



Inkblots



Vol. III

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

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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! Thank you also to anyone else otherwise 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!

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better than sex

by Elizabeth Rhinehart

- I. a new book
sensually thick pages,
the words so new I can
almost smell the ink,
sharp in the front of my nose,
the text dancing
as the chapter titles flirt,
the margins coy and flattering

- II. freshly laundered clothes
warm from the dryer
begging for someone
to experience every thread
and feel, as it releases,
that gloriously clean warmth,
the delicate scent of detergent

- III. the first bite of a fresh breakfast sandwich
carnal pleasure wells
in the watering of my mouth
as I begin to chew,
the bagel giving way
to the salt and fat
of bacon, egg, and cheese

IV. the sunrise in the city
visible as the sky lightens,
the slow, teasing,
revelation of the self,
the buildings glowing
as though limned in fire
or gilded with gold,
a feast for the eyes to drink in

V. a pot of tea
pure indulgence of time
in the boiling, the steeping,
and intimate knowledge
of those warm curves
as I pour that nectar
into my cup,
waiting to be filled



MINI MANDALA
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vastharyudu)

In My Dreams

By Alex Schwabe

The land of my dreams.
Nothing is familiar to me until dreamed,
cemented in my mind as a place worth visiting.

I'm at the mall now,
why am I wearing roller skates?
Skidding towards the railing,
fearing the fall,
but never quite getting there

but the fear is always there,
settles like cement on my shoulders,
surely weighing me down on my
roller skates

and now I'm at the
discontinued Disney store,
I can almost smell the carpet,
like feet and magic
(and of course magic has a smell,
haven't you ever dreamed about it?)

Chlorine is the strongest smell
for now I am in a water ride
surrounded by familiar characters

I once read about
nostalgic liminal spaces,
and that would explain
Mickey Mouse,
Shrek,
Blue
awkwardly standing there

as I drown
because I
fell off the vehicle,
water rushes over me again and again,
softer than I expected
but I'm struggling to breathe,
but I can breathe
(because this is a dream)
but I also can't breathe
(because this is a dream).

And I always fear water slides
because the ladder only goes up.

Stuck sliding down the water slide,
inevitably inhaling all the water,
the white noise of the water
drowning
out anything else.

But I love my dreams.
I love to see places that no longer exist
and places that will never exist.
And I remember the time I told my sister
I knew I was dreaming,
that the escalator scared me,
and she held my hand

And it was okay.

I am the architect,
the god,
the beta tester,
the servant.

When am I in control of my dreams?

And I love to write down my dreams
because they're the only locations worth talking about.

Why talk about a boring old Target

when we could talk about a 50 story Target
with an infinite toy section,
500 video games,
and Spider-Man?

Imagine if I could build worlds like this
all the time,
let myself imagine freely

Like I would with my sister.
We'd play games and the
house would be infinite.

50 stories with
malls
and water parks
and a Target.

Farrington's Farm

By Lia Smith-Redmann

The caped figure and lean, muscular greyhound stood at the end of a long, slanted drive, looking up at the place where the house should be. White fog obscured everything but the fence posts on either side of her and the slurry of muck that rutted the earth. She wavered on her little patch of grass. The greyhound lowered its nose to the ground and took a few courageous steps forward, then looked back at her with the uprightness of a knight.

The woman stepped forward and her blue boots, velvet from toe to heel, sank squelching into four inches of mud. As they climbed their way towards the house, the wire fences on either side continued to unfold, and she couldn't be sure if they were on the outside or inside of the pen.

The first figure emerged out of the gloom on their right side: a noiseless cow, her knotted head still, her lashed eyes unblinking. A few moments later the hound's head swiveled to the left, and a hundred thumping hooves pounded the ground beyond their view. Suddenly a herd of sheep pushed each other against the fence, gnashing.

By the time she reached the front porch, and the barn and nearby trees faded into view, mud had splattered her pressed pants and the embroidered edge of her cape. A gray fox peered at them from under the awning of a dying pear tree, then bolted under the house.

She admired the porch decor: a horseshoe, a dead rabbit, a bundle of clanking cowbells,



FOXGLOVE
McKenna Fox

and a woven wreath of garlic, cedar, thistle, and rosemary. She knocked.

The cragged woman that answered had long gray hair that hung like a web, and she wore her hex bags and casting bones on the outside of her shawl, in the traditional way. It was much more fashionable to wear them on the inside of one's cape, thought Ida.

“Miss Eudice Farrington?” she said. “Ida Whitney. I'm here on behalf of the Bureau of Witchery and Coven Security.”

The old woman regarded her. “How'd you get past the gate?”

Ida smiled thinly. “I'm here because it seems you have not received the summons that we sent you.”

“Mmbah.” The woman shrugged. Ida waited to be invited in for tea or tonic.

Eventually she continued,

“Are you aware, then, that you've been charged with ritualising in a coven with which you are not registered, animal sacrifice without a permit, the summoning of demons blacklisted by the Office of the Witches' Register under section 601 of the Black Book of Witchery, cursing innocents with intention to cause infertility—a Grade A Malpractice—and interfamilial violence, among other things?”

The gray fox reemerged inside. Eudice guffawed. “Oh come now, I can't be responsible for Nixus' actions!”

“Perhaps that was the case fifty years ago. Unsanctioned familiar-on-familiar violence is considered a very serious offense.” Ida paused. “There's also a witness that seems to think you've buried a body in your yard.”

“What kind of witch doesn't have bodies in her backyard?”

“So if Abbaroth here searched the grounds...” The greyhound's skin twitched as he stared down the fox through the screen. “He won't find Bekka Jameson of the Northwestern

Tallpine Coven under your sunflower patch?”

Eudice shifted. Her spectacles and beads clinked. “Back in my day, witches with dog familiars weren’t considered fit to practice the craft.”

“Well, Miss Farrington, times have changed.” Ida withdrew a parchment from her cape.

Off the hag’s look, she added, “It’s not cursed.”

But the woman wouldn’t touch it. Her fox sniffed the paper. Ida announced, “This a warrant for the immediate confiscation of your grimoire. Section two outlines the warrant for the banishment of your familiar—”

“You can’t do that!”

“You’ll find in section three the warrant for the burning of your apothecary—”

“It isn’t right!” Eudice cried. “You weren’t even alive during the Witches’ War of ‘65, and if you don’t leave this porch right now I’ll wallop you with a curse so bad—!”

“You’d add assault of a federal witch to your nine accounts of illegal witchery? Of course, this could all be avoided if you come with me. I have a broom by the front gate. What’ll it be, Eudice? Would you like to join the future? Or would you prefer to see your world go up in flames?”

Later, as Ida whisked away on her broom, the veil of fog glowed orange, like the light off a candle.

Yukki-Onna

By Harrison Schneider

My skin is pale, my body's frail,
And wherever I wander, it hails.
The snow that will not go away,
It holds my body in its sway.

For many years, I've lived in snow.
And despite my wishes, it will not go.
And from this mountain I desire,
The pleasant warmth of a cabin fire.

I long for a gentle human touch.
On my face, it would mean so much.
Not even a lover, just a friend, would do.
Or just someone that I could talk to.
When I was young, I danced and twirled.

I was a carefree little girl.
And then one day my temperature dropped.
And for some reason, that would not stop.

And in bed, I was sick and tired.
And I was told I would soon expire.

They soon left, without a trace.
And icy tears fell down my face.

I long for the warmth that I have lost.
On top of this mountain of endless frost.

Is someone there? If so, please,
I beg for help, and I yearn for peace

a conversation with vera

By Isabella Burkard

we said the words “spinal tap” four times.
you had a dream about me.

“i’m mostly bedbound now”

your mind has wanted death for so long;
i never thought it would be your body that let it in.
i don’t say that.

“i don’t think i’m ever going to get better”

hope feels too patronizing to say.
we've hoped before and it only led to this moment.

but i still hope.
maybe foolishly.

"I keep deteriorating"

i'll visit in may when finals are over.
because i am lucky enough to have finals instead of more pain.

i've been away too long.
you showed me your blood half a decade ago

but it feels like longer.
there was intimacy in our terror.

"i learned about new kinds of dinosaurs"



NARCISSISTIC REFLECTION

McKenna Fox

El Picaflor

By Noelle Gómez

Lita craves pimientos con sal in the middle of the night. She'll sit up in bed, her pillow hair wild, hands fluttering like hummingbird wings, telling me there's a sea of saliva in her mouth.

"It's okay, 'ma," I'll tell her. I brace myself for the coldness of the wood floor on my warm, bare feet when I go and get her the snack that she loves. "Dame un segundo."

But tonight feels different. There's a stillness to the air even though she's writhing. Lita's eyes are glossy moon-beaming pearls, and for a second, I am scared that she's going to die.

But she doesn't. Not yet, anyway. Instead, she just starts crying like a child, an elderly baby in a cream satin nightgown, fingers past her lips, feeling for her teeth.

I try to tell her that they're still all in her mouth. Her language hasn't left her just yet. But it's her greatest fear—to leave me y los dioses behind in silence—and there's nothing I can say to calm the wailing of her corazón.

Eventually, I get up and walk to the kitchen. Lita has left the window open above the sink. Outside, there are cicadas croaking. The moon is a billowing wispy shadow, a plume of candlelit smoke. The clouds part and the light blushes against the crescent carnations of Her cheeks. Un millón lifetimes ago, Her brother carved up Her body into tiny pieces and kicked Her head down a hill, where it rolled all the way up into el cielo. I beg la diosa Coyolxauhqui for guidance on how to cherish the ways in which my second mother cries, knowing in my heart that She is all too familiar with the sound.

When the knife slices into the pimiento's skin, the scent of mud and earth seeps out onto the cutting board como sangre. Inside, there's un pimientito, a carbon copy of its mother, growing from

the inside of her red pepper belly. I hold its small body in my hands, lift it to la luna, giving Her a gift. In another life, I would have had my own human heart sacrificed just to know of Her existence.

When I return to Lita, she's fallen asleep. Her cheeks are damp and her mouth is wide like a full moon. I don't climb back into bed. I don't want the tilt of the mattress to wake her. An ache in my stomach keeps me standing for a while, watching her sleep.

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The first time Lita spoke to me, I was stuck inside Mami's tummy, fluttering como un picaflor searching for los flores más dulces. Her insides had twisted themselves into thick vines around my neck, and despite the lack of oxygen, I was determined to come out. Lita would later say that I sang un río de sangre to her y los dioses from between Mami's legs, and that was how she knew I was like her. Mami would say that as I got older, I never liked anything touching my nape; that any time she wanted my hair to be long and sleek against my back, I would fuss and rage, twist it up and out of the way on my head—and that was how she knew I wasn't just fully her's.

To coax me out, Lita laid Mami on the floor of our kitchen and lit rose scented candles after undressing her. She had shut all the windows and barricaded the doors so that the smoke would help Mami relax, como un nube de misterio. When everything was settled and still, she reached inside the bloody silk of Mami's skin and hummed ancient hymns. My head emerged into her palms covered in a veil of salty wax like a pimienta wanting to feel the lick of her tongue, her language.

Mami cried out in pain, and I was born without any.

She would later tell me she felt Coatlicue take hold of her hands and help pull me through before the ambulance got there, that when she opened the windows after it was done to release the smoke into the sky, the yard was littered with feathers, a gift from la diosa for me, and that's how she knew we would be okay.

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En la mañana, I make huevos con tomate for Lita and me. The tomatoes have been sitting in the sun on the kitchen counter for nearly half a week. They were a gift from our next-door neighbor, Helena, simply because she is so sweet. But whenever there's fresh produce in the house, I have to remind myself to eat it. Even then, it has most likely already been claimed by the warmth of Huitzilopochtli's hands reaching down from the sky with the same violence He showed Coyolxauhqui when She came for Their mother.

When Lita joins me en la cocina, she picks up the cooling cup of tea that I have left at her place at the table. She sits down with her legs tucked underneath her. The undersides of her eyes have gone soft like the inside of the sun-ripened tomato. The wrinkles across her cheeks stretch out like the sun's rays as she takes her first sip. Her hair is as gray as the early morning light.

When I place the plate in front of her, she scoffs at the sight of it, says she isn't hungry. Says she only has un estómago in the nighttime.

"Necesitas comer," I tell her. "What will the doctor say if you go to him on an empty stomach again?"

"No voy a ir," she says. "You can't make me."

"Abuelita," I sat across from her. "That isn't what we talked about."

"No recuerdo."

Despite the tightness in my own tummy, which hasn't yet gone away, I start eating loudly in front of her. I do my best to ignore it, hoping it's just my hunger reminding me that I need to eat too. I think about adding más sal, wondering if it will make her lengua llora and her mouth run wild with appetite like it does when she's asleep and no longer in pain. Sometimes, if I do what I want her to, she'll forget her own stubbornness.

To my luck, after a moment, Lita's tummy rumbles; she reaches for her plate and starts eating. Afuera, the clouds pass in the sky, and the sun blooms into the room.

She notices my eye.

"Tezcatlipoca spoke to me," she says, and all I can do is hide my knowing smile behind every bite, thanking the great cielo for sending her the hunger of His jaguars.

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Lita spends the rest of the day in and out of sleep. She murmurs in old Spanish, *una idioma vieja se llama Nahuatl*. She calls out a *los dioses* in her native tongue, drooling out of the corner of her mouth. I think about crawling into bed with her, to listen as the hummingbird inside her stills its fluttering wings in her mind, *en sus sueños*, and she tells me the stories she seems to forget when she's awake. Instead, I kiss her forehead and tidy up the house.

It's late afternoon when Mami finally gets home. She slams the door shut, drops all of her bags onto the floor, and throws her keys onto the kitchen table in a flash of purple lightning.

"Ma," I say softly. "Lita is sleeping."

"She's fine," she says back, pulling off her shoes and tossing them onto the rug. "I have to take her to her appointment soon, anyways."

My stomach hardens into a rock. I nearly fall over. "How was work?"

Mami gives me a look and lets out a puff of air. I try not to feel guilty for asking. She looks beyond tired; her uniform is covered in grease, and her brown hair is falling out of her bun in sweaty spirals. When she moves past me, she smells like oil. Like metal.

"I'm taking a nap," she says, almost like she's trying to convince herself that she will actually fall asleep. "Wake me in an hour."

I watch her go into her room, glancing down the hall to the bedroom where Lita's frail body rests. She shuts the door gently, the softest I've ever seen her.

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I wake Mami up an hour later. She sits up in bed, rubs her temples, and says she doesn't know when they'll be back. I pretend I don't hear the *if* in her sentence. I don't tell her it feels like my stomach is going to split in half.

When I wake up Lita, I take my time getting her ready. I brush the sticky hair back off of her forehead, press my nose into hers. She holds *mis mejillas en sus manos*, which are dry and wrinkled like the crop circles of fields in which she used to work, thumbing *los vegetales separados del tallo*. They tremble like hummingbird wings against my face as she holds them up. *Me dice algo que no puedo entender*. I tell her I love her.

When they're gone, the house is quiet. I can hardly stand it.

The fluttering feeling in my belly that's been bothering me all day turns into sharp, static pain. There seems to be something alive inside my stomach, trying to punch its way out. I go into the bathroom and start running the hot water. Mami would kill me, scream at me that warm water is a luxury we can't afford right now, but I can't bring myself to care. I go into the cabinet under the sink and grab every bar of soap. I get a knife from the kitchen and start cutting them up like Lita's peppers, starting at the base and then cutting their bodies into long slivers. The familiarity of the push of the blade is enough to make me sick.

Once the soap is in the water, I take off my shirt and stare at myself in the mirror. My chest has started to swell—my breasts ripening like tomatoes in the warm afternoon sun. I try not to cry. My whole body trembles. I don't want to go through this alone.

When I step out of my shorts, there is blood on the inside of my underwear for the very first time. A smear of brown like the petals *de la piel de una cebolla*. I know what it means before I understand what it is. I toss my underwear into the trash so I don't have to look at it and step into the tub.

The water is so hot it makes my skin feel like soft wax. I bring my knees to my chest and press my chin into the space between them. There's so much soap that the water has turned into a swirl of purple and yellow and pink, glittering like the moon on a foggy night.

In the water, I see Her for the first time with my own eyes. Mother Coatlicue stares back at me, her twin snake heads slithering in the swirl of lavender and vanilla. She tells me She's been waiting for the hummingbird inside me to take flight, that the feathers that impregnated Her are passed down, even to all her human daughters. To Lita, to Mami, now to me. That it is our duty to give birth. That I am not alone. The snakes of her hands slither around my wrists, my ankles, my stomach. They settle the blood in my tummy. Her tongue becomes my tongue.

I know what She means when She tells me to let go.

Mornings

By Elizabeth Rhinehart

On my own, each moment is by design,
the sun rising, the Earl Grey slowly steeping.

I am deeply joyous to start the day
in my own manner, the way that is pleasing to me.

There is crisp air, birdsong, and above all else,
quiet in the moments before the rest of the world wakes.

What is a sacred ritual but the time we spend?
These mornings are the offerings for my temple,
the affirmation of worthiness, the space to breathe,
the refuge against the days' immutable regard.

In my parents' house, I become a hermit.
Every sound feels cacophonous, unbearably
intrusive, a forced breaking of fast.

There is no peace here,
unconsciousness a bare substitute,

Even that façade is dispelled on Sundays.
There is no recourse from these familial expectations.

My own rituals are superseded by the rigidity

of an 8:30 service, the awkwardness of fellowship
with people I no longer know, kneeling at an altar
that has become only a piece of wood.

I am exhausted by this pretense of belief,
obedient smiles and dresses the boundaries
of this sparingly allocated space,
confined and suffocating.

What would it take to coexist?
What cost would be exacted from me in return
for space in that sacred time?
Biting words maybe, or worse,
the pregnant silence of words unsaid,
ready to be birthed in bloody rage
at an anticipated but unknown time.

Why would I let that fear hold my heart?
I will hold my mornings close, unsaid.

Want

By Ashley Hale

One of the first stories that I can remember hearing over and over is the tale of sin entering the world. My mother read me the Genesis passage as I laid curled up under my floral covers. I made snake and apple-themed crafts in Sunday School, and on my living room bookshelf there was a creation story picture book and a pile of Biblical figures coloring pages.

As a child, I was obsessed with these images depicting the first few days of life. I traced my stubby fingers over lush green bushes and the glowing sun, finding revelry in the thought of all animals living together in harmony. I loved the thought of eating as much fruit as my heart could handle, its juices running down my neck freely and not having to worry about them staining my dress. Of no homework and fears of the future. Of the weather always being perfect for a swim. Never thinking about Adam. Of looking at Eve.

In these illustrations, Eve is gorgeous, adorned with wavy brunette locks that are long and luscious enough to strategically conceal her breasts. In these illustrations, she is not a real person. She is everyone's mother. She is a metaphor. She is the root of all evil. She is beautiful.

She is looked at and talked about. Did she ever run, laugh, sing, or dance? If she did any of those things, her hair would sway away from her bosom, and then she is too indecent for anyone to look at. And if she cannot be looked at, then she is no longer interesting.



AUGUST FLAMES

Helena Kobloff

I don't believe that rule to be true- that is how I imagine the men who create all this art surrounding Eve's tale view her. I suppose Eve brought this judgment upon herself through her want. If she never wanted to eat the fruit, then sexualization would not exist and men would not view women in this way, and she wouldn't have to cover herself up and then she could be viewed as a whole person.

I suppose it is also Eve's fault that men can't view a woman as a whole person. Eve wanted knowledge, and that is why every bad thing in the world exists. Please don't tell the others I've been thinking this, but if God is loving, why did he put that fruit there in the first place? Sometimes when I get really carried away with these thoughts, I wonder if I would bite the fruit just to spite God. To take something that a man says I am not allowed to have and to say that I can have it.

Me and Anna talk about things like this after Wednesday night Bible study. We talk about whether Eve biting the apple was a completely bad thing and if we would bite it too to get away from a world of only men and to have as much knowledge as God.

I don't like it when new boys join our Bible study group because they always take so much interest in Anna. It makes my heart tick because Anna is not just someone beautiful to look at- she is a complete person. She plays bass guitar, thrifts old t-shirts, runs track, and carries around a journal to write poetry in. I catch the boys sneaking glances at her, especially when she takes her sweatshirt off and pulls her dark, wavy hair into a loose ponytail. She always wears a lacy black camisole under her sweatshirt, and Pastor Russo calls her out for it, saying he doesn't want his daughter distracting the boys. When this happens there is always a fleeting moment where the boys rake their eyes over Anna's body, like they are trying to catch the last drop of sweet ice cream before the scoop melts. They peer at the dip where her neck meets her collarbone. I know she has a freckle there. But as Anna pulls her sweatshirt back over her head,

she doesn't look at any of the boys. She looks at me.

The boys like Anna, but they seem to like her less the more she talks. The more she asserts her knowledge of the creeds and the scriptures, the more she pushes back on opinions they state like facts, and the more she sits with one leg hanging over the couch armrest, the less they gaze at her. Me and Anna sit next to each other on the blue couch every week. Sometimes a lot of people come to Bible Study, and we have to fit four people on the couch. On those days, we sit with our sides pressed against each other, nerves buzzing. She always tells me her hands are cold and she needs to hold mine under the blanket. Pastor Russo must honestly think his daughter has abnormally cold hands, or this is just how girl friends are, because he definitely sees us doing this and never says anything about it. He joked that Emma and Connor needed to wait for marriage when they held hands, and when he realized Jason and Ryan were holding hands behind a pillow, he issued a sermon about the dangers of homosexuality. It was hard to sit through.

Me and Anna usually stay and clean up the youth lounge after Bible Study. The boys go out to play kickball in The Fellowship Hall, the adults go to supervise, and the girls go to watch the boys. She usually sweeps, twirling around an old broom as her microphone and crooning out the lyrics to a 70s disco tune. When she moves like this, her dark locks fly around her body, and I am lost in the movement. This must have been what Eve looked like when she danced. She is as beautiful as any illustration of Eden, but she is better because she is full of life and real and flawed and smiling at me from across the room as she rolls her body to the drum's beat. Does she realize I am staring? Is this a sin? I know that it is, but I don't understand how it could be. If God didn't want me to be in awe of her beauty, then why did he put her in front of me? Maybe this is the same argument the serpent made to Eve when she first laid eyes on the forbidden fruit.

Anna must sense what I am thinking because she leans her broom against the brick wall

and steps over to where I am wiping down the snack counter. She props one elbow up on the hard linoleum and leans in to study my facial expression. Her sweet hand raises to my cheek, and she uses it to tuck a fallen strand of hair behind my ear before her words bubble out in whispered giggles: “You seem a little frozen over here. Are you alright?” And in that moment, I am so taken aback by her here-ness and the proximity of her of her face and the hazel flecks in her eyes that my heart forgets how to function and I don’t think when I say, “I am glad Eve bit the apple”. Somehow, she stays right there and smiles at me, and I know that, despite what we have been taught, when Eve bit that apple she didn’t create sin, but rather the things that the men who created god couldn’t understand.

dyke

By Noelle Gómez

the first time I whispered the word *dyke* my lips hummed with electricity / a thousand flying dragonflies awoke from underneath the root canals of my teeth & their wings were beat / beat / beating / rattling my tongue / my language / my girlhood / & the desert sky of my mouth cried itself into a river valley.

dyke is all those years of kissing the back of my fist finally paying off / existing outside of a dream / kissing her for real / knowing how to without even trying.

dyke is the invisible language / of our eyes blinking / twinkling / mascara stained & sticky / star breath lilted the morning after / the way it makes my tongue heavy / dry & alive & manic.

dyke is knowing abuela's love for me without having to translate it in my head.

dyke is the giggles between us girls / a prayer that the pretty barista will be there to take our coffee orders / how we panic & ask for the same thing over again.

dyke is a miss-skipped stone / thrown only for it to fall / flatten the water into ripples anyway.

dyke is the loneliness of not knowing myself / of not knowing perfect Spanish / of knowing how much more the word *dyke* means to me than to you.

dyke is a larvae / crawling up from my chest cavity / a worm wriggling in the pink flesh of fresh fruit / made a home in my mouth / cocooned itself in waxed honey & warm breath / desert sky kisses / became a dragonfly that ripped its wings on the sharp ends of my teeth / veiny membranes beating with the electricity of a thousand thunderstorms against my soft pink gums /

I pray that you will come back & find it / find me.

Inside a Wandering Mind

By Helena Kohlhoff

Cracked earth,
 cracked lips,
 and a smile that hurts.
 You explore every generation—
 time doesn't seem real.
 Movies are like any history book,
 and you learn any story that comes from her mouth.
 Because you fall
 backwards
 into dreams of forget-me-nots and tumbleweeds,
breaking
 through memories like you're paid by the dozen.
"What does it mean to grow up?"
 you ask yourself,
 never wanting to know.
 The answer would be too late.
 This can't be right—
 the visceral aching that takes up half your chest.
So, you let go
 of your self
 with every breath,
 just trying to feel well enough.
 It never comes.
 You learn the cruelest mistress is time herself,
 and you ask
 far too many questions
 interrogating the idea of existing
 for her to give you what you want.
So, you prepare
 for a life of your body being a box
 holding an atrophying muscle.
 "It's no use
 to fight."
 The five words come out like a white flag
 lettering the skyline.
All you can do is hope
 someone,
 somewhere
 can read between the smoke signals.
 "How does one learn
 to love
 without needing to be loved

back?"
you ponder.
But it's not that simple,
and you know it.
If every question had an answer,
you wouldn't be here.
So, you lay,
belly up
and armor down
in the thralls of the only life you'll ever get
paralyzed by fear,
and driven by yearning
at the same exact time.



NESTING THOUGHTS
McKenna Fox

Regrets

By Isabella Burkard

“I don’t regret
what I did,
but I wouldn’t
recommend it,”

is an underutilized phrase.

Buyer’s Remorse

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

The hooded man stood at the gate, staring up at the banner that decorated it. The words read “Your Seven Deadly Desires” in gold letters, in an ancient-looking alphabet that the man somehow knew how to read just on instinct. The hustle and bustle of your typical marketplace could be heard from inside. It was a bazaar-type tented marketplace that could only be found once every century. And, miraculously, the man had just stumbled across it without even meaning to.

After taking a moment to collect himself, the hooded man stepped over the threshold, and immediately the noises that had seemed mildly distant before engulfed him in a symphony of shouting and advertising. There were only seven stalls, but each of them were big enough to be their own establishment. These stalls lined the walkway, three on each side, with a final one at the very end.

Despite all of the noise, there were not many customers. Only about ten others roamed the stalls, staring at the merchandise each vendor had to offer.

The hooded man started at the first stall, the one on his immediate left. Here stood a figure whose form was continuously shifting, so much so that he couldn't even configure what they looked like. One moment it seemed like it was a voluptuous brunette with emerald green eyes and ivory skin, the next a shorter black-haired woman with large chocolate-brown eyes and tanned skin, and one moment a muscular, long-haired blonde man with bright aquamarine eyes. When he stopped to look at the merchandise, the figure turned its gaze onto him and looked him up and down.

“What is it you seek from me?” The figure's shifting slowed, and finally settled on a tall, statuesque red-haired woman. “I am Lust. Whatever it is that you desire, I am here to provide.”

The objects at the stall included all sorts of more... intimate items that the hooded man attempted to ignore. He spotted a whip and some sort of harness among them. However, there were also bottles of things labeled “Beauty” or “Wealth” colored pink and gold respectively.

“Be wary of what I sell, stranger. It can enslave you just like,” The figure snapped its fingers in his face, “that.”

The hooded man moved quickly onwards to the next stall, which simply contained loads of food and drink. A portly man sat at this stall, eating his own merchandise, completely ignoring any would-be customers. The hooded man walked past this stall after a few glances; the salesman didn't seem bothered, continuing to gorge himself while occasionally calling out “Gluttony!” in between gulps of cheese and wine.

At the next stall were multiple salespeople, all calling out to anybody that passed by with a choir of similarly impish voices. They held up jewels, crowns, necklaces, all sorts of beautiful trinkets. One even scooped gold out of a treasure chest and tossed it up into the air, where it

landed perfectly back into the chest with a waterfall of *clink* noises.

“Greed is no trouble to you, friend!” One yelled to the hooded man. “You can be your own God. There is nothing too much for one to own!”

The hooded man slowed for a moment at this stall, but forced himself to continue. He went to the other side, where a shape could be seen hidden underneath a bunch of blankets on a high bed. It tossed and turned occasionally, but this stall was completely silent.

Its wares were simple comfort items, but they seemed to call out to the hooded man, begging him to take a rest and to calm himself.

“Who will miss you if you engage with your feelings of Sloth, stranger? Just close your eyes for a moment, nothing will happen...”

It was music to his ears; soothing and soft. But, he resisted the urge to lie down at one of the many beds or sofas. His legs seemed to ache more and more the farther he went away, until finally he broke through the hold it all seemed to have on him.

The next stall was exuding the scent of blood and smoke and fire. People were chained to the rafters of the tent, being whipped and burned with iron prods by devilish-looking creatures. As soon as the hooded man got near this stall, he seemed to enter a bubble where the horrific, ear-piercing screams of these people could be heard.

“You are frustrated with this world, stranger, we can sense it!” The creatures cried as they struck their victims again. “Come, release your Wrath upon those who deserve it!”

The hooded man’s fingers itched as he laid his eyes on one of the people, their face morphing into one that he recognized. His blood boiled just at the sight of them, and the idea of satisfying himself by spilling their blood onto the floor was incredibly alluring. But, yet again, he stopped himself from coming any nearer and continued onwards.

The second to last stall had statues of kings, celebrities, artists, other notable peoples, and

even some from the hooded man's own life. At the foot of each of them was a bottle.

"Envy is no trouble, stranger. Those who covet just want to better themselves," whispered a voice that the hooded man could not find the source of. He searched through this stall, but couldn't find the voice. And yet, he recognized it as his own. This was the most difficult stall to skip through yet, but he proceeded.

The final stall was practically empty, with one person sitting at the massive table. It was the hooded man himself, or at least it seemed to be.

He sat down at the table across from his doppelganger.

"What is it you sell?" The hooded man spoke for the first time.

"I sell nothing, friend." The voice was not his own, and yet it was still familiar.

"Why are you here?"

"Pride is the root of each of these other salesmen. Why would one engage in each, if not to believe that they are more important than everyone else? But, most of all, I have nothing to sell because I am already present in every person. I tip the scales of humanity, I wait for your weakness to show itself, then I attack."

The hooded man nodded.

"Strange, I spent all this time looking for this place, and yet I will buy nothing."

"No, friend, but you will still leave with something. Every person does, whether they want to or not. That is the nature of sin."

The two identical figures stared at each other for a long while, until eventually the lights of the bazaar dimmed and the market faded, leaving the hooded man sitting alone in the middle of an empty field. He said nothing more.

Phoebus Plucking

By JoAnne Potter

When from Olympus Zeus did spy

the fair wench Leto by and by,

he laid his head upon her thigh

and ripe with twins she did reply

but Apollo most admired.

And four days hence pride bid him go

to Python where he drew his bow,

and split its skull with a bright heigh-ho,

Apollo liked his ire.

The boy atop his fiery mount

Brought each day's sun to glad account

When too few cattle he did count

“Hermes! I hold you to account!”

Apollo did require.

But fat boy, he was not so stuck.

He had brains when out of luck.

“Here's a shell that you can pluck!”

Apollo played his lyre.

Fair Cassandra lived in windy Troy
To win her, spells he did employ
whose prophesy she did enjoy
but it was just a mean decoy.

Apollo's plan backfired.

The maid refused him recompense
“Oh Phoebus, you are just too dense!
I'll keep your gift, now hasten hence!”

Apollo played his lyre.

When, our hero at the river,
Daphne made his heart strings shiver,
Cupid reached into his quiver
and drew an arrow to deliver

so Apollo knew desire.

“O Daphne, dear, you are so fair!
Lie in my arms, your heart lay bare...”
“I'll die first—perch me in your hair.”

Apollo played his lyre.

Now laurel-trimmed, Apollo knew
he looked right buff in his new do,
so he gave Hyacinth a high yoo-hoo
and prompt the disc to him he threw,

Apollo's arm afire.

The sun-god beaned the chipper lad.
He died but grew back petal-clad.
“I really liked him; that's too bad.”

Apollo played his lyre.

--with apologies to Tennyson



CAESAR'S WARNING
McKenna Fox

Back Porch Musings

By R.E. Delikat

My coffee steams

And I pour cream

It clouds and swirls

like a song I heard

Engine turns

And worlds pass by

On the road with you

The kindest thing I ever saw

Was you and I

Braiding hair

Tumbling curls as light as air

I saw them smile

And laugh so loud

I swear the clouds could hear

My mother holds a kitten

A mewling squirming sight

Brown calf eyes and starlight skyes

Fill my day and night

The smell of mud

and growing things

And things we left behind

I think perhaps

it is good to be alive



SUNSET SAGA
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vastharyudu)

To my mother

By Elizabeth Rhinehart

An organ on Sunday mornings,
when she is here, she is present one hundred percent.

She fills the sanctuary of our house with sound,
glory imbued with purpose.

Then she leaves, and the air, so full and lively,
goes with her.

Our home has no pipes to make music without her.

An organ is a tricky thing to play,
any pianist will tell you the sound
never stays. The oldest keyboard, the widest range,
it is an instrument
of constant attention and care,
a representation of the accumulated knowledge
of thousands of years,
expertise passed down
in that powerful tradition of student and teacher.

And it is that knowledge,
the awareness that only a child truly has,
that says my mother must know everything.
I know she is infallible, because this great and terrible creature
becomes majestic in her care, nuanced
where I can find only clamor.

Monk, Mother, Mystery: The Woman in the Incomplete Portrait

By Lia Smith-Redmann

“**M**y children don’t know who I really am,” she would say. A portrait evades true revelation without the full picture—a book could be written deciphering the motifs and the moments of her life, and it would still only tell half of her story.

Utilitarian, heel-chewed jeans and dirt-smeared Sketchers sneakers, eyes that droop with the weight of her Slovene and Austrian ancestry, to which she is a stranger, and easily caramelized skin imprinted by transient freckles and sunspots—when Facebook comments from former classmates and distant cousins tell her she’s beautiful, she doesn’t believe it.

Curated like the Louvre, the books in her library fill floor-to-ceiling shelves, enshrined by their purpose: *The Natural Pharmacy* poses separately from *Picasso: A Biography*, and *Shanghai Girls* receives allocation to an eye-level shelf. Upstairs in the barn, a collection of her father's best paintings sits stacked against the wall, made phantoms by a dusty sheet—to protect them from sun bleaching, and so that she doesn't have to look at them.

During her Sturgeon Bay—"Big City"—runs, she is Daniel Craig on a James Bond mission, campaigning through selective aisles with cutthroat efficiency. She takes fast steps and sharp corners, swishing her ponytail. When at home, her wiggling toes metronome her methodical movements as her social anxiety deflates.

Worn, but practiced, slogans and phrases are like survivalist badges indicating some of the challenges she has suffered.

"I hate surprises."

"Family is not blood. You choose family."

"Death always comes in threes."

Death trained her—it turned her family into ghosts that habituated the home that she was forced to inherit. Grief and ego became weapons that her sister used to kill their sisterhood. She hates funerals and memorials—possibly because she knows them from the inside out.

The doctrines of her everyday rituals could fill a bible—one must follow the proper way to make a grilled cheese and study the intricacies of making a BLT; when shopping, always park next to the same cart corral; chocolate should be eaten after a garlicky meal. Four decades of journals, religiously tended every day, reveal the most reliable catalogue of memories: the birth of her daughter, every move—each house which she built or designed—every vacation, from hiking the grease-black lava rock at the edge of the lava flows in Hawaii when the kids were four and five, to

her middle school son surfing in Mexico, to midnight walks in Paris and biking down the Italian alps as teenagers—that undiagnosed PTSD and amnesia had taken away.

It is not her routines, however, that define her—ungirdled by relentless common sense, her craving for dance pours through her: ballet, modern, jazz, swing, tap, Hawaiian, Native American, Javanese, Irish, African, afro-Brazilian, Bharatanatyam, and Tai Chi. More than the mental liberation of writing, more than the perfectionism of drawing or painting, more than the house-rattling power of her singing alto voice, the physical shackle-shattering of choreography makes her whole.

She is whole when she sits, perched atop a stump at the edge of her East-facing bluff that spills abruptly into the valley that hides Fish Creek, where a patchwork of pines woven into the deciduous forest bends together as though meditating on a ritual to begin. Here, she addresses her sage and adoring “Inner Monk”:

“How do I connect to all people through love? What is next for me?”

She is whole even though her portrait contends itself like the battling colors of an Andy Warhol painting: a sage and a child, determined and confident, spiritual yet fastidiously grounded, loving and sometimes judgmental, and hospitable but private. Conservatism in a small-town cherry farming community, in which she grew up bookended by only two neighbors for several miles, allowed her to develop judgements about certain people: blondes are manipulative, southern drawls make a person sound stupid, conservationists drive Subarus.

Despite this, she touches with a healer’s hands—a modern witch, brewing essential oil blends for aches and ailments. The encyclopedia-like nature of her spirituality allows her to draw from the Hindu beliefs of the Bhagavad Gita, from Tibetan therapies, from the neuroscience of binaural beats, from Buddhist meditation, from massage, and from countless spiritual and philosophical thinkers and teachers. She heals to survive. She is a mother of two children and a

dozen others: the underdogs, the artists, the intellectuals, and the LGBT kids severed from the pedestal of popularity at the local school.

Facebook challenges, constantly updating technology, Fox News, CNN, reality TV, insurance companies, political abuse, climate change—this chaos, the kind that shatters her routine and timetables, she combats with cooking good food, feeding the tender rabbits hiding in the yard, maintaining her garden, and watching MASH on weeknights.

Dinner and birthday parties become showroom spectacles. Christmas Day breakfast is a live-action recount of a delicate painting delineating nobility at a Parisian table. A night out at the Door Community Auditorium becomes an art, made intense by the search for the perfect pair of earrings to match her floral black-and-white Goodwill skirt. The mosaic of these moments, made important by her touch, still do not piece together the whole picture.

The language of her love speaks through the intimacy of her details: attending her daughter's musical rehearsals to offer critiques on her dancing, driving her son throughout Door County villages to photograph for the local paper, taking time out of each and every morning to share coffee with her husband on the porch—even though it may dismantle the routine of her entire day.

She knows that how she is remembered makes up only the framework of what would be her lasting memory. Like the Mona Lisa, she lives the life of the muse of a portrait whose mystery only she knows.



APHRODITE GAZING

Helena Kobloff

girlkisser

By Noelle Gómez

I had a boyfriend for seven months.
we kissed in month five & the cold wetness
of his lips made me feel like I was a dead
corpsekissing girl. a hooked girlfish kissing a wormboy.
a girl made of russian dolls that just kept getting tinier
and tinier and tinier until the smallest girldoll version
of herself was actually just a pile of girlashes. & he tried
and tried and tried to kiss me again. he kissed as many
layers of girl as he could. but all I felt was sick.
I knew whatever I had inside me was contagious

& I didn't want him to catch it, to taste the ugliness
of girl that was growing inside me. not when he
made me laugh. not when he was such a good boyfriend.
not when he made me feel like such a good
girlfriend—not like a zombiegirl mouthing
against cold bone marrow or a drainthroat girl
o-ing down the toilet drain or a guttergirl
trying to swallow mouthfuls of warm rainwater.

but that was only

if he didn't kiss me.

Canning Jars

By Quinn Bednar

I love organization. I can't think when things are too messy. If something doesn't have a place, I rearrange everything until it has its own little spot. My books, for example.

Sometimes I have

them arranged by series and authors, sometimes by loosely defined genres. I've always loved libraries, and the way everything had its own identification. Dewey Decimal. The system used by the Library of Congress. It was intricate in a way that was also simple, if that makes sense.

Human identity is weird though. It has societal rules and norms, and when you don't fall into their strict categories you are ostracized. Even if you are outside of gender binaries, people

expect you to label yourself. They need to know exactly who you are in as few words as possible. One little word is supposed to be able to tell them everything about you. When you don't know how to explain who you are or how you feel to another person, things get messy. People hate not being able to comprehend things at a glance. They feel the need to categorize everyone and put them into little boxes so they can pretend to understand them.

My mom cans homemade tomato sauce in the fall, made with the tomatoes from our garden. It takes pretty much all day and after the sauce has boiled down and been doled into glass jars, after the jars have been sealed and left under a towel to settle, after they've finally cooled comes the most important step. Labeling. The simple act of writing "Sauce 10/15/20" on the jar determines its place in the world. Everyone understands what it means.

I'm not a jar. You can't take a sharpie to my thin tin-plated lid and give me a name and date. Mostly because I don't have a lid. I bear the curse of being a human who doesn't quite know who they are. The not knowing doesn't bother me as much as the fear of not being able to explain why I cut my hair so short when "it was so pretty long." Why I'm scared that if I use "she" pronouns in any combination with others, people will disregard the other parts of me because it is easier to call me what they see me as.

But in the end it doesn't matter. I stay silent. Not because of my own non understanding, but because I don't want to stress people with misunderstandings and confusion. But I know who I am, have secretly known for years, although I may not have known that I knew. I am me. I am Quinn. And that name might change later, to better represent me as I get a better understanding of myself, but then again, so might my label. Like I said, no sharpie on my lid.

The New Saddest Six Word Story

By Johnathan Dooley

Night shift, weekend availability, Bachelor's degree



SELF PORTRAIT

McKenna Fox

**An observation of the sun from my dorm room as it
rises at 6 AM after finishing an adrenaline-fueled essay
started at 11 PM**

By Elizabeth Rhinehart

And lo! At last, she burns across the sky,
the flames of gold reflecting off the lake.

I perch within my nest of rest and take
a moment's breath to watch the phoenix fly
her daily trek horizon bound to die.

Carnelian and ruby bleed and make
my bleary gaze a mourner in this wake.

Her travel thus begun, I now can cry.

The golden hue, this breaking of the day
a marker for my own deadlines to keep.

My desperate strength at 4, to push till dawn,
caffeine the last to hold the dreams at bay.

This vigil kept, I see the phoenix leap,
exuberance contrasted by my yawn.

911 Call...Eventually

By Reese Losieczka

Sydney was having a horrible day. First she slept past her alarm which made her late for work, and because she was late for work she couldn't stop for coffee, and since she couldn't stop for coffee she was groggy. The lecture she got from her boss when she arrived late wasn't enough to wake her up. She could hardly keep her eyes open as she sat typing at her desk for hours.

Her stomach grumbled but her boss had forbidden her to leave for her lunch break and, because she overslept, she didn't have time to pack a lunch. She glanced at her coworkers who sat in the same position as her: hunched over their keyboards, eyes blinking slowly at the computer screens.

As Sydney rushed to catch up on her work, she groaned as another advertisement interrupted her screen and she was forced to stop typing. Every time she blinked the advertisement would pause. Her eyes felt heavier than normal so she held them apart with her fingers to make the ad go by quicker.

She let out a sigh when the advertisement was finished and rubbed her dry eyes before she continued typing.

Thankful to finally be home, Sydney held up the key to her lock, but she froze when she noticed the door wasn't closed fully. With the key inches away from the lock, Sydney tried her hardest to remember whether she had locked the door or not when she left. The memories of her actions earlier in the day were fuzzy as she tried to push through the bothersome rhymes from the advertisements that had been stuck in her head all day. She *had* left in a rush so it was fully possible she had thrown the door shut behind her and not bothered to lock it.

Sydney slowly pushed the door open and peeked her head in. Her small apartment looked just as she left it. The sight didn't calm her nerves and her heart still felt as if it were about to burst from her chest like one of those gross alien movies her dad forced her watch as a kid.

As she walked in and quietly closed the door behind her, she didn't take her eyes off her cracked open bedroom door. The hairs on the back of her neck and arms raised as if warning her from something.

Sydney would have to thank her hairs when she saw a large figure move in her room through the crack.

Fight or flight kicked into action. Sydney ripped her front door open and practically flew out of her apartment. She didn't know where she was running to, but all her panicked mind knew was to get as far away from her infiltrated home as possible. The rain wasn't loud enough to cover the sound of pounding footsteps behind her. Sydney fumbled for her phone and dialed 911, her phone having trouble detecting her fingertips from the raindrops. She held the phone to her ear when it started ringing.

"Are you tired of the same, boring crime shows? Subscribe to Max for a large array of your new favorite crime shows."

"Come on!" Sydney cried. She turned down an alley and tried to hide in a nook. She couldn't run anymore. She was never good at running and that man was going to catch up to her in no time. When the ad for Max ended, Sydney sighed in relief only for it to turn into a cry of despair.

"If you or a loved one has been injured, call Gruber Law Offices now. One call...that's all!"

Sydney struggled to keep her crying quiet as she heard footstep descending down the alley. She kept her hand over her mouth and prayed the rain was loud enough to mask her trembled breathing.

She should've known her bad day wouldn't have a happy turnaround.

The rain was loud enough to cover her scream.

"911, what's your emer-"

IN COLOR
Isabella Burkard



i'm melting

By Fridarose Mohammad

Like the wet wicked witch,
Slowly, I too seep into the hard floor.
My insides match my outsides,
Altogether, indistinguishable,
puddled.

The remedy comes in automatically,

Doctors don't want you to know this!

Top way to cure melting,

Scroll for hours on end.

I promise you will feel better.

Go on, give it a try!

cat falls off a cat tree, like

the best grilled cheese, like

simpsons episode part 4, like

twins gender reveal, like

am I the asshole for..., like

kid missing his skull, brains out. Scroll.

minecraft parkour, like

barn cats coming in, like

get ready with me to..., like

cake decorating 101, like

taylor swift at chiefs' game, like

a father digging for his kids. Scroll.

three to seven glorious hours have passed,

You did it! Congrats!

Now everything is mush!

Your spirit is crushed!

This is your new bed, you made it just yourself,

Everything is now oatmeal.

A Man of Steel

By Gavin Fitzgerald

In the mirror stands a washed-out Hollywood hopeful who now wears tights for children. When Kirk Alyn moved out west he had one dream. To be Clark Gable. He remembered being ten-years-old, seeing Douglas Fairbanks's Zorro on the big screen, and thinking that's what he wanted to be. Back in New Jersey, he'd hang with the neighbor kids when not recreating scenes from the movies. They often got mad when Kirk took it too seriously. When he finally got out of Jersey the first place he went to was Broadway, slumming it as a chorus boy. After years of working up the ladder to his big break, he soon after decided to trek out to Hollywood after seeing actors like Cagney, and Bogart. But that was six years ago and his biggest role requires him to go uncredited. Dressing up as Superman for Saturday kiddie matinees was far from what he wanted, but now there was something that couldn't make him quit. He had a kid on the way and in walked Sam.

"How does it feel, kid?" Sam said, chewing a fat cigar in his suit that was as cheap as his films, suspenders so stretched out you could see the fabric wearing down. He's the kind of producer Hollywood would love to be yet looked down on. He gets multiple films made a year, but that often comes at the cost of quality and budget.

"I don't know about this, I look..." Kirk paused, trying to be honest without insulting Sam—, "...stupid". Kirk was cast because he is the embodiment of the all American man. Tall, Dark, and handsome, a B-list Cary Grant. He could sing, dance, and memorize lines.

"Well, who cares what you think. Is the suit too tight?" Sam asks as he circles around Kirk looking at it from various angles.

"The suit feels fine. I just think...maybe we should be doing something else"

“Like?”

“Something with class”

“Class only sells half the time. Action! Now that sells all the time. Think of this Broadway, you’re the first Superman. A name for the history books. As long as you get those little runts into the seats, you did your job” he said as he patted Kirk’s back.

“I’m just saying John Wayne didn’t do this”

Now Sam has a stern, often boisterous voice. He doesn’t get mad, but he does get firm and loud. It’s rare when Sam gets mad. “Well you do...So does the suit fit or not!” Sam snapped.

Kirk knew he ticked a nerve. “I did not mean it like...”

The room had a silence that was deafening, a pin could drop that would unleash a firestorm.

“Does. The Suit. Fit?”

“The suit fits fine,” Kirk says reluctantly.

“Will you be here Monday?” He asked with a stare that could break mirrors and nostrils that fumed like a bull’s. Sam did not plan for his Superman to drop out at the last minute.

Kirk isn’t sure, but he knows a job is a job and how much time has been spent so far. “Can you give me the weekend?”

“You have a contract kid”

“I know, but can’t you just-”

“Get someone else? That’s what I’m thinking!”

“That’s not what I am saying.”

“But that is what I am saying!” but as pissed as he may be, he caves and sighs.

“You have until Monday. But if you are even two seconds late, you’re done.”

The ride home for Kirk was a long one. His mind was blank. By the time he got home and walked into his California suburban home all he could do was look down at his feet and ignore the

neighbors who had waved hi. The house was vacant, but the sound of his wife singing brought a slight smirk to his face. He walks towards the voice and knocks on the door of their unfinished nursery.

Virginia O'Brien was a Hollywood starlet. She met Alyn on the stages of Broadway when they were both up and coming actors. They met on the chorus line and through various mutual friends. It was during a rehearsal when Kirk after months of knowing her, decided to finally pull the trigger and ask her out. It was on that date when she heard him talk about his goals and aspirations did she realize this man was the love of her life. Enough so that when he proposed going out to California to try and make it as a movie star, she said yes with no hesitation. Now she's exhausted, wiping the sweat from her forehead in overalls and a bandana, painting the walls of their soon to be nursery bright blue.

"Hey Kirk," Virginia said.

"Hi hon" he says in a dower beaten tone.

At this point she knows him better than anyone, maybe even more than himself. When they moved out she got the big break first and had been steadily moving up. Kirk was of course happy for her, but to say there wasn't a part of him that felt left behind, jealous, and defeated would be an understatement. Their baby is the only reason her career is now on pause.

"How was work?" she says in a hesitant tone.

"Fine, how was your day"

"Good, good. The room's almost done, and I ordered the crib so that should be a few weeks."

"That's great to hear"

"How's the film coming along?"

“The serial is coming along great” He says as he puts down his jacket and hat and starts to roll up his sleeves.

“Serial, my bad.” She paused from painting for a moment and decided to ask the big question. “Are you sure everything’s fine?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I be” Kirk says in an over enthused voice.

“Be honest Kirk, is everything fine?” She’s known what’s been bothering him for months. “It’s the job isn’t it?” He puts himself down on the floor by the only unpainted wall in the whole room. While Virginia goes to the kitchen to wash her hands.

“You know, it’s just not what I had hoped for” he says trying to lessen the impact it’s actually had.

Virginia comes back in and slowly moves down next to him. “Well, what were you hoping for?” Kirk stands up and helps her down.

“I don’t know. I just thought when we moved out...at least for me I thought I had already paid my dues.”

“And who are you playing again?”

“Well, I’m the lead this time. Playing the role of some cartoon”

“Which one?”

“Superman”

“Oh, my nephew likes him”

“And there it is”

“What?”

“Kids like him. The same ones who waste their money on root beer floats and baseball cards like him. And as much as you may get them on your side, that doesn’t help much when you go into an audition up against Bogart or Cagney with fucking Superman on your resume.”

“Have you thought that maybe your dues haven’t been all paid?”

“And that’s the worst part. Maybe you’re right. Even then I bet when those guys did they didn’t have to wear a goddamn leotard.”

She moves herself to face him and crosses her legs. She takes his hand and holds it softly. And with a slightly concerned expression on her face she asks “Do you remember our first date?”

“Of course. I took you to a movie, then dinner at Leone’s and had a nice walk around the park.”

“Do you remember the movie?”

“That part I always draw a blank on.”

“I don’t remember either, but what I do remember was that it was one of those creature features. Your friend told you to take me because if I were to get scared you could hold me closer.”

“And it worked out,” he says in a humorous tone.

Virginia sees that light come back into his eyes and laughs a little “Do you know who was in that movie?”

“Karloff?”

“No”

“Lugosi?”

“Nope”

“Rains?”

“He’s your favorite”

Kirk thinks about it for a moment but can’t come up with anyone.

“It was Humphrey Bogart.”

“Really?”

“The return of Doctor X! And he did that just a few years before the Maltese Falcon.”

“So, he was the stock lead.”

“No, he was Dr.X. And just a few years later he would break out. It just took time and he did what he needed to. And if it helps, you’ll get my nephew’s respect.”

“At least that’s something.”

“You’ll be the coolest uncle in the world, and our kid will suddenly be the coolest kid. He’ll be the son of Superman! But as of right now just take the job. Who knows, if you treat it like you’re Cary Grant maybe after this you don’t have to do serials anymore.”

“Fine, but this is my last one.”

“That’s fine by me.”

“Also something’s missing.”

“And that would be?”

“We have to paint Super boy’s bedroom!”

Kirk helps up his wife and races towards the supplies.

A few months later after the serial’s release Kirk was waiting at a bus stop. But it was the voice of a high pitched stranger that caught his attention.

“Hey Mister!” the voice says loudly, one of an early middle school boy.

Kirk was confused, he wasn’t sure who the voice was for.

“Over here mister!” The kid’s voice gets closer and more exhausted as Kirk looks down. He sees a 9-year-old kid and what seems to be his little brother.

“Can I help you?” Kirk asks.

“My brother wanted to know if you were Superman?”

“Superman?”

“Well, he says you look a lot like the guy in the movies.”

“Oh. Why...” He didn’t know how to respond. He was hesitant to tell them the truth. The older kid might understand, but he doesn’t want to shatter their allusions either. “Why yes, I am!” He kneels down to their level. “But let’s just keep this between us; I am currently on the job.”

“Golly! We won’t mister!”

The younger kid holds out a cut out newspaper ad. Kirk gladly accepts but can’t seem to find a pen, the boy hands him one.

“Thanks Mr. Kent, that sure means a lot!” the older kid says.

Kirk laughs “No problem.” But changes his face to a harmless yet over the top serious face. “Just remember to stand for truth, justice, and?”

Both kids proudly yell out. “THE AMERICAN WAY!!!” as they run off.

The kids run off as Kirk goes back to waiting for the bus. The guy next to him is chuckling. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just my kids barely talk to me because I am working to get them into college. Meanwhile you, a stranger, are teaching random ones life lessons. And I guarantee THAT will stick with them way more than what their parents will teach em at this age.”

“Hmmm”

“I’m just saying, if my kids found out I was superman they would go nuts.”

Kirk chuckles to himself and then it dawns on him. “Do you know when this bus will show up?”

“In about 2 minutes.”

“Could you watch my stuff? I have to make a quick call.”

“No problem, Superman!”

Kirk ran to that phone booth with tremendous speed and dialed that number as quickly as he could. “Hey Sam? It’s Kirk. I’m calling because you had mentioned doing another one. I’m In.”



7/4/19
Helena Koblhoff

The Barrel

By Anthony Lepianka

Father was laughing when the waitress sat us. She told him his shoes were the shiniest she had ever seen. She laughed too, throwing her head back and tossing a hand in the air. Mother smiled as well, though her eyes remained stiffly on father's. The waitress sauntered off and father turned to his two girls.

"When's the last time we had a meal like this, huh?" he asked with a small smile. Ann, who was older than her sister Claire by a few years, raised her eyes but never quite met father's. "I could be wrong, but wasn't it just a month ago?" mother said.

"Time flies, huh?" Father laughed again and Claire looked up at him confusedly for a moment but decided against saying anything. He opened his menu and flipped to a dog-eared page, barely glancing it over before shutting the thing and tossing it lazily on the table. "I suppose I'll get the usual, huh?" he said with a chuckle.

"Well that would be fair, wouldn't it?" Mother nodded and stared at a page titled *Big Joseph's Big Eats!* She recoiled upon reading, "butter basket," and folded her menu shut too, sliding it under father's. "I should get my usual too, then."

Ann thumbed through her menu, constantly glancing over at Claire's. She squinted and thoroughly read two pages before ultimately setting it down and sighing, slouching slightly. "Ann, I thought we talked about being unladylike at the dinner table." mother said with frown, reaching over and manually readjusting her shoulders with minimal resistance. Father watched approvingly, playing with his greasy white beard listlessly.

The waitress returned with a notepad in hand, glancing at father's shoes again before looking over at Ann.

“Do you know what you’ll be having tonight?”

Ann stared at a page titled *Shellfish and the Crab!*, dragging her finger painfully from the very top to the last item. Claire did the same, shoving her messy hair out of her eyes repeatedly as her finger trudged over *Y’ants on a Log Cabin!*

“And for you, ma’am?” the waitress asked mother.

“The cod dinner, please.” mother said, dropping her eyes low.

“And I’ll have,” father began, a massive toothy smile creeping out from behind his chapped lips, “*my usual.*”

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know what you usually order.” the waitress said, mildly embarrassed.

“Oh, I forgot, you are among the uninitiated.” Father’s brow furrowed and his eyes bulged ever so slightly. “I will be having... the poop barrel!”

Father laughed viciously, slamming his meaty fist on the table over and over again. He couldn’t stop, spittle flew from his gaping mouth, flying in between his missing teeth. He nearly fell backwards off of his chair before mother set him back upright and patted his undulating gut.

“That’s not good for your heart sweetie, you mustn’t get so excited.” mother warned. “I couldn’t bear to lose you, none of us could.”

“People have to know that it’s okay to have fun. It’s about principle.” father said with a dour frown. He stared at his empty appetizer plate and ran his finger across it. Again. Skin was coming off of his hand and sitting there. Only a little bit, of course, but some. Someone might have to eat off of that plate. Hell, maybe they won’t even clean it. It would be thrilling.

Ann tried to look at her sister, but she was hiding behind a thick layer of mussy brown hair and had no intention of coming out any time soon. Mother noticed, but never did any more than flash a disapproving glance.

“Ann, could you adjust your sister’s coat please?” mother asked. Ann nodded silently and grabbed Claire’s coat off of the back of her chair. She folded it neatly and draped it back over the chair before pressing out a few imagined wrinkles.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Mother couldn’t bear to look at father anymore, only sometimes glancing the tip of his beard as she stared at the tablecloth. Ann and Claire followed suit. Father waited patiently too, although he occasionally broke out in an excited smile for a few seconds at a time.

A gong rang.

“Order rangin’ down!” screamed a short man from all the way across the restaurant. Behind him were four boys, none of them older than 20. All eight hands were clasped tightly around the top of a massive oil drum. Father giggled with glee as they laboriously dragged the colossal barrel towards him.

“I’m ready!” he cried before the four boys pried the lid off and a thick, pungent steam erupted from the drum. Father jumped from his chair and bashed his head into the table seven times, screaming more wildly after every smack, becoming more animal than man.

When he stood up again, the waitress had returned. For mother, her cod dinner. For Ann, a platter of shrimp. For Claire, *The Andrew Jackson*, that is, fish and chips. They looked longingly at their dinners.

“Hmmm,” father rubbed his chin and spit on the floor. Mother covered her face when tears started to drip down her cheeks. Ann and Claire greeted their dinners like old friends who they knew they were seeing for the very last time. Neither of them cried.

“You know the rules, don’t you?” father said with wicked mirth. “From whom shall I inherit today?” He inspected each of their meals, his eyebrows twitching and his lips flapping, dripping with saliva. His bestial hunger consumed him.

“I’m feeling... presidential!” His sweaty hands lunged at the chips. He grimaced like a warrior and shoved far too big of a handful down his gullet, forgetting to chew entirely. “Now it’s your turn! I suppose you should try the barrel!” As father threw his fingers towards Claire, mother’s hand snatched his wrist. He turned to her, shocked. Betrayed.

“Not her!” mother cried in anguish, “not again! It’s not fair!” Father reached for his fork but fumbled and dropped it between his legs. Mother snatched the steak knife and put it to his chin. Her lips quivered.

“Try all you want,” he said with a glare. “Try to pop ol’ Jeb and see who’s standing, huh? See who’s stand -”

Mother jabbed the knife into his chin.

“In the barrel. Now.” she commanded. She gripped him by his unkempt ponytail and brutally dragged him across the table.

“Oh so you wanna pick a poop barrel fight with me, wife? I am the barrel, I am a goddamn institution around here, you’re an ant beneath my boot!” Father spit at her, blood starting to leak out of his jaw.

“I cannot ask twice!” mother screamed as she forced his wriggling body into the sludgy drum, and cracked his skull as she fastened the lid.

pulpline

By Noelle Gómez

she thumbs apart
the skin on my chest
like she's peeling back

the thick rind
of a ripe grapefruit.

her lips pucker
at the hollow gash,
the sweetness inside

me steeping like sugar
water for her to drink.

my ribcage glistens
with stickiness of
drops of pleated pith.

I'm stuck underneath
her fingertips. my hips rise

hungry for sunlight
as her mouth

ripens against the softness
dripping inside.

CLUMSY HEART
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vasthavyudu)



Lexical Therapy

By Sai Madhav Dongur (*whitepaper vasthavyudu*)

It can't be more apt than this one. I empathize with you.

But this shouldn't stop you. You have to give a comeback in such a way that it should be a tight slap to their wicked mind, as a victory howl that echoes in their ears, and as an immense tide that sweeps away their entire crooked kingdom.

Arise my friend!

It is not the time that you drown but rather crowned for your genuineness and honesty. It is just that the crown has thorns. Wait for the good time where the thorns turn into flowers and blood streams into nectar dreams.

Lots of power to you!

Caldesi

By Caleb Oglesby

As one of the many contracted mercenary groups that fought for Quaela Vora, the Travelers were expected to sacrifice their lives for a cause they didn't believe in. This naturally was the norm for hired killers like them, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

Most people who lived in the poorer regions of Destina's districts, no matter how horrid their living conditions were, had some modicum of talent. Singing, writing, carpentry, sewing. Even the most disenfranchised person who lived day to day eating from people's trash had at least the smallest possibility of becoming something worthwhile.

These men and women were the exception. For people whose only talents were killing, there was nothing else for them. For those who spent their lives undergoing physical augmentations, this war was the best thing that happened to them. Dying in it wouldn't have any downsides. If they didn't strike it rich, then they'd go back to living mundane lives as security guards. If they didn't gain renown, they'd go back to being reviled as brutes. If they didn't die, they'd continue being mediocre in everything they tried to do once the war was over. These 150 people only had each other and the battlefield. And as they prepared for their next battle, they began to feel that they would have both in death.

The Travelers were meant to join two other companies of similar size to fight together to seize an important bridge. If they won, they'd be able to starve out the companies hired by Ardenslow and secure their supplies. If they lost, then they'd die. That was the only consequence that mattered to them.

To all of them but one. Their leader. Caldesi.

As the Travelers all gathered in a makeshift meeting room to go over their plan, a woman was in the center of them. Caldesi wore the same fatigues as them. The grey and brown were best fitted for the urban environment they fought in, the dirt and blood only helping. Their dirty masks were settled around their necks, and excluding Caldesi they all held their guns at their sides. They couldn't afford to be caught off guard.

Caldesi towered over her soldiers. At a staggering seven feet in height, she was more a monster than a human. While all her soldiers had on their helmets, she didn't. She didn't even wear one to begin with. Her black hair was braided, reaching down to the middle of her back. Golden ornaments adorned it, some of the only luxuries Caldesi cared for. And only because her husband said he liked it. Despite the countless augmentations she received to increase her strength beyond what was physically possible, despite the countless lives she had taken, she still tried to hold onto her humanity. She still had hope, something her soldiers had lacked.

She looked over at them, the men and women were ragged. The battles they had fought before then had taken their toll. They were tired. Hungry. She knew that in their current condition, they'd all die in their next battle. They might not have minded it, but she did.

"All of you, stay here," she said. They looked to their leader, confusion evident on their faces. "You're all too weak for the coming fight. You'll die in vain."

One of her soldiers, Orys, objected. "But-"

She turned to him, her red eyes staring into his soul, and he didn't continue. She resumed speaking. "You might not care about your deaths, but I do. I will not tolerate any of you needlessly throwing your lives away under my supervision. You all are unfit for the mission. I am not. I will go and complete it myself. In the meantime, stay here. Regain your strength."

She knew her soldiers wouldn't disobey her. Her word was law to them, and so when the time came, the only combatant from the Travelers to show up was Caldesi.

The trip from their hideout to the bridge wasn't too long. She ran through destroyed streets, surrounded by toppled buildings and the corpses of countless civilians. Blood mixed with rain as it poured down on everything in sight. The smell of smoke was omnipresent despite the rain battering against Caldesi and everything else.

With each step she took she saw more and more corpses. Men. Women. Children. All were killed due to some attack or incident she knew nothing about.

She was almost to her destination. Just past this city would be Grainsfield Bridge, where she had hoped her reinforcements were. Each step she took brought her closer and closer, rushing through the discomfort the rain brought as it soaked her entire body.

She soon arrived, yet no one was there. Now standing on the bridge, she was all alone. Beneath her was a river that raged, smashing against the rocks beneath. The smell of smoke had finally faded away, but Caldesi was sure it would be replaced by the smell of blood and battle soon enough. She pushed her hair away from her eyes as she steadied her breathing. Her muscles were relaxed. Her body was relaxed. She needed to forget everything else but the mission.

In the distance, she heard the marching of soldiers, from where those fighting for Ardenslow should come from. Caldesi had to assume her reinforcements were either killed, assigned to something else, or otherwise abandoned this front. Leaving her and her alone to defend this bridge. As the marching came closer, she saw artillery and tanks approach. She saw just how much more firepower they had than her Travelers. She saw a sight that would make anyone else sink in despair.

She needed to focus only on the mission. Push herself to her limits. Use every strategy to make sure she would live to see her husband. The lives of these enemy soldiers weren't important to her, they couldn't be. She needed to convince herself, for this single moment, that they weren't human. To not hold back in the slightest.

They didn't have families. They didn't have children. They didn't have hopes or dreams or anything of the sort. She told herself this again and again as they approached. The ground shook beneath her but she stood steady.

Out of the corner of her eye, Caldesi noticed an animal's jawbone. From a horse or some such creature. She bent on one knee to pick it up, taking a moment to get used to the grip. She eyed the oncoming tanks, then took a step. Then another. Then burst out into a full-blown sprint.

Small craters formed each time her feet hit the ground, and with an explosion of force, she arrived at the tank. With one hand she gripped the barrel, then bent it upwards so that it exploded upon trying to fire at her.

That split second allowed for another tank to attack. Caldesi's response was like lightning, Her eyes widened, and she quickly dodged out of the way, rolling to the muddy ground as she was coated in filth. In a split second, she was back on her feet, blitzing toward the second tank. It fired again, the explosion ringing loudly. As the round came flying at her, Caldesi would reach out and catch it. A split second later she hurled it back at the tank, flying through the muzzle as it caused the vehicle to explode.

She didn't hear the screams of the soldiers inside. Or perhaps she ignored them.

The third and remaining tank was too slow to shoot at her. Once the explosion began, she was already rushing toward it, her movement a blur as she leaped into the air like some sort of creature. Her speed was too much for the tank's devices to catch, and she landed on top of it. She tore open the hatch and pulled out a soldier. She slammed them into the steel, caving in their skull. Before any of his comrades could do anything, she took one of his grenades and tossed it into the hatch. An explosion caused the tank to jump a bit, and their screams were silenced.

Caldesi leaped from the tank and saw several rockets heading right at her. She grit her teeth, landing in the mud as she hastily leapt to the side. The explosion kicked up dirt and debris as it

rained down all around her. She hid behind the tank, peeping out to see three artillery units, most likely mortars or some upgraded form of them. Explosions rang out around her, and soldiers with their guns would close in.

Caldesi closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and gripped the underside of the tank she was beneath. She lifted it, her muscles bulging as she then hurled it into the distance, aiming to take out one of the mortars. It succeeded, causing it to explode and taking out several soldiers in the process.

With her cover gone, they fired at her. These caliber of bullets wouldn't outright kill her, but if she took too much damage she'd be open for a mortar to bring her to the brink of death.

She rushed forward, the soldiers keeping their fire on her even as she was right in front of them. She swung her arm down, the jawbone caving into one of their skulls as blood splattered about. Less than a second later, she backhanded another, their head twisting unnaturally as they crumpled to the ground.

She ignored their terrified screams. She ignored their anger-filled shouts. She ignored it all as she kept slaughtering them.

Another mortar strike caused another explosion, launching her and the enemies near her off their feet. Shrapnel rained down, and she quickly used a corpse to block it from stabbing her. She'd almost immediately charge ahead once more, even as she was being hammered with bullets. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw a grenade being launched at her, and quickly kicked it to the side, taking more soldiers with the explosion.

Caldesi came closer and closer to the mortars, and with a loud bang, one would fire right at her. Her eyes widened, and her heart pounded in her chest as she raised her arm to block it. She was launched back by the explosion yet couldn't afford any time to let it slow her down. She landed and immediately forced herself to dart back at the mortar. Its target was changed from her to the bridge.

She had a split moment to react, and with all the strength she could muster she hurled the jawbone at the soldier operating the mortar. They were hit right between the eyes, the bone impeded in their skull as they slumped to the ground. In a split second, she was right in front of the mortar, tearing the jawbone from the slain soldier and with a powerful kick caused the mortar to shatter into pieces.

Right as this was done, Caldesi's eyes widened as the final mortar launched a rocket at her. She grit her teeth, picking up the slain soldier beside her and throwing them into the way of it. An explosion rang out as she braced herself for the impact. A moment later, she was running once more. Two soldiers were resupplying it, and with a growl, she hurled the jawbone at one of them. It stabbed them through the throat. She didn't hear the gurgled scream as their mouth filled with blood before they collapsed. Their comrade was too shocked to do anything, and even as Caldesi was battered with bullets, her fatigues were torn to shreds, and yet she still rushed forward. Quicker than thought she appeared right in front of them. Their face was entrapped in her palm as she crushed their skull. They died in an instant, blood spilling out from their eyes and staining their killer.

The tanks were destroyed, as were the mortars. All that remained was to kill everyone remaining.

She couldn't let a soul escape, for they would report to their superiors and more attacks would be on the way. More tanks and mortars and other weapons that would surely kill her. No one else would know that only one person killed all these people.

Caldesi roared, tearing the jawbone from the soldier's throat as she began tearing through the remaining soldiers. She was fast. Too fast for anyone to react to. She was a blur to normal people, and she left nothing but destruction in her wake. She leapt from one enemy to the next like a demon of war. One moment she'd tear one's throat out and the next she'd cave in another's skull.

She tore her arm through one's stomach and then a split second later punched another's head clean off. Her enemies were left as nothing but a red mist as she kept moving.

She ignored the screams. She ignored the pleas of her opponents. It was either them or her men. Them, or her. They had no families. They had no friends. They were nameless bodies for her to kill.

Time seemed to stand still as she kept tearing through their fastly dwindling numbers. Blood was everywhere. Blood was in the grass. In her hair. On her torn fatigues and the undergarments that were exposed. She was covered in it from head to toe, and the rain did little to wash it away, for as soon as a drop of blood was washed away it was soon replaced.

She was a demon to these men and women. A monster that would slaughter them all with no mercy. A swing of her arm caused one to lose their jaw, a kick caused one's heart to stop. She killed and killed and killed until there were none left.

The rain stopped, yet it was still dark. Caldesi stood there as she caught her breath, covered in blood. She dropped the jawbone she held and it finally shattered from all the strain it was put through.

Caldesi thought she was in hell. Everything was red. Everything in sight but the bridge that she slaughtered to protect.

She fell to her knees as she caught her breath, her hands soaked with blood. She looked around. The high of battle wore off, and all that was left was the act she had done. The lives she had brutally taken to protect a bridge.

With a horse's jawbone, she piled high heaps upon heaps of corpses.

With a horse's jawbone, she killed a thousand men.

Among the Dying

By Reese Losieczka

My mother always told me I had richest imagination she'd ever seen. She said I could look at anything and create some kind of story to go with it. I acted embarrassed whenever she bragged about it to the family, but really I soaked up the attention like a sponge. My father told me I had a hyperactive imagination and needed to get it under control in order to do well in school. However, he couldn't help himself from encouraging me to create some crazy story about the house on the lake that we deemed "The Walking Dead House" due to its dirty exterior and concrete foundation contributing to an all-around unwelcoming vibe hidden in the trees.

The lake house we rented was a place I looked forward to every summer. Not only was it a break from city life, it was a place where I felt closest to my family. My dad was finally able to take off work, my mother was able to escape the city life she despised, my grandmother was as restless as ever but even she took the time to relax, and my grandfather couldn't wait to ramble on about fishing to anyone who listened.

Maybe that was why it was the place I decided to go when the world went to shit.

I was curled up underneath an old porch somewhere in northern Illinois on the side of the highway, holding my breath as I waited for a herd of the undead to slowly make its way past me. My heart raced



CELESTIAL CRESCENT

Sai Madhav Dongur

(whitepaper vastharyudu)

inside my chest and my fingers played with my jeans- a nervous habit I picked up when I moved to college and one the apocalypse only intensified.

A rustle from the corner caused my head to snap up. I gripped my small knife as my eyes fell on the small figure curled up against the side of the porch. A relieved sigh escaped through my nose when I discovered it was just an opossum seeking shelter.

The opossum and I weren't much different. A few months ago I would have screamed and ran if the rodent was that close, but now I felt comforted as the animal and I held eye contact. It was almost like looking in a mirror. I thought about the crackers I had in my bag, but shook my head. The opossum had been a wild animal much longer than I had. It had a better chance of making it than I did.

The lack of groans and shuffling feet signaled the pack had passed. I crawled out through the small hole I entered through, cursing under my breath when my pants snagged on the broken wood. Quietly, I made the quick trek back to the highway and continued on my journey. I approached the signs on the highway where one road would take me to O'Hare Airport and the other would take me to the heart of downtown Chicago. My body tensed as I stared down the road that led downtown.

The very last thing the government did before falling was bomb all the major cities. Since population was so high in those areas, they deemed it necessary to eliminate as much of the inflected as they could. They didn't care about the living people stuck in the city; the people *they* trapped by not allowing anyone to leave when the outbreak started. I could see my dad's shit-eating grin as I imagined he would have said something stupid like, "I told you, kid. Milwaukee is just a smaller, weaker Chicago." If only he knew Milwaukee being Chicago's smaller sibling had saved it from being bombed. Its bigger sibling wasn't as lucky.

My feet started walking down the road that led me towards O'Hare. I tried telling myself it was because I had taken it every time I drove home from school, but I knew it was because if I saw the ruins of Chicago, I wouldn't be able to keep going. I would have fell to my knees and stayed there until someone or something came to put me out of my misery.

The moon's reflection on the surface of the lake captured my whole attention. The ripples from occasional jumping fish caused the light on the surface to flicker. It made it easier to keep looking at even when Papa sat next to me on the sand. We sat in silence for a few moments. I didn't know if he was expecting me to say something first, but I wasn't going to speak and he seemed content with sitting in silence.

"Your parents are worried about you," he finally said.

I sighed, curling my knees into my chest and hugging them tightly. It seemed like my parents were more worried about me than not these days. I was going to college soon and I was their oldest child so I understood their anxiety, but, God, I needed some space. They weren't the only ones nervous about my future college career.

"When are they not..." I replied.

Papa glanced at me before he cleared his throat and sat back on his hands. His gaze returned to the moon. We weren't able to see this many stars in Chicago. The night sky here was one of the reasons I looked forward to this week of summer every year. Papa's voice pulled me out of my thoughts, "Do you want to tell me what's going on with you, kiddo?"

I struggled to swallow. My throat felt like it was closing and I knew I'd be feeling tears in my eyes soon. I took a deep breath, breathing in the scent of the water and, unfortunately, the scent of the channel.

“I guess I’m just worried about college,” I said. It felt good to admit it. I had spent most of my summer convincing my parents I’d be fine in college and comforting my younger sister since she cried anytime it was mentioned. It felt so good to finally say it out loud that I was speaking again.

“What if I don’t make any friends? What if the people there think I’m weird or something?”

Before I could dwell on the thought, Papa laughed. Loud. I turned my head to look at him, wondering how anything I just said could have been so hilarious. He shook his head and let out a sigh after his laughing had ceased.

“That was a funny joke, kiddo,” he said. He wiped a tear from his eye and I frowned.

“It wasn’t a joke,” I said.

“You really don’t see how wonderful you are, do you?” Papa said, giving me a kind smile.

I shook my head, looking at the moon on the water again. “You just have to say that,” I mumbled. “You’re my grandpa.” That caused Papa to laugh again, though it was a shorter one.

“Maybe,” he admitted. “But I also see how you make sure everyone in the family is comfortable and loved. I see how you let the younger ones have longer turns on the computer when you’re playing your games. I see how you let everyone grab dinner before you.” The sticky feeling in my throat was back and the tears I predicted earlier started to make an appearance.

“If no one wants to be your friend there, then fuck ‘em,” Papa continued.

“Papa!” I exclaimed, but I couldn’t help the laugh that escaped me. It sounded funny because of my tears. I had never heard Papa swear before.

He chuckled, “I’m serious. You won’t have any trouble making friends, kiddo. You’re the kindest, most selfless person I know.”

I smiled, ignoring the taste of my tears as I hugged Papa.

“And I’m not just saying that because I’m your grandpa,” he said, shaking me. More giggles escaped me and I nodded. We sat there and stared at the moon some more in silence, pointing at the ripples from the jumping fish until my grandmother shouted at us to go to bed.

I didn’t thank him that night. Sometimes I wished I did when I felt sad about him being gone. But then I would tell myself that he knew I was grateful. It was like how you didn’t have to say “I love you” to someone because they already knew. Still, sometimes I wished I said thank you.

The sound of the gravel under my shoes kept me from getting lost in my head. While the world around me wasn’t offering anything great, the inside of my mind was worse. The soft crunch of the road provided a satisfying tingle and if I listened to it enough, I was able to stray further and further away from the memory of the crunch the bones the undead snacked on made.

I barely heard the screams for help. My eyes widened when I caught sight of a boy running towards me, waving his arms frantically over his head. I rolled my eyes. With all the noise he made, it was a shock he hadn’t died when this all started.

“Help! Help me, please!” He said. He bent over with his hands on his knees as he heaved. I looked around him and noticed the small, child zombie slowly making its way to us. I sighed before taking my knife out and marching towards the thing. Its growls became louder the closer I got and it swiped at me. I stepped out of its way and stabbed it through its eye, flinching at the squelch it made when I took my knife out as it fell to the ground.

“Thank you!” I heard the boy pant. I wiped the blood off my knife on my sweatshirt and returned to my path.

“Did you hear? There’s sanctuary in Canada! They’re working on a cure now,” the boy said. I didn’t turn around. I was getting closer to the large sign that read: “Welcome to Indiana!” The

original text was crossed off and the writing found over it read: "THE END IS HERE. PRAISE GOD AND BE SAVED." I tried not to scoff.

"You're going the wrong way," the boy said. He sounded desperate. Maybe he knew he couldn't make it on his own. Maybe he just needed someone by his side.

I kept walking. I focused on the crunch of the gravel. *Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.*

"The world will go back to the way it was!" He shouted, the wind carrying his voice to my ears and surely to some unwanted ones. "Don't you want to see it?"

I didn't want to see him. No, I *couldn't* see him.

My feet were glued to the floor. My mother placed a hand on my shoulder and guided me through the hospital door. Inside I found my grandmother sitting in the chair next to the white bed that was so bright it was painful to look at. I stood at the foot of the bed, not quite sure where else to stand. My fingers picked at my pants.

"Hey, kiddo," Papa said. He sounded like himself but he didn't look it. His once tanned skin was now sickly pale. His face was gaunt and I could see bones of his I had never seen before. It was as if that brain tumor was literally sucking the life out of him.

"Hi, Papa," I replied. My voice felt small, but I hoped it didn't sound so.

"How's school?" He asked.

"Good," I hoped my smile was convincing. "You were right before."

"I'm always right," Papa said. He started laughing but was cut off by a coughing fit. My grandmother stood quickly to help, but he waved her off as he recovered from the attack. He turned to my little sister and started talking to her, but I couldn't pay attention to anything they were saying. The wires and tubes stuck in him and the sounds of the machines connected to him captured all my attention.

“Are we going to the lake house this summer, Papa?” I heard my sister ask. I froze at her question, my hands clenching around the fabric of my pants.

He gave her a kind smile, “Of course, sweetie.” His smile was so convincing, but his eyes told another story. He knew he wasn’t going to make it to summer.

“Grandma,” I said, the word barely making it through my constricted throat. “Where’s the bathroom?” I pretended to listen to her instructions before walking out of the room, restraining myself from running. I walked through the hallways; the lights were blinding and the onslaught of tears didn’t help my ability to see. I didn’t know where I was going, but anywhere was better than that room.

He didn’t make it to summer.

I ran as fast as I could through some forested area in Michigan. One thing about the end of the world: there were no rules. The shitty men in the world celebrated that. I prayed the trees gave me some cover as I zigzagged through them.

“Woo! Run, girl, run!” One of the men hollered, sounding closer than they did before. I pushed myself to run faster, ignoring the burn in my legs and lungs. Low-hanging branches scratched my arms and face. A boom echoed through the air and suddenly a pain exploded in my side I knew wasn’t a cramp.

After face planting into the dirt, I pushed myself up and looked at my side to find a lot more blood than I expected. The wires in my brain were not connecting because I couldn’t feel the pain I knew should have been there. There was so much blood.

“Nice shot!” I heard and scrambled to my feet before running again. The shock started to wear off and I cried out when I placed a hand on my side to try and stop the bleeding.

“Damn!” One of them cursed loudly when they realized I escaped.

“Let her go,” the other said. “She’s a goner anyway.”

Gone. Gone. Gone.

“He’s gone, but never forgotten.”

I blinked at my aunt’s words. The smile she gave me was indication she thought she said something extraordinary. As I stared at her, I felt my sadness turn into anger. Gone, but never forgotten? That had to be one of stupidest things I had ever-

“Thank you, Denice,” Dad came to the rescue. She made an annoying little “hm!” as if she were proud of herself for her amazing comforting skills before walking away. I glared at her as she struggled to walk on the grass, her heels sinking into the soft dirt.

“Twenty bucks she loses a heel before the day’s done,” Dad whispered close to my ear. I looked up at him and studied his smile. If you were to just look at his smile, you wouldn’t even be able to tell we were at a funeral. His eyes, though. His eyes embodied just how terrible of a day this was.

“Forty bucks she loses both,” I shot back. I hoped my voice masked the heartbreak that threatened to choke me.

Dad laughed under his breath. His smile softened as he placed a hand on my shoulder. It would have been comforting if he wasn’t leading me to the gaping hole in the earth. My hands gripped my dress, the scratchy material of it combined with my sweat made my palms itchy. I watched as the casket began lowering into hole.

I looked away. The individual blades of grass grasped my attention and my mind latched on to the distraction with gratitude. The sobs from my family attempted to break through the bubble I created. The more I stared at the ground, the further away the sounds of anguish sounded. It wasn’t

the healthiest or smartest thing to do. I knew I needed to see him go into the ground. Still, I couldn't watch. I didn't know whether I was grateful or regretful.

I pushed on even though my body fought every move I made. My feet dragged along the small road. They felt like fifty pound weights more than they did feet. My hands were sticky from the blood on my side and when I wiped the sweat that fell into my eyes, I felt it brand my forehead. I squinted to make out the street sign ahead of me. My posture straightened out when my brain comprehended the words. I looked around myself, drinking in every detail I could find.

I knew this road. I memorized these trees on every car ride. I winced as I picked up my pace. My wound tugged and screamed in protest, but my legs had a mind of their own and I couldn't stop. I slipped on the gravel at the turn of the road and caught myself with my hand, barely registering the sharp sting as I continued running.

I halted to a stop outside the little cream-colored house. Before my brain could catch up, my legs were moving again and I was running down the hill towards the lake. My foot slipped on the grass. Mud oozed through my fingers as I caught myself. A laugh bubbled out of me. The grass was just as slippery as I remembered. I picked myself up, still giggling as my feet slipped some more. The sun's shine against the lake was blinding but I couldn't look away. As soon as my shoes touched the sand of our little beach, I fell to my hands and knees again. My hands gripped the sand, the tiny sediments sticking to the blood on my palms.

I moved to sit right on the shoreline. I surveyed the houses across the lake. Most of them didn't survive the apocalypse and had joined the water in pieces. The smile on my face widened as "The Walking Dead House" stood proudly against its crumbled neighbors. Of course it would have survived.

If I looked hard enough I could see Papa's boat flying across the water with the tube tied behind it. I could hear the screeches of pure joy coming from the children holding onto the tube for dear life. My mother's laugh rang over everything, echoing across the lake, and I knew everything was going to be okay.

My gaze fell onto the water by my feet. The red tint it now contained from my bleeding side didn't alarm me. I could only hear my mother's laugh as she yelled at Papa that one of us fell off the tube. I looked at the swampy channel on the left, the one I was always scared of falling in by for the swans there would attack anyone who came too close to their family. Another laugh gurgled out of my throat as I remembered hearing the shriek come from my grandmother as a swan flew straight towards her, and she couldn't row her kayak away fast enough for the swan's liking.

My eyes felt heavy and every breath I took was harder than the last. I reached out a hand towards the lake. A sigh that sounded like a wheeze on my ears escaped at the touch of the cold lake. The water felt amazing on my skin. I wondered where the swans were. The sun was getting brighter. The water was so cold my skin felt numb.

I think I'll just sit here and wait for the swans.

"Thank you."

When the Heat Comes

By Johnathan Dooley

When the heat comes

We'll resign into an icy memory

We'll convince ourselves we can breathe

Since there's nowhere we can run

Squandered by a red sunrise

The truth rises in the east

Each day ... A little longer ... Every day

I am enamored by poetry

Its whims are my wine

Crushed from the pale green grapes

Fermented by a blood red sun

Poetry is the process of life

The poem, its consequence

Just as the heat is a result

Of the process undoing life



CHICAGO
Isabella Burkard

Recipe for the Perfect High School Student

By Alex Schwabe

Ingredients

- Susceptibility to mental illness
- Pinch of perfectionism
- 1 app that tells her her grades 24/7
- 12 hours of homework a day
- at least 6 AP classes
- 12 teachers telling her she's doing great



CAKE SLICE

McKenna Fox

Instructions

- Mix all of the ingredients together. Don't worry about it being too much. It's *never* too much.
- Keep the heat high. Don't let it burn out.
- With each mental breakdown, let it rest for five minutes before adding everything again.
- Raise the heat during exam week. *Attempt* to lower it after.
- Leave it cooking for four years. Don't let it burn out.
- Once you finally take off the heat, don't assess the damage done just yet. That time will come.

Recipe Rating: A+, 4.0 GPA, graduating with distinction, "looking like you have it all together"

P E R F E C T

I'm A Monster

By Harrison Schneider

My name is Anna, and I am a monster. A big, ugly, scary monster. And I always have been. I'm covered with warts and blemishes, big horns, and a long tail.

And everyone hates me for it, even my mom, though she will never admit it. But I know she does.

I've heard what she says behind my back.

It was my first day of school, and I was terrified.

They're going to hate you.

"I know!" I said, "What do I do?"

Run! Run away! So no one will see your disgusting face.

"But what about mom?"

Mom wants to abandon you, remember?

"Anna! It's time for school!" There was no time. I took out the biggest, most concealing coat I could and squirmed myself into it. I slowly lumbered downstairs and to the car, trying to buckle myself in. But I couldn't. I was too big.

"Anna!" Mom shouted. "Put your seatbelt on!"

"But it won't fit!"

Mom sighed. She turned toward the back seat and fastened the seatbelt on me. "See. That wasn't so hard, right, sweetie?"

"I guess..."

"Great! Let's head to school."

"Ok..." I sighed. We started to head towards school. "Mom?" I asked.

"Yes, Anna?" she responded.

“Are you sure school will be okay?”

“Of course, Anna. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Everyone hates me... You hate me.”

“Wha-Anna? Why would you say something like that?”

“Because I’m a monster?”

“Anna, you’re not a monster. Stop putting yourself down like that!”

“But look at me!” I gestured to myself. “I’m a monster! “A big scary monster!”

“Anna...” My mom said, “Even if you were the scariest monster around, I’m sure everyone would love you just as much as they already do.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I’m sure. Now have a good day at school.”

You know she’s lying, right?

Yes, I know. I got out of the car, and I looked at Mom. I could see a scary grin on her face as she drove away. As I lumbered through the school, I could see everyone staring at me. I knew they were terrified of me. And why wouldn’t they be? I’m a monster, after all.

I sat down in the back of my first class, hoping not to get anyone’s attention. But unfortunately, that wouldn’t last for long.

“Anna?” the teacher asked. “Please take off that **COAT!** It violates the dress code, and everyone wants to see your beautiful **FACE!**”

“But—”

Don’t do it, Anna.

“I don’t want to,” I responded.

“**DO IT! NOW!**” I heard the teacher shout. I gulped. I slowly and reluctantly took off my coat, and everyone turned towards me.

“**EEEK! LOOK AT YOU!**” The teacher’s voice boomed. “You’re **A MONSTER! A FREAKISH HIDEOUS MONSTER!!**” I froze.

“It’s.. I’m... I–”

“**KILL THE MONSTER!**” I heard every student chant. “**KILL THE MONSTER!**”

Run Anna! Run! And so I did. I ran. I tried to run as fast as I could. There it was! The door to the school.

Everyone wants to kill you. Open the door, Anna. Open the door! That is the key to your escape. Yes... I must. I opened the door, only to find myself in a field. A beautiful field. I was alone in this field. It was peaceful.

Rest in the clearing, Anna. You’re safe. You can’t hurt anyone, and no one can hurt you. Yes... I lumbered into the middle of the garden. I was safe. And I was tired. I laid down as the bees buzzed and the birds chirped. A monster far away from other people’s eyes. And so I fell into a deep sleep...

Beep! Beep! Beep!

“Anna... Anna! Can you hear me?” I opened my eyes. I was in a hospital bed. And my mom was looking at me with tears in her eyes.

“Mom?”

“Oh, thank God you’re okay! You didn’t have a pulse!”

She’s here to pull the plug. Yes, I was scared. But I was done running. I knew that the monster must be slain.

“Mom?” I asked, “Are you here to kill me?”

“Anna!” My mom responded with tears in her eyes. “Why would you say that?”

“Because I’m a monster?”

“No. You’re not! Stop saying that!”

“Mom, it's fine. I'm ready now. You don't have to hate me anymore.”

“Anna!” she shouted tearfully. “Look, I know I was supposed to wait, but this is too important! Here! The doctor told me to give this to you.” She held out a pill in front of me.

“Is this to kill me?” I asked.

“Anna!” My mom responded, “Why **wouldn't it be?**” I gulped and put the pill in my mouth. But I suddenly began to shrink. I started to look... human. And soon, I wasn't a monster anymore.

“You... saved me?”

“Yes, Anna, you're okay now! You're okay!” she responded. There were tears in her eyes, but for some reason, she was smiling. “Just please remember to take one pill twice a day, and you'll be fine.”

“Ok, mom.”

A few months later...

I woke up, and I began to get ready for my first day of school.

Anna... Yes? ***Don't take the pills. She laced them with poison.*** I'd been going to therapy for the past few months.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “But I'm not going to listen to you anymore.” I took the pill.

Anna, you're making a big mistake! And it wasn't long before I was met with silence.

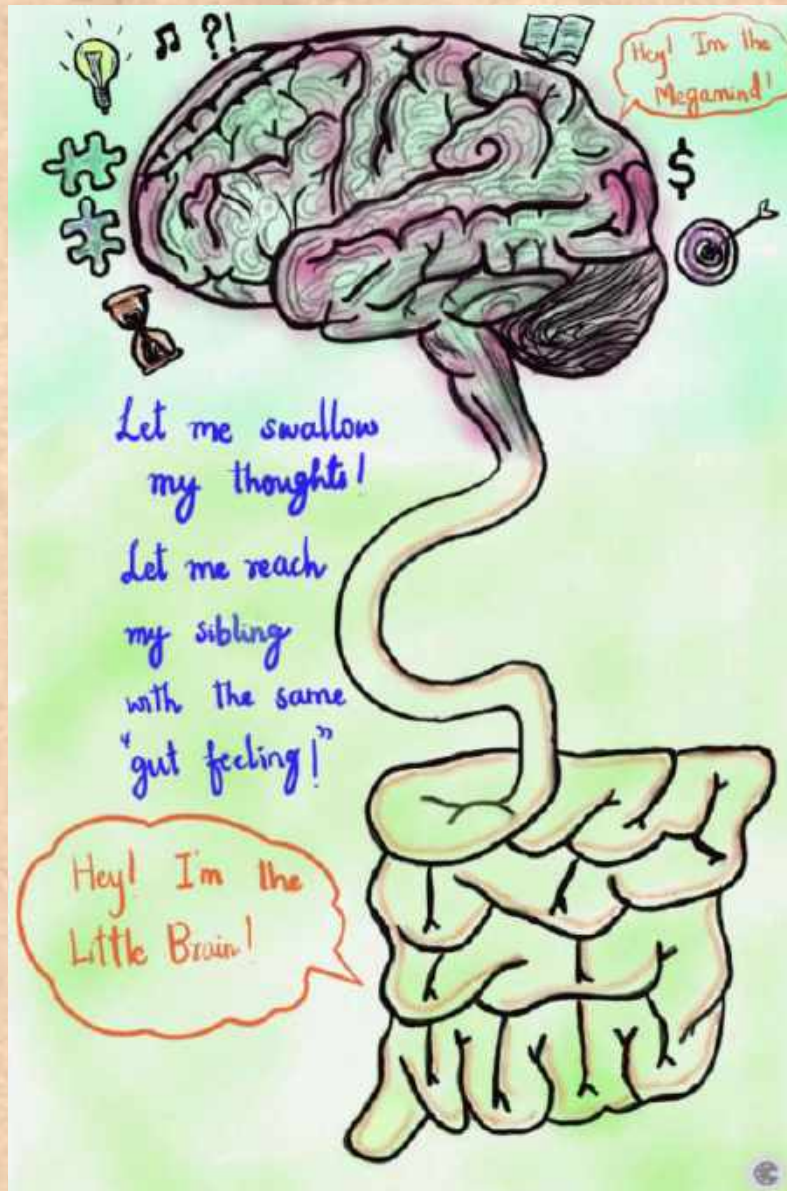
I got into the car and put my seatbelt on.

“Anna?” my mom asked.

“Yes Mom?”

“You can still attend classes remotely. We don’t have to go to school if you don’t think you’re ready yet.” I smiled.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” I responded. “I think I can do this.”



GUT FEELING
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vastharyudu)

Timeless

By Helena Kohlhoff

the wind is wishing me to sleep // and i feel like i'm from another planet // full of love and hope
and things i've never known before // i take off my jewelry in the afterglow of friendship // of a
late night // with blurred edges and smiles // the world has been so kind to me lately // i am so
grateful for her grace on this moonless night // i've carved memories into the sky // messy and wet
// from the last remnants of a snowfall in the new year // we walked and laughed like we didn't live
in a city // like time wasn't right behind us if we looked back // but we wouldn't // because we've
made these streets our own // with memories as the strongest currency // we may never be known
by the gods // but we're known by each other // and far fewer souls bear that honor

mama's new kitten

By Fridarose Mohammad

For my 19th birthday, Mama gave me a cat. I had begged and pleaded for one for years, but my little brother was allergic. After Christmas in Istanbul—meeting Ammati for the first and only time in this life—and my brother going out of his way to pet each cat he saw, he and Mama conspired to get one for me. A little three-month-old kitten, tiny as could be, was mine. The one person not on board was Bubba. Mama forced Bubba into saying yes to the kitten, but she allowed him to choose the kitten's name. *Hanouni, someone from Beit Hanoun— “the house of kindness” — home.* I wanted to name him Beans.

Last month, Bubba was getting ready to drive home and a kitten ran up to him. November in Wisconsin, in the middle of the woods, is no place for a kitten, so he scooped her up and drove her home. “For you, her name is *Hadiya*” — *gift*, Bubba declared to Mama. She wanted to name her Orla.

Hadiya now sits on Mama’s lap, competing with Hanouni for her attention. Poor Hanouni was kicked out of his favorite chair—*just like all the other Hanounies*. My brother and I tease Bubba—that he secretly likes cats like the rest of us. Now my brother sends me photos of Hadiya sleeping next to Bubba. Bubba also sends me photos. He sends me photos of Ammati, not in Beit Hanoun, but in Istanbul, surrounded by kittens.

Things I Wish I Could Tell Her

By Helena Kohlhoff

The grass is growing green
in the middle of January.

I went to the beach
and didn’t die.

I’m waking up
to the sunrise again.

The world kept turning.

I am okay.

Beneath

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

I was never exactly the curious type.

As a kid, while the other children would be pulling up rocks and peering at the bugs beneath, diving into ponds to disturb the tadpoles, or poking at a snake as it shed its skin, I stayed far, far away from anything that could get me in any sort of trouble.

I guess a part of it was the overbearing presence of my mother. I was never allowed to take the bus to school or walk home with friends. She told me the district hired horrible drivers and I would get in an accident, and that if I tried to walk home me and my friends would get abducted by a predator. Sleepovers and playdates were off the table, because who knows what habits I would pick up from other families? The same went for extracurriculars. My mother told me that good grades would be enough to get into the nearby college once I turned eighteen, so there was no use in taking part in “any of *that*”. She told me plenty of stories about all the ways these things could get me hurt or worse, so I never bothered to investigate. My childhood naivete is sort of funny in retrospect.

These trends carried on to high school, and of course they also infested any possible attempts at dating. Heh. *Attempts*. Like I even tried. The first day of high school, I remember my mother glaring at the other girls in their short skirts and low-cut tops.

“Whores.” My mother would scoff. “They’ll be pregnant in a month.”

After years of being raised like this, I was very much a follower of the “curiosity killed the cat” mantra, which ended up being quite useful for my choice of work. As it turned out, good grades were *not* enough to get into the college, so I ended up becoming a housekeeper. It wasn’t exactly pleasant work, but my discretion for the strange things I would find in my employers’ homes made me quite popular.

I worked about forty-five minutes away from the town where I lived, because God knows I didn't need to be cleaning the homes of the "whores" from my high school that had all gotten married immediately after graduation. Plus, the city where my company was located had numerous wealthy families residing there.

Again, my discretion made me valuable.

If a client told me not to go into the basement, I wouldn't. If they said not to clean out drawers, I didn't. And if they told me not to tell their spouse about their affair, I stayed quiet. I picked up the underwear the pool boy left behind and cleaned shirt collars of red lipstick. Once, I even pretended that a pregnancy test was mine.

I knew it was just business. Money is money.

So, when I received an offer in the mail to work as a live-in maid at one of the biggest homes in the city, I took it immediately. The pay almost made my eyes bulge out of my skull; I hadn't ever seen so many zeroes in this line of work. I didn't even bat an eye at the non-disclosure agreement I needed to sign.

For that much money? I was willing to keep any secret.

On my first day of work, I arrived at the massive manor with a couple of bags and a suitcase that contained my belongings. It was separated from the other houses, being at the end of the long stretch of road that led up a hill. The architecture seemed to be gothic-inspired, with tall windows, sharp roof accents, and a sort of castle-like layout that clashed against the more modern homes farther down the road. It was dark, too, not in color but in demeanor; the stark-white house was surrounded by a tall fence made up of thick stone columns and wrought iron. The columns were all topped with demon-faced gargoyles, their expressions frozen in horrific screams. Their claws gripped the columns that were underfoot, and small cracks were visible in the stone beneath them.

As I walked up to the place, I felt the creeping feeling that someone was watching me. Almost instinctively, I looked up to the third floor level of windows... and saw a figure immediately disappear behind the curtains, like shadows when lights are turned on. I almost thought that I hallucinated it, but that pricking feeling in my gut, the growing sense of fear... that can't be imagined.

My analysis of what my stomach was trying to convey to me was interrupted by the front door suddenly opening.

From behind the large double-doors was a tall, lithe man dressed in a dark-colored pinstriped suit. His pale skin almost blended in with his white shirt, and the red necktie he wore made it look like his throat was slit by a knife. The man's pale blond hair looked well-maintained at first glance, but the few stray hairs that were out of place destroyed the possibility of perfection, like a mirror with a crack in the corner. His piercing pale blue eyes seemed to stare right through me, and I had the sudden urge to cover myself up with something, *anything*, to stop those eyes from seeing me at all.

"You are the new maid." The man said this like a statement more than a question. His voice had an accent that seemed vaguely Eastern European, but it was completely unrecognizable from any that I had ever heard before.

At his words, I just nodded. He opened the doors wider and motioned for me to enter. The entrance opened out into the large foyer, and the characteristic that stuck out to me immediately was the pure age of everything. I suppose I should have guessed it would have looked like this from the outside, but the thick layer of dust that covered most of the surfaces and the enormous cobwebs in all the corners caught me off-guard, to say the least.

“I do not come down often. I spend most of my time on the third floor.” The man, my employer, spoke from his place behind me. “You do not go to the third floor.” Again, I said nothing and just nodded. The man walked around me and beckoned me further into the house.

“I will show you where you will sleep. It is a nice room. The last one enjoyed it there. Her decorations are still up. You can change them. Or not.” He hardly moved a muscle as he spoke, like anything other than his mouth moving would disturb his peace. When the man finished speaking, he turned around sharply and kept walking, forcing me to hurriedly pick up my bags and follow him.

For what seemed like an hour, my employer led me through the massive house. It was like a labyrinth; with all the turns we made, it seemed as though we should be ending up in the same places and wandering in circles, and yet every hallway was distinct. Each one had a different set of paintings on the surrounding walls with their own distinct themes. One set was of western desert scenes. Another was a collection of black-and-white pictures of women’s legs, all in stilettos and some also wearing fishnets. Stranger yet, one of the walls we passed had 5 ceiling-to-floor paintings of the progression of a decaying hand; the first had the hand fully intact, the next had grayish discolored skin, then one by one the flesh disintegrated until the final painting was just bone. What stood out the most, though, was a portrait of my employer. It sat at the end of the final hallway we entered, where the maze finally landed at a dead end. I thought that the portrait was a photograph at first, until we got closer and I could see every individual brush stroke that made up his face and hair. The only characteristic of the portrait that was not true-to-life was the red tinges around his eyes and hairline. It looked as though the artist had tried to give him crimson eyeliner and a straight scar right along the edge of his hair. Next to the painting was a dark door. I hardly even noticed it against the red wallpaper that was beginning to peel off the wall like dead skin. My employer

opened it with a silver key off the ring that I had just noticed he was carrying, and he pushed the door open with a slow *creak*.

The room's walls were covered with a pale, dingy yellow paper with a faint floral and ivy design on it. The floors were wooden, and a large brown rug was thrown on top of it as if to give some façade of coziness. The previous occupant's "decorations", as my employer called them, consisted of a vase of wilted roses on the nightstand, a couple of porcelain doves cracked in various places on the windowsill, and a framed picture on the dresser of a black cat. I entered the room and set my bags down at the foot of the bed, then turned back to the doorframe where the man was still standing.

"I will ring for you if I need you immediately." He pointed to a series of bells on the wall, each labeled with a different room name. "I pay you on Fridays. Eat whatever you want. Do not go to third floor."

Without another word, he closed the door behind him and left me in the empty, solitary silence.

Over the next few weeks, I wouldn't get "ringed" for anything. So, I busied myself with dusting and polishing all the surfaces I could reach, though with the strange decorations and setup of the place I could never get to everything I wanted. As my employer decreed, I never even considered going up to the third floor. In the night I would hear the distant creaking, squeaking, and thumping of his footsteps coming down or going up the stairs. *Step step step. Thud. Step step step. Thud. Step step step. Thud.*

It was peculiar. I couldn't imagine in what manner he was moving to make those sorts of noises. I figured since the stairs were a bit far away I may have been hearing the old building shifting and resting against the earth and wind.

The next morning when I came out with my duster and other supplies, ready to get my daily duties done with, I encountered a long, dark stain on the floor. It ended just at the front door, and as my eyes followed it I found that it continued all the way up the stairs. As I followed it, I found that it led all the way to the door at the top of the staircase. All the way to the third floor.

I spent the rest of the day mopping the floor. The water was like fruit punch by the time I was done. I never saw my employer that day, and I never brought it up with him. It was as though nothing had happened at all.

I had been working at the house for almost two months when, for the first time, I heard it.

Dingdingding.

I woke up slowly, thinking that I had imagined it and desperately wanting to go back to sleep. However, once again...

Ding. Dingding.

I sat up in my bed and, as my eyes adjusted, I could just barely see through the darkness that one of the bells on the wall was moving back and forth. Turning on my bedside light, I looked up at the label to see where I was needed.

The scratchy, rusting text read only, "Third Floor".

I pulled on some jeans and a plain black shirt before rushing out my door to the stairs. Despite every instinct in my body screaming at me to not be stupid, I practically sprinted up the stairs until I reached the door at the top of the stairs. As my mother's orders barked like a doberman in my head, intermingling with visions of every disgusting thing I had ever seen in the homes of my employers, I grabbed the cold metal doorknob, twisted, and pushed in.

The difference in temperature between the third floor and the rest of the house was obvious immediately. I stepped inside the room and shivered against the cold, but continued walking in

regardless. There was a dampness about the room, like it had somehow just rained. To accompany that feeling, a light *drip, drip, drip* echoed from somewhere in the room. My shoes squeaked against the floor, and I started to regret coming in more and more. “I... I’m here!” I called out.

At the sound of my voice, I heard the floor creak against the sound of footsteps. Something moved from the darkness somewhere in front of me to my right and behind me. I stood there, frozen, waiting for something to happen.

“...turn the light on.” My employer’s voice, shaky and muffled, sounded from behind me. At this point, my eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness and I could just barely see a lamp on a table in the corner of the room. I lumbered towards it, arms outstretched in front of me like a zombie.

I turned it on.

The lamp was dim, but I could at least see my hands in front of me as well as the walls and floor of the room. The light casted a waxy yellow cascade over everything, like I was looking at an old photograph. Slowly and hesitantly, I turned around.

What I saw burned into my mind forever. I still can’t really make sense of it. My employer was standing there, completely nude. I could see his clothing, including the white shirt that matched his skin, piled up behind him. But it wasn’t his nakedness that had me standing there agape.

It was the fact that his skin was crooked.

The man was grabbing onto his face, pulling it like a child pulling off a rubber Halloween mask. But it wasn’t coming off. He pulled and pulled, making the skin stretch like saltwater taffy. I could see beneath the white flesh the red, throbbing underside that would be revealed once he removed his face fully.

The rest of his body was sloughing off with every pull, looking more and more misshapen and loose the more he struggled. It was a violent movement, violent and unnatural.

There was movement beneath the flesh on his sides, like something was trying to free itself. It was then that I realized why I had been called.

I let my instincts carry me over to him, like I was on autopilot. Without a second thought, I grabbed ahold of the skin from his face, joining him in the effort to pull it off. It was waxen and soft, and with our combined force I could feel it slowly pulling away. We heaved back and forth, back and forth, the floor stressed and creaking under our movement until suddenly... the whole of his face came off in my hands with a foul *riiip*.

I stood there, holding the fleshy mask in my two hands, completely unfazed by the blood dripping from the underside of it. My employer paused for a moment, watching me, before continuing his (albeit more subdued) shuffling motions. From there, it was like a kid taking off footed pajamas; he tore off the skin from his neck and shoulders, peeling it down off each arm into separate pieces. Then, he took off pieces from his torso, then finally his legs. The dripping noises from before were even more plentiful as it seemed as though he was bleeding from every part of his body.

With the flesh gone, I could see what had been moving beneath the skin on the sides of his abdomen. There were two insectile limbs on each side that were now stretching and shuddering in perfect harmony, as if they were taking in fresh air after being contained for God knows how long. My employer stood there, his two monstrous sets of limbs outstretched alongside his scarlet, raw, pulsating arms.

After a few moments, I started moving again and picked up the sheets of skin like I was picking up laundry. I piled them up in my arms, ignoring the still-constant *drip, drip, drip* sounds from the skin and from my employer. I moved carefully towards the door, repeatedly adjusting my grip on the great mound of flesh. The slipperiness of the blood underfoot made it difficult, but it was really no different than moving sopping-wet clothes from the washing machine.

He stood there, watching me like a vulture as I departed. He made no noise, not from movement nor from his voice.

“Ring the bell again if you need me.” I said before shutting the door behind me, leaving the whole encounter behind. I disposed of the mound and mopped up the floors behind me, though I avoided the third floor completely.

My employer didn’t call me up there again.

I’ve been working at the house for a year now. I’ve never told anyone what goes on here. After all, what would I be without my reputation?

My discretion makes me valuable.

My discretion keeps me alive.

Severed.

By Johnathan Dooley

The moon shines bright through the windows best left open. Warm winds wave tattered curtains back and forth. The kids are asleep, but he sits, shaking. How many more nights like this, he wonders. The speed of Toyotas outside cause the windows to rattle and shake. It wasn’t always like this. The air was conditioned and kept cool then. The curtains were for privacy. No car sped by after sunset, and certainly not fast enough to startle. Then, she would lie with the kids, and he would be anywhere else. “To many more nights like this!” he’d shout with a laugh.



UNTITLED
Bird Berg

Mother

By Mackenzie Bergemann

“Good morning, Buttercup!” Clara reached into the crib and pulled out her baby girl. She swaddled her in a fresh blanket and rocked her back and forth in her arms, softly humming Rock-a-bye-baby. The toaster dinged in the next room and Clara returned to the kitchen to feed her seven-year-old daughter.

Raven sat at the table staring blankly into the distance. Clara smiled at her, setting the toast in front of the little girl. Raven stared up at her mother with wide black eyes, void of any emotion as she watched her mother carrying her baby sister, humming softly.

“Mother, what are we doing today?” Her voice was soft and quiet, but there was a chilling quality to it, sending shivers up her mother’s spine.

“We need to go to the store, but I’ll take you to the park first.”

Raven just stared back at her, not responding, not touching her breakfast.

Her mother stared back, “Your hair is so dirty, honey,” she muttered to herself. She reached out a hand to touch Raven but paused a few inches from her daughter’s face. For a moment her hand just hung in the air, and she seemed to be frozen in place. Then she shook her head lightly and a smile rose on her face. “I’m going to get dressed and then we’ll head out.” She carefully laid Buttercup in a basket on the table. “Watch your sister for a few minutes.” She moved into the next room but left the door open, watching over her children from a distance.

Raven stared across the table at Buttercup, her eyes boring holes in the infant. Her face was expressionless, her eyes unblinking. Her little sister didn’t stir from inside the bundle of blankets. Raven stood up on her chair, leaning over the table to get a closer look. She reached forward to move the blankets and peek at Buttercup’s face.

Clara rushed forward, “Raven!”

Raven’s hand halted, hovering above the basket. Clara snatched the basket away from her daughter. Raven stepped down from the chair, eyes fixed on her mother. Clara only looked at Buttercup as she adjusted the blankets that swaddled her baby.

Raven slowly shuffled past her mother toward the front door, her movements lethargic. Clara looked up as her daughter walked out of the room. With a protective hold on the basket, she followed her to the door. Raven waited for her mother to enter the foyer and open the door for the little girl before walking out.

Clara set the basket on the floor and gathered the infant girl in her arms before following Raven outside. The two of them walked down the thirteen front steps from the door to the gate. A wrought iron fence encircled their house. The shabby little house was slowly starting to fall apart, and it was barely big enough for the three of them, but that didn’t seem to bother Clara. She said that it gave the house character and felt that it was fitting, though she never explained why. They lived on the edge of town, close enough to stores, but far from the watchful eyes of neighbors.

Clara had been married for as long as Raven had been alive, but when Buttercup was born, things changed. Those changes caused her husband to pack his bags and disappear overnight. Clara liked to say that she was unfazed by this and that she didn’t need him anyway, but the other people in town judged her harshly.

When Raven reached the gate, she turned her head and looked back. She stared as her mother reached the last step, pulled a large key from her purse, and unlocked the gate.

“You’re so excited to go to the park.” Her mother giggled when she caught Raven’s eyes fixed on her.

Raven ignored the comment and walked through the gate alone. She kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk, her foot passing over it. She remained emotionless, staring at it under her foot.

Her mother rushed up to her, squeezing her cheek. "You need to be careful, honey. Don't run off on your own," she reprimanded. "I can't worry about you being hurt." Her mother grasped her hand, entwining their fingers. Raven said nothing but allowed her mother to hold her hand.

The park was colorful and filled with cheerful children. Other moms sat on benches watching their children play in the sand. Several little children ran in circles, tagging each other and shrieking with joy. Raven's mother pulled her toward the playground.

"Hello!" she said brightly. Clara waved at the mothers playing with their children and started to walk toward them. The mothers turned to look at Clara's smiling face as she greeted them, but they did not share Clara's happiness. Their faces turned pale, a mix of paste white and ill green. Without so much as a sound, they ran in all directions, rushing to their children and lifting them up in their arms. Within minutes the playground was empty, and the only sound was the rustling of leaves in the trees.

Raven looked up at her mother. Clara's graying hair was blowing in the wind, a small scowl on her previously happy face. She looked down at Raven and her smile returned.

"Well then." Clara paused, her eyes searching Raven's perpetually blank face. "Let's go to the store instead,"

Raven said nothing, staring back at her and then turning to look across the playground. On the other side of the jungle gym, in the grassy field next to the woods, a hole was dug in the ground and had been roped off with police tape. Clara turned her head, following Raven's gaze. When she saw what Raven was looking at, she gasped lightly and covered Raven's eyes with her free hand.

"Everything will be alright," she whispered to herself.

Raven just looked at her blankly.

Clara gathered herself, placing a smile on her face for her daughter and said, “To the store then.”

Raven said nothing, only walking in step with her mother.

As they walked the four blocks to the grocery store, they noticed that the attitude of the other townsfolk matched that of the mothers at the park. As Clara passed by with her children, people on the street stared in horror at them. Raven didn’t seem to notice, but Clara did. She glared at each one until they scurried off. Several of them hugged their children close or used their bodies as shields to protect them. Clara continued walking, her hand clasping Raven’s.

“Only another block,” Clara muttered to herself.

“Clara.” A voice boomed behind them.

Raven’s mother stopped walking.

“Clara, please give me the baby.” His voice was calm and unwavering.

Raven’s mother turned around, but her hands did not leave either child.

The man wore a long overcoat and towered over the other police officers who stood near him.

Clara radiated hostility and her grip on Raven tightened. “Never. These are my daughters,” she spat at him.

The calm look on his face faltered. “Daughters?”

Two officers closed in behind Clara and grabbed her by the arms.

“Don’t drop the child!” the detective yelled, rushing forward and grabbing the baby.

“Sorry, Detective,” one of the officers mumbled. When her hands were empty, they quickly forced them behind her back and into cuffs.

He sighed in relief and looked down at the swaddled infant. His face contorted in horror. He’d never seen anything like it before. Her skin was mostly gone but the bone was still covered by

muscle. There was a smell like a decaying animal, and he felt the smell hit his nose too late. His eyes watered, choking on the odor. The blanket was wet, blood and flesh patching it with red. He dropped the baby.

Clara screamed as her baby fell a second time. “Raven! Raven! Save her!”

There was a horrible cracking sound.

The detective came to his senses and approached, carefully picking up the body. The sight of an infant’s dead body was more horrifying than he could have imagined.

Clara called out to Raven, tears pouring from her eyes, but Raven just stared back at her. Raven’s eyes were devoid of any emotion, her hair caked with dirt. Worms and bugs began to crawl out of her clothes and hair. Her figure became gaunt and pale white. She stood there, wasting away in front of her mother.

Clara screamed, the realization that she’d killed her own children hitting her.

Raven’s small figure wavered, becoming transparent before Clara’s eyes. Her skin turned pale blue, shimmering in the sunlight as she began to disintegrate.

When the ghost of Raven disappeared from Clara’s sight, she wailed, her legs giving out, her body slumping over. She went silent, save for a few sobs. Her daughters were gone. Dead and gone and it was all her fault.

An officer hauled her into a police car, and the detective sighed heavily. He felt all the energy leaving his body and he sat down on the curb. One of the officers sat down next to him.

“What happened to her?” the officer asked. “She seemed to believe that her daughters were alive.”

“Clara killed both her girls. We found Raven’s body this morning in a shallow grave in the park. We had no idea if the infant was still alive. Ever since she had that baby, she’s been going

crazy. Guess it was only a matter of time before she went off the deep end.” He ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “She killed her own children. How could anyone do that?”



SUNSET SYMPHONY
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vasthavyudu)

In Case You Forgot

By R.E. Delikat

They said you might not remember after the accident. So, I thought you might like to read about what a magnificent person you are. When you could still stand you were tall, and dominated the room really. Both with your height and that smile. You always wore jeans. You couldn't stand early mornings, and you always smelled a little bit like woodsmoke. You never really thought about what you wanted, just about what was right. That's why you're in the situation you're in. The morning of the accident you picked me up in your twenty year old Chevrolet Monte Carlo. ACDC was playing. You were drinking a large McDonalds coffee.

Traffic was bad. You took me grocery shopping because I needed yogurt cups, peanut butter, and some kind of snack to bring to the game night tonight.

As we drove away from the Aldi parking lot we heard some gunshots and you made a joke about America's second Civil war. As you drove there came into sight a bridge where people were protesting the latest bill causing a ruckus in DC. They took up the entire. Span of the bridge. It was the police who we had heard shooting. The protest was becoming an all out riot. Someone had let a fourteen year old come to what was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration. The kid was being nearly trampled. You pulled the car over and told me to stay put. You ran into the melee. You tried to pull the kid to safety but a scared cop (no more than twenty) took your height for aggression. I got out of the car. You shoved the unconscious kid at me and I drug him behind the car. The cop was still gripping his gun white knuckled. You backed up, hands raised. You were against the barrier on the edge of the bridge. A woman behind the cop stumbled from the tear gas and bumped into the cop. He fired. The bullet hit you dead center of your chest and you stumbled backwards off the bridge.

Absolution

By Isabella Burkard

Like the flicker of an open flame
on a downturned palm,
the memories come back to me
sporadic
and imperceptible.

Papercut sharp.

I have already grieved and forgiven the
obvious.

What remains are the subtleties,
the shards of glass you step on
months after
the vessel shattered.

Ghosts born postmortem.

How painstaking it must have been to craft your
armor

link by link,
word by word,
dripping with guilt and undeserved sympathy,
twisting my good intentions
into a godless absolution
you know you never deserved.

And I the doe slaughtered on your altar.



ENLIGHTENED

Nicole Smith

Was I not the perfect victim,
too proud to admit defeat?
I could never say the words.
Averse, now and forever, to
the vulnerability
of my own weakness
and worse—my own lapse of judgment.
If I am not a living seismograph of humanity,
who am I?

I cower at my failings.

But if I cannot blame you,
I must defend you
to those who do so in my stead.
Judas walks within me.
How long does it take
to forget
the little traumas?

Will my bones always remember?

Storm clouds lie in wait,
and it is exhausting
keeping them in.
They have been gathering for so long.
Lightning was never meant
to be contained

by mortal hands.

Relieve me of my burden.

You are not worthy
of my time,
or effort,
or my unconscious attentions.

The deepest violation?
You are not worthy of my words.
You are a waste of my talent.

But, for once, you will bow to my needs.

Because this is not about you.
My heart deserves
the room to breathe.
I deserve the catharsis of my craft.
You may be the subject,
but this
is a subjugation.

You are merely the sacrifice
in my prayer
for peace of mind.



JAI GANESHA
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vasthavyudu)

first love

By Noelle Gómez

the first girl
who kissed me
was tissue napkin

paper pressed my
raspberry jam
butter smeared

mouth into the
crook of her neck
prayed no one

could notice
the way I lingered
at the shape

my lips left
on her papery
soft smooth skin

Stuck Between

By Reese Losieczka

I thought it was a conspiracy until it happened to my mother; just another overdramatic story the fearmongers online shared. I thought anyone who believed the idea of getting trapped in a dream was stupid and naïve. That was until I walked into my mother's room one morning and found her still in bed. At first I thought she had just drunk too much again so I set a glass of water next to her and left. When I returned from my lecture and found my mother still in bed with the cup of water untouched, I began to worry.

"Mom," I said, my voice stern. I gave her a small shove, but she didn't wake. Her skin felt cold. I leaned over her and my heart sank at the sight of the rapid movement behind her eyelids. She wasn't dead if her eyes were moving; I knew that for sure.

Still, I called the police. I knew my mother would scold me for doing so, but I was scared and I didn't *get* scared.

I was scared all the time after that. I was scared when the police took me to the hospital, following behind the ambulance that held my mother. I was scared when the nurses took one look at my mother and exchanged a look. I was scared when the doctor said my mother wouldn't be waking up. Ever. She wasn't dead, but she wouldn't wake up. She was stuck in her dreams.

I struggled with sleeping. I didn't want to get stuck in a dream. I wasn't as strong as I wanted to be. If I fell asleep and got lulled into a perfect dreamworld, I didn't know if I'd have the strength to wake up. Even if my real life wasn't the best, I couldn't leave Didi.

I sat next to her as we watched Netflix in bed. I couldn't focus on whatever shitty movie we had on because Didi kept fidgeting. I said her name softly and she looked up at me.

“What’s wrong, Didi? You look... *tired*,” I said. I whispered the last word even though we were alone. It was treated like taboo. Some said it unleashed terrible luck onto the person in question. I didn’t use to believe in supernatural stuff like that, but now I couldn’t be too careful.

Didi looked awful to be frank. The circles under her eyes were dark and their sag matched her body language. When she blinked it was slower than normal and it looked as if she was blinking one eye at a time. Her hair lacked its normal shine and sat atop her head in a knot instead.

“It’s getting harder to wake up every day, Millie,” Didi said. Even her voice sounded tired. The low drawl was a stark contrast to her usual chipper tone.

Dread turned the blood in my veins to ice. Didi was the only person I had left. If I lost her, I didn’t know if I’d be able to keep going. There were theories that said the dreams people get trapped in contain the victim’s happiest memories or desires. If I were to be trapped in a dream, I know Didi would be there- that’s not what I was afraid of. Dream Didi would not be real Didi and I know I would know the difference. No dream could compare to what life with Didi was like.

“Don’t think like that,” I practically begged. I grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it. Didi’s frown stayed and I kissed her lips as an attempt to erase it. Didi only grabbed the back of my head to keep my lips attached to hers. I followed her lead with zero resistance as she took her shirt off.

“I love you,” I whispered into her mouth, dragging my hands across her warm skin. I could feel her veins pumping blood into her heart and I was reminded that she was here and she was alive. I didn’t even care if she didn’t say it back.

I fell asleep easily for the first time in months.

When the sun shone through my opened curtains, effectively waking me up from its blinding light, I forced my eyes open. Last night felt like a dream and if actually was, I would’ve had a hard

time waking up from it. When I turned over and saw Didi's sleeping form next to me, I smiled at realizing it was not a dream.

I kissed her bare shoulder and scooted closer to her, expecting to find her normal, furnace-like heat radiating off of her. I flinched at the cold I felt instead.

"Didi," I mumbled, shaking her body gently. She was a light sleeper. She should have woken up by now. Her eyes moved rapidly behind her eyelids. They moved faster than I thought humanly possible.

"Didi," I said, louder now. I shook her more aggressively, her limp body flailing at my insistent pushing.

"*Didi!*" Her face looked distorted through my tears. I struggled to talk through my sobs. "Didi, don't leave me here, please!"

I stopped shaking her and tilted my head back as if that would stop the onslaught of tears in my eyes. My breaths came out in gasps. My lungs pushed against my ribcage so hard it felt like my bones were about to break. I looked at Didi again and the sight of her closed eyes pushed me over the edge again. Her eyes were moving under her eyelids. She was there somewhere. She was still Didi. If I could only get her to hear me and wake up, she would still be my Didi.

I repeated her name over and over again, but I didn't have a voice anymore so it sounded like painful wheezing. I hugged her limp body to my chest, my tears falling onto her skin and for a split second I was hopeful that my love for her would wake her from her endless slumber. But I wasn't that stupid or naïve. I knew no matter how much I loved her I couldn't make her choose me over a lifetime of endless happiness.

New Years

By Helena Kohlhoff

I am naked in the snowbank,
and I can feel everything. Jagged
crystals and jagged pasts taking
hold of my hips. I think I'm ready
to be an artifact. Raw porcelain
buried under history and lost
between the centuries.

I am utterly alone, and for once
that's okay. The gray of my hometown
doesn't define me anymore. I am born
anew in this cold reality. My name
can no longer be defined by the alphabet.

I am so much more than worldly.
The Universe is trying to consume me,
but I won't let it. My existence is a protest.
I am planting myself right here, at the bottom
of the heavens and the top of hell. Cracked
and free. I find myself freezing in the snow—

more alive than anybody else and learning

how to fall in love with myself

for once.

MAGICAL MOON
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vastharyudu)



Homegrown Talent

A Sampling of Creative Writing Club Prompts

The Honors Creative Writing Club meets weekly, and we have different prompts at each meeting. This section of the literary magazine is a compilation of prompts written by an assortment of club members throughout the year. We aimed to highlight the eclectic and talented pieces from our meetings in our prompt selection. Enjoy!

One Sentence Stories

She set the ornate crown on the bedside table as she got into a bed only made for one.



THE BRIDE

*Sai Madhan Dongur
(whitepaper vasthavyudu)*

She drank the lemonade on her kitchen floor and wondered when it stopped
tasting like freedom.

He said he would finally be happy when he crossed the horizon, so he spent
the rest of his life walking.

By Helena Kohloff

She tried everything to save her, and when it didn't work, she tried it all again.

By Allison Bass

The piano player keeled over his instrument, the song left unfinished.

A woman knelt in the snow, gazing at the trail of footprints that kept going without her.

The beer bottle was left half-empty as the man fell asleep, ballet recital tickets still in his pocket.

The knife was rinsed of the blood and returned to the kitchen drawer without another word.

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

With her dying breath, she prayed he was wrong to a god he had never believed in.

Under different circumstances, maybe the ring would've been
enough.

By Isabella Burkard



SUN AND THE LADY

*Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vasthanyudu)*

All the man in uniform could do was crouch down, look at my
children, and apologize.

By Trevor Delaney

Perspective of Snow

The Descent

“catch me if you can,” she taunted smiling wide
those eyes held secrets one could only dream of
with sharp breath and rosy cheeks, she spun freely
never slowing down

arms flung open in reverence, she gave in
gravity as her metronome in the clouds
she fell from their heaven to hers, without rules
still just as holy

it felt more like a homecoming than the end
as if everything she had done had led to this
when she made it there, the world blurred—soft and white
she could rest in peace

By Helena Kohlhoff

In a spiraling alignment of frozen fractals I was born, hurtling down from the clouds. The descent was quick and sharp, gusts of wind throwing me this way and that. Gathering speed, I plummeted towards the earth, until I didn't. A wave of chill snatched my momentum, and in an instant, instead of racing to meet the earth, I became lighter. I was truly floating. My newly elegant limbs and intricate pattern tumbled gently in the breeze, amongst hundreds of thousands of my brethren. It was then I got my first glimpse of what was to be my home. Layers of my kin already coated the ground, making it a pure white. As I drifted slowly downward, I began to make out shapes among the barren white landscape. Large boxes in rows, slightly smaller moving boxes, and strange bipedal creatures came slowly into focus as I got closer and closer to the ground. I immediately took pity on these creatures, how sad it must be to have only four limbs and look so asymmetrical and imperfect, especially compared to my flawless beauty. As I fell even further, I began to realize how huge these creatures truly were. Thousands of times my size, they were giants. What a shame, to be that large and not even have a hundredth of my grace and allure. I floated down towards a smaller being, sitting amongst my millions of brethren. As I got closer to the creature, I began to make out more detail. It seemed to be covered by different colors, padding its form. How sad that these creatures must cover themselves for being too ugly, unlike my pristine form, in complete, flawless view. A gust of wind pushed me towards the creature's face, and in a puff of warm air, my perfection disappeared, melting me into nothing as quickly as I formed, and I was no more.

By Allison Bass

She dances, light as a feather and white as a swan.
Her garment crystallized and bejeweled so she sparkles in the sunlight.
She is delicate; a single touch from me would end her, so she stays far away.

She glides, through the air and across my vision.
Her pale skin luminescent and her body without flaw.
At first glance, she is just like the others, a part of a matching set.
Looking closer, you see the details and intricacies that set her apart.

I wish I could keep her for myself.
An idol of perfection in a world of faults.
I reach out a hand to touch her, to catch her, to love her.

She is caught.

She disappears before my eyes.

Perfection cannot stay.

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

I am winter's comfort.

I am the only concession made
in the midst of the cruel wind
and hard earth.

--When nature is at her least forgiving,

I am the beauty
that softens the blow.

I fall lightly on the most delicate
of moments.

The mourners in the churchyard wipe me
from their eyes mingled
with their own frozen tears.

The lovers on the doorstep
smile like globed figurines
at each other and the sky.

The anonymous masses
moving through city streets
must yield to me and the world

I create.

For I have the power to stop time,
to render humanity helpless,
to free them from their calendars,

and clocks,
and cars.
If I so choose,
I can make it all stand still.

I cleanse the earth,
and for the briefest of moments
all is pure and white.
I am the delight
in a child's eye.
I am the blanket
for a freshly laid corpse.
I bring from the heavens
a natural rebirth of the world.

By Isabella Burkard



SWISS ALPS
Sai Madhav Dongur
(whitepaper vasthavyudu)

The Butterfly Effect

Across the street from me there was a large flock of birds. They were fighting over something, a loose fry or perhaps someone's honor. Either way, I chose not to interrupt them. I turned instead to take the long way back to the parking ramp. It had been raining for so many days, and the dry streets were a welcome change even if there was still a chill in the air. I walked slowly, having nowhere pressing to be. A new bookstore had opened on the corner. I hadn't been inside yet. Now was as good a time as any.

I wandered inside. It was the kind of place that serves tea and hot cocoa in little paper cups. A grey cat wound its way around the shelves. It found me in the mystery section, and I stooped to scratch it behind the ears. While doing so, a book on the bottom shelf caught my eye. It was a small red leatherbound volume, older than anything else around it. I picked it up and thumbed through a few pages. The paper was thin and yellowed, the words handwritten. Inside the front cover in neat print was written "Property of Mamie Shoe".

When I left the shop, I was holding the diary in one hand, carefully wrapped and bagged by an employee who said they'd never seen it before, and a paper cup of hot cocoa in the other. I locked myself in my car in the parking lot and read the first few pages. They were dated in the 1960s and from all I could tell Mamie Shoe was your average housewife. She had a husband and three daughters. She wrote about her family, and the neighbors, and the food she was making. They celebrated New Years Day with a sledding trip. I put the diary away and drove home.

I googled Mamie Shoe on my laptop and found an obituary dated in the mid 1970s. The family members listed matched those of the diary. I did the math. She was only thirty-three. Survived by her husband and two of her three daughters. I googled their names as well. One

daughter had died shortly before Mamie of a car accident. Another shortly after Mamie of a medical issue she'd had since childhood. The third was grisly. Her body had been found in the river, too bloated to determine cause of death. It was four years after the death of her mother. Foul play was suspected according to a news article, but ultimately her death was ruled a suicide. Mamie's husband was still alive as far as I could tell. No obituary but not much else on him either.

I flipped to the end of the diary, not sure what I expected to find. It was written years before Mamie had died. The last page sent chills down my spine. It read "I grow more afraid of him every day. The neighbor girl is still missing."

By Isabella Burkard



EARTH'S INTRICACIES
Helena Koblhoff

Nine thousand years ago, our people had no word for unity. Every square mile of land was the personal property of a lord, or a chief, or a king, or a grand vizier, or whatever else the head of the household wanted to call his or herself. Who enforced these borders? You could ask a historian or someone with a really accurate family tree, but the truth is that they changed almost every day. Trying to document the hundreds of independent and most likely completely nonsensical codes of law throughout our history would be a herculean and ultimately pointless task. The point is, we were not a single people, but rather a civil war that would be gawked at by even the most jaded and informed intellectuals of our time.

By the seventh millennium, it became very clear that this seemingly endless chapter of turmoil would finally be closed. In the year 6,200 (or 6,202 depending on who you ask), the first empire would rise. Under the fearless leadership of the Tilbaugh family, our people would proudly enter an age of unparalleled stability. The extravagant emerald standard, crafted with love and an almost unobtainable bright green dye, flew over every home, smithy, and town hall in the newly forged state.

Today, nearly 3 millenia later, the empire is a distant memory. After a long and extremely convoluted process of voluntary and involuntary devolution, the empire was finally officially dissolved in the year 8,037. The millions of green standards that dotted the land were thrown into scrap heaps or repurposed into clothing that could be handed out by the various lords and presidents who wanted to appear charitable. In a matter of decades, the majority of the flags had disappeared.

Yet, there were a few collectors and academics who hoped to preserve the memory of this once world-spanning state. Others, those with a penchant for kitsch, kept them as bathroom ornaments or tablecloths. There were even a few who clung to them as the last vestiges of a

better time, the radicals, the veterans. But the years trudged along, and with every passing day, memories of the empire would fade into the material of history textbooks and grandma's stories. In the year 9,627, Garrid Waylan inherited his mother's shades, which he always thought of as somewhat ugly, and never turned any heads or reminded anyone of days gone. That was until the antelope flood.

Garrid stood over his dinner table, admiring the masterful work he'd done with just one potato and a picture from a cookbook. It was all a salt miner's salary could afford. Well, that, and a ratty set of green window shades. The potato, peeled, diced, and fried in an oily soup, smelled like a dish his uncle used to make, and suddenly he was back home. Back on the farm, shoveling down a handful of diced roots.

The illusion was shattered alongside his green-shaded window. The cheap glass exploded out over the length of his raggedy carpet and in the living room of his tiny hovel stood a bleeding antelope. Suddenly, the other two windows would shatter as well, an ear-piercing mixture of broken glass and suffering antelope filled the air, and Garrid Waylan lay dead on the floor. His throat, still in shock, clamped shut around a particularly thick slice of spud.

Antelopes hate the color green.

By Anthony Lepianka

Love Letters

Dear Moon,

I am everything because of you. You have made me so much more than I was. I am just a girl, and you're just a girl, but together, we create the most beautiful symphony the world has ever seen. I only shine because your brightness reflects on me. My tides only crash gracefully and deadly into shores because of how you move me. I would give my entire being to you if I could, my darling. I know this distance between us seems impossible, but nothing could keep me from loving you—not time, not space, not gravity. I will find you in every being, in every place, in every universe for eternity. I will always be yours, and you will always be mine. You have become a part of my soul, and I cannot imagine existing without you. We are love embodied into tangible things. We are everything the poets dream of. We are the muse and the artwork and everything in between. You are the most beautiful thing anyone has ever seen, and I am so lucky that I get the honor to love you. Thank you for existing.

With all the love I can ever give,

Sea

By Helena Kohlhoff

Life, My love

Although we are so far apart, I wish to express to you my undying affection. The gifts you send to me, from the wizened old trees to the smallest kittens, I treasure forever. I will keep them lovingly in my embrace, as I wish I could hold you. Your beauty, with such color and splendor, is unmatched by any other. Your wit and thoughtfulness has no rival, in any domain. I

love you so, even though we may never be together. I long for your embrace more and more each
eon we spend apart. My love, even just seeing your face would truly complete my eternal being/
I long for the day the cycle of the universe comes into balance, and our domains will be united
into one. Until then, I will wait and long, and treasure each gift with the care I desperately wish I
could show you.

With all my undying love,

Death

By Allison Bass



PRATHIBIMBAM
Sai Madhan Dongur
(whitepaper vastharyudu)

Death, my eternal partner,

I know separation seems daunting. But let us
cherish what we have. A perpetual cycle of
growth and decay upon which the very nature of
everything rides. The death of some necessarily
enables the life of others. And what is life if not the ability
to die? While we see each other not,
we do feel each other The constant give and take, push
and pull, an elaborate dance to which all
creation must step in time. The music of our love rings
out across all, and the glow of my
affection shines bright.

With all my eternal love,

Life

By Trevor Delaney

Dearest Aaron,

I know we often find ourselves at odds. But as we work closer as lawyers, I cannot help but feel an unequivocal and absolute affection for your work. Not just your skills as a lawyer, but the way you carry yourself, speak, sing. The passion is undeniable. And it strikes me deeply. Pardon my forwardness, but, would you care to spend a night with me? My family is away at the Schuyler estate for the summer. And I feel alone.

I have the honor to be, your obedient servant,

A. Ham

By Trevor Delaney

My dearest obedient servant, A. Ham

While I can attest to us being at odds, budding heads one may say, I to carry these quiversome affections for you. I would like nothing more than to spend a night with darling Theodosia will be gone this weekend. You may come over but be discreet, our reputations are on the line. No one must know of our affections, or we will be hung in the streets by our toes. My dearest obedient servant, please come to my estate this weekend. I'll be waiting Til???

Yours,

A. Burr

By Faith Marschel

The Perspective of a Pumpkin

I screamed out silently as the blade drove into my delicate skin again and again. Carving through my flesh and gut as if it were nothing more than a paper-thin barrier. My soft exterior was no match for the serrated steel relentlessly driving into it. I tried to cry out again and again, but to no avail. No matter how I was affected, I was forced to stay still and silent as my skin was hacked into. Without warning, my innards were violently ripped out of my body. I tried to let out a scream, a noise, anything. I was helpless. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak, I had to sit in a suffering silence. But this was not the end of my torture. I felt something being placed in me, heating up to a painful degree. I was torched from the inside out. The flame glowed through the scars in my skin and filled the empty cavity within me with a searing heat. As I burned, I was left in the cold, to die a slow, tortuous death in the dark; just as my ancestors before me had, and my descendants after me will continue to do. As I withered down to nothing, my insides scorched and my outside frostbitten, my only and last thought was a prayer that my children would not suffer the same fate as I.

By Allison Bass

Jeremy sat on the porch contentedly, watching the children waltz by in costumes, some cheap and some strangely ornate. Jeremy didn't know why he knew what a child was or what the holiday of Halloween was or even why he knew that he was a pumpkin, but he figured it was just one of those things he shouldn't concern himself with.

Jeremy had been born just a few days prior when his guts were scooped out with a spoon and his face had been carved from the blank canvas of his body's surface. It had been an excruciating ordeal, one that Jeremy would have screamed gutturally throughout if he had the capability to. He could still vividly remember the feeling of his insides being removed, every slimy lump leaving an ever-growing void behind. Now, that space was only filled by a single candle, which warmed Jeremy physically but still left his inner soul cold and empty.

Jeremy distracted himself by staring at the children. He had heard them gossiping throughout the past week about what they would be dressing up as, and as he recognized some of the children's faces he could finally put the titles to the costumes.

Joshua was a red ninja from his favorite TV show, Ninjago. He kept spinning around in circles and accidentally smacking his sister Kelsey in the face with his candy bag. Kelsey was dressed as what she called a "Grizabella the Glamour Cat", which apparently involved a lot of spandex and furry legwarmers. Kelsey kept bursting into song, at which point Joshua would smack her again.

Behind Joshua and Kelsey were a smattering of other kids out to fill their bags; there was Carl, dressed as the personification of death (Jeremy thought this costume was neat). Sammy and Charlotte were dressed as John F. Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe (parents kept laughing at this pair and Jeremy wasn't quite sure why). Even the weird kid of the street, nicknamed Lunch, was dressed up as his Sonic the Hedgehog OC, Sonic the Fast Food Restaurant (Jeremy didn't know who this was or what it meant, and nobody else seemed to either). Apart from these peculiar children there were a bunch of others also roaming the streets, dressed as everything from witches to the Pope.

Jeremy sat contentedly on his porch for the whole night, until slowly it began to grow dark and the children started to return to their homes. The candle within him extinguished after a strong

gust of wind blew it out, removing the one thing keeping the void within him at bay. Jeremy sat like this for awhile, cold and frustrated with his meaningless existence. Over these past few days he could slowly feel himself growing softer and mushier, as if his very structure was starting to fail him. It was a sickly feeling, sickly and rotten. Jeremy wished he could just die.

Then, Jeremy saw them.

A group of people approaching.

They carried bats and wore big clunky boots that weren't tied correctly. They clearly didn't care much about their appearances, or were just trying not to care in order to be as aloof and chill-seeming as possible.

Teenagers, Jeremy thought as they approached. He wasn't sure where the word came from, only that it made sense.

They crept up the walkway towards the house, laughing and chatting with each other. They weren't afraid of trespassing, and as they approached, Jeremy's fears began to slowly fade too. Finally, they were right in front of him. The one at the front of the group pointed at Jeremy and smiled, and Jeremy wished he could do the same.

Please, Jeremy wished he could cry. Please.

Jeremy's prayers were answered quickly. The teenager in front raised his bat and, with a skillful thwack, the bat crushed Jeremy in half. Within moments Jeremy couldn't think any more, and he was just a pile of orange guts and gore on the wooden porch. The teenagers left, completely unaware of the consciousness they had just removed from existence.

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

The gourd sat atop his throne of enemies. It was a shrine, to his glory of course. He hadn't always been a king. Once he was a simple country boy, but in his adolescence, he was chosen. The people knew he was destined for greatness. They took him to the sacred place and arranged his foes at his feet. They used the bodies of those so clearly ugly, of both face and character, to raise him up. He resided now upon their shoulders, and the world was as it should be.

Pits and mounds full of those less fortunate than himself surrounded him. They were not so horrid as to become his slaves, but these were the common folk. They intermingled with the people, forced to accompany them on their mundane tasks and journeys. The flat black earth was full of these people and their great metal chariots. All of it was his. These subjects, ginormous oafs that they were, worshiped him. They passed by over and over, admiring but never touching. He proudly met their gaze. The gourd pitied them. What simple-minded creatures they must be.

Those most dedicated came to serve him on his throne every so often. He welcomed their presence as a great leader should, with grace and disdain. They did not disturb him much. Mostly they were employed to prod his slaves back into action when they began to rumble or stray. These humble humans rose the gourd back to his proper height. They ensured that he never fell into anonymity. His proud post remained his, at the heart of it all. He was the center of their universe—these poor, sweet, pathetic creatures. Why, they wouldn't know what to do without him. It was a responsibility the gourd welcomed and cherished. He was, after all, so clearly their superior. This misguided world was in true need of someone as great as him.

By Isabella Burkard

I don't remember how I was born. Whenever I try to remember it now, I get flashed an

image that I'm almost certain I myself had manufactured many years after the fact. I see a wild root, frantically growing and shrinking. I see days passing by, months, years. I watch the goats trample through the field, and I remember their final goodbye as they passed into the mountains. I see the cows, I see their chief, a bull with horns black as history guiding his flock to the land the root called home.

Though it writhed and screamed, to them it seemed imperceptibly slow and quiet. They would graze there for centuries, and their chief would disintegrate into the ground countless times. It was only after the third century of this that the root's wailing and thrashing would finally stop as I started to emerge from its tip.

I see time as the cows do now. If my mother still moves, I can't see it, and if she still shrieks, I am deaf to it. However, the cord was never cut, at least not in my first incarnation. I sat by her side for a few weeks, my skin changing color and growing, although I could never actually feel it. After that short period I could call my first childhood, my skin started to change again. What had once been a vibrant orange slowly melted into earthen brown, and I started to collapse. Although I knew I should have been screaming, I didn't care to. It was only when the flies came that I started to worry, but shortly after their arrival, I faded.

I entered a dream, and in this dream, I could see the world as my mother did again. I watched the summers pass over what my outgrown self had called seconds. This time, I wasn't simply watching the panicked thrashing, even though I didn't feel like I was in control, I knew I was doing it.

In a day's time, I had been born again. Over the course of what must have been centuries, I watched the field ferment. Though the occasional crow would dart overhead and squawk in the distance, I had largely forgotten what animals were like. In fact, I was relatively certain that the crows had been the only ones I'd ever seen with my real eyes. All of this would change on a fall

morning about twelve centuries after I was first born.

A tall creature passed overhead, he was accompanied by three others. They spoke to each other as if I wasn't there, and yet without the cruel arrogance of the crows. They were being sincere, they truly couldn't hear me.

One of them bent down on one knee and inspected me, rubbing his old fingers all over my face and brandishing a hatchet. After he lifted the blade over his head and swung down towards my body, I faded again. This time, however, was different.

I have no idea how long I spent in the darkness, I only remember being slightly afraid. But when I opened my eyes again, I had become my mother. This time, I yanked at the dirt and called out. To my shock, I got an answer. There were thousands of us, vines buried in shallow graves, just yards apart from one another.

The creatures who abducted me, who don't seem to share a common name, usually yank us from the dirt a few weeks after we're born, and yes, there are the complainers. You won't go a decade without hearing one of us moan about how life was so much better out on the plains, how we had so much space, how free we were to roam. Sure, I miss that too, but I don't miss the flies.

By Anthony Lepianka

Worldbuilding

- **Hetmanate of Lukarn**

- The Hetmanate of Lukarn stretches from the Sea of Goah to the plain of High Lotia. The core territories known as the Old Hetmanate comprise about half of the Hetmanate's holdings and are primarily inhabited by ethnic Lukish folk, while the other 12 administrative regions are ruled by various princes and governors, most of whom were installed directly by the Hetman, Jorg II Yuria. However, the Princedom of Shan and the Olegic Republic are ruled by a Shainish prince and Turrian governor respectively.
- While the Hetmanate is one of the largest geopolitical entities on the map, it recently suffered a blow to its total landmass and prestige at the hands of the neo-Sallitarian rebels in Breken, who seceded, taking the prosperous region of Breken with them.
- The peace was brokered by High Minister Tarr Hurin, a wildly popular reformist who convinced the Hetman to stop the bloodshed and give in to most of the demands of the insurgents. This move was highly opposed by the previous High Minister and his clique known as the Reclamationists.
- The jingoist Reclamationists, while popular among radical elements in the military and some of the burghers, face serious opposition within the church. The Prime Servant, Rolu III Turimik, has sided with the Hetman and his reformist cabinet, taking most of the peasantry with him. While civil war is unlikely, the power struggle only seems to be intensifying.

- **Free Republic of Breken**

- The Free Republic of Breken is a small republic on the northern fringes of the Hetmanate. Due to its small size, the republic has embraced a unitary system of government, handing all legislative power to the Liberation Committee, a provisional legislative body made up of representatives elected by the citizens of Breken. Almost all of them are war heroes.
- The republic was founded on the principles of neo-Sallitarian Republicanism, a radical school of thought born from the writings of Rakesh Sallitarios, an educated Gushkani who led a slave revolt against the Hetmanate just over a hundred years ago. Until a couple decades ago, his writings were inaccessible to the majority of the Hetmanate's citizens, as very few of them could read Gushkani; however, the floodgates were opened by Haros Piljeva, an accomplished theoretician himself, who translated the complete body of Sallitarios' work. By synthesizing the ideas of Sallitarios, Piljeva, and several other Lukish agitators, neo-Sallitarian Republicanism was born, and just years after the term was put to ink, it conquered Breken, and, in a way, the Hetmanate itself.
- The Republic is currently led by Andros Milanusk, who was the closest advisor to High Commander Bray Ano and a personal friend of Piljeva before his death. He seeks a simple life now, and is offering to step down from his post, and now the republic is at a crossroads. The people have been left to decide between the war hero Bray Ano, who values self-reliance and security and is supported by the military cult, and Jorg Alek, the chief propagandist of the revolutionaries in the days of the insurgency.

- **Durash Tribes**

- The Durash are a nomadic people from the plain of High Lotia. They move slowly, traveling around the known world every year, arriving back in High Lotia just in time for their annual renewal ritual.
- They have amicable relations with every prominent king and lord on their path, however, on their most recent journey, they were harassed and sometimes attacked by Reclamationist militants, who were spurred on by their leader's famous "privilege of the Durash" speech, which has been dubbed the "obliteration" speech by his opponents.
- The high chieftain of the Durash, Ulgo Ulgag, has threatened war against the Hetmanate in retaliation for these attacks. He has found support among other non-aligned leaders, especially King Jesha of Sinnick.
- **Kingdom of Sinnick**
 - A large kingdom to the west of the Hetmanate.
- **Kingdom of Nomrou**
 - A relatively small kingdom comprising the lush riverlands of Kur.
- **Tekrish Empire**
 - A near continent-spanning empire far to the east of the Hetmanate. While their traders are occasionally found in Lukish lands, they don't often stay long. While the empire is massive, it is also highly decentralized, essentially divided between three emperors and innumerable princes, dukes, and regional governors.
- **Noama Confederacy**
 - A confederacy of self-governing tribes native to the Noama Archipelago and the Bay of Mokrish.
- **Settaf Conglomerate**

- A trader community just to the west of the Noama confederacy that is essentially a client state of the Hetmanate, but avoided direct annexation as a result of clever trade deals.

By Anthony Lepianka

Origin of the Argonauts

In the slums of District Dellese roamed a man who was more monster than human. Standing at eight feet in height and having the strength to topple buildings, he was feared by those he saw as lesser and he wouldn't have it any other way. Having the position of Little Brother in The Hand crime syndicate, his name was Caligorante, and he was the target of an aspiring hero.

The young man who was no older than twenty walked through the slums at a brisk pace. With long blonde hair and piercing green eyes, alongside everything he wore, it was clear to everyone who saw him that he came from money. Adorned in an all-white suit with a pink tie and a golden cape flowing behind him, he would be a target for everyone in sight if not for the armaments he had on his side. A book dangled against his thigh, and he had a holstered sword. A smile stretched across his face as he hummed to himself.

His name was Astolfo, the son of the leader of the District Fairfax and a boy with delusions of grandeur.

Among all the dangerous crime families in Destina, the most vile and powerful were known as the Five Firmaments. And even among these Firmaments, The Hand was the most vile of them all. Strength met everything to them, and despite not being of the higher ranks Caligorante exemplified this regardless.

Astolfo had no idea how powerful his target would be. Truth be told he was hunting him down for the most flimsy of reasons, being that he thought it would be fun. He was willing to put his life on the line to alleviate his boredom. Such a thing was normal for the young man.

With a pep in his step, he scanned his surroundings. The absolute squalor of this slum didn't seem to disturb him. He saw people huddling over garbage fires and using drugs and arguing and didn't seem to have any bit of a reaction. He just kept walking until two people stopped him. They were two men, dressed in red leather jackets and black pants and boots. They were taller than him and had muscles upon muscles. One of them was pale and bald, while the other had a tan and messy black hair. Their faces were adorned with sneers as they sized up Astolfo. His smile never left his face as he looked at them.

"What's a rich kid like you doing here," the bald one asked as they reached to their side. Astolfo noticed a sheathed knife and yet he still smiled.

"I'm looking for Caligorante," he said, his voice far too cheerful for what his task was. The two men looked at each other in confusion as the bald one responded.

"What do ya want the boss for? Ya got business?"

"I'm gonna kill him!" he cheered. It took the two a solid ten seconds to fully process what the fool before them just said. And as soon as those ten seconds passed they both moved to grab their knives. A split second later their hands would be cleanly severed from their arms. Their

screams filled the air as they fell to their knees. Astolfo smiled. He looked down at them, sheathing the sword he had pulled out in less than the blink of an eye. He didn't bother to wipe the blood from his blade. The two men wailed in pain as they looked at their severed hand, and Astolfo walked past them. "Well...maybe if I make you two scream enough he might come out..." he pondered aloud. His words had no malice, no matter how demented they may be. It was a genuine and innocent question to him. "Hey, how do you two think I could-"

Before he could even finish his question the two men got up and ran, blood spilling from their wounds and leaving a trail behind. He knew they couldn't outrun him no matter what they tried, and so he simply followed behind them. The bystanders that beheld this sight would soon run away as if knowing that nothing good was about to happen.

Around ten minutes would pass as Astolfo followed them. He went even deeper into the slums, where it seemed that behind every corner and inside every shadow was someone out to get him. The thought made him excited. Rats and other such disgusting creatures ran about. A young boy was rummaging through a garbage bin, who was then scared away by an older and muscular man wearing a black suit. The man noticed Astolfo, yet didn't say anything.

The blood drops would start to grow smaller, and ahead of Astolfo weren't the two men he had seen earlier. Instead, countless men and women were approaching him, and leading them was a man who stood taller than them all. He wore a blue suit with a purple tie and shoes and had a pair of glasses. In his hand, he held a sword, which was more like a knife in his grasp. It was highly ornamental and decorative, more like a sword for ceremony than for combat. His hair was black and well-kept.

"You're the bastard who did this to my brothers," he growled. Astolfo smiled in response.

"Are you Caligorante?"

He didn't respond, instead stomping closer. His footsteps shook the ground beneath him. His eyes were full of murderous hatred, and Astolfo grinned. The sight infuriated him, and without thinking he swung his sword at Astolfo.

Caligorante was fast. At least faster than the men he was surrounded by. But Astolfo was not one of those men. In less than an instant, he unsheathed his sword. With no effort, he deflected the blow and slashed at Caligorante's stomach. The giant fell in pain, his blade clanging as it hit the dirty ground beneath them. The ones who watched this stepped back in fear. Their hearts pounded in their chests as Astolfo walked toward him. Caligorante looked at the boy, who even while kneeling was at eye level with him. Astolfo sheathed his sword.

"One of you, get me some rope," he said.

"What," Caligorante muttered, not even realizing he had said those words. Astolfo placed a hand on his hip.

"I thought killing you would be fun," he pouted. "But it'd be sooooo easyyyyy! It wouldn't be worth the trouble even coming here! Like, I ruined my suit! My all-white suit! And my shoes are all dirty too! Why don't you guys clean up after yourselves? Like really?"

Caligorante and his men listened to Astolfo's rather childish rants with a look of dumbfounded shock. This young man, who to them looked rather girlish, was complaining to their face after making their Big Brother fall to his knees. This disrespect was punishable by death, yet they were all too scared to try and bring out that punishment. They knew they were no match for him. And Astolfo knew it as well. He looked at one of Caligorante's men.

"Get me some rope," he repeated rather impatiently. "Or I'll kill all of you!"

One of them would rush off to find some, quickly returning and dragging it behind. Tossing the six-foot-long rope at Astolfo's feet. The boy picked it up with ease as he used them to wrap around Caligorante's wrists. The man groaned in pain, the rope digging into his skin as Astolfo tied

it tight. With a yank, he forced the man to his feet. He looked back at the humiliated giant's underlings, smiled, waved, then walked off. They were too frightened to try and intervene, only watching as they vanished into the distance.

Astolfo would go on to parade Caligorante through the streets of Dellese's wealthier regions. A smile shone on his face as he showed off the defeated and humiliated giant to all those who could see. This adventure, although rather annoying to him, was still somewhat enjoyable. And this action, this vain and humiliating deed done to the giant, would be the catalyst for Astolfo's next adventure.

By Caleb Oglesby

Quieth—A Stick Man Prompt



QUIETH

By Victoria Mazurkiewicz

For this prompt, we all went around the room and each added one feature to a stick man drawing. After our masterpiece was complete, we then wrote a story featuring the character we created. The man we dubbed Quieth (pronounced Keith) features double monocles, a beanie, cracked porcelain skin, a forked tongue, an eyebrow piercing, a peg leg, a belly button piercing, jorts held up by suspenders, and a Weezer t-shirt. He also holds a paddle ball while walking on a cobblestone pathway.

Quieth made his way through the dark, rainy streets of London. He was a horrific creation sprung from the mind of that terrible creature. As he stumbled across the uneven cobbles, every step radiating pain through his cracked porcelain body, he cursed the day he gained this sentience. It was nothing but misery, to be aware of the torment and the pain instead of an unaware, lifeless imitation like he should be. He was an abomination, dredged from the deepest recesses of his creator's mind. That troubled young fool, he shouldn't have been allowed to tamper with the purity

of life. That's how creatures like Quieth come about. Living jigsaw puzzles. Abominations. Monsters. He was the abused toy that was so loved in childhood, mutilated throughout dark adolescence, and now, found at the back of a closet, his form was subjected to the darkest combination of magic and science. The living doll, his creator called him. The most unloved, horrifying living creature to exist. Each step caused the cracks in his skin to grow, the peg leg to become a little looser from its clumsy attachment done years ago. Although he had not been aware for his transformation from beloved doll to horrific freak of nature, he now felt all its effects.

By Allison Bass

Quieth crawled out of his step-father's closet at the break of dawn, tip-toeing out of the room so he wouldn't be heard. He clasped his dual monocles, one in each hand so they wouldn't clank together and wake anyone up. He leaned against the wall for support and hobbled down the hall to where he'd left his pegleg last night. Quieth reattached it and stretched. It'd been cramped in that closet, and he'd been in there for hours. But hey, twenty bucks is twenty bucks.

Quieth wandered out of the house after shoving an entire chocolate donut in his mouth. Opening his jaws that wide worsened the cracks in his face, but he didn't care. He licked the frosting stuck in his soul patch off with his lizard tongue. It was a warm summer's day in the cobblestoned streets of Maine. The Atlantic breeze felt good on his bare legs and stomach. He'd been wearing the same Weezer t-shirt for five days now, but it still smelled fine to him. He pulled his beanie on to hide his bald spot before starting down toward the docks. On the way he found a super cool ball

and paddle thing in the gutter and picked it up, saying to himself, “Wow, a super cool ball and paddle thing.”

Quieth played with it while he walked, but the string broke and the ball flew into the ocean. He was sad, and a little worried for the fish he was pretty sure it'd hit. Deciding that he'd better check it out, Quieth leaned out over the water to make sure everything was okay and that all the fish were still swimming. They seemed all right, and he could see the ball bobbing not too far away. Quieth leaned out, hoping to retrieve and reattach it, but his balance wasn't great what with the pegleg and all. He fell in with a tremendous splash, knocking himself out on the rocks on the way down.

When Quieth came to, he was lying in a giant clamshell with a conclave of mermaids surrounding him. Wow, he thought to himself, they were really hot. Imagine Quieth's disappointment when he realized he was in fact in a mermaid nunnery and would now be converted to their religion. Quieth sighed, snapping his suspenders against himself in frustration. Unfortunately, the heavy sigh after everything else he'd been through that day caused his face cracks to split open even further, and the salt water came rushing in. “Wow, no way!” he shouted in agony, but it was too late. Quieth filled with water until his form was bloated and distorted. Then Quieth exploded from the internal pressure, and that was the end of Quieth.

By Isabella Burkard

The Ballad of Quieth

Cobblestones mark his steps
Strangers pass holding breaths
Their eyes have seen so much
But his legs are enough
To gain a sea's worth of stares
His shorts are barely there
He just smiles with his teeth
The ever-jarring Quieth

Pre Chorus

Oh oh oh oh no body knows no body knows
Oh oh oh oh no body knows no body knows

Chorus

So mistaken and misunderstood
They would love him if they simply could
Put down all their cruel perceptions
Maye then they'd learn their lesson
Everyone deserves to be loved
Appearance can be so misjudged
If you stay a little longer
Your love can grow so much stronger

Hear the clinks of his leg
He stands so tall on his peg
No one can hurt his soul
All their jokes are so old
He just lives his own life
Knowing what's wrong from right
He shows up to impress
You can't tell from his dress

Pre Chorus

Chorus

It's an age-old story so well known
Everyone deserves a home
Quieth is so much more than they say
Maybe they'll see it some day

Oh

Chorus

By Helena Kohlhoff

Quieth walked his way through the city of Boston, clacking along the cobbled streets, making his way towards a sorority house. Which didn't matter, he knew they would all work. His outfit? Booty jorts, Weezer, suspenders. His bling? Two monocles, paddle ball, peg leg. Oh yea, his friends did a number on him. See, this was all an elaborate bet. His fraternity, Sigma Rho Tou, bet him he couldn't leave a party with anyone if they got to dress him. They didn't stop with clothes, adding accessories and some back story. Jared, as he was formerly known, became Quieth. From studying business management to studying philosophy. From stud, to... something. But this didn't deter Quieth. It galvanized him. With Quieth's quirks, and Jared's suave, nothing could stop him.

By Trevor Delaney

America was consumed by the flames of revolution, and Milwaukee was at a crossroads. To the west, the federal government was encroaching, to the east, the socialist insurgents dug in, mortars loaded, preparing for the onslaught.

Just behind the front line sat the home of the enlightenment, UWM. While technically occupied by revolutionaries, the campus never saw any action, all of this thanks to its emperor, the almighty Quieth. After the chaos of the first few weeks, Milwaukee had become little more than a pile of rubble, and it would have remained this way, again, were it not for Emperor Quieth.

It was cold, and the walls of the imperial palace were still nowhere close to done. Sitting atop the felt-draped throne was the emperor himself; in his left hand was a golden scepter, in his right, that thing with the paddle and the ball on the string. His face was pale and smooth like that of a porcelain doll, although cracks had started to grow from his jaws, and thick black lines had

set in where his twin monocles sat.

He was flanked to his right by two young men, each playing lyres and singing a hymn to the heavenly patron of all bards, Rivers Cuomo. The emperor tried to stand, but collapsed back onto his throne, his peg leg snapping off and rolling with a collection of thuds down the stone staircase below.

“My emperor!” called a serving boy from across the throne room, “you’re bleeding!”

“Oh nah don’t worry about it bruh,” said the emperor, laughing, “I guess the duct tape wasn’t enough. Go on, boy, collect your tuppence from the maiden upstairs.”

Just then, the doors burst open, and Jar Jar Binks, closest advisor of the almighty emperor ran towards the throne, knocking the servant boy to the floor and killing him instantly. “My emperor, his excellency Joe Biden requests an audience with thee!”

“Hah!” cried Quieth, “he should know by now that I only play for the highest bidder!”

“Yes, that’s why he’s here...”

The wind stood silent and the sun hid itself behind the freezing moon. Fog drifted from the door as it creaked ajar, and the illustrious president appeared, surrounded by the mystics of Scranton, Pennsylvania.

“Look, Jack,” the president’s voice boomed and reverberated through the palace, knocking the vast majority of the servants unconscious, “from where I’m standing, it looks like you’ve got two options. You can cooperate with the good, hard working people of the United States of America, making good jobs and renewable energy a reality for every American family, or you can side with terror.”

“But what is terror, mister president?” asked Quieth, adjusting his monocles, “and why are you so hasty to condemn it. In the wise words of Maximilien Robespierre, the sword of the liberator gleams just the same as that of the tyrant.”

“It seems like you’ve made your choice, I’ve had enough of this malarkey anyway.”

“No, wait! Your excellency!” the emperor cried, but he was already gone.

By Anthony Lepianka

Experiment QU13TH - An Emergency Ethical Examination

To the Scientific Ethics Council,

It is with great dissatisfaction that I have to declare this experiment a complete and utter failure. While our efforts to reanimate the extraterrestrial lifeform were a success, our mission to integrate it into human society has brought about questionable results.

The reptilian creature refused to merge with any of the cybernetic enhancements specially crafted for it, and preferred to stay in its body hobbled together from the antiques it landed in. It was mostly docile, but would get really moody any time we tried to take away his paddle toy. (Note: a large part of the research budget went towards compensating the Goodwill for the damaged inventory, ie: the antique doll, the old eyepieces, the table leg, and all of the clothing items it scraped from the bins, as well as the structural damage to the roof of their establishment.) Our team put forth great efforts to make QU13TH look as humanlike as possible, but this proved to be challenging due to the nature of his reptilian features and porcelain mask. One team member also noted that his clothing was “a choice.”

The experiment went downhill on November 17th, 2017. QU13TH, affectionately nicknamed “Keith” by some of our junior staff, had been trained in basic arithmetic and reading comprehension. I postulate he was about as intelligent as a 10th grade human male. I guess that is where the trouble started. QU13TH managed to escape our facility that night, and started hobbling down the streets, mumbling incomprehensibly. Locals report that he was cackling menacingly, making crude tongue gestures, and spouting nonsense terms like “midwest emo revival” and “where’s my hug at?”. He was quickly detained by local authorities, and returned into the lab’s possession the next morning.

I theorize our experiment was tampered with by the new lab assistant Zach from the UW-Milwaukee internship program, but there is not enough evidence for a conviction at this time. I hope you, the fine members of the Ethics Council, will guide us on how to continue our education of QU13TH. However, I will understand if you decide it’s a lost cause and have already made arrangements to send him back into space henceforth.

Sincerely,

Dr. Penniesworth

By Marilyn Schnabl

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