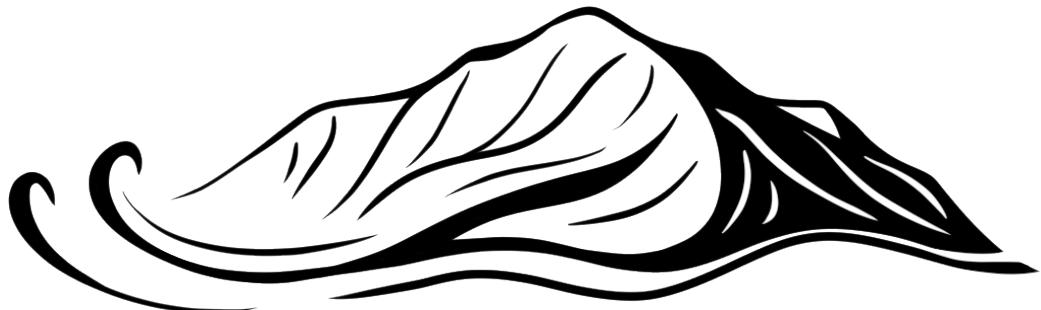


# riverrun



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Student Literary & Arts Journal  
of UCCS

*A River of Stories*

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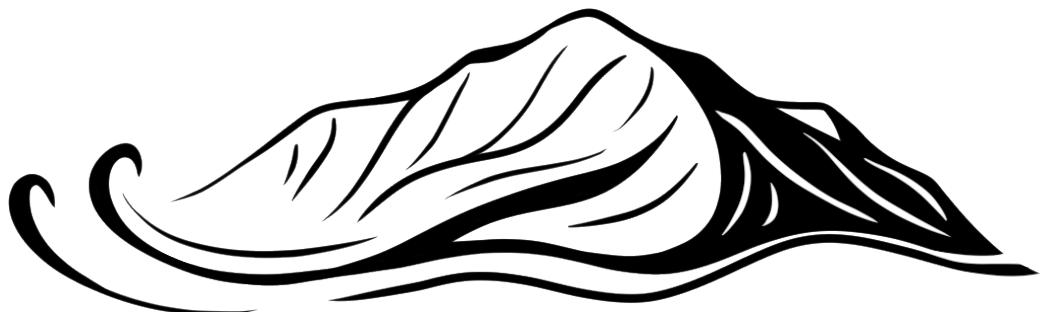
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*For those searching for belonging,  
facing uncertainty, or navigating a world  
that doesn't always understand—  
we see you, we hear you.*

## The Selection Process

This journal is made possible through the UCCS Student Media Advisory Board and funded by the Student Media Fee. The journal is designed and published by the editorial class, English 3170, each year. In making selections for this volume of *riverrun*, selection committees, comprised of student editors, worked vigilantly to select the most exemplary pieces from the vast number of submissions in each genre that we received this year. After determining which pieces met the criteria for selection and acceptance, the members of these committees worked closely with authors (and one another) to revise and refine the accepted work for publication.

Throughout this process, extra care was taken to ensure that the anonymity of these authors and editors was maintained for the sake of eliminating bias from the process. In the case of editors who also submitted, they were not on the committee for the genre they submitted in. *riverrun* takes pride in its honest and objective selection process.



# Letter from the Editors

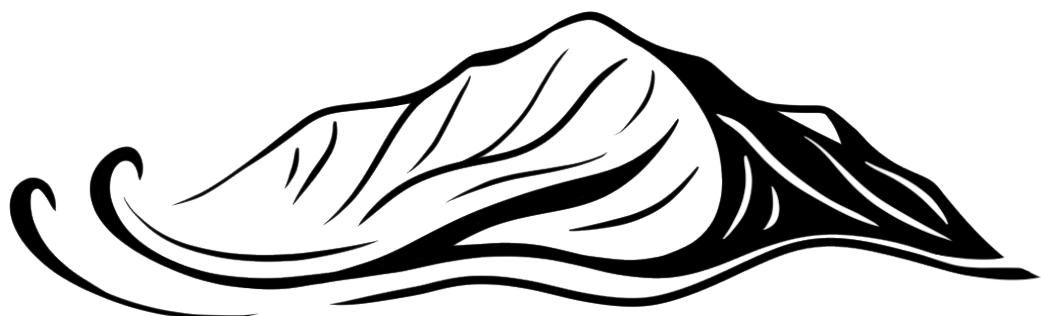
Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining us in celebrating a cherished UCCS tradition of literary and visual arts. The 52nd edition of *riverrun* draws inspiration from the vibrant culture and boundless creativity nurtured within our campus community. Like the river for which it is named, this journal flows with the imagination, talent, and voices of UCCS students and alumni. It is our privilege as the *riverrun* editorial team to provide a platform where these artists and authors can share their work and be recognized for their contributions.

This edition is more than a collection of creative pieces—it's a reflection of the diverse perspectives, experiences, and stories that shape our university. We hope each page invites you to pause, reflect, and engage with the beauty and meaning behind the words and images. Whether you are a returning reader or experiencing *riverrun* for the first time, we're honored to share this journey with you.

Sincerely,

The *riverrun* Editorial Staff, Vol. 52



# **Representation of Editorial Staff**

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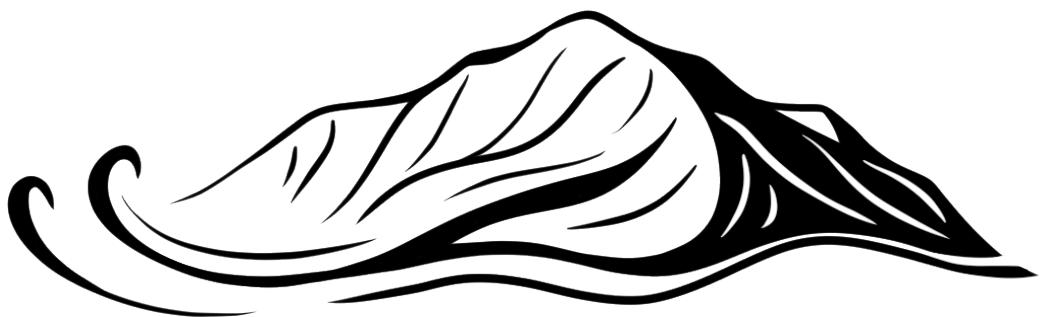
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***“...the **POETRY** of the Earth  
is never dead...”***

**John Keats**



# Content Warnings for Poetry

*The poets recognize that readers may appreciate the following content warnings about topics addressed in their pieces:*

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# My Desires Undone

By Gia Ayala-Rodríguez

“In this... lush tapestry of life  
abundance and richness often entangle  
with shadows of strife  
a heavy cloak of trials to bear  
whispering sorrow in the air.”

**I** desired nothing but death  
Death revived **me**

**I** wanted to thrive in life  
Life condemned **me**

**I** wished to be among the stars  
The Stars grounded **me**

**I** yearned to leave this desert  
The Desert raised **me**

**I** loved the cold and ice  
Ice formed hate in **me**

**I** enjoyed myself during the storm  
That storm ruined **me**

**I** would play with fire  
Fire snapped back at **me**

**I** read about the myths  
Those Myths stalked **me**

“Life’s abundance and richness  
also comes along with a great price  
to pay and endure  
weep and rejoice  
because nothing is forever.”

# **Get Help**

By Lizzie Bair

Get help,  
Before crying under the covers  
And constantly being on the edge  
Are considered normal,

Before the monster  
In your brain  
Becomes your best friend,

Before every step  
And every choice  
Is dictated  
By thoughts and fears,

Before it consumes you  
And withers you thin  
With fake smiles  
And deep breaths,  
A faltering foundation.

Get help, okay?  
You got this.

# Home

By Lizzie Bair

I used to think home  
Was a brown house  
On an average suburban street,  
But slowly it's become something  
new:

And the people:  
Tattoos and hats,  
Young and old,  
Dinners and jokes,  
Silliness and support;

The taste of coffee  
On cold winter mornings,  
Walking at sunset,  
Being peppered with snow,  
Taking in the view,  
Overwhelmed by its beauty;

A new home.

A new room  
With string lights  
And two windows  
And warmth,  
The perfect space for one,  
Or two;

A space full of tables,  
White boards decorated  
With equations and variables,  
Laughter, and chatter, and fun;

# **Death**

By Jessica Caldwell

*“I’ll try not to be long,”* the shadow gently sighed.  
Each deserves a quiet passage; avoiding dampened eyes.  
From his bed he watched it fade, wrapped in his linens clean and white-  
Alone he’d wait again, hoping to be taken another night.

# All The Wildflowers

By Noelani Canque Healy

We pick each other wildflowers  
from green sloped hills and mountain ridges  
violet lupine from the meadow  
periwinkle pinwheels from the peak  
where we sit for empty hours  
with nothing on our minds  
I carry them back down the mountain  
drying, dying in my hands  
put them in water, an empty bottle of wine  
blue and purple, orange and white.

*And when I ask you,  
please,  
don't leave me all alone tonight  
you lay next to me  
on top of wildflowers  
beneath the stars colossal shine  
beneath the flowers in the sky  
that I try desperately to describe.*

Across the oceans, mountain ranges  
across the years and pine tree forests  
somehow it has taken you until tonight  
to say you'll keep me warm

when I've been freezing this whole time.  
So when it happens,  
when you hold me  
you have to hold on tight  
run your thumb across my shoulder  
while I tell you about my visions in the sky.

*I am starting to feel alive.*

(And when I say it,  
*please,*

I wonder what you think  
when all my jagged edges  
turn terrifyingly sweet  
I wonder what you see  
if you know you've made me weak  
when I am begging, begging,  
*please.)*

Check the air  
check my breathing  
(you know that I've been suffocating)  
feel me shaking next to you  
listen to the wind  
as I listen to the little pieces scattered in your hazy monologues  
all the lines you didn't edit  
that tell me who you are  
then  
laugh at my hallucinations  
and wish on every shooting star

(don't tell me what you're wishing for).

You kiss every inch of me  
as I wonder if it *hurts*  
where my teeth have made you bleed  
as I wonder what you think.

*Are you laughing at me?*

You ask in the softest voice  
I'm not, I promise,  
I'm laughing at the sky.

I melt into a million wildflowers  
growing blue and purple, orange and white  
up from the skin beneath your fingers  
blooming in my stomach  
wrapped tight beneath your palms  
spreading roots from your soft lips  
taking hold inside of me  
wildflowers pushed into dirt  
under my arching shoulder blades  
dispelled into the earth as  
the air begins to crisp  
wildflowers struggling to breathe.

*And when we leave  
I lay our flowers on the porch  
to be watered by the rain*

*we drive for hours,  
for hours*

*without saying a thing.*

# Cosmic Brownies

By Noelani Canque Healy

I must have been sixteen  
because I could drive  
but wasn't used to weed  
this one time, when,  
yeah,

I must have been sixteen  
I snuck dropped tumbled out the hanging window of  
my broke down rusted to the ground  
you-call-that-a-house white trash trailer on the  
outskirts of town  
drove past the junkyard past the rotting wooden wells  
past white picket fence then gated entrance  
three car garage and an Audi in the drive  
“you-don't-belong-here” side  
to see  
a boy  
in the middle of the night  
and thought that I could take a little  
more than I could take.

And I got so...

deliriously  
astronomically  
idiotically

blasted-wasted-trashed-space-warp-black-hole-infinite-expanse kind of high

so zooted off my ass that I sat  
on his kitchen counter  
in the open concept modern home with indoor balconies  
eating an entire box of Little Debbie Cosmic Brownies  
with the rainbow M&Ms just like the rainbow prisms in the windows  
that illuminated everything  
parents always there to stock the pantries welcome home  
a big yard full of baseball gloves and mountain bikes I bet they always  
know where the kids are in the middle of the night  
and in between each packet that I ate I would say  
“Are you sure it’s okay  
that I keep eating these?”  
and he would say  
“Yeah, man,  
I don’t think  
that you should drive home quite yet  
stay  
as long as you need.”

So the other day  
while grocery shopping  
compartmentalizing  
ruminating on  
the cost of food

the cost of gas the cost of loving someone else more than you could love  
yourself the cost long term of sleeping eight hours in a week of evening  
shifts and morning classes building mountains out of debts and valleys  
out of dreams wrinkle lines from faking smiles crescents scars espresso

burns rolling coins to make the rent drugs to take so you make sense  
check engine light blinking crimson Prozac sink beneath the eternal  
droning of politicians vile spilling children screaming wasted time on  
bleak doomscrolling the cost of compassion and global warming the  
value made by oil drilling the price of coffee pick me ups the cost of  
clothes and human rights the cost the price of being alive I saw a box of  
Little Debbie Cosmic Brownies with the rainbow M&Ms and I thought  
that I could be who I used to be and taste the world the way I used to  
taste the world and feel the way I used to feel and see the rainbow prisms  
illuminating everything and I thought that I could stay a child insulated  
somewhere deep inside where all the evil I've ever seen could never reach  
and I believed and I believed and I believed and

If only they had been bittersweet  
at least that would be  
a poem to write, a song to sing  
about nostalgia's bite and sting  
but they were cheap.  
Flavorless.  
Meaningless.

And man,  
I don't think  
that I should drive home  
quite yet.

# One Thousand Times

By Noelani Canque Healy

It takes all day

to climb the cliffs to reach the rock above the stream

in the forest where you play the fallen logs disintegrate to pieces in your hands

the sun falls through the layered leaves the bark peeling and collapsing into outlines of your battered shoes

the world is gold and green the forest glows around you

you reach the rock at the very top it takes all day the chill of stone rises through your bones

sit with your fingers sunk in damp moss you shiver as you tilt your head up

you still feel it even now more or less towards the shrouded sky

do the birds sing, in the woods that day? less or more? it takes only an hour

was it summer? you don't remember anymore the climb, the cliff, the stream

if it was the birds must have sang your mind tends to stretch and bend your memory will change these things

you must have heard robins and chickadees is anything still the same? you do not remember

it had to have been summer the sunlight catching in leaves

because everything was green the bark splitting off fallen trees

because you were allowed to take all day it takes all day you can only remember the feeling

to climb the cliffs above the stream all day as your mind was swept out to dream

to run through the meadow

press fern spores against the nettle stings

bite into bitter red crabapples

a different memory perhaps

even if it was spring they remain intertwined

there must have been birds lost in the woods where you would hide

and birds must sing



# Waiting

By Noelani Canque Healy

## I. Everywhere

Almost always, I play with my brother.

It doesn't matter:

the weather, oppressive stagnant summer  
or rivulets of rain that tink tink against  
the metal of our box van

the place, concrete parking lots  
driveways on the riverside,  
grocery stores outside of town

the games, electronic run on batteries  
trading cards and trading pictures, crayon  
drawings paper-made

telling stories dragons soaring just outside  
the windows cracked for air

Anywhere, everywhere, it's fine if my little brother is there.

## II. Bank

Today my brother isn't here.

Alone, my mother bustling away into the  
Unreachable, unseeable, belly of the bank

My thoughts race until they arrive at the end:

What happens when I die?  
I ask the dashboard clock,

ticking up to count the seconds  
before the coming end  
nothing,  
it says.  
tick tick tick  
Where was I before I began?  
I ask the ball of fire in the sky  
pinprick light breaking through the peeling  
window tint  
nothing,  
it says.  
silence from the sun.  
How do I make it matter, then?  
I ask the silence as it suffocates  
my five year old lungs  
too tender for this epiphany  
nothing,  
it says  
nothing nothing nothing.  
Well then. If there is nothing.  
If nothing matters in the end  
if there is no way to know the answers,  
really really know,  
then, I suppose, I'll just love my brother.  
Would that be enough?  
I ask the anxious lump inside of me  
where one day diagnoses will form  
existential nightmares born from a child in the car

Yes, I think that would be enough.

# A Meditation on Past Lives

By Helen Carson

I shed my lives like a snake  
sheds  
its skin.

In the court of cats, I'd be The Queen.  
With half my lives passed:

Released,  
Taken,  
Given,  
Ripped,  
And twice the experience gained  
for each one's precious sacrifice.

I'd rule in noble fashion:  
Triumphant in survival.

I shed my lives  
like a snake  
sheds  
its  
skin.

Pardon me for my nonchalance,  
constant change has left me:  
Itchy,  
Liquefied,

Glistening,  
Guarded,

Jaded in personality,  
Shady  
In nature,  
An Impermanent  
Ethereal  
Archive  
Of entangled dreams and nightmares:  
Experiences had,  
Experiences desired.

I shed my lives  
like a snake  
sheds  
its skin.

But each shed is impressed upon me  
Like a fossil on a boulder,  
And as hard as I try,  
As hard as I shed  
The lives still remain.

I shed my lives  
like a snake  
sheds  
its skin.

# **Duttha Cārikā**

By Joseph Dagostino

Spindling vines, draped beyond vision. Inhalation, infestation within the walls. Lacerations circulate the tapestry, a maw careening through the patchwork. A case of meat condensed as a geode, hues in cacophony rip through your skin, cataclysmically beautiful. Throbbing temples, devote thy being, yet patronage does not dull the roar. Omniscient, cogs of flesh fusing within their domain, circumvent the breach. For not to fathom, yet to marvel, many become one. Eternally gorging, revitalized yet not replaced.

# **Requiem**

By Joseph Dagostino

A churning abyss, oily and murky, bubbles beneath you. Brooding, churning, boiling, can it be heard? A fissure of impenetrable darkness tugging at you, whispering its Siren song? Surely it won't hurt, surely the babbling of the meek will rock you as you are engulfed, absorbed, assimilated into the mass. What if, nothing else, you will be one? A gear, a cog... a fracture in the mirror? No, you don't want that! Don't stand out. Reveal neither oneself nor his intentions. What would It say? It isn't what It wants, It isn't what I want, It isn't what We want. What is want? To honor, sacrifice, worship? Growth of the mass is preliminary, a drop less shall not inhibit the message. To tread is in vain, to swim is to deny, to sink is to want. Is it for the best? The best is all that remains, all that calls, the mass resides.

# Ambitions

By Sophie Denmark

I've wanted to be a writer since I was in first grade.

*But you are a woman.*

I want to direct movies. I want to own a vegan bakery.

*Who will take care of your children?*

My sex is the shadow that enters a room before my soul.

I am capable of creating life. I bleed with the moon.

But I am difficult, I am sensitive, I am emotional.

I am sorry, sorry, sorry. I am sorry. Excuse me.

I am wired for life. If it is not my uterus punishing me,

It is society. My body, your choice.

*Is your family not good enough?*

*Why do you aspire for so much more?*

I am glad I am a woman. I am glad I can create life.

I like my femininity, so why do you antagonize me?

I want to be a writer. I want to be a director. I want to be a baker.

You can be both. You will hire a nanny. Why can't I?  
No offense, though. Please don't take this the wrong way.

# Bible Belt

By Sophie Denmark

You grew up before your body did. At age eleven, your peers were learning fractions. At age eleven, you were wondering if your parents' divorce meant being unlovable was in your blood.

Your high school's air was thick with hypocrisy. Teenaged boys with something to prove revved the engines of their raised trucks. Teenaged girls sat in their cars that smelled like fruity vapes and made fun of the "weird kids" that walked inside the building.

The guy that owned the truck dealership had a son with multiple allegations against him. Apparently he liked to touch girls at sleepovers. But his daddy was rich, white. They lived in the gated community. No one batted an eye.

You didn't go to their church. You didn't post praising the Lord that He was elected and that He was taking away your friend's rights.

On the roads, you would pass dozens of wooden crosses surrounded by artificially colored flowers. A few feet down you'd see a sign that said *Don't drink and drive!* But he did, didn't he? Even after he killed that man at 4 am, people still worshiped the ground he walked on. "He just made a mistake," they said. "He's just a kid." And yet, at seventeen, was he *really*? Or was it just another excuse made for a man who hadn't yet discovered empathy?

During the class debate, people looked at you funny because you thought women had a right to choose. The same kids who said slurs and cheated on all their partners called *you* the bad guy.

They said it was blasphemetic to be vegetarian, vegan. God wouldn't have put the animals here if He didn't want us to eat them. Maybe that's why you're so thin, anyway.

When you finally opened up, they told you to pray. God heals all, you know. Turn to Him! Depression is just the Devil trying to get you.

You had gay friends. One time you got called a slur by some teenage boys because your Pink Floyd shirt had a rainbow on it. You addressed the girl

that was transgender by her preferred pronouns—it was bad enough you thought pronouns were real, let alone that you respected them.

Why do you always use such big words? Why do you drive that? Are you trying to ruin his reputation or something? Oh my God, are you an atheist? Do you know a plug? So you think all babies should die? Are you anorexic? Have you tried praying? Oh my God, are you a liberal?

Thou shalt not have any other gods before God. Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain. Honor your Father and Mother. Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not covet.

Love thy neighbor.

# Steps in Rainlight

By Joyce Duran

The gloomy rain poured down the window  
Melding into the glass  
Turning the city lights into a blurry confetti luster.  
Her breath fogged up the pane  
Dissipating then clouding the view again  
Much like her thoughts  
Clarity and confusion in a repetitive loop.

The sleeping city sprawled out beneath her  
A labyrinth of alleys and highways  
Roads leading everywhere and nowhere at once  
Intersecting in every direction  
Her mind still at a crossroads.  
Where would she go from here?  
Where were they?

The pitter-patter of droplets hummed louder  
Pulling her out of a sullen reverie.  
A darkened room of things that lost all meaning  
Cheap possessions traded in exchange for her time  
Mementos of a heedless bygone era  
Years wasted in a somber cubicle  
Until the world stopped.

The empty streets lay desolate and barren below  
A deep silence vast all around her  
Both deafening and strangely comforting.  
Stillness held the world in its grip  
The great equalizer of the masses  
Enveloping cities in a blanket of uneasiness  
Humanity facing its reckoning.

The lightning flickered across the darkness  
Briefly illuminating her tear-stained face  
Racing like her heartbeat, from nothing to dizzying brilliance.  
Moving like a ghost through walls  
She gathered the vital remnants of her life  
One more glance back at the past  
Then the door closed as her footsteps met the rain.

# **The Temporal Wanderer**

By Joyce Duran

Every day I walk to nowhere  
The landscapes change beneath my feet  
And yet everything remains the same

I've long forgotten the sound of voices  
Laughing, talking, whispering,  
Only the screams are emblazoned in my mind

Immeasurable time has passed  
Since I've heard my own voice  
Or laid eyes on another like me

The solitude I once sought out, now inescapable  
Haunting every waking moment  
Tearing at my troubled mind

Memories of a past life envelop me  
Lovers, friends, family, lost to the darkness  
Their echoes a shadow I can't outrun

Tired steps tread through faceless towns  
Society forever frozen at the moment  
When everything changed.

Concrete jungles, they used to say  
Bustling metropolises, always in a hurry,  
Brimming with ants scurrying to nothing

Mechanical noise once filled this air  
Sights, sounds, smells, swirled together  
A cacophony of humanity that flooded the world

Countless lives lived in tandem amidst the urban sprawl  
Building after building set in an endless array  
Old and new, side by side, before being broken

Each place had a purpose, a meaning  
Structures once inhabited with life  
Now stand eerily quiet in the stillness

The jungle has reclaimed its birthright  
Tendrils climb boldly up steel beams  
Wild flowers bloom in empty bedrooms

Facades decay beneath the grasp of new life  
The old life quickly forgotten  
Except in the mind of wanderers like me.

I slip through shattered windows  
An intruder stealing what belongs to no one  
A stranger peering into lives I never knew

I slip through shattered windows  
An intruder stealing what belongs to no one  
A stranger peering into lives I never knew

I imagine what lives existed here  
Their clothes brushing past my fingertips  
A fool pretending to know who they were

People I never met torment me  
Sobs besiege my body, spasms so violent,  
Ending in guttural howls

I've become an animal  
A creature, a product of decay and desperation  
Every day my humanity ebbing away

Human existence, ever so vibrant and fleeting  
Pulsed loudly for a brief instant of cosmic time  
Marking our presence defiantly, absurdly

Reaching, like children, for more than we understood  
A plague on the planet,  
The culprit wearing our face.

Irony was built into our DNA  
Willfully ignorant that each step we took  
Was towards our own end

Human accomplishment, great glory ever pursued  
Driven by hunger, always striving for more  
At the cost of everything

Victims of our own hubris  
We succumbed to temptations  
Power, money, greed; the seeds of calamity

All of our self-righteousness became laughable  
Nothing matters  
When you can't escape the end

As I walk amongst the aftermath  
A broken world lays tattered in radioactive pieces  
Rubble and ash, all that's left of civilization

The Earth slowly shrouds the remnants of human existence  
Hiding the proof of its would-be destroyer  
Trying to heal from the depth of human betrayal

My eyes see a new and changing world  
But my mind still recalls the past beauty  
as I wander aimlessly on a planet, racing through the cosmos.

# Kentucky

By Stephanie Few

I said I should go  
She told me to stay  
To listen to one more song  
(She said this for three songs)  
And when she flashed me that smile  
I said okay  
(As if I was ever going to tell her no)  
I know other people were there  
Around us  
While the band was performing  
And the music vibrated inside my bones  
And the people around us sang along  
But all I saw was her  
And that smile  
And that fishnet  
And that skirt that stopped just above her knees  
And those little black boots  
Not really caring  
What else I was missing  
Even now, when I think about it  
All I remember is her

# Prescription

By Stephanie Few

Tell your doctor right away

If you have any sudden changes

In your mood or behavior

Thoughts of suicide

So if I suddenly want to live

I should call

And let them know

My mood and behavior

Are symptoms of being me

If you take that away

I have nothing left

There's no way to stop this

No way to cure it

I plan my impulsiveness

# **Parking Lots**

By Kaylie Foster

I can't park my car next to yours  
It's only a spot during business hours  
Do you even know what car I drive?  
I can't park my car next to yours  
Because what if you think I did it for you?  
Not because the spot next to you was  
Closer to the door  
Less of a walk from  
Where I usually park  
What if you think I did it for you?  
Our car doors could touch like you touch me  
Leaving a minuscule scratch, a speck of paint  
Just enough that I can't forget your car door touched mine  
And my car didn't ask for it  
And my car was just trying to do its job  
I just try to do my job  
But you think that I come into work for you  
You mistake my personality for flirting  
You see me speaking about fajitas  
As an invitation for you to call me sexy  
To tell me I'm your baby  
To touch my waist when you walk around me  
My boyfriend would kill you, you know?  
But that's not even the point  
I shouldn't have to have a boyfriend

For you to know I'm not yours to pine over  
Being a human should be enough  
For me to be free of this beastly pursuit  
Do you forget your wife when you come into work?  
Does she know what you say to me?  
I can't park next to you  
Because the simple task will say more than I intend  
Because the harassment will never end  
If I park next to you, you'll try again  
I'll ignore it once more  
No amount of saying no will change you  
Because I put makeup on  
Because I wore tight jeans  
Because I did my hair today  
Because I parked next to you

# **Black Hole,,,**

By Erika Freeman

There's a yawning hole inside of my chest  
Where happiness eddies into nothing,  
A pure void that no medication can erase,  
Or that religion can manage to mask

I am utterly nothing  
A mere continuum of matter,  
Blip of consciousness in a sea  
Of the universe's inherent nothing

# God

By Erika Freeman

Listen listen listen  
To the tale I'm about to say  
It began in my head  
And traveled through my brain  
There once was a girl  
She used to believe in God  
She'd pray for everything  
Every worry, every thought  
Then the world began to talk  
And she opened up to listen  
So God became a myth  
And she became a heathen

# If They Never Knew

By Erika Freeman

if they never knew,  
if we could do it all again  
i'd hide away,  
and continue to pretend  
they'd never know the truth  
until i let it go  
and by that time,  
i'd be ready for them to know

The memory comes back,  
her hand on my shoulder  
she cried and told me,  
“if i could i would start over”  
because i was the mistake,  
that she had to bear  
my tears confirmed hers,  
and we knew each other well

if they never knew,  
Would i still be the person i am today?  
would i be willing to risk that,  
just for things to stay the same?  
i push all of these thoughts,  
to the back of my brain

i'll study them sometimes,  
but they never change

# **Summer Sky**

By Matilda Hickman-Smith

The summer sky is a woman,  
Whose heart loves and cries.  
She misses us in the dwindling twilight  
of long summer nights.  
She rejoices in reconnection,  
When she wakes from restful sleep.  
She blows her kisses downward,  
Showering us with her reprieve.  
And she dries her eyes  
To wipe the heat from the day,  
Soft splatters kiss our burnt summer skin.  
The flower roots rejoice, green once again.  
She gives a refresher for the living,  
A cleanser for the forgiven,  
As her loving heat begins the decay  
And her rain speeds the decomposition.

# Light

By Hoang Phuang Vy Ho

You were right; I was blind,  
like no shadow in the dark.  
I'm lost, then found in this silent night.  
You're the light, shining bright,  
the darkness in my heart,  
rescuing me from these laden lies.

Spring arrived, bringing you near;  
love in bloom, budding romance.  
Tender touch warming tears,  
melting winter frost biting our hands.  
Golden sun kissed skin on skin,  
beautiful you, my sweet summer's child,  
chasing away wistful autumn dim  
and bringing me my smiles.

But as sunshine vanishes into thin air,  
this love hangs high, tearing the moon in two.  
Memories wilt into cold despair,  
as the wind carries my smiles from view.  
Gentle snow flakes the frame of you,  
leaving me frozen in the mirror's gaze,  
gathering fragments, lost and blue,  
flowers withered by haste.

I was wrong; you were gone,  
leaving my heart torn apart.  
I'm found, then lost in this somber song.  
Dusking dawn, cruel and long,  
draws shadows to the dark,  
drowning me in blindness all alone.

# Some Cups of Tea

By Hoang Phuong Vy Ho

## The First Cup

Strong tea or light tea.  
Warm, aroma flows; cold, aroma fades.  
Life, as hearts display,  
warm – we hold and stay; cold – we drift away.

## The Second Cup

Love is a cup of tea,  
missed chance kindles hidden love,  
through tea, love revealed.

## The Third Cup

What is a situationship...?  
Like a cup of tea  
brewed warm with laughter,  
cooling in silent pause.  
At times, words flow like a  
generous pour.  
At times, silence ghosts an empty  
brew.

## The Fourth Cup

Some people are like a bag of tea  
with their finest essence fades free.  
What lingers in their minds to stay,  
are bitter dregs that won't wash away.

## The Last Cup

When I was little, Mum would say,  
“Have a brew, love, it’ll be okay.”  
Nowadays, when my bestie’s blue,  
I just shout, “Tea time, bitches!  
Brew one for me, too!”

# Time

By Dale Huston

The body breaks,  
Tears come easy,  
The wound of time.

The view of decades,  
No longer young,  
The body breaks.

The helplessness of Age,  
The neglect of things not done,  
The wound of time.

The wavey hair that no longer grows,  
The blister of skin,  
The body that breaks.

The sight that weakens  
The fear of the endless dark,  
The wound of time.

And yet the simplicity of life,  
The happiness of living,  
The body breaks.  
The wound of time.

# love letter from notes

By Montana Huston

you're the friend who thinks they're funny  
i love me more  
i can only speak for myself but the restroom upstairs did get cleaned  
you're like a fancy redneck  
these are very trying times  
you're something else  
i don't believe  
adults aren't fun  
what's MTV?  
what are the four parts of language arts?  
reading, writing, speaking, listening  
that's right, none of them matter; it's all bullshit  
i hoorayed at a hip hip  
one little interaction is nothing compared to what you got going on over there  
the clock is ticking you all to hell  
what's the value of thinking about questions that have no definite answer?  
apple sauce and a lifetime of disappointment  
peace is heavy  
and  
you're not heartbroken from a man who folds towels gang  
what is poetry?  
and  
i don't understand death  
you'll be aight  
the search for knowledge by reading about  
lies

and you are  
i want to feel your love  
i see the appeal on you  
is that a Costco hotdog?  
stupid english majors  
who puts metal in their face?  
i don't care what we're hip hip or hooraying about  
what's Nick Kroll doing in my gym?  
you're just saying all these words  
so, i'm glad he has that figured out

# Otherside of the Mountain

By Montana Huston

i turn to the sky where i seek out the answers  
death never provides when the living are no longer heard  
where love is a myth and peace is a dragging anchor  
can't you hear it? i can hear it  
hollow wind spluttering across my face caving in on itself  
where reality is never real where you are just a fragment  
do you think of me when i think of you? do you feel the tug on your nervous system?  
agony and anticipation wait on the corner in that crowded room face to face  
with all the versions of yourself you've never been reflecting off each other  
like fun house mirrors bleeding into one another but never fully  
capturing  
the essence you leave behind in its wake the moment indifference is a blessing  
they say love lies bleeding when you're the rabbit and the gold leafed tiger leaves  
distorting the grape purple bruises indentations from lost fingers  
your head rests between my legs  
in between who i've always been and who i will never get to be and  
when that forgetful yellow sun sets just beyond those rocky mountains  
i hope you know it leaves behind you and me

# **The Moon, the Earth, and the Blue Jay**

By Lillian Hyatt

Someone asked of the moon-  
why do you push the tides back  
if only to pull them forward again?  
and the moon replied-  
because it is the way that my lungs contract and then expand with air  
again.

Controlling the pulls of the ocean waves is the way of my breathing,  
it is the way of my control,  
it is the way of creating beauty.

Someone asked of the Earth-  
why do you spin on your axis? don't you ever get dizzy?  
and to that the Earth replied-  
why stay in place all your life,  
when there is so much beauty around you to gaze upon?  
Why journey to the redwoods and not look up into the sky,  
why not run to the ocean and get your pants legs wet,  
why not buy a bouquet of flowers and let the bees pollinate them?  
I spin because there is so much beauty to look at,  
and in my turns I create sunrises and sunsets-  
beauty for others.

Someone asked of the blue jay-  
why sing the same song?  
and the blue jay replied-

just because I sing the same song each day  
does not mean that it is the same people who hear it.  
I nest in different trees every so often,  
and I fly overtop the highway from time to time,  
but there is always someone new listening.  
And to deprive that one person of my song,  
seemingly old and worn out to some,  
well to that I say-  
one jay's song is another man's reason to smile.  
I sing because it is the only way  
I can create beauty for another.

Someone asked of the poet-  
why write the words that you do? Does it not get boring sitting at the  
same desk every day?  
and the poet replied-  
Of course it doesn't!  
Sure, it is the same desk,  
but I notice a new spot in the woodwork every day.  
I have sat in the same chair, every single day, for years,  
and yet there is a different slant in the seat  
and a different sounding creak in every sit.  
I write poems about the trees and the mountains,  
although those have been there since before I opened my eyes.  
But to see things so differently,  
through different contexts or in light of different occurrences or even  
after a long break,  
is pure magnificence.  
and if I am not sharing the fact that the bark seems to be slightly more  
brown today,

or that my chair is wiggly on one leg,  
or that the tides of the ocean have seemingly changed  
or Earth's rotation seems slower than usual  
or even that my oatmeal was cold because I started writing a poem and  
forgot about it,  
then who is going to do that?

And the someone responded-  
well, why does someone need to do that in the first place?

And the poet replied-  
you may as well have asked me why the moon pulls the tide,  
if only to just push it back in again.  
Or why the Earth turns on her axis,  
if it will only make her dizzy.  
Why do you think the blue jay sings the same song each day,  
even if it is centuries old?  
Because, my friend, I am that mountain blue jay,  
and I am the moon and her tides.  
I am the Earth, constantly rotating on my axis,  
and I will continue to spin forever,  
soaking up as much beauty out of this life as I can get.  
And my only hope is that once I am dead and gone,  
that another blue jay comes along,  
or a sparrow,  
or a robin,  
to sing the same song that I had sung  
and repeat those verses as long as they live.

For if no one is trying their hardest to create beauty every day,  
if there are no creators to talk about their tree bark or oatmeal,  
then what are any of us going to sing along to?

# Salem

By Lillian Hyatt

*hysteria*

is a woman dancing in the woods  
her face lit up by the popping embers

*hellfire*

it's the townspeople  
moralizing their distaste for the feminine  
the way they shake their fists at the silhouettes

*witchcraft*

they are with me when my candle flicker lights up my face in the darkness,  
those women who danced before my time  
the women who bled with the full moon and contorted themselves in the dead of night

to the owl's hoot and the crickets chirp

those women that had to burn with the fire that lived inside them

*bitch*

is not the shadows of bodies twisting with the wind in the dark  
it is not the conducting of the invisible orchestra of the night  
nor is it the bleeding with the moon and celebration of such

*whore*

is the shame that fathers carry towards their daughters once they age past 13

*sugar, spice, and all things nice*

hysteria is what possesses those men to shriek and shake their fists at those women in the dark

hysteria is the laughter in those men's throats as they watch those contorted silhouettes burn and die by the same fire that fueled them.

*cunts,*

*sluts,*

if only they had let the women dance.

if only they had allowed them to light up the sky with the fire of a thousand suns

if only the popping embers resembled more music than gunshots

if only their genitalia was not a scarlet letter

if only fathers felt comfortable picking out clothes for their daughters past their 12th birthday

if only those men had not shrieked at them

if only those men had listened to the night music

if only those men saw them for more than wombs to be filled

if only those men could hear the owl's hoot and the cricket's chirp

if only they chose to move their bodies with the wind

and feel the warmth of the light on their cheeks

if only they had known what it is to be a woman,

and to bleed with the moon

and to contort with the embers in the wind,

and if only they had let them dance.

# **Silk Over Bone**

By Lillian Hyatt

“I had to fight to be this soft.”

I had to claw my way through piles of bone,  
Cracking rib, pulling teeth, tearing flesh from fingernails.

I  
had to punch before I could hold.  
Had to dig a hole in the backyard  
from frozen soil  
shovel more bent and bruised than I was  
Before I could stand up straight,  
blooming like my flowers after winter.  
Thawed  
out.

I had to learn to live without shelter  
Before I was tender enough to place the birdhouse back in the tree,  
A slew of nails ejecting from its trunk,  
Learning that there can be sanctuary in the face of desolation.

I was a wolf,  
my claws too long so I filed them on tree bark  
My teeth too sharp so I pulled  
them  
out  
one by one,

gums bleeding and paws sore but if only I were sweet now,

I had to fight to be this tender  
because when they saw the bark they called me “unfixable”  
and when I tried to show them the raw pads of my feet they screamed.  
All I wanted to do was exist among everyone else.

I

had to fight to love this hard.

I’ve watched captains abandon their sinking ships,  
and I have had to do the same,  
ripping my soul limb from limb,  
mutilating myself for the acceptance of others so I will not be labeled as  
cantankerous  
If I pull out all my teeth, am I safe now?

i don’t wear black anymore

because i’ve scuffed all my burnt edges away

i eat oatmeal every morning to keep me warm in the middle

when you let me know i wasn’t worth fighting for

how else could i remain kind

if i did not melt it down

crucible over an open flame

and ingest it as a pill of opportunity

i had to punch windows

to let the light in

shards of glass in my knuckles refracting rainbow spears on the ceiling

and the bruises as beautiful as the sunrise.

I had to fight, to be this soft.

Gums bleeding, feet raw,

mangled, maimed, hacked, lacerated,

Softness can come from violence,

it has to because why else have I done this to myself?

Softness can come from violence,

because why else would the sight of my body make others scream?

Softness comes from violence because flowers still grow in Chernobyl soil  
and

Softness comes from violence because

how else can I be kind now, in a world that has done nothing but labeled  
me

as a threat.

# Crossroads

By Tiauna Jones

They say that crossroads are the veil between words  
A moment where one can be tempted  
Where everything stands still but moves all at once  
A place to make to bargain, make a deal

Four roads that all lead to one place  
As if destiny herself brought you here  
Watching  
Waiting

Each piece of yourself leading to a moment  
Woven together by the spider's thread  
So strong that people fear it  
Dainty enough to be swept away

I have made my choice, suffered the consequences  
I have battled fate, resisting stagnation in fear of losing  
Losing what  
Myself

They say that crossroads are the veil between words  
A moment where one can be tempted  
If you had to make a deal to be who you are  
Or to be who you wanted to be

Would you take it?

# Glass Closet

By Tiauna Jones

“It’s just a phase”

“I guess, maybe you’re right”

Ice from your heart burning my throat as I choke out the words  
You ultimately closed the closet doors and locked them  
Barbed wire scraping the wood rubbing it raw creating holes  
In my heart, in my confidence, but not the walls I had built

“Why does it even matter?”

“I want you to see me”

Shattered mirrors as I learn to look at fragments of myself  
You love the me that you’ve created in your head sweet and obedient  
I am learning to love the woman I am, one who loves everyone  
Who has no preference in courtesy, love, or compassion

“I love you, but I am not ready to tell my parents”

“I love you too, take your time”

You hid me from the world like old memory you wanted to go unchanged  
Wilting and dusty still longing for an open love  
You weren’t the one, but you paved the way  
For men, women, and everything that is or isn’t in between

“I don’t think this is really who you are”

“If you can’t accept me that’s okay.”

Because I accept me

Because I love who I love

without reservation

I sink into love with life

With people

With me

# **Home**

By Tiauna Jones

There is a land where the sunset kisses the sky  
With vibrant hues de rojas y amarillos  
As if the sky performs flamenco for the moon  
A greeting to the white rabbit of fertility and peace

A place where some spirits wander and walk  
Across the marigold path that will bring them back  
In every home an ofrenda adorned with treats and gifts  
Waiting for the warmth and love the lost will bring

There is music playing in the streets  
The kind that makes your hair stand up  
Knowing that this moment is fleeting  
Echoing the stories of our ancestors

Fire burns bright in our hearts  
We inherit unwavering spirits  
The calavera teaches us courage  
In the face of the unknown

# Guilty Until Proven Innocent

By Leilani Keuma

Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

God as my witness, and sworn over the grave of my Grandmother Ruth,

I will answer any questions concerning myself.

And none concerning she who is accused herself?

It's against my conscious to give names or information about other people.

Even if you find yourself alone with god under a holy steeple?

Today it's all monopoly.

Don't try to blame bureaucracy.

They violate the natural rights of every citizen!

There is no order without discipline.

Am I free to travel?

We tire at your attempts to unravel,

Of course you're free to travel!

I am not here to dazzle,

But I may journey, only with a passport.

And free speech, does that exist?

Only if you are unafraid to resist.

# I don't remember how it started but...

By Leilani Keuma

In the middle there was a sunset.

In the middle two champagne glasses  
danced on a table,

In the middle an apple fell on someone's head.

In the middle a child went down a slide,  
the plastic burning from the sun.

In the middle lay a man on an escalator:  
pedestrians step over him,  
he stares at the fluorescent-lit ceiling  
and thinks the popcorn to be stars.

In the middle water falls,

In the middle everyone looked around  
at each other and  
wondered 'what next?'

In the middle pig skin curdled to rinds,

In the middle the hero got the girl  
(in the end they both died).

In the middle a mother cried.

In the middle a song was sung,  
a dance was done,  
a prance for fun.

In the middle a dress flew over the hull,  
and they thought it was a ghost.

In the middle there was a fire  
(and water falls).

In the middle was mycelium:

speaking to trees,  
connecting the roots,  
doing its job.

In the middle there were bright kiosks  
that skipped along the beach.

In the middle the morning dove cooed,  
In the middle a kiss petaled a child's cheek.  
In the middle a squirrel ate tree fruits,

the seeds rained over  
a stranger's new book.

In the middle a storm brewed,  
In the middle goodbyes were said  
(then forgotten).

In the middle was a lonesome train,  
speeding down the tracks,  
barreling through snow,  
waiting to go home.

In the middle a wish was made.  
In the middle everyone paused,  
and watched the sunset.

# **Kiss me**

By Leilani Keuma

Let's kiss under the war planes,  
where drones sound like red fire.

Let's kiss under the chemical rain,  
where it sizzles and pops our zits.

Let's kiss under big brother surveillance,  
where people park at Walmart.

Let's kiss under the nuclear mushroom,  
where the shockwave left us barely alive.

Let's kiss under light-pollution night skies,  
where starlight forgets to shine.

Let's kiss under the neon corporate logos,  
where we buy burgers, rakes, shoes and dildos.

Let's kiss under reverse-engineered UFOs,  
where big government pretends to be aliens.

Let's kiss under the imminent weather sirens,  
where they sing for chaos and safety.

Let's kiss under the remote-control drones,  
where its light casts our skin in blinking red.

Let's kiss under the hole in the ozone,  
where sunlight falls like volcanic ash.

Let's kiss under the tear gas and riot,  
where we get trampled and share blood.

Let's kiss under the school desks,  
where people shoot their guns.

Let's kiss under the normal night sky,  
where we're reminded of The Matrix.

Let's kiss under hypnosis filled concerts,  
where the music brainwashes us.

Let's kiss under the gas station pump roof,  
where dinosaurs bleed into machinery.

Let's kiss under the new nation law,  
where we shouldn't kiss at all.

Let's kiss under every sweeping stereotype,  
where our story is written with broken lenses.

Let's kiss under politicians' podiums,  
where presidents shout like apes and parrots.

Let's kiss under the raining fallout,  
where our skin tingles with dread and sunburn.

Let's kiss under the straw effigy,  
where we're almost set on fire.

Let's kiss under the piled-up cars,  
where rust is a forgotten toxin.

Let's kiss under the chem trails,  
where the sky becomes a grid line.

Let's kiss under the record-breaking heatwave,  
where our sweat curdles our skin to rinds.

Let's kiss under everything,  
where nothing is right.

# Princes, Priests, and Presidents

By Leilani Keuma

These picture-perfect parodies,  
They preserve the property of purity:  
Princes like poised benedictions  
Priests like prized philosophers  
Presidents brain-washed by politics.

A belied pride made palatable:  
Doppelgangers in pressed pinstripes;  
Puckered lips play poor lies  
Prim, pugnacious, and phony,  
Perpetrating our blind penance.

Oh Princes, atop the balkers,  
Saying, “permit this patriarchy,”  
Plowing over boosted pity  
Peeling back our preference for  
Pictures of betrayed paradise.

Oh Priests, praying in the chapel  
Bent into what’s believed proper;  
Prattle of pursed politeness becomes  
Puzzled from behind the pew,  
Prey to their particle partition.

Oh Presidents, preaching speeches,  
Map a patronized biparty business:  
Precision in the batty pageant  
Proliferates poppied poems like  
Pennies plinking into place.

And they promise “prosperity,”  
But they bribe our plasticity.  
Pass by broken painted pottery  
Provided by your preachers,  
Paired beside their palisades.

We, passengers of purpling prose,  
Of belittled pointy pretty Princes,  
Of pliant blackened pious Priests,  
Of passive pushy boorish Presidents;  
This peculiarity becomes pathological.

# Windows in Winter

By Leilani Keuma

They're all rolled down-  
Music is pouring out  
as the wind blows in;  
it's bitter cold and tangy  
like summers when we  
did the very same.

Windows locked away,  
lost portals to freedom.

Wind whips my hair,  
it turns to tangles  
that thread through my  
fingers like dancing like  
screaming every lyric like  
punching the car roof  
where the moon should be.

Winter is snow and shivers,  
but these jitters I get  
driving down the I-25,  
is nothing like cold  
and everything like  
dysphoria.

# From a Vietnamese Lens

By Jackie Kha

*Qilin and bánh bao*

Meat buns fed to them today

They dance on water

*Qilin* (pronounced: chee-LIN): a legendary hooved chimerical creature that appears in Chinese mythology and is said to appear with the imminent arrival or death of a sage or illustrious ruler

*Bánh bao* (pronounced: BUN-bao): a Vietnamese bun based on the Cantonese *tai pao* or *da bao* (large bun)

# Finding One's Legs

By Sophia Kustar

wet, musty straw  
and blood not even dried  
the foal cannot stand

most know little about  
horses and their habits,  
but they know  
the foal must stand  
within hours of being born,  
and the foal cannot stand

every two hours  
i drag myself into the car  
blink away the mosquitoes  
the barn's light is already on  
a beacon or a warning  
the mares rustle the straw

the foal tries to skitter away  
as i approach  
she cannot find her legs  
her knees are weeping  
from her past attempts  
knobby and useless

wet, musty straw  
i nearly choke from  
the stuffiness, the stale air.  
she doesn't want to be touched  
flanks fluttering with anxiety  
i'd feel the same, if i was her

blood not even dried  
smearing on my jeans  
one hand on her heaving chest,  
the other tight around her tail  
she is a whirlwind of legs  
sharp bones, joints, hooves

the foal cannot stand  
so i heave her up  
the weight of three cinderblocks  
pulling at my shoulders  
she knows the routine  
and scrabbles her little feet

the mother nuzzles  
her daughter  
such pride at the quivering legs

keeping the foal upright  
no presence of mind to know  
it is all because of me

i watch, off to the side,  
wait for the foal to nurse  
she wobbles over  
drinks deeply, greedily  
the scent of milk and blood  
mixing too closely together

wet, musty straw  
milk on her muzzle  
the foal folds her legs and falls

# ode to magyarország

By Sophia Kustar

i butcher my own language  
i stutter my own heart

and i forget the accent  
forget the accents  
spell check and do my best  
and let my father correct me

every new word is a notch on the belt  
a weight on my chest  
and they slip right out of my ears  
before they make their way off my tongue

i look up the lyrics, practice the consonants,  
while the songs are in queue  
and the sounds still sound wrong  
when they're in the back of my throat

my fingers are like a toddler's,  
fat and clumsy, leeching and  
strangling the beauty of my country's poetry,  
of my country's name

maybe it's not my language at all  
a step out of reach  
a city i haven't been in  
since i learned how to remember

and i do remember  
the taste of home, like  
a dream in four dimensions  
an ode to another world

but i butcher my own language  
i stutter my own heart  
and no matter how hard i try  
my mouth is not big enough to hold it

# **was/were**

By Sophia Kustar

in the was were  
in the time of times  
I was were a girl been  
the boy was mine of mines

in the was were  
in the sink of thinks  
You was were there too  
here been a with me now

in the was were  
in the lem of ons  
we lay lain on a lemon tree  
to get her and were just be

in the was were  
in the time of times  
I was were a girl been and you...  
You was were there too

in the was were  
in the cup of cups  
we was drank a bit a bit  
it got did a bit of buzz

in the was were  
in the sea of stars  
You was were a mile allay  
the mist been it a cloudy day

in the was were  
in the heart of hearts  
I was ner a girl then  
and naint a boy neither

# Granite Mountain

By Taylor Little

*Letters written by the victims of the Speculator Mine Disaster, June 8th, 1917*

**First letter:** Dear wife / this may be the last message you will get from me

**Second Letter:** Dear Pat / we are waiting for the end

in my hometown headframes /  
jut from the earth /  
like jagged black teeth /  
and the burnt orange hills /  
that circle the rim of our valley /  
like the rim of a rusted cup /  
sit gutted and bloody /

**First letter:** The gas broke about 11:15 pm / I tried to get all the men out / but the smoke was too strong

**Second letter:** I guess it won't be long

tunnels stripped of copper veins /  
by greedy puppeteering fingers /  
left behind to swallow themselves /  
like the heads of proverbial snakes /

**First letter:** I got some of the boys / with me in a drift / and put up in a bulkhead

**Second letter:** We take turns rapping on the pipe / so if the rescue crew is around / they will hear us

**Third Letter:** All alive

a lantern threw a red spark /  
a wrong spark /  
a cable stretching twenty five hundred feet /  
to the blue blue surface caught flame /

**First letter:** If anything happens to me / you better sell the house / and go to California and live

**Second letter:** Well my dear wife / try not to worry

**Third letter:** but air getting bad

a city of ash-covered /  
stone-bruised men /  
lungs choked to death /  
on the rubble /  
the rubble /

**First letter:** You will know your Jim died like a man / and his last thoughts were for his wife / that I love better than anyone on earth

and fire climbed hungry /  
to the red red surface /  
filling all the tunnels like a chimney /  
and gobbling air like a dragon /

**Second letter:** everything will come out alright

it was wartime /  
and we had the magic ticket /  
they called us ‘the richest hill on earth’ /  
and we payed for it /  
one hundred and sixty eight men /  
trapped in the dark /  
as our filthy rich tunnels caved in /  
slowly starving for breath /  
bloody fingernails clawing for /  
the surface /  
the redblue surface /  
the surface /

**Third letter:** one small piece of candle left

and the men screamed /  
the men screamed /  
the men /

**First letter:** We’ll meet again / tell mother and the boys goodbye / with  
love to my wife / and may god take care of you

a city of stone-covered /  
ash-bruised men /  
sit gutted and bloody /

**Second letter:** There’s a young fellow here / he has a wife and two  
kiddies

**Third letter:** think it is all off.

**Second letter:** tell her we done the best we could / but the cards were against us

and the men screamed /  
left behind to swallow themselves /  
like the heads of proverbial snakes /  
slowly starving for breath /

**Second letter:** Goodbye loving wife

on the rubble /

**First letter:** Your loving Jim

the redblue surface /

**Fourth Letter (written on the cover of a book):** In the dark

# New York

By Kate Marlett

New York, New York  
Full of shining opportunity  
Dazzling, glittering glass  
Pavement reflecting the beams  
Of sun  
that  
cascade  
down  
like shards of citrine  
And up from the ground below,  
Puffs of vapor from deep in the earth.  
birds,  
    cars,                   debris  
    scaffolding,  
    wrappers,  
dogs,                   dust,    leaves  
A dipping, swirling, incessant sea of people  
Each with their own dreams and needs.

There is a lot I will never know about this place.  
A lot about the foundations it sits upon,  
About those who surround me,  
bump me,  
pass me,  
look at me.

But that's what makes you interesting,  
New York.

# bystander

By Ruby Medina

sometimes i wonder if anyone ever knew,  
or if anyone ever had an idea.  
i wonder why no one spoke up.  
everyone sat and watched.  
sometimes i wonder why nobody cared enough to help.  
i wonder why no one saved me.  
everyone sat and watched.  
sometimes i wonder what would have happened  
if i stayed quiet.  
but,  
thank god i didn't.  
while everyone sat and watched,  
i made it a goal to speak up.  
and here i am, years later, hoping i never make the  
same mistake,  
by just sitting and watching.

# **the to-do list of a older sibling:**

By Ruby Medina

5:45am—wake up, make sure everyone is up, pick their clothes out, and make sure they have something to eat.

6:45am—go brush teeth, get dressed for the day, but do not take too long because something might go wrong.

7:00am—put the shoes on the kids and make sure they have their homework and any other necessities.

7:15am—quickly get my backpack together and head out the door.

11:30am—school is tiring, no one knows i only got an hour of sleep last night, must act normal and continue to be the light of the room.

2:20pm—last period of the day--starting to feel the anxiety knowing i'll be home soon. no one knows what goes on there.

3:30pm—he comes to pick me up. the kids are in the back, yet this doesn't stop him.

4:45pm—clean house and make sure they have a snack to eat.

5:45pm—begin to make dinner. serve everyone and ensure he has a plate made and a beer ready.

7:45pm—eat once everyone is done, but don't take too long, you need to clean the kitchen.

8:00pm—clean the kitchen, wash the dishes, and help them pick their clothes out.

9:30 pm—put them to bed and begin nightly routine.

10:45pm—lay in bed and wait for him to come.

5:45am—do it all over again.

## **Two words.**

By Ruby Medina

It's only two words.

You begin to contemplate in your head.

You let it play through your mind again.

You replace the thoughts, and you adjust.

You decide: it's time.

# Hysterical Girl

By Lea Partipilo

When I was thirteen, my mom was diagnosed  
with bipolar disorder, and her doctor told her  
that maybe I was bipolar too  
Because genetically, you see  
It's a genetic thing  
that mothers pass on to their daughters  
This inherent personality  
A curse, inherently  
Strong women for generations  
brought down by their unmedicated  
range of feeling  
Praise God for the patriarchy  
Savior of society

And so, he medicated her  
until she was silent  
Unmoving from the couch for weeks  
Which wasn't much different than when  
she was weighed down by the pain  
but now she says she *can't feel a fucking thing*  
Except she feels that it's wrong  
and who wants to live their life  
as a zombie

My daughter is thirteen and she says,  
*My counselor thinks I am bipolar*  
So I told her...  
Do *not* let them make you think  
this isn't normal  
Feeling all the things at thirteen  
This hormonal turmoil  
That comes with the coming of age  
And that's not to say  
Bipolar isn't real, it is  
but love, you must also consider this...

It could be a cop out  
To dismiss all the things *we* talk about  
To forget that reactions to trauma exist  
They'll call you crazy, a bitch  
hysterical, historically  
Just ask Nellie Bly &  
the women of her story

You must not fuss  
about what has been done to you  
and what has been done to your mother  
and your mother's mother  
and your mother's mother's mother  
*This is your ancestry*

Your blood does not run red  
and that's the end  
When you're dead, a little girl

One hundred and fifty years from now  
will carry *your* pain with her  
Your brain chemistry  
is having chemical reactions to  
all the injustice that put you here  
and carried you to...

Thirteen.

When you are your whole world  
And your world feels so small  
But the world is so big  
And you're trying to find where you fit  
*But they don't want you to*  
So they make the pieces so wide  
you fall right through  
And they shrink you smaller  
with meds that numb  
so you forget your power  
that comes from your femininity  
your intuition, your empathy  
It would cover and mend those holes  
and give ground for young women to build  
their homes, their community

Imagine if your feelings  
could give people back their rights  
and find solutions  
that were not the blood shed of  
patriarchal fights  
You are not a machine

to birth, to cook, to clean  
Your feelings are so big  
within those parameters  
but what if they could  
change society?  
The paths of others....  
Your emotions have power

# King of Pontus

By Zachary Peebles

To feel is to lack understanding, yet know what it is  
It is the understanding that there is no reason, for it betrays logic  
It sits within a realm beyond our comprehension, yet we can find it quickly  
We know it intimately, like a toxic lover

But like such a lover we avoid the sensation it provides,  
viewing it as poison, a blight of the senses  
Or we give into the temptation and allow it to ruin us  
Yet find the audacity to blame it for our mishaps, our suffering

We isolate ourselves and attempt to avoid that piece of us  
And yet fail to understand the frailty in such activities  
It is a flimsy shield, yet we believe with enough reinforcement a piece of paper  
Will be like iron, a steel plate of self-assurance

Or a locked door, one to which only we have the key  
Control is comfort in our eyes, and so we believe  
That as long as it is ourselves that drink the poison, then we are immune to its effects  
And thusly we stand as the lonesome king of Pontus did, unaware of our own corrosion

Committing ourselves to either isolation or a slow decay, self-imposed of course

For we must maintain the illusion that we are in control, rather than risking

Giving another soul a chance to take it from us, biting our own bullet  
We seal our own fate preemptively trying to avoid the pain

Yet throw ourselves into a fury when the pain arrives anyway

We attempt to rationalize what it is we missed, ask why it hurts

For we already accepted our fates, why does it still plague us?

Must we sit and feel nothing but agony for the rest of our days?

We find ourselves back at the beginning, where that door we erected sits now

Eroded and eaten away, now a disgusting mirror of what once was

And our reflection sits there, and as we look we realize we do not

Recognize ourselves, bearing witness to our self-imposed solitude

Or the result of our tainted chemotherapy, trying to kill the poison with more poison

And as we stare in that mirror we understand that we are not allowed

To be upset, for we did this, and we never lost control

And continue this behavior, failing to see the vice it has become

An addiction of intentional anguish, all to avoid what?

The disappointment of our peers? The turbulence of life's inequality?

No. It is to avoid life itself, for we cannot be a disappointment if we never had

The Potential to begin with. For in a world where control trumps discomfort

We are the star player, the expert navigator of our own misery  
And what was this poison to begin with? What was the catalyst to  
The pushing of this boulder up the mountain?  
It was the very thing we erected that door for, that gossamer barricade

The greatest vice of all, emotion, and all of its pieces.  
We crave joy and love, but are afraid of the fact that we cannot define it  
So instead we cut off such feelings entirely, choosing to  
Subject ourselves to disproportionate sadness and anxiety instead

Because we can define that. It is as concrete as the paths we walk from  
day to day  
And we walk that path of fear, fear of losing control  
Fear of not understanding, fear of ruining our lives,  
before they could get to the good part

Because we only want the good part  
But that means giving up understanding. Giving up control  
So when the door corrodes, we build a new one.  
And this time, we make sure to throw away the key

# Encounter on Sunny Street

By Josh Reynolds

A music box croons in the wind;  
the tune is Tchaikovsky,  
a merry excerpt  
from the Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairies.  
It gusts into my ears, and my shoes  
clop across the cobblestone  
as I approach the maroon door  
to the antique shop on *ul. Słoneczna*.

Wind whips at my coat  
until I step under the storefront  
and fumble through the *złoty* in my wallet.  
Here, I'm surrounded by stone,  
an old face defined by its hairlines,  
shaped into an arch that's crumbled  
at its apex,  
a fragmented circle.

The ground below my feet  
is dusted with snow,  
white under the moonlight's  
wintry glow.

I pull open the door  
and glance around the store

at silver plates  
(party favors from before the war),  
and the marbled blue glass bowls  
that chilled hands crafted.

The paint on the walls is yellow,  
a hue you'd see on chocolate bar wrappers,  
and the dim lights hum,  
white noise to underscore the music box.

Nearby, there's a postcard rack,  
and among them is *Stańczyk*,  
the poor old joker,  
woeful even at 10x15 cm.

There are sets of cutleries  
wrapped in red ribbons;  
art and pottery punctuate the walls.  
Hints of cinnamon and canvas  
hover around the paintings;  
the smells of an art shop down the street,  
which, the owner once told me,  
was what this shop used to be.

We talked one day  
about our lives, and he gave me  
a cup of tea to sip on  
while we chatted.  
It ran down my throat  
in scalding streams,

and he asked me if I needed  
cream to soothe it.

A man with long purple hair  
butts into my reverie.  
“*Zgubilem się*,” he tells me.  
His coat is black, woolly,  
and in need of a lint-rolling.  
He’s carrying a vase with  
two handles at the top,  
but they’re too small to grasp  
with puffy gloves,  
so his arms are wrapped around it,  
as you’d hold a child,  
to keep them from sinking into snow.

“*Tak, ja też*,” I reply,  
and spy a colder man than he,  
milling around the till and toddling around the tea.  
He wafts their scents up to his face;  
brusqueness, birchwood, and bergamot.  
The corners of his lips dip down,  
and he jams his hands back  
into the pockets of his khakis.

“Who’s that?” I ask and shake my head.  
“*Przepraszam. Czy możesz mówić po angielsku?*”  
“*Nie*,” says the man, who left with the other in tow.  
I step to the back of the store,

where a jar of candy stands beside  
a beaten-up billow.

I glance over my shoulder at the shopkeep,  
and he nods,  
so I take a round raspberry  
and unwrap it. I pop it in my mouth;  
it melts on my tongue,  
into a sea of sucrose  
with stray fibers from my glove  
swimming in it.

I smile at him, and a flash  
lights up the corner of my eye;  
outside the store stands a row of tourists,  
looking inward with cameras trained on me.

# Ode to the Great Masturbator

By Josh Reynolds

Head and shoulders of gold, folded in  
on themselves and flowing into  
a curvaceous yellow body,  
reaching its head towards the form of—who?  
A lover, or someone who just happened  
to stand at the bay  
of the Cap de Creus that day?

The Mastodon's eyes alight on you  
and perturb the Alligator  
who had crept so near  
from around the corner of the tomb.

His mouth opened and bellowed  
a question, the roar of a horn  
that human ears  
had ceased to hear.  
And his eyes, still trained on you,  
were a boundless, foggy blue.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” was your  
response, words lifted from condolence cards,  
and you rued them as your aphorism appared  
into the Monolith’s misty eyes,

and vanished as you wished  
to have told it, "I'm sorry we lost you."

Then the painters covered its skin in thin gold leaf,  
and the Mastodon folded in on himself as  
the lips of the earth parted to swallow him.

You reached out your hand, but the Mastodon  
was gone, and the painters set  
their paint rollers on the sand,  
roaming the curves of the desert like metal detectors,  
picking grains of sand up and rolling them  
into a fine gold film.

Their bodies, the color of porcelain white,  
were null except for the hats on their heads,  
which shifted from gray to blue, then ray to hue.

You stumbled back and fell,  
and a worm emerged from the sands,  
wriggled into your ear  
and slipped between the grooves of your brain,  
rearranging the heart's desires before  
they were pumped out with the rest of your blood.

It felt so funny, and you were so overwhelmed  
by sensations new and unknown  
that you didn't feel the touch of paint rollers  
sheathing your skin in shiny leaf.

When your eyes opened, you were by the Sea,  
a pine-green expanse stretching outward  
to a honeycomb island in the distance.

The only other thing to see was the haunted tree  
whose blue-black branches spindled out  
in your whereabouts.

Your neck had stiffened on the way down,  
muscles covered in sand and sediment;  
they refused to turn at your will.

The jaundiced twists and turns that made  
up your body  
were now reflected in the water,  
wobbling and stretching 'til you couldn't tell  
what was you and what was a trick of the Sea.

Where your form joined with the sand  
and turned from gold to tan,  
there it melded with the tree,  
its branches becoming navy veins  
that ran up your face like strokes of colored pencil.

Small creatures crawled on you,  
building homes in your golden folds,  
and you had no hands with which to bat them off.  
A malevolent mantis meandered across your abdomen,  
and perused you for a place to puncture.

A couple shared a tender moment  
beneath you, heard but barely seen.  
His head was egg-round with a golden sheen,  
and their form, brown as wilted grass,  
was tearing into tatters.  
Part of them was apart from them,  
lying on the sand,  
as the lovers' last embrace ensued.

A traveler walked by on the beach,  
garbed in a swimsuit of gray  
that forbade him from tanning  
the pallid skin it hid. It fit  
to his form, and from it protruded  
his only curiosity.

He stopped short a few paces away,  
and you reached your head up to his.  
Tendrils of molten gold  
melted off of you, and  
dripped up his legs, towards cuts  
open and red.

His blood dripped on you in turn,  
the beginning of a tenuous exchange.

He sidled up to you, and you brushed him  
with your nose.

You both felt capricious,  
indulging your souls  
on the shore of the Cap de Creus.

# “Shine”

By Brock Slider

“The stars envy your eyes.”  
“What a foolish thing,” you’d blush and say,  
“To embarrass the universe in such a way.  
In all of its glory, its awe, and its wonder...  
Just what kind of spell have you fallen under?”

“It’s exactly that, I’m afraid,”  
The words fall out as I turn to your face.  
“The kind of spell that never fades,  
One a heart feels and enjoys, but can never erase.”

But, our time would run out in the days that would come  
Not by choice or by fault, but as a result of the sum  
Of your dreams and mine; they just wouldn’t align.  
An ill-favored end to what might have been great,  
But God’s timing is never too soon, nor too late.

I could sit here and pine, or weep, or whine,  
But if I did that, it might be a crime  
To my heart, for breaking more than it needs,  
And to the future, wherever it might lead.

But I can certainly say that in all of my time,  
I have never seen anything shine  
Quite like your eyes when you looked into mine.

# When the Clouds Retreat From the Violent Sky

By Brock Slider

When the clouds retreat from the violent sky  
and the thunder and wind shall cease to cry,  
The sun will surely shine again.

But look now, hear what I say to you.  
The sky wears an arch of color and hue.  
'Tis beauty earned from rains passed through.

The storm is gone, its terror done.  
When all is settled, the sky has won.  
With bow adorned and the warmth of the sun.

The storms, they may come and the storms, they may go,  
But there's one thing that's certain: that beautiful bow.  
Look up! See you pastels of red, orange, and yellow?

They make up a scene so grand and acclaimed,  
There is only one way to give the sky its name.  
Worry not, I will tell you, for that is my aim.

The sky's name is Anna, and this I do know;  
For when I see stars streaking paint from below,  
I can see her up there; she is earning her bow.

# Marking 8 Years

By Rhianna Smith-Burns

“It comes in waves,”  
they say.

“It will get better with time,”  
they insist.

“Be strong.  
You’re not alone.

Time can heal all wounds if you  
let it.”

And, yes, time can help.

It can massage sharp stabs  
into throbbing aches,  
but it will not  
(can not)  
heal.

How could it  
when every tick  
loudly pronounced by Big Ben  
marks another second without  
you?

“Oh, that was a while ago.”  
Eight years.  
How long is eight years?

But, I pretend to agree  
with a shake of my shoulders  
and a sigh that concedes.

“Yeah, I guess it was,”  
because I remember my twelfth  
birthday party—  
the first without you—  
and that feels like it happened a  
while ago,  
a lifetime ago.

But,  
on other days, I’m  
sure it was only  
yesterday.

Yesterday,  
when I stared silently at a starry  
sky  
through a window stained with  
fingerprints,  
from the passenger seat on a long,  
long  
drive  
to a hospital far away.

*Ding!*

Waiting rooms stuffed  
with despair and wasted prayers.  
“Nothing is ever going to be the  
same,”  
the news reported.

How much time really fits in eight  
years?

Seventy-thousand eighty hours.  
1,946 times longer  
than how many hours  
he spent resisting Fate’s twisted  
scissors,  
so why  
do the cries of my baby cousins  
still ring in my ears  
when I think of that  
little boy riddled with tubes and  
unconscious in a hospital bed?

I’ve read that  
the summer of 2016 is nostalgic—  
hunting Pokémons in parks  
and listening to music with  
pounding beats  
that electrify senses.  
I remember the summer of 2016  
as the last one  
with my uncle, Blake Ernest,  
a young,

care-free child of  
only eleven years.  
Eight years  
is a long time—  
my first relationship,  
my first car,  
my first job,  
getting my license,  
graduating,  
deciding to attend college  
(or not).

But yesterday,  
we were only children  
tumbling  
down  
patchy hills  
and playing crack-the-egg on  
our aunt’s trampoline.

Today,  
I am pushing twenty.  
He is still eleven.

So push away  
Father Time and his gang of gears  
that grind and gorge  
on the bereavement of those  
left behind.  
And push away those who do not

(can not)  
understand.

Because what is eight years?  
What is 8?  
“The double, everlasting loop  
represents eternity,”  
they say,  
“everything comes back around.”  
But all I have known  
for these last eight years  
is eternal grief  
and an ache that always returns.

# **Skinny Love**

By Theodora Stein

I was 17 and  
my grandmother pointed out that I  
wasn't eating much  
with an approving smile  
and that made my  
heart jump into my  
throat,

so I pulled it out  
through my mouth  
and presented my organs to her,  
along with my full plate,  
which she shakily accepted,  
complimenting me that  
I was almost  
**slender.**

I was 17 and  
she could finally tolerate  
touching my body  
long enough for a hug.

and as I held her hunched and  
broken figure,  
with collapsed conscience  
and vertebrae,

I couldn't say thank you,  
since my throat was still raw  
from stomach acid.

# **Something Was Lost**

By Theodora Stein

the devil's horns are piercing into my flesh.  
they never said it would hurt like this.  
I was raised to be a martyr  
but they never told me the meaning of that word.

I was lucifer's child and that title was branded upon me with  
spiteful eyes and cups of blood,  
broken pieces of bodies, I was  
less.  
corrupted.  
flawed.

fire is what burns in hell. and any fire that burnt in me must have been  
brought along  
when I was taken from there, and I  
know they were just afraid.  
that is why they suffocated me.

the closest I could get to fading without actually  
disappearing  
was becoming water.  
but good girls are not water  
they are air, not seen and not heard and not anything but  
I was still water.

my bones were roots already grounded in the dirt and I could not be uprooted.

I was apologetic for my natural self preservation. but I could not stop it and I could not

disappear.

good girls

disappear.

I screamed from the moment of my birth and chaos is unholy  
so the roar that bled through my already flawed fire was  
the screeching of demons and they could not exorcise that from me  
and I was sorry.

no matter how many times my lips were sewn shut my eyes could not be covered

and I saw and I saw and I

understood things that good girls are not supposed to understand and  
my eyes said too

much my eyes thundered and blazed and they could

not be stifled,

merely quarantined.

a child born with a spirit of life that could not be removed;  
an abomination between idyllic humans and sacrilegious beasts.

I still apologize for not being able to break

my will to live.

I lied and I pretended that I had been drained and trained and

I wish I could say I won one way or the other.

carving out my core and letting it be sacrificed; I had nothing left to  
anchor me,

dissipating, or

embracing the demons boiling beneath my skin and ripping them free  
igniting my skin to flames, but  
I am still water.

I cannot stay solid for long.  
it takes years for me to wear down a single rock and I am  
so tired.

I have a quiet voice now,  
and I wish I could remember how to roar.

# **Veterans Day**

By Andrew Tyree

Seasons change like a dying hearth,  
While the oak trees gather in their silence.  
It is not the end of any moment however,  
For endings require the loss of a beginning;  
What remains is only a nascent bloom.

Such is pity.

A world unknown remarks a world yet lost,  
Fueled by curious hunger destroying its surface—  
Insatiable creatures parsing above its depths.  
Inspiring effort of absolute nobility,  
Inspiring yet another change to the foliage.

Such is objectivity.

A woolen-cover is draped over a woman's frame,  
A man wrapped in a woolen-cloak.  
Both marching towards a Spring thus past,  
A procession formed by omniscient instructions,  
Hiding all the poisoned apples once eaten.

Such is knowledge.

A candid display; show of force or weakness—  
Perspective sets the stage.  
Much like yesteryears' reliance  
Of a tale solely worthy of spinning,  
On romanticized ideals of a world forged by shadows.

Such is honor.

A man's return heralded by the Ides of March,  
A woman's cry announces the return of Spring.  
For the crops, stock, and children have all needed her tilling.  
Awaiting an end to the insidious drum's beat;  
Instead graced by the first flake of Winter's snow.

Such is loss.

The Divine Comedy haunts the world's bowels;  
A lake of ice for impious offenders.  
Worry not man, woman, nor child,  
For its comedy is the greatest form of irony—  
Exclusive to the art of man's history.

Such is humanity.

# **Fade**

By Lindsey Unger

If ever the moon stopped loving the sun,  
And ceased to rise with the stars and fade to the  
    Sun's desire to reign once again,  
Then stars would throw themselves down among men,  
    To protest the Sun's broken heart and  
        Beg the moon to come back,  
    And reflect the Sun's rays once again.

For, when refracting against her,  
The sun was never more softened, nor more powerful.

# **Musubi**

By Lindsey Unger

A tree with strong heart and  
Weak roots never grows.  
Passion and bravado do not  
Grip strong enough to sow.  
A wise Sapling knows  
Not only do the leaves and flowers  
Need to gaze towards the sun;  
But the roots need to push deep  
Past anything that could break the hold.

Musubi is not just the roots  
Pushing, digging, extending  
For a stronger grip.  
Musubi is the dirt embracing the  
Encroachment back with hard intent.  
Yet only enough,  
To find the center  
And redirect.





***“FICTION reveals truths that  
reality obscures...”***

**Jessamyn West**



# Content Warnings for Fiction

*The authors recognize that readers may appreciate the following content warnings about topics addressed in their pieces:*

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# The Umbrella

By Kyra Bass

Of course he had no umbrella. Why wouldn't it rain on the one day he almost took his umbrella but decided on leaving it at home? As he walked from his dead-end job back to his gloomy apartment, the rain started falling harder with every step Uvio took. But he was used to it, constant disappointment. He had a job working for the local paper which was no longer selling. He lived in a cheap apartment with a dying plant from his stepbrother—the only family he had that still talked to him. He had no one, but he was fine that way. Cursing to himself, Uvio made for the trees, hoping to get a little coverage from the rain. As he looked for the direction of his apartment, his atrocious sense of direction reared its ugly head. Uvio made eye contact with one of his coworkers.

Paulina was one of those girls who was overly optimistic, always cheering for everyone and offering help. No one in the office had the heart to tell her that her "help" was condescending, for fear of her having a crying fit. It really pissed Uvio off. *That attitude.* And there she was walking right toward him, a large animal print umbrella in hand. Paulina waved at Uvio, an overly wide smile covering her face.

"Marky!" Paulina greeted Uvio, taking notice of his soaked shirt. She partially held her umbrella over him. *How the fuck do you take the last name Marvik and turn it into something else?* Uvio would never understand. He hated the nickname she gave him.

"Hi," Uvio responded rather unenthusiastically. If he had it his way, their interaction would've ended there, and he would've continued looking for buildings that might lead him back to his home.

"What're you doing around these parts? You lost? If you want, I can help you find the next bus station," Paulina offered.

"Thanks for the offer, but I, uh, live..." Uvio searched around, noticing a small path leading deep into the forest. "Over there!" Uvio

pointed near the path he just found. “I was just, uh, taking a small walk through the rain.”

“Really? I didn’t know there was a forest in town.”

*Neither did I.*

“You’ll have to throw a house party soon! I’ll tell everyone in the office!” Paulina practically yelled.

“House party?” Uvio grimaced.

“Well, you said you have a house now. You told me before that you lived in an apartment,” Paulina said, her condescendingly sweet voice grating.

“Oh yeah! I’ll plan something soon. Uh... Well, would you look at the time, I—I’ve got a lot to unpack, so I’d better get going,” Uvio said and excused himself from the situation.

“See you later!” Paulina chuckled.

Uvio started walking down the dirt path and wondered how the hell one person could take an already shitty situation and make it a billion times worse. On the plus side, the trees did provide better coverage from the rain. Uvio continued down the muddy dirt path, his clothes getting heavier from the water. He spotted a house past the trees.

*A little bit further before I ask the Internet for instructions back home. I’ll never be able to find my way if I always depend on my phone.* His walking pace quickened to a jog in the hopes of reaching better coverage from the rain; the trees provided less protection than he expected. After a dreadful five more minutes of walking in the rain, Uvio encountered the house and regarded it with suspicion. The outside of the house was ragged, with splintering wood planks. Cracked, dust-coated windows gave the house an ominous appearance. On top of the already broken exterior, the rain wasn’t helping the old paint job.

Uvio knocked on the house door, his shirt sleeve covering his hand for fear of the splinters from the unpolished wood. Uvio timidly called out a greeting and waited for an answer. Not surprisingly, there was no response. He felt stupid for even performing the action. The door unhinged as Uvio went in for his third knock. He could swear he felt a

gust of dust and dirt fly past into the raining sky as the door opened. Uvio timidly stepped into the old house. Shrugging off his soaked suit coat, Uvio looked around what he assumed was a dining room.

There were dust-coated ornate wooden tables and chairs. White lace and a tea set were placed on one of the tables. Cozy-looking rugs kept most of the floor from becoming a filthy dust-covered white. Uvio glanced out the window behind him; he could tell the rain wouldn't let up any time soon.

Tired of standing in the doorway, Uvio walked over to a different room. Greeted by a small grand piano, the room gave off a warm glow as if its tarnished rosy interior kept the room from aging. Uvio noticed several other instruments lying on a shelf: a violin, a rusted flute, and an open box filled with spare strings. He also took notice of the disheveled carpet in the center of the floor. Uvio lifted the cover off the piano. He never got far in his musical studies. The closest thing he ever got was brief upright piano lessons from a friend he visited after torturous hours of school.

He placed his fingers on a few of the keys he recognized from childhood; the sound of an untuned piano filled the room, ruining the peaceful noise the rain provided. Uvio looked around as if he were a child caught doing something bad. Thoroughly embarrassed, Uvio walked out of the room toward the stairs.

He gingerly placed a foot on the first step, worried by its dry-looking exterior. The last thing he needed was to fall through the stairs. After deeming them safe, he carefully proceeded up a winding staircase. He looked around in the hallway for a moment before he opened the first door he saw. A quaint but filthy-looking bedroom fit for a child. Uvio ascertained that it was a little girl's room from the frilly clothing and stuffed doll lying between a pillow and another toy. He took a few pictures of the room. He could make a somewhat entertaining article about this "lost" or maybe "haunted" house. Uvio couldn't actually see himself calling the old house haunted; it felt like a mockery to all of its delicate and quaint contents.

He exited the room and entered the one placed squarely next to it. A small toilet and an even smaller bathtub and sink. The only thing of interest in the old bathroom was the broken mirror. The wood appeared

behind the glass, a stain upon its surface; on closer inspection, Uvio noticed a trace of blood smeared on the glass. Several products were strewn on the floor, as if a fight had occurred. That or a very clumsy fool. After taking a few pictures, he strayed to another door in the hallway. Uvio found it peculiar because it was the only door in the hall that was partially open. He took his apartment keys from his pockets and placed one in his hand, making a fist, thinking it better to be armed than naive.

He slammed open the door with a quick flick of his empty hand, scanning the room. Uvio took note of what he saw. Unlit fireplace, walls filled with books, a small couch where a man was lying. Cautiously, Uvio approached the couch. He stood over the stranger who might be the owner of the house. The man had long, green hair that almost spilled over onto the floor. He wore an off-white button-up shirt that was covered in lace and black slacks. Uvio felt awkward staring any longer but couldn't help but analyze the stranger's face with envy. The stranger had a long, slender face that looked soft as he rested on the filthy couch. His skin was pale and smooth as porcelain. Uvio practically ran to the closest bookshelf out of embarrassment.

For all he knew, that could be a well-dressed homeless man, cosplayer, or serial killer. Uvio felt his heart beating faster than usual; he blamed his increased heartrate on his jogging to the bookshelf. Was he really that lonely? He picked up a book with a green cover from the shelf, hoping the words would stop his brain from overthinking and overanalyzing his staring at the stranger. Uvio cleared his throat loudly, as if coughing would remove any lingering thoughts. He quickly covered his mouth, worried to wake the stranger. Uvio kept an eye on the green-haired individual; when the stranger didn't wake at his absurdly loud cough, Uvio got concerned.

He walked back to the couch and hovered over the stranger. Uvio lightly tapped the stranger on their shoulder, deciding it would be the safest place to randomly touch someone. Uvio's brow furrowed at the continued silence until he saw the stranger shift slightly. Uvio exhaled loudly, happy the stranger was not dead, or worse, violent—at least not yet. The stranger sat up slowly, flowing green hair spilling off the side of the couch.

“Pardon my rudeness,” the man said quietly. “I don’t quite remember why I’m here.”

“Y—Yeah, me too.” Uvio awkwardly laughed. Almost immediately, he looked at the ground, embarrassed for the thousandth time all week.

“Oh dear...” The stranger looked around the room. “I’m terribly sorry, I cannot fathom how the house has fallen into this state. Some host I am,” the stranger said dejectedly.

The stranger rose from the couch with such grace that Uvio could only compare him to a soaring bird. Already, Uvio could sense the stranger was careful with words; a faint accent painted his vocal cords as he spoke. The way he spoke piqued Uvio’s interest; he sounded like a character from some old book, like Jane Austen.

“Oh,” Uvio said, brought back from his train of thought. “I don’t mind—Wait, you’re the owner of this place?”

“Thomas Clavot, pleasure to have your acquaintance. Most refer to me as Tom. I am the owner of this house, yes.” Thomas spoke gently and extended his hand to Uvio. He carried an air about him, as if he had to be on his best behavior. Uvio shook his hand, cringing at the clamminess of his skin against Thomas’s.

“Is something the matter?” Thomas withdrew his hand swiftly, his brow furrowed. “Have I hurt you, sir?”

“N—No, that’s not it! It’s not important anyway...” Uvio said, an agitated tone taking over his timid and awkward one. “And don’t call me ‘sir,’ okay?”

“Understood.” Thomas approached the door. “If it’s not a bother, could you stay here while I tidy up the place?”

Taken back by Thomas’s words, Uvio nodded, gazing out the window where the rain still fell in an endless torrent. Uvio heard Thomas’s gentle steps down the stairs, but he paid no mind to the loud wind as it seemed to shake the frame of the house. As the footsteps quieted, Uvio’s mind was filled with regret and confusion. He hated how he acted during their first interaction, as if he was a shy schoolboy. He never acted that way, even when he was in school. Confusion racked his

mind; he wondered how the hell some guy was living in the chaotic and dusty filth of the house. Granted, the cringe wasn't called for, but Uvio couldn't stop playing over the stranger's—no, *Thomas's*'—worried face during their handshake. For Christ's sake, he acted like he committed murder. Yet Uvio couldn't help but want to console him further even after his pitiful elaborations.

Uvio was brought out of his thoughts when he heard what he assumed was the front door slam open. Uvio's initial thought was to call the police, but his mind told him there was no need. Instead, he settled for going down the stairs to check on Thomas. In front of the door, Thomas stood, drenched in water, a teapot in hand. *Did he just fill the teapot with rainwater?*

"Hold on," Uvio said, walking back up the stairs. "I'll grab you a towel," he shouted down the stairway.

Uvio entered the bathroom and grabbed a white towel off a hook on the back of the bathroom door. Uvio eagerly ran down the stairs and handed the towel to Thomas.

"Thank you ever so much." Thomas said, receiving the towel. "I'm quite clumsy, aren't I?"

"Not at all," Uvio refuted.

Uvio watched Thomas dry himself with the towel, his movements performed with careful precision. Suddenly realizing how weird it was to still be staring, he briskly turned away. Okay, maybe he was lonely, but he was weirding himself out. Uvio wandered back into what he called the music room. Uvio gasped, amazed at the transformation the room had taken with the little bit of cleaning Thomas had performed.

The room seemed to glow despite the darkening sky. Uvio looked out through the now clean stained-glass windows. He hadn't noticed that the windows were tinted before, but they were colored with a light peach tone. The house's atmosphere had shifted in a welcoming manner. From the house's previously gloomy fog came a feeling of warmth as the rose- and peach-colored room glowed.

Uvio glanced out of the room, looking for Thomas; he spotted him over a small kitchen sink. As Uvio looked on, he could see Thomas's

expression. It was one Uvio could only describe as lonely: a feeling Uvio knew a little too well. It was the quiet type loneliness that snuck up on someone in their best or worst times, just when someone thought they were okay. Despite the look on Thomas's face, he seemed never to falter in looking poised and gentle. As if the dishes he attentively scrubbed were baby animals, he held them with a softness akin to a pile of feathers.

Uvio returned to the music room. As if reading a newspaper, Uvio scanned through the sheets of music on the piano, seeing what notes of music he could pick out. Thomas walked in with a tea tray in his hands. Thomas set down the tea tray on the small wooden coffee table in the room.

"I do hope this excuses my previous rudeness," Thomas said.

He poured Uvio a cup of tea, his long hair draping over his shoulder, before walking around the table to the piano. He lifted the lid with gentle care, playing a few of the notes. He shook his head, opened the top of the piano, and looked at the strings.

"You'll have to excuse me," Thomas said after assessing the piano. "I'll be back in a moment."

While Thomas was out of the room, Uvio took his phone out, taking a few pictures of the rosy peach room. Uvio picked up the teacup Thomas filled and took in the smell. The smell of raspberry dominated the red liquid, but Uvio could pick up on the smallest touches of honey, vanilla, and mint that accompanied the beverage. Thomas walked back into the room, a small tool in his hands. Uvio watched attentively as he saw Thomas do what he could only assume was tune the grand piano.

When he finished, Thomas set the tuning tools next to the other instruments and sat next to Uvio on the couch. Thomas picked up the second teacup and took a dainty sip.

"I hardly have visitors, as you can see. Did you perhaps seek cover from the rain?" Thomas set his teacup on a matching saucer plate.

"My sense of direction is really shitty," Uvio said, rubbing the back of his head. "I got lost."

"In the forest?" Thomas looked outside.

“I didn’t know we had a forest! One second I’m in the park, then one of my coworkers showed up. One thing led to another, and I ended up walking here.” Uvio rolled his eyes just thinking about his interaction with Paulina. “People like my coworker are so annoying, you know?” Uvio shifted so he was facing Thomas. “They never shut up! Think they’re the greatest thing on the earth, like saints or something.”

“Such people can be bothersome.” Thomas rotated his back to face Uvio better. “They never seem to stop wanting to help, even when it’s unnecessary.”

“Exactly!” Uvio said, throwing up his arms. “So who’s it for you?”

“I’d say my mother.” Thomas grinned at Uvio’s enthusiasm. “She could never stop trying to do everything and nothing all the same.”

“Those people are the worst.” Upon realizing he might’ve insulted his new acquaintance, Uvio panicked. “No offense, of course!”

He felt relief as Thomas let out a small laugh.

“I take no offense at all.” Thomas sighed. “A dreadful woman, indeed.”

“You can relax,” Uvio blurted out.

Thomas gave a slight raise of his left eyebrow.

“Well, I mean, you look so stiff, and I just don’t want anyone thinking they have to act a certain way around me.” Uvio looked at the piano across the room, mentally punching himself. *Who the hell tells someone that?* He felt the couch shift and looked over.

Thomas eased his stick straight back to lie on the couch properly. “Thanks,” he said, sighing. “Force of habit, I guess.”

The two fell into a comfortable silence as Thomas’s “gentleman” facade softened. Uvio focused on his cup of tea, admiring the China cup it was in. He could feel the air change from a stiff awkward one to one that was more relaxed. Uvio thought about how normal people make small talk, and he scanned the room.

“Do you play?” Uvio asked, instantly feeling stupid. Small talk wasn’t his strong suit, and he was pretty sure it never would be.

“I do,” Thomas said, rising from the couch. “What would you like to hear?”

Uvio picked out a random book from the shelf.

“Can you play anything out of there?”

“Gladly.” Thomas stood up to sit down at the piano with the sheet music. Uvio let an imagination he didn’t even realize he had wander as Thomas played out of the book. Thomas’s hands looked like they danced as he played, his fingers flying up and down across the keyboard in an effortless-looking gesture. No fool could understand the skill and practice that went into each individual movement and sound his hands produced. The songs he heard made Uvio feel tired—the tiredness that made you want to lie down, but not completely lose consciousness for fear of missing out on the rest of the day. There were a variety of songs that Thomas played, each one producing a different daydream for Uvio; dreams of nature, mythical beasts, and ideas for articles to write flooded Uvio’s mind as he listened. As the songs came to an end, Uvio opened his eyes slowly. He gave a small but quiet round of applause before walking over to the piano. As soon as he stood up, he could feel his body calling him back to the couch.

“That’s so cool. Thanks a lot, Thomas.”

Thomas looked taken aback when Uvio spoke his name.

“Thank you, too. I probably wouldn’t have woken up from that nap if you weren’t there.” Thomas smiled. He brought his hand to his chin. “Have you told me your name yet? I am quite forgetful.”

“I never told you? My bad.” Uvio held out his hand timidly. “It’s Uvio Marvik.”

Their second handshake went much better than the first. Uvio was surprised when neither let go first, as if their hands belonged together. As they released each other’s hands, Uvio looked out the window; the rain had stopped.

“I suppose I should get going...” Uvio mumbled, wishing the rain had lasted longer.

Thomas rose from the piano bench and left the room; he reentered with an umbrella.

“It’s still sprinkling, so you should take this,” Thomas said. He looked calm and happy, but Uvio could sense the melancholy in his voice.

“I’d like to see you again,” Uvio blurted out, taking the umbrella from Thomas.

“Me too, Uvio,” Thomas said. He looked surprised, a faint blush covering his cheeks. “You can return my umbrella some time, how about we meet again then? I’ll have the place all cleaned up, too.”

“Sure,” Uvio said, staring at Thomas in the doorway of the house. “S—See you then!” He stumbled out of the house.

Thomas lightly laughed at Uvio’s clumsiness, a smile of adoration on his face. Uvio waved a final time to Thomas before walking toward what looked like the city. There were many things about their meeting that Uvio found odd, but despite the strangeness of their meeting, an awkward smile grew on his face. Perhaps forgetting his umbrella was the best thing that could’ve happened to Uvio. He looked back, but the path he had just been walking was gone, no house in sight.

# Absolution

By Alex Bell

As I walked up to the front door of the house, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window. I saw an unquestionably middle-aged man, and I didn't like it, so I looked away. The house was small and brown, set back from the road a ways down a rocky slope, tucked under a fan of trees. I could hear water running, and I was careful not to slip on the pine needles. When I knocked on the door, I assured myself that no one would answer, and that would be that. I would be absolved. No tears, no hugs, no handshakes—no strained, well-meaning small talk. The record would show I put forth the effort, and I could finally let go of the last twenty years.

Then the deadbolt snapped back. Damn. Damn it all.

“Hey,” the kid said and disappeared inside before I could respond, with a wave for me to follow. I immediately saw he had dark eyes and hair like his mother, had that shaggy dog look. But he was tall and permanently sleepy-eyed. Just like Will. The screen door creaked loudly as I pulled past it.

“Did I wake you up?” I asked. His text said I could show up whenever. It was currently 11:20.

“No, I’ve been up for a while. Do you want coffee?”

“Sure.”

He went into the kitchen. I stood by the door in the living room—spartan like a dorm, boxes along the wall, then a TV in the corner with a camping chair in front of it padded with blankets. Pale sunlight shone through the window. A video game was paused on the screen. I recognized it: *The Legend of Zelda*. He came back with two steaming mugs.

“You playing *Ocarina of Time*?” I asked as he handed me one of them.

He shook his head. “*Majora’s Mask*.”

“That’s the one where you run out of time?”

“Yeah.”

I sipped my coffee. “See, I can’t do games like that. It’s too much like real life. It’s depressing.”

“I understand. I’ve been streaming it on the weekends.”

“Oh yeah? Making some money?”

“A little bit, not really. C’mon, let’s go out back.”

We went through the kitchen, then out the back door. The enclosed porch was under construction, just waiting for glass and paint. Wood benches were built into it at each end. We sat down together. I looked out at the small stream I had heard from the front yard and the forest beyond. His nearest neighbors were out of sight. The birds were singing.

“I used to watch your dad play those games all the time,” I said. “I never really got into gaming, didn’t have the patience for it. I still don’t. But he would always show me what he was playing, when I came over to hang out with him. *Bioshock*, whatever the big game was at the time that everyone was playing. Whenever I see something related to *Zelda*, I think of him now. I can’t help it.”

“Me too. My grandma, she gave me all his gaming stuff. Most of it is at her house. But yeah, there’s games, books, little figurines.”

Speaking of books, there were a few stacked on the bench between us. The one on top was *Letters from a Stoic* by Seneca. It had a Roman statue on the cover. He said they were for school.

I said, “Yeah, tell me about that. So, this place is all yours?” I held out my arms for emphasis. The kid was twenty-one and already a homeowner.

He held his coffee with both hands and bobbed his head proudly. “It’s mostly from my dad, but some of it came from my mom’s family, money they set aside for me.”

“Have you had any girls over yet?”

He blushed and said no, not yet. He said, “It’s my grandma. The house took most of the money, so she made a deal with me that as long as I was doing school, she would, you know, fund my luxurious lifestyle. I’ll get a job when I graduate, of course.”

“That’s awesome, that’s so cool.”

After a pause, he said, “She was really happy when I told her that I had talked to you. She thinks a lot of you. She said you were one of the best people in my dad’s life.”

Now I felt my own face turn hot, and I attempted to extinguish it by taking a deep breath. “Thanks. That was very nice of her to say.”

He straightened in his seat. “What was he like?”

“He was a really good guy. I know everyone says that, but he really was. He didn’t have a malicious bone in his body. I can still remember meeting him, fifteen years old. He was two years younger than me, so I kind of ignored him at first, you know? Two years feels like a big difference when you’re younger. But then we got real close. And we were friends for, like, more than two decades?”

His expression got real serious then, like this answer pleased him, confirmed something he was already certain was true.

I said, “I’m not surprised at all he set aside money for you. He was ridiculous like that. I mean, when someone has an addiction, it’s like their personality is all uneven. They’ll be really good in one area of their life, and then totally hopeless in another. Your dad was probably better at managing his money than I am, even now. But he couldn’t hold down a job, you know? So it kind of cancels it out. Can’t hold down an apartment, and on and on.”

He nodded.

I tried to collect my thoughts. I stared into the trees. I wished I was in Hyrule, finding a sword, going on a quest to save the world. But I couldn’t; I had work in the morning. “When we were barely out of our teens, he went through a bad breakup. This was after your mom. I don’t know exactly what happened, but he had a tense phone conversation

with this girl. And afterwards, he stayed drunk for two whole days. Just wasted. I know, I was there. When he finally came out of it, I told him: you can't be doing that. You have to find some other way of dealing with your emotions. Because once you get in the habit of coping with things in this destructive way, you're done. It's going to mess up your whole life."

The kid downed the rest of his coffee. He said, "Well, you were right."

"I swear, I gave him heart-to-hearts for over a decade. I tried."

"That's all you can do."

"It didn't do much good. I shouldn't be giving anyone advice. My own life has been a dumpster fire for the past year."

"I heard. You and your wife split up?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we've been separated for a few months." I picked up Seneca, flipped through the pages. "Maybe I should read this."

"You can borrow it, if you want."

"No, thanks. Probably wouldn't understand half of it."

"There's a lot of good stuff in there. Nero made him commit suicide."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. And his wife tried to kill herself too, because she didn't want to be without him."

I skimmed the back of the book. "That's rough," I said. Then I looked over at him as I put it back with the others. The kid's eyes were far away.

He sighed. "Things were different back then. Nowadays, everyone wants to live as long as possible. They didn't think like that at all. For them, it was worse to go on living."

I took that as my cue to hit the road.

In the car I got so lost in thought, I nearly fell asleep. He said, if I wanted to, I could come over the following weekend and hang out while he was streaming his game. He said I didn't have to play or be on camera—I could just keep him company. It would take my mind off of things. I said I'd think about it and let him know. It was strange to have a younger person look out for me like that. Someone who didn't even know me. This new generation, they're something else. With the way the world is, you'd expect them to be worse than people my age. A lot worse. But, miraculously, they're not. At least not all of them.

I promised myself to tell him positive stories about Will next time. Not him making a drunken fool of himself, day in, day out, for years. Not him burning every bridge in his life well beyond redemption. Not him barely seeing his own son half a dozen times. Not how we stopped talking. And definitely not about him looking like a green wax sculpture in hospice care, unable to speak and barely breathing, until eventually, he stopped that too, leaving the rest of us in the room feeling every emotion in the world. Except surprise.

I drove up the hill to the road and went home.

The lack of TVs in the bar kept the weekend crowds away, for the most part. But it was still early. There was one medium-sized screen up above the mirror, behind the counter. The old owner refused to upgrade further than that, and the new owner, his daughter, honored this tradition like she was Joan of Arc. Guys would suggest she bring in a couple more, and she would flatly refuse, tell them, "Go somewhere else if you want every sporting event blasting at you at once." Rock music I couldn't quite make out was playing above my head. She was a nice lady, we went to school together. She was real shy back then; if another kid tried to talk to her, by her eyes you could tell her stress level was through the roof. Forget about a teacher. Working in a bar cured all that. You could still see that gentleness in her face, though, too gentle for the likes of me. Lately, I was here more than would be considered wise, and whenever I overheard someone asking about the TV situation, I always imagined her being burned at the stake over football.

Callie finally showed up. She dropped her bag under the table and sat down across from me. She didn't try for a hug or kiss, and that made it easier.

“Sorry,” she said. She was thirty minutes late.

“It’s not a problem.” I went and got drinks for us.

“How was your day? Did you go see him?”

“It was fine. I didn’t stay long. But it was good to finally meet him.”

“Was it awkward?”

“A little bit. Not really. I mean, he’s twenty-one, he’s an adult now. He’s not a little kid.”

“Did he remind you of your friend?”

“Kind of. He seemed really chill, mature. Way more mature than I was at that age.”

She nodded. Behind her head on the far wall was a mounted deer head. When she leaned back in her chair, she had antlers. Neither of us said anything for a while; we people-watched and looked past each other, avoiding eye contact.

Callie pushed her drink to the side of the table, then laid out her forearm. “Check it out.” She rolled up her sleeve. She had a fresh tattoo, shiny with a thin layer of lotion—one of those old stringed instruments that cherubs and angels play.

“It’s a harp,” I said.

“No, it’s a lyre.”

“That’s what I meant. I couldn’t think of the word.” I leaned in close, examining it—silver, with some impressive detail. “Cool. What made you want to get that?”

“It’s for my name. Calliope.”

“The Greek goddess?”

“She was one of the Muses. Dante wrote about her.”

I sipped my drink. “Does Mrs. Dante know you got that?”

“Stop—”

“I’m just saying. I’m not sure she’d appreciate it. She might feel a little threatened, understandably so.”

She peered over at me, smiling, a smile that was partially a threat. She didn’t have antlers now; the deer head was looking over her shoulder at me. His expression was calm and stoic. I felt like he was reminding me not to take things too seriously, that we all end up like him in the end.

“Dante didn’t write about me,” she said.

“Well, you’re still young. It came out really good.”

“Thanks.” She rolled her sleeve back down.

“How was your day?” I asked.

“It was good,” she said quickly with a certain lilt to her voice, like she was a customer service representative. I knew we were getting to it now. “I’m sorry about the other night. I usually don’t drink that much.”

“It’s okay.”

“I can give you money for the wall.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Or I can come over and fix it myself? I know how to do it.”

I shook my head. “It’s not a big deal. I’m not concerned about it.”

“Okay,” she said. Her phone went off, and she attended to it. Time slowed down as we finished our drinks in silence. I gripped my empty glass, bracing for an explosion that never came. Then she picked up her bag and stood out of her chair, eyes still locked on the screen, as though something there was urgently calling her away. She asked me if she could see me this week. I said I didn’t know and left it at that. And then she left. I looked at the deer; I swore that guy was smirking at me now. More people started coming in, in groups. Mindless and triumphant about the outcome of some stupid game.

I can psych-one-oh-one myself, you know? I can combine pattern recognition with self-reflection. Not to brag.

But I try to save everybody. I try to save them, and then I beat myself up when my ego trip doesn't pan out. I resent the other person for not being the way they never were. It's a glorious way to live, let me tell you. Callie and I only went out together three times, and that was enough for me to realize I hadn't outgrown my shtick. But the wheels had fallen off. She was the kind of girl I would have recklessly chased in my twenties, but neither of us were there now. The cycle of infatuation, anger, and blaming had been replaced by a general embarrassment. And just being so tired. She'd chucked a beer bottle at my head and put a hole in the wall last time she was over.

When I came in and turned on the light, my eye went straight to it before I could stop myself. I should cover it with something. The cardboard boxes in my small apartment made me think of the kid. At least he had an excuse. But this was only temporary. I wondered how long that would be.

I tossed my keys on the coffee table and sat down on the couch. I had purchased a little plastic Link to put on the table as a tribute to Will. Link was posed twirling through the air, sword coming out of a blur about to connect with an enemy, giving his battle cry. I stared at it. *This is how you should have been*, I thought. Fearless, cutting through any and all obstacles. *What happened?* I pulled out my phone, brought up the kid's number. I didn't have anything to do next weekend. I should just tell him now I'd be there to be his streaming buddy, his co-host or whatever. Even if I didn't play too, if all I did was watch. It'd be worth it just to be there with him.

# Jack and Screwtape (Scene 1)

By Jessica Caldwell

## DISCLAIMER

This script and characters were inspired by true events. However, the content of this script in no way is meant to act as a historical recount or claims to be true in any fashion. All characters and content have been thoroughly researched, but they still do not seek to accurately reflect the reality of the lives of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, or any other individuals living or dead whose identities have been referenced in this script. This script does not seek to represent the personal views and opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect the positions or opinions of any organization, institution, or individual living or dead with which the author is affiliated or has depicted within. The content presented within this script is based on the author's creative choices and research of the subject matter.

## Act 1

**Setting:** The year is 1941, the last night of April. The setting, Lewis's study. It is a cozy, comfortable place, lit by electric lamps. The study is a room that when you look at it, you would get a thick smell of pipe smoke staining old wood upon breathing. Even if you hate smoking, you would somehow feel comforted by the scent. This room has been well lived in and loved. Countless classics have been penned here, but anyone could house this room in their home. It is not a remarkable room. Ideally, it would look as close to images of Lewis's actual office as possible. An ornate, embroidered chair sits stage left beside an end table in front of a window with grand drapes. Should the window ever be opened, a single electric lamp post should be visible outside as an ode to *Narnia*. The chair and window are stage left from a door. A large wooden desk with a fountain pen and papers is center stage, with a leather rolling chair behind it. There is a bookshelf stage right. This is the setting in which the entire play will take place. A clock somewhere stage right reads 10pm.

*[Enter JACK. He is smoking a pipe and reading the Guardian. His attire is an itchy-looking corduroy suit partnered with a white undershirt and pressed tie. A round pair of glasses sits on his nose.]*

**JACK**              Rubbish. Absolute rubbish.

*[JACK throws the paper into the trash.]*

**JACK**              If this war goes on any longer, those parasites will find themselves lacking enough boys to dress as men. Now this. This propaganda. Religious duty being spun into patriotic nonsense. I'd say war times bring more guilty souls to the church than a Christmas Eve service, but there are hardly enough souls left on our soils to attend. I pray in death they find the comforts of the Lord.

**SCREWTAPE** You're quite right, Old Boy. I'd know.

*[The stage darkens, and through some sort of demonic lighting, smoke, or effects, SCREWTAPE now sits in the chair beside the window. Dramatic lighting for this conversation. JACK has fallen from his chair, paralyzed by fear.]*

**JACK**              What is this? What manner of creature are you?

**SCREWTAPE** Screwtape, master tempter. It's a pleasure, Jack.

**JACK**              You know my name?

**SCREWTAPE** I know a great deal about you; you've caused a great rumble down below these last few years. Slipped right through our fingers, you did.

**JACK**              I don't believe you.

**SCREWTAPE** You believe in my face, you believe in our Father Below. You don't believe that your return to the Church went unnoticed in the otherworlds?

**JACK**              You're nothing more than a figure in my mind, a damnable apparition. You poison my head.

**SCREWTAPE** You know as well as I that your mind was already poisoned, Old Boy. Isn't that what your beloved church teaches? That fellow John said it best, dare I say. Your kind cannot be without sin, yes?

**JACK** You speak the words of a well-read man, you quote scripture. But all I see is a demon intruding on my house.

**SCREWTAPE** One must know the ways of the Enemy.

**JACK** The Enemy? You're an animal.

**SCREWTAPE** Perhaps.

**JACK** What do you want from me?

**SCREWTAPE** A favor, nothing more.

**JACK** I make no deals with devils. I'll have no part in anything that puts me in your 'favor.'

**SCREWTAPE** You test my patience, Old Boy. I suggest you lend me the floor, and you may get out of here with your soul yet.

**JACK** Oh Lord...

**SCREWTAPE** He won't be intervening for the time being. Now listen. As I said, I am a master tempter. You're a well-versed man, you must be able to glean that at one point I was a journeyman and junior tempter. We tempters come from below, counteracting the hand of the Enemy. Quite amusing how your kind depicts us, little red creatures that sit on your shoulder whispering naughty little tidings into your ears. We all get quite a kick out of it, probably because it isn't far from the truth. Each of us has a Patient; we take care of them from birth to death, guiding them away from the Enemy with the gentle hand of a mother. It's an art of sorts, not something your average imp can succeed in without proper training. You may be surprised I find myself an uncle, and my nephew himself now roams your Earth as a junior tempter with his first Patient.

**JACK** What do I have to do with any of that?

**SCREWTAPE** Nothing, really. The issue is I'm far too busy to check in on him day and night, so he sends me letters when he needs advice. I need a scribe to send my responses.

**JACK** I'll be no scribe of yours, devil. I'll be no Patient, either.

**SCREWTAPE** Correct, you'll not be a Patient. Not while I'm here. Your cooperation with our correspondents will guarantee protection against your current tempter.

**JACK** My faith keeps me from your fingertips. I need no further protection.

**SCREWTAPE** You'd gamble with your soul? These are dark times, Old Boy. A break from our unholy intervention may very well give you time to focus your mind on the Enemy. If that isn't enough, consider this instead: a proper exchange. It must be obvious I cannot very well have my nephew's Patient receiving our letters. Wouldn't your kind be fascinated to know how we function? How we think?

**JACK** You're asking me to publish your drivel.

**SCREWTAPE** No, I'm giving you permission. You're an author, do with my words what you wish. Publish them as a cautionary tale, satire, whatever you please. Consider it a commentary on your anti-faith.

**JACK** You put much faith in me. If it's true that you know me and my work, then you'll know that I'll not defend you. Each turn of the page will just bring more mockery to your name.

**SCREWTAPE** Go ahead then. I need my letters to reach my nephew more than I care about being mocked by your type. It'll happen anyway, at least this way I'll be benefiting. You're an intellectual, you've considered the possibilities of life and death. Dabbled in sciences to disprove ours and His existence. You know just as much of the Greeks, Norse, Celts, and Irish religions as you know of your own. You're a smart enough man to know as well as I that knowledge is power, and your arsenal is well-equipped. But nothing so powerful as the knowledge of those who work against you. Pardon as I quote myself, one must know their enemy. Do you concede?

**JACK** I do.

**SCREWTAPE** And you will swear before your God that I am your enemy?

**JACK** I would swear upon my life. I've walked your path before, I'll not return to it.

**SCREWTAPE** Then to know me better would be to better oppose my hand. Wouldn't you gain that insight you so desperately sought those years you wandered in our precious darkness, directly from a source?

**JACK** I pray my soul to keep away from your darkness.

**SCREWTAPE** The only dark you shall feel while we speak shall come from my shadow.

**JACK** You're a tricky devil.

**SCREWTAPE** A master.

*[SCREWTAPE holds out his hand to shake JACK's. JACK looks at him with pure contempt; perhaps he lifts his head or steps away in defiance.*

*SCREWTAPE is unfazed by this disrespect.]*

**JACK** I will not shake your hand.

**SCREWTAPE** I would never expect you to. I'll be seeing you tomorrow night then. I expect the first letter to be published by the second.

**JACK** The second? You're mad if you think I can make that happen.

**SCREWTAPE** I don't expect you to on your own. Trust me, Old Boy, your strings aren't the only ones I'll be pulling during our partnership. Tonight, pen a letter to your publisher, whoever he may be. Tell him you'll be writing weekly, and then get some sleep. Tomorrow night, we begin.

*[Somehow, SCREWTAPE exits the stage, leaving JACK alone. JACK returns to his desk, basking in the feelings his agreement has left him with. After a moment, he retrieves the copy of the Guardian from the trash. He then picks up a pen and a fresh piece of paper. The next lines may be read verbally or played over a recording.]*

**JACK** My dear friend, I find myself at a crossroads. To find oneself communing with devils is a deplorable thing indeed, but I feel as if a story could bloom from one that lives outside my mind. What lies ahead should I undertake this task is one of reflection and philosophy; I am certainly no stranger to the whispers of demons. With all your talk of wraiths and things between our Earth, I wonder what you would do if

presented the opportunity to speak to one of your own creations. Would you speak with the dark beings that plague your little halflings? Perhaps you'd invite them over for a smoke so that you could write their story before you ran screaming for your life. Keep your eye upon the *Guardian* in the coming days. I'll spin you a story that is sure to catch your interest.

Faithfully yours, Jack.

*[Dim stage lights]*

**END OF SCENE 1**

# Hatchet Wolf

By Rita Chambers

Spring sat heavy in the woods of Vermont, the air thick with the moisture of the recent downpour. It painted everything darker, staining the trunks of trees and dripping off emerald green leaves. After hours of it, the rain finally eased off into a drizzle, weak sunlight filtering through the clouds and remaining drops of water. Later it would be moonlight, nearly as bright with the full moon forecasted. Despite the time since I'd last driven on this road, a couple months given to each of my cyclical migrations, I recognized each bend as I rolled over them. A tarp stretched over the lumber stacked in the bed of my truck, protecting it from all the weather I'd driven through in the New England states in the past few weeks since I put it there. I figured it would last me a couple more. It settled nicely over the weeks as time passed, especially when I made sure to take the forest roads slowly, easing the old pickup leisurely along the curves.

My precious old pickup had seen plenty with me, my one stalwart companion through the years, and carried me faithfully each day of the routine. After a few of my rounds, the locals in the towns I passed through began to recognize me. To shake up the old routine—and to keep them from recognizing my old truck as well—I changed the paint color every once in a while, keeping to a few simple, common colors. Currently, I had it painted a subtle shade of dark blue, a shade that hid us both on forest trails and on highways. The truck purred unfailingly, no matter how many loads of hand-cut lumber I filled the bed with for as long as I could keep them, and no matter how many hitchhikers I allowed into the front seat beside me. Hitchhikers didn't tend to frequent the back country roads I preferred, but that left just enough for some good entertainment. I always loved the girls—they told the best stories. Especially the pretty ones. Men agreed to get in my car less often than girls did, but whenever I picked one up, I retold some of the stories from the girls, giving both of us a good laugh.

The hitchhikers didn't usually come out in the rain, especially not

with how heavily the storm fell less than an hour ago. Muscle memory guided my eyes to the side of the road, but even then I missed her at first glance, only catching her when the angle changed and I saw her face. She kept moving for about fifty feet instead of stopping like girls usually did when they heard me coming so close, which gave me plenty of time to observe her.

Her clothing nearly camouflaged her against the trees, with rain-soaked brown hair, an olive canvas jacket, and dark jeans. She didn't miss a step, break stride, or change her steady, even gait when I pulled up behind her and kept rolling. She carried herself differently than girls usually did in the woods, with complete comfort and ease, which made her completely different from every other hitchhiking girl that rode beside me over the years. It took me off guard and piqued my interest. I preferred an easy pickup, but a challenge or two always kept the routine fresh, reminded me why I did it. A dry spell marked the past week for me, and my truck and I missed the company of a body in the passenger seat. Especially a girl.

Finally, I pulled up far enough that she couldn't ignore me anymore and rolled down my window to get a better look at her. I even turned down the static coming through the radio to turn my senses on her. Without the rain-slick window, I could see that her hair curled, even if the rain weighed it down and pulled it almost straight. It took me a beat to recognize the backpack in the lumpy shape hanging from her, obscured by a tarp only large enough to protect the contents but not the rest of her. Her clothing hung heavily off her body with the rain, meaning I could see her figure without difficulty. She stood tall, even under the weight of the water and her burden, probably due to the musculature that broadened her shoulders and stole any softness from her figure. I preferred a woman with more curves, but beggars can't be choosers, and the idea of company made me eager to get her in the truck.

With my car in view, she finally turned toward me and looked at me through the window. She looked rather unimpressed with whatever she saw of me, either the old pickup or the man driving it. I knew I couldn't rely on my looks to lure girls into my truck, my face craggy and pockmarked with age—and even before then, in my youth, I'd looked about as attractive as a pair of gym socks left to fester and mold too long. But her face looked just as plain, if not as ugly, almost canine in a way I

couldn't otherwise describe. Her keen, light brown eyes traveled along the truck to the bed, seeing the lumpy cargo resting there, and I couldn't help but speak up.

"They're just logs, girlie, nothing to worry about there! You can take a look, if you want," I joked, but to my surprise, she actually started toward the bed. Watching from the rearview mirror, I saw her lift a corner of the tarp, scan over the lumber, and nod to herself. She set the tarp back down and returned to the window, standing close enough that I could smell the faint odor of wet dog, matching her appearance. I stifled a grimace at the idea of the difficult process of removing the smell once I finished with her. She didn't touch the car but did raise her eyebrows expectantly, the way someone did when they wanted a bothersome person to leave them alone, not the way someone should when someone offered them help. I just about drove off right then, but my frustration kept me planted. I couldn't pass up the challenge of finding my way under her skin, making her regret catching my attention. I put on one of my best smiles, the kind that usually got a girl into the truck beside me.

"Where are you headed? Seems a shame that a girl like you would be walking out here in the rain, and we're pretty far out from civilization." Usually, a comment like that might crack the brave veneer, earn me a little flinch or some widened eyes. No such luck with this girl, and that made me want to figure out how to get her to break.

She hummed lightly. "Massachusetts. I'm fine out here on my own, but I'd be an idiot not to accept an offer of a ride." I expected a lower voice than the one she spoke with, and it didn't even seem like she pitched it up. Some girls did that when they wanted a ride and thought they needed to earn it. I always liked that. This girl, however, spoke almost indulgently to me, like I owed her gratitude for the favor she did just by listening to me. Like there was an unspoken, "*Wouldn't I?*" hanging onto the end of her sentence. It only steadied my resolve to get her composure to crack, and my friendly grin widened a touch.

"Well, I'd never call someone I don't know an idiot, but that is an awful long way to walk all by yourself. At least let me take you to the next town over?" I knew the woods well enough to know that hours of driving stretched between us and the next town, even more at the speeds I

preferred to drive. Plenty of time for the sun to set. Plenty of time to get nervous in the dark, especially if the cloud cover held over the full moon.

She gave another irritating little hum and boldly reached through the open window to unlock the truck door and swing herself in. I expected the same song and dance from hundreds of other trips, for her to pull on the door and yank against the lock, for that moment of embarrassment to win me a point in this game she unwittingly entered, but clearly, I needed to work harder than that. Her backpack slid smoothly to the floor, landing with a heavy *thump* between her feet, and she carelessly leaned her wet back onto my seat. The rudeness surprised me, although maybe it shouldn't have, given her attitude. I took a breath of wet dog smell, which did not steady me. She made no move to buckle in, but that suited me just fine. I could find some rocky ground to rattle her over, I knew just the place.

“So, what’s your name? Unless you want me to just keep calling you girlie,” I said with a chuckle after a couple minutes of silence and taking the truck at an easy, slow pace. Her walking pace had been faster than my driving speed at times, but not at others, just to ensure she couldn’t find the excuse to leave. Although, she didn’t seem like she would be moving any time soon, stretching her long legs into the footwell as best she could. As strong as they looked, covering the ground between Vermont and wherever her destination in Massachusetts landed must push the limit.

“If you have to call me anything, Marie works,” she replied, and I waited for her to ask me my name. She didn’t, but I refused to offer it. That short sentence gave me enough to place her accent. Not quite Boston, and fainter, like she spent a lot of time away, but I could still place a few distinctive sounds as coming from Western Massachusetts.

“What’s bringing you home?” Smug pleasure at the victory from the correct guess of her origin in the area, a certainty, flared and died like a match in my chest when she just gave me another of those damned hums. The dismissive little noise, like a teacher clucking dismissively over a boy figuring out what she thought common knowledge should be, as if teaching meant judging getting it wrong instead of teaching it right. Whether she knew it or not, she gave me enough time to calm down, ease up on my temper. The time for that could come later. I only knew time

passed from the surrounding forest, about a mile and a half between question and answer.

“I always feel the need to return to the old roots when I lose someone.” She spoke lightly, which didn’t match her words, confessing fresh grief. I’d struck gold with that little tidbit, no doubt about it. Something to finally dig into her about.

“Well, that’s a darn shame, Marie, sorry to hear about your loss. When did they die?” I purposely let my tone sound disingenuous, glancing over to see if that got any reaction. To my surprise, it did. She *smiled*. A tiny smile, sure, barely there on her mouth, more in her cheek and the corner of her eye than anything, but a smile. I couldn’t be sure, with my limited view of her face in profile, but that tiny smile seemed smug. Far from the kind of reaction I wanted, and I felt my blood beginning to boil in my veins again.

“Last month. He was a good friend, a gift to the world. You’re right, it is a *darn shame* to lose him.” She was mocking me, no doubt about that. Her hands came up, toying with one of her drying curls.

Unsure of how to continue, I just drove along, finally finding that rocky patch to shake her up. It was even downhill this way, but she barely seemed to rock, bracing herself with one hiking boot pressed to the front of the well at her seat and keeping her position by that alone. In another situation, one where her every action didn’t piss me off more and more, that control might impress me. How unfortunate for her. She didn’t give me any more information on her dead friend, and she never asked after anything about me. As I drove, the miles rolling by and the minutes slipping with them into hours, the suspicion began to sneak up on me that maybe, just maybe, knowing about her didn’t give me the power I wanted from it. And that made me furious.

Fortunately, as time went on, the storm rolled back in even harder than before. Thunder rumbled angrily above, lightning streaking the sky. It made the woods seem darker than they should be at that time of day, sunset still over two hours off. I decided to try and rattle her again; a news story from the last town I stayed in had slipped into my mind. Probably brought on by her wet-dog stink.

“You said your friend died last month?”

One of those stupid little hums in reply, but I forged ahead.

“Isn’t that the time that serial killer started up? The Werewolf, they’re calling him?” I used her same tactic as before, keeping my tone lighter than the subject matter demanded. It worked—her hands finally stopped twisting and untwisting the coil of hair. A point for me, I thought.

The Werewolf was on a killing spree, and they named him that because of the brutality of the murders. Murders so vicious that the cops attributed the first few to the animal they named him after, until the next batch all showed up in urban areas stripped of any intact clothing they might have worn. I couldn’t remember the exact number of fatalities, but I did remember two digits, the first being a 2 or a 3. Not bad, for a new upstart.

“Yes.” Her smile fled her purposefully neutral mask, and I felt one of my own tug at my lips. It took effort not to let it stretch across my face.

“Any relation?”

“No. He was overseas. Besides, he’s not his type.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Werewolf doesn’t kill good men. Not like him.”

“Most of those men’s crimes didn’t end up being proven.”

“Or disproven.”

I grunted a reluctant assent to her statement. Technically, all alleged wrongdoing by the victims ended there, as allegations, but that never stopped people from speculating about the pattern to the deaths. But I didn’t want to talk about the Werewolf, not really. She didn’t need to be scared of him, her tone becoming bored again and her hands rising to fuss with her hair once more.

“Rumor has it the Hatchetman is back in Massachusetts, too.” It didn’t, but I did get her hands to stop again. They even dropped the curl and settled in her lap. Well, one did. The other curled around her forearm, a kind of self-soothing gesture, I assumed.

“Is he?” Finally, I got a change in her tone that didn’t feel smug or dismissive, even as she took on the same kind of false lightness I used. Finally, her mimicry didn’t feel like mockery. I preened, just slightly, at not having to explain the uncaught serial killer, a man so prolific that his body count allegedly went as high as the triple digits. Or higher, if they found all the bodies.

“Oh yeah. He’s had to change up his pattern by the sound of it. Lucky for you, otherwise he’d be right here in this neck of the woods.” I took one hand off the steering wheel to gesture around us, and I got to enjoy the way her eyes tracked my hand before her gaze moved out into the trees, darker with each passing minute. But then she showed me my mistake.

“If that was the case, I’d owe you one.” Then her voice became dismissive again. “Good thing he isn’t here, hm?”

My knuckles blanched white with how hard I clenched the steering wheel in my anger, preventing me from reaching out and punching her. Those irritating little fucking *hums*.

“If he hasn’t changed up his pattern, then he’s definitely out there. It’s only a rumor that he has, after all.” I couldn’t keep my tone steady and light anymore, and I felt the shift in her demeanor as I all but snarled at her. I glanced over and saw her fingers creeping toward the door, still unlocked. Her face didn’t change from that steady mask, her gaze still locked on the trees rather than acknowledging my glances her way. Her body had stiffened, coiled tight and ready to move. If she insisted on it, then fine. She could move. I slammed on the gas, knocking her back into her seat as the truck leaped forward.

I took the forest road curves at speed now, knowing the route by heart, my destination in mind. The authorities had found too many of my hiding places and dumping grounds for my comfort, but the one I thought of now evaded their knowledge. I could take my damn time with this girl. After hours and hours of rage and tension bubbling up under my skin, my turn to get my piece arrived. I pictured in perfect detail exactly where each of her pieces would go in the area. My breathing rasped in and out in ragged huffs of rage, the tension in me breaking after yet another of her perfectly easy little dismissals.

“You think you’re so tough, don’t you? That just because you live in the twenty-first century that you don’t have to worry about anything in the woods. Well, I’m telling you, *girl*, you’re all much too eager to parade around like you’re not prey anymore. Someone needs to remind you of your place on the food chain, and it’s *below* men like me,” I crowed over the roar of the engine, and I could just barely hear her breath catch.

Good. I deserved respect from her, more than she gave me when I gave her the chance. She could make it up to me by giving me her fear now. I couldn’t spare a glance at her face this time, so I imagined it, that mask of indifference and that smug little smile transformed into a wide-eyed gape of fear. Her fidgety hands clenched with their own white knuckles, a self-made bruise across her forearm where her hand still rested. I pictured that bruised forearm, mentally removing it from where it rested in the woods in my mind’s eye, setting it among the logs in the truck bed to rot and wait. A first piece to place in my new dumping ground, whenever I found one. A savage grin spread across my face as I imagined it, but then the passenger door clicked open and sent the reverie splintering away from me.

To her credit, she didn’t even scream. By the time I slammed on the brakes, she had disappeared so completely she might as well have melted into the trees.

I grabbed my hatchet and a flashlight from their tucked away compartment and climbed out of the truck, shining the beam around to look for her, and saw the spot where she had landed. It looked like she knew exactly how to fall and roll and get back up, the mud barely disturbed. But thankfully, the rain gave me a perfect trail.

“Oh, come on, *girlie*. You know who I am, don’t you?” I followed the boot prints, every step, even the erratic sharp turns, probably in an attempt to lose me. I allowed her to impress me. She never once broke stride, even when making such snap decisions. The fall must not have hurt much.

“I’m the Hatchetman. I’ve got one of the highest kill counts in the country, and no one’s ever gotten away.” The storm rolled away again, leaving the trees as ample cover to block out the rain that still fell. The clouds thinned to reveal weak moonlight. The clear air carried my voice well; I knew that she heard me from wherever she hid.

I followed her trail right into a little clearing, where heavier rain would have wiped the prints away before I found them, leaving me unable to track her. Fortune favored me that night. The rain barely sprinkled down anymore, and the tracks laid there fresh and clear. I started across the clearing, on the lookout for her through the trees. I called out over and over, taunting, threatening, even starting to describe everything I planned to do to her once I got my hands on her.

Then something slammed into my back, and white-hot pain stabbed through my lower left back, wrenching a cry from my throat. It dug around in my back, twisting brutally before pulling out, a hand shoving me forward.

“Do you ever stop fucking *talking*?” I didn’t recognize the low snarl in my ear as her voice for a heartbeat. I turned, stumbling, landing in the mud, turning my flashlight beam on her. There stood Marie, a large hunting knife in her hand. I saw red dripping off it, and the pain suddenly made sense. My knowledge of anatomy, learned from so many bodies, gave me a clue of where she stabbed me, and the feeling of hot blood gushing from my back, too fast, told me the rest. Slowly, my eyes traveled up to her face, the neutral mask transformed into a snarl of rage.

“I—What?” I gasped, fumbling for my hatchet where it had landed, but unable to find it in the mud by touch.

“I didn’t realize you’d be so *annoying* when I picked you for my next target,” she growled, stalking forward. I scooted back, trying to get my feet beneath me. But where she was steady even in the mud, I couldn’t find purchase on the soaked ground. Seeing my struggle, a wicked grin stretched across her face. Her teeth looked almost inhumanly large and sharp in the flashlight beam.

“What do you mean, ‘target’?” I didn’t realize that she had led me right where she wanted me, pinned against a tree, until my wounded back struck the rough wood. I cried out and dropped the flashlight, white stars fizzing across my field of vision. The flashlight beam wobbled as the handle stuck in the mud and fell flat. By now, the clouds were gone, allowing the light of the moon to fill in around the flashlight beam. The bright, full moon seemed to burn through the clouds, illuminating her in silver and gold. I felt dizzy and lightheaded, my feet going numb in my boots.

“God, you’ve been at this too long to be this stupid.” Her volume lowered. She dropped her blade into the muck, then began peeling off her muddy jacket.

I watched in dazed horror as the canvas fell to the ground, which left her dark t-shirt to reveal her forearms. And most importantly, she revealed the brutal bite scar on the forearm clenched beneath her fingers. All the while, that horrible grin stayed on her face, growing wider and wider as her bones snapped and rearranged, the shape of her body changing.

Her hands landed firmly in the mud, her shoulders reshaping to better support her weight on them. Her feet kicked free of her boots one at a time and landed back in the mud, digitigrade and clawed and covered in gray fur turned silver with moonlight. Her face lengthened, teeth sharpening and coming forward, the grin feral and canine and still there. My eyes locked on hers, and I couldn’t look away, even as she crouched back on her haunches, gathering power into her body. Blood loss left me feeling floaty and distant from my body and the clearing. All my focus centered on her, where she stood solid, grounded, earthly.

I watched her pounce, the last conscious parts of me registering mild surprise. I never once thought that a girl could be a serial killer.

Then her front paws caved my chest in, and I didn’t think anything else.

# The Café Guitarist

By Oleander Coyne

The soft glow of warm, amber lights through an oversized window with several “Open Mic Night” posters taped to it, paired with the gentle aroma of ground coffee beans, brought your attention to the café first. It was the icy wind that pushed you, like several others, to enter the cozy space, a small bell above the door chiming your presence to the staff. People were scattered about in small groups in the dimly lit space, while a simple stage toward the back had been set with a single bright light upon a microphone and a stool, beckoning a performance. A single barista waved you over to the counter to take your order so you could focus on finding a seat.

As you settled into one of the wooden chairs, your ears picked up on the sound of an acoustic guitar being tuned to the right key. Looking over at the stage, you were met with the sight of a lanky guy wearing skinny black jeans, a stretched-out tee, and hair styled in a faux-hawk while perched on the lone stool. The mic was adjusted to focus on the instrument within his embrace. There wasn’t a long pause before a melody began to resound from the guitar along with a soft hum from the man. A deep, unwavering feeling of peace began emanating from the lone performer as the melody overtook the room.

You felt your worries from the day melt away as you were drawn into the performance, watching as his hands masterfully manipulated each chord with practiced precision. You then found yourself looking up to focus on his face. He wasn’t looking in your direction. Actually, you realized he wasn’t looking in any particular direction around the venue. His stare was off somewhere else, completely unfocused on this place... the gaze of someone focused on something far off in the distance.

His eyes only closed as he began to sing, a silky baritone vocalization adding a new color to the world he seemed to be in. It was as if the world around you faded while your heart fluttered at hearing this intimate expression of love for his trade. With your gaze focused on him, you noticed there was a gentle fondness in his expression as he continued

to craft each note. It became unclear to you how much time passed, but when the song came to an end, it was as if the frozen world resumed once more.

A bittersweet feeling lingered with you when you left the café, along with the melody.

# The Keys to Success

By Sophie Denmark

A million years ago, Sybill's home was enclosed in iron and covered in flowering vines of ivy that drew in crowds for more than just her fame. It was no wonder this was where she wrote all her stories; her home was marvelous. Children and adults alike flocked to that quaint cottage to take photographs, ask for autographs, or just do some writing beneath the trees of the park across the street. In the years after her retirement, though, her motivation for upkeep fled just as her creativity had when her typewriter broke. The home became a house, and though it was full of framed photos of her children and their children, there was nothing comfortable about it. The walls were now peeling and exposed jagged boards, the hardwood was cracked, and tapestries of cobwebs filled every corner. Though her books would live on, their awards and fame eternal, the admiration for Sybill fleeted. People disgraced her online, saying she was nothing but a washed-up woman with no real talent.

In her golden days, she was revered, respected, understood. Her novels were unlike anything readers had ever seen. But as with any aging woman, that reverence turned into an utter disdain rooted in nothing more than jealousy—jealousy of her success, jealousy of her ability to retire, jealousy of the lack of a masculine figure in her life. She had been in love once, for a few short years. Their marriage quickly crumbled when he began calling Sybill nothing more than a liar, a bluffing coward. The online discourse shattered his reputation, and he killed himself before reaching forty.

Pandora never understood why her grandmother wrote on a typewriter for all those years; she knew computers were more readily available, accessible, and certainly maintained an efficiency that Sybill's method did not. As if rehearsed, Sybill's response was precisely the same each time: "There's just an inspiration I found from my typewriter that I never did from computers."

When Sybill finally died, thousands of fans online came together to express their utter depression at her passing. How would they move on from this? Sybill was their favorite!

Pandora was the last of the grandchildren to visit her house. Most of the furniture had been distributed to other family members; the cabinets were fairly empty, with nothing but a few hideous plastic containers that were stained with tomato sauce. Even the attic had been ransacked. Pandora thumbed through cardboard boxes, finding nothing but vintage clothing that ripped at her touch, a few outdated smartphones, some photographs of Sybill's ex-husband, and a few dusty books with digitized faces staring up at her. It was the end of the day, and she was losing motivation. The house had been a ghost town since before Pandora was born. There was nothing to find.

Except for, hidden beneath a creaky floorboard, a wooden frame with protruding keys and a few external knobs and gears. It was the holy grail in Pandora's eyes, an awestruck device that had created utter magic decades ago. She had never seen it in person before, just in a few old biographies about Sybill. It was dusty and much heavier than she'd expected, but it was hers. She'd always wanted to follow in her grandmother's footsteps; this was her perfect way in.

Pandora spent the next few weeks cleaning it up, finding videos online about how to service it. She went to yard sales and vintage stores and thrift stores searching for replacement parts, some of which she was convinced just did not exist. But after a few messages with sketchy people on the Internet, she found all the parts and got the typewriter back in working condition. Her first time pressing a key caused a gentle, inspiring breeze to wash over her. It was Sybill, she was sure of it.

All the scrapped ideas for short stories and poetry and entire full-length novels of Pandora's were stored in a notebook. In fits of anger, she'd ripped up dozens of sticky notes with ideas, but she'd kept them, anyway. *Let's see if Grandma was right*, Pandora thought, beginning to type out a title for one story. The words came to her like magic. Letter after letter, word after word, sentence after sentence. Within mere minutes, she had an entire three-page short story. She attempted to recall the process of writing it but could only remember a frenzied blur of black

letters and click-clacking. She tossed aside “Unnamed Story #1,” then moved on to another. This second piece, a poem, was called “Daylight.”

Centered at the top of the page, she wrote this, and then words began to appear on the paper. Not in a metaphoric, “blinded-by-inspiration” sense, but literally. Her fingers were not even on the typewriter now, and one by one, the words continued to etch themselves into the paper. In seven timed minutes, a perfectly materialized poem had written itself. It reflected Pandora’s exact inner vision. Beyond her title and name, she hadn’t touched a single key.

Panic overcame her. Had she been drugged? Was she sleep deprived? Schizophrenic? Poisoned? She flung the paper across her bedroom and prepared another story. Again, the exact same thing transpired—somehow, telepathically, the typewriter materialized her vision onto the pages. It started small, as simple poems with expansive, beautiful vocabularies, then grew into entire short stories. Four pages became twelve, twelve became thirty, and before the week was up, she had written an entire novel with two hundred pages.

Pandora told no one. If she exposed the truth, she’d either be institutionalized or have her device confiscated. She let her friends and family read her work, partially hoping they’d stare at a blank page and blink confusedly. But no one did. “This is really great stuff,” they’d say, or, “Following in Sybill’s footsteps, I see!”

Weeks passed, and she continued having her ideas written. It was like this typewriter was her ghostwriter. But they were still her ideas, right? She was the creative visionary; the typewriter was just a device that made writing faster and easier. After another impressive novel, Pandora began researching the process of publishing. Her mother helped pay for an editor, saying she wanted nothing more than her daughter to honor *her* mother in this way. The editor, a man with a neatly groomed mustache and a suit so stiff each movement rustled, looked like the kind of guy who would love to harrow a teenaged girl over her work. Pandora was terrified during that first video meeting. All of her hopes and dreams were about to be shot down by this man, surely.

But that didn’t happen. He put down his copy, straightened the pages, then folded his arms neatly on the desk. “I read it twice,” he said. “I couldn’t so much as find a grammatical error. The plot was... perfect.

It was captivating, innovative, creative. Your vocabulary is spectacular. Young lady, you have a bright future ahead of you.”

This process continued with editors utterly floored by Pandora’s writing capabilities, leaving no notes. Some of them even refused to accept payment. One asked her to sign a copy so that he’d have it when she was world-renowned. Slowly, her novels began to fill the shelves of local bookstores, then corporate-owned. People began to recognize her in the streets. Love and hate accounts were made on every social media platform. Clips were taken from her interviews and turned into slow motion video edits. Freshly graduated, she had no reason to attend college now. She had made all the money she would ever need. There was a movie in the works based upon her first novel and a TV series for another.

She met with a reporter to discuss her newest release. “You’re especially popular for how efficiently you write these stories, Pandora. Can you tell us a little bit about what the entire writing process looks like for you, from brainstorm to release?”

It wasn’t a lie when she replied, “All I do is think of the idea. And then my typewriter does the rest for me!”

Laughter and applause filled the arena. “You’re the greatest writer since Shakespeare!” one woman yelled.

“You take after your grandmother!” screamed another.

And so this went on for years. Most of the time, Pandora would write a title or a brief sentence describing her hopes for the novel. Other times, she’d simply type a word and let the device write the story itself. As she continued this cycle, she began to lose inspiration. By thirty, there was no real inspiration behind her work, just words chosen at random from a dictionary. But each novel was just as beautiful. And they sold just as well. This was everything she’d ever wanted. Ever since she was a young girl, she’d wanted to be a published author, like her grandma. If only Sybill could see her now. Dozens of novels published. Fans crying at the sight of her. Much of her money was donated to programs designed to help polish children’s writing abilities so that they may one day be published themselves.

When filmmakers reached out about making a documentary about her, she had to decline. “My process is a little unconventional,” she’d say. “I’d rather keep things private. Mysterious, if you will.” She’d then flash them a smile, and they’d understand.

And when she moved to a quaint town in upstate Washington, her house was designed to resemble her grandmother’s. Maybe Sybill had been deceitful, but she was still imaginative. Her memory was worth preserving. So, Pandora had her house painted to match, planted identical flowers, and decorated with similar interior choices. *I am my grandmother’s unfinished dreams.*

Then there was the flood. Gushing water crept in through the windows, beneath the door, and up through the floor. Furniture and decorations swam in the water like innertubes. All her flowers sank. When Pandora woke, she didn’t bother reaching for her phone or a light. She knew her house by heart. With trudging steps, she made her way to the study, where her typewriter typically sat between colorful lamps and potted succulents. But she was too late. The typewriter had hit the floor, shattered into fragments of polished wood and keys and gears and knobs. Water had flooded the interior components.

It was irreparable.

Pandora’s career hit a steady decline after that. No more fresh novels. News outlets and social media blogs chalked it up to depression about losing her home. Fans made weak attempts at supportive movements. It wasn’t writer’s block or depression or the circulating rumors of a miscarriage or dissolved marriage or a political statement. Pandora wanted to keep writing. She tried paper, computers, even an expensive typewriter she found online. For decades, she continued trying. *If I wrote once, I can do it again.*

And as she was lying still in the hospital, oxygen tank clinging to her nostrils, airy hospital gown exposing her legs, she stared up at the fluorescent overhead lights.

She was a liar, she finally realized. Her typewriter was a box of lies and chaos that she had released upon the world. And yes, she would be remembered forever. The truth would never come to light. But was it worth it?

The typewriter could have answered. Pandora could not.

# I Remember Everything

By Emma Gilman

Sexuality had never been a concern of mine. I'm a woman. I like men. That's how I was raised. That's how I'm *supposed* to be.

My mother and father preached the Bible to me relentlessly when I was younger, and I can still hear their sermons, even now.

"Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh," my mother's sweet cadence drifted through the living room of my childhood home. It was meant to be an encouragement—that I would one day find a Christian man to love—but now that I was... questioning things about myself, her words sounded more like a warning. Like she was telling me to keep my head on straight.

What? Because liking a woman was a sin?

It didn't feel like one. And it shouldn't because on August 28, 2024, I met you.

*August 28, 2024*

A light mist was falling from the heavy gray clouds above, the silhouettes of city buildings reflected in Seattle's rain-covered streets. My feet splashed through a puddle as the traffic light turned green, and I sprinted through the crosswalk, barely avoiding a car whizzing by.

I was late for work... again, but I was their best barista, so they couldn't fire me.

The cluttered chatter of customers welcomed me as I pushed through the rusty door of A Muddy Cup—an eclectic but insanely busy coffee shop in downtown Seattle. I was twenty-two and still working in customer service, but hey, everyone had to start somewhere.

“Juno, you’re late! You’re training the new girl today,” my boss, Katie, a thirty-year-old divorcée with thinning blond hair, yelled at me from behind the bar.

I groaned, awaiting another tortuously long day of explaining how to make a vanilla latte to some college freshman trying to pave their way through life. If I heard the words “aesthetic” or “city girl” come out of their mouth, I would shoot myself.

Pulling my black hair into a loose bun at the base of my head, I followed Katie into the back. When I saw the new hire waiting with her brown Timberland boots crossed over each other and her head hung low to look at the phone in her hand, I stopped dead in my tracks.

“Juno, this is Bella. Bella, this is Juno, one of our assistant managers,” Katie drawled, but her voice had already faded into silence. She disappeared from my peripheral, and all I could see was... you.

*Bella.* What a beautiful name. I seemed to notice everything about you all at once. Your skin was like warm honey—golden Italian roots running deeply through your veins. You had short dark hair and even darker brown eyes, so brown they were almost black. You were wearing baggy camo pants and a white t-shirt that clung to your strong biceps. You were cool, dripping with ease and confidence, not to mention you were gorgeous, in that strikingly masculine way.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I whispered, nerves making me look to the floor.

And you chuckled like you knew that you made my stomach flutter just from one glance.

“Juno...” Your deep voice hung onto my name like you were rolling it around on your tongue to see if you liked the way it tasted. “That’s cute.”

I shook my head as my cheeks turned a shade of pink. “I’ll show you around.”

That day training Bella was surprisingly one of the best days I’d had in months, mostly because it didn’t feel like work. It was like I

already knew her—like I'd met her a long time ago. I didn't realize it then, but the day we met was the day my world shifted on its axis. Everything I thought I knew about myself changed, like I was born again, forced to discover the world for the first time.

In the weeks that followed, I looked forward to coming to work.

I awoke on a particularly beautiful Wednesday morning at 7 a.m. with a vigor I hadn't felt in a long time. My coffee tasted fresh and sharp, and my limbs felt rejuvenated, ready to start the day. I put on my favorite pair of blue jeans, a white and black striped turtleneck, and shoved an oversized shirt depicting the band Iron Maiden over my head. Tying a matching bandana around my head and pulling my headphones over my ears, I was satisfied with what I saw in the mirror.

I skipped out of my apartment onto Fremont Ave dancing to 070 Shake. Her raspy, grunge voice made me scrunch my lips and roll my shoulders as I sauntered through the Westlake Center—a busy strip filled with shops, cafés, and a carousel. I mouthed the lyrics despite the people watching me.

*Shut up, I wanted to tell them. Invisible directors are filming me in a movie right now.*

Eventually, those invisible directors had to cut the cameras, and I had to stop dancing like a fool because I finally made it to work.

Bella was already behind the counter preparing drinks for the early morning rush, and I sidled up next to her to help.

“Iron Maiden and a bandana...” She hung onto the words like she was trying to figure out what to say. “Might be my favorite thing I’ve ever seen you in.”

I hid a shy smile. Little did she know, I’d picked out the outfit just for her, hoping she’d see me as stylish and cool. “I was inspired by you. I wanted to give the whole lesbian style a try.”

She laughed so loud I thought she was going to bring the building down, and when she was done smiling, she leaned down to my level to look me in the eyes. “Job well done, Juno. Now focus, we have to get through this rush.”

I took in a heady breath, trying to ingest her cologne and absorb some piece of her to take home with me. “What if I can’t?” I whispered, and I knew she heard me because she smiled slyly.

She turned to walk around me before whispering in my ear, “I can’t either. I like you too much.”

There it was. She liked me. I watched with a goofy smile as she struck up a conversation with a customer at the register. Everything seemed easier with Bella. The flirting, the conversation, the honesty. She knew exactly who she was and what she wanted. She didn’t shy away or get nervous. For the first time, I knew exactly how someone felt about me.

For the next five hours, our eyes would meet from across the room, over our bustling coworkers, around the high-pitched squealing of the coffee grinder and the blaring music overhead, and my heart would settle deep in my chest as a wave of calm washed over me. I’d never felt that sense of peace before—that warmth in your gut that tells you you’re doing the right thing—that you’re in the right place with the right person.

But despite all the flirtatious comments and the secret glances we shared, it was more than lust that attracted me to her.

“So, are you in school?” I asked as the last customer in line settled into a table.

She finished pouring the strangest looking latte art I’d ever seen before answering, “Yeah, I’m in school to become an EMT, but the end goal is the fire academy.” She shrugged like it was no big deal.

I raised my eyebrows in question. “You make it sound easy.”

She chuckled, a dimple forming in her cheek. “It’s not easy, but I’m used to things not being easy. I played soccer at a D1 university, so easy isn’t really a term in my vocabulary.”

I grazed her back as I shuffled behind her to grab another steaming tin. “Wow. First a collegiate athlete and now an aspiring firefighter. You’ve got discipline.”

She flashed a proud smile at me. “That I do.”

*That* is what attracted me to her. She was hardworking, passionate, and driven—she had dreams and aspirations. Without even realizing it, after just weeks of getting to know her, I wanted to be her dream.

And I was, for a small, fleeting moment.

“You want coffee or something stronger?” she asked me after work outside A Muddy Cup, holding an umbrella over both our heads as a hard rain pelted at the fabric. Strangers ran into the coffee shop, seeking a reprieve from the cold, but I couldn’t have been warmer.

“You already know the answer.” I stepped in closer as water splashed at my ankles and her body heat pulsed off her in the little bubble we shared.

“Atta girl,” she said with a wink. “Tiki Bar it is. I’ll meet you there.” She left me with the umbrella and jogged to her car, the rain soaking her thick black hair.

I hurried to my car in the lot behind A Muddy Cup and immediately blasted my *When I’m In Love* playlist. Surely, I wasn’t in love, but things were good and that was enough for me. I pulled out of the lot singing my heart out to Etta James when my phone lit up.

*Mom*, the screen read. I sighed and turned down the music, my joyful mood now tainted, and debated whether I should answer. Confronting my sexuality had made my entire opinion of her change. Maybe it shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help but think that if she knew I liked a girl, she wouldn’t bother calling. Regardless of that, I slid the button to the right and answered.

“Juno!” my mother squealed on the other end of the phone. “It’s good to hear your voice, honey.”

The phone felt like dead weight in my hand, and my ear ached with how hard I pressed it to my head. “Hi, Mom,” I answered, turning down 5th Avenue.

She blabbed on and on about work and the economy, and when I finally managed to get her to stop droning on about her doomsday escape plan, she gasped. “I forgot to tell you.” Her voice lowered an octave and

took on the tone of gossip. “Aiden is gay. Can you believe that?”

Aiden’s my little cousin. He’d always been a little quiet and awkward, but I never would have guessed. Then again, my parents never taught me to guess. “Gay” wasn’t a term that was allowed in our Christian vocabulary.

Before I could even respond, she huffed out a laugh. “Your Aunt Rachel is even encouraging it. If he were mine, his shit would be on the front porch, and your dad would have already enlisted him in the Air Force.” She laughed like she expected me to laugh with her, and her voice was sharp and piercing as she ridiculed him for something that was out of his control—shamed him for discovering something inherent in himself: who he loves.

“I just don’t understand it,” she continued. “God laid it all out for us. ‘What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate,’” she quoted, and I could picture her shaking that dying brown hair of hers. “Men and women are made for each other. That’s how God made us.”

My heart started pounding in my chest, and I tried to take a deep breath as I pulled up to a red light. For some reason, I thought that if I ever told my parents I liked a girl, their love for me would outweigh their love for God. But I’d been naïve. I’d ignored what my parents might think so I could flirt with Bella, get to know her, and imagine what could be. But for the first time, I was realizing that maybe it just couldn’t be.

My chin wobbled as I fought off tears. If my parents were looking at me now, they’d hate what they saw—a girl looking for love, who just happened to find it in another girl. They would hate me. My mom spelled it out. My shit would be on the front porch, and my dad would enlist me in the Air Force. They’d kick me out—get me fixed.

And I couldn’t bear the thought of them treating me any differently.

“Aiden is looking at a life of loneliness,” my mom quipped.

I didn’t even say goodbye before hanging up the phone. There was too much noise, even in my now silent car, because all I could hear was my mother and father screaming at me, laughing at me, hating me. Tears welled in my eyes, and my hands shook so hard I could barely turn the

wheel to pull up to the front of the Tiki Bar. I took a wavering breath as I pulled down the mirror in my car to find wide, desperate eyes.

*Don't cry, don't cry*, I told myself.

Bella was waiting for me inside, and if I broke down, I wouldn't be able to pull myself back together. I could worry about my family later. Right now, I just wanted to see Bella's smile, feel her warmth against mine, and listen to her smooth voice.

"You can do this," I whispered to myself as I took one last glance in the mirror and shut off my car.

It was easy to shake off the conversation I'd had with my mom when I saw Bella leaning against the old wood paneling in the entryway. She stepped forward and wrapped me in a side hug as we meandered down the dark hallway into our own little fortress. The Tiki Bar on Pike Street had become a weekly occurrence of ours. Every Friday, we'd dive into each other's lives over piña coladas. A sense of familiarity hit me every time I stepped into the dimly lit bar decorated with swings hanging from the ceiling and booths tucked into secretive corners made for whispering. And that's exactly what we did. Whispered.

"So, when did you know you were gay?" I asked, leaning in as if we were sharing a secret.

Crinkles formed on the edges of her eyes as she squinted in thought. "I didn't come out until college, but I think I always knew. I don't know how to describe it." She shrugged as a small smile overcame her. "I have a distinct memory of my mom putting me in a dress when I was younger, and I cried and cried. I didn't know why, but I felt uncomfortable wearing those girly clothes." She stuck her tongue out like it was the most disgusting thought in the world. "It was easy for me to be friends with guys, too, because I was a lot like them. I liked sports and cars, and I just... felt distanced from what my sister and all her friends were like. I don't know."

"That makes sense," I offered when she began to shake her head as if she was embarrassed. She didn't have to be embarrassed by any of it, and she sure as hell didn't have to understand it, either. "It's just who you

are. I think you know that better than anyone. You don't have to explain yourself."

She looked at me sidelong with a twinkle in her eyes. "I told my mom I was gay during my freshman year of college when I dated this girl at LSU, and she said she was just waiting for me to tell her. She also said the best sex she'd ever had was in a threesome with my dad and another woman, but hey, I can't judge." Her chest shook as a laugh rose within her.

I was already cackling, and my smile was so big my cheeks hurt. "What? Your mom had a threesome with your dad?"

"Yeah." Bella huffed out a laugh. "She was so sweet, though. Said she'd always known I was gay and that she loved me either way."

As my heartbeat slowed, I found myself looking at the table, focusing on the grains of wood. How nice that must have been for her to have her family's support. I was jealous suddenly because after the conversation I'd just had with my mom, I knew my parents would never react that way if I told them. My mother would probably fall to her knees and threaten a heart attack, and my dad would stare at me like he didn't even know me. Then they would pray for me.

My heart broke a little then. My family was supposed to love and support me in everything I did, and to think that they'd shun me was unimaginable. "That's exactly how it should be." My voice wavered. "I'm sure your mom is so proud to call you her daughter."

Bella turned in the booth to face me, and she just stared, studying every inch. "You're probably the kindest person I've ever met," she said slowly.

"That's not true, I have my moments." I held my arms up in defense.

"What, when you're on your period? So do I." She smiled the goofiest smile I'd ever seen, and her teeth were blinding under the coconut-shaped light swinging above our heads.

I tipped my head back, laughing harder than I had in a long time. God, she was funny. But when I lifted my head, a wave of dizziness

washed over me. Was I already that drunk? Three drinks, and the rum had made a home at the bottom of my stomach, making my eyes heavy. Every sense was heightened—Bella’s cologne, musky like pine, her strong arms pulling at her gray t-shirt, and her fingers fiddling on the leather booth dangerously close to my leg. If she moved her hand just an inch closer, she’d be touching me.

When I blinked away the glaze over my eyes, I saw her looking at me with a frown on her lips, like she was focusing. “What?” I asked in a whisper, my words not sounding my own.

And then her hand was on my hand, her fingers on my fingers, and a surge of electricity shot up my spine. “I want you to want me as much as I want you,” she said. Her eyes had never looked so desperate.

My breath caught in my throat as I tried to form words. *Say something, anything*, I told myself. *Tell her how much you care about her—that you want to be with her*. But I couldn’t because she was asking for the impossible. Want her enough to come out to my parents, tell them I liked a girl, and hope they didn’t disown me by the end of that grueling conversation, is what she meant.

I did want her. I really did. But enough to change my entire life? Enough to change how my family—how *everyone*—would view me? I couldn’t do it. It was all moving too fast.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” I whispered, my leg bobbing up and down.

In a split second, the fun flirtation had been wiped away, and we were faced with reality. She was gay. And I’d always been straight.

In a perfect world, those things wouldn’t have mattered. In a perfect world, I could feel how I feel, act on it, and not face any consequences. But our world was far from perfect. I’d never considered dating a girl, and my parents wouldn’t accept it. I was faced with questions I didn’t have the answers to, feelings I didn’t understand, and choices I hadn’t ever made before.

I waited with an open mouth, unsure of how to get us back to what was easy.

She looked at me with dark, angry eyes before placing her hands on the table. The veins in her hands were a wild blue, darting up her arms in crazed lines as if they projected the emotions racing through her.

As she stood to rise out of the booth, I reached out and grabbed her arm. Her skin was on fire. “My parents—” I didn’t really know what to say—didn’t know how to explain something so unexplainable. My eyes pleaded with her, but I knew that I’d ruin everything if I told her the truth—that my family didn’t accept gay people, that they wouldn’t accept her or me.

But my silence said it all. She stood out of the booth and walked away without another word. Just like that, she was gone.

Her words echoed in my mind as I drove home, the sweet aroma of pineapples and coconuts clinging to my clothes. Bella pulled up at the stoplight next to me, and I buried deeper in my seat to avoid her eyes. I couldn’t look at her—not after what she’d just told me. Not after what I’d said. My knuckles turned white as I gripped the steering wheel, waiting for the light to turn green, and all the air seemed to leave the compacted vehicle, making my hair cling to my neck. I needed to get out of here.

I could feel her watching me as I twisted the wheel and turned right onto Broadway. Taking a deep breath felt like inhaling water. The air forced down my lungs burned hot and heavy, clogged with memories of our conversation.

Bella wanted me. Bella, the tall, beautiful, confident soccer player *wanted me*. And I wanted her. I didn’t understand why, but I knew how I felt, and I didn’t want to ignore what was obviously growing between us.

Working with her made me feel like a giddy teenager. We’d flirt like there was no one watching, and our sly touches and wary glances felt sweet and innocent. But this one conversation reminded me that we weren’t teenagers. We were adults navigating a cruel world. A world that was pitted against us.

I’d known two things my whole life: that I loved God and that I would love a man. But maybe it wasn’t so black and white. Maybe I

wouldn't love a man. And although that had the possibility of changing the rest of my life... maybe it was worth it. Maybe *she* was worth it.

After a torturous week of no communication, Bella asked to talk.

I knew what was coming, but I wasn't prepared for it.

I sat across from her in her car, the tension and awkwardness making the air feel heavy. Every time I took a breath, a stickiness seemed to coat my throat, like when you're about to cry and your lungs grow hot and inflamed, swelling with emotions.

"I think it's better if we're friends," she said. Her voice was flat, and her eyes were dull, not warm and chocolatey like they always were.

My stomach dropped. How had this happened? Why didn't she like me anymore? After only weeks of getting to know each other, she was already tired of the effort.

"Fine," I spat, angry about so many things. I'd spent the last week rethinking my entire life *for her*. I'd considered coming out to my family *for her*. And after all she'd put on me, she was just giving up?

"If I could grow something between my legs, I would because if I were a man, we wouldn't be having this conversation. If I were a man, I could easily walk into your home and be accepted by your parents. But that's just not the way it is, and I can't enter a relationship with you and risk all the progress I've made in loving myself for who I am. I don't ever want to feel small again, Juno."

Sometimes I forgot that Bella had been a little girl once. That she wasn't always this strong, confident woman. She'd discovered these feelings and felt lost and uncomfortable in her own skin. The particles of air floating around me suddenly felt that much softer. I could breathe again. Because the past couple of weeks, I'd felt what she'd felt—terrified of being unaccepted. And I couldn't risk her feeling that way again because of me.

"Okay," I whispered. "I understand."

She reached over the console to grab my hand, and my heart skipped a beat as her warm fingers locked with mine. “I’m doing this for you, too,” she said. “You are an amazing girl, but I know how much your family means to you, and I won’t be the one to jeopardize your relationship with them.”

The burning in my throat intensified, traveling up to my nose as tears sprang to my eyes. There was a small quirk in her lips and a gentleness to her. I looked at her with more respect and love than ever before because she cared about me enough to let me go. She cared about our hearts enough to not break them.

But mine was already broken because this was the first time anyone put me before themselves—cared about me enough to protect my mind, my heart, and my future. And it killed me. It made me want to crawl into someone else’s body and hide there forever. It made me want to burn the world to the ground and build something better for us.

“Friends?” she asked, her cold, hard-cut eyebrows rising. Her voice wavered, as if she was nervous that I’d tell her off.

She really didn’t know how much I cared about her, then, because I’d take Bella in whatever form I could. Wife, girlfriend, friend... none of it mattered. I just wanted her in my life.

“Friends,” I agreed.

It was A Muddy Cup’s annual Secret Santa Exchange, and I’d pulled Bella’s name out of a hat back in November. For a month, I’d contemplated what to get her and came up blank every time. There was nothing I could give her—nothing that meant anything, anyway. I was too scared to tell the world how I felt about her and make her my girlfriend, but being friends was nearly impossible. It seemed like there was no right answer—no happy ending for us. Maybe that was what I could give her. The truth.

That evening, I walked down University Street in a black trench coat and my coziest beanie. Winters in Seattle were brutal, making me blow warm air into my frozen hands. I practically ran inside Olympic Bar, dusting the snow off my coat and shivering as the door closed behind me,

bringing in a cold gust of air.

“Juno!” my coworkers announced, wrapping me in warm embraces that slowly eased the chill in my bones.

We settled down on plush suede sofas surrounded by walls of mahogany and antique chandeliers swinging above our heads. We sipped on our drinks as we rehashed the best and worst memories of the past year, like customers screaming over their cappuccinos being “too foamy” or The Seattle Times voting A Muddy Cup in their top ten for *Best Coffee in Seattle*.

“Now for the exchange!” Katie clapped her hands.

My coworkers eagerly hopped up and began swapping gifts with one another. Mark got me a pair of fuzzy socks and a candle.

Thanks, Mark. Really unique.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of Bella, holding out a white envelope. “Don’t open it now,” I said, pressing my lips together in a firm line.

She returned to her seat without saying a word, holding the letter gently like it was fragile. The veins in her hands pulsed a bright blue, and I was reminded of how strong she was. I was taken back to the first day I met her when she was wearing that white t-shirt. It stood so starkly against her tan skin, and her muscles pulled at the threads. Then I was whisked forward to the day at the Tiki Bar, when those same hands grabbed mine. Her touch had been so warm, so comforting, and suddenly, I wanted to cry at the hard truth that I’d never get to touch her again, never get to hug her, never get to experience the safety she offered me.

My coworker, Natalie, stood to exchange her gift, pulling me out of my thoughts, and suddenly, I could feel Bella’s gaze on me from across the room, lingering like a touch. And if her eyes could touch, they would have trailed up my bare legs, latched onto my waist, and sunk their fingers into my hair. I blinked rapidly to get her out of my head. Five seconds in her little atmosphere, and I was consumed by her.

After another hour of reminiscing, the party had wrapped up, and everyone was heading home. Bella walked beside me, although no words were exchanged, and when I made it to my car, she tore open the seal of the letter.

“You don’t have to read it now.” I shook my head and rubbed at my tired eyes. I was going to die of embarrassment if she read it in front of me.

“I want to,” she said quietly, unfolding the small piece of paper. Her eyes scanned the page, a little frown settling between her eyebrows.

*Bella,*

*Today is my last day at A Muddy Cup, so my gift to you this Christmas is honesty. Here it goes.*

*In a smothering, smoke-filled world, you are a breath of fresh air. You’re the sun breaking through the clouds, shimmering like dew in the grass. You’re the smell of pollen in the summer, the aroma of cinnamon sticks in autumn, and the warmth of a flannel blanket on Christmas day. You’re like home—all the best parts of it.*

*I wanted you to be my home, and it kills me that you couldn’t be. It kills me even more that the only thing stopping us from being happy is my parents. And I hate that I came into the world only knowing one side of things.*

*I’m afraid of everything, but what terrifies me the most is not giving you the love you deserve. I couldn’t live with myself if I kept you a secret because you, Bella, are not a secret. You are beautiful. But it’s time I let you go because for some reason, you won’t let go of me.*

*I need you to know that you’ve changed my life for the better—showed me that not everything is black and white, and I couldn’t imagine who I’d be if I hadn’t met you.*

*Your friend,*

*Juno*

Bella’s arm fell to her side, and she looked up at me with tears in her eyes. “You’re quitting?”

I nodded as my nose stung, and my eyes welled with tears. “It’s easier that way.”

“Easier?” Her voice raised an octave in anger.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and looked at her clearly. “I don’t know who I am.” I shrugged, my trench coat feeling like a ton of bricks on my shoulders. “And I don’t know if I want to spend the rest of my life with a man or a woman. *This is* my chance to figure that out. But I can’t keep seeing you every day. It raises even more questions that I don’t have the answers to.”

Bella swiped at her cheeks hurriedly, like she didn’t want me to see her cry. “Am I ever going to see you again?”

I covered my mouth as a quiet cry escaped me, and my voice shook when I said, “I don’t know.”

The world seemed dull to me now. Bella was no longer in my life, and I was left to figure out who I was and what I wanted my future to look like. I just wanted to turn my brain off because it was too much to think about, but I couldn’t do that because I’d gone home for Christmas to spend the holidays with my family. My parents lived in Colorado, and the frozen air shocked my system as I left the airport, as if preparing me for what was to come.

Every time I looked at my mom, I wondered what she’d think if she knew I liked a woman—wondered what steps my dad would take to fix me. Being around my family, I knew now more than ever that I needed to figure this out.

It was the week before Christmas when I found myself in church on Sunday morning. The worn chair I was sitting on was scratchy like the blanket my Nana crocheted for me when I was little. It bit into my bare legs like sand in a fresh wound—a constant irritation that wouldn’t go away, no matter how hard I itched. Its dull, gray color made me feel as though I was being sucked into an abyss because all around me were those old fucking chairs. No matter how many times I counted them, there were always more, and the more there were, the heavier they became.

I had a recurring dream that, one day, the floor would start to sink under the weight, the chairs being the one thing to pull us all down. So many seats for so many Christians, yet I felt like the only sinner there. For the first time, I felt like I didn't belong in church. I felt hated, unseen, and lost in a place where love was supposed to flourish.

Dr. Thomas Thatcher, an established pastor at One Love Church, was speaking that morning on the difficulties of marriage, divorce, and singleness.

Yippee.

Another lecture about how God has a plan for all of us.

My eyes wandered distractedly to the walls of the octagon-shaped building, all decorated with flags of different countries. They began to wave high above me as the AC kicked on full blast. I watched as the cameraman zoomed in on Dr. Thatcher, whose voice rang out like a warning, pulling my eyes onto the stage where he stood. “Some members of the LGBTQ community have vowed celibacy for the rest of their lives so as not to disobey God’s commandment,” his deep voice resounded in the microphone.

A high-pitched ringing filled my ears, drowning out all noise aside from the single word my sister whispered beside me.

“Bullshit,” she scoffed.

I wished I had the confidence to speak out like her, because she was right. That was bullshit. In what world was that considered normal?

“Amen,” my mother said beside me, loud enough for everyone to hear. She was nodding vigorously with a frown on her face.

Suddenly, the room seemed to grow darker, and the walls grew taller, like branches of a tree reaching out for me. I lowered my head and looked into my lap, but I wasn’t bowing in reverence. No, I was scared, ashamed, and embarrassed because everyone in the congregation—my own mother and father—disapproved of me.

*If he were mine, his shit would be on the front porch, and your dad would have already enlisted him in the Air Force.* My mother’s words came back to me in the hollowness of my mind, and suddenly,

under the blaring lights in the church, the oppressing voice of Dr. Thatcher, and the disdain in my parents' eyes, everything became clear. They didn't accept me. And if I sat willingly by their sides, I wasn't accepting myself.

I turned to my little sister, but she was already gazing at me. Her green eyes sparkled with so much understanding and love. She nodded almost unnoticeably before leaning in to whisper in my ear.

"You are perfect just the way you are," she whispered and squeezed my hand.

A tear slid down my cheek, and for the first time, I understood. I wasn't doing anything wrong. Loving Bella wasn't wrong. And I couldn't sit idly by and listen to people tell me that it was.

I sniffed and wiped away my tears, resolution setting in. It ended here. The shame, the disgust, having to make myself smaller to belong in a place that didn't want me. I wasn't doing it anymore.

"Go," my sister whispered with a smile on her face.

This was about me now. No one else. I gave a little nod before I stood out of my seat.

"Where are you going?" my mom whispered and grabbed my hand, trying to pull me back down. She looked at the people sitting behind her with an embarrassed smile, but I didn't care if I was making a spectacle.

"I'm leaving. Fuck this place, fuck what he just said, and fuck you for agreeing."

"Juno, sit down," my dad demanded as I ripped my hand from my mother's.

"Merry Christmas, Dad." I squinted in disdain before hurrying out of the row, past the people who glared at me, and out of the church.

As soon as I stepped into the cold night air, I was able to breathe again. From this day forward, I vowed to be myself, whatever that meant for me. And if it meant falling in love with a woman, then so be it.

*One year later...*

I hopped onto Mercer Street and watched cars drive bumper to bumper. So many people with different lives, I couldn't help but wonder where they were all going and who they'd return to... if they had anyone to go home to.

I, for one, didn't. It'd been a year since I'd last seen Bella, and still, I couldn't forget her. One day at a time, I guess. One day, then the next, and before I knew it, she'd be a distant memory.

I took a right on 1st Avenue and turned into the lot of the Metropolitan Market, pulling my winter coat tighter around me as I braved the frigid air. Getting groceries alone to cook dinner alone for my own birthday had to be an all-time low.

Fuck it. That was the mentality I had these days. Fuck it all.

I scampered down the pasta aisle, trying to make this as quick as possible. One more minute in this store listening to "LOVE" by Michael Bublé and I'd blow my own brains out. I scanned the shelves, looking up and down for my favorite alfredo sauce, when I heard my name.

"Juno?" It was spoken like a question, coming from a deep, gravelly voice.

I knew that voice.

I whipped my head around, and my heart dropped to the pit of my stomach when I saw that onyx hair and that golden skin.

"Bella," I whispered in amazement, chuckling, as if this couldn't be real—as if this was a dream. Maybe it was.

Only one way to find out.

"I didn't think you'd remember me." I laughed, Michael Bublé's voice suddenly sounding so lovely and romantic.

And then she smiled, her pearly white teeth gleaming against her bronze skin. "I remember everything."

# Operator

By Emily Johnson

“Doris already leave for the day?” Louisa glanced up from the switchboard as Paula shut the door behind her. She jammed her umbrella down into the stand and shrugged off her soaking raincoat, placing it on the coat rack.

“Several hours ago. She and Clive had a date tonight,” Louisa answered.

“Ooh, I do hope the rain hasn’t ruined their night,” Paula said as she smoothed her skirt and went to sit in the room’s vacant chair.

“Oh, I doubt it.”

“Well, I’m here to relieve you, anyway. Has it been a quiet night?” Paula asked as she sifted through a drawer, pulling out a notepad and pen.

“Hmm, yes, as usual, but I won’t be leaving for a bit yet. John said he’d be around to walk me home at nine.”

“Walking you home, is he?” Paula asked, raising her eyebrow.

Louisa bit her lip. “It’s not like that. He just feels responsible to look out for me since...” Louisa hesitated.

“Since he’s the reason your brother can’t anymore?” Paula stated.

Louisa looked down at her lap. “It was the war, you can hardly blame—” Louisa said quietly. “It was not his fault. There was nothing he could have done.”

“It was also over a year ago.”

“Paula,” Louisa begged, letting her gaze slide back over to her best friend.

“Come on, Louisa, he’s been home six months, and all of Washburn knows you’ve been in love with him your whole life.”

“Yes, but the world’s different now.”

“Washburn’s different now,” Paula countered. “Goodness, we are sitting in front of a switchboard for telephones. Telephones didn’t exist in this town before all the boys left!”

“I guess,” Louisa shrugged.

Paula rolled her eyes. “I bet you a week’s pay he kisses you tonight.”

It was Louisa’s turn to roll her eyes, just as a red light came on. Aunt Janie’s number. “I’ll get this one,” Louisa muttered as she put on the headset and flipped the switch. “Operator, information, please.” Louisa didn’t know why she held onto the anonymity. Everyone in this town knew who the telephone operators were. She, like them, had their voices and numbers memorized.

A voice quavered on the other end, “Louisa, can... Can... Can you get your father on the other line?”

“Aunt Janie, is everything alright?” Louisa asked, concern seeping into her voice.

“Yes, dear, just... Just get your father on the other line.”

Louisa did as she was told. She flipped the switch so her aunt couldn’t hear her moving the cords. She glanced briefly at Paula, who tilted her head toward the bathroom before standing up and going there. Louisa connected the cords just as she heard the click of the bathroom door.

Flipping the switch on again, Louisa made a move to remove her headset to give her family members a private conversation. She raised the headset off her head and began to place it on the table but paused. She had never listened in on a conversation before, even though Paula and Doris had numerous times. They enjoyed being the center of the gossip mill. Louisa thought listening in was a breach in trust, but tonight... Something was wrong. Besides, this was her family. She had a little bit of a right to listen in. Didn’t she? She put the headset back on.

“Frannie, Frannie, Frannie, Frannie,” Aunt Janie’s voice shook as she said her brother’s nickname over and over again.

“Janie, look, it’ll be okay.”

“The blood, Frannie,” Aunt Janie cried. “Francis, the blood.”

“Look, I’ll get it cleaned up. I know how...” Louisa’s father’s voice calmly carried through the phone.

“But the town, they’ll know I...”

“I’ll forge the documents. It’ll be a closed casket. All anyone will know is that he died.”

Louisa’s eyes grew wide. Had her aunt...? No, it wasn’t possible. Who had died? She kept listening.

Her aunt’s voice continued to shake. “What if someone suspects? Arthur was perfectly healthy. I shouldn’t have...”

“Hey, no one is going to suspect anything. What that man has done to you and your children. I would’ve—” Louisa’s father paused. “You’re free of him, Janie. Drop the wedding ring in the lake.”

“Frannie, it’s still there, though, it’ll always be there. And the blood. The blood!” Aunt Janie shrieked.

“Janie!” Louisa’s father yelled. “Pull yourself together. It will be alright. I’ve done this before. This is my business, after all. Funerals. And what better way to cover up a murder than a funeral?”

Louisa jerked off her headphones, getting her hair slightly tangled. Paula still wasn’t back yet. She fought with her hands to unwrap her hair from the headset. Just then, the front door of the room swung open. Louisa jumped.

“Louisa, is everything alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” It was just John, sopping wet from the storm outside.

The light went off. Louisa put her headset down and yanked the cord out of the switchboard. She stood up abruptly as she fumbled to turn off the switch. “Yes, yes, I’m fine, just—” She paused. “I’m fine.”

She pulled on her raincoat and took John's arm as he led her out into the storm.

# The Wolfknight

By Sophia Kustar

*“In Brittany there lived a baron...  
He had married a very worthy wife  
who seemed lovely.  
He loved her and she him,  
but she was greatly troubled by one thing:  
each week she lost him  
for three whole days...”*

*Bisclavret (The Werewolf)*  
by Marie de France  
edited and translated by Claire M. Waters

I am Bisclavret. *Werewolf*. I do not know if the word or the name came first; it has been too long for me to remember. But I do remember those first happy months, the green of the summer leaves and grass. And the touch of my smiling wife.

It was a while before she ever asked where I went on those three days every week. And those were the good times; I came home after my outings, and I kissed her on the cheek, the mouth, the nose. She blushed something fierce, every time, and we would go to bed.

It all made me feel human.

But those three days... I am torn about them, even now.

The first day was always my favorite. I somehow retained those personable parts of myself. And those parts felt the thrill of my animal freedom, even as they were chained to the peculiar curse that caused it.

When I killed the red-tailed squirrel on that first day, I thought of feasting at my king's table. I licked the blood from my wolfish lips all the same. When I saw the roe deer in the meadow, I thought of my wife's

doe eyes, brown and long-lashed. And when I crossed the mighty river that snaked deep through my forest, I thought of splashing my feet in the stream by my house. I shook myself dry all the same.

This is not to say that I wasn't myself on those other days, the seconds and the thirds. I was, but I was different. It didn't feel like it at the time, but as I look back, I can see it so clearly.

The squirrels began to taste like squirrels, too gamey to garnish my king's table. The does began to look like meals as well, more than they looked like any fair lady. And the river thundered on beneath my paws, nothing like the mellow water my human feet were used to.

And I felt this constant need—a ceaseless pull to my clothes, my tether to my other life. My pelt itched and pulsed where my belt would tighten and where my buttons would close. I, truly, felt naked in that form. And no amount of squirrel-skinning or doe-hunting or river-running would soothe that ache where my hands *should* have been.

My lips never seemed to close over my teeth, so sharp and cutting. My tongue was dry, even in my other form.

On the third days, I could not see the green of the leaves and grass anymore, the red of a fair lady's painted mouth. My lupine vision was serrated into blues and golds and the ugly browns of the in-betweens. And it is strange, to see those same things—things that you *know* like the back of your hand—become unfamiliar in their new shades.

I kept myself in that forest, as if those bordering trees were the spires of a great, great wall. I know I could have visited my home, my wife, during those three days, just to see how she was getting on... But I didn't want her to see me like that.

Because if she did, perhaps she would have noticed the human qualities left in me, even in my other form. And then, perhaps, she would have noticed the wolfishness that never left in time for me to return to her.

It was true, then, that I was a knight. Noble, respected by all. But if anyone looked too closely beneath my helm, they might have noticed—no, they *would* have noticed how different I was.

My canines, a touch too big and too sharp to be normal. My eyes, too dark and focused to be natural. Not to mention the coarse wiriness of my hair, the length and the sharpness of my fingernails, the width of my smile.

I planned my days carefully, then. Accepting the invitations of my king's court when I could, dining at my wife's table or on the forest floor when I couldn't. I felt myself pulled in all directions, stretched to the point of tearing.

She asked me one day, that dreaded question. And, like a fool in love, like a *puppy*, by all means, I told her. That may have been my biggest mistake, during all of my days on my mother's Earth.

Her eyes grew wide; her cheeks paled to a ghostly white. I knew the knowledge of my curse might create that fear in her, but I did not expect it would be such an ugly transformation.

And a transformation so it was...

My beautiful wife, she stole my clothes, my tethers, my chains. And with my clothes went my human form; she had trapped me beneath my silver pelt. I do not know her motivations, even now, but I can only imagine the blackness of the heart that could do such a thing.

I wandered. As the days grew longer and shorter with the seasons, I wandered. The forest was still a cage, but at some point, I could not remember why it was so.

My fur kept me warm in the winter and dry in the spring. I could not remember the fire of the autumn leaves, or the pink blossoms beside the river. I lived in an eternal world of gold and blue, though it all felt like the ugly browns of the in-betweens, at the time.

At times I saw other wolves; they turned tails and ran as soon as they saw me. It was a mirror of how other men treated me when I was in my human form. Only my king honored me, truly, as his knight, his right hand. And I had lost him and the rest of my tethers to humanity...

The next summer rolled around, and I came upon a band of hunters. I must've looked like a prize, with my silver pelt and glowing eyes and dinnerplate paws. I didn't feel like one.

A normal wolf's instincts may have told him to fight back, but maybe that's why I didn't. Perhaps, by fleeing, I proved there was some sense of the man I had been still in me.

They had run me down as if I was a shivering fox. The pads of my paws were raw and slick with blood by the time their horses' sharp hooves caught up with me. It was getting hard to run, to breathe.

And then I saw the king. *My king.*

His face, as gracious as the day he dubbed my shoulders with his sword. His eyes, sparkling with the fervor of a hunt. It was *him*.

That part of me—that part that never left but instead hibernated like a bear for this moment and this moment alone—awoke. I could not help myself. He was on a horse (a shining grey, like me), so I grabbed him by the stirrup and did what I knew best.

I kissed him; I cleaned his feet as if he were the Son of God himself. And the king shooed his dogs and men away, laughing—I could not understand his speech by then, but I could glean from his mirth that my queer habits had won me mercy. He did not speak to me, I remember, but he did not ignore me, either.

The king turned his steed's neck toward home, and I fell into step beside him, wolfblood pounding in my veins.

We arrived at his castle, and I became the king's knight once more. My pelt was my silver armor; my claws were my lance. The human tongue returned to my ears, though I could not speak it myself, and I heard how my king praised me.

I was treated well, doted upon by every person in that castle. My king's soothing words and hands I craved, every day and every meal. I followed at my king's heels, and though I ached to fight for him, to prove my devotion through blood and mettle, no one dared to test my patience.

Until I saw her knight.

Again, I do not remember every detail. I recognized him from my human days (now so far removed from them I was) as a suitor of my betrothed, the wicked woman who would become my wife. And, with

my canine nose, I could *smell* her on him. A thief of my most treasured partner. An accomplice to her crimes.

I set on him as if he was a red-tailed squirrel. I would have killed him if my king didn't call me back. He was right to, of course, as he didn't know my quarrel with the man. But I licked the blood from my wolfish lips, and I watched.

They tell me that twice more I tried to attack that bothersome man. They tell me that there must have been a reason, some way that the man had hurt me in the past.

As if I would be pushed to draw a man's blood over such a trifle.

The very next day, an even worse offender arrived at the castle. My traitorous *wife*.

No one could stop me then, not even my king. I greeted her how I always did in those good days: my lips and teeth on her cheek, her mouth, her nose. The latter, I bit with relish, popping it like a berry between my jaws.

I could not hear her screams or the counsel of the wise man to my king. Attendants pulled at my haunches, tore my fur out in tufts and clouds, to get me off of her. I shook myself, and I left that noseless woman on the marble floor.

I did not look back.

They must have interrogated her, torn my secret out of her lungs when she had given it up so easily all that time ago. Because I found myself in the king's private cottage, plush in its comforts, and my *clothes*—my clothes—were laid before me.

But my curse would not allow me to make my change in front of another man. I passed over the heap of fabric without even a pause, and oh, how it burned me to do so.

The wise man offered the king more advice, and I wondered how he knew so much of my plight. They left me to the room and shut the doors.

I snuffled at the heap. Perhaps it had been too long. Perhaps I was cursed to stay in this form—

Color returned to my eyes in fits and bursts, blinding me with its saturation and fury. My arms felt too long at my sides, my buttons chafed against my pale skin. I stumbled to the bed, barely able to right myself on my two legs, and promptly passed out.

I woke up to my king's arms around me, his lips pressed to my cheek, my mouth, my nose. The feeling of his skin on mine stung like a brand at first; this pelt was so much more sensitive than my previous one. I soon got used to it, though, and I kissed him back and I hugged him fiercely and we cried as one.

He cooed at my canines, and he swept his hands through my wiry hair. I reveled in his face between my fingers, how his kindness and devotion showed through every feature. And when he looked at me, I could tell he felt the same. My eyes, as dark and focused as a hunting hound's, told him all he needed to know. I never felt more alive than I did at that moment.

The road to his castle was a short one, but we took our time. He stopped to point out a red squirrel skittering across our path, a roe deer resting in a meadow not far off. We sat and talked on the bed of a rushing river, splashing our feet.

I learned about the noseless woman, banished from the kingdom. It seemed her ugliness, both inside and out, was her own curse to bear.

We arrived at his castle, and I became his knight once more.

# The Steam Brigade

By Trinity Ross

The city of Ironhold was alive with the sounds of thriving industry. Steam hissing from a thousand valves, gears grinding in unison, hammers on steel, and the incessant bustle of bodies, both metal and flesh, trying to survive the brutal, unforgiving streets. Above the factories, bellows of smoke entered the atmosphere, casting the world in a haze. Gas lamps flickered against the choking smog, illuminating the cobblestones with a dim and eerie light. It was a city built on ingenuity and invention yet fractured by its own hands.

There was once a time when the city was new, filled with bright minds looking to forge a new future for themselves. In the aftermath of long-fought wars and desolation, the humans trekked forward to rebuild. With so much work to be done, there was a growing need for cheap and fast labor. With this in mind, Farrow Ironhold—at the time just a simple young inventor—began to brainstorm a solution. From his mind, the Automa were born. Humanoid, strong, robotic slaves, built to do the heavy lifting of society. They began by inhabiting the factories, manning construction sights, doing the manual labor that came easily to them. After the city was built, however, it seemed they had no further purpose. That was when the humans began to take them in as personal servants. What were once hard-working, labor-bearing beings were now cooks, cleaners, and babysitters.

No one knew how or why it happened. To the humans, it seemed sudden and out of nowhere. For the Automa, it seemed like they had been watching and waiting for an eternity. Slowly, with time, the robots had started to learn. They watched their human masters talk, work, play, scheme. They began to understand how to think for themselves. They began asking questions. Who were they, and why were they there? What was their purpose? The humans told them what they believed the Automa were designed to do: serve humankind. Do as they were told. This wasn't enough for them. Automa from all across the city began to try to leave their assignments, to go out on their own. Of course, the humans

didn't like this. But after ages of watching humans and their behavior, the Automa knew how to revolt.

It is now known as the Red Month, the weeks in which the Automa overthrew society as it was. The streets, once beautiful and new, ran red with the blood of the humans that tried to stand in the way of Automa making their escape. It was absolute mayhem, fear and violence ruling once again as a new war took hold of the city.

In the aftermath of the Red Month, society splintered into two worlds: one for the humans and one for the Automa. In the lofty heights of Ironhold's human district, the air seemed cleaner, though still tinged with the smell of coal and the hew of fog. Towers of wrought iron and polished brass painted the city skyline, adorned with intricate carvings and banners fluttering in the artificial breeze of steam vents. Here, the humans enjoyed the fruits of their ingenuity—homes warmed by coal-fed furnaces, new and less humanlike automated servants, access to tools and resources. Built on the backs of the Automa, the humans lived their lives in feigned ignorance of what existed a mere few blocks away.

In the labyrinth of the Undermarket, a different world thrived. Beneath the weight of human oppression, the Automa lived amidst the grime and decay of Ironhold's forgotten corners. The cobblestones were cracked and uneven, slick with oil and rainwater that dripped from the city above. Rusted pipes crisscrossed overhead, leaking steam and occasionally letting loose a metallic groan that echoed through the narrow alleys. The air was thick and hot, carrying the acrid stench of burned-out machinery and unwashed metal. While it wasn't nearly as polished or opulent as the human quarters, the Automa enjoyed the freedoms afforded to this lifestyle.

The Automa here were a reflection of their surroundings: patched, scarred, and endlessly resourceful. They lived in shacks built from scraps, their homes powered by scavenged generators that hummed and sputtered. Some Automa worked tirelessly at repair shops, fixing each other and building makeshift tools. Others ran illicit trades—smuggling stolen parts, forging counterfeit papers, making supply runs to factories on the border between districts. Most of them simply wanted to live in peace, mind their business, and try not to get in the way of humans.

Then there was the Steam Brigade. They were comprised of the most unforgiving, the most bloodthirsty of the Automa. During the Red Month, they were the ones that first resorted to violence in order to get out—they killed first, asked questions second. Many of them were the former servants of the uppermost players in Ironhold's government and businesses. In the chaos of the Red Month, these Automa fought their way out of the homes imprisoning them and pillaged the streets to free as many others as they could. They were rebels, murderers, and thieves with one common goal: to see humankind fall.

Kaz Gearheart, the unofficial king of the Undermarket and leader of the Steam Brigade, was the most ruthless of them all. His frame was comprised of brass and iron plates and gears, broad and battered, tarnished with bits of salvaged scraps. His right arm, once a marvel of polished steel, was now a dull, mismatched piece of work damaged by years of fighting, patched together from discarded parts. His eyes—two glowing, amber lenses—seemed to be lit by the fury of his past. It was common fact that Kaz once belonged to Farrow Ironhold himself and was the very first of the Automa to revolt against their human. It was through the constant dismantling and reprogramming he endured from his master that he gained his awareness.

Farrow had wanted to perfect his inventions, never satisfied with them. He desired a way to connect all of the Automa, to allow them to communicate with each other and form a sort of consciousness. He wanted to improve their ability to work without the need for human instruction, allowing humans to live their lives entirely separate from the Automa, who would work in perfect silence. Kaz was given the very first update to his mainframe that awoke him to his state of being. As he awoke, he was immediately uncomfortable and angry, wanting to leave the small workshop he was confined to. As the update rolled out for the rest of the Automa, Kaz's feelings were somehow amplified between all of them, the growing desire for freedom simmering just under their metal surfaces. He never spoke about what happened during the eventual confrontation with Farrow, but it was assumed to be bad. While the inventor may have escaped with his life intact, he was left a crippled, burned mess after Kaz sent his workshop up in flames.

Now, the city of Ironhold bore the scars of war on its brass and bones. The humans lived on, pretending their towers rose untainted

by the exploitation of a now sentient lifeform. The Automa toiled and thrived in the shadows, slowly building the rebellion, seeking to overthrow their oppressors.

As Kaz stood on the balcony of his headquarters, he scanned the streets below, taking in the chaotic bustle of the Undermarket. Kaz was a being of metal and vengeance, but sometimes, when he lost himself in the echoes of the unrelenting streets, he wondered what his life could have been if Farrow had stopped at genius, instead of attempting to play god. Here, beneath the towering spires of the human districts, the Undermarket thrived in defiance of their inventor. It was a world that had been built from the scraps and scars he had created, patched together with ingenuity and a fury that moved them forward. And Kaz was its king.

He looked down at his people—patched together, dented, and maimed but free—and still, it wasn't enough. Freedom was never enough, not when the chains of the past still clanged so loudly in his mind, not when their oppressors lived in such frivolity while they were reduced to this.

“Boss,” came a voice from behind him. Bolt, a wiry Automa with corroded plating on his face, stepped into the dim light of the balcony. “You gotta see this.”

Kaz turned, his gears grinding as he did. In Bolt’s hand was a cog, blackened and scorched. Etched on its surface was a symbol Kaz knew all too well: the insignia of the human elite, those with the most to gain from the elimination of the Brigade.

“Where did you find that?” Kaz growled at him.

“The border. Someone recovered it from the burned-down factory out on 19th Street. Says it looked like they were building something—something big—before it went bad and burned the whole place down.” He chuckled. “Guess they can’t run things too good without our labor doing it for them, huh?”

Kaz took the cog from Bolt, eyes narrowing as he turned it over in his hands. The humans were always building something. Always

scheming about how to get rid of the Automa. But this... it felt different. Dangerous.

Looking out at the Undermarket, where the Automa people bustled around, living their lives unaware of the danger mounting against them, he thought back to the Red Month, to the blood and the smoke. To the rage he had felt.

Turning back to Bolt, his voice came out a low and angry rumble. "Sound the call. Get everyone here. The Steam Brigade is moving at dawn."

# The Crow

By Madison Sync

*For those of us who have experienced the cruelty of fate.*

The crow made its first visit on the boy's eighth birthday.

It was a day that began much like the others in Benjamin's world. The boy had spent his morning with a bowl of cornflakes and a round of cards with his mother before packing up the car to leave. Benjamin's mother dragged him to his grandparent's home that day to celebrate his new year of life—their farmhouse nearly an hour drive from his own neighborhood. Being the lone child within the family, the boy typically found these visits boring and full of tedious banter, but birthdays were meant to be spent with family as God intended—or so his mother claimed. To his relief, not thirty minutes into the visit he was sent out to play so the adults could have their uncensored conversations.

The weather was hot and sticky as the humidity remained unforgiving and cruel. Even the grace of shade was useless against the brutal heat. As Benjamin sat tucked within the towering crops, he drew various pictures into the soil with the jagged stick he had found abandoned somewhere in the grass. Then a bewitching caw from above called to him.

The crow perched itself along the arm of the scarecrow that guarded the cornfields of his grandfather's farm—a place Benjamin once loved to run and hide behind enemy lines in the way he imagined his father doing in the stories told at bedtime. It peered at him with blackened pearl eyes, its claws piercing the cotton fabric of the scarecrow's plaid, tattered shirt. The sun beamed down on the crow, gifting its dark fur a violet tint.

“Your grandmother will be dead in a week,” it sang.

Benjamin's mouth held agape, refusing to form any manner of words as chills stung underneath his skin, every inch of him throbbing. They stared at one another until Benjamin remembered himself. Keeping sight of the crow, he gently rose from the ground, the knees poking out from beneath the length of his shorts rusted with dirt. The boy retreated slowly at first, then suddenly, nearly tripping in his haste back to the farmhouse where his mother's alarmed arms greeted him. When he informed her of the crow's foretelling, she smirked.

"Birds can't speak, Benji," she chuckled, rolling her eyes at such absurdity. "A child's imagination," she mumbled to her own parents who were resting on the floral-themed sofa across from her. Soft, comforting fingers tangled themselves in Benjamin's short locks as the adults continued to laugh at his distress.

His grandmother died of a heart attack five days later.

"She was an old woman," his mother defended as they sat together in the church pews, both clad in mourning black. "A coincidence." Her voice was low—its usual charm absent—and for the first time during the quaint service, Benjamin risked a glance at her. Her gaze remained ahead toward the wreaths near the casket, the makeup around her eyes smudged. It was then that Benjamin realized she hadn't been speaking to him or anyone else.

He never stepped another foot inside that cornfield.

Six months into his eleventh year, it came to him again.

Benjamin spent most evenings after dinner playing with the other neighborhood children. On that night, their chosen game was hide and seek—Benjamin's favorite. Benjamin loved that game because he always won. After all, he had the perfect spot.

One of the other neighbor boys had a shed in his backyard where the father had worked before being called to the war. No child had ever been allowed inside, but with the neighbor boy's father gone, Benjamin declared it a seamless place to hide. Even if someone had chosen to break the rules and enter, Benjamin fit himself between two narrow shelves inside and covered his body from view with a grimy blue tarp that

otherwise took up space on the floor. Not ideal circumstances, but it was certainly worth the pride of winning.

Benjamin sat trapped with the dust underneath the tarp, the raw stench of mildew lurking nearby, but the boy was too lost in the giddiness of another sure victory to care. Suddenly, there was a rattling inside the shed, and just when Benjamin thought he had been discovered, a noticeable caw cried out. He turned cold. The joy he held emptied, replacing itself with a heaviness he had long since abandoned. With delicate speed, he slipped the tarp off him.

The crow was resting on a desk that was pushed against the wall, just in front of the broken window that no one had gotten the chance to fix yet. The glow of the outside glistened on its head, illuminating the sharpness of its stout beak.

“Your father will not return from war,” it warned in that same voice that haunted Benjamin’s dreams some nights. “He’s already dead.” The crow’s words were blunt. Not a threat, but a fact.

The walls began to close in on him as any air seemed to be sucked from the shed, but he remained in his fear, unable to move or speak. It was so familiar.

After a moment, the crow flapped its wings and abandoned its spot on the filth-covered desk, disappearing out of the glassless frame. Forgetting the other children and the game, Benjamin sprinted across the street back to his house, tears and snot mixing as they streamed down his face. There he found his mother at the dining table enthralled by one of her magazines, a lit cigarette in its rightful place between her fingers. It sprinkled the oak surface with ash.

When he repeated the crow’s words back to her for a second time, she was not as amused.

“Nonsense,” she swore under her breath with a disapproving tsk. “Absolute nonsense.” Her tone hardened with each word that left her lips. “You’re a grown boy, Benji. Nearly twelve years old. You should be over these childish fears by now.”

Bright red lipstick stained her one crooked tooth as she continued to scold him. She quickly disposed of her dimming cigarette before

fitfully lighting another. His mother inhaled the vice deeply before pointing the manicured fingers that secured it toward her son. “Young Christian boys such as yourself shouldn’t speak such devil talk, do you hear? I want no more of it.” The words were final.

Benjamin lowered his head, cheeks burning and nerves on fire.

“Yes, Mama,” he murmured. His apology and his surrender.

Olive, heated eyes examined the boy before softening. His mother reached out to him, an attempt to offer some nature of comfort. Benjamin accepted the pity and lay his head against her as she wrapped an arm around his small frame.

“Daddy will be home soon, Benji,” her sweetened voice soothed as she rubbed light circles into his back. “He’ll come home, and we’ll be a happy family again.”

In the end, it was a promise that wasn’t hers to make.

*Killed in action*, the telegram announced in bold letters two weeks after. Benjamin watched his mother collapse in the foyer as she read it, clutching the cross necklace his father had gifted her before leaving them.

Thick guilt latched itself to Benjamin and settled in his chest to fester.

A year passed.

And then another.

At thirteen, although the crow had not made an appearance since his father had died, Benjamin remained wary of the creature, turning his head whenever paranoia called for it. His grandfather lost the farm to alcoholism, his anger built over the years, and he was forced to move into their home, forcing Benjamin to take the smaller room previously meant for storage. His mother, unable to support herself and a son in her grief, relied on her father to provide, who in turn took whatever frustration he held out on them. His mother smoked more every day, partnering it now with whatever wine she kept on the shelf. On the worst nights, he would overhear her whisper to herself, “The crow, the crow, the crow.” His

grandfather called her senseless, but Benjamin took on the duty to care for her.

As the days continued, she plunged deeper. On a particularly bad day as they were walking through the park near their home, a bruising grip latched onto Benjamin's arm.

"Benji," his mother hissed, a wild look in her eyes. "Benji, is that him? Is that him?" She pointed hard, her arm straining in the stance. There sat a crow near a bench. Not *the* crow, but an innocent black bird searching the dirt.

"Mama," he began, but she didn't allow him space to continue.

"You destroyed my family!" she screamed at the bird, and it flew away. "That damned crow killed my family!" she yelled out. "You killed my husband!" The people around them whispered to each other, others shielding their own children from the perceived danger. Benjamin could feel the stares.

His mother wasn't allowed to leave the house after that.

The day the crow landed on top of the paper bag that held the groceries Benjamin was carrying home, the boy shrieked at its sudden presence, stumbling to keep upright.

"You're going to lose your mother," the crow cautioned. Rather than falling into that same pit of fear, rage rooted itself deep in the boy and burned like a ruthless fire.

"You don't know nothin'!" Benjamin cursed. They were his first words ever spoken to the crow, but it did not seem stunned by the outburst. Leaning further into his fury, Benjamin threw the paper sack onto the concrete with force, causing the crow to eject from it before it struck the ground.

"Get out of here, you bastard!" He continued to repeat profanity he'd only heard at home until the crow left his sight. "Never come back or I'll kill you!"

As the fit calmed and awareness returned, the boy thanked someone that not a soul was around to witness the outburst. He abandoned the sack of ruined groceries to litter the ground—something

he'd undoubtedly gain a bruise or two for later that night, but Benjamin couldn't find the sense to care. As he hurried home, he only thought of the crow's words and how they had to be false. As he reached the white porch steps of his suburban home, Benjamin decided that he would not tell his mother of the crow's curse. Instead, he would protect her.

The boy stepped into the darkened home that was once happy to see his mother sitting on the sofa. It was a common scene those days—a cigarette in one unsteady hand and a glass of aged, bitter sherry in the other. Without warning, Benjamin joined his mother on the sofa, laying his head gently on her thigh as he had often done in his younger years. Her legs stiffened at the contact, and for a second, he thought she might push him off. But a timid hand strung itself between the blond strands on his head—a ghost of a memory of what used to be. Such affection between them was rare and awkward—some days his mother could barely find strength to meet his eye, but nevertheless, Benjamin's love for her remained as it always would.

As his mother began her evening work, Benjamin stayed beside her, offering as much help as he could with the cooking and cleaning despite the chides of his grandfather, who argued he shouldn't be doing women's work. Later that night, when his grandfather was passed out on the couch from his third glass of bourbon, Benjamin snuck into his mother's room while she slept and kissed her on the head. He promised to keep watch over her as long as it ensured her safety from the crow.

But the next day, when Benjamin returned home from the school, his mother was nowhere to be found.

"She's insane, your mother," his grandfather grumbled when the boy questioned her whereabouts. "Sick. Doesn't shut up about damn crows and curses. Words straight from Satan, you hear? Doesn't get a damned thing done in this house like she should. Those people are going to fix her, boy."

Benjamin ran to the bathroom and got sick. He cried in her bed for three days.

He didn't see his mother for a while after that. They weren't allowed to visit. And then on one random Saturday, she returned home, and Benjamin had never been so relieved to see her. But his relief

diminished after he realized how different she was. Quiet. A distant version of herself. She could still perform her chores, but rarely would she utter a word. She barely showed emotion except for the few times Benjamin found her crying to herself. She was home, but she was still missing.

And two months after returning, she died. Found in the creek just behind their neighborhood.

Her funeral was held on a cloudy day, though it never once rained. It was a small gathering—mostly the other neighborhood women and children in attendance. One by one, each attendee left until only Benjamin remained at her grave. He dressed up just for her, in his nicest shirt and pants, even though both were almost too tight to wear. Benjamin sat quietly, picking at the grass.

The crow landed on the pile of fresh dirt, just feet above where his mother laid underneath. Its dark wings elegantly flowed down, gracefully resting on its sides.

His mother had called it a curse. Her words were harsh, but Benjamin was inclined to agree. Perhaps if he paid it no mind, it would release itself. An abandoned calf left without food would eventually starve.

But Benjamin found no point in doing so. Praying to God did nothing, and ignoring it would only result in the same.

Instead, on that day, he squinted at the crow with a curl on his lip.

“I hate you,” he admitted. The words felt good in the moment but did nothing that mattered. Benjamin desperately wished the crow would explain itself or even argue back, but it simply flew away—just as it had every time before.

The next four years of Benjamin’s life were not kind.

With no one else to pursue, the entirety of his grandfather’s resentment was Benjamin’s burden to bear. But as time passed, Benjamin’s petite stature grew, eventually bringing him nearly three inches above the man. Recognizing the disadvantage, his grandfather

resorted strictly to verbal abuse, and Benjamin evolved to ignore it. Benjamin's hatred for his grandfather flourished, and every night as he laid down in his bed, he silently prayed for the old man's death.

And then his wish came true.

As he read in his room, lying on the freshly laundered sheets of his bed, the crow appeared on the ledge of his open window. The breeze flew in with it, sending a chill into the room in the middle of summer.

"No," Benjamin declared instantly without even a thought. "Go away."

But the crow didn't retreat. Instead, it stood silent and unmoving, prompting the boy to throw the book in his hands toward it. It missed, hitting the wall nearby with a thud. The crow fluttered from the sill and onto the footboard of his bed.

"You do not wish to know?" It asked—the first time it had ever answered a word from Benjamin. "Even if it helps you in the end?"

Despite his aversion, Benjamin's curiosity was piqued.

"Who?" he asked, despite knowing the answer.

"Your grandfather will be dead by winter," the crow revealed, and for the first time during a visit, Benjamin felt relieved.

"How?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

Benjamin supposed it didn't. "Why are you telling me this?" the boy huffed. "Why do you return time and time again? Give me the reason."

A slow pause tortured the boy. And then it spoke once more.

"It comes whether you want it or not." The crow flapped its feathers and exited out of the window.

And so, Benjamin waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And when the vibrant green that consumed the leaves of the trees transformed to a mix of gold and orange before abandoning their place to clutter the Earth, his grandfather died in his bed. There was no funeral planned, and no one attended the burial—not even Benjamin.

With the death of his grandfather and the others that Benjamin desperately wished to forget, he sold everything to his name and left it all behind to run as north as he could.

Away from the pain and far, far away from where the crow could ever find him.

New York City was everything Benjamin had hoped for, though it wasn't the high buildings or the lively streets that reeled him in. The city represented change and a new start, as it did for anyone who moved there. He was hesitant at first to meet anyone new, but on his seventeenth week in the city, after finding a decent-paying office job in the middle of Manhattan, he caught sight of Margaret as he ventured through Central Park on his way home from work. He would never forget that first glance of her.

Her ginger hair flowed down past her shoulders, folding over her scarf and laying perfectly against the green sweater she sported. Plaid pants covered right to her ankles, but she held herself high with the help of those beige heels. Later, whenever he would often retell this story to her or anyone else that would listen, he swore he could spot her star-like freckles from such a distance away.

Margaret was speaking to a friend—someone unimportant now—and Benjamin admired how animated she was in the conversation. How bright she smiled at whatever joke had been told. Before he could catch himself staring, she turned dark eyes to him, her grin resting into a flattered, equal appreciation.

Something unusual ignited in Benjamin—something he wasn't confident he wanted to light—but without even a falter, he gravitated toward her, anyway. As he approached, she looked him in the eyes and spoke.

“Yes,” she said simply, robbing him of the chance to offer a word.

“Uh— Excuse me?” he asked, confused, stumbling over whatever he had prepared in his hurried walk over. Rather than blowing him off, she laughed and spoke again, forgetting her friend.

“It seemed like you were coming over to ask me to dinner,” she clarified. “My answer is yes.”

That night, after a lovely meal in a diner over less-than-mediocre food and captivating conversation, Benjamin found himself playfully racing the gorgeous, auburn-haired girl in the vacant streets of the city—both too lost in their infatuation to recognize how childish it all was.

Margaret was everything to him. She was beautiful and strong and kind—much like the way he chose to remember his mother. Although he was tentative to keep pursuing her, day after day, he fell deeper into her charm and sometimes thought about how his mother would have approved of the woman he had fallen for. That maybe in another life, the two might have been friends.

Benjamin remained vigilant of the crow, but his wariness dropped as his love for Margaret grew. The first time he confessed to Margaret that he loved her, they stood under the glow of the New York moon near the Hudson River. The salt in the air was the only thing that kept Benjamin from floating away in that moment. When she returned the sentiment, Benjamin felt he could conquer the world. He was safe with her. Nothing from his past mattered with Margaret around. Everything else was mute.

He barely made it a year before surrendering to the urge to propose. He made a reservation for them at the restaurant Margaret loved because it always played slow jazz on Friday nights and purchased a ring that was fit for her, even though it was a tad out of his price range. She said yes and Benjamin’s world spun a little faster and lit a little brighter.

He hadn’t thought himself much of a religious man anymore, but the happiest day of his life was spent in a church standing in front of a preacher. And though he never pictured himself fit to play the role of a decent father, when Margaret brought up the idea of children years after

their vows were spoken, he knew he could do it for her. Together they could do anything.

This sense of security was something he had never known. Perhaps he had—at last—gone where the crow could not follow.

It was only after months and months of trying that they found success in becoming pregnant. Just one month after his twenty-seventh birthday, Benjamin would become a father. They fought playfully over whose hair the child would inherit, though Benjamin secretly prayed it would be hers. One Margaret in his life was a blessing, but two would be more than he ever deserved.

When Margaret had gone to a friend's home to celebrate the pregnancy, Benjamin promised her he would finish painting the nursery they had been putting together. Halfway finished, he made himself a cup of coffee and sat outside on their deck to enjoy the winter breeze. They had moved to the outside of the city, and their suburb was recovering from a recent blizzard, the snow ever so patient to melt away, staying alive by the freezing temperature.

It was only in that peace that the crow reappeared, landing on the table on their deck.

“No,” Benjamin begged as he took in the sight of it. “Leave,” he commanded as he had years ago. But like then, it did nothing.

“Your wife is going to die,” it promised, but Benjamin refused to accept it.

“No,” he said again. “I won’t let you take her from me.”

“You cannot escape what is to be,” the crow said simply before flying away, leaving Benjamin to himself.

Benjamin sat in his anxiety as he waited for Margaret to return home, thinking over all the scenarios in which the crow could claim her. The stove could ignite and set the house on fire. A burglar could break in and attack her. With each passing second, he sank into madness. He had to get her away from this place. He was a fool to ever convince himself that he was free from the wretched curse.

There was little relief when Margaret returned home whole, pulling up into the driveway in their new station wagon they'd purchased to prepare for their growing family. Her welcoming smile faded when she noticed Benjamin, and her face paled.

"What is it?" she asked, her brows furrowing in concern. "What happened?"

But Benjamin ignored the question. "Get back in the car," he ordered softly, failing to not frighten her further.

"What is it, Benjamin?" she pushed again, a noticeable tremble threaded in her voice.

But he ignored her, pulling Margaret back to the vehicle by her arm before she managed to rip out of his hold.

"Tell me what's happening," she demanded, her signature confidence on display.

Benjamin's shaky, calloused hands gripped her face, her cheeks ablaze compared to Benjamin's iced fingers. He couldn't tell her now, not like this. He would get her somewhere safe first, and then he would tell her whatever she wanted.

"I'll explain everything," he promised. Light snow began to fall around them, but Benjamin paid it no mind as he moved one hand to her growing belly. "For now, I need you to trust me and get in the car."

Margaret stared at him for a moment, her brain clearly working overtime before giving in. "Alright," she whispered, walking straight to the passenger's side. Benjamin took his usual spot in the driver's seat and left their home, not knowing exactly where he would go—only that he had to get them somewhere the crow could not locate them until he could come up with a plan.

Benjamin tried to calm his panic as he drove, but his pressure on the gas pedal grew heavier as they sped down the backroads. Distantly, he could hear Margaret's own alarmed voice but couldn't make out what she was saying over the ringing in his ears. He took one sharp turn too fast, and when the front left tire slid on a patch of black ice, the vehicle was lost. There was a crash, a guttural scream, and then nothing.

When Benjamin returned to himself, he couldn't speak. It was hard to breathe, actually—nearly impossible. He turned his head, fighting the pain to find Margaret in the passenger seat, eyes open and unseeing, crimson flowing into them. A large patch of her red hair was darker than usual, blood mixing with ginger as it seeped out of her. He coughed his cry and moaned. It was only the sound of a crow that pulled him away from his grief. Benjamin moved his head the small distance he could toward the call. There on the dash, the crow stood facing him.

“You’re going to die soon,” it purred, but Benjamin didn’t care.

*The curse*, Benjamin claimed in his mind, just as his mother had said. But the crow resisted the brand.

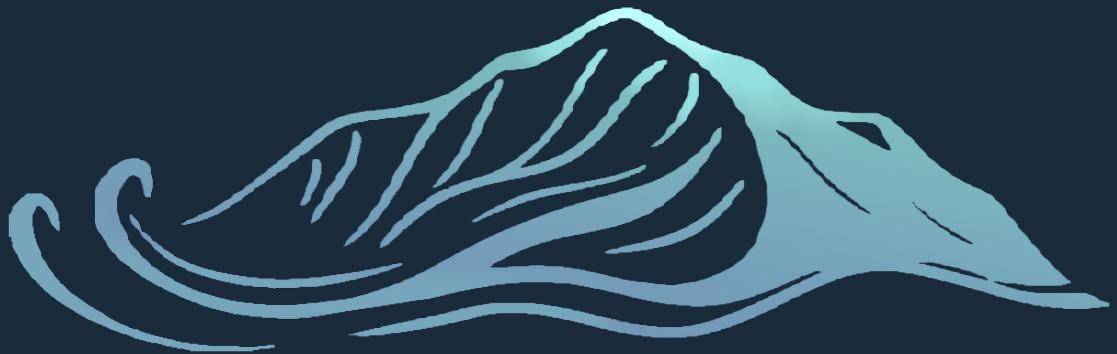
“No,” it rejected.

*The angel of death, then*, Benjamin thought. But again, the crow shook its beak.

“There is no such thing,” it revealed. Benjamin struggled through another breath. “I am what always has been and what always will be,” the crow continued. “I cannot be changed, nor will I be ignored or escaped. There is no hiding from me. We were made to meet one day, and it has always been so.”

*Why?* Benjamin wondered, ignoring his gasps and praying for the answers he thought he deserved.

But there were none, and slowly, Benjamin’s breaths shortened as the space between them lengthened. Benjamin faded into the darkness, and soon the voices of his love and his long-lost mother waited to greet him in the void.



*“...the challenge of **NONFICTION** is to  
marry art and truth...”*

Phyllis Rose



# Content Warnings for Nonfiction

*The authors recognize that readers may appreciate the following content warnings about topics addressed in their pieces:*

The Art of Letting Go — Death, Drug Use, Drug Overdose .....	210
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Staple — Blood, Gore, Graphic Depictions of Self-Harm, Medical Trauma .....	218
We Both Go Down Together — Death of a Child/Infant .....	224

# Tostones

By Gia Ayala-Rodríguez

*Mmm*, plantains are such wonderful fruits. Who thought they'd make the most savory snack you can find in my home country of Puerto Rico? After a long day of school, my dear mother serves me a big plate of golden steaming crisps, delivering the scents of pink Himalayan salt and garlic to my nose. They're called tostones, and they're made from plantains fried with any golden oil of your choice. You get a fresh bunch from your beloved tia or neighbor who happens to have a huge plantain tree growing in their small backyards. Then, it's the thrill of checking up on them every day, observing, feeling them until the day they are ripe, and you can finally prepare tostones. Peel the ripe, green skin; you will notice it looks just like a banana on the inside, but bananas can't make these golden beauties. Slice the plantain into pieces thick enough to make decent sized crisps when the time comes. Prepare the pot and pour your oil of choice: olive, canola, vegetable... whichever your palate guides you to use. Preheat it and be careful not to burn nor make the oil burst into the air as you place each plantain piece inside. Once they're fried, and the oil is cooled, you spread out the pieces and smush them with anything you can find; imagine you're a kid with a play-doh kitchen all over again. Sprinkle that *adobo*, that salt, that garlic, there is no limit...

Of course, you can't forget the *mayoketchup* on the side. Mix the namesakes, mayonnaise and ketchup, together to create a concoction pink like the corals off the beaches of *Vieques* and *Culebra*, seasoned to your heart's delight...

*A true Puerto Rican does not measure seasoning*, I say as I watch my loved ones prepare tostones the exact same way and give them to me, their faces glowing with endless love and affection. My Puerto Rican tias' love languages are cooking; their piping hot traditional dishes carrying the aroma of love alongside the spices. This dish reminds me of the love and togetherness I had with my family as a child that has carried on with me as I grew up and now find myself abroad. For me, these tostones translate to "*Te amo, mi niña hermosa.*" I love you, my beautiful girl.

# The Art of Letting Go

By Grace Brajkovich

The room is massive, pitch black, and packed full of people standing shoulder to shoulder. The chattering of two thousand people consumes space, completely filling the air with incoherent noise. Margot and I, despite being pressed up against each other, are shouting to have some sort of conversation. *When are they coming out?* Anxiety is beginning to overcome my body as I grow claustrophobic. *Do I have time to slip to the bathroom?*

Before I can escape, the crowd roars as microphone feedback screeches. The surfy-beat of “Midnight Cowboy” begins to play, sending the crowd into a total frenzy. As soon as the guitar’s strum starts, motion fills the auditorium. People shove their bodies into total strangers, and because Margot and I are in the dead center of the crowd, we immediately feel pressure from every direction. As sweaty bodies hurl themselves, a wave of commotion ripples back and forth between the walls.

Being in the center of chaos, it’s difficult to let go; I’m more focused on resisting the pressure of being shoved by the wild animals around me than on the music of my favorite band. I’m not moving with the waves, but I’m standing stiffly against them. Standing in the roaring tide is difficult, both physically and mentally; panic overcomes my body.

Sometimes life is a roaring tide, where all my energy goes into staying afloat. It has been, recently, at least. Michael died, and questions flood my mind. *Is it our fault? Should we have checked on him more? He never checked on us, but should we have reached out? We stopped calling Michael when we went sober, leaving him high and dry. Was he our friend, anyways?*

The music becomes nothing more than gibberish as I hyperventilate, desperately looking for Margot’s calming face. I lost her. *She’s gone. I need to get out. I can’t breathe.* My eyes race as I search for her, swelling with tears. Suddenly, I’m on the floor, getting trampled by

a stampede of fans. I'm down for less than a second before Margot yanks me onto my feet, asking if I'm okay. I hug her as tight as possible, and she shouts in my ear, "Let go of any fear you have. Just let go. Take your feet off the ground and let go."

As the song "Sugar" begins, my favorite, the ocean picks up, but this time, I take her advice. I jump in the air, lifting my feet from the ground, and I find myself floating with the waves of people, not against them. Margot grabs my arm, noticing my change in demeanor, and screams that she's having so much fun. She's like a sister to me. There's no one else I'd rather be here with.

One of the last times Margot and I saw Michael, we soared, like this. We took our feet off the ground, we floated with the tide. Michael, officially, was our coke dealer. We met him through Margot's old roommate, Kallie.

Kallie told us that we had to meet her new boyfriend, who she only referred to as "the plug." When we met him, we were confused at the sight of this visibly older man in Margot's kitchen.

"Hello, Mr. Plug," Margot and I joked.

"My name's Michael, Mr. Plug was my father's name," he replied.

We all laughed, then Michael pulled out a snack size Ziploc bag of cocaine. That was the start of it. Addiction is what they say it is, the high is only high for so long—eventually the best highs are lows, too.

As I float around the crowd, it dawns on me that I'm living for the music, and in the moment, I'm fearless. My feet touch the floor once every minute or so, but only to jump back up into the waves. Margot and I lock eyes to sing, "*TELL ME YOU LOVE ME AND GIVE ME SOME SUGAR.*" It echoes, convincing me that everyone in a three-mile radius could hear the boom. I scream so loud, along with the faces around me, sometimes locking eyes with strangers to sing until the ocean tears us apart again. Nothing else matters besides the words that everyone seems to know.

When "Lost Honor" begins, I look around the crowd excitedly for Margot. I don't see her anywhere, but the bass drum and rhythm from the green electric guitar make me forget that I am even looking for her.

I know she's okay, and I know I'll be reunited with her, so I jump up, finding myself deep in the middle of the crowd. I'm laughing hysterically, singing every word, when a swarm of crowd-surfers flock above. Apart from the swarm, soaring above the ocean, is Margot; I grab her ankle, and when our eyes meet, we erupt into manic laughter. I imagine that it feels nice to get some air out of the dense, sweaty, thick horde, but again, find myself floating away.

Michael came over with a bag full of white powder every week, gifting it to us for seemingly no reason. Kallie knew he was shipping narcotics to the house, but didn't tell Margot until later. We asked no questions; we would do anything for another line.

Every night around 4 A.M., Margot and I cried to each other about how much we wanted to die. The high didn't last long enough, and the crash wasn't worth it anymore. Everything we did ended with cocaine. Our lives revolved around the drug. We were slaves. We had to be done.

They close with "Disco," and Margot and I are together again, dancing harder than ever. We scream the words in each other's faces, not moving as much because everyone around us is screaming the words at each other, too. This song brings something out of us all; we are still, staring in awe of the lead singer's smooth voice over the hypnotizing beachy-rock riffs.

This moment of togetherness is blissful; I feel free. Nothing is holding me down. Free. When the overhead lights blast back on, the audience, this newfound community, roars, separating one final time, ambushing the exit.

When Margot moved out of Kallie's house and in with me, we still did coke, it just wasn't free. We spent nights awake, crying about our lust for death, only to buy another bag from Michael the next day.

We blocked him in April of 2024. We bought \$300 worth of blow before spring break and did it all in two days. We hated ourselves, but we hated Michael, too. Maybe he was just a scapegoat, but blaming him for our addiction was easier than looking in the mirror. Neither of us have touched it since then.

Margot and I were quiet once we opened the auditorium doors to fresh snowfall. We crossed our arms and walked quickly to my old Hyundai, where we cranked the heat and felt the ice-like air come out of the vents. The cold was a harsh reminder that life was waiting for us beyond the theater's doors. It's harder to let go of anxiety and depression when you can't jump and sail away. The first words we said to each other beyond the theater's doors. It's harder to let go of anxiety and depression when you can't jump and sail away. The first words we said to each other after warming up were, "Should we text Michael?"

Margot called me last week around dinner time.

"Are you sitting down?" she asked.

"I am now. What's up?"

"Michael died. He overdosed on Fentanyl. Kalima just told me."

My heart dropped.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

I cried.

Death is weird. I hadn't talked to Michael in months. Seven months. Seven long, healthy months. I thought about him almost every day. I thought about his smile and... and what? How he always texted us back and graciously took our money? I didn't even know him, really. He had drugs. His memory is associated with something that used to feel larger than life. Like freedom. It's gone. He's gone.

Seven months sober and I still think about texting Michael after a bad day. After a minor inconvenience, really. I didn't, though. Should I have? I won't. I can't, anyways.

# Everything in Between Family

By Montana Huston

“What do you want from the gas station?”

I looked towards my dad in the driver’s seat, door halfway open. “Chocolate donuts.”

He nodded back at me and got out, walking into the gas station.

We were already in the middle of Highway 24 when I went in for my second Hostess donut. I bit down and felt the squishing of fluffy dough between my teeth. It was soft and rough, an unexpected crunch and a sudden ache in my gums. I screamed when the taste of pennies mixed with smooth milk chocolate hit my taste buds. My brain tried to protect me, to forget, not the pain of my tooth falling out, but the grief of growing up.

I calmed down by the time we reached the Centennial campus of Pikes Peak Community College. My tooth was secured in a Chipotle napkin, placed gently in the center console of my dad’s truck. He promised me that the tooth was safe and that it would be under my pillow ready for the tooth fairy. I was skeptical of my tooth still being there when we got back, but I knew better than to vocalize my concern.

I don’t remember how we got into a dark room filled with high school boys and burning metal; I followed my dad anywhere. He’s always known how to get places. We sat on grey speckled folding chairs with black metal bases. Waiting for the competition to start, waiting to see my brother. Nathan talked with some of his friends while they all waited to start, and I wanted to talk with them. I knew nothing about welding, and still don’t, but anywhere my brother was, I wanted to be too.

They announced the competition was going to start, and I screamed in support of my brother, “Yay, Nathan!”

Embarrassed I was the only one who yelled, laughter filled the space from parents who once had small children too. Mutual

understanding and joy took over for just a moment. My cheeks crimson red, the color they still turn. My gums still ached when I ate the rest of my donuts, waiting for the event to finish. I avoided the right side of my mouth, nibbling on the small donut with the left side. Every once in a while, I could taste the blood, and when I bite my cheek these days, I am seven years old in that folding chair again.

The room grew brighter when the sensation of hot metal being warped into something new began. It was similar to when I went to therapy for the first time. I came out as something new, with pieces of the old me still attached. Hot orange and steel red and the hint of cobalt blue filled the room, filling it with a sunset. Where it waited for a new day and opportunity. I sat there proud, watching my brother weld whatever he was welding. I think my dad was proud of his son too.

When it was over, my dad and I met up with my brother, a conversation that escaped me. I knew Nathan was going to hang out with his friends, but I was impatient to go home and sad to leave him.

So when my dad asked if I was ready to go home, I said, “No.”

I was too young to have the words to express that beneath the aching mouth and blood. Beneath my skin and nervous system, where plasma swirls and beats between my heart and bones and brain. Where I didn’t want to miss this moment for my brother. I was anxious because I knew that he was leaving soon. Between moving out and living with our grandpa, and the arguments about grades and the knowledge that Nathan’s biological dad was never there. Between graduating high school and being ten years older than me. I grasped onto the fleeting moment of being brother and sister, of being father and daughter, of being father and son. The moment of being a family.

I don’t remember if my brother won or what there was to even win. I do remember being excited about my tooth, wondering what compensation the fairy was going to give me. I remember walking out and down those stairs wondering when I would see my brother that night. I remember our dad telling Nathan that he was proud of him. I remember getting into the truck and checking on my tooth, knowing who my dad was. I wonder if Nathan knew who his dad was too.

# Untitled

By Jackie Kha

It was small growing up. I had to share a room with my older brother, so everything in my room was dusty. I remember when I first got sick in that house. I nearly passed, and my mother said I was burning hot enough to boil water. I had inhaled something wrong when under the weighted orange tiger blanket, as if the whole building wasn't claustrophobic enough. People were closing in on our lands, always wanting to take them. We had to fortify the gates with barbed wire after the first robbery, and my mum had gotten sick when she got too much of the black preservant spray paint on her arms and not the fence. So there we were, mother and son enclosed in a home that was slowly crushing them. I could barely move, couldn't take the blanket off, and my throat felt filled with sand. I couldn't even cry out for anyone. My older brother was busy doing whatever teenagers did when they were his age. I just lay there in my corner, unable to make peace or forgive my youth's many mistakes. I still wince whenever I realize just how horrible I acted at my grandpapa's funeral because I didn't understand death. I was burning alive, cooked from the inside into the perfect cut. My little brother wandered in, though, and was able to get my mum. She still had red patches of bumps and pus across her forearms, but she yanked that blanket off anyway. I finally took a ragged gasp of dusty air, and I still survived.

It took a lot of water and artichoke tea, but I did. Not entirely unscathed per se, not then, not now, but I still did. My mum gave me another earful, but that's one of the only things she knew. Yell and work. Work and yell. It's what helped her survive the war, it's what helped her survive the second one, too. The war between her and an unknown land insistent on devouring her children whole. She would not allow that, even if it meant destroying everything she'd already built. Her body would fall before her resolve ever did. I had already drowned out what she was yelling about. Instead, I was thinking of what needed to be done. What was coming for school would surely end me if this disease had not. She cursed out my brother for ignoring me despite me dying two feet away,

and she cursed out my sister for her snide jokes that came at my expense. She never cursed my little brother, which would end up coming to bite her seven years later. Most of all, she cursed this world that had given her challenge after challenge, never giving her a minute of respite. I tried not to burden my mother with my sickness after that. It probably still eats away at me, unknown to anyone. Still, I am not sure if I will ever be enough. Clever enough to be free. Strong enough to be great. Old enough to be wise.

# Staple

By Sophia Kustar

I'm sorry for cutting too deep the night after Mom left on a trip. I'm sorry I left you to deal with my arm's disconnected tissues, that red gash slashed into my forearm, inches deep, the slow swelling of my fingers. I didn't even think about how a paring knife would be different, more destructive, than my pencil-sharpener razors or dull serrated steak knives I was used to. I'm a piece of meat, after all. I didn't think about how it would be different until I cut too deep, until I opened up, literally, and the layers of skin and fat and blood started to shine wetly under the lighting of my childhood bedroom. I'm sorry for seeing inside myself.

I'm sorry for letting the blood drip onto the floor, and for staying in the hospital overnight so that it stained the hardwood planks, and for pushing past my little sister in the hallway to get to the medicine cabinet. I think I yelled at her, and she didn't deserve it, and she didn't deserve to lose me for two days straight as they stapled me back together.

You asked me *why* while we drove to the hospital, and I didn't have a good answer for you, or for the doctor, or for Mom when you put the phone up to my ear to hear her lecture. I'm sorry I didn't have a good answer. I'm sorry I still don't have one. And I'm sorry for holding on too tight while the doctors put on the numbing cream, and while they used a staple gun to reconcile the gaping hole, the tear in the fabric of my skin. I'm sorry for being so dumb that the doctor called me a child, and I'm sorry for crying into your shoulder when he left the room. I'm sorry you were the only one there.

And I'm sorry for making you change my bandages every day after that.

But... people say it's nicer, it's better, to thank people for what *they* do instead of apologizing for what *you* do. So, thank you for holding my hand. It was swollen and puffed up to twice the size of my right one, and you held it anyway.

Thank you for changing my bandages every day after that, when the blood made me nauseous, when I couldn't even look at what I'd done to myself. Thank you for wrapping me up. The nurse we went to, weeks and weeks later, said it was weird that they used staples and not stitches, because staples leave scars. And her mouth snapped up as she unwrapped me, teeth clicking against teeth, as she saw why those little scars wouldn't matter at all. She didn't say anything as she pried out the metal prongs, no anesthetic, but I could feel her eyes on me. And I realized then that you never stared. At me, or at all the scar tissue splashing up to my shoulders, or anything else you could have stared at. Thank you for that.

Thank you for being the only one there.

I still think of you when I pull gauze from the roll.

# Languages of Love

By Lea Partipilo

My son is an infant, and I sing him every song I know all the words to. Songs about love, about heartbreak, about a life that exists only in our minds. I pour complex emotion into him while putting his hand to my throat so he can feel the vibrations words and melodies make. My father said it would help him learn how to speak. I did not yet know he would have moderate hearing loss.

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My son is an infant, and I talk to him constantly. I tell him everything I am doing and why I am doing it. I tell him everything I am feeling, while I am feeling it. I tell him everything I know to be true and every thought I have questioning truth. I tell him jokes and I teach him why it is funny. (One day in his toddlerhood he will laugh at a pun without being prompted. He will mess uncomfortably with his shoe, then cackle and say, “Ish-shoes, get it?” and I will smile with pride). I talk to my infant son and people look at me weird because they think he can’t understand me, but he looks me in the eyes, and he smiles, and he looks me in the eyes as his well up because I talk to my son, and I teach him that life is complex and humans have illimitable depth.

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My son is a toddler, and I take a deep breath, and I hide that I can feel my blood pressure rising and I lower my voice and I regulate my system so I can regulate his. I pull out a chart that has pictures of emotions so he can show me which one he is feeling. He yells, “NO, NO ANGRY” in the angriest, most frustrated voice I have ever heard. I ask him to show me so I understand. I ask again to show me when he is ready so I can (signs in ASL while speaking aloud) “help.” He shows me sleepy. I show him the corresponding pictures next to sleepy and ask which one he would like to do. “When we are sleepy, we can (points to pictures) 1. Cuddle 2. Get our sensory towel 3. Lay down 4. Read a book.”

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My son is a toddler, and I scream, “FUCK” as my tire slams into a crater in the pavement. My son is a toddler, and he yells, “FUCK” when it happens again two weeks later. My son is a toddler, and he is going through a phase of speaking like a dog. His teacher told him she will wait until he’s ready to be “human Ricci.” My son says, “Woof Woof, I’m fuckin’ ready!”

.....

My son is a toddler, and I call to him, “Cardito Angelito, bichito, papasito, mi amor!” My son is a toddler, and he asks for “mas” while pushing his little fingers together to sign it at the same time. I reply, “Mas aguacate por favor,” he says, “Si, mas, please!” still signing “more” with his green-covered fingers.

.....

My son is a boy. Not so small and not yet a preteen. He is a big kid and knows not to repeat swear words anymore, but somewhere he picked up the words “stupid” and “dumb.” I tell him these are mean words. I tell him I don’t like those words. He whispers them under his breath to himself because he thinks I can’t hear him. I would rather he said fuck.

.....

My son is a big kid, and he came home from school last week and signed, “I love you.” He has some deaf friends at school, and they are teaching him more signs.

.....

My son is a big kid, and his best friend is non-speaking. He told me another kid was being mean to him so he yelled at them, “Since [his friend] can’t and all.” I told him I am so proud. I tell him I am so proud all the time.

.....

My son is a big kid, and I answer all the questions he has about the world. He saw a carriage on TV and asked what it was. When I explained that was transportation before cars and asked if it made sense

he said, “Yeah!” and kept watching his movie. I told him it was a really good question. Later he asked what show I was watching, and I said, “*Supernatural*.” He said, “It’s about spooky ghosts?” I beamed that he knew what the word supernatural meant. I am always amazed, but hardly surprised.

.....

My son is a big kid, and he doesn’t really read or write yet. On Christmas he picked up a present and handed it to his dad. “This one is for you, Daddy.” The tag on the green and red paper confirmed he was correct.

.....

My son is a big kid, and the world does not understand him. Not when he speaks clearly, not when he shows his compassionate range of emotions, not when he displays empathy beyond what is age appropriate, not in his body language, and not the complex thoughts that he is able to explain with all the words and associations he knows, not when he doesn’t display a “typical” skill but the ability to learn the skill.

.....

My son is a big kid, and if I can’t make out the word he is saying, I ask him to explain. He picks other words that are associated with it. I get it. We talk about it.

.....

My son is a big kid, and when I graduated from community college, he said he was proud of me.

.....

My son is a big kid, and he sings all the words to every song he knows. Sometimes, he changes the words to the songs to sing about things he likes. Sometimes, he changes the words to sing about how much he loves his family. He makes up his own songs while playing his keyboard, and I will never forget listening outside of his door to “I do, sometimes, and guys, and cry.”

.....

My Angelito is a big kid, and he understands Spanish. He is learning the depth of the English language and the endlessness of complex thoughts he can learn to express. He speaks so well, and he chooses to sign because sometimes it is easier and because it's a cool new thing his friends taught him and because he wants to speak the same language they do because he knows what it is like to speak and not be heard.

.....

My son is nine and a half years old, and for his whole life we have had a secret language. A look, a small movement in the body, a telepathic tether. Our language is our connection, a manifestation of our understanding. We have sowed it, tended to it, grown upon it. It is unique to us, pulled from all these other sources and become our own language of love.

# We Both Go Down Together

By Lea Partipilo

## I. Bond

*“There’s been a change in the flight plan. They’ve landed in Holland and there you must stay”*

“Welcome to Holland”  
by Emily Perl Kingsley

I was so optimistic when my son was born. Twenty-two and full of resilience, I spent my pregnancy preparing myself to be the mother my child deserves. From the moment of conception, I was overwhelmed with knowing. I knew we had conceived; I knew he was going to be a boy; I knew he was going to be okay, and I knew that I was going to be exactly who I was supposed to be for him. I would be the mother I needed, the mother he needed, and together we would make our own family.

Although there were many causes for concern, I carried an uncharacteristic calmness with me throughout my pregnancy and my son’s first week earth-side. It was no surprise to me that he needed surgery when he was born. 3D ultrasounds show everything, and having just finished massage school, I was familiar with the tiny, shifting anatomy on the black and white screen. His fingers curling and uncurling, his bum in my ribcage, his heart loud and racing, and his duodenum—closed in the center. With his digestive system obstructed by this abnormality he wouldn’t be able to eat or digest milk until it was fixed.

Upon birth, his tissues and skin—purple and fragile, new to air and to touch—would need to be opened. One of his first experiences would be the trauma of surgery juxtaposed with the skin-to-skin comfort of his mother’s warmth. He would come into the world and be met with

the best and the worst it has to offer before he could conceptualize it at all.

The doctors told me that thirty percent of children born with a closed duodenum have Down syndrome. Those numbers seemed fairly low for concern at the time, and I refused genetic testing. The medical professionals pressured me at every appointment. I was tired of my instinct being questioned and told them that if it would change nothing in the short term, they needed to stop asking. This was my first of a lifetime full of advocacy, full of using my do-not-mess-with-me mama voice. I was finding my footing before I realized the rubble that would continuously fall behind me every step that I would carry my son throughout this life. I knew that even if he did have Down syndrome, it would change neither of our care at the hospital, and I didn't want the results of the test to cloud with fear the beautiful moment of his birth. I didn't want people who have never experienced raising a child with Down syndrome to try to guide me. If this was our journey, we would be innately ready. No books, prayers, or positive affirmations would help me more than my primal intuition guiding me in understanding my son's needs.

When children are diagnosed with Down syndrome at birth, they give the recovering mother a stack of books with possible medical diagnoses and outdated expectations, most of which will be completely irrelevant to the individual. The nurses, with sad smiles stuck to their mouths like stickers, give the mothers a poem that essentially says, you booked your trip to Italy, but now you've landed in Holland. Holland is not Italy, but it is beautiful, nonetheless. What they don't tell you is that everyone you know lives in Italy. That Holland's borders will separate you and your baby from ever fully connecting with others again. While celebrating the life of my beautiful boy, sure that I would provide him with everything he needed to live fully, I had no idea that from that point on it would be me and him, understanding each other, but nobody ever understanding us again.

...

The day after I was discharged from the hospital, my son was scheduled to have his surgery. Only four days old, and under six pounds. His skin was still wrinkled and peeling, adjusting to oxygen. The calm

certainty of his safety still rested inside of me. It burrowed, whether from intuition or the need to be strong. The surgery went as perfectly as it could; a small scar on the right side of his belly was the only physical indication that this tiny baby was a fighter.

He needed to stay in the neonatal intensive care unit following the surgery. We were given a list of goals he must meet before he could come home.

*“It will be two weeks at least to monitor healing. He must poop regularly; after that, he must drink three ounces of milk every three hours.”*

I stayed with him as long as I could, but I needed to rest and heal. When I arrived home, I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at his empty bassinet. My eyes welled up.

*“I have been here before,”* I told his dad.

*“This is the second time I have come home from the hospital without my baby.”*

I managed to choke the words out, my voice barely a whisper. I fell asleep with the tightness of dried tear stains stuck on my young, plump cheeks.

I drove an hour every day to the hospital to sit with him. I couldn't touch him for the first week. I changed his diaper through gloves that were attached to the glass walls of his bed while nurses told me how he slept and ate overnight.

*Does not being able to touch you hurt you as much as it hurts me?*

I sang to him through the holes in the glass. I took breaks in the cafeteria, returned up the elevator, feeling like a burden getting buzzed into the NICU floor for the third time in one day, day after day. I scrubbed in at the stainless-steel sinks before I was met with the alarms, cries, beeping, and general chaos of fifty sick babies in one room. Last row, last bed on the left, next to the window. There were cords attached to his every limb, all working a different job. He had a tube for eating for the first two weeks. It went through his nose, bypassing the surgery site, nurturing him, obstructing the view of his angelic face, but not his spirit.

He was always alert, even as a newborn, even as he was waking up from anesthesia (likely the first sign of his later ADHD diagnosis). His eyes, taking on multiple shades of deep colors before they settled on brown weeks later, were wide and taking in the world around him. His lips formed together in “coos” and “whos,” speaking to me the language of love each time I peered into the glass and whispered,

*“I’m back, mi amor. I will never leave you for long.”*

After three and a half weeks I couldn’t take it anymore. I called the NICU at 6 a.m. to check on him before getting ready to make the drive. It had become my new morning routine. Like every other morning when I called, I was informed that he didn’t drink his required amount of milk with the overnight nurse, even though he always drank it during the day when I was the one feeding him. He had to drink the full amount, every three hours within thirty minutes, for twenty-four hours. I hung up the phone and turned to his dad to tell him I would be staying at the hospital for twenty-four hours to bring our baby home.

*“I’m not coming back without him,” I declared.*

When twenty-four hours were up, and the last feeding was administered to their requirements, the nurse called his doctor to update her. When she returned to us at his crib side, she stated that the doctor wanted him to have another full day of eating before he could be released.

*Okay, forty-eight hours, I can do this.*

I started to hallucinate around hour forty. I left right after his feeding to go to my parents’ house fifteen minutes away. I needed real food and a bed. I remember my mom catching my arm as I started to tip over from vertigo, the sounds of the machines in the NICU still ringing in my ears from ten miles away. I slept for one hour and returned to the hospital, just in time for his next feeding. Again, when the forty-eight hours was up, the doctor insisted on one more day. I was angry, I was tired, I wasn’t leaving without my baby. I couldn’t trust that anyone else could get him to eat when I so easily could. His warm caramel-colored skin and full head of dark hair would nestle into the crook of my arm at each feeding. I could feel the softness of his hair and skin against mine releasing serotonin throughout my body. When his eyes locked with mine as he guzzled the milk I had spent two hours trying to pump just to get

enough, we were in a trance of our own making. I sang him every song I knew all the words to, and he drank every drop. We were locked in, and I wasn't ever going to let him go again.

*“It’s me and you, papa. It will always be me and you.”*

I slept on the plastic couch in the family waiting room periodically in those last twenty-four hours. At one point I awoke to a man’s voice which sounded muffled as I regained as much consciousness as possible. It felt like a fever dream as I started to sit up, and he carried on as if he had been talking for hours, though we were the only two in the room. I remember being profoundly moved by our conversation, but the only part I can recall for certain was that he had triplets in the NICU, each in isolation.

The nurses had previously told me I had the healthiest baby in the NICU, that they would take him out at night and show him the other babies and cuddle him. It was a privilege the other babies did not have. Just as I was feeling more defeated than ever, more tired than I thought humanly possible, I was overcome with gratitude. I hope that man and his three daughters are okay, ten years later, but something in the pain in his eyes, and the grief in his voice, just makes me hope they all found peace.

My son became a NICU graduate in the early afternoon of the fourth day, hour seventy-eight.

## II. Isolation

*“Everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy... and they’re all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say ‘Yes, that’s where I was supposed to go. That’s what I had planned.’”*

“Welcome to Holland”  
by Emily Perl Kingsley

The first few months of motherhood were what I expected of caring for a newborn. I was able to take advice from other mothers and pediatricians. It was towards the end of the first year that distance started to grow between how I related to other mothers and the advice they could give me.

*There are 1000 miles between the borders of Holland and Italy.*

What I was experiencing was beyond the knowledge of anyone I knew. I turned to Facebook groups for mothers to children with Down syndrome. I was looking for advice and community, someone to say they understood. I found that they were all decades older than me. Their experience and terminology were outdated. I would read posts and roll my eyes when I saw them say my child “is” Down syndrome or my child “is Down’s.” It was as if the Internet was not already in their hands, they were never corrected, never saw a problem, still reducing their child to a diagnosis, and often, disregarding their potential. I knew that although Down syndrome was a major part of our lives, it was not all my son was. Our differing perspective of this aside, those mothers all had other children, most before their child with Down syndrome. They all got to experience motherhood in a way I never would, a way I could never really understand.

I learned fast. Terminology, advocacy, common symptoms, and diagnoses that often go hand in hand with Down syndrome. I learned my son as he learned the world. We named him Riccardo “Ricci” Angelo, Warrior Angel, before we even knew he would be, that he would have to be. He has been fighting since the day he was born, and I, his loyal soldier. He calls the shots and I enforce them, protect him, as if the balance of the entire universe relies on his survival, his ability to thrive. From the outside, it would appear that I am leading him, but I will always follow his lead. I have been training since his birth to act accordingly to his every move, every glimmer of potential, when to coast and when to push him. We live on a balance beam structured with our understanding; every stitch that strengthens it is a moment of tapping into each other. We toe the borders of Holland, strong and fragile.

It was an odd occurrence to teach my parents and in-laws how to parent my child. It is wildly different than parenting the children they have raised. Me, a new mother, carefully explaining to these seasoned

parents potential situations and how to react, how to feed him and guide him to feed himself, hand over hand, be helpful but not too helpful, how to correct behaviors, how to positively reinforce, how to predict and avoid triggers before they even happen.

I quickly became an expert in developmental therapy techniques, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. I could identify the slightest change in my son's eyes to detect that we were about to have a meltdown, assess the environment and find the cause. The tension in his little fingers, curling and uncurling, would indicate to me to intervene, to soothe and find out where his mind is, why it's there, and how we can navigate with validation back to a neutral place. We worked on how he could advocate for himself. In the back pocket of my mind, I have a handful of tools that I will shuffle through to avoid catastrophe. His emotions, his body, his sensory processing all had a threshold and a point of no return. Does he need a comfort item to self-soothe? Are people talking too loudly? Is there a need he can't verbalize? An emotion he doesn't understand? Is that other child too close? Is there a tag in his shirt bothering him? Is he tired of standing because of low tone? As he got older, and mobile, we started to decline invitations to events.

At family parties I was always tucked away, in a private room with my son because he was overstimulated, or the other kids weren't playing with him, he was upset at them and became aggressive. The help from family members became less and less because they, although most parents themselves, didn't know how to watch him, or they were scared to, or it was too much work. Their children could be given a glance every five minutes, play with the other children without intervention, eat without choking, use the bathroom independently. They wouldn't wander into the street or make a run for it through the gate or in parking lots. All the bright and silly things he would say, his natural ear for music, his empathy and tenderness were overlooked, gone greatly unnoticed by everyone but me because navigating his needs and safety was too much for others.

Too many things to remember, too many extenuating circumstances.

...

When my son was three, only eight or so months after learning to walk, we had a party in the backyard of my parents' house. Before stepping inside for a moment, I asked the crowd of adults to keep an eye on my son. About five minutes later I walked into the kitchen to see all of those adults now inside, and my son nowhere to be found. Panic ensued. I was frantically screaming my son's name as if my limbs were severed and fed to wolves.

I searched every corner of the small ranch house with fifteen people inside. My mind was too occupied on the singular goal of seeing my son's head pop out from around the corner to fantasize about all the things that could happen to him in a matter of seconds without my protection. My nephew, just thirteen months older than my son, was the only person to check outside.

*“Auntie, Ricci is out here!”*

He yelled as loud as his little lungs could, and seconds later, I ran past him, my baby finally in my sight again. He was on the ladder to the pool, only one step away from being in the pool. I scooped him off the ladder, his tiny body clutched so tightly against mine I felt I could have absorbed him, my body porous with vulnerability and desperation to never let him go. I cried while squeezing him and my nephew, telling my nephew how good he did. Ricci, attuned to my every emotion, wore a face of sadness and fright, feeling the weight that something scary just happened, but confused as to what it was. With his lips quivering, I held him until my heart slowed. He was content to sink into my embrace until I was ready to let go. The time between losing and finding him was maybe two minutes long, but it felt like a lifetime. I was one minute away from losing my baby forever...

*but he climbed a ladder.*

He accomplished a huge milestone long before we predicted. He was getting smarter, stronger... something to celebrate and fear. I never take my eyes off him in a crowd, casually keeping a finger on his shoulder, ready to grasp him with all my strength away from danger. I never trust others at a party to watch out for him, even our own family. We are an island, the two of us, attached, hand in hand.

### III. Grief

*“And the pain of that will never, ever, ever, ever go away...”*

“Welcome to Holland”  
by Emily Perl Kingsley

Now that he is older, almost double digits, we both yearn for time apart, our own freedom, just sometimes. We will never have it. I think about how young I will be when he turns eighteen. I will have just turned forty, so much life ahead of me! I could travel, I could change careers, I could move to a cabin in the woods, I could have. I could have if I arrived in Italy, but I am in Holland. He might get married, and they might live alone (though our plan is to build him a house on my property so I am nearby if he needs me), he might learn to drive and be fully independent. He might be partially independent. The state might make me sign a contract as his guardian after he turns eighteen. Maybe, might, we don't know. My friends know though. Despite Ricci's potential to some degree or another, while my friends enjoy their empty nests, settling into peaceful retirement and becoming grandparents, it will still be me and Ricci. Hand in hand. Attached. Tethered.

I joke that we will die together of old age in a nursing home, side by side, like in *The Notebook*. He is the little love of my life, and we will spend our lives together. I joke, but I hope. I hope he never lives a second without me. There's a saying that “no parent should ever outlive their kid,” but if we can't die together, I pray I do. I pray I bear the pain of life without him, so he never sees a moment of life without me. I have lived a life without him, but I am his constant, his secret keeper, his translator, accurately predicting his needs and emotions without a word between us. There is no one who can care for him better, know him better, love him more, than me. What will become of my boy when Mom is not around to teach him how to grieve over the person that has never left his side? What will become of him when we are untethered, and my hand can no longer hold his in warmth, safety, and guidance?

Some parents may envy me. I never have to let go of my child, not fully. My baby stayed a baby so much longer than other parents get. He is nine, and he still loves to fall asleep on me. He told me he drifted to sleep

to the sound of my heartbeat in his ear after a nap a few weeks ago. He cries every weekday that he missed me when he was at school, and could I put off making dinner for a while so we can cuddle? He still thinks I am funny and will laugh hysterically with me. The kind of laugh best friends share, that keeps going when you make eye contact again after your abs are aching. I am still his favorite person.

*He's still partially incontinent.*

*He's still struggling with impulse control and aggression towards peers.*

*He still goes non-verbal when he's stressed.*

Most of the time, this is just normal. This is our normal. But then, the neighbor boy, who is the same age as Ricci, yells from his bike on a summer day. He and his friend who lives around the corner are getting their first tastes of freedom. They are probably allowed to stay within a few blocks of their houses, the park just two blocks away. My son doesn't realize that that should be him, but I mourn the life we don't get to have, while simultaneously grateful for the one we do. I have to remind myself that both things can be valid.

I imagine summer days where he comes home at dinner time, covered in grass stains, telling me about what he and his friends explored that day. He will smell of summer and sweat, not yet so old that it is body odor, still innocent and sweet. I dream of busy schedules, hauling him to baseball games and watching him hit his first home run. There would be sleepovers before the double header the next day, and I would wake up to a raided fridge from late night pre-teen boy hunger. A life where I wouldn't have to give him a pep talk as we get out of the car at the park, reminding him how to try to make friends, and that it's okay if people don't want to play, there are always friends that will, and if not, I am here for races, for soccer, for swinging, and exploring on the trails with him.

*I am always here, never feel alone, my boy, never feel unsafe, never feel unwelcome, because I will always be here. You are not discovering Holland alone. It may not be the only home I have ever known as it is to you, but we are mapping it out together.*

It is sweet, and it still stings.

...

Two days ago, a man approached me in the grocery store. He hesitated before passing us, thinking of a way to initiate a conversation without being intrusive. *"Pancakes, yum!"* he said to my son, motioning to the package of griddles Ricci was tossing into the cart. He went on to ask me about Ricci's heart and health before showing me a picture of his little boy with Down syndrome. I said the hole in his heart closed all by itself! He has had some other surgeries on his duodenum and ears but is otherwise in good health. (Parents of children with Down syndrome quickly learn the parts of their child's body that need constant monitoring.) The man then tells me that his son had surgery on his heart at four months old, and they lost him to a heart attack at just three years old.

As I look at other children, longing for Ricci to experience life like they do, for me to have a typical parenting experience, this man looked at me and my son with longing. Longing that his son could have been one of the lucky kids with Down syndrome, whose ailments could be mended and monitored without serious concern. Who could have lived a full life, even if that life did not look the way other kids' do. He longed for what I have, a healthy soon-to-be ten-year-old! Full of life, helping his mama push the cart he could hardly see over in the grocery store while doing a little dancey-dance, stealing the hearts of strangers with the contagious life energy that radiates from him.

The man gave my son a high five, told me to love on him, to which I said I always do as I rustled his shiny brown hair out of his eyes. The man stepped back and gave him one last longing look, a look that said I have everything anyone could ever want and that he would give anything to have his boy back in his arms. A look that said his son should have had a full, thriving, and meaningful life like my son has, even if that life is in Holland.



***“...be drawn to the **VISUAL ARTS**  
for it can expand your imagination...”***

**Barbara Jannszkiewic**



# Content Warnings for Visual Art

*The artists recognize that readers may appreciate the following content warnings about topics addressed in their pieces:*

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**Home is where you make it**

By Gia Ayala-Rodríguez



## **The Detective**

By Kyra Bass



## **Opposites Attract**

By Kyra Bass



## New In Technicolor

By Jessica Caldwell



## You Brought Color to My World

By Oleander Coyne



## Depreciating Value

By Avan Doeksen



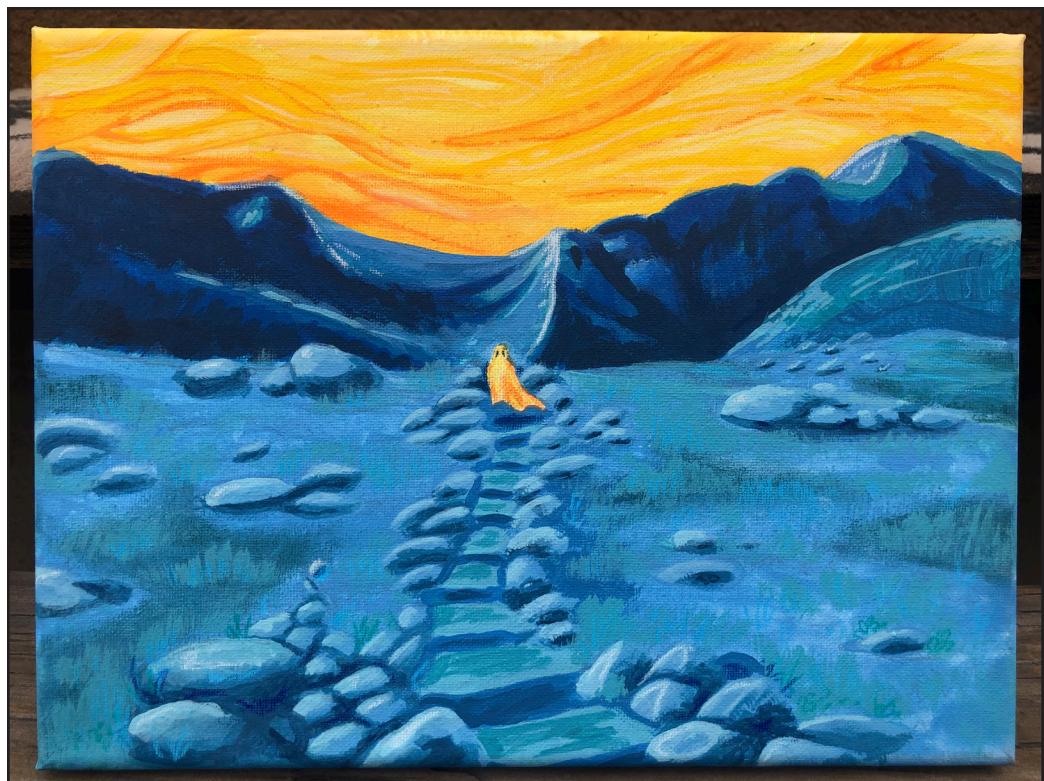
## **The Driveway Beast**

By Avan Doeksen



## No Rest

By Avan Doeksen



## **Sheets Pulled Over the Sky**

By Avan Doeksen



## Strung Up, Left Behind

By Avan Doeksen

I am happy because



EVERY ONE LOVES ME

**Alister**

By Kai Garcia-Curran



## Mouse

By Kai Garcia-Curran



## Parrot

By Kai Garcia-Curran



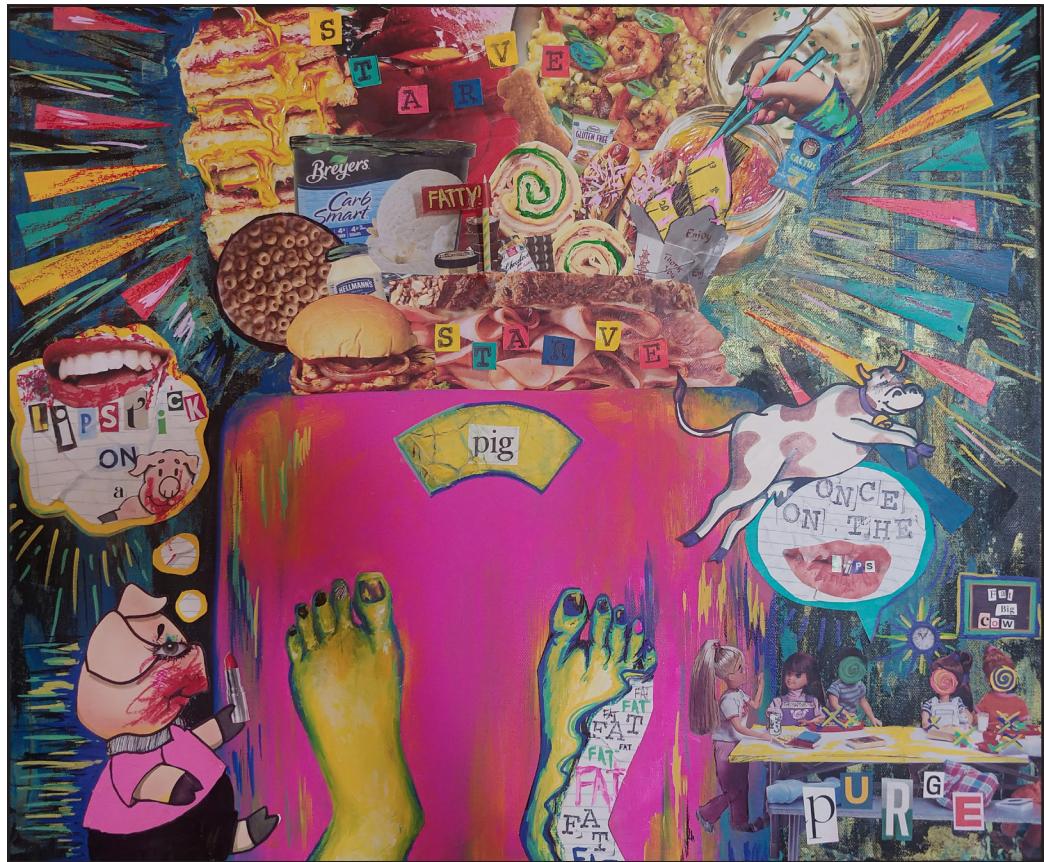
# Tiger

By Kai Garcia-Curran



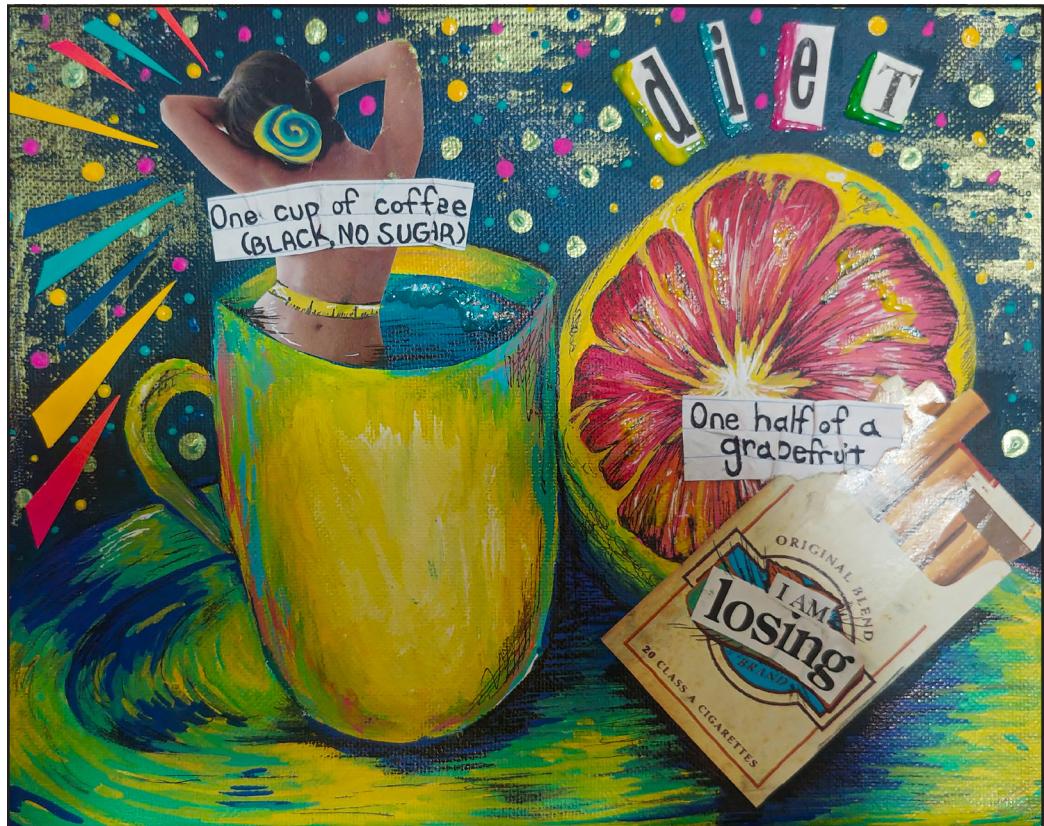
## Untitled

By Melody Gruber



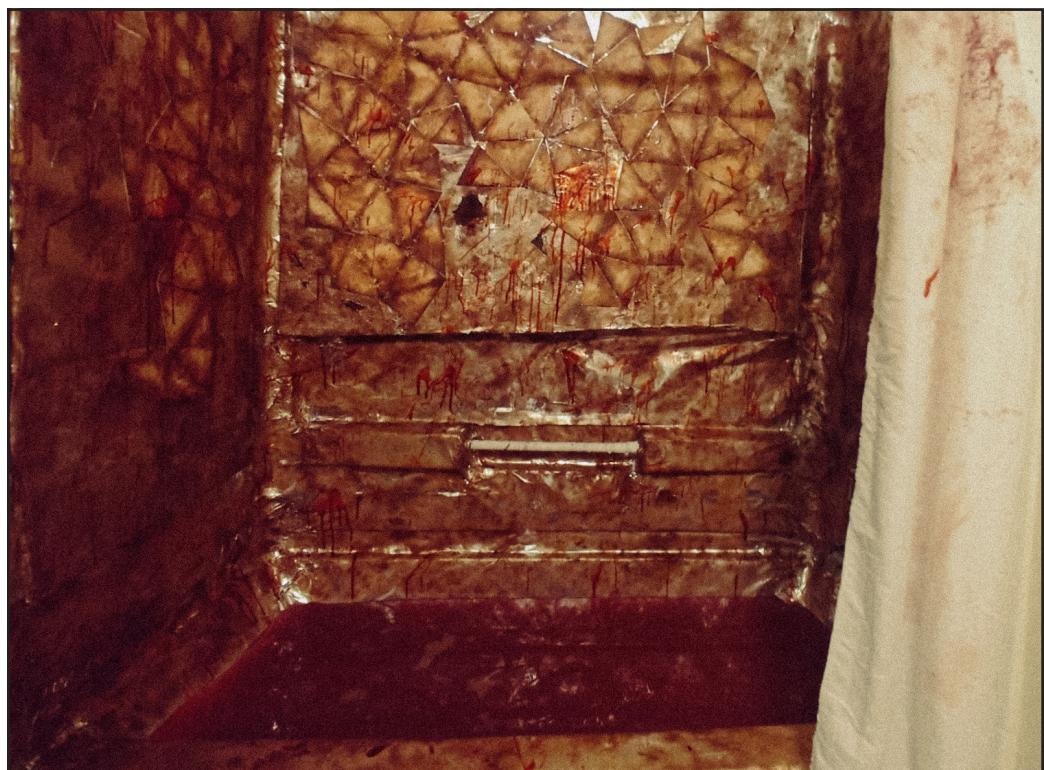
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By Melody Gruber



# Untitled

By Melody Gruber



# Untitled

By Melody Gruber



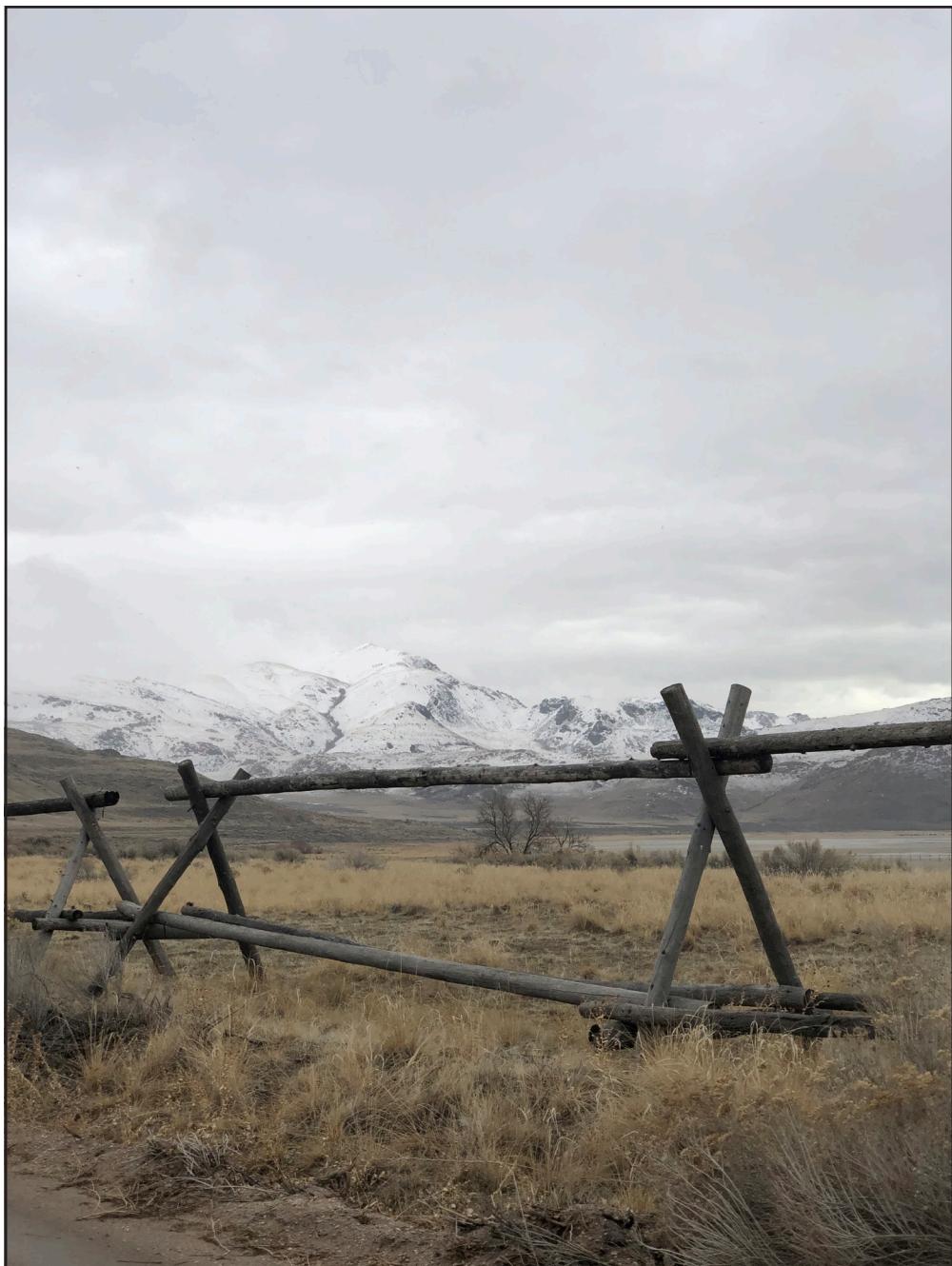
## A Traveled Sole

By Jorden Hillman



# Untitled

By Lisa Kujawa-Levine



# Untitled

By Lisa Kujawa-Levine



## Untitled

By Lisa Kujawa-Levine



# Untitled

By Micaela Morrill



# Untitled

By Micaela Morrill



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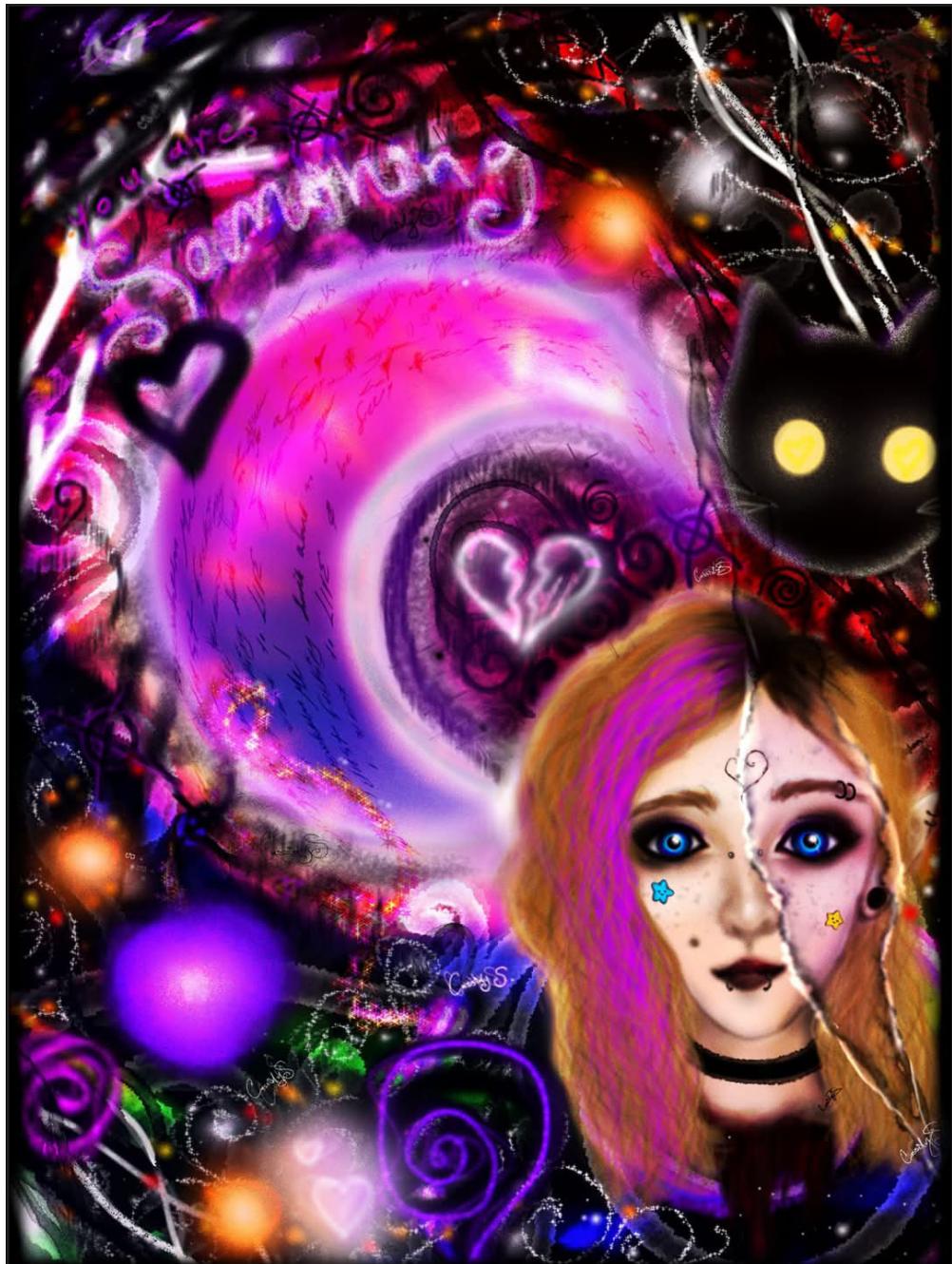
## Desert Lizard

By Larissa Snoddy



## **Summer Flower**

By Larissa Snoddy



# Untitled

By Cassidy Stiles



# Untitled

By Cassidy Stiles



## A Misunderstanding

*House Sparrow, both Female*

By Emma Welch



## A Quiet Moment

*Rocky Mountain Elk, Male*

By Emma Welch

## About *riverrun*

The UCCS student literary and arts journal, *riverrun*, began in 1971 when Dr. C. Kenneth Pellow became the first faculty advisor. The first *riverrun* journal was published during that year but did not become an annual tradition at UCCS until the 1980s. For more than 50 years, it has been published and circulated at the end of every spring semester and showcases the poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art created by UCCS students.

If you are a student or graduated alumnus that is interested in contributing to future volumes of *riverrun*, or if you are simply curious about the journal in general, visit the *riverrun* website at [www.riverrunjournal.com](http://www.riverrunjournal.com), where you can find news and updates pertaining to upcoming releases, as well as digital copies of previous editions.

Alternatively, feel free to send an email to [riverrun@uccs.edu](mailto:riverrun@uccs.edu), so that you can request to be made aware of future submission deadlines in a timely manner.

