



Spring
2016

VOICES

Voices is produced each fall and spring semester by students enrolled in Journalism 139 under the direction of Professor David Pink, with magazine design and layout by Professor Scott Fustin.

Submissions are accepted from current students, alumni, faculty, and staff. All submissions are assessed anonymously, and current student winners in art, prose, photography, and poetry are awarded prizes. Acceptance, publication, and awards are based on artistic quality as perceived by the student editorial staff.

The views or opinions expressed in this magazine are those held by the artists and authors.

Current and past issues of Voices, submission forms, instructions, and deadlines are available at rvcvoices.com.

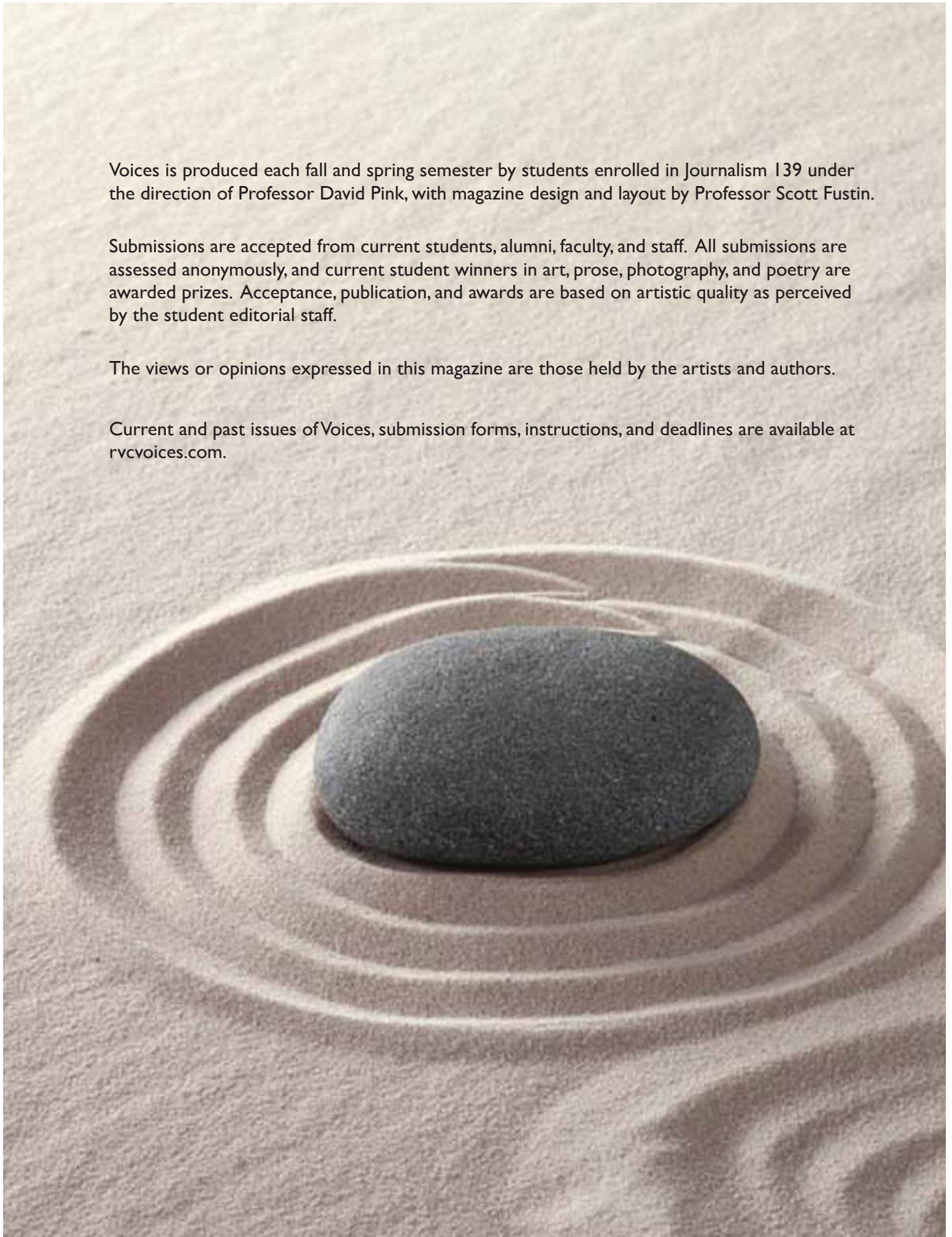


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FEATURED AWARD WINNERS

Asylum
by Cristiaan Jackson
..... Poetry

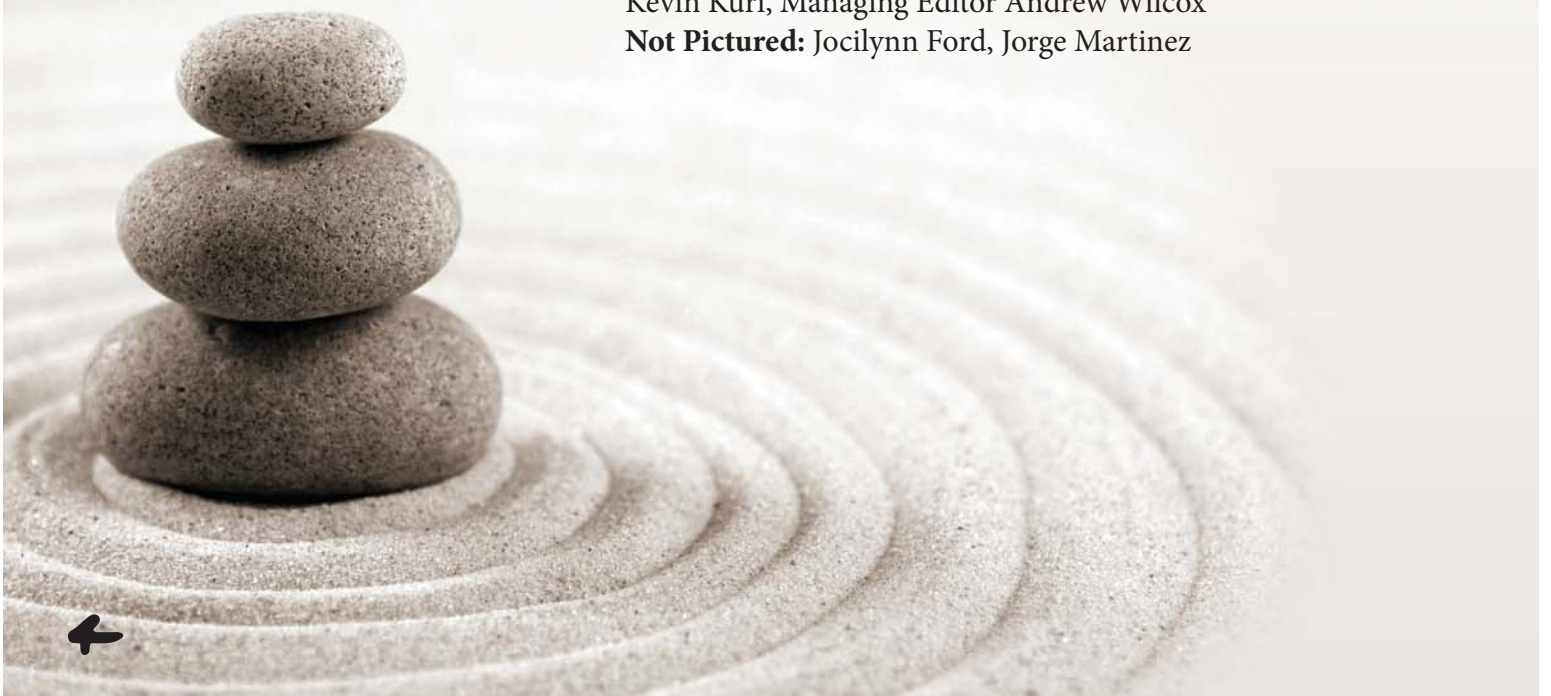
Red Church Door
by Barbara Rosenbalm
..... Photography

Happy Easter, 2016
by Max Burke
..... Poetry

The Staff



Left to Right: Ryan (Skat-man) Skattum, Mary Elizabeth Rudny, Jonny Montville, Alex Williams, Peter Schalow, Kevin Kuri, Managing Editor Andrew Wilcox
Not Pictured: Jocilynn Ford, Jorge Martinez



Empty

by Rebekah Wriedt



Deference To Possession

by Margaret McGraw



Shaped Like Knives

by Kayla Downey

Sentences? They're shaped like knives

Tongue vibrations? Crippling lies

Words unspoken? Pray to God

I won't decipher your façade

You claim my accusations fiction –

Swear on this unkind addiction

“Just a minor interruption” –

Highway paved with self-destruction

Crawling out of my cold skin

Lusting synthetic heroin

Veins wide open; blood runs thin

Devil's dance – my favorite sin

Fragments of infatuation

Novels without punctuation

Paragraphs derived of anguish

Written in a foreign language

Preach your peace has now been made –

Your empty fifth, a hand grenade

A cycle born of viciousness

My warning fails to manifest

I'll climb back into my body

Once I've drowned out your melody

No purpose hoping you'll haunt me

Even your demons don't want me

Focused on your own reflection
Cursing every imperfection
Subject to insanity
Though some would argue vanity

Master of manipulation
Victim of your own fixation
Still you harbor allegation
Built on faulty information

Diagnosed with disorder
Explain that bit to the coroner
Autopsy indicates torture
Genre depicted as horror

Degradation never-ending
Contradictions condescending
Immorality unrivaled
Vices versus your survival

Frank discussion goes outdated
Shouts pronounce you liberated
Whispers deem your lips frustrated
Silence leaves you devastated

Sentences? They're vacant now
Tongue vibrations lacking sound
Words unspoken suffocate
Synchronized with vows you've made
In vain.

Explain Yourself

by Nicole Smith

Walking the tightrope of anxiety from safety to freedom with a chasm of anger to catch me if I fall
Treading lightly on the buzzwords that will start the ticking of the bomb
Entertaining with ballerinas doing cartwheels on the edges of a canyon
Mesmerized until one exasperated sigh knocks them all down like bowling pins
Let the countdown begin
Delicate pointes commence transformation into merciless gnashing; bone on bone
Incapable of drowning out the white noise – unable to drown within
Frantic for a handle that does not resemble a hand
Dangling from bound wrists turning helpless pirouettes
Slipping farther from salvation into all-consuming desire to create an eternity that does not last
Lusting after each fire kindled by frustration
Lacking the courage to uncoil and touch



Grandpa Stu Watermelon Patch

by Chris Mann



Happy Easter 2016!

by Max Burke



Balloon in hand, the bunny stands, to celebrate the season,
And in the mall, both big and small, the children come to greet him,
They stand in line, to sit beside, the man within the suit,
There is a staff, to photograph, the children as they do,
The kids don't know, that just below, the rabbit's artificial skin,
The man inside, the suit has died, from dehydration,
All the while, they sit and smile, the man has decomposed,
He festers there, in festive gear, inside his Easter clothes,
It's been three weeks, he doesn't reek, despite his state of posthume,
Because the scents, of putrescence, are trapped inside the costume,
Yes indeed, the suit impedes, the smell of his decay,
Although inside, have liquefied, the rest of his remains,
Beetles, slugs, and other bugs, lay eggs beneath the flesh,
Under his skin, are determined, to keep his organs fresh,
This is so, the bugs will know, their young will be well-fed,
The eggs they've sewn, when fully grown, will feast upon the dead,
Still outside, and still in line, the children wait to pose,
With the funny little bunny man, whose body decomposed,
But inside, the buzzing hive, swarms toward the brain,
Where they go, to take control, and move his limbs again,
And on this day, they use his frame, to mimic his behavior,
And on this day, he lives again, to mock the risen savior,

“But Why?” you ask, “perform this task? The motives are unseen.”

You do not know, the bugs have grown, a taste for human beings,

And all the kids who come and sit, they do not know the danger,

They trust the funny bunny man although he is a stranger,

And one by one, daughters and sons begin to disappear,

The parents fret, but don’t suspect, the man with floppy ears

The csi and fbi search for the kids for hours,

The parents fear, and wait to hear, their kids have been devoured

And so it goes, or so I’m told, the story of a man,

A man inside a bunny suit who hatched a little plan,

And on his seat, he waits to eat, all except the bones,

The funny little bunny man whose body decomposed.

Monolith Hotline

by Joe Altamore

Trying to know how bad it is
is like trying to taste your tongue.
The low buzz in the back of the room everyone has
acclimated to and no longer hears.
Pain is like this. Its manifestations unclear.
Only your head in the formaldehyde,
your limbs doing a-okay,
but you're not sure why you're so jittery
until one day the thoughts Food, Work, and Death
are all at the same level.
Does this sound like you? Call toll-free now.
Phone calls to someone with a voice made of sunlight
are so much easier than long conversations
with the knife that did the carving.
The problem with carving, how it shapes you in spite
of everything you do to hide it.
The ball of clay, once given arms, is trying to shape itself.
It's thinking, "Majestic lion."
It's thinking, "Open heart."
But all it does is pull itself
apart.



Landscape

by Maureen McGreevy



Number of Lines: 39

by Josefina Bryant

You are not a poet
because I have been writing poetry
way longer that you have.
So that would make my poetry better.
Your 39 line long randomness
could never compete with my 40 line beast.
My words are bigger,
more symbolic,
like an elephant on a mountain
while your words
are fleas on a crumb.
Pathetic and no one wants you around.
Speaking of you
there is no way your 5'1 looking baby face
could match my 5'2 looking adult.
Did you even try to wing your eyeliner?
Was it drawn with a spoon?
No worries! I drew mine with a sword.
The same one I used to cut you apart.
Your circle identity now a square
just like mine...
and the rest of societies.
Dare to be different?
I double dog dare you to be the same.
You aren't yet good enough to be different.
You don't deserve to live in the clouds.
Bring your head back down here,
I have more words to say.
Sew your lips shut
with the same red lipstick I am using.
Don't speak up;
bury your words.
You missed your chance.
They won't believe you know!
You are not you now!
Try to write a poem;
try to speak out.
But, it has to be 40 lines,
not 39.

A Boost of Life

by Cristiaan Jackson



Once Upon a Somewhere

by Alejandra Mercado



Let's Go For a Ride

by Elizabeth McKinstry Sherburne



The Collection

by Nick McDowell

Like Moses walking through the parted Red Sea, conversations churned on either side of Ben like violent waves. But between the rows of lunch tables, the aisle was calm, peaceful.

The red Penny Drive coffee huddled close to the lunch line's register for protection. "Penny Drive" in black marker, in his father's perfect handwriting, lay imprinted on the can's ribs. Ben could tell that his father had paid close attention while writing that the "n"s since they looked identical. None of their humps went above or below the others. His father, the pastor of the sponsoring church, had chosen the most starved-looking coffee can for a donation drive benefitting the local food pantry. The smooth, rounded Maxwell House container at the church looked too "healthy," his father had said when he brought the pestilence-stricken can to Ben's school.

His father, Father Ernest McElroy, had marched down the same cafeteria aisle as Ben did now, only the torrent of conversation had been reduced to silent church pews that morning the week before.

=====

Children huddled for warmth after getting off frozen buses with slush built up by the wheels. Many were bundled in their colorful winter coats, wool gloves, and cartoon-themed stocking caps. The cafeteria's large plate-glass windows were rimmed with streaks of white snow like toothpaste squeezed onto a toothbrush. Yet as Father McElroy walked prominently through the open room, a wintry chill followed behind him, making children nearest to the aisle shiver, sit up straight, and their entire tables shush. Ben was drug along to the front of the congregation with his father's arm behind his back.

"C'mon, boy!" his father hissed. He snarled as he spat the words at Ben.

Children's wide eyes were focused on Father McElroy standing at the front of the cafeteria. Occasionally, they would drop to scrawny Ben. It

was his father's nature that caused such a reaction in children. His towering, bulky stature and booming voice made anyone believe that a wrathful God would commit them to an eternity of damnation, even children. He could silence a room by stepping foot in it. But, just as he could instill the fear of God in anyone, Father McElroy had a way of persuading people to forget that side of him. His sharp tongue could meld praises and seemingly kind conversations from its routine of criticism. If he knew how to instantly strike someone down with his words, he could deceitfully build them up, too.

Ben's eyes scanned the tile floor, occupying his mind with the scratches, scuffs, and smudges within the white boxes. He tried anything to avoid the rows of eyes. He had already heard his father's sermon in the car: You have to take care of the house of the Lord first, Benny. Then God will take care of everyone else. It's trickle-down economics!

Those words sat heavily, guiltily in Ben's stomach and made him nauseous.

"Good morning, children! Ladies..." Father McElroy proclaimed to his spectators, nodding to the lunchroom aides. Most of them were moms of students. Many of them attended Harrington's Church of God with their children. Many of which were seated among the plastic pews before Ben and his father. All familiar faces.

"Now, a lot of you know who I am. And I know who you are. But for those who don't, I am Father Ernest McElroy, pastor at the Church of God on West Ingull Road. You can call me Father McElroy, though. This here is my boy, Benny..."

Children giggled sporadically and softly about the room. Ben shifted his weight away from his father's side. It's Ben, Dad, ran through his mind for the umpteenth time that morning.

Father McElroy gave his son a light shake of the shoulders. He looked down at Ben. His salt and pepper

goatee created a tight frame around his deceiving smile. He then turned back to the crowd and resumed his chipper speech. Ben wanted to be in the back of the room. He could see his friends grouped beneath the cheesy poster of a soccer player scoring a goal. "Success" was written across the bottom in a neon green and blue splatter paint font.

Ben swatted his arm towards the ceiling and let it fall as quickly. That was the best wave he could muster with his shame-heavy body.

"Some of you may have classes with Benny here," Father McElroy continued. "Now, he and I have put together a Penny Drive for your school to participate in."

More giggles rumbled through the youthful congregation at Ben's nickname. Ben saw his friends muffling their chuckles with their coat sleeves, which only made his head bow closer to the floor.

Father McElroy picked up on the children's teasing, and made sure to utilize it. The church needed some extra funds after his "Pastors' Retreat" in Sacramento put him in Vegas by mistake. It was all God's plan after all.

"It's very easy! As a pastor and a man of God, I like to help those in need. Do any of you like to help people?"

Father McElroy's arms raised quickly from his sides, palms up, as if raising the generous spirit within the children. A slew of hands jumped, accompanied by the sound of scraping coat fabric. Those who hadn't initially raised their hands quickly joined the others to avoid smiting.

"Great! I thought so," Father McElroy bellowed. "Well, all we are asking is for each of you to put a couple extra pennies, nickels, quarters, whatever you can into this ol' coffee can. You can't miss it! It says "Penny Drive" across it. And I know many of you are good readers from Sunday School. Especially you, Margaret."

His firm index finger pointed at a tiny brunette girl in the front row. Her curls were pinned beneath her pink stocking cap and tucked against her head by her glasses. Her body compacted in from the center, her hands

became glued together and wedged between her thighs, and her ear dropped to her shoulder. She was bashful.

Father McElroy walked over to the stainless steel check-out counter. He set the coffee can down hard enough that a sharp echo pulsed to the back of the cafeteria and returned to the front, but he did it with a smile.

"As you can hear, the can's empty now. But come next Thursday, just before you all head home to enjoy your Winter Breaks, which I'm sure will be filled with delicious foods and expensive presents, I hope that you feel caring and giving enough to donate a couple coins here and there this week to help the hungry. Please keep that in mind that there are others in our community who are less fortunate while you eat your meals this week."

Ben nodded along, his chin bumping against his chest. His thrift store Power Rangers t-shirt had speckles and cracks across its colorful graphic. Out of his peripheral vision, he saw the other kids had their heads lowered, too. His father wasn't giving a sermon or reciting a prayer, yet everyone bowed before him and his words.

Ben patted his left jeans pocket, carefully avoiding Father's attention. A faint jingle of change rang out. His mother had managed to sneak him two quarters that morning so that Ben could treat himself to the chocolate milk that the other students indulged in every day. He received only plain white milk with the prepaid meal plan (father's orders to live without surplus), but Ben always desired the liquid chocolate that his friends bought. Well, thanks to his mother's daring move, the day to taste the temptation had finally arrived.

Father McElroy had glanced down as Ben patted his quarter-laced jeans pocket. Instantly, his eyes narrowed at the round impressions through the denim before springing open again. Ben hadn't noticed his father eyeing his pocket's secret treasures. A smile of anticipation for that day's lunch warmed his cold face.

"So, Benny," his father said, patting his son on the shoulder again. This time, Ben was rattled by the gesture. His father's large fingers squeezed into his shoulder like a tree securing its roots into the soil. "Why

don't you lead by example and make the first donation?"

Ben's smile vanished as soon as his father's words slithered into his ears and sank their teeth into his ear drums. He looked up from his jeans pocket and met the room of eyes locked onto his every movement.

Ben's line of sight instantly dropped to the tile floor again, avoiding the stares, tracing the floor's scruffs and scratches to his father's polished leather shoes, up his tailored dress pants, his lintless suit coat, the stubbly beginnings of his jowl, and finally to his ashy gray eyes. His broad black eyebrows cast shadows over his harsh glare, but by tilting his face upwards, back towards the congregation, Father McElroy's eyes look like those belonging to a gentle-hearted man-- warm and welcoming. Now, the shadows beneath his brow created empty crevices that pried a response from Ben. Ben shook his head slightly, so slightly that only his father noticed the resistance.

"The quarters," his father spat. "Now."

Father McElroy's words were quiet and close enough together that, to the audience, they merely sounded like he had coughed, or had muttered words of encouragement to a shy "Benny."

"Yes, sir," Ben murmured.

Slowly digging his hand into his pocket, Ben tried to crane the quarters from their nest. The two coins moved from one pocket corner to the other as they evaded his fingers. The fact that he was struggling with such a simple task in front of his classmates, under the scrutiny of his father's scornful eye, made his face feel hot and flushed. He finally managed to extract the silver coins from his pants, his prized tokens for later indulgence, and held the two out in his palm. The two George Washingtons were looking up at him, but they faced away from Ben's father. They didn't want it to end this way either.

"That's my boy!" his father called to the audience, placing a firm clawed hand on Ben's shoulder once more.

Father McElroy extended his free arm back, guiding Ben towards the red coffee can at the check-

out counter. It sat beside the cash register that housed numerous quarters. Ben hadn't made a connection with any of those. These two had made a promise to Ben's mother, who made a promise to Ben. These quarters had a job to do. And his father was ruining all of that.

Ben felt the eyes on his back, but the heat he felt at the nape of his neck was from his father's glare, which was hidden from everyone. He reached the coffee can and peered down into the aluminum well. The rusted spots in the bottom would be a tetanus hazard for whoever had to sort and count the coins after the Penny Drive was over. It'd most likely be Ben.

He held his closed fist over the can's opening. The quarters hugged his fingers; they didn't want to let go and fall into the metal cell.

"Well, we tried," Ben whispered, sighing as he released his shoulders.

His grip on the quarters loosened and each plunked against the can's bottom, sending a similar echo to the back of the cafeteria before returning. Only this time, compared to his father's echo, Ben's carried disappointment in its reverberations.

"Let's hear it for my boy Benny, everyone! Come on, round of applause!" Father McElroy said in his god-like tone again.

The room emitted a short, but intense burst of clapping upon the order.

"So as a reminder, please follow Benny's example today at lunch and for the next week. You'll give those in need more than you can understand. Thank you, everyone, and I should see all of you on Sunday! God Bless!"

Father McElroy moved away from his imaginary pulpit and looked down at Ben, the shadows obscuring his eyes again.

"We'll talk about this later. Your mother, too."

And he walked away, back through the cafeteria aisle filled with children on their way to class.

Father McElroy towered above their capped heads and bright backpacks. He was a shepherd leading the

lambs to salvation. Ben remained next to the coffee can, which radiated heat from his forced donation. He watched his father leave the cafeteria and go out the windowed main entrance to his Mercedes parked in the bus loop. A cigarette was burning from his lips before he even reached the curb.

Ben was so close to having chocolate milk for once.

=====

Now, a week later, the Penny Drive had come to a close. Coins could be seen peeking over the can's brim from anywhere in the lunch room, even from Ben and his friends' table beneath the soccer "Success" poster.

Ben made his way through the lunch line with a tray of dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, a banana, a rounded mound of mashed potatoes and gravy, and a carton of bland-tasting two percent milk. He waited until everyone was gone from the line before he neared the cash register. Mrs. P stood there, watching over anything money-related, which included the Penny Drive. The shimmering silver coins stood out from the bronze mound.

Mrs. P rubbed the base of her nose with her plastic glove as Ben approached her.

"Hi, kid," she said, her voice raspy and monotone. "That'll be two twenty-five."

Ben hesitated, gripping the sides of his Styrofoam lunch tray tighter.

"Mrs. P, are there more apples? There're only bananas out here."

Her eye twitched with indignation from the question.

"No."

"Are you sure? My dad says I need to eat more apples. Could you check, please?"

Mrs. P rapped her fingers on the check-out monitor. Her lips squished towards one side of her face. A few months back, Ben's father got her son out of jail solely by calling the police station and telling them to release him. Harrington was a small community.

She relaxed her stance.

"I'll check."

She waddled her wide frame around the check-out booth and disappeared behind tall metal ovens and industrial-sized sinks.

"Thank you," Ben called after her.

As soon as she was out of sight, he did one quick sweep of the surrounding area to spot any watching eyes. All the other lunch ladies were cleaning up after the day's rush. Ben heard the hissing of sink sprayers and the garbled adult conversations going on in the back. Students were busy devouring their food or burying their chicken nuggets in ketchup. The two lunch aides were comforting Kendra Millian, who was crying after getting barbeque sauce on her favorite shirt. She always did that.

Here was Ben's chance. He didn't care if this meant explaining this sinful act to God on Judgment Day. He was enjoying chocolate milk today. His father, Father McElroy, would have to do with fifty cents less for his personal church expenses. Ben snatched the two quarters from the can's pile, making the crudely formed peak dissipate, but only a little. It was hardly noticeable. Hardly. At least Ben hoped it was unnoticeable.

"We're outta apples, Ben," Mrs. P yelled over the hissing appliances as she shuffled back to the check-out. "You want anything else?"

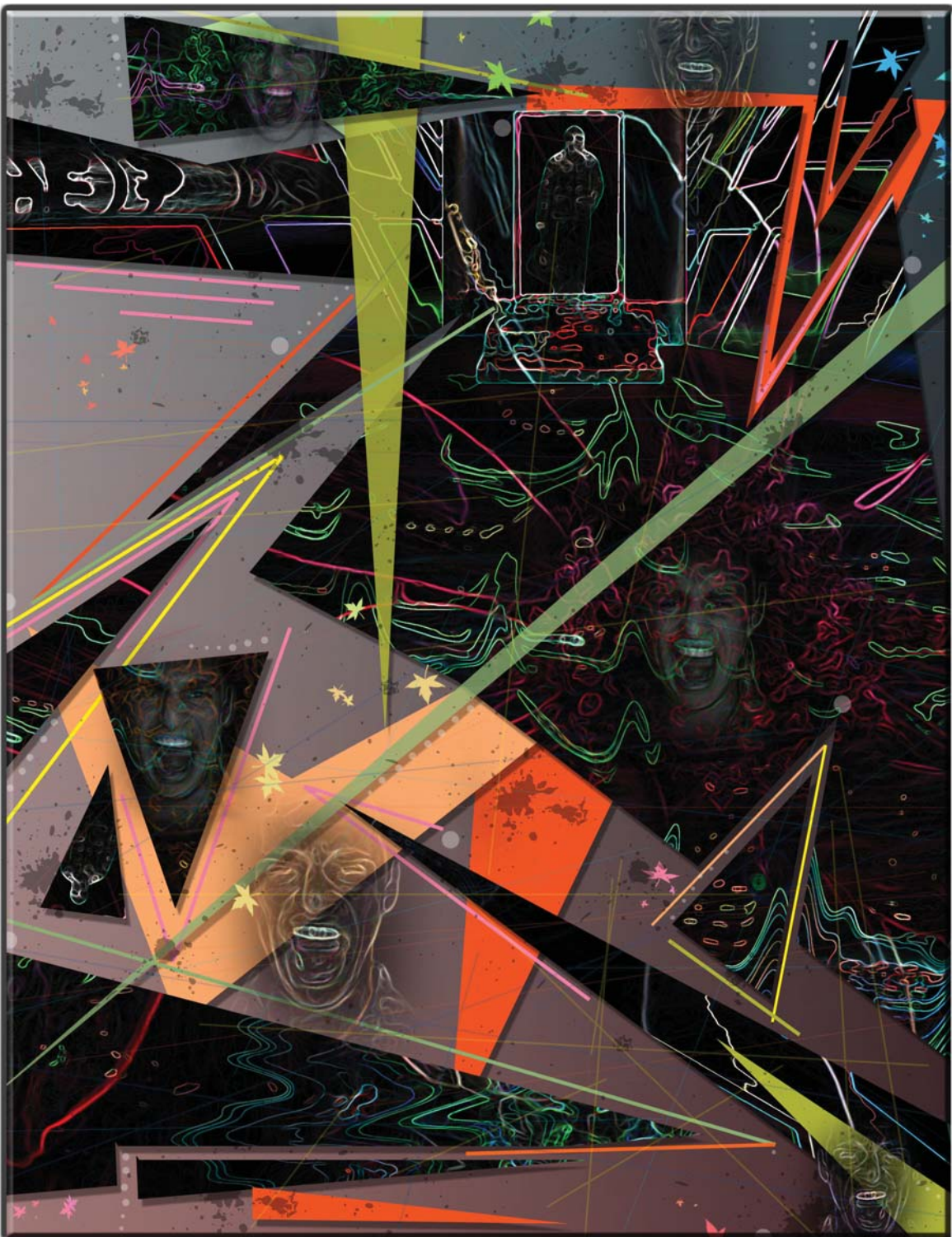
Ben stiffened out of surprise by her sudden reappearance.

"And a chocolate milk," he replied, quickly dropping the snatched quarters into her hand. "Please."

Asylum

by Cristiaan Jackson

*Award
Winner*



Head of Quetzalcotl

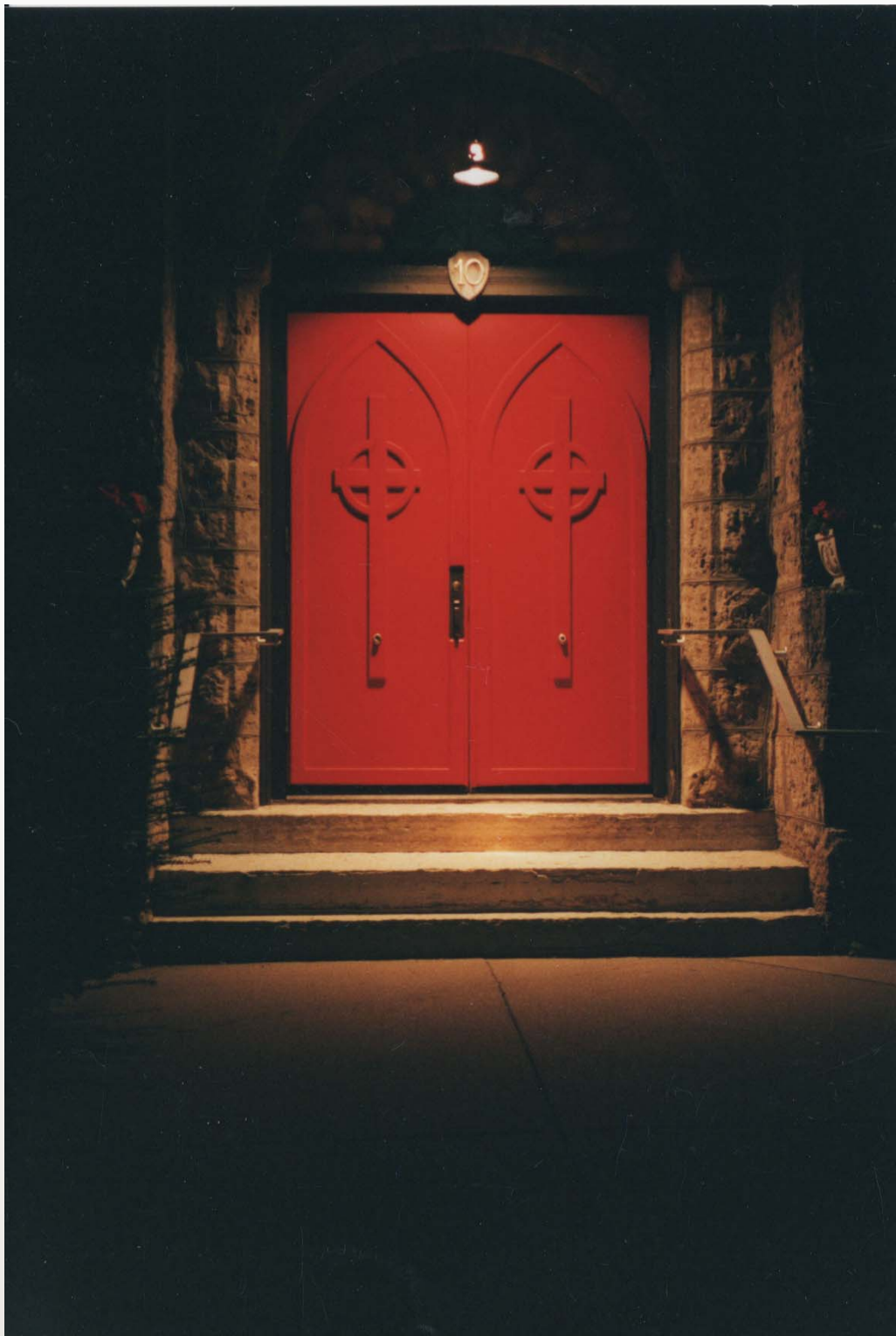
by Jorge Martinez Zarco



Red Church Door

by Barbara Rosenbalm

*Award
Winner*



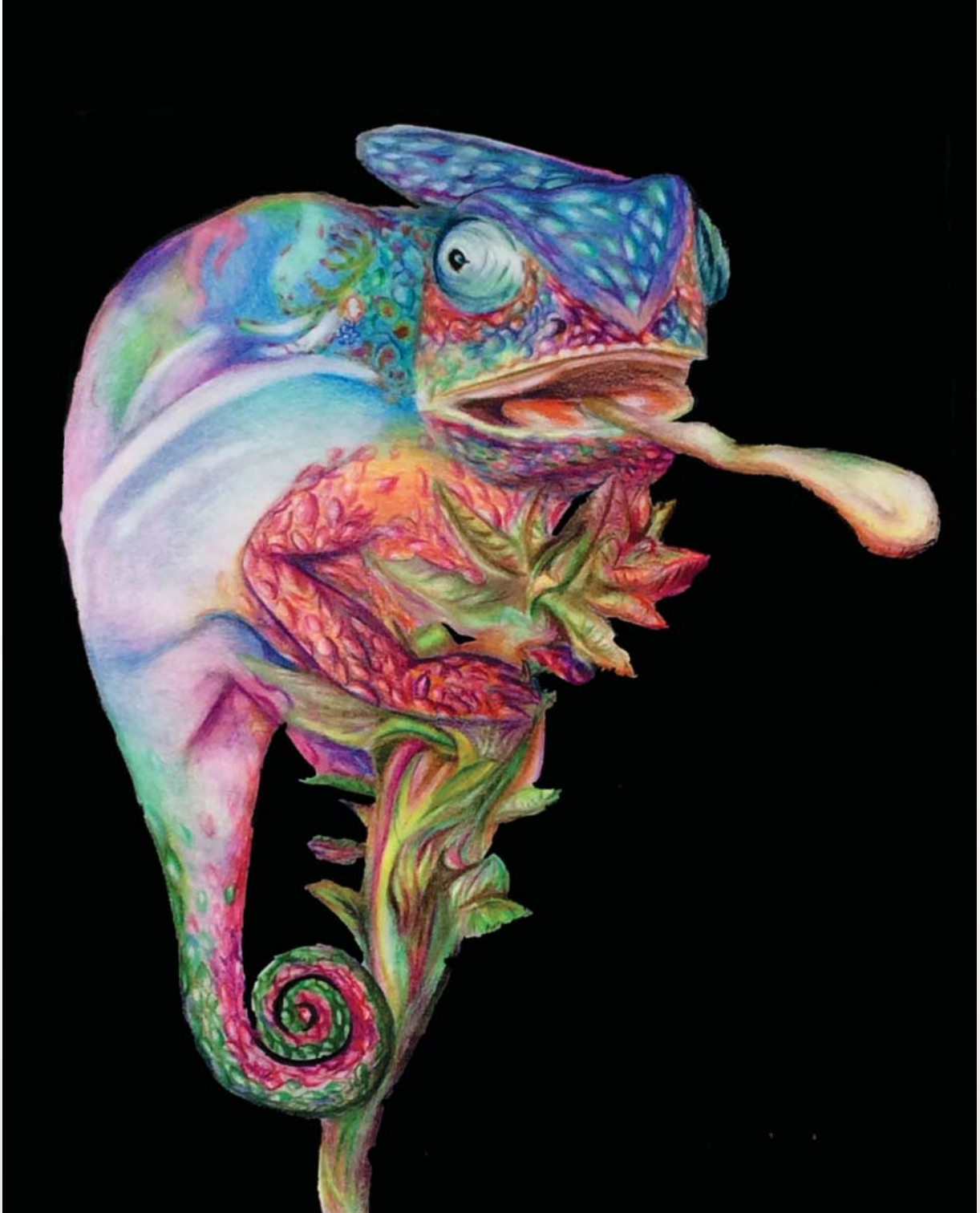
Snow Shadows

by Deb Dietz



Autoplastic Adaptation

by Sabrina Gessert



Depersonalization, Take a Seat

by Sabrina Gessert



Hot Box

by Nick McDowell

My first kiss was in a fucking hot box. I had this tree house as a kid that became an oven in the summers-- the one time of year you're supposed to use it. Anyway, Courtney Epton, the petite brunette from geometry class, who I'd had a crush on since the second grade, went to the movies with me on my thirteenth birthday as a "date." As intimate as an eighth grade date can be...

We had climbed up into my tree house for some alone time until her mom picked her up. Just as we pulled our legs into the hut, my mom walked out onto the back patio, ranting on the phone to my aunt Carol about sex. Her and my aunt's conversations were always loud and often profane.

"I'm not sure what to tell you, Carol. I guess that's why Tom and I never tried it! I'd hate to be sore just sitting..."

It's even worse when these personal phone calls took place in Wal-Mart's produce section.

People would shuffle by with their food-packed grocery carts, muttering curses at my mother. She would park our cart in the middle of the aisle. I'd stand at the front of our cart, constantly trying to keep it moving.

"Our junior-senior prom wasn't that long ago, Carol. You swallowed back then, why not now? You're the reason you and Ed are having problems. No one likes a spitter."

Old women would toss their oranges back into the heaps, scoffing in disgust. Mothers would tuck their children under their arms and hurry them to another aisle. A man passing by would ponder Mom's statement then nod along.

This was the type of dialogue that Courtney and I heard in the tree house.

I was sure glad my dad had me clean it out the day before. There'd been a dead robin, half-eaten by

maggots, baking in the shack for what I assumed to be at least two weeks. There was no ventilation in there. No air got in and no stench got out. Courtney gasped as the putrid stench entered her nostrils, sealing them shut with the back of her hand. I didn't notice the smell as much as I noticed its sour aftertaste.

"You sure there's nowhere else?" Courtney asked.

"Sorry, Tyler's in our bedroom. He has the flu, and I doubt you'd want to be around that."

"Yes, because this is much better."

Courtney tucked her knees close to her. I reached forward to close the loose trapdoor.

"I'm sorry, really. The smell goes away after a while, though."

I kicked the trapdoor shut, its hinges whistling as it fell. The door sat lower than the rest of the floorboards. I crouched against the creaking wall with the tiny window hovering over my shoulder. The window only let sunlight in. Sunlight that came through the panes in a solid beam and patiently waited for the floorboards to ignite. The calluses on my feet can attest to the heat.

Courtney sat patiently across from me, wilting in the stink and the evaporating air. She picked at her dress's skirt, rubbing the tiny blue flowers between her fingers, trying to scrub the smell away. Her bubbled pink nail polish chipped with the steady friction. While she fiddled with her dress, her eyes had a sweet glow to them as she looked at me. They shimmered, but that might have been the stench making them water. Nevertheless, she was gorgeous and my heart was in my throat. It pulsed and bounced inside the tight tube, making it difficult to breathe or speak. Courtney was the smartest girl in our class. She had known I'd liked her for a while before calling me out on it. After all, that's how we ended up on a date.

"I know you like me, Harry," Courtney had

said, twirling her cafeteria spaghetti around a plastic spork. Her eyes peeked up at me from beneath her bangs.

I dropped my hamburger, missing my tray. She batted her lashes at me and I could only look at her. I tried to play it off like missing my tray was intentional, leaving me to grab about the table until my hand found the half-eaten patty.

“I... uh... You know?”

“Of course I know,” she teased. “I see you write those notes for me all the time, Harry. I wish you’d just give them to me already.”

“How’d you-?”

“Oh, please, Harry... I sit behind you in Mr. Kipp’s class every day, and you know, you’re not the tallest boy around. It’s pretty easy.”

A smirk crossed her face. There was no denying it at that point, and yet I still struggled to find the words for my confession.

“I... I like you, Courtney.”

“‘bout time you told me! Harry, I’ve liked you since the day you said my braces made my teeth look nice. Wanna go to movies on Saturday? 1 o’ clock?”

It all happened so fast.

“Uh...”

“Great! See you then!”

I had waited years for the right moment to confess my adoration for Courtney, the girl of my dreams. And I turned into a baffled idiot when she called me out on liking her. I should have tried, “Why, yes, Courtney, I’ve loved you for many years. I think about you in gym class when I’m running. I think about you in biology when we dissect frogs and I accidentally get formaldehyde on my shirt. I think about you when I’m picking my seat for the bus ride home, hoping each day will be the day you sit next to me and not Lucas Henderson.” Instead, I flashed a dorky grin, making her giggle as she left.

My awkwardness must’ve done something for her

because she made it through two hours of zombie gore and my unbalanced body odor without calling it quits. Of all the days for my deodorant to run out, it had to be on the most important day of my life. It also had to run out after finishing only one armpit. And it sucks when your father’s cologne bottle looks practically identical to your mother’s perfume. So much for a smooth cover-up...

Courtney rapped her fingers against her lap and looked about the tree house. She looked at the crude etchings Tyler and I made on the walls with our dad’s pocketknife. There were a few stick figures with hearts above their heads. There was one of us somewhere.

“These are nice. Past lovers, Harry?”

She needed an explanation.

“No... just drawings” I said, trying to play it cool.

“Well,” she said, amused by my obvious lie. “You wouldn’t happen to have a drawing of us, would you, Harry?”

My pit stains doubled in size when I spotted it. It was right beside her. I had messed up carving her triangle skirt, so Courtney’s stick figure had a circular body. If she saw it, she’d think I drew her fat. If she saw it, that’d be it for us. Thankfully, she never turned to see it. Instead, she stopped shuffling and focused on me.

“Hey, my mom’s gonna be here in five minutes, so...”

“So...” I added, mirroring her tone and scratching the back of my head.

She wanted a kiss and I wanted nothing more than that, but my fear of disappointing her or embarrassing myself crushed any confidence I had.

Sweat slipped down my ankle. I moved my leg, hoping it’d create a cooling breeze. Courtney saw it as an invitation over.

She leaned towards me and I tried not to focus on the crack of cleavage staring up at me. I diverted my attention towards the floor. As soon as I did, I watched her hand press against the dead bird stain. Her fingers

sat in a layer of bacteria and bits of decomposed flesh. I didn't have the heart or the balls to tell her about it.

Courtney ran her bird-fluid hands through her hair. The scent of death, strong and unforgiving, mixed with her Watermelon L'Oreal for Kids shampoo. She pulled her hair away from her face, though a few strands hung to the beads of sweat topping her brow. In a moment, her hair would be against my face and I wasn't ready for the taste of rotten robin.

She whipped her hair like a lioness tossing a kill to her cubs. Courtney crawled towards me, pounding the floor with her palms. I could see the determination in her eyes. A black seed of intent hung heavy in each of her dilated pupils. She thumped the drooping trapdoor and the hinges screeched, the metal clattering against itself. Then, like a snapping tree limb, the trapdoor gave way beneath her. A shrill scream erupted from Courtney as her body dipped towards the new opening. I pictured her back snapping, her body folding like a card table as gravity sucked her through the square hole. I was about to watch my love plummet eight feet to her death.

In that same second, Courtney reached towards me with her diseased hand. I had to make a choice within a blink of an eye. I had to grab ahold of Courtney Epson's bird-flu hand or watch her die after our first date. Our potentially one-and-only date.

Adrenaline and bravery flooded my bloodstream and I lunged forward, catching her in mid-air. I avoided her tainted hand and hooked both of mine beneath Courtney's armpits. My fingers became sticky from her sweat. Our foreheads collided, jarring our thoughts. Our lips might have touched, but for a second. And my hand cupped her boob. For a moment, I had a handful of Courtney Epson's boob, and in the next moment, a boner.

We fell against a wooden wall as I pulled her over the gaping hole. Her head fell into my lap. Her chin rested on my concealed erection. I had to glance down to make sure I hadn't pissed myself on top of it. I guess I was even luckier I didn't blow a load right then and there. But, no stain either way. Thank God.

Courtney, being nudged by my excited hard-on, jerked her head from my lap and placed it against

my vibrating chest. Neither of us wanted to openly acknowledge the activity in my shorts.

"You saved me," Courtney said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Yep."

She looked up at me. That glow was back in her eyes, replacing those black seeds I'd seen just moments before.

"Thank you!"

"You're welcome," I replied and the two of us searched each other's faces for the next move.

Courtney clutched onto my t-shirt, prying the damp material away from my sweaty torso. She shoved me against the wall again. A shower of dust fell onto us, coating our arms, turning them into sandpaper. Next thing I knew, she was against my face. Not just her lips, but her chin, her cheeks, even her forehead. All of her face caressed mine. I tasted a tongue that wasn't mine. It was tart. It had an after taste that I had to warm up to, but I still didn't care for. I had waited thirteen years for this and it had been preluded by a dead bird, a zombie movie, and sex gossip by my mother.

"Lucky for you, you have that bun in the oven," my mother's voice chimed in; she was right under the tree house. "That's the only yeast you should be worrying about..."

Courtney snuck her arms around me and pulled me against her. Our clothes fused together in the heat and the passion. I contemplated when I should take out my retainer. I didn't want to damper anything, of course. To keep the moment fueled, Mr. Robinson blared Aerosmith's "Love in an Elevator" next door while he mowed. Love in an elevator. Livin' it up when I'm goin' down! It was my jam, and in the close confines of my tree house, it suited the situation perfectly.

Then, a jolt of pain stiffened my body. Courtney's braces had scraped the tip of my nose, taking a layer of skin with them. It'd eventually scar. I dabbed my nose with my finger, revealing more blood each time.

“Uh, Courtney,” I mumbled, trying to pause the make-out session.

Before I could stop her, she mushed my lips shut with the dead bird hand, her fingers tip-toeing inside my mouth as she shushed me. All I could think about was the rancid taste that dead bird and dust leaves in your mouth. It was earthy, tangy, and instantly brought vomit to the back of my throat. Courtney was sucking on my eyebrow at this point and tucking two corpse-stained fingers into my shorts pocket. Had it not been for the pain killing my boner, she would’ve been an inch away from setting me off with her fingers. But now, the moment was long-ruined and deflated.

“Courtney, I’m bleeding.”

Her body stiffened and lurched away from me. Her eyes shimmered as she studied my bloodied nose.

“Really?” she asked, mocking me as she surveyed the damage. “You’re gonna call it quits over that?”

“That? Your braces made my nose bleed!”

“Well, Lucas Henderson kept going even after my braces knocked out his tooth.”

Oh, yeah. Lucas Henderson. Our school’s baseball star. Every girl gushed over him.

“Well, I’m not Lucas Henderson.”

“I know, Harry. That’s why I like you.”

A car squeaked to a stop at the front of the house, accompanied by three quick horns to announce its arrival further.

“Hold on, Carol... Courtney! Courtney, your mother’s here!” my mom called from beneath the tree then walked back to the patio. “I guess you were right, Carol. Yes, a girl. You were right! I shouldn’t have been so worried...”

“I better go,” Courtney said. “Thanks for the afternoon, Harry.”

“Bye,” I said, holding the back of my hand to my nose.

She leaned in and kissed me once more, only this time on my arm. I’d covered my nose and mouth with it. The kiss was abrupt like the first one, but it was deliberate this time. There was a brief, apologetic tenderness to it, too. Courtney rarely showed her softer side. Heck, she still doesn’t.

Her head bounced as she descended from the tree house. I peered down the open slot from the buckled trapdoor. She glanced up at me. A drop of crimson blood fell off the tip of my nose and landed her right between the eyes.

“Ew! Harry!” Courtney cried, sweeping her hand across her forehead.

“I didn’t mean it... I’m sorry!” I whispered, defeated.

She swiftly shook her head and crossed the backyard to the side gate. Her pasty white skin turned gold in the sunlight.

“Thanks, Mrs. Trenton,” Courtney said, both shameful and obligated, and tossed a wave to my mother.

“Anytime, sweetheart! Stop by more often!” my mother said, giving Courtney a thumbs-up. Courtney’s immediately picked up her pace and kept her head low until she reached her mother’s car.

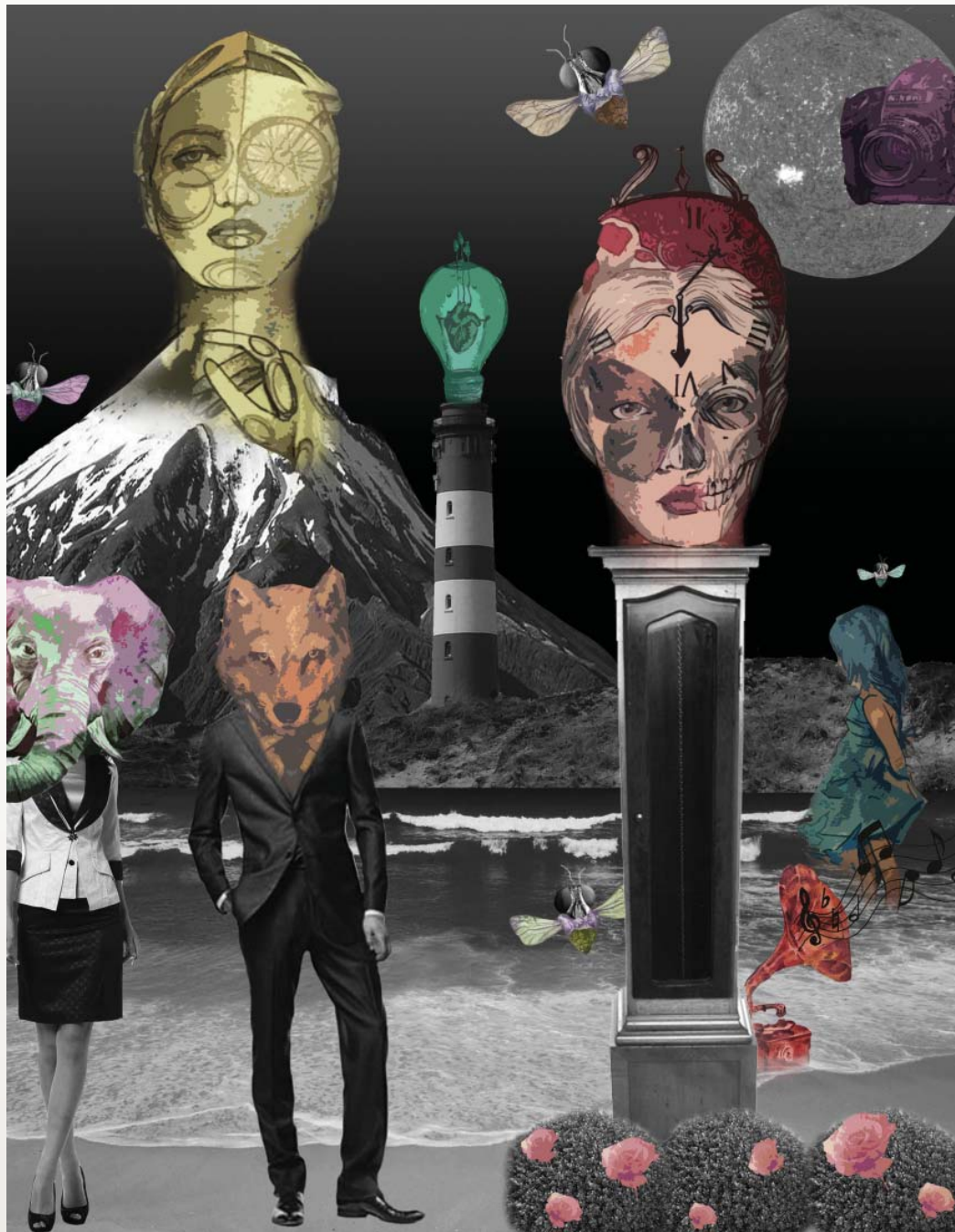
My mother caught sight of me looking through the opening and gave me the same celebratory thumb.

“Oh, God,” I grumbled and rolled over.

I was heavy with embarrassment, and my cheek pressed against the heated wood. I became the bird.

It Makes Sense

by Cristiaan Jackson



Koi Koi Koi

by Nancy Villa



Trapped Between Lightness and Dark

by Cristiaan Jackson



America, Birthdays, America's Birthday

by Joe Altamore

What are fireworks supposed to represent?
Bombs? Rockets?
Weapons of mass yada yada?
We already shook hands with blood at birth.
We didn't put a party hat on it.
Freddy Krueger is still scary as hell sporting a feather boa
yet we keep insisting on playing dress up
like evil is the only boy in a family of five siblings.
Everything is a euphemism, sublimated terrors lurking everywhere.
From handshakes (I can kill you)
to laughter (you will recognize my congeniality.)

Sleeping In complains that his graduation largess
has grown eyes and teeth and chases him around the bedroom.
I am beginning to think that gifts are only delayed requests.
That fateful Fourth of July when I couldn't kiss you
so I considered kissing the cement sidewalk at the base of a
thirty-story building instead,
which might have looked weird, but been less of a health hazard
had I not been at the top.
Did I mention suicide in there? I'm trying to avoid euphemisms.

What are candles on a cake supposed to represent?
Yeah, yeah, I know: years.
Then why are they on fire?
Maybe it's a reminder of how easily we can burn through them.
To that end, they'd be better as cigarettes or dollars
or somebody else's love.

I was never good with other people's symbolism, only my own.

Maybe a poem is just one giant euphemism for loss of control.

But how do you love a girl with a name like Biography Reading?

How do you ask her out on a date?

What if she misunderstands you, shows up at the coffee shop
with pitted tropical fruits of the same name?

What do dates represent?

The fruit, I mean.

God's benevolence toward man? "Gee, thanks," I say, looking upwards.

In one hand I carry the sorrows of earth,

in the other a basket of dates.

This scale could be balanced better.

The line above is a euphemism for existential frustration.

The line below is a euphemism for murder:

I didn't mind all of those men that got to live on the small of your back.

I just need their names and some identifying information.

Does jealousy represent deeply felt affection or something more primal?

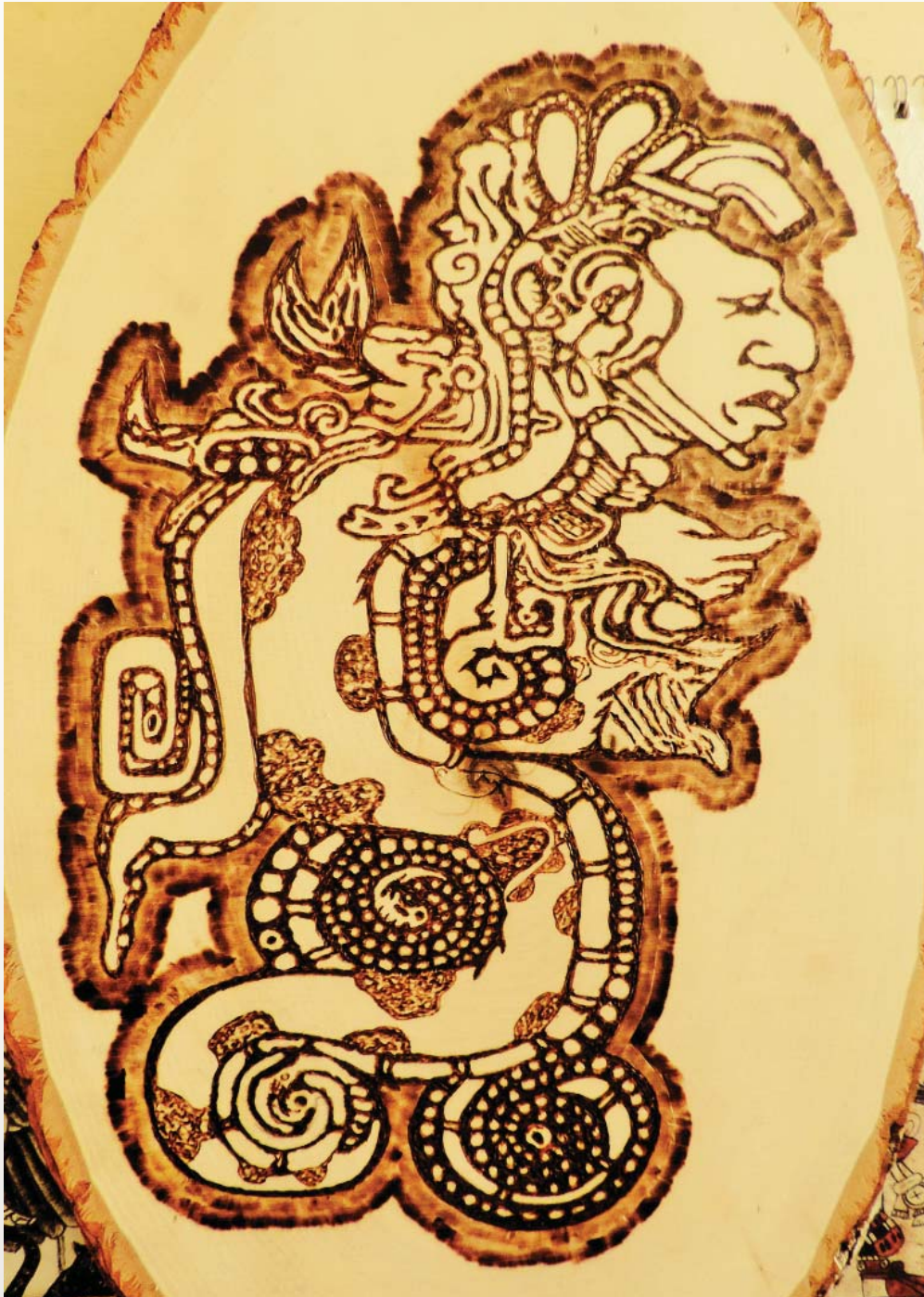
Do we beat our chests out of passion or anger?

And why the fuck should I ever have to tiptoe around the edges
of, "I love you?"



Kukulcan

by Jorge Martinez Zarco



Honey, I'm Home

by Madi Guzman



*Presented by
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Journalism 139 students*

Voices

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