

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cover Art:

Prism by Maria DeWald

Jeremy Daugherty Poetry, <i>Obnubilate</i>	3
Wesley Hedger Creative Non-Fiction, <i>Have You Had Soup?</i>	4
Kyndra Howard Poetry, <i>A Wednesday</i>	8
Alexis Ross Poetry, <i>Strange Hands</i>	9
Iain Applebee Poetry, <i>Wonder Wander</i>	10
Hannah Wilson Creative Non-Fiction, <i>The Cranfish</i>	11
Emily Broyles Poetry, <i>Break Me</i>	13
India Hackle Poetry, <i>scabs.</i>	14
Michael Stulz Poetry, <i>Finding Solace in the Grapes</i>	15
Kyndra Howard Poetry, <i>TO DAD</i>	16
Jeremy Daugherty Poetry, <i>Fatber</i>	17
Adrian Whittamore Fiction, <i>The Scent of Heaven</i>	18

Gretchen Kelley Art: Digital, <i>Blue Bug</i>	19
Gretchen Kelley Art: Ceramics, <i>Duck Vase</i>	20
Maria DeWald Art: Photography, <i>Susan Marie</i>	21
Maria DeWald Art: Photography, <i>A Mirror's View</i>	22
Sydney Gregory Art: Construction Paper, <i>Exploration</i>	23
Sydney Gregory Art: Drawing, <i>Toned Statue</i>	24
Owen Treolo Art: Photography	25
Owen Treolo Art: Photography	26
Michael Stulz Poetry, <i>Raw Rejection</i>	29
India Hackle Poetry, <i>one body.</i>	30
Emma Haller Poetry, <i>Shattered Illusions</i>	31
Andrew Evans Fiction, <i>Messing Around</i>	32
Contributors	42

Jeremy Daugherty
Obnubilate

the sun withholds its light
clouds eternally rest on my forehead

the shadow obscures the presence of agony,
and I display a Thalia mask

fictitious laughter in the face of pain
is the camouflage used to—
make family believe;
that I'm okay.

Wesley Hedger

Have You Had Soup?

I find myself standing in the supermarket, lost in thought. A loaf of bread and a plastic sack of smoked turkey hang like six shooters at my sides. Visions of sandwiches are marching through my mind like soldiers on their way to war. BLTs, grilled cheese, and ham sandwiches form long processions all headed towards their destiny with my stomach.

In these sandwiches, I find a single piece of the puzzle that is lunch. The construction of this meal has always confounded me because depending on what you pair in tandem with your breaded warrior, you can either overshoot your hunger and stuff yourself to the gills or deprive yourself of the necessary calories to carry you to supper. The crucial precipice on which you are attempting to balance all depends on what you apply in communion with your sandwich. This leads to experimentation amongst the various side dishes that can be applied. In the time that I've been making my own lunch, I have tried and forgotten a slew of different accompaniments to the main portion. None have stuck and most have been lost in the remnants of the memories of meals.

Most people have a cupboard full of food that awaits them at home. This requires the practice of shopping lists and only visiting a grocery once or twice per month. I have long abandoned shopping to sustain myself for an extended period and instead shop for the short term. Outwardly, I express that this type of shopping is an attempt to emulate the European style of preparing each meal with completely fresh ingredients. I envision myself, a modern urbanite, swiftly moving from baker to butcher to cheese shop.

In my mind's eye, I gather my ingredients and prepare the type of meal seen only in French films about older men having affairs with younger women. I open my eyes and find myself in a tiny Paris alley. Boulangeries, patisseries, butchers, and fishmongers line the small street. An aroma of baking bread intermingles with the stagnant scent of an urban thoroughfare. The sharp smell of freshly caught sea bass cuts across my senses as I wander down the alley. From side to side, I see dozens of merchants pushing their wares in my direction, but I'm helplessly drawn towards a singular distinct smell. As I make my way through the crowds, I find my olfactory system pinging off what can only be described as an unmistakable desire for home.

I find myself reminiscing about a time long ago and the comforting care of my Grandmother. I see her face as she tends to me in a state of sickness, like a personal version of Florence Nightingale. She reaches out to me with one hand while clutching a steaming bowl with the other. I feel a weight across my body begin to give way as my frame becomes like the vapor escaping the dish held in her grasp. I feel myself drawn towards her to see what she is holding.

Right as I'm about to see what is drawing me in, I'm violently pulled back to reality. In a sudden jolt, my ankles are rocked by a poorly controlled shopping cart. The sudden violence occurring along my Achilles tendon buckles my knees, and I begin to topple like an unbalanced stack of dirty dishes. I turn to see what appears to be a horde of orc-like troglodytes descend down the cereal aisle.

As I look around for a hand hold to pull myself, I am presented with a vision of what was seen in my subconscious. A holy grail of sustenance is presented on a shelf for me to purchase. As I pull myself from my prostrated position, I reach out and grab hold of a tin can containing an elixir to match the potent imagery held in my inner sight. The heft of the can surprises me. Tomato and Basil. A classic combination. My mind wanders to a Caprese salad I once enjoyed. My inner monologue begins to build a liquid version of said Caprese salad. It tells me to fetch a ball of fresh mozzarella. I decided instead to read the label on the can. Scanning the ingredient list, the close proximity on the front of the can between the words tomato and basil have now become a short novel. The pure image of Roma tomatoes mingling with fresh herbs is dashed by the inclusion of such favorites like corn syrup solids, soybean oil, and modified food starch. For a moment, I consider replacing the can on the shelf and experimenting with my own soup concoction before I recognize that my inherent ignorance in the kitchen and massive laziness will stall any attempts to recreate the joy that is potentially held within that metal package.

With all the components of my lunch assembled, I redirect my path towards the front of the grocery. For a brief moment, I consider walking out without paying in order to shorten the time between the present and filling my stomach. My moral code outweighs the criminal in me, and I advance on a checkout lane to purchase my goods. As I watch my lunch move away from my on the conveyor belt, I find myself desperate to complete the transaction so I can hustle home to fill my now growling stomach. I shuffle some money from my pocket into the waiting hands of

the cashier and hurry to bag my own groceries. With everything sufficiently bundled together, I make my way to the front door.

I am a notoriously erratic driver. I tend to drive very fast and with reckless abandon. A combination of overconfidence in my driving skills and an extended self-destructive streak can lead to the contents of my truck spilling to all ends of the vehicle. With this knowledge, I take precautions to contain the occupants of my truck to their respective seats. It may seem a bit odd to fasten in your non-human passengers, but it helps to recognize the ability of the seat belt to salvage the life of every slice of bread you have purchased.

With that knowledge, I strap in my groceries and begin the journey towards my home. At this point, my stomach is growling loud enough to be heard over the sounds of J Dilla and I am beginning to feel the effects of a lack of sustenance. I apply a more forceful amount of pressure to the accelerator and cut my trip time by a slight percentage.

I barely put my truck into park as I snatch the plastic bags holding my food from their resting spot and break down the door separating me from my kitchen. I scuttle across the house and cast my keys aside. I'm solely focused on what lies ahead. Tearing apart the bags, I remove the can from within and grasp at the pull tab. Thankfully Progresso has recognized that cutting down the number of steps between purchase and consumption will make for a more enjoyable experience. I empty the contents of the can into a pot and immediately place it upon the heat of my stove. Watching the soup begin to percolate, I begin to construct my sandwich. As I slowly stir the soup around the pot, I begin to reminisce on times past. Before I can fully delve into those thoughts, my soup begins to pop. Removing it from the heat, I dip a spoon into the pot to taste the product of my desires.

Bringing the spoonful to my mouth, I experience a feeling similar to the first time I tried morphine. In both situations, I felt a warmth travel directly from entry to my heart and that warmth begin to cascade to all other parts of my body. Closing my eyes, the feeling fills me from my fingertips to my toes. It's as if I've transcended from this world into another plane of existence. Unlike with opiates, I regain my motor functions almost immediately and ladle out a bowlful of soup. Making my way to the table, I am immersed in the smoky scent of the soup. Every taste is an experience that I had lost at some point along my life's path. I feel myself regaining a piece of my youth with each swallow.

I finish my meal and begin to clean up. Stepping away from the sink, I notice that I'm feeling more upbeat than usual. I must assume that

the recollection of youthful times and the experience of a favorite meal has awakened some fondness in my soul that I may have lost. I also figure that I might just be feeling fat and happy.

I step away and for the next few days am astounded at my reconnection with soup. I loudly proclaim it to everyone I see.

“Have you had soup?”

I ask it as if my spiritual journey with it was tantamount to a religious awakening. Most people give me quizzical looks before returning to whatever humdrum topic they were discussing.

Deep down, I know that they are missing out.

Kyndra Howard

A Wednesday

Knife sinking into the lip-smacking,
tender steak, its juices running down
my chin. We can grow a pumpkin patch
in the backyard, along the sagging
fence. Their vines twisted around
the dull cold net, and once they disbranch

we'll sell them for three bucks a pop when
it comes around October. You say
these things to me with steak on your tongue
and I nod my head and give a grin,
we share the smile and look towards the
TV display.

Alexis Ross

Strange Hands

The truth is I'm scared
of bright lights,
machines with minds of their own,
and strange hands.

Breathe.

My body becomes numb and motionless
and my brain is filled with smoke.

I let myself slip into the hands
of these men who examine me
like an artist critiquing his painting.

Tiny holes make a masterpiece
of my arms with rings of red and purple.

I can't move and I start to panic
realizing I could be the one percent
chance they warned me about.

Once it's over I examine my stomach
trying to feel that missing link,
but I come up empty handed.

My body aches, but the peculiar men smile down at their work.
"I have a good feeling about this one," they say.

Iain Applebee
Wonder Wander

AsIWonderDown
ThroughTheNarrowWindingPassage
IFindMySelfEncased
InDoorsAndChainsUnpassed
IfIWeretoFindMyself
InOtherRealmsUnchartered
WouldIKnowMyselfGenuine
OrWouldISimply
falter

Hannah Wilson

The Crawfish

I had never in my life touched a crawfish -- yet there I was, seated across from my boyfriend's parents for the first time, their faces obscured by a mountain of them. Not only did I have their eyes judging me, but the eyes of crawfish staring me down. It was out of my control that they were ordered for us. I was nervous and determined to make a good impression. I knew crawfish boils were important to my boyfriend, and he was important to me, so I gave it a shot. I had a debilitating nervous stomach -- partly to make sure I'm perceived as the perfect girl for their son, the other part from knowing I'd have to attempt to eat one.

Unsurprisingly, I struggled. I picked up a crawfish, stared into its tar black eyes, fiddled with it, then broke it in half. By the time I had completed the most basic step of crawfish consumption, he had eaten five, and his parents half the bowl. I watched them suck hard on the crawfish tails and discard empty carcasses, then looked at the still full shells that sit on my plate, hoping nobody would notice.

I began to see myself in the disposed shells. When you let someone love you, you're giving them the same power to crack you like a crawfish. You can be held in their hands and have the life sucked out of you. You can be tossed to the side, empty, discarded.

I start to panic and think that the first step downhill will be my failure to crack these prawns. All eyes are on me -- the parents, the crowdaddies, and most frightening, my boyfriends.

Suddenly, something snapped me out of my panic. A piece of crawfish meat, carefully taken out of its shell, was placed in front of me. The one I was struggling with was then taken out of my hands and broken into smaller portions. I look up, and we lock eyes. He didn't say a word -- just kept cracking crawfish for me, then returned to his own.

My last relationship had broken me. Struggling with my meal would have been grounds for him to yell. My panic took me out of that crawfish boil with him and into a diner with my ex, where I had been told not to swear, yet he talked crudely about sex. I go from that diner to the pizza place when I ordered the wrong toppings and he refused to eat, threatening to leave.

Instead of making a scene, I watched him crack crawfish for me, and that's when I knew everything would be okay.

Maybe we would grow old together, or maybe we would break up within months. Regardless, he showed me that not everything has to be drama. Not everyone will break me. Real love exists, and I'm lucky to experience it, even if it's just this once in this restaurant.

Emily Broyles

Break Me

You look at me I glance
away You reach out I shrink
back You open up I fall in
You smile with trust I
grimace with remorse You
laugh with mirth I drown in
pain You talk feather light I
wrestle out crude words
You glide across the room I
crawl to the corner You
stand tall I crumble under
my stones You step
forward I stay still.

You look at her
I glance away

India Hackle

scabs.

woman supposed to beat her babies. she supposed to put a fear so deep in them the devil can't find a place of his own and his demons can't uproot submission. when they're weak she supposed to tatter the blackness off their bodies and when they can't stand she supposed to blister them till they can't sit down. they gotta learn that bruises blend in and bones bend again. she's gotta beat them till they get tired of being beat and till she gets tired of beating

Michael Stulz

Finding Solace in the Grapes

When the rich warmth
passed her lips, she said it
felt like silk cascading across
her velvet taste buds.

It lured her in with a hypnotic lull,
which felt so different from the
venom her ears had to sip upon,
when being with him.

Every time her mouth kissed
the bottle, it was like a forbidden
affair. One that needed to
be cut before feelings ran too deep.

Just like she had replaced him,
she broke the glass that
sheltered her solace.
Not for herself.

This time,
for the sake of her children.

Kyndra Howard
TO DAD

I went to the house today and
tore apart what you left behind,
as sticky fingers pocketed all you had—
there was too much of you.
the ash wouldn't make room for your bottles
or your cards, or your chair, or your dvds, I became
so troubled by you, your things have become
profitable in some eyes, but
they ignored your bottles
pressed against your lips, they didn't leave behind
anything of you,
except who you had
been, but blind eyes can't become
unblind by a tight wanted memory of you.
a wanted memory. I wanted memory. from behind
I held you in this same bed, and we forgot the bottles,
or remembered the bottles
the two of us had shared
you are the bottles
and you had become
something I cannot leave behind.
so I carry you behind my back,
hoisted on my shoulders, you
are to become
ash now, in a bottle,
so I fill my hand
with your remains of sand.

Jeremy Daugherty
Father

when I look in the mirror – he’s there
I loathe the likeness glaring back at me
I yank, and pull, and stretch
but he is a part of me that refuses to be removed

I inherited his caterpillar brows
His patchwork facial hair
His need to erase his problems with Jameson
and a demon cackling on each shoulder

we never talked about
what it meant to be a man
but you lasted forty long years—
without crumbling under the weight of your own imbalance

You left me too soon—
and genetics passed your burden unto me.
now I look for you to show me
how to carry this anguish for another ten years

Adrian Whittamore

The Scent of Heaven

The order arrived at Anael's windowsill with a flutter of cherub wings. As the cherub hovered before her, Anael's feathers flushed with gratitude. She took the scroll of paper from the cherub, and it flitted off of her sill, no doubt already seeking its next recipient. As Anael unrolled the paper, she swept two of her wings forward. The feathers there slowly solidified and melded together, becoming hands to better hold the letter.

"Guest: Kathryn Hodgings," read the paper. "Memories: the old playground by the creek, her first dance, her wedding, her first child..."

The list continued on for several more entries. Anael scanned over it, her myriad eyes blinking and squinting as she considered the task before her. After a moment more, she set the scroll on her desk and weighed it down with a bowl of half-hardened wax. She'd start with the playground. Anael turned her head to regard her vats. She had already stoked them for the day's work, the smell of melting wax filling the small workspace. She approached the first batch of wax and stared into it. Met with her reflection—six eyes, no mouth, a halo ringing her feathered head—Anael considered how best to begin her work.

The playground was a good place for Kathryn, came a voice in Anael's head, soft and clear as a bell. She bowed her head, eyes closing and wings folding in reverence.

An important place, Father?

Yes.

An important memory of an important place deserved an important shape, Anael thought. She opened her eyes and floated over to her mold shelf. Her fingers skated along the bronze molds there and eventually came to rest on a small peace sign. Anael's eyes crinkled in happiness; Kathryn grew up in the 1960s. She would like that.

Anael picked up the mold and fluttered back over to the first vat. She gently dipped the mold into it, oblivious to the heat of the white wax as it shelled and cracked around her arms. When she sensed the mold had been filled, Anael lifted it from the vat and carried it over to her worktable.

Father, what do playgrounds smell like? Anael asked. It had been so long since she had been to Earth, she scarcely remembered.

(This story continued after Art section)

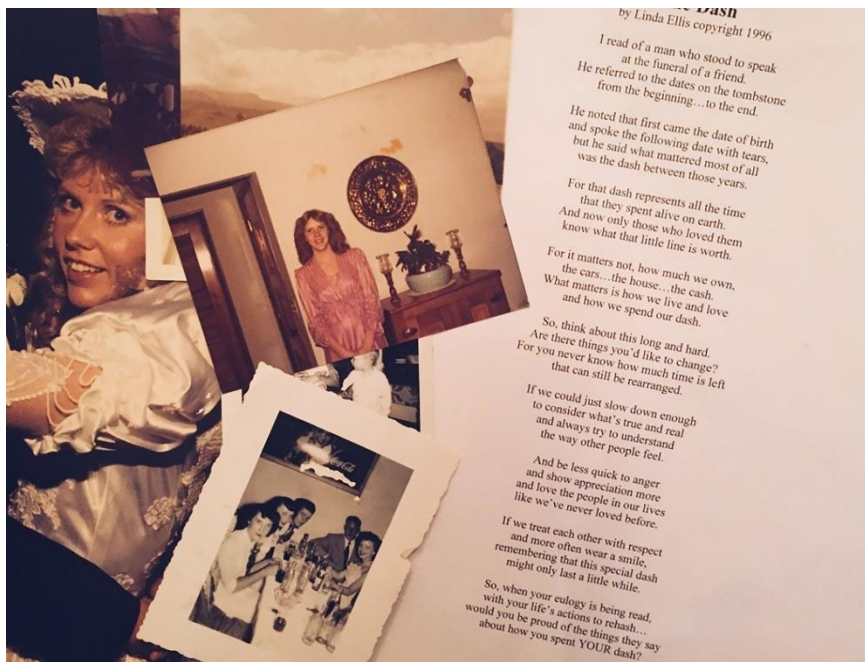


Gretchen Kelley: *Blue Bug*
Procreate



Gretchen Kelley: *Duck Vase*

Ceramics, 20" tall, 10" across



DASH

by Linda Ellis copyright 1996

I read of a man who stood to speak
at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on the tombstone
from the beginning...to the end.

He noted that first came the date of birth
and spoke the following date with tears,
but he said what mattered most of all
was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time
that they spent alive on earth.
And now only those who loved them
know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not, how much we own,
the cars...the house...the cash.
What matters is how we live and love
and how we spend our dash.

So, think about this long and hard.
Are there things you'd like to change?
For you never know how much time is left
that can still be rearranged.

If we could just slow down enough
to consider what's true and real
and always try to understand
the way other people feel.

And be less quick to anger
and show appreciation more
and love the people in our lives
like we've never loved before.

If we treat each other with respect
and more often wear a smile,
remembering that this special dash
might only last a little while.

So, when your eulogy is being read,
with your life's actions to rehash...
would you be proud of the things they say
about how you spent YOUR dash?

Maria DeWald: *Susan Marie*

Photography

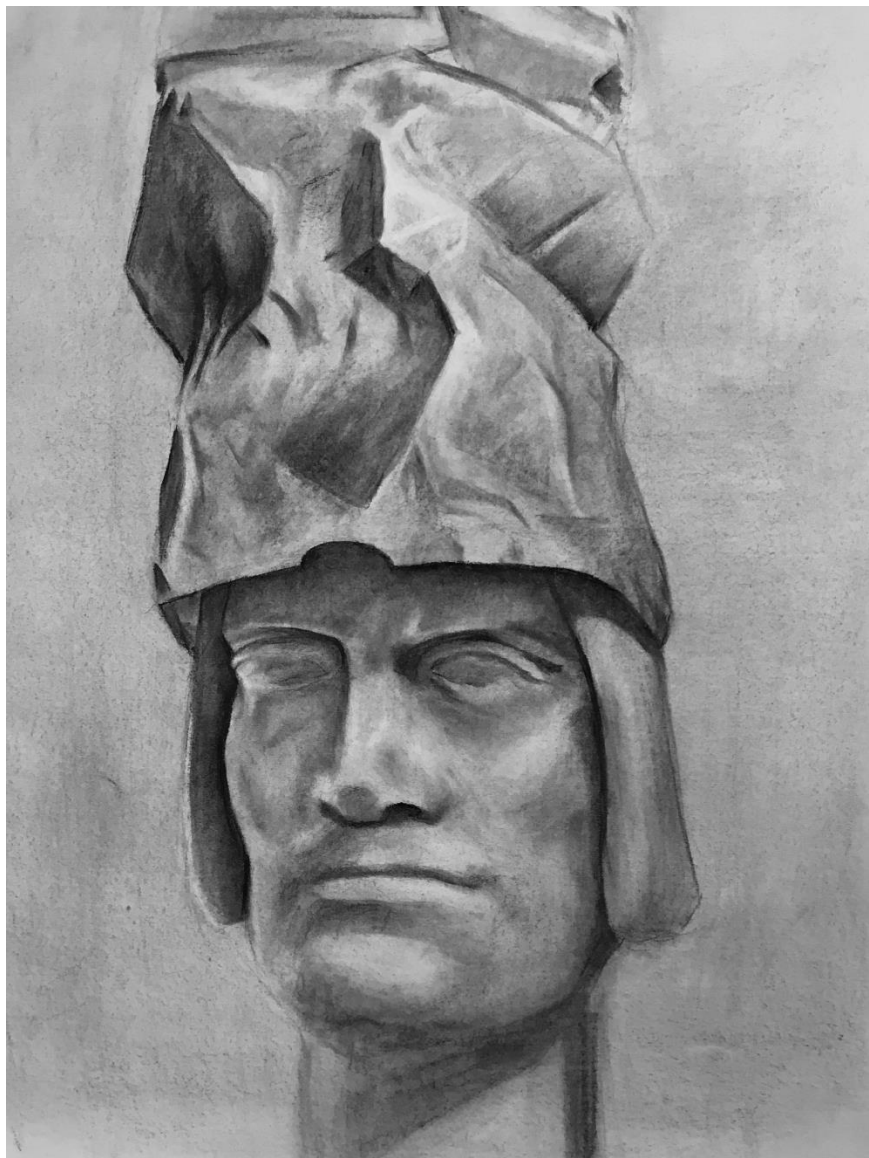


Maria DeWald: *A Mirror's View*
Photography



Sydney Gregory: *Exploration*

Black and white construction paper. 24" x 32"



Sydney Gregory: *Toned Statue*

Charcoal on drawing paper. 14" x 28"



Owen Treolo: *Untitled*
Photography



Owen Treolo: *Untitled*

Photography

(Continued from page 18)

Lots of things, came His response. Metal and sweat... candy and flowers... mowed grass and sunshine.

I think I understand. Thank you, Father.

Anael swept another wing forward and swiftly plucked a feather from it with one hand, twitching at the slight pain. Once it was in hand, she gently flapped her wings to produce a breeze. The feather danced in the wind before it began shimmering in her grip. As she watched, the feather turned gold, the light from it nearly as bright as her own halo. Anael crushed the feather in her grasp and then sprinkled it into the opening of the mold. There was the sunshine. What about the metal? Anael drummed her fingers on her worktable as she cast her eyes around the room. She quickly spied what she was looking for, sitting in a jar on her scent shelf. Anael reached out her hands to take it.

The jar was labeled “Summer, 1964,” and the lightning inside it arced and danced against the glass like it had been waiting for this day all its life. Anael’s wings ruffled in amusement as she held the jar over the mold and gently loosened the lid. There came an audible crack as a jolt of lightning flickered from the jar into the mold, and Anael quickly tightened the lid before any more could escape. After she returned the jar to its shelf, Anael tilted her head as she looked at her mold. Soon it would be ready to be dyed, but first, it needed one more scent—but what?

Anael reached up above her and took hold of her halo. She took it down and held it in front of her, all eyes focusing on the loop formed by its golden light. Slowly, the memories filled her head, and with them came all the scents and colors of Kathryn’s life. Once she found the information she was looking for, Anael returned her halo to its proper place and her attention to her scent shelf. She opened a jar of rose petals, removed two, and crushed them in her hands just like the feather. After sprinkling the rose dust into the mold, Anael blew on it. The hardened wax clinging to the outside of the mold fragmented and blew away like snow, leaving the bronze peace sign exposed once more. Anael tapped a finger against it, and it gently opened in response.

The candle lay inside like a pearl in its shell, sheening pink-white in the light of Anael’s halo. No longer trapped inside the mold, the smell of a summer day filled the workshop. Anael was pleased to find that she had gotten it right; there was the smell of the metal slide that had burned Kathryn that day in the hot summer sun, and there was the smell of a

thunderstorm on the way, and there was the smell of Kathryn's mother's rose-water perfume as she bandaged Kathryn's skinned knee. All it needed now was some color.

Anael scooped the candle into her hands and held it against her core, clutching it tight around it for extra protection. She made her way to her windowsill and took off through it, into the thin air outside. This was always her favorite part.

For a moment, Anael hovered in place, all of her eyes searching the skies around her. It didn't take her long to find a rainbow, and she took off towards it with sudden speed. As she skimmed along it, Anael opened her wings to expose the candle, and when she reached the rainbow's end, she flared her wings to stop and study her work.

The candle was the perfect gradient of a summer day. It started green at the bottom, just like the grass, and then turned a blue so bright, it almost hurt Anael to look at.

Beautiful work, Anael.

Thank you, Father. Will Kathryn like it?

Yes, Anael. She will.

Anael's eyes smiled. On to the next candle, then. There were many memories left on the list, and Kathryn would be arriving any day now.

Michael Stulz
Raw Rejection

You turn your nose
up at the pieces
of me I place
at your table
because
you'd rather gnaw
on the rotting meat
of a heart
that stopped working
years ago

Than love me

India Hackle

one body.

"One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." W.E.B. Du Bois

My Blackness slips
through my calloused palms.
It bleeds, bruises,
and wails for my embrace.
I watch as it tries to
push my legs apart

and crawl back up in me.
When its head reaches
the crack of my opening
I place my thigh
over its neck
and press.
I watch as
my Blackness
my baby
discolors

Emma Haller
Shattered Illusions

that night
the angel in the peaks
whispered to the stars

tis' she who stood upon his lungs
tis' she who came undone

and as the stars snickered
tears quenched the desert air
fleeing from the lips that said
I love you
and the eyes that said
Goodbye

Andrew Evans

Messing Around

I never really liked teasing Liam Greer.

He's in the same gym class as Dan and me. When Coach lets us out, we always head to the locker rooms and change before lunch. Even though there are usually seven or eight guys in the locker room after class, Dan always zeroes in on Liam when he walks in.

"Hey, fag."

Liam focuses on his locker. He has this way of curling up like wet paper when somebody talks to him. His gangly limbs scrunch together and his shoulders bend forward as he stares down at the tiled floor.

"I'm talking to you, queer," Dan says, pushing Liam's tensed shoulder. Liam flinches at his touch, and I laugh.

"Greer the queer," I say, which earns me a few chuckles from the other guys. It's an old joke, and not all that clever. They've heard it a million times before now.

"You're pretty jumpy." Dan's smile is easy, infectious. This isn't anything new, just the same old routine we do every day. He takes in the shifty, fervent energy of the crowd.

Liam attempts to edge past Dan, towards his locker. Dan shoves him back, harder. Liam goes down in a splay of pale appendages. He jumps back up with surprising speed, still hunched up and on his guard.

"Wow, Leah." Dan was always proud that he thought up that nickname for Liam. "That was fast. Maybe you should have moved like that on the court today."

"He did," says one of the boys, "Every time the ball hit him."

Dan chuckles at him. Taking advantage of the distraction, Liam scrambles to get his locker open. He tugs on the lock, and it won't budge. Liam tugs once more, and the lock clicks open. With a quick scoop, he folds all of his clothes over his arm and makes for the opposite side of the row of lockers from where Dan and I are standing.

"I didn't say you could go, fag," says Dan, his foot coming forward as though to stop Liam going.

I grab his forearm. "Let him go," I say, "This locker room's for guys."

Dan makes a noise of affirmation, and I drop his forearm like a white-hot poker.

Liam shoots me a look as he makes for the door. His eyes, the rich brown of varnished wood, are open wide, and his lips are slightly parted.

I shrug, but let my eyes meet his.

You're welcome.

#

Liam meets me after school in the bathroom on the south side of the building. Nobody ever comes to this side of the building after hours except the janitor, and you can hear his cart from a mile away.

"Thanks for today, Paul," he says, bending over to set his backpack on the scuffed linoleum floor.

"No problem," I say. "But you know they'd never really hurt you." His face twitches downwards, but I ignore it. There's a tepid pause.

"So," he asks, "How was your day?"

"It was school," I say.

He looks at his feet, and I step forward, backing him against the sandy brick wall.

My gym bag hits the floor as I press my lips into his. Liam smells of cheap shampoo and cheaper hair product. He seems to bathe his head in the stuff, as though enough of it will draw attention from the gayness that comes off him in waves.

Despite this, his lips are firm, and his arched neck fits well in my hand. My other hand roots us to the wall, keeping our two bodies upright. We remain in this position for a minute, and then I maneuver my hand to the hem of his shirt. I slide it up his back under the fabric, pulling his body closer to mine.

We've been doing this for a few weeks, and I still haven't gotten used to how skinny Liam is. He's paper on a frame of matchsticks, all wrapped in denim and cotton that hug his frame far too tightly. Too much pressure would snap him.

His head is lodged against the wall so he can't pull back, but he turns his head to the side to gasp for air.

"Finished?" I ask.

The pause in our rhythm irks me. When he's standing there, panting for air, I can almost feel Dan and my parents behind me, their gazes bludgeoning my spine. I'm supposed to feel private in this space, just me and Liam, but apparently Liam needs a breather to restore his stamina.

"Yeah," he says. "Sorry." We plunge back in. His arms hang like loose cables, so I withdraw my hand from the back of his shirt and guide

his hand to my chest. I start to slide my body against his, pressing his spine to the wall behind him.

He gasps and pulls away again.

“Dude,” I say, “Is there a problem?”

“Just a long day.” He slides out from between my arms and ducks past me.

I feel Dan and my parents again, in the back of my mind. Dan is laughing. Mom and Dad are standing silent, not needing words to express their judgement. I need to feel Liam’s skin pressed into mine again.

Liam has a different idea, though. He crouches beside his backpack, clearly wanting to talk. I lean against the wall next to him.

“What was so bad about today?” I ask.

“Well, there was gym class.”

I scoff. “Nothing happened. You know the guys just like messing around.”

“It’s not just messing around. Do you know what Dan would do if you weren’t there?”

The irregularities of the brick behind me are digging into my back, so I move to crouch in front of him.

“They wouldn’t do anything to you. They just like picking on you because you’re so...” I gesture at him, trying to indicate with my hand the expanse of his Liamness.

“So gay,” he says.

I shift my weight, uncomfortable.

“I’m just as gay as you are, Paul” he says.

I stand upright. “Don’t say that. I’m not gay.”

“Oh,” he says, raising his hands above his head as if in surrender. “So, I guess straight boy Dan wouldn’t mind that you’re hooking up with a guy in the bathroom after school.”

My gaze shoots to the door, which remains closed. “We’re not hooking up.” My face feels hot.

Our unspoken agreement has been not to talk about what we’re doing. Everybody knows Liam’s gay just by looking at him. He’s all tight clothes and hair gel. If that doesn’t give it away, his voice, high and girlish, is as good as an admission. That’s not me.

“We’re just messing around. It’s a bit of fun, but I’m not a... I’m not gay.”

Dad’s voice is in the back of my head. They shouldn’t let fags like that run for office. The school shouldn’t let those fags teach kids.

“Whatever,” Liam says, shifting his weight forward to stand in front of me. “Sorry I mentioned it.” He frowns and cocks his eyebrow.

I shift my weight from one foot to another, and Liam leans in, splaying his fingers across my spine. I reciprocate, and his arm goes limp as he drops his hand again. My breath is heavy against his mouth, and my lips are sore. His heat on my skin feels uncomfortable now, a foreign thing, a blush from the outside in. My body still wants him, but our conversation has shattered the moment. It just feels so *wrong* now. It’s my turn to pull away.

I expect him to protest, but he doesn’t. His silence prickles against me until I break it. “I don’t think we should do this today.”

“Do you want to talk, Paul?” he asks.

Instead of answering, I pick up my bag. He picks up his.

“Tomorrow,” I say. *We’ll try this again tomorrow.*

#

The next day is cold. We huddle in the gym, killing time by shooting hoops while Coach types away in his office. He can see most of the court through the glass wall, but his headphones are in, so it’s mostly like he’s not there. Most of the students not on the court are lounging in the bleachers with their phones out.

Liam is in the back row. Whenever I catch sight of him, he makes a point of not meeting my eyes, and I return the favor. We cut things off early yesterday, but this isn’t the place to discuss it, not for either of us.

“This is dumb,” Dan says. He steps off the court and grabs his water bottle. I join him, taking a long swig from mine. Dan’s gaze slides over to Liam.

Dan cuts through the knot of people to Liam’s refuge, “So, the queer is too good to play with us, Paul.”

“Coach is right there,” Liam tells him.

“Hey Coach,” Dan shouts. “Tell the fag to get up and do something.” Coach scratches his nose and adjusts his volume.

Dan grabs Liam’s backpack from the seat beside him and holds it up to his face. A girl behind us laughs and one or two of the guys on the court peel away from their game, approaching the bleachers to watch.

“What’s in here?” Dan says, hoisting the bag above his head as if Liam will try to take it back from him. Liam stays seated, his eyes fixed on the air a foot from my left shoulder.

Dan opens the bag and lets the contents spill over the bleachers. A few folders drip through the cracks and thud onto the floor below the

stands. Dan picks through the puddle of colored paper and finds a leather bound sketchbook.

“Put that down.” Liam has peeled himself off of the bench and is standing a step above Dan. He has the high ground by at least a foot, but Dan is still an inch or so above him in spite of the level difference.

“Hey.” Dan is grinning now, taking his time as he unwraps the thin strip of leather keeping the book shut. “What’s the problem? I just want to look.”

“Put it down.” There is a brittleness to Liam’s words, like he will snap and shatter into a thousand tiny daggers if pushed.

“Don’t bother.” I step up and pluck the book from Dan’s hand. He turns to look at me, the grin melting.

“What’s wrong? You sorry for the fag?” Dan closes the gap between us, chest forward. His breath is warm, and for a bizarre moment I’m reminded of Liam’s body pressed against mine. It’s an absurd thought. Dan is so much larger than Liam, so much less malleable.

I want to make Dan back down without making a big deal out of it. Pushing Liam around in the locker room is one thing, but these are Liam’s things Dan is taking. Liam will be upset if I don’t do anything about it.

“Just leave him alone for once.”

“I think Paul likes the fag. Is he your boyfriend, Paul? Do you love him?”

This is just a joke. It’s just Dan messing with me. *Don’t blush. Don’t step back.*

I laugh. “Yeah, Dan. He’s my big gay boyfriend.” I turn to face Liam. “I bet that’s what you want, isn’t it, Greer?” I fling the sketchbook towards him, a paper and leather missile. It tumbles past him, falling between the bleacher slats to the ground below. “Greer the queer.” I blurt it without much thought, saying the first thing that comes to mind to stop everybody looking at me.

It works, and the focus of the room shifts back to Liam. They’re waiting to see what he’ll do.

Liam’s eyes shimmer with unshed tears.

Just get it over with, I tell him in my head, Just cry. They’ll give you a hard time, but it’ll be over in a minute.

I know this will be worse if Liam fights back. Dan will keep pushing until he snaps, and it won’t be pretty for Liam. Plus, there’s always the risk that my name will come up again. I can’t imagine Dan looking at

me with the disdain he's aimed at Liam, but I know what people will think if Liam lets slip that we know each other outside of the school day.

Instead of crying, Liam shoots me a glare that could slice diamond. His lips lock together and his hands ball into tiny fists.

Don't look at me. Don't draw attention to me. If he plays this wrong, I'm dead.

Liam darts past Dan and down the bleachers. He takes the steps two at a time. Reaching the bottom, he turns and runs out of the room. His sketchbook and papers lie forgotten on the ground.

#

After gym, the day trickles along like water from a leaky faucet. I don't see Liam in the halls between classes, but I still go to the bathroom after school. Part of me wants to know if he's alright. Part of me wants to freak out, to remind him how important it is that what we do remains a secret.

Liam isn't there. The bathroom is chilly; the poorly insulated windows are not enough to keep out the elements. Despite the cold, I'm steaming at him. Liam must have left school without telling me. I stepped in for him, put my neck on the line. He didn't need to speak up, didn't need to talk back to Dan. And now he's left me on my own.

Today was too close a call for me; if anything gets out, I could end up just like Liam. Would the guys ever treat me like they treat him? And there are worse things than the guys. I never really asked Liam how things are outside of school. Do his parents even speak to him? They have to know what he is. I feel a surge of pity for Liam. How did I never ask? He probably doesn't want to talk about it. I imagine what my parents would do if I were Liam, if I were gay.

What have I been doing? Whatever this is, I need to stop it, for his sake as much as mine. Meeting Liam here has been fun, in a way, but it can't keep happening. It's not me who's doing it. Liam makes me do things I regret, and I know eventually people are going to catch on. I imagine what they'll say if I get caught.

Paul is gay. Paul is a fag.

They won't accept that that isn't who I am. No amount of fun is worth that.

It's been a quarter hour. Liam isn't coming.

#

When I reach my locker the next morning, Liam is there.

“What are you doing?” My voice is low. This isn’t supposed to happen. We never seek each other out during the school day.

“I wanted to talk about yesterday.” There are things I need to say to him about yesterday too, but they’ll take time. I need to tell him this has got to end, and I need to make him swear he’ll never mention it to anybody. Looking at him, though, I don’t want to do this now, not where I’ll need to rush it. The hall is nearly empty, but I can’t risk being seen alone with Liam.

“What about yesterday?” I ask, playing innocent.

“You know what I mean.” His brow is furrowed, and his face is downcast. “We can’t keep doing this.”

“I kind of got that,” I say. “You walking out on me was a pretty big hint.” A hint of annoyance has crept into my voice.

“Walking out on you?” He barks a single laugh, which does nothing to change his expression. “You ganged up on me again. Like you always do.”

“I protected you,” I say. I scan the hallway. “We can do this later. If you make people think I’m...”

“What? Make people think you’re gay?”

My face burns. I can’t believe he said that out loud. “I am not,” I hiss, “*gay*.”

“You’re going to have to face the facts at some point. Stop lying to everybody else. Stop lying to yourself!”

I ball my fists.

He sees, and cocks his eyebrow. *I know you wouldn’t*, he’s saying.

My fingers flex. “Don’t come here again. This is my hallway.”

Dan rounds the corner. “What’s up, Paul?” He does a double take at the sight of Liam. “What’s Leah doing here?”

“I was just talking to Paul.”

“Well don’t bother us, queer.” Dan turns away from Liam and towards his own locker. This isn’t the locker room. There are teachers in the rooms along the hall, and Dan knows it.

But Liam doesn’t take the reprieve. “Are you going to let him call me that?” he asks, right in front of Dan. He crosses his arms, daring me to say something. He’s a solitary fencepost, rooted in the ground, attached to nothing.

“It’s what you are,” I say. “You’re gay.”

Dan nudges me. “Wait for gym class.” The implication is clear. *Make him go away. We can get him back later.*

Liam stands motionless, swaying like a tree in the breeze. I turn towards him, trying to cut him down with my eyes.

Go away now.

He sways. I push him into a locker, and the metal lets off a harsh clang as it hits the buckle of his backpack.

“Get out of our hallway, faggot.” I weigh the two syllables before spitting them out, making sure both hit with equal strength. It’s the first time I’ve spoken them, at least to Liam. Dan has, of course, but never me.

Liam is winded, clutching his shoulder where it hit the locker door.

“Dude,” Dan says. “Don’t.” I turn on him, furious that he’s criticizing me for this. It’s not like he hasn’t shoved Liam around in the locker room.

A blunt force hits me from behind, forcing me to stumble forward. I turn, and Liam is in front of me, pounding his loose fists into my chest. His blows sting more than I would expect them to. His mouth is contorting, forming words that have no meaning, unable to make his fury conform to the limits of spoken language.

Dan jumps into action, slamming Liam into the locker. “What are you doing?” Dan says, struggling to brace himself as Liam’s legs lash out, trying to make up for the restrained state of his arms.

Liam’s neck snaps toward me like the needle on a compass. “Paul, you...”

He needs to shut up.

My fist makes contact with his side, and his words become an unintelligible mass of sound, their meaning dying on his lips. *Shut up, shut up, shut up.*

I’m jerked back by a woman’s hands. It’s a teacher, some lady from the English department. One of her colleagues is pulling Dan off of Liam.

“Break it up,” says the first woman. “Calm down.”

#

At first, my parents are furious at me.

This isn’t like you. What were you thinking?

But then Dan tells them about Liam the queer, the shifty kid who’s always getting into trouble, and their anger quickly focuses on him.

Did he do anything to you? Why would they let a kid like that have free reign of the school? You know to stay away from people like that.

I’m hardly paying attention as they rant. Hot tears ooze from my eyes, and my nose is running. I don’t try to stop it. Hatred roils in my stomach. Hatred for Dan, for my parents, for Liam.

No. Hatred for myself. I did this. I was stupid, and reckless, and I did this to myself. Mom and Dad don't get it. Everything they say is muffled, like my head is stuffed with cotton.

It was his fault, not yours.

They're wrong.

Liam gets to leave first. They've been keeping him in another room, and he doesn't look in as he passes mine. His eyes are red, but he's not crying. He's limping slightly, but he seems lighter now, like he's stepped out of a lead jacket.

His mother is beside him, her hand on his shoulder. She looks through the window and catches sight of me. She stops. Liam says something to her, and her face drains of expression. Her eyes slip from me and she turns back to her son. They lean together as he tells her something in private. Something secret. Something about me, I imagine. They're still talking as they take the stairs out of sight.

The guidance counselor wants to speak with my parents. They say I should stay, but I ask to go to my locker. I need to be alone right now, and the counselor clearly has an admonition to give that isn't for my ears. She says yes.

The walk to my locker is longer than I remember. Classes are in session, and the murmuring of teachers in their rooms somehow makes the solitary halls seem even more silent. An eternity passes between the office and my hallway.

I find it on the bottom of my locker. It's a page from a sketchbook, torn and folded. This is what Liam was slipping into my locker this morning. The page feels too solid, too firm, like if I try to unfold it I'll slice my finger. However, the sheet unfolds without incident.

The drawing is of a man curled up inside a closet door. He has broad shoulders and short, dark hair. Like me. His face is obscured by his hands, but the jacket is the same one I wear on cold days. It's not me though. This man was drawn with care, outlined, colored, and shaded with a light caress of the artist's hands. The shapes and colors on the page look like me, but they aren't me.

The caption, scrawled in black marker: *You're always free to open the door and step out into the light.*

My first instinct is to crumple it up. The adage is simple, meaningless, the sentiment of a boy with a mother who will hold his shoulder and listen to his words.

Then I think of the limp he's now sporting, and the way the locker slats striped his pale shoulder in shades of scarlet and rose. I did that.

I look down at the drawing again. Was this in the sketchbook when I threw it at Liam yesterday, or did he draw it last night? Liam cared about me. Maybe he doesn't now, but he cared. This drawing is of a trapped man, a lost man. Nobody else looked at me and saw that. But this boy, this gay boy, saw something I didn't see in myself.

I am gay. I think the words at first, unfold them and examine them as closely as I examined Liam's drawing. Even as I think the words, I look towards the end of the hallway, worried Mom and Dad will somehow walk in and see me thinking them. These are words I never said, not even in the boys' bathroom with Liam in my arms.

"I am gay." This time I mouth them, trying not to breathe lest the words escape me and wander off.

You're always free to open the door.

I keep the page. I stow it away at the bottom of my bag where my parents won't see it. Not for a while yet. They find me there, curled up outside of my locker door with hot, salty tears dripping from my chin.

CONTRIBUTORS

Iain Applebee is the Bohemian Bratz doll that was deemed too salacious for sale. A senior political science major, he is a member of Theta Chi fraternity, the Pagan Student Association, and a former SGA senator. His obsessions include cult classic films, animal print clothing, Nietzsche, and murder-mystery novels. His reincarnated theatre soul wishes that you enjoy the show.

Emily Broyles: I am a first-year student. I am nineteen years old. I love to read and write, which is what drew me to declaring my major. I have trouble sticking to just one genre of books to read because I want to experience life from as many perspectives as possible and reading is a great way to understand people. Writing allows me to take the thoughts that plague my brain and convert them into something less ugly. I express my creativity in the form of baked goods and enjoy spending many hours in the kitchen.

Jeremy Daugherty is an undergraduate student at NKU.

Maria DeWald is a first year Visual Communication Design Major and Marketing Minor. She is a visual artist passionate about just about all types of art but gravitates toward design, photography, theatre, tech theatre and writing. She is the secretary for the NKU Design Guild club on campus. This will be the first time she has been published in *Loch Norse*.

Andrew Evans is a Secondary English Education major at NKU. He currently helps out at an afterschool enrichment through the YMCA, and plans to teach high school English and write on the side after earning his degree. When he's not in class or at work, you can often find him writing creative fiction and poetry on his dorm hallway's couch, or else honing his theatrical craft in the SOTA building. Andrew minors in Theatre and is a proud member of the NKU Honors program.

The natural world is **Sydney Gregory's** source of inspiration. She wishes to embrace the movement and imagery of the natural world as it is the source of her nourishment. Through many years of private tutoring under Ben Reynolds on acrylic painting, spending a semester learning oil painting with the Louisville Visual Arts Association, and exploring her birthplace of Louisville, Kentucky, she found comfort in the earthly environment. As she continues working for a Visual Communication Design Degree at Northern

Kentucky University, she hopes to promote the beauty of the Earth and the importance of conserving it for nourishing future generations.

India Hackle was raised in Cincinnati, Ohio. She attends Northern Kentucky University, double majoring in English Creative Writing and International Studies. She has been positioned as an editor for the university's *Loch Norse Magazine* and accepted into a chapter of the International English Honors Society. India has poetry pieces featured in two documentaries, *Mourning the Creation of Racial Categories: The Categories Black and White* and *Let Our Loss Be Heard*. She is currently studying abroad in England at the University of Hertfordshire, where she is assigned to classes that will continue to strengthen her writing and equip her for publishing.

Emma Haller is an undergraduate student at NKU.

Wesley Hedger: I enjoy wrestling, writing, and alliteration. Take care.

Kyndra Renee Howard is a Senior expected to graduate in May 2019 at Northern Kentucky University. She is majoring in English- Writing Studies and has a minor in history. Her poems are inspired by the loss of her father in Fall of 2018 and revolve around events in her childhood home, or the home itself. After graduation she expects to move away to a warm place full of exciting opportunities as she explore employment in different fields and expands her knowledge and skills in visual rhetoric.

Gretchen Kelley: I've considered myself an artist since I was about 12 years old and now at 20 years old, I love it more than ever. I like to explore all different kinds of mediums in art, but I've found that my favorite is ceramics. Doing 2D work still means a lot to me though, and I've recently gotten into digital art. I've been using Procreate and it's a whole new world of creating. In general, I love to make art that includes animals, bright colors and whimsical abstraction. My style can be all over the place but tends to be fun and colorful.

Alexis Ross: I am an English major with a Creative Writing Track and a minor in cinema. In my spare time I love to listen to music (particularly soundtracks from great films), write, read, and enjoy the company of friends and family. *Strange Hands* is a piece I wrote at my most vulnerable point. Throughout my life I've struggled with body image and learning to love and accept myself. I wrote *Strange Hands* after having weight loss surgery in celebration of my new journey. I am very proud of this piece and

know many will be able to relate to my journey and will hopefully be able to find their own.

Michael Stulz is graduating this semester as an English Creative Writing Major with a minor in Cinema Studies. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta. She hopes to publish her own collection of poems one day.

Hannah Wilson is a senior public relations major with a minor in creative writing. Her piece, “Your Birthday,” was published in a collection of short stories entitled *Reigns, Rapids, Glory*, put together by Calvin Batista-Mallett. She is also a member of Delta Gamma Fraternity, a College of Informatics Ambassador, an accidental internet meme, and concert enthusiast.

Adrian Whittamore is a senior at Northern Kentucky University, where he studies creative writing and where he will receive his Bachelor of Arts in English in May of 2019. He grew up in the woods near Berea, Kentucky and comes from two long family lines of rural farmers and preachers. He hopes to honor that spiritual and cultural legacy with *The Scent of Heaven*. After graduation, Adrian plans on returning home for a time, where he lives in seclusion with his writing, his house plants, and his one-eyed, snaggletoothed cat named Morgan.