



It's Lit

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DVC 10th Annual Literary Contest Winners

CREATIVE NONFICTION

First Place: "My Queer Neanderthal Cousin Claude"
by Monte Fisher

Second Place: "Letter to Myself"
by Katie Nunn

Third Place: "Leaving China"
by Robyn McDowell

POETRY

First Place: "Revelations"
by Kaiu Aguigui

Second Place: "California Dreaming"
by Allison Jones

Third Place: "The Thoughts That Sprout Up After Midnight"
by Frances Bustillos

FICTION

First Place: "Longing for Sleep"
by Sierra Lofgren

Second Place: "A Brighter Tomorrow"
by Louise Edwards

Third Place: "4pm Over Two"
by Katherine Anderson

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CREATIVE NONFICTION

“My Queer Neanderthal Cousin Claude” By Monte Fisher

Look, I’m not a paleo-geneticist or even a regular geneticist. But current paleo-genetic research on Homo neanderthalensis (Neanderthals) should concern every Homo sapien (Human).

The bombshell disclosure that Neanderthals and Humans are completely separate and distinct species from each other blows up all cultural assumptions of who we are.

Since they were discovered in 1856, in the Neander Valley of Germany, our physical and cultural image of Neanderthals has become radically “humanized.”

The astonishing announcement in 2010, that current European and Asian Humans carry up to 4 per cent Neanderthal DNA, proves that inbreeding between the two species, Humans and Neanderthals, occurred in the not so distant past.

CAVEMEN?

Imagine you’re living 50,000 years ago, near present day Malaga, Spain, a seaside fishing village on the sunny Mediterranean. No internet, no cellphones, no electricity. No cars, no roads. Simply aboriginal nature in a benevolent setting on a beautiful coastline. Your home is comfortable, the climate is nurturing, and the sea provides most of what you need.

One day you’re out gathering food for yourself and your family. You’re a young adult Human male living in a diverse culture with a mild climate and natural abundance.

Right there, in your favorite berry-picking bog, you run into an interesting new neighbor about your age. He looks sort of like a Human, sort of like a Neanderthal, and sort of like a hybrid offspring of a Human and Neanderthal.

Your life’s about to change.

The discovery of Neanderthals as a separate ancient species challenges our beliefs about the origins of Humans. The Neanderthals’ short limbs and simian eye-brow ridge provoke an ape-like ancestor that doesn’t jibe with cultural or religious descriptions of God’s creation.

A major misperception about Neanderthals comes from a 1908 discovery, in La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France, of a Neanderthal skeleton of an individual who had been very disabled by arthritis. The skeleton was widely misunderstood as representative of the species, and Neanderthals were inaccurately stereotyped as short individuals of limited intelligence, “cavemen,” with bent knees who walked like chimpanzees.

OUR ANCESTORS WERE CAVEMEN?

There is widespread belief that Neanderthals were our human ancestors, or that we evolved from them. But we didn’t. Humans and Neanderthals diverged from a common ancestor about 500,000 years ago. Humans evolved in Africa but Neanderthals evolved in Europe and the Middle East.

Humans have been around for 200,000 years but Neanderthals had existed for twice as long.

When Neanderthals became extinct 40,000 years ago, they had been on Earth longer than humans have been now. Although Neanderthals were hunter/gatherers, and Humans were farmers, the two species interacted with each other for thousands of years.

Claude's blue-green eyes, red hair, and muscly body are seductive. You've never met anyone like him. He shows you where exotic berries grow and shares his stash with you. You never tasted berries so sweet.

As you work side by side, you notice Claude's wearing a white shell necklace, an artifact you've never seen. He invites you to examine it closely. You feel a certain heat radiating from him.

You study how the shells were pierced for the string that binds them together. You linger a little longer, feeling the jewelry, the back of your hand lightly touching his chest. The moment passes and you both resume food gathering as the temperate sun glides smoothly across the azure sky.

WE HAD SEX WITH NEANDERTHALS?

Humans began migrating from Africa to the Middle East and Europe about 30,000 years ago. They encountered Neanderthals, who had diverged as a separate species hundreds of thousands of years earlier.

Even though they were different from each other, Humans and Neanderthals got to know each other so well that they produced offspring with genes from both lineages. The biological remnants of those liaisons remain alive today in the genomes of Europeans and East Asians.

Current genetic studies explore how Neanderthal DNA influenced the composition of modern Humans. When the two groups interbred, some new traits remained in the human genome and some old traits disappeared.

But genetic research reveals even more subtle relationships between Humans and Neanderthals.

Neanderthal DNA, spanning at least 20% of their ancient genome, survives in modern humans of non-African ancestry. If you are European or Asian, 1 to 4 per cent of your genome originated from Neanderthals.

Not only were Neanderthals not repugnant "cavemen," they might have been movie star sexy. Well, at least attractive enough for Humans to have sex with them. Repeatedly, intentionally, perhaps even ecstatically, for generations.

Recently sequenced Neanderthal genomes reveal that Humans mated with Neanderthals over thousands of years. These couplings were sporadic but lasting. Just about every Human today, except those of solely African ancestry, has Neanderthal genes in every cell of their body.

The work day wanes and Claude invites you back to his modest dwelling. You join him in a comfortable hillside abode, an interesting dugout retreat under an overcropping granite cliff. Claude's home is positioned above the valley and is well protected from intruders. There's a welcoming fire in a rock-lined pit, a flattened log table, and a sleeping area with comfortable woven mats. Surprisingly, just above your head on the smooth stone ceiling, you notice a cave painting of two men hunting.

Claud offers you a wood cup of fermented fruit wine, and gestures for you to relax and enjoy the view of the village far below. You can just make out your family's hut among the other villagers' homes. The scene looks like a diorama of another world.

GENDER FLUID NEANDERTHALS?

Paleo-genetic-cultural anthropologists have established that Humans and Neanderthals had sex. But they're exploring an even more complex question: Could a Human and Neanderthal fall in love?

Anthropologists discovered the 5,000 year old remains of what may be the world's oldest known gay caveman during a 2011 study of the Corded Ware Culture, in the Copper Age, in the Czech Republic. The male body, dated between 2900 - 2500 BC, was buried in a manner that was reserved only for females.

The skeleton was found in a Prague suburb with its head pointing eastwards and surrounded by domestic jugs, rituals only previously seen in female graves.

According to Corded Ware culture, which began in the late Stone Age and culminated in the Bronze Age, men were traditionally buried lying on their right side with their heads pointing towards the west, and women on their left sides with their heads pointing towards the east.

Archeologists observed that people from this period took funeral rites very seriously, so it was highly unlikely that the positioning of this body was accidental. Researchers concluded that it was far more likely the body was a man of different sexual orientation, a homosexual or transsexual.

Archeologists had uncovered an earlier case, dating from the Mesolithic period, where a female warrior was buried as a man. Siberian shamans, or latter-day witch doctors, were also buried in this way but with richer funeral accessories appropriate to their elevated position in society. But the 2011 Czech discovery was neither of these, further establishing the probability that the man was homosexual or transsexual.

Claude prepares a meal of flame-roasted catch-of-the-day, paired with a butternut squash bisque, followed by a seasonal fruit medley. You enjoy the delicious meal next to the comfy fire, safely above the cares of the outside world. In a rare departure, suspended in time, you luxuriate in a relaxed atmosphere of domestic bliss.

WE HAD SEX WITH QUEER NEANDERTHALS?

What we know so far is that we had sex with Neanderthals. Our hybrid offspring continue to reflect Neanderthal DNA in modern humans. And archeological evidence strongly supports that same-sex relationships existed in our combined pasts.

What has yet to emerge, however, is in-depth research on the incidence of homosexuality and trans-sexuality in our most distant progenitors.

Based on paleo-geneticist anthropological research to date, it's clear that at least three intersectional events occurred sometime in the past 50,000 years:

Humans and Neanderthals had sex with each other;
some of their offspring survived within the Humans species; and,
some percentage of those offspring are gay.

As a queer Human with Neanderthal DNA in my blood, I can only conclude that at least one of my distant ancestors was a queer Neanderthal.

I choose to call him my Queer Neanderthal Cousin Claude.

Maybe a Human and Neanderthal glanced at each other across an Eden-like garden, met each other for brunch, and found themselves in an exotic same-sex rhapsody of romantic love that rocked their world.

New data paint a picture of just such queer behavior. For example, Neanderthals were more sophisticated and stronger than us; they wore jewelry; they took part in dramatic rituals like celebrating one's life journey; they wore cosmetics; they may have loved each other.

Our image of Neanderthals has evolved from a caricature of "cavemen" to a remarkably sophisticated species. We know they built tools, made jewelry, and buried their dead. They were stronger than us, just as smart, and desirable sexual partners.

Evidence of Neanderthal cultures continues to expand in research facilities around the world. For example, a display case in an Iraqi museum features the remains of a 40- to 50-year-old Neanderthal man who died around 45,000 years ago. He's laid out in a glass sarcophagus next to a rendition of how he looked alive; 5 - foot - 5 with brown hair, ruddy skin, and an attractive beard.

In 2008, archaeologists discovered a Neanderthal's pierced scallop shell in Cueva Anton cave in Spain. They found brightly colored minerals inside the shell, similar to previous such findings, including 50,000 year old haematite, lepidocrocite, charcoal, and pyrite. The team concluded that Neanderthals probably used the pigments cosmetically or ceremonially.

It looks like we had sex over thousands of years with queer Neanderthals who were stronger and more sophisticated, wore jewelry and make up, celebrated life passages, and left DNA evidence of their impact on modern Humans.

AND WE FELL IN LOVE?

New research is finding more commonalities between Humans and Neanderthals that go even deeper into our shared psyches.

Exploring possible emotional similarities between the two species, in 2017, researchers hypothesized that Humans and Neanderthals could fall in love. The emotion of love clearly exists in primates like chimpanzees, Bonobos, and gorillas. Given our common ancestors' experience of love, current research concludes that Neanderthals also experienced love.

After dinner, Claude approaches you more closely, looks deeply into you with those mesmerizing emerald eyes, and gently brushes a bit of food from your cheek. Without looking away, he slowly removes his shell necklace, places it over your head, and lets it fall lightly around your neck.

Claude steps back to view your new look. You feel the delicate weight of the necklace on your chest, like an invitation to become who you really are. You both smile shyly.

Later, you settle down next to him, reclining on a bed near the dwindling fire. He rests his arm around you as you watch the sun set over the dazzling Mediterranean, and you drift into a sleep that marks a new way of being in the world.

JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

Yeah I know, it's a lot of information to take in all at once. But that's how it is with creative nonfiction. You artfully present a lot of non-fiction facts in a short format while trying to keep the reader engaged.

Still, even I was exhausted after absorbing so many facts. I needed a break.

I had dinner with my husband on the deck of our Oakland Hills condo as the sun was setting over San Francisco Bay. He served poached halibut, pumpkin soup, and a kiwi-blueberry compote.

I glanced at him in the fading light and saw a pronounced simian brow ridge I hadn't noticed before. Alejandro looked back at me quizzically, scratched his beard, and sort of grunted. We finished our meal by candle light.

I gotta tell you, he was a wild beast in the man cave that night.

“A Letter to Myself” by Katie Nunn

Describe your bipolar disorder, describe 2017, now, three years later, after your paralysis. All I feel is destruction, all I know now is desperation and crisis. I need to know there is light, I need to know I get out of this cement building, Please, tell me everything.

My mind, *your* mind, swelled like the ocean, rushing out to sea and rushing back in, my insight awash. I remember feeling color that year, knowing the exact measurements of light rays, of knowing joy, of knowing sporadic memory. I felt night, I felt morning, I lost myself in patterns, in hidden tricks. The ocean swelled, and rushed back to sea, washing up all the carcasses on the beach with it; the slaughter was erased, and the beach-goers were none the wiser.

I looked at reality through the stained glass windows, and when it broke, I crashed. The shards collapsed over me, and the church burned down. I wrote poetry with my blood, my ashes, the medication coursing through my liver, my heart, becoming me.

I see things as color, as light, as metaphors, as jewels, sunlight and seasons. You will learn to view your curse as a gift. You will understand the importance of fairy tales.

I remember what youth felt like. How would I *describe* bipolar disorder?

Tell me, how would one describe drowning? How would one describe magic? How would one describe a freefall?

One in four people with my illness will commit suicide. After the past year, I understand. I look in the eyes of the people in the hospital, and I see nothing. When I look in their eyes, it is like looking down at a well that goes to the bottom of the earth, endless, black, ceaseless. Their depression is physical; I look at them, and then I look at the big window, and the light, and I think of how funny that juxtaposition is. Then I think that I understand, when I look into their eyes, I understand, because I am here too.

No, you do not understand. You think you understand, but you have not written a suicide note yet. I still wonder what stopping looks like, what not writing feels like. I wonder what giving up feels like, you think you understand why people give up, but you are not one to give up.

Describe where you are now, I need to know, I need to be reassured. At lunchtime I walk three blocks to the bookstore and back because I need to smell something besides depression and sunlight. I wonder most days if I will ever be young again. I wonder how it would feel to carelessly drink, to carelessly stay up late, to carelessly disclose. I wonder if things will ever be simple again.

Let me tell you, my ocean has leveled. They have looked at the tectonic plates converging and diverging and tried to prepare for the earthquakes and tsunamis, creating support systems, and medication refills. The beach goers create boundaries made of sea glass but upheld by iron. They are petrified, driven by the fear of riptides

that they create wooden fences around the beach, hoping, praying, that this will prevent their own carcasses from dragging out to sea next time the plates move.

Where am I now? Where I am now is radically different from where you are, be comforted in that. The carcasses have all but sank, and their gravestones rest on the shore. The ocean is level, the tides are calm, singular, unified, one in their duality.

Now, I am flying, and not so into the galaxy that I see fire; I am flying with the rest of the flock. The flock controls me. The flock manages me, regulates me. The last few months I have been wondering if this is how normal people are supposed to feel, colorless, dull, everyday, so dull.

The beauty of our galaxy was that I touched fire. The beauty of the galaxy was that I was weightless; you will miss the feeling of flying.

It seems that for once, life is easy, and yet life is uninteresting. I am finding that with success comes great leisure, great stability, yet when I am asked how I am doing, I can no longer hide my true feelings on the scars on my wrist. The scars are healed, now just a story. Everything is a story. Everything is a memory, and in the present, it is gray, timeless, and never ending.

I work hard now. The days are long, uninteresting, but I grew from the fountain of collapse. You grew, you did not remain paralyzed forever, you have taken your soul and spun it into gold. These days I go about life sober, fearing the magic in my bones, my brain, and now I work hard for gratification. I work hard for normalcy, for the beauty in the expected, the comfort in the everyday.

Why would I miss it? I am here, my life has stopped.

You will not miss the hospital, but you will miss the chaos. Life is routine, as everything is. You will keep my homeostasis maintained, maintained against my magical realism, maintained against my exacerbated feeling. It is an incredible feeling of isolation, to know you are abnormal, to know your pool is deeper, wider, colder. In that isolation, we alone must decide if I am cursed or gifted.

I now wonder who I would be without words. Words marry me to the gift that is my illness, I am special with words, I am alive. There is something wanted about a manic depressive writer, something knowing, something inane. It is what ties me to this, it is what ties me to the outside, the sunny, the California, the weather, the expenses, the finals, the lovers. It is the ripping of doors meant to be sealed tight for privacy sake.

I am sexless without words, without distress, without chaos. You will learn to love words, you will learn to use them to our advantage, and craft pictures with them. But you will learn that there is nothing sexy about a writer writing about equality, or some operational definition of happiness. Happiness is not lustful like the same way melodrama is. The free fall is as exhilarating as it is orgasmic, the magic a drug, the stranger enticing.

The room that I make, the room that I swallow, is built by the words stolen there. My past is nothing but words, nothing but a story, a fairytale I tell to strangers when they ask to hear answers. They flip through the book, ignoring the blood on the pages.

The strangers will keep flipping, and the blood will dry. At times the words of the fairytale will evaporate in the air and at times they will hang like fruit. The blood will turn dark, brown, scab, and at times you will tell your story as if talking about a stranger. You will learn that single words can command a room.

There is colorlessness in the mundane, the ticking of the clock, juxtaposed to the soft, rhythmic beauty of everyday routine. The people around me know someone different than you, you are much angrier now than I am. I help people. I maintain regularity. I am at peace. You will learn to be at peace. You will learn how to radically accept.

I look at the ocean, and see almost nothing but gray. The ocean hugs the land, the beach, which glistens in the sunlight, the slaughter forgotten with the years. I swim out far, past the buoys, into the cold, into the changing tides. And I see the sunlight on the ocean, it is blue, brilliantly blue.
And I have risen.

“Leaving China” by Robyn McDowell

When we left China, we were only allowed to bring as much as a duffle bag could carry. Three and a half years of our lives stuffed into five large red duffle bags. Not six. Five. We were leaving our father behind, unbeknownst to him. The size of a duffle bag limited each of us to only a few personal objects since much of the space had to be used for clothes and other necessities. One of the most important objects I took with me was a black telescope like instrument that can fit in the palm of my hand. It belonged to my father. I have never been able to figure out what exactly it is or where it came from. It's possibly some kind of tiny rifle scope since my father told me he was eligible to be a sharpshooter when he was in the military. At least, that's what he told me.

I used to sneak into his nightstand and take it out every now and then when he was missing from our home. I'd go to the semicircle of windows in the master bedroom of our apartment on the 25th floor and peer out across the bay at Hong Kong. I'd adjust the lens to try to get a clear view at each of the cars on the bridge, glistening in the sunlight as they made their way to the bustling westernized city. The water shimmered before the metropolis.

The day we left, when all of our duffle bags were being loaded into a van from the basement of my mother's friend, I snuck into the bedroom one last time before going to school. My father wasn't home, of course, and my mother was too busy arranging our departure. I couldn't forget this little trinket. I couldn't leave it behind. So, I opened up the nightstand drawer, rifling past suspicious papers and a few pictures of women my father had claimed were potential assistants, and found the little black telescope. I pondered for a moment if it was safe to take it with me. We were supposed to keep the majority of our belongings where they usually were, either objects displayed on shelves or many clothes left behind to hang in their closets. We couldn't risk him finding out we were gone until we were halfway across the Pacific. Would he really notice if it was missing? One of the last times I had ever seen him use it was when we were still living in America before we moved abroad. It felt more like mine than his at this point and he wasn't using it so I might as well take it. So, I took it. Or I guess I should say I stole it.

Later that day, just 15 minutes before school got out, my mother came to get me and my sister from our classes, as was planned. I was first. She came when I was fully immersed in the world of a famous boy wizard. At the very moment the dementors were sucking out his soul and he was casting the life saving patronus I heard my name whispered from the open doorway of the classroom. I looked up and found my mother beckoning for me to come. I'd completely forgotten the plan as I was lost in the much more preferable world of witches and wizards and magic, where the main characters dealt with more reasonable struggles like rescuing hippogriffs and fighting off dementors rather than secretly running off and hoping the person they were running from wouldn't notice before it was too late.

My classmates had glanced at my mother but they eventually returned to their books. They most likely assumed I was being picked up early for a doctor's appointment. I knew I was moving and I was quite sure it would be somewhere nearby, but I had no idea this would be the last time I would see any of my 13 classmates, some

of my closest friends, from our international school ever again. If I had known, I would have said goodbye.

I was frantically getting my things together as my mother motioned for me to hurry up. I got what I needed from my small locker, and at the last minute, I tried to stuff *The Prisoner of Azkaban* into my backpack. When my mother saw that, she stomped over, her eyebrows drawn in frustration, and ripped the book from my hands.

"You can't take that with you," she hissed in a whisper. Hopefully my classmates weren't watching.

"Why?" I asked. "I'll just bring it back once we're moved into the new apartment."

"No, you're leaving it here," she said, and that was that.

I left my precious borrowed book behind, one of the many worlds I used to escape the one I dreaded living in. She tugged me along outside the classroom and down the hall to my younger sister's fifth grade class. My sister was far more ready than I was. Her teacher, my former teacher, Mrs. Mace, greeted our mother, a fellow teacher who had also worked in southern California before moving to Shenzhen.

"We're going to a dentist appointment," my mother told her with a peculiar smile. I turned to Mrs. Mace, a woman I didn't have much of a liking for as I never liked any teachers who regularly yelled at me for not doing my homework. Yelling was a constant in my life I could never get used to. I was confused when I saw a similar expression on Mrs. Mace's face, as if my mother and her were sharing an inside joke. I can no longer remember what she had said, but I remember thinking it was an odd response. Only later, once all of this was over, I found out that Mrs. Mace, of all people, was one of the only few who knew what we were doing.

Once we were all packed up, we got out onto the busy streets of the city and made our way to an unfamiliar van parked in front of our school's building. We climbed in and found our older brother and sister in the back and a Chinese man who spoke barely any English sitting upfront in the driver's seat. Our mother gave him directions in Mandarin and then we were off. It wasn't until we got on the bridge to Hong Kong did my sisters and I start questioning where exactly we were going. We all thought we were simply moving to a different apartment in some other city. Guangzhou maybe, Hong Kong even better.

Our mother turned back in her seat to smile at us. She asked us to guess where we were going but none of us could. Our older brother remained silent. Finally, with an excited grin, she told us, "We're going back to America."

A moment of silence and then an uproar. We shouted with joy. Never did we think we would return home. Our brother's voice drowned us out as he exclaimed that he had known the whole time. Our mother had apparently trusted him to keep it a secret. We were filled with excitement at the prospect of being back in America after three and a half years of living in a foreign country, not knowing if we would ever leave.

Soon enough, we were loading onto a plane, stopping in Taiwan for a layover, and then we were over the Pacific for 14 hours, watching various Disney movies or trying to sleep. When we got off the plane, we tugged our heavy duffle bags onto rolling carts and made our way through the LA airport. It was thrilling. I pretended I was at platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ as my siblings and I rolled our carts around and found our grandparents who were waiting for us. They took us all back to my mother's childhood home.

I would like to end this story with a nice happy ending wherein we eventually bought our own house and lived like normal children without our abusive father while our single mother raised us and we all pitched in to help. That is the ending I always wished to have and I've spent countless hours wondering why it didn't and couldn't turn out that way. I've spent nearly the same amount of time wondering why our lives ever even got to this point in the first place. Wondering never helps. Wishing does even less. The real story of what happened after we left China and escaped our father involves too much conflict and turmoil for a twelve-year-old to handle properly, yet that seemed to be the long running theme of our family. Conflict and turmoil. I thought it was absolutely normal at the time. I still can't see myself as 'that kid'. The kid with trauma. The kid that came from a broken home. The kid with an abusive father. But apparently that's what I was. That's what people told me I was. Our grandparents made sure to remind us of this, what with the way they would treat us.

When we came back to America, our father figured out what happened and tracked us back to our grandparents' house a month later. He showed up the only way we could expect our father to, by barging right through the front door and appearing with a large smug grin on his face in the doorway of the family room where my siblings and I were watching TV. His fists were propped up on his hips like he was the hero of his own story. We stared at him, our mouths gaping. There was no warning. No foreshadowing. Our father had found us. I thought it was a dream. I thought it was a nightmare. Our brother ran out of the room and got our aunt from the other end of the house. No one else was home. Our aunt hated our father even more than we did. She tried to get him out of the house and he responded by shoving her into a wall. The police showed up not long after and we soon got a restraining order on him.

For years after we successfully cut off all contact with him, my siblings and I shared the same fear: that he would find us, kidnap us, and take us back to China. Melodramatic, I know, but we were children. Our fears and fantasies ran wild. It didn't help that our mother harbored that same fear which made it all the more real. We wouldn't use social media. We wouldn't put our personal information anywhere unless absolutely necessary. To this day, I have trouble giving out my personal information even when it's completely appropriate to do so and I'm practically nonexistent online. The restraining order was only superficial comfort. It said, by law, that he couldn't get near us. But when had the law ever stopped him? Not as a young married man when he'd been jailed while my mother was pregnant. I used to imagine what would happen if he found me while I was walking to school. I would pretend I didn't know him. I would pretend I was someone else completely, even giving a different name just to prove it. I would run. I would scream if he chased me. I would protect my younger sister and grab her hand and run. My father never came.

There were many things I used to wonder about after we left him, yet there's one thing I still wonder about even now. Did he ever find out that I took his telescope? Did he rummage through his drawers in search of it? Did he get angry? I found that funny. I would laugh when I imagined my father realizing I stole something of his. After everything that happened, everything he did, at least I got to keep something I valued the way he never did.

POETRY

“Revelations” by Kaiu Aguigui

Acceptance folds like an apology letter;
tongue-struck adhesive holding it together.
I lick a question off my lips,
casually, but missing no glimpse
of how my life could change:
the crowds calling on the deranged
-- or maybe just the strange --
but nevertheless, a change
in how this world has been built.
I spit it out over the passenger seat,
light-hearted, but slipping through every beat;
“how would you feel if I told you I was a girl?”
and in a second, i see your acceptance curl.
Underneath my boy, they know I am gay
but sometimes, my gay boy becomes frayed;
fries in the depth of my voice,
vibrating in my inauthentic choice
that he feels too often.
You say, “you aren’t, though, right?”
I wipe down the question, chuckling through my plight,
saving it to soak inside myself for longer than tonight.
My gay boy is living in the in-between;
more than hidden, but enough to be seen
because I know acceptance sings like a silent song
like it’s had its own rhythm all along,
burning into every note the higher it gets;
when my apology letters burn, how will the words fret?
Will they soak in flames?
Will they have any gain?
Will your acceptance remain the same,
or simply refrain from jumping into the smoke
and extinguishing the hatred it provokes?
Apologies have boiled in my mouth
-- tabled tongues gone south --
I never say what I mean and that’s because I can’t;
my diction is confused and my tongue at a slant;
“you can be gay, but not too gay”
and so, I listen, sending him away;
spending my whole life tryna pray
my soul into in-existence,
asking god to strip me of this weakness;
frack my frail fractures until there are no factors left

to disseminate into a world brimming with waves of theft.
We've got strangers telling us to be bold,
but only as long as we are sold
on being italicized when they need us to be;
when's the time we get freed?
When's the time we can be seen?
We are only faced with starving eyes,
full of creed, craving our demise;
disciples congregating at our not-yet tombstones,
our apologies surfing on nothing but fear alone.
I never say what I mean and that's because I can't.
My gender is confused and my sexuality at a slant;
always glossing my work with rhymes and metaphors,
and still finding myself washed out on the shore.
My gay boy don't swim, just taught to deplore
himself until my throat is too sore
to say anything but sorry.
Acceptance folds like an apology letter,
but my sorries are no longer tethered
to the need for your acceptance,
not entangled in the labyrinth of your essence —
I am sorry to the girl I am sometimes.
I am sorry to the boy I've trapped in confines.
I am sorry to the body that I never treated right.
I am sorry to myself for wanting to die all those nights.
I am sorry to my community
who only ever felt like they fit in a coffin
because the edges of this world are too rugged to be softened;
and we are soft, but we are lighters,
burning this world in color to make it brighter.
Our hands not playing with flames,
our voices not something needed to tame.
You can still thrive in uncertainty,
don't need to lose your body permanently;
or you can swim into a self you've known all along.
Greet the world with an introduction prolonged;
regardless, I refuse to let our apologies float.
Burn them along with all those notes
raised in every song ever sung
about the war that was never ours to be won;
but to battle with ourselves is to drown,
and we mustn't give their music any more sound.

“california dreamin’ (such a winter’s day).” by Allison Jones

the minivans - topped with roof-racks and
filled with dazed murmuring voices
and early-morning winter yawns - are trickling,
cold rubber-on-gravel-crunch, into the parking lot. between
makeshift changing rooms (shimmying into tight black
wetsuits) smiles flash and then are lost
amid the flurry of focus, the communal gnawing hunger
for salt-water and adrenaline.

and behind the taco-bell-on-the-sand the water
writhes and rolls and recedes, unbothered
by the trifling lines of boards and bodies gently
swaying within the ocean’s cadence. miniature hills
and valleys in the deep damp of the sand (yesterday’s footprints
or fossils of midnight sea-floor) and beyond
the reach of the morning waves - the drier shore, where
seaweed-carcasses and pebbles and discarded feathers
leave the sand tousled, mussed
like surfer’s hair in wind: a mess abandoned
to the care of later tides.

here, no wrathful crash of waves, no pummeling fury
of endless war between sand and sea: the water thrashes against only itself
tumbling laughter until it comes to rest, stretching, sighing
and then slow receding inhale. the early-risers are silent,
patiently rolling atop the lesser currents of the fickle ocean-rhythm until
it surges, winks: the cue - bodies lunge, spring skyward, lean and bend,
bodysoaringstomachplummeting. silence amidst roaring hush of wind
and salt-sting bliss; frothing white trails fade.
yet so many more - swellingupwardhopeful - blink, waver, pause
and are left to the fall - floating decrescendo of the board
as the water continues on, without them. (joyful or unsatiated, behind
or beyond the wave, all paddle against water and air
to the beginning, wait again.)

and then the sun, morning’s warm exhale: people appear,
colors brighten, chatter swells and the unflinching quiet reverence
lifts with the cold fog. gnarled elders, body and wetsuit sagging,
return to shore and the young (knee-high, still-round bellies
pressed to miniature boards) swim alongside mothers and fathers
and try to ride the ephemeral while brazen birds (jerking heads,

black eyes ablaze) bear witness from rocks above.

and tonight, as the sun falls and dinner-tables are set and minivans
trek inland, the dark water will breathe
foam and slow rumbling fury, reaching further and
further and oblivious to the slow, violent erosion of the valley-print trails
that connect the empty parking lot
to the water's edge.

“The Thoughts That Sprout Up After Midnight” by Frances Bustillos

You are the siroccos of the Mediterranean,
and the endless suns of the North Pole.
Chaotic beauty, the pains of longing gathered together like a bouquet;
All birds sing of you.
You are my bowl of June strawberries, cloyingly fragrant.
You are the fabric of the seas surrounding my body, supple and comforting
Yet you could drown me at any instant.
You are the festive weight of a pomegranate, regal and scarlet, in my autumn hand.
And the number of arils within are the number of thoughts I've had of you.
There are pearls in your mouth, onyx in your eyes,
And atop my bed I hang carnelian
So that you enter the swathes of my dreams.
Your name within my head is adorned with gold, hefty and glimmering.
You are the explosion of midsummer produce,
The joy of polychromy within a farmer's market;
There is a variety of blisses you offer.
Within you is the essence of blushing royalty in stone fruit,
The grinning, tickling sunshine in citrus,
A unexpected greeting of a bee sting,
The tomato-filled summers, the barefoot walks on the winter beach,
A true pleasantry indeed.

FICTION

“Longing for Sleep” by Sierra Lofgren

I couldn't get the image out of my head. His body, the blueness in his face, the death reflecting from his eyes into an image of myself, like a satanic mirror glaring into my soul. I was nine back then. Only nine, just walking into the forest full of decomposing plants and little creatures tapping the earth's ground, creating hymns that whispered throughout the forest. All I wanted was to read, to escape from the chaos of my house. Time away to get lost in my imagination and create a whimsical, fictional life story. I wanted a moment of comfort. Then I discovered the body of Breven Foster.

It has been twenty-two years since that moment. Thirty-one years old and still waking up to the image of Breven Foster's pale, lifeless face staring at me, waiting for him to blink. Longing for it, pleading for it. It has been so long since it has happened, and I cannot quite remember exactly what happened after that. I just remember his body hanging from a tree branch. It made me wonder how something so beautiful could hide such a secret. I remember the skin spreading from a purple out to a faint blue then to a lifeless white. All I did, all I could do, was stare.

“Honey, honey!”

My bloodshot eyes flared open and my mouth ached as I drew another heaving breath.

“You had another night terror, That is the third one this week. You feeling okay?” Gavin asked.

He had no idea. How could I explain to him an experience he would not be able to understand?

“Yeah, I must've had another dream about an unconscious fear or something.”

I let out a subtle giggle because that was bullshit. This memory was locked to my ankle, dragging itself behind me like a heavy boulder, one I couldn't seem to break away from. It is funny how easily I could lie to Gavin. I lied because he worried enough about me. He cared too much, which I adored, but also, it put a pressure on me. I sometimes needed to put on a show for him, play the part I needed to so he could feel like the man who always took care of his wife. I wanted him to be praised, he deserved it. I lied because I loved him, simple as that.

“I'll go get you a glass of water. We will get through this, you'll be okay baby.” How I wish that could be true, but life has a funny way of making us experience things we need to.

II

“Regular coffee today?”

“Yes please, but add a shot.”

Almost in an instant, she handed me the coffee, the one thing I look forward to. Sleep was unpleasant to me now. It has been a growing hatred of mine. I'm terrified of closing my eyes to that hideous image that I was too young to witness. I've lived in hell much too long, and many expect a heroic figure to come sweeping the victims off their feet and into safety. Never in a million years did I think my support system would be a

cup of coffee. I thought it was Gavin for a long time, but then the night terrors returned, springing back into my mind and poisoning every memory I had.

I savored each sip as I sat by the window, trying to enjoy the scenery of this new spring. The vibrant flowers were glowing from the sun and created an angelic environment. I couldn't help but smile to myself. Thank god, a smile I didn't have to force.

I saw him across the street.

The adrenaline rushed from my feet to my head. I was on fire. I could feel my skin melting, my eyes bulging from my skull. Everything was blurred around me. His hair was against the gravitational pull of the earth, floating up so I could only focus my attention on his eyes. He didn't blink, he never did. He just continued to haunt me with his endless stare as if he knew a secret of mine. A secret only he knew, which in a sense, was true.

I need to get out of this state of mind. I cannot take it. Who knew there was a fine line between heaven and hell.

III

I was back and he vanished. Tears were rolling down my cheeks and someone was shaking my shoulder. They looked genuinely confused, trying to understand how a woman could go from smiling to weeping in a matter of seconds. They said no words, they could tell I did not want to speak about it. They knew that it would only make me fall deeper into my embarrassment. The woman just patted my shoulder, smiled, and went about her day. I was so drained. I felt my lungs expand more with each breath. I could still faintly feel the burning sensation spreading within my body. I stood and walked out.

I watched my feet hit the pavement and heard the clunking of my heels drum against the ground. I did not want to look up. I was afraid to see him again. I could no longer stand it.

"One thing at a time", I thought. "Just tackle your indefinite fear one moment, one confrontation at a time."

I looked up and I bumped into him. I was fading in and out of reality. I felt a shiver climb up my body. I felt as if I was stuck in an infinite nightmare. I want to escape this rimstone. How could something that happened so long ago haunt me to this day? How could one event from my childhood, maybe lasting five minutes of my life, take control of my entire being?

As I heard the man who bumped into me mumble "Oh, I'm sorry", I looked at my reflection on a window and there he was. I could not believe it. The purples and the blues circled around my neck and my eyes. It was so precise, too precise to feel like a figment of my imagination. I fell backwards and hit my head. My heart began to pound out of my chest, beads of sweat dripping down my body. I felt so claustrophobic wearing my pantsuit, as if I physically felt my clothes shrinking around me, beginning to suffocate me. I was drowning in my thoughts, losing my sanity.

All eyes were glaring down upon me. Music stopped playing, people grew silent, everything froze. For a moment, it remained silent, then someone broke the awkward

moment by helping me up. Slowly, murmurs were growing into shouts, and in that moment, as the blood leaked from the back and top of my head and staining my hair, I stormed to my car.

IV

These delusions only grew louder as I sped down the road, hitting little bumps and cracks, hurtling for that place of horror to provide myself some relief, to return to where I should have gone so long ago.

As I put the car in park, I felt a drop of blood seep into my eyebrow. I did not give a shit at this point. I did not care how concerned the rest of the world was. I could not stand this excruciating pain of guilt twisting at my intestines and invading my brain.

I found roses and went to the cashier.

“Ma’am, did you need help finding the bandages?”

“I’m quite alright, thank you.”

For a moment, she raised her eyebrow at me and questioned my answer. I just glared back, and put up a twenty dollar bill. I slid it towards her hand.

“No questions asked, and you can keep the change.”

As I carried the roses to the back of my car and the blood began to dry against my skin, I felt a rush of aggression leak from my heart. For so long, I was one of those people who did not understand. Many never come to the realization that people cannot physically fake who they are for a long period of time. Instead, they simply undergo changes. Their priorities change, their goals, their interests. Things within their lives change. Change is as natural as the world turning round. People just tend to protest it, claim that this hurt is only the others' fault, when it takes two to continue a conflict. Dead or alive.

I knew it was a long drive, but it was worth it to gain myself back. My phone rang, but I ignored it. All I could do was watch the clouds drift across the sky as I grasped onto my wheel and drove forward.

V

I parked my car at the dead end and sat there, contemplating my decision. I have tried all kinds of therapy sessions, I have tried meditation, the support groups. This was my last glimmer of hope. I gathered all my courage, took off my heels, grabbed the roses and walked onto the dead dirt.

It all looked the same. Nothing seemed to change, the long overdue death of the forest around me contained no color, no life. I just looked down. I was petrified. Questions swam around my mind, making me wonder if this was going to work. It had to, it just had to.

A mile I had walked, then I felt a slight cushion against my feet with each step. I looked down and saw grass. I couldn’t understand. Then I looked up and saw every color I could imagine. I saw specimens of flowers wrapping themselves around each other, growing tall, hugging. I saw bushes reflecting dark and light shades of green with

little rosebuds beginning to sprout. I saw squirrels chasing one another, butterflies fluttering in circles. I was in awe. I felt so much relief, so much excitement. Then I ran.

I ran and did not feel my feet hit the ground, only the energy of the earth as I bounced with each step. Leaves flew by my face and the wind pushed me closer to the tree. I sprinted, swinging my arms back and forth to push me even faster. I laughed so hard, I could not believe it was possible for me to laugh this much. I felt young again. I slowed down and planted my feet into the grass. There it was.

I couldn't believe how beautiful, how full of life this tree was. Moss grew from its roots and began to climb up the trunk. The bark of the tree was radiating life itself, standing as tall as if it was the king of the forest. I heard a woodpecker from a distance, but the sound strangely soothed me. Flowers bloomed from each angle of the tree. Not a spot was naked below the tree. I gazed up and the leaves were being kissed by the spring breeze. I could not see an inch of sky peaking through the leaves.

I fell to my knees. My body became weak and my mind became puzzled. What a breathtaking view. How oddly beautiful that something holding so many dirty secrets could become so profoundly beautiful. After seeing the tree so full of life, it was impossible to view it as a symbol of Breven's death. Life goes on. Things grow and things die. What an odd cycle the circle of life is.

I stood to my feet and set the roses by the tree. When I looked up, there he was, but he was pink in the face and blinking at last. I felt my soul settle a bit at the sight. Finally, I can sleep. My phone rang and I answered it.

"Honey, where have you been? Your job called and said you aren't there! Are you okay?!" Gavin cried.

I paused. "I'm okay" and my voice cracked as I began to cry. "I'm okay. I promise."

“A Brighter Tomorrow” by Louise Edwards

Here I am with the best set up in town feeling accomplished, if not smug. I just got into the clean dumpster of the furniture store and found everything I needed to ensure a good night weathering the elements. A huge cardboard box that once housed the couch, the heavy-duty plastic that still encapsulated it making it a well-insulated tent, with the type of sky window. I had another heavy-duty plastic cover inside as my thermal sleeping bag. By homeless standards, this is the Taj Mahal. I feel bad that poor souls are out there in the pouring rain, miserable, but tonight my focus, like every night, is survival. I deliberately crush my well-built home to disguise myself, streamlining to the ground so I appear like undesirable trash. Little do they know I am snug as a bug in my clean cocoon, warm and dry, safe and sound. Or so I thought. Suddenly out of the darkness came some men to investigate. Being a homeless female is not a good thing, for I have been a victim of unspeakable acts, so in terror, I did what my big strong man did whenever we were together. As hard as I could, beast-like (without saying a word), I aggressively banged the top of my home, once and then twice with everything I had. To my surprise, they jumped back, more afraid of me than I was of them. The sense of satisfaction I felt as they scurried off back into the darkness from which they came is indescribable I am now able to resume the luxury of my well-built accommodations. It's amazing how low I have set my bar for what's acceptable. Society discards homeless people as dangerous degenerates, but we're often hopeful and valuable people derailed by life. If it could happen to us, it could happen to you.

“4pm Over Two” by Katherine Anderson

Anywhere else, the heat of the day would have been done and over by 4:00pm. But nope. For whatever god-given reason, Paris had to be different. Alvi sat at the table on one of the flimsy metal chairs, her dress of the day slung over its back. Dressed in nothing but her underclothes, there was little comfort in the suffocating humidity. The occasional whisper of a breeze through the open window provided little comfort; the muted sting of the chair’s metal tines through her stockings lending no aid. Her hair was still up in its braid from the outing just moments prior. Before they’d trekked back up the winding staircase and collapsed into their respective places; flinging open the windows and bordering on public indecency. Now, all stray hairs clung about her in its sheen of sweat.

Across the table stretched the small travel journal she’s kept by her side throughout the journey thus far - small bullet points detailing where they’d been, where they’ll go, anything that happens along the way dictating the need to put thought into words. Flights, reservations, midnight stays, museum tickets to be converted.

Behind, Moira spread out on the cream colored duvet, limbs stretched like a starfish across all corners of the bed where she hadn’t moved since their arrival. Her legs and feet were radiating with the pain of exertion, the left one in particular screaming. With a slow breath out, she propped herself up on her elbows, rolling up the leg of her jeans to just below her knee.

Sure enough, the bruise had grown since they had last checked. What was once a silver dollar now stood out as a hefty, palm-sized fruit, staining the underlying skin in a sloppy muted purple. The darker specks almost formed a line half-way through the bruise where her shin struck the lining of the tram. Americans really needed to watch where they were going. It took her a moment to speak. “It’s spread again.”

Alvi pushed the book aside and glanced over her shoulder, taking in the sight with a sigh. “Damn.” The cramped space was close enough for her to reach over, and she took the chance. Lightly, she ran her fingers over the leg, feeling the bump and swell of the bruise just beneath the thick stippling of hair. It had only been a few hours. “I think we should shave it. You know, to chart its growth or something.”

Moira let out a thin breath of air through her teeth, hissing out the pain. With a slight nod, she tried to sit up. Alvi put a hand to Moira’s lower leg, stilling the movement.

“Hold up. Let me.” Alvi got up and crossed the few steps over to the bathroom, gathering all of the supplies necessary. Razor, soap, towels. Luckily, there was little space to put them in the first place.

Lifting at the base of Moira’s heel, she held the leg upwards, supporting just beneath the bruise before slipping a towel underneath it. She grabbed the empty Pringles can from beside the trash, dumping out the remaining bits of crumbs before filling it with warm water.

Wetting her hand, Alvi layered her palm with suds from the bar of soap, moving to massage it over Moira’s coarse leg hair. Each strand prickles against her palm; the warm water doing little to relax it down.

Alvi sat on her knees, straddling just below the point of examination. Even from this distance, she could feel the heat radiating off of Moira beneath her. Between the two of them, she pressed the pringles can between the touch of their legs; careful to keep it from sloshing everywhere.

With an exhale, she started to shave. Slow, light, small strokes of the razor across the few inches of space. Pull, pull, pull.

As she went about, the blades caught up in the hair, struggling to continue forward as it snagged and pulled ever so slightly. She plunged the razor into the Pringles can when it no longer cleared the space as it should; swirling it about the increasingly cloudy water as bits of hair fell like confetti to the bottom.

When the flesh slowly exposed itself, the color became bright; vibrant enough as to yell through the pale white skin that had previously been choked out by thin brown hair. She didn't know bruises could look this fake in real life. To look like a failed high school intro to theatre project.

She remembered being 13 years old, having to shell \$25 of pocket money on that stage makeup kit that they would only end up touching once. All they ever ended up making was the fakest gore imaginable. Cuts, bruises, whatever could be accomplished by the small color wheel provided.

The class had lined up on folding chairs all around the wall-length mirror outfit in fake light bulbs, as if to create that 'big time' look any attention seeking high schooler craved. She remembered putting layer upon layer of dark purple and blue all around her eye; blocking out the natural pigment just as she had been shown only moments before.

"It has to be dark enough for the back row to see, but look real enough as to be believable," the teacher had originally said throughout the example, smattering a poor TA in oily gunk.

No matter what, she could never get the colors, or the lines right. The swirl was too deep, the stippling of material coming to look unnatural and almost pea-shaped. Everyone else seemed so practiced as they went about; melding the colors in all the right places, lining their orbital like an artist's canvas and putting their worth on display for the rest of the world to see.

Slowly, the strokes of Alvi's razor became more natural as she continued, putting a hand just below the bruise to hold her steady. Just the sound of the shaving amidst their light breathing.

When she was done, the bruise shone through like a halo, outlined and highlighted by the surrounding light brown covering Moira. "Perfect," Alvi muttered. She put her finger tips to the bare skin, touching the flecks of color engraved deeply below. I'm an artist. I'd completely forgotten how to draw.

BIOS

Katherine Anderson is an upcoming graduate student at CSU Long Beach who often spends her time reading, writing, and reflecting on the current happenings of her life. Finding the fantastical in the mundane, she is often seen jotting quips, ideas, drabbles, and quotes on any scrap of paper handy before hoarding them in one of her many junk journals. Although her passion for writing began at a young age, she is only now taking herself and her work seriously; making an effort to elaborate and perfect it for public viewing. As such, this is her first publically shared work.

Louise Edwards was born in the sixties to parents of the Great Depression. She is a first generation college student. She grew up impoverished and in underprivileged neighborhoods throughout San Francisco, including the Potrero Hill Projects and the Mission District. She has overcome many obstacles in her life by the grace of God and loving support of her family. Her success in college is due in large part to her brother Richard's support. She plans to major in Sociology and transfer to either San Francisco State or UC Berkeley, before going back to the underprivileged neighborhoods of her youth to give back to the community. Louise is enjoying her new-found love of creative writing, and has many more stories to tell.

Sierra Lofgren writes poetry and fictional pieces that are mostly inspired by the movies she watches and the life she has lived so far. In her free time, she loves to sing her heart out, spend time with friends, pet her dogs and cats and go on fun adventures to places she's never been before. She loves to examine the human mind, which is why she is going to DVC at the moment and plans to major in psychology! Sierra's ultimate goal when she writes is to inspire or motivate others to become the best version of themselves they can become! Although that may be her ultimate goal, as of right now, she feels very fortunate to be where she is now and dedicates her stories to anyone who has helped or guided her along the way, whether it be writing or with life in general.

Frances Bustillos is a DVC student and writer.

Allison Jones is a DVC student and writer.

Kaiulani Aguigui is an English major here at DVC, completing my fifth (and final!) semester. Some not-so-fun facts about me: I have twelve siblings, I get anxious going to my local mechanic, and I never take cream or sugar in my cold brew.

Robyn McDowell has been a storyteller their whole life. They mainly write fantasy and sci-fi stories but will occasionally dabble in creative non-fiction. They're not savvy with technology but they love their phone which they use to jot down notes about their stories even in the middle of conversations much to the annoyance of their family. When not writing or daydreaming about stories, they can be found teaching themselves tunes on the piano or trying to give their miniature poodle a haircut.

Katie Nunn credits the start of her reintegration to creative writing to Diablo Valley College's creative writing program and faculty. She works as a tutor in the English lab and as a supplemental instructor, working to help educate students in the English language. When she is not writing she enjoys hiking, reading, running, and watching Netflix. She looks forward to continuing her education at UC Davis where she will be studying English and Psychology.

Monte Fisher says the DVC English Department's Creative Writing Program is the best kept secret in California. The instructors, curricula, and classmates are also the best. He's taken several creative writing classes at DVC and highly recommend them to you if you want to improve your writing skills in poetry, prose, drama, technical writing, creative non-fiction, graphic novel, flash fiction, or any other genre. When he started at DVC, he'd never written a decent short story, and now his portfolio is lousy with them. Thank you Professors Clapper, Gonzales, Carbonell, Haslam, and the entire DVC English Department!

Want this to be you?

The 11th Annual DVC Literary Contest will take place in Spring 2021. Stay tuned for updates and info, or check out the [DVC Literary Contest webpage](#), or the [DVC Submittable page](#), or contact Creative Writing and Literature committee chairs [Rayshell Clapper](#) or [Lisa Ang](#).

