

# sandhill review

volume 26



**BELONGING**



Emma Jean Garrett



**HOME**



# sandhill review

Volume 27 • 2026

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









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Gianna Russo



## FOREWORD: BELONGING

**I**N 2019, students chose the theme of “belonging” for that year’s issue of *Sandhill Review*. We received many fine submissions and by December were already anticipating our annual “Crack the Spine” launch in April. But “Crack the Spine” never happened—at least not in the way we had planned. Due to Covid, we launched the issue with a small Zoom reading, not an in-person celebration. Our sense of belonging was impeded, even though the issue survives proudly on our website:

[www.saintleo.edu/sites/default/files/2022-09/Sandhill-Review-Volume-21-Belonging.pdf](http://www.saintleo.edu/sites/default/files/2022-09/Sandhill-Review-Volume-21-Belonging.pdf)

Since that time, there have been too many schisms splintering our country and often our personal and professional lives as well. Too many voices tell us we can’t *all* belong; too many talking heads insist that the world is not a unified *us*, but *us* versus *them*. Fill in your own “us” and your own “them.”

This issue is an antidote to those voices. Here we have multiple interpretations of what it means to belong. Our writers, poets, and artists affirm that we can belong to communities like Saint Leo, to our country, to families, to cultures, to friend and hobby groups, to partners and lovers, and to the natural world. I’m sure you’ll be charmed by the many iterations of belonging in these pages.

This is the final issue of *Sandhill Review* for which I will serve as editor-in chief. I’ll be retiring later in 2026 and I have been blessed to have belonged to Saint Leo for almost 15 years. I’ve also had the good fortune of belonging to the College of Arts, Sciences and Allied Services and the Department of English, Music and the Arts, where I’ve been embraced by caring coworkers who have become

supportive friends. But maybe most of all, I have belonged to the hundreds of writers, poets, artists and photographers whose work has appeared in *Sandhill Review* since I began editing it 13 years ago.

And all of you have belonged to me. I will carry the deeply rewarding experience of working on *Sandhill Review* forever and always be grateful for how I belonged.

Gianna Russo, Editor-in-Chief, Spring 2026



Mary Gail Russ



**STICHED TOGETHER**

Tiffany Anderson



## WILD EDGES, DANGEROUS CURVES

I don't belong here.  
I know I never have.  
I've tried to smooth my ridges,  
to fit symmetric expectations.  
Square peg. Round hole.  
I am the black-and-blue—bruised,  
against the forceful fist of Same.

The world prefers straight edges,  
voices that sing in unison,  
bodies that bend at angles they are told to.  
But I am built of Dangerous Curves,  
the kind they post warnings for—

Take Caution.  
Slow Down.  
Hazard Ahead!

I am the sharp curve in the road  
That reminds you - you are alive.

They told me: Straight and narrow is holy.  
But I am a parable.  
The long way home.  
The road to nowhere and anywhere.

I am both fever dream and restful slumber.  
The dusk and the dawn,  
folded into one fragile, tempered body.

A sliver of light that creeps  
beneath locked doors, or a shadow  
that lingers in a room so bright—  
I advance upon the dazzling radiance with stealth.

There is a strange grace here in the margins.  
A wild mercy.  
I have been both exile and prodigal,  
Both too much and not enough.

I am tight seams and itchy labels  
of a life that never quite fit.  
I am not the dress itself - I am fabric,  
unstitched and woven from quiet defiance.

I am the question that ruins the silence.  
I am the shadowy arm reaching out from the tree  
that teaches the moon beam  
to move of its own accord.

I am creation, still at work on itself.

And if belonging means shrinking,  
then let me live in the messy parts,  
the spillover, the wild edges,  
in the weeds in the garden—  
protesting against the fence line.

Because I am not meant to belong there.  
I belong here— in the in-between  
what is and what is yet to be.

Heaven Nazario



**PERFECTION: A GOLDEN SHOVEL**

From “We Real Cool”

Perfection is perfectly unachievable. We  
Are taught that beauty must be real.

Don't hide behind filters, but keep cool,  
'Cause criticism is to be expected. We

Want to accept ourselves but our mothers left  
Us to be torn apart by the popular girls at school

So, we cover our faces with makeup to feel better. We  
Know that girls who are prettier than us lurk

In the corners of social media midnight late  
And berate our every move. We

Fall into a rabbit hole, strike-  
Ing out to make ourselves better, but fall straight

Down to the pits of fiery self-hatred. We

Burn like moth wings, and keep sing-  
Ing “I'm fine, I'm okay,” but lying is a sin.  
We try to claw our way back up with little success. We

Are told “You have to stay thin!”  
So, we don't eat and drown in a bottle of gin

To pretend we are perfectly fine. We  
Think everyone has to be the same. No jazz

No rock, no alternative tunes. It's June  
But feels like January, because we  
are miserable. We want this tradition to die  
but that won't happen anytime soon.

Angeliki Thomas Markonios



## FOR THE LOVE OF LAW

“Who are you and why are you here?” asks the cop in a flat and tired tone.

“My name is Angie, and I am a new intern. I am here to meet with Judge Amy’s Judicial Assistant,” I cheerfully convey to the grim reaper who guards the second set of doors to the courthouse.

“Are you sure about that?” asks the cop as he eyes me from head to toe.

“Yes, I am sure,” I laugh in the officer's face, thinking that he will soon crack a smile. “You know that I arrest fake interns, I’m gonna have to see your credentials.” I feel myself freeze inside, being put on the spot for credentials I did not have yet, being that it is my first day.

*I mean, would you like me to call the Judicial Assistant and have you talk to him, because I can assure you that I am not a fraud,* I thought to myself. If I had the free time to be a fraud, I would be washing my pile of laundry.

“No, that's fine, just go on through.”

What is the purpose of asking me anything at all if he is going to let me in anyway, and what about me screams that I shouldn’t be there? I felt a heavy burden of anxiety suffocate me. I push down my concerns and get to the elevators and find myself in a maze of corridors where my Judge and her team worked. I was met by my Judge’s assistant named Jayden. Like the ferryman of the underworld, he guided me through the streams of tunnels, which form a labyrinth to all of the court chambers in the building.

“Would you like to meet the state magistrate?” asks Jayden as we open the door to a long row of offices.

“I would love to.”

We approach a dark room with a door half-cracked open, where floor-to-ceiling bookcases fill the office. The older gentleman sits behind the desk and reads in the dark.

“Hello, Judge, may we come in? I have the new intern with me, and would like for you to meet her if that's okay.” Jayden asks, while he inches himself in the doorway before he responds. “Of course.” The man stands up in his uninviting room to greet the J.A. “And what are you doing in a courthouse, young lady? Are you in school?” The magistrate asks me while sizing me up.

“I go to Saint Leo and am interning here this summer in preparation for law school,” I reply proudly.

“What are you majoring in?”

“I am an English major.”

“Why would you ever choose to be an English major if you are trying to go to law school?” he asks in a condescending tone.

“Well, you can major in anything and get into law school,” I defend shyly. I feel the embarrassment pressing me down into a shell. Jayden soon ends the conversation and goes back to guiding me endlessly through dark hallways, until we find a new great light.

This new chain of offices leads to a waiting room for a higher-ranking judge who is near retirement, the Honorable Judge Howard. He stood from his desk and shook my hand warmly, and offered for me to sit before him and talk to him. Judge Howard was delighted with my college of choice as well as my major. He advised me not to be intimidated by the people in court.

Within the eight weeks of my internship, I watched him go through at minimum one hundred cases, and I have never ceased to be impressed by his respect, generosity, and gratitude for others.

At the end of my first day at the courthouse, the J.A. allowed me into an empty courtroom. I sat at the bench and looked out upon the courtroom from the perspective of the judge. As I looked toward the counsel tables, I felt a mix of emotions boiling inside of me. To

feel the confusion of meeting the best and worst of the world. The people who will question your presence and make you feel like you do not deserve a seat at the table. Then, to meet people who will push those discouraging individuals out of their chairs to make room for you. I knew then who I wanted to become. I wanted to be in the collective of good.

I sighed and let it out. “Chief, I get kicked out almost every other day. My mom won’t give me my socials, and I have to find my own food and wash my clothes. I need money badly.”

Chief looked me in the eye, his tone serious. “I hear you, and I’ll help you because you shouldn’t be living like this. But it seems like there’s more going on.”

I hesitated before admitting, “Man, I’m thinking about selling that stuff. I don’t see another way to make money and survive.”

His face turned cold, and he said firmly, “You don’t want that life, Fuller. I’ve seen where it leads. You’re better than that.” I nodded, but I wasn’t sure I believed him. The streets had already taught me some harsh lessons, and I wasn’t ready for another lecture.

The next day, after a night spent sleeping outside, I walked into my guidance counselor’s office, tired and defeated. She smiled and said, “Have a seat.” Looking concerned, she continued, “I’ve heard that you’re homeless and have no place to stay. Is that true?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, trying to hold back tears. “I’m doing what I can, but I don’t always make the best choices. I need money just to eat.”

She nodded and said, “As a senior in high school, you shouldn’t have to live like this. There’s a program called *Starting Right, Now* that helps kids like you beat homelessness and find stability. Would you be interested?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Yes, ma’am,” I said, finally feeling a glimmer of hope. “I’m ready to make a change.”

A week later, I moved into one of the program’s houses. I was nervous but determined to better my life. Now, as I sit in my dorm

and reflect, I see how close I came to taking the wrong road. The path of destruction was easy to fall into, but with the help of people who believed in me, I chose the right road. Today, I tell my story to inspire others to make the same choice so they, too, can one day live out their dream.

Makayla Bech



## MY GENERATION IS POISONED

My generation is poisoned.  
Locked behind phones and tablets.  
Trends choke them, like snakes, coiled.  
I doubt even half of them have read Hamlet.

I dream of running barefoot in a queen's gown,  
With a dagger hidden in the fabric like I'm a martyr.  
I wish for gothic castles in candlelight and golden crowns.  
Men will run to me like saviors dressed in silver plates of armor.

The generations before me built cookie-cutter houses.  
They all look the same, lifeless shades of gray and beige.  
I wish to wake in a world of crimson shade and fire that dances.  
I'm a nineteenth century raven trapped in a twenty-first century cage.

When the sun sets, I write down my rage about politics in this age, or I scroll on my phone.  
I become enraged and realize that if I were born before my time I would be killed with stone.

Valerie “Ray” Eulett



**THERE IS A TEMPLE HELD UP  
BY PILLARS OF BONE**

but just barely. It should've fallen apart by now; it's an empty cathedral, and it doesn't know what to worship anymore. When you walk on the pulsing chamber floor, the *click-clack* of your stilettos echoes in the hollow chapel. Your heels catch on the sinew of the heart muscle.

If you look up past the sternum and through the ribs, you'll see blots of white burn bright as quasars, yet they're muted a crimson hue, trapped in rippling tubes. They're not stars—they're white blood cells, straining against the veins to catch a glimpse of you, a stranger.

They know you are here. They hear you. They know you do not belong here. They're judging if you're pathogen or messiah.

The temple is hollow, threatening to cave, to implode in the cold, despite the walls expanding with every breath, coated in a filmy smoke that fogs the lungs when you walk by, bittering the air. If it were your body, it wouldn't cough. You could make something great with this body.

I do not belong in this body. This body does not belong to me.  
You could belong in this body, though. It could be yours.

Stick an IV in your arteries to drip the queerness out and flush it with straight saline. This body doesn't have piano hands, but wouldn't it be wonderful if you played *Clair de Lune*? This body could be full of symphonies, not silence, feminine, not sapphic. This body could be something

I am too much for this body. I pick the cuticles and squirm when skin touches linger and slam the skull just to numb the brain. You wouldn't need to quiet your thoughts, would you? I'm sorry about Dad, but I think he would've liked you. I like you.

Dance for me? Before I leave this body to you. I'm sorry if I leave traces of myself, I don't know where I begin and the body ends. I am in the fractures in the elbow, in the tendons in the feet, in the rabbiting pulse in the heart, so sorry, watch your step. Just dance to Debussy, because I am too much myself to ever change into someone who can.

Hang a marrow chandelier on the sternum. String entrails from the osseous arches. Make this body beautiful. I will fade away like Claire's last rising notes—hopefully I rise into the stars. Please love the people I love; please love them better than I ever did.

Make this temple worthy of worship in a way I never could.



Jeff Karon



**BELONGING #1**

Alyssa Dufort



## CONTRADICTORY IDENTITIES

I am an isolating chatterbox  
Who feels introverted, yet cannot help but talk.  
I am a kind self-critic  
Who puts strangers' wants well before her needs.  
I am a sympathetic misunderstander  
Who feels others' emotions stronger than they do.  
I am a complicated rule-follower  
Who hasn't been following through.  
I am an intelligent procrastinator  
Who knows she can do anything, yet she does nothing instead.  
I am contradictory.  
I don't belong on either side.  
I am an oddity  
Who belongs anyway.

Sara Startup



## **OPEN ROAD BLUES**

[Based on the song “Ride”]

Winding open road has me singing the blues  
of all the places I've been  
nothing but sand in my shoes  
But the road brings a certain satisfaction to me  
even without the riches  
I've been where all there is to see  
Father would be proud of everywhere I roam  
though he doesn't know my true motive  
is to find a place like home  
From the east side bays, desert casino plays, and back to Colorado  
I fear that I'll always be  
a trail-blazing desperado  
The arid breeze, tall pine trees, a highway stretching long  
I'll keep following dash lines all the way  
to somewhere I belong.

Mary Missouri



## BELONGING

Motivate and remain equipped  
To inspire youth to succeed...  
Represent my hearts' desire  
My soul continues to breathe...

*My belonging...*

Envigorate youthful minds  
To cultivate nuggets of wisdom...  
Throughout their careers  
Livelihood, family and freedom...

*My belonging...*

Influence learners' determination  
To develop and stand...  
Steady on unforeseen obstacles  
Tribulations or sinking sand...

*My belonging...*

Appreciate each scholars' dream  
To accept who they are...  
With gratefulness and inspiration  
To follow them near and far...

*This is where I belong...*

*My belonging...*

Tiffany Anderson



**NO SABO**

They drew the lines, a fresh ink on old skin,  
Skin already weathered and worn, but tough.  
And we stood still. We stood our ground.  
My bloodline, native to that Mexican land,  
before they made it 'New'.

I see their faces, a fierce gaze,  
stoic eyes staring down the barrel of a future  
that would choose to erase them.  
We had spice in our lives,  
the daily prayer of green chile  
simmering on the stove.

Our ancestors' hands, a vein of our heritage,  
kneading history into dough and masa,  
a communion of corn and salt and memory,  
before they asked us to make our lives bland.

So my grandparents learned,  
to soften the 'r' on their tongues,  
to make the sounds small and manageable.  
They gave up the words that held history,  
so their children could have a future.

My father, *no sabo, tambien...*  
An outsider with roots too deep to ignore,  
a history begging to ignite.  
It is hard to belong to either world  
When you don't speak the language.

I feel a deep belonging, a silent pulse in my blood,  
a hunger for the stories that were silenced long ago.  
They took the words, left a song without a voice,  
a history locked behind a glass door,  
but the feeling, this feeling, they could not touch.

But now, a fiery heat,  
a flame that burns insatiable,  
taking up space that has too long been denied.  
We crave connection,  
to the history,  
to the future,  
and to the now,  
where we must take a stand.

Stand firm.  
Hold our ground.  
Our ground.  
This ground!

Israel X. Anderson



## DEFINE ME

My skin is white.

That immediately defines me as a majority.

I am treated without culture.

I am treated as what my skin color defines.

Is that how we live in this world?

Is skin color what defines us?

I am a Mexican.

My ancestors founded part of New Mexico before it was new.

My great grandparents carry those traditions to this day.

I don't carry an accent, and I don't speak the language,

But that can't take my heritage, or my culture.

I am Greek

Nick Xidis came over from Greece in the 1910's.

My γαγά's heart belonged to Greece, dreaming of the day she would return.

This household always has Greek olive oil and oregano.

No matter how far or long ago Greece was, it is still part of my heritage.

You may assume you know me.

But you can't define me.

Suzanne S. Austin-Hill



**THIS IS TO BE LONGED FOR**

[an Abecedarian]

Return to a time when there's no need to protest against

Apathy, anarchy,  
Bans, bigotry,  
Corruption, cruelty,  
Demagoguery, divisiveness,  
Exaggeration, exclusion,  
Favoritism, foolishness,  
Greed, grumpiness,  
Hate, homophobia,  
Ignobility, insensitivity,  
Jejunity, joylessness,  
Kinkiness, kookiness,  
Licentiousness, lies,  
Malevolence, misogyny,  
Nastiness, negativity,  
Obscenity, oppression,  
Prejudice, profiling,  
Quackery, quirkiness,  
Racism, rudeness,  
Sexism, suppression  
Thoughtlessness, tyranny,  
Unkindness, unreliability,  
Vindictiveness, volatility,  
Wantonness, wickedness,  
Xenomania, xenophobia,  
Yadda, yadda, yadda, yin,  
Zigzagging, and zingers.



Suzanne S. Austen-Hill



HERE'S A WAY

Makayla Bech



## THE LIMINAL SPACE

I placed my hand in the palm of the president I had only seen sporadically around campus. This man bid us farewell, my graduating class and me. He wished us luck out in the scary world; he blanketed us with the promise that the school he presides over would fill us with the capability of success. He was certain. I was not.

I shed my layers of accomplishments as soon as I got home. The dress, the gown, the chords, the stoles, the medals. I laid down in my bed and tried to close my eyes for a nap, tired from not sleeping the night before. I was busy imagining myself falling as I walked the stage and my dress ripping, my underwear becoming anything but a mystery to the crowd. At first my eyelids were resting, but within seconds they were squinted shut, the thin skin wrinkled, and I could hear the nerves crushing between my nose and eyebrows. I wanted to hide, but the curtain was open, and the rays of late afternoon sun were beaming through the glass. I shot up from my bed and closed the curtain, hiding from the daylight, hiding from adulthood. I found tranquility in the dark, in the irresponsibility of being young. A message from graduation echoed in my mind, *Today is the beginning*. The words lightened my dark mood. *I have so much time*, I thought. I fell asleep.

I woke up at three in the morning, anxious, sweating. The clock was ticking. I have a degree now, in English. The thought dragged me into consciousness. I don't have a job lined up. My parents aren't rich. I can't stay in my childhood room forever. I did the only thing I've ever known how to do. I called my sister. I needed a job, of course she found me one. A medical assistant in a doctor's office. My degree is in English.

Within two weeks, I was hired and walked into the doctor's office. The lights were so white; I felt like a skeleton underneath them, and I heard a high-pitched tone, like I was being x-rayed. I longed for piles of books to surround me, instead there were only blank PHQ-9 forms and blood pressure logs. A coworker printed out a sheet of medical abbreviations, and my heart momentarily stopped at the sterilized language. I longed for meter and rhyme, for stanzas and prose. I walked into the lab and saw little silver trays on wheels. On them were tiny cups, sealed shut at the top with liquid filled barely to the middle. I imagined little bits of skin floating around in them, cut and shaved from a human body. I saw the needles and bottles of medication. I observed a nurse shoot a needle into a patient's arm. My body felt numb.

That night, as I sat in my bedroom, I looked at my bookshelves full of drawn-in and dog-eared pages. I longed to be sitting in a writer's workshop. I craved the uncomfortable pang of being called out for grammar mistakes, or a phrase misplaced. I wondered how I was going to land where I really belong, writing, teaching and forever being ignited in the flame of literature. I wondered how I was going to make myself belong in an office full of people who thrive in the mathematical, scientific left side of the brain. Meanwhile I've always bathed in the right side, drowning in words, experiences, and emotions.

Now, six months later, my degree sits on a shelf, collecting dust, watching as I spend sleepless nights working on my creative writing master's degree. My scrubs hang in my closet, ready to be worn come morning. I confidently remove sutures from healed wounds. I inject B-12 and ketorolac into arms without a second thought. The beeping sounds and the smell of antiseptic feel nostalgic; the hum from the doctor's office lighting is white noise. I assertively pronounce words like levothyroxine and amlodipine, benign, and malignant like I know exactly what they mean. The doctors marvel at how quickly I can perform an EKG. But I know this is not where I belong.

\* \* \*

I have found a separation in reality. I have found that I can belong anywhere, even in the in-between. The clock still ticks as I work forty-hour weeks and barely sleep, but the clock is not ahead of me, and I know this is only temporary. My circumstances may be different from what I've dreamed, but my life, my ideas, my future still belong to me.

Daniela Arroya



## **BEYOND THE WALLS: THE IMPACT OF BCOTB**

**A**s you drive into the plaza, buildings with a commanding presence rise around you, strong brick structures in deep shades of red and brown, blending into one another. At first glance, everything looks the same. But then, farther down the lot, a burst of color catches your eye: five bold letters, each a different hue. B is purple. C is yellow. O is blue, with a puzzle piece tucked inside. T is green. And the final B is orange. These bright initials mark BCOTB, Behavioral Consulting of Tampa Bay, Tampa's leading provider of Applied Behavior Analysis therapy for children on the autism spectrum.

As a Registered Behavior Technician at BCOTB, I've learned that what happens beyond those colorful letters is life-changing, not just for the children but for all of us who walk through the doors.

When the glass doors slide open with a soft hiss, I step into a world carefully designed for growth. The walls are covered in bright visuals and bold labels, creating a space that feels lively but not overwhelming. Sensory-friendly corners with fidget toys, bean bags, and cozy lighting offer a comforting retreat when the world feels too loud.

The sounds here stay with you: the buzz of fluorescent lights, the scrape of tiny chairs on linoleum floors, and, my favorite, the bursts of children's laughter echoing down the hallways.

Each room inside the clinic has its own theme, the Monkey Room, the Space Room, the Ocean Room, and the Crayon Room, each thoughtfully set up for one-on-one instruction. In these rooms, I've sat across from children as they reached milestones that once felt impossible. I remember a little boy in the Monkey Room who

spent weeks working on making eye contact. The first time he looked directly at me without a prompt, I almost cried.

The open play areas encourage social interactions, and I often watch with pride as friendships form over building blocks or shared art projects. Sensory rooms, tucked into corners throughout the clinic, offer a break when a child becomes overstimulated, and it's in these quiet spaces that I've witnessed some of the biggest emotional breakthroughs.

Visual schedules, interactive games, puzzles, and sensory bins aren't just tools, they're bridges to a greater sense of independence. I'll never forget the first time a nonverbal child used a single word to ask for her favorite stuffed animal. Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, but in that moment, it was the loudest and most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

At BCOTB, every small victory is celebrated, a nod, a word, a shared smile, because we know these moments add up to a lifetime of possibility. BCOTB is more than a clinic. It's a place where hope takes root, one child, one lesson, and one heart at a time.

Sara Startup



## A CAVE BY THE BASEBALL DUGOUT

[Based on the song “Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd?”]

Do you remember the cave by the baseball dugout?  
Shaded in a shadow, surrounded by green meadows.  
Where imagination became our salvation,  
Where memories were fleeting like bats,  
And gossip hung in webs like dew drops.

Growing up has placed a stone  
Over a dark place so filled with light,  
Filled with friendship,  
Where we learned to be ourselves.  
One by one we walked out, never to return.

We find each other in different places,  
But can't you remember,  
There's a cave by the baseball dugout?  
Please don't forget me  
At the cave by the baseball dugout.

Tiffany Anderson



## AND TO THINK I SAW IT ON SUMMIT STREET

Take a look, it's in a book—  
and I did. One page at a time.  
Devouring pages like they held secrets,  
like they could take me somewhere bigger  
than my quiet corner of the world.  
And they did.

Fear Street, Miss Nelson's classroom, and Where the Sidewalk  
Ends.

The Scholastic Book Fair was my fortress,  
Beckoning covers lined up like windows staring out into worlds  
unknown.

Book It? Consider it Booked.

Oh, that was the dream—

Pepperoni and cheese for the girl who would read her way  
through the universe.

Saturday mornings smelled like sugared cereal,  
King Vitamin poured high in the bowl,  
prize inside—some tiny plastic something  
I would hold tight in my palm,  
as the cartoons came alive.  
She-Ra, fierce and golden,  
stood her ground in the glow of the screen,  
and I stood with her,  
the only girl in a house full of boys,  
learning power was something you had to take  
if you wanted to keep it.

Dance your cares away, worries for another day—  
so we did.

And Friday nights meant TGIF,  
meant Corey and Topanga  
teaching us what love was supposed to be,  
while outside, the streetlights flickered on,  
and someone's mom called them home.  
But we were latchkey kids,  
our houses silent when we walked in,  
except for the microwave beeping,  
a Lunchable unpacked with careful hands, or  
a Kid Cuisine cooked too long or not long enough,  
Cold in the middle, burnt around the edges.

It's 10 PM. Do you know where your children are?  
I was on the couch, SEGA controller in hand,

Sonic spinning fast toward nowhere,  
coins clinking,  
the only other sound in a room of wrestling brothers,  
who never let me win,  
but taught me how to hold my own.

Back then, time stretched wide, endless,  
summers lasted forever,  
and the biggest decision was  
Which roll-on lip gloss would I use to coat my lips? Watermelon.  
We searched cereal boxes for magic,  
dug deep, hoping for something more,  
something small, something bright,  
something just for us.

And maybe that was childhood—  
a handful of cheap prizes,  
a heart full of neon-colored dreams,  
a world that felt bigger than it was,  
but small enough to hold  
in the palm of your hand.

Brielle Terry



## WHITE OAK TREE

Cows walk deeper into the pen as a beagle threatens them  
The cattle's hooves garner dead, soiled grass and hay  
A calf moos loudly, calling its mother over to protect it

The dog runs back into the woods when I shout at it  
The wall of trees welcome the animal back into its embrace  
Until the paws of the intruder can't be heard in the grass

I take a look at the sole white oak tree in the middle of the field  
I promise the cows they'll be safe as I head over to the tree  
Mounds of hot dirt and spurs stick to my faded blue jeans

### *SQUISH*

I lift my foot to reveal the rotten peach eaten to the core by  
maggots  
The shadow of the tree casts a generous shade on me  
The dark, individual leaves dance as the wind blows by

The umber bulked bark calls me over  
I graze my fingers upon the grand tree  
Fire ants walk up and down the tree's canvas

I then lay under the sun that makes the grass brighter  
Pine devil moths roam in the vast, green field  
Violently flying and digging into the Earth

My routine starts over when the wild dog barks at the cows again



Jeff Karon



**BELONGING #2**

Michael Christopher



## SERVICEABLE ROOM

**I**n my day, I sat in many rooms. Rooms as common as the light of day. Enclosures too tasking for the average welp. Quiet, loud, empty, spacious, cramped, lopsided, opaque. Be there chair or no chair, sitting is what I did best in those places. It would not matter the accommodations, the colors, the décor, the furniture, I would sit and sitting is the task that was completed.

I became somewhat of a folk legend in many parts of the world. ‘Who would go through so much effort? What reason must he have?’ These were common questions for those unwilling to partake a quest for room knowledge. I had sought countless rooms, all just to sit in them. I was welcomed into many homes, used like some sort of test, but how they graded themselves through my investigations is not a knowledge I bear. Even great sacred rooms have recordings of my visitation. Even still, throughout my travels, despite all the rooms I seated myself in, I had not enjoyed a single one.

That is to say that the journey was made in an attempt, a feeble one at that. I have a general disposition to rooms. It’s never usually any one thing, nor is it any multitude of reasons. It’s simply an unsettling feeling that I can’t quite name. It’s as though your stomach drops, and your palms itch, and your head runs cold, and your teeth grind and all the while your heart unreasonably slows.

‘Why not try the outdoors? Has he ever sat under a tree?’ Nature is far less docile and controllable than any one enclosed room. I know it as a truth of truths that I will never enjoy the outdoors. I would impart to you my reasons, but I believe the word ‘wall’ should suffice in some manner. But yes, I had devised these travels to far off spaces to find the room that would suit me, one that would make me feel at ease, one that would soothe not only my eyes, but my heart

and soul. Despite my drastic efforts to enrich my sitting, my comfort was always illusive.

One of the many rooms I visited on my travels was a storage closet for model trains. One may assume a storage closet full of model trains to be quite dusty more than anything, and yet this storage closet was more appropriately a miniature freight yard. Each train was assembled and displayed next to its box. Needless to say, sitting was not an easy task, especially when the children wanted to use the train I was sitting on.

I shall tell you of another room that resembled an elevator, with its tall ascending nature. With its height came a lack of ground room, which is a fair trade off, yet not a pleasing one as the furniture assumed a great amount of the already limited space. It ascended through the whole room, and yet it was just one structure repeated. It was as if an incomplete concrete bench had duplicated itself near infinitum. There was no sense of color apart from a metal rod adorning its side all the way to the top in a strikingly feverish yellow and... It is now that I realize that it was a stairwell... Still, it was a very discomfoting one.

I shall also tell you of Stephen's house. It was almost perfect. His walls were of proper height, his furniture was spaced in a very convenient manner, and his pretzels were always within arm's reach. And yet, even with his perfect décor, his pleasant scenery, and delectable aroma, Stephen was there. Stephen was not an enjoyable person to be around. Even if he had delicious pretzels.

Despite all that has come to be, my journey ended not too long ago. I had found a cabin in some deserted part of the woods. The only man who knew of its whereabouts had left its location in a diary he had long since parted with. The outside had its damages, but I was after the one room that made up its insides. A nestled bundle of logs sits next to a fireplace. A chair sits adorned with a handmade throw blanket. A window that only saw the rising sun, a creak in the floorboards, a single light that wearily hung from the ceiling. I let

solace slowly engulf me as I fell gracefully into this chair, and I haven't moved since.

Marielena O.Gomez



**KILLOOLEET**

Ticklish moss in the underbrush of Vermont  
Carried stratus clouds up foggy mountains  
into dewy lakes crested with ridge  
lipped pale ale bottle gripped

I could smell skinned straps  
braced around your neck,  
carved wood droplets sanded  
smooth tied like flowers crowns in midsummer hair

Snails meander on pole-lined tents  
tucked up between flaps  
in viscous summer love

Fainted grey gliding through the canopy  
guide me from the moon  
souls rooted through movement  
our hands clasp and I am night blooming  
fragrant mammals cast in the light

Michael Trammel



**ATTAN AND THE GREEN CORN DANCE**

In the arid country of Afghans,  
Crow found himself missing  
the Everglades. There were  
hours of peaceful boredom,  
days even, but then moments

of sheer violence that shook  
him worse than the bark  
of any alligator—that was  
the story of Afghanistan  
in his year of duty. No water.

No M-16 on his shoulder  
this evening. He and two  
Anglo G.I.s walk a street  
and see dancers in a circle,  
and hear music, mostly drums.

Near the Everglades, that's  
where he learned the Green  
Corn Dance with his Seminole  
and Miccosukee people, his  
one uncle, tall as a tree, always

whispering to him that he and  
Crow had to have Calusa blood  
because *No Indians get this tall.*  
*Only Calusa. Even the Spanish*  
*said so.* Crow takes it firmly

into this heart, and this Pashtun  
dance on a dusty street in dry  
Afghanistan strikes his blood  
with fever. The drums, so like  
a Corn Dance beat. The women's

dresses, unlike yet like Seminole  
patterns, colors. Like his dance  
the Attan is all about circles,  
and when two men in black  
whip pirouette after pirouette

he can't help himself. He dances  
too. His comrades try to stop him,  
but he makes tight circles around  
the spinning pair and they  
keep turning and the crowd

expands like a balloon, until  
it's bulging in all directions.  
Things seem un-right to two  
G.I.s, one who runs to track  
down a commanding officer.

But Crow is deep in it now  
and can't be stopped. His  
Sergeant and then Lieutenant  
shout at him to desist, but he  
ignores them, and the crowd

grows louder and pushes the  
officers to the perimeter. It takes  
M.P.s to finally crack the spell,  
to take the Green Corn Dance  
out of the Attan and make him

sit in the brig until he can  
*Start speaking some*  
*English! Start*  
*making some*  
*sense!*

Michael Trammel



## OLD CROW AT THE INDIAN MOUND AT NIGHT

We reached the tallest manmade hill  
and climbed to the top. The sun set.  
*This mound has good bones*, he sighed.  
Wings cut the sky, swooping, drifting,  
living arrows, the flights of Mississippi  
and Swallowtail Kites. They made silent  
circles. Old Crow did as he'd said,  
sparkling fire, weaving a lean-to from limbs  
and vines, shaping beds of leaves  
and pine straw. He cooked bass  
he'd fished from the nearby lake,  
and we ate. The stars appeared and sang  
the tribe's old songs, perhaps had been  
humming them since today at Miccosukee,  
the voices of the starlight beaming  
streams of time for hours and hours,  
making our journey through the county  
seemingly set in a time sixty  
or seventy years ago. I'd wondered why  
we'd seen so few neighborhoods as Crow  
led us through trees and sloughs  
and steepheads; now I knew.

Crow then spun blankets from leaves  
and vines and covered us gently.  
The fire cooled but wind gusts  
kept it blinking all night.

Israel X. Anderson



## HOUSE IN THE WOODS

There is a house deep in the woods,  
Far away from society.

The house, built brick by brick, stands there after years of  
abandonment.

Moss thrives near the rusted downspout, meshing the green and  
red like a tapestry.

Vines shield the windows, blocking the interior from the outside  
world.

The grate on top of the chimney provides the perfect place for the  
sparrow's nest.

The welcome mat welcomes plants to grow on top of it;  
It allows bugs to live under it.

Inside the house, hidden behind the moss-covered walls,  
The interior is pristine, untouched by nature, still reminiscent of  
sudden abandonment.



Tiffany Anderson



**ONE COMMUNITY**

Elaine Person



## TOO MANY BELONGINGS

I own too many blouses.  
I own too many pants.  
I'll need to buy more houses.  
I'm tired of this dumb dance  
of walking in between  
the clothing I acquired.  
I have to walk so balanced  
that the process makes me tired.

People think I'm lying  
as my genre's fiction.  
But now I say, "Enough is enough!"  
I am on a mission.

I have way too many tops  
and way too many bottoms.  
They used to be sentimental to me,  
now I can't recall where I got 'em.  
Here I am—a packrat.  
There's no room left for me.  
So come on by, pick up some clothes.  
I'll give them happily.  
And they're all for free.

Elaine Person



## BELONGING WITH ME

**D**o you own an article of clothing that takes on its own life? One that gets dirty whenever you wear it? I bought a mint green jacket that I wore over a scoop-necked, mint green T-shirt. When I first wore it, I dropped liquid chocolate all over the front of the buttons, which dribbled down the front. After washing the garment, the stain wouldn't come out, but I wore it anyway with a small bit of brown showing. After a couple of washings, it came out.

On a work assignment, I spilled a cup of coffee on my jacket. The stain went through the jacket, onto my T-shirt, and to my underwear. I had to wear the jacket all day, so I turned it around and buttoned it backwards to make the stained area less obvious. To my joy, the stain easily washed out of the jacket, T-shirt, and underwear.

The next time I wore the jacket, more coffee fell onto the lower left area of the jacket. I thought either I should give up drinking coffee or stop wearing this jacket. That day, two women on two separate occasions complimented me on my jacket.

“Winter Park on Park Avenue,” I said, as that is where I purchased it, although that was years ago, and I never saw the jacket there since, nor the lovely color. Perhaps they don't sell that jacket color or fabric anymore since it's hard to keep stains out of this absorbent, cotton, waffled fabric. Also, the mint green T-shirt I wore under it developed a rip in it.

On my first date with Paxton, I wore these pretty and special clothes.

“You look lovely, Cecily,” he said. “That color looks great on you.”

*It was odd for a man to say that*, I thought. Of all the belongings I own, I find it rare that a date compliments me on my clothing.

“My mom is a buyer in the fashion business,” he said, as though he read my mind.

“When I was a kid, women came to our house with color palettes to learn their seasons and what colors looked best on them. You look great in mint green.”

Paxton ordered lobster. I selected chicken piccata. Paxton was so involved in his shell-cracking that he didn’t see my chicken fly out of my plate and onto my lap napkin – at least I thought it was my napkin. When I looked down, the fowl had made a landing and a foul stain on my jacket. Greasy butter and capers sat partially on my napkin and partially on my lower jacket.

Paxton glanced up. “Wow, Cecily. Did you eat your entree that quickly?”

I debated what to say. “Yes, I was hungry.” And wrap up the chicken into the cloth napkin, smile, and eat my veggies, or admit the truth and pull the food back up to the plate and explain what happened. So, I thought a minute and said, “If you're going to hang around with me, you'll need to learn that I do weird things by accident. I mean, little odd occurrences happen to me a lot, but I'm healthy and happy. Once, I knew a man who was never ill, never had peculiar things happen to him, and he had a heart attack and died suddenly. So I deal with stains and pains, tripping and slipping, misspoken words, misinterpretation, even misconduct, but I go on. So if you want to take an interesting ride, I won't hide the chicken anymore.” And I pulled it from my lap with a fork, placed it onto my oval plate, cut into the food, and ate it.

Paxton laughed. “We belong together,” Paxton said and laughed with a twinkle in his eye.

When I got home that night, I took off the jacket and added the pre-soak stain remover. I used more than usual this time. After the wash and dry, my jacket was still stained with chicken grease and

whatever else was left on it. The jacket was ruined. I kissed it goodbye and placed it in my clothing cemetery.

Ripped clothes are in fashion. Maybe permanently stained clothes will be the next trend. Until then, I'm on a hunt for a new mint green, waffled, cotton jacket.

D. H. Buxton



## SOMEWHERE TO HANG MY HAT

**K**enny looked forward to the coming day. He just turned seventeen yesterday and all of the clubs in school were opening up membership for the coming year. He had a broad range of interests both physical and intellectual; always thinking that he was well rounded. He never struggled in the realm of casual conversation and socialization, but always sought something deeper. He wanted friends and acquaintances that would last a lifetime. He wanted to find his place. Kenny reached for a new ball cap hanging on a plastic coat hook, which he received for his birthday, placed it on his head, and took the bus to school.

When Kenny arrived he went to the auditorium where all of the clubs had tables up looking for new member. With enthusiasm, he went to the Chess Club table. The two students at the table looked like stereotypes from a John Hughes movie. Kenny was grilled by the two students on complex chess concepts. Unable to answer their questions, Kenny was rebuffed. He went to the JROTC table. He was interrogated by the cadets and disliked how they treated him as second-class, thus rejecting them outright. Finally, Kenny went to the Debate Team table. The students there gave him a sample argument to work with and he attempted to keep up with the other applicants. Unfortunately for Kenny, he could not meet their expectations and was also dismissed. As the day ended, he was disheartened. He attempted to hang his hat on the hook that he used, but the hook fell out of the wall. Defeated, he threw it on the couch.

For his thirtieth birthday, Kenny's friends decided to take him to a club to celebrate. Despite how earnest his friends were in making Kenny feel like the star of the proverbial show, he quickly felt the exact opposite. All of Kenny's friends had their girlfriends there at

the party. Kenny, on the other hand, did not have a paramour. This was because Kenny spent all of his time at work trying to keep up with the absurd cost of living. He kept his face up throughout most of the celebration, but the awkwardness of being the odd man out wore on him throughout the evening. His friends never meant to embarrass Kenny, but the effect was felt. As hours passed, Kenny could not escape the deep sense of alienation he endured despite being among friends. They talked about their relationship and their possible futures in between congratulating Kenny on what he had accomplished. Once politeness provided an opportunity to excuse himself, Kenny drove home deeply dejected. As he walked into his apartment forlorn, he instinctively looked for a hook for his hat, now beaten and weather-worn as if the party had aged it unreasonable fast. Remembering that there was no hook to hang his hat, he sat it upon a night stand and went to bed.

Kenny looked in the mirror and was not pleased with what he saw. His hair had receded and begun to turn gray. Lines appeared on his face showing his age, which was the wrong side of fifty. He prepared to go to the city hall for a local debate over zoning for a new subdivision, which was very unpopular. He reached for his old hat, which was clearly threadbare and faded, and put it on his head. Upon arrival at City Hall, the arguments already degenerated into theatrics and straw-manning. Conservatives and Liberals were all but exchanging physical blows over how the commissioners should vote. Kenny phased out, even as people from both sides tried to convince him to join. He refused, triggering both sides to hurl savage insults at him. Not even bothering to engage their madness, he drove home alone. He knew he had no place there. As he walked in, he threw his cap, now practically worn out, on a couch. It deflated as its age prevented it from retaining shape.

The cemetery was solemn. Peace pervaded over it despite the chaotic din of traffic that surrounded it. Kenny's tombstone was simple and stood equal with the others around him. Some more grand,

others spartan. Kenny's neighbor, alone, stood over the grave. He placed Kenny's hat on top of the stone and walked away. The hat was faded almost white and worn beyond any possibility of comfortable or practical wear. The epitaph was simple. It read, "I now finally have somewhere to hang my hat."

Marielena O. Gomez



**NEW HOME**

Spanish softness brushed from moss  
covered branch

**i d**

**a**

**n**

**g**

**l**

be tween worlds  
flared nostrils towards  
perfumed wild winds  
of parentless neighbor  
with sun-covered smiles

we race on  
red brick roads  
insects waver from shirts ripped  
sticks flung unearthed  
each rubber step

we placed limbs of oak  
o soaked in stillness  
like hibernating cicadas  
in the guise of sleep  
from nymph to adult

you on the brink  
barely seventeen  
I the lifetime of a cell walled  
into cloud-rimmed daydreams

let us stare with our teeth wide  
smile with our eyes small  
and laugh in the branches of silence

Rayden Eggleston



## REVISITING

What was once a quiet, peaceful town - even on eventful nights, was no longer the slow-paced, welcoming area it had once been. Instead, the soft crunch of candy-wrappers echoed beneath his feet as he moved quietly through town. Between the rows of graffiti on public benches, once pristine, he could see all the teenagers and young adults smoking, drinking, and causing a general ruckus. His stomach twisted at the realization that these were the same kids who he would have grown up with, had he never moved. A growing pain in his chest developed at the shocking contrast of what he was used to from this once quaint town.

He had known peace few times in his life. Only when he was very young could he remember feeling a minor tranquility, or at the very least a stillness, standing out like radar blips from the blurry tumultuous chaos of his life. A few of these spots were on his childhood home street, a place that welcomed him when little else did. He booked a flight and arrived in time for the weekly fair on Friday. When Friday finally came, he took one of the loneliest walks he ever did have before.

He walked by the library he used to go to nearly every day as a child. Do you remember me? he asks it silently. The library is too distraught with the current state of affairs to recognize him. He continues down the street anxiously, slipping into a candy store he used to enjoy. All new staff. The young woman behind the counter smirks at him knowingly, as if this whole thing had been planned on purpose, deliberate and personal. What happened to your last keeper? he asks the store, yet only gets a muted response, as if afraid to talk. He tries to walk around, but feels too uneasy and leaves,

discreetly dipping out of the store and continuing onward into the fair.

Quietly weaving through the tents, in an attempt not to be recognized by any who might find him familiar, even after all these years, he discovers further travesties that make his face fall, the first break in his composure. What used to have authentic art, vintage artifacts, and various ornaments, in combination with a plethora of food options and honey sticks, was now replaced with what looked to be plastic, 3D-printed objects, and products created by or assisted with AI. He regarded them with a sneer and hustled through the crowd until he found the few stalls of old farmers he was accustomed to. They had a pained, forlorn expression on their faces. They used to be all smiles, exuberant to talk to anyone that approached their stall. Now though? You could have stolen from them, and they would not have moved. Their expression was tilted away from the crowd, distant. It was as if every step around them was a crushing stomp to their reputation and legacy. They were alive, but they were no longer there. What has become of you? he asked them, somberly. There was no response. His home had become a ghost town, where the living held no respect for the dead, if they even noticed their presence at all.

He gazed to see the landmark that had always provided him with a small dose of comfort, a street clock that towered over the small town. Both of its hands were frozen on the 11th hour. There was no telling how long it had been stuck like that. He considered, briefly, that this was the clock's decision, knowing that nobody would come by to fix it. The clock chose to be frozen, because it knew only worse times came after. What was better, to be stuck in a good time and place forever, the last bastion of peace—or to move forward with all the badness and muck? The time was neither wrong nor right. He knew his decision, as he turned away from the clock. He didn't even whisper it goodbye, the air around it was covered in ice. He would

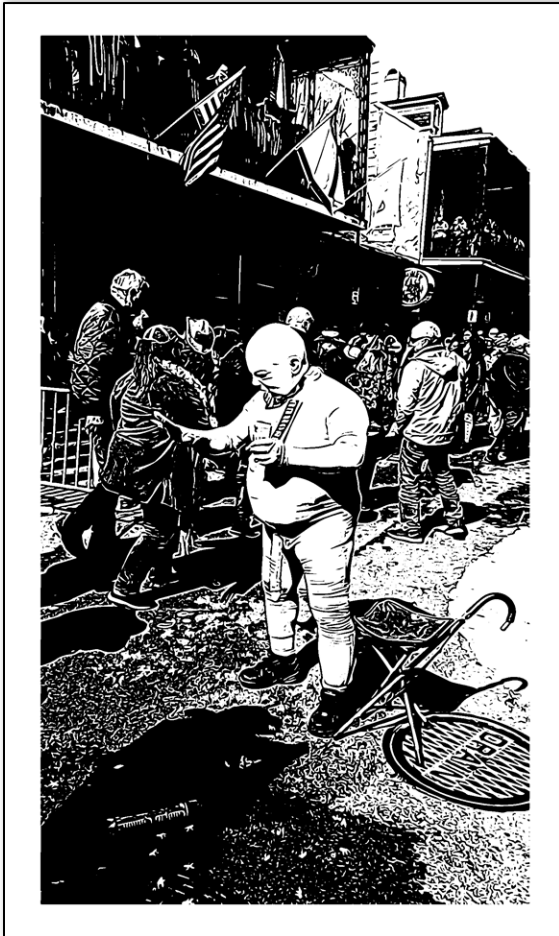
never come back. He would simply have to make peace with the fact that he would never have it.

Brandon Tabala



**HEARTLAND**

Where does a “Tabala” come from?  
The name means to chatter, to babble,  
something that runs like river water over stones,  
unruly, quick to scatter  
We come from where the old world blurs  
from the Polish hills to the Irish coasts  
bound by long roads of a thousand migrations  
footprints of which are now long gone to dust  
Now we are all scattered like our lost heritage  
But even forgetting is something  
Back home, down here or over there  
a shadow of us still lingers in a country that remembers  
what we no longer can



Jeff Karon



**BELONGING #3**

Naomi Steffer



**GOING HOME**

I close my eyes—  
now I'm five  
in the backseat of  
my parents' minivan  
on a long drive.

my eyes drift shut,  
head leans against the glass  
barrier separating me from a blur  
of rapidly blackening grass.

my consciousness stirs deep within me.  
sleepwalking eyes graze the sight of the  
rocky driveway, then crawl back into sleep,  
all of me into sleep,  
as warmth surrounds me.

This cocoon of pressure  
embraces me, tender walls  
holding me, keeping me,  
from falling and hitting the earth.

Never a spark in my slumber, all is calm  
unruptured water on the surface of a pond.  
*Home.*  
oh to keep this feeling everlong.

Brielle Terry



**THE LAND I INHERITED  
LONG BEFORE I WAS BORN**

Gunshots can be heard from afar  
But the acres of trees brush against each other  
Drowning them out

The smell of morning, dewy fine fescue and clumped dirt  
Enter my nose as I crush them with my red boots  
My dark knees ache from the steepness of the lofty hill

I keep making my way up until I reach the top  
I turn around to take everything in

Glistening green and light brown are everywhere  
The long strays of grass nip at my tired legs  
Gnats, dragonflies, and moths buzz all around me  
Brushing against my ears as if to say:

*Welcome back to your land.*

The smooth lakes behind the hill are piled with fish  
Enclosed by the sandstone-gravel trails  
That run through the whole bucket of land  
The forest of trees shelters hidden animals:

Deer  
Rabbit  
Beaver  
Fox  
Skunk

The land soaks in the sun like a hot bath  
Wind blows by to make the heat more tolerable

Then I roll down the hill—  
Strays of the Earth's ground stick to my skin  
Swarm of bugs flood over my body

The feeling I always love to feel  
When I visit my land

Evelyn Romano



## HOME SWEET HOME

I sniff the sweet-sick smell of uric acid as constant as daybreak.  
Confined in a *home* chair, I watch family: imposters, surely.

I *know* alone.

Mind swivels to last days with my spouse. His “where’s my hug?”  
triggers touches of love. The pained face looms “I have nothing  
left

to give.”

I force reality and think of food. Maybe I can *taste* joy: swell of  
buds, a happy tongue.

Will I last until the bliss of sleep?

Can I abide *this* family?

I move my chair forward.

Pain in my gut starts slow and burns.

Leanna Almodovar



WELLERMAN'S CALL

there is a ballad that carries across the wind  
a drunken chorus sung by youths, full of grand tales and woes  
some words are slurred, but never forgotten  
the beat is kept balanced by clanks of rum and steps  
and the floors of old mahogany creak with each shift  
the song drifts about the vessel, making its way to the bow  
where a girl named after the stars gazes into the nearly resting sun  
the mellow coral and salmon hues glowing on her face  
she can't help but recognize how striking it is  
the contrast between the shanty and her familiar overtures,  
the mahogany wood boards and her ivory marble floors  
but still, the melody encircles her, as does the warm gale that slices  
through her strawberry curls  
the gale that smells of adventure and of salt  
the same salt that sticks to her skin as the water invites her to  
follow  
but she already is following it, already pursuing that next fragment  
of hope  
and it seems she'd follow it as far as it goes  
with the anchors below her and the masts up above  
and the crew to her back, and the ocean in front  
the girl smiles and understands;  
she is home.

Christina Flocken



## BELONGING

Growing up in Tucson, I was immersed in the Sonoran Desert and embraced by the surrounding mountains. The Rincon Mountains were to the east, where each morning the sun rose to proclaim the birth of another day. On the west were the Tucson Mountains where exquisite sunsets eulogized the end of every day. There were the Santa Rita Mountains to the south, farther away but prominent, nonetheless. They were surrounded by the lands of the Tohono O'odham and the Pascua Yaqui. The Santa Ritas were the gateway to Mexico, which lay only sixty miles south of Tucson. The Mexican and Indigenous people and cultures flavored every aspect of life in Tucson including its food, its language, and its celebrations. Most importantly, to the north were the Santa Catalina Mountains—my north star. They were bold and magnificent to behold. They gave me a sense of direction and kept me grounded. As a child I was a conscientious church goer, but it was the desert and the ever-changing mountains that were my true place of worship, my cathedral. That was where I felt the presence of God, where I felt I belonged, where I was at peace with the world.

During high school, I was uprooted from this sanctuary when my family moved to Northern Virginia. The culture shock was massive, turning me from an outgoing, socially engaged, and conscientious student into a withdrawn, socially awkward, and ambivalent one. Disconnection is the antithesis of belonging, and it is anathema to a teenager struggling to fit in. My remaining years of high school were a quagmire from which I barely escaped. My self-esteem and my qualifications for college admissions were both tattered by the experience.

As a young adult working, going to night school, and living on my own, I came to appreciate Washington, D.C. It had muggy summers and snowy winters, but both were usually short enough to be tolerable. Spring was gorgeous with blooming trees, bushes, and flower beds heralding the earth's reawakening, while fall was ablaze with the colors of changing leaves. The city was an intellectual, cultural, and sports capital, filled with museums, plays, concerts, symphonies, and sporting events. Walking around Washington was a lesson in history and civics. I felt patriotic just living there. I started a career, and I stayed more than twenty years. But something was missing. The desert and the mountains still called to me.

I moved to the Orlando area when my children were eighteen months old. Filled with playgrounds, parks, and amusement parks, it was a child-centered vacation mecca and a good place to raise children. I went to graduate school and then taught elementary school for nearly a decade. The constant humidity was the bane of my existence; summers seemed to last from April through October. But I was a better gardener there than anywhere else. As my children aged out of their attraction to the area's attractions, I found enrichment, fulfillment, and community in a plethora of writers' groups. I began painting. My subject was nearly always deserts and mountains, backlit by sunsets, sunrises, big blue skies, and magical cloud formations. I lived in Orlando for nearly forty years. During the last ten years I visited my sister who once again was living in Tucson. I realized I was part of the Sonoran diaspora. I lived in Orlando, but my heart and soul were in Tucson. Despite my many good friends in Orlando, something was missing. The desert and the mountains were still calling to me.

After COVID and the proliferation of working remotely, I was able to return to Tucson without losing my job. I am back, surrounded by the Sonoran Desert and admiring my beloved Catalina Mountains. I live in a retirement community. The residents are friendly. There are countless activities and clubs to pique any

interest. When I'm so inclined, I avail myself of these opportunities to be a part of a group—to belong. I'm again near family. I still work and I'm part of my remote work community. But I spend my best time writing, painting, and communing with the beautiful views of the mountains that gave me a sense of belonging throughout my childhood. For over sixty years I missed this feeling of belonging, of being an integral part of something significant. Now I'm home where I belong, and I'm at peace. When I forsake this earthly plane, I hope to have my cremains spread amongst the Saguaros where I've always belonged.



Shannon Faith Walsh



**AWAKENED IMPRINTS**

Valerie “Ray” Eulett



## LED ZEPPELIN IV

“Dad’s in Ohio,” Ian says.

“No, he’s not,” I tell him.

“Dad moved to Ohio,” he says again.

“No, he didn’t,” I tell him again.

Maybe my brother thinks Dad went back because that’s where he belonged. If people grow from roots, then I imagine his must still be buried beneath the snow dustings. I imagine his roots as garlic, as bulbs that leave a hole in the soil when consumed. I own the photos: of the river baptism, of his grandma’s farmhouse, of his garage rock-and-roll band. He owned a denim winter coat, wore it while he played the guitar. I own the coat now.

I wonder if a child belongs to their parents, like how a black dog belongs to you, like how you can own it. You can leash a kid like a dog, give them a stick or four, but never quite let them sniff around in places or ideas you don’t want them sniffing around in. I wonder if belonging to a family means becoming property; if there’s kids, you leave them to someone in your will, just like any other property.

I own property now. It’s secluded enough to stargaze, to remember the moon was a goddess. Though I belong to no religion, I want to kneel for the queens of light—Mama-Killa, Artemis, Arianrhod—want to fight their battles in that black void evermore. It’s a shame the airspace belongs to the US government; I’d love to suck the universe into my mouth and mix it with my saliva, then spit out the starlight cud. But since I belong to nothing in a spiritual sense, I watch the turkeys picking through the backyard hay, think about Thanksgiving dinner, and wonder if they belong to me in a literal sense.

My dad belongs to me in a literal sense—I own him now. I own the urn his ashes are kept in, run my fingers in the grooves etched into the nameplate: “No more be grieved at that which thou hast done.” He confessed his greatest regret to me over a whiskey for my twenty-first, right after he told me about a Ukrainian woman in Atlanta, his grandmother’s meatloaf, and how much he’d hate going to California: he’s sorry for lost time.

“It just occurred to me,” Dad told me, picking at the vegetables. “That if I don’t tell you all these stories, then they’ll die when I do.”

“Well, I want to hear them,” I said, tearing into my steak like I used to at the Kountry Kitchen. Maybe this moment made up for that lost time, time that should’ve belonged to us. “Tell me everything.”

Tell me everything, Dad. You left me all your belongings, but you didn’t finish your stories. You know how much I love stories. But you left your CDs for me, and I know how much you love music. Your Led Zeppelin IV disc skips half the songs, but I hope you hear me play it on loop anyway as you climb your stairway to heaven. I’m sorry I don’t know if it’s your favorite. I’m sorry about the time. I’m sorry.

Florida floods easily, not like Ohio. There’s so much water everywhere, so many tears, but the waterworks will only be a problem when the levee breaks, and it hasn’t broken yet. My counselor says it’ll get worse when I’ve settled his estate, when the deeds are done, and there’s no more distractions to distract from the fact my dad is dead.

“Dad’s gone,” Ian says. “Dad’s in Ohio.” Yes, Dad is gone, and maybe his ashes belong in Ohio dirt in that bulb-shaped hole, but no, I keep him with me, because I can’t let him go yet. He’s still mine.

“Dad’s dead, Ian,” I tell him. His birthday was last month, and I got him thirty-eight candles for it, but I took them down when he said it was his twenty-fourth. Usually, I don’t correct him, let him live

in his sketchpads, but Dad's different; they both deserve the truth. It belongs to them.

"Popeyes," he says, so we go to Popeyes, listen to *Misty Mountain Hop* during the drive. I glance at him. We've lost time, too, but maybe for him it's like none's passed at all. He smiles, puts my hand on his freshly-shaved head, and runs it through it.

We belong to each other, now, our own little family. We have each other.

Angeliki Thomas Markonios



## ODE TO MY PAPOU

Life is like the ocean,

believing that you are still with us, then,  
remembering, you have shuffled off this  
mortal coil, believing that you are  
somewhere in the country on a road trip,  
then, remembering, you are where you  
belong, returned to the heavenly collective

Sometimes the waves are rough,

I can almost feel you with me, in the quiet  
moments when I am driving alone, as if

I could reach my hand out and push a hole through the fabric that separates us now, you were a  
spirit living on borrowed time, living to bless us all with love and wisdom

Other times the waves are calm,

I think of you every day and wait patiently until that fabric that I have been pushing against so  
helplessly will stretch out to the other side, where one day it will rip open, and I can bring you  
into my arms again, until then, I take comfort in knowing that your love is living with us always.

Anna Belle Noll



**TRIBUTE POEM**

Evergreen air nipping at our ears,  
Swirling snow tickling at rosy cheeks as we run between the trees.  
Playroom scented with nostalgia itself,  
Wooden toys passed down, generation to generation.

Making toys for children less fortunate,  
Your rocking horse and cradle now heirlooms forever.  
You gave movement to those in need, your lasting legacy,  
You are greatly missed.

You loved your four children,  
In turn, their children and their children grew up loving you.  
Playing peg games, finishing puzzles, looking through photos,  
Our visits were never a bore.

Even as your thoughts grew distant, your heart knew the way,  
You were ready to meet your Lord and Savior,  
Reuniting with Vera must have been a close second,  
Watch over our small Heavenly family until we can all reunite once  
again.

Daniela Arroyo



## NORTHERN LIGHTS

Star loved listening to the stories that her grandmother would retell about the “old days.” She found joy in hearing her grandmother express all the wonderful adventures she dreamed of taking, dreams she never got the chance to fulfill. Her grandmother had lived a life full of love and sacrifice, always putting others first, until time, as it often does, ran out.

Before she passed, she made Star promise something: “Don’t wait for life to happen, Star. Chase it. Follow the dreams I couldn’t. And when you’re lost, look to the stars, they’ll always lead you home.”

After her grandmother’s death, Star felt like a ship lost at sea, desperate to find her way back to the only place she had ever known as safe, her grandmother’s embrace. But she remembered that promise, and she knew she couldn’t let grief chain her in place the way it had once chained her grandmother.

To honor her, and to keep her own soul alive, Star set out on the ultimate adventure. She traveled all the way from the United States to Finland, to the snowy forests of the Lapland region, chasing a dream that had never been fully lived. Her grandmother had always longed to see the northern lights, their magic, their mystery, and now, Star would see them for both of them.

As she stood on a frozen lake beneath a blanket of stars, tears welled in her eyes. Although her grandmother was not physically there, Star had never felt so close to her. The air was sharp and cold, yet her heart was warm with memory.

Suddenly, she heard a faint voice, a voice that sounded achingly familiar, the voice she missed more than anything. “Star, follow the path.”

She froze. Star pinched herself, wondering if excitement had made her delirious. But no, she felt it, deep in her bones. A magnetic pull tugged at her body, urging her forward, guiding her by the colorful rivers of light overhead.

She ran, faster than she thought possible, her boots crunching against the snow, breath puffing out in frantic clouds. Above her, the northern lights danced in waves of deep blue, green, and violet. It was as if the heavens themselves were breathing, shimmering with silent wonder.

She pushed onward, her heart pounding, tears blurring her vision. Then, something shifted. The air before her shimmered with thousands of suspended lights, each one pulsing gently like a living star.

Star slowed, lifting her gaze from the sky. Ahead of her, a small bench dusted in snow appeared, glowing faintly under the dancing lights. And there, sitting peacefully, wrapped in a shawl of silver and moonlight, was a figure.

Star's heart nearly stopped.

Her grandmother sat as if no time had passed at all. The lines of age still graced her face, but her eyes shone with youth, memory, and a peace that went beyond this world. Star didn't know whether to run or collapse, but her body moved forward, pulled by a love stronger than anything she had ever known.

She had kept her promise.

And the stars had kept theirs too.

Ava Barretto



**ODE TO MY AUNT**

My dear Aunt.  
She was full of grace.  
She was everything you could want,  
In almost every other face.

Her friends called her the life of the party.  
She was the family's ace.  
She was always laughing and dancing,  
    Making me feel safe.

    In her cozy, safe Bronx apartment  
She always carried me in her warm embrace.  
She cared for those around her  
Despite the little space.

When she suddenly fell ill  
I had to somehow bear the tumors on her pale white face.  
She quickly withered away.  
And I could do nothing but feel disgraced.

Elaine Person



## DELAYED BELONGING

She stopped talking to her father many years ago.  
He acted domineering, so she had to go.  
He ruled, he dictated, he yelled, and he said  
mean things to his daughter. Then he was dead.

After all, they lived apart.  
The man was tough. He had no heart

Her mother wept when Papa died,  
and yet her daughter had not cried  
until the mom met her demise.  
Daughter's tears spilled from her eyes.

When she died, she was buried in the family plot  
next to her father, whether she liked it or not.

Now, they all belong together  
in the rain and sunny weather.  
I tell this tale ironically.  
Buried, they're a family  
together through eternity.

Emma Jean Garrett



## THREADS OF TIME

[Inspired by John Sloan's "The Sewing Woman"]

**I**t was quiet the day of my mother's funeral; no one spoke, and no one cried. I didn't participate in any merry making afterwards, instead I left for home afterwards. Home was the only place I wanted to be at that moment.

When I got home, I had a sudden urge to look up into the attic. I walked up the stairs and stared at all the treasure: old silver dishes, China dolls, and dresses that had braved the moths. However, the thing that had caught my eye was the grand sewing machine table in the corner.

I placed my hand against the cold machine. The surface was caked with dust, yet I couldn't help but feel the curves of the machine. That night, I asked my husband to bring the table down to my office. He offered to buy me material when he left for town, but I declined.

The next morning, I grabbed a pot of tea and isolated myself with the machine. At first, I did nothing but stare at it. After a while, I grabbed a duster and cleaned it. It was finally spotless, although, there were signs of wear. The gold paint flaked off the table, but the bold word **SINGER** was still displayed proudly at the top. I felt the scratches that formed small carvings in the wood of the table. I imagined my mother putting them there, perhaps during one of her slower afternoons. Finally, I opened up the drawers. They were spilling out with spools of thread, button, and small swatches of ribbon.

I inspected what was loaded onto the machine; a beautiful turquoise thread, the one my mother had used to make a school dress for my twelfth birthday. Just before my birthday, my mother

allowed me to pick out any fabric that suited my fancy. I chose this beautiful blue satin, but there was no matching thread. It didn't matter if we had a perfect match, the stitches couldn't have been seen anyway, but my mother was determined to find it. She never lost hope and she found it.

My mother's work was always exquisite. I had dreamed of matching her work one day, but it was a wish unfulfilled. There was a time in my girlhood when I tried to sew, but I was deprived of the urge when I realized I lacked talent. I could never line up the fabric correctly which resulted in angled stitches. After I got married, I gave it up entirely; my husband had the money to hire women to mend our clothes.

I wondered what would happen if I tried my hand at it again, now I had my mother's machine. I thought it over while completing my chores for the day. After bathing for the night, I decided to do it, even if I found myself unsuccessful. I found some old fabric, a soft white cotton, and I found some complimentary trimmings for it. I removed an old dress from my closet and cut it apart, for this was to be my pattern.

I cut the fabric around my pattern, leaving room for the seam allowance, and pinned the pieces together. I was finally able to use the machine. I lifted the foot gently over the fabric and began sewing. I became lost in the motion of the pedal under the table. One seam after the other, I sewed; the only thing stopping me was the bobbin thread running out.

I removed the bobbin and wound it up, making sure not to make it too loose. Before replacing it, I felt the desire to show my work to my mother, just like I did all those years ago. But I couldn't. Having sewn again, I was reminded of when I was thirteen with my mother in the next room making dinner. The thought warmed my heart.

I continued sewing the garment, adding ribbons and frills as I persisted. I was exhausted; I could not tell if it looked fine or not, but I was still making it. My husband must have found me asleep,

for I woke up in our room instead of my office. When I returned, I spotted the dress I made. It was a simple pattern; it had a long skirt with long sleeves, but it's many embellishments made it magnificent.

I perched by the machine again and caressed its features. Although my mother is gone, this machine of *ours* will always connect us, this life or the next.

Heather Harris



## GRAPEVINES AND SUICIDE

When I was seventeen, they asked me to read at my best friend's funeral. I said no. How could I talk when I wanted to scream?

Three days before Catalina sliced a knife through her wrists we were in our Wednesday night Belly Dance class. Catalina loved to dance. She excelled at every class offered at the Gotta Dance Academy: Hip Hop, Jazz, Latin, and Modern. She was vibrant, graceful, the envy of all of us other dancers. Outside of the academy, that was where sadness spit at her with its vile taunts. I shrugged off any depressing thoughts she shared with me. I wish I had listened.

Her mother, Ms. Pusha, taught the belly dancing class. You'd think, since I had been her daughter's best friend since second grade, I would be allowed to call her by her first name, Catherine. And I could, but not in class. Ms. Pusha was strict on everything when it came to dancing.

At the end of that Wednesday class, the other girls were gathering their hip skirts and slipper socks. They were quiet because Ms. Pusha insisted on silence.

"Mother," Catalina said quietly. "I learned a new move in jazz class, the Grapevine. I was thinking we could mix it in with the dance you've been teaching us for the festival. Look, I'll show you how it could go."

Before Catalina had taken two steps, her mother answered, "Don't be ridiculous, Catalina. Jazz is an American folly, showy and crude. Belly dancing goes back centuries; it was performed before kings. Your new move does not belong."

Walking away to collect her music, Ms. Pusha did not see the resigned, crushed face of her daughter. I did. I wanted to gag Ms.

Pusha with the silver clinking coins on her hip skirt. Make her pay for the harm she often inflicted on her sensitive daughter.

At the funeral, several girls from the Gotta Dance Academy talked about how kind and wonderful Catalina was. The priest talked about the tragedy of the death of a child.

No shit, I wanted to shriek. Of course it's a fucking tragedy. She was seventeen. We'd never get to double date on prom, be roommates in college, be each other's maid of honor, be pregnant at the same time, complain about how hard it was to have a successful career and be present for our kids. Tragedy was not a good enough word for what this world had lost. It was beyond that. I no longer had a best friend. The only person who could understand what I was going through was lying in a box of wood.

Ms. Pusha was at the front, three pews in front of me. If my looks of hatred could carve letters they would be inserting *You Stole Her From Me* on her skull. If she hadn't said those stupid words, 'your new move does not belong', Catalina would be here today. We'd be at the river slurping mint milkshakes and arguing over who was cuter, Henry Glass or Pete Ruskin. Not sitting in a church facing the disaster of my life.

At the end of the ceremony, six pallbearers brought down the casket. Next came Ms. Pusha with a black tulle veil over her face. I thought she was going to pass me but at the last minute she saw me standing at the end of the pew.

Ms. Pusha stopped to turn and look at me.

I have never seen grief on someone's face like I did that day. Lines that hadn't been there last week were now permanently scarred onto her face. Her skin was pulled back, drawn in on itself. It was the eyes that were the worst. Vacant, dead. They were scary to look at.

"I was a good mother, wasn't I?"

Last year I read an article in National Geographic about the teenage mind. Researchers found that teens didn't fully become empathetic until they hit their mid-twenties. That seventeen-year-old me must have had some insight into my future understanding of empathy when I answered Ms. Pusha, the mother of my now dead best friend.

“Yes,” I told her. “And she loved you very much.”

Ms. Pusha had not been the sole cause of my friend's suicide. Catalina had shown signs of depression and anxiety that we all should have recognized. We were all injured by her absence in our lives. But she will always belong in our hearts.



Shannon Faith Walsh



**PECKING ORDER**

Naomi Steffer



**FROM THE WATERS OF MARS**

Clay undisturbed, in solace abandoned,  
barren but for imprints of future past;  
I stand, silent, at the edge of vision  
witnessing the Earth's heartbeat everlast.

Lost to the eye and time, it sleeps beneath  
the russet dust of my skin. The waters  
run within my veins and lay frozen deep  
in the chest of this celestial daughter.

With phantom shores, I hold the mystery  
for those who dare tread a red sea's tableau.  
Among many knocks Opportunity  
until dark falls and the batteries go.

Curiosity comes with Perseverance;  
starry sojourners, come— break my silence.

Natasha Britt



## THE LION'S ROAR

A golden figure could be seen.  
Was it the sun?  
No. It was a great beast.  
It has a mane  
Like the rays of sunlight.

It was a majestic lion!  
With such grace and goodness,  
He seemed wild and fierce at first,  
But it has the Lord's grace.  
His amber eyes are gazing around.

The lion's roar shook the sky,  
Like the sound of thunder.  
Fiercely protective and proud.  
He will not back down.  
He's unafraid of danger.

The lion will always protect,  
Who considers his pride

Esther Bieber



**THE FALLEN ANGEL**

[Based on the painting by Alexandre Cabanel]

Why does such a beautiful figure  
Inside and out  
Sit on the cold ground  
With warmth getting leached from his delicate heart  
Why are you down here when you belong up there  
With all the other divine creations of God?  
Why must you be an outcast?  
Such punishment for being unique is cruel  
Why create an angel differently,  
and then punish it for being so?  
Come, let those tears cease and sore eyes rest  
The touch of dirty, hard rocks should not be bestowed  
onto an innocent, yet cursed angel

with such beautiful and wondrous wings  
What is happening in that hurt mind of yours?  
What will you do?  
Respond to the hypocritical disloyalty  
continuously from now on, appropriately in your own manner?  
Or sit—forever a victim  
Betrayed by his creator?

\* \* \*

We, the rest of the angels  
soar freely through the sky  
Do we also lack loyalty to our comrades?  
Just as Satan and God lacked loyalty to each other?  
Don't look at or acknowledge him  
He must just be an infectious bad apple  
And deserve all that was coming to him  
But weren't we all meant to be created equal  
And treated just as equally?  
We wonder what went wrong  
Does he know something we don't?  
Or is he simply greedy and power hungry?  
We continue to embrace the freedom and light that we feel  
But the among the rocks  
darkness stretches along the once glowing white feathers

It's in the back of our minds  
Don't look, don't think about it  
What if we do, we'll end up just like him?  
Ignore him and his pain, and everything should be fine  
We mustn't let another angel's mistake drag us down  
But we shall never forget the soon-to-be unrecognizable figure on  
the ground  
Alone and amongst the lowly dirt and germs  
The main marker of an angel—Pure white wings  
Those that are his will inevitably become dark

Joana Xipolitas



## WE ARE ALL ONE

Paul sat alone in the room, dim light from the oil lamp casted shadows across the walls. He stared down at the simple wooden table and the blank papyrus before him and sighed. His heart was heavy, and sleep was like a defiant child refusing to cooperate.

The journey was long to get to Anatolia, to the region of Galatia. Paul walked an arduous walk on foot from his home in Antioch. The roads were dry and dusty, he was hot and tired, but still he spoke until his own voice became hoarse and cracked preaching the love of Jesus Christ to anyone who would receive it.

And many did.

He was here now, ready to speak about one of the most important messages yet. He dipped the tip of his reed pen into the black ink, tapping it on the side of the inkhorn. Cautiously his hand hovered over the papyrus ready to write his message.

Paul thought back to the moment he arrived in Galatia. It didn't take long to realize that he was among a diverse group of people: Anatolians, Greeks, Romans, Celtic Gauls, Jews. This place was a true melting pot of people and with the diversified mix of people came varying religions with different belief systems. He found some were pagans worshipping gods and goddesses, while others were monotheistic Jews worshipping God in synagogues. Each one of them wanting their place and acceptance in the world. And deep down in the depths of their souls, the question begged where do I belong in a world that is so different from who I am and what I believe?

Paul, a mere man, preached to the diverse masses about Jesus Christ as the Son of God, all the while thinking in the back of his

mind *I was there right where you are now*. He knew firsthand the conflict that held their hearts captive. He knew the doubt and the frustrations felt when their belief systems were threatened. In his past, had found himself zealous and wanting justice, no, demanding justice for the blasphemers who jeopardized his faith. Paul knew how the people in Galatia felt because he was once one of them. He was once a man that held contempt for all Christians who threatened his Jewish faith. God knows he had many Christians arrested and imprisoned and his heart was once hard and unrelenting. He, too, was a great sinner, which is why he felt compelled to write this message to all the people in Galatia.

As Paul sat there reflecting on his own past his chest felt tight. He remembered his own experiences and now in this region, he saw so many people who seemed so lost. Their eyes had no joy, no light glinting from inside their souls, only sorrow. He just knew that he had to share the news of Jesus Christ to these people, to help them out of the sinking sand, just as he had been saved.

The papyrus remained blank, empty of words. He just stared at it, hand hovering. Where does he start? So many people in this world just want to have a sense of belonging, to have a deeper connection to something that is bigger than themselves. People want safety, love, connection, support, understanding, acceptance. These are the fundamental needs in every human being.

So, Paul took in a deep breath and paused for a moment, lifting up a prayer before he began to write. And once he started the words were like a fluid stream. The more he wrote, the more fervent the message became.

He was desperate to reach them. To help them understand. To convince them that there is someone to whom we all belong to in unity. He had to tell them the truth that it took him so long to realize.

Paul imagined what people would say: I've lied. Where do I belong? I've deceived. Where do I belong? I've done so many bad

things. Where do I belong? I've hated in my heart. Where do I belong? I've doubted. Where do I belong?

And when he was done pouring out his heart, Paul took in a breath as if it were his first. He placed the pen down and read what he wrote: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).



Emma Jean Garrett



**SWEETNESS**

Carol Ann Moon



**FROM *SOMETIMES A BREAST IS NOT A BREAST*  
*IS NOT A BREAST***

[After Gertrude Stein and after Charlotte Turner Smith]

vi.

Sometimes a breast is not a breast is not a breast  
but Publix Delivery

and the contactless weekly grocery service I contract  
to safeguard my immune system

I wear my mask and tip generously  
and since I put in the comments that I have a green door and my  
house lights are on

the drivers find me like clockwork  
(plus it doesn't hurt to stand outside and wave

them down when they drive very slowly and squint at the house  
numbers  
and simultaneously try to keep the onions from rolling out of the  
paper or plastic bags)

we have a moment of socially distanced humanity in the driveway  
and then off they go to deliver more cellular nutrition

soothers sweet  
slow but sure

vii.

Sometimes a breast is not a breast is not a breast  
but an internet Sunday Mass in a church 1200 miles away

I see my college friends sitting in the pew  
and I pretend I am sitting next to them

it is the New York accent of the priest that keeps my attention,  
such a comforting sound like that of my own family

the prayers for the sick don't mention me by name  
but I know prayers are being said for me daily

and I, too, say Our Fathers and Hail Marys for my intentions,  
especially for the Ukraine,

especially for my doctors and nurses  
and for angelic marathoners who drive me to infusions, looking  
forward to when I ring the bell,

sing anew, and  
protect the song

viii.

Sometimes a breast is not a breast is not a breast  
but a hurricane

or two hurricanes  
that make glancing blows at your county

and that put many lives along the Gulf  
to the south in the Gulf

how do you prep for a devastation  
how do you outrun the rising waters

you leave if you can  
you get on the highest floor if nothing else

the lucky will get the chance to heal  
the healing will be mixed with guilt,

delusions once again  
of balmy air

ix.

Sometimes a breast is not a breast is not a breast  
but a COVID bivalent booster shot

made in a lab for one size fits all  
along with test kits to take at home

science has stepped up to stare down a virus in months not years  
if it doesn't kill the scientists

the world death toll is staggering  
the toll on healthcarers beyond calculation

patients put off their appointments  
masks could not be found on shelves (make your own)

a mammogram delayed  
a lump, lobular and ductal, multiplied;

vacant mind felt  
cruel force

Sometimes a breast is not a breast is not a breast  
but a visit to a graveyard

of nuns and monks  
of abbots and prioresses

their resting places next to frat benches  
next to sorority rush rituals, Greek understood by the initiated

it is fitting that the sacred and profane  
have an everlasting timeshare on the campus together

it is consoling when the world has gone to hell in a handbasket  
to pull up a rock and talk with the monastic ghosts

they ran their races  
they may have had some good souled shoes,

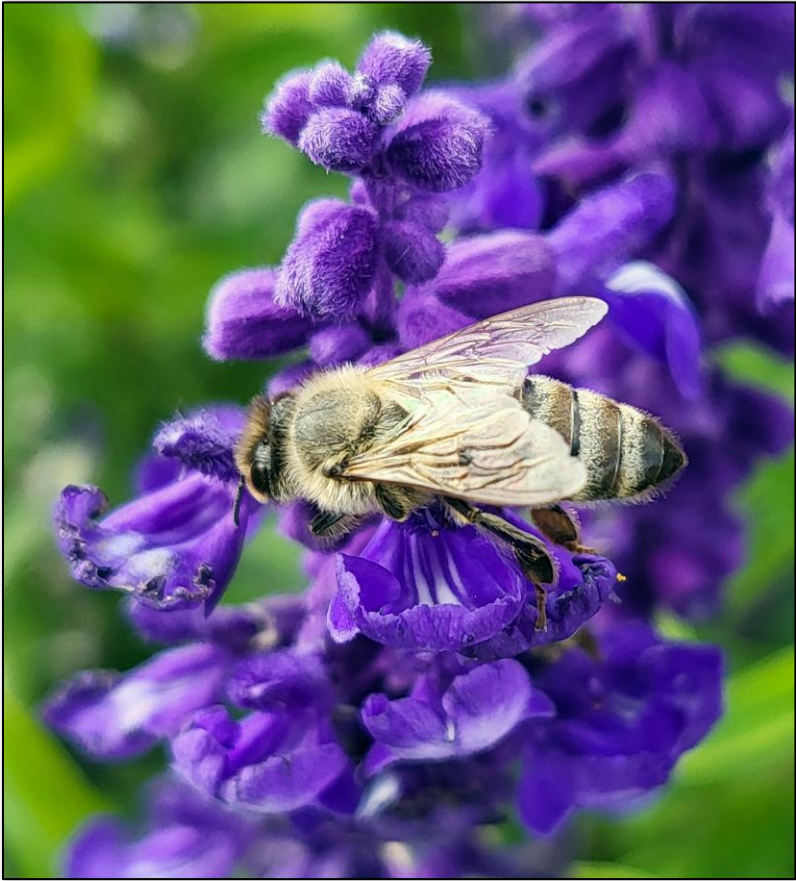
long lost visions,  
and tender hearts

Anne Barngrover



**LIFE EXISTS ON OTHER LIFE**

when rain fills the little reservoir.  
Rain wakes the faint aquatic flowers.  
Insects laud and multiply.  
Through night's exalted rainfall,  
green tree frogs harmonize in tropic  
bells, glow nocturnal lime.  
Two small herons arrive separately.  
The juvenile molts in gray-blue  
swirls, its back feathers white  
as if splashed with acid. The other's  
mauve and matured. They fight  
where they meet, a brief  
abstract painting. Hunting in shifts,  
each lifts its legs in the thinnest water  
as though stepping over glass.  
Rain creates a mirror. Without  
more rain, the water stills, a low bowl.  
It drains into the woods. The subtle  
flowers close. In the silence  
of no rainfall, stones glint dully  
as storm clouds. The reservoir holds  
out its empty hand, beseeching.  
All that remains is the world.



Emma Jean Garrett



**THE PERFECT PAIR**

Heaven Nazario



## TREEHOUSE, OH TREEHOUSE

When I was thirteen years old I had a favorite TV show and a dream. My dream was to have a treehouse; a treehouse like they would show on the HGTV program called *Treehouse Masters*. I was addicted to that show, watching in awe of the beautiful treehouses built like mansions. I wrote about my own fabled treehouse in my journal, imagining every last detail, even the flowers that grew around the trees. There were characters to play and stories to follow; a curated escape from my tired reality.

\* \* \*

Dear Diary,

I just had a great idea. I'm going to write a story about a kingdom in the trees. The people all live in treehouses, and there is a queen, guards, normal citizens, and maybe even wizards. I saw an episode of *Treehouse Masters* that had this super cool treehouse in Alabama, so I think I want to base my treehouse on that. It will actually take place in a proper fantasy world though, a world with towering mountains, rushing rivers, and vibrant forests. My nature encyclopedia could be helpful for me to figure out all the animals and plants that live in this fantasy land. Maybe my friends and I can all play this as a game one day. Although, by the time I get a treehouse, we will probably be too old to play anyway.

\* \* \*

When I was thirteen, I had about two friends. These two girls were more enamored with each other than caring about me. I pretended like I didn't care, and still hung out with them even when

they excluded me from everything. Writing became my escape. I could write about people who loved me unconditionally, people simply liked me for me. With writing, anything was possible.

\* \* \*

Dear Diary,

My treehouse would be a castle, with different sections connected by rope bridges or ziplines. There would be rooms hiding treasures and secrets. I would be queen of this tree-top kingdom, fighting a war with the people on the ground. How dare they tell us we cannot live in the sky! The others are my subjects, my soldiers, and most importantly, my love interest. My name wouldn't be Heaven, but another, something more queen-like, perhaps Angelica. There would be a boy who is king of the ground dwellers, my most hated enemy and my one true love. (I still need to find the perfect name for him). He and I would meet secretly, at night, to gaze at the stars and look upon each other longingly. Everything would be fairytale perfect until one fateful new moon night. We would lay in a meadow, surrounded by moonflowers, orchids, and foxglove, the only light coming from fireflies and a single lantern.

“Oh, my darling!” He would say, holding my hand tightly, “Just come to live with me in my palace and we could be together forever!” I would sigh. My sense of duty to my people outweighed my love for him, and I would pull my hand away. There would be a long silence, the wind rushing through the long grass, making water-like ripples.

“You know I can't do that.” I turned my face toward the starlit sky. “My home is the trees. I know you—” My mom is yelling at me from the other room, hold on.

\* \* \*

Dear Diary,

Sorry, I had to do the dishes, then I forgot to finish writing. Okay, back to it.

“My home is the trees. I know that you want me to be with you, but I can’t. You don’t know what it’s like to be up there, free flying among the birds, with the wind in your hair and the sun on your face.” I would stand up, twirling with the fireflies.

“Please, my love, just consider it. For me?” He would stand too, catching me in his arms, and for a moment I would. I would consider leaving the trees and returning to the ground, living with my love in a beautiful palace, and having everything I could ever want. All I’ve ever wanted is to be loved; by my people, by him, but my duties are stronger than my desires.

“I can’t,” I would repeat. Two simple words I would probably regret. I would turn away from my love, and make my way back to the rope ladder that leads back up into the trees. A single tear would fall from my eye, a crystalline droplet. Before I ascend the ladder, my love would grab my hand again.

“You know what I must do, then. This war must continue.” I would nod, and pull away again, my back to him.

“And we will fight until each tree is burned to the ground and every single one of us is dead.” I would climb the rope ladder, run blindly across the bridges until I reached my room, and fling myself onto my bed, crying until there were no tears left. The next morning I would wake feeling cold and tired, but resolved. I would go to my wardrobe, rifling through the dresses, until I found my most queenly one. After donning my regalia, I would call a council meeting to order.

“As you all know, the war is far from over. We need to muster all the troops we can, so that there may be hope to keep away the ground dwellers.” There would be a suffocating silence until one of the council members, called Indigo, would stand up.

“Your Majesty, with all due respect, we have no more people to conscript. All our soldiers are either killed, missing, or too afraid to fight. Those who are willing and able are angry and restless. I think it is best that you go to them, tell them the truth, and allow them to make a decision. You are the queen, to be sure, but this is the people’s home. They should be allowed to chose what happens to it.” Indigo would sit back down, looking fearful of what I might say next. I would be taken aback, but knew that she was right, indeed. There was truly no hope. The ground dwellers outnumbered the tree dwellers 100 to one.

“Very well, then. I will address the people.”

Then, I would go on to speak to the people and tell them of our kingdom’s plight. There could be multiple outcomes to this situation, or a shocking turn of events. Perhaps the people would lay down their arms and walk away, knowing there would be no hope of escape or victory. Maybe they would defect to the ground dwellers, and I would have no choice but to follow, or stay in my kingdom alone. Maybe there would be a surprise attack on the tree-top kingdom, and all the tree dwellers would be taken captive, and the only way they could be free was for me to marry the king. Whatever I choose, this will be a great story, I’m sure of it.

\* \* \*

One of the greats. That’s is what I wanted, to be one of the greats. This story was it, a way for people to see how amazingly talented I was. They would all bask in my glow, my skill. Finally, I would feel accepted, loved, cherished. I would be considered one of the greats. Of what, you ask? Of my homeschool group of about fifty people. I was desperate for accomplishment and recognition.

\* \* \*

Dear Diary,

I've been doing some thinking. Maybe instead of there being a war between two kingdoms, I could make different factions within the kingdom and have them fight. I like the idea of the kingdom having the treehouse as the castle and the town would be on the ground. I think that I could even turn this into a book! I've made so many character sheets and written so many descriptions of the fantasy world. Now that I am finally back to homeschool again, I have the free time to write whatever I want. I hope that my friends will enjoy reading this story when I show it to them. I think they will like it. I've even named characters in the story after them!

\* \* \*

Dear Diary,

It's been seven years since I first thought about this treehouse story. I never followed it through to completion, never turned it into a book, never showed it to my friends. I'm not even friends with those people anymore. Time passed, and I made new, better friends. I realized the two girls I had loved for so many years truly did not care about me. My now best friend helped me realize what true friendship really means. Life now imitates my art.

Throughout my teenage years I set aside the stories I deemed too childish, and moved on to stories I deemed as worthy of my attention. With my fall into academia, I was quick to judge, disregarding pieces that weren't of "high standard." What does that even mean? I'm not sure myself; that's what I get for trying to be a pretentious English major. As I learn and grow, I've realized that all I wanted to reach for are stories like my treehouse one; stories full of magic.

I suppose when I was thirteen, all I wanted was to be loved. I craved the drama of a fantasy novel. I craved the return to the childlike wonder I had felt only some two years before. I craved recognition, praise, and to feel whole, like I didn't want to scratch

myself out of my body every day. I would like to say I've grown up, and maybe I have in some ways, but in truth, I am still the same thirteen-year-old girl who had an obsession with treehouses.

Heaven Nazario



**FALL FLORIDA**

I pretend the leaves turn red and gold  
Smell cinnamon, chocolate, pumpkin  
I listen to slow jazz and hope it grows cold

I pick my perfume: chai and vanilla bold  
A long sleeve sweater sticks to my skin  
I pretend the leaves turn red and gold

Other states will be freezing by now, I'm told  
My heart yearns for autumnal places I've been  
I listen to slow jazz and hope it grows cold

Florida's fall colors mostly look like mold  
Muddy swamps, hanging moss, I can't win  
I pretend the leaves turn red and gold

The light gets low, summer's getting old  
It's too hot, I can't wipe the sweat away  
I listen to slow jazz and hope it grows cold

My long sleeve sweater I must fold  
Who knows when I will ever use her again  
I listen to slow jazz and hope it grows cold  
I pretend the leaves turn red and gold

Leanna Almodovar



**ENIGMA**

the stars are with the planets,  
the trees are in the ground  
and birds fly in the breezes  
while ants run underground  
nature has an order,  
a system of all things  
what happens when there's something  
that lies outside these means?  
I am a spring in winter,  
I'm sand on a forest floor  
the birds swim in an ocean,  
the fish stand at my door  
perhaps I'm an anomaly,  
perhaps I am relief  
I show the world a mirror,  
I ask them what they see

Sebastian Lopez



## JURICAN

The Lares mountains are still and pressed  
against the sky like green ribs.

The air feels heavy, still.

Even the roosters in town seem to be singing  
with less enthusiasm today, as if they were aware something ancient  
was coming to reclaim.

The mangos hang low from their branches  
and their sweet perfume intoxicates the air around them,  
sweetness that doesn't admit it is arriving

Women sweep their porches which will be wet  
and clean from the impending rain.

Men stack their jugs of water by the radio  
and in the corner, stands a child laughing,

a laugh too innocent for what is impending.

Abuela walks in the house.

A long table with candles tells stories.

She lights one for San Antonio

Then makes one silently, for the spirits

Who walk and drift pass native saints.

She hears her grandmother: "When the air stops  
Breathing, Juracan viene."

Donde nosotros.

Now the sky begins to darken on the edges.  
The banana leaves twitch without wind.  
The dogs yell at the corner, where nothing moves.  
Older people stop, steal a glance at one another  
but say nothing.

They've known this silence before.

The radio crackles of NOAA warnings,  
but she felt it before.  
This is older than cars  
Older than maps and forecasts.

The rivers recall his name.

Shannon Faith Walsh



## YOU AND I

You are like a grounded oak  
I am like the wind

You stand erect  
And don't expect  
Me to caress each limb

But I do  
I engulf you  
In a love embrace  
You don't know why  
When I pass by  
You always feel safe

My essence loves to swarm you  
I am gentle with my touch  
You feel my hug surround you

It's how you know you're loved

You'll continue to grow stronger  
Taller, bigger too  
In one place, you'll make your way  
As bold trees . . . tend to do

Time is a fine teacher  
As she proceeds to prove  
That I cannot be planted  
I am made to move

Some of us have no roots  
We're simply passing through  
Since I'm meant to breeze by  
I'll just blow a kiss . . . to you

Alyssa Dufort



## MY PLACE

I hatched in a warm box with others  
Under the feathers of my mother.  
I know they are my sisters and brothers.  
My heart feels cold, even though I am covered.

This isn't my place.

There are other chickens here that look just like me  
But they're not like me. They attack with glee.  
With how they act and peck so beastly,  
I don't belong here, this I guarantee.

This isn't my place.

I often notice a girl with her face to the sky and rings on her eyes.  
She's nothing like me, but I see through that disguise.  
She looks up at the clouds and stars in the sky  
With a longing like me. Could her heart be like mine?

This isn't her place.

I've waited day and night for her to come near.  
I pray that she will not leave upon seeing the sneers  
My flock will give. This life I lead is nothing but drear,  
But I have a hope we can bring each other cheer.

This isn't our place.

When she comes by, I finally find  
I am seen through the blind-  
ing ruckus. I feel the warmth deep inside  
As she picks me up and says, "You're mine."

I've found my place.



Jeff Karon



**BELONGING #4**

Rohana Chomick



## THE SON

Walking on a worn sidewalk  
cracked and scarred like an ancient woman  
he knows this is the only way home  
to the people he once loved

A nomad son on a mission  
to save the world from  
the vicissitudes of angry men

A visionary son far away  
in lands he never imagined

He became like a tiger in a forest  
caught in a death trap

bleeding with the knowledge  
that not all dreams can be saved  
There is a time in every man's life  
when he must decide

between mind and soul  
between peace and war  
between fire and water

And so on this day  
the broken son travels on  
the soothing whispers of home

At last

At last

Mary Gail Russ



**HERS**

I was hers  
But not enough her.  
I was just a bit off  
A classic beauty  
But odd  
That's the problem with having kids  
They are unique  
As I have gotten older  
I see her in my reflection

## Lenny DellaRocca



### AUBADE

I take off my clothes while morning takes off her hissing veil  
like a woman  
with a magic opal  
at her forehead.  
In a fish-spiced canal  
the sun is a child at play,  
light  
a feast of shapes,  
the new sky  
sees itself  
trapezoids in blue.  
Everything is a breath  
of earth, a song  
about every drowsy  
town. Then one  
poinciana flower tumbles from its red story, a fable, my  
eyes stung  
with green April.  
And then  
a break of warm rain.  
And then  
a skywire spits its secret code.  
Moved by how  
the world meets  
the thrumming trees  
half way to Jesus,  
I'm struck by the day's  
quiet little spells,  
smart and almost wicked,  
so adept at the  
clean invisible, its hiss in the trees, birds fevered with light.

Rohana Chomick



**ONE NIGHT**

The piano chords climb through the open window  
and find my stolen heart sleeping in the deepest night  
One note at a time  
ascending through and into my breath  
holding me close to the earth  
I am waiting for you  
The one who washes over me  
like the drifting piano melody  
The one who cascades into my dreams  
leaving handprints on the ephemeral sands of my life  
The pianist sleeps now but the music  
still echoes through the darkness  
touching my skin my soul my love  
And for the first time in a long while  
there is peace in the storm-blasted streets of this girl

Shannon Faith Walsh



**CLIPPED WINGS**

I domesticated dutifully  
Though, it was not in my nature  
There is no class, in that act

And alas, no nomenclature

Perhaps the closest is a caged bird  
Who wished that she could fly  
But her perch she'd gotten used to  
As the days . . . flew by

The other lovebird in the cage  
Kicked her out of their nest  
It was not what she'd expected  
But it was what was best

For now she soars with eagles  
Which she didn't know she was  
So she's grateful to that cuckoo  
Because he fell out . . . of love

She's thankful to her Savior  
That, that flight of fancy died  
And is pleased to be at ease  
Where the air is rarefied

And now the Spirit, known as wind,  
Serves there as her guide  
And perhaps one day an eagle  
Will soar by her side

Michael Christopher



**A PART**

Your arms like sweet bramble, troublesome to leave.  
Yet I know we must part.  
You know what it's for –give me grace.  
It's difficult for me to-get-her to understand,  
Yet I still feel the guilt I did as if it were the first time.  
We pretend we will be ok. Like the 'goodbyes' are good-byes.  
Just a reminder that we'll be touch starved.  
We struggle to keep up in distance, at least I do.  
All the signals in the world can't re-place you near me.  
The heart may grow fonder, in-stead I grow hungry  
I feel a need for you, yet I can't make it where you are.  
But with each passing day apart  
I will be-longing for you.

Naomi Steffer

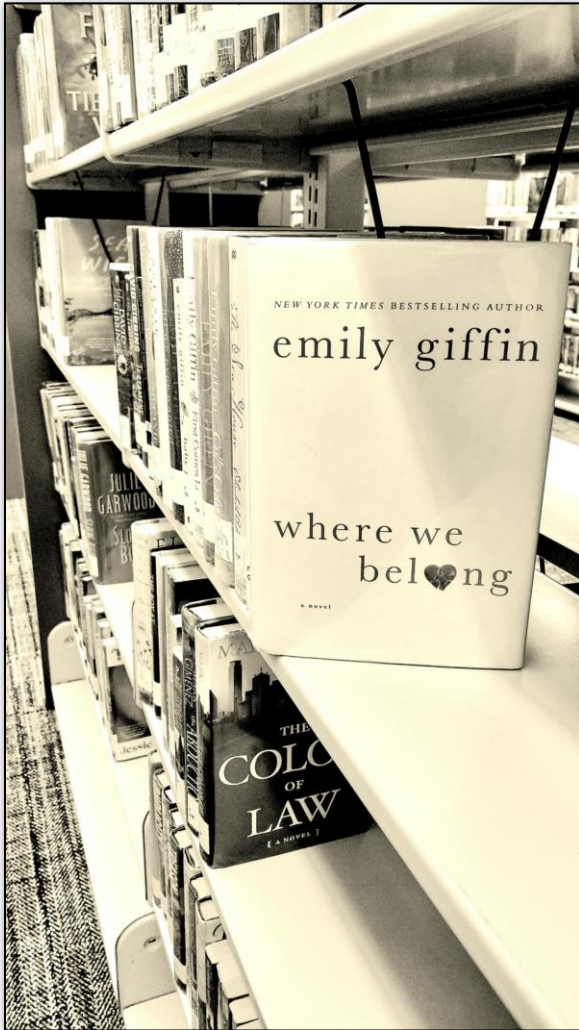


**MEDALS FROM TEACHING  
(IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER)**

1. My Amazon receipt for candy, snacks, toys, and trading cards over the years as I have stocked my classroom.
2. The stickers gifted to me from students and colleagues splattered on my laptop.
3. The artwork left for me hung on walls and bulletin boards.
4. The stories one student shares with me since he hates reading but loves to create.
5. The note a student asked me to decode the Friday before my dog died the following Monday morning. Working sullenly following the lunch period I found out, the same student asked me if I had decoded his message, which I hadn't. The note says, "You are a good teacher."
6. The wish one of the students from my first class shared with me, of how he— if he had a million dollars— would buy him and his mom a home since they were about to be homeless.
7. The Thanksgiving letter I was asked to deliver to a girl's brother at a neighboring school. When I asked why she couldn't give it to him when she would see him on Thanksgiving, she told me they got separated and live with different foster families. I drove the letter to the school that afternoon.
8. The smiles as kids come and stand watch with me when I supervise before dismissal.

9. The library visits, seeing the kids curled up on couches and sparkled at tables with books or drawing pictures.
10. The hug a student—that I had never met—gave me after spending the previous night in tears asking God what I was made for.

I may deserve medals, but I am already the richest teacher alive.



Tiffany Anderson



**WHERE WE BELONG**

Andrew Burgess



## PUNCH-CONNECTION

When I was a child my parents had very odd restrictions on what I could and could not play on the family PlayStation. I would beg and plead with my mother, asking to play the same games that all my other friends were playing like Call of Duty or Grand Theft Auto, so that I could feel more involved in their conversations and jokes at school. Kids would ask if I had played these games or if I wanted to come over and play them, and every interaction would go exactly the same. A friend, usually the same few friends every time, would say, “After school, we should go over to my house and play Call of Duty. We can play Gun Game.”

And me with my dejected voice would always have to answer, “I can’t, Mom said I’m not allowed to play those kinds of games.”

But in my life, where there was a mother trying to keep her son from the brutality of the world, there was a father that simply did not care about hiding his son from it. While my mother preferred to keep me playing my bright and bubbly Lego games and platformers, my father would sit on the porch after work and all I would hear were gunshots and blood splatters from whatever games he was playing by himself. While my dad is a hard-working, tough-skinned man, he’s a nerd at heart.

However, the one M-Rated game we played together was Mortal Kombat. If I had a dollar for every time I heard the line “Get over here!” from the PlayStation followed by someone getting beaten mercilessly, I would be a billionaire, I swear it. Even now he’ll ask if I’ve been keeping up with Mortal Kombat, and I end up having to guiltily say no because I stopped following the series.

But as a child, having the chance to join my dad in his interest was always the best part of my day, and playing Mortal Kombat with him was no exception. We were both and still are terrible at the game but even then, there was always something satisfying about accidentally figuring out something new and giving the person beside you that look with glowing eyes and a cheeky smile, like a pirate that just found gold. Sometimes I would sit in the practice mode and practice combos and Fatalities so that when he came back home from work, I could impress him or try to beat a boss we couldn't the day before. And somehow, he would always come home and outdo me or show me something new he found while watching YouTube on his lunch break.

I don't think I've ever asked my dad why out of all the M-Rated games he let me play, he let me play the one where you could kill your opponents in the most graphic ways possible. But I truly don't think we would be so close without those discs.

\* \* \*

For Christmas in 2019, I got my first big present in years: a Nintendo Switch. More importantly, this Nintendo Switch came with Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. Before this Christmas I had been obsessively watching gameplay and talking to my best friend Trent about what he'd been learning in the game. As soon as I booted up my new console and game, I pulled up all the tutorials and gameplay I had been watching and waiting to use.

Trent texted me and asked, "Did you get anything good?"

"Well, I got a Switch and Smash Bros.," followed by a smiley emoticon.

"We should play later."

"That, we should."

The entire day I endured my other Christmas gift openings anticipating playing Smash Bros. with Trent. I got home from my

grandparents' house and booted up the game again. Soon after, I got Trent into a voice call.

“Do you already know who you want to play?” he asked with a smile you could hear on his face.

“I think Joker is the coolest character, so him,” I responded, unable to contain my own excitement.

We got onto our call around 9 o'clock, and we didn't finish playing until 3 a.m. I managed to go through the game's 68 characters at the time, cycling through them twice. And I was never bored even though I was terrible at this game too. Unlike *Mortal Kombat*, I did want to actually improve at playing *Smash Bros*. Watching professionals play had grown to be one of the most interesting things to me, and I wanted to pick at their brains and understand their every move and choice. So naturally, when I played *Smash Bros* for the first time with Trent, I had tons of questions, and he had tons of answers.

After Christmas break, I told the rest of my friends what I gotten for Christmas and asked if they had the game themselves and most of them did. This meant that our new routine after school looked like this: 1. Finish homework, 2. Eat dinner, 3. Play *Smash Bros*. Originally, *Smash Bros* was something that only me and Trent talked about, but it didn't take long for my friends to find their favorite characters and master them. In a short number of months, we put hundreds of hours into the game and joined online groups to find more people to fight. Sometimes we would even have watch parties for tournaments over video call while playing the same game in the background.

Over time most of my friends grew apart, but me and Trent still play fighting games together sometimes with the same joy in our voices as the first time we played together. He'll text me on Instagram out of the blue and ask if I've been playing anything. Almost every time for the last few years I've responded with some other fighting game that I decided to learn, and almost every time he

has tried to find a way to buy it so we can play together. After a while, I am the one always getting him into these games, but he always ends up putting in more practice than me. This does mean, however, that I always have an excuse to ask Trent questions, and ramble on about them for hours on end.

\* \* \*

A few weeks ago, I was invited by some of my friends to go to an Esports tournament called GatorLan and watch them compete. Two of them, AJ and Francisco, were going to compete in Tekken 8, a fighting game that our entire friend group learned so of course, I was ecstatic to go and watch them play competitively on a big screen, screaming and cheering for them. I've seen these two go through every emotion possible because of this game, so I didn't really have a choice but to go, did I?

Before I had gotten to college, it felt like it had been forever since I had a chance to play fighting games with someone in person, a drastically different experience than playing online. Playing in person, the obvious benefits are things like having no connection issues or little to no delay with your inputs, etc. etc. But another aspect of playing in person is feeling the energy of the people around you. Even just two players sitting next to each other can have so much energy bouncing off of each other, whether that be joy or more commonly, anger. As a spectator, you get to see and hear each button press the players make and can't help but be impressed. So being able to go to an auditorium filled with people that each felt a smoothie of emotions comprised of ambition and anxiety was something out of a dream.

I got the chance to see my friends prove themselves with skills I had watched them mull over and practice nearly every day and I wasn't disappointed at all. Very quickly Francisco made it to 5<sup>th</sup> place and AJ made it to the Grand Finals and got 2nd. As I sat behind each of their matches, I couldn't help but get sucked into their own

focus and sat with my eyes glued to the screens they were playing on. Watching them play was like watching two mathematicians solving their favorite proof through instinct alone, with a silent bliss that was unable to be avoided by everyone watching. Even people who didn't know these two or understand the game were still cheering for them with all the air in their lungs. When we left, both AJ and Francisco were clearly exhausted, yet they couldn't help but smile on the way back to our car. I couldn't help but smile with them.

Peter Gordon



## PLAYING OUT THE STRING

September baseball is full of teams  
eliminated from pennant races  
playing only for pride and personal  
goals. I loved going to those games.

So easy to get a good seat in half  
empty stadiums, see minor league  
call-ups, dream of how good  
the team might become next year.

No pressure to win. Perfecting  
the process is the point. Those  
of us in the September of our lives  
know what that's like, playing out

the string. It's time for the rookies  
to prove themselves while we  
enjoy our beer and hot dogs,  
or oatmeal and bananas.

Yet they still keep score. Results  
affect team's won/loss record;  
personal goals remain attainable.  
I remember how sweet it was

to stand at the plate, swing,  
and hit the ball on the nose, watch  
it fly true and high over the fence,  
or bounce against the wall 375

feet away as I sprinted around  
the bases, sliding into third.  
What would you give for one more  
day on the field, the chance to not  
fade away, belong to a team again?  
You can't take money when you're  
gone, but you can take the glory  
with you, when it's your time to go.



Elaine Person



**WHERE WE BELONG**

Diane Neff



**HAIKU**

Deep inside the seed  
the roots know when to burrow –  
Earth's heart loves to bloom

Each drop of rainfall  
contains the ocean within  
universal force

Piano soundboard  
spruce from the northern forests  
vibrations live on

Generations pass  
their legacies and traumas  
we become their hope

## Our Community



### CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Leanna Almodovar** is a history major at Saint Leo.

**Israel X. Anderson** is a first-year student at Saint Leo University in the Cybersecurity degree program. Israel is a student worker in the information technology department with an interest in hardware and programming but also enjoys creative writing. He is a published poet in *The Truth Will Rise Unchained*, *Untold Poetry Anthology*.

**Tiffany Anderson** is the Manager of Community Engagement and Special Projects at Saint Leo University. She is a Saint Leo University graduate (2018; 2020) with both a bachelor's and a master's degree in psychology. Tiffany is an Amazon bestselling author for her contributions to *How to Maximize Your Network (Creative Loafing Best of the Bay, Book by a Local Author)* and *Networking Isn't a Dirty Word*. Tiffany is a longtime contributor to the *Sandhill Review*, a spoken word poet, and a purveyor of words. She is nothing without her amazing support system: Justin and Israel (2029).

**Daniela Arroyo** is a senior undergraduate student at Saint Leo University, set to graduate in Spring 2026 with a major in Clinical/Counseling Psychology and a minor in Creative Writing. Their academic focus lies in the intersection of therapeutic practices and the humanities. Daniela is an active member of the university's Psychology Club, where they regularly help organize and host events aimed at promoting mental health awareness across campus, and plans to pursue graduate studies in a related therapeutic field after graduation.

**Suzanne S. Austin-Hill**, Professor Emeritus (Miami Dade College), lives in Ruskin, an over-crowded suburb of Tampa, Florida. She earned three degrees in Mathematics Education and one in Sign

Language Interpretation. Her poems have appeared in *Of Poets & Poetry*, *CADENCE* (both sponsored by the Florida State Poets Association), *LifestylesAFTER50*, Silver Birch Press, *TELEPHONE*, *805 Lit + Art*, *Newtown Literary*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *O Miami*, and the *Sandhill Review*. Her first book of poetry, *Sixty-seven pages from the Heart*, is available at amazon.com.

**Anne Barngrover** is currently an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Saint Leo University, where she directs the MA in Creative Writing program. She is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Evermben* (University of Akron Press, 2023), which won a bronze medal for the 2023 Florida Book Awards. Her poems and nonfiction have appeared in places such as *Verse Daily*, *Arts & Letters*, *Guernica*, *Ecotone*, and *The Slowdown* podcast.

**Ava Barretto** is a junior at Saint Leo University. She is majoring in English with a Creative Writing focus. She was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. She hopes to become a creative director in the future and create multicultural medias for all to enjoy!

**Makayla Bech** is a fiction writer, currently working towards her master's degree in creative writing at Saint Leo University where she also received her bachelor's degree in English. She has published in *Sandhill Review* in previous editions and was the Editorial Assistant for the 26th volume. She is currently writing her first novel with hopes of having a completed first draft by 2027. When she is not writing or reading, she loves taking her dog, Jack, for long walks and spending time with friends and family.

**Esther Bieber** is a student at Saint Leo.

**Natasha Britt** is an English Major at Saint Leo.

**Andrew Burgess** is a senior at Saint Leo University with a deep passion for creative writing and storytelling, getting much of his inspiration from film and video games alongside literature. Once he

graduates, he desires to go into novel editing while writing and releasing his own short stories and poetry on the side.

**D. H. Buxton** is currently an adjunct instructor of Academic Writing at Saint Leo University. Mr. Buxton is a graduate of Saint Leo University's Master's in Creative Writing program and also possesses a master's degree in Military History from American Military University, Class of 2014. Mr. Buxton's interests in writing span mystery, suspense, horror, and military nonfiction.

**Michael Christopher** is a Senior at Saint Leo, hopefully ready to complete his major in Creative Writing. Apart from the absurd, Michael Christopher writes about his life experiences through fiction and poetry and often finds that despite his major, he never finds the right words to say, yet still expresses the words he knows.

**Rohana Chomick** is an on-again/off-again writer who can't stop writing even when she swears she'll never write another word, ever. She has a blog ([tampatowngirltalks.blogspot.com](http://tampatowngirltalks.blogspot.com)) that she sometimes writes in and a WordPress poetry/flash fiction site at [storygirl18.com](http://storygirl18.com). She has had many "careers" in her lifetime, including: kindergarten teacher in Barbados, retail clerk for a variety of stores, film lab technician, features writer for the *Clearwater Sun*, product description writer for HSN, promotions producer for WTTA-TV, resume writer, assistant to a financial advisor, librarian for the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative, and lately, retail merchandiser for a greeting card company. Rohana is also an animal lover who rescues homeless cats and feeds wild squirrels, all of whom give her great joy, even while they're eating up her retirement savings.

**Alyssa Nicole Dufort** is a Senior at Saint Leo University. She is majoring in developmental psychology and minoring in creative writing and was previously published in *Sandhill Review's* Volume 26: Dreams. When not writing or studying, she can be found absorbing nature and appreciating her pets at her family's farm.

**Lenny DellaRocca's** latest collection, *Pandemonium*, recently won the 2025 Slipstream Chapbook Competition. His latest work can be found in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Denver Quarterly*, *I-70 Review*, and *Blazevox*. He has poems forthcoming in *Chiron Review* and *Rawhead*. In 2016, DellaRocca founded *South Florida Poetry Journal* where he served as publisher and editor.

**Rayden Eggleston** is a fifth-year senior at Saint Leo University majoring in Criminal Justice with a Homeland Security Specialization, aiming to become a lawyer in criminal law. While originally part of the Honors Program and 3+3 accelerated law program, he ultimately withdrew from both during his sophomore year to seek treatment for mental health. Although he left campus, he continued to take classes online. After receiving treatment, Saint Leo University allowed certain accommodations to support his education, which helped him return to campus for his senior year. Instead of taking the opportunity to graduate in his fourth year, Rayden chose to sign up for an emergency management internship with Pasco County Sheriff's Office, coordinated by Saint Leo University's Field Placement Program, putting the lessons that he received in the classroom to practice. Although he could not participate in the full campus life experience, he occasionally joins debates hosted by the Medical Humanities club in Kirk Hall. He never gave up on his dream of being a lawyer and is expected to enter law school in 2026.

**Valerie "Ray" Eulett** is a senior at Saint Leo majoring in English and specializing in Creative writing. She was published in the 23, 24, and 25 editions of *Sandhill Review*. She is the VP of Sigma Tau Delta and has been accepted to two STD Conventions for her creative essays and flash fiction.

**Chris Flocken** has degrees from the University of Maryland and Rollins College. She writes memoirs, essays, and poetry. She's been published in FWA's *Collection*, FSPA's *Cadence*, and Saint Leo University's *Sandhill Review*. Her memoir was a semi-finalist in the

FWA's Royal Palm Literary Award in 2021. She has volunteered as an RPLA judge for several years. After nearly forty years in Florida, she now lives in Arizona.

**Emma Jean Garrett** is currently a junior at Saint Leo University studying English and is a member of Sigma Tau Delta. This is her first publication in a literary magazine. She loves storytelling and hopes to one day publish a novel of her own. She loves prose involving fantasy, romance, and horror. When she isn't writing, you can usually find her engrossed into a new craft, a book, or a video game.

**Marielena O. Gomez** started writing at the brassy age of nine. She has held positions as editor and contributing writer at *The Marymount Manhattan Review* (now the *Carson Review*), the *Metropolitan Review for SUNY Empire State* and *The Terrier Journal for Saint Francis College*. A past performer of Brooklyn Books & Booze, she has performed at the Brooklyn Book Fair, and has been published in *Palabra: A Magazine Of Chicano and Latino Literary Art* in Los Angeles, California. Marielena has been awarded the Sister Outsider Relief Grant from The Free Black Women's Library and the Zenoti Foundation Grant. She recently finished her MFA in poetry at Saint Francis College in Brooklyn, New York, where she wrote her thesis: a modern mythology for a woman of color, *Crossroads of the Strophalos*. She is currently an Adjunct Professor in the Literature, Writing, and Publishing Department at her alma mater.

**Peter Gordon** is an award-winning poet who's published three collections and over 200 poems in various journals, including *Sandhill Review*. He's a founder and past President of Orlando Area Poets, the largest chapter of the Florida State Poets Association. He earned a BA from Yale and an MFA from Carnegie-Mellon and teaches in Full Sail University's Film Production MFA program.

**Heather Harris** is an enthusiastic Masters in Creative Writing student at Saint Leo and is honored and exhilarated to have her story chosen for publication in *Sandhill Review*. When Heather is not

vigorously writing her novel or trying to squeak out her challenging homework assignments, she can be found teaching massage or volunteering as a CASA. She feels blessed with a handsome, supportive husband, two incredible sons, and two aggressively affectionate cats. She would like everyone to know that reading makes people sexy and happy.

**Jeff Karon** (layout editor) is a consultant who provides reputation and brand management for organizations and individuals through writing and editing, web and instructional design, and training. He has over twenty-five years' experience training thousands of students in classes and workshops, both as a former university professor (in English and writing) as well as consultant. As an editor and writer, he has worked on projects from around the world and has presented at the local, state, national, and international levels. His work has appeared in publications such as *Apalachee Review*, *The Hillsborough River: Human Connections*, *Glass Bottom Sky: 10 Years of YellowJacket Press*, *White Pelican Review*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *St. Petersburg Times*.

**Sebastian Lopez** is an English major specializing in Creative Writing at Saint Leo University. He writes about cultural identity, generational trauma, resilience, and personal transformation. Rooted in his Puerto Rican heritage and shaped by his journey into higher education, his work often reflects themes of resilience, identity, cultural memory, and ambition.

**Mary Cardell Missouri** is a poet and has published several poems with *Spirit Fire Review: A Magazine of Celebration*. The title of her poems are as follows: "The Answers" (February, 2018); "O My Heavenly Father," "I'll Rise Up Again," "The Revelation," (April, 2018). *Spirit Fire Review's* goal is to celebrate the Presence and Love of God, each other, and the magnificence of life through the beauty and power of poetry, creative nonfiction, visual art, and music. Likewise, Mary is the author of a poem titled "Villanelle of My Oyster World"

published with *Sandhill Review*, Vol. 23. Mary, strongly, believes in God's Armor of Protection and Covering over her throughout her Christian journey of creating Christian poetry. Ultimately, God's purpose for her is to praise Him and inspire other believers and nonbelievers. His promises empower her to run this race with confidence, and endurance. She believes that these empowering fundamentals are essential to destroy the enemy that wars against her as she passionately continues to speak courageously of His Goodness and Mercy crafted within poetics. As Mary endures to stand firmly upon God's Word, she will not be in fear regarding the battle, knowing He has encompassed her with His Whole Armor. Her desire is to make a positive difference within this negative world for His Glory which dwells throughout her lyrics of Creative Writing in Christian Poetry. Mary has taught Reading and Intensive Reading in public and private schools. In addition, she enjoys teaching Professional Academic Writing in higher education. Mary resides in Zephyrhills, Florida, and is a mother of two adult children and grandmother of two adult children.

**Carol Ann Moon** is a poet, and an academic librarian, living in West Central Florida. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Stetson University, concentrating in Poetry in the Expanded Field. Her work has appeared in *Aquifer*, *Sandhill Review*, *lipstickparty mag*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Muddy River Poetry Review* and at a Miami bus stop, as part of an O, Miami Poetry Festival Haiku Contest.

**Heaven Nazario** is a senior and English major at Saint Leo University. She is the current president of Saint Leo's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, International English Honors Society. Her work appears in the 2024-25 edition of *Sandhill Review*, the 2024 edition of Mary Baldwin University's *Outrageous Fortune*, the second volume of the teen-run magazine *evanescence*, and Sigma Tau Delta's 2026 Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana. After graduation, she plans to further her education by attending Saint Leo's Creative Writing graduate program.

She loves to write poetry and fiction, especially anything to do with magic and whimsy. She is incredibly grateful for her three years as a Saint Leo undergraduate and would do it all over again if she could.

**Diane Neff** is a former professor, college dean, and US Navy officer now serving as a librarian in Seminole County, Florida. A past president of Orlando Area Poets and the current secretary for Florida State Poets Association, her poetry has appeared in several anthologies and in public displays in Florida and Washington, D.C. Her debut poetry collection, *A Symphony of Words*, was published in September 2025. She is an alum of the Sandhill Writers Retreat.

**Anna Belle Noll** is a junior in college working towards a Bachelor's degree in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing. This is her second semester here at Saint Leo University. She is the oldest of seven kids, and she loves reading, writing, and painting. She currently working on her own sci-fi book, which is currently in the editing process.

**Elaine Person**, writer, instructor, editor, speaker, performer, and photographer, is a Crealdé School of Art faculty member where she teaches Writing to Art. She leads workshops for Maitland Public Library, Orlando Museum of Art, SOBO Gallery, and other locations. Her writing is in Random House's *A Century of College Humor*, Florida Writers Association's *Collections*, Florida State Poets Association's *Cadence* anthologies, *Sandhill Review*, *Encore*, Haikuniverse.com, *Poets of Central Florida*, *Poetic Visions*, *Florida Bards*, and other publications. Elaine won *Saturday Evening Post's* limerick contest. She co-edits *Cadence*, and is FSPA's Historian. Elaine received FWA's Kaye Coppersmith Award for Writers Helping Writers. She writes "Person"alized poems for all occasions for gifts.

**Evelyn Ann Romano** is an award-winning poet whose poetry has been published in numerous journals including *Bacopa Review*, *Sandhill Review*, *Wordsmith*, *Chasing Light*, *New Mirage Quarterly*, *Palettes & Quills*, *Cadence*, *Time of Singing* and many others. She is a three-time

Tampa Writers Alliance Poetry Prizewinner. Other awards include Mt. Dora poetry prize, New River Poets award and Hillsborough County Library award. Excerpts from her poem “Love Letter to Tampa” were displayed city-wide at numerous locations as part of the Love Tampa project run by the City of Tampa. Her debut chapbook *RIFE* was published in 2018 by Finishing Line Press. Her latest chapbook *Eve Redeemed: A Woman’s Journey* was published in January 2023. Evelyn has been a longtime contributor to *Sandhill Review* and has attended the Writers Retreat at Saint Leo University for many years. She was also a member of Life Long Writers at USF from its inception. She is a New Jersey transplant who lives in New Tampa with her husband Albert.

**Mary-Gail Russ** is an Adjunct at Saint Leo’s Tampa Learning Center. A recent retiree living in Tampa, she teaches Art classes for the Tampa Museum of Art. She enjoys the space to be creative, and the time to grow.

**Gianna Russo** (editor-in-chief) is Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Saint Leo University where she teaches in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. Gianna served as the inaugural Wordsmith of The City of Tampa, appointed by Mayor Jane Castor in 2019. She is the author of the poetry collections *All I See is Your Glinting: 90 Days in the Pandemic*, with photographer Jenny Carey (Madville Publishing, 2022); *One House Down* (Madville Publishing, 2019); and *Moonflower*, winner of a Florida Book Award. Gianna has poems published or forthcoming in *Plant/Human Connection*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Negative Capability*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *The Sun*, *Poet Lore*, *saw palm*, *The MacGuffin*, *Florida Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Ekpbrasis*, *Florida Humanities Council Forum*, *Karamu*, *The Bloomsbury Review*, and *Calyx*, among others.

**Sara Startup** is a student at Saint Leo University.

**Naomi Steffer** is a faith-filled author from Inverness, Florida. By day she is an English teacher and digital media volunteer while also

pursuing opportunities as a creative writer. She is a Creative Writing Masters student at Saint Leo, currently on the Fiction track.

**Brielle Terry** is currently a Senior studying English with a specialization in Creative Writing and a minor in Art. She is also Treasurer of Sigma Tau Delta. She has been published in *Sandhill Review* twice before. Since middle school, she has always been interested in creating her own work. Her plans after graduation are to become an English teacher, to encourage kids to embrace literature and be creative.

**Angeliki Thomas Markonios** is in her second year at Saint Leo and will be graduating in her junior year. She is proud of her Greek heritage and displays her connection to her culture through her poetry. She aspires to go to law school and continue to pursue creative writing professionally.

**Michael Trammell's** first novel is *Rad Sick Record*, published by Hysterical Books Press. He grew up in South Florida and currently lives in the Florida panhandle. His poetry collection is *Our Keen Blue House*. Other work has appeared in *New Letters*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Pleiades*, and the *G.W. Review*. He's a Senior Lecturer at Florida State University, where he teaches technical writing and professional speaking, and an associate editor for the *Apalachee Review*. In the summers he frequently works abroad for F.S.U. in either London, Florence, or Valencia, Spain.

**Shannon Faith Walsh** is a Saint Leo University staff member and is enrolled in the Creative Writing master's program at Saint Leo University.

**Joana Xipolitas** is enrolled in the Creative Writing Masters program at Saint Leo University.



Jeff Karon



CONCEPT FOR “BELONGING”

