Under Construction

Issue 55

Under Construction

The Literary Magazine
of North Hennepin Community
College Students

Issue 55

Cover art by Melanie Boulka

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Dear Reader,

We're excited to present to you Issue 55 of *Under Construction.* We chose pieces that would show a diversity of emotional landscape and appearance on the page. As an editorial board, we looked for passionate writers who loved the pieces they wrote and were excited to have an audience. There were a lot of pieces that felt relatable in terms of family and mental health struggles. The pieces we chose called our community to social action.

Please know that different dialects and speech patterns will show up in these pieces, and we want that. We want more of that. To respect authors in a way that showed their unique voices, we didn't edit their self-expression into a kind of standardized English. We weren't scared to publish the deep stuff. Somethings might be hard to read or think about, but as an editorial board, we found this an excellent opportunity to start some of these harder conversations.

Our goal was for the issue to feel inclusive in lived experiences and in possibilities for joy. Overall, in this issue, we hope you will find entertainment, encouragement, passion, and the commitment to move our communities forward.

Sincerely,

The *Under Construction,* Issue 55 Editorial Board:
Hasan Al-Faraj, Saoirse Ireland Hance, Corvine Parker, Nou Yang, and Elias Zibrowski

And Faculty Editor:
Haley Lasché

Authors List

Denise Boomer: Page 8

Nicole Bosire: Pages 23, 30, and 34-35

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D. Dylan Feltz: Pages 27 and 31

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Nishanth Peters: Pages 11-19 and 28-29

Gema Rangel: Pages 22 and 33

Taiwana Shambley: Pages 41-46

Amenda Vang: Pages 30 and 32

Fiction

Recipe for a Hex

by Corvine Parker

Ingredients

- Twenty-Eight Kernels of Black Pepper
  (There are thirty-two teeth in the adult human mouth, but most have their wisdom teeth removed. If an extra bite is needed, either add four to make up for what they lost or deliver the bite yourself—if you have your teeth at all, that is. You never show them, so who knows? You don't even remember for yourself.)
- Horned Eldritch Tendrils of Rage from Shub-Niggurath
  (If you cannot make contact with the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young, the thorny ones contorting your throat and strangling your heart will do. Extract them by spitting them out for once in your life, you silent coward.)
- A sheet of lined paper
  (Lined paper may not be substituted with printer paper. Graph paper will suffice if necessary. You're doing this for yourself, so you might as well do it the way you like it.)
- A pen with blue ink
  (Yes, a pen. You know the wrath is permanent, so too must be your retribution. Blue ink may not be substituted for anything. You know the heat of the oldest brother's rage, so use it.)

Instructions

1. Write your name with the blue pen on the paper of your choosing. Be careful of the fire the ink sets—burn the right person, don't scar who you don't need to.

2. Curl the paper into a scroll, tie with the thorned or horned rage. Don't prick yourself, they've bled you enough already.

3. Drop the chosen amount of black pepper kernels into the scroll, along with one of your own teeth. Don't let any of it fall out, you won't back down or flinch back this time.

4. What are you waiting for? Shove it into his mouth and force it shut. Make him chew but never swallow. Sew his lips and close his throat if you need to.

Blessed Be.

The Apartment on S. Michigan Ave.

by Denise Boomer

There is a woman who lives on the 8th floor, filled with bay windows that touch ceilings. The eyes of the windows overlook the lake. The kitchen is lavished in white marble and dark chocolate cabinets. The cabinets overlook stools that house the scent of leather. The bottoms of the stools grip the cold floor. The cold floor which holds shards of scotch.

Click click click—the knob turns.

In comes the woman, greeted by the canine who rooms with her. She looks through the eyes of the windows, setting away her keys in the middle drawer, to the left of the dishwasher, where his pocketknife was stored. Her canine whimpered words of warning. The woman filled his bowl of kibble. However, she couldn't help but fear something was missing.

She stepped onto the balcony for her evening cigar, as she gazed over Lake Shore Drive and took a breath of the crisp air.

When all of a sudden, she heard the sounds of growling, snarling, and snorting.

The sound of a wolf-like growl quickly interrupted. Her evening serenity was now disrupted. His snout was pointed to the east side of the apartment. Tail stiffened straight like a sergeant. Hairs spiked on his back like a predator ready to attack.

That's when the woman noticed…

The scotch seeping through the floorboards. Her ex-lover's cologne stuck on the barstool. The marble countertop where the assault occurred. The rest is all now blurred.

The dark chocolate cabinets were the witness of what contains. The cabinets are the ones who house his remains.

There is a woman who lives on the 8th floor…

Wishful Thinking

by Hanin Mousssa

They say home is where the heart is, but you're not heartless, you're just homeless. Often you are asked to indulge in conversations about places that make up your childhood or the sepia filtered memories that roll your happy moments down both cheeks. They're triggered by every breeze of cologne you've walked by, every luxury your taste buds have laid on, every tune that made your heart beat a little differently than the pulse before. So what's the memory that paints your picture? Mine? Mine is a place that hits home a little too much to write about without quivering lips and glossy eyes: Palestine.

I've never thought of the beauty of Palestine in terms of tourism, but rather as a scenery of two deep breaths. Palestine's landscapes are set in panoramic view, you look over at swinging trees on your left, never thinking olives could be that shade of green. To your right, any pupils would dilate about the same size as oranges hanging onto the trees—almost like a promise to never let go of their roots as a whiff of air flushes your senses with a humid, citrusy fragrance. As the clouds huddle up and the rain starts dripping, I make my way towards Masjid Al Aqsa, a mosque in Jerusalem, the capital of my homeland. I show gratitude to the Lord for the blessings he bestowed on my country, as it's believed that one of the best times to call on him is during the rain.

I say peace to the passersby and take a seat on a bench underneath the olive-branched umbrella, that even with its wet tree bark still offers to dry me off and give me warmth. The more the rain pours, the more I ponder. Psychologically, it's said that when a woman is pregnant and her minerals start to dissipate, it's often found that one of her pregnancy cravings is dirt. I've always insisted on interpreting this metaphorically to my land as the dirt moistens with the licks of raindrops. Perhaps I lack the minerals of warmth and tenderness that make me nostalgic for minerals of the earthy dirt and pour it to fill my heart's running time glass for when it runs out, tell them to take it and put it 5 feet over me.

*

No matter who the person is, every day at the break of dawn, there's always a grandpa with white-bearded wisdom who sits on the bench about 30 feet away from me feeding the pigeons and doves. While the doves flew away, the old man sprinkles the seeds to attract them back to him. As they return with graceful fluttering wings and seeds soaring in the air, I can't help but notice the doves look like brides being showered with flower petals as their white-feathered tails impersonate the train of a wedding gown and their breasts replicate the bodice.

I glance at my watch but the man doesn't look at his, for he has no worry about time. It's now 6:30 but the vendors are up bright

and early as the sky shifts its shade from lilac pink to a subtle China blue. “Potatoes, tomatoes, onions, we’ve got it all!” They cry out. My friends and I joke all the time that in Palestine, their yells were our school bell, but to be frank, it’s what gets the city up and running in the morning. Vendors in Palestine put up a tough competition with the bakers nearby, we also laugh about how their yells were a distraction from the fresh out of the oven aroma. I’m definitely a sucker for pastries and what better food to share with the shining sun than grab a slice of Knafah, a traditional Palestinian dish eaten for dessert or breakfast.

Just as the baker was about to slice me a piece from the top batch, I shook my head and pointed to the bottom one. He seemed confused so I winked and said, “Those are the warmer and stretchier ones.” He giggled and replied, “As you please, My Dear.”

As I made my way out of the bakery, it crossed my mind: home is where the heart is, but you’re not heartless, you’re just homeless.

Dear Reader, I apologize for having you read this far into my piece only to break it to you that this is only imagination, mere wishful thinking. Anemoia is a term used to describe nostalgia for a time you’ve never known, such as a free life in my homeland. Isn’t it funny how there could be land you call home but can’t call your own? Isn’t it funny how occupation and freedom are opposites yet come side-by-side in every speech? Isn’t it wild that the West is still deciding what colored people they want to see while the only colored people we see are covered in red?

As I deliver speeches of our current situation with a cracking voice and glossy eyes, as I revive people with poetry and short stories kneeling, begging, praying to God, they open their eyes. With the back of my throat turning to a swinging pendulum as I chant at the top of my lungs in marches, “FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA” and my people chant louder “PALESTINE WILL BE FREE!” in hopes one day they will take my hand and walk me there, in hopes one day, this will no longer be wishful thinking.

The Great Unravelling

by Nishanth Peters

Chapter 1: Kadavul Yaen Kallanan
(O god, why have you become so stonehearted?)

Golgotha, a small Lutheran village somewhere in Tamil Nadu

I found her body lying in a rice field. She was wearing a red and green silk sari. Palm trees swayed violently in the heavy wind, while the stagnant rice fields wilted, malnourished, emaciated, while the clouds began readying their wrath. I stood alone. The nearest bus stop available to me was miles away on the side of a dusty road. If she hadn't been my friend, I mused, as I turned over the body gently, caressing the remnants of my friend, I would not be here. Thoughts of my overcrowded flat complex in Bombay filled my mind. The streets of Mumbai beckoned to me, with the vada pav vendors selling their sandwiches. Chaiwallahs hawking tea, auto rickshaws running to and fro. I thought of the life I had built in Bombay to escape the petty existence of life in a dull, backwards Christian village.

This shouldn't have happened. I should be back in Mumbai selling jewelry and lehengas to uppity, overly stressed Hindi-speaking people while they chatted away on the cell phone about some business venture or something so superficially serious.

And yet here I was.

"THEY KILLED HER!!! AIYO! She was my friend!! MY FRIEND!!"

*

"Ae! Jyothi!" The voice came out of the distance, but I would recognise it anywhere after all these years. The deep, slightly froglike voice could only belong to Julius Maamaa.

I didn't respond. Did not move a muscle.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I began to feel heaviness come over me. My vision began to blur, the sounds becoming distant as though I was underwater and the voices were echoing from the surface.

"Ae! Jyothi!" The voice of my uncle, Julius Maamaa, moved closer and closer until he was right next to me, shaking me. "Jyothi! Jyothi! Jyothi! Speak! Speak! Say something to me!"

I howled in anguish. Whether it was because of her, or Julius Maamaa, I couldn't say. Either way, anguish overtook me.

"Yennada Saamy! Why did you do this?" Unexpectedly, Julius Maamaa stopped shaking me, and just held me with tender gentleness for what seemed like hours. Somewhere nearby, a song was playing, perhaps from a nearby house.

Kadavul Yaen Kallanan
Manam Kallai podhum Manithagazhalai...

O god. Why have you become like a stone?

It is because your heart has hardened

The song floated through the air, reaching into my brain, waking up the more advanced parts of my brain that had shut down.

"I've heard that song before…" I mumbled as my vision started to blur in and out of focus.

"Yes, I used to play it all the time on that VHS tape that we had when you were a child. The film star, MGR, remember? It was from an MGR movie…"

*

After that, I don't remember what happened. Only that I woke up in Julius Maamaa's house. More of a shack really. They didn't give much to people like us.

I was lying on a bed, my grandmother's old bed, I realised. The ornate quilt that she had made was still there. On the wall were pictures of Jesus. A woodcut panel laying out Jesus Christ and his twelve disciples, all of them pasty, unnaturally pale, and with slightly almond-shaped eyes, the kind you'd see on a film actor or actress of old. The Jesus was displaying a chubby profile, a moderately thick layer of puppy fat hanging from his face, once again invoking the film stars of old.

"Why are you coming here?" Julius Maamaa asked quietly. "You went to Bombay years ago. You left everything you knew here for some posh IT job or whatever it was. You don't have any reason to come here." I expected anger. And I found it embedded in his voice. But then he surprised me. "All the same, it is good to see you."

I got up from the bed. "I didn't come here expressly for you. I came because of Esther."

Julius looked at me askance but didn't say anything. His expression was not one of complete bafflement, but rather, a bemused, jaded sort of curiosity. My mind wandered to Esther's body lying there on the field. "Ey. don't be looking at me like that… She was my friend."

Maamaa's fists clenched in anger. "He is Anselm. Anselm. Anselm Joushua! You should not be talking the transgender nonsense here. You know it goes against God."

I knew that this is what he believed, on the surface. But I could tell that beneath that sexist rage was a sense of bafflement, of a failure to understand. And sadness.

"It's ok, Maamaa," I said, as I walked over to embrace him. "You know you loved her. I know you loved her. Even though you didn't understand."

He started sobbing. "Aiyyo! I never wanted him to die like this! The whole nonsense is just totally uncalled for… Damn caste people. Not just the Brahmins from their colony across the way. It seemed like everyone was after her!" His eyes became wide as a forest owl caught in the grip of a hawk's talons. "There were strange people there too, with saffron cloaks and giant dogs or something. They… They just walked around looking for something, as if they were surveying the village, but I think they were all coming for her!"

He raised his arms in the air in a dramatic flourish, appealing to the heavens for an answer. "Saamy! Saamy! What did she do to deserve such punishment!? Saamy Saavenum Yaen!? Why did you allow her to be killed, God!"

*

I was not going to let these casteist assholes get the best of us, I decided, as they have done for countless millennia. Not now. This was not the time to sit back and be complacent.

Blood coursed through my veins, an outpouring of lava from a once dormant volcano. "Where is everyone else in the village, Maamaa? I need to talk to them."

Wobbling his head, tears still coming down his cheeks, he muttered something that sounded like "church."

As I thought this, I heard noise, loud, bellowing cacophony, primal screams of fury. "Maamaa, run!" He nodded and bolted out the back entrance.

*

Barely aware of what I was doing, I ran, and ran, and ran. All rational thought had left me. I ran so far, I could barely see the village as I was surrounded by vast jungle.

In the midst of this dense, green panoply, I could hear the crunching of leaves and the tearing of tangled vines behind me.

Someone was coming. For a second, I thought it might be Periyappa, my adoptive uncle. Maybe he was trying to run after me to stop me from doing anything rash… His steps had the same uneven rhythm. It sounded somewhat like a classical drumbeat.

But turning around briefly, I saw a man the color of dark chocolate, with a rotund yet oddly angular face, angles and planes jutting out of his fat face somewhat. His hair was a dark, untamed horse mane, and his eyes were a piercing glare. He looked mean, the kind of person who had always been mean and ugly inside but was able to hide just how evil he was, until he got married, at which point he had transformed his once angular, robust frame into an awkward potbelly, and his meanness into wife beating cruelty.

"Grab her! Before she goes and squeals!" He barked in crude Tamil, the kind you would hear goons in the movies toss around with casual airs and a moderate amount of meanness and agitation. Something like macho talk. He proceeded to pin me down.

Kicking and screaming, my knees scraped the dusty ground as I cried in agony. "You bloody scoundrels!"

"Speaks too much. Makes too much noise. We should do away with her!" said another man, as I was pinned down.

*

I sobbed uncontrollably as they jammed my face into the ground. "AIYYO! ESTHER!!" I cried out.

Thinking of her body lying there, I felt a lurch in my stomach. I felt fear creep into my chest, a heavy, cold feeling that had nothing to do with the weather.

I didn't know anything, really. But still, I was on edge. I had every reason to feel this way, because we all knew what would happen in the aftermath of this.

Due to the fact of our community being a Dalit or Untouchable colony, descended from some local tribe or other in the area, "They" had total control over us. "They" were our only lifeline, and also our worst enemy. And we all knew who "They" were. The Savarnas. The upper castes. The assholes who owned our lives, though no one could say that openly to their faces.

If Esther was dead, then the gates were open for the hell to be unleashed upon us. Her death would open up a floodgate of attacks, of that I was certain. But why? Why this sudden death? It was wrong.

As I kicked and screamed my way out of their grasp, a sudden resolution came to my mind…I was not going to let this die and kowtow to the Savarnas like they expected me to. I was not going to go down without a fight.

I will find out who killed her, and bring justice somehow, I vowed to myself, even as the men pinned me to the ground, kicking me till I was bleeding.

MEENA

The fishmonger looked her up and down, scowling as though she were a dirty animal. Perhaps he had never seen a woman in a wheelchair buying things at a grocery store…Or maybe he thought it was absurd that she was buying 500 rupees worth of fish eggs.

"Wow, so classy! For you to be picking up these fish eggs, you must be making the good money only, isn't it?"

She shrugged, "I'm buying these for myself. I'm making fish egg curry for…" She almost said it. For my girlfriend. But she knew that this man would not stand for it if Meena told him she was in a relationship with another woman. That too, with her being out in public. She risked a lot of things by finishing that sentence.

So she lied.

"I've a business gathering tonight. High level IT elites. They are coming over, some of them from the US, so I have to make them something very special, something they won't forget!"

"Appadiyaa? In that case, you can buy all the fish eggs, no, all the fish in this market, and cook for all the IT companies!"

He started laughing.

"Dai, I need to buy these fish eggs. It doesn't matter if I buy them for my mother, an IT company, or whatever. I was told to come here for these kind of things."

"Aammmama, I am the man to go to! They call me 'Meen Thala' Pudusamy for a reason!"

Meena smiled, trying not to chuckle a little bit at the ostentatious bragging of this man. "Fish Boss" or not, she still needed the damn eggs. She handed him a 500 rupee note.

His eyes bulged, becoming giant eggs, "You are buying all these eggs, such a delicacy, and thinking you can cheat me! 1,000 rupees. Minimum!"

She scowled at him, "1,000 Rupees? Think I am going to let you scam me like that?" She refused to bargain with this bugger. She just reached into her pocket, grabbed 500 rupees, and threw it at him.

"Dai, I gave you the money. This is about 500 rupees worth. I'm not paying any less, so get me what I need!"

The phone rang suddenly as he began to prepare cutting the fish to get the roe out. Meena tried to ignore it. Getting this egg curry business over with was more important than answering any bloody phone calls.

It rang again.

She ignored it.

It rang a third time.

She ignored it. Then, she let out a long sigh and picked up the phone, “Hallo?”

“Meena, you need to watch the news!”

“I’m in the middle of buying the eggs for this damn fish egg curry!”

“Seriously Meena, there was a caste murder!”

“Another one?”

“This time it’s a big deal! They say she was a transgender or something; it’s all very hazy, but they bashed her skull in so hard, there was nothing left!”

Pause.

“I think you should take this case on, especially since it’s in your hometown, Golgo something or other!”

Her Bengali accent came out strongly as she gave a halfhearted attempt at pronouncing the name of Meena’s village.

Golgotha.

Shit.

Golgotha is a name that Meena had not expected to hear in a long time.

*

“Shit Shit Shit!”

Everyone stared at her, including the fishmonger, mouths agape, as though she were a new hitherto undiscovered species of exotic animal.

“Ey! What are you looking at, never seen a woman in a wheelchair curse?”

Everyone looked her up and down as though she was a rabid animal. On the best of days, she could do a pretty good job of ignoring them. Such was her life. But today was testing her patience. Everyone was looking at her askance. She began to wheel herself away from the fishmonger.

“Sushila, now is not the time!”

“Ok, ok, have you bought the fish eggs?”

“He’s cleaning right now.”

“How much did you give him?”

“500 rupees.”

“Chee! You need to give him more than that! How about I come over later and pick up the eggs. Tell him your friend is coming and will pick it up in an hour, and that I’ll give him 4,500 rupees extra!”

That seemed reasonable.

“I’ll have my friend come and pick it up later, serriyaa? I have to go now,” Meena shouted at the fishmonger.

The fishmonger looked at her angrily.

“Ey, I paid you, isn’t it? It will take some time to get the roe out of the fish and get it cleaned, so take your time. My friend can give you more money, 4,500 rupees.”

With that, she began to wheel away.

She heard muffled cries of irritation and disgust as she wheeled around. She kept bumping into passersby awkwardly, which prompted anguished cries of outrage.

“Ey! Watch where you are going, mind it!”

“What is a degenerate invalid like you doing in public place?”

“You’re invoking the bad Karma!”

In her mind, Meena was scrambling to find a way to get past all the chaos of ignorance that was surrounding her. But chaos did not want to leave her alone. Her phone rang, suddenly, her ring tone set to the old Christian tune her father had listened to, when he was alive.

Eppadi Naan Marapaen, Epaddi naan marappaen,
Eppadi naan marappaen
Un anbe

How can I forget,
How can I forget,
How can I forget
Your love?

The phone rang over and over again, repeating the same line. She struggled to pick it up: It was as though something was constraining her, some invisible sort of will that paralysed her slightly. After the 4th or 5th time, she picked it up.

“Hallo?”

The voice on the other end wavered with panic, quaking slightly, in a way that reminded Meena of ripples on the surface of a pristine lake, “I need to talk to Meenakshi Kumarasamy.”

“This is she, though I have not gone by that last name in some time. Who is this?”

Pause. Pause. Pause. In the background, static could be heard. It sounded like she was surrounded by an old broadband signal, the kind that used to undulate and ripple with static.

“Jyothi,” the woman whispered. “I’m from Golgotha.” Her voice was almost pure breath.

Oh shit.

Why are you punishing me like this, God? She thought.

“You can call me Meena, that’s just fine. But how did you get my number? Why are you calling me? I’m at the fish market now!”

Again, with that pure breath voice, she whispered, “I want to talk to you about the murder case in my home village.”

Pause. Pause. Pause.

“More specifically, I am needing the legal help and so are the people in the village also.”

“Aiyo, saamy,” Meena muttered.

The static began to undergo a change. It… rippled. Undulated. It was like listening to electronic waves on a digital ocean.

“Where are you calling from again? There’s too much static in the background.”

Nervousness crept into the woman, Jyothi’s, voice, like a mouse running away from an overly frightened house owner intent on killing it.

“Please, ma’am.” Meena could hear the quiet choking of her voice, as she attempted to stop from sobbing. “I am risking my life only. You have to help. I can hear the doubt in your voice, but this is important.”

There was more static; then a whooshing sound.

“I have to keep secret my location. But when we meet, it will be in Golgotha,” she said.

I am really in a bind now.

“Podhumada. I haven’t the foggiest what is going on with you. I don’t know where you are, I do not know your relation to Anselm, or Esther, or whatever they are calling themselves. Even if I did help, how could I?”

“I will tell you everything when we meet,” Jyothi said, a little louder, but still barely audible. “But there is a lot at risk. My whole family, Golgotha, all of it, could be at risk. I need you to defend me.”

Pause. Pause. Pause.

“I looked up your legal record. You have defended so many marginalised peoples and secured their safety. Why is this not any different?”

Aiyyo, Saami.

Was this God’s plan?

She thought about this as she reached the tram station.

This was a now or never moment…

“I usually don’t commit to cases ad hoc like this. But if you are needing the help…”

Meena felt the tug of this case in her heart. She’d rather not think about Golgotha, nor anything related to this case. As long as it had a connection to Golgotha, then there was no great motivation for her to get involved. But justice was justice. That was all there was to it. And something was tugging at her. This was more than just justice.

The static became louder in the background, “I will try and appeal your case to my supervisors at the office. But I can’t guarantee anything, ok?”

The bus came, and Meena got on it, her heart heavy with a feeling of dread.

What had just happened?

Poetry

Remember When We

by Délice Dinanga Mukuaya

Remember when we

ran through the field of dandelions

got allergic

Remember when we

broke the school bathroom’s sinks

Remember when we

got locked up after a party

Remember when we

got in college by luck

Remember when we

walked down to the altar

Remember when our

eyes burned for each other

Remember when our

son took his first step

Remember when

we got gray hair

Remember when you left me alone in this bed

And went to heaven before me

Remember...

The Loud Silence of the Chandelier

by Gema Rangel

Love can

make the butterflies flutter

silently

whispering in my ear

here

with you

can be wonderful

lightly twinkling

like a crystal chandelier

American Spit

by Nicole Bosire

Growing up I hurt

Whenever someone made fun

Of an accent that

Mirrored my mothers

When they talked of that

One substitute

As if their degree was any less

Than one laced with American spit

My mouth got smaller

Terrified of letting out,

What they rival so deeply

I remember once

How I closed my eyes

Prayed that the substitute knew

How much I appreciated them

For speaking in ways

That I trained my mouth to avoid

Wherever they are

Know this is for you

And for all the substitute teachers

Who sound like my mother.

Nightfall

by Zoey Morris

Oh, how the night sky brings such wonder, stars sparkling.
Twirling around for adventure, life, lust.
The moon is the center of it all, making sure all is at peace, balanced elegantly
Along the deep vast of sky, beaming like peaches on a fresh spring day.
I lose myself in the blue
Giving me a sense of longing.

Longing for my true one to come back to me tonight
My eyes sparkling for that sense of hope
My blue eyes cry the same tears, spilling over like the blue ocean.
Why must this love and lust be so hard?
I dream of eating fresh peaches
With my lover under the moon.

The moon taunts me
That big, lousy ball of energy, creating the longing of comfort.
Why must the idea of peaches haunt me so?
I want to be sparkling, dazzling in the sunlight.
Not stuck in lust.
This night sky makes me so heartbroken and blue.

Blue as fresh blueberries, ripe and plump yet, longing for more
Than to be swallowed up as the moon is once sunrise hits.
That lust creeps back every night, wanting a partner to hold,
Longing for a soft, gentle pair of lips to kiss.
My eyes sparkling with hope, for that day to become reality
The nightfall wishes it too, so I can stop dreaming of peaches.

Peaches that glisten and are so soft and sweet.
Never blue, always smiling bright.
The fresh morning dew, a tint of sparkling
Like the craters of the old, old moon.
Oh, how my heart screams, longing for that joy again,
Why can’t my mind stop becoming a sanctuary for lust?

Lust is a powerful emotion, clouding judgment and reaching for those desires.
Sometimes it can be soft like peaches, a gentle brush along the body.
Other times it can be a whirlwind of constant longing,
Blue from the thought of having no one to share.
Oh, how that moon makes fun of me,
As the sun starts to shine, a true sign of sparkling.

Authors Note on “Nightfall”: This poem is written in the format of a sestina. A sestina is when you have a fixed stanza of six lines each. [In this version] the words that end each line of the first stanza are used as the first word of the next stanza and so on. It is a very complex form of poetry, and I am glad to have tried it out myself…I hope you enjoy!

Creed for Freedom.

by Délice Dinanga Mukuaya

Let me out in the wild

to survive

Let me out of this eternal darkness

eating me within

Let me fly like a bird without

broken wings

Let me out in the world to

absorb its knowledge

Let me out to experience

the first love of my life

Let me out to see the

chaos

Let me out please, please

I am begging you

let me out of this cage.

Explosion

by Délice Dinanga Mukuaya

Children screaming

earthquake

Walls falling

Sand up in the sky

Blood dripping

Heads flying

Mothers missing

Loved ones crying

Homes disintegrate

Fire in the sky

A Prayer for Clarity

by D. Dylan Feltz

Sometimes it sits as a simple desire.

A taste

A breath

Moments of serenity.

Sometimes it comes in utter chaos.

Loud noises

High Energies

Moments for learning quick.

Sometimes it arrives as an overbooked schedule.

Too tired

Too late

Too early

A moment, only passing for the next.

Mostly it comes as a stormfront.

Crashing waves

Blurred vision

Grasping hope to move forward.

For Tyre

(and others like him)

by Nishanth Peters

There is a demon
Staring us in the face
A demon we all ignore

The demon we all hide

I can't do anything
To stop this demon

I don't have to worry about
If I am going to be safe
Going into my home

I don't have to worry about
Someone beating me to death

But what kind of species are we
If we ignore collective suffering

Throw it away
Like leftover food that got bad

Tyre was a lover of sunsets
He was a father
A mailman

I say to myself, and my friends,
He did all the right things

And that I fear for their lives

But the unfortunate truth is,
There is no end game here

What can a man do?
Why should his death be judged
By what he did or didn't do?

If you cut open my hand,
The same blood that came out of him
Will come out of that wound

Mario Savio talks about odious machines,
About throwing yourself upon gears and levers

What a luxury, for my friends!

The Gears and Levers
Are always moving
And they never stop

This is the true shop of horrors
A carnal play of who knows what

Hatred?
Resentment?
Systemic institutions?

(jargon for, we have built this nation on blood, sweat
and tears,
Guns, germs, and steel inserting themselves into
people's lives
Like lead into the soil,
Ambiguous language used to bury pain, by way of
bread and circuses,
Throwing it out the window the way they threw
Shingle Mountain onto an
entire
neighborhood)

It doesn't really matter anymore

Sunsets are beautiful
Reflections of the soul

He must have known that

Some say the soul never dies,

But our bodies will go
And the pain still remains

Grief

by Nicole Bosire

Grief is the way
Our body and brain
Forget to sync up
I remember my first death
Because it led to my second
My brother became broken and
After that moment
His grief rolled over
Into every part of our lives
To this day
I wonder if his grief
is a distant memory
Or if he has
Become used to
The pain it brings.

The Staple

by Amenda Vang

Out of all a mother's children, the first born always mattered.
No matter how hard a first-born daughter sought for praise and approval,
it will never compare to a first-born son.
She would've scraped and scrubbed the house clean,
tended to her younger siblings, and learned the ways of
being a wife but never be
equivalent to being a son.
Being a first-born daughter meant being tough.
To go through the restless nights filled with concerns for others and pursuing an
education would still not matter.
What mattered was putting everything personal aside because you're the staple.
You will always be the staple no matter what you've achieved.

Tired

by D. Dylan Feltz

I am tired of not falling asleep at night

I am awake

But I am not alert.

I am not hungry

I am craving a cigarette.

I am still trying to quit

I am getting annoyed with myself

I am not panicked

I am not afraid

I am tired

I am unsure of life choices

And I am aware of life's changes.

I am just trying to get by.

Never Heard of I'm Sorry

by Amenda Vang

I always saw them running in and out the door.

Them as in my parents.

They always told me growing up that I shall not give up education or else I'll end up like them.

Struggling, they gradually molded their dreams onto me.

My heart was full of their interests instead of mine.

If my wishes and thoughts went against theirs, not once did I ever get an apology.

They would nit-pick my passions and dreams with hopes that I would become a doctor, or a lawyer.

Tearing up my individuality and passions, they never felt accountable.

They would always tell me to stay healthy and offer fruit with bright smiles instead.

As if it was an apology and the solution to all my problems.

But regardless of what they did, I still wanted to hear a simple "I'm sorry."

Try-On

by Gema Rangel

White wedding dresses

collapse

falling off the racks

stacks

of papers make

the stress unbearable.

nothing is everything

inside my heart

I can feel the cold

like a mansion made entirely of marble.

False Security

by Zoey Morris

Being female is something that is scary in this world.

We are told to cover up

Be cautious when approached by others

But why?

Why should we have to be scared?

Why aren't men held accountable for what they do?

“Boys will be boys” they say.

But that isn't an excuse for the rape

The sexual assault

Constant harassment

The anger, the hurt

That we as women must experience on the daily.

Why aren't they held accountable?

Laws are made to ban abortions.

But why should a woman be forced to give birth,

To a child from a man who does not care.

Men act that they know more about female bodies,

Than a female does.

“Don't show so much skin.”

We should feel confident and comfortable.

In what WE want to wear.

Why should we have to cover up?

Why can't they control themselves?

A woman is called a slut

A tart

A harlot

But men are classified as players.

Why?

Women should feel free to express themselves,

Without the fear of getting hurt in the process.

Could’ve Been You

by Nicole Bosire

The streets are worse

Filled with trash piled into mini mountains

A can of pop stands at the top leaning over

As if it is daring to fall but never does

We are stuck like this

Daring to get better

But never changing only worsening.

There is no walk space anymore

Only warm bodies hogging every inch of the pavement

Pushing others off to survive

There are more children now

Who were forced to grow up and learn the trade

The ways of begging cars in stalled traffic

The ways of selling and stealing

I cannot blame them nor can I help all of them.

One came up to me today

She was small…too small for her age

I guessed 5 years old at first

But from the way she walked

To the way, I could see hunger in her eyes

Her eyes…

Big, watering, and filled with both

Hope and despair

If I could count her hunger in years

It would surpass 5

Her skin shimmered from the heat

Beads of sweat dripped from her neck to her shirt

Her shirt…

the only thing she was wearing.

She held her hand to me and looked at me with her big eyes

She had no hair

She smiled as I gave her money

She turned and walked away.

I followed her with my eyes

I watched her give her mother the money

I watched her go trolling in the streets again

With her big eyes

And her shirt,

Her torn shirt.

Lacking Sweetness

by Corvine Parker

Your mother is a very sweet woman.

Your mother makes sure you are fed.

Your mother says that you were once a sweet child, who grew into something ugly and wrong.

Your mother wants to help you be sweet again.

Your mother will fix you.

Your mother feeds you well, making sure you are sweet.

Your mother does her best, but you are still rotten at your core, and nowhere near sweet enough to make up for it.

Your mother eats you whole, she knows you cannot be salvaged.

Color Tick

by N.N.Y

In one bloody night

with the smell of orange too.

Shines three yellow lights.

Green men sit at four,

Five P.M below the blue,

six indigo snakes.

Seven violet men,

surrounded by eight black Glock,

center nine white clips.

It ends in ten shots.

Their smirks for eleven bucks.

My soul... Twelves o'clock.

Pink

by Zoey Morris

Pink

Warm like the soft sunset

Or cool like mochi

Soft and delicate

Effortlessly innocent

Cotton candy clouds floating

Flamingos looking elegant up to the sky.

Cherry blossoms fall softly from the trees.

Pink roses blooming in competition with the cherry blossoms.

Both elegant and beautiful

Wispy and light

A balanced combination of

Red and white

What could be more beautiful?

What could be brighter than

Interviews

An Interview with Ross Gay

Ross Gay is the author of four books of poetry: *Against Which; Bringing the Shovel Down; Be Holding,* winner of the PEN American Literary Jean Stein Award; and *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude,* winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2016 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. His first collection of essays, *The Book of Delights,* was released in 2019 and was a *New York Times* bestseller. His new collection of essays, *Inciting Joy,* was released by Algonquin in October of 2022 (www.rossgay.com).

At North Hennepin Community College, we had the unique privilege of seeing Ross Gay and his friends (Michael Kleber-Diggs, Su Hwang and Marlin M. Jenkins) read some of their works and discuss their writing experiences.

Ross Gay was also gracious enough to allow the ENGL 2030: Writing Poetry class to interview him. Here's what he had to say:

Q: What makes Ross Gay Ross Gay?

A: That he's changing and dying and heartbroken and loves stuff, just like you.

Q: What feels like home to you?

A: As far as landscape goes, I feel most at home in the Northeastern part of the United States, probably from around DC up into Vermont. Those rolling hills and rivers and trees make me breathe easily, breathe like I'm home. Other than that, being with beloved, wherever. Markets. Bustling places, and gardens. Basketball courts, oh, they feel like home. I often feel at home kind of behind convenience stores, maybe because those used to be secret skate spots. Bookstores and cafes. You know, schools kinda feel like home, in that rich, complicated way.

Q: What's the one thing you never leave your house without?

A: Clothing.

Q: How would you describe your writing to someone who has never heard/read your work before?

A: Actually, when I was getting a rental car in San Antonio the young woman working asked what brought me to town, and I said "oh I'm giving a reading," and she said "oh I love poetry, what do you write about," and I said, "hmmm," and laughed, and she laughed, and she

said “kinda everything maybe?” And I said “yeah.” Then I said “I have a book of essays where I wrote about something that delighted me every day for a year.” It’s a hard question.

Q: Did you always want to be a poet?
A: No.

Q: If you weren’t a poet/writer, what would you be?
A: Kettlebell teacher, jump rope enthusiast, singer, comic book person, journalist, sound artist, architect, dancer for Janet Jackson et al., basketball coach, therapist, cookbookist, cook, bookstore owner, etc.

Q: How do you overcome writer’s block?
A: Write about what I want to write about. Write what is interesting to me. What I want to read. Mind you, when I have assignments or obligations, I get stuck too, so I understand your question. But as far as writing goes now, oh this pencil has no trouble moving, if I’m writing what I want to read, or want to think about or try. I might be, I usually am, writing mostly shit, but it’s good shit, useful shit, shit that will make some flowers maybe grow.

Q: How long does it take (on average) to finish a poem?
A: Not sure. My last poem took 5 or 6 or 7 years. The one before that more or less three sittings, say two hours all told.

Q: How did you come up with the idea for the “Syndromes” poems?
A: I think I was reading Claudia Rankine’s book *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely,* and from that thinking about prose blocks, and also diagnoses, and then I started reading the *DSM*…(I think that’s what it’s called), and then I wondered [what] would be the syndromes of people who were the beneficiaries of enormous unacknowledged brutality, and then they started arriving.

Q: What do people commonly misunderstand in your work?
A: Oh, I think sometimes people yearn for “optimistic” writing, something that shows them how or why to be optimistic, which I don’t think my writing is or does—I know I’m not optimistic! Nor am I pessimistic!—so that’s a thing maybe. But maybe to question the question, and my response to it—if someone receives it that way, that’s just how it is maybe. Maybe it’s not a “misunderstanding,” but rather an understanding I don’t share.

Q: Was there a specific event in your life that led you to want to write about social injustice?
A: I suspect it was a bunch of events; you know, living with people.

Q: Many cultures regard the masculine view as the dominate way of thinking, but your work praises the feminine way of thought. Outside of the literary world, where do you think you can change how we deal with male intimacy and tenderness in society?

A: Oh god I don't know. Practice being softer, practice being porous and weird and enthusiastic and cuddly and batshit in love and maybe above all practice changing and dying.

Q: Who or what inspires your writing most?
A: My questions about my life, our lives, life. What I love.

Q: How do you care for yourself after a hard day?
A: I like to be quiet.

Q: What's your favorite word?
A: You are!

An Interview with Taiwana Shambley

A Black transgender woman with disabilities, Taiwana Shambley (she/her) is a fiction writer, teaching artist, & narrative strategist from North End, Saint Paul, living in Minneapolis. She writes stories, she teaches stories, she shifts stories, all to imagine liberation for BIPOC youth in Minnesota.

Taiwana teaches at the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists, a high school, and at Upstream Arts, a disability justice organization in Minneapolis. Currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Fiction from Warren Wilson College, Taiwana is a 2021 graduate of Augsburg University in English and African American Studies (www.taiwanashambley.com).

Taiwana is a 2022-2023 Minnesota State Write Like Us mentor. We invited her to come into our ENGL 1250: Magazine Workshop class so we could interview her in person. Her energy was infectious. This

experience ended up being incredible, full of laughter and connection. This is what she had to say:

Q: *What part of writing brings you the most joy?*
A: The part of writing that brings me the most joy, I would say, honestly is living. In periods where I find myself, you know, staying in the house a lot and not seeing my friends and not going out, it's always harder for me to write because I feel like I'm running on fumes. But then when I'm out in the world teaching or out at the club with my friends or just otherwise living and enjoying life…I get all of these new ideas for stories that come to me, and so I think my favorite part about writing is building the experiences and knowing I can go and nerd again later in my room to bring it out.

Q: What are you most passionate about outside of writing?
A: Outside of writing, it's kind of related. I'm passionate about teaching writing. I teach fiction classes and social movement classes to young people in St. Paul and Minneapolis at different colleges and non-profits that bring me in. And high schools. And I really enjoy leaning more into a mentor role and helping someone figure out what they're good at and cultivating their skills and their imagination. It feels humbling that [and] reminds me that I'm part of a tradition that existed before me and is going to exist after me. And it feels super affirming because I'm doing my part, you know. I also love hanging with my little sister. I have a little sister and two younger brothers and an older sister and an older brother and then a bunch of arts family. Spending time with them and discovering this next leg of our relationship as we're getting older and becoming adults and stuff is fun too.

Q: What poetry do you like to see in the wild?
A: I haven't been reading a lot of poetry lately. I would say poetry that is like angry and not afraid to be wild with the wild. In my writing I tend to explore anger and violence and action. And so when [I hear] poets who do that unapologetically, I feel at home.

Q: What's your first memory of writing/being a writer?
A: I grew up with my cousins who started a hip-hop group. I think my first memory of writing was just being around them as they freestyled and made songs. I think after years of that, my cousins knew that my dad is a writer, and so they're like "C'mon T, you know it's in you. We know you're a writer too." And them nudging me to freestyle with them and make music with them. It's probably my first memory of writing something that's my own. Yeah. Freestyling with my cousins and rapping with my cousins. And reading Percy Jackson novels.

Q: When you were a kid, did you know you would be a writer when you grew up?
A: It's interesting, the first thing I was like sure that I wanted to be was a video game designer, because I love gaming. I started gaming at a

young age. I just returned to it as an adult, but more casually. As a kid, though, I was intense. And so, looking back on it, like, I guess I was always interested in storytelling in a way, but no, I didn't always know I wanted to be a writer. I was like "video game designer" and then "football player" and then "lawyer" and then "philosophy instructor." It's like all of these things [I could have] landed on [but] writing is what gives me energy even in times when everything else is taking energy away. So no.

Q: If you could go back in time and be a mentor to her, what would you tell your younger writer self?

A: I struggled with mental health as a kid. A lot of bad mental health. Suicidal ideation. And younger Taiwana, I don't think she was convinced that she would be here in like 15 years, 20 years, however long. So I would tell her that she has time. I would tell her that there is a future for her. And, it's corny, but there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Q: What did you like to read as a kid (and what did you like about those books)?

A: Of course, *Percy Jackson* series. I love the concept of teenagers having the power of gods and just being super powerful. I loved the *Warrior* series by Erin Hunter. And I wasn't even a big cat person. I just loved the concept of cats being warriors and like patrolling their own territory and leading their own clans. That was cool to me. I used to read a lot of *Artemis Fowl.* And *The Walking Dead* comic books. Yet, I think a common thread between all those things was like that those things give me permission to imagine a new world and to play with my imagination.

Q: What's your writing process like right now? How has it been different in the past?

A: I was just talking to a friend about this. I feel like my writing process changes in seasons. I have times where I write every day for like an hour to two hours. But then there's times like in the middle of winter where it's like I might get one line down a week. I might write once a month. So for me, my writing process—I try to follow my energy. If I'm feeling active and if I'm feeling energetic then I'll write every day. And if I'm in a slower period of life, I give myself permission to write less. And for me, I try to always be reading or watching anime or something. Because for me, what's most important is that I'm staying in that headspace of storytelling. Because it gets harder and harder to get back the longer you spend away from that space.

Q: What piece of art (any media) influences you the most?

A: I would say anime and American cartoons and animation. I also get a lot of influence from spoken word poetry. There's something about hearing something performed that allows me to hear it in a new way. And also, I love memoirs, to hear people write about their life.

Q: Do you listen to music when you write?

A: I do. I listen to a lot Black femme rappers. Like Omeretta The Great and Latto and Kali. And I love contemporary R&B. I think my favorite artist right now is probably Amindi.

Q: How do you visualize your body of work as a whole?

A: You know for me, I try to live in the moment and not think about how the piece is going to live in the world in five or ten years in comparison to the rest of my work. I think I think of my work like documenting different times in my life. So like right now, I'm interested in a lot of anger and action and violence, and so I want to write as much of that as I can. And then in like 10 years when I'm interested in flowers and cinnamon I can look back and put that in conversation with each other. It can mark different eras of my writing.

Q: What part of writing do you struggle with the most? (And how do you get to the other side of that struggle?)

A: The part I struggle the most is coming up with new ideas. I've been working on this novel idea for 5-6 years, and whenever I work on that, I can kind of just fall into the characters. And the narrative voice where I've been working on for a while. But whenever I get a kick to take a break and to start a new short story or to write a different story I haven't been working on, I'm like "Dawg, ideas are hard." The story ideation part is hard for me. It takes me a while to build up an idea I'm excited about. Interestingly, the way I get out of it is through research. I find I like writing about stuff like social movements, abolition movements, anti-capitalist movements and black feminist movements. Going and studying the specific things people in those movements say and the frameworks they use. And taking on the challenge of trying to write a story around a framework. It makes writing more possible when I have that task.

Q: What are you trying to evolve in your writing?

A: For me, I want to get better at world building. If I have one thing that I walk around and speak on at schools and do TED Talks about, I want that to be world building. I take a lot of inspiration of how NK Jemisin talks about world building. And also Octavia Butler and adrienne maree brown. For me, I want to build a new world like the back of my hand. I want it to be easy to build worlds like *Percy Jackson.*

Q: What's your favorite word?

A: I like the word "nuance." Because of its meaning, but also it feels good.

Q: How do you find new things to write about?

A: The way I find ideas is through research, through living life and partying and stuff, through travel. Ohh, and also watching anime I'm excited about or a TV show I'm excited about, and creating a prompt based off that. Right now, I'm playing a lot of *The Last of Us.* And *The Last of Us: Part II* is essentially a revenge narrative. So I just started

this story with the prompt: write a revenge narrative when someone is killed, and the story is getting back at them. Building prompts around what I'm watching is helpful too.

Q: What piece of your writing are you most passionate about right now (and why)?

A: It has to be the novel I've been working on. The novel is tentatively titled *I Can Be Free Yesterday,* and it's about a disabled girl from St. Paul who's the daughter of the first black or first woman governor of MN. The story is essentially like the girl is angry and violent because she's been excluded and harassed a lot in her life. And her experience has led her to the conclusion [that] violence is how we get free. And then her mom is governor and she's like "policy" and "There's a process for this and a system we have to use." The main conflict of the story I'm trying to explore is different strategies for freedom. And really validating and holding space and exploring all those strategies, because I'm super interested in social movements and what we can do as a collective when our communities are together and put our power together. To validate different strategies in our movement feels important to me because sometimes some strategies become more dominant and more centered than others. You know, like policy work is usually a lot more respected than something like militant autonomous mutual aid kind of work. I'm like, "put some respect on the militant work too."

Q: How does/did your work with speech therapy influence/inspire the work you do as a spoken word artist?

A: I have a speaking disability, a stutter…It's interesting because when I started speech therapy, it was from a place of "Cure me. There's something wrong with me. There's something wrong with the way I speak, and I want to change it." But speech therapy offered me a different perspective. Like "Hey. No. Stuttering is just a part of me." It's my normal, you know? And so for me, speech therapy wasn't what I expected because it taught me how to love myself with my stutter instead of changing myself away from my stutter. And the way that affects my spoken word is like if you see me perform, you see me read, the first thing I say usually is "Hey, I stutter. It takes me longer to say stuff sometimes. I'm just saying that to make space for myself." That just makes the space feel so much different. Because so much of stuttering is feeling embarrassed and ashamed for the stutter. And so when I name it on stage, I just feel like the baddest bitch in the room. So speech therapy, it's helped me build a relationship with performance that works for me.

Q: How does your education support (or hinder) your writing?

A: I love the structure that education brings me in writing. I'm in an MFA program right now, and before my MFA I think I went like 6 or 7 months without writing. It's just wild. But then in my MFA program, I'm expected to write new work every three or four weeks. Having that deadline, having that structure, it helps me produce more. Very rarely

in the world outside of the classroom do we get the chance to really nerd about different frameworks and different literary terms and craft elements of writing, so education is one place in life that you can sit in class and talk about the Fichtean Curve.

Q: At this point in your writing career, who do you look up to?
A: There's so many people. It's wild too because they're all local. Nationally, adrienne maree brown, akwaeke emezi, and Kiese Laymon. And locally Michael Kleber-Diggs, of course Kyle Tran Myhre (aka Guante) and Junauda Petrus. And he's not local, but Hanif Abdurraquib.

Q: What are you reading right now?
A: Oh man, where's my bag. Right now, I'm reading *A Swim in the Pond of Rain* by George Saunders. It's essentially a master class on fiction, which is how he presents it. And he's doing it through exploring four different Russian writers. I'm so disinterested in Russian writers. I'm interested in growing in my craft, but people in my life keep telling me to read this, so I'm like "Okay, Taiwana, just read the Russian guys." I'm also reading Imani Perry. [She] just got a national book award for this book *South to America.* I'm getting into that too because my co-workers keep telling me about it.

Q: What does the future hold for your writing life/career?
A: I've gotta get this first book into the world. I think that's the last thing on my checklist right now in my career. Is to get that book into the world and officially launched. I've been in an emerging artist phase since I was 15-16 years old. I don't want to be an emerging artist anymore. I want to be old and practicing, and like, you know, making noise and shifting narratives.

Creative Nonfiction

My Experience in Taekwondo

by Courtney Kollmann

When I was about nine or ten years old, my mother started attending kickboxing classes at our local dojo. Here, middle-aged men and women would get together every Saturday morning to work out. Although sitting in the hallway of the strip mall was boring, my sister and I would come along to get donuts from a nearby coffee shop. The sugary baked goods were only a few paces away, so we frequented it often. Other parents confined their children to the halls of the mall, too. With the kids being around the same age, we all found ways to entertain ourselves. The long corridors provided room for our minuscule bodies to roam and play. Some days when we were particularly loud, the instructor asked us to be quiet or come inside so as not to disrupt nearby businesses. Taekwondo classes started after kickboxing, so I would catch the beginning of the class when my mom was packing up her stuff or talking to friends afterward. I began to gain interest in the sport when I saw kids my age in taekwondo lessons. With my face pressed up against the glass, I would watch in admiration of the older boys and girls who could break wood boards or swing swords around. I explained to my mom that I had an interest in joining. Not long after, my mom, sister, and I would join taekwondo. It made sense as my mom was already friends with the instructor and my sister was athletic. Instead of being expelled to the musty halls of the shopping plaza, I was finally in.

Attending taekwondo classes every couple of days was the highlight of my week. I even made a couple of friends in the few lessons I attended. It was not all fun and games, however. One of the main ideas taught in class was respect. Whether it was bowing when entering or exiting, addressing instructors by their belt ranking, or bowing to the flags, respect was shown everywhere. Attending for

almost three years, I became much more disciplined and respectful of others around me. Through this, my relationship with people in class and the instructor became closer.

It was the same routine every day for almost two years. That was until my instructor told me he wanted me to try competitive sparring. This was something my sister had been doing for a few months and had gotten good at. Over the years, my instructor believed more in me, so I told him I would try. When I got home, I could not stop thinking about the promise I had made. Partaking in competitive sparring meant training with a different instructor, Mr. Lee. Mr. Lee was known for being extremely strict and giving tough love. When watching a couple of his classes, I was petrified at him yelling at kids or asking them if they knew what they were doing. Soon enough, I would have fallen victim to the same thing.

Entering the cold, crammed dojo, everyone had a higher-ranking belt than me. As soon as my feet touched the mat, my heart sank.

"Everyone, this is Courtney. She will be joining us for a few sessions," he announced. I smiled and waved as my face warmed up. The class looked at me, then back at Mr. Lee.

"Laps!" he exclaimed. The kids immediately started running as if they were robots controlled by one magic word. I was not told how many laps to go, but I did my best to outrun all the other children.

I looked toward my mom every time I passed her for some reassurance. The grin or thumbs up she gave me was enough for me to power through another lap around the electric blue dojo. When others stopped sprinting, I stopped. Immediately after we started working on forms, a series of movements that we were expected to memorize. This set having been recently introduced, we practiced it often. I had not yet been completely comfortable with the progression, so mistakes were frequent. As soon as Mr. Lee said so, we all had to perform the succession at once. The beautifully choreographed dance turned sour when my body froze in place. Glancing over at Mr. Lee, there was no pity in his face. Although I could feel the tears welling in

my eyes, I knew that would not be acceptable. Shaken up, my head darted around looking to others to figure out the rest of the form.

After class, Mr. Lee pulled me aside.

"I would really like you to compete, but you need to keep coming to class," he whispered, knowing I was defeated. I looked over to the scribbled crayon drawings hung up on his wall.

"Yes, sir."

When the day of my match came, I had been training with Mr. Lee for about a month. I endured children crying, parents getting angry, and plenty of bruises from sparring. Entering the venue, squeaks and groans echoed throughout. There were several sparring rings set up with scattered stands around. My mom, my sister, and I sat down to watch a few matches before I warmed up.

*

When my time came, I put on the special padding and gathered my water. Walking to my side of the ring, I noticed that my opponent had a coach, and I did not. Desperately scanning the room, Mr. Lee walked up and sat down in a chair placed on the side of the mat. At this moment, I understood others' appreciation and dedication to him. Not only did Mr. Lee believe in me along the way, but he was there for me on the day of my match.

"Are you ready?" he implored as he tightened my chest padding. Nodding my head, I put in my mouthpiece and began my fight.

Mr. Lee encouraged me as I flailed my legs back and forth across the rubber foam. I kicked and was hit with an even stronger force. With every strike, my padding echoed a loud popping sound. Mr. Lee barked at me as my opposition's coach did the same.

"Keep your hands up!" he screeched as I was hit once again. My opponent must not have heard this because once her hands dropped low enough, I launched my first large hit. I lifted my arm and

made one swift punch to her torso. The air in her lungs expelled out of her mouth as the blow landed. The crowd made one unanimous gasp as my contender's eyes filled with tears. Her face, now as red as mine, was stricken with anger.

Not once did I glance at the scoreboard until halftime. My opponent was winning by a long shot. Mr. Lee spouted techniques and pointers at me, but it all went right over my head. My limbs were warm and pulsating with exhaustion. Tired, I waltzed back out on the red mat to give it my all.

The second half of the fight slowed down as my opposition, and I struggled to stay upright. Even though Mr. Lee had told me I was doing just fine, my strategy was sloppy. In that moment, I thought back to Mr. Lee's class. If I didn't prevail through my first day, he would not have believed in me to compete. So, pushing through the pain, I fought for the rest of the half.

The bell rang and as quickly as it started, the fight was over. A tall man took each of one of our arms and raised my opponent's hand, signaling that she had won. Staring into the crowd, my arms lay on my side. My instructor, mom, sister, and Mr. Lee all watched as I walked off the mat, not in despair, but with a smile on my face.

Sometimes, I still cannot believe that a shy eleven-year-old version of myself was able to build the courage to spar competitively. The best loss I could have taken was one that got to be a new experience to learn from. This event continues to teach me things about myself, even today, as I try to find courage in being bold. I have learned that taking risks can lead to the most memorable parts of your life.

Does Parenting Need to Be So Hard?

by Pa Lo

"We never know the love of a parent until we become one ourselves."

-Henry Ward Beecher

I was born in Fresno, California in 1983. I lived there for 12 years and one year in Denver, Colorado. The rest of my life I have been here in MN. I remember growing up we didn't have much money as there are seven of us kids. I clearly remember getting food stamps when they still have the paper money look like food stamps. We moved every year, and I was never able to finish a year of school in the same school. I don't know if it was because my dad is a pastor and we moved from church to church as he was needed, or what the real reason was. We moved to MN when I was 13 years old because my parents wanted to live in a state where we would be able to easily find jobs when it was time for us to start working. I remember being so sad that I couldn't get everything that I wanted because we couldn't afford it.

My dad is Thai Hmong so technically I am Hmong Thai. I was given the last name Lo but when I was in my early teens, I found out we had another part to our last name. The other part to our last name is Kiatoukaysi. There are not so many of us. I don't really know my dad's side of they family because they kind of disowned my dad when he started going to church. Most of his side are still old tradition. When my grandparents from my dad's side were still alive, they didn't really reach out to us for this reason also.

Now that I am a parent myself, I understand what I put my parents through. I wasn't always the best daughter, and I got into a lot

of trouble in my younger years. Honestly, I was reported as a runaway a lot. I liked to go out and my mom would call my probation officer and report me as a runaway, or she would kick me out and still report me as a runaway. I went to Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) so often with my sister that the staff there knew us. Because I was there so often, I was one of the juveniles that the staff trusted to go to Shakopee women's prison for overflow multiple times. Due to going to JDC so often I feel like they helped me to straighten my life out. So originally, when I started coming to NHCC in 2005 I wanted to become a correctional officer. But now I am choosing to go into Nursing. I would still be helping people just in a different way than I was originally going to. As I was growing up, I've been involved in gangs and drugs, but never hurt anyone.

My mom says I was stupid as I was growing up because I followed my younger sister whenever she did anything. She says I was the only one out of the kids that never argued with her. But the difference between my sister and I is that one day I was with my friends at a park when my sister was supposed to be babysitting my niece. She ended up coming to the park on the bus with my two-year-old niece. I ended up leaving the park with my niece to bring her back home. My older sister was very mad at me thinking that it was me that took her.

Right now, I have 5 kids. My oldest is 15 years old, the next is 12, then 10, then 7, then my youngest is 3. Being a Hmong woman, I end up doing a lot of things like raising my kids on my own. My husband likes to hunt so he's really gone most the time. He has told me before that my kids are my kids until they get older. Then they will be his when they get older. I tell him that because he doesn't like to hang out with the kids, they won't want to hang out with him when they get older. I have started making him take my 2 boys out to go fishing with him.

My kids say that I am overly strict, but I always tell them to be glad that I am always in their business. I just want what's best for them, and that's why I said earlier that now that I'm a parent I understand why my parents were the way they were. I have a tracking app on all my kids' phones, and it also automatically locks their phones at a certain time and their phones don't turn on until a certain time. Am I

an overbearing parent? Is it wrong for me to track what my kids use their phones on and when they can have their phones? No, I think me being worried about what they are watching or doing or even where they are is being a good parent. My 15-year-old tells me she should be able to not be tracked anymore and she should have her phone whenever she wants. I only have her phone locked from midnight to 6am so that she can sleep for school.

I just recently caught my 15-year-old on the phone with someone. I heard a male voice calling her baby and telling her to send some photos to him. As soon as I heard this, I turned her phone off even though it wasn't time for her phone to turn off. I had her bring her phone to me and I looked through her phone. In the text messages it showed the guy asking for explicit photos of her. I explained to her that she doesn't really know if this is really a kid or an adult pretending to be a kid. I also said that if they really cared for her, they wouldn't keep pressuring her to do stuff she doesn't want to do. I told her that even though me and her father are married, I have NEVER sent him pictures like that. Once photos like that is out, it is out, there's no taking them back.

I have a lot of expectations for my 15-year-old. She helps me cook, watch the kids, and clean. She tells me that she hates being the oldest because of this. Because my husband doesn't help watch the kids, I decided I am done having kids. My mom was really worried about it when I was pregnant with my last child. She asked if I really wanted to keep her. I told my mom that yes, I will, no matter how hard it'll be. My oldest cried when I told her I was pregnant with the last one because she knew she would be the only one helping me. My family is different when it comes to my husband's family. My husband's family is still into the old religion. They are shamans while my family are Lutheran. For shamanism they do ceremonies that worship their ancestors.

I am really blessed that I was born in United States. I can speak English very well and I've had people ask me before "Where are you from?" I just tell them I'm from California. Then they ask, "Where are your parents from?" My parents have been in the states for a long time. My oldest brother is 45 years old, so they have been here longer than that. My brother who is two years older than me has gotten a degree and my sister that is 11 months older than me has

gotten her degree also. My sister is still in school to get even a higher degree, and that is why I want to go to school. I want to show my children that getting your degree is good. My oldest has told me that she wants to become a doctor, and I told her ok. When you become a doctor, I will be your nurse. I told my kids that they can be anything they set their minds to. My parents always tried to do reverse psychology with us, but I never took it that way. I always just took it that they are looking down on me and they didn't think I'd amount to anything. I know I didn't get much when I was younger so now that I have kids of my own, I try my best to get them whatever I can if it is a necessity. If I have the money to get stuff that they want, I'll try my best to do that too.

Does parenting really need to be so hard? No, but it isn't easy. Some people say it takes a village to raise a child. Yes, there's some truth to that, but children are hardheaded. (At least I know I was.) The first time you hold your little one in your arms. The first time their little fingers wrap around your finger. The first time they call you mama or dada. You will just melt and become putty in their hands. No matter how much you try to fight it trust me, it'll happen. We will absolutely never know the love of a parent until we become one ourselves.

Humanity and the Changeling

by Corvine Parker

“I am who I am and there’s nothing wrong with that. The days continue like they always have, bringing neither excessive desire nor despair, nothing's changed. Yet I'm overwhelmed by this sense of fulfillment. I'm over here, you're over there.”

-Izaya Orihara

Ever since I learned about the myth of the changeling, I felt connected to the idea of the displaced Fae child.

When I realized I was autistic, I finally figured out why.

The basic concept of the Changeling is that the Fae will abduct a human child, and one of the Fae will take its place. Traditionally, the Changeling is thought to be an adult that is intentionally taking the appearance of the stolen child to cause trouble to the parents by being a nuisance at best and a danger at worst.

In my mind, it made more sense that the Changeling left behind would be the same as the human that was taken—a child, who was just as unaware and unprepared as the human. The Changeling child would be raised by and alongside humans who have no interest in understanding or sympathizing with anything different.

As a young child, I felt disconnected from my peers. I knew that I was different in some way that was invisible to me but was all too obvious to them.

I felt that I wasn’t human, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing. I was always either too perceptive or too stupid, too sensitive or too stoic, too blunt or too specific.

I soon learned that I was a sort of radioactive subhuman; someone who is decomposition itself, and who deteriorates others with my mere presence.

There are countless stories that follow the framework of the changeling myth, the vast majority of which are told in the perspective of the dismayed parents as a horror story. I know that a trait of humanity is to fear and reject that which it doesn't understand, but it still stings to be seen and talked about in that way.

I resented and abhorred humanity, but I also loved and coveted humanity. I envied and was jealous of humanity, which is kind of complicated. I was jealous of its ability to so easily intertwine and untangle. I begrudged it of its normalcy, wanting it desperately for myself.

This borderline hatred festered until it became resentment, which did not help anyone involved, let alone myself.

Nowadays, I still despise certain aspects of humanity, but I also hold a distant sort of fondness for it overall. I don't know if I'll ever feel or be human, and I'm not sure if I want to. I like where I stand with it, and I find satisfaction in my own status.