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This year's cover is a mosaic of all the past anthologies:
(They appear in chronological order – left to right, top to bottom.)

2016 - Skylar Shearin
2018 - Lauren Rogers
2019 - Victoria Pagan
2020 - Taylor Parker
2021 - Lauren Knowles
2022 - Maileleilani Kuikahi
2023 - Mary Huang
2024 - Krystal Marerro & Mary Huang

Ramblings of a Musician

By Abigail Fallin

“There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.” -John Cage

It's more than notes on a page.

Music is in all we do.

Birds sing.

Washing machines chime tunes.

The alarm blares a motif to wake you.

The ticking of a clock.

The cracking of a fire accompanying campfire songs.

Rustling leaves in the wind.

The crashing of waves on the beach.

Wind chimes blow.

Church bells ring.

The beating of a drum, or heck,

Even knocking on a door.

The same rhythm everyone instinctively does when they knock on a door.

Human nature is innately connected with music in many ways.

It's funny how even specific notes can inspire memories in an instant.

All meticulous patterns to construct a narrative.

Underlying in the beat of human emotion,

Is music.

Music endures the fragility of time.

It is a response to suffering
And embodies the spirit of resilience.
It is a vessel to transcend language.
It conveys more than notes and words.
Anyone can feel the chaos of Rite of Spring
The yearning of Swan Lake,
The unnerving mystery of Pavane,
The peace of Meditation from Thais,
The anguish of the Requiem
The depression of the Pathétique Symphony
The stress of the Dies Irae
The shimmering light of Liebestraume
The bringer of war that is Mars
The joyful harmonies of Morning Mood
The patriotism of the Overture of 1812.

I could keep going, but for your sake I will not.
And perhaps you may think I'm reaching,
But much as there is much more to life than surviving,
There's more to music than notes on a page.

You can teach a monkey how to read notes,
But it takes a true musician to **make** the music that isn't explicitly written.
And if you will listen,
You *will* hear it too.

By Heart

By Cathy Dyer

March 22nd, 2025 – my birthday

And for the first time in my life

I won't receive that annual phone call from Mom:

You FINALLY arrived ... over 3 weeks late ... at 2:44 a.m.

Head full of dark hair

The doctor said, "It must be a boy!"

But he was wrong! ...

But this year – no call

Just one more way I'll miss her presence here on earth

It makes my birthday seem ... surreal

And everything feels ... foreign

My mind floods with memories of all the other March twenty-seconds

When I would receive that call from Mom

And with a recoil of regret, I recall how I (sometimes)

Rolled my eyes at the other end of the phone ...

But now?

Now she is gone.

Now I would love to hear her voice

Now I would love to listen to that story

(that I know by heart)

Just one more time

Beautiful Presence

By Váli Kovacs

You are the anchor in my life,
The star in the sky that I follow.
You make me more complete,
And my life less hollow.
I want you to know that even if we're apart,
You are never gone from my mind
Because no matter what storm I'm in,
You are never hard to find.

For A Man, Love Is

By Matt Randall

For a man, love is like fire
It can give us light but can cause us to be burnt by our desire

But for a man it doesn't matter the heat of the flame
'Cause for a man in love, life, and pain, might as well be the same

If a man loves you he will look at you
And see nothing but eternity and he forgets everything that he once knew

If a man loves you, something as simple as your voice
Is angelic to the point where he must listen both with and without a choice

For a man in love, life before you is distant
Distant like a memory, so blurry and inconsistent

Life before you is completely forgotten
Life before you doesn't even exist
For life before isn't worth a thought even just briefly
Because life with you for him is one of the most beautiful and perfect gifts

things i know for certain

By Selah Lamb

i know for certain that you only take your coffee with milk and sugar,

and your favorite color is the radiant yellow of the sun.

i know for certain that you like it best when the sky is grey, rain falling from the clouds

and the sound of your laughter is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

i know for certain that the shine in your earth-toned eyes is like looking into the stars,

and the curls in your hair are as wild and free as Mother Nature herself.

i know for certain that i am you, and you are me.

and i know for certain that love is real, because i exist.

and i am full of it.

Nightingale

By Victoria Chavez-Mata

Hoping you're hopelessly longing
My deep dark nightingale
With wings of charcoal
And feathers made from ash
My deep dark nightingale
Hoping you're hopelessly longing for me

Hoping you're hopelessly searching
My deep dark nightingale
Beady black eyes like buttons
And a sharp gaze like broken glass
My deep dark nightingale
Hoping you're hopelessly searching for me

Hoping you're hopelessly waiting
My deep dark nightingale
With talons made from cigarettes
And a beak made of human teeth
My deep dark nightingale
Hoping you're hopelessly waiting for me

Adam

By Victoria Chavez-Mata

Once, you asked me if I thought space was quiet.
I paused, dirty dish rag making a small false rainfall into the sink, I asked you if it mattered.

“Why wouldn’t it?” You said, soft bubbles caressing your warm palms, reminiscent of some distant seafront found in magazines and crumpled vacation brochures.

“Well, if you think it matters, then it does.” Which wasn’t an answer, in this lifetime or the next, but it could’ve been in the one after that, if you had wanted it to be.

In that life, you would’ve laughed, nodded, as if that response could have satisfied your curiosity, curbed your wondering, and tucked that question into bed like an unruly child whose parents have bags holding tiredness and a bone deep ache under their eyes.

But we didn’t live there and you didn’t laugh and there wasn’t even a slight shake of your head, not a trace, not even a little.

I gripped the plate I was holding a little tighter, which I shouldn’t have, it was the good fine china your mother had given us as an engagement present.
It was blue and white, ornate in its swirling pattern and its weight good for throwing at some unsuspecting wall in a sort of fit of lovers’ passion.

“I like to think that space is quite loud.”
You pushed your glasses higher up the bridge of your nose, delicate in a way that only you seemed to manage, your ring finger gently kissing your frames.
Gold glinting in the orange lights of our small apartment kitchen, reflecting off our orange walls, highlighted by orange accents, I always picture you in that bright visage of hues.

I was unable to hold your gaze, my eyes finding the ceramic in my hands as I wiped at its shiny surface in a robotic, detached fashion.
You called it self-preservation, I knew it was the bitter taste of cowardice.
“And why’s that?” A faux causal tone painted my voice, like how one hastily applies a decorative leaf to their homemade craft, shoddily placed, lumpy in the places unseen and lacking in its most essential areas.

“You haven’t answered.” You grabbed the plate from my hands with the ease of one trying to open the closed fist of a newborn, draped and swaddled, holding something it shouldn’t have but desperately clings to.

“What, if I think space is loud?” I sighed out the words in an air filled whoosh that left my lungs feeling full instead of empty, as I relinquished the plate from my damp cold hands, flexing my fingers, thumb to pinky and back again in practiced motion that most psychiatrists would applaud from their leather seats.

“If you think space is quiet.” Your voice was soft as it drifted like music on a well loved record through the room, you turned to put the china away, it clinked as it made contact with its set, pretty and unassuming like a wind chime in the early days of spring, where the dewdrops cover the grass like a suspended pool frozen in motion and the flowers sing a siren song of pollen, hoping to entice the bees as they buzz in revelry.

You lowered your feet back to the ground and closed the cabinet door with a metal screech and thunk, frigid and hollow like the ending of something sweet, like when ripe fruit sits on a counter untouched and it begins its cycle of decomposition and you and your partner argue about the molding, rotting orange, the end of something sweet.

“Well, if you think space is loud then it must be.”

A wobbly smile seemed to take root across my lips, fraying at the ends like a worn down carpet, creased and faded from years of mistreatment. unraveling with every thread yanked unceremoniously from its woven fibers as I met your sun soaked eyes.

Then the next second I met the cold splash of childish rebellion as you flicked some of the sinks used, tainted water at me, hundreds of wet projectiles hit my unprepared form, I’m left standing, surprised and oddly delighted as the leftovers from the attack cool on my skin. “That is such a nothing answer, *if you think so then it must be true*, could you be any more obvious Takashi?” Your shoulders shook with barely contained mirth reserved for big dogs that chased sticks in the park or kids at recess playing hopscotch on sickly hot blacktops. But we were too old for playground games, so this was our equivalent, our kitchen was the green rolling hills of a sunny day in the park or a scorching, blistering blacktop while domestic water fights were the proverbial spindly sticks or multicolored chalk.

And then I held you in my arms and inhaled the cinnamon pumpkin scent that seemed to follow you like how one’s shadow lingers and is present even when it’s absent. You laughed as carefree as a man who brushes by death, complaining when the front of your shirt went unspared. I always remember you like this, in brilliant orange lighting and charming even with soap between your fingers and hair plastered to your forehead.

But when I dream of this moment in the artificial night of space, I never get to hold you, my hands clench around nothing and fall through wisps of the remains of you, like how haunted houses used to be homes or the way stuffed animals lose bits of themselves as the people around them age and mature with time.

And you were right, of course you were, you usually are when it comes down to the things that mattered, and—as we already know—the question of whether space was quiet or not was something that mattered.

From where I am, space is a loud, deafening, constant hum of noise, always something to worry about, always someone to save, I just wish I realized that sometimes I needed saving as well.

But you did, Adam, you always knew.

Lovely Lemonade

By Ava Hutchings

I may cut first but you always cut last
Always fast
Acting as if it was nothing more
And then you blame me for my past
What if it was you, not me?
Who's fault then would it be,
Yours or mine?
Its as if we mixed
The bitterness of love
Sour like a lemon,
But sweet like sugar
Mixing together an in ocean of flavor
Until salt falls in the drink
Tasting all that we can consume
Just another sip
Yet I drown in the taste of flavor
Was it your drink or mine,
Who created this endless drink of time?
Like a drug I'm addicted to
Who mixed this ocean together,
Was it you or me?
Who added the salt to end it,
Over and over again?
Maybe third times a charm?
Was it your fault or mine,
When I would lash out about insecurities I felt?
What about that one girl?
Was it your fault or mine,
When you called me names?
Unloveable trouble
It was quick but subtle
That was your fault not mine
The words from your salty mouth leapt onto my sugar tooth
Communication went away with the salt we added
So what happened to the sweet lemonade
Turning saltier by the day
Was it your fault or mine,
Why didn't we add more sugar over time?

Hugs

By Selah Lamb

inspired by 'anatomy of a hug', luna lu

a heart is a beautiful little thing, contracting and relaxing with each pounding beat it takes
and yet it sits alone in your chest,
caged by a set of ribs,
trapped on one side of your body
it beats frantically,
longingly
where is its other half,
the half that fills up that empty space?
and suddenly,
with your arms wrapped around me,
my heart is whole
your chest pressed to mine,
side by side our hearts beat as one, matching pieces of the puzzle we call love

Katniss to Peeta (If You Know, You Know)

By Hannah Bautista

I only pretended to like you to win. *Real.*
I just couldn't not win. *Real.*

Too many lives dependent on my victory.
Too many deaths paid for my sake.
And you were too obvious
With your too weaknesses
With your too feelings
With your too forgiveness.

You despised me for my deception. *Not Real.*
You hated me for my ambition. *Not Real.*

Not enough condemnation for what I did.
Not enough judgment for my ruthlessness.
And I was not worthy
With my not gratitude
With my not candor
With my not affection.

I kept you safe, but you saved me. *Real.*
No one else could have saved me. *Real.*

Always choosing to rescue me over you.
Always absorbing the pain meant for me.
And you are my always peace
With your always patience
With your always sacrifice
With your always heart.

You love me. *Real.*
I need you. *Real.*

If given the chance to relive it all,
I would still choose you.

...

I don't know.

Hot Dog, A Limp Bizkit Poem

By John Petiach

Bumping bumping,
Bass is thumping,
The crowd is jumping.
Everybody knows it's on.

Mic-ed up,
Pumped up,
The singer Limp up,
On stage. He stands proud.

Staring at the crowd,
a sea he commands.
He's a drug they demand,
They're a drug he demands,
Everybody knows it's on.

The Creator & Art

By Keilah Ramos

While my imagination flows,
Till I receive a vision,
If only I could ever create art,
As Jesus Christ did,
At the time God created the earth.

pause

After he died for our sins,
As he came back on the third day,
When he was risen,
So that I can share the beauty of what he is all about,
I can use his creation for inspiration.

Stagnation

By Mars Menge

I'm scared

because looking at myself from about a year ago doesn't make me cringe

and I'm scared

that I might not be growing anymore

and that's scary

because if I'm not evolving and seeing the mistakes of my past self, am I simply grown, or
am I stagnant?

maybe I'm both

maybe

that's okay

but it doesn't make it any less scary, because I'm only 18

I can only hope I find this poem embarrassingly laughable in 2 years time, but I'm scared I
won't

I'm scared I will read it and relate

I want to be a different person in that time

I want to have changed collaterally

My Pen

By Riley Colding and Jesus Torres

I have this pen.
Let's call him Ben.
Ben the pen.

Ben can draw lots.
He can draw pots,
As well as knots.
Ben can even draw astronauts.

One thing Ben hates to do is,
Write all of my thoughts.
All my silly little thoughts,
My deep dark thoughts,
And even all my wild crazy thoughts.

I have this pen.
His name is Ben.
Ben writes a lot;
Every single thought.

Soon his ink ran low,
The words he writ in time had stopped.
Though Ben the pen grew faint and fought,
His ink ended,
And I was distraught.

Static Hum

By Maddie Parrish

The TV was always dim,
It was always in the background, even as a child.
The exhausted legs of the table never even acknowledged the TV existed, even if it was
screaming in whispered tongues late at night,
However, by age 13, it began to dim even more because of the tabletop,
I thought the TV was useless, and I saw a reflection I knew wasn't mine whenever I gazed
into it.
Light was pouring out of it, and it was time to unplug this broken television.
Late at night, I stalked the halls, dodging the dining room table,
Once I reached behind the TV to pull the plug, a hand, one that complemented the rich
brown of the living room walls, grabbed me.
'Come with me,' it claimed, 'Follow me and you will find the light you seek!'
I managed to get away with a bad bruise that left my arm weak,
The table told me to keep it a secret, a color not meant for daylight.
Then, by age 14, with the head of the table beginning to rot, I knew it was time,
Every time I looked at that TV, it held someone who wasn't me.
When I went to smash it, to put an end to this madness, it began to move,
It warped into a picture-perfect weeping seraphine, arms held high. I stopped and began
reaching toward the old TV, its picture changing once again, realizing what its reflection
was presenting.
And when I touched it, the TV began to glow.

Transient

By Mars Menge

I can survive in my body for the single reason of my own beauty

I feel like I am trapped in a vessel

and I am scared that it will lose its appeal

that my slim waist will fill out

and my skin will continue to damage

it rarely occurs to me that my body is, well, mine

it doesn't feel like my own

but a gift from above that carries my soul inside

a gift that says

"this is the best I could do."

if I can't be a boy then I must be a beautiful girl

when I think about how one day I will be an old woman

I cry.

it was always unexplainable until I realized

I always imagined myself being an old man

I would be like my grandfather, would I not?

I always cringed when my grandmother would call me a 'little lady'
I've never felt like one

But I suppose, for now, I am

Rejection is Good, Actually

By Mars Menge

Rejection is good
like with Wesley and a crepe
good things come from rejection
and you'll never do anything if you're afraid of it
that's why you shouldn't give it any mind
but really
it's good
because without failure how does one learn

I Really Miss Wrestling

By Mars Menge

I miss the team
and my coach
and most of all I miss being good at something
and maybe it wasn't perfectly healthy
but it wasn't all bad.

I miss the runner's high,
and how low I felt after losing:
how close I was to hurting someone
that I could only run
until my lungs burned.

I wanted to pass out.
and nobody bothered me
because I took it seriously,
maybe even too seriously
but it made me happy.

sometimes,
other times,

I'm not sure.
but I don't regret it
and that means something

Spectacle(s)

By James Calzada

“A major change will attract attention.”
Something so blatant and unusual,
Something that can't go without a mention,
Something that before was nearly crucial,
Should be relatively clear to observe.

Yet most will never seem to bat an eye,
Missing something seemingly apparent.
They don't see this transformation go by:
A glaring change viewed as if transparent,
A revolution received by silence.

Only some will notice the shift outright,
It could be something they do not detect,
It may catch their eye as a bizarre sight,
It might be a difference they respect.
Most aware won't question the idea.

Many will say that they like what they see,
Claiming it's better than what was before.
They unknowingly let a new fear free:
Was it formerly something to abhor?
This cherished feature should not have been touched.

The Farmer

By Váli Kovacs

There once was a farmer who lived in a vast acreage of land,
His mind was clear and he couldn't hear a sound from inside the farm.
He just sat there outside looking at his land and thought of the vast opportunity,
How much he could profit but also how much he could love what he'd be doing everyday.

Then the farmers seating spot grew closer to the farm,
Acres of coverage for the mind seemed to disappear in an instant.
The land shortage seemed never ending until the farmer was right outside the door,
The echoing voices, screaming, laughing, crying all so close to his ears.

The farmer tried to get up from his now chained in chair,
The same chair he freely sat in.
The one that slipped so close to the farm without him knowing,
He now could not escape.
His farm was no more all he could do was close his eyes and listen to the noise,
This noise became so familiar.
His mind became consumed, the chains turned to a cage,
The chair to a hard uncomfortable floor.

Then all the noises stopped,
His mind was cleared.
He could not hear a word, a sound,

Not the slightest hint of livelihood.

The farmer's mind began to become filled with his own noise,
Noise recreated to mimic what he had heard in all his time in that loud farm.
His eyes remained shut,
The windows of the farm were boarded in,
He could not escape the cycle of noise that filled his head.

Until one day his mind stopped,
A polite knock echoed through the farm.
His rusty creaky hinges unsure of how to open anymore,
The only voice in his head was this knock.
A soft gentle soothing sound,
Sound he had been craving for years.

His mouth, dry, could almost barely speak,
But his tongue moved eloquently, masking the feeling.
He appeared as normal as he could,
Like he had not just escaped noise.

The door pushed open,
But this time the door made no sound,
At least none the farmer could hear.
He was so infatuated by the presence of the soft gentle noise.

Then he felt a hand reach out and touch his mind.

The cage melted,

The floor lifted back to his lovely chair.

He could feel the weight on his back lifted,

And he looked up to see the most beautiful presence to walk the Earth.

He was guided outside and shown the beauty of his farm again,

Acres that he wanted nothing more than to grow together with this savior of his farm.

The Fall of Rome

By Amaya Hutton

Upon the white horse of conquest was a rider in Roman cloaks,
With fierce ambition, bringing glory to the sword.
With legions marching in his wake, an empire swiftly rose
A kingdom built on stolen land, its people cried for war.

Power turned to greed and blood, and trust began to fade
For Rome had spread its roots too wide,
The empire struggled beneath the weight,
And Conquest's welcome was severely overstayed.

Upon the red horse of war rode a figure cloaked in flame,
With sword unsheathed for brother's blood, not foe beyond the gate.
The Senate, afraid, gave the sword a throne,
Then drew the blade on Caesar's back and called it saving Rome.

Though they thought they were free from War's reign,
They were left with fractured lands.
The legions turned against their own, and trust began to wane,
For in that blow, the Republic died, and civil war began again.

Upon the black horse of famine rode a rider lost in grief
With hollow eyes and frail hands, he turned each crop to dust.
Marble halls and temples dimmed, their splendor worn and brief,
As swords grew dull and tools unused were left to rust.

Famine rode through the market streets, weighing grain against gold
But a thousand coins could buy no food, the market dealt in lies
The wealthy dined on silver plates while empty hands grew cold,
As famine fed the rich with gold and left the rest to die.

The pale horse of death came last, its saddle bare and still.
As the sun set low on ruined stone, the aqueducts were dry
No trumpet blew, no legion stood, the marble cracked and cold,
Once busy streets now crumbled roads, with no Romans left to cry.

Hole-in-One Cup

By Mars Menge

“hole in one
living the dream”
the man stands there in his country club flair:
his unbuttoned shirt,
and his old white hair.
and he wants nothing more than that
hole-in-one goal
by the palm trees
in the green fields
with the little white holes
so he'll smile for the click
next to the fresh checkered stick
by the goal, with the hole, and he'll never quit.

Pink Limousine

By Mars Menge

everyday we drive past the pink limousine

with its busted underside

and its pretty pink sheen

today we drive past the pink limousine

like everyday we drive past the pink limousine

You See Different Than Me

By Anna Matys

They see the sky where I see unknown possibilities of wonder,
They see the flowers in a field where I see the way it interacts with nature,
They see the life of others where I see so many different ways the roads may lead,
They see the family of mine where I see people who are different but are a community.

I see trying to focus on the future while they focus on the present,
I see lost opportunities while they enjoy the now and not the then,
I see uncertainty of tomorrow while they see the certainty of today,
I see jobs I could have had now while they see the jobs wanted in the future.

They feel the joy of hanging with friends while I see distractions,
They feel the fun of doing nothing whenever they want while I see failed assignments,
They feel the immersed feel of drama while I see unneeded shows of theatrics,
They feel the enjoyment of athletic activities while I see wasted time.

I feel the pressure of my future while they see no need to worry,
I feel the expectations rising while they don't feel a thing,
I feel the worry I have for my college acceptance rate while they don't care to bother,
I feel the way I want to make an impact in the world while they don't think about it.

Religion is a Dog

By Mars Menge

religion can be amazing

a family

a comfort to some

but for others

it's this weird fixation that they just can't get behind

like how if you don't want to step in _____ you don't go to a dog park.

and you wouldn't

yet people still bring their dog wherever they please

slap a fake vest on it

and say it's their little angel

but their little angel has a jaw

and if it wanted, it could kill

Seeking Silence

By Hannah Bautista

This world is so LOUD.
Loud ideas. Loud opinions. Even the air is loud.
Saturated.
Heaving with honks, alarms, beeps, rings.
So many things.
Loud human things.
Things that interrupt my thoughts and my space
And my very breath. My dreams.
Loud things I didn't even know were a thing
Until the world told me so.
More like yelled me so.
Loud. Deafening. Overwhelming.

What would it look like if I suddenly screamed "ENOUGH!"
Screamed loud ENOUGH for the trees to bow in reverence,
Loud ENOUGH for the wind to applaud,
Loud ENOUGH for the earth to nod her approval.
What would it look like?

Would it look like peace of mind rising from the grave?
A squashed, mangled shadow that has been
Beaten down from a trampling sound?
Could we reinflate it
Like a blazing orange hot air balloon preparing for flight?
Could it rise from the inferno of noise
And hover above us like a symbol of cautionary quiet?

Would I survive the scream?
Could my throat harness the savage, carnal sound
That can only come from desperation?
If I lived, would I be revered? Worshipped?
Would I be honored with a moment of silence?
Or hated and stepped on,
Flattened and laid to rest in the dirt next to peace of mind?
Can I be reinflated?
Would I even want to be?

If Monsters Were Real

By Mars Menge

If monsters were real

and you looked up at the tree tops

and a stealthy creature

petrifying

with a face

stared back at you

I'm pretty sure humans would get along a lot better

if the scary things in the night weren't each other

The Dance of Thunder & Lightning

By Nathan Suarez

Long ago, before the world had the shape and order it now knows, the Great Sky was ruled by Wahkan-tili, The Thunderbird whose wings stretched from the eastern horizon to the western mountains. Below, the Earth was young, covered in forests as deep as the night, where the tribes of men lived in harmony with the spirits of the land.

Wahkan-tili was pure energy, her feathers crackling with the storm's power. She soared through the skies, her eyes glowing like a full moon, and her voice was the roll of thunder that echoed through the valleys. She commanded the rains, bringing life to the plains and forests below. Nevertheless, Wahkan-tili had a restless heart. The skies were vast and empty, and though she was powerful, she was lonely.

While flying over the high mountains one day, Wahkan-tili saw a curious glimmer below. Descending, she found the Great Serpent, Unktehi, who slithered through the rivers and lakes, his scales shimmering like the stars that speckled the night sky. Unktehi was a creature of wisdom and cunningness, and he knew the secrets of the Earth, from its deepest roots to its highest peaks.

Wahkan-tili spoke to Unktehi, her voice booming across the land. "Great Serpent, I tire of my solitude. The skies are my domain, but they are empty. I seek a companion who matches my strength and spirit."

Unktehi, wise and sly, hissed in response, "O Thunderbird, if it is a companion you seek, then I shall give you what you desire. Nevertheless, beware, for all power comes with a price."

Wahkan-tili, blinded by her longing, agreed without hesitation. Unktehi slithered into the heart of the mountain, where he coiled around the stones, whispering ancient words. The ground shook, and a bolt of pure light erupted from the mountain's peak. It danced wildly in the sky, quick as a falcon and bright as the sun. This was Waziyata, the Lightning, born of the Earth and Sky, the child of Thunder and Serpent.

Waziyata shot through the heavens, and Wahkan-tili's heart leaped with joy. She had found her companion, who could race with her through the clouds and illuminate the darkest nights. Nevertheless, as they danced together, Waziyata's wild energy began to

tear through the sky. He was untamed, striking the Earth below and setting fire to the forests. The tribes of men cowered in fear, for the lightning was fierce and uncontrollable.

Wahkan-tili realized the truth of Unktehi's words. Her new companion brought destruction as well as light. Desperate to control Waziyata, she wrapped him in her wings, trying to calm his fury. However, the more she held him, the more he fought, his energy sparking and flashing until the skies were filled with a terrible storm.

In her sorrow, Wahkan-tili cried out to the Great Spirit, Tatanka, the Great Buffalo, who walked the Earth and held the balance of all things. Tatanka rose from the plains and spoke in a voice that rumbled like the most profound thunder.

"Wahkan-tili, your desire has brought imbalance. Lightning is a force of nature, wild and untamed, but it also brings the fire that renews the land. To control it would be to deny its purpose. You must release Waziyata and allow him to be free, but I shall guide him so that his power brings both life and death in harmony."

With a heavy heart, Tili released Waziyata and shot into the sky, his energy tempered by Tatanka's wisdom. From that day forward, Waziyata roamed the skies, striking the Earth with fury and purpose, while Tili followed, her thunderous voice calling out to warn the tribes below.

So thunder and lightning became the omens of both destruction and renewal, a reminder that all power must be balanced and that even in the wildest of storms, there is a purpose that serves the greater good.

The Eulogy of Jack Hernandez

By Elvira Randall

Jack Hernandez, because my Emily didn't know plant names. What I remember most is how you were barely a stick with a lavender bloom on the tip when we planted you in the easement out front on my fortieth birthday.

How you froze that winter a few years ago, losing all your fronds at once, looking like a giant rack of bones. I remember how I told my husband with certainty, that if you died, we would have to move. How I went outside and talked to you, encouraging you, praying for you as I would one of my girls. How that next spring you bloomed---one or two flowers at a time--- continuing, supernaturally, it seemed, all the way through November. "Unheard of," observed my husband.

How I tried to preserve your vibrant purple flowers in resin only to have them turn brown when it dried. How those neighbors complained about all the flowers littering the road while my granddaughter stood under you waiting for the flower rain to fall. How well you weathered those other storms over the years, dropping only your fronds, but standing your ground.

How Helene was more of a contender and Milton, merciless. How your branches snapped and whipped away, leaving you only a fraction of what you had grown to be. Jack Hernandez will always be remembered as resilient and blooming when no one believed he possibly could.

God

By Mars Menge

the idea of god has never been comforting
there are uncertainties
endless uncertainties
and the idea of heaven is no less scary than hell
there's no certainty in it
purely speculation and
people never put up with that anytime it matters
it's pseudoscience
no realer than astrology
greek mythology
why don't people see the patterns
they preach god
life after death
but they've never seen it
no one has
the hard fact of life is that it ends
cells made out of chemicals
chemicals out of atoms
we are just material
we are not special
John Muir got that right
the endless cycle persists no matter what anyone believes
that's the most comforting idea

The Ocean's Song

By Ashley Lewis

The ocean sings a soft, low tune,
Beneath the sun, beneath the moon.
Its waves come in, then slip away,
They dance and sway throughout the day.
The salty breeze, the seagull's cry,
The boats that gently drift and sigh—
All join the song, both near and far,
Beneath the sky, beside the star.
So when you stand along the shore,
You'll hear it call forevermore.
A song of peace, both wide and strong—
The ocean's voice, the ocean's song.

Hurricane Refrain

By Elvira Randall

I am from surges and sandbags,
wind shears, wobbles, and outer bands.

I am from the water that threatens the back porch
(The saturated ground refusing to take in anymore.)

I am from Helene and Milton,
harbingers of what's to come in this new climate era
and from the everyday people, many of them strangers,
who emerged as heroes,
working together to help each other
pick up their lives
that seem to have been scattered amongst the debris.

I am from those moments---a mosaic of chaos, crisis, and loss
yet my soul finds perfect peace
in a hiding place, a refuge of safety.
Where winds and waves are stayed.

I'm Sorry I Take Interest in Your Smallness

By Mars Menge

I'm sorry you cannot flutter down and lie for a bird
but you are instead picked up by me
passed around by many hands
seen and viewed far past when you wanted to be
and rather than finish drying in the place I left you
a hungry kitty bit your wings
now I feel I should have left you
and yet here you lay
small thing
with big wounds from small teeth
and your scales were wiped away
so your silver age shows
Humanity is ugly

Why Does He Neglect Me?

By Samiya Burch

Here I do lay, isolated and alone
He says I don't exist to allow his pride to grow
Denial (The Nile) is a river, so he buries me deep
Even still I cry out, refusing oppressed sleep

His father says he's fine
His friends, they call him weak
And so he turns to lies
In dark, his cheeks will streak

Help is never free for him, they ask for more and more
I try to call out to the world, but he always shuts my door
He quickly shuts me up, because "Assistance isn't cheap."
But day to day, month to month, darker grows the week

My last hope is the holy one
The one that he calls "Lord"
The speaker on the dais: "Son,
Consider praying more."

But he's tired of hearing it, the dull and useless repeated
A listener, a true embrace, was all he ever needed
"Be a man" "Toughen up"—when will that ever work?
He's cold, he's sick, he's hurt enough: he's tired of my quirk

Desperately, I try for his attention
For his sanity and promised path
"Please don't hide me, did I mention?
I am you; you are me; never was I wrath."

Yet he struggles with himself, bound by his whole world
Keeping me away from life, never to be heard
I do exist, don't be fooled: my presence still remains
He's scared of what they all will say, if I go untamed

Here I do lay, isolated and alone
He says I don't exist, but tears spitefully flow
Masculinity is oppression, his feelings are always true
And so I ask the world, to write the types anew

The Upstairs Room

By Selah Lamb

my mother carries me in her arms,
up, up, up, the stairs to my bedroom.
though my eyes are drooping,
and my breathing has started to slow,
i am content.

she lays me down, tucks the blankets around me like a cocoon, and kisses my forehead.
she gives my hand one final squeeze, and i know it will be okay.

“goodnight, my love.”

goodnight, i love you too.

then she leaves.

back down the stairs she goes, the wooden steps groaning as she rejoins my family downstairs.

and yet, i am still content.

for although my skin has wrinkled

and bruised,

and my hair is a cloud of white,

i can still hear the laughter of my family below, their voices a soothing lullaby.

yes, i know they miss me dearly

and i miss them too,

but i am still content,

waiting here in the upstairs room.

Spring Cleaning

By Anistyn Cone

Out with the old in with the new they say

But what if the old is the reason why I stay?

What if the old is the reason I feel I need to pay?

It's hard to toss out the old things when they have such a sway

It doesn't matter if it's April Or May

If it's old and gray

If it's tattered and frayed

Some old things have the same feelings as yesterday is today and as today is tomorrow

So here I will stay

In my attic of a heart

Watching my old feelings begin to decay

Hostage Negotiator

By Abigail Fallin

Sometimes it takes a lot out of a person

To always be in crisis.

“Red, blinking lights will blare into your eyes,

But that’s not what keeps ya’ up at night.”

“What will they do if I do this?

And how will they react if I say that?

It’s all about them. It’s all about the power.”

It can even be about manipulation

The hostage is nowhere to be found,

But **I** see them.

Echoing in a mirror-maze of their mind

That only they mourn.

“Calculate your move, and make it.

Maybe it will get through to them.

You never play chess without a plan.

Only the hostage matters to you, not yourself.”

“Oh, and what they say to you, rookie,

Make sure it goes in one ear

And out the other.

Emotions will mess you up, kid.”

citrus-stained fingers

By Selah Lamb

Today I brought an orange with me for lunch.

I peel the skin off, the sweet, tangy scent of the fruit everywhere.

I want to peel it perfectly, cleanly, each slice as blissfully flawless as it should be.

But my fingers are too rough, and I crush the orange wedges, the juice spilling out.

You smile and shake your head; you don't want the orange anymore.

The pulpy remains of the fruit sit before us, now inedible.

But I don't understand.

The orange is still an orange, the flavor is unchanged, as sweet as it was before.

Why am I the only one who'll eat it?

Falling Away To Nothing

(Inspired by “Falling Away With You” by Muse)

By Abigail Fallin

The TV is turned off.

Stagnant static hisses.

It's better than the ads,

But something summons me.

I can't hear my “wife”.

The sporadic, specking dots

Hypnotize me.

I sink.

Everything heightens.

It's paradoxical.

I float, yet I feel my seat.

I hear [wedding] bells, yet I don't see her ring.

Where's it all gone?

In the blink of an eye.

Fleeting, sentimental declarations

Crumble into fragments.

I pick up the pieces in my mind's eye.

Piercing familiarity.

The more I watch the more everything fades.

It's agony. Why is it alluring?

Is it a trap?

In search for refuge,

I'm reunited with my enemy.

And yet it eternally endures.

Are they intertwined?

Perhaps the two entities perform

A bittersweet symphony.

My pieces shatter.

How I wish it could all return.

Without the side effects,

the fading, and the torment.

Regaining control now...

Reality snaps back.

Down in the Casket

By Mars Menge

CRACK

my lungs are caving in,

my nails growing out,

I can't move a single muscle in my body.

I can't even shout.

no air coming in

and no air going out.

I'm stuck

six feet underground.

for sure,

without a doubt.

but was it what I said to her?

because I didn't say a thing.

laying on the bed

heart stopped

no beat

but all the while I was thinking as her mouth gaped to a scream:

is it really all that bad to not feel a thing?

but oh, she felt, and I felt it too.

six feet of pressure come crashing through

Elizabeth and the Mine Curse

By Bianca Hernandez

In the country of Eldrythia, beneath the canopy of clouds and rainfall in mystery and dread, there's a small town named Fogmoor. The town consists of a single main road lined with a few shops on either side, a school, and a court, surrounded by decaying farmland and abandoned buildings. The land that was once occupied was roughly around 50,000 square feet, but now it has shrunk to 25,000 square feet.

The reason for the decline lies in a tale of an older man who lived on the side of a mountain; the locals know him as Frank. The local children would torment him relentlessly, until one September he had enough. In a rage, he called upon the sneaky, slithering devil to curse his home, ensuring that any who approached the area would vanish. As time passed, children began to disappear, never to be seen again. The townspeople grew concerned and concluded that the disappearance of many had to have been the source of the man who lived on the side of the mountain whose house was covered by fog.

On a chilly and stormy night, the townspeople huddled together, their breath visible in the biting air, as they worked tirelessly to create a protective barrier around Frank's house which had become the center of their fears. Just that morning, another child went missing so as their last line of defense against the unknown, and in desperate measures to prevent any further tragedies, they moved inward away from the barrier they created.

Elizabeth Westbrook had called Fogmoor home for as long as she could remember. The misty landscape was a playground for her imagination, drawing in her family with a sense of adventure that was hard to resist. They often wandered off, seeking comfort in the enchanting surroundings. It was this intoxicating mix of curiosity and wonder that ultimately led Elizabeth down a path toward her fateful doom, unraveling the secrets that lay hidden in the shadows of Fogmoor.

One gloomy afternoon, Elizabeth felt an irresistible pull towards the forbidden area, yearning for something different. As heavy rain poured around her, she climbed over the fence that enclosed the area. She raced forward, eager to uncover whatever secrets lay hidden in the shadows of the night.

When the night fell, she stumbled upon an ancient well. Its stone edges are partially obscured by overgrown earth. As her curiosity got the better of her, she leaned over the

crumbling edge, peering into the abyss, wondering how deep it may be. Suddenly, a chill ran down her spine as she began to hear whispers—"Elizabeth." A thick fog puffed out from the well, swirling around her feet, making contact with the underground. Whispers of her name coming in all different directions. One direction seemed to be stronger; it was coming from the mountain.

Compelled to follow, Elizabeth pushed forward, taking on the treacherous hike through thorny bushes and slippery slopes. Once the whispers faded, she found herself standing alone in front of a weathered old building, the home where Frank lived. Her heart heavy, she scanned her surroundings, wondering, "*Where are these whispers coming from?*"

Just then, a now strong and deep voice called her name again—"Elizabeth", this time echoing from the staircase that spiraled down below. With fear, she approached, and as if on cue, the door creaked open with a haunting groan. Elizabeth cautiously peaked down the hidden staircase, engulfed in shadows that spoke of secrets.

Heart racing, she began to descend, feeling the weight of tragedy heavy in the air. A flicker of a candle glowed faintly to her right. Startled, she pressed herself against the cool stone wall, taking a shaking breath. The wall crumbled, traveling onto her skin as if tapping her shoulder. Summoning her courage, she moved closer towards the staircase as her trembling hand grabbed it and drew it near her. The flickering light casted dancing shadows in the darkness.

With each movement the dust danced like restless spirits in the dim light. Finally, she emerged into a lit space beneath the house, a realm that felt forgotten by time. Around her, the air was thick with the musty scent of age. Moving the candle around her, she stumbled into what appeared to be an abandoned mine.

Once more, she heard her name, "Elizabeth, come close. Do not shy away. There's nothing to be afraid of." Elizabeth turned to the entry she came from, "*Should I just turn back around and go back home, or must I stay and discover what truth lies within these walls?*" She paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts before pressing onward further into the mine. The air grew colder the further she walked, and a brisk breeze swept through her as a newspaper flew by. The newspaper paused at her feet. "What is this? Oh, a press!" She picked it up, excited to see what was happening beyond her home. As she started to read it, she looked at it in horror, reading the headline exclaimed, "200th anniversary of the disappearance of Elizabeth Westbrook."

At this moment, Elizabeth came to the realization that she's been trapped in the mines for many years and hasn't found a way out. She begins to roam the tracks never discovering what truly happened and the answer she longs for. With such grief, even as her body gives out, her soul whispers the names of others, leading more people to their fate and joining her on this endless journey.

Delirium's Curse

By Kyleigh Johnson

I am headed westward bound,
The dirt is coarse and browned.
Rations for one that will last a month if I be blest.
Sat atop a wagon I take this chance to rest.
I hear a huff as horse hooves hit the ground.

Another full moon has come; we find ourselves off-course.
The food dwindles by the day.
My dear wife, her hair adorned with the feather of a jay.
How merciful she is; she comforts me in my weakened force.

My body is frail: my bones have nearly clawed out of thinned skin.
I look to my wife, her beauty remains cemented.
On the brink of death the devil tempts me with an undeniable, desperate sin.
Cursed with this hunger, I turn to my wife; I can only beg this sin be acquitted.
With a merciless act my dear wife lies lifeless and lamented.
The wagon comes to a harsh stop, I sob at the sight.
My sin's sole purpose; survival, though I am endlessly tormented.
My stomach goes silent, my world goes silent, I feel forever fixed at this site.

Silence interrupted by the creaking of a foreign wagon; which I'm sure is something
demented.
"It must be death—come to get me!" I cry, my body filled with fright.
I turned to face my fate, but was met with a friendly face, turning my frightened soul
contented.
The man's gaze shows pity; I'm beckoned onto his wagon without a hint of sleight.

As I take a seat the man starts, "She served you until the end, didn't she?" His words,
hearty, left confusion in the air.
"Well—yes, I suppose so." My answer filled with hesitation and guilt.
The man sighs through his thick beard, "I understand, it must be hard to leave such a
lovely mare."
I turn to see my wagon with a mauled mass laid by my horse, left to wilt.

How to Haunt a House 101

By Maddie Parrish

As she awoke from her weird dream of getting hit by a car, Carla rubbed her head, wondering how long she had been asleep.

Checking the clock's time - it read 7:34 - immediately Carla shot up, running towards her bathroom to get ready for school. She brushed her hair, teeth, changed her dirty school clothes (not that she noticed she had slept in them), and ran out of her room.

Checking her watch, she noticed it had only been ten minutes, meaning she still had around fifteen minutes until she needed to leave for school.

Easing her worries, Carla wondered if her mother was making breakfast this morning, which would explain why she didn't come to wake her up for school.

Practically, her hypothesis was logical, but in reality, she could have been wrong and left to fend for herself with the terrible school food.

Thankfully, once she descended her stairs, she noticed that her mother was indeed in the kitchen, appearing to cook breakfast, but failed to notice her sniffing and sobs. Carla checked her watch one last time and noticed it was almost 8'o o'clock, meaning she didn't have time for breakfast at home.

Yelling to her a "good morning," as she hurriedly threw on her shoes, coat, and jacket, all while saying how sorry she was for missing the family breakfast this morning.

Opening the door, she noticed a vast land of sand. Carla looked out in shock, "What is happening?"

Ushering the door closed immediately, she slid down against the door, clutching her hands, muttering "this can't be happening...I must be dreaming."

Reaching back towards the door to pull herself up, she noticed her mother sitting at the dining room table, with four plates of food, along with her father and brother, crying.

Easing slowly towards them, she noticed that her presence wasn't startling them, almost as if she wasn't even there. Carla waved her hands in front of her mother's face, then her father's, and even her brother's, and nothing. Not understanding what was occurring, she began yelling, "Hello? Mom, Dad, Jake, it's me, I'm right here. Why won't you look at me?" Their utter silence terrified her, when all of a sudden, a man in a striped suit, ugly face paint, and a ghastly hairstyle appeared. He then began to monologue quickly, and Carla only caught the words 'you're dead' and 'I'm here to help.'

Dashing upwards in an attempt to get away from this strange man, Carla ran to her attic, grabbed the door, slammed it shut, and barricaded it with her body.

Even with her fruitful attempt, Carla began to scream as the man suddenly appeared before her in the corner of the room. She ran towards the old pool table her late grandfather used to own, and began to crawl underneath it .

Accommodating the tight squeeze she hooked her hands up underneath her legs in the attempt to further hide her presence. After a few minutes, she wanted to make sure the freak following her was gone, even while she was still shaking.

Daring to even look up, the ominous green figure had a mischievous smile on his face, staring back at her. The man then held out his hand, and within his large palm held a book titled 'Handbook for the Recently Deceased.'

*Check each uppercase letter at the beginning of each paragraph to find the hidden message.



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