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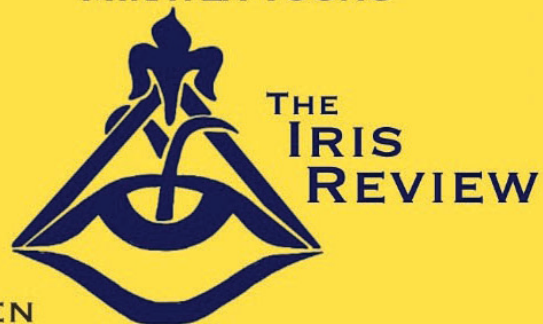
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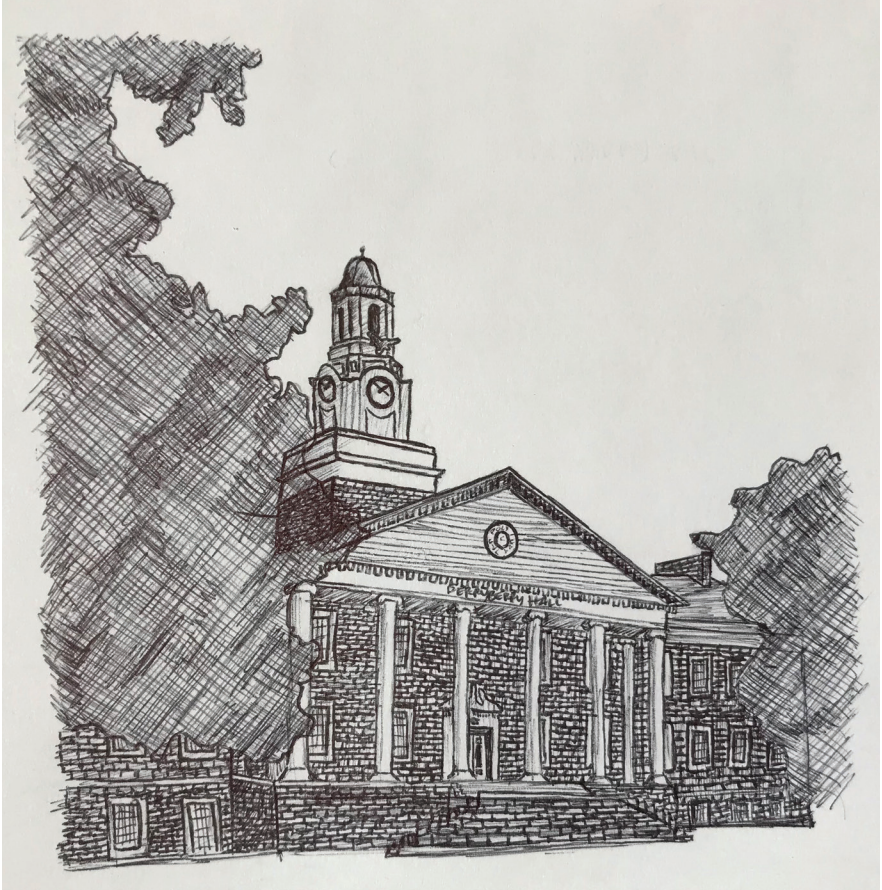
Tennessee
TECH



A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

The *Iris Review* is a publication of Tennessee Tech students, many of whom are studying English and creative writing. As a journal rooted in place, we seek to publish writing and art by Tennessee Tech students, faculty, employees, and alumni, as well as the wider Cookeville community. In doing so, we seek to offer a window onto our place and time.

This year we have responded to many of the works we are publishing with original drawings. Just as ancient monks in scriptoria, also rooted in place, illuminated the manuscripts they created not only with gold leaf, but also with their reactions, interpretations, and drawings, we offer our own marginalia as witness to our engagement with these works. We hope that in a similar way you will make this book your own, as a window always allows the viewer to look not just without, but within.



THE IRIS REVIEW

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Carbon And Bad Timing

Kat Gardner

I am not in love with life just yet
I am getting there though
I am carbon and bad timing
I am motivation and rain clouds
I am a student to the stars and a teacher to the dirt
I have places to go
I have places to exist
I have air to breathe and thunder to digest
I have love to give that I haven't yet learned to receive
I am carbon and bad timing that tends to forget what it is that
I am doing here to begin with



your manic pixie dream girl appears

Mari Ramler

I was sent here by you to say this:

We're all scared.

(That is to say, future me was hired by future you
to travel back in time
to deliver this message
in the very hour of your deepest need.)

This is the economics of it; the physics of it
are beyond our quantum comprehension.
But this is—more or less—how it works.)

Love, too, works the way you thought it should.
You send your signal
into the world
yearning for reception.

Dear God, please,
let somebody—anybody—know that
I am
swinging for the fences.

Or else,
you know what?
Just hit me.
I'll take the walk.

The message delivered.
The message received:

You are coming to save you.

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(the moment, almost here)

And here's that secret code:

Backed against the wall,
hope springs.



you stay
Trinity Cogan

“I am going to marry you someday,” she whispered.
Her hair burned my skin and yet I smiled.
Burn me, go ahead. I love you enough to handle the
flames.
I will waltz into your Hell and I will dance.
Your demons will love and caress me.
I see their beauty, their terror.

I see you. I hear you.
You see me. You hear me.

You stay.



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Jennifer

Mark Creter

I sit across from her listening to her
talk about a song we overheard

I love the way her eyes brighten as she talks

I love the range of expressions

I love the tonal quality of her voice

I love the passion with which she speaks

And her laugh, I love her laugh

I know that sounds weird

I have been sitting across from her

Listening to her talk

For almost thirty years

I never get tired of

Her voice

Her eyes

Her expressions

Her thoughts

Her passion

Her ire

Her joy

Her laugh

Her

I want to sit across

From her

For another thirty years

Listening



*Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Winner*

Solace

Heather Richmond

The withered tail of a stray feline,
Slightly grazed her shoe.
His proud arch vexed with
Defeat, struggled to rise once more.

She caressed his ear. The rough
Terrain of “alpha male” confessed
It’s wear. Abrasive as the blemishes
That flounced upon her heart.

Kindred tales they both shared
These solitary souls.
Unresolved plans; Unspoken words.
Yet, still she welcomed her due.
For if the doubt crept in beyond,
The calloused resolve would plunge.

He perched beside her, this friend.
This tattered tuft of fur resigned,
And here they sat. Their
Lives entwined, subtle victory.

The isolation soon dispersed,
The pair sensed she was near;
What fear-no, comfort loomed,
While Fate willed her wary ways.

Yet, she took pity on this fading duo.
Farewells aren't often easy.
Desolate sky before, rewind.
Their agile foe, no, their solace.



*Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
Honorable Mention*

Shreds of Grief

Jaden Mullins

Before my grandpa died, that man would leave tissues
everywhere
I guess that's what old men do
And old women clean up after them
From the table, from the pocket of his jeans
You could always tell when he left one in his pant pocket,
Especially after the rinse cycle

Before my grandpa died, that man would hum to himself
I guess that's what old men do
And old women listen.
When he came home from work or in the garden
You could always tell when he was near,
Especially when it was out of tune.

I was doing my laundry one afternoon
Mumbling along to the chorus of Conway Twitty
I opened the dryer door to realized I left a tissue in my pocket
It hit me all at once and I paused picking the shreds of a
crumpled-up math problem,
He is still here, the grief is still here, still here



*Clara Cox Epperson Prose Writing Competition
Winner, Nonfiction*

Eunoia

Bethany Brock

When I was about six years old, I remember having my first conversation about death. My brother Lucas and I had just watched “Joey,” a silly movie about a kangaroo and when he turned the lights out, I looked over at a funeral paper nestled in the corner of a picture frame on his wall. I knew that paper came from a funeral service. I knew the person in that picture had died. I stared at the picture and thoughts swarmed my head about the afterlife and what it must be like according to what I had heard in church.

“Why did he die?”

“People just die. It is a part of life.”

“But... they go to Heaven, right?”

“If they live their life for Jesus.”

“And he did, right?”

“I think he did.”

“Do you think it hurt?”

“Probably at first... but, not forever.”

All I knew was that we could have hope in a better place after death. A place with no more pain, tears, or separation. Still, I didn’t like the idea of it all. I thought, No... I will need my family every day that I live. They can’t leave me. I assured myself that surely God knew I needed them and prayed many times to make sure. And for that night, that was enough to calm my small and anxious heart. I fell asleep thinking about this inevitable phenomenon, knowing it was out of my hands, but that God would surely not take anyone, not now anyway. Time went on and I did not think much of death until I watched it consume my grandparents several years later.

At eight years old, I spent all my free time coloring, painting, and mixing different colors together to make all kinds of pictures, so when I saw him sitting on the couch not busy, I asked him, “Papaw, do you want to come to my room to color with me?”

“Why, yes, I do.”

My Papaw was a hardworking man with deep brown eyes, a skinny figure, and usually always wore a button-up shirt, jeans, and velcro shoes. I had seen pictures of him with brown hair when he was younger but the version of him that I knew had hair as white as baby powder.

He came to my room to color with me and we stayed in there for hours. He would tell me stories of his younger days as I listened and giggled. Then, I got out my Beauty and the Beast tea set for us to have a tea party. He was always up for cookies and a beverage. Later that night, he showed us the “rabbit dance,” a dance he learned when he was in the army, and when he was done dancing, he brought out the hymnal and encouraged us to all sing with him. Sometimes if he didn’t know a song, he’d still try to sing it even if the tune was the one that went to the song he had just sung previously. There was never a dull moment with my Papaw.

Unfortunately, when I was in fifth grade he was diagnosed with dementia. It started with him getting his days and nights mixed up, he would sing hymns all night and then walk around the house for a while. He did this all night. Then, he would sleep for the next three days, occasionally getting up for food. He had a lot of accidents since he didn’t get up much, I remember my mom constantly changing his sheets and walking him to the shower. This process would repeat over and over.

One day he took off walking outside and we didn’t know where he had gone. Thankfully, the neighbors are all our family, so we know each other. Still, it was scary not knowing where he had gone because we are surrounded by woods and

didn't know which direction he had gone in.

Mom called everyone around us and asked them all if they had seen him. I went outside with Dad to look around to see if he was out there anywhere. We did not see him anywhere and so we got into the truck and drove down the gravel road that eventually led to the pavement.

We found him walking on the road beside my uncle Bobby's driveway. We were about to leave for a Christmas Program at a church and he had decided to go ahead and head that way.

I was in eighth grade the day he passed. My other brother Phil, the computer teacher, came walking in the doorway of the gym as I sat on the bleachers. I knew it. Papaw wasn't very well that morning when I left. I had a feeling that morning as I got on the bus that whenever I came back home again it wouldn't be the same. However, I was thankful that it was my brother giving me the news and not the school receptionist. I couldn't have held myself together.

He approached me and stood in silence for a moment, "Hey, Bet... he just passed."

Tears filled his eyes as the words came out. I had been crying all morning. He took me into his arms as we sobbed. He drove me home and when we got there, all my mom could say was,

"Doesn't he look so peaceful?"

"Yes. He does."

Inexplicably carefree.

Before people got there for the funeral, I went to the bathroom with Nicole, my sister-in-law, and let myself grieve in privacy. I tried to not cry in front of my mom, to be strong for her. But, she came in there a few minutes later and found us.

"Don't hold it in, okay?"

I nodded.

"You don't have to be strong right now."

We all hugged each other in a circle as we wept. There was no doubt in our hearts that he was in Heaven now, rejoicing with his wife, his other family members that passed on, and Jesus. Still, losing him was like losing a limb. However, it was this connection with my mom and other loved ones that kept me going. We talked about him a lot. We sang his favorite songs. We grieved together. We got through it together.

My grandma was another very special person, we all called her “Maw.” She was barely five feet tall, had blue eyes, and usually wore a leather coat and carried a leather purse. When getting up in my dad’s truck she usually needed a little boost.

We would always watch westerns late at night before we would go to bed. She was especially fond of Perry Mason, Bonanza, and The Rifleman. She never went a day without speaking her mind, whether that be about the silly characters on tv or the silly characters in real life.

I also recall the many evenings when my mom and I would pick up cheeseburgers after my piano lesson and bring them to her house. We would sit at her table and eat as she talked deeply about prophetic dreams, bible verses, and stories of her children and great-grandchildren. She emphasized how important prayer was and that she always tried to pray for everyone, because we’re supposed to love everyone, even if we don’t necessarily like being around them. She always was the last one to finish eating because she talked so much. It was evident that family was very important to her, she made sure that we had dinners together so that we would see each other, talk often, and stay close.

I was a senior in high school when I watched skin cancer consume her. It started with a small scab that grew and grew. She had surgery to get it removed but then it grew back, even worse than before. Just like Papaw’s dementia, there was nothing we could do now for Maw either. We stood by, doing

everything we could to make her as comfortable as possible as the scab bled all over her pillow night after night. Even then, she still sang praises and talked about God's blessings and how thankful she was for her beautiful family.

The night she left us, there was such a feeling of peace that surrounded that small and stuffed hospital room. We all sat in silence, and someone said,

“She made it. She's there now.”

It was around 7:30 and the most beautiful sunset was just going down. I like to think that maybe that was her good-bye to us. She left beautifully.

Both of my grandparents sang praises as they fought their final battles. They knew that death was an inevitable plight. However, they showed me that just because death is a part of life, it does not mean that life is without purpose. Instead, there's even more reason to live life with double the passion because we are only guaranteed right now. Now is the time to talk to our mom, laugh at westerns, have tea parties, sing songs, say our prayers, make our peace, and create art.

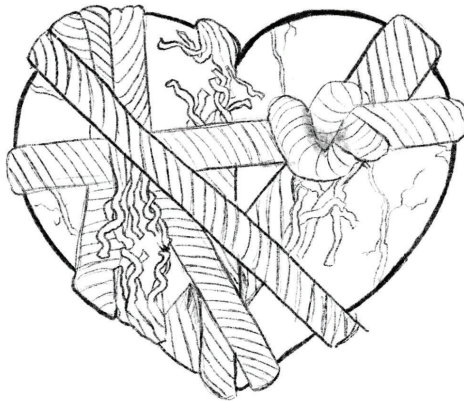
Even if things didn't go the way I had hoped, I still loved. I still lived. I still spent time with them. I still made memories. I still learned what the rabbit dance is and how to pray. I still learned how to laugh at myself and how to sing at the top of my lungs no matter who may be listening even if I forgot the tune of the song.

And now I know, it will indeed hurt at first... but, not forever.

David

Inspired by the Holy Bible
Destiny Wanamaker

Like David, I cry out to You!
My spirit is overwhelmed,
and I can bear no more.
My heart is a tangled mess.
Like David, I cry out to You!
Please relieve me from my distress,
and guide me closer to thy word.
Father Almighty listen to my cry!
Show me the answer I am searching for.
I surely cannot make it without Your help.
Father Almighty listen to my cry!
Clear my mind so I can see
the path You lay before me.
For I am Your servant
And wish to do as You please.
Father Almighty let me cry no more!



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Love Letter From God #1
Emma Mitchell



Love Letter From God #2
Emma Mitchell

God is a Hippie

Taylor Crabtree

Maybe God's closest child
Is the one without a bible.
The one, whose spirit,
Befriends that dissuasion,
Loosely threaded,
Through our contemplations
And tied in strands of Heaven.

Maybe that message was composed
Without a whisper or a pen.
Only inscribed in our benevolence
before life began.
And in its bonafide form:
The unwavering sense of love,
With which all are born.

But in misfortune
Does this heedless world,
Inact a listless tradition.
Where with bias and grudge,
Pounding upon
that irreproachable love,
It is ignorantly remolded.

Where the inscriptions
Divinity never wrote
And wishes kindness never spoke,
Tell the pure hearts
Yes and no, convince them to obey,
And their nature now frolics
in tempted steps astray.

God, within us dwells.
In a fraction of infinity,
A spec of divinity,
...
our never-ending affinity.

And from within,
That morsel must watch it sprout.
A labyrinth, stretching in vines
made of opinions and lies
sprouting twiners of greed,
And tendril-climbers of judgment.

Seldom does one remember
The always-smoking ember
of devotion.

A drip that swirls and willingly swells
Shining through,
In our gratitude for a familiar smell,
In the squeeze of our cat,
In the gaze of affection, entirely reciprocated,
In the touching lips of a single-gender kiss
In a teen's silent gratitude toward a parent
In saying I forgive
In saying I understand
In saying "fuck" to make someone laugh.
And in loving the lonely, on an ignorant world's behalf.

Maybe God's closest child,
Is the one without a bible.
The one who hears God
By reading the inscriptions of their own heart.
For everyone, it is there.
Thought often immersed deeply

In the greatest cautionary tale
Ever composed.
But this intended form,
is seldom seen, and its story,
Never told.



LUCIFER

Maverick Crawford

You're a lonely god
sitting on a pedestal,
watching but never experiencing.
It wasn't until an angel came
and sat beside you
that you realized what it meant to be human.
But what will you do
if that angel loses his wings
and comes tumbling down?
Alone
once again
not god
but a man.

Alone,
you sit,
watching wings tattered,
and broken.
“How foolish,” you thought,
watching the feather fall
down below.
“How foolish to fall
in love with perfect
imperfection.”

Alas.
That's what it means
to be human—
Falling,

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not realizing until
it's too late
that you've hit the ground

Below.



Memories in a Deluge

Alan Green

Anxiously eyeing the gas station clerk, Ramses stuffed his hand into his pocket and pulled out a hundred dollar bill. He had visited his brother, Ezra, three nights ago to celebrate the birth of his first child. While Ezra was in another room, Ramses impulsively pocketed the bill. Guilty feelings came up from time to time, but Ramses felt like he was owed something. What that something exactly was, Ramses couldn't pinpoint, and he was never likely to pinpoint it. Ramses handed the dry-looking clerk the money and pointed to a pack of cigarettes in the bottom of the case.

A beat up, yellowed pack of cigarettes in hand, Ramses darted out of the grimy store while the clerk turned around and fidgeted with some empty boxes.

After a five minute bus ride through several dilapidated streets, Ramses stepped onto the cracked sidewalk and into the complex where he spent almost every minute of his day. An office building hardly classifies as a decent location for apartments, but rent was ridiculously cheap. Ramses descended a couple flights of stairs into the basement while clutching the money and cigarettes in his pocket, and, turning down a lengthy hallway, he grazed his free hand along the wall until he reached his room. Exhausted, he flopped onto his mattress which lay in the corner of the room with no frame. He loathed the building's owner for keeping each room at an uncomfortably hot temperature, especially in a place with as little airflow as this. Turning to face his fish tank, which he kept situated on a table opposite from his bed, he strolled through an endless maze of lustful anger while he closed his eyes and begged for sleep.

The fish tank cast an alien glow over him as he tossed and turned in a mess of clammy sheets, trying to break through the ocean's surface. But he couldn't, so he lingered there flailing

his arms and legs around in panic while water forced its way into his lungs. Most nights he would drown in a timeless place only to wake up and spend the remaining sultry hours before dawn cowering in a corner, waiting for a taste of drowsiness to weigh his eyelids down again. Every night inevitably played out the same.

In the dark corner of the room Ramses put the back of his head against the wall and stared at the eerily illuminated ceiling. Shapes appeared and jumbled into each other, skipped over one another, morphed into completely new animals. If he closed his eyes, the shapes wouldn't leave. They'd only take a new, more amorphous form.

Thoughts of three nights ago intruded into Ramses' head.

Let me and Eleonore help you.

I don't need your help.

You called me the other day in tears. You worry me.

I don't want you to worry about me.

Then what do you want?

I don't want anything.

Ramses, you need to let me know what's wrong so we can help you.

Leave me the fuck alone.

He opened his eyes. Shapes twisted and contorted. Ramses needed a window. There are no shapes when you look out a window.

A smoke would have to suffice. He dug around in his pocket, pulled out the pack, and, before he could bring one in for a drag, he exhaled a thick cloud of vapor. It was then he realized how cold his room had become. As the fish tank's light intercepted every breath with an azure haze, Ramses crumpled the cigarette in his hand, which was rough and dry in the frigid air. His head still nested in the corner, he focused on both his breath and the tank. The tank was the only source

of light in the room, and Ramses' eyes couldn't fully adjust to his surroundings.

However, his hearing was clear. The sound of running water. The same trickle heard from the small fountains Ramses had desperately wanted when he was a child, but his mother refused to buy him because they were loud and distracting. Faint but distinguishable, the water flowed. He felt his mattress gently sway as if he were on a small fishing boat.

His mattress rocked softly back and forth into the room's corner, so Ramses shuffled to its edge and slid his feet down into an inch of frigid water. While a sudden feeling of surprise slowly crawled its way up his spine, he observed the fish tank on the table across from him casting its glow onto the pooling water at his feet. It shimmered like moonlight across a violet sea.

What the fuck. He quickly pulled his feet from the freezing water.

Ramses glanced back and forth to make sure what was happening was real, but he knew for sure when he lowered the palm of his hand into the flood. It stiffened the joints in his fingers. He was about to lose the place he was most content in. Surely, he wouldn't be able to find somewhere this far away from others. He would have to show up on his brother's doorstep begging for a place to stay. He hated the idea.

Again, he shuffled to the edge of the bed and dipped his feet into the water. It was unbearable, as if someone made sure to throw in an extra tub of ice to rub salt in the wound. Better yet, the water level crept up. Dragging his feet through the water, reaching for the door in the corner, he lost his balance and fell to his hands and knees. His palms were sprawled out on the floor, causing him to shudder at the temperature. Extreme heat like that of his room was intolerable, but this extreme shift was beginning to seem worse.

Shit's rising faster.

Regaining his posture, Ramses half-crawled, half-lunged for the door handle and forcefully threw all his weight into the door to escape into the hallway. It didn't budge one bit. No matter how hard he heaved, it just wouldn't open. He didn't know that the hall was already filled to the ceiling, and no amount of extraordinary effort would open that door. The pressure was too great. Even if he did manage to pry the door open, the swim to ground level was too great a distance—especially for a smoker. He would drown. Ramses, regardless, tried a handful of times and continued thrusting his shoulder into the door, yelling for someone to come save him. Fatigued and short of breath, he concluded it was hopeless, and, after taking a moment to rest, he raked his feet back across the room to think of some way to escape.

He waded to the only source of light in the room. Ramses banged his head against the edge of the tank. It was hopeless. Water climbed up his legs as he closed his eyes and began to cry.

It became unbearably cold as more water flooded into the room. Luckily, his bed floated atop the tide so Ramses could have somewhere to stay dry, but it was still unbearable. Having exhausted all ideas to save himself, he sprawled out on his back and stared at the blue-hued ceiling while the mattress gently swayed.

The distinct, aqueous smell of the room brought to mind an old memory. When Ramses was a child, his mother took him and Ezra to the beach. They always took this trip toward the end of fall as the temperature dropped with the change of season. They couldn't go during the summer because their mother worked too much and was rarely home, so a trip to the beach at this time of year became a ritual. It always delighted Ramses to play with his brother in the sand.

Often, he swam out far because he liked being in the open ocean, and it was comforting to have so many directions in which to swim. During one of these trips, he swam out

farther than ever before. It was euphoric to be engulfed by this incomprehensible mass filled with billions of creatures. One day, he hoped, he could be like the fish and go wherever he wanted. He paid no attention to how far away from the shore he swam until he started to become fatigued. Turning around, Ramses realized he no longer had the strength to make it back to his brother who stood on the shore yelling and waving his arms above his head. Ramses started to fall under the surface before long. He didn't remember much after the salty water invaded his body and his vision was filled with the deep black of the sea.

Finally, he felt arms dragging him along the shallow seabed while his feet raked up the coarse, wet sand until it quickly became fine and dry. He regained his senses as he coughed up water while sprawled in the sand. The sun warmed every fiber in his soul. It felt good to be this warm. Opening his eyes, Ramses felt his brother shaking him and yelling his name.

His mother, half a mile down the shore, sat in her chair reading some magazine about home furnishing. Her narrow set eyes and pursed, angular lips cast sharp lines across her face while her bony fingers gently held the magazine. She didn't think it was that serious. Ramses was clearly just playing around and looking for attention. Silly little Ramses.

Now only about two feet from the ceiling, he wept like a child while curled up into a ball. The glowing tank was now completely submerged. Fish swam freely about the room. Light diffused throughout the water, morphing into a giant tank you find in a large aquarium with the gigantic windows spilling azure radiance into dark, dry observation rooms.

He imagined Ezra hearing about how his baby brother Ramses had drowned.

Ramses was pressed in between his mattress and the ceiling. Less than a foot left to go. He brought up his arms and lightly grazed the ceiling above him. It was dry. Funny how the last dry thing he put his hands on would be the lid to a

giant box. If only he could just push with all his strength and swing it open and see the open sky. An open sky blazing with warmth.

Ramses, taking a deep, final breath, rolled off the mattress and into the water.

It was strange not knowing what to do while he floated around his room. There really was nothing to do. His entire body was stiff from the cold. Fish, backlit by the light of the tank, which was now levitating above its table, trailed in front of him. They twirled and darted around the room. It must feel nice to swim around so freely after being forced into a small tank for so long. Ramses thought they were happy, and that comforted him.

Reaching out, he grabbed the rim of the tank and peered in. In some ways, the aquarium resembled his room. It was a container, a habitat. Somewhere to stay forever. It used to be that his fish couldn't ever realistically leave. That used to be the case. They had a bigger tank to swim around in now.

Ramses gazed at the blue light as he struggled to hold his breath. It was painful. Suffocation is normally described as painless. Sure, there's no physical pain. Mentally, however, it's excruciating. Panic sets in and refuses to leave unless there's some air to be found.

He couldn't manage it. Ramses blew out bubbles that tickled his face while they rose up to the ceiling. His first breath came as a shock to his system. It felt like nothing. Several more breaths, and he felt perfectly fine.

I'm breathing! I'm really fuckin' breathing right now!

Twisting and turning around in jubilation, he then swam to the door and swung it open. Outside his room was a multitude of different colored fish swimming about. Ramses, joyfully propelling himself along the hallway, reached out his arms to touch everything around him. Finally reaching the top of the stairwell, Ramses opened the door that led to the lobby and was suddenly spilled out onto the shore of a sunlit beach.

He crawled, his fingers digging into the sand. He

crawled for what felt like hours until he reached a small boy. The boy's eyes were large and round, and a small scar rested just above his lip. It was the same scar from when Ramses was younger and had tripped and landed face-first on a rock. He looked up at the small boy and saw his reflection. By now, Ramses was so exhausted that he rolled onto his back as a soft breeze kicked up a shower of fine sand onto his body.

“Mom,” Ramses called out. “Mom, where are you? I’m over here. Please help me.” Ramses felt an immense weight settle on his chest. His vision started to blur.

The boy looked down on him, tears starting to well up in his eyes. “I don’t think she’s coming,” he whispered shakily.

Ramses closed his eyes, clenched his fists in the sand, and took in a long, deep breath.

FROSTBITE

An excerpt from a working novel series

Linda M. White

The trees bend, crooked and creaking, beneath the snow coat atop the canopy, and any melted water has since coagulated into elongated icicle fangs under the biting, cold, night wind. There is light, bright and almost painful white light that reflects on the drift like gaudy diamonds around a queen's neck—beauty almost masking the sinister secrets slithering among the shadows. Beyond the creaking of bent branches and yowling gusts of wind, the frigid silence mixes with the icy scent of desolate winter woods, and nothing else can be heard or smelled. Iron wine dribbles down the throat from cracked lips and a parched pallet. Amid the frost is shock, then shivers, then pain, and then numbness. As the ears, nose, tongue, and skin drift into the void, the eyes reign as the only functioning sense, but even then, just barely. Lids squinted closer against the gale limit visibility, and the shadow-play among the shimmering, monochrome void only increases the growing fright that jolts through the mind: *I will die here. I will die here.*

She rubs her frigid, bony hands together but doesn't feel them connect. Gazing down at the deep purple of her fingertips, curved and frozen joints that refuse to unwind, she knows that it won't be long before they'll become unsalvageable. Her bare feet are probably already black as they slug through the layers of snow. She's slowing down now. No matter how much she tries to will herself forward, nothing wants to move anymore. The urge to just lie down grows more and more overwhelming by the minute.

But there's a light in the distance—the inn she passed by weeks before, when it was fall and she was free. She pushes herself to continue and finally makes it to the log building,

peering in through the window at the gathering of people warm inside by the glowing fireplace with their alcohol and hot food and layers of clothing. And their loud laughter and harsh eyes and hated sigil. She turns away from the inn and stumbles towards the stables, pushing open the large door and heaving it closed behind her. She can feel herself begin to warm as she limps down the aisle towards the empty stalls in the back. The horses buck and scream as she passes by, cowering against the furthest wall of their stalls. She looks into a massive stallion's eyes, sees the dilation of fear gazing back at her, and presses on.

The heavy wooden support beams above the stalls host all sorts of woodland creatures hiding away from the blizzard outside, and though they don't risk the storm, they retreat as far as they can from her when she nears them. The wind-facing windows' shutters are closed but still bang rhythmically against their slots and the scent of grain and dung fill the room. She crawls into an empty stall at the far, left corner amidst the straw and pulls her knees close to her chest. Eventually, she begins to shiver again, and parts of her painfully pulse with each slow thud of her heart. Warming up is good for her, but it doesn't feel that way. Shaking, she looks at her hands and begins flexing them. After a few minutes, she glances down at her feet, which are black like she suspected. Without food or fire, it will take forever for them to heal. For a moment, she considers killing one of the horses and breaking a lantern, but she doesn't have the energy right now.

The door opens and a man walks in flashing his lantern around. "What's got you all spooked? One of those beasts in the rafters, hm?" the man says to the horses, looking up at the raccoons and opossums and owls above. "Give it a check..." he grumbles and begins moving down the aisle.

She presses further against the wall and stares in fear.

Rounding the corner, the man almost drops his lantern

with a gasp. “My word, lass, you nearly gave me a fright!” He raises the lantern and furrows his brows. “The cold has settled into you, hasn’t it, lass? Oh, but why did you come out here instead of the inn?”

She just stares at him.

“You’re a frightened one, aren’t you? Poor thing. Come on then, I won’t hurt you. Too old to try nothing. Come on.”

Slowly, she stands.

“That’s it, come on.”

She moves forward, more into his light.

“My word, you’ve had a right beating, haven’t you? Would you just look at the bruises! Oh, lass, you’re safe now. Come on, and I’ll get you something to eat. Come on.”

When she gets closer, he takes off his thick fur mantle and wraps it around her shoulders. She flinches at first but sighs under the warmth.

“Come on then, quick now. I may be old, but I’d like not to catch my death out here.”

He tries to put his arm around her, but she recoils and instead follows him back out into the blizzard. The icy wind slices through the fur mantle and settles deep in her bones. Everything springs to life with renewed anguish, and her shivers shake her into an uneven pace as she shambles behind the silhouette of the bent man. He leads her through the back door of the inn and into the kitchen. The overwhelming heat makes her smile in spite of herself. A vaulted ceiling supported by wooden beams leaks the occasional snowflake, which melts instantaneously and drips like rain onto the parched floor. A large elf skin lies beneath a hand-carved and well-worn round table with three creaky chairs. In the center of the room, a rectangular basin of stones frames a hole in the floor where a thriving fire rests licking a large cauldron of stew. Fresh herbs and spices, cooked meat, steamed vegetables, and smoke fill her nostrils which flare as her mouth begins to salivate. From the rafters hang dried plants and meat—a bundle of rosemary,

a whole rabbit, some garlic. Shelves of utensils and pots and cutlery add organizational balance to the chaotic corners of supplies stuffed in bags and crates and barrels. She takes a moment to look around in wonder, soak up the warmth, and breathe the stuffy, tasty air.

“Come on, lass. Let’s go to the front, and I’ll bring you something to eat and drink.”

She pulls away, glancing through the bare threshold at the dining chamber beyond. Blue and white banners bear the familiar and infamous crest of House Hearne: a speared dragon.

The old man looks between her and the dining area. “Well now, lass. The knights of House Hearne are not known for their kind spirits, to be sure, but these bannermen are my most frequent customers. I give ‘em a few drinks on me and they become a ripe bunch of jolly fools, telling tales and singing and laughing. And they’ve already had more than a few. There ain’t nothing to be afear’d, especially for a gentle, young lady like yourself.”

Still, she takes a step back and looks at the door.

“Now, now, lass. If you’re that scared of them, you can just settle in back here for now. Here, have a seat at the table, and I’ll fetch you somethin’ to eat.”

She watches him go over to the pot before sliding into one of the chairs and tugging the furs closer around her. It isn’t long before she’s forking the tender meat from the stew and glaring at the threshold. The old man hobbles into the dining area to tend to the guards when a sudden yelp hits her ears and sends her cowering towards the door.

“What’s gotten into you, mangy mutt, taking a snap at the old man when you’ve got plenty of food?” The gruff voice drifts back to her as the smell of her drifts forwards into the hound’s nostrils. It begins tugging against its owner’s hand, pulling him up.

“Must be something it doesn’t like,” another says.

“Coming from the kitchen. Got anything strange back there, old man?”

“Only this lass I found freezing to death in the stables—”

She flings the door open and begins running into the blizzard. The shouting of the guards sounds so distant in the howling wind. It isn't until the hound has pinned her in the drift that she realizes how slowly her feet carried her. With a snap, the hound falls backwards into the snow—its throat draining blood on the white, blanketed ground.

“She killed Hunter!” the owner says, and they begin drawing their weapons.

Shaking, she touches her mouth and looks at the wet, hot, crimson that soaks her fingers. Then, looks back at the frightened, frightening men. “I was only defending myself! I don't want any trouble!”

“You've already got it!” one growls, brandishing his blade.

The sting of tears forms in her eyes. “Please, I don't want to hurt you!”

“Then present your neck, and we'll make it quick!” one says, and they snarl and move forward.

“I can't,” she whispers.

*

She pulls the layers of robes and furs tighter around her, wiggling her resurrecting toes within the warm, leather boots, streaking fresh blood on her cheeks as she wipes the tears away and ventures once more into the frigid night.

The End of All Things To Come
Reece Edwards

In skies of azure, I've seen the end
The world around us is just too bare
There's no mystique or fresh meat
The dreams of joy are all used up
A million words that should be said
Just float in the warming air
Someone will know you in ways I never did
In days of rotting, look back and see
Things have not transpired as they meant to be
The hope is fleeting, should try digging holes
A place to bury the memories that stuck
Curl up as the dirt covers the carcass
Kill time 'til the end of all things
It's alright, no one's waiting for me
Count clouds as the storm begins



Spring 2023



Frozen in Time

E.J. Freeman



Bear Family

Eli Harris

Mama Bear

Graham Kash

“You’re a forest ranger. That’s good. You know nature and how to talk about it. From a distance, I’ve secretly attended some of your presentations around campfires. As a bear, I couldn’t understand your wild gesturing. I wondered if you had gone spastic. But finally I realized that you were using sign language—for deaf people. That’s right—include everybody. You told me this ability was one of the reasons you were hired, besides your biological knowledge. You can do both at once, but usually another ranger was lecturing while you were signing.”

“After we decided we could trust each other, you educated me a lot, and I gave you some help. We decided to concentrate on visual communication. Regular talking wouldn’t work. I’m not a parrot: I can’t make all the human sounds. And you haven’t had much success in trying to speak Bear; it’s subtle and complicated.”

“So the sign language does well. We’ve refined it until we can express almost any idea. It’s like the Western Plains Indians you told me about—you showed me on a map—the Sioux and others. Some of the tongues weren’t related to each other. So their solution was the same as ours: sign language. In fact we got a lot of it from them. You showed me a religious part—putting the hand into the mouth—something about ‘daily bread.’”

“What’s that you’re eating?” the ranger asked. “Looks like squirrel. Not much left.”

“I gave most of it to my two cubs, Climber and Hider. They’re starting to eat meat. They won’t be nursing much longer. They’ll stay with me for about another year and a half.”

“I just made what may sound like a strange grunt. It’s Bear for ‘Come on back!’ They’re getting too far away—not safe. Here they are. They’re good—most of the time.”

“Ranger, do you eat some of the same food we do? Lots of kinds? Whatever you can get? Are we both omvors—I can’t say it—that word you used?”

“Omnivores. Yes—some wild game—squirrels, rabbits, deer. We shoot them with guns, and then we always cook them on the fire or with some other kind of heat. But they can be hard to find. We get most of our meat from farms and ranches.”

“Deer,” said Bear, “are really good to eat. We got one last week. But they’re fast. We can’t outrun them. We have to sneak up on them—find one that’s young, or old, or sick, or asleep, or not paying attention.”

“What about plants? Can you eat grass, as we sometimes do?”

“No—we people can’t chew it or digest it. But we grow grain, which is really the seed part of grass. Dandelion greens and wild onions are good in salads. But we get most of our vegetables from farms and gardens.”

“I sometimes see what I can find to eat around those places—and at garbage cans in towns.”

“Dangerous—some people are trigger-happy.”

The bear and the ranger remained still for a few moments, as if trying to figure each other out. Then they began to communicate again, through gestures. They agreed that children are much more fun than trouble; that life in the woods, with all its risks and isolation, was the best way for them; and that with night approaching, it was time for them to go their separate ways.

Each thought about what learning had occurred. Although the ranger had preached daily sermonettes of “Do not feed the bears,” he decided to make an exception for this set. Early on most Sunday mornings, he visited the haunt of his three favorite bears and left some food—not enough to produce dependence, but sufficient to help them out a bit. They were always waiting nearby. He wondered if they could

tell calendrical time. Yet they did not rush forward; it was as if they did not wish to acknowledge that he was assisting them. Often they would remain half hidden until he left.

In turn, the mother bear remembered the warning about the hazards of people, and she reduced her forays into civilization. All four were happily doing a cautious mixture of regulation and desire, independence, considerateness, benevolence, and gratitude. Yet they did not discuss these matters. Occasionally they revealed themselves, reconvened, and (through signing) talked about other subjects such as their recent adventures in ravines and waterfalls. They desired for their communication to continue.

build-and-bare

Maverick Crawford

my foot is pressing the pedal in a build-a-bear store -
shoving meaningless cotton into a skin that will eventually
break.

*(knowing from experience,
it can be sewn back)*

it's messy
but a harmless surgery,
one that causes me to hear the whistle
between the canyons of my teeth *(way back when
when it was easy)*

soon the animal does get filled
and we stuff a synthetic heart in.

“rub it warm”
 i tell myself
“give it a kiss”
 *(i can almost hear
 the heart beat
 beat
 beat)*

“make a wish”
 (can you beat?)

i stitch it closed
pay \$30
for me to fall to your habits

and leave it behind.

i wish it was easy,

but old habits die hard

you're there
but grasping at strings
with shaky needles
trying to fill a bear
that's already been crammed
from years of wear and tear

you wonder why
i don't talk to you
anymore.

i wonder why
you started caring.



Why Sting, When You Can Make Honey?

Raniece Canady

I ain't never been stung by a bee before
But I've been stung by words
And I think that might hurt even more
Both leave behind wounds that are tender
Both end up hurting both the recipient and the sender
They say that bees die once they sting
Makes you kinda wish they'd spent that time on better things
More productive. sweeter things,
Like making honey things
And I know, I know, in their defense, they're just putting up
their defenses And I know, sometimes I've used my words to
sting and put up fences But those same fences put up, to
block people out, also lock yourself in And I understand that
things that feel trapped have no other choice but to sting But
why sting when you can spend that time making honey? I
know a time or two I myself have done it
I chose to hurt in an act of self defense and self protection
Over the production of something sweet
Once I figured out I had a choice in the matter
I chose to self soothe with self love
Instead of self defeat
For a bee to sting, it means it must self-amputate
And I wonder if that happens to us when we choose to sting
with hate
The same bee that stings
Can also make honey
I guess when you put it that way
Wasting your life stinging is kinda funny
We get to choose what we do with our words
So the next time you go to sting
I kinda wish you'd spend that time on better things

More productive. sweeter things
Like making honey things
Why sting?
Cuz we'd all be better off
If you'd make some honey, honey



A Half Screamed Hello

Kat Gardner

Good Morning my love
Or not a good morning
A morning nonetheless



Welcome to today
Welcome to what was tomorrow
I'm glad that you've arrived even if it wasn't safely

It's by far not the best out here
The view is bleak and not all of the journey seems worth it
I see you and feel your vibes
I know just how hard you're trying
How hard you've been clawing
How loud you are screaming at everything screaming back at
you
Everyone needs a good scream
I believe that's why we have thunder

It's a struggle but we are out here, wherever here is
We are half smiling and half breathing and we are halfway
given up but just not quite convinced that this is where it ends
Anything worth doing is worth doing half well and half well
sometimes feels like a hell of alot more than what we have to
give

So scream and claw and exist with half rugged breath
I will see you when tomorrow becomes today
I will tell you good morning because you woke up to hear it

All That's Left

Michael Lewis

“I don’t reckon ma’s comin’ home if she ain’t back by now.”

The boy sits on the couch, eyes vacant, staring off into nothingness when I tell him. Something about him is off these past few days. My brother can never sit still, always running up and down the house or out playing in the woods until the sun sets and pa has me go out and find him climbing in some tree. Not here lately though. He’s been sitting about the house quiet as can be, not saying a word, barely moving at all.

“I said ma ain’t comin’ back, Tuck,” louder this time, leaning down until my face is even with his. “Like as not, at least. You hear me?”

Something’s gotten into him. I ain’t sure what though. I give him a nudge and his eyes meet mine for a moment before they drift back to the wall where one of ma’s paintings is hanging, has been hanging, has always been hanging for as long as I’ve been alive. As much a part of the wall as the paneling, it may as well be invisible with how little attention we pay to it after all this time. The faded paint brushed into some semblance of the barn out back, almost lifelike, is a window into the past when the stump was a crabapple tree, and papa’s truck weren’t rusted and abandoned, and the barn weren’t full of holes with the paint peeling off. A better time. Was it a better time? It must have been if ma was still here and happy and not fighting with pa every night like these past few years. Was Tuck thinking about those times? He weren’t so much as a thought when ma’s brush hit the canvas. I weren’t neither, but things were like in the painting not too long ago. Far as I know, at least.

The barn out back. But not the same barn. A nicer barn. One with bright red paint and skies that are always sunny. One that isn't dark with cobwebs and spiders in every corner and the out-of-tune piano that plays scary music when the wind blows through its busted side and knocks the hammers against the strings where the felt has fallen off. My big brother looks at the same painting. Does he see it too? Or doesn't see it, I mean? The thing that's not there. The barn, the stump, the truck, the fence, the sky—they're all there. The tree is a stump now, and the truck has flat tires, and neither the barn or the fence is as nice, and sometimes the sky is cloudy with rain. They're all there though. What I saw the other day isn't there. I'm glad it's not. I wish it weren't now.

I always knew my youngest weren't like me and Wyatt. He's too much like his ma is. Was. She's gone now. Maybe Tucker will toughen up some now without her around. She made him soft. I want him to be a man like me, like his brother, like my pa and his pa. It ain't for want of trying. Whenever he was tailing her around the kitchen or hanging onto her dress, I'd take him out to help mend the fences or feed the animals or chop wood for the stove.

"He's just a young'un," she said. "He can help his ma mind the house for a bit yet."

She's too easy on the boys. Was too easy on the boys. She wanted a girl. I know she did. A girl to help her cook and clean and to sew dresses for instead of sewing up the holes in the boys' clothes. At least he goes outside and plays in the woods now. Did go outside and play in the woods. He ain't left the house here lately. Misses his ma I reckon. This'll pass. He'll get used to not having a lady around the house. A boy needs his pa growing up. He don't need his ma once he's round about five. That's about when my ma passed. Died giving birth

to a dead son. Pa was more upset about the child than he was about her. Me and pa were fine though. We'll be fine now. Tucker's eight, and his ma's gone, and now he'll come around. I won't tell him what happened. He don't need to know.

Sunday service tomorrow. I don't know how I can stand in front of the flock though. God'll strike me down if I stand up there and preach His word knowing what I did. What we did. What Mrs. Dailey and I did. I asked Him for forgiveness. Have been asking for forgiveness, for mercy, for days now. He hasn't spoke to me none though. I broke one of His commandments and He won't forgive me. Not yet. Not ever? He forgives all who ask for forgiveness. Am I beyond forgiveness? Forgive me, oh Lord.

I swear I ain't heard Tuck say a word since ma left last week. Won't talk and won't eat. He just sits and stares and won't say nothing to no one. She might come back yet. It wouldn't surprise me none. Ma's run off before, but she always came back somehow or another. I can't figure why with how her and pa are always at each other's throats. Can't figure why she'd leave for good this time either. Maybe she stormed off after her and pa had one of their fights and something happened to her. Stormed off into the woods and got lost in the dark or ran into a wolf or broke her leg or all three. Pa keeps going on same as always. He wakes up with the rooster and does his chores while I do mine and comes in and drinks his whiskey until he goes to bed. Except for when ma first left. That day, he was drinking before I woke up and was drinking when I went to bed. Told me to take the day off too. Maybe he drinks more now. He ain't ate too much neither. Without

ma around to cook anything, there hasn't been any dinner on the table once the chores get done. We're going to have to slaughter that hog here soon.

Pa's drinking again. He always drank, but not like this. Always liked to drink but not as much as now. He drinks until he goes to sleep. Drinks so he can go to sleep? Can only go to sleep if he's been drinking? Pa made me drink once. More than once, but all on the same day. It was a couple weeks ago, the morning after I last saw ma. When pa caught me outside early in the morning while he was shoveling in the pig pen. I was up before the rooster and so was he, but I was awake because I never went to sleep. Couldn't sleep after what I saw. Can pa sleep after what happened? Maybe he can't and drinking is the only way he can. I finally went to sleep after he saw me and sat me down at the kitchen table with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses, just the two of us since Wyatt was in town.

Pa poured the whiskey into our glasses and told me to drink. Told me to drink even after the whiskey burned my mouth and made me gag and choke and cry. I drank until I got dizzy and kept drinking until I forgot how to talk and threw up and then I fell asleep. When I woke up, pa was walking through the house in his boots with mud and pig muck all over them, leaving footprints everywhere and still carrying his shovel. I heard him pick up the bottle and drink from it. Then I went back to sleep.

The boy's still acting strange. Did he see anything? He couldn't have. I almost didn't see anything. But I did. I caught her at the motel in town. Caught her and him lying in

sin. Kicked in the door and dragged her out of the bed and would've killed him right then if I weren't so mad at her. The gun had enough bullets for all of us. What did I do though? I don't deserve to die. But they do. Did. Did and do. She did. He does. She hollered at me just about the whole way home. Yelled and yelled about how she was done arguing with me and how our marriage was over.

It's still not there. It is now, but it's not there in ma's painting. Is this all that's left of her?

Pa and Tuck gotta eat something. We only got the one hog, but they ain't ate for days now.

Had to tie her up before we got home. Didn't want her waking up the boys. Had to gag and tie her up.

No, she's still around. Pa had the shovel...

He's just about ready now. Shot him between the eyes myself. Shot him and bled him and skinned him and gutted him and carved him and cooked him.

Carried her over my shoulder for the last mile. She gave up struggling after a bit.

...because the pig didn't eat the bones.

Since ma ain't around to cook.

Strangled her right in the back yard. A gunshot would've woke the boys.

Wyatt didn't come find me when the sun set that day since pa weren't home. I was wandering home in the moonlight when I saw.

"Come get dinner y'all."

Threw her body in the hog pen. Figured I'd come back and bury whatever was left when the sun came up.

Pa threw her in and the pig wandered right over. I couldn't run inside with pa standing there watching.

"Tuck! Pa!"

The boy woke up before I finished. Had to make sure he wouldn't come nosing around for a while.

It's not there. I don't see it and no one else sees it.

"Tuck, you've got to stop staring at the wall and eat something."

She's gone now.

Ma isn't in her painting.

There is no peace in idolatry
Kaitlyn Baltz

*But I would die for you in secret
The devil's in the details, but you got a friend in me*
Taylor Swift, "peace"

With worship lit up in my eyes,
I folded my hands and held them high.
Red Kool-Aid in a chalice stained my tongue;
I'm sorry they didn't have fake blood.

Up there from the monkey bars you were like god,
and I, Judas who sent you to the cross.
But when did we stop playing pretend?
Why won't you, still, come down from the pulpit?

There was nothing false about you.
You were God.
If you didn't want to be worshipped
then why would you read all my folded-up prayers?

Stained glass windows clouded my periphery
as I knelt in a foreign confessional, but
I couldn't tell between your sins and mine.
Was it my own idolatry or your pride?

I used to sit alone in the first pew.
Now, there is a line to receive the sacraments.
I could not blame them for flocking to your salvation,
but was it wrong that I wanted to be alone at your altar?

My pew is full, and you have real wine, now.
What was once my sanctification now feels sacrilegious.
Was it a test or would I be just another sacrifice?
I'm sorry I didn't stick around to find out.



FATHER

Mark Creter

I have lived now thirty years without you.
So much has happened in that time.

I took a job that became a career and a career that became an
identity.

I fell in love, I got engaged, I got married, I became a we, we
bought a house, we made it a home, we filled it with love
and laughter and support and a baby boy.

We named that baby boy after you.

I lost and mourned many friends.

I lost and mourned many mentors.

I lost and mourned my brother-in-law.

I lost and mourned my Mom, your beloved wife who never
got over your absence.

We raised our little boy, and loved our little boy, and raised
our little boy and loved our little boy and one day, he
wasn't so little anymore. Not as much raising now but the
same amount of loving.

He knows of you and refers to you as "Big Gus."

I was an instructor, and then an assistant professor and then
an associate professor and now a full professor. And I
directed and acted and directed and acted and directed
and directed and directed. I won awards and honors and
recognition that I would love to have shared with you. I
think it wouldn't have surprised you.

My face began to look more and more like your face. When
clean shaven I often feel like I am looking at your face in
the mirror. It is comforting and disorienting.

I mostly stay bearded.

Shortly after you died, I dreamt that we danced together.

As we waltzed around the dream, I felt your hand in my hand and looked into your warm and familiar eyes, you said to me in your rich and melodious voice, "you have to lead now."

I have tried, Dad. Everyday, I try to lead.

Some days, I think I do okay.

I wish.

I wish I could see you again.

I wish I could hug you and feel the comfort of your "Creter hug".

I wish I could breath in you.

I wish I could hear your voice again.

I wish I could see your smile and hear your laugh.

I wish we could share a cigar together. (Something we never did.)

I wish we could sit at a counter together and eat a toasted hard roll with butter. (Something we often did.)

I wish I could tell you how grateful I am to you for being the Dad you were to me every day. I wish I could apologize for anytime I was rude to you or disappointed you, in the thirty years I was lucky to have you.

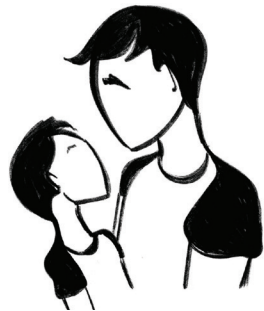
I wish I could thank you for your kindness and your warmth, your strength "strongest man in the world" you often said, and your stability and your humor and for all the times you should have lost your temper with me but didn't.

I wish I could thank you for all the many, many lessons you taught me without either us realizing that was exactly what you were doing.

I love you, Dad.

I miss you, Pops.

I'm doing my best to lead.



A ROAR

Hannah Yarbrough

Water often slinks around,
In and around outside.
And every now and again,
You will hear its mighty roar.
You hear it around twists and bends,
As it walks,
The dirt slowly fades away,
It leaves trails and marked territories.
A leftover from the past,
A roar that lasts a lifetime,
Or maybe less.

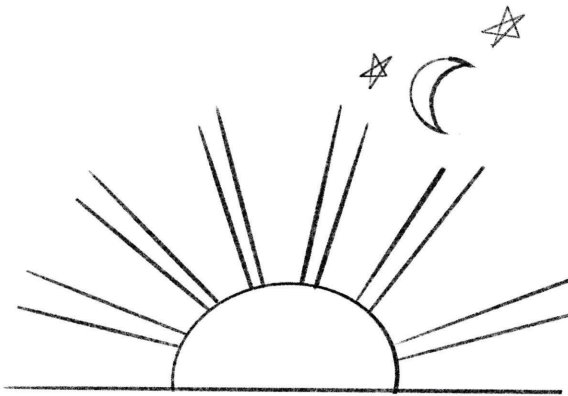
To see such a creature as mighty as water,
Is to see a lion,
With its young close behind.
Protecting its home,
Providing a way of life.
A mighty roar,
One that invokes primal instincts.
It shows strength,
A roar that intimidates,
And doesn't stop for anything.



Lyrette: Sunset

Emma Mitchell

Yellow
Kisses orange
Into purple
Cumulonimbus.
Foggy blue stains
The fading
Evening.



Spring 2023

Lyrette: Speckled Orchids
Emma Mitchell

Bloodied
Pink faces
Shrivel closed
On flaring tongues.
I stand watching
Another
Bloom fall.



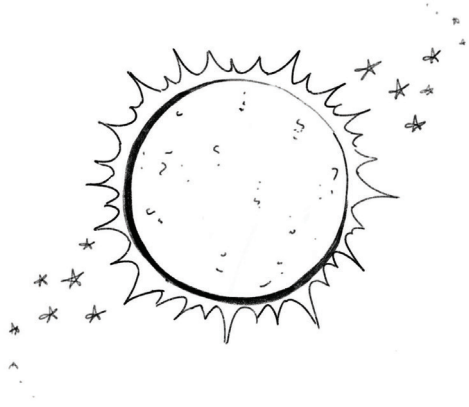
Gomer and the Red Giant

Taylor Crabtree

These familiar orbs,
Simplistically round and appealingly innocent,
petrify me,
With a love, magnificent.

This black hair,
Pure in glee,
Bringing joy,
That poisons me.

No one envies this,
Red giant in my chest.
Quick to bleed
And easy to scar.
Among the sky,
The most fragile star.



This care,
My heart's factious flu,
Cursing,
this blessing of knowing you.

But your face,
Is my joy.
Your presence,
My serenity.
And your mortal fate,
My heart's worst enemy.

Your health
Has always been pristine.
Yet, in my happiness,

I'm reminded to imagine
How it will someday unroll.
How someday your loss,
Will turn my star to a black hole.

Sucking in everything good,
Engulfing it in my grief.
Panicking because I might someday
forget the feel of your cheek.

In my gut,
I know I'll see you again.
You'll stand by my side in eternity,
But eternity is when?

I should live,
Over half a lifetime
Without you by my side.
Just a big red giant
Dwelling on the frame of a missing friend.

I'll never be ready to say goodbye,
But God doesn't care.
Someday, I'll find you again
In that sacred fog.
Fuck anyone that says,
"It's just a dog."

Grows the Edge of the Dark

Jacob Strickler

In the meadows of autumn lies a dwindling spark,
Who watches its embers casting light in the dark,
And dreams of tomorrow under myriad stars,
Vibrations of candles that glow from afar.

“Am I now a pyre?” says the solitary spark.
“This sod is my kingdom; this lawn is my hearth.”
“And am I the fire casting light in the dark?”
“To the shade of tomorrow do my embers embark.”

“Yet the vale is unending as my light travels far.”
“Grows the circle of radiance, grows the edge of the dark.”
In the meadows of autumn lies a dwindling fire,
An ember who watches its cinders expire.

In the meadows of winter lies a shivering spark.
“Am I now a pyre?” breathes its final remark.



*William W. Jenkins Creative Writing Scholarship
Winner*

Dax's Side of It All

An excerpt from the story for a comics series

SJ Bobo

As per my usual practice, I am taking careful notes on each of my colleagues. Perhaps, however, colleague is not the right word anymore; though the practice is an old one, these are in fact a new type of subject.

I believe this journal is in fact, rather, an analysis of my new siblings.

It has been 6 months since we found Misty and brought her safely back to this mansion—the place I have oddly come to call home—and in that time I have gained 6 brothers and 2 sisters.

Perhaps I should start with the person I consider myself closest to, and that would be an interesting 18 year old young man by the name of Connor Ketora. Funnily enough, I hated him—loathed him—for the first few months of knowing each other, and, while I'm not sure he hated me, he certainly didn't like me at first. I found him to be obnoxious, headstrong, irrationally noisy, and altogether annoying, his Variation was infuriating, and he was nosey to boot.

His personality was so vibrant, I despised even his voice. For 2 months, we searched for Misty, planning and butting heads, back and forth—which plan would work and why and who was obviously rushing in and what they were doing wrong. However, there came a time when Connor went sort of quiet, and that was uncharacteristic and unsettling to see, even back then when I didn't consider him a friend in the least.

That day, I noticed him staring at me at dinner. All of

the others were chattering away as per usual, and my sister was having fun girl-talking with Dusty and Sakri, but Connor seemed pensive and stared incessantly. To be fair, I was incredibly stressed that day; I was sleep-deprived and riddled with night terrors, and I hardly had an appetite. I was too busy with planning Misty's return.

Now, Connor is Dusty's paternal cousin. Her telepathy is a paternal trait so it's not surprising that Connor too had a form of the ability, but some days his empathy was all too accurate and seemed keener to certain feelings. That day was the day I discovered how powerful his senses were. After all, Malignant had beaten facial expressions out of me. There was no reading a blank face- or, rather, an "ever-scowling mask" as Brooke called it... However, this man I deemed an imbecile had a knack for it, and that in and of itself enraged me.

He stared, and yet, somehow, I never could force eye contact; each time I tried to catch him, he would dodge it with a natural turn of his head, scratch his eye, pretend to listen to the others, something to sustain his innocence, and finally I finished my food and headed for my room. There was a gust of air past me in the hall and suddenly Connor stood between me and the stairwell. I grunted.

"What?"

"..." he hesitated, his head down, eyes on his socks. "Are you ok?"

"What??" I raised an eyebrow.

"You're tired... and aren't eating in your weight class... and I can see your dreams at ni —"

"That's none of your business, and I told you people to stay out of my head." I pushed past him and trudged up the stairs, angry that my only chance to save my sister was to work with these witches and mind readers. "You bastards are going to poke into the wrong dream and i promise you you'll regret it."

"Dax."

“Piss off.”

“Dax—“ Connor flicked up the stairs and swung over the rail in front of me. “I didn’t do it on purpose. Night terrors are things that telepaths and empaths can’t help but notice.” “And that is why I didn’t want to live here. As soon as Misty is found, we’ll never have to interact again. Count on that. Now go away.” I passed him again.

“You’re hard-headed. If there’s anything I can do, I’m the door beside you- but you know that already, I guess. I hope you can sleep better soon. I’ll help you however I can.” I turned and stared blankly at him for a moment. There was nothing I wanted to say, so I just studied him, blinking in the grey-blue light. Connor held the eye contact with an odd expression etched across his features. It was caring in a sort of distant way, but distant in a “I’ll help from the distance you’re comfortable with” way. He stood, unflinching and stubbornly stuck on his words, a few steps below me. I turned away then, and without another reply began to trudge upward again. I heard his shoes scuff on the tile as he followed me, and I felt myself boil a little, but he spoke again.

“Calm down. I’m not following you. We live on the same floor remember?” I whipped back around.

“You really can’t help it, can you? You can’t help but feel my feelings, the same way that girl can’t help overhearing my thoughts unless I specifically put up that shield, huh? And you think since I haven’t learned that for my emotions, I won’t do it later? Are you really so dense??” He stared at me.

“Would you hurt a person for hearing what you whispered a little too loud? We’re not out to get you, Dax. Think whatever you want. It’s the thoughts you don’t want that dusty and I are offering our help with. We don’t care what you think of us or what you want to do to us after this is all over. No offense but even if you planned to kill us, you’d never pull it off. And I don’t need any telepathy to stop you.”

“What is that, a threat?”

“No, it’s a suggestion. A suggestion that you stop boiling us down to eavesdropping mind readers and use your international super-spy brain. Why would we waste our precious time on someone who doesn’t want to be helped. Not everyone’s out to kill you, moron. Get over yourself, you’re not that special.”

I blinked. His defense had become offense in such a gradual manner, my instant of realization was jarring. How had he gone from humble to critical and sharp without me noticing? I assumed he was playing nice to win me over and now he was fed up perhaps?

“We’re not going to kill you, or take your sisters, or hurt you. I’m sorry you don’t understand that not everyone is just itching to break you to their own bridle, but, honestly, I hope you sleep better.” And with that, he hopped the railing, opened his wings and pounded up to our floor. The door banged shut, and I was left contemplating his words.

I knew I wasn’t right in the head but why was he the one that could sum it up so easily?

Spring 2023



**Spruce Flats Falls, Great Smoky Mountains
National Park**

Eli Harris



Sunset Shadows

Kat Hawkins

Water

Martha Highers

That twilight something called me down
to water. I was hollowed out with loneliness.
Like the sky I became a question,
a problem of emptiness.
I lay on the bank at the water's edge
and watched it deepen: cloudless, blue, then
lavender, indigo, until it became the inscrutable
hue of eyes that recede, withdrawing recognition.

I wanted to tell you this.
Wanted to write to you.
Instead I waited.
Nothing would be good, I knew,
unless you came to me unasked.

And if you did not come
I would accept that, though from moment to moment,
from twilight to twilight,
I must learn how: each one painful, new,
unexpected: this one with its pink sky,
its pink water, its slow heron gathering
its wings, rising laboriously from the shallows,
this one with its cove slipping into the land
like a strange, three-fingered hand.

Later I would write this to you,
this description, tucked
into a dry box of dry papers,
a stillborn letter, knowing that this too,
this prettiness, was just disguised begging
when I had already told you everything, my secrets,

as if you were as strong as God.

That night I did not beg
That night I looked for you
by going farther and farther away from you.
That night I went all the way to the river,
and there, at its deep center,
in a small boat, far from the bank
I put my hand.

The river answered me.

For a long time

I leaned into it, pondered. I opened
my fingers, I closed them. I listened
with my hand, to what I could
and couldn't hold.

Someone had said once,

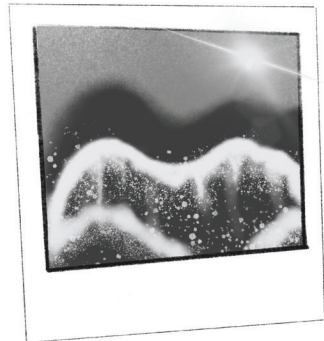
If you love someone, you will let them go.

I knew this was so. But that night
I longed to touch something urgent and true.

And as the water moved,

tangible, against my hand, I thought,
Love must be stronger than we think. I thought.
It must be deeper than we think.

And while the river stayed and left me,
*It is the dark water in the center of the river
flowing from your hand.*



Le Morte d'Arthur

Gavin H. Stackhouse

Lady of the Lake–

Eye-enthraling enchantress.
Dangerous games you play,
With all your forms and names.

Lune, Luna;
Mine, Mine lost.

Proceed with your charade,
Waxing, waning through your phases.
I drafted– enlist, a spectator,
Watching, whining through my faces.

So close yet so far we are.
Reference me, a little star.
Relatively close in our portrayal,
The reflection of the void below.

Do I shine amongst your crowded cosmos?
Drown me with your body, your open mouth.
Speak now! For I am the only one that shouts.
Safely, your wailing chorus awaits thee.

Creating our splashes of Gogh;
Rippling reverbed hues of gold,
Highlighting the grey knight,
The great nightlight of old.

I Breathe–
Inhale.
A throat touched by Hell,

I muster lifeless gasps;

Suffocating, the shallow depth of myself.
Only do I notice now, not before,
Night arrived once with you.
Dare I say now it arrives without?

I cannot find you,
I cannot see you,
I cannot hear you.
Arm-like beams no longer reach for me.

Embrace me.
I settle into the dank,
Backing from your rippled mirror.
Breathe, you dare say.

Howling breaths clear our mists,
Open skies, burning eyes.
I fully see your flaws, your indents,
Armour as pitted as my own guise.

You sink, you set.
You rest, you reap.

I Breathe– I expel and shout!
Fake is your dawn that dusk beckons forth!
For the light that shines on dewy reeds,
Comes only from the true source!

I crawl towards the glowing bank,
My lively ripples offset your timeless peace.
I am not your Lancelot,
I am my own Sun.

Spring 2023

I stand, I shine.
I drip, I weep.

The Grail Continues



Maria's Ring

Kat Hawkins

Maria went to church that day, as she often did, but as she stepped through the door, she felt a chill in the air. Somehow the walls looked darker, as though the light was gone, yet the sun shone just outside the door. Not a beam danced through the stained glass as it often did, nor did the air sing with hymns and laughter of years gone by. Instead, a feeling of dread overcame her.

She looked down at her left hand and saw a golden ring with three stones glowing as the sun shone on it. She smiled, for that was as it should be. One stone, white and pure, one red as blood, and one yellow as light.

She tried to ignore the feeling in the air as she skipped across the hall just as always, but a nagging feeling remained.

Then Maria saw her mother rushing down the hall with several ladies of the church looking distressed. None of the ladies were wearing their rings and her mother held hers in hand instead of on her finger.

The ladies were the same ones she always saw, yet a dark shadow seemed to hover over them and where they moved the light faded. They smiled and it didn't quite reach their eyes. Their hollow, empty eyes.

"We must be rid of these rings." Her mother said, fear clear in her voice. As the ladies chimed in, insisting that three was an evil number and such rings were a bad omen. After all, bad things happened in threes. They insisted the ring would weigh her down and ruin her life. Her mother handed Maria the ring she used to wear, and Maria burst into tears. She begged her mom not to give up the ring, that the ladies were wrong, and it wasn't evil.

She held the ring up to one of the ladies and the lady recoiled and screamed in fear rushing away. Her mother told

her to stop and put that away. So, she tucked her mother's ring in her pocket but left hers on her hand.

Just then, as the bells rang for church to begin, she saw her brother standing at the door and went to let him in but was quickly stopped.

"His kind isn't welcome here." The woman said with a cold smile. "Just look at his tattoos!" they pulled her to the sanctuary as she looked back at her brother, knocking on the door. And the room grew a little darker.

In the sanctuary, none of the candles were lit and as the acolytes tried to light them the flame kept going out. Eventually, they gave up and began the service. The preacher and choir came out, but they were all wearing masks as though for a masquerade. The preacher began to say the Lord's Prayer, but she couldn't get the words right and kept having to start over. Suddenly he approached her.

"Why do you still wear that ring? It's distracting, be rid of it." He said, his eyes full of anger and hate. Slowly she placed her mother's ring in his hand. He immediately pulled his hand back and dropped the ring, a burn appearing on his hand. He let out a scream. The lights went out and the three stones on the ring began to glow and a dozen hymns started playing at once, the music overlapping and swirling through the air. The people screamed in panic and rushed out the door, pulling her with them, as the light grew and filled the sanctuary.

As they rushed outside, she looked back to see the rest of the church was dark and beginning to crack, but the sanctuary now glowed. As the people began to regroup, they all started to head for the dark part of the church. Maria's mom grabbed her hand to lead her with them.

It was then that Maria saw her brother walking by, looking sad and lost.

"We should bring my brother." She said.

"Leave him, he's lost." Maria looked up to see her

mother's eyes were cold and dead since she lost her ring. She tried to pull Maria away.

“So are you, without your ring,” Maria said as she yanked her arm away and rushed back to the sanctuary. There the light shone bright, and the music played, and joy swept over Maria, but the church was still crumbling. She picked up the glowing ring, feeling a loving warmth spread through her as she held it and her ring began to pulse and glow in time.

She rushed out to where her mother stood, with her cold and lifeless eyes, and slid the ring on her mother's hand. She watched as the darkness surrounding her mother faded, replaced by a beautiful glow. Music swelled and light swirled around as the birds poked their heads from their nest. Her brother walked over to stand beside them.

The people from the church gathered around, angry and hostile. And began to scream at her to get her brother and those rings away from them and their perfect church.

“Alright.” She said. “We will leave.” Then she turned to her brother and smiled. “We will find you a ring, but until then, let mine light your way.” And she took his hand with hers, the ring touching his skin and the light began to spread across him. He smiled and the three of them turned and walked away.

Behind her, the church turned black as though consumed by fire and crumbled to the ground, but the tree staves in their rings burned bright, lighting the way with the love of God.

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Cigarette Burns

Reece Edwards

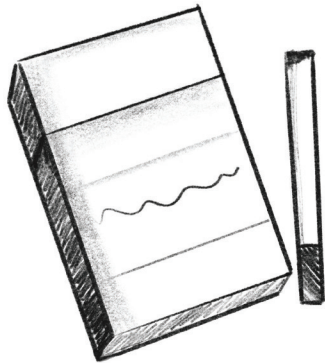
Your wings, they call me in
Away where no one can see
We'll float, synchronized

There's snow on your chest
The blade catches light
New moan, serenades
Alive, a new high

The floor is cloaked in plume
Can't step, it's all too wet
Form scars, they're dripping down

There's red on your dress
The night is still young
Same song, keeps me in
You dry, can't keep this high

Come down, and see you shake
You're warm, and then you're cold
You moan, to bring me close
Your wings, I'll pluck them off...



*Iris Review Young Writers Competition
Budding Writer Award for Prose*

Cumberland County High School

Belonging by Pretending

Molly Neal

I live my life in the shadow of my twin sister, Alli. It is dark, depressing, and lonely. Especially lonely. No spotlight is shined on me, and no star dares to let me wish upon it. Instead, I thrive like a parasite, feeding off the leftovers of my sister's greatness. I do not hate her for it. Alli is just...Alli. Bright, popular, beautiful, and so much more than I will ever be. She will always have her friends as a refuge, unlike me...I have no friends. I just do not understand how Alli does it. With one glance at me, people see my earbuds, hoodie, and old sneakers and categorize me as a girl not worth knowing. However, when they see Alli, their faces light up, and they instantly strike up a conversation. Yet, my sister and I are *identical*.

Alli is the favorite, of course, for our parents. How could she not be? She is a straight A student, volunteers at shelters, and wants to become a doctor. Me? I have no idea what I want to do with my life or even if I want to go to college. Not to mention I have a D average. Alli sometimes tries to include me with her friends because she feels bad. I deny her each time though because I want no one's pity.

"Tonight is going to be extraordinary! I can't wait," Alli exclaimed, all but squealing with vigorous excitement.

I was on her bed, crisscross, watching silently as she pulled out outfits from her overflowing closet. One was a cute flamingo pink dress, and the other was ripped jeans with a blue flowing shirt. I shuddered to even think about going out in public with those on.

Good thing I never will, I thought bitterly.

My closet was strictly T-shirts, leggings, and hoodies, and I was perfectly content with that combination. I brought my gaze back to my sister's face which, to my surprise, was contorted with queasiness. Her skin became pallid, tinted with a sickly green, and I spotted sweat forming from her hairline. I was up in an instant, coming to my sister's side, anxiety making my movements panicked and uncertain.

"Alli? Are you okay? You don't look that good," I remarked, and led her by the arm to sit on her bed.

"Yeah. Yes. I'm...fine," Alli wheezed, clutching her stomach like a lifeline.

She was grimacing, clenching her teeth determinedly. She shook slightly, reminding me of a volcano about to explode. I took a step back from her, realizing she might *actually* explode.

"You are not fine," I stated, and retrieved the trash can from her bathroom. "You're sick."

Alli peered up at me, her brilliant emerald eyes bloodshot with defiance. She opened her mouth no doubt to tell me that she wasn't sick, but instead vomited into the trash. The sound of the trash bag crinkling with its newfound weight made my stomach roil, and I couldn't hold in my gag at the smell. I pinched my nose tenderly, hardly daring to breathe.

"Lie down," I demanded and left the room to recover a bottle of water and a thermometer.

When I came back, Alli was nestled in numerous blankets, curled into a tight ball, shivering. I shucked all her extra blankets off until she was only under one and took her temperature. It was a solid fever.

"Alli..." I looked at her sympathetically, trying to find the right words to relay the obvious news of her condition. "You can't go to the party. I'm sorry, but you can't even stand! I'm sure next year they will have an even better celebration—"

"No!" Alli exclaimed, bolting upright.

The sudden movement cost her though because she puked once more. I looked away, trying to keep my lunch safely tucked in my stomach. She wiped her mouth and sniffed, and we locked eyes.

“If I can’t go,” she began slowly, enunciating every syllable, “then *you* are going to go. As me, of course.”

My eyes widened, electric shock thrumming through my body. My adrenaline perked, and I could hear the dull thud of my pulse in my ears.

Oh, no. No way. Not in a million years!

“I am most certainly not going, and neither are you,” I practically shrieked, wincing at the volume of my voice,

“Look, I never ask anything of you, Tris. I just want you to do this. It’ll only be a few hours, and I can’t take the embarrassment of not making an appearance. *Please?*”

I gawked at my twin. No sound escaped my lips, but I was definitely protesting. Pretend to be the social, popular, and flawless, *Alli?* Impossible. Just impossible. Yet, I found myself agreeing after one look at my sister’s pleading face. Before long, I was in the same pink dress I had scoffed at with my hair down and curled and my makeup crisp and perfectly striking. I didn’t even recognize myself. Throughout the makeover process, Alli told me all of the right and wrong things to say, and I was jittery with apprehension. I arrived at the party exactly fifteen minutes late, yet Alli’s friends were waiting for me.

“Oh. My. Gosh. You are literally so gorgeous, Al. I wish I could pull off that color,” Ella said, fawning over me.

I became uncomfortable at her touch, but I hid it with a dazzling smile that felt alien to my face. I thanked Ella and complimented her three-inch heels. Thank God Alli hadn’t made me wear those despicable feet killers. The celebration was outside on the football field. Lights were strung up everywhere, and tables of refreshments were plentiful. Music blared, mostly pop and rap, and many people were dancing.

Alli's entourage followed me as I strode to the middle of the field, assessing everything with wonder. I had never been to these things, so all of this was new.

Being followed around by friends is new, too. Or just having friends in general.

Alli's friends soon began to dance. I blinked, awkward, but then followed suit. I had never danced like this before, so I watched the other girls' movements, mimicking them expertly. Ella made a silly gesture, and I found myself laughing, doing one of my own. Other people circled around us, cheering us on while we had a dance-off. The competition ended in giggles, and for once, I wasn't being laughed *at*, but laughed *with*. It felt glorious. A newfound joy bloomed within me as the night continued. I wasn't to the side, listening to music on my phone. No, I was in the middle of all the chaotic fun, having the time of my life with people I hadn't even talked to before. I spoke to them like I had known them my whole life, like I had never done to anyone before. Not that I had the chance. I couldn't even recall what it was like to be alone like I was, crammed in a corner to make room for my twin. Nor did I want to remember the long days of discontentment and isolation. I was actually being social. I never wanted it to stop. I recollected scoffing at the thought of dressing up to be in front of people, but now I embraced it. I sensed myself evolving, growing into a person I never imagined I could be. Or maybe I was just really good at pretending to be Alli. Either way, if I had not stepped out of my comfort zone, I would have never experienced the joy of being accepted.

“IT’S POETRY HUNTING SEASON, BOYS”

G. Lira Houle

I load up my six-shooter, adjust my winter blue flap cap, and scan for poems.

I spot a five word phrase.

Flying high above the corn maze.

I fire five shots with the hope of gunning it down.

The phrase’s frightened flutters are met with the final round entering its crown.

My beagle named Bagel trots along to find its body.

Cutting through the maze we find the phrase bloody and muddy.

As we trek back, I reload my six shooter and see a figure fling a fishing pole.

Approaching the figure dressed in mossy green, I see the mastery of their control.

They adjust their wool red cap, turn and smile

“Look in the bag”

The dog and I glare into the brown sac

Paragraphs, stanzas, and sentences look back.

“And how have you managed that?”

I said aghast

The figure slowly reeled their line back in

His old hands smoothly pull along until the line pops back and tugs hard in the opposite direction.



“The secret is to wait for them to come to you”

Spring 2023



**DOME COMB TREE,
CLINGMAN'S DOME**

Eli Harris



Barred Owl

Eli Harris

The Great Game

Graham Kash

A certain secluded habitat was excellent for many kinds of creatures. The beavers had dammed a stream to form a small lake where the black bears and the bald eagles frequently fished. Even in midwinter the water was open in the middle, with only a little ice around the edges. In the surrounding woods the birds ate the berries, seeds, and insects; the squirrels ate the nuts; and the deer ate the leaves and small branches.

People seldom came here. The ground was too swampy for them. Would-be hunters had nearly suffocated in quicksand, or quickmud as some called it. True, the deer weighed as much as people, and the bears were far heavier; but they all knew the dry and high ground, and they staged a daily inspection.

Each species had a chief whose word was not authoritative but was definitely influential. If these leaders had known how to write, they would have capitalized their names. They and their followers did know how to talk, but it was just as folklore says; wild animals remain silent in the presence of humans, for fear of being put to work.

While Bear was full of fish and had rested for several hours, he would wrestle with others of his species. To him, the importance was in the sport of the event. He did not have to win, although he always sought to. Like a king at play, he criticized his subordinates if he thought they were not trying hard enough to beat him.

These contests occurred on a hillside with a natural amphitheatre. They became more and more popular, and all gathered around to watch. The squirrels stayed close to their holes; they said you could never trust an owl. The eagles sat in the tops of the trees. The deer observed from a distance; they said you could never trust a bear. There might have been some buzzards high in the clouds overhead, but even the eagles

could not see quite well enough to be sure.

At the end of one competition, Bear said, "Friends, we bears are so busy wrestling that we don't have time to gather food. And we are giving pleasure to you. Next time, could you bring along a little something for us to eat? How about some fish from Eagle?"

Eagle agreed on the condition that the wrestling matches should occur three times a week instead of twice. All summer and fall, the crowds became larger and more enthusiastic. Now the buzzards could be clearly seen, circling high above.

Then Bear said, "To keep our strength up, we also need berries from the birds. And could the squirrels bring us some nuts? Acorns would taste good." Next week Bear received what he had asked, but all the birds looked bedraggled except Owl. The squirrels and the deer were less numerous, and the buzzards were sitting in the nearby trees. The wrestling was more exciting than ever, but at the end of the contest, several birds complained.

Oriole said, "The wrestling made me forget to eat, and there's not much food left anyway. The weather is getting cold. I can't remember the route to South America, and I don't have the strength to get ever as far as Baltimore."

Cardinal said, "Pater noster. . ."

Blue Jay decided not to say what he was thinking.

"Beaver dammed the lake where the fish were," said Eagle. "He would know what to do."

"Good idea," said Bear. "Who volunteers to ask him?"

"I'll go," Skunk said. "Nobody will bother me. I can get listened to."

The next day the dam broke. No one knew whether Skunk had found Beaver. Nothing was clear except that a wall of water came rushing through the wrestling-ground. Owl decided that it was time to fly on. "Never trust buzzards," he said. Supposedly they eat only the dead, but some birds fail to study the bird books.



Maverick Crawford

I long for Venus.
She is liquid gold shining,
dripping down my enclosed hands
never filling my cup
though I try to drink.

*(Gold falls down my cheeks to my chest.
Do I belong now that I'm painted?)*

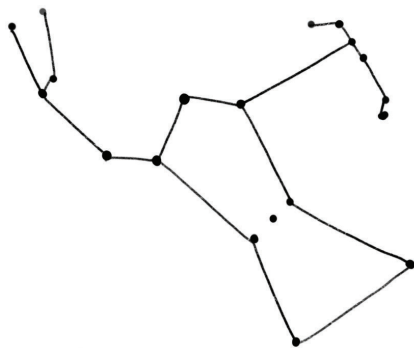
I feel the tether that ties me there —
after all, I am of that soil

*(If I grew from her garden am I not her
blossom? Even thorn bushes began in dirt.)*

But I drift
tucked between Venus and Mars
Hoping the void of space
doesn't freeze me over.

*(I yearn for Venus, but float
amongst the constellations.)*

*A twisted way
to say I'm stardust.)*



Hades in Spring

Alyssa Owen

When the bitter breath of winter bites the Earth
when crops wither and warmth hides away
she comes back to me

When the humans have no harvest
when they long for the sunlight of spring
she comes back to me

When the first snow falls,
I am warmed in her presence
I will banish the daylight
I can face their resentment

When the soft-spoken breeze returns
when flowers bloom and animals awake,
I sit in solitude below her footsteps
Cold as I have ever been
yearning for the moment
she comes back to me



Control Therapy

Heather Richmond

Talk about your feelings, Brush aside
the pain.

Wait. I feel uncomfortable now.

Bottle up the torrents of conflict
that compromise your happiness.

Are you comfortable, now?

Who has the majority vote to decide,

How I feel, when I feel, or if I feel at all?

Everyone seems to know, but me.

Society

Dictates.

Right?

It's a disguise. This perpetual platitude of self-serving reform.

If your hair color is "unnatural" you can't work here. Tell me

How his blue and purple hair causes despair?

Your clothes pronounce you a...

Will my pajamas suffice?

That accent's too thick.

Her skin is too...lived in?

How dare you recoil from the crowd.

You must be ANTI-social.

And????

Judge.

Judge.

Judge.

I cry, I must be depressed.

NEWSFLASH—

Repression

Is

Depressing.

“You’re entitled to your opinion.” — So long as it’s yours?

Yours.

No.

Mine.

Humanity is calling.
Renounce your scrutiny.

I am here. I am whole.
Whole as a two-leaf clover.
I could just walk away and

Blame
Blame
Blame.

But I won’t. I have something to

Say
Say
Say.

I’m not here to make you comfortable.
Understand?
I’m here to be. To be me.
Panic and promise.
Courage and callouses.
Splintered by Sentiment.
Real.



Spring 2023

Soap

Graham Kash

A fiction, soap:
External gains.
Inside our minds
The filth remains.



dead

Rachel Wingo

Things which do not grow and change are dead things.

– Louise Erdrich

the boys next door
have laid a track of brick pavers
and a log
leading from their mother's planting bed
overburdened with dormant lavender
to a rotting pumpkin

it, the pumpkin,
decorated their porch
many months ago in autumn
it is nearly February
last remnants of winter
in the air around them, the boys, as they play



every night the frost bathes its
sinking deadness
freezing the decay
until the southern sun hits it
and ripens its rot again

frozen and freshly dead frozen and freshly dead
each day
i wonder at the seeds inside
i wonder at the pathway to death dead deadness
these boys have built

i wonder at our changes

Spring 2023



Through the Spokes

E.J. Freeman



Down Dixie

E.J. Freeman

No One Tells You

Bee Goodman



No one tells you about the fear and pressure you have to handle after surviving an attempt. When they tell you it's okay to go home and go back to the real world outside the safe white walls around you; they tell you it'll be hard. I expected that. Nothing was going to change overnight and I knew that and I learned to accept it. What I didn't expect was constantly looking over my shoulder, afraid that I'll fall back into a dark place and be a version of myself that I'm just ashamed of. The one that dragged me into hospital to begin with. Every drop of doubt and shred of fear makes me nervous that I'm becoming that monster of a person again.

The monster isn't hiding under the bed, it's staring back at me with any glimpse of my reflection. It's haunting my diary, it's seen in past Instagram posts, and it's the person that defined betrayal to the ones that once loved me. It's the kid smiling at the camera in family photo albums. It's me. It's a me I never wanted to be, and it's a me I'm terrified to see again. I beat her once but I know she will fight harder next time and she won't accept defeat until we're both put down into the cold ground. Of all the pain I carried, of every drop of blood I lost, nothing hurt me more than seeing him leave the room. The person that promised to never leave had to escape the monster I became. My plan was revealed and he turned away in tears.

I have to remember that I have survived every day of my life. Even when the monster attacked, I still woke up. Battered and bruised but alive. And getting better. Today is not my final day. No one tells you about the monster because you have to see for yourself.

A Girl Named Margaret
Margaret Cody

“You don’t look like a Maggie,
But you’re too young to be a Margaret”
Without the ivory hair of wisdom,
The untested hands,
Unwithered, unlike those of my great grandmother’s
from the factories in the 1930s
No, Margaret is too grand a Persian name
for so un-storied a person
A rare gemstone, a pearl
Symbolizing the opaque tears
of a mourning widow, a motherless child,
a childless mother

Margaret is for the martyrs,
a Saint of Antioch
of the 14 Holy Helpers
Disowned by her father
Adopted by her nurse
Indents of the kneeling bench
marks of diligence on her knees

Margaret is violence
Consumed by the dragon
which she killed
by bursting from within

Margaret is the pen
Names and lists and obits
Scrawled into the margins of the family Bible
stretching to that great revolution

Margaret is time
From a tiny piece of sand
to Cleopatra's vinegar
Mined not from the earth
but of the sea

I may be too young to be Margaret
but I am growing older



An Adventure at a French Newsstand

Graham Kash

As an American teaching for a year at a university in France, I became acquainted with an educational institution: the French newsstand.

One morning, I went to visit my favorite newsdealer, Monsieur Le Voyeur.

“Bonjour,” I said.

“Good morning,” he said. “Remember we agreed to speak English every Wednesday. Sorry I’m late getting the newspapers out, but the deliverymen were on strike from 7:21 to 8:17. We have *Le Figaro*, center right; *L’Humanite, Communist: Le Monde*, center left. Let’s see if Jean-Marie Le Pen has anything from the ultra-right. . . .”

“This time I want a magazine.”

“Well, you see the usual assortment. *New Look*, bottomless, *Lui*, topless; or if you like your scandal seasoned with gore don’t miss the lead article in *Le Nouveau Detective*. “Un couple Depece et Devore par un Cannibale.”

“No, I need *Femme d’Aujourd’hui*.”

“Shh. Not so loud. It’s underneath. I’ll get it for you in a minute when no one is looking.”

“It’s for my wife.”

“Just as I suspected. *Woman of Today*. It’s like that American Magazine *Good Homekeeping*, or whatever the name is. “

“Don’t you sell many copies of *Femme d’Aujourd’hui*?”

“Of course--maybe a couple of dozen a day.”

“Then why don’t you keep it out in plain sight?”

“Impossible. Do you want me to ruin my reputation with the tourists? But notice how we all conceal what we value.

“Take me, for instance. I enjoy speaking English almost as much as I do French, but I have to be careful about it.

At school I could never make any sense out of geometry or geography, but in English I made the highest marks. Some of my classmates have never forgiven me.

“Another example: I’ve heard that in the United States, the risqué magazines are kept hidden under the counter. Is that true?”

“They’re not as secret as they used to be.”

“Then maybe America is becoming less immoral. Excuse me a moment.”

Another customer glanced furtively about, then said in a low voice, ‘Avez-vous *Le Chasseur* Français?’

“Oui.”

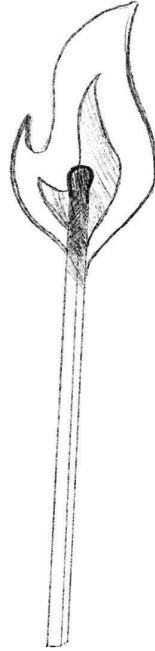
Monsieur Le Voyeur reached down a copy of a hunting and fishing magazine from a top shelf. He put both our purchases into plain brown wrappers. I paid (giving a half-Euro for the educational comments) and turned to go.

As I rounded a corner, an enterprising entrepreneur stepped from an alleyway, flashed open his coat, and whispered, “Psst! How about a bilingual digest of Billy Graham’s sermons?”

*Iris Review Young Writers Competition
Budding Writer Award for Poetry*
White County High School

Empathy Sensitivity
Ambrosia Jergensen

What's it like to care so deeply,
but get lack in return?
Does a match feel lonely
when it's the last thing to burn?
Well,
my heart of concrete weighs me down,
my empathy picks up every sound.
My eyes begin to burn and bleed,
Swallowing rocks
And throwing up tears,
I fight to keep it inside of me
But,
how do I say that their pain adds to mine,
when I'm not okay and they ask me why?
Maybe this is just how I'm wired,
So I'll smile and say that I am just tired.



Spring 2023



Bird at Disney World

Mikayla Young



Brown Rabbit in the Backyard

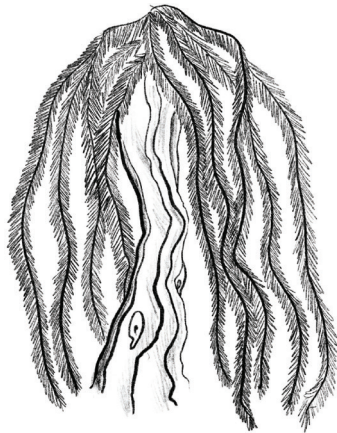
Mikayla Young

Willow

Heather Richmond

Willow, Willow
Wailing—weeps,
Borrowed burdens,
Settled deep.

Obsidian Dreams—
Flail beneath,
Phantom echo,
Covert retreat.



Clara Cox Epperson Prose Writing Competition
Winner, Fiction

MORNING GLORY

Kyle Metz

Chilled winds howl through the night fallen woods. Silently, I embrace this gale while concealed behind a tree. I've grown accustomed to the bitter feeling of hunting in frigid darkness. The beasts I hunt are too cautious during the daytime. The night gives them the edge, forcing hunters like me into traversing the darkness of nature. Moving from tree to tree, I vigilantly scan my surroundings. This is the furthest they've ever been from the village. Reports from travelers suggest they heard the roars of the beasts I'm after around this area. Carelessly giving away my position now means they'll certainly relocate and I'll lose my final chance. *There! In the distance!* My eyes detect the shape of an appendage moving behind a large rock. One too many of my clan have fallen to these cursed beasts, but now I move toward the final hour of the hunt. Moonlight guides my march toward victory.

My village raises its men to hunt. The best hunters in the village take the youth under their wings and teach them the skills they need to be successful hunters from early ages. When a hunter-in-training turns nineteen, that hunter must prove himself by killing a family of deadly predators. It's a rite of passage into adolescence. Failure results in exile from the village. Not only that, but it must be performed with a short-range hunting revolver. Anyone can stay dozens of meters away from a target and pull a trigger. Like a coward. There's no merit in that. A hunter who can closely approach a dangerous beast for the kill is one worthy of the "hunter" title. Many of my closest friends from childhood were killed before my nineteenth birthday during their trials. All of them fell to the

same beasts I hunt now. I won't join them tonight. I'll succeed where they fell and finish what they could not.

From where I'm situated, the rock is a few dozen meters ahead of me. I verified my scent was masked before this moment, but these beasts are unlike other predators. Their capability and unpredictability make them very dangerous. If I get any closer, I firmly believe they could pick out my scent even from the various aromas I coated myself in. I can't move forward yet. That makes circling around the rock from a safe distance the best option. A strange cold sweat takes over and my throat feels dry. *Why now? Why must doubt always take over before the crucial moment?* I stop behind a small rock while circling around. Inner doubt washes over me. Countless hunters before me have tried, but the beasts still roam freely. *Can I really do this? Will I make the same fatal mistakes they did?* I move the scarf warming my neck to cover my mouth instead. My deep breathing and trepidation cannot be detected in this moment of pathetic weakness or else. *I'm different from those who tried before. I won't make the same mistakes. I've learned from the past.* A paralyzing screech pierces the dark. My body moves without thinking as I stand upright and aim the revolver toward the large rock. This call to action reminds me why I'm here. On this night, the two beasts who've claimed the lives of other hunters before me will fall. If I give up now, I'll never have the glory I want. Weakness leads to demise. Until the hunt is done, I resolve myself to never showing another moment of weakness.

The first step is complete. I've successfully circled around the rock while avoiding getting closer. Crouching behind cover, I finally see my targets. The beasts who've evaded us for so long are nearly within my firearm's reach. *Don't rush in. Inspect what's happening.* One is on guard. The other is resting on the back of the rock. Two beasts comprised of thick, black fur with white patterns confirm these are the beasts I'm looking for. They look like they're around four

meters tall. It looks as if the female is resting because she was previously injured. There's blood on her hands and body, emanating from her stomach. Her gnarled jawline is twisted with pain from her apparent deep wounds. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of her blue eyes. They're allegedly quadrupedal in origin, yet she's resting in a sitting position. The male is standing on his hind legs. His red eyes survey the landscape for threats like myself. Camouflage grants me the advantage.

My heart anxiously beats faster. The male beast is too on-guard. I can't move from my spot or he might notice me. I only have six shots available before needing to reload. They're over 100 meters away where I'm situated. I'm not confident I can take out both beasts of that size from this distance in the current moment. I need to get closer since my revolver is inefficient from this range. But waiting for the prime opportunity is the essence of hunting. They'll make their move soon enough. Night doesn't linger for an eternity. Neither can they.

About two hours go by. The female beast occasionally cried out in pain while the male only guarded. I commend the resolve of the male protecting his partner, but my resolve is the one that will win. Situated behind cover, I hear a noise in the opposite direction of where they're hidden. The male notices a rustling tree from the corner of his eye and finally turns away from me. As a group of owls flies out of the tree, I move from cover and get them in range of my revolver. The sounds of crunching twigs and branches beneath my feet give away my position, but it's too late for them because I make it within a 50-meter range. I'm confident my revolver will shine from this distance.

In my haste, I fire two shots that miss my intended target, the male beast. Reports indicate he's far faster and stronger than his female counterpart, so his death is top priority. One misaimed shot bounces off the rock while the other breaks through an unbloodied region around the female

beast's stomach. Before I fire again, I pause and readjust my aim. He takes advantage of the momentary reprieve by quickly stepping in front of his partner then kicking backwards. Crying out in more pain from the kick, the female is forcefully propelled into the safety of darkness. I've never seen an animal do that before. His eyes narrow and his face warps with rage. Before I even realize it, he begins closing the distance while moving between the trees. Two more shots are fired off, but they miss. He circles around the trees, moving behind me. I turn around and meet his gaze. There's about 10 meters between us now. He lunges for the kill as I fire my remaining two shots.

Four slash marks emerge on my left arm. Blood savagely bursts out of my wounds as I fall backwards. My arm is in severe pain, but the male beast is in a worse condition. Two wounds ooze blood from his chest. He moves around in an attempt to orientate himself. I get up and walk a few meters away. While leaning against a tree, I reload my revolver with one hand. This only gives me time to reload two bullets before our eyes lock. On all fours, he rushes me. However, no animal can survive two bullets to the head.

The moment the bullets make impact, he roars in defeat with what little strength remains. In the distance, I hear the shuffling of panicked footsteps. The female beast instinctively knows what his cry meant. Seeking to shake me off her trail, she withdraws further into the woods. Her cries grow more and more distant. She's injured, meaning I should quickly tend to my wounds before pursuing her. My scarf should suffice as a temporary solution. I wrap it around my injured arm, tying it tightly to avoid further blood loss. I want to take a moment and recompose myself, to examine the remains of my encounter with the male beast, but I can't waste any more time. I can come back later to claim my trophy for the village. I must finish this hunt before the female beast escapes.

No matter how intelligent the animal is, anything can be tracked. In this case, my current prey has a head start but is severely injured. The blood trail and distant cries keep me on track. With every passing minute I know I'm closing in.

Her trail of footsteps leads right into the river. With how much she is bleeding, it seems foolish to enter a river as strong as this one. In spite of myself, I decide the river is where the trail goes cold. She wouldn't risk it. She's smarter than that. I follow the footsteps in the dirt a few meters backwards. Nothing appears out of the ordinary around the trail. To the west of her footstep trail, I spot something farther out. One large tree surrounded by dry dirt and bushes. I spot a broken branch, conveniently located in the bushes beneath the tree.

She must have backtracked over her original footprints. After backtracking far enough, she leapt toward the tree then climbed up and broke a branch in the process. That's why I can't find any blood or footprints no matter where I look. She's jumping from tree to tree, staying off the ground. Backtracking isn't a natural instinct to every animal. The only possibility I can think of is she learned this technique from prey she's hunted. *A hunt against prey of this caliber makes glory all the better.*

Daytime is on its way. The beast cannot hide in the dark anymore. When I catch up, she'll have no choice but to endure a confrontation on my terms. After figuring out her escape method, I follow the trees that are damaged in any way. Lost branches, claw marks, bundles of leaves, anything that suggests she moved through here. Eventually, the trees lead me out of the forest. I arrive at the exit, noting this is the part of the forest that rests atop a large hill. Examining the hill's slope shows me a trail of blood leading all the way down. *There she is. I finally caught up to her.* From atop the hill, I watch her go through a crevasse in a large rock formation. It steers anyone who enters into a large beach shore. The rock formation also run into the beach for a good distance. Unless

she can climb fast with her injuries, her only means of escape is attempting to flee through the ocean. At long last, this hunt will soon be over.

I make my way downhill as a shattering, lamenting shriek stops me in my tracks.

A ringing noise engulfs my hearing. Too stunned by fear, I remain at the entrance of the crevasse. This sound goes beyond life and death itself. It's the type of desperate noise heard from someone or something willing to give up everything to achieve nothing. Only an embodiment of selfish passion could stop anyone in their tracks like what's happening right now. The world went silent as she usurped priority over life itself to make herself heard. Her wrath couldn't go unnoticed. It was directed at me. All her hatred and disgust presented itself in the forefront of my mind. This primal instinct was a warning. If I enter into this beach shore, I don't know what waits for me. The only thing I know is there will be change. The absolute sublimity takes hold of me as I enter onto the beach shore, embracing the future in its totality to achieve the glory I've long desired.

She is dead.

Her last act was mere boast. Now I finally have it. I can finally receive the glory I've wanted! My composure can only endure because of this realization. Tints of sunlight creep over the ocean. Sunrise begins soon, and it will soon shine on a new day. I can return home with good news. Today is a day of celebration! The ringing in my ears goes away. I begin hearing nature itself praise my success, my glory! The call of the birds in the distance to the swashing of the ocean. Everything is celebrating my hunt! Until I hear a frail cry before me.

At the beach shore lies what spawned from its mother's body. I see a giant creature resting at the edge of the shore. It's drenched in various red, orange, and pink liquids while some patches of skin appear greasy. Visible bones borderline protruding through the skin indicates a malnourished state.

A black cord wraps around its waist. Bright bumps on the skin shine with the coming sunlight. Gray, scrawny arms move around the body, swiping away the excess materials coating it. The grotesque figure looks around, clawing at whatever it can on the shore. Occasionally, its left shoulder trickles blood. It stops whatever its doing when this happens and pokes at the wound, crying in pain when it does. A soft murmur envelopes the air as it scans the shore.

It tries standing, but falters. The top half of its body careens into the water, splashing about. Wobbling arms push against the sand. It pushes too hard and quickly finds itself back in a sitting position. Instead of attempting another stand, it crawls around the beach. Another rush of blood seeps out of the wound. Seemingly growing tired of the cycle, it forcefully jabs two fingers into the wound. In the process, it dislodges a gold and black shell that flies from its wound towards my general direction. It didn't cry. As it squirms around, it gets on its knees and begins scouting in every direction it can. Eventually, our eyes meet. I see the front of the foul creature and take in all its disgusting impurity. *It looks human.* What happens next will be the hardest decision. I know what I should do. But I can't. *I got what I came here for. What about the child? There's nothing left for me here. It looks human but it isn't. I'll still gain the glory I seek. It doesn't matter even if it were human. Would THIS really give me more glory? This creature shouldn't be allowed to live. It's not hurting anyone. You know the beast it will become. It didn't ask for life. Don't let your judgement be swayed. Is its existence really a crime against our village? Finish this.*

Thoughts dissipate as I come back into the moment. Directly across from me, it stands by the shore. My presence does not disrupt it. Or so I believe. It is no longer searching. Instead, I see it tighten its grip with something in its left hand. Wet, sloshing steps grow slightly louder with every step. It's walking towards me. I rapidly take aim with my revolver and

yell at it. It hesitates, having me believe for a moment that I could walk away, but continues anyway. With every passing second it draws closer to my revolver's range. I fire off a bullet into the air. To no effect. I fire into its right shoulder. My bullet barely connects and I knock it down. Temporarily. After a bit of struggle, it stands up and continues marching. My third bullet desecrates its mother's corpse by creating another hole by the previously inflicted wound through its stomach. This time it halts. All I see are empty eyes. Deep down, I know it associates me with its mother's corpse. The pause of its progression doesn't last. Tears flow down its face before it starts walking again. It now enters the range of my revolver. I don't move. After a minute, it draws near. The creature's left arm moves slightly backwards. *No weakness until you finish the hunt that you started.* I fire the remaining shots into its chest. It falls. Only meters away from its mother, it dies too.

The sun overwhelms me with its rays of glorious sunshine. As the creature vanishes from this world, it opens its left hand. A morning glory slips from its fading grip, fluttering in the sudden wind. I have no way of knowing if this was intended as a peace offering for me or an offering of sorts for its mother, but I take it anyway. The finality of what I've accomplished hasn't completely taken over me yet. I know I finally have it. I know I can finally receive the glory I've wanted. There's a bittersweet emptiness to it all, waiting to be filled by my return to the village. Or at least I hope this feeling can subside. The adrenaline fades and I realize my arm's previous wounds fester. The village is far, but I know my wound can be properly treated once I return. Before exiting the beach shore crevasse, I squeeze the morning glory in my hand and give into weakness. It's all I can do before I return and start another hunt for more glory. The hunt for another's life has an ending, but the hunt for glory never ends.

Halo

Alyssa Owen

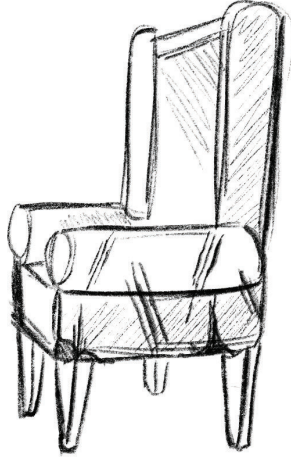
You are something pure and gentle
wanting of little, save for love
and it is painless for you
to receive it

You do not falter in giving love back
or wonder if something is wrong
with the way you lounge in the sun

You curl up to sleep naturally,
necessarily,
several times a day

there is no guilt
nor reason to feel guilty.

How can we blame you
for scratching the chair?
This is all simple to you.
You will never write a poem about it.



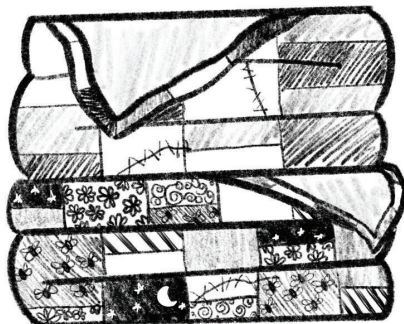
accounting

Rachel Wingo

the sky is winter pink this morning
and the heat in the house clicks on
a tiny roar follows and then
the warm air
it rained in the night and as such
the ground is wet but not frozen
this season. what will this season bring?

(more grief over
loss of seasons
more carving them
out of the stone
we've created.
the millstone around
our necks
the climate changing)

winter is on its way
or something like it
and i've not gathered enough stitches
to repair repair
all of the old quilts we may need
must every morning every season
 every pseudo-season
bring a counting of what
isn't done?



In Praise of My Favorite Elvis Song

Tony Baker

I used to settle for the radio. When I was a kid in the late 1970s, my parents owned a boxful of record albums and 8-tracks, but in small-town Indiana, we listened mostly to Chicago's 89 WLS AM or Lafayette's Z-96 FM, with some DJ choosing the songs we listened to. I didn't become interested in curating my own soundtrack to my own life until I was a mid-1980s high-school junior with a Sony Walkman. I'd buy and borrow albums and record my favorite cuts to cassette mixtapes for workouts or studying. A cheapskate even then, I could not resist Columbia House Music Club's offer of 13 albums for only one dollar. One month in 1985, because I failed to opt out of the club's monthly automatic selection, I received *The Best of Elvis Costello and the Attractions* album in the mail. Because it was a hassle to return the album by mail, I kept it and sent Columbia House a personal check for the full price: \$8.98.

I had heard one or two of the record's songs before, but one song stood out immediately. "Beyond Belief" was the first song that for me made music literary, worth studying, worth interpreting, worth thinking about. This Elvis Costello song grabbed me by the collar and challenged me to make sense of it, even as I enjoyed it. Formally, this 2½-minute song features complex lyrics. The lines are characterized by unpredictable rhymes (e.g., palace, Alice, malice, callous; oily slick, nervous tic; important issues, pocketful of tissues) and alliteration (e.g., "battle for the bottle is nothing so novel"; "My hands were clammy and cunning / She's been suitably stunning"). Verse or stanza lengths vary between three and four lines, and the rhyme scheme includes rhymed couplets, irregular and delayed rhymes, as well as lines that don't rhyme at all. Costello uses language in unexpected and playful ways, such as replacement rhymes ("Charged with insults and flattery"),

cliché swaps (“Do you have to be so cruel to be callous”), and double entendres (“I might make it California’s fault”). With its complex, clever lyrics, this song rewards listeners with pleasant surprises.

The song’s plot or storyline is likewise complicated. The male speaker discusses his uncertain relationship with a “suitably stunning” woman, of whom he feels unworthy (“But I know there’s not a hope in Hades”). He’s “oily,” “nervous,” “dying to be tortured,” “clammy and cunning,” and the woman is “cruel” and “callous,” and “her body moves with malice.” In the chorus, some formerly appealing choice made by the speaker regarding the woman has become to him unbelievable, “beyond belief.” He can’t believe he had the courage to ask her out in the first place? He can’t believe she agreed? He can’t believe he’s with her? He can’t believe they’re breaking up? Whatever he can’t believe, he knows he’s in over his head.

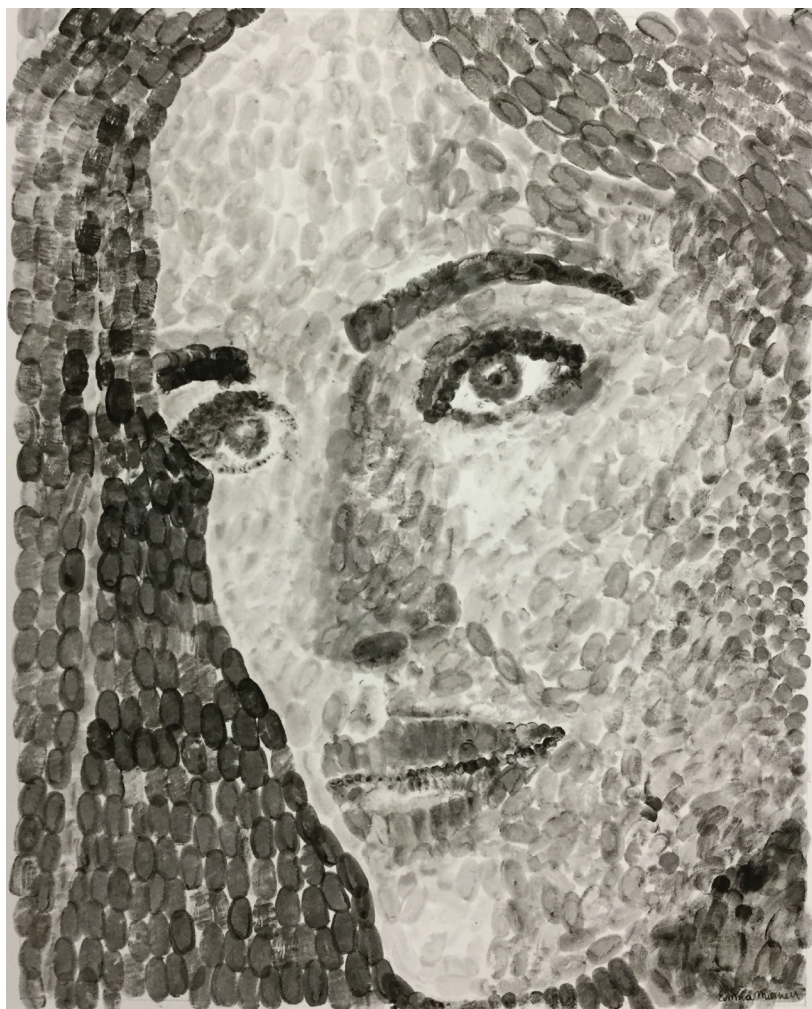
Musically, “Beyond Belief” is quick, syncopated, wide-ranging, and intense. No two verses are identical. Costello’s voice jumps accurately among very low notes of some of the verses and hits the high, earnest notes of the chorus. The song builds in momentum and pitch, intensifying at the final fade-out chorus.

Some listeners might not enjoy Costello’s anxious, rapid-fire delivery or his complicated lyrics. It’s certainly a challenge to understand. But I simply and purely loved this song when I first heard it, and I’ve loved it ever since. Beneath its surface, I knew the song told some intense, dark, complicated story that I’d never fully understand. If I like the flavor of a song, I don’t mind that the songwriter gives us only tastes of the story. At the time, the lyrics seemed more sophisticated and meaningful than most of the poetry we studied in my high-school English classes. Melodically, the song’s range was within my 17-year-old baritone vocal range, so I could try to match the lightning-quick voice, note for

note. Only in private, of course. I still sing along to this song; it's always a pleasant surprise when it pops up on a SiriusXM channel or in my shuffling playlist, maybe as I'm driving my car or my riding mower. The song begins, and I sing, trying to keep pace with my favorite Elvis Costello song. My sole complaint about the song is that it's over too soon. I want more.

In the mid-80s, some people knew Elvis Costello from his bigger hits, like the sugary-sweet "Everyday I Write the Book," or perhaps they'd heard "Watching the Detectives," with its reggae roots and clever criminal story about another femme fatale ("She's filing her nails while they're dragging the lake"). Or they'd seen his infamous 1977 *Saturday Night Live* performance of "Radio, Radio" and its scathing critique of the music industry. All are fine songs with their own merits. But for me, as a teenager just determining my musical tastes, it felt as if I'd discovered "Beyond Belief." I found this treasure—it was mine. Forget that the song was a big enough hit to make it to a greatest-hits album and that many thousands of fans own their own recording. Now, nearly four decades later, I still feel ownership over this song. Its music continues to evoke a rich intensity, and its playful, clever lyrics paint a mysterious story. The song's features actually exemplify my tastes in movies, TV, and literature: clever, masterful writing; challenging, intense stories; and accessible, wholehearted performances. I won't settle for less.

Spring 2023



Jennifer Garner

Emma Mitchell

SUMMERS AT THE CAMP

Jere Mitchum



Image courtesy of the author.

As I was growing up as a teenager in the 1940s and '50s, two eagerly anticipated events marked the official beginning of summer for our family, especially for my two older brothers and me. First, after a few warm days, Mom gave us permission to go barefoot; and second, as soon as school was out, the family packed up and moved to Echo Lodge, the family's log cabin on the South Harpeth River near Nashville, often called simply "the Camp."

We made the move in one of Dad's company trucks. In part of the truck bed we had suitcases of clothes, boxes of home-canned goods, Mom's books to read during hours between meals, bed linens, and maybe some furniture. (The cabin was furnished to sleep eight.) The other part of the truck bed was reserved for Sukie, our Jersey cow, an essential part of the family both in town and on the farm. Two bird dogs rode in the trunk of Dad's car.

My grandfather, my uncle, and my father built the two-story log cabin in the late 1920s on a 620-acre farm in Cheatham County. Grandpa bought the farm after he moved his family to Nashville from Milan, Tennessee, where he had owned a General Store. The farm was mostly hilly woodland

with about 100 acres of pasture and arable bottom land on each side of the river. They built the cabin using old chestnut logs that they bought from farmers in the area who wanted the money more than their neglected barns. The cabin got its name, Echo Lodge, from the way shouts from the porch echoed back from across the river and the distant hills.

After its completion in 1926, Echo Lodge was a popular gathering place for family reunions, church picnics, school field trips, and informal weekend escapes from city life. Visitors enjoyed fishing, canoeing, and swimming in the river, and hiking and hunting in the woods. Before leaving, everyone was asked to register their visit in a ledger, with a comment and the date. Many wrote long descriptions of their impressions of the place.

Dad and his brother, with the help of Earl Harris, the tenant farmer, grew hay and corn and managed a herd of Hereford cattle and a passel of pigs, mostly in the flat bottom land across the river from the cabin. Access to the fields and barns was by horse-drawn wagons and farming equipment crossing at a shallow ford downstream. Otherwise, paddling a flatbottomed boat was the easiest way across the river.

When our family lived at the Camp during the summer months, after Mom made breakfast, Dad left for his office in town, about half an hour away, and we three boys put on our overalls, tee shirts, and work shoes ready to help Earl with the day's work on the farm. Dad paid us a dollar a day! Mom's days included cooking and reading and knitting; during the war she made dozens of wool scarves and socks for soldiers.

One of our most frequent and most dreaded assignments was using sharpened hoes to chop weeds and Johnson grass growing between rows of young corn---35 to 40 acres of it! Every few weeks the weeds and grass had to be chopped out again until the corn was "laid by," able to mature on its own.

Every day at noon the welcome peal of the dinner bell echoed across the river as Earl's wife, Hazel, called us to dinner at her table loaded with home-cooked meats and vegetables and a couple of pies. Their four teenage daughters stood by ready to pass plates of hot biscuits and refill glass after glass of iced tea.

Later in the summer we cut and baled hay, hauling it on a flatbed wagon to the barn and stacking the heavy bales in the loft. Our favorite team of gray horses, Rock and Rye, had no problem pulling the wagon with its steel-rimmed wheels uphill to the barn, trip after trip, all day long, but we boys began to slow down about three o'clock.

But it wasn't all work, especially after a hot day of chopping corn or loading hay. At quitting time we couldn't wait to dive into the cool, clear river and cool off, or swing out on a rope, turning loose at the highest point to make huge splashes.

One summer we made molasses. We cut the sorghum cane and hauled it to a mule-powered mill where we fed the stalks between two steel rollers to extract the green juice. Then it was slowly cooked and stirred in a series of shallow, wood-fired vats until it reached the right consistency for the sweet syrup. After cooling, it went into large tins.

One winter after school started, Dad took us back to the Camp for a weekend to help Earl and several neighbor men kill and dress hogs. After shooting them in the head and bleeding them, they submerged the carcasses in large vats of steaming water to make scraping off the hair easier. They hung the hogs by their hind legs on poles attached between two trees and opened their bellies and cut off their heads. Experienced hands made quick work of securing the edible organs, then butchering major cuts to be salt-cured or hung in the smokehouse for several months. We ground up buckets of trimmings for sausage, and Mom made souse out of the heads. ("Never again!!" she swore!!)

Our summers at the Camp are memories now, but Echo Lodge is still there, in the care of a cousin who welcomes family and friends as before. We three brothers are thankful that our parents gave us those enjoyable and valuable experiences, and especially those memories.

One of my dad's business friends heard him talking about the farm and asked him, "What do you grow on your farm, Bob?" My father smiled and answered, "Well, I grow corn and hay, I have some cattle and hogs, too, but mostly, I'm raising boys."

Among the Unwoke

Martha Highers

If you leave the city limits of Cookeville, Tennessee, and drive fifteen miles into the hills near the Calfkiller River and begin the ascent to the Cumberland Plateau along state highway 84, you will soon come upon a small and shady cemetery lying close by the road. The wrought iron arch above stone steps reads “France’s Cemetery, 1858.” If you park your car and climb the stone steps you will find a village of stone roofs—tented graves—that bring to mind Emily Dickinson’s speaker in “Because I Could Not Stop For Death”:

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

But no one gentle or patient with death lies in this quiet village. Here lies Champ Ferguson, who murdered and assisted in the murder of as many as fifty-three black Union soldiers in Saltville, Virginia, on October 3, 1864. Most of the wounded were on the battlefield, left there by their Union companions, but some lay in hospital beds nearby. The battle was over. But Ferguson and his band proceeded to kill them all. The number of those murdered is disputed. Accounts range from fifty-three to over 100.

The crime violated even the etiquette of war. When a Confederate general arrived on the scene he ordered that the carnage be stopped. No one listened. The eyewitness reports, “He rode away - the shooting went on.” Unstopped, Ferguson and his Confederates also made their way to a makeshift military hospital at nearby Emory and Henry College, pulled wounded black Union soldiers from their beds, and murdered

them in front of a doctor. When, at the end of the month, Robert E. Lee heard about the massacre, he is said to have been furious as well.

Why the Union officers and soldiers abandoned their companions on that field I find no good answer to as I read. After a day of fighting the rear forces—all white—retreated early the next morning, thus abandoning the black soldiers who had forged to the front of the battle. Just as a tenet of just war is that you do not murder the injured prisoners, another longstanding ethos of militaries everywhere is that you do not abandon your injured on the battlefield. In this story, there is guilt at every turn. Still, the crime was so shocking that after the war someone had to be blamed. That person was Champ Ferguson.

He was unrepentant. Before his hanging in Nashville in 1865, he said, “I am yet and will die a Rebel. . . , I repeat that I die a Rebel out and out, and my last request is that my body be removed to White County, Tennessee, and be buried in ‘good Rebel soil.’” A sign at the front of France’s Cemetery quotes Ferguson’s words. It sets them off in a bright color, so we can imagine that we hear him speak.

What strikes me, as I stand among this quiet village of the dead in White County, Tennessee, and look about me, is that Ferguson got his wish. In Charlottesville, in Richmond, in New Orleans, the army of stone Confederates that has stood watch over towns and streets for decades is in retreat. Last year, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 73 more of them were removed. More—723 to be exact—remain, for in the decades following Reconstruction over 1,000 monuments were erected to Confederate heroes in the U.S., most of them, of course, in the South.

When Robert E. Lee’s statue was removed from Lee Circle in New Orleans, someone scrawled at its base, “White Supremacy is a Lie.”

No such words can be found near Champ Ferguson's grave. Only slow-growing lichen defaces the roof of it. But in truth the lichen does not look like defacement. It looks more like testimony to decades of acceptance. And perhaps more. Respect? Tribute? For beside his grave's headstone also stand three small Confederate flags.

I step back and look about me. Many other small Confederate flags decorate nearby graves as well. None of them are torn and faded. They all look new. Someone must care for them. Someone has come recently.

Scattered about on the tops of the tombstones are also pennies and other coins, to signify visitors who have come here and left remembrance.

Well, this is private property, I think. I think how, as the Confederate monuments retreat—a stone army—they come increasingly to places like this. To warehouses and to museums, yes, but also to private property. In fact, some town councils in Virginia are trying to sell the public property their confederate monuments rest on to private groups, in order to preserve them. The NAACP threatens to sue, if they do so. The debate goes on. Some have questioned the removal of all such statues because their erasure removes an important record of historical attitudes. And, if all such statues are removed, how will we remember the remembrance?

But—who asks this question? And do the ones who ask it think we have remembered only those whom we should?

Something troubles me, as I look at the flags, the pennies, the silent remembrance, but I do not name it right away. I move away from these objects and look farther about me.

A sign at the front of the cemetery says that “this cemetery is maintained by donations” and gives the name and address they may be mailed to.

Opposite the donations sign, sitting high on this private property, is a large metal historical marker put up, presumably, by the State of Tennessee. I bend toward it and read,

“Cap’t Champ Ferguson (Confederate Guerilla) Gen’l Morgan’s Cavalry was joined at Sparta, June 1862, by Champ Ferguson as guide for Morgan’s invasion into Kentucky. Cap’t Ferguson and his co-fighters were the only protection the people of the Cumberland and Hickory Valley area had against the Federal guerillas during the Civil War. Ferguson was hanged by the Federals in Nashville, but by his request, buried here in White County.”

In smaller type, but still permanently embossed print beneath these words, the plaque reads: “Erected by the White County Historical Society and the Sons of the Confederate Veterans -1975.”

I let the attitude of the words sink in. They characterize Ferguson as a protector. They do not hesitate to call him “Captain.” No mention of atrocities here. And I think how, in 1975, over 100 years after the Civil War, this version of him was still accepted enough to put it on a plaque. And that it still stands, announcing its partial truth and story, a monument to the attitudes of its time. I muse a bit about how, once engraved in metal or in stone, words stay, even half-truths or outright errors. For I notice that “guerilla” appears on the plaque twice, spelled wrong, and that it has been allowed to stand, uncorrected, for nearly fifty years.

I decide what troubles me most as I look about me, at the tidy graves with their small Confederate flags, is the absence of remembrance of the soldiers Ferguson slaughtered. Where are they?

Finally, in the small pull off area in front of the cemetery, in a newer sign, I find them. Here, within a flat plastic sign that includes a photo of Ferguson and his band, I find the words, “. . . Ferguson was one of the most notorious Confederate guerrillas to roam the Upper Cumberland. He was most infamous for the Saltville Massacre, in which he supposedly directed the murders of several wounded and captured U.S. Colored Troops at Saltville, Virginia, in 1864. . .”

The tone has shifted a bit, I observe. Ferguson has evolved from “the only protection of the people of the Cumberland,” to “one of the most notorious Confederate guerrillas” and “infamous” for the Saltville Massacre, which is, finally, mentioned. I notice though that the actual number he killed is obscured in the vague word “several.” I think it seems too small a word to hold the number “53,” let alone “100.” Also, the impulse to show Ferguson from a different angle or in a different light has not gone entirely away. I notice that in this text, his actions are softened by the word “supposedly.”

I look about me again, at an ancient quiet oak that overhangs the sign, at the cedars outside the cemetery’s chain link fence, and I think again of the murdered black soldiers who lie quietly inside this text, gathered together in that small word “several.” I try to imagine what kind of tribute would befit them, if they were to be remembered in a monument. I imagine 53 solid dark figures ringed around the cemetery, standing silent sentries, each engraved with his name. I imagine 47 other figures ringed behind them, diaphanous, shadowy, in dispute. But only the oak and the cedars beyond the cemetery fence stare back at me to confront my imaginings. Only they, and the sound of a mockingbird somewhere, and erasure.

Besides, I think, this is private property. Only if someone who owned the property around the cemetery believed in, or cared about, the massacre would such a monument be allowed to stand. I look again at the small Confederate flags. I think of another Confederate flag, one hundred times as large, that waves over I-40 a few miles away, that flag also on private property. No law in this country bans the display, as a symbol of hate, as the German government bans the display of the Nazi flag. In fact, until the disastrous protest in Charlottesville, the ACLU spent years defending the right of hate symbols like the Nazi flag to be displayed, including marches that displayed them. Charlottesville caused

the ACLU to rethink its policy. They now say they still defend that right, but only for those groups committed to protesting and marching unarmed.

But I wonder, even if symbols of hate speech were banned, wouldn't others take their place, and wouldn't new laws be required to make them taboo, in an ongoing game of whack a mole?

But the absence of acknowledgment of the black soldiers troubles me.

"I have never heard of the battle of Saltville," a local friend says, after I describe this to her. "And I did not know about Champ Ferguson and his connection to this area." And, as I reflect on the value of monuments, that is the point. I think of how many times I have driven past Saltville, Virginia, on I-81, with no knowledge of what happened there, or of who died. And as I reflect on the importance of monuments it occurs to me that the problem lies not just with those who have been remembered in public monuments since the Civil War, but also with those who haven't been.

And who were they, I wonder, these murdered soldiers? Nothing tells me here, in this cemetery signified by private donors and by the State of Tennessee, but when I drive home, along the shaded river and through the hills, I find them. I find them on the internet.

On an internet site maintained by the national park service I read the account of the battle, the words of eyewitnesses. <https://www.nps.gov/cane/battle-of-saltville-and-massacre.htm>

I read how the black soldiers who fought in the battle were incredibly brave, and also how they endured racist mistreatment not just from the Confederates after the battle, but from their fellow white Union soldiers before it. On the way to the battle, the black soldiers, most of whom were former slaves, were taunted by their fellow white soldiers. An eyewitness reports that the white Union soldiers sometimes

knocked the hats off the black soldiers' heads and even stole their horses. The black soldiers did not return the mistreatment. And then, at the battle, the black soldiers led the way, forged ahead to the front lines, fought their way up a hill, against oncoming downward fire, killed Confederates, took captives, and even, temporarily, held the Confederate installation.

“I have seen white troops fight in twenty-seven battles and I never saw any fight better... On the return of the forces those who had scoffed at the colored troops on the march out were silent,” wrote the colonel who commanded their regiment, a white officer. The commanding General himself spoke “in the highest terms of the gallantry of the Fifth Colored Cavalry,” and said that they gave “better service than any other regiment.”

No word from him in this quote about why he melted away from the injured soldiers afterward like a receding tide.

I think for a bit. I think that while no physical monument exists for these men in White County, Tennessee, these words, I suppose, are a monument.

But I also think how, since May 2021, it has become more difficult to even tell this story, at least in a public classroom in Tennessee. Among the eleven points banned for teaching of race by the Tennessee State Legislature in that law are these:

--any teaching that causes any individual “to feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual’s race or sex.”

--any teaching that shows “a meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex.”

It seems to me that everything I have written in this essay up till now, would violate that law, if I were to tell it

to students—as I have here—in any public classroom in the state of Tennessee. Could the relating of these incidents cause a young hearer “discomfort, anguish, and psychological distress”? It seems to me that they certainly could, or could cause distress to any sympathetic adult who hears them as well. At least to one who is alive to human feelings at all. And does the story of how the black soldiers were treated, both before and after the battle, show that the meritocracies of both militaries, both the Confederate and the Union, treated the black soldiers in a way that was inherently racist? It seems to me that this is what a reasonable person would conclude.

But these are simply the words of eyewitnesses.

I think too how this new Tennessee law too is itself a monument—a monument to the fear that white people in Tennessee continue to feel in confronting the history of race, in simply telling the truth about things that happened.

And I wonder, if I taught history or English in a public school in White county, Tennessee, or in any of the counties adjacent, how I could begin to tell my students about this history of their area without being afraid of breaking that law? Or of jeopardizing my job? And how could I bring those students here, and show them this cemetery and its signs, and study that cemetery as a text of attitudes and silence, and how could I ask them to interpret all of those monuments there, without breaking that law?

But I am not standing on public property, but within the private property of my own mind, so I’ll speak on.

The Resurrection of James Alder

Andrew Smith

I am at Shakespeare in the Park
& I don't even like Shakespeare
but so many kind beautiful people are
here for this wonderful production on
this cool Tennessee October Tuesday

My mother is with me & later says
that all the subtext I am singing here
is in the text but I wouldn't know
about that because like I said
I am not a Shakespeare guy

I am here & James Alder is king
James Alder is a clean-shaven child king
from some almost mythic time long ago
in a place far away & darn that
robe you're wearing sure is gorgeous & regal

I cannot tell you much about the play
but from what we could glean
it is considered a tragedy not a comedy &
the director's notes implied to me that in
the analogous politics of our world
comedy has turned tragedy
power is still a problem &
I digress

Because what I came here to
write this morning is that during
the second act on an autumnal Tuesday night
I watched James Alder die

& at just that moment there
were accidental sound effects from the city

I am not making this up but just
when James' fake blood was spilled all over
that stage in a choreographed murder we
heard emergency sirens
wailing & blaring all across town
& during those moments when

James Alder was dead & the
other actors carried his corpse all
over the stage & I thought he
looks more like king Jesus with
those long hippy locks &
that lithe 33-year-old body

then before we know it
it is curtain call
then the show is over
& I met James Alder backstage
& I am hugging him

James is not dead
he is resurrected
we are laughing
he is vaping

& I tell him that the death
of this king played by you
wounded while we watched &
as emergency vehicles howled
at the recently full
but waning harvest moon
made me think of Jesus

& without missing a beat or
blushing James said with a sly smile
not hid by those hippy locks

“That is the effect that I was going for”



The Ten Commandments

Linda M. White

You shall have no other gods before Me.

That's easy! I'm monotheistic, a Christian, so check!

*But remember that time before you were a
Christian*

when you prayed to "whoever would listen?"

Well, I wasn't a Christian then.

You shall not make idols.

I don't make a habit of crafting totem poles—I'm good!

The Bible says anything you dedicate yourself to—

instead of God—

counts.

Like those crystals, making money, intimacy—

Okay, so I guess I've done that one. I'll do
better on the rest.

You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.

Who doesn't do that? It's a slip of the tongue!

*Would you slip and say your mother's name as a
curse word?*

Because both have given you life.

That makes you a blasphemer.

Oh.

Keep the Sabbath Day holy.

Haven't done that.

Honor your father and mother.

I mean, for the most part—

You shall not murder.

I've never killed anyone.

*The Bible says to harbor hatred for your neighbor
is to have committed murder in one's heart.*

So we're looking in now?

You shall not commit adultery.

Never cheated.

*To look on another with lust
is to have already committed adultery in your heart.*

That in the Bible too?

You shall not steal.

That was one time! I thought it was complementary
ketchup–

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

What does that even mean?

Have you lied before?

Yes...

You shall not covet.

It's hard not to want things,
Especially when you're poor.

*Jesus was poor and wanted for nothing
but the Lord.*

I'm being held to Jesus' standards?

I can't do that!

*On the day of judgment,
when you stand before a God that is perfect
and who has committed no sin,
when before you stands the Kingdom of Heaven
where no sin can dwell,
and you–
who, by your own admission, are a*

*disobedient,
idolatrous,
blasphemous,
unholy,
dishonorable,
murderous,
adulterous,
thieving,
lying,
covetor-*

*await trial,
will you be innocent or guilty?*

Guilty.

Heaven or hell?

Hell.

This is not an accusation.

It is fact.

*If judged according to these laws,
your soul will burn forever in the lake of fire.*

Does that concern you?

Yes!

*The Lord is not only love and mercy,
He is justice.*

*Your life is not made easy with Him,
in fact the Bible says that those who follow Him
will suffer always*

*but in this suffering, we are like Him
who descended in mercy, suffered, and died for our sins,
that we may live with Him,
our debts paid,
in the Kingdom of Heaven.*

*If you believe in Jesus,
repent sincerely,
pray,*

*read the Bible,
attend church—for we are commanded to fellowship—
and live your life straying from sin,
feeling the deep sorrow when you commit it,
and repenting anew...
Then you are saved.*

Really?

Yes.

*And you can do those things right now.
This could be the sign from God for you,
your guilt is the Holy Spirit convicting you.
All you need is the acceptance of Jesus into your heart.*

And then what shall I do?

*If you believe, repent, pray, read, attend, and live according
to Jesus?*

*Then you are called to evangelize
and share this message
to all lost souls.*

*For it is not to offend,
nor argue,*

nor boast,

*but because you care so deeply for the lost,
because you know eternal death will snatch them away,
because you love them,
that is why you show them the painful truth,
and pray they listen.*



With my Soul at 1:11 AM

Emma Mitchell

In the pink-orange glow of the salt lamp,

I sit on my mat in dandasana

Danda = staff

{I am a staff.}

A thought moves through my mind like
a flower petal f

a

l

l

i

n

g

Is it beneficial?

Is it helpful?

I invite her in.

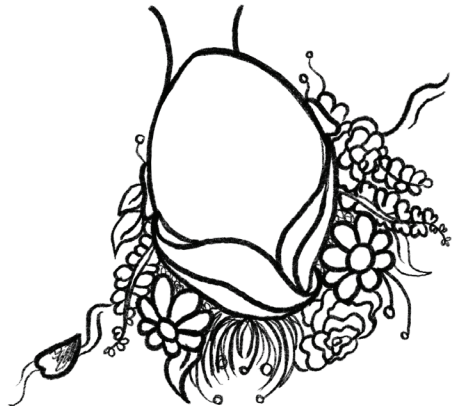
A thought of self-love.

Wisdom that can only be found in silence.

Inhale. Exhale.

Be still and know.

It is well.



The Sip

Hannah Yarbrough

An engine roars quietly,
Trees pass by slowly.
There are holes in the road to swerve by.
The light changes,
It's yellow, then red remind me
Of where I want to go.
A smell of desperate affair comes to mind
Something familiar.
An idea of what I am not supposed to have.
A crackle,
Yet crisp feeling that I so long for.
A green light to go
My mind wanders about it.
The colors appear before me.
The big yellow M,
That represents the mountains I would climb,
I pull in, the line is long.
Is it worth it? Is it going to fill the void I have today?
I pull forward in line,
There are four cars ahead before the speaker.
I order,
I pull through the line.
There are two windows ahead of me,
The payment,
Finally.
The receiving,
The last step of my journey has arrived,
I pull ahead and reach the window.
A cold, yet familiar object sits,
I can't wait,
I pull around to park.

I pull the straw out, its long stem reaching for my mouth.
A sip.
Just one is enough to satisfy
The need for that,
Cold
McDonald's
Sprite.



The Runaway

Heather Richmond

Beneath the bridge, she softly wept.
Unsteady, gloved fingertips traced the tears.
Her creamy skin chilled despite the effort.
Raspberry kissed remnants rallied upon her cheeks.
The bite of winter settling in.

Muscles aching, she rose to ignite some warmth amongst her
Bones.
Frail, forgotten, her frame tumbled towards the frost ground.
Shivers called out without remorse.
Too late to plead her discourse.
Designed by fate, he whispers now,
Silence stills amongst nature's howl.





Alternate View
Heather Richmond



DOWN THE TRACKS

E.J. Freeman

Spring 2023

A DUAL VIEW

Joseph Ashby

The edge of the verdant-blanketed mountain
Comes clearly crawling into the cityscape.
This concoction of architecture, both built
And natural, gives an excuse to the thought,
“Perhaps the world is better because of us.”

But just across an invisible border,
A border than spans through the souls of each,
Humanity has since proven the thought wrong —
A world, scarred and beaten,
Unviewed by the mind’s eye.



The Meaningless Tock
of the Pretty Woman Clock
G. Lira Houle

Pink highlights the room, the bed in the background is made.

The carpets are freshly vacuumed. The pile of clothing is
pushed to the outside of the frame.

She double checks her make-up
She pulls her clothing tight.
She watches herself move in the reflection of the camera's eye.
She fixes her hair with her pink brush again.

Changing the LED lights behind her from pink to purple to
red, back to pink.

She exhales
She smiles
She practices the movements towards the camera's five eyes.

It has been two days since her seventeen second video reached
756,000 views.
It's her ninth attempt to recapture whatever made such wild-
fire.

It's the same outfit, same make-up, same movements, the
same room, the same damn song.

She clicks the red key on her reflection.
She mimes the movements to the sound cues of a rap artist's
voice.

He raps in a low voice

Something about sex.
Something about money.
Something about drugs
Legal or otherwise

The red key automatically stops.

She watches herself move as the song plays.

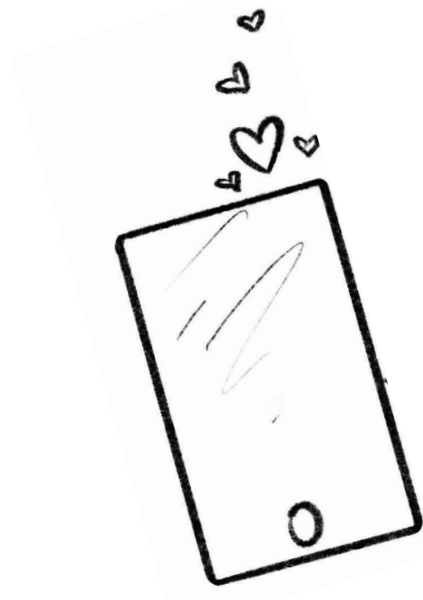
She watches herself move as the song plays.

She watches herself move.

Seeing a single hair out of place.

She presses an orange key.

She starts back from the top.



WE ARE NOT ALL THE SAME

Ferrill Gunter

I'm not a lot like you
And you're not a lot like me
That doesn't make me better than you
No certainty that I'll ever be

While you may be bursting with pride
I may carry a large load of shame
The whole world can tell in a moment
The two of us just aren't the same

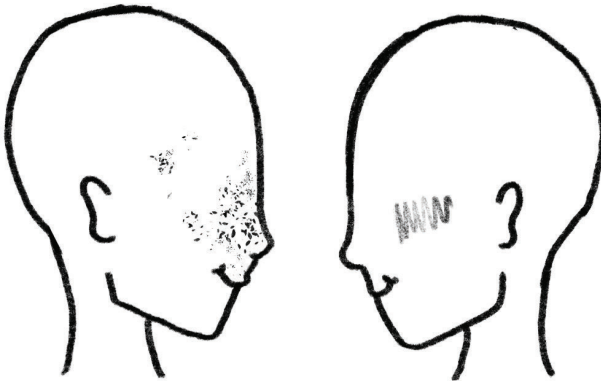
You may strive for great riches
Live your life seeking fortune and fame
I may be content with much less than you
It's obvious, we're not the same

I may have fair skin and freckles
Your skin may be bronzed or black
I can't tell from your outward appearance
If I love you, will you love me back

You may be tall and muscular
Perhaps you're a great athlete
Because of my weakness and frailty
With you I could never compete

But perhaps I could help you with something
Maybe reading, writing, or such
You could show me how to be tougher
I could teach you a softer touch

So you're a New York City slicker
And I'm a Tennessee Hillbilly clod
Please understand we're not all the same
Except...in the eyes of God



Contributors

Joseph Ashby is an English Literature major at Tennessee Tech. His Instagram is @cupofjoe.1.

Tony Baker teaches courses in composition, rhetoric, graphic novels, and writing pedagogy at Tennessee Tech. One of his favorite things about teaching is writing with his students, which is how his essay, “In Praise of My Favorite Elvis Song,” was produced.

Kaitlyn Baltz is a junior English major.

SJ Bobo is a comic book artist and writer, working hard to bring a series to life. She has been writing since age 12, and the same characters she started with have grown with her; out of stubbornness, she will not put them down. SJ’s plans for the future are to become an artist through Webtoon.

Bethany Brock is a student at Tennessee Tech. She is currently majoring in English with a concentration in theater and a minor in music. Bethany hopes to become a professional writer.

Raniece Canady is a mom of two amazing girls. She is a

special education teacher of 11 years, as well as a singer, songwriter, and life coach. She is passionate about creating a life she loves through prioritizing self-love and self-care and encouraging others to do the same.

Margaret Cody is a Tennessee Tech alum and a M.A. in teaching candidate at Kansas State University. As an aspiring English language arts teacher, she believes it’s important to model being a lifetime learner, a teacher of writing who writes and takes risks sharing her thoughts, reflections, and ideas.

Trinity Cogan is an English major with a concentration in creative writing. She writes fiction and a bit of poetry.

Taylor Crabtree is an English major with a creative writing focus. She loves art, and wants to create accessible literature for people with reading disabilities.

Maverick Crawford is a senior English major at Tennessee Tech. Their short story “Dye/Die” was published in the Bluffton University magazine, *Bridge*, in 2021. Recently, they won an honorable mention for poetry

from the Southern Literary Festival. You can usually find them crying over Sonic the Hedgehog or Choi Jongho. Their instagram is @1012luvr.

Mark Creter has been a member of the English Department at Tennessee Tech for 30 years. He serves as a professor of theatre and the artistic director of the Backdoor Playhouse.

Reece Edwards is currently pursuing his M.B.A. He recently earned his undergrad degree in political science with a minor in English. Reece's Twitter and Instagram are @reeceedwardo.

E.J. Freeman is a junior pursuing a degree in business information technology who passes the time by taking photographs. E.J. can be found @snackie_photography on both Twitter and Instagram.

Kat Gardner is a third-year engineering technology major at Tennessee Tech. She gives campus tours as a Trailblazer. She is also a member of the American Foundry Society. Instagram: @kat._gardner.

Bee Goodman is a journalism major and loves photography.

Bee is the co-managing editor of *The Oracle* newspaper on campus. Bee is proud to say she survived an attempt against her life and is getting stronger every day. She hopes that something she creates will help save someone's life.

Alan Green is an English literature major with a minor in French. His passions include cooking, drawing, and writing.

For 24 years, **Ferrill Gunter** taught mathematics to students at Cookeville High School. He has also been a part-time teacher at Tennessee Tech University and Western Kentucky University.

Eli Harris is a senior undergrad botany student. He is a nature and wildlife photographer, and posts all of his work on Instagram @eliharrissss. Feel free to check out his work!

Katherine (Kat) Hawkins is a geology major at Tennessee Tech with minors in Spanish and sociology. She mainly writes poetry and attempts to write novels but has recently been writing short stories as well. She loves animals, especially reptiles, hiking, writing, acting, and painting.

Martha Highers is a poet and creative nonfiction writer living in Cookeville. A three-time alumna of Tech, she was awarded a “Three Degrees Above Zero” award by former TTU foreign language chair Philip Campana. She is editor of the creative nonfiction journal *Under the Sun*, which can be found at underthesunonline.com.

G. Lira Houle is an alumni of TTU, 2019, and UAH, 2020. A recent consumer of prescription sunglasses, pre-distressed sneakers, and a watch that displays a map of the world. If there’s any thought of meeting him, he will be sitting in the corner booth of Persis Indian Grill reading *Catch-22* around 1900. Upon approach he will say, “The Internet said it will rain tomorrow.” The expected response is “Yes, it will be a perfect day for bananafish.”

Ambrosia Jergensen is a sophomore student at White County High School. She moved to Tennessee from Washington state a year ago.

Graham Kash is a professor of communication at Tennessee Tech. He lives with two people (Bettye and himself), two dogs,

three cats, five rescued turtles, and a feeder attracting various birds (such as cardinals and chickadees). No wonder he often writes about animals.

Michael Lewis is a master’s candidate studying literature at Tennessee Tech University. His works have appeared in the *Iris Review* and the 2022 anthology of the Southern Literary Festival. He enjoys chess, cooking, writing, and any respite from his responsibilities.

Kyle Metz is majoring in creative writing. He was selected as Tech’s representative for the Associated Writing Program’s Intro Journal Project last year and received second place in the Clara Cox Epperson Prose Writing Competition before that. During the short period since he started majoring in creative writing, his style of writing has significantly improved. These achievements are proof of his growth. They show him that he has a future worth pursuing in fiction writing.

Emma Mitchell is a senior physics major, minoring in English and astronomy. She has a joyful love for the wind and rides with her windows down year-

round and doesn't mind being cold too much. She also loves watching the sunset and finds personal connection with God in the beauty and magnificence of the sun saying its goodnights. Emma appreciates how God made something so wonderfully beautiful for her (and everyone else's) enjoyment. When she's not basking in the wind or the sun, she can be found writing, dancing, or rock climbing.

Jere Mitchum taught American literature and technical writing at Tennessee Tech from 1967 until 1999. His hobbies include reading, writing, editing, singing, and traveling, especially to the Far East, Australia, and Alaska.

Jaden Mullins is a student at Tennessee Tech majoring in history and English with a concentration in literature. She is minoring in women & gender studies. She hopes to continue her education and in the future to be able to teach at the university level.

Molly Neal is a freshman at Cumberland County High School. She wants to major in dermatology when she gets to college and is also very passionate about reading,

writing, and playing in competitive sports.

Alyssa Owen's major is secondary education English. She is in her fourth semester at Tennessee Tech and really enjoys literature in general, but particularly loves to write and read poetry. This is the first time she has ever attempted to publish (besides Wattpad in middle school), so she just hopes that people get something out of it, even if that is simply enjoyment!

Mari Ramler is an associate professor in the English Department at Tennessee Tech University. She writes at the intersection of science, religion, and technology. (And she's working on a semi-secret book of poetry entitled *Losing Jesus in Music City*.)

Heather Richmond is a senior at Tennessee Tech, majoring in creative writing with a minor in theatre. She enjoys film, literature, and music. She plans on making short films, writing novels, and of course, poetry.

Andrew William Smith (Andy Sunfrog) is a poet & DJ & theologian, a preacher, teacher,

& sober creature, who found his way from the streets of Detroit to the streams of Tennessee at the end of the last century. He studied poetry with Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman at the Jack Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics. He hosts Teacher On The Radio on WTTU 88.5 FM, the Nest.

Gavin H. Stackhouse is originally from Muncie, Indiana, and currently lives in Cookeville, Tennessee. Here, he is enrolled at Tennessee Tech with aspirations to develop his newfound love for writing through individual growth and learning new perspectives.

Jacob Strickler is a second-year M.S. student in computer science: cybersecurity, conducting research in social engineering and cybersecurity education. He is a CyberCorps SFS Scholar and the co-founder and former regent of the Tennessee Tech L.A.R.P. club. His hobbies including cooking, tabletop games and game design, reading, writing, studying foreign languages, practicing firearms and historical martial arts, and co-hosting a podcast in which he reviews horror films and related content.

Destiny Wanamaker is a secondary education English major. She was published for the first time in the last issue of the *Iris Review*, and this has inspired Destiny to continue her efforts in writing poetry! You can find Destiny on Instagram under the username @destinywanamaker.

Linda M. White is a M.A. student studying English with a focus on creative writing who is graduating in May 2023. She loves all things arty and nerdy—often spending her free time drawing, singing, playing TTRPGs, and writing, among other adventures. When she isn't expressing herself in art or fiction, Linda enjoys participating in church, hanging out with family and friends, or relaxing with her husband and two kittens.

Rachel Wingo is a lecturer at Tennessee Tech and a resident of Cookeville. She is the proud mother of two and bonus-mom of another, all of them delightful wildlings, and is fortunate enough to be married to the smartest person she knows. She is also an interdisciplinary visual artist and is the worse half of the

artist partnership Whimsical
Wreckage.

Hannah Yarbrough is a fiber artist for the most part, but dabbles in writing poetry. She is 24 years old, happily married, and has two cats. Hannah is a secondary education English major, and is currently working towards her residency.

Mikayla Young, an English major with a literature concentration, won second place in the White County Fair art contest for pencil drawing and graduated magna cum laude from Motlow State Community College in 2019. Mikayla likes to read, occasionally write, take pictures of nature, and create art.

