

The Paper Lantern

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Sincerely,
Normandale Creative Writing Club

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LAND WHERE THE WATERS REFLECT THE CLOUDS

Keith Bateman

Anchor my heart to this homeland,
Breathing in the balmy breeze
Caressed by valleys in viridian and
Days marked by sunset washes

Etched onto the face of a lake;
Flashing ripples of warm blush as
Glowing fireflies weave through
Hushed whispers of tall grass
Into the forest's canopy
Just beyond the lazy shoreline

Knowing all of my troubles from
Long nights spent beneath your skies,
My dear familiar friend,
North Star state, stargazing in your
Open fields flowing over

Press your imprint to my chest and I'm
Quick to miss your touch

Resting my head on your shoulder
Shaped by ancient glacial rivers,
Thinking of tomorrow
Under yesterday's sun

Vibrant in its variations and
Wandering wavelengths

Xenacious, yet true to
Your roots held close to the heart
Zipped up in my winter coat, your bitter cold like love bites, I'm
home



Whale Tale - Abigail Wamhoff

TIDES

Chloe Boatman

Sky broken open
by rays of sun.
Our hair cut short
by waves of wind.
Swimsuit bodies
huddled close.
Soggy smiles.
We will only know a week.

Sand sneaks in,
cuddling up
in crevices.
Rinse, lather, repeat, watch
grains circle the drain
wet but not clean
grit stuck
in my teeth. I
brush, spit, rinse, repeat.

He lurks behind, humming
against my skull. Dragging
tectonic plates apart until
the sea swallows itself. He
ripped his towel up
like a weed.
Spraying salt, he
leaves
marks as it dries.

JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Dhoha Qasem

I watch babies taking their first steps—
steps that lead to bigger places—
from preschool to skyscrapers,
global footprints are left behind...

I watch small hands grow larger by the day,
that share more and more handshakes as I go by—
until they reach a time for separation,
and tears stream down faces, young and old.

I watch promise rings intertwining love between people;
as ceremonies are held in celebration.
White teeth shine from their smiles,
before their canines and molars fall out.

I watch the wrinkles forming on young skin;
when black hair succumbs to the grey strands—
when bones were once strong from drinking milk,
now feel jolts of pain from even the smallest motions.

I watch graves being set in the ground;
as loved ones shed tears for their departure—
their souls rising just past the clouds
when people's footsteps leave the cemetery.

I watch as people plea and beg for me to slow down,
Just so they can enjoy and savor each sweet moment.

I watch as my uncontrolled wings extend and fly
leaving everyone I know behind.



En Dash - James Lou

TASTE

Meredith Bomster

A raspberry-
but instead of seeds
I find planets
clustered like cells.

When I bite down
the taste of its earth
hits my tongue.
Bitter and
dark and
sad.

The flavor is different than
the fruit from Venus.

There, every grape
is an aphrodisiac.
Delicate skin
grasping at
sweet flesh.

The fruit of Mars
has always been my favorite.
Spicy and
warm.
Like a Christmas chutney.

ORIGINAL SIN

Chloe Boatman

my arms are a bouquet of decapitated stems
cut from the Garden of Eden
ribs clipped from me
to grant life to man
around one tree, the garden gathers
manned by a serpent
who writhes around his temptations
serpent begs me to taste
Knowledge, lust red and dripping juice
close my lips around it
swallow seeds that sour my stomach
man howls
how dare you share with serpent,
though man visits orchards weekly
picking fruit before it's ripe
to mark with his teeth and discard
to Know is to sin
but *no* sticks in the throat
thicker than honey, burning bitter like wine
to Know one man is to be forgotten

GRAVEY MATTERS

Lyla Northup

My house is haunted. I hear the doors slam at night, and footsteps pitter-pattering up and down my hallways. I hear secrets being told in incoherent whispers, the walls stretch and fold, corners of the house appear that weren't there before. It doesn't matter though; I don't have another place to go. It's much easier to pretend the doors slamming shut are just waves crashing on the shores, and whispers are just rustling of my clothes. Maybe walls appearing and stretching are just signs of my undiagnosed schizophrenic brain, or maybe I'm just forgetful.

Things are better right now, I got a side gig at an ice cream shop on Second and Bernard Street, next to all these little shops and booths selling healing crystals and chakra tapestries. Some of them have psychics, and they get together every Wednesday to smoke cigarettes and get three scoops of peanut butter toffee brittle. The manager has extra tubs in the back for how quickly it goes.

"Helps focus the mind," they assure me, "Can't have rocky road, then the mind gets all bumpy and gooey, we're connecting with the beyond darling, do your job!"

I never took their harsh words to heart; I just think of all the times they have to tell people what they want to hear. For the extra twenty bucks, maybe tell their dead aunts they love them. Their ice cream is the only time they can tell people whatever they want. I wonder if they tell ghosts what they want.

I recently contacted my aunt about my ghosts, she was always into that kind of stuff, but instead of telling me how to get rid of them she did what she did best.

"Do you have strong arms now that you're an ice cream scooper?" Aunt Grace always breathed heavily into the phone like she was

walking somewhere important, “I have a nice neighbor girl who said she loves a guy with good arms. You should come over and have some iced tea with all of us!”

“I don’t want to meet the girl. I want to get rid of my ghosts.” I flinched as one of the doors slammed in the floor below. I also remembered I have to do laundry, but lately they had discovered the washer and dryer downstairs, I found teeth in them last time. I collect quarters for the laundromat now.

“No, it’s no bother for me at all, I would love to set you up!” She started humming through the phone.

“That is definitely not what I said.” I think the footsteps have been getting closer and closer to me than ever before, a hat fell off my dresser onto my feet. “Tell me how to banish ghosts!”

“Honey, this girl is very nice, and she told me she runs a YouTube channel for ghost hunting, I bet she could help you!” a cat threw up on the other line, “Gerald no! not on the davenport!”

“Uh I’ll let you go.” I think the ghosts were getting curious about my phone. An aura of ice passed over my hand holding it and I squeezed my eyes shut. They shot open when a chair scraped across the floor leaving a trail of red substance.

“Okay, next Tuesday afternoon, come and have tea!” a loud yowl on the other line deafened me, “Gerald stop running away, no not on the credenza!”

I hung up and threw my phone across the room. I quickly regretted this as my phone shot right back at me through the air like a fast pitch into my stomach knocking the breath out of me. There was a whispered giggle and the washing machine started rattling in the floors below me. I should get another job.

*

The next Tuesday I made my way to Aunt Grace's house, which was more like a cottage with its quant garden and barely 400 square feet. It was painted white with red shutters and doors. It reminded me of the blood I found on the tips of all of my socks the morning before. It was still glistening and dripping like the sock itself had sliced an artery an hour ago and smelled like rotting fish.

"Wonderful you're here!! Sevasti is just in the kitchen," She was hanging out of the doorway just closed so that the cat couldn't get out, "she has such a peculiar name, its pronounced SA-VAA-STIII." she was whispering loudly in a way that gave me a bit of a headache.

"You pronounced it when you said her name the first time." I sighed, "Should I come in?"

"Yes dear, I think that you will really like her, she's very excited to see you!" She clapped her hands and walked into the miniature house. Inside, it was decorated with porcelain figurines of children with big puppy eyes doing various things, holding wheelbarrows or falling in love or something. One of them was leaning to give another a kiss, but no other figurine was there to return the favor, just a shard of porcelain. Everything had a layer of dust that seemed to have been just placed there. Like a movie set. Maybe it came out of an aerosol can. I always felt uncomfortable here.

"Saavaastiii! I would like you to meet my wonderful nephew, Gabriel." She beamed at her work as a matchmaker, "He has ghosts you know! I'm just going to go to the garden to get some mint for the tea," she looked between us with an extreme expression, "introduce yourself, Gabriel!"

"Wow, how'd you find those ghosts? I've been looking for another site to shoot another video, but there's a short market for abandoned haunted places these days, you know overpopulation and all, you're not a triplet, right? I can't condone the extra resources we waste. Twins are fine though, it's not like they choose

to be twins.” She looked at me meaningfully.

“Um no. I don't know how I got ghosts either. Don't you know how to get rid of them?”

“Well not exactly but they can get a little camera shy, so they don't like to show up for me. Hey, I've got an idea, how about I come over at three to do a little inspection? Set up some things to do some good rounding of the place. Do you have any crucifixes? Holy crystals? Garlic bread? Bananas?” she seemed to be making calculations in her head after I shook my head, “Man, the dead is wasted on the dumb, you should watch a couple of my videos before I come over to get prepped. Just look up gravey matters on Google and I'll show up, I am kinda a big deal in the ghost hunting world.”

I had to stifle a scoff, “Whatever, when can you come?” My eyes wandered to the back window where Aunt Grace was staring down a praying mantis. It was on its back legs on a mint

leaf. She was trying to bat it away with a spade, but it bounced out of the way each time. It seemed to put its front legs up and bounce around like it was in the boxing ring.

“My earliest? I don't know, I'm a pretty busy girl but I'll move a couple things out of the way, so probably tomorrow.” Then she leaned close to me, “I'm not sure all what your aunt told you about me, but I've always liked the ice cream scooper boys the best, strong arms. Have you ever thumb wrestled a ghost? I have. I lost though.”

She went on a bit longer, but I wasn't listening. The praying mantis seemed to have gained high ground on Aunt Grace, climbing up her arm, I was starting to get worried for her until Gerald the cat sprung from the leaves and tall grass. It took out the mantis and pinned it on the ground. Gerald played around with it until he picked it up and took it into the tall grass to its doom. Aunt Grace recovered for a bit, dusting herself off, snatched an entire sprig of mint and scurried inside.

“And that's why I always have gravy with me while shooting

the videos.” she tilted her head at me like a dog, “Can I get your number?”

A screen door slammed, and I flinched. “Alright kids I got some mint! Anyone for some tea?”

*

The next day I got a message from Sevasti while I was scooping ice cream for the psychics. She needed a ride to my house.

“I had an old man at noon today come in. What does he ask me, to see his mother, that’s what he asks me!” they look at each other on the edge of their seats with a grin, “Then after

twenty minutes he pinned 100 bucks on the table, and I saw her just fine!” They cackle and bang the table and quiet down with murmurs of agreement over the “enlightening” effect of peanut butter toffee brittle.

Looking back at her message, I sighed. The night before, I looked over some of Sevasti’s youtube channel, it did have an exceptional number of subscribers. Her videos consisted of the usual ghost hunter things, ominous violin screeches, black and white videos of the city hall sign, night vision and heat sensors. What made her gain such popularity wasn’t her excellent shots of blurry forms in the dark but her strange situation with gravy. She would keep water balloons of gravy tied to a bandolier across her chest. When she would get the closest to finding the ghost, she would be alerted by all of the water balloons exploding, or so she exclaimed. Most of the comments mocked her or gave time stamps for when the gravy exploded.

“THE HAUNTERS NEAR!”

I started to realize the grave mistake I made. My ghosts are going to murder her, she has no idea what she got herself into. In any case, I picked her up at five, after the psychics went home and

we were out of peanut butter toffee brittle.

“You hurry too much. Gah! Your sorrow is ruining my vision! We must leave this place!” They didn’t tip.

When we got to my place, she unpacked a duffle bag she said she got from goodwill. “The more used, the more haunted. Have to get your priorities straight.”

It was full of Go-Pros and ring lights and what I’m pretty sure was a banana with a post it note taped to it “Tuberculosis, Do NOT eat!” In a separate cooler, a hundred pack of water balloons all in red, and a gallon milk jug filled with what I hoped was gravy. Once she was all packed up and weighed down by a gallon of gravy, she took it produced another bandolier for me. “For safety.” It made me take in the gravity of the situation.

“Well, where do you want to start? Do you want the basement or something?”

“Yeah, just take me to the most haunted part, we must get to the root of it all. Are your ceilings high down there? It makes it hard to hear, can’t have that.”

We walked across the house with water balloons of gravy bouncing with our pace to the stairs; I had not been down there since the washer-dryer incident. It was in complete disarray from what I left it. Rags and towels and other clothes I am pretty sure were not mine were on the floor circling a single rocking chair, the light dangling from the ceiling was swaying making the light float around in a dizzying affect. A chill went up my spine.

“Alright I’m just going to turn on my night vision goggles annnd,” She flicked on a switch at her temple, “I’VE GOT Somth-oh never mind, I think you have rats.”

“I don’t have rats, and the lights are on why do you need night vision goggles.” “For the effect. Seriously I think you have rats, like a lot of them, here put these on.”

“Fine,” Although it was bright for night vision, I looked through

the goggles to find a hundred eyes staring back at me. I shrieked; I can't afford an exterminator! Then from the depths of the rags on the floor a figure moved. There was a low grumble, and the figure sat up like Frankenstein, and rose from the ground. One of my gravy balloons popped and we stared paralyzed in fear.

"Does this happen a lot to you when filming?" I said.

"Definitely not." She was fumbling for her camera while staring at the figure, staring back at us.

"If you take a picture, it'll be twenty bucks, inflation is hard these days."

"Why does the ghost care about inflation. And why is it wearing a Dallas Cowboys tube top." Sevasti said, I was also intrigued and still mildly scared.

"What are you doing in my house?" I had an extra gravy balloon ready for defense. "Whoa! Chill dude I'll sick my rats on you!"

"What?" A chorus of squeaks followed.

The figure stepped into the light to reveal itself as an old man with a grey beard and smiling yellow teeth. He was wearing aviators over his tanned wrinkled skin hanging from his cheek bones and had two rats on each shoulder.

Sevasti leaned over, "I am going to run, and I think you should follow."

"Yeah."

We sprinted up the stairs and into the car, the gravy balloons completely popped and left a trail of gravy that the rats appreciated. I threw the car into the drive and sped off to my aunts.

After a bit she blurted "Are you getting a new place?"

"I think I have to. I'll probably stay at my aunt's house for a while."

"That's great, sorry we didn't find your ghosts."

I looked over at her and looked back. Our clothes were sopping with gravy, we smelled like rats and mildew, and she was covered

with cameras, night vision goggles and other ghosting gear. We were a sight.

“It’s fine, let’s go break into my work, have you ever tried peanut butter toffee brittle?”



Aussie Otters - Abigail Wamhoff

BURIED

Dayton Rowland

Bracketed by smooth curves of soil
it flowed in warmer and brighter than a body can handle
The left and right were dark with the chocking pressure of
Dead or dying earth, pushing in a stench that after filtering through
the two pound of M2
Still chalked the lung more than the nastiest cigar
Right is tilled fields, gulped up
In the lungs of sky
Forward, between the snowflakes of dust and the window of grime
rested a table
Her surface was curved steel licked clean of paint
Her legs, needles sinking into dirt with her own windows between
them
Preserving worn leather seating that we road
Helplessly to find the gritty
Sand, empty food in the
Roar of dust and then silent

QUITTIN' TIME

Casey Marble

Is it quittin' time or am I still on?
I'm on my smoke break so leave me alone
Your turntable command plays the same song
Each order you give me deserves a groan

It's not like I'm needed right this second
So why act like it's the end of the world?
Every five minutes, it seems I'm beckoned
I'm thrown around, shoved, yanked, pushed, spun, and twirled

Can't I have a little time to myself?
Can I not have some time to rest in peace?
I don't care about the CEO's wealth
'Cause I know I'm not gonna see a piece.

My boss thinks my free time is so crummy
'Cause when I don't work, he don't make money.

AFTERNOON APOTHECARY

Keith Bateman

You are my afternoon apothecary,
When it's midnight in the monastery

Climb steeple stairs in the mossy mausoleum,
Frail framework that I'd willingly undergo, no matter how uneven

The towering serpentine staircase,
Brushing tears from the moon's gauzy gaze

Trace trail paths of coursing cobblestone,
Water lacing languidly through my fingers

Will you guide me though I'm guarded?
Remain tender despite my taciturn tendencies?

Will you raise a sanguine sun,
Stretching over the forestscape in a glaringly tangential tangerine

I know that I falter, fastidiousness pushing fragmenting
But somehow, I feel compelled in your company

To reach for an unseen utopia,
Your hortatory words on the horizon

Can we watch the stars drift past in distant constellations,
And will you brush butterfly kisses to my face in a moonlit meadow

I feel like a distant part of me knows this place,
Like familiarity in your palm pressed to the heartbeat in my chest
somehow

Can I ease your weary eyes, your wrinkled brow,
Can I familiarize your handprint and your hold, whatever time will
allow

Can I tell you that I love you,
That I want to know all of you

Step with me in tandem toward an idyllic image,
Melting into a perfectly picturesque visage

I AM NATURE

Dhoha Qasem

I am the horizon that cuts the sky in half
where the sun's shine kisses the ocean below
with its radiant reflection on the surface.

I am the leaves that change colors
in different hues from reds to yellows—
yet, are covered as snow blankets a disguise over me.

I am the moon that chooses to reveal one side
of the world but ignores the other
as the twinkling of stars accompanied me.

My emotions are nature's grand design—
getting affected and aggravated by sudden changes.
From joyous crescents to tears of rain,
I am the canvas of emotions, eternally in change.

BIRDIE

Ru Dargatz Eliassen

We'll both roll in bed again, to wake up and torture ourselves like
old dogs.

By the back where the chain link fence lingers along the boundary
of my feeling.

A dead bird lies, blood on the grass with blurry eyes.

I writhe and I turn and I watch its body burn, the sun waits for no
starry sky.

When its bones have gone home I'll bury its soul and swallow it
whole.

I need a piece of freedom to fight the pull.

But this morning I heard its song again, like a haunting dawn I
fend.

My freedom flew away, I have the night to thank.

STRANDED

Sarah Huderle

The cashier shakes his head. “You bought that hoodie two hours ago,” he says, “And you still haven’t left. You need to go.” Fluorescent lights illuminate his dark eye bags. I glance out of a dusty window. It’s around midnight, and the full moon sears the empty gas pumps outside. Twisting oaks loom over the concrete. I shudder, then glance at my new gray hoodie. The tag still hangs from the collar.

“I can’t,” I say. My arm itches, so I scratch it through my sleeve. It’s hairier than before.

The cashier groans. “Why not?”

“I heard wolves. I’m afraid of wolves.” Moonlight slithers through the window, creeping over the tan tile floor, and I back away, still scratching my arm with tingling fingernails. A twinge flashes through my gums, and my tongue runs over my canine teeth. Sharper. They’re sharper than before. I look at a half-empty shelf full of peanut packets, candy, and jerky, then I grab a chocolate bar, but... Wait, chocolate? With trembling hands, I grab a beef jerky bag. It slips out of my clammy fingers.

“We don’t have wolves around here,” the cashier says, brows furrowed as I wipe my sweaty hands on the hoodie. I crouch to grab the jerky.

“You’re wrong,” I say, fumbling over the fallen bag. My claws pierce the plastic as I squeeze. My claws? Great. Just great. I leap up and slam the jerky against the counter. Cracks snap through the glass display. The cashier recoils, and I hold up my hands. “Sorry!”

The cashier steps back. “Dude, what’s your deal?”

I pull my wallet out and pinch my debit card between two claws. “I’m hangry.”

“Whatever. If you don’t leave after I scan this, I’m calling

the cops.”

“Fine,” I swipe the card and glance at my pristine hoodie, “I’ll leave.” The card reader beeps. I read the screen. Insufficient funds.

“My money,” I lower the card, “I spent it all on hoodies.”



Yawning Devil - Abigail Wamhoff

FREEDOM

Kaliyah Brown

A bird stuck in the cage
longing for freedom
its wings clipped
by the ones who care
desperate to touch

those blue skies
chirp chirp
the bird goes
inside the cage
never to fly those skies again

freedom to do
what it wishes
to eat to live and to rise
those heavy chains crushing
squeezing and coking this bird
slowly taking its will
for its freedom and flight

SUMMERING IN PARIS

Kylie McWilliams

The crisp flake off my morning croissant
the bitter taste of grapefruit juice as it hits my lips
watching over the sky from my balcony
sitting exactly 34 flights from the ground below

the sweet nectar from my decorative fruit bowl hits my nose,
it reminds me of days I spent picking my favorite fruits
from the vendors in my home town

the sun entering the ending stages of the day
turning orange and pink
telling the moon to wake up for the night

the sound of my spoon
piercing my ears as I circle it around my bowl of soup
the same soup I've eaten religiously for three months

living here,
in this realm
I felt the pounds slowly lifting off me
as I lean back
and see what the rest of my life
has set for me

ATLAS HOLDS THE SKY SO I CAN WALLOW IN PEACE

Row Jama

Pieces of the sky fall off
All around me
They slide and reshape into droplets of rain and snow and sleet
turns into black ice
And I cannot suffice
I am no longer enough for myself
But the night sky sees me and envelopes me in a tight hug
And I cherish the moments when the moon winks at me
And I savor the way the stars gleam a warmth of happiness
But I can never hide from the nakedness of the sun;
The ripples of hot air that expose my nose to the rawness of reality
What am I to do with the elements when they ask of me contradicting
things
I am but a physical object to carry the essence of self
So I guess I'll allow the spirits of sound and thought pass through
me
Even though I shan't use their blessings in the infinite day and night
And I shall allow the oracle to harbor in my gut and be of use to all
around me even though I can't help myself understand the whys of
humanity
But all that is too beyond me
I am still small in knowingness and rich in the contradictions of my
brain and body
And at the end of the day
When I, the sunburnt sky darkens to gray
I lay, disappointed in myself

WYNORRIFIC

Aaliyah Upshaw

A beautiful tragedy,
Of inner-insecurity.
A journey of acceptance,
Of self-doubt.
A delicate moment,
Of self-failure,
And a beauty,
Of delicacy,
Of perfection.
A bitter-sweet taste,
Yet the most joyful,
Sense of Security,
Of realization.
That your inner self,
Is every bit of perfection,
You may think you are not.

DON'T LET THE FLAME DIE OUT

Morgan Teats

What do you need to make a flame?
It seems simple at first;
 fuel, open air and dry kindling
And a spark to set the whole thing up

It is such a miracle then, that we can make a living thing so easily

They breathe just like us
taking the clean world in
and exhaling its spent self
Ember flare vein-like across timber as it eats
pulsing hot orange
It ages as strong dark wood
goes pale and dun
Fires too sing songs
sizzling symphonies of chittering clicking crackles
as they cackle mad melodies to those willing to listen
A fire, much like us is ethereal
It has a body yes
but what it really is remains unseen
Boldly flashing out at random
unseen in the everyday

But is it an easy miracle to make a fire?

If I set you to task could you do it
Could you make a life from nothing
If I gave you everything, does that make the task any less daunting?

The world of wind which animates all fires
also seeks their end
Tell me what if the wood is wet
or worse the world?
what if disastrous droplets drip down
perpetually placing you in a stagnant purgatory
Who among you can craft a spark
Those with practice make it look easy
those with dumb luck doubly so
Have you ever tried to spark flint & steel
or run a friction bow
it's harder than you think

But what if the miracle has already been performed

A great old flame sits before you
To you it is the light of the whole world
When the sun has gone the world is no less bright
The flame is light to all you know
and even those you have never known
And yet it nears its end

Now the great flame is yours
You hear its singing lessen
As it slowly fades away
Its body now rolling heaps of light grey ash
It is not just the fires weary cries you hear
but the whipping of the wind
and the call of distant rains
The wood pile grows thin
as the cruel world now surrounds you
Are you up to the task

can you respark the great furnace
can you abide by your lone command

don't let the flame die out



Over The Water - James Lou

OCTOBER

Sage Filmore

Flutter, flutter, all around kite
flying is a go.

Pitter patter on the roof
nick nacks' sounds all around.

No shine comes to me
just crimson pieces of what used to be.

Slowly, slowing down,
as they fall to the ground.

I give a little frown
for what is about to become.

My arms are bumpy
my face is dry
the air burns my eyes.

I miss my leaves
I miss my kite
now all I see is
white.

BE STILL

Ben Bury

Videos on the TV screen filled with fire and smoke played over and over. There were ambulances and airport fire trucks, blaring their sirens and flashing their lights. Rescue workers frantically acted to evacuate survivors from the plane wreckage. Seats, luggage, and huge shards of metal were all thrown far down and across the runway. There were also people, now dead, who had been flung from the aircraft after the landing gear snapped, sending the Boeing 767 hammering into the ground. Troy's heart was pounding, skipping beats. His lungs struggled to expand and contract. He could hardly breathe. His vision blurred by a mist of tears he was trying to hold back. All Troy could do was stand and watch. The reporter kept repeating "Flight 297 to Chicago... catastrophic crash... currently, the number of survivors is unknown".

Troy was still staring at the television when Max entered the room. She sat behind him on the brown leather couch situated across the room from the TV, which was set on a stand pushed up against the window.

"Where is that?" Max said.

"O'Hare," Troy said.

"What's happening, is everyone okay?"

"The landing gear snapped! My, my mom she was ... on the flight. Coming back from Czechia!"

"Hasn't she called you yet, to let you know she's ok?"

"No."

"Have you tried calling her?"

"Of course I have."

"Didn't she pick up?"

"No answer."

“Why don’t you try again?”

“Same thing every time! it’s just her voice message. I’ve been listening to it over, and over again!”

Troy exhaled and let himself fall back onto the couch beside Max, still watching the images on the screen. The two sat there for a while, saying nothing. Again, Troy tried calling his mother.

~

The same year Troy turned twenty-one, his father died from a heart attack, leaving him and his mom behind. Instead of continuing a college education in Aviation Science, as he had planned, he took up work at the Sinclair gas station to support his mother. Troy, like his father, believed that it was a man’s responsibility to provide for the household. That’s exactly what he planned to do.

Life had become a rhythm for him; wake up early, go to work, get home late, pay the bills, pay the medical expenses, repeat. He wanted to return to his college studies at some point, but the long twelve-hour shifts were barely enough to pay for his and his mother’s needs. With what little he had left over, he continued to add to his savings account, hoping that maybe one day he’d have enough to resume school. But, not really going anywhere, it was collecting dust. Then, his mom became interested in their Czech ancestry. Troy had saved just enough for a trip, but only for his mother.

~

“No answer?” said Max.

“No answer. I don’t know why I bother to keep trying.”

“She’s got to pick up eventually.”

“Yeah. Or maybe she didn’t even make it to the hospital.”

“Hey, you don’t know that. It looks frantic over there. Maybe she just hasn’t gotten a moment to sit down yet and call.”

“Yeah. Or what if-” Troy stopped himself. He knew that only more anxiety would come from whatever he thought of saying next. He needed to stay stable, to control his emotions. He wanted to let open the floodgates for all the “what if’s”. Troy let out a large exhale of exhaustion.

“We should go for a drive,” Max said.

“Where? What for?”

“I was thinking a drive could help reset our minds. And, maybe we could check the hospitals, I know a couple of likely places.”

“Oh, sure... whatever you say.”

“I was thinking maybe Northwestern Memorial Hospital?”

“Heart of downtown? no way we’d get there in rush hour traffic.”

“Hmmm, ok. Um, what about Trinity?”

“Almost into Indiana, too small anyway. They wouldn’t bring her there.”

“Ok,” Max was now scrolling through a map on her phone, “Oh! First Methodist? They’re decently close to O’Hare, and... the traffic shouldn’t be too bad getting over there.”

“Uhm... ok, sure”

Now driving down the freeway towards First Methodist Hospital, the car was quiet like the living room was, but separated from the horror in the news. Just the sound of the road. Troy and Max sitting side by side.

Pulling into the parking lot, Troy fixated on the cold monochrome architecture of the hospital. Sharp, straight lines, black windows, the outside a light gray pretending to be a shade of white. The main entrance was covered with a large white aluminum

awning that stretched over the small road in front, suspended by two steel cables above. Troy wondered about how well the structure was built as he and Max approached the hospital.

Stepping through the automatic sliding glass doors into the gray-carpeted and white-walled lobby, there was a frenzy of medical staff darting around. In one door, and out the next. Their scrubs create blurs of blue, mint, and maroon. A person has just been brought into the lobby from an ambulance, the top of their head wrapped in bandages, their arm in a tourniquet. A frantic family member was fighting with one of the receptionists.

“We’re looking for Marsha Wallace, has she been admitted here?” Troy asked the receptionist in scrubs.

“Marsha Wallace? let me check our records... looks like she’s just been admitted to the ICU.”

“The ICU? The intensive care unit?”

Grabbing Troy’s hand, Max said, “It’s just the two of us, are we able to visit her?”

“She has just been admitted, once she is stable, you can visit her. We do have a waiting room off to the right where you could wait if you like. And you two are...?”

“I’m her son, Troy.”

“And I’m his girlfriend” Max added.

“Ok, Troy, this is some paperwork we need you to fill out with contact information, as well as consent forms for your mother’s care.”

Like all parts of a hospital, the waiting room was intensely clean. The white tile floor nearly glistened, and the fluorescent lights in the drop-out ceiling shined brighter and whiter than the sun ever could. About 20 or 30 chairs, thinly cushioned, lined the walls and center of the room, with small tables set between them, a few with magazines that hardly anyone wants to read.

“What am I even supposed to do? Troy said.

“You’re supposed to wait.” Said Max.

“I mean when we leave the waiting room. When I see my probably dying mother, what then, what do I say?”

“Troy, you’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“I can’t... I can’t just pretend that... that I’m not worried though!”

“Troy, just be still. I’m here with you. I want you to take a couple of deep breaths, like a whale.”

“Like a whale...”

“Yes! Like a whale. With that giant mouth, they probably stay calm all the time, taking in all that oxygen.”

“Whales don’t breathe through their mouths, they breathe through their blow hole.”

“You are such a nerd. Of course you knew that. My point still stands!”

They thought they had made the hospital staff upset when the doctor entered the room to call them back to the ICU where Troy’s mother was. They made themselves serious and followed the doctor through the large metal doors with square windows of wired glass separating the waiting room from the intensive care units.

Immediately there was the sound of an oxygen machine, the constant rhythmic beep of the vitals monitor, the strong smell of chemicals, and the dim light of a private hospital room. His mom was wearing a neck brace and had a patch over her left eye, and her arms were wrapped in layers of cloth.

The doctor began, “When she was thrown from the aircraft, she severely strained her neck... nearly breaking it. The neck brace is to help keep her neck and head steady as it heals. When the EMTs got to her, her left eye was bleeding, and she had scraped off significant amounts of the upper layers of her skin, likely because of sliding across the runway pavement... Skin grafting likely won’t be needed, but it is not out of the question. Regardless, we’re looking at... at

least a week here in the ICU, and possibly months in recovery. She was also rescued with her left leg severely severed. We performed an emergency amputation to remove her lower leg. Again, there will be months, maybe over a year, of physical therapy with that.”

Troy was examining his mother’s ill state. A lump was forming in his throat now, his fears had become more real than he could have hoped.

“She’s still in a very critical state now. We have her on morphine.” the doctor said.

“Ok,” said Troy.

“Now, do understand that she lost a lot of blood, she is very anemic right now. Be very gentle with her. She might be able to hear you, but, between being very weak and strongly relaxed with the opiates we have given to her, she likely won’t respond.”

Troy walked up to his mother’s bedside, tears carrying complicated mixtures of both relief and worry started to collect on his eyelids. Max was standing closer to the door, to give him space.

“Hey, Mom,” Troy said gently. “It sounds like, the doctor said you could maybe be okay.”

With the one eye she had uncovered, her squinted eye gazed upon her son, and a tear rolled down her cheek. She tried to say something to him, but she only had the energy for a quiet whispering mumble. Troy thought that it meant “I love you”.

~

“What’s with all the smoke in the kitchen?” Troy asked, walking onto the light wood floor of the kitchen, whose windows looked out into the small backyard where a single acorn tree grew.

“I’m making us some Makova Babovka!” Said his mom. Turning from the stovetop where a simmering pot of chocolate was sitting.

“Muh moh... moh-ma bah-bow-what-now?”

“Makova Babovka, it’s a Czech sponge cake!”

“okay... and what are you making, uhm, that cake for?”

“Well, today, I got my DNA test back. Turns out, we’re 95% Czech! Isn’t that exciting!?”

“Huh, very exciting. I’m going to open the windows before I have an asthma attack.”

“Hah... You should grab down a couple of plates while you’re here. I think it should be ready in just a few minutes.”

Troy grinned, “You sure it isn’t burnt?”

“No, no! I just forgot to turn the stove fan on right away is all, the cake should be just fine.”

Troy sat out a couple of white plates on the wooden table, whose varnish had been chipping for a long time. Setting out white paper napkins and forks to the right of each plate, set perpendicular to each other. The yellow rays of the sun were shining through the large sliding door that led from the dining room to the yard. His mom was just finishing up by cutting a couple of slices from the cake across the kitchen and taking a ladle to drizzle the chocolate syrup over the top.

“So, usually this cake might have a lemony glaze, but neither of us are fans of lemon, so I found a recipe for a chocolate drizzle instead,” his mother said, bringing the cake to the table.

“Chocolate is always good,” said Troy.

“It has a bit of a nutty flavor from the poppy seeds as well, I hope you enjoy it!”

Troy carefully carved a slice from his cake with his fork, taking a bite.

“This is good Mom, thank you!”

“Good, I was worried I messed up the recipe somehow or something... you’ve got a little chocolate around your lip!”

“Oh, I do? Heh, thanks.” Troy continued, wiping the

chocolate from his mouth, “I love you, Mom, thanks for this. Maybe someday we’ll be able to visit Czechia.”

“I sure hope so, and I love you too.”

~

Sitting down in the chair beside her bed, he couldn’t help but notice the beeping of the heart rate monitor again, beep... beep it went. Then again beep...beep this time a bit faster. beep...beep even faster. The nurse was now walking over to the monitor. Then something changed, more staff started moving quickly into the room. The three extra nurses turned what felt like a cozy private space, into a cramped one. Troy’s heart picked up a pace that mimicked that of the monitor, the air grew heavy.

“We’re going to need you two to wait outside again,” the doctor said.

“What... what’s happening? Why do we need to leave?” Troy responded.

“We need room to work, I assure you that you can be right back with your mother once she is stable.”

“Troy, come,” Max said, taking his hand.

Once again in the sterile waiting room, Max and Troy waited. There was no laughing or giggling, just solemn faces. Troy was running images through his mind still of the plane wreckage, and how his mother looked in the hospital bed.

While a solid door separated him from his mother, he could still imagine it; her heart beating wildly, the nurses rushing to stabilize her, or maybe the stitching around her now-missing leg had come undone, and she was losing even more blood. Nothing good could be happening through the cold steel door.

Through the small wired glass window, Troy could see another couple of nurses rushing in the direction of his mother’s room. Troy

barely able to glimpse that in one of the nurses' hands, appeared to be a small red briefcase with a heart on it, a lightning bolt through the center of the heart.

Though muffled, minutes later Troy thought he heard shouting from the other side of the door, the sound of a man, hardly above a whisper in the waiting room.

"Clear!" Then a moment of quiet, the fluorescent lights seemed to be buzzing.

A minute later, another shout, "Clear!". Troy seemed to be hearing a ringing now, the lights seemed brighter, louder.

"Clear!" Then nothing.

Troy could only hear the ringing and buzzing of the lights, his whole body tingled like static. He felt like his heart had stopped. He was sitting up straight. The air was thin. He was staring at the lights. There began an echoing, almost like a song. Troy thought he recognized that the song had words. The words started to become a single word, Troy. Troy, the singing seemed to have a feminine sound to it, growing clearer. The song was losing its echoing music.

"Troy." Max was saying to him.

"Yes?" he said, the doctor was standing in front of them and was motioning for them through the doorway.

"She has died." The doctor said.

"She's dead?" said Troy.

"We did all we could for her. You can come back to the room."

Troy was numb. The same feelings he had staring at the news coverage on the TV in his living room had returned. The world around him drew away. His vision became foggy from the tears he was letting go, and his hearing was hazy again.

"What am I supposed to d-do? Is there paperwork I need to fill out? Do we just...just go home?" Troy was looking at Max.

All Troy could do was stand where he was. Like a symphony,

thoughts and memories bounced around his head; “Flight 297, a catastrophic crash” from the news reporter. Images of the shards of fuselage, on fire. The appearance of his mother bandaged up, her leg missing, her eye covered. “She’s... dead” from the doctor. Her lifeless body. He also saw that she was turning around from the stove top, smiling, and laughing while Troy was performing for his mom a cheap magic trick he had learned. She was making pancakes, his favorite. She was smiling, radiant. Even after Troy’s dad died, no day went without joy.

How could there be joy now? Troy thought. How.

Max took Troy’s hand again, and squeezed it.

Be...still, he remembered.

“Breathe,” Max said, “Breathe.”



Safe In His Hands - Kristina Ignatenkova

WARRIOR'S CRIME

Jesse Navarro

The dark beast enters my vision
I can feel its fangs
Cut my skin through the distance
Acceleration within
It could be felt in the ground
Hesitant behind my own fears
I might make the wrong move
It's hard to say what could come next
Leering at the wicked wanderer
Searching for the first one it will call its prey

Calamity strikes with the group of hunters outside
With no chance to rest,
Weapons are unsheathed
Rising from the ground
Running or fighting for a chance of life
Slashing across the beast's fur with shallow slices

Flesh in between its teeth is ripped out
Soon to become ashes on the ground
What once lived,
Became all this silent sad sound
Wounds set to become scars
Have dried with death's marks

In a time so delicate
Nothing else to say about it
The page turned too fast for me

My head stuck on their screams
I've committed a warrior's crime
Of leaving a comrade to die
This faded realm turned into a nightmare
Forever frozen in despair



A Devil Made Flesh - Morgan Teats

LET ONE OUT

Meredith Bomster

—a breath I mean.
A whisper of you
existing in the world.

If only just by
Particles of memories
laying maps of places you have been
and weed you have smoked
and people you have kissed
and their breaths that
you have collected
in your lungs.

A reaction formed
by a stranger's cloud
you happened to walk through
in the middle of winter
when you should have been able
to see it lingering in the air

stalking them.

Lungs fill with
the cold promise of newness.
New air,
new life,
new lovers.

Fueled by
knowing you are in pain
and looking for a way
to force that pain
out.



Lounge - Sarah Huderle

THE WARDEN

Casey Marble

A ticker tape parade for the year's end,
The wet leaves carpet the cold, concrete road,
Despite Fall's beauty, winter is no friend,
For weary and dread does the season hold

Why does it punish as though we've done wrong?
Why does the cold wind stab and pierce our hearts?
Does it despise birds when they sing their songs?
Does it resent the spring flower's fresh start?

Imprisoned where our cozy fires rage,
Reduced are the sun's visitation rights,
The warden locks us in his ice-walled cage,
He gives little hope through rations of light.

But we string bulbs so we still may be seen,
A snowy canvas painted red, blue, green.

WHAT I WON'T DO

Mona Mavluda

Walking into the bedroom with my fishing rod in hand
The body I see lying there asleep
I ask if he will awake and the universe tells me no
Forget the perfect outfit I had on
I won't go fishing today
The next morning I wake up
No food has been made everything stuck in place
I walk upstairs and see the body lying there once again
Groaning he shakes his head
I won't go fishing today
On to a new morning I awake with aches
I prepare hot coffee that burns my skin as I spill it down the pot
Bringing the mug up the wooden stairs my fate has been made once
again
He tells me to close the door after I leave the coffee on his bedside
I learn from my mistakes
I won't go fishing today
I won't go fishing tomorrow
I won't go fishing with you

ODE TO A BLACK RING

Sarah Huderle

Does an astronaut trudge
through a Martian city
over orange cobblestone
under red clouds
listening to drumming conversations
about emotions
they've never felt
and experiences
they'll never have,
or are they the creature
that crashes, then slithers
over concrete sidewalks
under Time's Square's glow
listening to piercing shrieks
that cry, "That thing
can't feel emotions
or have experiences
that make it human?"
One thing is certain:
It doesn't want to.

SAFE PLACE

Lexi Kaiser

Imagine your safe place
Go there now
Maybe it's a beach, river, or field
Maybe it's a hammock
Among a meadow of flowers
Maybe it's as simple as your room

My imagination takes me far
To a room that doesn't exist.
Bright wood fills it up, as does the scent
Of books both old and new

Shelves line the walls, and light pours down
From a window in the ceiling
Plants are all around, and so are the sounds
Of flowing, wordless music

There are many nooks to cuddle up
With a book
And you always find the one you need

This is my safe place
My comfort in this world
And when all else fails,
You know this is where I am

THE POND

Chloe Boatman

My brothers and I mudslide to the pond
A small world where minds thrive like algae
Bare feet sink into stinking muck
We turn into pies baked in sunshine

We swing cattails as wands, cast spells of fun
Pools reflect another world, turned on its head
Where we play on clouds softer than moss and
Trees block spying neighbors

We soar across creeks wide as the Amazon
Airborne in branches
Building homes from twigs and litter
Picked from the storm drain

We lay on the earth, grass tickling our arms
The sky framed by reeds
Sheltering us from whooshing cars
We pretend are distant waterfalls

IGNORING YOU

Christopher Reid

Shutting down the left and right
Have you ever woken to the sound of crows
As you sat there making coffee whistle
After that a flushing toilet gurgles
Shaving with the buzzing vibrating off your face or legs
Clicking on the television
Newsmen trying to hide their emotions gabbing
Chatting Politics
Cracking those eggshells on the side of the pan
The heat crackling those eggs
Scraping of iron as you lift the contents
Jackets zipping
Doors slamming
Rain pelting
Buses roaring
Chatting Politics
Brakes screeching
Splash splash splash
Doors squeaking
People jabbering
Chatting Politics
Click click click keyboard click click click
Until noon
Did you ever hear multiple microwaves buzzing
Eyes meeting trying to not express emotion
Chatting Politics
Click click click keyboard click click click
Until five

Reverse the order while traveling back home
Chatting Politics
Go to sleep
Shutting off the left and the right
Wake up. Repeat
Chatting Politics, Chatting politics



Hypnotized - Talia Winkley

SCORNED

Kela Gutierrez

A heart takes a dreadful and sorrowful turn once scorned. They become vengeful beasts, difficult to tame, ready to trample over those ungrateful for the love they have. They are broken by the false words of past loves and forgotten promises. Manipulated by those they loved and tossed aside like forgotten clothes under the bed. Still present but out of sight, forgotten and neglected over time. Only the scent of a forgotten memory reminds them of the presence you once had. Broken hearts are left behind to prevail over the injustice of a heart bruised and battered to live in spite and revenge. The pain from the last heartache always being present. A fragile cocoon is easy for others to nick and pick away the edges as broken glass shattered, unable to glue back together. Ready to tear the world apart in their wake.

THE MIDNIGHT TRAIN

Darren Almgren

“No, no, no, no, NO! Come on!” Ella yelled at the train as it pulled out of the station. She stopped running and clutched at the stitch in her side. Tilting her head back, she groaned with frustration. She looked at the empty platform around her, sighed, and went inside the train station building. The left hand side of the large open room was lined with ticketing booths. Each one was shuttered with a sign hanging from the small speaker that read: “Closed for the Holidays. Merry Christmas” in large letters. Ella walked up to one of the booths to read the line of small print at the bottom of the sign: “Tickets can still be purchased on our website.”

Ella went over and sat on one of the long wooden benches. She shrugged off her backpack and put her duffel bag on the bench beside her. She had to squint at first at her phone’s backlight as it shone bright in the very dimly lit depot. Tapping on a few things, she found her phone app and her mom’s number. It only rang twice.

“Ella?” her mom answered, voice sounding on the verge of panic. “Is everything okay? Did you make the train?”

“No,” Ella said and slumped in her seat. “It was literally pulling away when I got here.”

“Okay,” her mom said, panic replaced with mild-disappointment. “Are you going to be able to make it home?”

“I think so? Maybe. I don’t know. The ticketing booths are closed but I’ll check the website. Maybe there’s an early train in the morning. I’ll text you if I get a ticket for that or if I need to figure something else out.” Ella’s dad’s voice could be heard in the background. There was the sound of a phone being handed off, then his voice was clear.

“If you need to get a hotel or rent a car, let us know. If anything,

I can come get you, okay?"

"Okay, dad. Thanks. I'll let you know."

"Good," her dad said. "Love you, Beans." A chorus of I-love-you's sounded in the background.

"Love you too," Ella said with a smile and hung up. She switched apps and went to the train's website. The connection was agonizingly slow - her phone indicating that she only had a single bar of 3G service. After a solid minute, the website finally loaded enough for her to scroll through it. Both the times for December 24th were greyed out. She swiped to the next day, only half-hoping for anything. The only time listed for Christmas Day was at 6:00 am. Ella checked the time on her phone: 10:05 pm. Well, she thought, not much choice. As quickly as her poor connection would allow, she bought the \$300 ticket and sighed. Half of her phone's battery was drained by the end, going down to only 17%.

Ella slid her backpack over and laid across the bench with her feet on her backpack and her head resting against the duffel bag. She set an alarm for 5:30 am and closed her eyes. She felt like she'd only blinked when she was being gently shaken awake.

"Ma'am?" asked the man who'd woken her. She gave a slight jump. He was a tall, clean shaven man in a black double-breasted suit. His hair was neatly gelled to the side a handkerchief was folded in his breast pocket. She smiled kindly. "I'm sorry, but is everything okay, ma'am?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Ella said and sat up. "Sorry, can I not sleep here? I'm just waiting for the train." She looked around. The depot was still empty and only a couple lights are on. The clock on the far wall read 11:50.

"Which train are you waiting for?" asked the man.

"The six-o-clock one. For tomorrow morning." Ella said, blinking the drowsiness from her eyes. "Sorry, do I need to go somewhere else to wait?" The man smiled and shook his head.

“No, you don’t,” he gave a slight chuckle. “But there is a train about to leave if you’d like to take that one instead.” Ella’s eyebrows went up.

“What? Really? But the website said there wasn’t –”

“Come this way,” the man interrupted. “And I’ll get you a ticket.” Ella got up and followed him to the last ticket booth in the corner. It was covered in deep shadows, being so far away from the lights that were on. A large “Out of Order” sign hung on the window. The man seemed to disappear around the booth for a moment then the shutter went up and the booth light turned on. He sat down on the chair inside.

“Are you sure?” Ella asked. “There aren’t any other trains on the website.” The man shook his head and waved her question away.

“It’s never 100% accurate. Sometimes entire trains are empty because the railway company is so outdated on the website. No one knows it’s there and so no one gets on.” He sighed as he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a paper ticket. “I’ll tell you, I will never understand the endless march of the digital age. Things were so much more simpler, personable, back in the day. We had simpler technology. It was more than just a ‘what’s new’ or ‘what’s more convenient’ type of attitude.” He took out an old looking fountain pen. “Now, what was your destination?”

Ella told him, thinking the man was a bit strange. He looked and talked like he was from the 1950’s but he didn’t look older than 30. But, she guessed, there were people of all ages that yearned for the old technology before smartphones and Teslas. This guy just went a little further with the whole outfit thing. The man wrote down something on the orange cardstock ticket and slid it through the opening in the window. Ella started to dig for her wallet but the attendant put up a hand.

“No need. No charge. Consider it a Christmas gift.” Ella looked at him, wanting to protest, but then just smiled and took the ticket.

“Thanks. Merry Christmas.” She quickly went back and grabbed her luggage and stepped out onto the platform.

A thick smell of diesel filled the air as Ella looked at the train. It was large and unlike the sleek bullet trains that she normally rode on. Its body was white with a stripe of red running along it. “Burlington” was plastered under the stripe. Out of the door to the first train car stepped a man in a navy blue wool uniform and an old-fashioned conductor’s hat on. In fact, Ella thought as he came towards her, everything about him looked old-fashioned. Somehow even his glasses and smile looked out of time.

“Hello, ma’am,” said the conductor. “May I help you with your bags?” He held out a hand.

“Oh, uh, sure. Thanks.” Ella handed him her duffel bag but kept her backpack on. She looked up at the train again. There wasn’t a hint of rust or dirt, or graffiti anywhere on it. “Wow,” she said. “This is a really good restoration.”

“Oh yes,” said the conductor as he slung the duffel over his shoulder and led Ella to the train car door. “This old girl has been running since just after the War. Adopted from the steamliners. I’m not a fan of the smell of diesel I’m sorry to say. Maybe it’s an acquired taste that will grow on me one day. But, she runs like a stallion.” Ella smiled at the man’s words. He talked like the ticketing agent. She thought this must be part of the restoration project - hiring actors to play the part. She thought about the restoration program that the Historical Society was running to bring back the streetcars. They’d gone through great lengths to make them historically accurate but still street-legal, sure, but this was above and beyond. The conductor had climbed up on the train and Ella stopped.

“I don’t think I have a first class ticket,” she said, digging for the orange ticket. Before she could pull it out, the conductor smiled and waved a hand.

“Oh don’t worry. You’re our only passenger tonight it seems, so you’re getting the VIP treatment. On us.” He disappeared into the train with her bag and Ella shrugged and climbed in as well.

“Would you like your luggage stored in the luggage car, or would you like it to remain with you?” asked the conductor as they entered the first class compartment. Ella was surprised at the seating. Instead of booth-like chairs or rows of chairs like a normal train, there were full sized wing-back armchairs lining each side of the aisle. Faded green carpet covered the floor and the ceiling and walls were covered in lacquered wood paneling. Small Christmas wreaths and tinsel hung on the curtain rods above each window.

“Uh, no. They can be with me. No big deal.” They walked down the aisle, stopping halfway down. The conductor slid her duffel bag off his shoulder and onto the floor at the foot of one of the chairs and then took her backpack from Ella and placed it on the seat. He then smiled and gestured to the armchair opposite her bags.

“We’re just about to pull away,” he said as she sat down. “Can I get you a beverage? Coffee? Tea? Water? Or maybe something a little stronger?”

“No, I’m good,” Ella said. “Thanks.” The man tipped his hat and left the train car. A few moments later, the train’s horn blared and the train lurched forward. Ella looked around. The armchairs were upholstered with burgundy velvet and were balanced on a swivel, so Ella spun around. It almost reminded her of the Polar Express with the Christmas decor. She wondered how much of the train was original and how much was new. She could smell the faint scent of old cigarette smoke in the velvet. The chair was extremely comfortable. Ella sat back and relaxed until the conductor slid open the door sometime later and walked in.

“Are you enjoying the ride, ma’am?” he asked, smiling widely.

“Yeah, but you can just call me Ella. It’s fine.” The conductor nodded.

“Very well. Ella, can I get you anything? It’s no trouble.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just tired. But this really is a neat thing. I’ve seen the Historical Society’s plans to restore some of the steam-engines, but didn’t know they’d already gone through with these ones. I interned there last summer but didn’t think it would happen for a few more years at least.” She pulled out her ticket. It had a picture of the train in the center and all the text was styled and looked like it was typed on an old typewriter. “Even this. Really detailed.” The conductor held out a hand.

“I’ll take that, if you don’t mind.” Ella handed it over and he pulled out leather handled hole punch. It made a series of sharp clicks as the conductor punched out a row of holes on one end of the ticket, then handed it back to Ella. “If there is anything you need, just hail me down.” He tipped his hat again and left. Ella settled back into her seat and dozed off.

When she woke up, Ella had a moment of confusion as she remembered where she was, then smiled. She spun her chair around and pulled open the paisley curtains on her window. The lights of the train car reflected in the window so Ella could hardly see anything but her own reflection. She leaned forward and cupped her hands around her eyes to see out the window. A full moon lit up the snowy landscape as the train raced through. It was a beautiful, hilly landscape with sparse bushes and trees in the snow. It took her a second to realize something off. The trains she usually took riding home at the end of the semesters rode through dense forests. But the terrain they were passing was completely different. The sound of the compartment door sliding open drew her attention away.

“Hey,” she said as the conductor approached. “Where are we going? This isn’t the route.” The conductor smiled calmly.

“We’re headed to your final destination, don’t worry.” he nodded and left again.

Ella pulled out her ticket. She scanned the black text until she

found the word “destination”. But where there should’ve been the ticket attendant’s handwriting was only a line of punched holes. Her hands shook as she pulled out her phone out of her backpack. It was dead. She looked around. Are we going faster? She thought and looked out of the window again. The landscape did seem to be going by faster. She stood up and scanned around her. There wasn’t the emergency pull cord that modern trains had running along the walls, but after a few moments, she found it. It was a small red handled level on the far wall beside the door. Rushing over, she grabbed it and pulled. It wouldn’t move.

Just then, she felt the train turn to the left. She rushed over and sat in one of the armchairs and looked out of the window on that side. No, she thought as she saw the mountain range, no, this isn’t right. As the mountains loomed closer, she thought back to her internship at the History Center. The trains used to drive through the mountains, using tunnels built by the westward expansion. But after a massive cave-in, the entire state’s railway system was rerouted around the mountains due to the instability of the tunnels.

Just as she remembered the final details of the incident, the lights of the train car went out and she could see. She watched with horror as the train raced past several signs, each reading “DO NOT ENTER”, “TUNNEL CLOSED”, and “DANGER”. Her eyes welled with tears and her hands went numb as she turned around in the chair and she screamed. Sitting across from her was an old man in a three-piece suit reading a newspaper. He was transparent with a pale blue glow. Ella’s breath fogged up as she looked around her and saw the entire train was filled with ghosts dressed in suits and dresses. All of them were sitting, reading, or sleeping. One of them, a man in a wide-brimmed fedora and a long coat, looked out of the window and smiled. Ella turned and saw the front of the engine phase through the wooden planks that blocked the tunnel entrance. As the entire train went dark, Ella’s screams were drowned out by

the screeching of the train's brakes.

LOST IN A STORY

Hazel Neild

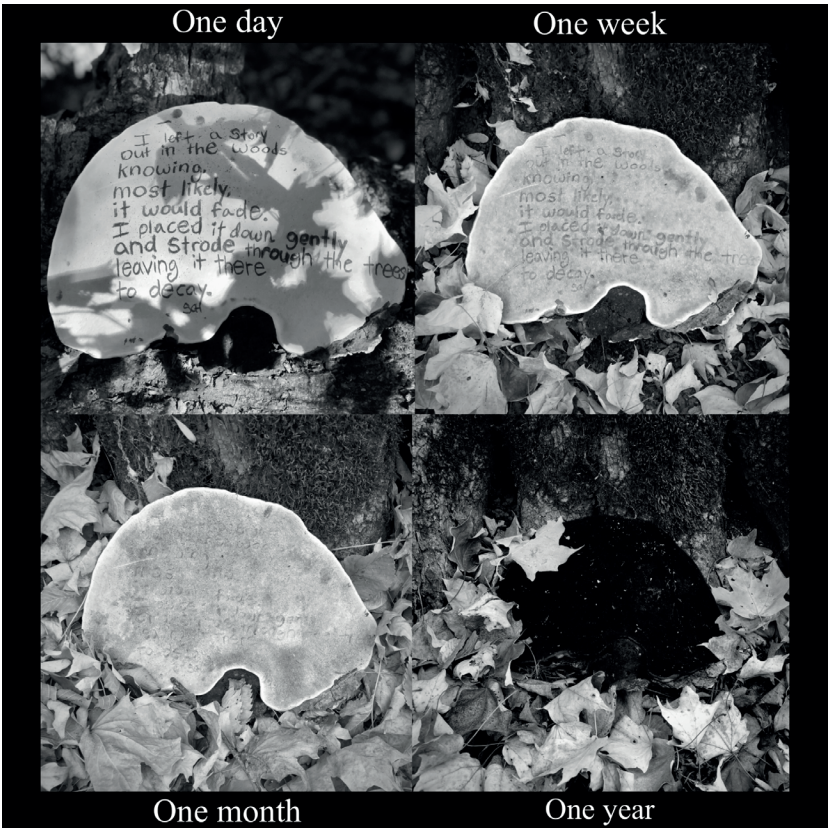
As I grow older
I find myself becoming
More foggy, losing myself
To pages,
Stories told and untold
Voices whispering, drawing me in
To their lives, their histories
Their beauty and their pain

There are some who say a
Good book will
Take a piece of your soul
A price for having been read
For someone losing time with them
Hours and days passing by

If they do have a cost, a price
Why is it that I find myself
More willing to pay that
With each line?
Writing cheques to
Cover the stories I read
The books I enter
The worlds I lose myself in

Giving my being to
The characters I understand
The worlds I recall

The words that claim me
Until I no longer remain
In this life
But a story



Decay - Sarah Huderle

Contributor's Notes

Aaliyah Upshaw: "Nothing much special about me, I am an average person with a dream like everyone else. I have an opportunity that my family never got to have, so I am taking advantage of it. I am learning what it's like to be expressive, and my love for writing can do that."

Abigail Wamhoff is always looking for something to do! While in Australia, she found a passion for photography!

Ben Bury has a passion for aviation, and labels himself as an "avgeek". In his free time, he spends hours playing Microsoft Flight Simulator. When time and weather permits, he can also be found around various parks next to the airport to watch planes and photograph them, known as "planespotting"

Casey Marble is a twenty-one-year-old, second year Normandale Community College student from Eden Prairie. Casey's main writing focus has been satirical contributions to websites and magazines around Minneapolis, but he thought he would try his hand at poetry after taking Normandale creative writing classes. Casey's hobbies include playing basketball, reading Kurt Vonnegut novels, and amateur glass working.

Chloe Boatman stays up too late most nights reading and writing. After some time in the medical field, she changed directions and is now pursuing a bachelor's degree in English and an associate's degree in Creative Writing. She wants to use her degrees to teach English Second Language in Thailand.

Christopher Reid is a student at Normandale Community College.

Darren Almgren is a fantasy and horror writer. Growing up, he loved making all kinds of art - almost always coming up with a story for whatever he was making. This penchant for storytelling led him to his passion for writing. When he isn't writing, he is enjoying a relaxing drive with his wife, watching movies, reading or collecting any mythology book he can find. He has self-published multiple short stories on his website. He also had a short story, "Bubblegum and Citrus", included in *Dark Mirrors*, a horror anthology by Archer Publishing.

Dayton Rowland is a Poli-Sci student aspiring to be a great horror writer in their off-time.

Dhoha Qasem has been honing her writing skills since fourth grade and has always found joy in creating rhyming poetry. As she grew older, she discovered the beauty of unrhymed poetry and its unique way of conveying emotions. Though she is still working on mastering poetry, she plans to continue writing as a hobby and improving her craft. She has also won second place for Patsy Lea Core. Additionally, she also loves expressing herself through drawing as a fun and creative outlet.

Hazel Neild never thought about writing until this semester. She has always wanted to escape this world for one that's more fantastical, but this is their first time trying to show that to others. They would rather be reading a book in a vast library or rowing on a river than here right now.

James Lou is a freshman at Normandale Community College that has been working with two- dimensional mediums for over 10 years. After struggling through an identity crisis for 3 years, the

pieces he now creates are an attempt to genuinely represent the world through his eyes without any put-on facade.

Jesse Navarro is a poet and songwriter. He writes about a variety of topics and themes such as nothing in life lasting forever, a journey of finding joy and overcoming hardships in life, overthinking, anxiety, and sleep paralysis. He attends Normandale and lives in Richfield, Minnesota.

Kalayah Brown is a computer science major who due to life circumstances lost her loved one at a young age and turned to poetry as a way of coping and connecting with others.

Keith Bateman is a student at Normandale Community College.

Kela Gutierrez is an author with the nuances of their life, from the good and the ugly parts, to create their literary pieces, from poetry to creative nonfiction short stories.

Kristina Ignatenkova is an Artist/Animator Majoring in Health Science and Computer Technology."

Kylie McWilliams, 19 years old, has been writing poetry for over five years now. Not only has it helped her overcome difficulties and struggles in her life, it has also helped her capture the beauty of the outside world she's living in. Poetry to her is one of, if not the strongest art form. It's real, raw, emotional, beautiful, and wonderfully random. She's been published in the Paper Lantern three times so far, and is honored to be published again!

Lexi Kaiser is a student at Normandale Community College.

Lyla Northup is a student at Normandale Community College.

Meredith Bomster is a student currently going for her AFA in creative writing. She has always loved poetry and finally decided to submit her work. She is not quite sure what she will do after Normandale, but she knows that writing will always be her hobby.

Mona Mavluda: “This is my second year at Normandale and I am a writing tutor. I love to write and poetry is one of my favorite types of literary art.”

Morgan Teats is a Sophomore who looks forward to graduation. He has a love of art and writing and looks forward to moving on to a four-year school where he can bring both loves together. He hopes to use these talents to explore the forgotten realms of the spiritual and bring them back into culture as the world turns right side up yet again.

Row Jama has been at Normandale for multiple years and loves writing poetry as a pastime.

Ru Dargatz Eliassen is an aspiring songwriter, filmmaker and artist. She has a deep passion and appreciation for creativity at her core, using any medium they can find to express their emotions and ideas. Including digital & traditional art, photography, and writing. Often turning to nature for inspiration and inwards to humanity itself for fuel to keep creating.

Sage Filmore is a seventeen-year-old full-time figure skater and student at Normandale CC. She lives with her parents and dog. She graduated high school at fifteen and a half. She is transferring to the University of Minnesota in the spring and plans to major in

anthropology. Her hobbies include reading, writing, dancing, and gardening.

Sarah Huderle is an LGBTQ+ artist and writer from the heart of Minnesota. She enjoys long hikes through the woods, playing D&D with friends, and writing about and drawing the great outdoors. At Normandale, they aspire to complete their AFA, pursue English, and embrace the world of writing.

Talia Winkley dislikes writing in third person but enjoys being creative. Especially when she is procrastinating. Her favorite medium is pencils (I know, so boring), and often her small black cat (Artemis) volunteers to “help” by shoving Talia’s hands, or laying down to sleep on her arms.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

The Normandale Creative Writing Club editorial team edited and produced this issue. They are: Sarah Huderle, James Palm IV, and Saff Drayton.

Interested in joining the amazing list of *Paper Lantern* contributors? *The Paper Lantern* accepts submissions bianually: Spring and Fall semesters, respectively. Fall issues are produced by the Creative Writing Club, and spring issues by the AFA Capstone class.

All work is reviewed anonymously, and acceptance is based solely on literary and artistic merit. Work in all genres of creative writing (poetry, fiction, memoir, short plays, etc.) as well as visual art are considered. Multiple submissions are accepted. Submissions are open only to registered Normandale Community College students.

More information, as well as the archive of previous *Paper Lantern* issues, can be found at www.thepaperlantern.org.

A Note on the Type

The Paper Lantern vol. 19 issue 1 is set in Cormorant Garamond, an open-source typeface designed by astrophysicist Christian Thalmann, who runs the type foundry Catharsis Fonts.

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