

IN THE WOODS SOMEWHERE

LeeAnn Gelapino



I've been dreaming about Bobby since he disappeared. He was a sophomore and I was in sixth grade. The whole district was consumed by the incident. Stuff like that just doesn't happen here. It didn't help that our town is about the size of four shopping malls smashed together. Everyone knew everything—at least it seemed that way.

The dreams go like this: I'm Bobby's shadow. At first, the dreams were faint and short. I'd barely remember the events by the time I left my bed in the morning. But, as I've gotten older, they've become more intense. More distinct. More commanding of my attention. They never go in chronological order. They jump all over the time spectrum. Sometimes I'm with him while he's still in school, trailing him through the hallways. Or I'm hanging out with him at his house. Other times I'm living with him in the woods. Most of the time, nothing notable happens. It's surreal. But it's always after things got bad.

I wish I could have seen it all first hand. I'm the kind of person who looks at someone and wonders what's going on in their head. I read every face and put words in its place. I want to know what it

felt like, being him. I can't count the number of times his face has jumped out at me from a newspaper or my T.V. screen after it all went down. In my dreams, I travel backwards through time. I disintegrate, become invisible. I hang like fog over the town. I'm an omniscient presence. Unfortunately.

I've learned a lot about Bobby from these private visits in my head. I like to think it's all true, what I've learned. I like to think I could've been there for him when no one else was. I replay these not-so-fictional scenes in my head, wondering what could have been done different.

"Do you believe in God?" they ask him in school.

"I wish, but I'm not that naïve."

"I don't get it."

Of course they didn't get it. No one understood Bobby. No one. That's why he wrote. Everything everyone knows about Bobby is from his journal. He was a quiet kid, but loved to write. You could recognize the sound of his pen on paper before his actual voice. The journal was found by the police. It was shoved under his mattress like a dirty secret, the way drug dealers stash their cash between their mattresses. It was his life, his treasure, his escape. Not even his parents knew it existed. When they were made aware of its contents, they wished it stayed hidden. No one wants to know that side of someone is capable of existing, especially not a son. We all want to think the best of each other, but the fact is that we are all human. We all have dark places inside of us. Everyone has something hidden in their closet or under their mattress. But no one ever expects it to go this far. No one ever expects things to get out of hand. We don't think that the badness in the world is able to penetrate our own little comfort bubble (until it actually happens).

One evening I floated up through Bobby's window. The police had found his journal. They were showing it to his parents. I told them that it was a bad idea, but no one listened to me. They flipped it open to a random page. Printed at the top of the page were five words that broke his parents' hearts. They might've broken everyone's heart, I don't know, but in my dream I watched them read it: [Why I Won't Kill Myself](#). His mom was crying. His dad was stoic. They were confused as to why he'd even write about that, but it made a lot of sense to me. They refused to read further. Conveniently, the scene switched then to Bobby sitting on his bedroom floor, writing. I peeked over his shoulder to read his words. His body was shaking.

His argument had three main points, written like a list.

1. Fear
2. Empathy
3. Clarity

No one really knows what happens after we die, the entry began, and that's scary as hell. In my dream I watched him write the words for the first time, before anyone else even knew they were thoughts, and he was scared. He was sitting on the floor and writing and scared and all I could do was watch. I don't know what I believe exactly, he wrote a few lines down, I don't believe in God, but even my doubt has doubts. I skipped around the page with my eyes, curious of what he'd have to say about empathy. I read the introduction, whispering to myself as if not to disturb him.

The only life I desire to ruin is my own, but ending my life may end the lives of others as well. My family. . . I wonder if other suicidal people think this way. If they feel this way. I feel too much. I feel not only my own, current, pain, but the pain of others and their future pain if I'd cease to live. It's a lot for me but it would be unbearable for them. . . .

I continued down the page to clarity. My throat was starting to swell and my eyes burned. His pen moved with a purpose, as if he had no choice but to get the words down on the page.

I live for the moments of clarity I have when I witness strangers genuinely enjoying life, in the moment, despite themselves and all of the shit in the world. These moments have a way of jumping out at you. They really make you feel, more than anything else. During these times, my pain doesn't exist. Nothing exists but their pleasure accompanied by the promise of more pleasure to be found in the world. It can happen on the street or at the grocery store. Anywhere, really. These moments fill me with hope and leave me raw. These moments are the ones I live for.

I can still see him in the grocery store. This was where we first met. He was looking bored and despondent, picking up bottles of soda pop, reading the labels, setting them down, repeating the process until settling for a 20 oz. of Dr. Pepper. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. My mom was in the next aisle down. He was alone. I felt my face flush. When he noticed me, it felt like I was hit by a truck. His eyes were that intense. I can imagine how silly I must've looked, standing there staring at him. I was thirteen, he was sixteen. My face grew hotter. I felt the heat in my ears. He smiled and his eyes softened. Just the slightest bit. Just enough for me to have that image branded inside my consciousness. I felt like the whole world had stopped, like it was hanging on a single breath. He turned away and headed towards check-out, his eyes no longer on me. They were far away, but I didn't know just how far at the time. That was the first and last time I saw him in person.

He wore his scars up and down his arms. The people in town told him to pray.

"It couldn't get worse," he said, as if saying the words allowed would make it real.

It's unsettling how mental disorders creep up on you without provocation or warning. I learned about it in my psychology class. No one knew exactly what Bobby could have been

suffering from. They speculate depression, anxiety, possibly schizophrenia.

I see Bobby sitting in class. I hear the teacher reciting something like, "The human degree of unsettledness is visible in the eyes, as well as the steadiness of the hand."

His pen jitters across the page he's currently on in his journal. He averts his eyes. I see the Bobby that others never have, never will.

No one was there to rub his back during wave after wave of panic attack. I was a nonexistent mist. I could only watch. The evidence was all there. I saw it clearly in my dreams, laid out like blueprints. Why couldn't anyone else see it? I ride the tears down his face like a water slide to hell.

One night I followed him home and caught a conversation between him and his dad.

"I feel like something bad is about to happen," Bobby said.

"When?" his father asked.

"Soon."

He sat on his bedroom floor, shivering from the October chill his open window let wander in. And he wandered out the window that night, whispering, "Don't let me be gone."

I followed him to his window. Clutching the sill, he situated himself, the muscles in his back tense as he faced the darkness. Then he jumped. Out of the window, out of his life.

I could feel most of what he felt. I knew most of what he thought. And he was confident. Or maybe he just didn't care anymore. He hit the ground, bending his legs to embrace the impact, and rolled. He stood and began to walk as if it were any other day. Not like his life was about to change. I watched him pull on the sleeves of his sleep shirt. He wore sweatpants cut into shorts and moccasins. He didn't seem bothered by the cold. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, or if he was thinking. He just walked and I followed.

I didn't witness his transformation, but one night horns formed on his head. I was convinced that they were from the words left unsaid pushing against the inside of this head as he wondered, "When will I be dead?"

I remember a time when we were walking and he tripped and fell while admiring the moon. I laughed, though I knew he couldn't hear me. That was just him. He was just that kind of boy. He was the kind of boy who made friends with the ladybugs that landed on his forearm during those lonely days in the woods. We're hungry for people to make sense of this crazy world.

Of course they searched for us. Some nights in the woods, I'd find him hiding in the roots of upturned trees or at the very top of those still standing. The authorities claimed to have overturned every rock in all 60,000 square feet of Chini Woods. They always came back empty-handed. I swear I could hear his parents' sorrow every time I opened my bedroom window that first year.

It felt as if the town itself was a living, breathing body and it was holding its breath for so long. Too long. The town grew quieter and quieter as time went on. I can't remember when it fell silent.

I close my eyes and I watch him pace a frozen creek.

"I keep hearing flies buzzing like they do around dead things but I'm the only one here," he mumbles to himself.

His hair is dark brown and matted. His skin is blue from the cold. Ice snaps beneath his feet. He keeps looking at the ice. He keeps wondering what he's doing out here.

He is inching his way further from shore. It's cracking under his weight.

He looks at me then and calls, "What are you doing? Why are you here? Go back!" He says I don't want to see how it ends.

I wince and leave him, dissipating like fog, flying backwards, crashing through tree branches and through my bedroom window and into my still sleeping body. I wake with a start.

I like to think that he made it out of Chini Woods. I like to think that these dreams are just a fantasy I constructed from the constant rumors I hear and not visions of what happened in the past. How could they be? He has to be out there somewhere, alive.



"We all want to think the best of each other, but the fact is that we are all human. We all have dark places inside of us."

- *LeeAnn Gelapino*

STITCHES

Riley Ross



When I stay at my parents' house I sleep in the room of a girl I've never met. I'm called by her name. I see her clothes in the closet, her things in the drawers. They don't fit me anymore. I hold up the dresses, the T-shirts—did they ever? And if they did, what was that girl like? I run my hands over the smooth surface of her life in my mind. Every thread is in place, but my rough fingernails snag and ruin it.

I can play pretend at being her if I try. She has my nose, my favorite color, cross stitches the rhythm of her thoughts like me. During the period where she blurred into me, we learned to sew. Xs in neat lines, rows of prayers.

Embroidery starts with intricacies, stitches I squint to see. They are never the same color that I expect, numbered skeins of embroidery floss organized before use. Three stitches like my mother taught me to secure the thread. One for an anchor, two for luck, three for insurance. Always leave a tail. The stitches must be small and perfect.

My mother taught me to sew, her mother taught her, it's the earliest form of female self-expression. Women teaching girls teaching their daughters to create in careful, useful ways. Whip stitches, backstitches, cross stitches.

I am not a woman; still the craft has been passed to me.

People on the street call me miss, remind me of my needle and thread beginnings, how the tail dangles from my sewing and gets tangled. My heritage is cross stitched and hanging on the wall in my childhood bedroom, sewn by my pregnant mother.

I hear my mother cry through the thin walls of her house, she asks God why am I like this. What happened to her daughter. I ask God to spare her from what my existence does to her. In her eyes, I am burning; I am not enough.

When I came out to my parents. I played it off casually—there are worse things to be—and didn't meet their eyes.

I stumble across my dad's search history and see articles with titles like "Trans-Trending" and "Why So Many Millennials Are Bisexual." It's been six years. I wonder why he can't just ask me. I wonder why I can't ask him either, why I whip-stitch my lips together when I go home. He talks about his daughter with pride in his eyes. I replace the she with they, bite my tongue.

I've never said anything, and I don't know if I ever will. I'm afraid of the response I'll get, ashamed to be stripped down to bone.

I wake up in a cold sweat. I dream about my grandmother's delicate hands quilting scraps of fabric while her family ate mostly love. I watched her hands falter, caught the needle as it dropped. It pricked my fingers crimson; she was buried with her thimble. The fabric she stitched lays over me. There are too many holes to keep me warm; the wind sings it to shreds. I shiver and she places her hands over mine, the last of her warmth.

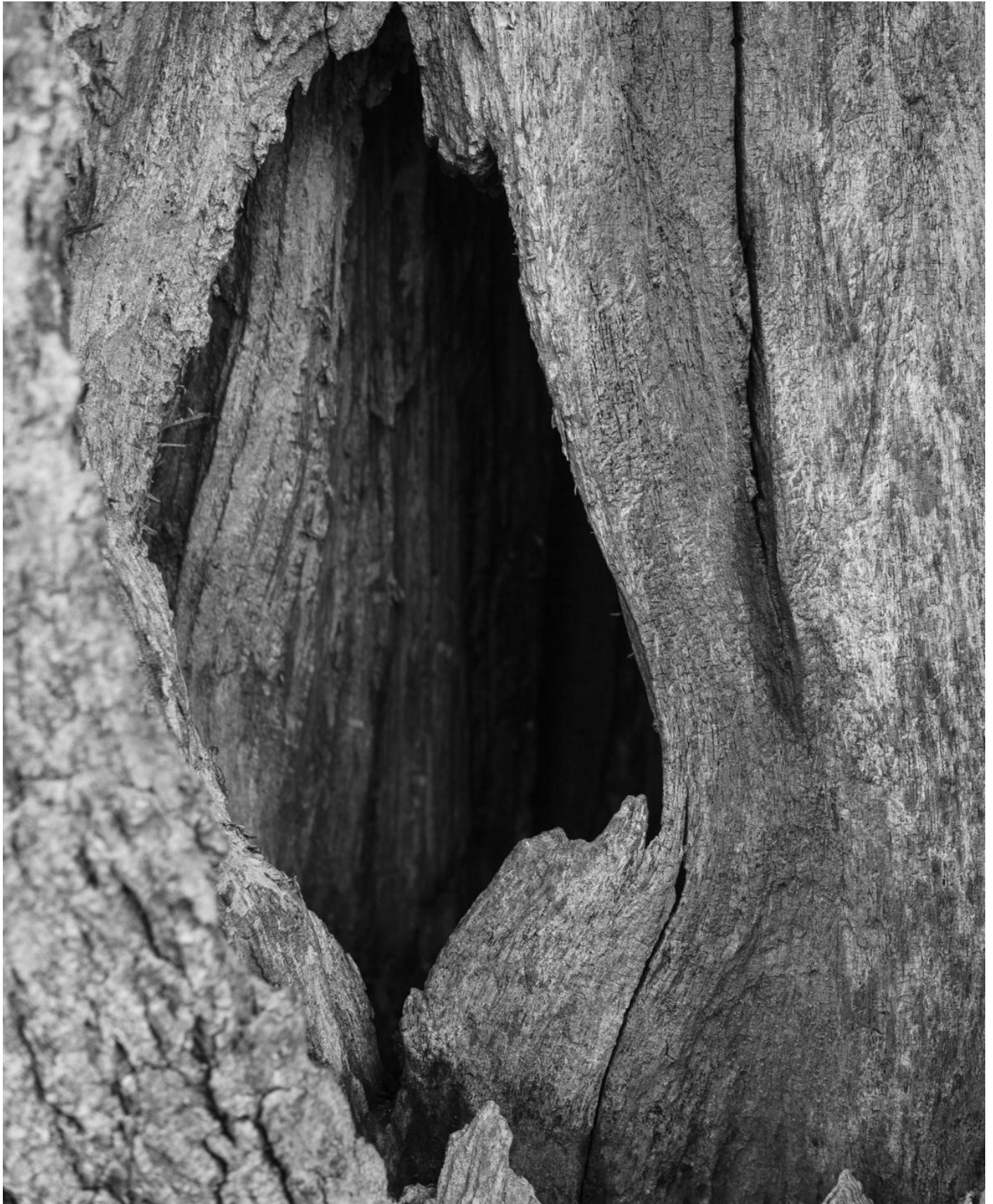
I am sewing her skin to mine; she is living through my young hands. Intricacies, keeping us stitched together. My mother did the same thing. She has a bookshelf of patterns, some she never sew. I silently leave a space in my home for them; the empty spot yawns at me. There are pieces to be rearranged on my walls, beautiful, finished works of needlecraft.

I try to become those finished pieces, created without a stray thread. The back doesn't once it's finished. I am and will always be the wayward ends and the furled knots with their blurry shape and messy colors.

I'm not what a woman should be. I'm not even what a woman is. I stitch confusion into my work, try to organize patterns. My transverse fault thoughts grind against each other. Healing comes slowly, if at all. I let the fading light stream through the blinds of my window and warm my face.

I make do—intricacies, French knots, a square in a circular feminine box.

My mother looks at me like my queer body is dirty sometimes, trying but falling short of understanding. I try to see nobility in my queerness where my mother sees sin.



"I can play pretend at being her if I try. She has my nose, my favorite color, cross stitches the rhythm of her thoughts like me."

- *Riley Ross*



I Feel Like I'd Lick Them Raw

LEEANN
CELAPINO

I feel like I'd lick them raw if I was given the time I needed to clean my wounds. I can imagine it'd be comparable to a deer with a salt block, but don't ask me why I'd think that, maybe it's just tongues and chemicals, but don't ask me why I'd think that, either, instead, ask me why my favorite flower is a lilac, or why I get uncomfortable about massages, or open flames, actually, don't ask me that one, but ask me about what I was like as a child, but only before middle school, not during, not after, or you could ask me what I write about and I could lie and say you and then we could kiss, maybe, but I can imagine it'd be comparable to a deer with a salt block.

Identity

ADRIANA
RODRIGUEZ

It's about arroz con habichuelas and mom's special cookies

It's about abuela's warm hugs y la sonrisa del bebé

It's about the mountains and el Morro Las chiringas — the kites — flying over the blue sky

It's about brown — moreno — mixing with white — blanco — and black — negro — and creating a mix of all three

It's about plena and salsa and merengue

It's about lo que crea me

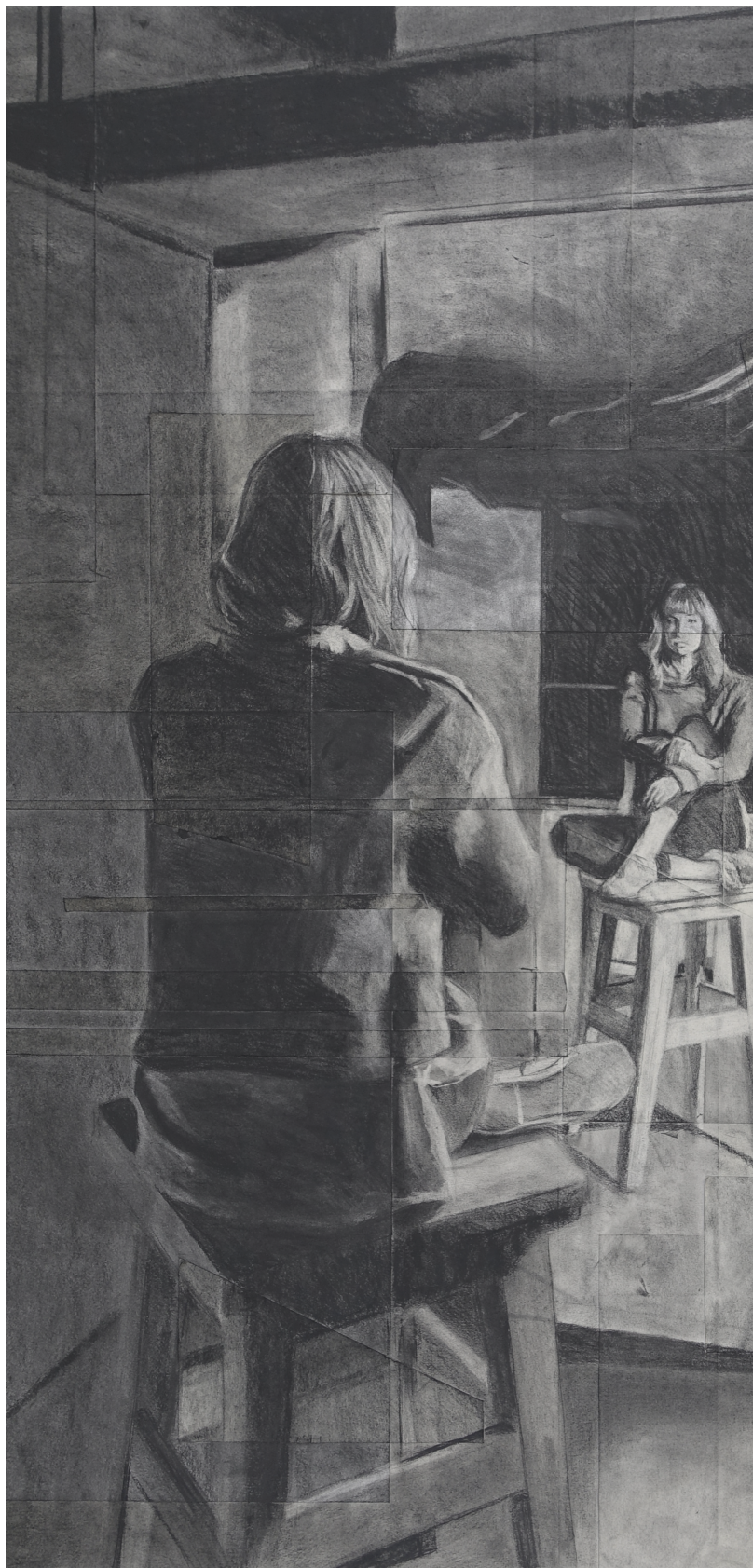
It's about lo que cambio when I come here

It's about what people no entienden

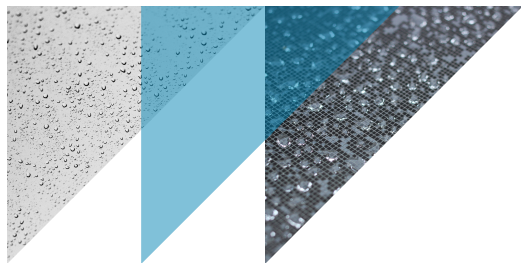
It's about lo que no preguntan

It's about what they don't see

But es sobre mí



Dear Reader,



We, the OWL Editors, would like to thank you for reading. Our mission for this year's OWL was to build a magazine composed of exemplary works of writing and artwork, and we believe we did so with the collection of works featured in this issue. It's our hope, reader, that you have enjoyed reading the magazine as much as we have enjoyed making it.

We wanted our issue of the OWL to truly stand out. Not just in appearance, but in its contents. As a result, the pieces we've chosen hinge on the unifying theme of identity. The editors of this magazine, though different in many ways, came together to present you, dear reader, with pieces of literature and art that capture what it means to be an individual.

To our contributors who may be reading this: Thank you. Your work has made the magazine possible. Without it, we would not have been able to create a magazine filled with the complexities of humanity that can only be conveyed through art — in all its forms.

We wish you the best in all that you do.

*Sincerely,
The OWL Editors*

Hayley Glessner

Lauren Heaney

Merritt Ver Steeg

Cuckoo Gupta

Glelia Rose

Jordan Waterwash

O Captain! My Captain!

Walt Whitman, poet and humanist, lived his life as an individual. The unbending authenticity he expressed through his writing reminds us all to spend our lives celebrating our identities, no matter how different from our neighbors, and act kindly to nature and those around us.

