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The Lantern, 2021-2022

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THE LANTERN

CAT + CROW!

"CROW"

"CAT"

NYOM



*“My fancies are fireflies
Specks of living light
twinkling in the dark”*

~Rabindranath Tagore

The Lantern

XCI

2021-2022

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Cover Art

Cats + Crows by Elliot Cetinski

I sometimes wish this piece had some deeper meaning behind it, but I think I like it more because it's simply some doodles of characters that make me happy. Cat (who is a crow named 'Cat') and Crow (likewise a cat named 'crow') are two silly creations of my classroom doodles gone wild. I'm pleased that they can make someone else smile by being published in more than just my class notes. No one asked, but I feel it's important that you know: Cat and Crow go on little adventures around the neighborhood together, getting into necessary amounts of mischief and classic levels of chaos. They are truly who we should be emulating in life.

Editor's Note

How can one summarize something so dear to their heart in just a few sentences? I don't know. As much as I tried, I couldn't figure it out. I tried, I really did. But in the end, *The Lantern* is not mine, as much as I might joke about it being. I am but a cog in a DIY machine, and my metaphorical cog just happens to be the first one mentioned in the instruction booklet.

I couldn't have done what I did here without a lot of help.

Amy, thank you so much for putting up with my emails and weird color coding and for just sitting with me while I organized the entire edition into alphabetical order. Also, thanks for suggesting a smaller font so we could fit even more work in and assuaging my worries about the line below the titles being slightly uneven. I'm so glad you were my production editor! I'm excited to see where life takes you (somewhere awesome, no doubt).

To my section editors, thank you so much for dealing with my countless emails and the follow-ups that inevitably came with them. Despite dealing with shorter deadlines than expected, you all came through and did such an amazing job. I couldn't have gotten this done without you.

To my roommates, friends, and family, I must apologize for never shutting up about *The Lantern*, but I also have to thank you for listening as I went on and on and on... I think it was all worth it, don't you?

To my dad, Carl Buck, thank you for caving and agreeing to be a judge this year. Having two generations in one *Lantern* is pretty cool! Sorry there weren't as many historical pieces as you would've preferred.

To my predecessors, thank you for creating a legacy that I am so proud to uphold. I would especially like to thank Nicole Kosar for taking a chance on me as the Fiction Editor for the 2019-2020 edition and inspiring me to apply for this job. To future editors: good luck. You've got this!

And of course, I would be remiss if I didn't thank Jon Volkmer for giving me a huge ego boost way back when I was applying to colleges and convincing me that Ursinus was where I needed to be; four years later, I can't imagine being anywhere else.

I thought the image of fireflies (drawn by our cover artist, Elliot Cetinski) was a great metaphor for this edition; there are so many people who put their time and hearts into creating something wonderful for you, our hopefully-excited reader, to take with you wherever you end up. All of our lights combined create something magical, and now we're setting it free for you to catch and experience for a while.

With that, I leave you to enjoy this stunning edition of *The Lantern*. I hope you love it as much as I do.

~Sarah Buck :)

Creager Prize

Winner: “No More Buses Through El Paso” by Isabella Almonte

“No More Buses Through El Paso” is the sort of poem you remember long after reading it. Through the judicious use of language, the poet creates a narrative that delivers a momentary vignette of a short and tragic life within the space of a few brief stanzas. The subject of the poem then broadens, capturing the story of many lives and the profound loneliness at the core of each. The imagery couched within these scenes is concise but powerful, a testament to the precision of the writing. At its conclusion, the poem implies an aloof, academic appraisal of human misery that leaves the reader with a sense of emptiness. For its unflinching approach to and evocative portrayal of the subject matter, this year’s Creager Prize will go to “No More Buses Through El Paso.”

Runner-Up: “The Dogwood Tree” by Benjamin Tobias

“The Dogwood Tree” is a compelling piece of short fiction that blurs the lines between reality and madness for its protagonist, who develops an antagonistic relationship with a tree in his backyard. The story’s expressive prose and impressively ominous depiction of the tree create just enough doubt to pose the question: does the tree possess some form of sentience and ill intent, or is the protagonist engaged in an imaginary struggle born out of his own paranoia?



Annie Rus '17 graduated from Ursinus College with a B.A. in History and a Minor in English. She won the Ursinus College Creative Writing Award in 2013, and the Dolman Prize in 2017. As Senior Proposal Writer for a staffing firm, her experience gained within Ursinus’s creative writing program continues to inform her professional work in the corporate world. She currently resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and enjoys reading poetry at open mic nights.

No More Buses Through El Paso

By Isabella Almonte

Scorching heat,
blinding sun,
reflecting the glare

off a Catracho tattoo
on the limp and lifeless
arm of a former

high school student
awaiting his 17th birthday.
Wrapped around his

neck is the crucifix
his abuela gave him
as she begged him not

to leave. Sweat ran down
the backs of all who
attempted this dream.

“Prevention through deterrence.”
That’s the official
policy.

Let nature take care of
the “other” as waves of
migrants prepare for the fight.

No more buses through
El Paso. Just treks
through sand. And bodies

left unidentified
to be found
by ethnographers finishing graduate work.

Poetry Prize

Winner: “A Woman’s World” by Makayla Heisler

An ode to women letting women know it’s ok to be a woman. This poem allows the audience to believe that their features are not going to be definitive nor will their differences diminish them. The piece suggests the definitions of beauty are outdated, how those definitions have changed and how they continue to evolve. The ideas surrounding body image from negative to positive push the poem along and make the themes feel universal.

Runner-Up: “Kneeling” by Jessica Celli

A touching love poem expressed through metaphors, a sentiment of Atheism and intriguing word play.



A proud alum of Ursinus College ('01), James Clark Robinson has taken what he has learned from the UC English Department and turned it into a passion. Along with winning a cover art prize, James' first published poem, *On the Defensive*, was in *The Lantern*. After graduating, James became a Senior Court Clerk at Bronx Civil Court, ELA Instructor at Hostos Community College, self-published author of *The Love Suite, Vol 1 – Movement Found*, owner of Roots Press Publishing; all while honing his poetic performance on stages performing as both solo and collaborative artist. His work, including his forthcoming collection of poetry, *Sinnerman*, can be found at www.the lovesuite.com.

A Woman's World

By Makayla Heisler

Gazing across the busy waiting room,
the eyes of Vogue magazine meet mine.

It always starts as a staring
contest.

Myself against the beautiful, petite
model being featured this week.

Is that what I should look like?

Screeching from the sideline
at my game of little league soccer,
the 40-year-old bald man yells,
round and tattered himself,

“Mark the *big* girl!”

Big girl? Big girl.

Racing to the locker-room for high
school gym class, my 5'9" body,
with my size 8 jeans that
squeeze my muscular thighs,
looks for sanctuary hidden between
the blue lockers and white brick walls.

Drowning in the art of comparison,
as my womanly friends,
with their womanly bodies,
exchange their size small t-shirts and
size two jeans with one another.

Why don't I share that privilege?

Staring in the mirror was once a battlefield
that fueled fiery bullets. All the shots loaded
keenly by my own negative self-reflection.

The mirror that once plagued my mind with
hatred no longer defeats me as it reflects
my broad shoulders that *lift* me up,
strong legs that *push* me forward,
and wide hips that make *me* womanly.

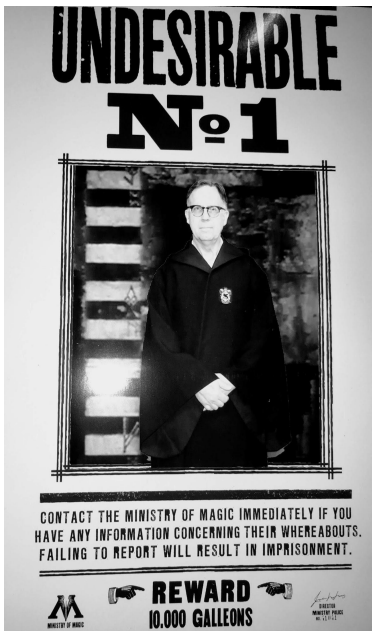
Prose Prize

Winner: “The Angel of Tragedy” by Bradley Kocher

As a multi-layered piece with not only writing acumen but knowledge of medical and mythological terms, “The Angel of Tragedy” reminded me of something worthy of Rod Serling. A terrific piece, both mercurial and foreboding. When watching movies and reading books, I am famous for saying “I wrote this” for knowing what happens at the end. Happily, that was not the case with this piece, and the ending was unexpected and jarring.

Runners-Up: “Fourth Wall Broken” by Jessica Schnur & “The Upside-Down House: A Dialogue with the Self” by Aurora McKee

“The Upside-Down House” shows a level of understanding and self-examination which makes it exceptional. “Fourth Wall Broken” has the ability to make the reader uncomfortable at times. A writer’s ability to do that without making the reader want to stop reading a piece is a rare quality. It reminded me of an old mystery writer story– something unexpected...



Carl Buck ('84) graduated from Wildwood Catholic High School in 1980 and from Ursinus College in 1984 with Majors in History and Economics/Business Administration. He was a member of Delta Pi Sigma Fraternity, involved in several ProTheatre productions and submitted pieces to The Lantern, a few of which were published. He has participated in a number of Ursinus organizations, serving on the Board of Trustees since 2010. He graduated Delaware Law School of Widener University where he served as the President of the Moot Court Honor Society, a charter member of the Order of Barristers and Treasurer of the Student Bar Association. He was nominated by Governor Chris Christie to be an Administrative Law Judge for the State of New Jersey in 2017 and has held that position since.

The Angel of Tragedy

By Bradley Kocher

Dr. Morrison took a deep breath, his usual stoicism betraying none of the trepidation welling up in his chest. He shifted slightly in the plain, cushioned chair, which was situated on one side of a square table. On the other side of the large, clear window on the room's far wall, the audio technicians gave a thumbs up to his interviewer, a woman sitting opposite him at the table. She returned the gesture, cleared her throat and adjusted the microphone before her right as the "On Air" light blinked on. She began her morning introduction, her arms crossed in front of her as her eyes trailed around the studio, clearly accustomed to the whole routine. Dr. Morrison looked around as well, idly examining the dark gray soundproofing and the wires running along the floor and walls of the small recording studio. He trailed a wire along the wall, then the floor, up the table leg, finally connecting to the large microphone in front of him, the attached pop filter staring back at him.

"Worrying about it is useless," he thought to himself, steeling his resolve. "You know that. Explaining the inexplicable is extraordinarily difficult. You'll just have to make the impossible possible. You know the truth, you've seen the truth, now make them believe it."

"Welcome back to WD-641 Mystical Monday, broadcasting from Blue Mount, Chicago. I'm Alina Jones, and this morning, we are starting off with a very special guest, Dr. James Morrison, a pioneer in pediatric neurosurgery in his hometown of Sunnybrook, Massachusetts. Going on his 20th year as a surgeon, Dr. Morrison prides himself in his dedication to science, his work, and his patients. However, today he is here to discuss the possibility that there may be more than just science and medicine at work when it comes down to our daily lives. Today, Dr. Morrison is here to discuss his life-changing experiences with what he calls a harbinger in his new book, *The Angel of Tragedy*, and how it may be shaping our lives." Mrs. Jones shifted her gaze to Dr. Morrison, "Welcome to the show, doctor."

Dr. Morrison returned her look as he leaned toward the microphone, trying to match the distance that she was from her own. "Thank you for having me."

"Your book focuses heavily on the idea of this harbinger, which you describe as 'a spiritual being, incorporeal to most, that takes the form of a human and accompanies those with little time left in their lives.' What is this

being exactly? And what would cause someone, such as yourself, to begin believing in such supernatural existences?”

“I chose to call it a harbinger because that is precisely what it has shown itself to be: an omen of misfortune and tragedy, thus the book’s title. The concept of the harbinger arose about four years ago while I was treating a patient of mine. I had been seeing this patient for nearly two years, and after around a year of treating him, he suddenly began to report having dreams where he would interact with a strange man. Naturally, I brushed it off as an imaginary friend. After all, the poor boy was so often in the hospital, it made sense for his mind to seek more consistent friendship in some form. But then, about thirteen months ago, another returning patient of mine, one who had never before reported anything of the sort, began to also describe having dreams and interactions with the exact same imaginary friend. The description, mannerisms, and even the name of this imaginary person were identical between the two boys. Not to mention, the name is very odd; it’s not the type of thing that you just come up with on the spot, let alone in two separate cases. As time went on, I even began to see an abnormally tall man around the hospital, but only when one of the boys was admitted at the time.”

Mrs. Jones furrowed her eyebrows before tilting one slightly upward, lips pursed in questioning. “So, you began to believe in this being’s existence when two patients of yours brought up the idea? And you believe this tall man to have been their tall imaginary friend? That sounds rather far-fetched, don’t you think?”

Dr. Morrison gently closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his right temple with his pointer and middle fingers. “Yes, of course; I know precisely how absurd it sounds. I’ve studied the many disciplines of neuroscience throughout my life, and I am still lost on this one. Formed hallucinations, especially of entire people, are normally caused by imbalances in chemicals in the brain, namely serotonin and dopamine. These imbalances weren’t observed in either of the children nor myself, and I personally have no history of mental trauma, abundant stress or even a genetic predisposition to suggest the occurrence of hallucinatory events.”

Mrs. Jones blinked a few times, her mouth ajar for a moment before she recomposed herself. “I see. Then I assume you do not believe these sightings to have merely been some sort of coincidence or vision?”

“I have run a number of tests on myself to discount the possibility of psychosis and early-onset disorders, along with other tests to confirm my mental status. So no, I do not believe these sightings to be so simple as to hallucinate. I know what I saw.”

“And what was the uncommon name of this imaginary friend? You said it is one-of-a-kind. In the book, I believe it is Caduceus.”

“Yes, well, that is the name in the book, spun from the scepter heralded by Hermes. A far more reasonable name, in my opinion.” Dr. Morrison took a quick breath. “The boys called him Meelaf.”

“...Meelaf,” Mrs. Jones said, more like a statement than a question. “Children truly do come up with the strangest things. You sure they didn’t know each other?” Dr. Morrison huffed a breathy laugh as she glanced down at her notepad and tapped a passage with her finger. “Have your experiences with this ‘Meelaf’ lead you to question your understanding of science and superstition? You expressed before that you were never one to buy into supernatural stories.”

“It is true that, before now, I never would have believed the sorts of superstitious anomalies I am describing to you today. But after everything I’ve seen and encountered, I’d be foolish not to assume that there is something more going on. My experiences, however, have not affected my confidence or understanding of science. Rather, they have only reaffirmed that, as a man of science, when evidence of unexplained phenomena is splayed out so plainly before me, I must work to uncover the truth behind them. That’s the whole reason why I wrote my book; it’s my collection of conclusions made through experience, research, and deduction.”

“Speaking of your book, you state that the children’s imaginary friend was your primary reference for your understanding of this harbinger, correct?” Dr. Morrison nodded. “Can you elaborate on your experience and the children’s experiences concerning him?”

Dr. Morrison felt a small wave of relief wash over him, grateful that, for now, Mrs. Jones seemed to have accepted his phantasmagoric story. “In the first chapter of the book, I discuss a patient of mine, we’ll call him Steven, who first described a person that he would often play with in his dreams. He described this person as taller than myself by a foot or so, and I’m six-one, skinny with long blonde hair, a young, kind face and ‘smart’ eyes. Of course, I believed this character to be an imaginary friend, just as you do now,” he said, gesturing toward Mrs. Jones. “I’ve had many patients with imaginary friends before. It wasn’t uncommon at all.”

“What was strange,” Dr. Morrison continued, “was how often I began to see an abnormally tall man in a black suit and hat pacing about the walkways outside the hospital while Steven was admitted. I never saw his face; every time I saw him, he always happened to be walking away from me. Even so, his height was undeniable and, for some reason, those who passed by him never seemed to pay him any mind. If you ever saw a seven-foot-tall man walk by you, you’d at least afford him a glance; it’s a very bizarre sight by all accounts.”

“Then, months later, Steven unfortunately passed away. After that, I didn’t see the tall man again for a while until a few years later when another boy was admitted into my care. I had known this boy, let’s call him Alex, for

many years because he was-“ Dr. Morrison cleared his throat. This was where it got difficult. “Because he was close to the family. Alex was placed under my care when a small cerebellar astrocytoma, a benign brain tumor in the cerebellum, was found when he was nine years old,” he said while tapping the nap of his neck with his middle finger. “I removed it, but a half a year later, a malignant glioblastoma multiforme, a much more deadly astrocytoma, was found in a proximate region of the cerebellum and had begun to diffuse into surrounding tissue.”

The heavy, monotonous droning of rain drummed against my office’s window as I rested my head in my hands. I heard a knock at the door. May entered with Riley, his face lighting up in a smile that brightened my dark office as he saw me. I tucked away Riley’s reports, which had been spread across my desk, and took him into my arms as he ran up to me. A cerebellar astrocytoma, huh? In a ten-year-old? Our family has no history of neurological tumors, but at least it’s not a major one.

“This will sound just as crazy as everything I’ve said prior,” Dr. Morrison continued, blinking the painful memory from his eyes. “But on the first day, Ri- Alex returned to the hospital after his diagnosis, during the brief time it took for Alex and his mother to walk through the front entrance up to the counter, I saw him.”

Mrs. Jones raised an eyebrow as she tilted her head upward slightly. She had placed her pen down on her notepad and was listening more carefully. “Who is ‘him’?”

“That very same tall man who I had seen pacing the walkways, the man in the black suit with the long blonde hair, the imaginary friend, Meelaf. He was surreal and carried himself with dignity and grace, holding the hat he always had on in his hands, which were clasped behind his back. He walked beside Alex and his mother, a small, sad smile on his face as he looked down at him. Neither Alex, his mother, nor any others in the lobby seemed aware of the towering man’s presence. When I blinked, Meelaf had vanished.”

“Never fear, Riley is here! Woosh! Woosh! That’s what flying sounds like! Superheroes can fly so they can always get there in time!” Riley wails as he runs in erratic patterns toward the hospital’s entrance.

“Settle down, honey. You can save the day later.” May, Riley’s mother, said with a gentle sternness, taking Riley’s hand in hers as the large glass doors slid open to greet them. She smiled brightly and pointed inside. “You see that, Rye? There’s daddy! At the counter over there! Look at how surprised he is to see you!”

“So, Meelaf, the imaginary friend you had had described to you years ago by a patient, suddenly popped up next to another boy? Do you believe

their imaginary friend to have been real all along?” Though Mrs. Jones’ words held the same professional tone that they had held the entire interview, the visage of skepticism once again settled onto her features. “What made these boys so special as to be watched over by this-“ Mrs. Jones raised her eyebrows once more, her head shaking ever so slightly. “This ‘harbinger,’ as you describe it?”

Dr. Morrison closed his eyes for a moment before saying, “As I had mentioned before, I know how this sounds, but I have no reason to waste your time or mine weaving such fantasies. I do believe Meelaf was real all along, that he was never imaginary to begin with, and that he made himself visible to the boys around the same time in their lives. Steven and Alex both shared experiences with Meelaf through their dreams, and each of their dreams were unique to them. Unfortunately, Steven never really described his dreams to me in great detail because he wasn’t comfortable talking to people other than his parents. Alex, on the other hand, was very...” Dr. Morrison pursed his lips. “Alex was very close to our family, so he was much more open about his dreams with me. Steven would describe his dreams to his parents, while Alex would always call me in to describe the latest of his miraculous adventures.”

“DADDY! DADDY!” His giddy voice echoed out from his room throughout the hall. The nurses at the desk outside giggled as May desperately tried to shush him. She came to get me after he promised to stop yelling. He had another story.

“Hey, buddy! How’d you sleep? Did mommy get you the chocolate milk you asked for?”

“Yeah mhm! The pillow is super comfy and Toothless kept me safe so I slept good!” He held up the stuffed dragon from his favorite movie proudly. He never goes anywhere without it. He pulled the dragon back into a bag. “Oh, and also I was kind of a little bit woozy when I woke up, but that went away, and I feel better now.”

Dr. Morrison looked to May, who was sitting next to Riley’s bed with her book. “Did he sleep?” he mouthed to her.

She nodded before pointing to a small cooler on the floor beside her. It was full of small bottles of chocolate milk. “I rock.” She mouthed back with a smile.

“Ah right, the wooziness.” Dr. Morrison continued, looking back at Riley. “Don’t let it bother you. It’s just your medicine doing medicine stuff. Now, mommy tells me we’ve got a new story, but after this you and Toothless have to promise me that you’ll both try and get some more sleep, alright? Superheroes can’t always save the day alone.”

“Isn’t that what you do?” Riley asked, his enthusiasm palpable.

“Not at all! I work with a team of people who are all really good at their jobs. I couldn’t save anyone without their help.”

“Oooh! Ok.” He looked a little sad for a moment. “Are they better heroes than me?”

“They’re heroes, alright. But you’re my hero. Our hero.” He said, resting his hand on May’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “That’s never gonna change.”

“Then I’ll do my best to be your and mommy’s hero!” He bounced excitedly and smiled widely. He stuck out his pinkie and said, “Pinkie promise!”

I hooked my pinkie around his and he beamed at me. He has his mother’s smile. “Sounds like a deal. So, what craziness did you get up to this time? Was your friend there? Ya know, what’s his name? Um-“

“Meelaf! Mhm, he was there again! He always is! Ok, so it was super crazy this time-“

Mrs. Jones’ voice once again broke through the hazy memories. “How often would Steven and Alex report having these dreams? Was there something specific about the dreams that made them special, aside from their shared interaction with Meelaf?”

“Apparently,” Dr. Morrison began, “both Steven and Alex only ever recalled their dreams after recovering from surgery.”

“Both boys reported playing with him in their dreams... during surgeries? Aren’t surgeries normally over in the blink of an eye for patients? I never thought patients dreamed while under anesthesia,” Mrs. Jones asked. “I’ve had two surgeries myself, and each one was like waking up from a brief sleep.”

“Well, yes, that is normally the case,” Dr. Morrison replied. “However, in rare cases, patients in recovery, while still sedated, may have dreams or dream-like recollections of their surroundings. Yet somehow, the moment Steven or Alex would recover from a procedure, a new, fantastical story would fill their heads in such vivid detail that you’d think it was a memory of a recent event. I’ll reiterate: this form of dreaming is quite rare to occur just once among recovering patients. In Steven and Alex’s cases, after each surgery they had, without fail, they would report to have had yet another dream. The chances of such an event recurring for one patient are already extraordinarily low. For it to happen in two cases with such similarities goes far beyond the realms of coincidence.”

Mrs. Jones jotted a few more notes down on her notepad, this time her face creased in concentration. She looked back up at him after placing her pen down with an expression not of skepticism, but genuine interest. “These dreams. What were they like, exactly? Did they share any similarities?”

“In Steven’s case, he dreamt of himself as a mighty warrior who fought against an evil empire with Meelaf as his wizard companion. He wanted to be a knight in shining armor—according to his parents—so the theme fit well. Alex, on the other hand, always wanted to be a superhero, so most of his dreams revolved around him playing a heroic role in a fantasy

world. And just like in Steven's dreams, Meelaf played a supporting role, acting as Alex's sidekick."

"Wait, wait! And then!- "He can't stop giggling at my confusion. His energy is infectious. "Wait no! Stooooop, why are you laughing!?! He did, I swear!"

"So, this time, Meelaf saved you from a- what did you say? A hellhound? What is that?"

"It's like a fire wolf from the pits of evil! Or at least that's what Zach's dad told me. They're like fire puppies! I saw them in a game he plays! They're real!"

"Alright alright!" I hold up my hands in defeat. "So Meelaf saved you from a, uh, fire puppy... on a magical farm... uh, which is owned by a magic cowboy... by jumping in front of it... and asking it to play with you instead of being evil?"

Ecstatic nods. A quirky smile.

"And then he befriended the fire puppy for you and now he's, like, your dog?"

More ecstatic nods. "His name is Kitty!"

"And then you... what?"

"And then we flew on this HUGE butterfly – like it was super big, like as big as a bus – to a big ice cave, where we fought a big white dragon named Beetle because he was a bully!"

"I never heard the specifics of Steven's stories, but one of Alex's favorite stories involved Meelaf saving him from a hellhound, which is apparently some sort of fiery, wolf-like beast, befriending it, and then flying to an icy tundra on a butterfly, where he and Meelaf fought a dragon."

"Did any of these dreams ever involve violent or graphic themes, by any chance?" Mrs. Jones suddenly asked, underlining a section of her notes as she peered across the table toward him.

"...Not that I can recall, no. The dreams were often filled with things the boys loved or enjoyed fantasizing about. Why do you ask?"

"Well, we discussed earlier that Meelaf is your model for a harbinger. And a Harbinger, as you state in your book, 'accompanies those with little time left in their lives'. Does this mean that this harbinger, Meelaf, was merely giving these children a form of a 'pretty last sight' sort of thing? I assume Alex also passed away, should his story match Steven's and the concepts we've outlined."

Dr. Morrison's eyelids fluttered for a moment, a prickling sensation settling upon his eyes. *"Don't think about it, just explain. Don't think about it, just explain,"* echoing in his mind.

"I had come to a similar conclusion myself, for I believe a harbinger, like Meelaf, to essentially be a sort of tragic angel, thus the title of the book. So... yes, that would be correct."

The MRI came back. A Grade IV astrocytoma, a glioblastoma multiforme, had appeared in the lower portion of the cerebellum. Grade IV? That's impossible. The recurring tumors were Grade II at worst, if that... We'll operate tomorrow morning. Riley put on a brave face; he's so strong. May and I slept beside his bed again that night. I wake up at three, tuck the two of them back in, and head off to prepare. Outside, the rain falls heavily against the dark sky. An hour or so later, I'm walking with my colleague, discussing the procedure. And I suddenly hear them. The alarms from a patient's room down the hall. Riley's room is down the hall.

“And that is one of the most sobering similarities connecting Meelaf’s appearance to both the boys’ cases... He only began to show up within a year of their—” Dr. Morrison let out a shaky breath, one he hadn’t realized he was holding. “He only began to show up within a year of their deaths. And even their deaths... Even their deaths were similar. Sudden... and terrifying.”

The displays at his bedside are blinking red, his oxygen levels dropping. There is bile on his shirt. He's not breathing. His body is seizing. His eyes are lazily open, but he's not responsive. He's looking at me. May is crying and shaking Riley, pleading for help. That's my boy. You're not taking my boy, you bastard. I call my team and prep for emergency surgery. I'm on the clock, but I know what I need to do. I can save him; I'll be his hero. I pinkie-promised.

A muffled question came from Mrs. Jones, but Dr. Morrison barely heard it. Mrs. Jones slowly furrowed her brow as she watched Dr. Morrison carefully, her eyes widened in confused surprise as his own slowly began turning red and watery.

“Dr. Morrison, I asked how recently Alex died and if you’ve seen Meelaf since?”

“Ah... forgive me. I must have lost my train of thought...”

A craniotomy of the lower occipital should relieve pressure and give us visual. The tumor had spread, just barely reaching the superior cerebellar veins, cutting off blood supply at multiple points and hemorrhaging veins at others. It's worse than I expected. There's so much blood, but I know how to fix this. Remove obstructions from pinched points, Cut off the bleeding and clamp the hemorrhaged sections to restore blood flow. It's ok. I've got you, buddy. I can fix this. You'll be ok.

“Is everything alright, doctor?”

The bleeding is too intense; we can't even get a clear view. There's so much blood. The cacophony of beeping displays seems so distant. His levels are dropping. I know, I

know. Just increase suction and clip the damn artery. God ,why is there so much blood? I just need to- I just-

Mrs. Jones places a hand on her earpiece and nods before saying, “We’ll be continuing our interview with Dr. James Morrison in a few moments to further discuss the stories and experiences behind his new book, *The Angel of Tragedy*, in a moment. We’ll be taking a short break while we jump to Alan for the traffic report and a few short messages. You’re listening to WD-641.”

The audio technicians, watching from behind the large glass window, gave Mrs. Jones the thumbs up as the “On Air” light blinked off. Mrs. Jones turned to Dr. Morrison, who now had his head in his hands, his elbows resting on the table before him. The aching in his throat and the pressure behind his eyes became unbearable. He laughed weakly and breathily as a single tear fell onto the tabletop. “Forgive me, this subject is always a little hard to-“

“What’s going on here?” Mrs. Jones’ harsh tone broke through the flimsy silence that had settled around them.

Dr. Morrison lifted his head, looking at her with puffy, watery eyes. “Excuse me...? I’m sorry, I didn’t expect for this to-“

“You’re a pediatric surgeon,” she interjected. “You must have seen hundreds of lost patients before. I understand it’s a difficult job, but what would make you crack at such a convenient time as during an interview?” Mrs. Jones shoved her microphone away from her face and leaned forward, giving Dr. Morrison a pointed glare. “With all due respect, doctor, I don’t buy it. What makes this one child more worth crying over than any of the others, huh? Not to mention, you have everything to gain by making our listeners pity you with a little waterworks! We’re not paying you to cry, so just stick to the stories without all the extra nonsense!”

Dr. Morrison stared at Mrs. Jones with wide eyes, stunned. Another tear began to fall, but he wiped his face quickly. “You... Do you think I am trying to do this?”

“Of course! Why wouldn’t you? You SERIOUSLY expect me to believe that you, a surgeon who works with dying children day in and day out, suddenly and conveniently breaks down NOW of all times? When you’re discussing your book? Give me a break!”

Dr. Morrison stared at Mrs. Jones once again for a long while. He pushed back his chair and stood slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. Looking down at her, in a dangerously low tone, he asked, “Does losing your only child sound like an easy thing to discuss, Alina?”

Mrs. Jones was taken aback by his change in demeanor. “Excuse me?”

“I am going to have to ask you to keep this confidential, Missus Jones.”

Mrs. Jones gave Dr. Morrison a wary look and a nod before motioning for him to take his seat, a gesture he ignores.

“Alex was not the boy’s real name. His name was Riley.” Dr. Morrison began, taking deep breaths to steady himself. “And Riley, well, Riley was my little boy. My wife and I only had one child, and his name was Riley. He was ten. He had his mother’s smile and my eyes. He wanted to be a superhero. And he always put on a brave face even while Death himself seemed to be pacing beside him.” Dr. Morrison ran his fingers through his hair, trying and failing to turn his head soon enough to obstruct the view of another falling tear. “Working with children... seeing them suffer... it’s already hard enough. So, when it’s your own child, YOUR little boy... that’s where I finally snapped.” Dr. Morrison slumped back down in his chair, huffing out a pained breath. “What happened to Alex, his story, is what happened to my little buddy three months ago. And, on that day in the OR, I sat, waiting to feel anything, waiting to wake up and forget the day as a terrible dream. When I looked up at his body one last time, I saw him. Next to the covered body of my baby boy was a man. His black suit covered his lean, tall form and his face looked youthful with his relaxed expression. His long blond hair draped over part of his face as he looked down at Riley. And-“ Another deep breath. “And then, for the first time, he looked at me.”

I stared, mouth agape under my surgical mask, as Meelaf stood next to the operating table. His visage was foggy in my eyes, as if he weren’t really there, and his hand hovered just above Riley’s covered face. His melancholy expression and gentle smile faltered for only the briefest moment as he nodded to me, as if in apology. And then he disappeared in a blur as the tears started falling.

~

Dr. Morrison took one last deep breath, finally regaining his composure after his breakdown. “*You knew it would be hard, but you managed to pull yourself together. Just finish the interview. The hard part is over, go back home, and hug May.*” He smiled at the thought.

“Welcome back to WD-641 Mystical Mondays. We are back with Dr. James Morrison, whose new book, *The Angel of Tragedy*, is on sale now at your local bookstore. During the break, we discussed Off Air that the boy in the story, Alex, is actually modeled off of your son, Riley, who died from medical complications. Is there a reason you kept that information a secret, and is it possible that the retelling of your story has been affected or exaggerated by the trauma of your son’s death?” Mrs. Jones asked, her face devoid of any expression.

Dr. Morrison stared at her in stunned silence, the itchiness in his eyes and the remnants of his dried tears reminding him of how foolish he had been.

"She's a reporter, what do you expect..." came his thoughts as he lowered his face into his hands and sighed. *"Just be professional about it."*

"I did ask for that to be kept between us, Mrs. Jones," Dr. Morrison began, his head still in his hands. "So, for the sake of confidentiality, I'd like to—" Dr. Morrison's words trailed off as he lifted his head. Standing next to Mrs. Jones, looking down at her with a sad smile, was Meelaf. Mrs. Jones cocked an eyebrow at Dr. Morrison, who was now gaping up toward the back wall.

"Is something the matter, doctor?" she asked.

Meelaf slowly closed his eyes, his shoulders relaxing as if from an inaudible sigh. When his eyes opened, for the first time since that day three months ago, he was looking directly at Dr. Morrison, an apologetic look once again on his face. Meelaf smiled his usual sad smile, adjusted the collar of his black suit, and tipped his hat before vanishing in an instant.

Dr. Morrison's eyes fluttered, and he blinked hard. "Ah..." He finally returned Mrs. Jones' look with a spacey one of his own. "Ah well... that's unfortunate," he said to her. "I think, well, I just saw him next to you. I don't particularly care if you believe me, but...after this, please consider getting an MRI done. Preferably on your head."

A Sunny Day in Sinkhole

By Miles Noecker

fiction

(Warnings for homophobic language and graphic depictions of violence.)

The stranger found the overturned, landlocked steamship easily enough, at the end of a long stretch of worn, quaint shops. Erected almost entirely of wood, the town creaked and cracked at each passing gust of wind, carrying a haze of dust through the sweltering, dry air. Faded white paint covered most of the exteriors of the shops lining the dirt street, with disorganized roof shingles the color of artichokes. The town built its way to its source material: the dilapidated white and green steamship, hollowed and carved decades earlier and transformed into a tavern. It was the only place in town with signs of life, the place the stranger traveled so far to find.

Before entering, the stranger paused on the porch, turning his back to the entrance to get one last glimpse of the town before him. A tumbleweed bounced across the street from one alleyway to another. A pale, orange lizard scurried under an overhang for shade. Several emaciated horses sputtered and neighed, tied up outside a rundown stable. The sun burned, the ground simmered, the air sizzled, and the day had only just begun. Outside the tavern, the town was silent, wrapped in a veil of forgotten serenity. Behind the swinging saloon doors, however, the hoots and hollers of the bar patrons rang out. The stranger removed his black bandana from over his mouth, placed it around his neck, and turned to enter the tavern.

His quiet, grey eyes took several seconds to adjust to the dimness of the saloon before he could take it all in. There were no light sources beyond a few open windows. Somehow, it seemed hotter inside than on the porch. Bleached white skulls and bones from every creature who had the unfortunate displeasure of meeting the townsfolk lined the otherwise barren walls. In the back corner, a dartboard hung lopsided, overlooking an ornate, antique billiards table, the prized possession of the bartender. Rich, carved mahogany displaying medieval knights, kings, dragons, and wizards lined the crimson felt of the table itself. Two burly men and a beefy woman, all clad in tattered leather scraps, gathered round the table, taking turns in their seemingly competitive game. A dagger, three black buttons, a penny, and a bottle of sandy water were grouped together on the edge of the table – the pool prize pool.

None of the pool players paid any mind to the stranger as he removed his black denim jacket, revealing his sweat-stained, blue button-down shirt and leather suspenders, which held up his khaki riding pants. He placed the jacket on a coat hanger fashioned out of deer antlers and approached the bar, essentially a long, stone slab placed on top of the worn wooden planks that made up the floor of the tavern. Each step of the stranger's black riding boots generated a hollow echo beneath the floorboards. The stranger passed by the empty tables and chairs, all wooden and rotting, and approached the bartender, who had his back turned while he polished the liquor bottles on display.

The back of the bartender's head was bare, revealing a burned, red scalp, surrounded by a ring of wispy, white hair. He wore a leather vest with nothing underneath and when he turned around, the stranger noticed the various growths and marks along the bartender's sagging chest and stomach. White body hair masked some of the discolored imperfections, along with several tattoos of various animal skulls, but the damage from years of surviving the apocalypse was apparent. A thick white mustache covered the bartender's chapped upper lip. Equally thick eyebrows raised above his ocean eyes at the sight of the stranger. The bartender cleared his throat and spit a mass of mucus behind the bar.

"Hey there, stranger. Welcome to The Dust Bowl. What can I do for ya?"

The stranger placed his gloved hands on the stone countertop and leaned forward. He removed his black, suede cowboy hat and plopped it on the counter. The bell stitched to the brim of the hat rang as it collided with the stone. The stranger locked eyes with the bartender, whose wrinkled face studied the unknown man. The stranger's voice was hoarse, yet kind. "I was hoping I could get a drink, been walking a long ways."

The bartender nodded and gestured to the polished spectrum of translucent, rainbow bottles behind him. "Of course, what can I get ya?"

The stranger smiled, flashing a perfect row of yellow teeth behind the stubble of his sculpted face. "Some water would be a great place to start."

The bartender's eyes widened, and he let out a roar of laughter, his belly jiggling against his leather vest as his face reddened, unable to control himself. The pool players turned away from their game to investigate the commotion. One of them, a tall, bearded man with a purple viper tattooed across his face, spoke.

"What's got you all funny, Kebert?" His voice was deep and irritable, turning his question to a command.

The old man behind the counter wiped a tear from his eye and pointed to the stranger, still laughing. "He – he – he...wants WATER! Can

you believe that?” The revelation sent Kebert into another fit of laughter, as the three pool players joined him.

The lone woman, whose shaved head was covered in floral tattoos, raised her oily, pimpled face from the table to face the stranger. “You know where you are, mister? This here’s The Dust Bowl, only shop still in business in the town of Sinkhole, and not for long. Now why do you think that is? Because we’ve got water flowing beneath our feet?”

The stranger observed the laughter around him and sighed. “I suppose not.”

“Oh, you suppose not?” The woman tapped her other friend on the shoulder, a short, stout man who shared the woman’s baldness, besides an unkempt, long, dyed-green beard. “Where the hell did you find this guy?”

The man with the green beard shook his head. “I don’t know him. Do you?”

“Hell no, I don’t. Who the hell are you, mister?” the woman demanded. “We don’t get a lot of fresh faces around here and you’re looking awfully fresh to be out in this heat.”

The stranger placed his hat back over his straw blonde hair, silver bell ringing. “You can call me... Tumbleweed.”

Kebert the bartender leaned forward. “The hell you call yourself? Tumbleweed? Boy, I know the world’s gone to shit, but even *I* know that’s stupid.”

“Oh, shut it, Kebert,” the woman interrupted. “He seems smart enough, coming all this way in that getup and still finding his way in here. My name’s Fran and these here are my brothers, Dan and Stan.” She motioned to the tall man, Dan, and the short man, Stan. They both nodded toward Tumbleweed. “We call ourselves the Van Peeble Boys, which is funny cause I ain’t no boy. But ever since this all started – or ended, I guess – and we lost the rest of our family, Ma and Pa and our sweet baby brother... the three of us, well, we’re all we got. We’re... Three peas in a pod!” She laughed. “Ain’t that right, boys?”

Stan rolled his eyes and stroked his beard. “Yeah, yeah, enough of the life story, Fran.”

Dan lined up his next shot and barked, “Would y’all shut the hell up so I can win this game already?”

Fran shook her head and waved to Tumbleweed. “Well, it’s nice to meet ya, Tumbleweed. Let us know if you’d like to join our next game, maybe you can put that fancy, ringing hat of yours in the pot.”

Tumbleweed waved a gloved hand, “I just might, thanks.” He turned to Kebert. “But first... a drink.”

“Yeah, yeah, a drink. Let’s not be ridiculous this time and ask for water, alright?”

Tumbleweed shrugged. “Then what do ya got?”

“Well, let’s see...” Kebert turned to the wall of bottles and began inspecting them, one by one. “We got Blue Tickler, Candid Upshot, She Shack, Dried Stone, appropriately named I might add. There’s Red Epistaxis, The Morning After, The Baby Blues, Hickey Hue, that one will burn your throat worse than the sun will.” He removed a round, purple bottle from the top shelf and swirled it in front of Tumbleweed’s face, demonstrating the tar-like substance. “I make this one myself, call it Lesbian Seagull Riot. Boy, is it a good one, something you don’t want to miss.”

Tumbleweed grimaced. “Anything a little more... standard?”

“Standard?” Kebert frowned. “You survive the end of the world and now you want *standards*? Boy, we’re standing in what used to be The Fair Wind, finest steamship on the Scurvy River, living, breathing, *surviving*. What more could you want? Sure, a glass of water would be nice, maybe a steak or a cheeseburger, but hell, we have our health, don’t we?”

“I guess so. Got anything nonalcoholic at least?”

“Oh, none of this crap’s got any alcohol, it’s all juices and herbs and the like. It’ll fuck you up all the same, though, don’t you worry.”

Tumbleweed placed his head in his hand. “Just gimme your weakest drink.”

“Alright, Blackwater it is.” Kebert retrieved a tiny, clear bottle from the bottom shelf and inserted a small dropper into its mouth, sucking up the liquid before transferring it to a shot glass, drop by drop. “You tell me when, Tumbleweed.”

The young man watched each drop fall in quiet agony, nearly cheering as they connected into one permeable mass resembling what would have been a drink before the end of the world.

After about ten drops, Kebert exhaled sharply. “Geez, how much money you got, young man? This ain’t some dive bar you can get away with just a few pennies and a pretty face, this here is premium stuff.”

“That’s plenty, thanks.” Tumbleweed took the shot glass and upended it into his mouth, his face clenching as the liquid hit the back of his throat, filling his entire body with a sensation of violent disgust. Whether the flavor came from grinded bones, lizard scales, or human feces, Tumbleweed did not care to find out. After all, it’s what they called the Wasteland Diet.

Kebert replaced the bottle on the shelf and returned to Tumbleweed. “So, what brings you to Sinkhole, Tumbleweed? These days, we don’t get many travelers, especially not in as good of shape as the likes of you.”

Tumbleweed sighed. “Can’t a man just enjoy a rest for a few minutes before he has to start answering questions about himself?”

Kebert’s eyes widened and he stepped away from the stranger. “Of course, sorry, pal. Just making conversation, that’s all.”

"I'm sorry, just not in the mood today." Tumbleweed removed his hat once again and turned his attention toward the game of pool. "Got a tough reunion ahead of me, not looking forward to it."

"A reunion?" said Kebert. "With who? Nobody in this town 'cept us, Bad Ronald, and old man Ken, and I haven't seen those two in weeks. You looking for Ken? I might be able to find him for ya, but no promises. He owes me a lot of money, wouldn't be surprised if you had a similar issue with the guy. Boy, he sure is a piece of work, that old Ken."

Tumbleweed's gaze remained on the three pool players as Dan sunk the 8-ball, winning the game. The towering behemoth raised his musclebound arm, still wielding the pool stick, in victory, while the other two members of the Van Peeble Boys complained of cheating and conspiracy.

"Say, speaking of owing money," Kebert said, "how was you planning on paying for that Blackwater?"

"I wasn't." Tumbleweed rose from the bar and placed his ringing hat back on his head. The sound of the bell cut the Van Peeble Boys' argument short. Tumbleweed faced the trio, legs spread, hands at his side. "I take it you folks don't remember me, huh? Guess that means this won't be so bad after all."

Dan's grip around his pool stick tightened. The purple veins in his arms matched the snake across his face.

Stan grabbed the knife from the prize pool and pointed it towards Tumbleweed. "I knew I didn't trust this fairy. What kinda name is Tumbleweed, anyway?"

Dan stepped forward, wielding the pool stick like a baseball bat, Stan by his side, blade drawn.

Tumbleweed smiled. "This how you want things to go?"

Fran interrupted. "Wait! Wait, hang on a second! Boys, boys, I know him! Look at his face, look at his eyes! I see it! I know now! Oh, brother, you're alive!"

Fran ran towards Tumbleweed, arms outstretched for an embrace. Allowing himself only one blink of his guilty, grey eyes, Tumbleweed pivoted and met Fran with a bullet through the heart. Her body echoed against the hollow, wooden floorboards of The Dust Bowl as it landed with a thud. Blood pooled beneath her, the same color as the felt lining the pool table.

The remaining Van Peeble Boys both cried out for their sister, dead as the rest of the world.

Tumbleweed stood over his sister's dead body, brandishing two shiny, silver revolvers in either hand. He aimed one at Dan and the other at Stan, while Kebert cowered behind the counter, having knocked most of his bottles off the shelf following the startling gunshot. Tumbleweed frowned

at his sister's corpse, shook his head, chuckled, then flashed his perfect, yellow teeth. "Any last words, brothers?"

Dan opened his mouth to speak and Tumbleweed filled it with a bullet, then another through his massive chest for good measure. His body fell harder than his sister's, but the sound remained the same.

Before the tears could make it out of Stan's eye, Tumbleweed fired a bullet through it. Another corpse, another thud, and the job was done.

He returned the revolvers to their holsters and knelt by the bodies. Tumbleweed removed a disposable camera from his pocket and snapped several photographs of the deceased. He rose and returned to the counter with the pool table's prize pool. Kebert remained cowering behind the counter but rose at Tumbleweed's command.

Tumbleweed placed the knife, the buttons, and the penny on the counter. "These are for you, old man, for your trouble. Sorry to conduct my business like this, didn't see much other way. You see, my name's Bran Van Peeble and these here are – *were* – my siblings, Fran, Stan, and Dan Van Peeble. I don't know how much you do or don't know about them and frankly, I don't care. That's between you and the men who show up tomorrow to clean up these bodies and ask whatever questions they care to ask. If I were you, I'd ditch this shithole – sorry – *Sinkhole*, and be on my way. See if you can find that Bad Ken fella you were talking about, or whatever his name was. These here dear departed siblings of mine committed crimes against humanity, Kebert, and they paid dearly for it. Hopefully, you had nothing to do with them, otherwise I'll probably find myself collecting a bounty for *your* head in the very near future, understand?"

Kebert said nothing, eyes wide, belly trembling.

"Answer me, Kebert. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? I'm a bounty hunter, killed these thugs under full protection of the law, or whatever version of the law still exists these days. Now they just happened to be my siblings but trust me when I say, they were not the first and they will not be the last to pay the price by these here revolvers. So, I'll ask again, do you understand?"

Kebert nodded and attempted a response, only for the words to turn to tears.

Bran Van Peeble, the bounty hunter, put his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Alright, now, Kebert, get ahold of yourself, now. I want you to take these here things, gather whatever else you want, and get the hell out of here. Run far, far away and don't look back. You got it?"

Kebert nodded.

"And give me that one bottle." Bran pointed to the top shelf. "What was it? Lesbian Goose Riot?"

"L-L-L-L-Lesbian *Seagull* R-R-Riot."

“Right, right, seagulls, that’s right.” Bran outstretched his gloved hand. “Give her here and I’ll be on my way.”

Kebert nearly dropped the purple bottle as he hurriedly retrieved it from the shelf and practically threw it at the bounty hunter.

Bran popped the cork and took a swig of the thick, black substance. He gagged. “Kebert, I oughta shoot you dead right here and now for letting me drink that. What’s in that? Real seagulls?” He threw the bottle against the stone counter, smashing the glass and sending the substance oozing along the smooth surface.

“N–n–no. No, sir, just some herbs, m–m–m–m–molasses. I–I–I–“

“Kebert, enough. I’m just giving you shit. I don’t care. Goodbye. I can’t say it’s been a pleasure but, in a way, I suppose this was therapeutic. Thank you for your compliance. Like I said, some men will be here tomorrow, I suggest you not be here to meet them. Have a nice life, Kebert. Enjoy the sunshine, it’s a beautiful day outside.”

With that, Bran the bounty hunter grabbed the bottle of sandy water, downed it in one swig, and made his way for the exit, boots echoing off the floorboards of The Dust Bowl. He swung open the doors, felt the sun on his face, and smiled, the silver bell on his black hat ringing as he walked out of Sinkhole.

A Victim of Circumstance

By Sarah Buck

drama

Characters:

CASS— 20, an autistic college student whose special interest is history. Struggles to be understood and taken seriously.

CLAIRE— 21, Cass’s friend. More practical than Cass, but supportive and loyal. She loves to ask questions and understand everything about a given situation.

Setting: A college classroom.

Playwright’s notes: When Cass is doing her presentation, the actor playing her is free to be as dramatic as they want, writing on the whiteboard or making grand gestures. Cass should also be played by a neurodivergent actor. Dashes and [] imply that a line is being interrupted and spoken over.

SCENE ONE

CASS stands in front of a blank whiteboard. CLAIRE sits in a chair nearby, watching her friend with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. CASS picks up a phone to start a timer, and begins to speak once the time starts.

CASS (*in a dramatic voice*): Sarajevo, June 1914. (*in a more normal voice*) Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary is on a tour with his wife, Sophie. He was pretty unliked by [most of his—]

CLAIRE: I thought this presentation was about someone you found inspirational.

CASS: It is.

CLAIRE: And you chose... *this guy*? Of all the people you could have chosen? What about Eleanor Roosevelt? Winston Churchill? Or—

CASS: I know more about Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

CLAIRE: Are you going to call him by his full name the whole time? It’s such a mouthful.

CASS: Yep.

CLAIRE: Okay then.

CASS: Can I keep going?

CLAIRE: Yeah, Sorry.

CASS (*muttering*): Just gotta restart my timer... (*when it is ready*) Okay. There. Take two. Sarajevo, June 1914. Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary is on a tour with his wife, Sophie. He was pretty unliked by most of his family. They didn't think he fit their perfect royal model.

CLAIRE: Harsh.

CASS: Kinda, yeah. But he was in line for the throne, so it wasn't like they could get rid of him without causing some problems for succession.

CLAIRE (*in dramatic fashion*): Oh no, not the succession!

CASS (*holding in laughter*): Anyway, in an attempt to make the guy more likable to the 'common man,' the Archduke and his wife went on parade in Sarajevo. It was a Big Deal. And because of that, it got the attention of some people who wanted to make a statement— The Black Hand. It was this underground organization that planned to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand while on his visit. So they made a plan. They set multiple people up along the route the motorcade was set to go on, so there were backup plans in case something happened. Spoiler: something happened!

CLAIRE: Oh, whatever could it have been?

In the following section, CASS becomes more dramatic, and as she gets further into the story, she begins to laugh, almost too hard to continue speaking. CLAIRE looks on with growing concern.

CASS: The day of the assassination came. When the cars passed the first guy, nothing happened. He chickened out! But it's fine. There's five more guys, surely the next one will take the chance to kill *Archduke Franz Ferdinand!* But what do you know, the second guy didn't do it either! The third guy was actually able to throw his bomb, surprisingly. *But he hit the wrong car!* The car exploded, wounding and killing many people in the process, but Archduke Franz Ferdinand was totally fine. The guy who threw the bomb took a cyanide pill and jumped into a river after he finished his mission. *But he didn't die!* The cyanide was *expired!* He got caught and arrested, obviously. After

that, the motorcade decided to take a different route than planned, to avoid any other issues. Guys four and five never had a chance to see their potential victim. But the sixth guy? He left his post after hearing about the failed attempts, and ended up at a food market and was just chilling there when a certain someone goes by in his motorcade! Gavrilo Princip was the last one in the line, and disappointed in his comrades' performance, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He *rushed* to the car, gun drawn, and shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand point-blank. Obviously the guy's freaking out, he's just been *shot*, so he turns to his wife and says "Sophie! Sophie! Don't die! Live for the children!" But Sophie *had also been shot!* She was dead!

CASS laughs a little more, then sits down on the floor. CLAIRE looks down at her friend, confused and a bit worried.

CLAIRE: Um... are you okay?

CASS (*still laughing*): Yeah! Yeah, I'm fine! It's just... he said that, and she was already *dead!* It was pointless! All of it was just a prolonged way to make this guy's final day of living absolutely terrible! Sure, he was a terrible person and all, but how often does something like this happen? The way fate had to work in order for this to play out the way it did... it's just amazing!

CLAIRE: I wouldn't say someone *dying* is amazing, Cass.

CASS (*starting to sober up*): No, the *coincidences* are what's amazing! Six assassins, two of which couldn't go through with it and one who couldn't even kill *himself* because of expired cyanide? And what's worse, Archduke Franz Ferdinand wasn't even their original target! They were going to kill the mayor of Sarajevo, but once they found out the Archduke would be there, they changed course! And that course caused World War One to get set into motion! *The Great War! The War to End All Wars!* You know, *that war!*

CLAIRE: Yes, I know what war you're talking about.

CASS: Exactly! The war that introduced trench warfare and mustard gas and so, so many new ways to kill people without a second thought came about because this one guy died! Yes, there were countless other factors that went into the war— the Austro-Hungarian influence on many smaller countries in southeast Europe, the familial rivalries between the leaders of England, Germany, and Russia— they were cousins, all related to each other through Queen Victoria— and that's just the start! But Archduke Franz Ferdinand— the 'poor' Archduke— it was his death that finally dissolved the last chance at

keeping the peace between all of these powder keg countries. After he was killed, the Austro-Hungarian empire declared war on Serbia, despite the fact that none of the assassins were even Serbian, and they sent the Serbian government the longest list of demands *ever*. Like, they asked for the most outrageous stuff.

CLAIRE: Such as?

CASS: I mean, total control of Serbia, for starters. What else? (*she pauses, finally, to consider*) I can't remember right now, but it was a lot of crazy stuff, I can tell [you that]–

CLAIRE: You don't remember? I think you've lost your touch.

CASS: Leave me alone! I'm just... riled up. That's all.

CLAIRE: I see that.

CASS: It's just so weird, right? How the world can be changed so drastically, how all hell can break loose, just because one nineteen year old rebel took a shot at royalty?

CLAIRE: Wait, the guy was only nineteen?

CASS: Yep. Most of the would-be assassins were about our age, if not younger.

CLAIRE: Really?

CASS: And that's another thing! (*standing up*) People our age all over the world– that is, in countries involved in the war, because despite the name, the war didn't include every country– were so inspired to sign up and fight for their countries despite still being in college or not being old enough to drink! And they went to the trenches and *shot people* and *killed people* all for their country and for honor or whatever you want to call it! All because Archduke Franz Ferdinand was *shot!*

CLAIRE: Well, didn't you say it's not entirely [because]–

CASS: But isn't it? Isn't it, really? Sure, something else could have been that final spark if Archduke Franz Ferdinand hadn't died, but what would our world be like? It's like the butterfly effect. Change one thing, and the ramifications could be catastrophic or generally world-altering. Suppose the

Black Hand actually went through with their original plan and killed Sarajevo's mayor. What would have happened?

CLAIRE: I don't [know]—

CASS: Exactly, Claire! Exactly! We *don't know!* We don't know *anything!* We just know what's happened, with the added disclaimer that we can never truly know what things were like in the moment unless we were *present* for said moment.

CLAIRE: So by that logic, you don't actually know what happened that day, do you?

CASS: Yes, I do. I've done research.

CLAIRE (*teasing*): But were you *there*?

CASS: Oh, shut up! I didn't say it's *impossible* to know, just that we can't know every detail! Like, we don't know exactly what color socks the car's driver was wearing. We don't know the exact pattern of the blood spilled onto the seats of the car once Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie had been shot. We don't know exactly how expired the cyanide pill was. We don't know what Gavrilo Princip was thinking once he got convicted of killing the couple and we certainly don't know what was running through his head when he died of illness in a war prison a few years later. We just know what's been passed on, and that's what we have to use.

CLAIRE (*after a beat*): I don't know how to respond to that.

CASS: Why not? Did it not make sense?

CLAIRE: No, it did, it's just... how is this inspirational, exactly? Wasn't that the point of all this? From everything you've said, this seems way too depressing to be inspirational.

CASS: It is. Totally. That's why I like it. I mean, I don't like that he *died*, that's morbid and honestly really mean to say—

CLAIRE: I get it. Keep going.

CASS: Yeah... I mean— I just— I lost it. I lost it!

CASS sinks to the floor, starting to sniffle. She's working herself up

CLAIRE: It's okay. I get it. It's okay.

CASS: No, it isn't! I don't know how to put the rest of it into words...

CLAIRE: You're doing a great job. I didn't know anything about this guy before you started, and now I know so much— too much, if you ask me, but that's not the point. This is something you're passionate about, and you don't need to explain yourself to me.

CASS: But my presentation—

CLAIRE: Is *yours*. You can do whatever you want with it. Your reasons for thinking this guy is inspirational to you don't have to make sense to anyone but you. And if anyone has any more questions after you finish the presentation, they'll ask you. And you'll be able to answer, because you know exactly what you're talking about.

CASS: I don't know...

CLAIRE: I do. How about we take a minute, and then we can run it again? Would that be helpful?

CASS nods, and CLAIRE pulls her into a hug.

CLAIRE: It's okay. Just take some deep breaths and try to shake out the tension. I've got you.

CASS and CLAIRE sit on the floor in silence for a minute. CASS's shaky breaths may be heard. Eventually, CASS sniffles for a final time and attempts to stand up.

CLAIRE: You ready to try again?

CASS: I think so, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I just have to, um... (*muttering*) What do I have to do?

CLAIRE: Take your time.

CASS: Where should I start?

CLAIRE: Let's just start at the beginning.

CASS: Okay. *(she takes a deep breath, then takes her place in front of the whiteboard)*
Sarajevo, June 19– wait.

CLAIRE: What?

CASS: Have to set the timer.

CASS grabs the phone to reset the timer.

CASS *(laughing weakly)*: We didn't turn it off from before.

CLAIRE: Oh. Oops.

CASS: There. Take.. three? Take three. From the beginning.

CLAIRE: Yep.

CASS: Sarajevo, June 1914. Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary is on a tour with his wife, Sophie...

CASS's voice fades out as she restarts the story, with CLAIRE listening attentively from her seat. The scene fades to black.

END SCENE

An Ode to Poppies

By Elliot Cetinski

poetry

Laud the field of blooming poppies,
Blood red in your marching ranks.
Bittersweet scent dents the procession,
Of the tulips following in aches.

Laud the vase of withering poppies,
Picked by the man next door.
He knows not what he does,
And you sadly wilt once more.
But I beg you stay, for you make my laugh lines flourish
Like they never had before.

Laud the poppy on my doorstep,
Swooning in the summer sun.
While you sit beside my bare legs
And I sniff your brightness to remember what's been done.
Letters and embraces may not solace,
Yet your scarlet petals warm my soul to you as one.

Laud the field of poppies near the grave.
When I visit you, I may cry,
But your comforting ranks embrace me,
And I find the strength of a soldier within,
To face the fact that you, and he, are gone.

Ace of Hearts

By Amy Litofsky

creative nonfiction

Asexuality (/āsekSHooˈalədə/): The lack of sexual attraction to others, or the absent desire for sexual activity.

When I was younger, my dad always kept a deck of cards beside his bed. In his nightstand, second drawer, bottom right corner, sitting next to those bright blue scissors that I would occasionally “borrow” for elementary school projects. It was nothing special. The box looked like a million others: white with a red spade stuck right in the middle. The edges were frayed, the opening flap was no longer able to close completely. The cards themselves were simple, boring, bent. Just a cheap deck you could find at any store.

My little eight-year-old self was enamored. In the short period between eating dinner and going to sleep, I could often be found crawling onto my parents’ king-sized bed and parking myself in front of my dad. Big round eyes followed his every move as he took the deck and carefully shook the cards out, after which he’d begin to shuffle them over and over again with experienced hands. The soft, rhythmic slapping of one card against another still echoes in my ears sometimes. He’d eventually hand them over to me with a reassuring smile and I’d take them with my own hesitant one. Of course, my slow speed and weak power always caused them to instantly collapse into a mess of a pile, cards sticking out in every which direction. My stomach would twist with shame and my vision would begin to blur with the onslaught of tears, but his bright laughter could always undo the damage as quickly as he could collect all the cards up into a neat pile once more.

At some point, I graduated from looking and “shuffling” to actually playing. My sister joined us then, while my mom occasionally sat on her side of the bed and listened to us yell in excitement or frustration. We only ever played two games. My dad once tried to pass his love of Poker onto us, but my attention span had other ideas. His words of explanation had been drowned out by Lady Gaga’s Poker Face blasting through every corner of my mind. Nothing was getting past “P-p-p-poker face, p-p-poker face.” A second attempt was never made.

Go Fish and War were much easier to understand (and there also weren’t any catchy pop songs with the same names, at least to my knowledge at the time). We often tried to alternate between the two, making sure we didn’t grow sick of either too soon. But I secretly always wanted to play War.

Always.

To call it a game feels too generous. It depends entirely on luck; the winner is decided the second the cards are passed out to each player. But of course, my young mind didn't seem to grasp this concept. I was simply in love with the rush of adrenaline that'd hit whenever everyone began to flip over their card, each of us hoping that we held the highest one in our grasp. The plummeting of my stomach whenever someone beat me was disappointing, but it was worth it for the moments when my King or Queen was able to demonstrate their reign over all those peasants.

Getting an ace, though, was an otherworldly experience. That feeling was unmatched.

I'm lying on the bed in my parents' room, holding my stack of cards protectively to my chest to keep them away from my dad and sister. He's sitting up across from me on the left side of the bed, holding his own deck. She's sitting on my left, dangerously close to falling off the bed. My mom is lying away from us on her side, reading a book that I'm too distracted to see the title of.

I have one finger on my top card, excitedly waiting to rip it off and flip it over to reveal my power. Despite having no idea what is underneath, my heart tells me that it's high - it has to be. Across from me, my dad exhales.

"Ready?"

Both my sister and I instantly nod.

"Alright. 3..."

I breathe in.

"2..."

I grip the card with more force.

"1..."

I breathe out, and...

"Go!"

...rush to flip the card over and smack it against the bed. The others do the same. My eyes sweep across the others first: a four - my sister falls backward with a groan - and a queen, which my heart lurches at. I nearly fall back myself until I finally take a look at my own card and see the beautiful image of a black heart right in the middle of the card. The As hide in the left and right corners, but they can't escape from me. I let out a cheer, picking up my families' cards and laughing at their exaggerated sighs. We're all smiling as we go to throw down the next card.

It was an honor to hold the card in my hand - to wield it like a sword ready to slice through my opposition. Oh, you have a King? You might as well have pulled a 2 because your card is meaningless against me. Those small, delicate hands never knew such power.

But one can only hold that power for so long.

Years passed, and playing cards became more and more of a rarity. My mind was developing, interests evolving, no longer satisfied with staring at boring cards. I craved complexity and intrigue, something beyond picking up a card and letting the universe decide the winner. Such simplicity was for

children, and my now eleven-year-old mind refused to associate with such childish things. I was in middle school now - an adult, clearly. Oh, how my younger self desperately wanted to grow up, wear fancy clothes, finally get contacts, and make new friends. I long ago lost what it felt like to pull an ace from a stack of cards. That rush of adrenaline can't be triggered anymore.

Naturally, my mind found new interests and new ways to occupy itself. And so staring at cards soon turned into staring at a flashing screen filled with images.

Watching television was nothing new in my family - Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network had dominated my life for many years with their shallow storylines and goofy graphics. But it was around this time that I finally moved up a couple of channels in the guide to discover Disney channel. On the surface, it was the same as any other pre-teen channel with its mediocre acting from young adults meant to be children. However, Disney's live-action characters discussed topics that I had never really thought much about.

The most popular topic? Love and relationships. No surprise there.

There is a particular movie that always manages to stick out in my mind from that era. I don't think it'll ever fade for some reason. It was all the way back in 2011, ten years ago now.

It's a school night, and I'm watching tv at 10:23 pm.

The room is small, and I'm alone on a bed that takes up nearly the entire space. I'm curled up on the left side with a blanket, leaving about 70% of the bed unoccupied. The room is dark besides the flashes of light from the tv. A lamp is far to my right, and I know that I should go to turn the light on, but I dread having to get up and ruin my comfort. The door is closed so as not to disturb my parents down the hall, who are surely already turned in for the night.

The television sits directly in front of me, about the same width as the bed. It has my complete attention. My mind is captivated by the story that Disney channel is presenting tonight. It's one of their original movies - one that I've never seen before. Onscreen, a young high school girl is forcing her new friend to try on clothes that clash with his personality. They're complete opposites, and yet they're falling in love with one another.

I lean in, completely focused, as my heart hammers in my chest. I desperately want the relationship they have.

Looking back at this memory is embarrassing. Disney Channel's *Geek Charming* was a movie full of stereotypes and recycled plots. There are a thousand and one other stories just like it, and there's nothing particularly charming about this one. But at the time, my young self thought it was magical. The romance and love between the two characters were wonderful to watch - the fact that their relationship moved from enemies to friends to lovers was beautiful. I wanted something sweet and pure like that. I wanted

to hold a guy's hand and make ice cream with him and maybe even eventually kiss. Nothing more, nothing less.

I didn't truly understand how strange this was at the time. I didn't realize how different I was - that my idea of love wasn't the same as everyone else's. I had always assumed everyone else felt the same as me, but I was wrong.

I don't remember the exact moment when it became known. I think one day, it just sort of all clicked. Perhaps it was a culmination of everything I had heard from my classmates, friends, television, and the internet finally coming all together to make sense.

My interest in television had eventually passed like my interest in those cards. As a fourteen-year-old, it just wasn't as cool to watch cable. I eventually migrated to the internet - a time when my parents finally let me use my own email addresses for accounts instead of theirs. I would spend too many hours on YouTube, watching video after video and procrastinating instead of working on the mountain of homework I had.

I would watch videos where people talked about their relationships and make sexual jokes, and I would sit back and look at the screen in confusion. Why do they want to do that? I simply couldn't comprehend why people wanted something so aggressively sexual instead of something sweetly romantic. It took me too long to realize what that meant for me.

The first time I ever connected a certain label with myself was in sophomore year, at age fifteen.

I'm on a Skype call, an app I've probably used only once or twice. There are six other people here, only one of which I know. They're talking about something - something I'm too distracted to focus on when my heart is beating out of my chest. The anxiety is building with each minute. How do I talk to these people? I'm awful at interacting with new faces.

Somewhere in the distance, I know they're talking about sexuality. There are words tossed around: pansexual, bisexual, demisexual, gay... some of which I know, some of which I know I'll have to look up later.

From far away, I hear someone say my name, and in an instant, I'm at attention. I turn back to my screen, looking at all the icons laid out. One person has a picture of their dog. Another has a drawing from a game that looks familiar. My own blue rose is there too, lighting up as I say, "Yeah?"

"Did you want to talk about yourself, or no? Don't feel pressured or anything."

I blink at the screen for a moment, thankful that we're not doing a video call, and consider the question. When I open my mouth to answer, it's not what I was planning on saying.

"I'm ace."

I didn't completely understand the word at the time, I know that for a fact. It was simply a term I had passed over on the internet once and associated with a lack of interest in relationships. As someone who had

never really thought about labeling herself, maybe it was what I related to the most at the time. I wasn't exactly looking for a relationship, too busy thinking about college and my future. At the time I told myself it was a temporary label, something that I assumed would change in a few years when I could actually focus on dating.

The change never came. My interest in relationships did, but not the label. Never the label.

Everything only became clearer as the years went by. Junior year passed, then senior year, and then I was suddenly a freshman in college. Surely things would change when I gained the freedom to start fresh in a new place, right? Nope. Instead, I accidentally overheard my roommate talking on the phone to her friend about having sex with her boyfriend, prompting me to cringe internally and immediately exit the room.

I never exactly "came out" to anyone. With my friends, I constantly dropped hints about hating sex and made ace jokes about myself, until one day they just knew. I can't pinpoint the exact moment that I accepted I was asexual; it just sort of happened.

I'm 21 now, a full-fledged adult who can legally drink. How that happened so fast, I'll never know. I've identified with asexuality for what feels like a lot longer than just a few years. I'm happy with the label - of being able to have something that properly encapsulates all my feelings. It helps to have a lovely group of friends who are all equally proud of their own identities. I'm glad I have them and that I can regularly talk about these things over Discord, despite us all being miles and miles away.

I dream of doing more in the future. Like going to Philadelphia Pride with a group of friends. Or buying an ace flag and bringing some gray, white, and purple to my otherwise turquoise room. Or writing a story about my identity and trying to get it published in a magazine. I want to scream at the world, "I'm asexual!" with a bright smile.

But at the same time, my mind is filled with worries. Things that I dream of destroying but that I doubt are possible.

I'm afraid to tell people about myself. Not because I'm worried about what they'll think of me. I'm not ashamed of who I am. I'm not ashamed of being "abnormal." I'm not ashamed of people realizing what my heart truly wants. I've long since accepted the person I am and have no plans of ever altering myself based on what another person wants. This is who I am and I'm more than proud of it.

But I'm afraid of people not understanding. I'm afraid of seeing that look in someone's eyes - that look of confusion as they try to comprehend what the word means. I'm afraid of hearing, "But sex is the best part!" or "You just need to find the right person!" again. I don't need to hear that. It reminds me of how lonely I am and how lonely I'll probably continue to be for a while.

I'm terrified of being thrown away, being alone forever, never finding someone who feels the same. Of being the only ace in a deck of cards, the other three having been damaged, lost, no longer usable. I don't think I can handle being left alone to fight in my own personal War against the rest of the deck. Cursed to win with pride but to never find an equal - to never find a partner.

Because, after all, the ace is the highest card in the deck - it always wins. But this isn't the kind of battle I want to win.

I still think about that deck of cards sometimes. I can't remember the last time I played a card game at all, much less War. There's a part of me that craves holding a stack of cards in my hand again, trying desperately not to bend the corners. I never learned how to shuffle, and I would love the chance to try and learn again.

I'm not even sure if my dad still has that pack of cards in his desk drawer, bottom right corner. Being miles away at college, it's not like I can go looking for them myself. Maybe I'll ask him about it soon; maybe I'll forget tomorrow.

Even if they were still there, though, would I be able to play? Why should I waste my time trying to win an imaginary game when I should be working on my final project for my English capstone, or trying to find another internship for the summer, or looking for a boyfriend? I'm supposed to be an adult, right? Card games are for children.

Sometimes I wish I could return to the kid who only cared about pulling an ace from a stack of cards, instead of a tired young woman who sees too much of herself in them.

Charlotte's Web

By Leo Cox

poetry

I thought I could live without closeness
but somehow I think of you.
I watched the spider spin his web and thought I was
cured of my fear of spiders
but somehow I see one on the wall
and panic. None of it is your fault.
You are the spiraled mushrooms
flourishing under the sewer grates.
You are a lullaby I heard once
and never forgot. You are the spider
teaching me how to spin my web, slowly and gently, and
you are the web I spin, waiting
to be split apart or wound tighter.
You are the future I hesitate to touch,
a dream. You are a dream
that I need to remember.
You are my evening prayer but not my morning prayer.
I must be my own morning prayer.
Some days I forget you
and some days I hate you
and some days I cannot tear myself from your side.
Some days I think I am cured of you
and then a spider crawls up my bedroom wall, saying

I am still here.

I am the thing you wait for.

Crab

By Kyle Guzy

poetry

I go down to the edge of the water
Every day
There, he waits for me
His little beady eyes
So much soul behind them
A wonderful crustacean

I sit down on the shore
Watching the waves roll in and out
There, he scuttles along
Coming to greet me
We ponder how small we are in this universe
Me and the crab

One day he approaches
“Little crab,” I ask, “What brings you to this place every day?”
He turns to me
Takes a deep breath
And replies
“We’ve been trying to reach you about your car’s extended warranty”

Crossing

By Ian Abrahams

poetry

there's something romantic about waiting
for the light
to change
before crossing the street

at 2am
when the bats
partake in
afternoon tea.

no cars have come
in five or six minutes,
but i dare not jaywalk.
the air is crisper when everyone is asleep.

Dandelions

By Lauren Flanagan

poetry

Rows of white dandelions
sparkle in the sunlight.
My girl with tanned skin dances, and
her nearly black hair sways around her.
She is breath-taking, carefree,
an artist's masterpiece.

Gently, she chooses a flower.
Why she chose that one, I'll never know.
I wanted to be that flower,
the one she was smelling,
caressing, holding.

We lay in the field and watch the clouds
pass overhead. The sky is vibrantly
blue and the clouds are purely
white. What a perfect day
with the perfect girl, who is perfect
in so many ways...

She's sweet like raspberry wine
on a summer night. She's delicate
like the lace on a wedding dress.
She's fragile like crystal glasses
in my grandmother's china cabinet.

It's a good thing I'm here to protect her.
And that I brought my camera
to capture her beauty.
It's a shame she cannot know
about the photos,
the ones that cover my walls
from floor to ceiling.

Dandelion Sandwich

By Gabrielle Pitt

poetry

It sat behind your eyes,
vacant and afraid,
no pills or Band-Aids to make it
go away.

It hid in moments
between the first time you asked me,
“How is swimming going?”
 And the second,
 And the third.
I do gymnastics, Papa.

I still see you sitting on the seawall,
cigarettes and Diet Coke
for breakfast.
I get up to leave and you hug me.
“Hold on to that one,” Mom says.

They say that we are always the unlucky ones
as we cling to an image of him that will never be the same.
The ones left remembering the
laughs that filled an entire room,
Oreos after school, but don't let Mom see.

And no one ever tells you how bad it hurts.
Not the dying – well, yeah that hurt, too – but
the living
in the eternity before it
 with your body, screaming for help,
 with no answers, nothing to stop it.

I want the pills and the Band-Aids,
something to make it real.
Instead you slipped and faded, trading
ocean plunges and summer bonfires
for bedside company. I'm sorry
the morphine wasn't double-stuffed.

The worst part of it all
is that she's looking for you
in every stranger's face and neighbor's house.
An empty bed and tangled mind,
it sits in her eyes now, too.

Extra Marshmallows

By Morgan Grabowski

fiction

“Oh, crap.” The golden blur of fur that had bolted out into the road now lay motionless. Its head reared back; an opened mouth gave way to tiny white teeth. The cat was dead. Jonah stood staring at the cat he had just killed. He stood hunched over the poor creature, letting his arms dangle at his sides. “Oh, crap.”

In its living days, the cat had belonged to Jonah’s neighbors, the Watsons. Whenever he drove past their house on his way to work, Jonah would see the cat sitting in the window, watching the cars go by. On his way back, the cat would still be at the window, but this time curled up into a golden ball of fur. Lily, the youngest Watson, would often bring the cat out in a covered stroller and show it off to the neighborhood. The cat Jonah killed was Lily’s cat. Jonah would have to tell a little girl that he killed her cat. He could already imagine it— he would stand on their stoop and knock on their deep blue door using the heavy knocker inside of the holly wreath. Mrs. Watson would open the door. She would give him a warm smile and invite him in. He would decline. He would tell her about the cat, and she would call for Lily, who would come bounding down the stairs, blonde pigtails whipping around. Jonah would hunch his shoulders over her and tell her. “Lily, I killed your cat.” He could already see the tears. He could already hear the cries. “Oh crap.”

Jonah was so focused on his future apology that he didn’t hear the bike coming up behind him until its brakes squealed right next to him. He looked up to see the eldest Watson. “Oh crap.”

He hadn’t had an interaction with the eldest since first meeting her two years ago, when he had first moved into the neighborhood. The only time he saw her was when they would briefly pass each other on the street; her on her bike and him in his car. He racked his brain, trying to remember her name. He knew it began with an “L,” like her sister, but couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Now she was here, and the second conversation they would have would be about her cat that he killed.

She looked down at the dead cat. The blood on its striped fur was starting to congeal.

“Whiskers.”

Oh, crap. Jonah opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets and looked away.

“Sorry.”

“My sister loved that cat.”

Oh crap. Jonah looked back at her. She was still looking at the cat, but her face was expressionless. The two stood for a moment in a memorial-like silence. It became apparent to Jonah that he would have to take control of the situation. Jonah rubbed the back of his head, and his hair pricked his hand.

“I guess I should tell your sister, huh, Laura?”

“It’s Liz,” she corrected him. “Why are you here? You don’t get home until five-thirty, right when I’m leaving for practice.” She looked at her watch. “It’s only two-twenty. Did you get fired or something?”

“No, I didn’t get fired.” For the first time in his five years there, Jonah wished he was back at his stuffy desk job. “Something came up. Are your parents home? I should probably let them know, and I need to apologize to your sister.”

“No. We’re not telling her,” Liz said sternly.

“Why not?”

“My parents haven’t had ‘the talk’ with her. It’ll be easier if I just tell her that he went off to live on a farm with her turtle and pet moss ball.” She put a foot on a pedal and was about to take off down the street.

“What about the body? I mean she’ll see that, right?” Liz examined Whiskers’ corpse with the same expressionless face as before.

“Right, well, I guess we’ll have to get rid of it.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Nope.” She looked at her watch. “We’ll have to act fast. Mom will be home with Lily in less than thirty minutes.”

“We?” Jonah asked.

“You have to help me.”

“You really are crazy.” He went to open his car door, but Liz rode in front of it.

“You’re the one who killed him. It’s your penance.” Her face was serious. “If you don’t, then you’ll have to fess up to what you did, and you’ll be known by the whole street as the guy who kills little girls’ cats. Is that what you want, cat killer?”

Jonah stared at Liz. “Just let me go home, Liz.”

She refused to budge. He stared her down. The last time he had gotten a good look at her was two years ago. She was in middle school then, so now she must be in high school. Her eyes were the same blue color as her mother’s, but much more intense, and lined with the dark bags of any sleep-deprived teenager. The ponytail poking out from her helmet was the same shiny blonde that each of the Watsons had.

She wasn’t moving. Jonah sighed. A cloud of frosted air came out from his nose. He rubbed his red hands together. For a brief moment, Jonah let his mind drift back to when he was Liz’s age. Whenever he came home from school, he would be greeted by his mother. She would smile

wide, and hand him a snack. In weather like this, she would have a cup of hot chocolate, topped off with extra marshmallows, ready to warm him up after a cold walk back. She always made sure to give him extra marshmallows, claiming that they could soothe any ailment.

Jonah ripped himself away from the happy memory. He looked at the dead cat and felt a twinge in his chest. "Fine." He threw his hands up. "I'll help you. What do you recommend we do?"

Liz smiled and straightened up. "We have to bury him."

She really is crazy.

"Ok, where are we going to bury him?"

"Your backyard."

"No way."

Jonah stood in his backyard waiting for Liz to return. She had gone back to her house to grab two shovels to dig the grave and a shoebox for Whiskers' final resting place. At his feet, wrapped in a plastic bag he had found in his car, was the cat. He and Liz had gone back-and-forth as to who had to peel the cat's body from the cold asphalt and scoop it into the bag. The duty was left to Jonah. Now, Whiskers laid in front of Jonah in a plastic CVS bag, his striped tail poking out, limp on the ground.

Jonah stuck his hands into his pants pockets and tried to see how big a cloud he could make with his breath. He looked out over his backyard. It was plain, just a small plot of land with a wooden fence surrounding it. Jonah never spent much time out here. The patio furniture his mother had bought him as a housewarming gift was only lightly used. He never had the time to relax out here, but he still shuddered at the idea of a cat being buried nearby.

Frozen grass crunched under spinning wheels. Liz was back with two shovels and a bright orange shoe box tucked under her arm. She braked beside Jonah, and gazed down at Whiskers, as emotionless as ever. Handing the shovels to Jonah, she dismounted her bike and removed her helmet. She smoothed her hair down and rubbed her hands together.

"Can I ask you something, Jonah?" She looked up at him.

"Sure." Jonah leaned against the shovels.

"How come you never come to the neighborhood's seasonal potlucks?" The famous neighborhood potlucks. Four times a year, to ring in each new season. They were a tradition kept alive in the spirit of neighborly gossip and homemade food. Jonah ached to go to one. A hand-written invitation from whoever was hosting the next one never failed to end up in his mailbox. He always had to RSVP with a "regretfully, I will not be attending."

"I've been busy." He sighed, letting the events of the past two years roll off his shoulders.

"How busy?"

“Work. I’ve been working a lot. Today is the first time since I’ve started working there that I got to leave early. And the first time I got to go home without taking work with me. And besides that, I’ve got my mom, you know, at the home.”

Liz studied him for a moment. Her eyes softened slightly. She opened her mouth to say something but closed it without saying anything. She turned back to Whiskers, and the cold look returned.

“Hand me the box.”

Jonah complied. Liz opened the box and crouched down next to Whiskers. Gently, she took the handles of the plastic bag and placed it into the shoe box. The cold air must have frozen the cat’s body. Its tail remained sticking straight out, making it impossible to fit his body into the box.

“Oh crap,” Jonah whispered.

Without a second thought, Liz covered her hand with a clean portion of the bag and snapped the cat’s tail, fitting it into the box. Jonah’s stomach churned.

“Seriously? How can you just do that?”

Liz shrugged and stood up. She grabbed a shovel from Jonah. “Let’s get digging.” She raised her shovel, and Jonah followed suit. He lifted it above his head and thrust it down. It bounced back up at him, the handle almost hitting his chin. The ground was frozen.

“Oh, crap.” He looked at Liz, who had the same success as he had. She poked the ground with the point of the shovel. He tried again. This time, he was prepared for the rebound, and tried to force the shovel into the ground with his foot. The ground refused to give way. Jonah leaned on the handle and looked at Liz. “What now?”

Liz studied the ground. “We could just toss him in the woods.”

Jonah’s chest felt tight, and his nose and eyes began to sting. He threw his shovel onto the frozen ground. “What the hell is wrong with you, Liz?” Startled, she turned toward him, eyes wide open in shock. It was the most emotion Jonah had seen out of her all day. “Your cat is dead, and you don’t seem upset at all.” Warm tears began to spill from his eyes. “Why are you so okay with this?” She stood still, looking Jonah up and down.

“What’s wrong, why are you crying?”

“Why aren’t you?”

“He was just a cat.”

“But he was your sister’s cat, he was *your* cat. Didn’t you love him?” The tears kept coming. They warmed Jonah’s cheeks.

“Of course I did, but it’s nothing to cry over. It won’t do me any good. I just need to keep it from Lily, she’s too young to know about death.”

“She needs to learn eventually. It isn’t fair to outright lie to her.”

Liz looked at the bright orange box that held Whiskers and sighed. “He was more my cat than hers.”

“What?”

“Who do you think took care of him? Fed him? Cleaned his litter box? Set up his vet appointments? Brushed him and kept him from eating the houseplants? Me. Not Lily.” Her eyes became red, and her voice quivered. “All Lily had to do was pet him and parade him around the neighborhood. But I took care of him. I want Whiskers back.” She broke down into a full sob. “And now I have to take care of his death because Lily can’t handle it.”

Jonah walked over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She turned to him.

“Jonah, why are you still crying?”

“My mom died today.”

A look of pure shock took over Liz’s face.

“Jonah, I’m so sorry.” They stood in silence, letting each other’s grief wash over them.

Liz broke the silence. She wiped the tear from her face and looked down at the ground. “I’m sorry about your mother. And for making you do all of this.” Jonah looked at the top of her head.

“I’m sorry I killed Whiskers.” He bent down and picked up the cat’s casket and extended it to Liz. “I think this belongs to you.” She nodded and took it from him.

“And Lily. She loved him too. She should know.”

“Will your parents be okay with you telling her?”

“I’m not sure, but I think this is something that us sisters should go through together.” She sniffed. “Is that why you got home so early, because of your mother?”

Jonah nodded.

“I feel like such an idiot. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, Liz. You didn’t know.” They both took a deep breath and looked at each other. Liz looked so small, looking up at him and holding the shoe box. Her eyes were red and puffy. She gave him a reassuring smile. A small laugh escaped Jonah. Liz’s smile widened and she wiped her nose again. She checked her watch.

“It’s almost three. My mom will be home soon with Lily. She gets worried if I’m not home when she gets back. And I guess I should call the vet now. I should get going.” She put her helmet back on and Jonah handed her the two shovels. She tucked them, along with Whiskers, under her arm and mounted her bike. “Goodbye, Jonah. I’ll see you around.”

“Goodbye, Liz.” Jonah didn’t know what to say. “Good luck in school.” She gave him a quizzical look before turning and starting to ride away. She stopped quickly and turned back around. “I won’t tell them it was you. I’ll just say I found him there.”

A sense of relief washed over Jonah. A small part of him felt that he had a responsibility to own up, but another part of him said it was better to let the two sisters have this to themselves. Liz began riding away, the grass crunching under her wheels.

Jonah sighed and let himself into his house. He took off his jacket, throwing it haphazardly over a kitchen chair. A sense of calm washed over him as he rinsed his hands free of any dirt and cat residue under warm water. The running water thawed his hands, making them hurt slightly. After drying off his hands, Jonah rooted around for an old kettle he never used and set some water to boil. He pulled out the largest mug he could find and made himself hot chocolate with extra marshmallows.

Fourth Wall Broken

By Jessica Schnur

fiction

The dark fog laid a thin veil before the laboratory, coating the pale lights in a musty hue. I slipped around back, careful not to arouse the suspicion of the two local guards. I stooped behind a nearby bush as one brushed past, but I was too quick for them. I could see it: the door. I'm in the home stretch. I slipped behind the metal barred doors, just as they were closing from letting in a clump of men in suits with fancy earpieces and thick leather briefcases. I ducked behind a large wooden crate, peering over the top to watch the lab coat clad scientist lift the hat into light.

"With this, the government will have the power to control the minds of anyone they please. Observe," he said. He placed the hat upon the head of one of the meat-headed brutes that surrounded the crowd. A light blinked on the back of the hat, and the scientist rushed over to the computer. He pressed a few buttons, and said, "I command you to shoot that man in the foot." The scientist extended his arm, and the brute followed along with the barrel of his pistol. The shot rang out, and the man jumped up and down in pain. The crowd applauded.

The low jingle of keys turning in the door rang out, making Peter jump. He stopped writing and laid the pencil on the desk. He rose, brushing pencil shavings and eraser chunks off his worn sweater before getting the door, holding it open for his lovely girlfriend, Vanessa.

"You will not believe what they said this time," Vanessa said, toting a large pile of lazily stapled manuscripts in her arms. The room smelled of lilac when she entered the room, brightening the dimness of his musty old flat. Her hair was a beautiful shade of deep amber, tucked under her knit hat, and the way the sunlight lazily kissed strands made her red highlights shine against the dusty air. Peter couldn't keep his eyes off her, silently watching the elegance in how she moved. She struggled over to the kitchen table, haphazardly dumping the manuscripts onto the chipped wooden surface.

She turned to him; her thin eyebrows knit together. She leaned back on the table, pursing her beautiful pale lips together, her trademark sign of bad news.

"I'm sorry, honey," she said, "but none of the publishers would take them." He lowered his head, letting a sigh escape from his chest. She came over, looking up at him with her pale grey eyes. "Don't worry, sweetie." She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight. "There's always next time."

He nodded, returning her embrace. He rested his chin on her shoulder, his eyes resting upon the melting pile of crushed dreams that

occupied his kitchen table. She's right, he thought, she's always right. Ness was the smartest person he knew; it was one of the many things he adored about her.

"Besides," she said, backing up to look him in the eyes, "I thought your story was fantastic. My favorite part was when the witch turned her into a moose."

"It was supposed to say mouse," he said in a low voice. "It was a typo."

"Well, I thought you played it off well."

His hands relaxed at his side, picking fuzzies off the edge of his sweater.

"Why don't I make you some tea to make you feel better?" she asked, heading over to the cupboards.

"That would be great, Ness, thank you." She began to rummage through the sparse cupboards until she was interrupted by the ringing of her cell phone. She plunged her hands into the depths of her coat pockets, retrieving her phone in her small hands.

"Hello?"

Peter slumped into the couch across the room, listening to the sound of Vanessa's voice. He closed his eyes thinking about the way she looked as beautiful right now as the first time he had seen her.

"Alright. I'll be over soon. Love you. Bye." She clicked off. She looked to him. "I'm sorry, Peter, I gotta get over to my parents' place. The move's got them about to rip each other's heads off."

"Oh," he said, "alright." She planted a kiss on the top of his head before grabbing her keys off the pile of manuscripts that littered the table.

"Love you," she said. "Bye." She dipped out through the front door, leaving it wide open.

Peter poured himself a quarter glass of scotch, resting down into his rickety old desk chair. The evening lights of the city radiated through the thin veil of curtain that tried to keep it out, illuminating the room with the hue of city fast-food signs and pale-yellow street lamps.

I ran home, tucking the hat I snagged under my peacoat. I finally managed to shake those government agents. I ducked into my abode, where my beautiful wife, Anita, was waiting.

Peter straightened up, trying to alleviate the cramps that shot through his hand as he wrote. He squinted his eyes, trying to shake the looming dread that strained his thoughts.

"Oh, Samuel, my dear Samuel," she said. "Are you alright? You seem distressed."

“You will not believe what I have found,” I told her, revealing the hat I had stashed on me. “The government is after us, we don’t have much time.” I took her hand in mine.

He scrawled his thoughts on paper, writing in a mad fury until the pressure was too much for his pencil, its point breaking off and rolling to the floor. He sighed, cursing under his breath. He downed the last of the scotch in his glass, drowning out the sirens that sounded in the streets below his apartment. He got up, following the red and blue lights that shone in through the thin veil of curtain that adorned his window as they chased one another into his kitchen. He dropped the glass into the sink, ignoring the shatter as he slunk into his bathroom.

He laid the phone at the edge of the sink, balancing it against the thin porcelain. He touched his face, feeling the dark stubble that sprouted in patches like weeds, the result of not showering in almost three days. He looked on, watching how the harsh fluorescence carved shadows into his jagged features, making him look older and far more tired. Gray began to peek its way through his thick, dark hair, coloring his roots in an unflattering way. He reached up to open the cabinet, conscious not to look himself in the eyes. He brushed his teeth, listening to the low roar of the fan for company.

His phone vibrated loud against the sink, startling Peter. He reached down, accidentally knocking his phone into the toilet. He gasped, swallowing the plethora of curses that boiled up in his throat as he plunged his hands into the porcelain throne, desperately trying to rescue the picture of Vanessa that sounded her ringtone. Her smile clicked off to black, trapped behind the blank screen that neither pushing every button nor all the rice in the world could salvage.

Peter already downed his second glass of scotch, beginning to polish off his third. He sunk deeper into the couch, peering up at the clock above the low hue of the television. He watched the seconds hand race itself, reading eleven o’clock on its face. Peter went back to mindlessly watching the TV, before he was interrupted by a knock at the door. It was a serious knock, one that shook his wall, knocking his store-bought picture frame off the wall, the one he still hadn’t filled with anything other than the default display image that it came with.

Peter sighed, forcing himself to his feet. He opened the door, blinking and squinting at the bright lights of the hallway that pierced his retinas. He looked side to side, but there was no one in sight.

“This is the fourth time in a row, Peter,”

Peter's head snapped downward, where the short little fat man greeted him with his greasy unkempt chest hair and the smell of stale cigarettes. "I told you, pay up or pack up. I can't keep harboring you on this whole unemployment bullshit."

"I am employed," Peter said in a soft voice, looking down at his shoes. "I'm an author."

"Oh, I see. So, you're an idiot." Peter stared at his balding dome, watching the way it shone in the hall light as the little gremlin-man bounced up and down in rage. "I said eight AM, Sunday. And here I am, eight-thirty, wondering where the fuck my goddamn rent check could possibly be. Use that pen for something useful for once and sign my check."

"Eight AM?" Peter looked back with a quizzically accusatory look, rereading that the clock, indeed, said eleven PM.

"Jesus Christ, you can't even keep track of the time you freeloader, and you reek of booze! You're a goddamn bum."

"Mr. Langston, please, I'm trying to get you the money. I just need a little more time, Vanessa—"

"Time for what? Getting drunk and watching cable porn all day while your girlfriend is out earning the money for you to keep this place? I'm sick of your goddamn excuses. If that check isn't in my hands in two seconds, Resol, you're on the street by Friday, do you hear me?"

"Shut the fuck up, you little goblin-man," Peter said. His eyes widened, and he quickly covered his mouth with his hands.

There was a pause, as Mr. Langston stared at him in disbelief. "What the fuck did you just say to me, you damn freeloader?" What the fuck *did* I just say? Peter thought.

Out of nowhere, Peter couldn't control his mouth. "You heard me, you wrinkly old bitch."

Mr. Langston popped one into Peter's face, his fist connecting directly with his nose. Peter stumbled back, gripping his nose as blood gushed between his fingers. "Mother fucker!"

"That ought to teach you some respect, you goddamn degenerate." Mr. Langston spit onto the floor. "You're outta here by Friday, or you'll be grateful that it was just your nose I fucked up this time." The oompa loompa marched off, steam practically pouring from his ears.

"What's wrong, Samuel?" Anita asked, placing a plate of chicken parmesan down on the table before me. "You've started a coup against the government and their evil conspiracies, you're a hero! Why the long face?"

"Because, Anita, you see: I'm a fucking loser."

“A loser?” She wrapped her arms around me, giving me a kiss on top of my head. “You’re not a loser, honey. You’re the super manly, intelligent, sexy man I fell in love with all those years ago...”

There was a knock at the door.

I whisked my wife up off her feet. “I know what would make this moment better.” I began to carry her away, as she giggled in my ear—

Another knock, this one louder and more intense, startling Peter. The pen fumbled out of his hands.

“Who is it?” He called, annoyed. There was no answer, so he picked up his pen and resumed his work. He smiled to himself as he wrote, imagining his characters as Vanessa and himself as he played out his next scene.

A third knock sounded, urgent and intense.

“Jesus fucking christ,” Peter said, pushing himself out of his seat. “Langston,” Peter called, “I said I’m sorry. Please, just call Vanessa, she’s not here, she’ll sort everything out.” He opened the door, and there stood two police officers. Peter froze, feeling his heart sink into his stomach. Fuck fuck fuck fuck, he thought.

“Peter Resol?” The officer said, his radio quietly mumbling a string of numbers and street names in the background. Peter froze, taking an abnormally long pause before answering. The other officer picked crud out from under his nails with his badge, not paying much attention.

“Y-y-yes? That’s me.” Peter swallowed, collapsing into himself as he spoke.

“We’ve been trying to reach you for two days now,” The officer continued, “but for some reason we’ve been unsuccessful.”

“Oh, oh! Yes! Yes my, um...my cell phone had fallen into the toilet, you see—”

“Mr. Resol,” The officer interrupted. “We’re here to tell you that your mother is dead.”

“My... my, what?”

“Mother. Dead. Found in her apartment Tuesday evening, the autopsy has revealed that she had been wrapped up in some sort of clown orgy-homicide.”

“She’s... dead?”

“Yes.”

“I—what?”

“We know this is very difficult for you to hear. We’re very sorry. We’re asking you to come and identify the body further on Monday—”

The officer’s radio buzzed, crashing static over his words, “Hop, Hop come in.”

“Officer Hopton reporting, what is it?”

“We’ve got a 27-93: someone’s holding the orphanage hostage on the corner of Oak and Second again, they’re threatening arson this time.”

“Son of a bitch,” Hopton said, turning to his deputy. “We gotta go, now.” He turned once more to Peter. “I’m sorry Philippe, our condolences.” The two dashed down the hall, disappearing down the fire escape stairs.

“My name’s not Phillippe,” he quietly said to himself.

“Please say your name and why you’re here, sweetie.” The lady gave him a calm smile, and everyone in the circle leaned closer. Peter rubbed his eyes, trying to blot the confusion from his mind, struggling to remember where he was and who the hell these people were and why they all wreaked of sadness and 8 AM booze.

“Where am I?” Peter asked.

“Why, Alcoholics Anonymous,” she giggled, “the sign’s right out front.” The crowd chuckled together as a collective unit, their breaths in time with one another. The woman offered up a small smile, her wrinkles deepening as she showed her teeth. She retrieved a pen from the breast pocket of her pink Goodwill sweater that had a kitten embroidered on the bottom. A small gold crucifix swung like a pendulum across her chest: a full-on crucifix too, Jesus dying and everything in gold and diamond accents dangling there, making Peter rather uneasy. “You checked yourself in this morning, we are very happy to have you here on this blessed day.”

“I don’t remember how I got here,” Peter started.

“Memory loss is often a result of extreme binge drinking,” she assured him. She wrote something down on a clipboard on her lap. “Now, please, your name.”

“Um, alright...” Peter stood up. “My name’s Peter Resol, and I, uh, guess I’m an alcoholic.” The crowd applauded. He continued, “I guess it’s because lately I haven’t been in control of my life, like this weird ghost force or something has been messing with everything and forcing me to do things I don’t want to do, and—”

“Ah, yes, many people often use alcohol because they don’t feel in control.”

“No, I mean like I *actually* can’t control myself. It’s like I’m this puppet, and someone’s controlling me. Two days ago, my landlord broke my nose after I called him a hobgoblin and the next day my mom died and I almost killed myself, I think, but after I did it I woke up here.”

“It’s a sign, the lord and savior Jesus Christ has brought you here because you’re abusing alcohol when you could find healing through the Lord’s grace.”

“What? No. You know what? Fuck this,” Peter said. He got up. “I’m leaving, you’re all nothing but a bunch of hippy Jesus freaks.” Peter slammed the door behind him, but for a split second he reemerged, leaning over to the complimentary snack table that was beside the entrance. “And I’m taking these, too.” He scooped up a handful of cookies and slammed the door once more.

Peter tapped the end of the bottle, trying to shake the last drop of scotch out of its hiding place into his mouth. He reached to his right, where he stashed a surplus of scotch bottles in between the cushions of the couch. He abandoned glasses at this point and took to his alcohol straight from the bottle. He fiddled with the next one, struggling to get it open.

The front door opened. “What the fuck, Peter?” Vanessa walked in, angrily throwing her keys down onto the coffee table. She stood in front of the TV, her hands on her hips.

“Babe, you’re blocking the thing.”

“I haven’t heard from you in three days! I was worried sick,” she looked to the booze in the couch. “You have all of our alcohol in the goddamn couch, and you look like you haven’t seen the sun in weeks. What the fuck is going on, Peter?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, right. Everything’s fine, honey.” He waved her away, going back to twisting and pulling at the cap, struggling to get a good grip.

“Are you even listening to me?” She snatched the bottle up from his hands, which wasn’t difficult.

“Hey—”

“What the fuck happened to you, Peter?” Her eyes didn’t shine in the light the way they always did. He missed that little twinkle, the one that winked at him from her swirling gray eyes, telling him everything was going to be alright. She looked so beautiful to him, even in this moment, while he was met with her dull, narrowed eyes, and they were telling him just how bad he fucked up this time.

“Ness, I can’t control myself,” he said.

“Clearly.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He straightened up. “It’s the apocalypse, Ness, my story came true. It all makes sense.” He got up and walked over to the pantry. He gestured to the pile of junk that spilled out from it. Cans of food, neatly made into a little castle on the shelves, were stocked up to the ceiling. Sledgehammers, first aid kits, flares, even a gun were all haphazardly shoved into whatever crevices were open. Supplies dropped from the shelves, scattering all over the kitchen floor. “The government’s been mind controlling me. It all makes sense. They’ve been

forcing me to do things and they've been having all these bad things happen to me."

"Jesus Christ..."

"I even made us matching foil hats." He pulled two little conical tin foil caps from the depths of the cupboard. "I painted a little heart on yours." He handed it to her. She inspected it, turning it over and over again in her hands. "I don't know how they're controlling us, since they haven't mandated us all hats to wear that would allow the access to our brains, but these tin hats will deflect any brain-altering waves they send us."

"Oh, Peter—"

"I've hit rock bottom, Ness." His hands were restless, grabbing hers and squeezing them tight. "They know I know. They've been making me do horrible things, I can't even physically control my own body anymore. They keep making terrible things happen to me, this morning I found out I have cancer and I robbed a convenience store dressed in a gorilla suit."

"You're insane."

"I'm not crazy!"

"You've become an alcoholic; you've completely lost it. You need to get help."

"I don't need help, dammit!" He reached out to her, but she backed away.

"Don't touch me." She gave him an odd look, for a second it was almost as if she were concealing a small smirk. She turned away, contorting her features to look as if she were in pain. "I'm leaving." She grabbed her keys and left without another word.

"Ness! Please!" He ran after her, nearly tumbling down the stairs. He caught up with her on the street out front, grabbing the sleeve of her jacket, stopping her in the street. "Ness, please wait."

"What do you want from me?" She asked, pulling her sleeve from his grasp.

"Please, come back inside."

"I'd rather die than go back in there with you." The rumble started, but Vanessa didn't move. Peter's eyes widened. "You get what you deserve," she said. The bus hit her, and she disappeared as it plowed on, not even stopping.

"Oh Peter," Vanessa said, "I'm so happy to be very much alive and safe from the evil government mind control all thanks to you, my lovely husband."

"All in a day's work. Now let's go on vacation somewhere far, far away from here." He pulled the expensive sports car out front.

"Fuck—" he said in slurred speech, realizing his mistake.

“Oh ~~Peter Samuel,~~ ~~Vanessa~~ Anita said, “I’m so happy to be very much alive.”

Peter drank the last of the bottle, throwing it onto the ever-growing pile that manifested in the corner of the room.

Samuel got out of the car, and Anita jumped with joy.

“Actually,” Peter said to himself deep in thought, rewriting his work.

Samuel got out of the car, and ~~Anita jumped with joy.~~ Anita ran over and kissed him, telling him over and over again that she loved him.

He smirked to himself. “At least I can write you alive, Ness,” he said. “Finally, I’m in control for once.” He froze, thinking about what he had just said. “I’m in control,” he repeated.

~~He came to the realization.~~

He stared at the desk in bewilderment, his brain slowly working out the events in his mind, trying to hold onto his thoughts before they slipped from him.

~~He came to the realization.~~

He shook his head, smacking his hands into his head. He struggled to focus, trying not to succumb to whatever force was erasing his thoughts. He began to slam his head into the desk before him, focusing all his power into concentrating, fighting the urge to forget.

He came to the realization.

He slowly rose. ~~He ran over to the front door, calling out for help.~~ He headed over to the kitchen, silently opening the pantry. ~~He grabbed the gun.~~ He grabbed the sledgehammer and walked into the living room.

“Please,” he said into the air. “Please, leave me alone.” ~~He jumped out the open window.~~ He felt his blood boil, anger rising inside him, his temperature rose, and his muscles contracted. “DO YOU HEAR ME? STOP WRITING ME!” he yelled. ~~He tried to escape.~~ He threw the sledgehammer in frustration, watching as it sailed straight through the thin drywall, leaving a hammer-sized hole in its wake. He felt a relief from this for some reason, staring straight through the gap to the other side. He began to destroy the walls that surrounded him. The first two went down easy, revealing nothing but the empty hallway and the outside air of the city on opposite ends. The third wall crumbled to dust, revealing a half-naked Mr. Langston in nothing but a towel, just about to step into a bath. He squeaked his rubber duck, before dashing out of his bathroom, yelling curses and threats as he went.

Tears welled in his eyes as Peter tore away at the fourth wall. It was the hardest to break, slowly chipping away piece by piece, until it finally gave way, collapsing to dust and debris at his feet. The fourth wall revealed a dark room, with a single light shining on a desk in the middle of the room. At the desk sat a woman, but Peter’s vision was clouded with dust that crumbled

before him. He blinked away tears, clearing his sight. He looked closer at the woman before him, and his heart sank.

“Vanessa?”

~~He ran over to the desk.~~ He took a step forward.

“Hello, Peter,” Vanessa said. The corner of her beautiful mouth twisted into a smirk.

“But... you’re dead.”

“I’m not dead, silly,” she said, her voice was smooth, yet sharp, like glass. “I’m the author. What I write is what goes. And I wrote myself to be very much alive, not a scratch on me.” Her hand constantly wrote away as she talked, she didn’t even need to look down at the page as she did so.

“The author?” He looked to his hands, trying to process everything. His eyes snapped up, anger knitting his brows together. ~~“You bitch!” he screamed at her.~~ “You mean this entire time... everything that happened to me, everything I did... That was you?”

She smiled. “Now you’ve got it. I thought I was going to have to explicitly write that one in for you to figure it out.”

“You broke my nose... you killed my mother... you made my last name fucking Loser backwards! You made me write shitty novels that nobody wants to read. You threw me out of my home. You made me drink myself half to death!” The anger in his eyes shifted to pain. “You wrote me to be absolutely in love with you.”

“I did indeed, Peter.”

He gritted his teeth. ~~He ran forward, sending the sledgehammer right into Vanessa’s skull.~~ He stood there, silent. Her smile beamed in the dark room, as the sound of graphite etched across the page.

“You can try and hurt me all you want, Peter,” she said, “but in the end whatever you try to do I’ll merely scratch out and rewrite you to do as I please.”

“But why?” His voice cracked as desperation consumed his tone. “Why write me such a miserable life? Why hurt me the way you do? Why did you even write me in the first place?”

“For the same reason you write, Peter,” she said. “So that I can finally have control over a situation that hurt me, gravely.” Her smile faded, and Peter could see the hurt well in her eyes. “Peter was a real person, like I am. His name was Peter Finch.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “He was my boyfriend, the love of my life. But he didn’t love me.” Peter’s grip on the sledgehammer tightened. “He said he did,” Vanessa continued, “but all he did was hurt me.”

Peter felt his body straighten, as every muscle in his body cramped up. He stared at Vanessa, watching her struggle to find the words as she wrote. He said nothing.

“The things he did to me... the way he made me feel...” She paused. “I put up with it because I loved him. It wasn’t until I found him in our bed with another woman that I finally left. But he took everything: the apartment, my money, our cat, Pickles...” She straightened up. “That’s why I wrote you. A version of him that loved me, the way I loved him. But now, I hate him, and I wanted to make him feel the pain he made me feel for years.”

“Ness—”

“No.” She rubbed her eye with one hand. “You’re not Peter. You’re nothing but a figment of my revenge story.”

“But I—”

“Know that the only way that you get out of here is if you kill me? I know. I let you have that thought in your head.”

Peter said nothing. He felt guilt eating at his stomach, but he swallowed it down. ~~He ran over, killing Vanessa with one swift swing.~~ He stood there. ~~He walked over to Vanessa, trying to reach out to her.~~ He remained still. ~~“Vanessa, I’m so sorry.”~~ He remained silent.

~~Vanessa felt bad for him.~~

Vanessa enjoyed the way Peter struggled, watching him try to move his body, desperate to kill her and earn his freedom. But now, it was Peter’s turn to be helpless.

“A part of me died the day I left him,” she said. “So now, I get to make a part of him die, too.” Peter swallowed hard, struggling to fight the force that guided his arms up, lifting the sledgehammer high over his head. ~~He won against her influence.~~

“Vanessa, please,” he pleaded.

She chuckled. “Suffer,” she said.

Peter brought the sledgehammer down, hard, cracking his own skull with all his might. He fell to the ground, dying instantly in a pool of his own blood. Vanessa smiled to herself, staring at the lifeless body of her ex-lover. ~~Vanessa felt guilty for what she’d done.~~ Vanessa gathered the rest of the papers on the desk, piling her revenge story nice and neat into a small booklet. ~~Vanessa began to cry.~~ Vanessa finished the last page of her story, before stapling all the pieces together, and moved on with herself.

~~Vanessa still loved Peter.~~

Fin.

Ghost Light

By Kate Foley

drama

Cast of Characters

DEAN: 20-something years old, male, dancer, dating Eli.

ELI: 20-something years old, male, singer, suffering from an illness, dating Dean.

Place

An empty theater/Eli's bedroom in a small town.

Time

Late evening, spring 2020, during the beginning of COVID-19 in the United States.

Notes

Eli and Dean share the stage from their respective locations, but they communicate via video chat on their laptops. This can be done with various staging/lighting effects.

Eli suffers from an illness that causes him to be immunocompromised, but the illness is kept vague on purpose so directors may interpret it as they wish (cancer, AIDS, diabetes, etc.).

The song Eli sings can be any song so long as it is from a musical. It should be something slow, beautiful, and hopeful.

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: A small, empty theater, dimly lit. There is the sense that it had been full of people, life, art, and laughter just an hour ago. The ghost light is prominent and lit.

At rise: Dean wanders the stage, the only one that remains here. He looks around as if he can still picture an audience, then begins to dance to music inside his head. He is graceful.

Eli appears in his bedroom, laptop open, phone to his ear. He and Dean are seen at the same time, though they are in different locations. Eli looks tired and sick. Dean's phone rings, and he stops dancing to answer it.

DEAN

Hey, what's up?

ELI

Get on video chat. I miss your face.

(DEAN hangs up and gets his laptop from his bag, sitting on the stage to open it. He and Eli begin to video chat.)

DEAN

You always miss my face.

ELI

What can I say? It's a handsome face. Don't you miss mine?

(ELI frames his face in his hands.)

DEAN

You're ridiculous.

ELI

That doesn't sound like an answer to me.

DEAN

Yes, of course, I miss your face too. Although yours looks a little tired right now . . . How are you feeling?

ELI

Eh. You know. Good days and bad days.

DEAN

Are you getting plenty of sleep? Washing your hands with soap and warm water? For at least twenty seconds? I saw this really cool image going around Facebook with snippets from different Broadway songs that add up to twenty seconds so you can make sure—

ELI

Dean, Jesus, you sound like my mother. Don't worry, I'm fine. Just a little tired, like you said.

DEAN

Sorry. It's hard not to worry these days.

ELI

I know.

DEAN

But seriously, Eli, you're-

(ELI holds up a bottle of hand sanitizer.)

ELI

Does this make you feel better?

DEAN

Actually, yes, yes it does.

ELI

You're ridiculous.

DEAN

I'm being precautionous, just like you.

ELI

I know.

(Pauses.)

How was the show?

DEAN

Not the same without you.

ELI

Hey, I'm sure Jonathan did an excellent job.

DEAN

He did, he always does. I just wanted to celebrate opening night with you here with me, you know?

ELI

I get that. I would've rather been there than here obsessively watching the news. If I'd taken a drink every time I heard "COVID-19," I would've died from liver failure before I died from—well, you know.

(An awkward pause. ELI's illness is the elephant in the room neither of them wants to acknowledge right now.)

DEAN

It's for the best you didn't come though. It was a packed house, way too many variables for you.

ELI

(Trying to find the positive.)

Packed house, huh? Totally sold out?

DEAN

All but a couple seats. It was a good crowd.

ELI

That's great.

DEAN

Yeah, it was.

ELI

It's pretty late. You the last one there?

DEAN

Oh yeah, everyone else left hours ago. I convinced Kelly to let me lock up.

ELI

Wow, I bet you had to wear her down.

DEAN

Yeeep. I promised her the largest iced coffee known to man next time I see her. Whenever that is.

(A beat. The positives are looking thin.)

It's a weird feeling having opening night be closing night too.

ELI

Hey, don't say that. The rest of the run got postponed, didn't it?

DEAN

Yeah, to an undetermined weekend in April, provided all of this really does blow over. But do you see that happening?

ELI

I don't know. Maybe. I hope so.

DEAN

Wal-Mart's shelves were stripped bare this afternoon.

ELI

People are panicking.

DEAN

This sucks. I'm so angry.

ELI

That's normal.

DEAN

You should've been up here performing with me, singing your heart out.

ELI

I will another time. Hopefully in April.

DEAN

They're saying this can last months. Maybe even through the summer.

ELI

There's just so much we don't know right now, babe. Try not to spiral.

DEAN

I'm not spiraling, I'm venting. I probably shouldn't have even performed tonight, to be honest, but I didn't know what to do. They didn't cancel, so I felt like I had to be here.

ELI

Everyone's being put in tough situations right now. You're making the right calls for you. You start work from home tomorrow, don't you?

DEAN

Yep, alone at home with my cat and enough canned food to last me three weeks at least. I'm gonna go stir crazy.

ELI

Me too. I love my mom, but she is not the ideal roommate when she's the only one I can see on a daily basis.

DEAN

You know what extra sucks? The fact that not everyone is doing their part. Half the cast went out for drinks tonight but I stayed behind because I didn't want to come in contact with more people than I had to. I didn't even greet the audience after the show; I stayed in my dressing room until everyone left.

ELI

That was a smart move.

DEAN

Yep. Smart and safe and totally depressing. I know it's the right thing to do, but selfishly? I want to be at that bar with everyone and then go home to my boyfriend to cuddle and watch a movie.

ELI

We could still watch a movie, if you want. I found a bunch of different apps we can use to watch at the same time while-

DEAN

That's not the point, Eli.

ELI

I'm just trying to stay optimistic. Keep things normal.

DEAN

None of this is normal!

ELI

No, you're right.

DEAN

I don't understand how you can be so calm about this. You're the one who's most at risk here.

ELI

(Betraying some fear.)

Calm? I'm not calm. Not one bit. But what other options do I have?

DEAN

Anger. Frustration. Fear. Sadness. Anxiety. Anything.

ELI

If I sit in those feelings, I'll never get out of them.

DEAN

Well if I don't vent and cry and scream, I won't know what to do with myself. I don't know when I'm going to see you again.

ELI

I'm right here.

DEAN

You know what I mean.

ELI

You could dance for me.

DEAN

What?

ELI

Dance. Lift those legs, give me a little shimmy. A step-ball-change. Something, anything, whatever.

DEAN

You're avoiding the real issue here.

ELI

No, I'm not. I'm just trying to find a light in the darkness.

DEAN

Well, everything's a little dark right now.

ELI

Right, and would you rather wallow in it and waste these next weeks and months moping in a cloud of negativity or would you rather bring more art and happiness into this shitty world?

DEAN (Mumbling)

Art and happiness.

ELI

There you go. So, I think you should dance for me.

DEAN

If I'm going to dance, you're going to sing.

ELI

I'm gonna sing?

DEAN

Yeah. You couldn't share your gift with an audience, but you can share it with me.

ELI

I don't know, I haven't warmed up—

DEAN

I thought you wanted to bring more art and happiness into this shitty world.

ELI

I do-

DEAN

Come on, it's the least you could do. Please? For me.

ELI *(sighing)*

You're convincing when you're so damn cute.

(DEAN pumps his fist into the air in victory.)

DEAN

All right, you pick the song and I'll do the choreography.

(DEAN stands up, stretches. ELI weighs his options, then chooses a song. Dean waits a few bars before finding the right steps. The two of them perform beautifully, individually, together. It crescendos into something hopeful and raw and all their own. When they've finished, they're both smiling.)

DEAN

Yep. Your voice is just as gorgeous as I remembered it.

ELI

Stop, you're making me blush.

DEAN

Good, you could use some more color in your cheeks.

(ELI laughs. A beat as the tone shifts.)

DEAN

Do you need anything? I'm going to the store for my final supply run for a few weeks. I could drop it off on your porch and wave at you through the window, "Dear Evan Hansen" style.

ELI

You're sweet, but I'm fine. My mom loaded up our fridge this morning.

DEAN

Okay. I guess I should find some way to drag myself out of here.

ELI

You can do it, I believe in you.

DEAN

It's just hard to say goodbye.

ELI

So say, "see you later."

DEAN

I feel like I'm abandoning this place. I don't want the theater to get lonely.

ELI

It won't be. The ghost light will look after everything.

DEAN

It better. These spirits can get rowdy.

ELI

Oh, I know, I haven't forgotten the disaster that was "Annie Get Your Gun."

DEAN

But you'll be a good ghost light, right?

(DEAN pretends to pat the ghost light as if it's a dog. ELI chuckles.)

ELI

That's right, keep the ghosts happy.

DEAN

Thanks for this, babe. I really needed it.

ELI

Of course.

DEAN

We'll talk tomorrow?

ELI

You know where to find me.

DEAN

I love you.

ELI

Love you more.

(ELI hangs up. His side of the stage goes dark. The ghost light seems to be the only source of illumination. DEAN packs up his things. He takes in his surroundings one last time, breathing in the air of performances past. He walks to the ghost light and considers it for all that it stands for.)

DEAN

Watch over this place for me, will you? Don't let anything happen to it. Just until I get back.

(He touches it gently, then exits. The ghost light continues to shine long after he's gone, ever constant.)

BLACKOUT

Grizzly Hood

By Derek Matarazzo

poetry

Little Red Riding Hood, not dressed in red
Garbed in black, her mother is dead
A wolf had killed her, gobbled her up
So Red set out to go find the pup

She passed through the forest, the flowers and berries
Once as a girl, they had made her merry
The berries were red, like the blood in her veins
But no number of berries should dull the pain

For the berries were poisonous, and muddled the senses
A perfect bait to capture her nemesis
So she gathered them up, along with some wine
And laid out a trap for the wolf to come dine

But no wolf came, only deer and a rabbit
Red was patient, but she'd just about had it
She stomped down the berries, and smashed in the wine
And set out with the bottle, a knife, and some twine

She tracked through the forest, the wolf's clues left behind
Its footprints and ripped fur, a trail oh so fine
Red tracked and traced, and raced through the forest
And came face to face with a bear so boorish

It stampeded at Red, froth at the mouth
But Red was fast, nimble as a mouse
She fought with the bear, hand-to-hand, tooth and claw
She stabbed with the bottle, forced the beast to a draw

Until the bear tripped, its paws were too large
And crashed into the trees, like a great moving barge
Red soon finished him off, a merciful end
She prayed for its peace, and to heaven ascend

Red went on, finding fur and blood
She found a trail, filled with thorns and mud

Red trekked through, getting torn and tattered
Until she found the wolf, even more battered

It was wounded and worn, it wouldn't survive
"A chance!" Red thought, revenge had arrived
But a small bark came, from behind Little Red
A frail little pup, soon to be dead

It was small and weak and extremely hungry
But it didn't want Red, just her to leave in a hurry
For it knew of the grudge between Red and its mother
And would not allow her to die like its brother

This was conveyed to Red in his eyes
And Little Red then dropped down and cried
She cried for her mother, and for the pup too
But she resolved herself to do what she had to do

She raised the knife, high above the beast's head
But the little pup's whimper filled her with dread
Would she take away its mother, just like the beast?
She couldn't, she wouldn't, for the dead stay deceased

She looked at the pup, then back to its mom
It huffed and it puffed, as weak as a fawn
Red decided to help the mother she couldn't
And healed the wolf's wounds, though she knew that she shouldn't

An unwise decision, to help a killer
Until the pup barked, and had run thither
He nuzzled his mom, then looked at Red
And let out a yip, for his mother wasn't dead

The wolf raised its head, its wounds had been bandaged
No blood on its maw, or the grin that it managed
And just like the pup, it met Red's hard gaze
And conveyed the whole truth about the past days

The wolf was not the culprit of the late Miss Hood's death
A bear was the criminal that forced her to rest
And then Red realized her revenge was done
She had killed the bear, but felt nothing, just none

Her rage and sadness could not be contained
And she cried with the wolves until she was drained
But then she got up, with the wolves at her side
And she returned to the bear and scavenged its hide

She made a new cloak, with the skin of the beast
And trekked back home, with its meat for a feast
The wolves stayed with her and made Red's soul good
Now all know the tale of wolves and Grizzly Hood

Help Wanted

By Kyle Guzy

poetry

Help wanted
Pay is good
Apply now, I know I would
Just don't forget to bring your bagpipe
Oh, and no reason, but what's your blood type?

Help wanted
At least twenty years prior experience
Extensive knowledge in the lore of the Fast and the Furious
Must never say no to a free massage
Even if it 'just so happens' to be in my garage

Help wanted
Must have a degree in astrophysics
Maybe skateboard too, but you have to know cool tricks
What's that sticky stuff on the floor? It's hard to gauge
But don't worry about that, just apply!
I mean who isn't crazy about minimum wage?

Help wanted
Send in your application, don't make it too long
Must be okay with potentially seeing some 'accidental' pictures of my dong
Put on a smile, just don't be late
Disobey me and meet an ungodly fate

Help wanted
Holy fuck, please just apply
If you don't, I swear I'm going to cry
We're so much cooler than Chuck E. Cheese
Just suck it up and let me borrow ten grand, please!

Help not wanted
The position has been filled
So nah-nah to all of you that shilled
This was a serious matter, but you all made it a hassle
Looking at you in particular, Hugh Jassal

Help wanted

I lied, reverse psychology didn't work

That's the last time I listen to my cousin Dirk

What turned you off to the job? Was it me asking how much you weigh?

Or was it when I was brainstorming about Naked Tuesday?

Help no longer needed

Investing in that foreign prince was a shameful blunder

The company quickly went under

Hemlock

By Jenna Lozzi

fiction

“Mayor Brown! Apologies for disturbing you at an early hour!”

“It happened again, didn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s the Jones’ family farm this time!”

“I’ll be out there in a moment.”

Agatha figured that she should have gotten used to the knocking by now, but it still took a few minutes for her to get dressed and follow the sheriff out the door. Agatha and her sheriff traveled to the edge of town on horseback where they could see both Mr. and Mrs. Jones standing outside shaking their heads at the disarray. All their corn fields had been destroyed and the pen keeping their livestock was ripped out of the ground. The farm hands were slowly bringing in all the scattered sheep. Agatha looked at all the damage, considering what had happened at the farms owned by the Smiths, Merings, and Thompsons.

“Whatever it is,” Agatha began, “it doesn’t eat meat. It smashes the crops and scatters any livestock.”

“Ain’t no coyote, that’s for sure,” the sheriff added.

Mrs. Jones held her head in her hands. “This is the fourth attack this month. It’s terrible.”

“We’ll figure out a solution,” Agatha said.

Agatha and her sheriff headed back to town square and hardly said a word to each other, but they could not get into town hall without being met with dozens of people- all of which had no shortage of questions. Agatha did what she had done after all the other attacks, she told them which farm was attacked and what had been taken or destroyed before disappearing behind the doors.

“Do you have any idea what to do?” The sheriff asked. “We’ve lost out on I don’t even know how many crops. Never mind that winter is coming.”

“I checked on what we have stored in the cellars, that’ll be enough for everyone to make it through the winter,” Agatha said. “As for early spring, I might have to cut a deal with Mayor Wilson’s village to the west. It’s not ideal but we’re going to have to make do.”

The sheriff sighed. “I don’t think folks here are going to like that very much,” he said. “Wilson always has an ulterior motive when he helps people.”

“The way I see it, Wilson has an ulterior motive, and he has a town that has more grain than it knows what to do with,” Agatha replied. “I can handle whatever it is that that man wants.”

Agatha paced back and forth wondering what she would do. She could palliate the food shortage problem by working with Mayor Wilson, but that would not help her figure out what was destroying her village’s farms. Her thoughts were interrupted by an increasing commotion that could be heard from outside as people began to gather. Agatha headed to one of the windows and looked out. She wasn’t surprised to see the Woodsmith climb off his horse and buggy as he came to greet the townsfolk. He came by every few months, trading his exquisite wooden carvings for supplies. Many of the townsfolk had one of his pieces in their homes. Despite not having spoken to him herself, Agatha never felt like she mistrusted the Woodsmith. He started visiting the town about eight years prior and never said much on any of his visits. Agatha had her questions about him, but she figured she would respect his business considering he was always kind and never overstayed his welcome.

“I’m going to go talk to Wilson,” Agatha said. “Since everyone here is preoccupied with our visitor.”

“You are going to make a deal with him now?” The sheriff asked. “Ma’am, you do understand that we have a serious problem on our hands--”

“I understand,” Agatha said. “And I have yet to offer these people any kind of solution or back-up plan. This is our only choice.”

With that, she walked out of the town hall and towards where her horse was being kept. She watched the Woodsmith as he was listening to some people. Out of the corner of his eye he must have noticed her because he looked her way and nodded then tipped his hat. Agatha nodded back as she jumped onto her horse and headed out of town.

Mayor Wilson’s village was to the west of Agatha’s, on the other side of the Lonely Alder. The Lonely Alder was a large and dense forest that was so thick that it would take less time to go around it rather than through. Agatha had not been to the Alder since she was a little girl going on hunting trips with her father. It was a place people would talk a lot about, but few would go to. Older folks would often talk about how the forest used to be filled with monsters until early settlers either killed them all or drove them out. Agatha hated ghost stories because to her they were not true- she had been to the Alder. No monsters there, just some deer and the occasional fox. Wilson’s village was easy to see in the distance since it was quite large and surrounded by cut trees.

Agatha entered the town and asked someone to direct her to the town hall. As she headed towards the center, she could see groups of men carrying fence posts and tools out towards the farms. Many of them were talking amongst themselves, but they stopped to watch Agatha as she passed

them by. She tried to ignore them and instead lamented how much bigger and more kept up Wilson's village was compared to her own. Agatha knew she could not blame herself; her town had been in a good place despite the recent attacks. Agatha was close to the town hall when Mayor Wilson stormed out arguing with his sheriff.

"You seriously think it's something that came from the woods?" His sheriff asked.

Wilson turned around to face him. "Something came and ripped up the crops on two of our farms, this ain't no regular animal we're talking about."

"So, you're saying that you think the legends of the Lonely Alder are true?" his sheriff asked.

"I'm saying-" Wilson cut off as he turned and saw Agatha standing in the middle of town.

"Mayor Brown," he said with a smile. "What brings you here?"

"I have a problem," Agatha replied. "A food shortage. I was hoping maybe you could maybe help my town out."

"You don't say," Wilson said, placing his hands on his hips. "Did something rip up your people's crops?"

"Yes, four of our farms lost everything," Agatha explained. "We have enough to get us through the winter but that's it."

"Goodness," Wilson said. "I'm sorry to hear that. Luckily, we've been doing really well growing grain. I can definitely give your town whatever y'all need."

"And what do you want in exchange?" Agatha asked.

"We can talk about that later," Wilson said. "I'm not too worried about that right now."

More groups of men came by hauling wood, which Agatha thought must have been to repair whatever damage was done to Wilson's two farms. She figured she had best leave so as to not give him anymore ideas. Agatha bid Wilson farewell and headed off. While riding back home she began to wonder where the men were getting all that wood, considering that the town had no surrounding trees anymore.

The next morning, Agatha commissioned some laborers to help clean up the Jones' farm and announced to the village that she had worked out a deal with Mayor Wilson to provide them enough food. This news was received with mixed response by the townspeople, which Agatha thought was to be expected. She watched as the crowd dispersed and decided that she would head home for the day, but she was stopped by the sound of galloping. She turned to see that the Woodsmith had returned, only this time he was on horseback. The people parted around him as he came into the town's center.

"Back so soon?" Agatha called as he dismounted.

“Yes,” the Woodsmith replied. “I need to speak to the mayor.”

“You’re talking to her,” Agatha said.

“My apologies, I did not mean to assume,” the Woodsmith replied, taking off his hat. “I’ve already spoken to the mayor of the other village nearby, but he wasn’t much help.”

“What’s the problem?” Agatha asked.

The Woodsmith looked around at all the people.

“Actually, I’d prefer it if we could speak somewhere private first,” he said.

“We can talk in the town hall,” Agatha replied. “I don’t want this to be too long of a meeting, I haven’t had much time to rest these past few weeks.”

The Woodsmith nodded his head. “That is fine.”

They went inside and the Woodsmith set his bag down on a table. He rummaged through it, pulling out a small wooden figure and showing it to Agatha. The carving made her turn pale.

It was a frightening looking creature; it had the jointed and hooved legs of a deer, but it stood upright like a man. Its body was slender and wiry, the arms were human-like but also too long. On its head was a crown of deer horns branching out in many directions, its face vaguely resembling a decaying human skull. Agatha carefully took the carving into her hands and studied it.

“What is it?” she asked. “What would possess you to make something like this?”

“Actually, I came here to ask if you’ve seen a creature that looks like it,” the Woodsmith replied.

They were interrupted by the doors flinging open.

“What’s all this, Mr. Woodsmith?” Wilson asked. “You ran off before I could ask any questions.”

“It’s not like you were going to listen,” the Woodsmith replied.

“He showed you the carving too, huh?” Wilson said, pointing at Agatha. “If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought Mr. Woodsmith here was asking if I’d seen the Devil.”

“He’s not the Devil,” the Woodsmith said. “In fact, he’s not dangerous at all.”

Wilson chuckled. “You know, my father told me when he was a young man that he killed some kind bear,” he began. “But it wasn’t a regular bear because it had antlers sticking up out of its head. My father told me it was one of those forest spirits. Apparently, it got really mad that he and his hunting party were passing through the Lonely Alder.”

“The spirit did not attack without reason,” the Woodsmith said. “They are peaceful as long as their homes aren’t damaged. I was out

surveying the forest and I found that people had been cutting down an alarming number of trees. I need whoever is doing that to stop at once.”

“Hold up,” Wilson said, “We need that wood for making homes, building furniture, and trading. Besides, you must cut down a lot of trees to do your little carvings.”

“Yes, I do,” the Woodsmith replied. “But my practices are different, they are more sustainable, and they don’t interfere-”

“You ain’t in a position to be telling me what I should and shouldn’t be doing,” Wilson said. “Besides, all this talking and you’ve neglected to tell either of us where you’re from.”

“I thought he was from your village,” Agatha said.

“He ain’t one of mine,” Wilson said.

“I live in the Lonely Alder,” the Woodsmith explained. “With my daughter.”

“I’ve had just about enough,” said Agatha, handing the Woodsmith’s carving back. “You can take that back wherever you came from. I’ve had enough ghost stories for one day.”

“Yeah, you’d best be leaving,” Wilson added.

The Woodsmith simply nodded and gathered his things. He picked up the carving and quietly headed out of the building. But upon opening the doors, the Woodsmith was greeted by the townsfolk, all of whom were curious about what he needed so much to discuss with Agatha. They watched him carefully as he made his way through the crowd. But then he held the carving up, and the crowd gasped.

“If you see this creature destroying your farms and your crops, let it be known that it is because of the continued destruction of its home, the Lonely Alder! Your mayor knows the truth!”

Agatha and Wilson watched from the window.

“Ugh,” Wilson groaned. “Same speech he gave my people. Although, your folks seem to be taking it a lot more seriously.”

The Woodsmith got back on his horse and left. Agatha showed Wilson out of town and was met with the concerns of her people. When she saw how upset they were she realized that she should have at least listened to what the Woodsmith had to say— if only if Wilson had not interrupted things. Agatha decided that it was worth going to the Lonely Alder to find more answers, even if it meant risking that even half of what the Woodsmith had to say was true. She went back to her house and changed into some more proper riding attire, trading her dress for pants, and bringing her hunting rifle just in case.

The horseback ride was a much needed break for Agatha. Everything was quiet except the steady pounding of her horses’ hooves across the ground. The air had only a slight chill to it characteristic of a beautiful autumn day. It had been a long time since Agatha had been able to

go out of town. The recent years had gotten away from her as she spent the majority of her days chasing after the needs of the people in her care. As the tree canopy of the Lonely Alder closed overhead, she wondered what her father would think of her. If he were that concerned with conventionality, then he would not have taken Agatha on so many hunting trips when she was a girl.

Agatha was yanked from her thoughts as her horse swerved to avoid an animal. It was a deer- a wooden deer. He was massive and standing strong in the middle of the woods, a peculiar statue with no inscription. Agatha made sure not to let her bewilderment get in the way and continued onward. Several more instances would give her the same pause, as she passed several more wooden statues of all kinds of forest animals- foxes, beavers, wolves, rabbits, owls, and more deer.

Further within, the Woodsmith felt relieved when he reached the clearing in the Lonely Alder where his house was. He set up his horse in the stable, wiping away his sweat with a rag as he emerged to greet his daughter. "Hello Clara, what've you been up to?" he asked.

"I took care of all my chores today," she said. "Also, Hemlock came back."

"He what? He came back? Where is he?"

"He's behind the house," Clara told him.

The Woodsmith stormed around back to see that Hemlock did, in fact, return. He could only wonder just how an eight-foot-tall forest spirit could go missing.

"Hemlock, where the hell have you been?" The Woodsmith snapped. "I know you've been destroying farms again- did you forget what I told you?"

Hemlock said nothing, instead he looked away.

"Dad, please don't yell at him," Clara said.

"It's not like I want to, Clara," the Woodsmith said. "But Hemlock can't keep doing this; people are getting really angry."

"So, they can get away with destroying my home," said Hemlock. "But when I retaliate then it's a problem?"

"I know that you're upset," the Woodsmith said. "I tried to tell them to stop cutting down the trees."

Hemlock slumped down.

"Look, if you keep doing this, you're going to put us all in danger. People have hunted down all the other spirits in the past. They will have no qualms about killing you, too," the Woodsmith said. "And I don't know how well I will be able to protect you."

Hemlock nodded and turned away.

"I guess he needs more alone time," Clara mused.

“Let’s leave him be,” the Woodsmith replied. “C’mon kiddo, I’ll make you dinner.”

They came around to the front of the house to see that Agatha was there, waiting for them. The Woodsmith sent his daughter inside before approaching her.

“What are you doing here?” The Woodsmith asked.

“I realized that I may have let Mayor Wilson distract us from our own conversation. I wanted to come to talk to you about the carving,” Agatha said.

“Well, we don’t need the carving,” the Woodsmith replied. “The real thing is hiding behind there.”

As the Woodsmith finished talking, Agatha looked up at the sound of large footsteps and then saw elaborate anthers and a large head silently peer out from behind the house. She gasped and took several steps back.

“That’s—” she began.

“I can explain more inside if you’d be more comfortable,” the Woodsmith said.

“Hemlock is in need of some alone time anyways. Please come.”

The Woodsmith sat Agatha down inside and first explained how he and his daughter came to live in the Lonely Alder. He and his daughter were originally from a small village to the north that had been stricken by a mysterious plague that was rapidly killing the townspeople. The Woodsmith said that he was one of the many adults that had gotten severely ill but was the only one to survive. He, then, revealed that he found Clara after looking through the entire village for survivors, she was crying and wheezing in her crib. Her parents were already deceased in their bed in the next room over, so the Woodsmith took Clara as his own. But, he was afraid she would not survive since she was also showing signs of the sickness. Not knowing what to do and with his daughter’s life slipping away, the Woodsmith took her to Lonely Alder where he could find something or someone that could help her.

“That’s when I encountered Hemlock,” he said. “He was able to save her with his magic, he also let us live in the Alder with him.”

The Woodsmith went on to explain that there was a time when there were dozens of forest spirits that lived in the Alder. They lived with the original people who dwelled both in and outside of the forest before the settlers drove all of them out. The original people knew how to live in a way that they were able to get along with all those spirits by using resources in a way that respected everyone. The Woodsmith explained that for him to be able to build a house, Hemlock had to teach him the ways of the original people and how they managed forests. The Woodsmith said he could not just cut down any tree that he wanted; he had to select a single tree based on

whether removing it from an area would benefit the health of surrounding trees.

“Forests don’t always lay themselves out perfectly,” the Woodsmith said. “Sometimes things get crowded in certain areas and trees start suffocating each other.”

Agatha looked out the window to see Hemlock looking in curiously.

“Is there any way that you can get the people to stop cutting down the trees?” Hemlock asked.

“I don’t know,” Agatha said. “Those are Mayor Wilson’s people, and he won’t listen to anybody.”

The Woodsmith suggested that Agatha spend the night since it had gotten so dark out, and she took him up on his offer. He showed her to the extra room and left her to her business. In the morning he went out to go make sure no new sections of the forest were being cut down, leaving Agatha with Clara. Agatha watched Clara play in the trees with Hemlock from the porch until suddenly something took Hemlock’s attention. He stood straight up, turning his head west.

“What’s the matter, Hemlock?” Clara asked.

“They are cutting down trees over that way. I can feel it. I can feel them all dying,” he cried.

“Oh no!” Clara said, throwing her hands up. “You stay right here, Hemlock and don't move. I'll make them leave.” And then she started marching off deeper into the woods.

Agatha ran down the stairs from the porch, calling after Clara but that did little to stop her.

“What are you doing, you can't make them leave!” Agatha shouted. “Besides, we need to watch Hemlock.”

“I’m not like my dad,” Clara said defiantly. “Hemlock always listens to me.”

“That’s great,” Agatha said. “But I’m not letting you near those men, they’re dangerous and they aren’t going to listen to you.”

She gently took Clara’s hand and started to guide her back to the house, but the second she turned, Clara broke free and started running. Agatha shouted in exasperation and then started to chase Clara, calling out after her over and over. It was no use; Clara knew the Alder better than Agatha did and her little body allowed for her to move through the thicker parts of the woods with ease. Soon Clara could see where all the trees were being cleared away and she ducked and hid behind a bush to watch it happen. Agatha eventually caught up where she was hiding.

“Are you kidding me?” Agatha whispered. “Come on, they’re going to see us.”

She heard more footsteps

“Well, well, well,” a voice spoke.

“Dammit,” Agatha grunted.

“Agatha, what brings you all the way out here?” Wilson asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Agatha shot back.

“Leave the Lonely Alder!” Clara shouted. “Or else Hemlock is gonna get you!”

“Is that so?” Wilson asked Clara. “Is the monster that your daddy was talking about real?”

“You’re going to believe a child’s word?” Agatha questioned.

“Don’t have to,” Wilson said, motioning his men to come over. “He left these big statues all over.”

The two men hoisted over a carving of a bear standing upright that had antlers on its crown, just like the one that Wilson said his father had killed.

“Those are totems,” Clara said. “Dad made them from all of Hemlock’s friends and put them everywhere.”

“Do you remember our deal?” Wilson asked.

Agatha swallowed hard. “Yes,” she admitted.

“Well, I know what I want from you now,” Wilson continued. “I want you to go back to your village and get your best men to help me kill this spirit of the Lonely Alder. If you don’t do it, your village gets none of my grain.”

Agatha gritted her teeth. “You son of a-”

“Oh, come on, Agatha,” Wilson said. “I know you spent a lot of time hunting with your father, I’m hardly asking for anything except for a little help and I’m offering to feed your whole village.”

Agatha thought it over for a moment.

“I’m sorry Wilson, but I’m afraid the deal is off,” she said.

“Really?” Wilson said, surprised. “Then I guess you need more convincing.”

He then grabbed Clara and pulled her to his side.

“What? Wait, no-!” Agatha shouted.

“Hemlock!” Clara shouted.

Back at the house, the Woodsmith had gotten done checking other areas to make sure no new patches of clearing had taken place when he noticed that Hemlock was standing up looking alert.

“Where’s Agatha and Clara?” the Woodsmith asked.

“Wilson has them.” Hemlock said back, then Hemlock hurried off into the woods. The Woodsmith followed behind as quickly as he could. They both reached the clearing to find Agatha in a stand-off completely outnumbered.

“Let Clara go, this has gone way too far,” Agatha warned, holding her rifle steady.

“Don’t worry, I’ll return the kid safe when I’m able to kill the Devil.” Wilson said.

“Release my friend,” demanded Hemlock. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Wilson looked up in shock at the spirit. Hemlock was much larger in person.

“Like I said before,” the Woodsmith added. “Hemlock is not the Devil; Hemlock is not a monster.”

Wilson and his men open fire on Hemlock, who winced as the spray of bullets pierced his skin. He fell to his knees as the men quickly reloaded. Hemlock did not bother to move out of the way and instead kneeled as if to pray.

Agatha ran towards Hemlock.

“Hemlock, listen, you need to try to run,” she said desperately. “I can’t fight back at them as long as they’ve got Clara, we’ll find a solution-”

“I am calling upon my friends for help,” Hemlock said, his eyes closed meditatively.

“What?” Agatha questioned.

“Hitting the ground when it falls is not the loudest sound a tree can make,” Hemlock said. “It matters not what is heard by humans.”

The Woodsmith came beside Agatha. “Get ready,” he said urgently.

“Ready to fire!” Wilson shouted to his men, but they would not shoot.

Figures surrounded them on all sides, the totems of foxes, beavers, wolves, rabbits, owls, and deer. Their wooden forms moved with the grace of still-living animals. They loomed over the men while watching Hemlock. Hemlock stood once more, eyeing Wilson as the bullet holes in his body disappeared.

“Why are you all standing there? I said shoot them, dammit!” Wilson barked at his men, but before anyone else could move, a much larger animal emerged from behind him.

It was a wooden bear with antlers.

It came down on Wilson, freeing Clara from his grip. It then proceeded to grab Wilson by the neck and quickly drag him back into the depths of the woods as the other totems silently looked on ready to help if needed. The remaining woodcutters did not want any trouble and surrendered their weapons and so Hemlock spared them.

Hemlock was left to the Lonely Alder in peace as the people prepared to travel back to the two towns to explain what happened. The Woodsmith agreed to go with them along with his daughter, so that they could help oversee the efforts to better protect the Lonely Alder and to aid in building a new community. Agatha was unsure if an understanding could be met, considering what had happened, but the woodcutters vowed to be

her witnesses in convincing the rest of Wilson's people to join her efforts. With everyone in agreement against an uncertain future, they headed off as totems returned to their resting places.

I Gave Way

By Alessandra Armour

poetry

I gave way to the clouds because they look pretty floating in the sky and, no, I didn't question how they move, or the reason why, because then again, the sun shines, and the moon is bright in the dead of the night, but no, I don't ask why, because that's always how it's been; why would I?

I gave way to mother nature's storms because of thunder and lightning, so beautifully intimidating that all you can do is sit inside your sanctuary, where you've learned to remain, and let the world continue raining.

So, when the storm passes by, it is once again light outside.
and why would I ever wonder why we go through the dark to reach the light?

For, once we get there, who wants to focus on the why?

Yes, I submit to how the world works,
however confusing it may be.
It is beautiful, it is tragic, and I admit
I have absolutely no control,
And yes, that's scary.

Cracked

By Julia Paiano

digital photography



In the Shadows

By Emily Bradigan

reverse charcoal



Jewelwing

By Kristen Cooney

digital photography



Life on the Wing

By Kristen Cooney

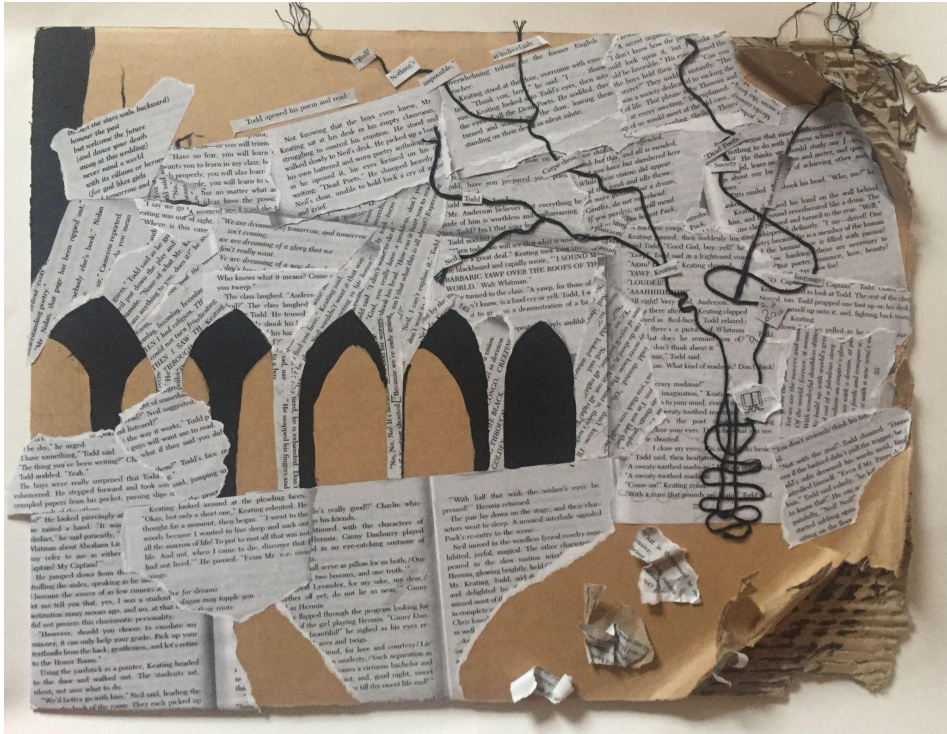
digital photography



O' Captain My Captain

By Emily Bradigan

mixed media



Stars Above the Bay

By Rishabh Kancherla

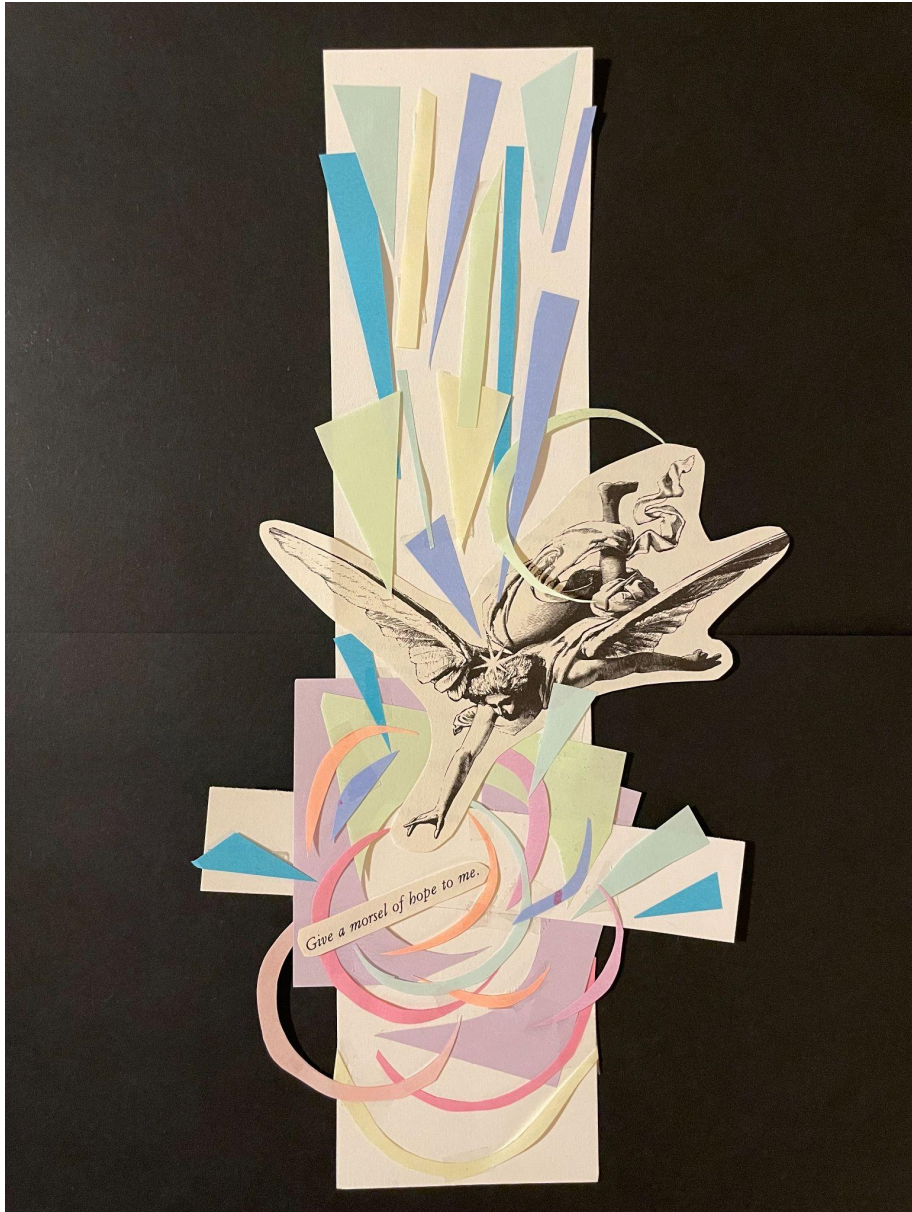
digital photography



The Common Fall

By Mairead McDermott

collage



Tom

By Kylie Halko

mixed media



I'm not who you wanted but maybe one day I can be

By Jessica Celli

poetry

Stories show that a mother will stop at nothing to protect their sons.
The goddess Frigg traveled across the world when her son Baldur was
prophesied to die.
She gathered a promise from every living thing to spare him
(Except mistletoe – My mother still won't forgive it and refuses to hang it in
our home).
The nymph Thetis risked everything to dip her son Achilles into the River
Styx
And grant him immortality, unknowingly giving him a single vulnerable spot
(My mother says we have the same spot, our pride).
Queen Medb renamed each of her sons to destine them for the greatest
prophecies
(I changed my name once too, but it didn't work so well).
Countless mythological women sacrificed everything for their sons.
It's no wonder I want to become one.
A son, not a mother.

In the Comfort of Others

By Amy Litofsky

fiction

The forest is deathly silent tonight. There is no rustling of leaves, no chirping or cawing of creatures, no rush of water, nothing. Not even the wind seems to breathe, the regular breezes having quieted their usual gossipy whispers. There is nothing normal or natural about it. A sort of suffocating terror exists in the atmosphere that slowly presses down further and further on everything. The plants, animals, and wind cower in the shadows, tucked away from the unmoving figure that stands in the center of them all. They are waiting for something, anything to happen.

His eyes are closed. The night sky has draped his body in shadows and hidden away sharp features. Beneath them there is a slender, lithe body with muscular arms and delicate fingers that remain stock still by his sides.

His body is completely unmoving. From far away, it doesn't even seem as though breaths are being drawn - no rise of the chest, no gentle inhales and exhales. He is a perfect match with the still background, except for one thing. While the forest remains silent out of fear, he emanates no emotion. Complete blankness, emptiness, nothingness. And yet there is something prickling at the edges that aches to be set free - the something that causes this suffocating fear.

It is unclear how much time has passed. His presence first became known when the sun was still high in the sky. Perhaps his chilling presence caused the sun to sink below, the rays of light hiding away to leave the shadows and the moon with him instead. Unlike the others, they have no problem crawling upon his skin, covering some parts in darkness and others in light, as if fighting for control. He doesn't appear bothered by the war being fought over him, letting the shadows and light shift over him as he stays perfectly still.

And then the smallest intake of breath. What would normally be barely audible sounds like a gunshot in the utterly silent world. It pierces the atmosphere and finally brings some semblance of life again. The game is over, the frozen snapshot now shattered into a million pieces, but the forest still remains silent. It waits in growing anticipation to see what is to come now, preparing itself for a burst of burning emotion.

There is movement and the world tenses. A hand moves backward, fingers latching around something across his back. In one gentle motion they pull out something almost the length of the figure himself, and when the moonlight manages to catch it, the object swiftly becomes a wooden bow. Its creator was clearly thinking of usability over personability, as there

is nothing particularly interesting about it. At first glance, the hand that holds the grip does so firmly yet delicately, but looking closer reveals a subtle shaking as its hold grows tighter and tighter. The wood creaks under the pressure and the forest trembles.

The other hand reaches back for something too, this time pulling free a single arrow amidst a quiver of near duplicates. It matches the simplicity of the bow with its wood structure, white-feathered fletching, and razor-tipped head. Quickly, the arrow is being notched into tough string.

His eyes are still closed. Even as the arrow is pulled back further and further, growing tighter and tighter until it's finally as far back as it can go without snapping into nothing, his eyes remain hidden from the world. The bow is held straight in place by rigid arms. The head of the arrow stares forward at its target in the distance: a lone tree with a small target painted on it in bright white, visible even in the darkness. Most of the bullseye is already laden with holes, while the outer rings remain completely untouched. The arrow's path is in sight.

There is the lightest exhale, and then the fingers release their hold.

With a whistle the arrow flies free. It rockets off at an unimaginable speed, forces carrying it farther and farther away from its starting point until suddenly *thunk!* It lands square in the middle of the tree nearly forty feet away. Bullseye. The sound reverberates through the clearing. Unable to contain its panic, a nearby squirrel scrambles away from its place beneath the tree and takes off into the distance.

“Man, what’d the tree ever do to you?” A deep voice appears from within the darkness, out of the moon’s reach for now. It speaks of tranquility and a hint of humor, yet it demands attention. At the sudden presence, the world trembles, a few creatures whimpering in their homes in fear of what’s to come.

If the first figure hears any of this, he shows no signs, merely letting the bow drop and pulling free a new arrow to nock almost mechanically. In seconds he’s at attention again, ready to fire once more.

“I think he’s already dead, bud. No need to waste another arrow.” The voice doesn’t miss a beat, remarkably unbothered by the lack of response. He’s clearly used to such behavior if the smile in his tone is anything to go off of. When the new arrow strikes the tree right beside the previous, he takes that as his queue to move.

The shadows immediately release their hold on him. He enters the natural spotlight, coming up a few feet to the right of the other figure. Immediately upon entering, the wind releases a single breath. He is rather imposing, easily over six feet tall and brandishing strong arms covered in black, gray, and crimson tattoos. His dark brown hair is pulled up into a messy bun, stray pieces being carried by the wind and knocking into light brown eyes that glitter with specks of gold. There’s a clinking sound that

occurs when he moves, a result of the silver chausses wrapped around sturdy legs. How he managed to get here without alerting the entire forest is a mystery in itself. His chest is free of the matching armor, instead showcasing a sleeveless shirt. Despite the stiff clothing, he still manages to walk with an air of relaxed cockiness. A longsword across his back completes the image.

Overall, he looks to be around his mid 20s. His mental age, though, is questionable. The cocky walk, cheeky grin, and voice that constantly pushes buttons speaks of someone far younger. The type of person who thinks everything is a game and has no plans on losing. And yet there's something soft hidden deep within.

When he opens his mouth to speak again, no doubt to say another "comical" line, the other beats him to it.

"Why are you here, Daemon?"

If the first voice was as warm and boisterous as a raging wildfire, this one is as cold as the deepest waters of the arctic. Even being around near silence, the voice is barely audible. It's laden with pure apathy, completely monotonous and devoid of a single flicker of emotion. The chill bleeds into the wind, leaving an icy breeze tugging at the sleeves.

Daemon's bright laughter chases it away.

"Is it really that shocking to think I'd be worried when I wake up in the middle of the night and find one of my companions gone?" He pauses to grasp at his heart in mock offense. "I'm not heartless, contrary to popular belief."

No response this time, so Daemon continues. "You know, I think a better question is, what are *you* doing here, Fynn?"

Here is nothing special. The clearing is small and practically empty, only a few trees scattered around here and there. Many have bullseyes drawn onto them, some still holding arrows. The area itself is hidden away from most eyes behind overgrown flora—vines, flowers, and other greenery. It's a secret location that only few know about.

"I figured you'd be here, of course, since you're obsessed with training and all. But even this seems a bit late for you. You're usually pretty good about getting sleep."

With a single finger left holding his arrow in place, Fynn freezes. His already pale skin seems to whiten further, glowing brighter beneath the moon. The hesitation lasts for the briefest of seconds, though, as the archer quickly composes himself and lets the arrow fly. It hits the tree a little low, right beneath the bullseye. For a random stranger, the whole display would seem trivial and barely worth noting. But Daemon is not a random stranger.

His eyes follow everything, the previous mirth that had been swimming in them slowly draining away.

“Something happen today?” His voice has taken on a tone that is perhaps too nonchalant. He stares at the shorter man in worry, clearly sensing that there’s something off tonight.

Another arrow shoots off, too high this time.

“Okay, that’s a yes then. *What* happened?”

Thunk! This one’s too low and veers to the left.

“Did Raz do something? I swear that kid’s always putting his foot in his mouth.”

Thunk! It barely manages to lodge itself into the tree, hitting way too far to the right.

“Or wait was it me? I don’t remember doing anything wrong.”

Thunk! It hits a different tree, and not the bullseye either.

“Is it something about that battle earlier?”

Snap! The string on the bow snaps like a twig, the arrow being sent tumbling off to the side. A muffled curse escapes Fynn’s lips, hand subconsciously curling into hiding.

Daemon’s eyes widen almost comically. He darts towards Fynn, immediately abandoning interrogator mode and switching into the healer role, trying to get a good look at the hand currently being hidden from him. “Shit, are you alright? Lemme take a look at that.”

When he steps forward, Fynn immediately steps back. He draws his hand protectively into his chest like it’s been burned. “*Don’t touch me.*”

Daemon flinches, not just at the pure venom with which Fynn spits those words, but at something else. Something far more unsettling.

His eyes. The eyes that have previously remained closed this entire time have finally opened. The eyes that now resemble a swirling dark blue abyss. Is it pain? Horror? Disgust? It could be any and all of them. Such a look on anyone else would be incredibly worrying - on Fynn it’s earth shattering.

The reaction seems to have been what the forest was waiting for, as suddenly everything begins to come alive again. A strong wind blows through the clearing and doesn’t leave, even colder than before. Critters begin to make noise in the trees and grass, although it isn’t gentle background noise, but something far more aggressive. Water crashes against rocks like a storm. A few feet away, there’s a gasp and the snap of something breaking, but neither seem to hear it.

The intensity of those eyes forces Daemon to look away, the man’s head instead tilting down to focus on hands still clutching the broken pieces of the bow - hands that are shaking violently. It takes everything within Daemon to not reach out and take them in his own calloused hands, chasing away the panic with friendly comfort.

Instead, he takes a deep breath and tries to look back up at the other, anywhere but the eyes.

“Talk to me, Fynn, we’re friends.”

“Are we?” Is the monotone response.

“Wha- of course!” Daemon steps back as if hit, his expression showing nothing but shock. “I kind of assumed traveling together for three months and constantly having each other's backs in these fights was enough to be friends.”

Fynn turns away, intense gaze breaking from him and hiding away in the darkness. Daemon releases a breath he doesn’t realize he was holding. The bow drops to the ground as Fynn’s arms come up to wrap around his still shaking body.

“We barely know each other.”

Despite the serious situation, Daemon can’t help but laugh - a noise that has Fynn furrowing his eyebrows.

“You wish. I know plenty about you. I know that you’re an emotionally repressed loner who doesn’t know how to interact with others. I know that you could probably kill me in thirty different ways with that bow and arrow of yours if you needed to. And I know that you’re probably the strongest person I know.” There’s a smile on Daemon’s face when he finishes talking - not his usual cocky one, but something softer and genuine.

“...I’m not strong.”

The words are spoken with such delicacy that Daemon almost misses them. He blinked owlishly.

“What? I pour my heart out to you and *that’s* what you have to say? And what the hell do you mean you’re not strong? You’re Fynn!”

The aforementioned shakes his head. He pauses for a moment, considering something, before decidingly untying the cloak around his shoulders. Daemon raises an eyebrow, expression seeming to ask *what’s happening right now?* As if to answer, he pulls down the neck of his shirt, revealing pale skin marred with a deep scar, no longer bleeding but still freshly raw and beginning to blister.

Daemon gasps. “Was that from the fight? The hell, why didn’t you mention that you got injured?”

The only response is the sound of the wind growing stronger. The iciness stings on his now exposed flesh but he doesn’t even flinch and instead takes the pain. He eventually returns the cloak to his body, a flicker of shame crossing his face before quickly disappearing.

It takes a second for the dots to connect. “Wait... are you saying *that’s* why you’re not strong? Because of some scar?”

Fynn’s silence is as much of a yes as anything.

Daemon shakes his head, utterly baffled. “Scars are badass, dude. Do you know how many I have? Way too many, and I love every single one of them and the memory attached to each.” Plenty can already be seen scattered across his exposed arms.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yeah? Explain it to me then.”

For a second it seems as though Fynn ignores that request, staring out at nothing and still holding himself with his arms. And then he forces his head back up to stare at Daemon with a mixture of pain and determination. “Scars are evidence of weakness. They exist to remind you of the moments where you were too weak to completely protect yourself. And so how can I protect you two when I can’t even protect myself?”

Silence, until...

“Okay, that’s not only the longest thing you’ve ever said to me but also the sweetest. So, thank you for that,” Daemon says, a cocky smile beginning to spread across his face. “But you’re completely wrong.”

“...what?”

“He’s right.” The voice that says this is neither cold and emotionless, nor boisterous and cocky. No, this one is soft and kind. It appears from behind them and they both turn around, completely taken aback.

“Raz?”

There is no darkness to hide in. The new figure stands before them with slight unease at the sudden attention. They wear a bright pink vest with a white shirt underneath, tight black pants, and unnecessarily high heeled boots that can’t be comfortable in the forest. Their wavy blonde hair cascades down their back and into a ponytail, bangs covering one eye while the other radiates worry. They look to be about nineteen, young but still holding something old in that eye.

“Sorry for eavesdropping,” Raz starts with a guilty expression. “I got worried when I woke up and didn’t see you guys, so I figured you’d be out here. And then I didn’t know when was best to interrupt.”

“It’s alright, kid. Sorry for worrying you.”

Raz smiles warmly at Daemon before turning back to Fynn, expression turning serious. “You’re wrong, though, Fynn,” they start. “Three months ago, I think I would have agreed with you. I used to be disgusted by the idea of scars. I thought that they were ugly, a flaw. And when I got mine... I felt so ashamed of myself. I felt like some hideous monster.” A gentle breeze rushes by suddenly, pushing away the hair hiding half of their face to reveal a milky eye, slashed through by a jagged scar. Instead of immediately rushing to hide away the angry wound again, though, Raz only smiles.

“But then I realized something: that if it wasn’t for this scar, I would probably be dead. During that fight, that beast almost hit me in the heart, but you pushed me out of the way, *you* saved my fricken life. So instead, I’ve let the scar become a reminder of the day you protected me. And I’ll happily wear it if it means remembering you, Fynn, because you’re worth remembering.”

For a minute there is only silence as everyone takes in Raz's heartfelt speech, until Fynn starts shaking his head and breaks the moment.

"If I was stronger, you never would have gotten that scar at all."

"Newsflash, dumbass, you're not superhuman. You can't be Mr. Perfect and never mess up somehow. Get that through your thick skull, okay?" Daemon instantly shoots back, scoffing.

"Also, it's not like you to be so obsessed with the past, Fynn. You're the one always telling us not to get lost in what could have been and instead focus on the moment."

"It's different when..." His speech becomes unintelligible towards the end, words quiet and muffled.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that?"

"It's different when it's about you two, okay?" The words are rushed out with such force that the two nearly miss it again. But then they take notice of the pink spreading over his pale cheeks and everything clicks into place.

"Oh, I knew you cared about us!" Without thinking, Raz jumps at Fynn and pulls him in a tight embrace. Instinctively, his panicked mind yells at him to run, something that Daemon senses as he prepares himself for the messy reaction.

His jaw nearly drops to the forest floor when Fynn's shaking arms come and wrap around Raz too.

Raz only holds him tighter. "It'll be okay. I know that things can be dangerous, but it'll be okay. Just trust us like we trust you and I promise everything will turn out alright in the end. We can be strong as long as we're together, okay?"

"...Okay."

There's a soft sniff from Daemon and then he's moving towards them. Very delicately, he places his hand on Fynn's shoulder, putting as much affection into the touch as possible. "You really are a softie deep down, Fynn. And Raz, who knew you had such a way with words." There are startled protests from both at that, but they quickly die away and turn into bright laughter.

Around them, nature peaks out from its hideaways. The previously icy wind has died down into a delicate breeze, the wind whispering softly amongst itself. Bugs scuttle around, squirrels search for food, birds sing cheery tunes in their trees, and water calmly rolls across stones. The broken bow lying on the ground rolls towards them with a push from the wind.

The sun ascends high into the sky, coating the whole area in warmth. Its rays of light wrap around the trio standing in the middle of it all, joining in the embrace. They stay there for a while, merely existing within each other's presences. A beautiful snapshot frozen in time.

Kneeling

By Jessica Celli

poetry

I cannot tell you why I still trust in God
He's not a good man, nor a kind man
Not to me at least.
Yet, when I dig deep, there's still prayer left inside me.
Prayers for moonlit fingertips
For my lips to forever be the ones that warm your hands
To swim in rivers of your skin, climb the mountains of your body each and
every night
I pray that the only thing kissing you more than me is sunlight,
The only thing you devote to yourself other than me is moonlight.
I pray the stars in your eyes never fade, and for the comets of your kisses.
I do not trust in God.
But for you, I'm his favorite saint.

Lasting Impressions

By Tyler Ways

fiction

My shadow disappeared. I don't know when, and to be honest I probably wouldn't have noticed had Clara not pointed it out to me. She had said something about how she seemed to have three shadows, and then laughed when she said I had none. I think I laughed too. Then we both looked again, there was nothing there. I looked around to see if anything was blocking the light. There was nothing that I could see. The next morning, I went outside and stood under the sun, hoping my shadow would come back.

I wanna say it was like a week later when I couldn't see my reflection anymore. I never really paid much attention to it, really I'd just fix my hair and run out the door as fast as possible. I probably should have been phased more, but it didn't affect me at all. I think I blinked a couple times before running out the door to my next appointment.

I could still check on myself, without the mirrors. For a while, cameras could still see me, so if there was something I needed to do I'd just record myself. I can't say I was surprised when one day I stopped showing up on the screen. Clara said I could be a vampire. I didn't think so, although I'd never been a huge fan of garlic or sunlight, so it was possible I didn't notice. At the very least I didn't have fangs.

Not seeing myself wasn't really a problem for me. Sure, it made for awkward conversation when people tried to take group photos but I didn't really care. If anything, I felt better than I had before. I never quite liked being in pictures, and my reflection and I disagreed more often than not. It was nice to not be able to care for once. Clara said she'd never seen me like this before. I wasn't quite happy, but I felt better.

The temporary high of semi-invisibility didn't last for long. It wasn't too long until I couldn't speak anymore. It wasn't like I could open my mouth or just couldn't form words anymore; sound was just absent from me. Clara couldn't hear my breathing and mom said it was like a blanket of quiet around me. I think this one got to me. When I found out, I wanted to scream. I did scream in fact, in the same way an astronaut might as they float through space. Silently. This time it did make for more problems, too. Clara tried to teach me sign language, but I didn't see a point. It would probably be ripped from me like everything else had. Still, she did get me to carry around a board and a marker so I could communicate.

I tried to get help from the biology department, but they couldn't find anything wrong. I think Dr. Dennis said something along the lines of

“it’s probably psychological,” though I’m not quite sure. I do remember the look on his face when I showed him my lack of reflection. I know for a fact he said “That’s not normal, kid.” I didn’t find that very helpful. It was a similar experience with the Psych teacher. Dr. Tracey said I should go to the biology department, because clearly there was something wrong with me in more than just my brain. I think I thanked them both, but to be honest I’m not sure. I may have just silently left.

When I woke up the next morning, I couldn’t see myself. I knew this was bad, and yet I couldn’t bring myself to care. I just put on my clothes and I walked to my class, not really even paying attention to see if I was noticed. I felt like a ghost. It must have been around dinner when someone finally addressed me. I think I bumped into him or something while making my way into the dining hall. He didn’t say anything, just looked at me and said something along the lines of, ‘watch it.’ I wondered at that moment how I looked to him.

Clara told me the next day that I should call somebody. I asked her who. I couldn’t talk on the phone, and anyone who could video call wouldn’t be able to see me. She sighed and called me nihilistic. I Wanted to laugh and say that I was a realist. I couldn’t do either. So, instead I must have shrugged, because Clara jabbed me in the arm. She asked me to at least text my parents. I did.

I skipped class over the next few days. I laid on my bed and considered what might happen if I vanished completely. I didn’t know if anyone would miss me. I thought that Clara might, and possibly mom and dad. That’s only three though. Mom and dad were getting old, and soon it might just be Clara. I thought a lot about Clara in those days laying alone. Even if I didn’t vanish, I might just be one more story to her in the future. One more person who came and went with life. It was entirely possible, no, completely likely we wouldn’t talk after college. Then who would miss me? I didn’t know. I must have gotten about a thousand calls and texts from her and my parents in those days. I still haven’t read them.

There was never really a time where I fell out of my funk. More so a day where I decided I had missed too much in my classes and should probably not waste any more of the time or money laying in bed. I didn’t think I’d ever feel any better, but I doubted I could feel worse. It took me two days to notice. I went out, and I lived, the same as I always had, outside of purposefully avoiding Clara while ignoring the messages from my parents. It wasn’t until I got back to my room on the second day and found Clara inside. I wasn’t sure how she got in, and I didn’t have my board with me, so I went and sat on the bed next to her. I think I tried to touch her shoulder. I don’t remember if I did. Before I could even try to let her know I was there she said “No one has seen or heard from you in days!” She looked around the room, failing to notice me. “I hope that you’ve actually

disappeared this time, because if you haven't I have some very strong words to share!" I scribbled, 'I'm here' onto my board. She didn't seem to notice. "Please just tell me if you're here." She sounded sad. This time I definitely did touch her. I grabbed her hand, but the second I got close she seemed to recoil. Then she sighed. "If you're here, I can't feel you any more." That was the last time I remember Clara acknowledging my possible presence. Then she turned and walked out of the door.

I followed her for a while. She never knew, as far as I could tell. She texted me almost everyday for a stretch of time, but after about three weeks she stopped. I don't think she ever forgot me. I wasn't following her anymore, but I saw her from time to time. I ended up going back home, after campus security came and took my stuff out of my room. When I found my parents, they had been pretending I was with them unknowable for weeks. It was kind of comforting, being acknowledged. Clara would come visit. I never knew how she found out where my parents were. Every time they would mention me to her like I was there she would flinch and look around the room. I don't think she ever knew.

I started fading after a couple years. I didn't want to die in my parents' house, so I left one morning. I didn't know where I was going. Eventually I found myself in some state park, surrounded by trees and flowers. I laid there hoping to fade into the forest around me. It was about a week later when I lost my hearing. Then another month before I couldn't see. I wish that I could say I minded. I still felt the ground. I knew I was there. I don't know how long it was before I lost that too. There's a chance I'm still there in that forest of trees and flowers. I don't know anymore. My memories have started to fade. I don't remember what my parents look like.

Lemon Cookies

By Amelia Kunko

poetry

I pour the extract from the little brown bottle,
watching as the fragrant liquid
seeps into the flour
and turns the mixture beige.
My father folds in
the remaining ingredients:
half a tablespoon of baking soda
and a pinch of salt.
I watch him stir
with the same attention he shows me
as I point out people walking dogs
during our Sunday outings
and with the same
keenness he possesses
during dinner debates
of Zeppelin or Beatles.
It is a concealed kind of affection,
disguised behind the promise
of sharing
frosted January drives
to the vacant mall and back,
and baking.

I stand
in the kitchen
and watch him pick up
the sticky cookie dough
as Robert Plant sings
from the radio.

Let's Do the Time Warp Again

By Kate Foley

fiction

After orchestra rehearsal, I took the short way back to my dorm, boots clicking against the pavement in a steady staccato rhythm. My violin case bounced against my back with each step and my shirt clung to my skin with cold sweat. How was I sweating in the March chill? Over three hours to go and my body was already in panic mode, antibodies rejecting the foreign substance that was me preparing for a date.

My roommate, Natalie, was all too eager to help me. Or torment me. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. She was a “cool kid,” someone with a nickname: *Nat*. A one-syllable name, a grace note. I was “Emma,” a standard two-syllable name, a set of nondescript eighth notes. I wore chunky glasses and had a wardrobe that consisted mostly of t-shirts with words on them.

“Jack, huh?” Natalie said with a wiggle of her eyebrows. This was not the first time tonight she’d made a big deal out of my midnight movie partner. “I wouldn’t have guessed he’d be your type.”

I plucked the tube of lip gloss from her hands. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, I just figured you’d end up with some scrawny nerd you met through Model UN or something.”

“Jack’s a nerd. He likes *Star Wars* and superhero movies and stuff.”

“Any human male with a pulse likes *Star Wars*.”

I shrugged and rearranged the way my bangs fell across my forehead. “Speculating about whether Jack is my ‘type’ is a little premature, anyway. This might not even be a date.”

“Of course it’s a date.” Natalie flopped onto my bed to watch me fiddle with my clothes in the full-length mirror. Her Lebanon Valley College sweatshirt signaled that she’d made the rare choice to stay in for the night. It was like we’d fallen victim to a body swap. “Why in the world would you think it’s *not* a date?”

“I don’t know. Aren’t you supposed to be clearer about those things when you ask somebody out? He just asked if I wanted to see the movie with him.”

“It’s a *midnight movie*, Emma. Nothing platonic happens after midnight.”

“What do you think is going to ‘happen’ exactly?”

“You know . . .” Natalie wiggled her eyebrows again.

I whirled around to gape at her. “Nat, *no*.”

“Why not? It’s about time you got some; you’re too uptight. You could use a good—”

“I’m going to stop you right there and leave you to your filthy thoughts.”

Natalie cackled at me as I fled to the communal bathroom. Despite having to share one stall with fifteen other girls, I was sure Natalie’s mind was still dirtier than this toilet.

But maybe Natalie wasn’t *totally* wrong. Maybe it was time I got out there more. Fall semester, I’d sworn to stay focused on schoolwork and adjust to college lifestyle. It was the perfect chance for me to leave the nightmare fuel that was my high school dating life behind me. The handful of dates I’d gone on fell into three categories when it came to the reasons why they were a flop:

1. I said something stupid, thanks to nervous talking.
2. I rambled about topics the other person wasn’t interested in (climate change, local elections, Carnegie Hall, etc.).
3. I wasn’t as forward as the guy hoped I’d be.

So when I’d moved into my LVC dorm, I told myself dating wasn’t worth the nausea when the guy and I never ended up being a match anyway. Between orchestra rehearsals and high-stress political science classes and Model UN, I didn’t have time for extra outings. But then Jack asked if I wanted to see the midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and his smile was directed only at me and he’d asked me out even though I was wearing a t-shirt with Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s face on it and I couldn’t say no.

Was it really a date though if RBG was on your chest when the boy asked you to go?

Time passed in an allegro whirlwind as I pondered Jack’s motivations and Natalie begged me to let her contour my face. Midnight came and I ducked away from Natalie’s makeup brush to leave.

Jack strode up the path as I stepped outside. Even though campus was poorly lit, I could tell he was wearing the same purple button-down he’d worn the day we’d met. I remembered because it was the closest thing to a “meet cute” I’d ever experienced in my life.

We were two weeks into freshman year, we both reached for the last slice of pizza in the cafeteria, witty repartee was exchanged when I made a crack about him already having a mountain of food on his plate, and I ended up winning the slice. Then I spent the rest of the meal with my cheeks burning hotter than the pizza oven when I realized he and I were sitting at the same table. Apparently, we shared mutual friends. Thirty seconds into meeting Jack and I’d snarked about his eating habits before trading names.

Maybe it was less of a “meet cute” and more of a “meet flop.”

“Hey,” Jack greeted me. “You’re awake.”

“Well . . . yeah.” I was on track to graduate a year early and head to law school, but these were the words I came up with.

“I’m kidding. You just almost always duck out of game night before eleven, so it’s weird to see you up this late. Kind of like seeing your teacher at the grocery store.”

This time, I managed a laugh. Jack’s smile never wavered. It was his default expression.

We walked through campus, just a few street lamps to light our way through twisting back pathways. March at midnight was cold when you didn’t wear a jacket, but Natalie thought it’d be better if I wore one less layer (“Sexy! Alluring! Show off those curves!”). Shivering in the dark, I didn’t feel sexy; I just felt small. I had no clue what to talk about without the buffer of our friends. At least in a group of four or more I could hide in other people’s dialogue when my mind was running on empty.

Jack saved me from myself. “First *Rocky Horror* showing?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn’t even know LVC hosted midnight movie events.”

“They’re not very well advertised,” Jack said. “Or well attended. Chicken or the egg, right?”

“Right,” I said. It seemed like the right answer.

Jack held the door to the movie theater open for me, a perfect gentleman. The zipper of his jacket bumped my waist as I moved past him. *He’d* worn a jacket tonight.

We picked seats in the middle: neutral, not too close to the screen, not too far away from it. Jack let me into the row first. I sat down, aware of every creak in my bones, every shift of my clothes. I smoothed out the new wrinkles in my shirt.

Jack’s cheeks flushed the color of orchids. From the cold? “It’s been ages since I’ve been to one of these.”

“A *Rocky Horror* showing?”

“Yeah, my parents would take me every year to the Hershey Theatre since 2009. You could pay for a whole bag of props there: noisemakers, rice, all of it.”

Why would you need rice for a movie showing? “Oh, wow. That’s cool.”

“Too bad they don’t have that here. They probably didn’t want the mess.”

I nodded like I knew. “Probably. So, the Hershey Theatre shows this? That’s a big venue. I had no idea *Rocky Horror* was still that popular.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jack shifted in his seat like he could barely contain his excitement. He leaned forward, then back, then forward again, grinning all the while. “There’s a huge cult following. It’s a great Halloween tradition.

We went each year until I got busier in high school. I'm surprised your parents never took you."

"My parents were more the . . . 'political rally, academic lecture, night at the symphony' types."

"Emma!"

A distant voice announced itself, knocking on the door of our little world of two movie theater chairs. Dan shuffled sideways into our row, carrying a clipboard and a small black tube. His gangly legs made a mess of walking: he tripped and fumbled and forced himself past the other chairs until he reached us, grinning so wide I could see the evidence of his high school braces. They'd done a good job on him.

"I didn't know you were coming." It was an innocuous enough statement coming from anyone *but* Dan, but I'd known him long enough to catch the subtle dig. *I didn't know you'd let loose enough to come to a midnight Rocky Horror showing.* "I mean, I knew *you'd* be here."

Jack and Dan did one of those bro fist-bumps all male-identifying people seemed to intrinsically know how to do. Was it a learned skill passed down from father to son? Something inherent in their genes? Another item for the list.

"You know each other?" I gestured between the two of them.

"We both go to video game club," Jack said. "Dan usually crushes me at everything."

"What can I say? I'm a Mario Kart master."

"But how do—" Jack started, his eyebrows pinching as he looked at Dan and me in turn.

A warning sound like the screech of string instruments filled my head. How to describe my long and complicated history with Dan . . . Did I introduce him as my high school rival who fought tooth and nail to snatch the Valedictorian title away from me, a goal at which he ultimately succeeded? Or did I introduce him as the loudmouthed basketball player who was *much* too pushy in every sense of the word? Even if he'd won Valedictorian, at least I'd won my dignity when I turned him down for a date. Three times.

"We knew each other in high school," Dan said. He didn't take his eyes off me even as he answered Jack. "Haven't crossed paths much here, though. Emma's probably still salty about getting Salutatorian. Right, Emma?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

"But hey, kudos to you for getting her to come to something like this, man." Dan slapped Jack's shoulder like he was congratulating him on a football win and not on asking me out. "I was never able to get Emma to go to anything with me past nine o'clock. She's an eighty-year-old at heart."

"Ha ha," I monotoned.

When a weighty silence fell, Dan turned his attention to me once again. With a jerk of his chin, he said, “You a virgin?”

I almost choked on my own inhale. “*Excuse* me?”

If Dan’s question shocked me, Jack’s comment sucker-punched me.

“Of course she’s not,” Jack laughed. “No way.”

I gaped at him. “*What?*”

“I’m not buying it.” Dan sucked air through his teeth. “She’s definitely got ‘first time’ vibes.”

Blood boiling, I gripped the arm rest to swivel myself around and face Dan head-on. It took every ounce of my concentration not to make my voice high-pitched and shaky. “First of all, what I choose to do or not to do with my body is none of your damn business. Second of all—”

“Whoa, chill,” Dan chuckled. The gleeful glint in his eyes reminded me of one of the many reasons why I did my best to avoid him on campus. “I just meant, are you a *Rocky Horror* virgin?”

Embarrassment and rage sat heavy in my stomach. What color was my face right now? “Oh. No, I haven’t—”

“She’s seen it,” Jack interrupted.

I shot him a look, equal parts, “Why are you speaking for me?” and, “You’re wrong.”

“That’s what I thought.” Dan brandished his black tube. Lipstick.

“I’m so sorry,” Jack said to me.

Dan cupped his free hand around his mouth and announced, “We’ve got another virgin!”

The twenty-some people in the auditorium, sans Jack, whooped and applauded. To my ears, the noise came from hundreds. I let the cushioned chair envelop me. This date was so not getting started on the right foot.

I flinched when Dan practically threw himself over Jack to draw on my face with the crimson lipstick: *Lady Danger*.

I tried to squirm away from him, but there was no room to lean back except into my chair as Dan shoved the tube into my cheek. The artificial scent, somewhere between crayon and chocolate, tickled my nostrils. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Dan capped the lipstick with a flourish. “I love it when we have virgins. Enjoy the show, you two!”

Dan left and I was granted more oxygen. Dizzying mortification gave way to confusion. I touched my cheek as if it could burn me. My fingertips came away stained the color of summer berry-picking.

“What did he draw?”

“A ‘v,’” Jack said. A heavy rest, a full measure of it, at least. He averted his eyes, scratched the back of his head. “For ‘virgin.’”

This bizarre assault had flushed my nerves out of my system, at least for the time being. “What’s the point of this?”

Jack never got the chance to answer. The auditorium exploded with noisemakers: hand clappers, cowbells, blowouts, kazoos. Student activity organizers jumped up and down in front of the screen, delighting in their chaos.

“All right, *virgins!*” Dan shouted from the front. “Come on up!”

Come on up?

Shit.

Dan was back. Dan was back and grabbing my arm. Dan was dragging me through the row of chairs. Dan was dragging me to the front of the auditorium. The front of the auditorium. The front—

I jerked to a stop next to a girl shorter and thinner and—if it was possible—more stunned than me. The ‘v’ on her cheek blended into her blush.

“Look at all these virgins!” Dan shouted to the rest of the crowd, the lucky ones who got to watch instead of participate. Dan gestured to us as if we were prize chickens at a 4-H fair. I’d never wanted to punch him more. “Are you ready?”

The crowd cheered back. I found Jack’s broad frame in the center of the auditorium. He clapped with a small smile, but there wasn’t much gusto to it. He shrugged at me, ducked his gaze. I fumed. He’d set me up, hadn’t he? He’d set me up and didn’t even have the nerve to meet my eyes. I was going to kill him.

Well, I was going to kill Dan first.

“Every *Rocky Horror* virgin must go through the initiation process, no ‘ifs,’ ‘ands,’ or ‘buts’ about it.” Dan paced in front of us, still clutching his clipboard. “Well . . . there will be *butts*.”

Dan stopped in front of me and wiggled his eyebrows in my direction. I didn’t return the favor.

“Virgins!” Dan barked, ever the drill sergeant.

“Turnaroundbendover.”

Excuse me???

The girl showed her back to the audience. With the demeanor of someone trudging toward the electric chair, she folded in half, grabbing her calves. Disembodied, I watched myself do the same.

“Everyone else, on the count of three: one, two, three—”

“*Fuck you!*” The chorus of voices reverberated in my bone marrow. My neighbor tugged on my sleeve. It was safe to straighten up. Not that it would ever be safe to show my face again.

“Bravo, brava.” Dan applauded us and motioned that we could leave. He grinned extra wide when I passed. I let my shoulder knock into his. He only laughed louder.

I couldn’t get away fast enough. Snickers followed me closer than my own shadow.

“Emma—” Jack started when I passed him.

“Don’t.” I hated how my words quivered. I was never the type of person who could stand up for herself without emotion taking hold of my vocal cords. “That was completely uncalled for and you *set me up*—”

“I didn’t set you up!” Jack reached for my arm, but I yanked it away. He followed me down the aisle, away from our seats. “I swear. I was trying to get you out of it. That’s why I was telling Dan you weren’t a virgin; I thought you could duck down and avoid it.”

“You should’ve told me ahead of time!” A few heads turned and I lowered my voice, eager to avoid yet more unwanted attention. “I was completely unprepared—”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t have come,” Jack said. “You would’ve been too worried about someone catching you in a lie and dragging you into the ritual anyways, and then—”

“That should’ve been my choice to make. *Mine*.” I jabbed my finger at my chest for emphasis. “And what the hell kind of ritual is this anyway? People get off on watching *Rocky Horror* virgins show their asses to the crowd? It’s humiliating.”

Jack shrugged, getting more and more sheepish by the second. Good. He should be ashamed. “It’s tradition. They’ve done it for years.”

“It’s tradition.’ Just because something is old doesn’t mean it’s necessary. This isn’t 2009.” The lights in the auditorium dimmed around us, but I was on a roll. “You’re so stuck in this time warp of nostalgia that you haven’t stopped to look around you and see that things have changed.”

Someone a few rows ahead turned around to shush me. The screen illuminated as the movie began. But the most distracting part of this scene was the fact that Jack was smirking at me.

“What?” I whisper-shouted.

“Nothing. Just something you said.”

“You think this is funny?”

“You’ll see why in a little while.”

Several more people shushed us, hisses and murmurs of, “It’s starting.” Jack gestured to our seats.

“Come on,” he said when he saw me hesitating. “Give it one more chance? The worst of it’s over. I promise you’ll like the movie.”

I didn’t think he could promise anything at this point, but the only thing more humiliating than bending over in front of my peers was letting Dan have the satisfaction of watching me storm out afterwards. I marched past Jack and returned to my seat. To think that half an hour ago, I was fretting over whether or not I should leave my hand on the armrest in case Jack wanted to hold it. Now, I kept my arms crossed, fuming as the movie began.

Jack leaned to the side, breath tickling my neck. “You know all the cues, right?”

“What cues?”

“Like audience participation. You shout things at the screen at certain times.”

“I think I’ve had enough audience participation to last me a lifetime.”

Jack coughed, like he couldn’t decide whether he should laugh or look guilty. “It’s just for fun,” he said. “*Everyone* will do it this time. No embarrassment, I promise. I can prompt you.”

I didn’t respond, pretending I was focusing on the opening scene. If this date was going to be a disaster, I might as well try to enjoy the film.

Right away, I could tell this wasn’t any ordinary movie. This was a campy, dreamlike, hallucinatory drug trip of wacky characters and catchy songs and vibrant costumes and *weirdness* for sake of weirdness. And it was entrancing.

I listened to the students around me yell in unison, slowly catching on to the rhythm. The first time Brad appeared on the screen, Jack’s shout of, “Asshole!” made me jump. Which made him laugh. Which made me smile for a second before I remembered I was still mad at him.

But by the middle of the movie, I joined Jack in calling Janet a slut and criticizing the Narrator’s lack of neck. With every chorus of, “Asshole!” I pictured myself yelling it in Dan’s smug face. Each shout let a bit of my bottled-up rage slip from my lips, left a little more room for Dr. Frank-N-Furter and the rest of the gang to burrow themselves inside my heart. In spite of everything, they made me laugh.

And when Jack leapt from his seat without any warning and offered me his hand, my newfound lightness let me regard him with curiosity instead of annoyance.

“It’s time,” he explained.

“Time for what?”

The thrum of a guitar made my stomach swoop. All the students cheered. The flash of colors on the screen reflected on Jack’s face, lit up the crinkles near the corners of his eyes.

“Time Warp.” He said the words like a prayer. And suddenly I understood the smirk he’d given me when I’d told him off. “Everyone dances along.”

I accepted his hand, let him help me up. “But I don’t know the steps.”

“Just follow me.” Jack took my arms and moved them, a puppeteer. “Hands on your hips.”

And then we were off: twenty or so college students dancing in harmony, some of them covered in glittery makeup, some in heels, some no

fancier than me in my plaid flannel. Jack followed the steps in perfect rhythm. I fumbled along a second behind, clumsily waving my hands or jumping to the side when instructed to do so. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't graceful and it wasn't cute, but I'd never heard Jack's laugh burst from his chest like that, like it came from his whole body and not just his mouth. I'd never seen his eyes squint shut because there was nowhere else for his smile to go. I'd never seen the signs, never realized that we were both clueless. He might have known the steps to "Time Warp," but neither of us knew the steps to this dance: the one of two friends who didn't know where to put their hands or when to say that joke or how to wear their clothes. We were so nervous and caught up on not stepping on our partner's foot that we missed the fact that the other was stumbling too.

Both of us, stumbling.

But in that moment, I was glad I wasn't the only one tripping over my own two feet. It felt good to be a part of something, to be the same as anybody else in this crowd, to feel like more than the crimson 'v' emblazoned on my cheek.

The song ended and we collapsed into our chairs, panting and giggling. I was too punch-drunk to remember to be angry. The story on the screen was too immersive, too enthralling to let me stew in my indignation. For once, I let it all go. *Let my hair down*, as Natalie liked to tell me to do. I let myself enjoy this moment in the early a.m., in the protection of darkness, next to a cute boy who'd shown me the steps to a dance I didn't know. I let myself forgive.

But when Dan waited by the doors as we left, credits still rolling, and asked me with a sneer, "How'd it feel to pop your *Rocky Horror* cherry?" I didn't forgive. That time, I flipped him off.

Lies

By Emily Crocker

poetry

Lies are honey, sweet and sticky.
They cling to my skin like spider webs.
They conceal the bitter truths I do not wish to taste.
Lies are a burning fire, comforting and blinding.
Providing a superficial warmth and a reprieve from the world I am forced to see.
Lies are seductive and entrancing, bold and bright.
They are a transformative kind of magic.
They make the old young, the rich poor, and the meek brave.
They conceal who I am in a shroud of mist and fog until I am no more,
Until I am a crumpled, water-stained note shoved in the pages of a gilded novel.
I am the lie. And the lie is me.
I wish I could remember the truth.

Method Acting

By Anastasia Dziekan

poetry

Let's go out into the woods to either make a movie or die.
Let's get high off our asses our first time smoking, delirious
With laughter and incapable of saying our lines.
Let's waste a day of filming even though time was already tight.
Let's have a quick little affair with the pressure.

Let's sleep on the floor because we didn't think it'd be so cold,
And let's shoot on location and live on location.
It's called method acting.
(Look it up.)
In this cursed cabin that we know, at the end of the shoot,
We are going to have to burn to the ground
So that no other hapless souls make our same
Cinematic mistake.

The director hears voices whispering to him
From deep in the forest, beyond the trees,
Calling him, and he follows their beckoning,
Leaving us and wandering, in the dead of night.
And when we find him on the freezing ground, and
Wrap him in a blanket, and walk him back to set,
He insists he only left because he was so fed up
With our unprofessional antics.

Let's spill the leading man's blood. A worthy sacrifice.
To see it drip down the screen, yes, as long as it keeps flowing,
The audience will love it.
And we can't afford props anyway,
So we'll have a working chainsaw, live and screaming,
Right up against our love interest's neck,
And when you can see her pulse pound with nerves,
It will be an easter egg for the true fans,
Just like the matte painted moon
Just like the limp our actor isn't faking.
What kind of klutz trips over a branch when running from a killer?
We used to scream at the slasher screen,
But our own star sprained his ankle on our first shooting day

And the director poked his wound with a stick.

We're going to die out here. We're doomed,
We're all doomed to rot under spotlights with rubber knives sticking out of
our backs

While the cameras will still be rolling.

There aren't any roads away from this place.

They all just take you in loops, twisted loops,

Back to the cabin, back to the set, back to convention panels

Where fans wearing your screaming face on their t-shirts

Ask if you think the director went too far,

And you, knowing that you saved money on the makeup budget by getting
real bruises

And were half-convinced all that freaky Latin chanting wasn't just gibberish

And took a role in a movie that will never win an award other than a lime
green sticker

In the back of the Blockbuster and an angry screed from catholic mothers
who call it a

"Video nasty"

Just to help out an old friend

Will say,

"Maybe he didn't go far enough."

And laugh

And live

And die

Onstage.

Missing Diamonds

By Jasmine Ruiz

creative nonfiction

I am not the biggest fan of people. I love being alone and not having to deal with others. So, who the hell let me get a job as a saleswoman?

It's the start of the pandemic in March of 2020. I went home for spring break. But even if I had stayed, I would have gotten kicked out just like everyone else did. So, I go home to Texas. I had to change my flight after being told we had an extended spring break. Two weeks of spring break? We're in heaven. But then it got worse instead of better. *You're not going to be able to come back. Come grab what you need and let's figure out how to finish the semester at home.*

I didn't really have a job, or at least I thought I wasn't going to have one and I sure wasn't thinking about getting one.

"Mija no estas buscando trabajo?" (Honey, are you looking for a job?) read a Facebook message.

It came from my childhood best friend's aunt. I had met and seen her a few times when I was younger. I had applied for an online summer internship through Ursinus. So technically, I wasn't looking for a job, but I knew my parents weren't going to be happy seeing me "just sitting" at home all day. I replied, and I got a quick response.

It's only a few days a week. You'll be tending to customers and selling jewelry. All you must be able to do is hold a conversation in both Spanish and English. You don't need to have any experience or knowledge of jewelry; we will teach you everything. The girls we have are wonderful, you'll fit right in with them. It is a little slow right now due to the pandemic, so you'll have time to be able to learn and chill but I need you on the weekends. Whenever you have time to pass by the shop, I'll talk to you about it a little more and see how you feel about it.

It was too good to be true, but I answered anyway and agreed to come in and see how it was. I knew from having them on Facebook that they had a jewelry shop and that it was close to my neighborhood, but I did not know exactly where it was located. We set a date and time for me to come in.

T-Mart. That's the name of the raggedy looking furniture outlet which we were inside of. A place I passed by all the time. I didn't think people actually went in there and especially not for jewelry. The little shop is a completely different business than T-Mart, but it was inside in a small random corner. They sell mostly gold and diamonds, but it's the type of jewelry shop you walk past because it's so random, and the prices are decent

enough to think there must be something wrong with the jewelry itself. Maybe it's fake. At least that's what I thought. No one goes in with the intention of buying some diamonds; they go in for furniture.

This was right after the first COVID semester. I was going to start my internship soon, so we decided only a few days a week and Friday-Sunday all day. I thought I would only be there for a couple of months until I came back to Ursinus, but I was very wrong. I was there for a little over a year. A very long and slow year.

There was this one time a lady came in to pick up her chain, and for some reason, I could not find it.

"Todas levantense y buscen!" (Everyone got up and looked for it) I was already mad even before the customer started freaking out herself.

"Y'all lost my shit, didn't y'all?" She had a lopsided big hair knot on the top of her head with no mask, of course, and pink pjs even though it was like 3 pm.

"No ma'am, it's here, but we've just been really busy, and there's a lot of chains to look through, which is why I asked for their help," I said forcefully, smiling. What I really wanted to say was, calm the hell down, your small ass chain is in here with the rest of these thin ass gold chains.

I looked back, and knowing it would annoy her, I said, "Ma'am, you need a mask for us to be able to help you."

"Don't worry about what I have on and look for my damn chain. By the time I come back with a stupid mask you better have my chain."

The minimum wage in Texas is still 7.25. I got paid commission too, but that really didn't matter during the week. We were only busy on weekends unless there was some major holiday coming up like Valentine's Day or Christmas. Regardless of when it was, we always had a problem of some kind, and it was usually just because Benny forgot to tell us he moved the repairs again.

Benny's Fine Jewelry. That's the name of the out-of-place jewelry store that I worked at, which personally I think should have been named Jasmine's or Mayeli's Fine Jewelry because we were the ones always dealing with everything. He was never there, and my coworkers and I were the ones trying to resolve the problems. Two twenty-year olds and a seventeen-year-old running a jewelry store which by the way was in a bad side of town. We got a whole "meeting" every time someone 'suspicious' came around, which was always where he would practically tell me to act stupid if they ever had a gun to my head.

"When they tell you to open the register, or the glass cases tell them your manager is not around and you don't have the keys. If they insist on walking to the register slowly and fake a fall, the gun is probably not even loaded they just want to scare you."

Are you kidding? If someone has a gun to my head, they can get whatever they want. But he was more worried about his money and jewelry. I should have run then.

I also should have run when the lady was screaming at me over some missing diamonds, according to her.

“Do you girls have a diamond tester?”

Lizbeth turned to look at me, and I shook my head.

“No, we don’t sir.”

That’s not the only time I had lied about that. I always told everyone we didn’t have one or that the batteries were dead, or that the manager had to be there to use the tester. That’s what I was taught to say because testing diamonds was a waste of time. The man proceeded to ask for a repair which he had left earlier that day. It was a gold ring with a couple of diamonds on it. Lizbeth checked the size that was on the paper before giving it to him. He inspected it closely and left but minutes later.

“WHERE ARE MY FUCKING DIAMONDS?”

Again, Lizbeth turned around to look at me, waiting for my response. I shouldn’t even have been there. It was a day I wouldn’t typically go, and in fact, I had taken another day off that week because I was working on my internship, but she called me and told me she really needed me. You don’t even have to do anything. You can sit in the back with your laptop and do your work while she works. I’ll even pay you an extra dollar an hour today. So, as anyone would, I went in.

“Just stay calm and ask her what the problem is.” I told her. I didn’t personally want to deal with someone screaming in my face, and again, I shouldn’t have even been there.

“Ma’am can you tell me what the problem is?” Asked Lizbeth.

“THE PROBLEM IS YOU STOLE MY DIAMONDS AND GAVE ME FAKE ASS STONES.”

“We didn’t do that ma’am. There is no reason for us to swap out your diamonds. We can test them if you would like so you can see they’re real.”

“THEY ARE NOT REAL! I JUST CHECKED THEM! In fact, they told me to come back and ask for my diamonds because yall swapped them out. SO, GIVE ME MY DAMN DIAMONDS!”

She was still yelling at poor little Lizbeth, so I got up and went to the counter.

“Ma’am, can I see the ring?”

As she handed me the ring, in came her husband. I grabbed it and inspected it closely myself. Nothing was wrong with the ring, and the diamonds looked like legit diamonds, from my knowledge. But, because the customer is always right, and we don’t do repairs (the repairman does), I proceeded to take it to him. I explained that she was screaming at us

because she was telling us we swapped out her diamonds and gave her fake ones. I had to explain because he didn't understand English, only Spanish. He looked at it and laughed. We both knew he didn't do that and didn't need to. I took it back and tried to explain to her that he remembered the ring

“All he did was size it, ma'am. Matter a fact, he didn't even touch the diamonds.”

“I KNOW HE TOOK THEM AND HE BETTER GIVE THEM BACK.”

“I'll test them for you so you can see they're real.”

“You girls told me you didn't have a diamond tester,” interrupted her husband.

Crap.

The more we tried to reassure them, the more they would scream and demand to see the manager, or they would call the cops. So, we called the manager, who of course responded with “deal with it.” But dealing with it wasn't an option after they called the cops and did not want to talk with us. I honestly don't know what happened after because the cops only wanted to talk to our manager. That was not the only time the cops were called while I was there.

The management wasn't good. They didn't know how to communicate with us, and we were basically running their whole business for them. The commission was worth it sometimes, and they were close family friends, which is what made it so hard for me to leave, I felt guilty for some reason. But thank God I'm back at Ursinus now. Studying math again. Which are not fun classes to take, but at least I won't have to deal with people in the future. Give me a fancy desk with some numbers, please.

Moment of Tranquility

By Rimsha Maryam

poetry

Crisp air completely fills my lungs,
wonderful stinging as I inhale,
the plastic back of my coat growing colder and colder.

I sink deeper in the ocean of white,
glistening and sparkling and reflecting
the moonlight.

A quick gust of wind bites at my exposed skin
and throws up a delicate cloud of snow dust –
slowly melting away on paled cheeks,
lightly settling on my lashes,
framing my view of the deepest purple sky.

Moonlight shines over me as clear as day,
feeling drowsy under a forever unending expanse.
The mattress of powder cradles my sides.

I draw out a long breath,
watch the vapor rise and dissipate.

Blaring
sirens of
a police car
rush past a block away,
making a screeching turn,
snatching my tranquil mind,
instantly vanishing into an empty night.

I heave up my numb body,
brushing off patches of snow clinging to my shoulders and knees.
Sighing another misty cloud,
I pick up my pace back home,

I mustn't catch a cold.

One Last Afternoon

By Marie Sykes

fiction

Their shoulders and knees had to be covered, but oh how much easier was that in January, when it might even be as cold as fifteen degrees Celsius instead of forty-five. But they were still here, and it was only forty-three since it was the morning. They had made sure and got there before the heat really hit and the vendors shut down.

But the souqs of Dubai were like this, outdoors and with little shade and with every shop blasting fans or spraying mist; they knew full and well what they were walking into. If they wanted that tea Safiyah had found, they would have to brave the souqs together.

“It is here,” Safiyah promised. “Someone brought it to the Jordanian embassy the other day and said they found it at Ahmed’s in the spice souq.”

“Did they say anything else?” Jae asked.

“Like what?”

“Like the name of the shop?”

“It’s just Ahmed’s. He has a red sign, though,” she added.

Lydie fought the urge to laugh at both of them.

“Aren’t there a million Ahmed’s around here?” Jae asked.

“Jae, why would there be any more information beyond that? That would make it too easy,” Lydie told her and the three of them laughed as Safiyah grabbed their hands and Jae consulted her phone’s map again. Jae had only been in Dubai since winter after her dad got transferred from Seoul’s office. Half the reason why they all had to visit the souqs was because Jae told them she hadn’t been yet.

Lydie didn’t know how Safiyah was in pants that day (she was hot enough in her long skirt), but Safiyah had lived on the Persian Gulf longer than her, with her father being one the lead Jordanian diplomats in Dubai.

Lydie felt her sticky hand peel off of Safiyah’s as she checked her phone quickly.

“Look over there,” Jae pointed to some of the beaded pillows on a cart. They were still in the textiles souq, with all their storefronts, carts, and stands scattered and cramped together in the somewhat narrow row they had entered. This area, at least, had wooden beams overhead with coverings woven through to block out the early morning sun. But despite the heat, all the gorgeous pashminas, shirts, pants, shoes, rugs, pillows, and every other textile known to the world still looked stunning enough to distract them from the task at hand.

“We need to find Ahmed’s store before it shuts down for lunch,” Safiyah said, after spending a moment looking over the pashminas and examining the designs on the scarves.

“We’ll get there,” Lydie told her.

Most people in their situations didn’t have the luxury of time, but for once Lydie knew she would finally be guaranteed to be somewhere for three years. Every city was a question of how long and when is the next place. Especially the last place.

“Again?” They had only been in Canada for a year and half...

“This is the last one, I promise, before you graduate,” her mom told her. They had only been here long enough to get a taste of what it meant to be Canadian other than having a good passport and going to her grandma’s for Canada Day, but not long enough for her to truly experience a “true Canadian winter,” as they told her. “It’ll be an adventure, Lydie. You’ll love Dubai, almost everyone else is an expat like us there.”

“Really?”

“Ninety percent of the city.”

Going from a summer of twenty degrees being hot and to a place where the nicest days were “only” twenty degrees was quite the change, but Lydie would’ve been lying if she said her wanderlust hadn’t been calling her. And so they moved a few months later.

Jae started getting into haggling with a vendor, but they let Safiyah take over. You could always get a better deal when someone spoke Arabic, and even with Lydie’s impressive one year of Arabic class, she could pick up some words.

“Beautiful, what price?” Safiyah said a lot more than that, but that’s what Lydie heard. Most of the words Lydie knew related to food or were things like “habibi” (“girl”), “yallah” (let’s go), “inshallah” (“if God wills it,” more commonly used as “yeah, right, if God wills it”) and “radiyu” (“radio”).

A few numbers were thrown around, but Lydie still had to mentally exchange everything back to Euros to really understand prices. After spending a good chunk of her life in Europe, she had had a hard enough time with dollars, and dirhams were still far from automatic.

Ultimately, Safiyah told the vendor they would take three for the price of two or they would just walk away. There were plenty of other vendors down the hall and after all, it was summer, although that didn’t mean they wouldn’t need them. It seemed like anywhere you went, they cranked their ACs colder than Ski Dubai, and being soaked with sweat only made the cold worse.

The vendor “gave in” – “they always mark it up because they know they don’t really sell for that much,” Safiyah would say – and they took their

pashminas, but Safiyah didn't seem as happy as she normally was as they strolled through the tightly packed street.

Safiyah's phone buzzed once again.

"Shouldn't you take that? We have time," Lydie told her.

"No, not really," Safiyah muttered under her breath. "My mom can wait. Let's keep going."

Lydie and Jae exchanged a look.

"Do we ask?" Lydie's face said.

"Let's wait a moment," Jae mouthed back.

"Let's find those teas," Lydie suggested, Jae and herself catching back up to Safiyah who had already pulled down the street. "And then we can sit down somewhere quiet."

"And we'll have enough time," Jae told her with a poke.

Time wasn't something expats were usually given, but for once in Lydie's life, she found she finally had it. And more than that, she would be with Jae and Safiyah. She never even dreamt of finding friends she could connect to so well, especially after Canada. She enjoyed her time there fine, but attending a non-international school for the first time left her feeling more left out than ever, even if they shared the same passport. And worst of all, they all expected her to be there forever, but she always felt the pressure of the clock was always ticking down and she had to act in the moment. Before everything else was snatched away. Before she was whisked off to the next place.

"But you've only been here for three years?" they had told her when she mentioned the move.

"Actually, it's been less than two," she told them. "But that's the life."

It was a talent and a curse to be able to slip in and out of people's lives like she had always been there or never was there at all.

But looking to Jae and Safiyah, she had never felt anything so different. They just got it. And they weren't worried about what would happen if they invested into a relationship that could be gone the next day if someone's job was transferred or a foreign war broke out or a shortage appeared a thousand miles away. They understood that it could happen to any of them, any day, and so they made all their moments together count.

The aromas hit them before they even saw the barrels of spices. The whole air shifted, as if the world was tinted a more red color. Maybe that was just all the chili and curry that had diffused into the air, but even though there were no signs and nothing official to signify the shift, Lydie knew at once they had arrived.

"This is it," Safiyah said with a small smile. Whatever had troubled her before washed away. But even with her soft voice, they could hear it all the same over the countless voices chattering in the background in more languages that Lydie could count.

“Time to find Ahmed’s,” Lydie said.

“Wherever that may be,” Jae told her.

Lydie grabbed Safiyah’s hand before she could even go back to thinking about whatever was on her phone and Jae grabbed the other, and so they walked hand in sweaty hand, exploring the spice souq until they found out where this shop was.

“That’s the red sign!” Safiyah said, pointing with Jae’s hand still in her hand.

“And that’s the iron gate going down on the shop,” Lydie pointed out.

“Not if we get there first,” Jae darted ahead, dragging them behind her. “One more minute,” she shouted through the crowd.

“Please,” Safiyah asked in Arabic.

“Girls, it’s hot, it’s noon, and it’s time for me to rest,” he answered back in English, smiling all the same with the gate only half closed.

Common sales tactic.

Jae darted under the gate to look at the teas lining his shelves. Some spices sat in barrels, some teas were in drawers ready to be scooped out, but almost nothing was closed in a bag. This was what made going to the souqs so special.

“Just one little sale,” Lydie pushed. “We’ve been searching all day to find this tea.”

Jae scanned through the different labels they had on the barrels. Lydie could almost see the difference in temperature between the shop and the outside, with its permanent shade and fans.

“Mo recommended it,” Safiyah told him.

“Mo?” the vendor asked, inching the gate up a bit more.

“From down in the Marina.”

He looked at them for a second, nodding, and giving in. “Well, yallah, what tea? I need to rest,” he returned in Arabic once more.

They bought the tea quickly, sweeping the packets into their bags and letting him shut the shop down for the afternoon.

“Now this is it,” Safiyah told them again.

“It better be just as good as you’ve described,” Jae told her. “I’m soaked.”

“Oh, we all are,” Lydie told her, but she had to admit it was funny to see someone’s first Arabian summer, especially since it wasn’t her own.

“Well I think today’s mission was a success,” Safiyah declared.

“Definitely,” Lydie agreed.

“I think today was a sauna,” Jae said.

“Oh, doesn’t she know?” Lydie asked with a small laugh.

“Know what?” Jae stopped sharply and turned to the other two. “What? Know what?”

“Oh, this is still the dry part of summer,” Safiyah told her, and Lydie joined her laughing as Jae stood there pained.

“Remind me to not be here during this part of summer next time,” Jae told them.

“Oh, you’ll survive,” Lydie told her.

But despite the sweat, despite their bags, they found a way to hold hands again as Jae guided them back to the teahouse they found.

But Lydie kept hearing the buzzing of Safiyah’s phone.

“We can wait. You can answer that,” Jae told her.

“No,” she said sharply before holding her tongue. “I’m sorry, it’s just. Ugh.” She pulled her hands away and took it, rattling off some quick Arabic that flew over Lydie’s head except for one word: home.

Safiyah hung up but reached for their hands again.

“Is everything alright?” Lydie asked.

Safiyah paused. “It’s just parent stuff. They’ll take care of it.”

And they held hands for a while, going back to the metro, the teahouse plan long forgotten.

Between everyone’s schedules two weeks passed before they were able to meet for tea, and the heaviness of August they promised Jae had already rolled around.

“This tea smells divine,” Lydie said.

“It needs a few more minutes,” Jae told her. “Hang on.”

They were gathered back at Jae’s and Safiyah had even made fresh chocolate chip cookies for them to drink with the tea.

Safiyah just sighed. “I suppose if we’ve made it this long we can wait a few more,” she tried to sound upbeat but it completely fell flat.

Jae and Lydie looked to the other.

“Oh, I’m fine, don’t give each other that look in front of me,” Safiyah told them, smiling and hiding her phone in her bag as she grabbed their hands. “I’m good. I promise.”

“I’m not-” Lydie started before the timer went off.

“Let’s drink it,” Safiya said, pouring herself a cup of tea.

“Careful, that’s still-” Jae started, but Safiya took a sip. “Really hot.”

Safiyah scrunched up her face and swallowed the tea.

“Yeah, it definitely is,” she said after a minute.

“Do you need water or anything?” Lydie started to stand up, but Safiyah reached out for her before she could leave her chair.

Safiyah forced a smile. “No, no, I’m good.”

They waited a moment for their teas to cool a little more before the others started to try it. Safiyah let hers cool more.

“It’s...” Lydie swirled it in her mouth. It was finally cool enough to really taste it. “Interesting?”

“Yeah, I have never tasted anything like it before,” Safiyah said, a little absent-mindedly.

“Is it just me or does this taste weird?” Jae asked.

“Okay, let me taste it again,” Safiyah said. “It’s different but it’s not, oh,” she said, pressing her lips shut. “That is not the same tea.”

“Well let me check.” Lydie got up and reached for the opaque bag of tea. “Oh,” she looked down at the little white wiggly things that most certainly did not belong in their tea. “I think it’s-”

Jae swore and Lydie turned just in time to see Jae drop her phone. “Safiyah, no.”

“Did it happen?” Safiyah asked weakly.

“What happened?” Lydie asked.

“Jordan Files Suit Against Ruler of Dubai after Princess Haya Reports Missing Children. Dubai Expels All Jordanian Diplomats with Nationals Left to Wonder– why didn’t you tell us something was wrong?” Jae asked.

Lydie’s face dropped, as well as the bag of tea.

“I couldn’t say anything,” Safiyah told her. “I barely knew what was really happening.”

“You’re the one that has twenty-four hours to leave,” Lydie told her.

“I just wanted one last normal day.” Safiyah was crying at this point. They all were. She pulled out her phone and she sent a text. “My mom says I have a few more hours. But there is so much work to do before the plane leaves tomorrow.”

“We can go help you pack,” Jae offered, her voice still breaking.

“I’ve been packed for two weeks,” Safiyah admitted. “It was coming. The fact that Princess Haya escaped with a divorce was one thing, but he was never going to let those kids go.” They sat there for a minute, and Lydie could almost hear the bugs wiggling on the floor.

“What-” Safiyah jumped out of her chair.

“Oh,” Lydie started. “Bugs. The tea has bugs,” she said softly.

Jae spit out a mouthful back into her cup. “Why didn’t you mention that?” Lydie looked at her. “Oh.”

It started with a short chuckle, then a laugh, and then all three were hanging onto the other, laughing and crying and crying some more. They had one last day- no. One last afternoon. They had to make it count.

Time, time, time. Lydie was a fool for thinking she had any grasp on it.

Our Home

By Ryan Savage

poetry

Our family home watches over
a lagoon. It has been doing so
for generations. Nothing changes,
but I too find myself watching,
observing the surroundings.

Seagulls fly overhead screaming
their usual loud calls as they go.
Boats patter by too, forming ripples
that splash onto the nearby docks.

These splashes began to rise,
not with the tide, but over time.

I grabbed my rusted iron net,
not paying any attention to the water,
and scraped away at the barnacle-
riddled pilings, hoping to catch a crab
instead of the empty soda cans.

The water continued to rise,
And, still, we did not notice.
Maybe those damned seagulls
were warning us after all. Crying
that the water was coming.

And it did,
taking our home with it.

Overthinking

By Leo Cox

poetry

Someday the moon will fall
in a sea of meteors.
Obliterate the little mysteries
etched in stone arches, bridges
wet with strawberry gum, carvings on trees.
Promises to shelter skeletons
in each others' closets.
I promise
to stay ignorant. Insignificant.
I asked for a gun
and you gave me a crutch.
I asked for an excuse to sing goodbye
and you gave me the taste of a future
sweating through your lips.
Overhead planes weave between each other,
fish in their element. Spilling milky trails of cloud.
Years pass—I collect them like dirty underwear
on the floor of my closet. In the end
I'll tell you what you want to hear.
You were right. I was the weaker one.

Sea Glass

By Jenna Lozzi

poetry

Whipped in the surf from trash,
Sprawled on the shore to be cherished,
Jagged edges that would cut if stepped on,
Yours were tamed, sanded, and salted
to hide with the shells under the seaweed,
Like an original product of water,

Mouths and bases of bottles,
Were any of you cast into the deep
by someone trying to break a habit?
Windows shattered in a storm,
Tableware from a shipwreck,
You gleam when held to the sun,
All of you swallowed for rebirth,
Cleansed of the sins from your past lives
with a new shape and frosted hue,
No longer part but instead whole.

I am not a diving woman of Jeju-do,
But you are a test of my endurance still.
The shoreline stretches between pieces,
Thousands of footprints are paid in exchange.
I call you the gem of the ocean
because I cannot find pearls.

Seasonal

By Vanessa Worley

poetry

I have spent three months waiting for fruit and now that it has arrived,
I've eaten far too much.

It seems that's what summer's roaring peak is for: Overconsumption.
A crescendo of foliage and fruiting bodies announcing that soon the
warblers will pass overhead
And the deer will lose their red summer coats.

Uncomfortable are our attempts to cling to this warmth and
companionship.

Our backs are slick with sweat as we trek towards the trailhead
together.

Soon the soft wineberries will give way to spiked chestnuts, satiety to
famine.

The hummingbirds hovering at the feeder will shoot south towards nectar
flows

As we tap into the sugar maples for mere drops of syrup.

We are four miles out before we notice the edges of the sycamores are
fading to yellow

And neither of us breathe a word of it.

Other things pass between us, mostly complaints of the heat

And smooth stones we skip across the algae-choked reservoir.

You mention when you are leaving, and I tell you I am going the day after.

We are not stationary by virtue of life's demands,

Nothing is. Even the rocks we climb over have been shifted by
weather this year.

The stones we cast into the water stir up silt and elodea,

Settling into the cool darkness of this seasonal shift far easier than
we will.

Both of us will be gone within the week, and the empty space we no longer
occupy

will slowly fill with chilled air and the sounds of snow geese
gathering on the ice.

Space Invaders

By Kyle Guzy

fiction

“At long last, Earth. Finally, Zorkbar-2. We have arrived.”

“Indubitably, Zorkbar-1. Now we must find a suitable place to announce our conquest of this galaxy. I’ve heard the ‘Superbowl’ is quite popular this time of year.”

The flying saucer hovered over Detroit for a few moments. After tactically maneuvering over to the parking lot just outside Ford Field, Zorkbar-1 majestically landed the aircraft, and the two extraterrestrials quickly exited. Normally one would be alarmed upon coming face-to-face with seven-foot-tall creatures that vaguely resembled Gumby, but the Zorkbar siblings had thought ahead, utilizing human disguises and names as cover until they were positive victory over the human race was assured.

“Remember, Zorkbar-2. The humans are a devious species, so we must not give away ourselves until the timing is absolutely right. We must blend in however necessary.”

“Not to worry, Zorkbar-1. With our fake names and extensive knowledge of their kind, we will have no trouble securing our-”

“HEY!”

The aliens turned around, seeing a man in a fancy outfit with a badge on his chest come running towards them. He seemed to be one of those ‘security guards’ they had heard so much about.

“Stay calm, Zorkbar-1. I know how to defuse this situation,” Zorkbar-2 proclaimed, puffing out their chest.

The security guard approached the two of them, arms crossed. He looked them up and down, then he sighed and shook his head.

“Just what do the two of you think you’re up to?” he asked gruffly.

“What is up, my dude? Have you done much listening to the ‘Call Me Maybe?’ It is very soothing to my very human ears!” Zorkbar-2 inquired.

Zorkbar-1 slapped Zorkbar-2 upside the head and turned back to the officer. “Pardon my friend, he is much the stupid. What seems to be the trouble, friend?”

“What seems to be the trouble? Are you joking?” the security guard scoffed as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “You know you need a pass to park here, right? Not to mention both of you are taking up like twenty spots at once with your... um... what do you call that?”

The aliens turned towards their flying saucer, then they looked at each other, shrugged, then turned back towards the officer.

“Why, that’s a Range Rover, of course!” Zorkbar-1 said.

“Ain’t never seen a Range Rover like that before,” the security guard replied.

“We, uh... ordered it on eBay?” Zorkbar-2 said.

“Oh, that makes sense,” the security guard said with a nod. “You seem like a couple interesting fellows. What are your names?”

“Yes, names. We have very human names, of course,” Zorkbar-1 said. “I am Lamp, and this is Stereo. We are named after very human things.”

The security guard stared blankly at both of them.

“Our parents were hippies,” Zorkbar-2 explained.

“Ah, I see. Well listen, guys. You’re not allowed to park here without a pass, so you either have to pay up, or you gotta move it. Them’s the rules,” the security guard said.

“Please, kind sir, would you make an exception for the both of us?” Zorkbar-1 asked. “We’ve come a long way to get here, and we’d really like to watch the Superbowl.”

“Superbowl?” the security guard asked, raising his eyebrows. “What are you talking about? The Superbowl ain’t for another three months!”

“Then, pray tell, what is the cult meeting within the walls of that giant metal monument for?” Zorkbar-2 asked.

“Oh, you mean the Imagine Dragons concert.”

“Dragons? I, too, would like to think of these serpents,” Zorkbar-1 said. “Madam, we must attend this concert you speak of!”

“You said the wrong thing, fool! It’s ‘sir!’” Zorkbar-2 whispered harshly.

“Apologies,” Zorkbar-1 said. “Madam, we must sir this concert you speak of!”

“Yeah, sorry fellas, but I can’t let you go in unless you pay for a spot or park somewhere else,” the security guard said, shaking his head.

“So be it,” Zorkbar-2 sighed. “How much is it to wrest this ‘parking spot’ you speak of from your possession?”

“About three hundred dollars.”

“Moist crumpets ahoy, that much?!” Zorkbar-1 cried out. “We haven’t a penny to our names, much less thirty-thousands of them!”

“Mayhaps we can offer you something of equal value,” Zorkbar-2 said, reaching into the pocket of their polar bear onesie.

Zorkbar-2 held their fist out to the security guard, dropping a ball of lint into his palm.

“I believe that should cover it,” Zorkbar-2 said.

“Yeah, no. This is... really nice of you, but I’m afraid this ain’t gonna cut it,” the security guard said.

“What? Don’t tell me you require two balls of lint!” Zorkbar-2 said.

“No, you don’t under-”

“Three balls?!”

“Guys-”

“Do you want my body?!”

“No, what are you talking about?! It’s cash only around here. You ain’t got the funds, I can’t help you,” the security guard said.

“The humans have fortified their defenses against us well, Zorkbar-1,” Zorkbar-2 whispered.

“Agreed, Zorkbar-2. They must have known we were coming,” Zorkbar-1 concurred.

“So it would seem. This is why we never tell Zorkbar-8, Zorkbar-11, and Todd anything anymore, Zorkbar-1.”

“Indubitably.”

The aliens were upset, but they couldn’t deny that this matter was out of their tentacles, so they decided to cut their losses and move on, getting back in their flying saucer. After parking on the roof of a nearby Denny’s, the two of them decided that they still needed to get into that stadium to announce their conquest of Earth.

“Now we are far away from the dragons, Zorkbar-2. How are we supposed to claim this planet for the Zorkbar race?”

“Fear not, Zorkbar-1. We shall commandeer a pair of bicycles in the name of the Zorkbar race, thus allowing us to get into the stadium as swiftly as the wind!”

But Zorkbar-2 was scared of bicycles, so they decided to take the subway instead. Upon arriving at the subway station, the two of them walked over to the counter to order their tickets, but Zorkbar-1 held Zorkbar-2 back.

“Hold it, comrade. Danger is afoot.”

“Is it as much danger as that time you consumed those candies that were two days past their ripeness, Zorkbar-1?”

“Worse, Zorkbar-2. We were expected to pay for that parking spot, and I now get the sneaking suspicion that we will be forced to pay for the tickets to ride this metal snake that moves at the speed of light.”

“Ah, indubitably. What shall we do, Zorkbar-1?”

“Fear not, Zorkbar-2. That security guard may have been oblivious to my charms, but I am confident that I will be able to seduce this attendant into giving us our tickets for free with my silver tongue. Observe, fool.”

Zorkbar-1 strode right up to the counter. The attendant looked up at them and smiled.

“Hi, welcome to Detroit Metro, how can I help-”

“Gimme tickets, now,” Zorkbar-1 said.

“Oh. Um, okay, where are you planning on getting off?”

Zorkbar-1 smirked. Things were going very smoothly.

“I would like to go to imagine some dragons. Me and my pal are in a hurry, you see.”

“Imagine some dragons?” the attendant said. “Oh, you mean like the Imagine Dragons concert. I thought that just ended a few minutes ago.”

Zorkbar-2 slammed both hands against the counter. “Blasphemy! We came all the way across the galaxy to-”

Zorkbar-1 quickly smacked them upside the head. “It doesn’t matter whether it just ended or not, we need to get to that stadium, ASAP! That means As Succulently As Peter!”

“Um, okay, well no worries, I’m sure we can figure something-” the attendant started to say.

“Please, surely there’s some other reason we can get in that stadium, is there not?” Zorkbar-1 inquired.

“Well, I think there’s a butter churning competition going on over there at like six...”

“We’ll take it!” Zorkbar-1 said.

“Okay, sure... two tickets to Ford Field... that’ll be... about ten dollars.”

“Finally, an affordable price!” Zorkbar-2 said.

“Fool, ten is more than five!” Zorkbar-1 said.

“What? Blasphemy again!” Zorkbar-2 said. “So, this is the ‘capitalism’ that we’ve heard so much about... a foul beast indeed.”

“Listen guys, I just work here, I don’t really have the patience for-”

“I’ve had enough of this, foul guardian of the butter!” Zorkbar-2 said, reaching inside their onesie. “If you won’t just let us have the tickets, then mayhaps we need to duel you for them!” they said, removing a katana and holding it up over their head.

“Oh my God, who are you people?” the attendant said.

Zorkbar-2 shook the katana over their head. “We’re not people at all, we are the Zorkbars, and we’ve come to claim this planet for ourselves, and nobody is going to-”

“Hey, is that a samurai sword?! Get that outta here!” a police officer yelled from across the subway station, starting to run towards them.

“Gadzooks, we’ve been found out, Zorkbar-2!” Zorkbar-1 said. “Run for it!”

The police officer chased the aliens all throughout the subway station. After being permanently banned from ever riding a subway train again, the two of them ended up back on the curb outside the Denny’s, holding their heads in their hands solemnly.

“Well, we tried our best, but the humans proved to be too much for us,” Zorkbar-2 said with a sigh.

“It is not our fault. Their defenses were most stalwart,” Zorkbar-1 said with a sigh. “Now we shall have to return back to our planet and get bopped on the head by the Kangaroo of Shame.”

“Again,” Zorkbar-2 grumbled.

“Mayhaps it is for the best that we leave these humans to their own devices,” Zorkbar-1 continued with a shrug. “It is clear that they are all wise beyond their years.”

“Yes, the way they leave their gum under things in order to consume it later has truly impressed me, Zorkbar-1.”

“So what do we do now, Zorkbar-2?” Zorkbar-1 asked.

The two of them paused for a moment.

“Cry?” Zorkbar-2 suggested.

“Indubitably. But first, we require sustenance,” Zorkbar-1 said, turning back around and surveying the Denny’s.

“Mayhaps we were not able to claim the entire planet for ourselves, but surely we can claim this fine, upstanding establishment as ours instead,” Zorkbar-2 suggested.

The two of them pondered that idea for a moment, then they nodded and promptly entered Denny’s. After observing the restaurant for about thirty seconds, the aliens were so appalled by what they saw that they immediately turned around, got back in their spaceship, and flew all the way back to their home planet without saying another word to each other, thus ending the Zorkbar conquest of Earth once and for all.

Thirty-Two (No Spares)

By Jesse White

poetry

I was going to write a metaphor about teeth
and make it about taking
(and make it beautiful)
but instead I counted all the dreams
where my teeth shattered in my mouth
and I spent my nights
spitting out white splinters
and in the morning I pressed my tongue
to the too-wide gap
in my leftmost molar
and did not think too hard.

I do not think this needs a metaphor.

The Autumn Beast

By Amy Smith

poetry

At summer's end, I hear a shrill cry of some unforeseen specter
Clambering over the dead, the husks, the spoils
Littered across the forest's dinner table, the victims of the chilled night air.

Its denizens prepare for slumber: plundering, gorging, making themselves
fat.

Less grotesque than baroque
More scandal than rococo
A dark romanticism that captures and ensnares.

Fear grips the tongue, as cold grabs the shoulders
Throttling, gnawing, till at last, the limbs tremble
With all the sweetness of a rusty guitar string and all the composure of a
roof caving in.

Its laugh, an overhead bird that catches me by surprise
A short burst from the lungs

Then silence as the mist pulls itself along the earth
Dragging across the carpet of colored leaves.

I run from invisible hands chasing behind
And laugh at my foolishness and the childish delight of my terror.

The Dogwood Tree

By Benjamin Tobias

fiction

A Dogwood tree refers to one of the fifty-five trees belonging to the *Cornus* genera, renowned for their brightly colored blooms, their distinctive bark, and for being a relatively difficult plant for horticulturists to tend to. Some people like to call them eastern Sakura trees, a fair enough comparison; especially considering they're just as much of a hassle to clean up after. Their flowers have four petals and no veins. They look something like lilies. Most commonly, they're some shade of white or pink, blooming into bundles of grape-like berries when they're ready to spread their seeds.

The tree growing in my backyard isn't a Dogwood tree.

I'm sorry, that doesn't make much sense, does it? Some random man with a funny accent comes into your institute and starts talking about trees like he loves to garden... I know that's not really your area of expertise. It's just... I need you to understand. I've looked into this. I've talked to people who run websites devoted entirely to the care and maintenance of Dogwood trees. I talked to the neighbor's girl who's going through her goth phase and a devout Wiccan. It isn't a Dogwood tree.

I... yes, sorry. Sorry. The beginning...

Last November, I was excited to finally move out of my parents' basement and into a place of my own. I'd graduated college earlier that year, but I'd been making a decent deal of money off – of all things – making plugins for Minecraft. There's an entire cottage industry there, and I got in early enough that I'd made enough to pay for the rest of my tuition and then some. So why shouldn't I move into a quiet little house up in Maine? A bit far from the folks, sure, but it's not like I was shopping for a place for anyone but myself. I could pack it up and move to California, but... California just didn't appeal to me. It still doesn't. I think summer is bad enough in New England, nevermind what it must feel like on the west coast.

I eventually found a place near Augustus, one of a dozen of the same little suburbias that Steven King can't get enough of. Picturesque, but just flawed enough to feel lived in. The homeowners were very accommodating when I came by for a tour, all smiles and laughs as they showed off their home. They meticulously clean in a way that I thought meant they hadn't lived in it since they decided to sell. The real estate agent was bored, checking their watch like they were going to be late to something and didn't want to hear the previous owners talk about how recently they'd renovated the counter and replaced the oven and would pay to get the playground taken out if I didn't have kids...

Of course I noticed the tree. I couldn't have missed it! But it wasn't the most relevant thing, not at 8PM with the homeowners blasting me with the 20 different settings their fancy Japanese dishwasher had.

I thought the tree was doing fine. Its branches were completely bare and the mulch it sat in covered in its dying leaves. The owners didn't say a word about it, and I didn't think to ask. Why would it be suspicious that a tree had no leaves in the middle of Autumn? I didn't realize. Please, please understand. Even if I had known....

No. No, no that doesn't matter. I'm sorry.

Months passed. I finished the tedious amounts of paperwork associated with the neighborhood in question, and moved in after celebrating one last Thanksgiving with the parents before I set about making my place feel like home. I managed it for the most part. But there were a lot of small things the homeowners never bothered to mention. A stair at the bottom of the steps that creaked in the middle of the night as the AC kicked in, a loose part of the rug by the bathroom door, and the way that on windy nights, the long branch of a massive oak would rattle the windows like it was trying to pick them.

The rustling got worse once Spring rolled around. The sound of wooden branches scratching and clanking at your windows, as though a twenty-fingered hand was slapping itself relentlessly against my window... it's got nothing on those same branches covered in leaves. So, so many leaves. They made the branch sound more like a maraca slapped against a glass drum some nights, images of claws at my window long forgotten. It made me cherish the nights I could get a peaceful sleep.

But with Spring came worse revelations, like the fact that the Dogwood tree wasn't alive. No, it was something worse.

It was rotting.

I don't know how long it had been dead. Far longer than my little house tour, that's for sure. Dogwood trees have a very distinctive bark. Some people describe it as scalelike, but I don't think that's too accurate. It looked more like a long series of hexagonal cracks, like dried-up mud in a drought. Deep, dark cracks that hid nothing but the hundreds of spiders that had decided to make their home in the dead tree, spinning so many webs in the drooping boughs that I'm sure they're the only reasons they hadn't fallen apart into mush. Husks decorated it like tinsel. And the smell!

If you think a bag of grass clippings left in a garage for a week or two longer than it should've been is rancid, that's nothing compared to the tree. I'm envious of the spiders now. The smell of that tree was so heavy I still can't get it out of my nose. It's lodged itself in there like a nail and now I can't even smell my blood.

I'm not much of an outdoor person. I don't know if you can tell that what with my fortune being made off the back of selling children what is

essentially hacks in Minecraft. But god, I avoided the backyard like the plague after that. I looked up the right people to call as soon as I could, and even paid extra to get Lawson and Sons Lawn Care there yesterday.

I watched from the windows as the tree was pulled and sprayed with insecticides, its roots squirming like tapeworms when they were exposed to the light of day for the first time. Spiders run out of its every crack like a swarm of locusts, vanishing into the grass. I was happier to see it go than the workers were to pull it out. I'd warned them about the smell, but I don't think they were ready for it even with masks. Yet they were happy to be paid, I got an empty lot in my backyard I would pretend I'd eventually get around to gardening, and the tree got to get stuffed in a woodchipper in some dump miles away from me.

I had the best dream of my life that night, even if I don't remember it. Not even the scratching and rattling, as though that old oak was trying to pry open my window, could ruin my good mood.

When I came downstairs the next morning, I found the dogwood tree in the backyard, almost as though I hadn't hired people to take it far, far away from me the previous morning. I was absolutely livid. I didn't really know how to process the fact it was there, not at first, and all I could really do was default to the fact that this must be a prank. That some idiot from Lawson and Sons had done this, and now they needed to listen to me shout and yell and demand they get back here to get rid of the tree or I wanted a refund. There was no other explanation for what had happened.

They refused to come back, especially on such short notice. They'd gotten rid of the disgusting dogwood tree that had practically melted in their hands and had gone through the extra step of incinerating it because they felt it might be a biohazard.

So instead of listening to a bunch of liars I called Miranda's Lawn Veterinarians, and since they were somehow more booked than Lawsons, spent three near-sleepless nights listening to the banging and scratching at my window while I refused to take a step outside. I'd tried going closer to the tree, to see how Lawson had replanted the tree so well that I couldn't even tell they'd removed it in the first place, but now the entire backyard smelled just like the tree. I'd even stepped in some absolutely foul mud one of them must have tracked on my back porch.

Miranda's Lawn Veterinarians weren't prepared for the smell either, but they were professionals. They pulled the tree out of the ground with concentrated effort and so many ropes that they barely flinched when spiders began crawling up them. They even cleaned up my porch without me needing to ask. The only thing they charged extra for was when I asked – demanded, really – to watch them put it through the shredder through my screen door.

I got another peaceful night's sleep. Up until the scratching started again, and I woke up to find the Dogwood tree in my backyard when I went downstairs to get coffee. I hadn't learnt from my mistakes yet. I thought this was just a much, much more elaborate prank than I'd initially thought – that maybe this was some lawncare scam-o-gram. Miranda's Lawn Veterinarians received several very, very angry calls from me, and utterly refused to come back or give me a refund on the grounds that they had done their job and hadn't been adequately warned about how disgusting the tree was. They said it had left moldy stains on their woodchipper that they needed a specialist to decontaminate.

So I found a third lawn care service and waited five sleepless nights for them to get around to getting rid of the Dogwood tree. The Lawncare Community talks, and while I apparently wasn't blacklisted, they'd been warned about me and had needed to get proper protective gear to deal with a tree they thought wasn't real. The wind wasn't any louder those nights, but I swore it must've been blowing harder for how determinedly it seemed like the oak was scratching at my windows. I barely left that room before the morning that they showed up. The entirety of the base floor of my house smelled like the tree now, leaking in through the windows no matter how much I tried to tighten them up and drown the smell in the cheapest air fresheners Amazon could offer.

Even the protective suits weren't enough for the third lawn care service, though they were the quickest. I didn't pay them extra to shred it in front of me. I got in my car and drove after them, all the way to the dump. I slinked after them as they shredded the tree, sloughing the tar-like ooze it had become into a trash bag that seemed to thrash all the way to the incinerator. A palpable burden was lifted from their shoulders the moment they shut the incinerator's door.

And when they left, I stayed behind, parked across the street and determined to watch until they came back to replant the tree in the morning. I fell asleep sometime near 4 in the morning, helplessly flitting between radio stations I had never heard of in my life. I took it as a good sign that I could hear scratching at my car windows in my sleep, like I was back home and in bed. It wasn't as good a sign when I woke up to the blinding sun and found that some wild animal had banged up the driver's side of my car in my sleep, ripping the mirror straight off the car. They'd puked on it too, or maybe just scratched their rear against my car, leaving behind a brown goo that looked like mud and smelled far too foul.

And when I came home? Well. I don't think you need me to tell you what I found in my backyard.

I called a fourth lawn service before I even saw it. I smelled it first. If I hadn't just pulled an all nighter I would've puked. I still dry heaved. I told the company I was just checking their rates, wanting to know how soon

they could get over. All the normal questions. I was too tired for a third angry tirade. I just left my car parked in the street so it didn't stink up the garage and hid beneath my bed sheets.

Now. I'm ashamed to admit it took me this long to realize it, but wind doesn't simply come and go with the moon. It whistles and roars all day long, and that day was the windiest in months. It was comforting to listen to the strange music that the branches of the oak made as their leaves slapped against my windows. Up until I remembered I had been haunted by scratching and clattering at my windowsill every night since I first tried to get rid of the Dogwood tree.

That's when I decided to face the Dogwood tree again. I wrapped my face in every scarf I could and crept back down into the backyard. There it stood, proud as ever in all its rotting glory, spiders skittering in and out of its cracks. I didn't even know what I wanted to prove at that point. I hadn't looked at the tree up close in so, so long. But the sight of it was seared into my brain as I got so close that I could reach out and touch it.

There were crimson berries sprouting from its branches. Long, bulbous, fruit, like grapes filled with water until they wanted to burst, or the bulging thorax of a well-fed mosquito. Spiders climbed across them, spinning and spinning their gossamer webs until the fruit looked almost pink.

But the tree was dead. It couldn't have fruit. Especially not when all its branches, like a thousand fingers on a malformed hand, were so bare. That's when I looked closer, got my face as close to these branches as I could, and looked at the spiders crawling across the fruit.

Some of them were plunging their fangs into the fruit and drinking.

I am not afraid of admitting I am a cowardly man. I'm just a smart one who knows when to cut his profits and run. In that moment, so close to the tree I could see all its cracks and black veins filled with rotting sap, I had never felt like my life was in more danger.

I grabbed some of the tree's branches, so brittle that they felt like they might dissolve into my hand even as I turned and ran inside. The tree didn't uproot itself or try to chase me. The spiders gave me absolutely no notice, since I hadn't grabbed branches without fruit. But I still felt like I had made my greatest mistake yet. It didn't stop me from shoving the branches into a little baggie as I barely resisted the urge to run to my car.

That's when I left. I haven't been back to the house in two months. I've been asking and asking and asking, but no one is willing to listen to me rant and rave about my tree anymore. Every Lawncare company in the County has me blacklisted. You're the only people left I know about who might take me seriously. I don't know what help you can offer, if you can offer any help at all, but... every night, in my hotel room, I can hear it. The

scratching and clacking of something trying to find its way into my room to do something with me.

The only thing my hotel room faces is an empty lot where another building was condemned.

The Miller's Daughter

By Sarah Fales

poetry

The
one
wears
is
King is
miller's daughter
who saved her child
from the monster,
who guessed the name, and won the happy ending, with only a few
little white lies to ease the path to the Golden Crown - woven from
the very golden straw that won her the King's hand in marriage in
the first place. Can you believe that the king was found dead in his
bed, stomach filled with grain turned to gold? Long Live The King.

The Upside-Down House: A Dialogue With The Self

By Aurora McKee

drama

(Warnings for discussions of mental health, ableism, and self-harm. This piece is inspired by other abstract dialogues, like *Funnyhouse of a Negro* by Adrienne Kennedy, that deal with the complexities of human expression. It's also meant as a representation of the author's own experiences.)

We open on a dormitory floor, filled with college paraphernalia--books, a laptop, a backpack, fridge and microwave, a bed, wireless headphones, a phone. There's a large drawing of Mary, Queen of Scots' severed head decorating one wall.

The SPACE CADET sits on the floor, staring blankly into space. You might or might not identify her as a CADET if you saw her on the street. As the rest of the play continues, she will occasionally move around the room, pausing to look at the computer or change the position from which she continues to blankly stare. She does not notice any of the other characters in the room.

The Scots picture begins to speak.

MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS: It's September. It's October. It's November. It's fall, winter, spring. You're supposed to be going to school, you're supposed to be taking a shower, you're supposed to be getting dinner before the cafeteria closes, you're supposed to be going to sleep. You can't. You're too busy thinking.

The GLASS SHARD emerges from the mirror. She resembles the SPACE CADET, but is dressed in black. The WRITER enters the room through the door. She resembles the GLASS SHARD and the SPACE CADET, but is wearing a hoodie.

GLASS SHARD: Irony of ironies. Too busy planning shit to actually get any of it done.

WRITER: I planned this, didn't I?

SHARD: Yes, we did. Because that's the best time to be plotting an impossible-to-perform indie play, while you're super fucking late for a class you really want to go to, and you can't drag your brain together to actually get out the damn door.

WRITER: We're not always late.

SHARD: No, sometimes we're up at three in the morning because we can't get off the computer or even brush our teeth. *(She prods the CADET with her toe, but there is no reaction.)* Look at this. What are the chances we'd remember to leave if the building was burning down?

WRITER: We always come back, don't we?

SHARD: So far. And what's with the we, you, me? We don't have dissociative identity disorder, right?

WRITER: Personas are a good method of self-expression --

SHARD: Fucking personas? What is this, Mr. Robot? You hardly ever watched that show. You haven't had the attention span to properly consume television in years. *(sighs.)* Look at that. Why do I have to be the villain all the time?

WRITER: Someone has to be. The story's nothing without one. It can't move without it.

SHARD: The story's not moving at all. *(points at the CADET.)* We keep that up any longer, we're gonna start drooling.

WRITER: That's ableist.

SHARD: So's human society.

WRITER: *(sighs.)* Maybe I shouldn't be breaking the fourth wall.

SHARD: Maybe your writing sucks ass in general. Maybe you're a bigoted fuckwad without even knowing it. Maybe capitalism's going to grind your bones and crush your dreams even if you don't lose your shit like you did last year. Maybe, maybe, maybe. You could drown in maybes if you wanted.

(A PA system activates. The CADET, the SHARD, and the WRITER all wince and cover their ears as the sound of the UNWANTED SPEAKER fills the room. It is a mean, nasally voice, ringing with dull cruelty.)

UNWANTED SPEAKER: CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED

SHARD: Oh my fucking god, shut the fuck up!

UNWANTED VOICE: CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED

SHARD: *(to the writer.)* Why are you censoring it? It's irritating as fuck, but it's still nothing like anything you hear in real life.

WRITER: I don't want to traumatize the audience, and I don't want to preserve it on paper.

SHARD: Fucking generous of you.

UNWANTED SPEAKER: CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED

WRITER: Mom says it's not my fault this happens.

SHARD: Mom tells us a lot of stuff.

WRITER: She doesn't lie, ever. Besides, there are people who agree with me.

(The VOICE OF TUMBLR emanates from the computer.)

VOICE OF TUMBLR: People with autism can have issues with intrusive thoughts. *(The CENSORED broadcast starts to die down, although it repeats in the background for a while. It should not die down until the characters involved are clearly not thinking about it. The CADET moves again, propping her legs on the bed as the rest of her lies on the floor.)* They might also experience dissociation, especially in times of stress.

MARY: You were sixteen when your parents officially told you that you were on the spectrum. You spent most of the conversation thinking of going back to your book. Your sister was more freaked out than you at the time. The impact of it sort of hit you in bits and pieces.

SHARD: Remember crying in class--during high school?

WRITER: Remember having public meltdowns?

SHARD: Remember freaking out when you didn't think you were reading enough?

WRITER: Remember running away?

SHARD: Remembering trying to see if I was a psychopath by hitting a dead rabbit with a knife?

WRITER: Remember walking down the street in your fucking pajamas?

SHARD: Remember hurting people with your words without meaning to, saying rude or even bigoted things by accident?

WRITER: Remember when hearing certain people talking or singing drove you up the wall for no damn reason?

VOICE OF TUMBLR: You are not alone. It's happened to others before you, out in the world. It will happen to others after that.

WRITER: So how do I stop feeling it?

SHARD: More importantly, how do you get your ass in gear?

VOICE OF TUMBLR: Zoning out is also a symptom of ADHD. *(They all look at the CADET in silence.)*

QUEEN MARY: You parents are psychologists, and they thought you had ADHD. The teachers didn't think so, so it never went anywhere.

SHARD: Because we weren't bouncing off the walls or some shit. We could go away in our heads, then we'd come back and manage to get good grades, and they never put it together.

WRITER: They worked with what they knew; it's not their fault. Who knows, maybe I'm not ADHD. And if I was, if they got me on meds, who would I become?

SHARD: Who knows. Maybe not someone just who stares at her fucking dresser when it's almost time for class.

WRITER: But we were diagnosed with something. A lot of kids don't even get that much. And a lot of the kids that do get treated like shit.

SHARD: Yeah, can you imagine what it would be like if the other students actually went after us for the weird shit we pulled? Of course, that doesn't mean they didn't irritate the fuck out of us, they just didn't know it. They probably didn't, anyway.

WRITER: They didn't. It was a good school. Better there for us than if we ended up in...

VOICE OF TUMBLR: *(screen flashes red.)* AUTISM SPEAKS. APPLIED BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS. AUTISM SUPERHERO MOMS. MUSIC BY SIA. *(Everyone--WRITER, SHARD, and the SPACE CADET--shudder and*

make signs of the evil eye. According to Wikipedia, it's "formed by extending the index and little fingers while holding the middle and ring fingers down with the thumb." Rick Riordan's mentioned it, so it must be good.)

WRITER: For so long, I was walking along the razor's edge.

SHARD: And we didn't even know it. How close we came to being swallowed by their cruelty.

QUEEN MARY: You wouldn't have made it without your parents. They treated you like a person, not a baby or a freak. They irritate you sometimes, but they keep you sane, too, and they didn't see your condition as an excuse to go insane.. They helped you figure it--figure out everything, even... *(beat)* the stuff that wasn't autism or ADHD.

SHARD: We really are neurotypical soup, after all.

WRITER: Yeah. *(goes over to the pill bottles. There are two--a bottle of Melatonin and a bottle of Zoloft.)*

SHARD: God, yes. We were the youngest person in the family to be medicated for a while. That was kind of fun.

WRITER: I don't remember when I learned that Zoloft is an antidepressant. I always knew that Melatonin was for sleeping, but I thought Zoloft--I thought it was just to keep me from crying in class. I didn't know what it meant, really.

(A strangled cry of frustration and fear rips through the room. It sounds scratchy and strange at the edges, like an old recording being played.)

QUEEN MARY: Last year, you left your meds at home when you came back from break. You ended up self-harming by hitting and scratching yourself. Your parents had to talk you into getting an Uber to pick up your prescriptions from CVS. It was dark, and you were alone, and you couldn't coordinate with the car. You screamed.

WRITER: We got there in time. We got out of meds. We got better. We are better. *(flexes her toes.)* We haven't screamed in a while, have we?

SHARD: That's good. That's really good. Not perfect, but it's good. And we've only hit ourselves, like, once in the past few months. And that was only a few smacks. So not that bad!

WRITER: (*sighs.*) Do you have to tell them?

SHARD: Hey, you're the one trying to be honest. Wanna tell them you feel guilty because you got hit by a sudden wash of inspiration and you fucked up your own work schedule by writing this?

WRITER: I've got it under control.

QUEEN MARY: You don't really remember how many days it's been since you took a shower. You don't remember how many weeks it's been since you did laundry. You're lucky your body doesn't really smell, for some freaky reason. You keep being late to your first class, and you love that class. You need to plan for the future, but you can barely bring yourself to plan for next semester. You assign yourself things you don't need to agonize over, things you should enjoy, and forget what you should remember.

WRITER: I do my homework! I take my meds!

SHARD: You thought about hurting yourself when you got constructive criticism for a class project.

WRITER: Only for a few minutes and I. Didn't. Do. It. (*beat*)

QUEEN MARY: You keep losing your shit, literally. What have you lost today? What small, precious thing? What gift from your family can you only hope you'll track down?

WRITER: Look, I'm trying, okay? College is where you try, isn't it? Where you fuck up and get to move on?

QUEEN MARY: But you won't be in college forever. You'll be chucked out in the big bad world, where everybody's on their screens and nobody reads books and nobody wants libraries and Amazon's starting up company towns again and you're more likely to be raped by a friend than a stranger and creators work themselves to the bone while barely making a fucking living and Biden might be a washed-out Trump and they're making laws to turn you back into a living womb and the tired and poor are beat up at the border or gunned down in the streets and--

WRITER: Stop it!

QUEEN MARY: I'm the narrator. Would you like me to recite fanfiction plot ideas instead? Talk about Kinktob--

WRITER and SHARD: No!

UNWANTED SPEAKER: CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED
CENSORED (*everyone jumps.*)

SHARD: Exactly.

UNWANTED SPEAKER: CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED
CENSORED (*similar pattern: a slow die off that shouldnot stop completely until the characters have clearly forgotten about it.*)

WRITER: Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do, then? Kill myself and everyone I love? Blow it all away with a machine gun?

(Silence. The WRITER and the SHARD stare at each other. In the silence, the CADET rises and goes to stare at the dresser, resting her hands on the knob. The WRITER goes to sit on the bed, and the SHARD goes to sit in a chair across from her.)

SHARD: (*quiet*) You don't mean that.

WRITER: I don't.

SHARD: You haven't meant any of that since you were a kid.

WRITER: I know.

SHARD: Then why say it? Is this a confession, then? (beat) Is that why you've been making me play the bad guy this whole stupid piece? Are you trying to absolve yourself of all the meaningless little mistakes you've made? All the little fuckups, building on top of each other? Do you think that strangers are supposed to purify you? Or are you seeking their pity?

WRITER: I want them to know what it's like.

SHARD: What's it like? Neurodivergent people can be on opposite sides of the planet, you know that. And describing yourself with this routine? (*Waves at the CADET*) 'Space Cadet,' really? Do you really hate us that much?

WRITER: I don't think so? Sometimes I think I don't understand myself. I don't understand you.

SHARD: Not the whole, but the bits and pieces.

VOICE OF TUMBLR: There is nothing wrong with intrusive thoughts. Oversensitivity to certain sounds is something that autistic people experience. Autistic and ADHD people can have difficulty performing tasks or getting out of their heads.

SHARD: That's fine and all, but that's not you. And Tumblr has a lot of scary things to say, too.

VOICE OF TUMBLR: Neurodivergent people are treated as inspiration porn as best and belittled and disbelieved at worst. Neurodivergent people are mistreated by their friends, family, and colleagues. Society is absolutely brutal to disabled people in general.

WRITER: Forewarned is forearmed.

SHARD: Yeah, it is. And there are truths there. But not the whole truth.

WRITER: I was sharing truths, wasn't I? Defending myself?

SHARD: You were. In the process, I became the bad guy, and we're seeing this turn into a fight. And the fight is only a part of everything. If you want the whole truth, you'd talk about how you can still find ways to read even when it's hard to concentrate. You talk about how your family loves you because of your weird shit, not in spite of it. Hell, you'd talk about your writing.

WRITER: Fanfiction. Besides, I write too fast and forget to check for errors before I post. And sometimes drafts get deleted before I save them because I'm a fucking idiot that way.

SHARD: But people read it, don't they? Lots of people. They get what we want to say. It makes them happy, it freaks them out...they feel things. You found a way to share your abilities with the world even when the real world scared you. This is—this thing we're making— this is just another way of doing that.

WRITER: Are you seriously giving me a pep talk?! I thought this wasn't inspiration porn! And you're the critic, why are you doing this?

SHARD: I'm self-reflection. I'm here for the truth, good or bad. And I can only reflect so much bad before I notice what you're leaving out.

WRITER: What is the truth?

SHARD: The world hasn't fucked us up. Yet.

WRITER: That's the truth?

SHARD: What do you want? You created me. You're not a prophet, so I can't be one (*gestures around the room.*) Me, Mary, Dipshit....we're the three witches, for you and for her. We're the antiheroes. I remind you of your fuck ups and I remind you of your potential. Mary is the narrator, representing the act of story in this world. Right now, if we let her, she could overwhelm the room with narrative, nonfiction and fiction, drowning everything. But you would be nothing without narrative. And Dipshit...(*sighs*) ok, Dipshit is pretty much useless. But she's a part of you, too.

WRITER: And her? (*turns to the SPACE CADET*)

SHARD: Don't you know? She's the protagonist (*the CADET opens the drawer, looks in.*) The one who puts it all together. (*groans*) The one who steadfastly refuses to get her ass in gear.

WRITER: No, that's not true. We go. We always... (*shakes her head*) There's never a climax, never a big fight scene. We just leave, bit by bit. (*CADET opens the drawer, takes out clothes, changes, and pauses again.*) Now, you need to keep moving. (*CADET starts to drift back to the computer*) No, don't! Get our stuff. (*Cadet hurriedly goes over to the backpack, pushing a computer and the book inside.*) Brush your teeth, put the stuff on your face, or--crap, we'll have to do that later, won't we? (*looking at the clock.*)

SHARD: It wouldn't be true if it was a perfect ending. Maybe you can manage it next time. (*pause*) But you still need one more thing.

WRITER: Right. (*picks up the headphones and phone, turns the phone on.*) We've got some juice today--good. Always good. (*she turns on the phone and flips through it, muttering to herself. Bursts of song play and stop as she tries to decide.*) Mmm, not that one, not that one, dull, old, wrong mood...oh, oh this will do. (*slips the headphones over the CADET's head and presses play--tinny music starts to blare from the headphones as she puts the phone in the CADET's purse and slips it over her shoulder.*) That's it, there we go. What are we going to do today?

CADET: (*her eyes focus for the first time.*) Break my own rules. Figure shit out. Do what I need to do and keep my shit together in the process. Write crazy shit and read crazy shit.

SHARD: And come back from wherever you go.

CADET: That too *(she turns and makes her way out the door.)*

QUEEN MARY: You're walking quickly, trying to get to class on time. You've got the raw pieces of this story spilled out on the page and you don't know what's going to happen to it, but you hope you can treat it well. You hope they will too. You're one among many, and someday you're going to be an author, or a librarian, or something else that matters. You don't want to inspire anyone, you just want to be here, and let other people know you are. Lucky for you you're good at that.

(MARY closes her eyes as the WRITER and SHARD follow the CADET out the door. The tinny music starts to flare up, filling the room. It is not hopeful music--it is loud, fast, and wild. It is something to dance to. Movement is the important thing.

Fade to black, curtain falls, etc.)

THE END.

Theodore

By Jenna Lozzi

poetry

I was playing in my room when you fell and broke your hip.
You tried to get off the couch and collapsed on the floor.

I remembered yelling at you a week prior
for waking me in the middle of the night.
You had wandered into my room not knowing where you were.

You used to play with me in the backyard and at the park
Until your joints started to ache
And you no longer heard when I called.

I remembered when you were always around,
Following me and doting on me
with watchful, loving eyes.
I want to forget them when they became cranky
and shrouded in cataracts.

I was at school when they stopped your heart.
My mom said that while your little nose was no longer wet,
There was not a single dry eye in the waiting room.

What I would give for you to still pace around me all day.
I wonder how your little body, not even thirteen pounds,
Could weigh so much on me still.

To the Earring I Left Behind in Your Carpet

By Kate Foley

poetry

Let me bury myself in coarse carpet threads.
Let me fall back asleep and
braid the hair of memory:
diamond—
fake, of course—
metal clasp.
Lost somewhere between your
hand in my hair and my
head on the floor.
Its twin, lounging in a
plastic jewelry box, makes
peace with tomorrow.
The lost one plays pretend in
your carpet threads,
caught in the drunken daydream of possibilities:
tequila shots,
lavender-scented cigarettes,
we smoked,

we danced to “Die Young,” and the
silver clasp plunged,
tumbled through sticky patches of
cheap beer.
Truth or Dare—
you whisked me to the porch,
dared me to kiss you,
dared me to spend

three sweat-soaked hours,
two “are you sures?”,
one missing earring in your bedroom.
The lost one still thinks we’re bathed in
Christmas lights, still tangled in
what ifs and maybes,
still splashing in
puddles of booze,

puddles of reflected sky.
Were there stars that night,
or just diamond studs?
Metal clasps.
Fake, of course.

Virginia

By Anastasia Dziekan

poetry

Virginia is the only reason I don't drive my car into the river.
When I drive down streets in this picket fence neighborhood,
I dream of swerving and speeding away,
Or slowing down and following her jogging path.
I keep a gun in my glovebox because one day
I worry I might have to kill Virginia.

She's the last thread that keeps the sleeve on my sweater.
I mark all the important dates on my calendar.
I wish I could show Virginia what I have kept track of.
I'd make a fine husband, as fine of a husband as any woman
Could hope to be.
I'd have to play husband when we play house,
Because Virginia must be the wife.

I've got suburban trauma.
I cut into a cul-de-sac of white houses
With a big butcher knife,
And it bleeds chocolate cake ooze onto my kitchen floor.
Someday I will make Virginia get down on her knees and scrub it up—
Just little housewife chores
Putting things right again.

Sometimes I drive out past the neighborhood,
Out to the drive-in where teenagers make out in the cars,
Away from the watchful eyes of their nuclear families,
And I watch a sad movie just to make myself feel sick.
When I get home,
Bent over the toilet, I picture:
Virginia holding my hair back,
Virginia telling me I'll be alright,
Virginia kissing my vomit-stained lips.

I never drive far, just going in loops
To the grocery store and to church
For some pie and some spiritual healing,
Some good old fashioned catholic guilt and some breakfast cereal,

Some brimstone sin reminders and orange juice.
I check everything off of my list, but
I need to cope with the fact that I can't pay for closure
With a loyalty card.
And I'll never kiss Virginia.

The house is a prison,
With curtains, not bars, on the window, an attic that doesn't open,
A kitchen, and a den, and an office I'm not allowed into.
And there is a basement where I keep my woman's things like
Knitting needles, and sewing machines, and the fire axe,
And my scrapbooks.
I look at the photos of people I knew once—
The hearts I have broken. I'm sorry to all of the black and white faces,
But I don't miss you.
I miss an old friend you reminded me of.
I miss a girl named Virginia.

We build little lives for ourselves out of popsicle sticks
And pill bottles.
Sometime soon two hands on my waist will stop me from
Looking out the window of the master bedroom
At a girl I knew from school who has her own little life now.
Hers is, near as I can tell, macaroni art and
Bottom shelf vodka.
Her brother had a car and she said what if we stole it?
What if we drove somewhere out where we can't even pronounce
The words on the street signs?
And I called her crazy and tugged on her cheerleader sweater
And smudged her lipstick and admired her nylons.
And one time we both said a summer goodbye,
And got trapped like flies in the glue of the sizzling pavement of this
goddamn town.

Lord, stop me wanting,
Coveting,
Convertibles and roadmaps,
Green apple grass stains and
Take however much of my brain you need to stop me from going crazy,
And feeling the way I do
About Virginia.

Waltzing

By Christine Heren

poetry

A humming melody hugs the room,
Steps tied to the tune.
Gliding like a water strider,
Bare feet skim the floor— just a touch
before they alight again. He grasps me snugly
As I clasp his shoulder, the black fabric
Prickling my palm. I'm the captive
In a hold that releases me.
His legs prod mine, and I follow. Like fluid,
We flow across the floor.

OneTwoThree

He charts our course, navigating.
That pressure at my back is an anchor
While my spirit unties itself.
Higher it flies, until it tastes
The soft dew of the clouds above.

OneTwoThree

Dancers swirl and blur past his shoulder,
The rapid pumping of his chest.
His hands grip tighter, moving us
To the quickening pace.
We spin, and I soar.
He lifts me from the floor,
As my dress billows out.
My heart's set sail again!
But then the melody crashes,
And the winds die out.
And my spirit slowly settles,
Burrowing in my sand,
Ready for a waltz again.

What is Chronic Pain?

By Marie Sykes

creative nonfiction

Chronic pain is never what anyone expects it to be. It's the constant anticipation of awaiting a knock on your door that comes the moment you give up on waiting for it but at the same time never stops knocking. It's being in pain when you say you're fine and being really in pain when you say something hurts.

When people see me in my brace, they often ask what's wrong, but where do I even begin? They expect an easy answer— a sprained ankle, two weeks of recovery, and then I'll be fine, don't worry— but it's never easy. No, I have to weigh if they're really asking me what's wrong and then go through whatever the appropriate layer of response is. Oh, it's nothing new. Oh, it's chronic pain. Oh, no, it's actually two different things: runner's knee and hyper-flexible ankles. The knees will recover sometime between ages eighteen and twenty-two but the ankles I've had since I was born will forever hurt.

And considering how often I moved around growing up, I've given the explanation more times than I can count. Each place meant that when I flared up, I would have to find a new set of coping mechanisms, a new doctor, and a new audience to educate on how, yes, this is a real issue. I can give the explanation in my sleep now, but that's not the hard part.

The hard part is that most people don't really know how to respond - especially back in middle and high school. What do you mean you're constantly in pain? That your good days mean your ankles are only at twos and threes? Sometimes people are supportive, other times cynical, pitiful, and occasionally they won't believe you.

So what is chronic pain?

Chronic pain is knowing that your day can go south at any point. One second you'll be fine, the next, you won't be, but you have no control over that. Except you do, in a sense, but no matter how much physical therapy you do, no matter how healthy you try to be, sometimes everything goes to hell and you can't do anything. You walk into a 9 am meeting fine and put on the knee brace you always carry so you can limp out.

Chronic pain is having a flare-up day be like this: you wake up, and if you're already in pain it's a really bad day. Most of the time it takes thirty minutes for the pain to set in, and in that thirty minutes, you need to be careful not to set yourself back further, which is difficult, because no matter how much you slept last night, you're probably still exhausted, because how can you sleep "well" like your body requires when you're in pain, even with

the ice pack and the ibuprofen (that you might even take a double dose of anyway, which, yes, doctors tell you you can take when you're in as much pain as I am).

When it's time to get ready, it's like balancing equations. No dresses or skirts because those are too difficult to deal with if you're icing or if you have a brace on. No jeans if you need to ice because that makes it more difficult. No sweats though, because if you put those on, you've already defeated yourself. But if you're not going to be comfortable, then it's more of a mental load. Make sure you wear the right shoes (not that your body can afford to not wear something with support normally, but if you mess this up, then your day is ten times harder than it has to be). And when you're packing your bag, make sure you have everything you need because you don't have the energy or ability to make it home before thirteen hours from now. Bring an ice pack because you can't find them on campus, but do you really need all your textbooks? You might miss them when you study, but each of them is another weight added.

Once you make it to campus after a friend drives you (because you have disability accommodations to live closer, but after residence life forgot to account for this, they gave you an ultimatum saying they can either get your accommodations or live with your friends, because friends are a privilege for the abled), every movement between class is a nightmare. But hey, you're such a pro at limping at this point, you can limp faster than your mom can walk, and your friends help make sure you can get there. Be careful to pay attention though and ignore the pain, and hopefully you don't wind up tearing up in Classical Mechanics because your body is caving in on itself and everything hurts so much you're about to blackout and you can't hear what your professor is saying but if you were to get up and leave everyone would see you cry and no one has noticed yet, so you sit there until you get a chance to do anything to relieve the pain. You've already taken all the ibuprofen you can, and the ice isn't helping.

After your classes, you find a place to camp and study for the rest of the day, because you really don't have any mobility, but maybe you'll have some sort of energy leftover to study with and get through your activities. Some just won't happen, and you're too tired to want to go anyway.

You get home that night and do what is absolutely necessary before passing out from exhaustion, not ready to do this all over again, but you smile and say you're okay when most of the others ask how you're doing. As if you owe it to someone to try to be happy through this. But maybe it makes it better.

Chronic pain is learning to ignore the pain. It's pushing through your day because what else can you do? So what if you're in pain? You need to get through classes, go to the store, do the dishes. It doesn't matter if you feel like you're on fire; the world doesn't stop, and you can't afford to either.

Chronic pain is being your own doctor. I've joked that I would save money by going to medical school, but with how many doctors I've seen over the years, some of which were good and some of which shouldn't have a medical license, not everyone will know what to do with your pain, and you're the only one that can piece together what you need. The first doctor (yet fourth I had tried) who understood what was happening with my knees told me this: "It's not cancer and you're probably going to recover, so no one will fund the research on how to help." I was fourteen and in enough pain, I asked my mom for a cane, but this doctor wasn't wrong. Chronic pain means constantly doing your own research, comparing your notes and experiences with others', documenting anything somewhat relevant, and trying to do what you can to make your life better. And doctors won't tell you everything, half because they'll think it's obvious, half because they think it's irrelevant. It wasn't until one of the worst flare-ups of my life with no trigger in sight did I discover chronic pain and your immune system are tied together, but never in my nineteen years did doctors think to list this as a possible trigger or to let me know this.

Chronic pain is getting desperate enough to do almost anything to relieve it. It's going to physical therapy. It's taking daily accommodations to make it better. It's carrying around two different braces and a bottle of ibuprofen in case you'll need it. It's sitting out of fun activities that you know you can't handle, but occasionally indulging yourself in them so you can feel normal and deciding it's worth it to be in pain for a week after.

Chronic pain is becoming an eternal optimist. If you lose hope then you lose everything. If you let yourself sink into the despair of being in constant pain with no hope out, what can you do? It's better to hope than to give up and think that it's all lost. Oftentimes, the pain only gets worse and you stop taking care of yourself.

Chronic pain is a disability. More than that, it's learning that it's okay to call yourself *disabled*. That *disabled* is not a bad word. That you're not defeating yourself by calling yourself *disabled*. That you're not stealing being *disabled* from someone else, even if yours is "invisible."

Chronic pain is invisible. Sure, sometimes you'll see someone with an ice pack, take their pain medication, or walk with a brace, but it's more than just those moments where it's reached a level that they need to take some sort of aid to combat. It's the moments where you're in class and have to shift in your seat because you're in enough pain to be uncomfortable, but you don't want to take any ibuprofen because you "don't need it."

Chronic pain is the pain building up so much it feels exponential. You can carry a five-pound weight for a minute without any issue, but if you hold it for a day you'll be sore. And some days you can carry it in your lap or in a bag, but other days it's both hands holding it overhead.

Chronic pain is just as mental as it is physical— but don't say it's made-up or exaggerated. Whoever you're talking to is probably too worn out to deal with that if you can tell they're in pain (because believe me, they constantly are), but chronic pain puts your body in a constantly stressed environment. High-stress during a flare-up. Everything hurts and the strain of walking through life knowing that you're constantly pushing yourself through the day drains you of all energy. Every added bit is just another difficult section to balance. You have to allocate a significant amount of emotional energy into dealing with it, and the everyday tasks that should be easy become summits to climb.

Chronic pain is having to develop creative ways to describe the pain because the pain truly feels like a million and one different things. Walking around with railroad spikes through your ankles. An eight-inch blade in the back of your knee. A golf ball lodged in your muscles. A simple *one to ten, how much pain are you in?* Scale isn't going to help you, and apparently it becomes skewed when you're in this much pain anyway. I try to alter my scale to try to set it back to normal, but what's a two for me who is always in pain when compared to someone else's? And a sharp six can feel worse than a dull seven.

Chronic pain is being afraid when the pain shifts somewhere else, not that it's spreading, but that you'll get accused again of faking it. So what if most people probably haven't noticed that you've been limping with your left leg instead of the right until today, and if you switch your brace to the other leg, it'll be fine? You've dealt enough with the accusations, but you don't want to today. So you don't switch your brace even though you should until the next day when you have to.

Chronic pain is spraining your ankle subconsciously while stretching your ankle to relieve the tension and realizing how much of a problem you have at fourteen.

Chronic pain is clinging to a rope of hope. It seems like it's braided well enough to get a grip on it, but, oh, how it is laced in oil. Ready to be lit up with a spark or slip from my grasp at any moment. But I dig my heels into the ground, ignore the spikes of pain shooting up my legs, and stand my ground. Because if I lose this last piece, then I'm in free-fall, and how do you brace yourself with nothing to cling to?

Yellow House

By Gabrielle Pitt

poetry

A distant metallic grind jolts me awake. It's only seven, but the three of us sit at our usual meeting spot holding the blend of foam and espresso, Dad's perfected recipe. A cool New Hampshire breeze disrupts the August air and they smile, admiring the forest of green that surrounds the porch. Sunlight breaks through the leaves, illuminating their faces. Soon each other's presence will be all that they have. First Garrett, then me, and now Gavin.

Empty nesters, they call it.

A house once scattered with Legos and dirty pans stacked high from kitchen experiments, remnants of the messy nights creating masterpieces of pepperoni and cheese. I see the yoga mats spread across the basement floor, wobbling out of Tree Pose and laughing with Mom until my stomach hurts. And then there's the car-seat dancing to Earth, Wind, & Fire with Dad on long drives to gymnastics competitions, medicine to cure Beam Routine Jitters. And now what? They'll bustle around cleaning working weeding painting cooking, anything to fill the newfound vacancy. Chaos to emptiness and it burns my throat going down. Yet he leans in to plant a kiss on her forehead, wrenching me back as this love comes to life, an impressive presence against the towering Oaks. My cup is empty but the warmth remains and I admire it, too.

1/25 British Monarch

By Sarah Buck

poetry

He is convinced we're distantly related
to Queen Elizabeth. Distantly, but related nonetheless.
My father, the prince, ten times removed.
He tells me this often, as if saying it again and again
will make it true, will call the Queen to our home
to clear things up and put him in line for the throne. He's obsessed
with ancestry, finding out where we came from, where we've been,
who we've met
what we went through
what *they* went through, not us.
He speaks as if he was there, a part of the story unfolding
over centuries of strife and struggle across continents
across lifetimes, grandparents and great-grandparents
and so on, so forth, in a line down the years,
but he only stares from afar, like someone watching
a movie and claiming they were an extra to impress their friends—
though he likes to joke he doesn't have many friends—
his friends are all found in books and on the radio or on TV
in old episodes of Hogan's Heroes and Blackadder
He learned his wit from them

The family tree appears at every holiday, every time I travel home—
if he liked tattoos I'd think he'd get it inked onto his arm
so he'd never have to go anywhere without it.
He says I will take the torch when he is gone
but he knows I hate it when he talks like that—
death makes me sad and he knows it but he says it anyway
to rile me up. He takes the pictures out of their boxes,
memorials for frozen memories, covered in dust barely touched
in fear that the photographs will crumble on contact.
But he does the best he can as he points out
every person
every place
every story he knows,
and he knows most of them, and he will never stop
telling them to anyone who will sit down and listen
for one hour, one minute, one second

He is the keeper of our past by choice
but he expects me to take it on by force,
and I am sworn in as its future protector, the one
who is meant to keep it safe and intact
until I can pass it on to the next unsuspecting child—
a blessing or a curse, I can't decide—
and maybe I will take it on one day but I don't know yet.
I want to make him happy
be the good kid
fit the model
but it's *his* model, and I am not meant to be royalty
as he so wishes we were, that much is abundantly clear.
He believes it though, so who would I be to take it away?

Contributors

Ian Abrahams is 00010101 years old but was 00010100 years old when he wrote the entry of poetry found in this issue of *The Lantern*. Ian's second favorite equation is $mg = ma$, making m cancel out, demonstrating that gravitational force is not dependent on the mass of an object, hinting at Einstein's equivalence principle. Ian likes cats.

Isabella Almonte is a class of 2017 graduate from Westtown School in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Class of 2021 graduate from Ursinus College with a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and a minor in Latin American Studies. Club member of Association of Latinos Motivated to Achieve on campus.

Alessandra Armour is a freshman at Ursinus. She doesn't know what she wants to major in yet, but knows that she loves poetry and wants to do something with it one day!

Emily Bradigan is a junior with majors in English and Theatre Design and Technology. Art has always had a special place in her heart so she's thrilled to share some of her artwork in this year's edition of *The Lantern*.

Sarah Buck has been told by almost everyone she knows that she walks too fast, but she will continue to walk as if she's being chased by a cat on a stick until— oh no, he's getting closer! Gotta run!

Jessica Celli is a senior majoring in Anthropology and Sociology. She has been working in the arts her whole life, and is very excited to share her work with *The Lantern*!

Elliot Cetinski is a sophomore at Ursinus who is majoring in Theatre as well as Anthropology and Sociology. He must finally admit to the public that the rumors are true: he does not have a pelvis. He is very proud and excited to be featured in *The Lantern* and hopes to work more with the magazine.

Kristen Cooney is an Art & Art History, and Environmental Studies major with a Museum Studies minor. She finds inspiration for her art in nature and spends her free time hiking, doing wildlife photography, and volunteering with local conservation organizations.

Leo Cox is a 19-year-old poet and English major at Ursinus College. He fills his free time with photography and avoiding public spaces. His poems have previously appeared in *Cicada Magazine*, *Canvas Literary Journal*, *The Apprentice Writer*, *The Troubadour*, and *The Lantern*.

Emily Crocker is a senior Neuroscience major and Anthropology minor. She is new to poetry writing but is very excited to be published in the *Lantern* this year.

Anastasia Dziekan is a senior English major with minors in creative writing and education. She is also a magician and the president of Lit Soc. The twist in the final act will reveal her to have been the killer all along, but please don't spoil that for anyone.

Sarah Fales is a sophomore double major in English and Educational Studies, with a minor in Creative Writing. She is also the 2020 winner of the Ursinus Creative Writing Scholarship.

Lauren Flanagan is a senior English major with an education minor. She holds positions on the Lantern, Sigma Tau Delta Honor Society, and Class Council.

Lauren's passions lie in reading and editing, and she enjoys fiction work the best.

Kate Foley is an author, actress, daydreamer, voracious reader, introvert, klutz, dog-lover, and overuser of tape. When she isn't writing stories about queer characters, Kate can usually be found onstage or backstage in the Kaleidoscope, rehearsing for the next theatrical production. A special shoutout to Sarah Buck for being an A+ Lantern editor AND roommate. <3

Morgan Grabowski is a sophomore English major. Morgan also writes for the Grizzly and is a part of the women's swim team. She also enjoys spending time outdoors, hiking and camping.

Kyle Guzy is a senior and aspiring screenwriter who, despite popular belief, does not "kinda look like the Hamburglar."

Kylie Halko Studio Art and Psychology majors, class of 2023

Makayla Heisler is in her junior year as a biology major here at Ursinus. She's a member of the women's soccer team, Abele Scholars program, Science Scholars program, Beta Beta Beta Biological Honors Society, and more across campus. In her free time, she loves to spend time with family and friends, play with her dogs, and relax.

Christine Heren is a senior majoring in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology with a minor in Anthropology. She works as a Writing Fellow and enjoys reading and writing.

Rishabh Kancherla, class of 2023, is a photographer from New Jersey. Rishabh's work focuses on landscape imagery, portraiture, and automotive work. In addition to photography, Rishabh enjoys traveling and has been to over 6 countries. More of Rishabh's work can be found on rkancherlaphoto.com and on his instagram [@rkancherlaphotography](https://www.instagram.com/rkancherlaphotography).

Bradley Kocher is a rising senior who aspires to become a writer for games like Dungeons and Dragons and God of War. He spends most of his time writing fantasy stories and exploring his imagination instead of actually working. Despite all of this, he is a math major.

Amelia Kunko is a sophomore Psychology major with a Studio Art minor. She is a staff writer for The Grizzly and a section editor for The Lantern. Amelia loves drawing, music, and dogs.

Amy Litofsky is (somehow) a senior English and MCS major with minors in Creative Writing and Film Studies. She wants it to be known that graduating college won't stop her from living in fantasy with her writing.

Jenna Lozzi is a junior majoring in English and Environmental Studies with a minor in Creative Writing. She also runs cross country and track in the winter and spring. She is finally proud of being a poet.

Derek Matarazzo is a freshman with a love for writing. He loves all things noir and fairytales. He hopes that love comes through in his stories!

Rimsha Maryam is a BCMB major/Biostat minor. She loves cherries, is allergic to cherries, will proceed to eat cherries anyways. She loves cherry blossoms, is very allergic to cherry blossoms, will NOT proceed to eat cherry blossoms. However, will not hesitate to pin cherry blossoms to her hijab.

Mairead McDermott is a sophomore majoring in Art History and Anthropology and minoring in Chinese and Museum Studies. She is excited to have her work in the lantern for the second time and hopes to continue making art.

Aurora McKee is a sophomore English major who will minor in either creative writing or gender and women's studies. She enjoys reading, writing fanfiction, and listening to reviews of games and movies she's never seen or read.

Miles Noecker is an English major, with minors in Politics and Theater. You may know him as the guy in your discussion-based classes who never shuts up because he is really passionate about the course material, and he also doesn't have much of a filter.

Julia Paiano is a junior Media & Communications major from Philadelphia. She is a photographer who creates what she feels.

Gabrielle Pitt is a senior Health & Exercise Physiology major with minors in Spanish and Neuroscience. On campus she is a member of Women's Gymnastics, SAAC, ELA, PEK Honors Society, is a Writing Fellow, and President of Wismer on Wheels. She enjoys doing yoga, surfing, and spending time with family!

Jasmine Ruiz is a senior from Fort Worth, Texas. Her majors are Math and Spanish.

Ryan Savage is currently freezing in the Adirondack Mountains. After you read his poem, send him warm thoughts.

Jessica Schnur is a sophomore majoring in Media and Communications, with minors in both film and French. She is very excited to be published in the Lantern. She loves creative writing and hopes to incorporate it into a future in film.

Amy Smith is an ENGL/ENV Double major with a BIO minor. This is the second year one of her poems has been published in the Lantern. She hopes to work in the environmental field one day while also becoming a writer.

Marie Sykes is a sophomore Physics and English double major with minors in Creative Writing and Mathematics. She is a strong proponent that cheesecake is a pie and has been told she is "obviously a cat person."

Benjamin Tobias has no idea what he's doing, and that's probably why he can't stop writing horror.

Tyler Ways was born in New Jersey, and that says almost everything you need to know about him. The few things that can't be gathered can be summed up with the phrase "Doesn't like garlic."

Jesse White is a junior English and Psychology major who insists she's definitely still a writer, she'll get back to it when she's finished knitting these socks, for sure. There's at least still enough writing going on to have something worth going into this book.

Vanessa Worley is a junior biology major and is waiting patiently for the next Brood X cicada year.