Hands are funny things / growing and changing / soft and worn / with thumbs that let us hold hands / and swing them together. / The pointer / guiding and appreciative / perks up when you inspire / and exclaim I have an idea / Middle fingers / steeped in symbolism / that made you laugh on the playground / and cry in the city. / Ring fingers / adorned through ages / in diamonds and sapphires / and string and twine. / Pinkies, though quite unimaginative, / regal with the right teacup / impressive in their un-impressiveness. / For handwriting and palmar / intertwining and backhanding / handfasting and backhanding.
Creative Writing Inspired by Art

What happens when creative writers respond to visual art? In a three-day workshop led by 2021 Scholastic writing keynote speaker Zach Savich, Scholastic writing students wrote original pieces that explore “ekphrasis”—a term for imaginative writing that engages with art.

The students each selected a work of art from the Scholastic Art exhibit to respond to and explored how close looking can inspire new insights about writing and the arts.

The following book pairs the literary and visual works.

Table of Contents

My Blue-Eyed Brother by Meredith Stewart ...... 2
Spaghetti Sketches by Sarah Voss .................... 6
Pipes by Sumeet Chakravarti ......................... 10
Weeping by Shaliz Bazldjoo ......................... 12
Hand of God by Genevieve Comar ................ 14
Silver Cage by Christina Ibos ..................... 16
Being Free by Halle Preneta ....................... 20
encounters with the void by Kendall Thomas ... 22
Reflections on a Man Undone by Madeline Bryan ........................................... 26
Silent Exchange at the End of Time by Carys Bowen ....................................... 28

Featuring writing by:

Shaliz Bazldjoo
Carys Bowen
Madeline Bryan
Sumeet Chakravarti
Genevieve Comar
Christina Ibos
Halle Preneta
Meredith Stewart
Kendall Thomas
Sarah Voss

Featuring artwork by:

Sophia Boyer
Roseline Dou
Caleb Ford
Grace Geisler
Alyssa Olivia Cerpa
Sophie Ozan
Joseph Richmond
Macy Sinreich
Nola Williams-Riseng
My Blue-Eyed Brother
by Meredith Stewart

You were only an idea, but still I hated you. I was thirteen, and you were only just finding a comfortable place to rest while my mom’s vessel of a body carried you to your final destination. When she announced you would be arriving in six short months, I cried. When people asked me how I felt about you arriving I feigned excitement. Now, I am embarrassed to recognize the intense waves of shame that drowned my face in hot red magma whenever I remembered that you were going to be born into the physical world. Into my world. How could I have been so evil as to loathe my little brother whom I hadn’t even met?

You did not ask to have been conceived, you were helpless. Did I hate you because my sisters and I had already crafted perfect fantasy worlds which would become seriously flawed at your inclusion? Would our pretend family break if we wrote in a baby boy we had found in a basket on the porch? Did I despise the idea of having but a kindergarten graduate for a brother visit my own kids as though he were one of them? Maybe it was the knowledge I had gained through middle school health haunting me with the inconceivable things my parents had to do to bring you here. You were born on April 7th. Two days after my birthday. Did I hate you for condemning my mother to her bed while I blew out my candles making you seem more significant than my upgrading from tween to teen? Whatever the reasons, I’m sorry for hating you. You didn’t deserve my wrongfully placed loathing. Afterall, you turned out slightly more attractive than most of your peers because you had not been cursed with the burden of baldness.

I held you, and you grasped my dry hands with your orange-yellow tinged fingers short and wrinkly like baby carrots. Your face was splotched with patches of bruised purples and bloody reds, and your eyes were shut tightly concealed behind almost transparent lids. Just as I started to recognize how helpless you truly were, I thought of the black screaming in the middle of the night and the muddy yellow-green stench of dirty diapers you would produce, and I retracted my sympathies. You remained in your boring, alien-like state for a couple of months caught in an endless cycle of sleeping, feeding and then repeating. I’d never noticed anything exceptional in you until I realized your eyes had evolved from blurred greys to a distinct blue. Before crawling, you would simply reach one bent arm after another as your sweat and formula stained onesie
stretched itself across the floor waiting for the back end of your body to follow. You teetered in a table top yoga position doubting your abilities to support the weight of your unproportional body without the comfort of all four limbs kissing the ground. I decided I would play with you just this once, so I knelt a few feet away from where you wobbled. I looked at you wide eyed and said “Come here, Willy. You can do it. Crawl to me.” In that moment, something clicked in your brain which I thought only consisted of fleshy pink mush, and your hand began to levitate above the floor it had just clung to. You placed that hand a few inches in front of the other, and before I knew it both hands were even with each other and your hind legs followed in the same sequence. I wasn’t the only one shocked by this physical achievement. You locked your eyes on mine as you completed your Olympic level feat. They lit up with wonder and amazement as you probably had never experienced your center of gravity being higher than ground level. Perfectly spherical blue marbles filled with life, light, and youthfulness. They seemed tangible like I could pour out their contents filling an ocean. Not a greenish-brown ocean polluted with god knows what, but the ocean I had seen upon traveling to the Bahamas. The ocean that I wasn’t afraid to swim in deeper than two feet because I could see everything which swam below me as if I was looking through glass. The ocean that I flew over in an airplane wishing I could dive into the happy turquoise and mesmerizing royal blue streaks which rested on a beautiful cobalt backdrop. Those colors possessed a certain and hopeful air. They weren’t bleak, ominous, or lifeless like the stagnant greys which once surrounded your black pupils. Before, those eyes looked at me so innately, entirely dependent on the care of another. That day, they held an admirable perseverance and a hint of independence. Those eyes looked at me longing for approval, and you finally received it. I clapped and showered you with “good jobs” and “wows.” I even called for the rest of the family to come witness the marvelous things you were capable of. Those eyes don’t seek my approval anymore, but they squint when your teacher tells you to “say cheese” for your school picture which you wouldn’t sit for the first time, and they widen at the word “chocolate.” I thought your eyes were grey until that fateful day you took your first crawls. Your second birthday came around two days after mine of course. I remember you stumbled over the words in “Happy Birthday” as you sang to yourself. The energetic red and orange flames of the candles flickered like happy spirits inside your brilliant eyes. Before the rest of us were done singing, you had blown out your candles and began staining your perfectly pink tongue with the blue frosting remaining on the flameless sticks. Since you’re now practically fluent in english, you demanded a piece of cake. Our father gave it to you and you said “thank you.” It amazes me that you are the same person whom I once looked upon as an extraterrestrial creature who’d served only to deprive me of sleep. I still don’t know how I held such feelings towards not only a child, but my newborn brother. The reality is incorporating you into my sisters’ fantasy worlds enhances them, you make birthdays more exciting, and you are a joy to push around in a stroller as people compliment your vibrant eyes. I wouldn’t trade you for the world, Willy.
Spaghetti Sketches
By Sarah Voss

I.
Skipping around the pond, the little girl in her dainty blue dress screamed and laughed while throwing flecks of stale bread to the ducks that had flocked to the bank. Her grandmother sat a few feet away with a bone-deep contentment that could only come from the simplicity of feeding ducks. Soft clouds ambled above them, keeping an eye on the happenings down below. One of the bolder ducks decided to waddle onto land and go straight for the bag in the little girl’s delicate hands.

“Grandma grandma,” she yelled, still laughing brightly, “Grandma, they’re trying to take my bag!”

Her grandmother gave a light chuckle and said, “Of course they are dear. Ducks haven’t learned how to be patient yet.”

“Like me!” the girl answered, obviously proud of the way her grandma taught her to be patient and kind and thankful to everything, including greedy ducks.

They stayed there for hours until the soft white clouds turned into thick blankets and the blazing sun burnt out from evening’s hand. When the ducks finally waded back to their nests, pleased with their meal for the day, the grandmother took her granddaughter’s hand and they headed home, awash in a simple happiness.

II.
It takes few ingredients: tradition, simplicity, love gently kneaded to imperfection as flawed and brilliant as the hands that molded it.

It starts at the beginning: soft fingerprints mar the dough their innocence hiding a promise that flourishes through stains from egg yolks and grit.

It’s a homogenous dichotomy: with introspective separation and an ancestral connection bringing an enduring, honest contentment through pasta in the kitchen.
III. Hands are funny things / growing and changing / soft and worn / with thumbs that let us hold hands / and swing them together. / The pointer / guiding and appreciative / perks up when you inspire / and exclaim / *I have an idea* / Middle fingers / steeped in symbolism / that made you laugh on the playground / and cry in the city. / Ring fingers / adorned through ages / in diamonds and sapphires / and string and twine. / Pinkies, though quite unimaginative / regal with the right teacup / impressive in their unimpressive-ness. / For handwriting and panhandling / handfasting and backhanding and manhandling. / Hands are funny things, they are.

IV. Let’s take a trip. It won’t take long, maybe a bit longer if you take the long way ‘round (and I’ve always enjoyed the scenic route). But we’ll make this a quick one. Take a look at that field over there - d’ya see it? The one bursting with golden streams and all that potential? There’s a nice autumn breeze there, under the cornflower-y morning sky, and the streams are swaying in its touch. They might be having a little chat, too. Wheat is quite a chatty grain, you know. Loves to talk about all the future it has. The warmly old farmer’s about to come down to check on his wheat, like he’s done for the past couple decades, and his father did before, and another couple fathers before that. Never took a day’s rest, either. You ever had that kinda soundness? Even if it’s unusually cold for that time of year, or your hands get one too many calluses and you think maybe I’m not cut out for this. And then you keep doin’ it? Well, now you can see him just under that nice hickory - ‘bout as old as him I believe - meanderin’ down in his faded blue overalls and that quintessential straw hat we’re all well acquainted with. He’ll get down there and kneel, right at the edge of the gold, natch, his hands through one of the streams take a little bite outta one, and all the little gears’ll turn and that funny thing called instinct’ll kick in. They’ll all come together, in a way I can only describe as magic, and he’ll either say “Ready,” or “Not quite,” and the wheat’ll keep talkin’ about all that future and the breeze’ll head on over to the next field.

Next stop’s not too far, just some more movin’ things to head ‘round. I’ve always loved this place. So much living. If you look over to your left you’ll see the cows linin’ up to get milked. Over to the right’s the sheep linin’ up to get sheared. I’ll have to get you one of their nice wool scarves - keep you right warm on those nippier autumn days. And here’s another farmer, this one a few years younger. He’s still got that spring in his step and his overalls still got some life in ‘em. This one’s headin’ over to the chickens, they’ll be behind you. They’re funny things, aren’t they? Spending their days hoppin’ and peckin’ and cluckin’, in and out and around the coop with the peeling yellow paint, all day and all night long. Never hopin’ to get past the rusty fence ‘cause they’ve got all they need behind it. He’s headin’ over to grab the eggs for the last time today. Maybe they’ll be tomorrow’s breakfast if they’re good. He’ll open the lock and step in, make his way through each nest, careful not to disturb anything, and pick out every little egg, fresh and full of promise.

We’ve got our final stop now. You might recognize it. I don’t know what it is, but I can guess if that’s fine with you. Just nod when I’m getting close. Is that time at the beach with your little brother, when you both got so distracted with building a sandcastle that you forgot to put on sunscreen and had a mean burn for two months? Maybe it’s the first fancy restaurant you went to with your fancy college friends in the big, fancy city, where you took a bite of the most delicious steak you’d ever tried, the garlic butter. Or the little neighborhood pond that some people on the street didn’t like because kids would always come and feed the ducks, but you love it because you and your grandma always watched the sun go to sleep there. Or is it that time you went on a hike at the local park, by yourself ‘cause everyone else was busy, and you sat next to that evergreen that was taller than the sky, and you took a deep breath and closed your eyes for a while? Or maybe it’s the last day you spent at your grandma’s house. And when all the adults were bickering in the living room, she showed you how to knead the dough properly this time, dear. Make sure you do it with love.
As I dropped over the ledge, I found myself trapped. I looked around for a place to hide but I couldn’t find any. Hearing voices, I had a few seconds before I was found. I jumped into the corner and I huddled up, hoping I would just look like a mass of trashbags. As I held my breath, I heard footsteps above and around me. I felt the heat of a flashlight and I stayed as still as possible. After what seemed like hours, I felt the light disappear. Fearing the fact of being caught, I stayed in the same place. I felt myself dozing off, and I didn’t stop myself. After being on the run for years, I had come to sleep wherever I could.

As the morning sun rolled through the clouds I decided to get up. I stretched and I took a deep breath. Around were brown walls with various stains on them. All kinds of plant life sprouted from the cracks, here, and there. It looked pretty peaceful. If I had my camera with me, this would have been heaven. I was a photographer before I got into all of this trouble.

Suddenly a glint of white, caught my eye. I walked over towards the other corner of this deep box. 6 white pipes all leading to blue taps hung on the wall. It contrasted the overall look because the pipes looked as though they had just been cleaned. A branch of some tree leaned against the wall and more greenery had sprouted through the cracks in them.

“Wow, that’s pretty neat,” I said softly.

“Neat indeed,” says a voice behind me.

I turn around, and there’s an old man standing there. He merely just stares at me. He has a white beard and he’s a little skinny. From where I stand, he seemed to be missing two teeth. For a moment he looked a little transparent like a ghost, but as soon as I noticed, it was gone. As I stared back at him, I worried who this guy is.

“Wh-who are you?” I ask, still quite surprised.

“No need to worry son. See those white pipes? I clean them everyday. If they weren’t kept in shape, the whole city would go down. No one knows about these pipes, just me. No one ever thanks me or congratulates me for maintaining the big city’s water system. But my motivation is that I am doing the right thing, even when no one is looking.”

“These 6 pipes run a city?” I ask.

“Yes son.”

I turn and look at them in awe. I stand there for a moment. I turn back around to ask the man how he got in here, but he’s gone. I stare at the pipes again. I think it was time to set things right.
You are weeping.

It’s lonesome here, and you can’t fathom any reason but the dark. You can’t see the feelings that flicker in front of your face, like coiling reels of film, or feel the spin of the world that unfurls around you, locks you in its hold, wraps around your throat and squeezes tight. In this abyss, there’s too many colors and not enough space. Too many drops of red and blue, gold and gray, and to jam all of it under your skin, into your veins, away and through and over. It leaks from every cut and scrape in desperation.

Someone keeps your colors alongside you. Call it a lover or a rival, a friend or a mirage of the long and wealthy dark. They are Other, but they, too, scratch at the colors that long to leave their veins. How they are and who they are is lost to you. Their face is an imprint in the black. There could be stars in those concave eyes, there could be cellars, but it is impossible to tell, for the hollow dark fills every orifice it finds. Every yearning face, every wavering body, even yours.

It eats up your history. Chews fate like a menu item. It drinks the tears off your face, always fed, always scrawny, always frail and always bold. It keeps you and your lover-rival in the gone. Colors don’t like it here. They want to be heard, to be seen, and so they resist you more than ever. You can see the invisible Other that stands in the silence, and they struggle, too, shadow-lined hands trembling against the veins that try to break open and free. That is when you realize you don’t weep for the dark. It is those colors screaming inside you that ache, that want to have eyes in the void, light in the endless pitch. They are a burden. Too many jagged gemstones to fit into one person. When you weep, they fall free, drop by crystalline drop, and the darkness laps them up eagerly, uses them to thicken itself and its barriers. That darkness is cold, with scraping teeth, but it is made up of wholeness rather than fragments.

The Other touches you by accident, at first. Their night-gloved fingers knock into your own, against the expanse, and the colors in your nails peel like bells at such a feeling. Your heartbeat frays. Slowly, ever so slowly, your tears crust. The shape in the darkness, it forms a memory, that there are other vessels where the reds and blues and gold-golds sleep. You almost forget how to choose. You could run your fingers across your face and draw the colors into war paint, and turn that starburst of feeling in the dark to rage, fight against the only other thing there was for you. Or run and tumble far away enough that the silhouette disappears and the shadows become a comfort again.

Almost. Your hand is out and yearning—it catches theirs, and both lock on like vises, soundless, roaring—and you don’t let go, and you let yourself search through the dark with jeweled-bruised fingers until you find their face, still cavernous, and graze the tears falling there.
Hand of God
By Genevieve Comar

The darkness is closing in, and I do not know how to stop it.
I am helpless, vulnerable, and alone, stranded at the top of a ridge surrounded by so many valleys. One false step, and like the pitter-patter scatter of pebbles tumbling down a cliffside so will I go. I dance around the rocks, avoiding the stones that could take hold of my ankles and never let go. A silent cry for help; I can’t even fathom how far I might fall, deep down into the waiting jaws of the darkness below. Waiting, a promise in the pitch black of night that when I fall, I will never stand up again. The fear curls dark inside me at the thought of that perilous end.

I can feel my heart fluttering, steady and insisting that I go on, keep living despite this pointless existence. We all know how this ends. No matter how long or hard I try to keep from tripping, I’ll eventually lose my footing and fall. Pounding my palm heavy on my chest I urge it to go faster, faster. Will it to beat so fast, I am flung into oblivion before the darkness can take me first. What would it be like there? In that oblivion? Sweet, comforting, wrapped tightly in the embrace of nothing at all...

Stop.

What are you doing?
I don’t know.
I don’t know. I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know why or how or anything at all.
I can’t control it. I do not know why. I just want to be back. Better. Okay. Back off the ledge. Safe in the valley, surrounded by my family.

But my feet are stuck in reality.

Waves of inky darkness crash in, roiling over top another like silver dolphins weaving through the water. A wonderful dance but deadly too, to anyone who does not know it. The black rises, so high it blocks out the sun. The last of the light.

Shadows slip over me, whispers caressing my skin with trailing fingers. This ridge of mine, so dark I can no longer even see the drop. For all I know I am millimeters from plunging to death, and oddly, I feel nothing. Perhaps it is poison, reaching the depths of my consciousness or I truly do desire to fling myself into oblivion I do not know.

From the Same Colors, Joseph Richmond
I am helpless, vulnerable, and alone, stranded at
the top of a ridge surrounded by so many valleys.
One false step, and like the pitter-patter scatter
of pebbles tumbling down a cliffside so will I go.
I dance around the rocks, avoiding the stones that
could take hold of my ankles and never let go.
A silent cry for help; I can’t even fathom how far I
can fall, deep deep down into the waiting jaws
of the darkness below. Waiting, a promise in the
pitch black of night that when I fall, I will nev-
er stand up again. The fear curls dark inside me
at the thought of that perilous end. I can feel my
heart fluttering, steady and insisting that I go on.
A scrape, a stumble. My feet slip against the rough rock of
this ridge. If I listen close enough, I can hear the echo of
pebbles scattering into the dark void. A spike of adrenaline
stabs my heart, spreading throughout my body. A thousand
millenniums worth of instinct kicking in. I dance away from
the edge
And in one wrong step
My foot, thrust out to bring me farther from the edge
meets only air
And for that brief moment, time slows down. I cannot see,
yet suddenly everything is shining with clarity. And I know in
my heart, I finally know
I do not want to end.
My voice cracks, jaw opening and letting out a scream,
tearing my throat raw and aching. My clothes slap against
my skin and I stretch. I stretch and reach and yearn and pray
and beg and grovel and hope because dammit I do not want to end this
is not the way I will go out I am meant for more I need to be
here longer--
GOD PLEASE LET ME LIVE.
And then my fingers brush it.
She slowly drifts down the hall, the wings sprouting from her back grazing the walls. Her heart pounds with every slight flit and flutter they make as she glides across the dusty floor. Whenever eyes land upon her fantastical form they imagine her an angel, a messenger from God to relieve the depressed and desperate from their dim fates. But she isn’t a saviour of any kind, so when those stares pierce her delicate wings, anxiety flutters in her stomach and she tries to hide amid the pale bricks. Her father once comforted her when she told him of this misconception, said a thousand years ago: “Don’t be afraid, Regina. Imagine there are butterflies in your belly. It’ll make you feel better.” She bites her lip and tastes bitter metal, cold and harsh.

She recalls the different types of butterflies she researched after he said that: painted lady, cabbage white, black swallowtail. But she loved the monarch best, the way it’s bright wings reached wide and without restraint, so unlike hers. They remain angled up, detained in this narrow corridor, in her nervous existence. But now, a thousand years later, she envisions monarchs upon purple petals taking flight within her abdomen as she fixates on the slate grey door down the hall. The winged insects multiply by the trillions and she vaguely wonders if they’ll burst from her stomach in a swarm of orange color, if she will join them in full-fledged flight, finally stretch her wings in gracious contentment. But before any of that can happen, she reaches the door. Her palm weighs down the silver handle and her anxiety weighs down her wings as she returns to the hard ground, returns to reality. Even as she feels small, her shadow covers the entire door in a dark, ominous shape, the outline of her wings bleeding farther and farther out on either side of her. She braces herself before entering the room beyond, knowing what happens next will change her life forever.

“Hi, sweetie.” Her dad’s open smile shows his buck teeth and white hair frames his head as he speaks from the hospital bed, “Sit down, I’ve gotta tell you something.” She moves to sit and feels a twinge of pain in her abdomen followed by a rush of movement. Panic surges through her veins as the wild butterflies escape from her middle and spread through her chest, her arms, her legs, and her skull. Her mouth opens to ask for help, to stop this overload of intensity, when a tiny-winged butterfly shoots straight from her parted lips. It’s as beautiful as she thought it’d be: orange and graceful, small and regal. But as it travels up and towards her father, she notices with dark menacing dread, that it’s wings are turning black.
“Regina, my dear, do you remember how I’ve been having headaches? And getting dizzy?”

The black butterfly flits above his head then suddenly drops and gets lost in his glistening halo of hair.

“Regina, my dear, you remember how I’ve been having headaches? And getting dizzy?”

The black butterfly flits above his head then suddenly drops and gets lost in his glistening halo of hair. The doctor says I have—have something growing in my brain, something called a butterfly tumor.”

She meets his sparkling gaze and sees the black butterfly behind his eyes, its wings reaching farther and farther…

True and freezing fear encapsulates her entire body; the butterflies within her halt in mid-air.

Silver gleams at the corners of his eyes, “I love you so much, Regina.” He grasps her hand as a tear rolls down his cheek.

Her own vision turns blurry as she squeezes his fingers. One by one, she places each of her butterflies in hard wire cages, fits the wilted wings on her back in a tangle of metal. She will never let them out, she will never let them spread again. A butterfly tumor grows much too fast.
Being Free
By Halle Preneta
Trigger Warning: Mentions of Self Harm

Water spills out
of the glass vase
onto the grey table.
The blue and purple
spiraling into a mess
of colors similar to the
shattered bits
of my brain
scattered on the floor.
I stay hunched in a corner,
tears streaming down my face
as the bits of broken brain stare back at me,
the whole world grey.
The only color I can see
is the blue and purple from the vase.
Is this a sign?
Am I finally going to be happy?
Am I finally going to be free?
I stick my hands in the blue and purple mess,
its stickiness covering my hand.
Its coldness shocking my skin,
causing goosebumps to arise.

But I could feel it.
Its slimy goo trailing over my hand and down my arm
running along my veins,
my bruises,
my cuts that remind me of who I am.
A person who doesn’t deserve love.
A person who doesn’t deserve attention.
But now, I’m finally feeling something.
Seeing color
for the first time in years.
The purple and blue in the slimy mess crackles
as the reds and pinks from the bits of brain
twinkle in the light.
Maybe, this is a sign
that one day, I’ll be able to be happy.
That one day, I’ll be able to be
free.
encounters with the void
By Kendall Thomas

“Good afternoon,” I say out of politeness, shifting my balance back and forth on my feet somewhat awkwardly. I try not to stare, but I’m not sure where else to look.

“It’s evening. Almost midnight. By all means, sit.” The voice echoes, bouncing off each of the walls before making its way into my ears as I sit cross-legged on the floor. It’s an almost off-putting deep tone, not exactly a musical baritone, rather more of a gravelly bass. My own voice sounds futile in comparison. When the words set in, my eyes widen in confusion, instinctually bringing my right wrist up to my face.

“What are you looking for?” the voice interrupts, with what sounds like the slightest hint of amusement. My eyes flick up from my bare wrist to the walls, but no clock is in sight. I put my hands into my lap and finally focus my line of vision on the source of the voice. My first impression is not going well, but I don’t have the time to bask in my embarrassment. At least, I assume I don’t. It’s hard to set a schedule when I obviously cannot keep track of time on my own.

As I stare at the void, the void stares back at me. That is, I presume it would if it had any semblance of a face. It’s a floating figure that reminds me of a mirror, but if the mirror’s surface was shrouded by a deep, infinite black. I suppose it more directly resembles a large black rectangle, then, but that isn’t nearly as eloquent of a comparison. After the silence becomes too prolonged for my liking, I decide that it’s my turn to speak.

“How do I get out of here?” It’s about as straightforward as one can get, but the void remains silent, as if it’s unsure how to respond. My eyes began to wander around as I wait, my fingers interlocking with each other and tapping patterns onto my knees. It’s then that I notice a fog-like haze surrounding me, and I wonder if it’s been here the whole time. As my eyes flit back and forth at whatever it can latch onto, I finally focus on the room surrounding me. I’ve been here for a completely indistinguishable amount of time, yet I don’t think I’ve ever really noticed the environment I’ve been coerced into calling home.

There’s clearly a floor, considering I am seated on it, but the walls are more of an enigma. Every time I blink it appears as if they take on a new shape and pattern, with curves and lines of black dripping ink that doesn’t seem to dry. The lines intersect at random points, making me think of a map, or perhaps a maze. The latter makes more sense in my jumbled mind. A maze has one entrance and one exit. I got trapped inside this place somehow, so there must be a way out.

Overwhelming Screens, Sophie Ozan
A deep humming fills the room, and I realize that it’s the void. My eyes jerk back to in front of me, curious. The humming stops, creating silence once more, and I find my pointer finger tapping my leg expectantly to the rhythm of a song I can’t place.

“Is that all you wish to know, how to leave?” I frown, considering the question. It should be an easy “yes”, as what more would one want then to escape what they don’t understand? Yet instead I find myself hesitating, and I can sense the void smiling in agreement.

The ink dripping down the wall slowly begins to pool onto the floor. I am seated in what feels like the center of the room, but I still flinch as if the ink is already filling up the space around my crossed legs. My mind becomes murkier as the fog becomes more opaque, feeling as if it’s entering me through my ears and nose. As the walls fade out of sight, I tear my eyes away from the wall and look back in front of me, where the void is still very much visible. I stare, head tilted upward at the void, and the void stares back at me. It isn’t impatient. Perhaps it knows exactly what I will say and I will fall into its trap, but there is no one else here for me to trust.

“Is this all that’s left for me? An endless expanse of grey and fog that makes it difficult to think and an unmotivated brain that constantly feels like it’s forgetting something important?” I find myself spitting the last few words out as my voice gets suddenly scratchy, which I suppose makes sense considering I haven’t had any reason to speak out loud as of late. I get the urge to stand up and so I do, wobbling slightly on my legs as I reorient myself, squinting through the fog.

“For some, yes. It’s quite easy to get lost in here. Others are luckier, and I can tell that you are one of the lucky ones. You can’t escape this place completely, but you have the ability to push it into the past and weigh it down. I can’t say we’ll never meet face to face again, but I can say with certainty that you will never become trapped.” Silence fills the room once more as the void wordlessly beckons me to enter. This time, I don’t hesitate.
Reflections on a Man Undone
By Madeline Bryan

There is a man in the mirror and a man in the moon. There is a man outside your door and a man in the street. There are men stretching the world over and you know less than half of those that you think you do. There is a man in the house that your grandfather used to live in, but you do not know this man, not anymore. There is a man in your grandparent’s new apartment and you know him, though not in the way that you always have. There is a man, and he is talking to you, though you can’t quite catch the words. You knew him once and are in the in-between process of discovering him once more, whoever he has become in the years that felt like minutes.

There is a piece of his life that you hold in your hands, a piece that you think of as yours. You would like to hold this piece and believe you know him, but this is a lie. Maybe you never have. Nothing good ever comes from dreaming the bounded area that you gaze upon to be infinite.

There is a man in front of you and—Oh. There are emotions that even you cannot yet name, and so I would ask you to imagine a man undone. Imagine agony, world-shaking, heart-breaking, agony.

Imagine years that have stretched too long, decades that might as well have been centuries.

You are not quite able to see this man, and so he is not quite able to see you. There are some things that cannot be communicated by being told, and this is one.

There are some things that can only be understood by being lived, though in retrospect, none would choose to live them if they had the chance.

But the man tells you, a picture is a moment in time, not a life lived. People are far too complex to be defined by a single moment.

Pictures flash like camera shutters before your eyes, piecing together what could one day be a story. For there are stories in single moments, yes, but this man is not one who has ever liked to be fenced in.

Pictures flash before your eyes and there are broad smiles and heads thrown back in laughter. Pictures flash before your eyes and there are moments of brutal heartbreak. Over and over, back and forth. The man sits before your eyes, his face locked into the frozen mask of an emotion that you still cannot name. The man sits before you, and he does not move, but he seems to, an endless rolling sea of laughter and joy, sadness and terror.

There are emotions that you cannot name, and those that you can, but you are not allowed to pick and choose what to represent. The man is the sum of his experiences or nothing at all.

Agony, (1927-2020), Caleb Ford
Silent Exchange at the End of Time
By Carys Bowen

silent exchange at the end of time

What the too-big-to-hide child is hiding from is you.

through the canvas. a ghost, perhaps, inhabiting a malevolent quietude.

is everyone else dead already?

When I was oh so young I was fascinated by the cupboards in my grandmother’s dining room. The room itself followed the style of her whole house—classy but not excessive in its richness, sleek and modern but still with space for laughter, art, and spontaneity—but it had a different air. The dining room was a place for special occasions and careful manners. There was a small chandelier, an expansive mirror, a beaded tree under a glass dome, and this yellowish wood armoire-type cupboard, with windows of large hexagonal mesh like a chicken wire fence, and curtains behind so soft & warm & thin. It was an object of mystery; we weren’t allowed to touch it. Inside, in this cool, shadowy cove, glass figurines and dishes stood peaceful & safe. They were ready to step to life at any moment, make their own version of the Nutcracker.

The child hides her fragile bones behind her mother’s fragile glass and chips her nails against the tallest, thinnest one. Her eyes are wary, but resigned.

If our stories continued in another way I might be taking out those treasures from my grandma’s armoire-type cupboard, noticing how small they look in my pawing, clumsy hands. If our stories took another path I would hide behind them too & take their shadowy cove for myself, a safe & silent space.

No one can evade you, and she knows it. but—her uninhibited eyes still challenge you. You stop and waver silently. She promises to fight you ’til she is crystal bone.

i don’t care if everyone else is dead already.

Fill the cups up with my emotion so maybe your impossible choice freezes the air

I’ll have room to spare, maybe I won’t overflow to crystal ice. both body and ghost and lose so many trembling ice-cold hearts paused forever in a sharp and brightly lit death.

to the carpeted hallway floor below.

i will not die for you.

Self Reflection, Macy Sinreich