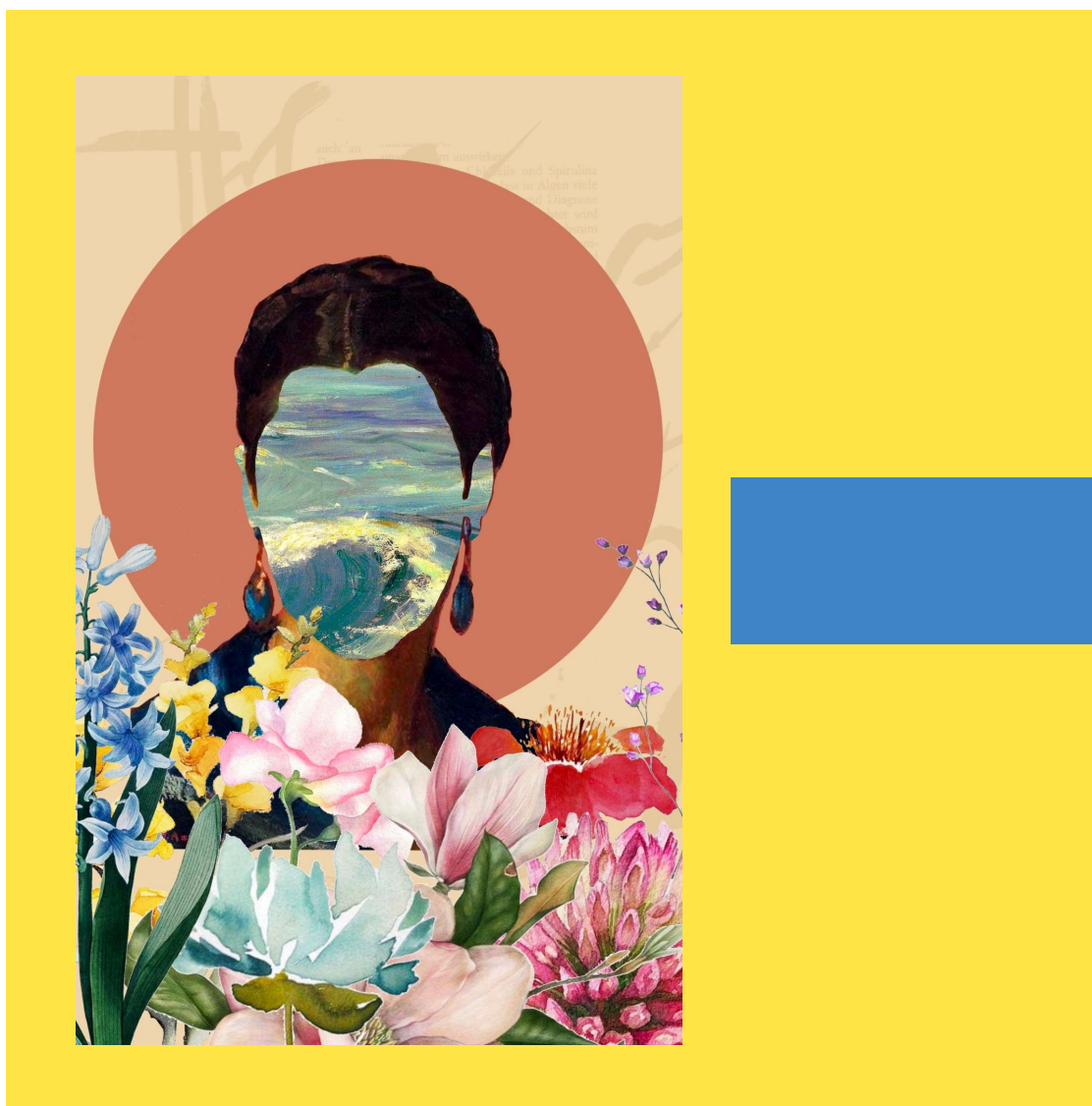


UNACADEMIC



JOURNEY

The Gumby Writing Project is a community writing project dedicated to the CLU community and committed to providing a platform for informal, personal, non-binary, outside-the-classroom, and community-driven writing.

<https://sites.callutheran.edu/gumbywriting/>

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The Unacademic Journey involves hobbies, personal challenges, identities, and anything else that may have complemented (or maybe complicated) one's academic experience. From reflections on nature, to heartfelt family stories, to journeys of all kinds, this collection of CLU student, faculty, and staff contributions includes short stories, poems, art, and personal narratives.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Cori Pizano ('24) is an English major and Honors Program scholar. He worked at the Writing center for over 2 years and was in the CLU choir for 4 years. In his free time, you'll find him hiking the Santa Monica mountains or reading on a Malibu beach.



This project has been an incredible experience for me as an aspiring professional editor. I saw this process through from start to finish, from putting out a call for submissions, to working with each individual author, to editing and designing the end product. There were a lot of twists and turns in this process (nothing ever goes to plan) but I was most blown away by the incredible submissions I received for this prompt. I chose the UnAcademic Journey theme because I wanted to learn more about our CLU community, focusing on its diversity and wealth of experiences, and I wanted people to write about whatever *they* wanted to share.

Throughout our academic careers, we are often asked to reflect on the educational triumphs and challenges that have led us to where we are today. Personally, my college journey has been filled with unexpected opportunities, such as the Writing Center, the Honors Program, and an independent study, but there is more to me than my academic achievements. For example, my mixed-race Mexican and Italian American identities and my identity as a transgender man have shaped every aspect of my life experience. I wish I had more opportunities to talk about those parts of myself throughout my time at Cal Lu. That is why, in this publication, I hoped to give others the same opportunity.

I was touched to see writers respond with such powerful and potent stories, in more creative ways than I could have imagined. I got all that I asked for and more, and I am honored to share these special pieces with the CLU community.

I believe this selection of works reflects the variety of different backgrounds we have at Cal Lu. We see childhood experiences from various perspectives and across multiple generations and cultures. Many contributors offer insights they've learned from their families, whether that be through tough times or shared life lessons. We also have journeys of many kinds—from fantasy adventures, to real world travels, to personal and emotional evolutions. Some of my personal favorites involve journeys of appreciation for the natural world.

I hope you enjoy each amazing UnAcademic Journey in this selection!

Sincerely,
Cori Pizano



Echoes of the Conejo

a pantoum style poem by Massimo C. Bianco

Beneath the vast sky, Conejo whispers, old and wise,
Where ancient oaks stretch arms towards endless blue,
The hills roll gently, cradling tales untold,
Echoing the footsteps of the Chumash, true.

Where ancient oaks stretch arms towards endless blue,
Their leaves rustle with the secrets of the dawn,
Echoing the footsteps of the Chumash, true,
In each leaf and stone, their legacy is drawn.

Their leaves rustle with the secrets of the dawn,
As red-tailed hawks glide over lands once roamed,
In each leaf and stone, their legacy is drawn,
A sacred ground where spirits freely roamed.

As red-tailed hawks glide over lands once roamed,
The hills roll gently, cradling tales untold,
A sacred ground where spirits freely roamed,
Beneath the vast sky, Conejo whispers, old and wise.



Why I Write

by Ernst F. Tonsing

He was tall; he was trim; and he was very intelligent, I heard. He was my grandfather. I never knew him, however, since he died before I was born. I have seen two pictures of him. One has him standing by his wife, my grandmother, gazing calmly at the camera. Another one has him sitting on a very old motorcycle that is piled high with mail bags. I heard that he established the first postal route in Saline County in the center of Kansas, daily delivering letters to Post Offices in the scattered little communities on the prairie.

I know only a few disjointed things about him. My mother said that he was born in Kristdala, Kalmar Län (county), Småland, Sweden, and came to the United States as a boy. He was indentured for seven years to an old bachelor farmer. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner during those years consisted only of fried eggs and bacon—nothing more. He worked seven days a week those years, with just one day off at Christmas and another at Easter to visit his family.

My mother also told me that he enlisted in the Army so that he could get his citizenship, and that he rode with Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" in Cuba. I later found that this was wrong. He had, instead, fought in the Philippine-American War. I heard that he had died an agonizing death of tuberculosis during the Dust Bowl days in which massive winds sucked up the soil into the air from the farms on the prairies.

Some late evenings when the responsibilities of the day are over and the light is fading outside, I wonder what would it have been like to have known my grandfather. Would we have played ball? Would we have gone on long walks? What would we have talked about? What could he have told me about his childhood, of the journey across the sea, of his tedious toil as a youth, and of his travels as a soldier?

Alas, he never put any of his thoughts down on paper. I will never know him, nor be able to be admitted to his inner self. He will remain just a few, scattered facts—remote, inaccessible, and unconnected with the realities of my life.

That is why I write now. Not only have I penned academic articles, I have also reimagined what it was like for my grandfather's parents to embark on a sailing ship to ply through Atlantic storms to America, their journey to Kansas, and what it was like to live in a dugout house where they had to combat prairie fires, hoards of grasshoppers devouring their crops, and droughts. I want to leave something of their stories as well as mine behind to connect with those who I shall never know, to be a part of their lives, too. A life is too precious to let it evaporate into a few, fragile, fragmentary facts. A life is too important not to record.



Motherly Wisdom

by Israel Lozano

Mom taught me that love is when we dance
On days where words aren't enough
To celebrate how life is beautiful by chance,
And people capture it by choice.

Mom taught me that family is when we dine together,
And the scents of seven or so spices
For a moment silence the room more than a feather,
But the room reverts to a cacophony of teasing and eating.

Mom taught me that truth is when forgiving an enemy
Traps our being in confusion and anguish,
But the key to being set free
And reaching peace is reconciliation.



Mom taught me that strength is when we laugh
Every night over the phone at our forced jokes,
Masking the pain of separation
As days become weeks, weeks become months.

Mom taught me that healing is when I cry,
Allowing myself the privilege of embracing loss,
Its cold arms wiping the tears from my eyes
And lifting me onto its shoulders to see hope.

Hope is when we have the strength to face truth
And accept its pain with the same love we have for family.
Before healing there is hope, the reason we yearn for our youth.
Before hope, there is everything else mom taught me.

A Unique Discovery

by Jazmine Smith

My life as a person and a student has been anything besides a normal pathway of development. This is due to the many unique situations that have happened within my life. However, I am not here to give a whole lifelong story about how I developed and my educational pathway. Instead, I am focusing on my first semester here at California Lutheran University as a graduate student. More specifically, the push and knowledge that was given to me from my counseling program which has allowed me to discover more about myself: my hidden identity!

To give some background, prior to being a graduate student, I always thought that my identity was how it was stated by my family. According to my family and my own knowledge, my identities are that I am a first-generation student, I am female, I am low-income, I am first-generation to obtain a career, I am from a White-Irish background, I am a person who struggles with mental health, and I am heterosexual. Honestly, there should be no reason for me to question any of these identities, right? However, something always felt off to me within my family. I have always questioned my racial background about being White and Irish. This might seem an odd thing to question, as growing up your family usually talks to you about this, or you figure it out on your own due to life experiences. Yet my family just passed down what was told to them. Also, due to the unique aspects of my life, I was not able to figure out this identity I had until way later in life.

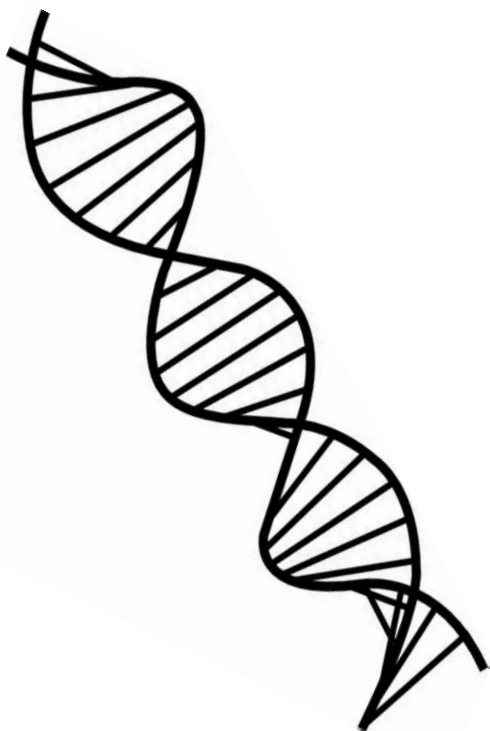
I questioned this due to not looking like my grandmother, who did tell my mother and I about the Irish history that we have. Again, my mother totally believed that this was our identity since there was no other possible answer. Yet, growing up, I always knew that my mother and I were darker skinned and seemed to be different compared to her.

Of course, everyone is screaming right now reading this, “Well what about the men in your family?” Well, there aren’t any biological men within my family. “How come you don’t take a DNA test?” Well, like many other people, there was a fear of finding something out. To add on, my mother did not have her father within her life, and as we decided to have a conversation about this topic, we discovered that my grandmother never told us who the father actually was. My mother also said that my father was just a random white man that left us before I was born. My family barely knew these men, but they were positive that we were still fully White and Irish biologically. Looking over to the DNA test aspect, my mom always feared me doing one and having our information sold on the dark web or something. So, I was very anxious to take this step for myself, since I also grew the same fears as my mother.

This fear from my mother and my own anxiety controlled my life to not seek an answer. Yet I still had to always be questioning myself and having others question me as well. I always just stuck with what I was told, even though I knew I had this questioning feeling every time I had to talk about myself. Being a graduate student now allowed me to decide to finally just take the DNA test.

The class I was taking my first semester focused on cultural diversity, not only within the future populations that we would be working with, but also within ourselves. My final for this class was to talk about my identity development throughout my life, but since I always questioned myself, I knew this paper would be a difficult task for myself. I always saw my peers confidently talking about knowing their background and their culture, and I would be like, “Well.... I am here I guess?” I finally decided that I am an adult, and this is graduate school where I am learning about not only myself, but my whole career choice. As a future counselor, how am I supposed to be a model for students if I don’t even fully know myself?

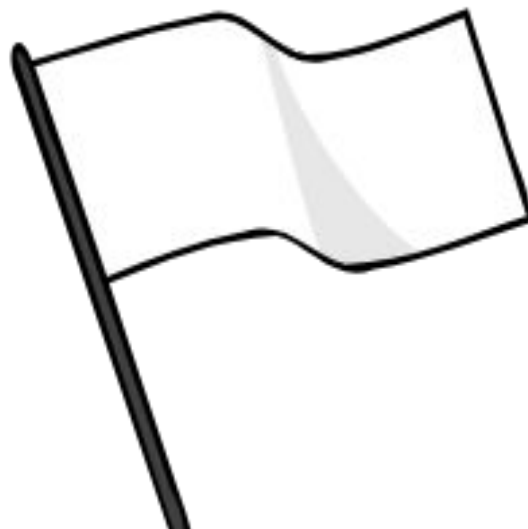
Therefore, the discussions, topics, and information from this class allowed me to spend the money and finally take the DNA test to end all my questions. However, this would not be a unique discovery if all my questions were fully answered. My questions are just as wide open as they were before I took the test. I found out that I am half White-European and half Mexican, having both aspects from both of my parents.



The DNA report told me that my father was mixed and my mother as well. However, this was not what I totally expected since I thought my mother was fully White, and maybe my father was Mexican? I finally discovered why I always questioned myself, since I knew something was different with my mother and I within the family.

However, this just opened more questions about my mother's background, since the report said she was mixed. Also, it filled me with this question of whether my grandmother was biologically related to us.

I am still sitting here with many questions in my mind about who I am, since this was a lost part of me that I now must see if I can gain back. Currently, my mother and I are the only living "Smith" relatives within our family. There are reasons for my lack of family within this story. For one, sadly, we lost my grandmother to cancer a few years back. Secondly, my grandmother is the only one who had and knew about the rest of our extended family. However, I was told that there is a reason we aren't in contact with them due to bad history. Now, there is no way to find out much more, since who can we actually ask? Instead, we are focusing on moving forward and trying to see how we can identify ourselves now. We don't fully know our feelings about how to identify ourselves, but what we do know is that we still hold the cultural aspects we grew up with, and maybe there are some new ones that we can find.



Do You Remember

a memoir * te acuerdas * vous souvenez-vous

Little Boy & Memories

niño y recuerdos * petit garçon et souvenirs



a paint-by-number poem
by Sherilyn Rudney

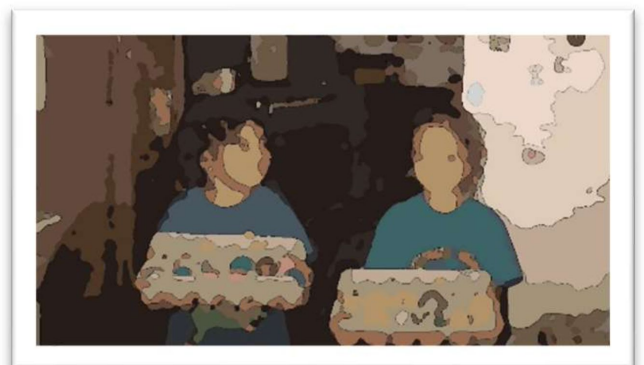
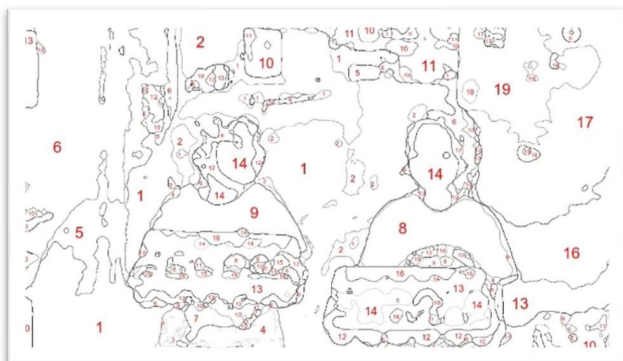
Paint

The paints are the gateways to the memories we created when we were young. The canvas – tightly bound and prepped – expected us. Smoothly sweeping our brushstrokes we created our world.

Unsnap the paint pot.

Stir the paint before it's applied. If it's too thick, add a tear and mix it well. Please be certain to cover when not in use. A dream deferred will ruin your scheme.

Use caution during application. The paint may permanently stain your skin. Now mix the colors and experiment. The sky's the limit – your stage is set. Mix and mix until your heart's content – use egg cartons, cups, or plastic lids. If you spill it won't matter. Gamma will hug you and tell you it's ok. While mommy cleans up after you the rest of the day –

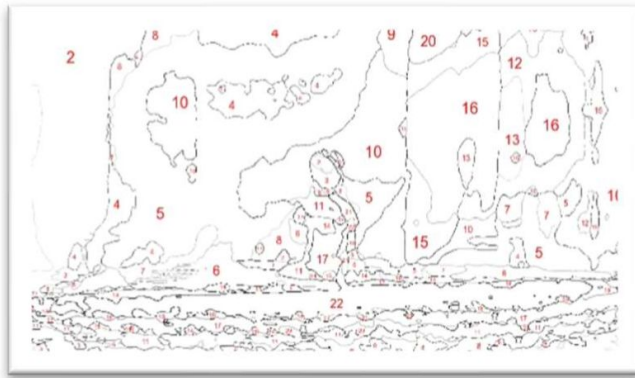


Do You Remember

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Brush

Stippled, tapped, stamped, & dabbed the canvas until you were satisfied.

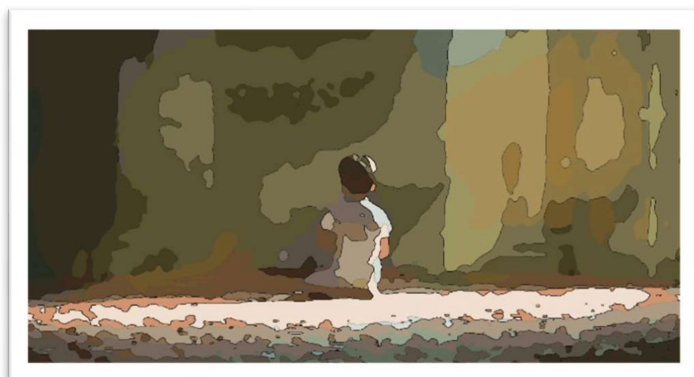
Tracing the edges

of my toes your little fingers guided you – perfectly. The silky black hair I'd sweep from your face, and plump chubby cheeks stained from the wind. Swirling and streaming your brush all around your artist plot enchanted us for hours as we watched you scale the couch and pounce onto the pillows below.

COWABUNGA-COWABUNGA & Mighty Morphin Power Rangers – that's all we ever heard. And if you break something it won't matter.

Gamma will kiss you and tell you it's ok.

While mommy cleans up after you the rest of the day –

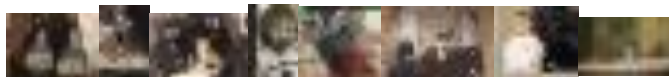


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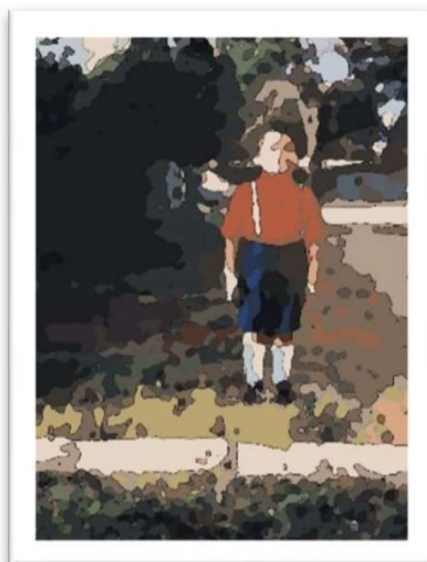
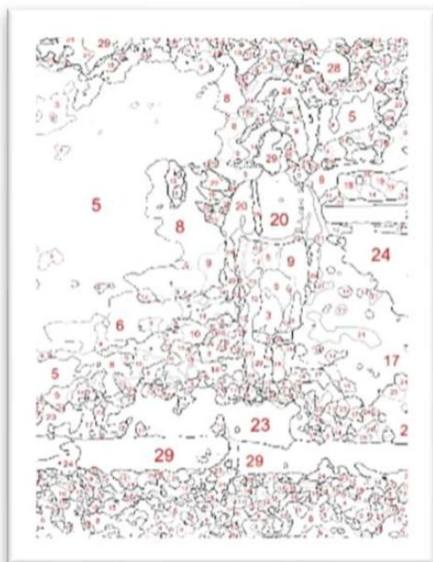
Board & Chart

The numbers on the board and chart indicate fading memories. Letters represent the process to keep them alive. The memories to use for the mixes are listed in the key. The first number on each pot is the faded memory.

The number in parentheses identifies a story. You will need to send me the code if you cannot remember the story.

Techniques

I recalled the sweeping magic memories across the canvas when we celebrated you. A hundred thousand million flashes and photos are never out of sight. I keep them close and look at them often never wanting to forget. You. Her. Dear son, please do remember and call on these memories when you're feeling sullen. Someday, mommy will greet you and tell you it's ok. The memories that faded will be stored for another day.

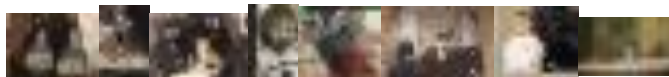


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Color Key

8,9,12,13,14: Love. Admiration. Shyness. Affection. Enamor.

5,6,8,23,24: Confidence. Excitement. Anxious. Happy. Cute.

2,4,6,10,15,16,17: Happy. Cheeky. Delight. Mischievous. Gregarious. Humorous. Knowing.

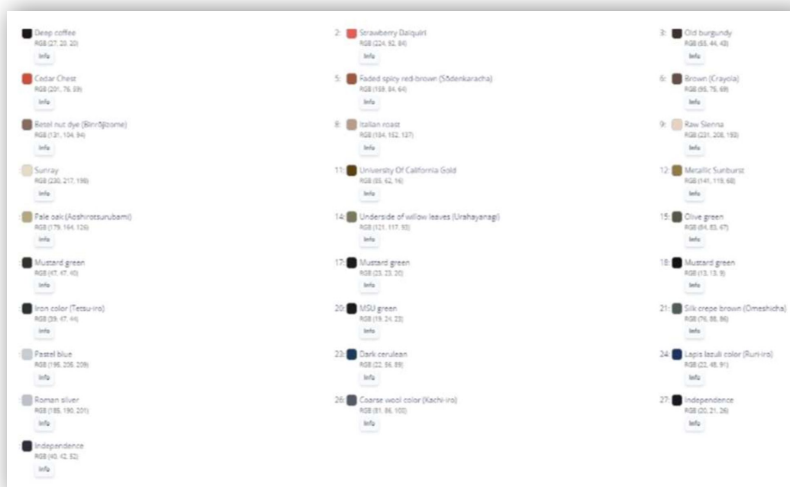
2,3,6,7,10,14,18,20: Chubby. Cheeks. Innocence. Reflection. Baby. Boy.

2,5,6,7,11,12,14,15,20,22: Inquisitive. Insightful. Curious. Silky. Black. Hair. Angelic. Messy.

12,13,19,29,16,17,18: Pride. Independence. Charisma. Confidence. Athleticism. Defiance.

1,2,5,6,9,15,17,25: Comfort. Admiration. Protection. Compassion. Joy. Relief. Pride. Beginning.

3,4,5,8,10,13,15,17,18,19,20: Tranquility. Empathy. Tenderness. Solitude. Poise. Understanding. Serenity. Grateful. Caring. Insightful. Aware.

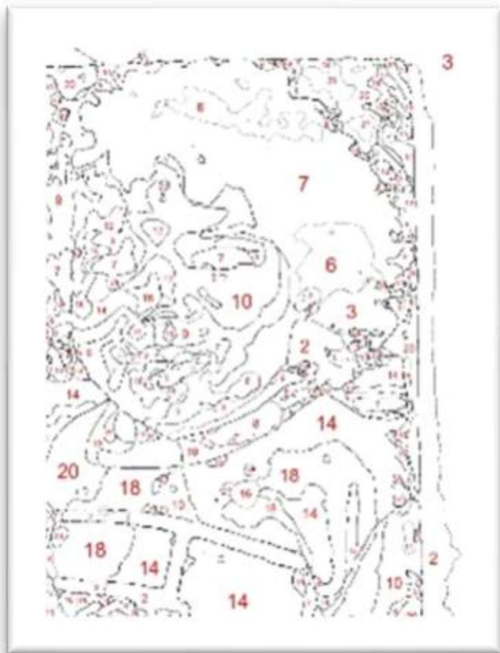


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Embracing Cultural Exploration

by Nadia Fahmy

“Building Global Friendship”

- CISV

At the age of 11, I was pushed into the world—quite literally—by being sent to summer camps abroad. I had always been curious about people, from any and all different parts of the world. I remember getting to have conversations about culture, traditions, religion, spirituality, and global friendships. The activities in those camps helped to foster a bond between us and build trust, which led us to view each other as other human beings who merely just come from different backgrounds. This early exposure instilled in me a deep sense of gratitude and curiosity towards people from all over the globe.

Growing up, I hadn't realized that there was more to life other than math and science. It wasn't until I was coincidentally placed in a sociology class, due to scheduling mishaps, that I discovered the world of humanities. It was really eye-opening to explore how our culture, social relationships, and history can impact how we see the world and behave in it. This gave me a whole new point of view on the complexities that shape our behaviors. It was especially interesting to see how different perspectives can be used to discuss the same human behaviors and why we think people do what they do.

This was one of the first times I started to reflect on not only macro sociological perspectives but also on my own inner circle of friends and family.

I was also embraced by my Indian friends who not only welcomed me into their culture but encouraged me to explore the vast diversity within India itself. One of them even gifted me with a book to help me explore that further. The conversations about religions and spirituality really tied everything together for me in terms of understanding their culture and traditions in a deeper sense. I actually felt at home in India because of the similarities I found with my own culture and background. I think these experiences further showed me how we can be blinded by stereotypes sometimes but also how easily those can be broken with a simple conversation. I was also blessed with meeting people who were just as open to knowing more about me and my culture. I managed to create lifelong connections through a myriad of meaningful conversations.

I think I have always been a curious person, especially when it comes to culture and people. These experiences have shaped me into a more empathetic and culturally aware individual. I've learned to embrace diversity not as a mere concept but as a lived reality. With every conversation, I get to learn more about the rich spectrum of human experiences. As I envision my future, I see my cultural exploration journey as a lifelong pursuit. I hope to keep nurturing global friendships, breaking down cultural barriers, and fostering understanding. I wish for a world that not only celebrates diversity but also embraces our differences, leading to personal and collective growth.

In the Forest & Against the Sea

by E.V. Mae

I am not myself. I am fractured into iridescent pieces that can not be put back together. My memory does not fail me—it betrays me. There are lapses, gaps where darkness bends like a branch above my head, and where the wind howls with hatred so loud it rattles the leaves of my soul. I do not know where I am. I do not know how old I am. Sometimes I am on the floor, clutching at the cold tile and hoping that the shaking will stop, and praying that I will sink back into the present. Other times, I am curled within my sheets with pillows pressed against me. I pull them around me like a shield, thinking that they will keep the darkness with green eyes at bay.

They don't.

I can not stop from slipping into the past and into the weathered hands of that six-foot-tall darkness.

But this is not that story. (It is). This story is one about the body that betrays me. This story is about the person I have become. This story is about my rebirth. This story is about the trees and the sea.

This story is about nature, and the power it has to heal.

I grew up surrounded by forests. I also grew up as a boy. Together, those two things carried a strange connotation that I was never quite satisfied with. Hikes became feats of masculinity. Mountains became things to conquer. Rather than swim, I would sail. Rather than sit, I would stand.

Time moved so quickly then. Is that what boyhood is supposed to be? (*Yes*). Are you supposed to conquer, to dominate, and to prevail? (*Hold your head higher*). Is there no time to stand still? (I have to keep moving). To appreciate the warm yellow-green light filtering through the trees? (I can see the darkness behind me). To brush your hand against the chalk of an aspen? (He tells me what to do). To dive into the lake and swim until your body is numb? (If I stop, he will drown me).

(I have to leave here).

Is that what boyhood is?



What does it mean to be a woman? When I first asked myself this question, I told myself that I did not know the answer—that I could not know the answer. I was a boy. I was a guy. And eventually, I would be a man. Whenever I became conscious of this, I became conscious of my body. The way my shoulders were broad. (*Uncross your legs*). The way hair grew on my skin like grass. (*Sit up straight*). Then, I became aware of the way my lips twinged down in response. (*Act like a man*). The way I hated it. (*Quit whining like a girl*). The way it made me hate myself.

Coming into my trans identity was like stepping into the warmth of the sun. It was welcoming, with the potential to burn. When I stepped into my womanhood it was so right that it overruled the fear, rejection, and hate. I ventured outside more often. I spent time in the grassy fields of Texas, and in the long mountainous forests of Colorado. I breathed in a world full of beauty and fluidity. I bathed in rivers and lakes. I ran my hand across trees larger than buildings. I often found myself in the forest, exploring what it meant to be connected to the land, what it meant to simply exist within it. And when I moved to California, I found myself at the edge of one world, pressing against the aquamarine abyss of another. (*Cross it*). I was scared as the water lapped at my feet, ruffling against the shore. It did not seem to have an end. It stretched over the horizon like a storm, but it did not sound like one. Gulls cawed above, a pelican swooped down and across the water. The wind was soft. The sun was warm. The air was crisp. I moved forward and the sea seemed to cradle my feet.

Then, I dove in.

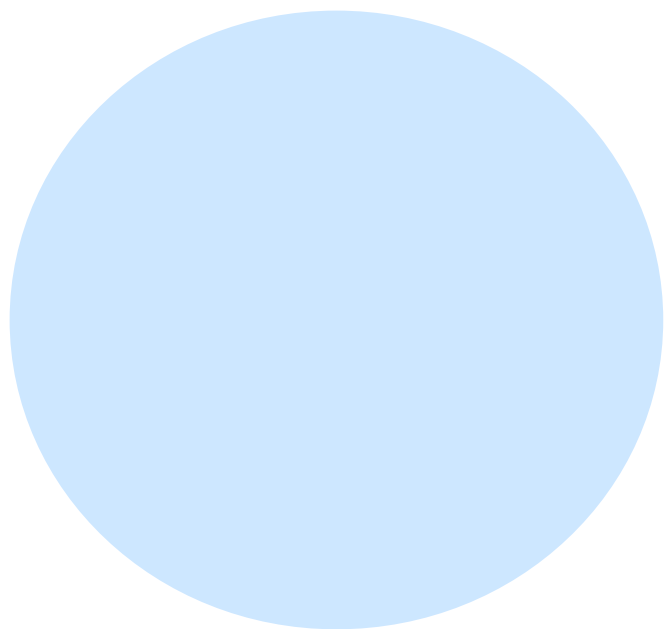
There was a moment of fear, but as the ocean swaddled me like her child, I felt myself changing. In those waters, the shape of my body did not matter, the depth of my voice did not matter, and the things people called me did not matter. It was as if the water was stitching together those lost, hidden parts of myself. I smiled, I cried, and I embraced myself and the life that was given to me.

I still think of the darkness sometimes.

Sometimes it haunts me in my dreams, or invades my memories.

But it is not what it once was, just as I am not what I once was.

I am still fractured into iridescent pieces, but in the forest and against the sea, I am stitched together, thread by thread, piece by piece. I look away from that darkness, and to the sky – gray, blue, purple, orange – and I smile.



Familiarity in Discomfort

by Renée Fournier

“Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out.”

But...

I’m not sure I want to.

There is familiarity in my discomfort,
I know how to handle it.

Still,

there is something inside me, it yearns to be discovered.

To be known.

A creature with my eyes.

It scratches at the walls I’ve built.

It howls in my voice.

Can others hear it?

~~I hope so.~~

~~I hope not.~~

It paces in its cell.

It doesn’t seek vengeance,
it only craves freedom.

Freedom for us both.

It is not the dangerous creature that others believe it is,
that they made me believe it is.

That they made me believe I am.

With the key in hand, I cannot open the cage.

For as much as the bars keep it trapped in,
they keep *them* out.

They keep *us* safe.

There is Familiarity in my Discomfort.

The Wandering Knight

by William Rivera

The shopkeeper looked up from fiddling with the change in his pocket and found a broken shape standing before him. The man was ragged, wearing mismatched, rusted pieces of armor, looking like a poorly cobbled metal shoe. Feeling slight unease, he forced out his rehearsed lines. “Your armor looks worse for wear traveler, could I interest you in a new set?”

The knight looked like he had been hindered and broken down by the weight of the world and then some. Every inch of the man's skin was covered in clothing or bits of armor. The shopkeep could not discern if the person was actually a human.

The broken knight lifted his head slightly and spoke through the rusty and malformed face mask, “No good sir, this one will do,” the knight responded.

“Ah, but you haven’t heard my offer just yet,” retorted the shopkeep.

The dented, rusted helmet of the traveling knight lifted ever so slightly as if considering the offer. The shopkeeper took this small opportunity to reel in another customer. “Well because I have never seen your face around here before I should interest you in what the locals have in their–” the shopkeeper could barely finish until the knight put up his ripped, gloved hand to halt the keep from wasting his breath.

“This armor has been through many battles and can withstand anything that is thrown or stabbed its way.” The knight kept his hand held up, then quickly crushed the air in his palm, making a tight clenched fist.

“Sir, if you don’t mind me asking, who is it that you fight for?” The shopkeeper asked sincerely, wanting to know where this unknown man hailed from. After no reply the keep asked another question, knowing that asking a more specific question would give him more clues to where this man came from.

“What king do you serve under?” After the question was muttered, a long, awkward silence hung in the air.

A soft chuckle came from underneath the war torn helmet. The chest plate, barely hanging on by a makeshift leather pauldron in place where a metallic one should be, rose and fell ever so slightly. The laugh was soft but the armor made it seem loud. The creaking from the bent and misshapen pieces of metal and what appeared to be rust sprinkled about made the laugh seem more pitiful than humorous. “King?” the knight asked. “I serve no king.” The voice that traveled out allowed the shopkeeper to hear the smile under the battered helmet.

After another brief awkward silence, the keep spoke up. “You serve no king... but wear the armor of a knight? That sounds absurd. Unheard of even.” The keep sounded more enthralled than appalled.

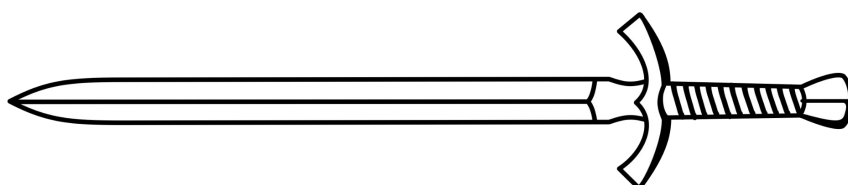
The knight was able to see the questioning look that he always got when he told someone he served under no one. “I do not serve anyone above me or those who believe they are above me,” the knight responded.

The knight's hand traveled to the side of his hip where the pommel of his sword rested.

The shopkeeper started to become nervous when he saw the knight's subtle hand movement to the pommel of his weapon. "I don't want no trouble my good sir, I only wish to show you the select items we have that would suit yourself properly." The shopkeeper bowed his head slightly as if to show he meant no harm.

"I wish you no trouble, my good sir," the knight said, "I only wish to show you who I am." The man unsheathed his blade in an instant with a whoosh of the air as he drew his sword. The sword glistened in the sunlight, the most beautiful weapon the shopkeeper had ever laid his eyes upon. A magnificent two-handed sword but handled as if lighter than a feather. A shorter hilt than perceived at first but a long and thick blade. The way the sun beamed off of it made it seem as if the blade were white. With a slight turn of hand, turning the blade away from the sun and into the keeper's view, he was able to see the silverness of it and the etchings of different names inscribed along the blade itself.

"What are all of those names you have on your blade? The men and women you have killed on your journey?" the shopkeeper asked, appalled by all the different reasons those names could be on the blade, none of them good. The shopkeeper's eyes grew wider in fear at this conclusion.



“No... nothing like that at all.” The knight rested the blade on his other hand as if presenting it to the man. The knight took a step forward to allow the keeper a further glance. The keep was transfixed as to how well kept this sword was in comparison to the armor. The difference was astounding. No rust shone upon the blade. Perfectly polished and shined. No dent or sign of wear.

“How do you keep your blade so well kept? Do you know a smith?” the keeper asked, curious to see who the master bladesman would be.

“No, I tend to the blade myself,” said the knight.

“Impossible,” the shopkeeper said, aghast. “How is it that your armor looks the way it does but your weapon is pristine?”

The knight lifted his head, almost prideful. “This weapon is solely used to defend the honor of my friends,” said the knight.

“Friends? You’re traveling alone if you haven’t noticed through that broken mask of yours.” The edge of the keeper’s tone was questioning but that is exactly what the knight wanted.

“Aye, I am alone. But what I wouldn’t do for the people that I have acquainted myself with along my perilous journey.” Before the shopkeeper could say anything, the knight continued. “I defend the honor and life of those who confide in me. These are all my friends.” The knight pointed to the names on the blade.

“This man here, Shannon of House Woodburrow, was a man who patrolled the village in honor of his house and his fathers name. He made sure to keep trouble at bay and allow the people of his village to live safely. When I traveled through he was nothing but kind to a weary traveler. We drank and sang songs together many a night, but when his village was attacked by a raider clan, he was alone in his battle. I offered my sword in return for his friendship.” The knight took a long pause, letting the memories flood back to the forefront of his mind. Strength filled his voice as he continued.

“The night was long and grueling but not a scratch was laid on him. We fought hard through the night. I was able to deflect the brunt of whatever came his way. I only wished to protect this new found friend. After sharing his story and what he wants for his future, I wished to protect him with all I had within me so he could preserve his past and live through his future.” The knight bowed his head slightly in remembrance.

“You protected the village out of friendship? After knowing the man for only but a few nights?” the keeper questioned. The tone the keeper had was a mix of amusement but the hint of wonder in the way he asked made the knight feel warm.

“Aye, my friend. Nothing but the truth. The armor matters not, for the blade speaks the truth. My power is this sword and the memories of every man and woman that I have helped. Although I have slain plenty, ‘twas but for the honor of a comrade,” the knight said. “I take the brunt of the force in order for them to stay safe. The scars on my armor show that their wounds are my wounds.

“The blade being etched with their name is them being remembered and honored through my journeys. Their names are my strength and what continues to push me forward. To allow a future that is bright and plentiful.” The knight flipped the blade upwards and rotated it down back into the sheath. “I will pass on your offer,” he said to the shopkeeper, “but I do appreciate you taking the opportunity to make the sale.”

The shopkeeper stood there in wonder at this mystical being in front of him. The armor seemed to become less rusty and worn and more broken in and ready. The keep rubbed his eyes in confusion at the subtle transformation. The shopkeep cocked his head in confusion. He thought back to when he first saw the knight. The knight did seem in terrible shape when he first walked up, but now he walked away confidently, the weight of the knight’s world briefly shared with the keep.

“Thank you for allowing me to share my story. If you’ll excuse me, there are companions to be made.” The knight walked off and made his way into the Inn. What a strange man, the keeper thought... a battle horn blew in the distance, as well as battle cry. The keep’s eyes widened. The raider village from the east had returned for its protection tax.

“KNIGHT!” screamed the shopkeep.

The knight turned back around swiftly, one hand gripping the sword hilt, ready to pounce on those who threatened his new acquaintance.

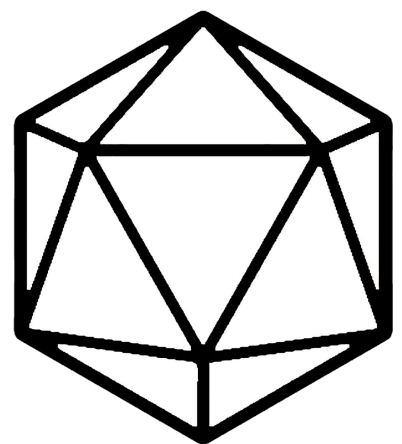
“What is your name?” the knight asked.

A Year's Worth of Dungeons-and-Dragons

by Madison Ferdman

Dungeons-and-Dragons (D&D) is portrayed time and time again in media and pop culture. Games like *Baldur's Gate 3* or the animated series *The Legend of Vox Machina* rely heavily on its rules and lore. Even the well-known Netflix series *Stranger Things* has villains who are based on and named after infamous *D&D* monsters (demogorgon, mind flayer, Vecna). But what exactly is *D&D*? Simply put, *Dungeons-and-Dragons* is a tabletop game of interactive storytelling. Players create characters of different classes and mythical races used to follow a plot controlled and often created by that campaign's Dungeon Master (DM). Sounds pretty straightforward, right? Well, maybe in theory. The game leans heavily on role playing with the impact of each character's action determined by how high a dice roll is. In other words, anything can happen.

After years of wanting to play, I finally had my chance to do so in March of 2023. Thanks to the suggestion from a friend, my peers and I, all of whom were taking the Imagineering class at Cal Lu, formed a campaign. Starting at 7:30 PM the following week, we each promptly showed up to the WRAC, taking over room 111 as we pushed tables and chairs together.



The DM assisted me in creating my first character, a kenku ranger called Kiko, a raven-like person named after my pet cockatiel. The session began shortly after, though I was unfamiliar with the rules, and even more unfamiliar with my classmates who made up the campaign's party. While I'll admit I'm normally quiet, I was more quiet than ever, unsure of what to do or who to talk to when my character was first introduced. Regardless, the session moved on, and from there we agreed to continue to play every following Wednesday.

A few months later, a new campaign began and the party had shrunk in size. Now familiar with the concept of the game, I was able to create a new character on my own. Named after the flying lemur from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, this new character was a 2 foot tall lizard person, a kobold rogue named Momo. Like a sewer rat, she stole, fought, and clawed her way to defeating villains and creatures alike, acting on the basis of being chaotic just for the sake of it (or maybe for a slice of cake in return). The creation of a more outgoing character allowed me to get to know my peers better as we played side-by-side. Together, we watched the *Dungeons-and-Dragons* movie *Honor Among Thieves* and attended last year's Renaissance Faire. With time, I became lucky enough to call them my friends.

Most recently, I played as a minotaur barbarian called Bern, named after Bernard from the *Where the Wild Things Are* film adaptation. With a personality similar to Ferdinand the bull, Bern was a gentle giant until it came time to avenge characters from his past. Together, my friends and I fought villains more powerful than any we had fought before. We defeated an undead spellcasting lich, a war-hungry cyclops, and many, many zombies.

While the campaign is on pause, we will soon return to fight another lich as we made the mistake of freeing him from his prison during a jailbreak. In the meantime, my friends and I play board games, race against one another in Mario Kart, and return to old D&D campaigns.

In the span of a year, I have formed new interests and made long-lasting friendships. Having become a close friend group, my party and I actively hang out together outside these mystical realms, hosting movie nights, meeting for weekly dinners, and, once again, attending this year's Renaissance Faire. Now, some are even creating Dungeons-and-Dragons companies together, in which they write and sell campaigns with exclusive merch. D&D brings people together both inside and outside fantastical worlds, and I am grateful for the adventures it has taken me on.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Born and raised in the scenic Conejo Valley, **Massimo C. Bianco** is the proud owner of Conejo Valley Online, a digital marketing agency. His passions include maps, hiking, and exploring diverse cultures, which fuel both his personal and professional life.

Nadia Fahmy is an international student from Egypt pursuing her clinical psychology degree at California Lutheran University. She's always been fond of traveling; the USA is the 10th country she's visited!

Renée Fournier is a sophomore and a psychology major. She is a student worker at Pearson Library and in her free time she likes to create short comics.



Madison Ferdman, a current junior at Cal Lutheran, has been a writing consultant at the Writing Center for a year and a half. Pursuing a degree in Multimedia, she loves to express herself creatively, whether through drawing, animating, or writing.

Israel Lozano is an undergraduate student majoring in History and minoring in TESOL and the University Honors Program.

E.V. Mae is a senior English major and a lover of nature, reading, and writing. Her academic/literary interests include fantasy, climate fiction, ecocriticism, and more recently post-colonial studies and petrofiction.

William Rivera is a current Cal Lu Grad Student getting his Single Subject Credential in English.

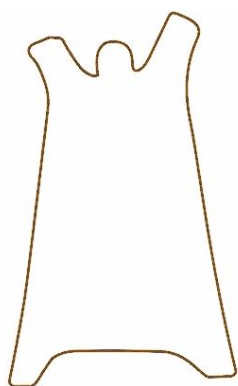
Sherilyn Rudney is a senior majoring in sociology. When she's not focusing on schoolwork, she enjoys writing experimental poetry and short stories. She draws inspiration from her childhood, motherhood, and ultra-long-distance bikepacking bike rides. She hopes to compile her life story and the epic experiences she's had riding her bicycle across the country into a comprehensive book that she would like to see as inspiration for people to follow their dreams.

Jazmine Smith is a first generation college student with a passion for student advocacy.

Dr. Ernst F. Tonsing (known by students as the Tonz) graduated from CLU's sister school Midland Lutheran University, served in the United States Navy as an officer, taught in the Navy Intelligence School at Little Creek, Virginia, graduated from Pacific Lutheran Seminary in Berkeley, and earned a second Masters and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He came to CLU in 1974 to teach New Testament and Greek, retiring in 2003 when he wrote the history of CLU, *O Summon Your Sons and Daughters*, to celebrate CLU's 50th anniversary.

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Thank you to **Dr. Scott Chiu**, my Writing Center director, faculty mentor, and independent study instructor. It was his idea to create the Gumby Writing Project in the first place, and I hope he will continue the tradition long after I am gone!

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The Gumby Writing Project

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