

A still life photograph of a table setting. In the foreground, there are three plates with a blue and white patterned border. Each plate has a glass of water with ice and a slice of lime. A blue pitcher is in the middle ground, and a white vase with blue flowers is on the right. A pink box and a glass jar are on the left. The background is a light-colored wall with a wreath hanging on it.

The Writers' Block

2024

THE WRITERS' BLOCK

The Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop

Anthology

2024

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Colophon

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In Memorium

Ada created the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop for High School Students to be her legacy. Her vision for the workshop was that it would be like the original Honors Program: a comfortable place where a community explored ideas together in a supportive environment. Under Ada's direction, the program was a place where you piled on couches for class, wrote on the walls as a form of self-expression, and did the remodeling yourselves on the weekends. It was a place of creative freedom where you built community from the ground up, asked questions, explored, and made your own rules. Supporting each other was built in through the first and second year mentorship program. Breaking down hierarchy and tradition by using first names was as integral as the interdisciplinary approach where it was clearly established that everything is connected, where looking at the same thing with different perspectives and through different lenses was the pedagogical approach. It was a place where everyone was equal, a safe place to make mistakes, a place to explore what you might want in your future while experiencing life changing lectures that shifted your worldview.

As a poet, fiction and essay writer, Ada was an endless supporter of the literary arts. She understood that creative writing changes the people writing it and the world they live in, and this is what she envisioned for her legacy. The Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop is a place where young people can explore who they are and who they want to be. It's a place where they can safely step outside the bounds of societal expectations and consider a world that they create for themselves, a much better place than where they come from. That's what Ada wanted and what this program does. It and the students participating in it are her legacy.



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Short Stories

Taught by Daryl Brown

Untitled

Amethyst Summer Hudson

Until my first psych ward, I was alone. I was drowning in self-loathing; I became consumed in self-pity; I did not know how to cope, I did not know that self-harming was bad, I just wanted to punish myself. I beat myself up over the small mistakes. I had never met anyone who I could relate to. Before my first psych ward, I did not take medicine. Things changed after my first psych ward. But they did not change enough, so I went to another 3 months later, when I attempted suicide for the first time.

Psych wards 2-4, I grew accustomed to the psych ward, it became a second home. My mom wished I did not think that. I felt safe there, the structure, the access to help when I needed it. I did not want to have to deal with the thoughts on my own, the thoughts of self-loathing, the suicidal ideations, I did not want to be alone again.

Psych wards 5-9, it was the same, nothing changed, I still got better there. But when I got out, I returned to how I was before. I hurt myself again, I tried to off myself again, I hated myself still. I stopped trying.

My last psych ward lasted a year. I got better, with wins and losses. I finally used the coping skills I learned from earlier visits, I wrote more, I knew what to do when it got bad again. I could listen to music or take deep breaths. I vowed to never go back. I was clean for a year after, I relapsed and have been clean for a few months now. This all happened in a span of 3 years.



It's Just a Game

Keon Davis

How did I get here? No one just ends up becoming a cold-blooded sharpshooter in a violent war out of nowhere? Life used to have meaning, and death had weight. Now, it's all just a game.

When I was 8, I was introduced to my first video game, Super Mario World. I'd take turns playing with my family, enjoying the vivid colors and animated landscapes. We would play carefree, spending quality time together.

When I was 12, I started playing more competitive games. Smash Brothers, Mario Kart, and Splatoon, there was always a winner and a loser. I would stay up for hours, losing game after game, as I couldn't for hours. After all you can't end on a loss.

When I was 16, I started playing COD. The colors are gone, the only sounds were gunshots, and the ground was bloody. Of course, I climbed to the top of the leaderboards.

When I was 19, I was invited to test a realistic shooting simulation. The company was shady, but it's just another game so I didn't mind. I was always the last one standing. Coincidentally or not, the tide shifted in our favor.

Now, I'm 32. I crave watching my victory in person, I long to see my training result in results, and I love when my shots meet their mark.

Gold

Daniel Alzoubi

I am in a convenience store in Brooklight Square, New Jersey. I'm searching for milk, my cereal waiting for me on the kitchen counter at home. But, something else has caught my attention. And, shamefully, the attention of all the men in the isles. Three twenty-year-old women stand in the check-out line. Beautiful, beautiful women. Their lips are glossed in red, birthmarks vivid in comparison to their white, powdered faces. Their polka-dot dresses sway in the wind. Though like the other little girls, I admire their jewelry. They're all wearing gold, its surface glimmering in the window sunlight. As they make their way to the cashier, their gold ankle bracelets ring above their high heels. Their cherry red nails are specks of dust compared to their beaded, gold bracelets—a dozen on each wrist. I wish Dad were here, so I could show him how similar their jewelry is to Mom's collection. I don't think Mom's collection is of high value. I mean, it can't be if it's hidden away in a box with numbers down the side of it. Plus, Mom never wore it when she was still alive. And just think about it—I'm so sure so many other girls would want to be as beautiful as them. I wonder if I could sell our jewelry in Saturday's flea market. That would make enough money to buy a plastic slide. And I need that slide.

It is the next day. I am surrounded by hundreds of people. A nun's uniform brushes my leg. A farmer's arm hair pricks my wrists; a butcher's muscular shoulder bumps mine. I clutch the Ziploc of Mom's gold as I walk. Maybe I'm clutching it too tight, for my palms are sweating like the clouds ready to unleash rain. The noise of the bustling flea market irritates my eardrums: the calls of mothers, the shouts of vendors, the loafer clicks against pavement. Finally, I find an empty street corner to set up the gold. It's covered in dried, black gum. On the side, a few grimy cardboard boxes rest. I flip them over and range all the gold I brought. And thus, my first business endeavor began! Maybe I should be shouting like the rest of the vendors. "Jewelry, jewelry! Bracelets, necklace, earrings, brooches! All gold, everything! Gold, shimmering and shining!" I get a few glances. I keep yelling to the sky, urging people to crowd around my items. Finally, a crowd of about 7 elderly women came to my stand, each wearing burets and matching sets. Looking at their level of fashion, I'm hopeful they will go crazy for Mother's gold. "Hello! Anything catching your attention," I ask, signaling to the jewelry. They ignore me, instead taking a good stare at the gold, their lashes covered in clumpy mascara. They start hand signaling to one another. "Doesn't she look too young to be selling out here," I translate. "That's why I don't trust her," another responds. They think I don't know sign language. If only they knew I had a deaf mother. The harsh wind is blowing away the zip bags. My knees crack to get it back, when I hear the sound of shoe flats waltzing away. They left.

Like it was on cue, it starts to rain, the cold droplets piercing the tip of my nose. Just great. Exactly what I need. The clouds start to pour laundry tubs of water, seeping between the gold chains. How could this happen? I sweep up the jewelry, throw them into the ziplock, and walk angrily home. My curls become wet noodles and my floral blouse becomes one of Mom's kitchen rags.

Later, after I got a severe punishment from my father for selling my deceased mother's gold, I started making necklaces from the stems of daisies and dandelions. They broke the next day, but it kept me out of trouble. Biodegradable, if you will.

Later, in my teenage years, I would have worked alongside the top jewelers. And later, even still, I will have created thousands of pieces of jewelry for big companies. And even later, I will have loved my self-made wedding ring that glimmers in the sunlight. Pure diamond.

But, on this Saturday, with the rain pounding on my head, this trip is enough.
Only a girl's ambition. My own small imitation of oxygen in this tiring world.

Waves

Sarah Jordan

Every Friday morning, my brother would bike five minutes to the beach. He would walk for an hour, until 7:30 A.M., then would stand in the water for a few minutes, staring at the ocean in silence. I only know his exact routine because he's asked me to come with him a few times. It's the same each Thursday. He'll refuse to talk to me the entire time we're there, but he speaks to the waves.

"I failed a quiz yesterday. It's the first time I've ever failed," he told it once, wiggling his feet deeper into the sand. He didn't say anything about failing a quiz at dinner or at any other point at home.

I didn't understand it at first. He would barely talk at home but would talk on and on to the ocean as if it were his best friend. My parents got increasingly worried the more he did this and when they asked me why, I explained about him talking to the waves. I didn't know why he did it, but for some reason, he trusted the waves more than anyone else.

At home, he would watch TV with me or play tag around the house, but he seldom said anything. It made both my parents and me sad.

It took me years to understand why he did this. I had no time to walk with him anymore because school started so early. He began to spend more time at the beach and I barely saw him. I asked him during dinner one night about his old friend, Charlie, who he spent most of his time with when he was younger. They had been the closest of friends, yet one day, they simply stopped seeing each other. I hoped the thought of an old friend would get him to socialize again. He looked at me and responded in a shaky voice that he had moved away. He didn't say anything for the rest of the night.

The morning after happened to be Saturday, so I found enough time to stop him before he left.

"Hey," I said, blocking the door with my arm, "Listen, I understand you think the ocean can get rid of your need for friends, but it can't. You need to talk to somebody else, okay? A human."

He looked away and folded his arms, "I don't have anyone to talk to."

I kneeled to his height and looked into his small honey-colored eyes. They were dripping with tears.

"You have me."

We hugged and I told him we could go anywhere he wanted. He chose the arcade.



Spanish

Sage Davis

I woke up every morning to the sound of Duolingo's correct answer. I rolled my eyes and covered my ears. "She does this every damn day," I muttered. At this rate, I couldn't fall back asleep. I made my bed and headed downstairs.

"Morning," I greeted and got no response, per the usual. I looked in the fridge to grab my pancake batter. "Tammy! Did you use my pancake batter?"

"No, no usé tu estúpida masa para panqueques. Pregúntale al perro, oh espera... no puede hablar," she responded this time.

"Ugh! You know I can't speak Spanish!" I shouted, frustrated by her antics. I closed the fridge and decided to skip breakfast.

There was no use in trying to remove her phone from her. The last time Dad tried, she got aggressive and stabbed him with a knife in the abdomen. Ultimately, he was rushed to the ER, and she never apologized. She's been glued to that app ever since I can remember. We took her to a therapist, and they say she's making progress, but I haven't seen a change yet, and she's had a therapist for 7 years. Even when she was in therapy, I heard she was still doing Duolingo.

I shook those thoughts away and went upstairs to prepare for my best friend, Dani, to come over. When they arrived and saw Tammy still doing Duolingo, they asked: "Has your sister always been this obsessed with Duolingo?" I had no answer.

I left for college, and she stayed home. I got used to her waking me up at the brink of dawn, so now my body naturally wakes up. Occasionally, I'd come back home for a holiday or a birthday, and I'd see her, on the same couch, with her on her phone, on that damn app still learning Spanish. It seemed as if she hadn't moved an inch since I left, but she didn't look like a corpse. A plate of food had long turned cold, left untouched.

"EAT SOME DINNER, T!" I yelled, hoping that it would snap her out of whatever trap she was in, but as usual, I never got a response. I hadn't heard her voice in a conversation in so long. The most I'd hear her voice would be in a voice lesson on Duolingo. Some years down the road, our dad died, and she got thinner and thinner. At some point, she wrote me letters, of course, they were all in Spanish. I didn't understand them back then, but I do now. She passed with her phone in her hand and that damn app up on her screen. We had her funeral, and her phone was burned. I never understood why she was so obsessed, and I never got an answer. The therapists never found anything wrong with her. I assumed that her obsession with Duolingo was just an obsession gone wrong.

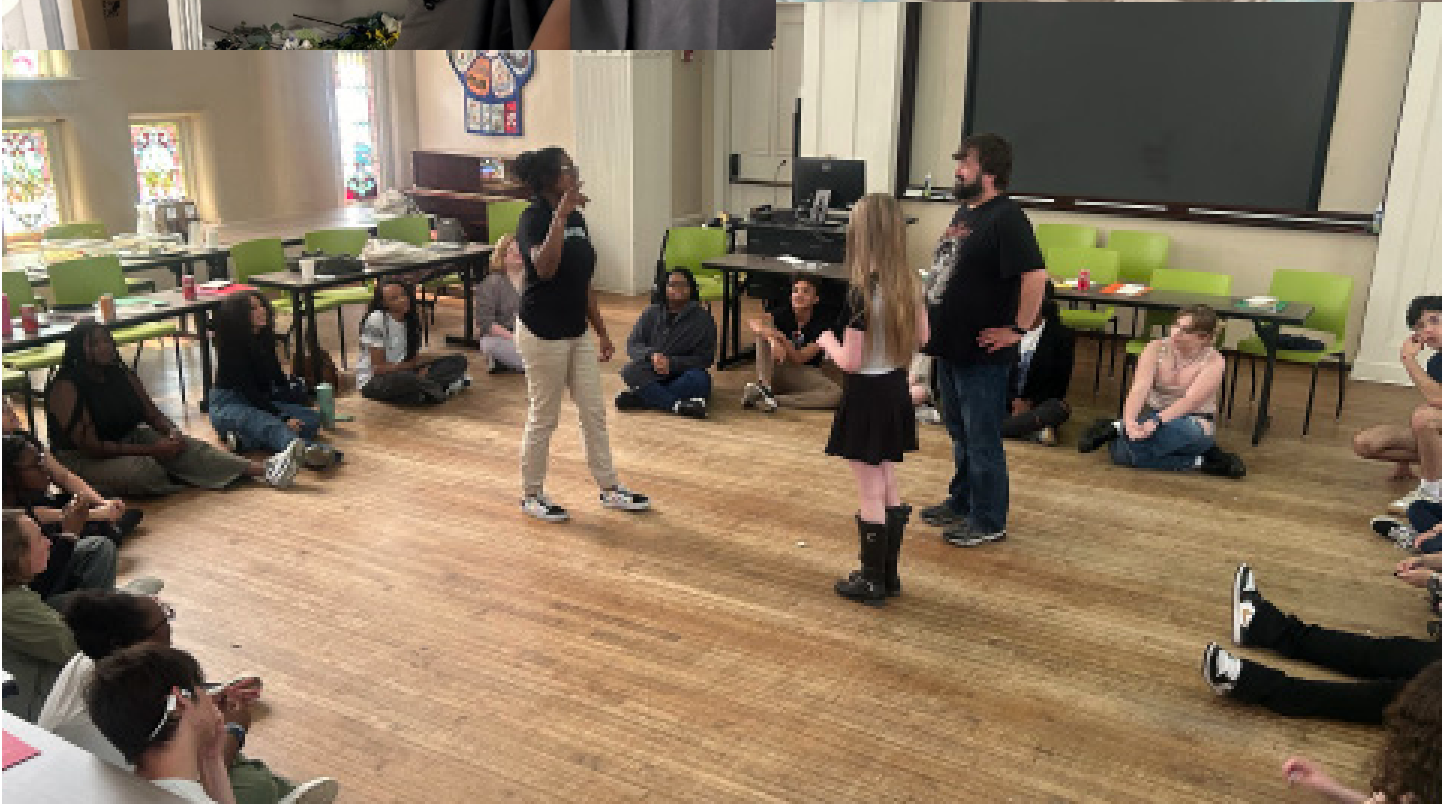
At some point, I moved back into the house. I sat in the same seat that Tammy sat in and got a little curious about Duolingo, so I decided to download it. From the little pieces of Spanish that I've picked up from her, I was able to get a few correct answers. I found the sound very satisfying, and I started to see why she was so obsessed with it, but I didn't want to end up like her, so I deleted the app, but I made the correct answer sound my alarm. Now I woke up every morning to the sound of Duolingo's correct answer.

Neighborhood Kids

Gwyneth Amrein

Every weekend morning, the shouts and screeches of children startle me awake. I'm a busy man, don't they know that!? They have school, so shouldn't they want to sleep too? They're not just content with interrupting my sleep: they kick their toys onto my roof, the dogs they begged their parents for poop in my yard, and don't get me started on their pranks! The egging, the toilet paper, even their games of "ding-dong-ditch" grind my gears! Disrespectful, ungrateful, spoiled pests are what they are!

One day, a boy knocked on my door. He threw his ball into my backyard again. "I'm tired," I thought before letting him in. I noticed his parents' car wasn't in their driveway. I remembered I needed help with some gardening, so I asked the young man. He refused. Of course, a brat like him refused. He got his ball, and I got my shovel. I finished my garden, put a new bird statue in it, and found a new fertilizer. I'll have to get more when I can. I'm sure their parents won't miss those pests.



The War (Remastered)

Kristopher Perez

When I was 17, I enlisted straight out of high school, leaving my small town behind. I dreamed of honor, to defend a cause I was told to believe in. I believed in it. The recruiter painted pictures of valor and camaraderie, and I was eager to be a part of something bigger than myself. I was beaten down to my last fiber in basic. Under all the yelling instructors, arduous physical tests and scrambling enlistees it ended up being fruitful. I felt a sense of pride putting on that uniform, standing shoulder to shoulder with my new found brothers.

When I was 18, on the way to my first deployment to the region, I had my helmet in tow as it represented to me the cause, the reason why me and my mates were here, something to fight for in hopes of making the world a safer place. During my stay the heat, the noise, the constant fear—it was like nothing I had ever imagined. The camp wasn't much better as none of our tents could keep out the mosquitoes or the heat. At the time our camp's superiors were not much of leaders as hags just ready to get out. I knew it was time to get new leaders and swore I would eventually be a better leader. For now the adrenaline was the only thing that kept me going, kept me sharp. But then there were the nights, when everything went quiet, and the reality of where I was and what my purpose would hit me.

When I was 20, on my way back to the region, my helmet bore scars displaying its worth and the endurance of the cause as it was our moral reason that drove us to do whatever we needed to or it could be higher ups overall views on a sense of justice. My second stay was different however. The locals started bombing our convoys with their molotov cocktails, their faces slowly blending in with the faces of the enemy. In spite of all this destruction around us, there was one shining light in it all. It took the form of a lanky kid from some small town in the Midwest, with a shock of unruly brown hair that barely fit under his helmet. He had a nervous energy about him, the kind that's always looking for reassurance but doesn't quite know how to ask for it. His name was Jerry Parkers, the newest member to our unit, he brought us a bit of that small-town innocence, something we were all longing for. Soon as the months grew longer we managed to capture some of the locals but they were no help as they preferred to opt out after muttering a phrase in their native language. Maybe a slogan or something.

When I was 23, on my third tour of the region my helmet bore more than just dents, so I just never wore it anymore and the higher the rank I got the more I saw the cause as just being the higher ups facade more than a personal sense of justice worth defending. Luckily I managed to be stationed at the same camp with Jerry Parkers again, this time he was older and a bit tougher now but he still kept his shining light. This time instead of working side by side with him, I would lead him as he was one of the members assigned to my squad. As the war dragged on the higher ups were sending us on increasingly more pointless and doomed missions. Regardless of whether it was an abandoned enemy camp or an ambush, I saw friends come and go. Some went home with medals, others in body bags. My dreams became haunted by the faces of my fallen comrades. Especially by the face of Parkers. His last words were those of confusion as he held my hand tightly, staring into my soul as I loaded him into the medical Huey. "Will Pops be proud? Was it worth it sir?" He questioned me as his superior, he trusted me and I had repaid him by

leading him straight to his death. My face stood still, holding back remorse and a few tears as I lied to him, telling him it was all going to be alright. I promised him he would be a hero. Except he wouldn't be, no one would remember the name of Jerry Parkers, just another statistic in the higher ups charts.

Soon this confusion would seep into the camp as our deployment stationed down there would begin to drag. "Why are we even down here? We don't have a reason, it was all a misinterpretation no?" Some of the soldiers would question each other. "They say it's to stop the Reds, but really we are just here to make the Ol' Richy look good" The others would answer back, further fueling the burning spite and disillusionment with the cause within the draftees. I was one of the only enlistees left, the only one who joined with a true belief in the cause. I tried to break up these mutinous moments by reinstating the cause, mouthing the words; to make the world a safer place but the sound would never leave my throat. Despite the war consuming my life, I was starting to lose the ability to believe in the cause, feeling that I was lying to myself. In the meantime, day-by-day, The enemy grew in numbers as more locals joined them and more of our camps fell under the relentless attacks with our flags being torn down, the red flag with a golden star, flying high in their place. It became clear to us that their attacks were filled with passion, a deeper meaning.

When I was 25, I carried scars both seen and unseen, each one a reminder of the price of service. The price of the cause. Then came the day that changed everything, the first time I had worn my helmet in a while. We were on patrol, and it was supposed to be routine. But there's no such thing as routine in a war zone. The explosion was deafening, our convoy was engulfed in flames. Most of us were dead, those who weren't were left to fight off ghosts attacking from all angles. I threw my battered helmet off to distract our invisible enemy, only for it to be blown into hundreds of shards, deadlier than a grenade.

Now I am 27, most of my helmet is in shards lying around the jungle, a few pieces lodged in my spine. I will never walk again, the Docs told me. I gave my life to the cause and now I sit in an empty home filled with no purpose. My television is the only thing in my home that reattaches me to reality. The news shows the enemy's flag flying high over every building in that war-torn country. I am wiser now, a far cry from the eager kid who signed up for glory. I realized that a cause for fighting can not be instilled to you by anyone but yourself. You have to nurture it and accept it into your morals and heart, putting forth as much determination as possible. It helped the enemy win, looking back, we lost because our cause was truly lost before the war or yet it was never truly there. Until lips feign no more.



Poetry

*Taught by Ashley Jones,
Emmett Christolear, and
Jermaine Thompson*

Do I satisfy you/why wait?

Bee Holmes

Does my queerness satisfy you?

Are you satisfied?

Are you satisfied with my identity,
my journey, my story?

Tell me, was I not bullied enough for your taste,
Called too few slurs for your liking,
Though I'm sure if you saw,
You would find my self loathing palatable

So, why do queer stories exist to you
When they're bad
Where's the rainbow in our stormy feeds
Why do queer stories exist to you
only after they've ended?

Why do we have to be traumatized and killed
to have our stories told?

And even then, It's not enough.
For you to stop your hate
When they cut me I will bleed
So why wait.



Why Some People Hold Me Like Glass

Jett Waara

They discuss me while I'm in the corner
I'm playing with sand, they say
I'm disabled

They treat me like I'm fragile
Even after so many years
When I break down
They try to pick me up
like so many pieces of broken glass
I could do it myself
If you'd let me

You Have Your Shadow

Ash Graham

Sometimes I wish I would know
But a lot of the time, maybe I'm not
supposed to
But how it starts is when it all goes to
The time I was all alone
White dress like snow
I had told myself
This way to give me help
And it was that "You are not alone You have your
shadow"
Imaginary friends split in reality
Trying to be the best me
Did you know it's exhausting?
Social batteries on 1 percent
The voices in my head are impatient
But I fear loneliness, it hurts so much
But talking all the time, isn't that my luck?
Me too I find myself annoying
But not you, who is destroying
It's the change that is troubling
It's the waiting
the wondering
The unknowing
the gaslighting
Why are all of my friends so mean?
None of them are, it's just me
Me to my imaginary fiends
Fiction that holds the lives
Diction that holds the lies
Well my time is tied
And my brain is fried
I cannot handle this illness
What even is this?
This obsession, these delusions
With such awful conclusions
I don't know what to do with them

Whenever I look at my own shadow, I'm
To think of this, I wasn't even aware
It's just like a monstrous version of me
That I tried so hard to keep
Away from reality
I remember seeing all of my fears
But people would see stupid tears
It's not skitzi, I'm just a bit frenzy
Will someone help me?
Or am I on my own journey?
But these shadows are just reminders
You are not alone, just endure
One day you'll finally open the door
And then you can make it so
All of the shadows
Are no longer alone
A golden warmth
Will provide the intrusives with rooms
Of their very own



The page is decorated with water droplets on the left and a lime slice on the right. The title is in a serif font.

the different connotations of blank

Cathryn Jones

You're a part of litter.
So dangerous.
On the side of the road,
I'm scared to pick you up.
I do anyway.
To prevent others from having to do the same
Maybe I don't want people to hurt...
On the flip side,
You're created for beautiful works
You can go places we never thought about going
But to think of where you came from,
A place so beautiful,
How did you become this substance we fear?

Her

Amber Carroll

As I write I think about the way she spoke.
Her words were soft towards me and harsh to others.
I think about the way she comforted me when I felt empty.
She made me feel full.



Stuck

Amaya Gresham

Stretched. Stiff. Hunched.
Petals white and pink or lavender in bloom
I grow by the water
Watching the frogs and tadpoles swim by
My bed is sandy soil and I coil in the winter
Low maintenance and my flower is showy
By myself I like full sunlight when I'm growing
I hear the crunch crunch crunch of the people walking by
They pluck pluck pluck things that intrigue their eyes
Robbing mother nature
They have plucked my brothers and sisters
Leaving me here
Alone
I watch every day
Wishing
Praying that I could move
But I remain latched down to the earth
Stuck and sewn into the world like a button



The Trials of Love.

Justin Fredd

As I stand here. Contemplating.
Should I let love corrupt my mind?

If i let love corrupt my mind,
The outcome would be dire.

I know it would be, but i wonder,
Why can't I give in this one time?

I gave in for the last time.
Now I'm back again, hurt.

I lay here. Hurt. again. I drift into a slumber that feels
like an empty void filled with sorrow and regret.

As I drift further, I fall into the same thought
that hurt me once before.

Should I let love corrupt my mind?
I gave in. I let love corrupt my mind.

Now I stand here.
Beyond contemplation.

Why Some People Don't Listen To No

Elin Barrett

They read to me my rights.
And tell me what I cannot know, or do, or say.
But they have not warned me,
To never plead no.
They never did warn me,
To beware the men on the streets,
Or the boy that sits beside you.
Those were not apart of my rights.
Why must I endure the pull of my flesh, the pain in my body?
They break me down into a prostitute.
But I am just a kid.
We are all women,
And children,
And we cannot ask to be seen,
Without being dictated into force.
Without having to strip our innocence,
Because some people don't listen to know.

Thorns and Weeds (A Side)

Rian McDade

After "Paper Bag" "For the Departed"

All these flowers have
Petals and leaves
Would it be prettier if
I was never here
I love the wind
The color
And the smells
Maybe pluck my sorry roots
From the rich soil
The lovely whimsy
Don't you see
The ink blot of black
On the white canvas
Of delicate flowers
So stupid tired
The sun must be
Wasting its billions
of years
on my wilted leaves
so far
so long ago
I felt like a flower
But I am but a weed

Sitting in a nightgown
In a room
Of elegant ballroom dresses
The elephant in
The room
Of swans



“Who has the keys to my cage?”

Mario Rodriguez

We dwell In fear
We live In the darkness
Corruption surrounding us
Taking over our lives
Our lively hood
We hope for release
But There's no such thing
Not here at least
When we see the light we run towards it
Thinking we have made free of the darkness
The corruption no longer
We rejoice thinking we can be free
Then the light changes-it shifts
Twisting and turning
Into something dark
Something evil
We ran from the darkness to find new hope
But is seems no matter where we run
There's always darkness
We will always be under someone's control
Freedom isn't real, it's a false statement
Luring people into its trap
There's no where you can run or hide
You will never escape its reach
You are to be forever caged



Pinkroot

Brooke Silas

Loss of space
Destroying my soul
Emptying my heart

Pink was my root
Brown now lays still beneath my feet

A final breath leaves my skin
Waves flow through my veins
Leaving me a marbled mess of a skin

Prickly thorns leaving me sickly
Fire burning my soul
Reaching the depths of my roots

Destroying me
Destroying the realm



DUPLEX USING 'TOO SWEET' BY HOZIER

Mikayla Rose

You know you're bright as the morning, as soft as the rain
I can't wait to be in your arms again

Feeling your warm embrace
My heart is like a flowing current rushing to get to you

Flowing and rushing it's all the same, i just want to feel you again
I would knock down, and break whatever is my path just to hold you

I would break down the trees and crash against the rocks
Holding you in my arms a sweet and kind embrace

Staring into your eyes begging to kiss your face
Hoping to never let go but then you slip away

Watching you drift down the immeasurable stream
I gaze upon your glory, hoping you know my story

I believe you know how I truly feel.. but my story is right here
You know you're bright as the morning, as soft as the rain



the little boy on the phone after "Face-Time" by Clint Smith

Harmony Adley

On another night
In a room
In a house
In a community
On a phone
I see you
I see your hands
Your feet
I see you
How small
You are
But I can
Not hold you
But I see you



some people never want the world to change

Allie Rezek

They tell me to bow my head
and burry my voice
so no boy will get offended.
they tell me that i am too young,
that my family still has the power
to dictate my every move.
that i am just a little girl.
that i have nothing to offer in this world. that women
were only made My God
to be a pretty face for men to admire.
that we should forever be laced with femininity even
if that's not what we desire.
that maybe someday, when i am older
If the world has changed,
i can pick up my head
and revive my voice
so i can be seen for something other than my looks.

Wild Flower Girls

Mairwen Jones

The round cheeks of hers redden,
Blooming little freckle flowers under her eyes.
Her flowers grow like weeds
Past her ears and into the soil I hold,
Dense in my hands.
She tells me about why she cries,
And I cry too.
I wish...
I love...
I want...
We always begin our thoughts with
I wish...
I love...
I want...
We always sob when we finish them.

Dangling Fruit

Ash Chavez Cruz

You reach your hand out
grabbing it in the sky
a star
a suffocation , a starvation
You eat it whole
crunching and screeching
Perhaps your dreams will come true
a star in the sky
a star, crushed, dies
the sweet taste
Burning, as it goes
sizzingly ripe



Listen to “U Are Beautiful” by Ash Graham, Brooke Silas, Dania Alzoubi, Dorianni Mendoza, Elin Barrett, and Maddison Cole.

Podcasting taught by Beth Shelburne.

<https://tinyurl.com/5c6waemc>

Wither

Taia Arsenian

“What does a panic attack feel like?”

They think

Of difficulty breathing.

And a pounding heart.

Like you had just run a mile.

Because they don’t know

The way

Your chest squeezes.

And your

Lungs, ribs, and heart compress

Pressed together.

“Breathe” says the brain.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe

But the lungs

Are trapped.

Next to the heart.

And the heart says “Wither”



Screenwriting

Taught by Katie Boyer

Screen Play

Joshua Litwiniec

INT. - CARLA LOCKER ROOM - NIGHT

Carla walks in throwing her gloves to the side. She is a lean but strong woman. With dark skin and is a little above average in height, age 24.

CARLA

That call was so stupid I threw a punch to the face and they said It was an illegal punch to the throat.

Suddenly Carla's coach James age 53 walks in. He is a big man with dead eyes like a shark. He was fuming.

JAMES

You promised that you wouldn't do anything illegal out there. So what the hell was that!?

CARLA

It's not my fault James. It's the judges. It's rigged. They hate me. There is nothing I can do.

James pauses his white skin Redding with fury.

JAMES

Not your fault, like hell. I've lost so much money in bets on your sorry self you should just quit!

Carla thinks to herself letting those words get to her. Tears start forming in the corner of her eyes. She grabs her keys.

CARLA

You know what? You're right maybe I should quit and waste all of what I have trained for. Like hell! So I'm



going to find a new ring and a new coach. Have a nice life James.

JAMES

Good riddance and good luck.

Carla grabs her keys leaving the room and walking down the hall.

INT - HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Carla walks down a hall. When a mysterious woman walks by her wearing a hoodie and baggy jeans she is mostly concealed. She is a little on the shorter side looking around 39.

NATALIE

Excuse me are you Carla?

CARLA

Yes.

NATALIE

I overheard the fight with your coach, and was wondering if you are okay.

Natalie's tone was sweet and disarming making Carla feel safe. About talking with her about the fight.

CARLA

I wish I could say everything is alright, but I am out of a job now and don't know how to carry on.

NATALIE

Oh, you poor thing. I'm so sorry.

CARLA

Yeah, it sucks, but some times that is how it is.

Carla begins to walk away when Natalie says something.

NATALIE

Wait a minute sweetie.

Carla turns to meet the woman who removes her hood and we can see she is blonde with faint wrinkles around her eyes.

NATALIE

I wouldn't have stopped you if I
couldn't offer you a job. I want you
in my ring.

CARLA

This is a little random. And a little
suspicious.

Carla thinks about the offer a little skeptically but she remembers how she needs to pay this months rent.

CARLA

How much would you pay me?

NATALIE

4000 dollars should convince you.

CARLA

I will take you up on that offer, but
how much is this compensation.

Carla has to bite her lip keep herself from screaming yes.
She practically jumps at the opportunity.

CARLA

That is more than enough with that
much I can be so far a head with my
rent.

NATALIE

Excellent. The fights happen at 10pm
in the old coke factory. I expect your
A game.



CARLA

But ma'am why did you chose me to
fight?

NATALIE

Because you have so much potential
that goes overlooked. You win every
fight.

CARLA

That's quite the opposite though.

Natalie starts smiling slyly.

NATALIE

We can all see that the judges hate
you and do whatever they can to foul
you. You have very few options, and as
much as I want you I could find others
who need this just as much as you do.
So I suggest that you take this offer.

CARLA

I will take it ma'am and trust me when
I say I won't let you down.

NATALIE


I know you won't.

EXT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Carla walks to her car driving to her apartment humming with
joy.

Int. Hallway - NIGHT

Natalie smiles wickedly as her footsteps clack down the hall
with a mysterious echo.



Screen Play

Maddison Cole

EXT.THREE STORY BUILDING, MELINA'S OFFICE - NIGHT

MELINA LENZA is Italian and in her 20's. She is seen sitting at a desk through her window.

She wears a professional black suit while sitting at her desk doing paper work.

It looks like it's through the scope of a sniper rifle.

Suddenly we hear the disinterested voice of a MAN.

MAN (V.O)

Hey boss. Eyes are on the target.

Another, different voice is heard; it is the man's BOSS.

His voice is much more gruff and demanding. He has a New Jersey accent.

BOSS (V.O)

Good. Make sure ya aim is straight
boy, an don't hesitate.

MAN (V.O)

Yes sir...

Movement and fiddling of the gun is heard and the sniper view shifts slightly. A gun shot is fired and the sniper rifle view falls.

Melina walks towards the window with an air of superiority and speaks through an earpiece to JESTER, a 40 year old man with a deep voice.

MELINA

So Jester, has it been taken care of?

JESTER (V.O)

Yes miss, the target has been
executed. I will have someone dispose
of the body at soon as possible.

MELINA

Good. Give me an update on his boss'
location ASAP.

INT. MELINA'S OFFICE - NIGHT CONT.

Melina's phone rings and she turns to briskly walk to her desk and pick up the phone. The voice on the phone is muffled and indistinct.

MELINA

Hey babe. [Pause for response] Yea,
I'm just finishing up my
paperwork. [pause again] Of course I
haven't forgotten about you love, I'll
be home soon. [Pause] I love you, too.
Buh-bye.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - THE NEXT DAY

Melina is seated against the wall in a chair facing the Boss on the floor.

Jester, the same 40 year old brooding man with
a deep voice stands in the corner with his pistol at the
ready. The Boss is balding and looks like a failed gambler.
He is handcuffed and sitting on his knees, huffing like he
just ran a marathon.

MELINA

So, what was your motive? If you
killed me, my men would come after you.

BOSS

I ain't tellin' you nothin' bitch.

MELINA

I'm sure we could change that, right, Jester?

Jester slowly stalks up to the Boss. He puts his pistol in
the holster with careful precision and punches him straight
in the face. Boss let's out an agonized shout and blood
spurts from his nose.

BOSS

AH! You broke my nose you bitch!
The hell is wrong with you?

MELINA

Nothing is wrong with him, he's doing his job. The question is, what's wrong with you? We didn't make no moves on you or your territory or your people, so why are you targeting me?

BOSS

Why do ya think? You don't know none of ya family history? Ya bitch mother killed my wife, so now I kill you!

MELINA

Well, seems like you didn't realize that this mafia is under new leadership and that ain't happening.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door and one of her lower ranking HENCHMEN opened the door. He was of average height and build with caramel skin.

HENCHMAN

Miss. I'm sorry to interrupt your... meeting, but there is someone who would like to see you.

MELINA

Well who is it? Is this really that important?

A voice is heard a ways from the door. It is Melina's boyfriend BRIAN. He is average height and brown skinned with a strong build.

BRIAN

Melina? What is going on? I didn't know you had body guards, or that you had a meeting. I was trying to surprise you with lunch.

Brian's voice drew ever closer and Melina began to walk towards the door, hoping to prevent Brian from coming in.

MELINA

Stay right there love, I'm coming to you.

BRIAN

No no, it's fine I'm almost there.

HENCHMAN

This is a very important meeting you aren't allowed inside.

Brian ignores the henchman and pushes past him. He walks straight into the interrogation room and looks around only to see Jester trying to block Boss from his view and Melina rooted to the ground in shock.

BRIAN

What's going on? Melina, you are a business owner, what are you doing?

MELINA

Yea, I'm a business owner.

BRIAN

What type of business do you own, Melina?

Brian walks towards Melina with a slight air of anger and Jester steps forward slightly in case of a fight. Boss is left in full view and Brian stops in shock to look at the battered man. Melina watches him warily.

BRIAN

Melina, what the hell is going on?

MELINA

I own my family's business... and that business is a mafia.

Brian stands there staring at Melina in disbelief.

BRIAN

This has to be a joke. Please tell me this is a joke!

MELINA

No, I'm sorry. I should've told you before, but it wasn't safe.

BRIAN

You're damn right it's not safe! I don't want to be a part of your messed up mafia!

MELINA

Brian, please listen to me. It wasn't

safe then because I had no way to
protect you! I can protect you now, I
have protocols ready to be put into
place

BRIAN

No! I don't want to be with you. You
are not the person I fell in love
with. You are sick and twisted. You
probably torture and murder people for
fun! Or sell bed drugs to people! Or
Sex Traffic.

MELINA

Brian, please hear me out!

BRIAN

No! You are a terrible person, I don't
know how you sleep at night. I never
want to see you again!



CLAIRVOYANT

Ada Long

My name is Clarence Day, and my parents were normal. That's what it says on my traveling van right after it says, in perfect red letters, that I'm 20" high and weigh 39 lbs., THE WORLD'S SMALLEST MAN. It also says I have a high school education. When that got added to the sign, my income went up 17%. My wife did that calculation, she keeps the books. It doesn't say so on the sign, but she's normal too. The loudspeaker tells about her once we've settled in at the fairgrounds and opened up for business. I hear over and over again, maybe eighty times a day, that I have a normal wife and two perfectly normal children. One of them collects the money while the other one hangs around a lot and calls me Dad. We all work together, and we eat well.

You're probably wondering if those two boys are really my children. People want to know that, but they never ask. I guess there's just no way to ask that question and feel good about yourself. If someone could figure a nice way to ask, I'd tell the truth. I'm pretty sure they're mine-as sure as any man is. I don't think about it much.

I'm good at my job. The sign says I'm small, and I am. I don't cheat people, even though they think I do. When they see me, I can tell they expected more for their 50 cents. I guess they expect a perfect little man, a tiny mirror of themselves, a little doll. They don't expect the head and trunk of a midget (even though they have to admit I'm a very small midget) with vestigial legs. But that's what they get. I'm not a doll. And nothing is perfect, not even freaks.

To be honest, I don't enjoy my work like I used to. Used to be that I'd hear footsteps on the wooden platform outside my trailer and my stomach would tighten as I waited for the faces to appear at the door- confident, happy faces on their day off, all lit up with the expectation of seeing something they could talk about back home on the front porch with a cool pitcher of lemonade sitting by. That wasn't the part I enjoyed, not that I begrudged it or anything. I liked the next part, the sudden bewilderment when those faces took account that it wasn't just them seeing me, but I was seeing them right back again. They hadn't reckoned on that when they paid their 50 cents, and I could see the sweat come up, see the eyes check for escape routes. I had them then-the world belonged to me in those moments they were recalculating, and I could have sent it spinning out of control. They were mine, and for a split second, they almost were me. I was that real to them. But I did nothing, of course. I just watched and enjoyed those moments until they got control of themselves again and said hello, clearing their throats of the fear that had got lodged there. We could chat then, with the touching formality of strangers who have survived a crisis together.

The chat hasn't changed. How do? Think there might be rain coming on? Hope not. Left the windows open back t'home. Ain't rained all month- be just my luck to have it coming in the windows the one day me and the family step out some. Ain't that always the way. Same conversations I've been having all my life, in uncertain weather. Rain and sun mean minor adjustments. Some folks don't put high value on that kind of chat, think nothing's getting said. But from where I sit, it seems like more's being said than any creature can take stock of. People come in there to see me and, no matter how disappointed they are, I expect they remember me a good long while. I expect what they remember, what pulls their coats every now and again, is the questions they didn't ask, that I didn't answer. Same thing I remember about them, all of them, and it's a lot to remember from so much chat, so many unanswered questions.

Could be I'm getting weary from so much remembering. Maybe that's where the salt's gone. Could be time for me to move on, do some other work. It's not always that I've worked the fairgrounds here in upstate Alabama, not by a long shot. It was some thirty years ago that we first settled on the outskirts of Gadsden. Had us an old farmhouse in those days and a yellow Packard, a clear and shiny yellow that nature never thought of, unless you think people are natural. Every time I looked at that Packard, I got hungry for sweets. Gained four pounds the year we got it, four delicious pounds that made me sick and happy. In

those days, we had a makeshift wagon, a box on wheels is what it was, that we'd hook up to the Packard on work days. Thinking back on it, I guess that box was real paltry. We painted it with at least twenty different shades of yellow, but next to the Packard, it was nothing but dull and puny. No light inside except what came through the door and the chinks in the wood. When folks came in to see me, they were really thrown off balance. Face to face with a freak in a dark box, nothing else to look at and no place to run. Pretty near all the men and women who walked through that door wished they hadn't, wished they could vanish back out into the sunlight in the blink of an eye. But every single one of them stayed for at least a minute or two. It wasn't the money they'd paid that made them do it; it was their pride. It's human pride that's kept me in business all these years, and I'm mighty thankful for it.

Things are different now. You step in the door, it's almost like stepping into somebody's living room. There's carpeting, electric lights, a kitchenette. Even upholstered chairs, if people want to sit down. Most prefer standing. Still, that old box on wheels had some magic in it. Maybe magic is the price you pay for comfort.

We gave up the farmhouse, too, for a split-level ranch-style, indoor-outdoor carpet, 29" color tv, furniture from Ethan Allen. It's more than comfortable. Funny how most folks just assume we live right here in the trailer, all four of us and not a bed in sight. Nice place you got here, they say, meaning nice home. But usually they ask if I come from around these parts- my accent isn't quite right, although I try- and I say, sure do, have a split-level just southeast of Gadsden. That's all they need to hear.

They also like to ask how long I've been married. I say forever, and they laugh. So I laugh too. But I don't let it stop there like I do with the weather. I go on and tell them that she's the finest woman on the face of the earth, and that's a fact. They look over at her- she's always right there- and I can see her in their eyes, see a normal woman flash up on their eyeballs. Then comes the squint, barely perceptible, while they wonder-wonder what it's like between me and her. Behind those eyes, there's a quick parade of snapshots- her and me at the dinner table, in the living room, in the bed. Finest woman on earth, I repeat, and the eyes come back to me. That's when I stop. I don't say that when we lie down together I'm tall.

Being the world's smallest man is my job. It's my work, and we all have to work one way or another. I do my job well, but doing it poorly would be just as much work, probably more.

There were some folks walked through my door just last week, young folks just starting to get the feel of being on their own. You have to admire the courage it takes to get the feel of that. Whatever else the young ones do or don't have, they've got courage. It's as common as the sparrow, and no less precious. Well, these kids are larking, and they come busting in the door full of fresh air and junk food and high spirit, till the hush settles on them. Four of them there are, and who's going to speak up first? You know they can't take too much of the hush. The guy that's first through the door stops short two steps in, causing a jam-up at his rear, so they're all stuck there together, a single lump of young humanity with eight big eyes. I never speak first.

Hi.

The sweetest sound you can imagine, and we're all grateful. Hi back to yoti, I say, with the emphasis on to. Come on in if you'd like. They separate out into two girls and two boys. The girl that said hi walks right up to me, Young Mr. First doesn't budge, and the other two shuffle in line between them. Where you folks from? I'm from Birmingham, says Hi, and I see myself in her eyes, big as life. Bigger. I look down the line, getting smaller and smaller, and I say you sure did pick a nice day to come to the fair. Mr. First has his eyes on my wife already, wondering, and Hi says yeah, it's real nice out there. She's worried now, doesn't want me to think she meant it isn't nice in here, so she asks if I come from around here. You know what I say, about the split-level outside Gadsden. Oh, she says, you don't sound like you're from Alabama. I say, you wouldn't believe all the places I've been in my life, telling her the truth. How'd you end up here? she asks. (My wife speaks up, says the kids are going out for hamburgers. Do I want one? No, I'm not hungry just yet, thank you.) I don't have to answer the question now, but I do. I say it's a good place to work. She wants to know why but doesn't ask, trying to figure it out for herself. Mr. First down there is thinking, what does

this dwarf know about work, sitting around on his tiny can all day, talking shit and collecting money? He's thinking about how hard he works, stashing all the goddamn pork loins and margarine and kotex into the goddamn bags for a bunch of old hags who don't even give him a goddamn tip. And here he is spending 50 cents to see a dwarf sit on his can.

He's right, of course. He works hard, too hard. It's a crying shame anyone's got to work as hard as he does, and it's a job to figure what makes them do it. It's not the money like he thinks it is. Twenty years from now, he'll be rolling in money, eating tenderloin and lying down each night with a woman who doesn't tip the grocery sackers. And he'll still be working too hard. I won't be here then, but when he drives past the fairgrounds, I'll be bile in his belly. His eyes will narrow in remembrance of the little fucker who sat on his can for a living.

On down the row, the skinny fellow with curly hair-it's brown in here but outside I know it's been golden-is looking at me in the past tense. I'm a story he's telling one Thursday night at Dugan's, story about a city boy venturing up a forlorn stretch of I-59 to experience the carnival of life among yesterday's people. His friends are enjoying the story, and so am I. He sets it up real good: the sunlight glinting off his Honda Civic in a field of unwashed pick-ups., the arduous journey from the parking lot through rows of pit-bulls and coon hounds that are bought and sold by dangerous characters (he describes them big bellies, no teeth, huge biceps; oddly cordial, even gracious, but scary as shit, like dams that could burst any minute and ravage everything in their path), the tables piled high with stolen hubcaps and ghetto blasters next to a table with nothing to sell but two rusted kettles and a broken toaster (Westinghouse, 1961). In the midst of it all a preacher, a kid in a J.C. Penney double-knit suit stained with his sweat, yelling about Gawd and Cheesus. Gathered around him are eight slackjawed farmers in overalls but no shirts, all twice the age of the preacher but awed, respectful, nodding as he tells them-begs them-to bring prayer into their lives and prepare for the coming of the Lorr-r-d-"For I say unto you, my brothers (hunh), that just as you put on your socks in the morning (hunh) before you go to put on your shoes (hunh), you must put on the Lorr-r-d, my brothers (hunh), before you can enter His Kingdom (hunh). The Kingdom awaits you, my brothers (hunh), but you have to dress rightly (hunh). Put on Cheesus every morning, brothers (hunh), and you'll march to Jerusalem (hunh) in Gawd's very own shoes ... " (A dramatic pause from our young storyteller here, and a giggle.) Suddenly, a small projectile rebounds off the sweaty sleeve of the double-knit suit. In the booth next door, a man is throwing chocolate ex-lax into the passing crowd-chocolate ex-lax, for chrissake-and people are down on their knees scooping the stuff up. You can tell the old farmers are tempted but don't want to be rude to the preacher, who's ignoring the ex-lax as best he can. (The crowd at Dugan's is laughing, but the story could be better, still needs work.) Finally, at the edge of the fairgrounds is this big yellow trailer with a banner on the side that says THE WORLD'S SMALLEST MAN / CLARENCE DAY | 20" HIGH / 39 LBS / NORMAL PARENTS / HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA / ADMISSION 50 CENTS. This voice is squawking on a loudspeaker about this guy's got a normal wife and two perfectly normal kids. I see a blond-headed kid, looks just like my little brother, hanging off the door, asking his dad for lunch money. Vick didn't want to go in, said it was all bullshit hype, but Nancy and I paid our 50 cents and you know Vick, wouldn't be caught missing anything and starts acting like it was his idea in the first place. Pays for both him and Rose, and we all go in. (Pause) I don't know what I was expecting, but, man, it was weird. (How was it weird?- this story's losing momentum. It isn't going anywhere.) I mean, it's like a normal room in there, little lamps and chairs, curtains on the window. There's a woman standing by the refrigerator, a plain woman, not bad looking, about my height. But right in the middle, there's this box-like thing, like a little stage sort of but more like a little barn with one wall missing, and that's where the world's smallest man is, looking right at us, very casual as if ... as if this was just an ordinary thing. It's kind of hard to describe but, I mean we were supposed to be looking at him but he was looking at us and just kind of like, well, waiting. I mean he was a real disappointment in a way. Vick was right, I guess- he was just a regular midget with no legs. With legs he'd have been normal height, for a midget, so it was like cheating. But it was weird. (How?) I mean, we had this perfectly normal conversation, very boring really, but it was a

strange experience. I can't describe it.

And finally he stops trying. There's something good here, he thinks, something about the South, about human nature and values, something that will make people laugh in just the right way. But he can't quite get it. It needs more work. He orders a rum and coke, feeling distracted and uneasy, but nobody seems to notice.

I like the storyteller. Next he'll edit me out and be a big success, but he'll keep knowing I'm there, wondering how to tell it right. Right now, looking down at me in the trailer, he's pleased with his story and the day's outing.

The other girl...well, she's having a hard time dealing with this and would rather not. It's gotten real hot in here all of a sudden, and there's a musty smell-not a particularly bad smell, but she feels herself breathing it in and doesn't want it inside of her. If she'd known what it was like, she'd have stayed outside. Can't imagine why anyone pays money to be uncomfortable like this. The only right thing to do in here is stare at this poor little man, but out on the street it would be the wrong thing to do. It's impolite to stare at the handicapped, not very pleasant either. She remembers going with her mother to the dime store when she was a kid. A lady was there at the lunch counter eating a hamburger, and she had this huge lump on her neck, like a balloon that got stuck to her face from the cheekbone down to the collar bone and the skin had just grown right over it. Her mom was busy fingering through the cosmetics display, and Rose just stared at that lump, hands clenched at her sides, afraid to feel her own face. As the lady chewed her hamburger, the lump didn't move at all-it was solid and still. The whole world narrowed in on that lump and that hamburger. The smell of the hamburger. Rose threw up all over the floor of the dime store and didn't feel right again for days. God must have a reason for doing this to people, maybe so the rest of us could count our blessings that He could have done it to us but didn't. Well, she sure does feel blessed, but it's not right to stare at people who aren't.

My wife is checking Rose out pretty close. Every once in a while we have folks getting sick in here-we've even had a few faint on us-and, believe me, it ruins our day as well as theirs. I'm hoping these kids are out of here before Todd gets back with the burgers, when suddenly Nancy asks, what's it like?

You can tell she's surprised she asked it and spooked now that it's out. She glances at Vick and Rose, who are wishing they didn't know her. Daniel lost the drift somewhere and doesn't know what she's asking. Fact is, she isn't sure either. Well, I'm on the spot now. I could say pretty near anything and it would be true, but what's the best truth for her and me right now? Nothing rises up to say itself like her question did. I have to choose an answer, and I want to do a good job. That's it, of course, so I tell her that it's a job. It's what I do, and I try to do it well. Right away, I recognize that I haven't gotten through to her; I've just gotten us both off the spot. The weariness comes on me, and I wish it didn't have to be like this. I wish I could open up her head and put the answer inside, put myself inside, and sleep. And sleep. I think I know what it's like to sleep, but I can't say I remember doing it myself. I close my eyes sometimes, but I don't see less clearly. Fact is I see more clearly, not just the upholstered chairs and lamps, the wife and kids, but lawns and battlefields, rug salesmen, princesses, outhouses, astrolabes, Walter the Penniless, Jane Fonda, broken scissors, and Faberge' eggs. Some folks say they have trouble remembering things, but the real trouble is forgetting. When those four kids said their good-byes last week and filed on out of the trailer, they marched right into the thick of my memories, and they'll stay there forever, rubbing elbows with people they don't even know about. At least not yet. They're still young now, and they think their lives are their own, but they're wrong about that. They're mine, too, and-like it or not-I'm theirs. That's what they got for their 50 cents. What I got was four new voices.

Student Biographies



Harmony Adley is 16 and a student at Holy Family Cristo Rey. She has volunteered to feed the homeless and march downtown for JROTC. For fun, she likes to play with her four dogs and sleep.

Dania Alzoubi is a rising high school senior planning to attend UAB in 2025! She loves science and math, and runs clubs at her school like Mu Alpha Theta, Science National Honor Society, Girls Who Code, and much more! On the other side of her brain, she loves



to explore creativity through poetry, music, photography, and illustrations. Dania's passion for kids shines through her work with her nonprofits @prishansi'stutoring and @readingroots. In her free time, she enjoys swimming, adding to her sticker collection, and having fun with her little sister. She is also fascinated by different cultures and dreams of learning as many languages as possible!



Gwyneth Amrein is a rising junior at Hokes Bluff High School and a straight-A student. Despite her gift for academics, she always found school boring and chose to pursue self-education and arts over textbooks and mathematics. She has always had a passion for fiction and a gift for writing. She believes while stories can reflect and teach about reality, the real world will always hold more value than what is on our screens. She hopes to inspire others with her work one day. She is now satisfied trying her best to learn Japanese and only shares her fiction with her cat, Nunya Business (actual name).





Taia Arsenian does not exist.

If she did, she would be a rising Junior at Indian Springs, and an aspiring writer whose work has earned a silver key in the scholastic writing competition. If she was not a figment of your imagination, she would enjoy reading, horror shows and podcasts, playing bass, learning about folklore and cryptozoology, and an assortment of music. She would have two cats, about a hundred unfinished documents, and a moderately impressive record collection.

But she does not exist.

is a tuba player and recently performed at Carnegie Hall this past march. She enjoys playing soccer and painting! Elin also has won a grand prize for poetry at her school. She has a huge passion for writing and loves the art of creating things such as poetry, music, and art.



Elin Barrett is a rising 8th grader at Mountain Brook Junior High. Elin also



Amber Carroll attends Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School, where she plays volleyball and flag football. She does photography and writes poems about her life in her free time. She has volunteered at a church daycare and at multiple school events and has interests in cooking and spoiling her little cousins with clothes. She loves to cook, specifically Alfredo. The thing she loves the most is taking pictures of her loved ones. Her favorite subject in school is English Literature and her inspiration to keep going is her History teacher, Ms. Jazmyne Evans.

Ash Chávez Cruz is 17 years old and from Holy Family Cristo Rey, class of 2025. She enjoys making commentary about issues around the world as well as her own life through poetry and short stories. Some of her favorite activities to do are cooking, baking, drawing, and playing games like Stardew Valley, Animal Crossing, and Sky: Children of the Light. At school, Ash enjoys STEMS, plans to major in Astronomy or Astrophysics, is President of Board Game Club and Art Club, is on her school's tennis team, and earned the Scholar Athlete award. A few facts many don't know about her are her controversial opinions on food, such as her dislike for mashed potatoes, and that she has a rock collection.



Maddison Cole graduated 3rd in her class and is a member of several honor societies, including the prestigious National Honor Society. During her time in high school, she was a part of the ACT Club, Spanish Club, Ensemble, and the Student Prayer and Reflection Committee. Outside of school, she was a part of her church's praise team and choir, she also helped with prayers, scripture readings, and other places she could volunteer in church. She enjoys singing, reading, playing piano, painting, drawing, watching cat videos, and writing stories and poems.

Keon Davis is a rising junior at Homewood High School. He is an A honor roll student and excels at his extracurricular activities as well. He's a 2nd degree black belt in taekwondo who loves to go to competitions and win titles. He loves playing a variety of instruments such as tuba, piano, and ukulele. In his free time, he loves playing videogames, doing puzzle challenges, and reading. He has a strong sense of justice and loves helping others in need.



Sage Davis joined the Alabama School of Fine Arts in 2023 as a visual artist and is going into her freshman year of high school. Outside of school, she engages in beach and indoor volleyball, and has been learning piano for 3 years. She has won a lot of awards with her piano skills and was the Bronze Champion in beach volleyball in 2023. Sage also volunteers at the Teen Advisory Board (TAB) at her local public library. She's also a girl scout and she just completed her silver award. In her free time, she crochets. On the right day, you might catch her wearing something she made.



The Amazing **Justin Fredd** is a rising junior going to Bessemer City High School. He participates in three extracurricular activities: choir, band, and AFJROTC. He earned a myriad of awards in his first two years of high school such as: Most Outstanding Choir Student, Most Outstanding Section Leader, Most Outstanding Vocalist, Most Outstanding Bass (Choir), and Cadet of The Year (ROTC). He also won the school talent show, leading in 1st place for singing. He has two dogs and one cat whom he loves like they're his real-life blood family. He loves music. He plays a few instruments such as the clarinet, saxophone, flute, trumpet, the piano, and of course his voice is his most valuable instrument.



Ash Graham is someone who thinks beyond the box with high levels of creativity flooding through their mind. To keep this creativity in check without it getting the best of them, Ash follow their deep passions for art, where she will show off her fashionable aesthetics and meticulous visual arts of millions of mediums, and hold many cartoony voices from very high to very low ranges. She also has had a lot of struggles in her life that could make her break down very easily and have caused her to have a very sensitive soul, but with their love of humor and laughter, they have learned how to bring brightness into the darkness of their lives and others by her friendly, accepting, and laughter-filled energy she gives everyone.



Blasting music until her ears bleed. Daydreaming until her mind goes blank. Driving until her tank screams at her to fill her gas. **Amaya Gresham** is somehow a scholar with a shaky lack of dedication. She will work herself to earn the highest grade even if the assignment gets turned in at the last minute. She is a fresh graduate from Gardendale High School in this year of 2024. During her school time, she earned herself the Best Overall English Award as well as various awards from the National Honor Society along with an awarding advanced diploma for having a 4.0 GPA. She has always found her calling in writing and poetry whether it be writing small poems in her free time or continuing already written songs from various celebrities. In her free time, after questioning her existence, you can find her at the pool with her friends, at church, or stuffing her face at various restaurants.





Bee Holmes is a rising junior at Magic City Acceptance Academy, an aspiring author, activist, fashion designer, photographer, and academic weapon. She is an Alabama native, born and raised in Birmingham. Bee is proudly queer. Bee hopes that one day she can create the same safe spaces for others that her community has given her, allowing people the space and support to explore and question their identity. Bee enjoys weaving art and activism together, whether that be in her writing, fashion, or photography; activism always seems to find its way into it in some way or another. You can usually find her scrolling through Instagram, taking pictures, petting her cat, at rehearsals, playing roller derby or writing notes app poems that will never ever see the light of day.

Amethyst Summer Hudson is a 2024 graduate of Gardendale High School. They are excited to start their college journey to become a therapist this fall at Jefferson State Community College. They long to help others through their struggles, having faced their own. They hope to set an example that even if you think you cannot continue, that life is too hard and they are not capable, that they can and they are capable. Amethyst, at the age of 14, published a small poetry book on Amazon. They love cats, though they are sure that cats do not love them. They hope to have a scrapbook of their two cats, KeKe and Binx, by the end of the year. If “who is most likely to become a crazy cat lady” was in the school yearbook, they would be the one to hold that title.



Joshua Litwiniec is a student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. He enjoys a multitude of activities, such as piano and violin. He holds many awards in piano, such as being the Alabama music teacher association winner overall. He is also a scout in the BSA and has achieved the coveted rank of star. When he is not doing other activities, you might see him backpacking or picking up a shiny rock.

Rian McDade is a rising 9th grader who will attend ASFA in 2024. She attends Girl Scouts and Wordsmiths as extracurricular activities. She has

consistently made the honor roll, earned medals in Science Olympiad, and has been accepted into the National Junior Honor Society. She volunteers in the Teen Advisory Board at the Pinson Public Library, Girl Scout Community Service Project, ELI Thrive, and Junior League as a Little Leager. In her downtime, she plays videogames, dabbles with the 3D modeling software in Blender, draws, paints, sculpts with clay, and other creative



activities. She is willing to help and work hard!



Dorianni Mendoza, a girl you’ve never met before, is a sophomore at Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School. She takes all honors classes and is an achieving student. She’s been accepted into the National Honors Society and Mu Alpha Theta. She’s received many awards during all her school years. She’s determined to always aim for the highest. Besides her academics, she loves to draw, create stories, nature walks, parties, dancing, singing and listening to her upbeat music. Though she is pretty quiet for the most part, she’s full of surprises. There is more than meets the eye for sure.



Cathryn Jones is a rising sophomore for the 2024-2025 school year at Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School (c/o 2027). As a child, she loved to read, and still does! Her interest in writing is partially influenced by her love of reading. Cathryn is a very active person. From running with her dogs, to playing on the court (volleyball and basketball), she is often engaged in some type of activity. The outdoors is like a second home to her as she takes great comfort enjoying the outside, weather permitting. If you ever rode in the car with her, you would notice that she totally prefers fresh air over air-conditioning during the summer! Her animals, her boyfriend, and her family mean the world to her. Cathryn loves to try new things and to meet new people. Most people would say she's a very

outgoing person, and it's never a dull conversation when you talk to her.

Mairwen Jones is a rising sophomore at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in the Creative Writing department. She has had fiction, poetry, and nonfiction writing published in her school's magazine, Cadence, for the past three years. She also enjoys filmmaking, and served as the script supervisor for a short film titled "Fool's Fortune" with the Sidewalk Youth Board. In her free time, she loves to read horror and analyze movies with her beloved kitten Bowie.



Sarah Jordan is a rising freshman at Hoover High School. She got into the National Junior Honor Society last year and got an award in math (although she has no idea how because she hates math). Sarah loves to write and hopes to write scripts for animated shows or movies one day. This hope also feeds into her attempt to learn to draw and animate (and if anyone has figured out how to animate in Adobe Photoshop, she would love to know). Not only does she want to make cartoons, she also loves to watch them, including Gravity Falls, The Owl House, Hilda, Over the Garden Wall, Phineas and Ferb, and Centaurworld. She also likes the outdoors, which includes kayaking, camping, and relaxing in the hammocks in her backyard. Sarah has a pet rabbit who is her favorite being in the

universe, although she is an absolute menace.

Kristopher Perez-Mata is a current honors student and rising Junior at Homewood High School. He plays saxophone in the Homewood Band and has received a Scholastic Golden Key Award for his writing. In his spare time, he also volunteers at the Bell Center and Exception Foundation. Kris has been re-casted for a 3rd (and possibly final) season at the Ada-Long workshop.



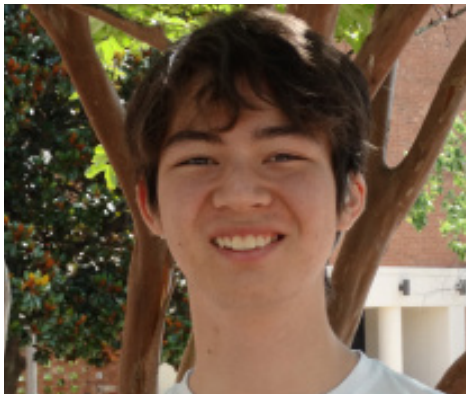
Allie Rezek is an upcoming sophomore at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in the creative writing department. She has been published in her school's yearly magazine called the Cadence. It is usually published around the end of the school year for the creative writing students to showcase their work. She is also published in an online magazine called GirlSpring which is a website for girls written by girls. Allie loves to read, write, and most importantly sleep.



Mario Rodriguez is a part of the senior class of 2025, at Gardendale High School. He is going on his third year of being a thespian, at Gardendale. Acting is just one of his many passions. He finds joy in helping his sister along with her softball journey, and being the softball manager for the high school. He is most passionate about writing and is the founder and President of the “Rocket Writers” at Gardendale. While being a student of the arts, he has many academic achievements and programs under his belt. Some of these include the Hudson Alpha Biotrain program, Huntsville Aerospace Society intern, UAB Hospital volunteer/intern, class president, member of the Society of Scholars, and many more great things. In his future, he plans on attending UAB with a double major in journalism and meteorology. While attending UAB, he hopes to join the student media team. In college, he plans to

continue his passion for the arts while continuing his academic life.

Brooke Silas is an upcoming sophomore at Chelsea High School and is graduating in 2027. She is involved in dance at Alabama Dance Academy and has been dancing since she was 2. With her dance studio, she has earned 1st and 2nd place with her contemporary trio and has earned 5th place with her contemporary quartet in the Universal Ballet Competition. She was voted “most likely to become a millionaire” and “Best Dance Captain.” She plans to go to college to become a pediatrician in the future. She enjoys playing tennis in her free time and loves to read and paint as well. She is involved in her school’s Key Club and regularly participates in volunteering to collect service hours and help her community. She takes care of her dog, Brownie, and enjoys listening to Stray Kids, Bruno Mars, and Laufey.



Jett Waara is a rising junior at Indian Springs School and will graduate in the year of our lord 2026. He can play guitar at least semi-competently and has played in a couple bands (currently learning “Drive” by Incubus). He has been nationally recognized as biliterate in Latin and will be going into the 4th year of learning that language. His photography has been selected to go to competition even though he didn’t win. He currently DMs a DND campaign for his friends, is in love with strategy games like CK3, loves old movies, and has 2 awful dogs by the names of Sprocket and Flash.

Mikayla Young is an upcoming sophomore at Holy Family Cristo Rey; Mikayla plays both volleyball and tennis for her school, and also does tennis recreationally. In her free time, Mikayla likes to swim, write, read, and bake. One of her favorite things to bake is any kind of cake or cookies. Mikayla enjoys writing poetry to express her feelings. She loves music even though her music taste is a little questionable, her favorite song right now is “Silence Between Songs” by Maddison Beer.



Writing Lives

