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Written Works

The Dark

Jacqueline Perez Rodriguez

Last August, summer- bright sun

I can't see.

Curtains wide open, bright summer light

Why is it so dark?

Whispered words, the silent night, my confidant

I'm scared

Relentless prayers and shaking breaths,

I've never been so scared

The silent battle, a one-man war,

I feel alone

"I don't know how to help you."

I've never felt so—alone.

"When was the last time you wrote?"

There's still a long way to go.

Blank document, white paper, clean napkin

And I know it's going to be a while more.

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Recovery

Jacqueline Perez Rodriguez

Embroidery, freedom; Cross-stitching, firmness

busy, busy, busy

Painting, creativity; Paint-by-the-number, instruction

busy, busy, busy!

Hands moving, fingers aching—

This doesn't feel right

A needle! A brush!

Why does my hand ask for more?

Dusty notebooks, scribbled words,

Who are you?

Dated documents, thousands of words

Why do I ache for you?

Names of characters, stories untold

What happened to you?

Tales to tell, for children alone

Did I do this to you?

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A New Page

Jacqueline Perez Rodriguez

"The red has gone down, not even yellow."

The sky looks nice today.

"Will you write again?"

Someone should paint the sky.

"What's so scary about writing again?"

What if I lost my voice?

Consuming thoughts, expanding lust

But what if I have a new voice?

Insatiable need, unrelenting craving

I came up with a new idea today.

Enraptured daydreams, enthralling thoughts

I wrote it down.

Scribbles on napkins, sentences on documents

My voice has changed

Sheets of paper, not crumbled and tossed

My writing has changed

But I write again

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Still Beautiful

Eileen Celeste Burnett

For Bill

He hails from places far, far from here,
places that smell of the sea, and of salt, and of freedom,
a man whose word is his bond, whose cry is the sand
mixed with sea oats, the waterfowl and their young,
palms groaning softly in the breeze as the
evening sky bids them linger, just a little bit longer, to marvel at the
flag as it waves its banner of glory across a sky of brilliance,
forever entertaining the notion that life is
still beautiful.

© 2022 Eileen Celeste Burnett

Oh, Sweet Sparrow Begin Again

Karolyne Galdamez

As rotten wood casts weary shadows,
Upon cracked footways, whose form
Has long been ignored by passerby,
That drudging pace from pillar to post.
Whilst looming dark clouds roll along the sky.
The coming darkness frightens the bashful sparrow,
As she nestles quietly among the fallen decay.
She trembles under browned leaves and twisted things,
While globe-sized raindrops wage war on her broken home.
For if the sparrow waits for dawn, she'll surely have no choice.

She has minutes to realize,
That her feathers are flexible,
That her wings are mighty,
And that she can fly.

By going, she will realize the power of choice.
Her journey will take her beyond the broken tree she called home,
And beyond the thunderous storm that caged her.

For hope will ease the pain,
That longing shall create.

And remember, sweet sparrow, you can always begin again.

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New Beginnings of a New Child

Veronica Segovia

New beginnings can have a different meaning to everyone according to their own life experiences. Mine began when I discovered I was pregnant with my second child. My oldest daughter was 16 years old at the time, so there was a considerable gap between my children. My boyfriend and I had only been dating a few months. He was a former Marine and a cancer survivor. He was deployed in 2001 and when he returned to the states, he had lung cancer from being exposed to chemicals in Iraq. My boyfriend went through a treatment of chemo and radiation and had half his lung removed. The doctors told him that he could not have children because the chemo killed his sperm cells.

As it turns out, sperm cells can grow back overtime which resulted in our little miracle child. Although we had created a miracle child, my pregnancy and birth were very difficult. I was much older and not educated on how to properly take care of my body during pregnancy. I had several ultrasounds that showed we would be having a girl. Her name was Zoe Rae. I went into labor early one morning in late October.

What I had in my mind as the perfect birth plan, turned out to be a disaster. During my pregnancy, the doctor encouraged me to have a birth plan in place. She did not mention to have a backup birth plan in place in case the first one does not work out.

I was in labor for approximately 23 hours when the baby started to lose oxygen and I had an emergency cesarean. The emergency cesarean was not in my birth plan, and I was starting to realize that there was a possibility I or my child were not going to survive. I was rolled into the operating room and within minutes my child was born. I heard the nurses gasp when the doctor held up my baby and I thought there was something wrong. My boyfriend who was also in the room screamed. "That's not a girl, it's a boy!"

Shortly after, I began to convulse, and I fell unconscious. When I woke up several hours later, the nurse informed me that I had a boy instead of a girl and that my boyfriend had already named him. My boyfriend was sitting at the edge of the bed bottle feeding our new baby boy. This was also not part of my birth plan.

When we arrived home, the emotion of losing the child I thought I was having came over me and made me very depressed. The entire nursery, clothes, and diaper bags were all pink and brown with Zoe's name

embroidered on them. No one could understand why I was so upset because at least I was able to bring a child home unlike those who lose their children.

I share my experience here because I learned it is important to always love your body no matter what society's expectations are. It is also important to allow yourself to go through your own emotions even if they do not match what others' expectations are of you.

Home for Thanksgiving

Cara Moore

“Hurry,” I tell him as we walk briskly down the pavement. I can barely contain the excitement rising inside me. There’s a weighted tension on my umbrella as the wind tries to pluck it from my hand and bring it on a spinning ride behind us. I shift its angle to escape the current. My son is focused on splashing in every sky-reflecting puddle. The leaves accept the wind’s gracious invitation to see the world away from its home.

I am not like the leaves. I am going to my home. And I am bringing my son. Usually, his grandparents come to visit him. Now we are journeying in the sharp cold to see them this Thanksgiving. They do not live far from the bus stop, and since my husband has the car to pick up some cranberry sauce, we decided to walk in the beautiful autumn rain to the place where all good things begin: apple pies, cinnamon, warm blankets, and comforting snuggles.

As we walk, our breath forms little clouds that disappear as quickly as they had materialized. I reach down and pull the red hoodie back over my son’s bouncing hair. It falls again after two bounces. I stop walking, and bend down still holding my little boy’s hand and point down a leaf carpeted trail. “See over there dear? That’s the way I used to walk to school.”

His little head looks up at me with wondering eyes. As he opens his mouth to speak, I smile, reminded of his lost tooth, and the adorable way he is currently talking. His small, sweet voice asks me, “Did you walk in the rain mommy?”

I brush the hair out of his eyes with a small laugh. “Yes, I did! Even in the snow!”

His eyes grow wide at this, and he states, “You must have been tough like an explorer.” He then makes his way to every puddle his little feet can find, with me right behind him. I love that he thinks of me as strong.

A row of houses begins; we are almost there. The quaint little wooden fences still trim every house, and birds dance around singing. We race up to the little brick house with the yellow wooden fence. The roses are still alive and dappled with rain in front of my home. My son is filled with wonder as he takes in the magic of his grandparents’ house. My mom saw us coming

through the front window and opens the door. A warm light fills the rainy air, and scents of Thanksgiving wash over us. She still has her apron on and is drying a bowl in her hands.

My little one runs to his grandma, and I smile at her. I walk up the steps of my childhood, and through the door where I will make new memories with my parents, husband, and son. I hope he will treasure today with all of its sights, scents, sounds, and love.

Playing with Fire (or, Please Stop Telling People that we're Living in a Post-pandemic World)

Kimberly Hall

Picture this—a long night full of
fireworks, falling like stars,
or ashes, or leaves in autumn, and afterwards
an open window

Now picture a fiery sunrise,
 like a phoenix
 burning itself alive,
dyeing the morning sky
 red

New beginnings can be tricky—
We want everything to be fine, we want the clock to restart
so we don't have to have lost anything, not our families,
not the house to fire, not even time—

It's a wonderful fantasy, isn't it? All soft eyes and
light hearts, easy explanations—here is where our heroes slayed the dragon
that was poisoning the air, here is where the house
still stands, burned out but not burned down,
here is where we counted sheep
instead of hospital beds, and where everyone who died
made a noble sacrifice and
nothing had to change

Do I sound angry?

I get it, you wanted to be a hero but you didn't even get to
rescue a damsel, you wanted to be a hero but now you're
tired of heroics and you just wanna set something
on fire, you're tired of the struggle and the hand sanitizer and
smelling your own breath—

and who isn't? Do you think I'm not tired too?

Do you think a single day passes where

I don't want this to end?

Between the asthma and the anxiety

I haven't taken a deep breath

since this all began—and believe me, I have tried—

I have tried meditation, I have tried
drowning out the dark days with candlelight,

with fairytales and vitamin D, tried to keep my heart from
bleeding through my sweatshirts, tried covering my eyes

with a mask when I go to sleep—

but there is no virtue in blinding oneself to reality,

and even less in blinding others, no matter

how much you wish

the fantasy

were

the truth

So yeah, maybe I am angry—

maybe I am full of rage—

because this wasn't how the story was supposed to go,
 we were supposed to keep each other safe,
 kill the dragon with kindness, kill it by giving it nothing to feed on,
 but instead St. George decided he wanted to change roles,
 play the dragon himself, decided our lives were worthy tribute
 and now—no,
 don't try to tell me it's all over,
 because there is still blood in the air
 and blood in my lungs
 and blood on the hands of people who think
 their pride, and their politics, and their ability to see our faces
 is more important than our ability to
 b r e a t h e
 safely—

And if I am full of rage, it is only because I have been
 full of grief, and I am desperate to be
 full of hope

The truth is this—we can rise from the ashes,
 but even the phoenix knows that the fire
 has to burn out
 before the rebuilding can start,
 and that cannot happen
 as long as any of us
 continue playing
 the dragon.

© 2022 Kimberly Hall

Houston

Candace Benjamin

Houston,

the salad bowl.

So why do I feel like I'm the one getting tossed?

To and fro

Thrown from small town life,

to big city traffic

I still don't know if I'm ready

but it's already begun.

I thought I'd find people from where I'm from,

people like me, some community

But who is there?

Who understands just how much flavor to add to my pot?

I'm melting but sometimes I'd just like to mix.

In fact sometimes I'd just like to stay fixed.

I am fixin to do some mixing... It's Christmas.

But do you even understand what's fruit cake?

If I offered you a slice would you understand that it's more than just something I baked?

Sometimes I'd like to relax my tongue,

float into dialect

speak way too quickly

and throw in phrases from a completely different language at random.

But this would only require repeating myself five times.

I came from an island

but I don't want to be one

How will I keep standing if I stand alone?
But this is just the beginning
so I'll wait.
I'll wait until everything that's new
becomes everything I'm used to.
And while I'm on the outside looking in
I will just try to enjoy the view.

About Last Year...

Aracely Viera

With all that has happened...

...

...No. That makes it sound like regret or a simple mistake. In truth, it was sheer choice (I won't get into the fact that it is still left to that) on parts of others that hold our fate in their greed-fueled and wrinkled hands. But looking past that... I hope to God, or the Devil, or anyone at this point that we've learned our lesson. We, at last, know what it's like to miss the ones we love when we can't touch them. To feel the brink of death without so much as a hug to comfort us. To have the weight of things left unsaid hang over us like looming spirits.

We've almost gone into that period of calm where no one wants to repeat the horrors we witnessed, but we **MUST** remember. Things will never be "normal" as they were before this catastrophe hit. Maybe that isn't such a bad thing. It is because we remember that we can move forward with a new lease on life. Despite our numerous losses perhaps humanity as a whole has gained so much more on what it is to **BE** human. We love, hurt, cry, create, and so much more. The fact that we try and try again is forever a fascinating and violent cycle. It goes to show that we will go to great lengths to stave off boredom and seek out others of our kind for any type of interaction.

What funny and beautiful things we are, to want to connect. To want to hope in tomorrow.

Live for tomorrow. Huh. That has a nice ring to it.

© 2022 Aracely Viera

Smell the Love on our Breath

Andrea Montgomery

Drive to your city's nearest poetry gathering, settle into an iron wire chair on the brick piazza packed with eager souls,
and listen.

Listen to your city's women renew the word poetry,
the word that Audre said was *so distorted by the white fathers*. This is no *sterile word play*.

Every stanza spoken into existence here is planted in the garden beds next to the bougainvillea so together they can climb up the fence's crooked smile and cover it in color. Here is where color coats the entire patio and makes the white paper lanterns stick out like a sore thumb.

And some listeners will shift in their seats each time a sister stands and speaks her rapist's name and recovers her power or when another sister rereads her poem about machismo and what her Abuela said when she finally came out. Then there's the poem from the sister who realizes the American dream makes itself available to her but side eyes her immigrant parents. And every listener will drift to the edge of their seat when they hear a story that interweaves with theirs, because

what are we if not patchwork quilt? What are we if not a sisterhood reclaiming all that was taken from us?

When i hear a man ask, "why does she need to keep writing about all this? why can't she move on?"

Because there is a difference in forgiving and forgetting. Because when you ask why these "petty" women can't keep their heartbreak to themselves, all I hear is "why can't these women stay silent? Why can't these women be invisible? Why do they have to take up so much space?"

The proudest poems i've penned down have been love letters to the women i've known,

or rather witnessed,

or better yet applauded,

and more so learned from.

The women who have set fire to every bridge but themselves. Because, yes, women are bridges, but it takes a fool to ever dare cross a woman.

The proudest poems i've penned down were praise songs for the women who bear the weight of other people's wounds and still come out unscathed.

Because what are we if not a living breathing protest? What are we if not *moon marked and touched by sun?*

When a woman speaks,

the earth shifts

and another planted stanza grows

When a woman speaks,

she speaks for all women because she knows there is no liberation without community

And as Audre says,

when we speak, you can *smell the love on our breath.*

Reflect

Travis Chrisman

The knife is sharpened by shaving off pieces of itself,
The whetstone and blade wearing down in order to perfect.

The eraser leaves only ghostly remains of past mistakes,
But must itself become diminished to fix and correct.

The rough wood grain is sanded to a fine finish,
Giving itself to dust in order to remove defects.

So then must a person give of themselves,
Chipping away until who is left is someone they can respect.

New demands old, beginnings demand endings,
The more you're willing to sacrifice, the greater the effect.

Life can only truly begin,
When one looks inward and reflects.

© 2022 Travis Chrisman

Continue

Travis Chrisman

Allison picked through her different outfit options with a weighted expression. It was too early, the sun too bright, the closet too dark, and the apartment too hot. All you can do is continue, she thought to herself. She finally chose a blouse and pair of slacks that would make her seem presentable, while not being too presenting. The absurdity of this dichotomy did not go unrecognized by her. She readied herself spending way too long on her hair and makeup. Once ready, she reluctantly marched across the small apartment that looked comical in comparison to her pristine presentation. Clothes scattered the floor, empty water bottles crowded every available inch of table they could find, and there was a pile of dishes that had been “soaking” for days. She sank into herself every time she looked around but did not have the mental fortitude to tackle cleaning right now. She had not had the mental fortitude for a while. The apartment was a reflection of her. A mess on the inside, presentable on the outside.

Once she got to the street and began walking to her destination, she grimaced. The smell of the cars going by, the crowds of people moving along at either the pace of a snail or a cheetah and no in-between, the incessant sound of the city clamoring in her ears, and the glances from strangers. Allison gritted her teeth and continued on. All you can do is continue. Once she arrived at the courthouse, she sat on the bench as far away from the defendant as she could. The hard wooden bench dug into her tailbone. Another annoyance added to an endless list. The plaintiff stood tall and proud, making those around her seem small. Allison thought back on yesterday when she had given her testimony. She had felt like a child being questioned by the principal and had not felt tall at all. There was nothing left of the trial except for the verdict. The judge opened the envelope and read off the verdict in a deep baritone. “Guilty.” The defendant stared between his feet as if the floor was the most interesting thing he had ever seen. Allison expected to see the plaintiff smiling with unbridled joy, but she just looked deflated.

Outside of the courthouse, Allison was stopped by the recent victor. “Thank you, Allison. I know that was hard, but you helped make sure he wouldn’t be able to do that to another woman again. You have no idea how much I appreciate what you did. Now that it’s over I don’t know what to do.” She sounded tired.

Allison just put on a smile with effort and said, “all you can do is continue.”

As she walked home, she breathed in the air and began to return the smiles of people passing by. The sun strode high across a cloudless sky. It was a rather beautiful day. She entered her apartment, opened the windows, and began to clean.

Ne Plus Ultra

Jennifer Lynn Beamer

Consider steps on
Paved pathways through
Wetland forests
Protected and not.

The turns,
The weaving,
The presence of
Systems unending.

There is rock.
There is water.
There is wood.
There are critters.

A path is needed only for feet to find it,
Not in wonder but in guidance,
Safe.

This path is a path close to others.
Marked not paved.
Protected.

Take a walk, observe, Life goes on,
Beyond the mask of sickness.

*Starting Over***Olivia Ellisor**

“Kinda beautiful, isn't it?” you said.
The fog against the trees against the sunrise.
We were on our way to my Big Test
You had stopped to buy me breakfast
(Although I was too nervous to eat)
And the hotcakes were getting cold in my lap.
It was a long drive to get there
No other testing centers were available.
I had all my papers ready in my bag
Believe me, you made sure of it
(I did not appreciate being nagged)
And we parked in a huge lot in front of the school.
“Dad, I don't want to do this anymore.” I said.
You looked over at me,
The tears threatening to spill out of my eyes,
And promised me it was all going to be okay
(You had always thought the best of me)
Because I can do anything for just a few short hours.
After the test,
A strict total of exactly 3 hours later,
You were waiting for me in the parking lot.
You asked me how I thought it went
(I could only look at my shoes)

And I told you the truth, it had not gone as planned.
We met eyes
With your blue ones that matched mine
And you told me something I'll never forget:
"Tomorrow is a new day." you said.
(I remember thinking I loved you more than anything)
"We will just have to start over again."
And we did just that.

*Yellow***Gisela Santos**

You buy flowers only on Tuesdays when Mrs. Sarah opens her booth. You always give her a twenty, no matter if the flowers are thirteen. And you like to read. I see you sometimes at the corner café drinking your cappuccino, only after you sprinkle cinnamon on top, with one hand while holding the pages open with the other. You like to read in Italian, Ludovico Ariosto and Umberto Eco. I've never read them, but I'd like to, just like you. Your skin is smooth, like eggshells and your nails are always clean. You are always kind to the waiters who are secretly in love with you as am I. They bring you extra napkins simply to see you smile again. And you like to stop and look at the stars when there is a chance. One too many wishes have been wasted on them and now you like to focus on the mundane things. On the people that don't have a hold on you. That is why you are so nice to Mrs. Sarah and the waiters and me, here on the street. I heard you once, walking by, on the phone. You said, "you can't always have what you want," and threw your head back with a smile. And I know you were talking to me, here on the street. You gave me a crinkled ten once for food and a blanket when it was cold because you said you don't like the winter. You smiled at me so naturally, so I watched you as you closed the blinds for the night. Your silhouette showed curves I have not seen in myself in so long. You, your life, is so sweet and easy, I only wish I could add to it. In any way. Maybe I'll make a bracelet out of old beads and give it to you. Yellow ones because that's our favorite color. So you can say on the phone, the bum across the street gave me a bracelet. And then I'll be a part of your life forever and maybe in that life I'll be able to go to coffee shops and read in Italian. I'd tip Mrs. Sarah, too and give people on the phone advice they didn't ask for. I'd close the blinds once the plants had their fill of sun and undress and walk nude in my own apartment. Maybe once our paths cross, with that yellow bracelet, we'd open another world where I'll have the same opportunities as you.

© 2022 Gisela Santos

*Blank Canvases***Sydney Nicole Charbula**

Much like the sky, my life is a canvas
Full of brushstrokes of color.
Some colors bright and joyful,
Others dark and sorrowful.
All hand painted
By the Creator of the universe.
Each mountain molded
By His gentle hands,
And each cloud spoken into existence.
The sunset shone bright and vibrant for all to see,
Proclaiming the work of His hands.
His eternal power is shown in the artwork
Displayed on the earth and in the sky,
So I hand Him the paintbrush to my life,
And say do what you like.

© 2022 Sydney Nicole Charbula

The Depths of Her Reflection

Sydney Nicole Charbula

The image that I see in front of me,
Reflecting off of the smooth, shining surface,
Bears a resemblance of a girl,
Radiant, bursting with life.

But that girl isn't me.
Beneath the bubbly exterior,
Into the depth of my innermost being,
There is a girl who is drowning.

The waves of grief and heartache
Pummel her and leave her gasping for air,
Reaching for the surface,
Reaching for relief,

But it only comes momentarily.
Temporary. Fleeting. Brief.
The weight of the water pushes her further
And further down into the depths.

But from those depths,
Past the pain and hardships and stress,
She sees a light, shining in all of its glory;
A promise, a hope, a faith.
And she is reminded that,

Beneath the brokenness,
She is strong. She is courageous.
She has the power inside of herself

To breakthrough from the depths
And rise above the surface of the crashing waves.
And that power has been inside of her
All along, waiting for her to realize;

Waiting for me to realize,
To finally see, that the girl I see in front of me,
Joyful and free,
Is the same girl deep inside of me.

© 2022 Sydney Nicole Charbula

Phoenix

Gyselle Alexander

Beautiful bird born of the sun

Dances gracefully in the wind

Gentle creature of virtue

Truth lies within her soul

Immortal heart

Consumed in flames

Arises from the ashes,

Exuberant and full of new life!

© 2022 Gyselle Alexander

Military Thanks

Dawn Wiedeman

Today you signed on the dotted line,
You gave up your right to choose for the last time.
You decided to put the needs of the nation before your own,
You left your family, and the safety of your home.

Today you decided to protect strangers around the world,
Willing to give your life if someone were to give the word.
Putting yourself in harm's way, not knowing if you will make it back,
With all your world's possessions shoved into a canvas sack.

Today you entered the unknown, because you are ready for the fight,
You suppressed all the thoughts that may fill you with terror and fright.
You keep a watchful eye so that I and others can sleep peacefully at night.
You fight for what you are told to protect, whether it's wrong or it's right.

Today you give your strength, your dedication, and your flesh.
You give your fight, your peace, your failures and your success.
You chose to protect the land of the free,
Today when you signed the dotted line and joined the military.

Thank you today, tomorrow and forever,
For each of your encounters and frightful endeavors.
Thank you for giving up your freedom so that I could have mine,
Thank you for your service, and for choosing to sign on the dotted line.

© 2022 Dawn Wiedeman

If I were to be with You Someday

Dawn Wiedeman

If I were to be with you someday,
I would smile gleefully, as I whisked you away.
I would take you to places neither of us has ever been,
And find the places that we can't wait to go back to again.
I would tell you I loved you each chance that I got,
I would remind you daily about it, so you could forget me not.

If I were to be with you someday,
I would hold you until all your cares rolled away.
I would help you dream big dreams, and make them come true,
And gladly walk through the obstacles everyday with you.
I would tell you I loved you each chance that I got,
I would remind you daily about it, so you could forget me not.

If I were to be with you someday,
I would take you on dates and refuse to let you pay.
I would cook you nightly dinners, and hope you liked the taste,
And if not, then take you to your favorite Chinese place.
I would tell you I loved you each chance that I got,
I would remind you daily about it, so you could forget me not.

If I were to be with you someday,
I would roll up in a ball and steal all the covers away.
I would lay nestled in your arms until we fell asleep,
And pray that your heart would be mine to keep.
I would tell you I loved you each chance that I got,
I would remind you daily about it, so you could forget me not.

If I were to be with you someday,
I would show you your worth, in a variety of ways.
I would stare into your eyes 'til they were forced to close,
And I would probably rub our noses together like Eskimos.
I would tell you I loved you each chance that I got,
I would remind you daily about it, so you could forget me not.

If I were to be with you someday,

I would be the luckiest woman from sea to bay.
I would yell from the rough tops that you were mine,
And smile through fall, winter, summer, and springtime.
I would tell you I loved you each chance that I got,
I would remind you daily about it, so you could forget me not.

WHEN I am lucky enough to be with you someday,
I will pull you in closely and not let you slip away.
I will communicate with you when my stress level is high,
And let you know if you are one of the many reasons why.
I will tell you I love you each chance that I get,
So there is never a doubt, or a way to forget.

The Phoenix's Shadow

Ethan Durrant

You look off into the distance ahead. You see the sun painting the sky pink and gold as it sets behind a range of snow-capped mountains. Your heart beats like a drum, driving you towards the stone monoliths. Beyond them lay your dreams, your future.

As the sun dips further below the horizon an icy wind begins to blow, slowing your advance. Then, you hear them. You look over your red feathered shoulder and see a swarm of black shapes gaining on you. Their loud and unearthly shrieks send a shiver down your spine. You race to keep your lead on them, but the now howling wind fights you every inch of the way. The icy landscape below crawls by with an agonizing slowness. You take a panicked glance over your shoulder. The shadows are upon you.

You tuck your wings and roll to the right to narrowly evade a diving shadow. The beast opens its large, webbed wings to turn and strike again. Its red eyes fixate on you as it bares its needle-like fangs. You raise your talons in defense right before it slams into you. Your talons dig into the creature's chest, stopping its maw inches from your face. You both begin to fall. It draws back its head to try again but you strike first, stabbing your pointed beak in its eye. A sour taste hits your tongue as the shadow dissolves out of existence. As soon as it dissipates, a sense of desperation wells up inside of you as you focus on more attacking shadows.

Getting beyond the mountains seems increasingly impossible as you fight for survival in the shadow swarm. You hold them off at first, but then they begin to land their attacks: a slash on your back, a bite on your shoulder, then finally, one of them dives from on high like a missile and collides with your wing. You hear a dull snap and feel an excruciating pain in your left wing as you fall. You could try to control the plummet with your good wing but, exhaustion has filled your body where hope once was. So, you decide to do nothing but stare up at the night sky. The moon is full, and the stars are bright.

You land back-first in a snowbank at the center of a clearing. You see the trees' snow-covered branches reach for the stars as your vision darkens and your last breath leaves.

Not everyone can fight their battles to get past the mountains.

Embers begin to fly off your broken body.

Not everyone can attain their dreams.

A ball of flame erupts around you and rises out of the melting snow.

But if we don't fight our battles, if we don't reach for our dreams... who will?

You emerge, reborn and golden. You are magnificent. You begin anew by taking to the sky. You will face the same challenges, but now you will never give up. Never.

Hustle your own way.

Kavya Priya Kairamkonda

I am here to share a few thoughts which I felt so important to be spoken.

I am just here to tell you and remind you how important it is to take care of your mental health

happiness, maintain peace, and have hope.

To whoever is facing a tough time, please remember you're gonna pass this and be a better version of yourself. Trust me. I know the pain of opening the eyes not ready for the day coz you are exhausted emotionally, but you have no choice but to force yourself. Be thankful for people helping you out coz many people do not have that privilege.

Do not get anxious seeing others' success, but just define what success truly means to you.

Remember everyone you meet might not understand you, so just stand for yourself.

Just take a moment to know what is truly important to you and what makes you happy even if that doesn't make sense to anyone.

Hustle your own way.

Be happy!

Be kind!

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Visual Works

Haiku

Emre Tichelaar

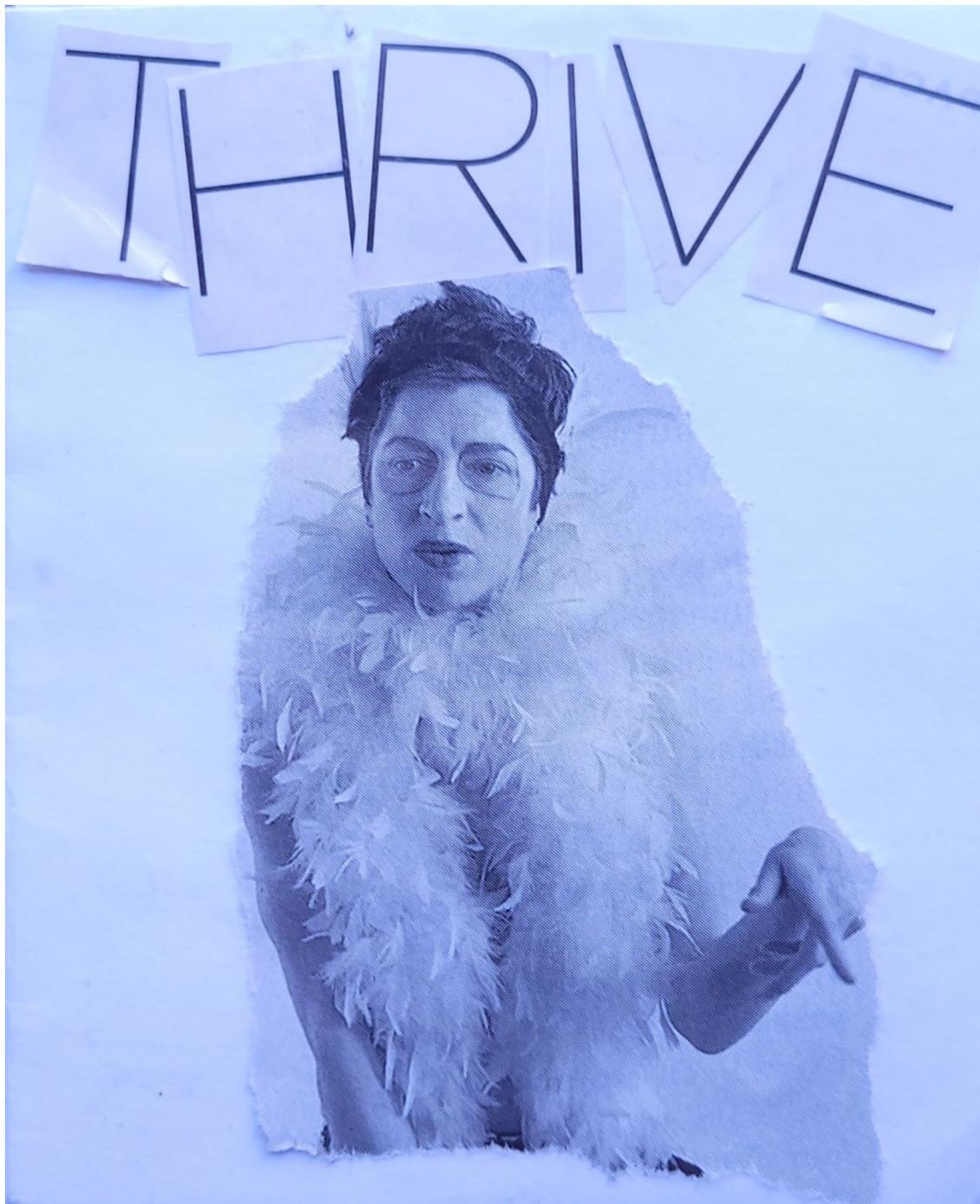


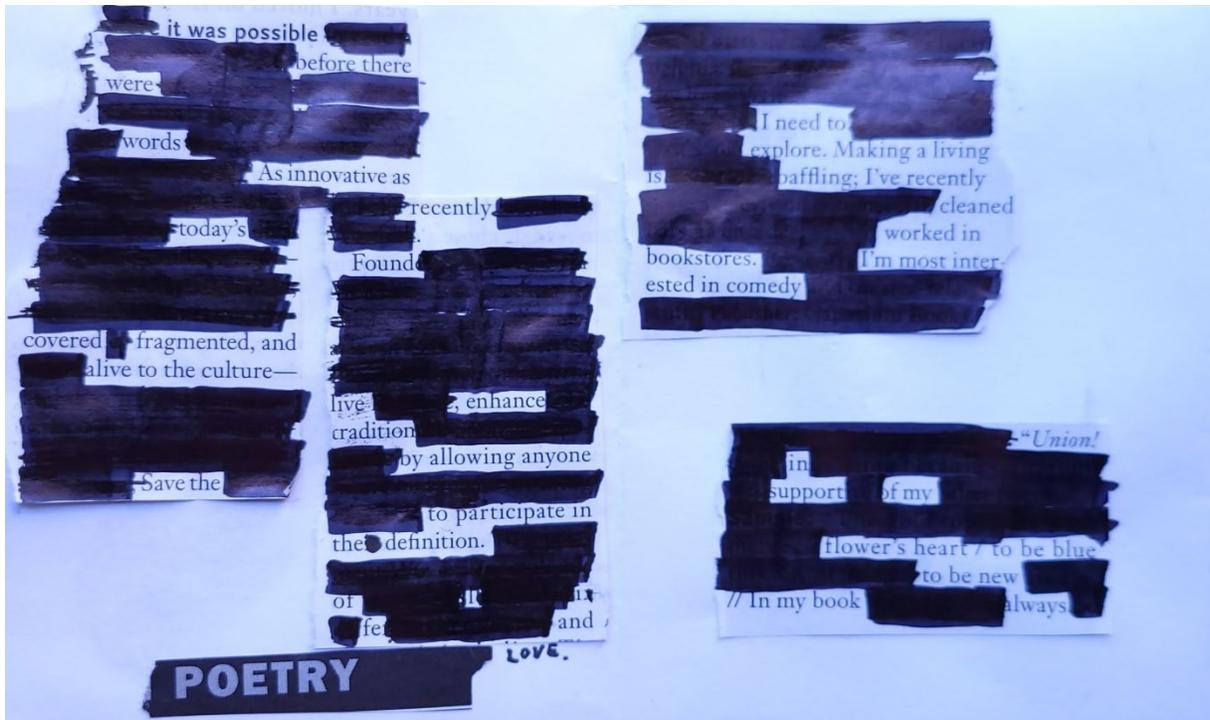
One hundred hours gone
Every week, I build my path
Or else I can't breathe

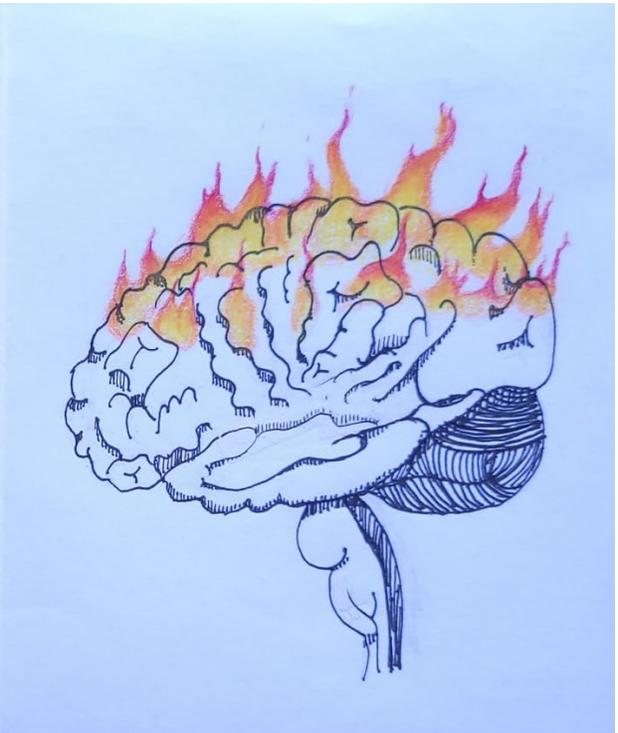
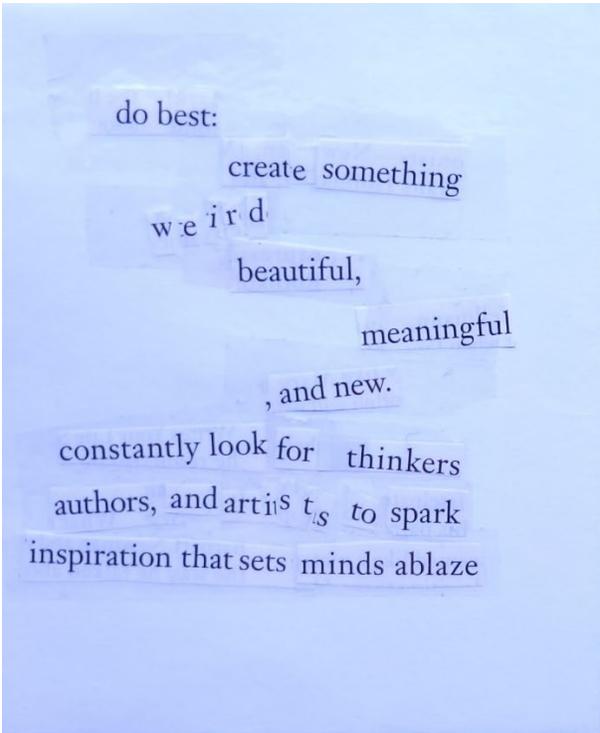
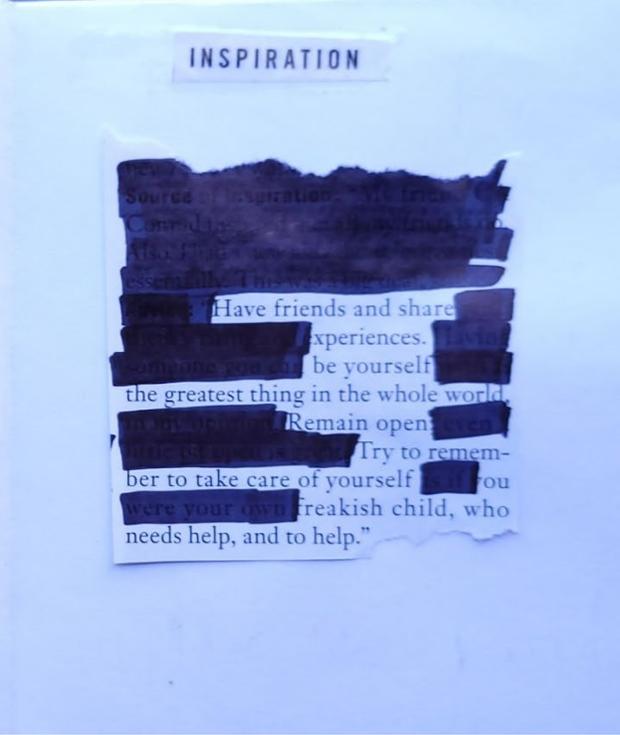
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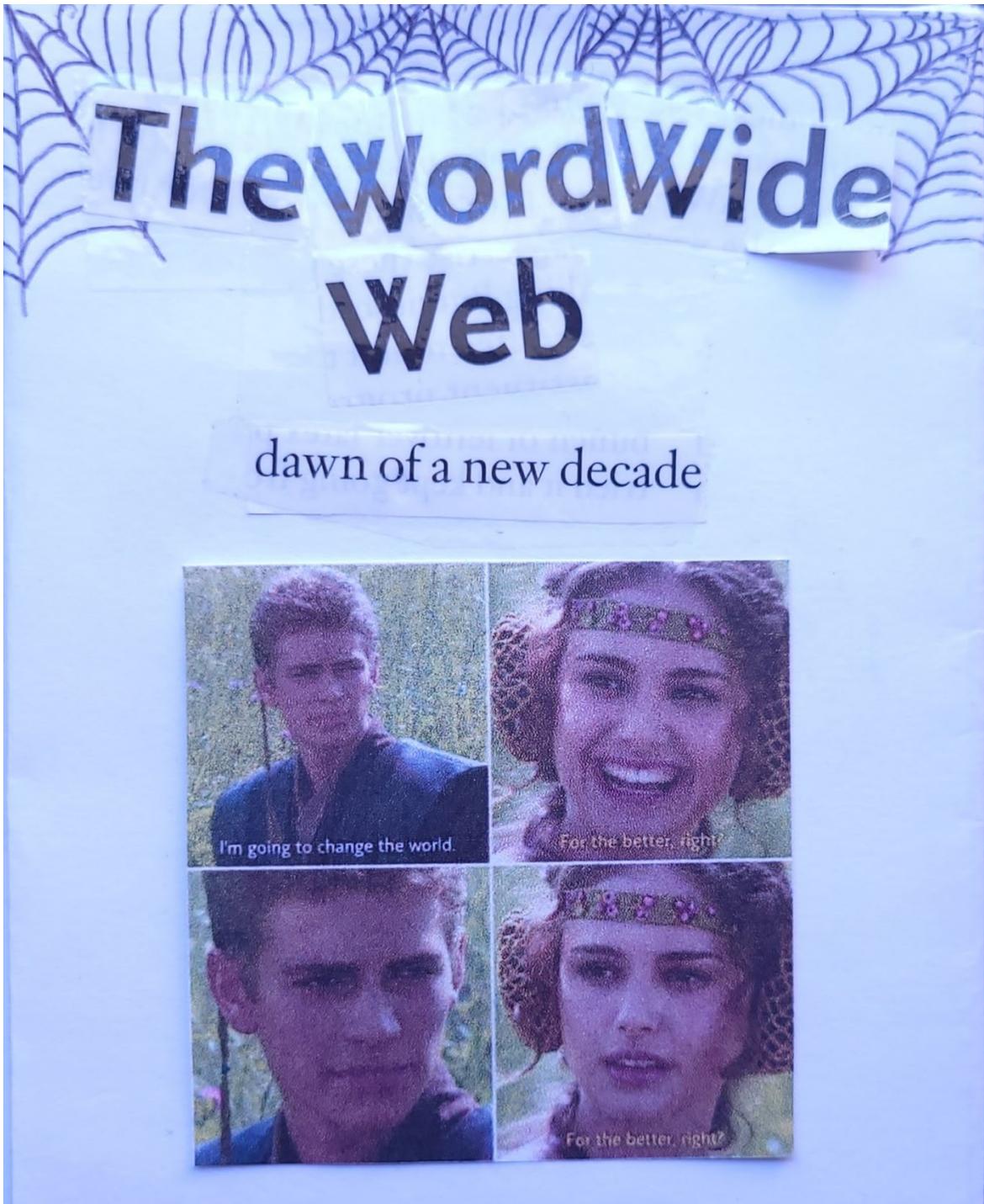
Thrive

Lex Blanco









Mandala

Kavya Priya Kairamkonda



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