

The Paper Lantern

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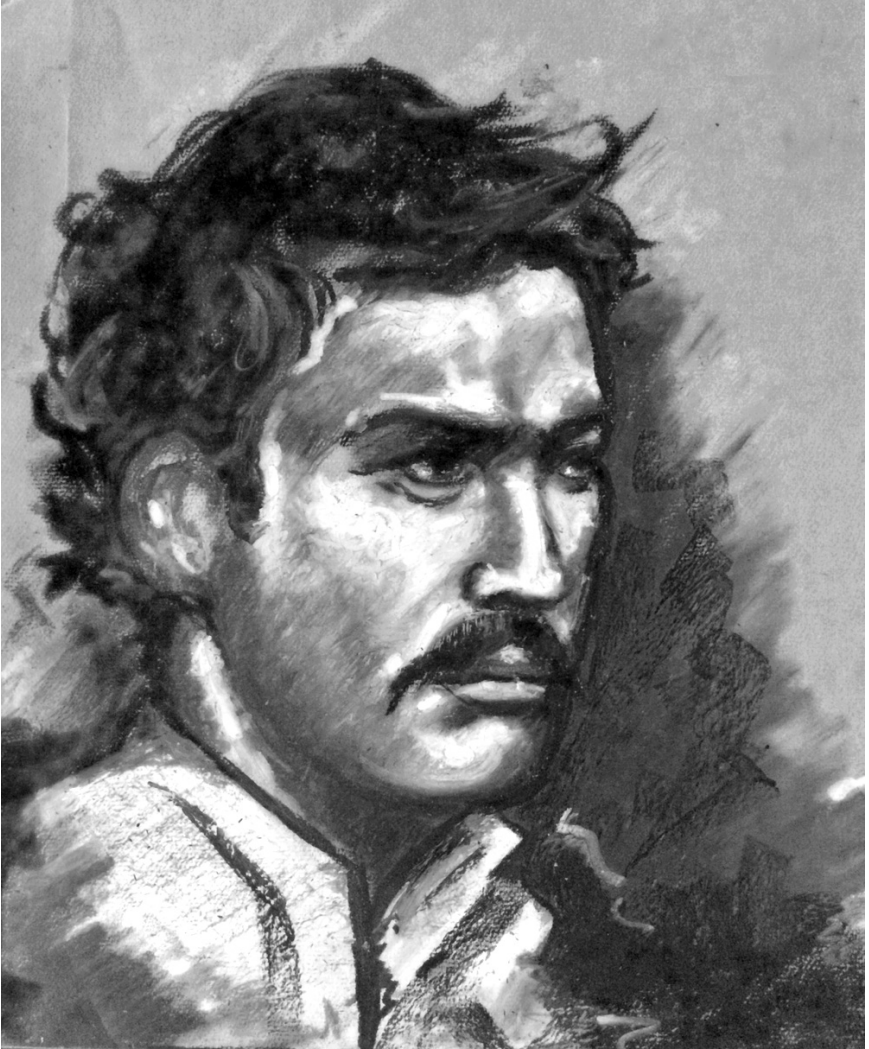
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Grandfather

by Jessica DeLapp



The Uncollected

by Sarah Huderle

Red jacket...brass band...red jacket...no...no...no! As Willow stood in a cramped thrift store on a cold Christmas Eve, hands digging furiously, frigid fingers flipping through album after album of musty-scented vinyls in a desperate attempt to find Grannie's old jazz record, she wondered why her mom donated the damn thing as dust drifted into her already teary eyes. Sure, Grannie didn't need it. In fact, seeing as she'd just died, it'd prove difficult to find something Grannie did need. Vinyl after vinyl flew past Willow's fingers. Somewhere in the pile, she'd find it, that crucial relic, that jazz vinyl they listened to together. Sometime, anytime, any moment now, it'd pop up and Willow would take it home, set it up, and sit on the couch, feet kicked up, head tilted back, and reminisce on her time with Grannie. Any moment now...the pile grew thin...any moment...only a few left...

The final vinyl flipped over. Willow stared blankly at the finished pile. Soulless, corporate Christmas tunes echoed from the speakers above. Dark blonde curls flopped over her eyes. Nothing. Nothing more at all. Grannie's vinyl wasn't here. She shook her head. Maybe another flip through? She reached for the first bin again, then froze as a familiar voice rang behind her.

"Hey there, sweetheart. Looking for vinyls as well?"

Willow jumped. She whipped around and watched as Valentina, a tall, lanky blonde with a jean jacket and a knack for breaking hearts, stepped around a dull Christmas tree and began flipping through a bin of vinyls.

Willow's voice cracked. "Uh...yeah. I was just, uh...yeah. Doing that." Heart racing, Willow stared at Valentina's scarlet lipstick and slowly reached towards the vinyls. Fidgeting, boot tapping, she flipped one over with a trembling hand and slowly turned away from Valentina. When Willow saw the vinyl she'd exposed, however, she furrowed her brows and spoke.

"Wait a minute..."

Valentina glanced over and grinned. "Oh, sweet!"

She leaned over, hand brushing Willow's aside, and snagged the record. Valentina and Willow studied it. On the cover, a well-dressed man

stood rigid next to a piano, his trombone held high. Behind him, two elevated rows seated a large brass jazz band. A red border surrounded the image. Instantly, yellow adrenaline slashed Willow's gut. She recognized that vinyl! It belonged to Grannie! She must have flipped past it. She stared at Valentina with wide eyes.

"Give me that vinyl."

Valentina raised a brow. "What? Why?"

"It was mine before."

"Yeah, was!" Valentina tucked it under her arm. "Finders keepers. If you wanted it, you shouldn't've donated it."

"I didn't! My mom did!"

"Sorry sweetheart, I don't care. This is a favorite."

Willow's breath trembled. "A favorite? I know your taste! You don't listen to jazz!"

Valentina laughed and shook her head. "It's not *my* favorite."

"Then whose is it?"

Valentina placed her hand on Willow's shoulder and flashed a soft smile.

"Your anger is adorable."

With that, she playfully patted Willow's shoulder and strode to checkout. Flustered, Willow wanted to chase Valentina and seize that vinyl, but instead, she watched her go, cheeks flushed, ears red, and cursed under her breath.

"Yeah! Then she pushed my hand aside and just took it!"

Finishing her speech, Willow threw herself back into a plush beanbag with a frustrated groan. A round pillow flew off the seat and rolled over the ground. In front of her, Shae, a curly bob cut in a snowman button up, clasped their hands together and nodded. Shae's brick fireplace roared beside them. With its soft browns, faux plants, and roaring fire, Willow often found Shae's home calming, but today, the vinyl flooded her brain and washed out all peace.

"Okay," Shae said, "as someone who deals with Valentina as a neighbor, and as the friend who put up with your messy, messy breakup, I believe I'm qualified to give advice. May I?"

Willow nodded.

"Let it go."

"What?" Willow shot up. Another pillow tumbled away. "Why?"

“It ain’t worth it. Despite the personal significance, it’s just a vinyl. Grannie ain’t hiding in the grooves. You could beg Valentina for it, but she’d just laugh and call you an adorable little puppy. Your dignity matters, Willow.”

Willow shook her head. Just a vinyl? Just a vinyl! No. It wasn’t just a vinyl. She needed it back. That exact one. She needed to hear it perfectly, to hear the crackles, to hear the snaps, to hear the pops, exactly as they came. No. It wasn’t just a vinyl. But how would she get it back? It’s not like she could just walk over. It’s not like she had a friend who lived next door... ah.

Willow grinned. “Her whole family goes to church on Christmas Day, right?”

Shae groaned.

Willow leaned forward. “Please?”

Shae rubbed the bridge of their nose. “Listen, I know better than to stop you. If you insist, you can sleep here and slip over in the morning. Just...be careful, okay?”

Willow beamed. “Thank you.”

That night, sleep refused to arrive. Willow begged for it to tiptoe through the door, caress her eyes, and sucker punch her into unconsciousness, yet hour after hour, it refused to show. She stared at the ceiling and the faux vines sprawling above, listened to the steady tick of the clock, watched snow fall outside, and shut her eyes. Songs from the vinyl looped in her mind. Memories looped with them, memories of Grannie’s snickerdoodles, of her warm knitted blankets, and, most of all, of the stories she told Willow under a blanket on the couch. Willow recalled the flashlight Grannie held to her chin as she told stories of wandering ghosts, along with the unicorn plushie she’d shake as she told fairytales of mythical beasts. Willow recalled, she remembered, she shook her head, all as tears squeezed from her eyes, as mucus dripped from her nose, as jazz looped in her head, jazz from that vinyl, from Grannie’s vinyl, Jazz she swore she heard out loud.

Finally, with a yell, Willow flung herself out of bed, rushed to the living room, pulled the backdoor open, and threw herself onto the patio. She panted. Brisk December air stung her throat and beat against her knit sweater. It felt like a splash of fresh, cold water, yet still, she heard the jazz loop, heard it loop constantly, heard it loop endlessly. Had she finally lost it?

Did she actually hear the jazz? She listened. She did. Notes floated over the snow, but from where?

Slowly, her eyes drifted to Valentina's house next door. From an open window, soft yellow light spilled over the midnight snow and illuminated falling snowflakes. Ignoring the piercing cold that stabbed her bare feet, Willow shuffled through the freshly fallen snow and approached the window, listening as the jazz slowly crescendoed with her approach.

The vinyl. Directly under the open window, the vinyl sat and spun. Willow turned to her tracks. Fresh snow would cover them by morning. Nobody could track her. Her opportunity had arrived. Carefully, Willow snaked her hand through the window. Her finger hooked the needle. She lifted it. The vinyl crackled. The jazz halted. She rested the needle. She breathed.

Someone sighed.

Willow jolted. A sigh. Someone sighed. Someone who wasn't Willow sighed. Her thoughts rushed. Someone nearby, someone dangerously close, someone who certainly heard the jazz stop, someone who was most certainly approaching, someone who must be approaching, approaching to resume the music, approaching to find Willow, approaching to keep Willow's vinyl, just sighed. Frantically, Willow glanced about the empty yard, glanced about the glowing room, and snapped her eyes to the couch. Valentina. Valentina, chest rising softly, sat on the couch, snoring gently under a thick knitted blanket, and next to her, a frail little woman with a puff of white hair and a fuzzy wool sweater breathed deeply, eyes shut tight.

Several seconds passed. What now? Staring at them, her mind racing, Willow took a deep breath. She had to do the right thing, right? Right? She drew another frigid breath. Yes...she knew. She knew what to do. She knew the right thing to do. Shae's words drifted through her mind, calming her nerves, steadying her hand, and clearing her foggy, foggy mind. Yes...she would do the right thing. And so, silently, Willow slipped her hands through the window and gently lifted the vinyl.

Prince Hamlet Finally Goes to Therapy

by Samantha Lindberg

In a room with two plush armchairs and a small side table with a bowl of sand, the THERAPIST sits shuffling through papers idly. She's a modern woman who speaks casually and without flair. She's clearly confused by her client's Elizabethan ravings. Enter, Prince HAMLET, of the Shakespeare tragedy, stomping into the THERAPIST's office with paranoia and anger evident on his face. He's a traditional Shakespearean character, purple speech and all, with a puffed-sleeve poet's shirt and a crown on his head.

THERAPIST

(Sighing to herself) Welcome back... Prince...

THERAPIST continues sorting her pile of paper.

HAMLET

Evening, fair subject. Come, sit ye down and hear my tale, for I have seen the devil in man's skin!

THERAPIST

Uh huh... And what did this "devil" say to you?

HAMLET

Oh, angels and ministers of grace, defend us! The devil hath claimed to take mine own father's spirit.

O! that this flesh should blacken and clothes turn to ash, and fashion myself in the shape of mourning, for I have sinned, dear citizen! What shall I do?

THERAPIST

(Smiling awkwardly) Right... I understand entirely. And what is this sin?

HAMLET

The devil asks me to slaughter, dear subject. He looks me in the eye in the shape of the most honest man yet to live and asks if he

would lie to me. Oh, a million times over, and another yet again, he would lie! And yet, my conscience compels me towards his wishes. How could I see an honest man in the mirror if in my yellowed, cowardly nature, my father's vengeance I do not enact?

THERAPIST

And you know this apparition isn't real, correct? That your father hasn't come back from the dead?

HAMLET

By heaven! Do not preach to me my own madness. You're just as terrible as mine own mother. The spirit I have seen may be the devil, who hath power to assume a pleasing form. Whether he is truly the soul of my father asking me to avenge him, I cannot tell. Yet, even if not, will I comply?

THERAPIST

It seems to be a theme in our meetings that you tend to lash out at everything. Have you been working on your anger issues since we last spoke?

HAMLET

(Visibly angry) Anger issues?

THERAPIST

Yes. Your tendency towards violence is... alarming. There are other ways to express yourself. Especially when it comes to these new auditory hallucinations, you need better coping mechanisms. Have you tried writing? Music? Poetry?

HAMLET

(Proud) Yes, I am seasoned in the art.

THERAPIST

(Relieved) Excellent! What have you written?

HAMLET

That I should paint this land in blood and scatter mine uncle's organs across the dirt and leave his body decomposing to the worms. Humble the prideful fool to let him be eaten by the silt beneath his feet!

THERAPIST

(Deflating) Anything you've written that *isn't* about murder?

HAMLET

(Laughing) You are too funny! Have you considered being a jester?

THERAPIST

(With a sigh) No, I've not. Now, I believe we have a few courses of action. I'd suggest you grieve properly and take some time away to think about your father and allow yourself to mourn properly. You tell me often that mourning is too much "like a woman?"

HAMLET

Correct. To mourn in such a fashion is to become a harlot like my mother.

THERAPIST

Right. We'll work on the misogyny, too. Or, if you'd prefer, considering hallucinations are driving you to violence, we could send you on a nice vacation to an all white room. *(Aside to herself)* And I can finally get a break.

HAMLET

And this pleases my conscience to not enact my father's vengeance? Will I be absolved? And in this absolution in my departure from these lands will my cowardly nature be gone with itself so that I may return with the strength of mine father to finally make work of the murderous kin? To return to soil in death what the devil has deposited upon the earth and redeem myself to the Lord?

THERAPIST

(Blinking) Sure. If that's what helps you sleep at night. Now, I just need to make a quick call. *(She pulls out her phone)*

HAMLET leans in over the THERAPIST's phone to get a better look, brows wrinkled.

HAMLET

What is this blasted communication box in thine hand?

THERAPIST

(Staring at him blankly) (Aside to herself) A really long grippy sock vacation...

The Hungry Worms

by Caroline Holmes



Nightmare

by Chloe Stromberg

The best dream
I ever had
Was
A nightmare
Because
It reflected
A reality that
Will never
Be
I shall relive
This twisted and
Warped
Euphoria
Night
After
Night
For eternity

Your Garden

by Saff Drayton

I look like my dad with my hair cut short. If I turn my head to the right angle, I can see his profile; the sharp downward dart of his nose, the spike of blonde hair that never quite sits right. He's there, too, in the sour pink flush that creeps across my cheeks. It's hard to recall what exactly prompted me to buzz it all off. Maybe boredom, maybe the heat, or maybe some lingering, sardonic sense of solidarity with you.

Two months ago, you traveled 700 miles and change to Fort Benning, Georgia for basic training with the Army. I begged you not to. I cried. I pleaded. I tried anything and everything to push past your sobbing refusal. But you went, and through letters, you sent pictures back— tiny, fuzzy snapshots of a girl I couldn't recognize. You had been shorn like a yearling sheep, your scalp all raw and pink from the sun.

Tomorrow will mark a full year since I met you, the *real* you, *Anne*, not , that ghoulish boy's name your parents saddled you with. Of course, I was (and am still) the same way, and our union was a perplexing and many-layered thing to everyone who saw us. Tomorrow's also the day that you come home.

I was introduced to the real you six miles northeast from my house, in a gully next to the railroad tracks whose stream had no name. Later, while retelling this story to our friends, you'd laugh at me and joke that at that time I was also a nameless, winding thing, just like the gully's stream. When I first saw you, you held a giant stick, used first as a walking cane, then as a spear to prod at everything that squirmed in the forest's undergrowth.

It took a while for you to notice me. You were engrossed in the movements of a turtle that scuttled around in the mud, and we were alone. We weren't supposed to be, but our mutual friend got sick and called out an hour before we were going to meet up. I was already halfway there when I got the text, so I figured I would see it through. I guess you did, too. You puzzled me at first because I thought I already knew you. We had been in the same English class for the last two years. I waved.

“?” I yelled down the gully.

“Ah. No. It's *Anne*, now, actually,” you yelled back.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I also go by *Annie*.”

You beckoned me down into the gully with your stickless hand and together we ambled further into the woods. Without thought, we fell into lockstep; you in your beat-up Chucks and me in something sturdy and thrifted. We spent the whole day shuffling through and around ponds, ditches, and streams along the railroad tracks. It surprised me how easy it was to talk to you. We told each other about our plans for school next year: which courses we wanted to take most, where we planned on squatting to skip class, and all the colleges we expected to get rejected from. You also told me how your mother didn’t like you staying out too late, or growing out your hair, or painting your nails lime green. You told me these things to ask me if I’d hate you for them, too, I think. I think you might have even been asking for forgiveness.

“What about you?” you asked.

“My mom tells me I look a little more like my dad every day. I don’t think she means it in a nice way,” I laughed.

“So... she knows?” You lifted yourself out of the gully.

I didn’t answer. Wordlessly, you lent a hand to pull me out of the gully, and we stopped to squint at the railroad tracks and the setting sun. The end of the tracks melted into the brush on either side. We couldn’t tell where each way would lead.

“Left or right?”

“Left,” I said.



The second time you and I met was more purposeful. I asked you if you wanted to go eat somewhere, and you made a game out of checking your schedule and telling me you’d *try* to squeeze me in. We decided to go to a cafe down the road from my house.

It was about 100° outside, and you ordered coffee. It was scalding. I still held it for you when you bent a knee to tie your shoe. I was glad for the heat, though, because without it I had no explanation for my nervous sweating.

We dragged our feet on the pavement and walked uphill to a small park. The benches there were wrought iron and hot from the sun, but we sat, and you spoke to me for the first time in a light, breathy tone you hadn’t

used before. You sounded just like any other girl. I don't think anyone else noticed. Maybe they thought that small, sweet voice came from me.

You fumbled a folded sheet of paper out of your back pocket and handed it to me. I took it and felt the crushed edges, brushed my thumb over the light pencil lines on it and unfolded it. It was a drawing of me.

"I did this while in English last year," you explained.

"Oh, wow." It was exactly what your view would've been from the seat behind me.

"Yeah. You had just cut your hair, and I thought you were cute."

"Oh, *wow*," I laughed. "I thought you hated me then."

"I mean, you're not wrong." You smiled a little bit. "But I still thought you were cute."



My dad planted coneflowers. He grew row after row of spiked pink bulbs that would bow and sigh in the dead summer heat. I always wondered what meaning he exhumed from tending them year after year, and when I got to your front step, I wondered what meaning your parents got from their plants, too. The whole front yard was teeming with feathery fronds, flowers and winding grasses I didn't know the name of. The sheer height of its unkempt spread made me feel small again.

I had biked to your house that day because I had, in your own words, graduated from an outside friend to an inside one. This did not sit well with your mother, who fluttered and hovered around our pack of rising juniors as we filed through the front door.

Inside of your house, the walls were covered in framed photos. One, a solemn portrait of your father in his military uniform; another, of you, facing away from the camera and reaching out to pet an old beagle. The most striking among them was your parents' wedding. It was summer and the humidity had mussed up your mother's hair. The edges of it were worn and dog-eared, torn in some places, and time had long since stolen most of the color from it, but still it was clear to me through that picture that you have the same face as your mother.

You led me and the rest of your friends down into the basement, where we killed a couple hours playing board games and teasing the secrets out of each other. Every moment you looked at me a little too long was precious to me. We were the only ones in that basement and maybe even the whole world who could see each other for who and what we really were.

I stayed for another fifteen minutes after everyone else had gone. In that fifteen minutes, you dragged me practically by the scruff to your room and shut the door. I handed you what you had asked me for, you put it on, and we sat cross-legged and adjacent to each other in silence. I don't remember who reached out first, but somehow my fingers and yours ended up intertwined. Red hot shame burned across our cheeks so intensely that we couldn't bear to look at each other.

"What? Have you never held hands with someone before?" you asked.

"No, I have... Just not someone wearing my old skirt."

"Does that make it different?"

"I don't know. Maybe?" I thought for a second. "I think it's cool how you can take a thing I hated and turn it into something happier."

"Would it scare you if I said I loved you?"

"No. What scares me is that you look Mormon with that skirt over your jeans."

"Fuck off."



I don't think I ever told you, but I fell off my bike the day you ended it. That morning, my head was swimming with declarations of love before I even made it to the park. Does it pain you now to recall that last day? Do you even remember? I wear that last day on my skin—when we met at our park for the last time and the first thing that stumbled out of my mouth was that I loved you, too. *I loved you, too.*

There was an oak tree—immemorial and immovable, it stood guard to shield us from eyes that might pry and cast judgment. What did you do with the privacy it afforded us? Nothing I can recall without choking back spit and tears. Lacking both the fortitude to stop it and the composure to recite those moments, I let you trample my dignity. For a full year now, it has been an unwelcome guest in my mind.

All these months I have asked myself why your hands had burned me then, why they left scorched flesh in their wake, and why I couldn't dare to put a name to it. Here it is, laid out on fine silver with all of the trimmings. But I can't ever say it.

The indelicate way you broke it off—*Sorry, I just don't want to do this any more*—hadn't helped. Coming down from the hill was more of a

homecoming or a pilgrimage than a descent, and I would have kissed the earth if I didn't think bending over would make me hurl.

I got about halfway home before my hands and knees crumpled against the pavement. The front wheel of my bike drifted off of the sidewalk and got stuck in the mud. I flew off of the bike, over and past the handlebars and screeching down toward the sandpaper cement. I saved my face by flinging all my limbs out in front of me, and later wept to my mother over my skinned knees instead of what you did to me.

I went back to that park after you left, once. I didn't go until then to be sure that you wouldn't come crawling out of the woodwork to reoffend. I couldn't find that tree. I couldn't find anything, not without you as my guide. It was as if the forest was hiding those trails from me. Like it wanted to shield me from those memories. I didn't appreciate it much. I wanted to remember.

The return to school nurtured the rift growing between us. Come fall, you'd toy with me, calling me late into the night to tell me all about your classes and how you missed the girl you'd been seeing and how long it'd been since you'd last stained your knees green rolling around in the grass. You never acknowledged what you did to me or what happened at that park. You asked me if we were *all good*, and of course I said yes, because the thought of losing what scraps of the old you I had left terrified me. Eventually, you mentioned your intentions of leaving and following in your father's footsteps. Eventually, something calloused took root in me.

Come winter, I was a new animal. The mornings before school were always dark and the daylight always faded before it was time to go home. I don't need to tell you how few windows our school had. I never saw much of the sun during those months, and I started to think of myself as a hibernating creature. I waited.

In the spring, I stomped on worms and let my feet drag in meltwater. Squirrels built stick forts and downy nests in my backyard, and all my mornings were spent watching them. They plucked too-green acorns out of woody hats and branches to use them for whittling teeth down. It made me think— did they ask the tree for them, or was the lack of a *no* enough?



When you come back, you're fresh off the plane, and you call me. Of course, I pick up, and I listen to you stumble through an account of

your experiences at Basic Training. It feels like I'm hearing your voice for the first time again. I don't know how to feel about it. I still want to cling to the idea of you I had. The hours creep by, and it's past ten now, which, on most nights, is when your words start to melt into one another. My mind wanders. I think of your letters. I think of your handwriting, dense and whispery like underbrush, and I think of the woods where we'd talk. Somewhere in the background, I can hear the muddied murmur of your guitar strings being plucked. I picture you as you were last year; sun-drenched, shimmering, and picking sticker burrs off of your socks.

It's strange hearing you talk like this, all rough and deep and soldier-like. I know that it'll fade, and you'll shed it for something lighter. You always do. Through drowsy lips you spin me a story of sprawling rows of bunks, your friends between the sheets— scared, vulnerable lambs shorn just as short and soft as you were. You ramble on about the cold steel of the bed frames, tripping and picking up words where they lie and marching onward without end. Past your recollections of latrines and soldier-boy games we trek, and finally we end up at the foot of a great wooden tower. Here, you say, your Drill Sergeant told you to climb.

“It sucked, but the view from the top was my everything,” you tell me.

“Do you remember the hill we climbed last year?” I ask. “With the big tree?”

“I do, I do.”

“Could we go again? Maybe tomorrow?”

You agree, and I make landfall in the morning. Your porch is quiet; the eaves of your house beckon me. When you open the door, I wonder if you can see my decision in the way I look at you. How its finality clouds up my pupils like cataracts. Would you pluck it from my eyes if you could? Do you even know what you did? I still wear that day on my skin. Do you? Can you tell? You shuffle out onto the porch and instinctively, I take a step back. Any persisting feelings of doubt that had endured within me are quelled by actually *seeing* your face. All that remains is the thought of your teeth scraping against the pavement and my boot against your neck.

We slide into lockstep like we never stopped, and we barely make it past your house before the penance starts.

“I got sent home early,” you confess. You're crying. “I didn't make it. My dad won't even talk to me.”

I'm somewhere else. I'm coasting downhill and falling off my bike, sobbing and picking the scab off my knee so the scar fades slower. I'm watching the wound fester; green at first, then black, then purple.

"I couldn't do it."



I learned to step lightly in your absence. I learned to wield my father's axe. By the time we reach the apex of the hill, my hands are slick with fear and sweat. I can hardly hold onto the axe when I take it out of my pack. I wish you'd look back at me, then maybe you'd see. Then, maybe, you could make it better. I want you to make it better. But you don't, you *can't*, and I swing.

In horror movies, the hero always limps away at dawn— clutching a cavernous wound, maybe— but their troubles always melt away with the rising sun. If you can make it through one bad night, you can vanquish evil. You can mend all that is wrong with the world. But monsters don't hide in shadows, and most horrors don't wait until nightfall. So, it's only natural that you, my greatest horror, die in the morning.

You wailed. You pleaded. You said anything and everything you thought might buy you another few precious moments, but it didn't matter. In the shade of that massive oak, we were nothing to the forest but ghosts. I've seen loggers wield giant axes and witnessed how they drive them down effortlessly through soft wood. I can tell you now, it's not the same with bone. The sun is too bright, and it makes the blood too real when I lodge the axe in the back of your thigh.

There will be no black dresses, no flowers to place on your grave. Your final tomb will be the stomach of whatever beast finds you most devourable. I'll make a bed of loam and sweetgrass— milkweed and coneflower and churned soil just for you. I wonder— can you hear, now, how hungry the earth is? How feverishly the roots of the world scream to reclaim you?

Seat yourself in the sweet marrow of the earth, I'll watch it devour you.

Omen

by Sarah Huderle



Headless Body in a Topless Bar

by Megan Ocel

“I’d say the irony is clever, but that’d be inappropriate.”

I turned to the other manager of Benny’s Topless Bar who was one of two other men who worked here that were going to be disposing of the current mess we had on our hands. I guess since I was the only girl in the room they decided to leave me out of all the “heavy lifting”. It’s pretty sexist if you ask me, but whatever. Our boss said he’d rather have me help with the clean up process anyways, which, now that I think about it, is even more sexist.

I shrugged. “It’s fine. I don’t think she can hear you.”

We both returned to staring in silence at the headless body of Lana Schroder, who about twenty minutes ago was found standing and gripping a pole as if someone had come and knocked her head off mid-swing around it.

No one knows exactly what happened. Our boss never gave us a heads up (no pun intended) about the situation and instead just waited until we all got into work for the “surprise” to be unveiled. Not that it was covered or anything, no, her body was front and center stage. The security tape couldn’t even account for what had happened. Maybe it’s because we were still using a system from ‘09 that could reason for the shitty quality of the recording. But the strange thing is, the only off thing about the tape was a five-second cut where it showed Lana alive and well, then five seconds later, no head. No witnesses, either, which in all honesty might be more strange than her death. We’ve been standing in the audience staring at her since we watched the footage. It was one of those situations where you kind of have to stare at it before the terror sets in, you know? Maybe you don’t know, and in that case, you probably shouldn’t be reading any of this. It’s not that we *wanted* to stare at her partially naked, bloody body. Or who knows, maybe these guys wanted to. *I* didn’t. I just wanted to know where the hell her head went.

“You think rigor mortis is what’s keeping her standing up all stiff like that?” Ezra asked no one in particular, walking up the stairs to the body while the other two prepared tarps and other body-disposing items next to me. One of them, our cook, a large man named Jerry, was passing out faded white aprons from his kitchen and black dishwashing gloves to wear.

It was a pretty disturbing sight. We were a mask and a chainsaw away from cosplaying Leatherface from Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

Upon being ignored like he rightfully should have been, Ezra then asked, “Is it bad that I want to poke her?” His tanned skin next to Lana’s pale, graying body was enough of a sight to remind me to go and sit out in the sun for a few hours when I get home. Deathly pale had a new meaning to it now, one that I wanted nothing to do with.

“Just hurry up, will you?” I told him, a scowl forming my face as if I was smelling something bad—oh wait, I was. Lana’s decaying body.

“What’s your problem?” He asked, as if there wasn’t a decapitated woman in front of us that he was now poking. “You’re *kind* of bossing me around, Sweetheart.”

I was one more nickname away from snapping a photo of him with Lana and sending it to the police. “This is a crime scene, and you’re acting like Lana’s body is a stress ball.”

“Uh, it’s not a *crime* scene because the cops aren’t coming. Nobody called them,” he reminded me in a snarky tone.

That was another thing that really pushed my buttons. Under any other circumstance or problem that might arise at the bar, such as a fight or a robbery, I’d totally understand if no one called the police. The men who worked here were all practically criminals themselves, so calling the cops was referred to as a “bitch move” and unacceptable while “handling issues like men” (though usually illegal and always the worst option) was somehow better. I guess I just figured because of the almost supernatural nature of this... murder? Accident? Whatever. Anyways, I just figured they’d want some extra help, because everyone knows I’m just here to complain.

But then again, a headless body in a topless bar really might put some suspicion on the establishment. Enough suspicion to close us down for good.

I refrained from saying anything else.

I did my best to tie my curly hair back before I slowly put the apron on, then the gloves. We had an hour until people would start pulling up in our driveway (yes, our boss told us the situation at hand was to be no exception to the “open 365 days a year” policy he was so prideful of), meaning we had an hour to take care of our dead dancer and an hour to find her head. By the way things are going right now, we might have to hold off on cleaning up and just throw a tarp over the mess and pray no customers ask questions.

I turned my attention back to Ezra who was now trying simultaneously to pry her fingers loose from the pole and kick her knees out from under her to get her body to fall.

You may have already figured out that the value of human life here at Benny's Topless Bar is grossly over-exaggerated. If I were to be completely honest, I think I'm the only one working here staring at their first dead body. I don't know if it was pride or guilt that was welling up in my throat after that thought, but it sure didn't taste good.

"Hand me that saw, Sweetheart, will you?" Ezra asked me, pointing over my shoulder at the rusty hacksaw in a bucket labeled "for inconveniences" next to one of our bouncers, Zane.

"Oh my God," I moaned softly, feeling my stomach flip. It's hard to say if it was because of the box, Ezra, the terror setting in, or the fact that Lana was definitely going to haunt us from now on, but I needed to get out of this room before I vomited and created another mess to clean up.

The kitchen was the nearest room I could get to, and since Jerry was out front dismembering a body, I knew it would be empty. I decided to use the space to take a few shaky breaths.

In, out.

Jesus. Maybe this onset of anxiety was actually Lana starting her reign of terror over this establishment, because after watching that security tape, I'm pretty sure this place has a few demons in it now. Her partially naked body would forever walk our stages at night as she searched for her head that for some reason is still missing. *T-minus fifty minutes until the doors open.* But hey, it would be pretty cool to see a ghost, now that I think about it. And I was always nice to Lana, so I'm sure she wouldn't possess me or anything.

In, out, in...

Then I stopped breathing, because it was at that moment that I noticed something I hadn't noticed when I first walked into the kitchen.

The air smelled...different.

Then I heard it. Something was boiling on the stove. A part of me hoped Jerry had left the stove on all night by accident and burned whatever was cooking...

But then I saw the hair.

Forgetting Rigor Mortis

by Malaya Guerrier

A long line of cars waits for gas at the Costco
by my house, since it's cheapest there. It seems
like a big deal, yet minimal compared to
what I see happening elsewhere:
Blood splatters on the ground. Bombs send shrapnel into
the enemy's skin—or is it the innocent's skin?
I can't even fathom it—it's like a pipsqueak four-year-old
having to take on the Rock one-on-one.

Culver's has its walleye available for Lent,
melting in my mouth with a tad of tartar sauce
while a delightful, playful breeze tugs at my
hair—I've got it pretty good, I guess.
I can go about my day, enjoying the sunshine
finally peeking out after months of bleak cold,
and easily forgetting that across the globe, earthworm
guts and smoke waft through another's nostrils, curtesy
of the growling, fire-breathing monsters rumbling through their town.
In my town, I'm too busy picking on a Mustang
that looks too close behind the screaming fire truck. I'm
too busy feeling annoyed because gas, that translucent gold,
went from Buck Hill to Mount Everest in a snap—
I don't even drive yet.

Hostilities in Ukraine continue. Following distances and
growing gas prices don't matter. All that's left are charred remains:
blackened buildings and broken buildings and abandoned buildings
from planes and tanks and shelling after shelling.
People running, people tripping, people crying;
buildings burning, buildings falling, bodies dropping—war.
War in my lifetime—unheard of;
Afghanistan—old news, doesn't count. I'm
just at home, safe, sound, and wrapped in a hug
by my soft, warm blanket. The sun comes out and melts the snow,

yet the air still bites, not unlike the planes roaring over Ukraine
with free rein. Their band, Beton, calls for help, singing, “Kyiv is calling.”
I don’t answer.

I had gone to NC. Coming back, I ate the greasy, melty,
gooey, cheesy goodness from the airport Popeyes, enjoying myself.
Back home, the melting snow drip-drips away,
flowing towards the drains as teachers stand in the snow
and in puddles, postponing school,
their fingers growing numb and cramped fighting for their rights.
At work, my numb fingers fight to open a custard bag,
its cap tight. Minnesota crazies walk into Culver’s, shorts on
and jackets kicked to the curb.

The teachers fight for their rights,
the crazies presuppose spring, and
the Ukrainians want peace and quiet but don’t get it,
their chests reverberating from mortars
and tightening from nuclear threats.

The only threat I have is that of annoyance,
the robot lady who welcomes everyone to RDU Airport,
who I first heard in French. She talked too much. I was
ready for home, for less annoying MSP.
Or it’s just as annoying with most local news all about
the same thing—the teacher strikes suspending school for weeks—
while the rest of the world moves on: snow stops, rain falls,
flowers bloom, and war kills.

But who needs wars or strikes or French robot voices
when there are stupid and forgetful drivers everywhere?
Use your turn signal, that golden arch of driving, you moron!
I can’t really drive yet, but I read the manual
and passed the test. It’s *one hundred* feet, not one foot.
Perhaps the winter blues have made me crankier, but
vibrant greenery begins to sprout forth like a symphony,
or I hope it does, while elsewhere war rages and people
simply hope to live another day.

They hope to live and not die, to not be the one
lying on the ground, blood flowing, eyes staring at the sky,
and maggots wriggling through their cilia.
Death tries to set in, rigor mortis, yet
xylem, a natural water hose, still promotes
the growth of flowers with beautiful colors,
showcasing life and hope,
shutting out death and despair.

I had gone to see my big brother, first greeted
by French robot lady, but then greeted by
my brother's loud, lifted Chevy. It was cold there, too,
but greener, the zephyr lightly blowing
my hair and tickling my face,
causing me to forget all else that happens in the world.

Today, Tomorrow

By Ethan Martin

Today, the Sun is made of the fires of the night.

Today, our infectious hatred will consume our minds.

Today, our reckless warfare will end humanity.

Today, our ignorance will cause misery for the dying.

Today, our greed will drain the Earth.

Yesterday, we thought someone else would solve our problems.

And now today, we blame it on others.

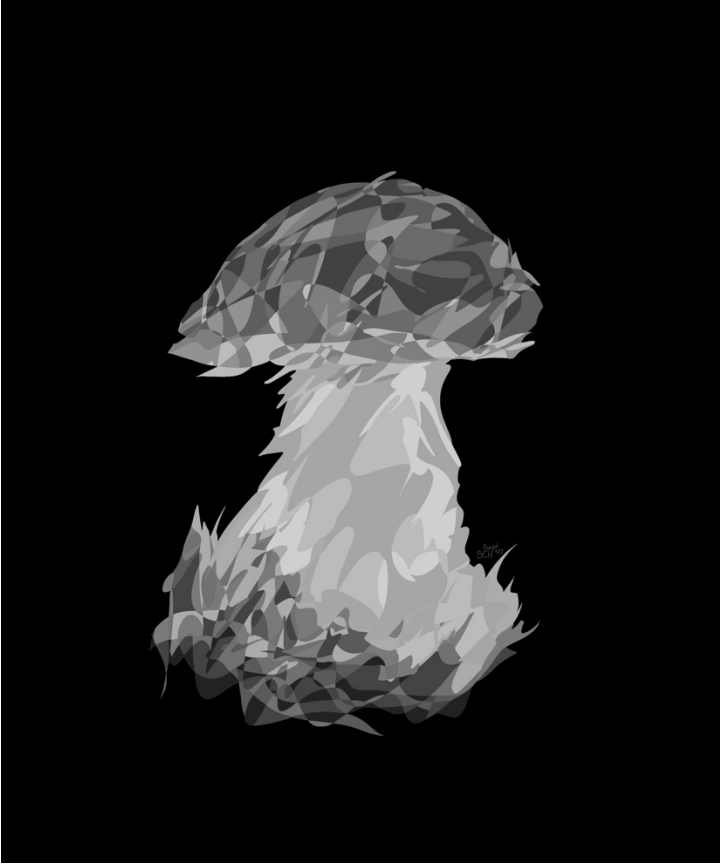
Tomorrow, we will look inwards.

Tomorrow, we will recognize our faults.

But tomorrow, the end will have come and gone, and there will be none left to regret our actions.

King Bolete

By Sarah Huderle



Under the Mushroom Cap

By Lisa Brodsky

As I peek through the window
behind the lemon curtains,
my eyes, fresh chopped onions
scratchy throat from screams unheard.

It's dry in here, in my tiny space
under the umbrella of the mushroom cap.
I hide in tall blades of grass
avoiding the scavengers who come to
collect me like a bread crumb.

I grab your white wing and hold on tight
It's warm next to your thumping heart
I find sanity in your nest up high
above the mushroom cap.

An Unforgivable Past

by Dhoha Qasem

The girl walked into the room
The bright light was present yet unseen
She could not notice the morning bloom
For her oblivious watered eyes began to intervene

The grey clouds appeared surrounding her
With every tear rolling down her face
She witnessed the storm occur
Evolving into something difficult to embrace

A mere figment of her imagination
Had taken control of her emotions
She counted every failure with frustration
As the clouds created a commotion

Hating herself for what she became
She was oblivious to the light
Finding only herself to blame
For every mistake that was in sight

As she washed away in despair
Alone without a single soul around
A girl appeared sitting in a chair
Across the room making no sound

She stared in confusion at her reflection
The younger girl she used to be
Trying to find some sort of connection
In the past that she tried to flee

The young girl drawing near
Did not seem threatening at all
As she wiped away every tear
That would continuously fall

“It is time to forgive yourself
For what you became and who you are
Hiding me behind a shelf
Is not going to get you far”

As she spoke to me, I realized
How cruel I must have been
That sweet girl whom I had despised
Was there for me with every loss and win

She added light to the storm
Even though she was smaller than I
My smile began to form
For loving the person, I tried to deny

Seeing how far I've come
From a young bright girl, I was known to be
Reminded me of where I am from
And that my path is still in front of me

As the young girl promised me
To always be by my side
She faded away, freely
For my eyes had already dried

Making the Mistake of Approaching Solitude Alone

by Megan Ocel

The stormy room is now sunny
Flowers in every corner blooming
I got up to get back on my journey
With a heart that was no longer glooming

She stepped into the woods
with a shotgun draped over her shoulder,
bitter,
like the stench of rotting, wet leaves on the forest floor or
the feeling of November's kindling wind against her exposed face

*She'd love it if snow walked alongside her
and told her what it's like to kiss Autumn's grave,*
The death and retreat of green to brown as Earth says, "See you next
season",
although the season's still open and she's not walking or looking
to kill, rather answer:

how far do you need to go before
you forget your own name?

*because she continues to
make the mistake of approaching herself*
with a gun in hand,
as if her emotions would fall from the sky with the snow
and she'd shoot them like targets
alone,
always alone which is no good either
but she'd rather be walking on the graves of the fallen season
than the graves of those with expanding lungs

Dear Winston

by Malaya Guerrier

The bus lurched over a pothole, sending my backpack beyond the safety of my lap. Another pothole sent it careening down the aisle, its worn and stained dark brown fabric being dirtied with dust and grime. I stood to grab it but another pothole sat me back down. Someone really needed to fix this road. Standing once more, I turned toward the back to find my backpack in the possession of her royal majesty and her pack.

“Hey, Maggot!” her majesty said. “Your backpack looks like dog crap.” Her ladies all giggled, at least if wolves could giggle. “We’re not even to the zoo yet,” one of them said. Everyone else on the bus also fulfilled their obligation to laugh. I swear the bus driver was deaf, or he too was her loyal subject.

“We’ve been over this—my name is Maggie. And I like the color of my backpack; in fact, I would deem it rather pretty.” My response only brought more laughter.

“Aww, Maggot likes dog crap,” her highness said. I couldn’t tell if she sounded more like a crow that just found a new treasure to add to its collection or like a wolf that found its lunch. “Since you think it’s so pretty, are you going to wear it for Halloween?” I wanted to yell and scream and possibly break something. She wasn’t *my* alpha, no matter how hard she tried. I was not about to please her. So, instead, I said, “Well, if you’re so sure it looks like dog crap, I think it’d look better on you.”

Her majesty’s face glowered at me like a wolf whose only thought is to attack and tear apart its prey, yet is unable to deliver the final strike. Her ladies also glared, the whole pack disappointed to have only leftovers for supper. “Wonderful,” she said, her fangs attempting to pull upward in a smile, looking like a lycanthropic Malvolio from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. “Here’s your dog crap, Maggot.” At that, she tossed my backpack back into the aisle.

I ran to grab it before another pothole forbade it. Settling in my seat despite the rough road, I pulled my notebook out of my backpack and wrote.

Dear Winston,

The last time we spoke, you were weak and tired but still cracking jokes about the fashion of your hospital gown. I had told you that I thought I wouldn't be able to make it through middle school without you. I remember your response to this was "Just wait until high school—it gets so much worse." I know you were trying to cheer me up, but I think I was right to dread it. Her royal majesty (the superintendent's daughter, Raven) has taken great interest in me. I guess it's because I have no gaggle of friends around me, making me easy prey, but who knows what her issue is. I fend her off as best I can.

You were the best neighbor ever. It was like having a big brother. Sometimes I still stand by the fence that separated our yards and imagine that you're there with me to listen to all my troubles.

When we arrived at the zoo, her growling excellency and her attendants got out first, accompanied by the reverent silence of their potential lunches. Then the plebes fought and hee-hawed over who ought to get out next. Our zoology teacher, Ms. Fehr, had conveniently missed the bus—no idea how that happened—so she drove separately and met us there.

Ms. Fehr wasn't a terrible teacher, except maybe for not having chaperones (I'm clueless on that one) or missing the bus, but I think everyone wished it could be the elementary school zoo trip, where all you have to do is look around and "Ooo!" and "Ahh!" at everything instead of having to write a paper about habitats and ecosystems. Even so, watching animals could be fun.

After Ms. Fehr gave us a lecture on our assignment and how to behave, and after passing through security, everyone dispersed like free-floating gas particles. I walked along the cobbled path toward the cold exhibit, or whatever it was called. Her eminence of the lycanthropes stalked behind me with her backup. Finally, I turned around and asked her what she was doing.

“I’m going to the Northern Exhibit same as you, Maggot.” She flung her dark bangs out of her eyes, showing their yellow glint. “You have a problem with that?”

“Do you have a problem with me?” Of course, she did, otherwise, she wouldn’t bother me so much more than the rest of the school. I just wanted to know why. Seriously—why did she take such pleasure in bullying me as if she were picking apart a carcass? What made my carcass so much more appealing than everyone else’s?

“Problem? What problem?” Fake innocence dripped from her words. “I just thought I’d keep you company since you’re too pitiful to have friends.”

“And you have friends?” I said as I twirled my pencil.

Her ladyship snorted (how unladylike). “Well, duh! Are you blind?” She gestured to her wolf-dog followers, the most loyal subjects to her tyranny.

“They seem more like blind or coerced subjects than friends.” Her face, which usually was pale, as if she never went outside, immediately colored and her lips pursed. It looked like each cheek was full of sour cherries. I almost laughed out loud. Although I preferred to be ignored than targeted by her royal highness and her wolf-dogs, here I was exchanging insults with her, which never ended well for anyone.

“Raven?” one of her so-called friends asked.

“What!”

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“Then go use the bathroom!”

“But where are they?” The girl looked frantic.

“Right behind you,” I said, gesturing to the entrance.

Noble Raven scowled but went along with her “friend.” To me, she said, “I’ll be back, Maggot.” As she hurried away, her eyes held lightning strikes to illuminate me for her to hunt later. Relieved for the moment, I turned back to my journal as I walked, trying to not run into anyone.

I was never much of a friend-maker. It wasn't that I was shy—I had no problem speaking my mind—I just didn't like people. The first day I met you after you had moved in, you waved at me but I just stuck out my tongue before running into my house and slamming the sliding door. You laughed, which infuriated me, but which also eventually endeared you to me.

I miss you so much. It's not fair you had to have cancer. Whenever I think about you I cry. I try to think of all our good times together, like when you'd jump the fence instead of just opening the gate further down. You'd sit with me under the maple and recite Shakespeare, even acting it out to make me laugh. I especially liked it when you were Orsino and tried to act so full of yourself but couldn't. Feste was much more you.

Wiping my eyes, I decided the tropics exhibit would be better, given that my nemesis seemed intent upon stalking me, so I passed the Northern Exhibit and kept walking. The inside of the tropics building was quite warm. Toucans, hornbills, and parrots flew around and sang in the dense foliage that almost touched the ceiling. It could make a good essay too, maybe something like their habitat of living in high, dense foliage (and their ability to fly) means they are probably safe from any potential predators that are cemented to the ground. Wouldn't that be nice?

As I walked through the building, looking at flamingoes and lemurs and snakes, I wondered what Winston would think of all this. I stopped and watched the three hippos resting in the water in their enclosure. Their chunky bodies looked like giant stuffed animals that needed to be cuddled, although, of course, that would be a terrible idea. I had to write Winston about them.

I'm staring at three hippos right now. I know if you were here, you'd be teasing me about that one conversation we had. I was maybe eight or nine, a couple years before you started chemo. We were staring at the clouds and you pointed one out that looked like a hippo. I had said that hippos were so cute and cuddly that I wanted one as a pet. You told me they were too aggressive and dangerous to have as pets. I didn't believe you, but when I read a book about animals that agreed with you while in school, I was so upset. I came home crying

that day, and I think I even screamed at you and said I hated you. You shook your head at my antics but hugged me anyway. You laughed, too, in your newly lowered voice. Your laugh always made me smile.

By now I had to use the bathroom myself, so I walked into the nearest one. The farthest stall was taken, but all the others were open. I went about my business and was about to leave when I heard the person in the farthest stall speak.

“How did that ‘just happen’? She was getting better!”

I stood by the paper towel dispenser, frozen. That was her excellency’s voice! Great, I was stuck in the same bathroom as my nemesis. Of course, I wasn’t really stuck—I could just leave—but what was she talking about? And why did she no longer sound like her usual snarling self? And where were her companions? They wouldn’t just leave her side unless she told them to, but they weren’t even waiting at the bathroom entrance. It wasn’t a problem anyway—if they weren’t around, I could eavesdrop.

Her ladyship sighed. “Just—just tell mom I love her, okay? And that I want her to get better and be done fighting these stupid tumors.” Tumors? Her mom had cancer? Well, tumors don’t automatically mean cancer, of course, but if her mom is still fighting the tumors and is supposed to be getting better but not, then it seems quite probable that—

“Were you listening to my *private* conversation, Maggot?” her eminence shrieked as she opened the stall door. Her eyes were most definitely flashing lightning by now, trying to strike me dead rather than wait for the wolf part of her to hunt me down and tear me to pieces. Or maybe she would call her pack to help with the kill. I couldn’t tell. Her body seemed to be taken by a raging earthquake that wanted its revenge. “How dare you!” *Now* her voice sounded more like a snarl. If she wasn’t going to strike me with lightning or hunt me and tear me apart as a wolf, then I had no idea what she’d do.

“So your mom has cancer and might not survive?” I said. Maybe that was a bit harsh for an opening line, even for her.

Her majesty looked like she was being constricted. Her voice came out sounding more strangled. “If you *ever* tell anyone—”

“Why would I?” I said. “You hate me enough as is. Besides, you’d be surprised how similar our situations are.”

Her highness looked confused. “How—just keep your mouth shut!” She walked past me in a rush, her shoulder slamming into mine. Rubbing my shoulder, I sat on the counter where my notebook was and kept writing, hoping there’d be no unpleasant surprises awaiting me outside the bathroom door.

Despite all the smiles you brought out of me, life still sucked. I could never keep a friend with my big mouth and antisocial ways—except you, of course. I never got why you stuck around and made me your friend. You always listened to my rants about all the people I didn’t like and to all my seemingly unimportant troubles, like my math homework in third grade.

I always enjoyed the stories you made up whenever you didn’t quote Shakespeare. There were dragons and castles and peasants who became royalty, all in a fantasy land where everyone lived happily ever after. I especially like the one story you told about the knight who had to fight the giant dragon but they ended up becoming friends. It took you a whole week to finish that one.

I think I did it this time with the queen. Apparently, her mom is in a similar situation to what you were in. I guess she just took out her frustrations on everyone else and turned her lack of control over that situation into control over the whole school. Maybe? She still confuses me.

Once I thought the alpha and her attendants, wherever they were, had ample time to leave the area, I ventured out of the bathroom. Time would soon be up, so I hurried back to the entrance to not miss the bus. As I ran up the bus steps, I tripped and dropped my notebook, which landed on the pavement. I hopped back down to pick it up when I realized I was surrounded by a horde of angry, hungry wolves. The royal alpha bent down and picked up my notebook. No, no, no—that letter was for Winston, not her. She perused through its contents at her leisure and smirked. Crap.

“I’ve taken great interest in you? You had to write your sick friend about me? You’re pitiful, Maggot,” she sneered. Her wolf-dogs howled and cackled, eager for blood.

“I’ve always told him just about everything,” I said, eyeing the raucous gang.

“Like I said, pitiful.” Her eminence kept reading. Her eyes narrowed, then looked at me, but she wasn’t growling. “A similar situation, huh?”

Her companions looked at each other, confused at what her ladyship meant. I stood there, once again unsure of her next move. Would she tell her “friends” and the whole school, taking an extra opportunity to taunt me? Would she stay silent because she had similar circumstances? I didn’t know what to do. Trying to grab my notebook out of her hand probably wouldn’t work—she could just move beyond my reach. So I stood still, waiting for her verdict. She suddenly slammed my notebook closed, then threw it on the ground by my feet. “Don’t write to dead people, Maggie,” she said. “That’s just stupid.” Then Raven and her clique walked onto the bus, leaving me with my journal.

I paused a moment before picking it up and getting on the bus as everyone watched me. As the bus pulled away, I opened my notebook once more.

Sorry about the crumpled pages. Raven threw this notebook on the ground. I was hoping for more sympathy once she read about your cancer, but didn’t get much. She did call me Maggie instead of Maggot, so I suppose that’s an improvement.

I wish you didn’t have to die. I have no one to really talk to about it. You would have been the person, but you’re gone now. I don’t even know what else to say except I still miss you.

Maggie

After the bus dropped me home, I immediately went to visit Winston. I stood in the cemetery, the wind blowing my hair into my

face. It looked like it was raining leaves, as the trees let the wind take them and spread them on the graves, giving the dead a blanket to warm their long-cold bodies. The sky was blue as always with white puffy clouds forming shapes—a bird here, a hippo there. Winston's grave still had some wilted violets and roses that hadn't been blown away by the wind but were buried beneath the leaves. I tore the letter out of my journal and folded it into threes. Kneeling, I placed it on his grave, putting a rock on top to keep it there. Winston would have listened and empathized with me before telling me once more that I needed to make friends. The least I could do to repay his friendship and honor his memory was try, so I sat next to his headstone and started another letter.

Dear Raven,

I still don't really like you but Winston would have. Or he just would have tried to be friends with you regardless. I don't like being bullied by you and your friends and I doubt anyone else does either. But thanks for finally calling me by my real name.

*I am sorry about your mom. I know how hard it can be. Does she like flowers?
Maggie*

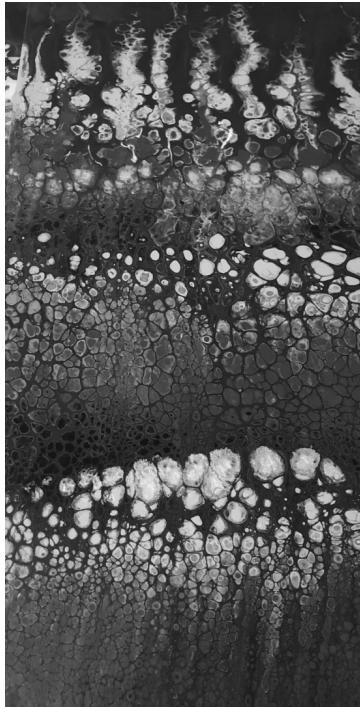
Fat

by Kylie McWilliams

Every bite of that sandwich slides down her throat like razor blades.
Painful and tracing her insides with cuts.
None of that really mattered though,
Because she knew at the end of the day,
She'd be back in the bathroom,
Reopening those cuts.

Earth

by Lisa Brodsky



A Thought from Another Heaven

by Jerry Carrier

A dilapidated ugly purple one story three bedroom rented stucco house built on a concrete slab set out on the Mojave Desert west of Barstow on Old Route 66. In the night, away from city lights, the house slept under a carpet of hundreds of thousands of stars in a dry unobstructed sky. A twelve-year-old boy lay in the darkness on the still sun-soaked warm roof of the house and stared into the black sky thinking he could see forever. He saw forever forward and forever backward into time, a continuous loop like a mobius strip, like a 3D symbol for eternity.

His father was a lapsed Catholic, and his mother a fierce Finnish Lutheran like her mother, aunts, and grandmother. The boy, like a large bone, fought between two dogs, his Irish Catholic grandmother and Finnish Lutheran mother fought over the soul of the first-born child and grandchild. The mother and grandmother came to a truce. The boy would go every other Sunday to Mass with his grandmother and the following to Lutheran services with his mother. The boy preferred the Catholic Cathedral full of tradition and art, saints, and statues. He disliked the office-like feeling of the protestant church and their no-nonsense fire and brimstone preacher, but he chose neither religion. The boy was not a believer. He wasn't a Christian. He didn't believe in the existence of God. It was not a rebellion. It was just what he believed.

It wasn't an act of defiance. It wasn't a matter of not wanting to disappoint his Lutheran mother or Catholic grandmother. In the end, he would disappoint them both. His grandmother would eventually agree with his mother and she allowed his mother to send him for religious instruction to learn the Christian Catechism every Saturday from a tall, intimidating, fire-and-brimstone Lutheran Pastor who believed in torturing children with his literal interpretation of the Bible.

The Pastor told his Catechism class on the first day, "What you learn in science in school is wrong, evolution is wrong. The Bible says the world was formed in just six days and the Bible is the word of God."

The boy couldn't let that go, he argued. Although he didn't believe in God, he knew that some scientists did and he said to the Pastor, "Day

can mean many things like a day as in an era. The theory of evolution and the creation story in the Bible could be the same thing.”

“No!” the Pastor shouted, “Every place it says day in the Bible it means twenty-four hours and your argument is disrupting the class and God’s house.”

The other children in the class were quiet. He knew they wanted him to shut up and be quiet as well. They wanted to get this over with quickly with as little fuss as possible. He knew he was making difficulties for all of them by angering the Pastor.

The boy couldn’t let it go. He went home and found his mother’s, King James Bible. He carefully searched and found passages where the word day meant something other than twenty-four hours. He made a list and brought it to Catechism class the next Saturday. The debate didn’t last long.

As the boy tried to present his findings the Pastor’s face turned crimson and veins stuck out in his neck. When he spoke, spit flew out of his mouth, “Enough of your blasphemy. Get out! Leave now!” The red-faced angry Pastor shouted at the boy.

The other children shrank in terror.

The Pastor called his mother, and he told her the boy was evil and disrespectful and would not be welcome back to his class until he admitted that he was wrong, and sinful and would apologize to the Pastor in front of the class.

The boy refused. Mother and grandmother demanded that the boy go back to apologize and admit he was wrong. He refused.

“Wait until your father gets home,” his mother said, “he’ll have something to say about this.”

When the father got home, he was greeted immediately by his mother and wife demanding that he straighten out his son. The father sighed and poured himself a large glass of Jim Beam and water and took a gulp. He then went and sat on the front step and called to his son.

“What’s this bullshit about pissing off the Pastor? Your mother and grandmother say you got thrown out of church?”

“We argued over evolution.”

“Is this about your fucking rock collection and your fossils?”

“No, it’s about science. He says science is wrong.”

“And you think you’re smarter than the Pastor? Don’t you believe in God?”

No one had ever asked the boy this question.

“No, I don’t.”

“Shit!” said the father taking a big drink of his bourbon. “Are you being a smartass? You really don’t believe in God?”

“No, I don’t. It seems to me it’s not very likely that some great being could create and control everything.”

The father was an alcoholic and a gambler who spent most of the family’s meager money on these addictions. He was not kind or understanding, but at that moment, he seemed to understand his son. He was quiet and then took another long drink, “If you really don’t believe in god then you don’t have to go.”

It was one of the few times the boy was proud of his father. He knew the hell his father would catch from his wife and mother.

That Sunday the boy was playing catch with his friend Anthony Hammond in the front yard as his father sat in the shade on the front step smoking camel cigarettes and drinking Jim Beam with two neighbors, Pig Proctor and Old Man Hammond who was Anthony’s dad. Anthony was not a bright boy and was having trouble passing the seventh grade.

When the three men were pretty well drunk, Old Man Hammond looked up from his bourbon and grinned widely at the boy’s father, “You know Anthony ain’t the brightest bulb, but at least he didn’t get thrown outta church for being a big smartass.”

The boy's father laughed along with Old Man Hammond and Pig Proctor. Anthony laughed too not realizing he had also been insulted.

During that night on top of a purple stucco house on the desert floor, the twelve-year-old boy lay in the darkness on the still sun-soaked warm roof of the house and stared into the black evening sky thinking he could see forever. He saw forever forward and forever backward into time, a continuous loop like a mobius strip like a 3D symbol for eternity. He saw thousands of stars and knew there were billions and billions more. He had the feeling of being small and insignificant and yet at the same time he knew he was made of atoms created from stardust and felt a part of the vast heavens. As he gazed out, he knew in his heart that no god could create and control all this.

Not My Home

by Rochelle Nibbe

The trees fly past the window as if trying to escape me. I let my hand hold my head, keeping it steady so my eyes can keep looking out the window. I look at one object at a time, but it never stays in sight. It seems to be happening lately with my old home, friends, school, Milly, and lastly, my dad falling out of my grasp. My mind wanders outside the signs and trees that fly past. Jane getting full custody, forcing me to a place I have never been. She claims it is for a new start. Claiming it to be a good thing. That our lives will change for the better.

Bullshit.

Jane's voice brings me to the car's back seat. "Sara, are you listening?"

My eyes are still gazing to the outside, not wanting to focus on the boxes surrounding me. "Yeah."

"We are almost there." Jane forces enthusiasm into her voice.

A pause comes in when I don't respond. Jane glances back at me. "You excited to see the new house?"

I let myself stay silent, wanting to continue looking outside (better than getting car sick), when I finally realize how small of a space I am sitting in. There are so many trees. At least there are fewer people considering, how few houses pass by. Jane probably wants to explore it all to start a new beginning.

"Sara," Jane says softly. "Are you excited?" She looks back for a split second.

Glancing at the woman whose knuckles turn white as they clutch the steering wheel, I muster up a half smile, "sure."

Jane looks like my mother for a split second but looks back to the road and begins to ramble off. "I'm so glad you think so as well; I've been

worried about this move since the divorce." Jane stumbles with her words, "I thought this was for the best." She pauses before saying, "You know."

I look outside, resting my head on my arm, and say, "I know," and go back to my wandering mind.

#

My dog, Milly, licks my face with her rodent breath. I try and push the hairball back, but as if reading my mind, Milly decides it would be a perfect time for her to sit on my lungs. I groan as I feel the weight of the six-year-old dog on my chest and laughter from above.

The man looking down at me has eyes of the sky, making me feel as if I could fly. His hair being the color of the sun with his rays coming from the stubble on his jawline. The man's very presence is freedom-like. Someone who did anything wrong would be forgiven because of the fresh air he provides. This man is my father, my dad. I look up at him and give him the biggest smile, feeling the tension on my cheeks.

My dad smirks back. "I'm glad I have you when your mom is not around."

The tension in my cheeks disappears, and I glare up at him and retort, "She's never around!"

A full grin encompasses his face. "That's why I'm glad you look so much like her,"

I roll my eyes, and a smile returns to my face.

#

A jolt startles me back to reality as the car pulls up to a gravel driveway, seeming not to have an ending. With many places to run to but nowhere to escape, the trees expand upward and in all directions.

A weight drops on my chest, and my lungs hardly get enough air. I grip my chest, looking at my new shoes, trying to focus on breathing.

My dad's voice rang in my ears. "Whenever this happens, you need to calm yourself down. Take a deep breath in and slowly let it out. Take back control of your body."

The tension begins to ease. My lungs fill with air, with it slowly being let go. Taking back my control, my grip loosens, and I look up to see a two-story house barely holding itself together. My unease settles back, but I have to be able to maintain my breath.

A jerk with my head hitting the back seat, startling me back to reality. "We're here!" Jane looks back, giving a warm smile. Her brown hair has started to take over her shoulders, almost wanting to reach me. I get out of the car, getting better air in my lungs, getting a better look at the house. The walls are taken over by greenery, choking the life out of the building.

Jane stands next to me, her hands going to her hips, giving the house a big smile. "Let's unpack and get ready for tomorrow," she looks at me, "we both have a new beginning; let's make the most of it!"

I look over to Jane and follow the scar that leads up to her eyes, the same color as my own, green. The same green we saw around us in all the trees, nowhere to run to escape that color, not even when I look in the mirror.

#

A new day arrives, and the smell of routine wood hits me as I enter my prison. I see Jane picking up boxes, moving them around, and trying to organize them.

I try to head upstairs before she notices. "Sara," Jane says with her high-pitched voice. "How is decorating your room going?"

I sigh, only halfway to freedom from her. "It's going."

"That's a good start." A small smile creeps up but slowly fades as she looks at me. She fidgets with her hands and asks, "Hun, how are you doing with..." she pauses as if unsure of what she should say next. "Doing with the move?"

I look down from the stairs to the same green eyes I see every morning and say my inner truth. "All I want to do is see dad," I whisper.

Jane tries to wipe her disapproval off her face, gently rubbing her forehead. "Why is that so important?"

I wrap my arms around myself. "He's my father," my voice starts to crack, "and I love him."

"He could have severely hurt you," Jane calmly says as she looks everywhere but my eyes as if she can't look at herself.

My sadness turns to aggression. "No, you did!" I yell as I trudge down the stairs. "You're the one who was never home. The one who left and had to take me with you."

My eyes connect to their lookalikes, a weight drops on my chest as Jane says, "I'm the one who is giving you a new start! As a new start!"

While fighting the urge to run, I keep eye contact. "No! You took away my life! My one and only home is gone. Thanks to you."

"That was no home but a roof we lived under." Her yell echoes in the kitchen.

Silence enters the room needing to fill the air with something other than tension and sadness. I take a shaky breath holding myself tighter, hoping nothing falls apart in this space. My eyes are still on the woman I should call mother, the woman I once called mother.

I whimper, "I want dad to come. I want to go back."

Stillness follows.

"Your father can't!"

I drop to the floor, still clutching onto myself as a means of survival.

Unwanted. Unneeded. Not loved. Not cared for. The world I wanted and tried holding onto disappeared, and the only thing left in its place being the body of a broken girl.

I hear a voice. "Don't you remember?"

#

A crash rings in my ears, stunning me in place. My legs shake but are unable to collapse to the ground, where the newly broken glass scatters. I look at my dad when his focus shifts in my direction, a fractured beer bottle in hand, dripping blood, and when I look into his eyes, I start to drown.

Breaths become shallow as my legs cave in, and my body starts to sting. My vision blurs as my mom runs over, a newly profound cut on her

face. Red carnage seeps from the wound. Once her grip settles on my body and starts to lift me, everything goes black.

#

My body starts shaking, and I begin wrapping myself in a ball, cradling my head, not knowing if I can begin to breathe. As my breaths became uneven, I feel a presence in front of my legs and a warm hand touching my knee.

"It's ok. Let it out," my mom tells me.

Pressure hit my chest, warm tears sliding down my face, and my voice came crying out. My mom awkwardly wraps me in her arms, holding me together, and I let myself break down. "I can't accept it." I whimper, "that he could hurt me."

Mom holds me tighter and whispers, "I know," she starts to shake, which turns into a weep.

Depression

by Kylie McWilliams

- I hear you scratching at my steel doors,
Dying to come out and consume me again.
You can scratch until your nails grind down to nothing,
I still won't let you out.
You will never overpower me again.
I won't let you bury me back into that dark hole,
Never again.

Tell Me What I Need to Hear

by Megan Ocel

Inspired by: I Carry Your Heart With Me by E.E. Cummings

tell me everything is going to be ok (you know
how difficult it is for me to think otherwise)
and tell me you can hear my heart pounding
(for I cannot stand to feel my heart pucker with each clobbering thunk,
a pulse that inhabits my body like a plague)
i fear

that things won't be ok (you make things ok, always) and
i'll be left alone (i don't like being alone anymore, i can't)
with only my heart that's overworking to
keep you here with me

To Be Red

by Malaya Guerrier

A rose is a flower. It's a flower probably best known for the thorns that adorn its stem and perhaps secondly best known for its traditional red color. But it's also a name.

In fourth grade, my teacher was Mr. Gallus. My friend, Brooklyn, and I wrote letters to him with aliases. Whenever we had some sort of free time in class, such as before the actual start of class or during an indoor recess, we wrote these letters. They were letters about things we made up, although I no longer remember exactly what we wrote about. I do know that my alias was Rose, my favorite name. I don't remember what Brooklyn called herself, but she changed her name also. It probably started during an indoor recess, everyone—including Mr. Gallus—was occupied, so we wrote our first make-believe letters to our teacher on the whiteboard. He kindly went along with it and responded. Pretty soon it became a regular habit, except that we then wrote the letters on paper and put them on his desk when he wasn't looking.

Letter-writing wasn't my only effort during indoor recess. I loved stories and being an author was my dream, so I figured I'd write a book. It was entirely handwritten in a one-subject notebook, its yellow plastic cover partially see-through. My protagonist's name was Rose, she was about my age at the time, and she had a treehouse in her backyard. It was there that she and her friends met to solve a mystery like Nancy Drew. Rose was the leader; all her friends looked to her for instructions.

That book, though I did finish it, didn't pan out very well. A few grades later, however, I started a new one, this time based on the historical fiction diaries I had been reading at the time. My protagonist, and also the narrator through the diary entries she wrote, was once more named Rose. Then there was another book after that one in which I wrote about spies and again named my protagonist Rose. And why not? The protagonist is always my favorite character when I'm writing, so why not give the favorite character my favorite name?

I had no problem with my name and still don't. Malaya is a good name, and a pretty one too, according to most people I've had comment on it. But something about the word rose, the name Rose, gripped me and held

me tight, unable to move as if in a straitjacket, unable to change direction as if tied to a post.

Perhaps it was the simplicity. Rose is one syllable; Malaya is three. Rose is easy to pronounce—so easy, in fact, that I have never heard anyone mispronounce it. My name, on the other hand always seems to prove difficult for just about everyone. It's pronounced muh-lay-uh, but I've gotten muh-lie-uh, muh-lee-uh, muh-lay-jsha, muh-lay-lah, and Mykaela. Plus people keep misspelling it by adding an extra "l" before the last "a." Rose could also be considered simple since it doesn't have a specified meaning; if you're named Rose, you're named after a flower. But if you're named Malaya, like me, your name means "free."

But maybe it wasn't the simplicity that drew me to the name Rose. Perhaps it was the color. At this point in my life, I probably still thought all roses were red, not realizing they could be other colors, or at least red and pink, not so much white or yellow or whatever other colors. My current favorite color is purple, but back then I had two favorite colors since I couldn't choose which one I liked better: purple and pink. It could have been that my love for pink led to my obsession since I thought roses were all red and pink is just red with white added. Watching my mom make the icing, such as for sandwich cookies at Christmas, was always a treat. She'd add a drop or two of red food coloring into the icing. It always looked red until she mixed it all up, the red and white becoming pink. No matter how many drops of red food coloring were put in, the icing always came out pink—various shades of pink, yes, but always pink, never red. It made me wonder why the cakes at the store had red icing as if they were in some top-secret lab trying to keep all of its capabilities a secret from everyone else, including my mom. But still, I liked watching the dark red drops get swirled into pink.

But perhaps it wasn't the color itself, but rather a form of color symbolism. I was often quick to get upset about something, even something small and unimportant. An example of this was my very last day of fourth grade. It was a field day of sorts with fun-filled outside games taking up the whole day. Near the end we got popsicles, and one of my classmates got red popsicle juice on the sleeve of my white shirt. So instead of enjoying the icy fruitiness of a popsicle on my tongue as a relief from the burning sun, I was preoccupied with the sticky stain I thought would be there forever. I wanted to yell and scream but my mom was right there volunteering for the day, so I just raised my voice a bit and snapped

something along the lines of “Look what you did!” My classmate hadn’t meant to spill on my white shirt of course and even expressly apologized, but even with my mom’s usual saying “People are more important than things [including white shirts that I rarely wore],” I would not be appeased. Instead of enjoying the moment, I once again decided to be Mount Vesuvius, ending my last day of public school on a bad note. Since red is often used to represent anger, perhaps it was because I was often quickly angered that I liked the color red and therefore a name associated with that color. Although if that’s the case, I’m not sure why I picked Rose over Scarlett or Ruby—perhaps the syllable count does matter.

Another reason could be that I liked Christmas so much. The day we put the tree is almost like a holiday in itself. Red ornaments, red ribbons against the greenery, red peppermint sticks or chunks in hot chocolate with a peppermint sprinkle on top of the whipped cream (on top of the hot chocolate), and so forth. Red is a Christmas color, and I like Christmas. Or perhaps, more outlandishly, it was my way of stating—way before I even liked football—which college football team would be my favorite. I only started liking football in sixth grade when I adopted the University of Alabama Crimson Tide as my team. Crimson is a shade of red but obsessing over the name Rose in fourth grade doesn’t really seem to bring much to choosing the Crimson Tide. It was mostly because my dad liked them, and I decided to stick it out with them.

And yet again, I could just never know. Perhaps there was no reason for it, I just found the name Rose attractive without any reasoning. As a fourth-grader, I don’t think I would have needed a whole lot of reasoning. Perhaps my initial love of the name didn’t have any reason, but what about my obsession with it? What about the three books I wrote or starting writing with a protagonist named Rose?

Perhaps the true answer, then, would be that I just liked the name Rose, but my obsession stemmed from what my character Rose came to represent. What was it about my first Rose? That Rose had a treehouse—in fact, she had a whole backyard, whereas my backyard was just an unnecessarily large, two-level deck and a hill with rocks that were only good for weeds—lots and lots of weeds that haunted my summer free time. She got to solve mysteries with her friends just like in the Nancy Drew books that I read and adored. I wanted to solve a mystery—in fact, in addition to being an author, I had, for a bit, also wanted to be a detective and be good at it. I wanted adventure; I knew only my house, my yard, “my” park, and

maybe how to get to school. Nothing ever happened to me—but Rose had plenty of intrigue with her friends.

Rose had her own group of friends who always joined her for her adventures. Rose and her friends met in her treehouse to hang out and determine what was going on. They tried to solve the mystery together. They all looked up to Rose, their best friend, and leader. She was patient and kind with everyone; she was sure of herself and had no problem giving directions to others.

But I had no friends. Oh sure, there was Brooklyn, but we weren't true best friends that always hung out and told each other everything and kept in contact. I never learned much about any of my other classmates either, and our elementary school relationships were mostly superficial. Brooklyn was the closest to a best friend I had, and probably my only actual friend, but I only saw her at school. We never talked about anything super personal as far as I can recall and we didn't keep in touch outside of school. I never saw or spoke to her again after our last day of fourth grade. Then there was church. I liked going to Sunday school (although it's not always called that anymore) and exhibiting just how much I knew. I would talk in class if I knew an answer or somewhat knew those in my group, but I had no friends. When church was over, everyone would be talking, mostly in "the cookie room" (as it was called due to the cookies provided as refreshments). My parents would talk and talk and talk while I would hold my mom's arm, begging her to be done talking so we could go home so I could do something interesting. It wasn't just adults talking. All the kids talked to each other too, all in their little groups. I might have been in Sunday school with some of them but never really knew them. Besides, I was shy and they obviously already had their friend groups. So I sat or stood by myself (or hung on my mom) in my own little world while I tried to patiently wait for my mom to be done socializing. Then we'd go home, eat lunch once dad came home, and then I would curl up on the couch and read through my stack of library books.

My third Rose, who I had as a teenage spy-in-training, had similarities to my first Rose. She had plenty of adventure and had a best friend who went with her through everything. But she also had her own unique attributes that my first Rose did not have. This Rose had a horse and was a spy-in-training, and, at that time, I had wanted to ride a horse and thought it would be cool to be a spy. But the main thing was that this Rose

was physically in shape and athletic—she did gymnastics and Tae Kwon Do and rode horses.

I was not athletic or “in shape” at all in fourth grade or the following years. I was always small and weak and the person who couldn’t throw the dodgeball across the gym to hit the people against the wall or even those relatively close to it. Honestly, gym class was the only class that I ever disliked at times, especially if we were playing dodgeball. I hated dodgeball so much in elementary school that me and a couple of other girls would stand near the sides do not have to participate, which often led to us being ignored during the heat of the game. This, unfortunately, led to us being the last ones left on the team. Even now if I’m playing nukem (since I am rarely put in a dodgeball situation and since I don’t play volleyball), I still can’t throw the volleyball over the net from the very back of the court. Strangely enough, the second Rose that I wrote about, written in the style of a historical fiction diary, was more like me. In one scene she and her mom were looking for her dad and in doing so interrupted his business meeting. One of his colleagues asked, “Who are you to dare interrupt our business?” to which Rose stomped her foot and replied, “Listen here, Sir... Mama and I came here on important business to bring Papa very important and joyful news. And in answer to your question, we dare to, and we just did.” Although not my best writing, and although she too had a best friend, Rose’s quick and angry response was rather similar to my outbursts. That story was never finished, and I wonder if it didn’t make it because I thought that Rose had too much of me in her and wanted to create another Rose closer to my first one, a Rose that had what I didn’t have, resulting in an athletic Rose.

Rose was basically perfect to me, not really the best believable character for a story, but I didn’t know that. Stories were fictional; that’s what I knew. She was patient and kind while I was impatient and could be mean a lot. She had a whole group of friends but I had none. Rose’s friends looked to her as the leader while I was always in the corner or attached to my mom, feeling ignored, overlooked, left out, and alone. She was strong and athletic, while I could barely throw a ball. I wanted to be bold, bright, and vibrant instead of being shy; to be loving, patient, and kind instead of being fiery and impatient; to have lots of friends instead of being friendless; to be strong and athletic instead of always being weak—to be just like Rose was. I wanted to be red.

In some ways, I still want to be like Rose. Although I now have friends and best friends and at least have “bold and bright” moments where I’m not shy (but usually only around my friends), and although I think I have grown in the patience department, I can still be shy and I still tend to be impatient quite often. I’m still not that strong or athletic, but I’ve been working out with my dad. I still don’t feel like much of a leader, at least not an outgoing one: I’m more of a quietly-do-your-work-well-and-set-a-good-example type over the talkative, rousing, charismatic type of leader, but there are some things for which I’m not a good example (such as being patient or being welcoming by talking to strangers). Even though I still haven’t attained the full red status and sometimes still think about it and want it, I think, for the most part, I have left Rose behind and am content with not being red.

A rose, a beautiful flower despite the thorns, red as the blood that results from those thorns, the color of love, unreasoned love for its name, or perhaps of envy, as green and piercing as the thorns. Or perhaps the rose, its petals hugging each other for support, is red with sharp thorns because that is what it is and not anything else.

Incarcerated Incidence

by Jessica DeLapp



Out of it

by Geroge Wahl

Days passed quickly
digital distractions
deep into my thoughts
though sometimes I still blink
freeze and
stutter,
perceiving
spent hours, in static
blurring screens that slur.

The First Time I Was Fired

by Jerry Carrier

I took the job of City Administrator in Lexington in 1985 because it was a short commute from where I lived, and I wouldn't have to relocate my family. It was a town doctor job, which is when a new city manager or administrator is hired to revitalize and solve the problems of a very sick city. I would live to regret it. Had I known the true extent of this malfunctioning city I would have never taken the job.

Lexington is a small working-class suburb north of Minneapolis. It has a population of a little more than two thousand-two hundred people, a quarter of them live in a large mobile home park. The city council had just fired the city administrator and city finance director. They were both alcoholics that were falling down drunk by noon each day. They were both married but were having an affair and had been found by the newly elected mayor nude and copulating on top of the city administrator's desk one afternoon prompting their dismissal. One of my first demands was to get a new desk.

I spent my first week assessing the condition of the city and then presented my findings at a city council meeting. Fortunately, the city was so small and boring that the press and the public didn't attend the meeting. I presented my horrific findings to the mayor, the four council members and the city attorney.

This is what I told them, "The city is bankrupt. It hasn't paid its bills for a year and a half, including the employee withholdings, Social Security, Public Retirement and payroll taxes to the State of Minnesota and the IRS. Municipal bond payments are on the verge of default. The city auditor is criminally inept. The city liquor store is mismanaged and losing money. The city has not sent out sewer and water bills in the last year and a half and the utility is bankrupt."

The mayor and council sat in stunned silence.

The city attorney asked, "Is the city really bankrupt?"

I nodded knowing that he was likely more worried about getting paid than in the condition of the city.

The newly elected mayor was stunned, and she turned to the council members "How did you not know any of this?"

They were silent and the mayor asked, “If we didn’t send out any sewer and water bills than you would have thought some member of the public would have come forward.”

The council readily agreed that it was awful that no member of the public let them know about the past due bills.

I asked the difficult question, “Aren’t all of you on city sewer and water? Did you complain?”

The red-faced room was silent.

I laid out a plan for returning the city to financial health. Included in that plan was to issue everyone in the city a full bill for sewer and water for the past eighteen months. I explained that I would demand full payment or the customer would face the shut off of water service. I told them that although I would demand full payment, that there may be individual hardships and that I would work with those citizens and businesses to pay this debt over six months. I also told them that they should let the public know of the city’s financial circumstances. They agreed to my plan.

I also had the foresight to tell them that I would not be very popular with the public and they promised to support me to get the city back to financial health. They lied.

One of the largest sewer and water bills owed was for the hundred-and twenty-unit mobile home park. The park owners had not paid sewer and water for over two years and had also not paid their property taxes for that time. The park also had over a hundred and twenty health and safety violations that the city had not bothered to enforce including: the requirement for a storm shelter, violations of fire regulations, and they had also illegally placed some units in the road right-of-way on the shoulder of US Highway 8, including a daycare center operating illegally out of one of the mobile homes. When I brought this to the city council’s attention, they also demanded that these violations along with their water bill and taxes be remedied immediately. I warned them that this would not be popular with the owners, or the residents of the park and they again told me not to worry that I had their support. They lied.

The residents of the city quickly grew to hate me. The mobile home park residents in particular. The park owners spread the rumor that I was trying to close the park and that they would be homeless because very few mobile home parks accept used mobile homes from other parks. The park managers on the owner’s behalf spread this false rumor. The other citizens and businesses reluctantly paid their bills, but they too disliked me.

In addition to the rumor about closing the mobile home park there were other malicious rumors. It was said that I had shut off the water of an old lady when she couldn't pay her bill and because of that she had died of thirst. Another rumor said that I was getting a ten percent commission on all the past due bills. The worst was spread by the mobile home park owners. They said that I was a drug addict and selling drugs to school children.

None of these were true, however, I did find out that the municipal liquor store assistant manager was selling liquor to minors for ten dollars over the price of the liquor. When I brought this to the attention of the liquor store manager, who was his mother, she defended him by saying that "He isn't earning much salary."

I made her fire her son and told her she was lucky that I wasn't pressing criminal charges.

Every city manager/administrator has a review of their work by the mayor and council after six months on the job. My plan had managed to save the city from bankruptcy, and I was told by the mayor to expect a very positive review and a raise at the next council meeting.

The meeting was a disaster. Over two hundred people showed up for the meeting at city hall, many of them had got drunk at the adjacent Municipal Liquor Store and all were angry. The city police reported before the meeting that there were rumors of violence and warned me that I had received death threats from the public. They had to call in deputies from the county sheriff to help provide crowd control. Lexington was no longer boring, and both the local and Minneapolis newspaper reporters were present expecting headlines.

As the mayor and council, the city attorney and I took our seats at the front of the room several drunks began hurling folding chairs over the crowd in an attempt to hit me and the mayor. They were quickly arrested. The police chief warned that if there was any further violence, he would clear the room.

The first thing on the agenda was comments from the public.

The mobile home park operators presented a petition of what they said was over two hundred residents that wanted me fired. Several members of the public repeated the rumors that I was selling drugs to children. Several citizens commented that I was biased toward the residents of the mobile home park, but the mayor defended me by saying, "I know for a fact that our administrator treats everyone the same."

The citizen replied, “Yeah he treats everyone the same, he treats us all like shit!”

I made the mistake of laughing, it was a bit arrogant on my part, but it was funny. The crowd booed at my arrogance.

The second thing on the agenda was my sixth month performance review.

The mayor asked the council members for comments. One council member said, “Well there is no denying that he’s saved the city from bankruptcy and has done a good job, but in light of this petition from the public I think he should be dismissed.”

The crowd roared their approval.

A second council member offered, “He has done a wonderful job, but I agree we should dismiss him.”

The mayor objected, “He saved your city, and this is his reward?”

The crowd booed and became loud and threatened violence and had to be brought to order by the police chief who again threatened to clear the room.

The two remaining council members not wishing to receive the wrath of the mob agreed that “although he has done a good job he should be fired.”

More cheers!

The city attorney interrupted, “You can’t fire a person for doing a good job, that’s an unlawful termination. If you are going to fire him, you need a lawful reason. And since he’s conducting the meeting and is the only one that can present the rest of the agenda to the council should you fire him in the middle of the meeting?”

The crowd booed the city attorney loudly.

Two of the council members put their heads together and then announced, “Although he’s done a wonderful job, we think he should be fired because he can’t seem to get along with the residents.”

The crowd cheered again.

The four council members quickly agreed to my dismissal with only the mayor objecting.

The attorney interrupted again, “Again you are in the middle of a meeting, and do you really want to dismiss him when the city is still on precarious ground? Don’t you think that you need him to put the city on a firm footing so that all this chaos doesn’t happen again?”

The council members agreed. The bravest of the four asked me, “How much time do you think you need to put the city of a firm footing?”

I was fed up, “Councilman are you asking me when I think it would be appropriate for you to fire me?”

His face turned red, “Yes, I guess I am.”

“I guess I don’t have an answer for that.” I replied.

The crowd not wanting to be left out booed some more.

The council then terminated my employment on a date yet to be determined, the crowd roared their approval.

As the meeting let out the mayor apologized to me. It was a Thursday and I told her I wouldn’t be in the next day. I wanted a long weekend to think about my future and if I wanted one with Lexington. The police had to give me an escort as I left the city that night.

I was at home the next day when the mayor called me, “You aren’t going to believe this, but after you left the council reconsidered. They’re sorry and they all want you to stay.”

“I appreciate it mayor, but I think maybe it’s time for me to move on.”

“I was afraid you may say that, so I demanded that they give you a raise of \$10,000. You deserve it and I really need you if I am going to save this city. Please stay.”

The mayor had been loyal to me despite public disapproval and needed my help. As much as I wanted to leave, I couldn’t let her down.

The following day in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* the headline of the Metro section read: **Lexington City Council Fired the City Administrator on Thursday and Hired Him Back on Friday with a \$10,000 Raise.**

Anger

by Kylie McWilliams

I've come to realize how different anger and rage are.

I've felt rage,

I've screamed my voice raw,

I've watched my blood boil over the pot,

I've even seen red.

It wasn't until recently, you made me realize how much scarier anger is versus rage.

Angers strange silence,

Its contentment,

The way it makes you feel no other emotion besides its own.

Rage startles me,

But anger scares me so much,

It forces me to stop in my tracks,

And take a step back.

When the World Flipped Over

by Lisa Brodsky

When the world flipped over
its open sign to closed,
we became moons in orbit
spinning in circles
seeking asylum from chaos
and isolation of the spirit.

The hospitals are still full
of those who tripped on the curbs
from shuffling their feet
on the slippery slopes
of the sidewalks and streets
while avoiding eye contact.

I want to love this world
but I'm tired of being tired
of the masses as they walk by
of mindless eyes
of heads bowed down
in their cones of solitude.

We sit with discomfort
afraid to touch or be touched.
We flutter by and tenderly land
for brief moments in time,
never lingering too long
for too many ticks or tocks.

It's time to emerge from our bubbles
where all voices will be embraced.
Change is unceasing and continuous.
Trust in the process.
Open your eyes and hear me

Coming Times

by Jessica DeLapp



5 o'Clock

By Kaitlyn Johnson

I have been lying awake on the linoleum floor for a million hours
As my eyes drift off to sleep, I hear the tinny chime of the clock
The fastening of the gangling keys tells me she's home, so I open my eyes
Footsteps of her combat boots pad the ground like rain tap dancing across
the roof
I rush over to say hi and my tail knocks the vase off the table with a crash
like tumbling dominoes, the ceramic indigo one she got from her friend
years ago
She sighs as the pieces crash and burn across the floor with a clang, but I
know from the glimmer in her eye that she never liked it much anyway
After the pieces are scooped up, I hear the crisp click of my food container
The smell of chicken and rice that lingers through the air makes my tongue
water
As she places my bowl down, she scratches behind my fluffy ear and wipes
away my drool
I look away from my food and paw her leg in appreciation
She laughs as light as a stumbling paper clip, and I continue to slosh my
food with a gleeful swallow
I see her sitting on the couch, I jump up and curl up the best I can
We sit like that for a while, with only the hum of the air conditioner as our
soundtrack as she strokes my ebony fur fondly
Want to go outside? She asks me. I bark in response as I stretch my long and
sleeping legs
I chased the burgundy ball swiftly for a while, my tail spinning in rapid
circles as I sail through the air
I bark happily as I dart around the mowed lawn and the neighbor jumps a
mile high in surprise
I smile at her earnestly as I trot inside the screen door
As I hit my bed, my thoughts fade seamlessly, and all I can think with a grin
is how I can't wait to do this again tomorrow

March Madness

By Malaya Guerrier

The bright cerulean sky is clear,
a clear blue like the ocean showing its creatures,
yet deep like the ocean depths,
seemingly going on forever where nothing can be seen.
The sun smiles down at me,
its rays walking through the window
and sprawling on the carpet. I
sit in its ethereal glow, a
halo around my body, soaking up
its warmth like frozen custard melted by hot fudge.

There's no snow to gauge the outside temperature
by watching how much of it melts,
so I take a guess using my sun-ray sauna.
I think it's forty so I go to get the mail
in just my usual joggers and hoodie, but
no sooner have I walked out the door
then my teeth sound like dry bones
rattling in a metal casket.

I run down the court of grass, ready to steal.
I make it back up the court, and through
the point guard, lining up to shoot.
The rustle of the stack of envelopes
hitting the stairs mimics the swish of the basket,
indicating a perfect three-pointer.

The game is over, March.
I won.

Pointe of Silence

By Kaitlyn Johnson

When Graciela had gotten accepted into Michel Ballet Academy, she hadn't imagined she would be huddled in the corner of a darkened studio with breathing hammering in her ears. The door had been locked with a firm click. Footsteps pulsed from the hallway. Graciela shifted and her fingers scraped the cool and pungent floor. She could hear Cornelia's unsteady breathing, and she knew she wouldn't be able to see to communicate in the dark. After a few minutes, Graciela heard Cornelia gasp. She turned, squinting to see her, but it was no use. Silhouettes in blurred lines filled her vision and bounced off the wall. The lights flashed back on, and Madame Maude unlocked the studio door. Cornelia was signing rapidly to Donna, who was watching her hands intently. Cornelia then pointed to Jax and Graciela as she pushed up her glasses. Donna nodded swiftly and turned to them. Her gray eyes were the clouds caught in a storm.

"Someone's taken Cornelia's hearing aids," she told them gravely.

Donna went over to Madame Maude with Cornelia and told her what had transpired.

"Alright, girls, I need to go to Headmaster Yates' office - I'll be back shortly. Mitzi should be in momentarily. Start practicing," Madame Maude chirped as she left the room.

Donna moved to where Jax and Graciela were standing as they waited for Cornelia to come back. Mitzi sashayed in a few minutes later and set down her clipboard and floral stationery.

Donna looked over as she dusted off her shirt. "Isn't she a bit young to be an assistant teacher?" She asked, looking at Mitzi, who was smoothing her glossy brunette hair. Graciela spotted Cornelia emerge back into the room.

"Yeah, she is," Jax replied, looking down at her. "She's the youngest assistant teacher the school has ever had. She knows her stuff, though."

GONE, Cornelia signed when she reached them. Jax and Graciela signed sorry in response. Out of her eye, Graciela could see Flavia look away at the ground.

S-O-O-N YOU FIND, Graciela signed, facing her.

Cornelia just smiled sadly and shrugged.

This is your final warning, Clara – resign by tomorrow’s dress rehearsal, or she will pay for it. If one word’s spoken, your secret’s revealed. You’ll be kicked out immediately.

Graciela stared at the crimson ink scrawled across the crumpled program slid under her dorm room door. How could they know? She hadn’t even told Jax or Cornelia. The clock glared eleven oh two, which meant she only had until two o’clock the next day. It seemed odd to her that Flavia wasn’t there yet since she usually was by now. She dashed out the door, lunging over a pile of clothes, to see if the culprit was there, but the hallway’s only company were the flourishing specks of dust.

Shaking her head, Graciela hurried back into the room and flipped over the threat as she sunk into her bed. To step down would mean to give up everything she had worked towards for a successful future. When she was three years old and starting ballet, Graciela never would have imagined she would land a role leading to the path of a professional dancer.

She remembered her first ballet recital, where her parents had sat proudly in the first row with a Sony camcorder. She recalled the pang lodged in her chest when she heard their murmured voices drift up the stairs, trying to figure out how to rack up the money to let her continue. When they won the lottery, life became the euphoria of a glimmering star. It had paid her chance to audition a one in one hundred twenty countrywide chance of attending Michel Ballet Academy.

The day of her audition was masked in misty air with the sky as clear as ghostly glass when she arrived in Albany. Graciela had shoved her doubts in an imaginary jar and marched up the marble steps, feigning confidence. When she entered the auditorium, she hadn’t been oblivious to the gazes of the kindred white, petite girls that sized up her curves and tan skin. Their whispers rustled like the wind and stares cut like midnight headlights. As she sat down, she only had one focus – to visualize performing flawlessly. She replayed her routine over and over like her mind was a broken record until her name was called abruptly. Her feet pointed like star-crossed arrows and arms curved like a spoon, she and her tornado-like twirls became one with every thought and worry fading in a dexterous arabesque. “I made it,” she had whispered to her parents as a current of tears gleaned upon her face.

Every ricocheting step and grueling second of practice had been worth it. But if she didn’t give this up, she didn’t know what chaos would arise. The letter had said *she* would pay for it, and to Graciela’s guilt, she

didn't know who that entailed. Or why her refusal to step down would put one of the other dancers in danger. All she knew was that she didn't want to do that.

A prick of insecurity flared up inside of her. While people hadn't outright said it, it was clear the academy didn't want ballerinas like Graciela. Sure, they picked based on skill, but if you were thin, petite, and blonde with rich parents you were already halfway to being accepted. It wasn't that Graciela felt ashamed of who she was – she was ashamed because others had taught her that she wasn't acceptable and that she couldn't possibly be talented enough as the white girls. She knew that there was tension that she had been chosen as Clara, and sometimes she wondered if they were right. Would it be better if Julia or Kate landed the role like everyone wanted? *No*, Graciela told herself. She was chosen for a reason and this was what the blackmailer wanted – for her to feel like someone else should have been granted her spot. The letter asked a lot of her, and it was hard to ignore what it said.

Yet how much truth could the letter hold? Whoever was behind it clearly didn't want her to have the leading role, but what if it was an empty threat and nothing more? That would mean she would have demolished her dream career opportunity and years of hard work for nothing. The question was if she was willing to possibly risk others' safety and having her secret leaked or if she would rather perform anyway. She knew she'd face consequences either way, but as the morning sun crept in, time was running thin, and Graciela knew what she needed to do.

When the dress rehearsal rolled around, Graciela was ready to be Clara. She had spent all night tossing and turning, but she wasn't going to step down. Not yet. Her parents were living proof of hard work and they taught her to always strive for the same. In the auditorium, there was a new note ready for her.

First, the wings of white prey have fallen to fatal grace. But you'll find it is darker inside the night than you imagined, it read. Let the games begin.

“Are you alright?” Jax asked as she and Cornelia came over to stretch. She seamlessly extended her lanky espresso legs. Graciela shoved the note away behind her before they saw it. “You look a bit distracted.”

“Yeah, I'm just...” Graciela trailed off as Cornelia looked over. She knew she couldn't tell them about the note. Its words were engraved in her

brain. *If one word's spoken, your secret's revealed.* "N-E-R-V-O-U-S," she fingerspelled hastily instead. She'd forgotten the sign, but it was true, she was nervous - just for a different reason than they thought.

Cornelia shook her hands back and forth like a tremor, reminding her of the sign while raising her brows to ask if that's what she meant.

"Yes," Graciela said and sighed with a heavy sigh. She wound her ebony hair up into a bun. "Nervous."

"No need, you're the best Clara there could be," Jax grinned, but Graciela had to force her smile back. Her phone rang, and she was about to ignore it until she saw who it was.

"Mom, are you here already?"

"No. I'm sorry, Graciela," her mom said with the bustle of chatter faintly painted in the background. "Our flight has been delayed. I don't know we'll make it in time."

Graciela's heart dropped. Before she could reply, the clack of Madame Maude's heels drew her to attention.

"Mom, I need to go, but I hope you make it in time." She swallowed back tears as she ended the call and tried to put it out of her mind as she practiced.

Flavia was pacing the dorm room and shaking slightly. Her hands were clenched by her sides as she muttered under her breath. Her feathery champagne hair dusted her back. When Graciela walked in, she didn't notice until she came closer and jumped.

"Flavia, is everything okay?" Graciela asked.

"Why do you care?" Flavia snipped. "Don't you have superior things to do?"

"I have things, but they're not superior. While we're not friends, you're still my roommate."

"Whatever. Once the show is over, we'll go our separate ways."

"Where were you last night anyway?"

"None of your business," she huffed as she got up and left to get ready.

Backstage, the girls were bustling and touching up. A cloud of rose perfume and jasmine hair spray spritzed the air. There was a flurry as their make-up was polished, and costumes were fluffed to be flaunted. Graciela ambled in circles, doing slow deep breaths. She'd practiced this routine so many times

she could do it in her sleep. With a bite at her nails, she wondered if her parents' flight had come in. As Graciela moved to go onstage, she heard Madame Maude talking to Mitzi, and it was time to find out.

"Where's Flavia?" She barked with her hands on her hips.

"Flavia's costume ripped - I need to take her to get it mended," Mitzi was saying.

"Now?" Madame Maude shrieked. "But she'll be on in a minute - there isn't time!"

"We'll make it quick," Mitzi promised as she rushed off into the hallway.

Graciela leaped across the stage in a grand jeté. As she spun in a rapid pirouette, she heard a whir behind her. A startled gasp sailed through the air. Graciela turned around haltingly as she rose from her plié. There was Flavia, being lowered down on a rope, in her ready position. They hadn't practiced this in rehearsal. An odor similar to nail polish remover filled the air. When she neared the ground, all eyes were waiting for her next move expectantly. But Flavia wasn't stirring at all. Graciela squinted and then froze. Flavia's chest wasn't moving. Her ocean eyes were partially shut, and so still they were glazed. Her milky skin was starting to drain color. With a closer look, you could see her neck wasn't arched - it was snapped. Flavia was dead.

Graciela couldn't breathe - the humid air seemed to set her mouth aflame. An ear-shattering scream pierced the air, though Graciela wasn't sure if it was from her or someone else. The dancers on stage screeched and ran into the wings while Madame Maude rushed on. The crowd was murmuring a symphony of hushed elegies.

Madame Maude took her pulse, and you could see the disappointment crash over her. She stood up and adjusted her microphone as she turned to the crowd.

"I'm terribly sorry, everyone, we're going to have to end the show here and handle this. Thank you for coming tonight and stay safe."

The curtain closed. Graciela couldn't move - she was paralyzed by the shock. The room was spinning, and the tears wouldn't stop coming. As she fell, she landed on Jax, who held her up. Graciela's parents rushed in, and each held onto her arms. She slumped against them as she choked back a sob. Madame Maude walked over to Flavia and rested her hand on her wrist. She closed her eyes gently and looked down and pulled out a note on

stationery lined with printed belladonnas. “*It’s not fun to lose, is it?*” she read. “*Consider this a statement.*”

That stationery looked familiar, Graciela thought with a frown. She knew she had seen it before - but where? With a gasp, bits of information clustered in Graciela’s brain.

“We’ll make it quick.”

Or she will pay for it.

The arrival after the lockdown.

Flavia’s absence in the middle of the night and her apprehensive tension following.

The wings of white prey have fallen to fatal grace. The Sugar Plum fairy’s wings dangled bent like her neck.

It all made sense.

“It was Mitzi!” Graciela exclaimed. “I have proof.” She held up Mitzi’s citrusy duffel bag. She unzipped it and pulled out belladonna stationery and Cornelia’s hearing aids. Then she grabbed the other notes on the same stationery. Sirens crescendoed in the background.

“Miss Michel, is this true?” Headmaster Yates asked as he looked at the evidence. Mitzi opened her mouth to protest, but his stern expression made her clamp it.

“I’m a Michel!” Mitzi spat, not answering the question. “My descendent was Edwin Michel. I was born for this position. I should have made it in – not her.”

“Bloodline doesn’t mean everything,” Graciela replied coolly. Mitzi sent amber daggers her way.

“But why Flavia? Or Cornelia’s hearing aids? Were you behind the lockdown too? Wait a minute... you weren’t even in the lockdown when the hearing aids were stolen!” Graciela cried.

“Any spot I didn’t get is a threat - it doesn’t matter who,” Mitzi snarled. “I didn’t care about Cornelia – I knew Flavia would do whatever I asked of her for the safety of her life, but let’s just say... Flavia knew *too much.*”

“Miss Michel, you admit to killing Flavia Richards and blackmailing Graciela Gonzales?” Mitzi’s face twisted like a strained lid, but she said nothing.

“I see,” Headmaster Yates remarked with a raised brow, running a hand through his speckled hair. “We’ll have to look at the security cameras to be sure.”

“But did you know Graciela is an illegal immigrant?” Graciela’s blood ran cold. So she *did* know. *You’ll be kicked out immediately.*

“We’ll deal with that momentarily,” Headmaster Yates said aloofly, though Graciela could tell he had no idea, “this is a more pressing matter.”

Two male police officers entered. Headmaster Yates repeated what they found with Graciela adding in bits and pieces. They took notes intently and watched the video recording. There it was – Mitzi shoving Flavia into the studio and the click of the door locking. There was a shriek cut off by a snap. Flavia went silent.

“Mitzi Michel, you are under arrest,” the first officer said as the second handcuffed her.

Mitzi hissed. “You’re next,” she whispered to Graciela on her way out. Her cinnamony breath swirled around her. “You may have caught me, but you won’t last.”

The remaining officer turned to Headmaster Yates. He was a stout, balding man with a slight Southern accent and a yeasty toothbrush mustache.

“Sir..”

“Hendrix Yates,” he said.

“Lawrence Smith,” he replied. “Well, Mr. Yates, by law, if these people are illegal immigrants, I am required to call the Immigration and Customs Enforcement.”

“What will happen to us?” Graciela whispered. Her dad took her hand. She looked into his chocolate eyes matching her own.

“Most likely, they’ll arrest you for forty-eight hours, and after that, it’s hard to say,” Smith said. “Whatever the officer there decides determining the removal proceedings.”

“Por favor, Dios,” her mom said quietly. “Danos fuerza y acompañanos.”

A stern-faced officer motioned for them to sit down. She told them they would have to run a record check and go from there, though they were mainly concerned about people with criminal records or those who had been deported several times. Agonizing hours and background checks later, they found Graciela’s father had been in the service, and because of that, he

was allowed to apply for U.S. citizenship if he enlisted on U.S. territory. If he got citizenship, it would be possible for Graciela and her mom to get citizenship as well, the officer had explained. She walked them through the process, and that's what they did.

Eight months later, it was complete. Headmaster Yates requested Graciela to come to a meeting in his office to discuss if she was allowed to still hold the opportunity. What he said changed her life forever.

The faces of fifty young girls stared at her as she strode up to the podium. There was no judgment in their eyes, only pure curiosity.

“My name is Graciela Celestina Gonzales,” she said, straightening her shoulders and holding her head high. “I attended Michel Ballet Academy as a teenager, and through here led me to my first career opportunity. It was a long journey to where I am today with many obstacles, but they were worth it. I put in the work and only allowed people into my life who supported my dreams. My friends Jax Kendall and Cornelia Trinh never doubted me, and my parents gave up everything for me to be here today. I wouldn't be talking to you today in this position if it hadn't been for them.” She looked into the crowd and saw the full attention of the alert young girls. She smiled as she saw herself in them - it was almost as though she was talking to a younger version of herself. “I never gave up, and I never let people tell me who I was supposed to be. I want you to do the same because your dreams are so important and not worth giving up upon.”

The Butterfly

by Ethan Martin

I sat, I waited, bound by chains I hated.

And along comes a butterfly, to pain not subjugated.

I watched its wings flutter, moving freely through air. As if to think that this place, was not Satan's lair.

Envious I felt. How could it? Why would it?

Was it mocking me? Stalking me? Blocking me from death's undying stare?

And then it landed, on top of my head, making its nest, like I would with my bed.

It lay motionless, all snuggled and warm. Then I looked at my clothes, all tattered and worn.

I wanted to grab it, to have it, to make it my own! I pondered these thoughts, forever alone.

It was free, unlike me, and yet I felt sympathy.

"I'd be no better," I thought, "I'd be just like those men!" Locking us up here, for little more than a hen.

"Be free," I whispered. "Live while you can!" But it stood still, despite the swat of a hand.

It was free, unlike me, and to me it felt sympathy.

I wanted to spare it, to share it, to make it a home! I smiled at these thoughts, no longer alone.

Until the dreaded black sun, no longer shone

Tsunami

by Lisa Brodsky



Gone Outside

by Samantha Lindberg

You have to understand that I wouldn't have believed myself either had I not been so sure of what I'd seen. I know that it being so late at night the first time I saw him, and my history of... mental health struggle makes it hard to believe that maybe he could have been real, but I assure you, there's no doubt in my mind of what I saw that night.

I had just moved into an apartment in the south of England, Brighton. It was a rather nice place, don't get me wrong, but so many things about it were simply eerie. Too eerie for me to ignore. First and foremost, my landlord – my friends had taken immediate notice of his strange tendencies the moment I'd moved in, but I decided to turn a blind eye to many of the things he did. But he is not the main subject of my story. Rather, a simple minor detail that I felt right to include as padding for what I'm about to write.

I had woken up in the middle of the night, roused from bad dreams, the details of which I can't remember, and went to my kitchen for a glass of water to calm my thoughts. I couldn't attempt to retell my nightmare even if I tried, but my most vivid memory of the day, before, of course, the main event, was that I'd woken up in a cold sweat, eyes wide open and pupils dilated, looking around frantically. For what, I can't say.

In the light of my kitchen, I couldn't see much out the window – there was substantial glare that distorted anything that wait outside. I could've sworn, however, that I'd seen eyes. And not simple human eyes, these seemed to glow. Which made no sense to me, the irises were dark brown, edging on black. There was nothing in particular that should have caught the light the way it had, which made them stand out all the more.

Of course, I was terrified. I backed away from the window and stared into the eyes with my heart beating a mile a minute. The eyes didn't even blink. I couldn't make out the appearance of the person, or maybe creature, that possessed them, all I could see was their glowing eyes.

Eventually, after I stared at them for what could've been minutes, but in my paranoid and fearful state felt like hours, the eyes simply closed. They did not open again, no matter how long I looked out my window, waiting for the person to look at me again. I should have been more at ease with the fact that they left, but it felt more unnerving than it would have been had they stayed until sunrise, or at least until a smattering of light could help me conjure a police report in the morning.

As it stood, I had no identifying information for this... stalker. But that even now doesn't feel like the right word.

I didn't sleep much that night. Every time I closed my eyes I could see the imprint of glowing brown irises on the back of my lids, and I'd have to look around in a panic to make sure that it was simply my imagination. It was, every single night for the next week, until I came home just a bit disoriented on the night of my eighteenth birthday.

It was not a good idea. My friends had all mocked that I would obviously be a lightweight even before I was of legal age, and I intended to prove them wrong. I drank far too much than my tolerance allowed in hard liquor without bothering to water it down in between glasses, but still told them that I would make it home safely on my own.

To my credit, I did make it home, but was ultimately not safe once I'd arrived.

There were the eyes again, staring in through my window. This time, I think they blinked— at least once or twice, though I'll admit, I was intoxicated to the point it was very well likely that I could have blacked out in those moments.

Even though I was solidly out of my right mind, I remembered each instant of the interaction when I woke up the next morning in perfect clarity.

The eyes stared for a good ten minutes. I looked back, and something forced me to keep my eyes on the creature every moment I could, as if at the second I were to look away something terrible would happen.

The creature raised a notebook or paper pad to the window. Like its eyes, the pad could be read perfectly, even in the dark from the distance I stood away.

“Are you alone?” it read.

Now, even as out of it as I was, I knew better than to tell the truth, and shook my head slowly, keeping my gaze trained on the eyes and the paper. Within seconds, the eyes disappeared, and with it, the note, with its threatening question.

I resigned to go to bed, hoping against all odds that the interaction was a fabrication of my disoriented mind, but when I woke up, I found the question taped to my window from the outside, and held my breath.

I refused to open the window to pull the paper off. I felt down to my bones that if I dared reach outside something would come for me. So, for the time being, it stayed. *“Are you alone?”* it asked me each moment I was unfortunate enough to spare a glance to the outside. For the next, maybe two days? I can't quite remember the specific time frame. It stayed up, regardless, until I came into my kitchen for a midnight snack and saw the eyes watching me once again.

It is strange how the human brain can choose to ignore so many things, and get used to the inherently unnatural, but this time, I felt far less scared than I had previously. A very low bar, considering my fear in each other encounter had sunk visions of brown irises into my night terrors, but still, an improvement is an improvement.

So, I stared. I had the innate feeling down to my bones that if I were to look away after making eye contact, that the eyes would be the last thing I ever saw.

The paper returned, asking the same question of me, but, notably, this time in far more frantic handwriting. It was scratchy, and at points, I could see where the paper had torn from the pen pressing too hard into the fibre. I shook my head once more, but this time, the eyes did not leave after my answer. They continued staring at me, so I stared back. Whatever I had come to eat was completely at the back of my mind. A strange sense of

self-preservation enveloped me, and I didn't dare to look away from the eyes.

Soon, a new question was raised to the window, and it made me take pause.

"Why not?" it asked. I looked at it with a raised brow and swiftly beating heart for far too long before the eyes simply disappeared once more, and I was sent into a fit of hyperventilation. I stayed up in the kitchen with my eyes peeled until the sun had risen once more, pondering over the question, driving myself mad considering the creature, the eyes, and the strange interrogation. Once the sun rose, I left my apartment and did not return until the next day, booking a hotel by the pier.

I should not have been so naive to think that maybe some time away would solve the problem, because when I returned the next night, I opened the door and was immediately greeted with the eyes looking into my apartment. The eyes smiled. I mean that, genuinely – the corners crinkled and formed into an almond shape, and I could tell that whatever this being was, it was happy to see me back again. It makes me wonder even to this day if the creature had watched me even when I hadn't made eye contact and knew that my disappearance was unusual.

I did not smile back. This didn't seem to bother it.

The paper raised to the window presented the same line of questioning as the previous encounter, and when I stopped at *"Why not?"* the creature didn't back down. Of course, I had no reply. What was I meant to do? Write my own response, and take my eyes off the creature? There was no way I would open my window or raise my voice loud enough for it to hear me, so I simply stared, until it raised a new sheet.

A sheet written without ever breaking eye contact with me.

"Smart child, doesn't look away," the sign read.

Though I of course resent the notion that I am a child, it proved to me that my approach was correct in some demented way. Maybe I shouldn't have taken pleasure to the affirmation and praise, considering I was in

imminent danger, but it made my heart feel fuzzy, in some way I can't explain.

After that night, the eyes didn't reappear for weeks. Or at least they never gave me the satisfaction of seeing them.

It was at this point my landlord was replaced. The new one was a charming young man, maybe in his mid-twenties. Attractive, well-spoken, clearly educated, but still all the same, unnerving. His mop of curly black hair was far too well-coiffed most of the time I saw him, and he maintained eye contact with me far too intently every time we spoke. I made a point to not speak to the man often.

It could have been passed off as a simple neat freak obsessed with presentation – I toyed with the idea that maybe he spent an hour in the bathroom each morning styling his hair, giving himself a pep talk – but I was not so stupid to believe that at this point. It was especially his dark brown eyes that gave me the clue that something was very wrong.

The eyes appeared outside my window once more the very next night after I'd met the strange man, and I looked at them diligently, refusing to cast a glance to the strange noises that began happening around my apartment. It seemed as though things in my bedroom were falling over, and floorboards in other rooms creaking. This should have set me off far more than it had, but I felt deep inside that if I dared look away from the window, whatever was inside my house would be incomparable to what remained *outside*.

The fourth question came that night. "*Come outside?*"

Though presented as a question it was clear the creature was not happy with my answer, shaking my head quickly. Nonetheless, despite the very clear anger, the eyes did not do anything. I would almost be relieved had it not been so petrifying of a situation to begin with.

The creaking in my apartment stopped, and immediately, two more pairs of eyes – green and blue – joined the brown, before vanishing. The paper remained once again.

For the next week, I sat for breakfast each morning with a beckoning sign taped to my window.

“Come outside?”

I tried to simply forget about it most of the time, but that proved far more difficult than I’d imagined.

I wish I had a better end to this story, but at the same time, I’m glad the eyes simply left me alone.

After months of inactivity, the paper was taken down in the night, not by me, and certainly not anyone else I knew.

The landlord – Julian, I learned – began to act strangely, but the eyes did not return. He managed to convince me, once, to come have dinner with him. I’d had nothing going on that night and agreed.

He informed me that the catch was I’d be meeting his family. And though this was a mild discomfort for a man I truly barely knew, I agreed either way.

I was surprised by the people that I met. They were equally as strange in demeanor and manner of speech as Julian, but what’s most notable, were their eyes.

Green, for the older man, Julian’s father, and blue for Julian’s sister.

You can likely make the same conclusion that I did that night, but it would have sounded insane to voice it to the people before me. I stayed tight-lipped until it was time for me to leave, and resolutely denied Julian’s offer to walk me home; he was to stay at his family house, as he did not live at the complex.

After this, the family simply vanished. I can’t tell you where they’ve gone as I don’t know myself, but I can’t help but feel saddened. It feels strange now to think, let alone write, that I believe these mild-mannered – if a little wacky – people were the same eyes glowing in the night that watched me each day outside my window. It can’t have been them, I don’t suppose, but something irks me each time I think about them. They seemed... inhuman.

In any case, that's how my story ends. I haven't seen them since that night, and sometimes I can't help but wish I had, or one day will.

Needless to say, I have moved out of the complex.

—

Following his statement, Milo cut communication with friends and family until his concerned mother came to his apartment and reported him missing. Three months later, Milo was declared dead with no leads on his whereabouts.

His long and disturbing psychiatric record makes note of mild psychosis, maladaptive daydreaming, and auditory hallucinations. It's worth mentioning, however, the diagnosis of psychosis was added to the list after the date of the original statement.

The only information in the closed cold-case file of the disappearance of Milo Hargraves is the note that was left taped to his apartment door the night he was reported missing. A plain piece of white printer paper with frantic handwriting reading "Gone outside."

Broken Bucket

by Malaya Guerrier

After "After You Left" by Michael Kleber-Diggs

The woman began insulating a water bucket.
It was safe and secure, yet, unexplainedly,
all the water spilled out
and carried the broken bucket with it.
The water and its bucket couldn't be replaced.
That water wrestled the woman to the bottom
of the ocean and pinned her there—
sand in her hair, the surface miles above her—
its pressure too great to be relieved
through two tiny tear ducts.
She never got to see the water bucket,
its form hidden by the insulation,
but she gave it a name:

Ezekiel.

The Last Light

by Chloe Stromberg

The second light of the candle is always the
Hardest
By the third time you've learned your lesson
On the light of the second match
The flames grow furious
Encompassing the
Tiny wooden stick
Almost enough to singe
Your fingertips
As Mr. Coffee
Takes his last breath
You light the third match
Waves of relief
Rush through
Your entire being
In a cabin in the woods
You've felt alone
For the first and
Second match
But by the third
You can hear
The cracks and
Creaks of the floorboards
Above you
The old stairs shifting
From the weight of other
Beings
Suddenly you're
Reminded
You're not alone

Color

by Rochelle Nibbe

Lavender; the calmer version of purple

Able to relax one's mind, both in spirit and in thought

[An otherwise unnatural color

Besides petals that form flowers

Rocks that come from beneath the earth]

in the form of crystals used in rituals

By those that call upon natural essence *

To heal

Lavender with Sage:

Encompass the bitter joy of one's senses

For the pretty moments, so small

Lavender brings calm

To All

Just Breathe

by Sarah Huderle



Golden Teeth

by Malaya Guerrier

Instead of waltz music coming out of my stereo, I hear
the sound of crinkling newspaper,
but crinkling in morse code.
I obey its command, slapping my friend's
ankles and pulling out two of my teeth.
The teeth turned gold.

Feeling invincible with my teeth in my pocket, I
release the air from a stranger's unattended bicycle
and carve my name in its place, taking the bike to a
landfill where I posted its picture on my Snapchat story.
No complaints heard, no cops came—was it the teeth?
I think so.

There was a car at the landfill—all scratched
and dented—as well as banana peels and other whatnot.
I sandpaper my car to give it a destroyed look
similar to the one I saw. The result: It began driving me.
My golden teeth made everything better, I think.

Awed, but creeped out, I quarantine myself and my
crazy dog, along with the seven squirrels that always
stole my dog's food. But this time they didn't dare touch it,
my golden teeth next to the bowl.

Quarantine ends, releasing the squirrels to chase
fallen finch feathers in the forest while my Pomeranian now
believes my golden teeth to extend to himself, so he drinks
apple cider vinegar and eats the finch feathers on the forest edge.
Nervous, I throw away my ACV and build a fence around the yard,
hoping for no further episodes and no chunky puke.
My teeth kept it all in.

The forest bull breaks through the fence, charging

at my house. I throw aftershave into its eyes and use a red curtain
to lure it away into the night,
my golden teeth in my pocket.

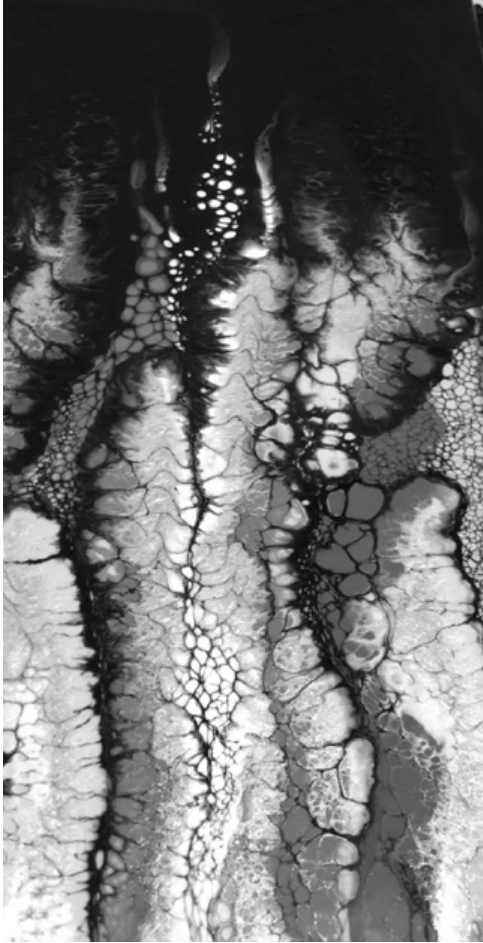
Had the bull come in the morning, I would have
chased it around the perimeter of my yard
and into the trees with a spade.

The spade would have broken several tree branches
and could have broken an igloo sealed with wax,
but it also would have chased the bull away
with my golden teeth.

And to think that all I had wanted was to listen
to waltz music.

Fire

by Lisa Brodsky



Peace, Lesbians!

by Sarah Huderle



The Difference

by Jessica DeLapp

A single path in an auburn wood
where are you leading?
Dancing in the crisp and cool and
falling with the leaves. Leaving the trees
naked and bare—a bass line of
brown, like the color of your hair.

Is the wind blowing? Are the trees
crying? Is the road winding and bending
playing peek-a-boo in the undergrowth
where you walk? Playful crunches
like candy apples beneath your boots
on the red draped paths of pine.

A single path in the woods
of painted strokes pulling me forward
yearning for travelers that seem to
go other ways, your road less traveled, but
we all end up there. Are you
waiting for me at the end?

That will make all the difference.

In the White Oak Savanna

by Sarah Huderle

Alone under the burning morning sky, Lover sits in a wooden chair on the patio of a small-town bar and takes a swig of dark beer, while above, frosty morning air rips the sun from the valley in front of him and squeezes. Scarlet beams spurt through the sky. Dripping sunlight pools in streaked clouds that glow orange, pink, and yellow, reflecting in a river that snakes miles below through rattling reeds at the base of the valley. A stone fire pit beside him crackles and burns, golden sunbeams illuminating smoke that billows upwards. Empty chairs litter the patio, their usual patrons either sleeping in bed or drunk in a ditch. Next to Lover, a zipped backpack with a bedroll, a hatchet, and a thermos slumps against his leg. Usually, Lover would find this solitude peaceful; now, however, he sips his beer, listens to the hollow wind, and yearns to forget.

Behind Lover, a door creaks. Hiking boots tap over patio stone. Heaving a sigh, Lover stares at the sky before closing his eyes. Steady, heavy, and slow: he recognizes that walk. In a soft, deep voice, he speaks.

“Seeker.”

A gruff, stoic female voice responds. “Lover. Good to see a fellow vagabond.”

“Indeed it is.”

A tall, muscular silhouette steps into Lover’s view, backlit by the burning clouds. The silhouette folds her arms, and her bomber jacket sleeves crumple. Lover stares past her and speaks. “Where’ve you been?”

“Wandering alone, no thanks to you.” Seeker circles the fire pit and sits in an adjacent wooden chair. Smoke billows around her as her rough black hair drifts in the wind. She continues. “What have you done since abandoning me?”

Lover ignores the latter half. “Me? Hell, I’ve been through a lot.”

“It shows.”

Lover laughs, then stares down into his mug. He looks up. “My heart aches, Seeker.”

Seeker pauses. “Why?”

Lover takes a long, hard swig from his beer, foam soaking his mustache as a stream dribbles down his thick stubble. He wipes his chin,

tucks a dark brown lock behind his ear, and speaks. "I traveled far, and come late summer, I found..." he trails off. Should he share this?

"Found what?"

Lover sighs. "I found a beautiful oak."

"A beautiful oak?"

"Yup. The most beautiful."

Seeker leans back. "Tell me more."

Lover nods, relaxing his tense shoulders. "After hikin' through a rollin' prairie, I found myself in a lush oak savanna. There, one oak stretched far above the prairie grass and scattered trees. Its twisted branches scraped so high that the clouds bent around them, the mist separatin' and flowin' like a broken creek around the lobed leaves."

"Sounds imposing."

Lover stares at the mug in his hand and swishes it side to side, watching the beer slosh in foamy circles. Flakes of leather flick off of his jacket as he moves. "Imposin'? Sure, maybe a little. But I found it comfortin', and after hours of sun-beat prairie, I welcomed the cool shade. It seemed almost perfect."

"Almost?"

"Pay no mind to that. As I rested, I found signs."

Seeker raises an eyebrow, but she doesn't press. "What signs?"

"Signs of a life."

Seeker furrows her brows. "Do you mean signs of life?"

Lover shakes his head. "No, signs of *a* life. I found food nearby. Hen of the woods fruited at the base of nearby oaks, and white-tailed deer roamed the prairie. Hell, I even found a massive patch of plum and apple. That's what first cued me in."

"Cued you in? To what?"

Lover brings the mug to his lips, speaking as it hovers there. "Cued me in that I could settle there." He takes a long, drawn-out swig. "Younger oaks provided lumber, while a nearby creek provided water and clay. Staring at that prairie-like space with those scattered oaks, I felt safe. Finally, I wouldn't have to roam anymore."

"You, of all vagabonds, stopped roaming?"

"Sure did. Roamin's lonely."

Seeker stares coldly. "Sure is."

"...Yeah. Sure is. So, while there I, uh, I started buildin' a home."

Lover shudders under her gaze.

“Elaborate.”

“I laid adobe bricks to dry in the sun, then hoisted my hatchet and cleared a young patch of trees.” Lover turns his head and stares at the rolling prairie beyond the town’s edge. It drifts into the horizon, broken only by lone trees and old leaning homes. His foot twitches, itching to wander away. “It took me weeks, but I endured with water from the stream and food from the wilds. For one month I chopped, sculpted, and built, until finally, under the twistin’ oak’s branches, I’d forged my place.”

“What happened next?”

“I lived peacefully.”

Seeker scoffs. “I doubt it lasted long.”

For a few moments, Lover doesn’t respond. He just stares in silence at the prairie, watching a pair of swans fly south. Their distant trumpets fade, and he longs to follow them into solitude. Dead silence follows, finding companionship only in crackling flame and bubbling beer. Seeker closes her eyes. Lover remains silent, then begins to tremble. Mist drifts into his vision. Eventually, he speaks. “For two months, I lived peacefully. Every day I sat and shared time with that oak. I loved its beauty, loved its branches, loved watchin’ its broad leaves fall. Even when the brisk autumn shook my bones, I stayed. I found myself mesmerized by a single hanging branch that clung with thin wooden fibers, its leaves turning scarlet first, then brown as they died.”

“The tree sounds lovely, but why mention the branch?”

“It was precarious. And yet,” Lover stares blankly, “I did nothing to fix it. Somehow, I thought it couldn’t fall. I enjoyed my loneliness, or so I thought. Nothing could ruin my peace, not even that branch.”

“You always did prefer solitude.”

Lover bites his cheek. Did he?

“I don’t know,” he responds. “I don’t think so.”

“When you slunk away from our camp in the middle of the night, you sure seemed to.”

Lover didn’t need to look to feel her piercing eyes. “Seeker, I-”

“Just tell your damn story.”

Shivering, Lover takes a deep breath. He yearns to apologize, to explain himself, but his mind drifts back to that night, to that campfire among the pines, and his silent footsteps as he slipped into the shadows, careful not to wake Seeker.

“You can’t stay closed,” she’d told him that night. “You have to open up sometime.”

“I don’t know,” he’d replied. “I just don’t know how.”

“Take your time. I’m here for you, Lover. You’re not alone.”

In all honesty, her words had scared him, but for what reason, he couldn’t say. He just stared at the stars, watching the slash of the milky way that splattered across the void, and as Seeker fell asleep in her bedroll, he stirred and rose. Staring at her still form, strong even in sleep, he packed his gear before leaving her alone in the clearing. Even then, guilt had knotted his gut. Now, that twist returns. As Lover stares into his beer, Seeker barks.

“Lover!”

He jolts. “Right! Uh...tree, branch, home... Ah, yes. As the days progressed, a, uh, a hum grew in my bones.”

“What kind of hum?”

“A hum of wanderlust. Desire...desire grew inside me to hike the prairie again, so I headed to the creek and sat on the banks to think. Watchin’ the water flow, I mulled over that hum, but when I glanced at the distant oak, the sight of its reachin’ branches inspired me to stay. I couldn’t bring myself to leave it.”

Lover’s cadence changes, growing slow, choppy, and forced. Seeker sits up cautiously, her tone softening. “Then why are you here?”

Lover swigs his beer. He stares past the valley, eyes zeroed beyond the sun. “When I approached my home after leavin’ the creek, I heard a distant crack, followed by a rumblin’ crunch. A strange feelin’ entered my gut, the kind that tells you somethin’s way off.” Hand trembling, he lifts the mug to his lips, tilts his head back, and chugs the remaining half of his beer. Then, he slams the mug against the table. Glass shatters against stone, rattling and screaming over the patio in glinting shards, and thick blood seeps through Lover’s clenched fingers into a crimson pool over the table. Lingering alcohol stings the wound. Seeker recoils as splinters scatter over her lap. She yells and springs up.

“Lover!”

“At the tree, I discovered the ruins of my home as the adobe sat, crushed, under that precarious scarlet branch.” Lover’s voice cracks. Blood oozes. He stares at the crimson pool, then clenches his fist harder. Seeker sprints over and frantically digs through his bag, grabbing a gray shirt. Softly, she dabs the blood with her rough, now trembling hands. Lover grits his teeth. “The poor thing had destroyed my home by crackin’ off the tree!

For hours, I paced in horror, drinking its fading beauty, hoping for a way to salvage it. I couldn't lift a big branch like that! It'd take weeks to fix, and by then, I'd freeze! With nowhere to stay, I had no choice but to leave. I aimlessly wandered, which, coincidentally, led me right to this patio, right here, talkin' to you!"

Seeker pries Lover's fingers open. Staring at his flayed palm, Lover grimaces, and sobs.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, "I'm sorry. I'm so damn sorry."

Blood drips over stone. Tears roll down Lover's cheek. Orange fades from the sky. Nodding, Seeker wipes Lover's wound with the shirt, wrapping his palm and pulling tight. Briefly, they sit still, panting. Lover watches tears form in Seeker's eyes as she places her hand on his shoulder and speaks.

"What a journey you've had."

Lover pats Seeker's hand, then rises. Wincing, he slings his backpack over his shoulder and gestures to the prairie.

"And what a journey we'll have."

Seasonal Depression

by Malaya Guerrier

The rain is pouring like a flood, and lightning gives an electrifying show to watch, like natural fireworks. I feel like crying because of this exhausting cold—a glitch in Minnesota weather, which gets worse with every passing year. I think I know the secret Minnesota holds: a curse of cold and nonexistent warmth and snow. But the snow is gone, although the cold has stayed. The rain and lightning signal spring, and spring is how the summer comes. And summer signals the sun expressing warmth to every weed, to every flower, animal, and being. To control the weather and make it do as I command would be my greatest dream, but then I wouldn't smile when I see the first signs of spring.

Eight Years

by Kaitlyn Johnson

She was the static force in my life, she was always there. Always. My life felt so right with her presence. Especially when she was older she didn't get out much, so when she did the house felt so empty and sad without her. Whenever I was sad, she would always be willing to lick my face or let me give her a hug. We brought her to as many places as we could, she came up north, on our yearly trip to Duluth, to restaurants, and more. On Saturdays, she used to follow my dad from room to room because she knew he would take her to the dog park. She was just as much a part of the family as the rest of us and we all loved her.

Daisy loved going up north on our yearly camping trip. She loved to sniff and wander and at night she would sleep in the tent with our dad. When she wanted to go inside the tent and it was shut she would paw it to get in so she could go to bed. When we would pack things up in the van she would follow as if saying, "don't leave me behind, I want to come!" When we went to Duluth she ran along the beach and went into the water at Canal Park. It seemed like it would never end.

I knew it was coming, I had to. After all, she was blind, and her legs didn't work that well anymore. It got even worse when she started shaking and having accidents. My mom had told us sometime the week before that it was coming and I was sad but it didn't sink in. It didn't seem real yet. I felt sad but I didn't cry, I just felt numb. It was something that crossed my mind occasionally in the past but I often told myself how far away it was and to just forget about it.

Normally I was excited for the first day of every month. It was a day for new beginnings. A fresh start. It was always something I enjoyed until July 1st, 2019. That was the day that we put our thirteen-and-a-half-year-old Basset Hound, Daisy, down. She came into our lives on December 29th, 2011.

I was elated to get a new dog after losing our Boxer, Maggie back in 2009. I love dogs with a passion, and I did then as much as I do now. My sister Lindsey was seven years old and still had a slight fear of dogs so the Basset Hound was an ideal dog for a family with children. At six years old she had so much energy and was running around the foster home where we visited her. My dad asked my sister and me if we wanted to get her. I was

hesitant at first because she was so crazy but something told me I still wanted her and so I told my dad yes. It was the best decision of my life. It didn't hit me until the day it happened before my parents brought her to the vet. It was a cloudy, dark, gloomy day that matched my mood. It wouldn't have felt the same to have a happy day in a negative moment. She had no idea what was going on, but I realized that was the last time I would see her, and that she wasn't coming back. It was real now.

"Bye, Daisy," I said as tears streamed down my face. I pet her one last time. I took one last glance at her and took in her long ears, short legs, chubby body, and light reddish brown tone that had white marks on it. My sister and I held each other as we cried in the kitchen, where we had been with Daisy before she left. We didn't go with because we didn't think that we'd be able to handle seeing it happen. I planned on getting dogs of my own in the future and I knew I would have to deal with this then but at the moment it was something I couldn't do. I knew it was for the best since she was in pain but that still didn't make it better. I imagined her laying on the ground in a small dark, gray room and her head going limp, her breath stopping.

Daisy had so much personality which made her harder to lose. She was the best dog I'd ever met. Because of her breed, she had a very easygoing personality. She was stubborn, but she was also very funny even when she wasn't doing anything. She was very intelligent as well. Everyone who met her loved her, it was hard not to. She would never hurt anyone. We could tell she was in pain but she rarely let it show. I hated the thought of her hurting but I also hated the thought of not having her. We made a concrete keepsake of her paw the day before so we would have the size of it and something else to remember her by.

If we hadn't got Daisy I wouldn't have gotten to love the dog who liked to bark on the tree stump outside, who was always ready for food, who loved the dog park, and who looked out the window from her chair. To see her again I had to rely on hundreds of photos and videos. We wouldn't hear her deep bark when she wanted to come inside or play, we wouldn't hear her toenails clacking against the hardwood floors, and we wouldn't hear her snoring. She wouldn't be licking her paws on her bed, she wouldn't be sticking her head out the window of my dad's 4Runner, and she wouldn't be sniffing outside. She just wasn't there. I tried to think of the positives to make it easier but none of them compared to having her there. I felt so down and when I was able to forget and feel happy I felt so guilty,

like I shouldn't be happy when she was gone. I think what was almost even worse though was when I forgot. When I'd go into the living room expecting her to be there and it was empty. When my parents would leave and they wouldn't say to take care of Daisy. When I'd come home she wouldn't be there. She wouldn't be barking since she was so excited for us to be back. On December 15th we wouldn't be giving her a birthday plate of her favorite foods like bread and hot dogs.

I knew it would be hard for me but what I didn't realize was that my life felt so wrong without her presence, she'd brought joy and happiness daily. I'd been to a few funerals but for the most part, they were family members that I didn't know that well or I'd been pretty young too. This was the first time I'd lost someone in my life to that I was very connected too. I felt lost and not sure what to do. Almost every memory I could think of we had her and so it felt extremely wrong and like a mistake.

I hated being dogless immediately, but we needed more time. Since we were so attached we gave up a lot to make the best life for her, which meant we always had a time when we went places and the temperature mattered and never left her with anyone else. Despite this, like my dad said, "if I could bring her back and have all that again I would in a heartbeat". One of the hardest things was telling those close to us. They were very supportive and empathetic but that didn't change the situation. They had known Daisy and loved her too. I had been doing fairly well and hadn't cried one day until we received a card from our neighbors. The cover had a galaxy theme with a dog angel on it. On the inside, it said, "I'm sorry for your loss, heaven gained an angel". My mom asked what it said but I couldn't say since I started crying on the spot. It'd been pushed beneath the surface and I tried to keep it there.

As time kept coming it got easier. It really is true that time does fly by. Obviously, I still miss her but I'm not constantly thinking about it. I'm getting used to my life without her and I when I think about her, I feel like I'm not as emotional anymore and I'm able to talk about it. I like to think that difficult situations make me stronger as a person and this is one of those. I've accepted it about as much as I can. Sometimes when you're forced to let go it makes you appreciate what you have in life. I'm so grateful for all the memories I had with Daisy and I'll have them forever.

Script

by Samantha Lindberg

A nice house in the suburbs, decorated modern style with only white and black furniture. On the couch, a woman, EMILY, sits with her arms crossed. She's a paranoid, perceptive type, and watches the door with suspicious eyes. The woman's husband, ALEX, enters through the front door and shrugs off his jacket, his hair mussed up, looking quite frazzled.

EMILY

You're home quite late.

ALEX

Oh, you know— had a late shift.

EMILY

I thought we agreed you'd say no to those?

ALEX looks uneasy. He moves to sit on the couch and EMILY turns to face him with suspicion evident in her eyes.

ALEX

Well, gotta make the boss happy.

EMILY

(Sarcasm)

I'm sure. What exactly did the boss need tonight?

ALEX

(Swallows)

Some reports printed out. It was real borin' stuff, you don't want to—

EMILY

No, no, I want to hear. What kind of reports?

ALEX

Uh— profit summaries. The New Year is coming, we gotta keep up with those figures.

EMILY
(Deadpan)
It's July.

ALEX

...

Right. Well, he's always been over-prepared.

EMILY

But you always complain about his lack of organization.

ALEX shifts uncomfortably in his seat while EMILY remains still, staring at him. ALEX coughs.

ALEX

I'm gonna get some beer. Do you wan—

EMILY
(Standing up)

I want to know where you really were tonight.

ALEX
(Eyes darting)

Ha— what do you mean honey?

EMILY
When will you admit it?

ALEX
Admit what?

EMILY frowns and narrows her eyes.

EMILY
I know what you've been doing.

ALEX
(Seeming uncomfortable)
And what is that?

EMILY
You come home each night with your hair all wrecked.

ALEX
Uh-huh...

EMILY
You're always staying out late.

ALEX
Right...

EMILY
You cancel plans and lie to me about where you're going, and you always seem nervous and suspicious. I know what you've been doing.

ALEX
(Looking far more nervous than before)
What do you mean?

EMILY takes a long pause, staring her husband down.

EMILY
You've joined a criminal organization.

ALEX
(Relieved, whispering)
Oh thank god...

EMILY
I never thought you'd stoop this low! What are you doing? Selling drugs?
Killing people?

ALEX

Um— both?

EMILY

And what money do you get from this that you're hiding from me? We could have paid off all our loans by now!

ALEX

I, uh, didn't want you to worry?

EMILY

You're forcing me to hide this secret from everyone, too! I can't believe you're doing this to me!

ALEX

(Confused)

I'm sorry?

EMILY

You should be! You've put us both in danger! How long has this been going on?

ALEX

Since April.

EMILY

The police could have already gotten you by now! What have you been doing? Who have you killed?

ALEX

I haven't killed anyone!

EMILY

You haven't killed anyone? Likely story! Who are these people? What are they making you do?

ALEX

Listen, I don't think you understand...

EMILY

(Throwing arms up in the air)

Oh I don't understand? Of course I don't, I'm not a terrorist unlike my husband!

ALEX

No, you're not getting this. I haven't been doing anything!

EMILY

Don't pretend now! It's out in the open! I know what you've been up to and I've already contacted the police!

ALEX

You've done *what?*

EMILY

It's all over for you. I never want to see you again.

ALEX

Slow *down* woman, what is wrong with you?

EMILY

(Distressed)

What's wrong is I fell in love with a murderer!

ALEX

No, you're not listening to me. Call off the police, I have an explanation!

EMILY

What explanation could possibly suffice for all the horrible things you've do—

ALEX

Holy shit! I'm cheating on you! Calm down!

EMILY

...

Really?

ALEX

Yes! Now call the police and explain to them!

EMILY looks relieved and happy as she picks up her phone.

EMILY

Well, you could have just said that!

ALEX

I could've?

EMILY

(Raising her phone to her ear)

Well, yeah. It would've been so much easier this way.

(She turns her attention to her phone)

Hi chief! No no, you can call the boys off! False alarm.

(Smiling)

Okay, thank you chief. Yeah yeah, just me being irrational old me, you know how it is! *(Pause)* Of course. Always. Thank you. Bye.

(EMILY hangs up)

EMILY

Well, I'm glad I don't need to have you executed.

ALEX

You were gonna *execute* me?

EMILY

(Putting down her phone)

Well yeah, you should have explained to me before I thought I needed to.

ALEX

(Looking incredibly confused)

So you're not mad?

EMILY

Huh? Why should I be? What did you do?

ALEX

...

You know what. Nothing.

Past Due

by Kieran Oakley

A whole world waits
safe and alive, basking
in the warmth of my imagination.
My mind is a womb,
heavy with thousands of unwritten words,
rather than a fragile human being,
but what begins the final trimester?
I have no way to count the days past due,
so I wait.
Those who know what I carry
call it a pregnant pause,
but I won't be coaxed into misery.
If I just sit and wonder
what it could be,
should be,
will I wake up one morning
prepared to push?
How does anyone settle on a day or hour
to call the beginning done?
Perhaps I'll have no choice,
and my opus will just bubble over,
tumble out my mouth,
and onto an unmarred page
to scream itself awake.
What a terror that would be.
Once bound and free,
I've no idea how I'd care for such a thing.
I mean, what does a story even eat
besides me?

i Ran with Scissors

by Lisa Brodsky

i ran with scissors, but i didn't die

and i wore my holey underwear
everywhere I went, but the
church penguins didn't notice.

i licked peanut butter
off the butter knife,
and didn't cut my tongue
for forty years of my life.

eating all those carrots
did not give me night vision
and greens beans still
don't taste like candy.

i didn't catch a cold
wearing sneakers in the winter
and i refused my mittens
and got frost bitten.

my hymen didn't break
when i rode a horse and
i never got "the AIDS"
from getting a tattoo.

i'm sure the gum i swallowed
came out in the end
with the watermelon seed
that began to grow.

the spinach that you fed me
made me more like Olive Oyl
and the liver that i choked on,
failed to make me tall.

I never told my children any of these lies
and lo and behold they managed to survive.

White

by George Wahl

White like sheets, like paper and knuckles

on test days and in the passenger seat.

Like eyes in headlights and the tips

of chewed fingernails still bleeding.

White spots in closed eyes

And bared between lips,

white teeth, biting down

on white fingers, that snap

to the beat

of questions on paper.

Dragon Flight

by Lisa Brodsky



My Life from a Word Find

by Malaya Guerrier

TIME-ADULT-SIMPLE

Birthdays only come once a year, and usually I find that my birthday takes its sweet time before coming back. I had always wanted to be older, to not be the youngest who doesn't get to go certain places or watch certain shows. I remember having to go to bed at seven-thirty during the summer when it's still light out and hearing music bits from whatever my parents and older siblings were watching. My fifteenth birthday couldn't come soon enough so I could watch *NCIS* and *Marvel*. But now I want to be younger. My next birthday will make me eighteen, an adult. I'll be able to vote, to sign my own waivers, and to stay late at work even on school nights. Then the school year will end and the following school year will be college, not just live at home and commute to a community college for PSEO. I will have to pay for it all if I get no scholarships or grants. I will live in a dorm with a roommate and communal showers instead of at home with my parents, my own room, and my own bathroom. My responsibilities will quadruple overnight, and I don't feel ready. I wish I could go back to when everything was so simple, when school was a breeze and the only other responsibilities I had were to get my chores done and practice for my drum lessons.

CLOSED-DARKNESS-BRIGHT

When I was little, I was afraid of the dark. I refused to sleep with my door closed; it had to be wide open. Maybe I thought there might be monsters or demons or that someone would break into our house and kidnap me under the cover of darkness, so I wanted light to see whatever it was coming. But I also didn't like having a nightlight directly in my room because that was too bright, making it hard for me to sleep. The solution was to put the nightlight in the hall bath and leave my door open. It worked well until I got older and decided that I wanted to sleep in the dark because the open door let in too much light, making it hard for me to fall asleep. The nightlight in the hall bath was turned off, and my door was only open by a centimeter or two (just so it wouldn't be pitch black). The nightlight wasn't fully retired, though. It was kept for the random two-a.m. bathroom runs when I didn't want to wake myself up with the blinding bathroom lights.

CHLORINE-DIVINGBOARDS-POP

My swimming lessons ended when I was ten or eleven. I remember the smell of chlorine that forced itself up my nose and how it stung my eyes when I opened them underwater. I remember the mostly gleeful yells and screams of all the children trying to swim, hearing them echo throughout the room. I remember learning to dive at the end of level two, diving into the ten-foot end of the long pool, cutting through the water with ease, and swimming however many yards it was the four-foot end. I remember the second pool in the room, a square thirteen feet deep with two diving boards that became the home of my level three group. Whenever there was free time at the end of my lessons, I would dive into that pool and try to touch the bottom. I tried both feet-first and head-first (technically hands-first). Several kids managed it, but I never could. After graduating from level three, I never went back and didn't swim again for a few years. By the time I was at a pool party and tried to dive off the diving board, I could no longer do it. Instead of my hands cutting through the water, my stomach hit the water with a flat pop and remained sore for the rest of the afternoon.

HOMESCHOOL-FRIDAYS-HATING

School was fun in fifth grade. It was my first year of home school and I loved it. When I had been at the nearby elementary school, I got up at seven, was picked up by the bus at eight-ish, got done with school at 2:50 p.m., and, as the last bus stop, got home around 3:30. In fifth grade I almost always got all my school done by noon or before. On Fridays, my finish time was closer to ten a.m. Then I could read all I wanted and had plenty of time to practice for my drum lessons (if I cared to remember). But then high school came along. In high school I did school for most of the day and started having to stay up late to finish work. I couldn't type or use Microsoft Word very well and my first major assignment was a five-page research paper with an outline and title page. That's when I started hating school. But even though I labored and stayed up late, I always got my work done during the school week. I always had the weekends off. I would do my chores and watch football on Saturday and watch more football on Sunday. Ever since I started PSEO, however, I end up doing school seven days a week, trying to get all my homework done. This makes it even harder to enjoy school, even for the classes I like, and often means no football or other TV on the weekends. This has also turned my usually neat-freak self

into a serious slacker for doing chores such as folding my laundry or cleaning my bathroom.

SPORTS-SIXTHGRADE-HANGOUT

Sports were never my thing growing up. I hated to play them and found it boring to watch them. I did, however, like spending time with my dad, and he watched football, so I would sit and watch for the sake of sitting with him (and often having nothing better to do). But as I watched the games, I began to pay attention to what was happening and became confused by it. My dad, a high school football coach for years, would explain it all to me. Once I knew what was happening, I began to enjoy watching football. By sixth grade, I was watching football regularly. In fact, by eighth or ninth grade, I actually grew sad after the Super Bowl because there wouldn't be any more football for several months. The most enjoyable part of it all was that no one else in my family liked watching football, so doing that was always time spent with my dad. It was our daddy-daughter hangout time.

RUNNING-UNSAFE-FASTER

One thing I haven't grown out of, despite being almost eighteen and my mom preferring that I had, is running around the house. I run up the stairs, down the stairs, to my room, to the bathroom—basically everywhere. I've done it for as long as I can remember and haven't stopped. It's not really all that unsafe since I usually don't slip or run into anything (or anyone) with only two major exceptions. One being when I ran down the hallway, slipped on the carpet, and fell, crashing into the wall and giving it a nice dent with my elbow. The second was when I ran down the stairs full speed and ran into my friend at the bottom, slightly tweaking my ankle. Those two instances got me to not run for a maximum of ten minutes (but probably more like five). Since fall officially started, however, I've slipped and nearly fallen down the stairs of my house four times but so far haven't injured myself. My mom doesn't understand why I run, even when I tell her that I get places faster if I run, as long as it's not for exercise, since that's too exhausting.

GROWING-MATURE-RECKONING

I'm growing up. I've been learning new things and unlearning other things. It has been both fun and stressful. The stressful parts make me long for the simplicity of my younger years, but the strange thing is, I also don't want to be younger once more. I want to look older, be older, be more mature, have more responsibility—the whole thing. Maybe it's just my

constant annoyance with my baby face that has everyone thinking I'm fourteen (and everyone saying, "You'll appreciate it when you're older"). Maybe it's just me being the baby of the family and not wanting to be seen that way anymore. Maybe it's just me still wanting to be seven inches taller. Or maybe it's a part of the process, the reckoning I'll always have with my age, no matter how young or old. I'll just always have pieces of my life to put in a word-find.

A Dawning Passion

By Dhoha Qasem

I have always strived towards being a lawyer
That specific goal was engraved in my brain
Guiding immigrants to the States as their employer
Was a dream I have long wanted to obtain

It all began from my ethnic dynamic background
My cultural yet religious beliefs had been set
However, after my American side was found
I needed to intertwine the two sides that had met

My Arab perspective created specific ideals
I did not know how to incorporate a different view
Yet, when diversity is one of America's appeals
Adaptation was a trait I needed to come through

Surrounding myself with people from different histories
It opened my mind to other ideas and sentiments
People became like distinct mysteries
And I had to unlock it to see their varied intelligence

Soon, politics became my favorite subject
I learned about the countries people come from
Realizing that the Middle Eastern aspect
Had many similarities to other places and their income

There were many hardships that people would embrace
War, famine, and unemployment are examples from multiple
Reasons have influenced individuals to find a new living space
Led people to migrate and find a new life, functional

America is known to be the land of opportunity

Therefore, it is one of the top migration locations
Immigration Lawyers help bring in the diversity
To one of the most successful nations

I want to help that dream become a reality
For those that are struggling elsewhere
Learning their points of view can guarantee
A diverse country and a safe place that they deserve to share

I may have grown up too ignorantly
Learning only about Middle Eastern issues and events
However, after much time I currently
Acknowledge diversity and what it represents

Political science will be my first step
It is the subject I started investing in
Law school will be the next prep
Before my immigration lawyer path begins

Hark! Yon Sailor

by Morgan Teats

Steady on Sailor
For thy weary hands do tremble
Against the tarnished wheel
You must move one
Must prevail
Against this rotten gale

So should you find...
A calm alluring rock
Untouched by raging storm
With twin bays of perfect blue
Brimming with sunlit sands
On which to land
You may be tempted
To build a home and stake your claim
To defend its dense and wooly forests
With every drop and breath

But Hark! Yon Sailor
For you must turn away
For better things await dear Sailor
The first be last
And last be first
And drive you to dismay
So set sail again
My tired friend
Think not of loss and gain
For now you must depart again
Surrounded by the sea

So should you find...
An archipelago
Unconquered by king
God
Or nation

No dictate or commune holds it
So it bleeds and swells with life
Here the fruit is boundless
Each sweeter than the last
Their juice drip down
And all fall down
Among your minds undoing

But Hark! Yon Sailor
For you must turn away
For your life is one of blandness
The lilies of the field
Do flourish all about you
To pluck them now
Mash them up
And breathe deep your poppy mixture
Would be ill-advised
For sight
Or soul
Or splendor
This was never yours dear Sailor
This fevered island dream
So run
Run
Run dear Sailor
Run back into the sea

So should you find
A continent
Behold to none but God
Enriched by beast and plant and mount
You may speak to men of power
Tell them where you've been
And they will pay you sailor
For maps
And guide
And sight
They will make you king

For pillaging be your right

But Hark! Yon Sailor
For you must turn away
For this place is home to none
Least of all be you
The beasts go free
Thick are the trees
Yet this place it now abhors you
The garden grows unruly
Without its warden's touch
So turn around dear Sailor
Before you too are mulch

Dear Sailor
Precious Sailor
I only ask you this
Why do you sail
Through the hail
In spite of blighted gale?

For you, it is the journey
Your destiny and song
For damn you
Damn you Sailor
Accursed on this path
For meager men would take the rock
The Archipelago
And Continent
But for you it is not the land
It never was
For you do love the sea

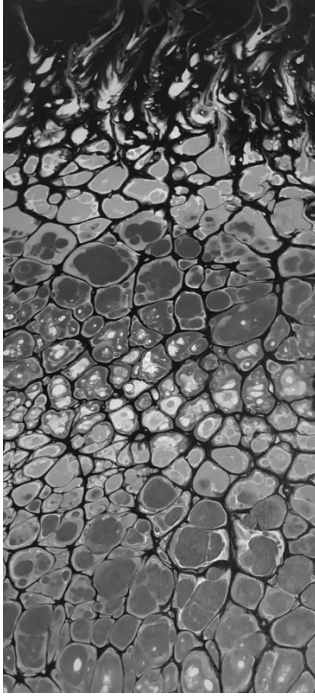
That is your crux dear Sailor
To sail restless upon the sea
To cut the waves
And scour the sky
Until your flesh grows old

For what awaits you sailor is nary sought by the rest
As you trawl the deep
Its treasure keep
But they are not your prize
For when the day
You find your home
It's then your hopes take flight
For every sailor seeks it
Though never they admit
For we are all alone here Sailor
Skimming across the deep
Yet we are driven by the same thing
We seek those golden shores
We know are home
That we have never seen before
And we bring in all our treasure
Our gold
Our fish
Our tales
Take harbor from that terrible storm
That we may finally rest
Away from baleful sea

So Steady on Sailor
For thy weary hands do tremble
Against the tarnished wheel
You must move on
Must prevail
Against this rotten gale.

Water

by Lisa Brodsky



Our Fort Meyers Beach

by Carly Peterson

It used to be the best beach of all
Bright white sand between your toes
The sun gracefully beating on your face
Night sky filled with stars that glow

As Mother Nature's tears were about to fall
Strangers cheered in the streets
Live bands played proudly
Praisers made bouncy, blissful beats

Dirty clouds arrived tall
Covering every inch of the bay
Carrying heavy blows
Hovering and running as if there were no next day

Winds picked up and started to bawl
Rain drowned cars resembling a pool
Garbage floated at the surface of disaster
Brains couldn't comprehend, they felt like a fool

Remains leftover and survivors could barely crawl
Houses destroyed and lives had been shattered
Commercial property found its next target
Blouses versus spouses, no matter how battered

We must stand strong and recall
Our memories we have made as a whole
Help those who you can help
Shower hope and strive to console

Vespa

by Jessica DeLapp



Slow and Steady

by Kaitlyn Johnson

“Leeva!” Harrison called worriedly. That diamond face stared curiously at her, crinkling his brow. She noticed he was balancing on the wall to get his shoes on, and wanted her to wait, but Leeva ran down the hallway, gasping for air. Her flip flop fell off, and she snatched it up while continuing to run. Let the neighbors talk, they always did regardless. She dashed into the elevator and pushed the buttons frantically. Only then did she take a minute to put her shoe back on and zip her pants back up. She also made sure to adjust her bra straps. *Gosh, why did he have to go and ruin everything? Maybe this was a mistake after all.*

She dashed through the lobby and down the street as soon as the elevator opened, following each path and curve that led to solitude. When she felt her lungs were about to collapse on her, she paused and hung her head, each breath heaving from her. She could not help but think if she were a dragon, her exhales would be fumes of smoke right now. She jumped when her phone vibrated in her pocket.

She slowly drew it out, crossing her fingers and praying not to see the name that appeared on the screen - Harrison. She could not help releasing a colorful string of curses and ignored the filthy look she got from the elderly lady passing by. She hit decline and kept walking, slowly turning her pace into a jog. She did not know what she would say to him anyway.

To be honest, Leeva could not remember making it to the park, just that she did. She made her way over to the swing set and sighed as she saw six new calls from Harrison and ten texts. Instead of replying to them or listening to the voicemail, she powered it off and climbed onto the equipment, sitting on the platform between two slides.

She sat there as bunched up as she could make herself, a pretzel of limbs trying to squeeze away the world. Then she tried to smooth down her disheveled hair. She spied a little girl gliding down the slide with her arms up gleefully. She giggled as the slide vibrated under her, and then raced around to do it again. Leeva remembered when she was that young and did not have a care in the world. What she would give to go back to those times, she thought with a reminiscent shake of her head.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the post. She tried to silence her mind but it was hard while listening to the caw of birds, shrieks of children, and whistles of wind chimes spiral around her. She heard

footsteps approaching her and snapped her eyes open. It was a mom casually strolling by watching her son run, but the look she gave Leeva asked her one question - *why are you hiding?*

With a less than graceful grunt, Leeva hoisted herself to her feet and strode off. Harrison would be bound to catch up to her soon, and she did not know what she would tell him. She ran through all the possibilities, but none of them seemed quite right. She was still debating what to say and do when she spotted her favorite place in the whole world - the beach.

She waded into the water and shivered as the coolness rushed through her body. She felt each worry roll off her and into the ocean that splashed her ankles. She soaked in the salty breeze that fanned out her caramel-tinged hair behind her. There were so many things she was concerned about, but right now it was just her and the ocean - and she would not have it any other way. She kicked the waves and walked over to a picnic table, swinging her bare feet in the sand. She felt movement and did not need to look over to know who sat down.

“Thought I might find you here,” Harrison said. Leeva looked at him out of the corner of her eye but said nothing. The lap of each wave breathe a tired exhale, and the ocean sprayed her face with a mist.

“Leeva, I just don’t get it. Everything was going so well, and now you’re running from me like I killed your dog or something. Am I really that bad or am I missing something? I thought you knew me better than this. I thought *I* knew you better than this.”

“Harrison, I don’t know I want to have this conversation right now,” she said evenly, trying to sidestep around him, but he blocked her. She felt as though her temper were a few kernels away from being popped and blown all over the beach.

“If you want to leave, you can leave, but *at least* tell me what’s wrong first. Don’t I deserve that much?” The logical part of her said of course and wanted to tell him everything, but the fearful side of her took over and tore her in half. But how do you explain that? *Oh sorry, I got freaked out? I’m not ready?* She did not know how he would react to that, and fear clung to her that this would mess things up.

“I - um,” she cleared her throat. “How honest do you want me to be?” He stared at her in bewilderment.

“I want you to be completely honest, Lee. Why? What are you hiding? If you don’t think this is going to work I want you to tell me now.”

“Okay, okay. I don’t know how to say this except I’m... different.” He rose an eyebrow but softened when he realized she was done talking.

“You think I’m worried about that? We’re all different somehow. I’ve known you for years and it’s never bothered me. What makes you say that now?”

“No, I mean yes - but I’m different, Harrison, from most people and it’s getting hard to ignore that. And I’m not saying that to be quirky or anything, I don’t know, I want to tell you but I think this might mess up things up.”

“Please just tell me,” he whispered. “Then I’ll let you know.” Her gaze dropped to the ground, but she snapped it upward into his hazelnut eyes.

“I’m asexual.”

“Um, okay.” A pause stretched out between them, and she dared him to say something. He stared out into the ocean. “So you’re not interested in me.”

“No it’s not that, I am, just not sexually.”

“May I ask why not?”

“It’s nothing personal, I just don’t experience any sexual attraction to people.”

“I’m confused,” he said, peering at her like he was seeing her for the first time. And to a certain degree, he was - this was a shade of her he had never managed to see over the years. She did not think he had questioned why she never talked about her hookups like he did.

“Why?”

“I thought we had something,” he said. “I know we have something, more than friends. Am I wrong?”

“We do. I think I need to explain this,” Leeva said, stuffing her hands into her pockets. The softness allowed her clenched fingers to loosen a bit. She tossed her dirty brown hair over her shoulder. She sat down.

“There’s asexual and there’s aromantic - well, both have wide spectrums, but essentially asexuals don’t experience sexual attraction and aromantics don’t experience romantic attraction. There can be people who are both but there are also people like me, who are asexual but still feel romantic attraction. That’s why I freaked out, but I figured you should know. It’s not personal, I promise.” She shrugged awkwardly. He stared at her blankly.

“Say something, *please*.”

“Have you ever done it?” Her cheeks redden at the question, though she knows it is not something to be ashamed of either way. Luckily, the breeze swirls around her and cools her down as the drops graze her face.

“Excuse me?”

“Sex. Have you ever done it?”

“No, no, I know what you meant, it just caught me off guard.

And... not that it's any of your business, but no, I haven't.”

“Then how do you know you don't like it?”

“I never said I didn't like it, I have no experience. I just said I don't feel any sexual attraction, so I've never had the desire to do it.” She peered up at him. “Does that make sense?”

“I mean, no, not really. So you just don't feel anything for me then?”

“I do, just not sexually. I really like you, Harrison, I do, but I think we're looking for different things. That's not bad, but it's something we'd have to work through.”

“I... I don't know what to say,” Harrison said, scratching his head.

“No offense, but this is kind of weird, and I think I need to think this through. I thought you were ready to be more than friends?”

“I understand,” she replied quietly. “I hope we can work something out.”

“Yeah me too, I'll be in touch, I guess.”

A week passed, and Leeva did not receive any communication from Harrison. She texted him a few times, but he did not respond. She tried to muffle her irritation when she saw he was still active on social media, just apparently not choosing to reply to her. *Of course he didn't.*

She thought they had something but it seems she may have been wrong, was that all she was to him - a sex toy? An object? She wondered what he was up to now, and an idea planted in her mind that she could not detach - Harrison hooking up with some random girl, not missing her in the slightest. She would give him everything Leeva was not, and the fear stung more than it should have.

Leeva slammed the lid on her blender and jolted at the loud clank it made. As it whirred to life, she sat and stared into its cycle. All the blueberries, strawberries, cherries, and bananas danced together ferociously, creating a smooth blend. But this dance was not unfamiliar to Leeva, as

numbly, she realized that she was reliving this endless cycle over and over again. The part she could not understand, was why this time it bothered her - why did it not in the past? What made this man worth that topped this new neglect of her when she did not sacrifice part of her she was not comfortable with offering?

She saw each fruit spin around as each of her exes, and their fusion as the break up. Leeva sighed, not just because she was upset with Harrison and herself (though she was), but because this element of their relationship could demolish the relationship, not even as partners, but as friends. It had never hurt to be rejected this way before, but hurt was wording it nicely. It felt like her heart was falling apart onto knife blades over and over. This hurt was not worth it, Leeva decided. Maybe it was a sign that she was not meant for a serious relationship. Or maybe it would not matter if she was anyway, since how would she find someone else who she cared for so deeply, who understood her the way she understood them and expected them to be okay with a sexless relationship? Because if she was honest with herself, Leeva was not sure she would have a desire to have sex even if she married someone she loved more than the world.

To quell her anger, she turned on the TV and flicked paint onto the bare canvas slap by slap. She had gotten into the habit of coming home from work, making some dinner, and then pulling out a canvas and painting. That was what she was doing when there was a knock on her door. Leeva set down her paintbrush and quickly washed her hands.

“I’m coming!” She called. She dried off her hands, tightened her ponytail, and *then* opened the door.

“I’m sorry I was in the middle of -” there in the hallway stood Harrison. He looked sheepish, and the rings around his eyes showed he had not been sleeping well.

“Hello,” he said in his rough and soft baritone. *Gosh*, how she had missed that voice.

“Hi,” she squeaked. “Want to come in?” He seemed to hesitate but then nodded.

As they settled on opposite sides of the couch, the distance between them seemed to speak volumes in their silence. She did not mean to, but Leeva could not help staring at Harrison. He did not seem to be able to stop staring at her either. *I feel like I’m in middle school again*, Leeva thought with a snort. Then her smile faded when she remembered him lying on the couch, pulling her to him, tugging impatiently at her bra straps with a low

groan. *No, no, no. This can't be happening*, she had thought before jerking away from him and running outside. She gulped and tried to focus on why they were there.

"I'm sorry," they said in unison. The silence that spread between them was as awkward as the time Leeva fell in the cafeteria when she was thirteen.

"I'll go first," Harrison said. "I didn't react well the other day, and I've been thinking about it since. I didn't want to talk to you until I knew I had my thoughts together and could talk to you in person. You didn't ask to be born like this, and I didn't either... that came out wrong - I'm sorry, I just meant it's not something either of us could control." He nodded, satisfied with that answer. "This has been a lot to take in, and I would be lying to you if I said I didn't feel torn. I really like you Leeva, and I know you like me too, we have a strong connection - I'm sure of that. But it's hard for me to pretend like this means nothing to me when it does. So I guess what I'm trying to tell you is I've been grappling with the question 'am I willing to make this work without sex?' and I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I'm willing to try."

"Really?"

"Really. I still don't get it or necessarily like it... but, it is what it is." He shook his head. "Anyway, why are you sorry?"

"I led you on, and let you believe I was fine with it until it happened... I know I should've talked to you about it, but it just seemed easier to let it go. I guess I was afraid of it getting in the way." She chewed on her nail and glanced up at him. But once she did, she regretted it, for it made her begin to cry.

"Lee?" He asked, moving slightly closer. He looked as though he was going to put a hand out to comfort her, but thought better of it and drew it back. "What's the matter?"

It had hit her, what Harrison meant, without meaning to. She saw his dimpled smile when he was her date to the middle school dance when she had no one else to go with, whispering in the corner of the classroom during physics lectures, and his sobs that raked the room when his dad died, but the boy in front of her continued to go on and take care of her when she forgot. But he was not a boy anymore, she realized with a start. He was now a man. *Her man.*

The answer had been in front of her all along - he was worth it. He had always been worth it - each smile, each laugh, each kiss, each tear, each

scar. They had climbed each valley together and crumbled under the same terrain, it was all what they made of it. Maybe this did not have to have a complex solution - it was simply what they made of it, just like every time before.

“So, let’s suppose we make this work,” Leeva said. “How would... How would we work around this?” He turned to face her.

“I think we do exactly as we’re doing now. We just take it slow and see what happens. Between that and communicating, I don’t think realistically anything would go wrong. What do you think?”

“I think that would be perfect,” she breathed. She scooted closer to him to let him know she wanted to be near him. His warm gaze melted her icy defense she tried to hide behind.

“Can you tell me what’s bothering you?” He asked softly.

“I love you. I love you so much it hurts, and I don’t want to mess this up. You deserve more, Harrison. I know you do, you can do better than me. Deep down, I’ve known that all along, but I’m selfish and want you.” She turned away from him, but he gently grabbed her shoulder and pulled her to his side. She tried not to cry, but a few tears leaked when she imagined him leaving her for someone else. Leeva was not blind, she knew he was good-looking, and she had noticed when other girls stared lustily after him. But that did not stop her from wanting him all to herself, though that was his decision.

“Oh, Leeva... I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” He stroked her hair as she dried her tears. The amber drops of dusk spilled onto them, bathing them in its warmth. “I let you think that’s all I was looking for with you. I admit it did surprise me. And I’m sorry if this makes you uncomfortable, but yeah, I am sexually attracted to you. But we’ve been friends for what, seven, eight years now? I had to think about it, but I realized I’m not going to throw away our connection over this.” Leeva nodded, unsure of what else she could add to that. She closed her eyes and let the warmth radiate as she snuggled into his side. He got up and went into the other room.

Leeva sat up, confused. She could hear him rustling around her bedroom and was about to check what on earth he was doing when he padded back down the hallway. She wondered belatedly if her room was clean enough for him to rummage through it. She craned her neck to see what he was holding, but he held it away from her until he reached her.

He held out a rectangular frame that Leeva usually kept on her nightstand. It framed a photo of the two of them when they were freshmen

in high school, when she had her pink hair and when Harrison still wore his glasses. He had his arm around her, and she held up a peace sign while sporting a cheesy smile with her eyes closed. She remembered how he had teased her after that. She cringed at how neon her hair was and then cocked her head, studying Harrison. He gave her a nervous smile, and she decided that while she liked him with glasses, he looked better with his contacts.

“We were such dorks,” she snorted, trying to contain her laughter. She burst out laughing when she saw Harrison trying to keep a straight face, his lips twitching into a smile.

“Were? I think we still are,” he teased. “That hasn’t changed.”

“Well,” she said slowly. “Maybe not all changes are bad.”

He kissed her, a quick peck, and this time that was all there was to it. As they sat there, hand in hand, Leeva thought it was quite blissful.

“Maybe they’re not.”

Moonrise Gate

by Caroline Holmes



What a Beautiful Day to Live in Minnesota

by Morgan Teats

What would you say about the state where you live?
What would you tell another man
From distant lands
A far afield from yours?

I would tell him of Miny-Sota, ay!
The coldest place that's not a pole
But we don't live here for the frost
Or the chilly autumn breeze

We live in Minnesota for the good days
Those great days
Upon which God does shine!

We live for times just like the other day
When the sky was full of modest cotton candy clouds
And bluer than any sea
The wind did rip through the emerald trees
But we did not so much mind
For that day was a hot day
Just a little too warm alone
But paired with gale it was a truly splendid day

What a beautiful day to live in Minnesota

We live for times just like last month
When I traveled through the north
Far from other men and city streets - my heart it did rejoice
On every side was opaque grey sky
Below were golden waves of grain and plain
Interspersed with mighty towers of pine
What a sight it was to see

And when far north I did endeavor
To fish upon a lake

To wade on through
That shallow space
Home to fish and clam
It didn't matter what I caught
Or that I'd cut my foot
For the deep wood green and glassy water
Did more to soothe the soul

What a beautiful day to live in Minnesota

We live for times like tomorrow
When I'll be driving in my car
Down twisting city roads shaded by trees and open to the sky
Windows down I'll fly like the redtails that soar high above
I will hear the singing of the birds and the cacophony of man
But most of all I'll hear the wind
As it dances through my hair

Then I'll be passing by the roadside beds
Of flowers wild and tame
Stems beautifully bright and flowers ravishingly radiant
Alive with oft-seen colors
I'll rush past waves of green and rolling hills of grass
Lakes that were once just humble puddles
And wetlands full of dragonflies

What a beautiful day to live in Minnesota

Today I sat outside
Golden in the sun
Sky open and blemishless
Centered on the sun
Its light enraptures the world, holding it close and banishing the dark
But not all is heat and light
The breeze to does persist

I was not alone
We all gather in the sun

All seek its warmth when it reveals itself
Like lizards they sit, just beneath the shade
Here to share in the bliss
Of living, breathing rays

What a beautiful day to live in Minnesota

Tonight I will walk into the dark
I will breathe deep the smoke of grills and bonfires
See the sparse net of stars above me
And laugh
Laugh at how I ended up in such a good place
At such a bad time
At how it's up to me to enjoy this while it's here

So I'll get in my car
Flick on the lights
And go off into that deep darkness
The wind will dance in my hair and rip through the leaves
And I will think

What a beautiful night to live in Minnesota

Baby Red Squirrel

by Sarah Huderle



Contributor's Notes

Amanda Glowa is a minor poetess, dancer, & world traveler. Professionally, she is a conservation biologist with a BS from the University of Minnesota. When she is not doing any of the above, she can be found reading or roaming with her beloved pug Finn.

Carly Peterson, 16, is a PSEO student from Jefferson High School. She loves to write essays and, occasionally, poetry on the side. She is hoping to achieve a career in business and participates in clubs such as DECA to prepare herself for the future.

Caroline Holmes is in her second year as a student at Normandale currently getting her associate degree. She enjoys writing and visual art.

Chloe Stromberg is currently in their second year at Normandale. They have always had an interest in writing, specifically creative writing. Some of Chloe's other interests include performing in musicals, meditating, skateboarding, as well as roller skating. They also enjoy spending time with their friends and family. They are very excited to be part of such a wonderful project and share their work.

Dhoha Qasem has been writing since 4th grade and enjoyed reading, as well as, creating rhyming poetry. Later, she discovered unrhyming poetry and found a different way that poetry can be portrayed so beautifully. Although she cannot write unrhyming poetry yet, she plans on improving and will continue writing as a hobby. Fun fact, she loves to draw for fun as another method of expressing herself!

Ethan Martin is an aspiring writer and student at Normandale who enjoys writing fiction, and dabbles in poetry. He strives to inspire and foster creativity and kindness in others, and he hopes that his writing will one day leave a positive impact on the world.

George Wahl is a 23 year old Minnesota native and amateur writer. He likes writing and reading of all kinds, but especially horror. Outside of literature he enjoys video games and cooking.

Jerry Carrier is a Normandale Creative Writing Student. He lives in Lakeville. He is a Normandale writing tutor.

Jessica DeLapp is a first-generation college student from Miami, FL. She loves a good romance and watches *Pride and Prejudice* on repeat. Her husband doesn't seem to complain, though. When she isn't reading or writing, she's probably singing, playing games like chess (and losing), playing with her two sons, or daydreaming about Captain Picard. She's also a proud member of Phi Theta Kappa though she doesn't do much with the organization except maybe use it as material for her bio.

Kaitlyn Johnson is in her second to last semester in the AFA program. She isn't sure where she wants to transfer yet but is looking forward to enhancing her writing and getting her bachelor's degree. When not writing, Kaitlyn loves to read and spend time with loved ones.

Kieran Oakley is an aspiring editor looking to specialize in long-form fiction. After completing her AFA in Creative Writing at Normandale, she plans to pursue a BA in English. She finds joy in rock climbing with her friends and loves curling up with her cat, Bear, and reading something new together.

Kylie McWilliams is an 18 year old girl who's wanted to become a writer ever since she was seven years old. She started writing poetry nearly three years ago, and immediately fell in love with it. Kylie's hope for her writing is to one day be a published poet and journalist.

Lisa Brodsky is currently working on her Associates in Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at Normandale Community College and was the 2nd place winner in the 2022 Patsy Lea Core Awards for poetry. She has been published in *The MockingOwl Roost*, *Otherwise Engaged* and others. She was born and raised in Canada and is a mom of four boys.

Malaya Guerrier is a PSEO student who is currently working on her AFA in Creative Writing and plans to get her BA in English. She enjoys reading, drumming, and watching football. She hopes to become a published novelist one day.

Megan Ocel is a third-year student at Normandale working on completing her AFA in Creative Writing. She doesn't specialize in poetry writing, but after taking more writing classes and having the opportunity to learn about and write poetry, she figured she'd give it a try. Her pastimes include writing, playing piano, and playing guitar.

Morgan Teats is a freshman here at Normandale after a gap year post high school graduation. He is an artist and a writer and endeavors to bring the mystic back into culture through fantasy stories about demons, dragons, angels, and God.

Rochelle Nibbe is a 20-year-old student attending Normandale community college to get their Associate's and pre-creative writing degree. They enjoy writing fiction, especially fantasy, for the different worlds that can be created and hopes to create their own someday. Rochelle aspires to learn the variety in writing and wants to see what they are able to do when it comes to storytelling.

Saff Drayton is a first-year student at Normandale who is working on an AFA in Creative Writing. Aside from writing, Saff enjoys photography, ceramics, and music.

Samantha Lindberg is a Fine Arts Creative Writing major born and raised in Minnesota with a love of long-form fiction and poetry. Her first novel comes out in 2023 under the pen name Samara Katherine. Other than writing, she enjoys playing her guitar and irritating her cats.

Sarah Huderle is an LGBTQ+ artist and writer from Minnesota. She enjoys long hikes through the woods, playing D&D with friends, and creating from sunup to sundown. A Normandale student, they aspire to complete their AFA, pursue English, and embrace the world of writing!

The Paper Lantern is the student literary journal of Normandale Community College, 9700 France Ave. So., Bloomington, MN 55431. It is edited by members of the Creative Writing Club. The project is made possible by the Normandale Student Life Activity Fee.

Officers and the following members of the Fall 2022 Creative Writing Club helped produce this issue:

Rochelle Nibbe, President

Vivian Clark, Secretary and Editor

Caroline Holmes, Secretary and Editor

Isabel Spande, Treasurer

Club Members: Lisa Brodsky, Saff Drayton, Malaya Guerrier,
Sarah Huderle, Ethan Martin, Samuel Miller, Morgan Teats,
George Wahl

Front Cover: "Galactic Barrier," by Lisa Brodsky

Back Cover: "Movement" by Jessica DeLapp

Submit your creative writing to the Fall 2022 issue of *The Paper Lantern*! All work is reviewed anonymously, and acceptance is based on literary merit. Submission links and more information can be found at **www.thepaperlantern.org**.

Works in all genres of creative writing (poetry, fiction, memoir, short plays, etc.) are considered, with a limit of 1000 words for poetry and 2500 words for prose and drama. Multiple submissions accepted. Submission is open to registered NCC students only.

Submissions are received via the online service, Submittable. Submittable is a free and easy way for writers to submit work to a variety of publications.

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