

# **HUMID 18**

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# Fiction

***Isolated Campfire* by Aarionne Hobbs**

Oil Panting, 2024





## The World Hasn't Ended Yet

By: Bradley Cavanaugh

Jacket on. Now backpack. Now shoes. Nate puts on his ensemble for the day with a precision and purpose betraying his fifteen years of age. No energy is wasted, nor is any time. He doesn't have all day.

Even still, he walks into his living room without much agency. Nothing has changed. He looks over to his mother who sits staring in front of the television, same as before. She's thinner now. Unblinking. The tv has been off for days.

"Hey Mom," he says to her, but she doesn't respond, because of course she doesn't. He looks at the sandwich he placed at her feet. Hasn't been moved. He looks at the water bottle he placed in her hand. It's a little lower than it was yesterday. Just a sip, really. He kisses her on the forehead. "Love you, Mom. Be back later."

He pulls his backpack tighter and walks to the door, taking the handle.

"Where are you going, Nate?" his mother asks, body unmoving. He can't tell the feeling in her voice. It sounds equal parts concerned, curious, and maybe a bit fearful. Or maybe that's just his own projecting.

"To school, Mom."

"Oh right..." she trails off. "It's Monday. A school day."

And then she's gone again. He looks at her for a moment, then turns the doorknob, walking out into the bright morning day.

Brooklyn has seen better days. The street is a mess. While the initial panic and riots have mostly ended, the fallout is still very much visible. Trash and broken glass litters the street, apartment buildings and storefronts have been devastated, their contents who knows where. He was lucky that no one came to his and his mother's apartment. At least the few bodies that remained were gone, he guesses someone took them to give

them a proper burial. People have been doing that lately, which he thought was strange. They'll all be dead soon anyway. Who was going to give *them* a burial? Will there even be enough left to? He shakes his head, looking to the sky.

His eyes meet an old banner that someone had put up in the first days. Written across it, in blocky red letters that unintentionally or purposefully looks like blood, was "30 DAYS." Thirty days was how long the invaders gave them. Thirty days and they'd unleash whatever weapon they had and blast them off the plane of existence entirely, leaving only the memory that they'd ever even been there. Except who'd be around to remember them? Thirty days left, they'd been told. It was day sixteen.

"Nate!" a voice rings out. Nate turns to see his neighbor, Carmine, schlubbed up on the sidewalk outside their building, bottle in hand, and more around him. He hasn't shaved in days, his beard matted to his grimy face. He's a zoologist. "How's your mother?"

"Same as yesterday," Nate answered, stopping in front of the man. "She took all this pretty hard."

"Who the hell isn't? Well, I guess *you* aren't," Carmine eyes his backpack. "You still going to the school? You don't have much time left, Son. You should be spending it on something that matters. With your mother."

Nate doesn't respond to this, instead looking again at the "30 DAYS" banner. He remembers the day the news came in. The airwaves had been taken over, if you were anywhere near a screen you'd see it. They all thought it was a prank, a mistake. Then the riots started. His mom broke down pretty soon after, the fear taking her mind somewhere between dissociation and a clean mental break. And that's when his emotions stopped.

"Something that matters, 'huh?" he finally says. "Y'know, some people think it's all a hoax. I saw it on the news, before the news stopped coming on. Some people thought it was a trick from Russia or something. Some people think it's a test, and when the thirty days are up,

the invaders are just gonna turn around and leave, and we'll be left with the pieces."

"Are you one of those people, Nate?"

"No," Nate says flatly, turning. "I'll see you later, Carmine."

"Let's hope so." Carmine takes a bottle and looks at Nate's shrinking form. "Who knows? Maybe they get tired of waiting and just blast us all early? Probably be a mercy."

Nate is careful on his walk. This part of town is mostly quiet now, the only ones left being the people who lived here before, but you never know. He always sees the light of fires from Hell's Kitchen, which isn't that far from where he lives. It's actually quieter than usual, though. He guesses that everyone is just in the fourth stage of grief, and sleeping in their own homes. He takes a moment to look out over his street. There are a few homeless (or what he assumes to be homeless) people on the road, but they're all sleeping this early in the morning. He sees a rummaging in a pile of trash on the road. He investigates. He moves some of the paper and finds the culprit. A cat!

It was a skinny thing, probably abandoned by its owners, if it ever had any. White with brown spots, or vice versa, it looks up at him. Seemingly satisfied by whatever it saw, it goes back to its rummaging.

"Hmm." Nate reaches down to pet the cat, but stops once he sees what's under the trash. The cat moves some of the paper out of the way, to reveal a body left behind, a hole in its cranium. It was a man. He guesses this might've been the cat's owner. Or maybe, the cat was just hanging around him. The smell of the corpse invades his nostrils, but he doesn't recoil. Everything smells like death now, even him. He looks down at the cat, who's started licking the hand of the man.

"You probably shouldn't lick that," Nate says to the cat, but doesn't move to stop it. He looks at the man's face, blank and empty, eyes already closed. He wonders if he had seen this sight before everything, if it would have affected him more. He looks closer at the brains spilling out of the

man's head, counting the ridges. Then he makes a sudden decision. He grabs the man by the shoulders and starts to drag him up the road.

He doesn't know how long he's dragged the body of the man, until he finally reaches his destination: Sunset Park. He looks and sees the cat has followed him all the way. It looks tired.

"Who's this?" a voice comes from behind him. Nate turns to see a kind-looking older man, shovel in hand. People have been using the park as a burial ground for the dead, and there were already large clumps of dirt littering the park.

"I don't know," Nate answers, out of breath himself. "I just found him."

The man nods. "That's a good thing you did, young man. A lot of people wouldn't go so far to help a stranger." The man looks out over the park. "We'll find a spot for him. I'm thinking right by that tree should do."

"Can I do it?" Nate holds his hand out for the shovel. "Please?"

The man looks at Nate for a moment before nodding and handing him the shovel.

It takes longer than Nate anticipated to bury the man. By the time he's done, the sun has gotten high in the sky and people are starting to move around in the streets. His body is covered in sweat and his hands and back ache, but it's done. The cat stayed, watching him all the while. He sits under the shade of the tree catching his breath, the cat lying by his feet. The older man comes up to him with a sports drink.

"Are you sure you wanna give this to me?" Nate asks the man.

"Son, you've earned it," the man says to him. "'Sides, I don't think anyone is fighting over Gatorade just yet. Dr. Pepper, maybe."

Nate nods and drinks some of the liquid. It's not cold.

"Have you had to bury someone before?" the man asks.

"No."

"Why now?"

Nate shrugs. “Just wanted to see how it would feel.”

“And?”

Nate contemplates this for a bit, looking down at the cat before answering. “I don’t really feel anything.”

Nate arrives at the school. There’s no one there of course. Most students don’t want to be here even when the world isn’t ending, and teachers don’t get paid enough to work with no hope of tenure. He walks past the gates and into the building. He walks down the hallway until he gets to his destination: the science lab. Inside he finds his teacher, Mr. Kusak, nursing a bottle of brandy.

“Sorry I’m late,” Nate apologizes, as he walks in.

“I thought you’d finally decided to stop coming,” Kusak takes another swig of his drink.

“I thought you wouldn’t still be here.”

“Nate, what else do I have to do?” Kusak eyes Nate. “You have a cat.”

Nate looks down at the small cat he’s carrying in his hands. “I think it likes me. I buried its owner today.”

“You buried its owner?”

“That’s why I’m late today.”

Kusak looks at Nate for a moment before laughing maniacally. Nate stands there awkwardly, holding the cat. Eventually, Kusak stops. “God, what the hell is the world coming to?”

“The end, I think,” Nate sits at one of the lab counters.

“Ha ha, right,” Kusak stands and walks to the dry erase board. “Go ahead and take out your textbook, we’ll pick up where we left off yesterday.”

Nate places the cat on the counter and starts digging in his bag for his textbook and notebook. Kusak takes out a few hotdogs from his jacket pocket and places it down for the cat to eat.

“Why do you...?” Nate starts.

“Don't ask smart questions with dumb answers,” Kusak takes out a pack of cigarettes and places one in his mouth. He holds out the pack to Nate, who takes one after a beat. “You know, I didn't used to smoke.” Kusak lights up his cigarette before lighting Nate's. “And not a sip in years. You can get some of the brandy if you want, by the way.”

Nate takes a swig of the bottle of brandy. “It tastes like rusted pennies.”

“Good, isn't it?” Kusak starts writing on the board. “Alright, stay sober enough so you can pay attention. I know you hate set-builder notation, but it's gonna be on the test.”

After a few hours, they bring their “class” to an end. They went through math, science, literature, and even managed to squeeze in some world history. “Do you think the smoke is bad for the cat?” Nate asks, waving his hand through the gentle haze.

“It'll be dead in a few days regardless,” Kusak shrugs before standing up. “But I'll open a window anyway.” Nate looks at the small cat on the counter, rolled over on its side. It yawns, then gives a small cough. Window now open, Kusak sits back down in front of Nate.

“How's your mother?”

“The same,” Nate says flatly. “It's like she's frozen in time. She thought it was Monday.”

“Maybe she's the lucky one,” Kusak dumps some ashes from his cigarette.

“Won't even know the end is coming.”

“Maybe,” Nate pets the cat.

“Hell,” Kusak chuckles to himself. “Maybe *we're* the crazy ones. Acting like nothing's changed when everything has. Once the announcement came, my husband hung himself that same day. Maybe he had the right idea.”

“Maybe.”

“Mind you, I’ve thought about it. I think the waiting’s the worst part of it. Why the countdown, do you think? You think they’re charging whatever weapon is gonna blow us up? Or do they just wanna see us squirm? It’s very human of them, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

“But I guess that’s why I don’t do it. Kill myself, y’know? I’m abhorrently human as well,” Kusak looks out the window at the yellow sunset, the light bathing his face. “I’m just really fucking scared of dying.”

Nate takes the cat in his hands, standing up. “Same time tomorrow, Mr. Kusak?”

“Yes Nate,” Kusak’s gaze doesn’t leave the window. “I’ll be here.” Nate, carrying the sleeping cat, walks to the door of the classroom.

“Nate, wait,” Kusak says, causing Nate to stop. “When you buried that man today, how did you feel?”

“The truth is, sir,” Nate looks at Kusak. “I felt numb. I don’t feel anything at all.”

“I see. How that must feel,” Kusak looks again out the window. “Sorry to keep you, Nate. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nate walks out the classroom. He walks down the road. He doesn’t know why, but he decides to go back to the park. He walks back to the tree where he buried the man, hoping that there is some sign there, something he missed before. He finds the dirt mound that marks the grave he’d dug earlier. He looks closer. Someone has left some shit on it. He wants to laugh, to get angry, to do something, to feel anything. Instead, he looks at the pile, turns on his heel and walks away.

He walks to his apartment. He sees Carmine. Someone had stabbed him and stole what alcohol he had left, leaving his body behind. He thinks of burying him, but it’s night now, it wasn’t safe to be out this late. He’ll do it tomorrow. Maybe because it’s Carmine, because it’s someone he knows, he’ll feel something this time. He looks at the banner. He goes inside. His mother hasn’t moved.

“Hey Mom, we got a cat.”

He places the sleeping cat on his mother’s lap. He looks at her for a moment. She’s so thin. He goes into his room and closes the door.

One day closer to the end.



## Tuesday Night Waltz

By: Shyanne Davis

The cicadas screamed as the sun rested at the edge of the world sending horizontal beams of warm sepia light across the porch and Randell. He lit another Lucky Stripe cigarette that was wedged between two calloused and crooked fingers lifted from his mason jar of a half-drunk Arnold Palmer. He stood leaning against a pillar of the porch. He sipped and puffed away observing the neighboring family's clothesline and how it seemed the missus got some sense and hid the undergarments closer to the house behind the linen. His wife had been doing the same for a while seeing that most of the neighborhood had young children and the newest addition to the park was rumored to have done time because he was a pedophile. He remembers when they found out that the new reclusive neighbor was a degenerate. Crystal told him, well, more like begged him to buy a dryer since she had a feeling that underwear was going missing while it was out on the line. Crystal appeared at the screen door with a sound of exasperation and general pissed-off-ness and asked if he wanted to eat dinner. Randell just stared out into the sky until she left. He went to take another sip of his tea, only to find that there was no tea left, only little black specs dancing around at the bottom of the jar.

For a while he had hesitated, but his wife insisted, and he eventually had to ask his brother, Robert, for a loan, and he bought an ancient looking Maytag from some estate sale in a good neighborhood. This used to be a good neighborhood, one where kids would run around in the street, and they would have block parties where the whole trailer park would get together and swap meals and the men would grill up a farm and shoot off fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Everything changed when the boy at the end of the park started selling something. Next thing you know shady people's cars piled up in

front of everyone's houses. Good people moved out to other places and bad people moved in to replace them, and the houses started to be neglected and yards became unkept and trash of all sorts started being left out. What annoyed Randell the most was how loud it could get at night and every once in a while he had the mind to grab one of his rifles and do something about it. Nothing, there was nothing he could do. Robert had suggested they move in with him and his wife for a while so they could look for a new place, but he declined like any sensible man would. His phone rang out the beginning of an old country song and Randell picked it up from the railing to see that Robert had resorted to calling him, seeing that he had ignored every message since noon when Crystal called Robert to tell him that Randell had gotten laid off. He let it ring for a moment longer before he threw it across the porch and watched it scatter, the battery slid to the edge of the porch.

Randell sighed the kind of sigh that you hold in your gut and release slowly, a kind of relief, a kind of disappointment, a kind of frustration, a kind of relent, and placed his empty mason jar on the splintering wooden railing of the porch and put his cigarette out against the same pillar he was leaning on, despite his wife asking him to stop that and carefully placed an ashtray on the railing next to the pillar. He stretched his arms out above his head and let his shoulders roll up and about, the weak cold front had finally settled in, and it made his bones ache and his muscles tight. He was sure he had slipped a disc, or two, maybe fractured some bones here and there, but it all came with the job more or less, and they had always been sure to compensate him fairly after any little "incidents." "Fuck," he grunted as he put his arms down, resting his hands on the railing, pulling his back down and sighed once more, he didn't want to think about it, about how he got fired. It wasn't worth it. He couldn't understand it. After he felt an unsatisfying pop somewhere in his spine, he propped himself up and looked out once again to the edge of the property where the forest, well the swamp, started. But his mind couldn't help it and he thought of the miserable shit he had just been dragged through. He

thought about how he had worked as a mechanic there for twenty years and they had no problem dropping him in the face of what they perceived as a slight issue, revenue had fallen a bit, oh no (!), no more fancy vacations for the management. So, what did they do? Cut the most loyal workers who had given all their physical prime to a career that left him with phantom pains and possible lawsuits never filed? Yeah. Fuck. What the hell happened to all that “we’re like family here” bullshit. He had a family to provide for, a wife and three young kids, kids they had waited to have because they were scared of shit like this. He wanted more for them, more than this piss poor fucken trailer park, but shit, it’s not like he was brainy, he could only use his hands.

The sun had finally gone to rest and all that remained was the residual light that made the sky a light dull purple-blue while automatic street lights flicked on and his wife put the porch light on for him from inside while the kids hollered and hooped at one another teasing and taunting and demanding that showers not be taken and that none of them were tired enough to go to sleep any time soon. He wanted to be in there with them. His eyes trailed the road of the neighborhood, he could smell that somewhere down the road someone had been cooking up some gumbo and cornbread that normally would have tempted him to rush himself inside and ask his wife to plate him his food, but the smell of a neighbor’s gumbo, and even his wife’s nacho casserole, was not enough to make him go in. He was sure she didn’t want him inside, at least not while the kids were still awake, at least not while she was still somewhere between upset and disappointed with him. For as much as he wanted to be inside, he wasn’t willing to accept Robert’s offer.

With the porch light on, the moths and various other nighttime critters couldn’t help themselves to the artificial night sun and began to conjugate above his head. He needed a beer. Some car, blue maybe gray, he couldn’t tell it was too dark, all he knew was that it was an fancy one, was coming down the road kicking up dust that was only visible by the dark plume of what looked like heavy smoke behind it and the sound of the gravel being crushed under the tires.

Tired and itching to go inside he shook his head and plopped down on the repurposed dining chair, at the repurposed dining table that they had made into an outdoor patio set, and he grabbed his pack of Lucky Stripes and beat it to his other hand, finally drawing a cigarette from the box and with a cautiously cupped hand hid the lighter from the wind that was starting to pick up as the sky finally turned a shiny navy blue. The car had come to a crawl when it approached, the driver slowly moving the car to the edge of the road and parked in front of the house in a way that blocked Randell's truck in, and Randell, knowing the type of folk that have been scurrying about at night, prepared himself for whatever kind of crackhead-son-of-a-bitch emerged from the vehicle.

When the car door opened, he made sure to stare and took a long draw from his cigarette and was relieved to see that when the lanky figure entered the porch light it became his brother. Robert stopped shortly before the stairs, he waited patiently for Randell to signal that he could join, but Randell only stared, blowing elaborate tricks of smoke from his mouth. Robert bowed his head, moving one hand through his receding hairline before he shoved both hands in his starched slacks, his suit jacket nestled in the crook of one of his arms.

"Crystal called," he said, looking at Randell's busted oil-stained boots. "She told me what happened, and you know... I'm sorry Randy. It's a real shitty thing of them to do." Randell stopped blowing mid-trick, his lips puckered, and he nodded slowly, he knew what was coming and had the mind to deck Robert flat on his ass, but he knew that his wife would probably chew his ear out for it. Robert stood expectantly, waiting for his brother to say or indicate something, but the silence that fell upon them both was one that only the brothers could decode. They both understood the meaning behind each little sniffle, each glance and avoidant eyes, bodies shuffle, the brothers understood each other but for the sake of one another they both knew words would have to be exchanged.

Robert, ignoring the silence and his brother's warning signs, hobbled his way up the awkward lopsided stairs and avoided the splinter

ridden railing, and made his way to the only other chair at the table and wiggled uncomfortably on the duct tape repaired cushion. Randell shook his head and turned away, he leaned over to the railing to put his nub of cigarette out on the ashtray. He thought for a second about how Robert never took up smoking like he did, like their father, grandfather, and great-grandfather did, and how they never smoked together or really did much of anything like that together.

Randell watched Robert's head start to bob, a lecture was incoming, "We got a position open at the company. Low level, basically a glorified janitor, well supervisor to the janitors, but it's something," Robert started, "something to keep the family fed and a roof over everyone's heads. Crystal told me that money's been tight for a while, and God damn't Randy, I know you don't want me to offer, but if you need the money, you know I'm willing to give you whatever you need to—"

Randell shot up from his seat and towered over his brother, "Will you shut up with that! I ain't need pity from you! From the son-of-a-bitch that lives in a nice ass neighborhood with a fucken Whole Foods, that has so much fucken money that you can throw it at your poor little brother and his little family and it makes you a fucken saint, right?" Randell was shaking his finger in his brother's face, and Robert had leaned back in his chair, their eyes locked together, neither one willing to break their gaze.

"Get out of my face, Randy,"

"Make me, pussy,"

"I'm trying to be nice here, so get out of my face before I have to do something about it."

Chairs screeched against the floor, grunts and groans and unintelligible curse words were thrown along wild arms making contact with whatever they could; faces, guts, biceps, eventually arms wrapped around each other as they mistakenly got to the edge of the porch, they tumbled down the steps in an embrace, and rolled around on the grass where mud and grass caked onto pants, shirts, and skin.

Eventually they both began to relent; older bodies weren't meant for wrestling on the ground like they used to be, and old bodies can't keep up the amount of testosterone needed to actually finish a fight. The men started to weaken their grips and began gasping for air. They laid sprawled out across the lawn staring at the moon, the crisp air felt like knives slipping in and out of their throats and lungs, the smell of the humid swamp had overtaken the smell of long discarded dinners and the stars barely illuminated the sky.

Randell felt a lump form in his throat, "Fuck."

They laid there for a while, neither one really knew how long but Randell noted how the moon waltzed leisurely throughout the dark sky from one place to another, silence was the sound of crickets and breathing between the both of them, that in itself sounded like a conversation. Robert broke the silence. Although Randell couldn't see his face, he could hear the deepness in his brother's voice, the voice he has when he's crying.

"Randy, I just want to help."

Randell felt the lump in his throat grow. It became almost impossibly hard to breathe, "Robbie," his face felt a chill as the breeze hit his wet face, "I know. I know." They rested on the lawn, waiting for more to be said, but both brothers knew the drill. Inside, he could hear Crystal yelling at the kids for not starting their baths, the kids screeched, and their little feet thundered against the floor as they ran away. For a second the sound of their broken breathing became funny compared to what was happening inside. What started as Robbie chuckling ended with the brothers roaring with laughter. While laughing the brothers had sat up and faced each other with tear streamed faces.

"How much does the job pay?" he scoffed into the thick night air.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Randy and Robbie smiled at each other and nodded at something that they seemed to quietly agree upon. Robbie held out his hand and Randy clashed his hand onto it making a solid slapping sound. They pulled

each other towards themselves, pushing them up together. The brothers wrapped their free arms around the other, holding the embrace. As they pulled away, backs were patted, and jokes were made of how far they had fallen from the physique of their youth. Robbie joked “Same time tomorrow?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Randy shot his middle finger out and used it to scratch at his cheek, grinning.

## When the Dead Dance

By: Allie Garrett

Death prowled in Ezra's house and crowded his wife.

A fever bloomed across her pale, chalky skin, smearing a dark pink across her cheeks and forehead. Her chest moved with hitched, stilted breaths, and a gentle wheezing accompanied every exhale. Her eyelids fluttered like an injured bird; quick, labored movements served only to waste her remaining energy. Black blisters bruised the skin around her throat and behind her ears. Blood painted her lips and trickled from her eyes, staining the trail where her tears once fell.

Death marked her with dense bumps, just as it had with so many others. Ezra held his wife's clammy hand and waited. A final, jerking cough brought bubbles of foamy blood to her lips. Tears fell well before she took her last shuddering breath.

The beak-faced doctor who reeked of sage and clove came forward and pulled a white sheet over her head. Ezra scowled at the tattered book of failed spells and useless remedies that sat inside an open medical bag. The doctor turned to Ezra and offered him soft words of condolence, but Ezra didn't respond. The doctor left to perch over the dying patient in the neighboring house.

Ezra pulled the sheet back and scrubbed the blood from his wife's face. "You promised that you wouldn't leave me. You know I can't sleep alone." He stopped his endeavor and peeled her eyelid up to meet her misty eye. "Wake up, Sim. Smile for me."

Ezra waited for any indication of life. His eyes lingered for a moment before he let go and walked out the door. He wouldn't stay in a house with only a dead body for company.

Smoke clawed its way into his lungs, burning a trail down his throat. His eyes stung and beckoned a wave of tears. The fire bred a thick



aroma that smelled like holiday dinners; red meat was a delicacy reserved for special occasions. Ezra passed a guard, who leaned heavily on a lamppost.

“You can’t be out here. There’s a quarantine in place,” the guard warned. His voice trembled around the boils that littered his throat. He coughed, and flecks of blood speckled his sleeve.

“There is,” Ezra confirmed. His eyes lingered on the guard’s death marks.

“You have to return to your home immediately.”

Ezra narrowed his eyes. “Why should I?”

The guard’s shoulders slumped, and his body was wracked with a coughing fit. His lungs rattled and tears poured down his cheeks. “We’re isolated for a reason. The plague has entered almost every home and it stains the streets. You look healthy, I think it would be in your best interest to go back inside.”

Ezra pushed past him. He didn’t turn to look as he passed the pits. Shrouded figures wheeled carts and dumped the contents into the hungry flames that lived in the town square. Tongues of fire leapt out and licked at these figures, unsatisfied with the offerings of the diseased dead. The figures swatted the flames from their clothes and went to collect another load of bodies. Heat caressed Ezra’s face as he approached, beckoning him closer.

Around the fire was a celebration. The damned congregated in the town square with drums and strings and horns. Corpse-like musicians plucked jaunty, stilted notes from their instruments. Their music prompted the gathered people to dance and sing along. The dancers cast silhouettes on the buildings that bordered the town square. The shadows were like marionettes, with buckling joints and limp movements and bodies that had gone too long without eating. Smiles stretched across sallow faces. A body collapsed, but the dancing didn’t stop. The dancers stepped on it and the hooded figures struggled to reach it. Once they did, the body was thrown into the fire.

A bony hand locked around Ezra's wrist. "Dance with me. Dance until you can't anymore," a voice rasped into his ear.

Ezra looked down at the skeletal face of a woman. She had hollow glassy eyes and a grin which leaked blood from rotten gums and rattling lungs. "Why should I dance with you?" he sneered.

"Why shouldn't you? It's only a matter of time before your lungs fill with blood, and your face looks like ours."

"I'm not dead yet, and neither are you. Leave me be."

"We'll all burn soon enough." She turned to the fire and beamed. "My son died today. The collectors came and took him, so I followed. They led me here, to the festival. My son paints the walls with his light and fuels our dance."

Ezra pulled away from her and walked until he was a safe distance from the dancers. They spun like maple seeds falling from a tree. His eyes tracked them until something drew his attention.

A ball of fire melted from the pit. At first he thought it was an ember that caught on a dancer's clothes, but it didn't move with the group. It hovered at eye-level and smoldered. He approached it and after he got a short distance away, it vanished. He knew what this was, but they weren't known for appearing in populated areas.

He looked around and found that the wisp had reappeared, only it was several yards away. He drew closer again and reached for it, but it vanished again. Ezra played the wisp's game, chasing it through the empty streets until they reached the gate.

A lone guard leaned against the lever that would grant Ezra his freedom. He placed a finger under the guard's nose, and when he felt no breath, he shoved the body and let it crash to the ground. He pulled the lever and stepped back as the gate creaked open.

The sun peeked over the horizon and greeted Ezra. Warm light kissed his skin and fresh air filled his smoky lungs. A dirt road stretched out before him, curving under the horizon and disappearing into the distance. Hundreds of crosses crowded the road, marking where the dead were laid to rest. There used

to be a sense of order to these graves; the dead were respected and given space. Now bodies were buried between plots and large areas were upturned to act as mass graves for early plague victims.

Ezra followed the wisp. Its pace slowed so that Ezra could keep up at a comfortable walk, and the further from town he got, the darker the flame became. The soft orange glow curled into itself and grew into a deep, living green.

The longer he walked, the more confident his steps became. He didn't want to go back. Not when the plague was ripe, and there were festivals celebrating damnation. Not when Sim had left him alone.

He clenched his fists as the wisp led him further down the path. The sun was directly above him when he reached a forest. Birdsong chirped from overhead and the rustle of life scurried within the undergrowth. Trees reached over the road to hold hands with their brothers. Shadows spilled over the ground, broken by the light that penetrated the canopy of leaves and branches. Briar and bramble lay thick around the base of the trees, choking everything but the path. The wind halted and the summer sounds died. His little green light appeared above the brambles. A fire, feeding from nothing and attached only to air.

“I can give you what you want,” a voice crackled from the wisp.

“You don't know what I want,” Ezra responded.

“I do,” the voice sang. “I know exactly what you want. I know exactly how you can get it. You know that just as well as I do, or else you wouldn't have followed me all the way out here.”

“Who are you?” Ezra asked.

He got no response. The wisp flickered and disappeared, only to reappear further into the undergrowth. This happened again, and Ezra tore after it. His breaths came out in sharp pants as thorns ripped his trousers and pierced his weathered shoes. He was tired of their game.

The barrier broke at a small clearing. Ezra tripped and tumbled to the ground. A grunt fell from his lips, and he took a moment to catch his breath.

“Hello Ezra, I’m glad you made it,” the voice crooned.

Ezra took a deep breath before he looked up. A woman with rough green skin and wiry white hair smiled at him. A thick yellow nectar dripped from her sharp black teeth and her pearly eyes glowed faintly in the dark. She held the ball of flame in her hand and watched it crackle. The faint smell of smoke mingled with the stench of leaf rot.

“Tell me what I want,” Ezra demanded. His eyes traced over her thick, veiny skin and he wrinkled his nose in disgust before meeting her eyes again.

She chuckled. Her movements were fluid as she moved around the harp that sat in the center of the clearing. Her spidery hand traced the neck of the instrument. “You want Sim back.”

“Yes. Can you help me?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have brought you here if I couldn’t.” Her shiny eyes met his and she ran her fingers across the strings of the harp. They sang for her. “This is mine. It’s a relic of another time, when war fed the hungry land and pestilence exercised free reign. It’s a tool that hasn’t been used in a very long time.”

“What does it do?” Ezra asked.

“Exactly what you want it to. It will bring Sim back.”

“What do you want for it?”

“I don’t ask for a lot in return. Just a guarantee that it will find use again, and that I will get it back. This instrument is my most prized possession, just like Sim is yours.” Her smile crinkled around her eyes. “My sisters might have asked for your firstborn or for you to write your name in their book. I have simple wants; knowing that it will be put to use again is payment enough.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t. Nothing is guaranteed, but you will have the harp. The harp is the important thing; you must take it to Sim and play it for her. Death cannot spare the plague victims from my music.” Her smile widened.

“What do you have to lose? Your village burns as we speak, but Sim has yet to be greeted by fire.”

Ezra nodded. “You will have it as soon as she has been returned to me. Shall I bring the harp here when I’m finished with it? I’m not sure I can find my way back.”

“I am familiar with your home. I will retrieve it myself.”

“Thank you. I look forward to seeing you again.”

“Good luck Ezra,” she hummed. The green lady lifted the harp and approached him. She placed it at his feet and stepped back.

Ezra picked the harp up. It was three feet tall, with fine golden details and nineteen iridescent strings. It weighed nothing, so he had no trouble carrying it as he navigated the sea of thorns. When his feet found the well-trodden road, he noticed the flecks of crimson that followed him. His blood speckled the ground around the shredded hem of his pants and pooled beneath his shoes.

His socks were wet and quickly grew tacky. Ezra slipped his shoes off and peeled his socks from his feet. They landed on the ground with a wet slap and remained there as he walked away.

The wisp did not return to guide him.

When he reached town, it was dark. The moon had ushered the sun into hiding and beckoned the inky darkness of night to swallow the sky. Stars winked to life, scattered like marbles across a wooden floor. Dusty galaxies clouded the void.

Ezra slipped through the gates and walked past the fallen dancers and listened to their gurgling breaths. Life slipped away like a misstep on a muddy road. The fire continued to roar and demanded to be fed, gnawing at the remains of its most recent offerings. One cloaked figure remained, limping as he tugged a body towards the heat.

Ezra’s house was just as he left it that morning. All of the rooms were empty save the bedroom where Sim lay. The fever which had blemished her cheeks was gone. Limp, greasy hair spread around her head like the tendrils of a beast.

He sat beside her, rested the harp on his lap, and began to play. Ezra was uncertain how to maneuver this instrument; he was only learned in the mandolin, but pleasant sounds dripped from his fingers as they bounced across the colorful strings. Time flew with each note, bounding away from him on waves of music until his fingers bled. Iridescent strings turned crimson, and a cold glow grew from the harp.

Ezra locked his eyes onto Sim. Her chest hitched, and a wheezing gasp drew air back into her lungs. The wheeze turned to a rasp, and she looked at Ezra.

He stopped playing and grabbed her hand. “Sim, you promised to wait for me. You left me alone in this infected town. When you recover, we can leave and find somewhere better. There’s no one left to stop us,” Ezra murmured. His hands trapped hers. “Smile for me, Sim. I made you okay.”

Congeaed blood vacated her lungs and splattered against the front of her nightgown. Her smooth, pale skin puckered and turned ashen, and her glassy eyes brightened to a toxic green. Cracked lips twisted into a snarl and her grip on his hand tightened. “You should have let me sleep,” she rasped.

Sim didn’t give Ezra a chance to respond. She lunged forward and took his throat between her teeth and *ripped*. His body fell and landed with a thud. Blood spilled across the floor and pooled around her feet.

Sim stood up and lumbered to the door, leaving a trail of crimson footprints behind her. When she opened it, she smiled and returned to grab Ezra. His head lolled against her shoulder, and she pried his eye open. His eyelid was thin and veiny, and his eye rolled in its socket. Sim pushed it with her index finger and turned it to the door. She let go and moved her hand to his mouth and hooked her finger into the corner of his lips.

He smiled for her.

Sim dragged Ezra outside and marveled at the figures who danced around the fire, which now burned a rich green. Bones cracked and flesh stretched as the revived bodies swayed and spun around the roaring

flames. Death granted them grace and rhythm in their celebration. Gaping mouths released rattling breaths. Green eyes reflected the light of the fire.

The dead danced and sang their own ghoulish music. They each had a partner; a limp figure who was drenched in blood and whose throat had been mangled. Sim slipped into the dance and song, swinging Ezra with her as she followed the tune.

His head fell back, so she nudged it forward. It rested on her shoulder.

The celebration continued, all under the watchful eye of the one who lent Ezra the harp.

# *Ascensionism* by Austin Peña

Digital Art, 2024





## Monkey Island, Oklahoma

By: Jason Kieffe

Two months and three weeks after I failed history and stole my dad's Crown Victoria and two packs of Newport's and a bottle of whisky, I learned there are no monkeys on Monkey Island. I knew he'd be upset so I decided to make the most of it. After spilling half the alcohol on myself and ruining the tread on his tires from attempting to do donuts in the only intersection in Calumet, I parked the car on the lawn and returned home.

Dad sat in a cone of lamplight with a thick WW2 novel in his hands. He snapped it shut, wedged it under his lanky left arm, took his feet off the ottoman, put his elbows on his knees and his hands on his prominent but wrinkled chin and said to me, "Dylan, you need to see what the world is really like. You need to go to Monkey Island for the summer."

I fought the whisky enough to ask what was on Monkey Island but he was already consumed by a slow, horse-like nod that was spurred by the cracking of his own mental whip. It was the same nod when my mother left, and it was the same nod he gave me when he drove away from the entrance to the camp, two duffel bags at my feet.

There is conclusive evidence that no monkey has ever been on the premises of Monkey Island, Oklahoma. There is also not an island. Instead, it is home to a six-mile-long peninsula that juts into the Grand Lake O' the Cherokees. Even the Grand Lake O' the Cherokees does not belong to the Cherokees but is owned by multiple housing firms that bought up the land surrounding the Pensacola Dam when it was made by Henry Holderman in 1940.

I received this history lesson from a Cherokee counselor while I was stuffed in a tight life jacket made from thick, rubber-coated foam. Several permanent bite marks were inflicted across the front. If you squished the jacket, water would dribble from the toothy pockmarks,

which did not instill me with confidence. I wouldn't be kayaking usually, but I need the activity credits to pass each month-long semester at the camp. Ziplining, trapping, archery, horseshoes, and kayaking to name a few. I don't know how horseshoes and trapping will help show me life's truths, but I know I need the credits to get the hell out of Monkey Island or my dad will make me go back next summer.

"Henry Holderman must be the least Cherokee name I've ever heard." I said to my one-time history teacher, who looked regal as he stood on the dock, facing the water. His long black hair scattered itself in the wind like a mustang. An embroidered snake looked at me from the back of his white denim jacket; he wore it like a royal family's crest.

"Uh-huh. The resorts down the peninsula bought up all the prime lake grounds so we've got this little swamp hole, but at least the dock has a roof. Hey, try not to scrape the boat on any stumps when it's your turn. It's hard to spot them suckers."

I grimaced at the aquatic plants as he spoke. The southern cattail was choked into submission by invasive kudzu that ran across the state like power lines and highways. It spiraled up the cattail's shoot until it squeezed the flower head into a seedy powder. My old man would say this reflects our current economic climate.

"That's a load of horseshit."

"Yeah Dylan, the island ain't an island, my jackets made of polyester, take it from a native you never get what you're promised in Oklahoma."

"That's pretty fucked up." I inspected his jacket again to see it stretched too much around his back, real denim is rigid. That pissed me off just a bit more than I already was, it feels like getting lied to.

Matt nodded in mild agreement as he helped another pair of troubled kids from their kayak. It's not a competition, but I bet I'm less troubled than them. The duo had been friends before the camp and were now inseparable. One of them was named Les, a red-haired wiry little dirt clod that I'm near certain stole my neon red shoelaces the day I got here,

the coolest thing I was allowed to bring. His gigantic kayaking partner was Hudson, the only fifteen-year-old I've met with a face tattoo. It was a sour green ice cream cone with three scoops balanced on it, rumor was he did it himself. Decent artistry, atrocious canvas.

"Hey, we've got an empty seat, either of you want to go again?" Matt asked in a stoic yet high-pitched tone of voice. It wasn't anything like the slow, broken English that John Wayne films had promised me. Les and Hudson were halfway down the deck, sprinting so as not to burn their feet on the plastic decking. God I hope they don't volunteer. They're both on their last straw at the camp for fighting.

"I could go again, I still need a few credits." Les spoke as he hobbled on his heels back to the shaded dock, his swim trunks jingling as he did. He religiously carried everything he stole, bottle caps and shoelaces are his crucifix and rosary beads. Nobody had ever tried to get our stuff back for fear of Hudson's ice cream cone being the last thing we ever saw. Matt grabbed a rubber life jacket off the dock and Les suited up again.

"Who wants front and who wants back?" Matt handed us each an aluminum and plastic kayaking paddle. Mine had a small bite mark taken out of it, like most things here.

I didn't want that inbred pickpocket sitting behind me.

"Back." Les and I spoke at the same time.

"Let me settle this, take the backseat Les." Matt held the yellow kayak steady as Les skittered in the boat like a spider monkey. I contorted my legs into the front and sat up straight as I could, anything to look like less of an easy target. The lake water lapped against the side of the grimy boat, occasionally spilling into my lap. Sadly, it was no less filthy in the boat than it was outside the boat. Kudzu had quadrupled the rate of erosion over the years, transforming the grand lake into a red swamp along the edges.

"The view is better from the front seat, I guarantee you'll find something less fucked up out there." Matt pushed us away from the dock and away from monkey island where there are no monkeys and there is no

less filthy in the boat than it was outside the boat. Kudzu had quadrupled the rate of erosion over the years, transforming the grand lake into a red swamp along the edges.

“The view is better from the front seat, I guarantee you’ll find something less fucked up out there.” Matt pushed us away from the dock and away from monkey island where there are no monkeys and there is no island.

Small talk had never been my strong suit, but my old man loved it. He bobbed his head to the best of Buddy Holly while pointing out native fauna and flora. Mustangs, roadrunners, boar and deer skittered around my hangover head like Oklahoma’s great mental migration. It amazes me how optimistic he was on the three-hour drive. Nothing got him down, he was an impenetrable force of fatherly will propelling me across the state in a trashed Crown Victoria. I was sitting on a still-soggy whisky stain when he asked me how I was feeling.

“Not great.” I mumbled.

“A hangover is nothing some smores and campfire songs can’t fix!” His enthusiasm bubbled, as did my headache. The unbelievable calm of him was startling, I think the weight of the entire world couldn’t make him crack. He hadn’t shown even a petal of rosy, red anger since I got home. It was a great injustice that he didn’t just throw his novel across the room at me. No, he should’ve beat me outright, anything to show that his shell had cracked.

Instead, I’m with Les, who I’m sure was absorbing the metallic blue sky speckled with birds that dove into the waters on the whims of their stomachs, scooping and chomping at darting fish with their beaks and talons. Or maybe he was listening to the winds whip along the waters, intensely focusing on the way they glided on the surface tension before nudging our boat ever so gently towards an outcropping peninsula across the lake. I’m near certain he was becoming one with nature and learning the secrets to not being a troubled youth any longer in a sort of spiritual/

metaphysical osmosis. Les was definitely not examining the back of my head for pressure points. The tension got to me and I broke the silence.

“I take it Hudson likes ice cream.”

“The fuck does ice cream got to do with him?” Les responded quickly, like a teacher’s pet on the edge of his chair.

“The tattoo. On his face. The three scoops on his cheek.” Our paddles collide in the water due to poor coordination, which has been happening consistently since we left the dock.

“Oh that ain’t got shit to do with ice cream, it’s about Gucci Mane.” Les said this as if I had made an egregious assumption about Hudson's character.

“Who the hell is Gucci Mane?”

“Seriously. You don’t know Gucci Mane? East Atlanta Santa, Trap House 1 & 2, The State Vs. Radric Davis?” I turned my head to see Les’ astonished expression through a thick coat of freckles. “The Gooch? Brick Factory? C’mon Dylan, he just dropped Trap house 3, probably his best mixtape yet.”

“What the hell does that got to do with the scribbles on his face?”

“Gucci Mane has the same tattoo, dumbass.” Les snapped.

“Does he like Ice Cream?” My voice was rising

“No, retard-” Les was cut off as a mallard swooped low beside our boat and floated beside us, expecting bread. I felt like an idiot crammed in a life jacket, yelling in front of a duck. I undid the straps on my life jacket and tied it to a cord on the side of the kayak.

“I don’t need a fucking life jacket, I know how to swim.”

“Yeah. No shit.” Les stripped off his life jacket. He copied me so quickly it bothered me. I ignored him as he reached for the duck, which wisely stayed just beyond his grasp.

I took this opportunity for a moment of silent anger. The deep realities of life that I’ve been missing out on was certainly out here somewhere, hiding in some shade or cold pocket of the lake. I’m sure there’s a life lesson just outside my grasp. Maybe it’s the perseverance of kayaking

with a moron. I set my sights on a patch of shade and decide to find something less fucked up over there.

We need to be out here for an hour to get our activity credit, and we need sixty credits to pass this month-long semester of the program. The camp faculty recommended we do two activities a day, but they let us decide for ourselves because, “Decision making builds character.” I and everyone else waited until the very last week.

“How long we been out here?” Les peeled his attention away from the duck long enough to ask. There were now two ducks swimming contently outside his reach.

“About twenty minutes.” I have a very precise internal clock, something the camp counselors find enthralling. They like to make me keep time during the activities to see how accurate I am. My margin of error is within minutes.

“Damn. I just can’t wait to get back to the trap. Twenty minutes me and Hudson can churn out some rocks.”

“The trap. To make rocks. Really?” My voice was lathered in sarcasm.

“Yeah, straight cooking up and selling snow, just like a real thug.” Les peered out over the water with a solemn expression, the way a soldier contemplates going back to active duty.

“How much snow have you guys sold?” The bite mark in my left paddle made it far less effective, causing the boat to drag to one side. Les had not resumed paddling, so the boat banked in a large circle.

“I mean, like, we haven’t sold that much. We got busted before we could really turn a profit. Trapping is hard man. You got to get the supplies, the recipe, a place to cook at. Shit we almost burned down my closet on our first cook.”

I turned in my seat to stare at him.

“Your closet? Seriously, you were cooking crack in your closet?”

“I mean, yeah. Kind of. That’s how we got busted.” An honest twinge of shame crept into Les’ voice and I almost felt bad for him, but

my frustration won over.

“You couldn’t even take it out into a barn? Or a field? You couldn’t at least cook it when your parents weren’t home? You think Gucci Mane ever got busted by his own mom for making crack?”

Les looked like he was about to cry. His little green eyes were starting to shine and his cheeks reddened as he deflated into his seat. He was an empty balloon.

“Ah shit man, I’m sorry. C’mon Les I didn’t mean to be that harsh.”

He didn’t look at me, his head was hung too low for me to see his face. The ducks carried an expression of disgrace toward me.

“It’s not that bad, dude. Even Gucci Mane had to start somewhere. Like, I’ve never even cooked crack, I’m kind of jealous you got to do it once, really. Man I’m here because I took my dad’s car for a joyride and stole some cigarettes and booze. That’s so much lamer than cooking crack in a closet.”

I sensed he didn’t want to be looked at so I faced the lake. He stayed quiet for two minutes. I tried to paddle toward the shade as he did, but his paddle was dragging in the water and we banked in another circle, this time in the opposite direction. The ducks circled us.

“Did you get to smoke them at least?” Les’ voice was deeper from the snotty buildup. I could tell he didn’t want to take a loud sniff, it would be too obvious he was crying.

“Yeah, they were awesome. The first two were gross but I still caught a buzz.”

Les made an upbeat grunt in approval.

“Look man, we could paddle over to that shady spot and sit out the rest of the time for the activity credit. We’ve got like a half hour left and we might as well not spend it in the sun.”

“Yeah okay.” Les resumed lightly paddling to the shade and we sat in silence, only interrupted by the occasional quack of the ducks or thud of our paddles colliding. Coordination was still not our strong suit.

Oklahoma's 98-degree heat is what made me dread fulfilling this activity credit's requirement more than the rest. Archery and rock climbing are shaded by the trees, but muddy red dirt does nothing to dull the sun. It makes every two-foot creek murky enough to engulf the world. Even the sun isn't bold enough to shine past the surface of the dirty water. It just looked so impenetrable.

I planted the paddle to my side and the kayak drifted to a stop under the shade. It lessened the heat, but the lake was more secretive in the dark. Snakes and catfish and alligator gar were just an arm below the coffee-colored surface.

Nothing less fucked up had presented itself, and it pissed me off. Matt and his dock were now just a speck across the dull water. Nothing in me has changed since I was dropped off at this shitty camp, much less gone out on the shitty lake. The only difference was that I'd seen Les sad, although he had already come out of it now as he splashed at the ducks. He had a special brand of emotional elasticity.

"You know why this place is called Monkey Island?"

"Because there's monkeys on the island. Duh." Les responds too quickly to the question, which I've learned is right on time for him.

"There's not a monkey or an island here though. The name is a lie."

"Why would it be named monkey island if there isn't? That'd be stupid."

"That's what I'm saying. It is stupid, because there aren't any islands on the lake. You could see an island from here, and I know you haven't seen a monkey all summer."

Les squinted as he scanned the smooth water. "No, there's definitely an island. It's probably just around that bend, and I bet you anything there's monkeys on it."

"No there isn't a monkey in the county, Matt was just telling me." Sweat dribbled from my shaggy crew cut as we argued, the last humidity of the day had settled.



“Calm down dude, Matt obviously doesn’t know the area that well or he’s lying. There’s got to be an island just around the bend.”

“There isn’t, that’s what pisses me off about this whole place. Nothing here is what I was told it would be, and this shit isn’t building my character, it’s just making me sweat for an hour. Everything is just as fucked up here as it was at the dock.”

“Damn dude, it’s not that big of a deal, just get your credits and go home.”

“Home is just as fucked up as this stupid camp. Your parents don’t care what happens to you, they leave you and expect you to figure things out yourself. The camp doesn’t fix troubled kids either, they get paid for each kid that goes to the camp so they have no incentive to help anybody. Ever heard of a repeat customer?”

“Why do you even give a shit? Who cares if there aren’t monkeys or if the place is full of them? It doesn’t matter. None of that shit matters, Dylan! Let it go!”

The ducks quickly paddled away from us as our voices rose. The sun had begun to set, sending rusty orange ripples across the water. I didn’t notice this yet, because I was turned around in my seat shouting at Les.

“Yeah take it from the idiot that cooked crack in his closet to know what matters and what doesn’t?” I doubled down. “Did your mom hit you before you got dumped here or was it straight to the camp?”

Les started to say something but I yelled over him. “I’d listen to Hudson before you, and he’s got a tattoo of an ice cream cone, *on his fucking face!*”

Les looked like he was going to cry, but his expression this time was tinted with a rosy, honest anger.

His boney knuckles whipped against my chin, clacking my teeth together against my tongue. I tasted blood as he slung his balled-up fists against the back of my head. Two successive strikes landed and my vision blurred. Playing defense while sitting in front of someone is a losing

formula, so I swung my bite mark paddle behind me and it connected with the side of his head. Les let out a yelp as his spindly body swung to the left side. I leaned the opposite way to counterbalance and a bucket's worth of Oklahoma swamp water poured into my seat.

My red shoelaces dropped past my eyes and Les pulled it tight against my Adam's apple. I tried to wedge my fingers under the garrot but Les was already wringing my neck with it.

Switching tactics, I swung my paddle behind me again with all the fury I had left. It snapped against Les' temple and forced him right out of his seat and into the swamp. I caught one gray breath before the boat tipped and I joined Les' scrawny silhouette in the water.

Oklahoma engulfed me. The boat capsized and hung me upside-down in the lake. I couldn't see more than a hazy brown bubble around me and my legs had fallen asleep from being wedged in the boat Indian style. As I struggled I saw my neon red shoelaces float just in front of me in my limited field of vision. Right beyond them was Tommy's wristwatch that he thought he lost the first day. And Wally's shark tooth necklace just beyond that. Ethan's pocket journal, Tyler's rings, and Ollie's trading cards were all sinking along with a half-conscious redheaded boy that never had anything cool in his whole life. A kid that had never felt accepted and would lie about knowing how to swim just to fit in.

Bubbles floated to the surface from his mouth and nose as he sunk out of my swampy brown field of vision, flailing as he did. I slipped my prickling numb legs from the boat and kicked off of it towards him, the water quickly grew cold the deeper I went. My eyes stung from the stagnant lake water but I pressed through the pain and brushed through the hoarded trinkets. An arm swung through the foggy water just in front of me and I tried to grab it but he was gone, devoured by the red lake. I floated in the foggy water surrounded by his inheritance of stolen goods.

A balled-up fist swung in the water, connecting with my head. I was rocked by the swing but managed to grab hold of him. He writhed blindly in the water, but I pulled him toward the dull light above me. Pain

needed in my stiff legs as I kicked upwards with Les in tow, returning through the fodder of childhood junk.

I burst from the surface and sucked in the dusk air before yanking Les from the swamp. His curly red hair was now drenched in lake water and scattered across a pale, mortified expression. I put his hand on one of the life jackets that I had strapped on the side of the kayak and we treaded water while staring at each other. He had a stream of blood running from his cheek which blended perfectly with the lake. It was where I struck him with the bite mark on the end of my paddle.

Trading cards and bracelets and assorted trinkets surfaced around us, the waterlogged mementos of his thievery. Les looked utterly ashamed of them as he clung to the kayak. My old man would've said I had baptized him and brought him to confession in the same moment. When I came home drunk there was no need for confession, everything was plain to see. He said the lack of deception made him proud of me. I'd never understood that until now.

"Let's turn the boat over." The cynical foundation in my voice was gone, replaced by a thin and shaky whisper.

"Uh-huh." Les spoke in a voice much deeper than usual.

We both latched ourselves onto the peak of the capsized kayak and pulled it over in the water. Les clawed his way into the boat while I collected the paddles.

"You want any of this stuff?" I said quietly. I didn't want any of it, least of all my red shoelaces. Les shook his head and I climbed into the kayak, letting in another bucket of water into the neon yellow coffin. We started back to the dock without discussing.

"How long was I underwater for?" I could tell Les was fighting a sniffle.

"I- I don't even know." My tone matched his as tears welled up in my eyes. We could both hear our quaky breaths as we glided over the red waters, still not wanting to take a vulnerable sniff. Only now did I notice now how beautiful the sunset was. It shone bright yellow rays over a clear

lake without an island; I couldn't muster the energy to give a shit about it. We made quick work of the return trip; our coordination was now perfect.

Matt's expression grew more concerned as we neared the dock. Our disheveled appearance did not speak highly of the trip. Our eyes were puffy and Les was still bleeding right under his eye. The kayak scraped against several stumps before colliding with the rotting dock.

Matt grimaced as he reached down to help us from the waterlogged vessel. Shell-shocked and still dripping, we scrambled onto the dock and stood side by side, facing Matt's bright white denim jacket.

"I take it y'all capsized?"

We said nothing.

"Hope you didn't get any brain-eating bacteria on you." Matt paused for a response as he shook his stallion mane of hair from his face. Still nothing.

"Okay, here's your activity credits. Les you earned yourself two today." He took three metallic tokens with a kayak paddle printed on them from his pocket and handed them to us.

"Dinner is in thirty minutes or so, was getting worried you'd miss it. Y'all better go get changed to make it on time."

Les nodded silently and started down the shady dock, not a sound coming from his empty pockets. I stood still and wrapped the coin tight in my palm until it made an imprint on my skin. Matt heaved the kayak from the water and hung it up vertically on a stand, his shoulders flexed against his vest as he did so. It was a really nice vest, even if it was fake denim.

"You find anything less fucked up out there?"

"Yeah. The sunset's real nice." Violet rays sprawled over the choppy velvet lake but I wasn't paying attention. Les thrashing in the cold, muddy waters, surrounded by his sins was still vivid in my mind. I'd never seen anything so desperately, honestly, real.

## World in a Bottle

By: Emily Smith

Aquamarine glass glints in the sloshing gray waves, a beacon through the fog, calling out to Caspian. The gothic iron lamp posts hum with electricity, emitting a warm yellow light, guiding him down to the beach. His bare feet sink into the sand with each step. As he walks further down the shore, it mashes between his toes, wedging underneath his nails, clinging and sticky against his skin.

Drifting closer to the sea, the lights become dingy, just a faint glow through the haze. Crouching down, he grabs the item that caught his eye—a bottle ebbing and flowing with the waves. He smears it against his pants, drying off the excess water. It's caked with dirt, but there's a hidden pattern in the glass. He jogs back up to a lamppost on the seawall, scraping off the grime with his fingernails. Small diamond shapes wrap around the bottle, embellished with swirls and other loops. Caspian knows nothing about design, but it's fancy to him, like something that would come out of a treasure room. He holds it up to the light, illuminating the piece of paper that's inside. He grins, one side of his lips raising higher than the other. Stuffing the bottle under his arm, he begins the trek back to his room.

Feet meeting cobblestone, he strolls down the uneven street. Buildings, mostly with unlit windows, line both sides, jutting up from the earth. The fog hangs in the air around empty picnic tables and storefronts, painting the barren town gray.

White light cuts through the fog from Old Man Barnaby's windows. A blinding square cut-out from the sandstone like a portal to another world. A shadow casts over the light, Old Man Barnaby stands in the frame with a cup of coffee, looking down at Caspian with hollow eyes. They're all like that though, everyone in this town. Ghastly pale from the lack of sunlight, sunken eyes, dark circles like smears of black paint. He

smiles up at Old Man Barnaby, waving his free hand. The old man doesn't smile back. He never does.

No one does, really.

Most of them are so sick of seeing the same people every day that they'd rather cut their own fingers off. Quite literally. Old Man Barnaby only has eight fingers for a reason.

Upon arriving home, the lights are dim and no one speaks to him. He walks past his mother and smiles, but she doesn't look up from her book. His dad flips a page in the newspaper—the one from two weeks ago—as if anything had changed since the last time he read it.

Caspian flicks on the bathroom light and turns on the faucet, drenching the bottle in cold water. Grabbing his brother's toothbrush—he never brushes his teeth anyway—Caspian scrubs the glass, getting in between the grooves of the designs to rid it of any excess dirt. He's only finished when it's shining and spotless.

"This is a treasure, alright," he says, lifting the bottle up to the light, turning it every direction.

"What's a treasure?" his brother asks, poking his head around the doorframe. Adrian's pale blue eyes cut upwards at Caspian, a smirk dances on his lips.

"Something I found on the beach," he says, holding the bottle closer to his chest with one hand, hiding the toothbrush behind his back with the other.

Adrian's eyes glide over the bottle. The spark of interest gives him away before he acts. Caspian lifts it above his head. Adrian's curly mop of hair comes just below Caspian's jaw, grimy hands reaching for the bottle.

"It's mine," Caspian grits, shoving Adrian away.

"What is it? Let me see," he whines, yanking at Caspian's arm.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Just because your twelve now doesn't mean you get to boss me around," Adrian huffs.

Maneuvering around him and down the hall, Caspian stumbles into his room. Adrian makes one more snatch for the bottle when Caspian shuts the door on him. “You’re gonna break it,” Caspian scolds, leaning against the door. Adrian shoves it with his shoulder, hitting the wood with a sharp thump.

Sweat pooling at Caspian’s forehead, his fingernails dig into the cork lodged in the neck of the bottle. Adrian would not get the letter before him. He squeezes the cork, trying to twist it loose, but it refuses to budge. “I just—wanna—see it!” Adrian says, his words broken up by attempts of knocking the door off its hinges.

“It’s not yours,” Caspian grumbles, jaw clenched. Crescent moon fingernail punctures litter the cork. Different angles make no difference. is cemented in place.

“You’re not being fair,” he groans, feet shuffling away down the hall.

Caspian presses his ear to the door, listening for signs of Adrian’s return. After he’s sure Adrian has given up, he sets the bottle gently on his bedside table under the lamp. It sparkles underneath the bulb, reflecting his room on its surface.

The letter inside begs to be read.

It could be a million and one different things.

Excitement washes out his worry like waves pooling over a sandcastle.

A treasure map, a call to adventure, anything, anything, anything. And it’s his. His, alone. Adrian wouldn’t get his hands on it.

He spares the bottle on last glance and smiles, clicking off his lamp. Closing his eyes, he throws his blanket over his head.

At dawn, he’s marching to the beach, cutting his way through the early Sunday morning haze. Holding the bottle up to his eye like a spy-glass, Caspian imagines the sand warmer underneath his feet. The sunlight filters through the clouds in radiant strips of yellow, warming his cold, blue skin accustomed to years worth of fog and rain. Today he is a pirate on the

Caspian Sea—of course, it was what he was named for, what he was destined for. Azure waves lick the sides of his boat—of all his boats. A fleet, to be more precise. He is most feared, a man of many names, moving from port city to port city, snatching the riches right from under their noses. He is a dream, a myth, a ghost of the most clever sorts. He has no need for an eyepatch, he's not one of those run of the mill pirates. A diamond is in place of his missing eye and jewels for his teeth—sapphires mostly, shining and ever blue.

He is in search of a treasure today, the greatest treasure known to man. It's in Turkmenistan, but that's only because it's the only country he knows that borders the Caspian Sea. His map tells him exactly where the biggest treasures are. Without it, he wouldn't be nearly as successful as a pirate. If it weren't for the bottle that washed ashore all those years ago, he would never have been a pirate at all.

“Sixty-three, sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-six,” he mumbles with each dramatic step, feet plunging into the sand with gusto. “Ah! Here we are!” He stops his search, squatting down to pick up a seashell. Pearly white in color, fanning out to the size of his palm. “Beautiful.” He smiles, stuffing it into his pocket. “Where was I? Oh, sixty-seven, sixty-eight...”

Every couple of steps, he picks up another shell. Mostly broken or halves of full shells, but treasures nonetheless. Pockets jangling, he decides to make the journey back to his ship to add these trinkets to his collection.

Humming a pirate's tune and skipping to the beat, his feet meet cobblestones and he's back in his childhood town. The soft swishing of a broom comes from his right. The fog obscures her figure, but Francis is the only one who would be out sweeping in this weather. The dusky blue, paint chipped pastry shop isn't complete without her constantly cleaning. That's all there is to do. No one buys her pastries.

Across the street, the warm, yellow light coming from Old Man Barnaby's window makes a halo around his figure. It's almost heavenly—well, as heavenly as Barnaby could be. As he gets closer, Caspian sees the



faint red glow of a cigarette in his hand. The puffs of smoke mingle with the fog with each breath he takes. His cold, dark eyes meet Caspian's and he frowns, pulling the window closed.

Caspian turns to Francis, who shrugs. Her big blue glasses rest on the tip of her nose, threatening to slip off. "Run on home now," she rasps, voice like gravel from years of smoking. "This fog's no good for kids like you."

He nods, giving her a slight wave with his free hand, bounding off down the street and around the bend to his house.

He empties his treasures onto the bathroom sink, cleaning them all delicately, ridding them of the sand in between their grooves. Carrying the clean shells in his shirt, he totes them to his room where he arranges them on his bedside table from smallest to largest.

Bottle sitting in his lap, he digs his fingernails into the cork. Using his legs as leverage, he tugs at it. Nothing. Just a deeper dent into the cork's tough exterior.

He places the bottle beside the shells, watching the light against the glass scatter, painting them aquamarine. Clicking off his lamp, he smiles to himself. The promise of another adventure lies on that letter, sitting so cozily inside the glass.

As the school bell rings out, Caspian rushes out of the double doors and down to the beach. The fog seems thinner and less murky, almost as if the sun could actually come out and shine for a bit.

Today he is Prince—maybe even King—Caspian, the Valiant, loved by all his subjects. He is a kind man, a generous man, he shares his riches with everyone, even the pirates so they won't plunder him of his riches. He knows pirates, ones with jewels for teeth, and they can be quite unkind sometimes. If it weren't for the bottle that washed up all those years ago, he never would have known that he was the secret heir to a far off kingdom.

With a small, twisted piece of driftwood, King Caspian practices sword fighting. He advances with one step and swings his arm with another, using his sword like an extension of himself. He cuts down his opponents with one stroke—he is the best swordsman for a reason. A gleam against the sand catches his eye. He stops his attack to scoop it up. A small silver and gold coin, shining against the light of the lamp post. Engraved in the center is a lion and on the other side is a scale. The writing around the rim is in a language Caspian can't decipher, but in small letters across the middle, it reads *I Birr*. It had certainly traveled a long way to end up here.

“Priceless.” He beams, flicking the coin up with his thumb, watching it spiral down, snatching it into his palm.

Dusk begins to settle on the horizon, washing the world in a purple haze. Soon, he wouldn't be able to see his hand in front of his face. Sword at his side, he makes his way back to his castle, where he would be greeted, celebrated, even. Just his presence would be a gift.

Holding his shoulders back and his chest puffed out, he struts through the town and around the bend to the palace. It's magnificent—an immense stone structure jutting out from the ground, adorned with his kingdom's blue flags and jewels along each archway. The thick wooden door is opened for him by his guards, creaking on its hinges. Closing the door behind him, he's met with a small room with dingy yellow lights.

“How was school?” his mom asks, fingers monotonously pulling and stitching a thread, patching up his father's work pants.

“Awfully boring,” he says, a twinge of hope lingering on his tongue.

“That's good,” she hums, not looking up. His shoulders sag. Of course she wouldn't even ask. She never does. She hadn't even realized he had been gone all evening.

Shuffling his feet to his room, he places the coin softly beside the bottle and the seashells, admiring his growing collection. This is what matters. Taking the bottle into his hands, his fingernails find their groove

in the cork. It twists, ever so slightly. A smile blooms across his face, a warmth flowing across his chest. Yes, this is what matters. This letter. The letter that will get him out of here.

The shrill, repetitive ringing of the school bell reverberates in Caspian's ears. He shoves himself up from his desk, watching the world rush around him. His classmates' loud laughs echo down the hallway. Their bright smiles and crooked teeth blur past him as he makes his way out the double doors and down the path to the beach, where it's quiet. Where he's alone.

Today he is a normal boy in a normal town somewhere far away from here.

Somewhere, maybe another coastal town.

Yeah, a coastal town with waters that glimmer and sparkle as the waves roll in. A town that's warm and that has flowers in bloom. Do other coastal towns have flowers in bloom? Can they bloom so near to the ocean?

He goes to school and has loud and boisterous friends that never let life slow down, there is never a dull moment. They wouldn't walk past him as if he were a ghost, they wouldn't leave him to walk the beach alone.

Today, he climbs the rocks along the coastline with them. Looking down, Caspian watches the frothy gray waves flow back and forth—well, no. They're blue, cerulean maybe. Crisp, bright, and not so unforgiving. His friend taps his shoulder and smiles, a big, toothy grin. "You're it," he says, jumping off the rocks, bounding away through the sand. Caspian shouts after him, pumping his legs to catch up. Using the bottle as an extension of his arm, he taps his friend and springs the other way. Throwing his head back, no footsteps follow him besides his own, but he pushes on. Shimmying through the rocks, he crouches down in a hiding place, breathless. No one will find him here. He imagines his

friends' voices shouting after him, the howling wind mimicking their laughter. They're getting closer and closer. Caspian tries pulling himself up, but the rock crumbles. He picks up the broken chunk and turns it upside down. It's almost shaped like a bird. Maybe if he squints and tilts his head a bit. His friends would be able to see it. Readjusting his footing, he climbs out of his hiding spot with his new rock tucked safely in his pocket.

The wind thrashes against his face and he smiles. It's almost like a hug from nature. Below him, mesmerizing swirls form in the tides, fizzing with each crash into the rocks. He takes his bird rock out of his pocket and holds it up to the sky. Perhaps it could fly someday. Perhaps the bottle could answer its wishes too.

Taking slow, deliberate steps, he follows the winding path back up to town. The fog hangs in the air around him, weighing him down. With each breath, it swirls in his lungs. He looks up at Barnaby's window, but he's not there. Francis, perched on her stool, flashes him a brief smile. It doesn't quite reach her eyes. Caspian waves his free hand, but she only sighs in response. His heart sinks into his stomach. She, too, had resorted to silence.

He turns on his heel and retraces his steps back to the beach.

The evening fog settles on his skin, slick and murky. He holds the bottle in his hands, feeling as if the world would come alive if he opened it. A blaze of color and light and music would swirl around him, whisking him to somewhere new. This bottle is everything he had ever hoped for. It is a dream, it is hope, it is a beacon, a voice in the void—his lighthouse in the distance. It will change his life, whatever is on this paper.

Closing his eyes, Caspian whispers to the sea, "Let this bottle bring me the world, my ticket out. I beg of God, of whoever, please let me in. Let me into the beautiful world that is out there."

He has been on an exoplanet his whole life, distant from the radiance this world has to offer. Far from reach, orbiting way out of

Earth's path, despite having his feet planted in her soil. He would surely turn into seafoam if he could not leave. He would turn into the very fog he breathes. He would fade away into the waves, just like everyone else in this town, never to leave a mark on the world.

Caspian inhales sharply, staring at the bottle—its aquamarine glass painting his hands blue with scattered light from the lamppost.

Slowly, delicately, he pulls the cork out of the top. It emits a round, full sound against the glass. Holding the bottle upside down, he empties its contents out onto his hand. A singular piece of paper, rough to the touch and stiff from its time rolled up inside its teal prison.

His heartbeat swells in his ears, drowning out the crashing of the waves into the sand.

Placing the bottle under his arm, he unfurls the paper. His eyes are sparkling and full of wonder, reflecting the ocean—reflecting the world on their watery surface. Quickly, he scans the words on the paper.

*Omar was here.*

That's it.

A singular sentence.

The paper flutters from his grasp, dancing away in the wind like dove wings dashing through the sand. Caspian had never seen a dove. Only ugly, annoying seagulls, and most of the time, they wouldn't stay long. A town like this isn't suited for even the most ugly and annoying of creatures.

Turning his head slowly, his eyes land on the paper—a white slash cutting through the fog. He gasps, looking at his empty hands. Scrambling after it, his feet sink into the wet shore with each sloppy step, raking up clumps of it as he runs. The paper swirls in the air, drifting towards the unforgiving water. He dives, crashing into the waves face first, snatching the letter before it can go under. A cold, unforgiving slap against his skin.

Resurfacing, Caspian's hair hangs in dark strings in front of his eyes, burning and blurry from the salty water. Pushing his hair out of his face, he blink blink blinks until his vision is clear again. The letter, nearly

crumpled in his hand, rests just above the waves, only sprinkled with water. He exhales, feeling his stomach relax against the sand.

Pushing himself out of the shallows with his left hand, taking care to keep the paper dry, Caspian sits with his feet in the water. The sound of the waves crashing and fizzling out into the sand rings in his ears. He holds the paper to his face, eyes closed. It's all he has. Even if it was nothing. A moment of peace was better than a lifetime of none.

The cold settles into his bones, chilling him from the inside out. It takes much effort to make himself leave this spot on the beach. It's a long walk back home, his feet drag, making swirls in the sand. The lamps light his way, looking down on him with their sallow faces, washing him in a sickly yellow glow. His eyes follow the cobblestones, not daring to glance at Barnaby or Francis.

Not bothering to take off his wet clothes, he flops back onto his bed, sinking into the blue blankets. He holds the paper above him, eyes scanning the singular sentence over and over and over again.

*Omar was here. Omar was here. Omar was here.*

With a sigh, his arm falls beside him.

"And I am here," he whispers, voice scraping its way out of his throat, hoarse and weak.

Rolling over to his side, his eyes find their way back to the paper, trailing the creases from being crumpled. The lines resemble rivers here, paths there. The prominent creases are mountains and the shadows beside them are valleys. It's much like a map. A journey he couldn't understand. A journey.

*A journey.*

His eyes gleam in the low, yellow lighting of his room. "That's it." He smiles, one side of his lips raising higher than the other.

Sitting up board straight, Caspian swings open the drawer to his bedside table, rummaging through its contents. Finding a navy blue pin, he tacks the letter to his wall. Leaning over to his backpack at the foot of

the bed, he gets his journal, ripping a page from its binding. He pops the cap off of a pen with his teeth, holding it in his mouth as he writes.

*I am Caspian*, scrawled in thick, cobalt ink. *Find me.*

He rolls up the paper tightly and stuffs it into the aquamarine bottle, sealing it in with the cork.

Wasting no time, he shoves his way out the door and rushes back to the beach, piercing his way through the fog. The last remnants of day are licking the waves, and the haze around him is growing darker with the sky.

With a running start, Caspian winds up his arm, chunking the bottle into the water. It streaks through the fog, an aquamarine arc soon out of his sight. For a moment it is gone to the abyss, then comes the satisfying splash of it plunging into the waves. He exhales, shoulders falling in relief.

Someone will hear him, save him.

His letter will reach someone, and they will know what to do.

Caspian stands on the shore, watching the silver waves fade into the fog until they become one. Somewhere out there, his bottle has started a journey for him.

An aquamarine sparkle glints in the corner of his eye.

Picking up the slick bottle, he hurls it back out to sea, this time with a more sideways throw, if that makes a difference. He wipes his wet hand on his pants, leaving a dark smear on the denim.

The bottle finds its way back to his feet

He pitches it in an upward angle, then tries again, then tries another running start, then a frisbee toss, and again with his left hand, then underhanded, with both hands, a spinning start, another running start, and another, and three more times for good measure, and again with a frisbee toss, maybe once more with his left hand, and just one more running start.

Hunched over, hands on his knees, Caspian heaves, breathless. His jeans are soaked up to the knee, his whole body spritzed with salt water and sweat. Standing up straight, he tosses the bottle into the water softly. It lands amongst the waves with a soft plunk.

It ebbs and flows, bobbing up and down, otherwise unmoving.

Caspian flops down into the sand, leaning back against his hands, breathing in sharp, unsteady breaths. The fog swirls his lungs, thick and murky. Saliva coats his mouth, lips dry and cracked.

Aquamarine glass glints in the sloshing gray waves, washing up against Caspian's feet, bumping his toes again and again and again with the rhythm of the sea.



*Clutter* by Logan Burse  
Photography, 2024



# NonFiction

*The Dinner Date* by Christian McClure

Screen Print



## **Our Little Spiders**

By: Shyanne Davis

Our parents wrap up for the night; I still have hours of work in my room. There aren't any nightlights left in the house. From the hall the cracks between my door and its frame glow; I always leave my lights on. I hear him get up to use the restroom, but on his way back my door opens and his head pops into the crack.

"Mom and dad are going to bed..." he trails off, his eyes are intense, "you want me to leave your door open, right?"

I check the clock and it's only ten; I have four hours of work left. "I sure do," I reply with a smile. He smiles too and takes a step or two to his room, where he leaves his door open. The light from my room doesn't really reach him, but he can see it nonetheless. From my desk I can see his outline. His feet hang off the end of the bed. He's fifteen. I want to leave my door open every night.

The stupid little spider won't leave my bathroom and I have to pee. It's just sort of crawling the edge of the baseboard, lapping the room. I would take it outside and free it, but it's already too dark outside. To squish it is just as bad because if I miss and it jumps on me I'll scream, or I won't miss, feel guilty, and scream anyways.

In the morning I tell him not to grow up. It's never lived up to the hype. My brother flexes his arms in the mirror and I frown.

## Granny's Fudge

By: Katie Friedrichsen

The fabric of her night gown was soft and plush beneath my fingers, the little dogs on the pattern staring up at me as I stared and stared and stared. My palm was still warm from where I had held her, a hand on her arm, feeling the warmth slowly fade away and out of her. Her skin had felt like velvet—so, so fragile, just a sheet of tissue paper that could rip at any second. I could still hear that last, raspy wheeze she made, the sound ricocheting around my head like a bullet of punishment and kiss of good-bye.

The chair beneath me was digging into my back, making me ache, but it was nothing compared to the weight that pressed into my chest, hugging so tight that I had to fight to take each breath. Tears stung my eyes, dripping and dripping, rolling down my face in boiling waves. I didn't have the strength to reach up and wipe them away. I wasn't the only one crying anyways, so I figured it'd be okay if I didn't hide them. We all knew why they were there.



My six-year-old feet pattered on the hardwood floor, loud in the quiet. The living room was dark, but enough light glimmered from the Christmas tree that I could avoid running into the couch. The yellow star and multicolored lights winked at me, knowing my intent. Cinnamon and pine floated in the air. Spy music played in my mind, adrenaline pumping as I heard my mom move in the back of the house. Fear crawled along my spine with spider's legs as I thought of my mom discovering my mission. If I was caught, I was dead. A lump formed in my throat.

I crept to the kitchen counter where my reward sat: the beautiful, bright red, Christmas themed Tupperware container. The snowmen on the

lid smiled at me, mirroring my triumph, and I peeled it open. It popped as the lid came off.

Inside, small brown cubes sat with little faces of anticipation that promised happiness. Little pieces of heaven. Chocolate fudge.

These fudge squares were my absolute favorite and a treat, as we only got them once a year at Christmas. I absolutely loved them, though my mom only let me have one once a day. I wanted something sweet—and I didn't want to wait until tomorrow.

The chocolate immediately melted in my mouth. It wasn't gooey, like most fudge. It was solid, thick, like a brick broken into little pieces. But the second it rested on your tongue, it warmed and became a consistency that only it could become, liquifying like a hardened heart feeling love for the first time. It tasted like peanut butter and chocolate, with a slice of vanilla, like hot chocolate and Tennessee winters.

I looked up, ready to grab another piece, and froze. Before me, a giant with flaming red hair stood with her arms crossed, her blue eyes staring at me in the way only a mother can do. My mother stood before me. I was caught. The sweet fudge tasted like bitter dirt.



My aunt was off talking to the hospice nurse, sobbing and hiccuping, her voice raw and raspy, like a chair scratching across hardwood floor. Her short, dirty blonde hair was in a messy knot at the back of her neck, wild hairs framing her face like fireworks. It was hitting her the hardest out of all of us. I don't think my aunt knew what life was outside of *her*.

I saw her son reach up and console her with a small hug, his other long arm wrapped around his sister, who was nearly as wrecked as their mom, clutching a small scrap of notebook paper with a heart that had been scribbled on it a few days ago in sharpie by the woman we were all now missing. That was all he was doing, walking between each of us and placing a heavy hand on our shoulders, giving hugs, offering support. His eyes

were still covered in crunchy boogers and sleep, wearing wrinkled clothes thrown on in a hurry. He was only seventeen. He shouldn't be in charge of keeping us calm, I thought, especially when he lost her too. But I didn't have the chance to really do anything about it.

My dad sat beside me, a look on his face I had never seen before. His dark hair was combed, and his teeth brushed, a solid pillar against the wreckage around him. His dark rimmed eyes were sad, his eyebrows raised, and a small smile would appear each time he glanced at me. But I knew he felt just as helpless as the rest of us.



The wind was cold, biting at me as I walked into her house, my muscles relaxing as the warmth of the heater melted into my bones. The smell of White Diamonds perfume and cigarette smoke crafted the air. She sat in her normal sofa chair, sinking deep into the cushions, holding her little purple plastic cup filled with ice and a splash of Diet Coke.

She smiled as she looked up at me, her never changing blue eyes stark against her pale face. Coughing as she sat up, she grabbed her walker, beckoning me with a wrinkled hand tipped with deep magenta nails. The kitchen drawer squeaked as she pulled it open, pulling out a single sheet of yellowed paper that had dark panned words scribbled onto it.

- 1) 3 cups Sugar
- 2) Salt (dash)
- 3) 2/3 Cup cocoa
- 4) 1 ½ cups Milk
- 5) Butter (2 tsb.)
- 6) Peanut Butter (Spoon) (Lg)
- 7) Vanilla flavoring ½ Tesp.

I pulled out the ingredients, joking and telling her about my latest boyfriend. She laughed, teasing. She placed the cast iron onto the stove, grabbing a metal spoon. Each move was smooth, from memory, 70 years' worth of work.

“It can’t be raining, and it has to be cold,” she stressed. “You need to constantly stir, don’t stop. If not, it won’t turn out.”

When we went to add the peanut butter, she took the spoon and licked it. The most important part, she said. When my arms got tired, she told me I was too skinny and needed to grow some muscles. When mom wanted a picture, she stuck her dentures out at her. When I called her short, she said she could still kick my ass.

The fudge poured into the pan perfectly, forming little waves and ripples as it solidified mid-pour. It was turning.

She turned to me, pride sparkling bright in her eyes, and said she was shocked that I had been able to do it first try. “I’m proud of you, baby.” The victory tasted better than the chocolate.



The line rang loud and clear, phone pressed to my ear. My fiancé picked up, the same boy from years previous, sleepy from the time difference, his blueberry eyes, calm and steady, barely opened in the darkness of his room. He listened as I told him, having known it was coming. His voice was soft, low, comforting and stable while the world around me shook. The loneliness crept back in, a tick in my side I couldn’t shake off, when I hit the red button to end the call and a sound too eerily like a flatline resounded.

By now, the entire family had gathered in the hallway. Nurses had pulled out chairs and we sat around, trying to figure out what the next step was. My aunts and uncles and cousins all huddled around me, crushed into a too-bright hallway that smelled like anti-septic and dead roses. They were talking about memories that I wasn’t there for, years before my time. Times where she had poured a pot of boiling hot beans at my aunt, called the cops on my mother, tried to flush my aunt down the toilet. Memories so different from the woman who used to sneak me extra fudge when mom turned around and give me a silly chocolate Easter bunny from the dollar store every year without fail.



I poured myself a cup of crappy coffee, stale and lukewarm, from the cart placed against the wall that someone had dragged over. It was disgusting, warm water with a hint of bitterness and sickly artificial sweetener, but at least it would keep me awake after staying up all night.



Early November, Christmas lights glistened bright and colorful from the tree, matching the festive decorations that sprinkled the living room. Wreaths of green pine leaves and crimson bows ornamented the TV stand, a cheesy, romantic Hallmark movie playing on mute. We'd rearranged the furniture, the couch pressed against the glass back door, opening the rest of the room. Her chair was in the same place as always, directly across from the door that led out to the garage, a red and white Christmas blanket draped over the top of it. A few days ago, she had made us decorate her living room to be an artificial winter wonderland, her favorite time of the year. She wasn't going to see the real December and she knew it.

She seemed small in the chair, her short white hair in tufts about her head. The hum of the oxygen tank was a constant drone, deafening and ear numbing, and I almost didn't hear her softly call me over. She asked me to refill her cup, but more ice, less soda.

I handed it to her, watching the spoon rattle against the side of the cup as she took a bite of the Diet Coke slushy. She lifted a single wrinkled finger at me, so I leaned down towards her.

She wanted to make fudge tomorrow, she told me. Tomorrow, when she felt good, we would make fudge.



They had draped a white sheet over most of her body, placing her hands ever so gently across her chest, like she was resting. Her eyes, those never changing blue eyes, were closed, her face relaxed, almost smiling.

Her hair was everywhere, a crazy mess of white, as messy and insane as she was. Her hand was solid, firm, but still her.

It was just me and her. So, I told her.

I told her about how I planned to name my first daughter after her, and how my fiancé and I already loved little Judy Anne. And how I would make sure she would have a place at our wedding that we had moved closer for her, and how I would make sure I had fun, just for her. I told her “Happy Thanksgiving” and that I wasn’t mad at her at all. That she needed the rest and I’d rather she be at peace than in pain. I told her I was glad that I got to spend one last night with her, even if it was me that realized that her heart was failing and had to call everyone. Even if it was in the hospital, listening to her rasped breathing slowly stop. And I told her that I’d make that fudge, even if I didn’t remember how, even if she was stubborn and never wrote the directions, even if I would spend the rest of my life trying to figure out how to make a wintery Tennessee candy in hot Texas weather, even if she wasn’t here. And that every Christmas, I would remember her and her warmth, her smell, her cough, her attitude and fire, and I would make her proud, making her fudge, so that here on earth we could have just another taste to remember her by.



***The Badger* by Christian McClure**

Screen Print



## Tito

By: Ruby Garza

Over 6 million people in the United States of America are currently living with Alzheimer's dementia. It is a condition also known as "the death with the long goodbye," and is often accompanied by little subconditions, such as "sundowner's syndrome," where the afflicted soul experiences increased confusion towards the end of each day. It is sad to witness, knowing that one in three senior citizens die with Alzheimer's dementia. It's hard to imagine Tito joining that statistic—in fact, I don't want to think about it at all.

Tito's name is Aaron, but nobody calls him that, except his brothers and sisters when they come to America for the holidays. And Tita; she used to call him Aaron. Some days, I am worried that Tito will forget and think that Tita is just in the other room, just out of sight. That is how it feels, sometimes, until we remember the visits to the hospital and the funeral and the anguished sobbing that we all did when we thought we were alone in our rooms. Tito misses her; she was an important branch in the family tree. I tell him that I miss her, too—we all do. It's hard not to.

He sighs and smiles and offers me a hand, and I feel my own lips curving into a grin at the sight of his infamous half-finger, which he lost in an accident while working on something in the garage. He used to tell me different stories when I was little, trying to convince me that he had battled an alligator or fought off a rabid dog. I believed him then, of course. I take his bony hand, and he shakes mine firmly. He says my name, he asks how I'm doing. I tell him things are great, and then the silence in the room stretches on for a bit too long. Tito takes this opportunity to reminisce about his youth, and I do not interrupt him.

My father sighs when Tito begins to ramble, because he knows that once he begins, nothing will stop him. In the past, Tita would swat Tito on

the arm and tell him to shut up, trying in vain to hold back a grin from sprouting on her face. Then he would take a deep breath in, look around the room, and realize that my sisters were no longer trying to pay attention while I was struggling to understand him. My father, who had been trying to get a word in edgewise for the past 10 minutes, would finally interject and mention how our swimming was going, trying to get us involved in the conversation again. It used to be that the rambling just annoyed my father.

Now, things are different. We know his mind isn't as sharp as it used to be.

More than 11 million Americans provide unpaid care for people with Alzheimer's dementia. My father and his siblings are soon to become 3 more. Tito has yet to be officially diagnosed with Alzheimer's dementia, although the signs are beginning to become apparent. It is beginning to cost our family more time as we go to visit him more often and move him from place to place. Although, it makes me wonder if maybe we should have *always* been visiting him like this, and not beginning to *now* just because he is getting older.

Alzheimer's dementia is an expensive condition. It costs an estimated \$345 billion (about \$1,100 per person in the US) to care for the nation's entire population of people living with Alzheimer's dementia. Most of the caregivers for people with Alzheimer's dementia are unpaid. This seems a bit unfair, but maybe it just feels wrong to expect payment for something like that. It is like caring for a child all over again, but instead of a child's face it is your mother or father's old and wearied face, constantly fixed in a state of confusion. It is hard to look into that face and think, *someone should be paying me for this*. After all, it's not about you.

Tito is telling me a story he has told me many times before. Back when I couldn't understand him too well, my father had to jump in and translate any time Tito would pause to catch his breath. I get the gist of it now. He is proud of me for understanding him, even though I must give some credit to the many times I had heard him tell these stories in the past.

He smiles brightly and rattles on slowly about the ranch back home, wrangling cattle, climbing trees, getting in trouble, and having fun. Looking at his thin body laid out in the bed, I find it hard to imagine that these old limbs are the same ones that carried Tito through fields and up trees and across Mexico into Texas. These leathery and calloused hands built the wooden swing that has been sitting in our yard for years, still standing strong through countless storms. He did a good job. Looking over at my father, who watches Tito's face with such tender patience it makes my heart break. I can see that Tito did a good job with him, too.

Some cruel part in the back of my brain begins to picture my father lying in that bed, and myself sitting by his side, my patience waning, and my hair thinning. Given that Alzheimer's dementia is partially hereditary, it's not a totally wild thought. Our parents give us many things, like stubbornness or skin that doesn't burn in the sun or a knack for making a certain facial expression in the same way as them. They also give us things like ADHD and low blood pressure and legs that look like shoots of bamboo. Or they give us Alzheimer's dementia.

Things like dementia emerge with time, and it is too late when we realize that the blood that runs through our veins carries DNA with specific instructions to make us forget everything until we die. Alzheimer's dementia kills more senior citizens than breast cancer and prostate cancer combined. It is scary that these conditions are all invisible; when you look at an old person, you cannot see the forgetfulness swirling behind their eyes, or the tumor growing under their papery flesh—you just see an old person. It's a cruel trick for these conditions to hide themselves from people who have already been through so much. There is no cure for Alzheimer's dementia, or cancer. Sometimes, it feels like there is nothing you can do for your loved one other than to keep on loving them, even when they don't make it easy to.

I wonder how much my younger sisters understand about this topic. I have tried to set the example for them my whole life, being the oldest. Even when performing the simplest of crafts, it felt good to hear

my mother say, “See, look how Ruby is doing it? Try to do it like that,” as if I were carrying out something effortless.

In reality, I was reveling in the fact that my everyday trials were seen as a good example. Now, however, it feels better to be honest and to let my sisters be better than me at certain things. It’s not right to be the best at everything, because when you never fail, your successes begin to mean a lot less. Sometimes, honesty is showing someone that it’s okay to ask for help, and to not be perfect. Honesty is essential to love; just like love, it isn’t always easy. I am not sure if my sisters understand this—I’m not sure if I even fully do—but I know Tito does. I hope he never forgets it.

We are taking Tito to visit his house, where so many old memories have been lying dormant while he has been away. I haven’t been to the house in a very long time. So much has happened there, and my own memories can barely demonstrate a fraction of it. The pictures hanging on the walls, Tita’s collection of knickknacks, and the creak of the door all sink their fangs into Tito as soon as we wheel him into the house. Some inject sorrow into his mind, making tears well up in his eyes and leaving his jaw hanging open with incredulity. A picture of his wedding day; Tita. Others fill him with a sweet reminiscence, allowing his smile to come back to him. Things like the backyard pool that is no longer a pool because it required too much maintenance, so my father arranged for it to be filled in.

He never swam in it, but he enjoyed watching us when we were little. He never complained about how much we splashed him as he sat on the patio and watched. Tito never learned to swim. He liked to think that we were the best swimmers in the world. At swim meets, when I swam as hard as I could, knowing that my family was watching made a third-place ribbon feel the same as a first-place one. I would flop out of the pool, gasping, and trudge over to my mother who was waiting with a towel and a weary smile as my family stood behind her, prouder than ever. Tito never learned to swim. It would be silly to think that he ever would.

People with Alzheimer’s dementia have a tough time with new things. From the outside looking in, new information seems to go in one

ear and slide out the other. It is frustrating for caretakers. From the inside looking out, new things just aren't as easy as they used to be when there is a vortex of confusion in your brain consuming everything it can. It's easier to hold on to old things, things you have known for years, and intend to keep on knowing forever. New things are too loose, the vortex eats them up too quickly. I wonder how soon it will be until new things are entirely too much for Tito, and he lets himself get lost in the memories and old things instead.

Even then, the memories threaten to overwhelm him, and he tells us he would just like to sit for a while. And so, we let him sit; we bask in the memories with him, the stale air of the house filling our lungs, our hearts, our minds. It is good that he remembers, I think. Despite the pain these memories bring, at least we can all feel the sting of the past. To go numb to such feelings would surely mean that we were all more dead than alive; the pain keeps our minds sharp. To feel is to be alive.

Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia, according to the Van Andel Institute. It is very well researched, although still a mystery. I suppose it could be considered reassuring that Tito and my father and his siblings and I are not the only unfortunate souls involved in this battle against the vortex that has begun to swirl in my grandfather's brain. We are not alone in life either, even when we feel like we are. Sometimes we are surrounded by people, but so, so lonely. Sometimes all we have are our memories to keep us company, and we find that we can build a friend out of them when nobody else can be there. I hope Tito's mind can be a friend to him for just a little longer.

We are driving back to the nursing home now, and I am not sure how many memories Tito will have left to build friends out of as the years go on. Right now, he has plenty, but eventually I think he will be lonely again, until tío or tía can visit him, and he will look up at them from his bed with a hopeful, childlike smile as they stand in the doorway. I wonder when the vortex in Tito's mind will catch up with him. How soon until the stories of the ranch will get sucked into the void, or the memory of how he



met Tita, or the memory of coming to Texas, or the memory of his own grandchildren, his own children. I worry that someday I will walk through the doorway with an anxious smile and a hopeful slant in my brow, and Tito will screw up his face and point and ask who I am and why I am there.

People with Alzheimer's dementia often get lost. They can get lost on the way to the grocery store, because the route begins to remind them of the route they walked on the way home many years ago, and then they take too many wrong turns and end up in the middle of nowhere. One time my father went to visit Tito, and Tito blinked his eyes and furrowed his brow, asking him, "Why did you come all this way to see me so late? You had to drive all the way through Hidalgo to get here, *mijo!*"

My father blinked back at him, pursed his lips, and carefully explained that they were in Texas, not Mexico. This was the first time my father got emotional telling me about his visit to Tito that day. He had just had surgery, and the effects of the anesthesia were messing with his tired mind. This was the first time Tito fell prey to sundowner's syndrome. My father got mad, telling me how hard he tried to keep his voice from breaking as he reminded Tito that they were in Houston, not Monterrey. He knew deep down that Tito must have been scared to be lost, even though everyone else knew exactly where he was.

People with Alzheimer's dementia often get lost in time as well. They think they are in the old house or the old city, or their grandchildren should be younger than they are. I have stood in front of Tito wondering if he will forget the "high school me" or the "college me" before he forgets the "kindergarten me." I wonder if he realizes that I won't be a little girl forever. It certainly took me a while to realize—I tried to put off my growing up for as long as possible, because it scared me.

But then my father would say, "Look at me Rubes, I'm living proof that you can stay young at heart even when your body gets old," with that lopsided grin of his, and I would feel all right about going off to college. I wish I could see my father more often than when he comes home

from work and eats dinner. I wish we all could live like today was the last day of our lives, and we could do what was important: spend time laughing together and making sure we all knew how much we loved each other.

Sometimes, lifestyle choices can contribute to the development of Alzheimer's dementia. People who experience a lot of stress have higher chances of developing dementia. I think my father works too hard. I wish he would take breaks more often, other than for eating and sleeping. A study was done that showed that taking three deep, cleansing breaths five times a day reduced the presence of cortisol in the participants—who were also caretakers for people with dementia. Cortisol is a negative stress hormone known to increase a person's chances of developing Alzheimer's dementia, and the caretakers had cortisol levels almost two times the normal amount. These people were unknowingly risking the sound-ness of their own minds by attempting to care for other people. By taking those deep breaths, participants reduced their cortisol levels, further reducing their chances of developing dementia. When things get tough, remember to breathe. Your own breath is more powerful than you would think.

I wonder what it feels like to slowly forget everything. How does it feel to experience death with the long goodbye? When you think about it, we spend our whole lives dying. But we have the ability to experience moments in which we feel so happy, so angry, so emotional, that death is the last thing on our minds. Those feelings make us alive; they separate us from the dirt and the trees and the squirrels. What a mystery it is to be human. What power we have, to create lives in which death is a mere afterthought. That is, if we seek out that life. For those who can't do much seeking anymore, it is up to us to bring them some life, as much of it as we can until their souls separate from their bodies and they float up to heaven. Then, instead of smiling up at us from the hospital bed, they can smile down at us from somewhere up above.

You never know what the future holds. Most mothers I know had the strongest aversion to children when they were my age, and then somewhere in their lives the tables turned—flipped, and now here I am, and

my sisters, my cousins, aunts, and uncles. I'm glad something changed, that the tables flipped. I'm glad our family tree has so many branches.

I hope one day I can be an important branch in some future family tree, where I have created a life that I cherish, and I can look back at this moment and be thankful that the girl sitting at her desk and writing did not give up when things got hard, and when she wanted to give up and curl into a ball, she stood up instead.

I want to experience what it is like to find someone that you love so much that when you are apart from them, you feel like a piece of you is missing. I want to never forget the importance of laughter and the importance of honesty. I want to pass on all the old family recipes, even the ones that my mother's father tries as hard as he can to keep secret; the ones that were never written down because the grandmothers came up with them on their own, and knew them like the backs of their wrinkled hands.

When it is time to leave, I turn to look at Tito one last time. He smiles sadly, and I can see that all these things have already existed in his life and are memories to him now. I want to help him remember them for as long as possible. I can see how much he cherishes his life, and as I walk out the door, I can see that he is proud.

## On Skipping Stones

By: Jason Kieffer

You hurt again. The natural anger and disappointment and loneliness of life carbonate in your skull, begging to pop the tab. You need release without consequence. An escape without a comedown. So you go to water, where the surface is flat and the wind is soft.

Take your shoes off, and your socks. The best stones are found sleeping underwater, in little sediment-coated communities, smoothed by time. Scoop through the stagnation and grab a stack of stones you can hold in one hand. Flat, rounded stones fly the furthest. If they're heavy enough to kill someone, they're too heavy. You're going for a nice concussion-sized object. Wrap your finger around the most misshapen part of the disc to get a good grip. Your index finger should be the last thing to leave the stone. Flat side faces the water. Let it fly parallel to the surface. When it glides every single one of your problems will disappear until it is engulfed by the water. Engage with the environment, use nature to salve natural wounds.

Ikebana is the Japanese art of arranging flowers to produce emotion. Artists take hours to select the perfect range of plant life before they clip and warp and shape nature into an artistic arrangement. These creations die as fast as any flower does but are selected for a new purpose the moment they're amputated from the ground. Harnessing nature, artists evoke emotions from plants.

Harnessing yourself you can invoke your emotions onto nature. Select the stoney scales from the snaking river and give them new purpose. Squeeze them tight and transfer your pain. Let the problems run like water from the fountain of your mind, wetting your hair and shoulders as they trickle down the curves and tones of your shoulders. Let them roll with the veins across your forearms until they reach that stone. Feel that anger,

loneliness, grief, and emptiness soak so deep into it the earth herself, she might as well have put them there. Then you move nature to move yourself.

Gravity will lower the stone until it slaps the water evenly and the surface tension trampolines it into the air again. Science will handle most of the process. The only if or maybe is how much power you put into the throw and at what angle. Angled upwards away from the water, a stone will ricochet off the surface six or seven feet into the air. Angled downwards, it sends it straight into the stream. Releasing the stone right on the surface yields the best results. Standing in the water is ideal too, just deep enough so that your fingers rest above the surface by an inch. This way you can release the stone within a five-degree angle of the surface tension, and it'll glide. For a blissful moment you hold your breath, as if your exhale could affect that stone's flight, and it does fly. But that stone sinks and those feelings come back.

Martial arts require years of mastery. Determination's spark finds its brush in the motion of strikes and kicks repeated until perfection. A spinning crescent kick isn't executed on the first try. It must be broken down to key movements that each require their own mastery before splicing it all together. Spin step, chamber, angles, and balance all twisting together to produce one striking movement that has been passed down to generations of fighters. When that winding pirouette is performed, centuries of fighters watch and smile.

Launching stones properly is a cousin to martial arts. Like a spinning crescent kick, it requires a windup. Think of the Vitruvian man, how his limbs windmill around his body. You can harness that windmilling force to send these stones further. Hold the stone, still dripping, above your head and rotate your arm in a wide motion. Remind your muscles of that centrifugal force that discobolus have been capturing for centuries. When you throw, the tension starts in your empty hand, where your fingers should curl like a carpet, transferring the energy to the forearm, to the bicep, to the shoulder, where it ripples across your chest. Here the energy apexes as you pinch your chest together. Transferring that power is key or

the windmill is stopped. Channel the tension from your chest to the front and ignite it in your shoulder where the rotation begins. Swing that rock in rotation with your shoulder and release the energy. Generations of Olympians watch that disc skitter across the water and they are pleased.

# *Reflections* by Logan Burse

Photography, 2024



## **I Tell Myself**

By: Kinley Thompson

He is the first boy in my room. Now his head is in my lap and my fingers are in his curly, blonde hair. We met two days ago at a party, and the introduction was mediocre at best. College students throw abysmal parties nowadays, with prepaid tickets and cheesy themes. It was silent disco night, and I was trying to ignore the others around me by pretending to like the playlist that has been thrown together. Most of the music was foul rap songs or early 2010s throwbacks.

But it was better than talking to people. I am not very good at small talk, especially in places I don't feel like I belong. My friends had dragged me to the party. He had just been there by happenstance.

It wasn't until he spoke, more than a hello, did I spark an interest. He told me about rock climbing and how it was his passion, following up with how beautiful I was. Naturally, I was taken back, childishly spell-bound. We spent the rest of the night awkwardly getting to know each other, allowing him to ask if we could trade social media handles.

I never thought I would talk to him again, until I got a private message asking if we could meet. We introduced our friends after meeting at the latest Greek council sand volleyball tournament. We parted ways with our friends to make the walk back to my dorm, another average hangout in the books.

Now, I am sure our short time together had come to an end as he dropped me off at my door, yet here we are—alone in my room. He told me he wanted to see how I decorated the place, praising how artistic I am before I even tell him I'm only taking one art class. I fold, and he ends up staying to get to know me some more, so he says. We start by just sitting next to each other on the adjacent, empty bed that belongs to my nonexistent roommate and continue with the awkward small talk.



“Where are you from?”

“Up north, you?”

“Down south. What’s your major?”

“Environmental Science, you know, plants. You?”

“English, and plants are cool.”

Things don’t escalate until the bland words have been shared. That is when he scoots closer and closer. He makes jokes about his friends that I have just met in a successful attempt to distract me. I laugh because what he says is funny, and I like funny guys. I also like light eyes and mischievous smiles, which he uses to his advantage.

Before I realize his head is in my lap, and I am scratching it softly with my fingers. I feel as though I have fallen asleep, and my dreams have taken over. I wait for the scene to suddenly change and his face to become a blur, so he represents the mysterious figure I always meet in my sleep, after wishing for someone to take an interest in me. But he stays still, and his features are strong.

“What’s your favorite animal?” I whisper as we lay face-to-face.

“Don’t have one.”

“Oh, come on. Everyone does.”

“Nope. I’m cold. Can we share the blanket?”

He pulls me closer and lets out a tired sigh, gesturing that our conversation is over. I almost try again, determined to learn more about him. He is in my room after all. But he is so warm and cozy that I let it slide this time. I don’t want to mess up this moment.

Hours go by, longer than any time that I would stay up if I were sitting alone in my room. He attempts to stay the night, but I manage to shoo him out in the late hours of the darkness by saying I must get up early the next morning. My nervous heart won’t let him stay until the sunrise. The idea seems absurd to me.

As he gives me a last-minute hug before our goodbye, I still feel it happening. I have fallen completely under his spell after only a couple of hours of what seems like pure magic. Even though I was curious at the

the party, he just now hooked me by being my possible first.

I am very hopeful about it all because I think he will be different. All the others before never came this far, never stayed in my room with me. They always fell off or gave up before the words “boy” and “friend” were fused together. This time, though, I pray the experience will be a whole new world.

I invite him to the movies the next day, the screening of *The Little Mermaid* in town, an Oscar-worthy romance forming in my mind. How can I not after the memorable night we had? My mind is distracted all day by the versions of how I believe the night will end. I zone out in all my classes and skip the studying I have planned for an upcoming test. He seems so excited when I suggest it. I am not expecting his expectations to be different than mine.

I try not to feel disappointed when he says he is already meeting his friends to rock climb. The plans in his mind hadn't been the same. He thought we would be alone in my room once again, laying close to each other with a movie in the background. No doubt it wouldn't have been a Disney classic.

He tells me this ten minutes before the movie starts after I claim my ticket, so I sit alone and try my best to enjoy the show. The room darkens, and all the groups around me quiet, save for the occasional crunching of popcorn. My heart is hurt, but the part of myself that is clinging on to the single night before tells me it is all right. I try to focus on the singing from the fairy tale in front of me. He obviously made a promise to hang out with his friends before. He must have forgotten about it when he agreed to go with me. He wouldn't cancel on me, or at least that's what the little I know about him leads me to believe.

It is hard to ignore the others around me whispering to each other while I curl into my seat, partnerless, and try to convince myself this wasn't planned. *It's okay. He'll make up for it*, I tell myself.

He is the first boy in my room for the second night in a row. Earlier, I hear the ping of my phone and find a text asking if he can come over. I say yes, a little too quickly, but I am relieved. He wouldn't ask to come over if he doesn't like me, right? So, the whole movie incident isn't his fault. I take him up to my room, and we fill our places on my bed.

A single apology has been said the entire time, but his arm is wrapped around me, and his fingers are laced with mine. The touch makes my body tingle and hot. I am distracted by his very blue eyes and wide smile. There is no improvement in the same casual words that are exchanged about classes and rock climbing, until he offers to watch a movie there in the darkness of my room. He tells me this is the plan he imagined, and how perfectly content he is with having the place all to ourselves.

Our conversations do not improve. I make an attempt every night for a week to drag him out in public, fighting off the fear that he is ashamed to be seen with me. I try to see a movie once again. Then go to dinner—twice. Or maybe visit the zoo, so he can discover his favorite animal. “It would be fun.”

“Nah. Let's stay in.”

“But I want to go out, do something.”

“How about rock climbing?”

I tell him I don't want to be trapped in some harness, and we should do something else. I suggest another party that is coming up and watch his jaw tighten as if he is agitated. My stomach churns. I worry that he will leave if I keep pressing it. We don't have to do anything tonight, not if he stays.

“Or we can stay in tonight,” I offer.

“Good. I'll make it up to you. I promise.”

He doesn't make up for ghosting me or shooting down my date ideas, but he redeems himself some by curling up next to me to watch yet another film. That's what is important, right? He is still here cuddling me, talking to me about rock climbing and how he likes the T-shirt I had on

today. He is willing to watch a movie with me, which is what I asked for. The whole experience of being in the theater together and holding hands where people could see would have just been a bonus.

I lie next to him and nearly drift off, while the screen plays a movie I have never heard of. He picked it out, some spy movie. Again, he tries to sleep in my bed with me, but I walk him down the stairs right before the building locks for the night. He smirks at me after we exchange an awkward side hug, looking me up and down in my oversized sweater.

“I will stay the night one night. I’ll convince you.”

This time I ask him to go dancing. I tell him how fun it will be, and how we can slow dance throughout the evening together. I talk it up by describing the outfit I plan to wear, in hopes that will sway him. I wear cut-off shorts and a bright top that makes me look tanner than I am. My hair is even curled, but I don’t put on much makeup since he says he prefers natural girls. I nearly melt when he says I look *great*.

He humors me, and he comes, but my heart is a little hurt because there is no slow dancing. I dance by myself and with friends, and I can feel his eyes on me as I move. I have mixed feelings about this, so I let the music take me away. I dance by myself the entire time.

We leave together, and no words are exchanged to explain his disinterest other than when he asks, “Are you ready to go?”

“Sure. Did you have fun?”

“Yeah.”

Yes, he came, but all he did was stand there and watch others as they follow the music, seeming as though he was counting down the minutes until we were back in my room alone. Am I just being dramatic, asking too much? He smiles at me as I open my room door, and I shake my head ever so slightly so he can’t see. Despite the night not going how I hoped, I tell myself it was still fun. Now we were going to lie with each other again, and he isn’t going to leave me. He is doing more than any of the other boys I have talked to. *Be happy he’s here*, I tell myself.

He is the first boy to sleep in my room. Yes, he convinces me to let him stay. Tonight, it is too late for him to walk home. Our bland conversations may not be in-depth, but they are lengthy. We spend hours going over our day, and I can't let him walk home at this hour.

So, I make the bed for two and lie stiffly on the outer side as he pulls me close. My body is like fire as his breathing becomes even. My back is starting to hurt from being so still for so long. I am tense. He snores—loudly. We stay this way the entire night. I'm on my back, and he's on his side. His arm weighs a ton by the morning. We do nothing else, and nothing is suggested, but I do not sleep at all.

I try to call him a couple of times, or maybe a few more than that. I figure he is just with his friends. They are very lovely people, and I met them the first night when he walked me to my dorm. Very few words were exchanged that evening, but he says they love me. Though I wonder how I am enough to meet his friends, but not enough to call.

Hours go by and the silence is deafening. I still wait by the phone in hopes he might ring back. I try to distract myself from the silence surrounding the phone line. I call friends, read, and make plans for dinner. I am trying not to be needy or crazy. I don't double call or text, and I don't check his location. Eventually, it leaves my mind, and I am able to meet my friends with little worry about if he is thinking of me.

The call comes hours later while I am still not home. One single call. There is no message left other than the ghostly phone number blinking back at me. Do I call back? I don't want to seem desperate. I just want him to see me—all of me. I want him to get to know the version of me that exists during the daylight, not just the girl he sleeps beside at night. I want this relationship I have looming in the front of my mind that I have dreamt up. It has yet to happen, and I am starting to lose a glimmer of hope. *Maybe this is a sign—no, of course not*, I tell myself.

He is the first boy to kiss my forehead. This is the third night in a row he has been lying beside me. I have gotten more comfortable now and have gotten a few hours of sleep over those days. But I would rather sleep with him here than be soundly slumbering and alone. I have become dependent on him, though I will not admit it.

And as I sleep beside him, I feel his lips lightly graze my face. I am wide awake now, but I keep my eyes closed. My mind is racing. What do I do? I know if I open them, he will be waiting for my reaction, a smile.

He will ask if he can kiss me on the lips. After all this, he still wants to kiss me. I know this because he has hinted at it before, even after I held back and said I wanted to wait for one of our dates that had never happened. I just brushed off the idea every time, too nervous and giddy to give him permission. I guess deep down, I was hoping he would just do it—swoop in and give me my first kiss like the movies. It will be my first of many things, but he has already been the first in my room. Why not let him give me my first kiss? The first kiss.

I keep my eyes closed, and he does not kiss me on my lips. When I do not stir, I hear him sigh and turn over to put his back to me. While I am disappointed, I am also relieved. The little voice inside of me is screaming with happiness, despite my attempt to keep it locked away this entire time. As the night creeps farther in I let it out, the tiny person running wild with its thoughts.

This voice in my head is yelling to the point that my ears ring, telling me this is wrong. I should not be letting a boy who won't walk with me to the dining hall for lunch or meet me after class lie in my bed. He shouldn't be holding my hand and kissing me with my eyes closed. They should be open, and we should be in the dimmed movie theater watching the new *Ninja Turtles* film I have been dying to see. He says it looks boring and the tiny person in my mind is enraged. I love the *Ninja Turtles*.

I squeeze my pillow tight. I cannot let him take the magical moment from me. Though I seem foolish, stupidly naive, I am not. Though I have pushed things aside and created excuses for him, I am aware. I know

his arms squeezing around me tightly and the constant pressure he puts on me every time he asks me if he can come over is all for the end result—the reward. Putting up with all my stubbornness and lack of experience will all be worth it when he is rewarded, when he gets to be my first *everything*.

Then he can move on to the next bubbly freshman girl that catches his eye. But I am a romantic at heart and challenging to sway. I will not let him have this reward. Not without a first date or a second, or however many I wish.

He is the first boy I kick out of my room. He tells me I give nothing, and that he must make all the moves.

“I shouldn’t have to keep hinting that I want to kiss you, that what you wear drives me crazy. Either you want it or not.” I am not as easy as he thought I would be.

Apparently, my eagerness isn’t as clear as I thought it was. My giddiness and nerves are mistaken for leading him on. So, I watch his very blue eyes turn cold and the back of his curly, blonde head walk out the door.

My blood boils as he spouts out things and tries to break me down by making all this my fault. My hopeless romantic self doesn’t want this. I want a relationship, not to get “it.” I do not go after him despite the aching in my heart. In fact, I slam the door shut.

I was growing to like him, or maybe I was just telling myself that. Maybe I was trying to love the few things I liked about him so much to make up for the rest. Maybe that is why I let him drone on about rock climbing and watched spy movies I have no interest in. Maybe I did like the physical touch after a lifetime of starvation from it, but I am not easy.

I will not be with someone who won’t dance with me or take me to the movies. I will sleep comfortably by myself, and I won’t have to talk about rock climbing ever again. I will forget what it felt like to have his arms wrapped around me and how many times he called me pretty. I will scrub him from my mind and move on to find a person who does have a favorite animal.

My firsts only happen once, and I have already wasted one on him. So, when he calls a few hours later to recite his single apology, I will let it ring.

*Because I can do so much better than him*



*Where the Heat's At* by Christian McClure

Screen Print



# Poetry

## **Putrescence**

By: Julia Bickham

Decay sits upon her visage gently  
it whispers, it sprouts, and tangles throughout  
dewy and light, it stays as though wealthy  
always looming, and becoming homebound

through decay, life is reborn and begins  
as life drains, and bones bleach, so carries on  
the spawn that thrive upon its meaty limbs  
thankful, the creatures live another dawn

falling, cascading, another body flows down  
a final breath taken, a last blink now  
a life taken, and death wears her vast crown  
formidable, she sits upon her throne

never curse an ally, who has been there  
since the beginning, and ever unfair

**Controlled Burn**  
By: Hannah Bryan

When a farmer scorches his field  
the grass grows back stronger.  
Like a phoenix, it rises back healthy and whole,  
bearing wild buds impossible without rebirth.

It does not make the farmer good.

You told me you were making me better,  
but I am not something you can burn  
until flowers push through my skin,  
burnt and bloody and broken.

No, I ascended from that ashy soil—  
like a fledgling bird  
like a budding blossom—  
and I proved you are not what made me strong.

The farmer is not responsible for the grass's strength,  
and you are not responsible for mine.

**Subdued**  
By: Hannah Bryan

Crashing waves,  
frothing jaws:  
stormy sea.  
Careful sailors do not traverse rough waters.

Glinting eyes,  
shining claws:  
rabid dog.  
Smart owners do not have feral animals.

Looming grass,  
grasping vines:  
wild field  
Good farmers do not pick tough thorns.

No one dares to breach the line  
between what is stubborn and what is  
safe.

But what is a sea without  
a sailor,  
and what is a dog without  
an owner,  
and what is a field without  
a farmer?

Tamed field, trained dog  
calmed sea—  
no longer free, controlled,  
for a moment.

There to be used over  
and over,  
until that savage nature  
breaks free again,  
and everything you sacrificed yourself for  
leaves.

## Driver's Side Door

By: Rowan Burks

I threw up in a parking lot in my hometown  
Pepto Bismol pink  
My grief on the pavement, three feet from my driver's side door

Three and a half hours from everyone that I now know  
back with old strangers  
back with old construction, old roadblocks, old potholes

Three and a half hours from [.....]  
Three and a half hours from [*it*]  
Three and a half hours from [HIM]

Stop

Stop it

Stop thinking about it.

The constant stream of messages, messages, messages

And the calls, the calls, the calls—

“What did I do? What did I do? One more chance, I'm sorry, what did I do?”...

The words pry their way into my mind with cold claws, slithering past my sense of reason...

Three and a half hours from the blocked phone number  
Three and a half hours from the blocked snapchat  
Three and a half hours from the police report

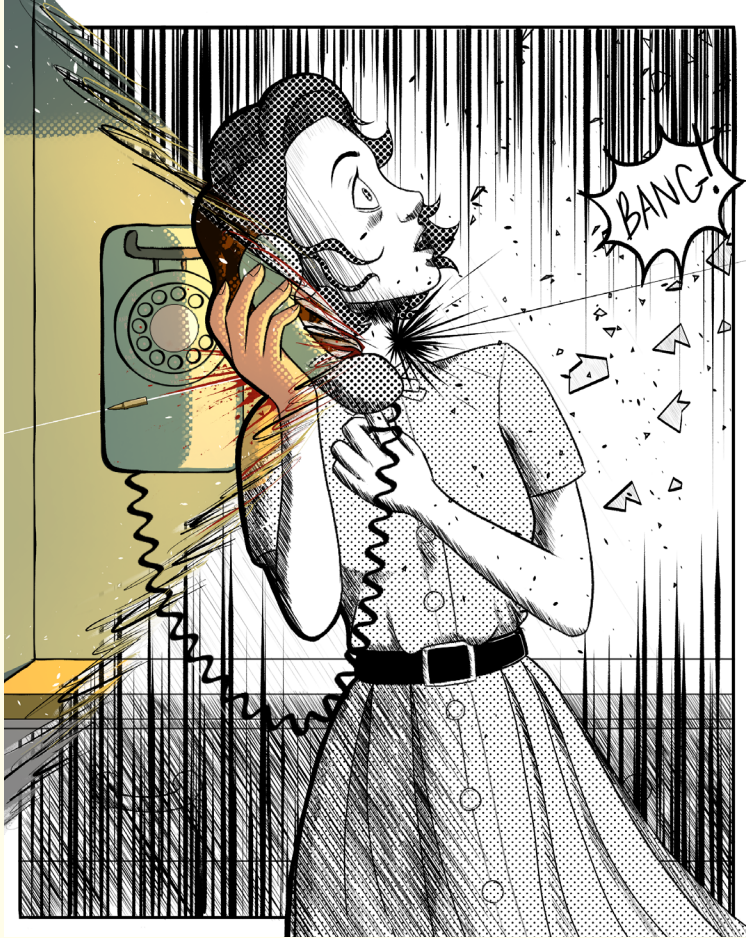
...

I threw up in a parking lot in my hometown after having lunch with my  
mother Pepto Bismol pink, colored by too much Big Red too quickly  
I turn away from the driver's side door.



## *An Abnormal Misfortune* by Olivia Milligan

Digital Art, 2024



*This is a piece depicting an original character of mine in shock at the terrible circumstances she's found herself in. It is meant to be a representation of a family member who found herself in a similar situation, with a medical condition almost just as abrupt and shocking as a bullet (she survived).*

## The Quiet of Our House

By: Rowan Burks

We sit in the quiet of our house.  
The lights are off  
the heater is running.  
We sit across the room from each other in the quiet of our house.

We sit across the room from each other.  
Staring into glassy eyes,  
words dying behind tongues.  
We say nothing as we sit across the room from each other.

We say nothing.  
Nothing of the ring laying on the bedside table,  
nothing of the wary side glances.  
We try to keep our faces still and we say nothing.

We try to keep our faces still.  
Still the tears hot behind your eyes,  
kill the scream scratching its way up your throat.  
We don't want to pawn the ring so we try to keep our faces still.

Neither of us want to pawn the ring.  
Neither of us want to sell these strained fifteen years  
neither of us want to sell the fifteen flings attached.  
We've both lost before we've begun but neither of us want to pawn the ring.

We've both lost before we've begun.  
Lost a confidant  
lost the comfort in our silences.  
We share only stone carved grimaces and we've both lost before we've begun.

We share only stone carved grimaces.  
His face etched in hieroglyphics,  
his thoughts hidden behind steely eyes.  
We are strangers and we share only stone carved grimaces.

We are strangers.  
A mask peels away from the stale face in front of me.  
The heater turns off  
We sit in the quiet of our house, and we are strangers.

## Sucuri

*After Ada Limón*

By: Sara Costa e Silva Santana

Seven meters long of rough green scales and black spots. Both aquatic and terrestrial. Easily blending into any environment with incredible cunning. Intimidating, even without venom. They wait for their prey to get close enough and wrap themselves around it, slowly strangling their meal. I didn't know that I was prey. I saw you beyond your thick black eyeliner and disdain-filled gaze. I didn't hear the hiss every time you spoke to me, or acknowledged the roughness of your skin when you trapped me in your deadly embrace, crying in pain. I knew you weren't inherently poisonous, so I let you feast on me. Turns out, my heart was the one suffocating me.

## **And Then the Waterspout Dried Up**

By: Theseus DeWeese

Once there was an itsy-bitsy spider, creeping to-and-fro;  
it was stuck wandering, lost in its adventure to find a home  
It searched high and it searched low,  
with a tapestry of its travels, it began to sew.

It wanted to escape, that it knew for sure,  
because somewhere newer and somewhere kind held more allure;  
it loved to learn and was eager to please,  
and it served those it called master with a feverish glee.

It let those it met take it apart,  
all because it wanted to be seen as a work of art;  
over and over, they gave themselves to their new friends,  
only to realize, their friends were all playing pretend.

The spider had been trapped in a different kind of web—  
a web so thick it began to mess with the spider's head;  
it wanted to be loved and treasured,  
but instead, the value of its worth was how it was measured.

It tore itself apart until its legs no longer moved,  
watching as its friends scoffed at their state and disapproved  
for the spider's friends had no more use for the spider,  
as its now disabled state was a decider.

If the spider could no longer do their bidding,  
the spider would be left behind, wishing its friends were just kidding.

So, the itsy-bitsy spider was then left for dead,  
its sense of adventure gone, and its tapestry left in shreds.

***Break Through* by Aarionne Hobbs**

Oil Panting, 2024



## The Veil of Tears

By: Theseus DeWeese

I am no longer what I once was.  
This too shall pass, and one day, so shall you.  
Whether it ends up in your bed,  
death lying still by your side like a cool mistress,  
head bowed into your breast like an infant to their mother's bosom.

Or perhaps,  
even in the sea,  
as you see death swimming slowly towards you,  
seeing you so raw and vulnerable in a way not even your family did the day you were laid to rest  
in a loosely-fastened wooden box, buried in the backyard next to the skeletal remains of your  
infancy all the way to your adolescence.

You're lost in a blur,  
stumbling through life babbling like a young lost lamb,  
willingly falling into the arms of every man with long hair and a wooden staff who calls himself  
a shepherd.  
Allowing decaying yellow fangs to tear through your soft and tender flesh and feast on your need  
for love and acceptance, sheepishly giving you a too-wide grin when you ask, "Grandma, when  
will it be my turn to feel the loving embrace of your intestines when you swallow me whole and  
take my place?"

You told me I was poison, bitterness dripping from every pore onto your blood-stained tongue,  
lacing your system with a killer too thick to name,  
the substance biting and clawing into your skin and finding a home inside  
feasting on your carcass as I cut my way out from your entrails and finally feel the harsh cares  
of the sun as she cuts my hair and sears her fingerprints into the impression of my skull

But I am not afraid,  
as I was brought up in the volcanic ashes of Pompeii,  
encased in the frozen fears of my youth as I forced eye contact with every gorgon in my path,  
knowing the only way is forward but still stepping back.



I was taught not to fear the storm but instead hold it in and let it out only in the solace and emptiness of my room,  
feeding on pills and empty bottles until my stomach bulged and threatened to burst,  
promising acts of violence if I ever stepped even a hair towards anything of substance.

I am a cancer on anything good in my life because I was taught to be,  
Lilac-colored words lacing temptingly through my bloodstream and into the hearts and ears of every person who ever did me wrong,  
swearing vengeance so sweet on lips stained red in their own menstruation and frustration,  
hoping every happy dagger I pierce through my war-torn skin might finally deliver a fatal blow so that I might finally hope of finishing off this soliloquy,  
the audience having long since grown bored and retired in the knowledge I'll still be there when they rise.

I do not fear death,  
completely fine with the idea that one day I too shall take my final breath  
I do not fear the reaper, with their hands so gentle and kiss so sweet.  
I have never been held so delicately as I am when they and I do this waltz to the music of eternity,  
locked together in a dance that is supposed to feel like a trap but instead feels like freedom.  
Like Icarus, I do not fear the fall,  
knowing arms wait to welcome me from below.

No,  
I could not possibly fear death when life holds such a deeper detriment to my psyche.  
I fear living in this dreary, monotonous prison, ceaseless and utterly pointless,  
almost able to reach out of the bars of my cage and grasp the key,  
but still not where I can open the doors and fly free.  
This life is my prison,  
leaving me shackled and detained behind bars of my own making,  
not realizing that I am the very thing binding me here.  
I have lost sight of my visions for the future and myself,  
begging for deliverance while serving as a reminder to anyone who dares to dream of freedom.  
I am a warning.  
The only freedom to be found is through death.

## Bleuler

By: Kaylee Fowler

**WAR IN UKRAINE NEW VIRUS EMERGES IN AFRICA REPUBLICAN  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE INVOLVED IN SEX SCANDAL EVIDENCE OF  
RUSSIAN COLLUSION IN THE** so many seams on my clothes **2016 ELECTION FAMOUS  
ACTOR FOUND DEAD IN** one, two, three stitches **APARTMENT AT AGE 46 APPARENT  
OVERDOSE ATTENTION SPANS** can I please go outside **GETTING SHORTER NEW  
CAR MODEL BUY IT NOW** without someone honking the horn at me **POLAR ICE CAP  
MELTING BOMBING IN SUDAN** I want to peel off my own skin **COMPANY BOYCOTT  
BUY NOW ONLY \$79.99 PLUS SHIPPING** will the world please just shut up **PLASTIC  
ISLAND IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN OIL** it wasn't built for my mind **SPILL IN THE GULF  
OF MEXICO LEADING OIL COMPANY** I need a moment to breathe **DECLINES  
COMMENT BUY WHAT WE SELL YOU** but the air smells like metal **\$79.99 PLUS  
SHIPPING AND HANDLING POLICE OFFICER** and the lights are too loud **MURDERS  
WOMAN OF COLOR ON CAMERA USE OF** they buzz too loud **RACIAL SLURS  
FAMOUS SUPREME COURT CASE OVERTURNED BUY** and I can't turn off the lights  
**NEW PRODUCT ONLY AVAILABLE FOR A LIMITED** the carpet scratches like knives  
**TIME \$79.99 PLUS SHIPPING AND HANDLING** how do other people live here **BRAND  
NEW PRODUCT BUY IT NOW FOR ONLY \$79.99 PLUS SHIPPING** how do you survive  
**ONLY FOR A LIMITED**

TIME.

## **Foolish Witness**

By: Clover V. Gislason

The night isn't dark, it can't be. Lights choke the night in every street. Specters of yellow and white float where the shadows used to dance. Eyes peer from hidden coves between buildings and trees. If their prey is bloated or slick enough with pleasure, they pay no mind to stray eyes. Graying tongues roll over dull teeth as they hunt. Some monsters match their prey step for step, others wait patiently with pleasant smiles. I watch from my window, twenty feet from ground but I feel like the man in moon, untouchable 'til morning. I don't hunt with them. I am not their prey. I don't play their games. I could yell a warning to their victims, but what's that got to do with me? The bloated strangers would just yell back and nothing would change. So, I just watch. The eyes used to be suspicious of me, but with all I've seen, and no red and blue rounding the corner, they accept me as part of their world. I am just another pair of curious eyes watching fools apologize to lampposts before losing something precious.

***Embracing My Otherside* by Aarionne Hobbs**

Oil Panting, 2024



## **Garden upon Garden**

By: Clover V. Gislason

Trees are frozen in their twisted dance. Limbs curl themselves into knots seeking comfort. Charmed by sweetness, branches lower to caress Death. They dance about the garden throwing presents just as clouds gift rain. Their touch festers, snarls, and chokes those They love. Sighing, the garden gathers what is deserved. Soft molds of yellow and gold kiss their friends goodbye. Kissed by rot, smiling so sickly, flowers lose their crowns. Garden upon garden eat one another. With the end to suffering, there is a beginning to peace. Death in Their kindness calls each of Their children by name, claiming them once more. The wind lifts Death and Their souls to travel somewhere praying for green. Prayers must be answered, and nature is always calling.

## Two Things Were Trampled

By: Samantha Hooker

Never will I forget when I found a four-leaf clover  
in the sweltering summertime heat,  
under the green grass cover with dew drops on the blades.  
Pointing excitedly, I told you what I discovered.

You took time delegating which foot,  
you walked recklessly yet with no rushed sway,  
with none of the swagger that you typically portray.  
I always thought it lovely when you'd walk my way.

Down on the wet ground, I was so small  
and you knew it. You used it all to your advantage  
at that moment. A bug in a tall underbrush,  
in a dangerous world. Was it prey that you saw?

I measured your steps with my eyes  
without recalling the lilt of your smile,  
intent alight in your eyes, fearful delight.  
You measured me as well, much to my fright.

My worth measured up to miles spent  
driving back and forth and doing always what you asked  
until my adoration, without words, was spelled.  
I realized too late and couldn't stop it: the resentment.

Now, hindsight is so perfect; I know it was over.  
Now, I can tell you were performing so cleverly.  
I search for a hint of the windup, the takeover,  
for the death of one and the ending of another.

It began when I found a four-leaf clover.  
My joy faded quicker than can be expressed  
when underfoot was that childish desire oppressed.  
Always, I will remember how you laid us to rest.

## Aquarium Gravel

By: Bill Koehler

I can't breathe.  
The air is too bright and loud,  
and reeks of expectations  
that I don't know how to meet.

I just need space;  
room to figure out  
how to talk to all these people,  
and to protect myself from their disappointment.

I built up walls;  
a glass sanctuary for myself,  
and filled it with colorful rocks  
and air that didn't hurt.

I'm still afraid, though.  
I can see you, and you can see me,  
but we can't touch each other,  
and I desperately want us to.

I feel so small.  
I'm afraid you see how small I am,  
and I'm scared you'll hurt me,  
so I bare my teeth at you.



I hate this cage.  
These glass walls I built  
aren't a sanctuary anymore,  
and the air is getting stale.

I want out.  
I want to touch people,  
but I don't know how to escape,  
and I'm worried I still can't breathe.

I need to be brave.  
I see you looking at me through the glass,  
and I want to trust you,  
and I want to trust myself

I charge the walls.  
They come down so easily.  
I'm bigger than I realized,  
and the air's not so bad.

I'm free.  
I look at the world I left behind me  
and see shards off broken glass  
and little colorful rocks.

*Happy Accidents* by Logan Burse

Photography, 2024



## Resurrection Fern

By: Bill Koehler

Tender leaves reach uncertainly outwards  
on the unbegrudging branches of an old oak.  
Hidden in the shadows of its boughs,  
high above the ground,  
and just above the heads of passerby,  
they peek out like fairy-folk.  
Shy and full of mischief,  
they draw the eye upwards,  
into the leafy crown of their kindly old host,  
to see a lush, green festival of life,  
like a forest in miniature.  
The very next day, the leaves have wilted,  
the festival has ended,  
the fairies have gone home.

**Air, Air, Air**  
By: Ellory Skye

Libra sun, my mountain of freshly ripped petals,  
picked at one by one the years before your arrival,  
until you landed carefully in my vinyl house,  
stems of striking balance and leaves of gentle warmth.  
When you plant your feet in the ground, you open towards the sun.  
As if ruled by the wind, you dance like inflatable advertisement  
and ripple like pebbles whipped into ponds.

Aquarius moon, my maker of nutrients,  
bearer of water like buckets under gutters,  
dampening gum arabic and stamping silly prose in the corners.  
Your steam sizzles above a hot pan and boils bubbles into words.  
When you print your name on paper, your signature leaves trees swaying  
and sand kicking, your body is a tumbling of forest and beach,  
you sing like the birds waking up our town.

Libra rising, waker of the wind,  
some strange ball of string and harmony.

My Libra rising, you salt of summer,  
you sugar-watered air.

## *Companionship in a Fractured Reality*

by **Olivia Milligan**

Digital Art, 2024



*This is a piece of two of my original characters walking in a world that is breaking apart. As a child, my family moved around a lot, having been to three elementary schools. While this hindered my ability to have friends, I had a twin brother to go through the dark times with. No matter where we moved or what school we went to, we could always count on having a familiar face in a constantly changing world. This artwork uses a fractured world of three different places to represent the moving of my family, with two sibling characters appearing unfazed by it, as they have each other, and that's all they need.*

**Eavesdrop**  
By: Emily Smith

With my ear  
I eavesdrop on the beat  
It reverberates in the cavity  
a secret conversation between  
It makes you tick and  
All we are is cells  
built on cells  
Blood pumps  
stretched like spiderwebs  
it doesn't make you you  
Each beat, counting down  
so I just sit  
with my ear

to your chest  
that makes you tick.  
tucked between your ribs,  
your brain and your blood.  
tick and tick, but why?  
built on cells  
built on cells.  
through your veins  
underneath your skin—  
but it makes you alive.  
until you're not,  
and listen  
to your chest.

## Seventy-Five Beats Per Second

By: Emily Smith

Dust hangs in the air around your figure  
suspended in a slice of morning light.  
Tangerine peels discarded on the counter,  
your fingernails stained a shade of orange like

the sun had been carved into the sky by  
your bare hands. Steam from your coffee spirals  
around your face in small wisps, and you burn your  
tongue, burning through life just as fast. Cycles,

like stars, and you're on the tail end. Going  
supernova would just take a matchstick.  
The world would go up in flames—you, glowing  
at the center. But right now, you're here, so

pause for a moment.  
Breathe and slow down. Now,  
watch the hummingbird's wings beat  
one by one.

## Celestially

By: Emery Walton

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[ sunlight ]

a sun's light flies a  
    six hundred seventy million,  
    six hundred sixteen thousand,  
    six hundred twenty-nine  
miles per hour.  
it dodges comets,  
    illuminates stardust,  
        and paints the expanse of space—  
    a gaping midnight maw  
well beyond the limitations of man's hands.

so how, then, am I to  
keep pace with you?

perhaps I am but sound, destined to lag forever behind,  
    asymptote.

sound skims a mere  
    seven hundred sixty-one  
    (point two)  
miles per hour,  
sluggishly lagging in your wake.

I warble and wane as you  
    dance,  
        beam,  
            and flee  
                within the scarcest slivers of space.

if you are indeed sunlight,  
                                    then I am the silent wail of space  
that always chases, but never reaches.   forever too late and  
  always too far behind.



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[ moonlight ]

silvery  
silence sits  
solemnly beside me  
while I breathe in the dew  
of night; mercurial melancholy  
cradles my mind as I contemplate  
my plight. she looms far above  
me, somber and soulful,  
tearfully mourning  
her spilled  
milk.

---

[ starlight ]

to watch the rain sprinkle the empty breadth of a window  
framed between yourself and the dreary, brumous world outside—  
to anticipate where next it will fall,  
painting upon a translucent canvas—  
offers incomparable comfort

so why is it that you despise

the negative space

between the stars speckling life's mantle?

even while the ravenous jaws of your despair threaten to consume you,  
with its rabid ache of emptiness,  
remind yourself that your own frail, mortal body is composed of the universe:  
your own galaxy brimming with stardust—  
glittering,  
nebulous,  
opalescent—  
in its boundless and unfathomable divinity.

## *Out of Sanctuary, Into Uncertainty*

by Olivia Milligan

Painting, 2024



*I created this piece during a time in my life where I was soon going to be leaving home and going off on my own, and was approaching what felt like way too quickly. This work represents the fear and anxiety attached to leaving a place you've known all your life to venture into a realm of unknowns. The hesitant silhouette looks out from a castle of safety into a forest of uncertainty.*

## *Contributor Notes*

**Julia Bickham** is someone who loves to write, paint, and just observe the world around her. She hopes that her work will be something that others will enjoy and help others think of good times.

**Hannah Bryan** has always loved writing, and she strives to infuse this love in everything she does. When she isn't writing, she adores hanging out with her friends and cats. She'd like to give a special thanks to her mom for supporting her in everything she does.

**Logan Burse** uses photography as the true best way to be able to express themselves as an artist. Working in the darkroom has always brought Logan to serenity, and they try to express that in their artwork.

**Rowan Burks** self-describes as having been an English Major since birth. They've always loved reading and writing, with a passion for literary analysis.

**Bradley Cavanaugh** is a senior of the Creative Writing program at SFA and a work in progress. He loves writing stories that combine fantastical elements with real-world struggles.

**Sara Costa e Silva Santana** is a Brazilian writer driven by fantasy novels filled with characters that inspire resilience and hope. You can find bits and pieces of her native culture embedded into her work through world-building or character names. When she is not writing or reading about powerful young women who favor a dagger as their preferred weapon, Sara enjoys dancing until 3 am and hanging out with family and friends.

**Shyanne Davis** is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. Born in Austin, Texas, and moving up and down the Rocky Mountains as a child, she has a rich background that she expresses in her writing. Her favorite book is *Baby* by Patricia MacLachlan.

**Theseus DeWeese** is a junior seeking their bachelor's in creative writing. While poetry is heavily what they focus on, they're currently in the midst of drafting several different stories, including a high fantasy-fiction book series. Their work is highly influenced by true events they experienced and the emotions that followed, resulting in works highly decorated in metaphorical symbolism to bring these elements to new heights.

**Katie Friedrichsen** is an English Secondary Education student from Baytown, Texas. Katie is currently a junior and plans to teach English at a middle school level once they graduate. Katie's passions have always been reading, writing, and learning about literature.

**Kaylee Fowler** is a literature student, Orthodox Christian, and aspiring writer living in Nacogdoches, Texas. Her writing is primarily influenced by her experiences with autism and her attempts to navigate the world through a neurodivergent lens.

**Allie Garrett** is a third-year English major with a minor in Creative Writing. Allie enjoys dark fiction and fairytales. She is a member of the Lumberjanes and co-hosts the podcast *A Grimm Reminder*.

**Ruby Garza** is a Creative Writing major with hopes of ending up in editing or journalism. As long as she's working with words, she feels at home. Family is wildly important to her and serves as a constant source of inspiration.

**Clover V. Gislason**, he/they, is a hospitality administration senior at Stephen F. Austin State University. He has been published in *Half and One*, *Washington Square Review LCC*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *The Word's Faire*.

**Aarionne Hobbs** is a BFA art student at Stephen F. Austin. Through his art, he dives into both personal and metaphorical aspects of life. Growing up in a Black community has shaped his perspective, and his pieces often depict a wanderer moving through fleeting spaces, representing a quest for self-discovery and a sense of displacement.

**Samantha Hooker** is a junior majoring in creative writing with the goal of being an editor. Samantha finds catharsis as a motivating factor for writing and mostly enjoys writing poetry and fiction.

**Jason Kieffer** is a junior creative writing major from Dallas. He enjoys punk rock, playing the drums, rowdy converts, and writing.

**Bill Koehler** is a Biology Major from San Antonio, Texas, who is minoring in Creative Writing. His poetry attempts to explore unfamiliar perspectives in the natural world.

**Christian McClure** is a graphic design major at SFA from Austin, Texas. While in university to become a professional designer, he befriended many like-minded peers who encouraged him to pursue illustration as well. McClure aims to make cute and approachable illustrations, making designs that wouldn't be out of place on a flea market t-shirt or pop-up shop mug.

**Olivia Milligan** has been creating artwork their whole life and has been making digital art since they were 11 years old. Olivia is majoring in animation and plans to go into the field of animated films and shows. Olivia's goal for their career is to work in an industry that allows them to express themselves artistically in support of storytelling. Olivia believes storytelling is a critical element of the human condition that helps us to connect and express ourselves.

**Austin Peña** is a Filipino artist still adjusting to life in the States. Austin has chosen art, specifically comic art, as their medium for storytelling. The inception of this idea started as comic strips Austin made in class when they were in 2nd grade. Austin's characters have their own trials and tribulations that mirror Austin's own experience, as well as those of the people they've met in life and deeply admire.

**Ellory Skye** is an aspiring author and poet from Humble, Texas. In her fourth year at SFA as a creative writing major, she works mostly towards perfecting her craft in speculative and feminist fiction.

**Emily Smith** is a Creative Writing major from Tatum, TX. When she's not writing, she's listening to Red Velvet or baking.

**Kinley Thompson** has two works: "Foolish I Am," surrounding a girl who is beating herself up about trusting this boy-loving him-just for him to leave her after making all these promises. She is telling him off in a way in an attempt to show how much he hurt her. "I Tell Myself" is about a freshman college girl, who is telling of her first encounter with the infamous "first college crush". She soon realizes that all the warnings she heard were true and it causes her to reassess her self-worth. Her naivety of love shows and it is her first journey of learning that she deserves someone who wants all of her.

**Emery Walton** was born and raised in Angelina County and is thus a true-blooded native to the Pine Curtain. This aspiring author has developed her style and craft since elementary school, courtesy of the bounteous encouragement and creativity received from her mother and maternal grandfather, who both write as well. She specializes in fantasy, historical fiction, and romance. Her primary inspirations derive from the utilization of language itself, the complexities of the human experience, and how the connections made between people and their worlds individually mold them.