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the normal review

A Literary and Arts Publication

FALL 2020

The Normal Review

A Literary and Arts Publication

Montclair State University
Fall 2020

Cover art: Life Goes On
by Javas Lal
medium: Watercolor and Ink

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Casey Masterson

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HOW TO SUBMIT

Only undergraduate and graduate students at Montclair State University are eligible to submit.

The work must be the original creative work of the attributed author or artist.

Specific submission guidelines and other information:

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Zip Ties and Loneliness

Emily Paluba

Why am I here

A. The dandelions need your feet to kiss
Them goodnight and the baby crows need
Their breakfast

Where do I turn

A. To glass walls—cleanse your borrowed
Reflection and see the other side

When will I leave

A. When I let you

No I want to leave now

A. Is not the time

I'm tired where do I rest

A. Next to the ants
In the rusty crevices of abandoned
Bathroom tiles

What is leather

A. Cracked cruelty and all hide

What is fear

A. The hot ice that has stolen
Your mother's palms and
The black pupils of your son

I want to go home

A. And why would you want to go there

I'm safe

A. You are nothing but safe between lipped
Walls that know your secrets

Reunion

Catherine Brothers

"I had a dream about you last night."

Silence.

"I'm young again. About 9 years old, maybe 10. I'm playing in the street with the neighborhood kids. The McCabes, the Hunts. You remember them, don't you?"

Silence.

"It doesn't really matter. We're playing kickball in the street, and it's my turn to kick the ball. The ball barrels towards me, and I punt it with a strength I didn't even know I had. It catapults through the sky. I never see it land, but I can hear the rubber hit the cement somewhere far away. From what I recall, I don't think I've ever felt so self-assured. I'm smiling so hard that I can almost feel my teeth start to tingle. Is that possible? Are you following me yet?"

Silence.

"As I'm preparing to run the bases, I hear your voice, calling to me. 'Jonathan! Jonathan!' I turn around and see you walking towards me with your arms outstretched. Like a buffoon, I tell myself that, surely, you witnessed my moment of triumph, my flash of unfiltered happiness, and perhaps you are willing to reward me with a straightforward pat on the back. There isn't an iota of emotion in your eyes when we're finally face to face. I stare into them, and it feels like we're the same height. I see myself in your eyes. You smack me in the head so forcefully that I can hear the blood flowing inside my eardrum. I ask you why you would do such a thing. You tell me that I didn't mow the lawn the way you liked it."

Silence.

"I'm a grown man. I'm 47 years old. I have my own family now, but your miserable existence continues to keep me up at night. You haunt me."

Everything I do, everything I am, your presence follows me around like toilet paper at the bottom of my shoe. I find myself repeating your patterns. One of my children, my oldest, snuck a candy bar from the pantry before dinner a couple weeks ago. I screamed so ruthlessly at her that she wet herself on our new carpet. I didn't care about the tears streaming down her face. I didn't care that she hid from me for the next two hours. All I cared about was that I'd just wasted \$1,000 installing a rug that was freshly soaked in piss. It took me a while to collect myself, but I saw you in the mirror as I was washing my face before going to bed. Maybe it's hereditary. Some people inherit good looks or a full head of hair, but not me. Did you ever feel anything afterwards? Do you feel anything now?"

Silence.

"Look at you. I can hardly recognize you. You look so harmless—so virtuous. You con-artist. You have everybody fooled, but you know what you did. You remember the criticisms and the tantrums and the beatings—every time I begged you for mercy and you ordered me to shut the hell up. Somewhere in the depths of your mind, you remember it all. I was afraid of you. It seems silly to say that now, but it's the truth. I was afraid of you. I lived in fear that any inconsequential gaffe I made would be met with the strike of your palm. Are you so ignorant that you're unable to acknowledge your own mistakes? Can't you see the problem with what I'm telling you?"

Silence.

"This feels good. It feels cathartic. In fact, I should have done this years ago, when it really would have stung—when you would have felt the same hurt that I've had to endure for almost half a century. I should have done this when I could look into your eyes and for the very first time not see myself in them but see you for the pathetic creature that you are. It's too late now. You're too

far gone, but for what it's worth, I hate you. I've tried not to hate you, I really have, but you've forced me to feel this way. With everything I possess, I hate you. What do you have to say to that?"

"You remind me of my son."

The Wish

Marsha Monel

afterwards
i wanted nothing more
than for the earth to split open
and swallow me whole
i could be its baby
it could raise me to forget
so that when i resurfaced
and locked eyes with yours
the images of your conquest
would fail to load in my mind
i wouldn't be a victim in the papers
or the star of a tragedy
i wouldn't be searching for markings
on my skin
the ones that claimed me as your property
and labeled me as used
the air would be easy to breathe
i would think i was easy to love
uncomplicated
simple
the way i thought my *no's*
should have been to you

Current

Javas Lal

In the hour of the waking, and the dawning of a dream
Comes evenfall of memory, where rivers run a gleam
In moonlight soft and pallid, and countless lotus flowers
Are faces lost in Time and Fate, asleep within their powers

Stone Pony

Victor Torres

The circle inhabits the unloved cretins.
A unity of anger and thrill floods the tides.
The cathartic electricity flows through the crowd
like spilled beer spreads into tendrils across a dive bar floor.
The atmosphere as gentle as a surly dockworker's right hook,
fueled by misguided machismo and Balkan.
The tides are spurred
and the sand rumbles with a backbone
as the Stone Pony breathes life on the scene tonight.

Growling angst of punk rock
lays the cacophonous backbeat of endless youth.
Spiked leather jackets swing their fists in the air,
the Doc Martens and Vans stampeding each other in confusion.
Pierced faces and bloodshot eyes greet every corner of my spinning vision.
Pabst Blue Ribbon rains over me,
the scent of fruit-flavored vape suffocating my head.

Sonic howls and guttural rage pierce the nighttime air.
Bodies awash and surf over the crowd.
Adrenaline clouds reality
and we hold time still.

Warnings

Carlin Jansch

In the pond under two white cherry blossom trees
Who are ignorant to the way of blooming,
Frogs often quiver atop lily pads, finding themselves a little off center.
Flies no longer mind the warmth inside their bellies,
And salmon awkwardly skate through the wayward streams.

Petals will fall from their towers and glue
themselves to the soil upon my arrival.
The colors here aren't what they want to be.
This sanctuary has been consumed by ruthless travelers
stopping not so far from home.
Confusing an oasis with a hint of cigarette smoke for a motel six.
Parts of this place plead *Ruin me like the rest*.
We love to get high and dance with the mushrooms caressing her grasses,
While wishing her waters were whiskey.

I hesitate sitting next to the pond, yet
my reflection shows someone better in the ripples.
She is confused when tadpoles hide in her
addiction of mud like school children playing tag,
And the water splashes up and down,
eagerly awaiting my skin to break through its surface.
My toes cannot help indulging in her games.
The liquid is honey and clings to my hairs,
Sugar slips into my bloodstream, the grains know where to go.

Our laughter echoes in the leaves of the twisted cherry blossom trees.
The scars embedded on my limbs are much harder to see in the water.
Winds whisper warnings through the dead strands of my hair,
Perhaps they do not know that I am deaf.

Spinning Still

Emily Paluba

The human being tattooed rings on their body
like a tree.

Branches sprouting from fingernails reach
me across the room
snaking up my spine.

Veins filled with life are everywhere.

Roots can be firm and gentle
touching hearts like plucked daisies
laying hands like god's wrath.

The tattoos look still but
they vibrate
they spin.

Invisible to the human eye
these movements prove some things are better off
hidden than ruined.

Freckles create a whole universe
on skin.

Cowlicks are blackholes.

Scars are shooting stars.

Seeping under the first layer
the rings wrap around muscles like tourniquets.

Fluttering through the air are
little droplets of blood — little leaves

saturated with oxygen
My mind is filled with
endless wonders —
grains of sand that can never be
caged or counted.

Trees try to stand tall
turn scars into armor and art
like me.
In the end
their bark will tell the story
of a life lived.

Instinct

Heidi Wassong

The rabbit sniffed, its pink nose soft against the snow, its white furred body hidden among the drifts, but its black eyes glinted like obsidian in the moonlight.

The wolf noticed. The wolf could taste it, could hear the snapping of bones between its jaws already, and could smell the bitter, dry coat of the rabbit, a mix of piss and dirt on the wind. Its muscles rolled under its dark gray fur, shaking the flakes off its back. The chill that brushed its slight fingers against its skin grew evermore persistent.

The wolf let out a breath, a puff. The cold air crackled around the heat and burned pieces of the quickly falling snow. Hot drool dripped from its maw, sizzling the tightly packed flakes, a venom. The rabbit heard, its heart a thick hum in the held breath silence of the wind. Then it ran. The wolf, vicious in hunger, hunted.

The rabbit's fear stained the woods a thick yellow, a voice saying *runrunrun* whispering fervently in its head. The wolf, its throat burning from the air, its lungs freezing every breath, had a voice saying *killkillkill*. They moved through the trees, the moonlight casting their silhouettes—a godless puppet show, they looked like paper and string.

The brown trees warped with faces, ominous totems, monuments, to the wild on these mountains whose peaks pierced the sky. The wind joined the chase, and the branches wailed. The rabbit felt its bones hollow at the sound, but *runrunrun* still shivered down its limbs. The wolf snarled, it foamed, *eateateat* clawing at its stomach.

Snowflakes changed to icicle teeth, cutting through the wolf's maw, slicing its gums, staining the gray fur around its mouth. The rabbit could smell it, metal like the chainsaws that roared in the summer.

They raced among the hills, they leapt over rocks, sharp edges stabbed the rabbit's feet, painful, but it couldn't stop, adrenaline— a golden serum— urging it to *gogogo*. The wolf's jaws snapped, so close to the hind legs of the rabbit, ravenous red blood surging through screaming *catchcatchcatch*.

A fatal step— the rabbit leaped but did not see the curve of the cliff, it fell, hitting dead branches, amputated limbs that curved up towards their trunks like hands in worship, until it finally landed at the bottom.

The wolf jumped and landed near, a confidence in its stalk, that of a knight when circling its bested enemy. The air steamed in a haze around its body as the heat of the hunt released.

The voice inside the wolf's head roared, *killkill eateat*. The rabbit's side fluttered up and down, its legs twitched. Its body thrummed to run, but the ice was starting to melt into its fur and the golden life it had flowing in its veins, spurring it, was slipping away as the cold started to gnaw at the edges of its skin. Resignation laid itself to rest in those eyes, as soft as the snow that blanketed the ground.

The wolf charged; the rabbit flinched. With a squelch, the snap of teeth sunk into fur and tore. The rabbit's heart ended with one last thump as the wolf feasted. When it was done, the wolf, with fresh blood staining its mouth, howled, shaking the picture of the world, causing the trees to shiver, the rocks to quake, and the snow to freeze. The moon watched on.

HAIKU

Emily Paluba

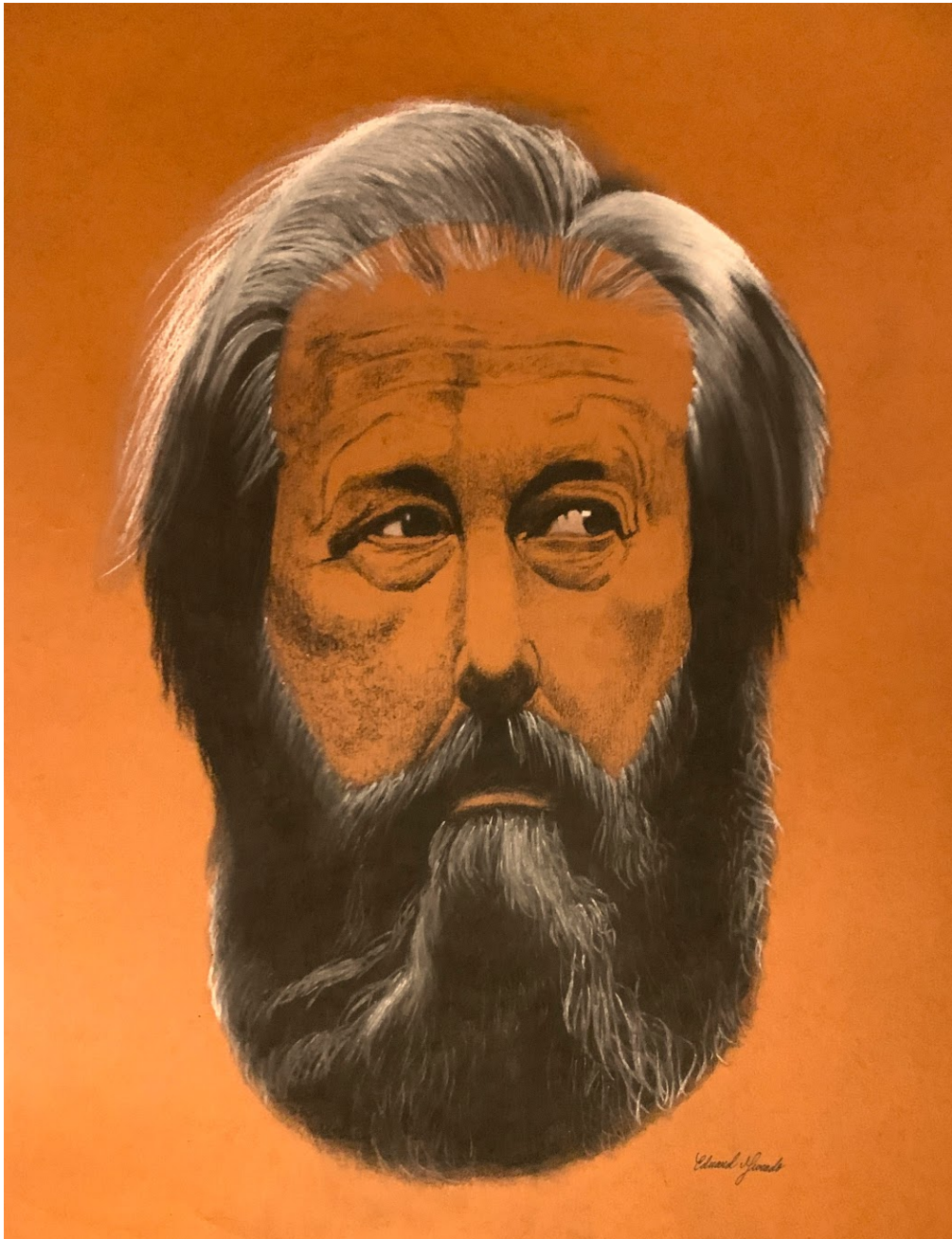
my scream is a borrowed sound
i was empty before it left my lips

After Hours

Victor Torres

Empty renditions of fonder nights as I creep
the sidewalks on a Friday without a crack
in the air. Silent mulling charges
the cacophonous ember that boils the rapture in my gut.
Lonesome squandering sings
the familiar tune of rose-colored solitude.

Will you weave the
strewn facade of the glimmer of hope
at the end of the duct.
Keep asking the question they'll never hear.
Play the charade until the tune has
a dead beat. It's a fickle solution
but not a trickle of clarity hits my mind.
But as I still have my vessel
I hold onto the moments of bond
as we collectively leave cracks in the air.



*A Small Apprentice Under God's Heaven; A
Portrait of Russian Writer Aleksandr I.
Solzhenitsyn*

White and Black Conte Pastels on Brown Media Paper

Eduard Jurado

DSM-5 for the Severely Depressed

Gabrielle Gentile

Aggression: Disastrous gales build in the depths of my stomach. Building, building, building until the whispering winds birth a hurricane of catastrophic demise, demolishing precious pledges and shattering familial bonds. Leaving an abandoned disheveled corpse filled only with regretful rage, the cycle starts anew.

Bupropion: Ivory belladonna ingested each morning. The Parasite's slow execution.

Change of Medication: The game of chance I play when my current treatment ceases to work. What kind of marionette will I become under the influence of the drug's gossamer strings? Will I finally be at peace? Perhaps I will become a hollow zombie dragging my prison of flesh with me wherever I go. Will I win this medical roulette? Will normalcy be achieved? I wonder if they offer it as a consolation prize.

Happiness: What is it? And will I ever have it? I've been told its liquid prosperity. An Ambrosia crafted with warm hands for humankind. Will a skeleton like me ever taste its intoxicating honey? Perhaps not. Maybe I am not worthy of its silken touch or blinding giddiness. But I still wonder, if by some luck, if I will be struck with its blossoming temperance.

Major Depressive Disorder: The Parasite within my body that shreds the threads of my insides. It screeches, creating a cacophony of

distortion within my mind that I should not be alive. No longer is it my face in the mirror, but vicious lingering sockets of sanity's lies. The phrase "cannot be cured" forever branded into my skin. Forever a lazy stain on society's clean pressed shirt. Forever a host for the Parasite to feed off.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Clouds of fervent scribbles clogging my conscience. Never ceasing tremors from heads full of unspeakable terror.

Insomnia: Lavender fields bloom beneath my eyes. Eloquently dancing to the beat of rapid thoughts within my head. Ideas, what-ifs, questions unanswered, regrets, memories, all race about the highway of my jumbled psyche, rushing to reach a destination unknown. To shut the central circuit off would be a blessing to my withered shell.

Isolation: 1. Comfort in solace and lovely silence.
2. The tenebrous pit in which the Parasite hides, purring slander from its sour mouth. It's spindly appendages scutter about the gloomy apparatus, seeking to impale my feeble mind.

Suicide Attempt: 1. An abrupt goodbye never fulfilled.
2. Disquieting humiliation.
3. Locked away, observed by alabaster vultures in rotting

white walls. Recused by mighty herons to unfolding golden worlds unexplored.

Therapy: Where those who are broken go. A place where I am forced to speak of the invading Parasite. A stranger promising to give me mental tools to rebuild myself. I come and I go twice a week to the pristine turquoise office. Patiently, anxiously waiting in the hushed waves of the waiting room blue. Slowly a transformation from invasion to awakened takes place. Dissolved into nothing more but a puny ant the parasite retreats. Streams of golden phosphorescence pierce through years of mental cement walls warming my skin. Ebullient laughter fills me. At long last, I am bathed in oceans of raw fairy dust.

Old Forest New

Takashi Kanai

There used to be giants.

Giants?

Giants. Tall as the sky and as thick as twenty of you. Sprouted from the ground. Thousands of them standing for a thousand years and a thousand more, until they didn't.

Why did they stop standing?

They were fell. Slain.

Slain?

Slain.

How?

A wicked plot to destroy; those who watched this land grow and die and grow and die. Heads sipping at the passing clouds, With feet planted so deep into the ground that nothing could shake them. A wicked plot... Destroyed by new things.

What happened?

Their bodies were left to rot. And where they stood. We now stand. Crammed

and cramped and cramped. There were giants and they were slain. And from their remains we were exhumed. Made in their likeness. By new things.

What are new things?

Who can say. But they were new.

We're giants then?

We were giants. But we will never be giants again.

Pray Tell

Lana Kurimoto

They say that an *omamori* must return
to its temple in the span of a year
Still I carry my expired luck close
knowing it will never have the chance
to be singed of its bad fortune
Overflowing, it must be lashing out
ringing up its respective god to snitch on me

I can't blame a temperamental prayer
going awry at the thought of Americanized
request where it doesn't know the streets
like I do, stumbling on its delivery
because another stupid tourist thought to pray
at the temple rather than their own church

Yet I've never felt God in his own place of worship
in the same delight a bee has never pierced my skin
I've watched from afar and listened to the quiet hymns
and prayers that seep from where the church bell rings
But I've never had their honeyed words pass through
my lips without the feeling of "wrong" wash over me

I've clung to the idea of an unseen savior
like the tangible ghost of a cicada shell
Brittle and hollow, devoid of the heathen body
that scours the Earth for an ethereal counterpart
Tempted by candy-coated pages, held together
by heat and wire, a crystalline web strong enough
to capture another heretic pest lost between the East and West

Seven Months

Sean Dolan

Seven months
Thirty-one point four three weeks
Two hundred and twenty days
Five thousand two hundred eighty hours
Three hundred sixteen thousand and eight hundred minutes
Nineteen million and eight thousand seconds
That's the time I had feelings for you
Whether it was romantic or platonic, that is when I had feelings for you
When things were "good"
When I actually respected you
Now I can't bear to talk to you
I can't stand to think of you
I ignore your text
And I don't even think about you anymore
I just can't help but wonder about the time I wasted on you
The time I'll never get back
The times you shamed me
The time you hurt me
That's what angers me the most
Say you miss me all you want
But actions speak louder than words

This is Called: The Black American Experience, Part 16/10,002,341 and Counting

Marsha Monel

i undressed in front of a white girl
and her jaw dropped to the ground
i searched my body for something out of the ordinary
nothing old was lost, nothing new was found
with a trembling finger she pointed to today's news:
bullet wounds spread across my back
down fell the confetti for her latest discovery
she delivered a speech and was awarded a plaque
it took everything in and surrounding me
to stay serene and as pleasant as she
my temper was monitored, i smiled for the photographer
as my blood boiled
to a toxic degree
probably the weirdest thing about all of this
is that it wasn't weird in the slightest
a touch of overdue acknowledgment
is often followed by a
hail king midas!
i finally spoke from my naked anatomy —
overexposed, but invisible, too —
*all i've been screaming from the top of my lungs
didn't matter
until it came from you*

alone together & alone because we're no longer together

Kyle N. Velez

I just don't know. It's noxious, I think—the absence of knowledge. It didn't have to be this way. We could have shown off our best selves, played pretend, shed them when the time was right somewhere down the line. And that's not a fantasy either, that's evolution. It's as real as any proven science. We grow and we grow to like each other's worst parts, lumpy or sharp. We make solutions. We become a solution.

The road's bumpy. Our bags clunk around in the back. At least the landscape's nice. It's what I imagine when I hear "landscape." Large fields of green, something endless. The driver's been quiet. Does he notice that no music is actually playing? There's a faint buzz coming out of the speakers, but I don't believe that counts. Maybe one of us told him to shut it off. I can't remember. This was stupid. Why did we pay for a driver? We could've done this ourselves. He's always been like this, needing to delegate.

I want him to stop tapping his foot. It's not a nervous tap, it's rhythmic. He probably thinks I don't notice, but I do. Maybe he does know that I've noticed and is continuing in order to toy with me. His left pit is soaked but his right is completely dry. The patch of skin below where his hair ends is a scratchy red. Anyone's ugly if you look at them long enough.

It was such a twist, who would have thought? It's such a classic. The hero is actually the supervillain. The call is coming from inside the house. He played it so smooth, so *suave*. The look on his face: the *who, me?* I think he doesn't even believe it himself. He probably thinks he's totally innocent. His appearance has changed to me. It's not like he's actually physically altered, there's just... *something*. Dust and light sit on him differently. My eyes dart over to his side of the car again. His foot is still tapping, but it's not the same beat as before.

I spot a cow, which quickly becomes a black and white fleck far behind us. Why is it out here all alone? The radio buzz continues. I catch myself sighing out loud. His foot stops for a moment before going back to tapping.

I think about how my parents will feel when they find out. They liked him, and they didn't like him at first, so I think that means something. They won't know immediately that we're done, but eventually they'll pick up on it. I won't be as chipper as I was at those dinners we'd have every once in a while. My smile won't be full toothed. They'll exchange those glances, like they're in a hostage situation and the clock is tick, tick, ticking. I always used to think that they wouldn't make it. Maybe it's all in those looks. Him and I never really had those.

In my head I just assumed that the right kind of looks would come eventually. *It isn't like all of those rom-com movies.* There's no love at first sight, no galaxy forming connection. I still thought there were lessons to be learned from those movies, though. There's no shame in being romantic for romance's sake. One night I went up to his apartment with roses. Blue ones. I didn't do research. I only thought I was spicing things up. *Surprise!* He gave me this blank-faced stare, waiting for me to say something after I'd already said something. We stood there until eventually he walked inside, leaving me with this fucking stupid look. To this day I've yet to learn what I did wrong, and I'm too embarrassed to ask.

I remember that I have water, the elixir of life. I take a long sip before placing it in the cup holder between us. The plastic is extremely dewy. *Dewy?* It's wet and slippery. His coffee's gotten cold. I never liked that about him. Not the coffee. Just the breath. It never changed.

That stare he gave—when I was holding the roses—I just can't stop

thinking about it. There isn't a worse sight to me. Is that where it went south? In all honesty, I don't believe it can be pinpointed. I close my eyes. I want to stop thinking about us there. Oh God, I've realized it. *That's* our look: confusion and dissonance.

He scanned me like I was a stranger, something foreign. *Who are you?* I've seen the look before. That's kind of why it hurts; I'm not a first timer. The problem is that people don't know that they're doing it. It's instinctual. What we don't get, we look at, puzzled. It's not always that we don't want to understand. There's just a disconnect.

The fields give way to tons of trees. Every single pine looks similar. Some have dead branches, but on the whole, it looks like we're driving past the same place over and over. I tilt my head so I can see his feet. His right foot is now knocking against the door. I thought it was just the road, or that the car was old and wheezing. For a moment the tapping sounds violent, angry.

Towards the beginning I gave our relationship a throwaway expiration date. I can remember everything: me and my friend were shopping. She has never given me the look. It was a supermarket, not a big corporate one. Family-owned. Her hair was wet, and even though she hated going out that way she needed to get some food. She had a press conference in the late afternoon. *Keep me company*, she said on the phone. *I don't want to just see strangers today.*

It was in between the cantaloupe and the bacon. She asked me about him, his looks, his personality. She hadn't met him yet. I wasn't looking at her when I said it. *I think we'll last for years.* I still wonder about that response. *Years*, how indefinite.

I glance forward. The driver and I lock eyes in the front seat mirror. His

His pupils dart back to what's in front of all of us. I keep staring. He seems worn out but not by age, nor the job. It's a battle on the inside. Something he'll never tell his family, if he has one.

I think about my options again. For a few seconds I imagine the cartoony image of an angel and devil sitting on my shoulders. *Scorched earth or diplomacy? You choose.* We could shout and scream, but that's not really his style. I remember him whispering to me at the airport. *Don't make a scene.* We could both just pick up our things and never talk again. It's not a stretch, since we're already doing the not talking part.

He reaches over to take a sip of his coffee. He slurps.

He wasn't who I thought he was. Maybe it's not that, and instead it's that he wasn't who he said he was. False advertising. I didn't have the highest of hopes for him; he wasn't going to pull me into bliss, or pay my rent, or blow my mind. He was just a guy, and I was just a guy, and we spent a lot of time together doing things. Maybe I do need to believe. In rom-coms, I mean. Maybe there isn't really love at first sight, but that shouldn't discourage you from trying. I don't know. Maybe it's meaningless. Maybe his father slapped him across the cheek when he was five and he's been grasping for power ever since.

I didn't know what to do while waiting at the baggage claim. I didn't know what to do on the plane, either. My fingers kept twiddling. To be honest, I've never been good with vacations. They always come around when I'd prefer to go see a shrink. He asked me just as I was considering the merits of everything. Think about that again, the first part. *He asked me.* What was he looking for? Why start trying then? I look over again. The coffee's hanging on his lip.

We hit traffic. Where did all of these cars come from? They're in all directions, like when we're in the trees, on the road. A minute ago, it looked like there was no one else. The driver lets out several coughs. I sigh just as a car behind us honks. We start to creep towards this piece of graffiti. I squint. *Trouble In Paradise?* is painted in big letters, casually concerned. I think about crying. I start to cry.

The driver looks back at us, eyebrows raised. Next to me he shuffles around. Everyone's uncomfortable. I have never been a crier and remembering that fact makes me cry more. For a second I try to stop but I can't. I can't stop any of it.

I am deathly afraid that every man will be like this one, someone with coffee breath, and the wrong looks, someone who takes and takes and *takes*. They may turn out to be all different, never the same, but that's not how it feels right now. It *feels* like they'll all be the same, and that I'm helpless, and that feeling makes the most monumental fucking difference.

Up until this moment, no one in any of the other cars has noticed what's happening. A woman in the lane over lurches sideways out of her Honda to witness our little episode. *My* little disaster. She sees me, and then I see her. Her look is motherly. We are connected. I'll never forget her because she'll always be attached to this moment. "Do you have any tissues?" I say, breaking our collective verbal silence.

"Uh-um, yes, yes right here," the driver says, opening up the front seat glove compartment. I practically snatch them out of his hand.

"Thank you."

He isn't looking at me, probably because I've broken our promise. I am

already a bad ex, and a loud one at that. It's an odd goal, wanting to be a good ex. Why do I still care?

“Are you okay?” the driver asks.

I laugh, in that choked-out paradoxical way only people crying can. “I mean, I *guess*.”

“Good, good, good, good,” the driver hums. We are now out of the tunnel, thank God. “And you?” The driver's asking him now.

“Me? Never been better,” he says, shutting his eyes, grimacing, pulling a shrug. I want out of this car. I want to leave and run away and never have to deal with this ever again. I grab my shirt and look at the places where tears have temporarily stained the cloth. There's nothing more I can learn from this, really. Once we get out of the tunnel, I roll the window down, unbuckle my seat belt, and let my head stick out. The air's rough but perfect. My legs stretch near his side, and my boots knock against his. I'm sure he's quite pissed. The driver looks back, but he just shakes his head.

propositions

Luke Winnicki

i promise
tomorrow we're gonna go
sit outside
and pretend like nothing
happened.

you asked
what my plan was like i
had one
i made a little sound that
you hate

i said
“you and i should go
dancing”
you said “you and i go
dancing?”

About Rain

Evan Dekens

I was grading papers in the living room with Diedre when, suddenly, she stood up, and walked over to the window, parting the spindly canvas curtains and pressing a greasy cheek into the glass.

“It’s going to rain,” she said.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

Our living room had a cherrywood console where the TV was housed, flanked by stacked columns of un-shelved books. I sat comfortably on the couch, warm and leathery, curled up in the elbow the same way our cat would stretch itself into the cushions after it returned from the wooded troves of land that stretched out and up around us like the black, rain-ready sky. The ceilings were high and might have echoed if the room were empty. It was tall enough for a tree at Christmas, for the children wrapped up in the wrapping paper to look up and not feel the weight of enclosure.

The thought of a child kneeling peacefully at my feet sent me back into the broken sentences of my students’ essays.

Diedre was wearing her green waffle-woven sweater—my least favorite shirt to look at, though I didn’t remind her of this. I was always hoping to eschew any unnecessary remembrances, since it was the same sweater she wore at the hospital two years ago—slightly damp with sweat and crimson—now clean and shrunken and apparently, to her, commonplace.

As I had on several occasions since that night, I imagined tenderly burning the sweater in the metal recycling can out back when she was asleep. Then I flattened out the papers on my knee and cleared my throat. “Come back to the couch.” I said, “You can help read through these if you want.”

But Diedre was in her head again.

She had taken time off her job as a cardiologist for a few months before quitting her practice altogether. She hardly ever seemed sure of anything anymore.

Each morning, pulling out of the driveway on my way to work, I dreaded the sight of her stilted frame through the window of the porch. She was morose, withdrawn. In fact, I started to suspect that Diedre no longer existed—that someone had come in the night and replaced her with this new ghoulish totem who now split her days watching daytime television shows and taking long walks through town with our neighbor Shirley, an older woman who had also lost a child when she was young.

But the scariest change in her was her newfound indifference.

Last summer we were on vacation in Cape Cod, walking through a brilliant nature preserve. I marveled at the waves of grasslands rippling like hair in beach winds, and the small armies of miniature crabs digging wet tunnels beneath the boarded paths. I gasped as we watched a long thin bird diving into the still water of a lake.

“Isn’t that something?” I asked. She didn’t answer.

She was not the type to ruminate over a restaurant menu or test-drive a dozen cars. Wherever she arrived in life, she had a plan. This was the reason I loved her: this sense of knowing, of direction and purpose. As her husband I was a part of that purpose, that hidden design for the future which lingered behind her eyes.

That was all gone now. When I would ask her whether she wanted take-out or a home-cooked meal, she’d respond dully with “I don’t know,” flipping through a magazine laid on a kitchen towel. When I proposed the idea of

having some of the other teachers over for dinner, she simply said, “If that’s what you want.”

“I want to know what you want,” I said once. She looked at me as if I had told her I was having an affair and left the house, looking for Shirley.

I readjusted my slippers and picked a chunk of earwax out of my ear. Some student had written an essay on Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”—a story which had grown lifeless and dull to me after my fourth year of teaching it—and was rambling on and on about the part of the story where the word “vessel” is confused for “vassal.”

I would have taken either at that point.

“It’s been dry lately; it’ll be good for the grass,” she said.

“Yeah, it will be.”

Fault Lines

Lana Kurimoto

The San Andreas Fault cuts through the coast of California
like drunken scissors slicing past the dotted lines
They said we'd gain another island if the stitches were undone
and in 50 years Miami would become the real-life Atlantis
Just one slip and it's all over, kiss your family goodbye
as the ocean swallows the canyon like it's never eaten before

I know a shift in tectonic plates doesn't change your scenery,
but I wonder if people start to notice before the world
is pulled out from under them, if they broke their coffee mug
on Tuesday morning, does it haunt them till Friday afternoon
Do they think about the chips and cracks that ran through
Mornin' Sunshine, calling it predestination
when it hits the tiles and the coffee starts a game of Snake

On the other side of the fault line, I wonder if you were slipping
away faster than the measly five centimeters a year, or maybe
it started long before I noticed the shift, mistaking cracks
for guidelines and walking heel to toe on splitting seams
I can't tell when I started to rub you the wrong way
When you started driving with both hands on the wheel,
and the five-inch lag in our strides didn't bother us anymore

I couldn't say it then, but I think I held on too tight
Now that we've slipped past each other I'm starting to bruise
And maybe I've marred you too, left a few scars that won't fade
in time, forcing her to trace them and ask what happened
To have my name on your tongue again even as tragedy
means that I've survived the aftershocks

The House

Cristian Morillo

I wonder what the house feels

It encapsulates so many emotions

Sadness

Happiness

Frustration

Anger

Despair

Joy

The moments that capture these emotions within the house tell stories...

Crying to sleep over a breakup

The excitement of starting your first day of school

The frustration that you would never be enough

But imagine if the house felt these things and took them to “heart”

I wonder what it would think

Would the house be a happy entity

Or

Would it die inside

Knowing that all good things

Must eventually come to an end

Water Motions

Eduard Jurado

Daniel D. Wilson absentmindedly strokes the faintly scarred skin of his jawline as Professor Wallace lectures on the defining characteristics of monotheism. Melanie H. Herrera underlines a previously written sentence in her wide-ruled composition notebook with a different colored pen. James Kimball fumbles with the car keys in the front-left pocket of his jeans. Marlene C. Frank types several words into a text document without looking down at her laptop's keyboard. Richard P. Collins walks in late, somewhat out of breath and perspiring slightly under a gray hoodie. Holly McAllister yawns silently and takes a sip from a stainless-steel tumbler. Bryanna Watson taps a mechanical pencil on her *Introductory Psychology* textbook, producing an arrhythmic beat which if transcribed into Morse code would translate into pure gibberish. Professor Wallace asks the class if they believe in God, and they all suddenly perk up, looking among themselves—attempting to gauge what would constitute a socially acceptable response. Modernity implies a reluctance to believe.

Catherine L. Anderson raises her hand. Susan A. Johnston, with diffidence, brushes a fallen strand of dark shiny hair from her face, revealing a poreless creamy forehead. Daniel D. Wilson looks down at his pen and tries to estimate how much longer it will continue to write (based on the approximate date of purchase and previous usage.) What used to be known as worry is now called anxiety. Kevin Alvarez massages his chronically sore left knee with his right hand. Karleny Hernandez audibly fails to stifle a sneeze. Melanie H. Herrera consciously attempts to maintain proper spinal posture to deal with her chronic lower back pain. Nicholas Sartore can feel his scalp start to itch and is debating whether to scratch. Kathy J. Wright makes a sudden leg movement, which reminds the which reminds the seated-directly-behind-her

,Glen Grogan of a high school tennis injury. Bryanna Watson can sense the first stirrings of a throbbing headache. Richard P. Collins's stomach makes an odd gurgling noise, and he wonders if anyone noticed. Catherine L. Anderson finally puts her hand down, unheeded. We become what we repeatedly feel...

Acne Vulgaris

Alopecia Areata

Antidepressant Discontinuation Syndrome

Antisocial Personality Disorder

Binge-Eating Disorder

Body Dysmorphia

Caffeine Intoxication

Cannabis Withdrawal

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Chlamydia

Constipation

Cyclothymic Disorder

Dissociative Amnesia

Enuresis

Erectile Dysfunction

Excoriation Disorder

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease

Gender Dysphoria

Generalized Anxiety Disorder	Psoriasis
Halitosis	Psychotic Depression
Herpes Simplex Virus	Seasonal Affective Disorder
Human Papillomavirus	Severe Alcoholism
Inflammatory Bowel Disease	Sinusitis
Influenza	Sleep Apnea
Insomnia	Social Anxiety Disorder
Major Depressive Disorder	Streptococcal Pharyngitis
Meningitis	Suicidal Ideation
Mononucleosis	Tardive Dyskinesia
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder	Trichotillomania
Occupational Stress	Unspecified Anxiety Disorder
Opioid Induced Disorder	Vaginal Candidiasis
Premature Ejaculation	Vision Impairment

There are two eventual suicides in the room, one of whom will leave behind no note. Justin Thompson sends a grammatically incoherent text message typed entirely in lowercase. Marlene C. Frank blinks twice and closes several web browser tabs all at once. Sidra Haidery stops writing, turns a page, and starts writing again. Franklin C. Thompson grins wryly as he remembers an old joke: The only things certain in life are death, taxes, and getting caught whacking off in the disabled stall of a public lavatory. Some people never grow up, others were never young. Daniel D. Wilson looks over his graded midterm exam and writes *LIFE'S* to the left and *BITCH* to the

right of the big red A on the first page—intermittently for the last hour and a half, he has been glancing over at Susan A. Johnston in hopeless admiration. Part of growing up is accepting the fact that some things must remain forever unattainable.

Past the room's Windex[®]-streaked windows, gleaming vehicles incessantly rehearse their automated choreography: heed the warning, stop, then proceed. The susurrus of rubber on pavement mingling with rustling grass composes a suburban chant, its muted phrase dissolving into the ether. High up above, the incandescent giant penetrates a lonely patch of cumulus. Free-falling at the cosmic limit, it bursts upon concrete and rust—propagates indiscriminately and refracts, awakening floaters in the eyes. Warm sunny days are infinitely sadder than cold rainy ones. Pay attention now. You are here, seated and subdued with bodies all around you. On faces upon which all is written, a few mouths agape. The soothing squeaks of a blue dry erase marker from which a solvent odor drifts. A fluorescent tube light flickers overhead, almost consumed. We are all of us alone together.

And so, the performance comes to an end, lifting the apathetic fog as numb legs walk themselves out—enacting the ritual. Reticent sightlines trace outlines all along reflective halls. Through doorways life begins again. The giant shrinks to a bright white headlight atop the cerulean dome, bathing you just within skin's comfort. Dry leaves crackle at your feet as soft shapeless wind caresses your face, parting back your hair just the way you like it. Slow conscious breaths amid the bustle, careful deliberate steps cadenced in sync with the earth as it moves fast and motionless—for a briefly everlasting length of time, the nightmare wholly receded. All of this you can *choose* to experience. Here, in this multitude of fleshy souls where every now and then, as if inevitably, two passing glances meet. Don't look away.

Deck the Halls

Casey Masterson

The wooden double panel door splintered as the crowbar was inserted into the side opposite its hinges. Little strength was required to force the lock, as it hadn't been changed since the '70s. The door handle would wriggle in its place when turned, almost as if it could be screwed out. The once-polished wood was faded and adorned with scars. Some of these were initials; others were various profanities.

Al Harvey kicked the door in after one last push with the crowbar. The door huddled against the wall in order to escape the intruder's wrath. He dropped his crowbar to the concrete step below him, the clatter muffled by the light dusting of snow below his feet. Al had little concern for anyone seeing him enter, on camera or otherwise. The brick wall of the alleyway behind him was his only witness, and the Church of Saint Nicholas was devoid of security cameras. All the church had was Father Abraham and the will of God to defend it— whatever the fuck that meant. Al could have sworn that the place was giftwrapped for him. If the will of God was to keep this church safe, then why wouldn't he divinely inspire Abraham to get Ring or some other security system? If anything, he was helping the old fart by teaching him how the world works.

Al cut through the darkness, striding towards the other side of the room. The only light was supplied from the skylight above, which was slowly being buried in a shallow layer of snow, and the advent wreath. He cast his gaze over the congregation of pews to the altar. Jesus hung his head above them, looking down at the intruder below.

“Careful, Hey-soos. Stayin' quiet when there's a crime makes ya guilty by association,” Al warned.

Jesus maintained his silent vigil over the pews.

Al swung open the door that led down a corridor. It was a stark contrast to the warm aura the church exuded. The walls were stark white, interrupted only by a framed picture of St. Nicholas. The white and blue tiles lead Al down the hallway toward his destination. The saint smiled at the man as he passed. The saint of giving, as well as repentant thieves, could only extend his influence as far as the frame before him. The holy figure could bring no obstacle against him.

Al pushed the door marked *Office* open. On the inside, to the left of the door, was a drop-box to the toy drive. A brown teddy bear with a Santa hat judged Al as he moved to the desk across from it. The burglar lifted the lockbox, which contained donations to both the church and poor, from its place on the desk. As he turned on his heel to leave, he was met by Father Abraham, who now stood in the doorway. Al hardly recognized him in his striped pajama bottoms and Simpsons T-shirt.

“Out of the way, Father.”

Father Abraham took a cautious step forward. The eyes beyond the bags of wrinkles seemed hurt. “On Christmas Eve? My son—”

“I’m not your fucking son.” As Al spoke, he raised his shirt to show the gun tucked into his pants. “Move.”

The old man hung his head. “Thou shalt not steal. On this holiest of days, where it is our duty to give to those less fortunate, I can’t let you steal from them.”

Al’s cold gray eyes stared into those of the Father before he sprung forward. He grabbed the Father by the shirt and cast him against the toy-bin. There was a sickening crack. Blood started to pool on the top of his shirt and dripped from his ear. As a stuffed bear hit the ground, it began to sing “Deck

the Halls.” Al poked the priest, and his head leaned to the side.

“Fa-la-la-la-laaa la-la-la-lah,” the bear sang.

Al clutched the lockbox in his fist as he left the room. The door slamming cut the bear off mid song. He strode down the hallway, and into the church. Jesus averted his gaze from the criminal. The nave was darker now that the snow completely covered the skylight above. He was quick to leave the building and entered into the alleyway from whence he had come. A woman and her daughter walked past the mouth of the alley. Al was invisible to them, or so it seemed, as neither of them looked his way.

“Deck the halls with boughs of holly,” the child sang as she skipped ahead of her mother.

Al waited for the pair to pass before he went back onto the sidewalk. He started walking west, passing the church on his left. A man passed by the grand church steps; his face buried in his phone. His eyes scanned over a message he had received, and he groaned.

“’Tis the season to be jolly,” the man muttered.

Al stopped in his tracks and watched the stranger as he passed. It was not long before he shook his head. He walked forward to the corner of Deacon and Main. A Honda pulled up to the stop light and waited for it to go green. Another car’s tires swerved on ice as it turned the corner, nearly hitting the Honda. The offended car honked its horn.

“Fa-la-la-la-laaa la-la-la-lah,” the car horn yelled.

“What the fuck...”

He was hearing things. He had to be hearing things. He was just feeling guilty about offing the old man. That was all, and nothing more. An old woman with curled white hair stood next to him. She held a bag with a small

yorkie in it, whose small eyes looked up to him as she whimpered in tune. Al ignored the dog and tapped the woman on the shoulder. “Did ya see that car? That coulda been some wreck, amirite?”

“See the blazing Yule before us,” she responded softly.

His face fell. The old woman hobbled across the street, blissfully unaware of what she had just said. Al stayed still as a group of college kids came towards him. One of the boys in a university sweatshirt playfully shoved a friend.

“Strike the harp and join the chorus,” said the young man in the sweatshirt.

“Fa-la-la-la-laaa la-la-la-lah,” the other grumbled.

Al ran forward, intent on leaving the church far behind him. Instead of dissipating, the song got louder. If there were no people near him, then the song would come from a radio, or from the clicking of a turn signal.

“Sing we joyous all together...”

“Troll the ancient Yuletide carol...”

“While I tell of Yuletide treasure...”

“While I tell of Yuletide treasure...”

“WHILE I TELL OF YULETIDE TREASURE.”

Al screamed, and rushed into the nearest alleyway. He slid his back down against a wall. The snow seeped in through his jeans and caused him to shiver, but he didn’t care. He kept his lockbox in his lap as he pulled his knees upwards. Al rested his head against his knees and covered his ears with his hands.

It had to stop.

It *had* to stop.

“You look like you’re yearning for peace,” a soft voice commented.

Al looked up to see Father Abraham standing before him. He was now adorned in his white vestment, a purple scarf hanging over his shoulders. He seemed to have washed off the blood from himself, as there was no trace of it. Everything was quiet.

“Father, you’ve got to stop this. I can’t fucking take it,” the burglar begged. He moved from his fetal position to his knees at Abraham’s feet. “Please, Father.”

The priest smiled down at the man. “There’s only one way for this to end, my son.”

The money.

The box had fallen off his lap and into the snow as he moved to his knees. He lifted it up and thrust it towards the old man. “Take it. It’s all yours.”

The priest took the box from his hands, and then he was gone.

Strike the harp and join the chorus.

“No.”

Strike the harp and join THE CHORUS.

“No, God, please, no.”

STRIKE THE HARP AND JOIN THE CHORUS.

STRIKE THE HARP AND JOIN THE CHORUS.

Al reached into his belt and pulled out his gun. Gray matter splattered against the wall as Al’s soul left the old world passing.

Fragile

Sean Dolan

When God made me, he was gentle
Stitching the soft skin over my bones with precision
Filling my heart with love
Making my bones with the finest of glass
Painting a sincere smile on my face to distract from my ignorance
The only thing he forgot was a warning label
A big yellow sticker with the words “fragile, handle with care”
Maybe then people would look at me as an equal
Maybe then, fuckboys would fuck right off
Maybe then, someone would hold me and say, “it’s not your fault”
Maybe then someone would say, “I’m here for you”
But instead, the world ripped me apart and tossed me aside
The guys I talk to treat me like a sex doll
The world thinks I’m incompetent
People ignore my feelings and treat me like I’m less than
My glass bones shatter in the face of fear
My soft skin hardens under pressure
My silly smiles smudges to a frown as the world laughs
I wasn’t built for this world
I’m not meant to be this fragile
If only someone would handle me with care

Contributors' Notes

Emily Paluba is a queer poet, writer, and artist who also goes by her stage name, Quatro. She is a sophomore English major with a concentration in creative writing and a Spanish minor at Montclair State University. When she's not in her notebook, you can find her walking her dog, riding horses, playing music, or on Instagram @quatrosays.

Marsha Monel is a senior exercise science major with a concentration in strength and conditioning at Montclair State University. She has been writing short stories and essays for as long as she can remember. In the last few years, she has grown to love reading and writing both poetry and screenplays. Marsha is currently working on putting together a book of poems.

Catherine Brothers is 21 years old and from Maplewood, New Jersey. For as long as she can remember, she has loved writing and has done it as much as she possibly could. She hopes to find a career in the literary field post-graduation. She has one cat.

Javas Lal has been drawing, writing, creating music, and involved in the arts since childhood. He is graduating in Spring 2022 and also participates in gymnastics at the club sports level for Montclair State University. You can find some of his recent music work at <https://soundcloud.com/javas-lal>

Victor Torres is a junior at Montclair State University. He is majoring in English with a minor in filmmaking. He is a first-generation college student and a member of The Sigma Alpha Lambda Honor Society, The National Society of Collegiate Scholars, and The National Society of Leadership and Success. His areas of interest include music, writing, video production, and art. On his downtime, he enjoys reading, exercising and making music. This is the first time for his work to get published, and the first steps in his goal to become an author and screenwriter.

Carlin Jansch is a part of the Montclair State University volleyball team and is majoring in psychology with two minors in social work and LGBTQ+ studies. Carlin has always enjoyed exploring her creative side through poetry, writing, and painting from a young age. She also enjoys spending a lot of time with her family, friends, and girlfriend, and always enjoys being a shoulder to lean on for those in need.

Heidi Wassong aspires to be a librarian one day so that hopefully she can discover the sacred texts to the netherworld. She has a dog named Bonnie.

Eduard Jurado is well aware that his banana is older than the rest, and his life is a mess, but he's trying his best. Also, if Mars had life on it he might find his wife on it.

Luke Winnicki is an English major at Montclair State University, and a student teacher from Neptune, New Jersey. Luke's interests include underground punk music, cyborg philosophy, and rice-based one-dish meals. They plan on moving to Philadelphia this summer to teach English Language Arts and continue publishing poetry.

Gabriella Gentile is a senior at Montclair State University currently working to finish her English major with a concentration in creative writing and minor in German. She currently lives in New York with her dog, Rascal. One day she hopes to have her own published book of poetry filled with her own illustrations.

Takashi Kanai is a senior dance major at Montclair State University. His interests on top of dancing and writing include sitting outside and flying kites.

Lana Kurimoto is a junior theatre studies major at Montclair State University. She has been writing since her senior year of high school. She has been inspired by Sarah Kay, Phil Kaye, and other spoken word poets to continue writing after high school. Her hobbies include writing, and music.

Kyle N. Velez is a sophomore communications and media arts major with a minor in creative writing at Montclair State University. His hobbies and interests include: writing, running, finding new music, working out, shopping at thrift stores, traveling, avoiding student debt, and finding the secret to the perfect pancakes. Favorite quote: "It gets easier...Every day it gets a little easier.....But you gotta do it every day--that's the hard part. But it does get easier." - Jogging Baboon (*Bojack Horseman*, 2015)

Evan Dekens is a senior at Montclair State University studying English, film, and creative writing.

Cristian Morillo is a psychology major with a minor in sociology, as well as a concentration in theatre at Montclair State University. Cristian can be found around campus participating in many activities at Montclair State such as being an event coordinator for the Office of Social Justice and Diversity (OSJD), playing on the Montclair State tennis club, and taking on the responsibility of poetry editor for *The Normal Review*. Cristian has performed in numerous area theatre productions such as Rhino Theatre's *Be More Chill* and The Wayne Y's production of *Chicago: The Musical* (just to name a couple). Cristian hopes to collectively incorporate his talents and interests into his own psychotherapy private practice as an aspiring clinical psychologist one day.

Sean Dolan is a public relations major at Montclair State University, who wants to share the following message: "I'm glad to share another semester worth of hard work, especially in such a hard time. Keep creating and keep inspiring!"

Casey Masterson is a senior German major at Montclair State University with minors in mythology and creative writing. Casey is influenced by Rod Serling, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, and Edgar Allan Poe. She has been writing since the first grade, and hopes to one day make a career out of it. One of her many hobbies is being the editor in chief for *The Normal Review*.

