

# Inkblots

VOL II

## **The History**

The Honors Creative Writing Club published its first literary magazine, *Inkblots (Vol.I)*, in spring of 2022. At the time, none of the editors had ever produced a literary magazine before. It was, and remains today, an extremely rewarding learning process. We look forward to many years to come.

## **The Staff**

Isabella Burkard is a sophomore social work major. She has been working on *Inkblots* since its beginning. She is the current president of the Honors Creative Writing Club and the editor-in-chief and designer of *Inkblots Vol. I* and *Vol. II*. She is also responsible for receiving and reviewing submissions.

Victoria Mazurkiewicz is a sophomore with a double major in English and film studies. She is the current vice president of the Honors Creative Writing Club. This is her first year working on *Inkblots* although she has submitted in the past. She is responsible for reviewing submissions as well as editing the final publication.

## **The Thanks**

We would like to thank all who submitted to this year's edition of *Inkblots*. Your work is truly beautiful, and we wouldn't have been able to do it without you!

We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to Ana Casper. She not only designed the cover for *Inkblots (Vol.II)*, but she also provided us with a wealth of artwork to fill its pages. We will never be able to thank her enough.

Thank you also to anyone else involved in this year's literary magazine—our club members, our wonderful advisor Jacqueline Stuhmiller, and anyone who ever had to listen to us ramble about *Inkblots* or beg for submissions. We appreciate you!

# CONTENTS

## **Written Works**

<i>it was always you</i> by Max Stern.....	6
<i>Innocence in the Wind</i> by Isabella Burkard.....	13
<i>Confession</i> by Janae Mancheski.....	17
<i>The Ceaseless Hungerer</i> by Michael R. Smith.....	17
<i>The Kali Yuga</i> by Emiliano Moreno.....	18
<i>Little Paper Dragon</i> by Evan Kuhn.....	22
<i>A Letter</i> by Ellie Kuhlmann.....	23
<i>Retirement</i> by Fridarose Hamad.....	25
<i>Numb</i> by Sabrina Arassi.....	28
<i>It's Journey</i> by Isabella Burkard.....	29
<i>The Starving Watcher</i> by Victoria Mazurkiewicz.....	32
<i>Ready Smile Action</i> by Madeline Marfoe.....	35
<i>Suicide Note</i> by Max Stern.....	36
<i>A Train Arrives in Indiana</i> by Liam Dooley.....	38
<i>The Various Illusions</i> by Michael R. Smith.....	46
<i>Keyhole Memories</i> by Ana Casper.....	47
<i>Study Buddies</i> by Thlee Xiong.....	51
<i>Unpaid Full-Time Job</i> by Sabrina Arassi.....	55
<i>Broken Symmetry</i> by William Miles.....	56

<i>Samara</i> by Isabella Burkard.....	58
<i>Grave Gambling</i> by Victoria Mazurkiewicz .....	61
<i>I once was a writer's best friend</i> by Evan Kuhn .....	65
<i>Edgar Allen Parody</i> by Michael R. Smith.....	66
<i>The Beasts of Lake Bakhurst</i> by Harrison Schneider.....	68
<i>The Ancient Dragon Melts the Hero with its Acid Breath</i> by Michael R. Smith.....	77
<i>Breathe</i> by Dane Buelow.....	78
<i>Twin Flames: Snuffed</i> by Isabella Burkard.....	86
<i>Cathedral</i> by Janae Mancheski.....	88
<i>Brotherhood of Man</i> by Max Stern.....	88
<i>Thorn of the Rose</i> by Aleyna Karacan.....	90
<i>Inheritance</i> by Janae Mancheski.....	94
<i>The Innkeeper's Daughter</i> by Jacob Borre.....	95
<i>How to Be a Good Father</i> by Madeline Marfoe.....	110
<i>Moving On</i> by Isabella Burkard.....	114
<i>The Man at the Train</i> by Evan Kuhn.....	116
<i>The Stranger in my Mirror</i> by Madeline Marfoe.....	121
<i>Untitled</i> by Sabrina Arassi.....	124
<i>A Summer at the Pool</i> by Ana Casper.....	125
<i>The Beauty of Rain</i> by Max Stern.....	126
<i>My Father in the Mountains</i> by Ilse Johnson.....	131
<i>Index of Authors and Artists</i> .....	140

## Artwork

<i>Call You Tonight</i> by Ana Casper.....	12
<i>Self Portrait</i> by Ana Casper.....	12
<i>Untitled</i> by Harrison Schneider.....	21
<i>Perspective</i> by Ana Casper.....	24
<i>Car Talks</i> by Ana Casper.....	27
<i>Till Death Do Us Part</i> by Ana Casper.....	31
<i>Sunrise</i> by Ana Casper.....	37
<i>Falling in a Dream</i> by Ana Casper.....	45
<i>Anxiety</i> by Ana Casper.....	50
<i>Self-Portrait</i> by Evan Kuhn.....	54
<i>The Bean</i> by Ana Casper.....	60
<i>Juxtaposition</i> by Ana Casper.....	68
<i>The Sword &amp; The Flame</i> by Ana Casper.....	77
<i>Two of Cups</i> by Thlee Xiong.....	93
<i>Eclipse</i> by Ana Casper.....	94
<i>Beams</i> by Ana Casper.....	109
<i>Canyonlands</i> by Ana Casper.....	113
<i>Desert Sun</i> by Ana Casper.....	115
<i>The Diner</i> by Ana Casper.....	124
<i>Rocky Mountain National Park</i> by Ana Casper.....	139

\*Any images not listed in the table of contents are in the public domain and were not the work of a UWM student or submitted by an individual.



---

“Storytelling reveals meaning without committing  
the error of defining it.”

Hannah Arendt

---



## it was always you

by Max Stern

*"It's meeting the man of my dreams*

*and meeting his beautiful wife."*

*-Alanis Morissette*

To all the people with broken hearts

who never even knew their love.

And all the fears I'll never face-

the imprint he left- a dark twirling trace.

A four-dimensional embrace

is but a fictional void of space.

\*\*\*

There is nothing more important than a promising beginning:

He looked at me with those arctic eyes.

Said something through soft-suburban pencil tapping

and the low-frequency murmurs.

Do you remember?

You told me a joke that day  
and the words, I've forgotten  
but I've never stopped laughing.

And, do you remember?

Those three months I couldn't leave my bed?

You admitted to me,  
the snow made you sad too.

Your eyes were as cold as I-  
freezing my tears and now  
every time I try to cry  
it evaporates into mist,  
like nothing in the air.

I stand on rooftops,  
observing every spark-  
a flame to a fire  
left alone to devour.

To awaken of yelling cars,



over the chirping birds,  
I'm in the land of Oz  
but you've always liked girls.

\*\*\*

I keep telling myself people are an amalgamation  
of words and actions-  
I keep telling it to myself.

It is not working.

\*\*\*

Did you hear?  
They've installed new LED lights  
and now I see your eyes  
every time I cross the street.  
I wander rooms without purpose,  
hiding from something I don't know.

Do you know?

I rip my muscles apart

four days a week

in your image.

Just for them to heal back

and back again.

I know-

pain is pleasure and

beauty is pain

but the middle of both-

repeated twice- I've said "pain"

is the love I've learnt again

and again.

Do you know?

Know how it feels

for every crush- a curse.

A lightened load of sorrow

nobody cares to know.

You must remember

that day I stopped laughing.

You tried to cheer me up,

but that would be impossible.

My joy is your torture,

the same in reversal.

Only when you're drunk

do you know me

and then you wake up.

Can't you see

what you do to me?

There is so much beauty

in pining for people, unrequited.

But you've made me worse,

and I wouldn't take it back.

You must remember- hear-

the pain- the snow- the eyes-

the curse- the crush- the joke-

the laugh- the quote- the gag- the throat-

the blood- the drink- the skies-

you must know

the anecdote-

It's

the eyes- the eyes- the eyes-

the eyes-

(I shiver, I try to cry)

and every time I close mine

it's darkness and

it's only

you.

Yes,

from the beginning of my life

to the day I die-

know,

it will be

and always was

you.

*It was always you.*

**CALL YOU TONIGHT**



*Ana Casper*

**SELF PORTRAIT**



*Ana Casper*

## Innocence in the Wind

By Isabella Burkard

Lillian stooped to pluck a ripe dandelion from the wet earth, her toes curling in the mud. The ruffles of her dress tickled her thighs, a constant reminder of her ever-advancing age. “Time for something new,” Mother said. “Getting too short these days,” Mother said. But Lillian was reluctant to give up such a sentimental possession of her girlhood. She blew the seeds of the wishing flower across the idyllic suburban landscape, hoping against hope to remain young forever—hoping to be as free as the floating seeds. For what a sweet flower the dandelion still seemed to her. It had yet to earn its title as the shameful scourge of an otherwise pure lawn. To care about such things seemed so adult that she’d rather not think of them at all.

Instead, Lillian threw herself down upon the hammock with an exaggerated sigh. She closed her eyes to its peaceful rocking and the groans of supporting tree branches. The great willow stood above as judge of the summer days. Its branches knew all moods of Mother Nature before that fickle lady could speak. One subtle sway in its character predicted change unbeknownst to the dissociated characters of everyday existence. Lillian was no exception, assuming monotony unless alterations were forced upon her. So, imagine her surprise when an unfamiliar voice cleared its throat beside her.

“Excuse me, Miss.”

Lillian’s eyelids flew open as she struggled to free herself from her precarious netted captor. Achieving some position of dignity in which she was at least sitting upright, she narrowed her eyes at the boy. “What are you doing on our property?” Her voice was so like her mother’s that she cringed.

Flushed cheeks betraying her embarrassment, she tried again with corrected countenance. “I’m sorry, what can I do for you?”

“Could you spare anything to eat, Miss? I have been walking for many days, and it would be greatly appreciated.”

She regarded him closely. He appeared to be near her age, give or take some years in either direction. His body was freshly a man’s, yet his cheeks remained roguish as a boy’s. His ruddy red hair looked as if it had seldom seen care, and his freckles appeared as though they may wash off with some proper soap and water.

“Where are you walking to?” she inquired.

“To Chicago. My brother has gotten me a job in a meat packing plant, and I am to join him.”

She nodded decisively. “Very well then. Wait here and stay out of sight.”

Evading her parents’ notice, Lillian returned shortly with a small tray piled high. A bowl of fresh strawberries, a shiny apple, sliced carrots, a turkey sandwich with artichoke spread, a glass of milk, a piece of chocolate. By the look of him, the food was likely more precious than the traveler had ever tasted.

“Thank you,” he said, scarcely waiting to breathe before devouring the gift like a wolf on the hunt.

Lillian observed him for a time, looking past his ill-mannered and voracious eating habits, before getting the idea to force some decorum upon him. “So, what is your name them?”

“Foley,” he said between bites. “How about you?”

“Lillian,” she said, “after my grandmother.”

He was beginning to slow as the tray emptied. “That’s far too formal. I’ll call you Lilly.”

She smiled, picking at blades of grass to occupy her nervous fingers. “Chicago sounds exciting. I’ve never been. Will you do anything fun while you’re there?”

Foley shrugged and swallowed the last of the milk before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I suppose if I am not worked to the bone, I will do whatever I please."

She nodded, unsure what to do now that it seemed their interaction was coming to a close.

"Say Lilly," he said, standing up and offering her a hand, "I'm going down to the lake to cool off now. Come for a swim?"

She accepted his assistance but hesitated at the proposition. She glanced back at the house, taking a small step in that direction. "I really shouldn't. I don't have a fitting bathing suit right now. Too small according to Mother. And I'm not supposed to leave the yard. Mother's rules."

"Are you a child?" he asked. "Mother says this, Mother says that. What do you want to do?"

Lillian bit her lip. She had always wished to retain her youth. There would be no responsibility, no worries of womanhood, no stake in familial drama, no constraints except her imagination. And yet she had never considered that she lived under tyranny even now.

"What about the bathing suit?"

"Just wear what you have on. Do you think I have one stashed away in some extravagant suitcase?"

Lillian wrung her hands at the impropriety, but it was awfully hot today. Sweat had been beading on her forehead for some time now. Her skin was pink and hot to the touch. It was the kind of day that necessitated a relief from nature's conditions, and even the willow seemed in agreement. "Alright," she said.

It was a short walk to the lake during which Lillian chatted meaninglessly to fill the silence. Foley led the way across the beach when they arrived, wading into the tempting water.



“Join me Lilly!” he called to Lillian who had stalled on the shore.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes! Come on, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She looked at the size and strength of him. Surely, he would be able to prevent her from being pulled under. She paused but a moment longer. “Okay.”

Lillian held her breath and plunged into the cool blue beyond. Wave after wave engulfed her, and for a brief second, she felt as though her heart may stop. The water stung in its sharp overwhelmingness. Her nerve endings danced. She reveled in the feeling of submersion—it was so complete—and laughed underwater. Joyful, Lillian kicked her way to the surface. “Foley! Oh Foley! I’m so glad you talked me into this!”

She spun around. “Foley?”

The water had calmed around her, crystal clear in the midday sun, but he was nowhere to be seen. “Foley!”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Foley, are you okay? Where are you? This isn’t funny!”

She spied the beach then. Two sets of footprints leading in. One leading out.

“Oh.”

She returned home, dress clinging to her damp skin. Her hair was wet and tangled. The wind had picked up, and the great willow was violent. Lillian shivered. Mother was waiting impatiently on the stoop to reprimand her. The tape measure around her neck must’ve meant new dress day. Lillian didn’t say a word as she walked up the driveway, but she plucked a singular dandelion and threw it down, grinding it into the concrete with her bare heel. Deplorable weeds.

## Confession

By Janae Mancheski

I confess  
who I met under the moon  
how our fingers interlaced  
what happened to her dress

I confess  
how it felt on my lips  
the first roundness  
the shape of her breasts

I confess  
we discovered  
what happens in bedrooms  
and which sin of all is best.

## The Ceaseless Hungerer

By Michael R. Smith

Unstoppable, indestructible, its appearance signifies the end of worlds  
Looming over the battlefield, it towers over armies and mountains and the sky itself  
Armed with indescribable power, All Is Dust beneath its ungodly gaze  
Memories of what was and dreams of what will be are reduced to nothing upon its cursed touch  
Originating from the void, the place between realities, it is both profane and profounding  
Game-winning card, my avatar of victory, a force as voracious as time itself

# The Kali Yuga

By Emiliano Moreno

Zemepotex popped his lips and sighed. “Ok, I’m willing to admit I screwed up,”  
his arms resting on his hips.

“Huh? What do you mean ‘screwed up?’ Look around us!” Temerikota replied.

Temerikota flung her arms around the entirety of the Universe. Pieces of rock and dust floated along a crimson horizon. Blue lightning zig-zagged throughout the cosmos leaving an undying echo in its wake. Large black whirlpools spiraled around every corner of the universe, sucking in decaying planets and those that inhabited them. The screams of the damned filled the air as they cried out to their gods before being silenced by hellish leviathans, scouring for their next meal.

“You fucked up!” Temerikota yelled.

“Ok! Ok! Screaming isn’t gonna fix our situation!”

“Oh? Then what do you propose I do!?”

“Do your fair share and help me out!”

“Over something you made happen?”

Zemepotex raised his arms and groaned.

“Ok! How was I supposed to know the Kali Yuga was supposed to be for one lifetime only?”

Temerikota scoffed.

“The Kali Yuga?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“The perpetual cycle of death and rebirth in an era of sin and destruction?”

“Uh-huh, that one”

Temerikota rubbed her hands down her face and groaned. “You made the Kali Yuga! You should have known how it worked!”

Zemepotex raised his arms again. “Oh! Sorry! My bad the Kali Yuga was one of the millions of things I had to keep track of!”

“We’re gods of creation! It’s our job to–” Temerikota stopped, feeling a hand grab onto her ankle. She looked behind and down. A balding man with light gray skin and demonic yellow eyes stared at her. A tired smile grew along his face while his eyebrows moved up.

“My gods! Oh, my glorious and gracious gods!” The man said.

“Uh, can we help you?” Zemepotex asked.

“Yes! Please! Save us from damnation! We’ve awaited your divine protection for ages! Help us in our most dire–”

Suddenly the man felt water splash over his face. He recoiled and raised his arms over his head. Temerikota sprayed water from a plastic cleaning bottle over the mortal.

“Shoo! Shoo! Away!” She said, fanning the man away from her.

“Wha-? Please no!”

“Bye-bye! Shoo!”

“Wait! Please!”

Temerikota kicked the man off her bright orange sandals. The man frantically moved his arms over the ragged surface, grabbing whatever he could to stay afloat. Temerikota stomped on the rock’s black surface, creating a large crack. The man screamed in agony and plunged into the crimson void below.

“It's ok! We'll fix this!” Temerikota yelled.

Temerikota placed her forehead on the palm of her hand and sighed. She then turned her head up.

“Ok, factory reset. New universe. Start from scratch.”

Zemepotex recoiled with furrowed eyebrows. “What? No way! We worked eons on this universe!”

Temerikota hunched over with her hands on her hips. “And who messed that up, huh?”

“Now is not the time for the blame game! I mean look! It isn't that bad!”

Suddenly, a giant whirlpool opened. A grouping of large razorback eels popped out and chomped on what remained of a group of planets. Temerikota raised her eyebrows at Zemepotex.

“Ok, idea.”

“Oh?”

“Why don't we contain all of this Universe's misery and sorrow into one area, then create a new one?”

“Why?”

“We get to keep our hard work and fix our predicament!”

Temerikota groaned.

“Fine, whatever”

Zemepotex leaned over, extended his hand, and smiled.

“Shakies?”

Temerikota rolled her eyes and shook.

*13,345,234,267 years later*

Cars drifted down a small road, passing a tall green sign. "Welcome to Gary, Indiana!"



**UNTITLED**

*Harrison Schneider*

## Little Paper Dragon

By Evan Kuhn

I'm just a little paper dragon  
Sitting on the table of a coffee shop  
On a cold November morning.  
From just a purple square,  
someone has folded me  
Into what I am now.  
I know I have a purpose,  
But I don't know what that purpose is.  
Oh well, what can I do?  
I'm just a little paper dragon after all.

## A Letter

By Ellie Kuhlmann

A Letter

to my rubber plant,

Your gorgeous green greenery has grown wonderfully

since I adopted you, I am proud to see your journey

You sit seeing and soaking up the sunshine through the

screened shield

The observer of my room offering oxygen with every breath

You bring me peace on the days where it feels like I am

a fledgling falling free

I saw last week that you've grown new leaves on one of your branches.

They are a brighter bloom than your other appendages

I wish I could attain new arms, as you, when mine become

aged and inadequate

You are the rule of my room, my rationalization

Ritualistically reopening the aperture to let in your reliance



You are my reliance.

Thank you,

Yours

## PERSPECTIVE



*Ana Casper*

# Retirement

By Fridarose Hamad

**I**t was normal for him to break his leg. Sometimes it was a cracked rib, or a dislocated shoulder, but today it was a broken leg. Just another day on the job.

*Good day to break a leg.*

Sometimes, it was bad. Flying through a windshield, bad. Breaking every other bone in his body, bad. Permanent scars all over bad—but those days become increasingly rare. Most days, he walked away with just a few cuts on his face and arms, bruises too, but he was never without them.

Legs aren't normally what he breaks, but something with the bumper this time? Or was it the front tires? He wasn't quite sure. That was okay though. They don't pay him to know why he gets hurt, only to get hurt.

*It was easy, he thought. Didn't take a lot of brain power.*

Someone finally came over to rescue him. His good friend James. They called him "Intern James"—not to, of course, be confused with "James, James," the head engineer. Intern James always came to rescue him.

"Hey buds. We hurt today?" he snapped some photos of him like he always did—air bag pressed against his right cheek, head against the headrest.

*This was a good headrest. He liked the pleather.*

James took off his seatbelt and wrapped his arms around him, carrying him bridal style to the table a few yards away.

"Let's see what Dr. Dave says!"

"Looks like you broke your leg, young man. A couple of bad scratches too." Dr. Dave always told it like it was, pointing to the scars that would form on the top of his skull.

He hadn't noticed the glass sticking straight out of his fleshy head.

"He looks to be on his last legs, Doc!" James joked, picking up his broken leg and jiggling it a bit. James was funny like that.

"Yeah... it might be time to trade him in. Can't keep making more gelatin to fix him and still get good results."

*Trade-in? This was the first he was hearing about that. He can't be traded in that easily; he was too good for that. He didn't want to leave. What about Intern James? Or James-James? Or Dr. Dave?*

"Where does he go after here, Doc?"

*Somewhere warm, he hoped. This steel is a little cold.*

"The military could always use some more men." Dr. Dave finished filing out his paperwork.

*Military? He could be a military man? He quite liked this idea. In a strapping new uniform, shiny buckles. Maybe he could join the band! He loved the sound of the trumpets.*

"They are always testing new bombs and stuff," Doc continued. Bombs? Why would they... Oh, oh no.

*He wasn't going to be sent to join the military band. He was a dummy. His brain was an artificial pink. His skin was transparent and fake. His scars were marks where the glass had scraped and punctured, and James refilled. Not really skin.*

"Where should I put him, Doc?" James asked, picking him up in the same way as before.

"Box in storage next to the other ones," he responded without looking back.

This was the end. He tried to look around to see all his friends--Dr. Dave, Intern James, James James--but his head wouldn't move out of the crook of James' elbow.

He forgot.

*His neck wasn't real.*

Intern James turned on the lights to reveal a small room, no bigger than the size of the cars he had been testing. But of course, he couldn't see that.

*His neck wasn't real.*

The fluorescent lights flickered as Intern James set him into his cardboard coffin, with a label: U.S. Army Operational Test Command, Oklahoma.

"Looks like you are going far buds," said James as he walked over to the box in the corner, "Oklahoma is miles away from New Jersey."

The fluorescent lights flickered as Intern James set him into his cardboard coffin. His head was crooked into the neck of someone who looked just like him--or so he had to think. This dummy's arm was dislocated, he was missing half his jaw, and whose face was so scarred, he wanted to look away, but again, his head wouldn't move.

*His neck wasn't real.*

This was his retirement.



**CAR TALKS**

*Ana Casper*

# Numb

By Sabrina Arassi

The funny thing about numbness

Is that it hurts

A shot hurts for a second

But Novocain tingles for hours

Feeling nothing is what scares me

When you chew your cheeks

And can't feel it

But the taste of my blood is there

I thought I felt something

But it was numb

The life I knew is gone forever

But life keeps going on

I numb myself 'til I shiver

I can't be sad forever

Yet somehow I feel worse

All I want to feel is something

## It's Journey

By Isabella Burkard

He only touched It when wearing leather gloves  
as if It would sting him.

“Fear,” he claimed,  
was his motivator for neglect.

Yet he treated It as something that did not understand,  
that needed his guidance.

He claimed both to be the expert  
and the novice.

And avoidance, after such long pursuit,  
only angered It.

He cried when It gnawed Its way free.

Its second captor was kinder.

He listened to Its wails and wailed along.

He understood that It was wiser than himself.

Yet he poked It with a stick  
for his own amusement, and was confused  
when It refused to sing.

He adored It but still  
refused to acknowledge all Its thorns.  
It was his companion,  
bound to him like a slave.  
He clung to Its feet as It sought a savior.

The savior came like water in a desert,  
and It chased him like he was  
freedom incarnate.  
It built Itself a glass cage  
to show off Its form and function,  
insisting the savior was not another captor.

And he played with It when the mood suited him.  
It basked in the warmth of his attentions  
and shivered in the chill of his disdain.  
It taught Itself to believe It was happy...  
until It was forsaken.

When Kindness found It,  
It was shriveled and stained.  
Kindness took It in and fed It and asked nothing of It—

only for It to smile.

And Kindness nurtured the light within It.

And finally, It could speak.

“Where were you all this time?” It asked,

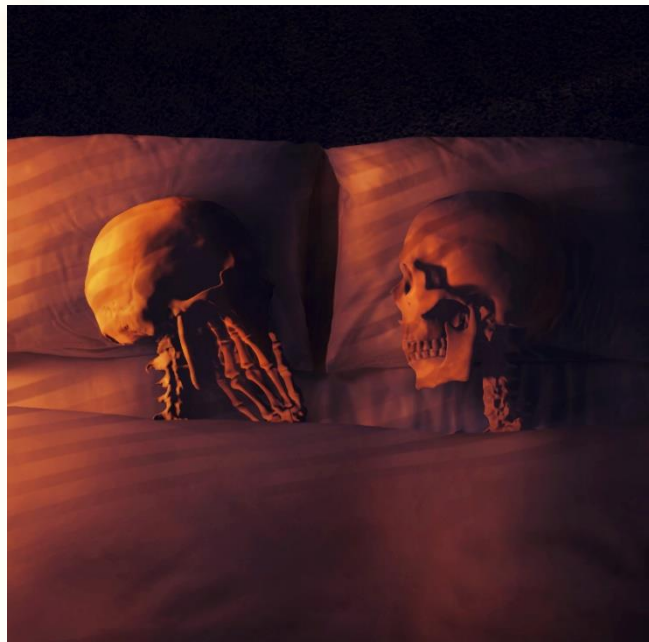
“Why didn’t you come sooner?”

And Kindness answered, “I was here all along, waiting for you.”

And It braced Itself for their time to end,

but Kindness stayed until the end of time.

### **TILL DEATH DO US PART**



*Ana Casper*



# The Starving Watcher

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

The creature stared out the window, bloodshot eyes gazing hungrily at the world it could not enter. A soft blanket of white coated everything, and it knew not what it was, but the cascade of fog that its hot breath sent onto the surface of the window told it that it was cold outside.

*Scratch. Scratch.*

Its fingernails raked against the wooden windowsill. The creature ached to leave its spot, but it knew what it was. An observer. Nothing more. It knew better than to imagine what it would be like to be out there.

Out there...

Its eyes caught movement from outside, zeroing in on it immediately.

Two people.

A red-headed woman and a black-haired man, walking arm in arm. Both wore thick outerwear and things upon their heads and shiny footwear. They clung to each other as the wind blew, and though the creature could not hear anything, it imagined their laughter as the thing on the man's head almost flew off.

The woman tripped, pulling the man down with her into the white stuff. It looked cozy. She grabbed a handful of it and shoved it in his face, and again the creature imagined laughter. It sighed.

*Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.*

They pressed their lips against each other, embracing until it almost looked as though they were one solid mass.

*Scratch.*

They eventually got up, but rather than walking away as most of the people did, the man and woman started walking around in the white void of coldness, mimicking each others' movements. They made two great rounded arcs that came closer and closer together until it formed a point on the end. The woman made one half of the shape, the man made the other.

*Scraaaaaatch.*

The creature's fingers made their way up from the windowsill onto the glass of the window itself. It pressed its fingertips into the cold, flat surface, pushing its face closer as well to watch them.

It noticed that the man and woman kept looking at each other, but not in the way that the creature watched them. This was not an envious, starved gape. Rather, they only looked at each other for brief moments, and only when they knew the other wasn't looking.

The man glanced at the woman as she moved through the white, entranced. He analyzed every bit of her in the moments that he stared. Eyes. Lips. The shape of her jaw. The curve of her body that was still somewhat visible through the thick outer layer that encased her. It only took a second or two for him to drink it all in, before he looked back to the ground to make sure he wasn't off track.

The woman gazed at the man just as he stopped looking at her. She watched the way that he walked, the confidence in his step, the way his eyes darted around at the ground to plan each movement. She looked at the bits of hair that had escaped the thing on his head, then at the bit of exposed skin of his neck that the outerwear wasn't able to cover. Then, she too looked back to the ground, cheeks growing pink.

They both looked up again.

Their eyes met.

*Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.*

The creature's fingernails dug into the glass, but it was too enraptured by the couple to see what it was doing.

The man and woman met at the point of their shape. They embraced again, lips moving in words that the creature longed it could hear. Not that it would understand.

After what seemed like ages, they started to walk away, taking one last glance at the shape they had created. Then, they went out of sight from the creature's window. It was left only with the endless white void and the shape that it couldn't comprehend.

The creature's fingers slowly drifted back down from the glass, resting back on the windowsill that was scored with millions of scars.

Its face had not changed the whole time it had watched. All it could do was sit there as a single tear ran down its face and dropped into one of the many gashes.

*Scratch.*

*Scratch.*

*Scratch.*

## HEART IN SNOW



*Public Domain*

## Ready Smile Action

By Madeline Marfoe

A picture is worth a thousand words

Smiling faces tilted up towards the flash

An arm around a loved one

Teeth sparkling in the sudden flash

Eyes twinkling with laughter

Smile lines etched into the skin

Smile kids

Smile for the camera

Smile for my audience

Everyone has to know how much you love me

Everyone has to know how good of a parent I've been

Everyone has to know that I'm here

The smiles are lies

A practiced motion we've all been taught

Our fingers curled and our teeth clenched

Forced to squish together

Just a way to fish for praise and lie to others

A picture is nothing but a lie

## Suicide Note

By Max Stern

The ugly fifth child asked with delight:

“Why do they love me on this holy night?

I’m usually lonely, sad, and afraid

for the other three hundred and sixty four days.

They point out my teeth- all buckled and frayed.

I’m always alone and somewhat afraid.

Because of my face

they don’t let me vote.

My reptilian tongue-

unorthodox joke.

Played on me-

to my dismay.

What would it take

to die today?

I’ve set my watch

to one-forty-three;

the day I was born

but never conceived.

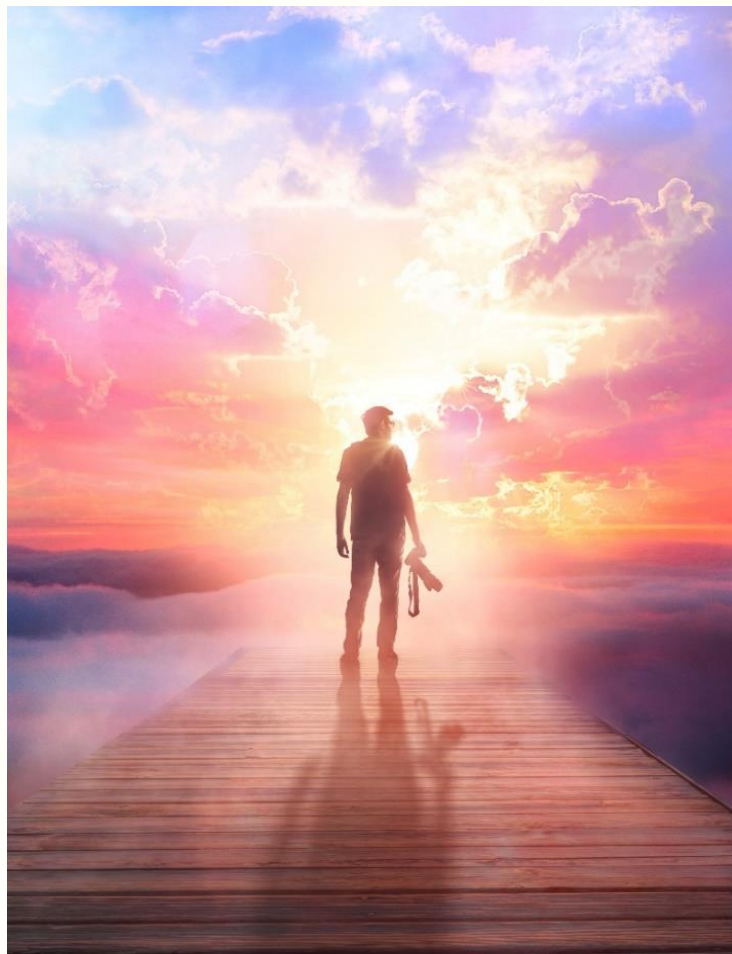
At a quarter to two, to two, today

I'll take my life- and know-

God,

it's okay.

### SUNRISE



*Ana Casper*

## A Train Arrives in Indiana

By Liam Dooley

**I**t was late, and the train station was nearly empty. Only two workers were present, both ignoring the other. A handful of travelers waited for their trains, checking their phones, reading romance novels, fiddling with the zippers of their jackets. It was quiet; Sean could hear the hum of the AC. Every once in a while, some unexpected noise – a toilet flushing, the doors opening, the loud turning of a page – caused the man sitting near Sean to startle. The man was tall and well-built, with dark hair, deep eyes, and thick eyebrows. He didn't seem like the kind of person prone to anxiety. Sean, on the other hand, affectionally called himself rat-like, though he didn't know if rats could be redheads. Perpetually self-conscious, he always added a few inches to height. He had always been skinny, sometimes dangerously so, and pale to the point that his skin would reflect in direct sunlight.

Sean felt his leg bounce as he checked his texts once again. There was no reason to; he knew the person he was hoping to hear from wouldn't be able to reach him. To his own detriment, he reread the old texts, trying to find the last time she said i love you. It would still be some time before Florence's train got in, at least another half hour. Something had happened at one of the middle stops which delayed the train by more than an hour, and Sean didn't know what to do with himself. He was never this early to anything.

Then, something happened.

"Hey." Sean's voice was small; he almost didn't recognize it.

The dark-haired man looked up, just a little too quickly, betraying the cool demeanor he'd worked to cultivate. "Yeah?"

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"No." A pause. "I'm going to meet someone."

Sean tried to read the silence. This man was clearly nervous, but if he didn't want to talk, he could've left it at no. "Can I ask who? Just curious."

"My sister. In Iowa." The man's shoulders dropped as he relaxed into the conversation.

"What about you? Where are you heading?"

"Waiting on my... a friend." Sean didn't want to leave it there, not now, when someone finally asked. "We're catching up. It's been a minute."

"Same here. I haven't seen my sister in years."

Sean didn't want to press, but now he needed to know more. "What happened?"

The man breathed in deeply. "A lot. Distance, that's for sure. I'm visiting from Europe, actually. We, uh, made different choices. But she's getting married."

"Oh, congrats to her. That's great."

"Yeah, it's something. Can't believe she's first, though. She's ten years younger than me."

Sean glanced down and realized the man wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Not that that meant anything, really. Sean wasn't.

That didn't mean he didn't hope to, though. Wearing one for six months had changed him, and losing it changed him again – and he wasn't back to the way he was, either. He'd been three different people in half a year.

"I'm Bass, by the way."

"Like the fish?" Sean said it without thinking – Bass probably got that one all the time. Bass chuckled, though.

"Yes, like the fish. My parents are a bit eccentric, to say the least."



“I’m Sean.” He extended his hand, and Bass took it. His palm was sweaty, but his grip was firm. Sean could feel that this man was dependable, just temporarily anxious. Nothing wrong with that.

“So, tell me more about this friend.”

Before Sean could get a word out, the automatic doors of the station whizzed open, Bass whipped around, and a staggering, stunning drunk walked in.

This woman was barely holding on. She was weighed down by an overly large men’s coat and dirty striped scarf and looked like she’d spent a month in someone’s attic – but she held herself with self-respect in the same way that a deposed princess would hold on to every ounce of nobility they once had. Anyone could tell she never meant to end up like this – but who did intend to end up like her? Does anyone wake up one day and decide to throw it all away to feel sick every morning, numb everything but pain, just because? Something had happened to her. She was tragic, not stupid.

She groaned as she stumbled towards the front office. One worker looked up, alert and curious, then poked their coworker - this was already easily the most exciting part of their shift.

“I have a ticket,” the woman said.

One worker frantically jiggled the mouse to wake up the sleeping monitor. “Okay, is it physical or digital? I can scan it when you have it out.”

“Um, one moment.” She procured her purse from underneath the huge jacket and began rifling through it.

Bass finally turned back to Sean. “Sorry. Where were we?”

“My friend.”

Bass smiled and nodded “Right.”

Sean couldn't focus on explaining what was happening with Florence, not with that woman in the background. Every word out of her mouth echoed in the desolate train station, and after a certain point, Sean just felt sad. She was trying so hard. After some time, she seemed to have found the ticket, but was immediately sent back to the purse to find an ID.

"Well, my friend is-" Sean lowered his voice without realizing, "my ex-wife."

Bass's smile faded. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright! It's been a few years now. She just... left, out of nowhere, and now she's back, out of nowhere."

Bass furrowed his brow. "Okay, and?"

"Well, she called me yesterday. Told me she's been in Seattle this whole time. She wants to reconnect."

"And you're letting her?"

Sean gave Bass a puzzled look. "Of course."

The attendant waved the woman on, telling her that the train was expected within the hour. She thanked them earnestly, shoved the contents of her purse back inside, and went to sit down. She eyed the remaining seats, mostly empty, then spotted Bass and visibly brightened. Bass stiffened when she plopped down beside him, so close she was practically breathing down his neck. She reeked of a bar – stale beer, cigar smoke, and sweat - but there was something in her breath that Sean almost recognized.

"You're pretty." She said this with awe, not lust.

"Um. Thank you." Bass was already back to being nothing but nerves. "Could you give me some space, please?"

The woman blushed and sank back into her seat. She apologized in a small voice, but Bass assured her it was okay. She sat like that for a minute before turning to Sean. "You're pretty, too. It's not just him. You're pretty."

Sean smiled. She seemed terribly familiar, but he couldn't figure out who she reminded him of. "You know you're pretty, too?"

Lucy straightened up in her seat. "You think so?"

"Of course I think so! I like your scarf, not many people can make it work for them." Lucy smiled, picking at the scarf's fraying edges. Bass looked at Sean, confusion evident in his face, as if asking Why aren't you ignoring her?

"I'm Sean, by the way. What's your name?"

She thought for a moment. "Lucy."

"That's a pretty name."

Bass jumped in to introduce himself, surprising Sean. He guessed that treating Lucy like a person instead of a problem made both her and Bass friendlier.

"Where are you going, Lucy?"

"I- I don't know. I got the ticket a while ago, it's supposed to get here today." She swallowed. "The train, I mean."

Sean tilted his head. "Can I... see your ticket?"

Lucy didn't hesitate to thrust her phone at Sean, still open to the ticket code. One Lucy Swanson, heading one-way to New York City – with nothing but a purse and the clothes on her back.

"Lucy, what are you doing?"

The question caught her off guard. "What?"

This was not a conversation for a train station, but Sean knew something needed to change for Lucy. She could still come back from this, right?

Sean's phone buzzed, but he ignored it, even knowing that it could be Florence. Suddenly, something else mattered in his life. How had he thought about her every day for years, yet minutes before she came back, there was something more important? More pressing? God, more personal?

Sean inhaled sharply to calm himself, and realized what it was that was so familiar – he could smell gin and tonic on Lucy's breath. His mother's drink of choice. Everything started to click – the way Lucy held herself, her go-to drink, even the scarf around her neck was so reminiscent of his mother. But he didn't even have time to unpack the realization, as the loudspeakers announced that the east-bound train would be arriving in ten minutes. Florence would disembark and Sean would leave with her, while Lucy got on her train, and Bass would keep on waiting for his.

Sean couldn't help but think: This isn't fair. But there was nothing he could do about that. All he could do was act.

"Lucy, do not get on that train."

The urgency in his voice was palpable. Bass looked at Sean with suspicion, while Lucy looked almost frightened.

"...But I already paid for it."

"Lucy, you can't go to New York. I don't know you, but I know that. You can't." Sean fought the urge to raise his voice and softened it on purpose, the way he'd talked to his mother when she would stumble home late in the night, years ago. "Please, don't go. You're going to regret it."

Bass spoke up. "What do you know? Why do you care? Let her be."

Sean simmered in anger. He could feel every second hanging in the air. "Bass, trust me. Lucy can't go. She can't."

“What do you even mean? She has the ticket and she got herself here alright-”

“She almost fell walking in! I can’t live with myself if something happens to her because of this.”

Bass’ eyes widened. “You can’t live with yourself if something happens? Christ-”

Lucy grabbed Sean’s arm, hard. “I’m. Fine.”

“No, you’re not. You’re drunk. They shouldn’t have let you in here.”

“Sean, let her be!”

“No!” Sean was shocked by how strong his reaction was. He was being too loud, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. “Lucy. Please. My wife is coming in on the next train. Let me take you home. Yours or mine. I don’t care. I just want to talk to you when you wake up. If you need to go to New York when you’re sober, I’ll take you. But don’t go tonight. Please, please, promise me you won’t go.”

The pressure of the situation brought Lucy nearly to tears. Still, she thought over his offer. The moment held still. Sean inhaled sharply and wondered if anyone had ever given his mother a chance like this.

Lucy composed herself, even with distress plastered on her face. “How do I know I can trust you?” She asked.

Bass perked up. “She has a point. Sober guys that try to take home drunk girls usually aren’t trustworthy.”

Sean was insulted at the insinuation. “Oh, come on, it’s not like that, alright? Can’t you tell that?” He collected himself, trying to come across as genuine as possible. “Lucy, please. I just want to help you.”

For a moment, Sean was certain Lucy was going to decline his offer; he was terrified that he’d never get a chance like this again.

Lucy stared at Sean for a moment, then nodded. “I’m... I won’t get on the train.”

Sean smiled as relief swept through his body. He'd never felt anything quite this sweet; even the day Florence proposed wasn't anything like this. Florence never let Sean help her, and Lord knows he never had a chance to save his mother, but at least he could help Lucy. And even if it never worked out, at least Sean had this chance.

The train pulled in, and Sean briefly remembered that a message from Florence was left unread in his phone. And when Florence walked into the station, luggage in hand and a cautious smile on her lips, Sean guessed he was happy.

### FALLING IN A DREAM



*Ana Casper*

# The Various Illusions

By Michael R. Smith

The illusion of beginnings; like all good art and all good people

This poem began before it was inscribed on paper

The illusion of a dream; when I try in vain to remember what was never real

I remember the sky being green and going to the zoo but never the names

The illusion of depth; no matter how the water looks it will swallow me whole

The dread forever justified in my mind an unreasonable precaution

The illusion of choice; whether I go to sleep now or later

The dawn will still rise and a new day will come and I will wake regardless of my readiness

The illusion of a lifetime; how my memory waxes and wanes

The breakfast of 2 days past is lost in time while the house I grew up in will remain forever

The illusion of conclusion; for when the end is never the end

This list of illusions could continue ad infinitum ad infinitum ad infinitum...

But right now I can only think of six

## Keyhole Memories

By Ana Casper

As of late

My mind is a pool

Swimming with memories

Of better days

The present flickers

And the past freezes

As time slips away

As I drink in the impossible.

Suddenly I'm younger

And I'm free

There's no boundaries

Everything was as it should be

As I see the world

Through a keyhole memory



If my mind is a prison

Then lock me in

I'm desperate to get drunk

On what I used to be

Here the hours are longer than days

Where better to escape

Than into my past

For there is no future to see.

And it keeps on going

Infinitely.

Like drums around my head

On and on, endlessly

The repetition.

The insanity.

A living paradox

Trapped in my head.

My mind is spiraling like

Two stars ready to explode

For minds trying to live without time

Struggle to grasp reality

What should I keep?

What should I forget?

What part of today will never happen?

How much of my future will never happen?

And if my mind is a heaven

With bars on its edges

It's inescapable but benign...

But only to those strong enough.

Why should you leave

To the horrors of the world?

Why not revel in the fantasies

Of everything that was, or could be?



## Study Buddies

By Thlee Xiong

**W**hen I came to, I found myself in a classroom. It was all orderly and pristine. Not even a single wooden floor panel was misaligned. All the desks and chairs were the right amount apart from each other. The chalkboard had the words “detention” written neatly in calligraphy. I was standing in the back. My head was throbbing and my eyes were swollen slightly. The room was empty but I wasn’t completely alone.

There was a boy seated a few rows ahead. His upper half laid across the desk, his head face down. My eyes couldn’t look away from his forearms which had various stationary stabbed through. It seems as if it pinned him-or at least his arms-to the desk. I stared at the sight a bit longer before feeling something disgusting in my stomach so I focused my gaze on his blazer. It was the same as mine, a dark brown with a diamond patch on the left arm. Cautiously, I stepped forward until I was standing by his side.

“Hey,” I stuttered. He didn’t seem to respond, “... You alright there?”

I saw his head move slightly. His shoulders then pulled back and brought his head up. He looked dazed for a moment, as if he had just woken up from a nap. He was definitely from here as he had the required blazer, white dress shirt and tie. I glanced at the little beige rectangular badge on his lapel which listed the name “Willahelm Krone”. He blinked a few times before finally reading the room.

“Oh, I thought it was just me again,” Willahelm said. He straightened himself up the best he could. His face softened a bit, “Hmm... I’m alright. Well, as alright as I could be.”

“... I see...”

“What about you? I’ve never seen ‘em bash a kid’s head in before.” I placed a hand on my head. I felt it throbbing again, though now my attention was to the blood dripping

down my face. Taking it in a bit, it didn't feel as bad, as terrifying as it sounds. I thought back a bit.

I remember I was studying in the library, frantically switching between subjects. Whenever I gave myself a break, my brain couldn't relax. A pain gradually grew at the side of my head. Eventually my notes seem to jump off the page, swimming about, taunting me. They all blurred together and became incomprehensible.

The silence that kept the library at peace disappeared. It was replaced by my screams. I felt my face warm up, something flooding out of my eyes. I remember putting my head down, my right hand banging the table. I don't remember what I said, if anything.

Eventually the librarian came by with a teacher. They conversed for a bit before the teacher stepped forward, grabbing my collar and dragging me out. It was all a blur. I just remembered I had my hands covering my face and the hallways whizzing passed me. We'd come to a stop. I was a few inches away from the wall to my right. I felt a hand grasping the top of my head and throwing me to the wall. I blacked out.

I shook my head a bit, regaining my footing and surroundings before looking at him in the eyes. I felt myself shaking, even my voice did when I answered, "Could be better I'd say."

He nodded his head, "What'd you get thrown in here for?"

"... Had a breakdown while studying. I overheard that it was because I made too much noise," Silence filled the air a bit, "What... did you mean by 'I thought it was just me again'? You've gotten detention before?"

"Plenty of times. I think it's all for the same reason: moving around."

"Really? For something that minor?"

"Not minor enough if it's a major problem apparently," He shrugged, trying to rest his back on the seat. I noticed the desk shaking slightly, looking down it was his leg bouncing, "Uh... How do you say it...? Oh! It helps keep me in check, helps me focus."

I nodded my head. I glanced behind me, seeing another desk there and propped myself up. Once I was seated, I shoved my hands in my pockets and took another look at him. It was then I noticed his tie again. At this school, your grade was shown by what color tie you had. Mine was blue which was for seniors. His green tie showed that he was two years below me. It struck me as odd as he was bigger than me and felt older too.

“How old are you?” I asked. He blinked.

“... Seventeen. You?”

“Fifteen.” Something briefly peaked through in his eyes. I couldn’t make out what it was exactly. His expression switched over to one more upbeat. It was like a kid seeing Santa for the first time.

“Whoa! That’s so cool! You must be pretty smart, huh?”

I rubbed my hand against the back of my head, laughing a bit, “Well, I guess so. I just grab onto things more easily. Admittedly, I also just want to get out of here the best I can.”

“Ooh, I see! What’re you gonna do after this? School I mean.”

“Well, I’m studying to be a doctor. I’m just grinding through the last of the basics this semester before jumping on medical classes. If I play my cards right, I should be able to work in a clinic in a few years.”

“Well, doc, can I ask something?” He straightened up his posture, “Can you get these out of me?”

“... I’m not starting off my career with a malpractice,” I sighed, “I’ve only taken anatomy so far so I wouldn’t be of much help.”

Willahelm slouched back in his seat, “That’s alright. At least you have a bright future ahead of you. I’m not good at anything so I’ll be stuck in limbo for a while.”

The air felt cold. It was a familiar chill I knew of. It haunts me well. I stood there for what felt like forever. Without thinking much of it, I said, "I can help you. I can help you graduate and get out of here."

He blinked, "... You sure? You shouldn't worry about someone you just met, much less deadweight."

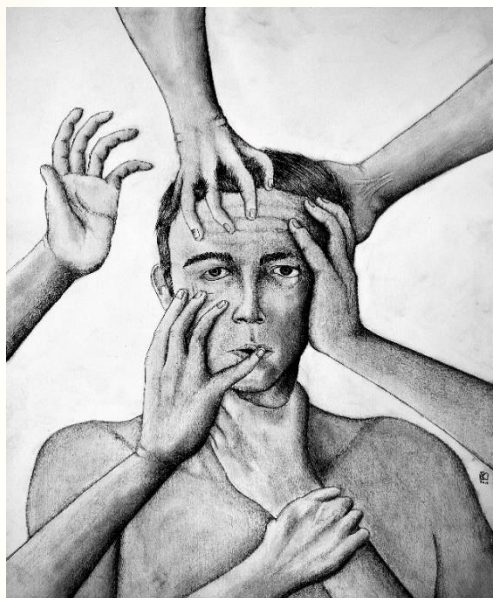
"... I'm sure."

"... Really? T-thank you! I'll do my best." He smiled. Willahelm turned his attention to his arms, staring at them for a bit. He balled his hands into fists and shook the desk slightly. I jumped in shock, sliding off the desk. I took a step forward, about to help him. Before that happened, he managed to free his arms from the desk which now flailed down at his sides. He stood up and looked at the door.

"I think detention ended a long while ago. They sometimes just leave students here," He looked back at me, smiling softly, "I know my way around so I can get us out of here. Oh, I forgot! I'm Willahelm, please call me Will."

"I'm Muirgen," I paused, "I feel like I'm going to end up here more often."

### SELF-PORTRAIT



*Evan Kuhn*

## Unpaid Full-Time Job

By Sabrina Arassi

The best years of my life

That I have to pay for

A fear of endless debt

And dying before it's paid off

Working long hours to pay the bills

Then study until I drop

Go through my days with a pounding headache

No time to take a break

Not even time to study

I'm told I shouldn't be in school

That I should work instead

Does no one understand my dream?

Guarded behind dollars and dollars

Set up for failure

But I refuse

One day my dream will overcome the dollars

And I will be paid in peace



# Broken Symmetry

By William Miles

This paperwork is equivalent to the constant nightmare of sinking to the bottom of the  
ocean.

Should relax.

Never quite.

Run the engine until it's fully flooded.

Free form combating against schedules holding me captive.

Where I never move forward, and you always fall back into the current.

These endless days running on low are favored by stubborn pride.

You're pushing for me to loosen the hangman's knot.

Occasionally I step down, wondering what carelessness feels like.

Wondering what it's like to fall into your fantasies.

Disproportionate from reality.

I feel blood dripping from inside the left of my chest.

Fear.

Symmetry auto locks into place.

I'm holding you at arm's length

I'm slowly taking a step forward.

You're terrifying.

You're amazing.

I'm running.

I'm dazzled.

Trapped

Yet

Comfortable.

## Samara

By Isabella Burkard

The pearl of my youth—

Scuffed up converse

kicked up on countertops

tattooed with lyrics and angst.

Late nights under the stars

laid out on the hood

of your older brother's car.

Swapped secrets and the hope

for something more.

Yours were always bigger.

The crack in the purple wall.

You dreamt with more ferocity

than anyone I knew.

And I was totally swept up  
by your silent screams.

L.A. Seattle. New York. And you.

Holding each other  
in the dark of horror movies.  
A tether to reality.  
Hands clasped in the theatre.

Labels be damned.

Teaching you to drive in my old  
Mercury with the radio low.

Pizza and the amusement park.

Arm around your shoulders.

Gossiping about the girl you like  
and the friends you travel with.

My friend the dreamer and me.

Too special to be anything but  
overidealized reality.

### THE BEAN



*Ana Casper*

## Grave Gambling

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

“So, Patrick... How did you die?”

The man took another drag of his cigarette, exhaling smoke that matched his translucent appearance. He wore dark sunglasses that masked his over-dilated eyes and the bags underneath them. Dried blood was perpetually lining his nostrils, and his long black hair had as much volume as it did in life. PETA would have had a field day with the amount of leather he was wearing: pants, a jacket, and boots made up his outfit, though he wasn't wearing a shirt. Instead, what covered his chest was only a bunch of miscellaneous necklaces and chains. He glanced at the poker cards in his hand one more time before speaking.

“I was doing lines off a model at a party, man. She's still walking around out in the world, silicone boobs and all, and I'm stuck here with you people—”

“And just what did we ever do to you?” An hourglass-shaped blonde woman asked in an affronted tone. Her voice and overall demeanor was reminiscent of the Golden Age of Hollywood, with the dropped R's in her speech and the refined way in which she carried herself.

“Nothing, nothing, I'm just talking. Goddamn, get the pole out of your ass, Marie.” Patrick cast her a devilish, yet somehow incredibly charming, smile.

“Well, regardless, at least you look somewhat presentable in the afterlife. I have a hole in my body.” She gestured to the bullethole that was square in the center of her abdomen. The entry wound was not immediately noticeable, if you ignored the amount of blood that seeped from it onto the white tulle skirt of her dress, but the bullet's exit point that was visible on her back was a different story. She made sure to sit in the chair with the tallest back to conceal the gory mess. Apart from her visible organs, though, she was quite a

beautiful woman. Her blonde hair was immaculately done in cascades of curls, and the red lipstick she wore ironically matched the bloodstains perfectly.

“And how did that happen?” The old man who had asked the same question to Patrick looked excitedly to Marie, anticipation clear on his face.

Marie tucked her curls behind her ear, looking the old man over. “I was one of the biggest headlines when I died... don’t you know, Fred?”

“I never read the papers much when I was that young. Look, I’m not gonna be able to make anymore horror movies now that I’m dead, so can’t ya just entertain an old man with some gory shit?”

Fred was a rotund, jolly old man who looked like he should have been playing Santa Claus instead of directing some of the most horrifying films that Hollywood had ever seen. He was the newest ghost at the poker table, having just died prior in the day. And, while it was typical for the new arrivals to be somewhat melancholic, Fred was an excitable type, even more so upon learning that there was something after death. So, he was by far the most energetic spirit there.

“Fine.” Marie took a sip of her martini, adjusting the cards in her hand slightly. “I was cast in a new romance film with the most attractive leading man at the time, and my husband got jealous because of all the kissing and messing around I had to do with him for the cameras. And, yes, I’ll admit, the studio made us go on a few outings to build up some publicity for the film. But my husband took it a bit too seriously, and he ordered a hitman to kill me as soon as I got home. With my pistol, so it looked like a suicide...that’s my suspicion, at least.”

“Wow.”

“Uh-huh. And the real kicker? My co-star turned out to be... well, let’s just say he wouldn’t have been interested in me no matter what I did. And my louse of a husband? He got all my money and married some twenty-year-old floozy after he convinced people he wasn’t guilty.”

Marie laughed loudly, her smile now morphed into something of a grimace. "I never should have married that bastard. Lucky for me, though, he got it good later on."

She looked across the table, leering at a tall, muscular man in a fitted black suit. He had been looking like he wanted to disappear throughout the entirety of Marie's story, but that would have been difficult for him considering that his feet were stuck in solid blocks of concrete. His suit and hair were perpetually wet, like he had just been swimming just moments ago. At Marie's statement, he looked up with pure malice in his eyes.

"Yeah, fuck you too."

"What's the matter, Al, can't take the heat?" Patrick blew some cigarette smoke in the man's direction, smirking while throwing up an obscene gesture his way from under the table.

Al struggled to pick up his poker cards from the table, due to the fact that his hands were bound together with thick iron chains that almost completely limited their movement. This only seemed to frustrate him further, as his sour expression worsened by the second.

"I'd hire that guy again in a second." Al finally gave up on trying to grab his cards, resting back in his chair and staring at Marie.

"Mhm. Well, we're both dead and I don't look like a drowned mutt, so I think I'm still winning." She raised her martini glass to him with a sarcastic smile, then drank from it with satisfaction. "Besides, I was in the papers after my death for months. Investigators are still talking about me on television. Your hitman made me even more of a household name than I ever had been before, so I guess I have to thank you for that. I don't think your own mother was looking for you when you disappeared. How's that feel, Al?"

He slammed his conjoined arms onto the table, spilling multiple drinks and causing stacks of poker chips to collapse completely. The look of fury on his face was enough to make Marie recoil slightly, but her expression remained exactly the same: steely and



superior. The former mob-involved businessman had lost any of the power he had in life, it seemed.

“Fred, you’ve been asking us all these questions, and yet we know nothing about you,” Marie said, turning to Fred to ignore the dirty look Al was still giving her. “How did you kick the bucket? I don’t see a single mark on you or anything.”

The man shrugged. “Just died in my sleep, I suppose. I was in my nineties, I had all my affairs in order... I don’t have a good story like the rest of you, unfortunately.”

One of the specters who had yet to say anything snickered, though he looked less than amused. He was one of the youngest-looking ghosts at the table, and he had been completely silent throughout the poker game. All he wore was a simple white t-shirt, blue jeans, and black converse shoes. Blood lined his forehead from a gash in it, and his body was covered in various dark bruises. Fred’s eyes lit up with recognition as soon as he looked at him, then quickly filled with sadness.

“So you’re just asking for all of our gruesome personal stories because you wish you had... what, died in a more ‘bombastic’ way?” The young man snorted a little bit, rolling his eyes as he drank his rum and coke. “Sorry that you’re disappointed.”

Patrick lowered his sunglasses down his nose a bit to peer at the two. “Oh, fuck. You two know each other, don’t you? Please tell me Fred killed you or something because that would be a twist, man—”

“No, I did that part myself, didn’t I?” He sighed, raising his glass to Fred. “This man got me my big break. I practically owe my career to him.”

“Just as hilarious as ever, Anthony. You got that career of yours yourself.” Fred grimaced, raising his beer as well. “You were gone too soon.”

Anthony smiled for a moment, then went back to his previous neutral expression. “Well, I had a good run. A few rom-coms, your horror movie, even my own action sci-fi thing? And my parents didn’t get a cent of any of it. Now, that is the best part of my life. I

got to take care of my siblings, donate to charity, and those freeloaders who thought they'd get everything got nothing."

"I've always said that Hollywood was too much for young people." Marie shook her head sadly, running her finger along the rim of her martini glass.

"Hollywood's too much for everyone." Anthony leaned his chair back, staring up at the ceiling. "It made me too overconfident with that car. If I had just..."

"...done something different." Patrick finished his statement, running a hand through his mane of black hair. "Yeah, man. Exactly."

Silence settled over the table for a few minutes as poker continued, with only a few words being spoken for the sake of the game. Fred glanced around at his spectral compatriots, then down at his cards.

"I fold."

Fred laid his cards down on the table and stood up, going off to find another game.

## I was once a writer's best friend

By Evan Kuhn

I was once a writer's best friend—

My words were his as he used me  
to bring his thoughts, his joys, his sorrows  
into the world. I was his companion and  
his tool.

Who saw him through novels and plays?

Through essays and short stories? I was  
there.

Will he remember where he has left me

Or has he found another just like me?

—I was once a writer's best friend.

## Edgar Allen Parody

By Michael R. Smith

On a morning bright and early, while I pondered, strong and burly

Over an empty page of blank and unwritten prose

When suddenly, my thoughts a strain, an idea came upon my brain

I sought to write a poem based on Edgar Allen Poe

“This is genius” I mumbled “I’ll copy Edgar Allen Poe”

“As long as I stay on track and write of cats instead crows”

If I correctly recall, it was the season of Fall

And the warmth of Spring was coming to a close

Patiently I wait for change - The Start of snow and the end of rain

The allergies no longer reign - Staring at my winter clothes

The warm and protective winter clothes

Which currently rest upon the hangers

...Wait - hangers? That doesn’t rhyme with clothes

I have just realized to my blunder

Bad news strikes my mind like thunder

I have failed to keep up the rhyme

The poet commits the greatest crime

This is all because I proposed

To write of Cats instead of crows

Now I've messed up the rhyme scheme

I'm pressed, I'm stressed, I've not had enough rest

I haven't even begun to gleam a theme

My diction is sloppy, the words don't make change

Maybe, just maybe I should write a different poem

I've come to a revelation on this day, while I throw this poem away

It's too hard to write like Edgar Allan Poe

His rhyme scheme is goofy, he must have been loopy

He only writes about sadness and woe

I could never write about sadness and woe

That's why I'll write about cats instead of crows

# The Beasts of Lake Bakhurst

By Harrison Schneider

*Cast in Order of Appearance:*

Mayor Paul Barths

Mr. James Tinderly

Officer Dan Kibbs

Mrs. Jane Clorus

Dave Johnson

Steve Walkin

Detective Phillip Richardson

Angela Richardson

James Richardson

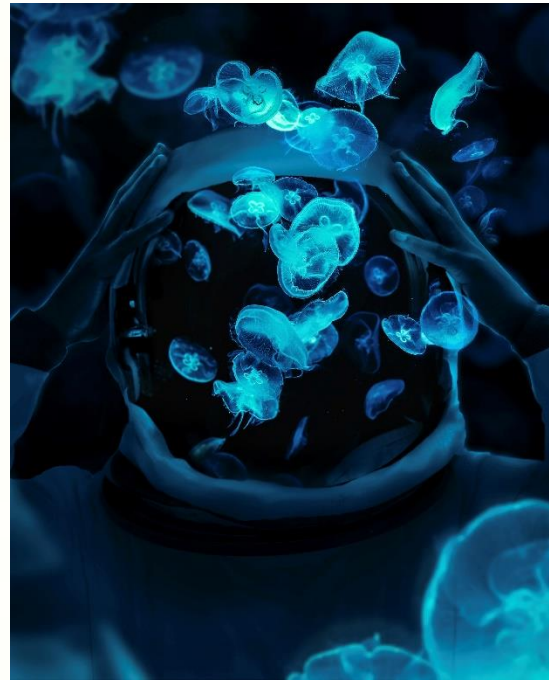
Anthony Richardson

Mourners (No speaking lines), serve as background characters

Denizens (Background characters)

“Beasts”

Pastor Brigsley



**JUXTAPOSITION** - *Ana Casper*

## Scene I

*One morning the mayor established an emergency town meeting.*

*This scene will have antique lighting, which means no LED. The podium area will have more lighting than the area where the townspeople are sitting.*

*(At the meeting)*

MAYOR BARTHS: Attention! Attention! Attention! Let the town meeting commence. Officer Kibbs! The issues that bring us here today.

*(Everyone applauds)*

MR. TINDERLY: I love you Kibbs!

*(Officer Daniel Kibbs comes up to the stand)*

OFFICER KIBBS: Thank you, thank you, thank you. Now we all know why we are here today. Mrs. Clorus has let her cats run amok again.

MRS. CLORUS: *(Speaks Gibberish)*

*(Audience laughs)*

OFFICER KIBBS: Yeah, Yeah, yeah very funny. Now for the real reason everyone is here today. As you may know, many people in this town have woken up today with strange bloody marks.

DAVE JOHNSON: Yeah. This morning I got out of bed and my arm was bleeding. The mark was a circle!

OFFICER KIBBS: Shut up Johnson! No one cares about you! Now we have looked all over town for a cause. A stray dog, household weapons, Mrs. Clorus's cats.

*(Audience laughs)*

OFFICER KIBBS: But so far it remains inconclusive. We do not know what is causing our citizens to bleed. But we will keep looking until we find the ans—

*(Officer Kibbs is interrupted by the local nut Steve Walkin)*

STEVE WALKIN: It's the lake! It is after us! Shield the women, sacrifice the children! The lake is out to get us!

OFFICER KIBBS: NOW THAT'S JUST RIDICULOUS!!!! *(Breaths)* Ahem. Pardon my shouting, but the only thing in that lake is water and some fish for the locals to catch and release. So Walkin, please leave immediately.

STEVE WALKIN: But...

MAYOR BARTHS: OUT!!!

STEVE WALKIN: You will regret the day that you didn't listen to me—OW!! Cursed door, always slamming into my big toe.

*(Door closes)*

MAYOR BARTHS: Officer Kibbs, continue.

OFFICER KIBBS: Thank you. Now as I was saying, we will keep looking until we find the answer. And to help, the police department has enlisted the best detective on this side of the Mississippi. Mr. Richardson, please introduce yourself.

*(Detective Phillip Richardson goes up to the podium)*

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: Thank you Mr. Kibbs. Now as everyone has said, there has been a strange bleeding incident in this here town; so, I have been hired to solve this case. I will leave no stone unturned until I find the cause of this incident. Now go about upon your day, as this anomaly shall be solved soon.

MAYOR BARTHS: Thank you, this meeting is now adjourned!

*(Townsfolk leave town hall. Mayor Barths and Detective Richardson remain)*

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: I shall soon investigate this occurrence, but first, here is how much you must pay me.

*(Detective Richardson gives Mayor Barths the bill)*

MAYOR BARTHS: Egad! A thousand dollars an hour!

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: Why the shocked face?

MAYOR BARTHS: We just spent most of our money on the new hospital. Our town is low on cash.

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: If you don't give me the thousand dollars an hour, I will not lend you my services. Good day. *(Begins to leave)*

MAYOR BARTHS: Wait! Please help us! Fine, I will give you the money. Please! Our town is in a state of emergency.

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: Thank you for understanding. Now before I commence this investigation, I need to talk to my wife.

MAYOR BARTHS: Very well.

*(Detective Richardson leaves the room)*

MAYOR BARTHS: *(Sighs)* I guess I have to raise taxes. The townspeople are not going to like this.

*(Mayor leaves the room)*

## **Scene II**



*Vaudevillian music plays in background as Backstage people remove the town hall props and put in props with two rooms. The first room is an office while the other is a kitchen. There is a phone on both sides.*

*(Detective Richardson calls his wife on the phone in his office)*

*(Phone rings on other side of wall. The office is set up so that two rooms are shown, the office and on the other side of the wall is the dining room Georgian style home in Glens Falls Virginia)*

MRS. RICHARDSON: Hello Phil, how are things going? Are you coming home soon?

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: Things are going well. I am sorry but I can't come back home yet. I have a case in Bakhurst, Pennsylvania. Something about blood marks on townspeople. I am being paid a thousand dollars an hour and it is coming to the house. I promise I will come back soon. See you soon, Annie.

MRS. RICHARDSON: See you soon Phil.

*(Both hang up phone. Detective Richardson's side of scene darkens)*

MRS. RICHARDSON: Kids! Come down for dinner!

*(James and Anthony Richardson come onto the stage and sit down on the chairs at the table)*

JAMES: When is daddy getting home?

MRS. RICHARDSON: Soon, James soon.

ANTHONY: He's never coming back, is he?

MRS. RICHARDSON: Of course he is! Now we know he has a lot of work to do with his detective shenanigans, but I know that once all this is resolved, he will be back in our family again.

ANTHONY: He's not coming back.

JAMES: Can I pick the new daddy?

MRS. RICHARDSON: NO!

*(Kids are shook)*

MRS. RICHARDSON: I am going to bed, Anthony, you're in charge.

ANTHONY: YES!

*(Mrs. Richardson's side darkens. Detective Richardson's side brightens up again)*

*(Detective Richardson hangs up phone)*

### **Scene III**

*Play swamp music. Use green light for swamp palette.*

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: Mayor, after looking at blood trails, all signs lead to the lake. I will not go any farther, since I can't swim, but I will camp out here tonight and deliver a report by tomorrow morning.

MAYOR BARTHS: Okay. Now I am going to get some beauty sleep. Raising taxes has been exhausting.

*(Exeunt Mayor Barths)*

*A moon is hoisted up in the sky, signifying the number of hours that have passed.*

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: It's midnight. Surely, I would have seen something by now.

*(Indiscernible whispers can be heard)*

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: What is that sound?

BEASTS *(In raspy voice)*: Ouuur Tooown

DETECTIVE RICHARDSON: What did you say?

BEASTS *(Screaming in raspy voice)*: OUR TOWN!!!!!!

*(Detective Richardson screams as he is dragged into the lake)*

*White strobe lighting occurs.*

*Stop swamp music. Turn all lights off.*

*While this was all happening, two different scenes were being set up.*

*The left stage light goes off, the middle stage light goes on.*

*We see Detective Richardson's skeleton.*

MAYOR BARTHS: What a fine day to take a walk! *(Sees Detective Richardson's skeleton)*.

MAYOR BARTHS: *(In solemn voice)* Oh no.

*Middle stage light goes on, right stage light goes on.*

*(Officer Kibbs rings the doorbell while holding the skeleton. Mrs. Richardson answers.)*

MRS. RICHARSON: *(Looks at skeleton, then puts hands on mouth)*

*All lights go off while final scene is set up.*

*When lights go on, we see the skeleton in a coffin, with people surrounding it, including Mayor Barths, Officer Kibbs, and the Richardson family.*

*Start Funeral Music*

*(Mayor Barths gets up on the pedestal)*

MAYOR BARTHS: Today, we remember not a legend, but a man, a man that cost this city thousands of dollars.

*(Mayor Barths gets off pedestal)*

*(Officer Kibbs gets on pedestal)*

OFFICER KIBBS: Honestly, I didn't know the guy very well. Good detective as far as I am aware. Rest assured we are still on this case.

*(Officer Kibbs gets off pedestal)*

*(Mrs. Richardson gets on pedestal)*

MRS. RICHARSON: Phil, you were my warmth in the cold, the sunlight to my rain, you made everyone smile, even when you were off working.

*(Mrs. Richardson brings the kids to the pedestal)*

MRS. RICHARSON: Boys, do you have something to say?

ANTHONY: All I can say is I told you so.

JAMES: Can we get another daddy now?

MRS. RICHARSON: BOYS!! Sorry about that, we will sit down now. (Mutters). I shouldn't have adopted them.

*(All get off pedestal)*

PASTOR BRIGSLEY: And that concludes this service, all head back to your homes while the body is disposed of.

*Stop Funeral Music*

*(Exeunt all but Pastor Brigsley)*

PASTOR BRIGSLEY: Poor Detective Richardson. I miss him already. But soon this town will be healthy again.

*Ominous Music Plays*

*(Pastor Brigley picks up a leech from his pocket and drops it into the lake. He turns his back on the audience and walks away.)*

*During this time, there is dark lighting in the back of the stage. When he reaches the back, ominous music stops.*

(Close curtain)

# The Ancient Dragon Melts the Hero with its Acid Breath

By Michael R. Smith

The great maw opens there's no time to react

The ancient dragon is on the attack

A sickly green hue rises from its throat

The draconic destroyer is raring to go

Out gushes a stream of boiling bile

The doomsayer's acid is certainly vile

Fingers stripped from hand stripped from arm stripped from chest

There'll be no remains for the despot to ingest

The shadow of the hero, now pinned to the floor

Shall serve as a warning for fools to ignore



**THE SWORD & THE FLAME** - *Ana Casper*

## Breathe

By Dane Buelow

The moldy, sticky air rose from the streets and sank from the pipes along with the unending buildings above our heads. It was like a warm film wrapping around my exposed skin. I took short breaths of the humid air to block the putrid smell from entering my nose. Occasional droplets splashed into the eroding potholes in the narrow alleyways or wide sidewalks; neither were large enough for a vehicle to pass. Like a rolling wave against sand, the people in the center of the main road were swept up from the other tides of people moving in an opposite direction; drowning in the overpowering force.

“Can’t you make him write any faster?”

The impatient, gravelly voice originated from none other than Hendrix, a powerfully built man and the leader of our squad. He’s known for his ‘boots on the ground’ demeanor; but the boots only run without care for who or what they trample over. Hendrix’s young face was somewhat covered by his growing chocolate colored beard. He would reach up and itch it now and then, his arms tattooed and scarred beyond recognition. Hendrix tapped the side of the shack’s sole window frame that he leaned against. The shack was disheveled and made by ruffled scrap steel. This kind of structure was commonplace for the underground. He used his hazel eyes as if he could telepathically force the local merchant to scribble quicker onto a whiteboard in a tongue that only Elystan could read.

Elystan leaned close to the whiteboard, pushing up his square reading glasses whenever the merchant started a new line of spiraling characters. His lapis eyes took in the words and copied them into a notebook.

Elystan was an average looking man, his build toned and face ironically kind. He was one of the two translators we had, specializing in the tongue only spoken by the locals living in this damp, over-industrialized underground. He murmured his translations in English as he wrote them down into his notebook. Elystan’s gloved hands scribbled another

question to the local. This process continued for what felt like hours. Maybe me periodically checking my watch hindered the passage of time?

Ayla, standing beside Elystan, was the traditional 'prodigy' interpreter. She was Elystan's counterpart in both trade and personality. She spoke nearly all of the Latin languages, German, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese... but like Elystan, couldn't get over the hurdle of speaking the tongue of the underground people. 'Un-ish' as Hendrix calls them. But also, unlike Elystan, she was illiterate in most languages she knew.

Ayla was petite, the second smallest of our team. Her mat-black helmet barely kept her fire-red hair from tumbling out. A fire of sister-like annoyance. Her neck was like a serpent's as she weaved between the writing text and her collauge's face. She looked over Elystan's shoulder, and smiled to herself in schadenfreude pleasure as Elystan struggled to make perfect Un-ish characters with a thin marker. Elystan continued to murmur as he struggled with the spiraling scribbles, which often called for Ayla to degrade him by calling Elystan a 'fake translator.' When he wasn't in the moment, Elystan would often retort by saying something along the lines of 'I don't have the second layer of vocal cords' or 'I lack the nimble tongue' or... and the list goes on.

"Juneko?" came a voice behind me.

"Yeah, Huey?" I looked down at the thinner-built young man; he was more of a scientist than an operator. Huey pushed himself up from the trash can he was prodding through. His boots kicked away crumbled up paper and food scraps. I could never share his passion for learning, let alone going through other people's junk. His oversized gear swayed slightly with his stride. His rifle dangled from its shoulder strap, lying horizontal with his waist.

He pushed away some of his scruffy hair, revealing his effeminate face that was blessed with sandy blonde hair and ocean-blue eyes. Huey was the smallest of the team. He lacked muscle and struggled with shooting, unlike the rest of us. But he was able to make up for his lousy shot with a knack for all things mechanical. He was the kind of guy who got



straight A's in higher learning, but spent his free time avoiding people and reading through manufacturing manuals.

“Can you take a picture of this local for me once they're done?” Huey's soft question was followed up by our medic, Leigh's, nod of agreement.

She too was finished with the alley's trash. Leigh had fair skin and a heart shaped face which housed algae-green eyes, deep with calculation. They reminded me of the algae farms in some of the protein districts. She wore the same uniform as the rest of us, except for the red cross on both of her shoulders and the Combat Medical badge over her heart. Most of the equipment in her backpack was meant to keep us alive from anything more serious than a bullet wound. Everyone hoped deep down that bag never had to be opened. There's no guarantee of medi-vac where we're going.

I couldn't really tell if Huey and Leigh were friends; neither of them probably knew what it meant to be a friend, let alone ever having one. One would usually watch the other's work while they lectured about how and why they did something. In her life before transferring, Leigh did the same things as Huey, but instead of manufacturing manuals, she read anatomy books and medical documentation. Ironically, she was the best shot out of all of us — except for the eccentric Fane, the designated marksman of our little special squad. Leigh spent full nights compounding her knowledge of the human body and her exemplar accuracy. Nearly every shot she took was lethal.

Fane peeked over from his perch against a wall. Both of his arms were crossed as he leaned against the cement wall. His long dirty-blond bangs tickled his unnerving heterochromatic eyes of blue and brown — occasionally garnering an upward blow of air to shift it away. Fane had an average frame as well, but a well-shaved face and bulging jawbones.

He was equipped with relatively standard things, except for the enormous rifle leaning beside him. It was both the highest power and most complicated rifle among us. A semi-automatic with a high power scope, barrel length nearing 40 inches, it had a bullpup design, compacting the massive barrel into the majority of the rifle. The most unique of all

were the bullets themselves — multi-staged like a small arms-sized tank round, but at a cost. He could only carry forty of those prototype bullets. It was utterly useless in the underground world; our quarters were too close for the precious rounds of his to even hit the distance where the bullet begins to arc towards the ground. Fane calls this the ‘dip-distance’.

I asked Huey, “Do you really need another picture of a local? We already have what, twenty or something around there?”

“But this one looks different; look at his mouth,” Huey pointed out.

The mutated merchant’s nose poked through his revolting curled lip that covered the skin below his eyes. The lip itself seemed as if it were welded onto his cheekbones during birth, whereas the nose poking through his lip seemed perfectly normal compared to ours, except for the thin, centimeter-long nub at the peak. The bottom of the nostrils glistened in saliva. The merchant talked as he wrote words with his uneven fingers, each digit a different length and width.

The humans here, if you could call them that, lived in this over-polluted underground where birth defects were common and insanity spread like a plague. Crawling around like ants that had no queen, lost in their own enormous mound.

Many miles above us, there were scientists that tested pollution on a fetus through multiple generations; but the subjects’ bodies and souls didn’t become anything like the locals that existed in the underground. Other scientists related the deformities to the food they consumed, leftover scraps and protein bits from the city above. But the continued existence of unimposing raccoons and rats would debunk that claim, especially since the locals don’t leave their dead to become food for the pests. The scientists gave up on the theory and resorted to more personal experimentation.

I looked to the revolting merchant and then back to Huey and Leigh, before mentioning “I’m going to run out of space if you keep telling me to take pictures of locals before we even enter into the Aberration.”

“C’mon, Juneko, this is a one-in-a-million opportunity,” Leigh added.

“If I run out of SD cards, you’re buying me more... both of you.”

They both nodded with grins on each other’s faces like their parents finally agreed to let them buy a new toy. I peeled open the misused ammo pouch at my side and pulled out the hand-sized digital camera to document our findings. I looked through the viewer and pushed down the button; with a click, the viewer blinked, and the camera’s fans whirred as it rendered the photo.

“Take a picture of him, cam-girl?” Hendrix peeled his attention away from Elystan’s slow work that had begun to drive Hendrix mad with impatience.

“Yeah, Huey wanted one.”

“Don’t we have enough already?”

“Leigh and Huey think we don’t.”

Hendrix glanced at the two intelligent types arguing over what caused the locals’ deformities, and shrugged.

“Their department.” He returned to observing Elystan’s struggles.

“Done!” Elystan pushed himself away from the counter with accomplishment and began to wipe down the whiteboard with the cloth he kept in his back pocket.

“What he say?” Hendrix asked as he eagerly pushed himself off the merchant’s metal plate shack. Elystan folded up his glasses and returned them to their thin container.

“We’re heading in the right direction, down this street, until we reach a symbol of flight.”

“It took you that long just to get that?” Ayla heckled.

“You can’t even learn their language.”

“And you can’t even—”

“C’mon, we’re leaving,” Hendrix’s booming voice interrupted. He turned and moved down the street.

Fane ran up to Hendrix’s side, much to the lead’s displeasure, while Ayla and Elystan continued to bicker together behind them. I walked behind Huey and Leigh, the last pair, to keep the nerdy ‘couple’ from inevitably falling behind during one of their conversations. Locals moved out of our way as if we were a boat cutting through waves of disfigurement. I couldn’t tell if it was because of respect for our mission and authority or because of the weapons openly carried across our shoulders and backs.

“Elystan!” Hendrix called out

“Yeah, boss?” he responded as Ayla continued to mock him.

“Did you find out what that symbol looks like?” Hendrix asked.

“Uhh...” He flipped open his handheld notebook and skimmed through while holding the book distant enough that he didn't have to switch to his reading glasses. “A pair of wings. Red wings with a circle around it.”

“Did he mention how far the Aberration was?”

“No, can’t openly talk to locals about it. They get spooked, like bad juju kind of stuff.”

“But the merchant was willing to tell you about the vehicle we’re gonna take?”

“He probably thought we were going to use them to get back up to the surface districts since we’re Purebreds.”

“Makes sense. Did everyone hear that?” He was answered with six varying tones of acknowledgment. “If you see it, say somethin.” Hendrix scratched the underbelly of his rapidly grown beard.

“Have you heard about the locals’ religion down here, Huey?” Leigh asked. I pushed her a bit as her pace faltered.

“Not really. What’s so special about it?” Huey’s tone leaked eagerness to learn something new.

“Our mission to find and enter the Aberration is heresy to these people.” Leigh’s trademark raised tone implied her brewing excitement and I sensed a lecture manifesting. “They say that miracles come from the Aberration — healing, enlightenment, purpose, anything positive that comes from worshipping any other god.”

“I could assume those are the positives since all religions orbit around those miracles in some capacity.” Huey commented.

“Indeed, but the Aberration is also where they hold their funerals. Bodies are dumped in droves to feed the Aberration power, and in turn, the locals get their miracles.”

“Interesting, but what about inside the Aberration; won’t there be enough bodies by now to completely fill the anomaly?”

“That’s the thing, no one knows how deep it really is. You’ve heard about the relocating of district 74, right?”

“Yeah, and how the taxes went to shit!” Elystan called out in between the waves of abuse being thrown by both translators. Leigh cocked her head, resisting a frown that would spoil the rest of her lecture.

“Yes, there was that, but the relocation was to clear space away for satellites to look down into the Aberration. We started with visuals, but to no one’s surprise, the satellite couldn’t see through the smog on the lower levels. Then we swapped to infrared; too hot. Then radio, what came out was just a black orb, as if there was a dark spot in the center of the under-district slums. We assumed the black spot was pollution because gasses can mix together and form similar things. But there was something odd in the center...” She stopped for dramatic effect to lure Huey deeper into the rabbit hole of information he was already engorged upon. “There was a torus.”

“Torus?” I asked, inevitably drawn to Leigh’s lecture.

“A doughnut shape, like a ring.” Leigh lifted her head towards me to explain, as she learned more than one student was in her presence. “It floated just under the Apparition, churning the gasses into a whirlpool. We’ve never seen anything like it, so -”

“That’s why we were told not to bring drones,” Huey connected the dots as his mechanical specialization finally became a subject.

“Exactly. We lose contact once something drops into the ‘gas’ that bubbles out of the Aberration.”

“And now I’m taking the pictures.” I sighed

“And Huey and I are here to observe.”

“I still can’t believe you two are operators; you should’ve stayed in the research district.”

“Well, think about it, Juneko,” Huey explained. “This is the opportunity of a lifetime. For us researchers, this is a dream. Seeing something truly unknown for the first time in centuries. That’s something none of us could pass up.”

I doubted Fane had the same option of choice, as he integrated from a different fireteam as Hendrix and me. I was ordered in because I’m still part of Hendrix’s ‘usual’ fireteam. Both translators were drawn from a hat. It just so happened that they knew each other.

Huey continued to tell his anecdote, “I asked Leigh if she was willing to get our ‘operator’ transfer or promotion, and she agreed, and now we’re here with you five. Weren’t we the only ones in our fields willing to do the training?”

“Lucky for us.”

“Absolutely. Best decision I’ve made in years.”

They both laughed despite the disparaging glances we got from the disfigured locals.

# Twin Flames: Snuffed

By Isabella Burkard

A handful of dirt for the earth's  
gaping maw,

and yet it hungers.

We feed it petals of love,  
the salt of our tears,  
and our finest mahogany.

It is never enough.

The earth requires  
bones.

We buried him on the first day of autumn.

-/-

The earth is relentless.

Even in hibernation

when its children are barren,

it wants for more.

Ashen face with eyes

on the steel blue sky.

Can you imagine the blood

on that pale morning

snow?

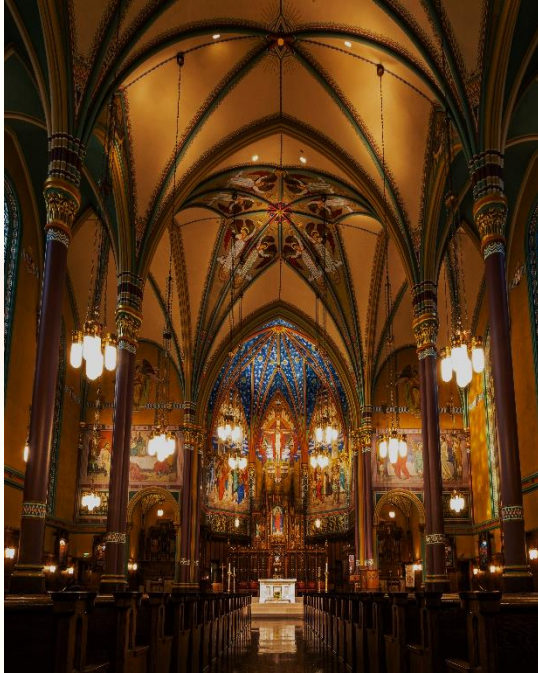
She slit her wrists in the dark of December.



## Cathedral

By Janae Mancheski

### CATHEDRAL OF THE MADELINE



*Public Domain*

The ribs holding up the ceiling  
Taste as if made in my image  
If I do my penance  
The gargoyle I would not ignore  
like Jesus, wept  
And so did my father  
When I took that sip of wine  
Sweeter than grapes  
From her breast

## The Brotherhood of Man

By Max Stern

I will not be joining the brotherhood of man.

Just recently,

under bright-blue skies

I observed (through passing cars)  
an attractive young man and his dad-  
  
not unlike mine and me,  
except there was a barrier between.

No mutual respect for pussy.

A woman matters so much  
to entomb love in a capsule  
like a blood-sacrifice to capture  
and admirance, together-

but I can never feel that connection-  
the brotherhood of man,  
  
and I never will.

God intended me alone,  
or, at least, away from  
the brotherhood of man.

# Thorn of the Rose

By Aleyna Karacan

**B**elle walked into the Beast's chamber with her dirty clothes and short hair. It was the first time she would see him up close. He was facing the window, wearing a suit. She waited for him to speak, but he didn't.

"What do you want?" she asked, trying her best to sound confident. He turned around, showing his face for the first time. There was a scar on the right side of his face. He slowly walked towards the nightstand and took the dagger sitting on top of it, pulling it out of its leather case. He walked towards Belle and stood right in front of her, holding her face and bringing his face closer to hers. Belle didn't flinch.

"Guess what happens to the girls that have a big mouth," the Beast asked, holding her face so tight she couldn't move her mouth. The cold metal of the dagger caressed her cheek.

"If you don't want to lose your tongue, you better keep your mouth closed," he said. "Do you understand me?" She nodded. This was going to be harder than she thought.

"Take her to the bath and clean her for me!" he ordered.

Two maids came to the room, both with shaved hair and black dresses. One of them was pregnant. They took Belle to a large bath made of marble from the bottom to the top, prepared the water, and added different soaps.

"How long have you been here?" Belle asked, but no one answered. She repeated her question. "How long have you been here?" Again, no response.

"Why are you not answering me!" she snapped. One of the women opened her mouth and showed it to Belle, and she didn't ask any more questions. After her bath, the maids took her to a room and made her put on a white dress. They put some scent on her neck and some color on her lips, and then they took her back to the Beast's chamber. She

knew what was happening but had no power to stop it. He was in the same place, watching his garden from the window. After he heard them coming in, he turned around and eyed her from head to toe.

"Now you look like something," he said, turning to the maids and ordering them to get out. Belle was shaking like a leaf, but she tried to look tough.

"You may wonder why I'm doing this. They always do. I'm just a man who likes perfecting things. My clothes, my garden, my women... They need to be perfect. Can you be perfect for me, Belle?" She was having a hard time holding back her tears. She was far from feeling brave. She hardly managed to nod.

"Beautiful skin," he said, touching her cheeks. "Look at these bright eyes," he ran his fingers through her hair. "Soft hair," he held her waist, "...and a tiny waist." His breath was hitting her face. She held her breath.

"You will give me beautiful maidens, won't you?" he asked. He wasn't waiting for an answer. "Let me tell you something, my little one," he said, getting his face closer. "On the outside, you are perfect, but not on the inside. It's not your fault. That's just how women are. I will help you get as perfect as you can. I am not a beast, I am just a man."

He put Belle's body on the bed that was in the middle of the room and whispered, "I will sheathe my dagger in your body, little one."

Belle woke up in pain the next morning and realized she was in a different room. Her head was itchy, and as she walked to the mirror to look at her reflection, she noticed her eyes had lost their sparkle, her skin wasn't glowing, and her soft hair was gone. She was still beautiful but now looked ordinary. Belle sat on the floor and cried before wiping her tears and helping the maids with cleaning and cooking. The only sound in the castle was the maidens coming from the garden, and none of the maids talked to Belle. At night, she was requested by the beast to accompany him. It looked like Belle was his new favorite.

The next morning, Belle woke up in her room again, unsure if the beast had carried her there. Days passed like this, and Belle continued to help the maids with cleaning. The castle remained silent, except for the sound of the maid who was pregnant and seemed in distress. The maid gave birth to a healthy boy that night, and they made heart stew for dinner.

One morning, Belle didn't wait for the beast to call her and went to his bedroom. He was standing in front of the window, as usual, and when she laid her body down on the bed, the creaking sound of the bed frame made him turn around.

"Did you miss your master?" he said, smirking. Belle nodded. "I thought you would be more difficult to tame, my rose. You surprised me."

He locked the door and asked, "Do you like being my rose?" Belle smiled and turned her head to the mirror on the wall.

The leather case was on the floor, empty. He put his weight on her and gasped in ecstasy as she sheathed the dagger in his chest.



**ROSE**

*Public Domain*

TWO OF CUPS

THEY JUST PUT UP  
THE LATE QUEEN'S  
STATUE.

IT'S REALLY  
BEAUTIFUL...

IT EVEN HAS THE  
QUEEN'S CUP.

I HEAR THEY  
WERE BOTH QUITE  
UNSTABLE BEFORE  
THE MARRIAGE.

WELL, IT WAS OUT  
OF NECESSITY  
AFTER ALL.

THEY GOT ALONG WELL  
AND THE KINGDOM  
FLOURISHED.

YOU DON'T THINK...?

... LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT THIS-

YOU TWO! CLOSE THE GATES!

W-WHAT? WHAT HAPPENED?

THE KING! HE...

HIS CUP OVERFLOWED  
AND SHATTERED!

By Thlee Xiong

# Inheritance

By Janae Mancheski

Yes, the meek shall inherit the Earth

But when I indulged the eagerness

of my lips,

My teeth,

My tongue,

O what celestial creature did I receive?

A temporary height and a body

that for a moment

surpassed the gift granted to those

much holier than I.



**ECLIPSE** - *Ana Casper*

# The Innkeeper's Daughter

By Jacob Borre

WALKING PATH EXT. – NIGHT

A light is seen in the far distance. Four hikers enter the frame walking down a poorly maintained dirt path. They show signs of desperate tiredness (heavy breathing, stumbling over themselves, etc.).

The main hiker is JINGTI (31), the hikers' guide. He is Chinese, with short black hair and a semi-muscular build. He wears basic hiker gear (big boots, a thick black jacket, tight pants, etc.), and carries a large gray backpack and a walking stick.

Behind him follow KIYOSHI (28), a Japanese man with a thinner build than Jingti, and carrying similar items as Jingti. Also are THOMAS (25) and CRAIG (23), two friends out of college. Thomas is Icelandic-American with a Scandinavian accent and blond hair, while Craig has shaggy brown hair, slightly chubby, with a thick beard and glasses.

As the group walks to the inn, Thomas stops to catch his breath.

THOMAS

Hold on one second. Just let me catch my breath quickly.

JINGTI

Let's not stop now. We should be at that building in 10 minutes if we keep pace.

THOMAS

You said the same thing 10 minutes ago. Are we close or not?

CRAIG



Suck it up. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can relax.

Thomas takes one more loud breath, before standing up straight again.

THOMAS

Fine. Let's go.

The group continues to walk toward the light in the distance.

INN EXT. - NIGHT

The group stops outside the building. It is very nice looking, with stone decor, a small fountain in front, and overall looking like a traditional Chinese building. Jingti reads the small wooden sign over the archway.

JINGTI

(to Thomas and Craig)

We're in luck. It's an inn.

CRAIG

(relieved)

Thank God. I would've killed myself if it was anything but.

INN INT. - NIGHT

The four enter through the doors. The interior is also very nice, with bleached bamboo flooring, lantern lighting, and very old school decorations.

At the front desk stands the INNKEEPER (65). He has noticeable signs of age with a very wrinkled face and a slight hunchback, wearing a kimono. He looks up, and smiles at the small group, who walk toward him.

INNKEEPER

(in Chinese/subtitled)

Hello young men. Welcome to Calming Wind Inn. How can I help you?

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

Hi. We're hikers on the Huangshan Mountain trail. We've been turned down by other hotels because of crowding, and we were hoping we could have a room for the night.

Craig and Thomas whisper to each other while Jingti talks.

CRAIG

Any clue what he's saying?

THOMAS

Don't ask me, you're the one with the translation book.

CRAIG

Yeah, but you read it while I slept on the plane here. Can't you catch on to anything?

THOMAS

I only read the basic crap.

While Thomas and Craig talk, the Innkeeper tells Jingti something that can't be heard.

JINGTI

(in Chinese)

What!? You're kidding me! We've walked for miles, and you're just going to leave us outside!?

THOMAS

Hey, what's going on?

JINGTI

Bad news everyone. Apparently we didn't get here soon enough. All the rooms are taken, and there are no spare rooms for us to lay down.

KIYOSHI

You're saying, we can't get a room or bed?

JINGTI

Unfortunately.

CRAIG

Are you kidding me!? What do we do now? There's no other inn for another 20 miles! Do we have to sleep in the goddamn fountain or something?

THOMAS

Craig, calm down. It sucks but...

CRAIG

Don't tell me to calm down! This is bullshit! I'm not sleeping outside! It's 20 degrees out there, and it's somehow ungodly humid out there, to!

While the group argues, the Innkeeper looks over them, paying close attention to Craig and Thomas, before centering his attention on Kiyoshi, who seems to be spacing out. He prods his chin, with a small smirk showing up over his face.

INNKEEPER

(in Chinese)

Actually, I could make a small exception.

The group turns toward the Innkeeper. Jingtí starts smiling.

JINGTI

He said he might have something!

Jingtí consults quietly with the Innkeeper. They continue speaking in Chinese, but their dialogue can't be heard. Craig crosses his fingers while Thomas and Kiyoshi look at the conversation with concern.

THOMAS

Please...

Jingtí moves away from the Innkeeper and towards the other three. He has a look of slight cringe.

JINGTI

Okay, I have good news and bad news. The good news is he can get us a room.

All three sigh in relief.

KIYOSHI

Yes!

CRAIG

Thank God! We don't have to freeze to death!

JINGTI

Bad news is, and you're not going to like it...we have to sleep in the same room...as a corpse.

All three's relief turns to horror.

CRAIG

What?

JINGTI

His daughter in law died recently apparently, and they're holding the funeral here. But there are some sleeping couches in the room where the ceremony is.

CRAIG

You're not joking? The only room open in this whole place has a dead body in it!?

JINGTI

I'm not happy about that fact either. But do we have a choice? Like you said, the next inn isn't for at least another 20 miles. I'm afraid we have to. Unless you want to sleep in the fountain outside.

The three give each other concerned looks. Thomas sighs with pretend relief.

THOMAS

I'm sleeping on the far end.

CUT:

SLEEPING ROOM INT. - NIGHT

The innkeeper leads the four into the small room. It's very minimalist, with beige walls and a few hastily strewn sleeping couches. However, at the far end of the room is a colorful shrine and a beautifully decorated casket. Craig groans, and the Innkeeper puts his oil lamp on the ground.

INNKEEPER

Sorry for the problem. I'd give you a better room if I could.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

It's fine. We'll only be here one night. We'll pay you in the morning.

The Innkeeper smiles before walking out. As he closes the door, his smile turns devilish, before closing it.

CRAIG

I don't know about you, but I'm not addressing that elephant. Good night.

Craig plops himself on the couch, still in his hiker gear, and falls asleep almost instantly. Kiyoshi joins him.

THOMAS

I have to agree. The sooner we get to bed, the sooner we'll wake up, get out of here and away from that. Don't have much longer on this hike anyway. Good night Jingti.

Thomas walks to a small door with the word 'Bathroom' written in Chinese. The lights are out, and everyone is in bed. Thomas, Kiyoshi, and Craig are all asleep and snoring, but Jingti is looking at the casket, as his couch is closest to it.

JINGTI

Just go the sleep, Jingti. It's a coffin. It's not going to hurt you. Just relax.

Jingti adjusts his position, and closes his eyes. He lays still momentarily, then hears a creaking sound next to him. He turns his head slightly, and his eyes widen as he sees the door of the coffin opening up.

Jingti starts shaking, but he grabs his arm quietly to try and calm himself. The door continues creaking open, until it stops at a 90 degree angle.

Jingti turns his head more to the coffin, and sees a figure rising out of the coffin. It is a GIRL (19). She's beautiful, wearing a patterned kimono and geisha garb, with her hair done up and her face painted white.

Jingti closes his eyes almost completely, but can still see the GIRL stepping silently out of the coffin.

The Girl seemingly glides her way to the oil lamp still on the ground. She puts her arm into her breast, and pulls out 5 incense sticks. She takes one and lights it in the faint flame of the oil lamp. She picks up the oil lamp.

The Girl walks over to Kiyoshi, who's snoring the loudest of all the men. She kneels down, and places the burning end of the stick at the tip of Kiyoshi's nose. His snoring, over a small period of time, grows quieter and less frequent, until finally no snoring is heard at all.

Jingti stares with an intense look of fear and shaking while keeping his eyes mostly shut. He watches as the Girl moves toward Thomas next. She lights a second incense stick, and places it at the tip of his nose, and Thomas makes some small choking noises and his body tenses, before his body settles.

The Girl walks toward Craig, kneels down, and lights the third stick with the lamp. She places it at Craig's nose. His body starts convulsing violently while he sleeps, before declining in severity, and eventually stops.

JINGTI

(almost inaudibly)

I'm next.

The Girl walks in the direction of Jingti. He quickly pretends to fall asleep. The Girl lights another incense stick, and places it at Jingti's nose. Jingti holds his breath for 20 seconds, before the Girl turns away. He breathes out, but quietly enough that the Girl doesn't hear.

The Girl places the lantern on the ground next to the coffin and climbs back in and lays down, but doesn't close the door of the coffin. Jingtí opens his eyes fully and looks at Craig's lifeless body on the couch next to him.

Jingtí slowly moves his leg off the couch. He kicks Craig's body softly.

JINGTI

(whispering)

Please. Wake up.

Jingtí kicks him again. No response.

JINGTI

(on verge of tears)

Please Craig. Do something.

Jingtí kicks the couch, and it makes a creaking sound. The Girl sits up suddenly. Jingtí quickly brings his foot back to his couch and squints his eyes near shut. He starts breathing heavily.

The Girl pulls another incense stick out of her breast and picks up the lantern. She lights the stick in it.

She walks over to Jingtí, kneels down, and this time sticks the lighted stick almost completely into his nose. Jingtí holds his breath while pretending to sleep. She holds it for almost 45 seconds, with Jingtí about to explode. Finally, she takes the stick out of his nose and turns away. Jingtí manages to exhale quietly.

The Girl places the lantern on a nearby table and the sticks back in her breast, and walks over to Thomas. She starts looking through his pockets, and pulls out his wallet. She then starts rummaging through his backpack, pulling out a few Chinese coins and dollars.



Jingti looks at the corpse with fear in his eyes, before looking at the door. The Girl brings all the money from Thomas to the coffin and places it gently inside.

The Girl moves towards Kiyoshi, and Jingti moves his legs off of the couch and onto the floor. He looks at the Girl, who's looking away from him and into Kiyoshi's pockets.

Jingti propels himself up with his arms and sprints towards the door. He opens the door, and the Girl jumps up from Kiyoshi and glares at him. She runs towards him, but Jingti closes the door before she can grab him.

FIELD EXT. - NIGHT

The sleeping room is shown to be a small building on the outskirts of the actual inn. Jingti starts running towards the light of the inn on the small dirt path.

The door behind him bursts open, and the Girl starts sprinting after Jingti. Jingti looks back and his eyes widen. He turns away and picks up his pace to run even faster.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME! HELP! HELP!

Jingti runs closer to the inn, with the Girl in hot pursuit. He finally reaches the building, and starts banging on the walls.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitle)

SOMEBODY HELP ME! I'M GOING TO DIE! I NEED HELP!

Jingti looks at the Girl, who's getting closer. He runs away and towards the main entrance. He tries opening the door, but it's locked for the night. He bangs as hard as he can.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

OPEN THE DOOR! SOMEONE'S TRYING TO KILL ME! PLEASE! OPEN UP!

Jingti looks at the Girl approaching him once again. He runs away from the inn and follows the dirt path that lead him to the inn, towards another faint light in the distance.

Jingti continues running, looking back and seeing himself putting distance between him and the Girl. Though each time he looks back to the road, he starts losing his breath. Each time he looks back at the Girl, she gets closer.

Jingti's leg suddenly spasms, and he grabs it, running with a limp. In the corner of his eye he sees a monastery in a cleared section of the forest on the side of him. He runs toward it.

MONASTERY EXT. - NIGHT

Jingti sprints up the steps of the monastery and starts banging on the door.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

SOMEBODY HELP ME! I'M IN DANGER! PLEASE HELP!

Jingti looks back onto the path and sees the Girl behind the trees. He quickly jumps from the steps of the monastery and hides behind a short but thick fir tree.

Jingti peaks around the corner of the tree to see the Girl climbing up the steps of the monastery. She looks up at it, and starts walking back down the path.

Jingti starts letting out a sigh of relief, but the Girl snaps her head to look at him. Jingti gasps, and she starts sprinting towards the tree.

The Girl sprints towards the right of the tree, but Jingtí starts running to the left. She then tries to get him from the left, but he runs to the right. The tree creaks in whichever direction Jingtí runs.

The two continue to try running in the opposite direction, and Jingtí looks up at the tree, noticing how it creaks in whichever direction to block the Girl.

After several more attempts to get past each other, both Jingtí and the Girl become noticeably exhausted. She pulls out two incense sticks, lighting them from the friction of a neighboring tree.

Jingtí is too exhausted to try and move, so the Girl makes her move to the left, directly at Jingtí.

However, Jingtí trips over a small tree root as he stumbles back, and hits his head on the ground.

Jingtí looks up, and sees the Girl caught in the thick, spiny branches of the tree. She tries freeing herself, but ends up tearing her kimono and her skin, entangling herself more in the branches. She drops the two smoldering incense sticks in front of Jingtí. Jingtí slowly loses consciousness from hitting his head.

Jingtí awakens in a daze, and stands up. He looks at the Girl, still stuck in the branches of the tree, but she isn't moving. Jingtí cautiously puts his finger on her neck to feel a pulse. He slowly pulls them back.

JINGTI

She's dead?

Jingtí continues looking at the Girl with utter confusion. After a short time, he slowly moves away from the Girl's corpse, keeping his eyes on her, and leaves the small monastery clearing.

INN EXT. - NIGHT

Jingtí bangs hard on the door with a look of complete apathy (Thousand Yard Stare).  
Finally, he hears the sound of a key moving on the door.

The door opens, revealing the tired looking Innkeeper. He looks up at Jingtí with a face of complete shock.

INNKEEPER

(in Chinese/subtitled)

But...how? You're...not...

JINGTI

(in Chinese subtitled)

My friends are dead. I need to call the police.

The Innkeeper struggles to talk, only managing to make small grunting noises. Jingtí walks in, nudging the Innkeeper aside with his shoulder.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

Also, your daughter in law's body is stuck to a tree.

The Innkeeper looks at Jingtí now with a look of horror and confusion.

INNKEEPER

(in Chinese/subtitled)

What do you mean? I want to see for myself. Take me to her.

As Jingtí picks up the telephone, he slumps on the floor, shaking. He stands up, still shaking, and turns around after he regains composure.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

(sternly)

You go. By yourself.

The Innkeeper motions to try and ask again, but Jingti walks menacingly towards the Innkeeper, glaring down at him.

JINGTI

(in Chinese/subtitled)

You go.

INNKEEPER

(in Chinese/subtitled)

Then tell me where she is. Tell me the way. I have to know where she is.

Jingti grows slightly more relaxed.

JINGTI

Okay.

MONASTERY EXT. - NIGHT

The Innkeeper walks up towards the monastery. He looks up at it, and then turns his head towards the tree holding the Girl. He walks towards it.

INNKEEPER

Fusun?

No reply. He walks closer.

## INNKEEPER

Fusun?

He circles the tree, but doesn't find her body. He turns towards another similar looking tree, before seeing something colorful in the corner of his eye.

He looks down, and sees a small section of kimono cloth resting hanging out of a small hole in the tree. He strokes the kimono, before noticing some long black hairs next to it.

The Innkeeper picks up both the kimono and hair, but notices they won't budge. He tugs at both. He tugs again, and suddenly both get pulled from his hand and into the hole in the tree. He looks at the hole, with a look of pure terror. He backs away from the tree, looks up at it, and screams.

CUT TO: BLACK

FADE IN TEXT: BASED ON A CHINESE FOLK TALE



**BEAMS**

*Ana Casper*

# How to Be a Good Father

By Madeline Marfoe

A father is someone who is supposed to protect you

Who shows you the way and gives you advice

Someone you can count on and trust and love

Someone who is always there for you whenever you need it

Yet you decided to take a different path

You decided to blame and shame and shit on the things that I loved instead

A very interesting twist on parenting I must say

You decided to ruin what little we had and ignore the damage that you had done to us

You left us all alone and lost

Children who were confused and too young to understand that sometimes parents lie

Sometimes they excuse and avoid and refuse to see what they've done to you

Sometimes they just don't love you

Responsibility was never a word in your vocabulary

Treating us like we were the culprits and the ones to blame for your actions and mistakes

That we were the reason you never showed up or supported us

That we were just less important than the events or the friends in your life

Yet you say you would never choose something else over us

That we were your first priority always and forever

And for years I believed your complete and utter bullshit

A desperate need to be near you and impress you settling deep in my stomach like an illness

My attempts at gaining your company polite and compelling

But every time I was denied and told that it wasn't my turn yet

That I must wait and be patient until you were ready to spend time with me

That your focus had to be elsewhere for now

Years went by without you and nothing changed

The emptiness you left forcing me to grow up and be the bigger person

An adult at an age where I shouldn't have been expected to be one

Your strategic manipulations bouncing off and eventually being silenced by my mind

Your attempts at coming back into my life blocked and discarded

You became nothing but a stranger to me

Where has my sweet daughter gone you ask

Why have you decided to treat me this way

Why would you do this to your sweet loving father

You whine and you cry to me, putting your selfish needs before my own

You refuse to look at your past actions or apologize for the pain you have caused me

Your stupid fucking baby brain incapable of thinking that maybe it was you



Maybe it was your actions that brought this upon us

Years pass and you're old and gray now

Your skin wrinkled and your back tired

Yet still you are a whiny, blubbering child

Treating your son the same way you treated me

Putting your issues before his own and using him like your own personal therapist

Expecting him to listen to you and feel sorry for the misery that you brought upon yourself

Ignoring his thoughts and feelings

Shaming him for his interests and ideas about life

Scared because you know that he is so much fucking smarter than you could ever be

He's just a kid I say

One who couldn't understand why his father didn't care about him

One who didn't realize that his father doesn't want to hear about his day

One who had to learn just as I did that sometimes people aren't who they say they are

That sometimes it's best to give up on people that cannot be saved

His innocence and hope were taken away too soon

His attempts at connecting with the man across from him decreasing every visit

Knowing that his father will never care about what he has to say

I blinked and now I see his tired eyes staring right back at me

My attempts at protecting him wasted and useless

I can't stand between them anymore

Now he's on his own

Left to deal with the mess of our parent

The whiny depressed self destructive human being who calls himself our father

And he looks so sad

Unable to express how he feels and unheard by everyone around him

And no matter how hard I try

I can't help him



## **CANYONLANDS**

*Ana Casper*

## Moving On

By Isabella Burkard

Isn't it a dreadful little existence  
we inhabit  
when we are not quite lonely but  
have no other word  
to describe the melancholic longings  
of our cavernous hearts?

Is there nothing to be said  
for the fact  
that "grief" has become a dirty word  
and we are told  
to move on even when our very souls  
ache and weep?

And does no one realize that we  
are grieving  
every single day the insurmountable loss  
of time and possibility—

that grief is a sum and we are expected

to begin it anew

before we have ever finished?

How do you move on from that?

### DESERT SUN



*Ana Casper*

# The Man at the Train Station

By Evan Kuhn

**T**here was no one else at the train station when I arrived.

It was still quite early in the morning, so I didn't give it much thought. I always liked traveling in the morning. Everything was so peaceful, and I felt like I had the day to myself. I had walked from my place to the small train station in my town as the sun was still coming up, so when I got to the platform, I had the place to myself.

I was going to visit my girlfriend in the city for a few days. She had just moved into a new apartment and wanted to show me around.

The brochure in my hand had the train schedule on it. The next one would get here at 8:30. I didn't mind the wait.

Soon after I sat down on the bench, I heard footsteps from my left. I turned to see the figure of a man slowly walk onto the platform. He stopped and looked around for a moment before glancing in my direction. He paused for another few seconds and then began walking towards the bench I was sitting on. I turned my head back to face the train tracks.

The man looked to be in his mid fifties. He was slightly heavy set, with thinning gray hair and glasses. He had on a plaid shirt and carried a large sketch pad with him. Something about him intrigued me, but I couldn't say what.

He leaned against the wall near my seat. I saw the man flip through a few pages of his sketch pad. I caught him taking another quick glance at me before turning away as if to hide his drawings from my view.

This was understandable, many artists are secretive about their work. I couldn't see his eyes as the sun was reflecting off of his glasses, but the expression on his face looked

less than pleasant. Regardless, being the curious and friendly person that I was, I still felt I should try to make some conversation with him.

“Are you an artist?” I asked.

It seemed like a stupid question. Of course he was an artist. But it was the first thing that came to mind.

“Yes I am. Studied art for four years in college.”

His demeanor appeared to change slightly as he said this, as if simply being asked a question was enough for him to open up. He had a higher pitched voice, but still sounded calm and collected.

“That’s great,” I said. “I’m in the business field myself. Not much art experience, but I can definitely appreciate it.”

“Art is in human nature.”

Not knowing exactly how to respond, I simply nodded in agreement. This guy was interesting to say the least. He seemed excited to talk about his art, but he still never smiled.

Then, out of nowhere, he asked me, “Can I draw a picture of you?”

The question took me by surprise. I’d never been asked that before, let alone by a stranger at a train station. But the way I saw it, he was simply a man expressing himself through a hobby. I checked my watch. 8:10. I had plenty of time before my train would arrive.

I paused for a second before saying “Sure, why not?”

This was the first time I saw the hint of a smile appear at the corner of his mouth.

“Alright.” He said. “Now just hold still. I want to get a good view.”

He took a few steps closer to the tracks and turned towards me. Now I was able to get a good look at the man's eyes. They were very dark brown, almost black, and not too expressive. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a blue drawing pencil and started to sketch.

I did as he instructed and sat there facing the train tracks. I wasn't sure how long I would have to sit for, but I wasn't uncomfortable. At least the train was still coming.

Sitting there made the train station grow quieter. The only sounds I could hear were the rustling of nearby trees and the scratching of pencil on paper.

My mind was just beginning to wander when the man spoke again.

"You have a very symmetrical face. Almost perfect."

"...Thanks," I replied nervously. Perhaps it was just an artist thing.

I figured I'd try to make more conversation while I sat.

"So... are you headed somewhere?"

"I'm waiting for some... -one." He hesitated before that final syllable.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'll know when... they get here."

Again, the man hesitated before that word, "they," as if it was difficult for him to say.

For some reason, I was driven to get another look at his face. Maybe it would give me some insight into his curious demeanor.

The man was smiling now as he was drawing. It was faint, but still a smile. His eyes also showed some emotion now. But it wasn't any comforting feeling. I also noticed his head would occasionally jerk in one direction ever so slightly. Did he have Tourette's? That's what I thought at first, but it looked more like he was somewhat able to control this movement. Not wanting to dwell on it, I quickly resumed staring at the train tracks, now

wishing the train would arrive sooner. I thought of Emma, and what a story this would be to tell her.

“You know,” the man started, “As much as I enjoy drawing faces, I find the human figure to be much more fascinating. So many different aspects to capture. I wonder if—”

He was cut short by the automated message that played over the loudspeaker.

*“Attention: The next inbound train will arrive in five minutes.”*

This brought me a tiny sliver of relief. A part of me did not want him to finish that thought. I’d been in plenty of awkward situations before, but this stood out to me. Being careful not to turn my head, I strained my eyes to the right to see that a few more people had walked onto the platform. This also eased my mind just a tiny bit. The man stopped drawing for a moment to look around. Then he looked back at me.

“I’m almost done, don’t worry. I wouldn’t want you to miss your train.”

Those words of comfort felt backhanded, and the man’s voice, while still calm, sounded slightly unsettling. Regardless, what he said was true. Aside from seeing Emma, this train would save me from the uncomfortable situation I was in. I tried to distract myself. Emma would pick me up from the train station in the city, then we’d maybe get a bite to eat before going to her apartment. I hadn’t seen her in quite a while, and I was very much looking forward to spending a few days with her.

*“Attention: The next inbound train is now arriving in your station.”*

That was my cue. I grabbed my bag and got up from the bench, not caring what the man thought. Surprisingly, he didn’t say anything. Not looking back, I stood on the platform until the train rolled to a stop. I showed my ticket to the conductor and boarded the train.

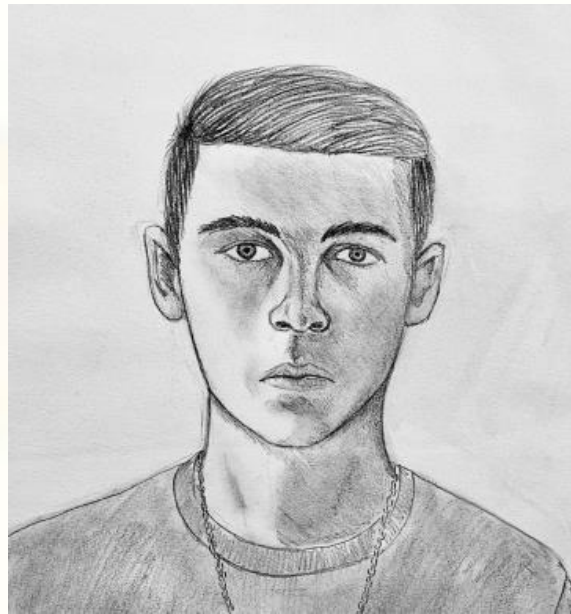
My brain was scrambled as I found a window seat on the train. I didn’t want to think about what had just happened. I looked out the window. It was something I was always used to doing on trains. The last thing I saw as the train started to leave the station were the man’s eyes staring directly at my window.



Emma and I walked into her fifth-floor apartment. I set my bag down and looked over to see a news broadcast playing on the TV.

*“Police have arrested fifty-two-year-old Nathan Donovan, allegedly responsible for the kidnap, sexual assault, and murder of fifteen people. Upon searching Donovan’s house, authorities recovered the bodies of nine of these people. Also found, and even more disturbing, were folders and files filled with drawings presumably done by the killer. Among these were drawings resembling the likeness of all fifteen men and women who had gone missing in the past several months.”*

On the screen was a mugshot of a middle-aged man with thinning gray hair, glasses, and an emotionless but all too familiar look in his eyes. Next to him, a graphite drawing was shown. I wish I could describe how I felt seeing my own face staring back at me.



# The Stranger in my Mirror

By Madeline Marfoe

I can't stand who I see in the mirror anymore

Your features hidden just beneath the surface

Twisting below my skin like a disease

Warping the blank canvas I crave to be

Desperate to mark me as your own

A child meant to be shown off

An excuse for praise

You're the root of all my flaws and problems

Your untold truths and hidden agendas

Your twisted manipulations keeping me tied to you

Trying to force me to be exactly what you want

My inability to trust caused by your broken promises

Your personality caked with deception and narcissism

Thriving in my inability to tell truth from lie

I hate how similar we are

I complain about your actions then look in the mirror

Disgusting truths making me sick to my stomach

Bile clawing its way up my throat

Fear filling my body as I see your reflection

Dead eyes staring back at me

Haunting my life forever

Everything about me has to change

I can't let you recognize me

The fear of you seeing how similar we are

The risk of you thinking that you own me

That you can claim me and show me off

Treating me like a trophy that you won

Taking my victories as your own

The person that I had to be become to escape you

Flesh and bones strained against their new mold

The parts of you built into my bones shattered and swept away

Every similarity becoming a disgusting attribute that I must hide

Tucked away in the shadows of my mind

In constant fear of the knowledge

That we're more similar than anyone knows

I want to believe that I have freed myself from your grasp

The life stealing

soul sucking

waste of space that you are

Calls declined

Messages ignored

You cannot reach me

But I can never truly escape the blood in my veins

It settles in the curve of my nose

The shade of my skin

The slight curl of my hair

Your features following me no matter how I change myself

Like a shadow over my shoulder

You're always there watching

Silently waiting

## Untitled

By Sabrina Arassi

Every day I wait for you  
I do not know your name  
But I know you wait for me  
Even though you do not know my name  
I grow tired of waiting for you  
It is almost unbearable  
I wish that you knew my name  
I wish that you could hear my voice  
I wish I could hear yours  
I wish I could say your name several  
times  
Keep saying it



## THE DINER

*Ana Casper*

Until it never grows old  
If you could try and make it old  
You would fail  
The sound is evergreen  
Even though I do not know your name  
And cannot hear your voice  
I know I could listen forever  
Every day I wait for you  
I hope you are waiting for me

## A Summer at the Pool

By Ana Casper

Small, pointy pebbles poke bare feet  
as they slap rapidly against the sizzling summer pavement.  
Children cheer as they cannonball into the icy water below,  
emerging from the depths with a grin as wide as the sky.

“Daddy! Did you see me jump?”

Teens pile into innertubes, racing down slides,  
splashing with shouts, screams and excitement.  
Sopping wet dollar bills are extracted from forgotten pockets,  
smacked onto the concession stand counter  
in exchange for greasy hot dogs and sweet ice cream.

Water rushes onto the deck  
licking the toes of passersby.  
Wet feet leave trails of prints behind,  
creating a path for bare feet  
to slap against the sizzling summer pavement.

# The Beauty of Rain

By Max Stern

*All the clouds*

she said,

*all the beautiful clouds*

*hold so much rain inside-*

she clenched her fist

and turned stone

to sand.

*They like pointing*

*at the pretty ones-*

she'd say,

*never-not the defects*

*falsely labeled mundane*

*fog-billows; rainy days-*

she'd say,

*they'll never see it.*

A tear rained down

her cheek.

*Rainy days are so beautiful,*

*so, so beautiful-*

she said,

*but the fog that*

*makes it whole*

*is lessened in the few*

*that cries the storm.*

She couldn't stop crying-

*how beautiful,*

I thought,

*how adorable-*

*so honest, so truthful!*

She would've seen her,

that sunny day

and know-

the clouds with rain-

the ones people would

pay to obtain-

would come crashing

down that day.



*The best clouds transform  
under their pressure to perform,  
and wetten the skin  
of those who've has-been.*

*She'd have seen. Would've  
she have loved this?  
She'd have loved this.*

Through fog thick as mankind  
stood slumbering showers-  
a heaven- self-given  
till the flooding overpowers-  
pours through the capsule  
of pain so powerful.  
Handle the shame  
by sharing it in the eyes  
of the sky,  
reflecting the beauty  
we all contain- inside.

Like the tears she cried

on her final night

We spread her ash

like sand she once

held in her hand.

And over the ocean

spanned beauty

so sad- the

water wavered

in admiration-

not caring for

the leagues of

love buried

so far in the sea-

but the little

sand so sad

enough to

beckon an

ocean's attention-

under the clouds

filling levels and  
levels of pain  
gathered from each  
and every tear  
cried in admiration  
of one single  
stone- clenched  
in the hand of  
beautiful darkness-  
and transparent  
rain.

I will always love that woman, and all the pain she gave.

### **SUNSET BEACH**



*Public Domain*

## My Father in the Mountains

By Ilse Johnson

**M**y father always had a certain fascination with snow leopards. As a child, he would tell me stories about them, sometimes fact and sometimes fiction. He would tell me about their habitats, their behaviors, then of their power, their magics. Often the two would become one story, and I could hardly separate the truths from the tales. It was his dream to see one in the wild, he'd say while tucking me into bed, to travel to their home in the mountains.

He was also an artist, often bringing his visions of the cats to life with stunning realism. There was a painting of a snow leopard hanging in every room of my childhood home, usually right next to a portrait of me. I was his second favorite subject to paint. I would sit with him for hours, giggling and posing as he admired me through a finger-made lens. When I married my husband, Michael, part of my father's gift to us was a beautiful portrait of our house nestled in the valley of two white mountains, a leopard asleep on the wrap-around porch, its tail flicking lazily in the painted sunlight. It still hangs in our dining room as a prized possession.

He was the kind of father who kissed my bandaids, changed his voice for stories, played catch with my brother, danced with my mom, never seemed to run out of things to do, made something up when he inevitably did, always knew what to say, who loved with his whole body.

He was as fascinating to me as the cats were to him.

When he was seventy-two, my father suffered a stroke in his right brain. Overnight, he lost his speech, his mobility, his painting. His vision went blurry first, in turn causing severe headaches. My mother called me from the hospital, where he stayed for nearly a week, showing little improvement.

After his release, he and his hospital bed moved into our guest room.

Our house was both bigger and closer to the hospital than my parents', and Michael could do more heavy lifting than my mother, so the decision was made that he would stay with us. Two nurses assisted his move, Katy and Emil. Katy explained that she would be making stops twice a week to check vitals and monitor his condition while Emil would visit every other day to help with medication, cleaning him, and any other housekeeping that we were not able to do. I'm sure she said more, but through the cotton in my ears I didn't catch it. The rushing in my head drowned out everything else. Michael stood nodding at my side, arm reassuringly around my hips.

It was a shock every time I saw him afterwards. How could my father, who was always so much larger than life, look so helpless, so small? It had aged him years. His skin fell in soft wrinkles, more noticeable on his left side. He could no longer walk without assistance. He could manage to control his wheelchair, but only for short periods before tiring. He couldn't speak more than mumbles, with the ideas of words rather than the words themselves. It was like he was, in a way, a baby again.

We moved a television into the guest room, keeping his favorite movies and shows playing during the day. Michael would lift him into his wheelchair and roll him to the kitchen to eat with us. We would bundle him up and go on walks together, Katy or Emil often joining if they had the time. Maintaining his hygiene was challenging, as he was embarrassed to need help with such basic functions and would often put up a weak fight.

Michael and I would take turns reading to him before bed, holding up options and letting him pick. When he didn't want a book, we would tell him stories, talking about our jobs or friends, that we are thinking of getting a dog or doing renovations in the basement. My mother would bring his clothes, packaged casseroles, and baked goods whenever she visited. Often she would stay with us for days at a time, reluctant to leave him, leaving only to bring stuff from their house or for groceries. The first month passed this way, slowly, syrupy, all of us adjusting to our new lives.

His seventy-third birthday passed halfway through his second month with us. My brother and his family flew in from Denver. Katy and Emil drove from the hospital together and made quick work of their tasks. My mom made a red velvet cake. We spent it quietly

and together, opening his gifts for him around his bed. My niece had drawn him atop the back of a snow leopard, a masterpiece done in a four year old's scrawl. My father smiled, mumbled what we had grown to know was thank you, and gestured to the wall above the TV. We tacked it there and he stared at it for the rest of the night.

A week after that my mom brought with her a canvas, a box of paint, and an easel built to sit on a lap. He was hesitant, but we encouraged him to try his old passion. "Painting would be good for him," Katy told us. "It's smart to begin introducing activities that require fine motor skills, allowing him to build some strength back in his left side." I watched him balance a brush in his left hand as best he could. My mother squeezed some paint onto a paper plate. I watched him make one shaky stripe before exiting the room.

I had just finished making myself a drink when I heard a crash and a shout from his room. My mother said something sharply, and he yelled again. She left the room holding the art supplies and whispered, "Not today." He never painted again.

I was sitting with him one night during the fourth month of his stay. It had been raining all week and he had taken to hot baths and stretching to keep his joints from getting stiff. His health had declined in the last few weeks. Katy had begun ending her visits with a sympathetic, "Any day now."

I was editing an article for work when my father made a sound. I looked up, pushing my glasses onto my head. He was smiling.

"Tell me a story," he whispered, clearer than he had spoken since he arrived. I was shocked to hear his voice, his old voice.

"What would you like to hear?"

"The leopards."

So I told him about the leopards. I described their mountains—*rocky and cold, capped with glittering snow so white it became a mirror for the sun*—the Himalayan air—*crisp and fresh, biting its way into your lungs only to steal itself back out*—and the cats themselves —*as graceful as they are powerful, built to disappear, inspiring their wisdom over*

*the peaks and valleys they protect. I told him the same story he had always told me, spinning his words around my tongue, hoping they reached his ears in the same manner they had always reached mine. If one ever chooses to show itself to you, drop to one knee and be still. If you show it respect, it will approach you and press its cold nose to your cheek, blessing you with the power of the mountains, and to give you the courage to stand up and keep going until you spiral your way into the clouds. Trust in yourself that you will know the way home.*

It hurt me to say these words to my dying father. I could barely get through the ending, my throat was so thick with unshed tears. The words seemed so far away when our roles were reversed, when he was sitting over my small body asking for tales of snow cats and magic. They were fantastical and comforting then. Now, they felt like razors in my stomach, cutting their way down my throat and catching my heart in the process.

He moved his hand across the pale sheets to grab mine with all the strength his body could provide. I reciprocated with both of mine, enveloping the frail limb and bringing it to my mouth.

“My Claire,” he smiled, stretching a thumb to wipe away a loose tear. “My snow leopard. So beautiful.”

I returned his hand to the bed but didn't let go. I held it tightly, then gently, watching him breathe through blurry eyes until he fell asleep, until the sky out the window was nothing but ink, until his chest depressed and never rose again, the soft smile never leaving his face.

In the days after his death, my house felt like a hollowed tree, the spirit and soul sucked out, leaving only the dusty bark and termites. The hallways were windy, drafty, too empty without the extra bodies. I was not dissimilar to the house. I had gotten so used to my father's presence in my house, to the nurses making their stops, to the space they filled. We had grown close to Katy and Emil and missed them dearly. It was difficult to watch them clean out his room, and I often didn't, hiding under my covers until the monster was locked away in my closet (I told them eventually that I regretted these actions, that they were childish and stupid. “You have nothing to apologize for,” Katy told me through a hug.

Emil squeezed my shoulder and said “It’s important to let yourself feel your grief for all that it is.”) There was a pit growing inside me, increasing in size with every phone call, every letter, every I’m Sorry. My eyes felt heavy, my body shook for three days, eating was a chore. I couldn’t go in the guest room anymore. The indents of the hospital equipment were still too deep in the carpet. His books were still piled by the TV on the dresser. My niece’s drawing was still tacked to the wall. His shirts still hung in the closet. Michael did his best to console me, and I love him dearly for it. I was depressed, irritable, angry, sometimes causing me to snap at his hands while they fed me.

He worked with my brother and mother to do most of the funeral planning. I did what I could, but I often found the actions to be too much. His death had hit me much harder than I had thought it would, having seen its approach while he was in our care. The knowledge that I would never see him again didn’t fully settle for weeks.

His funeral was simple, held at the mortuary one town over. Some of his art stood on easels, arranged from oldest to newest, the last an unfinished portrait of me and Michael for our fifth wedding anniversary, painted on old wood from the house we bought together, the house he spent his final months in. I am unsure how long I stood in front of it, time passed strangely that day. I looked into my own eyes and tried to find my father anywhere in them. I could barely find myself. It always struck me when my father would paint my portrait. The girl on the canvas was me, but she always managed to seem ten times the woman I was, more confident and beautiful and sure of her place in the world. Now, the sketch on the wood seemed like a stranger.

Michael had written a eulogy, and he managed to read it gracefully. His hand settled onto my thigh when he returned, warm and reassuring. Others spoke—my brother, my aunt, his best friend from college. People laughed, people cried. It was all very beautiful and impossible.

I sat staring at the silver urn long after everyone else had cleared the room. My mother sat with me as long as she could bear. She squeezed my shoulder gently and said “You did all you could, Claire. He was so grateful, I know it.”



Eventually, I worked up the courage to join the rest of the living. Michael was waiting by the door, talking with Katy and my uncle, who was telling a story about my father when they were boys—when they broke the windshield of their family’s car while playing a game my father invented called “Scooter Baseball”—gesturing with his hands as he went. I tucked myself into Michael’s side and listened. Hearing it brought a smile to my face. Katy was laughing. I glanced back at the unfinished portrait and thought the girl in it looked a little more like me.

---

On my thirty-eighth birthday, as old as my father was when he had me and nearly five years after he died, I saw a snow leopard. I went to their home, their mountains, just like he had always wanted to.

Michael and I were both outdoorsy people, spending afternoons hiking and weekends camping, but this expedition was something far out of our leagues. We spent years preparing—planning, saving, training. The Himalayan Mountains were not to be underestimated.

*Rocky and cold, capped with glittering snow so white it became a mirror for the sun.*

We flew into Nepal and spent two days in the city before we started climbing. It was difficult to find anyone willing to go as deep into the mountains as we were hoping, but with enough asking, we were pointed in the right direction. We were led up the mountains by two guides—Dache and Kipu, brothers. Dache spoke no English and Kipu did his best. He told me we would be the thirteenth tour they led, proclaiming that the number thirteen was considered holy in their culture, the highest level of heaven, and that our tour would be blessed with good fortune. It was a very special number to them. They were excited and ambitious, packs and poles comically large as we set off together.

That hike was the hardest thing I had ever done. The air had thinned and the sun was bright, but we pushed on. Dache and Kipu spoke to each other in quick Tibetan. Michael was panting next to me. I was quiet in the cold, the wind cutting into my cheeks, my jaw stiff and heavy.

*Crisp and fresh, biting its way into your lungs only to steal itself back out.*

After a few hours, we had reached a small peak. Dache stopped us, saying through Kipu that we were taking a rest. I was glad for it. My legs ached and my throat burned. I was careful to take sips of water so as to not make myself sick—Michael took a large swallow and I swatted his arm. Kipu handed us some dried fruit and Michael pulled granola bars out of his pack. We ate quietly, resting on rocks. Dache pulled out binoculars and scanned the upcoming mountains. Kipu told us that we were almost to where they seemed to have the best luck spotting leopards.

Suddenly, Dache gasped, exclaiming something in Tibetan and pointing excitedly. Kipu jumped to his feet, pulling out his own pair. “Heung chituwa,” he whispered. “Snow leopard.”

I jumped to my feet and scanned the cliffs with my binoculars until I saw it.

It was more beautiful than I could have imagined.

It had emerged from behind a neighboring cliff, stalking until it found flat ground. It crouched low and began working its way through something furry. “Lucky to see eat,” Kipu said. “Very rare show.”

I lowered my binoculars. It was close enough to see without them. Its coat was the perfect color to make it invisible, the perfect blend of silvers, whites, and browns. I could understand why they were the subject of so many of my father’s paintings. The cat was a work of art.

*As graceful as they are powerful, built to disappear, inspiring their wisdom over the peaks and valleys they protect.*

It raised its head from its prey, looking directly at our party—directly at me. It stole the air from my lungs. Even from this distance its eyes glowed proud yellow. I was frozen in my spot. Its gaze was hypnotizing, powerful. We stared at each other, me and that cat, not knowing who would look away first. I felt its heavy glare, its judgment, it could see right through me, stretching to the parts of me that only one other gaze could ever reach.

*If one ever chooses to show itself to you, drop to one knee and be still.*

I saw him there in that cat, my father in the mountains. I smiled, then laughed, then cried.

The leopard stood, finished with its meal, swiped its tongue around its stained jaw, and left. I had never been a particularly religious or spiritual person, but while Kipu and Dache spoke a prayer of thanks, I offered one too. It was intended for the mountains, but I hoped my father heard it too, wherever he was. I hoped he sent that leopard to us, or that it really was him, soul turned into what he loved most.

I turned and embraced Michael, he laughed and squeezed me. I missed my father terribly, more in that instant than I ever had since his death. I wished he could have been here with me.

*If you show it respect, it will approach you and press its cold nose to your cheek, blessing you with the power of the mountains, and to give you the courage to stand up and keep going until you spiral your way into the clouds.*

Kipu slotted himself against my back, wrapping his arms around the both of us. Dache joined him only a moment later. The four of us stood, embracing and laughing. Dache shouted, his *whoop* bouncing around the valley.

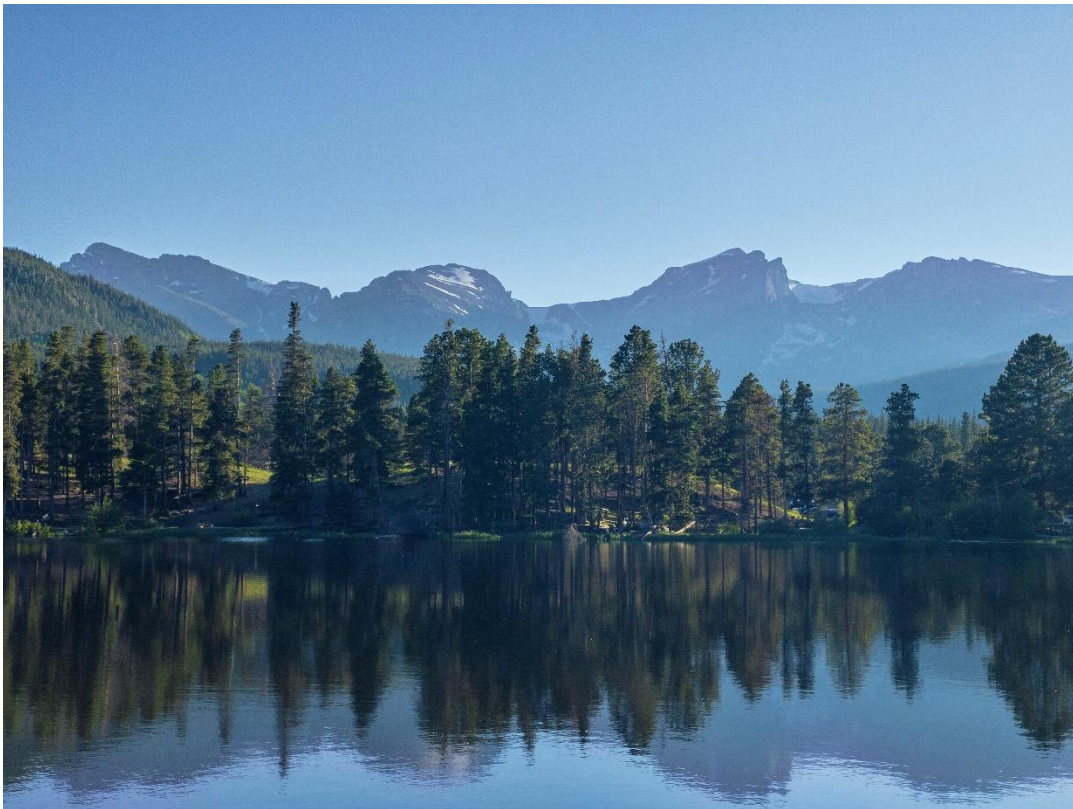
“Told you,” Kipu said, pulling away. He held up his fingers, one on one hand and three on the other. “Blessed.”

We separated and collected our things. I shouldered my pack to continue the trek, having decided as a group to finish the trail before turning back. Spirits were high and moods were lifted. Despite the sadness and exhaustion in my body, I felt strangely light. I hoped my father could see me and was proud. I thought of what he’d say if he were here, how he would have reacted. It was his dream to see snow leopards in their home, and I was overwhelmingly happy that I got the chance. This was all for him, because of him.

*Trust in yourself that you will know the way home.*

And up on that mountain surrounded by quiet and snow, the sun on my face was warm.

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK



*Ana Casper*

## INDEX OF AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

SABRINA ARASSI.....	28; 55; 124
JACOB BORRE.....	95-109
DANE BUELOW.....	78-85
ISABELLA BURKARD.....	13-16; 29-31; 58-60; 86-87; 114-115
ANA CASPER.....	12; 24; 27; 31; 37; 45; 47-50; 60; 68; 77; 94; 109; 113; 115; 124; 125; 139
LIAM DOOLEY.....	38-45
FRIDAROSE HAMAD.....	25-27
ILSE JOHNSON.....	131-139
ALEYNA KARACAN.....	90-92
ELLIE KHULMANN.....	23-24
EVAN KUHN.....	22; 54; 65; 116-120
JANAE MANCHESKI.....	17; 88; 94
MADELINE MARFOE.....	35; 110-113; 121-123
VICTORIA MAZURKIEWICZ.....	32-34; 61-65
WILLIAM MILES.....	56-57
EMILIANO MORENO.....	18-21
HARRISON SCHNEIDER.....	21; 68-76
MICHAEL R. SMITH.....	17; 46; 66-67; 77
MAX STERN.....	6-11; 36-37; 88-89; 126-130
THLEE XIONG.....	51-54; 93

