

Creative Writing Portfolio

Cole Barrios

Melipona - Flash Fiction, Coming of Age (800 words)	1
Emerson Calderón - Character Treatment (407 words)	4
Bean-Filled Body - Short Poem (53 words)	5
Pumpkin Foam - Long Poem (414 words)	6
Lunchtime Samurai - Short Story, Action, Fiction (1790 words)	8

Melipona

“Jefe, don’t move,” called my tío. “There’s a bee on you.” He seemed almost happy about it. I had curled into a ball on the edge of the pool. My cousins and I were competing to see who could make the smallest cannonball splash, and I had a duty as the oldest to always win. The bee landed on the sleeve of the bright blue swim-shirt my mom had forced me to wear so I wouldn’t get sunburnt. The sun and I hadn’t realized I was brown yet, after all, or it wouldn’t have been a problem. Brown kids can’t get sunburns.

I froze in place. Chlorinated water and sweat ran down my forehead, nose, mouth, chin. Dripped onto the concrete. The bee wouldn’t leave. It loved how bright my shirt was. Must have reminded it of flowers. My tío loved how bright my ears were. Tíos like to laugh when their nephews get scared. I stayed balled up and dripping wet for ten minutes. If there was anything I hated more than bees at six years old, though, it was boredom. Time to get rid of it. I leaned into the pool, letting the water envelop me for a few seconds—no sting! I was free! I began to swim over to rejoin my cousins. As soon as I did, I felt a flash of pain tear through my shoulder.

Three years later, I sat in the most boring room on the planet. White walls, white drawers, white floors, a white phone near a white bed covered in white paper—even the chair I was sitting on was white. I wore white that day, too, having learned never to wear bright colors lest the bees find you. Boring was a part of life; pain, on the other hand, was the worst. Especially the kind that went inside you, that your body had to fight and spit back out before it infected you and your soul. A nurse walked in, first speaking with my mother, then turning to me:

“I’m going to give you a flu shot now. It might sting a bit. Would you rather keep your eyes closed?” She looked bored, too.

I nodded, and closed my eyes, but I could still hear the nurse buzzing around, opening a drawer, screwing on a cap, flicking a stinger, lifting my sleeve, wiping my shoulder down with an alcohol wipe—my shoulder was wet again. Sweat dripped down my forehead, nose, chin; it smelled like chlorine. I couldn’t breathe. I felt her firm rubber hand hold my arm in place. “NO!” I opened my eyes and screamed, jumping back in my chair. The nurse flinched, then moved towards me, grabbing my arm again. I karate-chopped her in the hip. She sighed and went to the white phone. Two more nurses burst into the room. She told me to calm down—struggling only made it worse. They might have to give me another one if they messed up. But what child in their right mind would be calm when two adults held them down and a third flew towards them with a giant translucent bee? So, I fought back as much as I could. Until I felt a flash of pain tear through my shoulder.

The tattoo parlor my boyfriend and I waited in wasn’t like the cool ones you see in movies. It had tap-to-pay. The walls were an ugly off-white. Like what you see on those Adobe missions they make you learn about in elementary school without really telling you how many people got stung while building them. “C’mon, it would look *so* good on you,” he pleaded. He had wanted to get matching flower tattoos to celebrate my 20th birthday. I was hesitant. When I told him why, though (because bees love flowers), he looked at me like *I* was the crazy one.

He didn’t get it. He and his body were used to bees with stingers. Where I come from, bees are ancient, divine, soul-cleansing, and—most importantly—stingerless. But the European bees with stingers wake up at five in the morning, and work all day, and they make more honey,

even if it's worse. So my family's bees are mostly gone now, and because they're gone, he didn't get it, and because he didn't get it, he cried when I told him I didn't want that tattoo. It scares me when grown men cry over other people's bodies. More than potential bees and their potential stingers. I agreed to get the tattoo. As I sat down in the chair, though, and they rubbed my arm with an alcohol wipe, I realized that if I got the tattoo, I wouldn't be able to swim with my family again for months until it healed. If it ever healed. So I got up and left.

EMERSON CALDERÓN

This character was written for my upcoming webcomic.

Name: Emerson “Em” Calderón

Pronouns: He/Him

Age/Height/Weight: 18 / 5’11” / 130 lbs.

Ethnicity: Chicano

Strengths: Insightful, trustworthy, empathetic

Weaknesses: Self-critical, controlling, obsessive

Quirks: Medieval weapons collector, miser

Moving away from home is a big transition, and college is a *lot* of work. When four freshmen discover a portal to a fantasy world in their closet, the last thing they want is to see what’s inside—unfortunately for them, everything *inside* the portal wants *out*, so they’re forced to cram monsters and magic into their already hectic lives.

Emerson Calderón is one of the four protagonists of *Closet Campaign*. He has a thoughtful, warm personality and an inquisitive mind. He’s also a little obsessive—in the second grade, Emerson read from *one* ancient culture encyclopedia and decided to chase that niche for the next ten years.

Eager to contribute to the highest level of discourse, Emerson has spent his whole life working towards academic prestige and puts himself under immense pressure to succeed, often to an unhealthy degree. These high expectations usually bleed into his personal life—although he is a kind, reliable friend, he has difficulty letting go of his peers’ opinions.

As an ambitious person, Emerson sees the newly discovered portal in his closet as a roadblock to achieving his goals and tries his best not to let it affect his productivity. On the other hand, as a person of integrity, Emerson feels responsible for protecting his friends and the university at large from *whatever* finds its way out of the closet. These two core parts of his personality often come at odds with each other throughout the narrative.

Appearance:

Emerson is a tall, tense young man with a stick-thin frame that makes his otherwise scholarly outfits look like baggy streetwear. He keeps his face clean-shaven and wears his dark brown hair in a [mid-tapered crew cut](#). His skin is a pale brown, accommodating his Chicano heritage and penchant for reading indoors.

He wears horn-rimmed spectacles and “dresses grandpa style,” according to his roommates, though he’d contend that a more apt description would be ‘dark academia.’ In fact, most of his accessories follow that aesthetic—he lugs his textbooks in a worn leather knapsack, walks to school in dress shoes, and carries a pocket watch, although he’s more likely to just check his phone.



Short Poem
Free Verse
53 words

Bean-Filled Body

Over the summer, I was abandoned
on a concrete bench. Pants and stone
alike were slathered in colorful
acrylics that bled from every pore,
but mostly from my
eyes. Now, I'm bent at a weird
angle—cramped and a little bit too
warm; but I refuse to move my leg
because it's touching yours.

Long Poem, Free Verse

413 words

PUMPKIN FOAM

It was a hollow red, and it smelled like burning, and it crusted over leaf-tips on stems in pots.

If they were real, and not plastic, they might have tasted sour.

Your room always reminded me of religious *iconography*—

It drew in the sun's yellows, the brick's erubescence, the blues of the concrete outside.

The days melted together like chocolate the second your head hit my chest and the TV turned on,

The Space Prince's haloed figure a wordless chimera laying witness to the prayers you offered me;

I was your paradise, but only by convenience, only by nightfall, and only

In front of the lemon hard candy on your nightstand. Each time I opened my

Mouth, your smile would caramelize a little more, and

I'd find myself a little smaller.

Sometimes you forget how clouds

Taste when the earth and sky fall asleep in cars and hospital rooms

Instead of coming home. So I curled up on our dirty brown couch, watching

The Animaniacs piss the security guard off. I love it

When they work together to get his attention—even if it's negative.

I know why.

They only have each other in that empty water tower.

Thank you, said my host-dad—For what? Eating your food?

The harbor wave struck Minamisanriku in 2011; deep, cerulean waves crawled over four-story walls

Toward the office where his son worked.

For listening.

See if you can piece together the correct order:

A substitute teacher shook me by the neck in the second grade. I refused

To shut up, more times than they could handle. It's not my fault—I'd rather die than stop telling Veronica

About my cousin's famous rock band. Even if I made it all up. Maybe I deserved it. Would anyone have

Believed me?

Finally, my vision blacked out, and I became the fourth Warner brother—doomed to chase and be chased,

Until I get caught, and locked, in the see-through water tower. Behind the glass, I look a bit like a

Lemon drop; so I climb out and skate back to your place, where I ask you—*would you still love me if*

I lived in space, thousands of light-years away? And when you answer with a smile—

I look at myself in the TV's reflection.

In early June, a little man lies on a little asteroid—

Not his, because there are no claws, no jarred flowers.

Jewels glitter over black velvet, but

His back is cold and arched, and

He's bleeding, because he listened.

Lunchtime Samurai

The air whistled as it parted around the wooden sword's edge, ending in a loud whack as it hit another of its kind. Strike. Block. The swings were clumsy at first, but one by one, they got sharper, faster. Strike. Deflect. Counter. The red samurai steadied his breath, and his pulse slowed. He gazed intensely at his opponent, noticing the slightest shift in weight from one foot to another, the way the blue swordsman adjusted his grip. A shakuhachi started to drown out the surrounding noises, but it too faded away as the red samurai swung once more, this time with precision.

Jaime leaned in until his face was only a few inches from the TV. When he first began learning the blade, he'd been perplexed by the nature of the shakuhachi's cool, breathy whistle. Its noise was pensive, foreign to him. But the more that the boy studied the samurais' movements, the less aware of the music he became. He remained frozen in place until the screen went black. It took a few seconds for him to recognize the bloodshot eyes, busted lip, and determined expression reflected in the display as his own. *Bedtime*. He took the VHS tape out of the Philips and put it back in its box, then crawled up the stairs on all fours towards his room. Usually, when his mom worked late, he'd stay up until he heard the garage door open at the crack of dawn. But tomorrow was a big day. He hopped onto the mattress, pulled the sheets up to his neck, and closed his eyes.

That morning, Philips ate the tape with a loud whirr. Some amount of whining was to be expected—it had been eating the same snack for the past month. Jaime patted the VCR player empathetically. He left it playing while he crawled underneath the sofa, reaching,

reaching—*there*. His hand wrapped around something cold and plastic, and with a practiced effort, he pulled the toy katana out from its hiding place. Then, he got down to business, mimicking the combatants' movements. He swung with as much strength as he could muster, over and over, breathing strenuously. The swings were clumsy at first, but one by one, they got sharper and faster. Attack. Deflect. Attack. Block. Counter. Strike. His heart began to race—

A sharp honk broke the concentration. Jaime jumped and scrambled for his backpack, stuffing it with the essentials: pencils, erasers, unfinished homework, snacks, comic books—and, of course, the sword. He only had a few minutes until the bus left without him. That wasn't an option. *Not today*.

The boy reclined at a shaded bench underneath the playground system, patiently reading an issue of *Usagi Yojimbo* that he rested on his crossed leg. An array of snacks lined up at his feet so he could reach down and grab whichever he felt like at the time. Savory for the fun parts, sweet for the sad ones, and sour for the action. His baseball cap was tugged forward so that the brim stuck out below his eyebrows, shielding his eyes from the sun. *And enemy surveillance*. Jaime's backpack sat by his side, wide open. The sword's hilt poked ever so slightly through the front flap.

Then came the inevitable crunch. Jaime looked up from the sour scene he'd been reading to see a white leather sneaker standing on his now-crushed bag of chips. The shoe was brand new, unblemished by dirt, grass, or time, save for the fresh chip particles. Jaime's shoes were hand-me-downs from his older brother. Old and dusty, and the soles were starting to come off. At least *his* didn't have Cheeto dust on them, though.

More footsteps began to tromp up. Jack and his goons were back. Jaime began fidgeting with the corner of the page, flicking it back and forth. He refused to meet the older boys' gazes.

"Jaime, What did we talk about last week?" said the sixth-grader. His tone was familiar, and demeaning in a way that made Jaime clench his jaw.

Jaime's pupils dilated, but as they flicked to the front flap of his backpack, he took a deep breath and went back to reading, licking his finger to turn the page. Wait—he'd missed a plot point. He flipped back to the previous page.

Above, Jack scowled at the obstinate fourth-grader. "Can anyone here remind him?" Jack looked at Colin, who stepped forward and snatched Jaime's comic book with his stubby, fat fingers.

"We told you. This is our spot, vomitboy," growled Colin.

"Nice one." Ryan let out a thin, nasally snicker. Jack's pair of cronies had always vaguely reminded Jaime of a mean SpongeBob and Patrick, but stupider—if that was even possible.

Colin looked over his shoulder towards the rest of the schoolyard before turning to Jack. "The lunch monitor is gone," he whispered excitedly.

Jaime finally looked up, making direct, unblinking eye contact with Jack. The older boy wore full camo, an auburn buzz cut, and a supervillain grin—like Joker's, or Loki's. This kid had never faced the consequences of his actions. He would today.

Jaime wiped the sweat and crumbs from his hands onto his pants and froze for a second. *Say something.*

"I was reading that," said Jaime in a shriller voice than he'd anticipated.

“This nerdy shit?” Jack took the comic book from Colin and tore a few pages out before throwing it onto the hot asphalt. He took another step towards Jaime. They were within arm’s reach of each other. “Tough.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed.

A few feet from their conversation, a bright green leaf gradually floated down towards the playground structure.

Jaime’s busted lip started throbbing, but he remained quiet, maintaining eye contact with Jack as his hand inched toward his backpack. Jack cocked a fist and lunged forward, crushing a few unlucky gummy worms in the process.

The leaf hit the ground.

Wham! Jaime swung his katana out of the bag and struck Jack in the jaw, stopping the bully’s punch in his tracks. Jack yelped in pain and hopped back.

Colin drove in and swung at Jaime, who ducked just in time. A cool wave of wind rolled over Jaime as he slashed his sword in a swift diagonal motion, pounding Colin in the ribs. Grunting, Colin quickly clamped his arm down, catching the toy blade, and yanked backward, pulling Jaime with it.

“Got you!”

Jaime stumbled forward, gripping the hilt tightly. “Give it back!”

Ryan grabbed Jaime from behind, coiling python-like arms around him and forcing him to let go of the sword. Jack, now recovered from the previous blow, planted a fist square in Jaime’s stomach, leaving him winded. Then another one. Then, a left jab to his chin, followed by a heavy right hook that hit Jaime right in the mouth with a loud crack, reopening the wound on his lip.

“How’s that?” Jack shrieked triumphantly.

“Yeah,” said Ryan, almost spitting into Jaime’s ear. “That’s what you get for hitting us.”

Jaime's ears rang violently as his entire body slumped from the pain. “You made me do this.” Jaime’s voice shook as he tried desperately to hold back tears. “I didn’t want to fight back, but you kept hurting me, every day, and—” Jaime paused and hung his head, unable to squeeze any other words past the lump in his throat, except for an anguished “Why?”

Encouraged, Jack leaned in closer, flashing a wicked grin. “‘Cuz it was fun. And you wanna know the best part about all of it?” Jack picked Jaime’s head up by his long hair so they were face to face. “The best part is that when I tell my dad that you hit us, you’ll get expelled, and there’ll be one less of you *beaners* in my school.” Jack released Jaime’s hair all at once, letting the younger boy’s head hang limp again.

Jaime felt his stomach squeeze at that word. *Oh*. He let out a long, low sigh, trying desperately to keep himself from throwing up in front of his bullies. In doing so, though, his pulse began to steady itself. Something clicked at that moment—maybe it was that the situation reminded him of his favorite movie or the outrage of his ancestors, but when Jaime lifted his gaze to meet Jack’s again, his eyes were wider. Rounder. His irises shifted from dark brown to solid amber, and his gaze held an avian intensity. No—they *were* eagle eyes.

Jack flinched. “What the...”

With his heightened vision, Jaime saw the change in Jack’s demeanor—the slightest shift in weight from one foot to another. The tinnitus began to drown out all surrounding noises.

Jaime raised his chin. “Fuck you, and *fuck* Mister Smith.”

Jaime spat blood in Jack’s face. Then, he swung his leg up and kicked Jack in the crotch, sending him crumpled to the floor.

The younger boy curled into a low stance, pulling his center of gravity down and allowing him to elbow Ryan, who doubled over, wheezing. Lunging for his sword with both arms and yanking hard, Jaime managed to pull it free from Colin's hands, bending it in the process. In a flash, Jaime poked Colin in his Lunchables-bloated belly, bashing the wind out of him. Colin fell to his knees alongside the others.

Jaime leaped towards the jungle gym, and using a platform to launch himself higher into the air, brought the sword down on the base of Colin's neck, knocking him out. The plastic toy vibrated as it bent even further from the blow, bruising Jaime's palms from the sheer impact. He clenched his teeth.

Ryan, now several paces away, charged towards Jaime, frothing at the mouth. Still eyeing Colin, Jaime flipped the sword, grabbed it by the blade, and swung the hilt behind him without looking. The hilt hit Ryan directly in the temple, and he fell down with a satisfying thunk. *Two down.* Jaime walked towards Jack slowly.

Still sitting on the ground, Jack struggled to wipe the bloody spit out of his eyes as the shadow of righteous fury loomed over him. "Listen, I'm sorry about the comic book! I-I'll buy you a new one!"

"Tough."

The cool, pensive whistle of a shakuhachi played in the background. The air whistled as it parted around the bent, plastic sword's edge, ending in a loud whack.

The front door swung open fast and loud, hitting the wall behind it so hard that the whole house seemed to shake. Jaime walked in with a black eye and a tattered uniform. In one hand

was a now taped-up comic book. In the other, the battered and bent plastic toy katana. On his face—a massive grin with two missing teeth.