



# It's Lit

DVC Literary and Art Journal  
Spring 2022  
Issue 3



“Psyche” — Cover art credited to Higa Rinka,  
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## DVC 12th Annual Literary Contest Winners

### CREATIVE NONFICTION

**First Place:** "The Bus Ride"

by Kristine Cox

**Second Place:** "The Castro"

by Vincent Rozalski

**Third Place:** "Ramadan"

by Laila Ali

### POETRY

**First Place:** "[Red Bluff After 5:15am on August 5th]"

by Keylee Anderson

**Second Place:** "Chest Full of Flowers"

by Alyx Gilbertson

**Third Place:** "do You think i'm pretty?"

by Victoria Soleil

**Honorable Mention:** "Letter to my Congressman" by Andrew Pimentel

### PROSE — Fiction and Play

**First Place:** "Death of the Author"

by Andrew Pimentel

**Second Place:** "Waiting"

by Jenn Keohane

**Third Place:** "Birds"

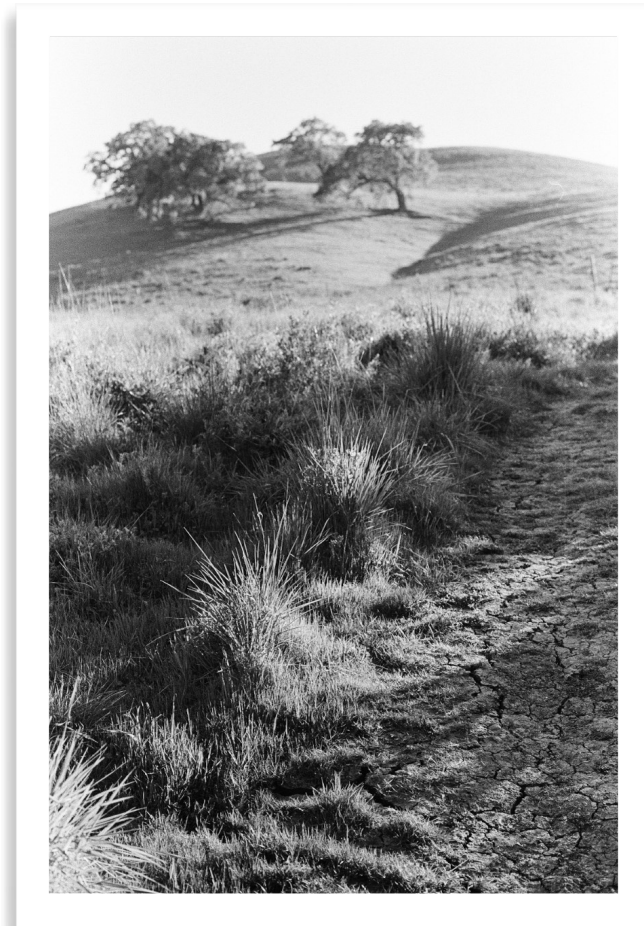
by Emily Lam

**Honorable Mention:** "Two Halves" by Dylan Mueller

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# CREATIVE NONFICTION



Zoe Libby, "Bandit's Trail," Digital photo

## “The Bus Ride” by Kristine Cox

The slender, black metal hand on the clock clicked and stuttered until it finally landed on the number 12, initiating a screeching and distorted alarm that crackled through antiquated high school PA speakers. On cue, Nikki and I bolt from our seats and beat the crush of students clamoring towards the door. Outside of our Spanish 10B classroom, we maneuver upstream, with our heads down, jostling through a wave of students. Chattering, and laughing boisterously, we make our way past rows and rows of lockers, through the crowded quad and past the senior parking lot. Then, finally, we are off campus. We slowed down and began talking leisurely. We can breathe more easily once we are by ourselves and off the premises. We stride past familiar shops: Stella’s homemade donuts, a mom-and-pop hardware store, Darcy’s Salon, before stopping at the Quick Stop convenience store. Nikki cocks her hip out, bending her knee back so she could playfully flick her foot at my butt and asks,

“Do you got any money?”

“Nope. I rummaged through my mom’s purse this morning, but I couldn’t find any cash.”

I tried to side-kick her back, but she caught my heel with her hand.

“Yep. Same for me,” she said smiling just before she let go of my heel. “I ransacked my brother’s room, but I got zip.”

Nikki had six brothers, four older and two younger. She didn’t specify which brothers’ room she tried to loot but I knew it had to be the older ones. She would never steal from her two little brothers; she doted on them and made a point of hassling the older ones if they teased or messed with them.

“You up for the five-finger discount?” Nikki asks.

“Oh Gawd! No! You know that makes me nervous. I suck at it, and I don’t want to get caught.”

“Calm down, will ya. I know your deal. Just keep a look out. I’m gonna grab us some snacks.”

“Look out for what?” I ask.

I trail behind Nikki as we enter the Quick Stop. The heavy glass door chimes as she pushes it open, and Nikki makes a point of saying “hey ho!” to the slender young man behind the resistor. He is wearing dirty jeans, a faded O’Neill Surf sweatshirt, and he has long greasy strands of hair hanging down his face as he tilts his head down toward the counter, immersed in a comic book.

“What’s up? How ya doing today?” chirps Nikki.

“Fine,” the young man replies without looking up from his comic.

“You more interested in comics than girls?” She raises an eyebrow, smiling straight at him.

“Wha?”

“Never mind,” she sing-songs. Her back already turned to him as she cruises down an aisle.

Then, like a cat, she returns quickly saying to me,

“I’ll be right back.”

My eyes widen. I go outside to wait. Moments later, the door chimes and there is Nikki. A sly smile spreads across her face, as she casually tosses me my two favorite snacks: a bag of Dorito chips and a Snickers bar. I drop both, but still laugh. We eat our snacks in silence, taking a shortcut through Del Mar Heights on our way to the bus stop.

I board the bus, plunging my hand deep inside the tattered side pocket of my camo backpack, rummaging through a morass of loose papers, uncapped pens, hair clips, discarded food wrappers, house keys, until finally, retrieving my bus pass. I exhale, blowing dangling strands of hair from my face and flashed the driver a crumpled, paper-thin ticket. Passengers pushed past me. I crinkle my nose as the stench of body odor wafts through the air.

I press forward into the belly of the bus, and eye a man I thought I knew, simply because he was staring at me. I force a smile and that's when it happens. He grabbed me. Hard. Right between the legs, with an aggressive cup of his hand. My jaw drops but no sound comes out. I freeze. I shudder and force my body into motion. I slink toward the back row of seats, feeling smaller and smaller with each step. As I approach an open bench, I grip the metal bar atop the seat in front of me and catapult my body forward. I slide fast and hard across the bench, crashing against the window. I wince. Safely in my seat, I slink my body down as low as it can go. I pull my backpack against my chest and wrap my arms tightly around it tightly. I startle, when Nikki slides her body onto the slippery, orange plastic bench beside me. She cocks her head, peers down at me and asks,

"What's wrong?"

I can't respond. I gulp, swallowing a bit of throw up in my mouth. My heart is punching at my throat, and I am breathing quickly. Nikki presses again,

"What's wrong Alex? What the hell happened?"

I can't answer.

Nikki looks at me, waiting for some words - angry but also pleading. All I can do is shrug and stare at my feet. My tongue too heavy to talk. I feel tired. I just need to do what I have always done and what I continue to do; pretend it didn't happen. Focus on something else. I squeeze my eyes shut, allowing shadowy clouds to clutter my mind and blunt my senses.

"Jesus Alex. Are you okay?" Nikki asks again.

I wrap my arms tighter around the backpack and slump my head against her shoulder. Nikki wasn't going to leave it alone.

"There's a guy up front. A guy that grabbed me. Right after I showed my pass to the driver," I whisper.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I told you. That guy. That guy up front grabbed me," I repeated, exhausted by the effort.

"Where? How?" she clipped.

"I don't know. He was just standing in front of me when everyone was getting on the bus. It just happened."

"I don't believe this. What did you do?"

"I dunno know. Nothing. I just got to my seat."

"What the Fuck?" she says, shaking her head.



I just want to pretend nothing happened and get to my stop. I flinch when Nikki screeches,

“He did what?”

The heat on my cheeks burns and I whip my head up towards her.

“Shhhhhhh. Please be quiet. I don’t want Him to hear you,” I whine.

“Why shouldn’t He hear me?” She amps up the volume.

I strain my neck, peering my eyes above the seat in front of me, searching for the man. He’s sitting on a side facing bench near the front of the bus, legs slightly spread apart, his hands draped casually over each knee. He is staring straight ahead, gaze fixed on the tinted cracked window on the opposite side of the bus. He’s wearing khaki pants, a pale blue button-down shirt, and white converse shoes. He looks so normal.

“Why are you hiding?” Nikki asks as I cower lower in my seat.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know” I mumble softly.

I close my eyes wishing I could crawl into a hole and bury myself alive. I purse my lips, still tasting the vile concoction of Doritos and putrid juices in between my teeth.

“This is so wrong,” Nikki said, shaking her head.

“I know. I know,” I thought to myself. I felt filthy and sour, like dirty water in a vase, long after the flowers had gone rotten and smelly. Nikki raised her voice,

“What did you say? Did you say that pervert grabbed you in the crotch!”

I clutch her arm, squeezing hard to make her stop. Stop drawing attention. Stop making me think. Nikki never stops. She gets louder.

“I’m sorry. Did you say that guy at the front of the bus grabbed you? Is that what you’re telling me?”

She stares directly ahead, aiming her questions at the man. A murmur of hushed tones reverberates through the bus. Sweat trickles down my neck as a cackle of laughter erupts from a trio of girls sitting behind me. I catch a glimpse of an older, heavy-set woman, in a loud printed dress, shaking her head, making “tsk tsk” sounds at Nikki. My panic grows, but Nikki is on her feet, raising her voice to a feverish pitch. She is pissed as hell and addressing my assailant.

“Hey you. Yes You! I’m talking to you! Do you think this is okay? Do you think you can grab women on the bus?” she screamed, jabbing her pointed index finger into the air.

The man tries to ignore Nikki, through everyone’s whispers and stares. I see him squirm, twisting his body in his seat, only focusing on the cracked window directly in front of him. Nikki is relentless. She straightens her back and puffs out her chest like the roided up wrestlers at school.

“Answer me!” Do you think this is okay?” she demands.

A dark-haired man sitting across from me makes inquisitive eye contact with me, “You ok,” I assume he was asking. He’s in his 40’s, wearing a navy business suit and a wedding ring. He is clean shaven with angular features and a handsome face. He holds my gaze for a beat, and I want to cry, but then he drops his head, staring intently at an unopened book resting on his lap. My shame is suffocating.

Nikki continues berating the man, and something unexpected happens. He reaches above his head, pulling on the cord to ring the bell for the next stop. Nikki pounces,

“Good! Are you getting off the bus? You are a disgusting pig. Get off. Now!”



I sit up further to watch what is unfolding before me. Everyone is staring and listening to Nikki, but no one makes a move. The man frantically pulls on the cord, causing a chaotic crescendo of chimes to ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, maniacally, drowning out the rising murmurs of the other passengers. The bus begins to slow down, and the man jumps to his feet, swaying unevenly to maintain his balance. He takes furtive glances back at Nikki, but inches as close as possible to the doors. Nikki continues yelling,

“That’s right! Run and hide you animal. You’re not fit for society. And you better think twice before grabbing innocent women.”

The doors burst open, and the man leaps off the bus. I hear the whoosh of the door closing but nothing more. The passengers are utterly silent with their bodies and voices. The good-looking man in the suit is staring at Nikki who remains standing with her gaze fixated straight ahead. It is impossible to know what she is thinking, and I remain silent, along with everyone else, trying to anticipate her next move. Even the driver appears to be waiting for a signal from Nikki because his hands are poised on the steering wheel, but his eyes are locked on the rearview mirror, and the bus remains idle.

Nikki sits back down beside me as I pull myself in a full seated position. I bump my shoulder against her body, and she turns to look at me. I take a beat before a smile escapes from my lips and I mouth the words, “Thank you”. Nikki shrugs and turns toward the passengers and says,

“Thanks for the help, folks. Hope you enjoyed the show.”

A giggle erupts from deep inside my throat and I throw my fist over my mouth to muffle the sounds. I tilt my head towards the floor, letting my hair cascade around my face. I shake my head a few times, smiling broadly to myself. I feel good.

A few stops later, I left Nikki, the passengers, and the man behind and began the mile and half walk towards my home. I live atop a steep hill in a dark green wooden house shrouded by a cluster of overgrown bushes as tall as trees. Our front door is practically hidden behind the jungle of foliage, and I have to bend down to open the door to avoid getting my face scratched by brambles. I blow the hair from my eyes as I shirk the backpack off my shoulders, and I open the front door. As I enter the house, I spy my parents sitting at opposite ends of our brown faux leather sofa. They are still in their work clothes and eat microwaved prepackaged meals on plates precariously balanced on their knees. I stand still for a moment. The television is blaring.... DUN, DUN, DUN. The bass from the Law and Order episode plays like a kazoo through our TVs broken speakers. I catch myself flinching. I walk past them, on my way to the kitchen, but immediately veer right to make my way down our narrow hallway toward my bedroom - my older brother, Mark, is at the kitchen table in front of a large takeout pizza.

“What’s up...Skank,” he hisses at me.

“Don’t start, Mark,”

I turn and whine out before I can stop myself. I am smart enough not to look my brother in the eyes.

“How’s your Skank-friend, Nikki?”

Nikki once told Mark off, after which he split her lip. I pass my parents and the TV again, and then grab a plate from the kitchen.

“Don’t think you’re getting any of this,”  
Mark says, waving a slice of pizza in the air.  
“Come, on! That pizza is not all yours.”  
“Mom and Dad got it for me,” he snarls.  
I am hungry so I press my luck.  
“Mom..Dad,” I call out. “Can I have some pizza?”  
No one answers. I strain my voice,  
“Guys?”

No answer. I eye the pizza box but, of course, Mark takes it and throws it on the floor behind him. He stares at me, to make certain I understand I will need to get by him, physically, if I want a slice. My stomach growls and the anger and shame I felt on the bus courses through my veins. I stare at Mark briefly before turning away and treading past my parents toward my bedroom.

## “The Castro” by Vincent Rozalski

When he kissed me on Castro Street in the middle of a throbbing crowd the night before the San Francisco Pride Parade in 2012, the muscles in my back and arms tensed. My legs and feet planted themselves in the ground among the litter of food, fifths of flavored Smirnoff, and glitter. Although I was out of the closet at this point, it was still fresh. When talking to a straight friend or coworker, I still hesitated to share that I had gone on a date the previous weekend or was texting with a cute guy. I would never talk about dating in any way with my parents, and my mom sensed my hesitancy around this topic. She never asked, and I never told.

I had come out in stages. The first time was to myself at the age of 11 or 12 when I noticed that I was paying a lot of attention to guys at the gym. As I pedaled on the stationary bike, praying that my fat would melt away, I justified my long gazes at straining legs and hardened biceps by telling myself I was doing research. I wanted to look better, but having been fat all my life, I didn't know what that would look like for me. Thus, looking at men on the elliptical or lifting weights was me figuring out who I wanted to look like. It turned out that this wasn't a lie, per se, just an incomplete truth. After I begrudgingly accepted I was gay – not questioning, not bisexual – I later came out to a trusted teacher and an older student during the summer between 8th grade and high school when I was distant from the consequences of rejection. They both disclosed to me that they too were gay; I suddenly felt like I had some grounding in the world and an innate sense of who was safe.

In high school, I told no one until I was about to leave for college. This was a braver act compared to my 8th grade transition in that I was still in high school, but only for a month or so. My friends' reactions amounted to little more than a pleasant shrug; it didn't bother them, and I felt lighter.

The first big disclosure was in college. I was determined to be out from day one, and I received a similar pleasant shrug from the ultra-leftist white students that comprised the student body, and finally felt like I could start being myself. After my freshman year of college, I came out to my mom, who had always been hugely supportive and protective of me. I was shocked when she asked me if I was sure I was gay, and that my dad probably wouldn't react well to this news. I wasn't hurt, but my previous positive and pleasantly calm experiences with coming out from those I valued less than my mom led me to believe I'd get a similar reaction from her. I didn't come out to my dad, siblings, or the rest of family for several years, fearing the sting of rejection. I moved back home after college for a year and saved up to move out to the Bay Area from Sacramento. Similar to my high school disclosure, I told the rest of my family right before moving, bracing for impact. My dad, who has voted Republican at every opportunity in his life, responded with the verbal equivalent of a pleasant smile and a shrug: “Well, you know we love you, son, so long as you're happy.”

I had moved to the Bay Area to secure letters of recommendation from labs at UC Berkeley to bolster my graduate school applications, but the volunteer positions pushed me to find work in San Francisco. This was the first time I was living on my own as an adult away from my family, and I started dating for the first time in my life. Despite being

out in college, I had been paralyzed by my self-consciousness around my weight; I spent hours rotating and contorting my body in the mirror to find an "acceptable" angle, always coming up short. That, coupled with the tiny size of my college, meant there weren't that many people I was attracted to and vice versa. When I got to the Bay Area, I had a lot of lost time to make up for.

In the year or so leading up to the kiss in the Castro, I had ventured timidly from the shallow end of the pool to the beginning of the deep end, right at the spot where your toes struggle to find solid purchase. My experiences with men had been enjoyable but largely private; sometimes we'd meet up in bars first, but that was short-lived before we journeyed to their apartment nearby. I would jokingly tell a friend about the latest apartment I had gotten a "private tour" of, and made note of where I would maybe like to live one day. I was friendly with a few of these men and had a few regulars (or perhaps, given many of these men were partnered in open relationships in rent-controlled apartments, I was their regular), but that was as far as it went. I knew I was likely leaving for grad school in the coming year, so I eschewed public romances for private dalliances.

The process of expressing my attraction to others and receiving their attention back was briefly horrifying, then eventually thrilling. I was sure I'd get rejected, having spent years rejecting my own body. In the first gay bar I ever went to with friends, I was surprised when a man drunkenly smiled at me and then later shoved his hands down my jeans. I was too young, self-conscious, and confused to register that someone was interested in me, let alone that I had just been sexually assaulted. As the months wore on, I started to accept that others didn't always view me as I viewed myself. I could feel however I wanted about my body, but so could they; if someone found me hot, that was their business, not mine. As I let people be attracted to me, I was happy to be myself in private or openly gay spaces. However, I never expressed any affection outside of a bar while meeting up with someone and kept my true feelings restrained to apps or safe spaces.

My comfort with being gay grew slowly as I started to enjoy myself. Still, my outward openness was constrained to friends in the city. When I visited home, went to work, or volunteered at the university, I gave bland answers to the chit-chat about our weekends. It was as if others knowing something personal about me would give them power over me, that they would be able to reduce everything I was down to a single category that had a troubled history. The risk of being invalidated for something I had no choice over paralyzed me. Instead, I watered down my personal life, making myself smaller. Being unseen felt safer than being judged.

The night before the pride parade, I got off work late and made sure to pass through the Castro. I wanted to see how the city lived up to such a famed event, and was satisfied to see the streets closed off. The blocks between Market and 20th were absolutely packed with music, revealing outfits, and the dull roar of a million conversations. Locals and visitors alike milled about in varying states of sobriety and dress, ranging from little more than underwear to resplendent costumes with flashing lights, jewels, feathers, and whatever colorful items found in the house last minute. I was dressed conservatively in black jeans and a grey hoodie having just come off work.

However, I would've worn the same thing regardless of work to let myself blend into the crowd easily.

It was one of the rare warm nights in the city – San Francisco Pride weekend always seemed to be blessed this way – and the color of strobe lights from the street and apartments mingled and danced with the streetlamps. After about a half hour of wandering, I decided to go home, which is when I spotted him: a bearded Latino man, a little taller and notably older than me, wearing a blue button-up shirt and jeans. We had briefly chatted on an app the week prior, but he stopped responding to me before the conversation went anywhere. While endeavoring to avoid an awkward conversation with a man who ghosted me, he saw me through the giant crowd, and I froze.

To my surprise, he made a beeline for me and materialized. He apologized for not responding to my most recent text and said he had plans for the evening. He looked me in the eye and made a motion with his hands as if he were texting: he wanted my number. We exchanged information, my hands slightly shaking as I processed that this was acceptance and not rejection. After we put down our phones, we looked up at each other. He stepped into my space, and he kissed me deeply in the street. I closed my eyes and forced myself to enjoy the intensity. I pushed away the fear that started to swell, once amorphous and invasive, now given form in the shape of anxious words and snippets of imagined disdain. The years of internalized homophobia and the embarrassment of being known and seen as gay in public grabbed all the muscles in my body and urged me to run away. Intellectually, I knew I needed to stay. If I couldn't enjoy kissing another man in San Francisco on Castro Street the night before the Pride Parade, where in the world could I?

Just as all these contradictory thoughts raced through my head, I heard a voice yell out above me. All the people living on Castro had their windows open and were enjoying the crowd, playing music, displaying flags, and dancing to their home disco setups. One such denizen, a thin white man, early 20s, shirtless, covered in body paint and glitter, wearing a bright hat of some kind, saw us kissing. He yelled down at us, his voice cutting through the loud chatter and music: "Whoo! Make out!" My suitor and I paused and laughed, and we looked up. The man repeated his request with even more vigor, and a small but determined part of me obliged him.

## “Ramadan, the Month of Fasting” by Laila Ali

Food has many different definitions for many people, some may think of food as a tool of survival and some have never even thought deeply of food. But for me food is not just culinary, it is science, art, and emotion. Even the food your mom and dad make is presented in a way that makes you want to eat more whether it is basil on your pesto pasta or the chilies near your butter chicken. Food is a form of art that evokes emotion, unlike any other thing.

I started developing an interest in food during the Ramadan of 2020, the month of fasting. I realized how much I neglected it or wasted it. Although I had fasted two other times before that one thing had pushed me to the limit, fasting with no friends. Everything at that time was online and everyone who fasts knows the only thing that helps get through the day is a distraction, the sound of your friends asking you to come outside and play, the high praise of your neighbors for doing something like fasting the entire day. But in 2020 nothing happened. I just sat in my room after being bombarded with bunches of online homework that I was going to complete after I lay on my bed and found a book I had already read five times. But at one point my exasperation got the best of me. I stomped downstairs, grabbed loaves of bread, a slice of cheese, a squashy avocado, and a knife. These supplies would be the end of my unrest. I was going to make food to keep my mind off of food.

I thought it was crazy at first, but I had tried everything to keep my mind off of food. Reading, writing, jumping, doing basement theater plays. But everything involved food. But what I was about to do in the kitchen would change my view on food for my entire life. I was in so much restlessness that I didn't realize how high I turned on the stove I left my bread to toast on. My parents didn't have the foggiest idea I was in the kitchen. So they probably didn't know I had put their favorite bowl in the microwave even though it wasn't made to be in the microwave.

For some reason I don't remember what happened to make my attention draw away from the stove. All I remember is hearing a sizzling sound and then a boom. The bread had erupted in flames. I began screaming, even though my throat was as dry as the Sahara desert. I still remember this moment I had lunged for the sink and grabbed our mint plant. For some reason I thought since I had just watered the plant it would have enough moisture to make the fire let out. I threw the plant from far away. The plant had only made the situation worse because it landed on the fridge.

You know what's more annoying than a stove on fire and fertilizer dripping off your dad's favorite fridge is the sound of a microwave beeping. My melted cheese was cooked and so was my mother's favorite china bowl. But before I could see what had happened to the cheese and the china bowl. I have to include one small detail, our microwave is right above our stove. Which meant if I wanted to get that annoying beeping to stop I would have to go near the stove and turn it off. Cautiously I lowered

my hand beneath the stove and another waft of smoke erupted as the toast began to burn further. You have to do this Laila otherwise your entire house could light on fire!

I turned the little knob making the stove turn off, the flames started to lower. In a swift movement I opened the microwave only to find the china bowl having a crack down its side. I had picked it up carefully and set it in the trash can. I started laughing, my cheeks turning red and I felt lighthearted. It wasn't that big of a mess after cleaning the mint plant and the dirt of the fridge. I still had fifteen minutes till I could break my fast. So I took my burnt toast and my mushy avocado and made my own masterpiece. Realizing that whatever happened, pandemics, and bad grades, I would always have my own true love, my food. Because everyone in this world needs this one source of happiness, Whatever happens, however different things may be, we will all connect over our need and love of food.



# POETRY



Amanda Medeiros, "Shattered Yet Unbroken," Mixed media

## “[Red Bluff After 5:15am on August 5th]” by Keylee Anderson

The skies bled onto the horizon with heat so terrible  
that I forgot winter comes in a biting freeze.  
The heat melted into smoke as the California North blazed in high flames  
and as I looked out the passenger window  
I saw the central flatlands I saw the farms that grew past Sacramento.  
The dying lands that beg for water and throw up signs  
demanding a new governor.  
I sat and heard the panting of dogs in the back  
and couldn't believe that life became somewhat of a disaster.  
I missed the morning blues that can bring turkeys and deer  
because we arrived in Red Bluff after dinner time.  
The path that lead us to our temporary home  
looked a lot like the evil forest that begged to take  
Snow White alive.

The air suffocated me  
for many reasons. We lost another Brink could be one.  
Another: I felt alone  
as I stood in the smoking heat recalling  
the last time I heard Uncle Henry's voice.  
Another: I remember orange most when I think of this day-  
I remember the single tears on my face  
I remember the white of papa's shirt  
How hard words felt for him  
How the room smelled of Henry one last time.

There's higher ceilings in Red Bluff for breezes to feel colder  
because the heat feels like it's sitting in your throat.  
Papa's pan rack rocked with the heaviness of grief,  
it's so much quieter in the country.  
The eyes hiding behind the linen curtains  
feel stronger in the country.  
The roads quit pavement and become bumpier.  
Neighbors look at us with sympathy  
because Papa couldn't get shoes on faster than he needed the police.  
They offered him a pastor in a black shirt,  
but God hasn't seen or heard from the Brinks since we were planted here.

If you're up early enough in Red Bluff,  
You can hear the coyote pack leader calling them all home.

There was not relief  
the morning after August 5th,  
Because the heat was as suffocating as grief.

The local news panicked as fires were getting closer.  
I walked my dog along the dry grass and worried about acorns dropping on his head  
I wondered if it would be possible to pray  
loud enough for freezing rain.

I was up before the sun and sat  
in silence  
and imagined the cave that held the coyotes  
and how they shared the trophies they hunted all night for.  
I wondered at the gray sky:  
when will the days stop feeling like a weird movie  
when will puffy eyes stop being a side effect of grief?

## “A Chest Full of Flowers” by Alyx Gilberston

[A warning: the following poem contains elements of body horror, please proceed with caution]

It started in the back of the chest  
A layer of dirt, sprinkled behind my organs  
Carelessly thrown in handfuls, filth collecting behind my lungs  
Seeds were embedded  
Some by my own unknowing hands  
Or by those who didn't know they carried the seeds in their pocket  
Or that their pocket had a hole  
Or that the seed was on their hand  
And that their touch would push it into the soil  
Some knew they carried those seeds  
They shoved them deep, deep  
Into the earth in my chest  
Waiting eagerly to watch them grow  
Wanting to see the destruction they'd wreak on the tissue inside  
At first they grew slowly  
Roots taking hold  
Spreading across the dirt  
I'd cough and bits of their seeds would fall into my hand  
Then they began to grow faster  
And faster  
And faster  
Vines wrapped around my heart  
Weeds began to clog up my lungs  
Roots anchored themselves in my diaphragm  
I breathed out pollen, spat out leaves  
Then it all began to flower  
Blooms  
Bursting into existence  
Unfurling, expanding  
They crowded my lungs and took my breath  
They pressed up around my heart  
Making it have to fight to beat  
Their seeds clogged up my veins  
And they pushed at my ribs  
The pressure increased as they bloomed  
They crowded together  
Pushing  
Packing

Leaving no space for each other  
More fought to bloom  
The pressure grew and grew  
Then one day  
It burst  
One by one  
Ribs cracked  
Fractures turned into breaks  
The flowers pushed  
They pushed through ribs  
Through bone  
Through tissue and skin  
Until they'd burst free  
My chest lay open  
Flowers finally opening  
Free  
After fighting for so long  
And there I lay staring at the sky  
My organs replaced with blooms  
A chest full of flowers  
Stretching towards the sun

## **“do You think i’m pretty?” By Victoria Soleil**

i’ve curled my hair with pins and wheels  
and i’ve painted my lips red with thorned roses  
i’ve never felt more pretty  
if i bleach my hair and skin i think They’ll finally like me  
They like my legs smooth and my skin nude  
i sewed my mouth shut because They thought my words were rude  
They like me so much that They fight over me  
They all want my innocence, They like my purity  
i hope They talk about me at Their parties  
They’re so nice to me  
They say i don’t even act like i’m fourteen  
i’ve never felt more pretty

## “Letter to My Congressman” by Andrew Pimentel

Dear Sir,

You and I are both civil servants,  
But I am only a humble postal carrier.  
On my person I carry  
A 3oz can of dog mace,  
A 2oz bottle of hand sanitizer,  
And plenty of nitrile gloves.  
I carry a flannel face mask for COVID-19  
And an N95 respirator for ash and wildfire smoke.  
I also carry a medallion of Saint Christopher:  
Patron saint of travelers,  
Who carried the weight of the world  
On his shoulders.

My world is my route  
My route is 712 residences  
Two terraced hills  
A nine-mile walk  
A ten-hour day  
Six days a week.  
My supervisor tells me  
That I complain too much  
That I don't walk fast enough  
One minute per address  
One pound of mail per minute  
712 pounds of mail per day.

I have carried living things:  
Tomato seeds,  
Meal worms,  
Feeder insects.  
And I have also carried the dead:  
A packaged urn labeled,  
“Cremated Human Remains.”  
Surprisingly not too heavy.

My route is 712 residences.  
I carry their stories:  
Postcards, birthday greetings,  
Memories and mementos  
Of human connection.



I carry  
Bidets and cornhole boards,  
Table saws and mattresses.

I carry  
Medications,  
Stimulus checks,  
Air purifiers, and  
Ballots.

I carry the weight  
Of the lives  
Of the residents  
Of my route.

But I am only a humble postal carrier,  
I only weigh 120 pounds.  
The weight I carry is nothing compared  
To the weight of the 710,000 lives of your district  
That you carry  
Every day you are in office.

How heavy are they?

Respectfully, I wonder

If you can carry that load.

# FICTION



Joshua White, "Tool of Choice," Mixed media

## “Death of the Author” by Andrew Pimentel

You know how the meal will end. You have planned each and every detail of the evening: from the menu and seating arrangements, right down to how you will hold the cup when you give the toast at the dinner’s conclusion. What a finale it will make. There are still uncertainties of course. You taste the roux. Does it really need more salt?

A dish is a carefully curated assemblage of ingredients. Layers of complexity funneled into a single definitive statement. Nothing added is arbitrary and nothing stands alone. Each ingredient is load-bearing; each supports each other in a fine latticework of flavor. Is this what you spent five years studying architecture and structural engineering for? To explain the most basic elements of cooking with clever metaphor? But you must rehearse your toast. And you must say that an apple is never just an apple.

You ruminate on your words. Reduce. Reduce. Reduce. You mutter as you drag your wooden spoon through the roux. Is this what you’ve been reduced to? His glorified cook? The host of his awards ceremony? Who is this dinner for exactly? We gather here to celebrate the author.

The guests will arrive. First the hors d’oeuvres—scallops with avocado toast, endive with miso crab cakes, his family recipe pork and raisin empanadas, and the vegan shiitake xiao long bao that took you a whole week to prepare. There will be an open bar with small talk. Then a game of charades. Questions will eventually follow. So where is he? Where is the great and powerful Oz?

Not yet home. You will say. The excuse doesn’t have to be complicated. They know and you know that he has always been aloof, lost in his plots. He never saw the bigger picture did he?

And yet here you are, heralding his accomplishments. The voice of someone else’s words. Tenderizing him for the audience. Why are you making him taste good?

You will be plating and serving from the rustic Bizen ware that you insisted on dragging back from Japan in your carry-ons. Even going so far as to send your own clothes back home through the post. The only reason you got away with it was because he thought the experience would make a wonderful anecdote to accompany the plates. That was all these dinners ever meant to him. Clever words at the cutting board. Clever words while drinking. Clever words while setting the table. Clever words while eating. Clever words while washing the dishes. And where is he now? With all his clever words?

You knew how this dinner would end. All those years ago when he first told you he loved you. You knew then. Like destiny. Guided by an omnipotent hand, just as you now guide the butter to dissolve into your roux. Reduce. You’ve become quite the reducer over the last few days. Who knew you were so good at butchery?

After the appetizers, the main course will be fairly simple comfort food. Roasted root vegetables with rice and a Japanese-style curry. But nothing is ever simple with you (an apple is never only an apple) right? You brought this curry to the barbecue. You smoked the meat over lapsang souchong tea leaves and almond wood. This isn’t just Japanese-

style curry; this is a play on the flavors and aromas of Japanese whiskey, and you will make damn sure when they taste it they know just how clever you are.

After the smoky richness of the curry, you will serve an asian pear sorbet to cleanse the palate. The 18-year-old Hakushu (his favorite bottle) lies in wait as the digestif. It will be your *pièce de résistance*: the final layer of complexity of your meal, and where you will make the celebratory toast. You will stand at the head of the table, the audience in front of you, with your cup of his favorite whiskey raised above their heads. As you look out across the table you will say: To the author I offer my love and support, and to you—colleagues, friends, and critics—I offer this load-bearing meal. Just as I have nourished you, so have you nourished us with your clever words.

But where is he? They will stammer. How can we celebrate? How can the dinner be over?

You know the answer, but you won't speak it just yet. You will savor the moment.

## “Waiting” by Jenn Keohane

A loud shriek, hysterical giggling, and the steady bounce of a basketball drifted over the flower beds, past the giant flag, and into the open kitchen window.

Bryn watched her “sidewalk friends,” with backpacks slung over shoulders, converge at the crosswalk. Girls with bouncy hair bantered with burly athletes as big as men. A shy kid with glasses stood near an orange bag on wheels. Sarah, her name in duct tape on her instrument case, cradled her cello, and two tall brothers, one with the noisy basketball, stared at their phones.

Today was just like last week, except many wore jackets on this chilly September morning, and cello-player Sarah struggled with a clunky knee brace. Bryn wondered whether it had been a sports injury. The cohort jostled across the street, and Bryn’s hazel eyes followed them down the block. As they disappeared into the ashen sky, her hand reached toward the window, just as it had each school day since the beginning of the last school year, 376 days ago.

A bell rang in the distance. Bryn’s mom sniffled and pushed herself out of her chair. She rapped the wooden table, stained and scratched. The murmuring ceased.

“Kiddos, that bell is for us too,” she said, gesturing to the wall. “Check the chore chart before lessons.”

Except for one of the girls, everyone faintly groaned. Anything louder and mama would dole out a hard smack or extra work, like picking up moldy dog droppings.

“Ugh, toilets again!” Cole whined. “George should clean them as he’s the one who can’t aim.” To his many siblings, he was Cole the Complainer. His mom affectionately called him Three, his place in the birth order.

“I can’t clean the pot. I’m too small!” George held open his grubby hand, with five fingers spread to emphasize his age. A ketchup drip almost blended into his camo pajama top.

“Hey, don’t pick on Georgie!” Daisy, a peacekeeper with three older siblings and three younger ones, weighed in. She stroked George’s sandy curls, and he wiggled under her soft touch. A lame duck-hunting dog lapped oatmeal from the linoleum floor at their feet.

“Stop complaining, Cole! Every Monday, you have toilets, and it will be the same next week,” Bryn sniped at the brother two years her junior. “At least you don’t have to do them on Sunday, before church, as I do!” Dread surged through her as she thought of another crappy Sunday.

The kitchen exploded. Stinging accusations flew about who skipped out on work and whose drudgery was worse. Cole hurled a barb at Daisy, who turned on Eleanor. Even Francie and George, the youngest of the siblings, flung insults.

Dad quelled the last family brawl with one hand on his wide brown belt. He was more threat than action, but the kids who’d been thigh-whipped recoiled. But dad was at work, and Bryn’s older brother, Ashton, also wasn’t around. He moved to a tiny trailer, across town, with his new wife and her six ornery tuxedo cats.

Exiting the mayhem, freckled Francie scrambled onto the kitchen table. She was finally taller than everyone, bushy blond hair giving her more height. Francie grinned,

her tongue pushing into the gap left by a lost baby tooth. Then came the loud bashing. She clanged two servings spoons together, again and again. Cast off bits of egg, and a slice of an overly ripe peach landed on her siblings. They quieted, turning to her.

Francie whispered, "I don't like it when everyone yells."

Bryn pulled Francie into a hug and said, "Hey team, knock this off now! Everyone wants free time before dinner, right? Let's get to work!" She tapped her wrist with her index finger, cuticles red and raw.

"No one listens to me!" griped Cole. A couple of the kids nodded. He'd been grumbling for weeks about taking on Ashton's backyard duties. His four younger siblings feared he'd foist his work onto them if he gained power within the family.

Waif-like Eleanor, the fifth sibling, exited the kitchen pushing an industrial-sized vacuum, which her mother found on a street corner before she was born. Cole and Daisy followed, heads low, feet shuffling. Francie and George began clearing the table. Filling the sink with warm, soapy water, Bryn donned thick rubber gloves.

"Mother, ugh... I need to talk to you about something important," Bryn blurted, scrubbing a plate.

"OK, I'm listening."

"We've talked about it in the past...but I want to go to school so badly that I feel like I will burst." Bottled-up words tumbled out.

"You already go to school, Twoey. Mom school." Her mom often called her Twoey, never Two.

"I mean public school, with other kids."

"Dad won't allow it."

"Can you talk to him? It's really—"

"Neither of us wants you in public school with their vaccine mandates and that critical race bullshit...." Francie and George were chasing the dog and didn't hear the swearing.

"Dad doesn't believe that guy from church, does he? I mean, his son was sick, but cancer got him."

"He was recovering, Bryn. Then he got that shot and was called to the Lord." A dry cough ripped through mama's throat as she spoke.

"I'm sad for his family." Bryn shook her head. "At 15, he was just a year younger than me."

"Fauci and the boys don't know crap! The shot caused Julie's fertility problems, and now she and Ash can't get pregnant." Bryn rolled her eyes at her 19-year-old brother's plight.

"Mama, I want to attend school, take chemistry, join the choir. Maybe I can get a vaccine exemption?"

Her mom, grabbing a tissue, blew her nose. She paused for a beat before replying. "Twoey, those folks are destroying their minds and bodies."

"Ma, there are vaccinated people everywhere, and they look healthy."

"It's messin' with them long-term. The shot was too rushed."

"The Monroe family, down the road...he's on a ventilator, his wife's sick too. And my old Sunday School teacher died from the virus."

“Twoey, did you hear the pastor last week? This is a false crisis to test our faith. The libs made up this so-called calamity to stay in power.”

“Yeah, I know. There’s politics involved.”

“Oh, there’s politics,” Bryn’s mom nodded vigorously. “Trump should be president, but the election was stolen!”

Mama sneezed, and Bryn mumbled a quick “bless you” as she reached for a worn kitchen towel.

“Mom, I won’t believe all the stuff they teach in history, and I’ll tell the other kids evolution isn’t real. Somebody needs to help them see the light.”

“Their parents have brainwashed them.”

“You always said I could go when I turned 15. I should have started last September as a sophomore, and I’m falling behind.” The teen’s voice crackled with emotion. “Mama, you didn’t graduate high school. How can you teach me what you never learned?”

“Stop! Don’t disrespect me, Bryn Sage. I have a mind to—”

“Sorry, ma.” Bryn dipped her head and put up her hands. “But, if I go to school, you can focus on Cole, Daisy, and Eleanor. They need your attention. The little ones too.”

“I didn’t need that high school learning, and I did ok. Done right by you kids too.”

Cole, looking satisfied, sauntered into the kitchen. Mama stopped him cold. “Three, scrub those tubs ‘til they shine!” The vacuum still hummed in a distant room.

“Twoey, I know we talked about public school, but folks are whipped into a frenzy the virus. I’m happy you’re home with us.”

“Yes, but schools are back to normal now. I want to... compose music and learn about the stars.”

“There you go with the stars again!” Her mother sounded tired. Under her breath, Bryn whispered “stars,” instinctively looking up to the dingy popcorn ceiling, stained in the corner from an old roof leak.

Bryn yearned for the celestial since the week-long church retreat two years ago. The bible studies, God’s country nature walks, and “What Would Jesus Do?” debates faded from her mind, but she’d been awakened to the beauty and vastness of the skies thanks to Jasper, the college-aged camp counselor who always wore a royal blue “Pluto, Never Forget, 1930-2006,” t-shirt.

On the first night of camp, Jasper set up a telescope and gave a mini-astronomy session, while Bryn stood awkwardly at the back. The next day, she crept closer to ask three questions. Soon she was sponging up details on the solar system, and Jasper dubbed her “Little Stargazer.”

During their last glimpse upward, in hushed tones, Jasper shared that the big bang theory created the universe. Bryn’s eyes glazed over at his scientific argument; her cheeks reddened at the deficiencies in her schooling. Still, it was unlikely that God could create something as complex as the universe in just six days. That’s when Bryn began to question everything.

Ma’s hand waved in front of Bryn’s face. “Learn music, huh? Well, I taught you to play grannie’s violin, didn’t I?”

“You did. I love that instrument.” Bryn wiped down the table and wondered if she could play in the band with Sarah, the injured cello player.



Her mom, looking flushed, gripped the chair arms tight. “You don’t need fancy learning for your simple life.”

“Ma, don’t say that!”

“You need to bake bread, grow vegetables, and manage a house. You’ve gotta keep your husband happy and have kids—gifts from our Lord,” she said, chuckling.

“I can run a house!” Bryn gestured to the bread loaf on the counter and the six-foot-high tomatoes plants outside the window.

“It’s not that bad, you know, this life.”

“Maybe in ten or fifteen years, Ma. I want to go to college and get a job.”

“A job? Hell, you don’t need one of those.... Some boss telling ya what to do. Your husband should be the one with a job.”

“Ok, mom, but can I try public school? I’ll make breakfast before my classes.” Bryn put her hand over her heart and tapped her chest. “I just need answers to questions that keep popping into my mind. Aren’t you curious about things too?”

Bryn’s mother drifted away, then meekly replied: “I always wanted to know about plants and photosyn...whatever,” mama admitted. “I love our garden. Praise the Lord for our generous bounty.”

“Ma, you’d love biology. I’ll get a library book to teach us how plants grow.” Sunlight streamed through a break in the clouds.

“Bryn, you’re a good kid. But my time has passed.” Ma’s eyes puddled.

“We can learn together.”

“Twoey, I’m exhausted. Keep an eye on the kids, will ya? They need a grammar lesson today.”

“But, can I go to school?”

“I’ll talk to your dad tonight.”

“Thanks, Mom, I won’t let you down!” Bryn pulled mama from the chair and into her arms. “It’s not too late for me to start junior year. They are only eleven days in.” She let go of her mom and twirled with Francie and George.

“We’ll see. Dad’s word is final.”

Bryn and her mom stood at the window. The red and white checked curtain swayed in the light breeze, and the dark sky released a drizzle. Drops gently graced the green grass. Two girls, running late, hustled by. The younger one opened an umbrella, and her older sister, wearing an Alabama sweatshirt and a crimson-colored mask, stepped under it.

Bryn’s mom fell back.

“Hell no! Twoey, you ain’t gonna attend any school with a ridiculous mask mandate! No one will punish my kid by putting them in a mask over a silly cold. We’ve got our freedoms,” she exclaimed with a last burst of energy before she dragged herself to bed.

Bryn stared at the rain, now heavier, then slid the window shut. Tomorrow she’d make banana pancakes for breakfast, just like every Tuesday. She’d check if Sarah, the cello player, were still limping. When the bell rang, Bryn would fold laundry, her favorite chore. That is how day 377 would begin.

## “Birds” by Emily Lam

John Cleaver sits on his front porch with his flask in hand, cursing the birds in the trees. His rifle rests against his right leg and a rocking chair creaks next to him as evening breeze hits. His denim and mangy beard protect him from the chill.

“If it were up to me, you fellas would be dead a long time ago.”

The birds warble back. As his meaty thumb strokes the rifle, green eyes lined with crows feet fade into memory. He stops.

“You’re lucky Mags liked you.” Taking a swig and squeezing his eyes shut, he pushes the birds out of his senses.

Surrounded by darkness, he soon drifts to sleep. In his dream, he is sitting in the same chair but the setting sun is streaming through the leaves, and the rocking chair next to him is occupied.

“Aren’t they lovely, John?”

“I really ought to shoot the damn things.”

“You say that every day, darling.”

“Are we going to have dinner tonight? Or are we just doing this?”

“Shhh, darling, I’m trying to listen to them sing.”

“Hmph.”

He hears a loud screech and his eyes fly open. It’s dark. He looks to his left. The rocking chair is back to being empty, creaking in the breeze. Damn birds. His thumb brushes his rifle and he falls back asleep.

John Cleaver and Margaret Woolly are lying together under the trees. Dew dots the earth and John mutters about it under his breath.

“Darling, you didn’t have to come if you’re just going to complain about it.”

“I’m not complaining about it.”

“Okay, darling.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“Okay, John. Oh! Look darling, a finch! A lucky morning we’re having, it must be because you joined me.”

A yellow bird swoops down from a branch and lands a few feet away from Mags to pick bugs in the dirt.

“It’s Florence! Darling, say hello to Florence.”

“Margaret, it’s a bird.”

Margaret turns away from Florence to look at him, and disappointed green eyes are the last thing he sees before she fades away.

He’s back on his front porch now. The sky is dark and he looks to his left: Mags is not there. But the birds still are. They warble on, late into the night. How could they still sing when Mags was no longer there to listen? How could they forget her, when she doted on them morning and night?

He reaches for his rifle. Aren’t they lovely, John? The familiar stock fills his hand. You say that every day, darling. His finger finds the trigger. Shhh, darling, I’m trying to listen

to them sing. He takes a shot into the black trees. It must be because you joined me. Birds scream and flap up and away.

The gun clatters to the ground and the night grows silent. Mags would've hated it. Mags would've hated him. He puts his face in his hands and closes his eyes.

## “Two Halves” by Dylan Mueller

There are two halves to every story. Split down the center of a suburban yard where vision is mirrored like the pages of a book. A small berry bush bursting with little red berries sits in the center of the center from which the threshold crawls forth to the back fence creating a T in the yard. On its right stands a little boy staring, pupils slightly dilated. He let his vision blur imagining the taste of the berries, but his parents had told him never to try one. The bush rattles ever so quietly in the wind, all the berries swinging like silent chimes. To his right reflects an expanse of mirrors, yards one after the other repeating down to the horizon, endless fields of houses that haven't changed in the 12 years of his life. Behind lies one of the same, though his version of the same. The berries blur from his mind even as they blur from his eyes. Then his attention is drawn elsewhere, to the threshold of the fence. Or rather to what lay beyond, to the unknown. To the great Rattlewood that waits for him, calls for him. To places where the light creeps through rattling branches and darkness dwells a permanent visitor. The boy drifts over to the fence pressing between the bars, staring yet again.

A girl the same age stands on the other side of the bush. The small garden to her left, her mother's doing no doubt. She glares at it with contempt; it's the place where the slow go to watch things quicker than them grow and die. To her right is the berry bush she knows tastes a bit sweet, a bit tart, and causes the strangest dreams. She knows that the center of the bush is where the best berries grow and the only ones which her parents do not check. But it is the Rattlewoods in front of her that draw her gaze, in that way she is like her brother—only in that way. She watches as they trill their rattling call in the wind where branches shake like little sprites at war. The light flickers and dies, the darkness grows only deeper as she stares.

She knows what lies in both, not from her few ventures into the eaves, but from her dreams. In the light, howling and yapping akin to the wild animals she's heard during camping trips and at the zoo, yet slightly different. There is abandon in their voices, and in her dreams she can almost make out words in their haunting cries. The darkness is laughter that rises after every howl, seeps from everywhere, the very forest laughing.

Her parents say only, “Do not leave this yard.”

They offer no explanation, but she guesses the truth and is silent. Her brother climbs the fence, she says nothing. She says nothing as he takes his first step into the forest, or his second. Soon he is gone, consumed by the darkness in the Rattlewood. She says nothing, the trees told her not to. (obeying the trees command)

She stays still for a while after her brother disappears. Then slowly turns towards the berry bush, sticking her arm in past her elbow, grabbing a berry, and plopping it in her mouth. Its red skin tore oozing a sweet, tart liquid that calms her with its familiarity. After a few moments she, lies down on the grass beside the bush, closes her eyes and dreams.

There is a small clearing in midst of the forest. Small stones line the clearing's edge and within are many creatures. Some have fur, others wings, some are wolves prancing with the foxes. Others still were covered in blood and lying very still. All that

could, came towards the center of the clearing, crawling if their legs were torn, some only gazed longingly their bodies too broken to move.

Then out from the trees strode beasts that made her gasp even in her dream. And curious she drove her mind towards them. They were, in truth, only part beast. One walked on three legs of deer, its last, human, arm jutting from an inhuman shoulder its hand still clutching tightly to a phone. Another had only fingers jutting from the paws of a fox. More and more drew into the clearing, misshapen, crying, yowling, clawing. As they joined the circle, silence fell and together their voices rose in song, the discordant melody resounding through her dream.

Dance, dance 'round the fairy ring  
stamp your feet, raise your head.  
Dance, dance all around,  
cry, cry to the sky.  
Grow your wings  
or howl and chirp.  
It does not matter—  
we are free.  
Howl, howl to the sky,  
chase and hunt,  
bark and bite—  
feed, feed  
we are free.

As the song fades a dark shape drew into the edge of her dream. It was a small boy the same age as she, crouching on all fours. Slowly, he looks up to the sky, pausing, stretching, skin taut across the length of throat, his chin jutting at a horrible angle, straight up to the sky. His diaphragm fluttered expanding his chest in a deep breath and blood began to spill as his skin tore. He held in his breath bursting with air before howling up at the sky and the growing stars. As his howl passed the branches of the Rattlewood they began swaying and beaming their joy.

She awoke as her parents came home to the only child they'd always had. In a town where every yard grew a single berry bush. In a world where every truth has a cost.



Arthur King, "Art Students," collage

## Author Biographies

**Laila Ali** is a student at DVC.

**Keylee Anderson** is a third year DVC student studying history with plans to minor in creative writing once they transfer to a 4-year-university. Keylee identifies as non-binary with pronouns They/Them, and their sexuality is queer/pansexual/bisexual. They started writing poetry their senior year of high school for an assignment in English and couldn't believe how natural it felt. When they're not writing or doing schoolwork, they're reading as many books as they can with their 2-year-old pitbull, Archie.

In today's poem, they're exploring the grief of their great-uncle Henry's passing.

**Kristine Cox** was raised in Santa Cruz before attending UCLA for college. Post graduation, she worked at Paramount Studios on the television series, Star Trek. Later she moved back up North to raise her three sons (18, 21, & 23) with her husband Aaron. She has been working with foster children, and she plans to pursue a graduate degree in social work.

**Alyx Gilbertson** is a person who spends a lot of time working on a lot of different things that usually don't pan out, like cosplays or writing projects or art, but enjoys having fun doing so. There's not much more to them than that, and that's fine with them.

**Jenn Keohane** grew up in Brazil and Mexico, returning to the USA for college (BA, Political Science). She's worked in finance, real estate, and education and now spends some of her days as a substitute teacher at a local high school. Jenn, an avid hiker and amateur vegan baker, lives with her husband in the SF East Bay. They have two young adult children and a naughty dog. She is currently taking her second creative writing class at DVC.

**Emily Lam** is currently a senior at Monte Vista high school, and in the fall she will study computer science at UC Santa Cruz. Her pastimes include reading, drawing, and playing badminton. In the future, she hopes to have a cat, a home with good lighting, and enough time to indulge in her hobbies.

**Dylan Mueller** is a college student who grew up in Benicia, California the place where his interest in creative writing first blossomed. Drawn in originally by the wonders Tolkien created, he quickly fell down the winding rabbit hole to the realm of myth and fantasy, wherein he now writes poetry and short stories. First as a C.S. major he quickly dashed through Business, Biology, and Chemistry before landing as a story enthusiast, commonly known in college as an English major. While looking to pursue a career in writing and teaching he often spends much of his free with friends, enjoying life while creating the stories of others.



**Andrew Pimentel** is a former U.S. Postal Service mail carrier. He is currently an undergraduate at San Francisco State University studying creative and technical writing. His creative works tell the stories of frontline, healthcare, and other essential workers, including his own experiences as a postal worker during the 2020 Presidential election.

**Vincent Rozalski** is an English student who is exploring his interest in creative writing, and sharpening his skills in both nonfiction and genre fiction. After graduation, he hopes to continue writing stories in the genres of comedy and horror, and to make room for more creative nonfiction stories about navigating the queer world.

**Victoria Soleil** is a part time student at DVC, currently taking Poetry Writing with Alan Haslam and Queer Lit with Danielle De Foe. Through her writing, she hopes to help people feel seen, loved, and understood. This is her first contest that she's ever been a part of, and she's very grateful for the opportunity to share her poem with you all.

# Call for Submissions

## Want this to be you?

The 13th Annual DVC Literary Contest will take place in Spring 2023. 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 12th Annual Literary Contest! We love your work, talent, and courage. Keep writing. Keep submitting.