

Gaillardia

Southwestern Region Journal
Sigma Tau Delta



Cardinal

Volume 1, 2019

Letter from the Editor

Welcome, dear reader, to the inaugural issue of *Gaillardia*, the online journal that highlights student talent in the Southwestern Region. We decided to name the journal after the flower that thrives in the dry climate of our region. Much like the gallardia flower, our hope is that this journal will become a perennial feature of the region, returning with fresh content each spring and growing stronger with each issue. That being said, we couldn't have asked for a better start. Students from all around the region submitted their work, and we could not be more grateful to them for trusting us with their words.

I hope you enjoy this issue, and I'm fairly certain you will. I know from experience that the pieces within prompt readers to return again and again.

To returning,
Chloe Harrison

Gaillardia is a publication of the Southwestern Region of the Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society. The writing awards are chosen by an outside panel of judges in collaboration with the student editor. The content herein does not necessarily reflect the views of Sigma Tau Delta or the Southwestern Region.

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2019 Theme: Cardinal

For this year's theme, we wanted to focus on what unites our region: geographical location. The cardinal directions of south and west can define our experience in unique ways. Setting is crucial. The 2019 issue of *Gaillardia* prompted students to ask the question: How does setting affect our day-to-day lives?

The creative pieces in this issue do not all take place in the Southwestern Region—though many do—but they all have a strong awareness of setting and are grounded in a concrete and tactile experience of their written world.

2019 Writing Awards

Poetry

1st place: “*El Sangre De Cristo, It Sets Me Free*” by Claire Lin

2nd place: “*Sonnet for the Rain*” by Samara Roberts

3rd place: “*Infidelity*” by Aubrey Ward

Prose

1st place: “*Salt Water*” by Mackenzie Caldwell

2nd place: “*An Ode to Highway 83*” by Shannon Simmons

3rd place: “*Waiting on Rain*” by Leatrice Ynostrosa

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El Sangre de Cristo, It Sets Me Free

by Claire Lin, University of North Texas

1st place poetry

One time in New Mexico
a man from the tribe
of Pueblo
pressed a cool obsidian
arrowhead into my palm.
He closed my fingers,
said, *for good luck*.

I left that place.
But, then I came back.
I keep coming back.

White man doubts
the way of
the Indian. But
this arrowhead
of mine, it points me back
to the place
it was given to me.

To the place of
Eternal Return.

I tell myself,
Escaping *to*,
is different
than escaping *from*.

The Chihuahuan desert
bids me come, welcome
to the land of Enchantment.

Mesas were fashioned
by God for himself

so that He could
sit and dine in the
Southwest.

And there are so many.

I drive on, notice my
reflection in
the rearview mirror.
The dying embers
of the sun melt into
the *Sangre de Cristo*
and onto my face.
I cry for freedom.

Tumbleweed

by Claire Lin

Tonight I can't sleep
so I get in the car,
 drive west.

I do this when the air in Texas
feels stale. I do this often.

I cancel the next day's plans.
I forget about everyone I know.
I think of recent regrets and the
yellow lines on the road dividing
people from people.

I try to recall the last
time X and I fought.
Vague memories of screaming
 in the car, tears,
the quiet shuffle, digging for tissues.

I'm not a very strong person,
but I know when to stay and
 when to leave.

Tumbleweed appear,
small one here, two big ones there.
Red rock looming overhead
like giants frozen in motion
 by lightning.

I stop by the next diner I see.
 Coffee and sopapillas please.
Motorcyclists in black leather
ride in. I greet them with my eyes.
We are one and the same – restless.

I stare out the window at
the earthen landscape until the
mug is empty and the sopapillas gone,
 and lick the honey from my fingers.

Salt Water

by Mackenzie Caldwell, Baylor University
1st place prose

Her skin was as clear and delicate as a rose petal, her eyes as blue as the deepest sea, but like the rest of them she had no feet, her body ended in a fish's tail.

Florida – Jacksonville, 1998

My first breath of air outside of the womb is late at night. I do not cry. I immediately smile at the doctor. My mother chuckles through her exhaustion at my happiness to be free. I am quickly bathed in a warm pool of water then laid in my mother's arms. Life has begun.

Many a night she would stand at the open window and gaze up through the dark-blue water. She could see the moon and the stars, their gleam was admittedly somewhat pale.

Virginia – Virginia Beach, 2000

I run out of the house down the grassy hill toward the water. It carelessly laps at the concrete slope I stand on. My matching shirt and shorts model a neon coral hue and scalloped edges that coordinate with my white sandals. I hate the outfit my mom picked, but I am more excited to fish for the first time. Impatiently, I dash across the pavement to find the perfect spot to fish. Running across the angled concrete proves precarious as I slip, scraping up my knee. The blood from my knee and tears from my eyes gush out. I hear my dad call out to me as I sit up on the pavement. The stinging worsens as I begin my hobble back through the grass. My dad meets me half way and picks me up, carrying me the remaining yards back to the house. A paper towel, a splash of hydrogen peroxide, and a Hello Kitty Band-Aid later, I am trekking back out to the water. I am invincible.

Our house is now a distant memory behind me as I walk out again, carrying my fishing gear. My father leads the way this time and holds whatever I cannot. I ask question upon question about how to fish and what kind of fish there are and how long it is going to take. He answers them all, adding explanations I do not ask for. I listen closely; the information is

crucial. I cast my line into the channel that leads to the ocean and watch the half red half white bobber splash into the water. Now I wait. My dad stands beside me bobbing the line he cast up and down. He tells me it attracts the fish because the bait looks real. I follow suit, taking both hands around my lime green fishing rod and move it in the seawater.

Time passes, and I grow irritated. “When are they coming?” I ask my dad.

“When they do; be patient Mackenzie. You’ll catch one,” He responds and looks down at me now sitting on the concrete that once wrestled with my knee.

An eternity of patience and silence later, I catch one. I reel it in by myself as my dad watches over me, making sure I do not fall into the channel. It is three quarters my size. My dad shouts to my mom back in the house to grab the camera. She brings it out and hands it to my dad. I stand for a photo, my face gleaming with pride.

The sun had just set as she lifted her head above the surface of the water, and the sea absolutely still. The little mermaid swam right up to the ship’s cabin window. She could look through the mirror-clear windows where the many people stood in fine array, but the handsomest was the young prince with the large black eyes.

California – Monterrey Bay, 2004

The sunlight saturates the saltwater creating a gradient of pale to deep turquoise and lush, olive green kelp extends thirty feet toward the water’s surface. Swaying with the tides, the Monterey Bay Aquarium Kelp Forest entrances me and I begin to pull my mother’s arm, steering us toward the overwhelmingly large tank. I slip my hand out from her grasp. My mother, occupied with my baby sister’s stroller, seemingly allows this freedom. My height does not match the rest of the crowd gathered at the face of the tank that now blocks my view of the leafy underwater artists.

Captivated still, I push my way through the sea of legs, arms, and strollers to reach the front of the crowd. My teal shirt and blue jeans only place me further in the mindset that I am in the water with the kelp. I watch the kelp elegantly undulate and appreciate that I am alone. The masses of people disappear from my mind as I disappeared from my parents. Hypnotized, I watch the rays of sunlight scatter across the seaweed and wish

that I could join the sun in its pursuit to color the underwater forest.

I am at the glass for what seems like an eternity. The only thing that breaks my trance is the fish in the tank beginning to gather and swim in a frantic tempo. A scuba diver in a black wetsuit, who I think looks like an underwater astronaut, descends from the sunlit surface. He looks so small in the kelp and is soon enveloped with fish. Once the fish feeding ends, the diver descends further, reaching my eye level. I wave at my new friend in the tank, outstretching my hand as high as my arm will reach. He sees me and waves back.

Blind and deaf to the rest of the world, I am snapped out of my experience when a heavy hand on my shoulder flips me back toward the crowd. The lack of lighting makes the face obscure, but I know the voice. My father grabs my wrist and pulls me back through the crowd to the back of the room where my mother and sisters stand. Seeing me in tow with my father, my mother's face turns from concern to wrath. I reach her and begin my trial.

"You can't just go running off like that! You made me worry. I did not know where you were," my mother says, under a thin veil of calm. I listen to my mother continue to scold me for what seems like a second eternity. I want to return to the scuba diver; he was nicer.

"I just wanted to see the seaweed . . ." I softly explain, my voice trailing off as I remember not to talk back. My father does not let me break free from his hand for the remaining exhibits. I think to myself about how I was not in danger while alone at the Kelp Forest. I was having fun. There was no need to be worried.

It was so pitch-black that she couldn't see the slightest thing, but a flash of lightning came, and everything was clear. The ship came apart, she saw him sink down into the depths of the ocean. She managed to reach the young prince. She held his head above water, and then let the waves bear her and him wherever they wanted.

Rhode Island – Newport, 2008

In the distance, whitecaps whack the shore leaving only weighty boulders of worn, weathered rock behind. I know that I will never be given permission to go on those beaches, but they intrigue me. Their odd shapes and violent breakers make me want to become a part of the beach. The beaches here are not the heaven-on-earth that is evoked on travel postcards.

They are icy and taxing.

There is a manufactured beach that my mother sometimes takes my sisters and me to during the “six-week summer” Rhode Island begrudgingly gives us. It has sand and people in the water floating mindlessly in their inflatable doughnuts. The water is not murky but never the cerulean we all want. I never enjoy that beach.

My father and I have a beach of our own, hidden and tough. Other than the occasional patch, it has no sand. We wear thick coats with three layers of clothing underneath. The wind picks up the seawater and mists us, reminding us where we are. There is no predetermined path down to the shoreline and the water is officially closed off to the public. Any trail down to this secret shoreline is sharp and slippery.

My father goes down the small but daunting slope first, then guides me down the passageway he deemed the safest. My shoes of choice are black Crocs; I think they fit my needs for the rocky embankment perfectly. They are waterproof and won't get dirty – easy to put on and take off for my trip. My father lets me believe in their perfection despite my mother's earlier disapproval.

We always sneak onto our beach, despite the weather, for the sea-glass. Sea-glass is valuable to me although it is simply a smoothed piece of trash someone tainted the ocean with. The ocean spits them back up for me to find and collect and add to the rows of filled jars in my garage. I cannot tell if it is the mist or the light rain that wets my hair, but I do not mind. It is part of completing the task. In the cloud covered sunlight, the green, brown, and white pieces blend into the rocks. The rarer colors, black, purple, pink, red, and blue, are almost nonexistent. That does not stop my dad and me from looking for them.

“I found one!” I hold up a shard of red glass the size of a cherry tomato. The edges are not smoothed but the largeness of the piece makes me ignore the less than perfect characteristic.

“It's not ready. Throw it back,” my dad says dispassionately, looking up briefly to make the judgment. He looks back down, hunched over again, and continues to scour the pebbles for pieces worth our time. So, I look at my fragment, knowing that I seldom find red but the red I found is not ready. I throw it back and imagine I will find it another day.

Now the little mermaid went towards the roaring whirlpools behind which

the witch lived. She had never gone that way before, no flowers grew there, no sea-grass, only the bare grey sandy bottom stretched towards the whirlpools.

Florida – Destin Beach, 2010

Sugar white sand stretches the miles of coastline in my sight. The sky has seemingly seeped into the water, creating a cyan to robin's egg to cobalt blue gradient in the ocean. Sea foam dots the water like clouds, highlighting the brilliant blues. Buckets of plastic molds and shovels in hand, my two little sisters and I run out of the car in our colorful foam flip-flops. Beach towels wrapped around us like capes, I lead my sisters from the parking lot to the shore. While I wait for my mother to catch up, I settle on a spot in the sand I think she will enjoy. She arrives and declares the spot sufficient. I promptly bolt through the sand to the water. The perfect temperature and transparency of the water makes me feel like I am on a postcard. I entertain my sisters for as long as I can take, then return to the sand. I want to begin what I came here for—sandcastles. I needed to execute my master architectural plan on the beach.

I sketch out a floor plan in the sand and begin to level off the area I want to work on. I drag my forearm across the sand, smoothing the surface. Measuring out the wall lengths, I begin to finalize my floor plan on the now even surface. I search for goldilocks sand—a perfect ratio of sand to water. I think I find it and begin to fill my mold. Packing the sugar white sand as tightly as I can, I level off the bottom and place the initial wall on my foundation. It holds for a couple minutes then collapses. I pause, frustrated, then smooth over the sand to start again.

My mother suggests I use different sand. I disagree and insist the sand I found is the perfect kind. I continue trying, the sand continues falling. Frustrated by my failures, I begin to smooth the sand over once more. I repeat the process of failing then decide I have grown tired of trying. I hurl my red mold in anger and slog through the sand, kicking it up as I go to the umbrella my mother is sitting under.

“The sand needs to have more water in it to hold the shape,” my mother says, reapplying her tanning lotion. Adamant that I have the right sand, I ignore her advice, continuing to sulk under the shade of the rainbow umbrella. I watch my sisters pick up my sandcastle supplies to work on their own. They build walls that stay standing. Seething with anger and jealousy, I

ask, “Mom, why do their sandcastles stay up but mine doesn’t?”

She smiles at me and says the same thing as before: “You need to add more water.”

“I know what you want alright!” the sea-witch said. “it’s very stupid of you! but you shall have your will even so, for it will bring you great misfortune, my lovely princess. You want to get rid of your fish’s tail and have two props instead to go around on just like human beings, so that the young prince can fall in love with you and you can have him and an immortal soul!” And just then the witch cackled so loudly and horribly.

California – Carmel-By-The-Sea, 2013

I am not at the postcard beach I was promised. The rocky embankments and sharp drop-offs are violent compared to my mental image of Carmel Beach. The water is grey, and the sand is pebble. My aunt and her parents decide there are too many people at the main beach for their liking. Her one-year-old son is seeing the beach for the first time, and I am charged with taking care of him. I am annoyed as I brought my camera to take photos of the beach, not to watch a child stumble in the sand, crying. The weather reflects my disdain as fog rolls across the water, humidifying the air and cloaking the sun.

I try not to be rude and make the most of my time here. My grandfather, who prefers the comfort of the couch and TV remote in hand, quickly vetoes the beach. He likes to watch the Weather Channel, not be a part of it. We arrive at the shops and my aunt insists we stop at a coffee house to warm up. We do. The smell of coffee perfumes the air, and the hum of mixed voices provides a mellow mood. I do not care for the coffee, just tea.

The shop sells mugs, and I collect them. A medium white mug with small tourist attraction drawings catches my eye. I take a picture and send it to my boyfriend. He tells me that it’s cute. I know I am not supposed to bring another mug home as the cabinet space in the house is running low.

“Your parents won’t be happy with a new addition,” my grandmother says, eyeing the mug.

“I know,” I say back, trying to be polite. I consider the reprimand I am bound to receive when I come home. I buy it anyway.

Day by day the prince became more dear to her, but it never occurred to

him to make her his queen. She had to become his wife or she would become foam on the sea.

Texas – Lake Waco, 2018

The sky's artist paints over her warm sunset with inky obsidian. Tonight, clouds are not to her liking and instead she allows the night sky pearls to boast their radiance. Looking around I notice the lakeside park has been shrouded by the absence of light. I see the trees and the park benches and the water but only through the highlight of the moon. I park my car and brave the December chill by wearing my Texas Tech sweater. Alone by the water, I came here to stargaze. My time here is ending rapidly, and I want to watch the royal family of the night sky dance above the water once more.

I look up as Cassiopeia and Cepheus control their daughter. Andromeda tries to shift toward the other side of the sky. It is not permitted. I have watched this dance a hundred times. It never goes in Andromeda's favor. My phone lights next to me. I open the message; it is my boyfriend.

"I miss you," he has told me. I miss him too. He tells me that he is at Newport Beach right now. I tell him I am at Lake Waco. He tells me he cannot wait to be with me again. I tell him only a couple more years till I can be there.

"I love you," I text him before sliding my phone into my pocket. I watch the miniature tide push and pull the lake's water. Andromeda gazes back down at me with sorrowful eyes. The king and queen pay no attention to her unhappiness.

She bent down, kissed him on his handsome forehead, looked up at the sky where the dawn grew stronger and stronger, looked down at the sharp knife and once more fixed her eyes on the prince. The knife shook in the mermaid's hand, but then she flung it far out across the waves. Once more she gazed at the prince with half-glazed eyes, rushed off the ship down into the sea, and felt her body dissolve into foam.

– *The Little Mermaid*, Hans Christian Andersen

Sonnet for the Rain

by Samara Roberts, Schreiner University
2nd place poetry

There is no sea nor sand, the creek is dead
for miles. I press my hand into dry ground.
The crackled grass pin pricks my palm and red
is all the world. Then everything abounds
in gray. The somber song of pregnant clouds
is calling Earth to open silently
her caverns, thundering throughout so loud
the roots are wet with sound. And violently
they scream and stretch until the sky
releases gentle tears of rain. A green
familiar ring of music cools my spine
and all the stones around me seem to gleam.
The mud is marriage – earth and sky – they lay
Supine and wish the gray was here to stay.

Independence Day

by Samara Roberts

I have tasted and seen
wild green grapes and arrowheads
sunsoaked heat on my breasts
– suspended in the stars –
His voice sounded like it
was coming from my heart
rather than his mouth

...

That type of connection
felt funny
– like home –
like when I couldn't sleep
unless I could hear
someone
breathing beside me

Tumbled

by Samara Roberts

Round rocks massage the squishy
muscle of my arches
I wonder at how it all fits
against my skin
stitched together with dirt

These golden green hills
smell now of rain
baked in golden sunset
shooting from the clouds
like fingers of God

My rounded bones tumbled
in the caverns and valleys
of my soul
until they were whitewashed
fitting wet in my palm

Drying slow I lay
polished by sunlight
upon the mother rock
from which I was broken
and transformed

Round rocks massage the squishy
muscle of my shoulders
I wonder at how it all presses me up
into the sky
pulls me into its damp womb

I wonder how big a hand
would be needed to skip
us in three big arcs
across the silver lining
of the river

An Ode to Highway 83

by Shannon Simmons, Texas Woman's University

2nd place prose

Two decades ago, at opposite ends of Texas in Brownsville and in Perryton, a young boy and a young girl lived very different lives. You may adhere to the old saying that opposites attract, but it's equally important to have something in common. The only thing that tied them together was the highway that sat adjacent to both of their towns.

Highway 83, the longest highway in Texas, stretches from the border of Mexico on the south side of Brownsville to the top of the panhandle at the Oklahoma state line north of Perryton. If you drive it, you will sail next to the Rio Grande, weave through hill country, and watch small towns pass in the blink of an eye. You'll look out your window to see empty rolling plains, fences with boots atop the fence posts, and scrub brush amidst red dirt. You'll see more cows than you can count and all manners of sagging gas stations boasting the best barbecue you'll find anywhere. All of Texas will careen past you as you barrel down a highway that cuts straight through the middle of the state.

Somehow, too, you will miss almost all of Texas. The highway does not slice through any of the major cities on the map. Not Amarillo, Dallas, El Paso, San Antonio, Houston. Not even the capitol, Austin.

Highway 83 melts into other highways, changes its name at certain curves. It can't seem to decide if it would rather have two lanes or four, but if you pay attention, you can easily follow the lines it weaves through the middle of the state. Like the road of life, this road is best driven without a map.

Eventually you'll have driven this highway enough to know the speed traps, the best places to stop for home style cooking. After all, the heart of Texas isn't in the big cities that lie scattered across the frying pan, but rather the small towns and the skinny highways that run across the land like small veins across a closed eyelid. That's what Highway 83 is: a panoramic photograph of Texas caught unaware of the changing world.

Officially named by the Texas Department of Transportation as the Texas Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway, the many roads that make up this highway honor the pains of war. Therefore, it might do the highway justice

to add one more story of a couple broken hearts to the mix of pain and remembrance.

The boy lived with his mother who worked long hours; she often left him with various babysitters. He loved watching cartoons, and he could go through cereal like nobody's business, especially the ones with his favorite cartoon characters. He visited the beach nearby so much he grew to dislike sand, heat, and salty water. He was a math whiz in school, but got bored easily after mastering the material ahead of his peers. The older he got, the more he wandered. He played drums in a garage band and sometimes wrote the parts for skits he and his friends would record after stealing beer from the fridge.

The girl lived with her parents and had a little sister who followed her around. She loved to ride her bike and bring home toads. She excelled in reading and writing in school, but disliked the discipline of grammar and analysis. She built so many snowmen in the dry and cold winters that she grew to prefer hot chocolate by the fire. The older she got, the more she began to roll her eyes in class. She wrote poetry and wrote in diaries with her friends to share her thoughts, but she also marched in the band and stayed out to drink after the football games.

These two were opposite in every way.

Almost.

After they each graduated from high school, they migrated from their hometowns to the big city. The Dallas Fort Worth metroplex sat like a spider's web, snagging all the winged wayward souls. Our young boy and young girl, somewhat grown up, became two of the many snagged in a place too loud and large for either of them to fully comprehend at first. To the two of them, both from mid-sized Texan communities on the edges of the state, the metroplex—full of freeways and towering buildings—was something new.

When they met, they did not tell each other the stories of their lives. They did not detail their hometowns or the highways that brought them to the city. Instead, they saw a spark and decided to coax it into flame.

They once had destinations in mind, these wayward souls. They once had dreams: the grand things they would do, the money they would make, the impact they would have. Wayward souls like this boy and this girl, though, often get lost along the way. Or worse, something inside of them dies when they are shown proof that, actually, their dreams are far out of reach.

The boy dreamed of writing movie scripts, setting the scenes, filming the

actors. But he was uncertain how to move forward. He didn't want to fail.

The girl dreamed of writing her story, documenting her personal history as it happened. But she didn't have a story worth telling yet. She didn't yet have the right words.

Speaking of none of these things when they met far off the path of Highway 83, they shared with each other a life of heavy leaning. They each needed somebody to hold onto because life alone in the world was simply too much to face. They laughed and gossiped and drank together but almost never shared real secrets. It was love, but something was missing.

At a lake east of Highway 83, late one hot summer night, two Texans who were nothing alike made a big decision. The stars that night were big and bright, and a tiny new lifeform took hold. A full twelve hour drive away, his mom felt the world shift ever so slightly, and her mom in town wondered if they were really fishing.

Highway 83 was the first to see the aftermath. The sun shone bright and the oases gleamed on the fresh black asphalt. The next time they saw that highway, they drove north together after Christmas, married and four months pregnant.

They never did drive the whole expanse of Highway 83 from one home to the other all at once, and it's too bad. There's so much you can learn about a person when you're stuck in a car with them for thirteen hours or so. And Highway 83, as empty as it is, would have been the perfect paradise to explore each other's thoughts, dreams, and taste in music. It would have made sense to pay homage to the highway that connected them.

But they didn't take the trip and therefore missed some important stops along their journey. From one end to the other, Highway 83 raised two adults who forgot to check if they could navigate the potholes and flat tires together before committing to a trip longer than they could fathom.

The last time the boy was at the north end of the highway, they celebrated their daughter's birth with family and the church members.

The last time the girl was at the south end of the highway, they celebrated their daughter's birth with fajitas and booze.

But after that, they turned away from each other; they felt their differences too deeply, and the love slowly fell apart like crumbling asphalt in the middle of nowhere.

Highway 83 still stretches across the entire state, cutting clean through the

middle, carving a vein of Texas life through different cuts of land, splitting the state into two, connecting Mexico to Oklahoma. Littered with histories larger than these two, this highway is marked by museums, state parks, home-owned restaurants, and landmarks that remind passersby of the events that took place in Texas long ago and the life still moving now. An empty road with an open sky, Highway 83 tells a thousand small stories of Texans and their lives.

For the boy, the story ends abruptly. Southbound, there's no further to go than the Mexico border unless one is willing to traverse the Mexican Federal Highway 101, known to locals as the Highway of Death. For the girl, however, northbound will take her beyond anything she previously imagined driving because Highway 83 shoots straight up middle America to Canada, where it continues as Manitoba Highway 83. For these two Texan souls bound by Highway 83 and the little life they brought into existence just east of that highway, separate destinies await them in opposite directions if they ever choose to take to the road again. The girl drove the whole thing herself, discovered the magic of Texas that can only be seen by driving this historic highway. Someday, she'll take her daughter on the same trip, show her the two places she came from, listen as her daughter tells her secrets and dreams.

But that can wait. Highway 83 will be there when she's ready.

Infidelity

by Aubrey Ward, University of Houston

3rd place poetry

The flies are bad today.
They cling to me,
My sleeve, my skin,
My hair and ears.

The breeze is stagnant,
Lukewarm. It plucks acorns,
Tosses them at my table.

An ant, one foot away
On the table's light brown wood,
Reigns hideous. It looks like
Two ants stuck together:
Its hind legs
Mingle with its body,
Tickle its pelvis and back,
Then raise up like wings,
One on either side.
It faces me.
I don't even know
If it knows I'm here.
You'd think I should feel intrigued.

The wind gusts, rips
My notebook open,
A crisp flutter of lined paper.
An acorn bounces off the table.
The dog lies in wait
For the next leaf to take flight.
He looks more like a cat the way he poses.

He pounces,
Catches a leaf in his mouth,
Retreats a few feet,
And spits it out.

He will do this one-hundred times today,
Surmising his attack,
Executing it gracefully,
Never sure what to do,
How to react,
Upon his success.

Wrangler, the black and white border collie,
The smartest dog I know.
Yet, he spends about half his time
Wrestling with a stick.
He cannot balance it,
And he has yet to find a surefire way
To pick it up.

Another ant slinks across my table.
It is orange,
With a black head.
I lift my notebook
And let it pass.

A hornet comes and goes.

Wrangler runs in circles,
Chases butterflies,
Digs his hole a little deeper,
And repeats.
When he brings his stick
And lays it at my feet,
“Not right now,” I’ll say.
He’ll entertain himself for another hour
Before trying again.

I look at my phone.

The cows graze so slowly and lazily
That I become angry.

Beyond them, only green,
Some powerlines in the distance,
Followed by more trees,
Like pieces of broccoli
Against a light blue-painted antique plate,
Thin clouds surrounding
The fluffy vegetable heads.

Amazing what the bold-face
Subject line of an unread email can do:
Set a mine off
Even here, away
From the human-made.
The thing about “getting away”
Is that our minds still come along
For the ride.
At least out here,
Everything between me
And the sky
Is like water,
Muffling the explosions.

Imaginary Borders

by Madyson Plummer, Texas Woman's University

North, south, east, west
Directions that lead us to imaginary borders; man made.
No...man imagined.

Land bridge.
They say, this is how we came to be
Travelling all directions on solid and interconnected grounds.
We have arrived.
And the air smells...clean.

North, south, east, and west
We drive our cars across imaginary borders to see large gaping holes of rocks
and rocks chiseled with past figures.
We see red cardinals offset by white, crisp snow.
But all this beauty we see crossing imaginary borders will fade.

West coast to cold cost; we have spread far and wide.
We have made new things, learned new tricks
We still fish and hunt but now for market and game.
The fish come in and they are not quite right you say.
They have stomachs full of garbage and appear, deformed.
And the air smells...bad.

And then, time passes and the Earth is not like it was once used to.
It is all the same and all at once different.

North, south, east, and west
we are gone.
And the Earth is not what it was once used to.
It is vacant and dark
Somewhat cloudy; like it is on fire and Earth is engulfed in a hazy smoke.
And the air smells...decayed.
Because Earth is Dead.

Waiting on Rain

by Leatrice Ynostrosa, Sul Ross State University

3rd place prose

Her feet didn't hurt anymore. They had stopped hurting three hours ago; now they were just numb blocks of wood at the end of her legs. She had worked four shifts in the past three days as a waitress at the most popular steakhouse in the area. The tips this Sunday morning were slow. Why did the church crowd praise Jesus and then come and tip their waitress eight percent on a table of twelve people? It was the unknown mystery of the server industry.

Her last table wouldn't leave. Two elderly couples who had both split a chicken fried steak decided to hang out for two hours and chat. The restaurant was swept, the silverware rolled. But she had to wait until they were done to collect her three-dollar tip before she could go home to her family. At this rate, she would still have to wear the scents of the steakhouse with her to church; she'd be lucky to change her shirt. God didn't care that she was barely functioning. He and her in-laws expected her to be there.

Forty minutes later, the table finally left (five dollars! Woohoo), and she walked to her car. Her lipstick was gone, her eyes were tired. The wind whipped a dirt devil around the employee's parking lot, bits of Styrofoam and an empty Lonestar can circling the air in fury. The world smelt burnt.

Driving the county road to her house, she barely noticed the shriveled heads of milo in the fields. The world had taken on an apocalyptic shade of brown. Even the cotton was stunted and sad. Forty-three days. It had been Forty-three days since it rained. That had been a mere sprinkle dried up within minutes.

Last year was beautiful and wet with a record eighteen inches falling in eight days. Her husband had enjoyed the days off; clearing land was impossible in the mudslick. He enjoyed the work, even if it was monotonous; work was work. It paid for them to rent a bigger house than the tiny one they owned. It let them buy the farm animals they had always wanted. It fed and clothed their five kids.

This year was a mockery of that, she thought. Her husband's job ended three months after those rains and he couldn't find any work; the cattle and oil industries were depressed, and no one had money to improve their land or hire workers. But they still had money to eat steak. So, she applied at the

steakhouse, telling the manager she was willing to do anything: bus tables, wash dishes, anything. The manager ignored the eleven-year gap in her work history and gave her a chance.

That chance was a blessing. The worse the drought, the more the farmers and ranchers came in to complain and to drink. The women in her Catholic Daughters of America club looked at her with pity and tipped her twenty percent. She made just enough working six days a week to keep the family afloat. One time someone left five hundred bucks in an envelope under her door. She cried and paid the past due water bill.

She tried to work up some energy as her van approached the house. The garden out front was shriveled and blighted from the heat. Nothing had grown well this year except watermelons. She realized she hated this big house in the country that cost so much, but now her other house was rented out and she couldn't go home. She hated the animals that she could barely feed and couldn't afford to sell. She hated how she never saw her children anymore; she would come home and sleep between shifts. She hated the look in her husband's eyes, the guilt of not working, the worry about her health, the look of a man who sees an ex-lover who broke his heart.

She ignored the looks her family got every Sunday slipping just a little too late into church. She ignored the condescension she received from those women at church who never worked an hour in their rich lives about how lucky she was to have a good job. Then they would smile and leave in their Tahoes, as she loaded her kids into the minivan which she could barely afford the payments on.

As she pulled in the carport and turned off the van, her youngest children started spilling out of the house. "Mama! Mama's home!" Two tiny blonde beauties in old princess dresses handed down from their elder sister came tearing toward her. She took a deep breath and got out.

She smiled as she bent down and grabbed the baby. She was two and a half, but she was so doll-like and petite that that's what everyone called her: the baby. Warm kisses rained on her neck as a hug from the five-year-old tried to take her out at the knees. She tried to be patient with them. She missed them, too.

"Come on, let's get ready to go."

She walked inside to hear her husband hollering from the living room for her eldest to go change; it was too hot to wear a long-sleeved shirt. It's too hot to wear *anything*, she thought. She had lived in West Texas for eight years and still hated how God singed the earth every summer. It's as hot as Hell outside, she smiled to herself.

She pulled on a decent shirt, applied lipstick, and peeled the shoes off her feet. She knew the church ladies would whisper, but she shoved her comfy broken-down flip-flops on her swollen feet anyway. She had just enough time to brush a head of hair into a ponytail before her husband began hollering for the kids to load up.

On the way to church, she looked out the window. Rows of ugly fields stripped of any hint of a tree passed. She hated those fields, and the cotton kings who owned them. She hated the manicured lawns of the fancy houses; she especially hated how the cotton rows came right up to those lawns. She hated the overgrazed pastures full of cattle that weren't worth what they were last year and weren't worth selling. She hated church, she hated people, she hated everything.

She had no idea what Father spoke on in his homily. She didn't receive Communion either; she had thrown a tired hissy fit three weeks ago and slept instead of going to church and she had no idea when she'd get to Confession. When the baby acted up, she took her outside to walk the path beside the landscaped church. The flowers her husband had planted at cost there last year looked beautiful and she didn't want to go back into the church.

She realized on the drive home she hadn't even kissed her husband today. He was still asleep when she left for work. She always got to work early, so she could sit in the quiet ticking of her van and read whatever book she was working on. Being at work first also meant she'd get the first large party; the Gully family was consistent in tipping fifteen percent.

Pulling into the drive, her husband hollered for the kids to change clothes and water the animals. The kids were grumpy and hot; thunderclouds had been building on the horizon all day and the weather was humid. She looked at those clouds with longing, but knew they'd probably blow around them as they had for forty-three days.

She went inside and collapsed face-first on the bed, exerting the least possible amount of energy to kick off her flip flops. Her bra was digging into her sides, and she smelled like ranch dressing and steak (she'd spilled steak juice down the front of herself bussing tables). She lay there grateful that tomorrow was Monday and the steakhouse was closed on Mondays.

She felt the mattress give as her husband sat next to her. He started rubbing her shoulders, and she almost had the energy to moan in relief. She pulled her head around to face him and opened her eyes. "Hi."

"Hi, my love." He bent and kissed her. She broke off the kiss first; she didn't have the energy to continue where that would lead.

"I made a hundred and sixty-five today. That's the groceries for the

week.”

“Thank you, God.” He’d meant it, too. His faith in God’s plan and God’s timing had carried her through when she asked God why they were struggling.

She closed her eyes again as he continued to knead her back. His phone started ringing, and he got up to answer it. She was asleep before he said “Hello.”

It was twenty minutes later that her husband came tearing back into the room. “Babe. Babe! Wake up!”

She cracked an eye open. His face, his sweet, loving face, was effused with excitement. She rolled over and sat up, automatically reaching behind her back with one hand to get that darn bra unsnapped. “Whhhhaaaat?” she moaned like a zombie. It thundered outside; she was so tired that the sound barely registered.

“Babe, I got it! I got the job!”

She tried to summon her brain into working mode. “What job?”

“That environmental job with Les! Babe, they’re giving me a car and thirty *thousand* more than I asked for. Les says they don’t want me to go anywhere. Babe.” He stopped, and looked at her, his eyes reddening and filling with tears. “I have a job. I have work.”

She smiled at him while her brain was still attempting to reboot. She opened her arms and he fell into them, crying hot, silent tears of relief. She heard tapping and was confused. What was that sound? It intensified in tempo, and she pulled back from him.

“What’s that noise?”

It became a drum beat drowning out the groan of the air conditioner. Suddenly, she sprang up and ran to the window,

“It’s raining!” Sweet, merciful drops were falling from the leaden sky; as she watched, a sheet of rain came pounding toward the house. Soon the world was a formless grey blob as the rain hit the window in slashing horizontal waves.

Her husband came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. She let her head fall back against him and wrapped her arms around his.

“Thank you, God.”

Heading North

by Heather Bayless, Baylor University

I threw up on the side of I-35, just
Crawled right over the passenger seat, opened the door,
And greeted the grass with my gastronomy. Some
Man's cows looked at me.

I shouldn't be reading texts while going 80 but
I do and I did and it said
"she didn't make it."
What a wide expanse, all this

Green, all this concrete. On the other side is a
Pond, burnt to a crisp. A truck honks at my backside.
I taste bile and the highway rolls on, steady stream
of sex-slavery and grief.

She died
Knowing that I never speed.

Blackberry Picking

by Heather Bayless

Done shoeless of course,
Like so many of life's best pleasures.
Knew where the burs grew,
The grass' bald spots.
Mom's shadow shielded fair freckled
Skin, newly scarred from an
Over-eagerness and an ignorance of thorns.
Now wearing gardening gloves,
Reaching further down and further in
Where birds had not been.
They were not for tasting, just to go from stained gloves
To bucket to canning. Next year's jam. Sell it at First Monday.
Mom would pop one right into her
Mouth, smile the smile she would pass down to me,
Seeds in her teeth.

I Live My Daily Life With You In Mind

by Heather Bayless

Mother I am afraid to hold you -
What glass are you hiding? Two more
pearl-strings twisted in knots around your
kidneys are not what you needed.
I am standing in your mother's kitchen spooning fried chicken into cooled
gravy and I do not taste a thing. An apt metaphor for porn:
you can consume it but I wouldn't call it a meal.
Love is
You saving up your Brookshires points
to get me a saucepan you thought I might need.
I don't need it.
Farberware in hand, you line up three generations
of the same-sized breasts to share the news.
Nonnie shakes her head. I'm staring at your abdomen.
In this kitchen you used to peel off burnt summer skin.
I imagine peeling you back, taking out the veins that
kink and cord.
I have forgotten that we've once been black berry picking,
that you taught me to skin a fish.
And now you are making me
Drink a tart tea that's good for my immune system.
This will not help.
I just want to cry to you, tell you
Mom everything is wrong,
Another friend is getting divorced,
I'm applying to jobs I don't want,
I don't know how to love the man I have.
You have a liver cyst and another aneurism
on each kidney. We joke and say they are your
babies. You're growing twins. We want them dead.

Breathe

by Katelyn Elrod, Mid-America Christian University

The giant gold Buddha smiled down at her from his perch, surrounded by flowers and incense. Her eyes were supposed to be closed. After distributing cushions and making sure everyone was comfortable, the monk had ushered the six of them into darkness and silence.

“Close your eyes . . . notice your breath . . . softly smile to yourself,” he had nearly sung. “Now is the most important moment of your life.”

Maggie tried to give her breath proper attention, but even when she closed her eyes, she couldn't stop thinking about the five strangers who sat with her in silence in front of the monk wrapped in red. The group was composed of a middle-aged man in a crisp white shirt and thousand-dollar watch, a woman of at least seventy in a cascading skirt that was far too long, a twenty-something guy with greasy black hair peeking from his beanie, and a mom in a Victoria's Secret tracksuit with her twelve-year-old daughter. Each had entered and sat without a word, and Maggie thought of how strange it was that the quiet existed with an absence of tension or the feeling of a void. The silence was weighty but still light enough to make her float.

Maggie took a deep breath, feeling the air race into her nose, make a U-turn, and exit far more gently than it had entered. Again and again she traced the air, attempting to exclude every other thought but failing to forget the SAT she would be taking Saturday, the painting she was working on but didn't like, the way her dad yelled at her brother, the lack of guilt she felt for lying to her mom, the current pain in her lower back. All in three minutes, they zoomed around her mind, crashing into each other like overzealous bumper cars. Then she returned to her breath. The bumper cars. The breath.

During the last five minutes, she gained control, breathing and existing for maybe the only time in her life. Though she wasn't consciously thinking it, now is the most important moment of your life reverberated throughout her entire body. It sounded silly when the monk said it, but it didn't feel silly now. This is it, she felt. This is it, and this will always be it.

The monk began lightly tapping a small bell.

“Start bringing awareness back to your body . . . gently move your fingers and toes . . . when you're ready, mindfully open your eyes.”

Maggie slowly crawled out of her mind and reentered the room. The Buddha was still grinning at her, beckoning her to join him in frozen serenity. The smell of frankincense, which seemed to disappear when she closed her

eyes, flooded her nose again. She imagined three wise men following street lamps to the urban vihara, resting a cardboard box of frankincense sticks at the Buddha's crossed legs as he smiled at them. "He reminds us of someone else we know," they would say, remembering the smell of animals and the creak of the manger they had visited all those years ago.

As she slipped her tennis shoes back on, she overheard the man with the watch and the monk speaking.

"Not everything can be suffering," the man with the watch said. "What about when we're happy? Like when my kids run into my arms when I get home from work? That can't be suffering."

"Even joy brings suffering." The monk looked up to the ceiling, appearing to choose his words both carefully and effortlessly. "We feel joy, but we suffer when it comes to an end, because we are left craving more."

"But what about..."

Maggie dropped a five in the donation basket and shuffled out the door. She didn't want to hear the man's protests or the monk's reply. Since moving, she had few moments of joy, and she didn't want them to be tainted by the thought of suffering, even if the monk was right. Maybe in a few weeks she could stomach the truth, but not now. Now, she would treasure the semblance of joy whenever it presented itself, knowing it would vanish if she clutched too tightly.

When she rounded the corner of the vihara, the city hit her. Horns blared and neon signs accosted her from above. Everyone who passed seemed to have somewhere important to be at seven thirty on a Wednesday night. One woman navigated the wave of people without ungluing her eyes from her cellphone, only looking up when she crashed into Maggie at full power-walking speed.

"Oh, sorry," the woman mumbled before jetting away and re-immersing herself, trance-like, in the blue light of her phone.

Maggie wondered if now, the moment after colliding with a woman who couldn't stand to walk and only walk, was the most important moment of her life. The monk said so, but she didn't want it to be true. This can't be it, she thought. She tried to think about her breath, but it zipped through her out of pure necessity.

As a woman shouted at her to try a lamb kabob, Maggie kept her head down, noticing the cracks in the sidewalk. They looked like they formed an astrology chart, crisscrossing lines telling passersby how their days would go and what they needed to do to be happy. She imagined the thousands of feet pounding on the concrete every day, their owners receiving daily

horoscopes simply by walking in the right spot. Though she knew the cracks were probably caused by roots or the swelling of frozen ground, she preferred to believe the weight of the pedestrians had gradually split the sidewalk. She couldn't help thinking about the fissures eventually saying enough is enough, ceasing to give horoscopes and instead opening wide to swallow everyone whole.

When a cyclist rocketed past her, Maggie's mind wandered to home, her real one. At home, no cyclists dared risk their lives on the street for fear that a driver in a nine-foot pickup truck wouldn't notice them. Everyone drove everywhere and knew the special rules. In the early evening, cars would creep past one another, each driver cautiously surveying the area since the sheriff always seemed to be on Main Street around five o'clock. Everybody who grew up in town knew that—it was practically part of the Driver's Ed curriculum. "You shouldn't speed at any time, of course," Maggie's instructor had said, "but you especially shouldn't speed on Main Street between five and six o'clock."

At home, garbage bags didn't form mountains on the sidewalks. They stayed hidden in blue bins, only making a public appearance on trash day. Some people in town took after the blue bins, but instead of using plastic, they concealed ugliness with a hard shell of red lipstick or expensive cowboy boots. Their Amens at Sunday lunch were meant to cancel out the rumors shared Friday night in the bleachers at the high school football game, a careful balancing of the social if not spiritual ledger. In Maggie's neighborhood, neatly manicured lawns signified neatly manicured families, and if anyone fell short of excellence in lawn maintenance, they could expect to hear about it from the homeowners' association. That was on the west side of the train tracks, of course, where the comfortable white folks lived.

But not everything was bad: there was the waitress at Papa Dave's who had called her "hon" for ten years; hiding behind the shelves of glitter in the craft closet when the youth group had dominion over the entire church for a night of hide and seek; sitting under Friday night lights, sipping hot chocolate and poking fun at the football players whose losing record did little to temper their arrogant strut through the Lynnville High School hallways; the bright green blades of grass that stuck to her feet when she ran through the sprinkler during summertime as a kid. Moments like these were overlooked at the time but easy to romanticize now, when Maggie could go an entire weekend without seeing a familiar face besides her family members'.

Like she had done every day since moving to the city, Maggie attempted to pick a winner. Here, she had more opportunities than the mom and pop

shops and steeples of Main Street back home could offer her. But she missed faces she knew and people who paid attention, just for a moment. On good days in the city, the quick people, the distracted people, the yearning people were part of a dazzling kaleidoscope. She would gaze at its beauty from just far enough away so she could look but not touch, finding no distinction between humans and buildings, trees and buses. On bad days, the days she craved to both look and touch, everybody and everything pressed in, and she couldn't look at or feel anything. The blur of the city was threatening, as if something might run her over without a thought.

The sound of screeching returned her to the present moment.

As soon as she craned her head to the right, toward the crosswalk perpendicular to the one she was about to cross, a car crashed into a woman. The woman fell onto the hood of the car before hitting the pavement. A couple got out of the car, but Maggie didn't see which one climbed out of the driver's seat. The man called the ambulance as the woman bent down to the lady on the pavement.

At this moment, Maggie realized that the woman on the pavement wasn't a stranger, at least not entirely. Her skirt was now covered in blood, sticking to her legs instead of cascading around them. Without thinking, Maggie rushed over to her, breaking her way through the group of strangers accumulating around the scene. A couple of them were attempting to check the woman's vital signs and wounds, but any expertise they had came from network TV medical dramas.

"We . . . we didn't see her," the woman from the car said. "We were turning right. We thought it was clear. And . . . and when we started turning, we saw her walking, then tripping, but not all-the-way falling. But it was too late. We tried to stop, we really did. We really, really did." Maggie couldn't tell if "we" was a coverup for herself or the man she was with, but she decided it didn't matter.

She peered down at the skirt, at least an inch below the woman's feet even when she was lying down. If she had just worn a skirt that fit, Maggie thought before reprimanding herself. She grabbed the woman's bloody hand lightly, trying to channel compassion through her fingertips without exacerbating the injuries. The woman looked up at Maggie through glassy eyes as she winced and shook with pain. She squeezed Maggie's hand as tightly as she could, Maggie thought, though it wasn't tight at all.

"Breathe . . . just focus on breathing," Maggie said. She knew it sounded ridiculous to tell a suffering woman to breathe, but it was the only thing she could think of and the frail thread that tethered them together. Maggie

closed her eyes, focusing on the air entering her nose, reversing, and creeping back out. The woman tried to keep in rhythm with Maggie's breath, but hers trembled increasingly with every second. Sirens screamed in the distance, but they didn't sound close enough, and traffic seemed so thick. Maggie knew, and the woman with the skirt seemed to know, too. The woman from the car kept mumbling stuff like "don't worry" and "everything will be alright" as the man held her.

The monk's words echoed through Maggie again: now is the most important moment of your life. She felt it course through her veins and into the woman through their locked hands. This is it, she thought. Right now, this is it for me, and this is it for her. She wanted to say something sage, or at least something comforting, but everything seemed trivial. Besides, the woman's eyes seemed to see right through her, so it didn't matter. Words would taint the truth of it all, and Maggie would not be the one responsible for that. She gently smiled down at the woman with a smile that wouldn't look like a smile to any onlooker.

"You look like him," the woman spoke barely above a whisper. She didn't slip away after those words, like Maggie had seen in movies, but kept staring and clutching Maggie's hand, her breath becoming more and more unstable. The woman reciprocated the smile that barely looked like a smile, the smile that made her look like him, too, but Maggie could feel it much more than she could see it. She knew the woman's smile would be frozen serenity, and envy intermingled with sorrow without her permission.

When the ambulance arrived, everything went into motion. Maggie didn't remember letting go, but she found herself on the outside of the action, watching the woman get placed on a stretcher and carried into the back of the ambulance.

"Let's try to resuscitate, but I don't know if . . ."

They shut the doors and drove away.

Maggie walked into a McDonalds to scrub the blood from her hands. She didn't notice when people gave her suspicious or pitiful looks, simply focusing on what needed to be done.

As she made her way home, the city reverted to its pressing form, the version that attenuated her feelings and quickened her breath. Tourists and fire hydrants and street vendors were obstacles, warring against her by slowing her down. She longed for another moment between the kaleidoscope city and the pressing one, though not under the same circumstances. She craved not only to admire the beauty of the city's movement but to participate in it. Traces of blood still clung under her fingernails. She wondered why it took

someone else's blood for her not to feel separate or suffocated.

"I'm home," Maggie said robotically as she walked through the door of her family's apartment. Smiling photos greeted her at all sides—her parents' attempt to make the two-bedroom apartment feel like a home.

"Todd, Magdalene's home!" her mom yelled, rising from the couch to give her a hug. "How was youth group? Are you still liking the church?"

"Yeah, it was fine," Maggie said while hugging her mom. "Just another Wednesday night."

Stained Soul

by Gregory Bradford, Angelo State University

Today, my professor
Described war to innocents
With academic eyes
Horrors captured
In pictures, video
Unnoticed
Was my forced departure.
From the sky
Cabin lights turn
From blue to red
Over enemy air;
A shade reminder
Of what stains my fingers in battle
Every day.
Every.
Day.
The Multi-media bombardment of battles cease—
The lights
Once again a safe blue
Then mercifully,
Classroom white.
Having lived another lifetime.
Again.
Yet I wonder
If he will ask
If I want to talk
Or cry
Or-
Wash my hands.

Queens

by Gabrielle DeMay, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

Strange
How in the most dangerous place in the world-
Where glitter flicks
From rapid anime eyelids
And the leotards
And the lights
And the tumbles in sugar crystals
From the ten-tier cake on her brow
Where hairspray fixes everything
Where small crumpled offerings
Are plucked up and poked
Up under the wig at the tips
Of dancing fingers
Where screams
Of love and terror
Erupt at a high step
Where the rapt audience is cornered
By soft rustling, guns,
The duller glint of a badge
Where she flings her beads at the crowd
Where the crowd roars
Where they scream their acceptance
Where they scream their hate
Where t-shirts are wrinkled in rainbows
Where tucking
Where strutting
Where rising
Where dying—
Strange
How in the most dangerous place in the world
I feel safe

Cherry Cola

by Courtney Ludwick, Texas State University

The first thing she noticed was the heat. It slowed down time, made everything take a pause. The lethargic hum of the cicadas was sluggish, thicker and denser and slower than the sharp cries that pierced through the cool air back home. The leaves didn't fall down. No, they floated, barely sitting atop the dry grass that crumbled underneath her sneakers. And the people! The humidity loosened their ties, and their starched collars wilted in the heat. It wasn't the middle of the day—far from it—but the shadows of the sun still beat down on their brows, tethering them to the ground. Even her footsteps were slower here.

The girl wiped her forehead on the sleeve of her cotton blouse as she rolled her suitcase across the concrete drive. It led her to the front door, red and bright and a sharp contrast to the cookie-cutter blues she had seen on the long drive over. She knocked, but the door was already being opened, the cool air was already inviting her in, and the grandparents who felt like strangers were already acting like family.

“Elizabeth.” One word was all they said, but their smiles said more. Wide grins were stretched across their faces as if to make up for everything that had happened in the last month. They both were looking down at her, and Elizabeth felt the weight of expectation settle above her chest, right above her ribcage, where it became hard to breathe. Did they want a brief assurance like everyone else had at the memorial? Perhaps a small smile? The girl struggled to make the corners of her lips turn up—and her grandfather and grandmother smiled even wider in encouragement—but she couldn't find the strength to do it. After a prolonged and unsettling amount of time spent trying, she let a frown settle in its place instead. There, that felt better.

“She must be tired from the drive,” Elizabeth's grandfather whispered, as if she wasn't in the room.

“She needs rest,” Elizabeth's grandmother nodded in agreement.

“Take her to the guest bedroom.”

“Yes, the girl needs rest.”

* * *

Elizabeth woke up the next morning in a bed that wasn't her own in a house that wasn't her own surrounded by people who weren't her own. The comforter was thick and warm, but the print made her homesick, made her miss Maine and the newly fallen snow that blanketed her dad's old gray

Chevy in the winter. The lamp was burning bright, but it made her miss the streetlights that would light up the slick road when the sunlight just faded out of view and the neighborhood kids were still running around the block, playing pirates or cowboys or whatever game kids played. The heavy oak desk was sturdy, but it made her miss the way her mother used to write on their old wooden desk pressed up in the corner of the kitchen by the space heater, pen pressed to paper and forehead furrowed in concentration as she wrote about love or hate or whatever mothers wrote about. Elizabeth missed home. But greater still, she missed the people that had made it home. Elizabeth missed her parents.

A knock on the front door cleared her mind. And several knocks later, she wondered where her grandparents were. Pulling her robe tight against her chest, she walked down the hallway.

“Hello? Grandma?” she called out. There was another loud knock. “Grandpa?”

Elizabeth reached the front door and let it swing open. She was shocked that the heat was just as intoxicating as she had remembered it from last night. Almost immediately, she felt it, sticky and cloying as it settled in her mouth, drowning both her and the boy standing across the entryway.

“Newspaper delivery!” The boy’s joyful voice cut through Elizabeth like glass. She wrinkled her nose and held her hand out for the paper. The boy didn’t leave.

“You’re new here,” he said. Elizabeth simply nodded her head. “I mean . . . I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“I’m living with my grandparents until I turn eighteen. Then back home again.” Elizabeth tried to close the door, but, when she looked down, she saw the boy’s boot acting as a door stopper.

“Home? Where’s home?” As the boy’s smile grew wider, the heat started to prickle Elizabeth’s skin. She felt the invisible rays shining down on the two of them. Beads of sweat started to form on her skin. She felt one drop slide down her nose and fall to the ground. The boy seemed fine, but was it getting warmer out there? She imagined her face becoming redder and hotter and redder and hotter and redderandhotterandredderandhotter.

“Home is far away from here,” she finally gasped and pulled the door towards her. It didn’t budge. She looked down and saw his boot firmly pressed against the wooden door.

“How far away?” Elizabeth glared at the boy, but he was unaffected, oblivious, or at least pretending to be.

“Home is up north.”

“Nice.” He paused, and then the tips of his cheeks went red as his voice rambled on. “My parents were from New England, but they hated the cold. I’ve never seen snow, but I don’t really like the cold much either. It must suck during the winter up there, huh? All that snow?”

“No.” Elizabeth’s eyes started to water, and the warmth of the summer day seemed to melt away. “It’s beautiful.”

Beautiful. The sky was beautiful. Elizabeth was five years old, and it was the first time she had seen snow fall. It wasn’t like in the movies. It wasn’t like in the books. You couldn’t see the individual shapes and colors and lines of the snowflakes. But they were still beautiful.

Her face was cold from the wind, but she felt alive when the snow touched her nose, stuck to her eyelashes. Her mom was holding her hand, and she could just barely see her dad ahead of them. She looked up at her mom. She had the prettiest black hair and the prettiest green eyes and freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose that looked like the constellations in the sky. She looked at her dad. He was the tallest and handsomest and best dad in the world. Her mom and dad were perfect. Everything was perfect. Everything was fine.

A ball of white ice whirred past her face. Frightened, she once again looked up at her mom, but her mom was laughing. She looked for her dad, but she couldn’t find him. Another ball of thick ice whirred past her. She felt the sting of it on her face, and her gloved hand reached up to touch the small red welt. Another one hit her leg. Her mom was doubled over with laughter, and her dad snuck out from behind a tree and launched another snowball in their direction. This time it hit Elizabeth’s mom. Suddenly, both her mom and her dad and her were throwing balls of snow at one another. And they laughed and they played and they smiled. And they laughed and they played and they smiled.

Elizabeth didn’t know if the water on her face was from the heat or from the memory, but suddenly, she wanted to tell the boy all about the snow. She wanted to tell him how great snowball fights were after a huge snowfall and how no feeling in the world could be better than sledding down a powdery hill. She wanted to tell him that there really was a proper technique for making a snowman even though everyone said there wasn’t. She wanted to tell him how a day in the snow always led to cozy nights inside by the fireplace and by family. There would be her dad’s homemade hot chocolate and her mom’s smiling face in the kitchen and the boy might even be there too. Elizabeth wanted to spend hours talking about the snow, talking about home and what she had and what she lost, but when she looked up, the boy

was gone.

* * *

After Elizabeth met the boy who delivered newspapers, her days became monotonous. Most of her time was spent inside, where the coolness of a book was preferable to the hot summer of a Texas day. As weeks passed, she didn't seem to feel any worse, but she didn't seem to feel any better either. Her grandparents noticed.

"Elizabeth, it's a beautiful day. Go outside," her grandma suggested.

"I-I will. As soon as I'm done with this chapter."

Her grandma reached for the book and pulled it away from her. "Go take a walk. It'll do ya some good."

Reluctantly, she nodded and went outside.

It was hot. But Elizabeth wasn't surprised. The high summer sun wouldn't have it any other way. She walked. And skipped. And stopped to look around. Soon, she started to notice the things around her. The neighborhood her grandparents lived in was pretty similar to hers back home. It was small and cozy. All the houses were the same size. All the mailboxes were the same color. All the residents knew each other. It was comforting, in a way.

There was a playground on the edge of the neighborhood. She looked at the parents fanning their faces while their children ran and laughed and sang.

"Ring-a-round the rosies!"

"A pocket full of posies!"

"Ashes! Ashes!"

"We all fall down!"

A little further down, there was a church, beautiful and glittering. The windows were a myriad of colors and the shards of glass caught the girl's eye. Elizabeth looked at the images in the windows, but the pictures told stories that she no longer knew. The bell—high in its tower—overlooked the neighborhood and saw even further out. Past the houses and the mailboxes that were all the same size, it saw the rows of corn and cotton sprouting in the fields. It saw the pastures full of animals, grazing and neighing and galloping. It saw the sunset fade into a million colors so beautiful it was hard to look away. Hazy pinks and lullabying yellows gave way to brilliant oranges and vivid blues and piercing reds. The bell even saw Elizabeth.

She was staring at the sky. As the sun dipped even further down, Elizabeth felt a chill creep up her arms. Goosebumps freckled her skin and she started to shiver. The sky couldn't really look like this, could it? This sky—this sky so foreign and strange and different and not hers—couldn't look like

this, could it? For a single moment, she didn't miss the snow.

* * *

Weeks later, Elizabeth was outside. The sun washed over her shoulder blades, and she didn't frown at the feeling. The clouds parted in the clear blue sky, and the heat radiated off of the concrete, the grass, the girl's sneakers. The birds nestled in the trees, and the small animals hiding in the bushes didn't dare to venture out of their homes. But the girl sitting outside in the grass didn't seem to mind the heat.

"Hey! You!" A familiar voice called out to Elizabeth from across the street. She turned and saw the newspaper delivery boy who had never seen snow.

"Hey, you."

"It's pretty hot today. Surprised you're outside."

"It feels nice." Elizabeth smiled at the thought.

"Too hot for me today. So . . . I just finished my paper route. Wanna go to The Pickwick?"

"Pickwick? What's a pickwick?"

"No, The Pickwick. Haven't you ever been to one?"

"Can't say I have."

So the boy who had never seen snow and the girl who missed snow walked to the soda shop. As they walked, they talked about everything and nothing. Elizabeth learned that he didn't have a mom either, and his older brother was coming home from college in two weeks. The boy found out that Elizabeth's favorite color was orange, and the color of the sunsets here made her feel happier than she had in a long time. Elizabeth discovered that he wanted to be a teacher when he was older, and he loved his little sister more than anything in the world. And the boy learned that Elizabeth was really extraordinary when she smiled. After seeing her smile, he didn't want her to frown ever again.

Once they got to The Pickwick, the boy bought two cherry colas. One for him and one for her. Then they sat at a table outside and watched the sun rise high into the sky. Noon passed, and the sun started to fall. They talked about their dreams, about their wishes, about their lives. They talked about favorite animals and the prettiest places they'd been and the things they wanted to do in the future. They talked about staying in touch when Elizabeth went home and calling each other during the winter to see how the weather had changed and wishing the day would last a few hours longer so they could talk some more. But the day didn't last forever. And the sweet contentment each felt ended as the sun set over the dimly-lit horizon.

* * *

The surface of a body of water is innocent. It's all calm. It's all still. You can't see what's underneath. You can't see what's going on beneath that surface. When a river becomes wild, it also becomes dangerous. Anything that's wild can become dangerous. Look at the sky. Look at the sky in Texas.

In the morning, the sky is serene. Hazy. Blue. Then it's noon, and hot bright white light envelops everything. When the sun starts to set, the colors move faster. You blink, and the blues and purples are gone. You look down for a single second, and the reds and oranges have faded to black. You turn to tell a friend a joke you heard the other day, and the summer heat has turned into a lighting storm. And the sharp crack of light and the harsh booms of thunder flash across the sky, flash in front of you and your friend. A few seconds ago, that sky was beautiful and blue. Now it's all dark reds and yellows and blacks so dark the shadows on the ground start to get jealous. It's beautiful too, but it's also dangerous.

Rivers are like that.

* * *

The newspaper wasn't delivered the next day. The sweet goodbye of a summer night, hot in its innocence and cold in its time, turned out to be forever. The girl never saw the boy, and the boy never saw snow. Elizabeth felt loss more than once that summer.

* * *

She rolled her suitcase out the cherry-red front door. The concrete driveway was a blinding white, and the tall oaks smiled down at the girl who was leaving, at the girl who was going back home. She said goodbye to the tall smiling oaks and then said goodbye to everything else. She shut her car door and drove away. The first thing she missed was the heat.

Dandelion

by Holly Kubiak, Oklahoma Baptist University

Ingest me.
Bitter to the tongue.
Life to the blood.
Sticky milk of hairy stalk.
Snap! Pop! Plucked,
dirt-clumped
broken
roots.

Yellow paint upon
her hand
and ground
smeared across warm
sidewalk's grains of sand.
Yellow blush upon
her cheeks
her nose.
Tiny petals
pollen tickles
her nose.

Romans 3:23

by Sierra Raheem, Baylor University

We are all sinners.

Bad roots ruining holy soil.

Digging our nails into low limbs of limp trees in God's Holy Orchard.

The flesh craves iniquity.

The sweet tooth for sin is hereditary.

We are:

Eve's offspring,

the tumultuous waves in the Sea of Galilee,

the cursed fig tree,

and we drink the gratifying poison only to foam at the mouth at the bleak realization of her betrayal.

Polar Vortex

by Cymelle Edwards, Grand Canyon University

I've got a song named after
me, it flows in muted hues
of cornflower against winds
hushed into submission,
where roads are riddled with ice
and order, like the rich timbre of
a baritone beneath the hands of
Stokowski, each note is born above
the snow and carved by a rift in
ecstasy that leaves the earth a bitter
clime—my thoughts fracture in
the zephyr like the fainted lilt of a
foreign phrase. Disaster emerges
as intricate staccatos of grief and
turns a winter hymnal into whispers,
to act as the hands and feet of mercy.
Boundaries close in, the cadence
grips its edges end to end and hemorrhages
strength. There are white trees that in
the ambience of spring would come alive,
but now are still like a skyline
towering so close to heaven yet
forsaken to ascend, poised in isolation,
and from them flurries a petition to God
in the form
of a snowflake.

Thunder Echoes Away

by Magda Rodriguez, Abilene Christian University

The newspaper arrived in the morning just like every other day, except this day wasn't as bright for this northern corner of México. Eliza still wasn't used to picking up the newspaper. She had refused at first and made sure to tell Octavio that she would buy him a dog to do it instead, but she gave in since the newspaper wasn't the point. The psychiatrist said it would be good for her to have a responsibility in the morning to get her out of bed, but she hadn't felt the impact of picking up a bundled piece of paper and doubted this chore was actually going to help her as much as they hoped. It just gave her more time to think.

She lingered a bit by the doorframe and took in the darkening sky to the west of her view. The billowing clouds were slowly eating away at the brightening morning sky. The sheets of distant rain brought shades of grey down to the houses of the far-off neighborhoods. Eliza looked down at her wristwatch, but it was facing the wrong way. She would have gotten it resized, but Octavio kept hoping she would regain some weight. She noticed how pronounced her wrist bone had become; perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing to regain a bit of weight. She heard thunder. It was about an hour away.

She felt tears forming, but she didn't let herself cry, at least not now. She turned back into the house. Octavio hadn't turned on any of the lights, as he still worried too much about bills out of habit rather than circumstance. The smell of coffee told her that he was in the kitchen. She grabbed the paper. Lightning jumped from cloud to cloud inching closer toward her and her home. Octavio was right about not being able to continue the demolition of the building today as planned, so there went Octavio's plan to take her out of the house today since it was the two-year anniversary of Nicolas's death. October the 17th, no matter the weather, was always just a bit grayer since. She closed the door and headed to the back of the house.

She found Octavio counting the tortillas to start warming them up. He flipped a tortilla onto the griddle. "Do we want three today?"

She hadn't eaten that many in one sitting for two years. "Sure. Just heat one less for yourself, just in case I can't finish all three."

Octavio didn't put any tortillas back. He must have known her answer. She held the rolled newspaper up to him.

"Anything interesting today?" He pinched a corner of the tortilla and missed it by a little. He burnt the tip of his finger. He shook it and

immediately placed it in his mouth.

“I haven’t opened it yet.” She moved him over and took over heating up the rest that he had taken out. He wasn’t used to helping her in the kitchen, although he had always wanted to flip tortillas without the spatula.

She watched him retrieve the eggs and ham from the fridge. She wouldn’t have to help him there. He could always make eggs well and probably better than she could. When he used to make omelets, he would impress the kids by flipping it over the pan dramatically. It had always made Nicolas laugh when Octavio theatrically opened his eyes and mouth right before he flipped it to increase the tension of where the egg would fall. They had imagined that Nicolas would grow out of it after his toddler years, but Octavio could get a grin from him even right before he left for college. Michael and Olivia, on the other hand, would never laugh at that. They were more like her in that respect. She finished the last tortilla and placed it in the tortilla warmer along with the others to keep warm. With the tortilla warmer in hand, she opened the fridge, grabbed the salsa, and placed both on the table. The sizzling of the ham in the butter was starting to make her hungry. From the smell, she could tell that Octavio was getting the eggs a bit too well-done for her taste. The smell of food was the only way to make her hungry now, which was why Octavio made sure to take a more active role in the kitchen. When she did take the antidepressants, they had helped to some degree with her symptoms, but they always made her feel the room around her wasn’t tied to gravity.

As she passed Octavio, she kissed him on the cheek. Even after their thirty years together, she still enjoyed seeing the little smile that he got when she did that. Perhaps her enjoyment was rooted in the fact that his grin would always start on whichever side she gave him the kiss. She wiped off the lingering lipstick from his cheek with a smile. The one-week beard prickled against her fingers, but she was still supportive of the new look.

She opened the refrigerator and grabbed the milk. “I think I’m going to have the students practice buying grocery items in English today. They were doing so well yesterday with the vocabulary I gave them that I think they are ready to practice a more real-world situation. So if you can’t find the bread and cereal later, I’ll have it in class.”

He slid an egg on a plate. “Getting to relive the times Olivia made you play kitchen with her?”

She winked as she passed him. “Maybe, but that play kitchen has come in handy. The students’ children use it to play while we are in class, and it helps the adults have a run-through before they have to interact in those

circumstances. Plus, what adult wants to stay sitting for two hours just saying words to each other?”

He set the plates down on the table. “You got a point there. So what will you be doing in class today?”

“I’ll have them go over the food vocabulary and add money, so they will have to remember the numbers we went over a few weeks ago. I stayed late in the classroom yesterday, because I was attaching the tags to the food items.” She poured some milk into her coffee.

He picked up a tortilla. “So that’s where that packet of tags from the store went. Earlier this morning Nancy couldn’t figure out where they had gone.”

She put down her mug and shook her head. “I did leave word with your secretary that I was taking a packet.”

“She must’ve forgotten to pass the message to Nancy. Her daughter is having her baby shower today, and it was supposed to be outside.” He tore off a piece of tortilla and filled it with eggs. “She was panicking all day yesterday. It was obvious that it’s her first grandchild. I’ll make sure to let Nancy know.”

“A grandchild? Isn’t she younger than us?”

“There might be more than one reason that she’s nervous about this situation.”

The rest of breakfast was quiet as there really wasn’t much to say. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence even though her mind had wandered to how long they would have to wait for grandchildren. The silence was a sense of comfort that they had with each other and took over the room. This hadn’t always been the case though—breakfasts had been loud when the kids were still living with them. Eliza didn’t mind being alone with him, but she did mind having an empty nest. It didn’t help her to look at the three empty chairs and remember having all three of them here.

“You are thinking about them, aren’t you?” Octavio picked up the plates.

Eliza looked at the empty chairs around her. “Yes. I just wasn’t done being a full-time mom.”

Octavio waited until he left the room. “You do boss me around enough to make up for it.”

Eliza noticed him turn around, waiting for her response, but instead she ignored him, unwrapped the newspaper, and put the last section on his side. He always liked reading the comics first since it would allow him to read the news in a better state of mind. She, on the other hand, liked reading them last to leave her in a better state of mind.

She noticed that the header of a story included their last name and quickly turned over to the page with the article.

She felt herself whisper “Octavio” although she wasn’t sure if it was loud enough to be heard.

He turned off the faucet and came to Eliza. “Amor, what’s happened?” He had his hands up like a doctor prepared for surgery.

“They are saying we stole the building we got Nicolas to build his law practice.”

He bent down next to her and put a hand on her knee. “What?” He let out a small chuckle. “How can you steal a building?”

The hot water from his hand soaked her skirt. She looked up at him. “That we forced them to take less than the building was worth.” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “The guy we bought it from . . . Mr. Reyes?” Octavio nodded. “Yes, him . . . is claiming that we scammed him.”

He stood up. “How much money did we scam him out of?”

“A hundred thousand or something, but what does it matter?” Her vision was beginning to blur as she touched her son’s name in print. “They included his name, Octavio, since we had the house bought in his name.”

Octavio moved next to her and looked at the paper. “Couldn’t he have refused to sell us the building three years ago then? You know, not taken the offer we gave him?”

She felt tears escape and run down her cheeks. “They’re saying that he didn’t know the value of the land and now he investigated and wants us to pay him what we owe him.” She looked up at her Octavio. He had started to gray around his ears, and it had gotten worse in the past year. They had agreed it was stress. This was the last thing their family needed.

But after all they have been through these past couple of years, she couldn’t believe that El Sol would have the audacity to say that. Nicolas had been dead for two years, and they decide to publish this today of all days. On the day when they were all in the hospital room with him and his doctors. On the day when he had looked the least like himself and the most child-like he had ever been. On the day when he had taken his last breath.

She could feel her anger warm her cheeks. Octavio still hadn’t commented. “What are we going to do?”

He just let out a small laugh and stood up. “Nothing.”

Eliza put the paper down, almost knocking over her mug. She felt bubbling anger flood her. “What do you mean, nothing?”

He made his way back to the sink. “There is nothing to do about it. We made an offer, and he took it. Even if we had forced him, it is a done deal. We

won't have to give him any more money. Besides, the paper doesn't have the best credibility. I don't know why we keep ordering it. If Mr. Reyes wants his fifteen minutes of fame, who are we to keep him from that?"

Eliza looked down at the newspaper. She felt hollow. All she could see in her blurry vision was Nicolas' name. "But what of our name?"

"Nothing will happen to our name, amor. And anyways, our name was nothing before. Why should it continue to be?" He rinsed the plates and put them on the dish rack.

She stared at the paper. "Because it's ours. You've worked so hard to get us to where we are now." She turned to him. "How many things weren't we able to give Nicolas when he was a baby?"

He turned and crossed his arms. "What does that have to do with anything, Eliza? Why do you have to bring that up?"

Eliza tried to hold back the tears. She couldn't understand why he couldn't see how Nicolas was as tied to their social rise as they were. "Because the name is all we have left."

"Eliza." He walked to her and hugged her. "We have so much more than the name." He held her tighter. "We still have all of the memories."

"But the name is all I have left to protect." Eliza saw him move her hair back behind her ears. As she ran her fingers over Nicolas' name on the paper, she remembered the first time he had come home from school by himself. His uniform pants on his right knee had been ripped and dirty with dirt and blood. Even though it was due to him playing a bit of rough soccer on his way home with the kids down the street, Eliza went and picked him up every day until Michael was in a different school. That had been a hard day, but he promised her that for Michael's sake he would get home without a scratch. He didn't always keep that promise, but he tried.

"What do you want to do?"

"We should tell Michael and Olivia. I don't want them to be taken off guard if it reaches other students over there." She would make sure they had the warning that she had always wanted rather than learning Nicolas had a few months left to live. Michael and Olivia had been on their way back home to help with the surprise of the building as Nicolas was moving back home, but when they arrived, Eliza had to ask them to get Nicolas's unpacked suitcase from the house and bring it to the hospital. "From there, I don't know."

They called their kids at their house. It took a while to get a hold of them since they hadn't been home due to classes. All three of their kids had gone to UNAM, so they had bought a house for them in Monterrey when

Michael decided he would join Nicolas. Eliza and Octavio knew Olivia would end up following her brothers, since she relied on them to have a social life. Thus, they saw the house as an investment and gave them the excuse to visit their kids whenever Eliza felt it had been too long since she saw them. Luckily, the kids hadn't heard the news before they had reached them. They didn't seem to take it as hard as Eliza, but that wasn't a surprise.

Eliza brushed that off. "I think we should release a public statement to deny the claims."

"I don't think we should do that. I agree with Dad, because no one in their right . . ."

There was a loud sound of the phone falling, and Michael complaining.

Olivia spoke louder than Michael. "Mom, what paper would publish our statement with the pure intent of helping us and to put the accusations to bed? If any published our statement, then it would turn into a bigger thing as the new newspaper would undermine what *El Sol* published. Then our name would probably be put in the news yet again."

Eliza had to agree as Olivia continued. It was decided that they would only comment on how the price had been negotiated by both parties. Although Eliza was still not convinced, what Olivia had argued had helped her agree that this approach was better than what she had come up with. Even though Eliza wasn't happy that they weren't attempting to clear the name as a whole, she realized that it was best that they were dealing with the issue as a family. It reassured her that even with all that had happened to them they could still come together and depend upon each other. The family needed to remain as strong and close as they were now.

Octavio stayed with her until she had to leave for the class. She tried to get him to go to the office, but he said that he told the office to contact him if anything came up. They spent the afternoon answering phone calls asking if they had seen the paper, but after a while Eliza let Octavio handle it and began to reread the first book Octavio had bought her as she did frequently for nostalgia. Later, they had a small lunch. When they were done, she had to leave to set up the classroom. Due to the storm, she only brought a few things from the house that she didn't have in the toy kitchen that had been part of the student's vocabulary list. She organized them at the back of the room. She then noticed that there were only ten minutes before class was going to start, yet there were only three students in the classroom. The students were talking amongst themselves, but she couldn't get herself to talk to them. When she saw there were just two minutes before class started, she finally went out to the front doors of the school to see if any others were coming in. She found

two in the hallway, three coming in, and two parking. She waited a bit by the doors and watched the rain come down. The rain was pouring so hard that it seemed to bounce off the sidewalk and return.

Her quiet student Sara came up to Eliza and practiced her English. “Teacher, the traffic is bad. The rest will be late.”

Eliza felt that she could take slow breaths again. She slowed her pace as she walked back with Sara and asked her about her little girl.

Sara was quiet for a bit. “She got sick yesterday, so she could not come and play with the kitchen.”

Eliza thought of little Emmy sick without her mother. “Well, you certainly could have missed.”

Sara smiled. “My husband said he would take care of her, so I’m here.”

They walked into the classroom, and Eliza had them start on the warm up exercise where they asked each other about their background with food. Halfway through the time left for the exercise, the rest of the students walked in and explained how there had been a car accident down the street. Eliza was relieved that even with the rain only one was absent. Although she had expected it, her students never brought the newspaper article up to her. She noticed that they made unintentional eye contact more often than normal, but at least they were all still coming to the class. Given, the new students probably were going to continue to come as they were depending upon these classes to help get jobs across the border that didn’t involve cleaning, yard work, or any hard labor. The students that had been coming for a while had been attending when Nicolas got sick. They had continued to come even after she had to cancel class for a month after he passed away. She hadn’t expected them to come back, but the ones that were parents themselves made sure to come back and bring others with them. So Eliza didn’t know why she had been so worried.

She transitioned the class into the role-playing activity. During this, Eliza could distinguish between which parents played with their kids and which didn’t. She noticed how two little girls had a restaurant name, My Place, that they seemed to use regularly. She remembered how Olivia had complained for a while about not having a sister since her brothers didn’t want to play these kinds of things with her. Maybe they would have named things like that, but then Eliza probably wouldn’t have played with her as much. Eliza had wanted a fourth child. This possible child would have meant less time with the three kids that she did have. To have loud dinners filled with laughter again with all three of them in their corresponding chairs. To have all three come and surprise them every once in a while, because Nicolas

knew she needed that. To not feel that what made them a family was missing when they were all together. Even though she tried to give all that was possible, she wasn't able to get her only wish.

The little girls looked up at her and called her over. As Eliza approached them, she heard one whisper, "No mencionas el periódico."

They handed Eliza a cup and asked her if she wanted agua fresca or a soda. She asked them for an agua fresca, and it was the most refreshing water that she had ever had.

After the students had shopped according to their allotted budget, she ended the class by having them translate a recipe for "battered toasted ramen with bacon and eggs" in pairs. The students typically enjoyed this a lot since she made sure to include the strangest recipes she could find using the most common of ingredients. As the students were leaving, some came over to thank her for her work and hugged her. These hugs had never meant so much to her, as each one reassured her that she hadn't lost them. She packed up and took her boxes to the car. The rain had slowed so she took the liberty of taking two trips, because she wasn't in a hurry to get home. She decided to go back home the long way as it would allow her to avoid the busier roads that were more likely to have a wreck. Even with this, she arrived home thirty minutes before Octavio. She changed into some more comfortable clothes and made pancakes for dinner. She had put the pancakes and the syrup on the table when she heard the garage door open. He came in, water dripping slowly off his hair and coat.

"Octavio, what happened?"

He removed his shoes and socks while leaning on the doorframe. "I left the umbrella in the car when I got to work because it was drizzling. It didn't occur to me how far I ended up parking since I let Nancy park in my spot near the door—she has the flu."

Eliza kissed him. "I'll make you a hot chocolate and make sure you don't drip too much on my clean floors."

She smiled as she watched him tiptoe out of the kitchen. She got out the Abuelita hot chocolate to make on the stove top. By the time she was setting the hot chocolate on the table, he had come back showered and in his pajamas and robe. That robe had been one of the best last minute presents she had ever gotten him. He wore it now ten years after she found it on sale.

He put her slippers down next to her, and he sat.

She picked up the mug and let the warmth envelop her. "How was work?"

"It was empty since the rain got so bad." He poured syrup over his

battered pancakes. “No one thinks of getting hardware material during a storm unless there’s a leak somewhere.”

Eliza nodded. She noticed him nod back. “I only had one person absent today. It was Belinda, so I’m not too worried about her falling behind. Overall, the class went well. No one seemed to struggle. The kids that were there had even picked up a bit when they weren’t playing at the kitchen.”

She wanted to tell him that she had been pleasantly surprised by how well they had treated her by not asking questions and how kind the little girls had been, but she just decided to enjoy his company as they ate their dinner. They didn’t take too long to finish. After they had picked everything up, Eliza washed the dishes as Octavio cleaned up his trail of water.

Then Octavio and Eliza sat out on the porch. It was not very big, but the black metal railing of the porch made the space feel larger. It was a tradition that after a long day they went out to watch the neighborhood slow down around them. It had started because of the boys. She would stand on the porch and watch them play soccer on the street with the neighbors until it would get dark enough for her to be able to convince them to come in. Olivia brought out Octavio, since she wanted the boys to play with her, and they were more likely to listen to him than her. As Olivia got older though, he would just join Eliza outside. Thus, Octavio got them a small table and three chairs for them to sit outside. It became useful when the kids got old enough to date and promised to come home before a certain hour, but more often than not, they would simply use the set up to watch the sky change as the sun went down. Even though the sky would change from the cerulean tones and develop streaks of lavender and rose, Eliza’s favorite evenings were when it rained.

The air was crisp. Eliza disliked the outdoors unless it was raining, because the smell of rain always helped her relax. She took off the slippers to enjoy the cool of the concrete porch and slowed down her breathing. A small pool of the rainwater formed at the base of the steps and was filled with dancing leaves as the rain drops gave them a choreography swirling away from each drop.

The sky lit up and revealed the streams that were flowing through the streets. The thunder came and rumbled away in echoes. The rain began to pour with a greater intensity. The stream began to extend out further onto the steps.

She noticed that the sound of the stream had changed. It no longer sounded like the small fountains Nicolas’s doctor’s office had. “Doesn’t the water sound like popcorn?”

Octavio stared at the stream. The pressure from the water shot an acorn up to their feet. “I think it sounds a little more like the ham I was cooking this morning or the fried steak that I love so much.” He bent down and brought the acorn up. “Especially since there are projectiles.”

Eliza made a note to move the meat from the freezer into the refrigerator tonight. “I do always end up splattered with oil and end up with a burn or two on my hand and have to wash whatever I’m wearing.”

Octavio laughed. “Remember how I ruined my favorite button-up because I wanted to surprise you by cooking the fried steak?”

Eliza turned to Octavio and smiled at him as she felt a rush of happiness sweep over her. “You almost cried.”

Octavio straightened up. “In my defense, I had loved that shirt for almost seven years. The kids got it out of their own money for Christmas that year, because they thought it was wrong to get us something with money we gave them to buy presents. Do you remember that?”

Eliza let out a chuckle. “Oh, I can’t forget. They did so much better picking your present. I still haven’t gotten a single recipe from the Italian recipe book they got me to turn out well.” She noticed that Octavio had that look on his face. “And don’t say it’s because I’m a horrible cook or I won’t make fried steak tomorrow.”

Octavio winked at her. “You know I would never accuse you of that.” He tapped his stomach. “I’m not overweight because I hate your cooking. That’s for sure.”

She moved her feet further up and let the cold rain fall on her feet. Eliza had gotten used to the sensation of drops falling on her. She had gotten better at hiding when she cried, but Octavio had a way of always knowing. “Are we going to be okay?”

Octavio reached and grabbed her hand. He slowly rubbed his thumb across the back of it. They stayed out watching the rain until it was dark out. The rest of the night was quiet, because there was nothing more to say. Eliza and Octavio allowed themselves to find comfort in their silence. The only sounds for the rest of the night were that of the falling rain and thunder echoing away.

*To our readers,
Thank you!*