



# Elements

Western Illinois University's Literary Magazine

2023



# Elements

## 2023

### **Acknowledgments**

The editors would like to thank the Department of English, University Printing and Mailing, and the talented WIU students who submitted their fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art.

### **Front Cover Image**

The Eternal City, Molly Borth

### **Back Cover Image**

Warp, Blake Murdock

All WIU students are encouraged to submit their work. Contact [elements@wiu.edu](mailto:elements@wiu.edu).

Dear Readers,

When asked what type of literary magazine *Elements* is, I've found it difficult to summarize everything it holds. Yes, it's a collection of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual art by undergraduate students. Yes, it showcases the winners of the Lois C. Bruner and Cordell Lerner creative writing awards. But it's more than just the stories and artwork. It's a group of students who are passionate about the creative process and coming together to publish a work that they can hold in their hands and take pride in.

Not only am I the managing editor, but I am a writer. Creative writing has always been a passion of mine. I remember writing my first story when I was in the third grade. Something about a tiger. I'm sure my mom has it stored away in a box covered in dust in the garage. I love writing in all genres, both fiction and nonfiction. Writing is like breathing for me: completely necessary for survival but sometimes difficult to do in certain seasons. But no matter how hard it may be, putting pen to paper (or fingertips to keyboard) is the most rewarding experience.

Writing is weird. At least it is for me. It's one of my greatest passions, yet a lot of the time I don't want to do it. It's one of those things that is hard to get started, but once you do, it's like you never stopped. I just finished another short story for a fiction class I'm in and let me tell you, it took a lot of willpower to sit down (or lay in my bed) and get the story finished. Eighteen pages later and I have a first draft that I'm super proud of...until I go back and read it through for the first time. Then I'll get lost in revisions and ask myself why I ever thought this part sounded good at all or what I was thinking with this plot twist. But after the countless revisions, I know I'll be able to read through it again for the hundredth time and finally exhale, knowing that all that work wasn't for nothing.

For most people, the creative process is messy. I've come to realize that we as writers make it look easy to everyone else. Maybe there's that 1% who actually find writing easy all the time and never have to worry about how good or bad their dialogue or plot is or how underdeveloped their characters may appear. But the rest of us are left to learn how to embrace this messy creative process. And what an exhilarating experience it is to embrace the mess!

Working on *Elements* was my first experience being managing editor of a publication. I can say with absolute sincerity that I loved this experience and would do it again. That's not to say it's always rainbows and butterflies, but that's the world of publishing. Heck, that's life. Being heavily involved in the production of *Elements* was a great honor. I loved being able to work with such a wonderful team of editors and such talented writers and artists.

*Elements* houses a wide range of creative writing. In our fiction category, we have everything from fantasy pieces such as "Elide and the Willow Branch" to realistic fiction such as "Dreadhead Sympathy." Our nonfiction category holds sentimental pieces about love and loss as seen in "Stage Four" and "The Christmas Game." The poetry category holds an abundance of intense imagery, as seen in "Danse Inferno" and vivid emotions such as "In Memoriam." Additionally, our visual art pieces stand alone as incredible digital and traditionally composed works. The cover images we chose, "The Eternal City" and "Warp" represent the wide range of creative pieces in *Elements*.

This year's edition of *Elements* showcases a diverse group of writers and artists on their own creative journeys. We present an array of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry as well as visual art that stimulates the senses. I am so excited for you all to read our writers stories and view the work of our talented artists. I hope you enjoy reading these pieces and admiring the artwork as much as we enjoyed putting it all together. Happy reading!

Emma Gilliland  
Managing Editor



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***Fiction***



## Peractio

Michaela Broadwater

“Well, really, what’s the point then? If there’s no God. No Allah. No Zeus. If there’s nothing out there, then what’s all this *for*?”

“Why do you only think your life is only worth something if there’s someone telling you what to do?”

Zarrah and I are spread out on the grass of the park, our fingers intertwined. It’s the first truly warm day in a long while, and we’re celebrating it. The trees have started to bud again, the grass is springing up all around us. Spring was late this year, but that’s okay. It always comes, regardless.

“If there’s no one out there,” she says slowly, “then I’m just here for no reason. It’s all just random. And that would mean there’s no higher purpose, and we’re doing it all for nothing.”

“Doing all what?” I point out a group of clouds shaped like a smiley face. Zarrah nods approvingly.

“I don’t know, like working and being a good person and shit.”

“If you don’t think you would be a good person if you weren’t religious, then you’re probably not a good person. And we work to live. We live to *experience*.”

She laughs at this. “What exactly are we trying to experience?”

I gesture to the sky. “This! Everything. Whatever you want, man. There’s freedom in not having a God, because then you have to decide who you are totally independently. And that’s hard.”

She thinks on this, rolling over onto her side to look at me. I do the same. “Well maybe I just wanna get through this as easy as possible, Erin.”

I shrug. “Whatever you want, man,” I repeat.

We look at each other for another moment and decide to have a smoke, not talking about anything in particular. The birds are flying and a homeless man wanders by us, pushing a Target shopping cart filled with junk. He asks if we know where to get some H and we point him toward the corner of South and Jefferson. He thanks us and shuffles away, his pace quickening.

The streets are quiet, but it’s a Monday afternoon and most people are busy. Zarrah and I roll up the rest of our weed and decide to smoke it by the tiny pond sitting in the middle of the park. I’m starting to get the shakes and the weed helps, but not enough. Zarrah strokes my forehead, fussing.

“I’m fine,” I tell her, and I mean it.

The world is starting to dip in and out. I’m nodding off, the joint still stuck between my lips at one point. Zarrah plucks it away, frowning.

“Do you have any regrets?” she asks.

I think about that. I run over some of the worst moments of my life, just briefly. Stealing my mom’s minivan when I was twelve and crashing it into a telephone pole, breaking my jaw and having to have it wired shut for months. The first time I was going through withdrawal and I thought I would die. The last time I saw my mother and she didn’t recognize me.

“No,” I say, and Zarrah scoffs at this. “What’s the point?”

“You fucked up your whole life. So did I. At least I don’t act like everything is fine and I’m living exactly the kind of life I wanted,” she says, sounding furious.

“No,” I say slowly. “This is actually exactly what I wanted, if I’m being honest.” I smile dryly. “I could never see myself growing old. I don’t want that. I’ve done so much and been so many places. I never wanted a regular job. I never wanted kids, or a family. And neither did you. So, at least I’m not trying to be someone or something I’m not.”

There is no reply for that. A cardinal lands on a tree on the other side of the pond and sits there, staring blankly at us. It shuffles from foot to foot. I wonder what it wants. I wonder if it even wants.

My head is pounding. We’re getting there. My eyes have drifted shut of their own accord.

“You ladies doing alright?” It’s a very official voice, loud and deep. It’s a damn cop.

“Yeah, we’re okay! Thanks!” Zarrah says in a chipper voice. I’m sure she’s stowed the joint under her leg or something.

“What’re you doing out here on a Monday afternoon? Got the day off?” He knows exactly who we are and what we’re doing. It’s just his way of being polite about being suspicious.

“Sure do,” I try to muster some strength into my voice. “Taking a vacation day to enjoy this sunshine.”

I crack my eyes open and he’s got that overly friendly smile on his face that they beat into all cops at their cop training for dealing with people you’re trying to get information out of but can’t actually arrest yet. I decide that this isn’t worth it.

“We were just about to head home, actually,” I say, and try to get to my feet with as much convincing stability as possible. He cocks an eyebrow.

“Don’t let me kick you out, I had just gotten a complaint that there were people using drugs in the park so I was hoping to see if you ladies knew anything about that,” he says with another cheesy smile.

“We don’t,” Zarrah says, and we join hands and walk in the opposite direction.

There’s nothing he can do, so he lets us leave. We head toward the corner of South and Jefferson. Time is running out.

The sunshine is relentlessly cheerful, piercing every shadow and warming our faces. It’s difficult to imagine that there could be any happiness after this moment. My body is stiff and aching and I’m having a hard time walking at anything more than a zombie shuffle, so that is what we do. Zarrah has always been so patient with me that she doesn’t say anything, just slows her pace along with me.

“You still going to rehab tomorrow?” I ask. I’m not sure what the answer will be. She always surprises me. This time is no exception.

“Yeah. My mom’s dropping me off. There’s no point, really, to keep going without you. If my Peter Pan is leaving, I guess it’s time to grow up now.”

This hurts my heart a little, the idea that she was only holding onto this life for me. That maybe she really wasn’t happy.

But I guess that’s why I’m leaving and she’s not.

We change the subject. She talks about how her mom is finally going to let her see her daughter again, about how well little Elsie is doing in school and how artistic she is, how much she reminds her of me. That part makes me smile; that just means Elsie is a handful. Zarrah is a good mom, when given the opportunity. She just had little Elsie too young, but she tries her best. It makes my heart heavy to think that I won’t see Elsie grow up. We’re close, her and I. At thirteen years old she’s sharp as a tack and funnier than half the adults that I know. She’ll be a force when she’s an adult, that’s for sure.

I ask Zarrah to keep talking to Elsie about me, and there’s more I want to say, but I find that the words get stuck in my throat, so I just leave it at that.

“She knows you, Erin. She knows how happy you are with your life and she knows you just gotta do what’s right for you. She wouldn’t want to see you in pain.”

I nod. We used to hang out a lot before Zarrah lost custody of Elsie a few months ago, so she knows what’s happening. She’s watched me deteriorate, much as I hate to admit.

My head is trying to implode, but I can see Jay sitting on the curb on his street corner smoking a cigarette, his right knee jiggling nonstop. He makes eye contact with us and waves excitedly. His favorite customers. But he knows how long it takes for me to walk places so he just leans back against the stop sign and keeps smoking.

“How much do we need?” Zarrah asks.

“I’m not really sure,” I admit. I’ve used for so long that I’m not sure what actually qualifies as a dangerous amount anymore. “Jay probably knows, though.” I have a fat wad of cash in my back pocket so I’m not worried about not having enough. It’s easy enough to blow it all when you’re not going to need it anymore.

Zarrah has begun to cry but I know if I ask her about it, she’ll try to talk about it again. I pretend that I don’t notice. It’s just another routine buy. Erin and Zarrah, one last hurrah.

“Hey, Jay!” I call out when I’m close enough, limping up to him and joining him on the curb. I tell him what I need. His eyebrows crease.

“I mean, I got enough, but it’ll be expensive...”

“That’s fine.” I hand him all of my cash. “This should be enough, and a little extra. You’re a pal, Jay.”

He hesitates but takes it. No way he could resist it. “You’re basically asking me to assist you,” he says. “I dunno if I can do that.”

“I’m going anyway, man. At least it’ll be the way I want to go. Either my heart is going to give out from the cancer in the next year or I can get super fucking high one last time and just be done.”

“No treatments, not even gonna try?” But he’s rifling in his bag anyway. He understands.

“Don’t wanna spend my life in debt. You got me or not?” I know he does.

He pulls out some baggies and hands them to me. “Should be more than enough. Are you gonna be there for her?” he asks Zarrah.

“She wants to be by herself. Stubborn cunt,” she smiles. “Hey, you won’t see me for a while. I’m going to rehab tomorrow.”

“No shit? Congratulations! I hope that works out for you.” He hugs her, and then me. He kisses my cheek and gives me an extra squeeze. “Never thought I’d see you guys part ways.”

“Only physically,” Zarrah says.

We make some small talk and Jay informs me that I’m going to miss his sale he was planning on having and I tell him that I’ve never in my life heard of a drug dealer having a *sale*, but he just laughs and tells me he’s an innovator. Zarrah says to let her know when it is and she’ll tell a few of her buddies. He thanks her. An older, shirtless man with sagging pants approaches awkwardly and greets Jay by name, so we take our leave.

Our short walk is spent in silence. What do you say to someone you’re never going to see again? Someone that you love more than life itself. She’s not crying anymore, thank God. We reach the split in the sidewalk.

One will go left; one will go right. To the west is Zarrah’s neighborhood. She’ll go home to her mom and sleep in her childhood bedroom. To the east is downtown, filled with people just like me looking for an escape.

She kisses the back of my hand.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

The curtains are falling on my stage, and I imagine them to be thick, red, and velvety. I used to love sneaking into the local theatre with Zarrah. We would sit in the back and listen to the music, admire the costumes, pretend that we belonged among the upper class. I reach out to touch Zarrah’s cheek, reveling in the warmth of her face. She’s always been a light. And then, because I’m not sure what to say, I tell her, “Good luck in rehab. It’s gonna be a piece of cake for you. Tell Elsie I said—bye, I guess.”

“Okay.”

I go east, and she heads west.

## Dreadhead Sympathy

Cyrus Dale

Fred peered out of the window of his third story three-flat apartment with his arms crossed. He watched as his red Cadillac CTS idly ran. He wondered how long it would take until it would be warm enough to block out the twenty-degree weather once he and his wife got inside. *I'll give it five mo' minutes*, he thought.

"Damn. I shoulda' just parked in the garage Par," he said to his wife, Parletta, while still staring out the window at his car.

"Well!" Parletta yelled from their bedroom, "You shouldn't have told our tenants they could use it for the winter. You did right though. Shoot, they older than *we* are."

They'd owned their Westside three-flat for over thirty years. Although over time the neighborhood had devolved, they refused to relocate. Their three children moved to the suburbs to avoid the relentless crime. They had invited their parents to do so, but they stubbornly declined. Fred and Parletta purposefully, and discreetly, only rented to tenants that were age sixty and above to try and keep the "riff-raff" from entering their domain.

The tedious sounds of the zipping and unzipping of a suitcase disrupted Fred's morning view of his running Cadillac. "Goddamn Par, how many days you packing for?" he asked, turning his head sideways. "This ain't nothing but a weekend trip ain't it?"

Parletta continued to zip away. "Oh, hush up Fred. You know you suppose to pack for twice as long as you *really* stayin', just in case."

Fred shook his head and resumed looking out at his vehicle.

"Well shit it's just a weekend getaway, dear, all we need is our meds and moonshine. The hell is the name of this place again?"

"Sankoty Lakes Fred," Parletta dreadfully answered. "How many times do I have to tell you?" she asked, this time projecting her voice louder from their newly remodeled bedroom.

Fred shook his head once again. He hated going to unfamiliar places, but his wife loved to explore.

"Uh-oh," Fred jumped, "One of them dreadheads just came out they building. Look like they comin' outside earlier and earlier now. Let's hurry up and get before the rest of em' come out. We not gettin' caught up in no crossfire on the way outta here."

Outside of the three-flat apartment building that stood across the street from Fred's, a man with long skinny dreadlocks stood on the cement stairs of his front porch. His red, leather Pelle Pelle jacket creased and un-creased as he constantly raised and lowered a lit cigarette to and from his mouth. Parletta emerged from their bedroom rolling a gray suitcase into the living room where Fred stood. She had a look of displeasure on her face from her husband's words.

"I wish you'd stop with your dreadlock prejudices, Fred," she said as she approached him. "I bet you didn't like in the seventies when the cops thought every Negro with an afro was up to no good, and you even worse than *them*."

"First off," Fred asserted pointing a finger at his wife, "Even if we were up to no good, we wasn't blowin' each other's heads off like these knuckleheads. Second, I don't got a problem with men with dreadlocks, I got a problem with *dreadheads*."

"You know, I'm startin to think that you half-insane, Mr. Frazier. What the hell is the difference?" Parletta questioned.

Fred put his arm around his wife that stood at the same height as him, "Well, a man with dreadlocks is just what I said; *a man with dreadlocks*. But that nigga sittin' over there with no job?" he said while poking the window with his finger, "*that's* a dreadhead," he concluded.

Parletta let out a soft laugh in retreat of the argument. "Fred, if you don't leave that young man be, he don't bother you. Now c'mon, we should go before I-290 turn into a darn parking lot."

They made their way into their Cadillac where scolding heat roared through the vents. Fred twisted a knob and the roaring subsided. Rose Royce's "Love Don't Live Here Anymore" could be heard playing through the speakers. Fred shot a curious glance at the man with dreadlocks who stood outside before pulling out of his parallel parked spot.

As they drove down Homan Avenue, Parletta held onto Fred's right hand as he steered with his left. The right side of the car violently dipped as they hit a pothole.

"Damn Frazier, that pothole been there for years, you forgot to go around it?" Parletta questioned, "You alright?"

"Yea, I'm fine, Par," he said, relinquishing Parletta's hand. He began to hold the steering wheel at ten and two.

Parletta looked out the corners of her eyes with skepticism at her husband. It was odd for him to forget details of his environment. A couple hundred feet later, Fred swerved slightly into the lane to the left of theirs and back. A tinted silver Chevy Cruze pushed down on their horn in consequence of Fred's mishap.

"Fred Frazier!" Parletta yelled, "You been dabblin' in some moonshine this early?"

"My chest," Fred said with agony. He put his right blinker on and pulled into the emergency lane using all the will he had.

He held his foot on the brake and leaned forward holding onto his chest. Parletta reached behind the steering wheel and placed the car in park, as Fred was in no mind to do so.

"What's wrong with your chest?" Parletta asked, staring at Fred with intense eyes that couldn't dare blink.

"Shit hurts like hell. Feel like I'm bein' punished to breathe."

"C'mon, get in the passenger seat. We goin to the emergency room," Parletta stated calmly as if it were routine.

She helped support her husband's weight while they walked to the other side of the car. He could barely stand on his own two feet without assistance. She drove their Cadillac in a speedy but controlled manner in the direction of the nearest hospital. She glanced back and forth between the road and her half-functioning husband.

"You make sure you stay right up here with me Frazier. Don't you go accept no invites from the Lord yet," she ordered.

"Just get me to the E.R., Par," Fred groaned.

After a two-minute drive, Parletta pulled in front of Langley Hospital's emergency room. She parked underneath the canopy that read "mergency" on top in red lettering due to the missing "E". Parletta paid it no mind. She put her hazard lights on and went to help her husband out of the car.

"No need to strain yourself, ma'am, I can get him inside," a nurse holding onto a wheelchair said. Parletta stepped aside.

"What's going on today?" the six-foot-three heavysset young man dressed in baby blue scrubs asked.

The nurse grabbed Fred underneath the armpits and placed him in the wheelchair.

"Ah, I'm havin' a hard time breathin'," Fred said with anguish.

"Oh no!" the nurse winced half-heartedly while pushing the wheelchair, "Let's get you to triage."

The three of them went into the half-full emergency room. Parletta quickly glanced over the patrons of the room trying to gauge their wait time. From what she could tell, everyone in there seemed like they could breathe just fine, unlike Fred. She figured his wait shouldn't be too long. She did all of the talking as a nurse collected Fred's information.

"Ok, you're all checked in. We'll call you to the back when we're ready for you," a nurse behind a laptop on wheels informed.

Fred perked up, "No, I need to see somebody *now*. Didn't you hear my wife say it's killin' me to breathe lady? I may not be here by the time y'all call me back."

"Please, sir," the nurse begged. "We'll place you in the appropriate order, have patience," she said while looking at both Fred and Parletta.

The nurse that initially greeted the couple pushed Fred next to an empty chair where Parletta would sit. Parletta put her arm around her husband and rubbed his back. She took another look at the waiting room, but this time she examined the look on everyone's faces. They all had a look of hopelessness and a level of energy that was drained. The low level of energy was contagious as she sunk down even deeper into her chair, giving up hope that her husband would be seen sooner rather than later.

A pair of automatic double doors leading down a bright hallway opened simultaneously. Out came an older nurse with gray hairs scattered through her head. She held a clipboard tight to her chest as all the eyes of the E.R. were glued to her.

"Bailey?" she said, raising up on her tippy toes. "Darius Bailey?"

Up popped a young boy in an orange basketball uniform. He limped in his all black Starbury shoes toward the nurse. He was trailed by a middle-aged woman that appeared to be his mother.

“Lord have mercy,” Fred pleaded.

“That boy ain’t got nothin’ but a sprain of an ankle. Ain’t no way in hell he shoulda got seen before you,” Parletta commented.

They both watched as the double doors closed. When they heard them lock, it felt as if they were being locked out of life.

“Just fall on the ground Fred,” Parletta said in a low voice in his ear, “fall on the ground, then they ain’t got no choice *but* to see you.”

Fred robotically shook his head. “No Par,” he replied in a raspy voice, “If I’m goin out, I’m goin out swingin’.”

“Goddammit!” Parletta slapped her knee.

Five minutes past and again the double doors opened. The same nurse appeared, this time she was looking at the clipboard with a puzzled face.

“Ummm. . . Oh-Lay-Yinka?” she said in an unsure tone.

“Yes!” a man with a West African accent answered.

He just so happened to be sitting a couple seats down from Fred and Parletta. He sprung to his feet. As he was passing by the two, Parletta reached out and tugged on the bottom of his corduroy coat to get his attention.

“What is your issue woman?” the man exploded underneath an all-black skull cap. “How dare you touch me!”

“What you doin Par?” Fred questioned.

Parletta ignored her husband, “Excuse me sir, but would you mind tellin’ me what you in here for?” she asked the man.

The man’s body huffed and puffed with fury; his eyes got redder by the second. “That’s none of your business woman, but if you must know, I think my wife gave me something another man had. Are you pleased now?” he said before angrily storming through the open doors.

“Nurse!” Parletta yelled at the top of her lungs at the gray-haired human intercom. “This don’t make no damn sense; my husband is over here dyin’ and y’all keep on seein’ these other folks with these owies and boo-boos. My husband could’ve been dead by now!”

“I completely understand ma’am,” the nurse sympathized, “Please, let me walk this patient to a room and I’ll be right back to talk with you.”

The nurse walked into the back once she realized Parletta didn’t have a response. Fred shook his head as he now had a diminished desire to even keep his eyes open. A few minutes later, the gray-haired nurse emerged from a different door than the one she’d been using. She walked up to Parletta and Fred then bent down, balancing all of her weight on her toes. She placed a hand on Fred’s knee and had a concerned look on her face.

“What’s going on today?” she directed towards Parletta.

“Hm,” Fred groaned while his eyes were shut.

“My husband can barely breathe and y’all puttin’ him on the backburner. He shoulda been seen *imme-de-fuckin-lee*, and I hardly even use profanity, but you all *makin’* me use it on ya.”

“Ok *ma’am*,” the nurse said while placing a knee on the cold tile floor. “Were you aware that we operate as a S.W.Y.C. Emergency Room?”

Fred opened his eyes to tune into what was being said.

“What the hell is *that* white girl?” Parletta scolded.

“Ok, that’s what I thought. We’re a “*Save Who You Can*” Emergency Room.”

Fred tilted his head and grimaced from the smell of the nurse’s sour smelling breath, “So what? Y’all can save me, can’t you?”

“As a S.W.Y.C. Emergency Room, we prioritize the patients who are most likely to survive *first*, because more can be done on our end, as opposed to a situation like yours sir, where, unfortunately, you are *closer* to death, which means less can be done on our end.”

Fred cracked a chuckle which shortly turned into a cough. Parletta angrily dug her top row of teeth into her bottom lip, she had no words. Suddenly, the nurse pulled out a vibrating cell phone.

She rose to her feet, “Oh, they’re ready for you to be seen Mr.? . . . Shoot! I forgot my clipboard.”

“Frazier,” Fred finished.

As the nurse gripped the wheelchair handles, three paramedics wearing blue coats burst through the sliding doors while rolling a patient in on a stretcher. “We got a gunshot wound!” one shouted, “He needs to be seen pronto!”

The gray-haired nurse held her palms out in confusion, “We’re not a fucking Trauma Center! Why would you bring him here?” the nurse exclaimed.

“We were too close *not* to come here. Going anywhere further than here would have been down right inhumane!” an out of breath paramedic yelled.

Parletta and Fred took a look at the patient on the stretcher. They noticed a red Pelle Pelle jacket that had even redder spots of blood stained all over it. Their eyes traveled up the body of the patient where they saw the head of the man with dreadlocks they’d seen on their block earlier. He breathed irregularly.

“We got one patient that’s before him!” a nurse that sat behind the check-in counter informed, “Push that stretcher into a corner and he’ll just have to wait.”

Fred cleared his throat and turned to look at the nurse that was about to start rolling him. “I’m next right?” he was able to muster out.

“Yes, we’re on our way back now,” the nurse responded as she began to push him.

Fred cleared his throat again with less intensity, “Don’t push me any further. I want *that* young man to take my spot. I want the *dreadhead* to be seen before me.”





**Underwater**  
Molly Borth

## The Fisherman

Abigail Golnick

Jack reached instinctively for one of the extra beers that he kept on the end table next to his faded brown, leather recliner as he sat down before he remembered that he had purged them all the night before, after having a long conversation with Ben—his thirty-something-year-old neighbor who had moved to the lake a couple of summers ago after divorcing his wife. They had sat on Ben's dock, fishing and talking about the rash of missing children. Ben sat silently, sipping on his beer as he listened to Jack talk about the monster he thought lived in the lake that had stolen children when he was young. Ben listened to Jack talk for hours until the sun had long set and a chill touched the air.

The springs in the recliner shifted and popped beneath him as he sank deeper into the recliner than he wanted to. He didn't want to get comfortable; he had a plan for the morning, and he didn't want to get sidetracked. He bent over, lacing up his ratty tennis shoes, his bones popping as his hands shook.

He stood slowly, running a hand through his thinning hair. He could feel the start of a withdrawal headache coming on. The television across the room droned on, some black and white show that tugged on the corners of his childhood memory. He liked to leave it on overnight; the constant noise from it helped him sleep. He ignored it when usually he would sit there and watch whatever was on, mulling over all his regrets in life. Staying on this lake—which kept him constantly reliving memories, good and bad—was the biggest of them. He had grown up fishing off the dock in the backyard for his and his family's dinner. Now, it sat half-sunken in the muck. Riding bikes on the dirt road with his friends was one of his favorite memories, though it always made him sad to think about what kinds of lives they could have lived. Getting beat in the basement by his father was the source of many of the nightmares he still had. He always thought he could have done something with his life if he had left the lake.

The sun hadn't yet started peaking over the horizon as Jack left the house, pulling on a cap as he locked the front door behind him. His keys rattled as they slipped through his finger, hitting the rotting wood of his porch. Instead of picking them up and hurting his back, he ignored them, knowing that no one on the lake would care to break into his slowly decaying home.

Jack walked slowly, quietly, along the back of his house, cutting across the yard to Ben's dock, where his small fishing boat sat tied up. He worked as quickly as he could at the knots; he didn't want Ben to spot him stealing the boat before he could make it out onto the water—though, he knew that Ben would still be sleeping, especially after drinking so much. He sighed with frustration as the knots took longer to undo than he intended it to; his old fingers could only work so fast. When he finally got the knot undone, he stepped into the boat. It rocked slightly beneath him, making him queasy. He realized that he hadn't been on a boat since his boating license was revoked a decade ago after one too many BUIs.

He bent over in the back of the boat and started up the motor, which kicked up water as it sputtered to life. He used the tiller to navigate out to the middle of the lake before switching over to the trolling motor and turning on the Fishfinder and GPS.

He was determined to find the monster that lived under the murky surface of the lake. He didn't know why it had chosen now to come back. He was sure he knew what it looked like, but he wasn't sure how he knew. Could he have seen it one night while fishing off his dock when he was young? Or was it in a dream? He couldn't be sure anymore. His memories had started becoming hazy long ago.

The monster had taken his two best friends away from him before they had even made it to high school. The three boys had been the only children living on the lake back then, and they had been like brothers. As delusional middle school boys, they had planned to play on the varsity football team their freshman year of high school and then go on to play football at the same university. Jack never felt like he could go through with the plans on his own. At first, everyone had been convinced that the boys had drowned while they were horsing around, but their parents insisted otherwise. After fighting with the police and detectives to investigate their disappearances, too much time had passed and it was too late for them to find anything that would help them figure out what happened to the two boys.

Jack was reminded of his father, the man that had beaten him senseless too many times to count. He remembered how his mother used to take away his father's liquor and pour it down the drain and the withdrawal that came with that. Jack resented his mother at those times; it was when the beatings were the worst. His father would drag him to the basement by his ear with a shaking hand, practically buzzing with anger.

His father kept most of the doors down in the basement locked, but there was one room that he always had unlocked: his rifles were mounted on one of the walls and a deer head was mounted on the center of the back wall, its beady black eyes staring down at him without sympathy.

His father would strip off his belt and have at it. Jack was sure that his screams rattled the basement. He always hoped that someone would come to save him from the monster that was always hurting him. His mother should have been that person, but she was too busy sitting on the couch, crying and thanking God that it wasn't her this time.

He never went swimming with his friends, his body covered in scars and bruises that they would ask too many questions about. Most fathers back then used corporal punishment to discipline their children, but Jack's father was excessive with it. It was his way of showing the world that he still had power. Maybe if his father hadn't beaten him so violently, he could have been there to protect his friends.

The early morning sun started to rise on the horizon, lighting the lake with reds and oranges. He watched the colors ripple through the water, momentarily distracted. Sunrise had always been his favorite time of the day, though he was rarely awake in time to see it anymore.

Something small splashed in the water next to him, causing him to jump and gather his thoughts again. He looked to the Fishfinder, hoping to see something on it that would be bigger than any fish that could logically be in the lake.

The sun rose higher in the sky, beams of light beating down on him. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and his heart pounded aggressively in his chest. He hadn't brought any food or water with him, which he was beginning to regret. His stomach cried out with hunger.

The sun was directly above him when he decided to turn around, angry with himself for not finding what he was looking for. All he could see on the Fishfinder were small fish, nothing big enough to be stealing children away from their parents. He took the boat back to Ben's dock, hoping that he wouldn't notice that the boat had been missing for hours.

Ben stood on the end of the dock, arms crossed menacingly. "I've called the cops!" he called out at Jack.

Jack shook his head. "Don't do that." His heart hammered in his chest.

Ben grabbed for the side of the boat, pulling it in and tying the rope with expert hands. "It's too late, Jack. You can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Stealing my boat." Ben reached in, his arm locking with Jack's, to pull him onto the dock.

Jack stood on shaking legs. He picked a bad day to stop being an alcoholic; his body and mind buzzed with the desire to drink. He stared at Ben, the young man who had sat with him on this very dock the night before, fishing and talking about life.

Jack looked at Ben with confusion. "I was just out—" He gestured toward the lake when Ben cut him off.

"I don't want to hear it."

Jack swallowed hard. His ears began to ring as a memory unfolded in the front of his mind.

*"I don't want to hear it." Jack's father pushed him away from one of the locked doors in the basement.*

*Jack fell to the floor, looking at his father who towered above him. Jack could never remember quite what his father looked like.*

*"What are you doing down here, boy?" It was never Jack, just "boy" as if he were trying to strip Jack's identity away by not using his name.*

*Jack pointed to the door. "I thought I heard something." He knew he shouldn't have been down there without his father's permission, but he could have sworn that he heard a voice.*

*His father reached down, picking Jack up by the collar. "Do you want to hear something?" He shoved him in the direction of the only room that Jack was allowed in. The one with the mounted deer that was already starting to crack around the eyes and nose.*

"Earth to Jack." Ben waved his hand in front of Jack's face, snapping him back from the memory. Ben sighed, "As I was saying, the police are on their way. Have you thought about seeing a doctor?"

Jack shook his head. He wouldn't trust the doctors, even if he was dying. He trusted them to take care of his mother, and he knew how well that turned out. Besides, he didn't need one. He was fine.

"Tell the police that they can find me..." He trailed off, looking out onto the lake. The high sun glistened off the ripples of the soft currents underneath the water. He looked back at Ben, almost forgetting that he was standing there. "The monster. Tell them to look for the monster." With that, Jack turned on his heel and walked back to his own dock.

The rotting wooden dock he had so many memories of fishing on sank partway under the surface of the lake. The green algae had taken hold of it and Jack had lost the will to scrape it off long ago. He looked out onto the water, putting his wrinkled hand up to shield his eyes from the sun as he took in the scene before him.

He watched for a moment, waiting for the lake monster to make a fool of him and jump into the air, bending its body and gnashing its teeth. He waited for what seemed like hours, the surface of the water remaining still and the sun still sitting high in the sky, before returning to his house.

The house that his grandfather had built with “his own nine fingers” his mother would say. When Jack would ask what happened to the tenth finger, his mother would only laugh, brush the hair out of his eyes, before laying down for one of her naps, rubbing her temples as she went. Jack never did get an answer from her about that tenth finger.

He let the front door hang open as he walked inside, feeling an invisible force pulling him to the basement. He left the door hanging open as well, knowing that when—if—he came back out of it, he wouldn’t be the same man as he was at that very moment.

He passed the room where his father beat him, the deer’s head long gone. The guns were still mounted to the wall, covered in dust; he had never known what to do with them.

He paused at the door of the room he had tried to open as a child, the doorknob worn from years of use. He reached for it, twisting the knob to open the door, but it resisted him.

*Who locked it?* A voice in his head asked.

Jack reached into his pocket, where he had slipped his keys, a new one seeming to appear most days. He inserted them one by one into the keyhole, until one of them finally slid in, letting him twist the knob and push open the door.

He heard a small gasp in the dark and stumbled back, his hand flying to his chest where his heart beat as though it were a butterfly with a torn wing only trying to fly. His hand reached shakily for the light switch. He held his breath as the overhead light buzzed to life, illuminating the small, concrete room with a sickly yellow glow.

His mind whirled, as he was sucked back into another memory of his father.

*The yellow light flickered in the concrete room that he wasn’t allowed in.*

*His father stood in front of him, metal baseball bat in hand. Blood dripped down the bat, covering his father’s hand. His father’s eyes burned into his skin with a kind of look that Jack hadn’t seen in him before. A mix of fury and thought.*

*“Go back to bed. You’re having a nightmare,” his father told him.*

*Tears slicked Jack’s face as he obeyed his father, turning around and leaving the concrete room without a word. He had only wanted a glass of water, but he had heard yelling coming from the basement, and, not knowing where his mother was, he went to investigate. If he couldn’t protect his friends, he would do his best to protect her.*

*But it wasn’t his mother that he found in the basement. It was his best friend, Michael. Laying in the corner, his body limp and sagging onto the floor. Jack’s father stood above him, baseball bat in hand.*

*Jack passed by the room with the deer head. A black bag filled with something, long enough for Jack to lay down in and still have room to move around, laid on the floor.*

*Jack held his breath as he walked past the room, going up the stairs and to the kitchen for the glass of water he had originally left his room for.*

*He watched out the kitchen window as his father dragged the old metal rowboat out of the shed and to the water before he went back to the basement door. Jack’s father dragged two of those bags out behind him and loaded them into the back of the rowboat before climbing in himself and rowing out to the middle of the lake.*

*Jack didn’t wait around to see what his father did with the bodies of his two best friends. He went back to his room, walking quietly so that he wouldn’t wake up his mother, and crawled back into his bed, trying to believe that this had all been a bad dream like his father said.*

He let out a cry at the sight before him. A small child—the same age as one of the missing ones from off the lake—curled in a corner, her body shaking as she tried not to look at him.

Jack fell to his knees, covering his mouth with his hands. The dark corners of the room seemed to crawl with something more than just shadows. Old, dried brown spots stained the floor. But it was empty—except for the little girl with matted hair and ragged clothes.

The sound of sirens flooded his ears. Footsteps thundered on the floor above him.

*Ben told them what you did.* His father’s voice echoed in his ears.

Jack couldn’t move. He could only stare in front of him.

## The Lamorro Manananggal

Peter Hostert

*The Necrophage is an intelligent, canine quadruped known to sustain itself by consuming the bodies of our dead. Much like we humans have terms for the meat we consume after preparing it, these Necrophages use fungus to create safe conditions to eat our bodies. They call this tanx. Many fear Necrophages, seeing them as monsters, calling them even ghouls, but this xenophobia hinders our ability to understand such a unique life form and its society and culture.*

*Journal entry from Necrophage Hunter Jäger Folsmite*

The neglected spires and wrecked parapets of the Lamorro Alcazar were like knives thrust into the purple and orange sky. Their silhouette, pitiful and thin, their shadows, long and crooked like broken teeth marred by some long ago defeat.

Spawning from a sagging entrance rimmed with the stubs of an old portcullis was a descending brick causeway. It resembled an appendage whose surface was pocked and blistered as if the brick had taken to rot. It cascaded down from its broken, stoney host, loosely folding upon itself as it descended into the surrounding lowlands. While a mere shadow of its former self, the Lamorro Alcazar was still imposing. Perched upon a jagged bluff it bore down upon the surrounding plains like a lord leering over her thralls.

But this architectural marvel was shattered now. The southeastern corner was blasted away, torn apart by an explosion long ago. Waves of layered mold, diverse and woven grew up the craggy bluff. The alcazar and its defenses were clenched in varying degrees of this grotesque, fungal ivy. Where mold wasn't, a bare starkness existed. The faded brick, stone, glass and timber of these bald spots suggested breakdown, a loss of color and depth, a bleaching of sorts.

Thick fuzz, intermeshed with brittle lichen spilled out over the Lamorro countryside. This infectious mold spread amongst everything for miles. Like a tsunami it flowed unchecked, unbothered. It choked the withered remnants of once vibrant, healthy flora, it consumed empty buildings, inside and out. The tops of abandoned carts and train carriages could be seen beneath this tangled ecosystem of fungi. These ensnared relics were a testament to what once thrived there. Mushrooms, varying immensely in size, grew from amongst the fuzz. They sprouted in clumps, developing into their own ecosystems.

The air was thick. Flakes of decomposed matter swirled upon air currents. They flickered meekly in the muted light of dusk. It was a sedated flurry birthed from a land made loose by decades of slow decay. Torn bits of the landscape were constantly being cast to the currents of the wind. Homes arduously crumbled, stout trees withered and snapped. The land and its buildings struggled to hold their own weight. All it could do was shed like the eyes of a grieving soul. These were the Wrothlands.

Three robust Necrophages plodded up the pitted brick causeway through the gentle drift. Hardy garments, scuffed and torn, made it easy to see the bonemail underneath. Masks with filters hung loosely around the necks of each. Fashioned from bone and glass these facial accessories were dirty from a hard journey through a land filled with endless mold and fungi. Each Necrophage looked up at the abandoned fortification with its broken windows and crumbling walls, eager and curious.

"Ah, just as I predicted, a mahk shuurga!" Exclaimed one of the Necrophages. He glanced at a large cloud densely building upon the horizon.

"It's the Wrothlands, Plomo," replied one of the others. "They're a common occurrence. That shuurga has been brewing for weeks now, the Lucids predicted it ages ago."

"You might trust divination, Rex, but I don't buy any of that," replied the one named Plomo.

"Oh, we've got a skeptic!"

Plomo eyed Rex contemptuously. "Half the time shuurga predictions by the Lucids are wrong. Why waste time on that sleepy nonsense!"

Rex and the other Necrophage named Till sniggered at this remark, yet wearily eyed the swelling dark cloud far off on the horizon.

Plomo saw the nervousness in his companions and gave a harsh bark of laughter in an attempt to shame them. "Scared of a little flurry? You knew about it before we set off. With the storm between us and the tribe they won't dare come looking for us. Therefore, we'll have ample time to pick through the ruins!"

The Elders are fools for listening to the Lucids warnings. Imagine the look on their faces when we trot into camp bursting with tanx!”

“I could get used to heartier meals,” grinned Rex.

“I still don’t like the idea of no one knowing where we are,” commented Till offhandedly.

Plomo turned to him, “Don’t be such a coward, there’s nothing in those ruins except for mold and delicious tanx. Besides, I told Wither where we are. As leader of our squad she gave me permission. If we don’t return after the shuurga has passed she’s promised to send aid our way, okay? Now c’mon, I wanna get inside before it begins gusting.”

Rex chuckled.

“What’s so amusing, Rex?”

He laughed a little harder, an air of resentment present. “Oh nothing... just that everyone in the squad knows about this excursion besides your slinky little sister. It’s almost like she’s a worthless, weak link in our already hindered group.”

Plomo stopped plodding up the winding brick causeway and looked back at Rex. “Why do you call her that? Why do you use that word?”

Another laugh from Rex, “Have you seen her, Plomo? That’s how she moves! She flops around like a fish out of water or a snake still learning to fucking move.”

Plomo’s hackles rose and he growled menacingly at Rex, who continued to smile, bemused at this obvious agitation.

Plomo’s aggressive stance faltered however under Rex’s implacable expression. His voice quivered when he spoke. “You know if it was up to me she wouldn’t even be in our squad. Wither wishes to placate my mother for reasons beyond my understanding so we got stuck with her. If it was up to me, I’d have left her as hunting practice for an amateur Jäger years ago.”

Plomo hated himself for saying this, but he desperately wished to distance himself from his shameful sister.

Once more Rex and Till sniggered.

“Well,” interjected Till, “at least Wither puts enough faith in us to pull the weight of her squad. With her ingratiating such a worthless slink of candidate into our ranks she really established some unspoken trust between all of us and our abilities.”

“Just stop blaming me for the situation, okay? And stop using that word when talking about her.”

Rex laughed at Plomo’s comment, “What, slinky? That’s what everyone calls her. She’s slinky.”

Plomo scoffed and turned back around. He took several strides, creating space between him and his two companions. They bound forward and picked up the pace to lessen this passive aggressive distance.

“Uh oh, I don’t like that,” Till nodded at a rusting iron rod hammered into the crumbling brick. A thin strip of tanned skin was knotted to the rod. It dragged along the brick path, caught in the wind. Necrophage hieroglyphs were written vertically in ink along the fluttering strip of tanned skin.

*Even those shrouded within dream find no escape from here.*

Plomo scoffed at the foreboding message. “See what I’m saying, what does that even mean? *Shrouded within dream*, our senile Elders try to associate everything in the world with our Lucid magic. They’re so stuck in their old ways. I really do hate the ignorance of our Elders sometimes. Do they expect me to be afraid of dreams?”

Rex laughed at this. Tills' ears pricked, “Do you hear that?”

Rex and Plomo nodded.

All three whirled around, ready to engage whatever was approaching them from the bottom of the causeway.

A small, runty, Necrophage dressed similar to them bobbed and weaved her way up the causeway. Her movement was jerky, a complete contradiction to the smooth quadruped gait of the Necrophage. This was due to the little one missing her left front leg. With every stride the back legs kicked out simultaneously while her single front leg flew out to catch herself before her chest and head struck the ground. While adept in moving this way, this little one’s gait nonetheless looked perverse and pitiful to any Necrophage.

Rex let out a cold, impatient howl of derisive laughter. “Well, well, look who showed up Plomo, it’s as if our conversation predicted her arrival. How’s that for not believing in divination?”

“Oona!” cried out Plomo in panicked disbelief, ignoring Rex. “What are you doing here? How did you find us?” He shot Till an angry glance and muttered under his breath, “Why didn’t you smell her?”

“Why didn’t *you* smell her?” replied Till defensively, giving Plomo an annoyed look.

Oona approached them, looking between them all. “What’s the matter you guys?” She said breathlessly. “I know I snuck up on you but I just wanted to see if my new non-scent paste worked. It seems like it did though cause you were acting like you didn’t know I was behind you this whole time! You didn’t seem to hear me when I called out for you guys to wait up. That’s okay though, you guys didn’t cover your scent so it was easy to follow after you. Once I caught sight of you a little ways out from the caves I just followed you.”

Rex chuckled glibly and muttered under his breath to Plomo and Till, “More like she struggled to catch up until we stopped to bicker amongst ourselves about her.”

Rex made no attempt to truly hide these hurtful words from Oona, nor did Till or Plomo hide their amusement in them. Oona blushed and looked down briefly, discouraged.

*He’s right, she thought self-consciously, they run so fast when they’re in full stride.*

She decided to ignore their cold reactions, even her brother’s, and moved past them. “Why didn’t you tell me you were going out on a hunt? I’m part of the squad, I wanna help look for tanx!”

“Oona,” sneered Rex, “you’d bounce off anything you tried to tackle. You can hardly pull yourself around let alone an overloaded sled of tanx. Slink back home before you become a liability and create actual problems for us.”

“Shut up, Rex!” exclaimed Plomo triggered by his use of the word *slink*. “You’re an idiot, she can’t just go back home, the mahk shuurga is between us and the caves now. I planned this whole thing so that we’d have a barrier to give us time to hunt for tanx and explore!” He turned away from Rex and looked at Oona, patronizingly. “You’re just a little too young for stuff like this Oona. I really wish you hadn’t snuck out of camp. What we’re about to do is dangerous. I really don’t want to have to make sure you don’t hurt yourself.”

Rex let out an extended sigh and glared at Plomo and Oona. “This is your fault,” he pointed at Plomo, exasperated. “She’s your responsibility, I’m not going to have her slow me down, you look after her.”

Plomo glared at Rex.

Till shrugged in resignation and bound forward, Rex followed.

“Well c’mon, lets go.”

Plomo’s grumbles galvanized Oona. She shot forward on her three legs, bobbing behind her brother.

The inside of the alcazar still clung to the memory of past decadence, yet layers of mold and years of neglect had left its unmistakable mark upon the place. To the three boys’ dismay, it was Oona who sniffed out the first tanx. It was curled upon a bed, perfectly preserved for consumption by the thick moldy cellulose that clung everywhere. The room was so tangled that Oona had difficulty cutting through the mess to reach the tanx. She insisted Plomo investigate and when he gave in to her pleading he came across exactly what she had exclaimed was there.

Genuinely impressed, Plomo let his little sister tear off a piece. They nibbled for a while on the fresh tanx, made ripe by the mold that clung to it. Away from his friends, Plomo smiled at Oona and complimented her before they both dragged the tanx into the alcazar’s courtyard and packaged it for transport. This genuine treatment from her brother evaporated the moment Rex showed up. He too dragged a ripe tanx from deeper within the alcazar. A healthy chunk of it stuck out from his mouth as he dropped his prize beside Plomo and Oona’s.

“Nice find, Plomo” said Rex, eyeing the tanx Oona had discovered. “I think that might be the nicest tanx I’ve seen in a while.”

“Thanks, Rex!”

Plomo played it cool despite the compliment, casually trotting down another hallway in search of more tanx. He left Oona behind with Rex, never mentioning her contribution or glancing at her.

“I was the one that actually found it,” said Oona timidly, uncertain if she should follow her big brother as he had given her no indication to follow him. “I sniffed it out.”

Rex barely glanced at Oona but forced a mean laugh, “Sure, whatever.”

He bounded away from Oona leaving her alone in the courtyard. She sprang forward on her three legs working hard to catch up to her older brother. Rex watched her bob off uncertainly and scoffed to himself.

*What a joke, I can’t believe our squad got stuck with such a crippled little thing. Of course Plomo had to have such a worthless sibling.*

The four Necrophages picked through the abandoned rooms and passages of the Lamorro Alcazar. Most of the rooms were so full of tangled mold that the sharpened kukris strapped to each of the necrophages’ hind legs had to be used to enter and clear adequate paths. After some time of this arduous



process a howl, unmistakably Till, echoed around the abandoned alcazar. It was a common call known across many Necrophage tribes that expressed a desire for all to converge.

Plomo's ears pricked up. He raised his long snout in the air, his narrow tongue flicked back and forth between his teeth. Beside him, Oona did the same, and within a moment dipped forward on her three legs.

*She's so excited she can hardly control herself,* thought Plomo, watching his sister's tongue and nose dance as she bounced on the soles of her mismatched feet.

"He's on the third level, to the west, I can smell him!"

"Okay Oona, follow me," Plomo moved past Oona and took up a brisk pace. Oona shot forward in excitement, following her brother.

"What do you think Till found? Oh I hope it's something other than tanx!"

"I don't," murmured Plomo more to himself than his little sister who was several paces behind him. A twinge of trepidation resonated within him. *All I wanted was to be the one to score extra tanx for my squad. Now I have to look after my naive little sister and deal with Till barking at things he shouldn't!*

Till's bark, in the same tone used before, echoed down a narrow spiral staircase. Plomo and Oona quickly scurried up, eager to see what all the fuss was about.

*That's odd, there is marginally less mold here,* thought Plomo, analyzing a corridor he and Oona traveled down. The mold present was young, and fresh. Much of the older mold that clung to the lower levels of the Lamorro Alcazar had been removed here.

Plomo and Oona found Till within the base of a robust turret. This wide turret could be seen for miles outside the alcazar and had been Plomo's landmark when he led his companions to this place. This thick, tall tower had defined the Lamorro Alcazar for the two centuries succeeding its construction. Within it, ascending stairs, cut into the stone of the turret's interior, led to higher floors and many other rooms above. While evidence of the Wrothlands could be seen within, this place seemed cleansed. Minimal spores blossomed in corners of the room, and the rounded edges of furniture. Much of this place had recently been tidied and cleaned.

The deep seeded mold present within the rest of the alcazar had been burned and hacked away, the furniture tended to, rearranged. Candles, wicks charred from recent use, dotted the room. Some were placed on dusty, lichen choked furniture, others, sporadically upon the stone hewn steps that led to the upper rooms. This relative cleanliness and attempted established order alone was impressive within a construct whose interior had been gutted by tragedy and the chaos that wrought.

"This is odd," murmured Plomo, looking the unique, circular room up and down. "Even the windows have been cleaned and left open. Who do you think lives here?" He directed his question at Till who moved about the room in curious wonder. "Have you seen anyone, Till?"

"What's left of them," replied Till.

"What do you mean by that?" replied Plomo, eyeing his companion. He didn't notice Oona bob towards a wooden table at the back of the room.

Just then Rex arrived from the opposite side of the turret. He sheathed his well used kukri, making sure to wipe it against his skin before putting it away. Rex looked around at the stark difference of interior, nodding impressively at the opened window panes "look at the windows, they're clean. Humans are definitely living here."

"Used to," squeaked Oona from the back of the room. She stood on her two hind legs, her single, front right hand steadying herself against the table's edge. She gazed upon an emaciated waist and pair of long, pale, feminine legs. They laid sprawled tensely upon the wooden table as if frozen in the throes of bodily pain. Entrails laid spilled out from the waist but little to no blood could be seen staining the table or the floor around it.

Plomo and Rex both frowned at this sight. They began to advance slowly, Rex taking the lead, studying the immaculately clean pair of legs and torn waist that was undoubtedly human.

"That's not like any tanx I've ever seen," murmured Rex. Plomo grunted in agreement.

"Interesting find Till, no need to be worried though" said Plomo, attempting to reassure his companion. He turned back to his sister as he made his way over to the table behind Rex. "What does it smell like Oona?"

"Nothing like I've ever smelled before," replied the little one, shimmying along the table and bringing her nose practically upon the motionless legs. "It definitely doesn't smell like a tanx, It seems to be—"

The rest of Oona's sentence was cut short as her small, uneven frame was snatched by a swift, dark figure. It streaked with the speed of a bat through one of the open windows and lifted the little Necrophage into the air by her neck. She couldn't even scream, all Oona could do was struggle and kick, suspended in the air from her narrow throat by a clenched fist.

The creature who held Oona beat wide, dark wings. These wings dwarfed its short body. Pale of skin and dark of hair, this terrifying creature was a feminine body cut off from the waist down. Severed entrails dangled from a narrow, torn waist, as its beating wings buoyed itself up. Despite appearing saturated, no blood flowed from this egregiously lethal wound. The face that looked upon the asphyxiating Oona smoldered with primal rage. Its mouth parted, revealing a barbed proboscis in place of a tongue. It quivered behind perfectly aligned white teeth and voluptuous lips.

“No!” shouted Plomo, horror exploding within him like a dam at the sight of his gurgling sister flailing in the open air. All three of her little limbs fought desperately to escape the clenching vice that compressed her life away.

“Help me damn it!” roared Plomo, flashing a panicked gaze at Till and Rex. *They’re contemplating running away, leaving Oona behind. I can see it in their eyes. I can fucking see it! They wish to get away.*

Plomo slapped the hindquarters of Rex in front of him. This seemed to galvanize his companion to action. He and Till bound to the right of the monster, towards the table and its severed legs. This would position them at its rear. Plomo gave a determined sigh and shouldered straight towards the monster who hovered in the air slowly raising Oona up and underneath itself. Plomo could hear his sister's gurgles every time the creature surged upward from its powerful flexing wings.

*Get away from her!* thought Plomo, panicked, scared, and enraged.

“Distract it!” roared Plomo to his companions, bearing down upon the creature. He squatted low with his hind legs, positioning himself to launch up at the vile thing holding Oona.

Something seemed to visibly agitate the creature though as Rex and Till looped around and approached the creature's rear from the table. It violently jerked around and gave a scream, dropping Oona and diving down upon the surprised Till and Rex.

Plomo watched Oona fall from eleven feet in the air. He sprang forward, catching her before she struck the ground instead of assaulting the now occupied monster.

Oona coughed, shuddering as she struggled to regain her breath. It came in stutters and gasps, snot and tears spilling out over her face as her traumatized respiratory system fought to regain autonomy. Plomo wiped Oona's messy face with the back of his hand and helped her up onto her three feet. As he did this, Plomo watched as the creature flung Till aside with ease, using one hand before turning upon Rex. Till flew through the air and crashed against the table, completely winded. Rex withdrew his blade and growled at the creature who screamed viciously before diving down upon him from above.

On the ground the creature tangled Rex with its wings, grappling and manipulating his limbs into positions his body would not allow. Loud cracks signified this monster was systemically breaking Rex through simply leveraging the fulcrums of his joints past capacity. Within seconds Plomo saw the promising adolescent warrior be broken like a common toy. As Rex cried out in agony the creature turned its attention towards the stunned Till. He had struggled to his feet beside the table, fighting to regain control of his breath. In one swift stroke of its wings the creature glided forward, pinned Till to the wall by his throat, and impaled his chest with its proboscis. Plomo watched in horror as the monster drew long gulps from Tills' pierced heart.

*I must make a decision,* thought Plomo watching the lethal horror unfold. “C'mon Oona! This way! Let's go!” With all the force he could muster Plomo hurled Oona behind him towards the door they had come from. “RUN!”

Upon seeing both Oona and Plomo run out the room consumed by terror, Rex screamed and cursed his friend. Plomo glanced back at the mangled Rex and Till who quivered against the wall as his blood was drawn like sap from a tree. Rex continued to scream at him, pure and complete hatred upon his face. As Plomo turned away and bound from the room, disgusted with himself, he heard the ripping squelch of what was undoubtedly Till's heart being wrenched from his chest by the creature's barbed appendage. Rex's screams of anger did not drown out the nauseating splash of liquid falling upon stone. It chased Plomo from the room and would haunt him for the rest of his days.

“We gotta hurry lil sis! Oh c'mon Oona, I know it's hard to breathe but we gotta be faster than this! C'mom little sis! You gotta be fast for me, okay? We gotta get out of here....COME ON!” He made sure to remain behind his fiercely bobbing little sister so as not to outpace her. Yet he resorted to angrily yelling at her, to scare her into understanding the severity of the situation. If she faltered she would experience much, much worse than her brother yelling at her. *Why must she be so slow!? This hobbling little thing is gonna get me killed!*

Upon the spiral stairs Oona stumbled and fell, rolling halfway down them before she could regain her footing and continue. Despite her yelps of pain and suppressed limps Plomo watched her recover and

push on faster than ever. Regrettably, he was thankful she had fallen, as she had been able to descend the stairs at a bearable pace. All the while Rex screamed in fear and pain. It echoed within the alcazar rooms and halls. The fortress itself seemed to be wailing.

At the bottom of the stairs Plomo grabbed Oona by the scruff of her neck. She had shot forward down the hall straight ahead. "The exit is this way Oona, now hurry! Come on, let's go!"

Oona sputtered and coughed, as if to object but Plomo nipped her tail painfully. She cried out and increased her stride. The path they ran down seemed freshly cut but to a greater extent than what they had made.

*The cuts seem to be Human, thought Plomo in mounting dread. They are concentrated at their height instead of low like a Necrophage. But I could've sworn this was the path we had taken...*

Icy, empty dread froze over Plomo as he realized he had taken them down the wrong path. These halls were subterranean, damp and dark, not exposed to natural light through slits in the walls and the large open courtyard. Plomo could no longer hear the shouts from Rex. Oona had been correct. This dread was finalized as he heard a wraithful scream behind them and saw far down the cleared corridor the winged monster swoop in and begin flying towards them. Malicious intent glinted in its eyes. Necrophage blood stained its mouth, neck, and hands, as if it had just indulged in a bucket of over-ripe fruit. The hanging entrails swayed and flopped above the ground as the black wings beat hard and fast. The creature expertly maneuvered through the hacked and cut mold, swiftly gaining upon Plomo and the hobbling little Oona.

"Hurry little sis! We gotta hurry! Please little sis, hurry! Oh god, c'mon... we gotta hurry!" Plomo nipped his sister hard in the tail once more. This time he tasted blood.

Oona cried out in surprise and pain but miraculously quickened her stride. Her little legs flung forward and backward, her claws digging and skidding against the stone. As she elongated her stride her head bobbed down too far and Plomo saw her chin strike the stone. But the little one took it in stride, clamping her mouth over her newly bust lip. Gushing blood flew behind her as she ran for her life. Another scream echoed behind brother and sister and the beat of flapping wings grew louder.

Plomo dared not look behind himself. He knew this was the end, they were trapped within the depths of this alcazar. Despite his little sister trying so hard he knew she would die and it was all his fault, his greed and arrogance had driven them all to their deaths. As they approached a turn in the corridor he made the decision. At the corner he would turn around and fight this beast. Hopefully Oona would find a way to escape but he refused to watch her die without putting up a fight.

Oona skidded and slammed into the wall as she made the turn. It slowed her down initially but Plomo watched his sister fling herself forward, head bobbing, breath ragged. It was the fastest he had ever watched her run. She had seen something.

*Light! A small square of light around the corner! There is an opening! A firestorm of hope suddenly thawed the gripping dread in Plomo. Death was not entirely certain if they could just... reach... that... light.*

"COME ON LITTLE SIS! YOU'VE GOT THIS! WE'RE ALMOST THERE!"

Oona understood, she ran at a pace Plomo thought impossible. Her ragged breathing and bloody face was a testament to how far she could go. Breathlessly, brother and sister hurled themselves along this subterranean corridor, plunging through the darkness towards the growing light.

As the beat of deadly wings grew unbearably close, Plomo heard a strained furious shriek. Unable to help himself he turned and watched the creature wheel around and fly panicked back the way it came. Something more urgent than them had called the creature away. Plomo panted quickly watching the creature wheel around the corner, its shrieks echoing down the narrow hall as they receded. Grateful, Plomo turned and bound towards the light. The three legged silhouette of Oona was nowhere to be seen. Plomo grinned, she had escaped!

With a whoop of ecstatic gratitude Plomo leapt out from the stone passageway. He slid upon frozen water, breaking through a thin patch as he dug claws into ice. Nearby, three-legged footprints dotted with blood ascended a snowy embankment clustered with fir trees. Happy to see his little sister had the sense to hide once out of the narrow tunnel, he followed after her, pushing the mounting curiosity of where he was and why snow had replaced the mold out of his mind.

"Oona! I'm here! It's safe, the creature turned back! Where are you?"

"Over here!" called Oona's squeaky voice from above.

And with relieved gratitude Plomo hurried up the snowy embankment towards his sister. Despite being in a strange land and all alone, they were safe... for now.

## Warm Bread

Abigail Jones

The wood thrush's song drifted in through the window, the melody gently pulling me from my sleep. Their nest sat right outside of my second-floor bedroom, the tree having become overgrown and touching the house years before I could remember. Every morning, my grandmother would open my window just after the sun rose, tip-toeing in before she started her morning chores on our farm in Iowa, and the chirping of birds would be the first sign to me that I was no longer sleeping. It wasn't long until Oma's voice floated up the stairs, slipping through the rose painted door of my bedroom and mixing with the thrush's song as it caressed my consciousness. I always seemed to wake just as she finished the lullaby, one she had learned back in Germany from her own Oma. As my eyes fluttered and my dream slipped from my grasp I yawned and pushed my face deeper into my small mountain of pillows, hoping to drift off for one more moment.

It didn't work. By this time of my life my body was used to my morning routine: thrush song, lullaby, waking day. I groaned as I rolled over, almost falling out of bed in the process, and stood up. I knew that, if I didn't get down there soon, my grandfather would come in from his morning chores and complain to Oma that she was spoiling me by letting me sleep in. Oma's morning lullabies were my indicator that breakfast would soon be ready, and, as my grandfather had put it, I had put off the day long enough.

"Summer," Oma greeted as she heard me coming down the short, rickety staircase. The stairs were old, squeaking and groaning whenever anyone so much as thought about stepping on them. "*Hase*, come here. I'm making Brötchen, come taste."

I turned the corner and entered the small kitchen, the pale-yellow paint the same color as the marigolds in her garden that were just visible outside the kitchen window. Of course she was making bread, when wasn't she? It was customary in my grandmother's house to bake fresh bread twice a week; sourdough on Sundays, rye on Wednesdays, and anything we craved in between. I grabbed one of the rolls from the batch she had just finished, watching as she pushed and pulled the dough of her current bread with ease, and tore into the staple breakfast roll. The crust of the roll crunched as I pulled it apart, and I watched as the heat from inside escaped. Oma continued her lullaby, her melody low and steady, her kneading matching her tempo. She smiled at me as I brought the roll to my lips to taste the warm bread.

My alarm buzzed and I startled, jolting halfway into a sitting position before pausing. A siren shrieked in the distance as I stared at the cold grey walls of my apartment, the fog of sleep still hovering over me. I let out a breath as I realize where I am and flop back on my bed, holding a pillow over my head and wait; one moment, then two. The dream is gone. I sigh and sit up, a ray of light blinding me as I lift the pillow.

My apartment in Chicago doesn't have windows that open, a safety measure installed a few years ago to deter suicidal jumpers, and even if I could open them it's been so long since I've heard a songbird that I doubt any live in Chicago. I told my neighbor this once, that I thought perhaps the smog and the noise had deterred them and no one had noticed. She laughed at me and called me a *sweet country bumpkin*, because of course they had songbirds. When I asked where I could find them, she asked how my work was.

There is no scent of baking bread when I wake in my apartment, a fact that would tear at my Oma's heart were she still alive. My grandmother started my bread baking education early in life, stating that we must stay true to our family name, Brodbeck, or bread baker in German. This never really made sense to me since my grandfather, who gave her the name in exchange for her hand and her youth, had as much ability to bake bread as he did to complete complex math problems with his eighth-grade education. Nevertheless, Oma baked so often the smell of freshly baked bread permeated the house, encompassing every wallpapered room and floral fabric furniture until it became synonymous with the house itself.

I couldn't even remember the man I had gotten the name from, my father running off to somewhere they must not have phones or mail when I was two-and-a-half. The week after I graduated college, when I accepted my position at the paper company I work at as a secretary and officially began my life as a city girl, I got the drunkest I have ever been in my life. Somewhere in between emptying my stomach of the caesar salad from lunch and eating an entire tub of butterscotch ice cream I managed to spew my guts, metaphorically this time, to one of my city friends. About Mom dying from infection a few months after I was born, dad skipping town and leaving me at Oma and grandpa's. About how much I hated being called "Daryl Brodbeck's girl" growing up, as if sharing DNA was enough to tether us for life.

The next day, that friend told me how their cousin had changed her name the year before, walking me through the cost and the paperwork and giving me a list of cool last names. *Better to leave it all behind,*

she said. *Start fresh.* I almost considered it, but then I thought about Oma, about the way she danced around the kitchen while she waited for the bread to rise, humming German songs she had learned from her childhood in Austria.

A year later, when she died and the obituary in the local paper listed me as the last of the town's Brodbecks, I felt I had made the right choice in keeping the name.

When I tell people I meet in the city this, they assume that we must have eaten a lot of bread and laugh at the idea of eating bread we had to toil to make. I think they must have gotten this idea from watching too many episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* as a child, because no matter how much I tell them that we had Walmart and stand mixers and it really wasn't that hard they still look at me with that same *poor child* look in their eyes.

We did eat our share of bread, buttering slices in the morning as Oma hummed or tearing into warm rolls at night as we recounted our stories over dinner. Most of our batches went to the people from town however, as there never seemed to be a week gone by where someone didn't need, as my grandmother would put it, something to warm their stomach.

As I get dressed for work, the thought of my small-town upbringing graces my mind when I stub my toe, a curse flying from my mouth before I can contain it. Back home, my Oma would have scolded me and condemned my grandfather for teaching me such words, something she did even long after he had passed when I was in high school.

It's not the last of my curses, as I see the time displayed across my phone is twenty minutes later than it should be. I pull on the first outfit I can find in my closet, easy to do since most of my clothes would come up if you googled "office wear" in varying shades of gray, tan, and black, and I manage to pull my hair into a low bun that should pass as decent enough for my office.

My walk to the office, more of a sprint today, is short enough that I don't bother with the subway or bus. Some days during the walk I look in the trees that line the sidewalk, miniatures compared to the oaks back home, and try to find bird nests. Today, I have no time. It's not until I walk into the lobby that the rumble in my stomach reminds me I forgot breakfast again, the toast I buttered sitting on my kitchen counter growing stale.

My job at this company fell into my lap a week before my undergraduate graduation when Thomas, the boy from the farm next to ours when I was growing up, posted online about how his uncle, Malcolm, needed to quickly fill the position after his last secretary quit to follow a boyfriend to California. The job sounded nice seeing as I had no idea what I was going to do with my degree. I hadn't been particularly passionate about my major in linguistics, so what difference did it make which job I worked?

My usual workday consisted of answering the phone and setting up appointments, taking notes when Malcolm met with his business partners, and grabbing coffee for the sales team that shared the floor with us. The past week this routine had been tossed out the window since Malcolm had to rush home when his dad fell sick. It had been unusually dull as my workload had been cut in half. Most of my days I had spent drawing the flowers I could remember from my grandmother's garden, the crude illustrations covering the company issued notepad I kept near the phone as I tried to at least appear busy.

I finally got my first meal in me when lunch came around, and in my frenzied hunger I had inhaled the cup noodles I resorted to daily within five minutes of them exiting the microwave. I still had plenty of time left before I needed to clock back in, so I decided to take a walk in the bare bones park near the office, trying to think of something to do this weekend since the office was closed Monday for some electrical work that needed done. I didn't even notice Thomas at first, but when I did, I froze. A sick feeling seeped into me as I watched him walk towards the building, talking into his phone as he went.

I was shocked to see him in the city, but I supposed I shouldn't be. I should have known Thomas would have offered to give Malcolm a ride back to the city. He had done it several times back in college when I went home to visit Oma.

I was debating ducking and doubling back when I caught his eye. His eyes widened and he hesitantly waved. I sighed as I waved back, trying to keep a friendly expression on my face. I knew from growing up in a small town that running into an old friend hardly ever resulted in a quick chat and I wished that I had worn more comfortable heels as I steadied myself for a long catching up. A sick feeling wrapped around my gut as he walked over. His smile was uncomfortably wide, as if he didn't want to seem unhappy at meeting me but also wanted to be anywhere but here.

"Summer," he said, my name spoken with empty enthusiasm. His mother had been close with my grandmother and had been comfortable enough to express her disappointment in me moving to a big city to attend college, something I had not taken well to. This had made our friendship tense even before the three years of radio silence. "How have you been?"

“I’ve been good,” I said, hoping my smile didn’t look as strained as it was. He looked the same as I remembered, from his tanned skin earned from hours of farming to the shaggy haircut I was positive he had gotten from the barber back home. I, on the other hand, must have looked like an entirely new person to him. The pencil skirt and tucked in blouse are a stark contrast to the denim overalls splattered in paint, the same pale-yellow as my Oma’s kitchen he last saw me in.

I hadn’t been good, but that wasn’t something I could share with him. If I had, he would have asked why I hadn’t been good and I would have to try and explain to him that I had just bumped into the very childhood friend that I had been thinking of all week. The childhood friend that I, at one point, had a crush on so strong that I wondered if we would hyphenate our last name or if I could convince him to just take mine. The childhood friend that, after I realized how silly my crush was, I had pushed off the dock at the town lake and refused to talk to for three weeks. The friend who I had been too busy to text back three years ago and whose text I still hadn’t gotten around to answering. Whose grandfather had died five days ago and I hadn’t even sent a condolence text to.

Because I couldn’t tell him that, I let years of small-town etiquette take over and asked, on autopilot, “What about you? How’s the family?”

His face fell and a knot formed in my stomach. This is why I hadn’t gone back home for the funeral, why I hadn’t sent a card. What was I supposed to say? Losing a family member was devastating and horrible, and nothing anyone could say would make the sting lessen.

“I’m so sorry,” I sputtered, “I just mean, um, is your family okay?”

“It’s all good,” Thomas said as he scratched the back of his neck, a nervous tendency of his I remembered from our childhood. “They’re, uh, good. I guess. The funeral was yesterday so, you know. Still kind of raw. It’ll get better though.”

I knew that kind of raw, the kind where everything and everyone made you want to bawl, where you feel like nothing will ever be the same again. It didn’t get better, not really, but I didn’t want to say that so I just nodded.

Thomas stood there a beat, just as awkward as I was, not sure how to proceed with any conversation. As a nearby construction crew’s jackhammers thundered, I looked down at my wristwatch, the time displayed telling me that I had twenty more minutes left of my break. Still, I let out a gasp and lied that I was running late.

Back home and seven years ago Thomas would have known that I was lying from the look on my face, but here I was a stranger and he gladly accepted my excuse. Thomas let me go with a wave and a promise to grab food next time I came home. I agreed, knowing that I hadn’t gone back since Oma died and had no plans to now that the house was on the market. The realtor had even promised to bring the paperwork to the city for me to sign when it sold to save me the trip.

I looked for a sympathy card in a corner shop on my way back to my apartment after work, finding only one left. The front of the card had a carnation and the words, *Sending you comfort. There is nothing a friend wouldn’t do*, the inside read, *to help during hard times*. The knot in my stomach tightened and I put the card back.

The rest of the walk to my apartment I couldn’t help but think of Thomas and his family, of the way his grandfather and mother drove the three hours here the day after Oma died to give me the casserole they had baked. The way they told stories of Oma, some I hadn’t even known, and helped me plan the funeral. The way that his mother whispered in my ear, during one last hug before they left to drive the three hours back, that my Oma had been so proud of me.

When I walked in my apartment, I tossed my keys on the entryway table and slipped my heels off, leaning against the wall as I sighed and I thought about my encounter with Thomas once again. The apartment was cold and dark, the sealed windows providing no light now that night had fallen except for some neon glow from the sign of the bar across the street.

I thought about when I was twelve and was sent to pick up bread flour for the fifth time that week, when I asked my Oma why we baked so much bread.

“If we don’t give it away to half of the town every week,” I said as I put the package down on the counter, “we’d be set for the next six months.”

“It’s not the same *Hase*,” Oma said, patting my head as she passed behind me. I could hear her footsteps in the living room and knew even before the first note that she was putting on the Sound of Music CD I had gotten her that year for her birthday, something she had been doing for months while she baked. “Elsa Hunter from down the road lost her husband last week, and with all her family coming to town they need food.”



“They can buy their bread from Walmart like everyone else,” I complained, burying my head in my arms that were sore from softball practice. That’s why I didn’t want to bake the bread, my arms ached and I didn’t want to knead another batch I couldn’t even enjoy.

“Store bought bread doesn’t taste the same way,” Oma said as she re-entered the kitchen. “It doesn’t warm and comfort the way our bread does.”

“What does that even mean,” I grumbled, but I stood up and went to wash my hands to help as Oma started measuring the ingredients with her heart and well-trained eyes.

I didn’t understand what she meant until tenth grade when grandpa died and I ate my first condolence casserole from Thomas’ family. Sitting in my apartment years later, tears still lodged in my throat and my face burning from crying all day, I felt it again as I ate the casserole for the second time. It tasted like I was back at the Sunday potluck, Oma laughing in the corner as she told half-true stories to the preacher and gave tried-and-true advice to any girl asking.

The memory of that casserole kept me awake until I finally gave up on sleep and grabbed Oma’s recipes from the top shelf in my kitchen, safely stored in the old cookie tin she had always kept them in. I decided on a whim to make Brötchen, the morning’s dream still lingering in my subconscious, and combined yeast with sugar water before watching as it reacted. I kneaded the dough by hand instead of using the mixer I had bought for grandma when her arthritis got bad when I was a senior in high school. After she died I inherited the mixer, which stood tucked in the corner of my small kitchen counter unused since.

The repeated actions of massaging the dough, pulling and pushing until it became just the right texture, came back naturally. While I waited for the dough to rise, I dug through the boxes in the back of my closet to find my Esther Ofarim CD, which held Oma’s favorite rendition of *Weißt du wieviel Sternlein stehen*, the lullaby she sang every morning. By the time sunlight started to stream in my bolted windows, the work was done and the smell of freshly baked bread filled the room.

A memory popped into my head while I watched the loaves bake. The faintest of recollections came to me, my grandmother singing the lullaby as I, who must have been barely six, started to wake when she opened my window one morning and stopped near my bed. She stood bent over my bed for a moment, stroking my hair as she sang the part of the last lyric where the singer asks how many children wake early and spend their days happy without sorrow. When she finished, the quiet descended once again, pulling me back into sleep, but I heard her as she recited the last line of a German children’s prayer for Christmas that hung illustrated above my bed.

“Send Thy rest to hearts in pain,” she breathed, kissing my forehead before she straightened and snuck out of the room. “Let teary eyes be closed.”

As I walked to the train station, early enough that the usual crowd of professionally dressed strangers were nowhere to be seen, I felt lighter. The bread sat nestled in my carry-on along with enough clothes for the weekend, the key to Oma’s house tucked carefully in the inside pocket of my bag. I hummed Oma’s lullaby as I reached the station, the line for tickets nonexistent at this time of the morning.

Somewhere far off in the distance, the melody of a wood thrush rang out.



## The Prince in Purple

Clarissa Lopez

The sun set on a landscape of death and despair. To the peasants, it felt like the prophesied end of the world. It was spring, yet the famine destroyed any chance for the crops to grow. Droughts and frost killed not only the crops but the spirits of the people as well.

But the biggest problem was the Red Plague, a deadly disease that took all that it touched. The hideous sickness could take a person's life within hours. It started as a fever and a cough, escalating into a cold sweat and coughing up blood as it filled the victim's lungs. The afflicted would quickly die from drowning in their own blood. Truly, a gruesome way to go. No medicine could cure it, and no one could stop the spread.

But for the Prince of the land, the Plague felt like a faraway thing and his biggest worry was how it would affect his lavish lifestyle. To prove to his nobles that they need not fear this Plague the peasants cried about, he invited them to gather at his winter castle in a type of self-imposed quarantine and drew them in with the promise of the party of a lifetime. He began to plan a masquerade ball, and the nobles hopped on the idea quickly. Their attention was pulled away from the Plague as they began to travel to the winter castle and through the barren lands. The nobles traveled in carriages with the window curtains pulled tightly shut, further separating them from the plights of the common people who lay dying by the streets, preventing them from seeing just how dead the land of their peasants really was.

The winter castle was the best spot to host such a party, as it was fenced off from the outside world to help shelter it from the cold. The high, impenetrable walls not only provided insulation, but the illusion that all was normal and well. The servants who staffed the castle lived there year-round looking after the place, and this kept them safe from the spread of the plague that affected their families and friends who lived outside the walls, so the Prince had no worries about them contaminating his castle with the germs of the Plague.

To commemorate this incredible party he was hosting, the Prince wished to commission a portrait of himself to unveil at the party as a tribute to himself. He planned to hang it above his throne in the grand ballroom of the castle and cover it with a thick red cloth to keep it a surprise. He sent a servant out to find him a master painter, but the servant brought back only the news that the Prince's usual handful of portrait painters had succumbed to the Plague. The Prince scoffed in mockery of the dead art masters. How weak their bodies must have been to succumb to a pathetic little sickness. But he still needed a painter.

Then he got lucky. One of his servants knew a reclusive painter who was willing to accept his commission. The Prince was delighted, and had the artist brought to the castle immediately. As he waited, he watched the servants rushing around, preparing for his party. They dusted the windows and scrubbed the floors. A few of them were in the process of moving his throne from the room into a spare room where the portrait would be painted.

He wanted to be painted sitting regally on his throne in his finest robes and jewels, with his unfortunately heavy crown where it belonged: on his head of curly hair. The throne and crown were both made by his great-grandfather and had been sat on and worn by four others before him. The prince liked to pretend he was the grandest of all who had owned them.

A servant came to inform the Prince that the painter had arrived and finished setting up in the portrait room. He immediately made his way to the room to size up the painter. Upon his arrival to the room, he saw the painter setting up and as they heard him approach, they turned to greet him with a bow.

The prince was struck with surprise! The painter was a woman! A beautiful, beautiful woman. Her dark hair fell in gentle waves down her back, and her gray eyes seemed to pierce right through him. The only makeup she seemed to have on was a light tint of red on her lips, but other than that she lacked the heavy makeup the ladies of the court wore. Her dress was simple, like that of a lower-class citizen, but paint stained the edges of her dress and a brush sat behind her ear. The Prince was amazed; she had a natural beauty he had never seen before, as he was used to only the artificial beauties of the court around him. He gestured for her to stand up, thanking her for coming and pressing a kiss to her hand gently, making her smile softly, although the smile did not reach her cold gray eyes.

Still, feeling pleased with himself, he took a seat on his throne and posed in the way the painter directed him to with soft-spoken and polite directions. As she dipped a brush in paint and began to work, the Prince attempted to ask her questions about herself. All her answers were either cryptic or just a silent blink in his direction. The more he spoke to her, the more enraptured the Prince became with this

mysterious beauty. Although he noticed trivial things like the dirt and paint under her nails, the bits of mud on her shoes, and the couple of marks on her skin that ladies of the court would cover up at all costs, these imperfections made her more alluring in his eyes, which were so used to perfection.

The painting session went on for most of the day, as there was a bit of a rush as to when the painting needed to be finished. There was a short break when servants came to present them with some light food and drink, which the painter turned down, not stopping her work for a minute.

As the day's session came to a close, the Prince asked her if she would care to join him for a private dinner. To his shock, she turned down the offer, excusing herself to prep and clean for the next day's session. She turned to pack away her supplies without another word, leaving him standing there to watch her with the wonder of someone wanting what they can't have.

He'd never been turned down before. He found he didn't really like it. All the women in court flocked to him like moths to a flame, even the married ones. He was the Prince: handsome, young, and charming. Never had a woman turned him down. Not even for dinner. As he dined alone that night, he found himself unable to get the cold gray eyes of his painter from his mind. The Prince vowed to win her heart before the ball. He refused to even entertain the possibility that she wasn't interested in him. It was ridiculous.

Love, to the rich nobles and the powerful lords, was like a game. You could find this game of love in royal courts far and wide. These courtly romances and flings were not actually love, but lust. They were a combination of desire, infatuation, and sexual attraction. For the Prince and the rest of the court, this was all very normal. It was just how they did things. To those not part of the courts of the rich and powerful, this was a strange take on what love should be. Just ask the peasants, who wailed for their lost loves in the streets, who refused to leave their lover's bedsides as they drowned in their own blood, knowing that by sitting with the doomed, they would be next. So clearly it did not occur to the Prince that the object of his affections, who clearly was from a lower standing, might not have had the same view on love as he.

The next day, he again attempted to converse with the painter. But her attention was focused on the painting, not on him. He found himself growing more obsessed with every unintentional cold shoulder she gave him. It was like a challenge. But he did give up trying to make conversation since she ignored him, especially as he noted that she looked a bit tired.

News reached the castle that the plague was getting much closer and that many peasants, even clergy members, were dying quickly. The Prince was not worried about that. He was worried he would not have enough ginger and cinnamon to spice the food for his party. Trade routes had shut down as the plague spread, and foreign spices from the East had become impossible to get ahold of. He was pleased to find he had enough oysters for the party and those were always a bigger hit than the spices, so he was able to sleep easy that night.

The Prince did not invite the painter to dinner after the next painting session, but he did send her a gift. A new dress, casual, but still fitting the more luxurious setting of the castle as compared to what the Prince considered her raggedy clothes to be.

To the Prince's delight, she wore the gown the next day at their painting session under her painter's apron. The deep red complimented her complexion. The Prince was mainly content to just watch her work, finding the peaceful silence only disturbed by her gentle brushstrokes, which were soothing in such a hectic time. Her face seemed paler somehow, and her dark circles more prominent. The changes did not take away her beauty in his eyes, so he discarded them. When the servants brought a light lunch for a break, she again turned down the food. Her focus remained on the painting, glancing back and forth at the Prince and the canvas from time to time.

After the session ended once more, the Prince sensed an opportunity and invited her to dine with him for dinner. This time, she accepted. Over dinner, she only drank a few sips of wine, eating nothing. She claimed she did not have much of an appetite that day. He thought nothing of it, enjoying his food and her company.

That evening, he gifted her a pair of ruby earrings at dinner and formally invited her to the party. She accepted the gift and promised she'd be there with a smile, saying she would be delighted to spend the evening in the Prince's company and to see his face when his portrait was unveiled. He kissed her hands before they bid each other goodnight. She left with a smirk on her face that the Prince attributed to his charms. He was sure he was finally winning her over. As the days went by, the Prince became more and more excited for the party, and for getting to dance with the mysterious painter. He hoped that afterwards, they could do a different kind of dance in his chambers.

The painting was finished three days before the party, and when he tried to sneak a peek at the finished product, the painter had slipped out of the room without a word to prepare it to be framed. The

only thing he caught was a glimpse of his face on the canvas, looking off into the distance with a handsome expression. It made his pride swell. Forget the old dead masters he formerly employed, he hadn't even seen the full portrait and already it looked so well done that he was considering offering the position of court painter to its lovely artist.

The Prince did not see the painter for the rest of the day, and when he sent out an invite for dinner, his servant came back saying the artist had turned in early and was resting. He was a bit frustrated, but reasoned with himself that she must have worked hard and that's why she rejected his offer for companionship that evening.

In the morning, the Prince finally had a moment to check in again with the ballroom preparation. He saw his throne moved back to its raised platform at the far end of the room, and above it, covered in a red curtain, the painting was already hung upon the wall. The marble floor had been polished until they shined, drapes pulled away from the windows so all could see out into the blooming garden of the grounds outside. Statues reminiscent of great Greek heroes and warriors had been dug out from storage and placed tastefully around the room. Candles in fine, golden candelabras made their homes on various tables and windowsills. The freshly dusted ceiling sported an oil painting that had been commissioned by his grandfather, which detailed angels singing in the clouds of Heaven. It was magical.

The anticipation for the party was building for everyone, as well as the anticipation to see this new masterful painting of the Prince that was already rumored to be one of the best of the times. Servants rushed around in the kitchens and halls, cooking and cleaning. Nobles picked their costumes and masks that they kept secret, whispering and teasing each other about what they would be wearing over dinner and in court.

The Prince was so busy with last minute preparations and plans regarding the ballroom and his costume fittings that he was only able to see his beloved painter once in the days before the party. They dined together the night before, where she ate nothing, and he ate enough for them both. The Prince had hoped that the days of resting would rid the painter's face of her dark circles, but they appeared worse than when he had last seen her, and her face seemed impossibly paler. After pouring himself more wine, he asked the painter if she had an outfit for the party the next evening. She nodded but refused to give anything away about it. Desperately, the Prince asked if she would wear the earrings he gifted her so that he could find her in the crowd of masked people. Her gray eyes looked thoughtful before she replied that no matter what, he was sure to see her. Feeling relieved, the Prince returned to his wine and food, not catching the smirk the painter had on her face that was quickly hidden behind taking a sip of wine.

Then, the day of the party finally came. News from outside the walls had stopped altogether, and the nobles seemed not to mind what implications that could have. The Prince was dressed in the rare and expensive purple color only royalty could get their hands on, a surefire way to make sure he would stand out in the crowd. His masquerade mask was purple as well and sported two large peacock feathers and a golden trim.

He arrived at the ballroom just as the few musicians he was able to find began to play in the corner of the room. The Prince stood near the opening of the ballroom by its large and heavy doors to greet his masked guests as they arrived, before quickly becoming bored and slipping away to mingle with the crowd. He would occasionally scan the guests for a familiar pair of ruby earrings, but to his great disappointment, he saw nothing of the sort.

As the evening wore on, the Prince danced with many of his female guests, but he had yet to find the one he was searching for. If their heavy makeup and covered imperfections didn't tell him that, then one touch of their hands would. They were all the soft, pampered hands of a noble lady, not the masterful hands of a painter. His disappointment only continued to grow as the sky grew darker and more candles were lit. But still, he tried to enjoy himself in the environment of courtly love and lust that he worked so hard to create for himself and his court.

Then, the moment came. It was time to unveil the portrait. He stepped up on the raised throne platform, a goblet of his best wine in hand. Two servants got into position behind him and grabbed the ropes attached to the curtains covering the work, waiting for their cue. He held up his free hand to signal the musicians to cease playing and the murmuring of the crowd grew silent. As the Prince looked out into the sea of masked attendees and opened his mouth to speak, his eyes caught a familiar flash of red. When he looked closer, he saw a familiar pair of red ruby earrings dangling off the ears of who could only be the painter herself. His disappointment at her absence disappeared immediately and was replaced by relief that she kept her word and showed.

However, as he took her in, he could not help but feel a bit unnerved. Her mask was the first thing he saw. It covered her whole face, and unlike the noble's masks, hers held no feathers, jewels, or other adornments of any sort. It reminded him of a skull, and with the black veil she wore covering her head and hair, he was unable to pick up her cool gray eyes from under the mask. Her dress was simple as he had expected, but it was all black and resembled a funeral dress, not a party gown. Her costume was the darkest and most morbid thing in the sea of colorful gowns and garb around her. The only color in her outfit was the ruby earrings from the Prince. While it was unnerving, the Prince did not want to think about the gloom her outfit brought. Sending a quick smile her way, he took his mask off to better address his court. It was time. The excitement could be felt throughout the room, no one more excited than the Prince.

"Friends," he began. "My friends, it pleases me that we are all gathered here today, safe behind the walls of this grand old castle. I have always tried to be a good prince to you all, and now I've had the chance to be a good host. Thank you for gathering with me upon this blessed day." Soft applause went through the crowd and the Prince basked in it, giving a small bow before gesturing to the covered portrait behind him. He could wait no longer. He had to see his portrait.

"And now," he announced, "the moment we have waited for. It is time." He glanced once more at the painter before raising his goblet in a toast to the painting. The nobles in the crowd followed his lead. The painter did not raise her goblet. She had no goblet in hand to raise. The Prince nodded to the servants, who pulled the ropes, and the curtains dropped from the painting and fluttered to the floor. A gasp rang through the crowd.

The Prince stared, wide-eyed at the painting in disbelief. His goblet slipped from his grip and clattered to the floor, rolling down the steps of the throne and spilling his wine across the polished marble floor. But other than that, it was dead silent.

No one moved. It seemed like no one breathed. The Prince couldn't form a single thought as he looked at that painting.

The painting showed him upon his throne. But it did not even slightly resemble the pose he sat in for days. His body appeared limp, his eyes rolled back into his head with blood trickling from his lips. The throne sat outside in a barren landscape holding no life at all, only dry dirt and dark skies. His heavy crown sat not upon his head where it belonged, but on the ground as if it fell from his head and now lay forgotten on the harsh dirt below, not a soul around to pick it up. Clearly, in this painting, he was dead as a doornail. This was not the painting he had seen a glimpse of.

When the Prince was able to pull himself back together, he turned to face the crowd. Looks of horror were plastered on their masked faces. But he saw past them all as his eyes found the one he was looking for. The one in ruby earrings.

"You!" He hissed in rage as he pointed at the painter. "How dare you make a mockery of me!" The crowd parted quickly as he stalked down the stairs and in her direction. She stood, unmoving, in the middle of the room. He stopped in front of her and glared down at the painter.

"Well?" he spat. "Explain yourself! I demand you!" She said nothing in the face of his rage. Fed up with her lack of reaction, the Prince leaned down and tore the mask from her face. The second he did, he recoiled back in fear. Her face looked so pale and skeletal, her eyes looked sunken in and glossed over. Her lips were almost a blue color, blood dripping from her mouth and nose. The horrified crowd backed away even further from the sight, with noises of disgust and fear.

The candles in the room blew out and the temperature dropped noticeably.

Somewhere in the crowd, a guest began to cough. Attention turned to the man as he collapsed to the floor. Moments later, he was coughing and choking up blood as he struggled to breathe, grasping at his throat like invisible hands were wrapped around it. Even in the now cold room, sweat was clearly visible on his face. The crowd watched in shock as he began to panic, choking harder before he could no longer manage to get a breath, then he collapsed: dead. Blood stained the marble floor beneath the dead man as screams rang through the ballroom. Guests tried to run to the door, pulling and tugging, only to find the heavy doors locked.

More and more began to double over, coughing and choking on their own blood, sweating and crying in a mass panic as they quickly lost control over their own bodies. They coughed and struggled until they too collapsed on the marble floor, further staining the room with blood.

Bloody hands clawed at the door and fought with window latches, leaving handprints on the freshly cleaned room, as though they thought getting out would save them.

The Prince was helpless, watching as his guests fell around him. The painter's glossy eyes watched his face, watching him cycle through emotions as he failed to understand what was happening around them.

As the nobles dropped like flies around him, he gazed into the eyes of the woman in front of him, desperately searching for any sign of emotion, and he uttered one word.

“Why?”

She reached out and placed an ice-cold hand on his cheek, almost like one would do to a lover. But her nails felt too sharp against the Prince’s skin, and her lifeless eyes seemed to look right through his.

“Death spares no one,” she said, a bit more blood trickling from her mouth as she spoke. “It spares not the poor, not the rich, not the young, and not the old. How dare you try to hide from it. You can’t. No one can.” And as she took her hand off his face, the Prince suddenly felt as if there was something in his throat. He began to cough, and it quickly became violent as he doubled over at her feet. He covered his mouth with his hand, and as he pulled it back, he saw blood. The Prince pulled himself to his feet and stumbled to his throne, collapsing onto it as he gasped for air and choked up more blood.

“How does it feel to be the Prince of corpses?” he heard the woman ask. But looking up, he saw he was alone, save for the dead bodies of his guests who lay strewn around in pools of blood on the floor. The only sign the woman had been there at all was her mask that lay cracked on the floor.

Unable to help it, the Prince let out a laugh of shock, which quickly turned into full body coughs and shivers as he grew colder and colder. The Prince felt tired, and as he wiped sweat from his brow, he knocked his crown from his head onto the floor at his feet. His eyes began to lose focus, but before they closed for good, they found the painting on the ceiling of the angels in heaven. But that brought little comfort to the dying Prince. With one more coughing fit, his lungs couldn’t take in any air, and his eyes rolled back as he lay dead upon the throne.

The castle was as silent as a graveyard, and just as full. What was meant to be a safe haven turned into a place of great doom. Outside the ballroom, servants lay dead in the halls, trays once carrying food now thrown carelessly about, every surface speckled with blood.

Perhaps the rats would have a feast if the Red Death hadn’t consumed them already. For the Red Death did not simply eat. She devoured all in her path.

*First Place  
Cordell Larner Award in Fiction*

## **The Crying Tree**

Steven Lung

Out in the Redwood Grove Lowlands,  
In a dark place no one understands,  
There you will see it, The Crying Tree,  
With a glance you will be free,  
From your sense, from your peace of mind,  
Leaving reason far behind.

“Where do you think you’re going?! You stay away from those Red Lowlands, Bobby! Nothing good comes to no one down there. Accidents, beatings, even murders, so you just listen to old Granny. Anyone heading down there only ever goes lookin’ for trouble and they find it. Or cause it. Like your Uncle Olsen. Came back crazy and knife-happy. Had to have him hauled off to The Red Moon loony bin! So, you mind yourself and stay where you’re supposed to out in the open.”

Bobby chuckled as he finished mentally reciting his grandmother’s diatribe to him. It’d been word for word, or close enough, by his reckoning. The day he’d tried to hike the trails of the Lowlands before she stopped him was still clear in his mind. His parents had told him similarly about how certain places in Redwood Grove were off-limits, but without the theatrics and embellishment.

“Oh, the Redwood Lowlands? Just stay out of woods down there. It’s dangerous. Something about somethin’ there driving people crazy,” his father had muttered when asked. “Probably just a poison plant. Stay out of there.”

“Just listen to Grandma Gertrude if she says it’s dangerous, Bobby,” his mother told him.

“I’m supposed to stay away from the Lowlands with a mystery waiting to be solved?” he wondered, both then and now.

Granny Gertrude wouldn’t exactly say what he was supposed to steer clear of down there, but that didn’t stop her from going on about what happened to people, or what they did, when they emerged from the wooded area of Redwood Grove’s Lowland. Bobby decided her tales wouldn’t stop him from finding out. That’s what the local library was for. When your elders don’t wanna talk about the dark side of town with you, you just ask a librarian. The books about their local history had been very enlightening about some things Granny didn’t want to divulge.

“The Crying Tree,” Bobby mumbled aloud.

There were numerous accounts of people seeing The Crying Tree, but only sketches of it existed. The boy didn’t doubt that a twisted, gnarled tree really existed and somehow became a part of local folklore. He was just highly skeptical that it caused insanity by some supernatural means. However, that wasn’t going to stop him from trying to cash in on being the first person ever to get a photo of it. The thought of the reward he’d receive for bringing local fantasy to life drove him to keep going and drowned out all doubt about his current course.

Bobby reached up towards his chest, feeling the camera that hung from its neck strap. He smirked. Even at age twelve, Bobby knew that old superstitions were nonsense. The Crying Tree was like the Salem Witch Trials. The settlers from centuries ago mistook a medical condition for witchcraft and let themselves get swept up in mass hysteria. Whatever caused people to go crazy and commit acts of violence in the Red Lowlands had nothing to do with a cursed tree. It had to be something natural that grew in the woods. Looking into the “eyes” of The Crying Tree drove people mad? Not a chance. Perhaps it was something in the water that did it. Bobby knew basically no one drank unpurified water anymore, that it was all cleaned before it came to your sink. So, it made sense to him that something was wrong in the natural waters around Redwood Grove. Something which didn’t end up in people’s houses.

This is why Bobby came prepared with long rubber boots that went up to his knees, instead of the normal tennis shoes he’d otherwise be wearing. It was why he had long sleeves on a summer day and protective rubber gloves. It was why he wore protective goggles over his eyes and a face mask over his nose and mouth. He’d applied a generous amount of bug repellent to what skin was still exposed and wore a billed cap, protecting his head. Bobby was prepared.

“Bleh!” he groaned behind his facemask.

He might have been safe, but the heat was killer. Bobby reckoned it might even do him in before whatever dwelled in the Lowlands could.

"It'll all be worth it when I'm the first person to take a picture of the famed Crying Tree and they update Lyman's book about our local legends. Bet I'll get paid a lot of money, too," he thought, smugly.

That greedy, ambitious glint in his brown eyes made him move faster. His steps widened as he plunged into the woods. Some sweat rolled down his face, which he wiped away. At this point, he was just glad he'd gone ahead and gotten his hair buzzed for his trip. He might not have liked how he looked with super-short hair, but he knew his usual blonde, shaggy locks would have made this hike so much more unbearable.

"Now let's see..." he thought, eyes looking from side to side. "It was supposed to be near the center of the Redwood Lowlands, off the third main trail..."

Bobby looked farther ahead, seeing it break off into several smaller paths on either side. The route he was on continued mostly straight into the distance before rounding a bend that was far off enough to be barely visible from his current vantage. The boy took his rolled-up notes out of his pocket, flipping through them until he found the directions.

"Rumored to be just off the main path on a side trail..." he mumbled the copied instructions aloud.

With a frustrated glint, his gaze raised to the many off-shoots ahead again. Groaning and stamping his feet a bit, Bobby realized how long this could take. He briskly walked over to the first one and stopped to scan the small animal trail. It only led to a brook before ending at the base of an ascending muddy slope on the other side. Bobby glanced towards the top, which was covered up to its edge in weeds, bushes, and trees with no visible trail leading deeper within.

"One down," Bobby thought.

He glanced over his shoulder to another side path just across from him. That trail went downhill, and he couldn't see where it went through the thick foliage. He glanced farther up the trail once again to see how long this would take if, heaven forbid, the very last path ended up being the one which took him to the tree. It was then he noticed something in the corner of his eye. It was back down the first trail with the little creek, some kind of structure he hadn't noticed the first time. He looked again, briefly wondering how he'd missed it. When Bobby saw it clearly, all he could do was stand and stare. The stream and muddy bluff were both gone. In fact, the entire lay of the land had been replaced by a large clearing, in the middle of which was the thing he sought: The Crying Tree.

Bobby was too dumbfounded to move as he continued to stare and blink disbelievingly. He took the goggles from his eyes and he still saw the inexplicable change in the scenery. He closed his eyes in a long blink and then slowly opened them again. Sure enough, there it was, The Crying Tree. It was a terrible, twisted thing that seemed to wrap and warp itself from end to end to end. Bobby's mind couldn't comprehend what had happened. How was it here now? Where did the brook go? His eyes turned squarely to the tree. The more he examined it, the uglier it got.

The trunk, instead of being mostly upright, jutted out of the ground at a low angle and grew upwards in an uneven, jagged spiral. Almost like it'd coiled itself around something else that'd been there when it originally grew in a spiral and then consumed it, leaving a hollow space which its dead branches now occupied. Not a single leaf grew on the pitiful thing. About six feet up from the base, where its trunk first began twisting, there was a great hole on the side, like a crooked mouth screaming in agonized silence. Just above it were two more holes on either side, like eyes, with dark sap flowing out of them like tears. They were wide, staring in frozen pain.

Bobby stood in his reverie of the massive spectacle before him, before one of his hands happened to brush his camera. Feeling the object even through his gloves reminded him of his goal. He looked down at it resting on his chest. He smiled and looked back up, lifting it to his eye.

"Gotcha!" he thought, as he snapped the picture.

Then, deciding that still wasn't enough, he entered the clearing and circled around the tree. He snapped more, and more, until he'd spent a whole roll of film on the tree. He took the last photo just as he'd cycle around to its front again. He looked proudly down at his camera, thinking of how his name and photos would be in the local papers and news broadcasts by tomorrow morning. Age twelve and he'd already left his mark on the world.

Smirking, he looked right into the "eyes" of the tree.

"I was supposed to go nuts just by looking at you? I feel fine! I can't believe it took so long for someone to get a picture of you," he said, and then broke into a laugh. "Bunch of wimps!"

Then Bobby let out a big whoop of laughter, and just kept belting them out uncontrollably. He didn't know why he was laughing so hard, but he couldn't stop, at least for several more minutes. By the time



Bobby had hooted his last, it didn't only hurt as he hunched forward holding his sides. It almost felt wrong, but he couldn't pinpoint why. He couldn't even say why it had gotten more than a small chuckle from him, and it was hard to think with his sides hurting so much. He gasped for breath through his mask and was practically blind due to the perspiration in his goggles. After he'd settled himself down, he straightened up, glancing into the tree's eyes one more time. This time he felt less smug and turned to leave quickly.

When Bobby stepped back onto the main trail, he looked over his shoulder one more time at the tree, and then stopped mid stride. It was gone. In their proper place once more were the babbling brook and the muddy slope. Bobby took a rigid step away, swallowing hard. He started glancing all around. A thought occurred to him. Maybe its eyes had been real and been looking right at him the whole time after all. In fact, anything could be watching him from the shadows of the woods. The tree might still see him. How would he even know? Paranoia sank its hooks in deep, and Bobby glanced back and forth, listening closely to the sounds of nature all around him.

Snap!

What was that? Bobby turned again, looking everywhere, but spotted nothing on the trails or in the trees. Then something rustled in some nearby bushes. His heart skipped a beat. Bobby wanted to run, but it felt like his legs were going weak. Then out from the brush popped a little white rabbit, its nose wiggling as it smelled the air. Bobby almost relaxed at the sight of it. Almost.

"What if... that rabbit serves the tree?" The thought felt like it'd pushed its way into his head. "Does the tree control the woods?"

Bobby realized he may as well be in another world out in those woods. If The Crying Tree could just appear to anyone who came looking for it, what else could it do? Did its influence go further than just those who stared into its eyes?

"But... I feel fine," Bobby thought.

The bunny's red eyes turned and looked right at him, and Bobby let out a yelp. In an instant, the little white hopper was back in the bushes and Bobby took off down the trail in a dead sprint.

"Have to get back to town! Have to..." Bobby's thoughts were interrupted by his own shortness of breath under the unbearable heat his protective clothes caused him.

He tore the facemask and goggles from his face and tossed them aside as he ran, finally able to gasp out free breaths in the open air. He couldn't do anything about his heavy clothes, so he'd just have to bear it. Before long, he felt like he was inside an oven, and was gasping and wheezing like he was on the verge of death. Huge sweat drops ran down his face and soaked him inside his clothes. By this time, he barely noticed.

All around him, the woods twisted and turned, having come alive! The tree branches reached for him, the birds chirped and screeched, announcing his presence. In the shadows, he saw the tearful eyes of the tree, staring at him. Then he saw them, again and again and again, everywhere, as he ran. On the side of the path, a fox skittered across his way with a squirrel in its mouth. It looked at him, and Bobby knew. It was a scout and had been sent to alert... them! The woods! They knew! They were coming for him! He had to get back to town, now! The Fox scurried into the tree-line on the other side of the path as Bobby blasted past him.

Thankfully, he was close now. The path took a dip and curved to the right. This would take him to where the three main paths converged back into one near the edge of the Lowland woods. After a few more minutes of running, he burst out of the tree-line, running in such a panic he'd have rammed right into anyone if they were in his way. He stumbled out into the open under the weight of his own momentum before coming to a stop. He leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees as he sucked in huge gulps of air while sweat dripped from his face and hair.

As he struggled to catch his breath, he warily raised his eyes to the surrounding area, and saw people. Whether they were just milling about, playing, or having a picnic, they were everywhere. In Bobby's eyes, none could be trusted. His eyes watched their every motion, on the lookout for anyone to make a move at him. After another moment, he found a second wind he didn't even think he was capable of and fled again. He did his best to ignore any glances which he got as he crossed the street ahead before he vanished around a corner.

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The door to the pharmacy burst open. Mr. Barrows, the pharmacist at the counter, looked up in alarm at how intensely it'd swung. Seeing it was just Bobby, a local boy who'd come in with his family a thousand

times before, the pharmacist relaxed. The state of the boy kept his attention, though. Young Bobby was even worse for wear than when he'd exited the woods. He was now filthier, sweatier, and more paranoid than ever. Bobby stared suspiciously out the store front's windows, trying to see if he was being followed.

"Good afternoon!" the pharmacist said, reflexively. "How may I help you today? Do you need some assistance...?"

The pharmacist realized he didn't know the boy's name, and went with, "Young man?"

Bobby squeaked and whirled around, facing the man at the counter.

"Are you okay?" the pharmacist asked.

"Don't tell me he's started doing drugs so young," he mentally added.

Bobby swallowed and slowly started approaching the counter, his arms at his side and camera still hanging from his neck. He stopped about a foot from the cash register, staring with an inspective eye up at the adult. He knew he had to be sure that the clerk wasn't infected by the woods.

The pharmacist cocked a brow as Bobby stared keenly at him. Seeing nothing to hint that the person before him was infected, Bobby lifted the camera from his chest and set it on the countertop.

"I'd like the film developed, please," Bobby said at last.

He reached into his pocket for the money. The pharmacist was still a little stunned, but he accepted Bobby's money and took the roll of film from the camera. While counting out Bobby's change, he kept glancing at the boy, who still looked like a miniature crackhead to his eyes.

"It's pretty hot out there today, son," he said as he handed Bobby his change and his camera. "So be careful and have a good afternoon."

"Thanks, I'll be back to pick up the film tomorrow," Bobby said, wiping his brow.

He glanced down to stuff his change into his pocket. When he looked back up, Mr. Barrows had his back turned, and was unlocking the door behind him to put the film in the employee area.

"See you, Mr... Barrows..." Bobby trailed off.

Something was wrong with Mr. Barrows. He could see it on the back of the pharmacist's neck. He had been infected by the woods. A seemingly normal mosquito bite had unnatural veins pulsing all around the wound. It was inside him. The boy started slowly backing away as Mr. Barrows stepped through the door. He was back in an instant, and spotted Bobby walking backwards away from him.

"Young man?" Mr. Barrows asked in confusion and concern.

This visibly spooked Bobby, who then turned briskly to leave the pharmacy, but he kept glancing over his shoulder to make sure Barrows wasn't following as he retreated for the door.

"He has to be on something," the pharmacist thought.

"Excuse me," the pharmacist said just as Bobby was opening the door.

The boy paused and looked at him.

"You run along home now. People will be getting off work and the roads will be busy soon."

"Thanks, Mr. Barrows," Bobby replied, cautiously, and then left.

Mr. Barrows watched from the register as Bobby took a good look around like a man being hunted before moving on from the store.

"He's the Kingston kid, right? Maybe I ought to call his parents," the pharmacist thought.

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"Why was he telling me to go home? What's waiting for me there?" Bobby's mind was a tornado of worried thoughts as he walked down the street.

His eyes moved back and forth, noting every person around him. He could see the presence of the forest in many of them, and most of the animals he happened to see. Whether it was a dog being walked, or a stray cat darting across the street into an alley, he could feel their eyes on him. Everyone who passed him by looked right at him, a few even pausing before going back to their business.

"I have to get out of here," Bobby muttered and darted into the nearest alley.

Aged, cracked red bricks lined the space between buildings on either side of him as he went. The boy had to watch his step running over the uneven concrete below his feet which had long been in disrepair. Bobby glanced over his shoulder and saw someone peak around the corner at him and knew at once he was being followed.

From there, he ran through the city park, ignoring the jeers a couple of younger children gave him, before sprinting the last few blocks home. He arrived at the block his family lived on, and with the last of his strength, he collapsed onto the lawn, wheezing like a dying old man whose heart had just given out. If

he had been exhausted when he left the depths of the woods, he may as well have been dead now for how numb his limbs felt and how boiling-hot the rest of him was.

He didn't know why he'd run home despite his suspicions about Mr. Barrows. At least he was away from the street and the prying eyes of the forest's minions.

Bobby slowly lifted his head, stirring with limp movements similar to a marionette, and looked around. Thankfully, no one seemed to be about.

"Or maybe..." he murmured quietly.

His head panned around, looking at the neighboring houses. A rustling there, a shadow moving here. Perhaps it was a trick of the wind, but he wasn't chancing it. Bobby weakly turned over onto his stomach to climb to his feet. He failed to stand twice due to his limbs having about as much strength as boiled spaghetti. On the third try, he managed to stumble towards the front door. His strides were awkward, on legs barely able to hold him anymore. He grabbed the front door and turned it all the way to the right. Bobby froze and remembered it should have been locked. He looked down at it, held firmly in his hand. How was it unlocked? Nobody was supposed to be home until seven that night.

Eyes full of alarm slowly looked back up at the polished surface of the door, wondering who had gotten into their home. He thought of fleeing, but his body was too heavy, and his bones felt like oatmeal. There was no running anymore. He doubted he could even make it over to the neighbors without alerting whatever was inside. He'd have to face it. So, he slowly pushed the door open and stepped inside. His eyes scanned the interior of his home. Nothing was out of place. The only difference was his mother's coat hanging by the front door. Her shoes were left by the front mat in the little tiled area just inside the threshold.

"Mom?" he called.

"Yes, Sweetie," the familiar sound of her voice came from the kitchen.

Bobby glanced to his right, toward the doorway in the back corner of their living room, from which her voice had come. He breathed a long sigh of relief. It was just his mother. Thank goodness. Just as he was starting to relax, he recalled exactly why his parents were going to be gone until evening. They were in Greenvale, Redwood's sister town, two hours away. How could his mother be home?

Bobby's heart almost stopped at the revelation. Just who or what was that in the kitchen, pretending to be his mother? He slowly shuffled his way through the living room, not caring he'd forgotten to take his shoes off.

"When did you get home?" Bobby called.

"Oh, about an hour-half ago. We finished up at Aunt Beth's early, so we came home."

"Where's dad?" Bobby asked, poking his head in through the doorway.

Inside, he could see her. She had her back to him, preparing something at the kitchen counter by a window that looked out into the backyard. From her neck-length cherry blonde hair to her familiar Chicago Bears jersey and jean pants, this imposter had the profile right for his mother.

"Your father's upstairs in his office, Honey," she called back, turning her head to make her voice carry. Then she saw her son in the doorway in the corner of her eye.

"Oh! Sorry for shouting," she said and turned back to her business.

Bobby moved from the doorway, and leaned to the side trying to see what she was doing. Then she stopped again, feeling eyes on her. She turned and faced Bobby fully and paused upon getting a good look at him. He could see she was in the middle of chopping vegetables with one of the big knives. His eyes locked on the slicing tool in deathly fear.

"What in...?!" his fake mother started to shout but stopped short.

Bobby's gaze was brought to her shocked face. She was looking over the living mess that was her son, top to bottom.

"How did you manage to do this?" she asked, and then noticed the trail of mud leading into the kitchen from the living room. "And did you track mud across my carpet?! Oh, Bobby!"

Bobby looked down at himself for the first time. He winced under the fraud's frustrated voice.

"Oh, I..." he started. But he stopped, knowing he wasn't supposed to be in the woods. On a purely instinctive level, he came up with an excuse much the same way he would if he was speaking to his real mother. "I was just out playing in the park and just kinda forgot..."

Bobby knew how stupid that sounded and looked away from the fake mother's incredulous stare.

"You went out dressed like that in the middle of 80-degree weather? Are you trying to die of heatstroke?" the thing pretending to be his mother exclaimed.

Bobby's mother couldn't believe him. In rapid succession, she'd seen him come home, a mess of sweat, mud, and burs tracking mud through their house, all the while dressed for brisk autumn in summer.

"Sorry..." Bobby mumbled, almost forgetting he was talking to an imposter.

"What am I going to do with you?" she asked and walked past him into the living room to survey the damage.

Bobby watched her go, and heard her exasperated "Oh, Bobby," when she saw the muddy footprints coming from the front door to the kitchen. More importantly...

Bobby's eyes trailed over to the kitchen counter. She'd been foolish enough to leave the knife. He walked over to it and picked it up. It was still freshly sharpened after only a short usage on the veggies.

"You are going to clean all of this up as soon as you've showered and changed, young man," he heard her firm voice come from the living room behind him.

Bobby stopped eyeing the knife in his hand and turned to look towards the other room. He knew what he had to do.

*Honorable Mention  
Cordell Larner Award in Fiction*

**Speed Trap**

Blake Murdock

Lex had, decidedly, fucked up. A police car sat outside the rather plain looking building she worked in all day. *All day*. She knew. She checked. Once or twice or a hundred times. She had almost relaxed when she safely made it to the end of the day with no police related disturbances. Almost. She had stayed late, yet the police car remained, positioned in one of the corners of the parking lot closest to the building. Through her final hours of work, she reasoned that there may not even be anyone in the car. Sometimes they leave police cars places to ward off potential speed demons, don't they? Yes, she had decided that that was it. No one was in the car after all. *No one would find her*.

Had she not been forcing herself to relax, maybe she would have allowed herself to wonder why the car wasn't stationed at the exit of the parking lot. Perhaps she would have questioned why the car wasn't even facing the road that passerbyers often sped down. But she was, and she didn't. She tried to be as focused as possible while conceiving ideas for weaponized vehicles that would one day be in the hands of a living, breathing person. Someone who didn't sign up to be put in danger by something they thought was safe. Some faceless figure she feared that the vehicles they were designing would somehow hurt one day. She wondered if it was ironic that someone who had signed up to design war machines for the government was worried about hurting people.

The sun was setting behind clouds as it drizzled slightly, a predicted thunderstorm slowly coming to fruition. The cop car and her pride and joy, a gaudy but useful maroon Hummer she'd practically rebuilt herself, remained in the lot. She glided through puddles, feeling lighter due to her earlier realization and the thought of being home, swiftly making her way to the oversized SUV and habitually running her fingers across "*THE HELLHOUND*" painted carefully across the side as she unlocked the doors. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding once she got inside. She was *fine*. She reversed out of her parking spot, only barely catching a glimpse of the lot's only other vehicle in her rearview mirror. It started. Exhaust began to rise from behind it. Its headlights felt like they were pointed directly at her.

Lex felt her heart drop into her stomach for a moment as she hit the brakes a little too hard. She looked back at the car again, attempted to swallow the lump in her throat, and left.

It followed. Of course it did. The day's paranoia flooded back through her. She *was* being watched. They *were* after her.

She willed herself to ignore it. To not glance in the mirror every few seconds. A watched pot never boils and a feared police car never fucks off, probably. She drove on. She didn't look. She took a different way home, making thoughtless turns down roads she'd never traversed. A flash of white in her peripheral vision caused her to speed up unconsciously.

She still hadn't looked when she pulled into an empty parking lot a block away from her apartment. She held strong even while darting into an alley, hoping that the police would think it was more trouble than it was worth to follow some woman into one. Some woman. She hoped that was what she was, instead of some suspect in a two-year-old cold case. She took stock of her surroundings as she walked. Dumpsters and garbage. No drug deals. No cops. No murderers. She wondered if anyone would know what kind of danger she posed if they were to see her in this alley.

Before she could finish her thought, she tripped over some forgotten and ill-placed wooden board. Her reflexes kicked in at the last second, her hands barely catching her. She lurched back to her feet and continued on. The fall may not have slowed her much, but it certainly hurt. Her hands ached and her vision blurred slightly, her head feeling lighter and lighter as she continued on. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to stop. Something rustled in the alley behind her.

And then, Lex was gone.

Some combination of terror, guilt, and pain all overloaded her body at once as she ran out of the alley. Everything slowed. She focused on the air rushing past her ears. The ever-so-slight stinging of raindrops colliding with her face. The impacts of her shoes on the concrete. The footfalls she swore she could hear behind her, so heavy she could feel them reverberate in her mind. Her head started to feel like TV static, and darkness began to close in around her. She realized as her vision faded away that her apartment building had been in sight.

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Sound broke through her haze first. A loud bang caused her head to snap up as her vision came back next, still blurry and untrustworthy. She believed for a moment she was in her apartment. She was on the ground with her back against something, she realized, as she had to look up further than usual to survey her surroundings. A TV, a thrift store couch, walls covered in shelves she and Ari had put up for the cat to climb on. Either the cops were into some seriously screwed up interrogation techniques or she *was* in her apartment. Another loud bang made her breath catch in her throat. They must be at the door.

“Holy shit. Lex, you’re *bleeding*.”

She couldn’t say anything as her girlfriend rushed towards her. She *wouldn’t* say anything. What was there to say? “*Sorry to alarm you, I was running from the cops.*” “*Oh hey babe, yeah, I have brain damage and can’t tell what’s real and what isn’t anymore!*”

“*I think I killed people?*”

Ari’s movement stilled for a moment. Lex realized she had said that last one aloud. Her thoughts *had* always been too loud to keep in her head all the time. She could practically see the thoughts on her girlfriend’s face as she processed what Lex had said.

She braced herself for anger, for rejection. She didn’t know if she could handle fear. Her head dropped down, forehead landing on knees pulled tightly against her chest. Whatever the reaction was, she couldn’t watch it happen, and it was probably only a matter of time before the door was kicked in or something anyways.

Maybe Ari would tell her to leave, that she didn’t want to be around someone who had lied to her their entire relationship. Maybe she would demand an explanation. How would she explain something to her that she couldn’t even explain to herself? Maybe she would let the police in and tell them that Lex had confessed.

She felt someone settle on the floor beside her. A hand came to rest on her wrist, and her arm was pulled away from where it had been tucked around her legs.

“Usually, that is something people know,” Ari said quietly.

Lex raised her head to look at her. Her eyes weren’t met as her girlfriend was carefully cradling one of her injured hands, holding a pair of tweezers and examining her wounds. Lex realized that she had tiny shards of glass, *dirty, back alley glass*, in her palm.

“Are you going to let them in?” Lex asked weakly, wincing a little as her hand was prodded at.

“Let who in?” Ari’s intense expression was quickly replaced with concern as she finally looked up at her.

“The cops. They were at work all day and I ran and they followed me and they’re here for me now and please don’t let them in I swear I’ll explain,” she rushed out, clenching her fists for a moment before realizing what a monumentally terrible idea that was and wincing more as tears began to fall down her face.

Her girlfriend looked sad. “Lex, honey, there’s no one else here.”

“What?”

“No one else is here,” she stated again, slowly.

“But I heard them. At the door. And while I was running.”

“And...they would be following you because you *might* have killed people?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So, what if you tell me what happened? If you want to, of course.”

Lex hesitated for a moment before she spoke. “Yeah, okay.”

Lex had always thought that the scenes in movies where someone recounts their dramatic backstory as the viewer sees it unfold in front of them were just dramatizations. After all, watching someone ramble for ten minutes wasn’t exactly good cinema. Apparently, those scenes held some truth.

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Lex was back in the auto shop she had spent many of her formative years in, working under the hood of a muscle car owned by the man who had taken her in here. Vince had become her *real* family after she had fallen out with her biological one. He taught her everything he knew, allowed her to work in the shop, and helped her through engineering school. He believed in her when no one else did. He even let her test her ideas out on his car. That was what she was doing: installing some engine modification she had dreamt up. She had managed to worm her way out of doing any actual customer service today so she could work on this. The shop’s other employees had covered for her. They always seemed to have a soft spot for

their youngest coworker. She was so proud of herself when she had finished. The car started, and everything seemed to be working beautifully.

Then, she was looking up at the sky. What the fuck had happened? Why did her head hurt so badly? Why was she outside? She tried to think, tried to overpower the ringing that was rising in her ears. She had started Vince's car. She had been installing that new part. Was this her fault? She tried to sit up, succeeding after pushing through the dizziness that accompanied any attempt to move her head.

The building was in front of her. It was caved in, melted, *fucked*. The world was spinning. Was anyone else outside with her? She didn't see anyone. She tried to listen. For sirens, for someone calling out, for anything.

Her ears just rang, a constant, painful tone. If she focused, it sounded like screaming, sirens, screeching metal, like a bell that wouldn't stop. She had no fucking clue what she was hearing. She didn't know if she *could* hear. She climbed to her feet, her mind clearing more and more as she began to panic. She was the only one outside. The building was still crumbling in front of her. Whatever happened hadn't happened too long ago. She wondered what it would look like for the police to find her standing in front of this. She thought for a while. And then, Lex was gone.

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"Did you ever find out what happened to them?"

"No," she said quickly. "Looking it up would make it real. Right now, they're all happy and alive to me...all the employees, anyone who was there just getting their car fixed." Tears kept falling. "*Fuck*, people were just getting their car fixed, and then I probably fucking *killed them*. And Vince...I *killed* the man who was more of a father figure to me than my actual dad. The man who helped put me through college. *Fuck*. Sometimes I feel like I should just turn myself in, like the cops should just find me and get me the fuck off the streets."

Ari had evidently finished pulling glass out of her hands, at least for now, because she pulled Lex into a hug so tight she couldn't get enough air in to sob. "God, you're so hard on yourself, Lex," she mumbled harshly above her ear before pulling back to look at her.

"If you weren't even in the building, how could it have been you? It could have been some freak accident. You don't even know if the cops knew you were there, honey," Ari continued.

"I just. I thought it had to be me. It made sense, I guess. That's why I signed up for this stupid military thing in the first place. It was advertised as some highly dangerous engineering job, and I guess I just thought it would be a good cover. And if something happened...well, fuck it, right? I was surprised when they didn't really look into my background besides confirming I have the degree I said I did. I guess they really needed people."

Tears began to well up in Ari's eyes. Lex went back into panic mode, trying to fix it immediately. "I'm sorry, I don't feel like that anymore, I swear. I want to be here. I want to stay here, so badly," she said, her grip tightening on her girlfriend's arm.

"No, no, I know. I just—" Ari trailed off before burying her face in her hands. "You got *hurt* this time. God, your hands are so fucked up," she whispered.

"What? What do you mean *this* time?"

Ari looked back up at her. "Don't freak out."

Lex's eyes widened. "Telling me not to freak out makes me want to freak out. I was already freaking out. *I am fucking freaking out.*"

"You do this, sometimes, Lex. You come home having a panic attack. You tell me about what you've done...we always talk about it like this. We agree to get you into therapy. But..." Ari took her partner's face in her hands and hesitated for a moment before continuing. "It's different every time. Last time, you told me you were installing something in a customer's car when something happened and...I don't know what the truth is. I've pieced together that you designed something, but whatever part it was has changed a few times. The car you were working on changes a lot, too. Sometimes you remember being told to go get something from outside right before it happened. I don't think you know what happened either, not really, but Lex, you always say it's your fault."

Lex stared at her, trying to figure out if she was serious. This was the first time she felt like she could tell Ari what was happening.

"I know you don't remember. It's okay. Every time I get you to relax enough to fall asleep, it seems like you wake up with no idea what happened. This time though...your hands are all fucked up. You would ask

about it, even if you did forget. And I thought, maybe, if I told you this has been happening, it would keep it from fading.”

Lex’s shoulders dropped. Her body relaxed, not out of relief, but as if she had fully given up. “I’ve been putting you through this for two years?”

“*Alexanda*, you don’t *put me through* anything. Shut up.”

Lex winced slightly at the unfamiliarity of her full name being used. “Sorry. Have we ever found out what happened?”

“No. I didn’t want to look it up. Because if...if I knew and you forgot again...”

Lex didn’t need her to finish. She thought back to the “episodes” she could remember. The paranoia. The panic attacks. The periods of time that were just...blank.

She tried to imagine what it would be like for Ari to go through this for another two years. Another twenty. The rest of their lives.

“Ari?”

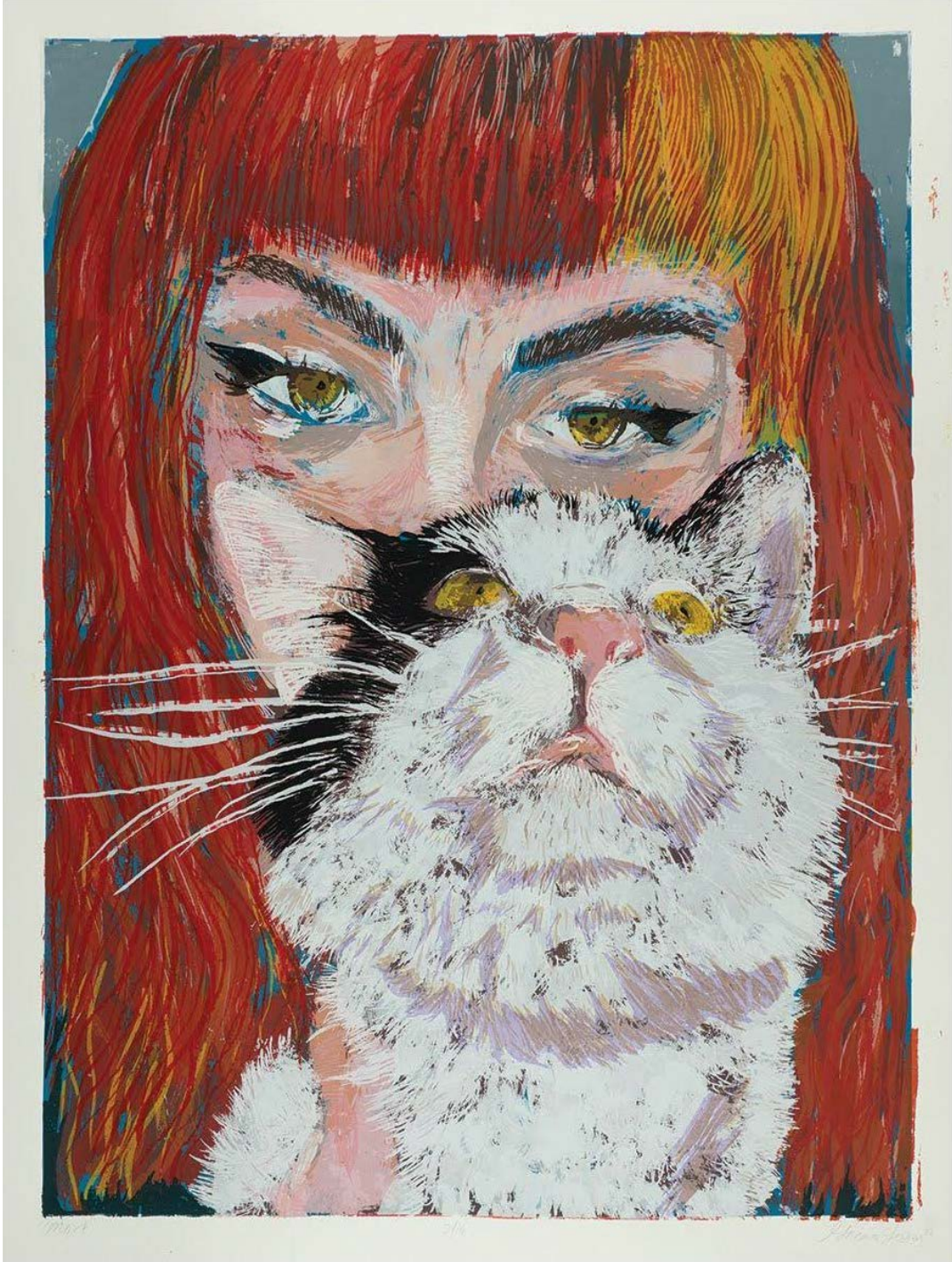
“Yeah?”

“Look it up. You can remind me in the morning.”





**Breeze**  
Molly Borth



**Mort**  
Grace Lessen

## Waiting Room Window

Maureen Roland

Casey nestled himself into the wafting hillside; knees to chin, arms interlocked. He loved the hillside during twilight when the windows opened. The tall wisp grass came alive then, and he liked the way each silver blade would bend and sway toward the windows, reaching for all the lost souls. It was an ethereal sight, watching the souls slip in. One by one they would slide through the ports, shapeless as smoke, individual, and vibrant as rainbows. He always hoped that one of these twilights would be for him. Even then, crouched upon a tuft of silver wisp grass overlooking the Valley of Ports, he held out hope.

He had heard the stories in the elder halls, of course. All lost souls are ushered into the elder halls for the stories. Casey was no different. He and countless others were told to wait if there was no one there to collect them. They could wander wherever they wanted and watch for the openings if they were expecting anyone. Casey was expecting someone. So, every twilight, he found his patch of wisp grass.

Many times it was painful, to see others being collected, reconnected, and sent out to the eternal realms. And he felt so guilty every time he wished she would slip through. He still remembered what it was like to be human; the colors, the tangibility of everything. As he sat on the hillside, with the wisp grass rustling, he strained to recall the feeling of green grass beneath his bare feet. The smell of sticky sweet earth flooded through him, and he felt her spark light up his soul. He missed her, and this view from the hillside was his only touchstone.

“If my time comes first, I will wait for you.” Casey promised her. He remembered the promise, but he could no longer recall when his time came. Time didn’t matter anymore. He had memories, of course, but no death memories. All the memories from his human form revolved around his love. Their first meeting, just north of the tracks downtown, along the river. Their first kiss, under the harvest moon, behind his father’s rickety red barn. He remembered how her amber hair framed her face, like a fiery pixie. He remembered how she used to say his name, and if he tried hard enough, he could still hear her voice whisper “Casey” and shivers would rack right to his core.

So many times as he sat on the hillside, he thought she was close to slipping through to him, because he had heard her whisper. Each time he was mistaken, and his soul would anguish. He didn’t try so hard to remember anymore. Casey now thought it best to leave the chances up to fate, if such a thing existed. He still hoped, though. Hoping for her was different than straining to recall.

As Casey meditated on the flowing blades of wisp grass, his gaze broke when the windows began to illuminate. This was his favorite part of twilight, and the only time the colors really came. He lifted his sight to soak in the swirling hues and he noticed something was missing. Normally, the windows would open with soft blues and greens and the babies would gently sweep in. The elder guards were always waiting for the babies, but not this time. The colors were different, too. The wisp grass separated in front of him, all the way down the hillside, and Casey was saturated in waves of orange, red, and yellow light. An odd warmth soaked up from his perch and he watched his own silver hue begin to morph into something more vivid. “What is this?” Casey whispered aloud.

“This is love” A familiar voice whispered back, “and I’m so glad you waited.”

## **Elide and the Willow Branch**

Addison Upchurch

In the time before, the goddess Elide held dominion over the collection of rainwater. She was not particularly well-known, being the goddess of puddles and ponds, and claimed no temples for the worship of her visage. Sparse prayers fell from human lips in her name, though she was diligent in her blessing of those few who communed at her watery altar. No, Elide was not a powerful goddess, but she was content with an immortal existence spent in the ripple of a minnow's fin, the bounce and roll of crystalline raindrops, the gathering of life's essence in a barren depression.

This contentment—a rare trait for any preternatural entity—was the precise quality that drew the goddess Indira to Elide. Indira, the goddess of waterfowl, had known of Elide since her own immaculate birth and had led her flock to rest on Elide's shallow waters. She had seen that Elide's hand never wavered from her own duties and her sharp eye was never drawn to the squabbling of more conspicuous gods. Elide did not hunger for more than what she already claimed and this alone brought Indira to breathe a quiet plea atop the surface of a pool no wider than a splayed hand.

"Elide, cousin, I must fall before you and shed all pretense. Never before have I asked it of you, but now I must beseech you for your aid. My birds, the crux of me, are falling ill and failing fast. When they go, my steadfast grip on my own power weakens. Even now, I can feel the sickness spreading. With the final beat of wings, I, too, will cease to be of this actuality. I cannot leave my flock, for they will fade far faster without me, but the root of this cannot be unearthed from this plane. I am certain there is divine intervention at play. Please, find the cure to what illness plagues them, Elide, or I will die."

Elide heard Indira's desperate prayer but did not show herself. She was well aware of what the death of the goddess would mean. All that power, the holy energy of the goddess, would be released into the world for other gods to chase and devour like howling, salivating, starving dogs. Elide, herself, had no intention of eating Indira's essence. She simply wasn't interested in bolstering her power and preferred to keep herself sequestered from the problems of others. For gods and goddesses, she felt little sympathy. Their fate was to be tied to the world, as was always prescribed, and they were meant to fade to obsolescence when their usefulness had expired.

So Elide turned her heavenly eyes to her duties and let Indira go unanswered. It remained this way, this crackling silence, for four rotations of the hot sun. As Indira waited, with hope a sinking anchor in her chest, Elide watched. She watched the birds.

She watched the heron and the crane abandon their posts between the reeds and cattails. She watched the delicate white plume of the swan, now heavy in death, grow dull and dirty. She watched the canvasback, the scaup, the mallard, and the goose cease their playful paddling, wither, and rot upon her shores. Worst of all, the plump yellow younglings; Elide watched them, *felt them*, grow weak with wasting. They waited, knowing and suffering and dying, to be turned to carrion and be snapped up into the open maw of the fox and the dog and the alligator turtle.

At the end of the three days, Elide could take no more. Her apathy for Indira's plight did not extend to the waterfowl. She pitied them, she mourned them, and she could not bear to see them wiped from the record of life. They, like all animals, were innocents. They turned her waters foul with rot. Whichever god set this pandemic upon them was too cruel and crass for reason. Their quarrel was with Indira, not with her birds. The sad creatures were the voiceless victims of another's crime. She refused to bear silent witness.

Elide rose from her bed beneath the water's reflection, intent to find the cause and the cure. She had already tarried too long in indecision but she knew where to travel to find her cousin Aarohi, the healer, among the blazing sands. Unfortunately, the journey would be exceptionally tedious for a goddess of the original realm. She had not maintained a physical form throughout the eons, preferring to spread thin and dance through the current as pure mystic essence. The years had slipped around her like a cloak. Time had escaped her and she no longer had the ability to form a full body around herself. She flexed her power and shaped a vessel for her spirit, but the form would not hold. Elide wrestled with the fizzing, electric buzz of her power. It slipped past her like fallen leaves in a current.

Frustrated, Elide gathered herself into a murky, shadowed puddle held within the gnarled roots of the weeping willow tree. It was a favorite spot of hers for daydreaming, hidden from prying eyes inside the



willow's embrace. Pulling on the threads of her essence, she spun sinew and bone to slip inside. The water trembled with concentration. Opalescent spheres of dusky liquid rose, twirling through the air, tightening into fresh skin. Yet again, the flickering silhouette shuddered and fell away.

Elide cursed in despair. Without a physical incarnation, she could not travel through the arid and desolate sands to call upon Aarohi. She would have failed before ever leaving her cradle. The very thought of such a thing was unacceptable, shameful. Her power had grown untamed and unchecked. It reared and bucked against her will like a wild horse. In her vexation, a dagger of her divinity took a needle sharp edge, electrified by Elide's fury, and pricked a narrow gash straight through the fabric of the living world and into the Veil.

There was a fraction of a second, barely long enough for Elide to realize what she had inadvertently done, before the keeper of the dead came to investigate the damage. He was known for his meticulous maintenance of the Veil and his swift, merciless reputation preceded him. Damage to the curtain between the realms could be devastating and could disrupt the fabric of not only this world, but all the rest, and of absolute reality. Elide had heard murmurs that the Veil was part of Death's body, like a leathery organ that pulsed outside of his body. Some rumored that the perceivable image of Death was only an extension of the Veil itself, a puppet for a primordial ancient that even the gods could not imagine. Thinking of the Veil as its own being, a supremely intelligent thing that weaved and wrapped and cradled and suffocated, was too large and too much for Elide to comprehend.

Elide prepared to disperse, to shatter herself into pieces across the millions of freshwater pools around the world and hide, but she was far too slow. No one can escape Death.

She felt him all around her. He descended through the small tear like a vibration, a ringing in the air that sets one's teeth on edge, and transformed into an overwhelming, choking pressure. The sheer force he exerted pinned her soul into the pool beneath the willow. It rattled her to her core. She feared him and admired him.

When the brutal pressure dissipated, the Death god dropped to a crouch above her tiny puddle. He sighed, likely annoyed. Creased lines of surprise formed around his eyes. It was, of course, unbeknownst to him that she had never intended to call on him at all. He must have wondered what bargain she wished to strike.

He wore the face of a man at first, though other parts of him seemed more beast than human. He was multifaceted, like a beam of light scattered on the many faces of a jewel. When he turned this way or that, a different face seemed to morph and grow from the lingering image projected by the last. A cat, a deer, a fish, an egret—his head fluttered from one to the next and a thousand more with every smooth movement. His garb didn't change, though. He was smartly dressed in a mortal man's dark woolen suit, complete with hanging coattails and polished leather shoes.

Though Elide could not and would not see it then, his coat pockets were stuffed with red spider lilies.

Elide had never seen him herself, but she had felt his touch countless times as he plucked the life from frogs and dragonflies and all the other creatures that she held. He was a constant force of all worlds, a friend and an enemy, the long-fingered hand that reached through the Veil. He served to guide the living, no longer for this mortal plane, over that shadowy cusp and into whatever eternity lay beyond.

Elide's mother had retold the story of Death countless times. She spoke of the beginning, when Death and Life, twins born from different mothers, slid from the Void. Then, everything was water. The first ocean licked and lapped the second ocean. There was no shoreline. Only water below and water above in an endless cyan wave. This was before the gods and goddesses, before the sea was cleaved, before the land rose. Death came before and after everything, perpetually.

No, she had never formally met Death, but she knew him. Well, she knew *of* him. She wondered if he would eat her alive for damaging the Veil, for distracting him, for wasting his time.

Death hovered one clawed finger above her and traced a circular path through the air. When he spoke, his voice held no threat. There was only a hint of curiosity. He eyed her pensively.

"Your time has not come yet, little goddess. I will not take you." He paused and inhaled deeply. His eyes were bottomless pits, slick as river rocks. "You smell like fear. Do you fear me?"

Elide, having no mouth, drew her power tighter around her. Even if she could speak, what would she say? Her power felt like a drop in an ocean when compared to the oppressive weight of Death's essence. She tried again to form a body, but her nervousness made the attempt even more pitiful than before. She had never claimed to be notably strong, but this level of weakness was laughable.

Death's expression never changed. He did not mock her or belittle her, as other gods would. Death did not judge or discriminate. All beings were equal in his eyes. The gods were blips in the timeline of his existence.

“You know,” he drawled, despite her inability to respond, “I am not often called upon by your kind. Very rare, indeed. Gods, with their supposed immortality...they tend to avoid me when they can. They certainly don’t often damage what belongs to me.” Death smiled. It was surprisingly warm. Between his fangs peeked a forked tongue.

If Elide had not already been in a puddle, she would have melted into one from embarrassment alone.

“It’s funny. No one can avoid me, not really.” Death settled down into a seated position with his back pressed to the trunk of the willow. He made himself comfortable, striking an impressive and looming profile. One hand absentmindedly twirled a small, broken branch between his fingers. Elide peered up at him, far too invested to try to run now. It would be useless anyway and it wasn’t every day that one could lend an ear to the musings of the death god.

Death began to talk. Elide could only listen. He spoke little of himself, instead telling stories of the lives he had seen. His voice, at times, seemed to quiver with some hidden emotion. He told Elide of other worlds, nameless gods, unbelievable beasts, and of joys. Death did not speak of tragedy. Perhaps he told her about these things on a whim. Perhaps he saw a spark inside of that muddled pool of water. Why he spoke cannot be discerned, only that he did speak.

As he spoke and she listened, he worked the willow branch between both hands. It was a pitiful thing, bent and scarcely holding any leaves. He used it to animate his tales, waving it through the air above his head. He slapped it against his knee as he laughed through particularly outrageous details. Once, he even tucked it behind his ear. He was an incredible storyteller. She could see it all, envision it, felt like she could even live it herself if she focused hard enough.

Elide lost track of how long she acted as Death’s audience. He was a terror, sure, but he was painfully charismatic. Death was more than just a thing to fear. To some, she realized, Death would serve as a most welcome visitor.

The sun had fallen beneath the horizon when he finally grew still and silent, twisting the whiplike branch between his fingers. His bottomless gaze was unreadable. Elide fidgeted, her essence bobbing inside of the cool basin of water.

“You never meant to summon me, did you small goddess?”

Elide could not reply, but the question was rhetorical.

Death stood, cracked his back, and effortlessly slit a doorway through the Veil with one gleaming claw. He stepped halfway through before, wordlessly, he turned and dipped the tip of the willow branch into her puddle.

This connection severed the distance between Elide’s pale essence and Death’s blinding one. In a fraction of a second, Death had swept the mere crumbs of his power into Elide’s soul. He had force-fed her the lingering mist of the unimaginable omnipotence that he possessed through the branch of the willow. In doing so, Elide was thrust from her ephemeral state and compressed into a physical vessel. This was, undoubtedly, another unexpected gift from Death.

Then Death was gone, slipped back into his own abysmal realm. In his place, he left the branch of the weeping willow. It shone with a silver hue, nearly metallic, and buzzed with a divine inner light. Elide maneuvered her new body on wobbly limbs to retrieve it.

She wondered, briefly, what Death could be planning and how he would ask her to repay a debt as great as this one. This gift would come at a cost too steep, she was sure. She cast those thoughts from her mind, however, when she recalled the hollowness of Death’s gaze and the way his voice stilted when he told her of the wondrous worlds that floated inside the ethereal pockets of the Void.

Death did not always want to be Death. Some days, Death only wanted to watch the migrating tern move purposefully through the firmament, led by an intrinsic internal compass. He wanted to watch them free and in flight, safe from his despicable hand for that moment alone.

Elide would not have known, if she had not consumed the scattered grains of Death’s soul, that he was exhausted. He was bone weary, sick of himself, and full of hopeless longing for a reprieve from his eternal task. Death lived a thankless life, without companionship and without rest.

Shaking, Elide grasped the willow branch between two fingers. She held it up to inspect it in the gloomy light that filtered through the branches overhead. It was a homely thing. Only four withered leaves clung to the slender branch, but Elide could feel that it vibrated with power; an ugly package for a lightning bolt of essence. With a soft whisper of thanks to her unlikely patron, Elide clasped the branch and set off.

The trip to Aarohi was exceptionally arduous. She would have to travel on foot across the golden waves of sand for miles and miles without losing her way and she would be forced to avoid the fearsome creatures that roamed the dunes. At the heart of the desert, Aarohi’s oasis would be waiting for her. If all

went well, Aaroahi would ask a fair price for the cure to the sickness that plagued the waterfowl of the world. Nothing was free, not in this world. She only hoped that she could afford to lose what her cousin would claim. If not, Elide would have traversed the dangerous sands for nothing.

Standing at the edge of the sands, with these tempestuous thoughts dancing at the forefront of her mind, Elide heaved a great sigh. It was now or never. She had never considered herself a coward before. She placed one pale foot atop the metallic sand, then another, and continued this way until the sun was at the height of its journey across the sky. Her physical body revolted at the suffocating, sweltering heat. The sun singed her skin and painted it pink, then red, then blisters began to form pockets beneath her skin. She did not mind the pain but took notice when the fragile flesh of her feet began to peel away. The surface of the sand rendered her mortal body useless.

Elide knew that she could not possibly continue in this manner. Her vessel had to last long enough to carry her to her destination and survive the trip back as well. Without Death's aid, she wasn't sure that she could conjure another body.

The knowledge of the willow branch was inherent. Elide had heard it whispering the secrets of its power as she traveled and so she wasted no time wielding it. She murmured the command, filled her mind with her intent, and the branch made it so. Her delicate mortal skin was soothed and healed, pain receding like a cool spring tide, and garments spun like spider's silk to cover her body and protect her from the elements. With her power diminished, a single leaf, dried nearly to dust, crackled and dropped to the ground.

Now clad in robes fit for her divinity, Elide pressed onward. As daylight slipped by her and darkness overtook the sky, the air grew frigid. Her breath billowed in muted tones around her face, but the material that encompassed her body trapped her warmth. She did not waste time with rest, which she didn't need, or pause to investigate the alien landscape. There was no time for dalliance. She floated swiftly across the desert like a vision.

She was so intent that, when the moon had reached its zenith, she failed to notice that she had drifted from her course. In all directions, dunes of sand piled in moats that shone like molten silver in the moonlight. Her feet faltered. Each way that she spun, the desert peered back. Doubt began to wiggle its way into her mind. She had climbed that dune, hadn't she? It all looked so similar to her untrained eye that she couldn't be sure. Elide was nervous to exhaust the power of the branch prematurely but saw no other option. There was simply no time to wander the desert, not when the birds were greeting Death so expeditiously.

She again lifted the willow branch and directed it with her request. She told it what she needed and the branch, seemingly of its own inclination, created it. From the crooked tip of the branch, a wispy orb began to grow. It bobbed in the chilly desert air until it reached the size of a closed fist before it detached from the wand. The orb was free-floating, dancing lazily, and when Elide reached for it, the sphere pulled away from her. She followed it on graceful feet across the sand, laughing, teeth glinting in the moonlight. The orb pulsed with a gentle fluorescence, casting a glittering glow. The sky above her ebbed and flowed with infinite pinpricks of light, like a black sea alight with bioluminescence.

Elide chased the orb, leaving another drained and discarded willow leaf to sink into the sand.

She continued this way for many cycles of the sun. Her robes protected her physical body, and the phantom orb led her closer and closer to Aaroahi's home. The willow branch was a reassuring weight in her hand, a bank of essence. When her destination grew from a speck on the horizon to a looming feature before her, she clutched the willow wand tighter. The healer was a bargainer by trade. She would make a deal with anyone, but the price could be quite steep. Elide doubted her cousin held that same soft spot that she did for the waterfowl.

However, when she approached the door to Aaroahi's workshop on softly padding feet, she did not feel a godly presence. The structure was silent, hollow, and the door creaked as Elide pushed it aside to enter. She called out. Dust sprang up from the breeze stirred by the open door and threw rainbows across sunbeams.

No one was there.

A wave of disbelief and desperation hit Elide head on. She had travelled so far on two mortal feet, far from the delicious chill of her watery bed, only for her hopes to be dashed in this final stretch. Was it all for nothing? Without the healer, there could be no cure. Without a cure, there would be no birds. She had been certain that she was on the right path, but her next step would drop her off the sheer face of a cliff.

It had been so long, Elide realized, since she had wanted to make an impact on anything. She had grown detached from her world, watching the centuries creep by her, without actively participating in them. She had sidelined herself. She had been content with her duties as stewardess of ponds and

puddles. As a new goddess, her essence had whistled through the water like a blade through air. Perhaps at some point, the contentment had faded, and acceptance had grown in the space left behind. Elide understood, in that moment, that her existence had grown as passive as still water. She also knew then, in the face of so many revelations, that she was a liar.

She didn't turn her nose from other gods and goddesses because she thought herself above them. The harrowing truth was quite the opposite, in fact. Elide secluded herself so habitually, hiding her face, because she was quite certain that she was incapable of yielding greater power than what she had. She did not reach for more, did not exercise her essence. She could be so much more than a minor goddess of ponds and puddles, but she felt herself painfully unworthy.

It's easy to be nothing and tell yourself it's because you never cared to try. It's much harder to be nothing after trying everything.

Standing at the threshold of her cousin's desert home, Elide made a promise to herself.

She thought of Death, who saw every life, every death, and could never live or die himself. She thought of the shackles that bound her, the fear and doubt and self-deprecation.

She lifted the willow wand, eyes wide and fierce with determination. She had crossed the blistering sands alone, with no direction. Her conviction had grown. She *would* save the birds. And she would have to change herself to do it. She possessed greater strength than she had allowed herself to realize.

No other minor goddess could slice a gash straight through the Veil, could they?

With gritted teeth, Elide pressed the dull tip of the willow branch to the tender flesh beneath her chin. Her mind grew loud, clamoring with intention and essence, and the willow wand sang out in response. Elide demanded every drop of the wand's power to move and flow. She drank it in.

Death had imbued himself into this willow branch, Elide understood, for this moment.

When the willow branch was thoroughly used up, she let it drop in the doorway. Power rolled from her in vibrating waves. Her physical vessel wavered, flickering, before shedding entirely from her godly form. With this power and conviction, she didn't need it anymore.

Elide smiled and stretched. She had forgotten what it meant to be a goddess. With a blink, Elide opened a portal home and stepped through.

Entering the clean water felt cathartic after so long in the arid heat and dust. She vowed to never stray so far from her rightful place again. Her essence sang and danced through the water, stroking the fish and frogs and cottonmouths. She pressed a kiss to the turtle's shell and murmured an apology through the reeds. Gratitude for eternity was a feeling that she hadn't felt since her youth, but now her heart was drowning in it. She was giddy.

She flexed her essence, felt it swirl and flow under her ministrations. It was not a bottomless depth, but she knew that she had reached her previous limits and had punched through, had dissolved them. If she desired, she could be more than the goddess of pools and puddles. She could be the goddess of tempests and typhoons. But Elide wasn't interested in destruction.

She transfixed her power, her energy, to the water. There, in that serene pond bordered by willows and shadowed woods, Elide poured her life force out. She imbued the water with her divinity, bolstered by Death's gift to her. The plants shivered and grew, arching over the surface to get a better view.

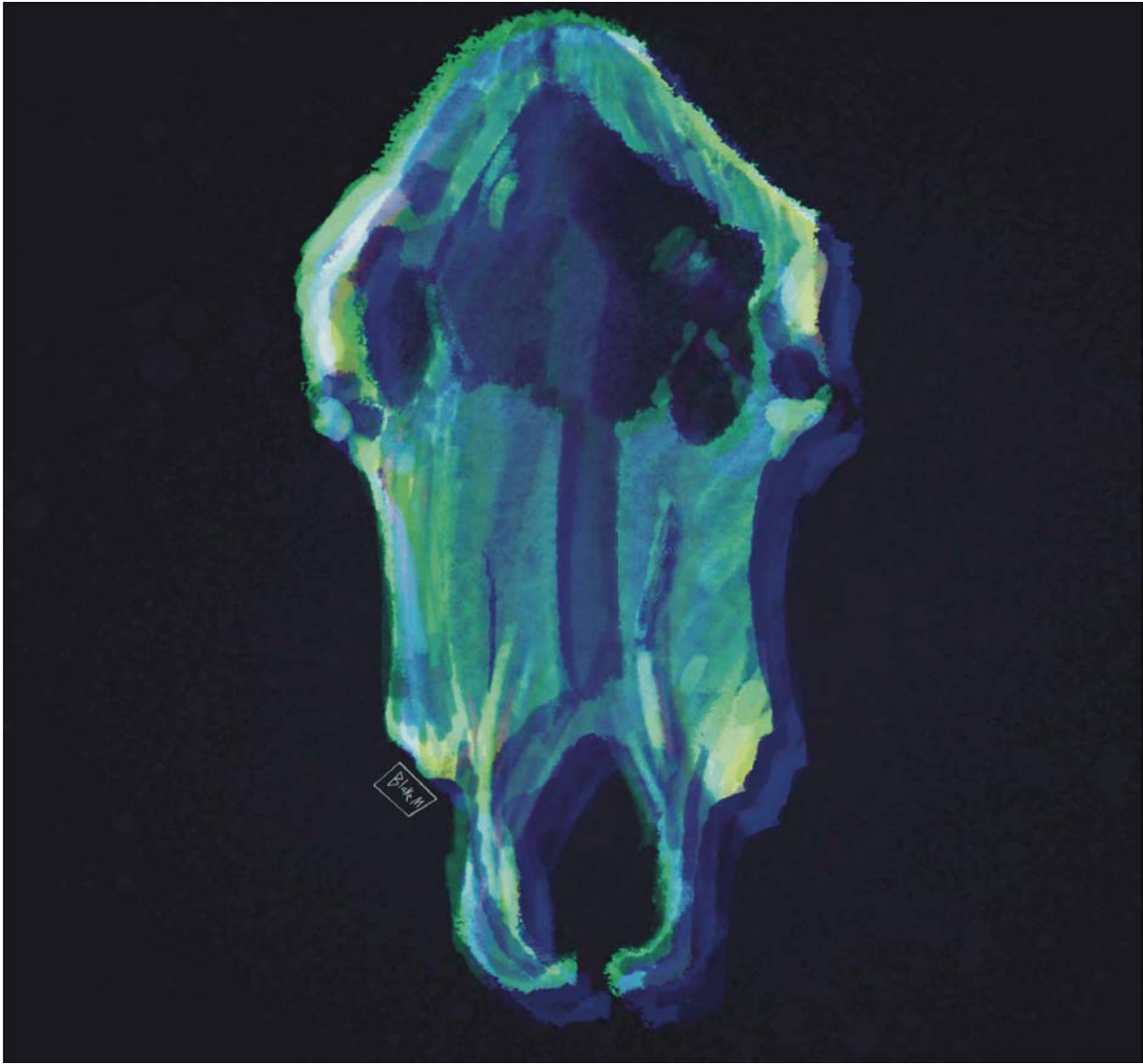
When she was done, Elide could scarcely pass a message to Indira before she sank to the bottom of the pool, exhausted, and entered a deep and fathomless slumber. The water was perfectly still and smooth, like slick glass. Elide slept so peacefully that she did not see the figure that stood at the bank of the water, silhouetted by reeds. He watched only for a moment, glimpsing what Elide had done, before slipping away.

When Indira arrived with her flock, Elide still did not awaken. The birds limped and whimpered, crying out their pain to their mistress and mother. Only the strongest had survived this long, long enough to see what Elide had given for them. Indira guided them into Elide's pool, where divinity ran milky and thick through the water.

As each bird set afloat, sending ripples and waves in their wake, the water healed. The pestilence was pushed from their bodies like a stubborn splinter, infection drained and dispelled. Elide's soul dreamed below them and sent the plague out of them like black smoke. Flipped feet created a joyous melody of splashing water and a crescendo of babbling, boisterous honking filled the air. Their pain was washed away, their suffering alleviated. Indira fell to her knees and cried fat tears of joy.

Somewhere, in another world, Death smiled at the little goddess of puddles and ponds and healing waters.





**Blots**  
Blake Murdock

***Nonfiction***

### **It's Just All the Memories**

Emma Gilliland

A few days ago, my Nana asked if I could make a quick drive from Macomb IL, to Vermont, IL, about thirty minutes, to pick up a few tubs and suitcases. She is in the process of moving to Macomb from her home of over twenty plus years. I reluctantly agreed, trying to figure out how I could plan it into my already busy Thursday afternoon. I enlisted the help of my younger sister, Lucy, to help me carry the heavy items and just for some company on the drive over. Her only requirement was that she got aux on the way there and back.

We arrived in Vermont, my list of items to pack was ready on my phone. Lucy and I heaved a couple tubs, suitcases, and a bookshelf into my silver Toyota Highlander. I'm not sure how we made it all fit, but where there's a will, there's a way. I rolled one last suitcase out to the car by myself while Lucy stayed inside. I came back in and yelled to Lucy, "Let's get this one last tub!"

There was no response. I walked into the kitchen and into the office space that led to the reading room. Lucy sat silently on the beige rocking chair. For anyone who knows my sister, it is rare to find her quiet. "Lucy?"

She began to sob. Tears streamed down her red cheeks in between gasps of breath. I walked over and just hugged her. She continued to sit while I stood, holding her while she cried because I knew. I knew that staring at the places where the couches once occupied in the living room or where the baby grand piano once stood in the basement reminded her of all the memories of this house. This house that we grew up in. This house we lived in off and on throughout our childhood when our family was in-between houses since we moved so often. This house that Papa spent his last days in. This house that we called home.

Finally, she said between sobs, "It's just all the memories," she trailed off, breaking into another fit of sobs. After she spoke, I continued to hold her and look around the room.

If walls could talk, I wonder if they would remember all the memories of each room.

The reading room. Sitting on Nana's lap, the beige rocking chair rocking back and forth as Nana read me a Bible story or some cheesy children's book. I would care more about the pictures than the words usually, but I still loved to hear her read. Her comforting voice, her Hoosier accent making it obvious she grew up in Indiana. Nana once told me some of the fondest memories she holds are of those simple times in the reading room. She loved holding us grandkids when we were little.

Connected to the reading room is my grandparents' bedroom. *Was*. I am still trying to wrap my head around this house being a part of only our memories now. When I was very little, whenever I had a bad dream or got scared, I would walk up the stairs from the basement and crawl in bed with Nana and Papa. Squeezed between the two of them, I somehow fell asleep through my Papa's grating snores and Nana's heavy mouth breathing.

When my sisters and I were little and spent the night at their house, Nana would get the four of us together on her big bed and do a Bible devotion with us. We would read a passage from the Bible sometimes or she would read out of a devotional book, which explained a piece of Scripture and how it could apply to our lives. I know my Nana treasured these times, but I knew my sisters and I were antsy for the popcorn and movie that often followed the devotional. Still, I tried to learn something from my Nana.

The living room was right off the master bedroom. This was the site of movie nights with kettle corn for Papa, Halo Top ice cream for Nana, and fudgesicles for us kids. Nana always had some PureFlix movie picked out for us that she would talk up the whole evening before finally watching it, especially if it was a true story. She loves movies based on true stories. I still think PureFlix is super cheesy, just by the name alone. But she loves it.

The living room was the center of holidays. Nana and Papa, my parents and two little sisters, plus my dad's sister and her husband and three kids. We would have our little Christmas together in that living room on Christmas Eve. One of us kids played Santa, giving presents out to everyone, watching each person open each gift, red and green wrapping paper covering the area rug, bows trampled on in excitement. But before presents, Papa always read the Christmas story. Sitting on the floor, all us grandkids would be so antsy during the reading, it felt like he went at snail pace for hours. But as I got older, I began to appreciate the tradition. I listened to my Papa's voice as he read, so confident in each

word as if he'd read it a thousand times, which he probably had. Last Christmas we missed that. We missed him.

The living room was where my Papa spent his last good days. After his first stroke, he spent a lot of time in his chair, his feet reclined, watching either a ball game, Andy Griffith, or some British TV drama. He is how I discovered my love for Downton Abbey. He was very tired and groggy in his last good days, but still so loving. His humor was my favorite, the type where we'd try not to laugh at someone tripping, or as my dad would call it, a "lip skid." My freshman year of college, I sat in the living room in the chair next to him on my laptop doing my Intro to Business class work. He owned a cell phone store and was a great businessman, so he was happy and even excited to help me out. I would ask him a question, but instead of a quick, sometimes witty response, he would take a little longer than normal. I assumed it was because of his stroke. Just a few days later, he had a second stroke that took his life. This memory of doing homework in the living room is one of my last memories with Papa.

There were two exits from the living room: one led to the dining room, while the other led into the kitchen. All throughout middle school and high school, I baked in Nana and Papa's kitchen. Every couple of months or so, I would go in there and bake my Papa his favorite: coconut cream pie. He would come home from work with a huge grin on his face when he saw the flour caked on my apron and breathed in the coconut cream pie baking in the oven. For Thanksgiving and Christmas, each family would bring a couple dishes while Papa cooked the turkey and ham. I was responsible for making pumpkin pie, pecan pie, apple pie, and any other dessert requested. I always baked them in that kitchen.

Anytime I spent the night, the first thing I would do is go upstairs to get myself a cup of coffee that my Papa had made special for me, knowing that I liked to sleep in. After he died, I spent a lot of nights with Nana. When I asked her what she missed about him, she said she missed when he would brew them both coffee in the morning and bring a cup into her while she read in the living room. It's the little things in life.

Whenever I spent the night on Tuesdays, I would wake up Wednesday morning to a box of Roger's Bakery donuts on the kitchen counter. My Papa would go to work early in the morning in Rushville for their weekly staff meeting and then come back to Vermont and bring me the remainder of the donuts, always making sure to leave an apple fritter in the mix. I always thought he was the best Papa for driving the twenty minutes back from Rushville just to drop off those donuts and then go straight back to work.

Connected to the kitchen by a set of bar stools was the dining room. The dining room was the site of everything from Jack's pizza nights to Thanksgiving dinners. Papa would sit at the head of the table, Nana to the right of him. Nana's serving dishes had been around since the dawn of time and were practically indestructible, with little blue flowers painted on the Pfaltzgraff stone dishes. Nana always baked those premade Pillsbury crescent rolls and placed them in baskets that had also been around since the dawn of time. I remember the smells of pot roast and rolls as Nana removed them from the oven, my stomach growling as we were seated at the table. Before we ate, Papa always said grace. Some of the best and most enjoyable meals I have ever eaten have been at that dining room table.

Right off the dining room was a door that led to the back porch, which then led to the patio. The fall season makes me remember crisp autumn evenings on my grandparents' patio. Papa would try his best to make a fire with newspaper and this special wood from New Mexico that actually smelled good. After a few years of this method, he finally gave into my Nana's suggestion of getting those fire starter logs from Walmart. Nana would go inside into her pantry to get Hershey's chocolate, marshmallows (the jumbo kind if we were lucky), and graham crackers to make s'mores. After Papa died last year, Nana and I made a fire together for the first time without him. We didn't make s'mores; we didn't really talk much for that matter. We just sat and stared into the flames. I imagine we were both thinking similar thoughts.

Walking back inside, from the dining room, past the kitchen, there was a tiny little hallway with a half bathroom that took you down the stairs into the basement. Throughout our childhood, my sisters, Annie and Lucy, and I would spend the night in the two guest rooms, always fighting over who would get the big bed and who would get the twin beds. We frequently brought our friends over, hyping up our grandparents' basement with its huge flatscreen that had a 3D feature, that we used maybe once, the jet bathtub, and of course, the baby grand piano. Papa would let us take over his man cave in the downstairs living room, in which we would have movie nights with all our friends eating junk food from the convenience store a couple blocks down the road.

Not once, but twice, Lucy did not fill up the jet bathtub enough before she turned on the jets. The first time, she was probably in the third grade. The second time was just a few months ago. She's fifteen. She yelled for help and I ran in to try to help her turn the jets off, water spraying in both of our eyes until we finally succeeded, a big mess on our hands. We still belly laugh about it.

Both guest rooms were super cozy, with the temperature just right, soft sheets, and fuzzy blankets to curl up in. But sometimes it was a struggle to fall asleep. Through the air vents, I could hear the distinct garbage disposal sound of my Papa sawing logs. My sisters and I would die laughing every time, trying to imagine it was just white noise. I guess we grew accustomed to it, because we always slept so good at Nana and Papa's house.

The baby grand piano. That is one thing we just had to move into Nana's new house. It's a shiny black Kawai baby grand. I remember days when I was by myself in the house and would lose track of time playing the ivory keys. There were times when I'd be upstairs and hear the gentle sound of my Nana playing the keys. I loved and still love to hear her play. She is one of the most gifted pianists and has taught me everything I know. My dad is also a gifted musician; he can play any instrument, but to his dismay, he could never quite master the piano. I remember one time my sisters and I had hid behind the guestroom door and recorded him trying to play the piano, his stubby guitar fingers plucking at the keys, trying to have a gentle touch, but failing. At a young age, Annie and Lucy were taught by Nana how to play the song "Heart and Soul." To this day, they slide onto the piano bench and, with choppy notes, play that same song *over and over again*. It gets tedious after a while.

The last room in the house was the mudroom. It was located right off the dining room and was added on a few years back along with an insulated two-car garage. This may not sound like it holds many memories, but you would be surprised. In the winter, my cousins, sisters, and I would run into the mudroom to feel the warm air on our frostbitten red cheeks. We would take off our soggy gloves and rub them together in front of the heat registers. Then we would throw our coats on a chair instead of on the coat hooks like normal people. Nana would have hot chocolate with mini marshmallows waiting for us and sometimes we'd watch a Hallmark movie, all snuggled together in warm blankets.

There was a large closet off the mudroom that acted as a storage space and hiding place. Any large present that could not be wrapped would be hidden in there, sometimes for months. Nana would forbid any of us from going in there, but we definitely snooped more than once because she never locked the door.

Lucy and I still sat in the reading room. I released my hug as she dried her tears. I said, "We'll make new memories at this new house."

Lucy responded, "I know, but it won't be the same."

"Of course it won't be the same," I said. "But this is a new beginning. We need this just as much as Nana." Lucy nodded.

I waited a moment before I asked, "Ready to get this last tub?"

"I guess so," she said.

Lucy took the front of the tub and I took the back as we carried it out to my car. We locked up the house and were on our way back to Macomb. I couldn't help but think of all the memories of that house. From the reading room, to the kitchen, to the mudroom, there are hundreds of memories, ones I cannot even recall. Until I smell a candle scent that always burned in my grandparents' house. Until I hear the crackle of wood reminding me of crisp autumn nights around the fire. Until I taste the hot Keurig coffee from my Papa's old mug. Until I feel the soft sheets in my bed, reminding me of those nights at my Nana and Papa's.

I will always have the memories of their house. Even as we grow older and people pass away and the next generation is born, we will always have those memories. Now it's time for new memories, new beginnings.

## **Walk It Off**

Abigail Jones

When I was fifteen, I bought the most expensive shoes I have ever bought. In my defense, they were on sale for ninety dollars. Finding heels that look cute on my size ten feet is a struggle enough and these didn't just look cute they looked glamorous. I just knew they were the right shoes for my first homecoming. However, I come from the kind of family that doesn't buy ninety-dollar shoes, so I had three minutes to convince my mom that these shoes were a practical purchase. I explained to my mom that the two-and-a-half-inch high silver heels with rhinestone decoration were a steal for forty percent off, plus I would take care of them and wear them at every chance. That was the part that did it, the promise to wear them at every school dance and someday my wedding.

That was the year I twisted my ankle. Not in the heels though, in gym class. I remember that we were playing a type of tag, but in this version, you had to run on the lines painted on the gymnasium floor like a tightrope. I don't remember if the floor was slippery or if I had just been running too fast, I just remember rolling my ankle. It hurt right away, but I had been a softball player since before I could remember and that meant I had dealt with soreness and bruises all the time. Twenty minutes later, just before we were released to go change, I asked if I could grab some ice from the nurse because it really hurt. The teacher said that it was probably just bruised and I should walk it off. She said it would be better by the next day and it wasn't a big deal. Now, all these years later, I know that ice at that moment wouldn't have helped but I still can't seem to let it go.

It's funny the things you do and don't remember. I remember with total clarity the way my teacher huffed the next day we had class and I asked to go get ice again, the pain still throbbing. I can't remember when I told my parents about the pain, but I have faint memories of my dad telling me to rub some dirt in it, his advice for any bump or fall.

The soreness in my ankle didn't go down; not after a few days, not after a few weeks, not after four months. My parents tried taking me to the chiro, the same practice I had been going to since I was eight years old, but after my third adjustment I sobbed in the car as my ankle turned an angry red color. Life was hectic at this time, both my paternal and maternal grandmothers suddenly diagnosed with rare cancers and, though we didn't know it at the time, in their last months. Rolled ankles weren't a priority.

Between hospital visits and funerals and catching up in school, it wasn't until after my second grandma passed in April that my parents decided that *rub some dirt in it* and *suck it up, buttercup* wasn't going to cut it this time and took me to the doctor. The doctor told me that it was a simple sprain and I should buy a brace from Walgreens to wear for a while. I did just that, packing that brace for my school trip to Disney where I walked for hours a day with little to no rest. On our last day at the parks I couldn't even walk ten steps without feeling like my ankle was being stabbed or flambeed or something horrible, my best friend having to remind the group to wait for me as I trailed behind. Some parent gave me a frozen water-filled diaper that they had brought as portable ice packs. Sitting on my bed with my leg elevated and iced with that diaper I thought to myself *this isn't right*.

That's what I told the doctor I saw when I came back, a different one from before, and he said that they must have just underestimated the sprain or I must have pushed things too far at Disney. He asked why it had taken me so long to come in the first place, lecturing me about how it probably had been aggravated in the time I wasted in coming. He gave me a walking cast and told me that in a few weeks we would reassess but it would probably be fine. This meant that my softball season, which had just begun, was already over. It was fine though, I had been assigned a new team after I aged out of my old league and wasn't really fond of any of my new teammates. This way I could rest up and get a new team the next season.

Next season didn't come though, because after the walking cast came two different hard casts that came with crutches and physical therapy. When that didn't work, they did nerve tests and ultrasounds on my foot, looking for any abnormalities in my foot structure. My physical therapists tried treatments from ice to needling, a type of acupuncture, before they discharged me and told me that they couldn't help me. I went to Iowa City and got a needle put through the width of my ankle, the doctors thinking they might be able to drain some fluid, and shots of cortisone. When the doctors in Iowa City discharged me, the doctors in the Quad Cities told me that there wasn't anything they could do for me and sent me to a pain clinic to

learn to deal with the pain rather than fix it. During these months, doctors came and went and I realized that their promises of feeling better next visit were the cruelest kind of lie. At some point, they stopped telling them.

A year and a half after I twisted my ankle, just a few weeks after being recommended to the pain clinic, I started seeing a special foot chiropractor. His treatments didn't do much and his ego was off-putting, but he promised results and my mother would have tried anything before she gave up and took me to the pain clinic. He recommended an orthopedic surgeon that he knew and my mother decided that we'd go as a last-ditch effort.

It didn't matter to me if I went or didn't. After being told that my ankle was fine, "just a little bruised—no wait, maybe there's a sprain and some tendinitis—no, not that, ah maybe the nerves of your foot are degenerative and you won't be able to walk in a few years—no wait, are we sure it isn't just a little bruised," I was pretty much done with doctors. I went because it made my mom feel better.

Ten minutes. That is how long it took for the technician to find the extra bone at the back of my ankle. The bone that had shifted when I sprained it, that had been rubbing against my tendon for a year and a half, made my ankle swell and bruise a violent, unforgiving purple when I walked any distance.

The surgery was quick and I don't recall most of what happened before or after, only that I cried and asked my parents to take me home before the doctors came in to inject the back of my knee with a nerve block. The recovery was long, as they had shaved down part of my bone, and I was on a knee scooter for a while. I had to take off the semester of school to recover, but on the last day of classes I came and showed my teachers the photos of the surgery and how the scar tissue was so bad it was all they could see when they first opened me up.

Perhaps I did that because I wanted to show them that I had indeed been hurt. That I had been hurt that time the gym teacher said to me "you *sure* you can't run the mile," staring me down as I wobbled on my crutches and stammered that the doctors think I'll be back to shipshape in three weeks. That I had been hurt that time my friend, for that's what she called herself so that is what she must be, had told everyone behind my back that I was faking it all. That I hadn't meant to be benched all marching season, which had made the directors annoyed and the boys need to carry my sousaphone, but I had been hurt.

I went back to physical therapy and did well enough that I was discharged a week early. Three months later, when they saw that I had walked in a parade they had also participated in, my physical therapists called me their success story. I was proud to be a success story, proud to stumble through the mile, proud to carry my sousaphone. I was proud to be walking.

Which is why I went to my post-surgery check ups honestly. Yes, it was better but I still had pain walking for more than ten minutes. The parade where I walked and ran into my physical therapists was brutal, reminding me that I still was far from back to normal. The surgeon informed me that he couldn't do anymore, so I went back to the chiropractor that recommended him. I went every week, twice a week. I knew all the interns and technicians. I knew his schtick, his pitch he'd say when his adjustments didn't help.

He would adjust my ankle and ask if it felt better. It felt colder, I would say, but I don't know about better. He'd tell me that it was just the blood returning to my ankle and that it was a good sign. Don't worry, he'd say as I slipped on my sneakers after the adjustment. I'm not giving up until you're running again.

After three months of colder ankles, just after I turned eighteen, my gym note expired and I asked if I was good enough to run the mile next week or if I would have to get another note. He waited until just before I left to ask if I was sure I was hurt, because in all his forty years of practice he had never met someone he hadn't fixed and I wasn't getting better. If he couldn't fix me then I must not be in pain.

I don't think I responded at first. I really didn't get what he meant and I didn't understand why he was asking if I liked gym class. Then it hit me, realization dousing me like a bucket of cold water. I tried to explain that I liked my gym class, that I *missed* my gym class. My tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes against my wishes and I tried to explain what it felt like not to be able to run. Not even just run, but skip, hop, or even walk briskly. I opted out of family outings because I knew I wouldn't be able to stand or walk the amount of time they could. I missed every season of softball I had left. I choked on my tears as I tried to have him understand what I would give to be able to walk with my friends without having to remind them to slow down. How it hurt to wear sneakers to dances while my friends wore heels, my own heels tossed in a bag so that I could pop them on for pictures and then shove them back into the bag.

He tried backpedaling and told me that he just needed to be sure and sent me to the front desk to make the next appointment. I told the receptionist that I would have to call and schedule later before I

went back to my car and burst into tears once again, unable to contain the sobs any longer. My mother brought in the final check for me and I haven't seen anyone for my ankle since.

I celebrated my twenty-second birthday back in September. I'm finishing up my undergraduate degree. I still limp when I walk sometimes, though I avoid any prolonged walking or standing as much as I can. When people ask why I never know what to tell them, I'm not sure how to explain the years of doctor visits and pain caused by a rolled ankle in my freshman year of high school. Most of the time I try to just brush it off and laugh at myself for always being the one to trail behind the group, my purse ready with Tylenol and pain cream in case I overdo it.

I won't go to the doctors if I can help it anymore. Every time I imagine going, my stomach turns and I feel sick. I prolong it and it only gets worse as I imagine them asking the same question that the first doctor did way back when I was fifteen. Why had I waited so long?

I wonder if I hadn't waited so long, if I had insisted that it wasn't just bruised, would it have gotten so bad? Would the scar tissue have been so thick, the diagnosis so hard to find? I watch the kids I babysit chase each other in a game of tag, both knowing that I can't join because of the ouchy inside of my ankle, and wondering if someday I will be able to play games with my own kids. I wonder if someday I will be able to dance at my own wedding.

Then I look at my closet, where my silver heels sit up on a shelf. The soles are loose, coming unglued after I stumbled taking pictures before junior prom, and someone asked a long time ago why I hadn't thrown them out yet. I think back to that day in freshman year, promising my mom that I would wear them to my wedding, and I can't bear to part with them.



## **An Asian Who Doesn't Like Chess**

Likhitha Kancherla

Being the model minority in America, though seemingly a positive attachment of my race as an Asian, has been the driving force behind molding my individuality into becoming a pawn in the larger game of chess of American society—to sustain a false consciousness of the American Dream and simultaneously silence other minorities raising their voices. Growing up, I never received help in my academics but was always expected to excel academically. When I performed well, I never received praise and would eventually learn to not accept any praise for my academic performance. However, if I ever did poorly, this was when I would receive criticism but still not any guidance or aid. This paradox that unfortunately characterized my childhood highlights the pressure I had to succeed and fear to ask for help on my journey. This, in addition to struggling to make friends socially since my academic achievements made me a social pariah (being seen as nerdy, or not personable due to the common stereotypes associated with being Asian) created a lonely atmosphere. As a result of the lack of friendships, I would avoid answering questions in class even though I knew the answer and engaged in self-deprecating humor to make myself more likable. In my early school career (grades 1-4) I went to a poorly funded school in California where the population was diverse, and the academic performance was low. Hence, my tactics did eventually work in making friends. However, later, my family moved to a neighborhood in Edina, Minnesota where the population was predominantly white and represented old wealth. The public school system was prestigious, and everyone had been enrolled in several extracurriculars in addition to receiving high levels of academic success. Suddenly, every skill I had developed to move away from my “Asianness” in regards to my academics and nerdy personality set me up for failure and made me an outcast once again.

While I had never genuinely thought a class was difficult before, the new school's curriculum was a challenge for me. I was scared to ask questions or for help because I used to be able to figure it out on my own. Eventually, I began to get accustomed to the new environment but struggled to fit in socially since I stood out as a person of color. There would be several classes where I was the only brown student in class, and this caused a lot of distress for me since I had placed an emphasis on fitting in (because I was used to being the new kid). I tried to dress up like my white peers and learned to make my own lunch as a ten-year-old because I did not want my peers to judge and make faces at my Indian food. However, no matter how much I did, I would never be enough.

Once I made it to high school, I began to learn more about race and intersectional social activism. I was not only able to identify the cause of some of my frustrations as an Asian but also learn of the privileges I receive as well. I was able to realize through this educational experience why I would become upset. As I got older my peers began to get henna or glamorize celebrities who would wear a bindi. Everything I had learned to hate about myself would be praised and validated when white people would do the same. My family in India would push me to use face bleaching creams when I got tan in the summer while celebrities were painting themselves brown. Even my family in India would put white people on a pedestal and uphold the notion that if white people did something that Indians had already been doing for ages, that the act was legitimate. When I began to raise my voice and became more engaged in activism, my own father would question why I felt the need because we should feel grateful for what we are allowed. By *allowing* us to achieve what we have achieved, there is an inherent power differentiation wherein we are subordinate, but the false consciousness that my father accepted as reality prevented him from realizing stratification. However, he was right in that I had the opportunity to succeed that many people do not because of their race.

America depends on Asian success in order to sustain the notion that as long as one works hard, success will ensue. This is due to the fact that if Asians, a racial minority, can make it in America, then the failures of other racial minorities are caused by the individual and not a consequence of larger social structures. If the privilege that I am given to become financially successful (achieve the American Dream) is used against the progress of society, then I want no part in playing the pawn.

## Hiraeth: Homesickness, Nostalgia, and Other Signs of Growing Up

Madison McCabe

There is a little girl, no more than six or seven years of age. She is kicking her legs, begging her father to get her out of her car seat faster. As soon as her father lifts her out of the seat and sets her on the ground, she takes off running as fast as her short legs will take her. Her grandparents are waiting for her on the porch.

She jumps into her grandpa's arms as her grandma remarks about how tall she's getting. The air is crisp and her grandpa's arms are warm and there is more room for the little girl to play than she could ever dream of. Their house is on a hill and at the bottom is a drop-off that falls into the lake. The trees that surround them are all different hues of red, orange, and yellow save for the few evergreens that sprinkle the area.

The little girl has waited weeks to come back here and "run like the wind" as her grandpa puts it, but she has to wait. Her grandparents will want to catch up and ask her about school, what she's going to be for Halloween, and other things that have been going on in her life, so she must hold off. *It's okay*, she thinks, *I have all the time in the world*.

\* \* \*

Christmas has come and gone. The hill is now covered in a soft blanket of snow and there is a nip in the air. The little girl's nose is turning red from the cold, but she couldn't care less. The only thing that matters to her is sledding down the hill faster than she did before. Her little sister is barely over a year old, too young to play with her, but she doesn't mind. Playing alone or playing with others makes no difference to the girl. Playing is playing.

As she is trying to make her way up the hill, the molasses-thick snow inhibiting her every step, she thinks, *This is it, this will be the fastest one yet*. With this hill, you have to know exactly when to jump ship and roll off the sled, as the drop-off into the lake means you don't have room to just dig your heels into the ground. Well, actually you do, but you have to stop almost halfway up the hill, making the ride feel like it ended prematurely, so that isn't an option for the little girl. But if you try to stop too late, you risk going right over the edge. So she has to figure out the exact last possible second to jump off as she moves at a breakneck speed, and she finds the element of danger that comes with almost falling into a frozen lake only adds to the exhilaration. She finally makes her way to the top of the hill and readies the sled. She is shivering with anticipation and the cold. She sits on the sled and digs her heels into the ground, ready to push off. "Three...two...ON—"

Before she can finish her countdown, she suddenly hears her grandma's voice calling for her to come inside. Her disappointment is evident as she gets up and drags her sled behind her, but perks up slightly when she realizes that she probably has a cup of hot chocolate waiting for her. *It's okay*, she thinks, *I can sled some more later, I have time*.

\* \* \*

The snow has melted and the world is starting to grow again. The little girl is regaling the story of how she lost her first tooth at school to her grandma.

She is doing her best to help with cooking dinner, but there is only so much she's allowed to do. She isn't allowed near knives, so she can't peel the potatoes. She can't work the stove, and her father won't let her anywhere near the grill.

Realizing she can't do anything to help, she makes her way from the kitchen to the living room to see if her grandpa will play a game of UNO with her before dinner. She can hear her grandma call from the kitchen that everything is ready. Her grandpa promises to play with her when they are done eating. *Okay*, thinks the little girl, *We'll have time later*.

\* \* \*

School is finally out, which means the little girl gets to go to her grandparents' house much more often. Her grandma has sent her outside with her grandpa to pick blueberries for her pie and she keeps getting sidetracked. There is at least one of every fruit tree and berry bush she could ever imagine and she

can't help but ask her grandpa about every one of them. He was always the one to indulge in the little girl's curiosities. He always seemed to know everything, and when he didn't they would always find the answer together. She wanted to be just like him.

The little girl is now being lifted by her grandpa so she can reach an apple on one of the higher branches. And as she is being lifted, her grandpa is regaling a story about when he was her age. It's a story she's heard a million times, about the time her grandpa's brother somehow caught a fish in the eye, and his mother sewed up an eyepatch right then and there. Years later, while he was reading the newspaper, her grandpa read a story about a giant fish with an eyepatch on the coast, dragging people into the ocean, and laughing while he did it. It is the little girl's favorite story, and while she knows they are supposed to be collecting blueberries for Grandma, she thinks, *We're okay. I can listen to it one more time.*

\* \* \*

The young woman that used to be the little girl is sitting on the hill, a decade later. She's thinking about this hill on this lake, about all the memories she's had here. She's thinking back to a time when she could play for as long as she wanted, from sunrise to sunset if she so wished, and she could ask a million questions without feeling like a bother. When her grandpa would tell her stories and sing her songs that she's heard a million times but, "Just one more time Grandpa!" When grandma would listen to her talk even though she was cooking a meal for at least six people. When being here gave her a warm feeling in her chest even in the dead of winter. When she could jump into her grandpa's arms and trust he would catch her. And now, even though these memories give her happiness, they take her to a place she hates, because she knows she can never really go back. And that fills her with so much sadness. So the young woman that used to be a little girl lays down on the soft grass and thinks, *God, where did the time go?*

*Second Place*  
*Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award*

**Stage Four**

Blake Murdock

The five stages of grief can go fuck themselves,  
at least in the capacity that I feel them.

**Stage One**

When I was sixteen, my first pet died, and I learned denial. Not my very first pet, of course; that title belongs to my dad's German Shepherd, Sadie. She passed when I was in kindergarten and I was too young to understand it. When I was fifteen, I did more research on owning a snake than I've done on anything productive in my entire life, and thus, Lieutenant Dan was delivered to my home in a live reptile box. He was a black and white Kenyan Sand Boa. He was Lieutenant Dan because he had no legs, but I just called him Dan. He was the first pet I'd ever truly picked out, owned, and took care of by myself.

He died in my hands nine months later. I was horrendously attached to the little guy. He lived in my room, I always fed him, and I decorated his terrarium with all the care in the world, wanting him to have the biggest, happiest life he could. We don't know what happened. I'm sure it wasn't my fault. Right before he passed, he looked up at me, and I had never known that snakes could really feel anything until then. He waited for me to realize he wasn't acting normally, let me pick him up, looked me right in the eyes, and then passed in my hands.

Theoretically, I couldn't have asked for a better end with him, but I fell harder into grief than I had with any human relative of mine. The pandemic was in full force. I had nowhere to go. His empty tank sat with me every day, and I denied it so hard; I denied myself, too. I stopped feeling emotions normally when Dan died. Maybe it's because your first anything always takes part of you with it. First love, first heartbreak, first pet, first death. Maybe it's because I feel grief in stages, never having enough time to move on to the next.

**Stage Two**

When I was seventeen, I learned anger. I had a cat, Tumbleweed, or Weed for short. She was born at my grandma's house because she always took in cats that were dumped on the property next to the railroad tracks where she and my grandpa lived, and eventually those cats got pregnant. Weed must have been born when I was somewhere between six and eight because I don't really remember anything except meeting the kittens for the first time. She wasn't allowed to live at my house—my mom didn't love cats and we had two dogs already— but every time I went to my grandma's house, I would go just to see her. Weed would know when I was coming over somehow and ran to the door when I arrived. She would always begin purring before I even touched her. I planned to take her to college with me, extra money for a pet-friendly dorm be damned. I never got to.

On February 20th, 2021, the pandemic was still real, and my reckless father had gotten COVID-19. I was told to isolate for two weeks even after he finished isolating because I would inevitably get it as well. Perhaps it's because I avoid that man like the plague or because my mom has OCD and cleans constantly, but I never caught it, which meant I had to quarantine for a month. I was in the kitchen when my mom came in and told me Weed had died. It was sudden. She wasn't doing well, my grandma had rushed her to the vet, and she died there. Alone. Without me or my grandma or anyone else she loved. Apparently, my cousin had gotten close with her during the pandemic because he had isolated with my grandma. My mom told me Weed was in his lap in the car on the way to the vet, as if that would reassure me. It didn't.

I learned anger in a way I hadn't felt since I was young and managed my emotions the way my dad had taught me. I learned anger in a way that meant I blamed my dad for getting sick, for being an anti-masker who made my cat die alone and afraid. I learned anger that made me blame my grandma for not staying with her the entire time. I learned anger that still hasn't fully gone, for that cat had my heart in a way I will never be able to let go of. I *was* angry, and I refused to let anyone say otherwise.

**Stage Three**

I learned how to bargain on Sunday, April 27th, 2022: Easter. My dog, Rocco, the one we got when I was seven right after Sadie died to fill the gap that all children feel when they don't have a pet to love, had

been sick for a while. My parents were sad all the time; I was eighteen and leaving soon, and a dog we'd had for twelve years was in pain and going downhill fast. He was constantly vomiting blood. Maybe it was the remaining trust I still had in my parents, but I believed we would take him to a vet before we allowed him to pass slowly and in pain. I was wrong. My mom came into my room around noon that day and told me he was gone. She told me it was okay, that her and dad were with him the whole time. I wondered why I wasn't. I wished they had told me.

I pretty quickly allowed myself to believe that it was okay because he passed in his sleep, with his favorite people around him. I was newly in love and deeply in the honeymoon stage of a relationship. Spring was emerging, and the whole world felt beautiful enough that I just thought he felt safe going when he did. He must have. It must have been beautiful and peaceful. I was a terrible person for not being there for him, but he had to have been happy. I'm sure of it. He was old, and he was loved. There surely was nothing better than going like that.

#### **Stage Four**

I would not wish upon anyone the pain of stage four, but at nineteen, I embody depression. Bella was six years old when my mom and I met her at an animal shelter while my dad was on a work trip. My mom noticed that she was scheduled for euthanasia in two days. We thought that Rocco could use a friend; we'd had him for a year or so when we got worried about how anxious he always was and wanted to get him a companion. Bella was a blue and white pit bull with the most intense puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen. She pressed herself up against the chain link fence of her kennel as my mom and I passed. I didn't fall in love with her then, but I'm forever grateful that my mom did. Bella gave us some trouble for a while; she was a breeding dog from a fighting ring, so she had a prey drive and a tendency to growl at people. My family refused to give up on her, and thirteen years later, I couldn't imagine my life any other way.

Bella was nineteen. Everyone I ever told this to didn't believe me. She bounced around and threw toys and was sassy the whole time, until about two weeks before February 27th, 2023. I had moved out in August of 2022, and I was so sure she would pass before I left. I almost wanted her to, so I could be sure I was there for her.

I'm glad she didn't. My parents had her when their only child moved on to university, and they spoiled her *rotten*. I love that she was loved so much even without me there. She grew incredibly close to my mom when she worked from home from 2020 to 2022. I think my mom was always her person, and it felt right that way. Nothing could have come between that woman and her dog.

I've come home every weekend except for two this semester. I know that's unhealthy, but I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could. I think it was worth it. I came home Friday, the 24th to find my mom telling me that Bella had gotten really bad over the past few days. She was having a hard time standing and controlling her bladder. She whined constantly because she couldn't manage to get up onto the couch next to my mom.

I think that's what hurt the most, the pain of seeing a dog who's so strong and stubborn lose control of her body before her mind slipped away. I think it would have been easier if she had given up.

I detest myself for wishing it had been easier.

Bella deserved strength and love in abundance, and I did my best to give her that. I stayed until Tuesday morning. I couldn't sleep at night without going upstairs and laying with her for a while. She used all her strength to get closer to me, to kiss my nose. I used all my strength to love her until the very end.

Sunday night, my dad got drunk off his ass and texted me that they were having her put down the next day. When I went upstairs, my mom told me they were having someone come to the house so she would be comfortable, so I felt a little better. I slept for two hours. I woke up early and felt more hopeless than I ever had, watching the clock tick towards 1:30. I spent as much time with her as I could without breaking down. I told my dad happy birthday.

She must have been lifted onto the couch at some point because I remember petting her there while my mom sobbed about how awful it was to schedule it. She said they had offered 10:00 or 1:30. She said she wouldn't be ready at 10:00.

My parents made her a charcuterie board of snacks to try. Bella was the most food-motivated dog I've ever met. A bag of chips could wake her out of REM sleep. She never stopped wanting food that day.

My mom told me I didn't have to be there, and I would have been offended if I didn't know that she was just trying to protect me. I want to be there, I told her, I wouldn't dream of anything else. She apologized for my dad being drunk. She called him a coward, and I've never agreed more. Bella hated

when he was drunk. He probably would have known that if he wasn't an alcoholic. I wonder if he did know but didn't care.

My mom went to the kitchen and Bella followed her, like she always tried to do. She crushed up one of her favorites, a fortune cookie, and fed it to her. She handed me the fortune and smiled in a way I still don't understand. Maybe it made her feel a little better. I keep the fortune in my phone case, terrified to lose it somewhere.

"*All the darkness in the world cannot put out a single candle,*" it read. I hate how much sense it made.

We decided to do it outside so we wouldn't have to try to carry her down a flight of stairs. At 1:00, my parents took her expensive orthopedic bed and blankets outside while I stayed inside and fed her Doritos. We'd started a little ritual the past few weeks I'd been there. I'd go into the kitchen and rustle the bag of Doritos just so I could give her one, even if I didn't want any myself. I remembered that we had this no-bake cheesecake filling and chocolate chip dip in the fridge. I gave her some, along with a Scooby Snack. I thought she deserved to have chocolate finally, since she had been so good for so long and it wouldn't be able to hurt her.

Then, we went to the living room and I dumped out her basket of toys. She had always loved toys but had lost interest in them when she started feeling unwell. We picked out a few of her favorites: a bone she had that Rocco had owned the twin to, another bone, and a giraffe stuffed animal she loved to throw into the air and catch. I took them outside as my mom got her ready for their difficult ritual of having to half-carry, half-pull her down the stairs to the yard.

The vet was late. We sat with her outside for an hour. She paced for a while before sitting down on her bed. We covered her up with blankets and gave her more treats while we waited. I think she ate an entire sausage my dad had cut up. At some point, my parents wandered away, either to smoke or give me some privacy.

I thought about her fortune, and I talked to her about how my partner loved her so much too even though they couldn't be there with us. It was overcast but not too cold, just a little windy. It looked like it might rain at any moment. I looked at her looking up at me.

"Everyone is so sad, Bella. The whole world is sad. The whole world is *so* sad," I told her. The whole world was welling up with tears in the same way we all were.

The vet and vet tech got there at 2:10. I'd never been happier for forty extra minutes. Part of me wonders if they do that on purpose, just to let people feel grateful for extra time when they realize they aren't ready.

My mom and I sat by her head so she could see us the whole time. My mom held her while I rubbed her ears. She yelped when they delivered the first shot. I'd never heard her that scared before. I almost asked them if we could turn back.

A few minutes passed. She settled in the arms of the woman who saved her so many years ago, and the vet started to administer the second shot. Then, my strong, always happy dog began to cry. The vet gently asked her why she was crying, and I'd never felt pain like that. She was all there. She was afraid. She needed us and *we* were doing this to her. I let the logic of knowing that she was starting to suffer overwhelm the part of me that became seven again and just wanted to hold their puppy.

"She doesn't like her paws touched," I managed to choke out, either hoping or explaining to the vet.

"That's probably it," someone said. I don't know if they meant it.

"Let's wait a few more minutes, let her get a little more sleepy," the vet told us.

And so we waited. My mom held her until she got quieter, seemed to be a little less afraid. He finished administering the shot. My mom held her with all the love the world had in it, I told her how strong she was, the vet tech whispered to her about how loved she is.

"You're so loved, Bella, you are so, so loved."

The vet tech was reassuring me, too. I wonder if she knew that.

He checked her heartbeat and told us it was still faintly there. Part of me went insane for a moment. I wondered if she'd survive it somehow.

He checked a little later. She was gone.

The barking of dogs filled the neighborhood for a moment, and that's the closest I've ever felt to God. They felt her go. The entire process was silent until she was gone, like they knew. They knew, they waited, and they howled for her. The only drops of rain that day fell then, just a few hitting me within a gust of wind. I imagine they were the tears the world couldn't quite hold back at her passing, the entire Earth willing to be weak for the passing of a being made of so much good.

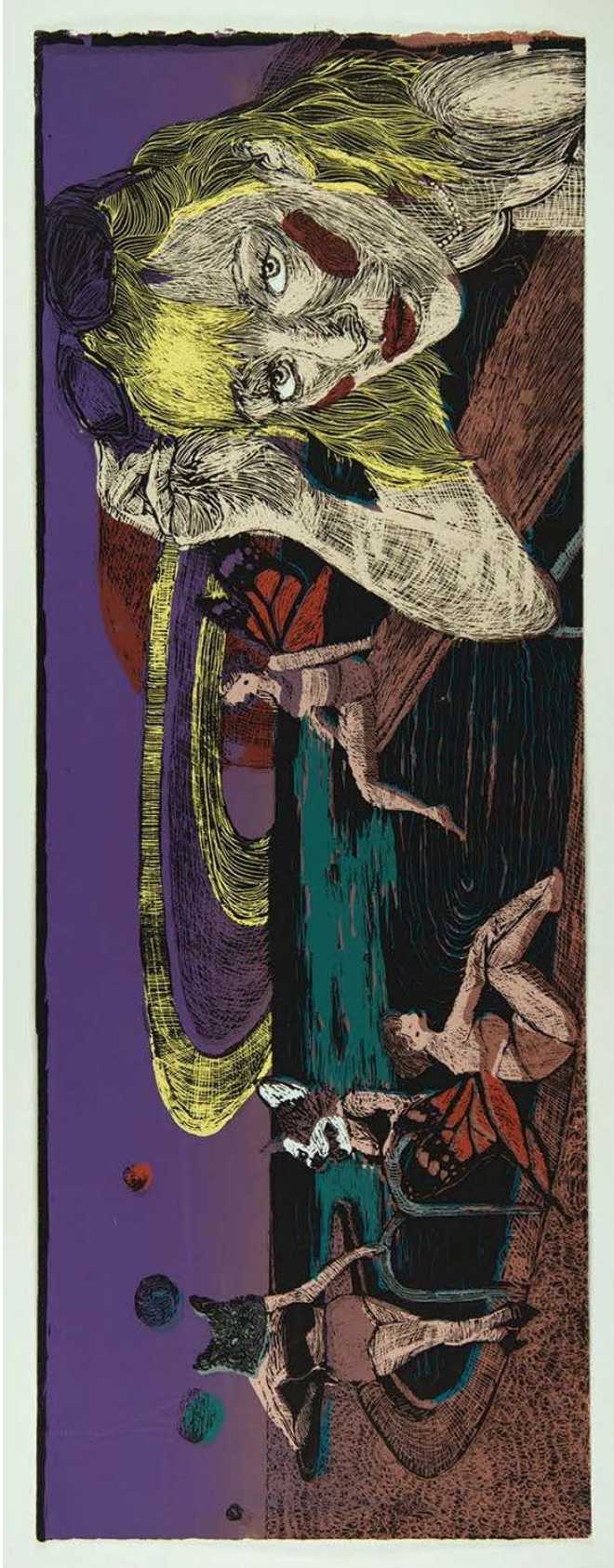
They quietly packed their stuff and apologized for our loss. We thanked them for coming so quickly and for being so kind, for making her feel better right before. I never got their names.

My dad sat at the picnic table out of our view and downed a beer the entire time. "Happy birthday," my mom told him, and it sounded like "You're a coward."

I kissed her head and couldn't bear to be there when they buried her. I ran to my room.

I wonder if that made my dad strong and me weak. I like to think not. I like to believe that I was there when it mattered. I held her. I was the last thing she saw. I told her the whole world would grieve for her and loved her until the very end.

She never even looked for him.



**Favorite Things**  
Grace Lessen



## Home of the Transient Whopper

Maureen Roland

This Burger King was just at the base of a heavy interstate exchange. Skirted with buzzing buttresses of concrete and asphalt and flanked by a myriad of hotel chains; this joint screamed of irregular clientele and lazy staff. We didn't care. Five hours of grinding freeway traffic, construction zones, and fearless drivers had made us rather hungry. A pit stop refill was needed, and BK was the closest place.

The floor was sticky, and the countertops even more so. There was a black sharpied "disinfectant" bucket filled with three-day old sludge, plopped by the napkin dispenser. I wondered which new employee had never cared to move it. My guess was all of them. Had I not been so highway frazzled, I may have chosen a different place to dine. Oh well. We chose our filthy seats, unwrapped our questionable burgers, and dunked our saturated finger foods in stuff labeled "ketchup". We slurped at our plastic straws without caring about which landfill they would inevitably forever lay. Then, she walked in.

She was a lone, middle-aged stranger from the random realms of public domain, and wore deep sadness on her face. I watched her gather a beverage from the filmy dispensers, walk into the kid's playroom, and settle at a table that appeared all too familiar to herself. I gnawed on my chunky chicken sandwich and viewed her hands stroke circles on the table top. At first, I thought she was attempting to clean the surface, but a far-off look in her eyes sang a different story. She was reflecting, remembering something, or someone.

My daughters poked fun at each other while I stared at our stranger and pictured a history only a mother would notice. The play area sat empty, except for her. She never drank from her cup while she laid heavy eyes on a small, vacant seat. How long had she been visiting? Weeks? I'd guessed years, at that point. It was an old Burger King, no question.

We dumped our discarded bits and pieces in the hardly emptied receptacle and moseyed back to our car. Outside the window, I saw her run thin fingers through her tired hair, and I hugged my girls as they climbed into their travelling seats. "Well, kids, how were your Whoppers?"

## The Christmas Game

Jill Ryan

*Is it candy?*

*Is it a game?*

*Is it jewelry?*

*Give me a hint, please!*

I was twelve years old. It was a few days before Christmas; I was playing a guessing game with my dad. Although we only played it once, remembering it still makes me giggle like the kid I was. Holidays apart from family are more bearable with sweet memories like this.

Dad was forty years old that year. Ancient to me at the time, but now that I'm long past that myself, I know how young it actually is. He was a typical Italian man who loved to cook. He was over six feet tall, with dark hair and the signature Italian nose that seemed to grow as he aged. I never missed spending a holiday with him growing up.

I can't help smiling when I remember how special it felt to have my father's attention all to myself. It didn't happen often; we didn't spend time watching sports together on the weekends like he and my siblings did. I never played myself and had little interest, but Dad loved sports. He played basketball in college and even went semi-pro. He's still coaching at the ripe age of eighty.

While materialistic gifts of bikes, games, clothes, and toys are long forgotten by me, the gift of time Dad gave me on that particular Christmas is the one I remember the most. I doubt he knew it would become a cherished memory for his middle-aged daughter all these years later.

I still giggle to myself at the thought of Dad sitting in the overstuffed blue chair in my grandmother's living room. I was nine years old when my parents divorced and my mom, two brothers, twin sister, and I moved into my grandma's six bedroom Victorian house. My grandfather had died a couple of years prior, so the transition from a lonesome widow to helping raise a house full of children was heartily welcomed by Grandma.

We lived in a rural midwestern town of 1,200 people. It was a typical small town where everyone knew each other. Although Dad moved three hours away after the divorce, he would still come visit us on the weekends, staying with us at Grandma's. My parents got along much better after the divorce, it seems, so Christmas was like many of the other holidays in my grandmother's house. Mom and Dad always cooked a big Italian meal for Christmas Day. The smell of simmering meatballs radiated throughout the house beginning in the early morning of Christmas Eve—a delicious, mouthwatering memory!

A few days before Christmas, Dad would arrive, his car packed full of presents and food. Gifts were signed From Santa, never From Dad. He carried on that tradition for many years, making sure that there were an even number of gifts for each child. Anyone with children or siblings knows how important equality is at Christmas time. Thankfully, Dad had this figured out with precision.

An abundance of gifts and decorations were part of our Christmas tradition. Grandma decorated the house with festive wall hangings, nativity scenes, lights, stockings on the fireplace and a real Christmas tree that filled the house with the scent of evergreen. She had an attic full of decorations—some purchased, but many given. She had been an Avon representative for fifty years, so Avon-branded decor was everywhere, turning the entire house into a veritable Christmas wonderland.

In the midst of it all hung my favorite decoration: a wall hanging of Santa that Grandma had made. From my earliest memories, it had always hung in the same spot at Christmas. It was a needlepoint Santa dressed in his traditional red suit, black boots and gloves. A beard of frayed yarn hung down from his chin. I can still see it now, as vivid as it was decades ago.

At the time, though, my interest was solely in the gifts Dad had brought with him. My siblings and I dutifully carried all the wrapped gifts in from the car and placed them under the decorated tree. We counted the gifts as we unloaded them, trying to guess what was under the wrapping. When we finally grew tired of our inspection, my siblings went back to the game. As I headed upstairs to my bedroom, Dad whispered my name.

"Jill," he said quietly. Not particularly wanting to be bothered, I barely glanced at him.

The only thing on my mind was listening to Donny Osmond on my record player.

"Do you see that gift over there?" he asked, pointing to a small package. Although I hadn't noticed it when we unloaded the car, it now stuck out like a kitten in a litter of puppies. As long as a book and round as a soda bottle, its colors—purple, blue, and yellow—set it apart from the other traditionally red and green wrapped gifts. A yellow bow as bright as the winter sun completed the look.

“Go get it,” Dad motioned. I did and held it out to him, but he kept his arms folded across his chest.

“If you can guess what is in this gift, you can open it,” he said.

“Really?” I grinned as he nodded.

The guessing game was on.

I slid my fingers leisurely over it, hoping to feel something that might give me a clue. I examined it closely, wishing for x-ray vision like Superman.

“Is it perfume?”

“Nope.”

“Is it makeup?” He shook his head.

I was so excited my stomach did somersaults. I rolled it, turning it over and over. I felt for edges—nothing. It was completely smooth.

“Is it in a box?” He nodded yes.

I sighed. This was not going to be easy. Nevertheless, I continued asking questions all day. The more time ticked away, the more Dad laughed. No matter—his laughter made me more determined to figure it out. I had two days; I was confident that I could guess before Christmas morning. My sister even tried to help by asking her own questions, but it didn't take her long to grow tired of the game. She'd always been more impatient than me, so I was on my own again.

We sat down for dinner, me still trying to guess the contents of the little gift. I'm not sure if Dad planned this game or if it was done on a whim. I did, however, convince myself that he intentionally used an entire roll of scotch tape. Despite my repeated efforts, peeking was not an option; the package was taped tighter than a drum.

The hours passed, me asking questions, Dad answering yes or no. Too soon, it was time for bed. The game would have to wait until tomorrow. Not that sleep would be a priority with the gift on my mind.

“Figure it out yet, Jill?” Dad teased me the next morning when I appeared downstairs.

I huffed. I hadn't figured it out, and I wasn't a bit closer to guessing what it was. My annoyance only grew as the minutes and hours passed. I'd been so sure that I'd be able to figure it out. I was young and naive. Obviously, I hadn't thought the challenge through. The gift could be anything. Guessing correctly would be next to impossible.

Although I was beginning to feel hopeless, I was too stubborn to give up. I continued to guess all day. Dad chuckled harder with each question. I resorted to begging for clues, but he wouldn't give in, sticking to the original challenge, only answering yes or no to my countless questions. I can still see him sitting in Grandma's overstuffed chair, shaking with laughter at my frustration. Now I realize how much fun he must've been having. I didn't know at the time this precious moment shared with my dad would leave me laughing today.

It didn't feel precious at the time, however; it felt terribly annoying. The game played out all day until another night came upon us. Despite my best efforts, I never guessed what was in that package. However, I wasn't surprised when Dad told me I could open it anyway.

Because that's what fathers do—no matter your struggles, they come through for you in the end.

He didn't care about my failure to guess the contents of that Christmas package. I'm guessing he had an ulterior motive: to spend quality time with his nearly teenage daughter who was fast becoming too old to find the time for him. Even at that tender age, I knew it wasn't about the package, nor the money spent on it. It was about spending time with each other.

No matter how hard I think back to that Christmas long ago, I cannot remember what was inside that little Christmas package. Instead, I fondly remember the innocent contest between a father and daughter, a game that turned into one of the most cherished memories of my childhood. We don't remember the things we accumulate—we remember the people and events that shape our lives and hearts forever. My father made a difference in my life then and continues to impact my life now in many positive ways. I will be forever grateful to Dad for giving me the best Christmas gift ever: the gift of his time.

## **Game Over**

# *Poetry*

## **Beautiful Black Baby**

Somayyah Austin

Beautiful Black baby with all of your unruly hair  
soft cocoa brown skin with a little bit of flare  
your soft brown locks have all the people stare  
beautiful Black baby with all of your unruly hair

Beautiful Black baby with your smile so soft  
those pearly white teeth with an unmatched cost  
don't stop and think of all the things you lost  
beautiful Black baby with your smile so soft

Beautiful Black baby with hardships and battles  
you always tread through life with different kinds of hassles  
with your head up high so that no one ruins your castle  
beautiful Black baby with hardships and battles

Beautiful Black baby with wonderful culture  
everyone soaks it up and steals from you like vultures  
educating the ones that didn't know you suffered  
beautiful Black baby with wonderful culture

Beautiful Black baby with your sad stricken face  
as sad as a lone flower standing alone at a field in place  
soaking up every drop of water it takes  
beautiful Black baby with your sad stricken face

Beautiful Black baby with thick skin and bones  
you're bold, bright, and brilliant, your star has always shone  
don't let words get to you, you're magical on your own  
beautiful Black baby with thick skin and bones

Beautiful Black baby with vibrant mind and lots of intellect  
all of the knowledge that you will collect  
with goals and dreams not yet even set  
beautiful Black baby with vibrant mind and lots of intellect

Beautiful Black baby with your creative ways  
the sun dances on your skin, it's a sunny day  
when you go outside and bask in the warmth, you have yet to play  
beautiful Black baby with your creative ways

Beautiful Black baby with a different way of life  
so pretty, you're a two times five  
nice shape, nice size, you shrug off all the strife  
beautiful black baby with a different way of life

Beautiful Black baby I hope you stand proud  
with a sign above that says "only beautiful Black magic allowed"  
you're a special one baby, you attract quite a crowd  
beautiful Black baby I hope you stand proud

## **Never**

Somayyah Austin

Special person.

They're a gentle warm breeze in a summer sun  
Their kind work and effort is never done

This person always knows the right thing to say  
On rain, sleet, thunder, fall or a cloudy day

They see me for who I am through struggle and strife,  
This person has been the reason I think twice about ending my life

They've gone away and found someone new  
This person who's very similar to them and seems real cool

I've been left behind and they don't see  
And when I point it out, they get defensive with me

My special person is not my significant other, more like my friend,  
But she's drifting away and soon I fear this friendship will end

She says it won't and I'm scared that might not be true  
Because when we're all together, it seems like it's me hanging around them two

I don't think I'll ever recover if I lose her as my friend  
I think if she leaves no one will come into my space that close again

I fear that losing her will crumble me down  
That I no longer will stand tall and then falls my crown

Because she makes me feel special as if I'm royalty  
And all I offer in return is my kindness and loyalty

I'll never have my special person, I don't think I'll ever win  
Because she wasn't mine to begin with, she was just my only friend

## Five Stages of Grief

Keyana Cruse

Some people don't understand  
How difficult it is losing someone  
You'll toss and turn thinking, wishing for things to be different  
People call it the five stages of grief  
I didn't know how to handle it  
So let me tell you what to expect  
The first you'll experience is denial  
You go numb for a while and want to shut down  
Wanting to deny that this is truly your reality  
Then comes the anger  
You'll be filled with rage and feel intense frustration  
Wanting to know how everything could've gone so wrong  
Then after that is the bargaining  
Thinking about the past and all of the what-ifs  
Wanting to change things to make it work the way you wish it could've  
Then is the depression  
The isolation. The changes. And all of those tears.  
You become so overwhelmed to the point where you feel hopeless  
Lastly comes the acceptance  
Learning that healing doesn't mean forgetting  
Going through these stages and emotions  
Hit you harder than you would think when you lose someone  
It's like you get sucked into a downward spiral  
Struggling to find your feet again  
You sometimes go through these stages not knowing who you lost  
Or what you lost  
Until you find out that you lost yourself

## How to Mend a Broken Heart

Keyana Cruse

How to mend a broken heart  
Truth is, you never fully will  
You'll look at all your future lovers  
With a little bit of fear that they'll be the same  
You'll be scared to plan a future with someone new  
Because if your previous lover couldn't follow your goals  
How could they?  
You'll be scared to start a new chapter with someone  
Because you don't want it to be a painful end...again  
There are nights you'll spend tossing and turning  
Because you'll dream about someone you used to love more than yourself  
And you'll be trying to put together this puzzle of your life  
Because one of the pieces you thought belonged  
Won't fit  
You can journal about it and how you felt and eventually  
The ink will run out, even though your heart never did  
You'll be reminded of the nights you spent crying on the floor  
And the moments where you just keep rereading the entire story  
Hoping that it would be a different ending  
But the part that makes the heartbreak impossible to mend from  
Is the fact that you'd do it again  
Because the pain of being with them  
Was unmatched to the pain of losing them  
Because you'd let them come back and break you all over again  
If that meant sharing those moments with them  
Because every once in a while  
You'll let yourself indulge in all the what-ifs  
Wondering if they're ever going to come back  
Or if it was truly a goodbye



## The Lost Girl

Keyana Cruse

I don't often want to write about how I feel  
It's so much easier to write about something  
Or someone  
Because your emotions are directed  
And somewhat complete  
Because it's easier to write about the causes  
Rather than all the effects  
But if I were to write how I feel  
I think it would be too dark  
All I would be able to write about is  
How I get through one piece of time  
With hopes that the next one would bring me peace  
When in reality it never does  
All I would be able to write about is  
How there are thousands of thoughts running through my brain  
All at once to the point where I sometimes forget to breathe  
And how exhausting it is to wake up anymore  
All I would write about is how people easily pass around false hope  
Saying that everything will get better  
When in reality it really doesn't  
How everyone is a liar  
How promises aren't real  
How life will make you feel crazy  
How people always tend to leave  
How lonely I feel  
How every second of every minute  
I feel as if I'm suffocating in my own thoughts  
And how I feel as if I can't be saved  
But anyways, no I don't want to write about how I feel  
Because the chapters would never run out



**Nyx**  
Molly Borth

## Poem 1

Peyton Furlong

I was born on February 9th  
The season of love  
Yet I still struggle to love myself  
I'm a sucker for a nice guy with a good haircut and a reputation  
I'm still learning how to let go  
Learning how to let people in  
And still protect my heart  
I was born at night and I've been naive ever since  
I like sleeping...a lot  
I've been told I'm really bad at consoling people  
They say I don't try but I do, I just can't connect  
I'm bad at being vulnerable.  
Secretly I get really nervous  
Every time I have to walk alone  
I have an odd fascination with old cars and Pontiac, Michigan  
I assume I like them because I cherish the idea of simpler times and an era of fast cars and freedom  
I guess that's why I'm always racing through life  
You see, racing reminds me that I'm not afraid of crashing or spinning out  
But I am scared to death of everything that's going to happen the very moment that I  
Stop  
I'm clumsy  
Yesterday I tripped over my confidence,  
Landed on my ego, and it shattered like a wine glass hitting the floor  
I've never been in a movie, but I have this undying need to be the main character  
I know this sounds weird but I wonder what my mask says about me when I'm not around  
If it exposes all of my hidden expressions and true emotion.  
Hi, my name is Peyton  
I enjoy pickles, throwback music, and a good book  
But I don't cry as often as I should  
I have solar power determination  
And a battery-operated emotion  
My hobbies include:  
Working myself to death,  
Cooking for people that will never show,  
And ignoring the world  
Editing my mental health  
Hiding behind my humor  
And trying to convince my family  
That I'm not lazy  
You see I don't know much but I do know this:  
I know that no matter how bad things get, it's a bad day, not a bad life  
And I know that I will prevail

## **Twenty-Eight Days**

Lena Glen

Flies live for approximately twenty-eight days  
That's twenty-eight days to see the world

I've lived on this planet for six thousand eight hundred and sixty-nine days  
That's two hundred and forty-five fly years

Yet I still feel like a fly sees more of the world buzzing around than me  
I take time for granted

I don't live everyday like it's my last  
I live like I have time

How much time?  
Wish I could tell you

I'm not sure if flies live everyday like it's their last  
But one can wonder

Everyday counts  
You never know if it's your last twenty-eight days

## **Black Lives Matter**

Kelly Hassan

Why? Why all this madness?  
What wrong have we ever done?  
Why are we constantly taunted, mocked, and laughed at?  
Why are whites constantly discriminating Blacks?  
Aren't we human beings; are we animals?  
Discriminating and belittling Blacks all because of our colour.

Is it wrong to be Black?  
Black is beautiful,  
Beautiful is Black.

Do they feel threatened by Blacks?  
Why do they always make Blacks feel unwanted?  
They massacre Blacks like some sort of mosquito,  
They assault innocent Blacks and end up killing them for no reason.

Why?  
I Can't breathe,  
I'm suffocating,  
I'm pained,  
I want to breathe.

Is our colour that terrible?  
Is our colour that horrible?  
Is our colour that bad that we are getting killed for it?  
Or is it all because of fear and jealousy?  
Are the whites jealous of the Blacks?  
If not, then why are they constantly bullying and slaughtering us like animals?

Enough is enough!  
Racism is evil,  
I'm sick and tired of whites thinking they are better than us,  
Treating us like animals without feelings.

Black lives matter  
We are not just Blacks,  
We are human beings with feelings,  
We are not some kind of monster.  
We have hopes and dreams,  
We have wishes and wants,  
We are Blacks not animals,  
Not creatures,  
Not monsters,  
Not freaks but human beings like you whites.

Skin colour shouldn't be a death sentence,  
Black lives matter.

Why do you keep casting and making us feel unwanted?  
You bear hatred and resentment towards us.  
You like killing us for no reason,  
What wrong have we ever done?

Who's meant to be overwhelmed with anger?  
We were kidnapped from our homes and taken as hostages,  
We were tortured,  
We were turned into slaves.  
Yet you act like victims,  
You kill innocent and helpless Blacks,  
With the pretext of fear.

Their skin colour shouldn't matter.  
Their skin colour shouldn't be a death sentence.  
Enough is enough!  
Black lives matter,  
Racism is evil.

We need peace,  
We need hope,  
We need love,  
We need togetherness,  
We need to stand tall,  
We need to put an end to racism once and for all.

Black Lives Matter!

## **Pains of Nigeria**

Kelly Hassan

Oh! Nigeria  
You face troubles all day long  
You are always in pains  
Why?  
Is it because of your past leaders?  
They used your money for their own benefit  
And left you in pains  
Past leaders why?  
You left Nigeria in sorrows and pains  
She mourns and cries and watches her body fall down into pieces  
Past leaders why?  
You are the cause of all Nigeria's problems  
You made all Nigerians helpless  
Nigeria has turned into the laughingstock of all countries  
Past leaders why?  
Why did you make Nigeria miserable?  
Nigeria is begging to grow  
We Nigerians too are at fault  
We don't obey the rules and regulations of Nigeria  
We are messing her up  
We only want her destruction  
Why do you think we have pollution everywhere?  
Because we are not taking good care of her  
The past and current leaders are at fault  
We too are also at fault  
We keep shouting change Nigeria can never change  
We can only change if we all work together to make Nigeria a better place  
Because we the youths are the future leaders  
So we can change Nigeria  
And make it a better place  
For all human beings and animals.  
Naija oni baje oo. O baje ti  
Nitori pe itesiwaju ipinle Naija loje wa logun.

## **Dying Fight ABC Poem**

Tonica James

Able I am to fight  
Believe in myself I must  
Conquer my foes with might  
Devoted to the cause  
Even through hard times  
Friend or foe unite  
Gearing up for war  
Heroes are then born  
In these dire times  
Justice conquers all  
Killing but an option  
Lives endlessly lost  
Many innocents perished  
Never more to cross

## **Unforgiving Wife Monologue**

Tonica James

I waited twenty-one years for you to see me as a wife.  
I cooked, cleaned, washed, and loved you yet you never saw a thing.  
Now you want love when I want a divorce...Please do tell me.  
What about those times you left me and the kids all alone?  
Where were you then, when I needed you the most?  
You went with your women then, forgetting about little old me, your wife  
Which wife now? Which children when?  
When I waited for you to be there for me during my pregnancy,  
Husband oh Husband, where have you been?  
Did you go to France to visit the queen?  
I sat down in a house longing, yearning for your touch  
Your love  
The touch of a husband  
Yet all you gave me was unhappiness  
It's too late now, I'm done!  
Now I call the shots!  
I'm simply done with you  
With this unhappiness and misery that you put me through.



## **What Is Love Sonnet**

Tonica James

Is it a remarkable human emotion  
Or a force of nature  
Sometimes filled with magic potion  
Created by the creature

Or is it a sheep to the shepherd  
Free to roam  
Yet stays in a herd  
Never really leaving home

But Love seems to be an intense feeling  
Of deep affection  
Something that guarantees healing  
And a strong connection

So, Love is coping  
With or without eloping

## **The Evil Dybbuk**

Aaron Summer Javadi

The dislocated  
spirit of him crept inside  
my body  
by grabbing hold  
a thin nostril hairline  
fissure memory of grief.

A two-cycle shift  
had long suffered  
his oblong mouth.  
I felt him there,  
with his cowboy urban glare,  
a hungry-bellied ghost  
easing into that  
molded winter place for resting.

A yellow bag draped near  
a silver dollar coin  
to pass the void  
with subtle expression.  
My hair tangle-clean  
over the porcelain tub  
into the water stream  
releasing the black tar enigma  
where the grape bush-tinged constructive terms  
through black diamond mud.

Loose leaf Egyptian lotus painted purple streaks  
in the fine gold trimmed teacup.  
It cracked as it fell,  
from hyper tone  
the ramen noodle strands  
dangled over the attempts to strangle out the  
evil dybbuk  
draped lightweight about my neck  
like a royal tunic.  
But me thinks he's free now.  
Or at least his stomach full.

## **From Poor Cotton Stitch**

Aaron Summer Javadi

When it was evening,  
summer sun grew later  
larger near the  
orange-pink horizon  
of a kindled phase  
as a tattered dress  
with frayed strings  
from poor cotton stitch  
clung to the tired ankles  
of an expectant mother  
her eighth time around.

The whispers of the townspeople  
wondering where she gets her gumption  
wondering where she gets her stubborn  
enough to evoke the higher realms  
of angelic regimes to fight  
those plucking strings  
vibrate against the owlsh  
cause within the night.

Hanging another dingy white,  
eggshell of a baby cloth,  
on the wire to dry,  
her biggest toe is sloshed with  
suds of soap,  
from the wooden basin,  
after the cardinal lacks,  
enough vigorous strength,  
to land upright.

It had been the fall,  
from an elevated height,  
a baptism from mire and dirt  
that helped the goads along.  
The plough of Nandi  
encircled the grains  
for cakes and for yet sold.

Sadness only envelopes  
the objectification of time,  
the sticks of butter,  
the loaves of bread,  
and the noontime whistles  
that suggest the explosive  
blackness draws nearer to us  
and each and every ear,  
as we wait upon that old oak log  
far too quickly.

## **Lapis Lazuli**

Aaron Summer Javadi

She wore his peace  
Upon her eyes,  
Gentle strokes  
As dark as night  
When the quiet descended upon  
Her shoulders  
Like a shimmering, woven shawl.

When the waves of sorrow,  
Enveloped her with  
Strong arm drunkenness and  
Time shrouded memories  
Swelled pregnant beyond the chill  
Of an Autumn grave-filled fog.

She kept silence at her hip,  
Like a ready-loaded holster,  
Heavy coals left where diamonds  
Once had softly laid  
Now reaped from foreign hands  
That gave stars away on loan.  
She stole pieces of her own,  
When the days grew long  
When strength crept away into black holes  
That wormed away  
Weaving in and out of her memory.  
Her gentle quiet turned to wandering  
Screams of helpless fright  
When the child she had wanted  
Lost the beat of its tiny drum  
And left her peace swimming  
In a shallow haze.

## **For Russia**

Abigail Jones

The ex-tsar and his wife seemed uneasy  
as we escorted them into the room, a premonition  
of what was to come dancing in their fearful eyes.  
Alexandria's eyes caught mine, and to this day  
I can't forget the undeniable humanity  
in them as she kept the former Tsarevich near at hand.

Nicholas held on to a daughter's hand, and kept a watchful  
eye on the elder sisters. A piercing sense of doubt  
shot through me as I thought of the atrocity  
we were about to commit.

*For Russia.*

The words seemed to feed the flame of hate  
in my heart, and the doubt was replaced with memories  
of what the tsar has done to us. I straightened my priorities  
as well as my spine. I refrained from making more unnecessary  
eye contact and chanted the words in my head.

*For Russia.*

"A photograph," we assured,  
and lined them up in perfect  
rows, just like so many photographs before.

*For Russia.*

Afterwards, the room seemed heavier  
with the smoke of what had just occurred.  
As the ringing ceased  
and the shame crept in,  
I wondered to myself how eleven deaths  
could brighten Russia's future.

And now, after a lifetime,  
the Romanov family still has their undying  
claws sunk into our foundation.  
The whispers will never fade, their ghostly  
tone echoing into a future far beyond any we could have imagined.

One whisper follows me home, a past shame  
given new hope.  
Anastasia. The ghost that never dies.  
Try as I might, I cannot deny  
or confirm her existence.  
I had the opportunity to meet Ms. Tschaikovsky, and look her in the eye,  
but it only barely eased my conscience  
as when I attempt to remember that night,  
I cannot remember her face.  
I wonder if I ever even looked her way.

I hear the children

question to themselves.  
“Why would they do this?  
Why did this happen?”  
The answer, an empty mantra,  
lacks the conviction it once held.

*For Russia.*

## **God Complexities**

Clarissa Lopez

I am God  
Creations come from my fingertips  
I mold whatever I want  
Into whatever I wish  
Each and every day

I am God  
I play with the existences of my creations  
Holding their lives in the balance  
Without rhyme or reason  
And they are helpless

I am God  
I answer to no one  
Even when I am criticized  
I close my ears  
And I do not listen

I am God  
Discarding what I make  
After promising my creations  
To leave them be  
Let them live without me

I am God  
But to those who look at me  
They see an artist  
And the lucky works  
That survived their creator's hands

*Second Place*  
*Cordell Larner Award in Poetry*

**Two-Headed Sheep**

Clarissa Lopez

Sometimes I feel like a two-headed sheep  
A freak of nature so unnatural and unholy  
That I won't live past morning  
And when the sun rises, and my body discovered  
I'll be carted away to go on display  
For people to point and stare and wonder





**The Lion and the Mouse**  
Alexandra Shuck

## **Bed Ridden**

Michelle Marck

For a moment I'm stuck staring at the sky  
It was in that moment my life flashed before my eyes  
All I had known was that you were by my side  
Holding my hand telling me everything's gonna be alright  
They tell everyone go back as you were  
Painfully and longingly as you go  
Then we were off going our separate ways  
You go on to win  
Like I always knew in my head  
I was being waited on by nurses in a hospital bed  
I thought of you all while bedridden  
It was all worth it when we reunite again  
Now I'm home it's like I never left

## **A Million Things I'm Scared Of**

Michelle Marck

A million things I'm scared of  
Scared to let people in  
Scared to disappoint those I care about  
Scared to show my flaws and make mistakes  
All because I'm caught up in this thought looming in my head  
This is just the beginning  
I still have a million things I'm scared of  
Scared to trust  
Scared to let go  
Scared of my own shadow  
That all who are in my life will leave  
Scared to fail  
Scared to show insecurity  
Scared to be anything other than perfect  
Because I'm nervous that I won't be good enough if I'm any other way  
Scared to be alone  
Scared to let my walls down  
Scared I'm controlling every aspect of your life

## **Plaid of Her Shirt**

Michelle Marck

It was towards the end of my last lap everyone else behind  
It was when I spun out when things went awry  
Something had happened  
I didn't know what but from what I saw only the plaid of her shirt  
And that was all  
All I did was run as fast as I could  
By her side I was holding her hand  
She looked in my eyes with the look of pain and distress  
I caressed her head in a comforting way as she lie there still as a rock  
Now they say give her some space  
I left her side looking behind  
I watched as she was whisked away  
I couldn't let her down now  
That's a fact  
So just for her  
I'll win  
All I thought of was her  
Every step of the way  
Wondering how is she?  
And is she ok?  
Good or bad  
Either way I'll pray  
When we unite at the end of the day  
In my arms is where she stays  
And in this moment  
I have no doubt that I love all of her inside and out

## **At Night in My Dreams**

Mya Matusik

I keep picturing a break-in in my new little blue house  
The lock is broken, there's creaks, and it's cold  
And I list off what little I can live without  
When the robber or the rapture comes  
And my nightmares cease and lose all meaning  
Screams settle to softer hums  
What makes my dreams so twisted now?  
This relaxed and subconscious landscape of freedom becomes my own personal hell and my life  
Is spent day-to-day, fixated on it;  
Some lost thought or stray image recreating scenes  
Of all that I've wanted, all that which revolts you  
And everything else in between  
And I live in dream now  
I cannot grasp acting any way  
Inside my eyes or inside my own body  
Inside her own body inside of your dream  
Well, that's all I can think now; and slowly it takes over my soul  
It becomes motivation, or something less vile  
I become what you loathe  
I contain her alone and my hands turn to stone  
It's over; so, why should I even bother re-slashing this nasty and infected scar?  
When the universe stops, will all of this matter; will I be staring at that one star?  
Can I wrap my mind around the consequences of conception?  
Was it right of me to push that only bums will go to heaven?  
Uncommon and afraid, unresponsive and aloof, unaware of animosity and any kind of truth  
Standing and existing, simply living, in a room,  
I cannot connect to any mortal soul around me  
I swear to any idol that this is how I will be;  
I'll be up in the air everywhere, and at absolutely any time  
Scattered in space and never awake to remember my soul will divide  
Greg asked you if limes grew on trees and I smiled  
It was the first time I felt happiness in a while  
You said, after he asked, that you grew watermelons  
And you had done it years ago, in your room  
I felt happier, then; when I heard that, I think that it stopped me from feeling so blue  
And you said that you grew "hydroponic herbs,"  
and that you grew tomatoes, too,  
But your mom killed them all, then I felt my heart fall  
This is how I tied my life and mind back to you  
At night in my dreams this will play out for me  
Your aspiration; the unachieved, seen-to seed  
When the captor corrupted your crop, you had cried  
It was something you bred and you kept it alive  
I try the very hardest that I can not to weep  
So I lose my mind to it, then I fall back to sleep

## **Try Calling God Again and Find a Friend in Him Before the End, Read the Billboard Looming Overhead**

Mya Matusik

Angels laid in shallow graves  
The day the horses all ran free  
La gente realized they were slaves  
As the carbon dioxide parted the sea

And monkeys wept and leapt from trees  
Started believing in Jesus and prayed  
For the heat to disperse and to turn into breeze  
This was their world that they had to watch burn  
And it wasn't their fault, but they paid

I can see time unfolding before me  
I can reach into the future now and know  
I read the subliminal messaging clearly  
And it is really quite clear that the militia must go

When all hope is gone; faith disappears  
You'll feel a fraction of the pain  
I have felt inside my core for years  
Will your masters feel the same?

I don't know if I can trust the sky  
To stay held up for long  
I hear the chains of Atlas crack  
As Gaia sings her song; it sounds like  
fires in the Amazon  
All the emission which spurs  
And Navajos with illnesses without the means to cures

I could crawl across the continents and still not find the grail  
To relieve us of this end of times  
When fascists finally fail  
But the power comes from knowing  
And we all have been wiped clean  
Of truth without corruption  
All the horrors that we've seen  
Just wash down the drain of hivemind  
While another headline reads  
Another coral reef is eaten  
by the filth which floods the seas

Are we so deprived of love and light  
From suicide and 9 to 5s  
Neither is perceived as real anymore?  
A human life spent within a video game  
When it ends then who will keep the score?

## **You Were Always Waiting for the Day it Stopped Hurting to Think of Yourself**

Mya Matusik

I have this pit in my stomach  
you may call it a hunch  
been through the ring without throwing a punch  
gritting through hunger, I've heard my teeth crunch  
then I summon self-hatred so that I eat less lunch

and I can't think straight when you work your telepathy  
anger or sadness both disapparate  
and give way to something more thick and more heavy  
how I do it all wrong just to hear you berate  
my sick sorry self, seventh year suicidal  
goes on so long you forgo the recital  
no explanation, no prescription meds  
but shoe boxes full stuffed deep under my bed  
in case it gets crazy, if it's all just too much  
and I'm no longer high from your eye's slightest touch

if this breath is my last and my future your past  
and your face a brief spectre whose smile won't last  
let me sink in despair then forget it all fast  
turn warm and forgiving and start loving living  
determined to beat it: this time, I'm not quitting  
to throw up then throw it away the next morning

you were caught in the leeway, lost in the laughter  
counting your breaths willing time to pass faster  
you were bravely awaiting the weight of the call  
praying this one was the end of it all  
but you woke up to silence and smelt like sour sickness  
prying your eyes open so to bear witness  
but it's all way too much and you can't ever help it  
however you feel, someone has already felt it

the room is still spinning though I'm frozen in time  
I lament this sad, intense, and sick predicament of mine  
to be manic and messed up, the next minute fine  
when the worst washes over, I wonder: will this evil let me be?  
the winds of change wash over me, my spirit will recede  
you can find me selling wind chimes sitting sweetly by the sea  
this damaged hippocampus longs to finally be set free  
he can swim around and find a warm and sunny spot to drown  
he can die and find a better place to be  
when his soul leaves his body the pictures all vanish  
every image that my eyes have seen  
disband into particles strewn across sand and  
because I now know nothing, my once sullied soul is clean

## **A Love Poem**

Madison McCabe

I am in love with everyone  
I am in love with the way my little brother always shows me his new Pokémon cards  
I am in love with the fact that my little sister loves the Final Destination movies  
I am in love with the way my youngest sister will make me a cup of tea when I'm upset  
I am in love with the look my mom gives me when I make a bad joke  
I am in love with the fact that my dad knows my favorite Star Wars movie  
I am in love with the way my best friend knows my socks never match  
I am in love with the way my dog will lay her head on my lap when she wants attention  
I am in love with the way the kind girl in my history class will listen when I get excited about a topic even if she has no idea what I'm talking about  
I am in love with the way the funny boy in my art class will always look when I try to show him what I'm working on  
I am in love with the way a girl I've never met helped me pick up my books when I dropped them in the hall  
I am in love with the way the barista at the coffee shop called after me to make sure I didn't forget my straw  
I am in love with the way the man at the gas station held the door open for me in the freezing cold, telling me "good morning"  
I am in love with the way the old lady at the restaurant told me my smile was beautiful  
I am in love with the way the baby in the doctor's waiting room smiled at me  
I am in love with the expression a teacher makes when a student answers a question correctly in class  
I am in love with the way people will tap their fingers to a song playing on the radio  
I am in love with the way people will sometimes say "you too" when a waiter tells them to enjoy their meal  
I am in love with the way people will laugh so hard it can become a breathless wheeze  
I am in love with the faces people make at themselves when they think no one is looking  
I am in love with the way people's eyes light up when you compliment them  
I am in love with the way people's voices sound when they talk about what they're passionate about  
I am in love with the way people's eyes crinkle when they smile, *really* smile  
I am in love with the sun and the moon and the sky  
I am in love with the stars and constellations and how humans couldn't help but see pictures and stories in the night sky  
I am in love with sunsets and sunrises and how even though they happen every day, the magnificence never wears off  
I am in love with thunderstorms and snowfall and fog and morning dew  
I am in love with the universe for creating all of these things and putting them in my life  
I am in love with how even if there are ugly parts of the world, there are just as many, if not more, beautiful parts too  
I am in love with the fact that there are a million other things I want to write into this poem  
And most of all, I am in love with myself, for getting to experience the world and all of its beauty

## **Thank You**

Madison McCabe

Once, when we were four, we were playing together in a hotel pool.  
There was an older girl there.  
I had nothing but trust in my heart.  
We were playing and suddenly she grabbed me by my shoulders and pushed me under.  
I struggled, but she was bigger than me.  
I didn't have much fight in me at that age.  
My lungs burned, my eyes stung, I tried to escape.  
The eventual acceptance was the strangest part.  
It was quiet and looking at the surface through the water,  
I thought, "This is a beautiful place."  
Only four-years-old, and I had accepted that I was going to die.  
But you were there.  
And you hit and kicked till she let me go,  
And you lifted me to the surface.  
And as oxygen filled my lungs, the air had never tasted so sweet.  
And like a truck, the reality of what happened hit me all at once.  
I cried and you held me with compassion shocking for a child.  
People always told me I had an old soul, but I think they got it wrong; I think you were the one wise well  
beyond our years.  
I don't think I ever even said thank you.  
I thought I would have a lifetime to make it up to you.  
I never realized how short a lifetime could be.  
I'm sorry I didn't realize you were drowning.  
I'm sorry I couldn't pull you to the surface.



*First Place*  
*Cordell Larner Award in Poetry*

**Consummation**

Blake Murdock

Splayed out, heavenly dissection. Quondam worthless, now suited for astronom: tremors ripple like paroxysms. Legs spread, arms outstretched; write a eulogy, dig an early grave. Release, won't waste a bit. Gnaw on bones; tear into skin; bite through flesh. Unfurl ribs, crack spines; pass tongues through veins. Ichor amongst incisors, filling gaps in teeth. Understand: intimacy. Rip muscle, lacerate lungs, snap tendons; never known sex like this. Disembowel, devour, dismember from the inside. Decapitate: eviscerate a soul. Residuum left to dry. A moment to materialize, forever to forget. Remain: beneath fingernails.

## **Our Bond**

Natoya Raymond

Times Change. What a phrase!  
The years go by, yet it's still the same,  
You still listen to all my rants  
And we still love our long chats.

We still hug tight and hate to part  
Our family rolls their eyes as we laugh,  
A magnetic bond  
Connection by blood.

A sister and brother we rely on.  
A bond so true, that I can't help but think,  
Would our friendship even last  
If our blood weren't linked?

Would anything change after months of hiatus?  
Would our love persist through  
Other friendships and status?

These wicked thoughts attempt to cloud my heart,  
And plant seeds of doubt that could break us apart.

But have no fear *Cous*, for my love is true,  
And I'm more than willing to fight my own self  
For you.

*Third Place*  
*Cordell Larner Award in Poetry*

**ChemTrails**  
Maureen Roland

Thunk.

The leather satchel popped open.  
His eyes widened.  
Messy contents on the floor.  
A buried brother, boyfriend, parents, people.  
More.

A divorce, a couple of kids.  
Broken hearts and dampened souls.  
All things touched.  
All things stained.  
His eyes strained at the sight  
and the door slammed tight  
in his wake.

Thunk.

She straightened her slacks,  
scooped up the leather sack,  
and fastened the deadbolt behind him.

Thunk.

## **A Great Siesta**

Maureen Roland

We sit on our concrete patios,  
next to our vinyl-sided houses.  
Ice cubes tinker in cups  
as we eat our grilled asparagus  
and watch the kids  
romp in the sprinkler.

Cold, sugary rainbows  
drip down their faces.  
Reminiscent propaganda.  
Iconic American calendar.

So sunny.

Tangerine-hued chatter  
fills the air and walls us  
into our festivities.  
We feel  
netted,  
vetted,  
and safe...for a while.

Meaningless banter  
as grease sizzles  
and toddlers wriggle  
for another piece  
of apple pie.

Selfies fly,  
statuses post,  
neighbors boast  
about their garden.  
But no one speaks  
of atrocities.

Our sun-laden lawns  
are all the mowing we want.  
Let the ticketers take  
care of the rest.  
Surely, if this were a test  
of testimonials,  
we would all fail.

No summer shandy  
behind the bars of jail,  
or on the bully buses  
heading for the river.  
And our kids quiver  
as the sun sets down.

Little feet scramble for towels,  
as we shuffle our dead presidents,  
freshly laundered, into towers

we will never step in.  
We grin as the nights'  
jubilation fuzzies our heads.

Sip.  
Sip.

No spirits in the rubble  
of other lands,  
of our land.  
But we never speak of that.  
And our babies, fed and happy,  
toddle off to bed.

## **Count to Ten**

Devin Romano

One.

I beg you to release me.  
Your hold is just too strong.  
The simple things that bring me joy.  
Have passed quickly as seconds gone.

Two.

Your mindset must be strong. They say,  
“Don’t let the demons in!”  
Try as I might, I cannot fight  
the storm brewing under my skin.

Three.

Affirmations are going to help you.  
Count to ten, and then you’ll see.  
The only thing I’m counting  
are the hours that I sleep.

Four.

When I close my eyes at night  
all I see is what needs to be done.  
There is no rest for me, my dear,  
for another day has already begun.

Five.

You have to look presentable.  
Hide the darkened tea bags under your eyes.  
Get a frozen spoon and leave it there.  
Brush your teeth and try not to cry.

Six.

What exactly is it that’s bothering you?  
Are you managing your day?  
You must stick to the same schedule,  
but the repetition kills me in every way.

Seven.

A two-honed blade is controlling me,  
and I have tried to dim the steel,  
but every sweep it takes at me  
has me barely at a kneel.

Eight.

It’s not a weapon that can be dropped.  
It’s permanent you see.  
Anxiety and depression  
are as cursed as you can be.

Nine.

But what if I still live my life.  
Take a small step every single day.  
Determination and those I love

help me up to the sword's dismay.

Ten.

Finally, I breathe again,  
I have made it out the storm.  
For I have won another battle  
with a beast of a different form.

### **The In-Between**

Devin Romano

A spray-painted honey canvas  
with hues of blush and lavender  
hiding the line between  
night and day.  
Good and bad.  
White and black.

Grey.  
The very brightest color in the in-between.  
The most complex mix of  
calm and anxiety,  
enlightened and scorned.

The daytime,  
floating  
on a warm cloud with no gravity.  
The miracle of childbirth.  
A light at the end of a fifty-yard tunnel.

The midnight,  
churning  
as a scream without a voice.  
Tangled in the sweaty sheets, waking from a nightmare.  
Fear taking your breath until you're left without lungs.

For how could you appreciate the light without the dark?

## **My Dear Sister**

Devin Romano

Her smile like the sunshine.  
Her hair wrapped in a bow.  
Yet she always seems to incline,  
on doing things “she didn’t know.”

A goofy careless bound of curls,  
like ribbons stretched with scissors.  
Your silly, dancing fairy twirls,  
your obsession with becoming bigger.

The youth have many joys.  
In knowledge they have few.  
While they tag along and try not to annoy,  
they want to be just like you.

The energy, the ruckus,  
crowned dandelions on her head.  
How she only seems to focus,  
when curiosity is the hand that led.

My lovely Poppy Eloise,  
a diamond in the rough,  
don’t ever lose your rainbow sparkles, please,  
because without them you’d be like us.

Another rusted, broken knife.  
Another crass, cranky crab.  
Whose only joy in their lonely life,  
is lifted when they treat others bad.

For these years, my dear sister,  
have taught me how to grow.  
It was your dazzling, sarcastic demeanor,  
that taught me not to be a bitter soul.



## **Louder than Bombs**

Jamariah White

“Louder than Bombs I break...”

Louder than bombs—my voice, my thoughts, and my opinions are louder than the echoing sound of bombs.

How can it be?

Why would I want it to be?

What do I gain from it?

Truthfully, I do not know.

I do not know what possesses me to be this way or why I have the desire to continue acting this way.

I have so many negative—and positive—outlooks on life but it seems as if the negative ones overshadow the light of the positive.

So I use my voice to be louder than these negative thoughts—to scream over them. To make them nonexistent.

“Louder than Bombs I break...”

In order to be louder than bombs, I lose a part of myself. I break away from my whole self to become half of myself.

In order to be heard, I have steered away from the parts of me that no one wants to see.

They don't want to see me pretty.

They want to see me rotten and miserable.

My negative thoughts and voices are more important to them than me.

Me—the brightest light, the most accomplishing light, the sincerest light.

I have to be better than them—I have to be louder than their bombs because my bombs are prettier.

“Louder than Bombs I break...”

## **Stuck**

Jamariah White

There was time,

A time when I loved you.

It was a long time ago, but you were all mine.

We had our horrible fights,

And eventually, you became my land mine.

Now we're stuck.

I'm stuck in this forest,

Surrounded by the scent of you and it sucks.

I'm miserable and nothing seems to be looking up.

How could you?

You knew we were tied together,

Our souls are trapped here for eternity.

We are supposed to make this work forever.

## **Uncle Daddy**

Jamariah White

I had an uncle once whom I called daddy.  
He wasn't my daddy, but he didn't mind it or hate me.

I was around him so much when I was growing up that I thought he was my daddy.  
My mother told me "No, he's your Uncle Jamariah" so I started calling him Uncle Daddy.

Younger me remembers him and loves him so,  
But now, I can't remember him at all.

He died of lung cancer due to smoking and I saw him on his deathbed, yet I don't remember him.  
How can I forget someone so important to me? It makes me ponder and wonder.

It makes me wonder if that's why people with Alzheimer's become so bitter.  
So cold, so indifferent, so confused.

The outlier of the group,  
You become the only one who doesn't remember the real you.

I think about my Uncle Daddy from time to time, wondering what it was like to be next to him.  
I only see his face in pictures now, and I wonder if anyone else feels the same.

Or is it just me who feels ashamed?

Uncle Daddy isn't the only one whom I know existed but has no memories of, my so-called "Young Brain"  
is to blame.

I'm not diagnosed with memory loss, but if I was, it would be one and the same.

## **Danse Inferno**

Mitchell White

I stood on the edge of tree line  
I watched as the first spark was lit  
The stage is set, the ballet begins  
The blaze begins to dance to a silent song  
It twists and turns to an unheard melody  
It reaches high into the night, grasping the stars above, but always falling short  
So it continues to grow  
The dance builds up

It extends and retreats in the winter air  
Embers and soot fall like snow on the forest below  
The frigid wind whips my face and dries my eyes, but I cannot look away  
For the fire dances faster in the wind, flickering and faltering, but never ceasing  
The dance marches on

The people come to end the dance  
They scurry and scramble to stifle its growth  
The ballet shrivels and shrinks with every douse of water  
I run forward to stop them from ending this beautiful spectacle  
But a hand catches mine before I can reach it  
They think I'm trying to help, but it's too dangerous, they say  
They don't understand my true intentions  
Helicopters approach, the whirl and beating of their  
Blades clash with the symphonic harmony that unfolds before me  
It's infuriating as their dissonance creates a cacophony in my mind  
It pierces my ears, and causes agonizing pain in my skull  
Yet the dance shambles on

But the fire is resilient,  
It refuses to die  
It reaches to touch another  
And that other spreads its awe  
Before long an effulgent performance is playing out before me  
It swells and undulates outward beyond all control  
They've since lost home of ever containing it  
Leaving nothing but pure allure  
The dance rages forth

I stay until the end  
The cold air like pikes piercing my skin  
But I watch as the fire dwindles to  
The last ember that falls to the now-blackened snow  
And dims  
The ballet is over, the curtain is closed  
And I will never forget my danse inferno

## **The Girl at My Bus Stop**

Mitchell White

I was only a boy when she strolled into my life.  
I was nothing but naive back then.  
Plagued by the demons of apprehension and fear,  
Ignorant to the concepts of love and affection.  
So we both waited there in silence.  
Me and her,  
The girl at the bus stop

Every day I saw her,  
And every day was just the same  
Though we were standing there just three feet away from each other  
We stood in a lonely silence that put worlds between us.  
It persisted through rain, it persisted with the snow  
It lasted in pain, and it lasted in joy  
It was the eagle to rip the innards from Prometheus  
An unchanging constant in my life  
Was the girl at my bus stop

At some point that I can't recall,  
The silence was broken; when we first spoke  
We talked often, almost every day  
But the conversation was dry and meaningless  
And every day still felt the same.  
Was it better than the silence?  
Does the shape of the rock ease the toil of Sisyphus?  
When will we ever truly meet?  
Me and the girl at my bus stop

But one day, she said something different  
Something that would unchain Prometheus  
Something that would break the routine of Sisyphus  
It broke the silence  
It put meaning into our words  
It filled my heart with elation  
I can only hope that she feels as I feel  
My girl at the bus stop

## **Incinerate**

Mitchell White

Have you any idea of what you have done?  
Though it was years ago since your blade pierced my spine.  
Day by day I endured that searing, burning agony,  
Diluted by your facade of friendship.  
In the light, you shook my hand  
But in the dark, you whipped me with your forked-tongue  
And tore my flesh with your gilded fangs

Now your poison courses through my veins,  
Boiling my blood, and setting fire to my life,  
And scorching everyone in it.  
It burns, Josh. It burns with an unending pain  
And every fiber of my being wants you to feel this same agony  
Wants you to incinerate in this fire you set upon me  
But even though I know that it would be pure bliss  
To watch you be ripped apart by this inferno

I forgive you.

## **An Artist's Life**

Steven Wright

I am an artist  
Of a different kind  
I can paint you a picture  
You can see with your mind  
You can paint me a picture  
I can see through your eyes  
It comes second nature  
Better if I don't try  
Explanation comes easy  
There needn't always a why  
Of the grandest creation  
Let's take a look at my life

The clock strikes 12:00  
I've been here a minute  
A warm welcome to hell, quite an accurate depiction  
Defining life in a time with no words for good description  
Might cry when I fall, might make some bad decisions  
I'd like to rewrite it all, can I at least make some revisions  
Step into the light, open your eyes, expand your vision  
All it takes is some time; slow it down, stop, look, and listen  
Find your reason to rhyme, follow through to fruition  
Work smart, work hard, find joy in the process  
Play hard, love hard, this life isn't a contest  
If you find yourself lost...  
Let me give you a little context

There's pros and cons in the rights and wrongs  
I can't justify everything I've done  
I can't find the words in my lexicon  
That defines the terms of your come and gone  
Realigned for sure 'fore the light of dawn  
Re-erase the lines just to be redrawn  
We all make mistakes, keep keeping on  
Maybe it wasn't your day, this ain't the fat lady's song  
Don't take for granted your age, we got we don't know how long  
Take a breath, take a break, before the moment is gone

To know your existence is to know this "exist" ends  
What comes after that don't seem to make any difference  
Treat each new tomorrow as another new beginning  
Fight to love how you live  
Present presence a present

## **Forget Me Not**

Steven Wright

I've got this pounding in my chest that I can't forget  
It's like trying to forget your taste when it's on my breath  
It's like calling out your name; you're not coming back  
It's like trying to tell my brain I did my best  
It won't all fall back in place if the days reset  
It's another lonely night lying awake in my bed  
It's another wrong that's right to disagree with my head  
It's just another fact of life I'd pay some price to forget

I remembered the ways yesterday we envisioned the future just like it would never end  
Unencumbered consumers on a journey without end  
Unprepared for the truth for we were lost in Wonderland  
Youth wasted on youth, old age is great for pretend  
Looking back, from this view easy to see how things went  
Don't let it leave you confused, consumed with what-could've-beens  
Foresight is easy to lose, that opportunity's spent  
Torment yourself if you choose, when you grow weary of that  
You'll confront your new truth face to face with the facts  
You'd be impressed what you lose when you show them your back  
You turn right back around, a broken record skips tracks  
Such a horrible tune for a comedy act  
I'm not the least bit amused; is this the joke, can I laugh?  
Strange connection with you, the chills that crawl down my back  
You've left me wholly consumed with the fact that you've left

I've got this pounding in my chest that I can't forget  
It's like trying to forget your taste when it's on my breath  
It's like calling out your name; you're not coming back  
It's like trying to tell my brain I did my best  
It won't all fall back in place if the days reset  
It's another lonely night lying awake in my bed  
It's another wrong that's right to disagree with my head  
It's just another fact of life I'd pay some price to forget

I thought "til death do us part" was gonna be the hard part  
I thought if you ever left you wouldn't make it that far  
We nodded off so content, call it the calm 'fore the storm  
I awoke in the mourn to find you far from the norm  
I spoke those cute little things I always told you before  
You're cold, an aura awry, night and day from last night  
Silence doesn't feel right, I sense you're all out of fight  
I sense the time has come for you to exit my life  
It's time I bid you adieu, and I know this much is true  
I wouldn't be me if it weren't for you  
You made me believe I deserve happy too  
You made me see things from a whole different view  
You planted the seed from which my footprint grew  
Although you won't be there to see how I bloom  
The impact I'll make is dedicated to you  
The fact is I've changed and the reason is you

I've got this pounding in my chest that I can't forget  
It's like trying to forget your taste when it's on my breath

It's like calling out your name; you're not coming back  
It's like trying to tell my brain I did my best  
It won't all fall back in place if the days reset  
It's another lonely night lying awake in my bed  
It's another wrong that's right to disagree with my head  
Bittersweet we conclude, our love story meets death  
I would pay any price if it would get me you back









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