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Labyrinth

Alexandria City High School's Literary and Creative Arts Magazine

Est. 1966

Volume 59 • Spring 2023

Labyrinth, Alexandria City High School's literature and arts magazine, has been showcasing the creative work of Alexandria City high school students since 1965, and a digital archive of that tremendous fifty eight year showcase of talent can be found on our website at www.labyrinthmagazine.com. I encourage you to explore it.

In addition to showcasing student work, the class itself, Journalism 2M, has provided the students who have put the magazine together with authentic project-based learning experience and valuable career relevant skills.

The past few years have been tough on the magazine, however. Covid was not conducive to magazine production, and for most of the years since Covid, the Journalism 2M course has been merged with a Creative Writing course, a merger which has not been beneficial to either group of students. Next year, due to low enrollment (under 15) and related budget constraints, the magazine class is on the chopping block altogether. Unless something shifts, you are holding the final issue.

In the late 1980s, as a student here, I was on the staff of *Labyrinth*, and it was a special part of my high school experience. In 2007 I began teaching the course, and have done so every year with the exception of two of the Covid years. During my tenure at the helm of the magazine, it has occasionally lost some of its momentum, sailed into the doldrums, but the wind has always picked up again and sent it forward on its journey. Isn't that always the way with real world ventures?

Although I am retiring and will not be here to see the next chapter, I sincerely hope there is one. Our school will be losing something special if we let the magazine go.

As always, *Labyrinth* is made possible by the hard work of Alexandria City High School students. We would like to thank everyone who had a part in the making of this magazine, including all students who submitted creative work.

We hope you enjoy this issue!

Taki Sidley, Magazine Advisor
& the *Labyrinth* Magazine Staff

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Ava Pache, Untitled. Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24", 2023



Anna McMahon



Elena Gutierrez



Neiko Brooks

STILL AS A HUMMINGBIRD - CALEB WARD

I do not stand still,
I cannot,
I sway in the wind allowing myself to buzz and rumble with anticipation,
with a sense of urgency to be doing something,
I twist and turn in the wind,
To shed yesterday's loss,
yesterday's mediocrity,
So I am free to hum and sing in the wind,
so I am free to ever look forward to the future.
I do not stand still,
I cannot,
I maneuver and wave through life, through fear,
So I'm ever gliding and zooming on to the next.

MY MESSAGE TO ACHS ENTREPRENEURS

by CHIDEBELU OJUKWU

"I am not promising I will change the world, but I guarantee you that I would spark the mind that will."

~TUPAC

I've said it before and I'll say it again: we live in the most exciting time in history. The world has never been more connected, and opportunities are limitless. But there's a catch—the world is also filled with more distractions than ever before, which means that if you want to succeed financially, you need to be smart about how you're spending your time (and money). Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to get smarter about managing your finances these days: from learning how inflation affects your spending decisions to understanding how compound interest works.

1. THE BIG PICTURE.

If you want to be rich, don't just become a millionaire. Become a billionaire. If you want to be famous, don't just become famous. Become the most famous person in the world—and then make sure everyone knows it! If you want to have an impact on others' lives and leave behind a legacy that will last forever, don't just start with one thing and expand from there; instead do as much as possible with all of your talents at once so that no one can ignore them or forget about them ever again. My message to entrepreneurs and business owners of ACHS; you have to learn to look at the big picture so as to see the future and evaluate the past.

2. SELF-ASSESSMENT

You need to understand your natural talents and skills. This is important because if you don't know what your strengths are, it will be difficult for you to find a path that uses those strengths. And if you don't know what your weaknesses are, then it may be easy for them to be exploited by other people around you and also difficult for you to point them out so they can be improved upon. You might also find it frustrating when others expect something from you that isn't within the scope of your abilities or interests (or both). One way to learn about these things is by taking personality tests. Another way is simply talking to people who know us very well: friends and family members often have insight into our strengths because they see us every day!

3. LEARN HOW TO LEARN, UNLEARN AND RELEARN QUICKLY.

The biggest financial hindrance is old information. Quickly being the key word there, Old information is a liability and new information is an asset. The quicker you can do these the greater the edge you have over others. This is not as easy as it sounds, because humans are stubborn creatures and our brains like to stay in their comfort zones. But if you want to get a handle on your finances, then there are some things that need changing in your brain before anything else can happen. The first thing that needs changing is your attitude toward learning itself: instead of seeing it as something

difficult or tedious that takes up too much time (or money), try making it an enjoyable experience where anything is possible! If this sounds crazy--and maybe even impossible--that's okay; just think about how much fun kids have when they're playing pretend games with their friends or family members. They don't care about being bored or feeling stupid; instead they just focus on having fun while learning new things at the same time! Of course we teens should be able to do this too...right? Next, you will need to find a way to make learning fun for yourself. There are many ways to do this: one way is by using books or other resources that teach you about financial topics in a way that's easy-to-understand and even entertaining. You can also talk with friends who have good ideas about money management; ask them questions and see what they say!

4. ACCEPT FAILURE!

If you want to be successful and make money, then take risks. Success involves losing and if you are afraid of losing and not ready to accept rejection, then remain impoverished — it's your choice. Failure is key to success. They don't show you their failures on social media or in person doesn't mean they haven't. Remember the journey of Lionel Messi — Knocked out of the world cup 4 times and even considered retiring but he continued and then won it the fifth time. Success requires you standing up after falling regardless of the number of times.

5. HAVE VALUES

If you don't love what you do then add values to it and someone will buy /hire someone like that who does love what they do! People tend to value what you value. If you don't value yourself you'll get disrespected and then you get annoyed or you pick fights. Long story

short, stop being in such a hurry, drawback, figure yourself out and what you value, come back more confident than ever.

6. MANAGEMENT.

The real deal is management of cash flow, people specifically those smarter than yourself and your personal time. Leadership is controlling people smarter than you, not the other way round. Ask questions first before agreeing on any terms with anyone (including yourself). Manage your thoughts and your mindset. Quick exposure; Your mindset and time is your biggest asset. The power of imagination because in today's world where information travels fast thanks largely due largely due internet connectivity among other factors such as smartphones etc., millions upon millions upon millions people all around the world regardless of age bracket using their imaginations to create products, platforms, apps etc.. These products, platforms, apps etc.. change lives everyday whether it's TikTok, Reddit, SnapChat, Cryptocurrency etc.. Those who have imaginations thrive while those without fail miserably due lack thereof.

7. BE A COPYCAT.

Be a copycat but copy the right cat. When I say this I don't mean word for word, but configure it to be your own. Create or copy a formula and follow it.

FOCUS - Follow One Course Until Success. Do not be afraid to change your plan if something comes up that you did not account for, but make sure to stick with the most important parts of your financial goals. Be flexible, but stick to your plan.

8. ENVIRONMENT.

Surround yourself with people who are

smarter than you are and seeking the same thing. Don't be afraid to ask for help, advice or guidance. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback. The key to success is information, but it doesn't guarantee it. With action, however, information can be turned into success.

TAKEAWAY.

Sometimes we need to look in the mirror and be true to our inner wisdom rather than our fears. In this way we will not be deformed by what we see reflected there--and then take appropriate action. You can be rich, but it won't happen by accident. The easy road becomes hard and the hard road becomes easy, choose wisely!



photo by Jaqueline Benitez



Margaret Carlson, Man Up. Water soluble graphite and watercolor on watercolor paper, 14" x 11", 2023.



UNTITLED - GABE COLLINS

Before me, you stand in the hot afternoon sun,
Your bare chest gleaming like,
Warm butter in my grandmothers' cast iron skillet,
Steam rises from the soggy grass in which you stand,
It envelopes you like soft pink mist,
Bringing a possibility of a thousand dreams to my mind.

Once rain and fog shrouded you,
But now the reality of us breaks through the veil,
As the truth of what futures could hold,
We lock eyes, forever preserving this moment,
And yet, still walking away from your gaze,
Bringing a possibility of a thousand dreams to my mind.

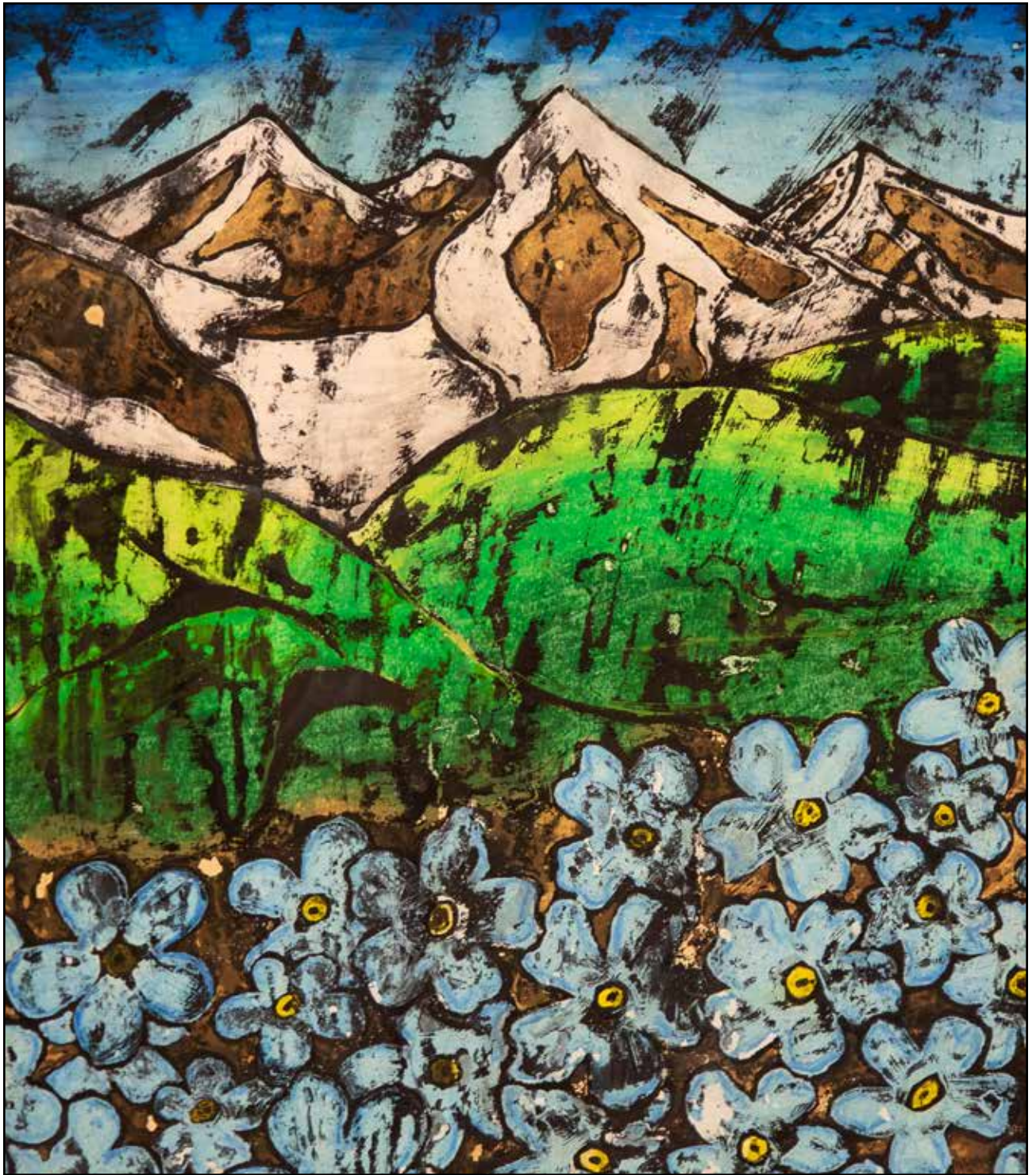
Drowning in orange lights and orange nights
Of which only I know of,
Watching the dark behind curtains,
Waiting for you,
Our bodies sway to the,
beat of the music,
As you take hold of me and bring me closer,
Bringing a possibility of a thousand dreams to my mind,



Sam Espach



Adeline Davenport



Cailyn Rowan



Sam Espach



all photos by Lila Garwood



Abigail Delgado, Balancing Act.
Glazed Clay and LED Lights, 2023.



Annette Haynie



Betty Amron,
Fungus Growth.
Glazed Earthenware Clay, 12" x 9" x 9", 2022.



Caroline Block



Monci Herrera

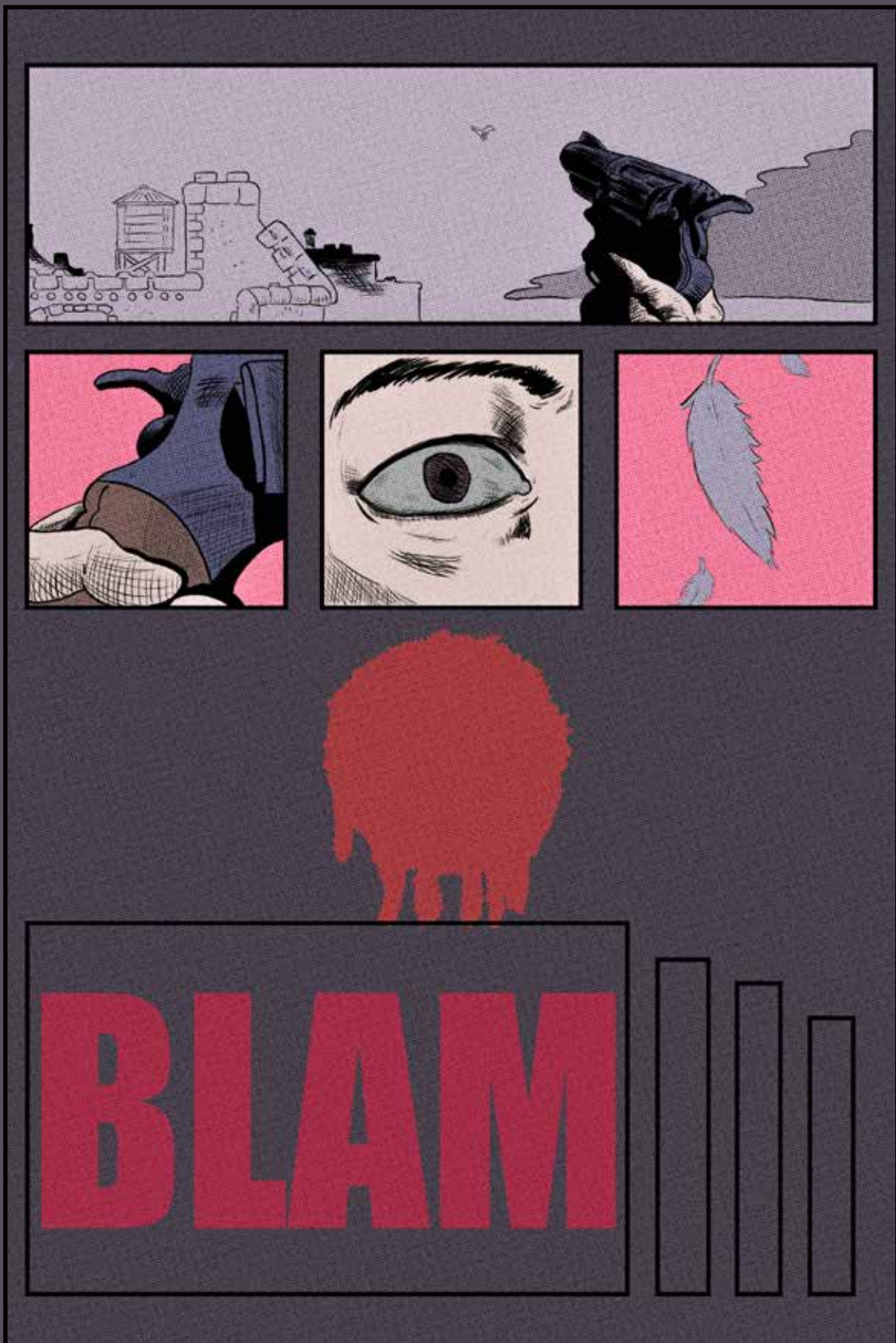


Alora Denby



Mia Amaya





opposite: Marisa Fischer, *Decompressing*. Oil on canvas stitched to unprimed canvas, 22" x 17", 2023



Mia Amaya Quintanilla



Gabriella Escobar



Keylin Barrios Alonzo



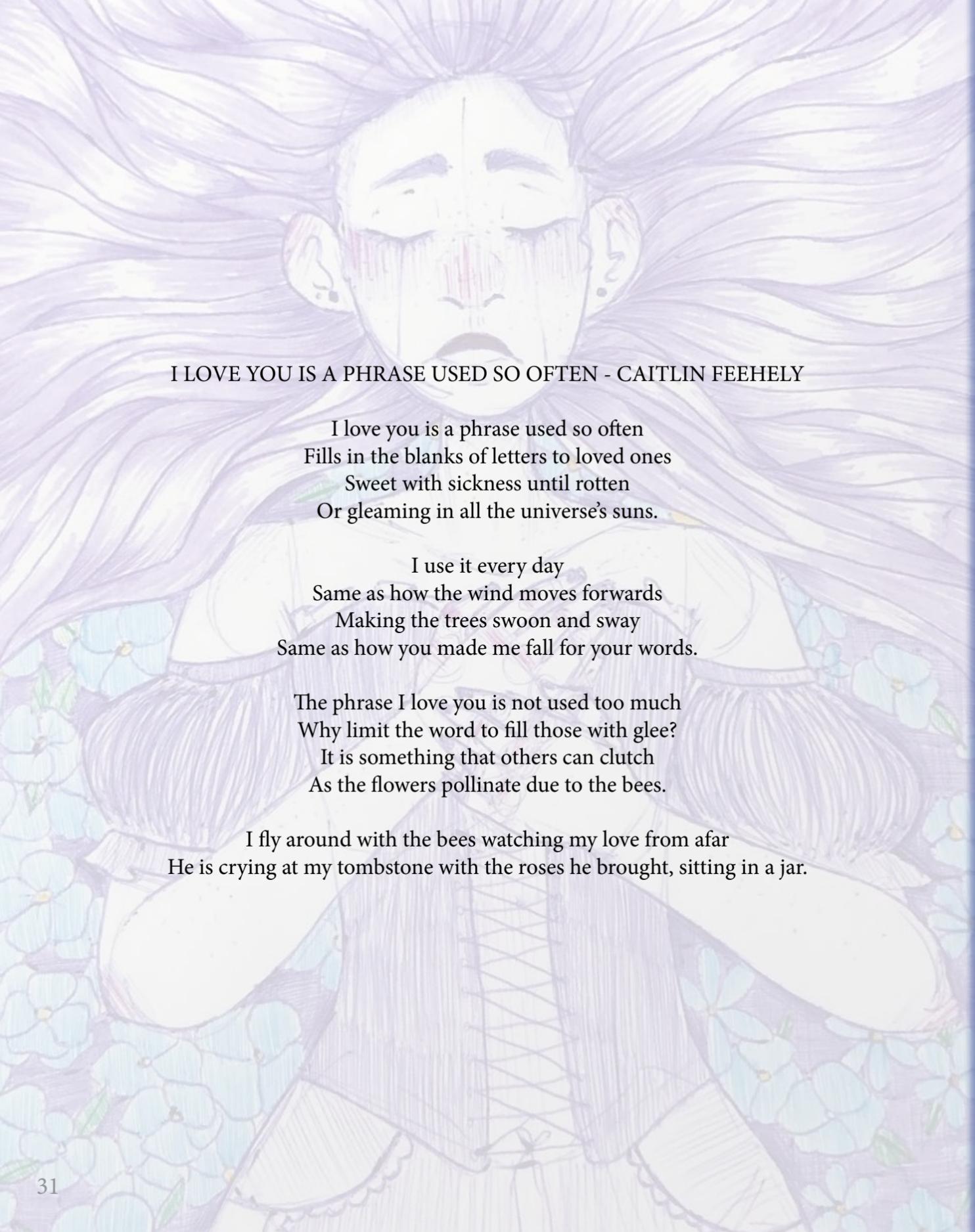
Eliza Rinkema



Eva Creighton



Susan Jackson



I LOVE YOU IS A PHRASE USED SO OFTEN - CAITLIN FEEHELY

I love you is a phrase used so often
Fills in the blanks of letters to loved ones
Sweet with sickness until rotten
Or gleaming in all the universe's suns.

I use it every day
Same as how the wind moves forwards
Making the trees swoon and sway
Same as how you made me fall for your words.

The phrase I love you is not used too much
Why limit the word to fill those with glee?
It is something that others can clutch
As the flowers pollinate due to the bees.

I fly around with the bees watching my love from afar
He is crying at my tombstone with the roses he brought, sitting in a jar.



Caitlin Feehely



EPSILON-731 - TAYLOR HOGANSON

Epsilon-731 was “happy.” At least, that was the condition that Apiskepelia-42 had attributed to the sinking feeling in her chest, and the nausea within her bowels. “It’s a common diagnosis,” Apiskepelia-42 had said, “people who misinterpret happiness. Some vomit, others are overwhelmed with tears of joy. Still others self-terminate, out of sheer incomprehensible happiness. Some serotonin will fix you right up.” Epsilon-731 had taken the serotonin prescribed to her, and according to the records, she had reported remarkable improvement. In reality, the substance made her head swirl, and she couldn’t stand to continue taking it. For weeks now, she had poured the medical powder into her morning-beverage, a mix of caffeine and water, but she simply dumped the beverage out the moment she was away from prying eyes. She didn’t want to insult Apiskepelia-42, so she never told him of her actions. No one had ever denied his prescriptions before, and she certainly didn’t intend to be the first. She was determined, now, to work this out on her own.

It was around 1200 hours that her symptoms first became difficult to hide. When she attempted to consume her calorie roll, she had to rush to a bathroom to vomit it back up. Multiple people saw her in her urgency, and a child named Delta-1452 ran to get Apiskepelia-42. When Apiskepelia-42 arrived, he immediately ordered an increased dosage of Serotonin, and rushed Epsilon-731 to the medical bay. “You don’t seem to be responding quite as well to the treatment as you’ve been recording in your reports.” Noted Apiskepelia-42. He rejected any attempts made by Epsilon-731 to say otherwise, cutting her off with a stern “I understand that you wouldn’t want to inconvenience me, but my purpose is to make sure you’re feeling normal. Do you think some of this is caused by the nearness of your day of enlightenment?”

His words caused tremors to course through Epsilon-731’s chest. He noticed them, of course, and turned to record the occurrence. Epsilon-731 silently cursed her body, so filled with joy that it must share it with the world, apparently. She didn’t understand why she felt the way she did. It was an immense joy, which is good, right? Then why did she feel like she’s falling all the time? Why did this insane pleasure feel so unbearable? Of course, it must be her day of enlightenment. She was produced nearly 19 solar years ago, meaning that her day of enlightenment was very, very soon. Of course she would be so excited! She was lucky. She’s an Epsilon model, meaning she gets to reach enlightenment far before the others. Poor Apiskepelia-42 would have to wait until he’s 85 solar years old! Yes, that must have been it. She must have been terribly excited for the day of enlightenment. She would now go back to work, like normal, and patiently await her day of enlightenment.

This time, Epsilon-731 took the medication that Apiskepelia-42 prescribed her. She asked no questions, and reported honestly on her situation. The drugs she was given made her waking hours like a dream. The unbearable joy she had felt was now entirely gone, replaced by blissful

mediocrity. She returned, within hours, to the grain fields that all Epsilon models maintained from the age of 5. Under the golden sun that floated overhead, her sickle cut through the golden brown stalks until it became dull. Still, she continued. She felt none of the joy that had so burdened her earlier. Only the drug-induced mediocrity. Even after the other Epsilon models returned to the sleeping dormitory at 1600 hours, she continued to work. Only once the sun went down did she return to the steel dormitory. She continued like this day in, and day out. Twice, Apiskepelia-42 checked on her, and twice he was reassured that she was fine. She simply wanted to make up for her falsified reports, which satisfied Apiskepelia-42.

12 solar days later, when the field was cleared for the last time, Epsilon-731 lined up with the other Epsilon models in her unit. In a single-file line, they walked into the emerald green building in the center of the colony. Moments later, she was strapped into a steel pod, a single glass slit letting in enough light to see. In an instant, the drugged stupor wore off. She began tearing at the steel plates around her, holding her confined. She struggled against the steel cuffs that held her in place, crying out in desperation, a deep, guttural scream. And her scream was answered. Immediately, Apiskepelia-42 was stood in front of the glass, regarding her with his calm gaze. She screamed towards him for help, for release. She looked deep into his eyes, begging him for mercy. In response, Apiskepelia-42 opened the window a crack, so that she could hear his voice.

“Epsilon-731,” his voice was calm, normal, “I’m terribly sorry that the drugs seem to have worn off. I know this amount of joy can be hard to contain. Please, take a breath. You can process your excitement, master it. This is a big deal. You will soon be enlightened. I envy you greatly.”

Epsilon-731 took a few breaths, and allowed her stomach to calm.

“Here, I’ll stay with you through the whole thing.” He smiled a kind, gentle smile.

In return, Epsilon-731 smiled back. Her stomach had calmed, and she was ready. She released her grip on the restraints, relaxed her body, and accepted enlightenment.

The pod, sensing her relaxation, promptly drove a steel spike through the back of her skull.

On Day 001 of the solar year 4208, a small, steel pod was ejected from the space station Theseus. Its single human occupant, a female, was dead. The sealed pod was launched directly towards the abandoned planet of Earth. Its single, terminated passenger was incinerated upon entering the atmosphere, but the structure of the pod survived. It hit the Earth in a region once known as North America, where it landed upon a pile containing millions of similar pods.

And thus, Epsilon-731 was enlightened.



Evelyn Keene



Aichalal Taleb Jeddou



Ziona Miller



Ziona Miller



Andrei Trinidad



Nate Kysilko



Lester Hernandez Aleman

THREE YEARS, THREE MINUTES, NO LIMITS - ARIANA SINGLETON

Three years, three minutes
We're still in it
Talking about no limits
No plays
Going down the drain

Sometimes we thought it might not last
But the past
Is in the past
Look toward the future
The sutures
Stitching up the sides
Of a dream too powerful to die

This dream
That has held us
Through the pain
The blood
The sweat
The tears
Three years worth of these things
The dream
It has never died

Only torn a little
Still three minutes until
That dream becomes a reality
Ding!
We never lost our camaraderie

Whether three years of struggling
Or three minutes into a beautiful reality
We'll still be in it
Talking about no limits
No plays going down the drain
Only limit is our love for and faith in each other

And those things are limitless



Annette Haynie

NOMAD (THE MILITARY BRAT) - LUCAS TRUEBLOOD

Lay on your floor and cry
Long for a different time
Before you moved away
And everything was fine
Wishing you could've enjoyed it
Is a common regret
But the ticking on the wall
Makes you never forget

Social life on a calendar
"I'll be alive until June"
Enjoy it while it lasts
The trucks will be here soon
Haul your things away
Final goodbye to your friends
Father Time came for payment
This is how it ends

I've gone to 8 schools, 3 in 3 years
I've lived in 6 places, 9 houses
Nothing has ever been permanent
My life was under boxes
When Uncle Sam owns your life
Childhood is not important
You can watch from outside
And just admire it

Magical realism, a term coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, refers to creative work that is set in a realistic world that is imbued with elements of magic. Unlike in the genre of fantasy, however, the magic in magical realism is not marveled at, not seen as fantastic, but taken in stride, accepted as unusual, perhaps, but reasonable. Although the genre of magical realism arose in Germany, it is most closely associated with Latin American literature.

MANDARIN SKY - HARLOW BABIC

The sky has been orange for three days now. The sunset bled into the morning and day, the clouds the color of tangerines. As time progressed, the bright clouds continued to crowd the horizon until no more blue was peeking out. Martha was quite annoyed. With the appearance of the clementine clouds covering the sun, her garden was suffering immensely. Her husband, George, however, was ecstatic. The orange tinge on the world led to a unique set of pictures, which he could sell for much more than his average price.

"Look at the sky Martha, look at the color! This could make us enough for a bucketful of new seeds!" George exclaimed.

Martha scoffed, rolling her eyes. "There will not be any use for new seeds if the sun does not show! My poor sunflowers are loathing its absence." She looked out of the window, peering at the now fiery clouds. Covering the entire sky, all anyone could see was a thick sea of orange.

"I don't even like the color," she muttered.

As she continued to peer out of the window, she heard a sudden plop. She turned to look at George, but he seemed unbothered. Shaking her head, she sat down with a huff, believing that she was hearing things. But soon enough, another plop ensued, and she was soon certain that she was not crazy. Stepping onto the porch, she looked around, seeing nothing but the blanket of orange around her. All of a sudden, something gently ricocheted off of her head and onto the ground. Startled, she looked at the floor, finding a small mandarin orange.

She began to notice it now: mandarins were falling from the sky. They rolled down the roof, bounced off her porch, and settled densely on the ground. Noticeably, they settled on her flowers. Huffing, she cleared them, pushing them from her walkway and removing them from her flowerbed.

To her disdain, as soon as she finished, she found twice as many in the same places. Storming into the house, she grabbed a wooden board to cover her flowers and decided that was all she could do. By now, the plopping of the oranges was becoming irritating, and even George had noticed. Thrilled, he pulled out his camera and ran from the house. In his haste, he began slipping on the oranges, inevitably deciding to take as many pictures as he could from his place on the floor.

As the hours continued to go by, the mandarin rain became violent. The buildup of oranges was becoming immense, and the couple could no longer see out of their windows. They were becoming "snowed in" by oranges. Martha began to pout, upset at the world. The plopping was incredibly abrasive, and the wooden board had collapsed, further crushing her flowers.

"Martha, I think we need to evacuate," George reasoned, "If we don't get onto the roof, I'm not sure if we will be able to leave this house for a long while. I won't be able to take pictures if I'm stuck in here!"

Martha continued staring down her buried flower garden, scowling.

“I suppose it’s no use trying to protect them anymore,” she sighed.

They grabbed pieces of spare metal roofing, climbed outside of the upstairs windows and settled into the sea of oranges. Moving was becoming increasingly challenging, and each tried to protect themselves while swimming through the oranges. They pushed through, holding on to one another to help the other along. The oranges were falling so viciously that the collisions with the metal made such loud booms that their ears began to ring. Climbing on the roof at last, they huddled underneath a shared piece of metal until the mandarin rain began to slow down.

Oranges falling gracefully now, the couple watched as the village was half-buried in mandarins.

“Martha, I think these pictures will sell very well,” George commented.

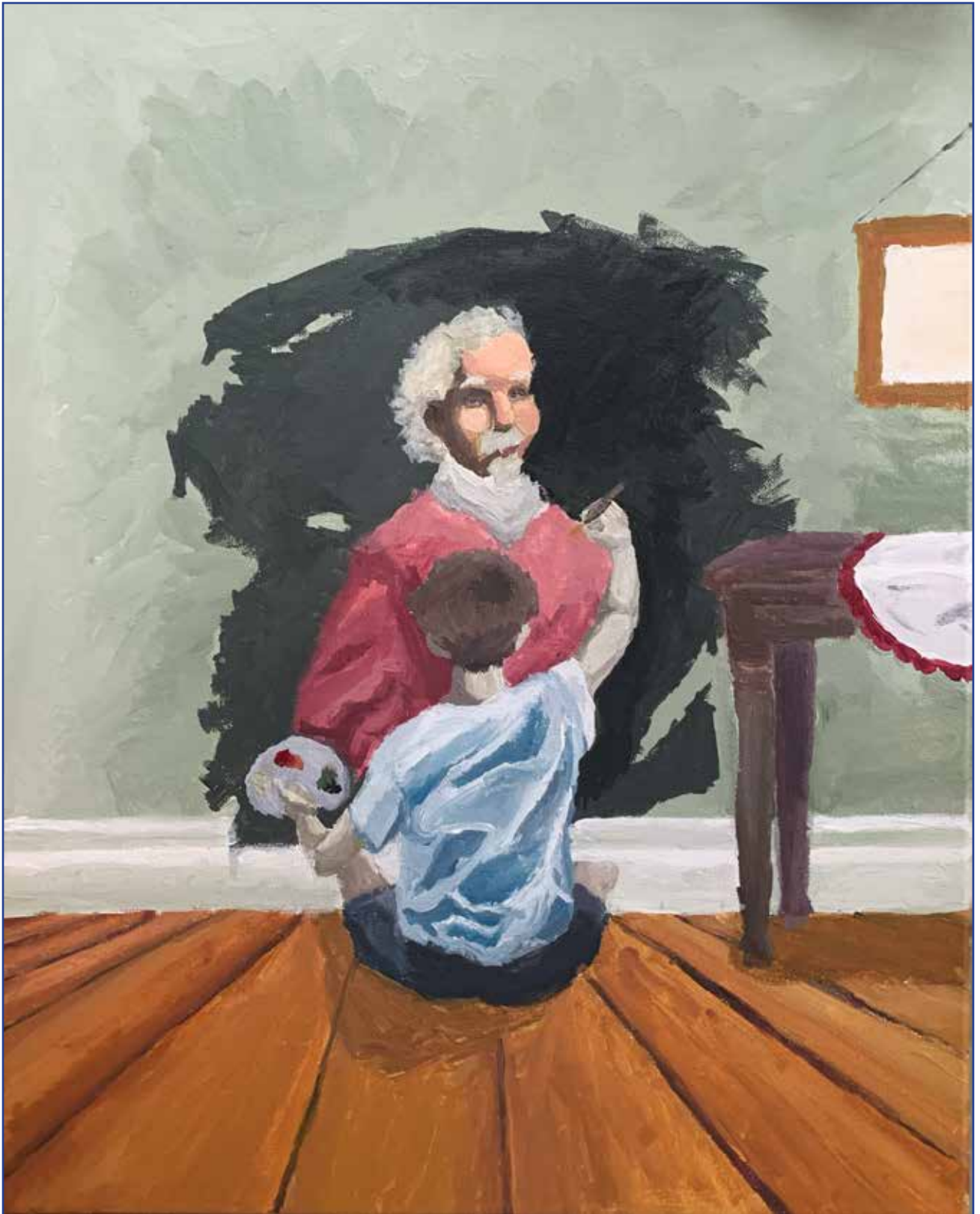
“Me too, George. What do you think of having orange pie for dessert tonight?” Martha replied.



Adriana Zelaya



*Ayla Orona, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.
Colored pencil and oil on wood panel, 16" x 12", 2022.*



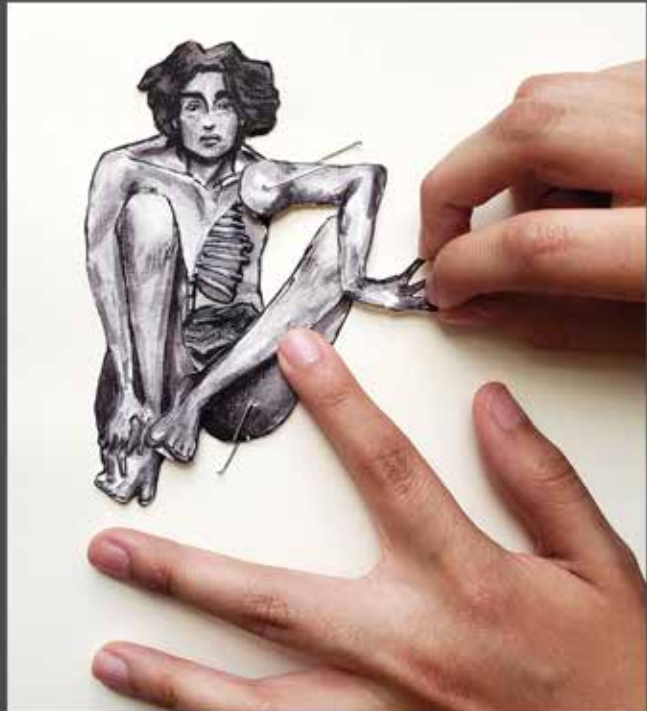
Eli Speckart , Wall Display. Acrylic on canvas, 20" x 16", 2022.





Adonajai Dalmida

*Opposite: Jack Lacey,
Never Ending Road.
Inkwask and pen and ink on bristol board,
12" x 9", 2023.*



*Fatima Arevalo Zambrano, Conceal What's Beneath Me.
Pen and ink wash on watercolor paper with deconstructed paper clips, 5" x 3", 2023.*

DO I SCARE YOU? - CALEB WARD

Do I scare you?
 Does my tall frame intimidate you,
 do my heavy long arms and strong legs alarm you,
 Instruments capable of greatness and darkneses all the same,
 But you stand in the light casting shadows upon me,
 But rest assured I mean you no harm,
 I don't mean to startle you with my sound stride,
 or shock you at the sight of me,
 Don't daunt at the sight of my golden brown skin,
 then marvel at the dark luscious crown atop my head,
 I am not a deadly black cat to be kept behind glass and admired,
 Some animal, some vermin
 Maybe you are simply not ready for me, not
 Ready to see my humanity,
 But when will you be?

HER. MY ONLY WISH. - GEYSON HERNANDEZ DIAZ

I wish to be able to live
in the garden
of her soul,
where each heartbeat
plays a symphony.
and where the sunshine
of her love
will keep me warm.

I wish to remove
the stress from her life,
and I wish to be able
to help her
when she is feeling down.

With love,
I wish I could ease the heartache
smooth and cool her soul
and bring it back to life.

If her heart was shattered,
I would gather up the pieces
of her heart
and put them back together.

Her beauty lies
within her heart.
And her eyes
are filled with light.

My only wish
just to be there
anytime and anywhere
with her.

MOON & STARS - RACHEL CAIN

I always wondered why
The stars never seemed to align.
Were you the one?
Trying to give me a sign?

I jumped from that One Cliff
Down to the well
If there was an end, there's no way to tell.

I thought I hit the ground
But it was your arms I was bound,
Our hearts' beat the only lone sound.

The moon's waters crystallize;
The stars never reply to our love cries.
Bound to each other by commitment ties.

This night--
No light...
My touch is your only sight.

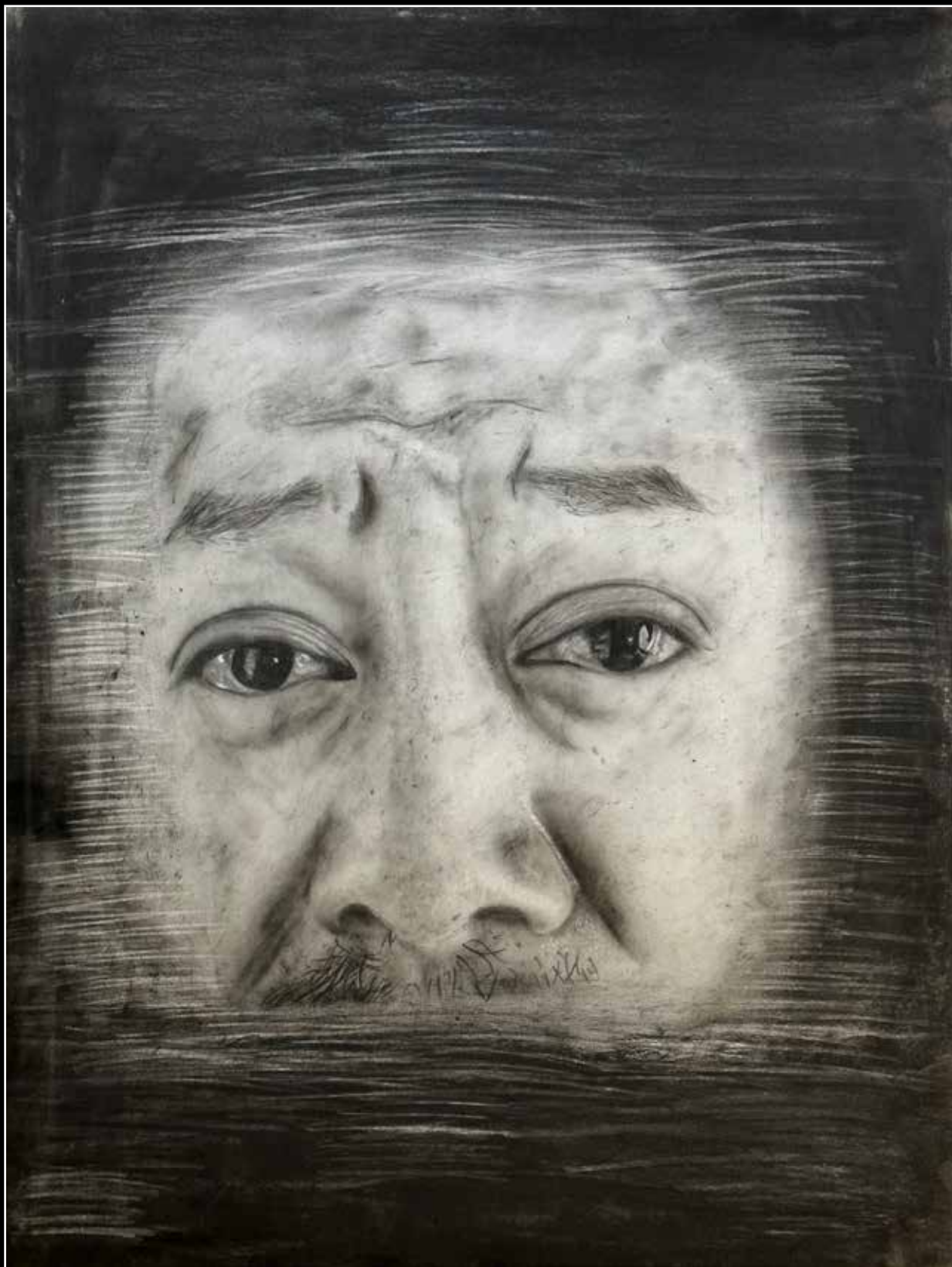
You are more than all can bare,
A sweet dream
Wrapped in a beautiful nightmare.

Blossoming at the heart
Later torn apart
My blood and flesh creates your favorite art.

One day...two....ten...
Then you do it all again.



Kalina Kaufmann



*Jocelyn Reyes-Caballero, , Infinite Worries.
Charcoal and powdered charcoal on bristol board, 24" x 18", 2023.*

BLACK SHEEP IN THE FOXES' DEN - AREEZA ABBASI

Calling that misfortunate day a slow day at work would be an understatement. Misfortunate, not because the silence caused by the lack of 'business' was so great that even the clicking of heels would be enough to draw everyone's attention. But misfortunate because that was the day I met *her*.

I was organizing some documents in front of a file cabinet when, from the corner of my eye, I saw her walk in through the door wearing a dress that complimented her slim figure. With her eyes as red as her lip tint and silky hair as ebony as her expensive-looking dress, it would be no surprise if she belonged to a prestigious family. Not that it mattered though. Everyone who came here came here because of one reason only, and truth be told, I could not care less about what circumstances led them here.

She looked nervous, with cold sweat on her face. After glancing around for a while she finally walked up to the person closest to her.

"Hello, sir," she said, "I was hoping to get some help..."

Help? I thought to myself, *Is she a fool?*

The guy looked at her with an icy glare, then a weird smile started creeping up on his face.

Foolish she may have been, I couldn't let this black sheep become prey so soon after entering the foxes' den, so I decided to offer my services to her.

"Miss, over here, I was the one you made an appointment with," I said.

Hearing my call, she stood there dumbfounded for a bit but then, realizing I'd probably be willing to listen to her request, she hurriedly walked over to me. I guided her into my office and motioned for her to take a seat. And so she quietly sat herself down gracefully on one of the chairs in front of my desk.

"So miss, which plan would you like to see first? For a lady like you, perhaps a 'health insurance' plan? It will need to be renewed at the end of every year bu-"

"Pardon? Insurance?" she said, interrupting me.

Her words stunned me. She did seem foolish with the cowardly way she carried herself in a place such as this, but at that moment I realized just how foolish even a fool could get. Was she trying to kick the bucket? She was sitting right in front of a professional assassin, in an establishment where people provide their "services" in exchange for money for Pete's sake... Whatever the case, I collected my thoughts and asked, looking rigidly into her eyes, "If not for insurance then what else are you here for, miss? If you aren't here for requesting a plan that takes care of your troubles, ensures the protection of someone, and/or something similar then I don't think our agency would be of any help to you."

My firm words probably hit her too deeply considering her entire body got tense with a face that practically screamed "Am I in the wrong place...". She fiddled with her fingers for a while as I stared down at her waiting for an answer.

Then finally, some kind of light bulb seemed to have gone off in her head as she perked her head up again and waveringly said, "If I were to...hypothetically...say that there is a certain 'problem' that keeps bothering me, and I'd like to purchase some kind of a 'death insurance' to rid me of said problem, will your agency ensure that I am never faced with that nuisance again...?"

"If the compensation is within reason then I can assure you that the services covered in our insurance plan will surely meet your satisfaction," I replied wearing a sly expression. Springing up from her chair and slamming her hands on my desk she said in an



Kate Rutherford, *Untitled*.
Ink and embroidery thread on fabric, 12" x 24", 2023.

uncharacteristically loud with rage in her eyes, "If so, then I'd like for you to take out Sir Rupert Albrecht. Shoot him, dismember him, burn him alive, suffocate him, I don't care what you do to him...just make sure this man doesn't live to see another day..."

Her trembling fingers as she practically clawed at my desk were a sight to behold. I'd be lying if I said I didn't expect such an outburst from a lady who carried herself in a manner as airheaded as hers. Though, however unexpected her reaction may have been, it was no good. And so I put one finger over my lips and with that same sly grin whispered, "Shhh...haven't you heard walls have ears too? We wouldn't want those pesky things spreading the word around, now would we? ... It sure would be a shame if our 'problem' came here and bought a 'death insurance' for itself too, now wouldn't it?"

It seemed she was quick to catch on to her foolishness in announcing her order and what exactly that could entail for her because her face became red, this time, not with rage, but rather due to embarrassment.

She quietly sat back down in her chair and I continued, "It's great to see that you're quick on the uptake. Now then, I'd like for you to answer a few questions so that we can finalize your purchase! So, have you been to and/or have been in contact with any other 'insurance agencies' prior to coming to ours?"

"No," she answered.

I continued, "Would you like the gold plan, the silver plan, or the bronze plan? The gold plan has a higher monthly premium however it's a good choice if the 'problem' is of such a troublesome degree that it requires a more skillful insurer to deal with it. Additionally, with extra fees, insurers can also provide personal aid or protection for the beneficiary. A silve-"

"I'd like the gold plan," she replied, interrupting me.

"I see. Are you married or currently in any romantic and/or sexual relationship?"

“ ”

“...Uh, ma'am?” I asked waiting for her response

“...”; Still no answer.

I look up at her only to see her cheeks all rosy and her face twisted into a perplexed expression.

“Oh, pardon me for the misunderstanding, that’s not a pick-up line. Married couples can be eligible for special discounts and in the cases where the beneficiary is already in a relationship we’ll need to determine whether the extra aid in the gold plan will extend to their partner too”, I voiced stiffly.

Her face reddened, once more, in embarrassment and she quickly looked away, “OH...oh, uh no, I’m not currently in any relationship.”

“Understood. Do have any significant health complications that we should know about?” I asked, continuing our questions.

She paused to think for a moment, and then replied again with her monotonous, “No.”

With the questions all done, I put on a professional smile, and placed the agreement document in front of her, directing, “I’ll need you to sign over here at the bottom and then you’ll be done for now. Though you’ll need to come in again next week for other details to discuss.”

She swiftly signed the document and handed it to me. She stood up on her heels and turned to leave, but just as her hand reached the door knob she made an unprompted request catching me off guard, “If possible, I’d like for you to continue being my insurer.”

I looked up from the document in my hand and warily said, “Since I was the one who took on your request, I will indeed continue being the insurer.”

And with that, the door shut close. I waited for the sound of her clicking heels to disappear and then slouching back in my seat I let out a deep breath. I turned towards the closed door and thought to myself, “I’ve dug myself a troublesome hole, have I...?” with a nervous sigh.



Evelyn Rivas



Quinn Bresner, *Dog Train*.
Oil pastel and paint marker on mixed media paper, 18" x 24", 2022.



AN ANGEL IN THE MOONLIGHT - JULIA SAYRE

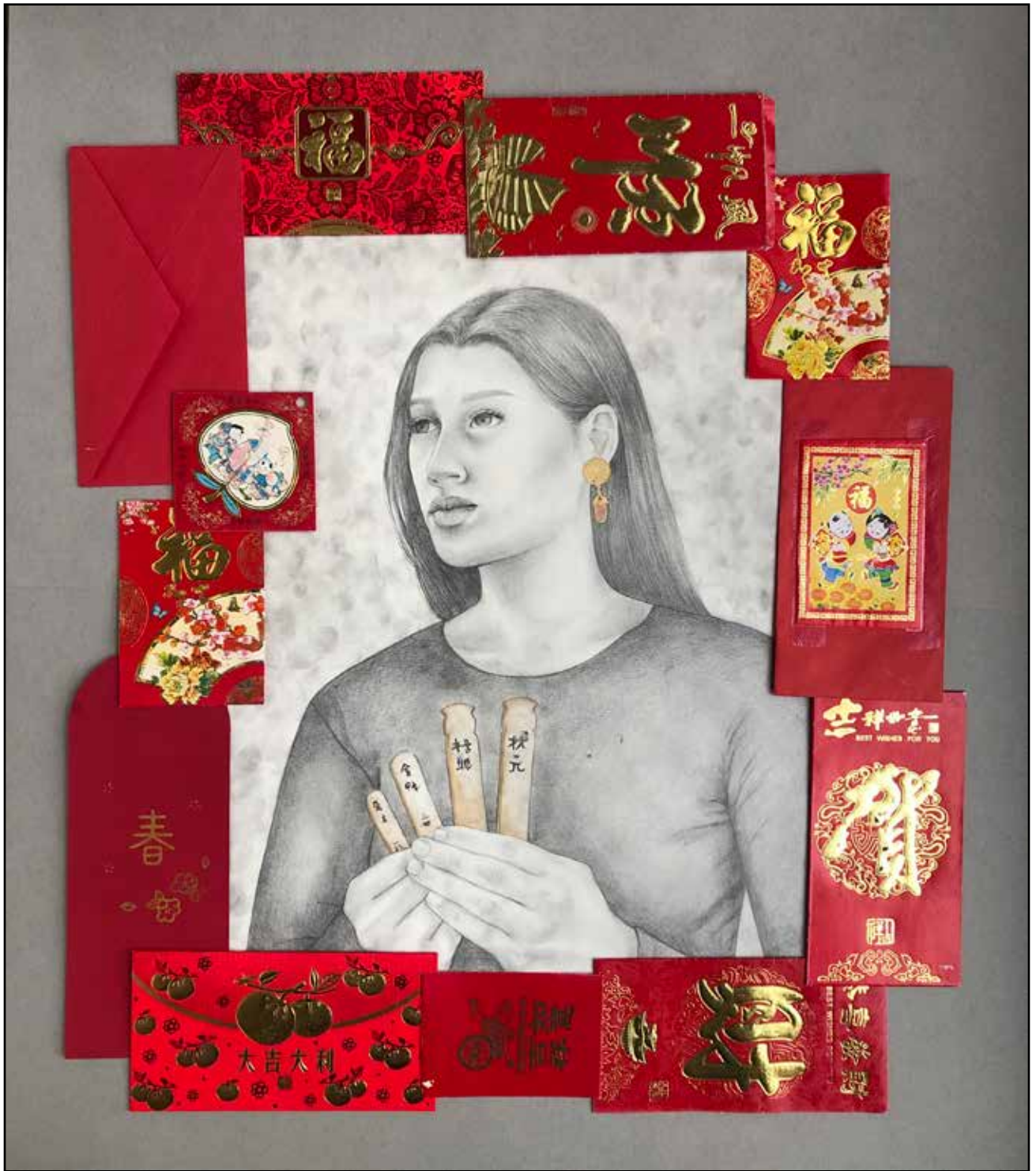
Ethereal. That's the only word to describe her. Standing at the back of the room, dressed in all white, covered in lace and jewels and glowing under the moonlight, which seems to reflect on her ivory skin and silvery hair. Looking out on the other dancers with unseeing eyes full of light and yet entirely empty all at once. Her very being whispers grace, a beauty so untouchable no one would dare try. She seems to be waiting. For what, no one is sure. But she is waiting.

There is a break in the music, a change in the atmosphere. The dance floor clears, and she moves for the first time in hours. Stands in the middle of the dance floor, resembling almost a porcelain doll with her delicate movements and expressions. Then the music starts again. A new song, with words only she can understand. A tempo that seems to breathe life through her soul. She begins to dance, a slow, beautiful thing at first, each step no less elegant than she herself. But as the chorus is reached, and the tempo begins to hasten, so do her own movements. And the hall begins to shake. A small

thing in the beginning, barely noticeable to even the most perceptible guest. With time, each tap of her foot against the floor seems to cause the hall to tremble on its very foundation, the windows rattling and the doorways threatening to collapse on any soul too slow to flee. And flee people did, away from this mysterious woman who brought destruction with every gesture of her body, in rhythm to a beat unrecognizable and a song whose words had been long forgotten, old in the way that only things like this can be.

It's clear now, as the last of the people cleared out, who she was waiting for. A dance partner, someone to match her lethal waltz. An old friend perhaps, or a family member. Someone she has danced with before. She is too practiced, too sure of herself, to not have done this very dance so many times already. And perhaps she would find that person again someday. Perhaps they were already gone, and her dance was now one of mourning and remembrance, an angry scorn to the world which had taken them from her. But for now, only one thing was for certain: on this very night she would dance alone, bathed in the moonlight which painted her to be so heavenly even amidst the desolation which surrounded her being and must surely lie in her own heart. An angel with painted wings.

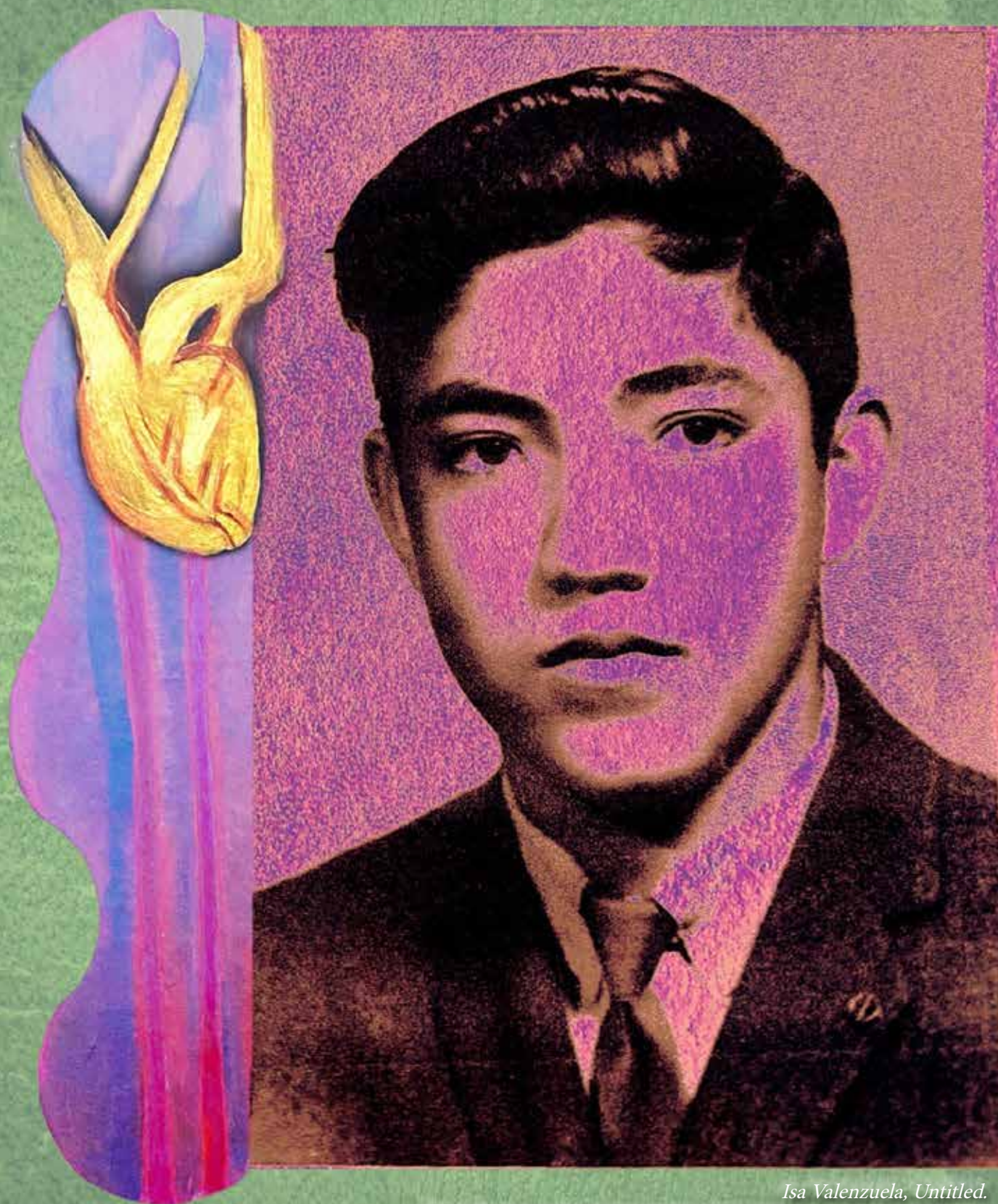




Kim-Anh Aslanian , *Saved Tokens*.
Graphite and metallic watercolor on paper framed within a collage of red envelopes ("li xi"), 20" x 18", 2023.



*Katie Hayden, Broom Part 2.
Yarn, thread, gouache paint on watercolor paper as collage, and acrylic on canvas,
36" x 24", 2023.*



*Isa Valenzuela, Untitled.
Digitally manipulated image of mixed media work, 28" x 21", 2023.*

