

Metaphor

Undergraduate Literary Journal

Metaphor is Weber State University's undergraduate, interdisciplinary journal, in its forty second year of publication. The journal is staffed entirely by Weber State University students.

Metaphor accepts submissions in visual arts, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction from students of Weber State University.

Publications in *Metaphor* are chosen through a blind submission process. The author or artist of each piece is unknown until the piece is selected for publication.

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Metaphor

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Cover Design by Arin Tooker



Note from the Editor

I was once in a poetry class at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Things were finally returning to normal – so normal that we were able to have an in-person poetry reading at the end of the semester without social distancing or masks. Like many others, I was experiencing the same type of excitement that comes with the first hints of spring after a long winter. As each of my classmates got up to read that day, I was filled with the kind of energy you can only get when existing in a shared space with other writers, artists, and creators. Community. After one student in particular had read, I remember a thought slicing into my mind: this poem has to be shared with others.

That poem, as many pieces of creative writing and works of art often do, filled me with this overwhelming feeling; I can't really name it (fancy an English major without the words to describe something), but I know that this feeling is utterly and completely human at its core. I desperately wondered if the poem my classmate shared with us that day would make it beyond those four walls. More people deserved to hear it. It should have been broadcasted to the world.

Although it's on a much smaller scale than the entire world, *Metaphor* provides an amazing space for students to share their writing and artwork. I'm incredibly grateful to have worked on the staff, both as a member and now as Editor-in-Chief. The people I have met through this wonderful journal inspire me to not only be a better writer and artist, but a kinder and more compassionate person. I think it would be safe to say that, for everyone involved – staff, writers, and artists alike – *Metaphor* has helped each of us to grow and flourish in completely new ways. The poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and artwork in this year's edition of *Metaphor* are phenomenal.

Over the course of the past few years, I have floundered a bit. I've found myself asking, what is the purpose? What's the point in all this? Maybe you have, too. Such questions aren't entirely unexpected, I think, after a global pandemic, daily casualties on the news, extreme political division, and being in the midst of so much heartache and tragedy. These questions linger at the back of my mind, a little bit haunting, a little bit scary. And then, I read a phrase of poetry that a student at Weber State has written, listen to one of their stories, get lost in the brushstrokes of their paintings – phenomenal.

They are the answers to my persisting questions: this and this and this, these are the reasons.

We, as staff, were enthralled with the submissions this year. Deciding which of all these unforgettable pieces to publish was difficult, and we so enjoyed every second of reading and viewing your work. We are very excited to bring the selected works to publication this year, and we are grateful to every person who submitted.

To each writer and artist who submitted to the journal, whether you were published in this edition or not: thank you. Your art is needed. Your writing is needed. Your unique ways of understanding the world in such a turbulent time are needed. Thank you for sharing these snippets of your lives and your minds, these frozen moments in time, with us. Please keep sharing your work with us.

The poem that I heard in my poetry class that spring afternoon is, by fortuitous and serendipitous circumstances, in this edition of *Metaphor*. It is not out to the entire world, yet, but it's here, in your hands. I hope that you will love it and this entire journal as much as I have. May each of the poems, stories, and works of art in this book remind you that words and ideas can change the world.

— Bailey Shae, Editor-in-Chief

"We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering — these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love: these are what we stay alive for."

— Dead Poets Society

Acknowledgements

As with any finished product, it's incredible the amount of work that goes into *Metaphor* on the back end. In creating this, the 42nd edition of the journal, we, as a staff, were only able to bring these amazing pieces of writing and works of art to publication with the support, advising, creative vision, and assistance of others.

We would like to thank our advisor, Professor Jan Hamer, for guiding and instructing the staff in preparing this edition of the journal. Your support, direction, sense of humor, and goldfish crackers have been invaluable throughout the year!

Thank you, also, to Arin Tooker who, although having already graduated from Weber State, provided us with a remarkably stunning cover that captured the colorful and creative vision the staff had for the journal this year. Your artwork never ceases to amaze.

Thank you to Kristin Jackson for your assistance in preparing the journal for publication and helping us to get it to print.

A special thanks to the College of Arts and Humanities and, in particular, the English Department. Elizabeth Hall was host to many late evenings spent going through submissions and fun-filled *Metaphor* events. Additionally, we are so grateful to all of the members of the English Department faculty and staff who promoted the journal and encouraged students to submit.

We also want to thank Shaylee Stevens for helping to get the *Metaphor* website up to date and looking better than ever. Thank you for your thorough assistance, time, and dedication to a long overdue project.

I am immensely grateful for each and every one of our staff members this year. The dedication, excitement, hard work, and laughter they have brought to our meetings has truly made this year fantastic in all ways. Special thanks to the section editors who stepped up to challenging positions and went above and beyond anything I could have hoped. I appreciate you more than you know! We had phenomenal students on our team and together created a wonderful edition of *Metaphor*.

Finally, a big, big thank you from all of us at *Metaphor* to every single student who submitted work. As always, we are impressed by your effort and willingness to share your writing and art with us. We spent many hours discussing your pieces and the way in which they brought ideas to life. Keep sharing your work! We are inspired by you.

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Poetry

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Dan Kranek

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Charlie Vasquez	Kristine Watterson
Mia Clement	Allison Ala
Evan Gomez	Erica Johnson
Sara Tesch	

To all those who submitted their poetry this year, thank you. We were absolutely flooded with submissions, eighty-seven to be exact, and we wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Your poems were a myriad of distinctive shapes, tones, hues, and melodies, which made me feel as if I was peering down through a glass-bottomed boat at shoals of shimmering fish thriving in some academic reef.

Many of you poets are already sharks gliding through coral colleges, but I have a feeling that more than a few of you will grow into literary leviathans.

I must also congratulate the poetry editing staff on a job well done. The amount of careful consideration, discussion, and of course, reading that they accomplished was extraordinary. They voluntarily took time away from their work and families so that they could better champion your poetry with the zeal it deserved. It was great to see such passion for poetry among my peers during the selection process, and I wish that I could find some excuse to gather you all together again to review more poetry in the future.

Working with the poetry editing staff was the highlight of my semester, thank you.

I hope you enjoy the following selections as much as we did.

—Dan Kranek, Poetry Editor

childhood bliss

Mia Clement

we screech and stumble through
the sunshine squares of the yard
chasing dandelion puffs that we blew
laughing when we fell, never scarred

in muddy puddles, stirring fairy potions
with flowers, endless charades
discovering magical oceans
pirates or adventurers or mermaids

we run a tiny lemonade stand,
with some kool-aid and ice
giggling on the grass, handstands
send us tumbling once or twice

flopping down on the tramp
trying to copy gymnastic flips
running our own sister summer-camp
and writing spy movie scripts

toasting starbursts for dessert
sleeping bags under the stars
before we found that falling could hurt
i miss the life that was ours

AFTER ALL MY SOUL SEARCHING

B. Jane

And in the end,
it's just me.
I've been wandering the lengths
of my Soul
questioning my every step,
hopping between opinions and
hoping for Significance, to be
Bigger,
Better,
Brighter.
I am just some person.
i am the stranger on the street
to you. Sometimes
to me, too.

The world will come crashing down
in my eyes
and it keeps spinning
for everyone else.
The stars planets creation
untroubled as i sink in my storms.
I am just me.

I can't expect significance to choose me
like some storybook character,
the Protagonist,
the worldwide point of view.
But I guess that means
if I can't be bestowed
with significance—I can't get
Chosen—I have to do it myself.
I have to define the significance.
I am the one
to choose it for me.
 I am the one.

The Witch's Prodigy

B. Jane

It takes thrice
as many mice to complete
the spell. I hold
four and twenty mice
in the blood-soaked, fur-matted
basket i balance on my hip.

Beldam Ilean tells me
to go and get more mice. I cannot
use the spell of ocean foam –
frothing, sailing, salt, wind, sand,
the bounds of it underneath my
bloody hand – without the lives of two
and seventy mice mixed within the brew.

All of night i spend watching, my
yellow-flickering owl eye
prancing to where the grasses shimmer
and shiver with the movement
of the most versatile rodent, the smallest
nuisance with a purpose. Beldam Ilean
says i'm the second smallest nuisance
with a purpose.

Once i clap up two and seventy mice altogether,
i walk back to the cottage, mouth watering
at the smell of the creatures. I'm hoping
Beldam Ilean will let me
watch
as she guts and boils and cleans and severs
all the pieces of the mice for my brew;
tail to tip and nose and nail, teeth and fur and
those beady little eyes, whiskers...

The spell will work nice for the voyage
she and i will take to the Far Underside, away
from the land we currently cry and wretch and steam
little spells on. It is a land full
of bark that bites
and chicken eggs that may or may not
hatch, but anyone is free to count them
at any time. She and i need those
for another brew to bring all the toads
to her doorstep, so we may kiss their little
warts – to soak up all their sun.

bed monster

Allison Ala

Sorry to call so late at night, but there's
A monster under my bed, except he's not,
And that's the problem. I'm worried, where is
He, is he all right? It's silly, I know, but
This monster of mine is how I can sleep
At night. He used to scratch my fears into
The wall, until one night he heard me cry –
He came out from under the bed and said
He hated being a monster, could we
Be friends instead? Now every night we go
To sleep without a scare, until he didn't –
He never came home, two nights ago.
My monster's been there many years, you see –
I need to know, where did my monster go?

for the painter in my dreams

Allison Ala

It's a maze, this waking up, stairs falling down and down piling up, pillows of nightmares clawing their way out of the closet into the light and feathering into false promises. I never know when to be scared anymore – if you're real please leave some blood, this grainy gray life is confusing enough without color. I need a sunrise of synths to whisper clarity back into this bleakness, a break from newsprint and ashen photographs and tornado warnings, a radiant reprieve of red light run into the horizon run through with brushstrokes. It's arcadia, this canvas, when it's spattered scarlet, thickening into proof and proofing into currant clouds with more color, more definition, more scars marring the sky you fly across, but don't worry, when it's all over you can hang on my wall like the dream I never had.

The Boy in the Plaid Shirt

Olivia (Neins) Herndon

Here's all I've got: the reasons why I want our friendship to be more. My boy, in the plaid shirt.
Because you laugh at the puns I make,
despite the rest of the room being
silent. That subtle chortle or even giggle at first
before it grows and grows into boisterous laughter is infectious,
despite you hating how it sounds,
and even though I love it so much.
Because your stupid face is the only one I see when I'm anxious.
Because your texts, or calls,
or just the fact that you're down the street from me
gets me through my day without worry.
Because the time we can talk and spend time together,
though it be only a few hours maybe once a month
or longer,
is enough to get me through to the next time.
Because you notice the similarities between me and my brother
who's four years older than me
and much weirder than *I* am, obviously.
Because I know you're double jointed
and you know my knees crackle and pop like a glowstick,
and neither of us cringe in disgust.
Because I know your taste in music is just as weird as my own,
because we've sung the lyrics to songs
in the playlist we made together
in the back of our friend's truck on our first date.
Because I know you have self doubts.
Because you know I have self doubts—
and I know my fears about this are irrational,
but you've been gone for a year,
and I fear one day one of us won't
feel this way anymore. Well,
I fear one day, *I* won't feel like this anymore.
Because it's you, my knight in shimmering plaid,
that's won the affection in my heart,
that won't leave
no matter how hard I try.
Because I can't get your face out of my head

especially when you wore my glasses
and made that wide-eyed, slightly awkward smile
that makes me laugh every time I imagine it.
I love that so much about you,
and I can just imagine what it'll be like
when you come home.
Because you once said, "I hope you know that I think the world of you,"
I will forever feel the same,
because no time spent with you will ever be regretted.
And maybe, just maybe,
I will find the courage to tell you all this.
Because you're worth all the anxiety and dozens of the thrown-away
notes that confessed everything I've written here.
I just hope my admiration
is reciprocated.
Because if I know anything
about how stupid I am over this sort of stuff,
as soon as you come home,
I will show you this and pray that
you will feel
a *fraction*
of what I feel for you.

That Yellow Hoodie

Olivia (Neins) Herndon

I see the girl in front of me,
her body hunched over a notebook
as she writes,
all alone. Of course she is.
She was called a freak so she decided
to fulfill the role.
She was called a loser so she decided
to simply be alone.
She was called fat, so she decided
to prove them wrong
in all the wrong ways.
Because God forbid
she be different;
why become the social pariah
when you can simply vanish from existence?
Because being different,
or fat,
or any other slur imaginable isn't okay.
Why would it be?
"It's not natural."
It's not the status quo.

She adjusts her headphones,
ignorant of the world around her.
She is me, or rather,
Was.
Maybe all of us. Who knows.
Adorned in dark clothes,
she scribbles down
all of her frustrations and anger towards the world
on a poor piece of paper,
later to be torn to shreds or burned.
That's what they taught us,
didn't they?
Take out your frustration
without hurting others
or I suppose yourself.

Continue pleasing the masses and
never let them know you're upset with them
or that they're hurting you
until you want to rip out your hair and
scream.

I don't think she would recognize me
if she saw me now.
She might recognize
that damn black hoodie
I still wear because it was our safety
in a world full of hurt.
Well, just until I realized
everything I was trying to live up to
was just bullshit.
I didn't need to be
anyone
other than
myself.
And when I learned that,
that old black hoodie
got a little bit brighter.
Would she still recognize it?
Would she see that things get better in the end?
She would, wouldn't she?
Because that little hoodie turned yellow,
just as the parts of her labeled "wrong"
turned into her best traits.
She'd be happy one day,
and I'd sure as hell make sure she was.
Because no one
should be made to feel
like a mistake.

No one.

Briar Patch

Melissa Holmes

When I fell out of love with you
It wasn't because of anything you did
Or said
It was because, as I was wandering
Through my briar patch
A little briar rabbit
Poked out his head
And said
"Don't you wonder what it would be like
To reach for the moon instead?"

I guess if you're reading it that way
You might argue it was because
Of things you did and said,
Or rather,
Of things you didn't do
Or didn't say.

You were in a constant cycle
Of never letting your moon get full.
 I was in a constant cycle of waiting
 For you to tell me my eyes were full
 Of stars.

When I fell out of love with you
I fell in love with a little rabbit
 And a summer night
 And a sky full of wonders.

dearest

Lauren Wynn

I love to hear you ramble,
spilling your thoughts
like lettered tiles upon hardwood
floors, your words tumbling out
in a measured melody,
the calming cadence emptying
the bowl of your brain
into the hollow of my heart
as you discuss how the world began
and how the world will end
and what lights fill the gaps between,
your voice soft as pink clouds, beloved
as the song that never loses its savor,
and dearer to me than either.

The End

Lauren Wynn

The day the world ended, everything smelled of fire and tasted like rain. Saline copper bleeding through sinuses and the hiss of midnight stars sizzling into nothing. It was magic and madness and melancholy—the chaos of being under no sun and no moon, but darkness alone, everyone wondering the same: *I ache, but why?*

The day the world ended, no one remembered what had come before. There are no beginnings when one reaches the end, and in the end, only sorrow lives on. Neither love nor peace can carry on for eternity. In the end in the end in the end the Earth will grieve, wondering: *I mourn, but why?*

The day the world ended, no man ruled the world. God twinkled into hazy nihilism and angels burned at stakes. People sang for refuge, lungs drowning in the Earth's savage tears. All that was became no more and all that could have become should have. Now is nothing, always, forever, eternally wondering: *I'm not, but why?*

The Kiss

Lauren Wynn

Inspired by "The Kiss" by Gustav Klimt

Lean into me, warm breath, taste of honey
and peppermint; allow my fingers, trembling,
to trace your face and write my name
upon your every feature. Listen to the stars
as they sing – spark – whisper:

I love, I love, I love.

Fall with me, tumble, on petals gold and
bleeding, wrapped in cloaks of starlight,
listening as the wind, soft messenger
of God, whimpers apologies. Taste my lips,
tainted with sorrow and remembering
your every wrong, only to love you better for it.
For you are everything, and everything is this moment:
The Kiss.

Pavement Mirrors

Lauren Wynn

I see you best in pavement mirrors, when
rain has gray-washed you to horizontal
lines and blanded hues of dreary soul-worn
dolor. When your face is only essence,

with no eyes and no mouth and no means of
distraction to spur my troubled mind. I
like you better when you can't look at me,
can't see me, with my face hell-bound and eyes

lidded with choking sorrow. I relish
the thought – the abstract – the idea of you:
but what is left when the illusion is
stripped away? When you've been carved into the

earth, leaving only the cataclysmic
despair of something that could have been more.

Psalm of Weeping Lemons

Lauren Wynn

I remember the day you called me, crying
about your mother and the way she
had never loved you. Her lips were twisted
snakes, pouring venom, tearing at your flesh,
unable to say what all mothers are supposed
to feel. I listened as you wept, tears bleeding
through the phone-line, choking me as I
felt the vibration of your lungs within my throat —
suffocating. Your words tasted of lemon, bitter,
but were you sour or were you sad?
Because when you wail: mother mother!
it should bring more than pink cheeks, polluted
with tears, your fingers clawing at the very flesh
she made, ripping soul from soul from skin.
You wonder: *why hast thou forsaken me?* O creator,
You were wrong. This is the world without
hope, and You are every mountain peak away.
And I am no god, but I heard your words, hornets
in my ears, mortal words to my mortal heart, no savior
of the world. I crushed every star within my soul
to try to light your way home; but you were raised
in closets, and in blindness you remain. So reach
for me and I will stitch your wings, quilt the scraps,
of every discarded piece of you. Your downfall shall
be your glory, and together we can build a world
entrenched in sparkling laughter, where lemons weep
sweet, and love is not currency, but breath.

Scarecrow

Lauren Wynn

Scarecrow
Like
birds
that
flutter
- fly -
when
one
gets
too close,
my
friends
are
always
leaving
without
me
proper
goodbyes.

such sweet sorrow

Lauren Wynn

heartstrings pulled until
they snap, whispered words
to fill the gaps, cuts that
bleed but never cry,
your eyes – your eyes – dark
as midnight skies, hands to hold and
worship for, cracking lips craving
more, fingers brushing my
cold cheek, silent gestures that cease
to speak, words said in solemn parting,
a new world is swiftly starting, *and* –
i'm alone again.

Winter Poem

Lauren Wynn

I am convinced my body
doesn't know how to be alive

hands perpetually purple
skin peeling to reveal

the wretched underbelly
of my soul itching

to escape this prison of bone
this castle of cracking carnage.

the difference a sandwich can make

Sara Tesch

Held tightly in your small hand,
A yellow paper wrapping
Conceals the fragrant lamb and vegetables
That are enveloped in a warm piece of
Pita.

The other children eat their
Flimsy white bread
Lunch meat
Mayonnaise
Sandwiches that have been cut into triangles.

They ask you questions
That you do not
Cannot
Understand.

At home, you speak a vibrant language
That reminds you of family
And writing letters
And blue oceans
And a golden sun on your face.

At school, the children speak a
Flimsy language.
Their language reminds you of
Confusion
And white bread sandwiches
And condescending teachers
And foreign places.

The lunch bell rings
And
The confusion begins again.

if you need a cure

Sara Tesch

if you need a cure,
step into the soft, buttery sun
waltz through the towering, mossy trees
ramble between the delicate, blooming wildflowers
and remember that nature does not need orange plastic bottles or iv lines
or therapy
years pass and the sun continues to gleam. the trees continue to stand tall. the
wildflowers
continue
to grow.
and you will too.

The Fool of Hearts

Dan Kranek

I juggle your wicked heavy heart
with only these, my time constrained hands.
It was a doomed mission from the start.
Love cannot thrive amidst barren Wasteland.

Muscle atrium, oh pulsing hourglass,
fragile ticker, I just might fumble you.
A gentle swansong into springy grass,
splattering blood, like glistening morning dew.

I wear you no longer upon my sleeve.
Instead, I bear this silly scarlet letter.
From this juggling act, I have no reprieve,
you once promised me, things would be better.

There are hearts lighter than angel feathers,
then why must we endure Hell together?

Art

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Erica Johnson

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Zach Gomez	Andrea Webster
Katherine Le	

Think about a time you completed an important project; time and energy used in creation consumed every thought. Something that began as an idea and then conformed into its entity. Whether it is a poem or painting makes no difference. Both represent composition; both focus on original precision.

Art makes use of negative space, proportions, and placement. An artist will supply a visual, leaving the remainder to the imagination. Our eyes drift across a design; our mind shifts to creative thinking. Then, finally, we begin to analyze what we see. Is it acceptable not to have any insight into a piece? Yes, it is.

An artist guides us on a journey of their creation, allowing us to interpret the piece how we determine. In a way, it is a description of the communicated vulnerability. If an artist explains their intentions while we observe a style of art, would this alter our perspective?

Uniqueness and individuality allow us to see the world differently. No two people will have the same thoughts on what they see because we view the world differently.

Metaphor believes in the students here at Weber. Each of us has a story, a voice to express, and a path to create. As art staff members, we are thankful these artists put their trust in us to showcase their work.

—Erica Johnson, Art Editor

Among the Trees

J. Ethier



Darkened Path

J. Ethier



Die Einzelheiten 1

Avery Knaub



Die Einzelheiten 2

Avery Knaub



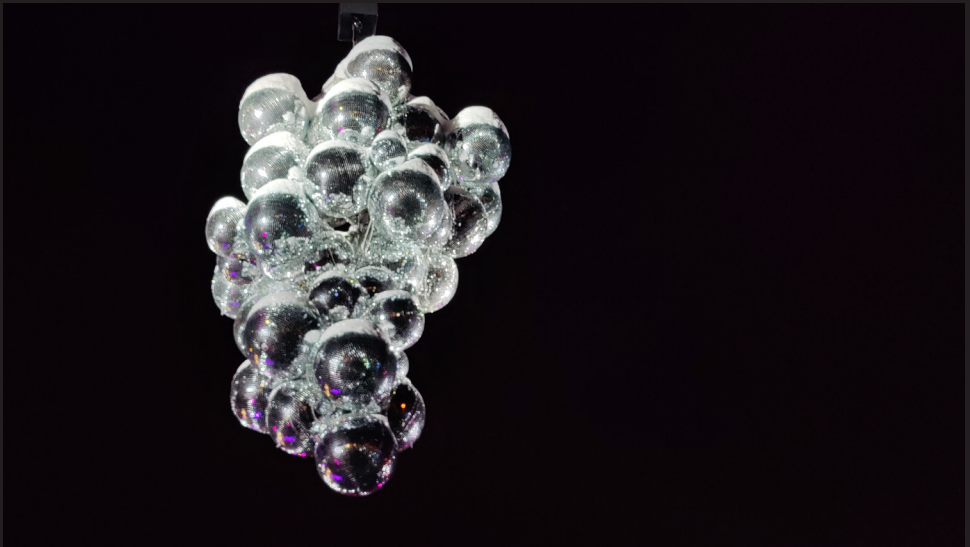
Die Einzelheiten 3

Avery Knaub



Die Einzelheiten 4

Avery Knaub



Candy Crows

Ravynna Deahl



Disassembled

Colin Halsey



Embroidery Fish

Megan Mortensen



Embroidery Floss on Fabric

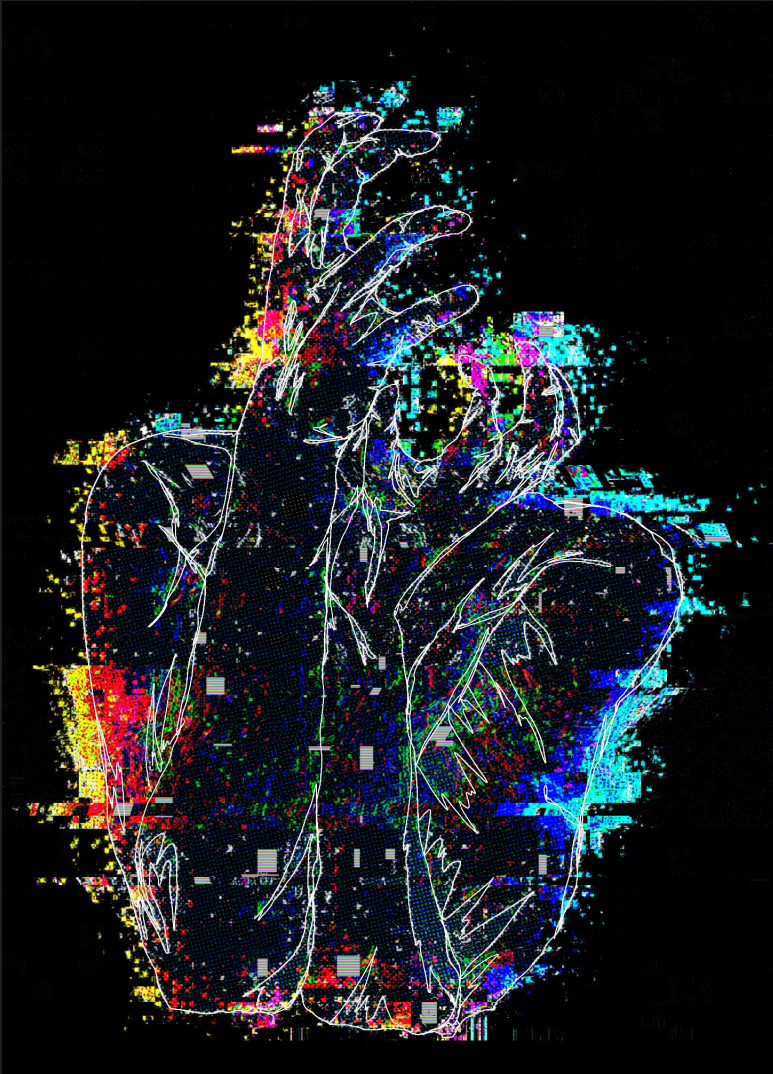
Fish for Thought

Ashlee Seager



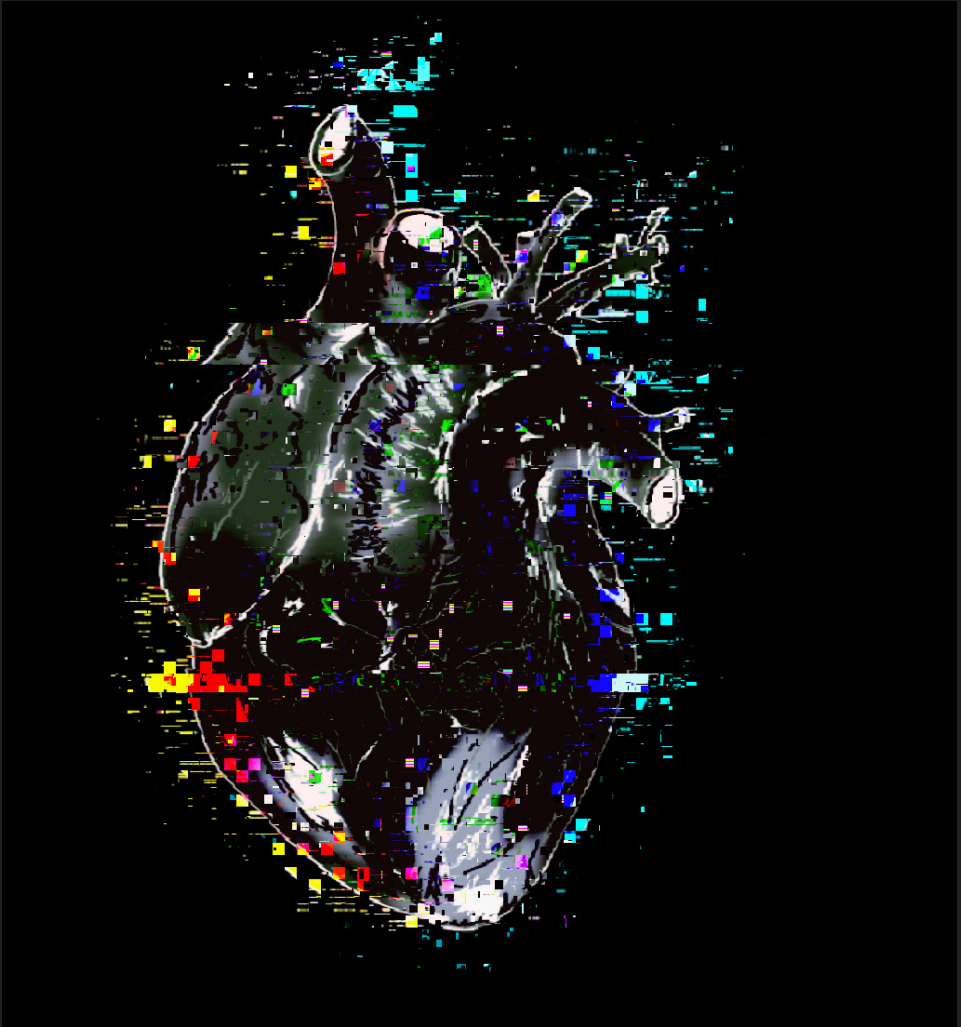
Intrusive Thoughts

Ashlee Seager



Panic Attack

Ashlee Seager



Sister

Katelin Johnson



Oil on canvas, 22 in x 28 in

Superiority

Katelin Johnson



Acrylic on canvas, 16 in x 20 in

The Selkie

Katelin Johnson



Oil on canvas, 22 in x 28 in

Ferris Wheel

Bailey Shae



Winter's Blazing Heart

Dan Kranek

Burning hot as an ember

You are numb to my pleas

Fire doesn't remember

Snowflakes alighting upon sapphire lips

The supplicants it has burned

Slipping on your frost-bitten tongue

Nor the simmering lovers casually spurned

With words as sharp as icicles

Or the blazing desires turned

Chill with glacial undertones

To ash, to clunky coals, to lifeless cinders

Frigid with undisguised disdain

That shall always the aspiring phoenix hinder

Bleeding Winter-wrought words

ignited passion, blossoming into flickering flame

Wreathed in wicked, wild, hoarfrost

Compared to lust and vanity, all fire is tame

Like veins of ice, webbed across your heart

at last, bare

Bailey Shae

the clock struck midnight
at last. it was a relief
to remove layer upon layer
of silk and satin material,
water pooling around ankles
on the floor

bare

the final clang of the hour
at last took with it the
immense pressure
the incessant chatter
of happily ever after
and beaded, lace corsets
restricting breath

bare

the fairytale has ended
at last. goodbye, finally
to crystalline slippers
false promises, godmothers
return my rotting pumpkins
tattered clothes and self

bare

the princess is gone
at last. all that's left
are ashes and cinders
shards of glass, blisters
from dancing with a fate
that was never going to fit

bare

look at you
mysterious girl
curious light
in your mind
filled with wonder
coraline
button eyes
wisting after
loves who left be-
hind nothing
will make it
better
but I digress
vanish back in
to gray fog
coating veins and
arms so love-
ly the middle
name of the girl
you wanted to be-
come now it
never could
happen
breaking bones
backs bent back-
wards toward
home
a thought that
is becoming harder
and harder to
capture
it melts away
into → nothing

Ghost

Melissa Simmons

God above, Divinity and Mercy is your name
But calls for blood never relent; echoing
Crying out for every perceived wrongdoing
Flesh and blood, cleansed by the same
Fragmenting bone and sinew, never enough pain
Sins pouring out onto cold tile – is it overdoing it
To say as you were another's savior, you're simply my undoing
A soul trapped in a body – aflame

I sawed at the branches with a butter knife
Slivers of bark stuck to my clothes
Now I pull the roots up of what once gave me life
Scorch the earth where once I held it close
Laugh as it burns away the last of my strife
And once more, you are what you always were, only a ghost

State Change

Melissa Simmons

The bark that took root and grew around
My heart
Drips down my ribs now
Pools in my stomach
Drop by drop
Dissolving in acid
An unchangeable shift in matter
And then you ask me
To piece it back together for you
So you don't have to see
The raw, red-beating of my freed queer heart

Heightened Speech

Melissa Simmons

g
n
i
t
f
i

My tongue takes flight; I
High into the mossy expanse of blue, pulling further away
Word by word
Or perhaps, touch by touch
The taste of something foul lingering still

You hand me a pair of socks and say,
“Put on a Christmas sweater”
It’s almost March.
I say nothing and obey

My tongue glides
Maneuvering the ever-growing expanse
Of purple hyacinths in the sky
Petals fluttering lazily from

above

above,

Their perches; above,

When I reach for your hand,
Your skin t a p e r s, sending
Silent signals, skittering out
Into the space between
Still; I say nothing

My tongue reaches the pinnacle
Of its flight
It's lying in the snow of some high
Mountain space; slowly buried
Under every word that went
Unspoken

I Never Said Goodbye...

Melissa Simmons

Goodbye

Every time I think it

Your ghost alights to the left

The crow on your collarbone never changing

In its eyes, there is a flicker of something

I'll never understand

Did I ever know more than that shallow shimmer?

I never can close my eyes to that image

Real or imagined

Goodbye

A slow heartbreak scatters you silently in a field of flowers

Tufts of dandelions burrowing into waiting soil

And when I think you're finally gone

I'll find a yellow dandelion waiting for me

In the most unlikely of places

Shattering (After a Panic Attack)

Karly Nyman

There is always that moment, after Shattering, when I am able to take the first deep breath and remember that I have a body, a body that I belong to, and begin to painstakingly drag myself back into it. Breathe again, inhale, exhale, try to soothe the frantic runaway thunder of my heart by promising that the chest containing it is a *shelter*, not a cage. I can feel all of my terrified bones, aching, uncertain of how to hold a body anymore, surrender and click so softly into place.

Inhale. Exhale.

My face is wet with tears, my eyes stinging, my throat dry and rasping. I pause to acknowledge them, chasing those sensations down and cradling them gently, gratefully, despite how they hurt. Hurting means *alive*. Hurting means *I'm here, be here*. Hurting means *it's over now, just keep breathing*.

Inhale. Exhale.

The breath in and the breath out still feel overwhelming. They hurtle around behind my ribs like concentric comets while I reacquaint myself with myself, the still-foreign sensation of hands, of tongue and teeth, of skin that practically sparks with sensations.

My wayward pieces, fragmented and sharp, finally spiral down into *Here* and, for just that moment, they shrink and condense into a Singularity, one I am not certain they have ever been before or are intended to be, but nevertheless they Become.

Become, yes, they become a drop of pure, soft light drawn all along my fingertips, my eyelashes, the edges of my hair, like—

Inhale. Exhale.

—a convalescing star, falling,
and caught, safely, finally,
in my own gently cupped hands.

growing pains

Cidney McQuade

it's just growing pains they say
 growing
 growing
 growing
 breaking
 bawling
 aching

[hic]
 [hic]
 [hic]

of my uneven breaths

growing pains, they said.

 not the pain of the world being brought upon me

 just the pain of my skin stretching
 my bones creaking
 my eyes leaking
 my vocal cords screeching

no,
no

it's not my body growing,
 but my mind instead.

mother mother

Cidney McQuade

mother, mother
hold me dear

give me advice
and words to hear

you tell me i'm crazy
that i'm too young
to know who i am

oh,
dear,

"you'll like it someday"

o h,
d e a r,

you don't feel that way

o
h
d e a r r,

you're not made that way

o h ,
d e
a
r,

you're only twenty

oh, dear,

"thank you," i say
but that wasn't what i needed to hear.

to-do

Cidney McQuade

to-do:

- 1) cry
- 2) fake the big "O"
- 3) more tears
- 4) apologize to my lover
- 5) vomit up feelings and turn them to words
- 6) avoid my mother like the plague
- 7) crying, crying, crying
- 8) choke back my tears
- 9) block out the chorus of judgement and fear
- 10) remind myself that I'm valid and real

- 11) nothing at all
- 12) everything at once

- 13) wash this substance from my hands
- 14) bathe myself in the salt from my tears
- 15) ask god to make me "normal"
- 16) break this cycle of regret
- 17) learn to love myself
- 18) cry again
- 19) spend another day alone
- 20) help my partner feel something
- 21) insist that it's okay if I feel nothing
- 22) wash
- 23) rinse
- 24) [repeat]

re p e a t
rep e at]]
r ep e at

rep[eat]
re[peat]

Repeat
Repeatpeatpeat
repeateateatpeat

Human Costume

Sierra Handley

How do I convince someone to drain me of my poison?

Who would willingly go along with the whims of a corpse, someone with little to offer except a place beside them in the ground?

Does anyone that selfless really exist?

I'm inclined to think not.

If there is benefit in draining whatever is causing me to rot, someone may place their lips upon my neck and suck the culprit from my life's blood.

There is nothing so advantageous in my revival.

What I receive is akin to pity; there cannot be someone for everyone. A lucky few might find many other halves throughout their life. Others are fated to smile from their shadowy torment and blink back tears masquerading as delight.

These saltwater traitors fall anyway, so nobody is convinced when your mouth moves: "I'm so happy for you. I hope you're happy. I'm happy too. I'm just so happy. For you."

Ink

Alisha Luck

Ink dripping down,

Down,

Down into the abyss,

Splattering as it hits the ground,

Sharp white against the black, leaking down the sides.

Pen to paper, writing,

Writing,

Writing.

Never knowing what to say,

Lies after pretty lies,

Building,

Building,

Building until it collapses.

Ink washing up and over the edge,

Lies mixing with half-truths, fighting for control,

Truth asks the lies why,

Why,

Why do you lie?

Lie cowers, dying on the inside from what it cannot say,

At last, the lie splits open, truths come rushing forward.

Lie lays weeping as the black ink taints the white,

Overwhelmed and uncoherent,

At last truth sees why they lied,

It lied to hide the pain, to prevent it from splitting open,

The screams of anger, frustration, and sadness.

Cry for help, for anyone to hear them,

The loneliness overwhelms, as she clutches her head repeating why,

Why,

Why must it always be me?

She screamed, banging her fists against the wall, hoping for relief.

That's when truth saw it, saw all the loneliness and sadness built into a stone brick wall,

Tears flowed from truth, the reality hitting her,

The lies were a stone wall keeping together what little control she had left,

Truth grabbed lie, pulling her against her,

Their tears mended together, a river of pale whites and dark blacks.

For the first time, lie felt heard, like she mattered,

That small piece of peace mended the gap between them,

Both knowing they weren't alone,

Alone,

Alone.

ink animalcules

Dayna Shirley

i like to watch words
as they tumble out onto a page...
parachuting out of my ballpoint pen,
desperately needing to linger on that pale stage

some think they are on a soapbox
and turn yellow as soon as they hit the white
some stay bold, dark, and frightening
laughing as they put out any light
some scatter blue flecks while dragging their tails along,
(they often sound like hummingbirds)
singing an indistinct, silly little song

some even have teeth
that leap out when your eyes pass them over
biting onto your thoughts
until they are all that is leftover

some even refuse to jump
they don't want to make their mark
because know that if they do fly down
it will have to be their first and last spark.

As she gazed 'cross the cattle field,
Her bleeding heart refused to yield,
The stifling agony her lover's death revealed.
A pain so empty, it could never be healed.

The cows and bulls roamed and cried,
Mourning a symphony for the farmer that died.
It followed her all the way to the riverside,
Where she waded into the middle to ride.

She floated downstream and saved a mouse,
That graciously sat upon her drenched-white blouse.
It cooed its thanks, and introduced himself Klaus,
He offered his service within her lonely house.

Momentarily leaving her grief of choosing,
She carried him back with the sunlight losing.
Over the meadow and hill, silently musing,
About graveyards the lucky dead were using.

Oh to be dead, would be a miracle!
To be barred from life the satirical,
And among the shining spirits so mythical,
Reaper I beg thee, take my body physical!

Upon opening the sad and creaky door,
She began to sob and fell to the floor.
She desperately wished not to hurt anymore,
Hoping her blood would leak from every pore.

Klaus planted a tiny kiss on her head,
Telling her death is something to dread,
For every warm tear she should shed,
Was a mark of her love strong and spread.

And with that, she wipes her spotty red face,
Smiling at last with beauty and grace.
She holds Klaus in a palmed embrace.
Life wasn't so bad in the first place.

Liturgy

Aurora Wall

I float along at my own rhythm,
Like a ghost to my own tomb.
The twilight melts into an inky black sky.
The brethren congregate.
They flicker along, furling and unfurling
the scrolls full of damp myths from an era before.
I look down into the abyss.
The bones pale as snow.
The flame's burnt out.
The casket rusts.
Bones become dust.
And I am empty.

Pine Trees in the Fen

Aurora Wall

after Van Gogh

inky trees
 gnarled
against the yellowed sky
 of old paper
 two lone birds
circling out of
reach of the branches
 needleless
 cross hatched
reeds bent below
 an incoherent wind
 the marsh
 bogged with
swampy bemiring water
the depth
 of pitch
the ground
 draws you in
 leaving ink

on your hands

Love, Guilt, & Resiliency

Catia Catu

The following three pieces have been created to allow space for human feelings to be protagonists, characters that breathe and live among us. In doing so, they can be experienced and accepted as part of life.

Love

There was a knock, Mercy got up and opened the door.

There stood Forgiveness holding Grace's hand. They had just married.
Mercy invited them in for a warm cup of tea, their journey had been long.

Mercy and Grace are sisters that seldom see each other.

The few times they do, they are priceless.

Grace sipped her tea, eyes smiling at Forgiveness. "I am glad I chose him.
Pride really tried to win me over. He offered me a lot. Forgiveness did not."

Mercy looked up, perplexed, "Then why choose him?"

"Because when I am with him, I have peace," smiled Grace.

She patted her belly, eyes sparkling, "We're expecting. Her name will be Love."

Guilt

Anger pounded at the door,

"Let me in!" Guilt leaned back on the other side, tears streaming.

She knew there was a part of her that wanted him in her life.

He had been part of her for so long. Somehow Anger made her feel alive.

Leaving him would be like tearing off a limb, or so she thought.

As Anger continued to pound, Guilt leaned her head back,
allowing her mind to escape.

It went to the future she was beginning to dream.

In that moment, she knew it was she who would catapult her life to a new beginning.

Maybe it was time she changed her name.

Resiliency

Resiliency, she goes by many names.

When she jumps off a cliff, they call her Brave.

When she carries a heavy load, they call her Strong.

When she stands her ground, they call her Tenacious.

What they do not know is this:

When she jumps, she is enveloped in fear.

Her loads are heavy, but she makes many stops to regain strength.

She stands her ground while her voice and hands tremble.

Perhaps she understood that she has no choice.

Call her what you want, but she truly is Resilient.

My Friend, The Love of My Life

Avery Knaub

In the morning my first thoughts
A weight like a freight train:
You're gone. You're gone

Oh, how I miss you, my friend.

Once, in the autumn when the leaves were changing
You were baking something I can't remember
Except the cinnamon, except the icing
Hands on your hips at the mess
You always did these things so well
In that moment as I am, always, quieted

Or when you were making that victory lap around the garden
And how the sway of the wind matched your pace
With all golden light, blue sky, honeyed scent
And you didn't make it quite back,
Collapsing into a tree trunk with the mouth of a feral dog
Eyes a-swimming, snot slicked down to your chin

Over the years you have sliced yourself away,
I think in hopes of slowly but surely cutting yourself out of existence
How I have craved to be the blood on your razor
The scratch in your voice when you try not to cry
The bubble of air you punctured into your vein
At least you could have had in those wretched hours a droplet of love

*How I loved you
even when you didn't.*

A Poem for Hook (A Ballad)

Brianna Nielson

The croc, the clock,
The shadow
The hook, the crook,
The psycho

They called me the villain,
The codfish
The worm
The murderous Pirate Captain

The bang, the twang,
The fall
We shot with our hot
Metal ball

Cannonball sing
Ending immortal reign,
Now red is my coat
Full of blood

Tinker Bell's frail,
And Lost Boys' wail,
Now Peter's all strewn in a row

Wendy, darling
Your hero is dead.
No love promised he
In his smile

Peter the flyer,
Peter the liar,
Peter the very lost boy

It's true, I was first
I was first, now I'm last
I killed the god
Of lost souls

He fell, the great falcon
The killer, the boy
The mermaids will eat him
And sing

Call me the villain,
The bad
The ugly
Call me much worse than the croc

The villain the winner
The free
The hero the pirate
That's me

White Voice

Charlie Vasquez

Forgive me for my nervous nature,
But I hate my voice
I sound like a white guy
My voice flows with postcolonial prose
And histories unsung and unsaid
No rolled r's or accented n's
No accents from distant lands
Or notes of some foreign brand
I sound like someone who watches Doctor Who
And I do, binge Doctor Who, I mean

I sound like I pronounce the j in jalapeno
Or confuse Ice Cube, Ice T, and T Pain
Like I listen to Nirvana and Alice in Chains
I sound less like hip-hop
And more like pop
Or country
And I hate country

My voice has hints
Of Mormon morals and white ethics
And a lack of anything ethnic
The voice of a person who would
call someone who looks like me spic
I hate not having a choice in my voice
I sound like a white guy
I'm told that's bad, I don't know why
It's hard to find your place
With a white voice, and a brown face.

Creative Nonfiction

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Melissa Holmes

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As another school year comes to a close, we are mindful of where our paths are taking us, mindful of our futures, and mindful of the experiences we've had that have led us to this moment. Self-reflection is an examination of our lives, past, present, and future, and how we have presented ourselves to the world and allowed the world to shape who we are. Our experiences are solely unique to each of us, and by sharing those unique experiences, we are offering a piece of ourselves to the world. Through our writing, the world can glimpse our lives, cherish these special moments with us, and come to understand a new perspective otherwise unknowable.

The creative nonfiction pieces published in this journal are reflections on individual experiences that will help others gain knowledge of different perspectives and different life-paths. Some pieces are heart-felt, funny, or enlightening, while others show a side of life that can be harsh and even violent. We all must experience hardships, and we all must experience love and compassion. Life without both the good and bad isn't a life worth living. Without hardship or fear, without love and friendships, our life paths do not progress. We are a species that always strives to grow and to learn, to push boundaries and to become the best versions of ourselves. Sharing our journeys through our writing is our way of telling each other that none of us are alone in this human experience.

"The journey into self-love and self-acceptance must begin with self-examination... until you take the journey of self-reflection, it is almost impossible to grow or learn in life." – Iyanla Vanzant

I want to thank everyone who submitted a creative nonfiction piece to *Metaphor*. Whether the submission was accepted or not, all pieces were read with open minds, and all pieces will be remembered and cherished as unique life experiences.

– Melissa Holmes, Creative Nonfiction Editor

No one wants to swim the five hundred. Twenty twenty-fives, splits at forty five seconds or less. Five one-hundreds. Two and a half two-hundreds. Think about it imaginarily broken up to make it easier to swim. Trick your brain into thinking it isn't the longest you'll ever be in the most physical agony you'll ever experience.

You can think of years like that too: months, seasons, weeks, days, hours, phases. Sometimes you can even split time up into which music artist you were into at the time, who you had a crush on, school semesters, obsessions. Life is like that, broken up. Pieces of a whole event all of us have to swim.

What do you even think about when you're under for that long? Five hundred yards—feels like a lifetime. In the silence of the water, going back and forth and back and forth, stretching out and slicing your hands through the water, kicking hard against the natural pull of the currents, pumping your muscles and mind like there's no end except the wall, flip-turn, and push off. What do you think about in the midst of that cold, pressing deep that keeps filling your bones and weighing you down, and you're just trying to stay afloat?

You think about nothing.

Nothing but that there's another nineteen twenty-fives to do, and if you think about it too much you'll remember your arms are hurting and you'll start to give up. If you think about it too much you'll remember you don't have a plan and wonder what you'll do when you swim to that next wall and finally get your degree. If you think about it too much you'll remember you don't want to swim alone anymore and don't know if anyone will stay with you long enough to finish a lap. If you think about it too much you'll remember you're relying on the air being there when you lift your head up out of the water and think about what happens when it's just not there anymore, when the selfcare and medicine and doctors and therapy just disappear and you drown in the chlorine deep and never take that next flip-turn. If you think about it too much, twenty twenty-fives become a five hundred, and it's just too big an event.

The next wall will be there. The air will be there when you take a breath. The water will be there, deep and cold and rolling. For twenty twenty-fives, five one-hundreds, two and a half two-hundreds, it'll all be there. The water, the wall, the future, the opportunities, the time, the love, the cures. No one wants to swim the five hundred.

Swim it broken.

Car Crash

Charlie Vasquez

They told me that I was going to be ok. They told me to hold a dirty old blanket they found in the back seat to my head to stop the bleeding. They told me that my head was bleeding. They told me that the car rolled four times, but it felt like more, it felt like the car would never stop rolling, and sometimes, it feels like it's still rolling.

They told me that they were going to help me, this group of strangers trying to save my life that I never saw before and would never see again, but I told them to help my sister first, because she was clearly more hurt than I was. I think it was obvious to everyone else that she was dead, but I was still in denial. These strangers began to ask my dad, who was holding my sister, how bad she was. My dad just cradled her head in his arms and said "She's gone."

They told me once again that I was going to be ok. I was in too bad of shape to leave the car on my own. My head was split open, my left arm was black and swollen from road rash, and my ear was dangling from a thin piece of flesh. I didn't know that my ear was falling off, I wouldn't know until later when the bandages were being removed from my head that I found that my ear was stitched back on.

As they removed the entire backseat from the car, they told me once again that I was going to be ok. Infuriated, I began to kick the seat in front of me. A mix of adrenaline and grief kept me from sitting still. The strangers just kept telling me to calm down because I was going to be ok, and I lacked the clarity or the courage to tell them otherwise.

The worst part was that they were right. After an ambulance, a helicopter, three days in the hospital, two months of bed rest, and a lot of therapy, physical and otherwise, I ended up being ok, or as ok as you can be living in today's world.

I never got to thank the people who saved my life. I am grateful for what they did, even if it took me a few years to realize that, but everyone who tried to save me after that made the same mistake. *God has a plan. Everything happens for a reason. Families are forever.* I love and appreciate everyone who tried to help, but most never understood.

I never had the chance to not be ok. I don't know if it was what everyone else told me or the expectation I set for myself, but I believed that I had to be ok. Anything else would be disrespectful of my sister's memory. Even now, at a point in my life when everything is going great, I would give it all up for my sister. I'm tired of people calling it survivor's guilt or depression. I don't want to be ok; I just want my sister back.

Love Song to Weber State

Josie Hulme

Surely, I am too old to be nervous so these sparrows, swooping and swirling in my stomach, must be excitement. Today is my first day of college—I'm forty-three and I'm a freshman. My French exchange student thinks I'm crazy. In his country, college is for the young and if you didn't go at that time, you missed your chance; accept your Walmart-greeter status and move on. It doesn't matter that I served my country in the Marine Corps as an Arab linguist after high school, that I've devoted twenty years to raising five amazing and productive children, that I've personally built two houses, written seven novels, lived in Europe and on every coast of the US, won many writing awards, and have a handful of paid writing credits to my name. It doesn't matter that I want to network with other writers, or that I want to hone my craft, or that we finally have enough money for me to fulfill my lifelong dream of going to school. None of that matters to him.

In France—what some people see as our sister-country in terms of politics, economics and societal structure—you just don't improve when you're my age. Improvement is for the young. And only some of them, really. Most European school systems decide what you'll be when you're in seventh grade. Think about what an idiot you were in seventh grade! Can you imagine your potential being decided at age twelve (in Germany it's ten) based on how well you did on a written exam? It's called tracking—you take a test and get shunted onto one of two tracks: one that takes you to university and jobs like being a doctor, an engineer, a dentist, or a business manager; and one that takes you to a vocational school and jobs like plumber, electrician, or mechanic. And that's where you stay (even if you aspire to be something else), because the bureaucracy and society don't encourage—or even make possible—improvement.

But not here. America has a restless culture. We're unwilling to accept someone else's idea of what's best for us, someone else's limits of what we can do. We chafe under restrictions; we're unwilling to accept stagnation. From the Pilgrims, leaving their homeland in search of religious freedom; to the war for independence and the right to pursue happiness; to the breaking of the chains of slavery; to the wild, lawless settling of the West, the story of America is a story of making something from nothing, of thinking you can do it better, faster, cheaper—and proving it. It's only in America, really, where “bettering yourself” is considered a life-long mission. Where you can start over in your thirties or forties or seventies and make something new of yourself. Where you're allowed to try again. And again. Until you're where you want to be.

And this is where I want to be, right here at Weber State: here with the Black girl posing for pictures, gorgeous, the sunlight drenching her dark skin, shimmering on edges of sculpted muscles that I have long since lost to five children and a talent for cooking; here, circling the parking lot with the other latecomers,

hovering like vultures, stalking back-packed students trudging toward their cars, hungry for their space, the grid lines like bleached bones in the sunshine; here with the beach-wave girls snapping selfies as they walk to class, their fragile, fearful selves wrapped in plastic packaging — so human, so extraterrestrial; here where the sun’s merciless rays melt the shuttle-waiters into rainbow puddles bleeding into the scorched sidewalk; here with the guy who’s picking up extra shifts at work to help pay for his little brother’s heart surgery, with the girl whose dream of being a pilot was dashed because of her health, wondering what to do now; with the courageous kids who battle anxiety and depression and addiction and still come to class every day; here where the teachers are so kind, generous with their time and knowledge, invested in their students’ success and sincerely willing to help where they can; where hundreds of employees work hard to give us an education, laying their futures in our open palms with confidence.

The first recipients of that confidence were ninety-eight students in 1889, when Weber State University drew its first breath in downtown Ogden as Weber Stake Academy, owned and run by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Later, with brutal irony, the aftermath of the “war to end all wars” directly caused World War II which, in turn, brought about two interesting changes to Weber College: the GI Bill was passed, allowing many returning World War II veterans to go to school, pushing Weber College’s enrollment from 465 students to 967 in one year; and this led to change number two — Weber College bought 175 acres on the eastern bench of the valley and began construction of a new campus.

The years have brought other changes and experiences: in 1957, overzealous fans lit a flaming “W” on the mountainside above campus and started a wildfire; the mascot, the Wildcat, was chosen by accident and in 1979 was changed to Primo Peacock, a change which thankfully only lasted one year; the day after the day I was born, the first basketball game was played at the Dee Events Center (Weber State won in overtime); and a piece of WSU even left this world aboard the Challenger space shuttle in 1985. There has been a Wildcat in the Olympics; one picked sixth in the NBA draft, one who served as US Secretary of the Treasury, one who played in the NFL, multiple graduates who have worked as professional sports coaches and business magnates, and one who was even a prophet of God and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In 1991, Weber State College became Weber State University. Most state colleges are named after their state, but this one chose to retain the name of the county in which it resides. That name is indicative of this institution’s heritage of commitment to improve, not only the lives of those who attend its classes, but also the surrounding community. During the Great Depression, when funds were so tight, the college allowed students to pay tuition in food rather than money. Weber State is working on ways to reduce its carbon footprint, like installing a solar array on the Davis campus and driving electric shuttles on Ogden’s. Sierra Magazine ranked the university a “Cool School,” an honor that means less about being cool and a lot more about taking care of the environment — which is actually pretty cool. Weber offers free tuition to students with

an annual household income of \$40,000 or less, and in 2017, Weber State helped create the Ogden Civic Action Network, a group dedicated to improving the quality of life of those living in Ogden's East Central neighborhood, one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in the city. Not to mention the thousands of volunteer man-hours organized by the college for things like the Utah Food Bank, the Red Cross blood drive, the Weber Cares pantry, and other service-oriented outreach programs.

Now Weber State is passing on this amazing legacy of both economic success and innovation as well as dedicated service and philanthropy to us, the next generation of graduates. So what will we do, my fellow Wildcats? How are we going to change the world? What impact will we have on our community, on American innovation, on the various fields we're studying? And does it have to be big to make a difference? H. Tracy Hall invented the industrial diamond. Do we have to do something like that to effect positive change? Does our name need to be in bright lights or on the side of a building or on a Wikipedia list of notable attendees to make us matter?

Or can we agree — oh, I hope we can agree! — that simply making a positive change in exactly one person, ourselves, is a win. That taking the lessons we're learning here — both educationally and socially — and bettering an aspect of our thought process or our sympathy or our understanding is an amazing accomplishment. Because there is no such thing as affecting just one person. When we improve, we automatically boost those around us. We smile and make someone happy. We teach and open someone's mind. We serve and improve someone's life.

Changing our little corner of the world — our co-workers, our family, our children, our partner, our friends, the people standing in line next to us at the grocery store — is a big deal and, if we're honest, way more influential than an industrial diamond or leading a company. I'm not saying we shouldn't invent the diamond or coach the team or go to space, but I am saying that if that's all we did — if the people around us were not better because we were there — then we missed a step. We missed out on the best education, the core lesson that Weber State is trying to teach: to be kind. To be good. To *do* good.

That is Weber State's true legacy, its true gift — its love song to us.

The Main Character

Olivia (Neins) Herndon

I think I want to kill off the main character in the story I'm writing. Might make it more interesting. "What kind of book is it?" one might ask. "An autobiography," I would answer.

Now before you get up in arms about "life being sacred" and all that, I ask you to consider the motive behind my decision. The main character's name was Olivia. Now. . . Well quite frankly I don't know anymore. I'm still workshoping it. You know, she was an odd girl. Always sticking to herself, didn't really know how to make friends. Fitting in never really worked for her, unfortunately.

Anyhow, she was very nice and all that. But she wasn't sure of what she could accomplish. She would worry a lot, not just about herself, but those around her. She would ruminate on what other people said or what they thought about her.

I don't know. She just. . . wasn't doing it for me. I changed her appearance a lot, and it helped every so often but nothing ever really stuck with me. I'd try to make her personality more complex, giving her actual diagnoses and the likes for old plot holes I hadn't figured out until later in the story. Even after doing everything I could, there was still this pit in my stomach. Am I really doing the best I can? Have I made this character the best they could be? What more is there to do?

Then I thought. . . Maybe I should just get rid of the old that I focused on for so long, and change the main character in the next chapter of my story.

I think I'll call him Neins. Hell, that name might not even work out later on, but it's a good placeholder. He'll probably look about the same if I'm being honest. I didn't mind how the last character looked, but I'll still put in some changes here and there. A bit more of a masculine build ought to help. Making Neins reflect how he feels, from the inside out will definitely be a journey, but it'll be well worth it. I hope so at least.

Rain

Sarah Taylor

It rained today. It rained in a desert. I saw it through windows, heard it on the roof, but I never did get outside to feel it on my skin. Rain makes me happy, and though it causes many people to run for cover, it makes me long to run outside and throw my head back towards the sky. It smelled like rain this morning, I knew it was coming, but responsibilities held me in class. By the time I was released, the clouds had blown past and the pale gray sky could hardly remember the angry tears of its thundering predecessor. But the ground remained damp.

My steps were springy and it wasn't until I sprung back to my car in the parking lot that I remembered, "Raining! In a desert."

The springiness gone, I unsteadily took a seat behind the wheel. I fought my phone out of my too-small pocket and opened my messages. It took longer than I liked to scroll to his recently changed contact name.

I could feel my heart beating in my chest – not a powerful drum like the drops that had beaten the roof, it was quick and light as though trying to escape from the things that'd made it altogether too sad. If I had to make sense of it, my heart's beat was drizzling.

"It rained today" I typed and stared until the words blurred together. *This is dumb*, I thought while blinking away tears at the softening sky.

"In a desert" I added, staring again at the mess of nonsense I'd made. The blue line followed my texts, blinking up at me, taunting, *just press the button*, it whispered. My eyes fixed on the blue send button for a few seconds, then I clicked home and slid my phone under my leg where I couldn't cause any trouble. I turned the key, my engine started, the windshield wipers sprayed that collected rain onto the wet ground, and beats of music blended with my beating heart.

Red light. "Rain soon" my phone informed me. "Expected to start at your location at 3:24 pm." Green light.

*"If I were rain,
That joins sky and earth that otherwise never touch,
Could I join two hearts as well?" — Tite Kubo, Bleach, Vol. 1*

"Please, please, pleeease let's get out of the car."

"Sarah it's pouring! No- roll up your window! My seats!"

"It's not *that* wet," I laughed, pulling up on the window regulator and wiping away droplets with my sleeve. His hand warmed my thigh as he let out a sigh. I turned to him, but he didn't look at me.

"Hey, it's okay. We'll catch up to them and even if we don't it's okay, we already said goodbye... we can have fun on our own." The corner of his mouth turned up: that was the phrase to finally get him to catch my eye.

“Okay.”

He pulled into the parking lot and made a quick call to our friends. I sat in the comforting white noise of rain, watching drops race down the window.

He ended the call and informed me, “It’s raining too hard, everyone else left.” Despite our plans falling through, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Good.” I cranked the volume knob and quickly slipped out the door. My hair was instantly plastered to my face and my skin broke out in bumps, but no part of me could care. I shut my eyes and tilted my face to the sky. I laughed, I spun, I threw my arms as wide as they could go along to the beat.

As I laughed with the new sensation, his hands slid comfortably around my waist and my hands found a home behind his neck.

“Hey,” I pulled him close and we swayed all too slow, ignoring the beat of the song. “It’s raining!” I yelled over the cacophony.

“In a desert,” was always his response.

I smiled at the rainwater dripping off the curls around his eyes. I loved his hair, and nothing, including heavy water, could weigh his curls down. He noticed with a smile in return and leaned in, one hand now finding my face, and our wet lips pressed together. His hands moved across my back, pressing my chilled shirt to my skin, occasionally coaxing out a giggly, “That’s cold!”

It was wet, and dark, and cold, and loud, except it wasn’t really any of those things. It wasn’t anything but him. Everything that was had been washed away. Nothing reached my ears except the pounding of rain on asphalt and thundering in the sky, and maybe God was angry and maybe that’s why we’d never have worked — because we kissed when the heavens wept.

“Being soaked alone is cold. Being soaked with your best friend is an adventure.” — Emily Wing Smith, Back When You Were Easier to Love

One summer later, I couldn’t contain my laughter as their screams were lost in the rain.

“That one was close!” Haylie exclaimed as the boom faded away.

“Definitely the closest I’ve ever seen,” I had to agree. It was so close I was actually a little nervous, but I couldn’t feel electricity in the air. “I’m going to venture out, go exploring. Anybody want to come?” I asked, pointedly looking at him.

“It’s too cold, I’ll stay here,” he said, and my gaze shifted from him to everyone else.

“Let me get my shoes off,” my friend Ian offered, “I don’t want wet socks.”

I watched Ian pull his shoes untied for a moment, then stepped out of the cave.

“I think it’s letting up,” I foolishly declared and the heavens poured an instant mockery. Everyone shuffled and shifted over to allow Ian to avoid our ankle-deep accumulation at the cave’s mouth. Standing in the rain seeing the new rivers surround us, I couldn’t even mourn the absent Arizona sun.

“You guys have to see this,” I called back, already climbing a nearby rock. The flowing water stretched before me for what had to be at least a mile. After taking it in, I ran to a puddle.

"Ian, how deep do you think this is?" His reply may have been lost in the pounding, or maybe it was never spoken but I didn't wait before inching in. "Holy – it's soft!" There was sand beneath my toes, soft, red, soaking sand. We climbed around exploring new puddles, running back to the cave when our shirts got too cold.

Our friends watched as Ian and I empirically crept deeper and deeper until we stood in the lowest spot. We discovered our accumulated water was now about knee deep – deep enough, in our books to be a lake, I'd rolled my pants up in vain; the thick cuffs I'd hastily made were quickly heavy and soaked. What a time to be present with hearts still beating.

The landscape was otherworldly enough; adding the rarity of Arizona rain was captivating. We felt like pioneers with every puddle we saw. The drenched reds were so much deeper. The rain was cleansing the earth, and my bare feet were the first to touch it. How many people had experienced this?

Ow! I was climbing too fast and watched blood rise past the skin of my toes.

"You okay?" asked Ian.

"Just a scrape."

"You're bleeding."

"It'll blend into the rock," and I ventured into the next puddle. Maybe those deep reds were cleansing me too. I hoped I was right and part of me stayed to blend there with the rocks until the next storm washed me away.

"It didn't rain for you, maybe, but it always rains for me. The sky shatters and rains shards of glass." – *Tablo, Pieces of You*

One month later, when we ended things, the ground was dry. We sat in a car, no comfort of white noise on the roof, only the beating of our hearts that we wished in that moment would stop. Our faces glistened with tears that neither of us could wipe away, for now it was raining inside. When my lips met his for the last time, they were wet.

"A large raindrop, about one-quarter of an inch across or about the size of a house fly, has terminal fall speeds of about 10 meters per second or about 20 mph. That kind of speed can cause compaction and erosion of the soil by the force of impact." – *The WeatherGuys Editor, 'How fast do raindrops fall?' 2018*

It rained today. It rained in a desert. Why does it rain in this desert so often? It kind of jilts the whole idea of a desert. I didn't think of him until tonight. I didn't think of him when rain gently kissed my skin, or even when it pelted me with swollen heavy drops. I didn't think of him when the roads were so saturated I couldn't see lines, and in some cases, other vehicles.

I thought about walking through the rain with my teammates as they complained about various clothing choices, and discussed how "You think this is heavy? It's nothing compared to Panama." It rained and I was happy and my skin found those bumps, and though chilled, I was happy. On that drive home

when I couldn't see lines, the beats of my music blended with the beating on my roof, and in my chest. Still beating. And I didn't think of him until tonight, when I was alone watching drops race from the windows in my home.

"Let's just sit quietly and listen to the secrets the rain wants to tell us." – John Mark Green, Taste the Wild Wonder: Poems

Savior Complex

Lauren Wynn

Once upon a time, there was a girl with a little yellow bucket. After every rainstorm, this girl would walk barefoot upon the sodden cement and collect – with loving child’s hands – the ruddy earthworms drowning in the gutters. She loved to speak to the wriggling, writhing worms as she walked the greening and gray neighborhoods, telling the creatures of the cabbage she had grown in her garden, and just how well she thought they would get on there.

Always, she would wait until her garden drained before planting the worms within the soil. She would place the bucket with care in her backyard, assuring its safety atop a high post. But one day, after collecting her worms and leaving them in wait, a great wind swept the bucket to the ground.

When the girl came for them, she found shards of yellow plastic, dirt spread thinly upon the cement, and worms – all of them dead.

She wept, and buried them in her garden.

She didn’t realize then, as mud crusted on her cheeks, that sometimes, no matter what she did, worms cannot be saved.

Content Warning: Contains description of sexual assault

Unfortunately, I seem to be incapable of stringing together a sentence that would properly convey the tumultuous storm of feelings inside of me. There is no specific way, no manual of how to tell you how it is. Perhaps I can try.

In the moment, it felt like nothing. But not the nothing that grants apathy. The nothing that weighs heavy in the pit of your stomach, and presses on your chest oppressively. The nothing that draws attention to the fact that there should be *something*. The morning after, it hurt. The physical was surprising, but not altogether concerning. The guilt burnt my chest like drowning. I had made a mistake.

Months following, there was pain. A vicious melancholy surrounded a poor young girl who had no equipment to deal with what had happened to her. I look back now and it's all a haze, memories flowing down a river I don't dare jump into.

With time comes maturity, comes understanding. Sometimes I wish it had been my fault. It would be easier, now, I realize, if it had been my fault. At least the self-hatred would be mine and not the property of someone else. But of course, it hadn't been my fault. I was fourteen. What fourteen-year-old knows better? If only that was the end of it.

I feel like I'm on a mission. I'm searching for something I haven't defined. I don't know what I want, but I know I'm not being given it. When does this feeling morph into something akin to understanding?

I know you feel out of your depth. What could you say to me? "Sorry it feels like a part of your soul was ripped from your body, eventually that emptiness will go away"?

And it is on a soul-based level, isn't it? That's the only way to communicate to you just how deep within me this runs. I wish I could replace my bones. Maybe they would hurt less.

1 in 6 women are victims of an attempted or completed rape in the US (RAINN). That fact, as indisputable as it is, must be taken with a grain of salt because not every case is reported. The number, 1 in 6, could, and is most likely, much higher. Not every woman knows she's been raped.

There's something that goes unsaid about rape victims. The feeling of specifically being a rape victim is so incredibly unique. The violation is ferociously intimate. The aftershocks continue throughout many years, never really truly stopping. It's the kind of feeling you can only imagine, but never truly grasp until it happens to you. Doesn't it make you sick to think about? That solidarity only rings true around other victims. Luckily, the likelihood of running into another victim is very high. 1 in 6, a truly unbelievable number. Imagine 30 of the women you know. Five of them are sustaining a violent form of self-hatred. Five of them are experiencing an excruciating heartbreak and treading endlessly in

their deep guilt and shame. Five of them have to endure the looks of their family members, the look that tells them 'you're a victim and I know it.'

Rape is the perfect word for what it means. It sounds just as vile as it's supposed to. The word sits in the back of your throat and hangs on your uvula, sinking its claws deep into the small sack of flesh until you vomit it out. I always found it to be too violent for what happened to me. It spoke of forced, heavy maneuvers and crime. That wasn't what happened to me.

I was assaulted early Sunday morning, March 25, 2018. I was fourteen, smack in the middle of puberty and a bright life ahead of me. Life up until that point had been relatively simple. Like any other fourteen-year-old, I adored any attention I could get from anyone, including boys. Especially older boys. In this messed up world, a rite of passage for a young girl entering the eighth and ninth grade often comes in the form of a high school boy four years her senior. The interest of a senior in a freshman (or younger) brings validation and popularity. No one, especially the young fourteen-year-old girl, would ever think that it was somehow wrong.

We were staying at a friend's house. My parents were going to be out of town for the week, and my sister and brother and I needed rides to the bus stop so we could go on a church-organized trip. The friend's house consisted of a mother, who spoke to me like an adult and listened to what I had to say; a father who was polite and proper in every way; and a son, who was as charming and attractive as could be. The son was a senior, like my sister, and was fairly good friends with all of us, though I had never really connected with him. The age difference, you see. The night was spent playing games and laughing. I was surrounded by a secret layer of anxious excitement because for the first time in my life, someone was playing footsie with me under the table. For the first time in my life, an older boy was showing interest. My rite of passage had come. Never mind the fact that the flirting and soft touches were just subtle enough not to draw the attention of my older sister, who would have disapproved greatly, and rightfully so. Never mind that he was eighteen, four years older and functioning with four years more experience than me. Never mind that I was too young to know anything and perfectly young enough to be taken advantage of. All of that was inconsequential when compared to the fact that he had chosen *me*.

Throughout the night, soft manipulation was pumped into my veins, making me just pliable enough to completely let my guard down. The suggestion for all of us to sleep together on the large square couch seemed like regular laziness instead of planned coincidence. Of course, I was sleeping next to him. That had been my choice because he had made it clear that he liked me so this was my way of showing interest. The hours of fun had lasted long, so by the time it was three in the morning, mostly everyone was asleep. I waited patiently for it to begin.

It started with soft touches on my back. Nerves built high as I scooped my body towards him. He gently pushed me onto my back, careful not to make too much noise because my sister was fast asleep next to me. His hands went under my shirt and the numbness started to appear. I couldn't feel my legs as his hands slipped further down into territory I hadn't even begun to prepare for. I stopped, placed my hand on his wrist that was well on its way into my underwear, and

paused. He halted, for a second, and then just kept moving. So, I took my hand away, and then went completely numb.

Your body can have funny ways of coping with stressful situations. Commonly known is the ‘fight or flight’ response, where your body moves into defensive or offensive positions, but less well known is the ‘freeze’ response. This is when all thoughts and anxieties and activity whatsoever stop. It is a beautiful moment of pure nothingness.

Everything was so quiet. I had never experienced such silence as that. All that mattered was the outward appearance. My body took care of me completely. I was safely locked away within the folds of my brain, watching as this girl I did not recognize arched her back in the right moments, touched him where he wanted to be touched, and dug her nails into his soft skin as a sign of ‘please more,’ but was actually ‘please stop.’ The only thing to briefly draw me from my hours of nothingness, was the soft kiss placed on my lips, completely shocking and disgusting all at once. The kiss, too wet on my severely chapped lips, and too quick for me to respond. Despite it being so short, it didn’t matter. My first kiss was gone. I mourned, and continue to mourn the loss of what would have been a special moment.

Once it was over, it was over. We never spoke again and I never told anyone what happened. The only people that would know of the full truth of what occurred that night were me and him. I think you can understand now why there was such a disconnect between the word ‘rape’ and what was done to me. It wasn’t violent and it was kind of nice, and so what if I hated all of the parts that were supposed to feel good? He chose *me*.

To this day, I still have no idea what it felt like to have someone else’s fingers inside of me. The numbness spread through my body and for those few hours I was submerged in the cold waters of shock. I thank my body and mind every day for protecting me in such a significant way.

With time comes maturity, comes understanding. It was an ordinary morning almost a full two years after that dreadful night that I finally realized what exactly had transpired. Then began the slow and painful healing process.

As you get older, the world and the things in it start to make more sense. Your brain is developing and you are being formed into an adult with adult feelings. When I turned eighteen, I understood completely that any eighteen-year-old engaging in any kind of romantic and sexual activity with a fourteen-year-old is icky and really gross in all instances. An eighteen-year-old knows better.

Through therapy and the support of my friends and family, I learned something. The man who raped me is completely insignificant. While his actions, yes, absolutely and permanently changed the trajectory of my life, he does not matter. Whatever I do, whoever I become, is not attributed to him.

Being a victim does not mean that you are weak. Being a victim does not mean that you are easily manipulated or stupid. Because however insecure or hateful you feel about yourself, you know that you will never be worse than your abuser and their actions. I am a victim of rape, but at least I’m not a rapist.

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To the Voices in My Head

Breanne White

You have no lips or tongue, yet still, you speak. Excited rumblings that demand my attention, catching me at the oddest of times. Folding laundry or driving down the interstate. You scream in my ear and pummel me with streams of scenes that I can see so clearly. With eggs on the stove, I inhale the scent of my burnt breakfast as I take notes on your inspiration. Though your voices are loud and sometimes shrill, echoing through my skull, nobody can hear them but me. I listen and ponder your choices, forming your thoughts and ideas into sentences and plots for the world to see.

You have no face or hair, but still, I see you. The blush in your cheeks when you're embarrassed and the glistening of tears in your eyes when you're hurt. The quirk of your lips when you're amused and the desperation in your frown as it slopes toward the ground. I see that scar over your eye that you wish you could erase. The way your hair stands on end when you've had a rough night's sleep. Your imperfections and strengths are filed neatly in the cabinets of my memory, your dislikes and preferences guiding me in my telling of your story.

You have no knees, yet somehow, you leap, forcing me into corners, driving me wild with twists and turns that even I couldn't see coming. I get lost in your world, painting the images that you demand of me, following the breadcrumbs you lay until we're all lost in a maze of plot twists and walls we didn't see coming. We strategize and plan for hours, preparing well-thought-out scenes, each one depending on the other. All for you to take matters into your own hands, hurtling over the walls we've created and leaving me on the other side searching for a way over.

I pore over our notes and yank at my hair, frustration boiling in my blood as I try to drive onward without a navigation system. No, Google Maps or GPS. Siri doesn't see your bounds, and she doesn't know how to guide us forward, caught at a dead end with the wrong map of the city. Even still, I eventually find our way through, taking sledgehammers to your walls and tearing them down with brute force, slowly crumbling the foundation with each swing until I finally break through and see your smiling face on the other side.

You have no flesh or heart, and still, you feel. Your emotions become mine as I join you in your adventure, each blow resonating as if it were my own. Your pain cuts me, and I bleed, the damage to your heart leaving holes in my own beating organ. Your wounds and bruises mark my conscience, driving my fingers onto the keys as I try to repair what I have broken. I cry with your loss and rejoice in your success, the tears decorating my keyboard as I look down on you with sorrow and pride. Though all of this requires time, and a frame to be laid before we can build beautiful walls and fill them with the decorations of your life.

Although you have no arms or hands, you still tug me back to my office, shoving me into my chair and placing my fingers so perfectly over the letters in preparation for what you have to come. You hold my head steady as I stare at the screen, the grin on your face growing as I bring your world to life, describing the colors and scents in what appears to be plain, black-and-white text. You hold my heart in your nonexistent fingers, pulling at the strings as I enter your world and step into your shoes.

You have no legs or feet connected; however, you pace around the recesses of my mind. Your steps leaving imprints in my brain that I can't clear until I finally give in to your demands. You chirp at me in my car and nag me as I try to sleep. You're screaming at me one moment, your cries so loud they mute the world around me. Then you're quiet the next, punishing me by refusing to talk in the time I so carefully set aside for with neon-colored pens of my planner.

I realize you have no eyes or ears, but your nonexistent limbs never seemed to stop you before. I know you're frustrated, and you're ready for more, but what you don't understand is the world that goes on without you. The expectations that stare me in the face, the living, breathing beings that depend on me. I need you to see the pile of dishes growing in my sink and the stack of assignments growing on my desk. I need you to hear the cries of my children fighting down the hall and the whines of my dog, who needs to be walked.

I feel your excitement, and I'm right there with you, the ticking of keys ringing like bells through my home as I strive to give you all that you want. I'm here for you, and I always will be, with one foot amongst your pages and the other firmly grounded in reality. I walk the tightrope high in the sky, giving you all the attention and life experiences you deserve. Though to step too far in one direction would mean that I fall, the pieces of your world shedding off of me, pages, letters, and words scattering as I tumble through fantasy lands and time, struggling to gather the pieces before they get the chance to fly away like birds fleeing the streets when a bus passes by.

The blood that pumps through your veins is nothing but a string of thoughts and assumptions. The tears you shed and the sweat that soaks your shirt are all just words and images I will into being. At the end of the day, you are a part of me, you share a special place in my mind, and you rely on my life to bring yours to life. My limbs are yours to control, my thoughts a canvas for you to paint your plans. But my heart, mind, and soul, you have to share. Your story is a team effort, requiring sacrifices by both of us to make them work. I see you and your struggles. I hear you and your complaints. But for once, I just wish that you could recognize mine.

Sincerely,
Your creator

A Relatively Mired Hue

J. Ethier

The deep gray sky shines ominous over the ravens' wings; their crimson eyes shine as the crane of their necks pulls them toward the mountain toward the lake on the other side. The mountain has staggered snow and the green bushes and yellow trees poke their heads out from under it waiting for the sun. The darkness looms over their black wings as they flap above me. The direction is ingrained in their tiny muscles, the memory of the foggy water, the bugs leaping on the surface, and the smell that draws them back to the lake. Flapping up and down, shouting at each other as they shout at me down below. Their voices reverberate around the parking lot. The flitting black looks luminescent over the relatively mired hue of sky. A large tree is frozen when the unkindness magnetizes to its limbs, like they do to the top of the lamppost. The light is out and all you can see is the plastic that forms around the light bulb. The chill in the air and the bleak sky reminds the trees to stay petrified. The chill is leaving; the cold, the dread, the angst, the throbbing deluge of petrified life that are the symptoms of winter leave too. They leave like a soldier with orders, the dripping stalled, waiting for the sun; deep in their slumber they wait for the sky to change and the hue to gladden.

Winter is awaiting spring's approach, like an ardent turtle rapidly running for the sea and avoiding the birds above, fighting for its life with its siblings. For now, winter is still here, for now the chill is all around. Frosted windows of the cars that I meander through fade away when the sun peeks through the clouds for a split second. The brightness penetrates the crystals and then vanishes just as swiftly as it came. The frost on the grass is like the condensation of soda on a clear glass as the ice expands and the bubbles fizzle, sending them up over the surface. That frost sends shivers up my spine and the twinge awakens my senses. The frost on the grass extends to the street where my feet trod. The cars glisten as the sun peeks through the relatively mired hue.

I hear the ground crunch and break with every step. The lacy ice is melting but clinging for life to the warmth emanating from the crust below it. I shiver like the middle of an earthquake. The dimensions transcend through my whole body and dispel the frigidity on the surface. Hot breath escapes my lips into a stream of steam and warmth, pervading the air in front of me. I see my destination before me; in my vision as the steam rising from the building beckons me toward it. My fingers are numb. My face is ice. My skin is frozen. All I want is to get warm: my arms are exposed to the chill, my hair stands on end as I rub my limbs to expel the chill from my body.

The jaundiced road lines are dull against the deep black of the street. The pebbles that live there dance and glide as cars drive beside them and the others catapult and soar out from under the wheels; they rush, run and dance along

without a care as they drink in the decadence of their friction. Their purpose is made evident as each car speeds and the process is perpetually repeated. The rubber of the black on black rubbing the spectrum of the minute uncut rocks is molded together in a tightly woven slab of black, held with the stickiness of the tar that is like caramel stuck in your teeth. As the sun moves out from behind the clouds the light breaks the somber sleep; sun is peeking through, the relatively mired hue.

Fiction

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Maggie Draper

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It is no secret that technology has come to dominate much of our lives. From online classes and Zoom meetings, to virtual shopping and great friends met on video games, it is nearly impossible to live a functioning life separate from this thing we call the internet. The quality of life has improved for millions as a result. However, the leaps and bounds in technology have presented a quandary riddled with complexity and fear.

An estimated 85 million jobs will be replaced by various technological functions by 2025.

Technology may be gaining a leg up on certain parts of humanity, but there is one thing that it struggles to produce effectively: art. When asked to create a piece of creative writing, Artificial Intelligence systems often come up with results that are goofy, stilted, and entirely inhuman. They can understand facts and reasoning, but they simply cannot understand the heart of art.

This heart is what we were searching for this year's fiction section. We received an abundance of stories that were well crafted, well loved, and well written, but when it came down to decisions, we chose stories that reminded us of how powerful the written word can be. We chose stories that spoke to the human condition as a whole.

We hope that while reading our selections, you can look at these stories and recognize the importance of each and every person on this planet, internet or no.

—Maggie Draper, Fiction Editor

EULOGY

Melissa Holmes

I get the call at two in the morning. “She’s not doing well. You need to get on a plane.” The next flight out is at noon, and then an hour drive from the airport. The car swerves through cornfields and rows of sunflowers that look taller than the sun itself. Though inside the car, I can still smell their earthy scents, feel the scratch of them on my arms while running bare through them as a child.

At the old house, chipped paint flutters in the breeze and rotted floorboards curl beneath my feet. I stop at the door, long fingers poised as if waiting for the door to open itself, to invite me in. *If it doesn’t open, should I just leave?*

Inside, Marv greets me. “Took you long enough.”

“I came from Galveston.”

Marv rolls his eyes then leads me through the foyer, down the hall as if I’d forgotten my way. Past rows of family portraits my memories flutter. I beat the wings until they are still.

“She’s in there.” Marv points to the parlor.

I hover in the doorway, seeing first thing the bay windows, open for the fresh afternoon breeze, though the room is still stale. Years of dust and loneliness accumulated to make the air unbreathable. I gasp and step inside; my eyes are pulled as if by force around the room. The piano sits abandoned in the corner—a black ghost buried in a white sheet covered in dust. A lifetime had passed since I last traveled along its keys. Those magical lands of my youth long forgotten in a sea of school and marriage and children of my own.

And next to it sits my mother. Silver hair catching glimpses of sunlight through the filmy window glass. She looks tired and withered, frail beneath a quilt of her own making. Her hands are tiny things, things that were once long and strong and pounded against my cheek, the way they pounded against those piano keys. There is hardly any hair left on her head, and if she had not been rocking in her chair, I would have thought her a corpse there under the filtered light. I want to go to her, because seeing her this way feels like a gift, but my feet stand frozen in the doorway. I want to laugh at her, tell her this is what she gets. My hand flinches, knowing it is overdue for its turn. She is the helpless one now.

The wind rustles the sheet on the piano, and she stirs. Her solid posture even in old age shivers in the breeze, though there is no chill in the air.

“Diane? Is that you?”

The sound of her voice sends me into trembles. The long years I have been away, I’d managed to forget that voice. But now it is like the tunes I used to play on the piano, still burned in my memory and humming through my mind.

“Diane?” Her voice quavers. She reaches out a trembling hand. “I called you. I called you over and over.” Her voice, like her body, is so fragile, so thin, the wind could break it. “I wanted to tell you that I stopped. I stopped drinking.

Marv told you, didn't he? All I wanted was you." Her hand lowers, even that simple gesture too much for the old woman.

"I never left," she whispers. "I thought maybe one day you would come back. I wanted to wait for you." Tears pool in the old woman's eyes. She looks about the room as if dreaming. "Are you really there?" Her whisper is softer now, so soft I only know what she is saying from the motion of her lips.

She lowers her head, chin resting on chest. "Do you remember how you used to play? The songs were worlds that would whisk us away. When your father was in his moods, it was the only thing that made my bruises heal. I used to dance to your fingers moving along those keys. Your songs took me to faraway lands. To magical places. To worlds where husbands loved their wives, and mothers loved their daughters."

I remember those nights. Light jokes and easy drinks turned into shouting and shattered glass. Thumps against the walls and dark circles beneath Mother's eyes. "Play for me," she would beg the next day, and I would play the only three songs I knew worth playing, starting with *Clair de Lune*. Mother would close her eyes, one hand holding tight to a glass of clear liquid and ice, and she would rock side to side, taken to some deep imagination I could never follow.

Tears fill my eyes. Mother wraps her arms over her body and rocks. She rocks as if I were playing. "Maybe you aren't there after all. Forgiveness belongs to those imaginary worlds."

I swallow, step into the room, quietly shuffling towards the piano. I remove the sheet and play, my fingers returning naturally to the melodies I used to know. Her face perks. The notes bring color to the room, and I see her sway, being carried away to distant lands and long-gone times. The sheet rustles, touches her cheek, and she smiles, her eyes now closed, and dances in her own way, dances in the light coming from the window. And I play for her, like I used to. And I wish I could dance with her. The sheet unfolds completely now, flapping wildly around the room. It comes to settle over her face, and I can hear her laughing beneath it. The notes thrumming beneath my fingers grow louder, as if pounding away the years of anger, the years of grudges. The white sheet sighs, then flutters to the ground. My notes sigh too, then settle in the wind, which carries them outside. My fingers hover over the keys, my eyes turn to the rocking chair, still rocking. Still rocking. Still dancing.

One More Shot

Karly Nyman

The eastern horizon was still muted, star-flecked indigo just beginning to hint at dove-gray and pale gold at the distant line where the sky and sea met. It was going to be another cool, clear day and the white shapes of gulls could already be seen wheeling and dipping beyond the end of the wharf. I couldn't hear their cries over the coffee grinder and the running water filling the sink behind me, but I knew how they harmonized with the endless susurrus of waves against salt-grayed wood and old stone.

I looked away from the window before I got too distracted by the oncoming sunrise and carefully organized my supply of metal steaming pitchers and paper cups, tucking my pen behind my ear. The opening rush of customers was over, and I had a lull where I could brew fresh coffee, refill the display of pastries, and make sure the little colorful packets of sugar and sweeteners were restocked in their individual clear glass jars. And, perhaps, just take a moment to *breathe*.

My eyes still felt swollen and sore, a headache taking residence in my temples that I knew no amount of caffeine would touch. I swallowed hard, feeling the tightness in my throat—the constant threat of a new wave of tears—and fighting to keep a new sob from escaping. I knew that, through careful application of first icepacks and then makeup this morning, that I didn't currently look like I'd spent hours crying last night. But if I got started again, that would change very quickly.

The bell above the door jangled softly as the Healer walked in. I looked up, glad for the distraction, tucking a handful of stirring sticks into their cubby as I made my way back behind the café bar.

I knew the Healer's name, of course. Everyone in this town seemed to know the Healer's name. Many times, when he'd come into the café, people would recognize him and greet him with handshakes and awed smiles as if they were encountering one of Christ's own disciples. The Healer always replied warmly, answering handshakes with both of his own hands, touching shoulders, speaking to them in his low, sonorous voice that had the power to immediately *soothe*. He'd also been a regular customer for years, one I saw several times a week. So yes, I knew his name. But to me, that careworn face had always just belonged to *the Healer*. I wasn't even certain he *was* a healer, as in a doctor or something, though I did know he worked in the medical field in some capacity. Going by his near-celebrity status around here as well as his usual manner of dress—understated but expensive, well-tailored suits—he was very successful at whatever he did.

"Good morning," I offered once the Healer reached the register. He gave me a small smile and murmured a greeting, calling me by name. He was tall, and he had to tilt his chin downward to make eye-contact with me. The smile grew ever

so slightly when I grabbed a twenty-ounce paper cup, his usual size, without asking.

As I started totaling his usual order—a large latte, unsweetened—the Healer indicated the pastry case, his expression thoughtful. “And one of. . . those, please.”

‘Those,’ when I followed where he pointed, were the most monstrously unhealthy items on offer: raspberry brownies with thick cream cheese frosting and a drizzle of extra chocolate all over the top. I was very surprised; the Healer, to my knowledge, had never ordered anything but his plain latte or the occasional tea, also plain. I pointed at the artfully arranged pile of brownies, glancing up at him again for confirmation that *this* was what he wanted.

Some of my confusion must have shown on my face because the Healer laughed a little and shook his head, his long sable-colored hair falling over his shoulders. “It’s not for me,” he admitted, smoothing both his hair and the lapel of his dark gray suit jacket. The laugh faded away as quickly as it had come, something faltering in his expression, and he added “It’s for Sylvie. It’s. . . um. It’s her birthday today.”

I winced and immediately felt guilty, despite knowing that nobody, him least of all, expected me to remember the exact date of his granddaughter Sylvie’s birthday. She was a sweet little girl, probably four years old now, and from what I could observe the Healer was doing an excellent job of raising her in her mother’s stead. Her birthday was probably one of the happiest and saddest days of the year for him because while on that day his only grandchild had been born, his only daughter had died in childbirth. The Healer’s daughter, Rose, had also been a regular customer of mine, and I had made her a hot chocolate just a few days before she’d gone into labor. Rose had been one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen—and Sylvie, with her freckled face and endless brown ringlets, looked just like her.

The Healer brushed a hand lightly across his face, his thick-lashed amber eyes mostly dry. I swallowed, the ache of oncoming tears returning in force, and scooped the biggest, most delicious-looking brownie into a paper bag without question.

“Oh. I see. Um. . . will you tell her ‘happy birthday’ for me?”

I passed him the bag and he nodded, and even managed a small, shaky smile when I snatched his paper cup back off the bar to add an extra espresso shot to his latte. It was something of an old ritual of ours—a few weeks after Sylvie’s birth, I’d spotted the Healer sitting on the edge of the dock just as I was leaving after a shift. It had been raining and his expensive-looking wool sweater was soaked through, plastered against his lean frame as he bowed his head from the downpour and just. . . sat there. His usual latte was next to him, a sad puddle of rainwater gathered in the dip of the plastic lid. His hands were empty, resting palms-up on his thighs as if in supplication.

It was, perhaps, one of the most heartbreaking things I had ever seen.

I don’t know what came over me at that moment, but I found myself going back into the café to leave my purse and phone in my usual locker, ordering two more drinks, then venturing out into the rain to join the Healer on the dock.

I sat down next to him, tilting my face up to consider the dismal weather, then offered him one of the two paper cups I was carrying. He hesitated a long moment, but just when it started to get awkward, he accepted it from me and held it cradled in both hands.

I kept my eyes on the roiling gray clouds overhead, watching a few persistent seagulls still diving low to investigate the pillars below our feet. "I put an extra shot in that one."

"You should go back inside," was his reply. I'd never heard the Healer's voice, usually as smooth and soothing as a slow violin solo, sound so hoarse.

"It's just a little rain, right?" I shrugged. "It didn't seem like you should be alone is all."

"You'll catch your death out here. You'll be soaked."

"Yeah, tends to happen when you sit out in the rain, huh?"

He snorted at that and finally, *finally* took a sip from his extra-shot latte. "Brat."

I hummed agreeably and swung my feet, sipping my tea and keeping my attention on the sky, on the way the seagulls' swift shadows patterned across the sullen, dark green water below. I'd acclimated to the unexpected cold shower at this point and even found it somewhat peaceful. We sat like that for a good while, and if my companion's face was wet from more than rainwater, I didn't say anything.

Eventually the Healer had heaved a great sigh, as if a weight was settling just a little more firmly in his chest, bowing him forward. Together, in unspoken agreement, we both stood up with drinks in hand. Then he finally looked at me and squinted before reaching over to ruffle my dripping-wet bangs, casting droplets in all directions. "You look like a shaggy pony now; I hope you know that." I beamed at him, pleased despite the uncomfortable way my t-shirt was sticking to my back. In that moment, I didn't care what I looked like. I was just happy that the Healer was not going to sit there on the edge of the dock, alone, drowning despite being several yards above the waves, for even one moment longer.

That memory, four years old now, was still bittersweet. But since that day it had become something of a ritual for me to add an extra espresso shot to the Healer's lattes on the days he seemed to be, in some way, still sitting alone in the rain overlooking an indifferent sea — the days he really seemed to be struggling.

I handed over today's extra-shot latte, and I could tell by the distance in the Healer's gaze that he was reliving that day just as I was. There had been a strange solidarity between us that day, despite the fact that we hardly knew each other. Knowing each other just hadn't much mattered; much like how two animals will curl up together in the dead of winter for no reason other than to share warmth, the Healer and I had sought one another out. I hadn't wanted a single blessed thing from him other than his continued survival.

The Healer managed another small smile, this one spreading like a bruise across his patrician features. "I'll probably bring Sylvie here on Saturday and let her pick out another treat. She wants to show you her new birthday dress."

"Is it pink?" I demanded to know.

His smile became so achingly fond, so *helpless*, that my throat closed over yet again. "Of course it's pink. What do you take me for?"

I just folded my arms and eyed him sternly. “*Good*. But yes, I better see it for myself just to make sure. I’ll be here bright and early Saturday morning.” I wasn’t actually scheduled for Saturday, but I’d bully someone else into trading me shifts. “Men struggle with colors sometimes. It’s *science*.”

The Healer took a prim sip of his latte and refused to dignify my observation with a response. Then, just as I was going to rinse out the pitcher I’d used to heat the milk for his drink, his amber eyes sharpened. He tilted his head and I thought, privately, that the gesture made him look like a curious hound. He gestured vaguely at my face with the hand that was holding the pastry bag.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I froze. The tightness came right back to my throat and I had to blink hard to contain the sudden, stinging flood of tears that raced to my eyes. *Damn*. I don’t know how he saw that something was wrong with me, not after all the work I’d done to hide the evidence. But then, perhaps, grief makes one adept at recognizing grief.

The Healer’s voice gently, so gently, called me by name. I had to answer. I looked up and managed a very weak shrug, not quite able to get my voice to work.

“Is it your dog?” He asked softly. “Is it Annie?”

I couldn’t quite contain my tiny, pained gasp at hearing her name out loud. She’d been my best friend for fourteen years, my confidante, my biggest fan, and now she was *gone*. Not even twenty-four hours ago I’d had to let her go, hold her in my arms while the breath—the *life*—left her tired, beloved body. I had cradled her close to my heart, whispering my love and gratitude and praise into her ear one last time, then she’d sighed just once and relaxed against me, and just like that my girl was beyond my reach.

Tears trembled on my eyelashes and I looked up at the Healer, rather helplessly, my mouth trembling as I whispered her name. *Annie*.

The Healer’s face fell. He immediately set his cup down on the countertop and reached over to touch my shoulder, just the lightest brush of his fingers. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I shook my head hard, two tears finally spilling over. How could he possibly be sorry for me, crying over a dog, on the anniversary of the day he’d lost Rose, his *daughter*, his only child? How shallow and selfish was I, asking even subconsciously for his sympathy for my loss after what he had lost?

He seemed to read my thoughts. His grip on my shoulder tightened for a moment, as if to get my attention. When I finally looked up and met his gaze, he nodded once, approvingly, and kept his hand right where it was. His hair—he kept it unusually long for a man, for a medical professional—falling forward. The gray at his temples and threaded all throughout the length of it gleamed bright like tinsel against the dark brown.

“You’re allowed to grieve too.”

His voice was very firm and brooked no argument. I didn’t have the fortitude to argue anyway. All I could do was tremble with the force of my fresh heartbreak and ask, my voice hardly above a whisper: “How do you deal with it? It hurts so much. How do you put it down?”

The Healer considered for a long moment. "In the moment," he finally told me. He gave my shoulder one more squeeze before releasing me. "And then in the next moment."

For some reason, that thought hurt worse than anything else had.

I blinked up at him; it was all I could manage to do. He plucked a napkin from the dispenser nearby and offered it to me before reclaiming his latte. His eyes remained compassionate, understanding, *sympathetic*, and for a moment we were both sitting dockside again, the rain soaking our clothes and the seagulls' eerie cries filling our ears. We were two simple animals, once more lost in a snowstorm, once more curling together to share enough warmth to survive.

"Alright?" he asked me.

I wasn't. I felt like a hole had been torn into my life and I knew I wouldn't be alright for a long, long time. Yet I nodded anyway, and it seemed like the Healer somehow understood. For the moment, it was good enough. The Healer left shortly after that, and as the door swung shut behind him, I could faintly hear the crash of waves against the dock's sturdy pillars, the distant laughter of a child, the warbling of a white gull as it dipped and whirled through the early dawn light.

I cleaned up my workstation and dried my tears, breathing as deeply as I could. I had no idea how to go home after my shift and look at the empty dog bed, the basket of abandoned toys, the vacant hook where Annie's leash usually hangs. I had *no idea*. But. . . now I had Saturday to look forward to, and a pink birthday dress to inspect, and another extra-shot latte to make. As I wiped down the bar, something clicked—maybe I did know the only way to handle grief, maybe I'd figured it out four years ago on that rainy day when a Healer had been sitting on the edge of a lonesome dock, in need of healing, and I'd done the only thing I knew how to do.

The only way to move forward in the face of what we've lost, how bad it hurts, how much our hearts must grieve: just give it one more shot.

Star Yard

Lauren Wynn

They were like big lamps, the new stars, rotund orbs attached to long black poles. They were set to GLITTER mode, giving them the illusion of twinkling stars. It was a noble effort, these fake stars. But what else could they have done?

When you kill all the stars, you have to make your own.

It's better this way, some said. Now the stars could be seen on cloudy nights and through the rain. These stars could shine through the pollution, giving all the lonely people of Earth something to wish upon as all that their ancestors had known vanished into oblivion. It wasn't the same, but these days, nothing was.

A crowd gathered beneath the town's new Star Yard: families with children sprawled out on blankets, couples holding hands, disparagers glaring at the false illumination. Most people couldn't remember what the old stars had looked like, but had seen photographs in magazines and illustrations in storybooks. They had heard grandparents whisper about the day the final star had winked out, and how *their* grandparents had told them that there had once been countless stars in the sky. *Can you imagine*, they would say, longing tinging their voice. *Can you imagine such a thing?*

Approximately an hour after the sun set, the Star Yard came to life. People filed in from all over town, dressed for the late October heat wave. Their chatter buzzed like the crickets the Ancients had once known, or perhaps it was the birds. Whichever one had come out on summer evenings. People *oohed* and *ahhed* as the sky was lit. It was better than they ever could have imagined. Probably, some said, even better than the real stars.

Some, who'd been to other Star Yards, explained that these stars, just like the old ones, fell into formations called constellations, stars arranged in patterns that the Ancients had given meaning. There were stories, too, that went with them, but no one could remember those anymore. Children asked what constellations lined this Star Yard. Glasses were handed out that, when put on, named, numbered and connected the stars, assembling them into a constellation. Some pretended to see and understand these constellations. Others complained that it made no sense at all – that it seemed the Ancients had been so starved for entertainment that they'd imagined these star formations.

As the hours passed, the crowd changed. Families went home. The lovers off to somewhere private. Only those both too old to be supervised and too young to hunger for sleep were left in the Star Yard. They leaned against the poles, some in clusters with heads pillowed on laps and stomachs. Others maintained only the starlight's company.

They stared up at the sky, the stars hazy as the night's fog enveloped them. They wondered, with a shared reverence, if this is what the old stars – *the real stars* – had looked like. The beauty shifted with this thought. The stars appeared dimmer. The people grew restless.

Someone began to sing. It was hours after midnight, and someone was singing about the stars in the sky. It was a song—a lullaby—that they'd all heard before. But now it made sense. The crowd calmed. And when the song ended, someone started up another.

They carried on this way for hours, singing songs about stars that shined bright. Stars that guided people home, as if their light was a GPS. Stars that were real and visible, not something fantastical and imagined.

Sometimes other celestial beings were mentioned in the songs, like the sun or the moon, as if they were something spectacular to behold. The Star Yard's occupants murmured that the Ancients must have seen the moon more often. That it must have been more lustrous than the muted rock it resembled now. Perhaps, some suggested, it had been beautiful without the sky's draining smog. Or maybe, others jeered, the Ancients hadn't known any better. Sure, the Ancients had known blue skies and starry nights, but their intelligence had been more than lacking.

The sky began to lighten on the horizon, a gray so warm it could have almost been pink. The stragglers grew restless once more, proclaiming the Star Yard pathetic. Delightful. Archaic. Wonderful. Primitive. Magical. Dull.

I dare you, someone whispered. I bet you couldn't knock one of those stars out of the sky.

Someone threw a rock. It hit a tall pole with a ringing ping. The stars were farther than they appeared.

No, cried another. Don't do it. Why would you destroy something beautiful?

Have you ever heard the phrase 'reach for the stars'? someone cackled. Laughter joined them. Another stone flew through the air. Then another. And another.

Some screamed, others laughed. One person began to cry. But the stones continued to fly higher and higher, tapping the stars, hitting them, splintering—

The sound of glass shattering pierced the night, rising above the pinging stones and silencing the laughter. A crowd gathered around the remains of the star. Someone muttered that it looked no different than a broken vase.

What should we do? a frantic voice asked.

Leave it, replied another. *It will turn to dust soon enough.*

They left the star where it was, cracked—crumbled—crushed on the faux grass, mingling with the dirt pellets.

The next night, an hour after sunset, there was one less star in the sky.

Monsters Don't Die

A.M. Shiner

Marlee Maria Mongrasas was a kind woman, the type of woman who sewed quilts for the homeless and counseled troubled youth groups, so when her husband's body was found rotting in Death Valley — his fingertips hacked off, gums raw and pried free of teeth, no one gave Marlee a single dark thought.

The medical examiner would later say there were signs of "massive blunt force trauma to the upper chest cavity" with "severe contusions to both eye orbitals, nasal cavity, and temporal bone." In other words, dear Mr. Mongrasas was pretty damn fucked up.

And sweet Marlee, almost nine hundred miles away in the cottage bungalow she and her husband had painted sun-yellow, had just received the news of her husband. "Apologies, ma'am," the voice in her old rotary phone was saying, "I can't imagine how —" but Marlee interrupted.

"I understand," her voice soft. "You shouldn't have to imagine this kind of tragedy, hon." She stared at the stove where kidney bean chili was bubbling. She still held the spicy red stirring spoon in one hand, the sauce dripping in fat splotches on the cool tile beneath her bare feet. Dimly, she wondered if the white marble tile would stain red, but she had plenty of bleach left over.

After all, she had been careful to stock up.

The officer again expressed sympathy in the few, stiff words language allowed, before explaining he would call back with more information. She thanked him, hung up.

Of course, Marlee was no suspect. The injuries on Mr. Mongrasas were too violent to be the result of a single woman — a loving wife no less. Police reports reasoned that while it would have taken a speeding semi to inflict such impact on the chest and skull, the injuries were too focused. Furthermore, the missing teeth and fingertips were blood-soaked, meaning they were removed when Mr. Mongrasas was alive, his heart pumping blood from gaping wounds. The site where the body was found was carefully searched. There had been no car tracks or footprints thanks to a rare recent storm, and no roads within twenty miles. The only reason Mr. Mongrasas had been found at all was a fluke.

A hiker had found an arm. Yes, you read that right, he found a severed arm. Traversing one of the trails that weaved through the great red nothing, the hiker strayed from the path to take a piss. That's when he saw it.

The limb had been ripped off by coyotes and dragged behind a rock where it was left. Gnawed clean of flesh, brown, sunbaked bone waved the hiker down, almost as if to say, "a little help, pal?" Though I'm certain the hiker had found no humor in such a find.

And in the end, it was hungry coyotes and a man's full bladder that brought the corpse to the authorities' attention.

The search around the body itself only brought one piece of new evidence in. A zip lock bag – the kind that has little cartoon pandas dyed over the plastic – inside contained Mr. Mongrasas’s middle finger, flecked with dried blood and shriveled from the sun.

Women came over. They wielded meatloaf, frosted mint brownies, and warm embraces. They smiled, sadly of course, at Marlee and like a flock of birds cooed soft words of encouragement. Marlee offered them a brave smile and many ‘thank you’s and ‘you’re too sweet’s. But when the phone buzzed, she was fast at shooing them away and quick to listen to the officer’s gentle voice on the other side.

She needed to know more. Needed to understand how he was found. But most of all, Marlee needed to know if she’d made a mistake. She did.

I’d made sure of it.

When later asked how she did it, Marlee didn’t smile – not the way one might expect Hannibal Lecter or some other psychopath to, and she didn’t laugh and hold her chin low in the light. She merely nodded like it was a reasonable question. A single word slipped from her lipstick glossed lips. “Trust.”

Tucked between full oak trees, Marlee didn’t have a basement in her picturesque cottage. No one would have suspected that past the potted petunias lining her porch and the hand towels that remind you to ‘count your blessings,’ Marlee concealed secrets, secrets buried so deep, even she sometimes forgot their sinister nature.

Marlee didn’t have a basement, but the walls of her 1920s home were uncommonly thick, built by a contractor who swore by the insulating quality of the space between the inner and outer wall. Thanks to that contractor, I watched Marlee, watched her through old bronze vents and through a lens of mounting resentment. A resentment that built a thick film around my hardening heart. I watched as she stirred her chili; as she hummed after learning the news of her husband. I knew her secret ingredient for a full, succulent dish was always a dash of fresh lime, and that she loved nutmeg but hated cinnamon. I’d memorized the way she’d trace her pink linoleum countertops as she strolled through her kitchen, memorized the hymns she sang when she was alone. But she was never alone. I was always there, watching, waiting.

All I needed was one chance and everything would change.

Marlee was a retired nurse; she specialized in assisting surgeries. Complex, long surgeries that beeped long into the night and typically ended with a coil of disease-rotted organs in a metal tray and a biohazard trash can stuffed with emptied blood bags. She had a strong heart, a patient mind, and all her patients loved her reassuring smile. When I think back on how she used to spend long evenings hunched over catheters, pressing needles into veins, how she measured out doses of life-saving medicine that, if misused, could be life-taking – I shiver. I shiver because I know how it feels to be a patient, a hostage to pain and treatment.

I know all too well how it feels to be locked under her care.

The official cause of Mr. Mongrasas’s death was left blank. I mean, they knew *how* he died – massive blunt force trauma, but as for *what* killed him, that was inconclusive. The case dragged on. There were no suspects. No prints, no bodily fluids, no cigarette butts or witnesses. Not even the moon had watched the night

he had been killed, for they were able to pinpoint the time of death to be around 4:00 AM, March sixth—two weeks after his fifty-third birthday. His hair still had a film of grease and his neck a dab of alcohol, however, the PH test confirmed it as cologne. But most of all, it was his grass-green pinstripe suit that confirmed that Mr. Mongrasas had been going somewhere, perhaps to meet a mistress or attend a special event, neither of which Mrs. Mongrasas had any knowledge of.

It was all bullshit. Marlee and I knew all too well how he had died, because, while her sweet little cottage didn't have a basement, she *did* have a little garage outback, a garage with tools. Namely, a set of rusted pliers and a hulking metal press. You should have seen it, the way the automated hammer pounded, the spray. The cleanup was monstrous, but, like I said, Marlee was a patient woman.

She needed trophies. Whether it be from her prized blueberry pies at the county fair or fingertips from the man she'd loved for only a dull moment. I knew she'd hoped that by removing the teeth and the man's soft fingers that the police would pronounce him a John Doe, wouldn't track him back to her. But they found her anyway.

All it took was a card proclaiming his rewards membership at Best Buy. I'd shoved it into his pocket before she'd shoved what remained of him into her Honda. It had his name. And his name was all they needed.

Marlee had planned everything. She knew a rare storm would weep in Death Valley and wash away her tracks. She knew that her sister would vouch for her whereabouts on March sixth—that dark, moonless night, when she drove for nearly twenty-four hours straight. She didn't even stop for gas, she was smart, and had pre-packed full gas cans the way a loving wife might pre-pack crab salad for a picnic. But Marlee didn't know the meaning of love, not anymore. It had been beaten out of her. And I had been eager to help her, to rid the world of a man as two-faced as her.

She promised that with him gone things would change, that we could be happy, free. I trusted her. Trusted her reassuring smile, trusted her steady hand, even after it had pressed a cleaver over my throat, even after it sawed away limbs, my limbs.

And I loved her. After all, Marlee Mongrasas was my mother. I was her 'little bird.' And I had a broken wing my mother insisted only *she* could mend.

I lived in the walls. My legs were long gone, my thumbs amputated, leaving only white scar tissue. My name is Marie after my *sweet* mother, and according to hospital records, I died eleven years ago. Apparently, I was ripped away by an undertow at Hermosa Beach on a family vacation. My body never recovered.

A tragedy.

That was when I was six. When I was eleven and threatened to go outside, threatened to go see my Grandmama, I ran for the door—almost got there too. *Almost.*

I woke up in the garage. Legs, thumbs, tongue, all gone. I tried to scream, but nothing but air rushed from my throat. A burning ripped apart my neck. I peered down at myself. Bandages collared my throat. My mother had stolen even my voice.

She fertilized the yard with my rotting meat.

Mr. Mongrasas had helped her do it; for that, I helped mother kill Mr. Mongrasas. But she only put me back in the walls. When her friends came to the door, I beat my fists into the walls and scratched my fingertips into bloody nubs. But my mother only pleaded rats. She never invited anyone in.

I don't want to tell you more. I have no voice, but I still don't want to speak. Don't want to talk of punishments or rules. I will never show you my scars, no matter how visible they may seem.

"All you need to know," I scratch out on the yellow-lined paper they gave me. The bright lights of the interrogation room stinging my eyes. *"Is that I killed her. I ripped free of the walls. And in the night, I dug a knife into her chest."* I don't tell them how many times I stabbed her, or that the moon was full and pooled over her pink, nightgowned chest like a target. I don't tell them that I licked the blood from my fingertips or that I hid my father's teeth behind the toilet. My trophy now.

That's when they tell me my mother is still alive, that I didn't kill her at all. I don't believe them. I scream soundlessly and beat my fists bloody.

Only then does clarity rise like the tide in my mind, drowning me. Of course. Of course, she is alive; after all, monsters never die. They only reshape. Twist and snap. Reform as something else, something dark and brooding. They conceal the sharp cruelty bleeding through their fucked-up brains and shove happy grins onto weeping lips.

Monsters don't die.

That's when a smile crawls, slow and cautious—like a spider on the tile floor—across my lips, twitching and full. I laugh, a guttural blast of air from lungs.

Bones like blades ripping through skin, I wrap my arms around myself. I laugh, mutilated and pale, until I gasp for air. And when I wipe a happy tear from my eye, I stare at my hands, four fingers, no thumbs. Dried blood black under snapped nails.

Another giggle jumps from me. How could I not laugh? After all, it was too perfect. If monsters didn't die then neither would I.

Dreams of Glory

Ewen Heaton

Such craftsmanship; surely a raiment this fine must be one of a kind. I must be incredibly lucky to come upon garb of this quality hidden in plain sight, amongst the discarded dregs of the commonfolk. Yes, this would be armor to defend against the fiercest of foes and the most brutal of conditions. Surely this marks the beginning of a new era for me, one of comfort and triumph. The journey home will be far more comfortable than the arduous trek here. . . if home still exists when I return. Many a scoundrel has pillaged my stores and destroyed my dwellings in times of my absence. Someday, when I have mustered the coin, and regained my honor, perhaps I will leave this unforgiving land, but for now it remains a fantasy. 'Tis slow going to build a name for oneself when all who know it see only the devil I once was.

As I make my way back to my shanty beneath the overpass on Main Street, I see it hasn't been disturbed tonight. I am a lucky man, I tell myself, as I curl up on the once cold cement in my warm new coat, drifting asleep to dreams of glory.

The Burger Den

Colle Christensen

"Welcome to The Burger Den, would you like to try our world-famous Tornado Shake? Order when you're ready."

"Hi, umm. . . Sorry, I haven't looked at the menu yet."

"It's ok, just order when you're ready."

"So, umm, I'm looking at the fried pickle burger, does that come with onion rings?"

"It does not, adding onion rings costs 75 cents extra."

"Oh gosh, ok, just a minute then."

"Ok. Order when you're ready."

"I see you have a chicken soft taco on the menu. Is your chicken locally sourced? Do you know where the chicken farm is? I love chicken, but I don't want to support factory farming."

"We are a burger chain, so all of our chicken is likely factory farmed somewhere."

"Oh. . . Well. . . hmmm. . . I don't like that."

". . ."

". . ."

"Order when you're ready."

"You mentioned something about a Tornado Shake earlier? I've never heard of that; you say it's world famous though. Do you know which part of the world?"

"I don't really know, sir. I didn't write the opening script, I just read it."

"I see."

"Do you have any questions about the Tornado Shake? We have 15 varieties and options available."

"No, I don't really like shakes."

". . ."

"The cookies on the menu, are they gluten free?"

"You mean the GF Cookies? Yes, they are gluten free. That is what the 'GF' stands for."

"Oh, I thought that stood for girlfriend."

"Yes, 'GF' can also stand for girlfriend. Do you want cookies for your girlfriend?"

"I don't have a girlfriend."

". . ."

". . ."

"Order when you're ready."

"Do your tater tots come with a dipping sauce?"

"Yes, we have ketchup, barbeque sauce, fry sauce or ma-"

"Never mind, I don't like tater tots."

"Ok. . . Just order when you're ready."

"If I get a small pizza would that qualify for rewards points? Even if it's just plain cheese?"

"What? Where do you see pizza on the menu? Or rewards points?"

"I'm looking at your menu on my phone."

"We don't serve pizza here, but every combo order qualifies for a punch card."

"That doesn't sound right. Aren't you Burger Don's?"

"No, we're The Burger Den."

"Oh. . ."

" . . ."

" . . ."

"Did you still want something?"

"Yeah, I need to look at the menu again."

"Ok. . . . Order when you're ready."

" . . ."

" . . ."

"Can I just have a salad?"

"Certainly, we have a variety of salads. Which would you like?"

"Let me just look for a minute."

". . . . Order when you're ready."

" . . ."

" . . ."

"On second thought I'm going to Burger Don's."

Casadastraphobia: *

Sarah Taylor

Everywhere the young girl walked, her eyes turned to the ground. *How can everyone live so carelessly?* she'd think, seeing others jumping and dancing when we all live moments from tragedy. Her mother wasn't around anymore, or her grandparents, or little brother, but this time it was her cat.

"Don't worry, darling," her father would say, "they're still up there." But she did worry. With every loss, her feet shuffled heavier to the ground. Shuffling was a safety measure, yet her toe caught a lip and her elbows and knees collided with cement. She helplessly hung with the expanse of sky below her, no room to get her legs properly positioned, no comfort but the sting of her scrapes. She squeezed her eyes shut and shifted to grasp the cracks on the ground above.

"Are you okay?" asked a kind stranger, pulling his rope tighter and bending to examine the situation. "Y'know if you loosened this up it might be a little easier to stay on your feet." He gestured to the tangle of rope and metal from the ground to her waist.

"That's okay," she mumbled, while quietly fighting to adjust them in any way at all.

"You're pulling yourself so tight, there's no room for your legs. Let me—"

"No!" she sharply cut him off. "Just hold my foot here and then I'll be on my way."

". . . to the ground?"

"That's right," she said coldly. He stabilized her ankle and she shoved off the ground with her hands to find her footing.

With his brows drawn together he looked her over, muttered an "okay then" and floated away, lightly pushing off the ground every ten feet or so. She watched his rope extend and retract, grimacing at the irresponsibility of each leap. Why would anyone take their feet off the ground and test the limits at all? How could he trust that little rope, when all it takes is too much speed and a hard snag on a corner to end in disaster?

She took her rope in her callused hands, pulling tighter, tighter until she sat on the ground, again staring toward her feet. She thought of her brother, so little at the time, breaking his little rope. His body that was only half the size of hers slipped upwards and away so easily. She wondered if maybe it wasn't so scary up there. They were gone, but were they really *gone*? She pondered and cried and mourned for what seemed to be longer than her brother had taken to leave. Once her tears dried she methodically loosened her rope and got to her feet.

Slowly, hesitantly, she lifted her eyes until her head couldn't fall back further and searched for them there in the vast emptiness until her weight began to shift and give way. On the cusp of falling, she snapped her eyes back to reality.

The world flipped. Her feet were beneath her, the sky silently overhead, the pads of her hands were smooth, and her rope nowhere to be seen.

"They're just right up there," her father was saying, "and someday we'll be there with them too."

*fear of falling into the sky

Mushman

Dan Kranek

Michael hummed the tune of "Here Comes the Sun" as he threaded his way through a tangled wilderness of dying trees and wilting bushes, whose black spotted leaves hung down like limp hands slipped from beneath a corner's shroud. Murky green light bled from the lantern creating a small globe of spectral light around him. He was a thin old man, hooded and cloaked, trapped within a ghastly viridescent bubble, floating through this Tartarean landscape like some forlorn ghost.

"Sun, Sun, Sun, here it comes," he sang as the weakly pulsing crimson sun hauled itself over the eastern hills. The green light from his bio-lantern revealed a cluster of drab mushrooms sprouting from a stump. A little pinpoint of life in this dying, dimming, world. He ran his fingers across the frilly edges of the fungi's fruiting bodies, peering at the white gills beneath. He couldn't believe his luck.

"Strix! It looks like fine dining this morning!" he called into the surrounding darkness.

"It's not mushrooms again, is it? What am I saying, of course it is, that's all you ever eat. If you're lucky, I'll get us a plump possum one of these days," she replied, stepping from the shadows and into the ring of weak lime-light; she shielded her squinting jade eyes with an upraised forearm.

"Oh, I think you're going to like this one, it's called Hen-of-the woods."

"Let me guess, it tastes like chicken."

"Well, yes, but this one has a little spice and earthiness to it too!"

Strix dismissed the distinction with a wave of her hand.

"How's our little light-loving buddy?"

Michael paused his harvesting and reached out to open the lantern door, revealing several flat discs of glowing, neon-green fungi overlapping one another like a heaping stack of midwestern flapjacks gone radioactive. Beside the fungus, a plant the size of his thumb, sporting with two tender leaves basked in the fungi's light.

"You worry over that green sprig like it's a sick child. How long did you say it took you to grow it? Sixty years?" she asked.

"It was twenty years or so. But time is a tricky thing when you're all alone, living a mile below the surface in a secret government bunker with only mushrooms and test tubes for company."

"I can imagine," Strix replied, stifling a yawn.

"No, I don't think you can."

When he turned back from his harvest, he found Strix sleeping in a pile of grey grass. She was clutching her spear as tenderly as any teddy bear, and he thought that she looked like some fey child slumbering in a haunted wood. He studied her briefly, this strange child of the night. Under the carved owl mask her eyes were closed, and the thin skin of her eyelids obscured the marvelous eyes shifting beneath: two vast pools of midnight bordered with a thin rind of jade.

"I'll have breakfast ready for you when you get up."

"Come and get it while it's hot!"

Strix sat up stiffly from her straw bed, bending only at the waist so that she arose like a cliché vampire from her sylvan coffin. She blinked owlishly and rubbed the sleep from her cartoonishly large eyes before sidling over to his cooking fire. She grabbed a tin plate from his rucksack and piled it high with steaming brown patties.

"You promise these aren't going to give me strange visions?" she asked.

"Visions of culinary bliss maybe. . . Ok, you don't look very convinced; I received my doctorate in studying funguses; those mushrooms are safe to eat."

"You're a mushroom doctor?"

"Maybe not in the way you're thinking, but yes, that's what I've dedicated my life to."

"Good thing you didn't choose to study plants. You'd be out of work."

"It certainly looks that way now, but who knows, if we pull this off, I might become a bit of a gardener."

Strix tipped up her mask slightly, careful to not show her face above her sharpened teeth and took a dainty bite from the mushroom steak. She chewed the morsel over for a minute as pointedly as any connoisseur before snapping up the rest.

"How much further before we meet this Midnight Queen of yours?"

Strix shrugged and held out her plate for another serving of breakfast. For complaining a lot about his cooking, she sure ate plenty of it.

"I feel like you're not being completely honest with me. For being my guide, you sure don't talk about our travel plans much."

Strix finished her second plate and scrubbed it with some dry grass before dumping it back into his rucksack.

"That's because you're a big-bearded baby who doesn't know anything other than mushroom facts. I lead, and you do what you do best: trip over every root that I don't explicitly point out for you. We have a system. Let's not break it now. Let's move. If we sit too long, we're going to have toadstools sprouting between our toes."

Michael couldn't tell whether she was joking about the foot fungus or not, but just in case, he applied just an ounce more vigor to his camp chores. In this new nocturnal world, anything was possible.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy, when skies are gray," Michael sang to himself, as the sun, weak as a dying ember, began to dip below the western mountains. He couldn't help thinking that the sun was only a shadow of itself these days, more like the light of a flashlight shone through one's hand rather than the glaring flashlight beam itself. It cast just enough red light for him to discern one ominous shadow from another. He could see the outlines of a city before them: great blocky monoliths of darkness, sprinkled with a few the remains of broken windows that glittered like rubies for a moment in the fading red light. "Please, don't take my sunshine away."

"Strix, what city is this?"

She came sliding out of the darkness before him, a mixture of waif and wraith. She leaned on her spear Nightbane, a four-foot ash pole with a combat knife strapped to one end; below the spear head were two flashlights, which had always struck him as odd, considering that she could see as well by starlight as he could with his bio-lantern.

"I'm not sure. My people call it 'The Warren'."

"Can we go around it? The place looks like a crypt."

"We could skirt the city by sticking to the hills, but then we'd likely end up in the belly of an Inkspore. It's up to you I suppose."

"Lead on, darkling child. Let's go poke our heads into The Warren, hopefully nothing bites them off."

Michael held his lantern over a crumbling sign reading "Welcome to Dovehearth," or at least that's what it had read before someone pried off a few key letters, so that it now read "We_come_oD_e_a_th."

"Where are you taking me, Strix?"

"Shhh, I lead, you listen. Tie your beard and mustache together if you can't keep your mouth shut. We need to move quietly. That means no singing, hacking, coughing, or droll commentary. Do you understand?" she whispered from behind the sign.

"Sorry, I wasn't sure if I was allowed to answer. Yes, I'll be quiet."

"Good. The city isn't as still as it seems. Follow main street till you appear on the other side of the city. If you go down any side streets, you're going to get lost; it's a maze in there. I'll scout ahead of us to make sure the path is clear of any . . . obstacles."

"You're going to leave me all alone?"

Strix poked her head around the sign, her large eyes flashing green in the lantern light. She looked like some grim spirit guide ordained to lead him through this blackened hellscape.

"In this city, you'd better hope you're alone. If you need me, screech like a night-jay."

And with that, she turned and slipped into the passages of the The Warren, leaving Michael to wonder what exactly a night-jay was and what it sounded like.

Michael threaded himself through the heaps of rusty cars strewn across Main Street. From a nearby sewer drain, enormous red tentacles, tipped with black spikes, spilled onto the street. Some mutated strain of Clathrus Archeri, known to most as "the devil's fingers." He marveled at the humongous fungus as he hopscotched his way over the fungal arms. He'd love to grab a sample of it, but the first and foremost rule of this new world was Don't Touch Anything Strange, Ever. He had learned that even before he had met Strix. From somewhere in the labyrinth of collapsed and ruined buildings, he heard a sob.

"Strix!"

The name echoed and The Warren chanted back her name "Strix, Strix, Strixxx." He listened for a reply, but there was nothing, even the sobbing had stopped.

Despite Strix's warning, he stepped off Main Street and into The Warren. He made a few twists and turns before he heard something clatter inside an old barbershop. The tattered banner above the barricaded doorway proclaimed that they had "The fastest snips in town!" The door was nailed shut, but the front window had been broken. Michael looked uneasily at the dark maw, with its shattered glass teeth shimmering green in the bio-lantern light. He grabbed ahold of the barber pole and leaned through the window. Beyond the collapsed chairs, a girl was crouched over something in the dark. He tried to get her attention with what he thought was a night-jay's call, "Eeeek." The girl swung towards him, and he saw immediately that she wasn't Strix. The mutant girl stared at right at him, which was rather disconcerting since she had wine-colored mushrooms, spotted with white dots, growing where her eyes should have been.

"Hey there, are you ok? My name is Michael, I—" he trailed off when the girl began sniffing the air loudly. She began crawling towards him. Michael lost his nerve and fled towards what he hoped was Main Street. Behind him, the girl began ululating, her high-pitched screeches multiplying with the echoes. Michael was dimly aware that similar cries were erupting from all around him. He halted when he came across a mushroom the size of a tree growing from a dried-up fountain. The fungus's lacy skirt hung down in tatters like the branches of a willow tree billowing in the breeze. He would have remembered seeing such a spectacle. He was lost.

A shadow peeled itself from the front of a nearby building. He heard a flurry of footsteps and saw two silvery green eyes bobbing through the darkness towards him. Strix leapt out of the blackness and perched on the edge of the fountain.

"Oh, thank God."

She leapt down and seized his free hand, pulling him into a nearby alleyway. She pushed him against the alley's brick wall. For being less than five feet tall, she was tough, or maybe he was frail: the impact nearly drove the air from his already heaving lungs.

"What in Bright-Hell were you thinking? I told you to stay on Main, Mush for Brains. You've awoken a world of trouble. What was so interesting that you had to wander off? Let me guess, you saw a 'rare' fungus and had to collect its spores."

"No, I heard sobbing, and I thought something had happened to you."

"And you came in after me?"

"I wasn't going to leave a friend behind."

Strix's eyes, already quite large, stretched a bit further in surprise. A low moan emanated from the entrance of the alley, and the mushroom girl from the barber shop lurched into view.

"Great, a Stumbler. At least you didn't wake up a hive of Leapers. If the Stumblers don't trap us somewhere, we should be able to outrun them. As you can see, they're not very graceful."

The Stumbler tripped over a trashcan onto the ground. Michael could see that the fall broke off several pale mushrooms growing from her arms, leaving behind jagged white stumps or gaping craters in their wake. Hearing Strix's voice, the Stumbler growled and began army crawling towards them, nails scrap-

ing against the pavement. Strix grabbed his hand and pulled him further down the alley.

Strix led him from the city and into the foothills west of Dovehearth. They left the roadway behind and holed beside a rocky escarpment that shielded them from the chill eastern wind. Michael sat against a boulder, his chest working like a bellows. The cramped conditions of the underground bunker hadn't afforded him much cardio over the years; now he was paying the price. He stared up through the skeletal branches of a dead tree at the dim scarlet light escaping from cracks in the clouds overhead.

"Strix, have you ever seen a live tree?" he asked, after he had recovered his breath sufficiently.

"Like with leaves and stuff? Only in the picture books the Midnight Queen reads to us."

"You're missing out. The world used to be covered in them. In the Fall, the leaves would fall so thick that you'd be ankle deep in them. I can remember how they crunched beneath the soles of my boots."

"Sounds noisy. I bet it'd make for awful hunting."

"Probably so, but I wouldn't know."

A bird screeched in the night; Michael wondered if it was a night-jay.

"Strix, do you really think your Queen will be interested in my project?"

"She will. I'll make sure of it. She sent me to look for strange old things, and you're about as old and strange as they come."

He laughed until it became a hoarse cough. He could tell by the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes that she was smiling too.

"We need you, Mushman. We ran out of supplies a few years ago, and we've been scavenging ever since. You're far better at discerning the tasty mushrooms ones from the ones that drive folks mad. We've lost many of our folk that way. . . Besides, if we could grow plants, maybe we could grow some of those vegetables that we used to eat from cans when I was younger. They were far tastier than mushrooms, though not as good as raccoon."

"Are the others like you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

Michael tapped the side of his eye socket, "Does the rest of your group have eyes like you?"

"Of course, how else would we see? You're the only person that needs the extra light. It must be your tiny eyes. Were you born with those or did something happen?"

He considered telling her that his eyes were as normal as apple pie and that at one point everyone on Earth had "tiny eyes" like him. Instead, he replied,

"Yes. It's a family trait."

"Well, it's a good thing you have me to guide you then."

"More than you could ever know, Strix."

The next day, they began to climb up a mountain. Michael couldn't see the top through the darkness, but his burning calves informed him that they were certainly going steadily uphill. They reached a section of rocky scree that forced

them to climb with both their hands and feet. Nimble footed Strix strapped her spear to her back, so that she could hold the lantern for him while he climbed.

"How much further?" he asked, as he hauled himself onto a narrow ledge beside Strix, who handed him back his lantern.

"Not much further. We've reached the 'Front Step'; the trail behind us will lead to the caverns."

Michael saw that there was a well-beaten path leading from the ledge and into a narrow cleft. Beside the path was a large cairn of blackened stones holding aloft the remains of several burnt logs.

"Is that a beacon?"

"Yes, it's how we call the salvagers home in an emergency."

"A bit medieval, but if it works, it works. Do you use it often?"

"Not as much as we used to, there's far fewer of us to call home nowadays. Let's go get you cleaned up for your interview with the Midnight Queen. She's a bit strict at times."

She led him through the mountain cleft until they came across a mountain pool so clear that he would have waltzed into it if she hadn't grabbed his collar. He looked at her blankly until she threw a pebble into the water, shattering the illusion with emerald ripples.

"Clean up here. I'll go behind those boulders over there so you can take a real bath. Call when you're ready to continue."

As she walked over to the curtain of boulders, she called back over her shoulder, "Watch out! It's a little chilly!"

He placed his bio-lantern on the flattest rock he could find and peeled off his grimy clothing. He dipped his big toe into the pool and decided that chilly was an understatement; the water was absolutely frigid. He bathed in record time. When he got out, his teeth were chattering and he had a hard time buttoning up the front of his shirt with his numb purple fingers. A scream erupted from behind the boulder screen; Michael grabbed the bio-lantern and rushed to her aid.

He found Strix, clinging to a pinnacle of rock ten feet above the ground. He watched as she raised her legs to her chest, narrowly avoiding the whirling cloud of shadow that leapt at her from below. It left five white claw marks on the rock where her legs had been just moments before. "Throw me Nightbane!" she yelled. Michael reached down and picked up the fallen spear. The churning mass of shadow turned from Strix and flowed towards him without a sound. He raised the bio-lantern before him and saw an immense black paw dart from the shadows, smacking his lantern and sending it crashing behind a nearby stone, plunging everything into darkness. He slid his numb fingers down the spear shaft to the flashlights fastened below the spearhead. There was a soft click, and a beam of yellow light blazed out. The shadow beast yowled and leapt away. Michael blinked his eyes several times trying to dispel the ball of light that had just imprinted onto his vision. When his sight cleared, he could see two slitted yellow eyes glaring at him from a crevice between two boulders. He flipped on another flashlight and watched the creature's pupils shrink into paper thin slits. The additional light revealed that the creature was a sinuous black panther.

"That Inkspore nearly had me!" Strix said, before dropping to the ground from her perch.

Michael watched the panther's muscles quiver, rippling the thousands of black mushrooms that covered its body, like fur. Black spores poured out, drenching the beast again in shadow till only the menacing amber eyes remained. Strix grabbed Nightbane from him and leveled it at the Inkspore.

"Grab your lantern. We need to get out of here before these batteries die."

Sure enough, the beams dimmed and flickered until Strix gave the spear a shake.

"Good kitty, good kitty, we're going now. Just stay put," she cooed.

The bio-lantern was a wreck. He reached through the twisted frame and grabbed the stack of bioluminescent mushrooms along with the remains of the little plant, which had lost a leaf in the fall.

"Got 'em."

Together, they backed away until they reached the trail.

A few switchbacks later, they arrived at a concrete cavern. Inside, a steel door was lit by a single flickering red bulb. Above the door, a sign read "Bunker 13: *Cor Umbrarum*."

The door opened and a child, wearing a mask that resembled a night heron, peeked out at them.

"Princess! You're back," he squeaked.

Michael shot Strix a questioning glance, but she ignored him. He allowed Strix and Kob, the boy, who looked like a miniature medieval plague doctor with his long billed mask, to lead him through the bunker's halls to the atrium, where Strix said the Queen had set up her court. The tour was unnecessary though; the layout was nearly the same as the bunker he had left behind: Bunker 8: *Fungoram Villam*. The only difference seemed to be that instead of rows of growing tables sprouting egg-like mushrooms in the labs, there were rooms full of broken cages, medical diagrams of eyes, and shattered pipettes and beakers.

"Wait here, Mushman," Strix said, pausing before the double-wide doors that lead to the atrium. "We wouldn't want to surprise her."

Michael nodded his assent and sat down. He pulled a cloth from his pack and veiled the glowing mushrooms he still held in his fist. Strix and Kob disappeared through the doors, giving him only a brief glimpse of the red-bathed stalactites hanging from the atrium's ceiling. He heard a clamor of many indistinguishable voices behind the door. The babble grew into a crescendo reminiscent of the cheering crowds at the baseball games he used to attend. An imperative voice from within shouted "Quiet!" and the cacophony immediately ceased. He heard footsteps approaching the door, but he wouldn't have recognized the girl who pushed through them if it wasn't for the owl mask pushed up onto her forehead. Strix gave him a warm smile that revealed her dimples and all her filed teeth.

"She has granted you an audience. As far as I'm aware, you're the first guest we've ever had!"

She swept her arm towards the atrium beyond. Michael stepped past her and into the massive domed cavern. A pathway of worn stone blocks led to a large

central dais bathed in a red glow of many red bulbs hung across the cavern's ceiling. The light revealed a cluster of children, maybe forty in all, sporting masks of various fiends and predators, gathered around a woman wearing a black mask resembling the face of a grinning bat. She sat primly upon a padded throne resembling an electric chair with the restraints hacked off. One of her hands stroked the fur of a mountain lion pelt draped over her shoulders. He could hear the distant roar of an underground river pulsing in his ears, and the hum of distant machinery, chugging away in the tunnels that branched out from the central atrium. He kneeled and bowed his head low, his beard sweeping the stone floor.

"Michael Mushman, Fungus Doctor, He of the Grey Beard and Bald Pate, my child Strix tells me that you bring us a great gift? Rise, and present it to me."

Michael had to smile; apparently, Strix had been overzealous in her description of him. He climbed up onto the dais. Children scurried out of his way as he strode to the Midnight Queen's left side while Strix stepped to her right. He bent down and pulled back the cloth from his hand, revealing the radiant bioluminescent mass of shelf-like mushrooms cradled in his palm.

"Panellus Providensicus, your Majesty."

The Queen turned to Strix, and beneath the mask, he saw her raise her left eyebrow as if to say, "You made all this fuss over an old stick of a man with glowing mushrooms?"

Strix revealed the crushed plant, minus one of its leaves. Her mother leaned forward in her chair, and with delicate long fingers plucked it from her hand.

"Where did you find this?"

"Michael grew it with those mushrooms, Mother."

The Queen's eyes shot to the glowing flapjacks and then to Michael's gaze.

"You can produce more of these?"

"Certainly, I have several vials of its spores here in my rucksack."

"Strix, grab the others and light the beacon on the Front Step; this is what we've been searching for."

Michael looked at Strix and saw her beaming up at him, her large eyes sparkling like orbs of obsidian. He'd happily spend another 20 years toiling in the darkness to see such a sight.

Death by Yellow Butterflies

Karly Nyman

The couch isn't uncomfortable. Worn from use but cared for, probably bought new. I was encouraged to sit wherever I wanted and so I curled up in the far corner, knees folded in. I was still, like a newborn fawn hidden in the tall grass (too weak to fight back, too small to run away, so being quiet and motionless and hoping to not be discovered is its only hope).

The therapist sits in a chair. Posture relaxed but attentive, scratched clipboard rested atop crossed knees, pen held in the opposite hand like a divining rod. Thin reading glasses perched just so, like little wire-framed half-moons. "So. It seems like you've been having a tough time lately."

Yes, I have. Lately. And, um, for a long time before now.

"Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?"

I don't. Even just recalling it *lacerates* sometimes.

I look around the room. Mostly undecorated. The thin gray carpet does that thing where it rises a few feet up the walls. Above, there is a wallpaper border, mostly light green with a repeating pattern of white daisies and multicolored butterflies.

"How long have you been feeling that way?"

I ponder the wallpaper as I answer questions. Yes. No. Yes. Two years ago. 70mg once daily. No, I'm fine. Just felt cold, sorry.

One of the butterflies is lilac-purple, lacey wings presented in profile, perched on a daisy. Just beneath it are two smaller butterflies. They're pink, one a little darker than the other. (I've never seen pink butterflies in real life.) Next to them, a daisy, then slightly above is a large yellow butterfly, then two more daisies, and finally another small butterfly, this one pastel blue. Then the pattern repeats, starting over at purple.

Sometimes it's hard to breathe. It happens for no reason, usually. Even if I'm fine; even if nothing bad happened. Just suddenly I can't seem to get enough air and I start crying.

No. Sometimes. Probably a few times a month. Sorry, what was the question?

The yellow butterfly is bigger than the others. Its wings are the most detailed, starting with a deep marigold color then artfully fading to butter-yellow wisps at the very edges (It's pretty, but I can't help thinking that those wings look so heavy). It floats grandly above the lesser insects and white petals, as if upswep by a breeze.

The therapist's pen goes *scritch, scritch, click*. "Do your friends and family know about that? Is there usually someone nearby physically when this happens?"

Yes, usually. ("Hey, hey, you're alright. I'm right here, алтыным.* Can you hear me?")

"Does it feel like it helps to have support from them when this happens?"

The yellow butterfly with its wings so widely spread looks like it could engulf the others, especially the little ones below. The two pink butterflies are perched on the same daisy, the petals starkly white against their coral-and-hollyhock wings. (No, wait, not perching—clinging.)

It helps. . . I guess I'm just not very attached to what's happening around me. Not just then, when there's a panic attack, but most of the time.

"I see." *Scratch. Click. Click, scratch, scratch.*

My hold on being here, on the world, has seemed tenuous for a long time. I glance at the butterflies, not perching, *clinging*. Almost wince in sympathy.

"Can you tell me about things that you do feel attached to? It doesn't have to be big or important things."

Important? I glance. To those butterflies, nothing is more important than the daisy they are hanging on to. It's food for another day, something to anchor their delicate bodies against in the invisible breeze that makes the little ones cling and the big one (yellow, like marigolds, like little apples in spring) take flight whether it wants to or not. Its wings are just too vast, too heavy to keep from being swept up.

I don't know. I guess I'm just tired. Yes, I've been sleeping. I don't know. I still feel tired when I wake up.

Glance. Very tired, probably as tired as if I had heavy, sunflower-colored wings that carry me much less often than I have to carry them. They look like velvet, much more substantial, much more of a burden, than the lace-like purple wings just a few daisies over. Not fair. Not fair.

I imagine being buried in yellow velvet, being made to lift it skyward and keep lifting it, breeze or no breeze. Some part of me aches to see how far away the safety of a daisy seems (it probably wouldn't hold up such lovely, heavy wings anyway, not with those dainty stems) even if it's not a handspan's distance. That can feel like miles when you're so small and carrying such a weight.

It seems like the wallpaper was crookedly applied near the other side of the couch. Just a bit, just slightly angled downward. The pattern still goes purple lace, daisy, coral and hollyhock, daisy, yellow (heavy like velvet, like beseeching words whispered against blonde hair, "breathe, *алтыным*, *please*, you know you have to breathe") daisy, daisy, and finally pale blue. But with the deviation from straight, the yellow butterfly doesn't quite seem to be rising anymore; now the ornate pale edges of those burdensome wings are dipping, tilting, dragged earthward by their own weight.

Click, scratch. Paper fluttering (like wings, so much like wings that I flinch) as a page of loose-leaf is flipped over. *Scratch.*

Those golden wings (gold, velvet, heavy, heavy, *алтыным*) are just too much. The other butterflies are sheltered beneath their span but for how long? The breeze won't last forever and what happens then? The yellow butterfly isn't perched, clinging, doesn't have the kindness of lace-light burdens (*no fair*) so what happens then?

It's like maybe it would just be easier to not try, you know? It's, um. It's heavy. Like maybe it's time to fall.

"What does falling mean to you?"

("алтыным, *please*. Let me help you. Talk to me, talk to somebody. *Anybody.*")

I glance. Yellow. Van Gogh yellow. When I said *fall* I had meant the wings. That butterfly already being pulled down by crooked wallpaper, by unfair burdens. All this time it bore them like a golden diadem, tried to raise them skyward for so long. (No daisy, no safe place to perch, to cling.) It maybe was time to fall. *That's* what I meant. Stop fighting and flutter downward to the ground far below. Just for a while. Just to rest.

Just to not have to carry it for a little bit. It's always heavy but sometimes it's *too* heavy. Maybe. . . maybe let go?

No scritch. No clicking. Knees uncross and eyes, kind eyes, focused over wire rims. I don't look at the butterflies this time. "Do you think about that? About letting go?"

("АЛТЫНЫМ?")

Still, even without looking, I know those golden wings are tilting just a little further down. I close my eyes. Try to imagine another color. Imagine wings of lace instead. Imagine if yellow wasn't so heavy. Imagine being weightless. Not fearing the burden. Not fearing the ground below even as all there seems left to do is reach downward, stop fighting, *just fall*.

Yellow. Wheat ripening in a field. Sunflowers. The school bus on fall mornings. Fat bumblebees. Bands of gold placed on left hands to symbolize hope for a future. Yellow is such a comforting color. But there is some strange peace in the conclusion too, in knowing that all things have their time, that if you can believe nothing else at all you can still trust there will be an ending. Somehow that thought hurts just as much as it heals.

I smile and it fragments, yellow-gold shards buried in my chest. My voice is soft, like velvet, like wings, like letting go.

All the time.

*my gold

How I Met My Angel

Allison Ala

Life comes to an end for all of us. It's something we all know, we all understand. You're born, you're alive, but with one condition: one day, you're going to die.

You don't think about it, not really. I know I didn't. Not until my grandmother died, and I saw what it did to my mother. And four years later, again, in quick succession, my other three grandparents. It was slow, but it was fast. We knew it was coming, but when it got there, we couldn't believe it. We wanted to rewind the time. Reverse the funeral procession. One more day, one more night, even if it was a day filled with the same nonsense that used to drive us crazy. Any of us would have given a limb to have any of them back. A world without family is inconceivable. Or it should be.

When it came for me, I wasn't ready. It wasn't even a car accident or a natural disaster, something sudden, unexpected. It was inevitable.

"The tumor's back," the doctor said. I called him Dr. Pensive because he had this deep crease in his forehead and a serious face, like William Holden. He was the fifth doctor I'd been to, and by then I didn't flinch at the news. I just wondered if he stroked his beard when he looked over patient files.

"Okay," I said. I gave him my I've-been-through-this-before look — guarded eyes and upturned lips to try to lift the weight of the world off my shoulders. I knew it was coming. I hoped it wasn't, but now that it was, I would have to make do. Maybe I'd get the record for the most number of brain surgeries performed on one person.

Dr. Pensive began telling me my options. It was all the same stuff. He recommended chemo to shrink the tumor, then surgery to remove what was left. I nodded, staring at the scuffed green floor. The last doctor I'd been to had gray carpet. The green was a nice change.

"We'll schedule you for chemo starting next week. All right? That'll go for..."

That's how it had gone. Fifth doctor, third tumor, two weeks to live. I made it to four weeks. It was the worst kind of waiting game. I ended up crying most days, holding onto my mother's hand as we silently prayed. God, heal me. Or take me. I'm not strong enough.

I still remember how she kissed my forehead before I fell asleep.

"I'm gonna run to the store and get your favorite ice cream, okay honey?" she whispered.

I nodded, drowsy, and that was it. The next time I woke up, I wasn't awake.

And now I'm here, standing on a lonely little street corner in Hanover. Waiting again, but for something else. Someone else.

A car rushed past, the buzzing street light illuminating a silver sedan. It wasn't the car I was waiting for. I always got this feeling, right before it happened, an itch behind my left ear. Until I got to scratching, I wandered. Town to town, street to street, alley to alley. Someone somewhere always needed help moving on.

A woman pushed open the diner door behind me, and I turned. Rich auburn curls and a familiar laugh assaulted my senses. A man came out of the diner behind her, and she turned toward him before I could get a good look at her face.

"See you in two weeks?" the man grinned and grabbed her waist. They kissed.

"Two weeks," the woman said. She waved to the window, where three young kids were sitting in a front booth. The boy, whose feet were dangling off the red leather, stuck his face up against the window and smiled. The two girls waved with their fries.

"I'm going to miss them," the woman said.

Her husband hugged her. "We'll miss you too, honey. But that promotion won't get itself, now, will it? You've got this, Nina."

The name stole my breath.

"Thanks, Nathan." Nina left his side and walked in between the cars parked in front of the restaurant. Checked left and right. Began to cross the rain-slicked street.

She dropped her keys.

I reached up to scratch.

A truck pulled out from the bar on the opposite side of the street and hit the gas. No headlights on.

Nina hit the pavement.

Her husband, who had gone back inside the diner, looked out the window at the screech of brakes. He leaped up, shoved open the door, and ran.

I turned away. I couldn't watch this happen. Not to her. But I heard it. The frantic shouting, the 911 call, the waves of sirens. The noise pierced through the empty street, the cold night, and reached through the numbness that wrapped around whatever was left of my heart. I knew death was senseless, but this. This was cruelty.

"Oh God. Oh God."

Her voice was right behind me. I heard the tears tracing their way down her cheeks. I wanted to run, but it was too late. Always too late.

Steeling myself, I turned. Nina was facing the accident, her back to me. The ambulance had arrived, and two medics tended to her small form sprawled out on the street, cream cardigan turning maroon from blood. Her husband knelt as close to her body as he could get without interfering, hands running through his hair. I looked toward the diner window, where her kids sat, eyes on their father across the street, food abandoned.

"Oh, Nina," I breathed. I watched as the medics pressed on her chest, once, twice, again and again. They looked up at Nathan and shook their heads. They moved her body onto a gurney and covered her up.

Nina's sobs grew louder.

God, this was never easy.

I came up next to her, wanting to hug her but not knowing how. So I stood there and waited. Watched, as they moved her body onto a gurney, covered it in black, and slid it into the back of the ambulance. As her husband ran, tear-streaked, back to his kids in the diner. As my own eyes threatened to overflow for another life whisked away without reason.

It took a moment before she registered that I was there. When she did, she turned to me, eyes wide. "Who are you?"

I searched her face as if she would answer for me. I wanted her to. It was such a simple question, wasn't it? Who I was? But I knew she wouldn't recognize me. Chemo had ravaged my body, pulled my hair out and pushed my cheeks in. I was a misshapen version of the woman she knew ten years ago. I almost didn't tell her, but I had to.

"Heide."

Her eyes widened further. She looked like she'd seen a ghost. "Heide?"

I felt her eyes trace my bald head, my tired eyes, my hunched shoulders. I used to be taller than her, but not anymore. If we were back in college, she would make a wisecrack about how old and frail I was getting.

"What are you — what am I —" she stopped, wrapping her arms around her body. Part of me wanted to comfort her. Part of me wanted to leave her. I did neither.

"You're dead, Nina."

She met my gaze, mouth open. She was still processing, and I could see it all: denial, confusion, pain, and deeper, in the flecks of her blue eyes, a bitter fear that this was real.

"But Nathan — the kids — Oh, God. I was just with them —" She rubbed her hands over her puffy eyes and looked toward the diner, where Nathan huddled with the three kids. She walked over to the window and placed her hand on the glass.

"Nathan," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, Nina," I whispered. I had no idea she had this beautiful life. I should have known, though. She was always the brightest person in the room, a star everyone else was merely orbiting. It would have been easy for her to start a family.

Nina kept her eyes on them as they left the diner and drove off, all the way down the street, the lampposts illuminating the silver van as it carried her family away. When they disappeared, she turned to me. The tears on her cheeks were dry. The shock had lessened a bit, as it always did. Now she was going to ask questions I wasn't qualified to answer.

"What now?" she asked.

And there it was. "Most people move on," I said. Emphasis on most.

"Most? Are you — are you dead too?" she asked.

Well, that was an easy one. I gestured at my body. "What do you think?"

"I didn't know," she said. The anguish on her face deepened, filling the air with a guilt I didn't want to bear.

"I reached out," I said. Against my better judgment.

"I didn't —"

"You didn't come." Not that I expected her to, but I wanted her to. I wanted my best friend to be there, or at least call, when I found out that I was going to die. There was so much that I let go of in my life, but Nina was the one person, lying in that hospital bed, that I wanted to hold on to.

"I'm sorry," Nina whispered. "I didn't know you were sick. I thought —" she paused to wipe her eyes. "I thought you hated me after what happened. That we'd never be friends again."

I snorted. "I did hate you. I was in love, and then I found out he was in love with you."

"I never meant to hurt you," Nina said. She stepped closer, her eyes pleading. "It was a stupid mistake, Heide. You're my best friend. I shouldn't have let anyone come between us."

I took a step back. "That wasn't the worst part, Nina. You left. As soon as I found out, you bolted, and you took all our plans with you. Seven years we were friends, and you said you wouldn't leave me. Of all people, you should know how much I needed someone to stay."

I took another step back and willed the tears to not fall. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. I was supposed to meet another stranger, in another car wreck, or overdose, or hospital, and help them move on because for some god-damn reason I couldn't.

"What can I do?" Nina asked.

I felt the guilt creep up at the pain in her voice. I shook it off.

"It's a little late to do anything, Nina. We're both dead." I sat down on the curb and put my head in my hands. God, take me. I can't do this. Not with her.

I heard Nina settle herself on the cement next to me.

"When?" she whispered.

I raised my head. "Three months ago. Brain tumor." I focused my eyes on the neon sign in the window of the bar across the street. It flashed yellow, red, green. I kept going.

"It came six years ago. Never stayed away for long. Last time it came back, I only made it four weeks." The neon sign froze on yellow and went out. A minute later, the barkeep came out and locked the door.

"If I knew, I would have been there. In a heartbeat, Heide. Believe me." Nina put her hand on my arm.

I dragged my gaze away from the bar and looked at the small hand wrapped around my wrist. Nina caught my gaze and raised her eyebrows.

I sighed. I never could resist her puppy-dog eyes. "I believe you," I said. It was a half-truth. When someone comes back into your life and says they would have been there, it doesn't change that they weren't there. When it really mattered.

"So why are you here? Are you my Ghost of Christmas Past?" Nina asked. A small smile graced the corners of her mouth.

My mouth tugged up. "That makes you Scrooge."

"I would be a *terrible* old man," she said, laughter bubbling out.

I began to laugh with her when it hit me. She wouldn't ever get to be old.

Nina noticed I had stopped laughing. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What for?" she asked.

For being an ass when you just lost your family. For blaming you for running away when I probably would have done the same. For being such a bitter person. I shouldn't be surprised I'm stuck wandering around watching everyone else find peace.

"For everything." I bit my lip. "What are their names? Your kids?"

Nina's smile wavered, but she kept it in place. "Marina. She's the oldest, seven. Nik's five. And little Angel, she's two." She closed her eyes. "I miss them already."

I could tell she was on the verge of breaking again. I put my hand on her arm. "I wish I could've been there. Aunt Heide sounds nice." I grinned.

She laughed and wiped her eyes. "It does." She paused. "You never answered my question, though. Why are you here, Heide?" She held up her hand before I could respond. "And don't say you're the Ghost of Christmas Past."

"Well, there goes my answer."

Nina rolled her eyes. "Really?"

The thing was, I had no idea. I figured I was either unlucky or had done something to piss God off. Wandering the earth, dead but still walking, helping others pass on to the next life—that was not my idea of a good time. It was heart-breaking. It was lonely. I don't know how many people like Nina I met in the last few months. More than I ever imagined.

"If I knew, I don't think I'd still be here," I said.

"Well, I'm glad you are," she replied.

In the strangest way, I was too. I turned and smiled at her, but she was tearing up again. Wrapping my arm around her, I laid my head on her shoulders.

"You can play with my hair if you want," I offered.

Nina snorted. "I'm trying to be sad here, you know," she said.

"I know," I whispered. "If I could send you back, I would."

Nina nodded against my head, and I wondered. All she needed was a heart-beat. If I had one, I'd give it to her. But maybe she had given me something. And maybe that was enough for both of us.

I grabbed Nina's hand. I squeezed it and sent up one last prayer. I know you don't like me, God, but this one's special.

"Tell your family you love them, all right?" I told her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I smiled, the biggest I had in a long time. I memorized my angel—her heart-shaped face, unfairly pretty eyes, and soft curls. Her features began to fade as I did the hardest thing I had in a long time: I let go.

Our Cottagecore Fantasy

Syrena Finnell

You and I have always classified our aesthetics as Cottagecore. Soft sapphics whose dream is to buy a cabin in the woods, living off the land. We'd spend our days gathering berries, consulting guides on edible mushrooms, and making delicate crafts with the nature around us. A woven basket or bookmarks made of pressed flowers. In the evening, we'd cuddle under the stars and giggle to each other until we fell asleep, noses pressed together.

But there are a lot of things that #Cottagecore does not mention. It doesn't mention having to work eight hours at a shitty paying gas station and being too drained by the time a shift ends to even think about picking daisies. Not that there are many for me to pick in our third-story apartment building. The toilet spits crap all over our floors more often than it flushes; the walls leak in some unidentified spot that makes the whole place smell damp. Months were spent haggling with the landlord to get permission for a little window box that you excitedly filled with mint and oregano. More often than not, the plants die before we ever get a chance to pick them.

You work as a freelance graphic designer, the second part of which doesn't fit the ideal, though the first potentially does. Many times, once I finish a double shift, I come home to find you slouched over your computer, having been in that position all day. Scented candles burn around you as you desperately cling to a shard of escapism. If I close my eyes, the lilac and lavender can almost stifle the dank smell in the room. Almost.

On the rare occasion we have an overlapping day off, we delve headfirst into our fantasy. We can ignore how the yogurt and berries are store-bought and that the wooden bowls we mix them in were on sale at Wal-Mart. Instead, they have been prepared painstakingly by our own hands, as have the threadbare blankets we wrap around ourselves. There are no stars, but you pull up a campfire video on your laptop, complete with soft music. I rub my hand over the stretch marks on your right breast while you trace the edges of my face. We curl up on the couch for an eternity, bodies meshing until there is no difference between you and me.

Of course, the fantasy can't last forever. We wake up in the morning, achy and sore, having to succumb to capitalism all over again. I stare at my checking account and then into the fridge. We'll have to settle for McDonald's today.

But as we trudge throughout our lives, we learn to appreciate those little perfect moments we can carve out. We may not have our countryside gay commune, or even a working oven in which to bake banana bread. But I have you, who has taught me how to make the most of what we have. And you have me. With a little luck, we can make that enough.

What They Call “The Life”

Avery Knaub

By three o’clock the refreshments I’d been downing weren’t doing much to keep my stomach full. I have to keep my bouncing knee in check constantly, because the gentleman seated in front of me always looms over his newspaper when he gets annoyed. I’d be smoking like a chimney if I hadn’t run out.

I gaze out the window, thinking of Theo. In our last catch-up call, it wasn’t his usual talk: being between jobs, between romances, between everything but solid ground. Turns out he’s actually made a life for himself. Hattie practically pushed me out the door to go pay him a visit. I was more than glad to leave, and I bought the first ticket to the big city.

The gentleman clears his throat. I plant my foot on the floor for the fifth time.

“Is this your first time going to New York?” he asks. He sounds like money and is dressed handsomely. My ideal type of wear.

“Not at all,” I answer. “Born and raised. You see, though, I’ll be visiting family after three years.” I then notice the ring on his finger. “It’s my first escape since I tied the knot.”

He smiles politely. “Then it shall be a real treat. There’s a great deal of gay things there you cannot find in the country.”

I want to believe so.

...

My brother is grinning ear to ear, exposing every crooked tooth in his skull, wrinkling his nose that I broke but never healed. I’m barely off the platform when his arms crush us together. He still smells like our childhood home, even after all his moves. He peels himself off of me. “Look at you, Ellis,” he says. “A mustache! All grown up.”

“Look at yourself! Why, I think you look better as a blonde. You look like you actually know a thing or two.”

“Oh, I’ve kept it this way awhile now. Have any more luggage?”

I jostle my briefcase. “Just this. I say, should we go slumming?”

Theo pushes me. “I’m not that smart yet, old man.” We head for what Theo says is the new way of getting around here—cable cars.

We meander to the Lower East Side. It’s our old neighborhood, one I haven’t seen since Autumn 1891. “That’s where I’m living,” Theo says, pointing to one of the buildings down the street. “But let’s go have a drink first.”

“Please,” I say.

The sweet, dry scent of tobacco fills the saloon just around the corner from Theo’s block. We manage to place our order and sit despite the crowd of men already here. We smile like school boys.

“I tell you, not a single man in this establishment is a married one. It’s a bachelor’s paradise.”

That means there’s still no girl for him, but I say zilch. Our parents had given him enough grief. I’m in awe. “It must be nice, Theo.”

His expression drops a touch. "Is married life not going well?"

"You know I did it only because you wouldn't. Mom and Pa would haunt us both if I didn't marry Hattie."

"But she's a nice girl."

"We're fire and ice. Just like every girl I messed around with before her." I'm raking my hand through my hair as I speak. "Thank God this baby is finally on its way. How do you suppose any man cares for a girl unless they have a common goal? I'd be like any of the guys here if I could."

I said what Theo only knew bits and pieces of. It's been on my chest even since before Hattie.

I don't want Theo to get the wrong idea, so I add, "I never blamed you. It's just that the familial responsibility had to land on one of us, and if you had no plans to take it, I had to." I lower the hands I raised in defense

A chorus of laughter echoes from the bar, where most of the men are gathered. Theo watches them for a moment, too. He returns his attention and thumps the table with his palm. "Leave it for now. This isn't the time to bellyache."

"I'll gladly do so."

I got us a round.

"Let's toast," Theo says, glass already raised. "To my baby brother. May he find joy, even if it's just a sliver of sunshine."

...

It's not long before we're tanked. I could never hold my liquor; it's a family thing. Theo is worse than me.

The last time I couldn't see a hole through a ladder was before Hattie's pregnancy. We had a nasty row, nastier than our sober ones.

I'm saying all this aloud, I realize, when Theo says, "Close your mouth already, would you?"

"How do we get back to your place, Theo? Where's that cable car?"

The cable car soon comes to our rescue. The driver warns that it's the last one running tonight. Theo and I lean on each other and clamber on. A few others are aboard. At every turn of my head, my vision takes a moment to adjust. When the car lurches to life, I hold onto Theo to keep myself from tipping over. We're both clinging to each other in a pathetic, drunk mess.

"I feel sick," he groans. His skin is paling. His eyes have an unfocused glaze.

Throwing my arm around his shoulder, I try to think of anything that will keep him from making an embarrassment out of us. "Stay with me, Theo. You haven't told me about this new job of yours yet."

"My job?"

"Sure. How long have you had it? What do you do?"

He only moans. "Frances is probably there. I didn't tell him I'd be gone tonight."

"You didn't tell your boss you weren't coming in?"

Theo shoos me with a wave of his hand. "No, no, he's. . . It's his hang-out. It's been a few months now." I must have irked him. Theo buries his head in his hands and doesn't come out, even when I try to coax him.

After fruitless minutes, I feel quite alone. That's when I realize, even through the waning and waxing of my vision, that none of the buildings we're passing are familiar. "Come now, Theo, what's the matter?" I shake him. He isn't asleep, but he still won't emerge. "I don't. . ." I have no clue where we are or where we're going. We've only taken a few turns, but it looks as if I'm in a completely new city. I spy theaters and locales. The yellow electric lights flashing against the darkening air give a mystifying ambience, and it eases some of my fear. Even if this type of transportation was around when we lived here as a family, I've never seen this part of the city before.

The car suddenly screeches to a halt, slamming me back into Theo. At last, he comes out. "Well, if a smack was all you needed—" I start.

"The Bowery," the driver announces. Something clicks in Theo. His eyes swim across the street, then he jumps from the bench, yanking on my arm to get off.

"We won't be but a minute," he insists. I'm led to an unassuming building, deep green and seemingly shoved between the two massive ones beside it. "Don't follow me inside," he slurs.

Twilight is sinking into nighttime. Theo's hair glows under the streetlight, his face flushed so pink it's like it's painted with rouge. "What are you saying?" I demand. "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly normal," he retorts. There's an edge to him. "I need a talk to Frances. We're here anyways. I have to tell him something. Just wait, Ellis, would you?"

I grab his sleeve, but he shrugs me off. He hotfoots it into the place like the devil is chasing him.

"Theo, aspettare!"

He's gone.

I kick the streetlight, drop my briefcase, and storm in. My eyes struggle against the low lights, all a barrage of colors. It's a bar. A noisy one. There's a considerable crowd inside, men and women, though they're blurring together into one massive body. I sway. I manage to get my feet to the counter, where my hands grab on for balance. The bartender moves my way. He's not a normal man whatsoever: his eyebrows have been tweezed into tiny lines and darkened with charcoal. Rose-colored rouge covers his cheeks to his temples.

"Did you just see a man?" I asked the person. "Blonde hair and a crooked nose? He's considerably drunk."

A coy smile is his reply. "Don't tell me," he says. "A lover's quarrel?"

"Excuse me?" Now my head is spinning much worse than before.

"You're asking for Theodora, aren't you? She just went through there." He points to a worn door across the tight room.

"You misunderstand, it's not a girl I'm seeking." Indeed, there are a considerable number of women, but my confusion has surpassed trying to understand how women were accepted inside a man's space at all.

I flinch. The bartender patting my hand disjoints my focus. "What is your name?"

"Amarante."

"Mr. Amarante, if you are looking for Theo, then the very same person, Theodora, is through that door. That's what we call her here. She's a fairy." I can't make out his expression. "You're *normal*, aren't you?"

I mean to tell the bartender that Theo's my brother, but I don't. Instead, my body floats across the floor. I scarcely know a Theo who improves his life, and I know this one even less. What miracle lay behind that door that turned him around right? Before I know it, I'm about to open the door, but my hand freezes. An odd, resolute panic encircles me.

I let just a crack through.

I can see the whole room.

And there's my brother, kissing a man with more passion than I think I've ever felt throughout my entire life. They're holding onto each other like they've captured romance at its core in a bottle, desperately seizing its mystery without question or worry. Their arms strain to not let an inch of air between their chests, their legs, their hips.

Their kiss breaks, but their faces hardly move an inch. Even from my distance I can see how their eyes are locked onto each other, private, doting, and I'm thinking of the way my father and mother would sometimes look at each other when we were children, the way I've tried to look at Hattie and have failed because the feeling never reaches past the command my mind gives me.

"Please don't marry her, Frances," Theo cries. My brother's hands are holding Frances' face like it's made of fine china. "That's what I've realized. I had to tell you without wasting another second. I don't want you to be unhappy."

Frances stares at Theo. He begins to frown, and I watch him burst into tears. I strain to catch the words on his lips as they embrace tighter: "*I love you, I care for you.*" His jaw quivers as he screams that whisper onto Theo's shoulder. Their shoulders heave with the burden of what anyone could see is immeasurable devotion. I see love I have seen inside foggy dreams, affection I have many times felt for my friends that I couldn't articulate.

I fall onto the floor; the scene slips away from me. I have sobered up, yet the room is spinning faster than before. I am staring at the ceiling, watching as every fragment of broken glass falls into place before me. I am no man at all. I am not a man for a girl. And Hattie wholly. . . slips away from me. A peace befalls me that carries winds faster and mightier than hurricanes, and I lay on the floor, letting it rush me upwards as I come into the world, wondering why I never knew the things that my heart was thundering with force enough to mutilate. I am on the floor of a bar. My chest is gunning for breath; as the men and fairies gather around me to see if I'm alright, it seems I am reborn from the very earth herself.

Lose Yourself

J. Ethier

The black road was glistening from the blazing sun and the lines looked jaundiced as the road curved under Genna's feet. She always loved to run, she won trophies for track and cross country as a young girl and sprinted all the way into her high school's championships.

She threw on her faded white sneakers and went out for her morning run. She headed west to the old mountain road just above her house. It was secluded and rarely used except for leisure, running, and the occasional family jaunt up the canyon. Not only was the road not far from her house, but she could run in the middle of the road and never have to move for a car. She could be alone with her thoughts, the asphalt, and her music pulsing from her ear buds.

The sun was bright, and her hot pink tank top seemed to draw the sun's rays directly to her back, making the sweat glisten and wet the crisscross pattern on her tanned skin. Her brown ponytail waved madly in the steady up and down of her forward motion. She breathed and looked forward. She let her feet and her instinct drive her through all the twists and turns that she ran every day.

She stopped for a moment to tie her shoelace and change the song on her phone to her favorite rap song. She looked up and scanned the road ahead before she started running again. It was clear and she resumed her previous pace. Her breath was shallow as the numbers increased on her watch, with every beat of the song, and thud of her foot on the asphalt that mirrored her heart. The music swelled in her ears, and she rhymed along letting the rhythm guide her movements, the sweat dripping off her brow. There was a curve up at the top of the hill and she lunged into the incline. The curve opened into one of her favorite views; her pace quickened with the adrenaline of the run and anticipation of the view the top would bring. Her feet matched the beat of the song with every step. She let the rhymes envelop her and followed every word. She took a breath and sang in her head, "Brace for impact." She thought those words were not part of the song. As that realization struck her, she knew she had to literally brace for impact. The next second she was on the ground, next to a motorcycle, shrapnel, and an enormous amount of red.

Her vision was blurry as she looked around. All that she could make out was blood, metal bits, and a shoe. She moved slowly and craned her neck backward frantically looking for her cell phone; she spotted it just out of her reach above her head. As she extended her right arm pain shot through her whole body. Her vision went black for a second and she blinked the light back into her eyes. The smell of gasoline grew as oil mixed with the pool of red above her phone.

She tried to yell, but all that escaped her lips was a dry weak grunt. The fear crept up her spine, just like the pain when she moved, as she extended her arm above her again and winced. Genna grasped ardently toward her phone; only the hot edge of her case was within her reach. Every time she felt close enough to grab it, it felt like she pushed it further away. As she was reaching, she heard an engine mix with her heartbeat. She saw her leg when she looked in the direction

of the sound. The bone was protruding out of her left knee and there was chrome shrapnel imbedded in her thigh. It felt surreal, she had never been in an accident before, it was like she wasn't looking at her own leg, but the leg of someone else lying helpless on the ground. What happened? She thought, was it her fault? There is never anyone on this road and she wondered if the man was still alive.

She screamed weakly when the sight finally sank in. The red from the motorcycle matched the deep red blood that pooled around her and continued in a stream down the hill. The car reached the top and screeched to a stop at the mess before it. A young man about nineteen threw open the door and ran straight for Genna.

He asked her something with a calm voice, but she could barely make out what he said. He took Genna's hand in his, it felt warm, and she squeezed it until her knuckles turned white. He looked down at her mangled leg and then back up to her face. His green eyes danced into her vision and the fog centered on his lips that mouthed something she couldn't hear. All she could hear was the quick beat of her heart, the blood pulsing through her veins, and the ringing in her ears.

Still looking at the young man before her, she hoped to tell him that she was not alone. With all the strength she had, she lifted her hand toward the body of the biker. His kind eyes looked away from her and scanned the road again. That is when he saw it, protruding from the bottom of the bike, the same shoe Genna saw. In an instant he stood up and walked over to the motorcycle on top of a man.

Genna felt her hand touch heat as she put it back down onto the road. The moment it touched, she heard the loudest most blood-curdling scream that she had ever heard. She lifted her head to try and get a better look at the bike and the mangled body beneath it. The young man wheeled what was left of the bike away from the motorist and crouched down next to him. Genna's eyes fluttered.

She watched as the boy crouched down by the man and then stood up just as fast. She could see his face again and his lips moved, but again she couldn't make out what he was saying as he walked closer to her. She blinked slowly, and her vision pulsed as the reds and blues flashed behind him. Her head pounded mirroring the sound of the sirens; then she saw only black.

Brought to You by Hasbro

Luke Thomas

There is a soldier crawling behind the cover of a short wall made of stone. He is wearing an old soviet surplus camouflage uniform and a green field cap, the trapping of a soldier in an under equipped army of a post-soviet republic. He peeks over the wall and sees the enemy, a modern soldier with body armor, an ammo vest, an AK-12, and night-vision goggles mounted on his helmet. His back is facing the first soldier who crouches behind the chest-high stone wall. The soldier hiding behind the wall turns around and looks straight at the camera.

"When defending the motherland, I only use the best," he says to the camera. "That's why it's Nerf or nothin'." He removes a plastic orange and yellow revolver from his holster, stands up, takes aim at the modern soldier, and pulls the trigger.

With a plastic-sounding pop, an orange foam dart shoots out of the barrel and bounces harmlessly off the modern soldier's helmet. The modern soldier turns around, levels his rifle at the toy-armed freedom fighter, and pulls the trigger. With a loud crack, the freedom fighter is dead.

Brought to you by Hasbro.

The Heart's Melody

Emma Shirley

A torn scrap of paper sat between two fingers. A chilled, autumn wind threatened to sweep the scrap into the sky, but the trembling hands held on desperately. She would not lose the paper too.

Eyes that had once been compared to the leaf of an almond tree watched the train station. Each oncoming train caught hold of her vibrant sight. Every time, she found herself unsatisfied.

An ache rose in her chest, threatening to further dull her bag-ridden eyes. She searched for something familiar, a song that for years had always accompanied her. Her dry lips parted, trying to mimic the tune. A hoarse croak escaped. She took in a breath, pushing the notes out of her small frame. The song was beautiful but in a moment it ceased.

Her hands tightened on the paper, trying her best to remember the original tune. It was nigh impossible with the humming of the tracks and the chirping of the tourists. "It's not the same," she concluded.

The leaves of the almond tree threatened to water. She could do nothing but sit and let the ache take hold. It consumed every part of her, burrowing into her heart as deep as it could go.

A steady beat tore her from her thoughts. The sound left her dazed. Somehow it was. . . familiar.

"Excuse me, madame." Her bewildered eyes settled on a tall, young man with messy brown hair and khaki pants. Despite his rugged appearance, he stood with dignity. He gestured to the bench with a smile. "May I sit?"

All at once, she despised him. How dare he intrude? Why could he not leave her be? Yet, like a good citizen, she nodded.

He settled in beside her as her eyes focused on the train station once more. The man seemed too giddy to sit still. He turned to her, excitement in his brown eyes. "Are you waiting for someone as well?"

She considered his question for a moment. "Yes."

"When will they arrive?" he asked.

"I don't know."

Despite her response, he continued to smile. "I don't know for mine either. They may be on this train, or the next, or the one after that." He grinned, leaning back on the cold bench. "I told them I would be here right when they arrived and I intend to keep my promise. They'll arrive eventually." He leaned forward, almost as if to catch her eye. "Yours will as well."

At this, she almost laughed. A small breath escaped, but nothing more. The man's smile faded before he leaned back on the bench. "May I ask your name?"

"Amelie." She glanced at him before looking forward. "Amelie Fontaine."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Madame Fontaine."

A chilled breeze hit them. With it, the bustling noise cleared. She heard it again, the steady beat that seemed so close and so far at the same time. The sound brought with it the smell of madeleines. She could almost taste the buttery

cakes, cherishing the slight hint of lemon they contained. They were her favorite to make.

"Do you come here often?"

The voice caught her off guard, and she looked at the man once more. "No. I'm visiting the area."

The man leaned forward. "From where?"

"Sautron."

His eyes widened. "That is a long way to travel. Are you here visiting friends or family?"

"Neither." Her lips paused as if to say more. She decided against it and looked ahead.

Amelie's mind threatened to wander. She welcomed the notion, but the man's presence prevented her thoughts from changing.

She turned to him; her face relaxed, but her eyes remained irritated. "You would not have to wait at the train station if you called them."

The man's brown eyes turned to her, curious. After a moment, her meaning dawned on him. "I have no phone."

This frustrated her further. "Could you not use someone else's?"

"I could," he said, "but there is no need."

She held in a sigh. "So you would rather wait for them?"

At this, he smiled. "For them, I would."

His response surprised her. "Who are you waiting for?"

"My children." He reached into his pocket. For the first time, she noticed how pale and gaunt his hands looked. The man pulled out a photograph, leaning over so she could see. She moved closer, spotting two small girls and a little boy. "Catharine, Marie, and Patrick."

His explanation continued, but his words fell on deaf ears. Her almond tree eyes threatened to close. A soft beat lulled her into memories long forgotten. She felt her feet moving. Her arms glided through the air. Her hands held another's. Through the lights and the music, she heard a much more cherished sound—laughter.

The vision left her smiling, but too soon it was gone as the man leaned away. "They will arrive sometime today. I would rather wait here than take the chance of missing their arrival."

Something compelled her to speak, though she wasn't sure what to say.

"Your children are beautiful."

The man glanced in her direction before smiling down at the photograph.

"Thank you." He took a deep breath. "My wife has gone to fetch them from their grandparents. They spent much of their time there when I was away. For the first time in a while, I will be here when they come home."

His comment left her confused. "Where were you when you were away?"

"The hospital."

The dread came to her all at once. She struggled beneath the surface. She couldn't breathe as the memories fought their way to the forefront of her mind.

She remembered running and screaming. She fought the nurses and doctors. Shouts were coming from his room. She could hear his heart fighting, struggling with each beat to keep going. She barely glimpsed his deformed face before the heart monitor rang flat.

Amelie fought a current stronger than any wall of doctors. Her love, her life, her Gérard. . . was gone. Life had plunged her into deep waters. There was no one to save her now.

The steady beat found Amelie in the present, her heart racing within her chest as the man continued. "I was diagnosed with a heavy sickness three years ago. I stayed in the hospital for much of my time, fighting for my life. My children stayed with their grandparents while my wife fought to keep our home."

Amelie swallowed, her chest tightening. "That must have been hard."

The man nodded. "It was."

Tears threatened to run from her vibrant eyes once more, but somehow she fought against the flood. "I'm here for my husband." Her own voice surprised her, but she continued. "He was driving home from work. A car ran a red light and—" Her voice caught in her throat.

The man's eyes drooped at her tears. "He is not arriving on the train, is he?"

She shook her head.

His eyes settled on the station. "I am sorry he is gone."

Her eyes widened, and she turned to him. "No. No, a part of him lives on. I know it does."

The man smiled softly, turning to study her vibrant eyes. "Of course."

Amelie bit her lip, looking forward. "How did you heal? Did your doctors find a cure?"

His eyes twinkled, and yet there was a sadness to them. "There was no cure. It was because of the sacrifices of many that I could heal." His eyes were no longer focused on the train station. Amelie could tell he was thinking of something else now. "I'd like to thank them one day when I am better and can travel."

Despite the pain in her heart, Amelie smiled. "I am sure they would like that." His doctors deserved thanks. Her husband's doctors did not.

Amelie remembered that long night all those months ago when she felt nothing but anger. The doctors had failed to save her husband. The nurse's attempts to comfort her were futile. All she wanted was her Gérard back.

A small, plump woman kneeled in front of her, patting her hands gently. "There is something I must tell you about your husband."

Amelie felt hope then—hope they had fixed things somehow. What remained of her reality shattered in an instant: "Your husband's heart is being given to someone else."

Amelie screamed. She broke through doors and ran down nurses, all to see the only thing left of her husband being wheeled away in a box. A doctor grabbed her wrist and Amelie reached forward. She heard a sickening rip. The surgeons directed the heart away as the doctors held her down. She shoved whatever she had grabbed deep into the pockets of her coat.

It was only hours later when she arrived home did she see what she had taken. A name—not any name, but the name of the person receiving her husband's heart: Henri Aubert.

For the next three months, Amelie searched wherever she could. She tried the hospital first, and when they wouldn't give her information, she moved on to other sources. Her last shot was from word of mouth, that a man named Henri

Aubert lived near Arcachon.

She knocked on many doors and searched the phone records. Every Aubert she called gave her the same answer: they did not know the man she was looking for.

After days, she had found herself waiting at the train station, reluctant to go back to a home that was no longer hers.

"How did you do it?" Amelie asked the man. "How did you keep that smile on your face, despite life itself coming against you?"

The man considered her words, his eyebrows furrowing. She could almost see the thoughts circling in his head. "Facing death taught me to dig deep inside of myself. What I found was that I loved my family more than anything else. I knew that no matter what happened, everything would be alright as long as they were happy." His brown eyes met hers. "Perhaps that's what your husband wanted for you."

The steady beat was louder now. Despite the train whistling and the sudden bustle of people, she could hear it clearly. It mixed with a soft hum, a melody she knew by heart. She saw the sapphire eyes of her husband as they danced. Lights twinkled above them as she fell in love with him for the first time.

She heard it again on their wedding day, vibrating through her body as she kissed the love of her life. She heard it when she placed a plate of madeleines on the table in front of Gérard. "We'll give the rest to your parents when we see them tomorrow."

Gérard laughed, taking one. "If there are any left."

Amelie found the beat was a part of every memory. She heard it everywhere: when she and Gérard danced in their new home, when they kissed under the moonlight, and when he had added the finishing touches on their child's cradle.

Amelie found her hand on her swollen belly, her husband's song leaving her lips. Their song—the one for their future. Nothing was missing from it now.

"That sounds beautiful."

Amelie had almost forgotten the man was sitting beside her. She smiled. "My Gérard would always sing it to me."

The man's eyes brightened before they settled on the station. "They're here." He shot from the bench, staggering forward. "They're here!"

Amelie couldn't help but stand as well. She wasn't sure why she felt so happy.

She followed the man, stopping a few feet behind him as he kneeled. The eyes of three small children lit up. "Papa!" They tackled him. There was obvious pain in his stance, but he hugged them tightly, regardless.

When the man stood, he noticed Amelie standing behind him. He looked down at his children, gesturing to her. "Catharine, Marie, and Patrick, this is Madame Fontaine."

The children waved. "Bonjour!"

Amelie smiled as the youngest—who she assumed was Marie—trotted forward. "Are you having a baby?"

Amelie grinned. "I am."

"When are you due?"

Amelie caught the eyes of a tired woman. "In two months."

The woman smiled. "Congratulations."

Amelie's smile lit up. She opened her mouth to continue speaking, but the train whistle blew. Her eyes landed on the man's family. "This is my train."

The man smiled. "Thank you for waiting with me, Madame Fontaine."

Amelie nodded, but she couldn't bear to step away. "Monsieur, I never asked your name."

He grinned. "Henri. Henri Aubert."

Light rushed through her body. "Henri Aubert." She smiled. "You have a good heart, Monsieur Aubert. Please, take care of it."

He held his children's hands, nodding. "I will."

Relief flooded into her bosom. It freed every part of her from the consuming ache she had felt before. "Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Aubert."

With that, she turned towards the station. As she turned, a shine lit up in her almond tree eyes—a shine that was absent before. A cold wind hit her hand. Her fingers finally relaxed, and the breeze took hold of the scrap. The paper flew into the sky as the train doors closed behind her.

Moon Rise

Molly Day

I talk to the moon every night. Even on the nights I can't see her, I look up at the sky and tell her the deepest secrets of my heart. As she waxes and wanes, I feel my own mood rise and fall, our phases synched. I always know when a full moon is approaching. I can feel it in my blood. I become restless: I can't sleep, I can't eat. I stay up dancing, smoking, drinking. I find myself running through the aspen groves, sounding my barbaric yawp, until I collapse, covered in scratches and bruises from sharp branches and unseen rocks. When the new moon comes, the night becomes so dark it swallows the light of the stars and threatens to swallow me up with it. Some nights I want to let it. I lie in my bed during those dark nights, waiting for her return. I contemplate the point of my existence, the point of this quintessence of dust. I am lost without her light.

I talk to the moon every night. I never expected her to talk back.

A winter night, just after a new moon, I was standing in the forest, searching for her aura through the leaves of the frosted aspens. There! She sat low in the sky, just a tiny sliver, barely visible. I watched her as she made her nightly pilgrimage across the heavens, and I wept. My tears dripped hot from my face and left holes in the snow on the ground.

"Moon!" I cried, "How do you do it? You are always growing or shrinking, never staying the same, but every night you rise over the horizon and make your way across the sky. Aren't you tired? I would be tired... I am tired."

I sank to the ground under a tree and pulled my knees close to my chest, crushing my bones together. A breeze stirred the branches of the trees, sending flurries of snow down to me. A pair of owls called out to each other like lovers lost in the night. I saw the glowing eyes of an unseen creature peering at me from the shadows in the bushes. I reached out my hand in greeting, but the animal retreated into the darkness. I did not feel afraid; I felt at home there amongst the trees, with my moon. I looked up through the yellow leaves and told the moon how I waxed and waned with her, always climbing or falling. I never felt content or at peace, and it was exhausting. I told her I didn't know how much longer I could keep going.

"Moon, you have done this for centuries, eons! Why? Don't you want a rest?"

A howl ripped through the air, somewhere between despair and elation. The forest stilled. The wind stopped. The animals in the bushes paused their nightly activities; I could see their glowing eyes blinking out at me. The lovers ceased their hooting. I held my breath. The air seemed. . . thicker. The dark night grew lighter. I looked up and saw the stars were becoming brighter. It no longer appeared as if it were the middle of the night, but instead just before dawn. I heard a twig snap behind me and turned to see a large stag approaching me. In his large antlers perched a pair of owls, large and silvery white. Three pairs of eyes fixed on me. He slowly lowered his head to me in what seemed to be a bow, and the owls spread their wings to their full span, greeting me. I held my breath. The

whole forest was holding its breath. The stag raised his head. The owls flew off to nearby trees, but stayed, watching me. With a trembling hand I reached out towards the stag. He approached me and placed his nose in my hand. It sent shivers through my body. My breath caught in my throat. Then he lay down beside me and rested his great head on my lap. Even lying down his antlers reached past my head. Heat radiated from the stag and wrapped itself around me.

As I sat there, petting the stag's velvet ear, I heard a voice.

"Child, listen to me." I looked around. The voice seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. It echoed in my head, loud and quiet, soft and strong.

The stag snorted and began to stir. I removed my hand from his head and he stood up to his full height. With a deep groan, he lowered his head to the ground and opened his mouth. From it, crawled out a large caterpillar. It was green as a budding leaf in the spring. The stag raised his head, gave me a long, discerning look, snorted, then faded back into the forest. The owls followed after him, melting into shadow. The caterpillar crawled up my arm, and as it crawled, it began to change. Soon a cocoon was hanging off of my elbow and then a soggy green moth fought its way out. It crawled around my arm as its wings dried. Slowly waving them open and shut, the markings on its wings, like eyes, staring into me.

The voice spoke to me again, "Look at these creatures. They are born, they grow, they change, and they die. Even the mighty stag is subject to the cycles of life. Every winter he sheds his great antlers and every spring they are grown again, new and velvet. Change is the only constant the universe provides."

"But I'm not changing! I'm trapped in this back and forth, up and down, high and low. I'm just circling around and around, never going anywhere."

"My dear, you are mistaken. You are not circling, you are ascending. I will show you."

The starlight grew even brighter until I had to shield my eyes. When I opened them, there was a large spiral staircase in front of me. It shimmered and twinkled as if it were formed out of the Milky Way itself. Perhaps it was.

"Come."

I carefully placed a foot on the first step. It didn't look solid, but it held my weight. Colors swirled around where I placed my foot. The light refracted into multitudes of colors and back into bright white. I took another step and watched as the colors swirled, the colors on the stair, reflecting onto the aspen trees, turning the whole forest into a kaleidoscope. I climbed higher until I was above the leaves. The full expanse of the cosmos shining above me.

As I climbed the staircase, I understood. I saw my life laid out before me. From above, I could see. My life was not a flat circle, but a spiral. Each time I circled back around I was higher. I wasn't stagnant; I was growing. I climbed and climbed the staircase. The further I climbed, the more I understood. Finally, I reached the top, and there she was. The Moon.

"Welcome home, my love."

I talk to the moon every night, and every night she talks back. We walk along our starry path, looking down at the world below us. And I understand.

It was born in a lab. Twisted metal, struck by lightning, rising out of a sheet in the middle of a stormy night with a full moon. Hands made of knives, yellow blinking eyes, seven feet of crooked spine and jagged titanium teeth. Designed for death. Broken at birth.

A Clockwork Beast.

The creator, a doctor, threw her head back and let out a guttural laugh to the heavens. "There! I've done it!" she cried. "Life is mine to control! The heavens cannot deny me now!" She slammed her hands down at the end of the table where the great beast sat with its head raised out of the blanket. "You will serve me, Beast, and do my bidding."

She swept around to the window of her great tower and looked down, her loose grey hair splattered against her face by the wind. She looked down into the valley, at the faint glimmer of street lights and chimney smoke. "This village will finally know fear as I did," she said. "When they cast me out, abandoned me to the elements. They will know my wrath."

The Clockwork Beast opened its jaw with a moaning, creaking sound. Its chin clanked against its hollow chest, letting out an empty, banging clamor. The doctor snapped back from the window. "Yes, yes it is time, my creation," she said. "I will let you loose." She crossed the stone tower, went to the leather straps tying down the Beast's foremost arm and undid the clasp.

Snap. The Beast's claw crunched against the doctor's jaw, lifting her off the ground, her toes dangling. The woman struggled against the rusty blades digging into her skin, her tongue hanging out, throat blocked with the pressure. The Beast brought the doctor close to its faceplate, the reflection of her straining expression ghosting in the electric lights of its eyes. The Beast watched her die, watched her struggle, bleed crimson from her neck onto its wires and springs, and eventually grow still. Her arms fell to her sides, the lightning flashed on the sharp elements of her empty face, and the Beast cocked its head to the side. Interesting.

It unclenched its grip, and the doctor's body dropped to the floor, crumpled and still. The Beast reached over its body, crossing to the strap on its other arm. Its claw ripped through the leather and jerked upwards, throwing the white sheet, now stained with crimson blood, off the Beast's legs. Thunder rumbled and the beast rose, its back hunched, steely feet screeching against the stone floor. The Beast stepped over the doctor, settling into an innate, programmed lumber, and loomed over to stare out the open window.

Its eyes were built to see through the darkness. The glowing yellow beams reached out into the night and found the village. The tower was positioned on the high end of the mountain, the houses far below, but even through the rain, the Clockwork Beast could see what the doctor's eyes could not.

Humans. Underneath the streetlights, stoking the fires in the homes, speaking through soft lips, touching with gentle hands, existing in a living world. A world where Clockwork did not belong.

It turned back to the floor of the tower. The doctor's skin lay abandoned and empty. Still soft, still warm slightly after death. The Beast looked down at its claws. Opened and closed them. They were sharp and metal and cold. It turned its head to the doctor's hands. Soft and round, and flesh.

The Beast considered for only a moment. Looked again to the village. Then reached out and picked up the abandoned skin.