

The Stone Circle

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Justin Pryor

Reckless and Abandoned

McLennan Community College
Journal of Literary and Visual Art

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Stuck

by Shevie Libhart

First Prize - Prose

I have been stuck on this shelf for 43 days. I am stuck, but the world has carried on as if I was not there. "Stuck" is the right word, as my stick sits in a cardboard display that prevents me from wiggling into people's lines of sight. I stand firm and tall as each person passes, hoping I will be chosen over those hateful chocolate bars and stuck-up ice cream tacos that customers carry by my shelf. My name is Alec, and I am a spiral lollipop. I live on the top shelf at the 7-eleven.

In the 43 days I have been here, all my friends and family have disappeared, yet I am still here, waiting. Each time a child enters my aisle, I try to grab their attention with my yellow and blue stripes. I am so beautiful; my colors are bright, not faded. I am tall, not broken. The display box is tattered on one side, but no one can see the damage. I am a vision of the ideal lollipop you want, so why can't I get someone's attention? When will I take the much-awaited trip to the register?

I share my aisle with the other candy bars and an ice cream freezer. Most of the candy is reasonable and supportive. We all want to be taken from our boxes to the register. Not the Reese's candy, though; they are cruel to everyone and gloat each time someone in their group takes the ride.

"We hate to leave, but we must go," they taunt, "Oh, who was overlooked again!"

Or, "We are down to only two, that means another box is coming; when will your box be refilled?"

They tear down everyone around them. Of course, competing with peanut butter and chocolate is different for me. I am crystallized sugar, but they know how to ruffle my plastic wrap. Yes, they leave the shelf quickly, but one day they will see that not everyone loves them as much as they think. The Reese's are mean, but the Ice Cream tacos are worse. From my spot, I see their silver lining shimmer in the light, drawing in the patrons as they pass the cooler. When pulled from their frozen home, they gloat. Some are opened right there; they do not finish their journey to the register. Still, they *feel* the world without a wrapper. I can only imagine it. Each day, I envision the bliss of being chosen.

"Keep your head up, Alec," my best friend, Stix, says, "We will be chosen; it just takes time."

Stix and I arrived in the same display box, but he acts older than his age. He has a notch in his stick, a defect from production. He thinks he may never leave, never be chosen.

"I don't have time! I am ready for my journey," I say.

"Patience," says the Now and Later. They were lost behind our box, left to gather dust, and they know patience. They expired two years ago, which is my worst

fear. What if I expire? What *happens* to lollipops that expire? Or worse, what if I break? No, no, I can't bear to think of it. I *will* be chosen. The next person on my aisle is mine.

"I want to know what happens when we are chosen. It must feel fantastic, to be a person's choice. I can't wait," I object.

"No one's come back to tell their story. I see their wrappers dropped in the bin. They must be too busy enjoying the world to return," Stix says.

As if they heard my words, a person comes down my aisle. He scans the shelves, top to bottom, right to left, looking at each of us. *Stand tall, be bright, oh snap, he's looking at you!* I think. Then, his hand grasps my stick from the display case. *This is it!* He pulls me closer and spins me in his hand, looking at my yellow and blue swirls. He holds me. He's *chosen* me! This is the moment I always wanted.

"Ha ha! I have been picked! ME! Not you, Reese's bar! Not you, Ice cream taco! ME!!" I gloat as he walks to the register.

The counter feels hard, and the cashier uses a red light to scan the sticker on my label. The sound frightens me, but I am so elated that I don't mind. As we leave, I hear my friends on the aisle cheering me on, saying, "Way to Go, Alec!" At least, that's what I think.

The man carries me to a large vehicle, and the door slides back on its own. A smaller person sits there. They throw their hands in the air, and I know they want ME! The man removes my plastic wrap, and I feel the world. *Cold*; not what I expected. He gives me to the smaller person, and she sticks me in her mouth. It's warm and wet, and I don't like it. No one told me this would happen. She chomps on my head, and then she drops me into the dark abyss beside her. There, I am greeted by a potato chip and a one-eyed doll.

"Welcome, newcomer," the chip says, "We are forgotten."

"Forgotten?" I ask, "No, I was *just* chosen. Not forgotten. I must return to the small person."

"Sadly, that doesn't happen. We may be found when the man cleans the car, but I've been here for months. I used to be her favorite doll," she says.

"No, that can't be," I say, and struggle to free myself from the carpet.

This can't be how the world worked, how my journey ends. I was to be cherished, not consumed and forgotten. Why did I wait 43 days to be chosen? I want my plastic wrap back, and the safety of my display box. I even want the ice cream tacos to gloat as they take their journey if this is how it ends. Not this pain, this darkness.

Saru Densha

by Riley Martin

Second Prize - Prose

I woke up on the train. Often, I sleep on the way to school. My home is on a military base in Okinawa, and the closest public school's far away. I looked down and saw a text from my dad:

"Have fun at school today! Your mom and I will be out at dinner, so it's fend-for-yourself tonight, love ya!"

The heart emoticon he included did little to rouse me, and using the phrase "your mom" would never make me do the same. They'd only been married *six months*. After my parents' divorce, I stayed with my Dad because I assumed we would *travel*. If I'd known he was going to settle down and ignore me so quickly, I would have stayed in the U.S. with my Mom.

I opened up my train pass on the Japan Railway app. My profile picture revealed a forced smile and messy brown hair above my name: Jericho Baros. I had on my gray school uniform, a blue tie poorly knotted around my neck. Sadly, my hair and tie hardly looked better today.

I stared out the window, thinking. The train sped through a forest of large, densely packed trees that blocked the early morning sun. I realized I didn't recognize the scenery. *Perhaps I sleep through this part*, I thought. I scanned the train car. Six other passengers sat near me. I strive for solitude, but something heavier than my typical social anxiety rooted me to my seat.

In the back, a quintessential punk bounced his leg. His snake-bite piercings and bleached hair reminded me of a belligerent gangster in a cartoon. Beside him sat an elderly man with a bucket hat and khaki shorts, who didn't seem to be a fan of the cartoon gangster. He glared in the punk's direction with pursed lips, silent.

The final passenger was a young woman in a pink dress. She stared out the window. Her ambivalence toward the scenery assured me that it wasn't unusual to her. My gaze lingered on her, and then moved on to the other passengers.

In the middle row sat a man in a white, American Navy uniform, complete with a matching hat and blue neckerchief. He smiled, feet propped on the seat in front of him. Opposite him was a caramel-colored mountain of muscle masquerading as a man. He stared blankly in front of him.

The final passenger in the car was a heavy-set, balding man in a suit. He sat across from me. Sweat beaded his skin and darkened his clothes, despite the cool air. His body spilled over the armrests, and I felt grateful for the aisle between us. After a few minutes, the signature *bingbong* of the train's announcement bell rang.

"Ikizukuri, now boarding, Ikizukuri."

I've never heard of th—

A scream froze the blood in my veins. The woman at the back of the train car sat, transfixed, as a small, hairy figure approached her. It pushed a cart. To me, it seemed like a monkey, but closer to the cymbal-wielding "Jolly Chimp" variety than a live animal. As the beast passed, I noticed what was in its hand. The monkey plunged a knife into her chest, and another scream pierced the silence. The creature pulled the blade down the center of her body. She clenched her armrests and screamed as it tore away strips of her flesh. When it stopped, her ribs lay exposed; her eyes were expressionless, though she gasped for air. The monkey pulled her body onto the cart, then pushed her past us without a glance.

Everything went still. The beast had gone, but all the passengers remained stuck in place, as if whoever spoke or moved would be the next victim. I knew how foolish this was, but I never budged.

Instead, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. *Relax Jericho, it's just a dream. None of this is real. Any second now, I'm going to wake up on the train and be back—*

Bingbong.

"Trái Tim Rán, now boarding, Trái Tim Rán."

My eyes snapped open. The door slid aside, and a cart with a clean plate and a bloody knife appeared at the end of the train car. I stared as the monkey pushed it toward the punk. Then, the monkey grabbed the knife and plunged it into the punk's chest, dragging it down his torso as if he had no bones. The punk's intestines spilled out, and he shrieked, but nothing could put them back in their place. The monkey shoved its hairy hands into his chest, ripped out his heart, and set it on the cart. The punk's heart twitched, and blood splattered onto the white plate. The monkey pushed the cart back through the door as the punk's body went limp.

Move. Move. MOVE. I forced myself to lift my hand. I had to stop it, but I was too terrified to act. If that...thing kept going, it would kill me, too.

But what if it stops? What if it wants them and not me? What if someone else here acts instead, and I don't need to risk going near that, that...thing?

No, snap out of it, Jericho. This is just a dream. If I just confront the monkey then I can end this, there's no reason to be afraid of a figment of my mind. I began to rise from my seat—

Bingbong.

"San-nakji, now boarding, San-nakji."

I clung to my armrests as the doors slid open. The monkey pushed the cart toward the old man. I held my breath and stared at the wall. The monkey shattered my resolve.

It passed my row, and I breathed again. *Calm down, Jericho, calm down. This can't be real. It's just a dream. Still, I can't let that thing live. If I don't kill it now, it will haunt me, even when I wake.* I prayed to God as I ignored the screams of the

old man behind me. My body trembled, but I gathered my courage and turned to the back of the car. The monkey cut off the old man's leg as he screamed. His arms were already gone, and blood gushed out of the gnarled stumps. I stepped into the aisle, and the monkey ignored me. I moved toward the cart, my heart pounding, and saw the old man's limbs, writhing, curling as if he had no bones. I looked away and took another step, closer to the monkey, until—

The cutting stopped. The monkey turned and leapt at me, its arms outstretched. I caught it by the throat and squeezed. I kept squeezing, even as its arms swung and it reached for my neck, a grin on its face. Its eyes bulged, and its face turned purple. The network of vessels and tubes in its neck collapsed, but I couldn't stop, not until its arms went limp. My adrenaline faded; in revulsion, I hurled its corpse away. The grin on its face remained as it hit the ground and—

I jolted awake, still on the train. Outside the window, familiar skyscrapers and crosswalks told me we were in Uruma, Okinawa. I shut my eyes and calmed my labored breathing. When I opened them, the car was packed with commuters. The panic faded, and I looked down at my sweat-soaked uniform. *Damn. That felt real. Way too real.*

Bingbong.

"South Uruma, now boarding, South Uruma."

I let out a breath I didn't know I had been holding. Looking down at my hands, I could still feel the monkey's pulse as it faded. The train was crowded this morning. I grabbed my school bag and fell in line to leave.

The Girl with No Name

by Harlie Hargraves

Third Prize - Prose

Blood-chilling screams traveled in between the dead pine trees, the type that make a person's stomach sink to their groin. The night sky didn't show any stars or gray clouds. All that illuminated her path was the bright silver-blue moon.

Being able to see where she was running did not slow her racing heart. A massive, yawning hole in the flesh of her shoulder roiled her guts, twisting them into knots. She tried to focus on something else, something besides the warm liquid flowing down her chest and back, darkening her ginger hair. The night air dried the blood against her skin like a clammy shirt. Her sweater hung in ribbons, as if it were cotton candy. The claw marks proved she was attacked, but the locals would never believe her. How could she describe being ambushed by something with antlers and a massive mouth full of sharp teeth? None of that mattered.

Screams she knew belonged to Chuck, her poor brother, became indescribable wails. Her ears rang, so she covered them and ran. Her life depended on it.

The forest moved with her. A network of spirited trees swayed as one. How was that possible? Was it her blurred vision? Tears streamed down her cheeks. She didn't suspect there was a man-eating beast in these woods. Everything seemed perfect, until it came for them. She no longer knew what was real and what wasn't. She didn't care about anything. Not even her dead brother crossed. The girl saw trail signs ahead on the left, and a throaty laugh escaped her lips. She recognized the stump they passed when they entered the forest. She could make it. She just had to reach the sign, and she would be free.

A massive branch cracked behind her. Maybe it snapped in two, or maybe a big, dead tree had finally fallen over. The sound stunned her, froze her into a slick, red boulder. She fell to the damp ground and waited there, still and silent. There were no more screams from the darkness, nothing to tell her if it was gone. Maybe it had given up? Somehow she knew that she couldn't be that lucky. She lifted her head. The off-limits sign was ten feet away.

She knew the beast wouldn't come near the main road. An idea took shape in her mind. She practically smelled her Jeep's tires, strong and wonderful. The smell of freedom. The others had no chance to run. Chuck went first, taken in front of everyone. Awful sight. Next it took Mary, and then the others. Somehow, she ran away before it could catch her.

As she dreamed of escape, her guard dropped. She pushed herself up and ran. Her gaze shifted as something caught the back of her sweater. She yelped, and it pulled her back with unimaginable force. She hit the nearest tree, a ragdoll, her breath gone. Her vision blurred as the monster kicked excitedly.

She had no idea what it was. She couldn't name it, and it felt too unbelievable to call it a monster. Its hooves pranced, and her insides went numb. It did the same thing when it got Chuck. Would her parents ever know what happened?

Would the police find her?

Her thoughts were cut short. Dirt filled her gaping mouth, and she coughed. It had caught her, or maybe it never lost her. Had it been lurking in the navy-blue shadows at each turn she made, like some sick joke only monsters got? She hated her friends for suggesting they come to this place. Now, none of them would live to tell the tale.

They had felt it the moment they stepped onto the trail. She warned them to turn back. They ignored the locals' warning, even when she told them about his enchanting screams. Chuck should have trusted her. If they had, none of them would be dead. Those old men in the gas station were right. She saw it tear them to pieces, and she was going to be his final meal.

"Please," She whimpered.

The beast twisted around, so she had a close view of its disfigured face. She took in its appearance, then screamed with all her might. His yellow eyes peered in her soul like searchlights. She knew she wouldn't leave this forest.

"D-don't!" She cried.

The monster pinned her, and the snap of her collar bone clicked in her ears. Blood rushed over her thigh in a warm flood. She was dying; this thing was going to eat her. Those locals never asked their names in case something went wrong, but it had. Everything went wrong. No one would know her name.

Awake

by Justin Kennedy

First Prize - Poetry

The sun rises; a new day dawns.
I open my eyes, and light I see.
Something has changed inside of me.
I feel a presence I have felt before.
It appears that Joy is at my door.

My home has sat empty for a long time.
I breathe in, and warmth I feel.
My heart is no longer behind a seal.
Thrilled, I swing the door open wide
and welcome my friend inside.



James Sanders

Mt. Fuji

Gambits

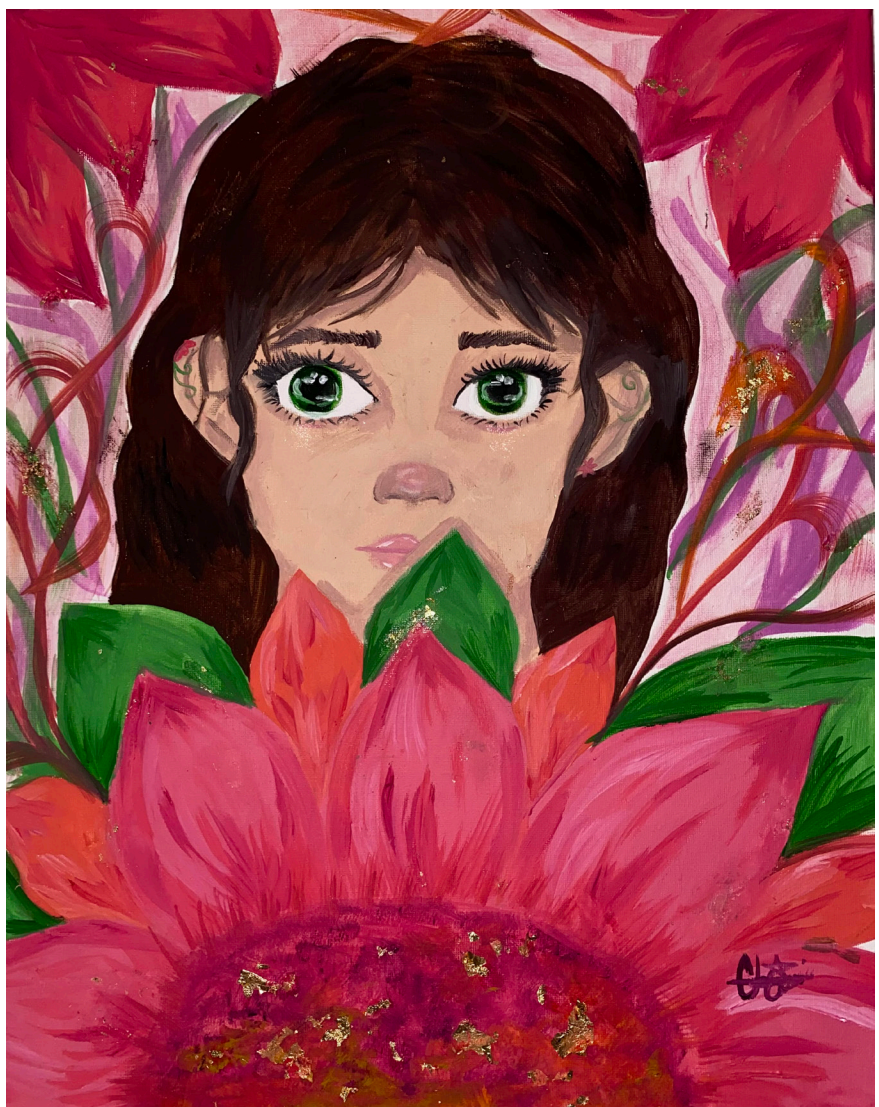
by Angel Aquino-Pineda

Second Prize - Poetry

Foible thoughts, an attachment to whims,
to ephemeral and unattainable desires,
Forge the chains that subjugate the self,
Tainting reality with one's own point of view.
Imprisoned by their own hand and
self-inflicted self-esteem,
blindsided by the need to fill the emptiness
with something good, with a perfect moment,
With any other moment, anything, even worse.
Awareness yearns to regress into oblivion,
For simple days spent contemplating the sun.
But to vanquish the lies,
one had to internalize them all.
Ignorance and innocence delivered a son.
He was a tree without roots,
Wild as the sea, but he learned to hide
himself to survive the night.
To release his woes, ignorance inculcated
a compelling litany of words,
hypnotic syllables spoken
to dethrone a well-placed thought.
They comforted his soul.
It made it all right once more.
Tell a lie; now, tell the truth.
It is all the same.
To fake a smile, or make a laugh,
To be a fool, or to be just you—
the here exists. Everyone's aware
That it is the same, but to find a better place,
who can say? What's the date?
Fury and patience are comforts
that kept loneliness at bay.
That's also a lie; Nothing reigns in one's soul.
There are no gains, and indifference is lord.
This is the pattern, recurring path of old,
the only way out of the pot of gold.
As time unrelentingly devours memories,

one opts to forget, the remembrance of events,
that put life together in a splintered way.
Turning points.
Those moments shape one's form.
They are the cold water against hot coals.
What forges? What tempers?
What breaks the body? Where is the soul?
Who becomes the dust, covering the bodies rotting in soil?
Over many cycles of light and darkness,
one schemed.
The mind obscured the reasons
While the reasoning laid
dormant in a stupor.
No one had a voice;
One's purpose was instilled,
long before anything else was born.
Where there was a thought-out plan,
Now it is relinquished at night,
embraced by the dark.
One is setting the anvil.
He is setting the trap.
No one is an enemy, no one is a friend.
Whom will be crushed
by the might of a biased moral?
One is one, if you recall.
The hour is upon us all.
Time to reveal the hammer
and make the first blow.
Take no captives; be high, run low.
Time is a stringent measure
That mimics our sense of control
as it unravels us all.
Thoughts are treasure, and X marks the spot.
Make haste, be smart, someone will find the path,
distracted enough to dig a hole, to let us out once more.
Hear—someone is near, strung out, and doesn't fear.
Slowly approaching from all sides,
to submit, to seize control, make it worth or sin.
Does this one notice the war within?
One could only hope that today is the day
To be set free, but heavy hearts pulse

as the steps receded; again, silence reigns.
Forgotten but never forgiven, vices and demons,
Playing chicken with the self.
There is one's gambit for the insane.
What do you call a self-checkmate?



Charlene Martinez

Youth

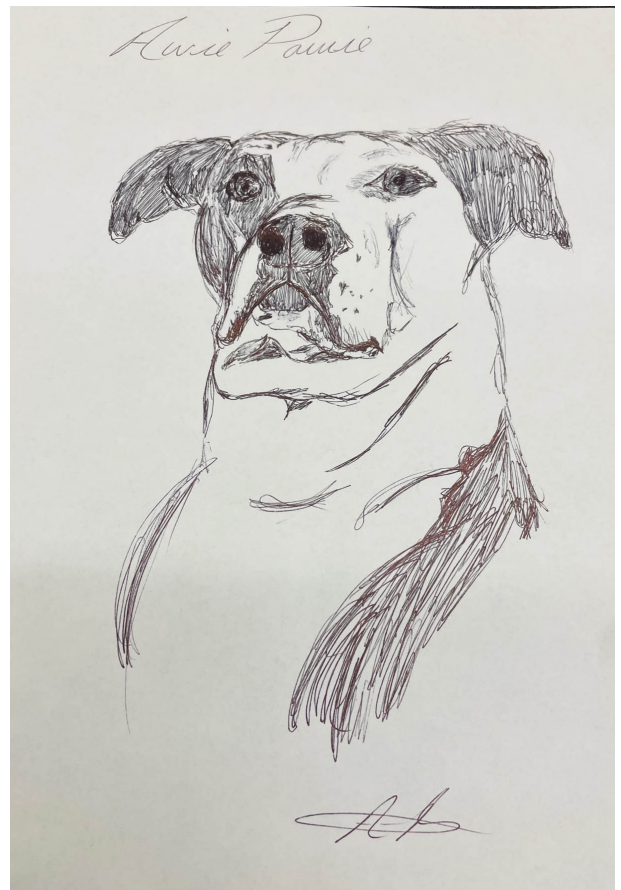
A Dog's Letter

by Amir Nahandast

Third Prize - Poetry

You think you chose me, but I chose you.
You are my human, and I am your dog.
You are my guide on this journey,
And I fully trust you with this duty.
I will make you smile.
I will make you laugh.
I will make you angry.
I will brighten up your path.
I do not speak your language,
but your soul I understand.
I will teach you patience.
I will teach you love.
I will teach you selflessness.
I am a gift to you from above.
You can hold me when you are lonely
and tell me all that's in your heart.
I will never judge you,
for I loved you from the start.
I do want tons of treats,
And I require long walks,
But that does not compare to the void
that I will fill in your life.
I'll love you unconditionally,
until I draw my last breath,
Thank you for loving me,
Sincerely, your BFF!

Amir Nahandast
Dog Sketch





Jasper Briones

So Long as You Stand in My Way



Chloe Thorburn
Second Prize - Visual Art

Reflection



Tyler Medlin
Third Prize - Visual Art

Flag

Maravilloso invierno

by Esther Marculo

First Prize - Poetry in Spanish

La nieve está cayendo del cielo
Hacia las carreteras pavimentadas poco a poco
La nieve no hace ruido; es tan silenciosa como un ratón
Estoy viendo esta vista desde mi casa.
Lenta pero constantemente, los carámbanos crecen
Uno por uno en una fila
Veo niños en trineo en una colina empinada
¡Oh, debe ser emocionante!
Arriba en los árboles, un pájaro deja su nido
Para ir al sur, un lugar más cálido que es mejor
Como topos cavando contra la tierra
Las palas surcan la nieve con todo su valor
He visto suficiente; Voy a salir
No me voy a sentar y hacer pucheros
Con guantes, bufanda y gorro rosa de rayas.
Estoy listo; y eso es eso
A través de la nieve blanca y polvorienta voy
Sin necesidad de reducir la velocidad
Bajo la colina en trineo con mis amigos
Es un momento que nunca debe terminar
A través del viento amargo, los lobos aúllan
Y en los bosques merodean
Después de mucho tiempo de jugar me voy a casa.
Más allá de la nieve y donde vagan los animales.

Un pensamiento, un momento, un mundo

by Esteban Naranjo Henríquez

Second Prize - Poetry in Spanish

Pienso, vuelvo a mi mundo,
lo que estoy viendo es algo inmundo.
Bonito pero feo, depende como lo vea,
no tengo ni idea de cómo volver el cielo clarito.
Lo que antes no sabía ahora lo sé,
quien antes estaba ahora ya no está,
lo que ayer gané mañana lo perderé.
Entonces sé que hasta lo inmundo será bonito,
porque mi mundo no es un escrito, es un momento, o eso pienso.

Pensamientos marchitados

by Martisa Hernandez

Third Prize - Poetry in Spanish

Quisiera poder conocer a cupido
decirle lo desgraciado que ha sido conmigo en el camino
quisiera brindar una reverencia a cupido.

Por haber sido tan cruel conmigo
poder estrechar su mano y rogar
por una poquita de misericordia.

Cupido, te suplico ya no me marchites
el querer entregarme al amor
porque hasta hoy lo único que conozco es el dolor.

¡Cupido te imploro y te repito
que ya no juegues mas juegos conmigo!
Necesito sentir alivio con este martirio.

Si alguna vez pudiera hablar con cupido
le diría que se retire de mi camino
porque soy un caso perdido.

Dios

by Alfredo Gutierrez

Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo
Cuando escucho estas palabras se me quita el miedo
No importa que no lo pueda ver
Porque sé que en cualquier momento un milagro puede suceder

Nunca me siento solo
Él ve todo lo que logro
Siento que camina conmigo
Estamos lado a lado en mi camino

Está conmigo desde el pasado, presente y futuro
Especialmente cuando lo necesito
Me ayuda con mis problemas y dolores
Y los reemplaza con bendiciones

Él es la luz que me guía en la oscuridad
Me llena con felicidad
No puedo esperar por la oportunidad
Para agradecerlo por quitar mi soledad

Las mujeres

by Emily Kelley

Las mujeres son fuertes
Ellas son más fuertes que hierro
Bailan incluso en tiempos estresantes
Dios bendijo la tierra con mujeres
Cada mujer es una diosa a su manera
Las mujeres regalan vida al mundo

La lucha de ser mujer es grande
Ellas pasan por muchos dolores
El mundo trata de romper a las mujeres
Mujeres siempre están invictas

I Am a Mother

by Shevie Libhart

I am a Mother.
I am exhausted, forgetful, and drained.
I am impatient, forgotten, and annoyed.
I am a Mother.
I am a cab driver, cheerleader, and boo-boo fixer.
I am a chef, housemaid, and seamstress.
I am a Mother.
I am dependable, loyal, and never-ending.
I am empathetic, honest, and forgiving.
I am a Mother.
I am an appointment maker, dental worker, and bubble bath connoisseur.
I am an explorer, craft maker, and princess, if necessary.
I am a Mother.
I am a motivator, self-esteem builder, and life coach.
I am their biggest fan, trusted companion, and safe haven.
I am a Mother.
I am loved, wanted, and needed.
I am all these things, but most of all
I am a Mother.

Tasiana Lopez
Empty Playground



Inocencia

by Angel Aquino-Pineda

Hay una respuesta oculta entre mis manos,
llega desde lejos, viaja entre planos,
habita entre deseos, se escurre entre mis sueños,
viaja muy despacio, quiere ser mi dueño.
Hay una pregunta durmiendo entre gusanos,
inicia en el espejo, es de humanos,
existe por complejos, avanza con los años,
viaja en el espacio, quiere hacerme daño.
Hay una certeza, absoluta a momentos,
inmensa carga de universos, imponente templo,
vive entre versos, se contonea lento,
hipnotiza los sentidos, causa de lamentos.
Hay una duda, escondida en el viento,
astuta por el tiempo, aparece cuando siento,
espera los segundos, se burla cuando me miento,
expresa su punto, escapando de mi aliento.
Hay una esencia, disfrazada de materia,
inconsciente a consejos, complejos e inercia,
es una inconsistencia, amalgama de incompleto,
palabras y conciencia, existencia y experiencia.
Hay un humano disfrazado de humano,
que piensa que piensa, mira mi inocencia.

Mi soledad

by Emily Kelley

Pensamientos corriendo en mi mente
Se crean innumerables pensamientos
Me calmo a través de la meditación
La creatividad crece en mí
En mi soledad

Otoño frío

by Esther Marculo

El otoño tiene un aire frío
Que a veces no puedes soportar
El aire frío susurra a través de las hojas de los árboles y las flores.
A lo largo de las horas
En otoño, hay hermosos colores de hojas en los árboles.
Algunos rojos, naranjas, amarillos y verdes.
Las aves migrarán más tarde en el otoño.
Ninguno de ellos se detendrá
Durante los días en que muchas hojas están en el suelo
Puedes hacer montones de hojas, ¿cómo suena eso?
Recoger todas las hojas puede llevar tanto tiempo
Pero cuando la pila esté toda terminada, no saldrá mal.
Pasear también es divertido
Especialmente cuando todo el trabajo duro está hecho.
Disfruta del otoño; mi amigo, el invierno pronto llegará
Los colores brillantes serán reemplazados por un gris que prosperará.



Teresa Heykel

Trains

Read to Me

by Haden Rhodes

The gold of Ultrán's evening sun blazed through the large crystal windows, enriching the brown woods and red, velvet-trimmed furniture of the Crafter Manor parlor. Looking at the small collection of curios held in a few cases and shelves was a human named Kenneth Whitman. A tall, young fellow, he was lean but solid, with fair skin and a mop of brown hair. His eyes were of a lighter hue and darted as he studied the ancient glass figures and assorted weapons. Mrs. Crafter's collection of heirloom dishware held his attention for a mere thirty-eight seconds; then he moved on. Wi'rox, a young, anthropomorphic Wolf and new owner of the Manor, leaned in the doorway and watched her friend's progress about the room. She wore human clothes—a black t-shirt and dark-colored pants—and her sleek, gray fur shone on her arms and neck. Long, silver hair flowed down her neck. Her tail swished behind her, and the sun glistened in her amber eyes.

"You know," Wi'rox said, "when Den passed on the inheritance, I almost forgot the manor came with it. Beats your tiny apartment in Horangi City with the Tigers."

"My job at Security pays for part of it, thanks to my time as the Tiger Paladin. Our economy isn't set up for them to cover it," he said. Wi'rox nodded.

"Yeah, I guess it would be hard to reset after the Imperium chased you from your homeworld, like they did to my tribe," she said.

Kenneth caught the edge in her voice and changed the subject.

"Okay, since you're so keen to bash my home, how much does your glorious manor cost?" he said.

Wi'rox pointed to the far wall. "Check in that stack of mail," she said, "I'm sure there's a bill in there somewhere."

Kenneth sifted through the envelopes. The first open letter he found had been crumpled into a ball, and the paper was shredded along the edges. He found five more like it, the last with a red "warning" stamped on the front. He formed a hypothesis.

"You were a kid when the Imperium took you away, right?" he asked, "Do you remember the daily routine for prisoners?"

"What, besides the shouting, berating, and general torture?" Wi'rox said.

"Ye-e-ah, sure," Kenneth said.

"Oh, you know, solitary confinement," she said, "There was a screaming contest down the hall, and every hour they used torture devices and propaganda on you, then a quick break for lunch, and back to confinement again. Nothing special."

"So, there were no extra-curricular activities or anything?" he asked.

"Not unless you count the hours of Imperial propaganda..." she said. Kenneth realized then his friend could not read.

"That's pretty much what school is anyway, right?" Wi'rox said.

"I was homeschooled," Kenneth replied, "So I wouldn't know."

They moved on, but the thought percolated in Kenneth's mind. He pitied his friend and wanted to help her. That night, as he retired, an idea came to him. The next morning, Kenneth opened his tablet and found an online class for Wi'rox. He confirmed his purchase as Wi'rox entered the parlor, holding a steaming mug topped with a dome of whipped cream.

"Whatcha got there?" she asked.

"A reading course," he said, "My mom and I used it when I was homeschooled. Judging by that stack of mail, I thought you could use it."

Wi'rox was taken aback. "Wait, wait, wait, hold up. Did you say a *reading* course? Aren't I a little old for that?" she said.

Kenneth put down the tablet, and said, "Let me put it this way. You either learn to read now, or the bank will foreclose on this place. It's for your own good."

Wi'rox was quiet. "When you put it that way," she said, "All right. I give up. Incarcerate me again."

Kenneth helped Wi'rox with the first lesson, then left for the nearby caves to chip out something of value to cover the foreclosure notices.

The manor sat in a large, lush grassland, bordered by trees to the north and east. To the south, a large hill rose from the landscape, topped with a temple in disrepair. Its treasures were safe, though: the pure, crystal blue waters of Chi still ran through the temple and the caves below. Precious ores lined the tunnels. Kenneth ventured there, gazed at the walls with one of Den Crafter's old laser-digging tools slung over his shoulder. The cool air swirled around him, and the lap of water echoed off the cavern walls. Tiny, luminescent blue crystals lit the path, accented by glowing runes from ancient days. He found a spot that Den Crafter hadn't finished. He lowered his tool and activated the drill. He hadn't started digging when his phone beeped.

"Kenn-eth! Can you *please* read to me?" she asked.

Kenneth sighed and lowered his digging tool. "No. That's why you're taking the course," he replied.

"But you're so cute when you read to me!" Wi'rox objected.

"Finish your lesson," he said, "I'll check on your progress later."

He didn't like to ignore Wi'rox's pleas, but she had to learn on her own.

Soon enough, Kenneth had harvested a few pounds of precious ores. His phone rang again. It was Wi'rox, her voice serious this time.

"Sorry to bother you, but I'm getting hung up on something."

"Okay, what?" he asked.

"What does A-P-P-L-E spell?"

"Um...Apple? It's a fruit."

"Okay. That's what that was," she said.

"Huh?"

"How about T-R-I-N-K-E-T?" she asked.

"Trinket," he said, "It's like a little bauble or keepsake. Like that tooth necklace of yours."

"Ooh, I like that," she said, "Is my Canus Blade a trinket?"

"No, it's too big," he said.

"Yeah," she said, "It is a little on the heavy side...Anyways, what's F-R-A-U-D-U-L-E-N-T spell?"

"Fraudulent. Lies. Deception," he said, "*Almost like cheating.*"

"One last thing," she asked, "How do you say F-O-R-B-E-A-R-A-N-C-E?"

Kenneth hung up in exasperation. He kept working and ignored his phone, though it buzzed several times. The evening sun had drawn its last card when he put the sack of harvested ore on the back of his speeder and left for the Manor. As he came in, Wi'rox didn't greet him as she usually did. He went to the office, where he found her with her arms folded on the desk, body slumped and ears drooped. At the sound of his footsteps, Wi'rox lifted her head.

"Hey," he said, "Everything going okay?"

Wi'rox whined.

"Can I see?" he asked, moving toward the tablet. Wi'rox thrust it at him. Her scores were mediocre: not F's, but not stellar, either. He knew she needed him.

"You want help?" he asked.

"No," Wi'rox sighed. She looked up at Kenneth then.

"I NEED it. *Please?*" she said.

"You've done enough for tonight," he said, "Tomorrow we'll start fresh."

For a week, he guided her through the lessons. He collected enough ore to pay off the foreclosure, too. The course ended with a "diploma," which Kenneth hung on the parlor wall. They both admired it. Then, Wi'rox turned to him.

"Thank you so much for helping me," she said, "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Well," he said, "You're welcome."

"That reminds me, I found some of Den's old journals. Now that I can read them, maybe I can add my tales, too," she said.

"Do you know how to write, too?" Kenneth asked.

"Uhh...yeah?" Wi'rox said, her voice uncertain.

Kenneth sighed. "All right," he said, "Next course."

"How hard is writing?" Wi'rox asked.

He laughed. "Wait 'til you get to arithmetic!" he said.

"Maybe a coffee first?" she asked.

"Fine," he said, "I'll get it started."

Wi'rox wagged her tail. The weather was bright and good, and the day ahead surely would be as well.



Justin Pryor

The Green Leaf Plant



Justin Pryor

Fashion for the Mysterious

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Chloe Thorburn

Tied Back

Preciosa primavera

by Esther Marculo

La primavera es encantadora, con hermosos estanques.
Es como si pudieras hacerlos aparecer con varitas mágicas.
Los estanques destellan contra el sol.
Con niños chapoteando en ese mundo de diversión
La primavera también tiene hermosos árboles altos.
Y en cada flor hay abejas
Crecen rosas, violetas, muchas clases de flores siempre sabrías
Todas las hojas están en los árboles, siempre en lo alto y nunca en lo bajo.
Tampoco tienes que preocuparte por estar bajo el muérdago.
Porque eso era invierno, ahora es primavera
Puedes escuchar el canto de un pájaro y el sonido de una campana
Mientras conduces, puedes ver un rascacielos en el cielo.
¡Oh, es tan maravilloso que podría mirarlo mientras paso!
¿Alguna vez has visto a un pájaro revolotear en un árbol?
Es una señal; ¡Ven a disfrutar de la primavera conmigo!

Cielos etéreos

by Emily Kelley

Los cielos están llenos de color en el anochecer
Los colores ombré nos traen la noche
Cielo oscuro se ilumina con millones de estrellas
Hay un lugar donde se puede admirar
Espero que algún día vayas conmigo a ver
Ver el cielo etéreo

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Tyler Medlin

Philadelphia