



Branches

volume twenty-four



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Heydi Dominguez-Torres

Mother

Intaglio

Awarded First Place by the Visual Arts Editors
(2-D Category)

Still? In the 21st Century?

By Gena Williams

This poem was awarded first place - poetry - by the literary editors of *Branches*.

No. 1

Mansplain to me again, please,
why I, a woman,
should be so happy in the world you have created for me.
How I have all I need
for a life of contentment,
straight from the pages of the King James Version.
I must have been confused,
thinking for a moment there
that I myself would know better what I need,
that I would know where the empty places are
that need filling with my own expressions of
my own divine female humanity.
But no, I realize now, dear,
that your wisdom far exceeds my own
and that I should defer to your station as my head.
Tell me again -- I forget--
which kind of pie do we like best?



Cindy Meissner

Untitled

Plaster

Awarded First Place by the Visual Arts Editors
(3-D Category)

Backwards Wink

By LB Sedlacek

This short story was awarded first place by the literary editors of *Branches*.

We went for the fish. Snow at the beach in the summer? How could that be? On the coast, on Hatteras. Yet there it was.

We got up early. Morning rise. To get the best haul. All the best fish there for the taking. Crappies. White or black. Specks. Strawberry bass. Calico bass. Grass bass. Swagle bass. Papermouth bass.

All frozen. In the ocean water. Sea water. Preserved by the salt. In July. Yes, July. Hot worrisome July.

I could taste the fish. Imagine it smoked, cooked over grits. Anything cooked with grits and butter melted in my mouth.

Watering, my mouth was, and I held two fingers up after licking them to check the wind. I couldn't tell anything. My fingers felt like ice cubes. The wind whipped between them. I zipped up my sweat jacket all the way. It had been light blue, but was more of a faded blue, a white now, I'd been wearing it so long. I'd had one too many girlfriend or friends with benefits bring up giving it away or cutting it up and turning it into rags. I didn't go to the university it represented and I didn't really care about the sports teams anyway, but the jacket was soft and mine.

I was the first one at the water and my sweat jacket was no match for the wind. I pulled up the hood. Tugged at the cords. Hitched up my jeans. Kicked my boots in the sand.

If I hadn't grown up on Hatteras, I wouldn't probably be known as the boy with boots, but I had, and so I was. I liked being a cowboy at the beach.

These fish, though, didn't need lassoing or anything but some scoops and buckets. Maybe an ice pick. To dig the fish out of the frozen water. They were packed in ice and snow. Nature's grocery store.

I fumbled through my pockets and pulled my hood over my ears and even wondered if I could maybe sell a fish or two; they wouldn't all keep in my freezer. I walked back and forth and then some more, and that's when I saw it. Something unfrozen alive and breathing, blood pumping and sounds of innocence I had never heard in person.

I slogged my boots through a sand induced snow drift. I stood still, but not still enough, because the innocence began to wail. I didn't know how to stop it or if the ringing in my ears would go away. I scooped it up. I looked upon innocence. It had big blue eyes and a sandy colored face. I picked up and held the baby tight and wondered what to do.

It didn't take long for my nickname to evolve and I'd always wanted it to, but not to what it became. Boy in the boots with a baby.

The ladies from church helped first with him. What did I know about raising a baby, they'd whisper. I knew they were right and I didn't want to raise it except I couldn't leave the innocence and no one tried to take him from me; they seemed to think we belonged together. It was summer and cold and the sheriff visited and someone from the DSS, but there was no one else, no one missing a baby. I think some people might have thought he was mine that I was the father and I was old enough, but I hadn't had that many girlfriends and not one that would know how to get it, a baby, to me by floating it with fish in ice on the coldest winter days in the summer when it wasn't supposed to be winter at all. It was Hatteras. I was 27, single, tan, and dark headed, with brown eyes, but single.

The baby looked nothing like me except for his skin. His eyes were blue; hair, what little there was of it, was blonde. A church lady knitted him brown booties that looked like cowboy boots like mine. I sang to him. I whistled to him. I took him fishing with me, morning rise or evening rise. I took him everywhere.

The single girls my age on Hatteras, all five or ten of them, some of them liked it that I had a tiny little human in my one-bedroom apartment right on the beach and that he was growing and smiling and seemed downright content to clap hands with me or up in the air. I used an old knapsack to carry him around on my back when I was fishing or trudging through sand dunes to go wherever we were going.

I knew he needed a name. I knew he needed me. I wasn't sure about his blood or mine or how far we would go together, so I would sit and think and try to think up his real parents and what they must've looked like and how he ended up in the ocean and how he was still all okay when I found him, and what kind of name that would mean for him, such a strong young baby.

I finally decided on Leif, like the explorer, because I saw him that way.

I was not the boy with the boots and the baby anymore, but now the boy with a baby named Leif who looked nothing like me. It was a miracle the church ladies would say, and soon there was a newspaper that wrote a story and it was local, but it got some attention. The two-lane highway and the bridge over the sound got full of cars and the ferries got full of cars, and soon I was in pictures and paintings and talked about by strangers I never would have known otherwise.

It made it hard to fish. The cars clogged up the roads the gas stations ran out of gas the convenience stores got low in stock, and the sound and the ocean started to warm up I always thought from the exhaust, the fumes, the droves.

I tacked up sheets in my tiny apartment and covered the windows. I didn't answer the door. I never had a phone. I could not fish. The ladies who helped to make sure Leif had food brought it to my back window in the night so no one would see. Both of us, the boy and the baby named Leif, were in the dark.

It stayed dark for a week, then two, and soon I grew tired of watching my day old beard become a full-fledged one, brown with gray specks. I was young, tall and tan, but my crew cut hid my bald spots and the boots in the sand by the beach drew attention to my feet not my head.

Leif was still my innocence to bear; no one had come forward to claim him. No answers to his origin had been unearthed. The winter in summer was gone and so were my boots. I went barefooted most days and the reporters' fascination was gone so I could fish again with the little boy on my back.

The church ladies guessed he was close to a year now, maybe having been six months when I found him. The latest clutch of reporters came to see the miracle on ice baby, but didn't stay long when they interviewed me because I couldn't tell them anything. There were no flirty back bars or pier walks or walks along the beach or stories of how I got with Leif's mother. There were no backwards winks to subtly let her know I liked her or that she liked me. I didn't know who the boy's mother was and probably never would.

It wasn't long after the second set of reporters left that Leif started trying to talk. It was a babble, a grin, a laugh, another babble, and then I heard it. At first, I thought he was trying to name a fish or say boy with boots or maybe his Mama's name if he knew it at all. Could he see her face? I often wondered. Did he know the sound of her voice, the feel of her heartbeat?

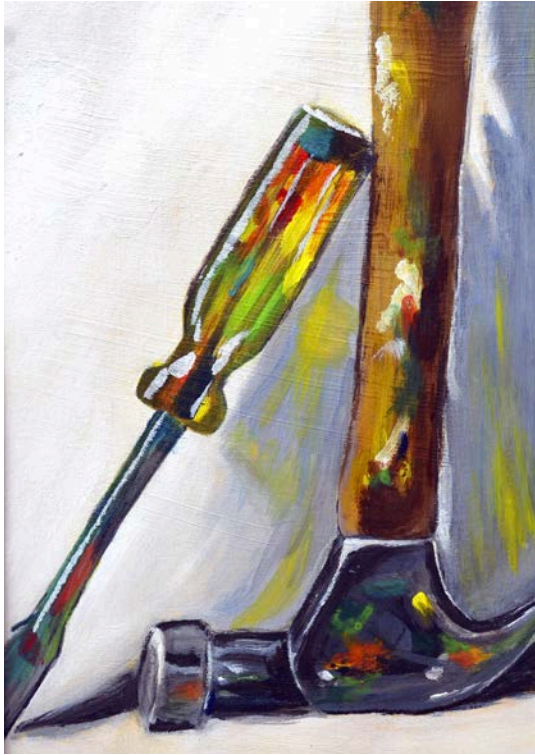
We moved along like that, the church ladies feeding us and us fishing together when the weather was good, and then summer came and went, and then it was fall. It was a cool fall with plenty of fish and no ice or snow or even too much sunshine; it was perfect fishing conditions. We were coming off the beach wind tossing my bucket back and forth and the sun washing over us. We both had

sweat pouring down our backs. I nodded at the church ladies sitting and knitting outside my apartment door and waiting for us to get back. We had just crossed the last sand dune, and I was headed into the parking lot with a pair of worn in but new boots for me, black with stiches and scuffs. The innocence spoke to me, and I know it changed my heart clenched it to his even further when I heard it.

One of the church ladies heard it too so I knew it wasn't imagined. It was innocence in the finest, pure white and the kind that slid right through the heart and stayed, never left. She looked at me and him grinned and hollered for the other ladies to look up from their knitting and she pointed a gnarled finger.

“Daryl. That boy just called you DaDa.”

The End



Cassandra Corza
Hammer and Screwdriver
Acrylic
Honorable Mention
(2-D Category)



Grayson Robbins
Saint Mother
Acrylic
Honorable Mention
(2-D Category)

My Words, My Weapons

By Peter Morris

I am a soldier, therefore I kill
Sometimes in anger at life's injustices
But never in hatred, often in love
I am a man under orders
Yet my words are my weapons
Not the flicking of my forefinger
Able to send projectiles unto death
Brothers, sisters, children...victims
Family, global relatives
But no, not in my war
Late at night under cover of canvas
The sky colorfully streaked amidst stars
Evidence of bombs, bullets, battalions
My mind wanders to distant times
People and places I have known
Happiness and sadness, joy and pain
I prop up on my cot, a pen, paper close
A poem's composed in bright shadows
"So long I've waited, to touch your face
Breathe deeply of the scent of you alone
Taste of the salt upon your cheeks..."
Out of my sleepless conscious, letters form
"Dear One, As the sounds of conflict envelop
My world, I recall our last goodbye..."
The words come to me in this dreadful place
Where friends die, yet I survive
Loneliness is my constant companion
I seek God's solace
All things working together for good
The understanding difficult
I will sleep, fitfully, my words my consolation
I write, therefore I am



Kiera Lyrewind Symmes
Through Hoops
Mixed Media
Honorable Mention
(3-D Category)

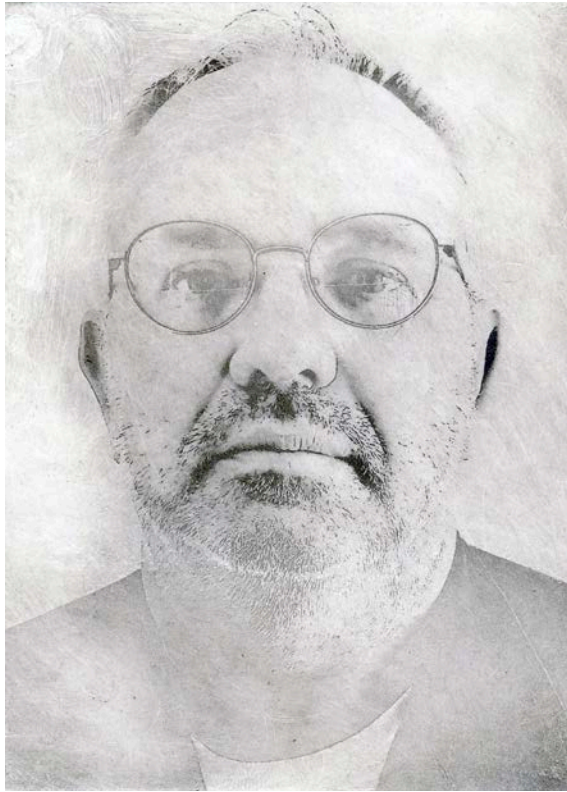


Grayson Robbins
Contagious Awareness
Clay
Honorable Mention
(3-D Category)

Patience

By Lilith Kincaid

Resent her because she killed your plants,
Hate her because she's so hard on you,
Dread her because she puts you down,
Loathe her because she calls you pathetic.
You can't understand why she's like this.
You just want her to leave you be;
To stop feeding into your bad thoughts,
To stop hurting you as much as she does.
It's not that hard to just be nice to people,
Except when you're dealing with yourself.
It was hard for you to water your plants,
Hard for you to not find yourself pathetic,
And hard for you to be gentle with yourself.
It was easy to sink into self-loathing,
It was easy to forget to eat,
It was easier to not get out of bed.
She never wanted to hurt you;
She just needed some patience.



Megan Coffey
Father
Polymer Photogravure
Honorable Mention
(2-D Category)



Rhiannon Greene
Zipper Spheres
Yarn
Honorable Mention
(3-D Category)

The Boy and the Monster

By Daryk Gresham

The town was still and quaint,
For once the air di-n't howl.
A boy stood out in th' night;
His face there formed a scowl.

"Nothin' e'er happens here,"
He said with so much dread.
"I want an adventure,"
He thought inside his head.

As he trudged on slowly,
Taking the usual route,
Something jumped out 'fore him,
Startling e'en a small newt.

It was a monster! Big,
Ugly and brown. With eyes
Yellow as daisies and
A giant crown of flies.
"The Monster of Boredom
I am! Who dares disrupt
My rest?" He said all while
Looking, not down, but up.

The boy wanted to run,
His feet refused to move
He remembered his wish:
Courage he'd need to prove

"I woke you!" the boy cried.
"Today I am your foe!"
The boy lunged forward to
Stomp on the monster's toe.

The monster danced around
His throbbing foot in hand.
He bellowed and snarled
Louder than could any band.

To slay this beast, the boy,
A weapon would he need.
Sticks b'came swords while many
Arrows fell from the trees
Imagination fired,
A jew'l encrusted hilt
Into the boy's small hand
The sword perfectly fit.

Boredom turned and charged him,
Pupils filled with hunger,
Terrifying enough
To hide in a bunker.

Eyes closed, arm stretched forward
Refuse to move did he,
Survive this encounter
He could not guarantee

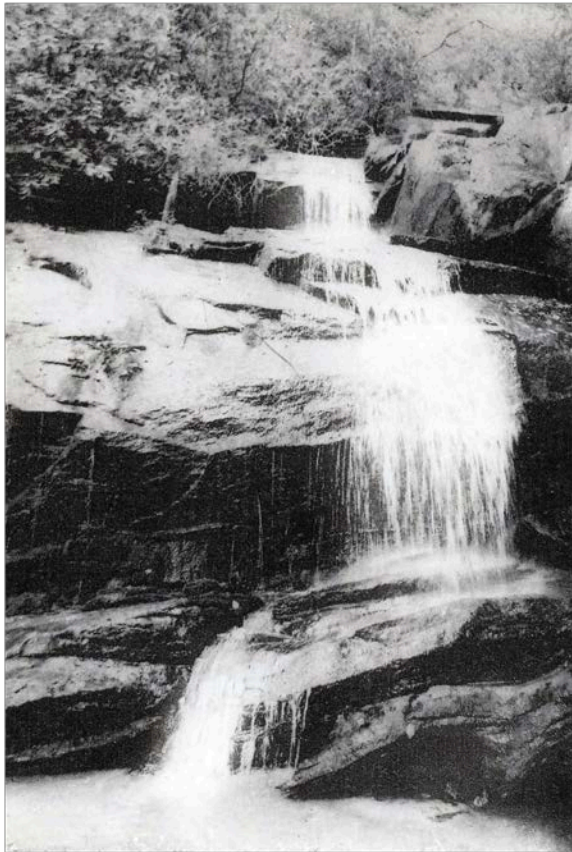
Fear closed in on all sides
For sure it'd take his life.
What would be his last thought
'Fore he saw th' afterlife?

But as the boy opened
His tightly shut eyelids,
His sword's blade, deep inside
The monster's chest it hid.
Boredom turned back to dust,
The sword became a stick,
But not 'fore his finger
The blade did surely nick.

The only testament
To his battle just won,
The small bead of his blood
That sat on top his thumb.



Makyleigh Hendrix
Truck
Polymer Photogravure



Alexis Orozco
Untitled
Polymer Photogravure

Enough

By Abigail Schmidt

Game changer. Two small words, one big meaning. I had tried to be a game changer once. Now I find myself standing high up, looking over the vast ditch known as the Grand Canyon. Tourists pass me by, noticing me enough to avoid running into me – though who would venture so near the edge? – yet not seeing me. Truly seeing me. I had tried to see people at one time. But I gave up. Three years ago, I had a vision. What if I could change the world? What if I could truly do something that mattered? Not in the way of gaining fame, wealth, or power. But what if I could change a life, end suffering somewhere, prevent devastation. What if I could do something that mattered? I suppose everybody wants that, but I really wanted it. Really, truly wanted it. Strove for it. Yet I never really knew why I wanted it. Maybe it was pressure from my family, maybe rebellion against those who told me I was unrealistic. Maybe I just wanted to prove myself. I don't know.

A branch of a shrubbery just brushed over a cut on my arm. I don't mind the slight, burning pain. It's already fading. Pain is a funny thing. So many people avoid it, yet it gives such a sense of being alive. It says, "You are here. Whether for better or worse, you are here." It can be soothing at times. Not too much, not too little. Just enough can take guilt away and replace it with reassurance. "You are here."

Anyway, I've always felt like people expected me to be great, be nothing, or be average. Perhaps it was because I was, or still am, I suppose, average, that I wanted to be a game changer. There was one time that I took a drawing class. I very much enjoyed drawing. I took a drawing class and was told that I was average. Perhaps I could score a B, which would be on the high end of average, and that was not bad at all. Well, I suppose being on the higher end of average would not be so bad. Not everybody can be a Michelangelo, after all, striving to be the best and achieving it. To have such a passion would be nice, but people survive without it.

Whoops. My foot just slipped. That would be a grand fall for sure. There are ledges to grab hold of and plants to grasp if I were to tumble down. Interesting how something that could cause such damage still offers potential life savers. Hmm.

Yes, passion is unnecessary. But what a dull life without it. I used to be passionate. Very passionate. I used to be passionate about the living creatures of the sea, of those misunderstood by man. I used to be passionate about helping others, telling people it would be okay. My pastor often tells the congregation it will be okay. He says, "Hey, it's going to be okay. God's got you." I almost cry every time, but I don't know why. Perhaps I hear the genuineness in his voice, the passion he has for preaching. Perhaps I wish that I could be genuine and have passion like that. Perhaps not. I don't know. Maybe I was never passionate enough to be a game changer, and that is why I will never be one.

I once had a dream of ending shark finning. What an accomplishment that would be. How many sharks would be saved without such cruelty circulating the world? It was a nice thought, once. What end is there, though, to evil in this world? When will hatred and murder subside? When will the world find unity and

harmony? Who can stand against the current and rebel, deviate, defy it? Well, many have tried. Some have made it so far, some farther than others. And some have been flipped backwards and gulped the current right down their throat the moment they tried to turn around. Maybe I used to think about trying to go the other way. Maybe I thought people would follow and help push the current in the opposite direction. I did once. I was once bold in my faith, proud to be a Christian. I was called “a little Christian girl,” demeaningly. I received eye rolls, murmurs behind my back. Perhaps I am still proud of being a Christian. It’s just, well...I don’t know. Perhaps it’s hard to try turning in the current. Perhaps I am just not strong enough.

The Grand Canyon is a beautiful place. So many colors, so many layers. On one side, fossils from the great flood are visible. It is truly incredible. So lovely, so vast, so grand, so deadly. Looking down, I can no longer see my feet. I see the next layer quite a few feet below me. Ten feet or so, perhaps. There is some brush down there, but it does not look very stable. The ledge isn’t very wide. A sigh escapes my chapped lips as my eyes graze over the rest of the landscape. There is a small building down there for hikers to rest at. I wonder how many bodies they’ve found down there. Many beautiful animals reside in this large bowl in the ground. Road runners, coyotes, rabbits. The rabbits are very cute.

I wonder if the rabbits ever want to be game changers. So small, surrounded by so many things to destroy them. Predators, lack of food or water, hunters. Yet they hop along, hiding in the bristly sanctuary of prickly pears and other species of cacti. They are smart and cunning, yet cute and cuddly. Such strange little creatures.

I wonder, though, if it’s okay for the little rabbits to just be little rabbits... what if it’s okay for me to just be me? What if I don’t have to be above average, below average, or even just plain average? What if I can be my own non-average? What if I can be passionate about the One who created me, the living beings He created? What if I can enjoy drawing and not try to be the best? What if I can just do me, be me? Maybe, just maybe, I can stand against the current. Maybe I won’t get a mouthful of water. Maybe I don’t need to feel guilty under the pressures of life. People suffer, but so do I. People have joy, but so can I. Maybe...maybe I don’t need to be a game changer. Maybe that’s how I can be a game changer. Taking one more look over the canyon, a soft smile graces my lips. I taste salt, and my cheeks feel sticky. Well, perhaps that’s appropriate. Taking a step back, I turn and walk into the flow of oncoming tourists. Maybe I am average, maybe I should feel guilty, maybe I should be different. But maybe I’m okay just being me. Maybe...maybe that’s enough.

Your Sun Chart Safety Action Plan

By LB Sedlacek

In 30 seconds or less
you could save someone
from drowning if you
reach them in time

In 30 seconds or less
you could save someone
from being shot by
not labeling parking spaces

In 30 seconds or less
you could rescue yourself
mute your cell phone
lie underneath your car

In 30 seconds or less
you can give advice
if it's a gun
then it's always loaded

In 30 seconds or less
you pretend your new
wallet wasn't pick pocketed
escaping a worse confrontation

In 30 seconds or less
you can ignore the
gang of ten surrounding
you ready to kill

In 30 seconds or less
you could be thinking
you see stars, sun
because you're still alive

In 30 seconds or less
your safe action plan
either succeeds or fails

It takes 2 ½ minutes

to

drown.



Lyndsie Aldridge
Citric
Intaglio



Cassandra Corza
Tomatoes
Acrylic



Zoe Shaw
Cut Pepper
Acrylic



Ella Gregory
Untitled
Acrylic

Alzheimer's

By Gena Williams (*for Sarah Allen*)

If I should lose myself inside my mind,
if all my memories are left behind,
do with me as you must –
I know we all are made of dust.
Just, please, be kind.

If I forget and can't recall my name
and you must come and take my things away,
recall me at my prime,
before the ravages of time.
Remember how I loved to laugh and play.

When I am old and cannot find my way,
and am not sure if it is night or day,
remember that I fought for good and right –
don't let me be afraid to face the night.
Help me believe that things will be okay.

If it should be that I don't understand,
please come and take me gently by the hand
and even if my lips can't say your name,
I'll recognize your kindness, just the same.
It'll make my stay more pleasant in the land.

When I've forgotten all the wars I fought,
and the causes I believe in come to naught,
the good I did will live on anyway,
the fruitful work of every busy day.
In life, I found the meaning that I sought.

Perhaps it will not matter overmuch
if I've forgotten faces, names, and such
if there are trees that grow now on their own
because I sowed and watered long ago,
if there are good things that my hands have touched.

There may be good that I can leave the world,
some decent thing, some blessing I can give
that makes the Earth a softer, sweeter place,
a touch of love, of mercy, or of grace—
a thing that shows it mattered that I lived.

If I should lose myself inside my mind,
if all my memories are left behind,
do with me as you must –
I know we all return to dust.
Just, please, be kind.



Storm Jacob Miller
Self Portrait
Intaglio



Charles Hagaman
Chaz Printerman
Intaglio



Sarah Moore
Self Portrait
Acrylic

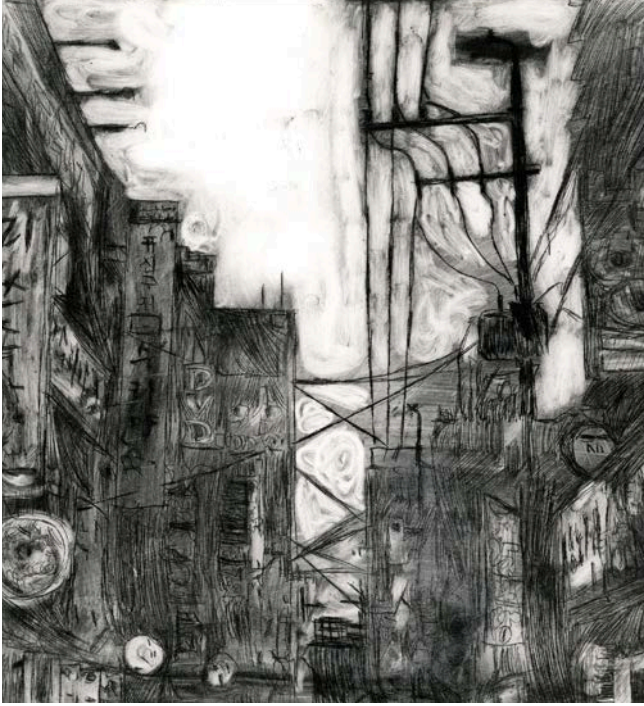
Seekers

By Peter Morris

“Seek...” I was told.
I sought, discovering dreams
Pathways to places I'd never known
Experiences previously not considered
“Conquer fears, go further...”
I discover densely forested jungles
Deserts hot, others with snow,
Climbed mountains, sailed oceans, seas,
Hiked continents,
Met strangers on foreign soils
Tasted offerings, strange delights,
Ingested cultures, differences,
Embraced unknown relatives
Members of the family of man
Inhaled deeply the dye pits of Morocco,
The steamy tastes of underbrush in Brazil,
Swirling salts of blue-green waters off Australia,
Acrid smokes of tribal fires in Africa,
Fish markets in Japan, Thailand,
Sweat of man in dozens of lands.
“Seek, and you shall find...”
I sought; I found.
I am the better for it.



Megan Coffey
Building on the Corner
Watercolor



Yairis Escobedo
Untitled
Intaglio



Caitlyn Queen
City
Intaglio

The Confessional

By Cameron Perry

Boston, August 21st, 1985. As Father Walsh stepped off the bus from his afternoon appointment with his doctor, he couldn't help but think about how foreign the building in front of him felt. St. Joseph Church had been his home away from home when his half siblings would make his actual home unbearable. This was the place he decided to become a priest, and this was the place he met his best friend, Stevie. This was also the place that he had seen his mother for the last time, looking cold and lifeless in that wooden box that had cost him an arm and a leg, sometimes he still saw her face in his dreams, and she was always calling him by his first name. He was named after his late father but no one ever called him that; they always just called him Walsh, except his mom.

As Father Walsh walked up to the heavy wooden doors on the stone face of the church his mind wandered to Jack, a local orphan boy that he was mentoring, he was turning 21 today and Walsh was planning on taking Jack to a bar for his first beer. As he walked past all the old pews with their dry rot cushions and cracked wood backs he thought about how proud he was of Jack. As he walked past the old ragged drapes covering the now broken but once beautiful stained-glass windows that lined the sides of the church, he thought about how he thought of Jack as his son, and he hoped that Jack thought of him as a father figure. As Father Walsh walked into the back room where Stevie sat, he noticed the sad look on his face and while he tried to brace himself for some sort of bad news he could never have been prepared for what he was about to be told, it was the second of three life changing conversations he'd have today.

As Father Walsh watched his father's watch in the confessional booth, waiting for Father Stevie to leave the church for the night, he couldn't help but think of what his doctor had told him earlier, "It's what we feared Father, Huntington's Disease". The doctor had told Walsh that he could live upwards of fifteen to twenty years, but he planned to drink himself to death long before then. To distract himself from these thoughts Father Walsh pulled out a small statue with the head removed from his pocket. He'd seen it on the doctor's desk, and the doctor had said "Its head was off when I came in this morning, I have no idea how it happened". Father Walsh loved fixing little things like this, and he thought he recognized it from his priesthood teachings, Saint Ignatius was the name that kept popping up. There was a knock on the booth.

"Hey Walsh, don't stay too late tonight!", Stevie said

"I was planning on heading out at around 1 a.m., if that's alright?"

"You gonna go home and rest?"

"No, that's when half off drinks start at the bar down the street!" there was no response from Stevie and Walsh thought he might have left. "You still there?"

"Yea it's just... I know you loved Jack and I know you were gonna be the one to teach him to become a priest, but you gotta let him go."

"I will, it was his birthday today and I wanted to celebrate it, in his memory."

"It's a horrible tragedy what happened to him." Father Walsh didn't respond "You can't hide from things like this anymore, Walsh. You need to face this, and accept it."

“You have a good night Stevie,” Walsh said, trying to avoid Stevie’s statement, he waited to move until he heard the doors of the church slam shut.

Walsh took out a book bound in leather with a small gold cross on the front from his left pocket and a small silver flask from his right. After taking a hefty swig from his flask, he turned to where he had left off in the book and began to read aloud, “...her scarlet lips grew moist. She was a living woman now, while before she seemed half a corpse...” Father Walsh liked reading his books out loud; he would always imagine he was teaching it to a class. He continued to read and drink for several hours before falling asleep.

Father Walsh was awoken by a strange voice in the booth next to his, “Father, it has been an eternity since my last confession.” Father Walsh sat up and tried to wipe the drunkenness from his eyes, the voice was not one but a chorus of voices intertwining, and it seemed to change which voice was leading.

“That is okay my son what is it that you wish to confess.”

There is a great amount that I could confess, too much to recount now.

“Do you feel remorse for these sins?”

No, in fact if I had the opportunity, I would commit each of them again just for the pleasure of it.

“If you have not come to do penance for your sins then why have you come?”

To hear your confession Father. Walsh was taken aback.

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but I have no sins to confess.”

You and I both know that you’ve committed your fair share of sins.

“Of course, all of us have, but I have already confessed and done penance for mine.”

Have you already done penance for what you did the night of August 21st, 1964? A shiver ran up Father Walsh’s spine.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about?”

Cut the crap, Father, and confess! The voice seemed to be growing very agitated.

“That does it!” Father Walsh began to stand to exit the confessional.

CRACK THAT DOOR EVEN A SMIDGE AND I WILL RIP YOUR HEAD FROM YOUR BODY LIKE I DID THAT ORPHAN! The voice was so powerful that it knocked Walsh back in his seat, *What was his name again?* Father Walsh was now staring into the other booth unable to make out any sort of figure in the darkness, but there was movement. The darkness seemed to shift almost like it was breathing.

“Jack,” Walsh said shakily

That’s right, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Jack’s head back on again. The voice began to laugh in amusement, what did you see in that boy anyway? Father Walsh was slowly coming out of his shock, but the alcohol in him wasn’t helping, “He was gonna become a priest. I was teaching him.”

Isn’t that pitiful? Well now that I’ve shared one of my sins why don’t you share yours?

“Who are you?,” The voice grew annoyed by this.

I am evil incarnate, and I have come for your confession so let’s hear it!

“If that is true then...” Father Walsh raised the leather-bound book to the darkness and spoke, “by the word of the Lord on high, I cast you out!” The silence that followed was deafening. The most horrible and terrifying laughter came bellowing from the other booth.

Do you take me for some dim-witted hoax? Do you not think I know the difference between the word of God and some romance novel? Father Walsh was angry now.

“I take you for a fool who doesn’t know when to quit a joke!”

I AM NO JOKE FATHER, I AM THE DARKNESS THAT SPEAKS, I AM THE BEAST FROM BEYOND THAT CALLS THE NAME OF THE DEVIL, AND I WILL HEAR YOU CONFESS OR I WILL BREAK YOU HARDER THAN THAT STATUE IN YOUR POCKET!

“This isn’t happening, I will not believe your lies!” Walsh angrily shouted back.

You better start believing, Walsh, because it’s happening. Suddenly, Walsh began to notice a face in the darkness, he was right it was just some jerk that thought they were funny. The face slowly came out of the dark and when he realized who it was, he nearly puked.

I’m as real as they come George! The voice came from his mother’s face which now floated in the darkness in front of him. Father Walsh dropped to his knees in the confessional and began praying,

“I will say of the Lord...”

Begging to God, now are we? The voice was growing louder...

“He is my refuge and my fortress...”

Where was God, when those Nazis put a bullet in your father’s head?! ... and louder...

“My God, in whom I trust..”

Where was God, when your half siblings bullied you out of your home?! ... and louder ...

“Surely he will protect me...”

Where was God, when your mother lost her mind to dementia?! ... and louder.

“From the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence...”

WHERE WAS GOD, WHEN SHE DIED IN HER SLEEP?!

“He will cover me with his feathers...”

WHERE WAS GOD, WHEN I TORE THAT LITTLE ORPHAN’S HEAD CLEAN FROM HIS BODY?! The voice was so loud now that the walls of the confessional were begging to buckle underneath the force...

“And under his wings I will find refuge...”

WHERE WAS GOD, WHEN YOU GOT THAT DISEASE IN YOUR HEAD?! ... and still the voice grew louder.

“His faithfulness will be my shield and rampart.” The voice was so loud now that Father Walsh couldn’t even hear his own voice.

WHERE WERE YOU THE NIGHT OF AUGUST 21ST, 1964?!

“I WAS BURYING A HEADLESS OLD WOMAN!” That was the first time since that fateful night that Walsh had ever admitted it, him and Stevie had both sworn themselves to secrecy. The voice now spoke with pleasure and calm.

Go on. The sudden change in volume was scarier to Walsh than the yelling. “I was young, and stupid, and drunk, and...”

No excuses, just confess.

“Stevie was driving us back to our dorm from some bar, and I thought it would be a fun idea to hit some mailboxes with my bat, and we were drunk, and Stevie was swerving all over the road and I swear I never saw her until...”

Until?

“I swung my bat at her thinking she was a mailbox and her head just... came... off.”

So, you buried her?

“It was an accident we didn’t want to get kicked out of the priesthood.”

Tsk Tsk, Mr. Walsh, I would have expected better from a man of your stature.

“I feel remorse for it, I always wanted forgiveness.”

Then why didn’t you ask for it?

“I was afraid.”

The voice laughed at Walsh. *Fear turns good men to savages, and Father you were never that good to begin with.*

“I know I’ve done wrong, but I don’t have to prove anything to you, I don’t have to prove anything to anyone except myself and the Lord.”

Murder and lying are pretty big no nos in the big guy’s book.

“I know and I don’t deserve forgiveness, but I can ask for it anyways.” Father Walsh took to his feet and stormed out of the confessional, “O almighty God...” Father Walsh walked to the table at the front of the church and filled his sprinkler with Holy Water.

What do you think you’re doing?

“Merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner...” Father Walsh moved swiftly but with grace as he grabbed a lit candle.

Have you forgotten who I am?

“Confess to you all my sins and iniquities, with which I have ever offended you...” Father Walsh took out the statue and laid it on the table, he took out his flask and book and dumped some of the liquid on the book, “and justly deserved your punishment...” Father Walsh approached the booth where the voice came from.

Stop this, you worthless worm! Walsh lit the book with the candle

“Now and forever!” he flung open the door to the confessional to reveal the darkness.

“Dear God forgive me for I have sinned!” Father Walsh chucked the burning book into the confessional booth and heard the voice scream in agony as the booth began to burn. Father Walsh began to sprinkle both the rest of his flask and his holy water into the booth as he said his final prayer, “Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them...” As he spoke he thought that he could see his Mother looking more alive than ever smiling through the smoke, “May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace...” Father Walsh saw Jack smiling and though he had long blocked out the face of the woman he killed he saw her there too. He knew where they were, and this thought finally gave him peace, even if he knew where he was going he would never see them again, “AMEN!” as he let out this final word the flames engulfed the walls around him, the drapes went up in flames followed by the cushions, the pews, and finally the heavy wooden door. Father Walsh knew it was his time and so he went, and he went not with fear, but with acceptance.

The Merciful Sea

By Lilith Kincaid

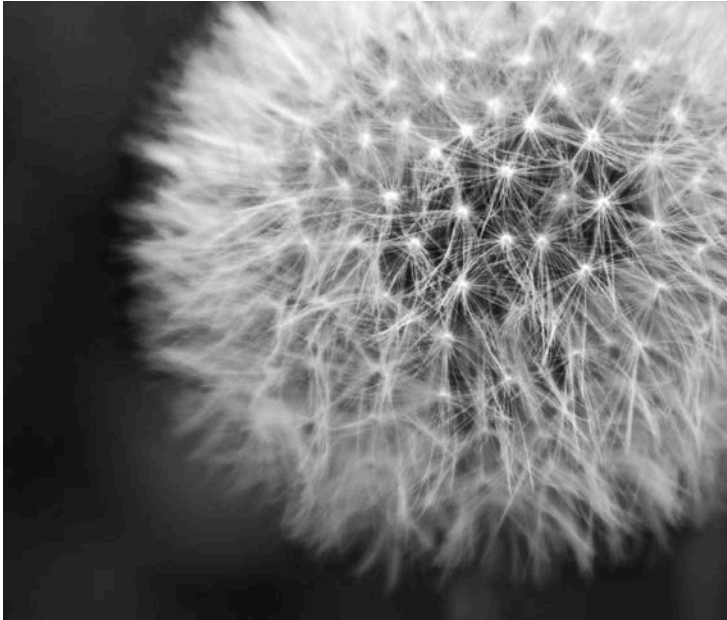
It was nice when your waves first hit;
They gently washed over my feet
And left bits of sand in my hair.
But then your waters turned rough
And they drug me through the sand.
You spit me out in the ocean
And left me to the sea's mercy.
I thought she would tear me apart
And wash me away, like you did,
But the sea carried me gently.
She healed all of my wounds from you.



Abigail Schmidt

Bodie

Digital Media



Joshua Slenker
Life
Digital Photography



Peter Morris
Two Girls Paris
Digital Photography

Bowls of Hope

By Peter Morris

Empty bowls
Filled with soup
Steaming
Broth
Cabbage, carrots, potatoes
Ladled out
Clutched by dirty hands
Tentatively brought to lips
Soiled faces
Substance
Given in hope, another day
A partial meal
With bread
Homelessness



Zada Lee
Boonies
Relief Cut



Joel Franquiz
Untitled
Acrylic



Kyndal Dollar
Homage to Keith Haring
Acrylic

A Life Changing Breath

By Michelle Jackson

Once More

I sat there staring at nothing. I knew this could happen, just like before. I had hoped that I wouldn't have to go through this again. Last time, it wasn't a fond memory. I was having an emergency cesarean for the second time.

7 Years Before

It was hard to breathe. I knew this was going to happen. I knew it in my heart for the last four weeks. Why didn't they listen to me? I told them that this was going to happen.

I looked to my right, straight at the machine that was beeping. It was the only sign for my family and the doctors to know I was scared. My heart rate had skyrocketed after the doctors gave me the news; I was going to be prepared for an emergency cesarean.

Reality finally set in and everything became stark as I looked up into my boyfriend Tyler's eyes. I could see how scared he was; he was as scared as I was. That is when the first teardrop started rolling down my face.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. I'll be right there with you." I looked to my left. Tyler's nana grabbed my hand to comfort me. We had decided that we would let his Nana come back with me into the surgery room because we had chosen to name our daughter after her, Leala Kay. We knew it would be a very special memory that Nana could have with me and the first great grandchild who was named after her. All I could do was nod.

My boyfriend took his Nana's place beside me and gathered me in a hug. I looked back at the doctor; in a shaky voice, I asked, "Am I going to need a spinal tap?" The doctor shook his head.

"No, since you already had the epidural, a spinal tap isn't needed." That gave me little comfort. All I could do was send a prayer to God that she would be born safely and healthy. "Okay, it's time." The doctor nodded at me. I turned to Tyler and gave him a tight hug, "I love you." He leaned in and kissed me, "I love you, too. Everything will be alright."

The Surgery

The room was intimidating. Four white walls with everything the doctor needed to perform the surgery. I laid back on the bed that they put me on. There was a divider between my head and my stomach. Nana was next to me comforting me by rubbing my shoulder. She was wearing a blue gown, surgery hat, and shoe coverings. It didn't take the doctor long before he started operating.

The surgery usually lasts 45 minutes; I don't know how long I was in there. It could have been 45 minutes; it could have been longer. Once the doctor had my baby out, the nurse brought her to me, so I could see her for the first time. "Beautiful" was all I could think. It started getting harder for me to keep my eyes open. "Don't fall asleep, Michelle. I need you to keep your eyes open," the doctor told me as I was in and out of consciousness. "I'm trying, but I'm so tired." I was getting very cold and groggy. I knew something was wrong. The last time I had

my eyes open, I was watching the nurses take my little girl over to get her checked out. “8 pounds and 12 ounces,” one of the nurses said. By then, my eyes had closed.

Once my eyes had opened again, I was in a room that had one other person and a few nurses. I asked where I was and how long I had been there. I was told that I was in recovery and had been there for 8 hours. I had to have two blood transfusions because I lost so much blood.

Here We Go Again

The memory scares me, but I know I would do anything to make sure my child comes safely into this world. A few weeks back my doctor let me know what actually happened to me last time I had a cesarean; I hemorrhaged.

“Ok, you ready?” The doctor came in and asked. I took a deep breath and nodded. Closing my eyes, I sent up a prayer to God to watch over me and my child. Here we go again.

The Message

By Gena Williams

What must the serpent whisper to split the world asunder
at the dawning of the age of human man?
He must choose his words with care,
knowing that the future mayhem of this planet
depends on the seeds of discord he would plant today.
This may be his one chance;
he must be at his clever, diabolical best.
As one cave man looks across the land at another cave man,
the serpent leans in close to an unsuspecting ear
and whispers,
“He thinks God loves him best.”



Alyson Pritchard
Pearl Tears
Mixed Media



Kelsey Hamby
Blue Boy
Mixed Media



Sarah Moore
Zentangle
Intaglio



Cynthia Wills
Box-O-Ghosts
Polymer Photogravure

How a Cowboy Grows

By Ruby Annas

Sand was everywhere. It was in his eyes, his clothes, and even in his boots, even though he never got off his black mare. All he had seen for miles and hours was sand. His horse hadn't stopped running, and he still didn't show any sign of tiring. Jack was exhausted, but he couldn't find any reason to stop. There was no shelter in this flat, golden land. The sun was also unforgiving and would cook him if he stood too still. At least when he rode his horse, he could feel a breeze. The cowboy looked all around him while he rode. Ahead of him...sand. To the left...more sand. To the right...a white dot.

Quickly, he pulled on his reins to stop his horse. He turned and headed towards the small white dot; intrigued and a little excited to see something other than sand. He untied the bandana around his neck to rub his eyes and froze. In front of him was a round patch of grass and in the middle was a white flower.

His hand glided over the soft quilt until it bumped against his wife's skirt covered knee. He looked up to see her putting a lock of honey blonde hair behind one ear. She was giving him an unamused look. "I was just trying to get my hat," he said. "Sure" she said, not sounding convinced. He picked up his black cowboy hat that was lying in front her. They were sitting beside each other in the middle of their green field. Jack had gotten lucky in a game of poker. "Daddy!" a small voice cried. Jack turned his head away from Missy as he saw a little figure bounding down the hill. She was a clumsy little thing, almost falling down. She clutched something white, not unlike her hair, as she raced towards her parents. As Annabeth got closer, he could see that her purple dress was covered in grass stains and sand.

"Daddy! What kind of flower is this?" She shoved her tiny fist in front of his face. The stem was long and limping over her hand after its journey. There were a single row of white petals surrounding a cone shaped middle. The cone itself was brown and had tiny yellow star shapes surrounding it. "I'm not sure darlin', but I bet your momma does," he said as he was craning his head down to inspect the hanging flower. Annabeth placed the flower in her mother's outstretched hands. Missy's intelligent amber eyes sparked with immediate recognition. Missy was a school teacher, so she could satisfy almost all of their five-year old's curiosities. "This is a white desert zinnia," she said as she eyed Annabeth's dress and hair. "That also means you wandered too far." Jack thought Missy could be a little overprotective at times. The field is situated equal distance from the desert and town; each a mile away. He made a noise and turned to his wife, "Missy, she didn't go that far. Besides, she's a little explorer like me." Missy narrowed her eyes at Jack. He knew what she would say if Annabeth wasn't here. "All you explore are empty bottles and open legs," she'd say. Jack turned to see Annabeth's lip quivering. "Oh, darlin' you're not in trouble. Cheer up." Annabeth swiped at her cheeks and said, "I'm not sad at being an explorer. I'm sad because I took the flower away from its home." Missy plucked the petals off the center and took it off the stem. She put the cone back into Annabeth's hand and said, "This is a seed pod. We'll sit it on the windowsill to dry out, then you can bury it where it came from." "It's broken," Annabeth's voice squeaked. Missy turned her eyes to Jack and with a sympathetic look said, "Some things have to be broken before they return."

Jack shook his head and wiped his stinging eyes again. This damn sand was everywhere. He turned away from the desert zinnia and continued in the same direction as before. All of a sudden, he heard a boom of thunder and felt the sand shake beneath him. The sand was ash. He looked up to see the clouds were gray, blocking out the sun. The clouds parted like the red sea and what he saw terrified him. They were bulls, but their eyes were red and fiery with angry faces. Their black horns glistened as lightning shot above. Even though they weren't on the ground, their steel hooves made his teeth rattle. Behind the herd of bulls was a group of riders. The riders weren't alive like him with their gaunt faces and blank eyes. Sweat soaked their shirts and some even had bones poking out of their grimy flesh.

The bulls went downward and Jack went to duck, but they barely grazed him as he felt their hot breath. The herd made a curve back up into the sky with the ghost riders following. A ghost rider stopped in front of him and said, "Cowboy change your ways, or with us you will ride." Jack's mouth felt like cotton as he tried to form the words. "W-What are you doing?" he asked. The rider replied, "Tryin' to catch the Devil's herd up in these endless skies." "You might as well be chasin' nothin'" Jack said. The rider's disgusting face was so close to Jack that he could smell the sweat dripping off his nose. "Cowboy, we're the same!" he said with a snarl. The cowboy was shocked and yelled, "I ain't nothin' like you! I'm trying to find what I'm missing!" The rider laughed and said, "You're finding nothing and leaving everything behind." Jack opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn't find the words. Before he could say anything, the ghost rider floated above Jack and joined his pack in the skies.

The sand was golden again. Jack looked up and he was blinded by the sun. He remained still for a long time until his arms started to burn through his sleeves. He took the flask out of his vest pocket. He went to put it to his lips, but stilled. He caught his reflection in the silver. What was he doing? He threw the flask and turned his horse around.

He was on top of his horse in the town's entrance. Across from him he could see the school house. The sides were lined with shops. Jack watched as wives hung to their husband's arms. Going from shop to shop. Jack was holding the white zinnia in his hand. He could feel the backs of his eyes sting, but he refused to let the tears fall. He twirled it in his calloused fingers, and he plucked one of the petals from the center and kept plucking. He took off the stem and clutched the cone in his fist. He heard the school bell chime and the cries of excited children. All of those sounds fell away though as he heard, "Daddy!" He looked up, and he saw her. Her legs were longer and her face less round, but she was still his little girl with a stained dress and messy hair. The cowboy's tears fell as he watched his Annabeth running towards him.

She stopped beside his horse and gave him a smile that could outshine the desert sun. "Hello darlin'. I missed you," he said. He got off his horse to bury her in a tight hug. Missy was standing in the school's doorway. Jack scooped Annabeth up and held her to his side with one arm. Jack walked towards the school. "I like your new hat daddy," Annabeth said. "It's not n-," but Jack was cut off as Annabeth took the hat off his head and placed it on her own. It fell in front of her eyes. The cowboy hat now matched her white hair, no longer black. Jack stopped in front of Missy. Her eyes started to well with tears. Jack had missed her too. He opened up his fist and said, "I've returned."

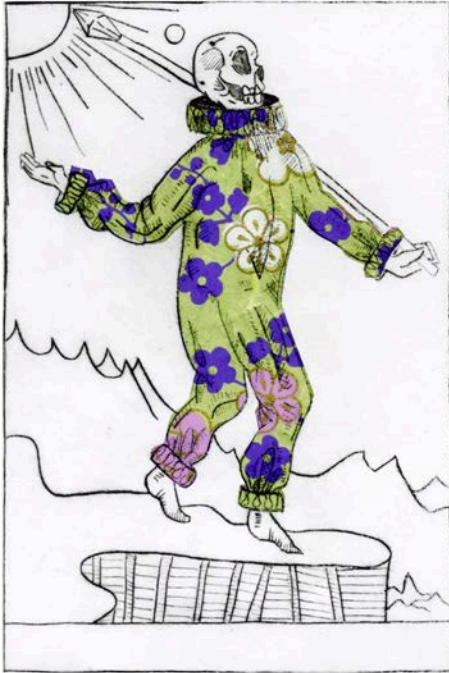
The Painter

By Lilith Kincaid

Crafted by perfect hands
And created in your image,
With a heart full of love
And the ability to be good.
Yet, they call your work unholy;
“The canvas looked better blank.”
Maybe you would prefer that
Over this little tainted painting of yours.



Heydi Dominguez-Torres
Toy
Acrylic



Lyndsie Aldridge
The Fool
Intaglio with Chine-collé



Alyssa Smart
Ahoy
Intaglio



Simon Stewart
Jeremy but Closer
Ink

When I Said Goodbye to My Old Life

By Hailey Lewis

I was angry that my father wouldn't let me take most of my things. I grabbed the box with all the things I could take, and I went outside. Poppy, my miniature donkey, retired therapy animal, was standing at the half wall that went along his paddock. My father forged some bill-of-sale papers, so I couldn't take him with me, his last "I won" smirk before I got into the car. He knew keeping Poppy was the only thing that I would show any emotion for. This was my last goodbye to my old life.

I looked at the house as we drove away. I thought about all the things people said about our house, how it was a dump and falling apart, but I loved our house. It was a single-wide trailer that had been built on by my grandfather to have four bedrooms, a full kitchen, and a large bathroom. I thought it was a mansion when I was younger. As we got older, our mansion's maintenance issues became a real struggle. Things like lights that didn't work, pipes bursting from corrosion and the cold, and falling through the floors started to get to my dad.

In eighth grade, I got Poppy. He was a Nubian, but we called him a Jesus donkey because of the stripe in the shape of a cross on his back. We built him a lean-to shack and later put walls on the sides. The paddock was our front yard, so there wasn't much space, but it felt cool to call it one. It butted right up to the green half wall of our concrete porch. My dad gave him to a man known for abusing his equine animals because he would accept the forged papers.

We only drove twenty or so minutes to the apartments, but it felt like an eternity. My mom was crying while she was apologizing, but I wasn't listening to a word she said as we pulled into the parking lot. We had always driven by those apartments, but I never paid them any mind. As we got out, my mom pointed to the top right apartment. "That's the one," she said, still stuffy from crying. As we got out, she said, "grab a box and go," while gesturing towards the stairs.

My mom's things were already here because she moved out a few weeks before. My two sisters and I each had a box. Mom had a box with essentials like plates, cups, and our medications. As we made our way up the stairs, I could hear the TVs of other tenants. I could also smell what the other tenants were cooking. One tenant was smoking, and I could tell that it wasn't a regular cigarette.

When my mom unlocked the apartment, we all huddled in the "living room" while we waited for my mom to turn on the lights. It was a one-bedroom apartment with carpet, a divider wall between the living room and bed, and laminate tiles in the kitchen. The bathroom was really small. I could barely close the door while inside.

We put our boxes on the kitchen island before my mom told us to put them by the wall since they were mostly clothes, and she didn't have a dresser. Those boxes would be our dressers until we moved out of the apartment.

By the time we got settled, it was time to sleep, so my mom and older sister slept on the queen while my younger sister and I slept on the futon in the living room. The next morning when I woke up, reality hit that the day before was not a dream. We got our clothes out of our boxes and took turns in the bathroom because it was too small for two people at a time. After we ate breakfast, we walked down the three flights of stairs to the car and went to school.

After school, when we got back to the apartment, my mom pulled out a 24" TV with a built-in DVD player from one of her boxes. That afternoon we watched movies without saying much else other than the titles we wanted to watch from the bag of CDs we brought. We were all too afraid to mention what happened the day before, but we all accepted our new life in some form or another. My mom is now free of my dad, and my older sister set aside her acting dreams to be a radiographer. My little sister wants to go into cosmetology now, and I want to build my own horse training company and a "tiny home" on wheels so I could reach people for business.

I realized the things I took for granted with all the space at our old house. The apartment was small and cramped, and we started arguing a lot when we moved in. We weren't the loudest kids on our dead-end street, but being in the apartment, we learned the true meaning of quiet. I could hear the whispers of the neighbor beside us and the TV of the one below, constantly. I learned what was a necessity and what was a luxury during this time. I also learned how to live cheaply and work hard. My mom worked two jobs, and my older sister and I worked a job to get by. Without this life experience, I wouldn't be who I am today. I wouldn't have considered the economic and environmental effects of living tiny, I would never have chosen to be in the equine field, and wouldn't have looked at my old life, or the people that were in it, the way I do now.



Arielle Ackerlund
False Superiority
Intaglio



Zada Lee
Decades
Clay



Aubri Perez
Super Toys
Clay



Cindy Meissner
Tree Man
Clay



Allison Grote
Untitled
Fused Glass



Grayson Robbins
Sea Glass
Fused Glass



Cindy Meissner
Windows
Fused Glass



Brittany Maria Ramirez
Whimsically Flowing
Plaster



Lyndsie Aldridge
Mind Games
Assemblage



Alyssa Smart
Native Hawk
Metal Repoussé



Kyndal Dollar

Charleston

Intaglio with Watercolor

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