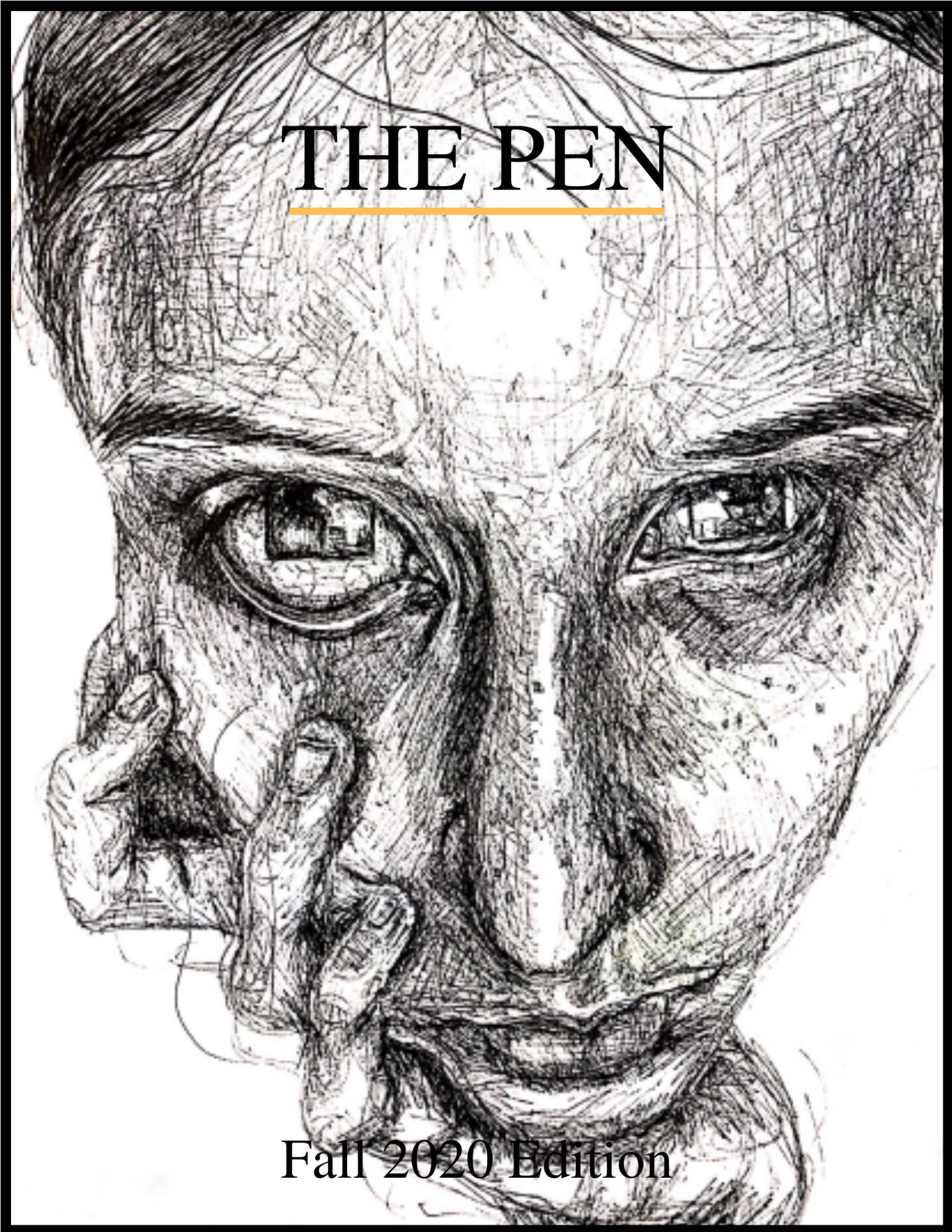




THE PEN

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Moments

Anonymous

The soothing touch of the ocean waves wrapped around my ankles, gently pulling me in ever so slightly. The breeze tickling my skin, and gently washing over. This was my biggest dream in life and all I wanted to do was savor the moment.

I was the only one on the beach, rising just before the sun, covered only by a white silk cover-up. My heart was at rest, my soul at peace, and I was one with nature and I was one with myself.

As the water began rising to my knees, the tickling of the fish nibbling on my legs let out a gentle laugh from my mouth. To savor the moment even more, I gently lowered my eyelids and spread out my arms. Who knew I could ever get to be at a beach like this, and this early as well.

The sun was just barely rising over the horizon, only a blazing red circle, smaller than my pinkie nail in the distance. Welcoming the sun, the sky became beautiful shades of blue, orange, pink and purple. My heart calmed and relaxed, started dancing around in my chest at the sight of a little boy walking out from the waves.

As he swayed over to me, he began to age and grow, flowing through the years of his life and then as he stood in front of me, he became the ten year old Daniel is now. I overflowed with joy at having my son with me in this amazing place. But he wasn't talking. He was only standing there looking at me. As I looked at him too, it's as if we were exchanging thoughts and memories.

"Thank you," I smile at him.

I'm really glad he's not a teenager yet and we can still talk and spend time together.

"Remember that time when I overslept and I had a really important day at work so you and Dad got on the phone with the office and started making up the weirdest excuses and stalling the lady so I could go?" I placed a hand on his head and ruffled his hair. He nods.

"You guys should do that again," I laugh, but then find myself wiping back tears suddenly.

Daniel comes closer and wraps my hips in the most wonderful hug I could ever get. I squeeze him close to me and kiss him on the head as his image disappears and becomes one with the gentle ocean breeze that lifts my hair once again.

Wiping my face with my hands again, I go over to a spot under a large rock on down the shore. This is the spot Daniel and I love the most. We try to find one on every beach we go to. It's very quiet, peaceful and isolated so no one can bother us as we nap or read a book. And after Daniel and I began doing that, Sean insisted he be included which would always make Daniel laugh.

I positioned myself in a comfortable book in the mini cave and just was. I remember that ever since a teacher told me the secret to life was to live and be in the moment, I have been more happy. And so I let my eyelids drop once more and recognized my surroundings. My butt was a bit uncomfortable on some weirdly shaped shells, but the breeze made up for that washing over me and my worries. And my mind was not as cluttered as before. But suddenly a

different breeze came around and this time I knew who it was.

“Carolina,” A raspy voice whispered.

The corners of my mouth slithered north and my eyes flew open.

“Sean!” I rolled over and threw myself on him, squeezing most of his dull life out of him. But my name seemed to be all he could say because he just looked at me, mute as a deer.

“Why do you always have to be right about everything? I mean, look at your life; it’s perfect! And look at mine- I ignore half the things you say and end up in a pharmaceutical company working as a secretary!”

All Sean does is smile at me and nod. Then he shrugs as we both get comfortable in our nooks.

“Well, you know I always envied you. As a person, and well, mainly as a person. I hope you understand that. But I’ll go ahead and thank you for being a good husband- at most times.”

He chuckles and sighs, locking his fingers in mine. We

spend what seems like almost an hour like this, sinking into our roots and letting our brain wander into any memories or anything pleasant it chooses to think about.

I begin to feel like I’m floating with the moment and becoming a part of those waves, of the rocky structures, or maybe even the grainy sand. I rest my head on Sean’s shoulder and slip away.

And then suddenly, my eyelids fluttered open, and a white room filled with flowers and balloons came into focus. I felt Daniel holding my hand in his, and as I looked over, a tear began making its way down his cheek.

“I’m done,” I whisper, and look over at my husband.

Doing his best to hold down tears, Sean nods and looks over to the nurse who does the same.

“Pull it, honey,” I feel my heart beginning to give as many pumps as it can before it can’t. I pat Daniel’s hand as he reaches behind my bed, and releases me back into our universe.



Sunshine and Shallow Water

Kamtoya Okeke

Walk amidst an endless field of yellow
daisies,
The brightest color possible
Sunburst yellow: the colors of the
flowers, the sun
Even the air is heavy with yellow
Everything is overwhelmingly yellow
It's weight on your shoulders, bearing
you down
Each breath, every inhale, is laced with
traces of yellow
Filling you up, streaming through your
very blood
The sun is fully awake,
A glowing orb surrounded by sky
Watch the flowers straining for sunlight
Move with the wind, let its fingers prod you
In any direction, every direction
Surrounded by water, the
clearest water possible
Slip out of your skin
Walk onto wet sand,
Squish it in between your toes
Step into water
Feel the cool grip of the ocean
Swim feverishly, furious, fast,
Until the last traces of yellow are gone
Contaminating the water
Swim further,
This far, the water has been filtered,
All that remains is pure water
Clear to the point of perfection
Drift down to the bottom,
The water holds the sun's warmth
Sway with the sea, churn with the current
This is home

Your fingers, translucent without sun
A creature born of water,
Made of salt,
Never controlled but forever eternal
Sink to the bottom
Let your hand sift through the sand
Your hands catch onto a stone
Pull it out
Admire it
A smooth, periwinkle stone,
Cool to the touch
Float to the top
Bob up and down back to the shore
And drop the stone in
the searing hot sand
The sun is up,
Rays of light shine through you
Once again filled to the brim,
Erupting,
Explode
Yellow, yellow, yellow
Filled with color
Find your way to a field
Dig your fingers into the ground,
Curling them into the dirt
Pluck a flower and
bring it to your mouth,
And nibble at the
petals
Warmth shoots through making you
flush with color,
A slight yellowish tinge
These are flowers that
belong to the sun,
They thrive on its light,
Seeking it wherever it goes

Like you
Pick more flowers
Tie them together with a
stalk of long grass
The sun has started to go
down,
Contemplate the most beautiful
colors in the sky
Doubly beautiful
Being reflected by the ocean,
And framed with flowers
Close your eyes in its brilliance
Your eyelids are painted with
colors without name
Layer upon layer of alluring
shades
Open your eyes—

Your eyelashes are golden
Your skin absorbs the color
The flowers so vibrant - more than alive
The water - a liquid gold
Stand up and spin around in a golden world
Until your face can no longer feeling the sun
Now
The sun is fully gone,
Leaving the memory of color on a quickly
darkening sky
Only your soul carries the remains of the sun
in all of its glory
Never forget
The light of day
The calm of water
Sunshine
And shallow water



Drowning in Pitch

Kamtoya Okeke

Spiraling darkness whips you around
Leaching your body of heat
Sinking fingers into skin
Pooling shadows surround you
This is the world of your nightmares
Where the sun no longer shines
Extinguished like a candle
The dark gets deeper until it's less of sight
And more of a weight—pulling you down
Twist and fall and drown and see darkness
The passage of time has no meaning
Your screaming is swallowed
Your mouth wide open but no

sound can pass
The air rushing by whispers
sinister things
Then the water reaches you
The impact shoving air out of your lungs
Your eyes briefly flutter shut
There's no difference between
open or closed
Swirling dark takes it all away
Its grip is cold and fearful
The deepest color: an inky black
Thick and unknowing

Unknowable
No; it is not black as you had thought
It is the opposite of bright
As if all sunlight had been consumed
The absence of color
Drop deeper like a stone sinking
The water pulling you down
Open your mouth and watch the bubbles
Float up and disappear
In too deep, too far
Your lungs ache for want of air
You inhale and water rushes in
Can't breathe
Can't move
Sink further
Panic gains control of your limbs
The water pays no heed to
your intentions
It pushes you down

This is a place of nightmares
And it never ends
Water evaporates into air
Take a needy breath
And choke
Sink to the ground
Kneel over and throw
up black water
It hisses as it reaches
the grass
Turning it a mottled grey
It dies before your eyes
Watch it shrivel and curl in on
itself
The wind blows it away as a fine
black powder
It cloaks your skin like sin
And drown
In the pitch of your nightmares



You just had to be there
Jennifer Nehrer



These are two pictures that I took during the summer of 2019 at my sleepaway camp in Massachusetts.

The first photo was taken on a normal evening; the sky is blue and orange and *cloudless* and you can see the other side of the lake in the center surrounded by the silhouettes of nearby trees. Quite frankly, if I didn't know what camp looked like... you could tell me that this was from literally any other lake and I would agree. It looks almost ordinary.

The second photo was taken from the exact same location, facing the exact same direction, during the exact same time of day, just thirteen days later. But instead of a mundane lake photo the sky and its reflection have been lit up with clouds and marvelous colors. Instead of the rather plain and monotonous blue and orange in the first photo, we see bursts of pink and purple and orange and yellow and even the slightest bit of blue. It's magnificent. It is, without a doubt, my absolute favorite photo of the ones that I've taken. Because it was taken at camp? No. Well, yes; but not entirely that. This photo is my favorite because it has a hidden, unintentional, message.

This summer was my seventh at camp. I remember my first, that two-week trial run, very vividly... because I *hated* the first week. I was homesick, I couldn't stop thinking of my family some 400 miles away from me, and I wanted *out*. But as soon as I felt better I couldn't get enough of camp. And when it was time to go at the end of every summer afterwards I lamented over the closure of another month at my second home. And when I arrived back in DC, as many a child would do, I rushed to regale my friends with tales from my summer... but they didn't get it. No matter how much I tried to convince them that the tales I was telling were incredible or that the inside joke I had mentioned was hysterical, their faces remained mostly blank and only vaguely amused for my sake. Then they would proceed to tell me about their summer camps; and the tables would turn so that I was the one with a blank expression, having no clue what they were explaining to me.

That's when it clicked for me. Each summer camp presents its own unique experiences to those who go. While some camp traditions overlap, there will always be some things that you'll have to tell your friends, "are just camp things." Camp holds a very unique place in the hearts of those who experience it. Others will be confused with how reverently I discuss my summers here. And I do say *here* because camp isn't a place; it's a community. It's a feeling. It's not a house, it's a home.

This is where I bring us back to the two pictures. The first picture is how those who have never experienced my camp may see it. It's a beautiful place, but rather simple; nothing that makes it stand out. But the second photo, *god, that second photo*, is how we, or at least I, see my camp. The same beautiful skyline has been dipped in a paint bucket of experiences and wonder, of unique friendships and unbreakable bonds, of summer nights under the starry skies and

spirit-filled afternoons during color war. When I see that second photo I see my Ultimate Frisbee teammates and I rushing onto the field after winning the big game against our rival camp. I see myself sitting on that very lake in a kayak, floating in blissful silence as I look at my fellow campers on the water toys. I see my friends sitting amongst the other campers, singing at the tops of their lungs on Friday nights. But when I go home and even *begin* to explain to my friends the unbridled joy I feel at my sanctuary in Massachusetts, only one sentence leaves my mouth:

“You just had to be there.”



The House at the Edge of the Road

Benry Juno

You are standing on a dirt road, covered in dust. It is night. The grass is tall around you, hiding those that only need luck once to find you. There is a full moon in the sky, and there are no stars. You should go home. You start walking down the dirt road, dust falling from your eyelids with every movement. Everything seems on loop. The grass looks the same as five minutes ago. The stars have not moved.

There is a house at the edge of the road.

It's small and dark and full of cobwebs. You are standing at the door of the house. You should turn back.

You turn the handle and step inside.

The shadows stop their conversations when they see you. A hundred beady eyes are watching you. You swallow the taste of blood. There is a clock on the wall. It smiles at you. You look away and then look back. Five hours have passed.

You leave the room. You are in a hallway. The walls are caving in on each other. Blood is leaking from the ceiling. The tub upstairs must be overflowing. You step barefoot onto the floor. The rotting wood breaks beneath you and you fall. You should stop falling.

You land in a bedroom. There is a black elk outside your window. Your partner's skeleton is waiting for you in bed. You don't have a partner. Your partner is the black elk. They are screaming at you and your ears start to bleed. You close your eyes and fall back into oblivion.

You are back in the hallway. There are no walls. The hallway is filling up with something wet. You are swimming in an ocean of dust. You should get to the end of the hallway. There is no end of the hallway. You are not even in a hallway anymore. You are in a chapel. You didn't realize houses could have chapels in them.

There is a woman wailing in the front pew. You do not disturb her. She is talking with

the black elk. You are the woman and you are wailing. Two golden eyes are watching you. A burning black elk stands in front of you, screaming. It is not the black elk screaming. It is you. You close your eyes. Your prayer is over.

The chapel is rotting. Its walls are made of bone dust and its roof is made of buzzing flies. Your lungs fill with the bone dust. You are the skeleton waiting for your partner in bed. The bells of the chapel ring out with howls. You are the black elk and you are being hunted.

You are staring down two yellow eyes in a forest. They blink. You are yourself. Did you always have eyes on your palms? You raise your hands. The shadows can see you. You turn around. There is a door. You shouldn't open it. You go through it.

You are standing on the porch. An old man sits in a rocking chair to your right. A child is crying to your left. The old man is watching you. He is the shadows. The child watching you. They are the shadows. You are watching yourself. You are the shadows.

The shadows are reaching towards you with a thousand arms. Decay incarnate is watching you. The old man is decay incarnate. He is laughing at you. His laugh sounds like knives.

You turn around. The door inside is open. You step through.

You are back in the house. The clock is ticking backwards. The black elk is sitting in a chair with the full moon between its antlers. It opens its mouth and begins to bleed. It says your name.

You wake up.

You are standing on a dirt road, covered in dust. There are two full moons in the sky. You should go home.

There is a house at the edge of the road.

Q&A with Benry Juno

Q: Who is your favorite artist/author/poet?

A: I have a few favorites! Firstly, I am legally and morally obligated to shout-out my amazing uncle, David Bruns. I love his sci-fi series, *The Dream Guild Chronicles*. Also, I adore the Arc of a Scythe series by Neal Shusterman. Lastly, Mary Shelley will always hold a special place in my heart, the Queen of Science Fiction she is.

Q: Does your recent work follow any themes?

A: While I tend to jump around in terms of genres, I think most of my works follow similar themes like finding one's identity or discovering unnerving, world-shattering secrets, as well as being worthy of love, no matter which form it comes in.

Brain & Body

Josie Reich

My brain paints with watercolors
imagines a ballet
slows my heartbeat
When I have no one else to do it for me, it buffs my ragged edges
and soothes me to sleep
promising a sweeter nectar for my lips when I awake
A temporary bliss: it attracts and allures, knowing its facade
crumbles completely
when I see another, but letting me pretend for the moment
Letting me pretend that my body is hollowed out and filled with dancing lights and swirling
brushstrokes blending and melding and
The thought crosses my mind
that I do know it's fake
but sometimes it's okay to be fake
when you need to be fake
so eventually...
it can be real.
Rain on my brain, the water liquifies the colors it holds inside
Melts over me,
on the inside I am a rainbow I am a prism I am an asteroid



Strength in Color by Gabriella Gastaldo

The Storm

Gabriela Orozco

Washington, a city, an ocean, a summer, a righteous tide

A mic to grab hold of / A megaphone to become / the protest-drum / A call cleaving the city / the
clap of thunder/ The streets warn / beware / the storm / the heat / they say it's the humidity that
kills you / A congress hunkers down beneath / city slick streets / gutters clogged with greed / we
stick to sweaty metro seats / stick fingers in between the grates / a ladder down the sewer leads /
An air conditioned caucus reaps / How many syllables will they hear me scream / a chant, a
chain, choking out to breathe / crushed underneath metro tracks / political suits, stumbling,
cynical, a cryptic breed / craft new names for the same silences / sing hymns of unsatisfactory
peace / blood gurgling down the drain / renamed streets / suffocating heat / white kids shouting
they can't breathe / blockaded white house behind wet-whipped black bars / we wonder who will
come back / claim victory / charged electricity /

The storm is not over yet / bulletproof glass won't shatter / but black bodies do / and still we
shall cry out / they matter.



my dad has a bright blue toyota rav4

pao milbank

i drove down mass ave and
took a right on western i
had to hold up my pointer finger and thumb to
make sure
i had the direction right i'm
still just a child—
i want to speed out of the city and
straight into the driveway of your
perfect suburban house and into
the storybook picture of your family
with the saint bernard sitting on
the doorstep like he'll protect me
but i can still hear the
voices of boys
i don't even recognize
in my memory
you're telling me to go to sleep and
i'm falling and

your voice is like a streetlight in the dark,
i'm speeding through it at 75
when i should be going 20 with
a flashing yellow light surrounding me

the weird pieces of hair that get left in the shower drain

Ava Dreifke

Wet, detached hair

It's no longer a part of you. A dead clump of cells but also a snake that is slithering its way around the bathtub. It wraps its way around your toes and your fingers, but you can't flick it off because the droplets of water have plastered it to you. The tendrils of hair infiltrate my serenity and disgust me. They look like little thin bugs that are collecting at the bottom of the shower ready to attack me once I get shampoo in my eye and my defense is compromised.



Ew

Ew

Ew

Ew

Ew

Maybe I
should
just
shave
my
head...

Nah

Dorothy Daphne Pinkerton Hale

Evie Stettin

Dorothy Daphne Pinkerton Hale
No saint among peers, not even in jail
Her poor father pleaded, her dear mother wept
Yet she drew on the portraits and colored the steps
She chopped off her braids, she picked at her hem
Tore petal off flower,
Tore flower off stem
She ran in the hallway
She romped on the rug
Poured salt down the rim of the lemonade jug
She went for a visit to see her grandpa
At a hospital down in old Saginaw
She spotted the outlet, she yanked out the cord
Then hid in a closet where needles are stored
The man's tired heart
Stalled, sputtered and failed
To Dorothy Daphne he frantically hailed
She laughed at the old man flailing in bed
She seemed not to notice him turning quite red
Then ten harried nurses, clad blue in their scrubs
Rushed in with devices to pump him with drugs
One rushed to the closet to retrieve a syringe
Where Dorothy stood, face contorted in cringe
Never before had been heard such a wail
From Dorothy Daphne Pinkerton Hale
She whimpered and weaseled, hands flew to her eyes
Though for droplets to catch, or for grin to disguise?
The father was stricken, took child in arm
But the mother held back, her eyes wide with alarm
What was it she saw in the small girl's complexion
That was not of her parents a perfect reflection?
Why yes, she was naughty, but never had shown
An ounce of the malice ran deep through her bone
"Why are you idle? She's witnessed a death!"
But the hiss of her spouse carried quite little heft
There she remained, rooted fast to the tile

As the daughter wept harder,
concealing her guile
"I must be mistaken," thought she to herself
But the inkling persisted, ever high on the shelf
She'd discover the carcass of spider, of snail
And wonder of Dorothy Pinkerton Hale

Q&A with Ava Dreifke

Q: How has quarantine affected your writing/art?

A: I have had the time to try out a lot of different mediums and experiment with my style.

Q: Does your recent work follow any themes?

A: I draw a lot of realistic faces. It is just something I am comfortable drawing, and it is very easy to explicitly express myself because a face shows clear emotion.

If It Was Up To You, Where Would I Be?

Gabriella Gastaldo

The following is an excerpt from the longer short story. Read the rest [here](#).

“We were heading towards electrical for my task, because I had waited for her to do hers, and the lights went nuts so we went past the electrical room and to the reactor. Why?” A resounding silence entered the room. Ada scoffed in disbelief. “You think we did it? Are you serious?”

“We’re not saying that,” Zachariah began.

“You’re not saying *anything*. In fact, where were the rest of you, hmm? I was with Yara for the 10 minutes beforehand, and before that I was in admin with Tamir.” A couple eyes turned to Tamir, who was bouncing his leg, and the rest turned to Yara. She met all of their eyes. Some, like Benjamin’s and Zachariah’s, were concerned. The rest were hard, flat gazes.

“I was recentering in navigation. I didn’t know what to do when the lights flickered so I froze up,” Lee admitted after a small silence. After that there were multiple claims about whereabouts during the... incident. No one wanted to say sabotage, because that would mean one of them was pitted against another, and no one wanted to go down that road.

“I was listening to comms with Ben,” Anton said.

“I was in Shields,” Ravi mentioned.

“I was in electrical,” Zachariah commented.

“Well I was doing wires,” said Charlotte.

Yara looked up at Ada. The look between them conveyed many, many things, the main one being *she’s lying*. Zachariah noticed, and probably understood part of the silent conversation. Ada looked like she was about to speak but Yara shook her head.

“I was doing wires, Charlotte,” Yara said quietly. The room slowly came to a complete standstill. The people who looked at Ada with skepticism before now looked at Charlotte in surprised realization. “Which part of the ship’s wires were you working on?” “Top engine,” she blurted.

“So you were right next to the reactor when it was sabotaged?”

Charlotte flinched when everyone looked at her. “Wait, no, I didn’t know where the problem was, I went out in the opposite direction-”

“You came to me saying you had seen Ada doing something strange in the reactor,” Ravi stated. “What were you actually doing? Did you go and see them and come back? Or did you do something and then blame them for it?”

“This is not fair, you’re making it sound like I sabotaged-”

“Yeah well, you’ve made it clear you weren’t just doing tasks,” Benjamin sniped quietly. “What did you do? That’s all I’m asking. As the Captain of this ship, I want to know what you were doing on it, or to it,” Ravi said.

Absolute quiet bled into the room. Everyone was looking at Charlotte, from under their furrowed brows or behind their hands, most just straight out.

It was clear that Charlotte didn’t want to say a word. Her lips were shut and pressing together hard. She looked on the verge of tears.

“I’ve heard... of something happening to some teams that went on, well let’s say *quieter* missions for Mira Headquarters. They brought something back with them, like a disease or something.” Ravi paused, speaking to the wall rather than the floor. “Some, who knew, said it was an actual alien that would eat the crew from the inside out. It would become the person, at least temporarily. It would kill, remorselessly, and then lie as if their life depended on it, which in a way it did. Now, I actually met a person who came back from one of those missions. He came back with only one other person.”

A collective gasp resounded through the room. “I don’t want that to happen to this crew. I really don’t. I like y’all, you’re a good group. So, we’re going to go back to our tasks. But, I am warning everyone here, if there *is* a murder, then there *will* be a person going into the airlock the next time this meeting is called.”

With that, Ravi released the locks on the doors.

Q&A with Gabriela Orozco

Q: What and/or who inspires your writing/art?

A: One of the biggest inspirations for my poetry is Elizabeth Acevedo. Her book, the Poet X, really spoke to me and encouraged me to write my stories. My favorite authors are Ada Limón, Sofia Samatar, Marge Piercy and Rhiannon McGavin.

Q: Why do you write/make art?

A: I use writing and art to help me process my feelings and my experiences. Using a historical perspective helps me to place my work within a larger scale, so my descriptions of my stories and histories are not isolated. My poems tackle themes of social justice, history, and silence.

Q: How has quarantine affected your writing/art?

A: This poem was written in quarantine, but I am lucky to have an incredible writing community that supported this and many other poems. This poem was not written from the perspective of one singular person; rather, it was written from the perspective of a collective. I am proud to incorporate that community into my poem.

