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The Lantern, 2022-2023

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The Lantern



*“I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.”
~Emily Dickinson*

*The Lantern
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2022-2023*

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COVER ART

Anywhere, if you look hard enough by Hannah Conley

This piece is a part of a series of artwork I did while I was overcoming difficulties in my life and challenging a looming feeling of purposelessness. During this time, I made art every day, mostly using the same blue bic pen and three (yellow, orange, and pink) colored pencils. To me, this piece represents rediscovering the magic in the small details of life through a change in perception and, sometimes, even a little imagination.

Editor's Note

Dear readers,

A thousand thank yous are in order. This edition of *The Lantern* would not have been possible without quite a lot of people who were willing to volunteer their time and energy to make it happen.

First, to the *Lantern* staff: my fearless section editors, readers, copyeditors, bio editors, production editor, and associate editor, you have all been a joy to work with thanks to your hard work and organization. I value all that you do to make my job immensely easier.

Next, to Jon Volkmer himself, the man without whom *The Lantern* would not exist. Thank you for your guidance, artistic perspective, and confidence in my ability to carry out the editor role.

To my friends and family, thank you for your endless support throughout these past couple semesters. Having the energy to continue this *Lantern* work is in large part thanks to your keeping me sane.

Special thanks to Emily Bradigan for drawing the inside cover illustration. EB, your talent for translating my chaotic and abstract concepts into gorgeous artwork is unmatched.

And finally, a huge thank you to Sarah Buck, last year's *Lantern* editor and my dear friend, who literally gave me dozens of pages of advice about how to make the editor position as smooth as possible. I dedicate this edition to you, roomie!

To you, the reader holding this copy in your curious hands, you're the one who gives life to the written word. Every poem, every piece of prose, every painstakingly crafted sentence is more than ink blots on a page because you drink them in. It's a magical transaction.

I can think of no better lantern for our inside cover than a ghost light. As an actor, ghost lights hold a special place in my heart: theatre legend says that every theater is home to a ghost or two, and so the lights must never go out on a stage lest the spirits get restless. The glow of the ghost light shines for the spirits to be able to see the stage and even perform on it. This light keeps art alive throughout the dark of night, and it appeases the ghosts.

The ghost light is much like our *Lantern*: long after we Ursinus writers have graduated, our ghostly glow lives on within these pages. We keep the art alive. We keep the spirits happy.

With much love, I give you *The Lantern*.

~Kate Isabel Foley

CREAGER PRIZE

Winner: *The Genie and the Scotsman* by Elliott Hannam

A vintage toaster serving as the pocket dimension for a contemporary genie is surely an idea most readers will encounter for the first time in *The Genie and the Scotsman*. One finds oneself rooting for the possibility of romance between two characters who seem to exist for the very sake of challenging the reader's ability to suspend disbelief. The witty dialogue modulates between absurdity and naked vulnerability, evoking laughter in one moment and a sympathetic sigh in the next. This narrative is also concerned with power, possession, and mortality: who belongs to whom in this tale? What is the extent of the characters' agency, and to what degree are they willing to sacrifice what little they have for the sake of the other? And wishing... once we take a close look at that which we're fortunate enough to already have, what good is it *really*?

Runner-Up: *Off Trail* by Vanessa Worley

Off Trail is equal parts transcendental homage and necromantic manifesto that sentences the reader to the nagging feeling of being stalked. The juxtaposition of thriving forest and rotting decay establishes a stark truth that life and death are not two separate poles on a shared continuum. Rather, they are one tangled thing. This story challenges us to discover for ourselves that try as you might, there is no escaping either.



Flynn Corson ('04) earned an M.A. in English and Literature from the Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English and an M.Ed from Columbia University. At Ursinus he helped establish the Writing Center and contributed to *The Lantern*. He has four children. He was deeply honored to select this year's Creager Prize-winning piece, impressed (but not surprised!) by the quality of *all* the submissions, and hard-pressed to create a shortlist, let alone a winner.

ELLIOTT HANNAM

The Genie and the Scotsman

“Set me on fire!” Jack requested.

Miranda stared blankly at Jack, genuinely unsure of how to respond. She’d had people wish for fame, riches, immortality (because death sucks), immortality reversal (because life sucks more), replacement limbs, *extra* limbs, disease cures, pictures of their ex, the latest phone, a lifetime supply of meth, the removal of ice from their front door, various superpowers, Justin Beiber tickets, a four-meter tall naked sculpture of Paul Mccartney made out of cheese (specifically cheddar), the Soviet nuclear codes, a 70-inch plasma screen TV (with Netflix), panties, a sandwich, and even a *pet brick*, but *somehow* self-immolation still managed to surprise her. Perhaps she had misheard what he had wished for.

“I’m sorry, did you just say you want me to set you on fire?”
Miranda asked.

“Aye!” Jack clarified.

“As one of your wishes?” Miranda asked.

“Aye!” Jack clarified.

“Why?!” Miranda asked. Genies weren’t encouraged to question wishes, as it was seen as somewhat unprofessional, but it wasn’t an official rule, so... fair game.

“It’s bloody freezing out! A wee bit longer in this and me nipples’ll be able to pierce solid steel!” Jack said, pointing to his frozen nipples.

“Alright, you’re cold, but why do you want me to set you on fire? Why not just wish for a jacket or something?” Miranda asked.

Jack pondered for a moment, “I suppose that’d work too.”

“Alright, so you want me to make you a jacket then?” Miranda asked.

“No, set me on fire,” Jack said.

Miranda sighed and snapped her fingers, trying her best to make a non-lethal quantity of fire. Of course, any quantity of fire is bad for humans, and Jack still received a few minor burn wounds. Miranda had a lot of experience lighting things on fire, so she knew how to stop it from killing the poor fool, but even in all her wisdom she still didn't know how to make it harmless.

Following the 4th edition of the genie code of conduct (section 13, paragraph 9), genies weren't held legally responsible for any harm caused to clients by incompetent, impulsive, or malicious wishing, so Miranda wouldn't lose her job over this. Still, she felt bad for the flaming imbecile, even if he had literally asked for it. Such a stupid wish... At least it was interesting.

Jack seemed to be on the verge of passing out. Miranda decided she should definitely do something about him being on fire. Putting it out would count as "undermining a wish" under the genie code of conduct (section 28, paragraph 6), so she couldn't do that without breaking the law. However, there was nothing legally stopping her from calling 999 (the UK's emergency number) and getting Jack an ambulance.

One ambulance later...

"Name?" the hospital worker asked.

"Jack Wallace," Miranda said.

"Date of birth?" the hospital worker asked.

"July 28th, 1996," Miranda said.

"Prior medical history?" The hospital worker asked.

"Uh... I suspect he was dropped on his head as a child, but... beyond that I've got no idea," Miranda said.

"Right... and your relation to him?" the hospital worker asked.

"Professional Genie," Miranda said.

The hospital worker glanced over Miranda, "Genie? You don't look like one."

Genies have full control over their form and how they look. The more introverted ones preferred to remain invisible, but most gave themselves an appearance. It was common to just be a face, or a head, or a human with a tail rather than legs. Some manifested as a floating hand, others chose to look like an animal, and the most immature genies would usually manifest as a floating penis.

Miranda went for the full human body look, feminine to match her gender identity, and recently modeled after a long time friend of hers, Emily Carlisle. When Emily was 27, which is the age Miranda's appearance was modeled after, she had shoulder length brown hair, hazel eyes, and a freckled face occasionally described as beautiful, but never

abnormally so. It was odd for a genie to look the way Miranda chose to. Most who chose human looks chose to be as stunningly beautiful as possible, with forms that would make the Greek Gods jealous. But Miranda preferred to have her look *mean* something to her, by being a reflection of someone she admired and cared for. Back when she was alive, Emily Carlisle was sweet, considerate, and most importantly, heaps of fun, and that's what Miranda aspired to be. She chose to be reminded of that every time she looked in the mirror.

"I know, unorthodox look. The papers?" Miranda asked.

The hospital worker looked over the papers, "Everything appears to be in order. We'll put your, uh... vessel by his bedside ma'am."

"Ta," Miranda said.

Miranda then spent a while chilling out in what she called "the break room", which was her own little personal pocket dimension. She'd decorated it with countless posters she'd collected over the last century or so. Movie posters, music posters, motivational posters, and even a couple pieces of war propaganda. The entire dimension was basically a monument to nostalgia. Whenever the walls ran out of room Miranda would usually just make the room bigger. Eventually she'd run out of space to expand, but that wasn't a "now" problem.

All genies had personal pocket dimensions tied to some object in the physical world like a lamp, or a bottle, or in Miranda's case, a toaster. Specifically a 1936 Toastmaster, the *finest* toaster in the land (or at least it was when Miranda last needed a replacement vessel).

Why a toaster? Miranda figured that if she had to take some item everywhere it may as well be something useful. Sure, she technically didn't *need* to eat to stay alive, but would you really consider an existence without toast to be living?

Later on, Miranda heard a booming sound emanating across the break room: single ladies by Beyoncé, which she'd set as the "being summoned" ringtone. She wrapped up what she was doing and poofed herself back to the physical world. Her vessel had indeed been moved to Jack's bedside, and he smiled and waved energetically at her as she materialized. Miranda couldn't help but smile back.

"Hello, Jack. How are you holding up?" Miranda asked.

"Well, I'm warmer now," Jack said, pointing to his now unfrozen nipples.

Miranda chuckled, "I suppose you are. So, what is it you wanted?"

"A fine lass to talk to while I wait to be let out of this place," Jack said.

"So... you want me to conjure someone, or...?" Miranda asked.

“I was referring to you,” Jack clarified.

Miranda was flattered, but confused, “You want to talk with me? As a wish?”

“Not a wish. It’s your choice, lass,” Jack said.

“Alright, uh...” Miranda contemplated the offer for a moment.

Jack wasn’t an unpleasant individual. Dim, but not unpleasant. Then again, dim could be a problem. Jack had somehow managed to forget that he’d hired a genie in the time it took Miranda’s vessel to be shipped to his home, and his first wish after 2 weeks managed to put him in the hospital. Then again, she wasn’t always the sharpest fork in the toaster either, she just compensated with experience. She always liked a little bit of stupid anyway, it could help make things more fun. Miranda figured she could do worse than Jack.

“Still there, lass?” Jack asked, waving his hand in front of her face, which had been completely still for the last 30 seconds.

Miranda stammered, “Yeah, sorry, just... anyway, what do you want to talk about?”

Jack shrugged, “I just want to know more about you.”

“Okay...” Miranda leaned back and started floating horizontally in a relaxed position above her toaster, “What do you know about genies?”

“Absolutely fuck all,” Jack said.

“Well, what do you *want* to know about genies?” Miranda asked.

Jack leaned slightly closer to her, “I want to know about *you*.”

Miranda chuckled and rested her chin on her palm, “Well, I’m from Arabia originally, but I’ve lived most of my existence here in the UK. I’ve been doing genie work for a little over a century now, and it’s... a job. The pay’s only average, and the list of rules is 31,926 pages long, but at least you occasionally meet some *very* interesting people.” she looked at Jack with a sly smile on her face.

“Wait, can’t you make money out of thin air? What use have you got for a bloody paycheck?” Jack asked.

“Remember when I said 31,926 pages of rules? It’s against the law for genies to use their powers on something like that. I can break the laws of physics, but violating the magical conduct act of 1925 is a step too far. I don’t want to get locked up again,” Miranda said.

Jack’s eyes turned to surprise, “Again? You’ve been locked up?”

Miranda rubbed the back of her neck nervously, “Uh... yeah. I might have done a few... regrettable things back in the 1800s. I-I was young, uh, for a genie, and I was stupid, and I kind of... set fire to... several government buildings, a cornfield, and at least one racist

magistrate as what I called ‘aggressive protest’. You know, rebellious phase things?”

Jack laughed, “Oh, I know it all too well, lass! I was a borderline *anarchist* as a wee lad! Ah... good times.” Jack’s eyes flashed with nostalgia as he remembered being a wee lad and hitting policemen in the knees with big sticks while quoting Braveheart, and later, the Communist Manifesto.

Miranda brushed her hair to the side, “Anyway, the normal punishment for that sort of conduct was death back then, but, um... it didn’t work. The local law tried hanging me, but I can levitate. They tried decapitation, but I don’t really need a body to live. They tried destroying my vessel but every Genie knows that the first thing you do when you switch to a new vessel is make it indestructible by anything short of a second big bang... Eventually they got sick of trying and finally just did what most do with criminal genies and locked my vessel up for 50 years. Now, *that one* worked as planned. I can’t go more than 2 or 3 meters away from the thing and they locked it in an enchanted box that blocked my magic.” Miranda let out a miserable sigh, “And so, I spent the next half century in a windowless room, with nothing to do and *nobody* to talk to.” The memory seemed to upset her quite a bit.

Jack tried to put his hand on hers, but it just phased through. Miranda tilted her head in confusion, “Uh, what are you doing?”

Jack cleared his throat, “Well, uh... Y-you seemed like you were feeling a bit down, talking about being alone in a magic box for 50 years, and I thought that maybe it would be comforting to remind you that I’m here, uh, for you. You know?”

Miranda smirked, “And the physical contact was needed for...?”

“Just thought it would be nice is all.” Jack said.

“Nice for you or for me?” Miranda asked, still smirking.

“Both, I suppose. Isn’t that the point of this kind of thing?” Jack asked.

“Depends on what you think this kind of thing is.” Miranda said.

Jack tilted his head, “You’re smiling.”

Miranda chuckled, “So?”

“So, I succeeded in bringing up your mood!” Jack said proudly.

Miranda laughed, “I suppose you did.”

And so began an unlikely friendship, born out of fire, which had in turn been born out of a severe lack of foresight. Against all odds, Miranda and Jack quickly grew quite fond of one another. Jack had an infectious sense of optimism, and an incredible talent for lifting Miranda’s spirits. Genie work was often a lonely job, with much time spent being ordered

around or cooped up in a vessel, and frankly, Miranda needed this kind of connection.

Jack tried not to bother Miranda too much at first, but about a week in she decided she wanted to start taking the initiative. Genies weren't encouraged to appear before clients unless summoned, but it wasn't an official rule, so again, fair game. Slightly nervous, Miranda took a deep breath and poofed herself into the physical world. Jack was singing a sea shanty to himself when Miranda appeared.

"Way hay and up she rises, early in the..." Jack turned his head, "Miranda?"

Miranda smiled and waved nervously, "Don't mind me, uh, feel free to finish."

Jack shrugged, "Early in the morning! Put him in the bed with the captain's daughter, put him in the bed with the captain's daughter, put him in the bed with the captain's daughter, early in the morning!"

Miranda then joined in, "Way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, early in the morning!"

Jack looked at Miranda and they both smiled, "That's what we do with a drunken sailor, that's what we do with a drunken sailor, that's what we do with a drunken sailor, early in the morning!"

Miranda started clapping to the beat, "Way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, early in the morning! Way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, way hay and up she rises, early in the morning!" Miranda concluded the duet with an enthusiastic clap and they both started laughing.

"Your voice is beautiful. Where did you learn to sing like that?" Jack asked.

"Prison." Miranda said bluntly.

Jack's smile faded, "Oh, sorry to remind you then... eh, changing the subject, did I summon you when I was playing with the toaster handle? If I did, I'm sorry about that."

Miranda chuckled, "No, I came out on my own. I wanted to talk with you."

"About?" Jack asked.

"Nothing in particular. I just... missed you a little." Miranda said, avoiding eye contact.

Jack's smile returned, "Well, I'm always here for you. You're sure you don't have a topic that strikes your fancy?"

Miranda smiled, "Now that you mention it..."

That particular conversation went on for two, maybe three hours. Miranda lost track of time, and Jack never really *kept* track of time in the

first place. Anyway, it was the kind of conversation that's far too long to recite verbatim. It mainly consisted of rather plain things, like discussion of international policy surrounding genie work, the exchange of nostalgic and/or humorous stories, a bit of playful flirting, some casual banter, and a few sea shanty duets. What's important is that this conversation marked the point where Miranda stopped giving even the most abstract fuck about staying professional and just started speaking freely with her new friend. This gave them a bit of an easier time getting to know each other.

2 more weeks of getting to know each other later...

Miranda was floating above Jack's bed playfully, "And that's apparently why Prince Charles asked me to make a ring that gave him an infinite supply of diabetic monkeys."

A nurse walked in, "Am I interrupting something?"

Miranda floated back to the side of the bed as Jack cleared things up, "No, no. Please, come in."

"Ok... So, your papers have been processed. You can go now. Make room for other patients," the Nurse said.

Jack leaped out of bed, "Freedom!"

Miranda chuckled and made an offer, "So, Jack, now that you can eat out again, do you, um... fancy getting dinner with me?"

One yes later...

It had been months since Miranda had used a physical form, and so she'd forgotten how weird it was. Not being able to move through objects was awkward, and being subject to gravity was exhausting. Jack was enough of a gentleman to carry her toaster for her, but Miranda preferred to keep it in a backpack. More practical.

In order to make the night as interesting and affordable as possible, Jack suggested they go to a place he knew called Kaldor's Pit of Sustenance. It was run by Jack's brother, Nigel, who went by the name Kaldor during restaurant hours (and also on Christmas). The moon was a waxing crescent, so the restaurant was playing jazz music. It was a Tuesday, so the staff wore cowboy hats and Hawaiian shirts. It was February, so the staff also wore groucho glasses. It wasn't a leap year, so the dance floor was open. The weather forecast at the start of the day was cloudy, so all day breakfast was available, which meant Miranda got to have toast for dinner. Jack just went with fish and chips, then asked that Kaldor be informed of his presence.

"So, what do you think of the place, lass?" Jack asked.

"A mix of stupid and romantic. In other words, perfect," Miranda said.

“We got lucky. It’s not usually romantic. If we came here next Saturday they’d be playing death metal rather than jazz, and the waiters would be wearing... viking helmets if I remember correctly.” Jack said.

Miranda chuckled, “Your brother’s insane.”

Jack laughed, “You don’t have to tell me, lass! I grew up with him!”

“My deepest condolences.” Miranda said.

“Aw, he wasn’t *that* awful. He stood up to a bully for me once... albeit with a makeshift battlesuit made out of duct tape and kitchen appliances,” Jack said.

Miranda chuckled again, “Really? How’d that go?”

“Well, the bully lost vision in his left eye for one week and Nigel got suspended for two,” Jack said.

Miranda smirked and nodded towards Jack, “Guess crazy runs in the family.”

“I... eh, fair enough.” Jack said.

“Don’t get me wrong, love, I like crazy. You ask me, you’re *just* the right amount of insane.” Miranda said.

Jack chuckled, “Thanks, Mira. I appreciate it.”

“On that note, most people have all three wishes written down and ready to go when I get there, but we’re, what, five weeks in and you’ve still only made one wish.” Miranda said.

“Want me to hurry it up, lass?” Jack asked.

Miranda chuckled, “Quite the contrary, love. I rather enjoy your company, and this gives us an excuse to spend some quality time together.”

Jack leaned forward, “That reminds me... I’m wondering, when I’ve made all my wishes, you think you’ll stick around?”

“Scared I’ll leave you?” Miranda asked.

Jack fidgeted, “Well... a little. I’m mostly afraid you don’t actually want to be here.”

Miranda chuckled, “Alright, allow me to clarify... If I didn’t want to be here, didn’t want to be with you, I could switch out with another genie in a heartbeat. Have them fulfill your wishes and never have to see you again. I do it all the time whenever I get paired with the worst of the worst. You know, politicians, psychopaths, Jeff Bezos, and anyone else who sees me as nothing more than a tool for getting what they want. If I didn’t like you, believe me, *you’d know*. As to what happens when you run out of wishes... I wouldn’t worry too much about that, love. I have ways of staying in touch.”

It was at this point that their food arrived. The waiter's outfit (cowboy hat, Hawaiian shirt, groucho glasses) forced Miranda to actively stop herself from laughing. She would have succeeded too if it weren't for Jack starting it.

At this point, the waiter was used to it, and he simply informed them that Kaldor would be with them momentarily. Out of the corner of her eye, Miranda noticed a rather large man walking their way. He wore a wide brimmed cowboy hat, prescription groucho glasses, and a suit of gothic plate armor adorned with a hawaiian apron, which was in turn adorned with a name tag that read "Kaldor, restaurant overlord".

Kaldor gave Jack an enthusiastic bear hug, "A thousand welcomes to my beardless brother Jack!"

"Lovely to see you too, Nigel," Jack said as his brother released him.

Kaldor turned to Miranda, "And seven hundred and four welcomes to his freckled companion, who I wager is named either Mary, Charlotte, or Harold!"

Miranda reached out her hand, "Miranda, actually. Nice to meet you."

Kaldor shook her hand vigorously, "To guests of the family I offer all alcoholic beverages free! On a scale of one to christmas, how drunk do you want to get tonight?"

"Uh... I'll pass, thanks." Miranda said.

Kaldor turned to Jack, "Since you quit drinking after the laundry incident, I know you don't want any fun juice, so... want a free chair?"

"Not this time." Jack said.

One of the staff, Amy, approached Kaldor, "Um, sir?"

"Thomas broke something important again, didn't he?" Kaldor asked.

"That he did, sir." Amy said.

Kaldor sighed, "Alright. Jack, Miranda, I've got to handle this. Fifty three apologies for cutting this so short, we'll have to catch up later. Enjoy your sustenance!"

"Will do, Nigel," Jack said as his brother went off to deal with the crisis.

"I said it before, I'll say it again. Your brother is insane." Miranda said.

"Eh, you get used to him," Jack said.

Miranda and Jack then turned their attention towards food, that thing most animals routinely kill each other over. Except Rhinos. Rhinos

are saints. It took about a minute of eating before either of them said anything.

“Mind if I ask you a question, lass?” Jack asked, not realizing he’d just asked one.

“Not at all, love,” Miranda said through mouthfuls of toast.

“If our roles were reversed, and you were the mortal with 3 wishes, what would you ask for?” Jack asked.

Miranda thought about it over another mouthful of toast, “Hm... I always thought the whole ‘riches and power’ thing was stupid. And not fun stupid, just bad stupid... You said I’d be mortal, and I don’t like the sound of that. Death’s a bit scary to me, so I might ask for immortality... sure, most tend to regret immortality eventually, but more than two centuries in I’m still fine with it. I’ll admit life’s not perfect, but I don’t think that means it isn’t worth living. So, to answer the question, I’ll go with immortality as a first wish.” her mouth then returned to the toast.

Jack took a pause from his food, “And for the second?”

“I don’t know. I always thought three wishes was a bit much honestly. I wouldn’t trust most people with *one*, much less three. You’ve seen why first hand.” Miranda said with a smirk on her face.

“I admit I was thinking with me nipples on that one rather than me head. In hindsight, I probably should have taken your jacket suggestion,” Jack said.

Miranda shrugged, “That’s the problem, love: hindsight’s a bitch. It could have saved you three weeks in the hospital and me fifty years in prison, but it didn’t play out that way for either of us... Anyway, to answer your initial question, I gotta go with flight, or levitation, or whatever you wanna call it. Gravity’s a nuisance I’d rather go without. Fuck Isaac Newton, I say what goes up has the right to *stay* up if it bloody well wants to.”

Jack chuckled, “And for the third?”

Miranda thought in silence for a moment before speaking, “Endless toast.”

Jack counted to three on his fingers, “So immortality, flight, and endless toast. You’d essentially wish for what you have now?”

Miranda chuckled, “Yeah, I guess I would. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in this job it’s that you’re usually better off trying to be happy with what you’ve got. And frankly, I’ve got it pretty good.” she smiled warmly and looked into Jack’s eyes.

Jack put his hand on hers, “So have I, lass. So have I.”

POETRY PRIZE

Winner: “Taxi Driver Savior Complex” by Catherine Stump

“*Potbelly politics wrapped up / in silk*” - it’s hard to find a line that delineates this certain kind of man so clearly. Taxi drivers are one of the most unsung heroes, but they are also just men. “Taxi Driver Savior Complex” beautifully depicts the love of a figure you know intimately, at the center of where affection, pity, and hope all meet. There is an unflinching tenderness in the taxi driver’s humanity. It’s as much an ode to the lover, the quietly witnessing “she,” as it is to the beloved. A lovingly made portrait, where the story is said in a single glance.

Runner-Up: “How About Now, Billy Joel” by Olivia Negro

This poem is just so funny, and so annoyed, and so tongue-in-cheek. That’s an important and rare skill, to acknowledge the thing and dismantle it, to laugh while dismantling. “How About Now, Billy Joel” perfectly captures this very particular moment in time. There is a tight shrewdness to the lines, all loaded with music and momentum. The speaker’s energy and certainty carries the reader through an impressive and apt chaos, and in all this recognition there is the bright, keen sense that yes, we are all witnesses, and yes, we are all surviving this together.

Prize Nominees

“Bug Trap” by Miles Noeker & “The Last Two People In the World” by Tatiana Kent



Isabella Matilde Esser Munera (’15) daylights as a tech bro and moonlights as a writer. Her work has been supported by Bread Loaf and Yale Writers Conference, and can be found in *Southeast Review*, *Foglifter*, and *X-R-A-Y*, among others. Her thoughts can be found on her twitter, @esserisst. She thinks a lot about her mom, immigrant child upbringing/unlearning, dog parenting, and how to cook good food.

CATHERINE STUMP

Taxi Driver Savior Complex

Potbelly politics wrapped up
in silk, Cuban cigars cradled
in forefingers. Muscular
ex-militaries straining their
suits, egos bruised by
autopsied fathers. Blood
money pensions parading
through parking lots,
appearances, like bleach-bottle
wives, manipulated by
stacks of rolled dollars.

She forgets how they feel,
when she reflects on each meal.
Forgets the curve of their
currency disposed of in spite.
But she remembers His
scent, His lack thereof;
no pomade, no vices, no
gunpowder, no grime, no
cologne choking on arching
collars or thin lips bruised with
bad wine. Just his mother's
detergent and dollar store
deodorant, smile sucking on
police station peppermints; he
offered her one. She was
always known to never refuse.

PROSE PRIZE

Winner: *Midnight Waltz* by Tyler Ways

Midnight Waltz takes the mundane act of eating a sandwich in a car and juxtaposes it with the somewhat fantastical dilemma that the newly dead face in choosing how to move on. The spare language doesn't overwhelm the story and constructs negative spaces for the reader to explore, creating more questions than answers. It seems only fitting for this story to have no true resolution in the final lines, not for the driver, the passenger, or the reader.

Runner-Up: *The Genie and the Scotsman* by Elliott Hannam

A world in which genies are commonplace, choose their physical form, visit pocket dimensions, cite the genie code of conduct, set a Beyoncé ringtone, and engage in a relationship with an odd and self-harming Scotsman, is the stage for an amusing romp in *The Genie and the Scotsman*. Add to the previous list that the genie in this story did a "few regrettable things back in the 1800s," and you will find it impossible not to smile while reading this light-hearted short story.



Allison Puff ('91) has recently been appointed the Executive VP of Academic Affairs at the Kansas City Art Institute. Before that, she was a Full Professor of Visual Communications at Farmingdale State College, where she taught for 22 years. She is a past co-chair of the American Institute of Graphic Arts Design Educators Community Steering Committee and served as a member of the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum Education Committee. Allison studied illustration at the Pennsylvania College of Art and Design and the School of Visual Arts, where she earned her MFA.

TYLER WAYS

Midnight Waltz

It was nearly two in the morning. He sat for a bit, staring at streetlights as he pulled ingredients out of his bag. He set the peanut butter, grape jelly, and bread, slowly and carefully, on the dashboard of his 2002 Volkswagen bug. For just a second he glanced at the graveyard he had parked next too. Looking back, he began making a sandwich. A small woman, whiter than a pearl, with long, dark hair appeared to his right. The seatbelt light blinked on. The man did not look up from his craft, instead, grunting as a sign of greeting.

"Where am I?" The pale woman didn't sound worried.

Had he been looking, the man would have seen that her expression did not match her tone. Instead, he took her tone as a good sign.

"In a car." He could have said his car, but he found it was best to start with the small details and work his way up.

Hope said she already knew what a car was. He still wasn't sure how to explain that to anyone who didn't know, "horseless carriage" ended up being less effective than he had thought it would be.

"Oh," she quietly looked around, watching as the man spread peanut butter onto slices of bread with a thin plastic knife.

It occurred to her then that she hadn't remembered getting into a car. Suspicion snuck its way through her body. Alarm bells rang through her skull as she registered the lack of normality in this situation.

"Why, exactly, am I in a car?" Not quite what she wanted to ask.

Her mind felt like it was rebooting itself, leaving her wondering why something was off. The man finished making the sandwich and handed it to her. It wasn't much, just peanut butter and jelly. She thought it looked like the best meal on the planet. He silently pulled out an already made sandwich and took a bite.

"Because I made you a sandwich."

His mouth was partially full, which she found to be quite rude. He still hadn't even glanced over at her.

"Why aren't you looking at me?" Past experience told her to try and remain calm, until she could be sure what type of situation she was in.

Which past experience she didn't know. Lack of concern in her voice made him feel more confident. He'd had some people show up who already knew exactly what was going on. Still, he wasn't willing to push it. Gore had always made him feel sick, and there had been several times where he had run into someone who was missing several parts of themselves. Other times he had looked and found the car suddenly empty. So he shrugged.

"No reason in particular" is what he went with.

Mentally he made a note to write a script so he could actually answer questions as he went. She wanted to ask more, but the sandwich in her hands grew irresistible. She bit into the sandwich and felt as though she had melted. Her entire body relaxed for what felt like the first time in forever. She took another bite, then another, then in one large mouthful she shoved the whole thing into her mouth. She realized then that this was not a normal thing to do, nor did she remember peanut butter and jelly sandwiches tasting so good. She eyed the man next to her suspiciously.

"Who did you say you were?" Another question she realized she should have asked sooner.

"I didn't." That was an awful response, and he knew it. He made another mental note. 'Write a script, soon.'

"Well that's not very helpful then is it?!" Anger and confusion, that's what she couldn't figure out earlier. She was feeling anger and confusion.

"I suppose it's not" The word script repeated itself over and over in his mind.

At this point he had simply forgotten his own name more than he was being intentionally vague. The situation had seemed to be going well, but now she seemed to be mad. He didn't know how to deal with mad.

The pale woman crossed her arms. A bright flash caught her eye.

"But I'm not..." she tries to wipe something off them. "I remember that I was..." licking her thumb she tried to rub away something from her skin.

"Wasn't I black?" This was less of a question and more of a statement as she stared down at her arms. The man glanced at her.

"You probably still are." She looked back at him, as she began to truly notice the strangeness of the whole scenario.

"I was," she pauses, thinking, as he took another bite of his sandwich. "I think I was just about to cross the street."

The man winced. The thought of this poor woman walking into oncoming traffic was not a good one.

"I remember a truck, then a bright light, then..." she paused and looked at him. "Then I was here, and you were making me a sandwich" she said this hesitantly, as though she wanted confirmation that she was, in fact, eating a sandwich in a car with a strange man.

"I'm sorry." This is the first sign of emotion she hears in his voice, and for once, she thinks she understands why.

"I doubt it was you in the truck." The sound of the horn was ringing in her ears now. An entire lifetime of experience rushed into her head. She puts her palm on her temple.

"It wasn't"

"Then why apologize?"

He stopped for a moment to think about it.

"Just that a bad thing happened that I wish hadn't." He took another bite of the sandwich.

She found herself disappointed that the dead could still get migraines.

"Are you..."

"No." He chuckles, "I'm just a guy who likes to make sandwiches, and apparently your type seems to like them."

Previously that comment would have bothered her under the circumstances, though, she let it slide.

"This is your first experience after? You haven't seen anyone else?"

"I don't remember seeing anyone else until now."

"No?" He looked at her this time, genuinely turned his face to what was visible of hers.

He wasn't smiling at her, his eyes a blue shade of melancholy.

"Some of the others claim to see when they get visited." He looks past her, almost through her, to the graveyard they are next to.

"My parents died last year," she paused to think, her brain, if you could call it that, still resetting.

"At least it feels like it was last year. I didn't really have many friends, but I guess they must be the reason I'm here."

She looks over at the graveyard too, wondering which of the many graves was hers. If he wasn't already feeling like he wanted to cry, he might have followed her gaze. Instead, he looked back at his sandwich and began to take the last few bites.

"I'm glad I came here today." His mouth was full with the last of the sandwich and he began to clean up his area of the car, sweeping all the crumbs out through the door he had just opened.

Leaving was always his least favorite part. Still, he knew if he stayed longer, it would not help her.

"I hope you come again." When she said this he stopped.

None of them had ever asked him to come back before. They had all appreciated the company, but after they realized they were dead, many were ready to attempt moving on.

"You don't want to move on?" He looked at her for the second time.

"Well, I'm not sure how to move on, and you've been very kind to me." She smiled at him.

He didn't return it, holding back his lips from quavering. Guilt pooled up inside of him.

"I'll be back again tomorrow night, and every night after that, until I've helped everyone stuck in this graveyard."

When he looked in her direction she was gone. He slowly drove away tears sliding down his face.

ALLIE ARMOUR

Eulogy of Caution

I grip the wheel as if my hands will shove it off the road,
flex my hands like they're going to run from my body,
and move my legs to keep my mind in one place.

Biding my time remains a waste, and
the world keeps spinning at a pace
that keeps me out of control.

I dig deep into my hand and find nothing of value,
lasso my thoughts in tight so that I don't spiral,
whatever it takes to minimize the terrors of
off-roading.

It's a slippery slope from fear to hiding,
hands holding on tightly to the comfort
of promised safety.

It can't go down from here, right?

EMILY BRADIGAN

Don't cry over spilled milk!!

You weren't going to say sorry,
were you?

For spilling the moon
into my lap
when *you* knocked it over
to hang the stars
for me to see.

That's okay.
I'll be sorry for you
instead.

EMILY BRADIGAN

I am the spider

(Volume I)

that weaves its web
in the corner of rooms
you don't look at everyday.

I weave my webs in the corners of kitchens,
in door jams between rooms,
in the little spaces of *your* space
and I make my home there.

I weave so many webs—
I'm in so many corners,
of every room,
every person—

please don't brush away my webs.
I have crafted them so carefully,
so intricately,
so the patterns would shine across your eyes
and you'd see the art of my craft.

(Volume II)

and I spin my webs
ever so intricately
all over this place.

I spin webs
that people fall into—
are trapped in
no,
they come on their own,
enjoying the patterns of myself
that I have carefully crafted for them.

ELLIOT CETINSKI

The Lamb

Abraham struck the stone
Slaughtering the lamb.

Don't you feel my love for you?
God cries
I've spared you the pain I caused in the first place.

...

Abraham sees the light.

...

Abraham struck the stone
Slaughtering his lamb.

I reject your love
Abraham cries
I give you what you asked for.

Isaac smiles, mouth full of blood.

ELLIOT CETINSKI

The Witch and the Shepherd

The fire burns, but her face burns brighter.
She stares unblinking at my skin,
Bubbling, melting,
Simmering flesh.
Her face contorts into shapes I've yet to see
On those delicate lips

Trapped against the glowing embers
Which adorn my head like a crown,
All I wish is to caress
Those warped features with my own lips.
Yet mine now crack with rivers of blood.
Too rough to calm her.

The taste of copper in my mouth
reminds me of our nights together—
Tearing my lip—
The bliss of
Tangled legs
Tangled fingers
Tangled hair

Mangled feet slip on crumbling charcoal.

The fiery agony
eating away at my stomach
Reminds me of the first time
I saw her.
Strolling past the field, a newborn lamb

Gentle, cradled in her embrace.

How, in that moment
I wished nothing more than
To be that lamb.

My vision fills with putrid smoke.
My lungs are already familiar with it.

Suddenly her face fades.
All I hear is the jeering.
The laughing.
I close my now useless eyes
Consumed by fire
Consumed by the burden of the witch.
And yet, a kinder warmth than the blaze
Reaches my palms.
Tangled fingers tangled legs tangled hair.
Mangled lips embrace tear-stained cheek

She and I.
The Shepherd and The Witch.
Anger, sorrow, passion
Burn as one.

We sear our hearts into the earth,
Screaming our pain and our love for
The Father to hear
The Matron to hear
The Judge to hear
The Accuser to hear
The Bystander to hear
The Guilty to hear

As we crumble to ash in the torchlight,
Fertilizer for the hay
The sheep will eat tomorrow.

How I wished to be that lamb.

ERIN CORCORAN

Nostalgia

Searching static channels
While rifling through
The dusty albums of my mind
Indebted to unraveling
The thread of lost
Glimpses,
 phrases,
 dispositions
To ruminate or share
That cable-knit feeling,
Elusive as prayer.

LEO COX

In the Summer I Want Light

Forget the shadows kissing on the avenue,
sheltered by jasmine palms,
fanning each other with dark lashes.
Give me sweet tears in your soft white shirt,
as cotton as candy clouds.
Give me the basil, crisply-minced, give me
the fat red tomatoes sweating
on the cutting board. The pot boils,
the clock ticks at the wrong hour,
the sun straightens up
with yet another second chance
glowing in her fingers.

OLIVIA CROSS

I Am (Not)

I am “just a phase”
a girl who knows
nothing
about her own body and mind
and simply thinks “swinging the other way” is a trend to try on and wear
out
I am confused and naive and juvenile
But I am not bisexual.

I am a fantasy
the hot porn video you’ve always dreamed about will finally become a
reality because
as everyone knows
my sexuality exists for your pleasure, straight man!
I am kinky and fun and a good fuck
But I am not bisexual.

I am a liar
my boyfriend proves that
standing as a testament to my straightness
because a self-respecting bi girl can never actually choose
I mean, it’s in the name, right?
so I am insensitive and deceitful and vicious
But I am not bisexual.

I am invisible
even within the community that has the “B” in its title
too straight to be queer
too tainted by a man to ever love a woman

too passing to ever know the “real struggle”
I am a little too much of everything
Except bisexual.

OLIVIA CROSS

Thanatophobia

I wear the necklace you gave me when we were “just friends” to bed every
night now
Fasten the chain on the longer hook so it lays near my heart
Maybe that way, I can absorb some part of you that I’ve missed
Or restore your nightly presence with a ghost

I drive with the windows down, my emotions in the urn of my sternum
Hoping to scatter their ashes alongside the road
Instead, they stick in my eyes and throat
And I mourn anew

CONNOR DONOVAN

We're not children anymore

Well, my eyes still cement
to a DreamWorks movie
like sweaty skin on leather car seats.

My mouth still quivers
for Kraft mac and cheese
like a restless voice mid-flirt.

My nose still clutches
to the smolder of soil right after rain
like Calvin Klein cologne.

My ears still crave
the hiss of a VHS rewind
like an approaching subway car.

And my hands still comb
through my grade school yearbooks
like I need to recall how much I haven't grown.

KATE ISABEL FOLEY

Hamlet's Fool

Ophelia,
do not believe
his vows.

You are always
the more deceived:
by every meadowsong,
by every reckless wrong,
by touch
and shout,
you are whirled about.

Take your daisies
and columbines
and plant yourself
a garden
worth tending.

TATIANA KENT

Lemon

My mother told me,
“You’re hardwired to feel shame.”
Perhaps I’m split in two-
one girl who grew up, one who didn’t.

“You’re hardwired to feel shame,”
strange men shriek through megaphones.
I grew up, you didn’t
Snuffed out with no legacy but my tears.

Strange men shriek through megaphones
that I’m a killer, a sinner, a woman led astray—
that you’ll be snuffed out with no legacy but my tears—
my cross will be too heavy to bear.

If I’m a killer, a sinner, a woman led astray
then what would you be but an evacuated house in my hurricane?
My cross to bear is no memory
but a face never seen, a laugh unheard.

I didn’t want you to be an evacuated house in my hurricane.
I didn’t want you to be a statistic or a slave.
Your face unseen, your laugh unheard,
your grave unmarked.

TATIANA KENT

the last two people in the world

Instead of trying to recreate the words of those long dead
I hand you an aspirin, twist a strand of your hair around my finger—
and hope you get the picture.

and whether we end up sliding bamboo shards under each other's
fingernails
or immortalized in ivory, i hope you know that we
were never special, any more than perseus and andromeda
but I'd still face my father's wrath to collapse into your bed
again, my sleep is dreamless
constellations line the cracks where gray matter used to be.

Crawling home from the show, we notice our mucus is black—
it must be those coal fires, raging through eons till the sun goes out.

ANDREW KMETT

Amongst Chaos (what captivated me)

Astigmatic, completely overwhelming
were the lights and bright colors
that danced upon my visual canvas.

A cult, masquerading as
a missionary group, stood on the side
of Main Street. I watched in anticipation.

Flurries of soundbites
pierced my eardrums, too sharp to
comprehend, yet unmistakable.

Rainbow flags stood in defiance.
Students hung dangerously off porch railings,
hurling insults towards the invaders of their home.

Cop lights flashed while their
sirens wailed. I took a step back to get a better
perspective and that was when it happened.

What I had been anticipating.
Some wild event that would captivate
my simple, human brain.

Amongst the chaos, there sat two
little girls. As their parents declared
death upon all homosexuals, they drew.

I couldn't see what they were drawing,
and I didn't need to. No one did.
In that moment, all I wished was that their hands
moved to the steady rhythm of uninfected innocence.

OLIVIA NEGRO

How About Now, Billy Joel

Shinzo Abe shot dead, water pipes still full of lead,
 South China Sea, no debt relief, new pandemic dropped.
 Bannon wants the world to burn, Roe v. Wade was overturned,
 Climate change, save us Bill Nye, who is telling the “Big Lie”?

Brittney Griner, NRA, Congress with a thousand “nays”
 People hooked on opioids, Zuckerberg, George Floyd
 J+J, Disney+, goodbye to the anti-trust,
 Americans still uninsured, many sick just left uncured,
 BTS, book bans, leave him be—he is trans,
 Brexit, COVID, me too, can we get a redo?

Who started the fire?
 Has it always been burning
 since the world’s been turning?
 Does it matter who started the fire?
 Who’s gonna fight it?
 Who’s trying to right it?

Monkeypox, Hong Kong, Jan 6, Ruth’s gone
 Amazon, make it rain, all the glory to Ukraine
 51 found dead, United Nations left on read,
 Pakistan under water, Rowling ruined *Harry Potter*,
 Mr. Beast, Elon Musk, Jesus Christ,
 Who can we trust?
 Lin Manuel’s *Hamilton*, pandemic of depression

You may have started a fire,
 It’s been burning while your children were learning,

You may have started a fire,
If you light it, are you gonna fight it?

Mass school shootings 'round the clock, Gen-Z brains wrecked by TikTok
The U.S. left Afghanistan, Amini was slain in Iran,
Paul Pelosi with a hammer, picked up the phone, it's a scammer
please just share the vaccine, England's got a new king
Hand the beer to Kavanaugh, "China's under martial law"

If "we didn't start the fire"
And "it was always burning since the world's been burning"
If we didn't start a fire
We still all ignite it so lets
Try to right it.

MILES NOECKER

Bug Trap

TW: violence and gore

That woman pounded on my door
Middle of the night
Begging me to kill a bug
In her apartment
Buzzing *please please please*
My man ain't home

All the way down the stairs
Squished the tired from my eyes
Face burning crimson
As she whined at my back

I stomped into her place
And her man behind the door
Pressed a gun against my skull
They swarmed me

Took my keys
Made me strip
Tied me up
Laughed at my naked body
Flew off with their harvest
Leaving only a *sorry, sucker*
And me molting on their crusty floor

MILES NOECKER

Spring, Musser Hall, Room 219

when the heater stops creaking
and the dust stops piling
and the windows squeak free
will all this just be a white box
to the next sucker?
will the bed stay angled in the corner
so morning sun
blasts onto the pillow?
will the water stain on the carpet
or the chipped paint on the wall
still tell stories of stupidity?
will rhythmic knuckles
invite the next guy
down the hall
to turn some directionless mission
into the best night of his life?
will blazing string lights
unplugged, wound, and packed
in a cardboard box labeled "DON'T TOUCH"
shoved into a dark corner of the garage
ever hang the same?
will they ever glow again?

LEO QUINN

Time's Denial

We are subjected only to time
Time is what brought the movers to the house at 8 o'clock sharp

Shuffling outside of the door and bringing about a panic (as we under the assumption that it was Tuesday, not Monday morning in which they would arrive)

No time to prepare, no time to collect yourself or your things

What if, upon lifting your couch, they reveal the imprints left behind in the carpet?

God forbid you subject them to signs of a prolonged temperance, where you must face the recognition of impossible permanency and the fact that a long-lasting existence is subjected to time

The recognition that *we* are subjected only to time

Hardwood floors exist for nothing but scratches.

Where are the imprints in your carpet?

EMILIA REED

A Song of History

Seated, soft fabric
enveloping my legs;
a blanket woven from
golden threads of silk.

Her red manicured hands
caress my skin, braiding blonde
ringlets that cascade down my
bright pink, glittery t-shirt.

Omi's still youthful gaze
transcends three generations,
a warrior woman who fled the
Nazis as a rosy-cheeked toddler.

Those emerald eyes sailed in
Queen Mary's steerage with
four elder siblings. They are
my mother's eyes, and my own.

Her old German song flows in
the air, scented with pumpkin
spice candles through blue flower
curtains, a river of sonorous melody.

Across decades, Hanitschak music
traveled across the ocean, through
Philadelphia, arriving in a red brick
house to bless my childhood.

RYAN SAVAGE

A Haiku for You

Have you ever had
A poem written for you?
Oh, well now you do.

ZE'EV SHAHEEN

Hello! My Name Is:

Hello! My Name Is:
Something
you can't pronounce

“That's so unique, where is it from?”
From tongue they were told
not to take with them

“What does it mean?”
It means me and my name
Monument to myself

“Can you say it again?”
I'll serenade you, scream
It slip it smooth like silk

“It's beautiful...”
“But it's so hard to say!”
“Do you have any nicknames?”

Hello! My name is:
An accommodation
so you don't have to try

To know me

ZE'EV SHAHEEN

Toilet Humor

Stop me if you've heard this one:
A tranny walks into a bar,
or at least that's what
the assailant said
in the police report.
and they believe him!
No its funny, I swear
Why aren't you laughing?
That joke usually kills.
Okay how about this
Is it hot in here or is it just me
And the constant reminders
That I'll burn in hell
For doing nothing
But live as my authentic self?
What's the deal with airlines
When they pat me down
Because
"sir there's something wrong with your chest"
I mean you're telling me
What do you need after
Years and years of abuse
And terror
In public bathrooms?
Thera-pee!
I was eleven
When I went into the
Bathroom and someone
Got scared enough

To call the security guard.
They banged on the door like
The beating of my heart
Against my ribcage
“Occupied!” Is apparently not
The appropriate response.
They dragged me outta there
With my pants around my ankles
And my heart shaped boxers
Barely up.
The comedian before me
With the M on his
Unchanged
Birth Certificate
Said “why didn't you laugh”
You said a slur
You said people
Like me
Deserve what's coming to them
Maybe it was a well placed
Punchline but
You punched down.
I didn't laugh
Because it was slapstick
And you weren't the one
Who got hurt
He groans
“You just don't get it”
So I'll take a lesson
From that guy
The next time someone
Looks at me
Like I'm a danger
Like im mold
Creeping
Up on the faucets
And up on
the precious children
Who are the same
Age as me,
I will laugh.

I will laugh
Because when
I say i am being attacked
You put it in your sitcoms.
When I say
don't use that word
You put it in your comedy specials
When I try
to convince you
I am human
And you think it's
Hilarious.
You just gotta laugh
When you're always the joke
Thats my time, folks
I'll see you in the papers
As the latest hate crime
Victim

AMY SMITH

Waterfalls

A chisel is nothing
Compared to the power behind trickles of water
That grows until they surge over the edge.

Collected together to rush
Running forth at great speeds only to fall
To create a curtain that bellows and roars.

A ruffled skirt of a wedding dress
That melt into the endless bottom of a seductive pool
that begs the mind to imagine what lies within it.

To observe from afar
It may seem as though it is alive
As if stone and water are dancing together.

A destructive romantic rendezvous
That topples trees perched at the perilous borders
Slowly freefalling until their trunks litter the streams.

The spray from their mouth
Brings life to the walls they had constructed with time
From small green mosses to basketfuls of flowers and ferns.

A sight to behold
During the oppressive heat on a summer's day
The fulfillment of a thousand years of work.

CATHERINE STUMP

Communion

Hallowed be thy shame
of a downturned lip, that little
quiver of a line so often
crossed. Said I spoke of you
like a prophet does pain but
you stuck around despite that,
prying those frowns apart.
You devoured my words,
allowed yourself to love a girl
who gave up her blood & body
in return. I let you cannibalize,
let you deceive, let you kiss your
sorrows like a Judas in heat just to
cradle no anger in your absence.
Do this in remembrance of me.

VANESSA WORLEY

Shift

Autumn thunders in with the yellowing of the shagbarks
And the death-scent of ginkgoes.
Hastily the goldenrod takes the place of garlic mustard,
Choking out the underbrush with fine, sunny plumes.
A few thousand shorebirds pass over each night,
Guided by moonlight or magnetism or love.

Birdwatchers celebrate the arrival of teals,
Mourn the fleeing of redstarts.
Visiting egrets step lithely through the edge of the reservoir,
Watch carp stir its chilled surface.
Amanita caps push up through the leaf litter,
Toxic beauty bright against their background of decay.

Fractals of frost grow across the windowpane,
The leaves curl in on themselves.
Apoptosis to torpor, we all have of our ways of coping.

AURORA MCKEE

Mama Told Me Not To Waste My Life

TW: Depression

(Title taken from “Wings” by Little Mix)

You are sitting on the bedroom floor. You are sitting on the bedroom floor, hunched over like a warped parody of *The Thinker*, hands pressed to your face. Your mouth tastes bad because you haven't brushed your teeth and you can't bring yourself to brush your teeth, even with a dry brush.

From a distance it probably looks like you're crying, and maybe you should be. Crying would make more sense than this.

You aren't crying, is the thing. The thing is, you are *thinking*, your mind caught up in a whirlwind of thoughts and phrases, ideas for stories you've never written and conversations you will never have. A haze of everything and nothing, all perfectly irrelevant to the situation at hand. You are missing—not going to miss, you are *missing*—the first class of the day, even though you woke up at eleven and said class started at fucking noon.

Under the hoodie you wear more often than you should, your back has started to sting and itch, complaining at the hunched-over position unless it's something else.

First, you couldn't get off your computer. You were already late when you managed that, and then you couldn't get off your brain. Your little hunched self has made its way from the bedroom to the floor, stopping to throw on the hoodie you wear too often. Other than that, you're still in your pajamas, ready to bullshit your way through school with the pajama top covered enough for plausible deniability. The classroom you're not going to make it to today is freezing cold—at least to you—and you hoped pajamas would help.

The itching grows worse, and you consider going over to scratch your back against the desk. You plan to do this and then you procrastinate

on that plan: to plan out a story you cannot gather yourself to write. That is just how your brain works, sometimes. That is just how your brain works, too many times.

Music might help if you hadn't briefly misplaced your phone or your headphones. If you weren't so good at losing, or *losing*, since you were a child who hadn't grasped the nature of your difference but felt it every step of the way.

And you feel the scrape of shifting flesh inside your back. Every shift inside *you*, your body undoing and redoing itself in accordance with the nature of your thoughts. The stories and plans in your head shift and drop plots as easily as blinking, after all. Why shouldn't the rest of you follow?

Maybe it's for the best that you chose today of all days to get stuck here, because your aunt called to tell you about a care package she sent that you've left to rot at the school post office for far too long. You know this hurts her, the same way your parents are hurt (scared) when you forget to return their calls. Or rather, you don't realize they've called you at all. They blur at the corner of your mind if you don't work hard enough to hold on to them, and you're not good at holding on to things.

You roll your shoulders. They sting, they ache, they ripple, and you are not afraid. You're not good at deciding when or when not to be afraid. Growing up terrifies you, but body horror barely makes you flinch. You write stories that your parents say are full of "mayhem" all the time. You fall in love with creatures that have teeth and claws and endless, staring eyes.

You're not paying attention, really. You're thinking about the class you're missing and whether you want to make the next ones. You think you can manage, but it's hard to say—you're terrible at upholding your truly important obligations, while far too good at getting distracted by the nonsensical ones.

Blood trickles down your back. Once you walked around the house with blood on your foot without noticing, without feeling. Once you ran in circles on the soccer field. Once you walked in circles on the playground. You are good at moving around the problem, dancing on the edge of the things, a soft blur.

The class you're missing is a foreign language class, and it's in a cold room that doesn't seem to bother anyone else but you. The teacher is good at her job, but her job involves loudly enunciating words for ignorant Americans, and your brain is not comfortable with these swift rises and falls in tone, or the way the world around you shudders with everyone being expected to respond at once.

It is overwhelming sometimes. Other times it's just cold and you don't want to be there. Either way, you keep finding yourself hiding in the bathroom for stupidly long periods of time, and you are waiting for the teacher to either point this out for you or dock points from your grade. You do a good job of participating in class while you're there, at least, raising your hand to answer questions when you are the only one who gets to speak. You fear it's not enough.

Your back bulges, splits, curling you even farther into yourself. Your face presses against your hands hard enough that your hands might pull away with part of your face smashed into them, eyeballs glistening on your palms. Blinking up at you, watching, waiting. One eye, you know, is poorer than the others, and if you broke under the temptation to close your hands to fists it would go first. *Squish*.

Your brain is spaghetti that cannot stop boiling, growing lump and soggy. Your brain is your dearest friend, the thing that makes you yourself. The brain is where the stories that provide your lifeblood live, and home to the nightmares, the wandering thoughts that sink barbed nails into you. Your brain bulges at its confines, sinks down your neck, through your body, your skin. Your back.

It hurts when the wings slowly start to peel out your feathers scratching against your skin. It stings more than you expected, like the knife you placed to your skin once in hopes of creating a hole big enough to reach in and tug the imperfections out (It didn't work. You don't even have a scar).

You will send an email to your teacher telling her that you were dealing with "issues" getting to class. "Issues" is a good, open-ended word, and you think she will take it, even if she will also mark you late and you can't remember whether you have two or three missed classes left before it starts affecting your grade.

Your parents, as always, will be harder. They're still worried about you forgetting to answer their calls, failing to charge your phone again and again, and you know from experience that it sucks for everyone involved when you have to report another missed class. You don't want to explain this one to them because it isn't as simple as oversleeping. Even oversleeping isn't as simple as oversleeping—it takes a certain kind of brain to miss-set her alarms as much as you do.

Wings split from your back, stinging and strange and beautiful, their light arching across your bedroom room. Immediately they run into a problem, because your room is far too small for them, and they bump awkwardly into your dresser drawer, your bed, the mess you've scattered

across the floor. They are raw and fragile, and they hurt, hurt at the core in a way you don't feel nearly often enough.

Sometimes you worry your meds numb you. But you know what would happen if you didn't have them, know whatever you have with them is truer and more stable than the person you are without them. It doesn't make the numbness you felt since your old dog died, the fact that you had to weep for him with stories instead of tears, any easier to think about.

Instead of taking flight, your wings have to wrap around you, bind you up in a tangle of feathers. They press close enough that you are warm in a way you usually only get in bed or the shower or the summer sun, or when you are lost enough in your stories and in your mind and in your love (you do love, you love the people in your life even when you forget to show it).

Your wings hide you from the future. The future of today, the future of tomorrow, the future of a year to two years from now that terrifies more than words can say, because you don't know how to plan for that, and you fear that any plans you make would fall to pieces. The wings make it easy to block it all out, to not have to think about anything.

They press tight enough that it hurts, just a little. That it gets hard to breathe. Substance bleeding from your thoughts, your limbs locked up, your mind sealed in a column of feathers. Closer, closer, holding you down because they do not know anything else.

Here is the truth: you love your wings. You love your differences, your strangeness. You love the beautiful, hissing patterns of your brain matter, your strange and lovely meat. You love the stories that fall from your hands like flowers, you love the way your back stings and aches with new life.

Here is a truth: bearing your wings is hard. You are not a bird, you are not a goddess, you are just a person who is a little different from the others. You are not starseed, you will not save the world. Instead, you will struggle to navigate it, to stand up under the weight of your wings and walk out the door.

Flying is not as simple for you as it is for birds. It takes concentration, commitment, all the gifts you were not blessed with. It takes more than simple words or a simple promise. It can be so hard to fly sometimes, especially now, when you don't remember what's important, when you are suffocating under the weight of your wings and you are drowning on the floor and you don't know *how*—

But you do, don't you?

It's been dancing through your mind all this time, reflected in a haze of words, waiting for your wings to hold you tight enough, for you to be pushed far enough that you can look down at yourself and understand. You need movement, you need breath, and nowhere can you find that as quickly as through a story. And not just *any* story, but one you chose, one you focus on.

So, you start with a story. You gather the haze up and you slide it onto the page, onto the words, to lock at it, to wield it. You force yourself to move, because creating a story is an act of motion, and that means opening your wings up again, pushing them aside. Even if it hurts, and sometimes it will, you get to work.

You move, and the blood hums through your veins, and you freeze again, but then you keep moving. The next class is one you chose, and it's easier to move again for that, to guide yourself, following the story—your story, any story—along like a thread. Guiding you through the storm, guiding you out of your head. You trace the pattern, and you find the place where your wings will cut through the air currents, pushing you on.

This is not the story you wanted to write. It is the story you need to write at this moment, the story about all the things that make other stories possible. You cannot write a perfect ending; you cannot be brought back by the missed class or skipped lunch; you cannot make up for the fact that it will be hours before you stop yourself enough to brush your teeth.

But you still have the story that pushes you to your feet with your wings folded tightly towards your back, ready to fly. You walk out the door and you do not stop, and you do not fall, making your way towards the class you will participate in and the package you will get and the meal you will eventually eat and the teeth you will eventually brush.

That is the best you can ask of yourself and your story, right now, and right now you want to believe it is enough.

EVAN CHARTOCK

Writer's Block

Cast of Characters

ALEX: A struggling writer attempting to write his next work to make ends meet.

THOUGHTS: The personification of Alex's brain; condescending and doubting, but ultimately wants what is best for their physical form.

Place

Alex's living space.

Time

The play takes place in the present.

Playwright Notes

I initially wrote this play with an abundance of stage directions, but quickly eliminated them. This is because I did not want to constrict the respective imaginations of the director(s) and the actors. This is meant to be a fast-paced comedy, and part of that will be achieved by the decision making of those involved in the production. Both characters should feel free to move around the stage and interact with each other in sometimes overly dramatic, intense, and humorous ways.

Both roles can be played by any performer regardless of race/ethnicity/national origin/sex/gender identity/religion/etc; Alex was purposefully given a gender-neutral name and their "thoughts" character does not have to be of matching physical characteristics.

Double lines "//" indicate that the next actor should begin their line, even if the actor currently speaking still has more words to say.

LIGHTS UP.

We see ALEX typing on their laptop. In the room with them is the personification of their THOUGHTS.

THOUGHTS

Pointless...

ALEX holds down backspace and tries something else; this whole process of deleting, thinking, and typing should take approximately 20-30 seconds.

THOUGHTS

Hopeless...

ALEX holds down backspace and tries something else; this whole process of deleting, thinking, and typing should take approximately 20-30 seconds.

THOUGHTS

Are you even trying to write something good?

ALEX

I'm just...brainstorming.

THOUGHTS

Is that what we're calling it?

ALEX

Do you wanna shut up?

THOUGHTS

You can't get rid of me.

ALEX

Unfortunately so.

There is an awkward silence.

ALEX

I'm...sorry I lost my cool there.

THOUGHTS

I know. I'm you.

ALEX

Oh, right. I guess I'm just paranoid // that we're not a very good writer.

THOUGHTS

That we're not a very good writer, I know, I know, every other neuron-firing you send to me has had that thought. Just relax—

THOUGHTS begins to massage ALEX's temples.

THOUGHTS

—and see what comes to mind.

ALEX

Ok...how about something serious.

Beat.

THOUGHTS

Specific.

ALEX

I know, but it's a start. How about...a death?

THOUGHTS

(overjoyed)

Now we're talking. Who? A family member, a romantic partner?

ALEX

Let's start with...mom.

THOUGHTS

Ok! Let's get this conversation going.

BOTH move away from the laptop and begin to act out the following scene:

THOUGHTS

Oh, my baby...

ALEX

Stick with me mom, it's going to be ok.

THOUGHTS

Why would you let this happen to me?

ALEX

I'm sorry. I should've known...there were...pineapples in that dessert.

THOUGHTS

(breaking character)

Pineapples?

ALEX

Yeah, I was imagining a food allergy type situation thing, you know?

THOUGHTS

I was too...at a preschool birthday party!

ALEX

Well how else was she supposed to die?

THOUGHTS

A sickness or a car accident or at gunpoint.

ALEX

Isn't that a little morbid?

THOUGHTS

Tough shit! It's what the people want to see.

ALEX

Ok well you don't have to yell at me!

THOUGHTS gives ALEX a look; ALEX, piecing the next phrase together:

ALEX

I don't have to yell at me // through you—

THOUGHTS

Don't hurt yourself, bud. Let's try something else. How about a significant other instead of your mom? And raise the stakes a bit, maybe?

ALEX

I'll try.

BOTH get back into character.

ALEX

My dearest...dearest...

THOUGHTS

(stage whispering, to show they are not in the scene)

Come up with the name later.

ALEX

My dearest dear! I'm sorry I let this happen to you.

THOUGHTS

It's not your fault.

ALEX

If I had known that drug cartel would have held me in an underground bunker for the past eighteen days with nothing but dog food and rainwater whilst simultaneously freezing my assets and stabbing the one person I love forty-two times—

THOUGHTS

(breaking)

What the hell, Alex?

ALEX

(breaking)

What? You wanted more stakes—

THOUGHTS

More stakes, not more plotlines! How are you gonna write that in a timely manner? Do you even know what a “cartel” is? Why so specific with forty-two—

ALEX

I don't know, I don't know, I // don't know!

THOUGHTS

Clearly!

Beat.

THOUGHTS

(taking a deep breath for patience and strength)

Maybe serious writing isn't your forte. We could try moving into some more lighthearted stuff.

ALEX

(glumly)

I guess so.

THOUGHTS

I kinda liked that last scene we did. How about a romantic comedy?

ALEX

(more optimistic)

I'm cool with that. Let's go with... // stuck together.

THOUGHTS

Stuck together.

ALEX

We know us so well.

THOUGHTS

Let's do this.

ALEX

(after a moment)

What do you mean the door is locked?

THOUGHTS

I mean the door is locked!

ALEX

How could this happen?

THOUGHTS

Well you see that door over there?

ALEX

Yep.

THOUGHTS

It's locked. (*Beat. Breaking:*) Do we know why the door is locked?

ALEX

(*breaking*)

I'm working on it. Uhm...because...

THOUGHTS

Keep in mind // we're doing a romantic comedy.

ALEX:

(*in "character"*)

...there is a gorilla on the other side of the door, // dammit.

THOUGHTS

Dammit.

ALEX

Maybe we shouldn't have focused on intimate relationships.

THOUGHTS

It's not like we've ever been in one before.

ALEX

Way to hit us where it hurts.

THOUGHTS

Hey, that's not a bad thing.

ALEX

You're right, I'm sorry.

THOUGHTS

No relationships, no problem. Let's just stick with comedy.

ALEX

Okay comedy...

THOUGHTS

Comedy.

ALEX

So I'm thinking we do a story about two childhood best friends...

THOUGHTS

That's a start

ALEX

On a road trip. Scratch that, on vacation.

THOUGHTS

It looks like we're on to something here. Let's get into character and make some magic!

BOTH become new characters for the scene.

ALEX

I can't believe it! How could you afford to get us to Paris?

THOUGHTS

Believe it, my friend. This new job has been treating me well—

THOUGHTS bumps into a wall.

ALEX

So that's what they mean when they say...french kiss!

ALEX looks at their THOUGHTS with a big, goofy smile. ALEX is proud of themselves for this joke. THOUGHTS breaks character, BOTH are back to themselves.

THOUGHTS

What was that?

ALEX

A joke! Did you like it?

THOUGHTS

I would've, you know, if it was funny.

ALEX

Yeah I guess I don't know how to be funny when I'm stressed. And I didn't even get to make my french fry/french guy joke!

THOUGHTS

Trust me, I'm happy you didn't fire that neuron to me.

ALEX

(Getting more worked up throughout the following paragraph)

You know, I don't know if we can do this. I can't write anything serious, I can't write anything romantic, I can't write anything comedic, what am I even doing here? A book is gonna take too long for me to make money, I live in the middle of nowhere so film isn't an option, and I can't create a meaningful character for any story!

THOUGHTS

Can we just take a deep breath? Who was it who won their university's creative writing award?

Beat.

ALEX

(begrudgingly)

Me.

THOUGHTS

And who knew they wanted to be a writer since they were six years old?

ALEX

(again, now sighing)

Also me.

THOUGHTS

(proudly, with a semi-sarcastic tone)

And who was who let out a little bit of pee at their fourth grade viola recital.

ALEX

(The same)

Me...

Then, realizing:

ALEX

Wait, why'd you bring that up?

THOUGHTS

Because you've dealt with failure before! With being a loser!

ALEX

You're not making us feel any better.

THOUGHTS

No, all of that is a good thing. Do you know how many times Dr. Seuss's works were rejected from being published? A lot.

ALEX

I think I want to write more complex stories than him. Plus, wasn't he racist?

THOUGHTS

And the greats like HP Lovecraft weren't?

ALEX

Point taken.

THOUGHTS

You have to understand that writing isn't easy. That we are not perfect. Do you know why we won that creative writing award? Because we spent three days in our dorm room, munching on some grilled cheese, avoiding our other responsibilities, and writing some new stories. They didn't have to make sense. Most content for adults these days isn't substantial. It focuses on forced romance and unrealistic action sequences. The reason

we're struggling is because we're trying to make something meaningful and relatable.

ALEX

So instead of trying to think about how others should perceive my writing, as you were saying earlier...

THOUGHTS

Yes...

ALEX

You want me to instead write what makes us happy...

THOUGHTS

You've got it!

ALEX

...and it shouldn't be realistic.

THOUGHTS

Exact—no! No, that's not what I'm saying at all! (*Half beat.*) You have a creative mind, Alex, I should know firsthand. I do know firsthand. You don't write blockbuster superhero movies or page turning period pieces. You dream about a goat on the moon and you make it an endearing piece. You pass a billboard of a baby laughing and create a world of giant humans.

ALEX

Got it...and why did you mention me urinating on stage when I was ten?

THOUGHTS

For two reasons, my flesh encompasser. First, because we were embarrassed by that moment. It still haunts us to this day. But we are stronger because of it. Now we much more easily handle negatives that come our way.

ALEX

I guess that makes sense. What was the second reason?

THOUGHTS

Because it's funny to watch you get annoyed at us.

ALEX
(laughing)

I hate you.

THOUGHTS

I hate us too.

ALEX

I think I have something.

THOUGHTS

Let me hear it.

ALEX

It is a ten-ish minute one act scene. It involves a writer, based on myself, struggling to write their next big thing. But they are not alone: a personification of their brain is with them. Naturally, they butt heads when trying to create the writer's next masterpiece. They begin to act out the writer's ideas in an unorthodox performance. In the end, the brain gives the writer newfound confidence and they begin to work on their next big piece. The audience may not get all of it, but at least the two performers will be having fun doing physical and verbal comedy. *(Beat.)* What do you think?

BOTH slowly, turn their heads out towards the audience. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, BOTH quickly turn to face each other again, but just as quickly relook at the audience. Then:

THOUGHTS

Do you want my honest opinion?

ALEX

Go for it.

THOUGHTS

It seems overdone//

ALEX

And a little bit tacky.

THOUGHTS

I know, right! I feel like the first mistake most writer's make is that they take the phrase "write what you know" too seriously.

ALEX

Right? Like why are there so many stories about struggling writers making poor life decisions. Being a writer isn't easy, but that's what makes the pay-off more rewarding, right?

THOUGHTS

Well we don't know what our pay-off is going to be yet. Just do us a favor, ok? You have a gift for thinking outside the box. Don't be afraid to use that gift.

ALEX

Outside the box...

THOUGHTS

Yes, a metaphor meaning to think diff-

ALEX

I know what it means, me. But it does give me an inkling of an idea.

Beat.

THOUGHTS

(a little offended)

Ahem!

ALEX

Oh, whoops! Let me send that your way.

ALEX touches their THOUGHTS's forehead; THOUGHTS does a convulsive movement, as if electrocuted, to indicate receiving the message.

THOUGHTS

A short story about a professional boxer? Funny, I never assumed you to be the athletic type.

ALEX

That's not what I meant to tell you. God, we must be tired, let me try that again.

ALEX touches their THOUGHTS's forehead again; THOUGHTS does a different convulsive movement.

THOUGHTS

The owner of a box manufacturing plant?

ALEX

Yeperooni.

THOUGHTS

What's so special about this person?

ALEX

They don't just make boxes for shipping products or for board games, they make boxes for // interdimensional travel.

THOUGHTS

Interdimensional travel! It has the appearance of a children's tale with the potential for mature turns. Where do these boxes lead to?

ALEX

Right now, I have no clue. And I'm fine with that. I'm gonna try not to stress or freak out, although both of those feelings are valid; I'm just gonna write and see where the words take me.

THOUGHTS

Ah, I've watched you grow so much!

ALEX

You do realize we're literally the same age right? Like the same person, too?

THOUGHTS

You know what I mean. I'm just so proud of you that I might cry.

ALEX

You do realize that I am you and that I would cry, right?

THOUGHTS

Touché.

ALEX

Touché indeed.

ALEX begins to write their tale. There is a big smile on their face, as well as on their THOUGHT's face. ALEX pensively stops, turns to THOUGHTS:

ALEX

Do you think it's weird I talk to myself?

THOUGHTS

I don't think it's weird, but I may be a little biased. Do you think it's bad that you talk to me?

ALEX

(making direct eye contact with THOUGHTS)

I wouldn't change a thing about our relationship.

The TWO smile at each other. ALEX turns back to their work and begins typing again. As that happens...

BLACKOUT.

KATE ISABEL FOLEY

Sharp-Tongued Women

Cast of Characters

LIZZY BENNET: 20-something-years-old, woman, witty

MISS DARCY: 20-something-years-old, woman, generally unimpressed

MRS. BENNET: 40-something-years-old, woman, Lizzy's mother, matchmaker

MISS BINGLEY: 20-something-years-old, woman, Miss Darcy's closest friend, eager

PARTYGOERS: men and women of various ages

Place

A fancy dance/dinner party

Time

Ambiguous: it looks like the regency era, but the song choices are modern. This is the old-fashioned *Pride and Prejudice* of modern daydreams.

ACT 1SCENE 1

Setting: *A spectacle of a dinner party. Guests dressed in their best regency attire. Some dance to music (all of which is modern, though played on stringed instruments), some drink champagne and mingle on the outskirts, all nervously flirt in the hopes of finding their perfect match.*

At rise: *Miss Darcy and Miss Bingley chat at the edges of the party, Bingley overeager, Darcy brooding mysteriously. Everyone—men and women alike—are entranced by Darcy, who appears not to notice.*

Lizzy and Mrs. Bennet enter the room. Mrs. Bennet fusses over Lizzy's hair and general appearance (Mrs. Bennet might even lick her thumb to rub something from Lizzy's face). Lizzy looks like she'd rather be anywhere but here.

MRS. BENNET

Lizzy, I know this isn't your usual idea of a relaxing weekend, but you could at least *try* to look like you're enjoying yourself.

LIZZY

I'm a writer, mama, not an actor.

MRS. BENNET

Then pay attention and take some notes. A party in Miss Darcy's honor is the most drama-filled event you'll ever attend.

LIZZY

Why did you drag me here?

MRS. BENNET

Because you spend far too much time hunched over your desk and not nearly enough time stretching your legs and meeting new people.

LIZZY

Meeting a future spouse, you mean.

MRS. BENNET

Is it a crime to hope for grandchildren?

LIZZY

Only when I've told you for ages now that I don't wish for any.

MRS. BENNET

(singsongy)

We'll see.

LIZZY

Where is the infamous Miss Darcy, anyway?

MRS. BENNET

You can't tell by the crowd of adoring fans?

Sure enough, a group of partygoers swoons nearby, unnoticed by both Miss Darcy and Miss Bingley.

LIZZY

I don't understand what all the fuss is about.

MRS. BENNET

Other than the fact that she single-handedly transformed her business into a nation-wide success and just secured one of the most important trade deals of her life, making her the richest woman in London, all while being no older than yourself? I wonder why every person your age is in love with her.

LIZZY

She *inherited* her father's business and used cutthroat strategies to claw her way to the top. And besides, *you've* never been her biggest admirer.

MRS. BENNET

That's because I find her cold, arrogant, and rude.

LIZZY

Then why drag me here to make small-talk in her presence?

MRS. BENNET

Because rich, beautiful people tend to have rich, beautiful friends. Now go, go talk to at least three new people, and then we can leave.

LIZZY

Promise?

Mrs. Bennet rolls her eyes and abandons her daughter. Lizzy looks like a fish out of water as she wanders the party.

Meanwhile, Miss Bingley and Miss Darcy's conversation comes to the forefront. Lizzy is close enough she can definitely hear every word.

MISS BINGLEY

Don't tell me you're going to sulk the entire night.

MISS DARCY

Not the *entire* night. Just most of it.

MISS BINGLEY

Need I remind you this part is in celebration of *your* achievements?

MISS DARCY

I never asked for a celebration; you insisted.

MISS BINGLEY

Anything to get you out of the office and into the real world.

MISS DARCY

Champagne and string quartets—that's the real world?

MISS BINGLEY

It's your world.

MISS DARCY

And it's my money that funded this party, so it stands to reason that I should be able to leave anytime I want.

MISS BINGLEY

(groaning)

Darcy. People showed up to see and congratulate *you*. Do you know what most people would give to have a dance with you—hell, even just to brush your shoulder as you walk past?

MISS DARCY

They want my money, Bingley. No one wants my mind.

MISS BINGLEY

Come now, just *one* dance. One dance with one partner. You can literally pick anyone.

MISS DARCY

What I want is to be left alone.

MISS BINGLEY

There has to be *someone* with whom you wouldn't be opposed to dancing?

MISS DARCY

You are the only person in the room who is anything but detestable.

Lizzy lets out an unseemly guffaw. It startles both Bingley and Darcy. Lizzy's laugh turns into a coughing fit.

MISS DARCY

(dryly)

Can I offer you a glass of water?

LIZZY

(still laughing)

I'm sorry, it's just—well, I've barely heard you speak for two minutes and already the idea that *you* are exempt from the "detestable" is hilarious.

Bingley snickers.

MISS DARCY

I never claimed to be as agreeable as Bingley, but at least I'm not shallow.

LIZZY

Aren't you, though? You haven't even spoken to any of your guests and already you're writing them off as nothing but gold-digging vultures.

MISS DARCY

And you've labeled me as inconsiderate and unfair without so much as offering your name.

LIZZY

Lizzy. Lizzy Bennet.

MISS DARCY

Well, "Lizzy, Lizzy Bennet," if you had deigned converse with me before making such judgments, you would have known that years of shouldering the burden of the responsibility of being the most intelligent person in most rooms have jaded me. No one likes a woman with a sharp mind.

LIZZY

Or, perhaps, no one likes a woman with a sharp tongue.

MISS BINGLEY

Darcy, I do believe you've found your match.

Darcy shoots Bingley an exasperated look. Bingley just smirks and goes to join the rest of the party.

LIZZY

Pardon me for not fawning all over you like others might be inclined to do, but status and fame don't frighten me.

MISS DARCY

If you're as unimpressed with me as you claim to be, why come here in the first place?

LIZZY

I wish to be here as much as you do. Displays of extravagance and insincerity tend to make me ill.

MISS DARCY

And with this, we find the first thing upon which we agree.

A beat. The smallest of amused smiles from both of them. Something has shifted.

LIZZY

Even still, there is a minimum level of decorum that is expected from party hosts.

MISS DARCY

Ah, but, Miss Bennet, Miss *Bingley* is our host; I am merely the guest of honor.

LIZZY

The party may be in your honor, but you are anything but honorable.

MISS DARCY

(with great sarcasm)

You cut me to my core.

LIZZY

And here I thought it was impossible to insult you. You appear impervious to all attempts to engage in any form of social interaction.

MISS DARCY

Up 'til now, no one has dared to try to engage me with anything but flattery.

LIZZY

Well, if you want flattery from myself, you will have to do something that is worth complimenting.

Lizzy's wit attracts Darcy, whose edges start to soften. There is a playful and even flirtatious energy about the two of them now.

MISS DARCY

You know, most people concede that my accomplishments are, indeed, worth praising.

LIZZY

Accomplishments aren't everything. There is more to a person than their achievements.

MISS DARCY

Despite my sharp tongue, I am generally well-received by those around me.

LIZZY

What must it have been like to grow up that beautiful?

MISS DARCY

I beg your pardon?

LIZZY

Well, a woman as wealthy, well-accomplished, intelligent, and beautiful as yourself . . . It's a wonder no one has ever dared to challenge you on your rudeness before now.

MISS DARCY

Clearly my lack of charm hasn't fooled you.

LIZZY

I prefer the sort of beauty that can't be perceived on the surface.

MISS DARCY

Does my beauty only go skin-deep?

LIZZY

I haven't yet decided.

The music shifts. A song swells underneath their conversation, a song of beginnings and attraction and the rush of a new connection. "Gold Rush" by Taylor Swift would be a perfect option.

MISS DARCY

What would it take to solidify your decision?

LIZZY

Perhaps a dance would influence my opinion.

MISS DARCY

A dance?

LIZZY

Didn't your friend Miss Bingley say that a dance was required of you?

MISS DARCY

Even so, what would a dance tell you that conversation couldn't?

LIZZY

One can manipulate with words, but to convey emotion through movement and eye contact alone, well—the truth is rarely lost in a dance.

MISS DARCY

I have never been fond of dancing. In fact, I don't believe I've ever agreed to a dance at a party before.

LIZZY

(with mischief)

Then imagine the rumors we shall start.

Lizzy extends her hand. Darcy considers it, only for a moment, before accepting. Their touch is a spark. It ignites a magnetic sort of eye contact. As they dance, following the same precise steps as the other partygoers, they never look away.

It is emotion and truth without words, just as Lizzy said. The longer the dance continues, the more the other guests begin to look their way, noticing the connection in the same way the audience undoubtedly will. This attention does not phase Lizzy and Darcy; for all they care, they might as well be the only two people in the room.

The song ends. Breaking eye contact for the first time, they bow/curtsy to each other, just like the other dance partners. They look back at each other. The other guests resume their conversations and mingling, some dancing to the next song, but Darcy and Lizzy remain frozen. Mrs. Bennet and Bingley return, shattering the spell.

MISS BINGLEY

All right, Darcy, I do believe enough time has passed that your leaving would not be considered abrupt.

MRS. BENNET

It's time I put you out of your misery, my dear. Your father is in the next room and has indulged himself in a drink or two more than—oh, Miss Darcy. I apologize, I did not see you there.

MISS DARCY

It's quite alright. Did you enjoy the party?

MRS. BENNET

(a little flustered)

Very much so. I thank you, and Miss Bingley, for such an enchanting night.

MISS DARCY

(looking at Lizzy)

The pleasure was mine.

The four bow to each other and break off into their original pairings, exiting in opposite directions. When Darcy and Lizzy reach the doorways, they turn at the same time, find each other across the room. Lock eyes. A spark.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY

Off Trail

TW: animal death

Early winter is far from an ideal time for foragers. Pennsylvania's next-to-barren forests always leave us with little to seek out besides invasive Oriental Bittersweet, which is inedible and purely decorative, and invasive Japanese Barberry, which is edible but awfully tart. Although evergreen branches and fruits are in season, I can only stand the smell of juniper berries for so long. In a morbid way, this lack of life in the forest is reflected in the prevalence of bones scattered across the frosted ground. Once the leaves from fall have finally moved along with their return to the earth, they reveal the summer's unlucky critters, stark white against winter's grays and browns. I've made a habit out of searching for them, wandering further away from manmade trails to find the places animals may have tucked themselves away in their final moments. One particular trail has provided me with more treasures than I could have imagined.

The bones I have collected and cleaned are congregated in my bedroom. They line the shelves, nestled between rocks and bird books, framed in dried flowers. There are deer antlers on the top shelf, one a single-point horn from a juvenile, the other five-pointed and dropped cleanly by the neighborhood's ruling buck. I'd like to think they belonged to father and son, but one has been shelved for over eight years, and deer don't fare too well for too long so close to our roads. My late uncle's mummified pufferfish and triggerfish accompany them, alongside a handful of shark teeth. From the nearby creek-washed beach, I brought home the femur of a small mammal and the peeling, pearly-white shells of freshwater clams.

The act of collecting bones is not new to me. At age seven, I had already filled a box under my bed with natural oddities, ranging from snake skins to shark purses to cicada shells. My consideration of the habit

as a hobby is new. Collecting the dead is something beautiful, and the labeling of people who do so as “vultures” is fitting in a precious way. My admiration for vultures and other carrion-seeking birds does make being compared to one a bit less morbid, after all. Although I understand being averse to handling dead and rotting animals, I have a hard time understanding when people consider bones gross. The skeleton is an evolutionary marvel. I am always astonished by the fragility of mouse phalanges and the flexibility of ray pelvic girdles.

The last time I set out for my preferred trail, the last week of winter break, I went alone. Isolation in the outdoors is the quickest method of escaping anxiety, after all, and my seasonal worries were beginning to combine with my impending school-based fears. Nature has always been the most immediate source of comfort for my stress, an open, real, grounding place that’s always within reach. Especially when there was nothing I could identify that had sparked my stress. Everything, maybe. Or maybe nothing in particular.

Either way, the fire stress that was setting below me felt as real as ever, and I couldn’t stand to be in my house a moment longer. The air was too stagnant, the walls too close. My knuckles were white as I parked my car at the trailhead and hurried to the woods. My legs were heavy with exhaustion that was admittedly more mental than physical. The turmoil burning in my chest and my racing heartbeat were almost immediately soothed, or at least drowned out, by the bubbling creek at the start of the trail. The rhythm of my worn boots on wet gravel became steady, reassuring me of my own presence.

When a deer looked up from the field to my left, she saw me. She was real, and by extension so was I, because she saw me, flicked her ear, then raised her white blaze of a tail and bounded away. I added her to my naturalist log. But there was still a disconnect in that moment. She was real. She left behind scat and hoofprints, but she stood ten yards away, behind the blackberry tangles. I couldn’t touch her. Something about the way the deer there watch me feels fantastical. I’ve always been a fan of “monster in the woods”-type stories, ones where the protagonist only catches a glimpse of the creature lurking before it slinks off into the dark woods. And that part of the story always feels familiar. Less horrific, thankfully, but still an experience I can relate to. The blank lines in my naturalist log indicate the same slight inability to pinpoint exactly what I saw. But, in my case, it’s comforting. The forest is moving on without me, and I am just there to watch. I am lucky to catch those glimpses.

My anxiety is a facet of this thought process. Feeling as though things aren’t real until I can interact with them, feeling invisible to what’s

around me, like I'm a blur against the bare branch backdrop. I'm an audience member in a movie that I can walk through. But this, combined with the slightly unsettling feeling being alone in the forest sometimes brings out, is certainly more manageable than most other things in life. I can handle a few unidentified animals. I can handle finding one rotting. The woods offer more safety than strife.

The day in December when I crossed that little dark creek, I didn't follow the trail too far. As I gazed at the rain-flattened grass, I noticed a familiar warm, slate-blue color. Stepping over the runoff-dug ditch beside the trail, I approached the great blue heron feathers that scattered the ground. Mostly tail feathers and some down, too many to have just dropped naturally at once. Something unfortunate had happened to her, but my interest was piqued. I'd never thought I'd have the chance to add heron bones to my collection—they've always felt very elusive. They look regal, walking delicately on long legs, their necks coiling like snakes just before they launch their razor-sharp beaks through our unsuspecting koi. This image of distinguished skill and elegance remains unbroken until you hear their vocalizations, which are unflattering, non-lyrical squawks.

But, like all birds, they're at risk of an array of threats, and this bird certainly had fallen to one of them. I climbed through the line of underbrush dividing part of the field. There I found more feathers, this time primaries. Poor thing. Hopefully, all the feather pulling happened postmortem. The pile of down and coverts I found next had the characteristic "explosion" pattern of a bird tackled by a raptor. The local bald eagles were behind this. The rest of my search turned up little else, aside from a few bloodier feathers. Sorrow for the wading bird was balanced out by joy for the eagle.

Death in the animal kingdom can be spun into a poetic experience. A completion of one turn of the life cycle. A creature giving itself back to the earth that nurtured it. I certainly appreciate those views. As someone who primarily forages for mushrooms, detritus is certainly a favorite of mine. Decay is intriguing and the physical process of rotting isn't particularly gross to me, just a bit unsettling at first. If I must clean a skull of some old skin in order to be able to collect it, I'm willing to make that small sacrifice.

The next trail I followed from the feathers was a narrow deer path that ran down to the bank of the little creek. Based on how close it was to the road, I knew that animals would shelter here to die if they'd been hit and hadn't died on impact. The number of foxes and deer I've seen smeared across the road here is tragic. I go under the speed limit driving by at night.

My intuition proved correct, right away the smooth white of bone caught my eye against the withered razor grass. A front leg of some sorts, consisting of a few metacarpals, along with the radius and ulna, clearly not done rotting. Flesh still clung to it in drying reddish-brown strips. I was not impressed enough with its condition to feel compelled to keep it. It's more difficult to clean fresher bones. But, as I looked up to see if the rest of him had been scattered nearby, I realized his skull was only a few feet away.

I had originally believed him to be a fox, based on the length of the leg, and the canines that were so prominently protruding from his jaws. But I had swiped a fox skull from a cornfield the summer before. This skull was the wrong shape, the snout too short, its cavity too rounded. And I was awfully familiar with fox jaws, as I'd spent the earlier part of the day giving myself blood blisters, prying out fox teeth and dropping them into a solution of peroxide.

I looked the new skull over, then pulled out my phone, deciding to identify him before starting the gross part of fresh-bone cleaning. I wasn't convinced dealing with brain matter was worth expanding my collection. There are few small predators in Pennsylvania, however, and my first guess happened to be correct. Striped skunk. I crouched beside him. He was awfully interesting. I didn't have any skulls remotely similar to his. And I'd never found a skunk before. I'd never even seen one in the wild, despite the countless hours I spend wandering towards nature and away from people. So, carefully, I wrapped him in a plastic bag, triple-checked that it was sealed, and went back to my car.

Right now, his skull is finishing its rotting process beneath a flowerpot. He is sitting on concrete, and the pot is held down by a rock. This is for his own protection. Animals will carry off bones if they aren't weighed down or hidden, but bugs and other decomposers can fit in the gaps between the pot and platform. He'll be done with his process in spring and then will be degreased, whitened, dried, and added to the shelf. Maybe both he and I will emerge from our winter confines and find ourselves unburdened by nature's challenges, but odds are only he will have found peace.

EMILY BRADIGAN

Paper Bag Town



MATILDA DUMAINE

Serenity



SHARON GEARHART

Landscape of Ursinus Courtyard



Yemu Huang

Image #07, Affinist Designer



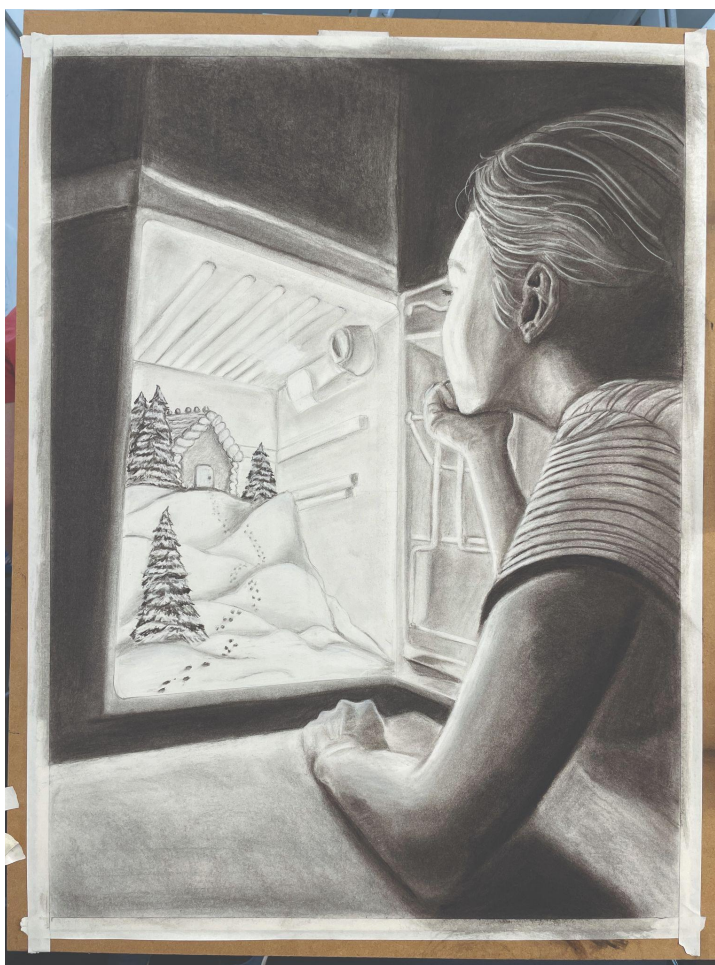
SOPHIE LOUIS

Love Birds



Mairead McDermott

Discount Narnia



JORDAN ULSH

False Security



MATTIE YOUNG

Stripes and Illusions



EMILIO DE SOUSA

The Burning Of Ophelia

It is a grey, rainy, autumnal afternoon, and a shredded painting of Ophelia sits in the fireplace.

It is the sort of rain where it comes down cold and heavy, and the general dreariness of the day dispels any plans of leaving the house. I watch through the rain-blurred windows as the wind nips and pulls at the barren limbs of the trees. I try to ignore the fire as it crackles and smokes, flirting with the scarred canvas. The painting that lies darkening and crumbling in the fire grate had once sat in my library. It had been lovely; Ophelia was surrounded by flowers, almost as though suspended in a lake full of spring. She had hung in the study for years and had been my silent companion for almost a decade now. But not after last night, a night of restless sleep and troubled dreams, and the smell of the lake with the autumnal rot still in my nose.

What the painting would have you believe is that drowning is a beautiful thing; that you'd float ethereally down the river looking like a rose some heartbroken maid had tossed over her shoulder. What they don't tell you is that when you drown, it's a horrifying thing. They don't tell you how your hair drifts ghost-like around your face. They don't tell you that if your drowning is especially *violent*: your eyes turn to blood. Those eyes. Those eyes. Those eyes. For the past day I have been avoiding looking into the shadows of the house, afraid to see those eyes staring out at me. Those eyes...

The painting had been my tell-tale heart, my nagging raven, my star of madness. Her gaze, her eyes, and the part of her lips all seemed to be screaming at me, "It's your fault I died. It's your fault I died. It's your fault I died. It's your fault I died."

I could no longer tolerate her gaze and now as she burns, my headaches are back. I am beset by a particularly painful one that makes me feel in full sympathy with old King Tut, for I too feel like an Egyptian

mortician is trying to split open my skull to drain out my brain through my nose.

I do the only thing I know to settle my jumpy nerves and soothe the throbbing in my head. I slip into my study. I draw the curtains shut and make myself a cup of tea. The tea is lavender, a private joke from my wife.

My headache begins to abate and I feel myself relax. I would be quite unable to cope without my darling wife, for the past few years my headaches have become quite unbearable to the point there are days when I can't leave the house.

My wife, Lavender, will come home soon, drape her rain-soaked coat over the fire grate, see the smouldering remains of the painting and scoff at me. She will call me weak. And I suppose I deserve it. I am weak, I suppose, especially compared to her.

Did you know that the Ptolemaic Romans worshipped a god named Harpocrates whom they revered as god of silence and secrets? He served as a sort of confessional for the ancient Romans, and they would pour out their secrets into his ears. We know this because statues of him have been found with the ears blanced, weathered from centuries of sin and secret. No priest shall ever hear my confession, but Harpocrates will. "Oh Harpocrates keep our silence and watch over our secrets..."

We'd long been each other's confidants and told each other secrets we hadn't told another soul: not a parent, not a teacher, nor a priest. She'd tell me about the girls she'd secretly bring into her family's country house; how they would sneak letters to each other by hiding them in books in the library and giving each other clues to the bidding place. I for my part told her all about the boys at school I liked, and my attempts to express my feelings through what I now know was rather awful poetry.

Lavender, Lavender. How do I begin to explain Lavender? I could compare her to Venus, but it would still undersell just how beautiful she is. Or I could compare her to the greatest of philosophers, but I still couldn't come close to describing her intelligence.

We'd grown rather close during our four years at Uranus College. It was a small school thrown rather inconspicuously somewhere along the New England coast. I do not recall now how Lavender and I had met; I can only imagine that we had a class together in our first year and the pair of us, being quite unsure how to make friends, recognised a kindred soul in the other. Our friendship had started off slow with shared lunches or study sessions in the library; eventually, we would make up our minds to leave our little campus and go for a walk. We walked together, preferring

the solitary of cliffs to the hustle and bustle of the campus or the little neighbouring town.

When we finished our classes for the day, we walked the cliffs together and looked out over the brooding sky and sea. She'd told me a story her grandmother had told her; about how in the days before mankind, the sea and sky had been lovers, but they had sired horrible and brutish children. And so the sun kept them apart, and they were forced to spend eternity longing for each other. We'd always stroll over to a little churchyard where we'd spill our secrets for only the dead to hear. I recall sitting there and wondering if Poe had ever come here and dreamed of dreams of his Annabel Lee.

I am not entirely sure what drew us so close to each other and so quickly. Perhaps it was that we had the same interest, both of us English majors in love with Wilde and Forster. I do not think our friendship was merely a symptom of all the endless time we'd spent together. The Greeks had a tradition, that in the old world each man and woman had shared one body. Each person had two heads, four arms, and four legs. But the gods, either fearing their power or perhaps for their own entertainment, had split them into two condemning them to spend their lives searching for the other half. Lavender and I had wondered what this meant for those of our persuasion; she'd smiled and said that we were each other's soulmates and that our friendship transcended any form of romantic love.

It was a summer day and Lavender had asked me to meet her in her garden. She had gazed at me over her shoulder, her red hair loose over her tweed jacket, and her alabaster skin shining in the summer sun.

"Ah there you are, darling," she had said as I sauntered over to her, trailed by her mother's ever-yipping dogs, which she sent scurrying away with a snap of her fingers.

"What have you been up to?" I had asked as I dropped onto a garden chair and was poured lemonade by a butler.

"Oh, well I had been at clay pigeon shooting till my darling brother yelled at me for spooking his beloved horses. Never could stand those animals, noisy troublesome beasts."

She had sent the butler off as well and when she was satisfied that we were alone, she sat down next to me. "So I have been thinking. I know that you are quite devoted to the idea of living life as a bachelor, but I have a proposal for you."

"A proposal. How very formal of you," I had said, sipping my lemonade before I nodded at her. "Do go on."

For a moment she had stammered on the edge of wordlessness, her fingers worrying at the hem of her dress.

"Lavender?" I watched the uncertainty in her face shift and as she settled herself.

"Do you know I envy you?"

I had laughed at her, the thought of her envying me had been absurd. It had always been the other way around. She had grown up in this grand old house with acres of grounds. Pictures of her childhood had shown endless carefree days spent with family and friends. I on the other hand had spent most of my life bouncing around while my parents were in the army. I had only managed to escape my dreary rootless and friendless existence by throwing myself into my studies and managing to get into a good school.

"Well not you," Lavender had clarified, "Your sex. A man living alone and unmarried isn't a suspicious thing, it isn't a cause for fluttering lips and wagging tongues. For a woman, however, to not take a husband is unimaginable."

"Well to be honest with you, Lavender, I am not entirely sure how I can help you with that."

She scowled, evidently displeased with my interruptions. "Well you actually can help. Which brings us to my proposal."

"Do go on."

"People like us, well, we aren't exactly welcome in polite society," she had said. "If people find out about our choice of romantic partners, I don't imagine they would be very understanding. Least of all my sweet waspish parents. "

"Once again, Lavender, I am not sure I can help you."

"Yes, yes, I am getting there," she leaned over and took my hand.

"We have always been good friends. I am offering you a proposal."

"Wait, hang on a minute. You mean a proposal of marriage?" I had opened my mouth to respond but she had cut across me before I had a chance to speak.

"Oh come, you can't tell me you are happy with your life the way it is now. I am sure you are very happy in your hovel." She stepped out of her chair and made a frustrated sweeping gesture towards her family's home: the grand facade, the park, the woods. "But we could be here together, and you could be waited on hand and foot. Oh, and believe I expect nothing from you as a husband other than your name."

She had turned to me, breathless- her face flushed with passion. With our carefree college days swiftly running out, I had been utterly unsure what to do with my degree and had briefly considered beseeching Lavender's father for a job. But what she was suggesting hadn't occurred to me before, and it did make quite a bit of sense. I was growing weary

with my loneliness; I was growing weary with the cold and the bad meals. I had no plans of returning to my family. And, if I am being honest, I had quite forgotten how to exist without Lavender.

I must have nodded because she had given a short sigh of relief. "We shall have a lavender marriage as they call," she had begun to chuckle more to herself than me, "Oh what a leg pull! oh what an excellent marvellous joke." She laughed and laughed and laughed. We wed in spring and the church aisles were strewn with lavender. We had made our vows to each other. We made the usual ones of course, but privately we had vowed to protect each other and our secret no matter the cost.

Our marriage had started off happily enough. Her father, who had always been very fond of me, took me under his wing and brought me into the highly successful family business. When he passed, Lavender and I inherited it.

This allowed us to live quite comfortable lives with us having moved into my wife's country home, where our lives were eased by the constant attendance of maids and butlers. Our lives had been what Lavender promised; endless carefree mornings spent shooting or riding and evenings spent playing cards.

We had our share of tragedies, of course; Lavender's brother and father passed only a few years into our marriage. Her brother's death was perhaps the most tragic, mostly because it was completely unexpected. He'd been out riding his horses; he was deeply fond of those damn horses. But they are fickle animals. He had lost control, fallen, and broken his neck. The rest of the family had taken it hard. Her father already had health complications, but the shock had sent him on a downward spiral. Lavender had been strong as ever; she had only cried once after her brother died. I had held her as she cried on her bed, it only lasted a moment before something in her face shifted and she steeled herself. She had then gotten up and slipped silently out of the room.

Her father hadn't lived much longer either, but that one we had expected. Lavender didn't cry.

The house had felt so empty after, but my wife and I had gotten used to the privacy. I for my part had begun bringing my romantic partners into the house. We had passed several years without incident until a series of particularly unfortunate events. We had a new maid in our employ, one unused to the house rule of staying out of my chambers during the hours of the day.

She had discovered me and poor Campion in bed together. The poor girl was terribly embarrassed and though she went about her day

normally she could not bring herself to look us in the eyes as she brought us lunch. My wife had spent the day in shaken silence, we spoke without talking. I had watched her glide around like a ghost with her alabaster skin shockingly blotchy.

Later, I found Lavender standing eerily stock-still and looking out the window. It was a warm evening, and the setting sun turned the surface of the lake to fire. I had stood by her and realised that the maid was standing by the shores, staring out at the water.

She has always had a short temper; the stomped feet, smashed plates and angry tantrums of her youth had given way to her oscillating between explosive rages and stony silences. I could see the anger bubbling away inside of her, I could see her blanched knuckles and the muscles in her jaw flexing.

"Lavender," I whispered, and she didn't stir. I placed my hand on her shoulder. I had been expecting an explosive reaction, for her to come crashing back to reality, to cry out startled. She was so calm. She turned to me, took me in and placed a hand on mine.

"What are we going to do?" I said.

After a moment of listlessness, she responded, "Well, what do you think?"

"We could offer her money?"

She gave a small mirthless laugh, "You know what these people are like; we could offer her diamonds, we could offer her castles. She won't keep our secrets." She had paused for a moment, frowning at the little figure across the green. "Look at the bitch, now she's smiling. Smirking. She's laughing at us."

"Lavender, you can't possibly see-"

She was already pulling away from me, and she left the room and disappeared. I watched her stroll across the green, I watched the brief struggle. I watched her push the girl into the lake.

A moment later she was by my side stretching languidly, "Well what do you want for dinner?"

I hadn't responded, I had stared at the lake at a girl floating on the surface, her hair fanning out around her and the fall foliage all around almost like a painting of Ophelia.

Lavender spoke and I heard the disappointment in her voice, "Oh do come on. We promised to do whatever it takes to protect our secret, to protect each other."

I hadn't responded, I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. "You didn't have to kill her."

She scoffed, "I killed my brother and my father, and this is where you draw the line? A common serving girl? She took in the look on my face and laughed in delight. "I was going to tell you eventually of course, but I was hoping you'd put it together yourself."

"Your brother?" I'd said, my voice harsh and soft. I had never been friends with him, but we'd always gotten along. I rather liked him as a person.

"Horses are horribly skittish animals. They were always so loud; they'd keep me up at night. I was so glad when mother had them all shot after. Oh, come on, with him alive I would never have inherited this place or the business."

"Your father?"

"That was an exaggeration. I merely encouraged his already existent drinking problem. The way he treated my mother, the way he treated me, he deserved it." She'd patted me on the back, "Well, glad we could have this talk. I will see about dinner. Do call the police and tell them our serving girl had a mishap, and then call the agency to tell them we are in need of a new serving girl. Oh, and next time dear husband please lock your doors."

I am alone now watching the canvas crumble into ashes. Lavender was at the girl's funeral. I had spent the night tossing and turning, expecting police investigations and angry mobs. But they never came. Lavender had comforted the grieving family and made promises of financial aid, all the while looking like an angel.

She had paid for the funeral, which from what I hear is to be a particularly lavish affair perfect for the tragedy of a young life cut so tragically short.

I had felt the onset of a headache, and I had elected to stay at home. It had been my fault; it had been entirely my fault. If I hadn't been so careless the girl would still be alive.

Lavender is home and I feel some tension I had been holding disperse. We would be all right. We would be all right. We would be all right. We have nothing to fear from mortals or ghosts. Nothing to fear till judgement day, when Christ returns in glory and *when the earth and sea shall give up their dead*.

She comes in now, beautiful as ever, looking like someone out of a Daphne Du Maurier novel with her pale skin glowing moonlike against her funeral attire. She slips off her coat and drapes it in front of the fireplace.

"I take it you did not have a good day," she says, taking in the remains of the canvas. "Did it bother you in some way?"

I speak and my voice comes out shockingly smoothly. "I think it's time we redecorated. That particular painting was incredibly garish. But how was the funeral?"

She sits next to me on the sofa and places her hand over mine and her skin is cold and damp from the rain. "Lovely. A lot of people were crying."

We sit together for a moment as we watch Ophelia burn. I watch her face. I watch the glow of the fire play on her face. My friend, my confidant, my bride. The things we do for love.

SARAH FALES

Molly's Folly

Running away from home was easier than Molly expected.

In books, it was always sad or scary. Sometimes the characters had to sneak out of their windows on ropes made of bedsheets, or they were chased by angry dogs on chain leashes. Molly had filled her backpack with fruit roll-ups and juice pouches and gone out the front door. She waited for a moment to see if Mama would come running down the stairs, shouting about all the terrible things that she'd do if she caught Molly, but nothing happened.

It was hard to imagine Mama shouting those things anyways. She wasn't like the people in books who threatened to send kids to the orphanage when they were bad. Mama was nice: she read bedtime stories to Molly, and had tea parties with her, and always let her pick out one extra thing at the grocery store.

Molly wasn't planning to run away for good. She wasn't even planning on running away for very long. She liked her toys, and her bed, and Mama. But Mama said that as long as Molly lived under her roof, she couldn't go in the woods, and Molly finally needed to. So, for a little while at least, she couldn't live under Mama's roof.

Folks talked about the woods around Molly's house. Not everyone: there's a difference between people and folks, and people don't waste time on stories about the forest. Folks, though... folks talk.

The older kids in the movie theater parking lot who wouldn't let Molly drink any of what they were drinking, they were folks.

"Hunter killed an old god with his truck a few years back," Caroline Weisman told her once, sitting on the curb and watching shirtless boys do skateboard tricks. *"Didn't mean to, it just jumped out at him and—"*

She clapped her hands together sharply, then picked up her flask and had another swig. *"Woulda thought it was just a fuckin' deer, 'cept it*

wouldn't stop fuckin' bleeding. It's still bleeding. Rotted down to bones, you can barely see where it was lying, but there's still blood pouring out of the ground, running off into that fuckin' forest. My brother and his dumbass friends followed it once. Wanted to see where it led. He didn't go far. Said it got weird real fast. Friends being far away, getting separated, even when they were holding on to each other. Birds singing backwards. Crazy shit. Dumbass. I'm just glad he came back. Shit goes missing in that fuckin' forest."

One of the boys called something to her, and she snapped back something about what his sisters would say if they heard him talkin' to a girl like that, and the conversation ended like it never happened at all. But Molly remembered.

Molly remembered, and then a few months later Bluebell, her cat, had started yowling to be let out the back door each night. Mama didn't let Bluebell out, and Molly didn't let Bluebell out, but apparently Bluebell wasn't gonna let something like a door stop him, because last night Molly and Mama woke up to find the kitchen window broken and Bluebell gone.

Molly tried to tell Mama about the forest and the old god and the place where things disappear to, but Mama said that there was no such thing as old gods.

Mama didn't believe in any sort of god, but she wore a cross around her neck all the same, and rubbed at it when she worried. She worried an awful lot whenever Molly mentioned the forest.

Molly didn't want her to worry, so she didn't tell Mama when she filled up her backpack, went out the front door, and ran away for a little while.

The forest wasn't half as scary as Molly thought it would be. It was warm, and the trees seemed to part before her. She found a stream after a little while and followed it, because characters in books always follow streams in the forest.

It was all exciting enough that she'd almost forgotten why she'd come there entirely, when she entered the clearing and saw the stranger.

The stranger was beautiful, which was odd, because Molly couldn't quite tell what they looked like. Something about them seemed to shift, so that even close in the light, they looked... out of focus.

They were also covered in blood, and hunched over a black furry lump on the ground.

She oughta have thought harder about that, but something about them just made Molly's brain want to jump over those thoughts. She would try to pick up the thoughts, to bring them to any conclusion, but it

was like trying to pick up Bluebell when all he really wanted was to wiggle out of her arms and go about his own business.

“Pardon me,” Molly said, because even if her brain did feel all fuzzy, her Mama taught her to be polite. “Can you help me?”

The stranger lifted their head and turned to her. Their eyes were the only clear thing about them: the same soft, solid gold as her mother’s cross. “If I want to,” they said lazily, cocking their head as they studied her. “You are young to be here. Have you no mother or father to keep you?”

Molly frowned. The stranger talked funny, but Molly could catch their meaning well enough. “I’ve got a Mama, but she says that lots of kids don’t have Mamas or Daddies, and that it’s okay if their families ain’t like ours. And I ain’t that young, neither,” she added. “I’m gonna be nine years old next month.”

“Not so young then,” the stranger agreed. “But much younger than the eldest of your kind.”

Molly frowned, trying to keep her thoughts straight in her head. There was something about the stranger...something wrong that she was supposed to think about. “Are you hurt?” she asked.

“No.”

“Oh.” She struggled for her next question. “Is someone else hurt?”

The stranger gave a disinterested glance around, as if they were already bored of the conversation. “They are no longer in pain.”

“Oh,” she said again. “Mama says that when you’re hurt you need to ask a grown-up for help so that they can make you feel better.”

“Your mother seems wise,” The stranger said. “You would do well to listen to her.”

“I do, mostly,” Molly said. “But she told me I couldn’t go in the forest, and I needed to go here to find my cat.”

The stranger went still, stiller than normal folks could go. “What did your cat look like?”

“Black.”

“Black with a white tail?”

“Yeah!” Molly took a step forward. “Have you seen him?”

The stranger glanced at the lump of fur behind them. A flicker of something like displeasure flickered across their face. “...Yes. Go home now, and don’t come back to the forest. Your cat will be waiting for you.”

They gestured towards a path that Molly didn’t remember seeing before. When Molly turned around, the stranger and the lump of fur were gone. Hesitantly, she followed the path, though this time the trees seemed

to close up after her. She stepped out into her backyard in what seemed like nearly no time at all.

Bluebell sat on her back porch, watching her lazily, with eyes the same soft, solid gold as her mother's cross.

OWEN FAZZINI

The Son of Bethany

Giovanna lived on the corner of a claustrophobic street in a tenement she shared with a drunk and an escaped nun. The thin brick walls were dappled here and there with colored plaster and there was a curtain over the doorway. The tallow candles in the windowsill gave the whole building a foul odor. She did well for herself, or so she told those few of her clients who cared enough to ask.

Giovanna ran a very particular kind of business. Those who dealt with her would knock twice on the shutters, leave their shoes outside, and say a prayer to Saint Mark before she would let them in. She saw many different kinds of people. Oarsmen before embarking on a voyage at sea; their widows if they failed to return. Germans, lawyers, tradesmen, and even a priest, once. The merchants never came to her directly, but the men they sent in their stead were always reliable customers. Venice spoke the language of wealth, but only those in Giovanna's line of work knew what it would say next.

The toll of the sunset bells in the Campanile meant she was closed for the day. Giovanna lit a small fire in the hearth and was peeling onions for a soup when she heard a man walk through the door and draw back the curtain.

He wore a black wool coat lined with silk and bejeweled rings on almost every finger, whose gold caught and glinted off the candlelight. A wool cap covered his thick white hair like a crown. The belt around his waist was decorated with silver and inlaid with a ruby at the spot where it met the paunch of his gut. As he surveyed the room, a slight sneer appeared on his face that he made no attempt to conceal. Rather, the stranger stared at Giovanna as if she were somehow in the wrong for making *acquacotta* in her own apartment.

“Young woman,” he began, “I am in need of your services. I always despair of coming to unfortunate districts such as this, but I’ve been told that you’re quite skilled at what you do.”

Giovanna raised an eyebrow. “And what have you been told that is?” she asked.

“You...provide guidance, so to speak.”

“If you want guidance, take it up with him,” Giovanna said, pointing to the miniature Christ crucified to the lintel. “The best I can do is guide you to the door. Goodbye and good-night.” With that she turned back to her onions.

The stranger produced a purse from the folds of his coat that seemed nearly over-full and set it down. Gold ducats spilled out onto the floor. He flashed a crooked smile as Giovanna set down her knife and hurried over to him, gesturing for him to sit on the ragged carpet.

“How did you hear of me?” she asked, sitting across from him.

“My sister came to you a week ago. Women are a weak species – they fall victim to these kinds of superstitions easily. But she said you were different from your run-of-the-mill charlatan. You told her that she would receive a surprising revelation, and the very next day she caught her husband in bed with another woman.”

“That makes you Alvise Loredano, then.”

“Yes,” he said, taken aback.

“I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a visitor as important as you,” Giovanna said, beaming. “You do me a great honor.”

“That’s right. Let this serve as a reminder that even you common folk can be on the receiving end of a miracle. I’m sure you weren’t expecting to see a patrician of the highest rank on your doorstep. Tell me, young woman, how much do you charge?”

“Eighteen ducats.”

“*Eighteen?* What, are you going to give me a haircut and knit me a new hat, while you’re at it?”

“Normally, it’s thirty. The discount comes as a matter of course. I would feel bad about charging a man as great as yourself the full price.”

“...Understandable. Very well then, young witch, take my money.” Alvise handed Giovanna the coins, who put them away in her purse.

“Are you left or right handed?” she asked.

“Right.”

“We’ll start with the left. Hold out your hand.”

Alvise’s hand was cold and pink. It had the fleshy, smooth quality to it that only appeared in the hands of those for whom a hard day’s work consisted of sitting for portraits and attending plays. Giovanna traced the

shallow lines that crossed his palm, beginning with the heart line under his middle finger and traveling down to the life line at the very base.

“You’re very passionate, and can be impulsive at times,” she said. “Despite this, you have a brilliant mind. That of a thinker on the level of Saint Augustine, and a speaker on the level of a Roman senator. You are so intelligent, in fact, that some of those around you can be intimidated by your genius, and resent you for it. You have great physical strength, but you use it only to help your community and those you care for. You also have amazing vitality – to tell you the truth, I can’t believe you’re only sixty. You are blessed, Signor Loredano, truly blessed.”

“Amazing,” Alvisè said, astonished. “You’ve got me down perfectly.”

“Now, let me see your other hand.”

Giovanna read Alvisè’s right palm. A salt-smelling draft blew in from the open window.

“When I read your left hand, it tells me of the Alvisè Loredano of the present; your qualities, your state of mind, everything I need to know to interpret the right. Let me be very clear. I don’t take any responsibility for what I’m about to tell you.”

“Alright,” Alvisè said, somewhat amused. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“Tomorrow, you will die.”

Alvisè jumped to his feet.

“What is the meaning of this? I don’t know what dark power you’re indebted to, but for you to insult me like this? Unforgivable! Let me predict what will happen to *you*: Lord willing, I’ll have you dragged before the Inquisition in chains and hung in the Square like a thief.”

Giovanna shrugged.

“It isn’t any concern of mine, really. Venice will mourn the loss of one of its great men, but life will go on. Your fate won’t change even if they throw me on the rack or cook me like Saint Lawrence. You are a dead man walking.”

Alvisè sat back down slowly.

“What do I have to do?”

“There is only one way to avoid your fate, and that is to make fate think you’ve avoided it.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Simply put, you must fake your death.”

“Foolish girl! Elections for the dogeship are in a week. Do you expect the Great Council to vote for a dead man?”

“Would you rather be alive or a corpse with your name on the ballot?”

Alvise grumbled.

“How would you suggest I go about accomplishing this, then? ‘Faking my death?’”

“It must be done in a way that convinces everyone you have actually died. No half-measures. No revealing yourself to friends or relatives, or anyone at all for that matter. Shut yourself away in some secluded space. I’m sure a man of your means won’t have problems finding food and water.”

“How long must I do this for?”

“Only a week. Lady Fortune is always looking ahead. She has a short memory.”

“I see. I’m sure my wife will be thrilled...wait! Young witch! A stroke of genius!”

Alvise began pacing around the room excitedly.

“Signor da Ponte is standing for election at eighty-seven. I don’t like to admit it, but there’s not a chance he loses. Lord willing, he’ll die in office before the new year – perhaps something can be arranged. And then I will run, with the reputation of having beaten Death at his own game on my side. A great story. A useful story. Who in the Council will be able to debate against the favor of the Lord?”

Alvise rose to his feet and tossed a ducat to Giovanna. She reached her hands out to catch it.

“Tomorrow night there will be a fire in my *palazzo*. It will be small enough that I won’t have to spend more than a pittance on rebuilding it but great enough that I will be thought dead in the blaze. There will be a funeral Mass held for me in the Basilica, no doubt, and all the shops and galleys in the harbor will be draped in black. But then – surprise! – Alvise Loredano is found alive and well, delivered from death by the hand of God. A plan so ingenious even Fortune will fall for it.”

“Most intelligent of you, Signor Loredano.”

“Quite!”

And Alvise left, cackling loudly to himself down the street. Giovanna finished her soup, blew out the candles, and went to bed. Eight days went by before she saw Alvise again. He came at midday, carrying the lingering smell of wine on his robes, fumbling with the door handle like a fool before spilling into Giovanna’s apartment.

“A man of my stature forced to hide in the cellar like a rat,” he said, picking himself up, “with nothing more than the arms of the Lord for comfort? Oh, how sordid! How tragic! And yet...”

Alvise grabbed Giovanna by her shoulders and shook her vigorously.

“It was necessary! Oh, young witch, you should have seen the look my wife gave me! That old wanton thought she was getting something in my will. I thought she would finally shrivel up and die at the sight of me. I must admit we argued all through that first day. I won, of course. But that was then, and this is now, and now we’re onto my future. My *new* future, thanks to you.”

Alvise sat down, stacked twenty ducats, and slid them across the floor.

“Young witch, tell me my fortune again.”

Giovanna read his palm, following the same lines she’d traced the first time. She kept a close eye on his expression. His face was expectant, as if he thought that he deserved some good news for cheating Death.

“What do you love the most?” Giovanna asked.

“The Lord,” he said, without hesitation. “Why?”

“Because it is that which you love the most that will betray you.”

Alvise threw his cap to the floor in anger and rose to his feet.

“Nonsense! The Lord God, betray *me*? How is it that He, after blessing me with wealth and wisdom beyond imagination, turns against me in the twilight of my life? Wasn’t His only begotten Son nailed to the cross to save my soul? I don’t believe you.”

“You have every reason to. After all, I’m the only reason you’re still alive,” Giovanna said matter-of-factly.

“That’s true,” Alvise said, resting his chin on a hand and looking pensively at the wall. “Fine. What do I have to do? Stop praying and going to Mass?”

Giovanna put the coins away. “If God is what you love the most, then yes. Of course, there’s always the possibility you’re giving something else more room in your heart. Go home, sleep on it, and come back to me tomorrow.”

Alvise stood up. “I will do no such thing,” he said haughtily. “You blaspheme the name of the Lord with your witchcraft. I will pray for you tonight. I hope, sincerely, that you’re saved from the dark spirit that possesses you. Christ died for us! Never forget that.”

Alvise left and did not return. Giovanna didn’t particularly mind. She kept herself busy and was able to give far more to the hospitals and the leper colonies than usual. The whole summer passed, until one night, in the early hours of the morning, Giovanna was woken by the sound of two sharp knocks on the shutters.

Giovanna jolted up and dashed across the room for her purse. The window opened directly out onto the canal. She would have to swim. Cursing, she made an indecisive look from the window to the door and back again. Just barely she could hear a voice in the opening strains of the Our Father. Giovanna sighed deeply, rubbed her eyes, and lit a candle.

Alvise was standing at the door. He had grown much thinner and his sunken cheeks seemed like they would poke through his pockmarked skin. His robes were tattered, decrepit, and there were holes in the silk. Much of his hair was gone. The wisps that remained formed a thin tonsure around his skull. He brought a heaviness to the air as he walked in, barefoot, shutting the door behind him and drawing the curtain closed.

“What is your name, young woman?” he asked, not looking up.

“Giovanna.”

“Giovanna. You have the same name as my niece,” he said, looking fondly off into space. “I’m sorry to trouble you, especially at an hour like this. I’ve come to have my fortune read.”

Alvise opened his palm to reveal a single silver grosso.

“It’s all I have,” he explained.

Giovanna closed his hand around the coin and smiled.

“Sit down,” she said. “What happened to you?”

Alvise laughed bitterly.

“A friend of a friend convinced me to invest in a voyage to Syria. He said they’d bring back two hundred tons of cinnamon and nutmeg. I could have doubled – no, tripled – my investment. I bought the ships and paid for the crews. The Turks got them just three weeks in. Paying the ransom for six hundred oarsmen and sailors was almost enough to bankrupt me. I took out loans from the bank in Rialto to cover a second voyage, this one to Egypt, but it was scattered in a storm and had to turn back. I was forced to put up my house, my jewelry, my Tintoretto, and my Roman statues. Everything I owned.”

Alvise sat down with a great sigh. Something cracked in his knee. He winced.

“That, Giovanna, is how a fortune assembled over three centuries was lost in a single summer. I am an old man, and recently I have come to suspect that I’ve been living too long. I have no need of any lofty prophecies or a foretelling of greatness. Just...tell me my future.”

Giovanna began to read his palm. It didn’t take her long to come up with his fortune.

“The rest of your days will be filled with nothing but happiness,” she said.

Alvise was silent for a long moment.

“For four days now I’ve been on the street. The people look at me, laugh at me, call me names. Alvise Loredano the pauper. The debtor. The wretch. At one point, I was stabbed in an alleyway.” Alvise pulled up the remnants of his robe, revealing a deep and ugly gash, still not fully healed, that ran along the side of his chest. “I learned then that noble blood flows just as easy as any other’s. I fell ill. At one point, I thought I was going to die. These last few days have been like a dream, and sometimes I find myself wondering when I’m going to wake up.”

Alvise stood up, and in an instant his whole face changed, lighting up with a joy that Giovanna honestly thought he’d lost the capability for.

“I see now!” he exclaimed. “Oh, I see! Giovanna, you are a saint! An angel! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

And Giovanna watched him wide-eyed as he danced out of her apartment and onto the street, cheering and calling and singing the praises of God.

KATE ISABEL FOLEY

Meta

I.

Later, they would point to her junior year of college: the honors societies and 4.0 GPA and executive boards and on-campus jobs—not one, but four—and early mornings and late nights and plastered-on smiles and under-eye bags, and they would say, “That’s why she disappeared.” And perhaps it was.

In graduation messages the following year, friends wrote notes of thanks, of laments that the spring semester of 2022 had only lasted for that crystal moment, of wonder at the kind of magic she performed. Charlie saved every letter in a shoebox that eventually found a home in a cobwebbed cabin closet, hundreds of miles away from campus.

“Thank you for bringing me the love of my life,” one message read, scrawled in green ink on a pastel pink card. “I truly don’t know what I would have done without your generosity. For those few months, you were a miracle worker. I wish you all the happiness you gave me.”

Charlie gave everything away.

II.

It was a gray February afternoon and Charlie was spending her Saturday hunched over her laptop like her spine had never known good posture.

And then her writing leapt off the page. Literally.

A Creative Writing assignment requiring her to write a flash fiction piece featuring a person she knew at school took the form of a story about her roommate Sam’s side of the room transforming into a field of wildflowers.

Sam gasped. Charlie yanked her spine back into place as she whirled around.

Bunches of sunflowers and lush green grass had sprouted from Sam's bed, spilling onto the floor, blooming across her desk.

"What else can you do?" Sam wondered hours later when the shock had subsided. A simple press-and-hold of the backspace button allowed Charlie to undo the damage. "And is it *you*? Or the laptop? Or something else?"

"You have as many answers as I do," Charlie said. "This is—"

"Amazing," Sam said, wide-eyed.

Crazy was the word Charlie was reaching for. But hearing Sam's excitement, Charlie convinced herself she felt it too.

III.

It was, as Charlie's friends would reminisce years from then, a miracle that would completely change the course of their college career.

"What if you wrote a story about me acing my accounting exam?" Julie, one of Charlie's friends, asked in the New Hall common room the next day. "Would it happen?"

Charlie shrugged. "Who knows? We've just started testing the limits."

"Well, give it a shot!"

"I don't know . . . is that ethical?"

"I still have to take the exam, don't I? Besides, I don't think anyone could prove that *magic* was the reason I passed my exam."

Charlie hesitated for a second, then opened a new document and tentatively typed a few words.

Julie scooted closer on the couch to look over Charlie's shoulder. "Wait, why can't you just write a sentence that says, 'Julie got an A on her accounting exam?'"

"It doesn't work like that," Charlie said. "It has to be within the context of a whole story. Only fiction will come to life. Completed fiction."

"What a pain."

"Yeah, it's a little time-consuming. But worth it for what it can do, right?"

"Oh, totally." Julie tapped the edge of the laptop. "Are you the only one who can do it?"

"Seems like it." Charlie paused as she typed another couple sentences of her story. This piece featured Julie the finance major who

spent her mornings holed up in the Bomberger basement classrooms, hidden from the sunlight as she took notes on numbers and taxes. “Sam tried on my computer and it didn’t work. Then I tried on Neil’s laptop and that didn’t work either. Kieran even gave it a shot, and if anyone was going to be able to work that kind of magic, it’d be him. So it’s something to do with either me or my laptop. Or both.”

“This is so cool,” Julie breathed. “Imagine everything you can do. This changes everything for all of us. College is going to be a breeze.”

Charlie kept typing, but her smile didn’t reach her eyes. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to help Julie—in the grand scheme of things, this was one of the simpler requests she could fulfill with her powers. The simplicity of the story she had to write now didn’t rid the uneasy fluttering in her stomach. Like something bigger was approaching.

IV.

The senior had submitted over thirty job applications and received zero acceptances. He also has mountains of debt to look forward to after graduation. He had heard of Charlie’s abilities through the campus grapevine, the friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend pipeline that connects every Ursinus student to every other Ursinus student.

“Just one offer,” he told Charlie at a Myrin desk. He glanced around as if someone might be eavesdropping. Though the word had spread among students, everyone had unofficially agreed to keep the powers hidden from the prying ears of professors, lest they catch on to the fact that some of their star students were frauds, mere results of a junior’s rambling short stories. “That’s all I need.”

Charlie fought against a yawn, then nodded. “You got it.”

Soon, the story was finished.

When the senior woke the next morning, there was a job offer gleaming at the top of his inbox.

When Charlie woke the next morning, she sent emails to her professors, asking for extensions on assignments that were already twelve hours late.

V.

It was two months later in the semester when the trees bloomed, and the students seemed to bloom along with them. Love blossomed between friends where there had previously been no chance. Grade point averages soared. Every other day, a student announced their acceptance to

an internship or summer research program. Even Wismer food improved (some people saw an opportunity to ask for As, others saw an opportunity to ask for decent mac and cheese).

Zoey hadn't spent a minute studying for any exam in weeks. She found the man of her dreams by "chance" one March day while standing in line at Café 2020. Her parents flipped a switch and suddenly gushed about how proud they were of her theater major daughter, how they'd never doubted for a second her ability to succeed in school or get a well-paying job after graduation. The lead in the spring play had gone to her after the best audition of her life. Her weekends were filled with parties in which she was the center of attention thanks to her newfound dancing abilities. Homework was largely ignored until it was done at the last minute—it didn't matter how little time was spent on it, because the assignments always received 100s. Her TikTok followers exploded in number. Graduate performing arts programs were already starting to recruit her.

Tomorrow, Zoey would knock on the stranger's door to ask for "just one more story." And even though they weren't friends, because Charlie was known as Ursinus' fairy godmother, the stranger would say yes.

VI.

Charlie never viewed her magic as a business opportunity. Sam tried again and again to get her to charge—one-hundred per story, seventy-five for follow-ups—but Charlie refused.

"These things always go to shit when money gets involved," Charlie said. Even though she could barely keep her eyes open, she couldn't stop bouncing her legs as she spoke. She was on her third iced espresso from the C-store. "I just like helping people."

"Yeah, at first it was helping your friends. And then your friends' friends." Sam gestured to the passersby in Lower Wismer. She and Charlie had just beat the lunch rush and were now tucked away in their own booth. "Now it's any random schmuck with a sob story. It's eating away at your time, your energy, your sleep—"

"Did you just use the word 'schmuck' in casual conversation?"

"Be serious. You're falling apart."

"I am not." Charlie downed the last of her iced espresso. At this point, more caffeine ran through her veins than blood did. "I'm just a little tired."

Sam gave her a Look.

“A lot tired,” Charlie amended.

“So stop writing all these stories!”

“I can’t say no to them. It feels selfish to have this amazing power and not use it to help people.”

“You can’t help people if you don’t help yourself first.”

“You sound like my therapist.” Shoving her half-empty plate of cold fries aside, Charlie booted up her laptop. The internal fan screamed in protest as the poor thing was more overworked than it had ever been. Every time it whirred and groaned in class, Brad would whip around in his seat to make wide-eyed eye contact. “Fine, let’s get some money involved. Watch this.”

This flash fiction piece was short and sweet, as all flash fiction ought to be: Sam, the fearless heroine, discovered a duffel bag filled with cash—hundreds of thousands of dollars—underneath her seat in Lower Wismer.

Sam finished reading the story, then flung herself forward to check under the booth. No duffel bag. After a few minutes of checking and re-checking, Sam said, “Still nothing.”

FlashFictionSamMoneyDiscovery.docx met its fate in the recycling bin. “I guess we found more of my limits,” Charlie said.

“No curing cancer, no ending wars, no general global humanitarian efforts, no turning John or Maddie into Ursinus’s next recipients of a previously unheard of full-ride scholarship,” Sam listed off on her fingers. “And no finding heaps of cash. Got it.”

The list of impossibilities lengthened. Charlie handwrote each addition to her notebook page, the one she made every student review before adding their request to her very detailed, very long spreadsheet.

VII.

Late April arrived with the same grace and subtlety as the Kool-Aid Man.

On Monday, Charlie pulled another all-nighter to finish her story requests.

On Tuesday, she skipped lunch—by accident—then dinner—on purpose—to catch up on her overdue homework.

On Wednesday, she met with her advisors about her academic alerts.

On Thursday, she didn’t make it to any of her classes. She didn’t even make it out of bed.

On Friday, she canceled her therapy appointment, too tired to even talk about why she was so tired.

On Saturday, she ignored texts from her friends. Most of them asked if she could write another story. One or two asked if she was okay.

On Sunday, Charlie took a shower. It washed the grease and grime away, but also the rest of her energy. Hair still dripping water down her back, she slumped at her desk, staring at the blank word document. The story requests were in the dozens. She had two papers due on Monday that she hadn't even started.

Charlie wrote a new fiction piece instead, not for someone else, but for her.

She wrote about waking up to find that all of her powers were gone. No more stories. No more magic. No more strangers knocking on her door, begging for a miracle. No more texts from Lily or Sam or anyone else she knew. No more feeling like she couldn't refuse. No more facing their devastation when her powers couldn't stretch as far as curing their grandmother's disease. No more sleepless nights.

On Monday, Charlie woke up. She wrote something short, just a few paragraphs about Sam's side of the room transforming into a small forest, just like in the beginning with the wildflowers.

A bird twittered its morning song from behind Charlie. Sam stirred, but instead of bedsprings creaking, leaves rustled. One hot tear slid down Charlie's cheek.

VIII.

She didn't quite fail her finals. Maybe her professors noticed how she'd withered away. Maybe they remembered that at the beginning of the semester, she was the first one seated for class, the last to finish taking notes.

Whatever the reason, they took pity on her. Charlie didn't like pity or asking for help. This time, though, she took it.

IX.

No one heard from Charlie all summer. Most assumed she had slept right through it. Most would be right. That and she'd tucked her phone in her nightstand drawer and didn't pull it out until move-in day.

X.

During August orientation, RAs told the new residents of BWC and BPS folktales about the junior who singlehandedly rewrote Ursinus students' fate. Somehow, the folklore sounded much more sinister than the reality. After all, the only student's fate who had suffered spring semester was Charlie's.

XI.

She had tried all summer to look for an answer: a way to rid herself of her powers, to transfer them to someone else, to make people forget she had ever been able to do what she could do. It turned out another limit of her abilities was that she couldn't write about herself. She could magically change anyone's life but her own.

Charlie had just finished unpacking the last of her boxes for day one of fall semester when someone else knocked on her door.

She answered it. Listened to the student's request. Then Charlie changed her life the regular way, the boring way, the non-magical way.

"I can't anymore. I'm sorry."

XII.

The students were never given any more explanation.

Word spread and most assumed that Charlie's powers had just run out. Most would be wrong. But Charlie didn't correct them.

It was two months later in the semester when leaves fell from the trees, and the students seemed to fall along with them. Contempt spread between couples that had previously been solid. Grade point averages dipped. Every other day, a student got rejected from an internship or winter research program. Even Wismer food became more unbearable than usual.

But students also went out on first dates. Or scraped an A in an exam they'd studied all night for. Or wrote a killer personal statement to a research program. Occasionally, a Wismer dinner was a respectable 3.5/5 stars.

And it all happened on its own.

Winter faded to spring. Charlie collected her shoebox of letters. She ended the semester on a higher note than she had the year before. She posed for pictures in her cap and gown, posted farewell messages on Instagram, sent thank you letters to her advisors.

Charlie disappeared in June, here and gone as suddenly as the spring blossoms.

When facilities inspected her old room over the summer to make sure it was empty, they found bare walls and a stripped bed and empty closet, but one item still sat on the desk. A laptop, with a post-it stuck to the center. It read:

Maybe someone else can make the magic happen. Just make some magic for yourself too.

And, maybe, someone would.

GEORGIA GARDNER

Little Blue Sailboats

The sudden shining of light and the loud chatter of voices wakes me from my sleep. My body tenses and my neck turns 180 degrees as my roommate and a guy are stumbling in the door of our dorm.

“Maddie?”

She ignores me. I grab my phone. 1:30 am.

“I have my 8 am tomorrow, can you keep it down?” I say.

“Yeah, yeah whatever.” Maddie says lying down on her bed with the mystery man.

I turn back towards the cement wall. My leg rises to wrap around the body pillow, and I hear that sound. The sound of lips smacking together.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Déjà vu flashes to the night a month ago that ended with me slamming the door and spending the night in the common room with just a small throw blanket.

She’s doing it again. She is about to have sex with a random guy while I am five feet across from her. The raggedy carpet filled with hair, dust, and whatever else she does not like to clean up is only about seven feet wide. One foot of said carpet is lying beneath each of our beds. So yes, five feet. But maybe I’m jumping the gun. Maybe it’s just a kiss goodnight and then their heads will lay to rest. I give her the benefit of the doubt, and take my moral support stuffed animal (Bert) from under my arm and slam it against the side of my head.

I try to be obnoxious with my movements so that maybe one of them will notice and remember that they are not alone. They are not alone. I am here. I am in this god forsaken dorm room with a roommate that has been traumatizing me for the past 2 months. Only with my luck would I have the worst first year of college ever.

As I am pushing my stuffed animal to what feels like up my ear canal, more noises are starting. It is not just a goodnight kiss.

“Is she going to leave?”

Maddie rises from her bed and taps me on the shoulder. I turn my head with a snarl.

“Please?” Maddie says.

I throw my blanket away from my body and get up while pulling her into the closet behind my bed.

“What happened to Jack?” I say as she throws her palm against my mouth and her finger to her lips.

“Who's Jack?”

“Come on Maddie, I need to sleep at least one night of the week!” I roll my eyes.

“Please, please, please, please, please....”

“Dude, no go to your boy toy's room for once”

“Come on Sav please, I'll never do it again if you do this for me.”

Even though I know that's not true, I give up trying to reason with her.

“Fine, but you're buying me Starbucks tomorrow.” I say as I slid on my slippers.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She says while I wave my hand toward her and make a beeline for the door. I don't want to witness any of what is about to happen.

My head is hanging low as I make the short ten second walk toward the common room that I know oh so well, but something makes me stop. My eyes travel up from the floor. I do not have pants on. I am pantless and hopeless standing in the hallway of my dorm. I'm certain this is the lowest I can get.

I am quickly proven false as I hear footsteps. I inch forward whilst trying to pull my extra-large pink Scooby Doo t-shirt down when a young man turns around the corner. Even in the state that I am currently in, I can still take notice of the dark curls that gently fall across his forehead, and how the top of his head is only a foot away from the ceiling.

“Are you alright?” the stranger says.

“Uh, um, I uh, I- my roommate kicked me out, she, um, needed the room.” I awkwardly laugh.

“I got shacked out too.” The boy says as a smile spreads across his face.

I nod my head weirdly and let go of my shirt, giving up on the piece of cotton.

“You got kicked out without pants?” The boy laughs.

“It was all quite sudden.”

“Sneak back in and grab some sweats.”

“Oh no, I know what's happening right now and I'd rather be pantless than witness any of it.”

“Well let's go find you some pants,” He turns on his heels, “you coming?”

“Uh, where do you plan on getting me pants at 1:30 am.”

“I don't know, but you got something better to do?”

We make our way down the stairs and to the exit of the dorm building. The security guard has his head towards the ceiling while drool slides down his cheek. The boy-

“Wait, I don't even know your name,” I say as I crane my head toward him.

“Do you really need to know it?” he says as we start to walk across the lawn behind the dorm.

“I mean just in case the police ask.” He throws his head back as a deep chuckle leaves his throat. My god his laugh, I want to hear that again.

“Fair enough,” he stops and sticks out his hand.

“The names Aaron,” He bows toward my hand and puckers his lips. I pull my hand away, “You're right. Inappropriate.”

I look back down at my fuzzy slippers.

“And yours?”

“Savannah.” He grabs my hand and shakes it.

“Nice to meet you Savannah, do you want to go on an adventure?”

“Need pants first.”

“Oh, right.”

Still holding on to my hand he pulls me in the direction of the neighborhood behind campus.

The chilled air of a late September night creates goose bumps across my legs. My free hand goes down to my thigh and rubs it aggressively, trying to generate heat. I can feel eyes on the top of my head, and I slowly turn my neck toward Aaron.

“What” I ask.

“Nothing.” He smiles and turns forward.

I shake my head and look down. I notice my hand still enlaced with his and I quickly let go, embarrassed that I held on for so long. I see his smile fade out of the corner of my eye, disappointment? No, definitely not.

“I found you some pants.” He says

I look around at the dark and empty neighborhood with nothing but houses and cars lining the streets.

“Where do you suppose there are pants around here, I mean unless you plan on breaking into one of these houses and going to jail?”

He points towards the backyard of a one-story home with bricks lining the sides. Hesitantly, we walk across the grassy lawn.

“You’re kidding, right?” I say.

“Not at all.”

Aaron points to a pair of extra-large, men’s boxers covered in blue sailboats that hang along a close line.

“Aaron, this is theft.” I whisper and yell at the same time.

“They’ll think it was a bird.” He shrugs and he unclips the boxers from the line, throwing them in my direction.

We run out back to the street. Under the streetlights of Highland Avenue, I slip the briefs over my legs and do a little twirl. Aaron claps and again throws his head back in laughter. I look down at the pavement and smile.

“Let’s go.” Aaron says as he grabs ahold of my hand.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know yet.”

We’re walking away from the quiet neighborhood, toward City Avenue, and I can feel the sweat start to make its way to the palm of my hand that is clasped with his.

“Larry’s is open, you want to grab a slice?” I say.

“Larry’s?” Aaron tilts his head and furrows his eyebrows.

“Yeah, Larry’s Steaks,” I repeat confused, “you’ve never been to Larry’s, and you go to Saint Joe’s?”

Aaron looks down at our hands with an expression that I can’t read. I ignore the pit in my stomach and say, “Come on, let’s go,” and pull him in the direction of the staple restaurant on City Ave.

“Oh my god.” Aaron says as his eyes roll back, and pizza grease covers his lips.

“I told you.” I say. My heart beats faster when his eyes lock with mine. I can only hold the contact for 5 seconds until the blush on my cheeks becomes too much.

“You’re cute.” He says, and my head shoots back up.

“What?” I cough as I choke on the pizza.

“I said you’re cute, the way you blush so much.”

“Oh,” I wipe my lips with a napkin, “thank you?” I say, confused.

He laughs and takes the last bite of his slice before throwing the crust onto the plate before him. I finish right after him and get up to leave.

We’re back on the empty sidewalk. I look towards the field just a few 100 feet in front of us.

“Wanna play some ball?” I say pointing toward the soccer field on campus.

“Why not?”

Aaron jumps the fence that lines the field and extends his hand toward me. I take it and climb over, looking around to see if security is anywhere near. I find a soccer ball laying on the track and throw it on the field. Aaron walks into the goalie's net.

“Let's see what you got.” He says as he claps his hands together

I grab the ball, lie in front of me, and give it my best shot. As the ball bangs onto the side of net, my hands go over my mouth in shock.

Aaron is laughing once again.

“I've never played soccer!” I try and reason.

“Yeah, I can tell.” He says clutching his stomach as more laughter comes from his mouth. I run over to the net and hit his shoulder.

“Give me a bre-” I stop as soon as I hear the low hum of a car approaching.

I look up towards the road next to the field only to see the familiar white and black security car coming to a stop.

The officers are getting out of the car as I yell, “Run!”

Aaron throws the ball to the ground and follows after me. We both jump the fence as the screams from the officers are getting louder.

Looking back, Aaron's pointing to the right and I nod. Still sprinting, we make a quick right turn and continue racing down a back road.

After running for 5 minutes, I stop to catch my breath once I know the officers have given up. My hands land on my knees as heavy breaths spew from my lungs. I turn around as I hear giggling behind me. Aaron has his hands over his head and a smile on his face.

“This is not funny.” I say

“It kind of is.” He says, and my straight face breaks into a grin.

“Where are we?” He asks as we both look around.

Somehow, we made it all the way to the park down the street from campus, and once I realize, I am quick to sit down on the grass.

“We're at the park.” I say with a huff.

Aaron sits down beside me, leans back and rests his weight on his hands. I bring my

knees to my chest and wrap my arms around my calves. As I begin to catch my breath, I tilt my head upward. The stars that litter the sky immediately grab my attention.

I've always loved watching the stars. The bright lights have always intrigued me. My thoughts are interrupted by a tap on my shoulder. I turn towards the boy sat next to me and am met with his dark eyes piercing into

my own. I take notice of his hand that has failed to leave my shoulder and is now brushing my hair behind my ear. I wish I knew what he was thinking.

“I feel like I’ve known you all my life.” He says and I burst into laughter.

“What?” He says as he lets out giggles along with me.

“That’s so cliché.” I say, putting my hand over my mouth.

“Well, it’s true.” He says as our laughter dies down and our eyes meet again. I can only hold the contact for a few seconds before I am looking back towards the sky.

“The stars are so bright tonight.” I say.

“Yeah, they are.”

“I’ve always loved watching the stars.”

“Why?”

“From our point of view, they’re just small bursts of light, but in reality, they entail so much more,” I say as he shows me a puzzled expression, “I mean, stars are millions of miles away and the smaller stars, neutrons, can be 120 miles wide, and supergiants can be 175 million miles wide.”

I finish my rambling and look back towards Aaron. He has the brightest smile across his face, and I can already feel the blush starting to creep up my cheeks. Before I can move my gaze to the grass beneath us, his hand stops me by resting under my chin. His eyes dart between my lips and my eyes. I nod my head ever so slightly. I can feel his thumb begin to tilt my head upwards towards him. As our faces slowly inch toward one another's, my eye lids close and my head tilts. Suddenly, everything stops. Aaron quickly pulls back, and his hand leaves my chin bare. My eyes shoot open. Embarrassed that I misinterpreted the situation, I go to stand up. Aaron’s arm grabs ahold of mine, keeping me from rising from my spot on the grass.

“No, please stay,” He says while he moves to be in front of me and holds both of my hands in his, “I want to, I do, but I can’t until you know the truth.”

“The truth?” I question.

“I, um, I don’t go to college here.”

“What do you mean,” I say confused, “you said your roommate kicked you out of your room.”

“He’s my buddy from high school. I’m just here visiting.”

Even though I know I have no reason to be upset, I mean I barely know this kid, my hands automatically release from his.

“Where do you go?” I say, hoping for Penn or Temple.

“University of Southern California” He says all in one breath.

“Oh, wow that’s, uh, far.” I say as I stand up, he follows my movements.

Without saying a word, we start to walk back to campus. My hands are clenched together in front of me, and my mind is clouded with confusion. Why didn’t he say anything earlier? Why wasn’t that one of the first things he told me? Why, the hell, did I get attached so quickly?

“Savannah, I really am sorry,” he says as he looks in my direction, “I didn’t think tonight was going to be like it was. I didn’t think I would have one of the best nights of my life.”

“It’s okay, really.” I say.

“It’s not though,” he says as he stops and looks at me, “I should’ve told you from the start.”

I decide to not let this night end badly, and let it be a night I won’t ever forget.

“Aaron, let’s end this night when the sun rises,” I say as I put my arms around his shoulders and he wraps his around my waist, “we’ll remember this night as just one amazing adventure and spare ourselves any heartache.”

“I can’t ever talk to you again?” He says.

“We can exchange numbers,” I say as I laugh, “but I don’t want us to be pining over each other for the next three years as we’re thousands of miles from each other.”

“Ok, but after three years?” He says as he wiggles his eyebrows. I smile.

I didn’t realize it before but the slow sway between our bodies, following the gust of wind makes me think of something I’ve always wanted to do.

“Can we dance?” I say.

“Why not?”

Aaron tightens his grip on my hips, and I inch closer to gently lay my head against his chest. My ear is pressed against him, and his heart is ringing through my body each time it beats. His fingertips begin to dance along the small of my back and mine go to tangle themselves into the curls that lay on the nap of his neck. He cranes his head back and looks into my eyes.

“Can I kiss you, just once?” He says.

I nod my head and say “just once” with a slight grin along my lips.

Our eyes close, and our bodies find a way to become even closer as our lips meet for the first and last time.

For now.

CHRISTOPHER GERROW

Grease Trap

TW: Gore

I

Flipping burgers was towards the bottom of Finn's list of ideal jobs, but he was destitute enough to recognize when he had to take what he could get. Money was tight and ends were waiting to be met, so flipping burgers it was. His daily tasks were as easy as they were mundane, but the pay was decent, and his boss, Bill, seemed nice enough. The burger shack he worked at (the name of which he couldn't pronounce) was quaint and, admittedly, a bit too dirty for most prospective customers, but the crowd they brought in was enough to keep the place going and garner a friendly environment. It was tucked away in the Pocono Mountains, catering to the small town of Milford Pennsylvania: Finn's new home.

He made sure to use the word "new" quite liberally, however, as both his apartment building and his place of work (the only buildings he had shown his face in during his first week in Milford) seemed like they were about to fall apart at any given moment. The most newfangled matter Finn had encountered was the neon green sign outside the burger shack displaying the name he had yet to learn and located right next to the worn-out "HELP WANTED" sign no one had bothered to take down.

Due to the smallness of his workplace, there were only two staff members working at a time. Finn worked the closing shift alongside Rodney, the only coworker he'd had the opportunity to meet. During his first shift, Finn could tell that Rodney was much more accustomed to this place than he could ever hope to be. He knew everyone's names and everyone's usual orders. He seemed a bit younger than Finn, maybe early twenties, and he was a bit smaller than him as well. His short blonde hair peeked over the visor they were required to wear during work, and he

greeted every customer with a radiant smile. Typically, Finn would love having a coworker like Rodney, but every time they spoke Finn couldn't help but think of his ex; a reminder he was trying to avoid.

Every day, Finn had the same responsibilities at work: show up, make burgers (they only had a few variations on the menu, that's how you knew they were good), and clean everything. It was a short list, but it filled his eight-hour shift to the brim. Today was a bit different though; it was the first Sunday of the month, the day they cleaned the grease trap. Or, more accurately, the day *he* cleaned the grease trap. He knew how gross cooking waste could get due to his time in the kitchen, so cleaning out a month's worth of it seemed vile.

After the restaurant closed for the night, Rodney wished Finn luck and headed home. Finn donned the restaurant's old protective coveralls, rubber gloves, and respirator that must've been worn by countless workers before him (the thought of which made him wince) and made his way out back to the device. With a scooper in one hand and a bucket in the other, he was more than prepared – physically speaking. This grease trap was located outside, so at least there was no concern of getting fats and oils all over the floors that Finn had just cleaned as part of his closing routine.

Finn began unscrewing the lid of the box, and he noticed a rotten smell emanating from within it, the respirator doing nothing to combat the stench. He lifted the lid to a sight he would never have been prepared to see. A body, coated head-to-toe in golden-gray grease, lay in the trap, having been rotting away for what seemed like weeks. Finn dropped the lid and recoiled.

“Fuck!” The putrid smell continued to fill his nose and the spectacle he had witnessed penetrated his mind, commandeering his vision even when he closed his eyes. “Fuck! No! Albie!”

Finn felt his chest heat up, and the smell combined with the disgusting image caused him to puke, clogging up the respirator and stinging his nostrils and throat. He ripped the mask off his face while choking on his vomit and threw it to the ground. Tears filled his eyes as his body succumbed to the burning pain in his nose and the reality of his situation. Sobs filled the alley behind the restaurant as Finn sat there in shock. He didn't know what to do, his rational mind telling him to go get help, but his instinct telling him to run. He'd done it before. Running was the only thing he knew how to do – and run he did.

Finn tore off his protective gear and ran home, tears clouding his vision of the route back to his apartment. He wasn't worried about the consequences of ignoring what he had seen. He wasn't fearful of his

safety. He wasn't afraid. The only thing Finn felt was dread. He knew the body he saw couldn't be real because he had seen it before.

II

Finn slammed the door to his apartment behind him. He hadn't stopped running, not even for a second. He never got the chance to process what he saw, or rather, what he *didn't* see. The body in the grease trap. Short blonde hair soaked in oils, withering skin caked in fats. Running had distracted him from reality for a short moment, and now that he was finally standing still, it was all flooding his mind. His old home, his late boyfriend, the friends and family he ran from. Milford had been a distraction, a hiding place, a way for Finn to escape the horror of the past. It only lasted a week. He was still broken, but he was hiding it well. He could feign a smile or squeeze out a hello for Rodney if he needed to, but this was a bridge too far. He knew that no matter what he couldn't even try to distract himself anymore. He couldn't run away from what he had just seen.

Crouched down, back against the door, Finn was heaving after his marathon. His tears had dried on his cheeks from the wind, and the taste of bile in his mouth had all but faded. He sat there motionless for what felt like hours. He was barely breathing, barely blinking, and he couldn't bring himself to get up.

Eventually, after much deliberation, Finn willed himself to his minuscule bathroom and got into the shower. The sound of the water drowned out his howling sobs. The streams of tears on cheeks were washed away down the drain, mixed with the water that flowed before them and all the water that would flow after. After his long shower, Finn threw on the first pair of shorts he could find and flung himself into bed, dreading the prospect of waking up tomorrow.

III

Albie was playing his favorite playlist over Bluetooth: Indie, rock, some jazz thrown in. His smile lit up the car and every time Finn looked at him, he felt like he had just fallen in love all over again. His heart was warm and fuzzy, and so was his head. The party was fun, and so were the drinks, but he was excited to spend some time alone with Albie. *He has pretty eyes*, Finn thought to himself while staring at his lover. Albie looked back at Finn grinning, cheeks flushed from the alcohol. He looked back towards the road and his face dropped, eyes widening and all the color

draining from his cheeks. As Finn clutched the steering wheel and turned his head, he was blinded by headlights only a few meters away.

His head pounding, Finn awoke to blaring sirens and chaos all around him. The impact threw him far away from the sight of the crash. He was dazed and hurting all over, not quite sure how he ended up here. The truck he hit must've been filled with some kind of oil – or grease. It was all over the road, the surrounding area, what was left of Finn's car... Albie. Where was Albie? Finn scanned the area and crawled towards the wreck, wincing and slipping on his way there due to the unbearable pain and slick oil. There he saw him. The one he'd always hoped to protect. The one who lit up his whole world. The one who had planned on staying home. Albie was lying there, unmoving, curled up, and surrounded by thick golden grease. He shined with crimson and amber, his blood diluting the oil he had been coated in.

Finn froze, he didn't even notice the events unfolding around him. They weren't the only ones involved in the crash. Screaming and crying filled the air as paramedics weaved through cars and trucks, careful not to slip on the oil that had spilled. It was a catastrophe. No one even noticed Finn, the man who caused all of this. He saw a paramedic approach Albie as fast as she could. The face she made told Finn everything he needed to know.

IV

Awoken by the taste of bile in his mouth, Finn blinked open his eyes. His sheets were soaked with sweat and the pillow beside him was half-covered in vomit. With the taste of acid coating his mouth and the stench of salt filling his nose, Finn clutched his clean pillow and began to cry, screaming into the soft cotton.

He tore the sheets off his bed and his pillowcases (taking care to throw his adjacent pillow out now that it had been soaked in bile) and started up his second shower of the night. Even after he was out of the shower, Finn still felt scorched. He grabbed his extra pair of sheets out of the linen closet and remade his bed. He laid down and closed his eyes, fully expecting to take off from work tomorrow, and hoping that his dreams would spare him for the night.

V

Finn had hoped that the sweat would have subsided by the time he woke back up. If he couldn't be at peace mentally maybe he could at least

be physically comfortable, but he wasn't at all surprised when he woke up even warmer than before. The headaches were manageable and the nausea came and went, but the sweat was becoming unbearable. No matter how much water he drank, and no matter how much medicine he took, the sweat wouldn't go away. He was exhausted and defeated.

Finn spent the day sulking in his apartment, rotating between the bathroom and his bed. His stomach turned whenever he thought of the body he saw last night, and his chest tightened whenever he remembered how much it resembled Albie. His sobs were all but dry, and he could feel his own dehydration caused by the combination of crying and sweating.

A knock on the front door rang out through the apartment. It was the only sound other than weeping that Finn had heard all day and he jumped in surprise. He made his way over to the door and opened it, not thinking about how ill he looked.

"Finn! Hi! I'm sorry if I'm overstepping but I asked Bill if he knew your address. Since you didn't call out of work and haven't been answering Bill's calls, we were worried something might have happened. Are you okay?" Finn looked at him inquisitively.

"Albie?" he said in a tired voice, having not spoken a word all day.

"What? It's me, Rodney." Finn's face fell.

"Oh... Hi Rodney," Finn said hesitantly, not sure where to go from there.

"Finn, are you sick? Something seems wrong, and you're really sweaty. Do you need help?" Rodney asked.

Normally Finn would be insulted, but he could tell Rodney cared. Albie always cared. "No... I'm fine." They stood there in silence, Finn's uncomfortable responses filling the doorway with tension.

"Listen, I know we aren't super close, but you look like you're about to fall over. Let me help you."

"I don't need help, I'm fine. I'm... I really am fine. Tell Bill I'm sorry."

"Finn, you're sweating through your clothes. It's January. Please just let me help--"

"I said I don't need your help! Jesus Christ, just stop worrying about me and get out!"

Rodney flinched and stepped back. "Sorry. I'll go. I hope you feel better," Rodney said with his head down. He turned and walked away from the building, not looking back on his way out. Finn closed the door, sighing as he walked back towards his bed. Before he made it though, he fell to the floor and everything went black.

VI

Finn had collapsed on the floor of his apartment, dehydrated, overheated, and most of all, sweaty. He faded in and out of consciousness for a few minutes, during which he tried to muster up the strength to stand up and call himself an ambulance. He needed to acknowledge that he had a serious problem; the time for toughing it out was over. Once he had fully regained his consciousness, his efforts became more purposeful, but – nothing. Finn couldn't move. At all. He was stuck, laying on his side, helpless. He tried to call out for help but couldn't even manage to muster up a squeak. So, he just continued to lay there. In the most uncomfortable state he'd ever been in, hoping that Rodney would stop by again and realize that Finn really did need help.

VII

The reality of Finn's situation began to sink in during his third day on the floor. No one was coming to help him. He was struggling to breathe and his sweat began to congeal, sliding down his greasy skin like rotten milk.

It became obvious to Finn that something was *very* wrong. Besides the fact that he had been paralyzed on the floor for nearly three whole days, something about his sweat was – strange. It was thick and oily. He could almost see it seep out of his enlarged pores, and its usual salty smell had disappeared and become reserved for the tears that trickled down his cheeks. His eyes had become foggy as if a sheen was cast over them, making his blinks slow and wet. He felt hopeless, having no choice but to submit to whatever had been forced upon him. Then began the choking. Breathing became even more of a challenge. Finn's throat felt clogged, a thick layer of mucus surrounding the walls of his windpipe. All the moisture in his body was oozing out of him and pooling on the floor. Taunting him. Sinking through the floorboards.

VIII

By any reasonable metric, Finn should be dead. He continued to lay on the floor, paralyzed, for another two days. The struggle to breathe only grew and more grease and mucus filled his organs. That part that scared Finn the most though was what he had to watch happen to the skin on his arms. Once the sweat had had its way with him, his skin was the next in line. It began to liquefy, falling off of his muscles and bones and

mimicking all the substances before it. His blood, now mixed with the greasy puddle beneath him, also began to change; its red hue turning a muddy gold.

He had no choice but to accept the fate that had been handed to him, although to say that he wasn't horrified while being forced to watch this abhorrent scenario take place would be a lie. He couldn't feel much of anything anymore, and the rest of his body had begun to befall the same fate as his arms. The only movement in the area came from the sinking, puddling grease.

As Finn melted away, he saw Albie laying across from him through his foggy vision. He wasn't moving, much like Finn, but he wasn't dissolving. He stayed stagnant, constantly reminding Finn of his past. He couldn't run anymore. He had to face the man whose life he ended. The love of his life. A man who deserved so much better.

IX

Finn was no longer breathing. His sight was all but gone as his eyes were both sheened over with a thick layer of oil and melting away themselves. Any identifiable structure to his body had disappeared and all that remained was a mound of dissolving flesh and bones finding their way into the floorboards.

What hadn't changed, however, was Finn's consciousness. His body was long deceased, but he was still awake and able to think and feel. He was aware of where he was – who he was – but not what he was becoming. He was left in the dark, waiting for whatever sick transformation he'd been forced to undergo to be complete.

X

There was no longer any solid matter that belonged to Finn's body. His bones were the last to change, but change they did. He continued to sink through the floorboards of his old apartment building when he reached the foundation. Then from the foundation to the ground. Then from the ground to – something else, something worse. It took weeks for what was left of Finn's body to work its way down through the layers of concrete, soil, and rock below it, but it reached an unimaginable sight. The grease began to drip down from the stone it had just sunken through into a homogenous mixture of the same fluid. A colossal reservoir filled with the same substance Finn had just melted into.

As soon as the first drop hit the pool, Finn felt – different. His consciousness was still in a state of limbo, but he could feel other people. People that had come before him. Some of them felt desperate. Some of them felt lonely. They all felt guilty. There was no telling how this had happened or how many people were a part of this collective consciousness, but the feelings projected onto Finn made it very clear that this was it.

He wondered if Rodney had ever come back to check on him. He wondered if he saw what Finn was turning into. He wondered if he would've run away. Finn would have. Finn *did*. The only thing he could be sure of was that he deserved this. He took a treasure out of this world. This was more than justified, whatever *this* was. He began to join the other voices in their dread. He knew there was nothing he could do about his situation. All he could do was feel. He wished he could apologize. He wished he could tell Albie how sorry he was, how much he wished they could trade places. Neither of them were in a position for that anymore. They were both gone. Finn could only hope that Albie was in a better place than this.

JONNY GHERMAN

Hitchhiking With My Eyes Closed

Every night I fall asleep to you. I don't know what you look like. I don't know your name, your struggles, or even if you exist. You're a mystery in every sense of the word. Every night riddles new questions until exhaustion overwhelms my yearning.

I was with you once, but then you changed. You loved me once, and I did too. I thought the world of you. You were everything to me, until you weren't.

But I know what you make me feel. I know how my fingers become a bit more sensitive when I run them through your hair. How my smile lasts a little bit longer when our eyes meet. I know how I want to feel, how I'm supposed to feel. That is, until we met again.

Life seems to have its own set of rules in Milford, Kansas. The air is warmer, the ground is harsher, and for miles, rustic homes become synonymous with civilization. The people living here aren't much different. Simple, conventional, and forgotten. Like me, they wanted something they knew little about. Something they probably saw in a rerun of an 80's movie.

The best thing about Milford was the lake. It's cool cyan waters surrounded by wooden summertime homes made for the perfect postcard. Besides a rundown movie theater that showed movies five years too late, and an abandoned prison where kids snuck off to smoke weed, the town didn't offer much. That is, until the summertime. Our economy depended on tourists as much as our sanity did. We'd make fun of them, rent them overpriced AirBnB houses, and occasionally drink with them. Normally it's a quick chat and leave, but not this time. This time was different.

You were laughing with friends, enjoying the here and now. A weekend trip for them felt like an eternity of blissful rush to you. We talked a couple of times before, but nothing like this. Your cursive hair

beating around the kitchen with each song. Your voice overjoyed with each shared laugh. Smile shouting your blushing energy.

You are truly you.

I was sitting with my mom, slurring her words as she tried to explain the photo of us on a fishing trip to one of your friends. If he was genuinely into fishing as much as his white ‘Barstool Athlete’ shirt and orange viper sunglasses suggested, then he and my mom would continue talking for hours.

I knew I stood out that night. The odd-man silent always draws eyes. I hated not talking as much as I hated starting it. Calculations of judgmental exclusion began to outweigh any plausible attainment.

Just before I left, something in me told me to stay. My drumming heart urged my mind to stop. Each step forward I regained assurance. I walked towards the kitchen, to grab another drink, where you and your friends were pouring shots.

“Hey! Do you wanna take a shot with us?” you asked, already placing the glass under the bottle.

How thoughtful.

One-shot turned into countless more, as drunken courage morphed into a newfound group. Your friends showed a lot about you. Inside jokes became backstories. Backstories became sameness, and sameness became connection. We laughed and we sang until the spinning rush slowly faded away, dragging your friends along with it.

You were still up. We shared more stories than we did interests. Summertime ventures echoed closeness. Mutual excitement for future ones launched us deeper into conversation. We talked about our futures; you, a prominent college student going into environmental science, and me, a summer town boy helping rent houses with his mother. I asked you if one of the guys here was your boyfriend and you said no.

Really?

You said you’d been hurt by love before, and badly. You gave more than you got, and scars of the past still bled. They bled when you noticed the old couple on the metro holding hands. They bled when your best friend told you she was getting engaged. But they bled especially when your parents fought.

Is that why I trust you?

My father was an optimistic person. He was raised to view the glass half full, no matter how bad his luck was running. Maybe that’s why he double-downed his Christmas bonus on red. My mother was a realist. She knew the world was an ugly place, and that it was in human nature to

sin. Needless to say, they didn't meet eye to eye. This made for grievous holidays.

Winter in Kansas is a twilight zone; too cold to stay outside, too humid to stay inside. I managed to survive my parents during the summers by venturing off to different parts of the lake. They'd be off at work and I'd create my own destiny. But in the winters we were all trapped under the same roof; forced to see each other, prepared to fight one another, afraid of what would happen.

Too often would I find myself pressed against my bedroom door, praying the howling "FUCK YOU" and "I WORK TO DAMN HARD" would stay in the kitchen. I knew they loved each other, otherwise they'd get a divorce right? How could a love survive slammed doors and nights spent on the couch?

Is this what love is?

I didn't want to listen, but even bad experience is experience. Their yelling would always end the same. One would leave, time would pass, and the two would forget the experience until the cycle repeated.

One day I asked my mother why she was still with my dad and she said "to keep this family together."

Staying trapped? Is love worth staying trapped forever?

The last time I saw you was in front of a packed car. What little time had expired, as your friends piled into separate cars eager for departure. You made sure to wait for everyone else to leave before hugging me. I didn't want to let go, and neither did you.

I shouldn't have.

Now I find myself thinking about you. How we could be better than our parents. We could build on that one night and make it last a lifetime. You're probably thinking how greenhouse gasses affect the earth's Hydrosphere.

I called you one-night drunk, and you said we were too far apart to make it work. Maybe when we see each other things will be different. They have to be different. I know that night was not a fluke. That was just a sign, the start of something better. If only we'd slowed down time that night. I could show you what a happily ever after looks like. We still text, but it's not the same.

Will it ever be?

One day I drove to the AirBnB house. A couple of miles away, I passed a hitchhiker. He looked beaten, shaggy, and tired. Like me. His thumb, shaking with every step he took, jutted into the road as his back faced me. As I drove towards him, his body turned, locking eyes for a concise moment. His humbled eyes begged for my position.

Countless cars passed him and countless more would, but he still plugged along. Too hopeful to stop, too drained to reach the end. Hope both blinded him and inspired him. Every step brought agony, deprived of a goal only achieved by the lucky. A goal of knowing riddled questions. A goal of familial trauma conceded. Rewarding nights of sleep and relief.

I didn't know him, where he's from, or where he wanted to go. But I could learn, I could help. Hope sealed his haven shut, but I could open it. I could open his eyes the same way you opened mine.

The Donna of Our Time

Known colloquially to the public as a time machine, the device that Dr. Piervicenti had spent the last twenty years engineering was finally ready for trial runs. Located in a special research facility, the time machine was complex and large, combining a particle accelerator and a small nuclear reactor, among many other configurations from across several scientific disciplines. The news of time travel becoming a potential new reality had already been making rounds in the months leading up to the big announcement. Most people wondered about the implications that this technology would have, but they spared very little attention for the woman behind this development even though she was much more interesting.

It was the early morning, and Dr. Piervicenti was running some background tests on the time machine to verify that everything was ready and working.

“So, you think you have found a way to beat me?” Donna heard a voice speak from the dark. This voice no longer spooked her, nor did it cause the hairs on her neck to stand up. She merely continued with her work.

“I have, now go away,” she said without turning around. “In just a short time it will be as if I never even met you.”

The voice from the shadows did not respond.

Academic news outlets had referred to Dr. Piervicenti as the “DaVinci of Our Time.” In public she awkwardly pursed her lips at this, and in private she cringed. What Donna wanted to tell the news outlets was that she was not allowed to study under DaVinci when he was alive. Nor Galileo, Bacon, or Copernicus. By the time she shared the Earth with all four of these men, Donna had been alive for over a thousand years. Though she was not quite old enough to have lived in Aristotle’s time, she figured in retrospect that it would have been best to avoid a teacher who openly postulated that women were just deformed men.

It was moments such as those that Donna wished her memory would fail her, so she could live in the present just like everyone else was. Donna remembered a lot of things the world forgot, such as how Greek fire and Roman concrete were made, what old statues and busts looked like, and how Latin really sounded, though she had no interest in reminding anybody. What Donna did not mind was teaching students quantum physics at Princeton University.

Almost two millennia ago, Dr. Donna Piervicenti was known as Donica Tertia, or the third daughter of Donicus. Born and raised on the outskirts of Rome to a family of humble means, Donica was sent along with her two sisters to serve at a general's estate near the city center. There, she and her sisters attended to the needs of the general's daughters; washing their clothes, helping them bathe, dressing them, fanning them, and just being someone they could talk to. It was a life, though an invisible one, and a safer alternative to working odd jobs on the city streets. Instead of hurrying through the hot, crowded streets of Rome, Donica spent her time wandering around a mansion larger than anything in her imagination instead.

The cause of Donica Tertia's immortality would come about not long after receiving a proposition of marriage when Donica would have rathered to do quite literally anything else. Her whole life, Donica had been told she was a step up from being a slave, but now in the general's mansion she could hardly see a difference. Like the other female servants, she actively avoided the men in the home, having heard terrible stories from other households. Donica had no right to property, each of her days were dictated entirely by the needs of her masters and mistresses, and the money she was paid did not offer her much buying power towards anything. The only perceived advantage that she had was that she still possessed the legal ability to get married- but to who was not her choice. The general was more interested in repaying Donicus than he was in what Donica Tertia wanted in life.

The general arranged a marriage between Donica and a man named Blaesus, who was a widower and 25 years older than her. Blaesus was a praefectus castrorum, third in command of a Roman army legion. He was of lower social status than the general, but had served just as long and was responsible for advising and training the legion and gained standing through his long and successful career. Donica had met Blaesus only once before the general arranged the marriage, something the general was quick to remind Donica of how lucky she was.

"You are just doing this for my father," Donica had said to the general.

“You are correct,” he replied. “But I am also doing this for you. A woman of your social standing would have only been able to marry another Plebeian, and not a good one considering your role as a servant. Your father’s only wish was that his daughters would be able to eat from a better branch, and now you certainly will. I was not able to help your father when he fought under me back then, but I can do something for his children.”

“Why not marry one of my sisters to Blaesus?” Donica asked. “They are older than I, Blaesus would certainly appreciate one of them more than me.”

“I gave Blaesus the choice between the three of you,” the general said. “And he chose you.”

Donica hung her head. “General, I am sorry but I do not think I want to do this,” she said quietly.

“The decision is final,” the general said firmly. “I do not appreciate this back-and-forth. I hardly tolerate it from my own daughters. Your father has given his blessing. Blaesus will not expect much from you. I have told you that he is widowed and has been for five years. He only wants a companion; he already has three sons to continue his name.”

Blaesus will not expect much from you was a thought that echoed in Donica Tertia’s mind as she weighed her options. Donica was simply an ornament, a fixture being handed from one family to another. By marrying Blaesus she would no longer have to toil in servitude, but she would still be stuck in the same place- in the side of someone else’s life. Now Blaesus was not a bad man, and that was Donica’s problem. When Donica requested to see him again before agreeing to marriage, he did not protest. He was a typical soldier; a veteran hardened by years away at war, having risen through the ranks from a less privileged position than his comrades until he reached the highest level of respect someone like him could get to. He got there the difficult way, and yet the only thing that could break him was his first wife’s passing. Blaesus was a man of few words, but his baritone voice was shocking when heard. He was polite to Donica and answered every question she had for him. He told her he planned to retire soon, and his next campaign would be his last. He told Donica that while she was born a servant, she would die a lady.

Back then, Donica Tertia realized that her world could not give her close to what she wanted. To change her fate, it would have taken a miracle- or a deal with the Devil. Donica tried to convince herself that marriage to Blaesus was what she wanted after all, which she did, right up until the night before the ceremony when she ran out of her quarters to the

riverbank to cry. It was in the midst of her tears that the shadowy figure of a man approached her walking on the surface of the river.

Donica Tertia wiped tears from her face as she looked at the figure. Was this the one the Nazarenes called Christ? Christianity at this time was still very much illegal in the Roman empire and had been deemed heretical by the emperor.

“You are in quite the predicament,” the figure said. “If you are willing to pay the price, I can fix all of this.”

“I don’t need this fixed; I just need more time,” Donica said. “There are so many things I haven’t done and so many things I will never get to do.”

“I can give you that and more,” the figure replied. “But it will come at a cost: your soul.”

Donica swallowed hard. Whatever this being could do for her was certainly more than what she was ever going to get anywhere else. Her soul seemed like an inconsequential bargain, because since the day she was born it seemed she functioned as if she were without it. Donica Tertia accepted the shadowy figure’s offer, and he snapped his fingers. For a moment, Donica’s world went pitch black- darker than the night around her, and then reality resumed. Donica examined herself to find that nothing had changed.

“Did- did you take my soul?” Donica questioned.

“Not yet,” the figure said. “You are still alive and will be for a very long time. Think of it as a loan of sorts that I will be back to collect on the day you have had enough.”

What the figure failed to understand was that Donna was never going to be, in fact, done. At least not on his terms. Looking back on it all now, Dr. Piervicenti thought of the shadowy figure as nothing more than a cunning thief. He came to her at a highly opportunistic time when she was nothing more than an uneducated Roman peasant and swindled her because of her own ignorance about the world. She did not allow this realization to make her spiral into despair and regret like it used to.

Still, Donna spent much of her lifetime “treading water” as she would call it. After gaining her immortality that fateful night, Donna left Rome for good. She had no concern for eating, drinking, or sleep as she found she got on just fine without them. She developed an interest in learning about the world and spent time traveling.

Donna had watched civilizations rise and fall. She watched the Roman empire become the Byzantine empire, and then the Ottoman empire, and then watched it all collapse in two World Wars. She knew that the most notable artistic movements and developments in scientific

inquiry only happened in periods of time when things were going well. There was a reason for the Dark Ages just as there was for the Renaissance. The current world's understanding of space and time was completely unlike that of any other period. The Earth was no longer "flat", nor was it 6,000 years old. Tangible distances between stars have been calculated. They know the speed of light. They send things into space and get them back. To Donna, there was not a more apt time to begin her studies than now. After all, she knew that at any time all of this could change. The magic that the shadowy figure used to create the contract between himself and Donna defied all her ability to understand. However, Donna figured that while magic was a strange phenomenon, it had to exist within the laws of the Universe which humanity was gaining a better understanding of each and every day.

In the present year, Dr. Donna Piervicenti had only been an active scientist for two decades. But this was built upon nearly a century of informal but intense individual studying. Before then, Donna had made some attempts to study astronomy, calculus, and other developing fields but they landed her in trouble more often than not. The most notable instance was when she was brought before the Spanish Inquisition on charges of witchcraft- she had been practicing alchemy, which was at the time the predecessor to modern chemistry. She was sentenced to be burned at the stake. As the fire could not kill her and merely danced along the surface of her skin, Donna had to wait a whole three days until the executioner and guards grew bored and left her to burn out. She waited until that night to wander into a lake to put herself out, after which she began making plans immediately to get on a boat to a new place everyone was calling the Americas. She would eventually leave the colonies when she heard of what they were doing to witches in a place called Massachusetts.

Many of Donna's experiences led her to not trust other people very much. In her experience, most people stood to just get in her way. It was men that largely barred her from studying, but it was a woman that reported her to the Inquisition on suspicion of witchcraft. To her, immortality did not excuse those actions, had Donna been mortal she would have paid the price for science with her life and that was unforgivable. For a time, she returned to her servile ways, drifting from house to house over the years before anyone would notice her inability to age. She did this until it was a time when she could at least begin to study on her own and merely be considered a strange woman rather than outright executed. Donna would point out the beginning of her academic pursuits as the same year that Marie Curie won her first Nobel Prize.

She had become acutely aware of the signs of society crumbling, having to get up and leave many times in her life. As a result, she was hardly the kind of immortal to own several rare artifacts and antiques. She had accrued no wealth over the years, often having to drop identities and start over entirely so as to avoid suspicion. Donna found written portrayals of immortal individuals to be interesting in this regard, although she did not find them all to be useless caricatures of her life. Of the few things she did keep, like the occasional sketch of herself or later photographs, she would claim them to be her female ancestors when it finally did become easier to settle down. This trick she picked up from reading both Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as well as its predecessor Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*.

Closer to the current era Donna had a much harder time moving about in the world unnoticed. This was largely due to the amount of paperwork that people were bogged down with, as well as the surveillance tool that social media unwittingly served as. Not even a hundred years ago, Donna could get up and leave to another country if she was so pleased with not much trouble. She would show up in a new town, with a new name and that would be the end of it. Visas and passports were not as difficult to obtain and the need to constantly verify who a person was was not a big issue.

The more Donna understood about the nature of her existence, the more imperative it became to work towards a solution. Over the years she learned through various accidents that the nature of her immortality made her indestructible. She also learned that Earth and the sun would not exist forever- nor would the rest of humanity. In her mind she had a hyperbolized, but still imaginable fate where she was stuck floating in space unable to move and unable to die. So, she finally applied for her PhD after making it through undergrad, because she was still going to be dependent on the help of the few other brilliant minds of that current generation in order to make time travel a possibility while they were still here.

Donna remembered asking the shadow man what he intended to do with her soul once many years ago. It was late at night while she was sitting on a park bench looking up at the stars and the moon. She had already seen so many things change in her time of living, but the night sky stayed the same for her at least. Seasons changed and constellations shifted, but everything was still there waiting. Donna did know that many years down the line the constellations would in fact lose their form as far off stars were moving as well, and the moon was slowly getting further and further from the earth. The figure came beside her, as he knew she was waiting for him.

“I approached you all those years ago simply because there was something you wanted badly enough that only I could give to you,” the shadow said. “I have a sense for this sort of thing. Everybody wants something, but few want something that is out of this world, and even fewer will give anything to get it.”

“So, I am not the first,” Donna said quietly.

“No, and you won’t be the last.”

“If I say I am done now, where will I go?” Donna asked.

“You will go where I come from,” the shadow figure answered. “A special place exists for those of us who go against the rules, the flow of the world; you will join me there soon enough.”

Donna did not turn to look at him. Instead, she continued to speak.

“You know, in my time of studying space, I have learned about what I believe to be the most frightening celestial objects to exist in our universe. Singularities so dense and heavy that their gravity pulls in any and all mass within reach. Where all of this matter goes is still a mystery. We can only see them because the light that gets pulled in along with all the planets, debris, and gasses gets bent and refracted like a halo all around the event horizon. As far as I know, a black hole is the closest thing to an angry god that we have, swallowing anything and everything in its path. They, like you, claim to be inescapable, with the only hope lying in one’s ability to potentially bend space-time to break free. The only thing you have standing in my way is a hypothesis that I cannot go back in time and change my decision. I only have to prove you wrong once.”

Donna wondered what the true implications of meeting her younger self would be. There would not be a paradox, at least from a physical perspective. The atoms that make up her person now were completely different from the ones back then, so there would be no replication of matter at the very least. The big question remained in how Donna and her younger self Donica would perceive each other, if they truly only had one permanent soul, what would it mean for the state of their respective consciousnesses and bodies? That part Donna did not know.

Dr. Piervicenti insisted that she would be the one to test run her creation. One because she was immortal there would be no other victims to her invention, and two because she did not trust anyone else to use the time machine in a way that would not completely interfere with the timeline of the world. Two thousand years of immortality had left Donna isolated from other human beings, the inevitability of death being the greatest cause of all. Dr. Piervicenti left the current time period the night before Princeton University was going to unveil the time machine to

public viewing. The time machine would no longer exist soon after, as Donna had been such an integral part of its construction that the remaining members of the team would not have been able to build it again without her- as the knowledge of how to conduct time travel was known by Donna and Donna alone.

“Are you sure you want to go back?” the shadowy figure asked Donna, as she was about to step into the time machine.

“Like I have said many times,” Donna replied. “I know that what I am going to do will work, I will not just give myself up to whatever you have planned for me.”

“But you will lose everything,” the figure said. “It will be as if everything you have done in the past two thousand years never happened.”

“Just because it will seem like it never happened doesn’t mean that it didn’t,” Donna argued as she finished punching in the calibrations and stepped into the machine. “I have seen the world in many different ways:, good, bad, and worse. I have lived long enough, and I am going to die with my soul intact.”

“I’m just saying you could have had a little bit more fun,” the shadow figure said. Donna knew what he meant by this. She could have been upfront with the world about being an immortal, they would have at least treated her like an icon and at most an idol. Donna had other concerns, and those had largely to do with her being seen as a bystander to larger problems. Enslavement, genocide, war, and climate change being just among the few.

Closing the door and strapping herself in, Donna pressed the final activation button which would break her being down into atoms and fling them at a speed faster than light, sending them back in time. The machine began the process, and for a second, everything went white. The next moment it was night in the courtyard of a Roman mansion. Donna could hardly contain her excitement and satisfaction that she had been right all the way up until this point. She then hurried to where she could see herself crying along the riverbank. But what she found was not herself crying; instead Donica was staring right back at her as if she had known who was coming. A wave of relief came over them both simultaneously as they ran towards each other.

Donna could see both Donica from her own point of view as well as herself from Donica’s at the same time. It was their consciousnesses being one and the same- the soul which they both doubted the existence of even after they had sworn it away had proven itself to be there. And so did the shadowy figure.

Donna took Donica’s hands and squeezed them.

“Listen, I am you from the future. Do not take the shadow’s offer; he only wants to con you,” she urged.

Donica looked at her trustfully, but still confused. “But he told me I could get out of this, I know what I have to do.”

“Don’t. Please,” Donna said forcefully. “I have lived many lifetimes; I have seen the world and I have seen enough. I did all of this because I want to still exist in some way after death. I came all this way because there is a way out, can you see the world through my eyes?”

Donica looked down and thought it over.

“Donica, up until now you have not had a choice. I can give you the opportunity to do whatever you want, and when you have had enough, then I will come for you,” the shadowy figure said.

“Donica, you do have a choice. I am you; I have seen everything as you will see it if you give up your soul, and I am telling you that it is not worth it. You have no idea what that thing’s plans are- neither do I. But I have worked to at least undo my mistake. Please just trust yourself.”

Donica stood quietly and nodded her head. Suddenly, Donna vanished into thin air. Then Donica turned to the shadow.

“The deal is off,” she said. “A world where time travel may no longer exist, but I remember what I have done. There are things in this world I may not ever know, just like how I did not know I would remember my own life after it being undone. There are also things I will never be able to do, like touch a piece of machinery again, as I no longer live in a world with the means to build it. But I remember everything I have learned, and maybe I can do something with it- and maybe, just maybe, I can make the rest of my life worth living.”

With that Donica headed back to the house.

“You are going to go through with the wedding?” The shadow figure said.

“I am not, respectfully,” said Donica. “I may not be able to do most of the things that I could do in the future now, but there is still work to be done knowing what I know. I can change my destiny for the better. I am getting some things and then I am leaving. Be gone.”

The figure realized it was wasting its time and left. Donica gathered her supplies and then headed out into the night, ready to change the course of history.

KEEGAN MCGOWAN

The Magic of Cooking

Josh perused the shelves of the local bookstore: Smithyn's Catalogues. He wasn't shopping for anything in particular, simply browsing as he usually does on his Friday afternoons. He and Emily Smithyn were good friends, and every Friday Josh would come down to her bookstore and browse, peruse. "Meander?" he wondered aloud to himself as he walked through the shelves.

"Hm?" Emily looked over from where she was rummaging through a bin behind the counter.

"Nothing. Just thinking of adjectives for what I'm doing. You know, meander, roam, I think I've heard someone say *riffle* before..."

Emily laughed as she pulled a label gun from the bin and pushed her glasses further up her nose. "Those are verbs dummy. Adjectives *describe* something, like 'it was a *good* day.'"

"And who's saying I'm not having a *riffle* day, hm? Fridays are my riffle days."

Emily sighed in exasperation and Josh gave her a smug look, knowing he had beaten her on a technicality. He browsed the fantasy section, reading the titles of new releases, but nothing immediately caught his attention.

"You got any plans for this weekend?" Emily asked as she went around with the label gun, updating the shelves with new stickers and prices. Josh shook his head.

"I've got the whole week off actually. They're finally getting that exterminator to deal with the mice, and didn't want us poisoned along with 'em."

"That's good. Can't have your Fridays become die days." She leveled the labeler at him and made some *pew-pew* noises from a few isles away.

Josh clutched at his chest and fell to one knee, miming a pained expression. “Her vocabulary is too strong! I can’t fight it!”

Emily laughed lightly and turned back to her labeling as Josh continued his charade. From his new, lower perspective, a title on the bottom shelf stuck out to him: *To Whom It May Concern*. Odd. He pulled the book off the shelf to see the cover. It was old, or at least designed to look old, with creased and worn leather binding. The lettering on the spine was a faded grey, and flecks of it were peeling off, as if it were painted on rather than printed. The cover depicted a detailed forest scene with a clearing and a small campfire, all of which looked to be hand-painted as well. A large, blackened metal pot hung above the fire. Steam curled from its top and artfully swirled through the clearing. The pages were yellowed, thick, and unevenly cut. As Josh inspected his rare find, he stood and turned to Emily. “Where’d you get this?”

She glanced over, and Josh thought it strange when a look of genuine surprise crossed her face.

“Hey, is everything okay?” he asked.

Emily swiftly averted her gaze, furiously staring at her label gun. “Yeah, sorry! That’s an old-timey cookbook. I was just surprised to see it in the fantasy section is all, someone must have put it back in the wrong place.” She looked up at him and seemed back to her normal self. “I wonder if there’s anything good in there?”

Josh shot her a weird glance and flicked through until he found a list of recipes. “Braised chicken with sauteed mushroom sauce... Cream of spinach and char-grilled steak. That sounds pretty good.”

“I’ll give you the book for free if you promise to invite me for dinner next week.” Emily tucked a curl of brown hair behind her ear, grinning coyly.

Weirdness forgotten; Josh felt his face go red. “I... uh... yea sure!” he stuttered out.

Everyone knew everyone in this small town, which meant everyone knew that Josh and Emily were madly in love. They’d almost kissed once, maybe a year back, at Tim’s summer solstice party. They were both a little tipsy and had split from the rest of the festivities to sit on the lawn and watch the stars. Josh had brought a small speaker, and he vividly remembered *Unforgettable* by Nat King Cole was playing. Everything was perfect, but then Tim and a group of his friends piled out onto the lawn, and the romantic starlit scene was spoiled. Now Josh just felt embarrassed about that night, kicking himself for having such an opportunity be ruined. After that, He resigned himself to just being friends

with Emily, unable to muster the courage to try again, knowing that no matter the scenario, it would never match the perfection of his failure.

Emily chuckled at Josh's obvious shyness. "It's a date, then. Are you free Sunday night? How does seven o'clock sound?"

"Uh... d-date? Yeah, I'm free." Having gotten over the initial shock of her offer, Josh tried to compose himself. He studied the recipe titles. "I haven't cooked a proper meal in a while..."

"Here, let me choose!" Emily stepped up next to him and glanced over his shoulder. After a moment, she tapped the page. "Cranberry Ham with Mac & Cheese. I love mac & cheese, and it's super easy to make, you shouldn't have a problem with it."

Josh flipped to the corresponding page and Emily offered him a scrap of paper to bookmark it. "Alright, I'll do my best, but I can't make any promises."

"I look forward to it. See you later!" Emily waved goodbye as Josh continued on his *riffle* day. He hoped he wouldn't make a fool of himself on Sunday. It might finally be the chance to make up for his past blunders.

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Over the weekend, Josh read through the strange book. The entire book was handwritten, with flowing script and mystical symbols scattered through the pages. The mac & cheese recipe Emily had chosen was listed under "Simple Meals." He decided to find a more difficult recipe though, hoping to impress Emily with something a little more complicated to show off his – nonexistent – cooking skills. After flicking through the old cookbook, Josh settled on something called "The Parlor Pleaser." It consisted of baking a thick, doughy bread, then hollowing it out and filling it with a cheddar and broccoli soup. There was a warning near the top of the recipe page screaming "Danger! Difficult!" surrounded by more mysterious sigils, but Josh ignored it. It may be difficult but he highly doubted it would be dangerous.

Josh set to work by noon on Sunday. He started first with the bread, knowing it would take some time to bake. "*Churn the flour, egg, and oil until smooth. Chant "Umer Gra-han Epsis Flate" thrice... Churn?*" Josh hadn't ever thought to churn before, but he gave it a college try with his whisk as he chanted, beating away at the batter until he hoped it was the right consistency. He'd never chanted before. There was something cathartic about the strange words. They made him feel... powerful. The old cookbook had the ingredients listed on one page, while the other showed a detailed painting of the finished product.

“Dice 10 frog legs into bite-sized cubes. This will enhance the buoyancy of the soup.” “What on earth? Who actually eats frog legs?” Josh shook his head in wonder. He didn’t have time to go to the lake and catch frogs, so he decided to use chicken as a substitute. A deep sense of unease filled Josh as he diced the chicken. He shook it off, assuming he was just nervous about the date, and moved to the next step of the recipe.

Make sure the coals are smoldering, but not burning, and place the dough onto the baking rock. Whisper “Lissa Lissa Lissa” once, and wave your right hand over the fire. Josh hesitated for a moment, feeling the sudden, burning urge to make a cooking fire. He set the dough aside and had a good-sized fire ready in minutes, his years as a Boy Scout finally paying off. He poked and prodded until there was a flat coal layer and placed the dough on a baking sheet into the fireplace, whispering the words and waving his right hand over the flames.

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As Josh finished the last incantation over the boiling pot, he felt his cooking prowess grow. At some point when he was grating the cheddar cheese, he noticed quiet whispers in his mind, helping him with the recipe and chants. It was an odd experience, but comforting. They commended his work, and assured him that if he made mistakes, they would harbor no ill will towards him. Josh thought that was a weird thing to say, but his mind didn’t linger on the thought; the whispers were already preparing him for the summoning portion of the recipe.

Setting up the candles was easy enough, but Josh had to make a separate trip to pick up chalk for the pentagram. Luckily enough he lived nearby to the hardware store, and after a brief walk there and back, he was home just in time to take the bread out of the fireplace. Its skin had a perfect golden crispiness, and it was thicker near the bottom to keep the soup from seeping through. He set the bread aside to rest and cool while he copied the chalk image from the book’s painting to his living room floor. It called for a pentagram *large enough to fit two goats placed nose to tail.*

“That’s not very helpful. What if it means pygmy goats or something?” Josh scratched his chin with a piece of chalk, and the voices clarified that it meant Anglo-Nubian goats. “Well, that’s not helpful either! Do I look like I know the difference between goat breeds?” The voices pointedly reminded him that he had all of the world’s knowledge in his pocket. “Jeez, you sound like my mom. Give me a sec...” Josh pulled out his phone and after a moment of googling, he had a rough idea on sizing. “Aww, their ears are so floppy!” The voices chastised him for getting distracted, and after a few more seconds of scrolling through cute goat

photos, Josh shoved his sofa stacked with decorative pillows, and his expensive glass coffee table aside to get the space he needed. He hoped Emily wouldn't come early so that he had time to rearrange everything and scrub the chalk off of his floorboards. Though confused about how all of this would affect the taste of the meal, Josh was still proud of his handiwork. The whispers told him not to worry. All would be revealed in time.

Place the finished bread bowl at the center of the pentagram and sit cross-legged on the northernmost point. The chef-lock hollowed out his bread, setting the scraps in a bowl on his coffee table to be used for dipping. He poured the thick cheddar and broccoli soup into the excavated bread crust, and placed the finished product at the center as he was told. Josh hadn't even looked at the book since he'd returned from the hardware store. The whispering voices guided him calmly, and he simply did as he was told. He confirmed where to sit with the little compass embedded in the hilt of the pocketknife his grandmother gave him on his 15th birthday. Sitting at the north point, words floated into his head, and he began chanting in unison with the whispers. "*Umer Gra 'han Epsis Flate. Umer Gra 'han Lissa. Umer Epsis Lissa. Umer Flate Lissa.*"

Several minutes of unbroken chanting later, a darkness slowly began to fill the room. A cloud of smoke was collecting on the ceiling. The candles scattered throughout the room had been burning for a while now, but certainly not long enough to cause this. Candle smoke doesn't swirl like that either, Josh thought to himself as the cloud wriggled and undulated, coalescing above the pentagram. The whispers continued chanting. Josh could feel that this smoke was a good sign. *The veil is weakening.*

The veil vapor continued thickening and solidifying until the woodcarving of the pet duck he'd had as a child, sitting on his mantle at the south side of the room, vanished into the fog. The newly minted warlock had only noticed because he'd been inspecting it for flaws as he chanted. Maybe after this was finished, he'd rub it with wax to give it a nice glossy look. The now solid wall of vapor bulged towards him slightly, like someone was pushing through a black plastic trash bag, stretching and deforming it in an attempt to rip through. Whatever was going on – Josh still wasn't quite sure – it was the most exciting thing to happen in his small town for years. He couldn't wait to tell Emily about it.

A razor-sharp claw the size of a fire poker suddenly tore through the veil. The wall crumpled and cracked as an enormous creature forced its way into the poor warlock's living room. The whispered chanting morphed suddenly into a harsh cackling. Josh cried out in pain, clutching

his head as more of the creature stepped through the splintered, vaporous wall. It was far larger than two Anglo-Nubian goats. The whole living room would be barely enough to fit the thing. The piercing laughter ceased as the creature finally forced its head through the veil. The thing seemed to be bending light around itself, as if a black hole had appeared in Josh's living room. Its humanoid features fuzzed and wisped at the edges.

"D-darkling!" Josh stammered. Now that the whispers no longer permeated his mind, he vaguely remembered references to such a creature in the recipe. The Darkling floated above the carefully drawn pentagram. It had no legs, its torso taking shape from a cloud of the same writhing smoke that made up the veil. Two pinpricks of red light appeared on the Darkling's face where eyes should be. It looked down to Josh's humble bread bowl, picking it up daintily between two claws, inspecting it carefully.

The red eyes darted towards Josh. "This sourdough?" The Darkling had no mouth, but its voice permeated the room, washing over the poor warlock like a tidal wave.

"Uh n-no, Your Smokiness. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure w-what it is..." Josh didn't know what was going on, but the hell demon wasn't killing him, and he hoped to keep that up, so he knelt and bowed down towards the creature submissively.

"Hmm." The single syllable made Josh's teeth vibrate in his skull. "But the soup is cheddar and broccoli, with frog legs?"

"Uh... Y-yeah Oh Great and Darkling-y One," Josh lied. He looked up. The Darkling was sniffing the soup apprehensively, if one could sniff without a nose. "May I be so bold as to ask your Darkness a question?"

The giant demon sighed. It reached out of the pentagram to grab a crust of bread from the chef-lock's coffee table. "Speak, mortal." It dipped the bread into the soup.

"Are you going to eat it? I... well, I made it to have dinner with a friend of mine, and if she comes over and you've already eaten it..." Josh was cut off by a rumbling laugh.

"Fool of a warlock, you do not eat these summoning recipes. They are offerings for the creature you summon. Truly, have you never done this before? Did you summon a *Darkling* on your first try? I cannot help but be impressed by your gumption." The Darkling brought the bread bowl to its chest and pushed inward. Josh's hard work disappeared as the creature's body rippled and ingested the bread bowl. "I am almost sorry that I have to kill you now."

“Wait, What!?” Josh scrambled to his feet and backed away. “Was it not good? I tasted it as I was cooking, I thought it was good!”

“It was good. Delicious, especially for your first attempt. Alas however, you lied to me. There was no frog in the soup. You used chicken, and any good chef-lock knows to never substitute ingredients in a summoning meal.”

“Well yeah but everyone says frog tastes like chicken, right?” Josh backtracked, “I didn’t think it would make a difference!”

The ground rumbled and a small puff of white smoke ejected from the demon’s midriff, curling upwards slowly. “Maybe a lesser creature would not know the difference, but I am a Darkling. Chicken is not buoyant, fool! Without frog, the texture is ruined!”

Josh bumped against the wall. He looked down to his phone on the coffee table. If he was fast enough, maybe he could grab it and call 911, but what would the cops do to a smoke monster? That was as far as his thought process went before an invisible force slammed against him, pinning him to the wall. The coffee table shattered, shards of glass piercing into the walls just next to Josh. He slid upwards, feet dangling above the floor by several inches. It was painful to breathe. Josh’s vision started to fuzz at the edges, and as he slowly blacked out, he heard the Darkling let out a deep, rumbling sigh. “Goodbye, poor little chef-lock. I would say it was a pleasure to meet you, but I pride myself for being honest.”

...

Emily parked her little white Prius in the driveway. She’d arrived quite early, hoping to help set the table or take care of any last-minute incantations. She’d dressed especially nicely for the date, combining a golden flowing skirt with her favorite crop top, and layering on her blue knitted button-up sweater. She even went so far as to swap her regular studs to full, dangly earrings, set with blue and yellow gemstones. Emily had brought some homemade mac & cheese and stopped to pick up burgers and fries as well knowing that Josh’s meal, delicious as it might be, would be eaten by the faeries. She hoped today was the day Josh finally came to his senses and asked her out, for real this time. Emily had been ecstatic ever since the magical cookbook revealed itself to Josh. She wanted to live a life with him, but relationships with people who weren’t mages were next to impossible. Now that Josh knew the truth, she wouldn’t have to hide that part of her life anymore. She hoped that he didn’t mess up the mac & cheese summons. She’d chosen it because it was a simple, non-threatening faerie summon. Even if it went wrong, there would be very little damage done. If he did well with it today, maybe they

could do some baking magic for dessert. Baking was Emily's specialty and required more in-depth magic.

Emily skipped up the steps and onto Josh's porch. He'd texted her earlier to come right in. He said he'd keep his door unlocked since he might not hear her knock from the kitchen. She reached for the handle when a booming voice shook the house. "Goodbye, poor little chef-lock. I would say it was a pleasure to meet you, but I pride myself for being honest."

The witch cursed under her breath, quickly reaching into her purse and drawing out two caramel candies. She popped one into her mouth, keeping the other in a clenched fist. As soon as the candy touched her tongue, she threw open the front door. The room beyond was a mess. An upturned sofa sat against a broken glass coffee table. A pentagram was chalked into the floorboards. And a Darkling hovered over it all, its wispy, cloudlike body obscuring Josh's slumped form held aloft against the back wall.

"God *damnit* Josh! You just *HAD* to choose the Darkling ceremony? And *mess it up too!?!?*" The Darkling's red eyes swirled around the cloud to focus on the intruder. Without missing a stride, Emily reached into her purse, procuring a chocolate chip muffin and waving it at the beast. "You know what this is, don't you?"

The Darkling laughed. "You wouldn't dare bind us all, filthy witch! Mortals do not make such sacrifices for others."

"Oh, don't we?"

Emily tossed the muffin grenade-style towards pentagram. The darkling let out a fearful yelp and flattened its billowy form against the left wall. Taking the opportunity, Emily dashed across to Josh, who had fallen to the floor as the Darkling moved and broke its hold on him. She didn't bother checking his pulse. She pried open his mouth and shoved the other caramel piece in before hugging him tightly and closing her eyes.

"You will regret this, witch! I'll be back. I will hunt you dow-" the Darkling's tirade cut off abruptly as the muffin exploded, sending chocolate chips, splintered floorboards, and decorative pillows flying everywhere. As suddenly as the explosion began, time seemed to reverse, pulling everything back together. She opened her eyes and turned in time to see Josh's prized duck clatter to the floor.

The room was back the way she'd first seen it. Messy, yes, but there was no sign of the explosion. The Darkling was gone. She winced at having to use her only planar muffin to banish the demon. It would have taken her and Josh too, but the caramel had been enchanted with binding magic, keeping them grounded to the material plane as long as it was in

their mouths. Certain that they were no longer in danger, Emily turned her attention back to the comatose form on the floor. She dumped out her purse and grabbed a blueberry scone from the assorted baked goods she always kept with her.

“C’mon...” She knelt next to the unconscious Josh, broke a piece off the scone, and force fed it to the would-be chef-lock. His eyes fluttered slightly. “Please. Please Josh, wake up.”

A moment of silence passed as she waited with bated breath. Then Josh sat up straight as an arrow. He coughed up a dried blueberry and looked up at Emily. “Where... who... what’s going on?” he stammered.

“You did the recipe wrong and summoned a demon!” Emily wiped her eyes, only now realizing she was crying. “Why didn’t you do the mac & cheese! If I’d gotten here a minute later, I’d have lost you!”

“I... I wanted to impress you,” said Josh, sheepishly. He leaned against the wall, and his eyes focused on her, noticing the great deal of effort she’d put into her outfit and makeup. “Oh wow, you look gorgeous.” His face went red and he looked away, embarrassed. “Sorry... is this a bad time?”

Emily let out a strangled laugh before leaning down and giving him a peck on the forehead. She smiled as he blushed profusely, and she sat next to him in the cluttered, half-destroyed room. “Now is the perfect time.” She pulled him closer and their lips touched briefly.

Josh chuckled. “I’ve been wanting to do that for ages.”

Emily’s eyes sparkled, and she leaned in, kissing him passionately. She kissed him to make up for all the lost time, to apologize for their awkward past, to assure him that everything was going to be okay, as long as they had each other.

DAVID MCCAULEY

The Closing Shift

There is always a strange melancholy during the closing shift, especially this late into it. The moon has been out for hours and only the regulars remain. Each of them sits alone, as they always did. They don't speak a word, not to themselves nor their fellows. The only sound in the diner is the hum of the fluorescent lights. I wouldn't be surprised if none of them knew each other's names, even though they spend more nights together than they do with their own families. I may not even know their names if not for the fact that I handled their receipts. It's late enough that I can start closing up. Just simple jobs, cleaning glasses and plates, all the while giving a simple nod to the regulars as they start to file out, accompanied by the little ring of a bell above the door. Now there are only three people left: George, Martha, and Edward.

I'm all done cleaning the plates and go to put them away for the night, but just as I pick up the stack I make eye contact with George. Setting the plates down, I grab the pot of coffee and head over to George sitting by the window. George was the only one of the three to come in before the sun went down. He comes just after opening and hands whoever is working a simple golden ring to keep safe, and then he heads out. Then once he finishes work, he comes back to the diner to sip on coffee until late at night. I pour George a cup of black coffee, but as soon as I turn around, and no sooner, I hear the tearing of sugar packets and the splash of half-and-half. I round the counter and look over at George. He is quickly dusting off some of the spilled sugar on the table, looking around to make sure nobody has noticed. He looks like a child trying to hide something from his parents. But I pay him no mind and get back to cleaning.

This little routine goes back and forth until closing. I prepare for closing, and if someone wants a refill, they don't make a sound, or even raise a hand. They simply look at me, and I'm over there in seconds. They always ordered the same things as well. George had his so-called cafe noir.

Martha always has the tea of the day, with just a splash of whiskey. And Edward takes just a simple vanilla malt, no cherry, and no whipped cream. Once they had their drinks, I would head back to my place and resume whatever I had been doing before.

Another hour or so passes, and all of the dishes have been washed, dried, and set out for the next morning. George stands up and comes over to pay for the coffees he had tonight. He hands me a twenty, I open the register and grab five ones. Before I give him his change, I grab the golden ring under the counter and hand it to him in between the ones. He nods, as he puts the ones into his pocket, along with the ring. My eyes follow him as he walks out. He stops at the door, pulls his coat around him, and starts his walk home. Right before he crosses the street, I see the golden glint on the back of his hand. George is a good man but doesn't have the best life at home. I think he finds the dark city streets safer than the confines of a city apartment.

I continue along. Grabbing the cleaning supplies from under the counter, I head over to clean off the tables, starting with George's. As I do so I look over at Edward, he's sitting at the end of the counter. He has his malt in front of him, the straw in his mouth, and today's paper in his hands flipped to the page with job postings. Most of the jobs were crossed out, but he still had a few options left. I want to have a chat with him, that was half the reason I got this job in the first place, but I still don't know if I can do it again.

"Ahem." The sound of Martha clearing her throat brings me back to reality. I've been cleaning the same spot on George's table for well over two minutes.

I look at Martha, her glare piercing me from over the top of her travel pamphlet. She looks back down, and I refocus. As I clean the other tables, I glance at Martha every minute or so. In one hand is her cup of tea, tonight a raspberry and cherry rooibos. In the other, is the travel pamphlet she is focused on. Every night she had a new pamphlet; tonight it was of the Taj Mahal in India.

I've seen Martha outside of the diner only once. It was in the park, right across from the bakery. She was sitting on the bench with a blonde woman, and at their feet were two brown leather suitcases. The one closer to Martha was plain, it looked old and unused. The one next to the blonde was covered in various stickers and patches. Many of them were scratched or starting to turn white due to time. There was however one of the Eiffel Tower in France, it was pristine, and looked as if it had just been put on. The blonde was talking animatedly to Martha. I wasn't close enough to

hear what she said, but Martha simply nodded along, keeping an eye on the kids playing in the park.

The next night Martha, drinking her whiskey-tainted silver needle tea, was reading about France. I truly hope one day she'll make it there, or to India, or anywhere that was outside of these soot-covered city streets. But until that day comes, I will continue to serve her the most exotic teas of the night, with that dash of Scottish adventure.

All done cleaning the tables, I make my way back behind the counter and bend down to put away the cleaning supplies. I stand back up, and Martha is standing right in front of me. Set on the counter is a ten, a five, two ones, and two quarters. Exact change, but I make a show of counting it anyways. Martha and I both know there is no point. She pays in exact change every single night, but if it didn't look like I counted it, then she wouldn't leave until I did so. And I didn't want Martha to wait until closing and have to kick her out. I never want that to happen again. Satisfied with my counting, Martha heads out the door, and crosses the street to reach the bus stop. Once the bus comes only a minute later, I go to grab the cleaning supplies that I had just put away and go over to clean Martha's table.

Now it's just me and Edward. He is still nursing on that same malt I had given him when he came in for the night, but he had put the paper down. Glancing over at it I saw only three postings not crossed out. He reached over to grab a napkin and copied the information from the paper onto it. Once he was done, he paused and crossed out one more job before folding up the napkin and putting it in his jacket pocket. He then crumpled up the newspaper and tossed it into the trash can behind him, returning to the malt.

I make my way around the diner doing a last check for cleaning, before returning to my post. As I do this, Edward makes his way over to the register, putting a five in the tip jar as he did so. His order had been on the register for over an hour, so once he hands me his card, I simply swipe it across the reader and hand it back to him. He signs the receipt and walks out. Just before he reaches the door, he stops, and turns back to me, breaking the hour-long quiet of the night.

"Who are you?" he says.

I froze.

"Every night you spend with us," he continued, "yet none of us know your name, or what you do when you aren't behind that counter. We don't even know the sound of your voice." Edward paused, realizing soon after that I wasn't speaking. "You are clearly smart, too smart to be

working at a rundown diner like this, especially during these hours. So, who are you? What have you done? What are you running from?"

"Y-you-you've got me all wrong," I finally manage to get a word out, "I'm just a, well, I'm just a nobody." My hands are trembling, so I quickly shove them in my pockets.

"Very well," Edward says coldly, "If you don't want to tell me, then I guess there is nothing I can do." Edward turns around and leaves. Accompanied by the ringing of the bell above the door.

Though Edward is long out of sight, I'm still shaking. I need to find a distraction, so I go over to finish up the cleaning. I grab Edward's empty glass and start rinsing it out. I turn around and am met by my reflection in the dark glass windows, though it isn't my reflection, is it? It was Edward's. No, that couldn't be, it isn't that either, it had to be me. But the hair is much shorter, I started growing mine out years ago. It is clean-shaven, and its eyes were free from the burdens of working night shifts six days a week for over a year. It isn't either of us, not me, and not Edward. So, what is looking back out from the window? I look down at its hands, dropping the glass I was cleaning as I do so. It shatters on the tile floor, and I bend down to pick it up. Pain shoots across my hand as I feel a glass shard cut into my palm. As blood oozes over the glass my vision goes dark.

I'm back there. It's been years, over a decade, but I'm in that same moment. My hands are covered in blood, I'm standing over the bleeding body of my father, a knife lodged in his chest. I look up from the body, finding it staring back at me from the mirror. I scramble to grab the knife and run out into the alley behind my house, throwing the knife into my neighbor's garbage can. They have a son, only a year or two younger than me with short black hair, just like mine. I run, and I keep running, the sound of sirens and red and blue lights take over the night.

I come back to the present. Memories still lingering. I wash my hand of blood in the sink, just like I did in the river, and wrap it up with a cloth. I clean up the glass on the floor and toss it in the trash, seeing the crumpled-up newspaper, like the one with a young Edward's face, the suspected killer of my dad. I take off my bloodied apron and put on my jacket. I'm reminded of stealing a change of clothes from a homeless shelter. Everything looks to be in order, I turn out the lights and lock up the diner. I hurry down the street towards my apartment, the questions of the cops the next day, and the image of Edward being escorted into a cop cruiser for killing a man he didn't even know filling my head.

The cool night air clears my head. The streets are quiet and dark, the full moon hidden by the clouds and smog in the sky. My apartment

wasn't far, only a five-minute walk, but tonight it felt much longer. As I came to the intersection of Lawndale and Sixty-Third, I stopped. I could treat this as any other night, turn right, and put everything that had happened after Edward paid behind me. Or I could go left, where just across the street stood Edward. I've always played it safe; playing dumb when I needed to, trying to hide my past, being just another figure in the crowd. All that time and effort would go away if I didn't go left. I'd taken too long, and now if I don't finish it tonight, he will. There is no other way.

The night was dark, and there were few cars or people on the street. I don't have anything useful on me but the blood-soaked cloth, but it is long enough to get the job done. It will be quick and quiet.

I take a deep breath, cold air cutting through my lungs, and turn to cross the street. I head towards Edward and freedom from the night.

AURORA MCKEE

A Baptism of Teeth

The forest is like an ocean, endless and bottomless, spilling over the land in dark green waves. It rises high enough to drown out even the distant mountains, to snuff out the light of cities like so many candles. The great trees are silent, but only because they're watching you, holding as still as they need while they watch you pass.

You know this kind of forest, even though you've never dared to enter before. You've always loved stories, and so many of the great ones have a place like this winding through their dancing hearts. It's where you find the little old ladies with magic humming in their cauldrons, the enchanted frogs in ponds, the princes disguised as bears and beasts, the glass coffins and thorn-bound castles. It's where the satyrs play their pipes and the gods turn maidens into trees out of a heartbeat's cruelty.

And of course, it's a place for wolves.

That's what the villagers said when you arrived, anyway. They shook their heads and rolled their eyes as you drove into town, exchanging whispers behind your back. A man standing next to you at the light change gave you a long, hard look, as if memorizing your face for the police. A mother with a child crossed the street to avoid you, making a sign for the evil eye.

When you paused to get coffee, the waitress made a point of telling you that the forest wasn't really the village's fault. They tried to get rid of it, honest—they don't *want* idiots like you to wander in there. They tried to burn it, chop it down, but the fires just...vanished into thin air, and machines don't work out there. Even their attempts at fences vanished overnight, and guards will wake up on the other side of town with no memory of how they got there.

As for attempts to actually *explore* the forest, or manage search-and-rescue...well. The lucky ones walk out of city warehouses on the other side of the country, staring around in confusion. The unlucky ones don't walk out at all.

“You’ve sent your last texts, right?” the waitress had asked, and you nodded. You’ve got a few friends who either don’t know you’re here or are sending panicked messages you ignore. As for your blood family—well, you haven’t talked to them in a while, and your possible impending destruction doesn’t feel like a good enough reason to break that streak

So you went into the woods. It was frightfully easy to just...start walking. It always is, no matter how many homes you’ve left, how many strange paths you’ve navigated in the dead of night. One step in front of another, trees rising slowly up around you as the forest closes in softly and easily as a Venus flytrap. The village disappears behind you disappears in between glances, as if it was never there. As if the woods are all there is, all there ever was or will be.

Dramatic? Maybe. But you’ve come far enough, traveled in the back of buses and hitchhiked down dangerous roads and broken into the back of trains, and generally put yourself through enough shit to be worthy of a little drama. Same reason you decided to get yourself a red hoodie when you entered the woods, because there’s no time like the present to call back to the classics.

The magic hums through your hair as you walk, tracing dark lullabies over your goosebump-dotted skin. You sigh, wishing you’d worn something warmer as you pull your hood up and hug yourself tightly. Your boots are the only sound on the cool, dark dirt, steady and monotonous.

You get tired eventually, of course. Maybe that’s what they’re waiting for. You start stumbling over roots you should have easily avoided, rubbing your eyes in the fading light. Usually you’re pretty good at finding your way in the woods, but right now you don’t think you have a snowball’s chance in hell of finding your way home.

It dawns on you, then, that maybe all the stories you’ve heard and the dusty old articles you’ve dug up and the forums you’ve burned out your eyes exploring are wrong. Maybe the villagers are less worried about what lives in the forest and more about the power of a foolish legend to draw idiots like you to their untimely demise. Maybe—

Of course, it’s only then that the shadow looms up out of the dark in front of you.

Maybe it’s just you, but all the stuff about knowing when you’re being watched seems to be a total amount of bullshit. There was no prickling on the back of your neck, no sudden spike in goosebumps, no flash of ancient instinct. One second you are wandering in the woods on your one like an idiot, and the next you’re scrambling backward, yelping like a fucking dope.

The Thing looking at you is not a wolf. It looks a little bit like a person, if you took someone's skeleton and mixed it up with metal and crusted ash and a little bit of oil, if you twisted it into an awkward, warped shape with too many sharp edges. If you gave it eyes, big deep eyes the exact color of your dad's face when he got really mad.

It opens its mouth and a low, rattling sigh spills out. There's something sharp and hungry in its voice that makes you bring your hands to your ears, as if scared of them getting cut. Its head twitches back and forth like a bird, cheeks rippling in what you might almost call consternation.

It's not a wolf, but you know what it is. Once upon a time, the creature standing in front of you was just another wanderer, a pilgrim entering this bizarre green temple. Maybe they got subpar coffee from the same waitress, maybe they got the same warning, maybe they marched into the woods as arrogantly as you did today. Maybe they hoped, as desperately as you did, that the wolves would judge them better than they have.

That's what everything in this odd little fairyland of a forest is about, after all. Judgment. Or at least that's what the strange mythology of this place says, all the rumors you've heard over the years, the rumors you've just recently started to chase with a vengeance.

People face the wolves because they want them to see them, to know them as they truly are, and make it so everyone else can see the same. They're asked to tear rotten, ill-fitting skin away and give the petitioner a new form—something beautiful, something *right*.

If the wolves consider you worthy, they give you the form you've always deserved, whatever that may be, from the glorious to the bizarre. They say that people have walked out of these woods as supermodels and strongmen, as dragons and cats and elves, as creatures not too different from the wolves themselves.

If they don't like you...well. There are plenty of wicked people who come to these woods, convincing themselves that they'll be the ones to scam the magic enough to get their perfect new form. You've heard whispers, dark little snippets, but you've never really been sure what happened. Part of that is out of a lack of information, part of it is simply not wanting to think too hard about what might happen if this goes bad. Now, though, you don't have a choice.

The fallen one growls, claws tearing free of their skin. You back up one step, then another, your breath rasping in your throat. It smiles, mouth tearing impossibly wide to what looks like a tooth fairy's sack worth of

teeth. Tortured gums split and spill red, blood dripping off the end of its tongue,

You do the smart thing and run for your fucking life.

Branches scratch your face as you haul ass, ripping open red lines as if the forest wants to unzip you. You stumble and fall and get out up again, mud smearing your stupid bright hoodie a dark brown. You can hear it screaming in the distance over the roar of blood in your ears and the desperate rasp of your own breath, scraping painfully in your throat. The ground seems to lurch sickeningly to your feet, and every step feels like a plummet to your depth.

But you keep running. And you keep moving *deeper* into the woods, or at least what you think deeper is, because as much as the thing behind you scares you, the civilized world scares you even more, and you can't survive it unless you get what you came for. And if all you find are monsters, then that's okay. Civilization has plenty of those, too.

Still, it's not hard not to wish you'd thrown your lot in with the civilized monsters when you feel a claw swipe behind your head. You scream, jumping a foot in the air, and of course you come down all wrong. You hit the ground in a tangle of limbs, gasping, breath heaving—

The howl is loud enough to shake the ground beneath your feet. Or maybe that's just the impact when the bodies come crashing to earth behind you. You whirl, hair flying in your face, and that combined with the dying light makes it seem as if your first encounter with the wolves of this forest is lit by strobes.

They come pouring out of the forest in a river of fur, making sounds that are so much rougher and wilder than anything you've heard in movies. The fallen one crashes under the weight of their bodies, crying piteously, and you can't help feeling sorry for it, even though you know that if it's here now that means it must have been a civilized monster once upon a time.

Either way, there's nothing you can do. The wolves engulf the fallen one while it writhes and squeals, feet beating helpless against the ground. For a second you think they're going to rip it apart, but instead they just nudge it to its feet, sending it staggering off into the woods. It lets out a hateful shriek as it runs, tossing venom over its shoulder even as it vanishes deep into the trees.

You're left on your knees, trembling as your aching throat clutches precious air. Your fingers dig into the dirt like you're trying to stop the world from spinning, or at least keep from falling off. But even if it weren't for all that, you don't think you could run.

The wolves turn away from their prey and move back towards you, paws silent on the earth. Strange lights flicker in the depths of their dark eyes, as if they've each got two little stars tucked up in their heads. You wonder what you look like through a lens of starlight, if they see something worth fighting for. It's impossible to tell.

They gather around in a loose circle, a few even flopping down like this is a casual affair. One, the largest of them all, draws near enough for you to see the way their fur flutters as they move, to catch the flash of their silvery patches.

"Hello," this wolf says. The voice is somewhere between male or female, androgynous in a way you find oddly soothing.

"Hello," you say quietly.

"Are you afraid?" they ask.

You decide it would be better not to lie. "Yeah." You straighten up, trying to look just a touch more dignified when you're covered in mud and filth on your knees.

"But you came here anyway," the wolf says thoughtfully. "And you ran *deeper*, even after you saw the fallen one."

"Yes." You stare into the wolf's eyes, trying and failing to figure out what they're thinking.

The wolf blinks slowly, as if thinking. "It used to be a man," they say conversationally. "He would lure women close and then hurt them in all sorts of ways. But he convinced himself that he was the victim every time." A soft sound—a dark little chuckle, perhaps—rises up from some of the wolves in the circle. "He came to us as he grew older, wanting to be made young and beautiful again so he could pull more women into his net. He believed the lies he told himself, so he thought we would too." The wolf shrugged, massive shoulders rippling. "He was wrong."

You look at your hands. "My parents think I'm a liar," you admit quietly. It's the first time you've ever told anyone about this; most of the friends you have now were made after you broke with your family, and you were always careful not to talk about the past with them for too long. "They think I'm making it up for attention."

"Are you?"

"I'm *not*," you say firmly. You think of the gender marker on your birth certificate, how looking at it always makes you feel just a little off-kilter. You think of how much you hated it as a child, the way your body changed and grew in a way you couldn't stand. You think about what it means to be poor and alone and with no idea how to pay for the changes you need. And you remember the paths that lead you to this place, to this

magic, to this strange little story that you let yourself stumble into because why not?

“I’m not a liar,” you whisper.

The wolf raises their head. “And if we don’t believe you?”

You shrug. “Then whatever I become, I’ll still be me.” Who knows, perhaps even a monstrous body might be easier to bear than this one. At least it would be a shape to reflect *you*, the true you, rather than the box others have been putting you in since you were a child.

The wolf gazes at you steadily, ears twitching in the wind. They turn to look at their companions, eyes flickering and flashing as if they’re discussing you. In fact, you realize that’s exactly what’s going on. This is the council, the glittering and implacable court you’ve found in so many stories of the fae.

Eventually, the wolf bows their head. “Very well,” they say, and it sounds a bit like they’re talking to someone other than you. “But be warned, human, even we do not know what you will become. And the change affects everyone differently.”

You nod. You wouldn’t want to wind up like anyone else anyway, clichéd as that sounds. Trying to be like other people has brought you nothing but pain.

“Will it hurt?” you whisper.

In answer, the wolves lunge.

You want to say it’s like getting a shot. It is not like getting a shot. It is teeth sinking into your flesh, a thousand tiny pinpricks that something tells you isn’t nearly as agonizing as it could be, but it burns nonetheless. They growl as one, the sound vibrating through your guts, and then there’s a ripping sound that it takes a second for you to realize is *your skin being torn away*.

For a second, all is fire and pain and blood. It scorches you, breaks you, crashes deep down into your core so that you fall in on yourself like a collapsing building. You have no breath left to scream, no power to so much as close your eyes or clench your fists. You burn, galactic and unbound, your atoms coming apart in a hellish dance.

You open your eyes, and you see the stars unfolding around you. Specks of light beyond counting, pulsing and humming, the sound echoing deep into your bones. *Eyes*, you realize. These are eyes, searing into your flesh.

Are you brave? an impossible voice asks. Not *are you afraid?*

And then, just like that, it’s over.

Your eyes flicker open as you lie on your back, staring up at the trees. It’s lighter out than you remember, and the branches are sparser.

Your body feels...raw. That's the only way you can describe the way it tingles and pulses against the grass, energy dancing over skin—*skin*. You have skin again, covering you like a fresh, crisp sheet of new paper.

You draw in a shuddering breath and gingerly push yourself up, wincing. You don't know exactly where you are, but when you look over your shoulder you can see the town off in the distance. Perhaps you'll be able to buy another coffee from the same waitress.

Something glimmers at the corner of your vision, and you turn to see a pool of water, glistening under a tree. You wonder if they arranged it for you, somehow. By now, you're having a hard time imagining anything the wolves *aren't* capable of.

You push yourself towards your feet and totter towards the pool on weak new legs, feeling as young and vulnerable as a colt. You take a deep breath before you look in the water, heart thudding as you wait for the surface to clear.

And it's...you.

Or, rather, it's the you that so many people told you didn't exist. It's the you that haunted your dreams when you didn't even know what that was supposed to look like. Your jaw drops, your breath stealing away, because in all of your wildest dreams, you never suspected that a transformation like this would feel so much like coming home.

The water shatters as you laugh, loud and fierce enough it almost sounds like a wolf howling.

MADELINE O'CONNOR

Dear Beloved

In 1924, just before starting a summit attempt on Mt. Everest with a younger, less experienced climber named Andrew "Sandy" Irvine, George Mallory wrote a series of letters that were logically assumed to be addressed to his wife. The two never made it off the mountain alive, which you could've guessed from how Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay are the names in the history books. However, when Mallory's body was discovered in a deep crevice of the mountain some time in the nineties, the letters were found preserved and still on his person, which raised a whole host of questions. If they were meant for his wife in the case of his demise, and he knew the odds of his body being recovered were slim to none, then why would he have kept the letters with him?

Unless, of course, the letters were meant for someone who was on the mountain. Sandy Irvine. And thus the conspiracy began.

To be fair, I spent most of my time entertaining this conspiracy in a musty, poorly ventilated dorm room tucked away in the far corner of the illustrious Pine Hill Institute for Girls. For even though my peers and I were being groomed for the Ivy Leagues, it wasn't enough to justify spending money on adequate housing conditions. Sleepless nights were spent browsing message boards, digging up primary sources, engaging in contemporary speculation, and everything in between. I'd made casual friends across the world who were all united by this common topic; this footnote in the archives of history that would cause most others to shrug. And I suppose the general public had a point. I would be lying if I said this hadn't caused me to neglect my real world responsibilities. Such as Homecoming. Oh god, *Homecoming*.

All the same, despite the objective distracting nature of the work, I couldn't help but feel that I was doing something important. If we weren't

working hard in our little corner of the internet to catalog this piece of queer history, who would?

In fact, here I was now, attempting to read a primary source to my roommate to ensure I wasn't insane. "*Dear Beloved, you may hear from me again. You may not. Who is to say? At this point, it is entirely at the discretion of the mountain and Mother Nature herself, and I fear she may not smile upon us...*"

She didn't even give me the dignity of looking up from her algebra homework. "That's lovely," she cut in, "but your Frankenstein essay is due in two hours, no?"

I loathed it when Diana was right.

"No, but you don't understand. It's addressed to Beloved. Not his wife. *Beloved. Beloved!*" I waved my hands, only to receive a blank stare in return. She had to understand the significance of that, right? Apparently not. She returned to the persistent scribbling of someone who was actually doing what they were supposed to.

"Still sounds nothing like an analysis of Mary Shelley's riveting commentary on the morality of humanity and the consequences of playing God. That is your essay topic, correct?"

"You're impossible."

"And *you're* not doing your homework."

I scrunched my face and lobbed my pillow across the room, which Diana swiftly dodged, because of course she did. Even when solving equations, her reflexes were on point. She continued, "I get that you're battling a crippling obsession with your silly, gay Mount Everest men, but respectfully, I care about you, and I feel like there are more important things you should be addressing. Like the essay, for one, or Homecoming, or the whole Nadia thing, even, or—"

"Don't bring Nadia into this."

"Yikes. You know, it would be less of a touchy subject if, also respectfully, you just grew a pair and asked her out already. Yeah?" She shrugged, as if this was the easiest thing in the world and not the equivalent of biting off my own thumb.

"Mhm, yeah. Totally. *Respectful* today, aren't we?" Another shrug. God, this was getting nowhere. I loved Diana, don't get me wrong, but on days like these it was obvious she would never understand what I was going through. To her, everything was so easy. Have a homework assignment? Just sit down and do it. Feeling sad? Just watch a few episodes of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Have a massive crush on the senior captain of the volleyball team who you were certain would

never be interested in a reclusive nerd obsessed with a pair of long dead *mountain climbers* of all things? Just ask her out. Easy.

Yeah, right. Maybe if she knew I existed, outside of a brief group project in Chemistry, I'd actually have some hope of getting somewhere. Alas, this was not the case. All I had to go off of was school gossip that she was bisexual and the occasional passing grin and wave in the hallways when we saw each other. Not exactly the most credible evidence for my case.

Diana noticed that I had been stewing in my thoughts for a while, as I was often prone to doing, and added, "Okay, look, I don't know if this will help you come to a conclusion, but think: What would your boys do?"

"My *boys*?"

"The guys who died on the mountain!"

"George Mallory and Sandy Irvine?"

"Whatever!" She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, assuming I have the story correct, they were willing to risk everything in order to live their authentic lives, yeah? What if you lived by their example? Granted, I doubt there's a risk of death on your end if you ask Nadia out, maybe death by embarrassment, but I digress..."

She had a point. I chose to ignore the last part, but still, it got me thinking. What would Mallory and Irvine do? Their situation was much more treacherous than mine ever would be, considering how much more accepting overall this school was of queer identity compared to the time period they lived in. Yet they still had the courage to try. Perhaps I needed to make my own personal summit attempt and get this over with.

"*Fine*. I'll make a plan to ask her out to Homecoming." Diana gave a satisfied nod at this, and returned back to her calculations. I expected a bit more pomp, but that was just how Diana was sometimes. As soon as a matter was resolved and she got her way, she returned to her business at once. In the meantime, it was my turn to figure out what the hell I was supposed to do now.

I glanced back at my laptop screen for guidance. *Dear Beloved...* An idea sparked in my brain. My Frankenstein essay could wait until later. Eager, I opened up a new Google Doc and began typing away.

"*Dear Nadia...*"

...

I was decently proud of my results in the morning. It wasn't your typical Hoco proposal poster, but it would do. In fact, I went through the extra effort of printing my letter onto thicker cardstock, curling it up like a scroll, and wrapping it with a green ribbon. It would be an embarrassing amount of work to put in if this all went wrong, yes, but in the process of

executing this scheme, I had worked myself into enough of a frenzy to convince myself that there was no way that this could fail. In fact, I imagined this was not unlike how Mallory and Irvine felt right before their fated summit attempt. There was still that voice nagging in the back of my skull reminding me that they both died at the end, but that was beside the point. This was obviously different. Like Diana said, I just needed to act.

The nice thing about dorming with an extrovert was that they had much more information about the goings on of the school than I ever would. It only took Diana a moment of brief contemplation to recall when volleyball practice ended on Wednesdays. Likewise, I now waited outside the gym at 8:59 pm, shivering in the cold but gripping my work to my chest like my life depended on it. In a few minutes, I'd know for sure whether my efforts were for naught.

And there she was. Strolling out of the glass doors, chatting with her teammates about how difficult her AP Biology class was. Sweat still trickled down her head, but it didn't stop my heart from skipping once in my chest at the sight of her. She must have recently tied her ponytail again, because not a single black hair was out of place. When she noticed me, she smiled and gave a nod of acknowledgement. I was so lost in the thrill of the moment that I forgot what I had come for, and when I remembered, I scrambled at once to recalibrate my intentions. She had walked past me when I blurted, "Nadia! C-Can I talk to you alone for a moment?"

She swiveled on her heel and gave me a curious look. "Yeah, River, what's up?" She stepped away from her friends, who only hesitated for a moment before continuing to walk off into the night.

It was just the two of us. This was it. Now or never. My breath hitched in my throat before I was finally able to choke it out. "I-Uh...I wrote you a letter. For Homecoming. Which like, I know, that's so cringeworthy, and like I don't even know if you'd like me like that or not, and like feel free to say no, but, uh, I'd love to go to the dance with you if you're available? Yeah, heh." My hands were trembling as I handed her the scroll, but it was too late to back out now. She took the paper, gave it a once over, but didn't open it. *Why wasn't she opening it?* Now I was the one sweating as she gave a smile that was more apologetic than I would've liked.

"River, this is lovely." My heart sank. There was going to be a but hammered onto that statement. Sure enough, "But I already have a date for Homecoming: Anthony Turner. You wouldn't know him, he's from Billings Prep, but yeah, I'm truly sorry."

I nodded, biting my lip to disguise the quiver. Of course. I was foolish to think this could've gone any other way. "Oh no, that's totally fine." *Don't cry. Don't cry.* "H-Have fun. Yeah. Sorry for bothering you-" I turned around, fully prepared to make the walk of shame back to my dorm room. I'd imagined the whole pathetic scenario in my brain before it was interrupted by someone grabbing my hand. *Nadia* grabbing my hand. I stopped in my tracks.

I turned again, confused, only for her to blurt out, "Ask me after the dance. I'm not committed to him long term by any means. If you're really interested, I'd maybe love to get to know you better then?" Her cheeks flushed, but not from the cold. "Ah, sorry, I hope that isn't too much to ask-"

"No, I'd love that." I nodded, warmth spreading throughout my body. It wasn't what I expected, not by any means, but I would take it. "I'd love to get to know you better too." And it was true. Up until this point, she'd been an idol, a goddess, someone to be revered from a distance. Now she was real, and at the very least I knew we had potential. Even if I'd have to wait for a man to exit the picture, it would all be worth it for the possibility of being together in the end.

"Glad to hear it." She gave my hand a squeeze, then let go. I found that the ghost of her fingers on mine would linger for the next few days, but I wasn't complaining. Her hand migrated to the letter, which she clutched to her chest in such a tender fashion that I knew at once she'd read it when she was alone. "See you soon? Hopefully?" She waved with her free hand, frantic, then took a step off, which morphed into an awkward scuttle to catch up with her friends. I raised a hand in return, unable to stop smiling. I'd gotten my happy ending, and I didn't even have to perish from hypothermia to do it.

Anthony Turner wasn't going to stop me. No one else knew it yet, but I was on top of the world.

CATHERINE STUMP

How Kansas Got to Chicago (855-FOR-TRUTH)

TW: suicide

She comes to him at night, when tomorrow slips into yesterday. She comes to him in memories—trailer park dances, Sunday cable cartoons, spilt Nesquik across laminate countertops and the sticky toy sections of thrift shops. She comes to him gently, and he feels her as such, the gun oil that sticks like perfume grazing his skin; she smells like home. Tender violence.

He hears her sometimes, too, whispering like she used to do when she thought nobody was listening. Little confessionals, were she the type to repent. “I know,” is what she says to him now. “I know I know I know, I know that you’re sorry.”

And he thinks he can still hear her, even after he wakes. Even when the fingers of the sun splay up through the cracks of the windowpane, lighting up his bedroom to transform boogeymen back into piles of unfolded clothes; he hears her, in the whirring of his box fan, the wind through the curtains, the dust that dances like snow. She’s whispering through it all, ruffling his hair. *I know I know I know.*

“I’m running away.”

Declaration happens slowly, softly, like the arms of his mother had she stayed, and there’s a silence from across the kitchen table which feels just as smothering. After a beat or two, Cash breaks the quiet, the click-whir of his lighter dawning conversation; he speaks through the drag, “Don’t talk like that, Kenny.”

“But I am.”

“You and what money.”

Kansas watches the cigarette bounce between Cash’s teeth as he speaks and twitches in his chair. His logic feels childish, now that he’s forced to articulate it, and so he focuses on his breakfast instead, poking

limply at the flapjacks with his fork. “The bagger boy called me pretty yesterday,” he mumbles. “They like pretty, in the city. I could score.”

“Mom was pretty too.”

And look where she ended up, is the point of that statement, and Kansas just wants to hang his head and weep. “I know that.” I know I know I know. “But I just can’t stand this.”

Cash arches a burly brow, the expression familiar just as much as it is prodding. “What can’t you stand, Kenny,” he drawls. “Flapjacks?”

“You’re such an ass.”

“You’re running away,” Cash gives, “apparently. I’m just trying to figure out what to write in your police report. *Yes officer, five-foot ten, blonde, skinnier than a beanpole, last seen babbling on about how he just can’t stand this.*”

“Like you would even look for me.”

Cash puffs out another drag, his brotherly disposition crumbling into ash. He begins to speak, an answer forming around the shape of his open mouth, but he clamps it back shut, the half-baked thought aborted. Kansas thinks he looks a lot like a catfish, bobbing his dumb lips like that.

“I’ll get a Greyhound to Topeka.”

Cash sighs, again, which only pushes Kansas to continue.

“I don’t need much, for a fare that long, and I can hitchhike the rest. To Chicago.”

“You’ve never even been on a bus.”

“So?”

“So,” Cash mocks, and he sounds a lot like Pa, before the geezer went all stony and dismissive with his grief. “You’d call me cryin’ from a payphone half-way out ‘cause you don’t know nothing but prairies.”

And it’s true. From the rye that whispers like flirtations past his hips, to the tips of his fingers when he works the soil, Kansas seems to have been born from the very state he’s named after. He’s tall, like a cottonwood tree, and the sweat that rolls down his back mimics the falls of the Little Blue River. Even his feet, pinching between the shoes he bought before puberty grabbed him by the hair and yanked, have never crossed that Missouri line; in all his years, he’s been here. He might as well dissolve if he ever escapes.

“And let’s say you really do leave,” Cash carries on, and it pisses Kansas off, the sheer amount of doubt in that sneer. “What’s the plan then? Do you know what hitchhikers have to go through? How quickly pretty things get ruined out there?” Cash shakes his still-sheared head, as if even humoring the thought is ludicrous. “You’ll leave this state with nothin’ but

sex and an extended thumb before crawling back home all battered and sorry and needing me.”

“So that’s what this is about? You needing me to need you?”

“You think Pa’s pension covers this house?” And there it is, the ace of all guilt. “You think you cross his mind at all whenever he gets those government checks? I’m the only reason you got a goddamn roof over your head—why do you think I enlisted?”

Suddenly the syrup feels too sweet. Too much like birthday cake. Kansas pushes his dish away.

“Because it made you feel better about yourself.”

If there’s one thing this family knows best, it is how to sit in silence. Holding back the need to shout could be considered comforting in all the ways in which it is familiar—they can always fall back on this little quiet. Always carve out a place to breathe inside their confrontations, and breathe Kansas does. His chest swells as the whip-quick tension lifts, a mutual understanding that what is said in anger is not said in truth; of course Kansas is thankful, above all else. Of course he’s expected to spend the rest of his life working as a farmhand in vain attempts to pay Cash back, *you and what money*, and of course he’ll still be resentful beneath it all.

Because Cash wasn’t there, when Kansas really needed him. Wasn’t there when the paramedics paraded through the house with a body bag limp in their fists—he was too busy getting all those patriotic insurance benefits those high school pamphlets promised, and while abandonment wasn’t necessarily Cash’s intention, the cost of recruitment came at that expense.

The syrup has chilled over the flapjacks like amber by the time Cash finally responds, trapping them both inside this moment. There’s no more veteran anger in his tone, just exhaustion and regret for the responsibility he’s been shouldering for seventeen years. “You’re a smart kid, Kenny,” he says, and it feels like a white flag, that compliment. “You know that what you’re running from is never going to leave you. You’ll always have her eyes.”

Said eyes are now stinging, and Kansas blames it on the smoke. Secondhand crybaby.

“I know,” he whispers. “I know I know I know, but...”

“Yeah.” Cash reaches for the discarded plate between them. “You just can’t stand this.”

The clock above the kitchen stove reads ten, blinking helplessly from a previous power outage, and it’s a bit funny how everything inside of this house seems to have become stuck. Two brothers compensating for

lost childhoods, a father soiling his memories and liver, a mother who's culpable in death. A clock.

They're all stuck, and Kansas can't stand it.

"Where's all this coming from anyway," Cash chews, cheek protruding as he cuts into the amber with a fork. It's been months, is what he's really asking, how come your grief got too heavy today?

And there's a lot of things Kansas could say, then. *Because after mom had me her brain went all screwy and she just couldn't love me right. Because on my seventeenth birthday she lit too many candles and slurred through the happy chorus before stumbling upstairs to go shoot herself in the bathroom. Because I can still hear it, the shuffles of her slippers going up up up, the onomatopoeias of her death: bang, thump. Because I think I see her ghost whenever I'm brushing my teeth. Because it's all my fault.*

"Because I can't sleep at night," he decides, and it's as true as the rest of it. At least the city will reflect his restlessness, whereas the house just feels too quiet, sometimes. Amplifying everything.

Cash stares at him, for a second, still chewing. Kansas stares back, waiting for one good reason.

"Well," Cash settles, cigarette poised, syrup on his lips. A dare disguised as giving up. "Go on, then."

I AM A MIRACLE, the billboard says, a baby's gummy smile beaming fourteen-feet high. Kansas can't take his eyes off it, less transfixed by the evangelical politics and more curious about the baby itself. Did the parents know what it was for? Did they pimp out their eighth-month-old with the hope of persuading truck drivers and Winnebago retirees?

It's a silly thing to think about, Kansas decides, but he can't stop wondering. Even as the bus pulls up, even as it parks, all he can think about is that baby. Its fragility. Where it would go from there.

And his mother comes to him, then, personified through the humid evening air. She tugs on his sleeve as he boards the sleek Greyhound, carding through his hair and whispering sweet forgiveness; he tries to ignore her, adjusting his backpack and gripping his fare, but it's a senseless thing to do.

He goes where the scratchy patterned seats are mostly empty and folds himself into a phony example of comfort. She sits beside him, slippers pausing to nestle, an umbilical cord never properly cut.

The holes in his plan begin to gape.

There's an old man snoring a few seats up, breath purring like the rev of the bus's engine, and all hope of sleep is lost within that ripple. So Kansas keeps his eyes open and leans against the window, watching the road change from parking lots to highways to landscapes so unfamiliar he's sure the whole wide world is nothing but dirt.

Billboards speed by too, on occasion, reminding Kansas and all his guilt that he is a miracle. That there is a number to call. That deep down Cash was right when he said the thing he's running from is never going to leave him; "I know that you're sorry," she keeps on saying.

He makes it forty miles on that Greyhound, because Cash raised him. Went to war to pay for him. Knows him better than he knows himself, sometimes.

The payphone is a dingy little thing. "Hello?"

"Before she had me," Kansas whispers, too flippant to give a proper greeting, "was she always like that?"

There's a silence over the line, and for a second Kansas is convinced his quarter fell through, but then a crackle of a sigh breaks the quiet. "It wasn't your fault, Kenny."

"Was she always that sick, Cash?"

"Maybe," he admits. "Maybe, I don't..."

"Well, there's got to be a reason as to why she did what she did. And don't tell me that there isn't, because there is. She had me and then it all went to shit."

It's night by now, and the Topeka truck stop has been invaded by beer bellies and tobacco sneers. It makes Kansas nervous, more nervous than he'd care to admit, and it just goes to show how unprepared he was for all of this. How all that kitchen table talk was just a cry for help fallen on deaf ears.

She stands outside the payphone.

"Listen," Cash returns. He pauses, contemplating, before diving back into his tired, brotherly prejudice. "You must think pretty damn highly of yourself if you believe everything was your fault. Yeah, it got worse after you were born, and yeah, maybe, *maybe* there is a biblical fuckin' reason as to why she did it on your birthday, but that doesn't mean you asked for it. Doesn't mean your name would've been in her note."

Kansas closes his eyes, calloused knuckles from schoolyard fights going white across the receiver. He gives a childish whine, "Then why won't she leave me alone?"

But it's a senseless question. A question neither of them can properly answer, for there are no reasons as to why guilt is passed down

through blood. Why parents curse their kids with each mistake they make; it will always be there, this sickness. All they can do is live with it.

The hums of distant engines wrap around Kansas as the two brothers breathe in silence. A recorded voice politely tells him to insert another twenty-five cents, and it snaps him awake like a twig across a bent knee. He wipes his eyes with his jacket sleeve.

“I gotta go,” he whispers. He hates how his voice sounds. “They’re calling for a quarter.”

Cash sucks his teeth, and beneath the click Kansas can hear a pair of car keys jangling. “Where are you?” he murmurs.

The call fails before Kansas can reply.

CONTRIBUTORS

Allie Armour didn't respond to our bio request, making our *Lantern* staff very sad. :(

Emily Bradigan is a senior who majors in English and Theatre Design and Technology. Art and poetry are things that Emily has always loved, and they are thrilled to be able to share their work with *The Lantern* again this year.

Elliot Cetinski is a current junior majoring in Theater and Anthropology/Sociology. He enjoys writing poetry in his spare time and serves as a section editor for *The Lantern's* Creative Non-Fiction and Drama pieces. He is grateful for the opportunity to have his work showcased in *The Lantern* again this year!

Evan Chartock (he/they), the class of 2025, is a double major in Media and Communication Studies and Theater with a minor in Legal Studies. This is the first year they have submitted work for *The Lantern*. Go Bears!

Hannah Conley is a senior here at Ursinus (set to graduate in December of 2023), and she majors in physics. When not applying her creativity to problem solving, she enjoys using it to make art. Drawing, whittling, reading, and writing are some of her favorite things to do to de-stress.

Erin Corcoran is a junior Media and Communications Studies major with minors in Digital Studies and English. She is a staff writer for *The Grizzly* and copyeditor for *The Lantern*. She enjoys reading, music, and spending too much money on tea lattes.

Leo Cox didn't respond to our bio request, making our *Lantern* staff very sad. :(

Olivia Cross is a junior History and Theatre double major from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania. When not writing, Olivia enjoys sewing and playing Dungeons and Dragons. She is very excited and thankful to have her work featured again!

Emilio de Sousa is a final year English major who grew up between Bombay and Brooklyn. He likes to read murder mysteries, play cricket, and hang out with friends. He has three cats and a dog at home.

Connor Donovan is a senior mathematics & educational studies double major. He has plans to become a teacher in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, upon graduation. He follows a gluten-free diet religiously and watches his daily step count without any desire to raise it.

Matilda Dumaine is a sophomore studying Biology and Health Equity Issues. She turns to art to reconnect with herself and the natural world. Art allows their creativity to run free and evolve.

Sharon Gearhart is a freshman filled with an immense passion for fine arts and Psychology. Spending time making a new piece brings her much joy, as well as blasting music on her trumpet (or from her highly beloved jam bands), hanging out with her adventurous friends, and reading a new novel! She cannot wait to continue sharing her creations with everyone on campus! :)

Sarah Fales is a junior majoring in English and Educational Studies, with a minor in Creative Writing. She is fond of cats, knitting, and stories with big explosions. When she isn't quietly reading or studiously doing classwork, she can be found shouting her opinions from the tops of tables in empty Olin classrooms.

Owen Fazzini never skips leg day.

Kate Isabel Foley is very tired most of the time, but would happily lose sleep over the production of *The Lantern* again.

Georgia Gardner is a sophomore at Ursinus College with hopes to bring her ideas into the film industry following her schooling. As a Media and Communications major and Film minor she exudes her talents into the arts every chance she gets. Please enjoy her piece, *Little Blue Sailboats*.

Christopher Gerrow is a freshman at Ursinus College and a prospective English major who is fully submerged in the genre of horror. His words are daubed in oil and grease, striving to engage those who are piqued by a sebaceous title and encapsulated by a fatty tale.

Jonny Gherman is an English and history major with a minor in educational studies. A member of Phi Alpha Theta, he plans on teaching middle or high school following his graduation in the spring of 2023. Jonny also wrestles, coaches rugby and is a TLI senior consultant.

Elliott Hannam is an extremely human person with an internal skeleton and only two legs who likes writing fiction, swinging swords, and giving hugs. He is certainly not a disguised lobster who plans to destroy mankind from within as revenge for the capture and consumption of his people at the hands and mouths of hungry humans and their devilishly inescapable traps.

Yemu Huang didn't respond to our bio request, making our *Lantern* staff very sad. :(

Tatiana Kent is a junior from Rhode Island. She enjoys seaglass hunting, yoga, and scratching her vinyl records. She recently signed a billion year contract with the Sea Org and is looking forward to spreading Xenu's light and love across campus.

Andrew Kmett has had a passion for creative writing ever since 1st grade when he won his first writing award. He appreciates Dr. Volkmer for helping to refine his skills.

Sophie Louis is a Psychology major with minors in Biology and Science & the Common Good. She's very excited to share her art with others.

Jenna Lozzi is an English and Environmental Studies double major. She is very grateful to have participated in *The Lantern* these past four years.

David McCauley didn't respond to our bio request, making our *Lantern* staff very sad. :(

Mairead (rhymes with *parade*) **McDermott** is a junior, double majoring in Art History and Anthropology with minors in Chinese and Museum Studies. She loves dipping her toes into anything she can! Mairead has participated in an archeology dig, and is now a student curator, an archivist for Myrin Library's special collections, and layout editor for *The Grizzly*.

Keegan McGowan has been a lover of high fantasy and mythology since he first learned to read. Though he's tested the waters with mini story excerpts and has created several storylines for his D&D friend groups, he only wrote his first full story for class last year (2022). He is honored that his first finished work was accepted to *The Lantern* and hopes to write more and more in the years to come!

Aurora McKee (she/her) is enjoying her spring semester of junior year, hoping to get an English Major with a possible GWSS minor. She hails from New York (the city not the state) and holds a deep love for books, writing, online puzzles, and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. She hopes that her writing will engage, entertain, and maybe even inspire.

Olivia Negro is a member of the class of 2023 studying Politics/International Relations and Educational Studies. She is also a Bonner Leader, Melrose Fellow, Writing Fellow, president of the Alpha Delta Phi Society, and an aspiring Social Studies teacher. When she is not attempting to realize her academic or vocational goals, you can usually find her chilling somewhere, playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* or listening to various true crime, supernatural, or history podcasts.

This is **Miles Noecker's** final appearance in *The Lantern* before graduation. He would like to thank all the unsung heroes who put together this lit mag (himself included) for the many hours of reading, interpreting, and editing hundreds of submissions. He hopes the quality of next year's magazine does not falter without his incredible eye for content.

Madeline O'Connor is a freshman History major and Creative Writing and Japanese minor. In their spare time they like to draw and read.

Leo Quinn is a freshman English major who takes inspiration from Richard Siken's poetry collections. His main goal when writing is to convince people that poetry can be more than the condensed, and often rushed, version that is portrayed in high school English classes.

Emilia (Emi) Reed is a prospective English/theatre double major and dance minor. When she's not performing a dizzying array of shows, you can find her singing in the Voices of Ursinus Choir or reading anything she can get her little bookworm hands on. She's been writing for pleasure since eighth grade and is very excited to have a poem featured in *The Lantern* during her freshman year at Ursinus!

Ryan Savage, despite his delusive last name, is a kind fellow. In fact, he is so kind that he wrote a poem just for you.

Ze'ev Shaheen is a trans writer from New Jersey. He enjoys avoiding concussions in rugby and ranting about TV shows that no one asked him to talk about. His parents are very proud.

Amy Smith is a junior at Ursinus studying English and Environmental studies. She has a deep love for her family and nature which reflects in her writing. After Ursinus, she hopes to pursue a career in the environmental field while also becoming an author.

Catherine Stump is a suburban cowboy too weary for the horse. Wherever, whatever, have a nice day.

Jordan Ulsh is a senior Biology major with minors in Science and the Common Good and Studio Art. Pen and Ink is her favorite medium.

Ohio is the problem; **Ty Ways** is the solution. Sent as an emissary by some god or another, he will work tirelessly to keep the world safe from that great threat.

Vanessa Worley is a senior Biology major. They're still waiting for the next Brood X cicada year.

Mattie Young, class of 2023, is majoring in Psychology and Spanish with a minor in Studio Art. She has most recently studied Baroque Art History at the Universidad de Sevilla during her semester in Spain. Although "Stripes and Illusions" was created in her senior year of high school, she is grateful that Ursinus has given her the opportunity to combine her diverse interests and pursue her passion for art.