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The Works

The arts publication of Sauk Valley Community College

The Works

2024-2025 Editorial Staff

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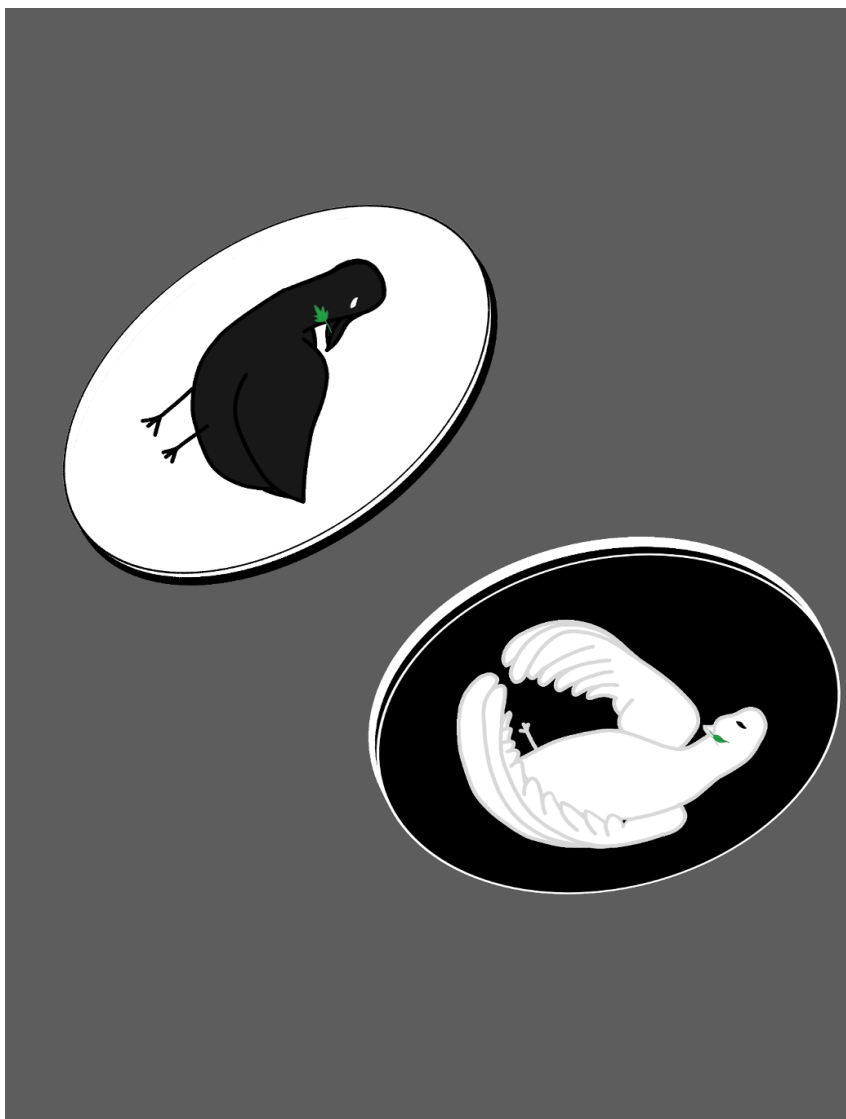
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Coin

by Annelise Brown

River

Glistening groves on the water's edge.

Spikes of light glint on the water's tips.

Harshly, they scatter.

Beams of orange sun glare with blinding fulfillment.

And her head lays heavy.

Pulled down, back, with little force though heavy still.

Sopping and dripping, her hair extends like a trunk to the soil.

Elbows to the hilt in the dirt which holds still.

Stiffened body, rigid with ease, as it floats in air as if in water.

Skin blue, nostrils red.

Nose raised far, moisture at heart.

Water pushes and pulls through veins of blue, through twists and turns,

an endless labyrinth of flowing.

A flowing of rich liquid, filling every ventricle and cave as it pumps and pounds.

Water in her, water in you.

-Samuel Mauch



by Michael Jenkins

"Come on, Sophie!" Zelda calls excitedly. "You should touch some grass for once. It'll be good for you."

I sit in the driver's seat of my car for a while, watching her through the window. She studies the grass for a bit, looking for a spot where she won't be laying on an anthill, or a bunch of pointy sticks, or one of those prickly "don't fucking step on me" plants. Once she's found a nice spot, she sprawls out on her back, spreading her arms and legs out real wide.

"Sophie-ee!" Zelda whines. "Look how nice it is out here!"

She could do this in the park next to the playground down the street from her apartment. Or even in my backyard, where she won't have kids tripping over her. Still, she insists on coming all the way out here. I can't imagine what makes this park out in the middle of nowhere so much nicer. There's so much animal noise out here that it's not even any quieter. Maybe louder some days.

Zelda sits up just long enough to pout at me pleadingly. I sigh theatrically, turn off the car, and walk out of the shade and AC into the open sun. She's staring straight up into the clouds with a huge, brain-empty smile on her face. She seems happy just to be outside. Being out in the sun always has a tangible impact on her mood. Which makes sense, I suppose.

A dense mat of cotton-y fiber grows from her head, and a few other places on her body, interwoven with a bunch of chlorophyll ... things of some kind. It's a plant

thing. I've never been able to figure out what photosynthesis actually feels like. I've asked a few times, but I've never got an answer that made it clear to me. I guess it's like trying to explain how color works to a person born without eyes.

"What are you doing all the way up there?" She asks.

"Standing?"

"Why?"

"Why not?" I shrug. "I mean, what else would I do?"

Zelda narrows her eyes and frowns.

"Get down here," She pats the grass by her head. "When I said 'touch grass', I didn't mean with the bottom of your shoes."

We argue with our eyes for a minute . . . Fine. She wins. I crawl onto the grass, and lay on my back opposite her. The ground here is lumpy and uneven, and not very comfortable. For a while, the only sounds come from birds and bugs chattering all around us.

.....

Am I really this easy to manipulate? A cute girl tells me to lay down on the ground, and I'll say "Oh, okay!" and sit here doing nothing for five minutes, just staring up at an empty sky like a moron? If she had asked me to jump off the bridge with her, would I be at the bottom of the river right now?

Seriously, what am I doing? Is there honestly a part of my brain that genuinely thinks this will somehow make her like me? "Gosh, Sophie, you're so great at laying around on the ground like a dumbass! SMOOCH!" Are there even depths more pathetic than this? I should have given up long before things got this dire. Why am I even here?

Fuck this. I'm going back to the car.

"Do you ever think about the sun?" Zelda asks.

". . . Huh? What do you mean?" I pause, still half-sitting.

Zelda stops to think. A butterfly lands on her forearm, and she stares at it for a while.

"I mean, being alive is a thing that takes energy, right?"

"I guess?"

"Like, there's a huge ball of light thousands of times bigger than the entire planet, ninety-three million miles away, and not only can we see it from here, but it's the only reason anybody is alive anywhere. That bright thing in the sky is something that connects every living thing in the world."

"I'm not a plant, Zelda. I don't survive off sunlight," I tell her, lying back down.

"Of course you do! You have to eat to live. Food comes from plants who got their energy from the sun, or animals who got their food from plants. That's what the food chain is. All the energy used in life goes back to the- AHH! Hey!"

She sits up, sending her butterfly flitting away. She looks to her right. A wild bunny has wandered over to start chewing on one of the green bits in her hair. She pushes him back and sharply spans his butt, sending him shooting off through the grass like a furry torpedo.

"Oh yeah? I thought so!" She calls after him. "Go chew somebody else!"

". . . Okay . . . What's your point? Lots of things are universal. Death is a universal thing too. What makes the sun so special?"

"The sun is connected to that too, you know. Energy can't be created or destroyed, only moved around. And it can only move from places with more energy to places with less."

"So?"

"So?!" Zelda pinches her forehead in frustration. "So the sun can't keep shining

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forever. Nothing can. Someday, all the energy in all of forever will be spread out evenly, so nothing could ever change. There will be an actual day, in the actual future, our future, when the very last living thing will take its very last breath, and then nothing will ever live or move again."

She shifts around to check on me, and she cocks her head curiously.

"What's with the look?" She asks.

"Are you feeling okay? You're usually the last one to be sitting around crying all doom and gloom like this."

"What do you mean?" Zelda asks, baffled.

"What do you mean?" I repeat in that high-pitched, girly voice people do when they're mocking someone. "You're over here going on about the universe being cold and dark and empty. You're not normally one to be on the whole "life sucks and everything's awful and nothing matters because we'll all be dead someday" thing."

"That's not what I said at all!"

Okay, that one made me flinch. It's usually very hard to make her angry like this. She takes a moment to breathe deeply, then starts again.

"You heard exactly the opposite of what I was trying to tell you . . ." She sighs, defeated.

". . . Elaborate . . ."

Her eyes track a dragonfly hovering around over her face, watching it zip over towards me. I lazily lift a hand to shoo it away.

"It's true that all our days are numbered. Maybe a smaller number than we think. Not everybody lives to be 80, you know. Not everybody lives to see 40. Hell, not everyone makes it to 25. There are people born around our time who haven't made it this far. We get together every weekend, and you never think "this might be the last time I ever see or hear from her", do you?"

""

"That doesn't mean nothing matters. It's the reason why things matter. How would you spend your time if you knew for sure you'd still be here in three hundred years? Or in three hundred-thousand years? When would you get anything done? Would you bother to come see me at all? Could you even love anything if you knew your heart would never stop beating? I can't think anything else when I see the sun. And I have to see it a lot. Does that make sense? I hope that makes sense."

Another dragonfly comes by, maybe the same one as before, landing on my shoulder. I leave him there this time, tilting my head to look over at Zelda. She inhales real deeply, then exhales slowly with her eyes closed. My hands start shaking thinking about how to say what I'm thinking right now. It takes at least a few million years to swallow the fear bubbling in my throat enough to get some words out.

"Zelda? . . ."

"Hm? . . ."

I can't believe I'm about to say this.

"I . . . Would you . . . like to . . . go out sometime?" My voice is so weak. I feel like a stupid child.

"We are out," Zelda answers.

"Wh . . . what?"

"Does it matter why we went outside? We're here together. That's "out". That's where we are."

"No . . . I mean . . . You know what? Forget it. Whatever."

"Wow. You give up easily. I know what you're trying to say, dummy," Zelda says, looking over with a smile. "I'm telling you that we're already together. We don't

need to make a separate trip just for the sake of leaving the house for a different reason."

". . . Okay? . . ."

Zelda snaps half-upright, turning to the side. She glares at the rabbit casually hopping over, then points at it menacingly. He whirls around in a panic and rushes off behind a tree. She smiles, then lays back down.

"Look, I don't want this to sound mean, but unlike you, I can actually take a hint. I'm not saying you're dumb, but you are about as dense as a neutron star. I could tell you, for the fourth time, "I want you to take your clothes off", and you'd brush me away all "Oh, swimming is lame and public pools are gross anyway" without even looking up from your phone."

"Is that why you keep trying to get me to go swimming with you?"

"Nooo!" She says defensively. "There's three very legitimate reasons I want you to go swimming with me."

"Yeah? What would those be?"

"Well, one, I think swimming is fun," Zelda says, counting off on her fingers, "And two, I want to do something fun with you. You know, you can get a real dark and miserable attitude sometimes. More and more these days. There's a place for that, sure. But you could use a little sunshine in your life. At least sometimes."

"What's the third reason?"

"Oh, yeah. Three . . . I just kinda wanted you to take your clothes off. You were right about that one," She smirks at me. "Now. Get. Over. Here already!" She tugs at my sleeve, pulling towards the empty space next to her.

I crawl around the grass to get next to her, and lie on my back. She waits precisely zero seconds to roll over and rest her cheek against mine and throw her arm around my waist. My whole body clenches, and she smirks at me.

Her skin is so warm from the sun, and her hair smells strongly of some coconut and chocolate scented stuff, and faintly kind of grassy. A soft breeze flicks some soft cotton fiber across my face.

Is this even really happening? How could this be happening? I've never felt anything so impossibly surreal, and immediately, overwhelmingly actually happening to me.

Zelda's hand finds mine, locking her fingers between mine and squeezing me gently. My hand finally stops shaking. I can feel her chest rising against my side with her breathing, slow and heavy, and her breath is oddly cool on my neck. She hooks her leg around mine, and silently holds me for a while.

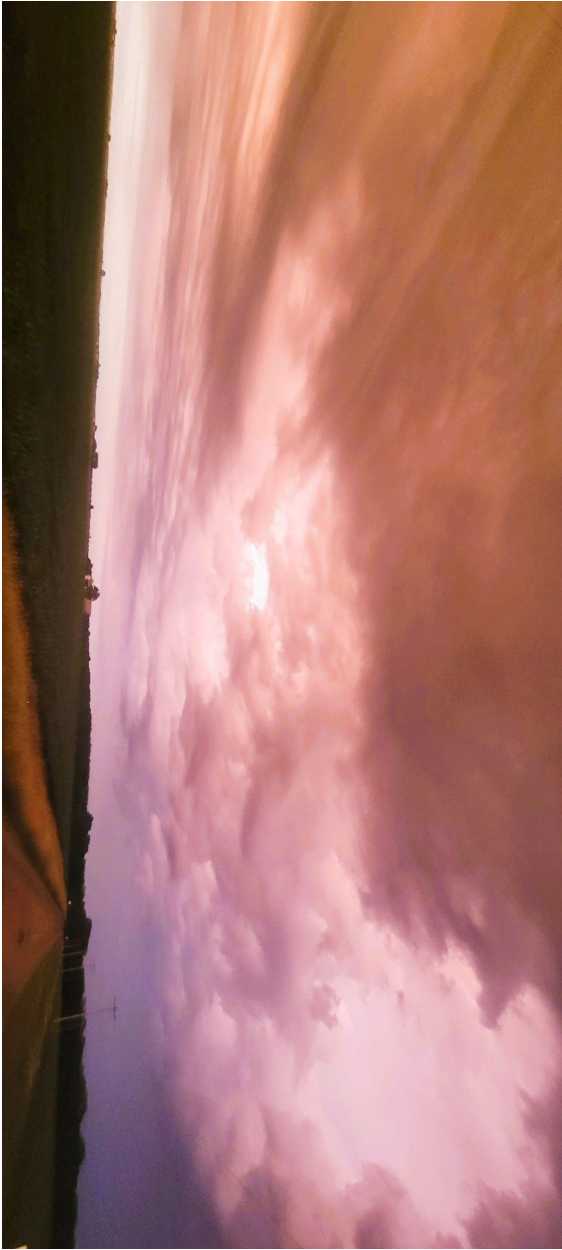
I think, for the first time in a very, very long time, I feel like I want to be here. To be anywhere. Like I care about waking up tomorrow. Like I have something I would care about losing. Even with Zelda squeezing me like she's scared of losing me, I feel like I'm breathing for the first time.

"Thank you for being here, with me, Sophie," She whispers gently.

"Y-Yeah . . . Uh-huh . . ."

She squeezes me a bit tighter, and her smile gets the widest it's been all day. She knows me well enough to understand what I was trying to tell her.

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Warm Meridian

by Brynley Jones

Mgsyha'hah'mglw'nafa

In the coldest reaches, furthest and darkest beyond,
Jagged winds carve the sky, freezing lungs mid-breath,
It stirs, a sluggish, bloated hunger shifting in the void,
A soundless tremor shattering stone, rattling marrow,
It grows louder, a pulse like the march of dead suns,
A drumbeat of flesh against sinew, a rhythm of madness made real,
It watches, an eyeless gaze pressing down like lead,
Dragging shadows into shapes too wrong to name,
It breathes, a soundless gale that bends mountains low,
Carving hollows in the minds of those who dare listen,
It writhes, coils of formless flesh slopping against charred stars,
An orchestra of chaos, a mockery of existence,
It descends, dragging light and reason into its orbit,
A vortex where time twists and space shrieks in agony,
It sees, its awareness a searing knife thrust into the skull,
Ripping and tearing the veil that shields fragile minds,
It whispers, a chattering of grinding, ragged sounds,
Each murmur a needle twisting deeper behind the eyes,
It devours, pulling stars into its churning maw,
The light flickers, swallowed into a deathless night,
It laughs, the sound a grated, gurgling mockery of joy,
A sound that flays the soul, leaving only raw dread,
It falls, impossibly vast, yet scraping the dirt like a worm,
A blind and idiot king, writhing on a throne of its own decay,
It reigns, unknowing, uncaring, a blight unshackled by reason.

-Darien Huggins

Would Anyone Care?

Depression.
A thing many suffer from.
Lingering shadows,
haunting memories.
An endless cycle?
I've lost so much,
felt worthless,
helpless,
seeing friends move beyond.
Why couldn't I do it?
Why couldn't I join them?
I've long believed that I shouldn't exist,
yet, I'm still here.
Lingering, suffering,
crying, suffocating,
running, and falling.
I just can't stand it anymore.
I'm loverless, lonesome.
Taunted by shadows,
demons, and ghosts of my past.
No matter where I run
no matter where I hide,
they always find me.
Plunging me into a realm of
tormented nightmares,
sick, twisted dreams
trapped in a labyrinth of endless circles.
Chasing cries of joy that seem so near,
yet out of reach, impossible to find.

Would anyone care?
Would anyone love me?
If I disappeared,
Would anyone cry?
Would anything change
or will it remain the same?
I know I can't be replaced,
yet is that true
or am I easily replaceable?
Can I be fixed?
Can I be saved?
Or am I too far gone?

-Austin Adams



Untitled

by Kelis Green

CYOA

by Riley McGinn

trigger warning: This story contains a brief depiction of self-harm and references to suicide.

"Is this some kind of joke?" You ask, barely making any effort to conceal your frustration. You know better than to go off on the first guy you stumble across in the afterlife, but this is growing remarkably tedious.

The man behind the desk doesn't even meet your gaze and seems quite irritated by the disturbance. "I don't know what to tell you, friend. I don't read each book that comes across my desk. You have any idea how many people die a day? I just hand them out."

You plop back down and let out a sigh. Up until this point, the book you hold in your hands has only gone in chronological order. Many pages only end with one choice. Even the ones with multiple paths have zero impact on the "story".

to pursue a career as an electrician, turn to page 3,283.

to pursue a college education, turn to page 3,283.

You find that if you had gone to college, you merely would have dropped out in less than a semester and become an electrician anyway. Your "choice" amounts to little more than an additional paragraph at the top of the page.

You had no real say in any of it. Were all your decisions really so inconsequential?

You don't entertain the thought for long. You know what is to come. You know the moment everything fell apart.

This time you'll turn right.

The day comes. You skim through most of it, you remember the day well. You begin your drive home. You are lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood. It is raining quite hard which obscures your vision and your GPS on your phone is not responding. You don't remember the way back.

to turn left, turn to page 48,458.

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One choice.

You slam the book shut. You refuse to relive it. You choose indecision. It seems to be the only other you have, and you'll be damned if this book is going to take it from you.

Hours pass. Days. Weeks perhaps? All the while, the man sits at his desk, reading quietly to himself. He glances up occasionally only to return to his book.

You know the rules. You must finish the book before you can leave this room. Your hands trembling, you resume where you left off.

As you pore over the page, you are taken slightly aback by the sparse nature of the details. The outcome left the most indelible of impressions, a sense of immediacy that has never quite faded. The causes, the precipitating events; these feel like someone else's memories. It's as though they happened to someone else, somewhere else, so very long ago. You recall the briefest glimpse of a bicycle in your headlights. The sudden impact. The sound of a head rapidly meeting pavement. A sound no amount of whiskey will ever drown out or water down. The blood. So much blood. What seemed to be an impossible amount of blood.

The woman screaming. The pleas for help.

The therapy. The guilt. The anger. Bewilderment. The copious amounts of alcohol and the many fights that come along with it.

to tell your wife you understand her decision, turn to page 872,862.

to beg her to stay, turn to page 872,862.

For the next 500 pages or so, your choices are very limited. More often than not there is only one option. This is starting to seem like a sick joke. Eventually, there is one alternative that shows up every now and then that grabs your attention.

to forgive yourself, turn to page 2,567,873.

You will do no such thing.

to buy another bottle, turn the page.

to forgive yourself, turn to page 2,567,873.

to browse through that young boy's memorial page on Facebook again, turn the page

to forgive yourself, turn to page 2,567,873.

To try slicing down the wrist this time, turn the page.

to forgive yourself, turn to page 2,567,873.

You turn the page once more.

pull the trigger. close the book.

You crumble to the floor and begin to sob uncontrollably. This is the only option you have left. The man sees his cue and walks over to scoop up the book.

"What....what was the point of all that? To torture me? Have I not done that to myself enough?" You didn't realize you were steadily raising your shaking voice as you spoke, but the man remained unfazed.

He turns back, your book tucked under his arm. "You've done that more than enough, my son." He speaks gently for the first time since you began the book.

You slowly stand on legs that barely prove to hold you, desperately hoping he will continue talking.

"You had no choices because you made no choice. You were only ever prepared for moments that had already passed. What you could have done differently. You couldn't choose your adventure because you were so fixated on changing it."

You keep your eyes trained on a particular spot on the floor. You cannot bring yourself to look at him.

"The path you took is the path that was. Alternate endings are merely an author's fantasy."

You look him in the eyes and nod apprehensively.

He hands the book back to you.

"You know what to do."



Pakistani Village Elder

by Glenn Bodish

Extra Child

When my mom died
She had one more child
Named it Grief
And handed him to me
In a solemn sort of way
That only the dead can really achieve
He seemed so large then
More than I could handle
Requiring constant attention
Feeding and Changing And
Playing and Bathing and
Every moment of my time
Every bit of my energy
Given to him
I hated him, he was easy to hate
But he was necessary
He kept my mind still
While the world shifted around me
Kept me from doing something
That i know I would regret
Because he has her eyes
And the same smile
And she'd never want that for me
Before I knew it he was bringing home friends
Responsibility and Legacy
I never minded responsibility
She was someone who I could understand
Someone with strong shoulders
And high expectations
And I couldn't fault her
When she seemed to carry
The weight of the world
I never cared for legacy
Always trying to be
What she wasn't
What she couldn't stand to be
Trying to take cues from Grief
And the weight from responsibility
Looking at me
With eyebrows knitted together
A sneer on her lips
When I wouldn't do the same.

-Nara Hardesty

The Grief of Emigration

by Kena Rivera Ayala

We often hear the argument that immigrants should stay home and fix their own countries. If their government is unjust, corrupt, or oppressive, perhaps the immigrants have the responsibility to try to improve it, rather than seek their safety somewhere else. The assertion that immigrants who are running away from poverty or violence in their countries should be responsible for those situations is wrong for several reasons. In most of the cases, these people have minimal or no responsibility over those situations. The fact is that no one wants to leave their home country, but sometimes it's necessary, and in my own case, it caused a lot of real anxiety and fear.

It was the summer of 1998 in Mexico City at my family's restaurant. We were unified, passionate, and hard workers for my parents' business. I was twenty-three years old, married, and the mother of a blonde and charming little five-year-old boy. He grew up at the restaurant between tables and chairs. While we gathered to work, he quickly learned how to walk. By beating on some pans and pots every morning, he played the same song loud and dramatic. Every once in a while, there would be two men who are coming to our business and once, we saw the guns; we knew what they wanted.

That day was not busy as usual, which was odd. Regularly lunch time runs busy and crowded. The two men came into the restaurant calmly and then shut the front gate like they always used to do. Then everyone at the place we knew what they wanted from us. Anger filled us when we saw their stoic faces remained cold hearted. They started asking for our money and valuables. They walked around the tables with every single person, and lastly, they faced my mom.

She was furious; I still remember her sharp eyes. She stared at them with blazing fury, her pupils dilated wide. Not only angry, she was tired about this constant situation and she was not going to back down. The older man put the gun on her head and he said, "I will kill you if you cause me trouble." He knew that my mom was challenging him. Next, my dad felt unsafe because of what she was doing, and he spoke to my mom. He said, "Don't argue! Just give them what they want!" The other man was closer to my dad and he hit my dad in the head. We saw his blood running across his face. Later the man pushed my dad out of their way, and he locked him into the restroom. There was a short silence, and then my little boy made a word noise, and they noticed his presence.

My mother shouted at the man as a way to distract him, and she said, "I don't have any money today, and you can take anything that you want, like as always," followed by a bad word that she was holding for a long time. The man was irritated with my mother's attitude. His hostile glare scared me. I saw his jugular pounding and his blood boiling through his hands. Definitely he was showing distress. I still wonder if my mother should have stayed silent.

The next twenty minutes I would never forget; he faced my mother with his angry look for the last time and he said, “I will kill your son if you still refuse to give me more money.” He was threatening her with taking the life of my little boy! He was very upset with my mom; she was wasting his time. The burglars didn’t know that I was the mother of the child, but I am sure that they wouldn’t even care about it. They knew that no woman would give up an innocent baby. He gained pleasure from violently punishing her both verbally and emotionally. I was in shock and scared; I couldn’t speak or defend my mother or my child. I had to keep silent for our safety.

At the point the man took control of everything once more. He walked to my mother and he held the gun on my mom’s temple. Instantly, she had looked down and tears rolled down her cheeks; she was giving up and finally she had settled down. Lastly, they looked in the cash register for more money, but they found it empty. They got ready to open the front door and they left us in a deep silence in that place. I saw my mother’s face and everybody in there very frustrated; we watched as the assailants left with what they had stripped us of and that we had worked so hard to acquire. After this event there is no way to be sorry; we just had to move forward. It seemed the men weren’t so sadistic to kill someone that day, we were fortunate.

I wrapped my baby in my arms and I held my mom’s hand. She was quiet for the rest the day. I am sure that day my mom knew that it was time to look for a safer place to live. I understand that she was bold to react over this danger. She may not realize the consequences of that moment; perhaps she was overwhelmed and tired of being repeatedly abused all this time. My mother fought for her family and our wealth. I am sure that she didn’t conceive that the day could have been the last one that we could be together. I couldn’t blame my mother for anything she did that day. I am reflecting with sadness, not about her decision over her fears but how much impact this would be, with a different ending.

Over the next few months our family was arranging our intention to find a new place. Our family felt fear because of challenge. My parents sold our car and anything that they could to make money to start. Never in my life did I think about having to plan a trip to a place where we didn’t know and we couldn’t take our belongings with us. We took some pictures and goodbye letters from family and friends, and perhaps that was enough. My family and I moved to United States on March of 1999. We lived at Rochelle II, for a couple of years and my mom found a place at Dixon II to begin a new restaurant. She resumed her path and we have been open more than twenty years running my mom’s dream. Our family has been growing and we stand for the combination of two cultures that we are proud of. We are still a very united and hardworking family. We all have worked sooner or later at the restaurant. I know that we do all this for my mother. As the oldest daughter I worked at a very young age, and I left school many years ago back in Mexico. I know the grief of immigration; it abducts a chunk of your dreams away. I do not look back very often but when I do it still hurts. As an emigrant you constantly face anxiety and fears that challenge you; however, I returned to school stronger than ever. Education has opened many doors; I am grateful I had the courage to dream again.



Untitled

by Ethan Reyes

Narrative Dissonance

by Riley McGinn

You told me the story of my life was not set in stone. The ending had not yet been written. It's unfortunate that up until this point I have written it in ink. Ink is permanent. I can't erase the wrong answers, I can only haphazardly scribble over them and leave behind an ugly black stain. This blotched ink often bled through into the other side of the page.

I'd start from scratch with a new story, but you already seem so inexplicably invested in this one.

So I keep writing. After all, I haven't written the ending yet.

May be true, but I've gone through a couple rough drafts and the end result has never been pretty.

Spoiler alert: He probably doesn't slay the dragon. He probably doesn't get the girl. I'm not even sure if he's the hero or the villain. How can one character be the central protagonist and the source of the conflict at the same time?

For the first couple chapters, even at their bleakest, I still wrote with a sense of optimistic wonder. There were just so many delightful possibilities for my story. As far as I knew, the writing process was limited only by the boundaries of my imagination. By my capacity to dream.

You told me everything would work out the way it was supposed to. I saw no reason not to believe you. That's what any good story had taught both of us. Conflicts introduced in the first act would be resolved in a satisfying manner before the end of the third.

The story pressed on, and I had no real choice but to put pen to paper, powering through even the most maddening bouts of writer's block. Loose ends were tied into the most disappointing knots. Plot threads were woven into story arcs riddled with inconsistent tones, rereading plot lines, and frivolous themes that offered little to teach. Characters I once beloved to be central to the plot dropped out of the story, never to be seen again.

I began to wonder if I was writing a story worth reading. Was mine the grand, sprawling

The Works

epic I had dreamed of, or just another short story in a collection of billions?

I suppose I still need to write the ending. A proper ending determines the meaning of, and reveals the need for, the story as it has now been told. It's hard not to feel like the story just happens. And we write the explanation later to make sense of it. Seldom does the author provide his own epilogue. Perhaps we may still live happily ever after. But only after we've ever lived happily.



Shatter Me

by Kaitlyn Jones

Nowhere

by Lauren Daniel, Darien Huggins, and Annalise Brown

Characters:

DICK

JACK

TEEN JACK

CHILD JACK

JEFF/RADIO ANNOUNCER

GHOSTLY VOICE

DIFFERENT GHOSTLY VOICE

Setting:

A cabin near Three-Fingered Jack, Oregon.

Time:

Evening, January 4 th

Setting: Three Finger Jack, Oregon.

At Rise: The sun sets, rays shining through treetops, bushes and dead grass abound. Birds chirp as deer prance through the forest while squirrels scurry across branches on high.

Dick:(Screams in the distance.)

(Jack's stomps inside his cabin, dragging a body across the wooden floor and to the wall near an old radio sitting on the counter. Jack turns the radio on.)

Radio Announcer: Good evening, listeners. Tonight, we're in for quite the storm—a blizzard blowing through Three Finger Jack.

Snowfall is expected to trap anyone unprepared. If you're not ready, you might just find yourself stuck for quite some time

(Jack stares at the radio, frowning as the voice continues.)

Radio Announcer: Temperatures are dropping fast, and roads are closing. If you're up in the wilderness... Well, you better hope you have plenty of supplies and good company.

(Jack turns off the radio abruptly, swallowing hard. He removes his coat, and moves the body, propping it against the wall near the fireplace.)

Jack: Nobody's finding you up here. Not until spring thaws, and by then, you'll be fertilizer.

(Jack walks to the kitchen, opening cabinets.)

Jack: Got some whiskey... jerky... enough for a few days if the storm doesn't drag on.

(Suddenly, the wind picks up, howling louder. The fire flickers.)

Jack: Huh. Gonna be one hell of a night.

(The lights dim, and a low whisper echoes.)

Ghostly Voice: Murderer.

Jack: (Spinning around.) What was that?

(Silence. Jack shakes it off and returns to his meal.)

Ghostly Voice: You can't hide.

Jack: (Pauses mid-chew.) Cabin fever already, huh? Great.

(Jack pours himself a drink and downs it. From behind him, faint laughter fills the air.)

Dick: You thought this would be simple.

Jack: Shut up.

Dick: Drag me up here, freeze me stiff, forget me like the others?

Jack: I said shut up!

(Jack hurls the empty bottle, shattering it against the wall.)

Jack: (Whispering.) Just my mind. Just the storm playing tricks.

(Jack stands, pacing. Looks out the window—snow piling high.)

Jack: Days of this... Maybe weeks... the storm won't last too long... right?

(Jack eyes the body.)

Jack: You're not gonna rot too fast, are you?

(The fire crackles louder.)

Dick: What are you gonna do, Jack? Drag me out there and let the wolves eat me? Or maybe... eat me yourself?

Jack: (Covering his ears.) Stop it! Just stop!

(Jack collapses onto the sofa, clutching his arms. The lights dim further.)

X

AT RISE: Jack is sitting on the couch in front of the radio.

Radio Announcer: Good morning, everyone! I hope you all had a splendid night!

Jack: You could say that...

Radio Announcer: The weather is still cold and of course snowy.

That blizzard isn't stopping any time soon. I hope everyone has a good supply of food until the storm blows over.

Jack: That's right, what am I going to do about food? I ate the last of the jerky last night.

Dick: (Faintly) What about me, Jack?

(Jack looks around the room.)

Jack: That's strange, I thought I heard someone.

(Jack gets up from the couch and walks over to the bookshelf.)

Jack: Maybe I could read something to keep myself busy.

(Jack bends down to look at the titles.)

Jack: The Grapes of Wrath, And Then There Were Two, Johnny Got His Bone I mean Gun, Their Eyes Were Watching God, The Day of The Broncos I mean Locus.

(Jack stands straight and starts walking towards the couch. He puts his hand on his head.)

The Works

Jack: Why am I seeing body parts for words?

Ghostly Voice: 'Cause you're hungry Jack.

Jack: Who said that?!

Ghostly Voice: Listen to your stomach.

(Jack jumps up from the couch and looks frantically around.)

Jack: Who's there!? I'm warning you! If this is a trick!

Ghostly Voice: Oh, when we are through you will wish it was all just a trick.

(The air audibly gets louder with a substance passing through the air, and Jack passes out onto the couch.)

X

AT RISE: Jack gets up from the couch as the radio wakes him up.

Radio Announcer:

From dusk to dawn the carcass lies,

And on the floor is cold from blood so red,

Tomatoe is the color,

From the bone chilled teeth to the sickled lips,

Oh, how I want to eat that corpse.

Jack: (Sleepily)

Yeah, hmm... Wait what...?

Radio Announcer: And that was the note left by the cannibal Theodore Bunard. Last seen at Lance's Grocery and remember stop in at Lance's Grocery for all your grocery needs!

Jack: Uhggg, I had a terrible dream last night. Maybe I should go look for some food in the kitchen.

(Jack stands up from the couch.)

Jack: That's right, what am I going to eat? I'm all out of food, and this corpse is all I have.

(Jake gets up from the couch and squats down next to the body.)

Jack: The cuts are not as clean as I would have liked them to be, but I guess he's dead and that is all that matters. Now what am I going to do with you until the storm is over?

Ghostly Voice: Why don't you take a nibble?

Dick: Yes, why let old Dicky go to waste?

Jack: No! I'm not a cannibal!

Ghostly Voice: You said it yourself, what are you going to eat?

Jack: I don't know, but not Dick...

Dick: Why? I was good enough to kill, but not to eat? Why would you let me go to waste like this?

Jack: No! I am not a cannibal!

Ghostly Voice: Why not take a nibble?

Jack: No, No, NO! Absolutely not! I am not like one of those lousy, greedy cannibals!

Dick: But you're almost there.

Jack: No, I am not! I'm a murderer!

Dick: And how do you think cannibals eat their victims?

Jake: I don't care! I'm not like those cannibals!

Dick: But you'll let me go to waste? I'd rather you eat me than

leave my body for the termites.

Jake: I don't care! I am not a cannibal!

Radio Announcer: This just in! Cannibals and murderers are in fact very similar!

(Jack plopped back onto the couch.)

X

At Rise: A man sits at a chair and flicks a switch on a box. He sits back and stretches as he smiles, and he turns to his board of connected string, photos, and notes.

Radio Announcer (Jeff): Three days. If only it could have lasted longer. It would have made the best part all the more entertaining, but I guess this will do. When I make my grand appearance.

Dick: He hasn't suffered enough...

Radio Announcer (Jeff): I decide that. Not you.

Dick: He stole from you.

Radio Announcer (Jeff): True, and I wonder how much more he can take.

Dick: Why not find out?

Radio Announcer (Jeff): (Laughs) Do you doubt that I plan to?

Did you forget who started this?

(Jeff gestures to windows with snow falling down.)

Dick: I haven't forgotten, Jeff. Not once.

Jeff: When I'm done his status quo will know its race is run.

Dick: Oh, this will be fun.

Jeff: Let's see if this new meal is going to be a tasty one...

X

At Rise: Jack is lying on the couch. The radio starts to make a static sound.

Jeff (Radio Voice): Salutations! Good to be back on the air. I hope all you listeners are holding up in this storm. While everyone is sitting around a warm fire drinking coco, I'm going to give you some breaking news! There was a cannibal spotted on the Two Finger Trail. If you see him, call the authorities immediately. He is armed and dangerous. Now back to our regularly scheduled (a little menacing) silence!

(Jack face changes to that of disgust.)

Jack: Ugg, I maybe a killer, but I wouldn't stoop that low. I mean what is there to remember the thrill? Nothing except the bones would be left. Even then, you could do a Dick bone broth. (Jack starts salivating at the mouth.)

Jack: NO, NO NO NO!! I said I wouldn't stoop that low.

(Jack stares at Dicks lifeless body on the ground.)

(Ghostly Voice): But Jack, there is no more food in the cabin... You are going to starve.

Different Ghostly Voice: Yes Jack, what are you going to eat?

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Dick: Are you going to let me rot, Jacky boy?

Jack: I don't know yet! Maybe I'll throw you out the window, but I won't eat you... however, I will need a memento to remember you by for all the trouble...

(Jack stares at Dick for a moment.)

Jack: Maybe I should look for some pliers, so I can pry a tooth from your air-filled head. Might also be a good idea to check how soft your gums are, since it's been two days... I think.

(Jack walks over to Dick's corpse and opens his mouth. He puts his fingers into Dick's mouth and tugs on a tooth, pulling it out as he falls backwards.)

Jack: I guess I don't need those pliers after all.

(Jack puts the tooth in his pocket.)

Dick: What are you going to do with the rest of me?

Jack: I. Don't. Knnoow? Am I really talking to myself right now?

Dick: Maybe? And if you aren't? What about the body lying in front of you? A nibble?

Jack: No, I am not a cannibal, cannibals are foolish and... messy.

(Jack looks down at his hands, seeing blood on them.)

Jack: Maybe I should go lie down for a little while.

(Jack walks over to the couch.)

Ghostly Voice: Cannibal. Cannibal. Cannibal.

(Jack falls down onto the couch.)

Jack: I will not be a cannibal; I will not be a cannibal...

X

AT RISE: Jack is sitting on the couch, slumped with his hand's barely holding his chest up.

Ghostly Voice: You heard the man, they're the same.

(Jack looks down at Dick.)

Ghostly Voice: Just one little nibble

Jack: No, NO, NO!

Dick: Bone Marrow Stew, Dicky Liver Salad, Pinky Finger

Popsicle, Lover Heart Burger...

(Jack starts salivating at the mouth.)

Jack: Hmmmmm. Maybe just a nibble

(Jack pounced off of the couch and runs over to Dick's body. He kneels down next to Dick and grabs his hand. Jack starts to gnaw Dick's arm from the wrist to the shoulder. Jack then moves the hand back to his face and nibbles on one of Dick's fingers.)

Jack: What am I doing?

(Jack looks at Dick's hand and then back at his own hand.)

Ghostly Voice: What's the matter? Doesn't it taste good?

Jack: I am not a cannibal!

Dick: Then why are you nibbling on my finger?

Jack: I... I-I...

(Jack scoots away from Dick and pushed the body away.)

Jack: (Quietly) I am not a cannibal.

Ghostly Voice: What's the matter? Can't handle the blood?

Jack: What blood?

(Jack looks down at his hands to see them smeared in blood. He looks over at Dick, only to see no blood.)

Jack: AHH! WHERE DID THIS COME FROM!?!?!?

(Jack backs into the corner of the room and curls up into a ball.)

Jack: I am not a cannibal! I am not a cannibal... I am not a cannibal, am I...? No, no... I'm not.

(Jack stays curled up in a ball until he falls asleep.)

X

At rise: Jack stares at his bloodstained hands. He starts rocking back and forth. His breaths come out heavier and heavier until he chokes on his own breath and starts to gag. He takes a knife and stabs it into Dick's body again and again, making blood splatter onto his face.

Dick: It wasn't enough to kill me? It wasn't even enough to have a taste of me?

Jack: Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! You're dead! I killed you with my own two hands! Get out of my head!

Dick: What if I'm not in your head?

(Jack starts waving the knife around.)

Jack: You aren't real!

Dick: (Chuckles) Then you're crazy.

Jack: I'm not! I wouldn't stoop that low... I wouldn't...

Dick: You already have.

Jack: Shut up! I'm a killer, just a killer!

Dick: Don't you want another taste of human flesh?

Jack: This isn't real. This isn't real!

Dick: But the blood on your hands is, the flesh in your mouth? That's real too.

(Jack looks at his hands before bringing them up to his mouth and clawing at his tongue. He falls to his knees.)

Jack: I'm not that low. I'm not that low. I...

(Jack stops clawing and starts laughing.)

Jack: It's your fault. It's all your fault. You told me to eat you. If I couldn't hear you, I wouldn't stoop that low...

(Jack waits but no one answers.)

Jack: (Laughs) See I'm not the disgusting cannibal.

(Jack wraps his arms around himself, rocking back and forth.)

X

At Rise: Jack is feasting on Dick's corpse. He carves out the heart and takes a rabid bite before stabbing the liver with a fork. After consuming several organs Jack takes a step back.

Jack: From dawn to dusk,

The cannibal

(Sniffle)

The Works

Will not prevail

The murder is... more.. righteous?

(Jack looks up from his knees.)

Jack: But how can this be true, when the cannibal must kill before eating.

(Jack looks to the bloodstained knife in his hand that he used to carve up Dick's corpse.)

Jack: Survival. It was all for survival. It has always been for survival...

Child Jack: If it's to survive, I'd do anything.

(Jack looks up and sees a visage of himself as a child, holding a bloody knife while looking downcast, standing over Dick's corpse. He also sees a teen version of himself standing next to Child Jack while smiling and pointing a knife at Jack.)

Teen Jack: If you don't have the will to survive, you don't deserve to...

(Jack grips the blade tightly.)

Jack: (Quietly) Whatever it takes to survive.

(Jack glances at the corpse and then back at the knife.)

Child Jack: Was it worth it?

Jack: (He laughs) If the voices stop, the nightmare will end. They just have to stop.

Child Jack: This isn't the first time that we killed to survive...

Teen Jack: We killed those who weren't strong enough to survive.

Jack: (Whispers) Survival at any cost...

(Jack looks over to the body and vomits.)

Jack: It's the voices.

Child Jack and Teen Jack: And if they don't stop?

Jack: They will. They have.

Child Jack and Teen Jack: (Whispers) Have they?

X

At Rise: Jack is curled up next to the half-eaten corpse of Dick, holding his eyelids open while laughing.

Jack: All night! All night, and NOT A WORD! (Jack laughs). I knew it! I knew it! Who's the cannibal now?!

Dick: The one with a taste for human flesh.

(Jack chokes on his words. Pushing himself off the ground and scrambling backwards away from the body.)

Jack: No, no, no!

Ghostly Voice: What about us Jack? Would you eat us too if our bodies were in front of you?

(Jack grabs at his hair and yanks hard.)

Jack: It's not real! You're not real!

(Jack laughs manically in between words then starts hyperventilating.)

Dick: So, you're a cannibal by choice.

Jack: You just. Need. To shut. Up.

(Jack grabs the knife, slashing at the air.)

Dick: Why would a knife work on something that isn't real.

Jack: Just. Need. Shut. Up.

(Jack takes the knife and stabs one of his ears. He screams and for a moment everything is silent.)

Dick: You're not just a killer, you're a cannibal.

(Jack screams and tosses himself out a window. Landing on the snow outside, he scrambles to his feet and begins to run.)

X

At Rise: Jack stumbles through the snow, coughing, shivering. The blizzard obscures his vision until a figure emerges from the blizzard—Jeff.

Jeff: (Smiling eerily.) You look like hell.

Jack: Who—who the hell are you?

Jeff: Someone you've wronged.

(Jeff points at the cabin.)

Jeff: That man you killed, Dick? He was mine.

(Jeff points at himself.)

Jack: Yours?

(Jack puts both of his hands on either side of his head.)

Jeff: I was gonna eat him myself. Then you swooped in. So, I thought... Why not make things interesting?

(Jeff pulls out a talisman, flicking it between his fingers.)

Jeff: This blizzard, my doing and the voices not in your head,

Jack. Those are real. All too real.

Jack: No. No, you're lying!

Jeff: Am I? (Laughs.) I made sure you'd turn into exactly what you despise.

(He steps closer.)

Jeff: You see, I don't just eat flesh—I break people. And you,

Jack, are my favorite kind of meal.

(Jeff raises the talisman, and the specter of Dick appears, cold and pale.)

Dick: Remember when you said, "This is where you die"?

(Jack stumbles backward, shaking his head.)

Dick: This time, I hit, and you run.

(Dick raises his hand, counting down.)

Dick: Three... two...

(Dick's finger is left with one finger remaining up as he mouths one. Jack turns and sprints into the blizzard, his panicked screams fading into the wind. Jeff and Dick watch him disappear.)

Jeff: He won't last long out there.

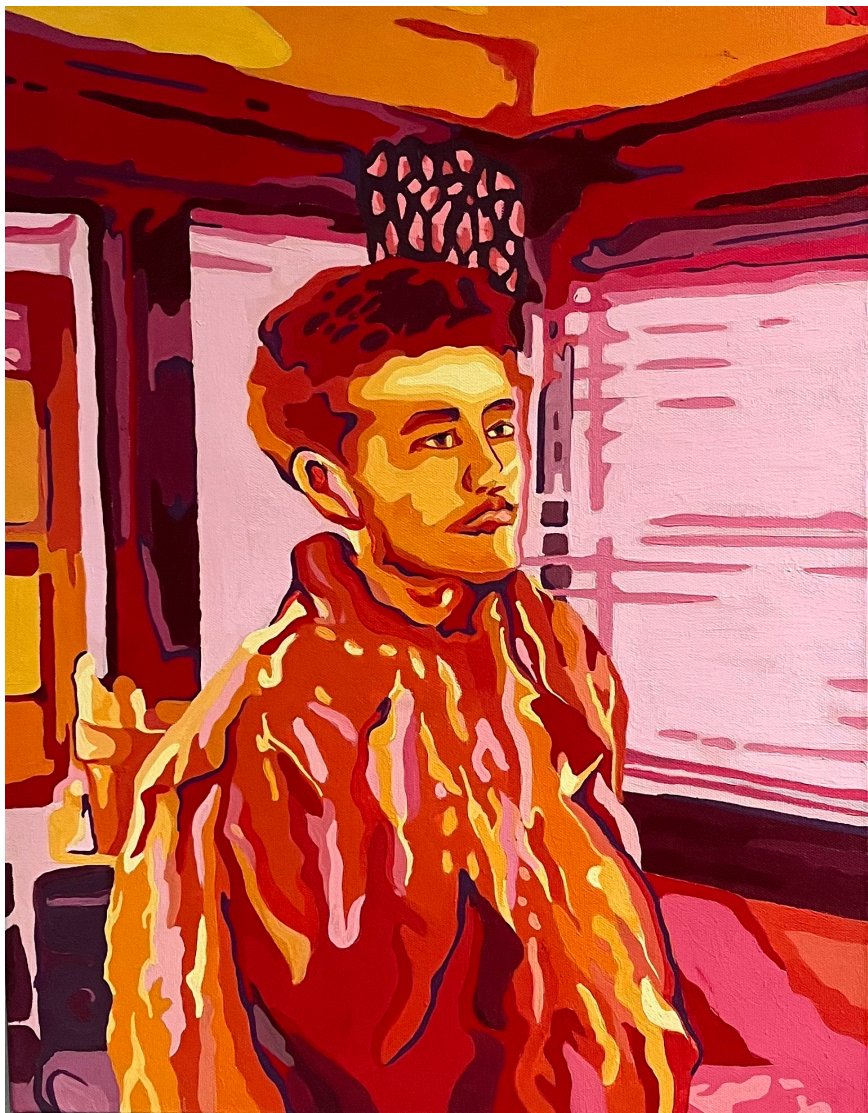
Dick: No. But he'll wish he did.

Anger and Appreciation

I have never appreciated my anger
Reminded me too much
Of a small brown-haired child
Looking up their father
And wondering why he was so loud
Why every shout hurt more
Than just their small ears
Why it would stick with them
Even when their mother
Would read them to sleep
I have never appreciated my anger
It felt too much
Like I was becoming
Like an older brown-haired child
Trying his best
To deal with what life had delt
Like a two pair to a royal flush
And instead of embracing the world
Instead of trying to move on
Let the glue trap of his own despair
Bring him down
Stuck and struggling and snarling
And even now as he is older
He has never really escaped
And looking between photos
Of his father and him
The differences are slight
Far slighter than he would like.
I have never appreciated my anger
Even as it kept me going
As I got older
Older than I ever thought
That I deserved to get
And I was no longer
That small brown-haired child
And I would never become
That older child,
And I was someone not yet seen
A person who screamed
And threw punches
And bled

But not for the past
Not for every ugly thing
That I ever went through
Not for the many scars
That I pick at when I know
That no one else is looking
I am angry so I can be kind
So, I can gently hold
My friends close to me
So, I can preach loving prose
To all I care for
I have never appreciated my anger.
It was too familiar.
But without it I do not think
I would know how to be kind

-Nara Hardesty



Untitled

by Harvest Day

Shine

The moon shines white
through the black of the night
it's light never dimmed
it's beauty often skimmed
like the moon shine so bright
Never let anyone dim your light
you may feel defeated trying to shine
the black and darkness does not define
you are the white light beautiful and divine.

by Dasia Lewis

Angel of God

by Emma Oswalt

The light fades along with the sound of the vacuum. Other than footsteps muffled by hallway rugs and carpet, it is silent. No talking. No music. No joy. Just dull monotony from people who have been there too long doing what they do too often. An emptiness cloaks the entrance to the church which is dim save the moonlight shining through the front glass doors. The light marks a pathway into the church. A path to follow. The One True Way. The way to Heaven. A path of light that is quickly obstructed by clouds. The grand double glass doors swing open and I step onto where the path of light once was.

The shadows dance around me, the church, vacant of it's normal warm glow. Grey carpet leads to the marble floor near the altar which reflects the meager moonlight coming through the normally bright stained glass windows. My breathing echoes while I walk past the empty pews arranged in rows facing towards the altar. A chill travels its way up my spine, creating goosebumps up and down my arms. The feeling of eyes on me causes my neck to tingle. The eyes from the biblical scenes painted on either side of me, the all seeing eye in the stained glass window on the right, the sad eyes from the Mary statue, the angels holding up the altar. All looking. All staring at the sinners who enter this holy place. The sinners who come to kneel and beg. The ones who give themselves up to be forgiven. I keep walking steadily. Incense lingers in the air, tickling my nose; there must have been a funeral today because why else would there be incense in the air on a random Friday during winter. My steps start to reverb when I reach the marble floor, breaking the silence, the stillness, the peace which once rested upon the chapel.

The sacristy isn't much different from the main area of the church. Cold, dark, melancholy, but the lack of being watched is sudden. Shocking. The feeling of eyes grows normal, constant. When gone, one misses their presence, it's less lonely with them. The far back of the room is cluttered with random things: the cross kissed on Good Friday, fake plants that come out once a year during Easter, old banners missing the light of day they haven't seen in years, and a line of vacuums so old they barely work. The one I grab swerves in front of me while I walk. Bending my wrist into awkward angles. In order to not scratch the marble, I heft the weight of the vacuum in my left hand. The feeling of being watched returns as I walk down the steps back to the dull grey carpet. The burden of the vacuum leaves my left hand and I stand still, the silence overwhelming, captivating. A spell cast and can not be broken. The tingle on my neck returns stronger than before, as if someone larger, mightier, is watching me now. Seeing

deep into the souls of those who dare cross its path. Seeing everything that was, is, and will be.

The crucifix hangs behind me, bloody. The gory scene emits its own light for it has no need to reflect the little moonlight coming through; all must bask in its Heavenly radiance. The power comes off it in waves sending shivers down the most righteous of spines. Making its presence known. Telling everyone it can not be ignored. The gold from the tabernacle casts a rich glow to those who look upon the crucifix. Calling sinners to grovel on their knees, begging for forgiveness. Forgiveness He could give them. Forgiveness He wants to give or so they say. Calling all who believe to come and drink the blood pouring out of His side, to grant them His eternal life. His head is bobbed to the left as if whispering into the ear of someone who is not there. His crown deeply embedded into his forehead. The muscles in His arms and legs are tense, hyperextended. Even so, no pain is strewn across His face. No pain. No fear. Instead, Christ looks down on all who enter, mournfully. Looking upon their faces or their backs. I continue to walk towards the entrance.

The choir loft is almost entirely dark. The stained glass flower which lets the light in at sunset is bleak, muted. The microphone stands are hardly seen, blending in with the black around them. Looking hard enough, young choirboys and choir girls can be seen, singing for Christmas Eve mass. The loft crowded and heat radiating down to the nave. The Christmas ribbons dipping like waves across the railing, the rich crimson and shimmery gold. The Heavenly Blood, the Heavenly Body. Christ's eyes are still felt on my back. Begging those who have looked away to beg for forgiveness. To return to the light; return to Him. The angels harmonize with His plea, their heads bent in prayer; praying for the sinner to come back. Praying so the sinner does not fall like their brother fell. Doubt the way their brother doubted. Michael prays for the sinner to be saved, so his fight is not in vain but Lucifer stands outside the main entrance, beckoning the ones who doubt, the ones who do not care, the ones who are too far gone. He extends his hand whispering sweet nothings into their ears, waiting for them to choose. To come to him. He convinces them they will live the best life and after death will be even better. He tells them after they die they will feel no pain, they will be reunited with the ones they love. All they have to do is follow.

The tension in the church rises, becoming heavy. Suffocating. Both sides are calling. Whoever is caught in the middle is being pulled back and forth, gaining whiplash from the eternal struggle. Follow the light or fall in the shadows. Let Michael save you or ignore his pleas. Let Lucifer guide you to a painless life or let him claw at your back. The cold and dark envelopes me as I walk. I struggle against the pulls I feel and I ignore the cries until the grand double glass doors swing closed behind me as I exit the chapel.

The Toad's Holy Throne

The fat frumpy toad waits for his throne.
The mean grumpy toad grabs for a crown.
In this rearranged reality truth is negotiable.
Deny what I've done, ignore what I've said.

Rotten, stinking teeth fall out like lies.
Projection is a set of mirrors and smog.
Propaganda is devoured by the gullible.
Memes are now research sources.

Pipelines and hurricanes are trashing the land.
Sacred and stolen ground, now jealously guarded.
The Great White slave owners timelessly watch
with chilly eyes, engraved in vandalized stone.

Podcast bros wage hateful holy wars. Red pill
alpha spirituality is a set of rigid rules.
Words hang in the air like ghosts of the
ashy leaves of burned books, glowing around the edge.

Maybe they'll bulldoze Mount Rushmore.
Maybe we'll get a new statue of a mean angry toad
complete with a crown and unchecked power. Vengeful eyes
built by sculptors, unpaid and ruined, crushed under a stone foot.

God's guns are Great and pointed.
Scientists and women who dare to push back
are the destruction of Greatness, targets in the Holy Cross-hairs.
Truth is treason, and the King's bastardized Bible is a war manual.

-Nic Uni

The Lair of Scylla

by Lauren Daniel

It was a dark and stormy night. The docks were creaking like a loose wooden door swinging in the wind, and I thought it would be a good idea to go fishing. Some fishing “experts” told me that when it is raining like this the fish would be more likely to bite. I sat at the edge of the dock and started to assemble my bait, but then I felt the air suddenly become colder. I mean it was already cold since it was a mid-spring shower, however it was like going from a cold shower to an icy snow shower. I turned around instinctively. All I saw was the dead silent ocean with the shining stars bouncing from the clam ocean waves. The moon and stars were the only things illuminating the pitch-black docks. I turned back around and finished putting the bait onto my fishing rod when something swooped me up out of nowhere and blindfolded me. I couldn’t see where I was, all I could do was listen to what was going on. I could hear what seemed to be sailors, and not just any sailors. They were swearing like a certain kind of sailor. The potty mouth pirate sailor. From what I could hear they were discussing what to do with me. They finally settled on the brink. So, for the time being I was tied up from head to toe, almost like a cartoon character. When they finally let me out, they took off the blindfold. They stared at me for a long time before uttering any words.

“What may you be here for?” One of the crew asked. Before I could answer another crew tried to inquire what I was. “Maybe he is one of those mermaids.”

“No, you barnacle, mermaids are female and live in the sea. Not dry and fish on the docks.” One of them got closer, and as he got closer, I could make out more details of this fellow. He was short, stubby, had a wooden peg leg instead of a right leg, what seemed to be no hair on his head but instead seemed to all be to his beard or other extremities. “I think this might be a human.” He said as he turned towards the rest the crew. They all turned towards each other and started to whisper. He could hear different words that could piece together its own sentence. ~What ~if ~he ~sirens ~mermaids ~sea serpents then it all went quiet. They turned back towards him and looked as if they wanted to formulate a plan.

“Oh, Captain!” They all unanimously shouted. The captain stepped forward and listened to the idea his crew had. His face lit up like a firefly squid on the darkest night of the seven seas. “And d you're sure he is what ye say he is?” The captain asked, trying not to be overt. “We’re sure Captain.”

“Alright, he will be one of us then.” Everyone seemed so excited by this news. “Arrgh son, what is your name?” The captain asked me, I muffled my words a little bit, “I’m sorry, wha’ did ye say lad?” I was about to point to my mouth when I realized I had

my arm tied. The captain realized I was unable to talk "Boney, take off the rope around his mouth." Boney quickly started to slowly start unravelling the rope. "Now what were you saying?"

"My name is Jerry."

"Oh, ahoy Jerry. How do ye feel about livin' on the ship wit' us and becomin' part o' me crew?" the captain asked. "I don't know, there something quite odd about this."

"Wha' do ye mean?"

"You picked me up from the docks out of nowhere, tied me up, and you are forcing me into a life of swabbing the poop deck, so to speak."

"Ye could always walk the plank into the oceans waters." From where I was standing, I tried to see what the waters looked like; if they were shark infested, gator infested, the kraken, or some other terrifying creature lurking in the waters. Instead, what I saw was a graveyard of an ocean. The sea suddenly became quiet, eerie. It stood still and almost looked as if it turned a grey color, then again, the dead fish rising from the ocean's depths may not have helped that illusion either. I gulped and shakily said "W-what d-did you have in mind?" The captain smiled when he heard these words. He motioned me towards the rest of his crew.

"Let me introduce ye t' the rest o' me crew." We walked toward the crew and pointed to the first crew member. He was short, stubby, and had a wooden peg leg instead of a right leg. "

"Tis be Morgan, He's the brains." Morgan stepped forward. He stomped his right leg down, and at the same time gave a salute.

"Nice t' meet ye." He stepped back into the line. We walked to the next crew mate. He was also short, stubby, and had two eye patches. One patch on the right eye, and one on the back of the head.

"Tis be John. He's nah the brightest starfish in the sea." John stepped forward. He stomped his right leg down, and at the same time gave the same salute, only his back was facing us.

"Nice t' meet ye sir." He stepped back into the line and almost tripped on a nail. We walked to the next crew mate. This one was taller, more muscular, and had scars all over his arms and one peeking out from underneath his shirt.

"Tis be Bones, he be the muscles." Bones stepped forward. He stomped his left leg down, and at the same time gave a salute.

"Nice t' meet ye sir." He stepped back into the line. We walked to the next crew mate. He was also tall, but lanky, he didn't have any scars or peg legs.

"Tis be Jake, he be as lily-livered as a purple firefish." He cautiously stepped forward and gave a shaky salute.

"Ahoy m-sir." He cautiously stepped back into line and almost jumped at the sight of a firefly. We walked to the final crew mate. He was short, stumpy, and muscular. He also had scars all over him and an ear siring.

"Tis be Harlock, he be a competitive rogue." Harlock stepped forward. He stomped his left leg down, and at the same time gave a salute.

"Nice t' meet ye sir." He stepped back into the line. The captain instructed me to follow him to his quarters.

Once we arrived at his quarters he showed me the map of the seven seas. Along with the many lands such as the Grecian Islands, there were mythological places and creatures marked on the map such as Scylla and her brother Charybdis, Shen, Mami Wata, Bunyip, Leviathan, the kraken, Marianas Trench, and the Bermuda Triangle. He pointed to the map and asked, "Be ye familiar wit' any o' these creatures?"

“Mami Wata and Scylla I’m pretty familiar with.”

“Wha’ about Charybdis, Scylla’s matey?”

“I am familiar with him as well.”

“Good we shall sail t’ the Strait o’ Messina t’ take down Scylla n’ Charybdis.”

The captain said. Before I could get a word in, he ordered his men to clear out a section of the crews’ quarters so that I had room all to myself. In the blink of an eye every one of those men went straight down below deck and cleared out the room. I speculated as to why they would be doing this in such short order; however, I could only ponder why and what to do about Scylla and Charybdis. The captain ordered his crew to show me to my quarters and to make me comfortable since we had a long couple of days ahead of us. Without uttering a word, the crew showed me to my quarters and left me to be alone. As I entered my quarters, I wondered how I got into this mess to begin with, and more importantly if these myths are true how would I be able to slay them.

I laid in my bed anxiously awaiting my doom. Mythical creatures and places? The Bermuda Triangle and the Marianna Trench are all real places so what would be mythical about that? That the legends surrounding them, UFOs and ancient dinosaurs thought to have been extinct for a long time are real? This sounds very familiar, however considering we are sailing to Scylla and Charybdis makes the legends and tall tales sound plausible. Still heading towards two ancient creatures that are real metaphors for being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Charybdis being the rock and Scylla being the hard place, this is sometimes used as choosing the lesser of the two evils. The captain came into my quarters trying to be quiet. “I thought ye would be up.” He spoke. I thought about that statement, how would he be able to know I was awake. For all he knew I could have tried to go below deck and figure out a way to leave this ship. That is not a bad idea. “I ‘ave a book fer ye.” He took out a book from his blue jacket and handed it to me. It was titled “A Beginners Guide to Creatures and Deities”. “Of course.” I thought to myself. “Of course he would have a book, and just by coincidence gave it to me.”

“Since ye be unfamiliar wit’ the creatures dat we shall be encounterin’ on our voyages, the crew n’ I scribed a draft o’ all o’ creatures n’ deities fer ye.” It wasn’t a bad idea, and he was right. I hadn’t heard about some of these creatures or what they did. Scylla I only heard about thanks to Odessey, and even then, a book detailing what each creature is capable of is helpful. “I’ll leave ye wit’ the book. We shall be dockin’ at the Strait o’ Messina in three days, dat shall give ye time t’ read up on Scylla n’ her brother.” He walked out of the room, and I looked at the book. I opened the book and right there was a warning. “WARNING: The creatures in this book are highly dangerous and without proper training will get you killed.”

“Great.” I thought to myself. “There is always a catch to these types of things.” I looked further down the page. There was something in fine print that I couldn’t read. I thought about having a magnifying glass to try and read it, and then I thought I would leave it for the morning and before I knew it, I was fast asleep. I stirred only a few minutes later to something sitting on my chest. At first, I was terrified, because I thought it was a rat. I still had my eyes closed, then thought that it was quite big for it to be a rat. So, I slowly opened my eyes to find the magnifying glass sitting on my chest. I figured I accidentally said it aloud before I fell asleep and one of the crew brought it into my quarters. I picked up the magnifying glass and read the tiny lettering. The lettering said, “If you magically found a magnifying glass after wishing for one, no one gave it to you the book gave it to you.” As I read this I thought “Ooook, so this is all real.” I read though the book a little more and stopped at the page titled Scylla. I skimmed over the page, it described her myth. “Glaucus was a prophetic sea god, it was believed he would help rescue sailors and fisherman from storms. He fell in love with Scylla, but the enchantress

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Cerci was in love with Glaucus. So, when Scylla went to bath in her favorite spot, Cerci poured a potion into the water and turned her into the creature she is today. There was a theory that Scylla and Charybdis are siblings, and that they were born creatures. However, the parents differ from source to source.” When I got to the heading titled “How to Kill Scylla” I closed the book. I wasn’t ready to read what I could do to kill her. So, I put the book on the table next to me and fell asleep.

As the next day came and went, I was reading how to kill Scylla and her brother. I figured that if we killed Scylla first the captain might leave Charybdis alone since he was essentially a giant whirlpool. The book went through many detailed ways of potentially killing Scylla. One was particularly interesting; one would have to either trick Scylla or throw her into her brother. Tricking Scylla would be difficult but what would be even more difficult would be throwing or pushing Scylla into her brother. Either way it would be tricky, on the one hand you need either super strength or good luck. On the other hand, you would need to find something Scylla would want more than sailors on board their ship. The only thing I could think of that she would want would be her old form back, not being reliant on sailors passing through the strait and maybe sailing into her or her brother is something she probably didn’t always want. So, if there was a way to turn her into a mermaid or back into a nymph, maybe she would go for that and not go after the captain’s crew. The only thing now is how to turn Scylla back into a sea nymph. Then I remembered who turned her into the sea creature in the first place, Circe. If we could somehow convince Cerci to turn Scylla back into a sea nymph, there would be a safe way around Charybdis. However, if the legends were true that they were siblings, then she would want her brother turned back into a deity as well. However, this was the only strive to a conclusion I could make to keep myself and the rest of the crew alive. I decided to talk to the captain since he seemed to know something about Scylla that he didn’t mention. I walked straight into his quarters, and he was sitting in his wooden chair with his feet up on the table. “Ah, ‘ave ye figured out how t’ slay Scylla?” He asked.

“I believe I may have.” I responded.

“Oh, ‘n would ye please tell me o’ dis plan.” I looked at him confused. It almost seemed as if he didn’t believe me. “Are you familiar with Cerci?” I asked. I watched his eyes light up like a kitefin shark. He grinned and said “Aye o’ course. Who doesn’t know o’ the infamous tale o’ Cerci ‘n Scylla?”

“I thought maybe we didn’t have to slay Scylla...” His eyes, his eyes said it all. His pupils dilated, his teeth in his grin turned to sharp pointed teeth, and his chest started to rise up and down as if he was laughing, but it didn’t sound like he was laughing. “You don’t understand pirating, do ye?” He asked as he stood up from his chair. “I asked you to find a way t’ defeat Scylla.”

“Yes you did, and I did just without harming her.”

“And what makes you reckon I could care less if she be harmed or not? All I wanted was a way to slay her so I could have her head as a trophy.” He exclaimed. “These creatures are monsters, monsters who deserve no mercy. So, if ye don’t want the same fate as the last sailor who suggested such an ungodly idea than I suggest you go and figure out a way to slay her.” He spoke. I quickly ran back into my quarters trying to process what just happened. What happened to the captain who was warm and welcoming? What happened to the captain who gave me the book? When I arrived back at my room I looked down at the book. I thought maybe I should at least read what it suggests on killing Scylla. I opened the book and saw there was a simple sentence inscribed on the page, “Heracles killed Scylla.” I almost jumped for joy until I realized that the captain would not be too happy about the news of someone else killing Scylla before we could. I flipped the page over and it simply stated that she was brought back to life to continue

her punishment. My joy quickly turned into despire, who would resurrect someone just to carry out a punishment. Then I realized who turned Scylla into the sea creature she was. I knew I had to come up with a plan to kill Scylla, otherwise my head would end up with the many sharks and serpents lurking below the ship. Not unless I wanted to take control of the ship. I don't know how well the crew would respond to mutiny, especially since I am a new member, however it was worth a thought.

I decided to walk up to the crews' quarters and asked what they thought of the captain. They all looked at me with hesitation. I knew they thought I was going to say something to the captain and there goes their lives. "Wha' do ye reckon o' the cap'n?" John asked.

"Well, I think he wants a trophy more than he wants to make the seas calmer." I stated. They all still had a look of hesitation in their eyes. "Look, I pitched an idea to the captain about Scylla and he said he wanted Scylla's head as a trophy." They all looked at me confused.

"Wha' idea did ye 'ave?" Morgan asked.

"I thought since Cerci was the one to turn Scylla into the creature she is today, I thought maybe we could convince or trick her into turning Scylla back into the sea nymph she used to be. That way whenever you need to sail through the strait you only must worry about Charybdis." They all looked at me astonished. Morgan started pacing back and forth. He started to murmur under his breath. "I believe it could work." Morgan said. "If we sailed t' Cerci's temple 'n offered her somethin' in exchange fer her t' transform her back, we wouldn't 'ave t' worry about Scylla anymore."

"n n wha' about the challenge, the thrill o' scuttlin' her?" Harlock asked.

"W-well I l-like the p-plan." Jake said.

"O' course ye would, ye hate danger." Bones said as he pointed to Jake.

"Wha' if we sailed around her?" John asked with his back to the rest of the crew. "Where be everyone?" Bones turned him around and sat him on the trunk in front of the bunks. "Oh."

"If we sailed around Scylla, we would end up eaten by Charybdis." I said.

"I wonder why the cap'n wants t' scuttle her." Morgan said. As he said that I could sense a bone chilling presence about to enter the doorway. I turned around to look at the doorway.

"Shiver me timbers, wha' be it a mouse?" Jake asked, but I stayed quiet just in case.

"And what is this congregation on my ship?" The captain asked as he was walking past the room.

"I was just asking them where my room was, so where did you say it was again?" I asked Bones. He looked at me and said, "Ah why don't I show ye again, so ye don't get lost." The captain looked at both of us and moved out of the doorway. "Ye will wants to rest up. We shall be dockin' at Scylla's lair tomorrow night." He said with a bone chilling, sharklike smile beaming across his face. "Yes sir." I said as I turned my head towards the floor to avoid any eye contact. As we walked out of the room Bones was quiet.

"He ain't normally like dis." He spoke. "He must 'ave a reason fer why he wants Scylla dead."

"We have to help Scylla." I replied.

"But wha' if he has a good reason?"

"His reason is clear, show how strong he is."

"n he be."

"Then why is he enlisting my help to kill Scylla when there is possibly a more humane way of taming her. Even if we came up with a plan to kill her, she would kill

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some of us before we could kill her." He stayed quiet until we went to my quarters.

"I recommend ye stay put fer now. We shall natter 'im into nah scuttlin' her." Bones said as I walked into my quarters. I nodded my head, and he walked out of my quarters. I walked to my bed and attempted to drift off to sleep once more, but once I closed my eyes, I could hear my quarters door open. I open my eyes to see who would be opening my door at this time of night. When I looked no one was there. I was about to grab the book from my beside table when there was a fant bang from behind me. I looked out of the porthole, and I saw another ship coming our way. I could hear the captain yelling from above. "Everyone on deck, we be under attack!" The next thing I knew I heard the stomping of four men, and what seemed to be the tiniest footsteps I ever heard. I soon followed them to see who we were up against. As soon as I hit the top deck, I spotted the captain armed and ready to fire the cannon right in front of him. He had the same shark like grin he had on his face from before. He was about to light the cannon when he slightly turned around and caught me in the corner of his eye. "Ye shant be up here! Go back to your quarters!" He barked, but before I could move the captain of the other ship and three of his men swung over to our ship. "Argg, secure dis vessel! I don't wants any rogue leavin' dis ship 'til dat be done!" He ordered his men. Immediately the captain, Bones, and Harlock started to pull out their swords. Morgan ran up to the helm and started to steer the boat away from their ship. Harlock and Bones started fighting with trespassers while the captain was fighting the captain. They both were winning until Harlock got a cut just over his heart. It didn't pierce the skin, but it made Bones scared for just long enough that they had a chance to stab him in the leg. They stayed on their feet and fought with all their might, while the captains were doing the same. "I see ye prepared yer mates from the last time we fought." The captain said.

"Better t' be prepared than t' surrender t' ye Flyer." The captain said as he almost stabbed Flyer in the chest. Flyer looked over to his ship, but it was gone. It disappeared out of thin air. "Wha' happened t' me ship?!"

"Oh, it be where ye left it." The captain said as he stabbed Flyer from behind. Flyer tried to pull the sword out, but it was too late. Captain already pulled his sword from his chest and pushed him to the side of the boat. Captain Flyer fell onto his knees; he looked down to the waters below. The same watery grave he planned on giving the captain. His crew mate tried to make it to their captain, but Bones and Harlock finished them off as soon as their gazes left the two of them. Flyer saw this and looked up at the captain. The captain put his sword up to Flyers neck. "Ye know, dis was too easy." He pushed the sword deeper into his neck, but not yet piercing the skin.

"So be it." He said as he cut Flyer's throat. We all stood there for a while. Of all the things I thought I would see, I never thought I would see a murder. Even though I was on a pirate ship, I didn't think I was going to witness a murder. Everyone stayed still. "Harlock!" Harlock looked over to the captain. "Throw 'im overboard."

"Yes captain." Harlock said as he walked over to Flyer's lifeless body. "Bones! Take Jerry back t' his quarters." Bones moved quickly without saying a word to take me back to my quarters. Before I went with him the last things I saw were Harlock throwing Flyer into the ocean with the sharks and sea serpents devouring his body, and the captain's great white grin.

Bones took me back to my room and shut the door. It was clear to me that everyone else on the ship didn't think that the captain would murder another captain. They probably thought that he would throw him in the brink but never murder him. This got me thinking, if this is something new to his crew maybe they would be willing to form a mutiny. I stayed in my quarters for a while before heading back to the crew's quarters. When I arrived there, they were all sitting on their trunks looking down at the floor. "I've

ne'er seen 'im kill someone before." Morgan said.

"He's the cap'n, he has t' protect his ship somehow." Bones replied as he swung his feet from side to side. "I don't even know wha' me scallywags be sayin'." John said.

"Dat's 'cause ye didn' even go up thar!" Bone saw me through the corner of his eye and quickly shut his mouth. Everyone else was oblivious to the fact that I was there.

"Wha' if we formed a mutiny?" Everyone looked up in shock. "I mean ye all saw how he acted. He wasn't in his right o' mind." They all looked at each other. Morgan slowly nodded. "Dat be true. He's ne'er acted like dis afore."

"B-but w-wha' about his p-protection?"

"Wha' protection!?! It's only a matter o' time afore he turns on us like dat!"

Harlock stood up from his trunk with his head lowered.

"I hate t' say it, but thar right. The cap'n be slowly loosin' it." Harlock looked at Bones and nodded their heads. At that moment a wave of relief washed over me. I couldn't understand why, but it felt good. Before I knew it, I was already in the crews' quarters with them staring at me. "He heard everythin'." Bones said while looking at the rest of the crew.

"Indeed, and I do believe it would be a good idea to form a mutiny. We can start by sailing towards Cerci's."

"Aye, captain!" Bone said. We ran up to the top deck and started heading towards Cerci's Island. With Morgan taking the lead at the helm I knew we would be there in no time.

The captain joined us not to long after. He looked a little confused but was almost impressed that all his crew was dedicated to the mission. Bones and Harlock start to walk up to the captain with rope in their hands, and quickly the captain's surprised face turns into bitter hatred. He jumps out of the way of his two best fighters and starts to make his way towards me. As he was walking towards me, I could see what looked to be swordfish in his eyes. "How dare you turn my crew against me!" He yelled as he grabbed me. He picked me up and started to shake me. "This is MY crew! We do things MY way!" He shouted. Bones and Harlock tried their best to make it to me before the captain did anything drastic, but it was to late. He dragged me up to the bow of the ship as I tried my hardest to kick and get away from him, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't. He looked directly into my eyes and dropped me overboard. The last thing I saw were bloodlust eyes ready to kill myself and the rest of his unfaithful crew. The next thing I remember is waking up in my bed back at home. My warm and cozy bed, better than the hard cold bed I was using before. I rubbed my eyes to see my surroundings a little better, but everything was familiar the maple bedside table, ivory bed sheets, cream curtains, everything seemed familiar. Then there was a distant call I knew very well. "Come on dear, you'll be late for work." Everything was just a dream. I ran downstairs to see my beautiful wife, and it was true. She was as real as ever, so everything was a dream. "How long was I asleep for?" I asked. "Only eight hours, it was more you usually get so I figured you needed the sleep." How did I not remember going from the docks to my bed. "Did I say anything strange when I came home last night?"

"Just where is my fishing gear? I thought I left it at the docks." She said, "But all of your fishing gear was in the closet, and you had just come home from a stressful business meeting, so I just figured you were tired." She continued as she was plating a bacon and cheesy omelet. I didn't think too much after that, I finished my breakfast and went back to my room. I looked over at the bedside table and saw a book. A book titled "A Beginners Guide to Creatures and Deities" and a note "I know you didn't think you were going to escape me, did you? Signed Captain Blackbeard"

But I Didn't Know Your Name

Snow began to fall,
and I wanted to go,
but this was your first time.

Big Ozark flakes fell,
turning to water droplets
on hair and shoulders and eyelashes.

I was wearing shorts,
living in defiance of winter,
but you were cold.

You'd never seen snow in Africa,
and your face couldn't contain your joy.

Wide-eyed and open mouthed,
you watched and felt the flakes fall on us
with amazement.

You watched the snow.
I watched you.

And for a moment, I believed
we had our whole lives ahead of us.

-Zachariah L. Forkner



His Plasma Said Pray

by Samuel Mauch

Forever

Forever was made for memories,
Never for people,
Humans come and they go,
Willingly a friendship slowly fades,
A person passes quickly,
Their crisp voice turns to whispers,
Their clear face now a muddled shadow,
They slip from your mind,
Some for the better,
Often for the worse,
Forever was not made for people,
People lie and they hurt,
People cheat and they steal,
People love and laugh,
People are full of love and full of hate,
People aren't meant for forever,
Forever are their memories

-Leah Kalina

Pride, Prejudice, and Paper Petals

by Briah Merriman

I was dissected in my seventh-grade biology classroom. In a single afternoon, I was split apart by a scalpel of shame. My pride was unraveled and pinned at the surface like earthworm innards, frog guts, and cow eyes. As with earthworm innards, frog guts, and cow eyes, it was not a beautiful sight to behold.

The biology teacher, Mr. Engstrom (affectionately dubbed Mr. Egg in conversations between students), was a fan favorite. With a never-ending monologue of dry remarks and witty one-liners, he held our attention unwaveringly during what would typically be a grueling final period. One could never be quite sure if he was laughing with or at you, but it was certain you'd be laughing along all the same. He would take us into the school garden to identify wildflowers, exclaiming, "Your generation needs to learn the ancient art of frolicking in a field!" He held intense races for speed-writing the photosynthetic formula and kept a wall of pictures displaying the wide, brace-faced smiles of the proud class victors. The competition was fierce, but I stayed ahead through no great sacrifice on my part, filling my lonely lunch hour with formulas and fast facts instead of awkward silence. Mr. E. wasn't just a fan favorite; he was my personal favorite teacher, which is why I was so blindsided by his utter betrayal one fateful September afternoon.

"Okaaaaaay, ladies and gentlemen," Mr. E. began class with his signature sigh. "I suppose you all expect me to teach you something today, don't you? You do? Rats. Well, what exactly is it that you're expecting to learn about?" Hands shot in the air. He pointed to a smiley brunette from the girls' cheer team.

"Uh, how the earthworms are going to, like, digest and stuff?"

Mr. E's eyes widened as he feigned awe. "That's, like, literally what I was hoping you'd say, Hailey!" He quipped. She laughed good-naturedly and he continued. "As excited as I am to get into digesting and stuff, we have one pressing matter we must attend to first... a matter of the heart." He paused, undoubtedly for dramatic effect. "Someone in this class has a special gift from a not-so-secret admirer." We looked around, shrugging our shoulders and shaking our heads. No one had any clue what he could possibly be speaking of. He reached behind his podium and slowly lifted a mysterious item, milking every moment of suspense. Eventually, he revealed a small origami flower.

The flower was folded from an old worksheet covered in pencil scratches etched on the answer lines. The paper carried a message.

"I love you," he read aloud, "from Elijah."

No sooner did the name fall from his lips than the classroom erupted into

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laughter. Instantly, the boys began to elbow one another. "It's for you!" they taunted. The girls giggled, albeit nervously. No one wanted to be the unlucky recipient of this token. Elijah was a frail boy who donned a bulky pair of headphones and a constant scowl. He had a lazy eye and a distinctly hostile voice, apt to talk at you rather than to you. As it goes in every junior high, there existed a social hierarchy, and these traits had left the boy near the very bottom of this totem pole. That year, when we'd learned about the survival of the fittest, I'd thought of all the species of the student kingdom who were endangered by the inferiority of their birth, rank, and circumstances, knowing I myself wasn't spared from that list. So, I tried my best to make the ecosystem less cruel. The boy's locker was directly next to mine, and I'd occasionally smile at him and make small talk as we shoved textbooks into our backpacks. In gym class, I'd pick him as a partner so he wouldn't be left alone. These acts of kindness weren't revolutionary, as acceptance had always seemed to come naturally to me. But it would turn out that another, more dominant animal instinct would awaken from hibernation: fear.

I feared the flower was meant for me as soon as the name was spoken. Still, I kept my eyes glued to my desk. I crossed my fingers in my lap and silently begged. Please, oh please, do not say my name.

He did. Maybe I should've knocked on wood.

"This is for you." Mr. Engstrom suppressed a slight smirk, and I swore he knew exactly what he was doing as he marched ceremoniously towards my spot in the back row.

"Oooooooh!" The boys' squeaky voices rose as they teased. The girls turned around to watch. My face was red hot. Under their microscopes, I felt every cell magnified. They looked me up and down through mascara-curtained eyes. I could see them taking mental note of my two-sizes-too-big garage sale sweater, glasses, acne, and New Balance orthopedic sneakers. Mr. E. set the flower on my desk and walked back to the front of the class. I don't remember a word he taught after that, but I know the glances and snickers continued long after he began speaking. I scooted the flower to the corner of my desk, trying to create as much of a distance between it and myself as possible. The smell of decay filled my nose. The flower was a corpse, and I could see an epitaph engraved in the fading wood of my desk: "Here lay my social life."

In the final moments before the bell rang, the kids lined up by the door. In tears, I picked up the flower and carried it to the trashcan. With their eyes still on me, I gripped its delicate paper petals and held it above the bin. A few kids nodded in approval. The bell chimed, the door flew open, and Elijah walked into the classroom as everyone else stormed out. His eyes fell to my hand, still hovering above the trash, then towards my blotchy face and red eyes. At that moment, there was a face to the humiliation I carried. This humiliation expanded beyond anything that his little gesture could have caused. It was nine years of being the new kid. It was knowing I'd never host a sleepover because bedbugs crawled from the cracks in my wall; thank you very much to my cracked out upstairs neighbors who just couldn't keep their place clean. It was picking my skin and pinching my legs. It was clawing and clawing and never fully breathing. It wasn't the paper petals, not really. But they were something I could crumple. And so, looking him in the eyes, I did. Elijah glanced toward Mr. E, who just shook his head slightly. As I walked silently through the door, the boy's face fell, and I heard a faint whisper I would never forget.

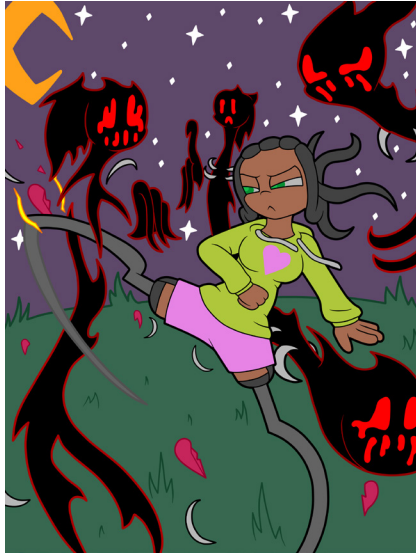
"Why did I even try?"

With those words, my heart broke. Instantly, the echoing caws and cackles of the junior high herd were silenced. My hunger for the adulation of my peers was washed away by a deep, crashing wave of remorse.

A year would pass until another warm September day when Elijah's words would resurface in my mind as I overheard a circle of girls I thought I had befriended take turns describing how odd I was. After saving up babysitting money for American Eagle jeans, begging my mom for bleach blonde highlights, and adopting every possible manicured mannerism, I had thought I'd found a way to camouflage in their habitat. I realized then that sometimes prejudice is permanent, and total migration is the best way to find warmth. Elijah's sorry words took on a more hopeful tone. In the knowledge of somewhere better to fly, why should I even try?

His words would return to me again years later as I would hand a boy a bracelet, a souvenir from a summer road trip, my own sort of origami flower that I hoped would carry the message, "I think of you even when we're apart." It would be my own first childish love; I'd feel my own hopes crushed as I swallowed the bitter aftertaste of embarrassment over the boldness of my declaration. Again, I would discover the fragility of human connection and realize that the roots of my heart would always thirst until they would taste a living water found only in divine intervention.

These moments and many more that followed would hang like paper mâché lanterns across my life. I'd never return to school or see Elijah again. I would wish countless times that I could retrace that day's missteps like some sort of experiment, trading in those cruel variables in hopes of a kinder outcome. Unfortunately, there's no scientific method for reversing time. There are, however, life cycles. As I have been truly loved, I will love truly. It will never be perfect. But with all the earnestness of a brave seventh-grade boy, I will try.



Phantom Pain

by Michael Jenkins

I sit down on the chair beside the couch with one slice of pizza from the center of the sun and one peeled off the bottom of a glacier, somehow microwaved on the same plate. Ada and Bethany sit across from each other on the living room floor. Ada's wheelchair is folded up and tucked against the back of the couch. Though she doesn't have Bonnie to bounce off of anymore, Bethany is at least willing to sit down and listen to her recite poetry.

"They just can't wait to see you stripped to the bone
Tearin' through your marrow like they're diggin' a hole
So they can turn around and say that's just the way that it goes
The weak ones belong between the jaws of the strong
That's the way that nature does it so it couldn't be wrong
And everybody nods and we all play along
Not because we think it's fun being meat
But because we dream someday we'll be the ones pickin' bones from our teeth."
Maybe if I stack both slices of pizza top of each other and take bites from them
together, it'll cancel out-
Nope! That's somehow even worse.
CRACK!

All three of us turn to the front door. Elaine speed-walks into the house, and firmly shuts the door at lightspeed, then practically dives for the floor..

"Guys!" She whispers harshly. "There's a lot of phantoms out there! Like ... Like a LOT of phantoms."

"How many?" I ask quietly.

"Dude, there's like . . . seven of 'em maybe? Could be eight. I couldn't get a clean head count."

"That's bad, isn't it?" Ada asks.

I creep up out of my chair, and slink over to the front door. Elaine crawls past me and ducks down below the couch, hiding out of view of the front window. She frantically motions for Bethany and Ada to hit the deck. They both lie down flat on the floor.

I slowly approach the window in the front door. A bunch of lanky, wispy ghouls made of a blackness beyond blackness block out portions of the night sky, slinking around and terrorizing a very fat raccoon who's terror-waddling for a sewer grate. From the softly glowing red eyes, I can pick out at least five of them, probably more. They buzz around the unfortunate fatso like flies around a garbage can, picking away at him with long, slender fingers and leaving a trail of blood splatter and raccoon chunks along the curb.

I slowly crouch back from the door, and pick up the two, black hockey sticks next to the snow shovels. One of them has been duct-taped back together several times, and both have a white crucifix sloppily painted onto the blade. I hand Elaine's hockey stick over. She stares at it, bewildered.

"Hope we don't need these. We'll probably have to wait this one out . . ." I whisper back.

Ada's eyes go wide, and Bethany's face collapses like a building being demolished. I don't think they've ever seen me back down from a fight before.

"Did they see you?" I ask Elaine.

"I don't think so. I was able to get inside without lookin' like I was panickin', but I don't know.

"Pinkie, legs!" Ada says quietly to Bethany. Instead of getting her legs from her wheelchair, Bethany helpfully crawls under the blanket they've been sitting on and pretends to be a pile of laundry. She barely holds up the blanket and motions for Ada to crawl under there with her.

Ada rolls her eyes, and awkwardly butt-scoots around her towards the couch.

"Stay down!" Elaine hisses quietly.

"Guys, I can help! If it's too many for you, I'll bet can take a few." Ada insists.

"You don't know what you're dealing with," I tell her. "Demons don't fuck around."

"Trust me, I can keep up with you. Just tell me what I need to know, and I'll be fine," Ada says, reaching up onto the couch.

Elaine crouch-sprints across the living room, ready to tackle Ada to the floor. Ada freezes, and Elaine stops right before impact at the sound of a loud click.

The front door just unlocked itself.

Creeeeeeeak . . .

A black void appears in the gap between the door and the frame. Before it can get its eyes into the room, Elaine rushes over and swipes at it with her hockey stick. There's a bright flash of light, and a loud shriek.

"EEEEEEEE!!!"

Elaine throws the door open and charges out into the yard.

"COME ON, THEN! You want some a' me, come an' get it!" She screams, swinging her hockey stick around like a lunatic.

"Wait!" Ada shouts, now sitting on the couch and fighting to get a prosthetic leg fitted right.

"Don't move," I tell her. "If you come out that door, I am throwing you back in here through the window. I mean it."

The Works

"But-"

"STAY."

Ada's face droops, and she looks at me heartbroken. I rush outside to help Elaine.

As soon as I get the door closed behind me, it hits me how stupid we are for charging out into this. There are WAY too many of these slippery bastards for us to deal with. We almost got ourselves killed trying to fight three of these at once before.

But, once I've made my peace that this is how and when I'm going to die, my head clears out. All that's left is the weapon in my hands, and the whirlwind of hate taking over the front yard.

Hell, as long as Elaine can keep some heat on them with me, we could probably take out two or even three of them on our way out-SNAP!

Elaine stops chopping at the air to look at the half hockey-stick in her hand, the other half flung into the street. On the other side of the black whirlwind of angst clogging up the yard.

Never mind. I guess we're just fucked.

"Stay behind me," I step in front of her. "I'll block them as long as I can."

"Ay, don't that inspire hope," She sneers at me.

A grouchy bitch to her final words? Yeah, sounds about right.

I try my best to get at least one hit in, but I can't seem to pull it off. It seems like everytime I swing for one of 'em, he's gone by the time the stick gets there, and some other phantom somewhere behind me drags a nail through my skin. Scratching my cheek once, then my shoulder, down my back. Every time I swing at them, the only thing that gets hurt is me. They're just too fast.

Elaine is taking hits too. She's covering her face, and getting scratch marks all over the back of her hands. They're going for her eyes, and one of them has gotten wise enough to start tugging at her wrist when he makes a lap by her. I try to cover for her, but every time I turn her direction, they dig into my back and poke me through my jacket.

Suddenly, a door bursts open behind us, and even the phantoms turn to look that way.

Ada kicks the front door closed behind her with a prosthetic leg, and vaults over the porch railing to sprint across the yard towards us.

"Yo! What the fuck? Get back inside!" Elaine shouts.

One of the phantoms picks up on Elaine's fear, and its face lights up with a very punchworthy grin. Still staring at Elaine, it backs away towards Ada, then twirls around to rush at her, sliding along the floor and staring up at her with hunger in its eyes.

"Gehhh~Hehh~Heh..." It laughs weasel-ly.

Without flinching or slowing down, Ada jumps into some insane spin kick directly to the phantom's face.

THWIP!

The phantom's shape is disturbed, like a puff of smoke scattered by a whip cracking. It quickly finds its shape, then swipes at her. Then again, and again. Every time, Ada just ducks under or whirls aside, then answers by splitting the air with a spinning kick.

THWIP! THWIP! THWIP!

It takes me a second to realize that everyone else has stopped to watch her fight too.

Even the other phantoms are watching her, bewildered. She moves like her heart will stop beating if she sits still for half a second. She circles her phantom, staring it

down intently. Every time it swipes at her, she's already moving out of the way.

"You won't be able to kick him!" I call over. "Its weak point is too high up. You can't hit the shadow; you have to break its heart to put it down!"

THWIP-KRAK!

"EEEEEEEEE!!..."

The two halves of a glassy pink crystal, shaped like a cartoon heart, land in the grass.

The phantom's face twists in anguish, and the blackness evaporates, dropping a set of bony spikes around the shattered glass, ribs landing in a pile around the heart.

Without skipping a beat, Ada twirls around, lowers her head, and narrows her eyes at the other phantoms. Swaying from side to side, she circles towards the rest of them. The crowd exchanges glances with each other, then confusion turns to anger as three of them rush after her at once.

"KYYYYAAAAH!!!" They shriek together.

"Shit! Shit! SHIIIT!" Elaine shouts.

Ada still doesn't flinch, hurling an endless tornado of spin kicks at them. She's right in front of them, and they can't seem to find her. Her movement looks somehow both endlessly practiced and entirely improvised.

THWIP! THWIP! THWIP-KRAK!

THWIP! THWIP! THWIP! THWIP-KRAK!

THWIP! THWIP-KRAK!

"EEEEEEEEE!!!" The last two phantoms cry, rushing off into the night whining like injured puppies.

"LYRAAAA!" Elaine screams at the top of her lungs.

It looks like the demons have called in some of their big guys. A hulking bony homonculus, six feet tall and nearly as wide, apparently made of spare bones and dragon skulls stitched together by purple veins stands on the sidewalk. He's picked up Elaine by her wrist, while a second one has grabbed her other wrist and is pulling in the other direction. A third one has just started crawling up out of a huge hole in the lawn.

I clamp down on my hockey stick, and run over. Once I get into striking range, the dragon-hand-bone-man holding Elaine's left wrist stops trying to tear her in half and throws a punch/dragon bite in my direction with its free hand/head. I smack the head with the back of my left hand, and my crucifix tattoo explodes out a blinding flash of white light.

Dr. Bonehead drops Elaine and stumbles back, briefly dazed. I hook the hockey stick around the back of the big central head, and plant my foot on his lopsided, misshapen pelvis bone for leverage. The glow from the hockey stick becomes painful to look at directly. Getting this thing through its neck is like trying to drag a pickup truck through a river of maple syrup, but eventually the wood blade pops all the way through.

There's a big thud as his central skull topples awkwardly onto the sidewalk. It seems to take him a moment to realize what has just happened, as he reaches up for where his head should be, throws up his "hands" in defeat, falls flat onto the cement, and THEN spews a bunch of purplish-red blood all over the ground.

The other two bone-monculus things stare down at the rapidly melting body for a second, visibly stunned. The one holding Elaine has not noticed that Ada has moved on to furiously, but ineffectively slapping him with spin kicks. Then, like the phantoms, they both become completely outraged.

"AAAUUGGGHA-RRRRHOUUUGHA!!!" The one still holding Elaine cries out.

He steps towards me and tries to hit me with her. I step back, and Elaine wrig-

The Works

gles out of his grip, rolling onto the grass and massaging her wrist.

In a brilliant tactical move, furious at his buddy being decapitated in front of him, he lunges face-first at ME, instead of Elaine or Ada. Holding the hockey stick with both hands, I block the bite with the stick. Another flash of white light bursts out, this time from the hockey stick.

"Hey! You can stop kicking him now!" I snap at Ada. She hops backward, still moving around like she needs to avoid a bullet to the back of the head any second now.

I step in closer to Bony Skullguy, pushing the top half of his skull further and further back, climbing up to reach all the way over, eventually snapping the skull in half and dropping the top behind him hanging like the hood from a jacket.

"BLRRRGHLL-BLRRGBLBL!!" He glurges hopelessly, spewing blood-like gunk all over the lawn, drunkenly staggering and waving his arms around stupidly. Ada cries out in surprise, stumbling back and losing her composure for a second. Finally, he thuds pathetically onto the grass and begins to melt. See, I like the big guys. I can actually HIT the big guys.

I turn towards the last of the three, who has started frantically digging back into the ground. He looks back over his shoulder at me, and the little glowing dots of purple light hovering in its eye sockets go wide.

"EEEEEUUGHA-RRHHOUUGHAA!!" He whines, then starts digging even faster. Elaine is back on her feet, scowling at me.

"You're welcome," I tell her. "Here," I hand over the hockey stick. "Go nuts. Now," I turn to Ada, "What the hell was all that?" I gesture at the scattered pile of broken hearts and discarded rib bones scattered all over the front lawn.

"It's-"

KONK!

A white flash bursts out of the hockey stick.

"GLOOG!" Bones McJones interrupts oafishly, the blade of the hockey stick embedded in his forehead.

"See-"

KONK!

"GLUGGLE!"

"I-"

KONK!

"GLAUGG!"

KONK!

"Gloodge!"

KONK!

"Gl~ludgle ..."

KONK!

"grrrk!~grgg ..."

KONK! KONK! KONK! KONK!

Elaine finally stops, breathing heavily and splattered with sludge blood. I don't know why people are scared of the big guys. They're closer to a Three Stooges act than a menace half the time.

"Are you done?" Ada asks.

"Yeah ... Sure ... Wait . . . one more-"

KONK!

Finally, the last member of the Boneregard family begins to melt away into a pile of putrid slime.

"Okay. I'm done."

Ada frowns at her, then starts to speak again. She stops when she notices the blood running down my sleeve.

"Whoah, are you gonna be okay?"

"Oh, this? Yeah, I'll be fine. It's all superficial. I've been roughed up worse by people. I could tell they were getting bored of playing with us, though. That was a lot closer than it looked.

So, I'll repeat my question from earlier: The FUCK?" I point down at the pile of broken hearts again.

"It's called-"

"YOOO, Did you SEE that shit?!" Bethany calls from the front porch. "She's a fucking LEGEND! How'd you learn to whoop ass like that, No Legs?"

"It's called Capoeira," Ada explains. "My dad started taking me to classes when I was in middle school. I've been practicing at least a little, pretty much the whole time since then," she says, walking back towards the front door.

"Daaamn," Bethany says. "No way I could ever move like that. She's got some insane talent, right Lyra?"

"Sure."

Bethany watches me expectantly. For some reason. Ada stands on the porch next to her, awkwardly avoiding eye contact. Bethany's face sours.

"Well?"

"What?"

"Let her join the team! Don't ya think?" She asks.

"Team? What team?"

"The demon hunting thing!" Bethany snaps. "You guys wouldn't let her come along because you said she was dead weight, and she just axed four of those freaks before you two could get one of 'em. Just let her join the squad already!"

"You still want to do this?" I ask Ada.

She nods sheepishly.

"You know they will absolutely rip your head off if you let your guard down. I mean it. I've seen them do it before. More than once. Elaine is REALLY lucky to still have two arms right now."

"No thanks ta YOU," Elaine sneers.

"YES, thanks to me, because if I didn't step in, you'd be dead."

Elaine crosses her arms and swears at me under her breath, massaging her shoulders tenderly. Ada pauses, then nods again.

"Alright. Let's get you geared up. You'll want to get some crosses on whatever you're fighting with. Your legs, I guess."

"Wait, you guys are serious about the cross thing?" Ada asks. "I thought that was just a bit."

"You JUST saw it working on them. Anything that makes it harder for them to fight back will help keep your head attached to the rest of your spine. Literally. Assuming that's something you care about."

"... How?"

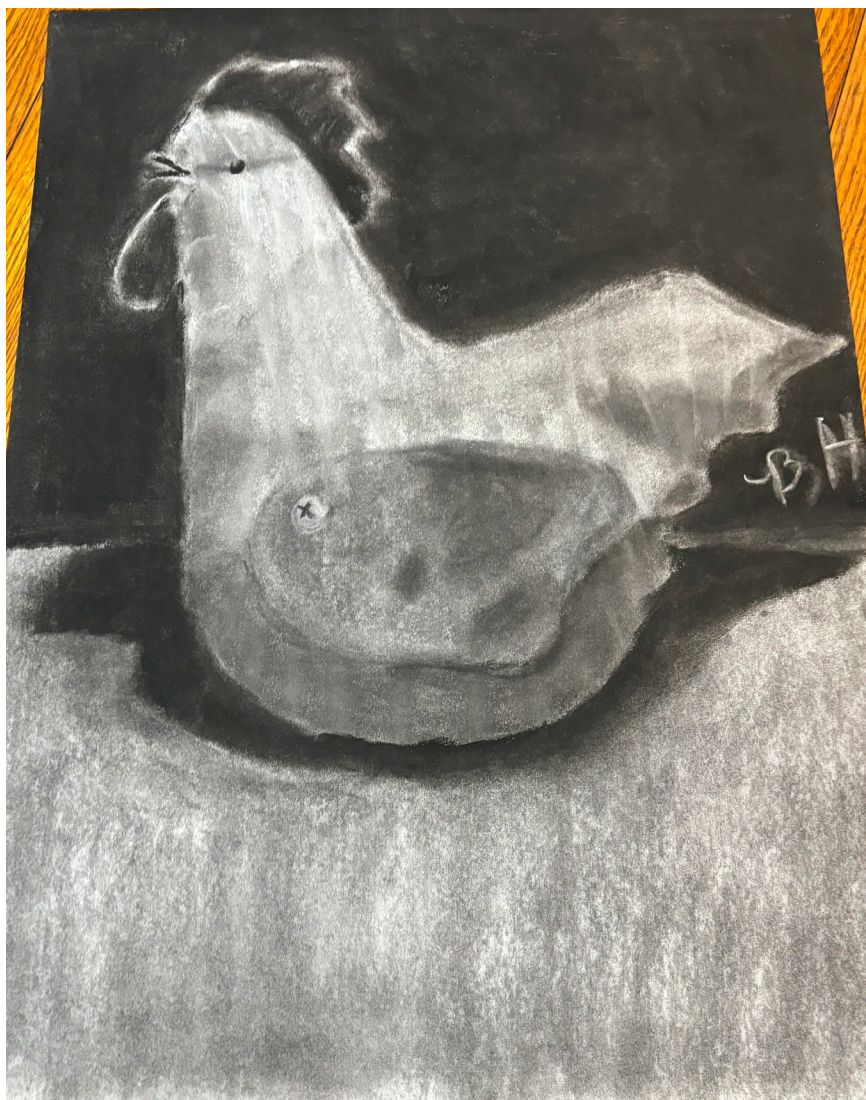
"I don't know," Elaine answers for me. "They have to be able to see it though. It doesn't work if you hide the cross away. I'd wager it's all in their heads. Like a self-fulfillin', self-defeatin' prophecy."

"However it works, you'll want to take advantage of that. Come on, we'll get you set up."



Untitled

by Ethan Reyes



Untitled

by Brayden Houzenga

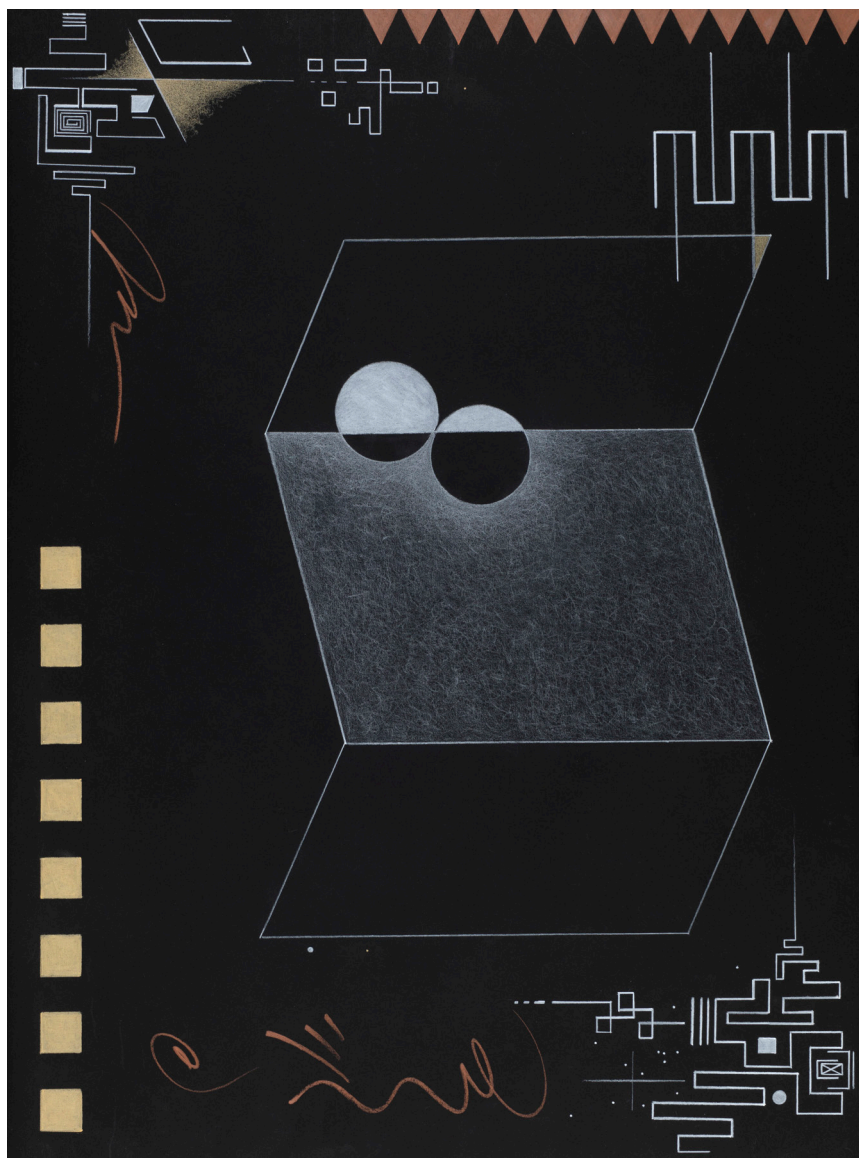
Ignore it

You are a coward.
A thing of trembling flesh,
Of purple-ish bruises,
From where hand grips arm,,
Trying to keep the whole together
You watch lights reflect,
On yellow road signs,
Staring ahead never over,
Where sniffing comes from the driver's
seat,
Where someone is falling apart,
Ignore how,
In the reflection of the windshield,
You can see their red eyes,
Ignore how,
They look like an old reflection,
Of everything that you've tried,
To pick out of your brain,
Ignore how,
Your hands sting,
From how you've interlaced them in your
lap,
The pain keeps you here,
Keeps you present,
On that long drive to the end,
You can't breathe out yet,
Your lungs burn,
You've been holding your breath,
Since she pulled out of the lot,
Down the highway,
Sun in your eyes,
You're holding your breath,
But you can't breathe out,
Shes taken all the oxygen anyways,
And you don't blame her,
You can't,
You see towers in the distance,

When she speaks again,
Her voice is gravelly and worn,
And it doesn't suit her,
She asks for a trifle,
You wouldn't say no if you wanted to,
She asks you to fill the silence,
Ignore how,
You feel like if you open your mouth,
Your guts will spill out,
You'll fall apart,
Ignore how,
As you open your mouth,
And your words are swallowed up,
Falling on deaf ears,
That prepare to say goodbye.

Ignore it.

-Nara Hardesty



Fold #3

by Glenn Bodish

Musical Syntax

by Riley McGinn

I'm always willing to play my song of woe for any and all who are willing to listen. People love music. They nod along to the cadence as if they agree with what it has to say

I serve these eager sycophants with what they desire, never a single note out of place. The wrong key here or an incongruent rhythm there may as well render it a different song entirely.

I'm not willing to learn a new song. I've only known the one for years. But people stop coming to listen to the man who can play only one symphony. No matter how painstakingly crafted and rehearsed it may be. Pulling the same strings time and time again can only resemble music for so long.

There's something inherently manipulative about any performance, however sincere the intent. Whether it be to charm you with an upbeat ditty that will make you crack and smile and tap your foot, or to move you to tears as I relay to you the ballad of all my failures, I am setting out to illicit a specific response. If my mark is missed, or worse, my intent transparent, this will generally be deemed to have been a poor performance.

My audience of hand-picked marionettes once danced of their own volition because the melody just delighted them so. It wasn't until they grew tired and wished to stop could they feel the wires continue to yank them to and fro in a desperate attempt to keep the show alive. After all, when the curtain falls, I am left with only myself and this damn song.

Sometimes I forget that best songs set out to communicate, not control. I forget that the silence that falls between each note can be just as precious as the noise. I forget my "captive" audience was only ever interested in the composition, not the composer.

Even as these familiar chords and tired refrains keep them sedated, any given member of the crowd is playing their own private song to themselves, praying one day someone will listen. We perform for audience of aspiring performers. We perform for an audience only interested in captivating their own.

Actors

We descended those stairs
so many times
But I never cherished the last time
until now

We separated at points
that are irretrievable
We walked hand in hand
under exploding skies
Fire lights exploded
into the dark
And that night you exploded
into my heart

And it's in your arms that
I fade

And it's in my heart that
you stay

We danced those moments
a million times

And I would shoot down the stars
for a million more
For the stars that fall
are the stars that landed
upon your cheeks
that night

And there they shine
the stars in my eyes
I know they were in yours too,
back then.

But I realize now
I was just a part of your scene
A fleeting presence
on your stage of love,
And now the red curtains have closed.



Complete Hourglass

by Annelise Brown

Choosing to Live

by Ashley Prewitt

I was diagnosed with depression my freshman year of high school. I practically had to drag myself out of bed each morning. One day, the weight of my own thoughts became too heavy, and I went to see my counselor after first period. I remember the tears welling up in my eyes as I sunk to the floor and let that weight go. Crying hysterically, I could finally breathe again once I shared with her what was going through my head. Only a few hours later, I was in the emergency room waiting to go to a behavioral health hospital. Decisions are never meant to be easy, but knowing when it is time to surrender and ask for help is one of the hardest things any one person can do. Losing interest in everything, harming myself to release the psychological turmoil I felt, and planning my own death are what lead me to decide that it was time to seek the help of professionals.

Depression was a scary illness to have because I no longer had any interest in doing the things I used to love doing. My depressive episodes would last anywhere from three days up to two weeks. I always felt like I was a burden to everyone around me and even the drop of a pen would send a river of tears down my face. I stopped eating, cut off my friends, and shut out my family. I completely isolated myself from the world in hopes I would not drag them down with me. I remember feeling everything, but nothing all at the same time. Each day was like an out-of-body experience. I remember the late nights I sat balled up on my cold, hard bedroom floor pleading with the man above to stop me from feeling the way I was feeling. I was so tired and mentally exhausted from pretending like nothing was wrong with me. All I wanted was to be happy, but had no idea how to get there.

It was hard to find interest in anything when the urge to harm myself to feel something other than numb became unbearable to shake. I started out by snapping a rubber band against my wrist any time I was having thoughts of harming myself. The quick snap of pain was enough for me to localize the pain I was feeling inside. I finally had a small sliver of control over how I was feeling. Eventually, the rubber band was no longer enough. I remember one night when I snapped my rubber band too hard and it broke. My chest began to hurt as my heart raced. Frantically, I tried finding another rubber band. I did not find any more rubber bands, but I did find a small, blue pencil sharpener. I remember smashing it to pieces on my bedroom floor until the razor fell out. From that point on I no longer used a rubber band to localize my pain. My thighs are covered in the scars those dark, scary nights left behind. I began covering up as much of my body as possible in order to keep people from learning my darkest secret. Eventually, I got tired of slicing my skin and it no longer helped me. I was back at square one.

It was not until I found solace in harming myself that I gave it up. More importantly, I knew I had hit rock bottom when I started planning my own death. I dreaded opening my eyes every morning. I was so tired of all of the harmful thoughts flowing through my mind, and the urge to make it all stop grew bigger. It started out as passive

thoughts of being involved in natural disasters or a car accident. Then, I started getting serious. I started taking notes of different ways I could end everything. I had everything planned out, I was going to go to school and then that night was going to be my last. I remember going to school and barely making it through first period. I was terrified of what that night was going to bring. I was not ready for it all to end. I shoved my way out of first period to the counselor's office and told her everything I was going through. I only wanted to feel better, and I knew it was time to wave the white flag and ask for help. I was not equipped to handle the situation on my own and that was okay.

I look back at those days of darkness, and I find myself at peace. I look at my life now with all of the love surrounding me, and all I can do is smile. All of those painful memories made me into the person I am today. I am now a mother, working in a career I love, and mentally stronger. All it took was making the hardest decision of my life. I chose to seek the help of professionals for my depression, and through them I was able to get back to myself. The good thing about hitting rock bottom is that there is only one way left to go: up.

A Heartstopping Blizzard

by Kaydence Younger, Becca Hoyle, and Jorja Reynolds

Characters:

Eve (author, and has a southern accent.)

Iris (Works as a barista, also southern, but talks more city.)

Jade (Eves roommate)

Off screen voice

Setting:

Eve's house, Tennessee Appalachian Mountains and a Haunted Cabin.

Time:

Now.

Setting: Eves bedroom

At rise: Eve picks up the phone to call Iris while she is packing her bags.

Eve

Hey hun, did you pack your swimsuit, I'm packing mine. There was a hot tub in the sunroom on the listing.

Iris

Yes I did. I thought you had mentioned something about it. Did you still want to try and have a no tech weekend? Try and disconnect a little bit you know?

Eve

Yes I would love that. How much longer until you're off?

Iris

Only 25 more minutes, I'm so bored though and ready to leave. It's been so slow all day, kind of odd but I guess I can't complain.

Eve

Okay, perfect, I think that's my last thing then. I'm all packed. So what's the plan?

Iris

I just need to run home, change my clothes, grab my bags and we can head out. We should silence our phones once you pick me up so we can take in the drive in.

Eve

That sounds amazing! Text me when you're home and I'll let you know when I leave here.

Iris

Sounds good I'll see you so soon. Bye

Eve

Bye, see ya soon.

(Eve's roommate, Jade walks on stage observing Eve)

Jade

Why are you so frantically packing? You're running around like a headless chicken headed to fashion week. I thought you guys planned this trip as a relaxing celebration before the chaos of the launch?

Eve

What are you talking about? No, I'm not, I just want to be prepared.

Jade

I don't know you've been anxious and wired all day. Why are you so worried it's just gonna be you and Iris, there's not much room for anything to go wrong.

Eve

Something feels so off today, I don't know.

Jade

Is everything okay with you and Iris?

Eve

Yeah why wouldn't they be, what do you mean?

Jade

Things are kinda funny between you two, definitely an interesting dynamic.

Eve

I have no idea what you're talking about.

The Works

Jade

Yea me either I guess.

(Eve looks down to her phone to see a text message from Iris letting her know that she is ready to be picked up)

Eve

Okay Im taking my stuff to the car. I'll be back in a second.

(Eve exits the stage)

(Eve reenters the stage looking down at her phone)

Eve

Okay I think I have everything I need and Iris just texted me she's ready.

Jade

Hey wait, after reading all those drafts of this book I got to thinking a bit. The characters seem really familiar. Where did you get the idea from?

Eve

Familiar? I wouldn't say they're familiar. I don't know where I got the idea, it just came to me.

Jade

Whatever you say girl. Be safe on your trip and no funny business.

Eve

Bye I'll see you when I get home.

Setting: Arrived at Cabin

At Rise: Eve and Iris enter the cabin and begin setting their bags down to look around.

Eve

Ugh this place is gorgeous! I can't believe we finally made it. I love how antique it looks in here, it's almost spooky in a way.

Iris

I know it looks straight out of the 40's in here. Maybe that old look has to do with the fact the cabin is in the creepy, very haunted Appalachian Mountains. God it's cold in here I'll go look for the thermostat to get the heat going.

(Iris walks out of the main room while Eve starts opening up the curtains to look at the sunseting.)

Eve

(Yells out to Iris.)

It is not haunted, you're being ridiculous!

Eve

(Thoughts Aloud)

This sunset is so pretty, I can't believe I finally made it. All the struggles are finally worth it, it's just amazing. This trip, the view, and my best friend is just the cherry on top to me finally getting this book published.

Iris

Girl what is this shit hole there is no heating in this cabin! It really is like it's from the 40s, it's a miracle there is even lighting at this point, what's next no microwave?

(Iris walks into the kitchen.)

There's no microwave! Also, did you follow me to look for the thermostat?

Eve

Hahahaha, Iris!

(Eve is doubled over in laughter.)

There is a fireplace right here darlin'! But, no, why do you ask?

Iris

Oh...Well it's just that I could have sworn I heard walking behind me, I thought you were messing with me and hiding when I'd check to see if you were there.

Eve

That's odd, maybe your mind was playing tricks on you? I was looking at the last bit of the sunset before it gets dark. As for the heating, let's wait a bit to light the fireplace. They stocked it pretty well, but we should wait until it's a little later into the night to keep it warm in here.

Iris

Ugh yeah alright, that makes sense.

Eve

Let's play some music, I saw a radio by the kitchen.

Iris

Maybe something nice will reach up here.

The Works

(The radio starts playing without prompt cutting in and out through different stations before settling on one. The song Can't take my eyes off of you starts playing.)

Eve

Will you do me the honor of dancin' with me darlin'?

Iris

(Said while pretending to swoon)

Oh I thought you would never ask my dear!

(Iris and Eve are twirling each other around the room while laughing, as they try to dip each other and keep adding a twirl in at every turn. Suddenly there is an alert sound underneath the music as it reaches the chorus)

screen Voice

Weather *ba dum ba dum ba da da* Alert!

(The weather alert sounds.)

screen Voice

Snow *I love you baby* Affected areas *Alright I need you baby* Pigeon Forge, Gatlinburg, and Chattanooga *Trust in me when I say* Two *I love you* Snow fall.
(Weather alert sounds again after the message is done.)

Screen Voice

(Music cuts out and static comes through the radio. It blares loudly and sounds of the alarm come through. The beeps fill the room, Errrr Errrr Beep Beep Beep, dial up tone sound/malfunctioning 1999 window sound.)

Snow ---warn! Affected--high Knoxville-- Forge, ---burg, and Chatt---snow up to ---snow fall.

Iris

Well that's alarming, now we're stuck in a haunted cabin, in the mountains, going to be snowed in! This is awful, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?!?!

(A harsh Knock from the front door can be heard. Both girls look at each other in shocked silence.)

Oh god, please no. Eve, we are not opening that door.

Eve

Oh yes we are sweetheart! What if someone needs help we can't just ignore them. I'm going to open it. You heard the radio, well part of it, we NEED to make sure someone didn't experience the same and is stuck out there.

(Eve goes to the door, opening it to a white out abyss.)

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(A loud bang can be heard from the back bedroom. The lights start to flicker before returning back to their normal state.)

Iris

Umm, what was that?

Eve

(Eve strains her eyes while looking out into the now dark sky to see if she can see anything that could have caused that.)

Maybe it's a little windy? I can't really tell it's so dark it looks like I'm looking into an aimless void. I can see something grainy, but it could just be fog.

Iris

I don't know, I mean lights flickering due to wind we can't even hear would be a new one for me. I did hear footsteps behind me and now this? I have a feeling this place is haunted.

(The glass of the window across the room is tapped three times. Tunk, tunk, tunk. The girls whip their heads to look at where the noise is coming from only to be confronted with an identical window to the one they were just looking out of.)

Eve

It is not haunted, that's just a coincidence! I mean it could just be an animal outside. A bear, raccoon, or a deer I'm not entirely sure, but it's not haunted Iris.

(The girls are silent and avoid eye contact for a moment before Eve looks at Iris with a smile.)

Soooooooo, lovely curtains right?

Iris

Oh yes, so lovely! Absolutely compliments the dark knocking abyss that is that window. The floral pattern really exemplifies how gorgeously haunted this place is.

(Three more taps hit the window, Tunk, Tunk Tunk.)

Eve

(Eve shrugs.)

Come on, it could easily be a tree branch that just hit the window. The cabin isn't haunted Iris, it's just old.

(Iris looks from the window to Eve with a look of disbelief.)

Iris

Sureeee, and that's why I heard footsteps behind me, the lights flickered, the window got tapped not once but twice, the knocking on the door for nothing to be there, the radio turning on by itself, and it's cold as Antarctica in here. But you're totally right,

The Works

let's just ignore that scary list of events and I'll make some dinner.

Eve

Perfect! While you do that I'll take our bags and put them in the bedroom.

(Eve picks up the bags as Iris leaves the main room to go into the kitchen. As Eve walks down the hall she's on high alert making sure there is nothing out of the ordinary is going on.)

Eve

(thoughts allowed)

I can't believe how much of a dork Iris is being. Nothing haunted is going on sure, there is creaking in rooms we aren't in, footsteps being heard, lights flickering, the door, it being oddly cold, tapping on the windows, the radio coming in and out oddly, and not to mention how notoriously haunted mountains are in stories.

(Eve shakes her head as she's unpacking.)

Ugh get this haunted idea out of your head, just because Iris thinks it is doesn't mean that's what's going on. It's fine, plus she's making a cute dinner we can eat by the fire all cozy with blankets. It will be relaxing and nice.

(Steps can be heard coming from down the hallway to the bedroom Eve is in.)

Eve

Done with dinner already? That was really quick, what did you even make in that amount of time it couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes at most?

(Eve turns around only to be met with the most terrifying thing she has ever seen. It was a shadow figure taller than the ceiling. It was crouched so far over that its back was against it. Its arms were long and hanging down beside it. It hovered close to her to the point her face was nearly touching it. It tilted its head 90 degrees to one side and growled. It was so loud she could feel it reverberate from the floor she was sitting on. Suddenly it went to rush closer and the lights flashed off.)

Eve

(Eve Screams.)

At Rise: Eve stands frozen in the bedroom where she saw the figure, she then runs into the kitchen.

(She runs in to the kitchen after she sees the figure in the bedroom)

Iris

(Quickly turns around after she hears Eve scream and then run into the kitchen)

What happened?! Are you ok? I've never heard you scream like that before. You scared the shit out of me Eve!

Eve

(Opens her mouth to say something but nothing comes out, so she just shakes her head)

Iris

God damn it Eve, speak to me! You're really starting to scare me right now. Did you see something? Oh I knew I should have said no to a cabin in the mountains!

Eve

I'm alright darlin'. My mind just must be playin' tricks on me after the whole static weather alert and then that weird knock on the door. I think I'm ok though.

Iris

(Nods her head and then pulls Eve into a tight hug to alleviate both their fears)

(Fades to black)

(The women are sitting in front of a lit fire place on the floor in front of the sofa, covered in blankets with mugs in their hands)

Iris

You wanna talk about it? You just screamed and haven't said anything about what made you scream like you were being murdered. You said you were fine and you mind was playing tricks on you. You see or hear something?

Eve

Not really. There was just something there and it scared the shit out of me. Let's just talk about literally anything else so I can take my mind off of it.

Iris

Ok we can do that. Only if you admit that I was right and this place is totally fucking haunted. Like girl, we are in a cabin in the Appalachian mountains during a snow storm, and keep hearing and seeing weird shit. So say I'm right and I'll drop the whole thing.

Eve

Alright Iris, so this place might be a little haunted, I'll give you that. But at least we have each other.

Iris

You're right about that girl. So tell me, famous romance author, what exactly got you back into writing? I thought you were in a massive writer's block episode.

The Works

Eve

Ok so we are getting right in to it then (said while lightly laughing)
I wrote it because of you Iris

Iris

Me? What about me, this glorious lesbian disaster in front of you, made you write about a man and a woman falling in love?

Eve

It wasn't really about the man. Didn't you read the book? The main character spends a lot more time with her "best friend" than she does the love interest. Doesn't the friend remind you of someone?

Iris

I mean, the friend kinda reminded me of me, but thats ridiculous because you aren't in love with me. And thats what happened right? The main character was actually in love with their friend and not the love interest? Or am I reading into things right now and potentially embarrassing myself? Because I gotta tell ya, embarrassing myself like this in front of the best friend I ever had was not in the cards for me on this trip.

Eve

You're not reading into things honey. You gave me the motivation to write again. You were so bright and interesting when I first came in to the cafe, and I couldn't help but be inspired by you. It drove me crazy for a while because I didn't understand. I had only felt like that towards men before so I thought maybe I was just lonely. But then my feelings for you kept getting stronger. I had to work through a lot of stuff to get here but I finally get it now, and I'm not scared anymore. I fell in love with you along the way of us becoming best friends. Do you think you could ever feel the same about me? Even if you don't, can we always be best friends? Cause I don't wanna lose you even if you don't feel the same.

Iris

I thought you would never say you were in love with me babe. I've been waiting for a sign that you could be in love with me too. Im so excited! I thought I had been reading too much into the hangouts we had, and then the beautiful book you wrote. I was driving myself crazy thinking about you.

Eve

It took me a while to get there. You know I was raised in a pretty stifling environment that didn't tolerate anything that was outside the norm. It took me a while to realize what I was feeling for you was ok, and that I shouldn't be ashamed of myself simply because I loved a woman. I had to get over that guilt the church instilled in me. The

church had told me it wasn't ok to even look at another woman with anything other than friendship. Growing up in the 2000's didn't help either, with gay being used as an insult. But I couldn't let the opportunity to be with you pass me by, so I decided I

needed to be brave and tell you. I just wish it was during a cute cabin trip, and not in a potentially haunted cabin with snow piling up outside.

Iris

I can't believe we finally got our shit together because of a haunted cabin! This is going to be the greatest love story yet.

Eve

That it will sweetheart. Can I finally kiss you? Now that I have bared my soul to you and the countless ghosts that are around us?

Iris

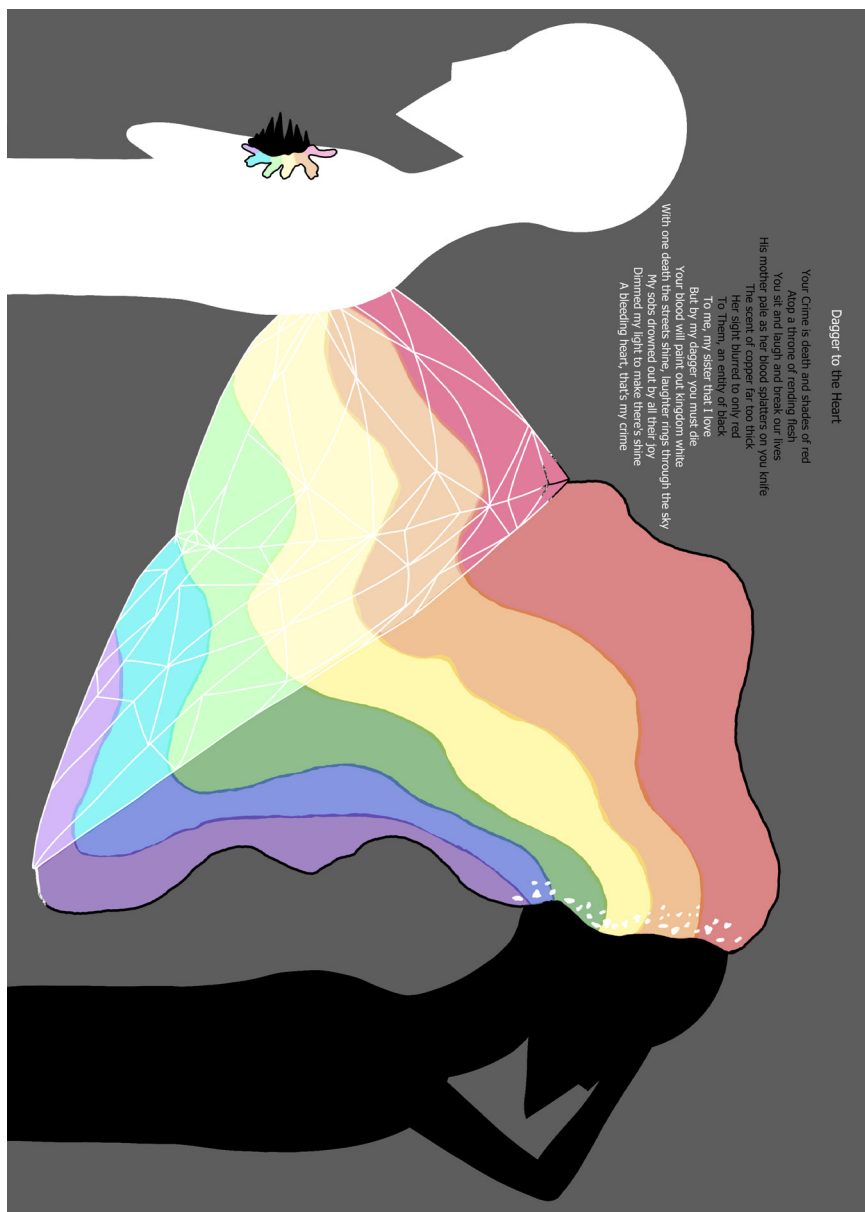
Of course you can, I've been waiting for too long already.

(They finally kiss, and the cabin feels more homey and warm)

Blisters and Blasphemy

Your blood burned
As if liquid fire had touched me
As our hands met there
Clasped in our covenant
I burned for you
I left myself blistered
As you pulled me
By my scorched hand
Into what was a mockery
Of a loving embrace
I could pretend for a moment
That you were love itself
Here to save me
Here to give me hope
I thought that was the burn
I thought the blisters were signs of love
I thought it'd be worth it to burn
Because it meant I was loved
I treated you then
As if you painted me into existence
As if you spun me to life through song
When all you intended
Was to leave me in ruin
Damn you
I blaspheme openly at the mouth of your
church
At every brick and every pew
At every mural of your visage
I walk there as my feet burn
And I know it is not love,
And I know you are not love,
And I know that if given the chance
I could never bring myself to make you burn.

-Nara Hardesty



Dagger to the Heart

Your Crime is death and shades of red
Across a horizon of reeling flesh
You sit and laugh and break our lives
His mother pale as her blood splatters on you knife
The scent of copper far too thick
Her sight blurred to only red
To them, an entity of black
To me, my sister that I love
But my dagger is a poison white
Your blood will stain our horizon
With one death the streets shine, laughter rings through the sky
My sob's drowned out by all their joy
Dimmed my light to make theirs shine
A bleeding heart, that's my crime

Dagger to the Heart

by Annelise Brown

Spotlight Section

Felix Culpa

Man has flit like a leaf
His fate torn asunder from under the tree
His eyes glint with envy
O! How remarkable our resemblance

Soul in solstice
In winter he waits
With the kind of longing belonging to longer days
Passing down worry like a second-hand gift
Watching the second hand steadily tick

As the wind creeps in through the broken glass
A river of tears flows like blades of grass
As the first bird waits for the flower's bloom
This caged man sings his sorrowed tune

Still to hope's sweet song
He harks
And waits as dawn breaks from dark
A flicker of light through the iron bars

O! How fortunate a fall
Behold the beauty of it all
A misery eclipsed
By epiphany
Is greater than none at all

-Briah Merriman

"Felix Culpa" is a touching reflection on suffering, redemption, and hope. Its lyrical structure, biblical allusion, and imagery convey a journey from despair to enlightenment with emotional depth and elegance. **-Darrien Huggins and Nara Hardesty**

Spotlight Section

Old Hardware

Does magic fade with creeping age?
No multi-colored LED lights glowing
on sexy skin. Decades, like bricks, stack.
Bones, old stones, under the pull of heavier skin.
I sat in the sun-hot grass among scorchingly yellow
dandelions. Southern springs, like summer, are wet
and warm in both morning and night. Twenty-something
years later and a few hundred miles can't delete memories.
The internet is forever, except it's getting harder to find
the broken bits of Web 1.0. The drive in my head hasn't failed
yet, like the long-gone hardware of my childhood. Everything new
immediately begins to collect scratches, damage, and dust. Scars on skin.
In the crispy, cool North I gained layers of clothes and weight.
That cold grey cloud cover presses palm-down and all around.
A cement patio's edge, bright green backyard, and my parent's taste in music
are traps and boxes. High fidelity stylus dragging across time leaves faded F.M. scraps.
You can't upgrade past the biological standard, just under a century of memory.

-Nic Uni

"Old Hardware" blends nostalgia with modern decay, tracing memory through both human aging and digital erosion. It shows the emotional weight of time and loss through vivid imagery, creating a layered reflection on mortality and impermanence. -Darrien Huggins and Nara Hardesty

Spotlight Section

The Run

by Lydia Massa

I staggered around the ring of black rubber crumbs and binding polyurethane, every jagged breath sounding like the whistle of a dying train. My classmate, a short (couldn't have even been five feet tall), freckled, ginger-haired, asthmatic girl, was in even worse shape further behind me. My vision was fading from lack of oxygen as I wobbled back and forth, not even running in a straight line at that point, but she looked like she was on the verge of collapse. The early summer sun felt hotter than usual and the wind whipped around me like a hurricane as my lungs strained with every burning breath as my drenched uniform weighed me down. My legs strained with the effort of propelling myself forward in a pitiful attempt to meet the teacher's expectations.

The mile - a part of physical education class that every sane or out-of-shape kid despised, second only to the dreaded pacer test. In middle school, students only had to complete the mile, but in high school teachers began putting time limits that students had to achieve or else they wouldn't get full points - physical education teachers that followed (and started) the stereotype of not being able to pass their own class.

It was my sophomore year and the school day had begun just as any other - chanting the pledge of allegiance as if it were some capitalistic, religious mantra, calling attendance, and passing in any homework that was due - did I mention this was always done on a Monday? As if they weren't bad enough already. I had heard in passing that the physical education teacher was planning to force us to run the mile, but I refused to believe it as a pit of dread settled in my stomach. I drifted from class to class, unable to focus from my usual sleeping and otherwise undiagnosed issues - but mostly lack of sleep. My unwavering anxiety only grew as the day went on, only adding to my inattentiveness in much more important classes.

By the time physical education had finally rolled around, I felt like my heart was free falling and the pit in my stomach felt like it was made of tungsten. Realistically, I knew that I shouldn't be dreading the mile this much, but every time we're forced to run the mile I feel like my lungs have been in an oven and my legs have done one hundred jump squats.

It had started out just as any mile would. The athletic students would run through the mile in much less time than was given and walk around the track the rest of

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the class and chat while the other students would pace themselves so they wouldn't throw up halfway through. The sprinters from track would fail to contain the contents of their stomachs as the asthmatic students would inevitably lose the ability to breathe, though not all of them brought their inhalers to class due to (unfounded) expectations of the teacher to be fair.

My all-time personal record had been two minutes above the allotted time - not that it mattered to the teacher, of course. By the time I finished my second lap I was truly feeling the strain on not only my lungs, but my calves and dry throat as well. The wind blowing my tied-back hair into my mouth so I would continuously choke on it certainly wasn't helping me to control my breathing. I may have sounded like I was having an asthma attack, but the asthmatic girl in my glass was actually having one. Of course, being on the last lap, she was forced to finish the run before she was allowed to walk - alone, mind you - all the way up the hill from the track and into the school to grab her inhaler just to have to waltz right back down and join the rest of the class in walking for a few more minutes before having to make her way back up again to change back into her regular clothes and finish her school day.

I made my way to the final curve, the bottoms of my shoes coated in black from the hot rubber of the track and burning like I was walking on hot coals. My face was an unnatural shade of red as I gasped in the hot, humid air. I felt as though the wind was trying to keep me from finally finishing what felt like a marathon. My throat felt like I had swallowed a molten-red cheese grater as I nearly collapsed over that white line, sweat covering my face and making my eyes sting as though it were salt water.

The physical education teacher glanced at her stopwatch - and didn't hesitate to tell me that I was a minute and a half over the allotted time. It still should have felt like a monumental achievement for me - beating my fastest ever time by thirty whole seconds! But as I stood there, staring at her with wide, hateful eyes as I willed my breathing to steady and hoped that it was sweat falling down my face, I silently cursed that teacher in my mind, glaring daggers over at where she had been standing for the past half an hour as students made themselves physically ill to meet her illogical standards. Thankfully, my eyes were already irritated from the salty substance covering my face and my throat was already as tight as a metal vice, so nobody there could tell how distressed by my supposed failure I was at the time.

I was sent to walk for the remainder of the class, hoping against all odds that the teacher would recognize how hard I had tried and let me keep my points.

She did not.

Soon (but not soon enough - it's never soon enough) the teacher called the students back inside to get changed and continue into our next classes as little, shaky-legged cherry tomatoes. The students formed herds with only a few stragglers and trudged up the hill to the school. Of course, when I got to my next class and checked my grade I saw that I was docked points. I wanted to cry, but I was too dehydrated for my body to willingly release that moisture.

Back then, I felt terrible about myself and wanted nothing more than to sink into my bed and get lost under the covers. These days, I understand now more than ever how unfair that class was - to be in shape is something that not only takes quite a bit of time outside of school, but also a very large amount of energy (that I didn't have due to previously mentioned undiagnosed issues). It would take months to even begin to build the muscle mass that teachers expect the same students they force to sit still at a desk for

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about thirty hours every week (not including homework) to have if you don't already have it.

It was never meant to be fair, though.

It was meant to be rigged.

We chose to highlight "The Run," not only for its descriptive imagery but also for its relatability. Everyone, no matter where we went to school, had to run the dreaded mile. To have what we all felt during the run, written out in such descriptive ways, "burning like I was running on hot coals," makes the piece universal to a majority of students. The piece highlights how running the mile is difficult for people with asthma or "undiagnosed issues" who were still expected to meet the time requirement. Overall, the piece is full of descriptive imagery and its relatability is what made the piece stick out to us. Emma Oswalt and Jorja Reynolds

Park Boys

by Jeni Melzer

The park in my town is always so pretty. Springtime and summer have their vibrant floral. Winter has its sparkly icicles. But autumn has to be my favorite by far. That's when there's yellow and red, mingling with orange, brown, and the waning green. I love basking in the crisp air, sitting on my favorite bench. A weathered and worn thing, nestled under a big, gnarled oak tree. I'd usually be devouring a book, but lately, I've been too distracted. I spend my time on my bench watching something a little more alive.

Golden hair shines in the sun as the lithe body it belongs to bends and contorts. There's a serene smile on his face. His eyes are usually closed, making me want to discover what they look like. I shamelessly stare at this man doing yoga, cursing whatever provoked him to bring his routine to the park. He has become my favorite show, my favorite activity, leagues more interesting than any novel. I look forward to watching him.

Today however, the man is not smiling. He's not doing yoga either. He sits on his mat, furiously typing away on his phone. Eventually, he lays back, tossing the device aside. I steel my nerves, standing up from my bench before I chicken out. I approach the man cautiously, not wanting to frighten him, but when I clear my throat, he jumps anyway, sitting up.

"Oh shit! You scared me!" he exclaims, laughing. I can't help but sigh in relief at his smile, rubbing the back of my neck awkwardly.

"Sorry about that," I say sheepishly. The man stands up and my breath hitches in my throat. He's looking at me expectantly with beautiful golden eyes. I let out a chuckle, shaking my head slightly.

"Right, uh, I've noticed you the past few weeks... What's your name? I'm Kit," I hold out my hand. The man grabs it, shaking it.

"Delaney!" he says brightly. I freeze up, still gripping his hand without realizing. His smile, his soft hand, the way he makes eye contact is all short circuiting my brain.

"You alright man?" Delaney chuckles, trying to tug his hand away. I release him quickly.

"Sorry!" I look away, feeling my face heat up.

"It's all good, dude!" Delaney smiles. My heart skips a beat. This man is like sunshine incarnate, and I feel like I'm melting just by being near him. I crave more. I want to be closer, to let him melt me down into a puddle. I see his lips moving and I blink.

"What?" I ask shamefully.

"I was just asking what you needed? You came over here like you were on a mission..." Delaney trails off.

"Oh! Uh... I was just wondering what was wrong. I noticed you weren't doing yoga like normal, and you had such a serious look on your face when you were on your phone," I explain, fidgeting with my book. He glances at my hands before sighing.

"Oh, I was just texting my boyfriend. We're kind of fighting right now," Del-

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aney sighs again. There's a pang in my chest and my heart sinks.

"Boyfriend?" The word slips out before I can stop myself. The look of anxiety that passes over his face breaks my heart.

"Uh, yeah, uhm... we're friends and... he's a boy..." Delaney shrinks in on himself a bit. I reach out subconsciously, wincing when he shies away from my touch.

"It's cool! I'm not ho... please don't... I'm gay!" I blurt out. My face flushes as he looks up at me. Suddenly, all I can focus on is how much smaller he is than me. He's so delicate and tiny and adorable and his smile is so pretty when he's laughing. Delaney's laughing. It's like music, like an angel's choir.

"Well, that's good to know. I will not be hate-crimed today!" Delaney grins, tilting his head. My heart squeezes in my chest and I smile softly.

"So... what are you and your boyfriend fighting about?" I ask gently. His shoulders drop a bit as his face falls.

"Oh, he's upset that a mutual friend of ours made some comment about me and I 'didn't even deny it.' I just sat there and 'let him flirt' with me," he huffs and rolls his eyes, using air quotes to punctuate his frustration. "Which isn't even true! He wasn't even flirting with me in the first place!"

My heart aches at his words and I swallow my feelings. I want to see him smile again.

"I think you should talk to him in person. Relationship issues are always better dealt with, in person," a pang of regret shoots through my chest. Memories surface of angry words, scarred hands, and lots of crying.

"Yeah, you're probably right... I just hate confrontation, especially with him because he truly is such a good person. I always feel terrible no matter how small the situation is," Delaney sighs again, rubbing a hand on his arm. I can see the love this man has for his boyfriend, and I can't help the wave of jealousy that washes over me. I push aside my feelings, speaking the painful words clawing their way out.

"The fact that he's such a good person is why you should talk to him instead of standing in the park with a stranger. It sounds like you two have something good. Don't lose it just because of a little fear." I'm slapping myself on the inside. I want nothing more than to hold him and take him away. Instead, I step back, waving as he gathers his things.

"It was nice to meet you, Kit! Thank you for the advice and conversation!" I can only smile, heading back to my bench. I watch that golden hair retreat towards the park entrance, leaving me feeling just as empty as before. When there's a small splash of water on my hand, I wipe it away, opening up my book and ignoring the blur.

I really liked the emotion in this story. It felt bitter-sweet but also realistic. The message about unrequited love is clear, but not over stated. The hints to each character's past and how that affects not only their current personalities, but also their emotions is a nice touch that gives the characters depth. Annelise Brown and Becca Hoyle

Pink Fluid

by Brynley Jones

The guy said to just drink it like lemonade. I looked at the brown packet the size of a deck of cards. Jerry Evans was his name. He lived on a small farm outside of town where I lived. In spite of his ragged appearance and gruff countenance, he seemed to know what he was talking about. “I can tell you’re in a funk. Why don’t you just think about it before taking this?”

He was right. I had been in a funk for a while, for as long as I can remember. I don’t know who I am. I’m just a shell of a human being, nothing more, nothing less. I’ve lost sight of the lake. I’ve lost my way off the trail going through the forest to the other side. There is no lake on the other side of the forest. I’ve been stumbling and tripping through the dim, humid foliage laden path, and I will never get to the other side and swim forever.

I looked at the packet and still thought about what I was about to do. It’s a beautiful day outside, objectively. I just can’t see its beauty. The sun is shining as though God is real and is smiling down on my house. It looks grey, even though I know it’s not. I walked over to the window and just stared with a dead gaze across my lawn and the neighbors. I saw a family, a handsome couple with two perfect children walking next to them. They also had what looked like a poodle mix of some kind. Why the hell don’t I have that? What horrible thing in my life stopped me from being able to seduce a woman and just walk beside her, as I would want her to do with me?

I quickly turned away. It’s as though the happiness outside just repels me. I walked over to the fridge and found a bottle of water; cold, clear, and pure. I opened the package of pink powder that looked like any other vitamin mix that you would find at the grocery store, poured it into the glass and watched as the liquid began to fizz. It reminded me of my very own quiet desperation, bubbling to the breaking point. Jerry said that there is a 95% chance this should end things, but he also said that there’s always a hallucination involved. “For every person it’s different, and the only reason we know about the effects is because only two other people have actually survived this, and they were alive over fifty years ago. This may be like a languid walk to the end, hopefully. However, the brain chemistry and thought patterns prior to taking this will determine the intensity of the hallucinations. In simple terms, if you’re thinking negatively, you’ll get extreme hallucinations. If you’re thinking positively, which most likely is not happening since you clearly want to take this, you’ll have a very nice, pleasant way out. Try to think positively before taking it, ok.”

I knew that was impossible, but I was willing to take any measure necessary to end my pathetic existence. My whole body began to shake while looking at the glass of pink fluid. Forty years old, and I’m shaking like a little boy going into school on the first day. Jesus Christ. I breathed heavily, like breathing through an oxygen mask but with a cloth over the hole. My shaking hand picked up the glass, almost without any conscious effort involved. I lifted it to my lips and drank the glass. While I drank it, the passage

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from Matthew came to mind. *But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, we are able.*

For five minutes, I sat with absolutely nothing happening. I couldn't tell if the throbbing in my chest was just placebo, or if it was the chemicals taking effect. I slowly saw the outside of my periphery begin to darken, and the walls cave in. It felt like a roller coaster about to plunge down at the greatest height of the ride. I said one goodbye to reality for the last time, as the walls continued to cave in, and I slumped over in my chair and onto the floor. Black.

I woke up and stood in the center of the room. I turned to the doorway. Outside was a group of six boys, and one small boy standing further out in front of them. It was dusk outside. In the distance stood the fading blood red horizon, the setting sun. The six boys stood around the seventh boy and circled in on him. They mocked and belittled him without mercy. Then one of them picked up a crowbar from a pile of various random objects and bludgeoned the boy in the stomach five times. The boy cried and held his breath in due to the wind knocking out of him, with tears flowing down his face as he fell to his knees and clutched his torso almost in the fetal position. The boys laughed and jeered like wild dogs playing with a dead rabbit. As I watched all of this, a sharp pain came to my rib, and I too fell to my knees in the same position and wept. The blood horizon then swept like a flame over the aperture from my vision just inside of the doorway. It closed around me, and my pain was enhanced even more severely. I blacked out.

I woke up again, somehow on my couch. I looked over to the kitchen area, which as I gazed through the doorway seemed to fade into a restaurant area. I walked apprehensively and slowly towards the entrance to the kitchen. There was a black mesh table that sat on a stone patio with two chairs facing each other. The chefs bustled around, and waiters waited on the man and woman facing each other. The man was dressed in a sloppy, sweaty polo shirt with tan slacks and black tennis shoes that matched miserably with the rest of his attire. He couldn't have been more than twenty-four, but he still held a youthful naivete and perception of himself. The woman was a beautiful, slender and dark-haired girl, with a kind smile and laugh that resonated throughout the room, like the call of a whip-poor-will outside of a forest on a cool morning. However, I could not see her face clearly to save my life. It glitched and faded, then reemerged in full clarity every ten seconds, but remained anonymous to me. The man was fumbling over his words and trying to make her laugh, but to no avail. She maintained composure and kindness towards him, despite the clumsy dialogue from his end that led the interaction nowhere in the direction that he wanted. She looked at her flip phone and told him that she had to see a friend for drinks. After she left, the man sat and stared right back at me, with dissociation and austere lifelessness that gazed back into my very being, and I stared back at him with the exact same expression. I felt numb, as though I entered a colorless void that broke somewhere far out within the fabric of reality where no other soul except mine remained. The man's face seemed to slowly yet quickly zoom in close to mine, and our bodies converged, and we became the same. Then I blacked out.

I woke up in the kitchen chair where the man was sitting, and I heard an incessant scream coming from the bathroom. A calm female voice was soothing the rising scream that emanated throughout the house. I then heard a deep male's voice

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also trying to calm the scream, that of which sounded like a siren rushing down the street in the middle of the night. I was almost too afraid to walk over to the bathroom door, but my body made me do so, whether I was consenting to or not. I wearily peered through the doorway of the privy as though a great thing of unknown terror lay inside that I couldn't comprehend or imagine fully. Inside a woman lay in a tub of dirty, almost pink water, and she wore only a white gown that was barely cleaving to her skin. She was beautiful, with dark hair, but I couldn't see the color of her eyes. She wailed like a banshee on a clear night in an empty field, with an almost primal sound that echoed throughout the rest of the house. I heard the slow ticking of a clock that hung on the wall on the right side of the door. It was a heavy metal clock that seemed almost impossible to pick up.

Two other individuals stood in the bathroom, one was a large man with brown hair and blue eyes, and easy to look at. The other person was a woman in her early twenties, soothing the wailing woman in the bathtub. Within the sound of the continual wailing, I heard the man say, "It's about to come out, grab me a towel, Cheryl!" She handed him a new dry, white towel. He cloaked the woman's torso with the towel and attentively held position as I heard a faint cry of a baby coming out of the uterus. Finally, I eventually saw the man lifting a small, moving object in his hands. The baby was frail and covered in pink fluid, with his eyes closed and mouth open, gasping for air and ignorant of the new world he just entered. I saw the man whisper something in the baby's ear, and while I could hear the resonant, whispering voice, I could not hear the words. I looked with vacuous dissociation laced with intrigue as the man gave the baby over to the midwife. I looked over to the woman in the bathtub, and she lay still and lifeless. I stared at her as the other people in the room rushed around me, my perceptions of them blocking them out as I observed the corpse of the woman that was alive only five minutes ago. *I should be weeping right now, but I don't know how to feel. I blacked out.*

I then found myself sitting in the same chair that I found myself in when I took the pink fluid. I looked around, my mind dull and hazy after what I just witnessed and experienced. All of it still felt almost too real, even though I understood that I was just hallucinating. *I should be dead now, why am I still here?* I waited for approximately five minutes. It felt like twenty-four hours passed before my very eyes, since I was waiting for myself to enter some void and relinquish my existence. Suddenly, I heard a gentle opening of a door, and a light, uniform pattern of walking on the other side of it. In entered a tall, magnificent white man. It was as though his flesh was white, but he could have simply been covered in a full body laminate. The only color on him other than white was his two pure, black eyes. They weren't normal eyeballs, but simply two black voids that seared into you and almost penetrated you to the very bones.

He sat down across from me. My body became erect, and I could not move even if I wanted to. He gently spoke, "Why?" I didn't even know where to begin. My mind was out of words at this point. "You disappoint yourself without even realizing it. I am here to do my job, and taking you out of this world will be just as easy as bringing you back into it. The choices you make and have made before are but a small blip on my radar. You're simply another tenant I'm kicking out. I've done it before many times."

Without saying another word, the white man got up and gently but firmly grabbed my neck and threw me to the ground, dragging me to the bathroom. The way he did this felt like he had done this a thousand times before me. I didn't have the energy or

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the sound left in my voice box to even try and scream, even though I tried. My body just seemed to accept its fate. *This is how I'm going out.* I was almost glad that this insipid nightmare was coming to an end. I never believed in hell, but this is as close to what I would imagine hell to be like. However long this lasted, it felt like a lifetime. I didn't even remember what living in the real world was like, my mind had acclimated to this new fate I had chosen.

We entered the bathroom. Once again, I saw the dead woman laying in the bathtub, the man and midwife nowhere to be found. Without even thinking about it, the white man plunged me into the bathtub, like how a pastor baptizes a new believer. I landed right on top the corpse, now finally mustering the courage and energy to scream. The scream left my throat as though I had suppressed it my entire life and was finally freeing it from its cage. I landed on top of the woman, with the white man attempting to shove me down into the water. I gasped and screamed, hugging the body as though I was leaving her forever and never going to see her again. Tears began to flow from my eyes as the hands pushed down on my neck and back. Finally, I was pushed down past her legs into the water. I could, to my surprise, see clearly what was beneath me.

A vast ocean of pink lay all around me, with the pink color being closer to the surface. As I looked down at the bottom, an infinite void of black pulsed below me, with the black color becoming even darker as it went further down. I beheld a fear and horror that was unlike anything I could ever understand, as though this fear transcended death itself. It was the feeling that what was below me would drag me to a place that no person had ever or would ever enter...except for me. I knew that if I continued forth, I would never leave, and I would exist in perpetual misery without any hope of getting out. I looked up and saw the distant head of the white man above me. From where I was, it looked like the burning white sun from underneath the ocean.

I continued to sink lower towards the abyss, at this point simply being forced down like being pulled into the Bermuda Triangle. Suddenly, the words the man said to the baby rang clearly in my mind, out of nowhere: "I've been waiting for you. I want you. Please don't die, either. I'm losing her, I can't lose you." This impressed in me the sudden urge to overcome my fate that I knew all too well was definite. Out of nowhere I felt an agency manifest within me, and I swam up to the surface of the pink ocean. I sprang out of the fluid past the legs of the dead woman. The metal ticking clock was set in its usual place, just past the shoulder of the white man. For some reason, the white man just stood there, either confused or forced into a catatonic state. I grabbed the clock off the wall, without even thinking about it. It felt like a blurry next minute, when I bludgeoned the white man in the head six times. He lay on the floor with blood seeping out of his face, his black eyes being covered by the blood. He looked like a picture from a Rorschach test. Immediately I blacked out.

I woke up like one does out of a nightmarish fever dream. Blood spurted out of my mouth with violent repulsion and agony. I was lying on the floor, underneath the window. Somehow, I ended up there, I don't know how. The sun was shining through onto my face, and all I felt was pleasure and warmth. I wiped the blood off my face as I looked out the window and noticed the wind gently blowing over the grass and through the leaves of the trees.

As I walked outside, I noticed how I reacted to the environment around me. I did not have the same disdain or repulsion that I had for thirty years. I accepted everything for what it was, and I saw my place amid everything. I accepted that I was wrong

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about everything, including myself. There is something greater than me that I can't explain. I looked out into the distance on the sunny horizon that lay before the street where I lived. Within the center, I beheld a great mirage that held four figures in its grasp. *It's the family that I was just hating an hour ago.* Then, without thought, I stepped forward and walked towards the mirage, with no idea of what I would do next.

The description in this story was viscerale and really well done. The way this was vaguely horrifying was impressive. The message this story conveyed could be interpreted a few different ways, but overall, I'd say this could really resonate with someone who was struggling with wanting to be here. -Annelise Brown, Jeni Melzer, and Becca Hoyle

Spotlight Section



Tempest

by Brynley Jones

We chose to spotlight this photo because it shows the spirit of the Midwest in a single photo, from the rolling in storm to the beautiful colours of the sunset. The photo also follows one of the most well-known rules of photography, the rule of thirds, as well as others like leading lines, as well as being well exposed. It is well cropped, fully showing the rolling clouds and farm in the bottom right corner, as well as a lens flare. To anyone from the rural areas who sees this photo and gets a nostalgic sense of home. -Leah Kalina and Nara Hardesty

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Foggy Sunrise, Rock River Illinois

by Glenn Bodish

We chose to highlight this photo for its eerie feeling. The fog rolling along the water gives an eerie feeling, as well as following the rule of thirds and leading lines. The lighting is calm and well-balanced with bright colors and dark shadows. -Leah Kalina and Nara Hardesty

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Photobomb

by Kelis Green

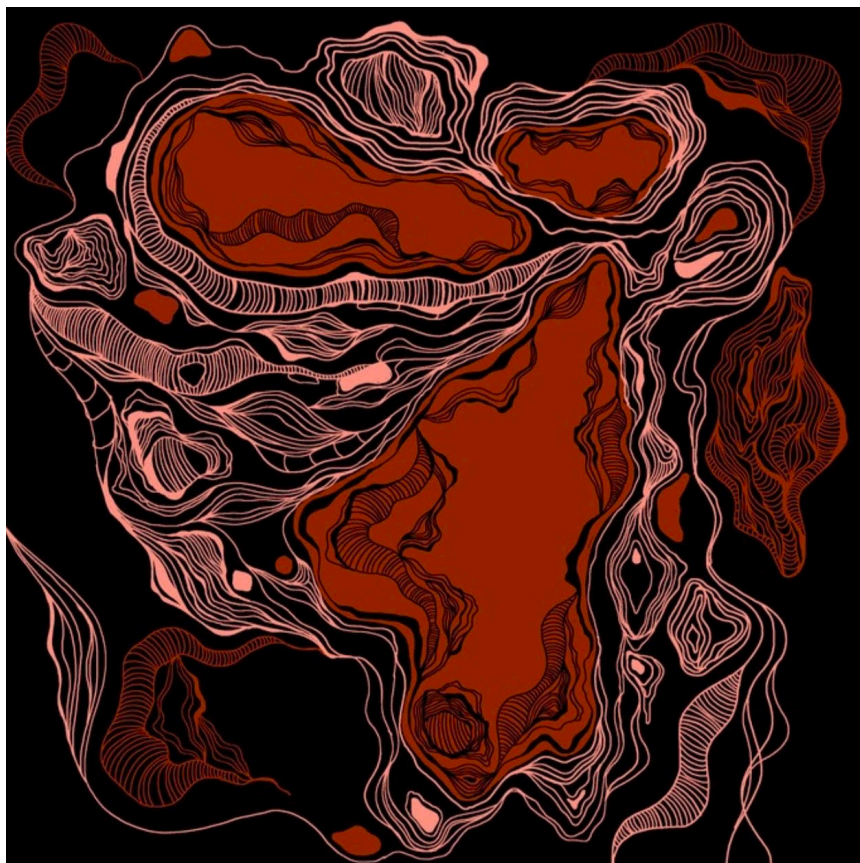
Photobomb shows a creative concept of depth using both digital and traditional art. The creature crawling out of the page is a fun concept that comes across well in the piece. The concept of having a pencil drawing with one done digitally encapsulates the creativity that can be done with mixed media. The real environment being incorporated into the piece with the cup holding the paper down is also a brilliant touch as it adds an element of depth and photography to the art.

-Kaydence Younger, Annelise Brown, and

Darien Huggins

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Controlled Chaos

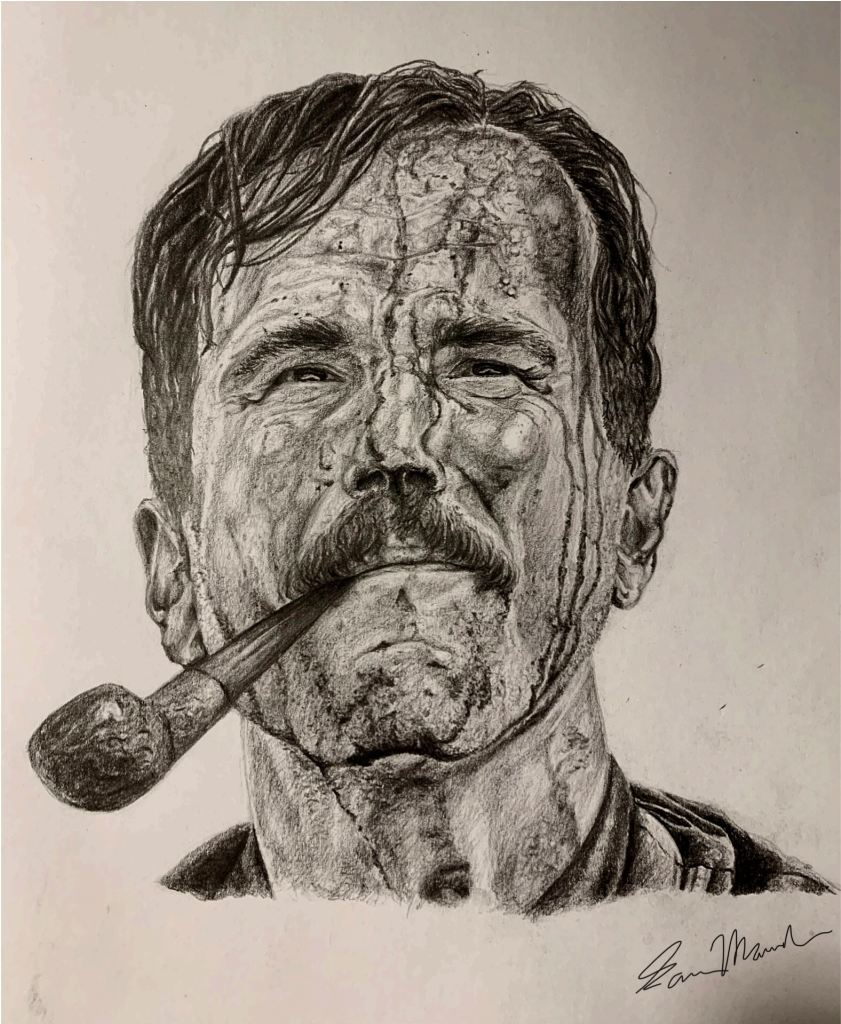
by Harvest Day

The tones and hues of the piece flow beautifully together. The different shades all come together in a pattern that brings three dimension to the space. The lighter colors outlining the darker colors helps them pop against the dark background. The abstract interpretation of all the swirling lines opens the piece up for thought provoking discussions.

This abstract image presents a fascinating interplay between organic forms and flowing lines, evoking a sense of natural movement and geological layering. The earthy reds and browns framed by intricate, sinewy pinkish lines resemble a topographical map or cross-section of sedimentary rock.

-Kaydence Younger, Annelise Brown, and Darien Huggins

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Oil

by Samuel Mauch

Oil shows a beautiful rendering of a man smoking a pipe. The use of charcoal here brings and shows depth in the piece. It effectively shows emotion conveyed through the water dripping down. This clear emotional rendering is powerful and brings so much dimension and emotion into the piece. -Kaydence

Younger, Jorja Reynolds, and Becca Hoyle

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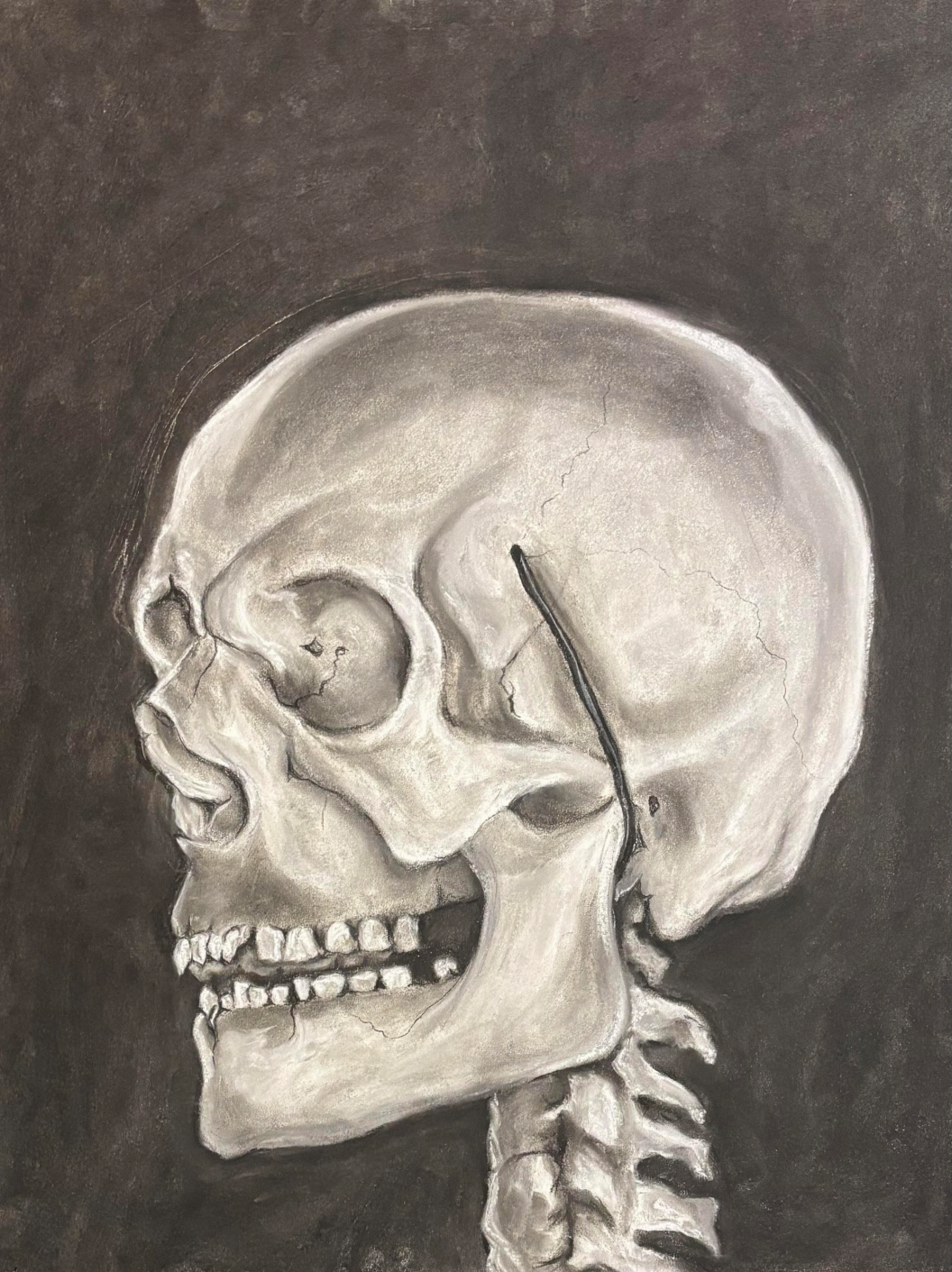


Tank

by Kelis Green

Tank is an incredibly powerful piece created from Veterans Memorial Park in Dixon. The tank being front and center in it is powerful in of itself. The lest we forget behind the tank frames the piece beautifully. The piece is well rendered and has a three dimensional aspect to it.

-Kaydence Younger, Jorja Reynolds, and Becca Hoyle



Sauk Valley
Community College