

the traveler



12 X 8 IN.
28 X 20 CM.
100 SHEETS

VOLUME 58
MULTI-MEDIUM
SKETCH PAPER

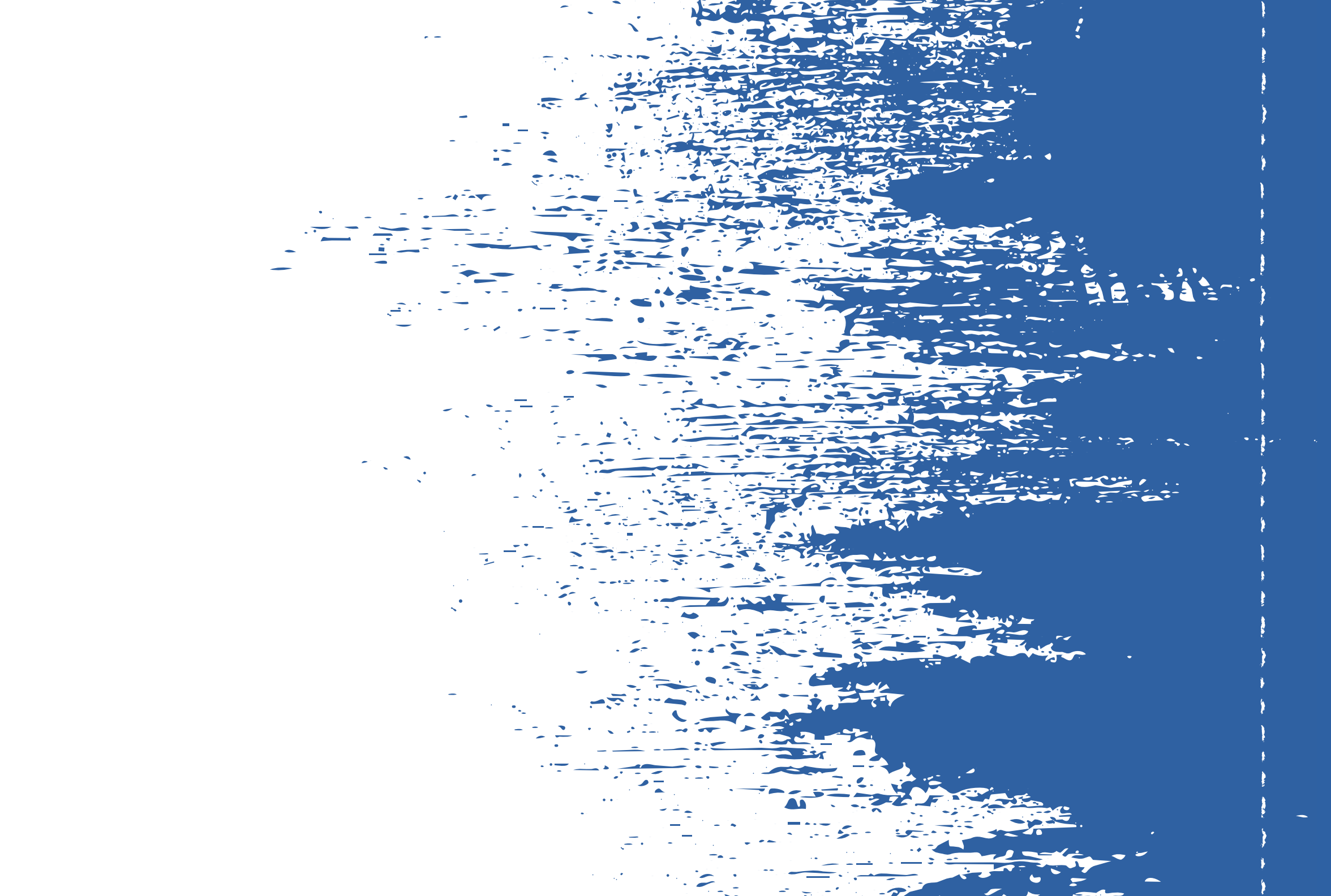
THE TRAVELER

VOLUME 58 | 2026

WARNING ... *the contents of this publication are uncensored.*

The Traveler may include adult content not be suitable for all ages.





This volume of *The Traveler* is a celebration of human creativity and the quiet journey of art in the making. From the first spark of an idea to its final form, we explore how imagination becomes something tangible. By rediscovering the value of time, skill, and intention, this edition highlights the creative process as an evolution shaped by trial, error, refinement, and growth.

Across disciplines and mediums, each work reveals what is often unseen, the marks, revisions, and decisions beneath the finished piece. Ideas are sketched, tested, reworked, and refined. What begins as a fragment develops through patience and care into something whole. Creation is not instant. It is built through time, persistence, and the presence of the human hand.

This is the nature of the handmade.

Work shaped slowly, through touch, repetition, and intention. Craftsmanship is not only seen in the final form, but in every step that leads to it, in the choices, adjustments, and care that define *the process*.

In a world that often rushes toward outcomes, this collection lingers in the process. It honors the drafts, the in-between moments, and the subtle shifts that give work its depth and meaning. Creativity is not only a result, but a practice. It is shaped by experience, perspective, and a willingness to continue.

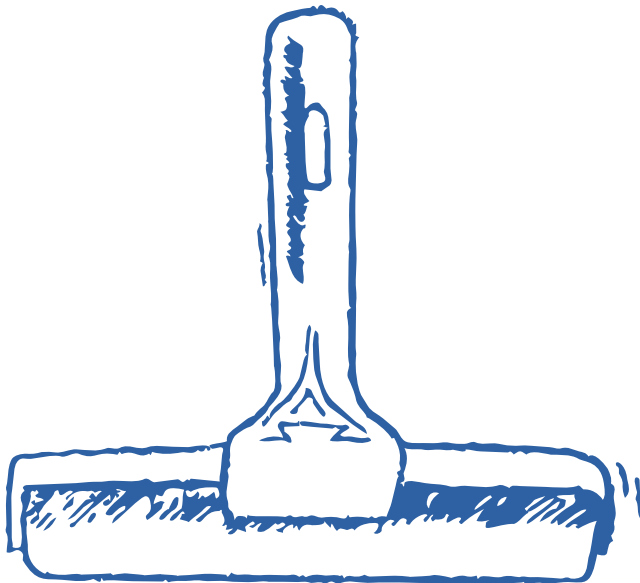
Traces of thought appear throughout in the form of student quotes. These reflections are not tied to any one artwork; instead, they offer general insight into the creative process, giving voice to the ideas, intentions, and experiences that shape artistic growth.

Nothing here is rushed.
Nothing here is accidental.

This is where ideas take *form*.
This is where *process meets imagination*.

Welcome to this year's edition of ...

..... *the traveler*



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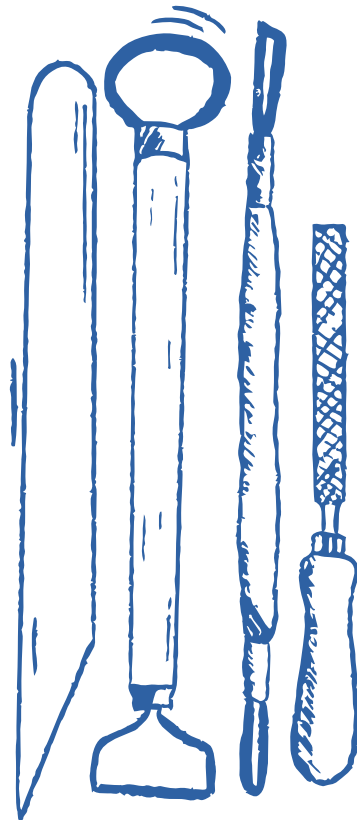
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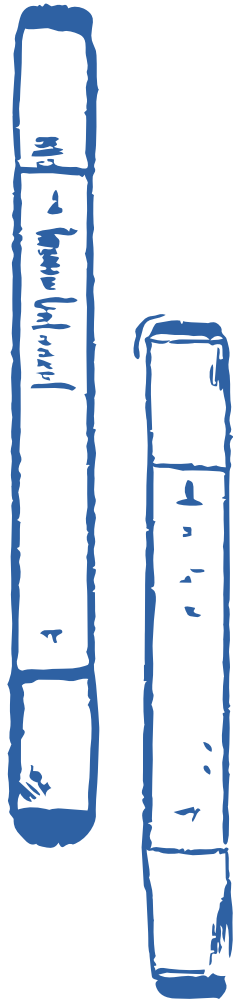
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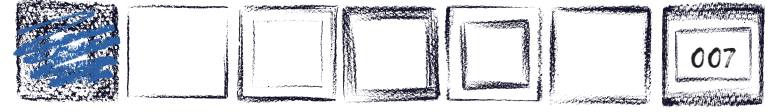
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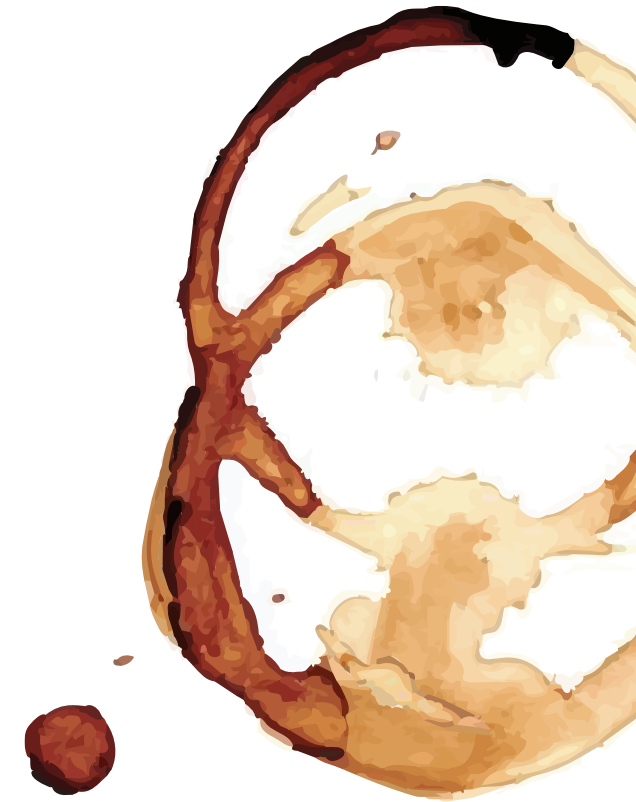
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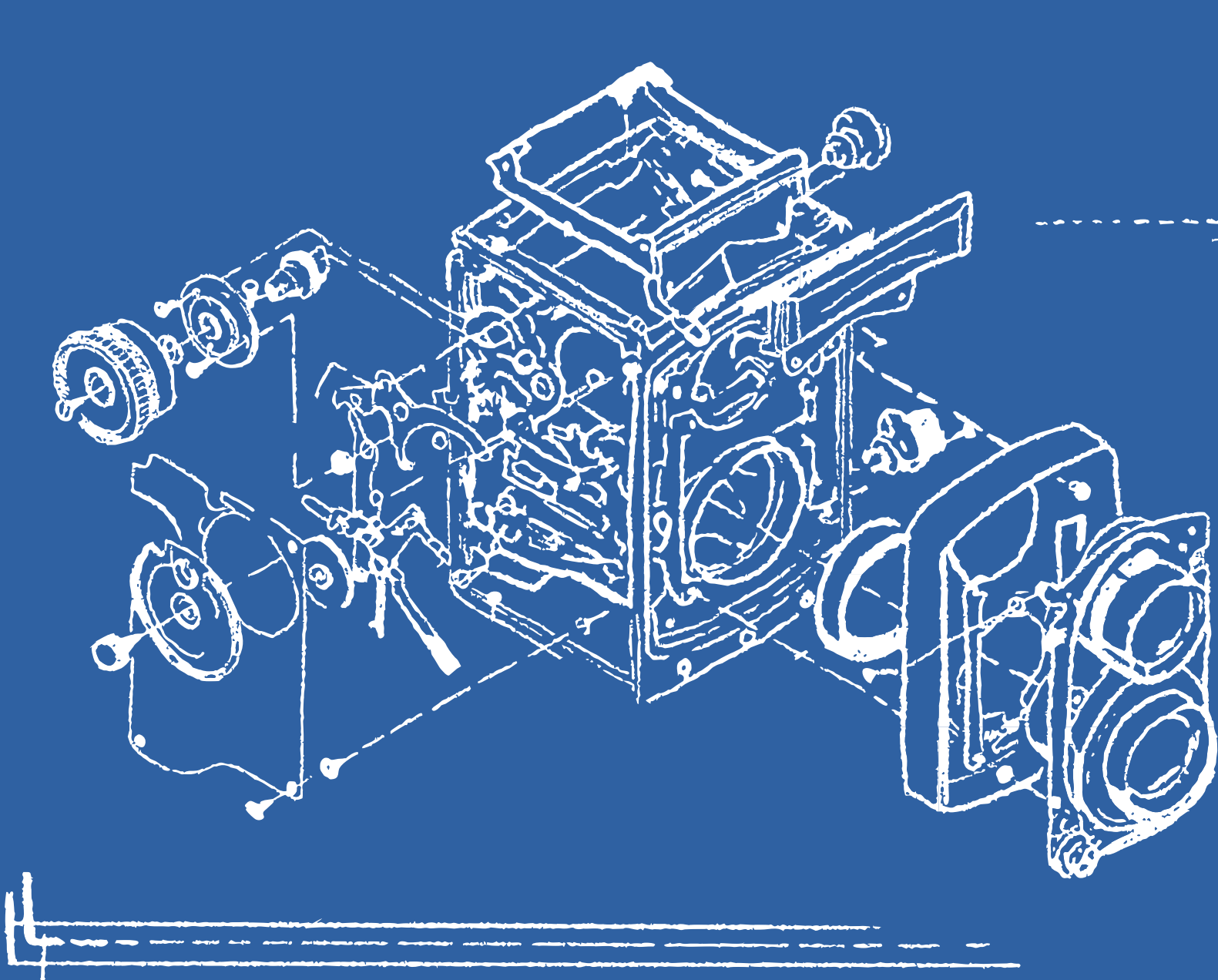


what creative tool do you use on a daily basis?

" ...just the essentials

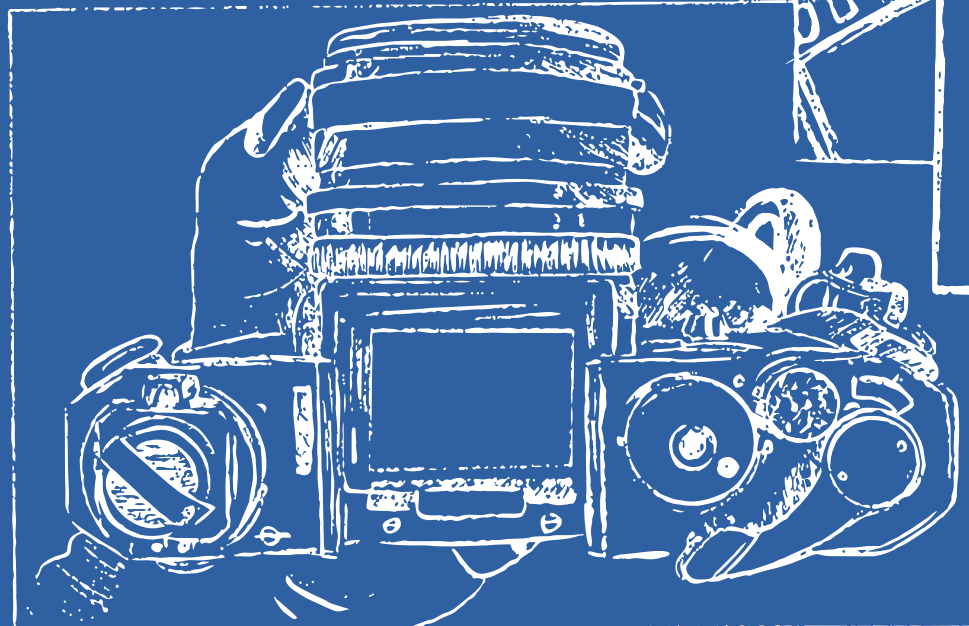
... coffee, energy drink, pencils... & my sketchbook "





fiction

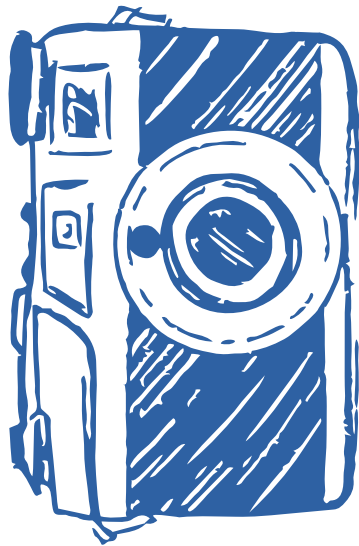
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The Last Sonatas

ALEX ARENO



Charles Thompson arrived at the stage door of Carnegie Hall a little before one o'clock. The stage manager had blocked a two-hour rehearsal time for him in preparation for tonight's recital, which would be his last. Charles had enjoyed a brilliant and satisfying career as a concert pianist and a renowned Beethoven interpreter, but arthritis was starting to work its way into his fingers. He knew he should quit before his audiences began to realize that something was wrong.

The stage manager had given Charles a badge for the security guard to scan. He had explained that the badge operated a security gate and was assigned especially to him, and that it would expire after the recital had concluded. "I hope I don't expire along with it!" Charles had jokingly told the stage manager.

West 57th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, where Carnegie Hall is located, is one of the richest and most prestigious, and one of the safest, blocks in all of Manhattan. But the stage door is in the rear, on West 56th Street – a little darker, quite a bit less traveled, much more foreboding. There was no telling who or what might be lurking. Charles glanced over each shoulder. Confident that he was alone, he opened the stage door and showed his badge. The guard scanned it and the security gate swung open.

The corridor leading to the Carnegie Hall stage is well lit, but is replete with narrow passageways full of twists and turns, off which open stairways leading to the dressing rooms. Charles felt somewhat lost in the maze, but finally made his way to the stage.

The work light was already lit on stage as Charles walked over to his piano: a Steinway Model D concert grand. Work lights cast odd shadows, he thought. The shadow cast by the piano lid in the stark glow of the work light reached out into the orchestra seats. It looked almost as if someone were sitting there. The red exit signs over each door in the orchestra, dress circle, parquet, first balcony and second balcony glowed in the dark auditorium like ghostly eyes staring at the stage.

Dismissing those grim thoughts, Charles eyed his piano fondly. Concert pianists often give their pianos names – Charles called his piano Ludwig, after Ludwig van Beethoven. He knew that many musicians think Steinway to be the finest piano in the world, and he agreed. The touch, the action, the tone, the sustaining power, are all unrivaled. It is almost impossible to play badly on a Steinway – the piano practically plays itself. One could easily pay almost as much for a Model D as one would pay for a house – and one would be getting

it cheap! "I'd rather not think of what I paid for you, Ludwig," Charles said out loud, "but you're worth every penny. We've made some beautiful music together, haven't we?"

Charles knew that Beethoven would have loved to have had a piano like this. But no. The piano had been invented in the early 1700s, and even though the instrument had advanced greatly by 1800, the year Beethoven began to notice that he was losing his hearing, the pianos Beethoven had to settle for were primitive compared to today's instruments. In fact, it is said that even if Beethoven had wanted to play his greatest sonatas on one of his pianos, the instrument would have fallen apart under the strain. Beethoven knew that he was writing for future generations, not his own.

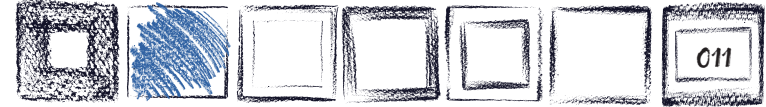
Charles sat down at Ludwig and tried a few chords and arpeggios. In perfect tune, he judged. His tuner had been there earlier and had done his usual good job.

Satisfied, he ran through the repertoire he was going to play at tonight's recital, his last: Beethoven's last three sonatas, among the last music for the piano that he ever wrote. Number 30 in E, Opus 109; Number 31 in A flat, Opus 110; and Number 32 in C minor, Opus 111. All three exceedingly difficult, yet incredibly beautiful. All three take the piano to the absolute limits of what the instrument is capable of producing. And Beethoven never heard a note of any of these sonatas. He wrote his greatest music after he had become completely deaf.

Charles finished up his practice run. He could play all three sonatas note-perfect, with all the storm and fire, but also all the tenderness, that Beethoven had put into them. His hands felt nimble and strong – not a hint of stiffness.

Arising from the bench, he closed the fallboard over the keys and lowered the piano lid. He knew that the stage manager would open them again, and give the piano a final polishing, before the recital tonight. His piano would look as beautiful as it sounds. He blew Ludwig a kiss as he walked off stage. Threading his way through the maze of passageways, he arrived at the stage door and stepped outside, again looking in either direction for who or what might, but shouldn't, be there. Walking the short distance to his hotel, he took the elevator up to his room.

A brief nap would be in order, Charles decided, before dinner and the recital. Not bothering to undress, he lay down on the bed. His mind wandered back to his student days at Juilliard and to his teacher, Rosina Lehvinne, wife of legendary pianist Josef Lehvinne. Madame, as all of her students always called her, was one of the finest, perhaps *the* finest, of all of



Beethoven never heard a note of any of these sonatas, but he surely must have imagined what they sounded like.

Juilliard's piano faculty Many of the 20th century's greatest pianists had studied under her, including Van Cliburn, John Browning and Misha Dichter. Charles was honored to count those three pianists among his closest friends. Van, John, Misha and Charles had spent many a Sunday afternoon at the soirees that Madame used to hold at her apartment. They all played for each other, with Madame gently correcting a trill here, a scale there, an arpeggio, a chord. Van's specialty was Chopin. John favored twentieth century American composers, in particular Samuel Barber. Misha played the frightfully challenging works of Franz Liszt. And Charles' area of expertise was, of course, Beethoven. Madame herself played Mozart better than Mozart probably did. What glorious music we made, he remembered. But Madame is gone now, as are Van and John. Misha is still alive, but an injury to his hand had put an end to his career. Charles was the last of the group who still played, and after tonight he too would no longer play.

As he reminisced over those wonderful times, his eyes grew heavy and he was soon fast asleep. Shortly he began to dream that he was playing the piano in a tomb. Van, John and Madame were there. "Join us," they said to him. He awoke with a start.

Putting the dream out of his mind, he showered and changed into fresh clothes, and ordered a light dinner from room service. Having eaten, he set out for the concert hall. He would change clothes again when he arrived. His "concert blacks" – tailcoat, trousers with suspenders, formal shirt, bow tie, cummerbund, black socks, black shoes – were waiting for him in the dressing room that had been assigned to him.

Passing in front of the hall on his way to the stage door entrance, Charles paused to look at the poster prominently displayed: FAREWELL PIANO RECITAL: CHARLES THOMPSON: PLAYING BEETHOVEN'S LAST THREE SONATAS. Beethoven's farewell to the piano – fitting choices for his recital. He also noticed the crowd waiting for the doors to open. He thought he recognized one of the people on line, but he wasn't sure.

Charles again approached the stage door with caution, and again the security guard let him in.

He found the stairway that led to his dressing room, and climbed up. Once there, he changed into his concert attire and waited for the stage manager to tell him he was on. That moment came, and Charles walked out on stage to loud applause from the sold-out house. As he took his bow, he noticed the person he had seen outside. The man was sitting

in the front row, center seat. His full head of long, gray, wavy hair framed a face that appeared to be frozen in a perpetual scowl. He wore a red cravat and a long dark jacket that was fashionable in days gone by. Where had he found it? Charles wondered.

As the applause subsided, Charles sat down at Ludwig and started in on Opus 109, the playful opening notes alternating between right and left hand, quickly segueing into a fantasy of arpeggios and scales. The melody suddenly turning dark. And Beethoven never heard a note of this, Charles marveled. The first movement ended well, and Charles began the second movement, which Beethoven wrote using his favorite form: theme and variations. The solemn opening theme had an air of "farewell" to it, Charles always imagined, as if Beethoven knew that he would not be writing much more. As the variations progressed through a variety of moods, they never lost that "farewell" sound. The movement, and the sonata, finally ended as quietly as it had begun.

Thunderous applause. As Charles stood for his bow, he noted that the gentleman in the red cravat seemed especially pleased.

Charles returned to his bench and began Opus 110, the quiet, sweet opening melody turning dark, and then stormy, but never losing its sweetness. The second movement playful, employing those trick rhythms that Beethoven reveled in – he so loved a joke. The slow, tragic third movement. Funereal. The fanciful fourth movement, a fugue, its theme suggesting flight. Was Beethoven thinking of a soul flying to heaven? Perhaps his soul?

The sonata ended in a spray of arpeggios and a final thunderous chord that rang out on the Steinway, his Ludwig, as only a Steinway could make it ring. Once more, roaring applause. The red-cravatted gentleman was actually not scowling any longer.

Intermission. Charles returned to his dressing room and sat down in the comfortable lounge chair the room was helpfully furnished with. He closed his eyes. The recital is going very well, he thought. His hands still felt as they had felt years ago.

He must have dozed off, as the stage manager's entering and telling him he was on again took him by surprise. Yes, he must have dozed, as now he felt more refreshed, more invigorated than ever. He gave himself a once-over in the mirror and returned to the stage, again to much applause. But as he bowed, he noticed that the red-cravatted gentleman had not returned to his seat. Oh well, he doesn't know what he's missing. Charles

It was almost as if
something else – what?
– was playing his Ludwig
here tonight.

thought.

Charles again sat down at the Steinway and started in on Beethoven's last masterpiece, his Opus 111. The abrupt opening chords segueing into scales played with the left hand at the very bottom of the keyboard, the right hand at the very top. Beethoven having a joke on us again.

He played well, but something felt strange. It was as if his hands were playing automatically. It was Charles who was pressing the keys, but it felt as if some unknown force was causing his fingers to move. This became more apparent as the first movement drew to a close, the final chords dissolving into that strange little bridge passage connecting the first and second movements. Did Beethoven imagine that he was crossing a bridge? The bridge between life and death? He remembered the dream he had dreamed in his hotel room. "Join us," the others had said. No, not yet, he thought. Beethoven himself had once said that he could not die until he had done all he felt called to do.

As Charles began the second movement, once more in the theme and variations form that Beethoven loved so much, he felt that odd force growing even stronger. The movement starts off quietly, with each variation rising in intensity. After the fifth variation, the movement detours into an extended fantasy of triplets and trills until the original theme returns in a rolling avalanche of sound.

All the while, Charles felt that curious force moving his fingers. They say that a Steinway practically plays itself, but it was almost as if something else – what? – was playing his Ludwig here tonight. He knew that he had always played well, and his audience was testimony to that, but he found himself playing better than he had ever played before. Not even the slightest hint of stiffness was evident in his hands. Beethoven had never heard a note of any of these sonatas, but he surely must have imagined what they sounded like. And Charles felt that what he was playing was at the heart and soul of Beethoven's imagination. Ludwig sounded almost like it was singing.

At length the musical avalanche settled and the sonata came to its quiet end. No sooner had Charles lifted his hands from the keys when the audience sprang to their feet and clapped more loudly than he thought an audience could clap. But where was the red-cravatted gentleman?

Having taken his final bow, Charles left the stage and climbed the stairs to his dressing room. "You have a visitor," the stage manager said as he approached the door. Entering,

he saw that he did indeed have a visitor. The red-cravatted gentleman was sitting in the dressing room's lounge chair. "Guten Abend," the gentleman said. He's speaking German, Charles realized. But then he continued in English: "The three sonatas that you played tonight were the last I ever wrote. I poured my entire being into them. But I never played them myself – I couldn't. My piano could not have taken the strain. And even if I could have played them, I never would have heard them."

Charles stood aghast, his face completely drained of blood. "Mein Meister!" he stammered. "Mein Herr!" He knew now who it was in whose presence he found himself.

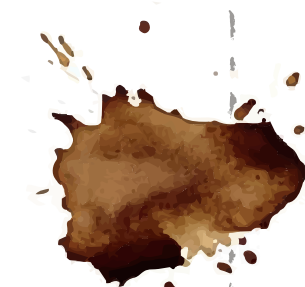
The ghost of Beethoven continued: "After intermission, you didn't know where I had gone. But you felt a strange force in your fingers as you began my Opus 111. I was that force. I played my last sonata through your fingers, on your wonderful piano, and I heard it through your ears. Ludwig, you call your piano, ja? You make me proud. I am grateful. Danke schön. And now, will you join me?"

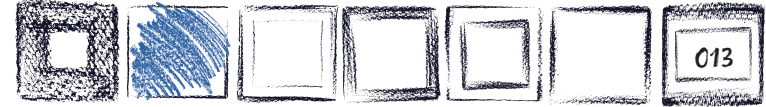
The ghost rose out of the chair, and Charles, in a daze, reached out to take his outstretched hand. He felt its grasp, but at the same time he realized that he was not grasping anything solid. The ghost's hand was merely an apparition. The two left the dressing room, descended the stairs, and found their way to the stage door exit. The security guard had gone off duty, Charles noticed.

Charles and the ghost stepped outside. The weather had suddenly turned stormy. A lightning bolt flashed across the sky, followed by a clap of thunder. And then the rain came. Charles spun around and nervously tried to open the door, hoping to seek shelter inside, but the door was locked.

"I died during a thunderstorm," Beethoven's ghost said. "My biographers say that I shook my fist at the heavens as I breathed my last. I don't remember doing that. I was glad to be joining those who had gone before me. But won't you join us now? Madame and your friends are waiting."

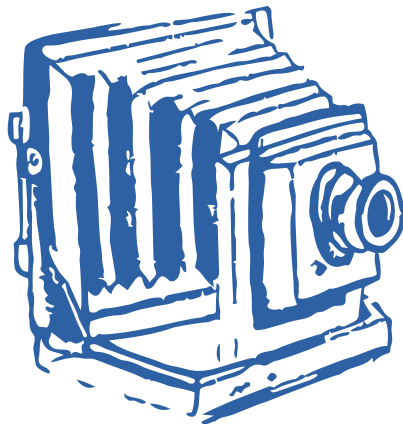
The ghost beckoned to him. Charles took a step forward. It was the last step he would ever take.





There's No Place Like Hell For The Holidays

LIESL MEADOR



Alex held in her groan, her grandmother bustling in the kitchen nearby. Pots clanged loudly against the counter, and the unmistakable scent of tangy figs and raisins baking in an oven twirled and danced in the air around her.

Yet, the scowl remained fixed upon Alex's face, her features twisting in disgust.

She had *told* her grandmother that she didn't like fruitcake. She had *explicitly written it down* in the letter she had sent this past month informing of her plans to stay for winter break – for lack of anywhere else to plant her bags for a couple months.

And yet. *There she was.*

It wasn't as if her grandmother wasn't *aware* of the reason for her dislike. She had been there, after all, as they watched the cake slide down the wall of the dining room in the horrifically roaring silence. They had borne witness to the screaming and observed the disaster that followed. Yes. Her grandmother *knew*. She had probably heard that bullshit advice from the therapist to "confront your fears" or some fuckery like that.

She wasn't *afraid* of fruitcake. *How utterly absurd*, Alex thought, picking at her nails silently – envisioning the pearl necklace her grandmother cherished coming apart over the rising dough. She imagined the pearls embedding themselves within, and the secret satisfaction in knowing its inevitable destination in the trash.

Alex's eyes wandered over to the doorway of the kitchen. The television in front of was blaring with the latest propaganda – or at least, that's what Alex called it. *Shit* was bad everywhere, but the news that her grandmother continued to consume proclaimed their country's supreme dominance in their world. As if kids weren't starving to death a half a world over. As if their country wasn't actively falling apart because of a wannabe tyrant and his squad of goons.

She sighed heavily, knowing that she had no other family left to take her in and telling herself that she need only put up with it for six more weeks.

And two days.

And sixteen hours.

And thirty-one minutes.

Not that she was keeping track, of course.

"Can I get you anything while it bakes, Al?" Gram called, her lilting soprano clashing with the cacophony of tumultuous sound coming from the television.

Alex *hated* that nickname. She had told her grandmother to stop calling her that. *Alex*. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Al was the name *he* crooned to her after he beat her mother.

Fruitcake, oozing disgustingly down the wall.

Alex stopped, banishing the image from her mind, and cleared her throat. "No, Gram. Thank you."

The clanging ceased, and her grandmother leaned her head out of the doorway. Her piercing, ice-blue gaze appraised Alex as she sprawled across the itchy, disgusting, floral couch. Alex hated that couch. She hated the pattern. She hated how she could never get comfortable. And she especially hated that it used to be in *her* house.

The one she would never see again.

Her Gram held an idle hand to her throat, toying with the damned pearl necklace perched atop her frail collarbones. "Could you take the trash out for me, Al?" That fucking *name*. "It's getting pretty full, and my back is bothering me."

Gram's back was *always* bothering her. The cynical side of Alex was convinced that it was only partly true. That the rest was just a persistent manipulation to get others to do things that she'd rather not partake in. "*Al, could you water my plants out front? Al, could you scrape out my gutters? Al, could you please eat this disgusting ass fruitcake and pretend nothing ever happened*"

Instead, Alex said, "Sure, Gram." And she rose from her uncomfortable seat on the ugly couch and dragged her sullen feet into the kitchen – where the aroma of the fruitcake swelled like a crescendo at a symphony.

"Thank you, Al," her Gram smiled at her as Alex passed - her fake teeth all visible in her broad grin.

Alex was now certain that she was calling her that on purpose. There was no way she didn't *know*.

Her patience was wearing dangerously thin.

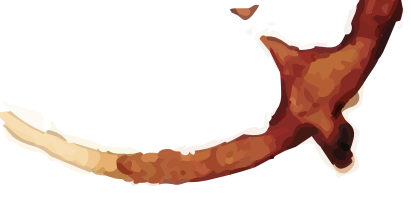
"When you come back in, it should be nearly done," her Gram said, humming to a tune only she could hear.

"Perfect," mumbled Alex, the sarcasm dripping off of her mocking tone. But, of course, the old bat couldn't hear her. Had barely heard anything for years. Alex thought it might have had something to do with her endlessly blaring television drilling holes into whatever was left of her ancient ear drums.

Alex stomped outside, her shoulders heaving with the effort of holding the massive, black trash bag. She wondered bitterly if her grandmother had held off on taking out the trash for the past two weeks, knowing that Alex was going to be there soon.

She wouldn't put it past the conniving hag.

The humidity of the outside pressed in around her, and Alex groaned as she waded through the moisture-filled air to deposit the waste in her hands. She wished she had stayed in Phoenix.



Maybe she could have even asked a friend to stay with them over break. But, if Alex was being honest, she hadn't been that close with anyone in years. Not since...

Screaming. Sobbing. Fruitcake, forgotten on the floor.

Grunting, Alex heaved the bag into the large green can around the side of her Gram's quaint, yellow farmhouse, surrounded by miles and miles of vast fields of maize. Alex always cackled at those who claimed that they'd been to Illinois. That they loved Chicago and its bustling city streets and deep dish pizza.

That's not Illinois, Alex would say. No, her Illinois was endless fields of prairie. Of corn farther than one could possibly see. Backroads that seemingly lead to nowhere, if you didn't know where to go. Tractors stopping traffic and potholes one could more than likely find Narnia in. *That* was Illinois.

And Alex desperately wished she had never come back.

There, in Illinois, painful memories bombarded her – all her unhealed wounds creeping sadistically to the surface.

There. Illinois. Was where her mother died.

Alex glared at the yellow house, slamming the lid closed and halting the wretched odor that was beginning to gleefully assault her nostrils.

Fucking fruitcake.

With another heavy sigh, she started to trudge back towards the house when she spotted something out of the corner of her

eye. A writhing, *slithering* something.

Perfect.

"I hope you're hungry," her Gram sang as Alex closed the door behind her and took a brief moment to bask in the cool air enveloping her from the oppressive humidity outside.

"Famished," Alex crooned, ensuring her fingers held her pocket closed – worried that the wriggling would reveal her wonderful secret.

She waited until her grandmother faced the counter, donning her oven mitts. She waited until the oven opened and the revolting stench of the baking fruit pomeled into her.

Alex waited until her grandmother's thoughts were focused entirely on the cake in front of her before she removed the slithering *something* from her pocket and set it on the ground before her.

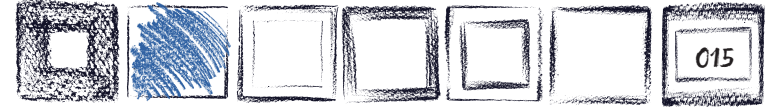
She watched as it writhed away from its captor, its tongue flicking out as if telling her off for her unwarranted assault.

She fought back a grin as her grandmother, at last, turned, the wretched fruitcake clutched between her warm mitts, and discovered the creature moving towards her.

A horrified scream split the air, temporarily conquering the volume battle in the other room. Hot fruitcake flung up into the air, and at the top, it seemed to freeze – the moment extending into eternity.

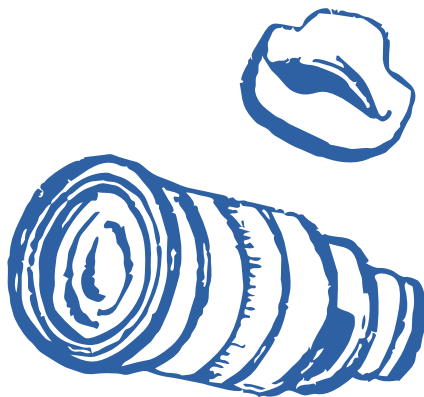
Fruitcake, ruined upon the floor.

Fucking fruitcake.



The Master, the Sword, and the Lord

SANDAL SPILLER



The embers glowed brilliantly with hues of orange and red blanketed by a bed of dark ashes waiting for the block of steel to grace its coals. The youngest apprentice worked the billows to ensure that the embers kept those bright hues of red and orange. Navi, the senior apprentice, and the junior apprentice stood by with hammers waiting for the process to begin. The master picked up the block of steel with his tongs and bowing toward the forge plunged it into the glowing embers. He continued to pray as the metal began to glow bright orange with a boundary of red. Soon the master took the block from the embers to the anvil, and then the apprentices began to hammer the block.

The boy at the billows marveled at how the block began to lengthen. The master held up his hand, and the hammering stopped. Navi took an axe and struck the metal halfway to notch it, then the master turned the metal over and slid it to the end of the anvil where Navi struck it to bend the metal. The master turned the metal over again where the apprentices hammered the end so that it folded upon itself.

The master held up his hand and placed the metal back into the forge. It would take seven days to fold the sword a thousand times, each layer forging strength and spirit into the blade. A painstaking task not only to strengthen the sword, but also to make it more durable. The youngest apprentice so enamored with what he saw said "Master, this will be your best sword ever made."

The master sat silently as Navi glared at the boy. "Yoshi, you do not say those words here. Go and cleanse your body and pray at the temple to cleanse your mind and soul before returning. Make sure you do not waste your time."

The boy left the forge with his eyes looking at the ground. Navi turned his attention to his master. "Takada-San, I will bring your meal while he is gone."

Takada looked at his apprentice, "you act like an old wife." Turning to the other apprentice said, "please attend the forge."

The boy returned thirty minutes later, bowing to the master and the forge, and assumed his position at the arm of the bellows. They continued the process of forging the sword that Takada would present to his lord.

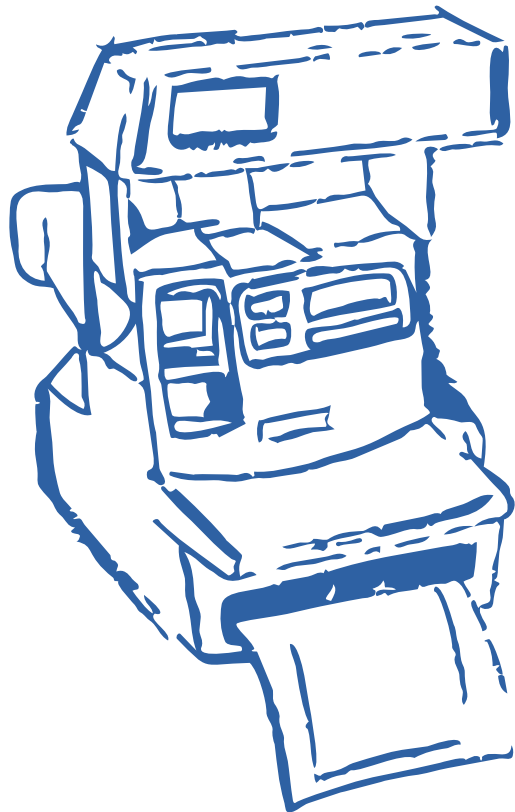
Takada's wife Marasu watched as the youngest apprentice exited the forge for the bath house. She knew that meant that the process for the gift to Lord Tarabu would continue into the night until the light was gone from the sky. Her husband would suffer from exhaustion, but she could not interrupt this process until the gift was ready to give Lord Tarabu. Sighing

she prepared rice and fish for her midday meal and sat silently contemplating the ceremony to come for Lord Tarabu. She knew all the villages were going to show their recognition of his selection to the council of Lords. It was a high honor, but there would be ramifications. Her husband and Lord Tarabu had history and not all of it was good. Marasu mind wondered remembering when she first saw Takada.

Times were prosperous then and their small piece of the world was peaceful and filled with joy. Marasu had gone with her mother into the village to see what the fish monger had to sell, when a young man ran into her knocking her to the ground. The young man stopped and helped her to stand saying, "I am sorry, but I am late, and my master is unforgiving." He rushed off before she could say anything to him. Her mother, she remembered, had copious amounts to say about how insolent the young man was, that she thought he was a worm, and he was undoubtedly a thief too. Marasu remembered her mother thought that about all the young men who talked to Marasu. Her memories continued to when she next saw Takada.

She was walking through the village with her mother and father after going to the temple to honor their ancestors. "It is about time that Marasu started looking for a husband." Her father said. Her mother replied, "It is men who should look for wives, not women who should look for husbands." Then they would look at each other and smile. It was something between them but never spoken openly. Marasu noticed Takada while her parents talked, he looked exhausted and dirty, but his clothes were clean. She wondered how that was possible. She remembered what her mother said when she noticed Marasu looking at the young man. "He is not for you. He is just an apprentice to the black smith," with animosity in her voice. Marasu had always wondered what her mother had against the village black smith. Whether it was going against her mother's wishes or following her curiosity she began to go the village more often to try and meet this young man. After a couple of weeks, she did finally meet him at the fish monger's hut, where it seemed like all her courage left her as she stood next to him. Takada had turned to leave and bumped into her, apologizing for not seeing her standing there. She remembered smiling and saying, "You seem to be making a bad habit of running into me, or is it on purpose?" Takada only smiled.

"You always are in a rush. What is it that you do?" Marasu had asked.



Takada's chest puffed out as he replied. "I am apprenticed the famous sword maker Torso."

An older man standing next to Takada cuffed the back of his head. "You must practice how to be humble Takada."

"But Kenji, he is famous. One of his swords was handed to Lord Ieyasu before one battle that he won," replied Takada.

Kenji looked at the young man shaking his head. "Even Torso is humble, by calling himself a black smith instead of a great sword maker. Learn from this. If you want to achieve greatness you must accept your humbleness." Kenji then walked away.

Marasu remembered Takada looking at the ground in humiliation. He apologized once again and followed Kenji.

Marasu memories faded when she heard the three gongs summoning the villagers by the head man of the village. She looked up to see the door of the forge opening. She adjusted her kimono and walked to the path. Takada came out of the forge first adjusting his headband on his head after tying it. His three apprentices were walking behind him in order of seniority. Bowing slightly to him, she looked at him as they walked toward the village. He stood about a head taller than her; his hair was still dark black with no gray. The only thing that belied his age were the lines on his face.

"I wonder what announcement is going to be made today?" Takada said more to herself than to anyone.

Marasu knew that this interruption would only cause more delays for the sword, unless it was to the point where it could be set aside, even if it was for a meal, but she doubted it.

When they arrived at the center of the village, it was the provincial head man that stood there. All the villagers bowed to him showing him respect for his position. A couple of the villagers did not like the man, but that did not stop them from showing proper respect.

"I have three proclamations from Lord Tarabu. First, the ceremony will not take place at Lord Tarabu's castle. It will take place here in this village. Second, Lord Tarabu's samurai will be situated and fed by the villagers. Third, only the head man and two villagers will attend the ceremony. Ensure that the gift presenter is one of the two villagers. That is all." He then folded the scroll and put it back into his kimono. Looking at the villagers, he waited to see if there was any dissent or looks of dissatisfaction. The villagers bowed and waited for his departure. He mounted his horse and left the village.

The village head man stepped into the center of the village. The villagers were upset at the news about Lord Tarabu and

his samurai. One villager asking, "why did he pick this village?" What does he have against us?"

"Lord Tarabu has given us a great honor," He started but was interrupted by another villager.

"Honor, he knows no honor. If we fail him, this village will no longer exist. He has done this before. Remember what he did to Kanwa. My grandson is one of the survivors, and he has not spoken a word since then."

Then an elderly woman, whose body bent by years of working in the village's small vegetable field looked at the head man. "How will we feed 30 samurai, when we barely can feed ourselves?"

The head man's gaze swept over the villagers, "we will form a group that will list the food we may need to feed the samurai. Once we know that, if we can't use our own food, then we will purchase what we don't have from other villages."

The fish monger stepped forward. "With what? What money we have Lord Tarabu takes in taxes."

Haruto smiled. "Not all the money goes to Lord Tarabu. I have kept a little money aside from time to time in case we have an emergency. How do think we were able to bring a doctor here to treat Shinjo?"

The villagers nodded saying nothing more.

The head man then looked toward Takada, "will your gift be ready in time, Takada?"

Takada nodded. "Only if I am allowed to return to my forge along with my apprentices it might be ready in time."

The head man nodded. "Then you should go to your forge."

Takada bowed to him and left.

At the forge, Takada and his apprentices removed their outer kimonos and donned their white kimonos and black hats in reverence to sword coming from the Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess.

"At least not all the coals are dead," stated Navi as he looked at the forge. Pointing to the boy, "work the bellows faster to bring the coals to life." Turning to the other apprentice, "add wood and coal to the forge."

Takeda looked at Navi. "Will you be prepared when the time comes?"

Navi furrowed his brow as he looked at his master. "What you ask for will be extremely difficult. I have spent time at the temple praying on this, and I have continued to practice. So that I will be ready when the time comes."

Takada only nodded as he turned his attention back to the forge. He placed the piece of long metal back into the forge



It would take seven days to fold the sword a thousand times, each layer forging strength and spirit into the blade.

waiting as the metal began to heat. Once again, the process had begun.

The men and boy worked like this for eight days, only taking time for sleep and small meals. The sword slowly had taken shape. Takada looked at his apprentices. "Now we begin the final chapters to the sword's story."

Navi brought out the files and scraping irons. Navi began the filing on the sword as the other apprentices prepared the water trough for the hardening of the blade. The filing completed Takada took the sword from Navi inspecting it. "Navi, this superb. You are close to the time where you will have your own forge."

Navi bowed to Takada. "Thank you, Takada-San."

"Now you, and the others go eat. Return when you finish so we may finish the sword's story." Takada then turned his attention to the water trough.

Once the apprentices departed, Takada began scraping the ridge into the sword. He would also add Lord Tarabu's name to it and a small inscription. When he was satisfied with it, he applied the clay to the sword, removing it only from the top of the blade. He plunged the sword into the forge and then put it into the water trough. Placing the sword on the anvil to cool, he left the forge to have his own meal.

It would take five more days of polishing the sword with the polishing stones and sharpening the sword until the blade, honed to its ultimate sharpness, when Takada produced the box where the sword and scabbard would lay inside for the presentation to Lord Tarabu. The youngest apprentice leaned forward to try and read the inscription on the sword; he felt a slap to the back of his head from Navi. "That is not for you."

As the boy rubbed the back of his head, "but you know."

Navi turned and looked at him. "I do not and furthermore it is a personal message to Lord Tarabu from Takada-San."

Having completed the sword with one day to spare, Takada watched as Navi supervised the cleaning and cleansing of the forge. Picking up the box he left for his home and Marasu.

Marasu bowed to him as he entered the house. "I have prepared your bath for you Taki." Her private nickname for him, which always caused him to smile. They both departed for the bath house to wash away the day's work and worries.

The silence was deafening for Marasu while they ate, but she knew better than to bring up the question that persisted in her thoughts.

"I know what you are thinking." Takada said as he put his chopsticks down.

"What would that be, Taki?" Marasu replied as she looked at his empty bowl.

"I will only say that I will not bring dishonor to this house." Takada looked at her and smiled.

Marasu said nothing, but a tear rolled down her cheek. Using the opposite end of the chopstick, he captured the tear and shook his head. "Do not worry, my wife. All will be well."

The next day Lord Tarabu and his samurai arrived with all the villagers in attendance. The villagers bowed deeply in reverence to Lord Tarabu. After he dismounted from his horse, he addressed the villagers. "I am honored that you have accepted my invitation to hold the ceremony here in Santo." I will ensure that the council remembers this village."

The villagers said nothing but bowed even deeper than before. Lord Tarabu then turned to the village head man. "I require a bath after this long journey. Which house is yours?"

"My Lord, my house is directly behind me. I have already had the bath house prepared for you. It is a great honor you bestow upon this village and my home."

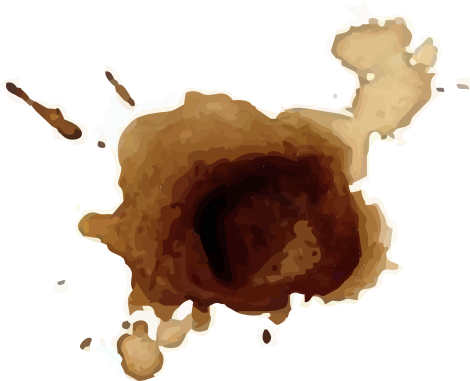
Lord Tarabu only grunted and walked to the house with his personal guard. Once Lord Tarabu was inside the house, General Haruto came up to the head man. "Show the samurai where they are to sleep and eat, then return to me for further instructions."

The head man bowed and began showing the samurai where they were to stay. Marasu noticed that the two samurai assigned to their home looked cruel. One had a scar on his left cheek and was missing his left ear. The other was stocky, but muscular under his armor, but it was his eyes Marasu noticed the most. They looked soulless like he had seen or done things that should not have happened.

The night passed without incident to which the villagers were happy and relieved about. The samurai assembled in the center of the village kneeling as Lord Tarabu exited the house. A stool placed upon the porch for him to sit upon.

He looked over his samurai as he thought, "I wonder if any of these men are from this village? It would be a good lesson for them to learn that I hold their lives in my hands." He chuckled to himself and then thought about the instructions he would tell them.

"I want you to encircle this area with an opening opposite from me. There will be three villagers that enter, and then the circle will close. If I am not pleased with the gift presented, you will receive a signal from General Haruto then this village will



Even Torso is humble, by calling himself a black smith instead of a great sword maker. Learn from this. If you want to achieve greatness you must accept your humbleness.

cease to exist. If you do not receive the signal, we will prepare to depart this village to the next village tomorrow.”

The samurai all answered in unison. “Your will!”

One samurai in the back shook his head slightly and sighed remembering his boyhood here in Santo. *“I wonder why he hates these people so much?”*

At Marasu and Takada’s home, Takada pulled on his finest kimono with Marasu making sure that everything looked immaculate.

Marasu looked at Takada, “are you sure that this is the right way?”

“Yes, this must end. I am tired of Tarabu continuing his harassment and unending requests that for things that we both know are meant to give him a reason to end my life and destroy this village.” Takada looked at Marasu who only nodded her head. “I have been an embarrassment to him ever since I survived his attack on my village of Maki. Living to become a master sword maker in this province.”

Takada picked up the box with Lord Tarabu’s sword. He slipped on his sandals and left for the village center. At the edge of the village, the head man and Navi meant him. He had with him Tabu, the fish monger, but Takada insisted that Navi should attend telling the head man, he wanted him to learn how to properly present a sword. In the end, the head man agreed.

“Thank you, Takada.” Said Tabu. “I did not really want to attend but ...” looking at the head man then he turned and left.

As the three men approached the village, the head man began to get nervous when he saw how the samurai encircled the village center. He, Navi, and Takada entered the circle of samurai and walked toward Lord Tarabu. About ten feet away from the Lord, the men kneeled and bowed deeply.

“You are Takada, are you not?” asked Lord Tarabu as he acknowledged the men. All three men straightened up placing

their hands upon their thighs.

“Yes, Tarabu-Sama. Your greatest embarrassment.” Takada said as he looked directly at Lord Tarabu watching his expression change from amusement to frustration. Takada knew what he had said would infuriate him.

Lord Tarabu used his fan as if dismissing the discussion. “Enough of the past. This village has a gift honoring my selection to the Council of Lords. You may present it now.”

Takada and Navi stood up to approach Tarabu when General Haruto stopped them.

“There is to be only one who presents the gift.”

Takada did not look at the general, “This is my senior assistant Navi who also worked to make this magnificent gift.”

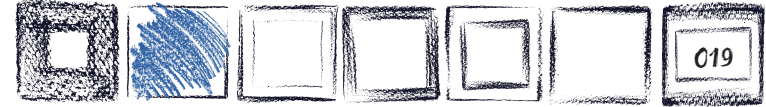
Lord Tarabu looked at his General Haruto. “They may approach.”

Navi and Takada knelt again when they were about a foot from Lord Tarabu. Navi took the lid off the box and placed it to his left side. Takada carefully removed the sword from the box and Navi removed the box and placed it on his right side.

Tarabu smiled as he looked at the sword. “The sword is magnificent, and I notice that there is an inscription on this sword. What does it say?”

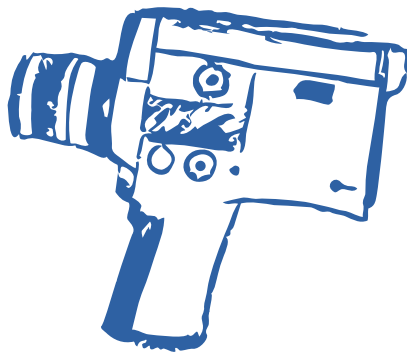
“The inscription is for your eyes only. It would be a great dishonor for you to share it with others below you, Tarabu-Sama. If I may approach, then you can read the inscription, but before he could say a word Takada swung the sword and took the head of his tormentor. Navi stood quickly taking the sword from Takada and beheaded him before the general could react. All were in shock, not knowing what to do next. Navi wiped the blood from the sword using Lord Tarabu’s kimono, placed the sword on his chest and knelt awaiting his fate. The general stepped forward and read the inscription on the sword.

Revenge and this blade will deliver death’s final embrace.



Teeth Like Thorns

ASHLEY LOWELL



There was truly nothing worse in the world than paper straws. At least that's what Kori thought as she mindlessly chewed at her third one, grinding her teeth enough to make a small tear. The only thing comparable to the plight that are paper straws is perhaps when her best friend attempts to pry into her love life over iced coffee.

"Kor, it's been three months. When am I going to meet this girl?" Bella, Kori's best friend and resident pseudo-therapist, questioned. Golden light from overhead bounced off her brunette locks, which rested lazily on an old band t-shirt.

"She's shy." Kori's teeth grinded further.

"Bullshit. You met her on a dating app." Bella waved around her hand as she spoke.

"Shy people can use dating apps."

"You showed me her profile. Shy people don't post in-mirror bikini selfies."

"They could."

Bella didn't dignify that with a response, only giving Kori a raised eyebrow that said she didn't believe her at all.

Kori's eyes wandered around the café, as if trying to keep herself from noticing that the look in Bella's eyes wasn't one of judgement. Their usual corner-table meetup spot suddenly felt far too confined. What once was perfect for sharing salacious secrets without the fear of eavesdropping now felt like a trap of her own creation.

She never questioned why Vera never wanted to meet her friends. Neither did she question why her girlfriend would never go out with her in the light of day. But now with the bustle of the café drowning out her thoughts and Bella's stare burning into her neck, it felt unavoidable.

"I never really asked her. We usually get a little too caught up in the heat of the moment to really talk about that."

Bella tilted her head curiously. "There is no way that you guys hook-up every time you go over there."

"Sometimes she cooks dinner before."

Bella's jaw dropped and she let out a short laugh. "Well shit, I didn't know you were so sex-crazed!"

"I'm not sex-crazed." Kori covered her face with her hands. The tear in her straw grew larger. "Can we talk about like anything else?"

Bella gave an airy nod. "How's work been lately? The school hasn't burnt down, has it?"

"Not that I'm aware of, sadly. Most of the smaller kids always say I'm their favorite sub, so that's nice."

"Has the school gotten any better? I mean, it's been a few

years since we got out of there, so it's gotta be."

"Nope. I feel like the fact that they said they'd train me and then didn't should've been a sign though."

"One of those signs with a speaker attached to it. Just blaring ominous warnings."

Kori chuckled. "I had a high schooler try to fight me when I told them to put away their phone the other day, you know?"

Bella's eyes widened in disbelief. "Christ, Kor. I don't know what to be more concerned about: the fact you're one bad day away from throwing hands with a sixteen-year old or that your mysterious girlfriend might be a psycho killer."

"She's not a psycho killer."

"Why else would she avoid being seen in broad daylight? She a vampire or something?"

"Ha, real funny." Kori rolled her eyes.

"It's not like you tell me much about her."

"Are we back on this?"

"Come on, at least tell me a little bit about her."

"Well, she's just sort of great."

"And what makes you think that?"

"Our first date was just the best. She took me out to a fancy restaurant, paid for the whole thing, and walked me home."

Bella huffed. "Okay, I've heard that. But what about her specifically? What is she interested in? What's she do for work? Literally anything about her."

Kori hesitantly paused. She searched the back of her mind for any possible answer where none was to be found. Something about it made her head burn. She couldn't tell if she was angry or embarrassed, but she raised her voice enough for it to be either. "I don't know. I just like her, alright?!"

Bella raised her hands in defeat and shrank slightly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to hit a nerve. We can talk about this some other time."

Pain throbbed unstopably in Kori's head. "No, no, it's my fault. I think I'm getting a migraine or something. My head's getting fuzzy." She slowly rose to her feet, having used the table to steady herself.

"Are you gonna be okay getting home?" Bella placed her hand over Kori's. "Yeah, I'll be fine." She shook her head before pulling away.

Bella gave a look of disbelief in return that Kori chose to ignore. She turned away and hurried out of the café.

Kori's vision blurred as she found her feet were leading her the opposite direction of her apartment. She didn't fully register where she was going or why her mind was in such a haze all of

Before she could protest, Vera bit into Kori's neck. It wasn't like she expected, it was so, so much worse. What felt like two needles pierced into her veins and the throbbing pain grew to a feverish pace.

the sudden. She didn't really find herself caring either.

She remembered developing more regular migraines after she turned fifteen. That was about the same time that she came out to her parents as a lesbian and the same time that she started to need to be an adult. Her parents didn't kick her out. However, they did ignore her. They stopped inviting her to family dinners, they stopped buying food for her altogether about a year later. She had to get a job working night shifts at an amazon factory. Most of what she remembers from that job happened to be a familiar buzzing pain in her head.

Before Kori knew it, the fog in her eyes cleared well enough to show that she had walked all the way to Vera's apartment. The light had faded from the sky just enough for it to be unsafe for her to walk home alone. Her right hand clenched into a fist and knocked on the red oak door. Her right foot tapped impatiently three times against the concrete.

The door swung open, although Vera was nowhere to be seen.

"Vera?" Kori called out as she stepped inside. She turned her back only for a moment to shut and lock the door.

No response.

She stepped further in and kicked off her Chucks next to the door. A single light shone from a lamp in the kitchen space.

Kori felt around the wall next to the door for the light switch and flicked it on, though no lights turned on. The dark sent a chill down Kori's spine.

Couch cushions, throw pillows, and fuzzy blankets were strewn haphazardly upon the floor. As Kori placed her right foot forward, she felt a slight stick on the ground, as if she'd stepped in some liquid left to dry.

"Vera? Where are you?" Her voice turned shaky, along with her hands.

The back of her neck turned cold as breath hit it.

"Right here." Her voice was raspy and deep, unlike how it usually sounded.

Kori jumped slightly before turning to face Vera. The other woman was only wearing a satin robe, her blond curls laid messily on her shoulders, and her eyes looked to be completely bloodshot. "Are you okay?" Kori barely croaked out before being silenced by a bruising kiss. It wasn't gentle like she was used to, instead it felt like a beast trying to devour their prey.

Her instincts screamed at her to push Vera away, but the very thought of it made the pulsing in her head even worse, so she didn't. She gasped for breath as Vera finally pulled away for a few moments. Then she felt Vera's breath graze once again

against her neck.

"Wait." Before she could protest, Vera bit into Kori's neck. It wasn't like she expected, it was so, so much worse. What felt like two needles pierced into her veins and the throbbing pain grew to a feverish pace. Her body felt light, as if all of the blood and muscle was being pulled from it.

It was difficult to make out through the ringing in her ears but Kori could swear that she heard Vera say "You'll forget this in the morning."

Within a few moments, the assorted pains grew to be too much, and Kori's eyes fell shut.

Cone-shaped ceiling lights hung low over the tables in a restaurant that felt far too fancy for Kori's usual tastes. She was used to takeout and shitty plastic utensils, not gold trimmed napkins and silverware with intricate engravings.

She especially wasn't used to having a gorgeous woman giving her bedroom eyes. The other woman had luscious golden hair that stretched halfway down her back, her fair skin was nicely complemented by her crimson slip dress. Her name was Vera, or at least that's what she had listed on her dating profile. Kori still wasn't fully convinced that this wasn't some sort of scam.

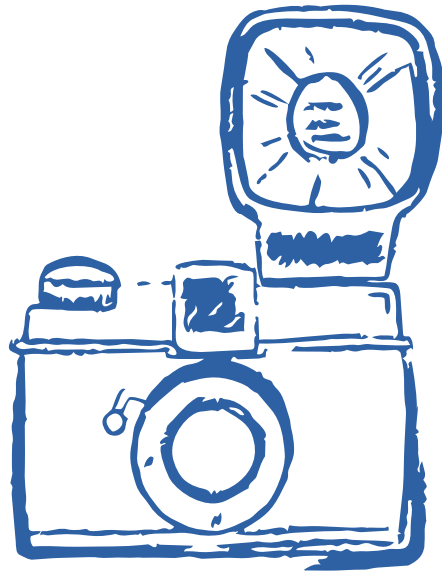
Looking over her own outfit, Kori thought she didn't look half bad. She had decided to wear a black wrap dress that Bella had bought for her birthday one year. Her auburn hair was tied into a tight bun, as if trying to make it seem that she was far more put together than she really was.

"You know, you seemed a lot more talkative over text." Vera teased, a slight smirk grew on her lips that were painted a deep red.

"Oh, right, sorry. I haven't really been on any dates in a bit. Especially not with-" The word caught in her throat. Why was it so hard for her to admit that she was on a date with a woman? It's not like she was new to loving women, she just never really had to face it so head-on.

"Someone as gorgeous as myself doesn't come around often, sweetheart." Her devilish smile widened, and her words oozed confidence like she was speaking well-known facts.

Kori really had no idea how to respond to anything that Vera had just said, especially not the fact that this girl was calling her pet names less than five minutes after they met each other. "So uh-" Her mind blanked, since when was getting to know people this hard? "What do you do? For a living, I mean." She capped off her question with a long sip from her glass of water.



"Well, I would say that I'm an investor. But really, all that you need to know is that I could afford to buy this restaurant fifty times over if I wanted to."

Kori choked on her water for a moment, no doubt making an even larger down out of herself. "Wow, that's..." She tried to sit up straighter and pull herself back together, though she already felt like this date was in tatters. "I'm just a substitute teacher. It's not like I'll ever make enough money to own a mansion, but it's a start." She looked down at her napkin anxiously for a moment. "Wait, do you have a mansion? That'd be really cool if you do."

Vera chuckled and waved her hand. "Please, I wouldn't know what to do with that much space if I had it. I much prefer something smaller. But that's enough about my wealth, how about you, Kori? How do you spend your days?"

"Well, I don't especially know. I try to paint sometimes? Mostly just random stuff with acrylics."

"Oh? I've always admired those that have a passion for the arts."

"It's not really a passion. More of a hobby, really."

"Good to have hobbies, nonetheless."

"Of course." Kori nodded.

There was a silence between them for a moment. Kori tried to fill it by taking a long sip of her water.

"So, do you want to come home with me tonight?"

Kori choked on her water once more and struggled to regain any sense of composure. "Sorry?"

"I think you're beautiful and I'd like to spend the night with you. Is that an issue?" Vera stated plainly.

Kori shook her head repeatedly.

"Good. So, don't worry and just answer my question." Vera's eyes shone with an alluring light. A light that made Kori's heart feel like it was soaring weightlessly through the sky, drifting towards Vera's awaiting arms.

"Uh, maybe we just see how this date goes first?"

Vera chuckled and shook her head. "You didn't do that, darling. You know that's not how it went. Let's go again. Answer the question."

"Right now?" Kori's mind felt foggy, her vision only focused on Vera's shining eyes. The world wavered and shivered behind her.

"Yes, right now. We haven't ordered anything, and it's far too—" She waved her hand. "bovine for my taste." Vera's smile widened to an impossible length, nearly stretching off her face. The canines of her upper teeth elongated downwards,

covered in a red liquid that Kori didn't remember being there. "Okay." Kori nodded and closed her eyes.

When Kori opened her eyes, Vera was covered in blood all the way down to her neck. The liquid almost matched the color of her dress exactly.

"Do you remember that night? How I took you home and drained you dry? You didn't scream, you were so good for me. My wonderful girl, you won't fail me like the others. I won't let you." Vera's eyes shone brighter than any star in the night sky. "Now wake up for me. Wake up and allow me to love you."

With great force, she managed to pull the chain just enough to turn it on. Upon looking down at herself, her heart most likely would've stopped if it weren't for the fact that she couldn't fully process it. She was covered in blood. She couldn't tell if it was her own or somebody else's. She hoped it was her own but also couldn't fathom the possibility that such a large amount of blood could have come out of her own body.

The room was surprisingly bare, devoid of all the posters and paintings usually hung on the walls. Plastic sheets covered the floors and blackout curtains hung in front of the windows. She already knew the room was sound-proofed from previous experience. Maybe Bella was right, maybe she was dating a psycho killer.

With what little sense she had left, she could smell something vaguely like steak coming from the next room, which she knew to be the living room/kitchen.

After a second, Vera burst into the bedroom while carrying a tray of assorted foods in both hands. She had a wicked smile that bared two glistening red fangs. Her eyes were back to their normal oceanic hue, and she looked noticeably more put together. Now, she was wearing a black hoodie and jeans. She placed the tray on the bed next to Kori. "Morning baby, or goodnight. I can never really figure out which to say."

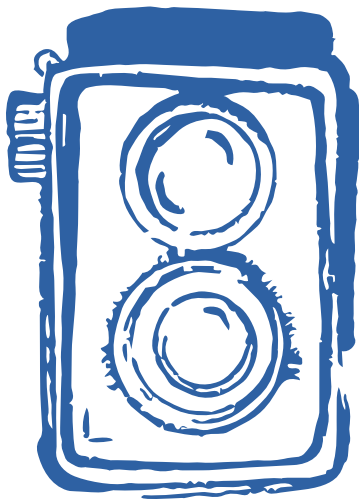
"Wha—" Kori could barely even choke out a whisper.

"Shh, don't bother. You won't be able to talk for a bit. I accidentally went a little too close to the vocal cords." Vera's voice was smooth, almost nurturing.

Kori's heart matched the frantic rhythm of the pulsing in her head.

Vera grabbed a wine glass full of a dark liquid from the tray and put it up to Kori's lips. "It's just pomegranate juice. You like it." Her eyes seemed to shine with a silver light as she said those last words.

You'll forget this in the morning.



Kori pursed her lips and allowed Vera to pour the liquid into her mouth. It tasted better than anything she'd ever drank before. Even though she could distinctly remember hating the taste of pomegranate juice before now.

"You still love me?" She asked, though her tone made it sound like more of a demand than a real question. Her eyes shone with the same light once more.

Kori nodded.

"Great. Now just eat and stay with me tonight, then I'll have you patched up before you go in the morning. Good as new." Her eyes shone again.

Kori took hesitant bites into the food as Vera held it up to her mouth. There was a steak, plenty of different fruits, veggies, and some more meats that Kori couldn't fully identify.

"There's my girl. Every other week, you come here on schedule and take it like a champ. I'm proud of you." Vera set aside the empty tray.

Kori winced slightly, still unable to fully form a sentence. Even just forcing the food down her throat felt like a gargantuan task.

"You won't remember the pain, don't worry. I always make you forget. I love you too much to see you hurt like that." She brushed the back of her hand against Kori's face. "But you just taste too good to refuse."

Kori jerked her head back.

"You're not the first, sweetie. I've been alive for what? Two centuries now?" She shook her head. "So many missing girls. If only they'd have listened to me when I told them to stay put."

Kori felt her strength returning ever so slightly. She moved to prop herself up against the bedframe.

"Mh, you're doing better, good. I put a bit of my blood in the food. In the juice too." She shrugged lazily. "It should help you heal a bit faster."

Kori's stomach rose to her throat. It took all her strength to stop her from throwing up then and there.

"I have to go run some errands. I trust you'll be good? You'll stay put?"

Kori nodded wordlessly.

Vera hummed as she left the room. It was a tune that Kori could just barely recognize as *We'll Meet Again* by Vera Lynn. It was something she'd heard in a cartoon when she was growing up. She thought she saw Vera's eyes shine once more when humming, but she had no idea what it meant.

After a few hours, Kori was able to muster enough strength to stumble to her feet, relying on the walls for support. She found her baby blue dress from earlier folded neatly on the kitchen counter. It took a few minutes for her to manage to put it on, but as she did, she felt something fall out of one of the pockets.

She looked down at the ground only to see the keys to Vera's car. Kori bent down and grabbed them without second thought.

Kori took her time while navigating out of the apartment and towards the parking lot. The pain in her head had surprisingly gone away and it was getting easier to walk. Her bones felt weak as the sunlight beamed down on her, even though her other ailments had faded away.

Vera's car was a crimson-red Dodge Challenger. Kori had never been in it or driven it. She hadn't cared to before today. But it seemed like her perfect way out.

She got inside and turned the key, praying that her luck wouldn't run out yet. It didn't. The car started up; the radio tuned to some oldies station that Kori could care less about in the moment.

Kori sped as fast as she could away. She wanted to get away, out of California, to somewhere that Vera wouldn't follow. Somewhere with lots of sun, most likely.

As she drove off, a familiar tune started over the radio. The very same one Vera had been humming when she left.



Rooted in Stone

BROOKE GEORGE

“ Music gives me ideas for drawings or animations that relate to the lyrics; scrolling through other artists' work sparks composition, coloring, and style inspiration. ”

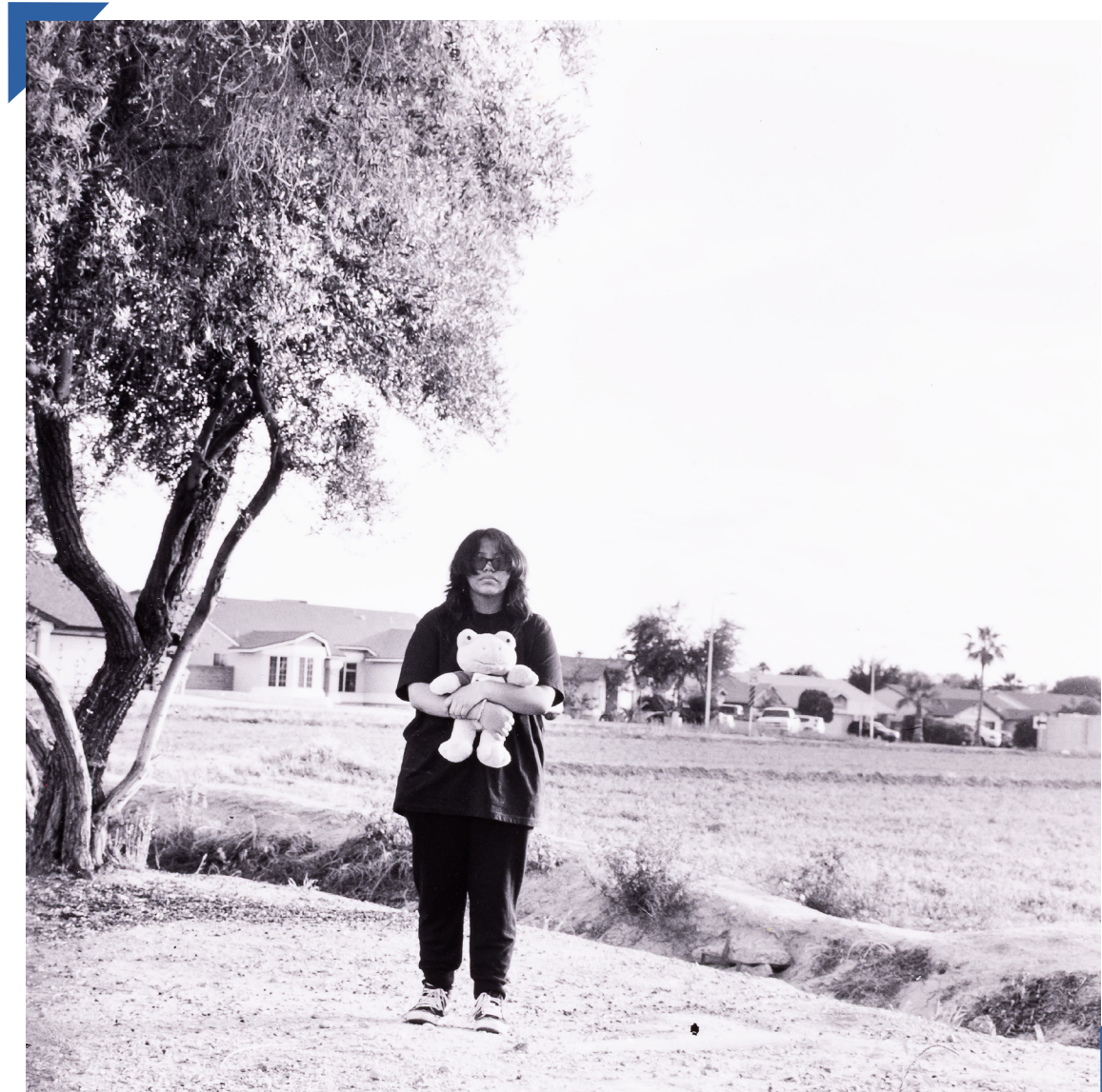


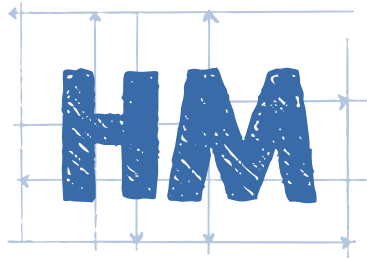


Girlhood - Lonesome

BRIANNA CURIEL

“ Most of my inspiration for poses, sketches, or ideas come from references or just from my imagination, then I start sketching and experimenting with textures and brushes to build a mood. ”





Untitled

MARISSA HARO





Dreamer
BRIANNA CURIEL

"It's my therapy, my talent, what makes me... me."





Walk in the Park

PAUL DAMERON

"I love putting on music that is very interesting to my brain like jazz or funk to set the mood."





Words Never Said
MICHELLE VILLARREAL PINA

"I experiment with heat, color, and timing to create unexpected effects."





Dear Climate

MICHELLE VILLARREAL PINA





Aspen Glow

PAUL DAMERON



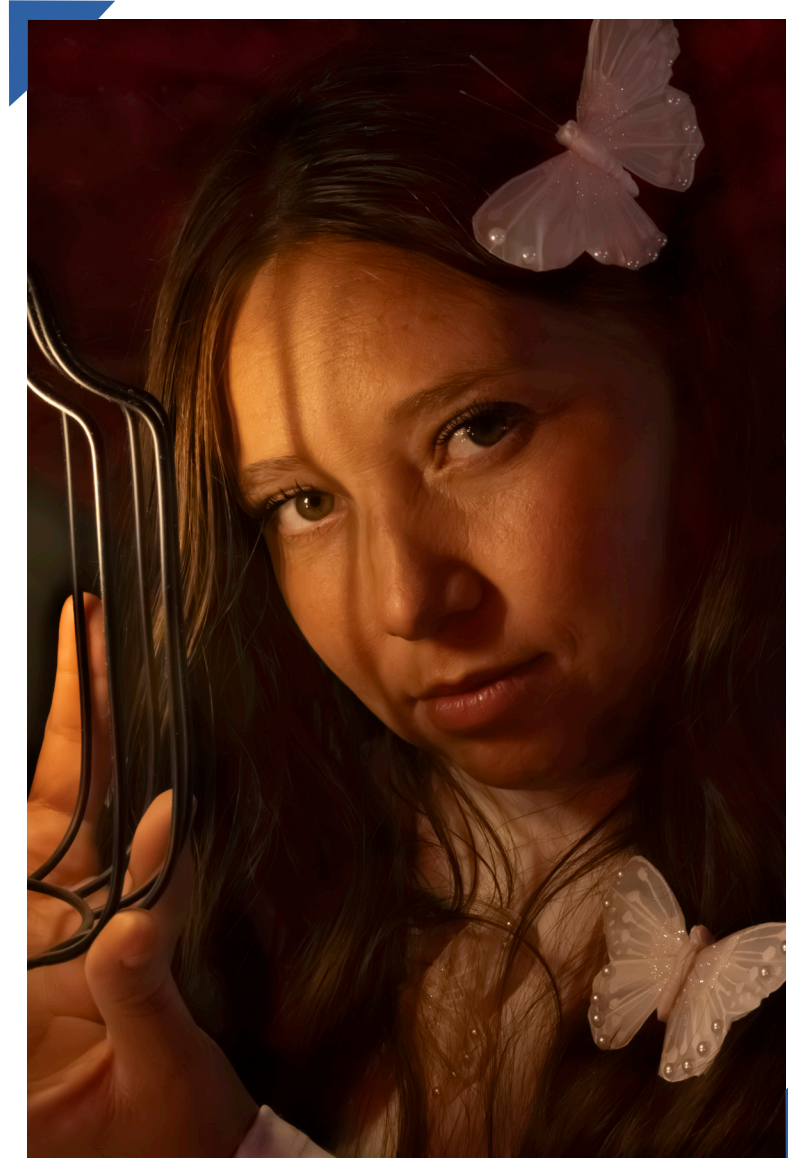
*"I use my hands, my senses,
and a lot of trial and error to
see how ideas take shape."*

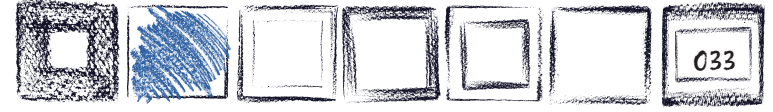


*As Pure as the
Changing Crimson*

SAMANTHA HOLMES

*"I like imagining how
people will move around or
interact with my work."*





Under the Overpass

GRACE FREEBARIN

"Small details can make a huge impact."





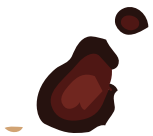
Street Traffic Light

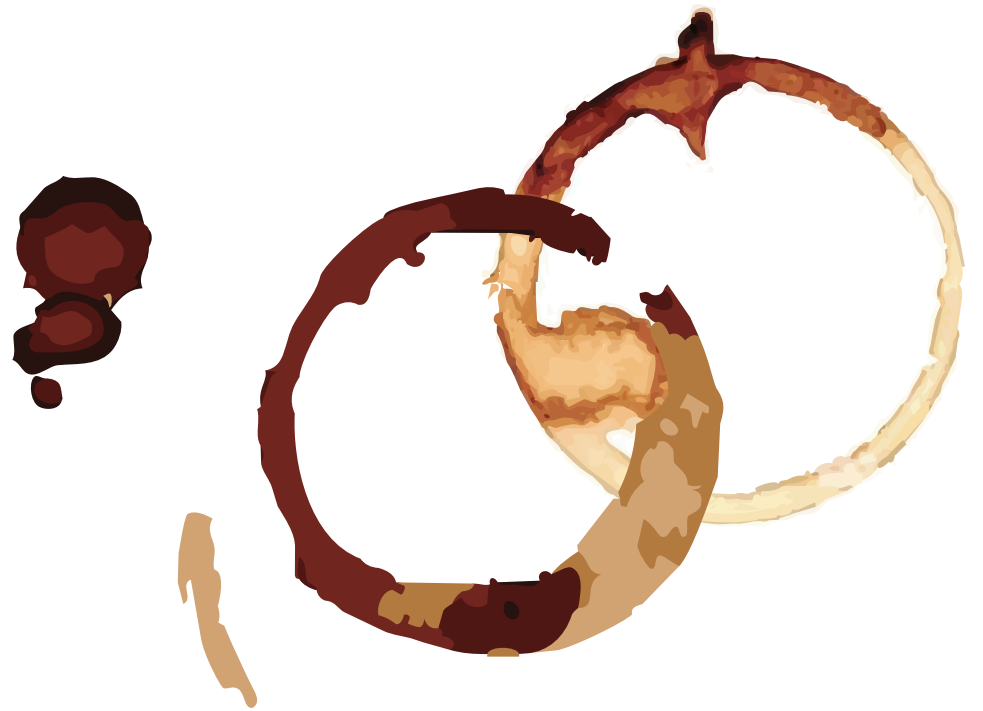
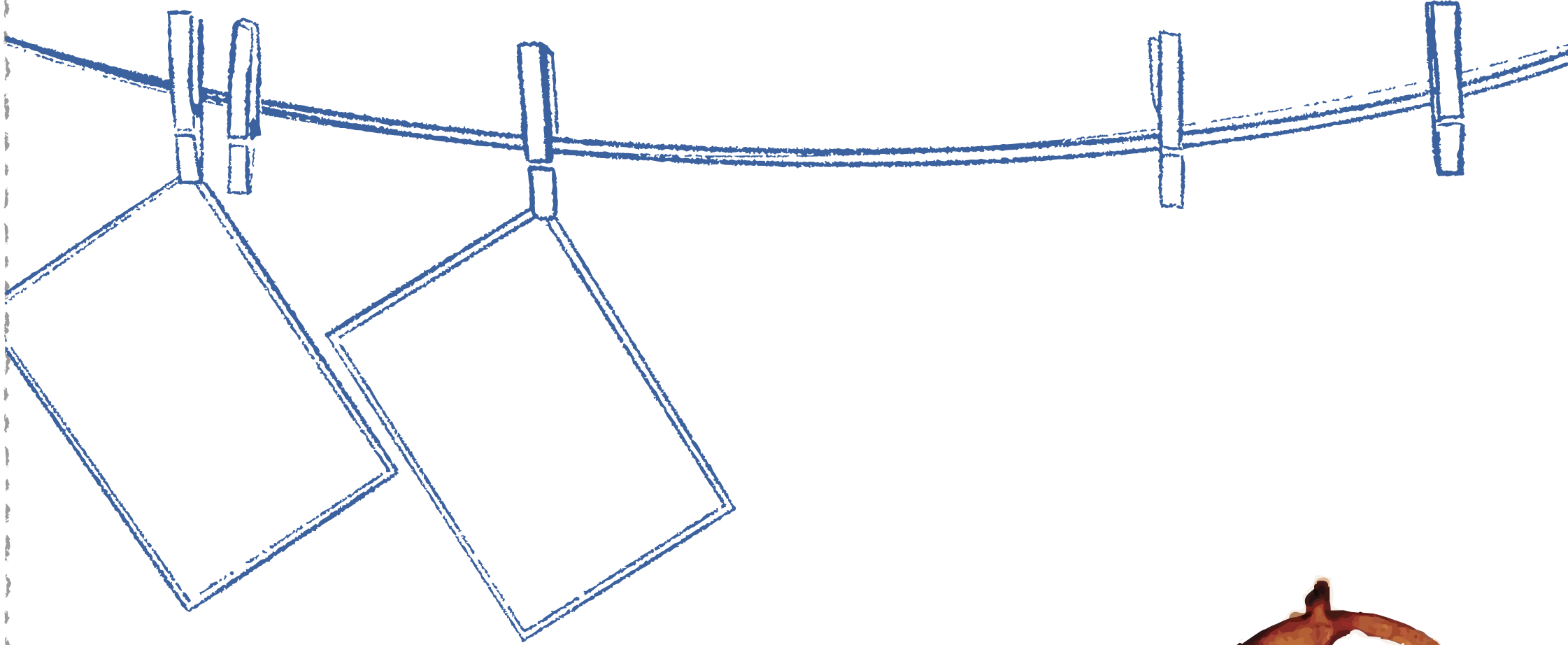
JOHNNY LEGENDRE

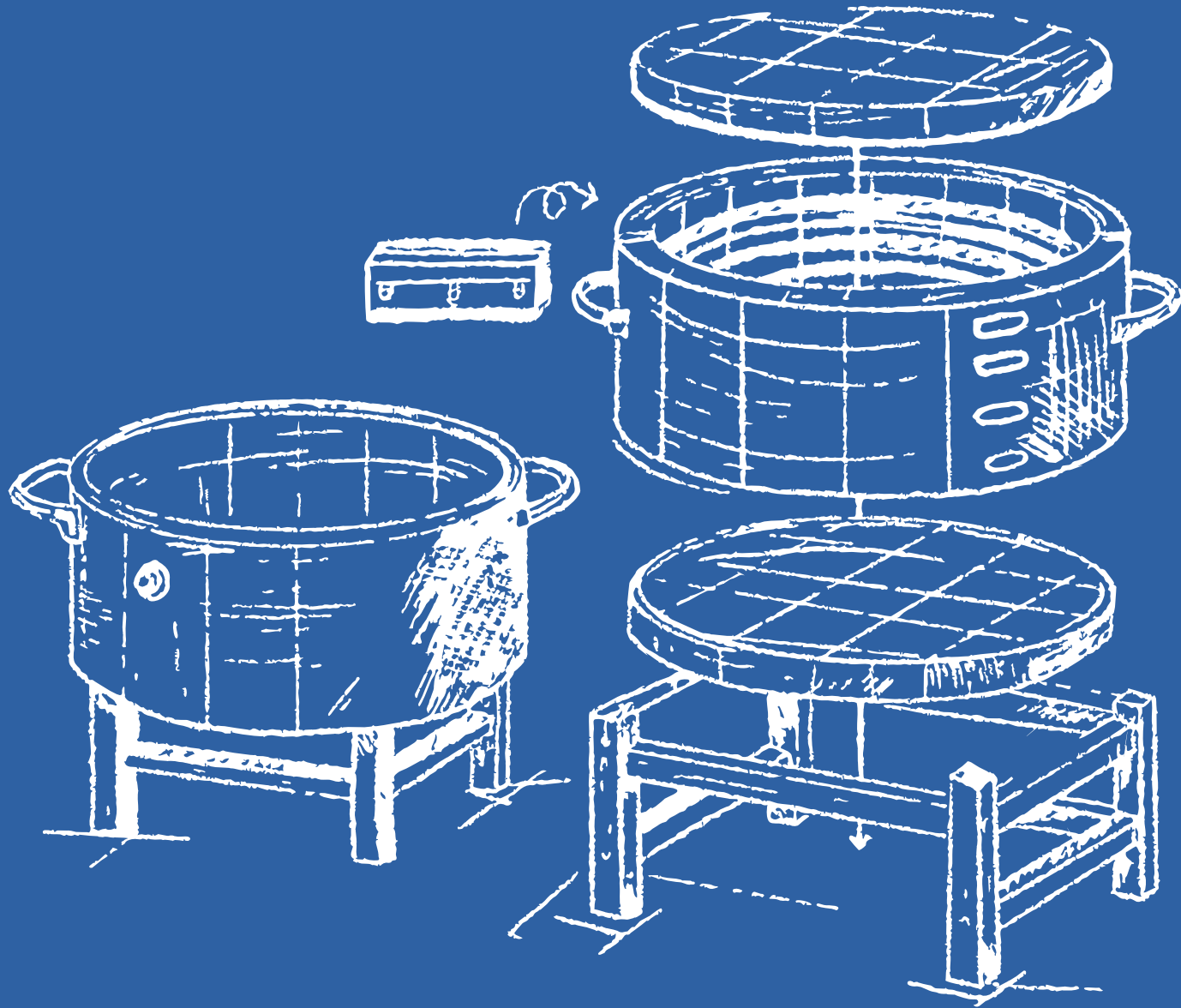


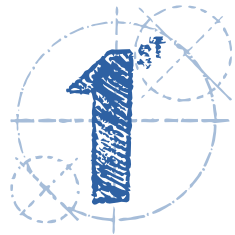
Reflections of Life in Vegas

KEVAN MONIZ









Act of Being Exposed

MICHELLE VILLARREAL PINA

“ There's a lot of moments when I look around, all I see is hate and violence. Feel's like we're drowning in it; but there's always an avenue that everyone can get behind. The process of creative minds is untouched. ”



creative nonfiction

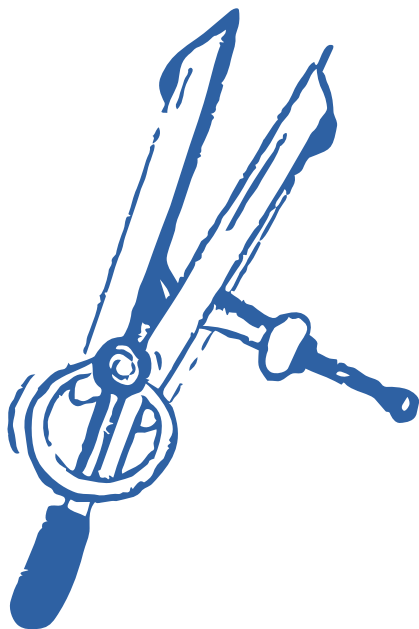
ft. ceramics, glass, 3d design & sculpture, jewelry





A Day Like All Days

ALEX ARENO



In the early days of television and of the sainted Walker Cronkite's career as America's most trusted television news anchor, there was a weekly program called *You Are There*, hosted by Cronkite. Each episode reenacted a famous moment from history, with Cronkite inserting himself into the action as a reporter. The characters always seemed a bit surprised to see someone from the twentieth century traveling back in time to interview them about the assassination of Julius Caesar, or the travels of Marco Polo, or the Salem Witch Trials, or the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but they were always happy to help Cronkite get his "scoop."

Cronkite ended every episode of the show with the same postscript: "What kind of a day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events that altered the course of our times. And YOU *WERE * THERE!"

November 22, 1963 began for me as a day like all days. I was in my sophomore year at college. I didn't live on campus – I was a "dayhop," as we called them – students who lived at home and drove to school only to attend class and take part in activities. I don't remember what classes I had in the morning that semester, but my first class of the afternoon, after lunch, was Overview of Ancient Philosophy, with Father John Campbell. In those days Marist College was a Catholic institution – it's secular now – and most of the faculty was comprised of Marist brothers with a smattering of laymen and laywomen. The chaplain was a Dominican priest, as was his assistant, Father Campbell. Father Campbell was a down-to-earth, very likeable sort of guy, and an excellent teacher. I wouldn't exactly call Overview of Ancient Philosophy fun, but Father Campbell knew how to make it interesting.

Anyway, there we all were, in Room 127 of Donnelly Hall, listening to Father Campbell wax eloquent about Plato and Socrates, when someone suddenly burst into the room with the news:

"Father Campbell! President Kennedy has been shot!"

Shock. Utter silence, except for perhaps a gasp or two.

Father led us in a prayer and then dismissed the class.

None of us knew where to go or what to do. I went outside and just stood in one of the campus pathways while staring blankly ahead. Others did likewise. It was a gray, cold November day, made grayer and colder by the news. Should I go up to the chapel? I was the chapel organist. The chapel had an electronic carillon that could be played from the organ console. During the noonday daily Mass I sometimes drew the carillon stop for one of the verses of whatever hymn I happened

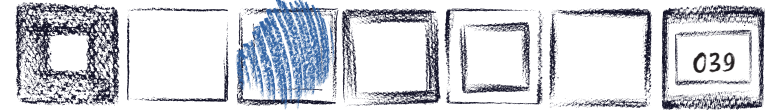
to be playing at the time. Should I go up there now and toll the deepest bell on the carillon as a dirge? No, I decided to go home instead.

Arriving home, I saw that my mother already had the television turned on. Walter Cronkite was reading the latest dispatch: "From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official – President Kennedy died at 1:00pm Central Standard Time, 2:00pm Eastern Time, some 38 minutes ago." As he read the statement, he took off his glasses, grimaced, and looked away for several seconds. It was clear that he was crying. Walter Cronkite crying on camera, on live TV. What kind of a day was it? It was that kind of a day.

The Presidential election of 1960 had been historic in many ways. It was the first election in which the incumbent, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was ineligible to run because of term limits established by the newly ratified 22nd Amendment to the Constitution. It was also the first election in which Alaska and Hawaii, newly admitted to the Union as the 49th and 50th states, respectively, voted. It was the last Presidential election in which the District of Columbia did not vote. It pitted Richard Nixon, a highly intelligent man who served as Vice President under the enormously popular President Eisenhower but who had acquired a reputation for sneakiness and underhandedness – "Tricky Dick," as people called him – with John F. Kennedy, a rich boy from a privileged family, a young man who suffered from poor health that the public mostly didn't know about. To top it all off, Kennedy was (sin of sins) a Catholic – a puppet of the Vatican, his detractors called him. But Kennedy won that election, due in no small part to his brilliant performance in the first ever series of televised Presidential debates in which Nixon came off as someone who had just rolled out of bed and should probably roll right back in.

John F. Kennedy's Presidency was not the most trouble-free period our country ever lived through. The dictator of Cuba saw to that, as did Nikita S. Khrushchev, the Premier of the Soviet Union – "Crookchev," President Eisenhower used to call him. But it was undoubtedly the most enchanting. The young, personable President, his young, attractive wife Jacqueline, their two darling children Caroline and John-John, won our hearts. Kennedy's Presidency was marked by an aura of glamour, high fashion, and unbridled excitement not before seen in the office. We called that era "Camelot."

But the events of November 22, 1963, and the days that followed, were events that altered the course of our times, as Cronkite would have said. Who can forget Vice President



*Shock. Utter silence,
except for perhaps a
gasp or two.*

Lyndon B. Johnson taking the oath of office aboard Air Force One, with Jacqueline Kennedy standing by his side, still wearing the jacket stained with her husband's blood? The funeral procession through the streets of Washington, with Jacqueline heavily veiled in black widow's weeds and little John John saluting his father's casket as it passed by. The funeral Mass celebrated at St. Matthew's Cathedral, with Richard Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston, presiding. Cardinal Cushing, whose deep, booming, gravelly voice could wake the dead. The choir and orchestra intoning Mozart's gloomy yet stirring Requiem, which Mozart left unfinished when death stole him from us also. The burial at Arlington National Cemetery and the lighting of the Eternal Flame.

President Kennedy was the last President ever to appear in an open-air motorcade, although his was not the first Presidential limousine to be armored – Franklin D. Roosevelt's, seized from the spoils of gangster Al Capone's ill-gotten empire, bears that honor. But no Presidential limousine since Kennedy's has let the President be so vulnerably exposed. Today the President rides in a veritable bomb shelter on wheels, cleverly disguised to look like a Cadillac De Ville touring sedan.

Numerous other changes have also occurred since that fateful day. Lyndon Johnson was not the first Vice President to succeed to the Presidency, but the 25th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1967, now makes clear the conditions under which succession can occur, and gives the new President the power to name a replacement Vice President with the approval of Congress. The Amendment also enables the Vice President to serve as Acting President if the President is declared unfit to perform the duties of office.

Presidents are no longer at liberty to stroll about the city of Washington unprotected, as did Abraham Lincoln, Calvin Coolidge and Harry Truman, among others.

Former Presidents, upon leaving office, are now afforded lifetime protection by the Secret Service. In Kennedy's day, the Secret Service numbered a little over 500 agents. Today's Secret Service employs about 7000 persons in various roles.

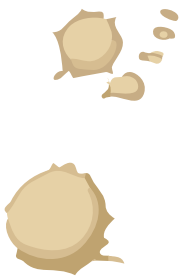
And even TV news has changed. The Kennedy assassination and the events that followed marked the first time that a major happening was broadcast live without interruption. Today that is commonplace, as political uprisings, military invasions, school shootings, and terrorist attacks unfold almost daily before our very eyes. But we no longer rely on reporters such as Walter Cronkite to give us the news. Nowadays anyone can post the most blatant lies on social

media, and people believe them as if they came from the mouth of God himself.

Also, what can be said about conspiracy theories that has not already been said? Countless speculations have reared their ugly heads concerning that fateful day. The Cubans did it. The FBI was behind it. Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone – the Grassy Knoll veritably teemed with gunmen. Of course Jack Ruby had to shoot Oswald before the truth came out. Kennedy didn't die – he is alive and well in Argentina. But these, and other such theories, pale by comparison to things we hear about stolen elections and secret bank accounts in Ukraine. The 1969 moon landing was fake. Covid is a hoax. Zombies do exist. Bill Gates is manufacturing fake snow – that's why there were so many blizzards last winter. And what else?

But most of all, we no longer live in Camelot, nor have we lived there for a very long time. We no longer trust our government or the process by which candidates are elected. We no longer let our children walk to school or even allow them to stand unguarded at bus stops waiting for the school bus to arrive. We have to station armed guards in every school, and even issue pistols to the teachers. Not even church is safe. No one's identity is immune from theft. Don't use your credit card at a gas station – thieves have rigged the card readers to steal your card number and security code. Don't believe for a moment that it's your children, or your mother, or your uncle, calling you on the phone – artificial intelligence has copied their voices to perfection.

"Filled with those events that altered the course of our times?" Indeed. And as for "You were there," I wish sometimes that I was still there, back in the days of Camelot, Walter Cronkite, Father Campbell, and me playing the carillon at Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Chapel, Marist College.





Raw Denim

ASHLEY LOWELL



There's this denim jacket that my mom gave me about a year after I came out to her as a Transgender woman; it has since seen a fair amount of use, and an overwhelming number of pin-prick size holes from the buttons that I shove in it so carelessly. I fell in love with that jacket immediately. Not only did it fit perfectly with the rest of my wardrobe, but it was the peak of fashion, in my opinion at least.

The first time I wore it out was my first day at my local community college, then most subsequent days after. In this new environment, wearing it felt like I always had a connection to home. It was there that I also happened to gain the habit of picking at the stitching on the sleeves when I got nervous.

I was wearing that jacket when shamelessly swiping through a Lesbian dating app in the student union. A few different girls had popped up as matches, but I connected with nearly none of them in an actual conversation, all until one. For the sake of my own sanity, let's avoid her actual name and simply call her Marci.

Marci was a rather stereotypical nerd with curly blonde hair and chunky glasses. In the beginning, our conversations flowed with an ease I wasn't used to. I also found myself unfamiliar with people showing interest in me so quickly, just the thought of it made my heart race. She asked for my Instagram, I gave it to her immediately.

We didn't start dating until around five months after I met her. In my time as a Lesbian, I've found that it's nearly entirely impossible to tell whether a woman is flirting with you, or just being kind. That was the main reason we didn't get together sooner; she didn't realize I was flirting, and I was entirely too self-deprecating to ask her out.

I wore the denim jacket the first time I went over to her apartment. She introduced me to her sister as a friend, which confused me slightly. The stitching on the sleeves grew a bit more worn out that day. We walked her dog, she told me she loved me; I didn't know if I loved her, but I said it back anyway.

That jacket was thrown on the floor of my car the second time that we hooked up. I was anxious and uncomfortable. We were in her apartment's parking lot around midnight, I wanted to leave two hours before. It was the first time that something like that had happened, but it wouldn't be the last.

My denim armor hugged me tightly when I helped her move to a new house an hour away. I had told her days before that I wanted to just take the ride with no stops, but when she got in the car with all her stuff, she immediately asked if we could stop for a soda. I was sleep deprived that morning, since she'd

kept me up every night texting me. I didn't look forward to driving, but I said yes anyway.

A few weeks later, I went to a bar with Marci and her friends for the first time; it was a sort of video-game bar. The only problem was that we were almost an hour late to the meet up with her friends. As I helped her get ready to leave, she pushed me onto the bed. The next thing I knew my pants were off and I was telling her to stop. She didn't. I closed my eyes until it was over. Afterwards, she asked "Wow, you were so quiet, was I really that good?". I can't say whether she was being sincere, but I nodded, not having the energy to risk a fight.

Throughout the night, I learned how generous Marci's friends were. Namely meaning that they were above drinking age and not at all against giving alcohol to an 18-year-old. Marci said she didn't drink, but encouraged me to, she could drive us home. In retrospect, that was probably a terrible idea since she didn't have a driver's license.

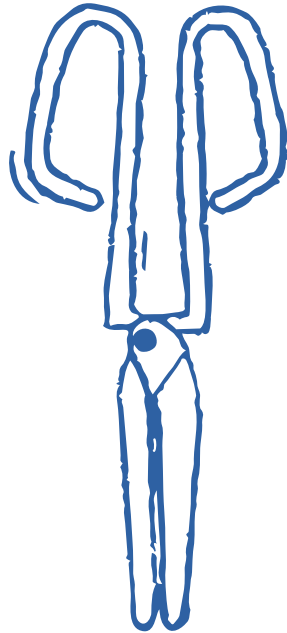
When we left, I was stumbling blindly out the door, leaning on her. I remember mainly that she drove us back to her place. The rest comes back to me in the form of patchwork experiences. I remember making it back to her bed. I remember her helping me to lay on my stomach and shimmy off my pants. Then I remember her taking advantage of my state to do something that I'd never have done sober.

I remember that I woke up at two A.M., finding my butt was sticky with a mix of my own blood and another fluid I wanted to ignore. I wasn't completely sober when I drove home that night, but I couldn't stay there. My mind was shattered into a million pieces; I wanted to run away, but I didn't. I wanted to leave her, but I didn't. I wanted to make sure that something like that would never happen again, but I didn't.

Over the next week, I found out that my dog, Reggie, who had been my closest companion since I was six years old, refused to eat anything anymore. Which was entirely surprising since he had always carried the attitude of attempting to consume anything he could set his beady little eyes on. I scheduled a vet visit, but in every waking moment I felt as if I'd either vomit out any essential organs or break down crying.

I tried to talk to Marci about how horrendous I felt, I really did. Her "solutions" were to either send me shirtless selfies or attempt to change the conversation topic to how horrendous I felt, I really did. Her "solutions" were to either send me shirtless selfies or attempt to change the conversation topic to how she was struggling with working at a convenience store. It was then that I realized that I was mainly just an emotional crutch for

*My denim armor
hugged me tightly...*



*...I closed my eyes
until it was over.*

her, which was a fact that I found a strange contentment in for a short period. At least I didn't have to worry anymore that she'd care if I were gone. She could find somebody else to listen to her.

There was one night where she didn't let me catch more than thirty minutes of sleep. That same night was the night before the vet visit I had scheduled. It was that same night, when I felt so nervous that I could barely hold myself up, that she decided to threaten to leave me if I went to sleep.

In the morning, Reggie died. I called Marci immediately, my face dripping with tears as I propped myself against my car. When she started to bring up her own issues; how she had it worse and that was why I didn't deserve to have support, I immediately hung up. I tore the stitches out of my right jacket sleeve that day, I sewed them shut the next.

A few weeks later I managed to barely pull myself together. Well, only enough to be able to lie about being happy to those around me. In truth, I had chosen a date at the end of that month to kill myself. I'd go through the motions as if everything were fine, then on some meaningless Friday, I'd take enough blood thinners and painkillers to end everything. It was the only thing I really looked forward to at that point.

With a false smile on my face, I attended my regular club meetings at school, where I happened to be the president. We were designing buttons, so I was mainly focused on figuring out what I could put on my jacket, so much so that I went to the wrong room entirely. When I finally got to the meeting room everybody was already there, including a new member.

After talking to her for a moment, I found out firstly that her name was Julian and secondly, that she was possibly the cutest girl I'd ever seen. She had curly brown hair adorned with a pretty pink bow, which the rest of her outfit followed suit, mostly being pink. Then we started talking, and I found out that she had a passion for art, which was just amazing to me. At some point while talking to her, I found myself forgetting my plans. I didn't know why, but the thought of making this girl that I'd barely just met sad was enough to scare me out of it.

After the meeting ended, the club decided to walk together to the north parking lot, where we each slowly filed off to our cars. In my stupor, I ended up following Julian to the parking lot without a thought in the world. The main problem was that my car happened to be parked on the exact opposite side of the school. I stuttered to make some dumb excuse about needing to go to the library and practically ran away.

As I was walking away, I realized how terrified I was to go

through with my plan. I also realized that I absolutely had to break up with Marci.

A few days later, I found myself in front of Marci's house. We went to a nearby park where I would break her heart. At least, that's what she said repeatedly for the next two hours. She pleaded with me as much as she could, even trying to guilt me by saying she would kill herself if I went through with it. I almost couldn't do it. I thought I was a monster for trying to find a way to be happy. Marci pulled out a knife and I immediately took it from her. I didn't know what to do with it, so I put it in the inside pocket of my jacket, though it stabbed through the fabric. The drive home felt much longer that day, since she'd kept me there just long enough for it to be peak rush hour. I spent three hours on the road, debating if I was a monster.

About two weeks later, I grew closer to Julian, enough for her to invite me to hang out at the mall. I'd abandoned every notion that my crush would turn out to be anything other than just idle fantasy, I thought I didn't deserve as much. So, of course I accepted her invite. I decided to wear a shorter black dress, tights with cat faces on the knees, and my denim jacket, attempting to bolster my confidence. It wasn't perfect, she was an hour late, I was half an hour early. According to her, my crush was obvious. Apparently, I had been walking too close to her in the mall without realizing it.

Julian and I got bored of the mall quickly; there is only so much window-shopping that two broke college students can do, after all. She invited me back to her place to play some video games, I agreed. Once there, we started talking a bit about our pasts. We steered into relationships at some point, and I told her about my recent breakup. My hands found the sleeve of my jacket as I debated telling her about the fact of my crush, and how it motivated the break-up. Then I just did it, anxiety swirling in my gut as I thought she'd be disgusted with me. There's no way someone as beautiful as her would want to date me, right?

Then she kissed me, and I didn't know how to react for a moment. My head spun like it never had before. I never considered that she could like me, especially not enough to kiss me. As I sewed the once-gold stitching of my denim jacket back together with black string, I smiled like a fool. Maybe I was good enough, maybe I wasn't disgusting. Maybe, just maybe, there might be a future where I'm truly happy. And now, I'm glad to know a future where she is the woman I'll marry.



The Desert Botanical Garden

JOSELYN MARIA LOPEZ

*I'm like a cactus,
beautifully alone with
my spines as my shield.
But the right person will
find a way through and
see me for myself.*

Arizona is home to one of my favorite gardens, the Desert Botanical Garden. It is a 140-acre living museum in Phoenix filled with species from trees, plants, cacti, and flowers. The Desert Botanical Garden or the DBG for short has a rich history. It opened its doors in 1939 due to the efforts of Gustaf Starck, a botanist who saw the Arizona desert as something to conserve (Our History). And that brought on support from Gertrude Divine Webster, who upon her death left her estate to the DBG (Our History). It's been almost nine decades since the Garden has opened to the public, nine decades to appreciate the beautiful array of engendered and rare plants.

I discovered the Garden on one of my college field trips and I've been going back ever since. I go to de-stress from life, see nature at work, and remind myself how nature thrives even in a climate like our desert. And how I too can thrive in difficult circumstances. I enjoy visiting not only for its beauty but also the tranquility and peace it provides me. I lose myself in the most beautiful ways possible in the Garden.

I recently visited when the flowers were in bloom, the sun was warm on my skin and there was a light breeze that guided me deeper into the Garden after my admission was paid. On my right, there's Gertrude's Restaurant. I haven't tried their food yet; I always see it bustling with people. Sometimes it becomes so packed that reservations are needed. But I don't mind, I prefer a quieter spot, the Patio's Café, wedged between the Sonoran Desert Nature Trail and the Heritage Garden. It's a perfect spot, serene with a view overlooking the mountains and the cacti scattered around.

The Garden has a Living Trail that consists of garden beds filled with herbs, vegetables, fruits, and cacti that are safe to or used for medicine, ointments, or soothing teas. There was basil, cucumbers, strawberries, aloe vera, and so much more. Out of everything, my eyes fixated on the strawberries the most. They are my favorite fruits, tiny but so poignant. I especially like how they stain my lips and leave a sweet taste behind. Looking at them made me yearn for a garden bed of my own.

There were also so many cacti. Many of them were hairy to protect themselves from the heat. It was fascinating to detect the variety of spines with sharp ends. Some were thin and tiny, sparingly spread out across the cactus, others were thick and long and in the center of the cacti's heads. Some resembled fuzzy white hairs due to the amount of spines they had on the ends. They had small cacti enveloped in long spines. Others were huge and shaved, with no spines in sight. The most eye-catching cacti was the black-spined prickly pear with their

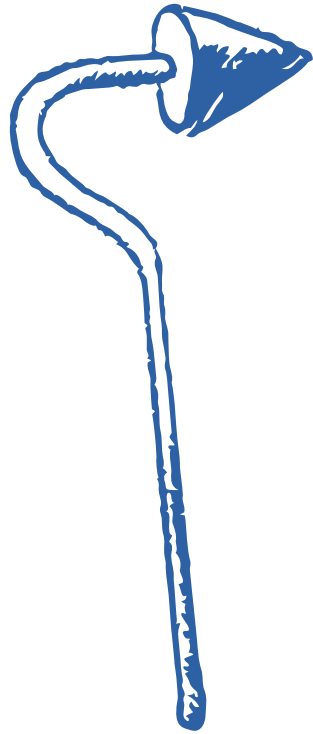
paddles brilliantly pink and purple. Their coloring was lovely; it was how they produced their pigment that made me a little sad.

Under stress, from lack of water and the environment, the black-spined prickly pear is the most alluring shade of purplish-pink. I ended up brushing my hands on the parts where there were no spines, there was a rough firmness to it. And it had me wondering if anyone else takes the time to find a way to touch a cactus. Under all those spines is a radiant cactus, longing to be seen, touched, and loved. They remind me a lot of myself. I'm like a cactus, beautifully alone with my spines as my shield. But the right person will find a way through and see me for myself.

I continued walking towards the Plants and People of the Sonoran Desert Trail. It was interesting to learn a little about the history. I found out about them through my walk; there were posts about certain plants or specific trails. That is how I discovered the Spanish brought many vegetables and fruits from around the world to the Americas. They brought long green chilies from Mexico; watermelons from Africa; pomegranates from the Mediterranean and rosemary, cilantro, and wheat from other parts of the world.

Bees buzzed around the area, performing their dance before sipping nectar and resting on the countless sunflowers along the Native Crop Garden, Apache, and Akimel O'odham Households Trail. There was a fire pit, made of natural stone, which the natives used to cook on. And further along was a little Desert Oasis, a stream that grew willow trees and cottonwood alongside it. The stream was home to cattails and orange fishes that came as far to the edge of the water to greet me with water kisses, then went on their way scavenging for food on the edge. There was this subtle peace in the air, with the water lulling me as it rocked softly. It had me so transfixed I had to rest on a rock. I felt beckoned to walk into the water, forget everything, feel the coldness on my skin, and do the unthinkable. Break protocol. But I didn't. I sat and watched, wishing to be one with nature.

The Garden is a forty-five to sixty-minute walk through the various trails. I stayed longer though, completely enraptured with nature. I fall in love every time. I like to contemplate over the intricate details of nature. No plant is too simple in my eyes. They all have a story. They all want to be seen by pollinators such as ants, flies, beetles, bees, or hummingbirds that fit their specific flower shape and size. They are all competing to survive, to give their offspring (thanks to pollination) a chance. The way

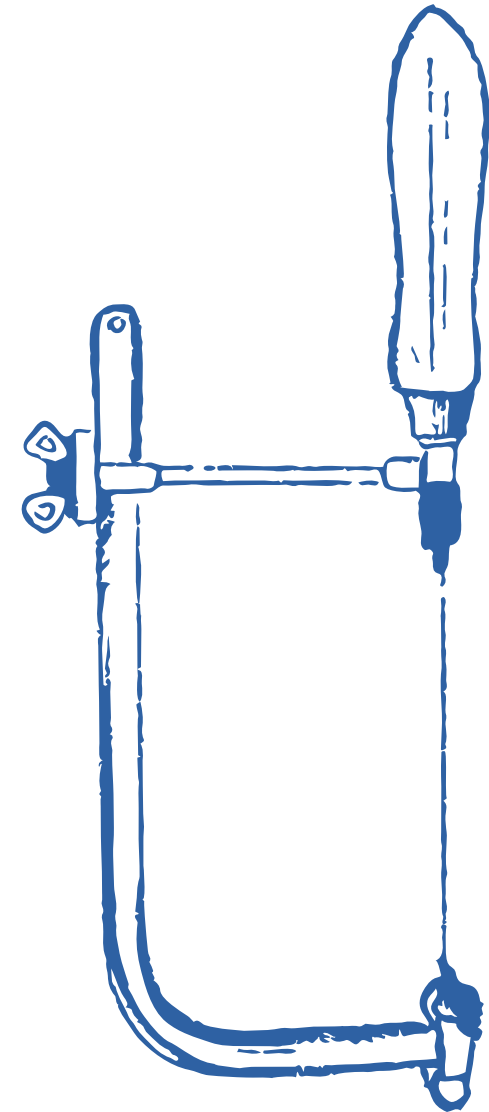


nature works reminds me how I must work to get what I want, while also letting life take its course. If something is meant for me, it will find me like the pollinators.

One of my favorite flowers from the Garden is the orange trumpet which emits an intoxicating sweet fragrance of citrus with undertones of lemon and honey wrapped together. I was addicted to it, as were the ants. They crawled on the bell-shaped flowers, addicted to the nectar, leaving tiny sticky trails behind for the others to follow. I wondered if they ever leave some for the hummingbirds who are always thirsty from traveling. But then I'm reminded that the Garden has over 50,000 plants on display, enough for the hummingbirds to choose their favorite drink. And my thoughts settle on knowing that no matter how thirsty the birds, animals, or insects get, nature will always take care of them.

The Garden has an array of smells. I'm always struck by the earthy aromas in the air and how subtly they shift depending on the trail. It could be floral, earthy, or sweet but never too empowering. The scents drift lazily in the air, casting a dreamy effect. It is this effect that had me enraptured, in complete awe as I've spent hours exploring and appreciating the plants, cacti, and trees around me. I never want to leave, because once outside the protection of the Garden, I'm exposed to the putrid smell of the city, the traffic, and the congestion of smoke. The Garden doesn't mask the smell, on the contrary, it helps to detox the air. Something that Phoenix needs more of, trees and lots of them.

Whenever I must say goodbye to the Garden, I grow incredibly depressed. And so I take a little of the Garden with me; I buy a plant or two at their shop. And when sadness gets a hold of me, I turn to my plants and my heart rests. It rests knowing I will visit again with new eyes and new appreciation. And the sadness fades away, while my heart beats in tune with nature.



And when sadness gets a hold of me, I turn to my plants and my heart rests. It rests knowing I will visit again with new eyes and new appreciation.



The Offering
ABBIGAIL WILLIAMS



"I like creating in a quiet space, letting my thoughts guide my hands."



Morning Dew
SANDY BADERMAN

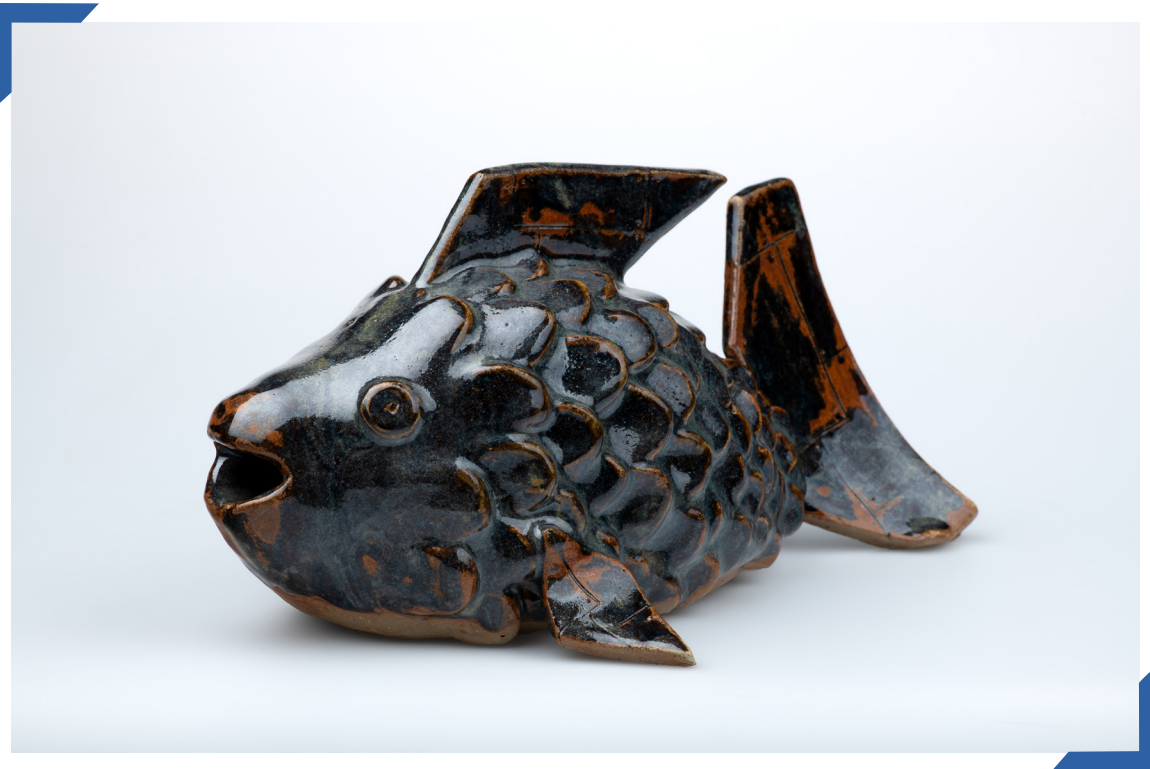
"I love working with tangible materials; seeing something emerge from nothing is the best feeling."





Future Oceans

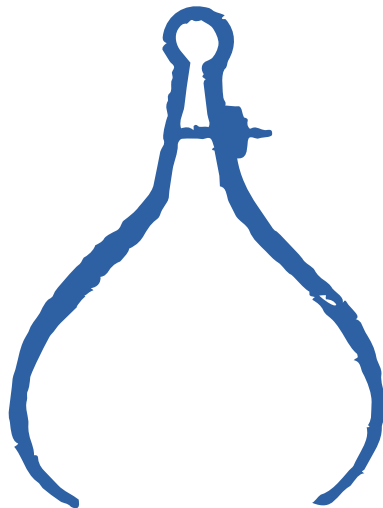
ELLA TWEEDIE



*“Textures, glazes, and
tools are my playground.”*



Driplets
RUMI POLING





Arizona's Glorious Aspen Corner

GABBY SANDY

*"I start by sketching or
making models to see how
it occupies space."*





Fire Flower

SANDY BADERMAN



"I get lost in the flow of molten glass and the way it bends to my intention."



Abstract Robot

HAROLD KNOER

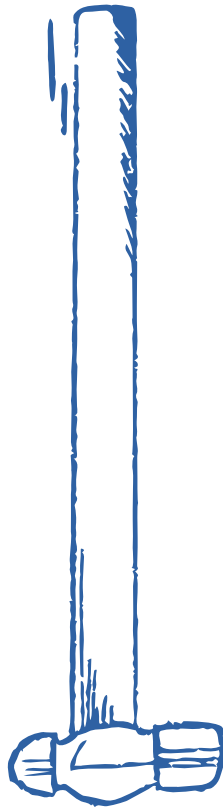
“Gather anything that looks nice and very fitting, then start piecing it together like a puzzle.”





Christmas

MARY WOREL





She is Found Falling

REBECCA ABBOTT

" Every piece tells a story,
even if it's tiny."





Stargazing
RUMI POLING



*"I like using references
and then pushing them
to something new."*

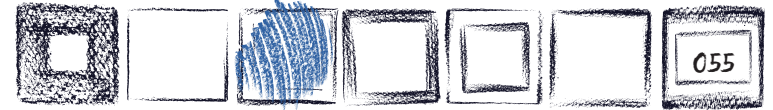


Jack

CYNDEE PASTORIUS

*“ Shiny, matte, rough,
smooth... each surface
inspires a new idea. ”*



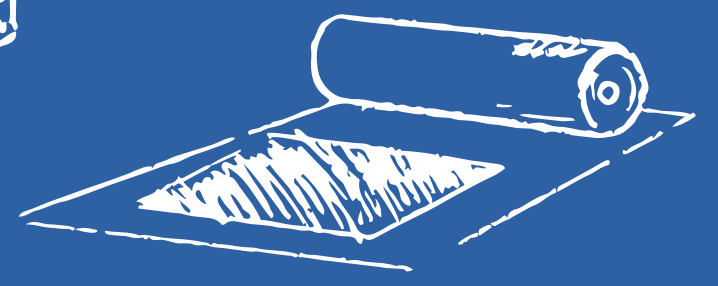
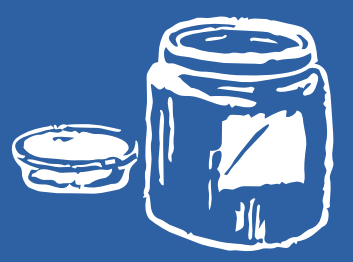
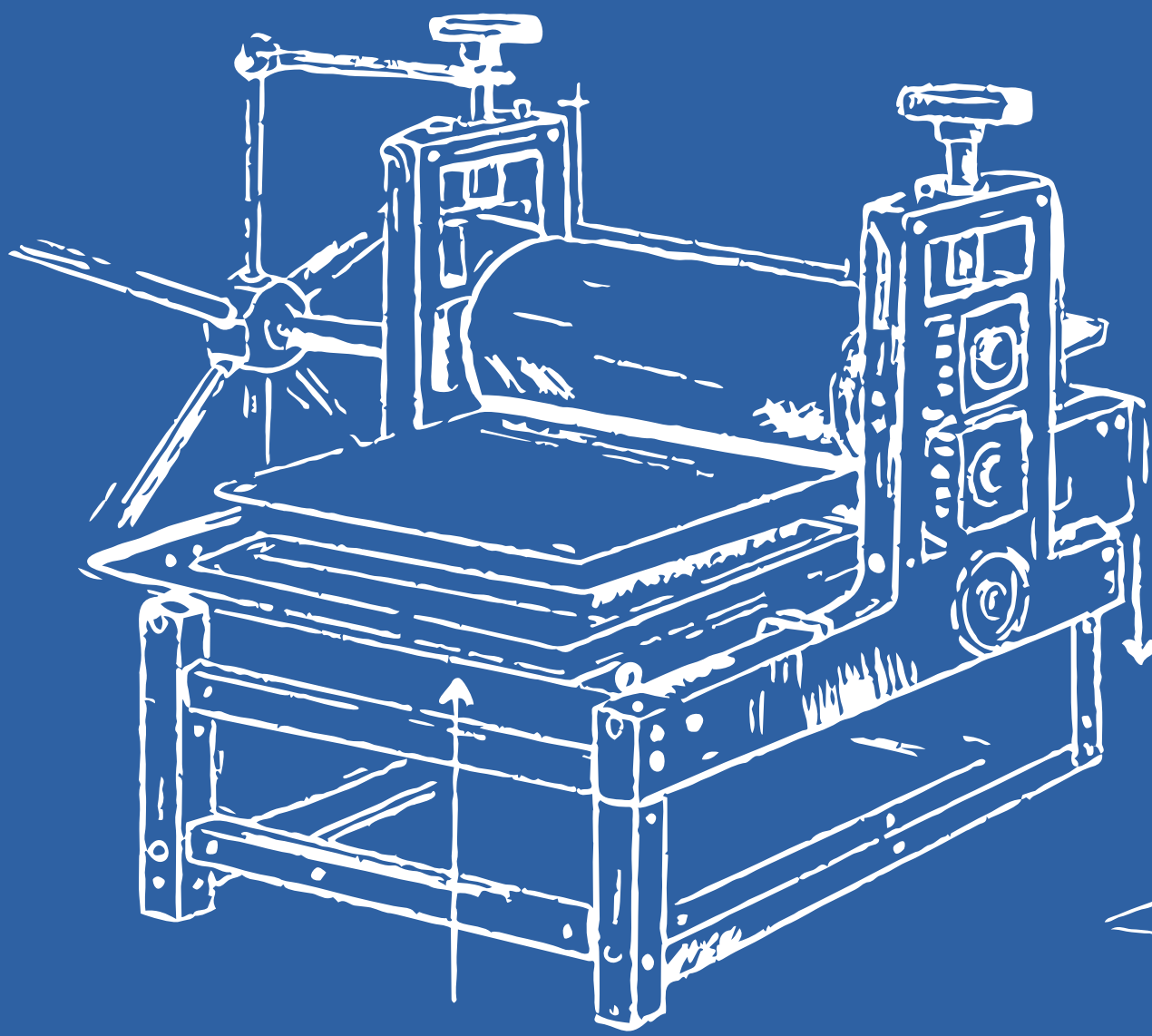


#1 - Turquoise + Amethyst

LINDA GANTT

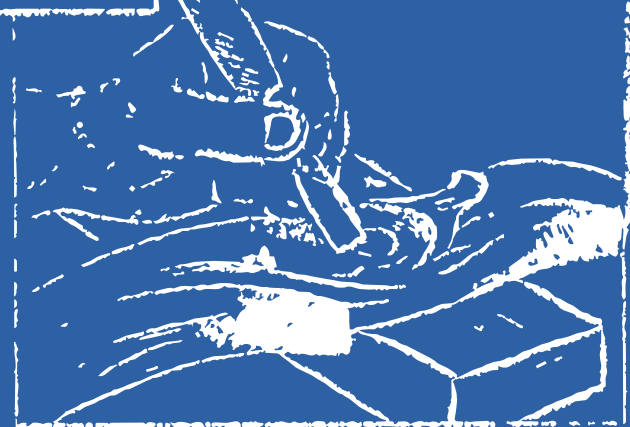
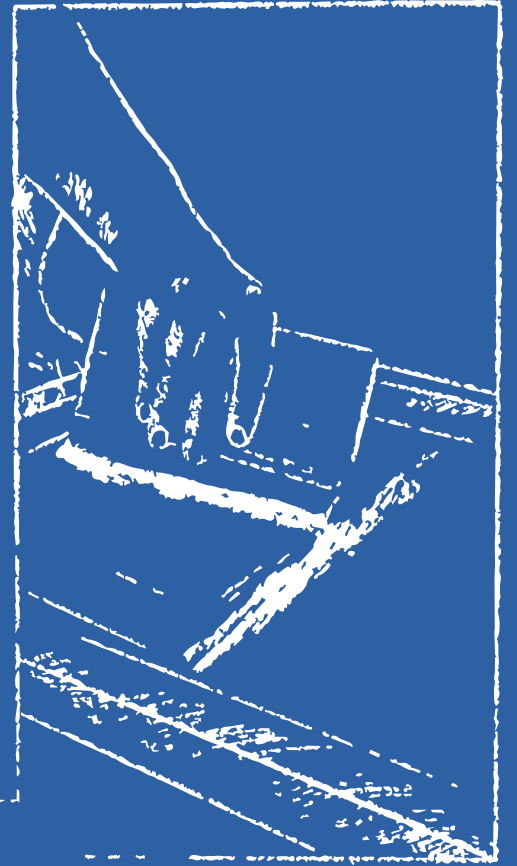
*" Seeing an idea come
to life visually is my
favorite part. "*





poetry

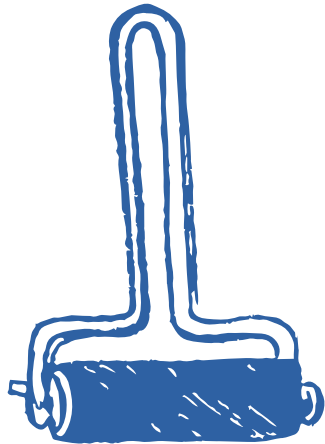
ft. 2d & graphic design, printmaking





Once You Stop This Car

ADRIAN CASTILLO



My passenger seat still waits for you —do you? I do.

Never thought we'd make it to October
Never thought we'd make it through the summer

If I never make it to Hollywood
You and I would storyboard for all the scenes under our hood
If we never make the drive to the ocean
I'll shift in neutral for you

Do you know what it feels like?
I would stay up all night
To see you in the blue light
Draw on me like a knife
Another chance to live life
Like a spark needs a gasline

And I thought I knew you well
Spilled out all my regrets
I never had a chance to tell
Two monkeys who sit above the treeline
Ratfinks with ice cream avoid the streetlight
Capuchin rendezvous

My truth to you, I'd drive us out of this
How does this dream become true
When the rearview shows you all the mess
All the stress we've been through?
I'll tell you all the things

I should've never let swing by
My passenger seat still waits for you
Do you?
I do

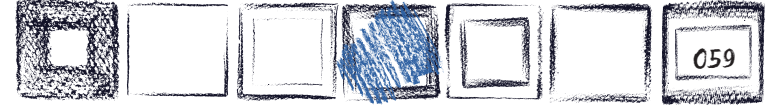
Can we go back to the park under a blanket of stars?
Can we go back to the start, we were towering above cars?
Can we go back to the part where I should've showed you my heart?
When we get back to the car, I'll say you're all that I want
And once you stop this car, I'll do whatever you want

I trust you to do what you must do

Once you stop this car
I'll never want to break free
All the shapes that made me grasp to your fingers, beautifully
I never wanted to leave
All the split-cust' sketches stare out as they're left on the street

Is this what it feels like?
I've been staying up all night
How am I gonna make this right?
You say we're gonna be okay, but I would hope for one day
I will hear you say





Crossing the Finish Line

ROGELIO S. AGUAYO

Imagine, if you will, the runner and the race.

There is no finish line.

There is no starting line.

There are no legs, no shoes, nor feet;

Just the horizon upon which your gaze must meet.

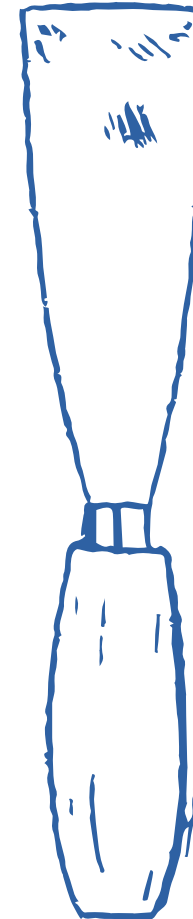
I met you half a dozen times in the freezer; of course it was cold, you stood next to the beef.

But beef that it was I was still without heat; you know, because I was cold, because I was in the freezer.

Some people, I suppose, try to argue that the more often you furrow your brow the more powerful becomes the laser beam that shoots out of your forehead, but I wouldn't know; I'm just really, really cold in this meat freezer.

I tried running without feet, feet without shoes, shoes to no body, no body under my nose; truly.

But I kept thinking of that rhythmic horizon; I didn't need a finish line; I had forgotten when I started; running down the freezer line; gutted and unguarded.



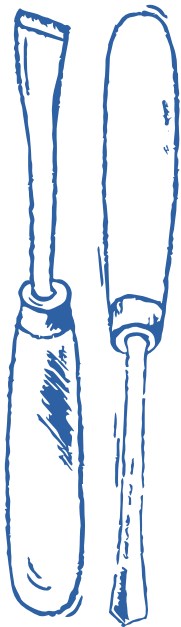
I didn't need a finish line; I had forgotten when I started;

running down the freezer line; gutted and unguarded.



Other Men's Thoughts

ROGELIO S. AGUAYO



It wasn't that I couldn't follow the deceit of your departure, it was just like the cicada, a symphony of that monochrome buzz; there was just so much of it; it was all I could think about.

Then, later, I stopped by the grocery store to get some ice cream; no bugs in the freezer I guess.

But why didn't you tell me about those anxious cactuses in our back yard! I could have pulled them out, you know! Damn it, if you thought the work was back breaking we could have hired someone; damn it, you were always a lazy son of a bitch.

I'll have to forget about it; forget about all of the dumb times you puked on your shoes or the way you thought they wouldn't stink if you just "hosed them off".

I can't stand it, I can't fucking stand it, I cannot stand the raunchy bandana that you refused to wash because you thought it was lucky; like some rotten gambler you retreated to your rabbits foot, and refused to look at yourself in the mirror; a menagerie of data points, conjured into your mind that gave you an excuse for having the maturity of a 2 year old; if that even.

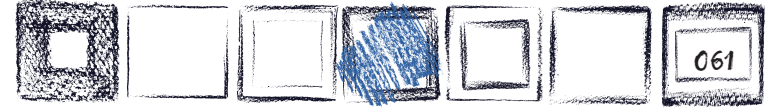
I, I, I don't know what to do; it's just so much waste; I mean money is one thing, girls are another; but you kept lighting furniture on fire thinking that the house would be fine; I can't think of anything more stupid.

You know, there were many times where, you know, I would count the imperfections. It was petty, I get that, but this violence against your better self is really the hardest part; you weren't always this way.

So yeah, that's it; there isn't anything else we can do you know; I'm just gonna sit on the concrete next to the car, kinda pretending that maybe the earth would drive itself and I can remain as listless and naïve as a stroke patient, waiting to die. But I'm not gonna die. And it's gonna hurt. And there's nothing I can do about this spiritual carnage every one has fallen into, because, lets face it, no one is perfect, everyone moves on, and we all waited for the good times that are actually behind us. That's the way it is, that's the way it will always be. I'm just glad I know how to cook and I still have a wad of cash; but maybe my answer is in the wind, lost in the cicada swarm, waiting to irritate someone else on a hot sunny day.

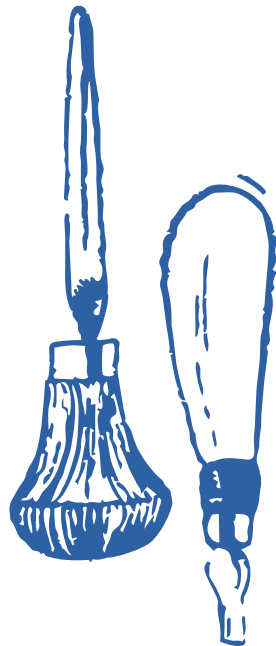
This violence against your better self is really the hardest part;

you weren't always this way.



Heavenly Birthday

GINA GUERIN



Maybe he's not real anymore, but it's okay, because I am;

My dad's birthday rolls around in April.

They say your birthdays after passing away are called "heavenly birthdays," but I'm not convinced he made it to any sort of paradise at all. If one thing is for sure, it's that he doesn't celebrate life because he is a void now. There is a space where he used to be.

He doesn't light a cigarette first thing in the morning or angrily make himself coffee anymore. He doesn't sit on the front porch and reminisce until it's time to start his day. He doesn't kiss his dogs goodbye, he doesn't climb into his loud, obnoxious truck or curse at traffic. He doesn't talk to old friends for hours on the phone or eat at his favorite diner. He doesn't enjoy the sunrise, he doesn't listen to old music, he doesn't stop to throw rocks into the Eel river anymore. He also never said sorry, even while he still could. He doesn't laugh or cry or get angry or sad, he just can't anymore.

He's dead.

Even if I wanted to, I can't reach out and grasp him because he has been reduced to a mere concept. Once here and now gone forever, simply just passing through. Accepting that he has withered into memories is confusing, especially since I never got the closure I deserved from him, even though I waited a decade for some sort of resolution. I can make up a million scenarios in my head of what that might have even looked like, but the truth is that I actually lost my dad when I was a girl, in the midst of all of his abuse— not the day that he died, years ago. The closure I was seeking from him I had to lay to rest beside him, it's been earthed forever.

Yet I find a strange sense of comfort taking on the driver's seat now because I will be delicately making closure for the rest of my life; and although he lives in the contours of my heart, in a way I am sincerely free now. The rest of my life is a clean canvas, untouched by his shadows and at the core of it all I can thank him for offering me the experience of being alive. Maybe he's not real anymore, but it's okay, because I am; and this is my life now.

and this is my life now.



I Began Where She Broke

ALI BLACKBURN



"I enjoy experimenting with textures, materials, and color combinations."



Radial
"I Began Where She Broke"
Atmospheric

Ali Blackburn 11/4/25



Anniversary
RUMI POLING

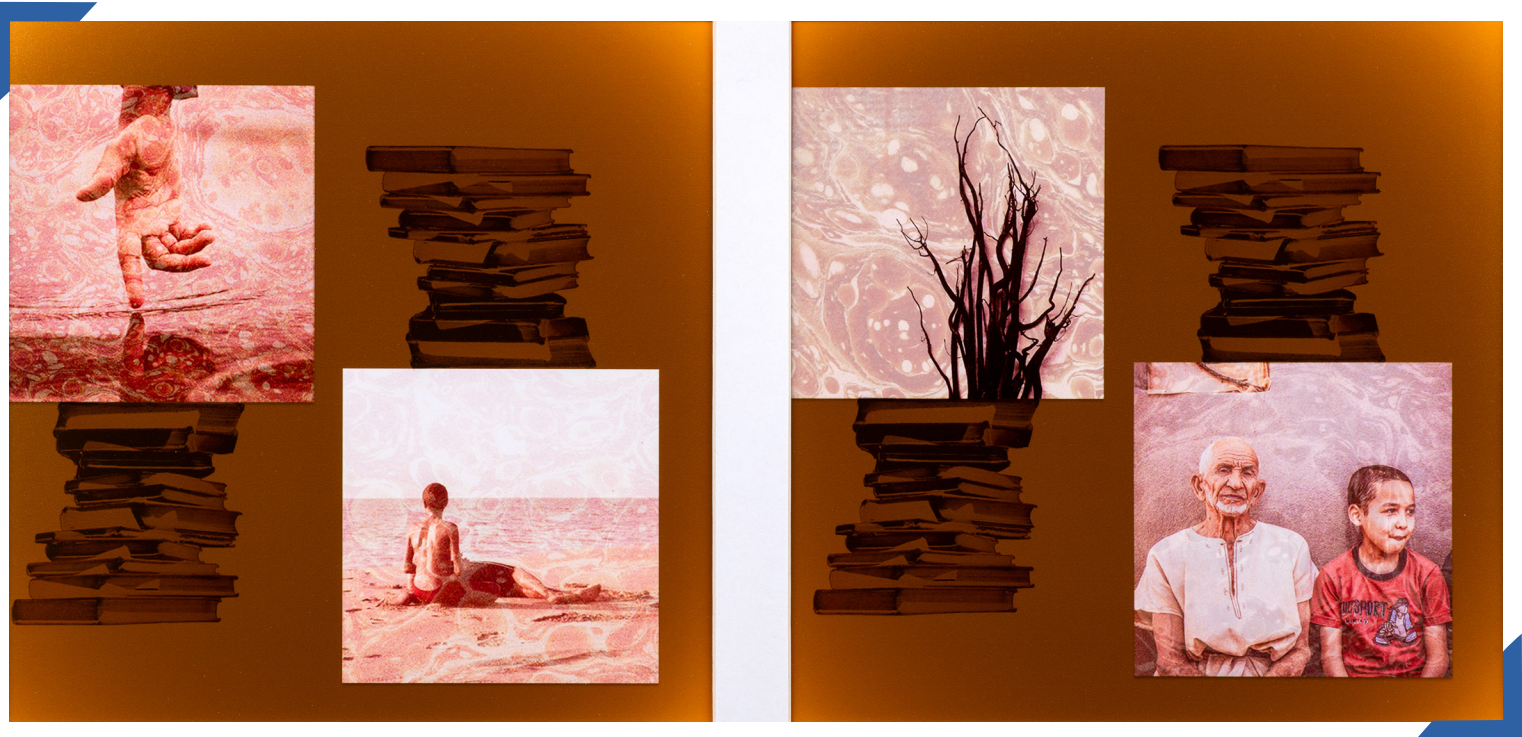


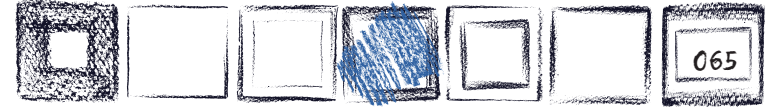
“ Every piece has its own personality; I just help it show itself. ”



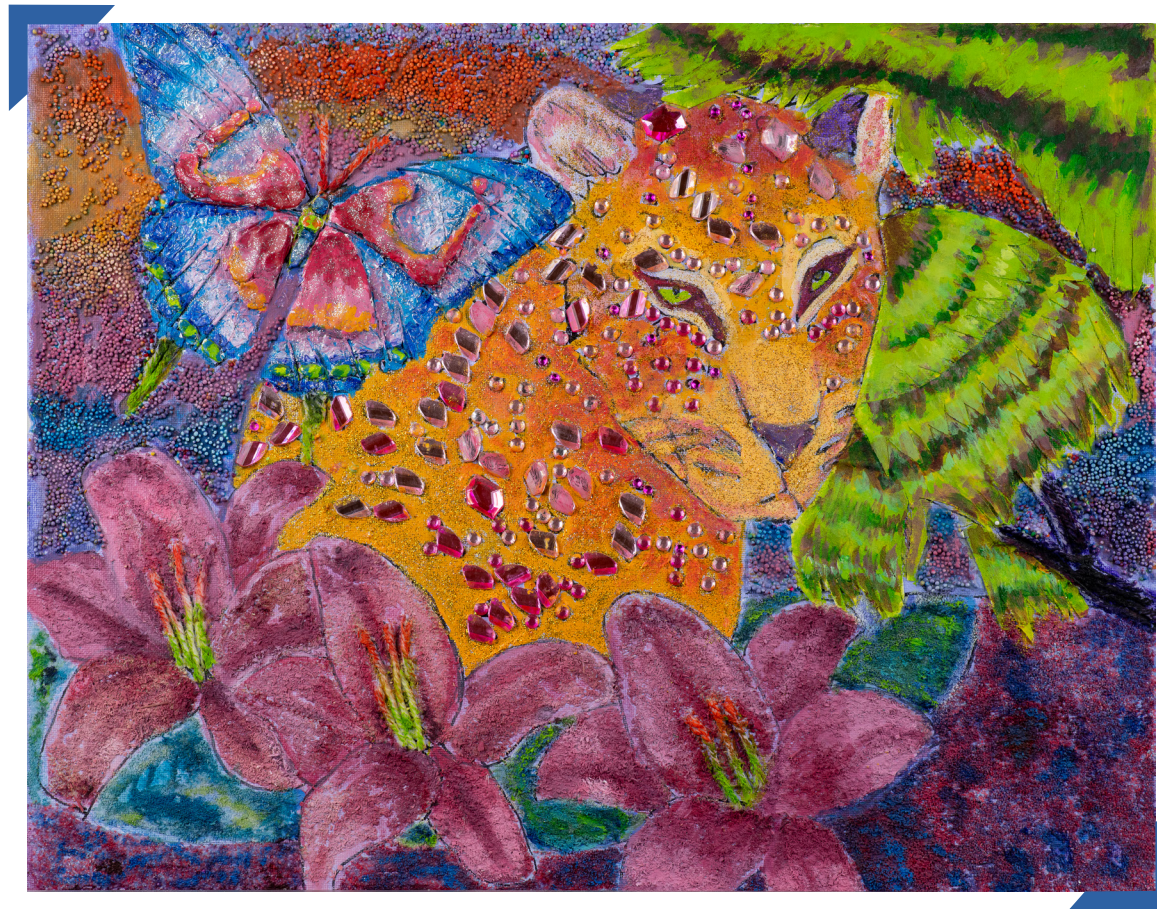
Generations

BRIANNA CURIEL





Leopard's Dream
CASMIR FLORES



"Active minds need fuel of creativity; sometimes I can't even sleep because my ideas keep spinning."



Cowboy Serenade

ERIN SHAEFFER

*"Sometimes the process
teaches me more than
the final piece ever will."*





Memento

KIMBERLEY BOEGE



“ Mistakes can become happy accidents in printmaking. ”



Florida Egret

SHERRI MCCLENDON



“Layering and experimenting with color is thrilling.”





Blue Bug
ERIN SHAEFFER



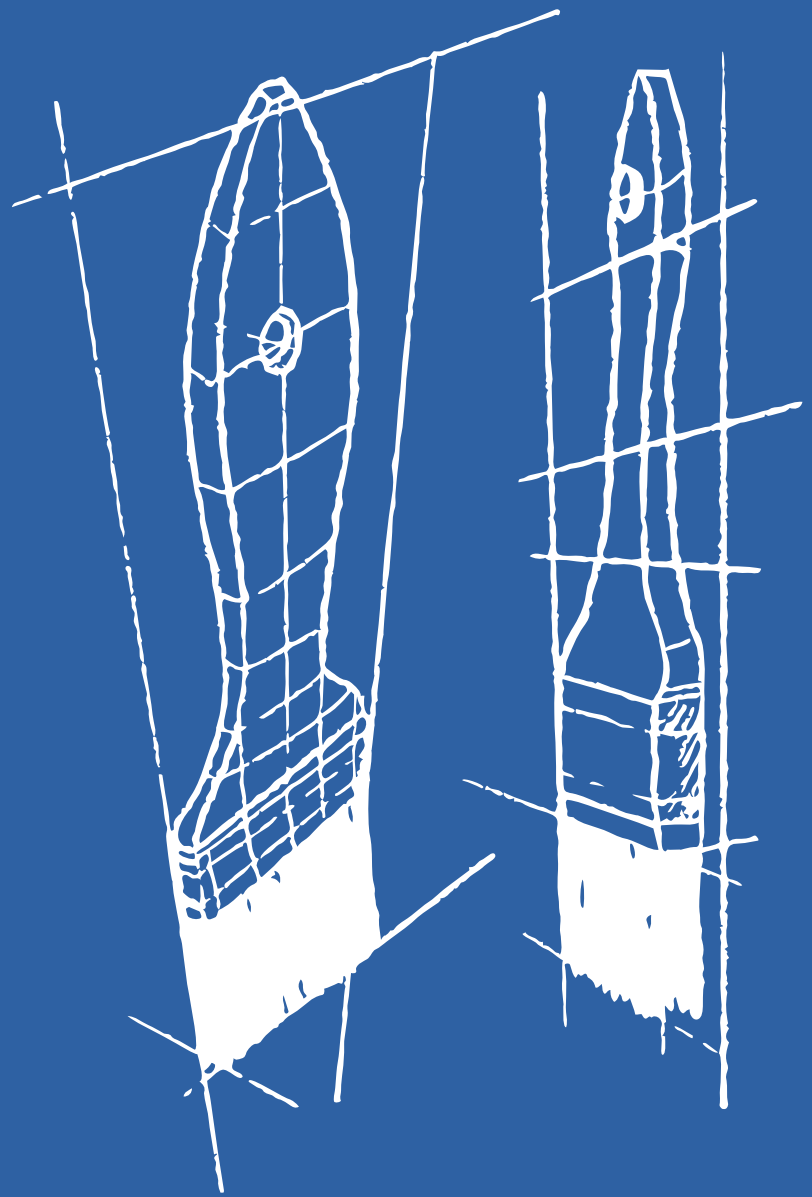
When the Birds
Return to Sausalito
KIMBERLEY BOEGE



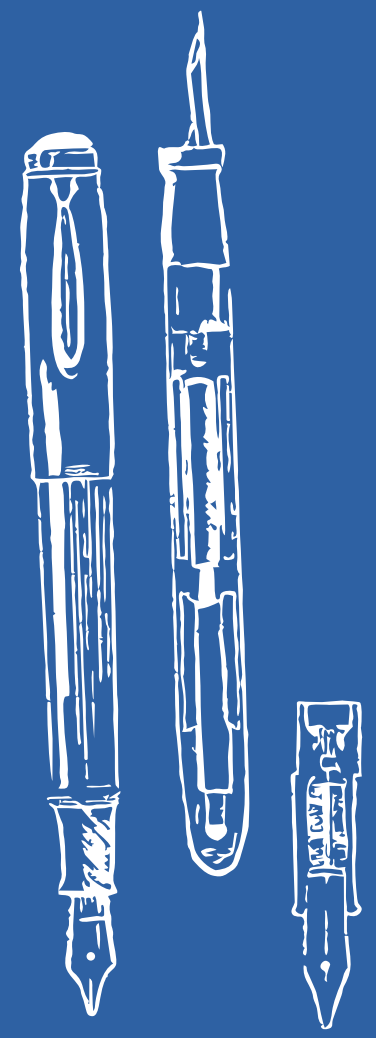
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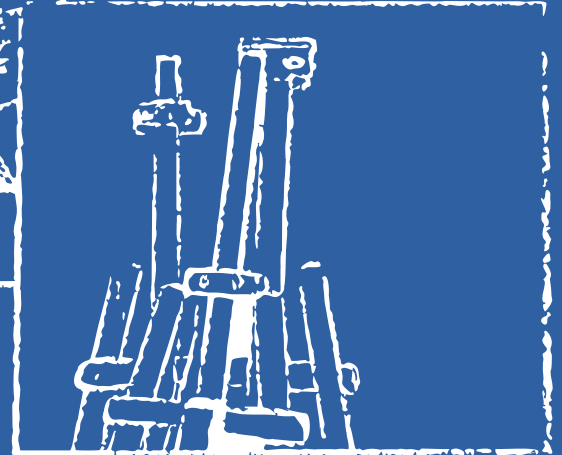
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drama

ft. drawing & life drawing, painting, watercolor





50!

WALTER T. WIMBS JR.

INT. KITCHEN MORNING

A half eaten birthday cake and party favors cover the kitchen island in an otherwise well kept home. One birthday card reads "Happy 50th!" "I love you Daddy".

Family pictures and military plaques are mounted on the stairway wall.

INT. MASTER BEDROOM

MORNING WILLIAM 50, Tattooed, fit with a light grey beard is fast asleep next to his WIFEY 42, Fit, with dark black hair.

Very tidy bedroom, a few paintings hang alongside family pictures. Cell phone, jewelry, and a family picture lay on the night stand next to Wifey. Alarm clock, 9mm, and cell phone on William's side.

William suddenly pops up in bed.

WILLIAM

What the shit!

He looks around the room and gathers his bearings. The clock reads 05:30.

He slowly rolls out of bed. William begins to stand, he grabs his lower back. Face grimaced in pain.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM MORNING

A WRESTLER, 6'8" 300+ lbs, wearing a black singlet and matching boots. Picks William up like a rag-doll and squeezes him.

WILLIAM

AHHH!

The Wrestler bear hugs William with all his might and swings him around with little effort.

William delivers crushing elbows to the Wrestlers forehead, blood pours from the head wound but do not effect the Wrestler.

A noise is heard from the bed. The two men pause the fight, look at each other and slowly turn their heads in the direction of the bed.

Wifey rolls over in bed, facing away from the men. They look back at each other again.

WILLIAM (WHISPERS) (CONT'D)

Wow, that was close.

The Wrestler nods in agreement. William chops the wrestlers ears. The Wrestler drops William and grabs his ears wincing in pain.

William kicks the Wrestler in the nuts.

The Wrestler falls to his knees, rolls to his back, and clenches his balls.

WRESTLER

OHHH!

William climbs to the corner of the bed. William stretches his arms high as if he were a professional wrestler. He leaps from the bed.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM/BATH MORNING

William sits on the floor and stretches his lower back and hamstring.

Spotless bathroom, clean towels hang on the back of the door, an air-purifier squirts out pleasant smells.

William walks to the water closet. An aged KUNG-FU MASTER, white goatee, Kung-Fu uniform, and holding two Kama's sits in wait. He ruthlessly attacks William. Slicing through his shirt leaving two cuts across Williams' chest.

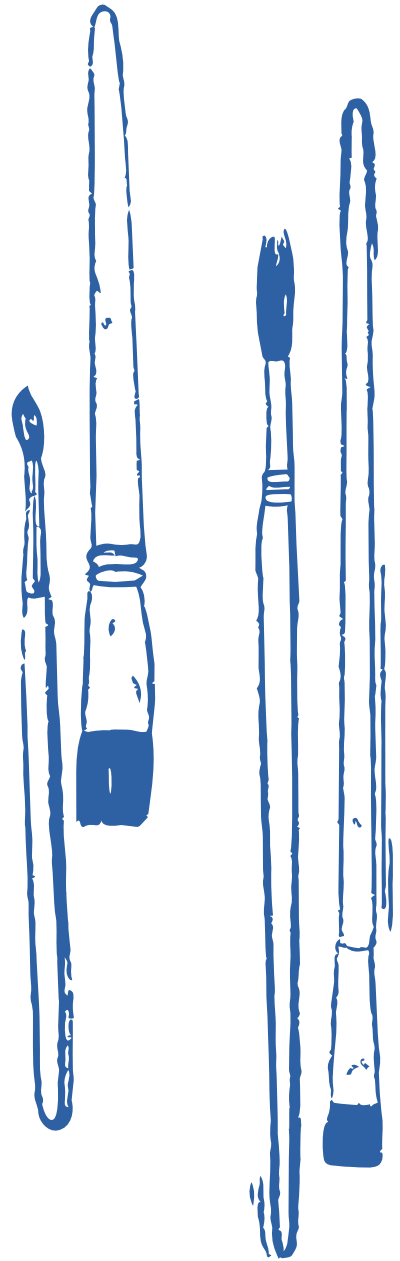
William stumbles back into the bathroom.

Kung-Fu Master follows him, Kung-Fu Master swings both weapons again at William. William is ready and dodges.

William counters and delivers a knee to Kung-Fu Master's liver. Kung-Fu Master drops one of his Kama's and instantly swings wildly with the other. William moves just enough to dodge again as the weapon cuts hairs from his chin. William attacks that arm holding the last weapon and chops it from Kung-Fu Master's hand.

William drags him to the bathroom floor and traps the arm

What the shit!



and head with his legs and locks in a triangle choke, Kung-Fu Master struggles for air until his neck snaps.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BATHROOM MORNING

William finishes up in the water closet and flushes. He walks to the sink, washes his hands. He heads out of the bathroom, into the Master bedroom, and continues to the hallway.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

William turns the corner into the hallway. A BIKER in full leather motorcycle attire, blacked out visor on her helmet stands behind William in another room. She runs at him with her kendo stick. The Biker winds up like a major league baseball player, takes a full swing at the back of Williams knees.

WILLIAM

AHHH!

William drops to his knees at the edge of the stairs. The Biker stalks William like a small animal being hunted. She takes one more swing at William, right across His back. William tumbles down the stairs head over feet.

CUT TO:

INT. BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS

William walks down the last few stairs. He gets to the bottom and slowly stretches his quads and hamstrings.

INT. KITCHEN DAY

William grabs eggs, bread, vegetables, and steak out of the refrigerator and begins to make breakfast.

INT. KITCHEN DAY BREAKFAST NOOK/LIVING ROOM

William sits at the breakfast nook, prays, and loads up his

fork for his first bite. He grabs the hot sauce and looks up from his food.

Wifey stands directly across from William in the living room. She's dressed in all black leather, and carrying two machete like a ninja across her back.

William looks at Wifey and scoffs.

Staring right at her, He adds a splash of hot sauce.

She pulls out one of her machete.

William loads up the bite with even more hot sauce.

Wifey pulls out her other machete.

WIFEY

HAHAHAHA!

William eats the huge hot sauced covered bite and jumps up out of the nook armed with his fork and knife.

Wifey and William square off. She shows of her fight skills as she swings her two machetes around. William mocks her and does the same with his Knife and Fork. He attacks with both weapons. Wifey blocks the knife/fork double attack with a single machete. She swings the other machete towards Williams stomach.

The machete slices his abdomen wide open. William looks down at his stomach as blood and guts pour out. He try's desperately to hold his intestines in. He drops to his knees, falls to his side, and dies.

Wifey walks to the kitchen island and grabs a slice of Birthday cake.

She sits at the nook and takes a bite.

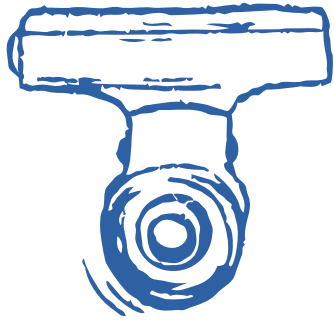
WIFEY (CONT'D)

Wow! This cake is incredible, If I do say so myself. (speaking to Williams dead body)

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN DAY

William looks nauseous as he sits at the breakfast nook and holds his stomach. He gets up with his breakfast in hand, walks to the trash can, and uses his fork and knife to dump the rest of his breakfast in the trash.



Wifey walks to the kitchen island and grabs a slice of Birthday cake... speaking to William's dead body: 'Wow! This cake is incredible, if I do say so myself.'

INT. HALLWAY DAY

William walks to the bathroom down the dark hallway. Family pictures line the walls.

INT. DOWNSTAIRS BATHROOM DAY

William looks through the medicine cabinet. He grabs a pink plastic bottle and closes the cabinet door. Suddenly Wifey appears behind him in the mirror.

WIFE

Pass me the pink stuff Nino.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM DAY

William suddenly sits up in bed.

WILLIAM

What the shit!

He looks around the room disoriented. The clock reads 0531am.

He starts to get out of bed, Wifey grabs his arm and Slightly startles William.

WIFEY

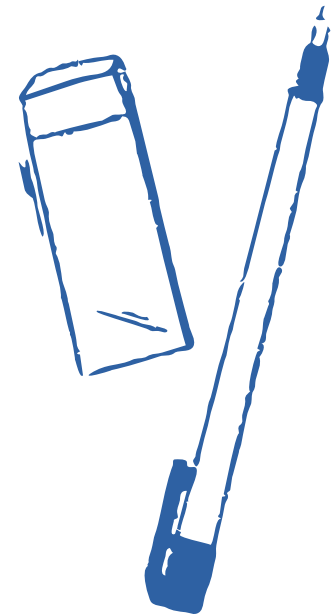
Come back to bed old man.

WILLIAM

Okay baby.

William lays back down, rolls over, and puts his arm over wifey. Wifey's arm hangs over the side of the bed as her extended hand slowly reaches for the machete.

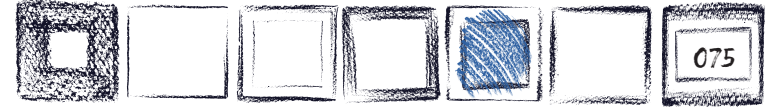
FADE OUT.





Winter Blues

MEG CAMPBELL



FADE IN

INT. APARTMENT BATHROOM - DAY

JESSICA, meticulous mid-30s tall blonde dressed in luxury black loungewear, brushes her teeth aggressively, and stares at a dingy popcorn drop ceiling. A dark web stains the corner of the room: unmistakable black mold. Jessica shudders.

A huge mirror reflects her horrified expression at her. In front of Jessica is the bathroom counter, so covered in cosmetic detritus that only the sink is visible.

She spits out her toothpaste — careful not to get any on her black shirt.

The sound of a toilet flushing comes from the partially opened door to the bathroom and shower. Still eyeing the corner suspiciously, Jessica grabs her phone and googles 'black mold'. The photo matches almost identically. Jessica almost gags.

ASHLEY (O.S.)

I am so glad we could get together!

Jessica looks between the phone and the ceiling, distracted.

JESSICA

Mmmhmm. Me too.

Ashley, 30s, a short, round redhead with mismatched loud-patterned nightwear, opens the door to the toilet and shower. She enters the tiny vanity area. It barely fits both of them. Ashley radiates with the nuclear energy of a morning person. Ashley opens the closet door, and an avalanche of items falls out. She kicks and shoves them in.

ASHLEY

Was the pull-out okay? You got enough sleep?

Jessica puts her phone away and leans against the wall to give Ashley working space.

JESSICA

Yeah, any sleep is good sleep. For me, anyways. And the time change helps...

Jessica picks up some of the fallen items and hands them to Ashley.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

And thanks again for letting me crash here.

Ashley takes mouthwash, apparently what she needed, and slams backwards against the door, closing it with her body weight.

ASHLEY

Of course! I'm so glad we can get together! It's been too long! Girls weekend! And now you can check out the vibes in LA, see if you wanna make the jump to the West Coast! Be single somewhere fun instead of fuck off Chicago...

Jessica and Ashley shuffle their positions in the tiny space; Ashley takes the space in front of the mirror at the sink. Jessica is silent.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Fewer Bears fans anyways...

Ashley skips toothbrushing and goes right to mouthwash. Jessica opens a small black vanity bag hanging from the doorknob of the door and begins to lotion her elbows.

JESSICA

Have you seen that?

Jessica points at the obvious black mold on the ceiling. Ashley spits out the mouthwash.

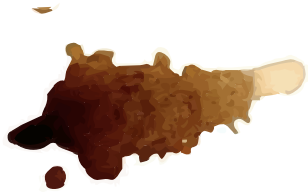
ASHLEY

Hmm? What?

She looks up from the mirror to the ceiling.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Oh, yeah...



It looks like black mold...

JESSICA
It looks like black mold...

Jessica offers Ashley the lotion, and Ashley accepts, rubbing it on her arms.

ASHLEY
It's not.

JESSICA
Really? Did you get it tested? It looks just like--

Ashley turns to face Jessica.

ASHLEY
Yeah, the apartment complex comes, like, once every few months and tests it. They even replaced it a couple times. It's just discolored from the AC unit up there dripping on it.

Jessica puts the lotion back in the bag.

JESSICA
Really.

ASHLEY
Yeah. They even painted over it last time.

Ashley turns back around and starts to look for something on the counter.

JESSICA
Mmmm.

Jessica opens the bag again and pulls out a hairbrush, and offers it to Ashley.

ASHLEY
Not everything is a health crisis,

y'know---- Oh. Thanks.

Ashley takes the hairbrush and begins to untangle her top knot.

JESSICA:
Mm. No, I know. It just looks like-

Ashley stares daggers at Jessica through the mirror. Ashley brushes even more aggressively.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Well, if you start tweeting transphobic shit and get cancelled...

Ashley laughs, and some of the tension is broken. Hair half combed, Ashley sighs and hands the brush back to Jessica.

ASHLEY
Good enough for government work.

She puts her hair up in another bun. Ashley turns around to Jessica and gestures to the door.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
I need caffeine to plan the day.
Coffee? Or tea? Whatever you drink?
Kombucha? Hard liquor?

Jessica opens the door to the rest of the apartment and steps out, Ashley following.

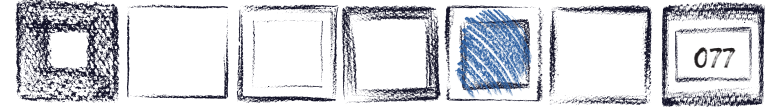
JESSICA
Liquor? I hardly know her.

Ashley groans, and Jessica laughs.

INT. APARTMENT LIVING ROOM - DAY

The living room looks like Christmas threw up in it. Decorations everywhere, three Christmas trees are jammed the room--a sofa that looks like it was found in the dumpster sits in the middle of the room. A TV is attached to the wall, below a portrait of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, their

It's not.



faces replaced with Jessica and CHAZ's. Christmas lights string the ceiling, flickering at different times. Liquors, bar equipment, and cookery are haphazardly sitting on shelves that run from the floor to the ceiling. Two barstools sit in front of a countertop, crowded with even more cooking and bartending equipment. There is no space to sit. Jessica and Ashley carefully step around luggage and decorations to the kitchen.

JESSICA

So, uh, did Chaz leave already? I thought I heard him earlier.

Ashley opens the fridge, full of takeaway precariously balanced. She takes out a huge pitcher of peppermint iced coffee.

ASHLEY

Just shove shit off the stool.
Thoughts for the day? Hit K-town?

Jessica turns in a tight circle, looking for a place to move the junk. Ashley gestures to the ground and pours herself a huge flask of coffee.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

Just put it on the floor. And yea, he's gonna hit the gym and then do his shift. You put the bed away already!

Jessica puts the items on the floor and gingerly slides onto the stool.

JESSICA

Yea, I thought it would be a bit easier to get around...So, does he do it every year?

Ashley turns from getting creamer out of the fridge.

ASHLEY

Go to the gym?
Jessica rolls her eyes.

JESSICA

No, the bartending shift.

Jessica watches as Ashley grabs chocolate syrup and drizzles it on the drink. Jessica reaches out a finger, and Ashley puts some on Jessica's finger. Jessica licks it off.

ASHLEY

Oh, yea. He says its cuz otherwise he would feel tempted to start bartending again and yknow..

JESSICA

Remember how much it sucks?

ASHLEY

Ha. Yeah. Well. Remember that it's fun for a while. And justify keeping all the bartending shit.

Jessica laughs and looks around, as if taking in the clutter for the first time.

JESSICA

I mean, I really think you could fit more stuff in here.

Ashley leans against the cabinetry and drinks her coffee. Jessica pops up and grabs her purse, pulling out a tin of green tea from it, and shakes it at Ashley.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Can I boil some water?

ASHLEY:

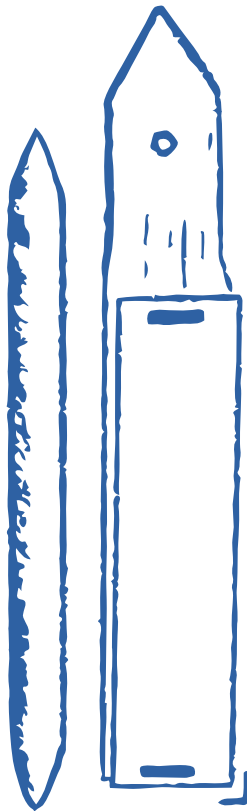
Chaz has so much bartending shit, it's unreal. --Oh, yea, go for it.

Ashley opens a cupboard. She pulls out a crusty pot and a container of Splenda and hands them to Jessica.

ASHLEY

Ha. Yeah. Well. Remember that it's fun for a while. And justify keeping all the bartending shit.

Jessica laughs and looks around, as if taking in the clutter for the first time.



Is this? Is this human comfort?

JESSICA
I mean, I really think you could
fit more stuff in here.

Ashley leans against the cabinetry and drinks her coffee.
Jessica pops up and grabs her purse, pulling out a tin of
green tea from it, and shakes it at Ashley.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Can I boil some water?
bartending

ASHLEY:
Chaz has so much

shit, it's unreal. --Oh,
yeah, go for it.

Ashley opens a cupboard. She pulls out a crusty pot and a
container of Splenda and hands them to Jessica.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
There's even more in the storage
unit.

Jessica begins to wash the pot.

JESSICA
You have a storage unit?

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Oh, it's clean.

Jessica puts the water on to boil and leans against the
counter.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Oh yea. Biggest one they have.
That's where I put all the
Christmas decorations. This year's
theme is Christmas at Versailles,
cuz France for the honeymoon.

JESSICA
Impressive.

ASHLEY
Well, we can't all hate Christmas
like you.

JESSICA
I'm getting better. The farther

away I get from Gregg, the less it
sucks.

Ashley reaches out her hand and awkwardly touches Jessica's
arm.

JESSICA (CONT'D)
Is this? Is this human comfort?

ASHLEY
I'm trying!

The silence sits for a moment. Ashley pulls out her phone and
scrolls as the water boils. Jessica steeps her tea and adds a
disturbing volume of Splenda to her tea.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
That is freakish, though

JESSICA
Ah, see, that's more like it.

Both women sip their drinks in silence.

ASHLEY
Plans for the day? Are you
caffeinated enough? I could take
you on a tour of some
neighborhoods. See if you're a
Burbank girlie. Or, of course, Van
Nuys is always an option.

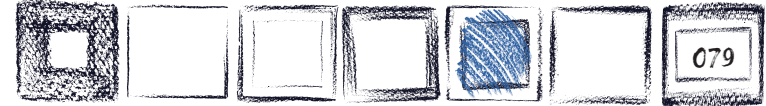
Jessica sips her tea, silent for a second.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Too soon to think about?

JESSICA
No, I just. Yeah, I guess. It might
be good to see what options there
are.

Jessica remains leaning against the counter. Ashley finishes
her drink and sets it down, smiling.





ASHLEY
Or...Do you think you're depressed
and weak enough to say yes to a
Christmas movie marathon?

Jessica goes to take a sip and sees an ant floating in her tea. She
sighs and then laughs.

JESSICA
...I think I've lived through
worse.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jessica and Ashley sit in a plume of smoke, with take-away
pizza boxes covering the surface around them. They're
watching a Christmas movie. A pitcher of drinks is on the
side table. CHAZ, mid-30s blonde charismatic surfer type,
enters.

CHAZ
Ladies... I gotta pee.
ASHLEY
Chaz! You're home!

JESSICA
Chaz! My man! How'd it go?

They giggle. Chaz throws off his coat and crosses in front of
the TV.

ASHLEY
Not in front of the TV!
JESSICA (CONT'D)
Ahhh! You're blocking Bill!

Chaz disappears into the bathroom. Ashley looks for the
remote and finds it under Jessica's butt. She pauses the TV.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)
Did you get my text?

CHAZ (O.S.)
What text?

ASHLEY
Maintenance is coming tomorrow! To
look at the black mold.

Chaz re-enters, wiping his wet hands on his t-shirt.

CHAZ
Again?! Ooo. I'm fucking starved.
Sausage and... green peppers?

He points at the pizza.

JESSICA
As if. Sausage and green olives!

Chaz and Ashley both make gagging sounds. Chaz grabs a paper
plate from the kitchen, moves things off a chair, and grabs a
slice of pepperoni.

CHAZ
So, did you tour neighborhoods? Get
an idea of what you're looking for?

Jessica and Ashley start giggling.

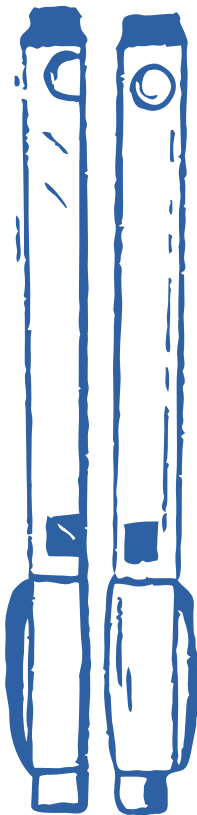
JESSICA
We've done... exactly this. All
day.

ASHLEY
Christmas movie marathon, baby! But
really, what about sunny Van Nuys?

Chaz takes a vape out of his pocket, takes a huge rip, and
hands it to Ashley. The heater kicks on.

JESSICA
Nah... I think I wanna live by
myself for a bit.

FADE OUT





Monteverde Angel

MACY BAXTER

*"I always start with sketches
and then build on them,
refining shapes and lines."*





Summer Treat

ALONDRA MORA



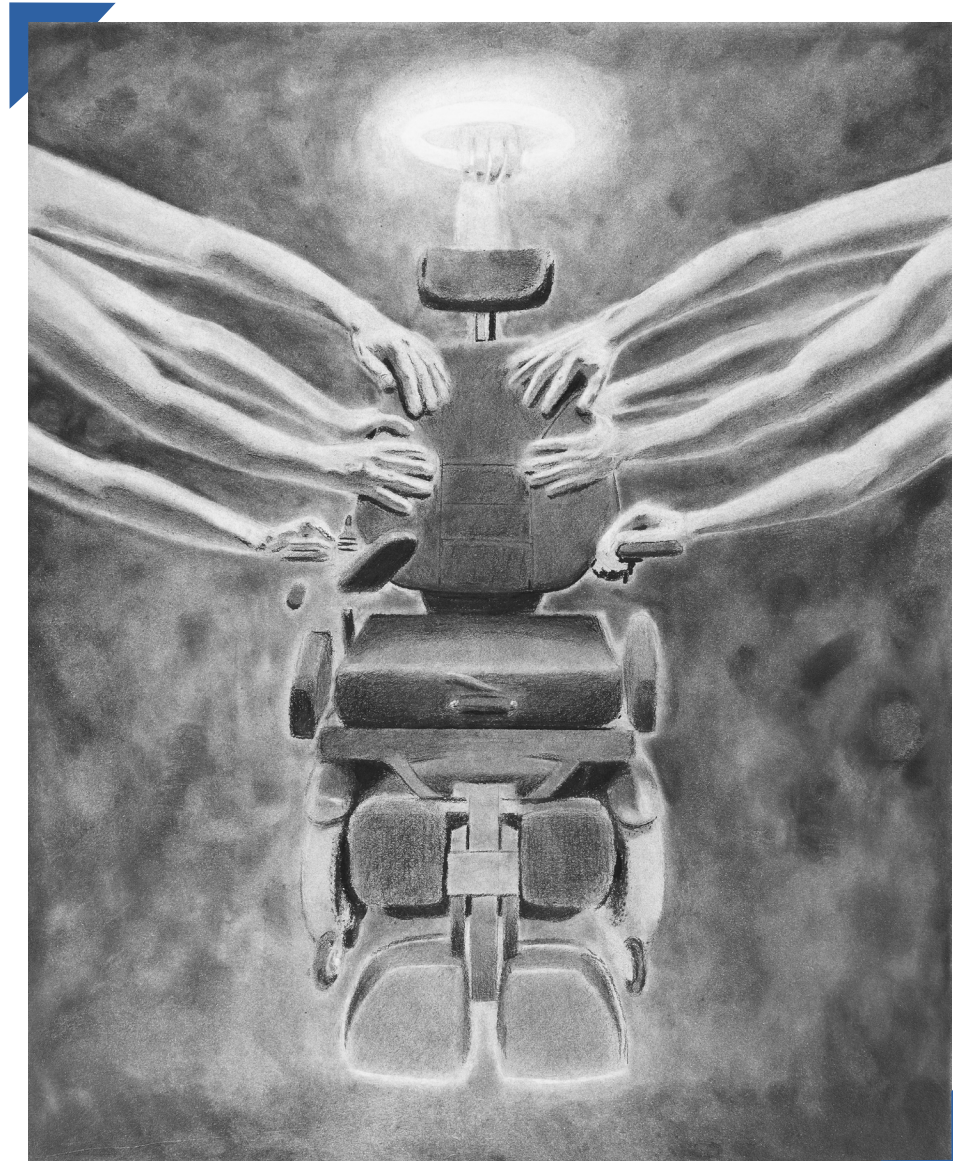
“Mood and atmosphere are as important as the subject.”



Peter Nearman

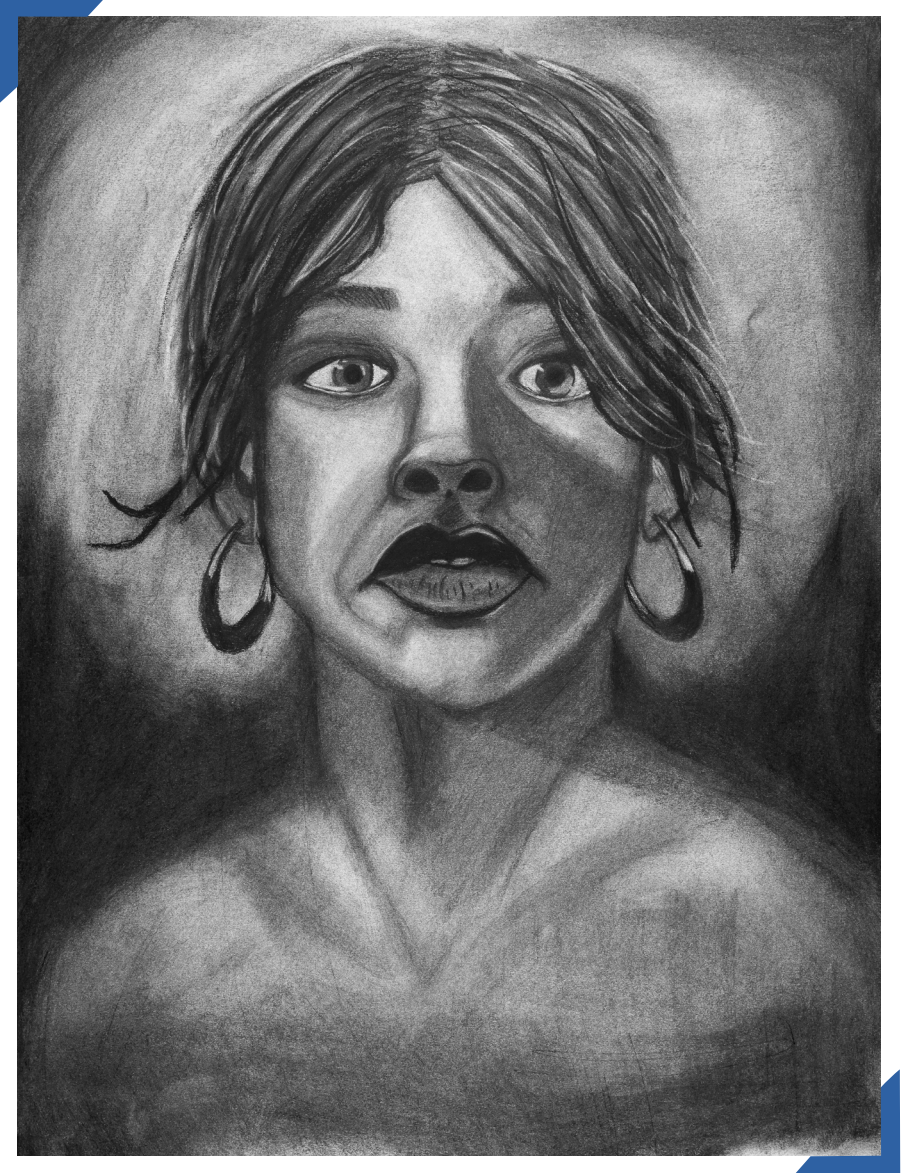
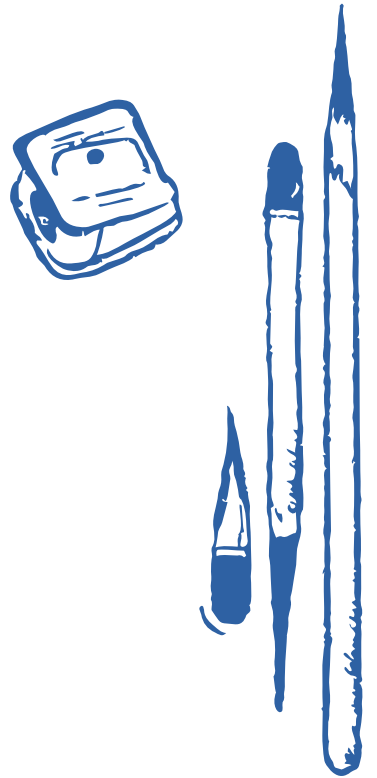
JETT SEGUIN

*“Charcoal, pencil, or digital—
it’s all about expression.”*





Empty
CYNDEE PASTORIUS





KIRBY!!!

ALONDRA MORA



"I mix colors intuitively and let the brush guide me."



Just Let It Happen

ALONDRA MORA

" I get most of my ideas in the dream state. The next day I grab a fun drink, turn on some music, and get to creating what I envisioned or dreamt about. "





*Thoughts in the
Night with an Ape*

MIGUEL VILICANA

*"I love how colors bleed and
blend in unexpected ways."*





Fallen Crusader
BRIANNA CURIEL





Pan Dulce y Atole
ALONDRA MORA



*“ Creating something from
nothing is my therapy. ”*



Fresh Oranges

SIERRA PRIBYL



"I want to communicate experiences and perspectives through my medium."



Intezaar (Waiting)

ANJALI VIJAYVERGIA

*" Seeing my visions
become reality is the fire
that keeps me going. "*





How Koi
JETT SEGUIN



Apples to Apples
MACY BAXTER



Brokenhearted
Buffalo
REBECCA ABBOTT





behind
the
sketch



Q: What are your chosen artistic mediums?

A:

- + graphic design
- + animation & digital art
- + film
- + charcoal or digital
- + graphic design, animation, digital illustrations
- + film & photography
- + animation, writing, & photography
- + animation & writing
- + art illustrating & graphite art
- + 2d & digital art

Q: What elements do you use to get inspired or prepared before, during, & after your process?

A:

- + travel, nature, exploring new places
- + music. hard-core music. like heavy metal stuff like frank sinatra
- + always like to have a fun drink like coffee or coke
- + music & a good nap
- + drawing exercises, walking, & snacks
- + my own room colored lights, pj's on
- + listen to podcasts, games, or reading
- + watching a movie or show
- + my travels
- + having gummy bears on deck

Q: Do you prefer traditional or digital art mediums?

A:

digital

traditional \ \

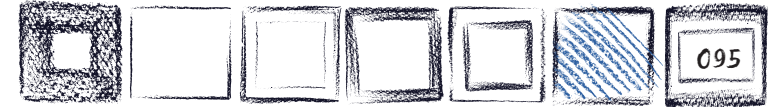
both

Q: What is your creative process (from start to finish)?

A:

- + I slap a bunch of words on a page. then I sophisticatedly connect it chronologically. then storyboard. then script. then back to storyboard. then script. and boom. there's my story.
- + I always start with brainstorming the character & their aspects like background or personality, then start sketching.
- + most of the time I get inspiration from the games I play, if I like a character I learn more about them, listen to songs that fit their story, or look into fanart people have drawn.
- + sometimes I storyboard scenes, but mainly I do key animation frames for characters. I can use traditional sketches to support digital art, or I can use digital sketches to flesh out final animations.
- + I start with writing notes of what my idea is and then start a script and make a half ass storyboard.
- + daydreaming the idea, looking up references/creating references, making a sketch, polishing
- + setup area, pull up references, sketching/storyboarding, break, block out, browse media, animate or render, break, fine tune and finish
- + I usually start by making three thumbnail sketches and I would pick what I like the most then refine the piece. I would start rendering going with the flow & find references or inspiration.
- + I listen to music throughout my entire drawing process to keep me motivated & inspired as well as watch something off to the side (very stimulating!)
- + photography: take walk/travel somewhere -> find something that captures my eye -> take photo -> experiment with editing until I get a result I like
- + gather references for poses & clothing to start sketches ... build on my layers, refining the sketch each time -> plan color palette & shading
- + sketch, mindmapping, & research to then start creating until I don't want to work anymore, get out of the house for fresh air & new perspective to get my creative juices flowing again (repeat as necessary).





The Traveler Design Team

Madisen Wohrle Lead Editorial & Graphic Designer | Lead Illustrator | Project Manager |
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 Madeline Lawler Graphic Designer | Front Cover Design | Assistant Layout Designer | Research
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Dawn Gibbs
 Liesl Meador

Faculty Literary Judges

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 Roxanna Dewey
 Ray Lira
 Eric Luthi
 Chad Merrell
 Jeff Sanger
 Lori Walk

Community Literary Reader

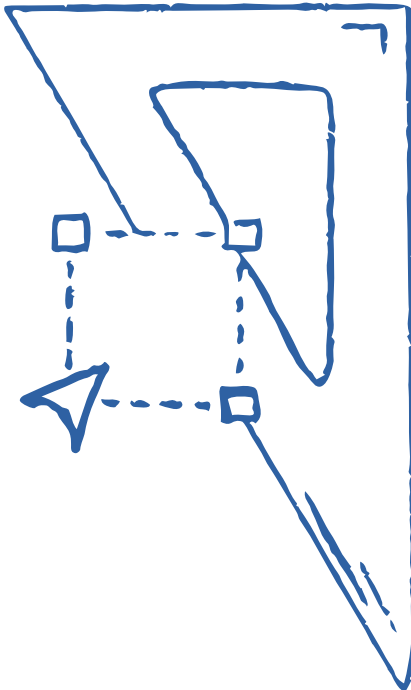
Ashley Scheideman

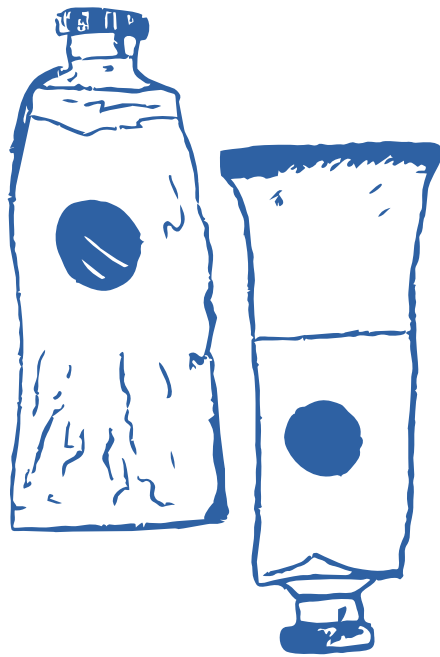
Special Thanks

Meg Ruff
 Shelby Stanley

Student Participants in *Behind the Sketch* Survey

- + Scattered across these pages are fragments of thought, process, & reflection.
- + We thank the students who shared their voices through our survey, whose words help trace the unseen lines & passion behind their own artistic process.





what inspires you... what is your why to creating ...?!

" ... that's a secret. "

