

The Colonnade

2024-2025

Fine Arts &
Literature
Publication

NEWBURGH
FREE
ACADEMY



After the germ cells have united, they move into the complete, many-celled individual. In many species of plants and animals, the parent does this "on their own" in the external environment. The union takes place outside the body of either parent, as is the case with many species of fishes. Higher plants and animals, however, aid the process. After union has taken place, the higher forms keep the united cells some time within the body of one parent until the development has taken place. Plants and the eggs of reptiles and birds are typical. In the highest animals, growth takes place within the parent body until the new individual is completely formed, though immature. This is the case with all mammals—except the platypus and spiny anteater of Australia—and with many species among reptiles.

many people think, but it is not a snake.

a few

REPTILE (*rép'til*). To a reptile simply means snake, creeping and crawling creature. A class of animals. Reptiles are the first kingdom between the amphibians and the mammals. (Amphibians are animals that live both on land and in the water.) Many scientists believe that birds developed from reptiles several million years ago. The reptiles were then the ruling class among animals, some of them of giant size. (See PREHISTORIC LIFE.) These giant reptiles died out, and the reptiles living today are comparatively small. The largest of these are the crocodiles, some of which may reach a length of 23 feet, and pythons (which may reach 30 feet).

In many ways reptiles are much like amphibians. All are coldblooded, creeping animals with backbones. They are distinguished mainly by their lungs and their skin. Amphibians breathe through gills when they are young, and many kinds develop lungs. Reptiles, on the other hand, breathe by means of lungs all their lives. These lungs, too, are more highly developed than those of amphibians, bringing them a stage closer to the mammals. (Mammals have their young. They are usually covered with hair or fur and have a four-chambered heart and a diaphragm.) The skin of a

Amphibians is smooth and clammy, being kept moist by special slime glands. Water passes easily through this skin, and therefore most amphibians dry out and die if kept out of water for long. Reptiles have no slime glands, and their skin is dry and scaly. Because water cannot pass out through their skin, reptiles are able to live entirely on land. The reptiles living today are divided into four main groups: the turtles, the crocodilians, the lizards and snakes, and the strange lizardlike tuatara of New Zealand.

Turtles and tortoises differ from other reptiles in having their bodies surrounded by a bony shell covered with horny shields. Into this shell the head, legs, and tail can be drawn. Their toothless jaws are covered with sharp, horny substance. This may be broken up into sharp, pointed edges serving in place of teeth. All turtles and tortoises lay eggs. Many of the turtles live in or near bodies of fresh water. A few have finlike limbs or flippers and live in the sea. In American usage the term "tortoise," that is usually given to the members of their order that live entirely upon land. The food of turtles consists largely of fish and shellfish. Those which live in water feed mostly on fish, mollusks, and seaweeds. Tortoises eat earthworms, insects, vegetables, and fruits. (See **TURTLE**.)

The alligators and crocodiles and their relatives are long, four-limbed animals having scales covering their bodies. The plates on their backs and in some types on the belly are supported by bony cores. Alligators and crocodiles are so much alike that it may take a close examination to tell them apart. In the U.S., however, crocodiles have a shorter and broader snout. Both have the eyes on the top of the long, pointed head and breathe when the head is above water. The head shows the nostrils, using the mouth only for breathing.

The crocodiles are the largest of the reptiles. It is difficult to tell the difference between the alligators and crocodiles. The crocodiles have a pointed snout and their nostrils are placed near the front of the flat head so that they can see and breathe while in the water with only the top of the head above water. They swim by means of their tail and legs only for slow movement. They eat almost any animal food. All lay oval, hard-shelled eggs that are usually hatched by the heat of the sun or by rotting plant material. (See **ALLIGATOR AND CROCODILE**.)

Lizards and snakes belong to the order of reptiles.



JAS

Colonnade Editorial Staff Members

Natalia Aragon Nava, Jesus Arriaga, Dakota Diamond, Shanik Garcia-Marin, Annaya Harris Lino, Riley Maida, Amelia Reza, Ava Thomas-Pabon

Advisors: Ms. Gina Carbone, Mr. Ryan Walz



Mission Statement

The Newburgh Free Academy Colonnade is an annual compilation of student work that includes art, written composition, and photography. Its purpose is to create a lasting and indelible memory that immortalizes outstanding student contributions to the arts.

We hope that you find these poems, short stories, reflections, and visual pieces entertaining, enlightening, and perhaps even uplifting.

Special thanks to the NFA Administration, the Fine Arts Department, the English Department, and the NECSD Print Shop.

Front Cover: Tina Wang

Front Interior Cover: Jaslene Gomez

Rear Exterior Cover: Amelia Reza

Rear Interior Cover: Kamille Agulto

Featuring contributions from...

Kamille Agulto
Cesar Alpazar Bello
Jesus Arriaga
Nicolina Babcock-Perez
Jacklyn Balbuena
Liam Baxter
Aleyna Birinci
Mulan Brooks
Jake Corsetti
Robert Coyopol
Alexandria Crawford
Dakota Diamond
Ingris Diaz
Justin Flores
Aaliyah Fryar
Shanik Garcia-Marin
Jaslene Gomez
Jaqueline Gonzalez
Madison Gravel
Meriem Hamdoun
Anniya Harris Lino
Sofia Hernandez
Jah'zye Herring
Wilman Horta Leal
Charlotte Koziak
Annie Liu
Hector Lopez



Edwin Lozano
Riley Maida
Conor Mummery
Amir Okashih
Ryan Orsino
Jesse Pagano
Josephine Palmer
Aafreen Pathan
Jazer Pazos
Alyssa Pena
Vivian Piscitella
Amy Ramirez Wills
Amelia Reza
Desirae Rice
Lily Rios
Sarah Rivera
Diosmari Rodriguez
Laurent Sarr
Arlowe Schultz
Amiya Sisco
Brillith Sotelo
Anaydelyn Soyos-Cruz
Sahara Swarn
Arianna Sylvester
Ava Thomas-Pabon
Zara Tranquada
Jackson Vegliando
Dominick Zorilla



The Fire Within
Nicolina Babcock-Perez

I've walked through storms with shattered skies,
With fire in my lungs and truth in my eyes.
Each scar I bear is a map, a sign—
Of battles lost, but a soul still mine.
The nights were long, the silence loud,
Hope a whisper beneath the cloud.
But still I rose, with shaking hands,
Built my strength from broken strands.
I've drowned in doubt, I've choked on fear,
Yet somehow, still, I made it here.
Not whole, not healed—but not undone,
I kept on walking toward the sun.
They said I'd break. They watched me bend.
But I refused to let that be the end.
My voice grew hoarse from screaming pain,
But even then, I learned to reign.
I found a light within the dark,
A flicker first, then roaring spark.

And every tear that left its trace
Carved wisdom deep into my face.
The past still lingers, shadows creep,
And some nights, yes, I lose sleep.
But courage doesn't mean no fear—
It means I choose to persevere.
Through every no, through every door
That slammed behind me—still, I swore
To rise again, to find my pace,
To claim my name, to take up space.
They never saw the war I fought—
The silent battles, the tangled thoughts.
But still I breathe, I speak, I strive—
I've made it here, I'm still alive.
So let the winds howl through the night,
I've learned to stand, I've earned my fight.
My soul is steel, my heart is fire—
I'm not a victim. I'm a survivor.



Edwin Lozano



Jazer Pazos



My Funny Valentine
Aaliyah Fryar

How sweet and soft he is with me. That's one of the things I love. His funny little laugh too. Spending time with him is a dream. A fantasy that anyone who loves romance would dream to come true. The beautiful rain reminds me of his alluring eyes, the exact eyes that look at me with love, and tell so many stories. Too many that I can count, anyway.

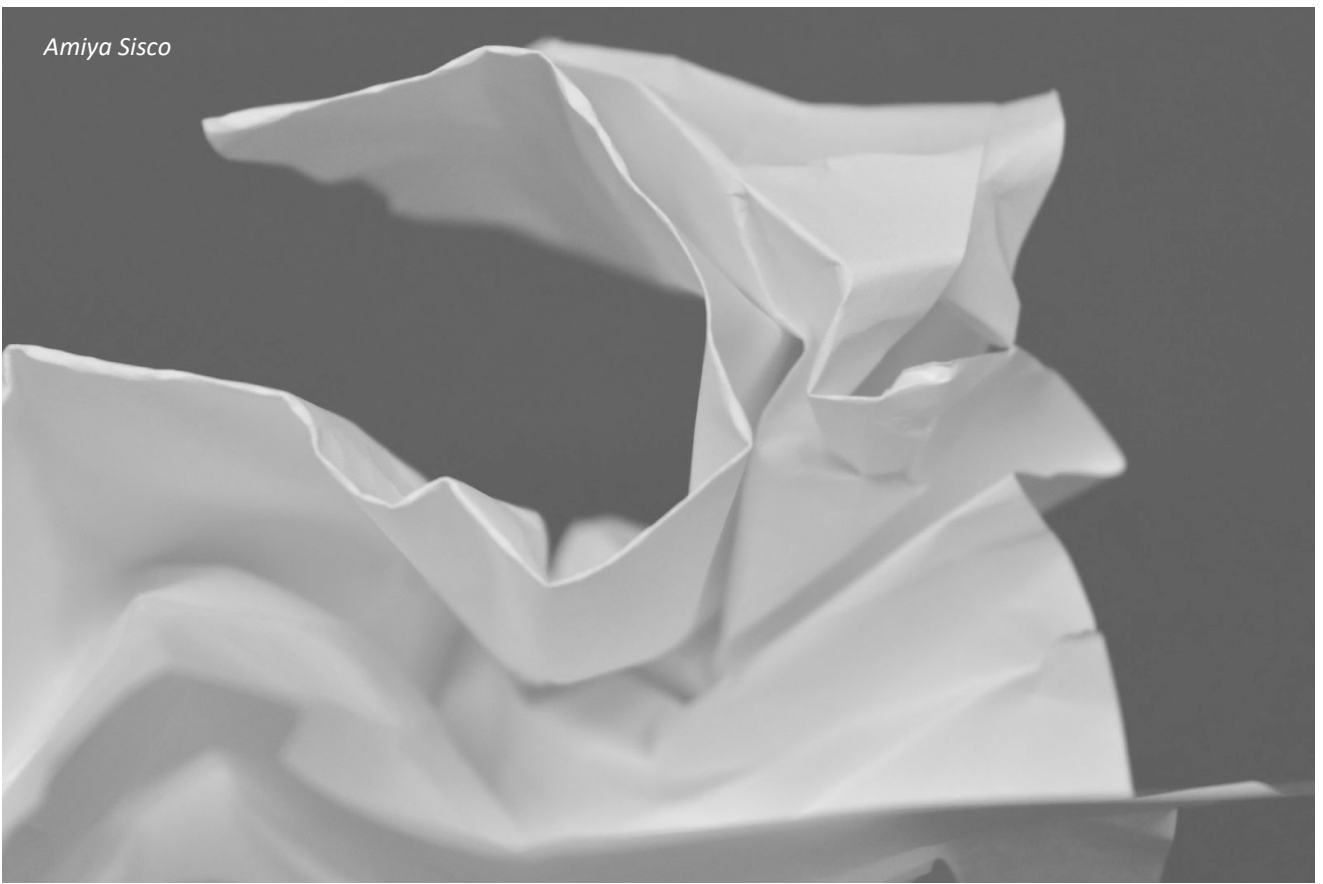
The songs that get stuck in his head, the little laughs he lets out when he says something funny in his head. My funny little valentine, he is. How delightful he becomes when I'm stressed, spoiling me with kind words and food, showering me with kisses and little jokes to get even the smallest laugh to come out. My funny valentine.

I tell him I'm not good with words, yet the feelings that sit on my heart for him speak thousands of them. Though I'm not the best, he still has love for me as I do for him. Though we fight like any two people in love do, we always come back together, like two swans mated for life.

My funny valentine, how I love him so. He makes my cheeks warm and my heart flutter. How can it not? When he speaks to me like I'm as soft as a feather, his voice, smooth like fresh silk. How in love I am with him, nothing can measure.

Oh how I love you, my funny valentine. Oh how I love you so.

Amiya Sisco



Jackson Vegliando



The Love of My Life?
Diosmari Rodriguez

Mami always told me,
“the love of your life is your best friend.”

1 friend,
2 friends,
3 friends.

“Mami, can I have more than three loves
in my life?”

3 friends,
2 friends,
A friend.

“Mami?”

Learning on my own,

Soon to learn that
The value of a friend has a ring to it,

The ringtone for the love of my life.

Whoever,
Whatever,

I sighed—
Why is this so confusing?

Friends come and go.
Is love the same?

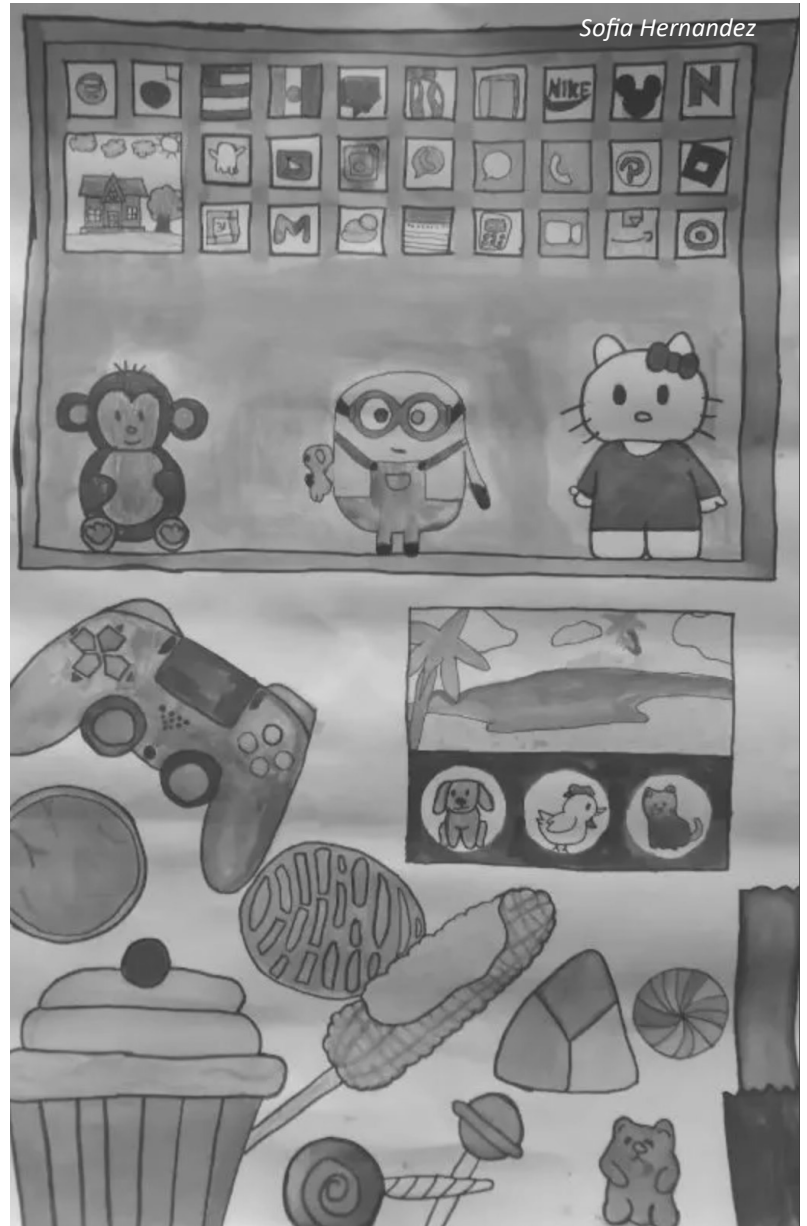
A friend,
He is who fits.

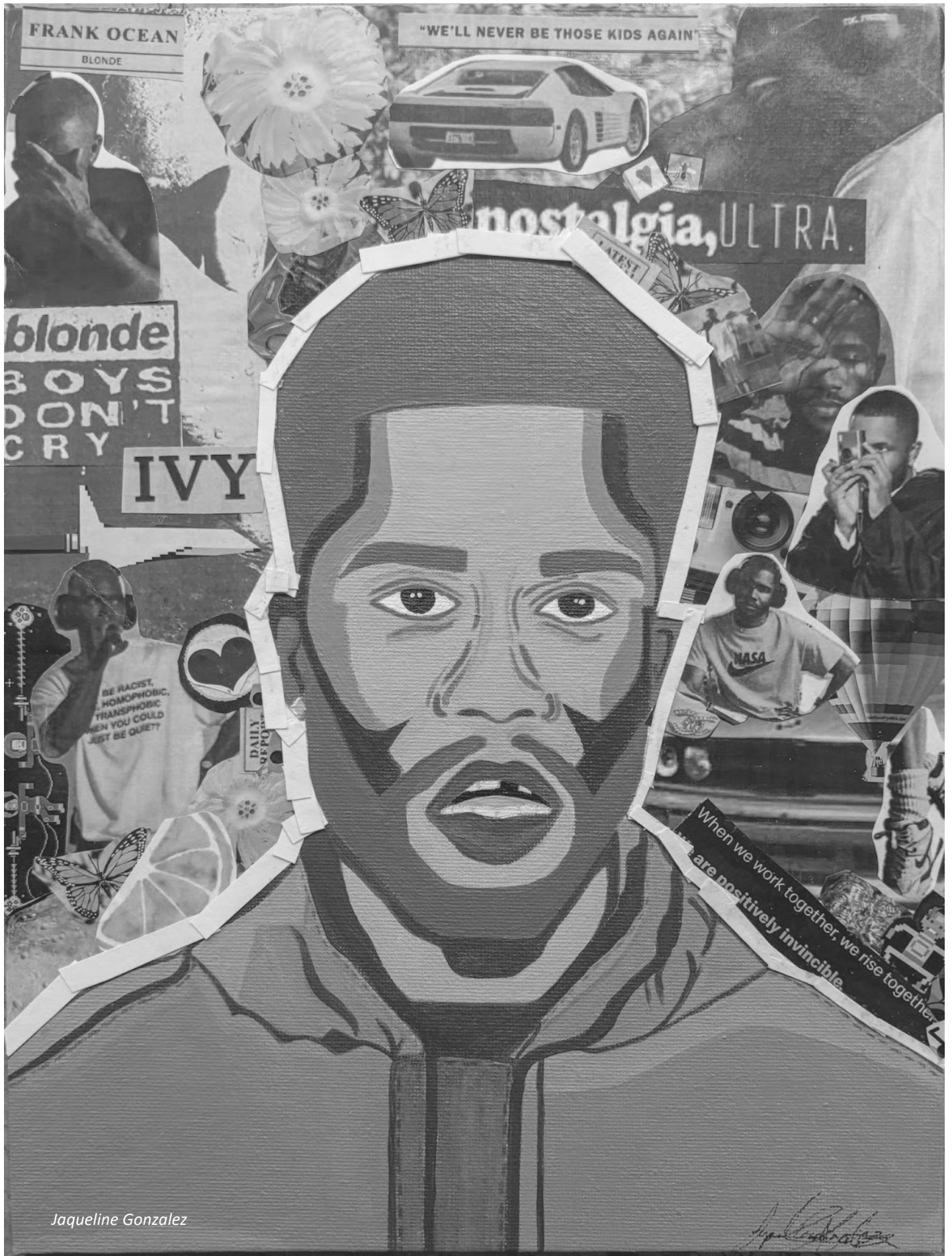
Unexplainable.
My love ringtone changed.

What is this feeling?
My heart is beating out of my chest.

Hours and hours we talk-
no rest.

A year goes by, and I just know:
He is my best friend.
The love of my life.





Jaqueline Gonzalez



Zara Tranquada

Grasp Onto It
Jaqueline Gonzalez

Hold on.
Hold on to the bad memories,
Even if they pain you.
Hold on to the good memories,
Even if you miss them.
Hold on to yourself,
Even if you feel like letting go.
Hold on to others you love,
Even if you feel like a burden.
Hold on to life,
Even when it feels like it's collapsing

Bliss or Blindness
Robert Coyopol

Walking these narrow halls with our heads held high,
We think we know it all - but do we really?
Scrolling fast, double taps, eventually we move on,
But what happens when our beloved blue light is gone?

Whispers roam, rumors fly,
No one stops and questions why.
Eyes stay gazed, ears drop like flies,
Truth gets lost amid all the lies.

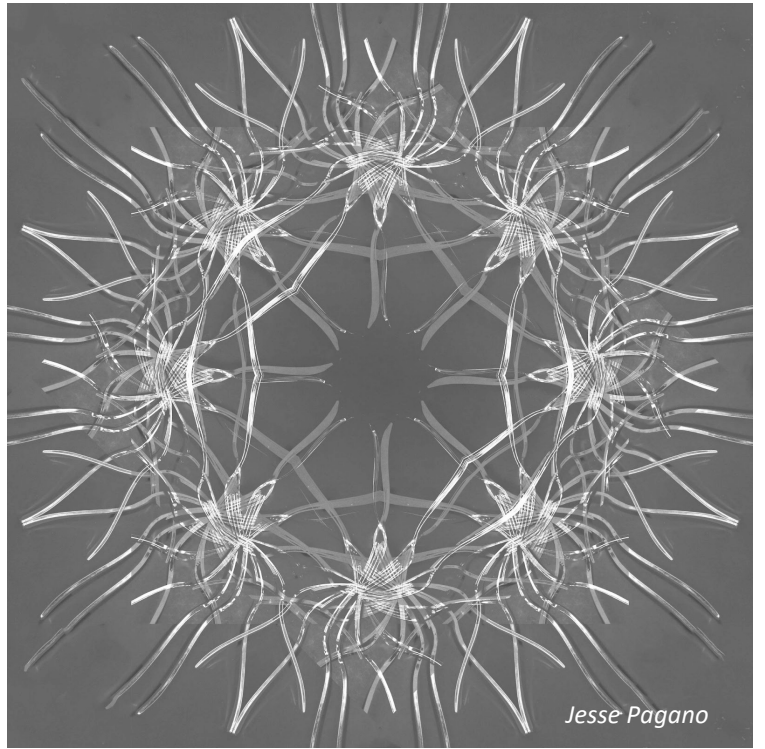
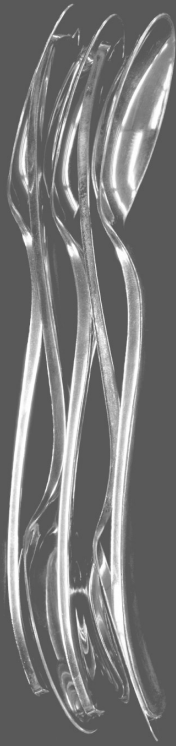
Test on Thursday, stay up all night,
But real life lessons? Out of sight.
History textbooks remain dusty and old,
So the same myths keep getting told.

Knowledge knocks, but we deny,
Afraid to ask the question: why?
Ignorance, our lovely companion,
Are you the cause of our expiration?



Justin Flores

Jake Corsetti



Jesse Pagano



Conor Mummery

Arlowe Schultz



Casa dei Nonni
Vivian Piscitella

Casa dei Nonni, where heart finds its place.
The rich scent of garlic and simmered sauce lingers in the air, a memory to embrace.

Nonna stirs the broth with hands worn by time,
Each careful motion, each flavor intertwined.

Lasagna, ravioli, each dish a gift,
Cannoli and struffoli, a sweet Christmas dish.

The forever table, watching our faces rearrange,
Black and white photos of family, their presence never ever strange.

Outside, snow falls like whispers in the night,
But inside, warmth represent a loving light.





Jesus Arriaga



Ingris Diaz



Sweet Dualities
Annie Liu

A donut, with its indulgence and simplicity,
Mirrors human desire — a constant chase.
At times, we crave excess, sweet and vast,
In material wealth or moments that pass.

We pile our lives with layers, bold and bright,
Hoping the excess will feel just right.
We seek out experiences, rich and grand,
Yet often, it's the simple touch we can't withstand.

The glossy glaze that coats the mind,
A surface sheen, but does it bind?
We pile our plates with ambitions and dreams,
But is it in simplicity that true joy springs?

For while we gorge on fleeting pleasure's plea,
It's in the quiet moments that we feel free.
Like the donut, both rich and light,
We find fulfillment and joy in what feels proper.

Yet, just as a donut's layers unfold,
So do we, with stories untold.
Beneath the sweetness, a deeper core,
A complexity we can't ignore.

Some are filled with flavors bold,
Some with surprises,
Others with quiet, secrets untold.
A dusting of cocoa, a swirl of frosting —
Each person's self a varied dream.

We wear our layers like toppings bright,
Each choice, a reflection of our inner battle.
Are we the sugary glaze we show?
Or the layers of dough, more complex below?

But within the layers, a maelstrom whirls —
A storm of thought, a dance of worlds.
We strive for peace, yet hunger for more,
Caught in the chaos, we find ourselves unsure.
Perhaps it's not the gilded glaze we wear,
But the simple truths, the moments rare,
That brings us peace and quiet grace—
The softest touch, the simplest embrace.

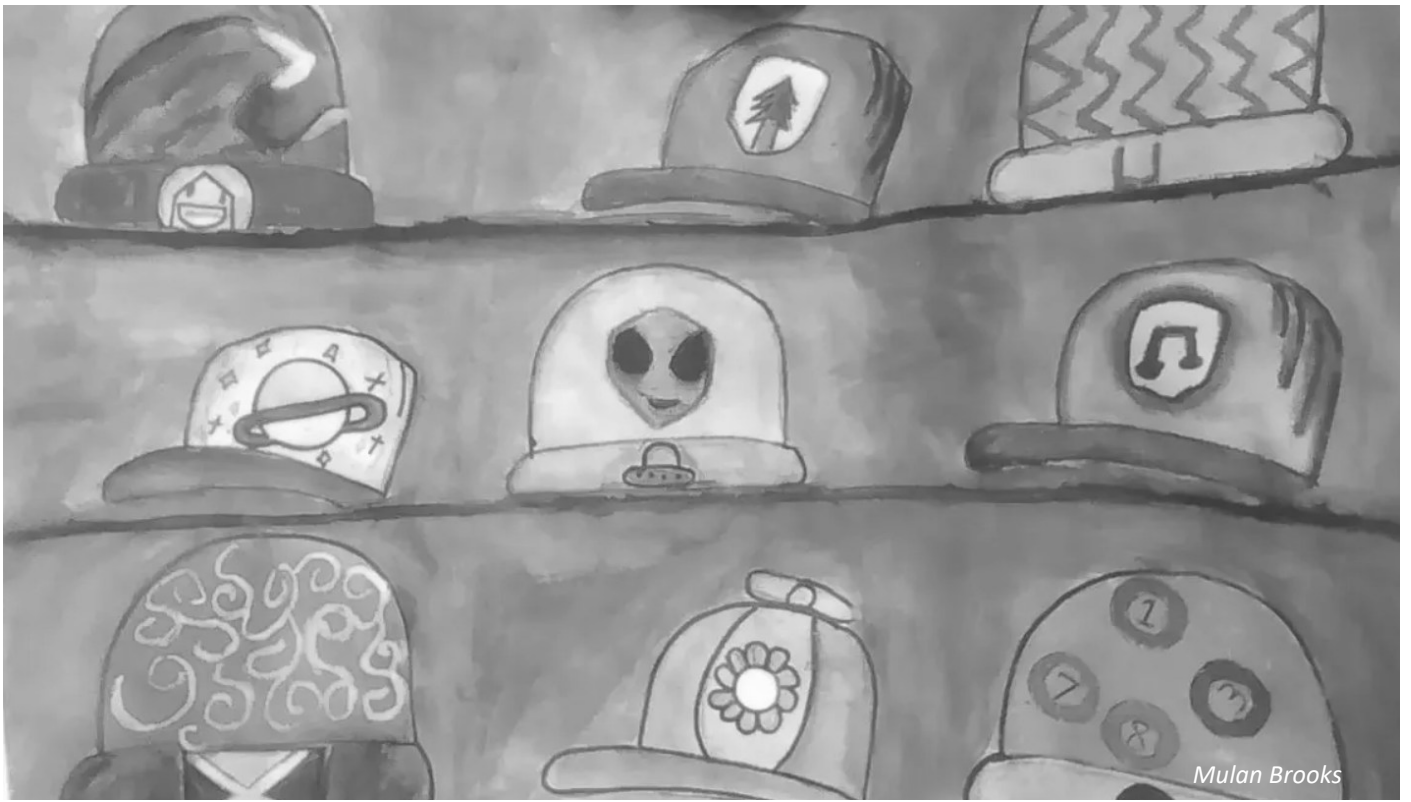
In craving more, do we lose our way?
Or find ourselves conflicted in the things we don't say?
For sometimes, it's not the excess we chase,
But the simplicity that brings us grace.

So we look at the donut, round and pure,
A paradox, simple yet obscure.
In its abundance, we find a transient cure,
And in its emptiness, a space to endure.

Are we more than the layers we crave,
Or the hollow that we long to save?
For in the balance of excess and restraint,
We find the pleasures that won't grow faint.

Just as a donut holds a thousand tastes,
Our identities, too, are filled with many weights.
In every topping, a doughy fold,
Are the stories of lives, both quiet and bold.

And in the sprinkles, a spark, a sign—
Of how, sometimes, it's the little things that shine.



Hector Lopez

Hector Lopez
3/22/25

A Weird Family



Love in Times of Rupture
Anaydelyn Soyos-Cruz

Love is a beautiful and terrifying concept, an emotional battleground where warmth and pain coexist. For her, love was a deep longing, a desire to feel loved in every language. She longed for that tingling in her stomach, the nerves that made her smile when she heard his voice, and the peace she found when laughing with someone who understood her essence. Yet the shadow of her past wounds followed her, like a persistent echo recalling the times when love had been a double-edged sword.

The scars on her heart were deep, like cuts that wouldn't heal with simple Band-Aids. Each painful memory was a mark on her skin, a reminder that she had loved intensely and had been hurt. She felt like she was trapped in a time loop, where good moments intertwined with bad, and hope mingled with fear. She was like a shattered vase, with pieces she tried to put back together, but always visible cracks remained.

There were thorns in her throat, unspoken words struggling to escape, and in her eyes, a sea of emotions that overflowed when she spoke. She wanted to be loved, despite her history filled with heartbreak and wounds. She had tried to heal herself, recognizing that no one would do it for her. With each attempt at repair, she learned to love again, to discover beauty in vulnerability.

One day, she met someone who lit up her world. He was a person who saw beyond the scars, who accepted her just as she was. With him, she felt a deep connection, a love that seemed pure and sincere. Yet, the fear of betrayal plagued her. She wondered if she could open her heart again, if she could risk loving someone who might break her once more.

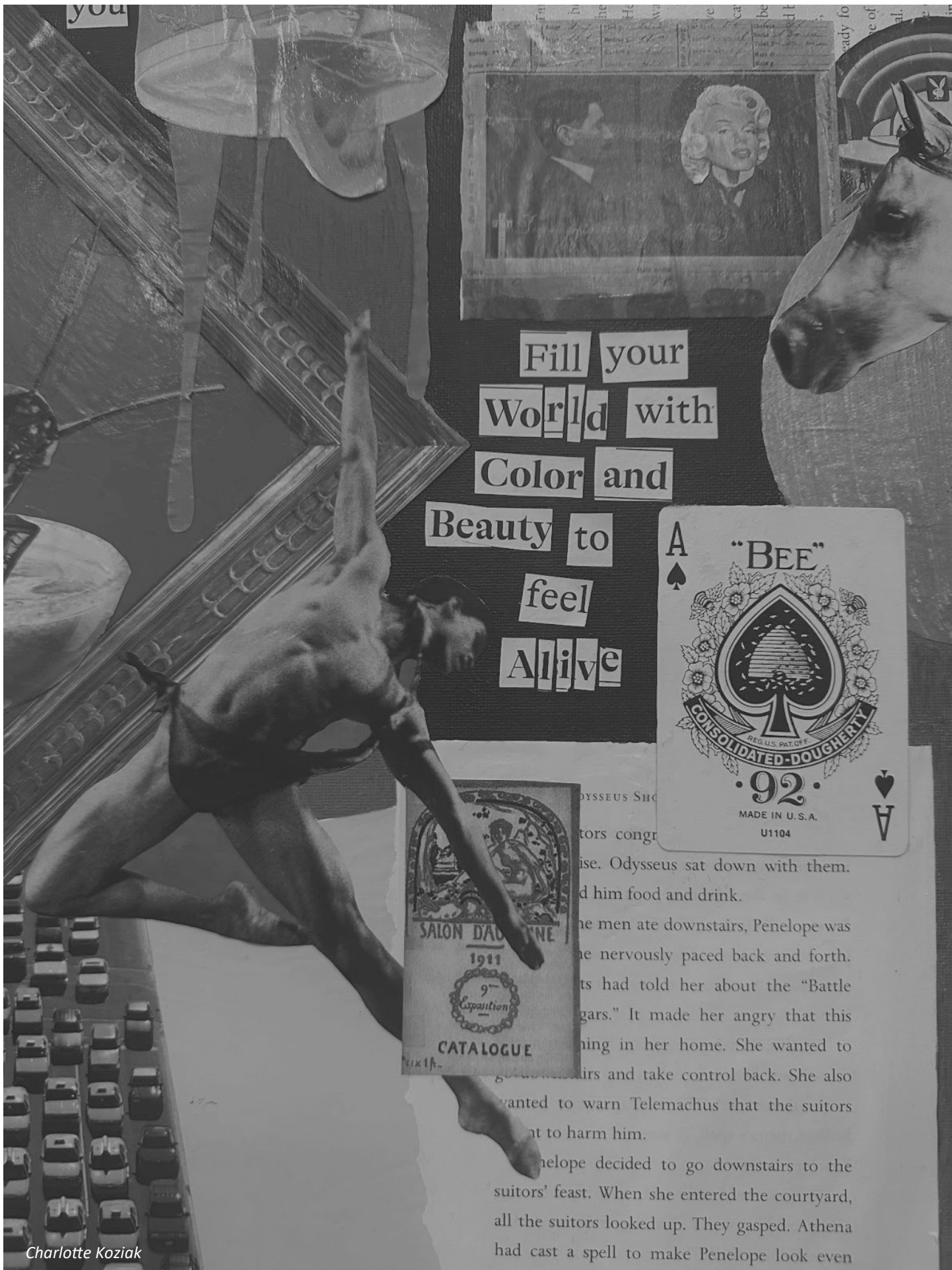
With each encounter, love grew, and she realized the risk was worth it. Hope began to displace fear, and she allowed herself to dream of a future together. She understood that love wasn't perfect, that it carried with it the risk of being hurt, but also the possibility of experiencing genuine happiness.

Finally, she decided to take a risk. With her heart on her sleeve and a mixture of fear and hope, she surrendered to that love. She accepted that, although she was broken, she had the capacity to love and be loved. In that act of courage, she found a peace she had never felt before. She learned that true love is not about the absence of wounds, but about the ability to embrace vulnerability and allow someone into her life, despite the scars.

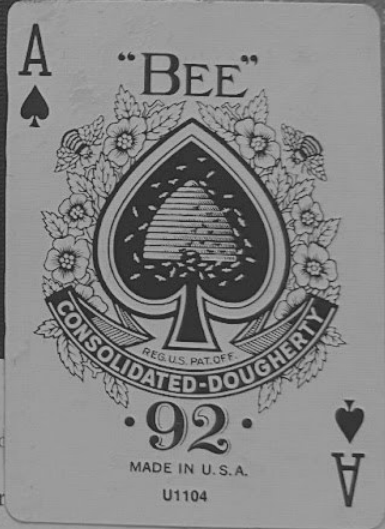
So, amidst her fears and hopes, she chose to love, knowing that every day was a new opportunity to heal and grow. Love, in its purest form, became her refuge, a place where she could be herself, broken but beautiful, ready to write her own love story.



Amy Ramirez Wills



Fill your
World with
Color and
Beauty to
feel
Alive



ODYSSEUS SHE
tors congr
ise. Odysseus sat down with them.
d him food and drink.
ne men ate downstairs, Penelope was
he nervously paced back and forth.
ts had told her about the "Battle
gars." It made her angry that this
hing in her home. She wanted to
gains and take control back. She also
wanted to warn Telemachus that the suitors
t to harm him.
elope decided to go downstairs to the
suitors' feast. When she entered the courtyard,
all the suitors looked up. They gasped. Athena
had cast a spell to make Penelope look even

Charlotte Koziak

Another Self
Dominick Zorrilla

The hatred. One of the most lethal poisons of man
But it is also one inevitably evil.
All day long I suffer from this unbearable contamination,
Forced by the melancholic feeling that there is something wrong with me,
Something that is not normal,
Making me not fit in
Like a defective piece in this jigsaw puzzle that is life.
Escaping my own reality, vigorously trying to build a mask for my wounded soul.
I desire to become something else
Like a snake growing wings
Or a fish walking on land,
Something that makes me forget the endless curse of being myself
And the flaws stuck to my personality and soul.
I want to be something new,
Something unexpected that makes me feel worthy,
Something that does not remind me of all my imperfections.
I want to be another self.
A self that isn't infamous.
A self that doesn't bleed.
A self that doesn't have this endless ache.





June 2026
Madison Gravel

Who will still be by my side?
What happens after I cross Academy Field?
When do I have to “grow up”?
Where will I continue my education?
Why do I feel so unprepared for June 2026?

Who, What, When, Where, Why?

For why am I stressing these questions as if the end of the world depends on my answers?
When in reality, these questions have the potential to make the best version of the world I’ve yet to experience.

Know that the best people with genuine love will stay, **know** that the world is your oyster, **know** that growing up is not a feeling but an inevitable gift, **know** that wherever you choose to go is right and **know** that you have enough knowledge to be ready for anything.

Who, What, When, Where, Why...
am I losing sleep over what happens following June 2026?



Josephine Palmer



Dakota Diamond



Arianna Sylvester



The Skeleton Of You
Sahara Swarn

You've been gone long,
Yet I can't let go
Not yet.
Your spirit says "free me,"
But how can I when your body is so close?
Your bony fingers intertwined with my flesh filled ones,
Your once beating heart against mine that pleads for you,

I apologize for my greed that night.
I couldn't bear the thought of you with someone else.

I did what I had to.

I carry the burden of hearing your last few faint breaths,
A painful reminder of my nails that dug into your neck.
Now on nights like this, I lay with your skeleton.
Holding you the way I used to before.

It Pours
Jah'zye Herring

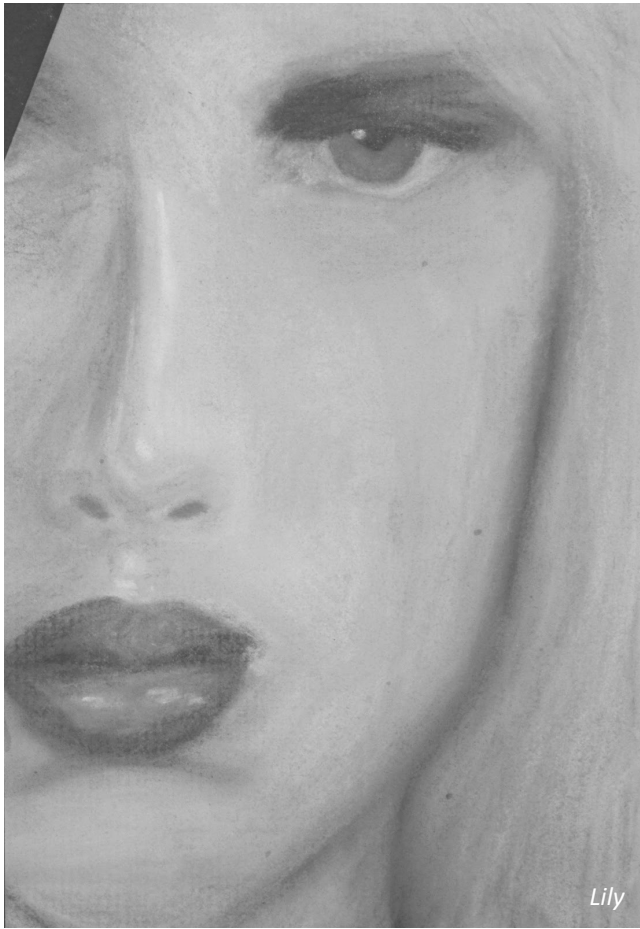
Everyone knows that on some days it pours.
Sometimes it could just be through a creak in a door
As the wind blows by and time slows down.
Sometimes these day make you want to drown,
Drown in the sound of the running in the halls,
Drown in the pounding of the voices through the walls.
And for others, a silence filling the room,
Almost feeling like a suffocating tomb.
Quietness up in the air
Filling with a kind of despair,
But for some, that despair ends with glee
And others, they'll just run and flee,
But nevertheless when it comes to this pain
And life goes and grabs you by the reigns,
In comes a thunderous rain.
And when the day ends and you're alone and bored
Just know, that some days it pours



Aleyna Birinci



Amir Okashih



A Day of Brightness

Ryan Orsino

Her hair was as bright as the day,
Though it began to fade away.
Maybe it was just the way
I felt about her on that day.

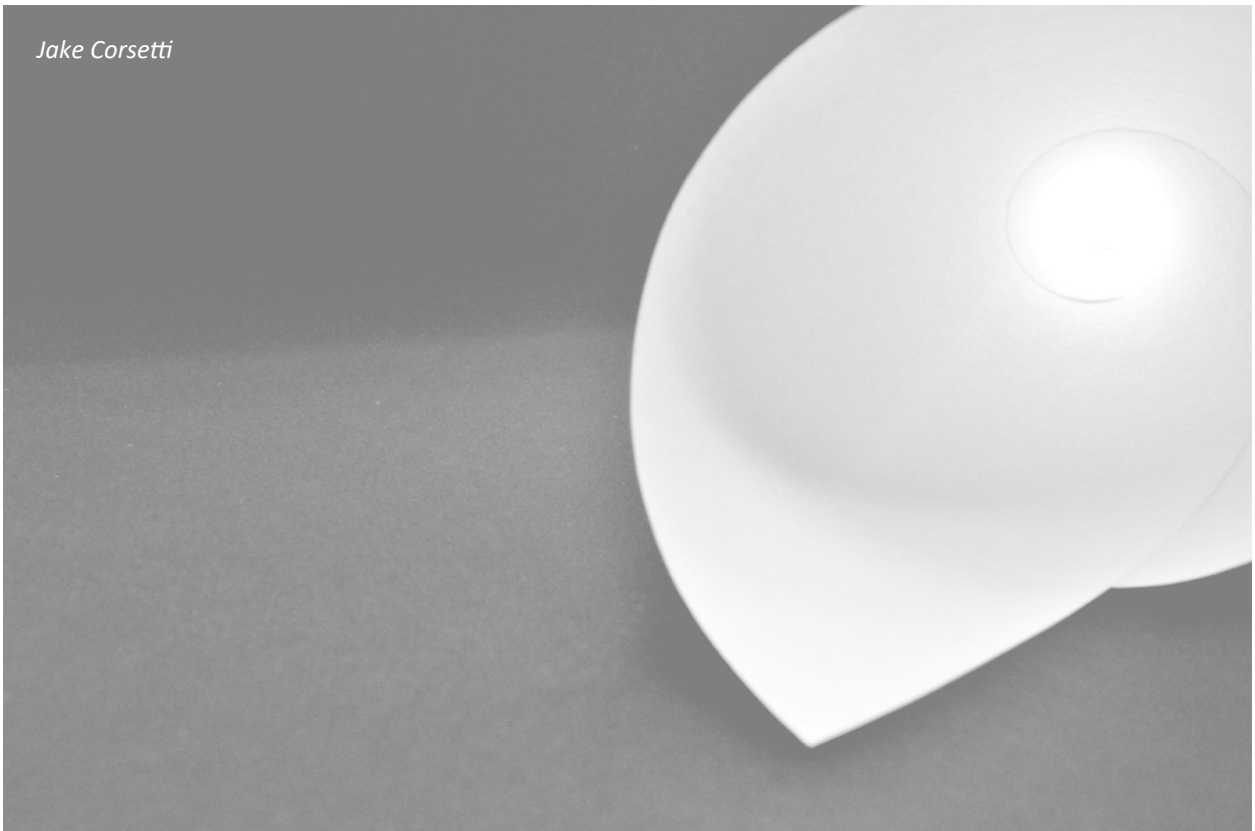
Her smile once lit up my sky,
Her once-bright eyes now purely dry.
Something about her has shifted.
My heart is no longer lifted.

Feel
Shanik Garcia-Marin

Say goodbye to the person that was.
Do not run, walk.
Proceed to hold yourself gingerly.
The birds will speak,
You will awake.
A bathroom mirror was never against you.
You are allowed to speak softly,
Bathe yourself in sunlight,
Caress your hair for new beginnings,
Feel your skin.
Feel the eternal gap between an inhale and an exhale,
Hear yourself breathe.
Tuck this black jacket around you—
it will not be cold forever.
In one blink the rain drops will hit the ground.



Jake Corsetti



Alexandria Crawford

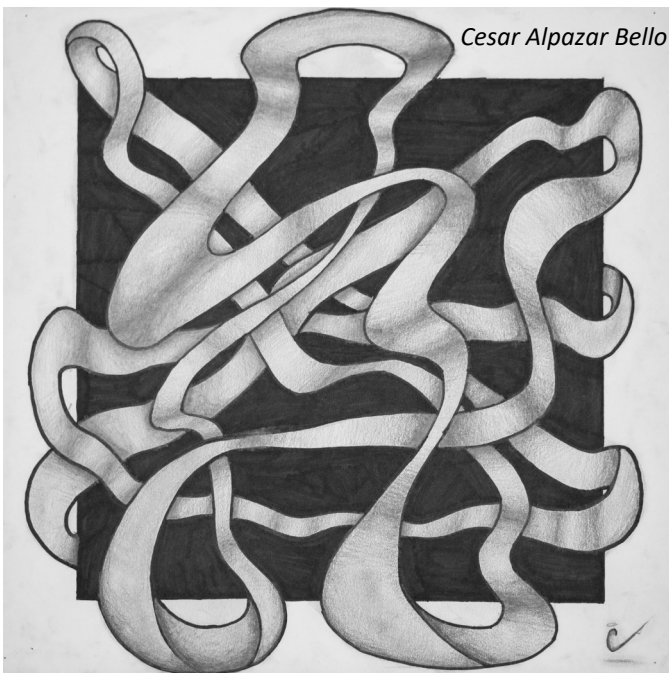


Annaya Harris Lino



What of Tomorrow?
Desirae Rice

I sit and stare,
My words go nowhere,
My mind races with thoughts,
A door I won't knock,
As time moves on the clock,
A race I cannot stop.
I know it's for the better,
The reason I write my letter,
The thought of the end brought much more than sorrow,
The overwhelming question: "what of tomorrow?"
Will it be filled with abundance and life?
Or will it have me crying out to Christ?
I know what I want, I know that it's you.
You bring color, a certain type of hue.
I don't want to depend on you and you only.
Piece by piece, I'm okay but just slowly,
Something I've never felt before, someone completely new.
I read my books but all of a sudden, I don't feel so blue.
"Does their absence make you feel relieved?" they ask.
No it does not, my answer as clear as glass.
"What of tomorrow?"
Abundance or sorrow?
Forward or back?
My mind starts to crack.
I sit and stare,
My words remain nowhere,
Mind racing with thoughts,
A door I never knocked,
Time moving on the clock,
A race that'll never stop,
But what of tomorrow?



Musings For a Mother
Laurent Sarr

The rushing honey bees around her.
A dog and puppy by her side await.
In her bed, she lies praying in need.
Could be a possible persistent heart beat.

She has lovers to jostle the heart.
She has family to open her eyes.
Herself can believe she's enough.
This is a positive creature in us.

Rare name to me! My mother, my heart
grows from the ground
to grab. You gave me
a heart as my resource.

You're my resource of
blessings. One prayer
makes a special magic.
I live for you and forever.

Thanks for giving me security.

Thank you for your forever service.

Poppy

Planting Season

They bloom from late summer to early frost in the fall. The plants are often only 16 to 18 inches tall, bloom in midsummer. The planting season is in May, if roots or plants are used, or in March if the plants are grown from seeds. This latter method of propagation is used for

has long narrow pointed petals. The various species and varieties have been crossed and selected until there are hundreds of kinds.

andy plains. Late in the 19th century they were introduced to Europe. The poppy which bore still the same form then the dahlia. Most countries in cultivation hundreds of varieties have been bred. The first, Andersson, was of great interest. *Papaver*



These small flowering plants are used as border plants. The most successful method is the most successful for the beginner. The plants are planted from two to three inches apart. The plants are four inches

POPPY

species of the poppy are the most common. They are found in the mountains of the Alps, the Pyrenees, and the Himalayas. The poppies grow in the north temperate zone. They are used in gardens for their flowers. The flowers of the Mediterranean poppies are the largest, often six to eight inches across, white to red in color. Iceland poppies, from arctic regions, have small, fragrant flowers of different delicate colors. Alpine poppies are low-growing rock garden perennials with sweet-scented yellow or white

Asia, is topped with many, creamy to bright orange flowers. The California poppy is found in western United States. California varieties may have single or double flowers, some in shades of red. Prickly poppies are natives of the warm, dry parts of the United States. They have white, yellow, or purplish poppylike flowers and thistlelike leaves. They become weeds in some places.

Poppies grow best in sunny places. Most kinds do well in ordinary garden soil. Seeds



and dies. After this happens, the bulbs may be dug up and stored in a dry place, or they may be left in the ground

POPPY

Meriem Hamdoun

My Silence Ends Here
Nicolina Babcock-Perez

I've swallowed storms to keep the peace,
Let shame demand my voice's lease.
I've bent and bowed beneath the weight
Of silence dressed up as "fate."

They told me, *hush, don't rock the boat—
Be softer, sweeter, learn to float.*
*But I was made of deeper tide,
Of truths too jagged now to hide.*

I held my words like loaded guns,
Afraid they'd scare off everyone.
So I locked them in behind my eyes,
And wore a mask that whispered lies.

But masks crack under years of ache,
And quiet hearts can still break.
My silence wasn't grace or grace—
It was a cage.
It was *erased*.

I used to dream of speaking loud,
Of standing tall, unbowed, unbowed.
But dreams are not enough to live,
And I have more than pain to give.

**I will no longer bite my tongue.
The war is over—I have won.**
If I must scream, then let me burn—
I will not wait to take my turn.

Let them flinch, let them flee—
I don't exist for them to agree.
My voice is flame, is quake, is key—
And it is finally breaking free.

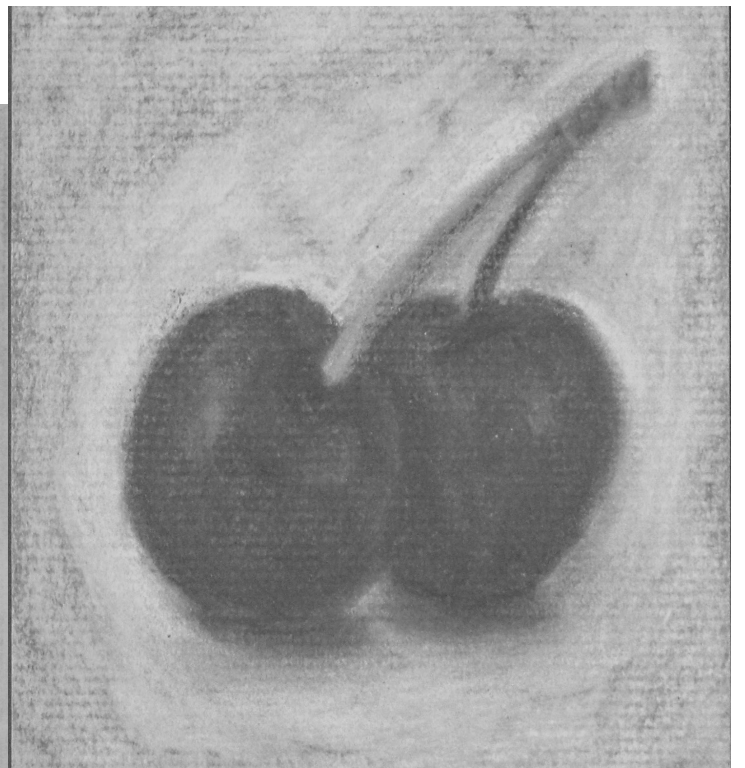
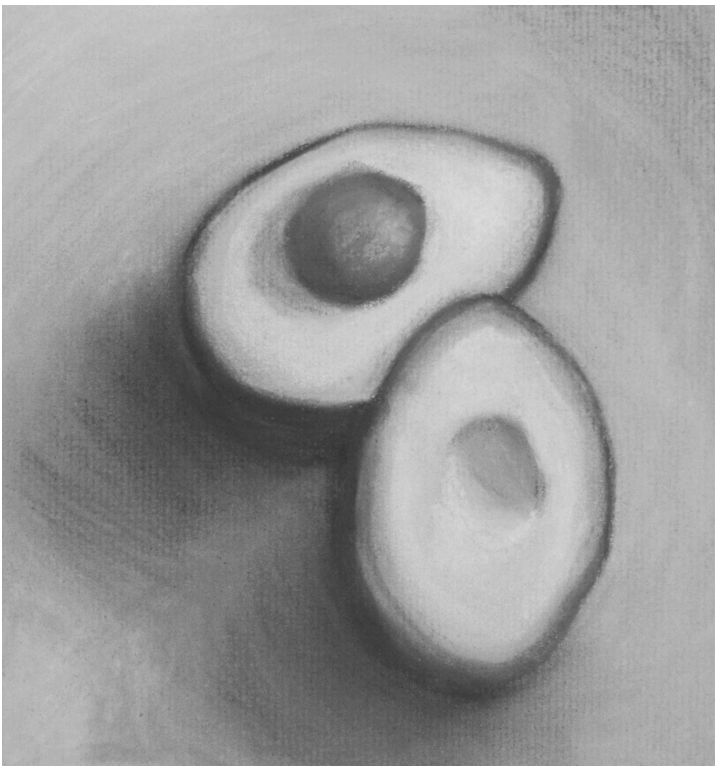


No more whispers in the dark,
No more burying my spark.
I'm done with shrinking just to fit,
Or choking on what won't submit.

I speak for every silenced hour,
For all the times they stole my power.
For every "you're too much" I heard—
I rise. I roar. I cut. I surge.

So let the sky split from my cry,
Let all who've doubted wonder why.
My voice is mine—raw, bright, and clear.
And I am done with doubt and fear.

**My silence ends today, right now.
I'll never again learn to bow.
I'm thunder, fire, and rising sea—
And no one's ever caging me.**



Lily Rios

Shanik Garcia-Marin



Close Shortcomings
Liam Baxter

Even before we are born, we are looked at as an idea to our parents. An idea that they wish to have a family. That idea, nine months later, becomes a reality. "The world is a barren desert with a paradise right next to it, and I'm a speck of dust that won't move to that paradise."

There were always questions that I had not for myself but the world. Too many—some too big, others too small and not worth asking. Why did things exist? Why did people live as if the world wasn't unraveling like an onion, layer by layer? Why did everything feel both infinite and fragile at the same time? Teachers praised the sharpness of the mind that asked them, classmates admired the effortless grades. Others saw it as a front with nothing left in the end. Understanding equations and history facts didn't bring us any closer to understanding the world itself.

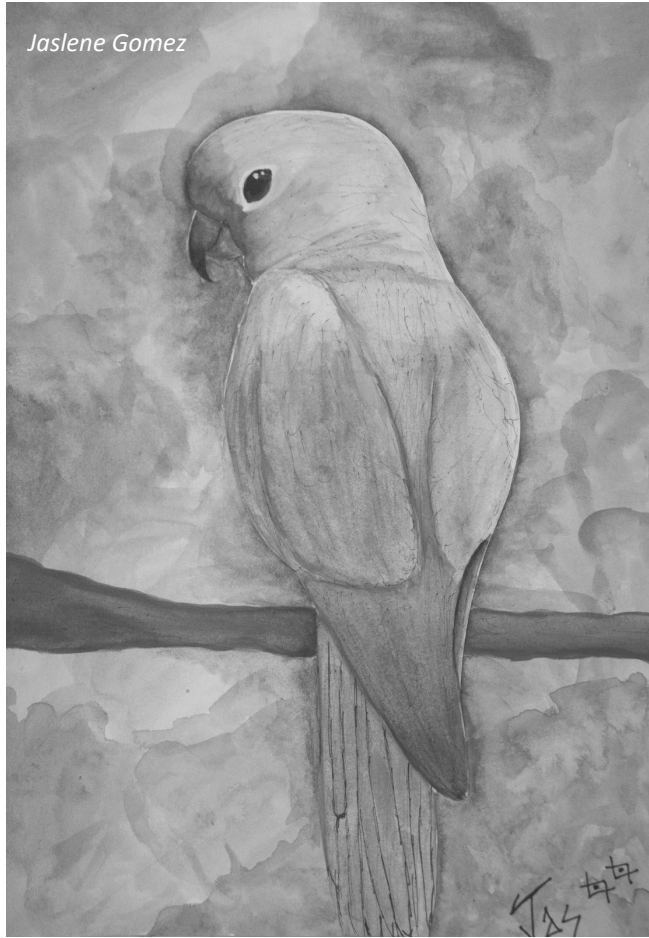
One night, the weight of it all settled in, heavy and suffocating. So suffocating it was as if I was a million stories below the surface of the water. The universe stretched endlessly and in comparison, everything else did as well. School, routines, and ambitions felt unbearably small. In the grand scheme of it all, what did it matter? A single life was nothing more than a speck of dust in a vast, empty desert. That thought stuck, lodged deep in my chest like a cold, immovable stone.

For days, it lingered. But then something shifted. Not in the sky or the universe, but in the little things. A laugh shared with a friend, the feeling of a pencil gliding across paper, the warmth of sunlight through a classroom window. The world might have been incomprehensibly vast, but that didn't mean existence was meaningless. The impact made on even the smallest scale mattered.

The fear of it all never fully disappeared, but rather moved as if it was on the opposite side of the planet. But maybe, just maybe, the beauty of life was in the little things.

Finally that small speck of sand moved closer and closer to paradise.

Jaslene Gomez



Dakota Diamond



Lily Rios





Brushstrokes of Survival
Jacklyn Balbuena

There's a moment, just before I touch my canvas, when time stands still. At that moment, it's just me, a blank canvas and a whole world of colors. I didn't discover painting in art classes or from a textbook; it found me while I tried to survive.

Growing up, my home life felt less like a childhood and more like a battlefield. I was forced to mature quickly, taking on roles that I as a child should not have been able to fill. I became a mediator, a caretaker, but most importantly, an observer. Later, I became a survivor of something I never thought I'd have to endure, an experience that shattered not only my sense of safety but my sense of self. And throughout it, my mental health wavered under the weight of it all.

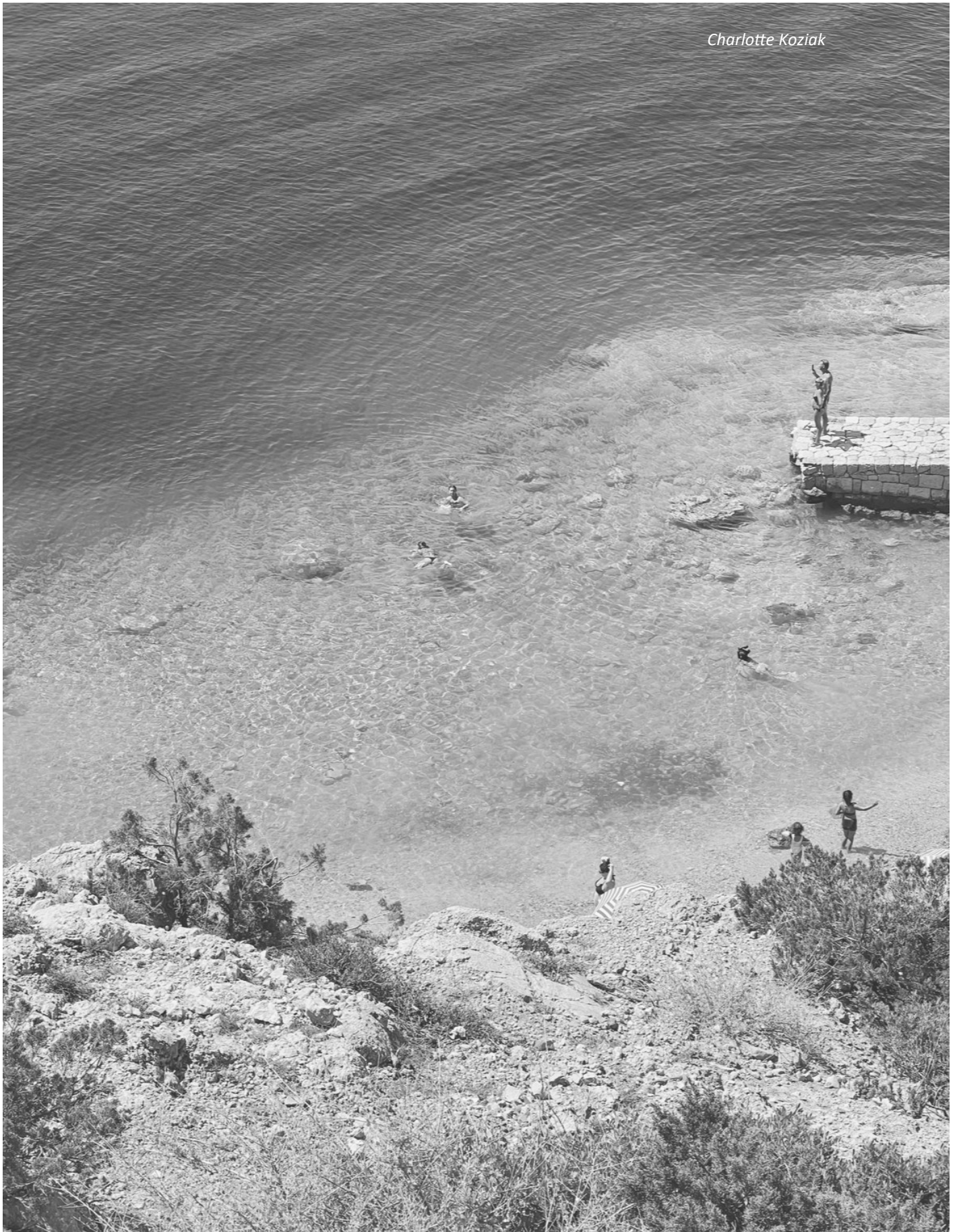
Painting became my way of reclaiming space in a world that had taken so much from me. At first, I painted in silence, alone in my room, where the only sounds were a soft sweep of a brush. I didn't think about technique. I let my emotions bleed into colors. Some days, it was deep reds and chaotic lines. Other days, soft blues and calm skies. Over time, the canvas began to reflect not just my pain, but my growth. It became a diary that did not ask for explanations. It was just a place where I could be honest. Without fear.

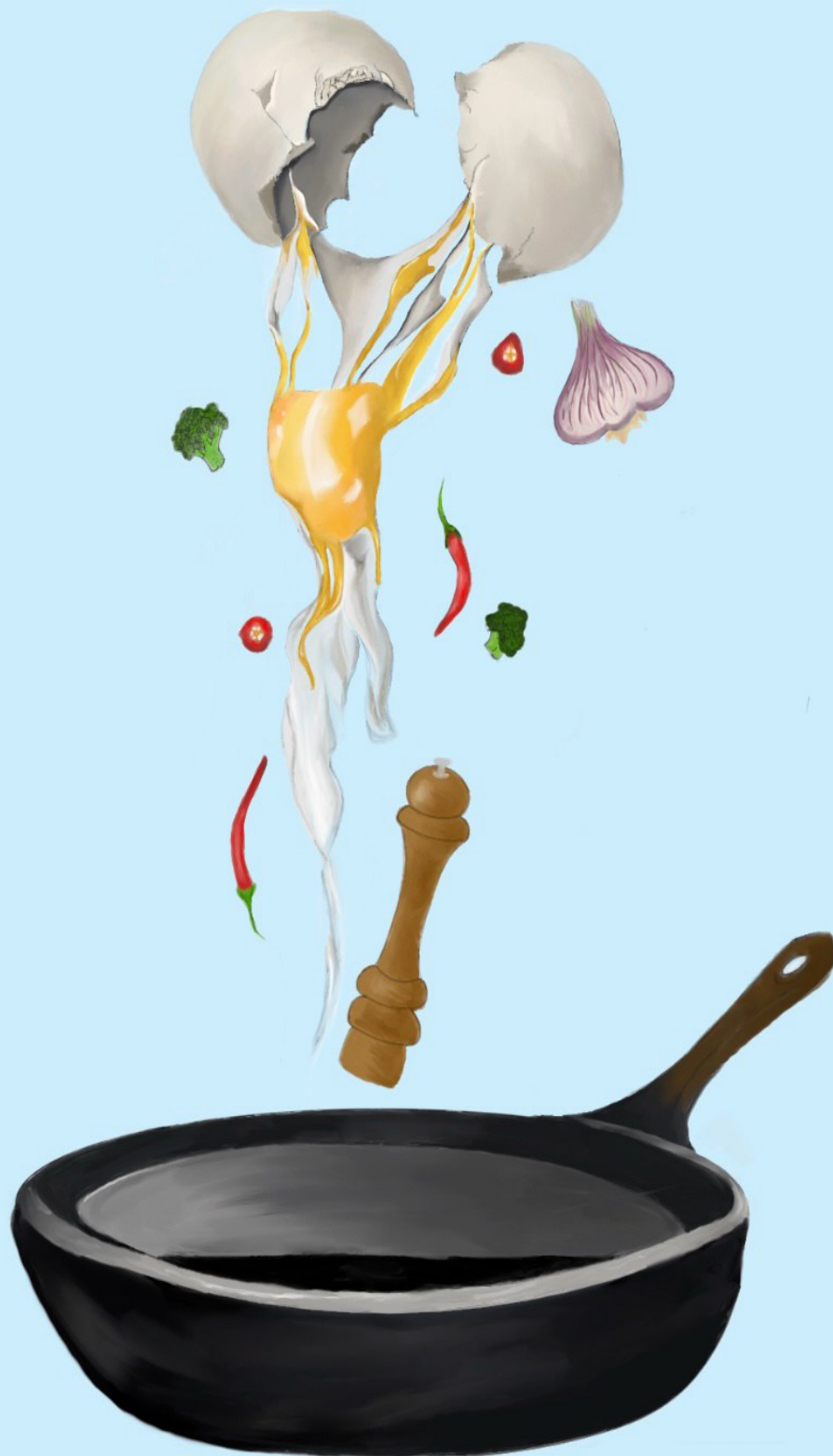
What I love most about painting is that it allows contradictions. A single piece can be both broken and beautiful, just like people. That's what I strive for; not perfection, but truth.

Art has taught me how to sit with my feelings without letting them consume me. It has taught me patience, acceptance, and above all, resilience. The same way I layer paint to create depth, I've learned to layer my experiences—not to hide them, but to honor them. Because behind every challenge is a story, and I've found the courage to tell mine—on canvas, and now, here.

I used to think my past made me damaged, but through painting, I see now that it made me complex, compassionate, and deeply human. And as I continue through life, I carry not just my wounds, but the wisdom they gave me—and a brush, ready to keep creating.

Charlotte Koziak





K.A

