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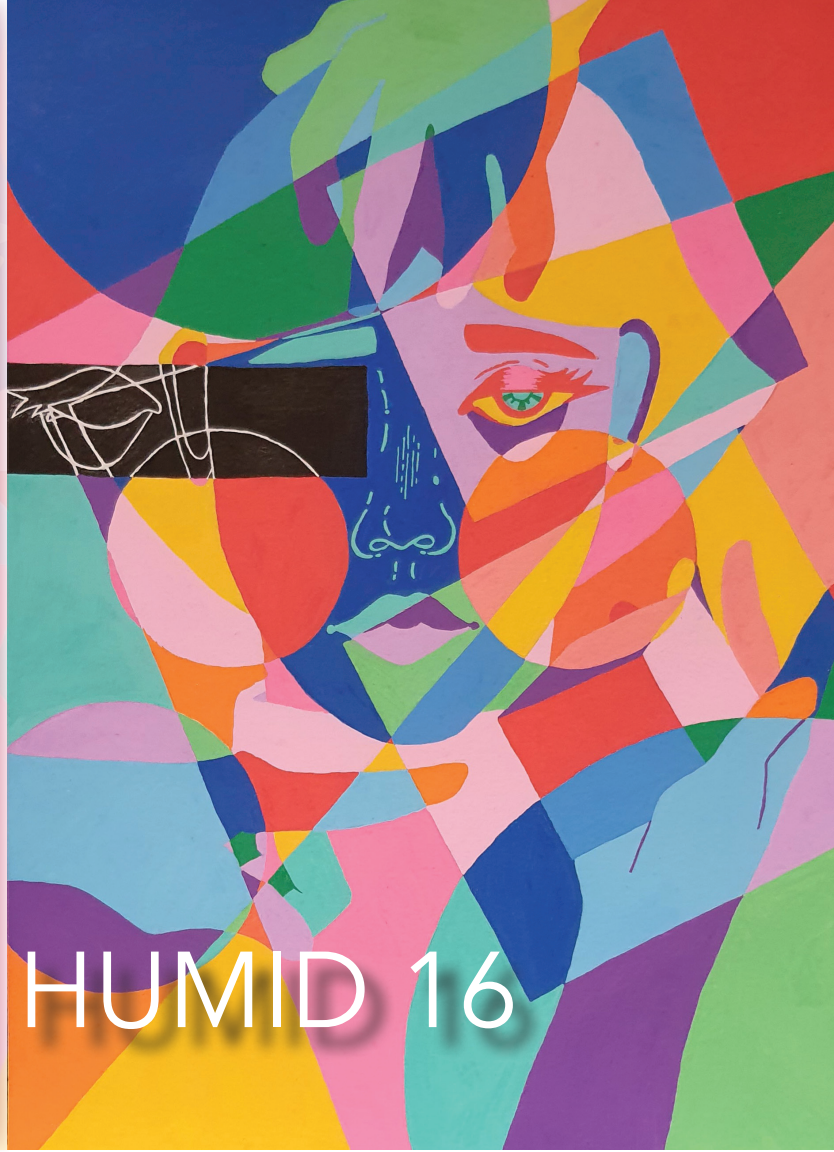
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Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, Texas

Online ISSN 2769-8343
Print ISSN 2769-8335

HUMID 16

FALL 2022



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HUMID is the undergraduate literary journal of Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Produced with the generous support of the Department of English and Creative Writing, the views expressed do not reflect those of the Department, the College of Liberal and Applied Arts, the administration, or the Board of Regents at Stephen F. Austin State University.

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Editors' Note

Coming of age, whether we accept it or not, is inevitable. Nevertheless, it brings the opportunity to grow from the experiences that mold our identities. We all have memories that define us and how we view the world. Each memory is impactful to the individual, but sharing them can impact all of us. Throughout this edition, we have selected pieces that represent formative moments from all walks of life but push us toward our independence.

Just like the child working with their parent to build a treehouse or the first time we scraped our knees, stories — no matter how small they are — have the potential to unite us. We hope this journal will be just that: a smell of crisp fall air for you and an inspiration for new beginnings, discussions, and connections.

Sincerely,

HUMID 16 Editors, 2022

Enough

2

By Megan Bynum



Enough

Megan Bynum

Drawing manikin, gold string, & candy-coated razor blades
2022

Expectations often drive human behavior, real or imagined, someone else's or our own. Utilizing gold thread, I represent the effects of expectations, and the stretching and pulling of the individual that occurs. Suspending the manikin over the candy-coated razor blades portrays the looming effects of failing and falling. I invite the audience to consider the implications of living and measuring oneself exclusively by expectations and attempting to define the abstract and often unattainable concept of "good enough." Despite the macabre and disheartening aesthetics of the piece, by capturing this moment in time, I am emphasizing the hope that we can lay these burdens down, relying instead on different criteria for our sense of self-worth.

Bright, Young Girls Among Small, Fragile Flowers

By Ellory Brossette

4

Weeds, my father calls them, before raking them to death.

Killers of grass, he says, and I imagine this must be true

as I watch their limp bodies smear across the dirt,

souls rested and astray right along with them.

One lonely survivor, peeking through a crack

in the concrete beneath me, holds a mirror to my head.

She tells me— that despite the teasing names

as we grow closer to pollination, painting us out to be nothing

but burdens and destroyers of surrounding life—

but we are flowers just the same.

Bright, mini daisies growing from the ground,

decorating the floor we walk on with our yellow petals,

the crystal dew drops given to our foreheads by the sun we thrive off of.

Young girls, she says, waiting to be raked by metal prongs

who deem us all too small and unworthy to exist among them.

Tall and radiant just like the grass, our careful home.

Questioning daughters like you, she says— no matter how small or frail,

no matter how destructible or weak in the eyes of our creators—

are flowers just the same, who grow strong

and sturdy and muddy and beautiful.

They are scared of us, she says,

scared of us flowers.

Scared of you, she says,

the flower, who grows just the same.

As I Read the In-betweens

By Ellory Brossette

5

As I stretch my arm to reach the highest shelf, I think,
it won't always be this way.

I may not always support the weight of evergreen,
of March and June on their very tips as I can now.
I may not always look this way, I think.

I may have scars from where my skin bounces back
as my arm comes down, blooming forest in hand, again—
In 50 years, maybe.
In just 20, maybe.

And then, I start to wonder if the lines by my eyes were always there,
I don't remember when they appeared,
as my raising eyes have never seemed as ever-changing
as the size of my big-as-ever hands.

The color on my cheeks or the marks on my nails,
the gentle shine in my voice or the silk of my hair.
And then, at 35, I wonder if I may just as well think:
maybe I've never really been shiny and new.

Maybe I've always been an old and dusty book,
pages dog-eared on all corners,
smiley faces drawn in the dirt of both cardboard covers—
pictures carved in both my beginnings and my ends.

Year-Round Teddy Bears

By Ellory Brossette

6

Cellophane shines back at the light from the ceiling it looks up at,
wrapped around old trinket jars and heart-shaped jewelry.

Theodore, handsome as ever, meets my mother's gaze
as her eyes gloss up in their corners,
pre-tidal oceans waiting to crash over him.

This does not scare me,
for I know he has always been a wonderful safety net;
he does not fear water, doesn't flinch
as it comes racing toward him,
embraces all that washes up with it—
the Band-Aids and bloody knees,
the boys who lie and the girls who tell too much,
the hair that knots up at the end and waits to be cut,
the shaking of my hand as it may soon linger over the door knob.
My mother missing me before it's time to go,
before I'm even gone.

And at this, I remember,
as the mountains of duffle bags seem to tower over the three of us,
the day Theodore came home with her.
Bearing the new stuffed animal tightly in my growing arms,
I asked her if I'd done something to deserve him.

Gifts don't always need a reason, she said,
just because I love you.

The door grows back up to that same, menacing size
as I walk toward it, my mother avoiding its stare.
Never much of a hugger, she knows,
but I give her one longer and tighter than ever before—
like the ones Theodore used to give in the mornings,
warm but full of dread for the length
in which we may have to part between the next.
Six gentle pats on her back,
just because I love you.

When the World Expects Me to Soon Raise its Children

By Ellory Brossette

8

As I become one of the world,
a mother already, I say,
to the men who hand me brooms at the breaking of their glasses.
To the dogs who lick my hands at the shaking of bowls,
to the children who look up at me, just barely.

A mother,
to the thunder who takes a day off and waits
for lightning to spark him once again
so that he may rumble rightfully the next morning.
To the growing pains who beautifully mark my body
a ticking time bomb, an explosion resting in potential
until time erupts forward.

A daughter, I say,
who waits and waits,
for time to drain her until she's an empty metal can
filling up the garden she's been watering
since she first took a drink from the sky above,
to fill it up with the flowers she's been known to love.
A fairy—
a great big freak of nature
sweeping shards from the ground in daylight
and painting nimbus over every stratus in the ceiling
once the sun goes down.

As I become one of the world,
the hands of a builder, and a home, they say.
And right back to them—
great big me, I say,
the making of great big me.

Beginnings

10

Bird, bird,
molt and shed,
feathers gone dull with time.

When new life begins,
something old must die.

Bird, bird,
carry away
on wings that glint
in the morning light.

Let past troubles
shrink below
as you spread anew
in flight.

By Agafia Bowden

Onward

By Agafia Bowden

11

The phoenix burns to ash, and rises,
all the more beautiful.

For us, life scrapes by and leaves its mark
in shadowed eyes,
smile lines and scars.
Memories.

Like Oak,
with his grooves and rings
of centuries,
intricacies in whorls and scuffs and knots,
our minds a mycelium map
of days.

Our focus shifts.
Our knowledge grows.
Our hearts are chipped and patched with bits
of hearts that we have known,
and we've seen so many colors
that we can't see color anymore.

Others they have swam to shore,
and we are left to row alone.
Rainbows breach in pieces through
the storm that runs
its course.

Home

12

All I have is what I know;
they can take all I'm supposed to own.
And all that's really mine is me,
so home can never leave.

By Agafia Bowden

Pine Trees

By Agafia Bowden

13

The oak can bear
the winter's brunt.
The oak can stand
alone in spring,
and in the fall
let go of old,
and oak withstands
the summer heat.

But we are less like
oak,
and more like
stands of pine;
snapping easily,
stretching too high.

Our limbs reach,
only to be broken
by turbulent skies.

Pine stands together
in tangled, messy woods,
and together—
that's how we survive.

Girl on the Corner

By Mary Deborah Talik

14

There's a girl on the corner,
she glances up as I walk by.
It looks like her world is ending,
her eyes are close to tears.

I wasn't sure what to say
that could cheer her,
and I almost considered
walking on, but her eyes
stopped me. Beautiful eyes that
once held a man's affection,
but she's alone now.

Her friends are nowhere to be seen.
She makes eye contact
with me, pleading with a stranger.

I look her in the eye, tell her
the truth her ex couldn't see.
"You're beautiful, worth more
than he will ever know."

She smiles at me, and though
we never spoke again, I still think of her
now and then, my encounter
with the girl in tears.

On *Water Lilies*

By Amelia Kleiber

15

The girl with the mousy brown hair
stands poised on the tips of her toes,
nose in the air, searching—

She can smell the orange
of the *Orangerie* & taste
the citrus hiss of the word
in her mouth. Round
& pulsing like a yawn
trapped in a lion's mouth.

She catches her reflection
in purple-blue pools
next to Monet's cloudy
beard, while the old
woman behind her peers
through a thick black lens.

The shutter clicks
but not loud enough
to wake the guard, slumped
over in his chair—
bottling the lilies for later
boiling lilies into photographic
perfume. The mousy-haired girl
wanders among the reeds
breathing in the perfume
of lilies as they are.

Imagining she lives under the bridge
& floats, bathed in green light,
watching as the sun hikes across
a blurry sky. Water stretches
its bleary arms around
the egg-shaped room
& the mouse reaches for a lily pad,
landing delicate, as a cup on a saucer.

Water Lilies

1906

Artist:

Claude Monet

French, 1840-1926

17

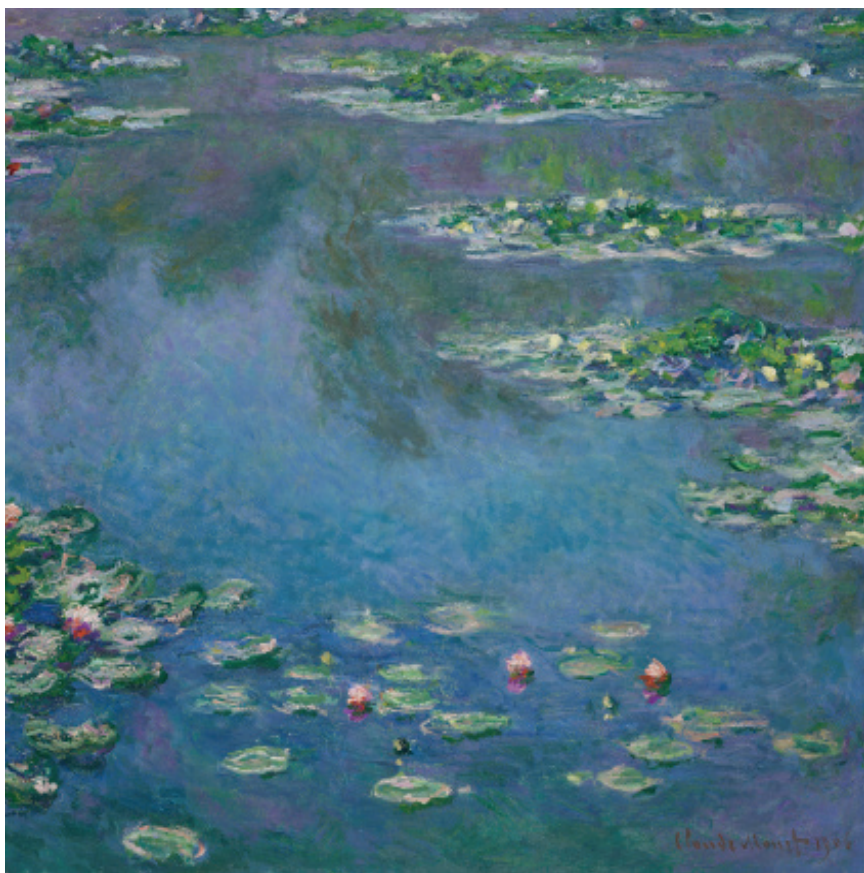


Photo credit: Art Institute Chicago

This Dance We Dance

18

By Parker Ramsey

My hands graze briefly against yours
as you pirouette gracefully on your toes,
not letting up for a second. We dip,
and leap, and it all feels so beautiful.

This dance we dance, to the song we sing
together. I trust you to know where
our feet should land, and you trust me
to catch you if there's a slip.

There's no crowd for our dance,
we've always done it in secret,
but you like it that way. Admittedly,
I've always preferred the audience.
Why dance if there's no one to see?
You breathe heavy, feet gliding across
the stage. We've tried this before,
but something would stop us
from seeing it the whole way through.
It seemed to always be on me
though I feel now it's because of you.
You reach me, and you leap
into the air. I watch you fly,
and this time I know
I won't catch you.

That Night With Him

By Parker Ramsey

19

A single moment can feel like
forever. We're silent, but the world makes
noise regardless — a siren in the distance,
a dog barking, an argument between
the neighbor's kids. We stay silent.
I hold him, and he holds me.

The moon is out, and its light seeps
in through my window. We should sleep.
There's work to be done tomorrow, but this,
whatever *this* is, feels too pleasant to leave.
My room is dark and the shadows linger,
but he's never seemed to mind the black.
I hold him, and he holds me.

I love him. I think I truly do. What he
thinks of me, I'd rather not know.
If he loves me, too, he still wouldn't
stay. And if he doesn't, I'm not sure I could
stomach the night. But tomorrow we part,
and he goes home. We go through our days
but one thing won't change: last night
I held him, and he held me.

Twin-Tea: an Emily Dickinson Style Poem

By Emily McFall

20

As like more than two years ago -
Still feels the same,
Stuck in everlasting limbo -
The Ending of a name.

Thrill, panic, blue
Never again the same
Life still so knew -
Ever without change.

Once was adored
Never so abhorred
Spite the new ending -
Ending of Sprite.

An alien imposter, mirror,
Still so far away, nearer,
Say goodbye, ending,
Say hello, terrifying.

“Tea” has come - I hate the bitter taste
Hide it with sugar and milk -
Such dramatics for a number change
But it is against my will.

More than two years ago
The fear of the coming age
The “Tea” I abhor,
Ending of the Juvenile Stage.

Paint Me a Picture

By Arron McMorris

21

Paint me a picture
of a slanted clock of time,
truth of honoring,
life as environment.
Whether yours or another
time as essence,
sent as a scent,
tastes like light
just before noon.

Butterfly moments,
a 3-D world captured
in different instances
make a history
rather than a picture.
As the paint dries
does our art not ensue?
While the painting
once a revelation
becomes an echo
a conversation in a coffeehouse

I can almost make out the song
that was playing.

The Trial of a Train

By Mia Criswell

22

“Train” the word
prattled and negotiated
in a terrified and tormented
tone of a toddler in tears.
Almost two and yet the trials
drift, towering on top of
the truth she’s trained
not to trust. Though
her 2T, teal, high tops
haven’t stood pointed
at the traumatizing tracks.
She strains to listen for its
frightening presence trilling
often in the distance.
Past the straight trail of
houses and onto the bustling
locomotive of timber and tin.
The sound travels its tapping and
whistle, towards the trialed infant

True recognition of Tomball's loudest
commotion doesn't enter her thoughts.
Naught but the destruction of
pleasant solitude to introduce tears
Security detailed within Aunt's arms
startle away terror, instead invite
safety and laughter, twirled until fright
trailed off as a distant thought.

Time waited for the moment
that this present innocence
would stand to see the truth.
The reality that tears and trains
persist in existing despite
our efforts to forget.

Lonely Memories

24

By Mia Criswell

Returning back to grandma's house again
I hear the sizzling sausage. The scent
of mom's perfume visiting like an old friend.
My comfy bed sheets turn into a tent
we race to taste the freshly baked gingerbread
waiting for little hands to come and dig
their fingers into icing brightly red.
Now I'm alone with my dripping Keurig
reminding me again. I hear the sound
of sister sneaking past the wooden stair
to turn on Christmas lights so bright and dear.
My brother peeking at the presents, he dares
to look around too early in the morning,
but now I'm the only one left here, mourning.

Gettysburg Drummer

By Skylar Free

25

A slow drumming among the reeds,
beats like bullets as they hit his ear,
 bullets tearing into bodies around him.
 His mother still wrote to him sometimes,
letters he was not allowed to see.
Soldiers weren't to be distracted.
 Nothing could distract him from hitting his drum.
 Musket burned bodies float in the water,
bumping against his calves with blank faces.
Cannonballs splashed with scalding water and steam.
 Scalding bites of steaming apple pies
 made his mouth water as he thought of home.
They'd let him go home eventually if he
continued his slow drumming among the reeds.

Loss of Self

By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez

26



A Train in Session

By Maggie Brown

This world held a million mysteries, but the one Cora was concerned with was why the damned door wouldn't open. People had been shuffling in and out for hours. The little sprightly bell went off every time when someone decided to just hop on or off. All they had to do was press the little circle within the circle, and voilà! The whole world to greet them.

At first, she thought she had the wrong ticket. She wasn't normally one to spring for the more expensive, but just this once, she'd thought it'd be worth it. After all, how often do you journey across the country?

So, while at the kiosk, Cora had handed the teller an extra Rukborn, and he'd handed her a ticket.

Premium, All Sales Final.

That was all it said. There was no texture on the ticket, no pattern, nothing. Just a semi-thick, glossy, white ticket with those words printed on it. Cora turned it over in her hands now, hoping she'd missed a part. This premium experience, it wasn't what she had signed up for. She'd imagined plush seats, gourmet meals, and maybe even a butler like the old nobility had had. Instead, she'd found hell.

On the outside, the train had looked like all other trains. Cora should have paid more attention to the details. Only, when one is in the middle of an emotional rush, as Cora had been, the little things tend to slip through the cracks. What Cora had needed; Cora had found. For years, perhaps even decades, she had imagined these moments. The teller, the departure, and what she was most excited for: change.

East Ferrin wasn't the uncivilized city people dreamed it to be. There were no longer outlaws that ran around at night, or at least not ones that had bothered her. Instead, in the vastness of brown, her little gleaming city sat upon a whisper of a river. There were no ports, no large bodies of water, no mountains or mines. East Ferrin existed only because the people willed it so. Over centuries, immigrants, along with Cora's ancestors, had been put to work. A bank here and a little church there. Clydesdales turned into tractors, men became winged, and tradition adapted. East Ferrin became a city of the world, but her family remained people of the city.

The other half of her people had made their way through the back country. A people of thick skin, bruised fists, and strict faith. Recently, they'd disguised themselves as civilized. Their gadgets were just a bit better than everyone else's, just a tad bit more judgmental. As worldly as East Ferrin was, Caster was full of sameness. Same lawns, same brick, same ornamental features, and the same people. Cora spent summers and weekends in Caster, and her youth in East Ferrin.

She had wanted to get away. Not to leave behind those she loved, but to see the world for herself. So, sobbing, she'd bought that train ticket. It was important to remember that women didn't cry. Bits and pieces of Cora had come from each place, and Caster had been a place of steel will and silent endurance. East Ferrin might allow others to leak tears, but Caster would pray for their weak souls.

Cora, with eyes of salt, had not noticed how quickly people came and went. People did not stay on the train for long. It was hours before the ringing of the mystical bell came to her attention. By then, as you know, it was much too late. These trains work on... well, we're not entirely certain. But it's dangerous to remain.

At the seventh stop, a woman sat down next to her. Unlike the other passengers, Ellwyn had been on for years. At first glance, Cora had thought her normal. She was kind, and a bit loud. There were small conversations here and there. As stops became slightly more frequent, a sort of tension developed. It wasn't sharp. At least, not yet. It was in glances, the undertone of words and compliments, the carelessness with which Ellwyn seemed to snap at newcomers. They were meant as jokes, Ellwyn assured Cora. Others were simply unable to comprehend them. Cora blushed and inched closer to the window.

Days came and went, and the sun swirled 'round the train like a pole dancer.

Without such stormy emotions, Cora had begun to notice little things. When Ellwyn snipped or snapped, the train gave a shudder. At times, these shudders (which alerted few other passengers) were intense. Ellwyn would excuse herself. Hours later she'd return with bags under her eyes and a new kindly attitude. It was odd, but as Cora was only here for a while, she decided not to ponder it too much.

Ellwyn gave her no choice.

At stop thirty-four, Ellwyn snipped at Cora. It wasn't entirely unexpected, but Cora had been nothing but kind. Or, she had kept to herself. To Cora, that was being kind. Being of backwooded people, her first reaction to the snip was anger. How *dare* Ellwyn. Cora, like her family, might mind her own, but to snip was to cut, and her family never let them heal. Ellwyn had etched herself onto Cora's skin and there was no going back.

The train began to shake. Seats rattled, windows cracked, and the lights flickered in and out. Like always, Ellwyn got up. Unlike always, Cora followed.

In the car next door, there were two mats decorating the floor. They were the same soft texture, the same large size, and differed only in hue. Left was yellow, right was red. Ellwyn claimed the red, so Cora (mad as she was) staked her claim on the yellow.

I could not, in good faith, tell you what went on in that room. Cora considered them sessions of sorts, or punishments of care. After all, if the train didn't care for Ellwyn or Cora, it wouldn't demand such sessions. The train was acting in the interests of its passengers. A kind, benevolent train.

When Ellwyn and Cora sat back down (in still seats by crack-less windows), they attempted new attitudes. But the cut remained bleeding, and with every stop, Ellwyn bought a new knife. Session repeated session repeated session. These acts of care became a daily occurrence. No longer could Cora sleep, or eat, or (at times) breathe. Sometimes, she'd go walking the cars, trying to gain a moment of peace. She could think a bit better away from Ellwyn. The fog that had descended over her brain cleared a bit and her now massive wound would begin to creep closed. Only she had made the mistake of returning to her seat.

At stop one-twenty-seven, the session ended in the casting out of Ellwyn. She went kicking, screaming, crying, but she went, nonetheless. Cora, who was raised with the courtesy to turn her head when others received punishment, watched the casting with a tired...emptiness? Thus was the issue of love and hate. Cora neither loved nor hated Ellwyn. There were moments she debated, but when it came down to it, Ellwyn was just Ellwyn. She had the faculties to understand what she did, when she did it. But Ellwyn, like Cora, had made a God of the train. It could do no wrong, it could only be obeyed (or a session would be endured). How much hate can one have for a fellow worshipper?

Without Ellwyn, the sessions ceased. There were longer gaps between the stops. Cora often thought she saw her old seatmate in the distance, bags under eyes. The train demanded sessions when Cora sympathized too much or too little with Ellwyn. She wasn't sure what to do, but she tried to guess anyway.

At stop one-fifty, Cora bought paper, pens, and began to borrow books from the local Booker. Letters went home, letters returned. They spoke ill of the train, and this pissed Cora off. The train was doing nothing but transporting her. She made her own decisions. (Another Session). The books spoke of a world outside the train. (Another Session). The Booker, who traded Cora books through the window, grew concerned.

"Are you okay?" The Booker asked.

Cora didn't know the answer. She was always tired, never slept, never ate, found it hard to breathe, and was questioning every

thought she had. How was she supposed to utter all that to The Booker?

“I’m-” (Another Session) “good.”

The Booker was not convinced. New books flowed in the window.

At stop one-sixty, a new passenger, one that had been on for two (two!) stops, got off. She handed Cora a letter and an address.

This is not a normal train.

Cora ignored the message, but she began writing to the young woman. She was sweet and kind, and while her life seemed to be more unstable than a tornado, she took the time to write to Cora. So, Cora made sure to write back. When it came to the train, Cora remained loyal. There were times she was annoyed with the train when- (Another Session). There were times Cora became frustrated at the lack of communication- (Another Session). There were times Cora made the mistake of assuming it was the train’s fault.

By stop one-seventy, every letter she received wrote about the train. *This isn’t normal. Get off. Trains don’t have sessions*, Cora dear. Cora was too tired to take these warnings seriously. (Another Session). Cora was too loyal to listen to her jealous family or the young woman who didn’t know the full story. The Booker continued giving her books.

“You good, Cora?”

“Yeah, just tired, Mr. Booker.”

At stop two hundred, Ellwyn returned.

This was the first time Cora debated getting off. (Another Three Sessions). Ellwyn needed help, so she’d gotten back on the train. There was screaming, crying, tired outbursts. Session after session after session. They lasted hours and seconds, and Cora began to wonder if this train was- (Another Session).

At stop-two hundred-and-ten, Cora made a mistake:

“May I get off? Just for the night?”

The train remained silent. There was no shaking, no session, nothing. For a few days, Cora tiredly wondered what she had done wrong. She apologized, begged, pleaded, did everything she could to repent, but this time there was no session. The train was quiet. Stops didn’t exist. Ellwyn, who had returned with new knives and bags under her eyes, glared at Cora as she made her way to her red mat.

Cora hadn’t known quiet in so long.

It wasn’t peace.

Not quite.

But it was quiet.

The Booker announced he was out of books. The young woman and her family wrote letters. They'd be waiting at the next station if she wanted off.

So, while Ellwyn was in session, Cora gathered her things, and like all the other passengers before her, tapped the little circle. It didn't budge. She pressed it again, not believing what had just happened. Push, nothing, push, nothing, push, nothing- she was stuck.

Cora moved back to her seat, dropped all her bags on the floor, and wondered. Why wouldn't the damn door open? It worked for everyone else that wanted off.

And suddenly, it was too much. The past months, all the sessions, the bleeding cuts Ellwyn had left behind, letters screaming warnings and her defenses- How many of them were even her own? Cora couldn't think without doubting every word that popped into her mind, Cora couldn't eat without berating herself, Cora couldn't sleep without thinking of all she had done. Put simply, Cora couldn't.

So, Cora cried.

In most stories, water is renewal. It is the storm inside finally erupting into the real world and washing it away so that a character may begin anew. But this was not the rich beginning of summer rain, or the relief after a winter's blizzard. This was an emptying. Cora was not new, and the storm had been waging in the real world for quite some time. This was simply Cora finally allowing herself to be.

At the next stop, the young woman and Cora's family (Casters and East Ferrins alike) stood with crowbars, hammers, and brass knuckles. She simply watched as they broke the window. Glass shards rained in the train and on the platform, adding glitter to the ground. Carefully, and with care Cora had long forgotten, her family pulled her out of the train.

It left.

Over the next few months, Cora spent time in Caster and East Ferrin, slowly relearning the way of life she'd known so well only a year before.

Caster, for all its toughness and faith, relied on nature more than anything else. It was a town of rolling fields, sunsets, and bird songs. During the day dogs barked, chickens clucked, and far in the distance a single donkey brayed. At night, the sun and moon danced in the sky. Trees, the immovable giants, swayed calmly in the eastern breeze. Here, in Caster, Cora remembered how to breathe.

In East Ferrin, the air was a bit darker. The people though, were strung together like a quilt. Her grandmother knew every house in the neighborhood, and her grandfather the people within them. Cousins, parents, aunts, and uncles, all fluttered together with a rhythm Cora had never noticed. For all the bickering

and petty remarks Cora had once hated, she found familial love beneath them. The people of Caster relied on the world, and the people of East Ferrin relied on each other.

Packed once again, Cora put her things into the back of a buggy. She would leave again. This time though, she knew to keep an eye out. As Cora and her family got into the buggy, a ticket flew by on the wind.

With a quiet glance, she turned away. *Trains be damned.*

Smoke Break

By Parker Ramsey

33

Hank's large triangle nose crinkled any time one of the nurses or assistants came by his room. He didn't like people in his space and he wanted to make it known. He set up his books delicately, arranged his photos just so, and kept his VHS collection exactly how he wanted it. The janitors always moved his stuff to clean. For no damn good reason, he thought. If he wanted to clean he would. As if being dumped in a nursing home wasn't bad enough, he had to be stripped of his privacy too.

Hank considered himself lucky that he didn't have a roommate anymore. He died a month back and Hank was more than happy to take over his part of the room. For hours at night, he could sit alone and be at peace. He could put on one of his movies and pretend he was all alone.

At midday, there was a knock at the door. His nose crinkled. He hated the man who brought him lunch. Always so bright and cheery. His smugness irked Hank. The door opened but the man at the door wasn't whom he expected. It was a new guy bringing his lunch. He was tall and skinny and very young, no more than eighteen, his long red hair pulled back in a knot.

"Hey, Hank," the man said, "my name's George. I'm bringing you your meals now." George's tone was dry. He very obviously did not want to be there. Hank's response was similarly dry.

"Yeah, just set it over there. I'll get it when I'm hungry."

When the door closed he struggled his way out of bed. It embarrassed him to think of somebody seeing him struggle with something so simple. The food was disgusting. He needed a smoke.

He took his seat on the bench outside the door. He hated that he had to be accompanied by a member of staff just to smoke. He wasn't going to run, they should know that. He's not stupid. They had him be escorted by George, who was coincidentally also taking a smoke break. George pulled out his cigarettes and lighter and went through the ritual. Hit the box, pull a cigarette, flick the lighter twice, and take a pull. Hank chuckled at the sight and pulled out his cigar — a man's way of smoking. He chomped off the end, pulled out his matches, and struck one. It didn't light. He tried another one. Nothing.

"Aw, hell," he groaned. George silently offered his lighter.

"It'll ruin the flavor. The flame from a match is better."

“But this is faster.”

George looked at the lighter, and, after a moment's deliberation, took the lighter and lit his cigar. They smoked in silence for a while, but George's cigarette was coming down to the last few pulls. He eyed Hank's long cigar.

“You finishing that?”

“I might.”

“Jesus, man.”

“The hell's your problem?”

“That's gonna take you an hour to smoke.”

“So what if it does! I'm enjoying my time outside! You got someplace better to be?”

George didn't have a retort. He fell silent again. Before long he pulled out another cigarette. He flicked his lighter, but no flame came out. Hank laughed and pulled out his matches. He offered them silently. George took the box and struck one with ease.

“Kid,” Hank said, “how often do you come out and smoke?”

“How often do you?”

“I'm not judging you. Look at me I've been smoking my whole life, who am I? Listen, next time you wanna smoke, come get me.”

Hank put out his cigar and placed it in his front shirt pocket. George looked a lot like Hank when he was a young man, and he sure acted like it, too. George took one last drag of his cigarette before putting it out too and walking back into the nursing home with Hank. He accompanied him back to his room, and, for the first time since Hank had moved in, he started telling his stories. He kept it short, kept it brief. He wasn't some social butterfly, he was still a rude old man, but he finally found somebody he felt he could relate to.

When they arrived at Hank's door, he turned to George and smiled. “Thank you for indulging an old man,” he said and headed inside. He saw his photos were moved ever so slightly an inch to the left by the damned janitors. He put them all over to where they should be, but he stopped at one. He'd seen it every day for god knows how many years, but today felt like the first time in a long time. He looked at his son in his navy uniform. He would've been forty-five had he still been alive, but to Hank, he would forever be a young man, no older than eighteen. His red hair was cut short — just barely noticeable under his hat. Hank sucked it back in and wiped the tears from his eyes. He put the photos back into their places and struggled his way back into bed.

The Wrecks We See in the Road

By Parker Ramsey

35

Dave and Lisa's marriage never quite recovered after 9/11, but their son, Jonny, didn't know what that was yet. He was alive when it happened, and the event cascaded into most facets of his life, but the changed world was all Jonny really knew. His parents didn't live together, cameras were set up in the halls of his elementary school, and his father *never* wanted to take a plane to visit his parents. Jonny lived with his mom the majority of the time in the house she bought before he was born. Lisa had told Jonny her job was to make sure good people were treated fairly and bad people were punished. Dave had told Jonny, when he asked, that his mom got people to argue and made lots of money doing it.

Jonny didn't talk much at school. He was friends with the kid who sat at the back of the class eating his boogers, but Jonny never thought much of it. If they taste good, why begrudge a man his simple pleasures? One of the booger-eater's other simple pleasures was giving their teacher hell. He didn't choose the spot at the back of the class, he was placed there after he spent his time pulling on the girls' hair, stepping on the boys' new shoes, and the final straw of shooting a spit ball right in Mrs. Hoover's face.

"Jonny," the booger-eater said, "I just thought of something that would be funny."

"What?"

"What if we put tacks on the teacher's chair?"

"Is that funny?"

"Yeah it's really funny! I did it before and everybody thought it was funny."

It never took much convincing for Jonny to join his friend's schemes. Despite seeming glaringly obvious this was a bad idea in hindsight, Jonny saw nothing but a good friend with a practical sense of humor. That day was especially perfect for their plan, as it was the 100th day of school that year, and a Friday no less. As was custom, the kids had a day to take a break from their work and eat a single slice of pizza while the teachers put on a movie and talk amongst themselves. Their teacher's eyes would be on them less than usual, and she would be away from her desk more than usual. It was the perfect plan and Jonny's friend just knew it.

~

After a few hours, Jonny had mostly forgotten about the scheme, being sucked in by the brownies one of his classmates had brought to share. The booger-eater approached Jonny when he noticed their teacher had stepped out into the hallway.

"It's time," he said, "I have the thumbtacks right here." He reached into his right jacket pocket and revealed a pair of brightly colored tacks. Jonny poked one, but quickly reeled back from the sharp edge. That hurt more than he thought it would.

"Are you sure? It seems like that might hurt her."

"She'll think it's funny."

She did not think it was funny. Once she had returned to the class she grabbed a cookie from the counter, and promptly plopped herself down on her chair. In less than a second she jumped back up and screamed, scaring the kids in the class — Jonny most of all. This was his doing. She pulled the small pins from the seat of her pants and looked at them, stewing in her rage. Then, as if planned by a divine comic of the universe, Jonny's booger eating friend burst into a fit of cackles. Jonny shot his eyes in the direction of his friend who was rolling on the ground, crying with laughter. His hands started to sweat, and his stomach started to turn. Maybe those brownies weren't a good idea after all.

It didn't take long for Jonny's friend to admit he had an accomplice. Jonny was called up to see the principal. He had never been inside the principal's office before. The booger eater had told him that it wasn't scary, and that even when he had been given detention it wasn't that bad. Jonny wasn't so sure about all of that anymore. He was seated on a bench outside the door. The hallway stretched in both directions, and the white walls combined with the strong fluorescent lights felt blinding. He heard a constant thud sound and convinced himself it was a kid being paddled, but it was only his heart which was beating hard and fast. He had already thrown up into a nearby trash can. Why was he sick? He didn't have a fever this morning, but he felt *hot* and he felt *sick*.

After what felt like an eternity, the principal opened the door to his office. He looked down at Jonny with a face he was convinced could only be from a demon. Without either of them saying a word, they both found their places in the office. The principal spoke quietly yet firmly. Jonny couldn't focus on anything being said. Before he knew it, the principal had his mom on the phone. Jonny listened closely, hoping desperately his mom would rescue him, but he had trouble hearing everything from the phone.

"Hello," the principal said, "is this Lisa Lovejoy?"

Jonny heard his mom respond in confirmation.

"This is Principal Hammond calling from Elm Tree Elementary. Your son got into some trouble and we're sending him home early. He's going to be suspended for the next week. We can go over the details on Monday. How soon could you be here to pick him up?"

Jonny didn't hear every word that came from the phone, but he did hear one word: Father.

"I'll try him. Thank you."

His mom was about to enter a courtroom to defend a drunk driver when she had gotten the call. With it being Friday, and his dad Dave's time to have Jonny over the weekend, he was the wrinkle that had to be ironed out.

His dad was able to pick him up, though he had to take off work to do so. When he arrived at the school he was still wearing his dirty coveralls from the car repair shop he worked at. He apologized profusely to the principal, who responded in kind with a monologue about proper behavior. "It's absolutely unacceptable," the principal said. "I've already told his mother we should have a talk about this on Monday, and I expect you to be here too."

~

Though Jonny and his mom lived in Queens, Jonny's dad had moved to an apartment in Brooklyn after the divorce. It took a little over a half hour on a good day to drive one way from Dave's apartment to Jonny's elementary. He got there in record time. Driving home was a different story. Traffic had backed up due to a car accident that completely blocked the road. Jonny was fascinated by the wrecked cars he saw hauled away on tow trucks. How could a car get that mangled? The image burned into his mind, adding to his nausea.

Jonny and his dad were silent in the car at first. Dave looked back at Jonny in the rear view mirror where he sat, buckled up, staring out the window.

"What were you thinking, Jonny? Putting tacks on the teacher's chair?" Dave said.

Jonny mumbled something approximating, "I don't know." He felt like he would be sick again.

"We taught you better than this. *I* taught you better than this. You have to respect your teacher! Stabbing her with little needles is *not* how you do that Jonny. Frankly, it's fu-," Dave caught himself. "It's absolutely unacceptable." Jonny looked down, not wanting to meet his father's fiery glare in the mirror. He wiped the sweat from his shaky hands on his shorts.

"When we get home I want you to go straight to your room. If you have homework, you get it done, then I want you to write an apology to Mrs. Hoover. Do you understand me?" Dave watched Jonny nod slowly, still not meeting his gaze. The two rode in silence the rest of the way.

Jonny was drafting his apology the entire ride, and walk up the stairs to his father's apartment. "Dear Mrs. Hoover, I am oh so sorry for hurting your butt. I'll never do it again," seemed a good place to start, but he knew there weren't enough words to feel truly sincere. He needed for her to tell him it was okay, that she wasn't upset. He tried to think of big words to prove he put thought into what he was writing, but none came to mind.

It was always a shock to Jonny how small his apartment was. His mom's house was by no means a mansion, but compared to this it truly felt like it. Dave had one bedroom, one bathroom, half of a kitchen, and a small space for a pull out couch and TV that barely passed as a living room. That was where Dave slept, leaving the bed for Jonny when he had him on weekends.

"Go to your room. I'll bring you dinner when I have it ready. You better be doing your homework when I do," Dave said. He tried to put on the same stern voice he used in the car, but the energy simply wasn't there for it anymore.

Jonny went to his room and dropped his backpack down on the bed, then sat down on the edge of the mattress. He looked down at his light-up shoes, which he'd forgotten to remove at the door. His mom got them for him after he got straight A's on his report card. He remembered how proud he'd felt of himself and the way he strutted with them on the next day, feeling like the envy of every kid he passed. Now he felt shame for wearing them. He didn't deserve his nifty light-up shoes.

He kicked the shoes off and tossed them under the bed before rolling over and crying. His life was over in that moment. The school wouldn't accept him back, he would lose the love of his parents, never again would he wear light-up sneakers, and Mrs. Hoover would never forgive him. He cried softly into his pillow until he fell asleep.

~

Jonny awoke to the smell of spaghetti in the air. It was the only thing his dad knew how to cook. He could hear his dad talking on the phone in the next room. He couldn't hear what he was saying, but he sounded sad. After a few minutes, Dave hung up the phone, and then silence. Jonny could hear cars outside, sirens, the neighbor's music — but nothing from the next room over. Then after a few minutes his dad knocked on the door.

"Hey, kiddo," Dave said from the other side of the door, "can I come in?" Jonny grunted a yes to the door, which slowly creaked open. Dave turned on a small lamp in the corner of the room, giving a soft light for them to see each other with.

"I didn't do my homework," Jonny said, "I don't think the school will want me back."

"That's okay, buddy. I'm sure they'll want you back."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know?" Dave said. Jonny nodded his reply. Dave thought for a moment, and looked out the window. The skyline of Manhattan lay in the distance. Dave looked across it as if something were missing. Jonny watched his dad's face realize what was gone.

Dave crouched next to Jonny's bed. "I did the same thing when I was your age. I put tacks on my teacher's chair. And you know what happened after that?"

“What?”

“I went back to school the next day, and she kept teaching me.”

“But I hurt her, and I think it made me sick. I threw up.”

“That just means you feel bad for doing it. That’s a good thing that you feel that way. We all make mistakes. But you learn from them, and you don’t make the same mistakes again.”

“Do you still make mistakes, Daddy?”

“All the time.”

“Does Mommy make mistakes?”

“Yes, your mom makes mistakes. But don’t tell her I said that, huh?” Dave winked at Jonny with a smile. “Listen, I made some spaghetti — do you wanna come eat and see if we can’t find something good on TV?”

“*Star Wars*?”

“We’ll see. C’mon, kiddo. After we can see about writing that apology, sound good?” Jonny nodded enthusiastically and hopped out of bed. He started to leave the room but turned around at the door and ran back to the bed, diving under the frame and grabbed his light-up shoes. He placed them back on his feet and stood, proudly.

“You going somewhere?” Dave said. Jonny shook his head and walked out the door to get his spaghetti. Dave looked back to the window — back to the city skyline — and held his breath before closing the door to his son’s bedroom.

Unnamed 1235-903

40

By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez



Jagged Porcelain

By Skyla Free

41

1990

He died later that year. Anthony searched the crowd for his father, his feet shuffling over the weathered stage of the Renaissance Faire that always left scuffs on his shoes. This year, as a gift for his enrollment to the University of Montana, his father bought him a new pair of shoes. The cherrywood Nappa leather gleamed as Anthony pulled them out, the deep red darkening into black after the wingtips. While his father tried to hide the fact they broke the bank, Anthony knew the Oxford brand. He tried his best to step as delicately as he could while not looking stupid.

“Tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed.” Anthony bellowed, continuing his lines as he finally spotted his father. His father smiled back, though Anthony thought he looked pale, his smile wavering slightly. Seconds later, his father was seizing on the ground, his own patched suit rubbing into the dirt.

2006

Anthony shook off the memory and cupped his hands near his face, puffing as he lit a cigarette. He leaned against the wall of the only gas station in Rosepark, Montana, one leg propped against the concrete. The smoke of his cigarette stained the air as he finished it rather quickly. He coughed, spit, and reached into the pack for another. Meanwhile, a blue firebird pulled off the highway, parking in front of him. He turned to walk to the other side of the lot when a familiar man dressed in a silky black suit and navy tie stepped out.

His crocodile leather shoes crunched against the gravel; he buttoned his jacket as he came closer. He had a friendly expression and threw his hands up in greeting.

“Hey man, long time no see. You doing well?” The man asked, his voice tight and strained as he tried to act casual.

Anthony ignored his question, hissing, “What are you doing here? I’m busy. Go away, Anika.”

Anika put his hands down and slumped his shoulders, dropping the casual act, “Hey, look, I know you’re trying to push people away, Tony, but with this can- ”

Before he finished, Anthony punched him square on his nose, sending him into the gravel holding his face. Blood seeped through his ringed fingers and adorned his tie with purple splotches.

1981

When he was nine, Anika Khalil moved to Rosepark. His father was Egyptian and his mother Polish – Tony later learned they had moved to America to escape the war in Europe, bouncing around the states until settling in Montana. Tony thought the boy was fascinating, and, wanting to enjoy the summer, he begged his father to let him play with the new kid. Harold Miller agreed, telling him to stay in the neighborhood while ruffling his hair.

Anika didn't speak English very well and had a strange accent, but it wasn't long before the two were inseparable. They spent the summer building a fort behind Tony's house, camping between the slanted walls when their parents would let them. Tony also taught Anika to read there, using the walls to pin pieces of paper with large letters scrawled on them.

Despite being younger than most, Tony towered over everyone in his grade. Once school started, he was glad to have the height advantage over Anika's bullies. He protected him for years.

When they were 13, the two boys fought over Evelyn, a blond haired farm-girl with green eyes. Tony thought they looked like the emerald-studded jewelry he saw on late night infomercials. Evelyn introduced Tony to theater — their first date was to the Renfaire and it became an annual outing they'd spoil themselves on.

Anika's parents died from a car crash when they were 14. Tony's dad stumbled out to their fort to break the news, finding the pair trading baseball cards and lusting over a playboy pinned to the wall. That was the first time Tony saw Anika cry. When Tony found out Anika was moving to Egypt to live with an aunt, he pleaded with his father to do something. Eventually, it was sorted out with the family and decided Anika would be best left rooted in Rosepark and Harold adopted him.

2006

"God, Tony, what the fuck?!" Anika moaned, trying to stop his nosebleed unsuccessfully.

"It's Anthony. You don't get to call me that anymore. Not after you left." Anthony flicked the butt of his cigarette to the gravel before lighting another. He tried to ignore Anika, hoping he'd get up and leave when he noticed a pick-up turning into the station. The truck's windows were tinted, but he knew who it was — his dealer. It slowed for a second, and Anthony almost felt hopeful the driver would stop. However, Anthony spat in annoyance as he watched the truck turn sharply back out of the lot.

"God fucking damnit. See what you did?" Anthony kicked Anika's leg, growling as he scratched his arm and pulled his sleeve down.

"Fucking tell me what you want so you can leave already."

Anika managed to stop the bleeding, holding a handkerchief against his bruised nose, giving his normally smooth voice a nasally tone.

"I... Fine, okay, I came here because I saw your charts. I know about the cancer, Tony—" He corrected himself as Anthony gave him a look, "...Anthony. They caught it early, so why aren't you getting treatment?"

Anthony stiffened. Of all people, he never expected to talk to Anika about his disease. His doctor had told him he was contacting a neurosurgeon as the cancer spread to his spine, but he never knew the name of the consult.

"I'm not talking about this. Get back in your car and get your pretty little ass out of here."

"I'm not taking no for an answer, Anthony. What does Evelyn think? Surely she's tried talking you into getting chemo."

Anthony disregarded his estranged wife's name, instead gritting his teeth and pushing Anika's chest.

"Oh go to hell. You think you can just come back like everything's fine? After all these years you think I want to talk to you? You're the one that ruined everything, don't fucking try to fix it now, you don't know me anymore."

1993

Anthony gave a stupid grin to his wife, pushing the sweat matted hair out of her face as they lay together on their honeymoon. She laughed, pushing him back onto the bed.

"God, that was awful."

Anthony frowned, trying to see if she was serious before she continued on,

"We are *never* doing that position again. That was... just awful. Oh, you were great though!" She laughed again, reaching to flick his nose. "You always are, don't look so gloomy... I might know what could cheer you up..."

A year later, Samantha Harley was born, and Anthony had everything he wanted.

They took annual trips to the Renfaire and, in the latest years, Evelyn had gotten into the habit of dressing up as a wood-elf and volunteering.

Once, when she was working the turkey leg booth, Anthony came up behind her and pulled her hat over her eyes.

"Yknow what you look like? Like those Star Wars fans that used to go to the theater."

Evelyn gasped, fixing her hat, "You take that back!"

"Make me," Anthony chuckled in a playful way, leaning down so his face was level with hers. He stuck out his tongue.

Evelyn narrowed her eyes before reaching up, grabbing his tongue, and pulling slightly. While Anthony was still recovering, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss.

2002

Anthony tossed his keys onto the counter, returning home after forcing Anika back into his car. He groaned and scratched his arm again, tearing his hoodie off to reveal his shirtless body underneath. His track-marked arms lost the muscle he once had. He dug into the hoodie to find his flip phone, staring at the screen before calling the one on the speed dial.

"I already know what you're going to ask, man. No." The voice on the other end was garbled with static.

"Come o—" Anthony croaked.

"No." Click.

Anthony frowned and looked at the screen. The only other contact in the phone was Evelyn, though he hadn't called her since that night. He sighed and tossed the phone onto the counter, deciding to take a hot shower and then head to bed.

When he woke, his sheets were soaked, his body drenched in cold sweat. Whimpering, Anthony pushed himself up to a sitting position, cradling his head. He had a splitting headache, feeling the effects of withdrawal crash against his skull. His nose was runny, causing him to sniffle as he eventually convinced his body to stand up.

He scratched his arm, pacing around the disheveled room: old take out, dirty clothes, and used needles were scattered over the floor. He began to tear it apart, throwing everything onto his bed. Surely he missed the leftovers. Surely he had even a little bit left.

After twenty agonizing minutes of digging — pricking himself with a needle or two along the way — Anthony let out a defeated sigh and struggled into the kitchen.

Stumbling, he pushed overdue bills and the plate of lasagna from two nights ago off the counter, desperately trying to find his phone. Finding it, he shakily dialed a number, holding the phone to his head as each trill made him wince. Despite Anthony calling over and over, the line never picked up. He held the phone to his forehead, muttering to himself before a flash of anger made him slam it into the counter, cracking the screen.

2002

His life was moving too fast — he swore that he turned around for a second and then Sam was six, handing him a porcelain plate she made with her mother with a very poorly drawn stick figure family that looked more like fish than people. Anthony thanked her for the gift, saying he would love it always before reaching down to ruffle her hair. He winced as he remembered his father. Since Sam was born, he often did.

A month after, as Anthony's 30th birthday approached, he began to get more irritable. Unable to hold down a job, the family relied on Evelyn to make ends meet, and Anthony did his best to

help around the house. It wasn't that Evelyn yelled at him, hell, he'd rather that happen. Instead, she was sympathetic. Anthony hated sympathy — his life had more than its share.

Worst of all was Sam. She came home from kindergarten one day asking about what hunting was — how the other kids said their older siblings and parents did it and how they went on trips. Anthony struggled to answer her questions, stammering over his words as she rambled. God did she do that a lot, just like his dad.

"Okay. Okay. Stop. STOP." Anthony bit his lip as soon as he raised his voice but tears already welled in her eyes as she ran to her room. He didn't stop her, partially because his wife stood, with her hands on her hip, looking at him with pursed lips.

"Tony...What's wrong?" She was the only one that still called him that at all, and only when she really needed his attention. There it was again. Sympathy. Not yelling, not throwing things. Sympathy. God it drove him mad.

"Is this about your papa?" Her eyes softened as she looked at Anthony, "That trip he promised when you turned 30? Oh Tony..." She kept her words soft to try and soothe him but Anthony had already felt his blood boil. All the bills, the questions, the fucking sympathy, it all drove him to a breaking point. Before he knew it, he backhanded Evelyn, screaming, "Yell at me, Damn it!"

2002

He sat there for a few hours, holding himself. His body didn't want to move, his head still pounding. It got worse over the course of the morning, as the day trickled into the afternoon. At some point, he decided it would be best to lie down, even there on the tile. He felt as if his bones turned to sandpaper, grinding against each other with the worst sound he'd ever heard. He breathed hard as he laid his head down among the broken ceramic, his head turned away from the window.

By the time he woke up, night was taking over the sky, letting the sky bleed away into nothingness with thousands of needle marks, the orange lines turning pale and purple. Anthony was a little better than before, his skull still splitting with pain but not delirious. Sitting up slowly, he looked around him to the ceramic scattered on the floor. It was completely obliterated aside from one decently sized piece. Horrified, he picked up the piece as gingerly as he could. He stared at it for a long time — it contained not only his wife, but Sam as well.

His heart raced, mulling over how shit his life was and wondering how it got to this point.

It was deep into the night before lights in the window tore his attention away from the broken plate. They didn't stay long, there for just a few minutes, accompanied by a few honks, and then disappearing back to leave him in darkness. Confused, Anthony

managed to spur his body into standing up, dragging himself to the door and opening it.

Looking around, the car was for sure gone. While he was about to close the door, as he turned, his eye caught a paper bag next to the door. As he knelt down to peer into the bag, he went into a coughing fit, coughing into his hand for more than a minute. By the end of the fit, his hand was wet with not only mucus but blood. Anthony winced and wiped it on his pant leg, peering into the bag.

In the bag there were, it seemed, dozens of pill bottles that contained two different types of pills: A simple white, round one, and a longer white and blue capsule that had smaller pellets inside. On top of the bottles there were multiple large sticky notes.

Anthony pulled the first out, reading the words over and over.

Tony,

I saw the track marks and I know it's hard, but these will help;

The white pills will help you get off the heroin.

The capsules are oral chemo pills. Please consider it.

- Your Brother, Anika

Anthony Growled and crumbled the note. Where does he get off? Normally, Anthony would throw the pills away, but thinking back to the plate that lay broken on his floor inside, he sighed and snatched the bag and brought it inside.

Anthony tossed it on the counter, contemplating whether to take the pills or not. He wasn't happy about it, but he couldn't stand the splitting headache any longer. He read the directions for the Methadone. It said to not exceed 40 mg on day one to assess your tolerance, but Anthony brushed it off and took 80 after finding himself something to eat. What does he care? Win win either way, he thought. He wasn't waiting to 'assess' anything. Fuck that. Fuck Anika and his instructions.

1990

Tony sat in the hospital chair, his hands clasped together and pressed to his face as he stared at his father's form. The doctor cleared his throat, snapping him back into the conversation.

"Tony? Did you hear what I said? It's going to be time soon. His body is shutting down. I know it's hard, but you have to be ready. I'm here if you need to talk." He consoled, his hand reaching down and squeezing Tony's shoulder.

Everyone in Rosepark knew each other, and Tony had gotten that offer dozens of times already. When he didn't respond, the doctor sighed in acknowledgment and left the room. Tony hadn't eaten nor had he left the room in days, spending his time talking to his father. Evelyn had come and gone, spending as much time as she could with him outside of her job. She, like everyone else, was sympathetic.

The phone in the room trilled and Tony was content with letting it ring, instead reminiscing about memories with his father. It was only when an annoyed nurse came and stood in the doorway, looking at him with her arms crossed that Tony answered it. She walked away as he picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Tony?" The voice sounded irritated, though it didn't seem directed at him.

"Yes?" His heart sank, recognizing the voice.

"This is the last time. You better come get your brother before I toss him in a cell for the night. He's drunk off his ass and broke into Cyrus' barn."

"I'll be right there."

"Thank y-"

Tony saw red, slammed the phone down into the receiver and stood up. He told his father he'd be right back and began to drive to the police station. As he arrived, Tony got out, ready to yell at Anika and apologize to the sheriff. The sheriff, however, was standing outside, looking solemn. As he stepped out of his car, he was told that his father died while he was gone.

2002

After a couple of hours, Anthony's headache was gone, though his stomach was turning in on itself now. The sunrise gleamed through the window and Anthony rubbed his eyes. What to do now?

He returned to the plate below him, touching his fingers and tracing his wife's figure. His phone was broken, he couldn't call her. He'd have to go in person. He wonders how much she'd changed in the years since. He pops a cigarette into his mouth, lighting it before grabbing his keys. As an afterthought, he brings the plate with him, deciding he wanted to keep it on him from then on.

He finished two more cigarettes by the time he arrived at their old house. He finished another three in the car, letting it run as he worked up the courage to go up to the door. He groaned in frustration and shut the car off, forcing his car door open with a screech like nails on a chalkboard. He dug his hands into his pockets, keeping his figure as small as he could as he crossed the street and stood at the door. He knocked, letting out an anxious sigh and trying to make himself as small as possible. He heard shuffling inside, at war with himself over whether this was a good idea or not.

He winced as his choice was ripped away, the door opening and a preteen with peach blonde hair and Evelyn's eyes opened the door. Anthony gasped, trying to find any words as he stood in front of his daughter. He wished he had worn a long sleeve shirt, the track marks along his arm visible. He turned in his arms as much as he could.

He fumbled over his words before she interrupted.

“Dad? DADDY?” She stood there, in complete disbelief before slamming the door in his face. Through the door, Anthony heard more shuffling as she ran away from the door, calling to her mother, “Mommmmm, Daddy’s here!” After a minute, Evelyn opened the door, leaning against the frame as she looked him up and down. She hadn’t changed much.

“Wow. You look like absolute shit.” She didn’t hold back, gesturing to his poorly concealed arms, “God Tony... What’s happened to you?”

Anthony still couldn’t find his words as she rolled her eyes. Why wasn’t she afraid of him? She continued, “What are you doing here? Well?”

Anthony stared at her, eventually murmuring as he pulled out the plate, “I’m sorry. I, uh, broke this”

“You...broke this? That’s... What you came here to say?” She gave a hollow laugh as she realized, “That was a long time ago, Tony... I’m not saying I forgot but... Just, you were going through a lot and I know that.” She shifted uncomfortably.

Anthony shook his head, “I don’t want you to forgive me, but I miss you, and I miss Sam, I miss us.” He gestured to himself, not trying to hide his arms any longer, “I’m tired of being this person. I want to be better and I’ll do anything to make it better.”

Evelyn eyed him warily. She didn’t respond, instead holding the doorknob, the door wavering on its hinges. Anthony stood there awkwardly, not sure if he should continue talking or something else.

“Alright.” She stepped up to him, pointing a finger at his face, “But. Only on a few conditions.”

Anthony stammered, not expecting such an easy answer. She looked deadly serious as she listed them, giving Anthony no room for debate, “First, anger management and grief counseling. Your father is dead and you never got over it. Second, make up with Anika. He came by earlier acting all strange and talking about you. But he cares. Third, there will be absolutely no drugs in this house. That includes smoking — your clothes stink.” She gestured to his shirt when Anthony looked confused.

“And lastly, take your daughter to the Renfaire next week. You have no idea how much she’s missed you.”

Anthony tried processing it all, opening his mouth to speak but simply nodding instead.

“Good.” She stepped aside, her body behind the door, “You can stay for dinner if you’d like.”

Anthony nodded again, stepping inside and looking around. The place hadn’t changed much, the same white walls he grew up in. The furniture was new. At least to him — the carpets, chairs, and couch were all adorned with stains. The curtain rod for the window hung at an odd angle like some child pulled it too hard.

The shelf that rested against the far wall had way too many plants. Anthony could spy a little bit of dirt from the pots on the carpet. He was about to joke about it when he noticed the portrait nestled between two of the pots.

It wasn't showcased, but also not hidden. Moreso left as it was and life went on. In the frame there was a picture of Anthony, Evelyn and Sam at their last Renfaire. Evelyn wore her elf costume and for the picture, Anthony had picked her up, holding her on her side while Sam sat on his shoulders. Anthony stared at the picture, looking at how he laughed. He smiled and moved over to the shelf, pulling it in front of the plants. He set the broken plate beside it, nicking his thumb as he pulled away.

Self Portrait 02-24-22

By Nikolaas Van Kley

50



The Road to Heaven is Unpaved

By Bradley Cavanaugh

51

It was unusually cold tonight. Being a Grim Reaper, Peter wrapped his long black cloak over himself and kept his scythe close. Regardless of how cold he was, he had an important job to do.

The Forest of Whispers was where all souls went when they met their end. The first time you enter you might be absorbed by the beauty: all of the leaves glowing different colors, the moonlight shining down from above. But it loses its luster when you've entered it a few million times.

"Harper Jackson," Peter thought aloud as he looked over his dossier. "Another one for Hell, huh? For the grand sin of... suicide..."

Peter stood in front of the tree of Harper Jackson, and saw a little blonde girl looking up at him with wide eyes, no older than six or seven. She was naked and soaking wet, huddled in on herself, incredibly frightened.

"...Harper Jackson?" Peter asked, taking off his cloak and putting it over the girl, revealing his short chestnut hair.

The girl nodded yes, although her brown eyes never stopped moving. Peter thought about what to do. According to protocol, he was now supposed to escort this girl to the gates of Hell and drop her off. The price for suicide was high, and she would be trapped in fiery torment for all of existence. Those were the rules. But she was just a little kid.

"Harper," Peter said as he sat across from the still shaking girl. "My name is Peter. I'm a Grim Reaper."

"Where am I?" Harper asked as if finally noticing Peter was there. "Where...where's Daddy?"

"Your father is probably back in the mortal world," Peter explained. "Harper, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you have unfortunately died."

Harper just looked at him, like she couldn't process this. Did she understand what death was? She was still a child.

"Harper?" he asked. "Do you know what death is?"

Still wide-eyed, she nodded her head. "Momma said it's when you leave your body and go to Heaven. Like Grandma did."

"That's...yes," Peter nodded. "Do you know what a Grim Reaper is?"

"You're...Death?"

"No, I'm not Death," Peter snapped back, too harshly. Harper all but jumped backwards away from him, horrifying fear on her face. "I'm sorry Harper, I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. Forgive me."

Harper still kept her distance from him, but didn't run away. That was good.

"Harper, do you know how you died?"

Harper looked at him for a moment, as if contemplating.

"How did I die?" Harper asked.

"Yes," Peter replied. "All I know is that you committed...that you died on purpose. That you maybe wanted to die?"

Harper shook her head. "I don't think I died. I was just hiding."

"Hiding? From what?" Peter sat forward. "What's the last thing you remember before you came here?"

Harper sat quietly for a moment. "Can I trust you? You won't tell my Daddy I told you?"

"I...promise."

That seemed to be enough for Harper. "When...when Momma leaves, sometimes Daddy hurts me. And Momma left for a work trip..."

She looked uncomfortable, like she didn't want to continue.

"I... I was taking a bath, and I heard Daddy calling me. He started getting mad. He was throwing stuff. So, I hid under the water so he would give up..."

"Harper, I'm...I'm so very sorry that happened to you," that was all he could think to say. "Did you...ever come up from the water?"

She shook her head. "I still heard him."

"I see."

Peter sat for a moment, contemplating what to do. Technically, she did commit suicide by drowning herself. And while that was considered a grand sin, he had never agreed with that ruling, especially in cases like this. But what could he even do? There was no way for him to challenge this ruling, it was given by the Lord Above All after all. He couldn't—

"Mr. Peter..." Harper got his attention.

"Peter is fine," Peter said out of habit, a strained smile on his face.

"Where am I? Is this Heaven?"

"Ah, no, although I understand why you'd think so," Peter looked at his surroundings with fondness. This is where he came after he himself had died after all, all those years ago. The glowing leaves of the forest gave an eerie, but also beautiful, scene with the always full moon looming overhead. "This is the Forest of Whispers. Where all souls go when they pass on."

"The leaves are glowing."

"Every leaf is a memory," Peter informed her. "Every tree you see represents someone who has passed on, grown from their soul."

The Grim Reapers come here and escort the souls to their...final destination.”

“Is this my tree?” Harper asks, looking at the small tree behind her, although calling it a tree was generous. It was shorter than her, and was skinny, as if a stiff wind or stray foot would knock it over. There were only a few leaves on it as well. “It’s so...tiny.”

“Yes...it is,” Peter said solemnly. “How old are you Harper?”

“Six and a half,” Harper looked proud as she held up her six fingers, with a seventh half up.

Six and a half.

“Come on Harper,” Peter reached out to her. “Let’s get...”

This time, Harper did jump away from him, with such force that it seemed to shock even her. She narrowly avoided knocking over her tree, which likely wouldn’t survive the impact. They both froze and looked at each other, Peter with his outstretched hand, and Harper with her wide eyes.

“Sorry,” Peter said, finally retracting his hand. “I wasn’t thinking.”

Harper didn’t respond, just stood up and looked down at her tree with worry.

“I’m sorry, Tree,” she said before asking. “If my tree falls down does something happen to me?”

“No, nothing like that,” Peter said. “It’s more like a memorial. It came from your soul but it’s its own separate entity.”

She looked at him quizzically.

“You’ll be fine.”

“Mist...Peter,” Harper asked.

“Yes?”

“Are you taking me to Heaven?”

“...Yep” Peter’s eyes didn’t meet hers. “But first we’re making a stop.”

He looked at her tree again.

“A flower?” Peter looked and noticed a small flower hanging off the top of Harper’s tree. A sunflower. He took it in his hand and examined it. “That’s interesting.”

“That’s a lot of books Peter,” Harper commented, looking at the towering bookshelves.

They were in Peter’s small home, where he was gathering supplies for the journey. Warm clothes, ropes, etc. Taking the long road to Heaven was a long and dangerous path, and while they couldn’t die, the quicker and easier they could make it, the better. It’s not like they could afford to be seen. Peter’s home didn’t have loads to entertain a child, just books and paintings, along with the essentials.

“Do you like to read, Harper?” Peter asked, stuffing a jacket in a bag.

“Mm-hm. My mom reads to me all the time,” she pulled out his copy of *Dante’s Inferno*.

"I like reading too," Peter stopped her. "M-maybe that one is a little much for you."

"Aww," Harper put the book back, taking a sip of the strawberry milk Peter had handy. "Do I still need to eat if I'm dead?"

"You don't *have* to," Peter took a bite of his cookie. "But I like to."

"Yeah, it's good," she took another sip. "How long will it take to get to Heaven?"

"I'm...not really sure. A few days probably," he'd never gone this way before. "You'll probably be stuck with me for a while."

"You're not so bad," Harper smiled.

Before Peter could respond, he heard a knock on the door.

"Damn."

Peter opened the door and it was who he thought it was. While he'd normally be happy to see Raine at his door, that wasn't the case today.

"Hey Pete," Raine smiled, her short black hair laying on her face. "You're back pretty quick."

One could think of Raine as Peter's "handler." She was the one who gave him his dossiers on the souls he was taking, as well as his point of communication with the Lord Above All. Any problem that Peter had on his journeys, Raine was the one he called.

"You gonna let me in?" Raine's eyebrow arched.

Crash!

"Come on in," Peter sighed.

They walked in to find broken glass and the remains of Harper's strawberry milk on the carpet.

"I'm sorry Peter," Harper herself was huddled in a corner of the room, shaking, her face scrunched up on the verge of tears. "I'm sorry."

"Harper, it's okay, I'm not —," Peter started.

"Hey sweetie," Raine knelt in front of the scared girl. "No use crying over spilled milk huh? You must be Harper Jackson."

"So that's it," Raine stood over Peter who was cleaning up the spill. He had just explained to her Harper's situation, although he didn't tell her what he planned to do. Harper was sitting on the couch, nursing a new glass of milk. Raine walked over and sat down next to her. "Harper sweetie, do you know what's going on?"

"Peter said I'm dead and he's taking me to Heaven."

"Oh, he did?" Raine cast a glance over at Peter who looked away. "That's great sweetie."

"Are you a Grim Reaper too, Ms. Raine?"

"First of all, never call me that again. Raine is great thanks," Raine shook off the goosebumps that were forming. "And no, I'm not a Grim Reaper. You can call me a...consultant. I help Pete here when he gets in a bind."

"Are you an angel?"

"I'll take that as a compliment," Raine smiles. "Well, we're not angels anymore. But we were at one point, me and Pete both."

"So, you were both alive? How did you die?" Harper asked before realizing. "Oh, is that rude?"

"It's fine. I died of old age," Raine finally answered. "It was pretty uneventful. Nobody showed up"

"What about your family?"

"Didn't have one, didn't need one," Raine answered. "I spent my life like a queen, playing video games and having orgies every other..."

"Raine!" Peter reprimanded her. Raine flinched, remembering Harper's age.

"What's an orgy?" Harper asked innocently.

"A breakfast cereal sweetie," Raine quickly got up and walked back over to where Peter was standing. She whispered to him. "She's a good kid, you shouldn't lie to her."

"Who said I was lying?" Peter looked over to her. Raine avoided his gaze.

"You don't have to do this y'know," she hesitated. "You can just keep her here. It'll be safer for the both of you. I can help you raise her."

"What, you and I play house?" Peter smiled at her but dropped it when he saw her serious expression. "I thought about that, but I can't just keep her holed up here forever. It's not fair to her. *Nothing* has been fair to her."

Raine turned to Peter, her face serious. Very serious.

"Are you absolutely sure about this? There's no going back."

"I know. It's not right."

"I'm not saying it's right; I know it's not, I just..." Raine sighed. She smiled at him for a moment and ran her fingers through his hair softly. "You really are a bleeding heart. Isn't that how you died? That's actually kinda funny."

"If a literal wound to the heart is funny, then sure, it's hilarious."

"Always so serious," her smile turned sad. She stepped away from him and picked up his scythe.

"What are you doing?" Peter asked.

"Were you really going to take the long way?" Raine asked. "Why didn't you ask me for help?"

"I didn't want to get you involved."

"Luckily, I can take care of myself," Raine rolled her eyes. "Get ready."

Peter sat by Harper. "Hey, Harper."

"I'm sorry about your rug," she didn't look up.

"You made a simple mistake Harper," Peter met her gaze. "That's part of being human. It's really not a big deal. And I'm sorry you grew up in a place where it is."

“Really?”

“Really,” he stood. “Now come on. *Ms. Raine* is giving us a shortcut.”

“Oh, I hate you,” Raine grimaced. With a spin, Raine cut the scythe through the air, creating a large portal in the middle of the room. She turned to him. “Goodbye, Peter.”

“Peter, huh?” Peter asked, a soft but sad smile on his face. “No Pete?”

“It was...nice knowing you,” Raine put a hand on his arm and held it there. “Truly.”

“...Yeah.” He said.

Raine knelt down to Harper’s level and patted her on the shoulder. “It was nice meeting you, Harper.”

“It was nice meeting you, too, Raine,” Harper smiled back. “You’re really nice.”

“I’m sure we’ll meet again,” Raine said, standing back up. “I got you as close as I could but you’ve still got some traveling.”

“Thanks, Raine,” Peter smiled. He took his scythe back. “For everything, I mean. Harper’s right: you are ‘really nice.’”

Raine just gave him a sad smile at his attempt at levity as she waved them through. Peter stepped through after Harper, resisting the urge to look back, and he heard the portal close behind him.

Peter looked around him and saw the snowy landscape of the stairway to Heaven. They were actually pretty close. The stairway appeared as the side of a snowy mountain, with the peak being the Gates that would take someone directly into Heaven.

“Make sure you keep my cloak tight around yourself,” Peter said as he started to walk along the worn path before them. “It’ll keep you warm.”

“Okay,” Harper said as she followed close behind him. They walked a bit in silence, Harper looking at her feet and Peter’s eyes forward, focused on the path.

“Peter,” Harper hesitated. “Am I really going to Heaven?”

Peter stopped and turned to face the little girl who was now looking up at him with pleading eyes.

“Raine stinks at whispering,” Harper stated. “She said you were lying.”

“I’m not lying,” Peter turned. He was going to leave it at that, but thought better of it. He knelt down in the snow so he could properly look Harper in the eye. “Listen, Harper, this world likes to make simple things of things that are anything but. Do you understand?”

“I...I think so?”

“What I mean is,” Peter had to pick his words carefully. “You’re not supposed to go to Heaven. You’ve been marked for Hell. Because killing yourself, dying on purpose, is considered a sin.”

“But I didn’t die on purpose!” Harper contested.

"I know you didn't," Peter assured her. "But it's not up to me. And I didn't lie. I'm going to get you to Heaven. We're just going to have to sneak you in."

"Is that right?" a voice came from behind causing Peter's blood to freeze. "You seem pretty sure of yourself."

Peter turned around, hoping that he didn't recognize that voice, that it was anyone else, but his eyes proved him right. Standing before them was Death itself.

"Peter, Peter, Peter," Death remarked, tightening the tie of its white suit. "Can't you just do the sensible thing and do your damn job?"

"Get behind me," Peter stood, putting himself between the girl and it.

"I guess not," Death commented, fiddling with the white antlers that jutted out of its head, its snout flaring. "The girl chose her fate, and I marked her. The way it's been since the beginning. You have no right to go against the Lord of All's ruling."

"It's not right!" Peter yelled in defiance.

"I don't give a rat's ass," Death came ever closer. "We have our roles in this, our jobs to do, and we do it."

"So, you just do whatever you're told?"

"Watch your tone boy," Death strode closer still. "What do I care if one little girl burns in Hell for eternity? There are a myriad of souls that have existed, exist, or will exist. Are you really gonna stake it all on one kid?"

Peter looked down at Harper huddling behind him, scared, clinging to him. Trusting him. The poor girl likely didn't even understand what was going on. She looked up at him with big eyes, her whole body shaking but not from the cold. Peter looked again at Death. He nodded.

"So be it." Before Peter could blink, Death was upon them, readying an attack.

But it never came.

A light came down, causing all of them to freeze where they were. Eventually the light enveloped them, blinding them. When the brightness subsided, Peter found himself standing in a large, white, featureless room.

"Harper?" Peter looked around quickly.

"I'm here," Harper said behind him. "Are you okay?"

"Don't worry about me, are *you* okay?"

Harper nodded.

"Aw, you're not gonna ask about me?"

Peter turned to see Death, its white clothes and features almost causing him to blend into their surroundings. He was sitting comfortably on a large throne that towered over them.

"Quiet, Death," a booming voice came from above. Descending down on them was a form that Peter recognized immediately, although they hadn't met. Their form was constantly changing.

Sometimes they'd be a man, sometimes a woman, but always beautiful, hauntingly so. They were called Jehovah, Allah, the Lord Above All, and countless other titles. They sat on a throne even larger than Death's, although Death was at their side. "It seems we have a lot to talk about."

"Are you God?" Harper asked.

"I've been called that," the Lord Above All answered, a soft smile on his face.

"How can you smile at her when you've condemned her to Hell?" Peter demanded. "A little girl."

Peter could tell that his tone wasn't appreciated, but the Lord ignored it. "The rules exist for a reason. We cannot let personal feelings get in the way of duty. Harper committed a grand sin and must be punished."

"It wasn't on purpose!" Harper pleaded. "I was just hiding from Daddy!"

The Lord gave a sympathetic look. "I know, and your father will be punished thoroughly when he meets his end. That said, you felt the pain in your chest when you were under. Every signal in your brain was telling you to come up but you did not. That was your choice. And those have consequences."

"Imagine giving up the gift of life you graciously bestowed, Lord," Death instigated. "Then having the nerve to claim innocence."

"It's not that simple!" Peter yelled in defiance. "She didn't have a choice; she didn't ask to have a monster for a father!"

"Humans have free will..."

"But...!"

"And they must be punished for the sins they commit with that free will. There are checks and balances that must be..."

"You can't just lock people into a binary sense of right and wrong!" Peter was angry now. "Yes, the evil must be punished, but Harper isn't evil! I guarantee many of the people you've sent to torment were not evil as well! People are not so black and white that you can judge them with close-minded..."

"Watch yourself, boy!" the Lord bellowed, her voice shaking the foundation. "And how could a lowly Grim Reaper dare tell *me* that I am wrong?"

"Because I know something that you don't," Peter said. "I know what it's like to be human."

"Watch your tone, or so help me...!"

"Peter, stop!" Harper yelled, stopping both Peter and the Lord.

"Harper?" Peter asked.

"I don't want you to get in trouble," Harper had tears forming in her eyes. "It's okay. Don't worry about me. He's right, I'm just a kid," Harper wiped her eyes. "I'm not important. You don't have to..."

“Harper, stop that.” Peter’s voice was soft. The Lord looked at Harper with sadness. Peter knelt down in front of her. He pulled something from his pocket.

“A flower?” Harper asked.

“It’s from your tree,” Peter confirmed. “I want you to look at the petals.”

Harper looked at the petal that sat at the top. In it, she saw a memory. It was her and her mother on Harper’s sixth birthday. Her dad had to work that day so it was just them. Her mother was teaching her how to bake a cake. They were dancing to the song that was playing, flour and sugar all over their clothes, smiles on their faces. The cake turned out terrible, but they still ate it together.

“You were happy then, weren’t you?” Peter asked. “Your mother was too?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Keep looking.”

She did. She saw her and Leslie, her only friend, playing on the playground swings. She saw Ms. Pullin, the old lady who gave her cookies every Sunday. She saw Mr. Mann, her teacher who always told her how smart she was and how proud he was. The petals brought these memories back to her, and she started to smile bittersweetly.

“Harper, everyone’s life is short, yours more than most,” Peter gave her a sad smile. “But it’s never meaningless. You impact the lives of everyone you meet in ways both big and small, and they you. The good times you had with your mother and your friends, the happiness you felt in those moments, they weren’t meaningless. And even if they don’t remember every little detail, those moments helped shape who they are and who they’ll become. No life, no matter how short or small, is meaningless. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah,” Harper wiped her eyes. “I do.”

“Your mother will be okay Harper,” the Lord finally spoke. “Your father will claim innocence, but the autopsy will...prove otherwise. Your father will spend the rest of his days imprisoned, and your mother will blame herself. But she will heal, and she’ll think of you every day. She will never forget you.”

“You can read my mind?” Harper asked.

“I can,” the Lord confirmed, her brown hair falling in her face. “Your words did not fall on deaf ears, Peter. I will consider what you’ve said.”

“So...”

“But you must understand,” the Lord held up his hand. “I can’t just accept her into Heaven. There’s a tally system that cannot be overridden, even by me. Hell is expecting a soul and they must have it.”

“And they will.”

"Are you sure?" the Lord asked seriously. "You know what that means for you? For her?"

"It's better than the alternative," Peter muttered before kneeling down in front of Harper once more. "Hi, Harper."

"Hi, Peter."

"I guess I'll see you later," Peter smiled. He unconsciously reached for her and almost stopped, but she didn't move. He put his hand on her head in a comforting way, and she gave him a small smile.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"On a little trip," Peter said as a fire started on his leg.

"Peter!" Harper warned.

"It's okay, it's okay," Peter assured her as the fire grew. "Bye Harper. I'm glad I met you."

"Mm-hm," Harper said. "I'm glad you were my Grim Reaper."

"Me too," Peter smiled. The fire continued to grow until it fully enveloped him, and then it disappeared, along with Peter.

The Forest of Whispers was colder than normal tonight. She pulled her dark cloak closer around her, making sure not to disturb the glowing flower that sat tucked in her front pocket. Her scythe wasn't as heavy as it was when she first started, as she had grown, so she could lay it on her shoulder as she read her newest dossier from Raine.

"David Oda, age 17," she spoke aloud. "Death by 'suicide.'"

She stood in front of a small tree, only waist high. In front of it was a young man, shifting around nervously.

"Hey there David," she smiled. "I'm Harper, your Grim Reaper."

"H -hi," he stammered out, not meeting her eyes. "So, I died huh?"

"Unfortunately," she held out a hand to him. After a moment's hesitation, he took it and she lifted him up.

"You've been through a lot, huh?" she gave a sympathetic smile, looking at the scars and bruises over his body. "Let's get you on your way."

They turned, and confidently walked through the forest, on the road to Heaven.

The Present

By Jaqueline Stewart

"It's freezing. I want to go home."

"Quit your complaining," Faith lightly scolded, "we'll be there soon."

Marcus looked at her with a mischievous pout, his gloved hands clutching at her ticklish sides knowingly.

"Cut that out," she giggled, mildly panicked.

"Fine, but only because you're driving and I don't want to die a virgin."

She laughed. "I'm your wife. I'm literally pregnant."

"Wasn't me," he denied childishly, sticking his tongue out. She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Okay. It would be a problem if it wasn't me," he admitted slowly, "but I'm saving my second virginity until we renew our wedding vows. Until then, do not touch me, temptress!" He huffed in faux anger.

She laughed again before refocusing her eyes on the road, stopping at a stop sign covered in frost.

"It's seriously too cold. We should never leave the house again."

"You know you'd go anywhere just to have a slice of your mom's home baked pie," Faith argued to unhearing ears.

When he did not reply after a moment, she glanced over curiously. He was fast asleep, somehow leaning comfortably against the car window. His unruly brown hair was suspended above his forehead like a halo, and his lips were open, releasing steady breaths. Shaking her head fondly, Faith focused intently on the road once more.

Though neither of them was fond of the colder seasons, she appreciated the beautiful scenery they produced, so different from the usual *green* and flat plains she had grown accustomed to while living in East Texas. The landscape was picturesque, even on the monotone and snowy road where she glided alongside a few other vehicles. The abundance of evergreen trees framing either side of the avenue were enveloped in snow, brown and blackened branches laden with the pillowy substance that looked soft enough to sleep on. The silvery and glistening boughs of trees, tightly knitted together, contrasted sharply against the darkening sky and looming clouds like white paint on a black canvas.

Beneath the shade of the trees, the snow lay mostly undisturbed—save for a few drops of frozen icicles on branches that were unable to bear the weight of the snow, bending to

give some to the ground in an icy descent. As she drove, silvery flecks of snow came down in a horizontal blur, sticking to the windshield and windows like lovebugs sticking to one another in the spring.

Though she was now in a remote area—traveling on a mostly barren road to her in-laws' cabin—she still remembered the wondrous Christmas lights and decorations from the town she had driven through earlier. The red, green, and white flashing lights strewn throughout the small city illuminated the entire town in a gentle glow.

"We're almost there, so wake up already," she said softly, making a familiar turn down a particularly thin and snow-covered path. Marcus stirred from her words and his eyes lit up in recognition of the specific turn, wiping away the drool that settled on his chin before he grinned openly like a kid.

"I'll call and tell them we're almost there. Ma better have that pie baked already," he muttered excitedly, rummaging around for his phone that had slid between the seats sometime during his nap.

The welcome they would receive would be warm in juxtaposition to the cold weather that greeted them as soon as they exited the car. Shivering, Faith drew her large coat tighter around her mostly flat stomach, trying not to feel subconscious as Marcus wrapped his arm lovingly around her middle.

This Christmas was particularly special because they would be telling his parents she was pregnant, and that they would be grandparents. Having known them for a few years, Faith knew they would be ecstatic. But whispers of her past—of her first pregnancy as a teenager—still haunted her, making her feel doubtful she even deserved such care.

Dispelling those bad thoughts, she smiled, looking up into Marcus' concerned eyes. He smiled back, squeezing her gently as he turned to admire his parents' land. The foxtrot cabin was homey, sequestered in a cozy region that seemed separate from the real world like a winter wonderland oasis. The roof was completely covered in snow, plastic models of Santa's sleigh and his reindeer standing near the chimney. The front yard—entirely buried in snow like the rest of the forest—was filled with more Christmas accessories: an inflatable Frosty the Snowman, cheerful plastic elves, colorful cardboard presents that were damp from exposure to the snow, and a giant nutcracker with a red outfit that Faith knew Marcus' mom had personally sewn.

Faith and Marcus walked slowly to the front door, afraid of falling in the slippery heaps of snow. Before she could knock the door opened, and they were greeted with the sight of a short, plump woman holding a baking sheet in oven mitt clad hands.

Jamie, Marcus' mom, smiled big and wide as she called to her husband over her shoulder, beckoning them inside and closing

the door behind them with her hip. Even with the gray in her brown hair, the crow's feet nestled in the outer corners of her eyes, and the many laugh lines that adorned her face, she still appeared youthful and spry. Her Christmas sweater depicted Santa Claus in a colorful argument with a presumed Mrs. Claus, and her pajama pants were such an obnoxious shade of green that it almost hurt Faith's eyes.

"It's so nice to see you again," Jamie enthused, placing the wonderful smelling cookies aside as she pulled Faith into her arms. Marcus pouted, joining the hug from the side as he grumbled about his parents preferring his wife to him. His dad, John, appeared at the sound of merriment, his own arms extended as he pulled everyone into his hug. John was a large man, resembling a lumberjack with his thick gray beard and knitted beanie pulled down over his ears. His outfit matched his wife's, but he had swapped out the loud green pants for a tamer color.

"Did Faith have to drive again?" John asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"You know I *cannot* drive in snow. I would rather not endanger everyone on the road because of my pride," Marcus defended himself good-naturedly.

"Say that to the you who wanted to tickle me on the highway," Faith huffed, taking off her layered coats and gloves. Once again, she resisted the urge to touch her midsection, fully aware of the growing life that she knew was residing within her. She was only five weeks into her pregnancy, so she didn't exhibit any obvious signs. Even so, she was too careful as she gave John a hug, scared he would somehow sense it and ruin the surprise she and Marcus had planned for Christmas the next day.

"You spoil him too much. How will he ever learn? Also, you do *not* bother someone who is driving. Whose kid are you anyways with those bad manners?" Jamie said gleefully, always willing to tease her only son. John joined in on the teasing, a large grin splitting his face as he drew Marcus into a gentle and playful headlock.

Faith took in the familiar cabin, feeling warm and content. Christmas lights were strewn across the four walls of the living room, flickering from red to green to white in quick succession. Four stockings were placed above a lit fireplace that crackled gently. Various paperweights and snow globes that appeared to have been recently shaken lined the area above the mantelpiece.

In the corner of the room, a Christmas tree embellished with ornaments nearly touched the ceiling. Only a small gap was available for when they would put the angel atop the branches tomorrow. Several glistening ornaments were handmade, some created by Marcus when he was a child, some recently made by her in art class with her elementary students. Beneath the tree were both messily wrapped gifts and neatly wrapped ones, the former

being John's handiwork. Faith mentally reminded herself to tell Marcus to bring their presents into the house later.

Beside the tree was a spinning figurine that had initially confused Faith when she had first seen it three years ago. The figurine was of two people dressed in white outfits, two eye holes cut from makeshift masks on their faces. Marcus had explained to her that it depicted mummering, a Christmas tradition of Newfoundland, Canada that his parents held close to their hearts even after moving to Oklahoma in the United States. Mimmers would dress in strange disguises before visiting neighbors at home, spreading Christmas cheer amongst each other, and looking rather silly while doing so.

Marcus plopped on the sofa beside her, pulling her from her thoughts as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and settled in for the first Christmas movie. The afternoon of Christmas eve was passed lightly with several Christmas movies, snacks, and the pie that Marcus had wished for earlier. Full and sleepy after a long drive and all the festivities, Faith retired to the spare bedroom with Marcus, her nerves regarding tomorrow only keeping her awake for mere moments before she succumbed to sleep.

She woke up to Marcus' head placed against her belly. "Stop. Your face is cold," she complained tiredly, swatting him away before she realized what he was doing. Rolling her eyes, she put her cold feet against his legs, laughing at the shocked hiss he let out.

"You're not going to hear a heartbeat or feel a kick yet. You know that right?" she asked, amused.

"You never know. Maybe our baby is super talented," he replied, moving so that now his ear pressed against her belly button. Too tired and not genuinely wanting to dissuade him, she simply carded her fingers through his hair, enjoying the early morning light streaming through the curtains.

Christmas day had arrived, and instead of coffee, they started the day with a cup of hot chocolate and s'mores. Soon, the time to open presents arrived. At some point, Marcus had brought in their presents and added them beneath the tree. Though Faith was not a kid anymore, the thought of gifts still excited her, especially since she had never gotten any as a child. Growing up, her parents had been the opposite of caring and loving, which had led her down the dark path of doing anything to get their attention.

She would always remember the cold look on her father's face when she had gotten pregnant at seventeen by some delinquent, the pain she went through when she decided to go through with the pregnancy alone and had a miscarriage, and the hurt she experienced when no one was there to pick up the pieces left behind. She had no other choice but to repeat a year of high school, burdened by both the stress on her body and the school system that did not help her.

But she'd pushed through and graduated, using what little money she had saved from her part-time job to enroll into Angelina college. There, she met Marcus, the half-dumb half-charming math major who had followed her around relentlessly. Only when she learned to love herself again did she give him a chance, and the rest was history.

She would always remember the courage it took to want to try again, the courage it took to leave the past in the past. She was not alone anymore: she had Marcus, she had Jamie, she had John, and she had *herself*. She was not a confused teenager anymore, chasing a fragment of affection from people she would never receive love from.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled and nodded at Marcus, taking his hand in hers as the two stood. She could have her *own* family now, and as she grabbed a gift addressed to both John and Jamie containing a Christmas-themed onesie, she felt that there was truly no gift greater than the present.

Continual Growth

By Hilario Espinosa Gonzalez

66



What is Left

By Amelia Kleiber

Missing!

Name: Alanta "Lantie" James

Age: 16

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Blonde

Height: 5'7"

Last Seen: Market Basket on Elm St. around 3:30 PM

Wednesday, February 9

Disappearance Out of Character!

Phone: (603) 668-8711 Missing Persons Unit Manchester, NH

67

Note to Self

Pick up blueberries for performing arts pancake fundraiser.

Subject: Thanks

01/26/2022 3:47 PM

Dear Alanta,

I really appreciated you paying for my lunch today. I guess my mom forgot to add more money to my account. She does that sometimes.

Anyway, it was really cool of you. What's your Venmo? I'll pay you back.

-Milo

Sent from my iPhone

Subject: Happy New Year!

01/03/2022 10:00 AM

Hello West High Parent,

A few reminders as we begin the new year:

1. Students must purchase a parking pass to park on campus. DO NOT park in visitor spaces.
2. Students MAY NOT leave campus early without signing out through the front office.
3. Students MUST wear their IDs for the entirety of the school day (excluding athletics/gym blocks). THIS IS A SAFETY PROTOCOL! Students without their ID badge will be asked to purchase a temporary badge for \$1. New badges can be purchased through the front office for \$3.

Go Blue Knights!

Manchester Sunset

The sky looks like orange juice
and honey
and the sea
all meeting for the first time.

Imagine falling into a sea
of orange juice
and honey
with me.
And we would just swim
sticky and sweet
and laughing.

A Discovery

Milo makes a detour between Latin and lunch. It's not like the librarian is going to notice his tardiness anyway. She's almost always re-shelving the science fiction section at this hour or hiding in her office and pretending to do research. She is Milo's second favorite person at this school.

He is on his way to pay his dues to favorite person number one. She is not usually at her locker at this time as she doesn't have the same lunch block as Milo. No matter. He can slide the dollar bills through the slats of her locker. She will know who they are from.

At locker 279, he does just this, feeding the singles to the door like a vending machine. Before he can head to the cafeteria for another underwhelming serving of Tuesday's spaghetti and "meat" balls, something bright orange catches his eye. A sticky note, in her handwriting. He can see it says something about blueberries.

Without a second thought, he picks up the note and deposits it into her locker. If only it were always that easy.

Announcements

Hey, Blue Knights! Here's what's going on this week: The West High Theatre Company presents: As You Like It a play by William Shakespeare. Come enjoy this comedic performance next Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 7:00 PM. Student tickets are on sale at the box office this week for \$5. General admission tickets may be purchased at \$10 apiece. Teachers are reminded to show their class a 15-minute safety video during Thursday's Advisory A block. Finally, Principal Chapman reminds students not to share their locker combinations. If you need to reset your locker combination, please fill out the request form in the front office. Thanks, and have a Marvelous Monday!

A Gift

Lautie,

I hope you don't mind—Syd gave me your locker combo. I just wanted to tell you to break a leg at next week's performance. You're going to make a wonderful Celia. I know how much you like sunflowers. It's fitting since you seem to bring sunshine with you wherever you go.

-A secret admirer

Dear Alanta,

Do you love sunflowers because you love the color yellow? Or do you love them because of how tall they are? What are the colors of your bedroom walls? Do you like being the middle child? Have you taken up guitar like you wanted to? If you have, have you learned how to play that Lumineers song you're always listening to? And will you ever perform for one of the theatre coffee houses? Or will you try out for the spring musical? Will you audition for Winnie Foster? Or do you see yourself more as a Mae Tuck? And, back to the music, will you write songs of your own someday? Will you ever write one about me? Will you ever know enough about me to write a song?

Will I chicken out and never give you this letter? Probably.

Sincerely,

Milo

A haiku

You stand tall and proud
like a sunflower blooming
in a thunderstorm.

Dear Diary,

Rehearsal felt sooooo long today. You would think Emily would know her lines by now, but no. And the show is next weekend! Bloody Saturday is going to be even worse, especially since half the cast keep missing their marks. But it's going to be okay. We'll be ready in time—we always are.

On a more exciting note, someone left flowers in my locker today! At first, I thought it was Jesse, but the note was signed, "a secret admirer," so it can't be. I didn't tell him because he gets jealous so easily. At first, I thought it might've been Milo, that guy from Physics. But he already paid me back by jamming three dollar bills into the slots of my locker door. Clearly, he doesn't know the combination. And I asked Syd if she gave anyone my combo, but she claims she hasn't. She can be kinda ditzey though, so who knows?

I don't know. I kind of hoped it was Milo. Is that wrong?

Love,

Lautie (02/08)

A discarded proclamation

Alanta,

~~I feel that we have a connection.~~

I think you are a kind, talented person. I bet you hear that all the time, but I wanted to tell you because ~~I haven't before.~~ I never properly thanked you for buying my lunch before. And it's not just that. You are one of the only people that have really paid any attention to me since I moved here. ~~I wish we talked more, but I guess you're pretty busy.~~

~~I want to get to know you better.~~

~~Do you want to get coffee sometime? I don't really drink coffee, but I would be willing to try it if you went with me.~~

~~I like you a lot.~~

I guess that's what Jesse sees in you.

If We Ran Into Each Other at the Market Basket

You would see my cart
filled with Mountain Dew,
chewing gum for my sister, grape tomatoes,
a Snickers bar, chicken noodle soup, and paper towels.

Maybe the wheels on the cart would be squeaky
so you would hear me as I rolled it down the aisle
and turn toward me
blueberries in hand.

Maybe we would talk,
ask how rehearsals are going,
laugh about Mr. Larson's lisp.
"Thatic Friction" and "velothity,"
but cringe about the homework load
and countless rows of math.

Maybe you'd look at your phone,
see that you were running late.
"It was nice seeing you."
"Likewise."

But all along
I'd be wishing for words I can't say
and wishing for what I can't have
and wondering if I came on too strong
or took more than I gave
and what I could do to make you stay.

Pumpkin Eater

Jesse makes a detour between lunch and English. It's not like the hall monitor will stop him if she catches him wandering

around after the bell rings. She's always the first one to like his Instagram posts, even before Lantie. She is Jesse's second most loyal fan.

He is on his way to pay a visit to loyal fan number one. She is usually at her locker at this time, talking to Sydney—that loud girl that dresses like the 90s. No matter. He can slide his hand into hers, and she will know it is him. And she will politely excuse Sydney from the conversation.

At locker 279, there is no one there. No loud girl with mom jeans, no girl with a blonde ponytail and a bright smile and delicate fingers. Instead, he sees something peeking between the slats on the door, a yellow half-moon shape.

He knows the combination like it's his. She wears his sweatshirts like they're hers. So who left her this note attached to these golden monstrosities? Whose handwriting is this? And all he can think about is the one word record-scratching his brain: *cheater, cheater, cheater.*

Celia

Lantie makes a detour between Precal and rehearsal. It's not like her batty director will notice if she slips in halfway through warm ups. He's fully aware that Lantie is the only one ready for the show next week. She is his shining star.

She is on her way to make a delivery to someone else who sees her that way. At locker 303, she slips an envelope between the slats and keeps walking. He will know who the ticket is from. She will be waiting for him after the show, ready to accept her bouquet.

Subject: Passing of a Student

02/14/2022 7:00 AM

With tremendous sadness, we report that a West High student, Alanta James, has passed away. Alanta was a hardworking student, loyal friend, and talented actress. The flag has been lowered today, February 14, in her honor.

Additionally, counseling services will be made available to students all week in the counseling office. Please reach out if you are experiencing difficulty with this news.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, February 19, at 11:00 AM on the football field. This loss has diminished our entire community, and we send our deepest sympathies and condolences to Alanta's friends and family.

Principal Chapman

Memento Mori

The two boys sit only one row apart. One is with the family of the deceased, much to her father's chagrin and to her mother's comfort. The other sits with the rest of the student body. Their cheeks are ruddy and tear-stained, their eyes hollow with grief.

They stand when they are told to stand. They sit when they are told to sit. They find no comfort in Sydney's speech. They do not sing.

In their pockets, one has a letter. It is long and rambling and sorrowful. In the other's, a ticket.

Two weeks later, when the police begin investigating her murder, their hearts are still heavy with grief. And their stomachs are still writhing in guilt.

Reunion

All things considered, he did not think he would come back to this place. Yet on a Sunday afternoon, he kneels by a patch of grass by a slab of stone. He knows he cannot escape her. Sometimes he thinks he hears her wailing through the static of the radio or in the chime of the bell at the store's entrance. He cannot look at sunflowers anymore.

Now that he is here, he has something to get off his chest. He makes a survey of the area, makes sure no one is around. He leaves his burden at the headstone, and then he gets in his car and drives to Cambridge, not noticing the footprints of the boy who tread the grass before him.

There are now two envelopes addressing the girl in the grave. Both are filled with apology. One contains a ticket. The other bears a confession. But no one reads what is left for the dead.

Wilting

As winter melts and green returns
and earth is soft beneath my feet
I find myself with grave concerns,
my wilting heart left incomplete.

You gave this cold world all you could
with a light that outshone the sun.
They found your body in that wood,
Your brown eyes closed, your light undone.

I cannot help but feel at fault
when I gaze upon your prison.
But truth must lie within the vault
as sun rests until it's risen.

To know for sure who put you there
is luxury we cannot bear.

Seven Years Bad Luck

By Elyana Williams

In my parent's house, there is a floor-length mirror that has traveled with us as the fifth member of our family. From house to house, coast to coast, the mirror has followed us, always ending up perched against a wall. The mirror has been a witness to time and how it passes, observing as we age. Every nook and cranny of my childhood exposed before it — moments of tenderness, bliss, and pain. Everything from my first steps to my first words, to me adorning my mother's oversized clothes as a toddler. Aching for the day that I look like her.

As a child, the mirror watched as my mother walked in front of it, scanning her body and shaking her head the lower she got. Her eyes crinkled, her mouth pouted, and she pulled on the skin at her sides and stomach. "I need to lose a few pounds," she would groan, glancing at her 6-year-old daughter for approval. In response, I would drop my gaze at my own juvenile body, hoping that I would never grow to look like her.

Once I got older and matured more, the mirror would see moments of me shooting up, outgrowing my jeans and shoes. It would capture me sulking back and forth in front of it, pulling my skin at my sides and stomach. "I need to work out more," I would moan, tugging on my hips so that they didn't appear as wide. In high school, my mother would stand in front of the mirror and scold herself for everything she ate that week, saying she hates her body. I would look down at myself — at the body identical to hers — and get confused when she would tell me I looked fine.

Before going to college, I took a final look in the mirror, inspecting my body and its curves. In the years following, its only spectator would be my mother. It would watch as her fingertips graze over her skin — one day lingering over a lump on her right breast. And the mirror would watch as her hair began to litter the floor beneath her. The life left her face, weight left her bones, and she gushed, "Well at least I have the body I always wanted now."

Now, when I visit home and look into the mirror, I bite my lip at the impulse to criticize the girl staring back at me. I think of my mother and yearn to be as strong as she is — proud knowing that what I see in the mirror is identical to her. Wide hips, supple flesh, rosy skin. A belly that holds the organs that provide me life and sustenance; a body that can fight through cancer until the end. I think of the girls before us and the ones after who will inherit the same strong, feminine figure.

And I think that when the mirror gets passed down to me, I will break it.

The Echoing Siren

By Mia Criswell

I had my head on the cold side of a satin pillow when I heard the siren. At first, it barely echoed in my subconscious, but then it grew closer and closer until it hit my eardrum with enough force to wake me. Trying and failing to fall back asleep, I gave up and decided instead to get a snack. The walk from my bedroom to my small kitchen doesn't take much time, but just enough time for my foot to land on my single squeaky floorboard. There was a squeaky floorboard at the home I was born in. It was on the narrow staircase that connected the first and second floors with now outdated carpet stairs and a wobbly railing. A railing that shouldn't have held the body weight of children sliding down it but never failed to do its job. There it is again. The siren of a police car first, and then an ambulance perhaps? They pass more quickly this time, urgent to reach an unknown problem that desperately needs to be solved.

Sitting in my own apartment now, I can still pretend the tile under my feet is the rough carpet of my childhood home. The sirens I hear outside are really just the cry of my new baby brother down the hall. I recall what I think are my own five-year-old memories, when, in truth, they are probably a combination of true memories and stories I've heard from family members. The years of sitting with my orange juice on the back porch with my dad before he leaves for his night guard job sit in the back of my mind collecting dust. Now I drink strong tea and run out of ink in my pen at two AM as the cramps in my stomach cause me to wonder about the excruciating pain of childbirth. My mother must have the highest pain tolerance. Four children, all born at home, no epidural, and three of us born in a house with bulletproof windows. She tells stories of my brother and me as children standing in the yard, waving to the prostitutes walking down the street early in the morning.

I don't think that my mother ever expected her children would be born at home. She'd share memories of my grandma making grilled cheese or her cocker spaniel jumping into the pool, but never such newfangled aspirations. There she was, countless years later giving birth on the third floor of a rundown house in the inner city of Kansas City, Missouri. That three-story, ancient, faux victorian house without a regulating heater housed nine people within three families. We missionary families are used to sharing space. We *weren't* used to sharing our kitchen

cabinets, which were stolen off the wall one night. I'd climbed onto the coffee-stained countertop and touched the holes left behind in the drywall asking my dad why we didn't have the opening boxes on the wall anymore.

Smelling my chai drifting through the air, I recall the bitter scent of the hall bathroom where I'd seen my mother battle morning sickness. Vomiting into the toilet that only flushed properly when the squeaky "hot knob" on the sink was turned all the way to the right. Down the street, the faint sound of a siren rises steadily until I can feel it ring in my ears, and then fades away as the police car races past my apartment complex. Those sirens always used to pass my house and send me out of my slumber. Scrambling out of my purple flannel quilt and brushing my tulle canopy aside to pad down the hallway to my parents' room. I'd dodge the edge of the dresser right inside the door. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there. Instinct reminded me to take that extra step so I wouldn't knock my head on the pinewood drawer stuffed with socks that my dad always left open.

My own drawers would soon be invaded by the tiny clothes of that little person who had more in common with me than I've cared to admit for most of my life. Our small room, we already shared with our big brother, would become cramped with a hand-me-down crib assembled at the foot of my trundle bed. Homemade blanket forts became a sanctuary for the brave soldiers that we were, and Lego pistols armed our sides as we bonded together to defeat a common enemy. Despite our best efforts, maturity attacked over the next thirteen years, leaving us alone in our own kitchens, hearing the city sirens pass us from across the country.

That first night with a baby brother, the siren screamed down Northeast church street, but I didn't run to my parents' room because I was no longer the baby of the family. I was braver than the infant who'd never heard that awful sound echo in his tiny ears. Laying alone in bed, watching my big brother sleeping soundly through the commotion, ignorant of the memories that would fade and require a bitter sip of tea and insomnia to remind me.

Now I have no parents room to run to when the sirens wake me in the night. Instead, I make my way to my own small kitchen and imagine my hands are warm from holding my baby brother instead of the mug of hot tea making a ring on the table.

Wasted Time

By Mia Criswell

I was afraid of dogs until I met Governor. Large enough to reach my four-year-old torso, the ancient mutt stained all of my shoes with slobber and ate my colored pencils, but he was the first animal I ever loved. Pulling into an unfamiliar driveway, U-Haul swaying, my dad's F-150 followed the mangy brown thing up to the house. Some friend of a friend of a friend had a vacant guest house we lived in for nine months. A little girl about my age came down the front path on a scooter to hide behind her parents greeting mine. Her name was Abby. We had matching haircuts. Short brown hair with bangs, but mine was a little lighter. Like two small animals, we circled one another, assessing friendship possibilities and eventually running into the garage to fetch another scooter.

Fourteen years later and I'm home from college, sitting on the couch with my mom flipping through scrapbooks. I turn to a page from when I was a little girl, back when we lived with Abby. About nine barefoot kids stand scattered around a grassy area, each surrounded in collections of pinecones or rocks or whatever random thing they found in the yard. Despite the high exposure, it was clear that all of us were smiling as wide as we possibly could. I remembered my mom reading me a book that inspired our activity that day.

Roxaboxen by Alice McLerran was my favorite book as a child. Abby and I looked at the pictures in her backyard, lying on our stomachs in the mulch under the swing set. My mom had read it to me the night before and I recalled it as best as I could. Our imaginations went wild watching watercolor children create their own world in the dust. Banks, florist shops, and ice cream stands made out of sticks and rocks sparked our attention. Clearing a wide space between our houses, we prepared the land for property ownership. Off the driveway was a long dirt road with hidden depths. Beyond one curve in the road were my brother's friends, around another was a girl our age and her siblings. Practically a gold mine. Bare feet ran and stopped at each backdoor to explain our plan and show the pictures inspiring our empire. One by one, we collected companions and each determined our own "shops" to run.

Sometimes college feels like collecting companions. Going to new places in hopes of finding other people willing to share the "Roxaboxen" moments with me. Those old friendships remind me of college relationships. All of us living in close proximity to each other, get a crazy idea, and run around telling people about

it until there's enough to make something happen. Would those relationships ever become anything without that proximity? The moment of bonding necessary to build the foundation, but without it, would they survive? All those old friends scattered over Texas, never as close as those nine months on the dirt road.

That guest house holds memories from flawless days I can't seem to forget. With a lifted foundation, a few small stairs led to the front porch elevated about three feet off the ground opening up to the yard. With the kitchen as our changing room, that porch became the stage supporting many dramatic productions. Our families bore the mosquito bites to lounge in fold out chairs and watch singing contests or reenactments of our favorite movie moments. The scent of the citronella candle on my apartment porch allows me to time travel to those glorified evenings.

Sitting in the dim lamplight by my desk, I wonder if those plays weren't the only thing we used our imaginations for. Now my imagination is used for far less as I feign interest in dull conversation or pretend I recognize that girl from class. Four of us dirt road friends somehow ended up at the same college. Faces I used to rely on as my playtime comforts now offer small smiles as we pass on the quad. Shallow greetings and formalities smack me in the face as I recognize that maybe those friendships were never made to last. A grasp at that romanticized time leads me to throw out a joke about Roxaboxen only to be rebutted by silence. Proximity is not the same as compatibility.

That proximity shifted when I moved only 30 minutes away. Seasonal events brought us all together, but it was never quite the same and I never tried to make it the same. Every now and then, some mutual friend would introduce us, and we'd laugh and explain how we already knew one another. Even still at school, whenever our worlds collide it's a cause for a moment of laughter and reminiscing old days, but it never grows. It stays reminiscent. That's all we have in common and all we care to connect. It's just as much my fault as all the others, but I'm pining over lost opportunities without acting any differently. Are any of them missing me? Do they go tell their friends how rude I was when I just walked past them without more than a small wave? Does Abby remember the time I found her nearly blackout at a fraternity party I'd been dragged to? Did the scent of weed and human sweat in the air mask in an old friend trying to say hi and offer her a ride home?

If Governor was still alive, he wouldn't absentmindedly greet me or forget our special memories. He'd remember eating my flower crowns, falling asleep on my stomach, and how his whiskers tickled my chin. Governor would throw small talk out the window and follow me to go dig a tunnel under the house. When the other dogs scared me, he would lay on top of me. When life scared me, Abby forgot how to be my friend. All those old memories she must've washed away in cheap frat party liquor. I lie to myself and say, "it's just college," but I know it happened long before then, and I could have changed it.

This I Believe

by Darren Brown

Drive, passion, and courage. Have you ever thought about where you get these characteristics? Belief to me is what shapes and molds us into the people we are fated to be. We cannot control every situation life throws at us. However, we can control how we react to it.

Though we lost a great deal the day my childhood home burned down, I soon assimilated what may be one of my most treasured beliefs. I believe that feeling broken is a choice; we can choose to be defeated by things we cannot control, or we can choose to drive on being that example for others to follow. My father is a prime example of this. Not only did he get up that next morning after we lost everything and went to work, but he was also there early. That level of motivation and determination through adversity is one of the very things I contemplate when something goes wrong in my life. It is a reminder to me that I am not the first person to struggle nor will letting it get to me do me any good. We do not have to let anything we cannot control discourage, distract, or hinder us in any way. It has taken me a long time to fully grasp this concept because I used to live in a tiny, introverted bubble, not realizing for whatever I am going through there is always someone worse off.

In junior high, I remember not wanting to play football; I wanted nothing to do with it during my sixth-grade year. Then, as I got to know the coach better and spend more time with the team, I decided to go ahead and play my seventh-grade year. I became a skilled asset, but I soon lost interest due to my home life. Anyone that has played any kind of a sport or did any other activity as a kid and their parents did not show up knows how demotivating that can be. So, I went to talk to the coach about why I did not want to play. He then proceeded to tell me about how things were for him growing up, and he explained to me that a football team wasn't just a game; it was a place where you knew the others around you had your back and that I didn't have to let my home life define me. I didn't have to fall into those same patterns. This was my chance to make my own choice. This was my moment of truth. That very situation is why I can go through similar situations now and see things as independent of each other. I had to learn to separate in a sense and this is not always easy to remember. In fact, a few years later, I lost sight of this. When I was in boot camp it was never the physical aspect of the training that discouraged me, it was more

the mental aspects such as being away from family, maintaining my relationships, and the best but worst of them all was the why I was there in the first place. Though as a soldier many trying times and uncertainties come with the territory, I allowed myself to fall short in making that choice to be strong and drive on to not let those things confine me. To me, it wasn't until I got to know some of the other soldiers and learn about their backgrounds that I realized some of them come from nothing. For some, this was their last chance, and I thought to myself if they can get through all the things they've gotten through, still choose to show up, and attempt to put their best foot forward, not only could I do the same, but I would be that light of inspiration and motivation that we all needed to get through those daunting weeks of training.

We are more than capable to stand firm in our beliefs. It is our choice whether we rise to the challenge placed in front of us or let those thoughts of negativity cloud our judgment. So, ask yourself this: "Will you allow your beliefs to guide you and be the structure in which you make your decisions, or will you just give in?"

Vignettes From the Car

By Amelia Kleiber

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Now that she has reached the sweet and sudden age of sixteen, my younger sister is close to obtaining her driver's license. This is the same sister who, as I fretted over a college statistics course's group project, proclaimed that there were students in her eighth-grade algebra class who were better at math than I was. The same sister who spent a year learning pressure points in Taekwondo and could now kill a man with her thumb. The same sister who made one of her classmates cry during a circle discussion in English class. For these reasons, she has earned the parenthetical title of "Ugly New York Raccoon" in my phone contact for her, and they are why she escapes driving-related criticisms as I lurch around in the back seat, calculating the severity of my whiplash at a seventh-grade level. The only reason I allude to the truth now is that she thinks my writing is boring and won't be reading this.

With one car accident on record, maybe I have no grounds to complain. In fact, the sister was a passenger-seat witness to the accident in which a woman U-turned into my car and then promptly blamed me for it. In the moments just before the collision, all I could think was: *we're going to hit this car*.

And in the moments just after, I heard the sister say, "we just got this cleaned," for the In-N-Out lemonade had spilled all over the dashboard. I gave her a that's-not-my-top-priority look as left-turn-from-the-right-lane-Linda shouted at me from her high horse.

"Call Dad," I said in an oldest-daughterly way.

The sister did not, in fact, call Dad. She interpreted the command to mean, "text Dad the word *crash* all lowercase with no other explanation or context clues." She excelled at this.

After getting zero insurance information from Linda (which was not actually her name, if you were wondering), I asked for an update on the Dad phone call situation. The sister showed me the text message. I blinked at her in dismay.

"I didn't say *text* him, I said *CALL HIM*."

"No, you didn't," she said, pressing the call button.

Punk.

"I did not admit fault," I tell our dad. That was the one thing I knew about car crashes.

"Did you say sorry? Don't even say you're sorry."

"I asked if everyone was okay."

Everyone was fine, albeit a little grumpy considering we were being blamed for something that wasn't our fault. By the time we finally got to eat our In-N-Out, it had grown cold. When I put the fries in the toaster oven to reheat, the sister finally, mercifully, burst into tears.

Leonardtown, Maryland would be the perfect place to go into Witness Protection. All the houses are hidden by overgrown trees (heaven knows how the USPS knows where to deliver the mail), the streets downtown are completely deserted at lunchtime, and it's at least an hour's drive to the nearest city, Baltimore. No one would find the person who chose to hide there.

Living for a week in my grandparents' house felt a little like what I imagine being in the Witness Protection Program would feel. Each day, I popped one or two Benadryl to combat the onslaught of sneezing and tears brought on by the stack of cats hiding behind the fridge. I put on shoes to go downstairs in case there were loose nails, and I never set the dishwasher, lest I burn the house down.

It was mid-June and hot, the summer after I graduated high school, and I was there to bide my time between cruises because being eighteen is all about freeloading while you still can.

"Do you want to go to the commissary?" Granddad asked.

I *absolutely* wanted to go to the commissary. I had never been to a commissary before, I hadn't even known that a commissary was basically a military base's grocery store until that week, so this was my shot to see one, maybe my only shot. Granddad loved the commissary, mostly because he loved buying things he did not need at a low price.

Granddad also, I learned, was really obsessed with gas mileage. And cruise control.

"If you have the automatic cruise control on, you don't even need to keep your foot on the pedals," he explained. The car maintained a polite distance behind the person in front of us. Granddad decreased the number of car lengths between us on his fancy dashboard screen, and I felt my pulse go up a tick.

"You see?"

I nodded. Granddad seemed satisfied.

"Good. You can drive us back."

Suddenly, I became very aware of what streets we were taking. *Did we take a right or a left at that first intersection? I think a right.* Because there is nothing more embarrassing than making a wrong turn on the way back to your WITSEC bunker in a town you've never been in before.

At the commissary, I thought Granddad would forget about the whole me-driving-his-car thing. He was asking me a lot of questions about if I liked steak and Reese's ice cream (yes and yes)

and buying me a lot of snacks I did not need, so he could eat them after I'd left. Alas, he did not forget.

"What are you doing," he said, standing next to the passenger seat where I was sitting.

"Oh yeah, right," I feigned, switching to the driver's side. As if I could forget I had the opportunity to use automatic cruise control.

When we approached our first red light, Granddad gave me wisdom I will take with me to my grave: "You gotta have road guts not to step on the brakes."

Either 'road guts' or complete stupidity. One of the two compelled me not to hit the brakes, and the auto cruise control blessedly eased us to a stop on its own, still maintaining a respectful distance from the other cars.

"You can change that you know."

"I'm good."

And he started talking about gas mileage again, his favorite, and that was just fine. Anything to keep him from realizing I was applying the brakes at all the other stoplights.

My brother's first car was a green Ford Ranger with no aux cord. Someday, I would drive that truck over a median going 10mph (give me a break; it was my first time driving, the median was in my high school parking lot, and the truck was fine), but riding shotgun as we sailed along the IH-10 overpass, I could only envision my brother behind the wheel.

He had the wisdom of Hercules after his twelve labors, and I had not yet invoked my own muses. Twenty-One Pilots blared from his phone in the cupholder.

"You don't have to do everything Mom and Dad tell you," he said.

I shifted in my seat so I could sit on my hands. They were always cold.

"Like with music," he continued. "You don't have to sing what they want you to sing."

The 'rents did have a lot of opinions on what music I should make. A song would come on the radio that they liked. "You should learn this song," they'd chorus. Then they'd badger me for six weeks, asking "have you learned it yet? You should really learn it. It fits your voice perfectly."

And sometimes they were right, but more often than not, the songs in question fit my voice from when I was eleven and still sounded like a ukulele. But more than that, I was tired. Most of the time, I felt like spaghetti in the strainer. All this hot water rushing over me, flaying me against the metal curve of the colander. And then someone would peer into the pot and lament, "I thought I bought fettuccine."

But I could not be fettuccine, no matter how hard I tried. I was not a runner, not a musician, not an engineer, not a graphic designer. But I did not know that yet, so much of my time was spent attempting to flatten myself out.

"You can sing whatever you want," said the brother. "Whatever you want."

I listened to the music of the road beneath the tires. It could sing too, careless as to who heard, and for the first time, I understood why so many people wrote songs about driving. It was the music of the industrial world. It was the sound of my mom gripping the edge of her seat, the sound of lemonade washing over my glove compartment. It was the harmony of backseat passengers puzzling out a car tag clue, or of my friends asking questions on our way to Hot Springs at 10 pm, *what's the most important thing you've learned this year?* and *what's your ideal sandwich?*, or of deer hiding among the trees, debating whether to cross the street.

There is such richness in the getting-there of life. But we consider the moments spent in the car as the string holding the beads together rather than as beads themselves. The road plays the refrain of living rather than the interlude if we are attentive enough to listen to it.

I thought I would cry when the brother said those words, but that would have ruined the moment, so I didn't.

Chad the tow truck driver does not look like I expected him to. He is middle-aged, reserved, and polite. He is not some twenty-year-old frat bro who works for his dad's towing business and thinks women are car-illiterate. In fact, he himself cannot find the latch to open the hood of my car, and he does not bring any tools with him, so he uses mine. Chad the tow truck driver is just as clueless as every other man who has looked at the inner workings of my Mini Cooper thus far. He does not immediately know where the battery is. I show him the cover it hides behind.

"We just replaced it yesterday, but it still won't start." I stand with my hands on my hips and wait for his diagnosis.

Chad, not a mechanic, tinkers away aimlessly with one of my wrenches until resigning to remove the entire gear shift. The car is too stubborn to go into neutral, but he coaxes it into his truck bed somehow.

"Do I get to ride with you?" I ask.

Chad shrugs. "I mean, you can if you want."

This is as much of an invitation as I will get, so I climb into the passenger seat of the cab, and we roll away. Chad does not immediately engage in conversation, and prolonged silences make me uncomfortable.

"Have you always lived here?" I ask, noting that he is not wearing his seatbelt.

"Yeah." Great answer. Very informative.

“And how long have you been doing this?”

“Bout fifteen years?” Chad looks out the rearview mirror to check on my car. It remains rooted in place in the bed of the truck. It almost looks peaceful.

“Have you always done this?”

A nod. Not even a verbal response anymore.

“Is it a family business?”

“Uh, yeah.”

We ride on without speaking, Chad’s truck beeping at him to put his seatbelt on. He refuses. I wring my hands together and look out the window.

“But I like it,” he says, and I am caught off guard. Chad speaking without first being spoken to? Where was this five minutes ago? “You get to go all over the place.”

“Oh really? Where do you go?”

And for the first time, Chad talks for a stretch of a few minutes, uninterrupted about the places he’s been. Chad the tow truck driver may not know where to find the battery of a Mini Cooper, but I find that he knows of the peace the road brings. He too is a lover of the in-between, a connoisseur of road music. And though he is a stranger who loves silence and neglects safety, I can understand this language of movement, of liminal space, so we fall into a rhythm of conversation until we reach the repair shop.

How to Draw a Relationship

By Jason Couch

Overview:

Are you at a loss for what to put on a blank page? Are you frustrated with your current art style and want to find a new one? Are you tired of drawers full of empty sketchbooks that you received years ago as Christmas and birthday presents? Tire no further: This step-by-step tutorial will help you refine your skills and find a technique that best suits you.

Step One: Start with a clean slate.

If you are looking to experiment with a new and unfamiliar art style or technique with which you have no experience, find yourself a crisp, brand new sketchbook. Rearrange your room. Move to a new apartment, a new town, a new state. You are a student at an unfamiliar university, surrounded by unfamiliar faces. You may present yourself however you wish without comment or prejudice. No old acquaintances ask: “Why aren’t you consistent? Just a few months ago you were drawing deep and heartfelt artwork, and now you’re relapsing into comic, cartoonish nonsense. Where did the real *talent* go?” The freedom is overwhelming, but it also brings you peace of mind.

You can be yourself again.

Step Two: Begin with a general idea of what you want to draw.

What do you want to gain from your art? Do you feel drawn to realistic works or animated doodles? Ask yourself these questions, but don’t torture yourself trying to find an answer before you begin the initial outline. You may find that this step is unnecessary and you would rather fill pages with small, short sketches; If you would rather not take things so seriously, then you may enjoy confessing crushes that could last for two weeks, rushing into three-month-long relationships, and having fun one-night stands at parties with strangers that you may never see again. Quickly turn these scattered pages when you finish, and move onto blank ones.

Step Three: Experiment.

Try exploring new techniques; use unfamiliar drawing utensils such as thicker or thinner lead than you are used to, watercolor brushes, or even digital programs. Work with eccentric colors, compose on tinted paper, or all of the above. Surround yourself with new people. Examine the faces in the crowds at your first university event. You notice a short girl with curly black hair enhanced with pink hues and eyes shaded with dark makeup as she sits across from you at a small table. You make a subconscious mental note to talk to her again.

Step Four: Breathe.

Take things slowly. Otherwise, you may start at an advanced stage too quickly and overwhelm yourself. Lightly sketch the lines that you are unsure about. Take her and other new friends with you to streetside taco stands, and dance in skating rinks in which the multicolored neon lights catch the rainbow of tints in her short, frizzy hair. The first time you visit her dorm, you quickly notice the posters and records of Broadway musicals hanging on her wall. The crystals and salt lamps on her desk give her small room a charmingly witchy vibe. She mentions that she used to work at a pottery studio in the big city from which she just moved. You begin to notice her looking at you out of the corner of her eye for a few seconds too long while playing board games with a group of friends, and you catch yourself doing the same to her. You make a habit of cracking awful jokes whenever you are in her presence so that the air around her is alive with giggles and lovably cheeky comments like “You’re such an idiot.” You find yourself repeatedly spending hours with her in the car, screaming the choruses to songs that you both love. You can’t help but acknowledge that you and she sing the male and female parts of various duets, respectively. *Maybe trying collaborative art wouldn’t be such a bad idea*, you say to yourself.

Step Five: Put on a beloved movie or upbeat music in the background as you perfect the drawing.

If your atmosphere is filled with compositions you enjoy, inspiration may come more naturally. The lights are out and you are both in her twin-sized bunk bed, laying side by side on your stomachs. Your favorite movie is playing on her flatscreen television. It’s the first time she has seen the film, and you want to give her a good impression of your tastes.

Step Six: Be willing to take risks.

When taking things slowly becomes stale and you long for transition, continue drawing without hesitation. She makes a

lighthearted remark about how cute Al Pacino is as Michael Corleone. You laugh and absent-mindedly agree, but you have forgotten about the movie. Your heart pounding against your ribs, you decide to make a single, definite line with your marker on the page; you put your arm around her waist in the gap between the end of her shirt and the band of her yoga pants, and you start gently drawing circles on her skin with your thumb.

She speaks up in a timid yet forward voice. “What’re you doing?”

Your palms sweat as you realize the mistake you may have just made. “I don’t know,” you say in a ridiculously shaky voice as you pull your hand away from her waist. Anxiety begins to pollute your bloodstream. *Fuck*, you think. *This is it*. You’ll have to change your name and move away again after this; there’s no coming back from such a blunder. *She’s going to kick me out any second now*.

She laughs and kisses you, and for a few minutes, nothing else exists.

Step Seven: Relax.

When you are satisfied with a line, continue the technique that you are applying to the page. Recognize and treasure the moments in which she says things that make you feel like the world is one with you.

It has been three months since step six. The background shifts and the tints change into the gentle grays and purples of the third floor of a quiet office building at your university, and you lean against the wall and look into her eyes as you wait for your ride to show up so that they can take you home. She talks aimlessly as she selflessly keeps you company while you wait.

You ask her what her plans are after you go home for the afternoon.

“I think I’m gonna go to the store and get a cheesecake so that I can eat it in my blanket fort while I watch a movie.”

You break into a smile, and she blushes and asks why you are looking at her like that. In a split-second, you conclude that the Puritans of 17th century America may have been onto something when they said that you would know if you are saved if you experience a singular, euphoric moment in which everything in the world seems absolute and heavenly.

“I just love you,” you answer.

She laughs, embarrassed, and looks down from your gaze.

Step Eight: Observe your work from a bird’s-eye view.

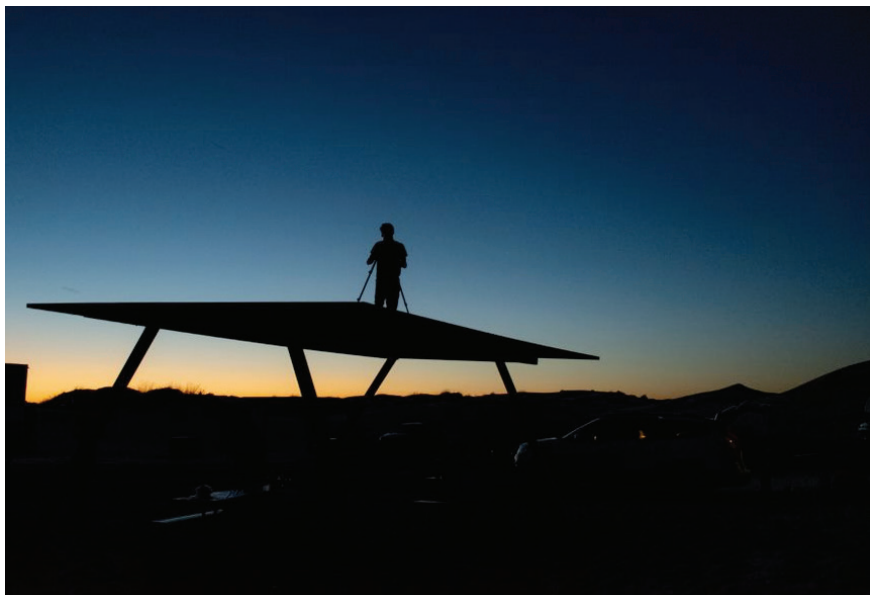
Step back. Take a look at how the drawing is progressing and decide if you would like to continue the piece. Will you look back on this page fondly? Will you regret any mistakes you made, but

treasure the craftsmanship of the many parts which bring you joy? Will you take her with you to plays and listening rooms and unabashedly dance with her until you are both red-faced and laughing? Will you take candid polaroid photos of her with flowers in her hair while she skips stones and crosses wooden bridges on nature trails brimming with pine trees and statuettes? Will you stand by her side during the moments when she feels dejected or inadequate, pulling out a pink colored pencil and reapplying color to her cheeks as you crack one of your awful jokes to make her laugh again? Will you tell her that you will always be there to steady her when the ground seems to crumble and dissolve beneath her feet? If the answer is yes, repeat steps four through eight for the foreseeable future.

A Photo Gallery



Unnamed 5052
By Skylar Free



Good View

By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez



Rok

By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez



Unnamed 9076

By Skyla Free



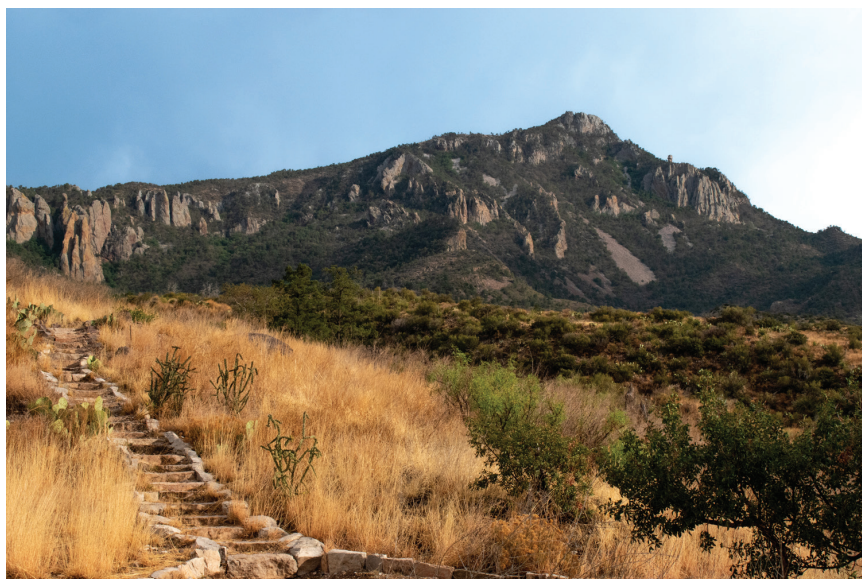
Unnamed 123123098
By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez



The Story of Three Tents

By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez

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Where (question mark)

By Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez



Tailights

By Nikolaas Van Kley



Unnamed 8904-2

By Skylar Free

Contributor Bios

in order of first appearance

Mia Criswell is a second-year junior from Tomball, Texas studying Creative Writing with a minor in Literature. She writes non-fiction, short stories, poetry, and music with the intention of establishing her career as a published author.

Skyla Free is currently completing her BFA in Creative Writing with plans to attend graduate school afterwards. Along with writing, Skyla enjoys photography, focusing on aspects of Nature. Her ultimate goal is to be able to travel the world while writing and being able to take pictures of all the exotic places her travels take her.

Mary Deborah Talik is a sophomore majoring in Creative Writing with a minor in Literature. Her strong suits are poetry and fantasy fiction, and she also enjoys photography in her spare time (she runs an Instagram page called Evira Photography). She loves plants, and enjoys sunflowers and the sky most of all.

Emily McFall is an English Education major from the Houston area. Emily has always loved writing but never thought about sharing it publicly until now. Enjoy!

Amelia Kleiber is a senior at SFA, studying English, Secondary Ed, and Creative Writing. Her work has appeared in HUMID 13 and 14, The Piney Dark, and, most recently in The Dillydoun Review.

Arron McMorris is a 25-year-old percussionist currently studying Sound Recording Technology here at Stephen F. Austin State University. Music has always been Arron's passion, but poetry has been their longest used outlet. Arron enjoys writing about life, time, and trees.

Parker Ramsey is an English major at SFA.

Ellory Brossette is a Sophomore at SFA from Humble, TX. As she works towards her Bachelors in Creative Writing, Ellory hopes to someday find success in the world of literature as an aspiring poet and author.

Agafia Bowden is a freshman at SFA. When she is not drilling anatomy terms into her head, you might find her hunched over one of her dozens of notebooks writing poems and stories and jotting down the notable happenings of the day, like what type of trees she saw or pondering whether a necromancer really does live on North Street.

Maggie Brown is an English/Education major at SFASU, with a passion for words, new worlds, and animals. Special thanks to Mom, Dad, Victoria, & John.

Bradley Cavanaugh is a Creative Writing major at SFA, and this is his first publication.

Jacqueline Stewart is a self-motivated and driven person who has always enjoyed both reading literature and creating it. She aspires to become an English teacher and a published author who can inspire other readers to become writers one day.

Darren Brown has written a story about the lessons he's acquired and how they have come to play in his recent life.

Elyana Williams is a senior Mass Communications major, studying Advertising. In her free time, she enjoys reading, baking, crocheting, freelance copywriting, and spending time with her cat, Ivy.

Hilario Espinoza Gonzalez is an artist from Marshall, TX that is majoring in Graphic Design and minoring in Digital Media. A lot of their art is based on mental health, specifically mental states that they have found themselves in growing up and on a daily basis. For Hilario's photography, they tend to focus on the size of people to emphasize the world we inhabit as not just a hunk of rock but a place where we live and are still exploring.

Nikolaas Van Kley is an undergraduate student who is currently pursuing a degree in Mathematics and Physics. Nikolaas was born in Nacogdoches, TX and spent some of his early years in Russia. One of Nikolaas' passions has been photography, for which he uses traditional analog methods.

Megan Bynum is a visual artist from Texas whose major discipline is sculpture. Her work is informed by philosophical concepts about the nature of humanity and our connections to each other and ourselves. Using the three-dimensional modality to extrapolate on human emotion and

the intricacies of the actions pursuant to them, Bynum's motivation for artmaking is driven by a passion to improve the world by changing human interaction and increasing understanding of self. She invites her audience to consider their psychological imperatives in hopes that they will recognize the significance of interconnectivity by examining ideal or abhorrent human behavior.

Jason Couch is a senior pursuing a BFA in Creative Writing and has been a resident of Nacogdoches for over twenty years. As a fan of historical fiction and poetry, he strives to romanticize earthly scenes in life, portraying realistic relationships and finding wonder in the mundane. After he graduates, he hopes to relocate to Washington State, where he can study, write, and teach literature in an environment that suits his soul.

“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.”

~ Sylvia Plath

