

# COLLECTED STORIES

of the  
24-Hour / 250-Word  
Ekphrastic Writing Contest

SPRING 2026



featuring  
artwork by  
Annelise Mejias

The Year of  
  
Aesthetics



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## Introduction

We did it again.

Last semester, in the Fall of 2025, students, faculty, staff, and the community beyond campus were invited to participate in our 24-hour, 250-word ekphrastic contest. With our first launch, we had no idea what to expect. But when the returns came back, with incredible stories and positive feedback from the participants we knew we had to do it again.

The rules were the same as previously: at 11:59 pm on a Saturday night (February 21), participants would receive an email that included a photograph of a work of art created by a Middlesex College student. (This semester's artwork was created by Annalise Meijas -- and it is absolutely extraordinary. See the details about the artist and the art below.) Writers would then have 24 hours to return a story -- of any genre -- of 250 words or less inspired by the art.

The first story was returned within the hour, hitting our inbox before 1:00 in the morning. The last story arrived 20 minutes before the deadline, near 11:40 pm. And in between them thirty other writers would also take up the challenge and share their creations.

The rationale for holding the ekphrastic contest was also the same as it was previously. As our college celebrates the Year of Aesthetics, we have been fortunate to have a wide variety of events, presenters, and activities that help us to reflect on the value of aesthetics in all areas of our lives. What is aesthetics? The etymology of the word is Greek -- *aisthetikos* -- meaning "relating to perceptions by the senses". This original meaning of the word was skewed later on to be synonymous with "beauty", but the Year of Aesthetics has taken it back to its true denotation. Aesthetics represents how we relate to our physical world; how we take in information about the objects around us as we use our senses and then how we make MEANING of that or how we FEEL as a result. This doesn't have to be feelings of beauty,

alone. Our perceptions of the world are unique, individual experiences. How YOU react to a piece of artwork might be very different than how I react to it. The stories it evokes in YOU might, similarly, be very different than the stories I conjure from it.





The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

And our ekphrastic challenge demonstrated this perfectly. As you can read for yourself in the pages that follow, the feelings, meanings, and possibilities that Annalise's artwork inspired in our writers were as numerous as the writers, themselves

Our team of judges -- whom I do not envy in the least for their impossible task -- were asked to read the stories and rank their top three stories. And while the judges' tastes varied, there was one story in particular that they unanimously agreed was notably outstanding.

CONGRATULATIONS to all our first place winner, Viviana Ly for "The Weight of Being Human".

Congratulations, too, to our second place winner, Michelle Bista for "Distraught" and to our third place winner, Chernoh Bah, for "Sensory Overload", an acrostic poem.

As the Year of Aesthetics draws to a close with the Spring 2026 semester, we hope that the lessons continue; that our call to be mindfully present in the physical world around you, to consider your relationships and responsibilities to the objects within -- people and things, both, and to bring feeling as well as thoughts to your experiences, will carry far beyond.

Please enjoy the creativity and artistry of our community in the pages that follow.

Warmly,

*Nikki Gonzalez*

#### WORDS FROM THE ARTIST. ANNELISE MEJIAS

For as long as I can remember, I've been passionate about art. I had the privilege of participating in the gifted and talented art program in the Woodbridge Township School District. I continued to develop my art skills during my four years at Woodbridge High School. In High School, I followed an art focused curriculum, which included AP Art courses and ceramics.

I'm currently a second-year Fine Arts student at Middlesex College. Thanks to my professors, I have reached the level I am at today. I plan to continue developing as an artist by pursuing both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Fine Arts.

**Table of Contents**

**FIRST PLACE WINNER**

Viviana Ly ..... The Weight of Being Human

**SECOND PLACE WINNER**

Michelle Bista ..... Distraught

**THIRD PLACE WINNER**

Cherno Bah ..... Sensory Overload

Tammy Acevado .....	Trapped
Ankita Ahlawat .....	Untitled
Yadilka Alfonso .....	Missed Call
Rosalyn Berne .....	A Memory
Aarzo Brahmbhatt .....	Heart and Brain
Roberto Carballo Prieto .....	Journal Entry #5
Katy Castillo .....	These Days We Are Living In
Elena Chalcraft .....	Connections
Kaydence Chan .....	No Day But Today
Olivia Dolan .....	Untitled
Nicolle Duarte .....	Old Memories
Nour Ediris .....	The Insides of Me
Benjamin Estevez .....	A Favorite Memory
Rosario Flores .....	Untitled
Sanyukta Gadewar .....	Greed

(continued)

The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

Samantha Gagnon .....	The Mind is a Castle
Diego Gonzalez .....	Suicide Note from a Man Who Knows Everything
Nikki Gonzalez .....	The Sun Set
Fathima Haseena Naushad .....	Untitled
Stan Lee .....	Untitled
Nasir Lopez .....	Road Trip
Carolyne Maclel .....	Untitled
Melody Mejias .....	The Subject
Victoria Mozo .....	Aftergray
Laura Rijo .....	Changes
Meilani Serrano .....	Untitled
Jody Silver .....	Empty a Wired Mind
Spencer Soletto .....	Untitled



The Weight of Being  
Human



The Year of  
Aesthetics

## Viviana Ly

It's like someone finally admitted they were overwhelmed  
and decided to set their thoughts down for a minute.  
Right there in the center is this bright pink brain,  
all folds and curves, messy and real,  
resting in two large green hands.  
The hands don't look scary.  
They look tired.  
Like they've worked hard for a long time.  
Like they've carried groceries,  
wiped tears,  
dug in dirt,  
held onto people they didn't want to lose.  
Now they're holding something you can't usually see,  
a mind that just needs a second to breathe.  
It doesn't feel like a science diagram.  
It feels like a moment.  
Like when you sit quietly  
and press your hands against your forehead  
because everything feels a little too loud.  
Around it, life keeps moving.  
The sun burns warm in the corner,  
heavy and orange.  
Bright apples press in from the side,  
glossy and full,  
sweet, but also risky.

(continued)



The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

They feel like choices.  
The kind you can't undo once you take a bite.  
Thin lines twist through the background  
like nerves or roots underground.  
They remind you that nothing is separate.  
Thoughts grow from somewhere.  
Actions spread.  
A small, bright beetle crawls through it all,  
unbothered.  
Confident in its color.  
And that flip phone, half open,  
feels caught in between.  
Call someone.  
Don't call.  
Speak up.  
Stay quiet.  
The whole thing feels honest.  
Like being human is just this,  
holding your own complicated mind  
while everything around you  
keeps glowing, buzzing, growing.



Distraught

Michelle Bista

When my brain slipped into my hands, it was trembling.

It was not the soft pink from textbooks. It was blotched and overripe, heavy with things I had not said out loud. The folds pulsed too fast, like they were trying to outrun something invisible.

Fruit grew from it, but not the kind you would want to eat, apples with split skin. Oranges are collapsing into themselves. Each one carried a memory: the smile I forced, the test I failed, the message I reread until the words changed meaning.

A phone vibrated beside it, lighting up the surface in a cold blue glow. Every notification felt like a tiny bite taken out of me. Every silence felt worse.

Underneath it all, something small and bright, a beetle, crawled slowly across the bruised places. It did not panic. It did not rush. It carried away pieces of rot I thought were permanent.

"I am tired," I whispered, though I was not sure if I was speaking to it or to myself.

The brain twitched in my palms. Not broken. Just overwhelmed. Just carrying too much at once.

I realized then that I had been feeding it fear, comparison, pressure, expecting it to bloom anyway.

Carefully, I brushed away the buzzing phone. The beetle kept moving, patient and alive.

Maybe healing was not loud.

Maybe it was small.  
And stubborn.



Sensory Overload

## Cherno Bah

Sounds collide, consistent and endless,  
Enveloping like a curtain over the ears.  
Noises that were once whispers, now roar and pound.  
Smells appear briefly before drifting away,  
Only to quickly be replaced with anew.  
Restless lights flashing like an endless migraine,  
Yearning for a silence that I no longer find.  
Overwhelmingly persistent, capable of crushing the mind.  
Vehemently as ever, the body attempts to keep up,  
Every nerve fires, ached, and overcast.  
Reaching for a quiet, gentle space,  
Longing to vanish and slow the frantic pace.  
Only if it were possible to simply flip a switch.  
All that I have longed for,  
Desperate for the peace of silence.

Trapped

**Tammy Acevedo**

I lay lifeless on the bed, alive inside this meatsuit my brain can't move. Trapped.

Visiting hours.  
I hear them, every time.  
How long has it been?

My babies chatter, quibble; touch things they oughtn't. It's excruciating to be unable to hold them.

Mother mothers. Thank you.  
Father is always the same... I hear him restless. Clearing his throat. Impatient.  
Uncomfortable.

They never stay long.

Memories rip me. A day marveling at the iridescence of the carapace on the death watch beetle. Tomatoes. Are those tomatoes? Bio class. The petri dish. The feeling of his hands on my face the first time we made love. Trapped. The first time he choked me. Everything is connected here. Are those tomatoes? Dawn the morning after, thankful that I lived to see the orange through the rip in the curtain. Are those tomatoes? The old flip phone he gave me to replace the one he shattered after he accused me of being with other men. I don't think those are tomatoes?

Trapped.

I feel the anger rise inside me. I scream.

I'm here!  
(why can't anyone hear me?)

I'M HERE!  
WHY CAN'T ANYONE HEAR ME?

Rage.

(continued)



The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

Trapped.  
Flicker.

There it goes again. White? The beetle? ... . we didn't kill it ... The base of his mother's antique lamp.  
The hit. NOT tomatoes. Fade to Black. Pomegranates. Like Persephone.  
Trapped.

No!

I hear a beep. Fight. Is that a memory?

A glimpse. White. What is that? FIGHT. Up in the corner. Flicker.  
It's Hope.

Untitled

**Ankita Ahlawat**

I can almost dream the texture of the hospital gown that lays delicately upon my body. Feel the cotton fiber from sheets beneath me. My eyes moving in their respective sockets. But that feeling is only fictitious, a part of my imagination now.

“He has been brain dead for over two weeks.” The doctor says above me. “We do not know if he can feel the sensations or talk, but all we know is he’s a fighter.”

I sense my family’s presence fading as they walk away from the bedside, their footsteps growing distant. No matter what I do, I can’t stop them from leaving. Nothing I haven’t already tried.

I remember being on the phone talking to my friend Jonah about the happenings for the week. I was behind the wheel, texting, my brain completely occupied. Then it happened. I skid off the floor, my mind disoriented and that was the last thing I remembered.

Was that text worth it? Worth the breath in my lungs? Worth the distance now separating me from my family? Was it so important that it cost me everything?

Nothing I say can reach them. Nothing I do can get their attention. Nothing can bridge this impossible divide.

I am an eternity away.

Missed Call

Yadilka Alfonso

The phone keeps ringing, although I know it won't ring again.

It lingers on the edge of my mind, tiny and silver, agape like a mouth that was interrupted mid-sentence. I recall the last time it lit up. I recall gazing at it, pressing my palms firmly against my face, promising myself that I would call back later.

Later is a cruel word.

Above me, my mind buzzes: pink and active, reliving the instant on a loop that refuses to be turned off. The memories unfurl like those bright, obstinate cells, proliferating despite my best efforts to squinch my eyes shut.

I should have answered.

I should have said something.

Anything.

The colors seem too garish for a space this still. The gold patterns writhe like wires strung too taut. Even the warmth surrounding me can't penetrate the space where the silence resides.

My hands remain, cradling my face the way they did then.

Only now I understand—

Some calls are non-negotiable.

And some silences never disconnect.

A Memory

Rosalyn Berne

It was the cell phone message. The words were a jumbled mess. She stared at the screen, seeking to interpret what her son had written.

Born 18 months after her daughter's anencephalic brain meant for infant death, her son was precious. Bright eyed, smart, funny. A high school heart throb. The up-and-coming rap artist whose lyrics thrilled his audiences. He brought her joy and delight.

She had big dreams for him. (Might he be the next Obama?) He had dreams for himself. (He'd rival J-Z; 50 Cent; Eminem.) She had hopes for him. (A family, perhaps?) He had his own hopes and plans to start college that fall.

He hadn't been sleeping much that week and seemed a bit anxious. But no need for alarm, she'd reassured herself.

She and his father spotted him coming in their direction, his 6-foot stature towering among the boisterous crowd of students changing classes.

"What are you doing here?" he'd asked them, an air of carefree glee in his tone.

He was right there yet seemed so far away. There was an expression on his face she'd never seen on him. An odd, wide grin. She looked into his eyes, searching for the son she loved so deeply, not recognizing who was looking back.

In the emergency room he gave incorrect answers when asked what year and day it was. The diagnosis was gut-wrenching. Bipolar with psychosis.

"Please god, no!" she whimpered. Her mind faded from reality as they took her son away.

Heart and Brain

Aar Zoo Brahmbhatt

My heart was free and wild,  
Until the world arrived-  
With color and chaos,  
Sunlight too harsh,  
Over the fruit too ripe to trust.

Until the brain caught up, bearing the weight of command,  
Pink and bright -  
Pulsing and roaring,  
Placed its green hands over mine.  
Renamed the color to chaos,  
Organized the magic,  
Caged the wildness inside its colossal fingers.

It named it control.  
It called it safety.  
Turned the spells into logic,  
And my wonders into warnings.

Now my heart beats  
Inside its own restraint -  
No key to escape.  
A prisoner held captive.  
By hands meant to protect.

But somewhere above the prison  
The sun shone bright and hard and golden.  
Spilled the color of euphoria.  
And in the warmth,  
I eased.

In that light,  
I surrendered.

And before the brain could speak again-  
My heart lunged to be free and divine.

Journal Entry #5

Roberto Carballo Prieto

Journal Entry #5:

Old books conquer the countless rows and columns of the library.

The building surpasses my grandmother in age, and she is nearly ninety years old. Like her, the building is unnatural to my time; both are dressed in memories of a forgotten fashion with a scent of broken dreams and hearts. Ironically, it is my favorite place.

Though I have walked different roads and met different walls throughout my life, none can compare. My soul and mind are at ease, surrounded by worlds that defy reality. A place of infinite possibilities, where golden apples cursed the body with immortality, or diseases are extinguished by magic.

I live in those worlds as I take care of them. My job as a librarian shines complex, for as I pair the books by genre, I must ensure to keep their world attached to the pages. My senses -one with the library, show me when they try to escape.

Once, a boy stood still in a corner watching two beetles battling while white birds circled them in the air - Don Quixote in his hand. He saw what he saw, and who beside me would believe him? Those are the dangers, a collision of worlds that can numb the brain.

Though I must be honest, it was impossible to have the job while keeping my sanity. I no longer distinguish one world from another.

So, I walk through the library, mind long lost, conquered by old books, executing a perplexed job.

These Days We are  
Living In

Katy Castillo

*To speak to these days we are living in  
It feels like being in transit between peace and relaxation,  
yet at the same time being unable to let go.*

*The mind tries to escape,  
but it keeps running toward what comes next.*

*We are never fully disconnected  
from all the things we need to do.*

*Even in moments that should feel calm,  
there is movement,  
tension,  
and thought  
beneath the surface.*

*It captures that struggle between  
wanting stillness  
and being pulled forward  
by responsibility.*

Connections

Elena Chalcraft

There are times I don't know who I am at all. I don't mean in an existential way, like "What am I doing here?" or "What is my purpose in life?". I mean, honestly, I don't know who I am.

It's not amnesia—even though that was common on soap operas, and always got resolved just in the nick of time. It's like I'm stuck in my own head, with echoes of someone I don't know floating around somewhere like snowflakes that melt as soon as you try to grasp them.

Yet there are certain things that ring with the clarity of truth, where I know all the exquisite moments in my life in minutest detail, and I can tell you about them. I remember my uncle refusing to play Trivial Pursuit with me because he said I had a head full of useless information. But I don't know when that was, or where that was, or who else was there. It's frustrating.

Those moments where I understand everything, where synapses fire freely, and my sinews and bones and brains and everything connect me to the universe and nature and God. Those pinpoints of time, just out of reach, where I just know. What I am. Who I am. Or was.

No Day But Today

## Kaydence Chan

As much as I may endeavor to avoid it, there was a certain poignance in the air and in the music that traversed it. Yet still, my friend once departed is in my ear behind me voicing her thoughts in the chatter-filled room, and across from me someone I never thought I'd see cry sorts through hundreds of cards with me. I spent so much time in my head, and to be present there and surrounded by bonds strengthened after a year spent in the dark was astonishing. This hobby somewhat conveniently shared, something connecting us all in the present, and rooted deeply in our pasts.

And if I took the time to think deeper, time bends in some unorthodox way. Some years are lost under feet-deep permafrost, others shine with the dew of the morning and the birds gliding through the crisp air. I firmly believe that it all lies in my head irregardless and will find me on some sunny day when the snow may finally relent, as I do strengthen myself to the frostbite climbing up through my blood. And truthfully—at my worst—I could just feel my body and know there was less of it there than there used to be. Yet still, I had developed a new understanding of myself and those around me to a substantial degree, and as the restaurant grew quieter, the night drew to an end.

Untitled

Olivia Dolan

I finally heard footsteps after being drowned by my thoughts all morning. They sounded lighter than usual. Even lighter than the chirping of the birds outside my window. I hoped it wasn't a new nurse coming to prick me again. Just then, the room felt clearer and more familiar. It suddenly got easier to breathe. I felt the touch of something subtle drag from my forehead to my chin. Like a bug slowly crawling down my face. "Your color came back, you look as rosy as ripened fruit," said a soft and calming voice. "I knew you were strong enough" it kept repeating. Cold hands framed my face which caused the sensation of tingles throughout my body. I recognized those hands and gentle voice. I even recognized that floral scent circulating around me. A chiming melody broke the silence. I felt the vibration on my right hip. "She's coming back to us" the voice announced with optimism. A rush of colors flooded my head. At that very moment, my finger twitched and my eyelashes began to flutter.

Old Memories

Nicole Duarte

*The mind can store many memories but can be a labyrinth in recalling them.  
The stories my mother used to tell me as I laid down in bed.  
Her gentle hands on my cheeks as I looked up at her.  
Sometimes it was the hand of my abuela, but my mind soon fused the two touches.  
My mind understanding either touch as a feeling of comfort.  
Then an old memory of me clutching a paper mandala I made at a cumpleaños.  
Its holes and fragile connections like the nodes in the brain each holding a memory.  
I then recall the time I dropped the old container of pennies my mother used to store.  
Their distinctive sound ringing in my mind to this day the smell of metal potent.  
Similar to when I caught a beetle in my abuela's yard all colorful and smelled metallic.  
The smell of fresh peaches from the tree seeing a white dove fly by.  
The dove now symbolizing the day my abuela passed my mind fusing those two memories.  
How odd two different moments are now forever tied because of one symbol.  
I come back to reality as my phone rings; one I bought that reminds me of my abuela's flip phone.*

The Insides of Me

Nour Ediris

I stay up contemplating the whispers inside my head  
I stay up rattled by the screams that rip my heart  
I stay up drained from the world that's ahead  
I stay up because I can't close my eyes  
Drowned in memories  
Drowned in sorrow  
Contemplating decisions  
Contemplating tomorrow  
Wish I could take my insides all apart just for it to be morrow  
The brain, the heart, the memories, will I feel it if I were apart from the enemies  
I just need a break, a breather, a stretch  
But I'm tied in red and yellow, bound in the night with a bretch wound  
I used to say I wish I were a wild bird  
Free, far, and pure  
Free from the pressure, free from the poison of one's hands  
Far from the shambles of the light and the injustice that's held in the night  
Like a colorful glass, fragile and thin  
At any moment could prick your skin  
That's how the pressure feels, that's how the propaganda adheres  
Adam and Eve and the lethal adversary  
A recycled tale that's lost to heed

A Favorite Memory

Benjamin Estevez

I always wondered what my favorite memory was. I mean,

From birth, the brain wires itself frantically,  
sparking faster than I can name a single thought,  
And it only increases in speed from there.  
But what happens when it stops to think about this,  
even for a moment?

In a split second, it computes everything vicariously,  
allowing the subconscious to stack thought upon thought,  
memory upon memory,  
anything to keep itself occupied.

But when you take a breath  
and allow your body to soften,  
to unravel a little  
and to simply be,  
You begin to absorb the moment around you.

The phone, which slowly rewired itself into your thoughts.  
The dove rehearsing its morning love song.  
Fruit stacked in bright defiance  
of its inevitable bruising.

And then the memories you stopped long enough to notice.  
Hundreds. Thousands. Millions,  
scattered inside a pink note box  
folded into itself.

(continued)



The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

Maybe my favorite memory  
is not one I can retrieve,  
not something waiting obediently  
behind a pink fold.

It is not buried.  
Maybe it is unfinished.  
And maybe that is the truth of it.

The phone will keep glowing.  
The dove will keep singing.  
Another memory will form  
whether I try to hold it or not.

The brain keeps building.  
It does not stop for approval.

So I stopped searching  
because it will never ask me which one is my favorite.  
It just keeps going.

And somewhere inside all that going,  
that memory is still being made.

Untitled

## Rosario Flores

stalwart progression ticks on  
and on  
fruits of the land declared forgone  
salt of the sea erodes away  
thus we move on  
through night and day  
a gentle touch leads us towards dawn  
reverent do we gaze upon  
through spider's lace of twilight's yawn  
letters sent stall and still  
*"does this find you well? i hope it will."*  
although time drags far too long  
we must march on  
and on  
and on  
familiar hands cradle our gaze above  
where beetles are prisms and planes are doves  
myriad wires entwine betwixt  
avian souls conjoin with mist  
centuries past to digital age.  
people act on a different stage!  
where missives spread through every town  
testaments bonds and discord abound!  
through the beauty of the human mind  
chaos rears its roguish head  
but not to cause harm nor dread  
the march never ends, it will not stop  
but it sends a regard, that time forgot  
the letter that has found you well  
reaches from the past of what we dare not dwell  
those voices now respond in kind:  
*"leave a message at the end-"*

*it's now. it's finally time.*

Greed

Sanyukta Gadewar

*He left like a ghost and haunted the walls of their apartment. He promised he would come back for her, but it has been more than three months since he left for his new job in London, leaving his fiancée behind in Delaware. She thought that if he came back, the wedding planning would commence, and that after they tied the knot, he would take her to London. She waited by her phone every single night, not a moment went by that she had not missed him. It felt like eternity had gone by since she last kissed him goodbye at the airport. How she yearned for him!*

*Then, one night the phone rang. It was just another Tuesday night. She had previous arrangements with her friend for her birthday, and she was getting her hair done in the bathroom of the apartment that they shared.*

*"Alexa, turn off the music, please!"*

*She peeked at her phone. It was him.*

*"Hey, I thought you would never call! How is work? How is the London air treating you?" She answered the phone after clearing her throat. She was excited to hear his voice after a long time.*

*"Hey, yeah. I'm just swamped with work. Listen. I just think that you and I are not working out anymore. I'm sorry."*

*"What? Why? You know what? I knew this would happen! You greedy pig!" She burst out into tears.*

*The phone call was cut abruptly.*

The Mind is a Castle

Samantha Gagnon

The mind is a castle,  
With towering walls and watch towers  
A large wooden drawbridge to cross the moat

The mind is a castle,  
With corridors that maze through rooms  
And secret passage ways

The mind is a castle,  
With a garden of exotic fruits  
And musicians with hypnotic flutes

The mind is a castle,  
Which can feel more like a prison  
When the walls to keep those out  
Keep you inside

The mind is a castle but the architect is you  
The archways and columns,  
Can be Safety and serenity  
Or chaos for eternity  
The mind is powerful

So are you.

Suicide Note from a Man  
Who Knows Everything

Diego Gonzalez

My reaction to the whole ordeal is actually kind of underwhelming. Everything that ever was and everything that is yet to come hit me all at once. I feel like most people would be overjoyed with all the possibilities that lie in front of them. Bet on Powerball. Crush the pub quiz. But I don't really care. That doesn't matter anymore.

Every person's identity consists of experience. Memories that define who you are based on the choices that you've made. As well as the memories of the people in your life who surrounded you. But now every experience lives within me. I am everyone and no one. The man that I was is already dead.

I could try to teach people what I know but what's the point? Even teachers are always learning. The second I spark a discussion I already know everything they are going to say, so should I tell them their question before they ask it too? Should I just get to the good part and tell them the day they are going to die? Or explain to them the root of the trauma that made them the way that they are? But then I am cursing them to the same fate that I am faced with now. Stripping them of the possibility of finding their own answers or maybe even never knowing. So the best gift I can give the world now is my silence.

The Sun Set

Nikki Gonzalez

Even as the light was fading, even as the memories seeped out one by one  
and could not find their way back,  
I prayed to Khepri.

I heard, for one last time,  
the metallic bleating of the phone  
I used to call him on,  
heart pounding, palms sweating  
(we were just kids, after all, weren't we?);  
the same phone I would flip open to see his pixelated message:  
143.

I saw, for one last time,  
the birds circling overhead,  
swooping at our picnic basket as we raced  
our hands under the lid to bring the food to our mouths  
quickly, quickly, before they could peck it away  
(their anguished, hungry cries pained my heart a bit, yours, too?)  
but we were selfish then.

I smelled, for one last time,  
the grassy musk of tomatoes on their vines  
(that was always my favorite smell, wasn't it?)  
and with it, my grandfather appeared,  
his outstretched hand stained in the soil of his garden.  
I hesitated to take it.

These, and others, faded away,  
the strings loosening.

And yet I prayed to Khepri.

Please, roll the sun for me one more day.  
Please, toil in your unending burden so that I may  
warm myself in the burnt orange rays again.  
(I will miss it. I will miss all of it, don't you understand?)

Can't I have more time?

But the strings inevitably unwind  
for us all.

Untitled

Fathima Haseena Naushad

*There is a ringing in my head.  
Like a thousand beetles scampering around my brain.  
Like the sound of chestnuts bursting behind my ears.  
I can hear it.  
But no one believes me.*

*I stare at white walls in their absence  
Those white robed men with their little pointy sticks.  
They bled me fifty-eight times now.  
I've been counting.*

*They hold my head  
And lean in close  
and say I'll be free at the fifty-ninth time.  
I do not believe them.  
I cannot believe anything in a room that has nothing on its walls.*

*They say I'm hearing things.  
They say it's all in my head.  
"It is," I say, "It is in my head."  
But does that mean it is not real?  
I can hear it. Still.*

Untitled

Stan Lee

As cold, mechanical hands swept across her face, all she could think about were the vividly surrealist images flashing through her mind from the night before. She couldn't remember much, but the chimes of her phone, the cobwebs in the room and the gloomy atmosphere projected an inevitable feeling of dread to her.

Out of the corner of her eye, a beetle rests in the corner of the room. Covered in dust and ash, it scuttles out from cover. As the warm amber glow of sunlight peeked through the cracks in the walls, the light glimmered off its kaleidoscopic husk. A myriad of colours, she can't seem to take her eyes off it. As it scurries across the room, she can't help but notice the door in front of her. Impossibly tall, rusty and blackened, its only redeeming feature a dove etched into where a handle should be.

The beetle stops. Almost as if it was inviting her, it squeezes under the hinges of the door as she stared. The comfort and warmth of another living being. What could be the answer to her plight was on the other side of the door. Between the cold, dark purgatory of the room, and the uncharted territory of seemingly unknown proportions on the other side of the door, the dove stared back at her as she made her choice.

## Road Trip

Nasir Lopez

His phone died on the road trip. One second he was scrolling on Instagram, and the next the screen went black. A sudden panic started to arise in his chest since he was watching a reel that really caught his attention. With no steady videos to watch and keep his mind stimulated, he felt like his mind was chained to nothing. His mind felt unbearably still.. He looked up and saw that his family was laughing about something he had no idea of and realized he hadn't said a single word throughout the 3 hour drive. He reached into his bag for his charger then froze. He had left it at home. Now what?

Out of habit he checks once more for a charger and asks his brother for one as well. Of course they all have the wrong chargers. Frustration rose more and more as the time went by from complete boredom. He thought nothing but negativity. All of a sudden it went silent. He closed his eyes, leaned back and rolled down the windows and took a deep breath, realizing his true problem. How he hasn't been paying attention to the beautiful smell of outside. He opened his eyes and looked at his family, really looked at them. For the first time all day he realized he wasn't missing anything.

Untitled

Carolyne Maclell

The brain grew far too large to stay hidden. It lay in the open, pink and surrounded by quiet movement. Below the brain, two large green hands held a small head gently, as it was protecting something precious. All around it, life was blooming, stunning fruits stood open, their seeds luminating like small lights. Small colored circles floating from the head, like water rising to the surface. Next to the fruit, a small flip phone lay. It gave off almost a small steady hum, still laying to be noticed. The brain felt the hum, it was almost curious. The hands that were steady and calm, tightened little by little. Somewhere nearby, the seed cracked open, a new singular thought had sparked, the brain has turned its back from the light and it has leaned into the existence of the living world.

The phone continued to hum, unanswered.

## The Subject

### Melody Mejias

A bright light appears from the darkness. It shines on a body laying still on an operating table. The table is stained with vibrant colors consisting of red, orange, and yellow. The body breathes heavily with its eyes closed shut. A tall man wearing an over sized lab coat examens his subject.

"It's been a while," he said as he tightens his mask.

The subject stirs a bit as the man's gloves touches its grayish green skin. He picks up its arm, astonished at its veins.

"Extraordinary," he thought.

The veins are nothing like he had ever seen. They resemble white shattered glass. The man grabs a needle and pierces the subject's skin. The blood appears as an overlay of red, orange and yellow in the vacutainer tubes. Once finished he examines the subject's large palms and delicate face. He then moves to the subject's head.

"Time to finish what I have started."

Continuing the subject's last surgery, the man left half of its brain exposed. A healthy pink brain. Yet the subject is still alive... but for how long? The man poked and prodded the brain making the subject breathe faster, harder, with growing tension. He quickly sees the racing heart monitor.

"Shhh... it will be all over soon," he whispered.

Suddenly the flip phone from his pocket starts ringing loudly, having him startled. This makes him drop his scalpel. He bent down to pick it up. He doesn't notice two blood shot eyes staring behind him.

Aftergray

## Victoria Mozo

The screen of my flip phone lit up blue with a text from my friend Carla reading:

*Party at my place tonight at 8!*

She was the only person outside of my mother that seemed to invite me to things.

I wore brown pants and a gray shirt with a football logo. When I entered her place, the apartment was packed. The snack table was vibrant: a charcuterie board, artichoke dip, and a bowl of red liquid next to a stack of matching cups. I drank a whole cup of the sweet syrupy juice before filling up again and looking for Carla.

It took a while for me to find her. She pulled me to the side of the room.

“I like your shirt,” she said, her finger on my chest.

I felt dizzy as I looked down at the place where she was pointing.

The football on my shirt was now a rainbow scarab beetle. Carla touched my face with green hands, staining me. The charcuterie board was an orchard of orange and yellow peaches, miniature like a diorama.

I had never seen color like this in my life. Was I colorblind before?

My palms sweat cold. My heart pounded. Everything around me became spaghetti neurons. Hours passed. People were leaving. The room emptied and I was still there, in rainbows.

I went home. Where my feet hit the pavement, white doves flew into the air.

Gray didn't exist anymore. Everything was color, and it never left.

Changes

Laura Rijs

A chaotic mind moving through the world divided by those seeking peace some trapped in the brain by a web that does not allow when to see the horizon a mind trapped between the urge to connect through technology but then again, a mind who wonders if there's more to life than having the strength to adapt and be resilient in a always changing world .

Like that of the transformative jewel beetle who thrives in different environments, a mind of many intrusive thoughts on what the world should be and not be. The constant fight, changes, adaptability to remain up float with the different environments we can travel through in various stages of life.

A mind constantly trying to rewire through the thoughts of what's to change in the world next feeling not grounded and unable to produce fruits to stay alive and take a break from this chaotic world of constant change and adaptability.

We will we ever find peace in new beginnings like that of the doves?

Untitled

Meilani Serrano

Judy always knew her mind had never been her own. That reality wasn't reality. The colors of the world were always too bright, too vivid. The sky was too blue, grass too green. Apples too red, and always too sweet.

Nothing felt right. Nothing felt real.

Judy lay in the too green grass, staring up at the too blue sky. "What are we?" She asked the sky that she knew was listening.

Sighing, she closed her eyes.

"Judy" a little voice whispered.

"Open your eyes, Judy."

Her eyes snapped open, "Hello?" Looking around her, she could see no one.

"Down here," the little voice said.

She looked down and found the tiniest, bluest beetle sitting on her leg.

"Who are you?" Judy asked.

"They wanted to show you the answers to your questions."

"They?"

The beetle just crawled away, and so Judy followed. But she lost it in a bush. Dropping to her hands and knees, she whispered, "where are you?"

(continued)



The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

She crawled into the bush, crawled until her hand had sunk into the ground, and she fell in. Endlessly falling, she heard the voices of every creature who'd ever lived. Saw the infinite worlds, some like hers, and some different. So much information. Too much. Her head hurt.

Finally, she saw them. The beautiful gods that controlled everything surrounded her.

She reached for them, but the piercing pain in her head grew larger...

...and larger.

Until...

Judy sat up, back in the grassy field, clutching her chest, panting.

Empty a Wired Mind

Jody Silver

Curved fingers holding a human face  
Freeing its mind from the race  
Chin and eyelashes  
The chaos of speckled flashes  
Thoughts flying like a bird, outstretched wings  
Images of what science brings  
Synapses split, twists of the hemispheres  
The mind shut off without any cares  
Phone tossed away open, wires tangled mind  
Fruit from the tomato vine, the world can find  
A beetle moves in yellow and teal  
The human world it can feel  
Escaping from the electronic hold  
Surfaces on the anatomical holes  
Blue waves beneath, the molten sky beams  
Floating in disconnected dreams

Untitled

Spencer Soletto

checking on the doves  
in the back yard  
to see if they have bird flu

adding to last year's nest

my dog got into the trash again  
a blizzard  
for a stray from Kentucky

icarus wings  
webbed in mycelium

screen gone blank  
with ambiance  
my entire body is lifted  
unevenly each night

gaps between each fold

two days  
the flock  
flipping leaves

biting into  
replicas of the sun

(continued)



The Year of  
**Aesthetics**

is there silence  
between prompts  
continuous hum  
circulating cooling systems

fingers  
I try to massage  
some humanity  
into the next endeavor

just go to sleep you've done enough

peaches and tomatoes  
the answer doesn't address  
my impatience to cook  
biting into them raw

scarab carcass  
in the window sill  
shimmering gold



The Year of  
**Aesthetics**