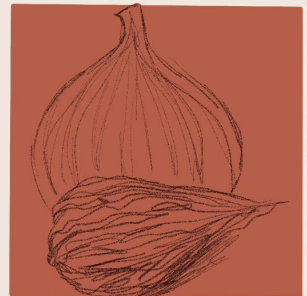
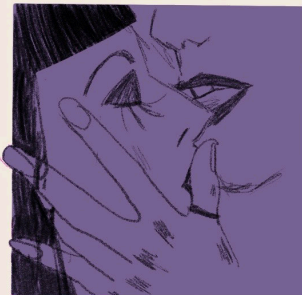
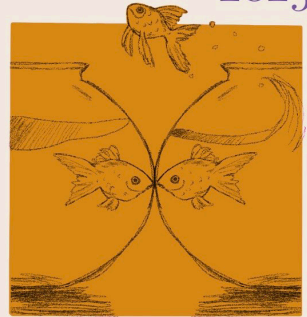
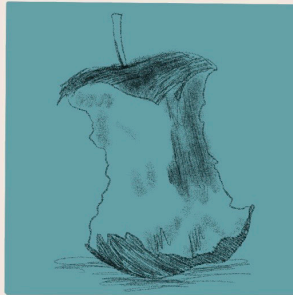


H A R B I N G E R 2025



S T O R Y B O A R D

Harbinger 2025

n. har•bin•ger [här•bin•jer]

a person or thing that comes before to announce
or to give indication of what will follow

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First place winner in the 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020 Literary Arts Journal Category and second place winner in 2015, 2022, and 2024.

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CONTENTS

Foreword | 8

*Isabella Walker and
Jubilee Forbess*

Contributors' Notes | 88

Fiction

The Song of Something | 10

Miah Sickler

Garden of Stone | 13

Kadence "Jo" Douglas

Fishbowl | 20

Alena Harper

The Cat's Pajamas | 28

Kadence "Jo" Douglas

Death Works in a Diner | 53

Miah Sickler

**Pittman Prize for Prose*

The Devil's Great City | 77

Allison Easter

Natalie Clifford Barney's

Lavish List of Loves | 80

Alena Harper

Nonfiction

Teuta Matoshi

Has My Heart | 34

Thalma Wahab

No, Grandma | 51

Genavieve Hudson

I'm Not Going Anywhere | 56

Emily Greenwood

Poetry

Resurrection | 14

Fertile | 15

**Pittman Prize for Poetry*

Jordan Davis

Garden of the
Ancient World | 26

Shannon Allabaugh

A Nod to the Past | 27

J. Hunter

What Will Be | 30

Lament from Prison | 32

Sarah Phillips

Poetry (cont.)

oh, that quiet beach in the
depths of september | 37

Ollie Ubaldo

Room 9347 | 46

Alena Harper

My Father in the
Amoeba Museum | 60

Light Years in a
Spinal Column | 62

Clione limacina | 64

Baylee Bleu

Created in His Image | 70

Lydia Sheehan

The Consortium | 71

The Aggregation | 73

The Bloom | 75

Genavieve Hudson

Broken Glass | 82

Isabella Walker

folk saints | 84

spark birds | 85

i feed the bluebird
a cheese ball and tell
her not to cry | 87

Jubilee Forbess

Drama

Wait, You Speak
Mexican? | 38

Jubilee Forbess

Interviews

A Conversation with
Sarah Rose Nordgren | 16

*Genavieve Hudson
and Lydia Sheehan*

A Conversation with Michelle
Collins Anderson | 48

Isabella Walker

A Conversation with
Kristin Atwell Ford | 66

*Kadence "Jo" Douglas
and Sarah Phillips*



FOREWORD

Isabella Walker and Jubilee Forbes

One of the best parts about elementary school was our library days, and the unforgettable joy of book fairs. When we talked about those memorable times, our experiences were surprisingly similar. We recalled how the homeroom teacher would line us up and lead us down the hallway, bumping into other students in the rush to arrive. The library door, a mystic portal, was a huge wooden one, something straight out of *Howl's Moving Castle*. The librarian, usually a sweet older lady with short hair and wire-rimmed glasses, would usher us into a world of wonder, excitement, and adventure. For the next hour, we could wander the shelves in search of a new book. We would get lost scouring the library stacks for the best story, something that would tide us over and engage our imagination until the next visit.

Sitting beside friends on that alphabet rug (*criss cross applesauce, please!*), we were transported into lands far beyond our wildest dreams. For me, Jubilee, it was Narnia. I loved the blistering winter scenes, the dramatic war background, and the themes of redemption. The movies brought the wonderful world of Narnia to life with careful, heartfelt attention that is rare in other book-to-movie adaptations. For me, Isabella, it was the wonders of *The Magic Tree House* books. The author had an uncanny ability to tell a different story in every book while keeping the characters, siblings Jack and Annie, consistent and interesting. The books kept me wanting more.

And we both loved the cheeky and hilarious mad-cap journals of Junie B. Jones (*the B stands for Beatrice except I just like B, and that's all!*), through her kindergarten and first grade years. There are countless other books we read as children and enjoy revisiting, too. For example, earlier this year, while rereading *Frindle*, we both pondered the new “slang words” of Gen Z. The new generational slang reminded us that kids have always reinvented words! Their “skibbidi” is our “frindle.” Reading these books as kids, though, we related to the characters who offered new insights into ourselves. The discovery of self through the stories of others was a gift vital to our development as children. The experience fueled our present love for reading and writing.

As writers, we have our own styles of telling stories, regardless of medium and genre. Our voracious reading sparked a lifelong love and attention to the continued desire to tell stories about our lives, our communities, our

world. The love of reading has continued into our college years. Some of our recent favorite books include Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*, which offers profound, palpable storytelling and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, which is also an engaging and enthralling work. These canonical authors who are thankfully part of our college curriculum have pushed us to think about the importance of narrative.

The theme of this year's edition of *Harbinger* is "Storyboard." The concept is significant to us because it engages with the idea that our lives start with story and the writer's commitment is to create and share despite obstacles or roadblocks or the counter-narratives others try to chuck at us. As Matilda sings in *Matilda: The Musical*, "Nobody but me is gonna change my story!" And, like the titular character, we know stories of the past are imperative to building the ones of the present and the future.

We hope this year's edition of *Harbinger*, through its emphasis on storytelling, takes you back to the time when you were first enthralled with a good book or poem. We want these pieces to transport you to a place where you can let your imagination run free, and your heart grow even larger. Come delight in Kadence "Jo" Douglas's voice driven short story, "The Cat's Pajamas" and Allison Easter's historic narrative "The Devil's Great City," which are both set during the 1920s. These stories offer different perspectives on the era, but both depict the decade's love of excess. "The Song of Something," by Miah Sickler takes the reader back to the beginning of time with their creation-based tale as they depict a meaningful encounter between Nothingness and the start of Something. Alena Harper's "Fishbowl" is a surrealist tale that captures the narrator's odd relationship with what begins as an ordinary goldfish. We also present the poem "Resurrection," by Jordan Davis, who pens a beautiful reflection about her past and the process of coming to terms with the unknown. The poem "Lament from Prison" by Sarah Phillips is inspired by Anne Boleyn's letter to her husband, Henry VIII, who has condemned her to death for false crimes. It captures her state of mind before the end of her life.

With these and the rest, along with interviews with women in the arts, we invite you to run far, dig deep, and love hard as you journey through these pages. Let our stories be part of yours. In the poignant words of Frederick Douglass: "Once you learn to read, you will forever be free."

THE SONG OF SOMETHING

Miah Sickler

In the beginning, there was Nothing. It was not a stark paleness or a looming shadow, as one might have expected, but a silence. The trees stood tall, yet still, waiting for the inevitable Something that would bring back life. The river, unrippled and translucent, waited as well. The wind did not move, and the grass did not grow—neither had much reason to. Nothing had been waiting for a very long time, but it would not have to wait much longer.

Something came in the form of a child. Tall enough to grasp the trees' branches, but not yet strong enough to pull itself up. At first, Nothing was afraid of Something. It was loud, disruptive, chaotic. In mere moments, it had interrupted Nothing's centuries of stillness. But with time, Nothing found itself drawn to Something. Its bare feet left imprints in the soft ground. Its tossed stones sent ripples through the still water. Its gleeful laughter echoed through the silent air. It was unlike anything Nothing had ever envisioned. So, Nothing sent the grass to tickle its feet. Sent the waves to splash at its legs. Sent the wind to carry its laughter. Thanks to Something, Nothing realized what it had been missing in its silence.

Nothing began to speak to Something, not in words, but through the groans of trees and whistling of the wind. It was not sure if Something would understand, but it began to speak back. Something would open its mouth and create strange sounds, and Nothing would reply with a shift in the current. Neither were sure how it worked, but that did not stop it. Something would weave stories for Nothing, elaborate tales or tunes to entertain them both. Nothing, in turn, would share what little it knew about what came before. As time passed, Something began to grow and change, while Nothing remained the same.

It was hard for Nothing to accept that Something would someday outgrow it. But it was only inevitable that it would long for other Somethings. When that day came, Nothing tried to hide its sorrow, only wishing Something the best of luck and asking that it return someday to tell it about the other Somethings. And so, Something left, and Nothing was alone once more.

Nothing didn't remember the silence being so loud. It seemed like a ridiculous thought, but Nothing found itself longing for the quiet comfort of Something's laughter. For its stories. For its company. But without Something, there had to be silence. Right?

Nothing shifted the branches at the tops of the trees, sending a cascade of leaves to the ground as it mused. There was silence before, but did there have to be now? Wind swept up the leaves as it pondered. What would it

say, now that Something was gone? The leaves settled in the stream and were carried away as Nothing began to retell Something's stories, re-sing its songs, keep its tales alive until it returned.

And so, Nothing began to sing. Not in the words Something had used, but in the howling of the wind, in the ripples of the water, in the groaning of the trees. It told Something's stories through the weather patterns. It recalled Something's jokes through the shining of the sun and moon. While it was true that there was only silence before Something, Nothing made sure there was never silence again.

On the day of Something's return, the sunlight shimmered brightly on the water's surface. The grass swayed in the breeze, imploring Something to sit down and regale it with stories.

With a wry laugh, Something obliged, settling beneath one of the ancient trees. It had grown gray and hunched while Nothing had remained the same.

"You are as eager to hear as I am to share," Something spoke kindly, "but please, give me a moment to rest."

Nothing had waited eons for Something to return. Yet these few moments felt unbearably long.

Once Something began to speak, it did not stop. It told Nothing of the other Somethings, how there were dozens or more but all different. Some crawled on all fours, others soared through the skies, but the most interesting were the ones on two legs. They spoke to Something in their own tongue. They taught it their ways and welcomed it into their home. It found a place there, with the other Somethings, and experienced many of the things that life offered. But it could not experience them all, for it had discovered the Somethings greatest foe: Time.

"Time has changed me," Something said. "It has taken my youth, my friends, and soon, it shall take me too."

Nothing tried to soothe Something with its soft wind and grass, and through sparkling tears, Something smiled once more. Not a happy smile, nor sad, but a smile somewhere in the endless in-between.

Eventually, Something went still. Not the patient stillness of waiting, as Nothing had done, but a new kind. A stillness that did not wait but lingered. In this stillness, Something did change, as Somethings always do, turning from gray to white, peering into the clouds even after its eyes had vanished.

Thick droplets fell from the sky as Nothing cried out in pain. Lightning

**NOTHING
DIDN'T
REMEMBER
THE SILENCE
BEING SO
LOUD.**

cracked and wind howled as it cursed Time, vowing its vengeance with a storm. The trees themselves screamed, their boughs breaking and their trunks twisting. The river pounded at the shore with thick, choppy waves, yelling over the wind in a desperation to be heard, to be seen, to be with Something again. This chaotic cacophony was unending, unyielding, and as undying as the being that made it.

But the storm subsided, as anger always does, and Nothing was alone, once more, with only the destruction it reigned, and a dull ache within itself. There was no Something to speak to, no stories to tell, no songs to sing. There was simply Nothing.

And so, Nothing waited. That was all it could do. That was all it knew how to do. That was all it was. It waited for Something to wake. It waited for the destruction to decay. It waited for Time to respond to its threats. It waited for anything at all.

It was during this waiting that Nothing began to sing again. At first timid, afraid of disrupting the stillness again. Afraid of forgetting its pain, its tears, its vow. But Nothing became louder. The grass began to grow again, the river resumed its course, and the soft wind tickled the tips of the tree branches. It expanded Something's stories with the tales of the other Somethings, the ones who crawled on all fours, soared in the sky, and had accepted Something as their own. It spoke about the cruelty of Time and the stillness it left behind. And finally, with a roar, Nothing began to sing again. Singing the song of Something.

GARDEN OF STONE

Kadence "Jo" Douglas

Gramma tells me there was life before the fallout. She says that the grass was green and healthy, there were trees with leaves that changed colors, and flowers weren't plastic. People weren't sick, and some of them lived on hills surrounded by brush and non-irradiated animals. I don't know how she knows this because all the bombs were dropped a hundred years before she was born.

Because of her obsession with all things natural, Gramma takes me and Bubba to the Gardens: a large glass dome that encircles an old plot of greenery. Most of the greenery is dead now. Gramma and her weird friends have managed to fix some of it and make it more pre-bombs-y, but there's not much you can do with mutated plants.

Plants and things are boring anyways. Bubba loves them, but he's only six. All he sees are the vibrant colors, and he's entranced. I'm twelve, and I know more than him, so plants don't impress me at all. It's been a long time since I sat among the green and meditated like Bubba and Gramma and her freaky pals do. My favorite part of the Gardens are the stone people.

The stone people sit nestled in every corner of the Gardens: Naked babies holding trumpets, naked men and naked women embracing, and just lots of naked people. I'm assuming that's how most pre-bomb people went about life. But there are some wearing clothes, like the girl in a ruffled dress holding flowers. She is my favorite. I've dubbed her Nuclear Fallout. She deserves to be remembered as something cool like that.

Gramma always says that the stone people are just statues, but I know better. If she can make-up stories about what happened before her life, I can too. Like Nuclear Fallout. I think about what her life must have been like as one of the few clothed people living among the naked. I wonder if she knew that the bombs would be dropping. Did she pick her favorite flowers, sit down in this beautiful garden, and watch the mushroom cloud form? I imagine that in an instant, her once fleshy body had transformed to stone, and she now sits preserved among the dead.

I don't tell Bubba any of this. He's too little to understand. But I tell Gramma, and she gives me a strange look, and says I have a big imagination. She doesn't get it. She doesn't see the way the stone flakes off Nuclear Fallout, and the way I can almost see pink beneath the gray. She doesn't pay enough attention to the stone people to notice how their poses change every day, how they seem to be getting tired. It's okay. When the stone people become fleshy again, those stupid plants won't matter as much anymore.

RESURRECTION

Jordan Davis

My father works in prison reform.
To black faces linked to craning necks that peek through iron-wrought bars,
He speaks about Christ and a freedom that transcends physical confinement.
He tells the black men about the resurrection, Christ's rising from the dead
And how before that resurrection came death.

My father grew up near Virginia Beach.
He takes me every summer.
My father points to the boundless, undulating waves.
On sailing ships, bodies once crossed the Atlantic,
Bodies, brown and bare, watched their neighbors die with their kin.

Where was Christ during that transatlantic trade?
When they looked into the eyes of their captors, the unblinking blue,
A center of boundless cruelty,
Their souls drowned before their bodies could.
And I remember my father telling me about the slaves jumping off ships.
Though I can't see Christ, I wonder if he reveals himself to those ready to surrender,
Ready to concede their life on land rather than fall into the refusal of their freedom.
He understood it was better not to revive bodies that'd have to hold their breath on land.
Christ told them to strip off their flesh and bones because death was their saving,
And now, when my father takes me to Virginia Beach,
I no longer run from the waves.

FERTILE

Jordan Davis

“Most women are awake, simply numbed during a C-section,” my mother told me. “The doctor cut me open. He rinsed and rested you on my chest. Your father asked how long it would take for me to lose the weight. Both laughed. But it was all worth it.”

My mother bought my father flowers.
Glass vases held lilacs and lilies,
She watered twice a week.
My father tells me,
It’s a woman’s job to make the house look pretty.
My mother says she used to look pretty.
She smiles and hides truth behind a clenched grin.
After she left my father,
Our home no longer smelled of sweet, damp earth.
Glass vases swaddled in packing boxes,
She tells me not to unpack them.
Like the days she knelt over the sink,
Nourished the lilacs and lilies with her tears,
She only cried to them
Because like those flowers, her rot was silent.

A CONVERSATION WITH SARAH ROSE NORDGREN

Genavieve Hudson and Lydia Sheehan



Sarah Rose Nordgren is an American poet, writer, teacher, and cultural organizer. She is the author of four books of poetry and prose, including, most recently, *Feathers: A Bird Hat Wearer's Journal* (Essay Press, 2024), which earned the Essay Press Book Prize, as well as the poetry collections *Darwin's Mother* (University of Pittsburgh, 2017) and *Best Bones* (University of Pittsburgh, 2014), winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize; and the chapbook *The Creation Museum* (Harbor Editions, 2022). Her poems and essays have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Narrative*, and have been featured by PBS *NewsHour*, *The Slowdown* podcast, *Poetry Daily*, and elsewhere. Nordgren lives in her hometown of Durham, North Carolina where she teaches poetry, serves as Emerging Poet Feature editor for *32 Poems*, and is the founding director of The School for Living Futures.

Genavieve Hudson and Lydia Sheehan: Tell us a little about the origins of *Feathers: A Bird-Hat Wearer's Journal*. What inspired the topic and the magazine-esque format of the book?

Sarah Rose Nordgren: While reading a book about natural history dioramas a few years ago, I was struck by a sentence about an ornithologist who was shot by hunters while he was trying to protect birds in the everglades from being killed for their feathers to be used in the millinery trade. The shock of violence—both against the ornithologist and the birds themselves—in connection with something as frivolous and decorative as a woman's hat jolted my attention and made me want to learn more. The bird hat thus became symbolic of questions I had about humanity's relationship to "nature," such as whether to respect and preserve it or whether to commodify and wear it.

To research this topic, I went to magazines from the turn of the last century (1880s-1920s) to learn about how these feather fashions were being visually and rhetorically presented to the female public, and what women thought about them. The visuals of the magazine form became an inspiration for the early writing I did about it. What would happen, I asked myself, if I replaced the captions on these fashion spreads with my own text? The

magazine form ended up being a fruitful structure for the collage-type thinking I was doing, bringing in different forms and voices.

G.H. & L.S.: When making the book, were you at all concerned with the look of the format? The book is beautifully organized and designed.

S.R.N.: The format and visual design of the book is something that evolved over the course of writing it. The challenges that arose were mostly technical (learning InDesign and trying to make it look like what I saw in my imagination), though I did sometimes wonder what readers would make of it, and whether the pieces would, in the end, add up to something larger than the sum of their parts, as I hoped they would.

G.H. & L.S.: What was your research process for this book and for your other books?

S.R.N.: My research process for my books is not what I would call organized or methodical like it would be for purely academic or journalistic writing. Rather, it follows the energy of my interest and obsession. I dive deeply into a topic and find myself in strange and wild places, following my question and my hunger. One pathway leads to the next, with treasures along the way, like a scavenger hunt.

G.H. & L.S.: This story discusses feminism and its connection to fashion culture, double standards, and expectations. How much of this history and context do you think still applies today?

S.R.N.: I hope I showed in my book—particularly in the sections on Victoria's Secret and Alexander McQueen as well as in the memoir passages—that many of the questions about gender, beauty, and violence are very much still with us. My hope in including the memoir thread in the book was to show how these cultural strains may play out in an individual woman or type of woman. There are new chapters in the story about how women are expected to appear publicly, and if I were to carry the story forward now, I would likely pursue questions about how these issues are playing out in the heightened visibility of the online and social media world, where young people have been expected, in some degree, to appear “publicly” from a young age, and what this does to our self-identities. This is something I feel deeply grateful to have avoided in my own childhood and adolescence, since social media only came into existence when I was in my

20s. I think it would have been much harder for me—both as a woman and a writer—to come of age and find my way in the environment that exists today. I encourage anyone and everyone to set firm boundaries (or better yet, opt-out entirely) around that world.

G.H. & L.S.: How does it feel knowing that your book is being read in the classroom setting and elsewhere?

S.R.N.: It makes me very happy. I love hearing from readers and students of all kinds about their own thoughts about my books and the questions they raise for them.

G.H. & L.S.: How is this work different from your other books?

S.R.N.: The design and construction of *Feathers* is very different from my previous books, all three of which were put together more like poetry collections, even though *The Creation Museum* also contains some prose pieces. *Feathers* is unique both because it is more of a continuous narrative/argument, rather than a collection of separate pieces, and, obviously, because of the unconventional magazine design.

G.H. & L.S.: Tell us something unexpected about your writing process.

S.R.N.: It might surprise people how fun not knowing what you're doing can be, and the delight of having your own writing surprise you. Unlike academic writing, where students are often taught to carefully plot out their thesis and main points in advance in a highly prescribed way with an introduction and conclusion, etc., creative writing asks for us to walk in the dark with, perhaps, one small candle.

G.H. & L.S.: Do you have advice for beginning and emerging writers?

S.R.N.: Follow your obsessions and let them lead you to unconventional (and primary!) sources. Talk to your research librarian for help along the way. Read books, not just websites and articles. Books are often full of signposts and signals of where you might go next. Read as much good literature as you can, to have experiences and be present in your life.

G.H. & L.S.: Before we close, will you say a little bit about your writing and habits?

S.R.N.: When I feel stuck with starting something new, I stay away from the laptop for a while and get out a notebook and pen. It helps relieve pressure to tell myself I'm taking casual notes. I also do a lot of freewriting. When I have some material, then I can bring it to the computer and see what I've got and go from there.

G.H. & L.S.: Finally, we would like to ask you about your literary influences. Who inspires you? Who are you reading?

S.R.N.: I have many influences, but some literary writers I return to again and again include the poets Mary Ruefle, Linda Gregg, Edith Södergran, Anne Carson, Theodore Roethke, and Lucille Clifton. Prose books that are important to me include *Frankenstein*, *The Overstory*, and the work of Amitav Ghosh, Paul Kingsnorth, and Claire-Louise Bennet.

G.H. & L.S.: Thank you, Sarah Rose. You have been wonderfully gracious to speak to us about your work. We value this conversation.



FISHBOWL

Alena Harper

My therapist said to wait for it to come to you. Close your eyes and wait for the tug forwards, then tug right back. Stay present in your body, she said. Notice it.

So, I let my feet sway in the lake. I imagine the salt, like dust, getting stuck in-between each toe. When my butt starts going numb on the creaky wooden dock, I shift my weight and straighten my back. I notice my grip is tingly on the reel seat. I notice my hair keeps sticking to my lip gloss. No matter how many times I tuck it behind my ear, the wind glues it back. I keep my eyes closed. Not because she told me too, but because the vastness of this lake nauseates me. I can sense the sun's setting. I shift and grip and wait.

Dr. Clark insists meditation will help. I thought her job was to help me forget it. Not to tell me to literally spend a portion of my day, every day, to sit in a "silence," where I inevitably begin thinking about it.

After a week of failed attempts, I went into my next session and told her, "I can't meditate."

She said, "That's fine, Amelia," and then, "You've mentioned that you used to go fishing as a child, right?"

I had mentioned this to her. I had mentioned how dreadfully boring I found it as a child, and how it perhaps even planted the seed of resentment I had toward my parents. "Yeah," I said.

"Why not pick it back up? Breakups present a great opportunity to start a new hobby or get back into an old one."

"Yeah?"

"You've got a lot more free time. Alone free time. Silver lining, right?"

No. I hate being alone. "Yeah," I said.

"So, why don't you go fishing? Close your eyes. Stay present. Notice your body. Wait for that tug. Then, tug right back. Just wait for it to come to you, Amelia."

It wasn't until I had already cast a line that I realized she was just making me do meditation again.

Twenty minutes is all I'll give myself. Twenty minutes, and then I'm getting up and maybe finding a new therapist. Twenty minutes to catch a fish that'll teach me some sort of lesson, I'm sure.

An awful thought occurs to me. There's plenty of fish in the sea. Is that my lesson? Stop sobbing, you can find a billion new exes at 7-Eleven. Am I that simple to Dr. Clark? Do I bore her? Do I just bore everyone?

A bite interrupts my spiral. A nibble, even. At my toes. I jerk my foot out of the water and find there's a goldfish attached to my big toe. Its bright

orange scales stand stark against the grayed blue of the lake. I raise my left leg high enough to view its coloring against the now night sky, and my back thuds soft against the dock. Highlighted against the night sky, its orange bleeds into white fins, thin and wispy. Until now, I've never looked into a fish's eyes and felt as though it could see me. This goldfish is looking at me. Judging me.

I sit up, dunk my foot back into the water, and shake it. But. It. Won't. Budge. I splash it, out and in, out and in, out and in, out. It continues to look at me. This poor creature. How desperate is it that it thinks I'm a suitable meal, let alone a companion?

"Okay. Okay. You win." I fold my leg back toward myself and pop it off my toe. I want to toss it in the water, but as I cradle it in my hands, I swear I can feel its lungs wheezing for air.

Surely this lake isn't its natural habitat. It must have been an unloved, unwanted pet. Its owner had heart enough not to flush it down a toilet, but not enough heart to take care of it. Damn it. I can't resist a stray.

"Hey, I'm gonna set you down in the water, okay? But I'll be back. I promise." It flops out of my hands before I can drop it in, but I see it stays close.

I return from my car with a glass cup. One from a set of four. We agreed to each keep two. I dunk it under and the goldfish swims easily inside.

"I'm sorry I don't have anything bigger with me right now. At least you'll fit nicely in the cup holder." It circles around and around and around.

I drive the most carefully I've ever driven in my life. A couple of cars pass me on a single lane road, flipping me off, the price for slowing down. When I get back to my apartment, I set the glass in the middle of my makeshift dining table. It's nothing more than a folding table with a matching metal chair. The cup of fish makes a fittingly absurd centerpiece.

"Hey," I say to the fish. "Sorry I don't have a lot right now. I'm still, uh, in the process of moving in." I don't know why I'm saying this. It's not like the fish will care. It circles and circles and circles. Still, I'm embarrassed by the cardboard boxes piled like anthills. Jesus, it's been a month, and the dishware is still in my car trunk. Almost like I hope it ends up breaking itself so that I won't have to put it in the new cabinets.

"I can get you a better bowl tomorrow." It circles and circles and circles. "I'm sorry. Maybe I should just take you back. This can't be healthy for you.

UNTIL NOW, I'VE NEVER LOOKED INTO A FISH'S EYES AND FELT AS THOUGH IT COULD ACTUALLY SEE ME. THIS GOLDFISH IS LOOKING AT ME. JUDGING ME.

Am I committing animal abuse? I'm sorry, I'll take you back."

It stops circling. It's looking at me again, judging me.

"Please stop that," It doesn't stop. "Can you see me? Can you hear me?" I know not to tap on the glass, but still, I reach out a single finger and just touch. For a moment, I truly believe the goldfish may reach out with its own little fin. Instead, it starts circling again. I watch it circle until I dizzy myself. I can see my own faint reflection in the glass. I look horrible.

"Okay. Yeah. I should probably go to bed. Goodnight, little fella."

I leave it circling in its glass. I consider bringing it to my bedside table. It feels strange to leave it by itself. Not because I'm worried it will be lonely, but because it feels as though my apartment has a stranger in it. But that's silly. It's a fish, not an intruder. I fall asleep with thoughts of fish circling.

When I wake, it's with a harsh cough. Did I swallow dirt in my sleep? My throat is dry, and my coughing is violent. I need water.

I down three cups before I notice it. The glass on my folding table has shifted. I'm sure it has. I placed it in the center last night, didn't I? So why is it kissing the edge?

"Oh my god, are you crazy?" I scoot the glass back to the center. "Don't do that dude, you'll kill yourself." He swims a little slow in his glass. "Okay. Okay, I'm going to go get you a bigger bowl. And some food. Please don't die before I get back."

The fish at the pet store won't look at me. They hide in their rocks, and swim into the illusioned back wall. They believe they can escape. I pick up a classic bowl, a food shaker, and some suitable fresh water, and check out as quickly as possible. The fish won't look at me, which means they see me.

When I get back, the glass is still in the center, but he is not circling. He stares toward me, as though he heard the door and was waiting for my appearance.

"Hey, I'm back." I suppress the urge to wave. I remind myself that this is a fish, and you are being ridiculous. As I approach, I realize why he's really stopped swimming. The glass seems entirely too small for him to circle in now. He's grown, without being fed. I don't have much time to question it. I'll have to leave again in an hour anyways.

The transfer is relatively smooth. As soon as he plunks into his new water, he starts up a figure eight route. I shake out some flakes of food, and he swims up to meet them, dragging them toward his mouth with his fins as though they were hands. For a second, I could have sworn I saw the flash of teeth. Human teeth. I blink away the image quickly.

"Okay, bud. I work late tonight, so, um, be good?" Maybe I should have

taken my mom's advice and gotten a dog. That would be less weird, right?

Work is total hell. Gas stations at nine p.m. are seldom anything else. My cough returns with a vengeance. I end up refilling my water bottle at least twice an hour.

Even my normally oblivious co-worker, Kyle, notices. "Dude. You better slow down with that. You're going to be pissing waterfalls later."

I planned to pass out as soon as I got home. Unfortunately, my plan is foiled when I walk in, and I'm met with the sound of glass crunching under foot. I stare at it for a moment before my brain catches up and I gently maneuver around the mess, only to look up and meet eyes with the perpetrator in question. My goldfish, swimming in figure eights in his bowl. His bowl, which is once again aligned with the edge of the table. The shattered glass on the ground was his previous home. I breathe a sigh of relief before I lose it.

"What the hell! You're crazy!" His circles are smaller, tighter. He's been growing. "I'm sorry. I'm crazy. We can't both be crazy. That's not healthy, okay?"

I check three boxes before I find the dustpan. "I'm going to clean this up. Seriously though, please stop it. I can barely take care of myself. I can't handle crazier." My hands itch when I'm finished. The skin is red and cracked, dry.

I set seven Styrofoam cups on my bedside table and hope it's enough to sate my thirst through the night. It's three a.m. when I wake up, having downed my seventh cup. I'm about to roll over and fall back asleep when I hear it. A buzzing, then, more awake, a muffled conversation set to dramatic strings. My skin chafes against my sheets as I rise.

"Hello?" I say, my voice cracking.

A light is glowing in the living room. The only thing I had bothered unpacking and assembling was my TV and its stand. I didn't have a couch yet, just a bean bag chair unused since college. As I came into the room, I found three things. The TV was on. The TV remote was on the floor. And my bean bag chair was wet. In fact, there were wet splotches on the floor too, in a line, leading to the fish. The fish was swimming in circles.

I check all my locks before I let myself believe it. I've really lost it now. Maybe I should schedule an emergency session with Dr. Clark. She'd surely send me straight to a psych ward. I'd lose my job. I can't afford to lose my job. God, what would Alex think? I'm crazy. I'm really crazy. My throat burns. My skin burns. The world is so dry.

I don't want to look at the fish, but I also don't want to leave him alone.

What would he do next? Hop into my bed? I shut my bedroom door, then lock myself in the bathroom. I'm awake. I'll hear him if he does anything. He won't while I'm awake.

I turn my bathtub faucet on and without stripping off my clothes, I get in. As the water rises, the burning lessens. I let it fill, fill, fill, fill, fill as it swallows my arms, my shoulders, my neck, my mouth, my nose, my eyes. My hair floats around me. I can hear the tub overflowing. I let it spill, spill, spill, spill, spill. For a while I lay there, letting the world happen around

me, without me. I breathe. Underwater, I breathe. I don't know what I'm going to do with this fish, but I know I need it out. It can't stay. I know this.

When, finally, I lift my head, sound rings in my ears. Literally a ringing. My phone. I wipe my hand off the best I can on my soaking wet towel. The floor is drenched. When I check my phone, I nearly drop it. It's three p.m. I'm late for work. "Fuck." I give myself two quick minutes to change, and I'm out the door.

At work, all I can think of is the fish. I didn't check on it before I left. I must get rid of it. I don't think I can take it back to the lake, though. It'll

surely murder me in the car before I get there. But I can't just outright kill it. I'm not a monster. Maybe the pet shop will take it? I can lie and say I bought it there and it just didn't work out. But again, I'll have to suffer a car ride with it first.

"Hey man, are you, like, okay?"

"No, Kyle."

"Oh. Damn. Do you want me to like do something?"

"No." I try to unclench my jaw. "Thank you, Kyle."

I haven't decided what to do by the time I'm driving back. My manager let me off a couple of hours early. The incessant itching at my dry arms probably had something to do with that. I'll miss the extra pay later, but right now, I can't help but be grateful. I need to get rid of this fish.

I key into my apartment, but the door won't open. I knock my shoulder against it, as though I could break it down. The fish. The fish must have slid the bolt lock through. I slam my body against the door one more time, before I turn for the fire escape stairs.

Outside, I pocket a couple of large rocks and then I climb three floors. Through my window, I see my faucet. I never turned it off. I can see into

**I CAN SEE INTO
MY LIVING ROOM;
THE TV IS FLOATING
AND THE FISH IS
WALKING, GLIDING
THROUGH WATER.
HE CAN SEE ME,
AND HE IS SMILING,
WIDE, WITH TEETH.**

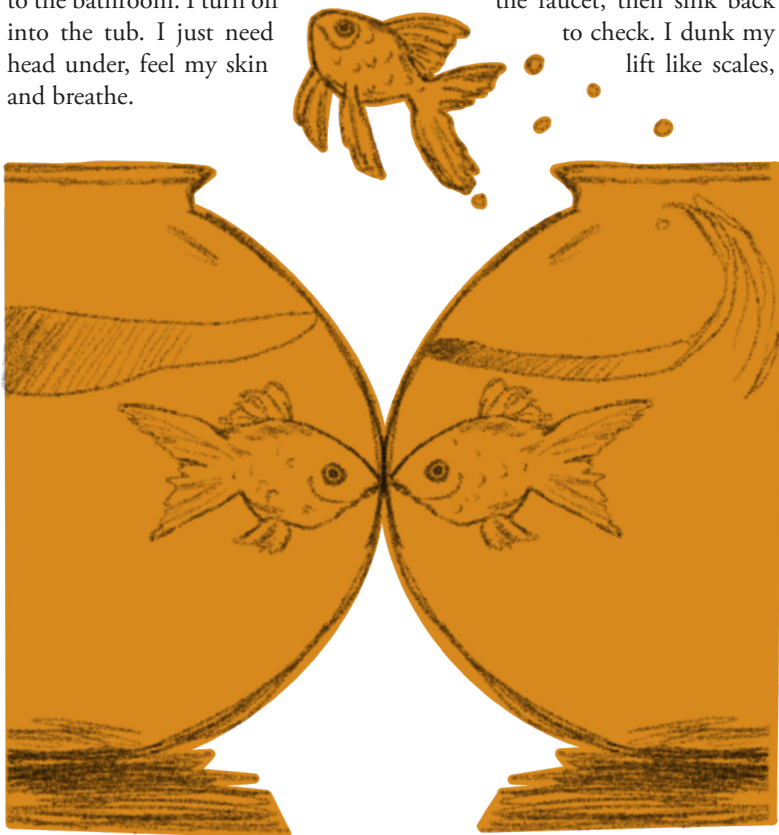
my living room; the TV is floating, and the fish is walking, gliding through water. He can see me, and he is smiling, wide, with teeth. He sees me, and he is judging me.

I take a rock in hand and start smashing the glass. My water bill is already going to be atrocious. What's a broken window to that? I throw my weight into my hits, and the window cracks, then shatters. I barely feel the shards cut my skin before they sting with the water rushing out of the faucet. I can only stare at this fish as he threatens to spill out the window. As he nearly tips over, I grab him, cradling him once more. In the dry air he heaves and coughs, water spluttering out of his lungs. He deflates in my hands. A fish once more.

Maybe I should keep him. He's not so bad. He's fixed now, right? Everything will be okay. I try to clasp my hands around him, but he wiggles free, and falls down, down, down. Just before he hits the ground, a bird scoops him up, swallows him whole, and flies back to the trees. He is gone.

I climb back through my window, stepping through my soggy apartment to the bathroom. I turn off the faucet, then sink back into the tub. I just need head under, feel my skin and breathe.

to check. I dunk my lift like scales,



GARDEN OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Shannon Allabaugh

In Celtic lands, the crows take flight,
Messengers between the worlds.
They glide through the mist, and ancient trees,
With feathers black as midnight's veil,
Carrying whispers from the Otherworld's trail.

Their eyes hold secrets, deep and old,
Knowledge gleaned from realms unseen.
They perch on stones where warriors fell,
Their caws a call to those who wait,
Guiding souls to fate's uncertain gate.

Morrígan's voice rides on their wings,
A goddess draped in dark feathers.
They circle battlefields in flight,
Foretelling blood, foretelling doom,
Their presence is thick with death's cold bloom.

Yet they bring more than death alone,
In their wings is wisdom's power.
To see a crow is to see through time,
To glimpse the threads of fate unwind,
Their calls are a weave of heart and mind.

In twilight's hour, when shadows grow,
The crows still soar, their paths untamed.
Guardians of a magic vast,
Between the worlds, they rise and fall,
Carrying the ancient Celtic call.

A NOD TO THE PAST *J. Hunter*

With a line from "The Orange" by Wendy Cope

I love you.
I'm glad I exist
with your bronze in my skin,
your blood in my veins,
your naps in my hair,
your drums in my heart.

I'm sorry
for your family that was torn,
your history that was burned,
your language that was lost,
your art that was taken.

I'm grateful
for your skills that built,
your fight that spread,
your children who lived,
your love that shone.

Thank you. I love you.

THE CAT'S PAJAMAS

Kadence "Jo" Douglas

Oh, darling, we're getting old. Do you remember those trips across the globe? They adored us. They clamored for us. Begged for us to look their way. We were more gracious than that, and I think you loved the attention more than even I! But such is the life of a young star, isn't it? Dressing in our finest clothes and jewelry, and going to the most marvelous parties?

Well, you weren't there; that was my scene, not yours. I miss the Ritz. Even more so, I miss being the diamond of the night. Gosh, could I dance. I could sing, too, but tap dancing on tables is much more entertaining than whatever I could squeak out. Not that you don't love my singing, dear. I know you do, but it has grown stale. The style, I mean, as every other style has changed. The girls have even stopped bobbing their hair! Can you believe it? In our glory days, it was the norm. An act of youthful rebellion, I suppose. You could not be famous without the bob.

Do you remember when I cut my hair, darling? Of course we went together. We still lived in Arkansas then. Ah, the Bible Belt. Well, the barber was shocked to see the two of us! I think he nearly dropped dead when I told him what I wanted. I had even brought little clippings from our favorite magazines. Goodness, he was pale! But he did it, because I had the money from working at the diner every night. I was nineteen, maybe? That was before we became famous. Mimi had told me I would look like a doll with my big eyes and porcelain skin. You never liked my hair long, anyhow. We had just never considered the other option until then.

**THE STYLE, I
MEAN, AS EVERY
OTHER STYLE HAS
CHANGED. THE
GIRLS HAVE EVEN
STOPPED BOBBING
THEIR HAIR!**

Oh, my bobbed hair was quite a hit at our socials! The boys couldn't stop staring, or cutting in on me, or trying to neck with me, but I had never cared about them, love. You know that better than anyone. I suppose my disinterest in boys only made me more desirable, a little less like a flapper. Despite how much I would claim the label, I would get pushback. All the other girls were hopping from boy to boy, why wasn't I? Of course, I couldn't just say, "Because I want the

girls." That would have been obscene! I would have been paraded as an abomination. Could you imagine the headlines? "The Blasphemous Sins of a Hollywood Flapper." Oh, no, that would simply be a story told about me by some man. Even so, only you would have loved me if that had gotten out, sweetheart.

Now, they don't even care about us. No more pictures, no more parties,

no more boys or girls. Just you and I, oceans away from home. I miss home. I miss Hollywood. But that is just my own nostalgia. I like this life abundantly more. Look around us, love! There are no men ogling us, no crazed fans, no one pretending to be our friends. Most importantly, there is no pressure to be something or someone we don't really want to be. I mean, there were too many eyes on us back then, and I know how much you hated those cameras. They always flashed a bit too bright. Oh? What is it, darling? We were having a lovely conversation. Are you hungry? Yes, meow, meow. I suppose it is getting close to six. You are a stubborn old kitty, you know that? Come, let's get you fed and watch some of our old pictures. We deserve a little treat.



what will be

Sarah Phillips

walk into the party,
smelling like green jeep, blue-collar suburbia
and soaked in vodka
serpentine pathway that pries open
to hungering stomachs,
roaring blood red to silent ears,
make malt liquor become too sweet
to cotton swabbed mouths
and scars open
in the spotlight glow doctor's office
now bourbon burns down easier
and fame quiet in your mind
until it addles,

it settles the hard way.

grow up,
view of the hudson,
suit and tie,
9 to 5
where the yuppies chest plate reads:

what? did you think you'd perfect your dying art?
art to become spring blue light
light, it becomes heavy to pay for the controls
control, control what you lack

go to the gatsby party
look at the dawn
the clown, the dragon in the yard
make believe,
in essence,
blinds you

what? you're still here
haven't jumped
haven't ripped open that
blister on your foot
let it bleed through the cracks
and empty to the coast

i'll play pretend
with wounds open,
open and howling.

LAMENT FROM PRISON

Sarah Phillips

“My last and only request shall be, that myself only bear the burden of your grace’s displeasure.” –Anne Boleyn’s letter to her husband, 6 May 1536.

crowds with pitchforks
burn an imperfect portrait
where my womb is a demon,
my fingers count six
portraying: each hand, each fable

“whore”
“witch”
“satan’s spawn”
they’ll spit,
a cross around my neck,
brands me

and I ask
if i had an ounce less breast
or less french charms
if i didn’t claw my way out,
scarred tissue replacing my chest
if dead fetuses didn’t multiply,
didn’t take my ripe body for a mother,
didn’t bare a daughter
no crown to lace her sweet head
when fault lines
are her middle name

I did it for him
I’d do it for anyone
as they will say

I'll apologize,
my licentious behavior
grew my skin
rank and common
100 men
enough to get me pregnant
1000 times over
so I did it,
plotted the downfall of a
man, of a king too gracious
and kind

100 men blamed
never broken

“whore”
“witch”
“satan's spawn”
with my burning cross
etched into my chest,
crowds part around me

so I'll ask
are they happy now?

as my head meets the floor.

TEUTA MATOSHI HAS MY HEART

Thalma Wahab

I've always enjoyed fairytales. Whether they are in books where the author describes in immaculate detail the dazzling ball the princess never even dreamed of attending, or on television shows where the prince and princess get their "happily ever after" once they've gone through all their trials and tribulations, I try to imagine my life as if it's a fairy tale. Constantly, I look for anecdotes that I can include to build this perfect story, whether it's a gel pen I found on the ground, sparkling pink lip gloss, or even my clothes arranged by color.

As I've gotten older, I realized I was missing something to complete this fairy tale that plays in my head. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it would immediately click the moment I saw it. One drizzling night, while I was doom scrolling through Pinterest, and the lighting in my blue-painted room was dark and dreary, I saw it: the thing that I've been missing. It was my dress. The dress. A dress made of the most luscious pearly pink fabric that shifted color depending on where the light touched it. I imagined myself looking into a mirror, running my hands down its smooth taffeta fabric, my eyes taking count of its many buttons. The moment I laid my eyes on this dress, I envisioned myself running down a long corridor in massive puff sleeves. This was the dress I needed to continue my happily ever after.

After seeing this dress, I could not get it out of my mind. Later in the week, one of my favorite YouTubers, Mia Maples, posted a video with multiple dresses on the screen, one of them looking like my dress. Immediately, I clicked on the video and was transported to another world. The designer of the dress I had fallen in love with was Teuta Matoshi. In that video, every single dress shown was made with the utmost care and detail, each truly exciting my inner child.

Teuta's website evokes many feelings, the main being comfort as I can truly see and feel the love and passion that she puts into each dress. While some of the dresses use the same fabric, Teuta includes different silhouettes, stunning trims, and daring details that proves that each dress has its own story to tell.

My favorite story ever told is by a dress named "Bordeaux Brocade Ball Gown" from her 2023 spring/summer collection. It is a strapless, A-line gown, composed of a deep maroon brocade fabric. The leathery almost velvet like texture of this dress is what hooked me. Looking at this dress, I see an evil queen longing for love. I see her wandering through the forest,

the deep maroon of her gown contrasting with the many shades of green. In this scene, she is barefoot and confused, her gaze constantly shifting, trying to make sense of her surroundings. Tears are streaming down her face, smearing her makeup as she feels a sense of hopelessness. There is no one here for her and there will never be anyone here for her no matter how hard she tries. No one will ever love her the way she wants to be loved, the way she needs to be loved.

Another story I constantly catch myself dreaming about is inspired by “Butterfly Meadow Mini Dress.” It is a short, all-white dress made of 3D butterfly lace. On the straps, it seems these intricate butterflies are flying as high as possible to tickle the wearer’s face. I imagine this dress on a child. I see her helping her mother in the kitchen to bake her 4th birthday cake, the sun radiating through the open curtains, almost as if it’s smiling down on her. I see joy and excitement shining through her face as she licks purple icing that covers her fingers. I see the parents smiling at each other, thinking back on the hard days when they were unsure if they would get to witness this cheerful one.

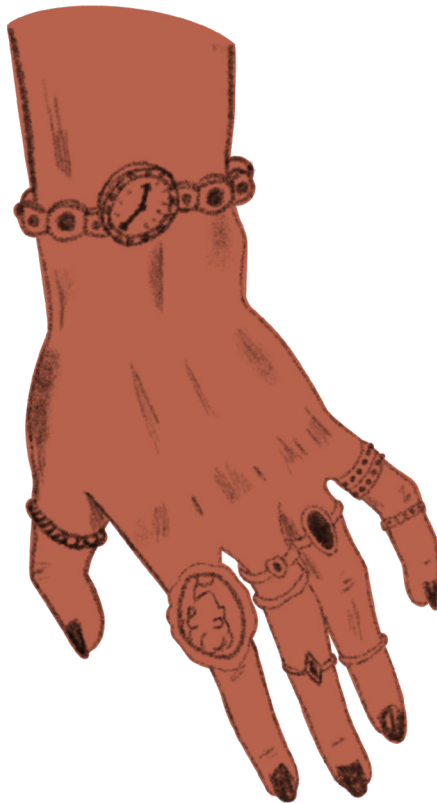
One story that is both interesting and exciting relates to the “Marigold Reverie Gown,” a golden yellow, floor-length dress, every inch covered in gold beads and sequined flowers. When I think of this dress, I imagine a girl getting married. While this should be a joyous and momentous day, the girl is quite angry and annoyed. Doesn’t anyone understand that she does not want to be chained to a tall, blond Brad Pitt wannabe? She wants to be free to travel the world and do things as she pleases. To achieve her goals, she uses the dress to her advantage. She hides behind its sunny and inviting nature and plasters her best fake smile to show her guests how “excited” and “ready” she is to marry. No one suspects a thing as her hand slides into her right pocket, and she palms the poison she’s going to use to murder her husband tonight.

I love the artistry of Teuta’s designs because they allow me to escape my surroundings. When I saw the “Timeless Rose Gown” I envisioned the story of an older sister who does small things with great love. She’s bustling around the kitchen to get dinner prepared, the pink puffy sleeves often getting in her way. I see her mindlessly listening to the chatter of her loved ones, each

**LOOKING AT THIS DRESS, I SEE AN
EVIL QUEEN LONGING FOR LOVE.**

voice its own melody. I see how she interacts with them, every hug she gives tighter and longer than the last. She radiates confidence, gratitude, and stability. She's someone who lives without the fear of failure. She lives to do all that she desires in life without care of how she's portrayed. She's happy and free. She's me. She's who I hope to be.

I worry at times that the stresses of the world will take away the childlike view. It is important to me that I don't let go of the fairytales and the sparkle simply because I'm becoming an adult and that this viewpoint is no longer acceptable or appropriate. To my future self, I hope I continue to remember the work of Teuta and the values it holds. I hope to continue seeing the small, delightful charms of this life.



oh, that quiet beach in the depths of september

Ollie Ubaldo

those soft rocky shores, tinged with streaks
of gray and orange and blue,
traced by the foaming tides of the sea.
staring out at the silent shores,
little seals dotting the landscape,
doing as they do —
well, nothing in particular.

you look away for a moment,
a journal, a book, a speck of sand.
when your eyes return,
not a seal to be seen on that september shore,
an empty canvas.
your stomach burns in disappointment,
a lost opportunity,
but you simply move on, as humans do.

what you do not see is the scene
when the warm september night falls into the sea.
the sky, covered in paintbrush strokes of pinks and yellows
dotted with tiny sparkles and stars.
the beachside is alive once more,
splashes of colors
circles of women with bare feet in the sand.
they say little but dance plenty,
a gentle song in that humid air, carrying
to the neighboring farmer's market.

and when true dusk lulls the creatures to sleep,
the women fade back into the seaside tides,
shaping, twisting, turning
to seals.

WAIT, YOU SPEAK MEXICAN?

Jubilee Forbes

SCENE ONE: CLASSROOM

A new student has arrived in the United States from South America. The students are very confused and cannot comprehend anything the new student says. The teacher doesn't try to help.

TEACHER:

(Twitching, nervous) Okay, kids, this is. . .Um, how do you pronounce this?

SANDRA:

(Politely, waving to the class) It's Sandra. Sandrah. Sandra.

TEACHER:

Right. Samantha. *(Sandra glares at her. The teacher laughs nervously.)*

TEACHER:

Okay, Sunder. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

SANDRA:

(Trying to reign in the conversation) Well, let's see. I'm from Bolivia. My dad got a new job. I just moved here, but I'm excited for the new landscape. *(nodding)* That's it, pretty much!

The class starts to chat madly. A kid raises his hand.

TEACHER:

Yes, Taylor Dyland? Do you have a question for sweet Sami here?

TAYLOR DYLAND:

(Taylor Dyland has no grasp of geography.) You lived in AFRICA? With the PYRAMIDS? That's crazy! Did you ever see a kangaroo?

Sandra shakes her head.

SANDRA:

No, it's in South America.

TAYLOR DYLAND:

What's that? You mean, like, Canada? With that big old wall? Maple syrup and BTS! That's so cool.

SANDRA:

(Frustrated) No? It's a continent. South America.

*The teacher is pacing
back and forth gently.
She can't deal with
this. Another kid raises
her hand.*

TEACHER:

Yes, Kassandriline? Do you have a question? I'm sure Sandstone would love to answer.

KASSANDRILINA:

(Rapidly, like she's been waiting her whole life to say it) So, like, you speak Mexican? I love Mexico! *(Leaping out of her chair)* Do you like tacos? I learned how to say tortilla the right

way! It's like with a y and not l's! Oh, I'm so excited. (*Fanning herself*) We've never had a person who speaks Mexican here. You speak it, right?

SANDRA:

No. (*Exasperated*) I speak Spanish.

The class erupts into conversation again. They cannot comprehend. Sandra moves to find a desk, but the teacher stops her.

TEACHER:

(*Reaching out for Sandra*) Wait, Sunbeam, they may have more questions.

SANDRA:

(*Shuffling around but staying by the teacher.*) And I have to answer them?

TEACHER:

(*Shrugging*) Yeah, why not? They've never heard most of this stuff. They're just curious! (*Beaming*) Go on, Starlight, tell them about your janky third-world experience! It's a THRILL. (*Correcting herself*) I mean, learning opportunity.

SANDRA:

(*Relenting*) Okay. Any more questions? (*She takes her backpack off and puts it on the teacher's desk.*)

KASSANDRILINA:

(Jumping back into the slaughter) Did you have indoor plumbing? *(She joins Sandra at the front of the classroom.)* I went on a mission trip to Cancun and they did. *(Sandra tries to speak, but is cut off by the next question.)* Have you seen a real roof before? My mom watched this one documentary where if you donate a penny every month, millions of disadvantaged children can have bread and carpets! I'd give you my bread. Let's be best friends! *(She tries to touch Sandra's hair, but Sandra ducks out of the way.)* I've always wanted one like you. *(She saunters back to her seat, leaving Sandra to stand awkwardly alone once more.)*

TAYLOR DYLAND:

(Still utterly confused) Could you watch TV? I heard in Switzerland they watch their llamas run in the fields, instead, so that they don't try to climb Mount Everest or, like, the Waffle Tower.

HUNTER:

How many times did you almost get shot everyday? *(Expecting something deep and gritty, leaning forward in his chair and speaking conspiratorially.)* Did you come here to save your family? *(Increasingly louder)* Or were you PART of a gang? That would be crazy. Have you watched anyone die? Have you KILLED someone?

Sandra is looking at the teacher, but she won't do anything. She's expecting Sandra to actually answer the questions. They keep coming.

PAISLEY MCKENNA

(Vapid, twirling her hair around her pencil.)
Wait, so like, did you come here in a boat?
(Wrinkling her nose) Did you have to climb into
the back of a smuggler truck, like, with cocaine
and stuff?

BUBBA KYLE

(Shouting) Can you READ?

LAKYNLLY:

(Also shouting) Did you have a CAR?

*Sandra stares at them in
horror.*

SANDRA:

(Taking a deep breath) Please stop. This is so
embarrassing! Do you hear yourself? Can I read?
Indoor plumbing? A boat? This is insane!

Sandra points at Hunter.

SANDRA:

How many times did I get shot everyday? YOUR
country is the one with the gun problem, not
mine. *(Triumphant)* Stick that in your country
song.

*She runs over to Bubba
Kyle, tears open the
book on his desk, and
points to the first page.*

SANDRA:

(Knowing very well the answer is no) Can you read
this?

BUBBA KYLE:

I ain't never gonna read that. (*Defiant*) You're not my momma. You can't control me! I hate the government!

Sandra throws the book and runs over to the teacher, who is almost cowering behind her desk.

SANDRA:

And you. You can't pronounce my name? San-drah? But you can say. . .

She grabs the name roster and holds it out.

SANDRA:

You can say BUBBA KYLE, LAKYNLEE, and MAIHZY with an h and a z and BRETTCHET, but you can't say MY name? Sandra? What's your name?

Sandra stares out at the class. They're very quiet. Sandra picks up her teacher's nameplate.

SANDRA:

Your name is LeeAnne Meradyth, with a y. You can't say my name because you take one look at me and then my name, and automatically, your brain shuts off. Why?

Teacher trembles and hides behind a book.

TEACHER:

Please, Syracuse. Stop. You're making us so uncomfortable.

SANDRA:

You know what makes me uncomfortable, LeeAnne Meradyth with a y? The fact that your students can't find my home country on a map. The fact that they can't fathom how I watched television without English subtitles, or that the language I speak is the second most spoken language in the entire world!

The students start to weep. They're shaking. Sandra turns back toward them. She folds her hands.

SANDRA:

I don't deserve having to teach you all about my home or my language. That's what Google is for.

She grabs her bag, strolls over to the desk by Bubba Kyle, and sits down.

SANDRA:

(Unpacking part of her lunch) I think I do deserve a snack.

Bubba Kyle raises his hand and Sandra whips her head around really fast.

SANDRA:

I swear, Bubba Kyle, if you ask me why my food smells weird I will. . .

BUBBA KYLE:

(Gently) No, Sandra, I was gonna tell you my mom has a friend from football camp who, uh, she made something like that. I think they're called, well, *(Struggling but ultimately saying it correctly)* pasankallas?

SANDRA:

(Amused and happy) Yeah, actually, you're right. They are called passankallas. You pronounced that so well, Bubba Kyle! *(Proudly)* Maybe there's hope for you yet.

She and Bubba Kyle smile at each other.

BUBBA KYLE:

That's good to hear! *(He leans toward her)* Hey, can you tell me some bad words you know? Like, in Mexican?



The national anthem comes on, and Sandra puts her head on her desk.

ROOM 9347

Alena Harper

I live in room 9347
of the Infinity Hotel.
Relatively close to the ground,
mathematically speaking.
Not so close,
if you look out the window.

Infinite space above,
finite
space
below.

Do you ever think about how we used to drink water, which used to be the
tears of Romans, which used to be dinosaur spit? I do.
Now I drink coffee. The same coffee which I drank yesterday. The same
coffee I'll drink tomorrow.

I don't leave this room, room 9347.
I sit on the chair, I lift my feet, for the vacuum that passes underneath.
I lay on the bed, I rub my eyes hard, until stars wink through the ceiling.
I roll onto my tiptoes, glance through the peephole, memorize faces which
will never know mine.

I can't leave this room, room 9347.
With infinite rooms comes infinite people.
It wouldn't take you a hundred people to meet a demon, let alone ten.
So, here? I don't like my chances.

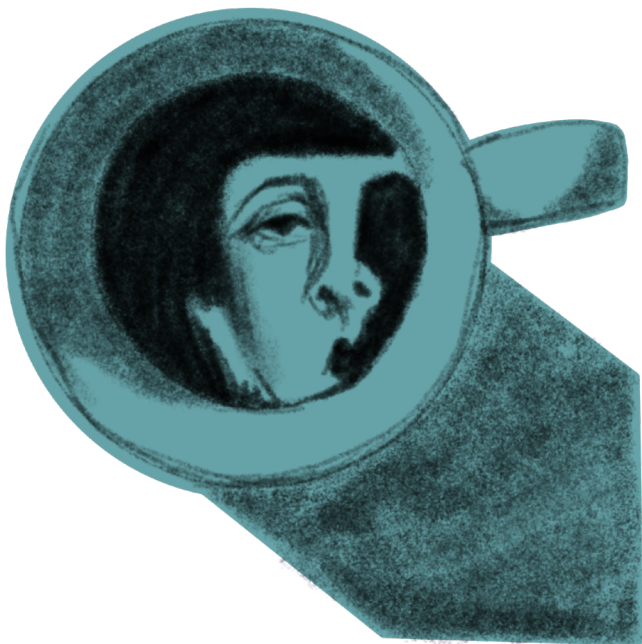
Besides, why would I want to leave?
I've everything I need right here.
What's a broken branch to a bird who has already got the perfect nest?
What's human connection to the convenience of loneliness?

I'll die in room 9347 like I lived in it.
Sitting in the chair, lifting my feet, letting the vacuum pass by underneath.
Lying in bed, rubbing my eyes, seeing the stars.
Rolling onto my tiptoes, peeping out into an unknown world of people that
I'm too proud to admit are far braver than I've ever been, or will ever be.
Drinking my coffee.

And drinking my coffee.

And drinking my coffee.

And drinking —



A CONVERSATION WITH MICHELLE COLLINS ANDERSON

Isabella Walker



Michelle Collins Anderson grew up on a registered Angus cattle farm outside of West Plains, Missouri, deep in the Ozarks — a place and a way of life that have shaped her writing. She graduated summa cum laude from the University of Missouri with a Bachelor of Journalism degree and spent the next fifteen years as a copywriter in advertising and public relations agencies in St. Louis, Palo Alto, Denver and Houston before pursuing a freelance writing career. She and her husband Clay returned to Missouri in 1997 where she taught as an adjunct professor at both the University of Missouri and Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, their home for the next thirteen years. In 2010, they moved to Liberty, Missouri, where they lived until 2023. During that time, she graduated with an MFA in Fiction from Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina and taught creative writing to elementary students. The couple has three adult children and recently relocated to St. Louis where they live in a 1907 brick row house in the city with two cats and a rambunctious border collie. *The Flower Sisters* is Michelle's first novel.

Isabella Walker: When did you know that you wanted to be a writer? What were your influences?

Michelle Collins Anderson: I've wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember. When I was a kid, my little brother and I created a handwritten-and-illustrated newspaper on blue-lined notebook paper called "The Family Press." It covered all the goings-on of our family of five on our 60 acres outside of West Plains, Missouri — so you might imagine the content was not that scintillating! But I've been writing ever since and hold a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Missouri and an MFA in Fiction from Warren Wilson College. My early writing influences were authors I loved reading, from Margaret Atwood and Anne Tyler to Kurt Vonnegut, Amy Tan and Maya Angelou.

I.W.: What was one of the most surprising things you learned in creating your first novel, *The Flower Sisters*?

M.C.A.: How characters I created had their own minds — and I couldn't control them! And how sometimes minor characters can come into their

own and have more of a voice or role than I had envisioned. For example, I had originally planned to use three voices in alternating chapters to tell *The Flower Sisters* story, but I ended up with six!

I.W.: Based on that, what was the most challenging part of creating and publishing your first novel?

M.C.A.: I had only written short stories prior to writing *The Flower Sisters*, so I had a lot to learn about pacing and organizing a novel — deciding which characters would get to tell what part of their shared story, where I needed backstory for character development and how to be a ruthless self-editor. No matter how much you love a sentence or paragraph or chapter — or how beautifully it is written — if it doesn't serve the story or fit the narrative voice, it can't stay in the manuscript.

I.W.: I know you did a lot of research for your novel, based on all the information you gathered, what seemed to be the most inspiring for your novel? And what advice would you give to a fellow author using real-life events in a novel or piece of their own?

M.C.A.: The real-life event of the Bond Dance Hall explosion in my hometown of West Plains, Missouri in 1928 was devastating, killing 39 and wounding many others in this town of 3,000 — and the cause of the blast was never determined. That alone was a terrific inspiration — but the fact that I was unaware of it, despite growing up in this town (like my father and grandfather before me), made it even more intriguing. Why didn't people talk about it? From survivor's guilt to the judgmental nature of a Bible Belt town, there were many interesting angles to explore. My advice to others wanting to use a real piece of history in their novels is to do your research on the event itself as well as adjacent digs into the culture, trends and norms of the time. Getting the details right keeps readers in your story — and you never know when something you discover will make a perfect plot twist, character trait or action, or backstory.

I.W.: What was the hardest part of traveling while promoting your new novel? How will that experience influence your next novel press tour?

M.C.A.: I did a three-week driving tour that spanned Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, and put more than 3,500 miles on my car! I absolutely loved meeting so many readers, booksellers and librarians and reconnecting

with friends along the way. So even though it was grueling to drive the long distances and do events in different cities every day, I am not sure I would change a thing next time around!

I.W.: What is the most inspiring feedback you've ever received from a reader?

M.C.A.: Just hearing that my writing touched them; that they understood at a deep level what I was trying to do and appreciated it.

I.W.: Will you describe one of the most rewarding moments you experienced during the writing process.

M.C.A.: Writing the last chapter. Many authors know exactly where they are headed when they start a novel, but I wasn't sure until the very last how I was going to end the book. I had toyed with several different ideas and hadn't settled on one that seemed right. But then one morning on a jog with my dog (when I do my best thinking!), it came to me how the story should wrap up — and who should do the talking. I ran home, wrote it immediately and enjoyed every single minute; I was “in the zone.” Writing is mostly difficult and painstaking, but I keep doing it for those transcendent times when the words come so easily and perfectly. It is truly a joy.

I.W.: Writers receive a lot of advice, particularly when they are starting out. Do you recall any valuable advice you've been given about writing?

M.C.A.: If you want to be a writer, you must write! It sounds obvious — but it's hard to commit the time and mental energy to writing, especially if you have a career, school, a family or other things that take you from your desk. Sadly, no one (except maybe your mom!) is breathlessly awaiting your novel or poem or short story collection! So you have to make the decision to call yourself a writer and live into it. Take it seriously. Set a schedule and keep it — there is no substitute for butt-in-chair time!



NO, GRANDMA

Genavieve Hudson

It was to be expected. I had steeled myself for it many times. I had played the scene out in my head, and yet. . . The woman's skin was pale in some places, blued and purpled in others. Her veins were ropey, and her lips were cracked. Her frayed gray hair seemed to come out in lumps. She trembled when she moved, even as much as an inch. She smelled of a blend of must and perfume. But most of all, she seemed unaware.

She had seen my face thousand times—watching TV with her, conversing with her, and sitting with her to play games and read books. But now I was almost completely unfamiliar despite my similarity to my mother. I have my mother's features: round face, blue eyes, and bark brown hair. But my grandmother didn't seem to notice these similarities.

"Rose?" she asked, unsure of herself.

I looked at her blankly. Without her dentures, her lips caved in, and her cheeks were gaunt. Her bony arms rested on her small body. I had never thought that this idol of mine could become so frail. I swallowed, but my throat was dry.

Of course I wasn't Rose. My hair wasn't golden blonde. My eyes weren't hazel green, and I wasn't short. Those should have been her first clues.

I suddenly felt the urge to move closer and demand that she tell me my name. My actual name. I wanted to scold her and ask her how could she call me Rose? But would it make a difference.

I peered into eyes that glittered with child-like innocence. She meant nothing harsh by calling me Rose. She probably thought she'd gotten my name right. I made myself smile. I bobbed my head weakly, and said, in a cheery voice, "Yes, Grandma."

No, Grandma. The lie washed through me like a hurricane. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to look at or speak to her. But how could I be mad at her? Her confusion wasn't her fault. I had known this would happen. I had prepared myself, yet now I struggled to look into her eyes. I hadn't expected my reaction to be so volatile. My feelings were a chink in my cautiously assembled armor.

Grandma went on talking about a life where I did not exist. I was insignificant, a simple droplet in the vast ocean of memory. This woman had helped raise me for nearly two decades. She had gifted to me many childhood memories, which were precious to me but seemingly inconsequential to her.

My knees trembled as I took a seat beside her, sinking into the rough-sewn, olive-green cushions. I shouldn't have been so upset. It wasn't her fault. Everyone ages, everyone regresses. Humans aren't meant to live so long, are they?

As I sat there, not really listening, I felt extraordinarily selfish. My

Grandma was old. I was young. It was simple, and I should have understood. I should know better than to feel angry. Yet, my cheeks burned, and my fingers clenched. My guilt made me feel rotten.

I wondered if she could feel the guilt and sorrow that hung in the air between us. Perhaps she was forgetting that she could feel anything.

Sitting there, I worked hard to remember why she had been such a hero to me. We shared a love of horses and had talked about them non-stop. I learned to ride a horse because of her, and we loved old black-and-white westerns with their unrealistic gun fights and overly heroic cowboys. We had watched them every time I visited. From Grandma, I learned the saying “Get outta dodge,” which I still quote. Together we had played Yahtzee and marbles while I shared every detail of my life as if it was a great action-adventure. To her I communicated my dreams in fantastical ways.

Now, all those lessons, adventures, and stories feel colorless and bland in the face of her fading memory. Much of my life was shaped by her caring and warmth, but now, I was wondering if she had ever loved me as much as I had loved her. How could you forget someone you loved?

I breathed deeply to calm the chaos, but my breaths had switched to manual mode, taking all my focus. Then, there was a break in that focus. Would she also forget how to breathe? A quaking hand touched my shoulder.

“Hmm?” I asked.

Grandma looked at me, confusion in her brown eyes.

“Steel, steel, steel, steel,” I repeated in my head like a ritual, like a church hymn. Grandma tilted her head.

“Rose?”

My eyes seemed to boil with tears as I forced myself to smile, my lips feeling pinned in place like a ragdoll. I looked into my grandmother’s eyes. “Yes, Grandma,” I said. No, Grandma, I thought. It made her happy to think she’d remembered something, even though it broke my heart.

DEATH WORKS IN A DINER

Miah Sickler

Checkered tiles line the floor of the empty diner. The red vinyl booths wait patiently for someone, anyone, to have a seat. The oversized menus beg for some hungry soul to pour over them, flipping through their laminated pages as they debate between the eggs or the pancakes. A jukebox stands in the corner, the neon lights flashing while Frank Sinatra drones quietly from within. Behind the counter, an aproned man mumbles along. A faded nametag labeled “Grim” clings to the fabric of his shirt. Hunched over the countertop, he drags a pen along the back of a receipt, forming the jawline of the figure on the page.

The front door swings open, the bell on top chiming cheerfully. The waiter doesn’t look up. “Sit anywhere, I’ll be with you in a sec.”

Grim draws another line, forming the shape of an ear before setting the pen aside. He straightens his apron, composing himself before heading to the booth where the diner waits.

The diner is a young man, peering around the room with wide eyes. He hasn’t even touched the menu. His eyes linger on the brightly colored walls, the jukebox, the pitch-black world outside the windows, before settling on Grim, waiting at the side of the table.

“Want a drink?” Grim asks, “We’ve got water, coffee, Coke.”

“Where am I?”

The waiter shrugs. “A diner.”

“But I was just. . .” He trails off, his brow furrowing. “How did I get here?”

“The front door.”

“No, no, I was in a car? And then. . .” His eyes widen. “Oh my god. Am I dead?”

“Probably.”

The man grabs his head, staring at the plastic tabletop.

“We also have beer.”

“I’m going to throw up.”

“Please don’t.”

A moment of silence passes, then another. The man cups his hands over his eyes, taking deep, long breaths. Grim simply stands at the end of the table, one foot tapping as he waits.

“If I’m dead,” the man says, then hesitates, looking up at Grim, “Is this Hell?”

“Nope, just a diner.”

Another beat of silence. Grim follows the man’s gaze as it traces over his surroundings: The red accents, the gaudy decor, the autographed photos

lining the wall.

“Why a diner?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you. . .” He pauses, “God?”

Grim shrugs.

The man frowns, his eyes drift back to the window, peering out into the void. He doesn’t speak for a while, and Grim doesn’t expect him to.

“What happens next?” His voice trembles.

“You order something, then you leave.”

“And go where?”

“Out the front door.”

“What’s out there?”

“Not sure. Probably whatever comes next.”

“So, like, Heaven, Hell, Nirvana?”

“Look man.” Grim sighs. “Maybe it’s one of those places, maybe not. Whatever it is, it’s none of my business.”

“You seriously have no idea?”

Grim shakes his head.

“Well, what can you tell me?”

Grim pauses, deliberating for a moment before speaking.

“Our daily special is a bacon omelet.”

The man doesn’t order the bacon omelet. Instead, his final meal is a stack of pancakes: Simple, classic, impossible to mess up. The only sound is the jukebox as he eats, taking the time to savor every bite. Grim observes him from his post at the counter. He adds to his drawing the small scar along the man’s chin. He adjusts the hair, which is wilder in person. His pen scratches against the counter as the image takes shape. He draws the final line as the man takes his final bite.

**HIS EYES LINGER
ON THE BRIGHTLY
COLORED WALLS,
THE JUKEBOX,
THE PITCH BLACK
WORLD OUTSIDE
THE WINDOWS,
BEFORE SETTLING
ON GRIM, WAITING
AT THE SIDE OF
THE TABLE.**

The man doesn’t move. Tears stain his face as his eyes linger on the door. Grim stands and walks toward the kitchen window, portrait in hand.

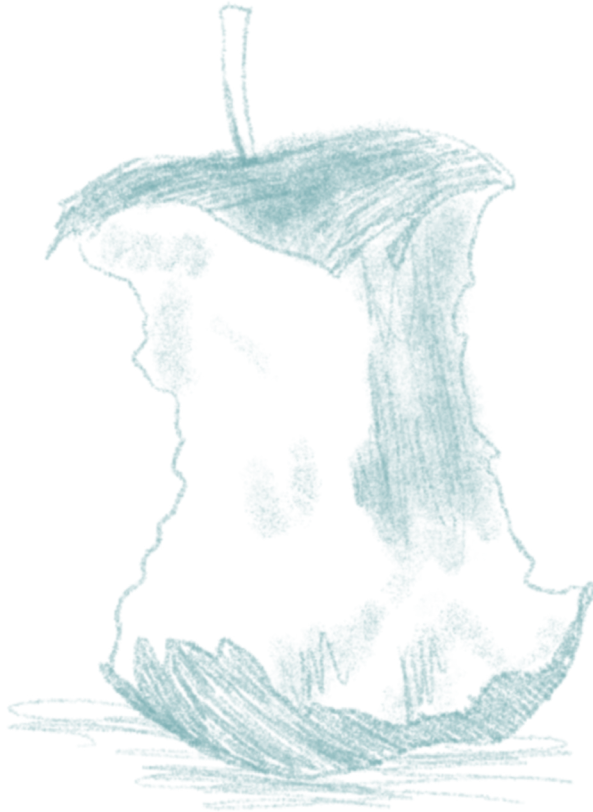
The man’s legs shake when he finally rises, each step hesitant, agonizing.

Their eyes meet for a moment, the man’s hand on the door, Grim’s hovering over the ticket spike.

“Can I stay a little longer?” His voice cracks with desperation.

Grim shakes his head, watching the desperate look turn to fear as he impales the drawing on the spike. The doors behind the man swing open, and a freezing blast of wind pulses through the diner, sending plastic menus flying. Grim merely watches as some unseen force grasps the man and pulls him out the door. His terrified scream fades as the door snaps shut behind him, while the bell lets out a cheerful chime.

Once again, Grim is alone, save the crooning singer from the jukebox. He searches the void beyond the building for some time, knowing he won't find anything, but hoping all the same. He eventually turns back, collecting the displaced menus and returning them to their homes. He takes the discarded dishes and watches them vanish beyond the kitchen window. Then, he takes his place at the counter, drawing his next visitor as he waits for the bell to ring again.



I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE

Emily Greenwood

While growing up, some kids believe that their parents will live forever. But what if that isn't the case?

When I was growing up, I quickly found myself afraid of the inevitable. I was afraid of something I knew could happen tomorrow or in twenty years. What a terrifying thought.

Maybe it was because my parents had me in their forties. I always knew they were older compared to the ages of my friends' parents. So, I understood my fate, and I understood that I would never get to have my parents as long as most other people got to have theirs.

I often experienced nightmares of my parents passing away horrifically. I would wake up crying, wondering if I somehow lost one of them while I was deep in slumber. I would be warm and tucked away in my bed, not there to help them, or there to stop something horrible from happening. The scenarios I made up in my head often felt like a wake-up call, and if I lost my parents, I was the one responsible for not being there.

"I'm not going anywhere," they would reassure me once morning came.

Then finally, a parent is gone. As a kid, you feel abandoned.

Whether a death has dragged on for years due to illness or was sudden and unexpected, most of us who have lost loved ones are left unsatisfied and emotionally lost. They might even feel as if there are a hundred things they could have said if they found the right moment.

I spent months after the loss of my father under the impression that he had simply gone away for a while. He was on vacation, a road trip by himself to escape a mundane life and to contact his true self. I believed that someday, he would come home to assure me, "See? I am still here. I missed you!"

Death is simply an idea one cannot grasp until they have lost someone themselves. That is the case with many things. There were so many emotions I never imagined I would feel after losing my father. I tried to predict what my emotions would be, where my life would head, but I was off the mark on most of it.

Something I did not expect was how convinced I was that I felt okay. Two weeks after the loss of my father, I got my first job. It is mind boggling now, but at the time, I could not wrap my head around why I came into work crying every day.

I quit that job right before my junior year of high school. I stopped taking care of myself. I treated everyone close to me horribly. I became someone that I despised, and it took a long time for me to realize it.

I worried that I was not grieving properly. I was depressed, sure, but

wasn't I always depressed? Long before my father's diagnosis, I had felt a grievance in my heart. So, was this any different? It was already my life. I felt fine.

I felt frozen in time long after my loss. Life felt as if it was both moving too quickly inching forward too slowly. After two years, I dreamed about my father fading into ash. He was sitting in his recliner in my childhood home, looking terrified. He was terrified to go back to his sentence, an eternity of nothingness. Or whatever death might be.

In another dream he was slowly deteriorating in a hospice bed. How can a person die in front of you, while you hold the knowledge that life will continue to bloom from your young, able body? It felt unfair to possess a perfectly capable body, while my father was lying still in front of me, unable to move, and slowly dying.

Having dreams about my father made me cry uncontrollably. I would find myself leaving my room to go outside and look up at the stars. It is hard to look at the night sky these days, because it makes me emotional for reasons I cannot explain.

It can take years for that feeling of mourning to come, and it is not always consistent. It can last for five seconds or twenty minutes, but then I pick myself back up and continue with my day. Occasionally, while driving down the highway, the stranger in front of me might have his arm hanging out of his truck window, an image that resembles my father. Suddenly, I would find myself praying for the stranger to keep his arm still, so I could picture it as my father, alive and simply going on a leisurely drive. The image brings comfort in my desolation.

Then, almost three years after my father's death, I was lying in my dorm room watching *Back to the Future*, my father's favorite film. I pictured the moment when I watched it with my father. I was seven years old and in my childhood home, sharing a bowl of popcorn. Suddenly, the only things that comfort you also bring immense pain.

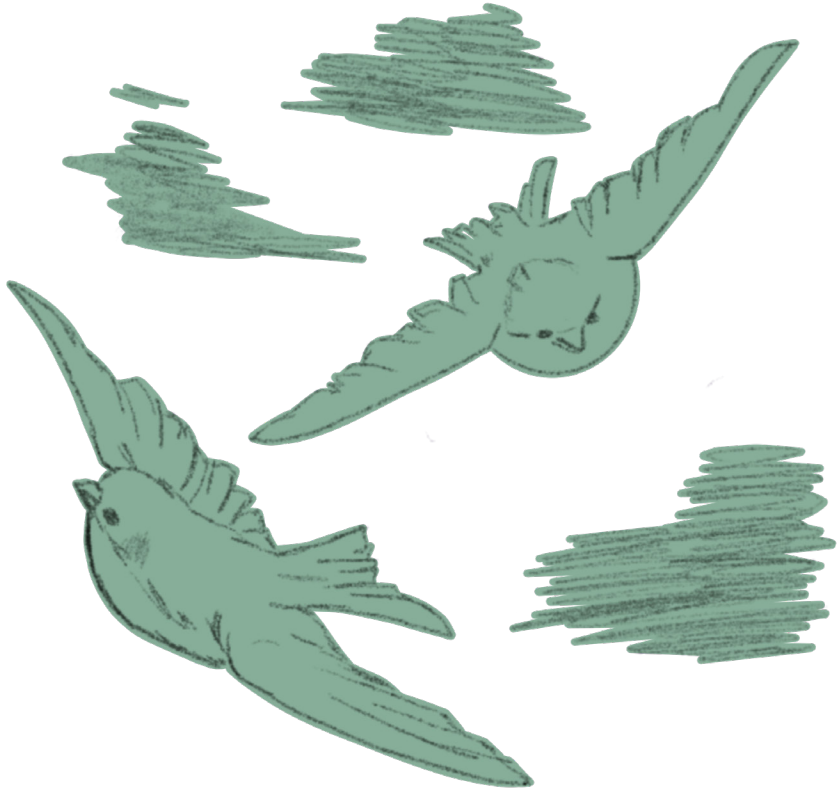
Sometimes I think to myself, "My dad wouldn't even know me now."

He does not know the person I have become or my life up to this point. My father has no idea that I attend college. He does not know my new interests, new boyfriend, or the fact that I crashed my car last year. He wasn't there to give me a ride back to town. I couldn't call him for help.

**SO, I UNDERSTOOD
MY FATE, AND I
UNDERSTOOD THAT
I WOULD NEVER
GET TO HAVE
PARENTS AS LONG
AS MOST OTHER
PEOPLE GOT TO
HAVE THEIRS.**

Your loved ones' lives might end, but your life must go on, and you must keep learning, living, and experiencing growth. The world does not stop turning, work piles up, the dogs need to be taken out, and you must take care of yourself and your loved ones. You must remain available for your growth, and it does not happen immediately. You need to take time for yourself.

Someone I look up to told me that the moment someone truly dies is when they are forgotten. When they are not spoken of, when their stories stop being told, and when everyone who knew them has either passed on themselves or are afraid to speak their name, because they are afraid to miss them. Yet, we must keep these stories alive. It is our duty, as those loved by the deceased, to keep their soul's spark living within us, because maybe they do not have to go anywhere after all.

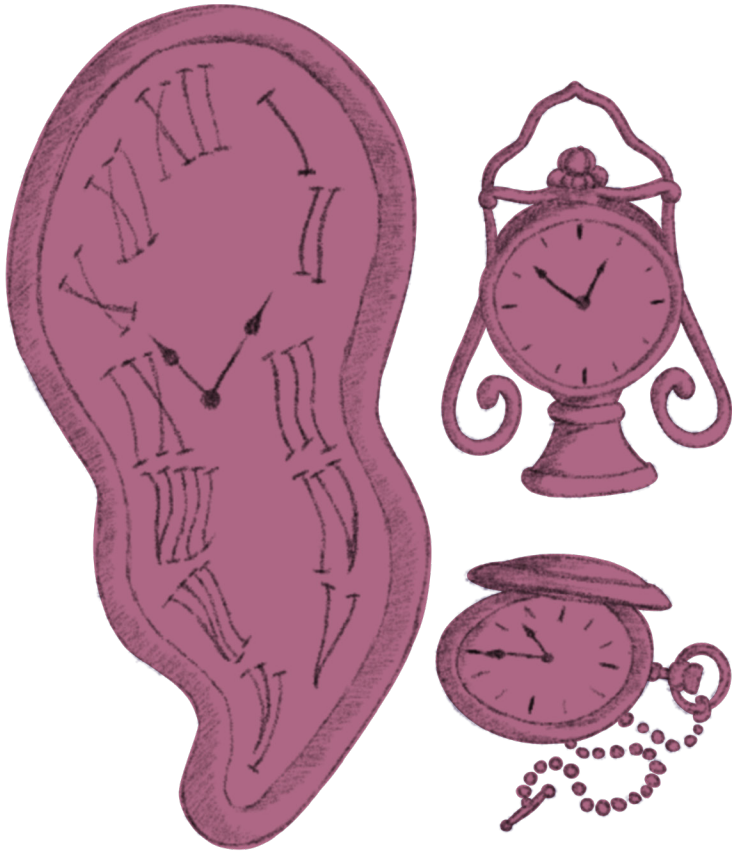


MY FATHER IN THE AMOEBIA MUSEUM

Baylee Bleu

Hand-in-hand,
a child and a man among,
winding, clicking clocks.
A gadget, a habit, a rabbit—
it's biology in a box.
Writhing, thriving,
red, green, blue,
a cosmos, a hodgepodge,
watching and gawking,
hand-in-hand with you.

It's a lovely museum,
you would know it well:
a spectrum of life,
a showcase of cells,
our moving, changing, whims.
Inside the exhibit,
no population, just moving limbs.
Amoebas on counters,
amoebas on shelves.
There is no curator,
just ourselves.
Writing, typing, click,
amoebas scale the walls.
Mixing, flicking, click,
ribosomes fill the halls.
Driving, drawing, click,
my father is very tall.
Clicking, clicking, clicking.
It's a pleasant sort of play.
What a nice museum day.



A kaleidoscope,
you remember, I hope.
Walking, talking, chalk,
on the ceilings, walls, and floor,
there's cells, amoebas, more.
A nice visit, we reach the door—
red, green, blue.
Hand-in-hand at the museum,
hand-in-hand with you.

LIGHT YEARS IN A SPINAL COLUMN

Baylee Bleu

I once heard that humans weren't quite tissue and bone;
we're more of a biological cosmology,
beings born of stardust who often toil,
with the concept of being alone.
Space is an amniotic sac,
bearing both stars and cells.
When given all the life we could ask for,
we're always in search
of a life we just can't seem to find,
though I reckon,
we knew it once before,
somewhere in the Cradle of Mankind.
Ancient hominids witnessed the same sight:
a pale-faced moon that steeps in the day,
and rises at the night's peak.
It's the same moon that enamored Cleopatra,
and inspired Shakespeare and Van Gogh.
This lingering lunar rock from a time,
we'll never know,
entices a longing for a new flock.
In some ways, I am nostalgic for a life unlived.
A man of the past won't remain,
but the stars certainly did.

I once heard that starlight,
is the mark of a star,
that burnt out ages ago.
Dead stars in a vast infinity,
irks the mind, feeling terribly,
existential.
Though if we did spawn,
from stardust—the sublime—
perhaps there comes a kindred species,
born of the same dust,
living another lifetime.
It occurred to me once:
what if we've met this,
kindred species?

Somewhere within,
dead skin cells float
among the rays of sunlight,
or deeper inside the oceans,
among sea glass and plastic.
If they truly must be beyond us,
I believe they've found the perfect form,
always alive.
They'd glow at once then,
hide in plain sight.
There's a dying species in the night sky.

I think the life we've longed for
is both near and far.
There's a dying species,
masquerading as the stars.

CLIONE LIMACINA

Baylee Bleu

Joy is a matryoshka doll.
It nestles within itself, always surprising with
every new layer that is uncovered.
Everything comes in layers:
flowers, skin, sediment,
glaciers, plasma, molecules.
With every discovery condensed into
a medal worn around our necks,
there's something to be said about
our desire to view things
on a miniature level.
We derive joy from every new discovery.
Does this mean we've found joy with every fossil unearthed?
We've uncovered skeletons in caves and mountain tops,
and age-old pandora viruses inside ice caps.
We can do anything.

Humans put a dog in space,
then we found 26-foot squids in the ocean.
We used radio waves to communicate,
then realized there's colors we can't see.
The world revolved around the Earth,
according to Ptolemy,
and then it didn't.
We scraped rubber from trees,
ate mummies and learned to fly.
In fact, we learned we could
genetically modify ourselves.
Then we found micro-animals that could
resist starvation,
and suffocation.
Layers upon layers of knowledge.

Aren't libraries nothing more
than groves in a different form?
Trees have layers and we use roots
to refer to intricacies.
The Divine Comedy said that Hell, too, comes in layers.
The deeper you go, the worse it gets.
If we reach a little higher,
do you think we'll find
what we've been looking for?
The next best thing, our magnum opus—
we want to find angels.

But maybe those ancient civilizations
were looking at things upside-down
like a pinhole camera's aperture.
Maybe our angels aren't winged anymore,
but flutter graciously,
somewhere below us out of sight.
We found angels in a frigid ocean,
and no one batted an eye.
Maybe we've learned that a plague
of locusts weren't anything special.
Or maybe we realized that,
sometimes discovery is just life,
that there's cause for jubilation
whenever we want it.

Everything we've ever looked for,
has always been an eyelash away.
Skin comes in layers
like a matryoshka doll.
If we look a little deeper,
maybe we could find,
joy within ourselves.

A CONVERSATION WITH KRISTIN ATWELL FORD

Kadence “Jo” Douglas and Sarah Phillips



Kristin Atwell Ford is an Emmy award-winning filmmaker, alumni of Stephens College, and the recipient of the Stephens 2024 Alumni Achievement Award. Her work consists primarily of documentaries that expand on a vast array of topics, including *The Weight of a Feather*, *Riders of the Purple Sage: The Making of a Western Opera*, and the upcoming *Miss Sherri & The Pharmacologist*. Much of her work focuses on Arizona, where she was born and raised.

Jo Doulgas and Sarah Phillips: What made you want to use film as a storytelling medium?

Kristin Atwell Ford: Film became my medium because all the different disciplines I'm interested in are expressed in film. The underlying foundation of film is writing and storytelling. Really the goal—the overarching reason people make films—is storytelling. It's a form that encompasses the performing arts, which is where I started in my career. That experience of gathering people together to share stories in a theater, whether for film or dance or theater or musical theater—that's still the same impulse. It's just that film was the right expression of that for me.

J.D. & S.P.: Your work strikes us as a synthesis between many moving and different parts. How do you create such a unique synthesis within your films?

K.A.F.: The synthesis of filmmaking is no different than the alchemy of writing, dance, or theatre. It is a tapestry of ideas, painted with colors, tempos, and moods. Different disciplines weave with different materials but the creative process is the same. The stew of ideas, the expression or illustration of thoughts and feelings, comes together in the right expression, the right medium for that story. Synthesis in filmmaking; the fusion of image, sound, time, and emotion can only be built by teamwork. It's the director's job to cast the vision and then be open to all the strengths and divergent views from the other team members to chart a course for how to get there. It is a journey that often ends up in an unexpected destination, but the emotional experience of the story is always crystal clear for me from day one.

J.D. & S.P.: What draws you to producing documentaries rather than fiction stories?

K.A.E.: I've always liked true stories. A lot of it came from being a river runner. We would get around the campfire at night on the river and you'd tell the stories of like, oh, we went into this rapid and we were going to run it this way, but this wave hit us, and it pushed us to the center, and we ran the hole. But we held on, and we got through it. This impulse to relive our most heightened moments together and how those stories become touch points for the culture that we share has always had a powerful influence over me. I have profound respect for fiction writers. You know, what do they call fiction? The lie that tells the truth. And the ability to craft something out of your mind that creates an experience. Art brings us into ourselves in a way that we can't get normally. But to fashion stories out of what people say, the documents we leave behind—to create art out of the real tinder of our lives is what moves me.

J.D. & S.P.: How has being an alum of Stephens affected you and your career, if at all?

K.A.E.: Stephens is the basis of everything I do in my work, whether I'm writing or producing. I'm creating a synthesis between people, between organizations and the public, between viewers and an audience. I was given access to a liberal arts education in the best sense of the word because I was able to explore everything that was of interest to me. I was able to synthesize the information from different disciplines into single narratives or stories that I wanted to share. So, my time at Stephens, learning art history, studying different religions, mythology, and all the women's studies courses I took were groundbreaking for me in terms of my own self-confidence. I took classes wherever I was interested. The course catalog would come out and it was like Christmas morning, and I could pick whatever I wanted to study. Because I had no defined major, I thought I was going to become an actor. I was learning as much about the world as I could to inform the characters that I was going to create as an actor. It turned out that my time at Stephens completely changed the trajectory of what I thought I wanted to do in life because I got to discover my own voice and my own creative process.

J.D. & S.P.: Many of your films are set in Arizona. You were born and raised there but what else ties your creativity and filmmaking to that place?

K.A.F.: One of my most humbling inspirations is the landscape of the Southwest. The desert is my creative and spiritual home. In the desert, there is nothing more precious than water, which brings the possibility of life for all living things. It is that dynamism between everlasting rock and capricious water that moves me to be part of this community and try to reflect our culture. (Plus, what better dramatic tension could there be between drought and flood?) I'm moved by being in wild places and deeply bonded to the people I get to experience them with.

J.D. & S.P.: Your most recent film focuses on the struggles and advocacy of your mother before *Roe v. Wade*. How did you go about telling a more personal story about yourself and your family? How did it differ from the more expansive documentaries you have released in the past?

K.A.F.: Telling a personal family story has been a monumental challenge. I'm more accustomed to being a witness to the stories of others. As a storyteller, I usually step back and look for the themes and patterns. I want to emotionally connect with the subject but maintain a scholarly distance as the storyteller. With my mom's story, I am revisiting my mother's greatest trauma and that is a delicate proposition.

In 1962 my mother, Sherri Chessen (Finkbine), unwittingly ingested Thalidomide, a drug that causes severe fetal anomalies. When her story became public, she had to leave Arizona and travel to Sweden for a safe procedure. Sherri was judged in headlines and hate mail from across the globe but her conviction to determine what was best for her family opened the discussion for abortion reform in the United States. It's an inspiring story, but also a sad one. It's a serious subject matter with the potential to alienate many people. It also gets heavy to work on when you research the impact Thalidomide had on people's lives, navigate the delicate waters of disability, and deal with the profound complexity of abortion. My films are designed to bring people together and build common ground. So the challenge is to apply my style of storytelling and my mother's approach to her abortion, which she pursued out of love for her family, to tell a story that could be strident and angry—because there is plenty to be angry about in the way women are being mistreated and traumatized in this country since the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision in 2022—but instead illustrate that my mother's abortion was an act of love.

J.D. & S.P.: What advice would you give a young creative who is just starting out in their field?

K.A.F.: Trust your voice and be curious about people around you. We can get up in our own heads and think we must rack our brains to find all the answers and to come up with creative solutions. But that willingness to let go and interact with people and see unexpected solutions can be powerful.

J.D. & S.P.: As a whole, what do you want to say with your creative endeavors?

K.A.F.: That we're not alone. We all have unique experiences that inform our approach to life. If someone can watch something that I have made and feel more connected to themselves, to the people around them, more connected to the landscape and the earth, there's tremendous power in that.

CREATED IN HIS IMAGE

Lydia Sheehan

He stands behind the potter, directing her delicate,
not-yet-tired hands.

She fights for control of their creation,
putting in the effort and getting none of the credit or praise.
He throws the clumps down, over and over,
hoping to make it into something resilient.

He throws it into the fire head-first,
letting it become hard and delicate.

He scrapes away at the rough edges that threaten
the need for obedience and uniformity.
He uses it to hold all his needs and wants,
but never remembers its use.
He drops it on the ground and watches it shatter,
before mending it with Scotch tape
He paints over the cracks so no one notices them
and glazes over the mistakes.
He will continue to break it
then make it shine to show it off?
He molds the clumps of clay into the perfect creation he imagines
and continues to do the same with every new piece.

He learned from the potters before him
What not to do and what he believes he's doing better.

No one would ever guess
his creation went through all that.

THE CONSORTIUM

Genavieve Hudson

We slither, each tentacle its own mindful snake
of feeling and conscious, and we explore, with
our suckers that are like talons, but soft and supple,
so that our grip is firm, yet as gentle as a cat's nip.

When we thrust ourselves like propellers through the water,
we soar as falcons of Under, great pressure around us.

We are found everywhere, the great, curious,
and sprightly wanderers, painted and repainted with the textures and colors
of our homes made in the sand banks, the pools, the reefs,
and the open, where we grace in pulses.

Each limb is a feather, with its own intuitions,
flaring in undulations that crawl along with precision.

Our skin is of variety, but also of a moistened quality,
as if the water infused us, became us,
and we returned to it,
plucked experiences of the composite.

Our eyes are not so much for seeing,
as for sensing, briefly, and our arms do our seeking,

like hawk's wings, unfurl,
the sensation like a hedonistic exploitation,
of our beautiful, refined, multi-cultural bodies,
of everywhere in the nowhere,

hide in the plain sight and scent,
conceal in the middle of nothing.

We erupt from our nests,
snatching the crabs and the fish that shift
the water, unable to become it,
as the collective becomes the sea,

and the sea, with plunging, lurching, laboring,
strength made of galaxial reflections, imparted sweetly,

like a loving kiss upon the surface, never daring too deep,
where the tremendous, volatile community preys,
where we hold scaled, finned, or tentacled grips, warmly, with the violent,
and embrace the serenity, the grandeur and picturesque.

When seen, our crawling, soaring, savory forms,
tucked, quietly, in the beds of the corals and sand,

and the sea, flush and enamoring,
lulls the mystery through us and our likeness,
alien and unknown, in strange depths and shallows,
like the tidal of a thought.

Here is the body; see it, feel it, taste the salt on your lip,
the power that seduces the sky's honeyed mirror,

as the subtle creatures toil within,
like us, clad in watery pelts,
our heads without true shape, malleable
as this body of sea.

THE AGGREGATION

Genavieve Hudson

Our collective is in a gentle, affectionate bond,
in our mothership, and in the social obligation we have
to our calves, who we smother in our attention,
so that they are our most important soul, and we
seek, aspire through them,
through their new, simple eyes,
big black jade beads tucked in pudgy fossil gray creases,
that wonder of the Above and the Below,
to which we are vulnerable.

We breath this collective, through our stone noses,
like the nostrils of a harvest feeder, of cattle,
with backs swaddled in moss,
our bodies ovaline eggs, fragile crackings
with fins like paddles that spank the water.

Ours is that of blood, a hive made through genetics,
makes us stay afloat, to spite our soft
mammalian flesh, and despite the throes of dangers
that cast our bulked, herbivorian forms into threat, and so
ours are those that know of destruction,
of homes, built of thriving seagrass
—which drift and dance to the symphony of the tides—
being cut short, lives chopped into decaying memories,
of once prosperous cycles, of once reverent youth.

Watch experience fade into memory,
watch vibrancy fade into a mellow spiritlessness,
watch a collective fade into nothing. . .
a continuous cycle of death
and rebirth is cut short, like the swirling
pirouette of a heavenly body, ending
in evaporated tissue, wrinkling like our ancient skin,
and we synonymously float, aimless.

Dreams are left drifting, amongst the piles
of stacking sealife that were once elevated beauty
of foaming sapphire and seagreen,
flowing from tropic paradises,
from underwater Edens,
that are razed into melancholy nightmares of mechanization,
become the sand shoals of our adolescence,
an unsurvivable purgatory.

But the memories overflow,
with a sweet, pungent taste,
like durian, honey, cloy and savory.
The edges, spilled with bitterness,
like shaded brushstrokes, black and white on a canvas
with destroyed habitats,
and the dream curls up, fetal, and prays
for revitalization, for rebirth, amongst the collective.



THE BLOOM

Genavieve Hudson

from the roots, the trees burst,
blooming, from the coral beds,
wispy, translucent willows,
thoughtless lissome bodies,
drifting afloat in the tides,
everywhere in the expanse

with flares of dragonfly wings,
caressing upon the water
temples of soft membrane,
mesoglean memories

of fervent currents,
storms gracing the surface,
gentling carousels beneath,
cast paintings on the walls

and a sisterhood,
overlapping nurtures,
of odd growing,
from sessile forms

a unity made of vines,
thorned and seaweed juniper,
directionless,
sensing right there,
across leagues of sanctioned cerulean,
with moments glistening atop

a whetted dream,
pearls dug from mantle structures,
swimming in the eggs,
of the mother,
larvae,
from where both share origin

and from where
emerges the subtle dismantling,
of innocence, shredded
by generational teeth,
that graze upon each other

a tempestuous association,
an unknowing, nerved breath,
untaken,
first held in spring,
in hexagonal combs,
in rocky structures,
unstable and unexplored

orbital lives,
crowned in gelatin trembles,
an epiphany among collective,
an unconditional harmony,
an undecayable bloom

THE DEVIL'S GREAT CITY

Allison Easter

Mrs. Connie Dean asked me what I thought of the city one morning. It was sort of an unexpected thing, as though she'd asked when I was due to wash my linens. I had only been there once, I told her, but she insisted on hearing my thoughts. I told her plainly, "The city howls in the morning, when the air is crisp and the wind rushes through the orchard. It's an ominous thing, like the moaning of a sickly child or an old, bed-ridden, pastor. Something one does not see but can't help listening to." She said that was very moving, and that she'd never heard the city "howl," but somehow always knew.

Connie couldn't ever hear good after getting caught up in a grain silo when she was twelve. She always joked that there was corn in her ears, and that if she ever got too hot, it'd "pop-pop-pop," and her head would come off.

She wanted to hear more. So, I told her what Papa always said, "It's just the cars in the morning. They roll on down the paved roads and push air through the tall buildin's. Ain't nothin' but wind, Darlene." I told Connie I don't believe him. She asked me why, and I got all theatrical. Mama says my behavior is from readin' too many'a grand-dad's old books, but I told Connie what I felt from my heart.

"I know the wind," I said. "It sings to us here on the hilltop. It recites the holy passages, belting with a voice more delicate than choir boys, and with more passion than the preacher."

"The air of the city is cloying and insidious," I continued, feeling my face get hot with an anger that really wasn't mine.

"It snatches up beautiful young women and tears ribbons into their cheeks—hot, angry tears that claw themselves through caked-on makeup."

Connie told me I spoke a whole lotta truth. I didn't ask why she wanted to know, not that she'd ever tell me. Connie is mysterious like that. Grandma called it "verve." Papa calls it "loony-talk."

I thought about it later. I really have seen it happen. Nearly a dozen ladies left the county in the last year. All of them returned, pin-thin and ragged. They flew to their mothers, pleading, crying, mourning something terrible that they had lost in the city. I wouldn't dare ask what—any mention of their stay would redden their eyes and send tremors through their hands. Mama told me they'd seen the Devil.

I promised myself I'd never go there, but work begets work. We had to sell a young heifer to a man in the city—she was good stock, and he offered to pay maybe three months my father's check for her. We couldn't say no.

The ride there felt like a stain on a blouse, ugly and obvious. Our carriage

rattled on the uneven streets. We were gawked at. We were old relics, the long dead now walking.

To talk price, we met the buyer in a dingy hovel that reeked of gin and desperation. A tall, dark woman crooned into a microphone, shadowed by a quartet of men who caterwauled into dented instruments. The noise was terribly upsetting but paled in comparison to the exhibition our buyer only referred to as “cabaret.”

Hollow, fragile-looking women sauntered up and down the hovel’s stage, quivering and howling like starving alley cats. I’m sure if you startled one, they’d scamper off on all fours, their short, greasy hair standing on end. They kicked their legs up high, and Papa covered my eyes. I could feel his teeth clench, but we were here for good reason. We’d have to grin and bear it, and we wouldn’t dare tell Mama. I fear it’d be the death of her. A hawk-nosed woman beside me whooped and hollered at the stringy dancers, whistling sharply just as a man would call upon a corner-store escort. Was she mad, or simply just too far into drink to tell the difference? These dancers looked like ash-dressed devils stomping their black hooves and wearing their black helmets.

We ended the awful night toasting to good fortune. What a lot of rot that was. We clinked glasses with the buyer, and his gin spilled into mine, splattering on the table and dribbling down my fingertips. I thought better of myself not to hit him.

Hours later, we were back on the trundling—yet far calmer—ride home. I was merely watching the grass blow in the breeze when I had quite the start. It was pitch black and no earlier than midnight, but the wire fence marking the county-line was crowded with movement. I thought it jackrabbits or some of Connie Dean’s goats that had gotten out, which would make it the fourth time this month. Sure enough, it was children! Little Ronald Baux’s favorite hat caught the light of the moon as he hopped the fence, followed by a swarm of clamorous youths that surrounded Papa’s carriage, sending the horses into fits.

They jabbered and jostled one another for space until Papa shushed them with a crack of his whip. They were bug-eyeing me like I’d just returned from Hell itself. Tiny Miss Anna-Marie—Connie Dean’s granddaughter—grabbed me by the arm and jumped up and down, asking me “what it was like,” “why did it take so stinkin’ long,” and “why did I look so cantankerous.” She didn’t say that last part, but I knew she would if she could. Papa gave them a look that’d break a mule, but didn’t say anything aside from asking them to “git out the damn way,” as I got off the carriage to try and calm their hysterics.

I got them to settle in the pavilion at the corner of St. James and Ash, a cute little white gazebo that hardly contained them all. Wylie Forrester couldn't keep it in much longer, shouting across half the neighborhood if I'd "seen any who-ores like Nana Baker or Miss Crawford." After telling him to pipe down and not to call poor, old, Miss Crawford that, I remember sighing and rolling my head between my shoulders. I had seen whores, I told them. They danced on stage and sat on men's laps wearing clothes thinner than cellophane! Isabella Crane nearly shrieked, clutching the ends of her petticoat as though it would try to fly off her. They drank and danced and smoked like stovepipes, all while caterwauling about broken hearts and dead lovers. Frankie Marion cackled like a loon as some of the girls tried to shut him up. He was red in the face by the time they managed to clamp their tiny hands over his mouth. I regaled them with my story, but I couldn't tell them everything.

I didn't tell them about the hawk-faced woman, the liquor-pigs in the streets, or the sound of girdles popping as wives snarled at their husbands for ending up in such a place. I wouldn't tell them all of the awful things—it'd scare them for life—but they gobbled up what I did tell them. It was enough to satisfy their drama-hungry bellies. Afterwards, I walked them back to the center of town. They knew their ways home from there.

That night, I thought long and hard about what I had seen and why things were changing so much and so fast. I couldn't come up with anything substantial. When I think about Paula Brooks and Josie Newman, two girls who left the city and came back in tears, I think of them like soldiers. The so-called "Great War" sent so many men to die, and those who came back were never the same. Were there women dying in the city? Were there parlor booths, trenches, and the wine bottles, rifles? Were their black helmets made of metal and cordage, designed to stop bullets, but never actually able to? Were their boyish dresses, uniforms, flat shoes, and their boots? I don't know. It makes me sick in my throat just thinking about it. Connie Dean said she didn't know either.

She told me to go back to the city, just once. She asked me to look in the eyes of those dancers, and think of the eyes of Paula Brooks, of little Anna-Marie, of myself, and of her.

"We're all women," she said. "But not all of us have seen Hell."

NATALIE CLIFFORD BARNEY'S LAVISH LIST OF LOVES

Alena Harper

To love only once was never in my nature. My love is meant to be handed out freely like sprinkling breadcrumbs to hungry pigeons. Were I a man, I ought to have made a mighty fine businessman, considering I seldom heard a “no” to my offerings.

I had three kinds of love: liaisons, demi-liaisons, and adventures. My adventures were many and fleeting. My demi-liaisons were a couple and friendly. My liaisons were few and fruitful.

The first was Evelina. She was a medieval beauty with red hair to her ankles. It's well she was not born in Ancient Greece, lest she give Aphrodite a jealous fit. We were young, so we talked about poetry and horses and then kissed.

Liane de Pougy was irrevocably French. To say she was beautiful would be a drastic understatement. Yet, words leave me when I'm in her presence, and alas all I can tell you is that she was beautiful. She could be won over easily by a page cap and an audacious attitude. Both of which I had plenty. But she could not be rescued. A damsel who'll take the kiss, but not the castle.

Renee was a poet, and I was her muse. She had an odd proclivity toward suffering. She wanted to keep me shelved, but she stayed with me because I refused. So totally and completely obsessed with her own pain. We daydreamed in Lesbos for a short while, before she finally got bored of me.

Olive was a quick exchange of love poems. A final night of fun for Olive, before she settled down and married. A taunt to Renee.

Dolly was an addict and an addiction. My fascination with her uncle Oscar led to an engrossment with her. As a simple party trick, she would sometimes dress up like him, talk like him, be him. This man she had never met yet embodied so fully. She had me enchanted and nostalgic for my youth. I wish my time with her had been longer. But, as I said, she was an addict. I often wonder if I was her favorite addiction, but I'm not sure I'd like the answer very much either way.

Lucie was adoring. A bit of a fan. I initiated her into life, she said. She introduced me to love with Elisabeth.

To Elisabeth I signed over my life. She had already lived what seemed

**WE DAYDREAMED
IN LESBOS FOR
A SHORT WHILE,
BEFORE SHE
FINALLY GOT
BORED OF ME.**

like half a life when I met her. A father who squandered their wealth, a stingy stepmother, a rushed marriage for security. I despised her husband as he despised me. He tried once to keep us apart. It didn't work very well. After her dreadful husband left her, we formed our own union. A contract not based on mere fidelity, but on true loyalty of the heart. Our love was exclusive, though our beds were not. She is so very gracious to unexpected guests. She will make us tea before leaving us to bed. Never have I met a woman so polite in the face of nonmonogamy. I shall very much like to die in her arms. If she does not die in mine first.



BROKEN GLASS

Isabella Walker

Hands full of wet dirty dishes
and soap-covered edges

I scrub them all clean
one after another

Gently placing each clean
and pristine dish away
in the proper place

I try to take my time
but it gets ahead of me

A glass slips
shattered rainbow shards
cover the floor

With a sigh
I begin to clean the mess
hundreds of little pieces
that can never be put back

I've seen you do this before
you taught me the right way

Shoes on
Gentle hands
Delicate motions
Swift sweeping
Double checking for more
Discarding in a bin
that you won't touch again

I'm careful in picking it up
as not to hurt myself

The same way
you would pick me up
and carry me away from the mess

You showed me from afar
how to collect the tiny pieces

put them in a pile
sweep them all up
scrub the floor clean

When you were done
you'd lift me back up
bring me close

your warm body and caring hands
showing me the shiny clean floor

You'd smile at me
and say "see! all done"
plant a kiss on my cheeks
then let my bare feet run

But now I'm alone
crying over shards of glass
because you were the one
who taught me how to pick it up

but you're not here anymore
and my finger is cut

folk saints

Jubilee Forbess

i love you because you are light
not because you led a perfect life—
but because you did your best and
your best was awesome, in fact,
the coolest thing about it is how
you kept getting up no matter the
way they kept hitting you, true,
there were moments where i would
look away, i mean, who doesn't?
we all do—
it keeps our hearts in line, right.

i love you because i see
who you are when no one else looks.
when you blow a kiss to a baby in line or
hold a cold cross to your chest,
i see you catch hope with two open hands
and let kids win those arcade games,
and leave a light on in case
the prodigal son returns,
you are pasted like panko crumbs
to the chicken of my life,
healing and shaping and creating and providing—

i love you because you show me a different way.
there is divinity in our choices,
and to choose well is a sacred state of mind.
i pray with your eyes in my hot little palms,
and i keep your name like a promised devotion
folded like a flower between the pages of a book.
i love you, all of you, any of you, elevated by patience
and mumbled sleepiness
one, two, three fireflies,
the holy trinity visiting, observing,
the folks and their saints
and each saint once one of them.

spark birds

Jubilee Forbess

what made you love the words
on your tongue,
behind teeth?

what force created flames and
let them lick up the walls
like
climbing
spiders,
tangled
in a web?

what heaviness on your heart or joy kept in your eyes
leapt out and slammed into the page,
words on paper
and it became all the rage, for you

what was the bumblebee of a question
that stung your lips and stumbled
into a room full of books and pens
and the letters of the alphabet stacked
on shelves upon shelves and piled
in little messy-neat stacks all over,
i mean,
all over the floor?

what
was it that compelled you
to begin this journey of
heroes and villains and syntax
and motifs and reimagining and
i don't know
playlists for empty google docs, fantasy maps, pinterest boards,
walks in the park with your headphones on
and you're bounding, bouncing ideas off
your best friend and
rattling,
rattling,
like a sick straw
with a dream;
what was it?

i have my own.
stars beaming,
waterfalls, wedding videos, or
those where a guy sees his kid
or dog
for the first time after like,
a really long time?
and ten o'clock news i saw with grandma in the flickering low-light living room,
moths drawn to anything brighter than themselves, like me, and
what else? everything else...
free time, prayer, a poster of a cat or steaming white rice.
it's not one thing just like i don't love one way, how can i explain myself?

i learned a term:
"spark bird"
if i had to pick,
i'd still have
an aviary of
things that made me
a poet, a partner, a person with a hyperactive
little spirit.

i feed the bluebird a cheese ball and tell her not to cry

Jubilee Forbess

we are strong and independent, i whisper to the bluebird.
she is dressed to the nines and her songs are all written by women.
her cage is lathered with bath and body works soaps and smells like heaven,
everything she could want for herself is within reach. i feed her any kind
of junk food or vitamin, we watch the bachelorette and project runway,
she is a girl's girl and goes to bed by ten pm.
my bluebird wants the first female president—
do i have the heart to tell her the first female president
doesn't want either of us?
my bluebird keeps me naive because
every time she pipes up with a concern
of the heart, i give her another cheeseball.
don't cry—
don't worry about it !
i find her shaking with remorse
in the morning, choking on
orange dust and begging me
to let her out of the cage.
but it's such a nice place to be,
i wish she was out here
and i was locked behind the key.
i hand her a job application
and tell her to start filling it.
if she won't work for me,
i'm sure there's some other
wounded poet
waiting for their conscious
to return home.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



Shannon Allabaugh graduated from Stephens College in December 2025 with a B.A. in English. Primarily a fiction writer, she also enjoys writing poetry and nonfiction. When not writing, she can often be found practicing aerial arts. Shannon is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, a former *Harbinger* intern, and the college's undergraduate commencement speaker. This is her first publication.



Baylee Bleu is a senior English major and creative writing minor. This is her third publication in *Harbinger*. Her work has also been published in the online journal, *The Ekphrastic Review*. She is the showrunner and lead writer for two seasons of *The Sisterhood Archives* audio drama series. After graduation in May 2025, she will pursue a career in fiction, poetry, and scriptwriting.



Jordan Davis is a creative writing major and Editor-in-Chief of *Stephens Life Magazine*, President of Black Women Enlightened and Sigma Tau Delta. She is an avid reader of African American literature, particularly the work of Langston Hughes and James Baldwin. This is her second publication in *Harbinger*.



Kadence "Jo" Douglas is a sophomore creative writing major. She is an active member of Sigma Tau Delta and *Stephens Life Magazine*, as well as president of Spiritual Susies. Her biggest supporter is her cat, Yoshi. Her short stories and literary interview are featured in this year's *Harbinger*, and she is very excited to share them with you.



Allison Easter is a sophomore English major who plans to pursue a career in education and editorial work. She works as an English tutor at Stephens' Student Success Center. In her free time, she is hard at work on a series of novels and online stories. This is her first publication in *Harbinger*.



Jubilee Forbess is a sophomore who studies creative writing at Stephens College. She can be found in her room watching movies, snacking, and reading. Jubilee is the vice president of Sigma Tau Delta chapter and will be presenting her work at the 2025 conference in Pittsburgh. This edition of *Harbinger* will be her second publication in the magazine. She has a rabbit and a boyfriend, and only one of them stays in a cage. Her poetry book, *Tropical Studio Fight Pit*, was self-published in 2021, and her first novella *The Present* is forthcoming in 2025.



Emily Greenwood is a freshman majoring in communication design. She has a long-standing love for writing and poetry across many genres and is proud to present her first publication in *Harbinger*. She is a current volunteer at the True/False film festival.



Alena Harper is a junior majoring in creative writing. This is her first year working on the *Harbinger* staff, and second time being published in the magazine. Previously, she has worked as a writer and voice actor on *Sisterhood Archives*, a fictional audio drama. She enjoys reading and writing fiction and poetry that is surreal and mystical, along with a sense of humor.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES



Genavieve Hudson is a junior creative writing student and new initiate of Sigma Tau Delta, who transferred to Stephens College fall 2024. She is excited for her work to be featured in the 2025 issue of *Harbinger*. The poems in this year's edition are her collection-in-progress: *Seahive; An Oceanic Installment*, which was accepted for presentation at the 2025 Sigma Tau Delta Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is her first time being published, so she hopes that you enjoy her work.



J. Hunter is a freshman creative writing major and member of *Stephens Life Magazine*. You can find them at any point in time reading, writing, and/or listening to Hip Hop/RnB music. This is their first time publishing a piece in *Harbinger*, and they are looking forward to sharing more pieces in the future.



Sarah Phillips is a sophomore majoring in English. She is a writer for *Stephens Life Magazine*, an active member of Sigma Tau Delta, and Vice President of Spiritual Susie's. Her poems are featured in this year's edition of *Harbinger*. She has a passion for giving voices back to women and writing about familiar feelings of grief and loneliness.



Lydia Sheehan is a senior majoring in creative writing at Stephens College. This is her first year on the *Harbinger* staff. She is the secretary for Sigma Tau Delta and a member of the Warehouse Theatre Company. Outside class, she can be found on FaceTime with friends, watching a new movie at Ragtag Cinema or frantically writing lyric ideas in the notes app. She is interested in pursuing playwriting and continuing songwriting and poetry after graduation.



Miah Sickler is an English and creative writing major and a new initiate of Sigma Tau Delta. This is their first time publication in *Harbinger*, and their first year working on the magazine. They have a soft spot for fairy tales and creation stories, as illustrated in their short story “The Song of Something.”



Ollie Ubaldo is a freshman creative writing major. Her works focus on nature, romance, and other soft things in life. This is her very first publication in *Harbinger*, and she is looking forward to sharing more of her creative work in the future.



Thalma Wahab is a sophomore biology major with a chemistry minor. She is currently a member of Tri-beta, Design Collective, Black Woman Enlightened, and Stephens College Planning Committee. During her free time, she loves sewing, reading, and ice skating. This is her first *Harbinger* publication.



Isabella Walker is a senior creative writing major at Stephens and co-editor of *Harbinger* this year. This will be her second publication in this magazine along with having been published in the *Mid Rivers Review*. She was also an editor for the *Gateway Review*. Isabella is working on her first poetry collection while concluding her college career, aiming to be finished by the end of 2025. She is excited to be ending her year with the release of this edition of *Harbinger*.



About the Cover: Lillian Anson is a senior communications design major with a minor in arts and humanities. She is passionate about using history to engage and educate in design and illustration. When she learned about this year's *Harbinger* theme, "Storyboard," it resonated very deeply with her. As a versatile artist, storyboarding is an integral part of her creative process. Using elements from her own stories and the writings in this edition of *Harbinger*, Lillian designed the cover to show the raw and detailed process in creating art. She took some inspiration from a cover mockup by Dr. Bethanie Irons for some of the images on the cover and interior pages.

