



It's Lit

DVC Literary Journal

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“Witness” — Cover art credited to Tarra Lyons, DVC Art Professor and Artist © 2021

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DVC 11th Annual Literary Contest Winners

CREATIVE NONFICTION

First Place: "The Hike"

By Danny Morris

Second Place: "Treatment Kid"

By Cianna Book

Third Place: - "The Pit"

By Hali Loyd

POETRY

First Place: "Be Careful, I Pinch"

By Kelly Autumn

Second Place: "My Catalogue of Fears"

By Sarah Jimison

Third Place: "I Don't Look for Butterflies Anymore"

By Tess Manto

PROSE — Fiction and Play

First Place: "Four-Two-Nine"

By Joe Chung

Second Place: "Wraith"

By Stephanie Pick

Third Place: "How to Date a Millennial Boy (Executive, Techie, or Burnout)"

By Samantha Snider

EDITOR'S CHOICE

"How? Why?"

By Teresa Kloss

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DVC 11th Annual Literary Contest Winners	iii
CREATIVE NONFICTION	1
“The Hike” by Danny Morris	2
“Treatment Kid” by Cianna Book	5
“The Pit” by Hali Loyd	7
POETRY	10
“Be Careful I Pinch” by Kelly Autumn	11
“My Catalogue of Fears” by Sarah Jimison	12
“I Don’t Look for Butterflies Anymore” by Tesa Manto	13
FICTION	14
“Four-Two-Nine” by Joe Chung	15
“Wraith” by Stephanie Pick	19
“How to Date a Millennial Boy (Executive, Techie, or Burnout)” by Samantha Snider	23
EDITOR’S CHOICE	25
“How? Why?” By Teresa Kloss	26
Author Biographies	27
Call for Submissions	29

CREATIVE NONFICTION

“The Hike” by Danny Morris

The trail snaked up and away through fields of scree and spotty snow toward still all too distant peaks. We hoped to pass just below two of the peaks before dark, sometime in the next few hours, but for the moment I had more pressing needs. I wobbled from the established trail, loosening the straps on my pack, and half-sat-half-melted onto a low flat boulder. I knew that stopping might rob me of the will to start walking again, but I took the risk anyway. All right, that might be a bit dramatic, but I was freakin’ tired. It was our fourteenth day backpacking on the John Muir Trail, a two-hundred mile traverse of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Fatigue had settled into my bones, a near constant companion.

The day had started easily enough in the Rae Lakes basin, a fairytale-esque string of alpine lakes framed by imposing granite walls and sawtooth crests. Our group of four breezed up the first several thousand feet of elevation gain out of the basin with barely a pause. With the right amount of instant coffee, oatmeal, and acclimatization to high altitude you can do anything with fair ease. However, the ten miles since had been long, and tedious, and more than a little dreary as we trudged through a valley of endless copy-and-paste pine trees. When we could see them through the thick forest cover, the low clouds dulled everything to shades of gray. Eventually, the pine trees thinned, giving way to sparse meadows of wild grass and mountain flowers. The valley we had spent the better part of our day hiking through began a gentle slope upward, signaling the “easy” part of the day was coming to an end. The second, more difficult mountain pass we were to ascend that day was nearing. A moment of rest would be better now, before my resolve was truly tested.

Jerami caught up a few minutes later and joined me on my boulder. She looked as tired as I felt, but she never complained and never faltered so I didn’t worry much. I may have a stronger body, but I still envied her mental fortitude. She took out a small package of granola with freeze-dried blueberries and dehydrated milk for us to share, the last of our snacks for the day. A meager offering considering the task ahead, but any energy boost was welcome.

A crisp, clear stream burred its constant music just behind us, some of the purest water you’d ever see or taste without the use of an industrial filter. It originated somewhere above, near our destination for the afternoon. Lucky stream, always traveling the path of least resistance.

We ignored the stream for the moment despite our nearly empty water bottles. A liter of water weighs more than two pounds, and every unnecessary pound you carry on the trail is just another pound of regret. The lush environment of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in early summer meant you were never far from a snow-fed stream or lake, and if you have enough water to survive the next two hours, you have enough water. Carrying any more up a steep grade is just silly; there would be plenty on the other side. That had become my philosophy over the previous two weeks, and it hadn’t failed me yet.

As we snacked and gathered ourselves, the gray sky opened briefly and shafts of golden light streaked across the powdery white peaks, dancing with ethereal wisps of

cloud, illuminating violet wildflowers. Everything was perfect for a moment, and I experienced that moment fully. It was a scene straight out of a photographer's dream, but I was too tired to bother reaching for my camera. I munched a spoonful of milky rehydrated granola instead, and took it in.

I never really feel ready to start moving again. There is an immediate relief that comes with sitting. After that, unless you plan on going to sleep, you're pretty much just wasting time, waiting for nonexistent energy to return. We finished the granola and sat for another few minutes before shouldering our gear. We set out on the last push of the day.

A family of three passed by going the opposite direction, clearly relieved to be done with the steep, meandering trail that still lay ahead of us. They smiled and stopped to chat.

"Are you guys going up today?" they asked.

"That's right," Jerami said, brightening slightly. Their faces fell.

"Oh...well good luck with that."

When they had gone, I turned to Jerami. "Was that supposed to be encouraging? What did they expect? Do we really look that tired?" I probably should have been amused, but I think I lacked the capacity for amusement at the time. My annoyance was soon forgotten, drummed out by the rhythm of feet finding their way through rocky debris, the squeaking of my strained straps, the cold breeze on my face.

I spotted a couple of small dots, sitting on a saddle of rock that seemed to mark the halfway point, one bright orange and one navy blue. I paused for a sip of water. "Look, I think that's Nicky and Victor." I said, pointing. We hadn't seen them since noon. They seemed to have all the speed and energy we lacked on this trip, but even they needed rest on a climb like this. They still seemed very far away despite our progress.

Other little figures dotted the mountain side, marking the parts of the trail we couldn't see from below. No one was around us or behind, and none of the dots were coming down. We would be the last ones through the pass that day. We traced their progress up and up, a little line of ants crawling along, and the line disappeared through an invisible gap near the top. Forester Pass. At least we finally had a visible target.

The valley faded away below us, every step an effort, like dragging a sledge. My backpack bit into my shoulders and hips, heavy even by my own standards. There is something extremely liberating about carrying all the supplies you need to survive a week or more in the wilderness, the idea that you could be inconceivably lost in the woods but still be able to thrive. Walking uphill, it just weighed me down, all fifty pounds of it. I walked on under my burden, and soon it too faded from my mind as I once again found my rhythm.

My favorite part of backpacking has always been the steep climbs, making a push, fighting against gravity. Blood pumping, out of breath, an energy and euphoria comes over me, and I begin to revel in the challenge, the promise of greater views. Every part of my legs starts to burn, but man is it a good burn. I rarely feel so awake and alive as I do when I am walking up the side up a mountain. This is what I have been waiting for all day, this feeling, in this uniquely beautiful place. This is why I do it.

Unfortunately even euphoria takes a back seat as your elevation crosses twelve-thousand feet, and fatigue began to drag me back down to earth. But I still felt better

than I had most of the day, if only a little. I don't think Jerami enjoyed the challenge quite like I did, but I could see she was hitting her stride too. I set miniature goals, parts of the trail immediately ahead that I would reach if I just kept walking a little farther. My mind drifted through snatches of songs, mantras, thoughts of the hardships others have endured, before focusing back on the milestone before me, then setting a new one and starting over.

Before we knew it, we reached the saddle where we had seen our friends resting. Our progress had been steady. They were gone, and we were still alone, but we were encouraged by how quickly we had gotten there. If anything, getting to the halfway point was a first real taste of victory and we were desperate for another. We didn't stop for more than thirty seconds, puffing encouragement, a sip of water.

My head throbbed vaguely, and thoughts came slowly if at all. There is a strange state of mind one achieves when all they do is walk for hours while speaking very little, eat, and sleep. It's like a meditation retreat, except you are kept in a constant state of exhaustion and hunger. So, a meditation retreat. I often found myself at the extremes of emotion, deeply introspective or intent on my surroundings. There isn't much of a middle-ground out there, those constant micro-distractions that people and technology and worries bring into our lives completely nonexistent.

Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. Shift to take the burn off my quads and onto my calves. Step. Breathe. Step.

My excitement grew once again as we closed the distance to the top. The switchbacks became shorter and tighter, and I wanted to cut the trail, the top felt so close. Ten switchbacks, nine. I powered ahead.

I waited for Jerami on the first level ground we had seen in hours. It felt strange to no longer have to strain with every step. We passed through the gap together, and a magnificent vista greeted us. The sky was clearer on this side, and beams of light snuck between the peaks once again. A feast, a well-deserved reward for our hard work. We had made it to the top of Forester Pass, all 13,153 feet of it. I felt some of the fatigue from the last eight hours recede. I dropped my pack and took out my camera for the first time all day, snapping a few pictures until my battery died from the cold. We still had more than a mile to go down a steep trail, to fully level ground and water where we could camp, and eat, and sleep, and start over again. At least for now we had gravity on our side.

“Treatment Kid” by Cianna Book

I don't know how long I was sitting on the bathroom floor; it felt like minutes, but it could've been hours. All I knew was that the sky was black as night when I went in, and when I looked up, the sun was smiling down at me, mocking me. I groaned, inching over the green bile shimmering like slime on the floor. Ew, that's gross. Someone should clean that. My thoughts weren't clear, nothing was clear. All I knew was the day had finally come when my life, at 17, would change forever.

A wave of dizziness fell over me and I was thrust into a different reality. My mind's frightening, dark world recalled a memory that I had been running from for the past two days. I fought for sanity, but I lost to that treacherous organ as I slowly slipped away into nothingness, once again.

My eyes flew open as my comforter was being ripped off of my previously sleeping body, and immediate panic set in. I screamed.

“Who are you?! LET GO OF ME! Please, why are you doing this? Get off!! MOMMY, HELP ME!”

Wild with fear, I frantically fought off my kidnappers as my parents just stood there, staring the scene unfolding. I was the prey, as the sharks circled me with unfeeling eyes. There was no one I could trust.

“Please,” I whispered, pleading for my freedom as the strangers who ripped me from my bed still had firm holds on each of my arms. “PLEASE!” I screamed again.

I turned to the one who was supposed to protect me, the one who was supposed to love me. “Mommy, don't let them take me. Please, Mom, don't let them!”

I wrenched my arm from one of my kidnapper's grasps. There was no way in hell I was going down without a fight. “MOMMY!” I screamed again.

“Wait, stop.”

I looked up and my mother was starting towards me, anger and sadness written all over her face.

“Let go of her.” She then turned to me as I was being released, her eyes like granite, cold and hard. “This is happening, no matter what. We can't go on like this. You either go with the transporters now, or you go willingly with us on Monday. Either way, you're going.”

“Go where?” I choked out, hugging my arms around myself, barely able to process what was going on.

“To a mental health treatment center in Utah.”

Awakening into consciousness—still on the bathroom floor—I shuddered. I didn't know how long I would be gone for, and no one was speaking to me anymore. Dazed, I finally mustered up the energy to crawl on the cool floor towards my bedroom. Pulling myself into bed, I felt the soft sheets against my skin like silk. They were enough for me to pretend that the pain in my heart wasn't there. No one wants me anymore. I had been at war with my parents for years; they just didn't understand. But I never thought they would get rid of me altogether. Unwilling to face my reality—a common problem I dealt with—I drifted off into another slumber, dreamless this time, instead.

The next thing I knew, I was on a plane, hearing the deafening sound of the roaring engines, and fear gripped my chest. Wildly, I looked around, and saw my Mom seated next to me. I then remembered; I was on my way to Utah. I couldn't believe this was actually happening. Too fast, it was all too fast. I needed a couple days to recover; I kept blacking out. I opened my mouth to say something, but then we were off. Hopelessly, I sank into my seat, as the fear seeped into my bones like a bitter arctic cold.

Through the flight, waiting to get the rental car, and during the drive to the facility, I was numbed by the icy fear in my veins. At least I have my wits about me, now. My eyes glanced at my Mom once again, and she still was silent; unmoving. Like a pillar of stone, my mother was no longer human. We pulled into the ranch of the treatment center, and absolute anguish overtook my entire body. Please, please please please. I silently begged myself not to allow the tears that burned like matches in my eyes not to spill over, I must be strong if I was going to survive.

Forcing my lead-filled limbs to get out of the car, I took in the sights around me. The mountains loomed over me like giants wanting to eat my soul, and the grass was dead, just like how I felt in that moment. Two men walked out of the sagging, miserable building to greet me, and I knew my fate was sealed. My Mom couldn't look at me, the men wanted to take me, and I had no idea how long I'd be stuck in treatment for.

A strange, metallic taste filled my mouth mixing with the fear inside me. My anguish only grew as I watched my Mom walk away from me, leaving me in this strange place with these strange people. Not even a goodbye. The robot who raised me turned her back on me, and so I turned mine right back. I stalked up those stairs leading straight to hell, ignorant to the fact that 14 months later, that hell would become my Garden of Eden.

“The Pit” by Hali Loyd

I could feel the bright stage lights on my face as pools of sweat dripped down my face. Luckily, the white sheet that I was underneath cloaked me from the audience. The pit in my stomach grew bigger and bigger, as the impending doom became clear in my mind. Keep it down I thought, your whole grade is watching.

I couldn't see the audience, but I could feel the burning of their judgmental eyes. There is truly no harsher critics than middle schoolers.

“I wonder what could be under these white sheets?” my fellow castmate said as she pulled the sheet off me.

“Look at all of these wax figures!” I could feel my stomach begin to tie up even more; I still had another five minutes up on stage before the scene was over. My anxiety began to rise, and I started to panic. Don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw up.

I am going to throw up.

I run off the stage as fast as my Viking costumed feet could take me. I had to find the nearest trashcan; luckily there was one in the nearby hallway. I looked at my metal savior and threw my body over it.

I didn't throw up.

Instead, I sobbed. I ran off the stage for nothing and embarrassed myself in front of everyone.

“Don't cry! You just caught the flu everyone else has,” my drama teacher said, trying to console me.

I, as well as half of the class, went home after the performance. The anxious feelings were gone, but intense guilt came instead. What if it's not the flu. I had instantly felt better after I walked off the stage, not very common with the flu. This is just bad timing. It won't happen again. Little did I know that this day would set a pattern of stage fright that would plague me until the end of high school.

I have always loved theatre and never had much stage fright till that fated performance. I had done plenty of shows before and was always excited to get on stage. I enjoyed getting to play a character, and what theatre kid didn't love all the extra attention. I came back to school the following week and it seemed like nobody noticed; I thought I got off scot-free.

It had been a normal Monday. All my classes had gone by and I was finally in English, my favorite. I sat down at my table group, our desks in groups of four.

“Today, we will be looking at the medium of the short film,” my English teacher said in a cheery tone.

My classmates perked up at that. Today will be an easy day, I thought to myself. The lights began to dim and I could hear the soft hum of the projector as it turned on. Then I felt it, the same knot in my stomach that I had felt the week before. What...I'm not on stage right now. I figured I could just ignore it; I should focus on the movie instead.

It was some random Pixar short, one that had won many awards. I was supposed to take notes, but all I could focus on was the queasy feeling. What if I throw

up right now, in front of everyone. I'll be known as the girl who threw up in class, no one wants to be that person. I felt trapped, in many ways the dark and quiet atmosphere of the classroom made it ten times worse. If I threw up, everyone would notice. Instead of taking notes, I stared at the clock waiting for the class to end. Don't throw up, don't throw up, don't throw up.

It seemed no matter where I went, the anxiety of throwing up came with me. Movie theatres, classroom lectures, the first day of school, anywhere where I felt I would be a burden, the anxiety returned. However, the feelings of anxiety came the worst when going on stage or presenting.

In my freshman year of high school, I took choir. It wasn't my first choice; I had signed up for drama, but didn't get in. My anxiety stayed away during class time, but it was a different story when it came to the performances. Choir concerts are my personal hell; it is the exact opposite of a theatre performance. With theatre, you are a character, one that has a motive, speaking pattern, and history that is different than your own. You are, usually, on your feet during scenes, and entering and exiting the stage. For a choir performance, you are yourself, wearing business casual attire, and worst of all standing perfectly still for a fifteen-minute set. I had been able to keep my nerves at bay with my theatre performance for the most part by getting my nervous energy out through my character. This was not an option for choir.

Our choir performance was looming its ugly head over me for months. No matter how much practice I had, the nerves wouldn't go away. What was worse was that no one seemed to understand my plight.

"You can be alone on stage, but you can't perform with a group of people?"

"You've been on stage thousands of times, why are you nervous?"

"Buck up, you'll be fine."

The dreaded day finally came. I put on my black slacks and white blouse; I looked ready for a job interview. My grandma drove me to the school and all I could think about was the growing pit in my stomach. At the time, I would fast on the day of my performances, thinking I wouldn't be able to throw up if I had nothing in my stomach. Fun fact, that makes the feelings of anxiety even worse.

The tears first came during our dress rehearsal. We had just finished singing a Scottish hymn when I looked out at the empty seats. In thirty minutes' time they would be filled to the brim with people, hundreds of eyes would be on me. And all I could see is myself running off the stage.

I turned and looked at my best friend at the time, "I...I can't do this," and began to hysterically sob. She took me backstage so I could talk to my teacher.

My choir teacher, or Bruce as we called him, took it exceptionally well. Perhaps it was due to him having to manage seven choir classes across two schools, or maybe he saw just how much of a mess I was and didn't want to deal with it. Regardless, he told me I could go sit in the audience and watch.

I made the walk of shame towards the packed theatre and sat next to my grandma. You let everyone down again. The theatre began to fill with parents, friends, and romantic partners. I had friends that came to see me, they came all this way for nothing. The lights began to dim, signaling the show was about to start.

The first choir shuffled onto the stage. You should go up there. They were the advanced class, showing off their skills by singing overtones. GO. UP. THERE. But the pit in my stomach still stayed, a constant reminder of the worst possible outcome. The next choir class came on, there was only one more before my class. If you don't go up there, you'll never be able to get on a stage again.

I slowly rose from my seat.

"I'm going to go," I said to my grandma, voice wavering. She gave me a smile, and I hurried out of the theatre.

I saw my class lined up against the wall; we were about to go on. I slipped into my spot next to my friend.

"You're gonna do it?" She asked me.

"Yeah...if I don't, I don't think I'll ever get over it."

She gave me a reassuring smile as the line started to move. We entered the side door to the theatre. I could see the audience through the curtain as we inched closer and closer. Right before we went on stage, our teacher was giving us high fives. When it was my turn his face lit up and he gave me a big thumbs up. I took a deep breath and walked onto the stage.

The lights were bright, so bright that I couldn't even see the audience. The pit in my stomach was still there, but it wasn't getting worse. Breathe. You'll be fine. My choir teacher picked up his baton, we were about to begin. You'll be fine, you'll be fine, you'll be fine. And we started to sing.

And I was fine. Eventually, the pit disappeared, and I shockingly had a good time. I had one more choir concert that year, but it was a pop-themed concert. We got to sing songs I enjoyed and had choreography; I didn't get the pit in my stomach once.

I still struggle with stage fright, but I have learned a multitude of tools to deal with it. The biggest one being is that I know this pit won't last. The hardest part is the first five minutes, but it will eventually fade. Dealing with stage fright is an interesting battle as there isn't a cure for it, it's something that you must deal with yourself. I don't regret running of that middle school stage so many years ago, as it has forced me to go on my own journey that is uniquely my own.

POETRY

“Be Careful I Pinch” by Kelly Autumn

When you tell me —
“You’re so cute, I want to put you in my pocket!”
I want to ask you —
What would I do there?
Eat your crumbs?
Sleep in a piece of tissue?
Breathe in your smoke?
Tickle you?
Not to mention;
I would have to listen to you all day long!
If I lived in your pocket—
I would build a little fire
from the wool of your sweater.
Scratch your glasses,
Steal your wallet,
Erase the contents of your phone,
and cut off your beard in the middle of the night.
Would you still think I’m cute?
Put that in your pocket.



“Be Careful I Pinch”
by Kelly Autumn
Monotype Mixed Media Collage
2021

“My Catalogue of Fears” by Sarah Jimison

I am afraid of the dark,
the blackness that steeps over like an ocean
covering everything
taking you with it as a feeling,
feeling yourself drown.

I am afraid of my fear,
that is a clutch
holding me back
stalling out on the freeway
keeping me from rising
like a phoenix in the ashes.

I am afraid of what's next
if I rise from the depths
cold and alone
where do I go
and who will I be?

I am afraid of myself,
that I am not good enough.
Am I enough?
It is my inadequacy
my failure that is the root
not the cause, but the tree.
Like a tree when the roots are rot
it topples over.

I am afraid I am broken,
that my fractures can never be mended,
that I am not worthy to be fixed,
that I will never find the goodness,
never find the light.

I am afraid of the light,
the potential happiness
that is undeserved
the feeling of being unburdened.

I am afraid to be free.

I am afraid to me.

“I Don’t Look for Butterflies Anymore” by Tesa Manto

This time, it’s not butterflies
I’ll be scribbling.
The moth symbolizes unexpected guests,
visitors. Oh, to be open to new opportunities,
blessings. To take whatever
comes your way, instead of willing
things to be
something they’re not. I’m tired
of wearing away, painting spots on
vacant wings, splattering
orange on brown.
I will never know if
you’ll be there for me.
But at this point, I’m finally
taking the lenses off,
placing down the paint brush,
seeing you for what you are,
and knowing
what I deserve.

FICTION

“Four-Two-Nine” by Joe Chung

Sitting silently in my car crawling through traffic headed towards the entrance to highway ten, I decide to break up the monotony by peering through the passenger side window to catch the bustle forming outside. There is a long line of multiracial twenty-somethings styling enough beanies, distressed jeans and graphics tees to fill up the entire wall inside an Urban Outfitters store. The end of line is headed towards what appears to be the latest Japanese ramen hot spot that’s opened up in Koreatown. Then I find myself smiling. I remember when that same location used to house a Subway sandwich shop. Before that, a teriyaki chicken bowl joint, before that a donut shop and way before that, there was...nothing. Everything on this plaza was decimated down to the ground, just the ashen remains of many mom-and-pop stores. Korean Americans refer to it as sa-ee-gu which stands for numbers four-two-nine in Korean to commemorate the date of 1992 L.A. riot on April 29. Many of them had to helplessly witness their life’s work vanish overnight and my parents’ convenience store was no exception.

It is the sixth day after the riot when looting had finally stopped at the expense of thousands of businesses set aflame. I can still feel the chill that ran through the car during our drive that morning. Only the sound of murmuring car engine could be heard inside our 1980 white Cadillac. Streets are quiet except for the few pedestrians who would stare us down as we roam past them. Then as we draw closer to our block, I notice that all the familiar landmarks have been transformed into charred masses on either side of the street, hollow wounds festering in dust.

I briefly recall the Sunday School story of Daniel’s three friends who were protected inside a fiery furnace and wish that somehow my parents’ store would be found standing, miraculously unharmed from the enraging flame. I imagine us standing underneath our store sign in disbelief and embracing each other in unbridled joy. But when my dad put our car in park, my hopes are burnt to the ground as was our store. The metal security gate outside the entry door has been weirdly stretched and blackened from the fire, leaving a human-sized gape in the middle. I watch my dad slowly walk towards the mouth of the store before being swallowed whole.

When I step into the store, I find my dad stoop down and sift through the ashes with his bare hands grabbing at nothing. I half expect him to cry for sure but he doesn’t. Instead, he rises upon slapping his thighs as to steel himself for another ordinary day at the store. Except there is no store, only the ghostly remains of its former self. I try to help out by searching for any salvageable items that the looters may have overlooked. The half of the store facing the street is mostly burnt down while the backroom reserved for inventory was relatively unscathed yet virtually emptied out. I could see my mom still standing on the pavement outside the store. Stepping inside the store seemed too much for her. Perhaps standing outside gave her a hope that maybe this was just a bad dream, one that will ultimately end if she holds out long enough.

Mom wanted to come down to the store immediately when the riot first broke out, but my dad stopped her. He said it was too dangerous. She said it was everything. The city of angels, they say. But there were no guardian angels to protect our store that night.

I imagine the aisles lined with stacks of snacks and candies before the incident and momentarily stop at the part of the display where my favorite candy, Twix sat. I feel a sudden buildup of saliva from thinking about sweets and quickly wipe my mind in embarrassment for indulging in such thought. I step around the counter area and my heart jumps when my foot stumbles upon the cash register buried inside a small pyramid shaped pile of debris. In my excitement, I reach down in hopes of finding the family photo frame but when I look underneath, there's nothing but ashes. Photo is nowhere to be found.

It's a picture of our family taken back last year when we had attended our first ever Dodgers game in celebration of my elementary school graduation. Even then I knew it was a considerable sacrifice from my parents since they hardly ever take any time off from the store, not even on Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Along the uphill path to enter the stadium, there was a throng of street vendors hawking knockoff Dodgers paraphernalia. I didn't want to overburden my parents so I tried hard to sneak a peek at the merchandise without them noticing but after my third take, my dad asked me if I wanted to take a look and before I can answer, he tugged me towards the vendor. My eyes were immediately drawn to Daryl Strawberry's gray jersey showing off his number in red lettering underneath the team logo. My dad pointed at the jersey and next thing I knew, my dad was sliding my arm through the sleeve. I felt a foot taller. I marveled at the jersey during the entire game, sliding my hand down its slick polyester sleeves several times as if Daryl himself had worn it.

Even though we were sitting afar on the top deck where players were barely distinguishable, my heart pumped fast every time I saw Daryl's face light up on the Jumbotron screen. I stood up and screamed his name so loud each time, my mom was afraid that I was going to lose my voice. The Dodgers were trailing until the eighth inning when Daryl decidedly hit the ball with a crisp crack that reverberated through the park and put the Dodgers on the top for good. In an instance, the entire stadium erupted with cheers. My dad and I stood up in unison with our arms raised then hugged each other.

My parents kept the photo standing next to the cash register facing them. Perhaps as a daily reminder that there will be many more happy days like these only if they just work hard. Suddenly realizing that I will never see the photo again starts to make my nose tingle.

Tears start to form when my dad silently walks towards me to wrap his hand around my right shoulder and after a pause, says don't worry, we'll be okay. At his words, my shoulders start to shudder followed by streams of tears that drip to the dust covered concrete floor. Then he stoops down to gently grab both of my shoulders. Looking into my eyes, he says, don't cry. What did I tell you about crying as a man?

I utter through my syncopated sobs that men only cry three times in their lifetime. When you are born, when your parents pass away and when your country is lost. The last one always confounds me since I can't imagine another country big enough to take over the US.

That's right, Jin. My dad tries to smile. This isn't one of those three situations.

But what about our store, dad. It's all gone. Even our family photo.

You know, Jin, I can still remember the first time we opened up this store. You were just born. Mom straddled you on her back and watched the register while I was busy

getting the shop in order. Things were even tougher back then, customers called us names and told us to go back to our country. But here we are after all these years, we are still standing. The store may be gone, Jin, but mom and dad aren't. Together we will get up again.

Sonny, you in there?

I hear a familiar voice. It's the unmistakable voice of "Mr. Martin", he's one of our longtime customers. Our family name is Son so he likes to refer to my dad as Sonny. I actually don't know his last name but address him as Mr. Martin out of respect for his elderly age. His tall and lanky body belies his deep guttural voice. He always makes me laugh by asking me how many girlfriends I have now and showering me with tips on how to play better basketball. When we step out of our backroom, I can see Mr. Martin standing in front of our imaginary front door on the sidewalk with his arms akimbo, scanning the damage.

Man, I'm so sorry for what happened, Sonny. He takes his hand and put his fingertips on his forehead and exhales. I tried to stop them, told them you are part of the neighborhood and all but it was no use. Bunch of outsiders looking to cash in on someone else's misfortune. His eyes were blood shot. I was afraid that he would make me cry again.

By the way, I've got something for you. He then reaches for his back pocket and pulls out our family picture frame that was missing from the counter register. I was able to recover this before things got really bad. My dad holds up the photo frame and stares at it for a long time and turns to Mr. Martin to say thank you. Then there's a bit of silence. My dad turns back to start cleaning the store again when Mr. Martin says let me help you. You can use a hand. He grabs the sweeper leaning against the wall and starts sweeping the floor. Both of my parents look befuddled, try to verbally stop him, but Mr. Martin's having none of it. He keeps sweeping away. Then he turns to me and say, "Jin, people get angry. This is a terrible experience for anybody but especially for kids, and I hope you can forgive them. Not right now but someday."

In midst of my confused emotions, I nod in resignation.

"And when you've forgiven them." After a pause, he says, "Forgive again."

I didn't fully understand what he meant then and I can't say that I do today with absolute confidence.

Mr. Martin passed away a while ago. When I visited him at the hospital, his frail thin body bellied his smile that did not seem to age at all. When I stood next to him, he took my hand and said with a mischievous grin, "You know what I'm gonna ask, Jin".

"Yes, I do." I pulled out the photo of my then girlfriend who became my wife and showed it to him. "Here, her name is Nicole. We've been together for two years now".

"She's a keeper."

"How do you know? You haven't even spoken to her yet", I asked incredulously.

"Oh, I know, Jin. When you are at my age, I don't need to speak to her. I can tell by the look of your face. Looks like I won't have to ask you anymore how many girlfriends you have."

"No, sir. And by the way, I got you a gift"

"No way. It's not a Twix bar, is it", he said with a full smile.

“No, it’s not. It’s not that good of a gift”, I shot back with a smile of my own. I then proceeded to pull out a photo frame from the gift bag. It was a picture of me, my parents and Mr. Martin standing in front of the store on the day we finally re-opened after the riot towards the end of that year.

Mr. Martin took a long gaze at the picture before saying thank you. He was still staring into the picture even as I last saw him stepping out of his hospital room.

“Wraith” by Stephanie Pick

Cahir regretted not settling in at the town he passed by a few hours ago. He and his horse, Thaddeus, could have had their first real rest in days, but he thought they would be able to get to Algein before dark. Cahir only began to realize his error once he looked up and watched as the winds hastily blew in dark cloud cover, accelerating the summer sun’s retreat.

“Fucking hell.”

Summer precipitation was uncommon in this area, but not unheard of. It seemed just his luck that Cahir would get stuck sleeping outside in the rain again. He remembered one of the locals in the previous town mentioning an abandoned settlement that should be close by. Certainly, a rotten roof would be better than none. With renewed determination, Cahir continued his trek, ignoring the familiar ache in his knee as he spurred his horse to a trot.

A gentle wind blew south, rustling the branches of the deciduous woodland he passed through, carrying the scents of fresh rain, and the sweet nectar of a night-blooming flower. At least he could enjoy the moments before the rainfall.

Just as Cahir closed his eyes to savor the short respite, a shrill wail pierced the air, and every muscle in his body tensed.

Cahir was familiar with the screams of battle, of the sounds humans made when they were struggling to survive, desperate for an end to their suffering. It was primal. An instinct ingrained into the recesses of the human mind. That was not human.

The rain began its descent and Cahir shivered from the cold.

“Shit.”

He could barely see the circle of rotting houses down the road, but a wraith was not something he wanted to deal with at any time of day. Especially not at night during a rainstorm. Barely corporeal, wraiths could only be slain by a silver blade, or cleansed through rigorous prayer by specially trained priests. And even then, there was always a chance they could come back if their remains were improperly disposed of. No, there was no way he was going to deal with that, no matter how desperate he was for a dry place to sleep. He needed to leave before it sensed his presence.

Another wail pierced the air, and before Cahir could register the feeling of the hairs on the back of his neck rising, lightning struck somewhere in between the houses. A new scream erupted from the chaos. This time, it was clearly a woman. Without any prompt from its rider, Thaddeus jolted forward in a full sprint towards the strike. Cahir’s efforts to change course and slow down were resisted, and the stubborn stallion brought him closer and closer to what he assumed must be a fresh corpse and a vengeful wraith. As they rapidly approached Thaddeus’s destination, Cahir gave up fighting the animal and readied himself for a battle.

When the stallion finally halted at the edge of the encampment, its rider carefully dismounted and cautiously moved further in to investigate. Cahir couldn’t hear anything other than the horse’s heavy breathing over the thunder of the rain. With his sword at the ready, Cahir approached the scorched well in the middle of the settlement. The roof must have been what the stroke of lightning hit, but why would it hit the well, when the

houses were taller and the whole settlement was bordered by towering maples on one side?

As Cahir circled to the far side of the well, he came upon an unexpected sight. There, on the overgrown path, lay the remains of the wraith. A steaming gooey mess of ectoplasm and bone was all that was left of the phantom. Cahir's nose wrinkled as the smell of sulfur and iron assaulted his nose. If the wraith wasn't completely dead, Cahir at least had plenty of time to get far enough away to never worry about it again.

A snort from his horse startled Cahir to straighten his back and glare at the animal. It had moved from where he'd initially dismounted and was now standing in front of the entrance to one of the abandoned homes. Footprints in the mud beside the messy remains led into the dilapidated house. Sighing in exasperation, Cahir followed the tracks into the crumbling home.

At first glance, nothing seemed out of the ordinary inside the rotting building. It was a one-room house with a broken bed frame in one corner, sparse furniture—just a wardrobe that had fallen over, a small table, and broken chairs—and a fire pit with a filthy cooking pot on the other side. Moss and small herbs were beginning to reclaim the unoccupied home.

"Hello?" Cahir called out to the space, feeling a drip of what could have been either sweat or rain fall past his temple and land on his shoulder. "If anyone is in here, I suggest you get out of here while you can. The wraith seems to be done for now, but it could come back in a manner of hours." Cahir waited a few moments, but there was no response. The hoot of an owl startled him, causing him to jump higher than he would ever willingly admit to himself, and he decided that was his cue to leave.

"...Wait."

Cahir froze mid-step at the soft plea coming from somewhere in the room. Slowly, Cahir faced the room again and focused on the fallen wardrobe. His feet carried him the short distance to stand in front of the wooden armoire and, with his sword raised in suspicion, Cahir bent down and cautiously opened one of the doors.

Watery, bloodshot eyes stared back at him. With the lack of sunlight, he could just barely identify the form inside the wardrobe as a human woman. Cahir sheathed his sword and offered his hand to the woman.

His voice was shakier than he expected. "Are you alright?"

The woman hesitantly grasped his outstretched hand in a trembling grip, but she was able to pull herself out of her hiding spot without much help from Cahir.

Her voice was ragged, probably from screaming and crying. "I think so."

She kept a tight clasp on his hand, and he gently coaxed her to follow him outside, just past the warped doorframe. The decaying eave of the roof barely protected them from the plummeting rain, but it was better than nothing.

"I heard screaming," he explained. "And then my horse wouldn't stop until we arrived here. You're very lucky that lightning struck when it did." The mysterious woman cast her eyes down and didn't answer. In the marginally better lighting of overcast dusk, Cahir could just barely make out some of the woman's features. She came up to his nose in height, and her dark hair was pulled back into a haphazard braid that fell past her broad shoulders. Her clothes were simple: a tunic, trousers, boots, and a dark cloak. She gripped the strap of the bag slung over her shoulder nervously.

Cahir suddenly staggered back as his typically aloof horse eagerly shouldered its way past its rider to investigate the stranger. Cahir dropped the stranger's hand to pull at the horse's reins in an attempt to stop the beast from knocking the poor woman over and traumatizing her further. To his great surprise, the stranger welcomed Thaddeus's uncivilized greeting with open arms. Cahir noticed the woman's shoulders sag in relief as she threw her arms around the beast. Thaddeus snorted softly and leaned into her touch as Cahir stared in mild shock. He had never known any horse, let alone the stubborn bastard he called his steed, treat a stranger—or even acquaintance—with so much ease and affection.

Movement in the periphery of his vision made Cahir's eyes dart up at the outline of the decrepit roof. It took his eyes a few seconds to identify the small shadow on the edge of the roof as an owl, likely the very same bird that had startled him just a moment ago. It stared unabashedly at him.

Cahir took a small step back, peering cautiously around his surroundings as his mind summoned the voice of his stepmother to scold him for not paying better attention. He was certain there was something watching him, hidden within the woodland.

His new companion finally lifted her head to look at him as he shifted uncomfortably, staring at the nearby cluster of trees.

She gasped, "Oh, I'm so sorry." Cahir turned back to her with a raised eyebrow, attempting to mask both his confusion and apprehension.

She continued, "They...could sense I was upset." The mysterious woman eyed Cahir warily before she glanced at the mischievous owl above them. With a short, quiet trill, the bird took off into the night, and as the woman moved her gaze to the trees, Cahir felt the predatory eyes on him retreat.

"I see..." He couldn't, really. The rain was falling with more ferocity now, lowering the visibility of night even more. This woman was clearly on the run, but she didn't seem to be malicious. The animals, however...

Cahir sucked in a breath and pretended to be unshaken. "Well, I was on my way to the next village over, if you'd like to join me in getting out of this forsaken rain."

The woman's eyes lit up at his offer, and she opened her mouth as if to speak, but she hesitated.

Cahir suddenly scoffed at himself. "Ah, where are my manners?" He bowed dramatically as he finally introduced himself. "My name is Cahir. It's a pleasure to meet you, mysterious woman."

She bristled at the overzealous nature of his greeting and responded in a flat tone. "My name is Anya. Thank you for helping me."

"You are welcome, Anya." The horse beside him snorted and nudged past Cahir's shoulder for more attention from the newcomer. She obliged happily. Cahir crossed his arms and allowed sarcasm to drip from his words as he eyed the beast chidingly. "And this valiant steed is Thaddeus, although you seem to already be acquainted."

The barest hint of a smile was present in Anya's voice as she next spoke. "Yes, well, he is rather charming."

Cahir opened his mouth to respond with more disparaging words, but he was interrupted as a bolt of light flashed in his periphery, followed promptly by the earth-shaking boom of thunder. Anya abruptly spoke up.

“I think I should take you up on your offer, Cahir. A proper wraith-free roof and a fire sound lovely.” Cahir nodded and led Thaddeus and Anya away from the rotting building so that they could mount his horse without knocking their heads on any protruding wooden planks. Once Cahir had secured himself in the saddle, he offered Anya a hand to help her up. She accepted it, but as she easily slung herself onto Thaddeus’s back with ease, it was clear to Cahir that she hardly needed his assistance.

As Anya settled in behind him, Cahir’s nose caught the scent of rosemary and damp earth, and for a vulnerable moment, homesickness choked him. Without his consent, a memory of reading to little Benji in his favorite spot in the garden, on the sunny stone bench flanked by rosemary bushes flashed through Cahir’s mind. Benji had always been fascinated by the honeybees as they hobbled clumsily from flower to flower, and the rosemary’s fragrant purple bloom was a bee favorite.

Cahir cleared his throat and pretended that if he breathed in enough air, his lungs would distract his brain from the past.

Thaddeus abruptly turned around and began the trek back to the main road without any prompt from his riders. The sudden movement lurched Cahir out of his thoughts as he tightened his hold on the reins. For a moment, he wondered what had prompted his steed’s actions, but as he stole a quick glance at the woman behind him, a wary voice in his head whispered the answer.

“How to Date a Millennial Boy (Executive, Techie, or Burnout)” by Samantha Snider

One contrived meet cute per week sourced via application keeps the isolation away. You look for partners the same way you shop for produce nowadays. In the past you'd go to the store with a list, only picking items that were on it. If avocados were on your list, you'd look at them all side by side, test a few for ripeness and place only the best of the bunch in your basket. Nowadays you select your avocados on an app. All the Avocados have the same glamour photo. Even once the Avocados arrive at your doorstep there's really no telling from the outside whether or not they're any good on the inside. Sometimes the Organic avocado wasn't available, so a regular one shows up. Other times they're out of avocados altogether and will 'substitute with best available', as if a russet potato were an analogue.

If any of his photos have alcohol in them, he's either an alcoholic or he's probably just 'here for a good time, not a long time'. Despite what he thinks, 'liking food' is not a unique personality trait and 'Watching the Office' a not hobby. Absolutely no shirtless photos or photos with exotic cars; these indicate he cares too much about what others perceive his life to be. Same goes for anyone that's too active on social media. Find one with a personality that doesn't revolve around career, consumption, or attention. Meeting for coffee or drinks is something you'd do with someone you already have an established rapport with. First dates should be an opportunity to share an experience and build rapport, not an interview.

On Friday, wait until the clock strikes 5pm. You've already told your coworkers that you'd need to leave on time today. Wave goodbye to the team down the hall as you make your way to the elevator, summoning the lift with your badge. Down to the lobby and it's a short walk to catch the BART home. On the BART you rehearse in your head all the steps you'll need to take to make yourself presentable.

Shower, blow dry, makeup, contact lenses, dress. Not too much, but enough to make it look like you put in a little effort. Remove your work badge from your keys. Remove your Lexus fob from the bundle, leave it on top of your badge. Schedule a reminder in your phone to reattach your badge and car key in the morning otherwise you'll be late and the office security guard will raise hell. Choose a single piece of your least expensive jewelry to wear. Empty your wallet and house keys into an unbranded handbag better suited for a mouse. Always meet on neutral ground, in public. He cannot know where you live or work.

If he's local, he'll come by foot or by BART, and he'll let you know that he'll be a little bit late. If he's from elsewhere, he'll arrive by car on time, you're sure he'll offer a ride later. Sometimes he'll be a no-call, no-show or he'll send you a text fifteen minutes after he was supposed to show up saying he got 'caught up' at work and won't be able to make it.

If he shows up, you'll walk together through the sparsely lit downtown area. He'll ask you about your day, and you'll return the pleasantries. If he asks about work, talk about your coworkers and non-specifics. Don't disclose your position or title, and don't inquire

about his. Let him pick the restaurant. If he's an Executive, he'll pick a full-service steak or sushi restaurant with entrees in the twenty-to-fifty-dollar range. Reach for your purse at the end and offer to pay for your meal. He will insist on picking up the tab, to bolster his ego. If he's a Burnout, he'll pick a fast-casual restaurant that serves potent alcoholic beverages out of a Slurpee machine, you're going Dutch. But offer to pay your portion nonetheless. If you are splitting the bill, make sure to use your regular debit card, never the American Express Black card. The Techie will take you to an arcade bar; he'll order his food then inform the server that you'll be having separate bills.

Ask questions about his family. Pay particular attention to how he talks about his mother. Men treat women in their life with the same reverence they show their mother. Make note of how he treats the server. If it's not a full-service restaurant, take note of how he bussess his table. If he leaves things for others to clean after him, he'll likely expect you to clean up after him down the line. Keep an ear out for undertones of sexism, racism, and homophobia in his speech. Listen to how he describes the quality of his relationships with his friends and past partners.

As the meal comes to an end, thank him for his time and presence regardless of who paid. He might invite you to extend the date. Whether you'd like to see him again or not - politely decline, cite a favorable excuse. Plans with your friends, an early morning hobby, but nothing work-related. This sets the precedent that your time is valuable. At this point he might try to kiss you. Return the kiss if you like him but keep it brief. If he doesn't initiate, don't read into it. Thank him again for a lovely time, whether or not it was.

If he drove his car, he'll offer you a ride home, decline. He'll want to see you get into your shiny post-modern building safely, and then he'll know where you live. If he offers to walk you to the BART station, accept. Otherwise bid him goodnight and order an Uber.

Make your way home, into the elevator, and up to your penthouse apartment. If he wants to see you again, he will text you. He'll tell you what a great time he had, maybe pay you a few compliments.

If you don't care to meet with him again, be kind but direct.

If you'd like to see him again too, imply it.

He'll say, you're not like other girls, and even though you know he's said that to every girl, say, I like you too.

Get comfy. Turn on your favorite podcast. You'll be up until ten, and then you'll wash up and brush your teeth before bed.

Your phone chimes, but it's not a text from him. It is your reminder to clip your Lexus key fob and work badge back onto their loop before you forget.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

“How? Why?” By Teresa Kloss

How could I have let him do this to me?
I let him take my power away.
I replay everything that happened that day.
All I think is, I could have, and I should have,
done something,
to make it stop.
I start to blame myself all over again.
I sit here and think,
I could have gotten up and walked out,
when he started to undress me.
I could have pushed him off of me more,
when he laid on top of me.
I could have screamed and punched and fought,
when he started to enter me.
I could have moved away and screamed
“NO!” more
when he started to feel all over me.
I could have gotten dressed right away,
instead of just lying there
like some useless toy.
I could have told someone right away
then taken a shower when I got home.
All I can think now —
I let him.
I deserved it.
And I could have done more.

Author Biographies

Kelly Autumn is a multidisciplinary artist based in Oakland. She holds a BA from San Francisco State University and has studied Fine Art with DVC since 2017. Kelly received certification in Printmaking and has been a TA for her mentor, Professor Toru Sugita, Chair of the Arts Department. Kelly's prints have been shown at various group exhibitions throughout the Bay Area and she is frequently a guest art instructor with the Sonoma Community Center. As both a visual artist and a creative writer, she enjoys experimentally pairing her work together. You can see more of her projects on Instagram @kellyautumn

Cianna Book is in her third year here at DVC and will be graduating with an AA degree in Sociology at the end of the semester. She will be transferring to the University of California in the fall, although she's not quite sure which one yet. She is 21 years old, and was raised in San Ramon, CA with her two sisters and dog, Taquito. She currently lives in Concord, CA. Cianna loves writing and is so honored and grateful for the opportunity to share her work with you all today. She hopes you like it!

As a long-time reader but a novice writer, **Joe Chung** (he/him) is truly honored (and equally surprised) to be able to take part in this year's literary contest. He previously studied Economics at UC Berkeley and after years of climbing the corporate ladder, he is super grateful for the classes offered at DVC to rekindle his love for literature and overcome his fear of writing. Above all, he admires stories for their power to impart much needed empathy among us. Lastly, he would like to especially thank Professor James Wilson for encouraging him to submit this particular story for the event.

Sarah Jimison is a part time DVC student from Martinez. She obtained her Bachelor's degree from UC Davis and has been attending DVC classes for fun and to fill her love of learning. She's in professor Alan Haslam's Contemporary Poetry Class. She enjoys reading and writing poetry and is very excited and honored to be chosen as a winner for the DVC Literature Week Contest.

Teresa Kloss has been a student at Diablo Valley College for a few semesters and has a passion for mental health, helping others, and writing. She is a Psychology major who wants to "Be the person she needed when she was younger" by helping teenagers as a counselor. She wishes to transfer to Sacramento State and will apply this August. This is her first literary award and one that she is extremely proud of and thankful for.

Hali Loyd is a third year English student at DVC. She plans to transfer to UC Berkeley with a minor in theatre. This has been her first attempt at creative writing and has been enjoying every minute of it!"

Tesa Manto is spending her first year here at DVC, and finds joy in exploring just how much poetry has to offer. Though passionate about poetry, she currently majors in physics to satisfy her ever-continuous curiosity and love for learning. She uses poetry as a way to convey her ideas and thoughts on the experiences she faces in her life. Her poetry is heavily influenced by aspects of nature around her, and she places emphasis on finding beauty especially in the smallest things.

Danny Morris is what you'd call a "DVC dabbler". He likes doing outside things, and contemplating what makes his favorite authors so compelling.

Stephanie Pick (they/them) is an Environmental Science major and LC tutor with a passion for reading, writing, and being a loud and obvious queer. They have always wanted to publish a fantasy series or five, and their lifelong dream is to become a forest hermit with animal friends and wifi. They have been in college since 2015 and are desperately trying to transfer to a Four-Year so that they can finally get a degree and be done with it. Their favorite hobbies include playing video games, reorganizing everything, and making their therapist proud.

Samantha Snider is an artist, writer, student, and Oakland native. Her sculptures have been exhibited in the Art Ark Gallery in San Jose, California. She is currently working on her Environmental Sciences A.S.-T at DVC and hopes to transfer to UC Berkeley to complete her B.S. in Environmental Sciences. When Samantha is not creating or studying she participates in and volunteers with local roller derby and teaches roller skating.

Call for Submissions

Want this to be you?

The 12th Annual DVC Literary Contest will take place in Spring 2022. Stay tuned for updates and info, or check out the DVC Literary Contest [webpage](#) or the DVC Submittable [page](#) or contact Literature Week and Literary Contest coordinator [Rayshell Clapper](#).

Many thanks to all those who submitted to the DVC 11th Annual Literary Contest! We love your work, talent, and courage. Keep writing. Keep submitting.