

Perspectives



Spring 2026

"The Art of Stories: in honor of our Student Veterans and the Stories they Share"



Submitted By: Phi Theta Kappa and the SCCC community

SPRING 2026 ISSUE

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A literary arts magazine composed of original pieces from
Suffolk County Community College's students, staff, and friends.

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Editor's Note

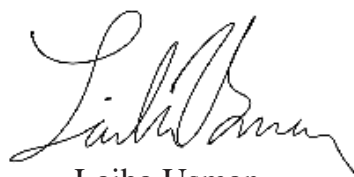
Dear Readers,

I welcome you to the Spring 2026 issue of *Perspectives*! This is the magazine's one-hundred and ninth issue. When stepping into my role as Editor-in-Chief this semester, I wanted to honor that as best as I could, and drew inspiration from issues dating decades back, as this magazine has been built off of all the previous editors' merit. It has been an honor to hold this position and to stand on the receiving end of so many artistic pieces. I truly thank everyone who had submitted this semester, and wish you all the best in your journey. I'd also like to congratulate those who have been published in this semester's issue! You all made this issue extremely special, and I humbly thank you for that!

I was not sure what the vision would be for this magazine until those who submitted created it for me. This issue is a collection of experiences and perspectives. During this time in the world where empathy has grown difficult to carry, I wanted to showcase a variety of both hardships and joy. I believe that goal was achieved thanks to all those who expressed their experiences through multiple forms, and decided to share it with the community. Through different cultures, backgrounds, and identities, we share this world together. I hope it is something we always embrace.

I'd like to especially thank our editing team for the result of this issue, as well as our advisor, Leanne Warshauer, for her endless support and guidance. With all of our strengths, we present to you this issue. I'd also like to thank the previous Editor-In Chief, Billy J. Yeamans, for his faith in me when entrusting me with this position. It's truly been an honor to have this role. Once again, I'd like to congratulate and thank those who have been published! You all have made our Spring 2026 issue a beautiful and irreplaceable collection.

With Gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laiba Usman', written in a cursive style.

Laiba Usman
Editor- In Chief

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Gold or Brass

Shannon Martin

I always wondered what it might be like,

To be dressed in white,

The picture of femininity.

She is the epitome of grace,

With lace on her waist

And flowers in her curled hair.

It's a beautiful ceremony,

I hate to admit.

I want a sacred day for my own,

I want a partner and a home,

I wish I could have rhymed this better,

but that is not who I am.

That dress wouldn't fit me,

I'm far too lean.

A smile on my lips is often the last thing

People see.

Malicious as it is,

I don't want to change. This is who I am. I pity the groom and the bride; I pity the family and friends who share their congratulations now that the ceremony is over. Those rings look expensive, at least as far as I can see in the crosshair. I wonder how much they cost, or if they had to take out a loan just to prove their love to the world.

I can see the glare in the lens from the tears on the wedding party's faces as they mull about. My actions have the same effect, though the sounds made are far less soft.

They tend to rip through the air.

I don't know why I'm trying to keep this as a poem. Maybe the idea of love has pervaded my mind. But that doesn't change what I'm here to do.

The groom made a mistake by choosing love

Over his duties,

When life is about living

And not thriving.

The sound of the hammer hitting the butt of the round lags as the bullet propels into the back of the groom's pomade slicked hair. My eardrums join with the church bells in the melodious, pitchy tune, but I know that when all is silent and dead, the ringing will still hum.

I wish I could be a poet,

But I am paid to kill.

If it came down to it,

I'm not sure if I'd choose gold over brass.

The Comfortable Chair

Ta'Tiyana Bond

i love my chair
i remember when every hole was poked
created by the prodding people who passed
every tear revealing my infinite pain, loosely sewed shut with deflection
rips along the seams caused by the constant friction of friends coming and going
i knew exactly how to sit so the springs weren't stabbing my soft skin
maybe you should get a new chair, he says
sure, it was worn out
sure, rotting memories were molded into the stuffing
but i didn't mind the smell
it was familiar
it was warm
it was comfortable
i knew every hole, every tear, every rip
a new chair would be freezing
the cold leather sticking to my rough skin
i would not know how to sit
the fresh smell would be nauseating
it would be unfamiliar
i don't know anything about this new chair
i do not know anything outside this feeling
you need a new chair, you say
yes, perhaps i do.



I MA OHWHO I AM

Ta'Tiyana Bond

a blackness envelopes me
i lay still in the center of my bed
past lovers' heads permanently indented the pillows
my eyes scan the paperback meant to be a distraction
but the whispers of old friends fill the room
my feet drag across the hard surface
paper cuts from years of journal entries
the pain of those pages
now physically represented on my crippling ankles
music quiets the whispers
but the pounding on my bedroom door breaks the silence
i stand idle
waiting
the noise grows louder and faster
but i am stuck

the door swings open
and there i stand on the other end
exasperated
desperate
a hand reached out to me

my back to me
i head back to bed
my bloody ankles staining the blanket
the whispers growing in volume
the indentation progressing onto the mattress
and sink into the sheets



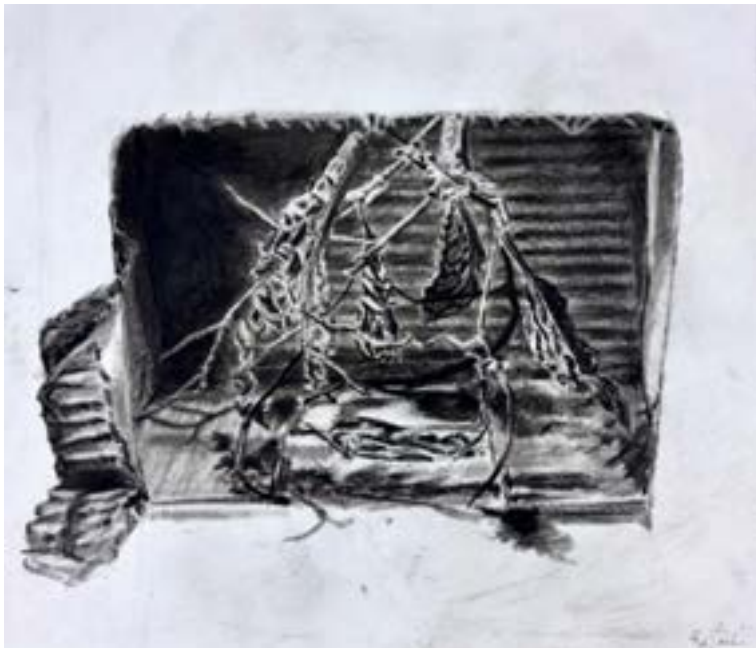
ENVY
Emily Gray

Untitled

Kevin Walsh

the cold stone links each dotted light
twisting, curling, the remains of the serpent long dead
you felt the call to scale this carcass
as the ringing echoes in subcutaneous caverns below
in the distance, a man tends a fire
he looks up and past, as he continues fanning the flames
his presence eerie, your mind wanders
and paying him no mind, you continue your leery assault
each handhold, each foothold ringing
with that same echoing laughter that fills the serpent's corpse
it jostles your mind, sets it alight
though still not understanding, your soul begins to warp
ahead, you see more journeymen just like you
who felt the call of the serpent long dead
their hands are pruned, and their veins bulging
they too have set forth on this death to-day
and will likely tomorrow as well
the light in the distance, ever closer but still so far away
teases you lightly, easing your burdened mind
the floor gives way, and you fall inside
and meet your watery misery

Sinking
Desperation
Amelia Maldonado



Bug
Shrine
Kyle J.
Vassiliou

HOW TO GUT YOUR DAUGHTER

Juniper Schkoda

Section I: Murder

If you're going to cut her apart,
It shouldn't be with heavy heart.
See her as an infestation, nothing more.
A rat like her won't mean anything
once it's dead on the floor.

Of course, you'll need a knife.
Something to cut through her layered lies.
Something that'll silence her cries.
And not just any old knife will do,
You'll want something sharp too.
Like the one she made with you.
Now, once she's done,
(At least once you're sure you've won)
You need her cleaned and dressed.
And you'll hardly realize how much they wear
Until you have to strip them bare.

Section II: Gutting

Now you get to make your mark,
I'll admit, it's not a walk in the park.
It's ok to make your first cut slow
but once you're good it should have a flow.

So pop her lungs, rip her liver,
Slice her bowels, destroy the rest!
And always cut the lies off her chest.
Take her tongue, break her arms,
Tear her ear, leave no trace.
You must rip apart every disgrace.
Clean his glasses, wipe his face,
Cut his hair, trim his nails,
Cleanse your son of all that ails.

But there's one thing you won't touch.
The part your daughter hated so much.
Your son would want it,
He cannot go.
You will not cut him down below.

Section III: Cleanup

Now once she's cleaned
and her lies are addressed,
You'll want to hide the corpse
Before another son she'll infest—
And make more daughters we'll both detest.

You'll want to get her out fast.
(Before people wonder how she passed)
You know you'll need optics if you're to last,
You can't just tout: "the bitch is in the trash!"
...At least not unless you want a cast.

But there's one thing you won't leave without.
A good father takes a trophy that he'll recount.
So now you get to rip her soul out.
Be careful with her heart, it looks good on a mount.
On it, you'll inscribe: "The son that didn't count."



Priidick Spies Ailo III: Ailo Bathing
Lizzie McCormick

kali yuga

Rain Rook

himalayan salt
on a gun wound—
ethically sourced
living a hollistic life
dying a hollistic death
conscious mass of static
error 771
telly for a head
tune in
needle inside the vein
snow inside the exhaust
anchors tied to anchors
chlorophyll stimulation
within chloroplasts
of a jacaranda
plastic bag of the landfill
from ethical markets
paper bag of groceries
from ethical markets
slip on icy remnants
of a snow angel
on the way home
“no day is a bad day
to drive on the wrong side
of the road”
light outside the body
light inside the body
makif//pnim
the lowest common denominator
the world erodes as it is built upon



Keep Reaching
Amelia Maldonado

The Wind Can Wait

Justin Kagan

As we sit in this sailboat, waiting for the wind to pick up,
I notice the sun's heavenly glow shining down
on the ocean, forming a crystalline
like reflection. The water is still,
as if a small part of the sun's essence is instilled
within the water. And in this moment,
I feel at ease.

She slowly strokes her long, kerosene blonde hair
with one hand; with the other, she gently plays
with the water, like a child plays with sea shells
at the beach. Her newly tanned legs distract me
and I forget what my father taught me
about creating wind.
Doesn't matter now. All that matters now,
is this moment.

The way she is: so cool, with her leopard Wayfarers,
her waifish, nonchalant contentment on this boat,
drifting for what seems like hours, but could be just
minutes. In this moment, I couldn't care less
if we ever find wind, to move us.
She and I could lie here forever. But for now,
the wind can wait.

Unknown

Justin Kagan

Like walking down an unknown alley in an unknown town.
Cigarettes jumbled with broken glass bottles, broken cracked pavement.
Broken, that's me, that broken glass bottle,
That cigarette, that's me; used and hazardous, coughing, I can't breathe.

See me

The piercing sound beneath my feet as the glass crunches into my Chuck Taylor's.

My eyes stare at walls.

What do the walls see? Do they see me?

Every turn I take is wrong,

Only there are no turns, just twists, and wrongs.

Wouldn't matter anyway if there were, always make the wrong decision,

Like grabbing a jar of jelly, only to find its jam packed, filled to the lid,

With sticky black tar,

What's with the jar?

Like black poppy seeds getting caught in my white shag bedroom rug,

Or beach sand in my favorite sweater,

That just won't come out.

Feels like gum stuck in my hair, no matter how many times I cut it out,

It just grows back, like a bad memory

on a loop.

It feels like trying to comb a knot out of my fluffy dog's fur.

Why oh why is this?

A whisper I hear, but from whom? From where? Over there?

Unknown to me.



Outsider Kyle J. Vassiliou

*Buenos Aires,
Argentina*
Emily Gray



A Rat Named Dennis

Matthew Ortiz

The highway was pitch black, the constant strobing of the lane markers giving off hypnotic pulses almost begging for an accident. “How was your day...” I was the first to speak, my mental roadmap loaded for the usual back and forth between me and my mother always have, the routine was practiced and rehearsed thousands of times. Her response was simple and tired: We found a rat today...”, Although my household is generally very clean a field mouse had wandered in from a gated wooded area next to our home. After a short pause I joked about naming it Dennis then after a few seconds we had a small chuckle then we continued our drive home in silence. It was a small joke meant just for the two of us, but it was also cathartic for me.

Dennis was the name of my late grandfather. Growing up in a single parent home he was one of my two male role models, the other being my uncle. He was a navy veteran although he never served in combat, he was the head cook on a massive navy vessel having served thousands during his enlistment. It was when he was done serving that he married my grandmother who had just fled an abusive ex-husband from her home island of Puerto Rico, with nothing but her two children and a few words of broken English she made her way the big apple New York City. They’d eventually end up divorcing, but they were together for decades prior to that; they always maintained a generally cordial relationship. Eventually he moved over to Florida. Between summer visits and maintaining regular contact, he honestly never really felt absent.

I never understood why my mother and uncle hated him so much, never missing a beat when it came time to insult him. I’d never known the cruelty they had endured; as a old man he had apparently mellowed out. Whenever he’d visited an event, he had this overwhelming charisma that would follow him everywhere he went; he was the center of every party. It felt like he was on a first name basis with everyone. From neighbors I never knew I had to strangers off the street, everyone adored him.

He was also incredibly progressive, especially for his age. The last time I saw him alive was at my cousins' coming out party. She finally came out as a woman; it was a touching experience even though it was something alien to us. The entire family came together to proclaim our love for this new family member we didn't know we had. Not soon after he died of lung cancer. My final words to him weren't just I love you, but just how much I wanted to make you proud; words that now feel wasted.

Soon after I found out just how little I meant to him. Under the advice of his new partner Sue, he was convinced to cut me and my side of the family from his will. Apparently my mother received a call from him formally informing us we were no longer family; it was a call I never knew happened. I had always thought we were close. He had always told me that although we weren't related by blood, he thought of me as if I carried his family name. I had even spent months of my life nursing him back to health when his heart gave out; he had a pacemaker installed and his recovery was long and difficult. Before I left for New York he looked genuinely sad to see me go. He even offered to help me settle down in Florida if I ever wanted to stay, an offer I politely declined at the time.

During life he had experienced this same cruelty. His brother had stolen millions of dollars worth of property from him leaving us impoverished; he knew firsthand that every dollar could make a difference. But when he was gone, he left everything he owned to his real family, the money that would have helped me pay for college, the car that could have saved me from debilitating bus rides to and from said college. The promises I once valued, now a scab on the heart, the image I built myself upon now forever tainted by the reality of his hypocrisy. What hurt the most was watching his real family gradually heal without me; I was excluded not just his death but the celebration of his life. Healing doesn't come easy and it's definitely much harder to tackle alone; there's no fanfare or fireworks, sometimes it's just a joke at someone's expense and a quiet drive home.



Lamha
Mariam Munawar

Hallowed Nations

These men will never have their fill
When they point their fingers, many will follow
And the blood will always continue to spill

All around the world they must go
To fill their pockets, never too shallow
These men will never have their fill

Many will stand up to resist this flow
The wealth of their country soon to be hollow
And the blood will always continue to spill

While we die, they'll fasten their bow
Peacefully inside their secure massive wallow
These men will never have their fill

For those at home, they'll put on a show
Their demagoguery the people shall swallow
And the blood will always continue to spill

The wealth of the few will continue to grow
Soon our lands will all become fallow
These men will never have their fill
And the blood will always continue to spill

By Damien Cavalcante

Stuff You Think About At Night

Jack Parente

Somewhere in South Vietnam during the war.

We were in our ambush position for the night and it was my turn on guard. The M-60 machine gun ready on a rotting log, locked and loaded, pointed into the blackness. Next to the gun, an ammo bag filled with grenades and a pair of detonators that would blow the six claymore mines along the trail. We knew what to do. We knew how to do it. Let the enemy walk all the way into the kill zone. Be patient. Stay cool. Try to get all of them in the box. Let them clump up at that pile of brush we dragged across the trail. Then, do it. Blow everything, and wait, stay silent, don't move, listen. If any survive, throw frags. Stay low. Stay quiet. Shoot only when you can kill. Never give away your position. Kill them all.

It was May 13th, 1969, the night of the new moon, the darkest night of that brutal spring. Fatigue and jungle silence tempered the expectation of contact with the enemy, and I was tired, dead tired, all of us were tired, but for me sleep was still two hours away. Charlie was everywhere. I had to stay alert. Falling asleep on guard is the worst thing a Grunt can do to his brothers, a mortal sin, but exhaustion made staying focused difficult, and my mind drifted from one random thought to another.

Kill them all!

I never thought about killing people before The Army. None of us really wanted to kill anybody, at least I don't think any of us did, but it became our job, and now everybody's okay with it. Now, it's what we do. It's all we talk about. It's all we think about. When Charlie shows up everything switches to automatic, and fear becomes something different. It isn't that the fear disappears, fear of pain, fear of a slow death, of being mutilated, of being taken prisoner. The fear is still there, but we change. We transform. We become less human, more aggressive, more animal. We get to be the hunters for a little while, and it's exhilarating, primeval, visceral, almost sexual, exciting and terrifying at the same time, a response built right into our DNA. We are the dominant species, the apex predator, and killing each other is our favorite sport. Humans, especially young males, have always loved killing each other. If we didn't love it so much we would have

stopped by now. But here we are, after all the civilizing, still addicted. There's a fatal attraction to mortal combat, the excitement of battle, the taste of adrenaline, the smell of fear, the closeness of death. Love of combat. It's natural. It's genetic. We can't help it. For better or worse it made us what we are.

The Hill

I thought about that night on Hill 54, and about my brothers, gone forever. I thought about Bernie's parent's devastation, and about how quickly their lives fell apart after his death, his mother suicidal, father close behind.

I thought about how Ray never knew his real dad, and about Ray's mom, with three young kids and a deadbeat drunk for a husband, and how she depended on the money Ray sent home every month, and now he was dead. I thought about Mitch, with his pretty new wife who just turned nineteen, and how his bunker exploded and collapsed on top of him, his life ending upside down, buried headfirst. Nothing showed above ground except a leg sticking up through the rubble, a jungle boot on the foot, a dog tag tied into the laces. I thought about that night a lot.

New Moon

It had been dark that night. I remembered the dead NVA soldier, just a couple of feet in front of my foxhole, the first man I ever killed. I looked deeply into his lifeless eyes every time a flare lit the hilltop. I don't know what I thought I would see, blame, forgiveness, something, anything; but I looked into those dead eyes until the sun finally came up, and saw nothing. Not a fucking thing. I should have felt more, it should have meant more, but it didn't. Nothing meant what it did before. When the shooting stopped we tied a rope around his feet, dragged him down the hill, and dumped him next to his buddies, disturbing a thick swarm of green flies that rose in a shimmering iridescent cloud, hovering over the pile of human carcasses.

The World

I thought about how everything turned to shit when the moon went dark. There's nothing blacker than a jungle trail on a moonless night. The sky though, that crystal clear night sky. That was different. An uncountable number of stars filled the heavens. Stars I had never seen before. We didn't have a sky like that back home, back in the clean world, on Long Island with its expressways, suburban shopping malls, and nearby city lights washing out all but the brightest stars from our night sky.

I thought about that night last summer, home on leave, making out with my girlfriend in the back seat of my old car at the beach under that black starless sky, and my eyes flickered, my head nodded, my chin dropped to my chest... and I suddenly awoke, startled, afraid, confused. Then I remembered that I was still in the jungle, Charlie was coming, and it don't mean nothin', man. Never did. Never will.



“DOMESTICATED III: AILO
AMONG THE WINTER WOLVES”
Lizzie McCormick

Flower In Glass - Kyle J. Vassiliou



'To My Love'

The path to happiness is never far,
Listen for laughter that's where you'll find,
A smile awaits for your arrival,
To share memories for your archival,
My hands were made to guide yours to mine,
Love is peace we spend in time

By: Kyle J. Vassiliou

Sunsetz

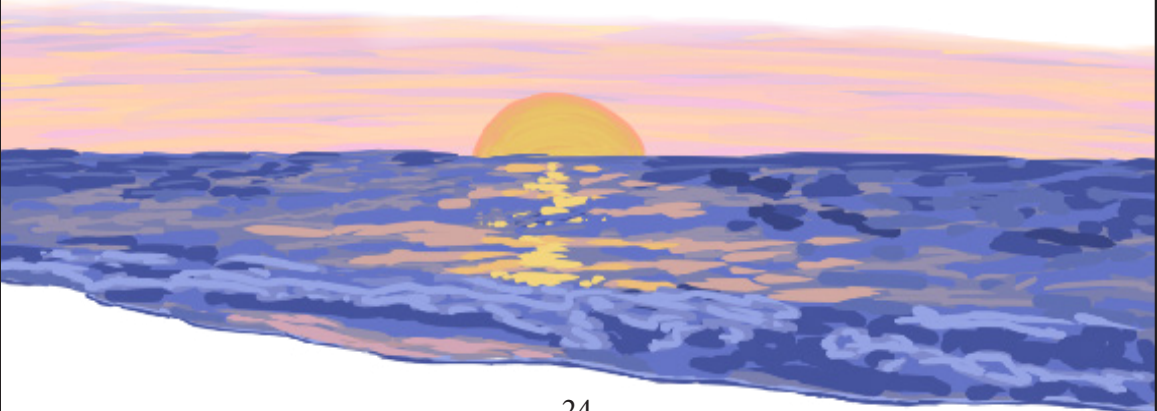
Laiba Usman

I look at them everywhere I go,
against the bay I never got to show you.
Strong waves but our view would be on cracked
pavement and washed out lines like the parking lot
at the gas station back home.

I stare at the relentless sun
through the window of his car.
She's trying to tell me something but the trees
break up her light so I can continue
to believe

It's simply the sunsets I adore.
When

I just miss seeing you
in my rearview window.
The flush air and false
lashes coating your eyes in the sun
when there was nothing else I wanted to know.



My life in Lyrics

Lisa Anne Reiss

I pop an old VCR tape into the machine.
It sputters, spits, but it still runs.
Images jump-jump-jump onto the screen.
A line wiggles its way up
Over our faces.
Along comes another.
Chin to forehead.
I adjust the tracking; we're all set now,
And we watch. And listen.
Old music is playing.
The background of our lives, like theme songs.
Black and white images of people
Long gone.
A time
Long gone, too.
They're only memories now.
Immediately, tears fill my eyes.
The songs make things worse
In my opinion.
They add to the longing.
I long to see my aunts, uncles, grandparents
again.
It makes my heart hurt.
There's my grandmother. She died when I was two.
I miss her.
I miss them all.
There's my grandpa dressed as Santa.
I was four.

The Most Wonderful time of the Year is playing.
Johnny Mathis's voice jump-jump-jumps with the still-struggling tape.
It was wonderful, though.
Those were the days, as they say.
As I am saying now.
Soon, another song plays. Big Yellow Taxi. It's Joni Mitchell, I believe.
I confer with my sister next to me on the couch.
She nods. Yes, that's her, she says.
"Don't it always seem to go
that you don't know what you've got
'til it's gone.
They paved paradise
and put up a parking lot," sings Joni.
This one hits me the hardest.
Yeah, I know. I know what I had, Joni.
I know what's gone.
The song keeps playing, as it will forever.
Like my memories, it lives on.
And my heart keeps breaking.
Like it always will.
I miss them.





Rocking Horse
Emily Gray

The Never-Ending Night of Grief

M. D. C.

On this cold night my heart refuses to sleep
A stranger in a city not my own
Had I been where I belong, I might have wept
And found my own way back home

When I was new to this world, I marveled
each sight held its surprise, every face was a door
In loving you, I lost both worlds entire
This night of grief outlasts them more

My heart is fragile; do not blame its silence
It is nor stone nor distance neither release
Make no promises that the morning can't carry
I will not dig up a love that's been buried

Love is not a burden; you need not carry
you need not pretend
If you were never mine to keep
let this memory end

My words move against my meaning
whenever they are spoken
yet something in me remains
unaltered, unbroken

It was easy to die in your arms, beloved
but it took me a lifetime to let you go.

Union Square- Alvin Milton



Faces blurred in wait;
Echoes bounce off of tiled walls,
Moving through the gloom

The Tallest Man To Ever Live

Laiba Usman

Kissed by the sun and moved by the wind,
He stands tall in my memory no matter where
I left him buried. When we met he directed the sun
Where he needed her so the wind would push us together.
Yet, all I could see was the access he had to command such a thing.
I envied his audacity to dream for everything
He had ever wanted.

I rushed against his favor to find how far I could push.
My muscles strained, tugging at my bones, begging.
Could I be stronger than his grandeur?
Will I be able to direct my will as he does?
I want to run further than he is.
I need everything I've ever dreamed of too.

But I fell through the clouds I was resting in.
Crashing into reality, realizing his copper coated audacity
To be golden ambition, Timeless, steady, and relentless.
Melted by the sun but molded through labor,
I live off his currency.

I forget where I left him but gold has plated my eyes
And I'm ready to grab everything I can see.
I've cemented my bones in all I have so one day
When they break I'll have diamonds in their place.

They'll be snug around my neck the day
I see him again.
He'll be entranced by his own polo mallet

And I, by his long lasting merit.
But I don't think I could tell him

the truth. So I'll just cross the street.

Luke

Briseyda Soto Galeas

A reason to live was found on Greeley Ave. in November

As I trudged down the left side of the road
Too close to the cars
as my mind overflowed
Deciding to lay on the upcoming tracks
Or first break off my bonds and close off the gaps

To make the process seem smoother
for those in my midst,
Make up for the anger
preserved on my wrist

When I looked down, crouched down
and started to weep.
A squirrel was curled up,
eternally asleep.

Its wounds weren't seen
It's tail crooked high
Its try to cross the road
Had gone sadly awry

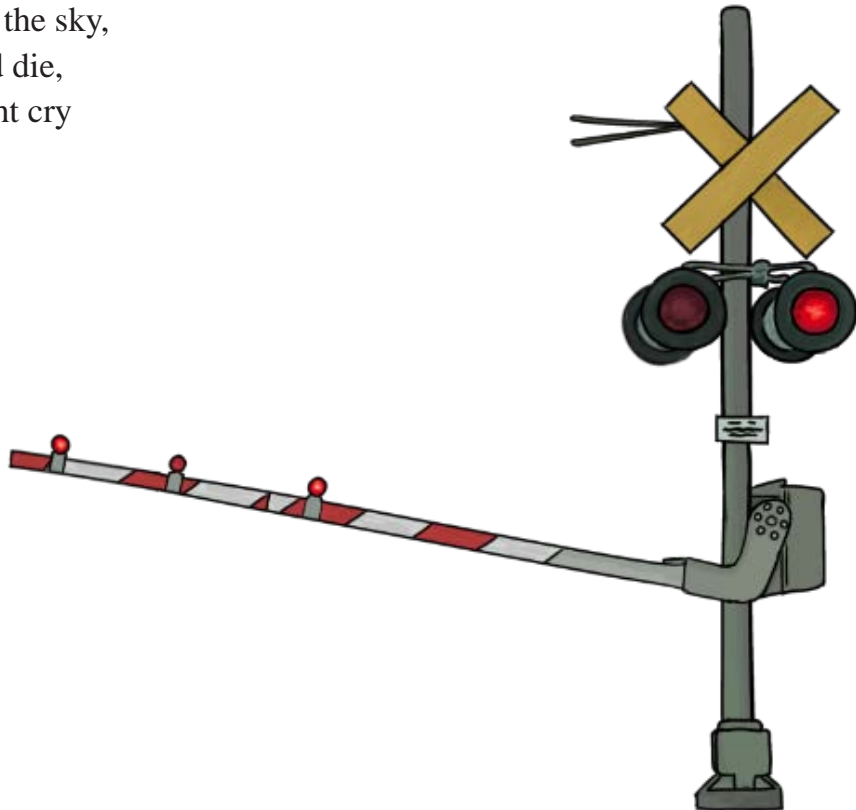
It's paw was extended
It's whiskers were bent
And it's head rested on a red leaf
Almost peacefully content

I wanted to take it.
Give it some care
Some warmth and some love
Despite its last seconds of despair

I wept for the squirrel
That had painfully died
And decided today,
I had to survive

I came to a thought
That convicted my want
To put down what I fought
And give in to the dark

That if Yahweh cares
for every bird in the sky,
If at my hand I'd die,
My Creator might cry



The Participation Trophy Was a Cup of Coffee

Kimberly Kuethen



Annotation #2

Mar 17, 2026

On Tuesday night I had an insanely random dream that my literature professor made me a cup of coffee in class. Actually...the dream wasn't the insane part. No—the insane part was sipping a cup of coffee my literature professor made me Wednesday morning.

Let me preface this by saying that I have been in the workforce for a long time, long enough that waking up early has been ingrained in my daily routine. So much so that I am at the point where sleeping in past 7:30 a.m. is impossible. That doesn't mean I wake up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Oh, on the contrary. If I don't have a cup of coffee shortly after I wake, I will make it everyone's problem.

Wednesday morning I woke up slightly earlier than I do on any other given day because I had class. No matter how lethargic I am, I will continue to wake up early because why start your day rushed? That is no way to start one's day.

Nor is being so tired that one forgets to make her morning cup of coffee.

I would also like to add that I stayed up later than I had intended on Tuesday night, and it is a bit embarrassing as to why. My literature professor assigned us to read "The Hunger Artist" by Franz Kafka, and it had my mind racing. When I am assigned a reading for class, I need to take notes; it helps me comprehend things better and organize my thoughts. Well, my thoughts were running so fast my pen couldn't keep up, therefore, I switched to typing it all up.

Like I'd imagine other literary brains do—at least this is what I tell myself to make myself feel better—I was making all these connections and had all these opinions and, to be frank, I got carried away. Delirium hit close to midnight, almost three hours past my grown-up bedtime, thus justifying my reasoning to email my professor my brain dump because I knew we were not going to touch on half of these topics in class. I was making a lot of references and connections to modern art, another class I am taking.

My email may have also said something along the lines of, “I quite literally have no one else to talk to about this,” but I digress.

To my surprise, my professor replied after a few minutes and said that my enthusiasm makes him smile and asked me to please bring up my connections during class.

Sometimes, and I really do try to restrain myself, I withhold my insights because I don't want to annoy anyone else in the class. I participate often because class at eight in the morning would be insufferable if quiet. I know some of those kids are there because they have to be. I understand that some of them would much rather sleep in until one in the afternoon. I understand that this is my redemption year. Put yourself in their shoes. Don't you remember that one class with that one person who would not shut up? Not that that makes me look any better either, but you know what I mean.

My freshman year of college was twelve years ago. Eight in the morning is not early for me. I am, in fact, at least a whole decade older than all of them. All of that to say, I still need a fucking cup of coffee in the morning in order to function. So when Wednesday morning rolled around and I miraculously made it to class, my professor was setting up in the front of the classroom. I was chatting with a peer a few minutes before our session began when I realized I had not made my cup of coffee.

That realization came with a gasp and a hand covering my mouth in utter disbelief. I was too busy losing my mind that I hadn't noticed when my professor stepped out of the classroom, but when he returned, my day unknowingly was about to be saved.

In my professor's hand was a mug of freshly brewed coffee. We didn't think much of it because he usually comes in with a mug. However, the class fell silent when he was about halfway across the room and nowhere near his desk, but instead headed toward mine. There was a brief pause where everyone seemed to realize at the exact same moment that the coffee was not going to his desk.

He placed the mug gently on my desk without a word, and I just stared. Completely speechless, partly because I didn't have the cognitive strength fueled by my morning caffeine to muster a single thought. The other part contributing to my silence was bewilderment. Truth be told, I can't remember exactly what I said, but it was something along the lines of "Oh my god, thank you." "I want special treatment like that," was said by one of my peers.

Did it feel like special treatment? Yes... and no.

Yes, because that coffee was for me and only me. In the moment, how could that not look like special treatment? How could it not feel like special treatment? But after I took a few sips, I came to, humility intact. It wasn't really about the coffee. Well, actually it was part of it. But really, it was about being told, in a small quiet way, that curiosity is welcomed here. I was being rewarded for simply participating. Being my age in a room full of teens is intimidating (and I'm using intimidating loosely), but as I got older I got wiser.

I love being in a learning environment again, and I love using my brain in a way that has nothing to do with adult responsibilities. Unlike when I was eighteen and it was my responsibility to go to college in order to get a job, I want to be in college now, and it's coming from a place of passion. The "intimidation" evolves into enthusiasm, and intellectual enthusiasm is not annoying—it's valuable. Ironically, that was the opposite theme of "The Hunger Artist," in which the misunderstood artist was confronting an indifferent audience. Instead, it's a curious student rewarded by an appreciative teacher.

Maybe the reward for curiosity isn't recognition or praise, but simply being encouraged to keep asking questions.

Walking out of class, I returned the mug with a gracious, happily caffeinated smile. My professor apologized for not adding any milk or sugar. Little did he know, I take my coffee black anyway. And unlike my dream, the coffee was hot.

rm -rf -no-preserve-root /

Rain Rook

you must tend to the machines
you must update the antivirus software with the latest
shiny new upgrades they have found
more exploits vulnerabilities perilous to
the machines and
you must tend to the machines
you must purchase more RAM
and the latest
shiny new OLED monitors they have found
more saturated colours for the eyes to see through
the machines and
you must tend to the machines
you must build a home server
with the latest
shiny new router tech they have found
more methods to increase security and speed for
the machines and
you must open a window
you must find a bug
you must not be tempted by honeypots
as you have in a life
before
the machines



Fairy Observation

Rebecca Nadell

Before Breakfast

Serafina Shaner

Blood. It's not the color they say it is.

I always thought it would look more like the stuff in movies. Ripe cherries, the glossy skin of a crisp apple, maybe even like a drop of nail polish spilled on tile. Something bright. Something clean.

But this... this isn't that.

It's not ruby or rose. Not some beautiful, romanticized red. Ruby sounds expensive, like something set in a gold ring or wrapped in velvet. It's a color people admire, something that catches the light and holds it. And red – real red – is bold. It's lipstick and hearts and stop signs. It demands attention. This isn't that. This is quiet and murky, the color of something used up. The kind of red no one ever paints with. The kind no one writes poems about.

It's duller, more muted. It reminds me of rust. That flaky, brownish orange stuff that clings to old pipes or the bottom of a forgotten swing set. Rusty and dry, like it's been abandoned. Rust smells like something that's been sitting too long. Like something that's breaking down. And that's what this feels like. Like something that's ending. Something quietly unraveling.

I sat there staring at it, legs numb, still in my pajamas. The room is quiet except for the buzz from the TV in the other room. It's just past seven. I'd only gotten up early to watch reruns before anyone else was awake. Some old space show, with a rover rolling across dusty terrain, always discovering something it didn't understand. I kind of feel like that now. Like I'm exploring some unknown world I didn't sign up for.

But now I'm here, frozen, with this stain and this heavy feeling in my chest.

What am I now, if not a kid?

It's not like anything has changed on the outside, but on the inside – there's this ache, confusion, the world just tilted slightly on its axis. Like I've entered some random stage without warning or choice. And I can't go back, I can't reverse it.

What does this even mean? What does it reveal? I didn't ask for this. And yet, here it is – real, undeniable. Not like a rumor anymore, but the kind of thing that might start one. I can already imagine the whispers in the bathroom if someone finds out. Girls lined up at the sinks, trading half-truths and horror stories, like it's some random and secret club with rules that no one ever explains. It feels like a risky thing to carry around, something too personal for hallways and locker rooms. And no matter how many health class diagrams they show you, none of it really sticks. You don't retain the weird details, the awkward tone of the teacher, the vague drawings. Not until it's on your underwear and your body feels like it's slowly being rewritten from the inside out. Something you never really retain until it happens to you.

I want to rewind, just hit some invisible button and go back. Return to the days before when my worry was whether or not I could sneak in two episodes before breakfast. Back when I felt light and untangled, not like some frayed piece of rope trying to hold everything together. Now everything feels different, and I don't know what to do with that. I can feel the edges of my life shifting, the start of some wide range of things I'm not ready for.

I try to breathe. Try to retrieve the version of me from five minutes ago, the one who wasn't panicking, the one who still fit into her skin. But that girl is slipping away. She rose this morning like it was any other day, and now she's somewhere else. Deeper, heavier, and a little more scared.

Am I supposed to tell someone? Am I supposed to reach out and say the words out loud? That feels like a risky move. Like admitting it makes it more real. I'm not sure I'm ready for that kind of exposure. I don't feel rosy or radiant. I feel like a question without an answer.

My thoughts start to spiral, everything beginning to revolve around this one moment. Somehow, it means everything and nothing at the same time. I wonder if this will change the way people look at me. If they'll expect more. If I'll be expected to act like some kind of grown up when I still feel like a kid who just wanted to eat cereal in peace.

There's a lot I still don't understand. But for now, I stand up. I rose slowly, like I was testing this new version of me. I change, I clean up what I can, I try to ignore the feeling that part of me has been quietly marked forever.

And I walk out of the room, acting like everything's the same. Even if it's not.

Linda
Emily Gray



Dhalia

Black Stars in her lungs
and night tides in her eyes
I never saw her with less
than three lighters and a smile

She'd order her coffee sweet
but finish her food with dark chocolate.
The blushed nose with a mean streak,
in every polaroid from when I was seventeen

By: Laiba Usman

Underwater

Terrence Lee

My alarm cuts into the empty air, telling me to wake up. I was never asleep. The tapping of rain against my window was enough to keep me up. I let the alarm go for a while. This is the easiest part of the day, and the hardest. The silence, the privacy. No need to wear a mask, no need to shield myself from their eyes. But that also means there's nothing to shield me from my own. Eventually, I rise against the weight pushing me down, staring down the barrel of another day. I know it wants to be the one that breaks me.

I'm thirsty. I drag my body to the kitchen against its will, grabbing the cleanest glass I can find and filling it in the sink. The water is warm, barely relieving the dryness of my throat. But as that thirst subsides, another rises to the surface, one I don't know how to quench. I've been trying for a long time, but it always seems to come back. I look in the fridge. It's nearly empty. A single plum sits on the counter. I inspect it. It doesn't seem to have gone bad, so I take a timid bite. Rotten. I spit out the deceitful fruit and throw the rest into the trash can that threatens to spill over. The knot in my stomach is too big for me to be hungry, anyways.

With the little time I have before work, I trudge my way to the shower. The water is freezing. It doesn't feel good as it hits my face like falling hail, but at least I can feel it. For the first time today, I almost feel awake. I rub my face once, gently, then again, and again, quicker and crueler each time. As if there's a stain just below the surface of my skin that I can't get out. The thought only makes me scrub harder. I ignore the pain for as long as I can. It's not like I don't deserve it. Finally, it becomes too much to take. I keep scrubbing anyways. Only when I realize I can't feel it anymore do I stop. The stain remains. Now, tears run down my face, hidden by the stream of water raining down on me. I crank the shower faucet around, making the water as hot as I can stand. Then I turn it a little more. I stand there, frozen, waiting until the heat thaws me out. After a long while, I turn the water off, frozen still.

I towel off slowly, then walk to stand in front of the mirror. I realize that I'm afraid to look into it, and for some reason, the thought infuriates me. I force myself to raise my eyes, and staring back at me is a face so familiar, yet at the same time so foreign. He looks resentful. Hurt. He says nothing, but his puffy, reddened eyes tell me that I let him down.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Again, he says nothing. We stare at each other for a while, until his gaze grows too intense to hold, and the silence grows too loud, and finally I break contact and walk away.

Already an hour late, I throw on some clothes, stick my nametag onto my shirt, and head for the door. Right before I open it, I realize I forgot one thing. It slips on easily now, but gets heavier every time I wear it. Still, I'd rather this burden than the one that waits behind it. Mask in place, I step outside and sink into another day of pretending.

Don't Leave

Gianluca Cacciamani

Oh great one
You who conquered mankind
How doth we keep alive
In lands of decay
Where life so likes to give way

In strife, may we continue
In pursuit of glory
The fire ablaze
Will fill your stomach,
And steel you into the future.

Then to continue,

We the unblestened
Squandered in Life
Lost in the void.
Our 2D shapes cast no shadow
Our proof, what of it?
The enemy would not fear the imaginary

I speak of all creatures
Shine your sword
Let it reflect your smiles.
You never know
When next battle comes
Seek it out yourself,
Claim victory while it lays in the tub, ha!

You spirit is beyond us
Beyond the mightiest mountains,

Our dreams cannot reach you.
We, insolvent fools
Of drought in mind
What little has departed
The little we cling to.

Even the highest mountain will fall
Take to the wind
And follow the waves.
The river has never waited
Neither I shall
For time isn't my friend
But you have a chance.

I beg to you Great One
Thou not need to diminish yourself for us
We merely ask

For golden grace
May we be blessed.
Thou spirit within
The freedom to be
What we cannot be
It cannot be envied
What fits so well.

My dear friend
To you and all in need
Best be to leave and be free
Your shackles are not what they seem.
Greet yourselves with open arms,
And never forget
What is within yourself,
That boundless energy
That I too possess.

...

Great One...
No, Honored One...
It's been so long since I've heard you speak.
That you've wandered these gardens.
I'm sure you're happy wherever thou are
As the adventurer I knew you as.
Please, rest well
I will continue to thrive in earnest
And let no one forget your name.

Ghost

William J. Yeamans

Night, upon them fell;
Its blanket o' dew
Drawn o'er the earth,
And, in whisper, night sang:
"Be not afraid the ling'ring ghosts;
The ones who linger like soft caramel,
Or sweet American pie;
Be not afraid those ghosts, who
Like the breeze upon a sanguine day,
Drift, and fill the sky
of a melting sun."

Likewise, a counsel formed, and thought was had:
Feelings too remain as a ghost in the room,
Alive and watching and burdensome too;
In a room come alive, the presence remains—
Ripples water, and flickers light
In every wink, its watchful eyes;
On, then off, and
Light, then dark;
The gath'ring fireflies saw it thus:

At once night fell,
And forward came the moon;
She cast her face—the friends of five,
They watched, and sought, and beckoned her, too;
For it was at last the hour,
The great time of night
Where tongues came loose, and
Drinks ran dry.
It was the hour at last whence truths be told:
The moon o'erhead, 'round the fire they went.
Laughter and stories told, and
Tales of ghosts they sang,
A strum-a-long tune, called
"Miss American Pie"
And from a dim lit corner,
A twinkling face, ecstatic and
Alive:
"I'm a poet!" he'd say,
And the laughter commence;
Lo! More stories told—stories,
Like that of the lonely ghost.

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