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Tennessee Tech University
English Department

Editors' Letter

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The *Iris Review* offers students the opportunity to learn the process involved in creating a literary magazine, from soliciting submissions, accepting pieces, designing the layout, and culminating in planning a launch party. This journey has been one of growth, collaboration, and creativity, and we're thrilled to share this collection of work with you. We have spent many hours curating, editing, and designing. This magazine truly is a product of our collective efforts.

The *Iris Review* is not just a space for showcasing talent or allowing the class the opportunity to learn the publication process—it is a platform for voices to be heard, stories to be told, and ideas to be explored. Every poem, essay, story, and piece of art you'll find here comes from someone just like you—someone eager to express themselves and connect with others. As student creators, we understand the power that words and art can hold, and we've worked hard to ensure that this publication is a reflection of the diverse voices and perspectives that make our community so special.

We want to take a moment to thank each of our contributors. Your courage to share your thoughts and creativity with the world is what makes the *Iris Review* an award-winning literary magazine. Whether your piece is bold and audacious, or quiet and introspective, or somewhere in between, you've added something meaningful to this conversation. As you read through this issue, we encourage you to not only enjoy the art and words on the page but to engage with them. Think about the stories that resonate with you, the ones that challenge your views, or the ones that make you laugh or reflect. Let these pieces spark conversations, inspire your own creativity, and remind you of the power art holds in shaping the world around us.

In a time in which our country feels divisive, we hope that the *Iris Review* can offer a space for connection—a place where ideas, emotions, and creativity can intersect. Thank you for being part of this journey and thank you for supporting the voices from across the Upper Cumberland that are featured here.

Sincerely,
The Iris Review Team

This edition of the *Iris Review* is dedicated
to Graham Kash, a good friend and professor,
and to Jesse Filoteo, a good artist and brother.

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ACT ZERO

SOFTWARE

Young Writers Competition
(Budding Writer Award for Poetry)

Software

Dani Hassler

Cumberland County High School

I am a real person
I am a real person
I am a real person

I walked past a mirror today
And forgot how it felt to be real
When your reflection seems to be foreign
What are you supposed to feel? What am I supposed to feel?

It's like I'm reading a pop-up book of my life
Just watching the events unfold
It's like I'm a third party
In my own body
All at once too young and too old

A famous author once said
"The parasite believes itself to be the host"
What if I am the parasite? What if I'm the parasite?
Latched on to a poor girl's body
Stealing her days away

They say "I think, therefore I am"

But what about the parts of me
That aren't my thoughts?
Do they even truly exist?
Do I exist?

How do you cope
When "I" doesn't include yourself

I know my thoughts are mine
But nothing else seems to be

When you spend too much time
Imagining lives that aren't your own
You forget which one is real
In the way that words lose their meaning
I am a real person, I am a real person
The more that you speak them aloud
So too does the human experience
Losing the definition
You thought you found

Am I a real person?
Am I a real person?
Am I a real person?

I used to think the soul
Was kept inside your chest
But mine is behind my eyes
Because that is the only part of me
That I have ever belonged
I don't belong

I know who I am
But I exist in a limbo
Where being inside my skin
Is too much and not enough
I'm not enough
For what is my body
But a puppet for my brain
A suit of armor
To cover the software up

William W. Jenkins Creative Writing
Scholarship

Brainworm

Kaylee Savage-Cutcher

When I lay in the dirt, it's like the earthworms can talk to me. They're weird animals. Their slippery tentacles remind me of The Monster, but they're too tiny to wield any power. When I come out to dig every morning, a few wriggle out of the ground, almost like they're happy to see me. It makes me wish I could stick around longer, just to hang out with them.

I never get that option, of course. By ten o'clock, The Monster always appears in the trees. His tentacles, coming out of his head like an axolotl's fringe, always grab me by the hand and pull me back inside.

Today is different. He's wearing human skin. He has it slipped over his face like a children's mask for All Hallows' Eve. I can see bleeding purple scales around his red snake eyes. It looks decently natural, thanks to his flat-ish face; but it does hide his tentacles, so he holds out hands covered by skin gloves. When I take it, I can feel his fake fingernails sitting just slightly off from where they would grow on a human. I'm sure his disguise has more defects I can't see under the oversized sweater covering his abnormal anatomy.

"Your finger, Madame?" he asks once inside. I hold up my left ring finger, its hand knobbed and callused from cuts and bite marks. I had to be able to dig with my right hand, after all.

He opens his mouth. He doesn't strip away the leathery human skin, so his disguise stretches, wrinkles, and tears slightly below his left eye. He unleashes his tongue, flinging ice blue saliva across my face. A drop gets in my eye, and I flinch though the pain doesn't necessarily feel bad. He sucks on my finger. The way he tenses his gums around me is relaxing. He nibbles around where my ring would be if we were married, but when he spits my finger out, I don't see many bite marks.

"Thank you, Nolan," The Monster growls. "I'll go out and catch some lunch soon. Patrol the grounds while you wait, please."

A man so skinny that he's skeletal sits atop a horse which seemed to have a more fulfilling diet than his master. I patrol the grounds almost every day, but this is the first time in years I've actually come across a trespasser.

"Are you lost?" I ask. I can't imagine any other reason someone would find their way here. The Monster's forest is so extensive that I would have to walk for hours to get to a clearing and even longer to approach a village. The Monster allows a few others to live under his domain, but they usually keep their distance.

"That depends on what your name is," the man responds.

"I'm Nolan, I'm sure I'm not who you're looking for. Maybe I can give you directions—"

"No, I'm looking for you. Your name is actually Cassandra, though."

“I think I know my own name, Sir—”

“Listen to me. The Monster captured you a few months ago. You used to be Cassandra. He changed you until you were another person entirely. I’m here to help.”

“How do you know about The Monster?”

“Everyone knows about him. He’s not a secret. He makes you think he is. Why else would no one dare to travel here? It’s his saliva. It lets him control your mind.”

I roll my eyes. The Monster gave me a room and provides me with food in exchange for being his life force. He wouldn’t want a slave. Hard workers have to be willing. “Say this is true. Why would you care?”

“Because I used to be a Nolan. He gives that name to everyone he commands. And I recovered. You can too.” He hands me a flask from his pocket. “This will stop him from affecting you. I’ll come back tomorrow and see if you remember anything.”

I take the flask. His horse gallops away. I return to the dirt mound and set the flask by the worms. I pick up a shovel and continue digging my own grave.

I hide the flask under a loose floorboard in my cottage when I go wash up for lunch. I don’t drink out of it. That man was spitting nonsense.

I should have left it outside or maybe even thrown it in the woods, but part of me didn’t want to part with it. It wasn’t like it would do anything. I could drink it just as the man said, and my life would stay the same. There probably isn’t anything magic about it.

And even if there is, I’m Nolan. I’m not Cassandra.

If I drink it, and nothing happens, I’ll be sure of that fact. If I don’t, the question is still kind of up in the air, even if I know the man was either crazy or a trickster. But I don’t need to drink it. There’s no point in questioning what I know to be reality.

I’ll drink it. Just to be safe. Which is almost a betrayal to The Monster, so I can’t make myself yet.

So, I guess I’m bogged down in a secret, which isn’t much better.

It’s not like The Monster would find the vial even if it was sitting out on my dresser. He had given me the tiny cottage in my name, within sight of his fort and my gravesite. He doesn’t need sleep, so he lives in his fort stocked with weapons and whatever oddities he keeps in the rooms I’m forbidden to enter. It’s not a place for a human. He doesn’t even have a bed. We constructed my little home together so I would have a more appropriate place to live.

He has no reason to come by my cottage unless I give him a reason to. I’ve never done that, at least not willingly. One day about a year ago, I had caught some kind of illness and overslept, and The Monster had to come wake me up so I could attend to my tasks.

He had been so worried about me when I didn’t arrive for my chores. That man from earlier doesn’t understand The Monster’s kindness.

The man claimed I had only been The Monster’s servant for some months. How could that be possible when I remember getting sick? How could that be possible when I remember serving The Monster for almost my whole life?

I lift and press my water pump in the corner to fill my basin. I scrub the graveyard dirt off my hands and cheeks. I dump the muddy water out the door on my way to see The Monster.

He must have kept his skin suit on while hunting, because it's starting to look awful. There's a huge smear of blood on his cheek. Most of his gloves had fallen off completely, revealing canine paws with human thumbs. His sweater had torn with patchy feathers falling out of the holes.

"I got a few pigs," he says. "I even dug up some carrots."

"Thank you," I say, sitting down by the firepit in The Monster's main fort room. I shuffle around some burning logs and tie the smallest hog above the flame. I grab a carrot while The Monster eats the largest hog whole. "I do have a question, if you don't mind," I say.

The Monster nods and his skin mask begins to fall off.

"There was a trespasser earlier. He was pretty obviously lost. He was looking for someone and confused me for her. Do you have any idea where he was trying to go, so I can give him directions if he comes back?"

"There's no one for at least a few miles out," The Monster says. "I'd say whoever gave him directions was playing a trick on him. They probably thought no one lived out here and wanted him to get stranded."

I nod.

So there couldn't be any way to get the man off my

tracks when he comes back. I'll just confirm I'm Nolan and hope he moves on.

"It is odd you encountered someone," The Monster says.

"I thought so too. I assumed he was lost before I even spoke with him, especially considering his condition. He looked bad."

"He was ill?"

"Yes. I could count his bones. And he looked a little green."

The Monster raises his fake eyebrow. "What was his name?"

"He didn't say." The closest thing he had told me to his name was that he had claimed to 'be a Nolan', but that doesn't make any sense. There is no reason to bother The Monster with that information.

Besides, if The Monster knew I could even imagine a world where he was untrustworthy, he would be disappointed in me. He wouldn't let me test the man's flask, either.

"He didn't reveal who he was himself, but claimed you were someone else. Fascinating." The Monster smiles. "You know, I know I'm going to spend a fair amount of energy pondering this. Let me suck on your thumb a moment to make sure I have the stamina." Blue saliva drips from his lips.

I hold out my hand. Supposedly, this is how he controls me. That's such a silly idea.

The Monster licks my nail. He presses my thumbprint onto his teeth. I can't help but close my eyes

and smile. I almost forget about the man.

The Monster lets my thumb fall out of his mouth but leans in closer. I can smell the blood of the pig he just ate on his skinsuit.

“Can I try something new?” He whispers. I nod.

The Monster licks my cheek. It’s kind of sandpapery, but I never noticed that texture with his tongue in his mouth.

He licks again. It’s like he’s wrapping me in a blanket in my warm bed.

He touches his lips to my cheek. Then our lips meet. He thrusts his mouth as he spits into mine.

I feel his saliva in my mouth and everything is different now.

The Monster is good. The Monster is perfect. The Monster can do no wrong.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

“The best I ever... have.” I can barely string a sentence together. I answer him without thinking. I don’t have control over what I say. I don’t need to, because The Monster is good. The Monster is perfect.

“Do you know what I did to you?”

“No...”

“You can’t resist me any longer. You’re the perfect servant now.”

I like the sound of that.

“Your pork is cooked. Eat it,” The Monster says. I comply.

“Were you telling me the entire truth earlier?”

“No.” I speak with my mouth full.

“What did the man say?”

“That... I’m not really me. He used to... be me.”

The Monster grins. “I expected as much. Did he give you anything?”

“Some liquid.”

“Where is it?”

“In the cottage.”

“Finish eating quickly, then. We don’t want to let him win, do we?”

“No...” Of course not. The Monster can do no wrong.

The Monster escorts me to the cottage. I love his company.

The door to my home is ajar.

The Monster walks ahead of me, slamming the door open and ducking in. I follow.

The man is here.

“You can’t do this to her,” he says.

“What I do now is none of your concern, Francis,” The Monster says. “It would have been much smarter of you to stay away. I guess I overestimated your intelligence.”

“You probably gave me brain damage.” Francis gestures to me. “What did you do, lobotomize her?”

Even if he did, it’s a good change. The Monster is perfect.

“Like I said, none of your concern,” The Monster says. He lurches with his tentacles. His skin mask finally falls to the floor.

Francis ducks and rolls under my bed. The Monster raises my bedframe up and slams it down again.

Francis rolls out of the way. The bed knocks out the loose floorboard. The flask glimmers.

Francis dives after the flask and grabs it. He darts out from under the bed.

The Monster almost seizes him. Francis is so tiny he slips through The Monster's arms.

"Nolan!" The Monster shouts. "Run!"

I bolt from the cottage to the depth of the forest. Francis chases me. The Monster chases Francis.

I don't have to worry. The Monster will catch him. The Monster is perfect, after all.

I hear shouts in the distance. I glance behind me. A herd of humans on horseback weave around the trees. Some of them have torches.

I keep running. I haven't been given the order to stop, and The Monster would want me to escape them.

The Monster roars. I glance back around, and he's surrounded.

Francis has to be getting weak from all this running. It's not like he has any muscle on him.

I turn at a clearing. I think I lose him.

There's another crowd. I step back to turn the other way, but someone grabs my arm before I can escape. Someone else grabs my leg. I pull, but they just squeeze tighter.

Once I've been detained, Francis appears, panting.

Someone yanks my jaw open. Francis uncorks the flask. He pours the liquid down my throat before I can

react. It's bitter. A little fizzy.

I shake my head. I start to feel dizzy. Not dizzy physically, like when I grave dig before I've eaten and the worms have to take care of me. I'm dizzy like my emotions are a whirlpool I'm drowning in.

Suddenly, The Monster isn't perfect.

It's strange. I remember something that happened before I met him. The memory feels recent, but I know I had to be living with The Monster by then.

Everyone I knew mourned a man who had been kidnapped by The Monster. We thought the man would have surely been dead by the end of that week.

Who was the man? Where was I? Why were we afraid of The Monster?

"Cassandra?" Francis whispers.

That was what he had told me my name was. Before, it had been completely unfamiliar. Now, it feels right. It's prettier than Nolan and fits me better.

Maybe the old skeleton knows what he's talking about.

He offers his hand. I don't take it.

"Will you come back with us?" he asks.

How could I leave The Monster after everything he had done for me?

I could leave if it wasn't real. Maybe some of it was real, or maybe my whole life had been The Monster's imagination.

"I can't tell you yet," I say.

I take off the way I came. No one follows me.

All of the trespassers who were alive retreated. I try not to look at the bodies left behind, but the majority survived. I tell The Monster that I'm not feeling well. I thank him. I hug him.

Was it because I want to fly under the radar, or because I truly love him?

He lets me rest in bed. I nap until sunset, stare at the sky, and go back to bed until sunrise. I would have gone into a coma if I had the choice. But I've been laying down for so long, completely unable to close my eyes. I have to make a decision before The Monster's feeding time.

If I stay, he's going to feed from me until I die. He's going to take my life force until I have none left. That's why I dig my grave.

That's probably why Francis is so fragile and skinny. If The Monster claims Nolan after Nolan, Francis must have been pretty close to death. He could be the man I remember mourning.

Is there someone out there I don't remember who mourned me? Were they in the crowd that came to rescue me?

Did they die for me?

There's a chance someone did miss me. They don't deserve to lose someone like that. They don't deserve to lose themselves. If I leave, I could have a life. I wouldn't eagerly count down the days until my death.

But I've changed now. I've lived as Nolan. I don't think that can ever go away. A part of me will always love The Monster.

I grab a bag and throw in clothes. I pick up a

month-old portrait of The Monster from my dresser. I tried so hard to develop the contrast between his scales and feathers and to make his tentacles look like they were truly in motion. I slip the portrait in my bag.

I open the cottage door. I take my first steps to leave. I'll always be homesick for the worms in my grave.

Clara Cox Epperson Prose Writing Competition
(Second Prize)

Florian

Jenna Herrin

The house on Pine Street stood in the early morning hush, its once-white walls now faded, its garden overtaken by weeds that stretched hungrily toward the porch. The air was thick with stillness, the world caught between sleep and waking. A weak winter sun slanted through the skeletal branches of the trees, casting flickering shadows against the glass panes. Inside, time moved in slow circles, quiet and unbroken—the house more memory than home.

For as long as Florian could remember, this had been his world. The creaking wooden floors, the dust that swirled in the slanted light, the faint scent of warmth clinging to the air like the last traces of a dream. And Ambrose—always Ambrose. The old man shuffled through the house like an echo, his footsteps barely more than whispers against the boards. His hands, weathered and slow, reached for things absentmindedly, as if memory guided them more than thought. Most days, he sat by the window, a book balanced in his trembling grip, his breath shallow and measured. The pages turned, though the stories within them seemed secondary to the act itself—the repetition of movement, the quiet ritual of it all.

Florian, sleek and dark, watched him with amber eyes that missed nothing. He had never questioned the way things were. The slow rhythm of their days, the hush of passing time—it was all Florian had ever known. The world beyond the house was distant, insignificant. What

mattered was here, in the warmth of a lap, the stroke of a gentle hand, the quiet presence of something constant.

Today was no different, at first.

Florian perched on the arm of the chair, his tail flicking in lazy intervals, watching the familiar ritual unfold. The book in Ambrose's hands trembled slightly as he turned another page. The light outside was pale, hesitant. The air in the house held its usual weight, the comforting scent of old paper and something that could almost be called home.

But then Ambrose stood.

There was nothing remarkable about it, nothing Florian had not seen a hundred times before. The old man shifted forward, slowly, carefully, his breath catching as he braced against the chair's arms. His knees protested—a familiar sound—as he straightened and reached for his coat. The fabric rustled as he buttoned it, his fingers slow but steady. Florian watched, impassive, unconcerned. The door creaked open, and a breath of cold air curled into the house, sharp and unwelcome. Ambrose stepped out, his hunched figure disappearing into the gray light.

Florian stretched, his claws extending briefly against the fabric of the chair. He had no need to follow. The house was where he belonged. Time passed. The light shifted, stretched. The dust swirled in lazy spirals.

A sound tore through the calm atmosphere.

Sharp, violent, unnatural. The screech of tires clawing against wet pavement. The thick, wet thud of something meeting steel and glass and cold, unrelenting ground. Silence followed—heavy and immediate—the kind

that swallows the world whole.

Florian's ears flicked. His body tensed, just for a moment. Then stillness. The air had changed, but he did not understand how.

He waited.

The house remained quiet. Outside, the world had tilted, but inside, everything was the same.

Almost.

Curiosity pulled him from the chair. He moved with the same unhurried grace as always, his paws silent against the wood. The cold nipped at his fur as he stepped outside, the snow beneath him giving way with a faint crunch.

His gaze swept across the street. There, in the snow, was Ambrose.

Florian did not rush forward. He did not make a sound. He simply looked.

The old man lay crumpled, his body twisted in a way that bodies should not be. His coat, once buttoned with such careful fingers, was dark now, stained with something that bloomed like ink in the snow. His breath came in shallow, desperate gasps. His hand, outstretched, trembled as though reaching for something unseen.

The street was empty. The world had taken no notice. The sky remained heavy, indifferent. The house stood silent behind him, unchanged.

The only movement was that of Ambrose's fingers—curling, uncurling, reaching—

"Florian..."

His name, barely more than a breath, ghosted

through the cold. The sound was strange, unfamiliar in its urgency.

Ambrose had never spoken like that before.

"Come here... please..."

The old man's voice cracked, his fingers clawing at the air, at the snow, at nothing.

Florian stepped forward, his paws landing lightly on the frozen ground. His eyes flicked over the old man's face.

And then, with an effortless bound, he hopped over the man's hand and into the street beyond.

A choked, wet sound broke from Ambrose's throat—something between a sob and a strangled breath. His body shuddered. His fingers twitched once more.

Then stilled.

Florian did not turn around.

He wandered down the quiet street, his sleek form slipping between the frozen hedges and the hushed doorways. The wind carried new scents, and soon, he stopped in front of a house where a dim light glowed behind frost-laced windows.

A door creaked open, and a pair of soft, unfamiliar hands scooped him up. The warmth seeped into his fur as the door closed behind him, shutting out the cold. His hunger was soon satiated, and he jumped up to a new windowsill, one he would get accustomed to over time. The house was nice enough. Maybe this time, he would stay longer.

Behind him, the house on Pine Street stood quiet and empty, its door left slightly ajar, the last traces of warmth seeping out into the cold.

Young Writers Competition
(Budding Writer Award for Prose)

Down by the Water

Lillian Brackett

Cumberland County High School

Through all my years of exploring and adventuring outside, I never imagined finding anything like this.

Today started as an average day. After leaving a note for my mother on the dining room table, I left my house on my bike to meet up with my two closest friends, Jenny and Alex. The three of us would ride to the creek about two miles from my house to swim; it was a beautiful, bright summer day, and I didn't want to stay inside. After knocking on Alex's door, I waited on the porch for about five minutes, as usual. I could hear all types of loud noises coming from inside the house.

"Coming!" Alex yelled from the other side of the door. He finally emerged from the chaotic household and gave me a friendly wave. Then he poked his head back inside. "I'll be back later, Mom!" Finally, he shut the door and sighed. "Sorry about that, Nick. We're s'posed to have company later this afternoon, and my mom has been running around like a chicken with her head cut off all morning trying to get the house clean."

I chuckled. Alex lived in a large house with a large family. He was the oldest of his three siblings and often had the responsibility of babysitting them. His father worked most of the time, and his mother stayed home and ensured the house was always clean and organized. Alex, however, was very much the opposite. His room was always

a mess, to the chagrin of his dear mother, and his hair and clothing were just as untidy. He was always excited to have an excuse to leave the house and go somewhere.

"No worries. Are you still up for going swimming?" I asked.

"Absolutely!" he exclaimed. "Is Jenny coming?"

"I think so. We'll ride to her house first and check."

With that, we got on our bikes and started off to Jenny's house. Jenny was the smartest of our group. Alex always wanted to get into trouble, I would help organize it, and Jenny would tell us we were being dumb. She was like a mom, keeping us from doing or saying things that we would either regret or cause problems in some way. She had a sarcastic, witty nature and wasn't very concerned about her appearance. When Alex and I reached her driveway, she immediately noticed us through the window and met us on her porch carrying a small backpack.

"You two sure are slow," she said jokingly. "For a minute I thought you weren't coming."

"What's the bag for?" Alex asked.

Jenny rolled her eyes as if he should have known the answer already. "A towel, a brush, wipes, and Band-Aids."

I looked at her, confused. "Why the Band-Aids?"

She laughed heartily. "For you two fools! Every time we go somewhere, one of you always gets hurt in some way."

Alex looked down at his scuffed knees and the random bruises on his arms. "Fair enough."

"You guys ready to go?" I asked. I wasn't in a hurry

exactly, but I didn't want to waste the day talking about our clumsy natures.

Jenny nodded. "Yup. Lead the way, Nick."

With me in the lead, we headed to the creek. The afternoon summer breeze slapped our faces as we sped down the back roads that eventually turned into rocky dirt paths. Everything felt great until we smelled something odd in the woods.

"Ugh, what is that?" Jenny plugged her nose and fanned the air away from her.

"I don't know, but that's disgust—AHH!" Alex was cut off mid-sentence as his bike slid on mud leading to the creek. It fell sideways and caused Alex to fall to the ground and get drenched in mud.

"Alex! Are you all right?" I got off my bike and helped him up. Jenny did the same and checked for any cuts that would need one of her Band-Aids.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said as he wiped mud off his arms, "but... there's something buried right there. It's part of the reason my bike fell."

"Weird..." Jenny said quietly as she looked towards the buried object. "Blech, the stench is worse over here!"

"We should probably see what that is," I suggested. "At least then we can move it out of our path."

The three of us moved towards the buried object. Jenny was right; the smell was worse here. Upon closer inspection, the pile of dirt was unsettlingly long. Carefully, I unearthed part of the pile. I was mortified to discover a male face, which looked to be that of a young adult. I jumped backward and gagged violently.

"Oh my God..." Jenny stammered, her face pale.

We all stood quietly and wondered what we were supposed to do. Finally, Alex broke the silence.

"I guess this breaks the swimming plans, huh?"

Jenny and I looked at him. Jenny exasperatedly began to speak.

"No, I would love to swim as a dead guy watches us. Of course it ruins the swimming plans!"

"Just trying to lighten the mood," Alex said quietly. "But seriously, what are we going to do with him?"

"Why don't we report him to the police?" I suggested. Alex shook his head. "They'd think that we killed him. We'd at least be suspects."

"Well, do you have any better ideas?" I asked, slightly irritated. "We can't just leave him here."

Jenny stood quietly, thinking hard. Finally, she looked up. "What about the lake?"

The lake, although undeniably beautiful, was not a popular place for citizens to visit. The water was known for being extremely deep, and even advanced swimmers would never dare venture into it. If anyone were to hide anything, the lake would be a good place. The only issue was that it was several miles away.

"How would we get there? It isn't like we could ask our parents to take us and our new, stinking, dead bestie." Alex chuckled at himself, then quieted, remembering the severity of our situation.

Quickly, I thought of a solution.

"I have a wheelbarrow and a green tarp at my house. What if we told our parents that we would do some

yard work and then met up here to pick up the body? Then we could hide it under the tarp and gardening tools and take it to the lake,” I suggested. I felt sick that I was even pondering ways to hide a body.

Jenny and Alex looked at each other in consideration. Finally, Jenny nodded.

“Yeah... let’s do it.”

The next morning, our plan went into motion. I explained to my mom that we planned to do some yard work for community service hours. She agreed and allowed me to take the wheelbarrow and some tools from the shed. I hid the tarp as it would be suspicious. I grabbed three pairs of gardening gloves, rope, and the gardening tools. Then, I met Alex and Jenny at the creek that started this whole ordeal. When we looked at our project lying on the ground, we thought of something we hadn’t previously considered: how would we pick him up and move him?

“We’ll each have to lift him from a different spot. I’ll get his arms, Jenny gets mid back, and Alex gets the legs. I brought some extra gardening gloves, so make sure you each wear a pair to avoid prints,” I said determined.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this...” Jenny said quietly.

“What choice do we have?” Alex asked. “We can’t tell our parents because we weren’t supposed to be at the creek; they thought we were at the public pool. And calling the police would be too risky. We would probably get labeled as suspects. I don’t want to waste the rest of my school years as a criminal!”

Jenny grimaced. “I know. It just... feels wrong.”

The three of us went silent and put on our gloves. Then we went to our respective areas and prepared to lift the deceased man.

“Okay, on the count of three, pick him up and move him to the wheelbarrow,” I instructed. “One... Two... Three!”

With slight difficulty, we lifted him and threw him into the wheelbarrow. I repositioned his legs so that he would fit better and threw the tarp on top.

“Okay,” I sighed, “I think we can go now.”

With that, we started on our journey to the lake. For the first few minutes of our walk, there was only silence. However, Alex was incapable of being quiet for long periods.

“This is so boring. No wonder murderers in interviews say that this is the worst part of the job.” He continued, clearly not reading the room. “Not to mention the strength you would have to have! I bet they work out before they kill so they can lift the person. My arms are so tired and—”

“Can you please stop talking?” Jenny finally snapped. “There is nothing normal about this!”

Alex snapped back at her. “You think I wanted to do this?! Of course not! At least I’m trying to make light of the situation! I’m just as terrified as you are...” Alex suddenly sank to the ground, hugged his knees, and started to sob.

Jenny looked at him pitifully, then went to comfort him.

“I’m sorry. This whole situation has brought out the worst in me. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

Alex looked up and rubbed tears away from his eyes.

"It's okay. I get it. We should probably keep going, though," he examined his watch. "It's already ten o'clock."

We continued our journey and occasionally took moments to rest. On one of these breaks, we finally acknowledged our need for food.

"I brought snacks just in case. I don't have that many though, so make sure to eat them sparingly," Jenny said, bringing out a small backpack.

"Thanks," I said gratefully and took a pack of crackers.

"Cheers," Alex said to our deceased companion in the wheelbarrow. He started to grin, then gestured to the body and pretended to whisper to Jenny and me, "He needs a bath. The smell is making me lose my appetite."

Jenny and I laughed, I appreciated his humor despite our unhumorous situation.

"What do you think he was like before he died?" I asked.

Jenny thought for a moment before replying, "Outdoorsy. He looked like the type who would have enjoyed that creek. Maybe he will appreciate that his final resting place will be with nature."

Alex and I nodded in silent agreement. We looked at the time again and set off on our journey again. By about two o'clock, we reached the lake. We stood on the small, wooden bridge and stared at it, nervous about the depth of the water.

"Okay. Now we need something heavy to tie him to. Otherwise, he'll float," I explained. Alex found a decent-sized rock and brought it over.

"Would this work?" he asked.

"Yes, that should be fine," I answered. "The challenging thing is getting the rope to stay secure."

"I learned several types of knots at camp last summer. I know a few that are tight," Jenny said.

I nodded. "Okay, Jenny is in charge of the knots. Once she is done, we will all work together to throw him in the lake."

Jenny got started on the knots and was finished within five minutes. We inspected them to make sure they were secure and decided that they would stay strong for a while. After a bit of difficulty, we lifted the man once again.

"Goodbye, new friend," Alex said serenely. "Enjoy the fish."

We tossed the deceased man into the lake and watched him sink to the bottom. We collectively shuddered at its depth.

"We should probably throw the tarp and gloves in too," Jenny suggested. "Since they will have his DNA on them."

"Good idea," said Alex, still standing on the bridge. "I'll throw them in."

I threw him the items that would be disposed of. As he got ready to throw them in, the boards started to creak. Suddenly, there was a scream.

"Alex!" Jenny and I yelled in unison. The board underneath his feet collapsed under his weight, and he was holding onto the other boards to avoid drowning in the deep water.

“Help!” He yelled desperately. “These boards won’t last long!”

Jenny and I rushed over and grabbed his hands to pull him up. Then we dragged him off the bridge, and Alex started to cough out water.

“Thanks,” he said gratefully. “I was worried.”

Jenny chuckled. “Well, it would have sucked to lose two lives in two days. At least we wouldn’t have to go through the trouble of hiding you though.”

I looked up at the sky and then down at my watch. “We better get home. The sun will be setting soon.”

After the same long walk that we took for our journey, we finally made it back to the neighborhood. I waved goodbye to Alex and Jenny as we each made our way to our respective houses. I put the tools and wheelbarrow back in my shed and went inside my house. My mom greeted me in the doorway.

“Hey, sweetie. How was the—” She stopped dead in her sentence to cover her nose and move the air away from her. “Ugh! What did you do that made you smell like that? You smell like dead animals!”

I chuckled and muttered under my breath, “Not exactly.”

“What?” my mother asked.

“Nothing,” I answered. “I’m going to go take a shower and I think I will go to bed early. Goodnight, Mom.”

“Goodnight,” she answered. She blew me a kiss since she didn’t want to get close to my stench.

After I showered, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling for a bit.

“Next time I go to the creek,” I thought, “hopefully there won’t be any surprises.”

Clara Cox Epperson Prose Writing Competition
(First Prize)

Woe-Companion

Alaina Johnson

It was movie night on Thursdays at the BetterDeath Complex. The nurses always made popcorn with the break room microwave in the mornings—it would be stale by the six o'clock movie time, but most never noticed. The smell would waft into the hallways, attracting the early risers in wheelchairs. The nurses would shoo them away, although if they were lucky, the especially nice ones snuck them a plastic cup full and hurried them back to their rooms. My sister always managed to be one of those golden few. And it was never a surprise either—she practically primed the nurses all week with candies from her pockets and a reputation for being exceptionally unproblematic, especially compared to most of the patients at the complex.

“Roger, get up. I got an extra this time.”

I felt a hand wrapped around my arm, shaking me from my dream. I turned my head to find my sister sitting in her wheelchair holding out two cups of popcorn, steam still rising from the freshly popped kernels.

“You know that stuff gets all stuck in my teeth.”

Phoebe huffed and set one of the cups down on my bedside table. She wheeled herself towards the dresser to grab the TV remote.

“Well, you always eat it anyway.”

“How’d you get up? Did someone transfer you?”

“Miriam’s on morning shift today; she was nice

enough to move me early. You know I can’t be in that bed for long without going crazy,” Phoebe said as she flipped the channels on our small plasma TV.

I cast a side glance at the ruffled covers of the hospital bed next to mine. This room had been our home for six months now, but Phoebe’s refusal to settle in made it feel temporary, like it was all one long dream we could eventually wake up from.

I shifted my pillow under my neck to see the TV. Phoebe had her eyes dutifully fixed on the screen to absorb every second of her Hallmark movie re-run.

“With how much money we’re spending to be here, you’d think they’d give us some better channels,” I said.

The complex was experimental at best, and all the money floated into the “experience” rather than the accommodations. The room was big enough for us both—two beds, two birch nightstands, a dresser, and the TV. There was a bathroom to the side of the beds with one of those LED lights that flickered at night. Phoebe liked it on at night.

I threw the covers back over my head to drown out the Hallmark channel noise.

“Wake me up when it’s ten.”

I caught my reflection in the window as Phoebe and I went down towards the lunch hall. My back hunched over slightly and my hand pushed hard on my cane with each step. My face sagged around brown-framed glasses, more than it should at fifty-two. Ever since my diagnosis, my skin had gotten loose around my whole body, like I was

an orange rotting inside the peel. I glanced over at my sister, rolling along her chair. Her face had lines like my own, but they seemed to be the leftover creases of a life full of smiles. Phoebe had always been good at that—smiling through it. We had the same brown eyes, with the same mousy brown hair, now with life-earned streaks of gray. Our mother said that at birth, Phoebe was holding my heel, as if she was trying to be born first, just like that old Bible story with Jacob and Esau. She used to read it to us as children, and Phoebe would complain every time about feeling unrepresented.

“How come there’s no boy and girl twins, Momma?”

“I don’t know sweetie, you’ll have to ask God when you see him next.”

“Well, I hope it’s soon. Then maybe he can write about me and Roger.”

“Maybe so, but let’s hope it’s not too soon.”

I grabbed two trays from the stack and slid them onto the stainless steel belt in front of me. The lunch hall was cafeteria-style. It felt like being in grade school again. BetterDeath said it was to promote “community interaction” and “a feeling of independence.” If it were just me, I would eat my food delivered to me in bed with the TV on, but Phoebe insisted on thwarting my plans for a hermitage. I slid each tray down the line, surveying the options of the day. Thursdays normally meant spaghetti, but today there were small plates with fried chicken and warm bowls of portioned-out mashed potatoes sitting under the heating lamps. I set one of each onto my tray

and then set another bowl of mashed potatoes onto Phoebe’s tray. The doctors said she needed protein if she wanted to last to her own Receiving Day, but I knew she’d turn her nose up at the chicken. I slid the trays down farther, skipping the vegetables, and snagged three cups of Jell-O from the dessert shelves. I scanned the sleepy lunchroom and saw Phoebe at a table turned to another patient, jovially gesticulating into the air. The recipient of her enthusiasm, a glassy-eyed old man spooning pudding up to his lips, sat in a daze across from her.

“Can I help you with that, sir?”

I looked behind me. A young man in scrubs gestured towards my two trays and the cane in my hand.

“No, I can handle it, thank you.”

I stack the two trays and balance them unsteadily in my left hand.

“Are you sure, sir? It’s really no trouble. I’m on my lunch break.”

“No—I’m fine. Thanks,” I said in a more forceful tone and walked towards Phoebe. I dropped our food down as soon as I made it—the trays made a loud smack against the table and one of the Jell-O cups splattered across it.

“Roger, geez, why didn’t you get some help? I was going to come over there.”

I rolled my sore wrist around while she scooped the Jell-O cubes back into the cup with her fingers. She situated the trays between us.

“No spaghetti?”

I shook my head and stabbed my fork into my chicken. I looked up at the old man with his pudding; his

eyes were still fixed on an indiscriminate point in the distance. Phoebe caught my gaze and glanced back at him again.

“Oh, that’s Gerald. His family admitted him a couple of days ago. I met his daughter too, but she went to talk to the doctors about something.”

I nodded.

“Oh Roger, get this, Michael’s Receiving Day is next Friday.”

I looked up. She smirked, knowing that she had yanked me out of my sulking.

“How do you know? They won’t announce the names for next week until Monday.”

“Miriam told me this morning during transfer. She said Michael submitted the paperwork a few weeks ago.”

I sat back in my chair. Next week.

“Do you think he’ll go through with it?” Phoebe asked in between forkfuls of mashed potatoes.

“Go through with what?”

“Don’t you remember? The splatting? He used to talk about it all the time in bingo.”

I’d only been to bingo once or twice. It was one of the complex’s complementary activities that I just couldn’t abide by. Sitting next to all the other withered folks with their necks craned forward to make out the bold, black numbers right in front of them. I was sick, sure, but not sick enough or old enough to play bingo once a week. But I remembered Michael breaking the concentrated silence over the game crowd to talk about his Dream plans to jump off a building. It was an unspoken taboo to talk about

the details of your Receiving Day, but Michael never cared.

“I thought he was just pulling everyone’s leg,” I said, trying to feign disinterest.

“He’s probably got the color of the pavement picked out by now.”

“They can do that?”

Phoebe grabbed the spilled cup of Jell-O and poked her fork into one of the misshapen pieces. She looked at me and pointed the ruby-red cube at my nose.

“They can do anything they want.”

The nurses ushered us into the rec room like a herd of sheep. I plopped into one of the plastic folding chairs at the end of the aisle so Phoebe could park her wheelchair next to me. She spent every minute she could before the movie socializing, but she always found her way over to me eventually. I looked at the blue square of light cast against the wall by the projector. A row ahead of me, the young man from the cafeteria fiddled with a laptop, glancing up at the projector screen every couple of seconds. He plugged and unplugged a cord from the side of the computer. Nothing happened. He put his hands on his hips and scratched his head and then cast a glance back at me. I snapped my head forward, but it was too late.

“Technology, am I right?” he said.

I nodded.

He had a nervous, flitty energy to him, like a two-liter of Coke with Mentos with the cap on.

“I’m guessing you don’t know how this works either.”

“No, I don’t.”

He sighed.

“Well, I guess I’d better go ask for some help. I don’t know why they put me in charge of this anyway.”

He smiled at me again and then walked off. I sat back in my seat and my thoughts drifted to Michael and to Monday. There was some sadness mixed into it. He was annoying, sure, but he kept Phoebe entertained. She would miss him. But mixed up with the sadness, mostly for Phoebe, something else bubbled to the surface. I could feel it break out of the corners of my mind. At first, I was ashamed to feel it, to wish it upon myself. But it was the most honest I could be. I was envious. Envious that I wasn’t going to be dead by next week too.

I pushed a thin paintbrush up and down the lopsided table in the rec room. They always made us paint on Receiving Days. It was one of the more humiliating activities the complex had us engage in. We got those plastic cases of watercolor paints and thin sheets of printer paper and then were told to muster up our feelings for the day onto the canvas. An “artistic guide” would walk around to aid us in our emotional journey. We weren’t allowed to paint anything real, or else we risked “narrowing our creative flow,” so we smeared our paintbrushes around until we ended up having to examine our own blobs of color, like some kind of reverse Rorschach test.

“This is our multipurpose room here. We like to give our patients multiple activities each week to encourage community building.”

I looked up from my paintbrush and spotted a

BetterDeath tour guide in the doorway gesturing toward us. Behind her was a group of young families, most looking slightly unhappy to be there.

“Should I fall out of my wheelchair?”

I looked back at Phoebe spinning her paintbrush between her fingers—she had one of those mischievous grins on her face, the ones that used to mean trouble when we were kids.

“No, no, it’s Receiving Day; you know they’ll delay it if they think you’re going to kick the bucket.”

Phoebe huffed as she eyed the tour group as they wandered away from the rec room.

“It would’ve been funny.”

But today wasn’t the day for funny. The nurses tried to hide it, but Receiving Days always carried an air of nerves. The program was only five years old after all—still young enough for a scandal to shut them down for good. I could still hear the tour group guide down the hall, waxing poetic on BetterDeath’s mission towards “transforming geriatric and hospice care, one patient at a time.” One patient at a time. One death at a time.

A bell tone came through the rec room speakers. A measured, robotic voice announced the end of activity time.

“All patients please proceed in an orderly fashion to the operating theater for Michael Morton’s scheduled Receiving Day.”

The nurses in the room began packing up the watercolors as everyone was ushered out. Phoebe dropped her paintbrush into the water and swirled it around.

“I wasn’t even done yet.”

I stooped down and grabbed my cane from the floor.

“You can always make another next week.”

I looked back down at my own paper. There were a few streaks of red and a black dot at the center. I fixed my eyes on the point, and the more I looked at it the wider it seemed. The black stretched out farther and farther until it crept past the streaks of red and swallowed every bit of white in dark paint. The watery black turned solid in front of me, and the abyss of it called out like something I was meant to jump into. If I could just sink even my hand into the page, then maybe I would be alright.

“Are you keeping that, sweetie?”

A middle-aged nurse rested her hand on my shoulder.

I look back at the printer paper. A black dot and a few streaks of red.

“No.”

I crumpled it in my fist and chucked it into the recycling bin by the door.

The operating theater was fashioned after the ones from the nineteenth century, when surgery was still a Bonafide spectacle. The room was circular with sterile white walls and brown, theater-style seats lining the walls in three circles. The row closest to the bottom was lined with glass, blocking the seats from going past. Down below and at the center was the operating room. It was white like the upper walls and the floor was tiled in black and white squares. The only color that existed was a long, green chair at the center. Phoebe used to think it looked like one you

sat in at the dentist.

“It’s like they’re about to clean her teeth or something,” she said before the first Receiving Day we attended. She never said it again afterward.

Patients flooded into the auditorium; the especially sickly ones were flanked by nurses on the stairs and ushered to their seats. I sat down in one of the red chairs on the back wall farthest from the operating room and rested my cane on the seat in front of me. Phoebe rolled in, pushed by her nurse. She situated Phoebe’s wheelchair at the end of the row next to me.

“Thanks, Miriam.”

Miriam smiled and then turned on her heels and disappeared out of the amphitheater.

“Did I miss anything?”

“No, not yet.”

All of a sudden, the lights flickered off. I could hear the sound of the video screens descending from the ceiling in the middle of the amphitheater until they were at eye level with our seats. I peered back down into the operating room. Nurses and doctors shuffled around in the dim light and fidgeted with cords and wires. A message then flickered onto the screen and the same voice from before echoed through the room.

“Welcome to the Receiving Day of Micheal Morton. Please remain seated for the duration of the ceremony. If you are experiencing a medical emergency, please notify one of the several staff members at the exits behind you. Thank you and enjoy the celebration.”

The second the announcement was finished, the

lights in the operating room turned on down below, and the video screens switched to a live feed of the green chair at the center. A sliding door to the side opened, and Michael was brought out into the room in a wheelchair.

“Guests, please welcome Michael Morton.”

Scattered applause reverberated through the amphitheater as Michael beamed at the crowd above him. He wore a bright orange Hawaiian shirt with white lilies scattered across it and khaki shorts. But beyond the bright display, his face was gaunt, and his legs looked as if all the fat had been peeled off of them. The nurses transferred him cautiously to the green chair and the camera feed fixated on him. I could see his bones shifting in his skin.

I looked over at Phoebe. Her hand rested over her mouth as her wide eyes stayed glued to the screens. Some of the other patients began to shift uncomfortably in their seats. The room was a hive mind, all fixated on a fate that was also their own. Receiving Days were like that. They were a reminder of our collective purpose—our reason for existing any longer than we do now.

The screens flickered to a new announcement.

“Michael Morton is ready to be received.”

I looked back down into the amphitheater. Michael was covered in a series of wires, each hooked up to a different electrode on his scalp. His hands were folded onto his stomach and his eyes were closed. I could hear the distant whir of a new machine as doctors flitted about the room. The screen in front of me turned white. A voice boomed from the speakers.

“Today, you will witness a modern miracle of science

and an avenue towards a better death.”

Some footage of a family playing in the park with their dog flashed onto the screen. An elderly woman in a wheelchair gingerly tossed the tennis ball, and a border collie jumped up and elegantly caught it between its teeth.

“For centuries, we have allowed our most vulnerable demographics to deteriorate in front of our eyes. Here at BetterDeath, we believe death should be on your terms and personalized to both you and your family’s needs.”

The video was still rolling, and now the mother, father, and grandson all surrounded the old woman in her wheelchair, hugging her close. Her hair was cut into short, gray curls and her blue eyes were bright. She smiled into the camera with perfect white teeth.

“I’ve chosen a better death, will you?”

The video faded. A light flickered onto Michael’s body. Even from far away, I could see a grin spread across his face.

“And now, without further ado, please direct your attention to the screens to witness Michael Morton’s Dream.”

I scanned the crowds as patients began to shuffle out of their seats and back to their rooms for the evening. Phoebe laid her hand on my arm. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

“I can’t believe he did it.”

“Died?”

“No, no, the pavement. It was purple.”

She smiled briefly. Miriam appeared at the entrance

to the theater.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked. Phoebe nodded.

“Coming, Roger?”

“No, no I’ll catch up with you later.”

Phoebe gave me one last pat on the arm as Miriam pulled her chair out of the theater. I surveyed the remaining crowd. Most were gone by now, save for a small group of three in the stands. Then I remembered. One of the tour group families from before. They were still glued to their seats—their eyes fixed on Michael Morton’s twitching body. Two nurses below cast a white sheet over him. I watched as the woman, not much younger than me, tore her eyes away from the scene. Her face was hidden in her hands, but I saw her body begin to heave. Once, then twice, until a wail rang out into the theater. The man sitting next to her laid a hand on her shoulder and looked up. I caught his eyes briefly. Something like pity was in them, but I couldn’t tell who it was for.

“Today’s going to be a little bit different, sir.”

I sat on the thin paper that covered the exam table. As a child, when our mom took us to the pediatric center, the paper would have stars and shapes of all colors printed onto it. Now, the paper was plain and crunchy under my legs. I twisted my cane around in my hands.

“What do you mean?”

Dr. James, a man in his forties with a short black beard, adjusted his glasses and smiled at me. He’d been my doctor since I moved into the complex.

“Roger. Congratulations. It’s time to submit your

paperwork.”

He clasped his hand in mine and shook it vigorously.

“I looked over your file, and after today’s checkup, I believe your body is on a steady decline. I would recommend scheduling your Receiving Day sometime next month after your Dream information is processed. Do you know how to fill it out? Sir?”

Dr. James was saying something important, but his voice sounded garbled and far away.

I stared at the lights on the ceiling. They were the LED kind that burned your eyes. I shut my eyes, expecting to see the afterimage. But all I could see was Phoebe.

How do you choose how to die?

The question bounced around in my brain like a ping-pong ball. I had thought about it for over six months now—fantasized even. Now there was nothing to show for my months of daydreams. I turned over and checked the clock on the nightstand. 3:00 am. Phoebe was nestled under her covers, snoring softly. I carefully slid my nightstand drawer open and pulled out a thick stack of papers. The first few were the standard paperwork—age, date of birth, next of kin, and all that. I flipped through them until I landed on the Dream section. The prompt was simple.

“Please describe, in as much detail as possible, how you wish us to conduct your Dream.”

There were sheets of lined paper stapled to the prompt. I grabbed a pen and rested the pages onto my book of crossword puzzles. I began to write in neat, blue-ink script.

“I want to die—”

The words stopped almost as soon as they began. Faced with limitless options for a proper death, and nothing came to mind except all the ways I’d seen it happen before. I listed them off in my head. My childhood bulldog died in his sleep. My great-aunt died of a heart attack. My mother, she—she was the reason I came here. Pallid skin and sunken eyes were the legacy of her death. Her hospital bed had been firm and barely gave under the weight of her frail body. Her veins jutted from her arms, and an IV was ever present at her side. In the beginning, she was hopeful. But the hope faded under the weight of so many promises until there was nothing left but skin and bones and a heart that somehow was still beating. In the last weeks, she was quiet. That was when Phoebe stopped visiting. And then, without much fuss after that, she was dead. Yet I knew she was gone long before she was gone. I glanced back at Phoebe before setting my pen back against the paper.

“I want to die—before it’s too late.”

I want to be here until I’m gone.

The Receiving Day office was down the hall past the rec center. I opened the wooden door to a small room with chairs, a small fish tank, and a desk where a young woman sat on the phone. She made eye contact with me and held up a “one second” with her hands.

“I’m so sorry, can I put you on hold for just a moment? Thanks so much.”

She pressed a button on the keypad and then smiled

at me.

“Hi honey, what can I help you with?”

“I’m just here to turn in my paperwork.”

“Oh, congratulations! You can pass that off to me then.”

I walked over and slid the paperwork across the desk.

“So now what?”

“Well, depending on the complexity of your Dream, it may take a couple of weeks to process. After that, we’ll notify you of your scheduled Receiving Day.”

“And that’s it?”

“Yep! You’ll need to go to a final physical with Dr. James the morning of the Receiving Day, but other than that you’re good to go!”

I thanked her and walked out the door back towards my room. I looked up. A woman in a wheelchair sat in the hallway.

“So, it’s true then” Phoebe said. “When were you planning on telling me, Roger?”

She stared at me with furious eyes. Her breathing was shallow and quick.

“Phoebe, I—why are you here?”

“Miriam told me Dr. James gave you your paperwork three days ago. Did you just want me to find out with everyone else?”

“No, I was going to tell you. Even tonight, maybe. I just needed time.”

“Time? Time is the one thing we don’t have now because you turned in that stupid paperwork! Don’t act

like you have time, Roger.”

“We never had time! That’s why we’re here! Isn’t it? Because we know we’ll be dead in a year? No matter what?”

“Then let’s just die in a year! Why do we need to play God? If you’re supposed to die in two weeks then you will.”

I leaned against my cane, afraid my legs would buckle underneath me.

“What are you talking about? That’s why we’re here in the first place! To choose. You want to waste away like Mom? You want to just go crazy?”

“No, of course not, I just—”

“You don’t get to have an opinion—because you didn’t see her. But I did. And I’m not going to live like that and I don’t want you to live like that either. We’re dying Phoebe. And I just happen to be dying faster. I’m sorry.”

Phoebe opened her mouth again to retort, but then she was silent. She sat back in her chair. Her breathing was slower now. She looked up at me.

“I hope you picked a good Dream, Roger.”

It was Thursday. The smell of popcorn drifted through the halls into our room. It had been three days since Phoebe talked to me. Ever since they announced my name on Monday, she decided she had nothing more to say. The last time she gave me the silent treatment was on our tenth birthday, when I accidentally blew out her side of candles on our cake. She wouldn’t talk to me for days after because she claimed I’d stolen her wish.

I looked over at the bed beside mine. It was empty. Miriam must’ve transferred her early again this morning.

Tomorrow was Receiving Day. I lifted my arms in the air. Thin, blue veins protruded from my skin. It scared me. I remembered when my arms were strong and tan in the summertime. I let them drop to my waist. I needed to find Phoebe.

I leaned to one side and grunted as I sat up. I grabbed my cane from the end of the bed and pushed myself to my feet. I walked out the door, not bothering to change out of my pajamas, and trudged towards the break room. The smell got stronger as I came around the corner. I expected to find Phoebe with a plastic cup of popcorn in her hand, but the room was empty, save

for two nurses sitting at the back of the room. Miriam sat with her head in her hands. Across from her was the young man from before, the one who couldn’t get the projector working. Except, his expression was not one of youthful nerves, as I had seen twice before. He looked up at me and his face paled.

He jumped up from his seat and walked hurriedly out of the room.

“Miriam, where’s Phoebe?”

She turned toward me and a sob escaped from her throat.

“Roger, I’m so sorry. I—I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“What are you talking about Miriam?”

My stomach began to churn. Miriam fixed her eyes on the table.

“She just didn’t want to lose anyone else.”

I hobbled forward now, and then I was falling before I could even register the feeling. I crashed onto the tile floor. Miriam dropped to the ground and lifted my head.

“Roger! Roger, are you okay?”

I turned over and clutched at her shirt.

“Where is she? You need to tell me right now! Where is she?”

But Miriam only looked down and shook her head, over and over and over again.

“We’ve already talked to the board and they will be facing immediate termination. Roger, I’m so sorry.”

Dr. James sat forward in his office chair. I was back on the exam table. A small plastic cup of water sat next to me.

“I just can’t believe it. Accepting bribes? That just doesn’t seem like Dr. Jenkins. She was always so respectful of the system. Of our mission. I can’t believe she would perform a Dream under the table like this.”

A million questions went through my head. Grief felt so far away. Only anger persisted at the forefront of my mind, like a knife with its point ready to slice its way through my temple.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean before they promised her the procedure! How was she even here? You said Dr. Jenkins admitted she wasn’t sick!”

“Roger, Phoebe’s paperwork was forged. They helped

her get in after she sent the first check.”

I shook my head.

“No, no. She wouldn’t do that.”

“They said she wanted to be here, with you.”

“Then she should’ve come to visit!” I yelled and let the anger tear its way through my body. My body shuddered under the weight of it. “She could’ve just visited.”

The clock on the wall ticked rhythmically.

Dr. James sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

“Roger, I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but I have to ask.”

“What?”

“Do you still want to go to your Receiving Day tomorrow?”

The electrodes felt itchy on my skin and the IV in my arm was starting to feel sore. I rubbed my hand across the green leather of the chair. The promotional footage was almost finished playing from the speakers. I imagined the dog, the family, the old lady with perfect teeth.

“I’ve chosen a better death, will you?”

The music faded and the announcement system began again.

“And now, without further ado, please direct your attention to the screens to witness Roger Wilson’s Dream.”

I closed my fists tight as I heard the whirl of the machines. The electrodes on my head felt warm, and my head felt lighter and lighter. The darkness surrounding me

began to shift and change. The green leather of the chair under me was gone. Instead, I felt cocooned in something soft. Someone breathed under me, rhythmic and slow, and held me close to their chest.

I opened my eyes.

My mother looked down at me with tear-streaked skin. Sweat stuck pieces of hair to her cheeks and forehead. She had on a hospital gown, but all of her features were youthful and soft. I heard the coo of a baby, and my mother smiled.

“Roger, that’s your younger sister Phoebe. She came out right after you did. You guys have been together this whole time.” She held up her other arm. Phoebe was swaddled in a white blanket, with a small, knit blue hat covering the top of her head.

A vital signs monitor beeped.

“We’ll be out of here soon, don’t you worry.”

Something like warmth spread throughout my bones. I could hear voices far away that sounded out of place, but my mother’s brown eyes seemed to take up all the space in the room.

“Phase two. Injection administration, please.”

She leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. I heard the soft cries of Phoebe next to me. I was here till the end.

Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
(First Prize)

Magnetic Resonance

Katie Nelson

I have been here before.

I am always here.

The harsh, cold metal breathes my body
Into an imperishable cage of my thoughts.
The tube narrows, and the drum begins.

–thunk-thunk-thunk–

I hold my breath tight and tense my body.

Can *you* hear it, *mom*?

My heart.

–thump-thump-thump–

In this familiar feeling,

The weight of the entire world

Onto *me* here now.

I have been here before.

I am always here.

A lonely space.

A claustrophobic grip

That makes my blood boil over.

I want to scream.

Will they hear it?

Do they see the pain behind my silence

Like I saw *yours*?

Pinching, poking, prying.

Needles, numbing, navelbine.

I remember my diagnosis—

Just like yours.

The word became *my* label.
 A lurking shadow of torment
 And constant reminder of *your*

absence.

—thunk-thunk-thunk—
 The sterile waiting room,
 Where we would sit together
 Hand in hand as the doctor spoke.
 Masking the fear and ache.
 Now, in those walls,
 it is my name they call.
Your pain became *my* own.
 An inherited
 Burden—a pink ribbon

I have been here before.
I am always here.

Lora A. Printz Memorial Poetry Prize
 (Honorable Mention)

A Hiraeth from Nysa

Claire Harris

Dark and delicate descends the death of Spring
 when sweet Persephone goes down again,
 and leaves me with nothing but the winter wind
 to soothe the ache of my green memory.

I stay where she last left me as Demeter
 walks the world—lost and longing in a way
 that echoes in the dreary end of Summer
 when all the Earth is dead and grey.

Life has been buried, and Spring now belongs
 to the Kingdom of the Damned. Onyx and bone
 have replaced her flowers, and obsidian her golden throne.

Hell may have lured my love down with fire
 and pomegranate seeds, but he has made her a queen.
 And how could a mortal's love compare to that of a God's?

But have I, in all my foolish adoration,
 not proven worthy of her attention too?
 Is all of Hades' splendor enough to shun
 the warmth of a sun that only ever shone for you?

We were girls together: You with your
 honeyed skin and me with my dark curls—
 as pale as the spirits you preside over—
 I wonder if they've ever reminded you of me.

The Vale of Nysa can never be as
beautiful as it was that Spring when you
belonged to me. Winter rules here forever now,
but the cold must feel like home to you.

And I cannot join you, Kore, because you
would never allow it. You would take my soul,
still aching from the thorns of my envy, and
say that I was still too lovely for a place like this.

For a rose could never grow without the sun,
And her Aidoneus could never be a woman.

ACT I

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The Pursuit of Happiness; or Staring at the Bedroom Ceiling

Kaylee Savage-Cutcher

midnight is the only time Happiness
is close enough to touch because
the sun once caught Her in barbed wire
and prodded her like a zoo animal and
She decided daylight was overrated.
She runs for hours to escape the sun and
is convinced if it catches Her it'll happen
again or She'll die or something gruesome
will happen and She'll regret it. you know
it's ocd but you're only a pitiful mortal so
maybe it's not your place and if you upset
Her She would hate you forever and
never come back. which is also ocd and at
least you can admit it. She doesn't have the
mental capacity to realize. She always bursts
in after dark crying and
 maybe this time will be
different. She's out of breath so you hand
Her an inhaler but She refuses because
fires burn oxygen and She shuns all allies of
the sun or else they'll come for Her. you know
She's break
ing
so you sit up all night and
 you tell Her good morning even
though She bolted before dawn so you crawl into bed
because sleeping late used to be Her favorite so
you'll rot in bed for Her

Halves

Martha Highers

My heart
a dark bloody knot
working its angers
I have hidden from you for years
from the blades of your eyes,
yet I think of it cut open
like the flesh of an oak
its many rings of secret loves
etched deeper in it
their red tattoos
and you counting them
and asking their names
which I still cannot utter
showing you instead the long

spaces
of silence between them
as if that would please you
my wooden faithfulness
when once my delight
rippled out like echoes
like invisible rings of birdsong
to the edges of dark lands
where I both feared and yearned
to go, and I laid
my head on your chest
and listened
to the secret rivers
of your heart.

The Lurking Thing

Linda M. White

Fell shadows surround my withered husk.
Each goosebump, a touch.
Each ringing, an echo.
God, how I wish You'd banish this lurking thing.

You've said that Christians suffer more than most—
Your Words, not mine—
but I thought You meant ridicule, public defamation,
not this lurking thing on my mind.

I peer between the book stacks in the library,
tense that those black eyes will be staring back at me,
the gaze of a killer.
Oh, how he smothered me with his words, his promises, his
hands!
The lurking thing has returned when I thought it was gone.

I know he's watching me somewhere:
creeping around the corner,
computer surveillance,
clairvoyance.
Someone so evil has to have power like that.
He had the power before—
crushing me like brittle bones,
sucking the strength from my marrow,
chilling my blood,
that *predator*.

He looms, he lingers, he lurks!
He's laughing somewhere at my delusion—
or he's laughing because of the conclusion—

That it'll never stop.
He is not here, but *it* is:
this foul impression he left on my mind.
this monster made manifest.
this lurking thing.

Chemical Bliss

Gracy Luna

My mind is a house with walls.

I pace through this mansion some rooms ornate
others austere. Some rooms filled with vivid memory,
some have me questioning why they hold a place here.

Walls painted different shades distract me, some black, some green,
some are some muddy shade of a shade that is somewhere in between.

As I stumble through, mixes of emotions pass by, a dreadful draft
I can't quite see. Squinting hard, I start to grasp on to one specific memory.

A memory of the exit lingers near. My grasp slips but I don't
let go because that memory leaving me is my only fear. I would
like to escape these high highs and low lows. I would like a quaint
cottage instead of my haunted mansion, in size it continues to grow.

Sertraline, the sweetest elixir to ever touch my lips, soothes me and builds
bridges over my valleys and depths. I no longer crash in that old, haunted
mansion. I no longer have to face unnecessary ghosts wanting my attention.
I now reside in my cottage divine drinking the sweetest elixir I'll ever find.

Dope

Nathanael Newton

I float in an infinite surf of emotion and thought.

A roaring static that washes through my mind.

With every swell, I feel a buzzing rush of affirmation.

A curling beckon that slides through my body and mutes my mind.

I take another step...pulling the trigger again.

Drinking oceans. Devouring mountains.

A blue, buzzing sun lays its hand, burning, on my eyes.

The dope runs dry.

I am awash in cold light. A familiar, icy needle crawling out of my skin.

Mind imprisoned back in a body, reminded of everything I cannot escape.

Life outside the endless sea.

Where I drown in emotion.

Life away from the bewitching desert.

Where thoughts melt like mirages.

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Deeper

B.K. Lucas

No one has escaped it. There is simply nowhere to escape to. Once you are there, whether by some freak accident within the chaos of the universe or imprisonment, you are stuck. You try to leave, but it just goes deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper. Every direction you go takes you further down.

Life was never meant to exist there, that godless plane, yet something persists within. No air nor light, yet land has found itself there. Plants that mirror those of the sea grow there, reaching immeasurable size. The birds there don't sing. They scream in pain.

It has something against life itself, destroying every trace of it with an unseen force. The natural inhabitants, if that even fits, have adapted to it over a million of our universe's lifetimes. In that place, they rule as wardens. Their cells no more than your very essence, packed into a crystal for easy storage.

Time doesn't exist there, not in the way you know. In a cell, you can live one thousand lifetimes, each unique to themselves. You can die over and over and over again, but if you're in a cell, you wake up every time ready to repeat the cycle.

You somehow break free. You go deeper. You survive the Jailers. You go deeper. You avoid suffocation. You go even deeper. You begin seeing familiar objects, ones not of this place. Creatures, structures, mountains, moons, planets, stars, and gods. Every single one frozen in place. Then you see Him.

He is no god. He is a scholar, a collector, a warden of wardens. He is nothing, but at the same time everything. He

is that place, and that place is he. He is the key to leaving.

He has no body. No arms, feet, or hands. His legs aren't connected and his head floats, a single piercing eye is all that it contains. He takes notice of the rogue element in the collection: you.

You win the battle, He goes deeper, and you follow. You win. He goes deeper. You follow. You win. He goes deeper. You follow. Win, deeper, win, deeper, win, deeper. Down both of you go until you reach the bottom. He has nowhere to go. You win. You leave.

You get picked up by a passing transport ship and dropped off at the next planet. You start a life there, trying to forget the place you see when you close your eyes. You find love, start a family, and grow old. You manage to live a fulfilling life, even after a timeless amount of time trying to escape. You lay in your bed, surrounded by your spouse, kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids. You pass peacefully, the best people you could've ever met by your side. Then you wake up.

No one can escape it. There is simply nowhere to escape to. Once you are there, you just go deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper. Every direction you go is chosen by Him. You have escaped a thousand times, and will a thousand more, and every time He will welcome you back.

Cynical Dingers Make Me a Villanelle

Gavin H. Stackhouse

It's tough enough.
The Blue Jay sits in wait.
It's certainly tough enough.

"Jesus Christ, it's just a scuff!"
Probably just some ankle sprain.
It's tough enough.

Play-calling cries of
"The Orioles win today."
It's certainly tough enough.

Draft talks, draft in hand, and drafts like this all
rough.
"Do you have anything due tonight?" "Certainly!"
—It's tough enough.

Hand signals holding hands all bluffs.
"You'll get through this my babe!"
It's certainly tough enough.

"You like my cooking, it's not so tough!"
Running diamonds, I chew home's plate.
It's tough enough.
"It's certainly tough enough!—"

</scripted>

Gavin H. Stackhouse

<There is no cellulite in cyberspace>
<The kinks of phishing are un-rippled waters>
<Deep stretch of black clouds
With no boundaries, or ad-blocking pop-ups>
<I steer the drone that dogfights the other
With no face> <I am unknown> <At sea, lost
Behind the 30-60 fps screen of a real first-person
shooter>
<"Tel Aviv" that he missed> <meta name equals
Reaper–Global Hawk–Predator?>
<What is a cybercrime?>
<An ad flagged with coding:
Hot singles in your area>
<Y2K civilian casualties since launch?>

My joystick got greasy due to my lunch.

A Tortured Poet

Gracy Luna

For who is a poet without words
to write?
What happens when the words only come to you
some nights?

The stanzas are only written when the emotions
are high.
Writing about her own tortured past is the only way
to get by.

Writer's block becomes the bane
of her existence.
The words never have a flow
that is consistent.

She often has inspiration but
it is distant.
It lives far in the corners of her mind
which is typically persistent
on keeping her out.

For who is she without the words to write?
Will she ever be able to spite this trauma
by writing something happy?

Elegy to Love's Drama

Scott Moss

I barely read your perfumed lies
Scattered dead upon the page
Neatly shoveled there in your flowing script
A shallow grave for betrayal.

Empty promises you never meant to keep
Memories that time will fade
Fleeting passions shared
An epitaph of vanquished desires.

Softly folding them within the envelope
This fragile sarcophagus of love
I know I must bury them forever
To release what once belonged to us.

I seal them in and send to him
Wanting his eyes to read
The empty love you claim to keep
Offering him this pyrrhic victory.

You call one last time some days later
A halting voice revealing grief
Your prepared farewell to me
Must now include one unforeseen.

You murmur softly
"This will haunt him forever."
My dirge reply,
"Your love seems destined to be a ghost."

A Twin Pair of Irises

Lance Terwilliger

Paul stood, balanced atop the concrete curbside that separated the forest from the parking lot behind the drab, grey office building he used to call work. He loosened his tie as the adrenaline began to wear off. His body was hot, and it felt like his skin was suffocating under his ruffled suit. The sparkle of the sun against his worn and nicked silver latches atop his briefcase was so dull one could argue it wasn't even a sparkle. In contrast, Steve's blood, which decorated Paul's right knuckle, glistened brightly as he dropped his briefcase behind himself, tipping his balance towards the greenery before him. The soft crunch of the grass under his feet brought quite a depressing thought to his mind. It had been a long time since he'd heard the sound of footsteps against the grass and dirt, only months of asphalt, tiles, and carpet.

Paul had made it past the tree front as he tossed away his tie, now unbuttoning the top of his suit as he began to sweat. Six years of his life that he had given to that company. Six years of unpaid overtime. Six years of sitting quietly, patiently, not so much as giving an errant glare after getting passed up on again and again for his rightly deserved promotion. These truths made his blood boil as he trudged on deeper and deeper into the woods. A sudden sense of cognizance washed over him as he noted the growing ratio of birch trees about. The leaves grew more and more abundant as he walked further in. He didn't know why he kept walking or what he would do

next. The thought that the cops might be after him, that is if Steve had the presence of mind to call them, had come to his mind, but that was just an excuse. To be honest, he just didn't want to go home.

The erratic buzzing, chirping, and chittering of wildlife grew quieter and scarcer as the canopy above began to blot out the sun. The black marks decorating the ever-numerous birch trees began to resemble eyeballs, the feeling of being watched becoming ever-present in his mind as the wooden onlookers filled his periphery. Paul's feet drug against the dirt as his even pace had turned into a slow trudge. It felt like he was standing in front of an open oven, hands shaking and lips chapped. If you were to ask him, Paul probably would have told you it had only been a couple of hours, at most, since he first wandered into these woods, but a more honest answer would be he had no way of knowing.

He contemplated turning back, but, at that very moment, a whistling of wind whisked through the woods. It washed over the tired man like an icy spirit, passing him by. Then—for a moment, the heat rising in him subsided, and he felt refreshed. Like that, it was gone, and he was left once more in his torment. His heart began to race, and his eyes widened as his head whipped around, scanning the dim, verdant ocean for any signs of the wind. There, not too far ahead, in the darkness, he spotted it, a rustling in the leaves retreating from him. He stumbled over himself as he sprinted after the rustling, his body screaming out for it desperately: that wind.

Weaving through the trees, he clipped against one every so often as his eyes were glued to the trail of shaking leaves. He was so close he could almost feel it. In fact, he could hear it right in front of him, merely a couple of inches, that heavenly gust. Out of the blue, a bright light blinded him, causing him to trip and fall, rolling onto the grass below, and it was cold. He found himself in a small clearing, the canopy giving way suddenly to the vibrant sky above. He looked around, finding that the light above was contained to the clearing, not a single ray spilling out into the dim surroundings. Forming a ring around the small clearing were twin pairs of colorful flowers.

His first reaction to such a sight was sorrowful, devastated at the thought that he had lost the wind. But such emotions were quickly waved away as another gust of air rushed from within the forest and washed over the clearing. This wind, as cool as the last, was not fleeting, and it was more than lingering; it was perpetual. Deep in the whistling of the whipping wind was a whisper. One which he hadn't heard in quite some years. Not since he ignored her calls and texts, saddened by the absence of her dear son. "Poor boy, poor baby boy," it wept, heartbroken.

"All those things you did for them. All the time, experiences, and people you sacrificed. Just for a crumb, and they couldn't even spare that for their hardest worker. Next, they would demonize you and lock you up. Put you away for lashing out, rightfully so, at such injustices. They... are monsters! No monsters will get you here baby. Not while I'm around. Now, lay down, you look so tired, and you're practically red as a cherry. Mommy's here now."

Paul obeyed, laying on his back and gazing at the sky above him. It was beautiful, white streaks of fluff against that baby blue canvas. The heat that plagued him began to wash away as he felt himself sink into the grass below. It came again, the soft voice, "Good boy, relax. Do not panic. Mommy is just bringing you back home. Sink deeper into the coolness and be content."

He could feel the dirt sifting beneath him, but he felt no need to react, and there was no fear within him. Soon, his bloodied hand, as well as the other, were beneath the earth. His ankles, too, were swallowed, leaving his fingertips to imitate the blades of grass around him. He sank further into the cold dirt, and it felt like he had submerged himself in an ice bath. Yet he felt no jolt of pain or shock within him, nor did he mind the cold. All Paul could feel at this moment was radical acceptance. Some black bird flew overhead, but he could not hear its cries, if it sounded any, to begin with; the dirt was pouring into his ears as he closed his eyes. His descent quickened as the dirt reached his cheeks. The voice returned to him despite his inability to hear the wind. "You're almost here, back home with me. Leave your regrets up there and smile."

He didn't believe he would have any regrets or anything he would miss, at least any that he could think of. Though he couldn't find himself thinking much of anything right now. His eyes fluttered open as the dirt reached the corners of his mouth. The sky glistened as he let out a whisper, "Wait." Like that, the ground obeyed.

"Mama, I'm gonna miss the sky... Can I please keep looking at it when I'm back home?"

“Of course,” she promised.

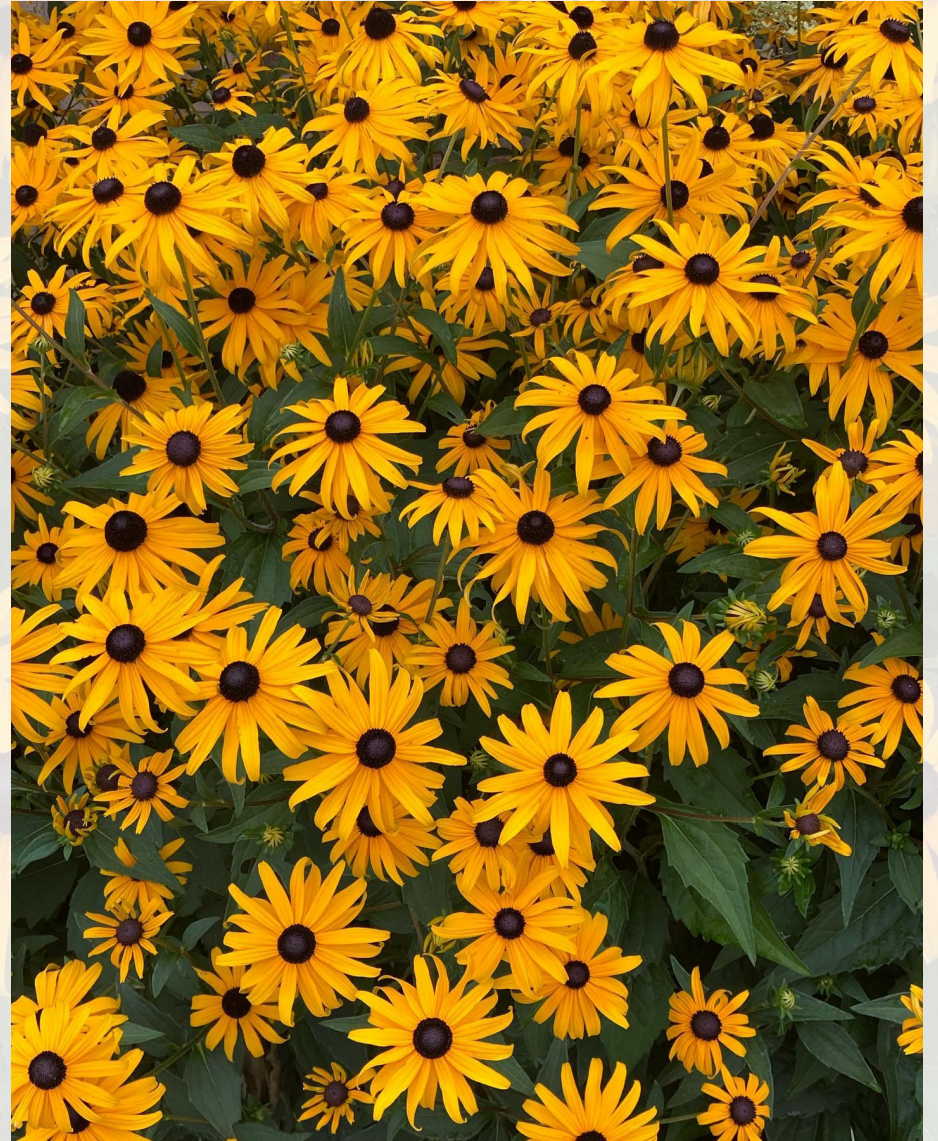
The earth swallowed him whole with nothing left of Paul to be seen. The clearing was once again empty. From where he was buried, slowly grew a twin pair of irises looking up towards the sky.

ACT II

KUWOHI



“Kuwohi” by Chad McDonald



“Susan When She Tries” by Chad McDonald

The Gleaning

Chad McDonald

The cotton gleaned; fields laid bare,
stark and lonely expanses, no sanctuary to spare.
Procumbent far as the eye can see,
this is winter in West Tennessee.

High above in boundless sky,
the relentless hawk circles with a discerning eye.
Scanning tedious stubble with a piercing gaze.
Watching for shadow or stir or quarry to dart the maze.

Yet another, aloft in a barren tree, is deathly still.
Alert and resolute with ferrous will.
Searching the rows for an elusive prize,
perched and waiting with patient eyes.

Suddenly, the once hidden is revealed.
Qualms aside, the raptor drops and peels.
With a sniper's calculating skill,
the assassin from above executes the kill.

Devoid of emotion, an inevitable death;
the hunter stands witness to life's last breath.
The vanquished, eclipsed and failing in the chase,
serves now another purpose, having run its last race.

A modest meal to brace and sustain.
The repast consumed; naught remains.
Appetite now sated; the courser again takes flight.
The game begins anew between meek and might.

The struggle continues; seasons change.
Life and death compete for reason and range.
Change will come soon to the vast domain
where cotton will grow to be gleaned again.

Sacrifice

Chad McDonald

An autumn leaf; confidant of a season passed;
a willing servant; from first fallen to last;
beneath the soil, one final role to play;
shepherding the host through spring to reclaim summer
shade.

When (Little Lessons for Life)

Ferrill Gunter

When you find the good in others
And adopt it for your own
When you measure your life often
To see how much you've grown.

When you're in self-doubt and trembling
And stifling a burning tear
You can be comforted in knowing
True courage is born of fear.

When reacting with your fellowman
And you must take and you must give
Know that in and of oneself
You just really cannot live.

When you praise, praise in public
Should you be in the lead
But reprimand in private
When you feel there is a need.

When you interpret the scriptures
With no xenophobic slant
And refrain from judging others
Even when it seems you can't.

When you shake no fist at a contrary wind
But adjust the sails of life's barque
When you've learned to light a candle
There'll be no need to curse the dark.

When you learn to listen with your heart
And really hear your brother's plea
Soon you'll be speaking from your heart
And know your mind has been set free.

When these little lessons you have learned
I just know, somehow, you'll find
That sweet contentment will be yours
And you'll have precious peace of mind.

Sestina – The Stumbling Path

Scott Moss

There, I was told, one can find knowledge
So, gathering my burdens I journeyed far
Hoping along the way to discover wisdom
Stumbling over rocks and briars in the path
I sought out trails to ease my wandering
Neglecting those I deemed too arduous

Not realizing what appeared to be arduous
Might hide an approach to knowledge
And ease my ceaseless wandering
For though I traveled near and far
I seldom found the lighter path
Would lead where one could locate wisdom

And why this long sought wisdom
Seemed crouching, hiding, amongst the arduous
Rock strewn, briar filled path
Remained a mystery, a stumbling block to knowledge
Leading me still to travel far
Seeking, hoping, to end my wandering

And so, amidst this aimless wandering
I began to catch a glimpse of wisdom
Recognizing that by traveling far
And seeking out the ways so arduous
Darkened trails often hid the knowledge
Not found along the easier path

Now searching along a newfound path
I learned new purpose in my wandering
No longer aiming just for knowledge
But learning the journey adds to wisdom
And what had seemed oh so arduous
Was not so hard, and not so far

The space between the near and far
Had led along a different path
I relished now what had been arduous
And realized joy in all my wandering
There is no destination to discover wisdom
Just hope and love and truth in knowledge

Accepting all I found as knowledge
Understanding life alone is wisdom
Enjoy the path and love the wandering

Fall

Erika Robinson

The persistent crackle of auburn, yellowed leaves underfoot, and the rustling as they shake off the trees, solitary drifts from branches rising 20 feet above my head, encircling and overwhelming me and the small foliage below. I breathe in the freshness of clear days, crisp snapping winds, and breezy interludes. Bustling mornings and afternoons overtake my focused and unfocused time. With my hands in the earth, plucking weeds, pushing through the depths of red clay, rocky ground, and stepping, twisting, and pressing a shovel deep into the ground to cut through roots, dislodging and severing connected vines to replant, determine what has survived, what has died and remove what subverts. This Tennessee soil is ruddy, resistant, reflective of a persistent spirit and a toughened, bittersweet history of a land where struggle and toil sharpen & refine the people and the land. On my knees, then slowly maneuvering to my feet, gloved hands, and sweaty brow, I dig and till and work to nurture, reclaim what has perished for a season, and grow.

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Mosaics

Sophia Clark

I think it's beautiful, how we become mosaics of our surroundings. Broken fragments of people we love, that fall in place creating a masterpiece. We are afraid of aging, the lines on our skin growing deeper as the days pass, but how lovely it is that we have smiled enough times and laughed at enough jokes to permanently stain our joy in our skin. How ethereal it is that our bodies are marked with lightning bolts that mark the change of our skin, and that our bodies carry us day to day. How incredible it is that we have bodies meant for comforting, figures that are soft, and nurturing. I think it's beautiful, how we become mosaics of our surroundings. I am a patchwork of my favorite people, I drive with my leg up on the seat like my grandmother did when she was young, and free. I share my sister's laugh our giggles creating joyful harmony. I have the ink of my best friend's handwriting engrained in my skin, and I think of her every second of every day. I think it's beautiful, how we become mosaics of our surroundings, and it helps me see the rarity and beauty of this life bestowed to me.

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Miss Bun

Taylor Crabtree

She's got that hair. You know, where the top is greasy and the ends are frazzled. It's not been washed or brushed in a while. The strands are twisted and tangled, but she just rolls all the knots up and ties them in a tight ball against her scalp. It's not pretty, but it's not supposed to be. She's Miss Bun and what she does is "get it done." Artists know her very well, but everyone depends on her now and then. She'll show up to pack your bag twenty minutes before a trip. She writes the last two pages of your essays. She runs on things like buttered toast and air-fried tater tots, but she could save your life from collapse on just a handful of almonds. She's the inverse of our impulses, doing the long clean ups a day or two later for your fifteen minutes of fun. But don't get it twisted, she does no more and no less than what she must. She'll finish painting that wall five minutes before guests arrive, but she doesn't tape the ledges and doesn't care about what you think of her edges. Bottom line, you're always happy to see her and are grateful no matter her work. She takes care of you the morning of your hangover. And when she finally takes a moment to lie down, her tailbone cracks and her feet tingle from the release of pressure, but she's quick to hop up mere moments after taking a rest. She unclogs your drain at two a.m, even if it takes hours. She comes to finish your painting with some sloppy strokes. She wears musky t-shirts and mismatched socks. She might brush your teeth, or she might not. She will wash your face, but

only if it itches. Don't forget, she really doesn't like to leave the house and will only travel to the store up the road if she really really needs something. She's not afraid to fail, but she knows you are, and she loves you. So she shows up after you've shed those tears of stress and regulated your breathing, when you're finally ready. She lingers in those last drops of energy before collapse and will drive you home hours after your final glass. She doesn't like other people. They're just a distraction, and your friends should call someone else once she's in action. We need her. We need those slightly shaky hands that fold our clothes for hours on end, that spine that clicks in three different places when she bends down to pick something up. She reminds you of your mom. Almost looks like her too. Though you might be cautious about not taking ibuprofen, she'll knock back four without a second thought. Because the thing about Miss Bun is that she always gets it done.

summer time

Rachel Wingo

in the summer there
everything
 is/was/will be languid
overripe
the sun dips a little bit lower
 even it can't stand its own heat
the plants in the garden
take on their sickly pallor
lean exaggeratedly against their stakes
the tomatoes turn their shimmering red
humidity teases with a seductive jazz
 too heavy on the trombone
the stifled air gives in
when the rain finally
 comes/came/will come
it clashes with the roof
drives against the dirt
yells and screams its happiness
in the thunder and
shows its pearly whites with the lightning
everything smells of
dirt and earth and
wet and mud and
life and light and
the beginnings of rot
the house is clapboard, and
whitewashed, and all porch
trees are too-tall with too-long limbs and the garden
 sprawls/sprawled/will sprawl
there are people there too, in this summer
time
my mind, my memory, my imagination

some of them only exist there now. now. now.
summer of 1993 then. then. then.
or the summer that isn't yet
the house that is in worse shape than my mind's eye sees it,
 or
the person
 i make/have already made/will make
 a saint
in my broken heart
no longer there to receive the honor
this house/that is me and isn't me/
remember /who i am and where i came from/
this house /what I have left of the rock anchor/
this house /heavy string of remembrance tied tightly around
 my finger/
the days that are and were and the days that weren't
 all connected
so each moment i remember
cannot help but bring me back
to the screen door that i never
 should have slammed/am slamming
the injuries of my girlhood days
the sinking feeling that i wouldn't have a name for until
 adulthood
worsening each summer
time

ACT III

RABBIT'S FOOT

Rabbit's Foot

Mari Ramler

I'm walking in the Clemson parking lot toward my car, feeling hot and hopeless. Limping toward my car in boots, my favorite boots that I wear to feel powerful. Limping toward my car in the boots I wear to feel powerful, feeling hot and hopeless. Limping.

I hate feeling like I'm living out of my car, hate this commute, hate that I don't have children, yet. I hate how simultaneously behind and ahead of my peers I feel. They have specialties that I don't even believe in. We're getting a master's in English, for God's sake. Aren't we all generalists at this stage in the game? And I'm here for a second master's since my first is in education, and I can't use it to teach what I'd like. I've had to go and get another master's degree. And I hate that I'm overeducated and under-understood, even to myself.

I'm walking to my car from my independent study, from meeting with an adjunct instructor who works two other jobs and who agreed to do an independent study to help me graduate on time, and I feel bad for taking this person's time, a person who also faces the same commute of an hour and a half if traffic is good. I think about what he's said, "Can you survive on twenty-eight thousand dollars a year, if you're lucky? If you get classes?"

I can't. I know that already. But I don't have to, not technically. I have a husband who is working toward his Ph.D., even if a completed dissertation seems lightyears away at this point. I do not know yet that it will take him

seven more years to finish that dissertation. That he'll abandon academia and deliver pizza and then temp at a mental health clinic and then deliver more pizza and then get on at Samsung. I don't know any of this. I just know in this moment that it's ridiculous to be wearing faux leather knee-high boots in an eighty-plus degree fall and to walk almost a mile to the outer parking lots. I've been walking for years, it seems, and it feels like I'll never get to where I'm supposed to be. It seems like my life will never start.

Then there is Todd, who is leaving, who has a plan and a university and a program and a specialty and a girlfriend to help fund it all. I wish I had a girlfriend to fund my dreams. I guess I have a husband, but I suspect that it will never be my turn if I stay married to this man. But I don't let myself know that, not yet. I was the wife who put him through school, through the degree that he refuses to finish. He's like what's her name? He's like Odysseus' wife, Penelope. That woman with the thread, who bought herself the time she needed by writing a five-hundred-page dissertation during the day and backspacing it to hell at night. I did my part for five years. Now it's my turn to have a dream. And what am I doing? I'm back in school, starting over.

My right pinky toe is bleeding again. I can tell from the squishiness in my sock. I'm wearing the wrong socks and the wrong footwear, and I'm in the wrong life.

And, suddenly, I have this thought, a vision really, like I'm in a cage. Like I'm an animal in a cage. A squirrel or maybe a rabbit. And my foot is trapped. And there is only one person in the world who can set me free. My eyes

are frantic because I can't speak. I'm watching myself as
an animal in this cage, losing its fucking mind. And my
husband is watching me, looking down on me from above
like he's God. My husband is watching me and not lifting a
finger.

A Problem

Mark Creter

The Universe(ity) decides that
your 30+ year career

a career of which you were once so proud

Is now
A problem
To be solved
By Human Resources

And
Handsomely paid
Lawyers
And
Vice Presidents
And
Administrators

You speak up
You ask
Why?

You ask
When?

You call out
Help?!
Anyone?!

No answer is given.

The Universe(ity) won't talk to you.

The Universe(ity) can't talk to you.

The Universe(ity) is mum.

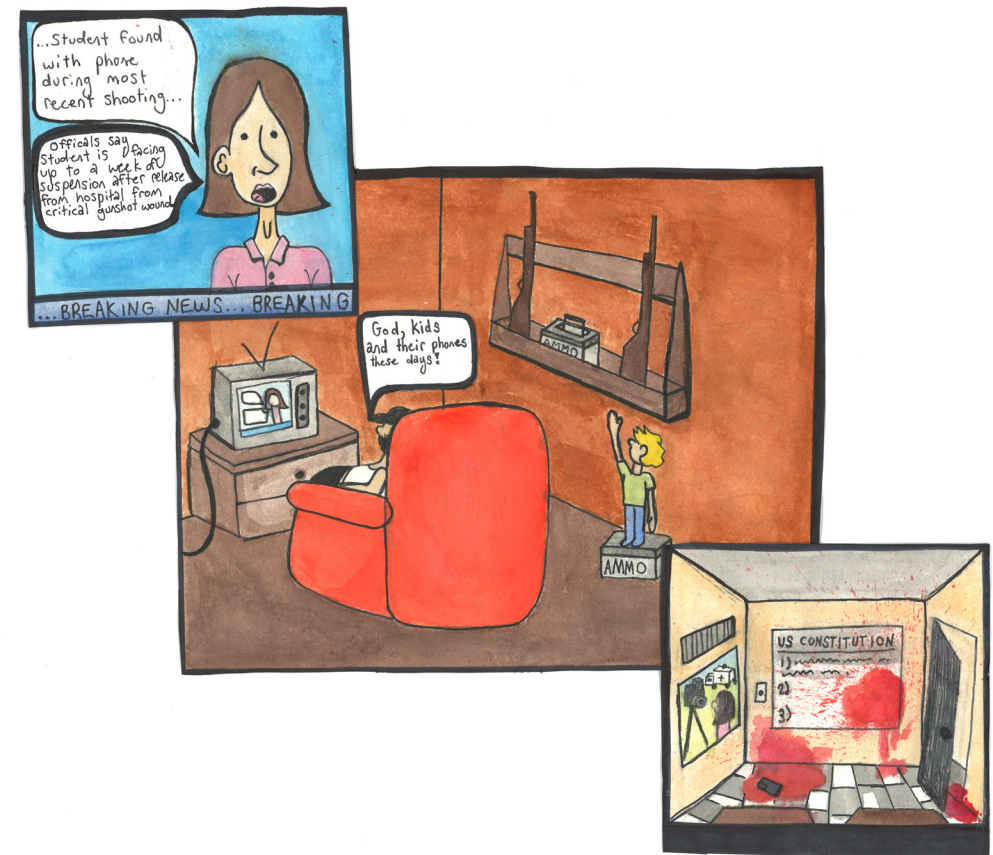
Macbeth heard cries of "Sleep no more"!

You awaken, sit up, and cry
Sleep? No... more...

But Macbeth killed a King! What Did You Do?

Priorities

Julia Ramler



How to Control Women

Jada Hall

How to control women: your easy-to-learn guide on how to influence this group of the species if you ever have to start over again (see *Global Warming For Dummies*). Ten easy steps, and remember, once you complete this cycle once, your role is cut in half!

Step 1: Once they are born surround them with toys and clothing that are a certain color and base these toys and clothing items around certain characteristics that we are going to convince them is the basis of being female.

Sidenote: Currently we use the color pink, and some characteristics we like to reinforce currently are the idea females talk A LOT, their interest in their appearance, or tending to a house and children. But it does not matter what characteristics you use; the important part comes later!

Step 2: Once these children have reached a time where they are out of solo play and have been introduced to only the toys that you deem are appropriate for their gender, you can start introducing them to peers of the same age group. Try to make sure the children are of mixed sexes! Let them divide themselves by gender presentation, and if they are kind to their male peers make jokes about them possibly being a couple. Let them interact with their female peers, and anytime they have a conflict remind the child the reason they have that conflict is due to an

attribute of their sex!

Example: Currently when two little girls are fighting, a common reasoning we use is jealousy! We even imply the jealousy is about looks, and we reinforce the idea that girls are jealous of each other consistently.

Step 3: While we encourage this step throughout childhood, once they are three or four we have determined this is the latest you can postpone this step. You must make sure that the children are exposed to examples of the behavior you want, via the real world, media, radio, and books. Whatever material you have, you must ensure they see it and know that if they do anything else they would be abnormal and that is BAD.

Step 4: Once the child enters schooling age, we can keep doing as we have. However, now when boys are hurtful to them, we must tell the girls that is a sign of attraction. But when girls are mean to the child, we have to be harsher and remind them that this is parts of girlhood—vindictiveness!

Step 5: Once these girls start getting to the age that they are entering puberty, 10–13, we start to shake things up! They are in the most vulnerable state of their lives, and this is where we get the real work in! Give them messages continuously that their bodies are unattractive. That everything we have taught them about being a girl is BAD. That if they see these things in each other, you need to ridicule them for having characteristics of these things.

Step 6: Now that they are in full blown puberty, convince them that all their friends are setting them up! (Remember they are jealous of you, and all girls are jealous, so why be friends with girls in the first place?) Start hinting that boys can tell when girls are pretty, and that their own judgment is compromised!

Step 7: Now that they are involved with men and in relationships, we must make sure they know that men are the ones who make the decisions. Remember, you were lonely without him! If they look like they are going to try and find female friendships, send out media that makes fun of girls who prioritize men in their lives. (We call them pick me girls!)

Step 8: Once they are interested in hobbies and jobs, find fields that women tend to flock towards and pay lower amounts to women than their male counterparts. This will tell them that they are not as comparable to men in all aspects, even professional ones.

Step 9: Do not teach women about birth control! Let them get pregnant and a majority of women will now have a true weakness not tied to their physical body. But reinforce the idea that motherhood is bad and makes women weaker!

Step 10: Let the women teach their daughter the same things, and the cycle will rebirth itself over and over again!

Electively Tomorrow

Kat Gardner

What does tomorrow feel like?
What does it feel like to live in a space where patriarchal passion is in opposition to
compassionate understanding?
To step forward into the face of historical resurrection
To move in reverse at a rapid pace, desperately clutching for a path for the future
Hopeful comfort finds itself being drug into depth that weren't meant for discovery
The division of a heartbeat
The song of love and cry of hate mingle and merge into a national anthem
What does tomorrow feel like?
It feels like what we had thought wouldn't happen again has retraced its steps and found its
missing key along a path that should have long been blocked

God Speaks to Modern Christians

Taylor Crabtree

“Those who use the defense, ‘because the Bible says,’ do not truly know me. How could any person ever wish to convey my unworldly presence in a book? You think the words of any language could ever convey my essence or message? My message, in its only trustworthy form, is documented in the hearts of my children. That’s the only place I ever wrote it down, verbatim and clear. My message is the unwavering sense of love you are all born with, but you see the problem is this world has adopted the practice of trying to mold and change that love. With the Bible, you’ve given that love rules. You tell it ‘yes’ and ‘no’ so much that you create a final product where my presence and my gifted, never-failing guide to life lies hidden in a labyrinth of rules and lies. I am *always* there in *everyone’s* hearts but often emerged deeply in other people’s theories about who I am and what it is I want. Because of that, some people find it very difficult to see God in their hearts. People will help others to misplace my presence, though they can never steal it or remove it. Did I not make it clear that love and God should be the easiest things in the world? ...

You know, the worst thing you ever did to me was make me contradictory to myself. Humans biasedly interpreted my legends and caused my story to not make sense. You let timeless scriptures become outdated and gave my religion a bad name. My love has no rules. Wherever there is true, genuine love I am there, approving

of it. My presence in all of you has now been named a “heart.” Of course, I am not that literal beating organ, but I am that unnamable magical sense, so powerful that it should be considered separate from the human mind. I am that thing at the forefront of every story ever written, Christian or not, but my children. . . your hearts no longer guide you. You’ve made the unfortunate mistake of assuming logic is separate from me. Logic in many instances is love. It is my sense of justice and always remember that sense of justice is mine. That right to judge is mine. And even for myself, judgment is not something I take lightly and not something I enjoy. Once someone has truly found God in their hearts, they should never choose logic or printed words when they contradict love. Love is the true pay-it-forward. I gift it into your being so that you may possess and give this world a never-ending piece of the Divine. You must all believe in this divine gift because love is the only thing about yourselves that is never ending. You can love and love. You can love day and night, and you will never run out of it because I am infinite. Some of you have intentionally forgotten me and still claimed my presence in all of your choices. You have disgraced me and created non-believers in your hate. You have attached this “hate” to my name and claimed me the owner of your cruelty towards others. I am beyond disappointed in you.

But you know what, most of all, above everything else... I love you. I love you with every ounce of my infinite being. So, I remind you, I am not a story. Knowing God is something each person can only achieve by looking inward. I am discovered, not told; and people can be Holy without

Taylor Crabtree

ever touching that book. So shed the skin, the one that's worn and weathered by the experiences of your life and makes you selective with your affections, and love and take care of all things."

ACT IV

GENIE

Genie

Jacob Hancock

Still follows
Eight hours and the sun

I watch waves
Me.

Wobbling with
Asphalt.
Rise from the

I keep walking knowing
Dance.
An alluring

Things have been
Back.
That I cannot go

Said,
Things have been

Done.

Th e
I r i s
R e v i e w

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I march through
My eternal

Day.
Falling into my

Sweat beading and
Eyes.

It must
Have been

Years.
Since I've

Seen the
Moon.

I just wished for a break...
A pause in time.

One,
Wish.

Damn,
Genie.

He only gave me
One.

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105

Wishing for one
 Thing,
 Is harder than
 Wishing for the
 World.
 I've wasted my
 Time.
 Waiting, planning
 I did nothing
 But lose it
 All.
 Now I keep marching
 Until I
 Fall.

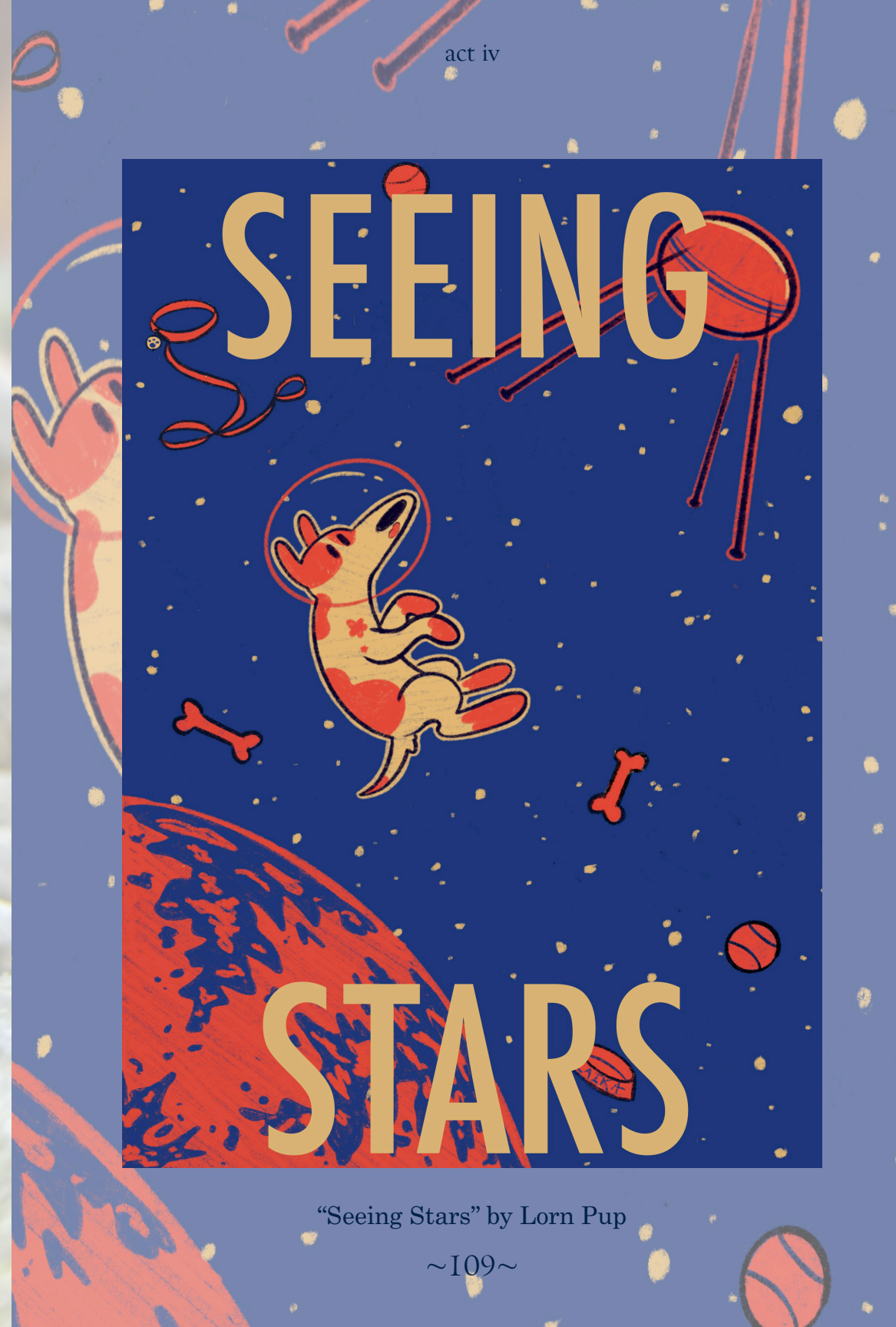
The Shortest Story I Ever Wrote

Taylor Crabtree

I parted a weary eye as the cartoon character on my TV finished his scream of utter agony. I didn't mean to fall asleep, but I suppose snuggling up in bed after a long day to watch TV is a recipe with one inevitable end. Though some people might be alarmed, I dismissed the figure I thought I saw watching me from my glass doors. I knew better than to trust my half-awake eyes, especially when peering into the dark. As I thought, I gave them a rub and it was gone. The TV was very loud, but I was also very tired, and so I didn't look for the remote. I just switched off my lamp and went back to sleep. What felt like seconds later, though, I reawoke. I shot right up in bed, as my body told me to be alert. I soon realized I must have come to from a scary dream, because when I looked around, nothing in my room was amiss. I turned off my TV and listened, just to be sure, but the house stayed silent. I switched on my phone light and walked into the other room. Out of the corner of my eye, in the dark end, I saw that laundry piled chair that always looks like it has a person sitting in it. I pass it so often it only spooks me for a half second. I turned the corner and headed into the living room when a sight stopped me dead in my tracks. The front door was busted open, and splinters from the frame scatter the floor. Then I remember, *I put the laundry from my chair away yesterday.*



“Frog Eyes” by Elle Anderson



“Seeing Stars” by Lorn Pup



“On the Way to the Book Store” by Jill Van Domelen



“Birthday Birds”

“I

Jill Van Domelen 21”

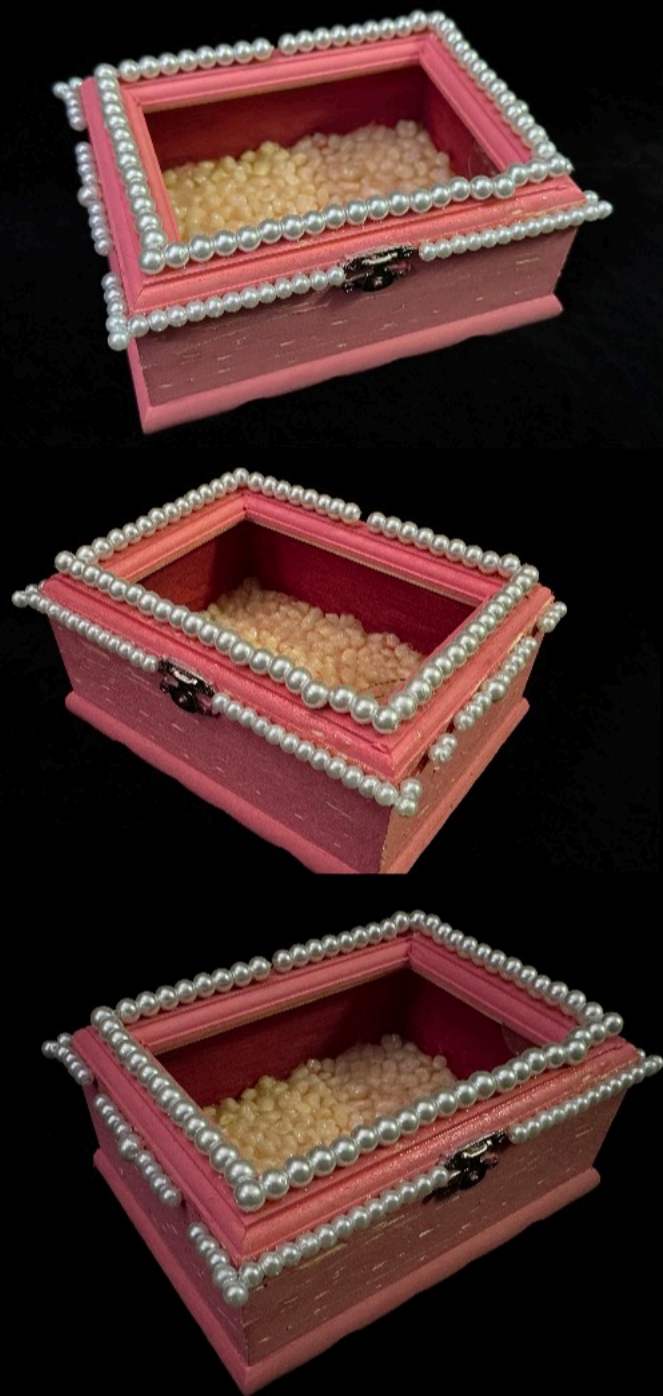
“Birthday Birds” by Jill Van Domelen



“What the Dog Doin” by Brie Rankin



“Serenity in the Chaos” by Brie Rankin



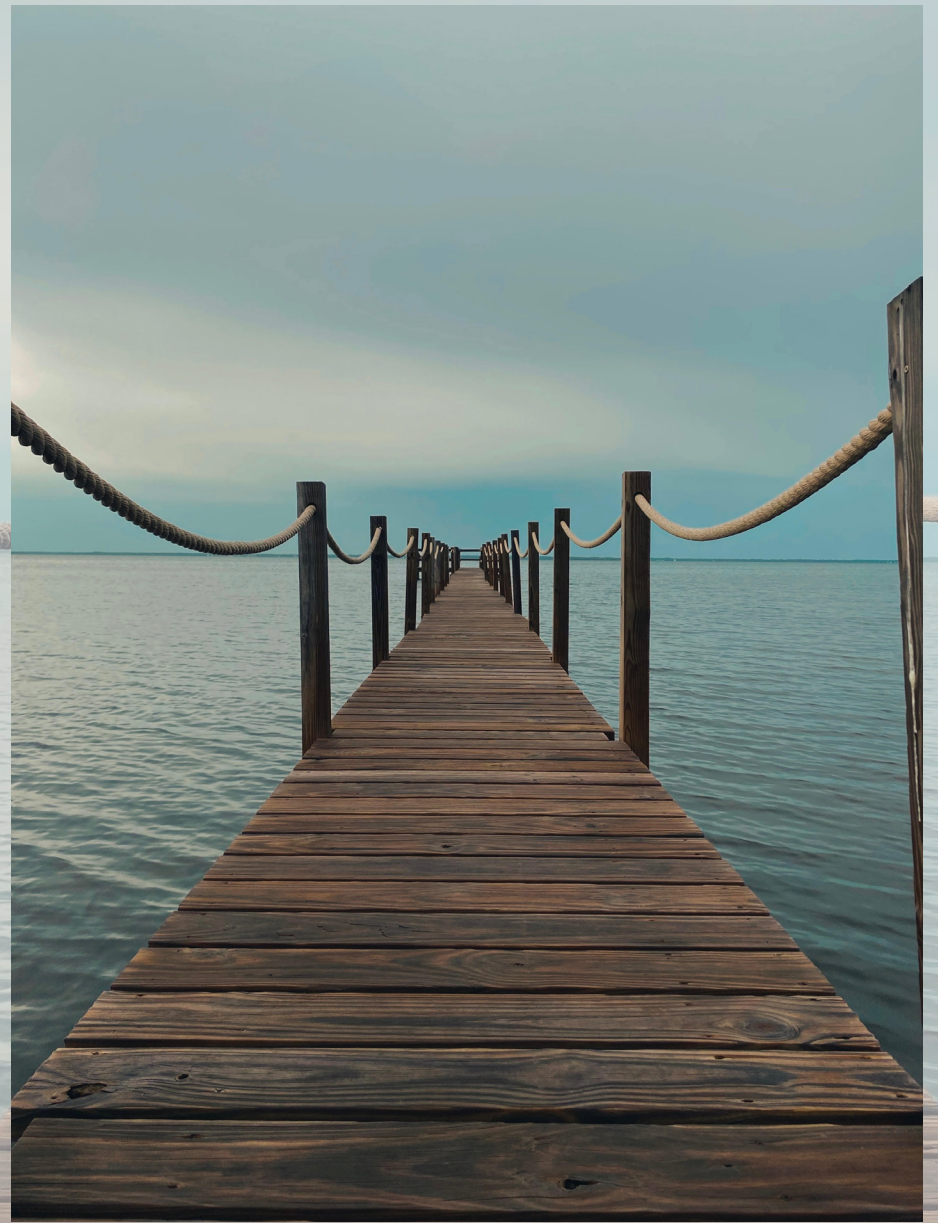
“Jewelry Box” by Mallory Webb



“Self-Portrait” by Mallory Webb



“Close Up and Personal” by Emmy Easterwood



“Path to Serenity” by Jaylon Ward



"Pond" by Jill Van Domelen

ACT V

LAST MIDNIGHT

Last Midnight

West Below

It would have been the first time that the girl was able to see the sun again. Yet she was running, running, like all the times she ran before. She ran into the woods, into the dark maze of wooden carcasses plucked bare by the vulturous winter. She was more terrified than she had been ever before, and especially so of the man that chased after her.

That man hurriedly grabbed the flashlight in his left hand and fumbled his fingers in search of the button on its rubbery side. It flickered for a moment before coming to life, and he oriented the halo of light toward the clearing in the woods in front of him. He barely saw her leg kick over her bound hands as she ran before she was enveloped into the labyrinthine dark of the trees. Shuddering, from what he could not tell was fear or the cold, he sighed as he trotted through the muddy grasses and into the forest.

The branches, old bones that they were, cracked beneath his feet as he entered the forestry that the girl had fled to. Behind the trees there were more trees, and behind those were more still. Like a web, the thin and light trees branched and spindled this way and that, indicative of a strange order that he was not meant to comprehend.

He cried out her name, but the forest answered only with the barest shake of the thinnest branches. Not even a crow woke to console him or divine the answers he sought. Every step was now cautious, and his eyes were darting like a needle of a compass being held at the world's end.

Every step took him deeper and deeper into the web with light on the left and knife on the right.

Within any web, there are traps. Only its weaver, the spider, knew where the traps are; where the prey must step so the predator shall feast. In the web of trees, there were many spiders, and many more eyes were watching that small man. Waiting, watching, as he approached that place. The place that was made all that time ago for him to find himself in.

He froze, his breathing tightened and everything in his body constricted. He stepped no more, but the crunching under-foot did not stop.

There were two noises that he heard beside himself. The first was the howl of the wind against some ethereal laughter. The second was a loud snarl behind him. The man spun around, and a creature's piercing sapphire gaze staggered him. He dropped his light.

Stepping forward into the light was a wolf. The man brandished his knife.

There was some part of him that hoped that the wild beast would understand the unspoken languages of men. The showing of one's knife was a mercy. If a man saw the weapon before it drew blood, the one wielding the weapon gave a chance to submit or escape to the one without. If the one without refused, their death would not come as a surprise. The wolf, however, did not speak the human language, and what that wolf saw in the strange and dirty man before him was not mercy. It was his fear.

The man saw, as the beast stepped closer into the moonlight, that it too was afraid. Its rib cage showed

through the skin, and a stained yellowness was below its stomach. It was starving. Perhaps it was cut off from the pack and forced to fend for itself, or perhaps the prey had a much easier time fleeing from him than his pack.

The man realized with every new observation that he was taking nervous steps backward. He willed himself to stop, and he moved in a circular motion. The wolf humored him and circled in the same direction, but only for a moment. A wolf's humor never lasts. After the time that the haggard man earned and then spent on a singular short breath, the wolf stepped in a straight line. Then two steps, then four! The man screamed, ran forward and thrust the knife forward as the wolf leapt straight for his right arm.

The wolf was caught, but not by him. Like out of a horrible dream, a tall wraithlike figure leapt too. Its talons grabbed the wolf by the nape and ran them both into the darkness. He scrambled to pick up the flashlight with his left hand, he did not dare release the blade in his other. He heard the wolf struggle, snarl, bite and chomp. He pointed the light to the scene. The wraith's hand shoved the head back, and the other reached into the body. Her frazzled hair was blown as her head moved downwards. The man winced and the evil sounds of the animal's final squeal mixed with the sloppy-wet chomp of teeth digging into fur, then neck, then innards, and finally the violent ripping of the canine's throat from where it was when it was still permitted to draw breath only made the spectacle more vibrant when it was beheld within the imagination.

A last whimper escaped the wolf's tongue, which

lay loosely out of his agape mouth. The man finally dared himself to look at the specter that haunted him. He turned the light toward it, then towards her. White marble skin, fit for a statue of Athena or the corpse of Hera, remained on the features of a lady taller than him. Her dark hair was frazzled and parted toward the good side of her neck, leaving bare the side with two pronounced indentations in the skin just above the carotid. Neither the wolf nor a wild beast had bitten her. It was the bite of a creature much older, its violence more sinister and cruel. This creature changed her long ago and died still before then. The blood of the beast trailed down her neck and stuck only loosely to her dampened, once-fair dress. An afraid smile shone through her bloodied fangs as she looked down on him. Her love.

"You can't save me, Noel," she trembled as she spoke, "any more than you could save that dog. We're both monsters."

The man raised his hand, palm forward. He shoved his other hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

"And if I resist, you'll show me this, right?"

It was her voice, and the footage showed her. She was on a bed in some cheap motel she barely remembered. She was wearing the same dress, only that was before the thin white cloth was seeped in blood.

"Fine, fine! I'm not sure why you're telling me to do something you'll fight me over, but fine, tell me!"

And then there was his voice. He hated how nasally he sounded, all wretched and nerdy.

"Noel," she said, *"The person who sired me said she*

was giving me a gift, immortality. I was a fool! This isn't immortality. I don't have eternal life. I only have the other lives I've taken away!"

"Did-did you drain someone again?"

"More than one. Two of them, last midnight. And you wanna know the worst part? Nothing happened. Some news company immediately caught and killed the story. They always do that with us. The family was probably paid off, and the staff lead probably got a big fat check stuffed below their door the next night. I didn't even tell anyone, I just ran!"

"Is this your confession?"

"No. They'd bury it, kill you and hurt me just for trying."

"Then what do you want us to do?"

"I can't live like this, and I certainly can't die like this! I'm not a higher being, I'm lower, I'm a parasite! But there's a cure. I have to drink—"

"Noel, stop..." she said weakly and held up her hand flat above her rope-burned wrists, "I get it."

"Let it finish!" he insisted, but he didn't bother to rewind.

"— nd I have to drink it willingly. If someone else were to get it for me, or if I were to drink it anywhere else, I'd die. Not like I don't deserve it."

"You have to drink the thing that kills you if you even so much as get touched by it?"

"I do..."

"And you've based this off of a story you were told?"

"It's all I have. If they were lying to me, I die. And

I deserve to die. But if they are telling the truth... then I have to. For all of our sakes."

"Do you think you're not going to be able to control yourself?"

"I know I won't. Our weakness is that even being near that kind of place fills us with primal, eclipsing dread. We'll make any excuse that we can. We'll lie, cheat, seduce, to get out of there and away from those people. And tonight... tonight is the only night out of the year where I can go there and get the drink. Any other night, it's going to be locked away, but not tonight. So please, no matter what I do, no matter what I try to do to you, please take me where I need to go. I can't get there by myself."

The recording ended and stilled on the final shot of her hands over her face, bloody tears leaking through the gaps between her fingers. A single drop of crimson resurfaced over her cheek, crawling down until it met the drying blood of the animal she ripped apart.

"It's just... not for me. Do you know what would happen if we find out if it works? Then more and more of my kin, for even the slightest inconvenience from being bloodsuckers, will drink it as well, and become human. They'll make a grand show about how they've changed and have ceased their wicked ways. They'll use the money they've laundered and stole to put their face on every television. They'd receive attention, praise, interviews, controversy, and presence. And by the time their fifteen minutes of fame is up, by the time they see the first wrinkle on their forehead that refuses to clear, then they'll run right back to embracing the night once more."

He put his hand upon her shoulder.

“Zoey,” he said. The girl took many names over many years, the invention of this one was still recent in her mind, “do you remember what you told me right before I recorded that video?”

She did remember. “I told you that I love you.”

“And that’s not possible. For bloodsuckers to love, is it?”

She trembled and said, “I did not lie.”

“You didn’t. There’s still that last bit of goodness in you, even after all this. That’s what makes you different from them. They don’t want to stop. They don’t want to own up to what they did, to do that they’d have to stand in the sunlight. They hate that. They don’t just hate it because the sun hurts them, they hate it in other people too. They hate light and wish nothing more but to gain the ability to wet their own fingers and snuff out the last candle by which men and women can see. You’re not like that. And I won’t let you say that you are.”

“You don’t deserve me,” she said, “You deserve someone better. Someone who’s good...”

“Do you think I am a saint, Zoey?”

“I think that I’ve egged on a lot of the breaking you did to your vows.”

“It doesn’t matter. Even before I met you, I was trouble. The things you made... the things I did after meeting you just took me from one set of troubles to another. But that’s the thing about life, it’s our one shot to make it better.”

“Oh, Noel...” she said, stammering. The monstress

walked over to him and held him in her arms and traced a cold finger up and down the back of his neck, like she had always done. “Let’s walk back and embrace our fates, together.”

“I’ll do you one better,” he said, and he placed one hand below her waist and scooped her up until she lay in his arms like a bride.

“Noel...” she cooed again and reached out her hand to cup his face, “You’ve gotten so strong. I’m so proud of you.”

He, with she, walked back the way they came. The labyrinth of spiny trees finally ended and began to shrink away into the horizon. She saw the sign to the place she fled from, the place that lost and found her.

"Church of Saint Lucia of Syracuse," the sign announced.

It was right where they needed to be, this place. She needed to drink their holy water and become human again. It was the closest place she could find on the only day of the year in which it could be freely given at a time where it could voluntarily be consumed, not forced, sprayed, or splashed. It was midnight mass; its beginning always marked the arrival of Christmas Day.

The priest, the greeter, and more with them—a heterogeneous group dressed in solemn black, flowing white, and flowery dresses of many kinds—waited for them. They surrounded the couple not threateningly but invitingly, and many among them offered to ease Noel’s burden. Noel continued to carry her. They offered to wipe

Zoey's face, and they ensured Noel was unharmed. Noel continued to carry her.

The congregants opened the door for them, and a square, black lady in purple held a chalice. The chalice looked like it was made from cheap aluminum, and the water looked like all the drinking water she'd seen before. Whatever power the waters had came strictly from its purpose.

"Baby?" she said in the worried tone that asked for reassurance.

"It's going to be all right," he answered in a low, comforting tone, "You're ready."

She held the chalice in her hand and her small, talon-like fingers clasped the stem. She leaned upwards and looked down upon her fate, careful not to spill even a drop before its proper time.

"To my very good health!" she exclaimed and drank. From the very first gulp, the world around her began to swim, darken, and fade. She kept gulping and gulping until there was no more.

She woke to snow. The white flakes had already christened the ground outside and collected upon the edges of the windows. The floor was cold and dry.

Most of the people she had seen crowding her had left. The few that remained were still on their knees, praying without ceasing. She turned her head and saw that Noel was among them.

When she finally willed herself to stand, the men and women who surrounded her stood with her, and she politely thanked them before retreating to Noel's arms.

Noel pointed outside and suggested that she see the sunrise. They stepped out, the clouds had passed, and the cold sun hovered just above the mountainous horizon.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" He asked while squeezing her hand.

"They'll have to wait a day," she explained. "For humans, it's a day of celebration. For them, it's their day of mourning. The humans were saved, and the dark ones despaired."

"What will happen after that?"

"The news already caught my story, but no bloodsucker worth their lines of salt wouldn't keep the evidence just in case. A police report will be filed first thing tomorrow morning, and soon after, they'll arrest me."

"Are you going to run?"

She looked at him intently.

"No," she replied.

They both smiled lukewarmly, like hearing the praise for a loved one at their funeral.

"Why do you think that worked?"

"It was your story we were going off of," he said.

"A bloodsucker's story is rarely true. It was just water. It didn't come from anywhere special."

"Special hands blessed it. It's a reward—no, not a reward, a result of decades of faith from a hundred people. They believed wholeheartedly in the power of the good man from the good book and lived their lives accordingly."

"So, you're saying that they just... believed in something? And their belief manifested it?"

"I think it's the other way around. I think there's

true things in the world, truer than even you or I standing and breathing. Things like love, justice, good and evil. They were here long before us, patiently waiting for us to start thinking about the past and looking at the future. That's where they were. But then the vampires came, and a lot of people stopped being able to look that far either way. That's the difference between being alive and being undead."

"Wow... Noel, you should have been a philosopher."

He chuckled. "Philosophy doesn't pay the bills."

She giggled as well, "I guess even we still need to worry about now, still."

"True. Now's only going to last a short while though. What do you want to do?"

"I want to eat a hamburger! Or a cheap burrito!"

"Just that? When we only have so much more time?"

"Yes! I need to remember what they taste like before they're gone."

With that, they walked hand in hand to the only hamburger restaurant open on Christmas within a twenty-mile radius. The red and blue neon spelled out the word "open," but Noel could barely think about that.

"Wow," he vocalized the thoughts he could think, and he looked at her softly. "Your hands, they're so warm now."

worth two

Megan Dunsmore

oh little blue bird, i must leave you fallow
cerulean feathers and beak so narrow

she sings me a song that shall never transcend
you, whose strain impels me to ache and bend

like a tree, a breeze of melody floats through my hollow
ears
let me whistle the whispers of your tune under skyfallen
tears

an aves of aqua in my branches, the heart of a beech—
silvery and sallow—but you, my sparrow, i cannot reach

i dig my roots in protest, oh earth, keep me tethered
fluttering wings, grace me with your kiss that's feathered
i wilt and i weep, your frail figure becomes smaller
perhaps next flowering i could grow a little taller

my shoots soaring high enough to nestle you
within the wooden arms, where you once flew

Autumn

Ann Jared Lewald

You left in autumn—
 Blue diamond skies,
 Eye burning, when
 Laughing gods spar
 Above trees that
 Shed exhausted leaves,
 Like dim gypsy moths,
 That quiver and cling,
 Only to fall,
 Fall,
 Wordlessly ground underfoot,
 Ash frost,
 While dying insects,
 Dizzy with fear,
 Fly into the sun,
 With Icarus,
 Beating their wings against death.
 And deer,
 Running from hunters,
 Flee the woods,
 Their eyes melting with panic,
 Only to meet death in metal and asphalt.
 Remember me, you said,
 In the cries of geese in autumn,
 But I no longer grieve for dark angels,
 Only, sometimes,
 For gentle, fallen deer.
 The sea, that old weaver,
 Moves shuttle and loom.
 Listen,
 One day, everything shifted a bit,
 Like something in earth's core,
 And you returned to
 Faded gold—
 No more.

Geneva

Gracy Luna

Neve, I checked on your house the day that you
 left. I went up to the swing as if you'd be
 waiting there for me. All that was left was your
 glasses. Turning them over in my hand, I
 wondered if I should put them on. I didn't.
 Maybe I got distracted wondering who'd water
 your flowers. Or restock the weird strawberry
 candies you kept in a dish. I can't go back into
 the house, for it's not yours anymore. I miss the
 smell of antiques inside and the shells hanging
 in the doorframe. I miss the way the velvety
 carpet caressed my feet and the way the piano
 keys felt under my youthful fingers. I miss your
 scratchy yet soft voice and the way you hugged
 me saying "I love you a bushel and a peck and a
 hug around the neck" quickly swaying before
 planting a kiss on my red cheeks.

I put on your sunglasses, and wish you were
 here to swing with me.

DiffRACTed Coffee Rings

Kat Gardner

The Iris Reveals

Sun through a windowpane, mid-June, perhaps late May warmth
The beams of sun diffracted into rainbows on the wall swallowing you into a hug
Or a handshake or kiss on the forehead
You were never much for hugs
You said they were too tight and reminded you of the suffocatingly heavy days when gravity was
not to be taken lightly
The chair you were sitting in was my grandmother's favorite spot, the misshapen cushion and
coffee rings belong to her as did the rainbows diffracted through the window
When you sit there you sit with her, in her arms and though you say you don't like hugs I find
you in that seat often
With the blinds always open and a coaster never in its place

~
I 34
~

act v

Beauty and the Beast

Ann Jared Lewald

Where are you, la belle?
My hands are smoking again.
Oh come to me, come to me,
The mirror's scorn wounds me.
The wild moon calls,
Though my self loathing
Poisons the taste,
Of blood.
For you, only for you, la belle,
I hide my claws
In velvet glove.
Every evening at seven
I long for your little silver comb
That will soothe my matted fur.
My diamond queen,
I sleep with roses,
My only comfort,
Until you return.
It's true I am a monster
With yellow eyes
And clumsy foot,
But your love transforms me,
I become your dancing bear,
In love,
I sing with poets,
My dying animal self
A trophy I lay at your feet.
Take my love and weave a garland for your hair.

~I 35~

More than Friends

Linda M. White

Colorful images on the screen
dance across the dark room's walls.
A splash of red hits my cheeks
and clings like blush on a painted doll.

His body's close, his skin on mine,
brushing faintly as he breathes.
The heat is all that's on my mind
as his soft hair tickles me.

My breathing quickens at his glance.
My heart increases in its pace.
Should I take this as a chance
to close the distance to his face?

"You're my best friend" is what I blurt,
instead of some great dialogue.
His lips curve into a smirk:
"Same to you. Is that all?"

"I love you," I say. "Do you love me too?"
"Yes, babe, that's why I married you."

The Lightning Bugs of the Universe Told Me About You

Kat Gardner

I can't give you the world but I surely can give you my hand
My love if your hand is in mine I've got the world in my grasp

Empires fell and birds learned to fly and life was breathed back into flowers to bring me to you
The matter of the universe danced into collision to create all that you are
Love is no less than the force that pulled the space rocks into magnificent planetary systems
In the lightning bugs and the lilac sky's I see all the soft magic that convened to craft your
intrinsic ways of saying I love you
Gentle breaths and rhythmic thumps of a heart speak the same language as constellations

In this life I've found the stardust that made up the rest of me as a comet
In the next life perhaps we'll be fish in the same pond or cats adopted by the same old lady
Maybe in the next life we'll be inanimate objects like crayons in the same box or gears in the
same clock
I'm not quite sure what the next life will be but I do know that in the next life my stardust will
find yours

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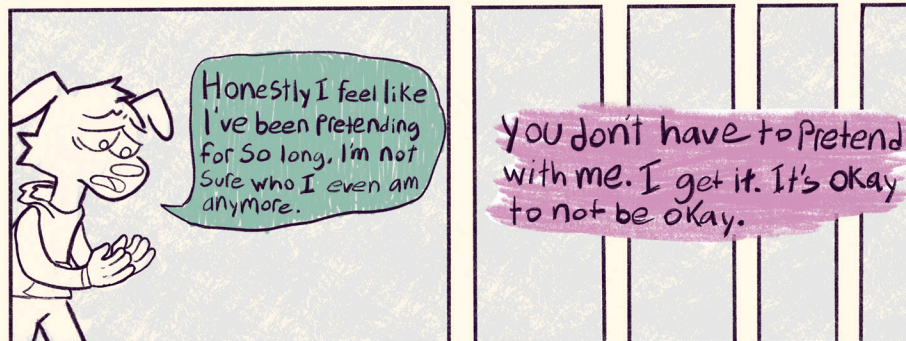
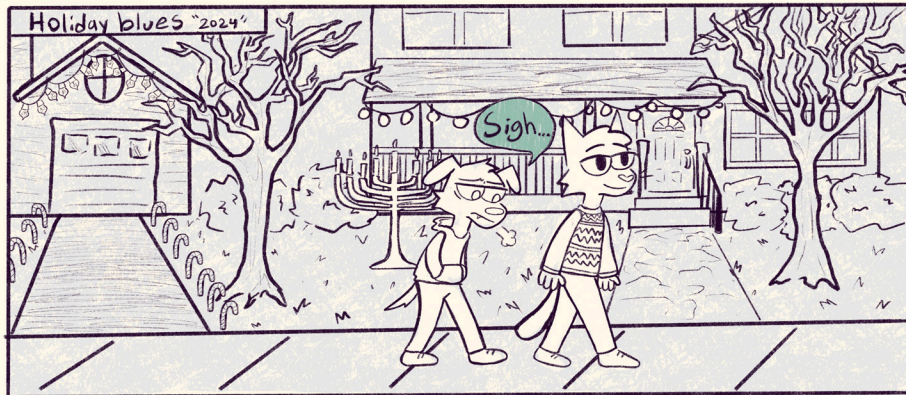
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HOLIDAY BLUES

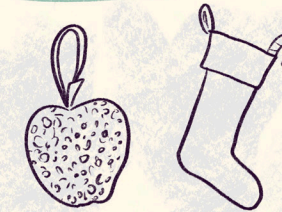
Holiday Blues "2024"

by Lorn Pup

@Dumb Dog Doodless



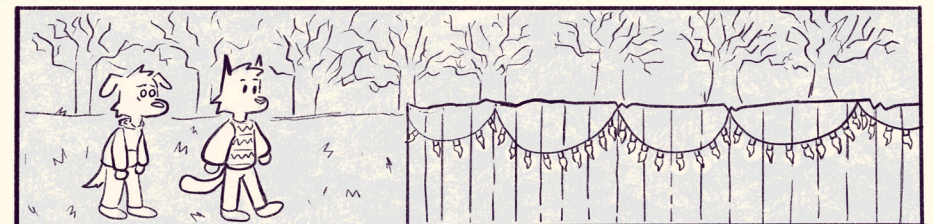
I just wish... I wish I could stop feeling like this during the holidays. Like, why can't I just... feel something? Everyone else seems so full of joy but it's like I'm stuck in this gray void.

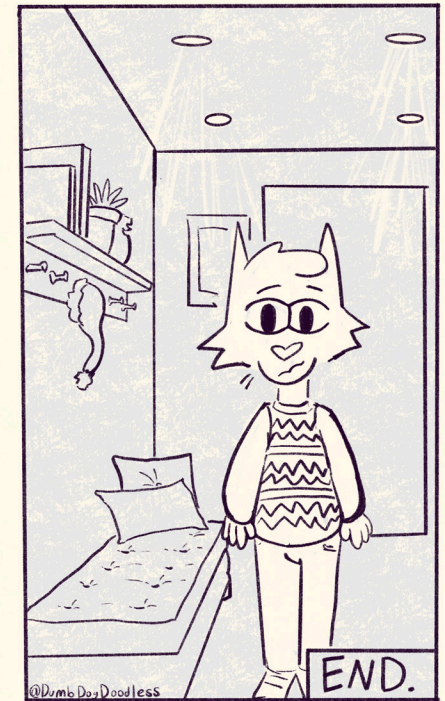
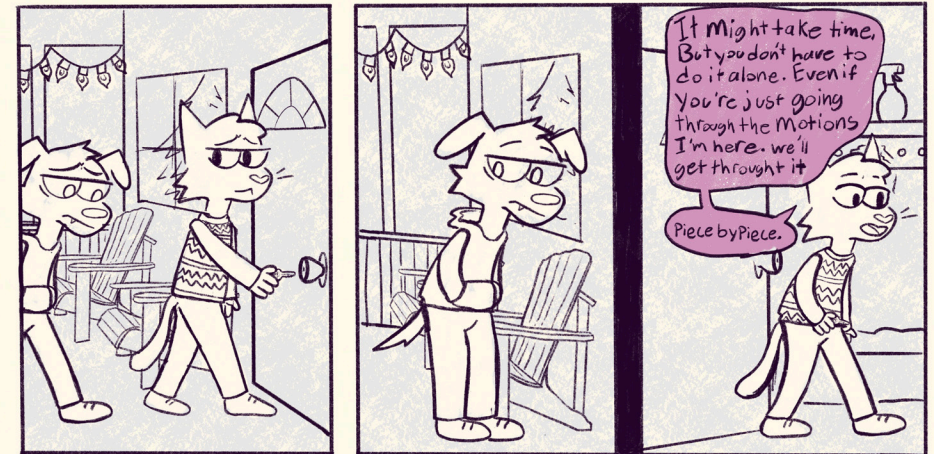
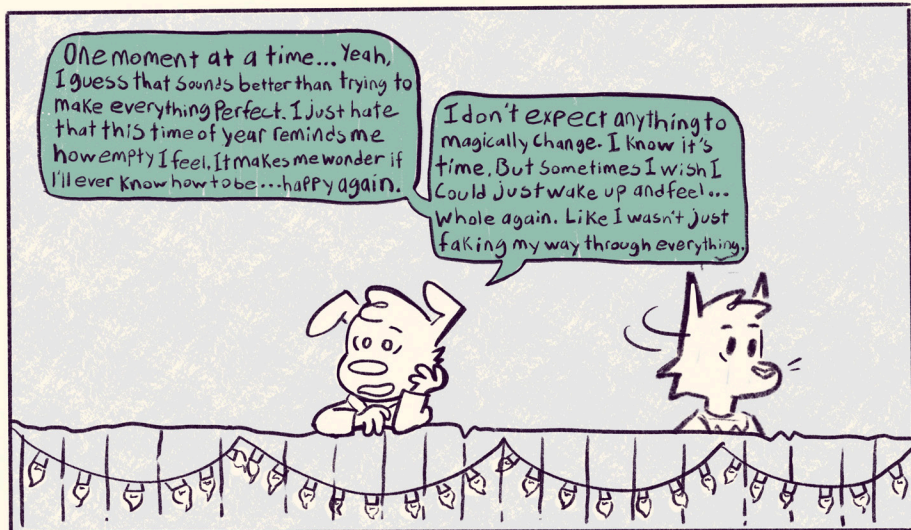
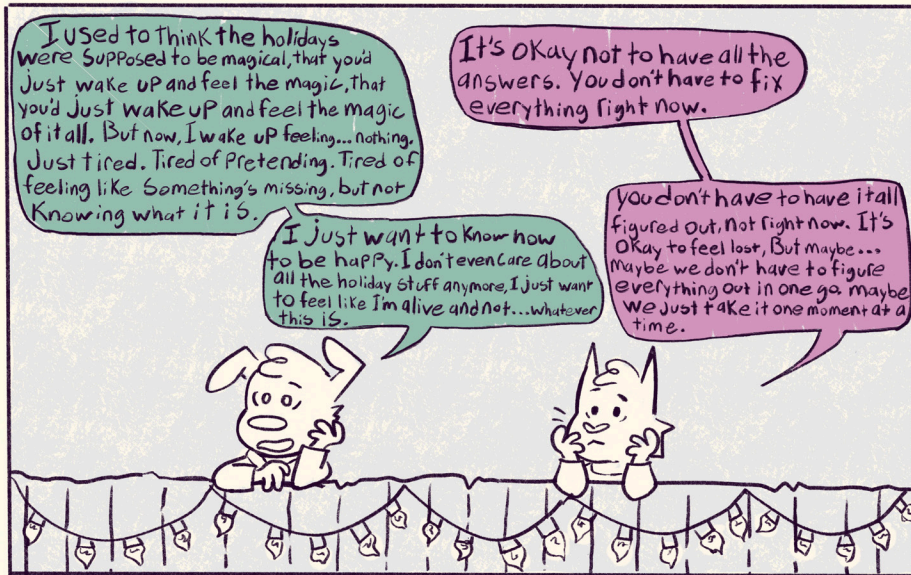


I get it, the holidays can be tough, but you're here with me, and that's something.



Yeah, but it doesn't feel like enough, you know? I should be able to just snap out of it. I should be able to be happy like everyone else. Instead, I feel like I'm just... empty.





Five Ways to Reclaim Your Masculinity After Fifty

Tony Baker

1. Build a campfire just before dark. See if your young adult daughter will join you, but the chances are low, since she's mostly outgrown these moments. Crumble up newspaper or phonebook pages (nobody uses either anymore), layer with small, dry twigs, and top with a criss-cross of logs. Consider pouring on an accelerant, like from that can of old mis-measured gas/oil mix. Light the fire. Feed it twigs and additional tinder. Spend no less than an hour contemplating the licking flames, the glowing coals, and your lucky, lucky life. A cigar might help.
2. String a hammock between two trees in the shade on a breezy summer day when you should be mowing the lawn or paying bills or fixing the leaky faucet. Lie down in the hammock, and try not to worry that it'll rip under your weight. Nap for no less than ten minutes. Dream about bungee jumping or playing football or sleeping. Wake up slightly disoriented but recharged, with the wind whispering through the trees. Don't confess this indulgence to your spouse.
3. Before the long holiday trip with the family, pack the back of the nondescript SUV carefully, expertly, systematically, with no gaps or spaces, Tetris-style. Treat the luggage as if it's important. Gaze with satisfaction upon the snug suitcases, the just-in-case snow boots, the filler pillows, and the bags of wrapped gifts for grandma, nieces, and nephews. Pack nothing in the very back that needs to be fetched mid-trip. Make sure that your spouse sees your

masterful packing skills, but accept her compliments nonchalantly. Act like it's no big deal.

4. Listen to Tom Waits singing "Lucinda" or "I Don't Wanna Grow Up." On CD, vinyl, Spotify, whatever—don't be a snob about it. Just turn it up loud. If you're not driving, take a swig of stout or porter or Scotch. But of course, you're driving, probably on your way to or from work. So take a swig of the large Diet Coke you always buy at the Sonic. Sing along with Tom in your lowest, most gravelly growl to match his raw, hound-dog howls. Sing along until your throat hurts a little, but don't blow your vocal chords entirely. Nobody needs to see or hear this private performance, so keep it to yourself. Be careful at stoplights.
5. Look closely at your face in the mirror. Take your time. Study your graying hair, your receding or receded hairline, that mole, the multiple chins you attempt to hide under your uneven goatee. Study your frown wrinkles, your yellowing teeth. Vow to smile more. Regret that you never had braces as a kid, that you don't work out, that you've let yourself go, simple as that. Then look closely at your patient spouse. Study her familiar face, her soft skin, her twinkling eyes, her sweet, genuine smile. Regret how you've taken her for granted. Think about the loser you'd be without her. Appreciate the fact that out of the millions of possible mates in the world she chose to spend the rest of her life with you. Thank her and mean it. Then tell her—tell her!—tell her everything.

Lavender Menace

Kaylee Savage-Cutcher

I am a dragon.
 My wings and tail are hard to spot
 but I promise they're there.
 I feel them against the sheets when
 I sleep. I feel them against your skin
 and shirt and jeans when you pull my head
 to your chest. I wasn't sure if you noticed
 my horns brushing against your chin.
 I always take a nail file to their tips before
 seeing you, shaving down every point on
 my sharp, scaly body. Then one day you kissed
 my horns, pressed your lips against every twist
 that longs for the sky. I knew we belonged together,
 in flight, your soft body nestled on my back.
 Some would call you a tyrant, but they triumph
 over bird and birch—it's only a matter of time before
 they see my wings and shoot me like creatures
 considered *foul*. They'd call me obscene.
 Not only a dragon, but a dragon in love?
 Being a dragon is love. Love for the hunt,
 gold, fire. Only kings are ruled by cruelty,
 and only knights distress damsels. They assume
 an animal like me captured you, violated you,
 led you astray, because you would never rebel to
 seek a life in the clouds. I smell the lavender
 on your lips from my floral, smoky breath and know
 our love is their menace.

On Revelations 21:4

Linda M. White

Besides gifts, I don't like surprises.
 Any change can send me spiraling,
 like moving seven times in seven years
 or buying my first house
 or your cancer.

But you and I have something most don't:
 we know the destination of our souls
 when we go.

I cry the tears He wipes away,
 I know that death cannot remain,
 my mourning,
 your pain,
 For He has said former things won't stay.

I'll weep each time I hear our name,
 and the smell of White Diamond perfume
 will bring bittersweet memories of you,

But.

When your heart stops so will your agony—
 death will be God's greatest mercy.

So run ahead now, and I'll catch up soon.
 Among starlight, the sun, and moon,
 I'll see you again when we're both made new.

Can I Be Myself With You

Raniece Canady

Your heavenly body will meet mine
and it'll feel like before chemo,
 before you became skin and bone,
 before you said "I want to stay"
 and God said "No, come home."

I wonder if the question
we are all silently asking
each other is:
Can I be myself with you?
And in my silence sometimes
I hear what being myself
was met with as a child

Being myself was met with
being called goofy
and greedy
And clumsy
and dumb
and stupid
and being
too
sensitive

And though
I can't rewind
the hands of time,
In my mind
I rewrite those words
With love
and understanding

I know my parents
were just aching
And aching
just leads
to more

heart breaking
But they were mistaken

You weren't goofy honey
You were funny
and silly
and free
As any child
deserves to be

And you weren't greedy
baby
You were growing

You weren't dumb
You were
just exploring

Not stupid
but smart
And shining
and curious

And you weren't
too sensitive
Your heart was just
Tender
and wanting love
And big

And the only way
I can let you be
yourself with me
Is if I first
let myself
be myself
with me



“Graduation Day” by Luz Filoteo

Until I Meet You in Montana

Cody Bates

someday, when black skies shine blue
and clear of pain,
When withered trees glow green
And starved fires don't scorch them dead.

I'll meet you in Montana
someday, and we'll eat those fat huckleberries
that grow together upon our little home,
around our quiet cottage,
deep within wild Montana.

I'll meet you in Montana
someday, when your heart still beats the hum of love,
so whole and full of life,

and I don't burn away
all we could've been.

I'll meet you in Montana.
Someday, I know I'll meet you
Free in Montana. And I'll take your hands,
I'll hold them right,
I'll say, "I love you,
Finally forever."

Deep within wild Montana.

Contributors

Alaina Johnson is an avid writer and book enthusiast from Knoxville, Tennessee. When she's not reading or writing, she enjoys spending time with her family, heading to the movie theater whenever she can, and talking incessantly about her favorite cartoons.

Ann Jared Lewald is presently retired from the faculty of Tennessee Tech University, where she taught English composition, developmental writing skills, college reading skills, and English as a second language. She co-authored a textbook about developing college skills in writing. She has published poems in various journals and in an anthology recalling Hurricane Katrina. Some years ago, she wrote a poem that won the Celtic Heritage Award presented by the Knoxville Writers Guild. In addition, she has judged various poetry contests in Cookeville, Oak Ridge, etc. Today, she continues to write poems while participating in the monthly Sawmill Poetry readings at Plenty Downtown Bookstore in Cookeville, Tennessee.

B. K. Lucas is a sophomore at Tennessee Tech currently pursuing his environmental science degree. He is an avid player of video games, having thousands of hours across many games. This is where he gets a large amount of his inspiration from. He truly believes games are an art form and seeks to prove this with his inspired pieces.

Brie Rankin is a photographer passionate in capturing photos of people in their best light. She loves photographing events, portraits, and pets. She has taken several photography classes and studied under professional photographers. You can see the rest of her work or request her service at Rankin-Photography.com or her Instagram [Rankin_Photography_TTU](https://www.instagram.com/Rankin_Photography_TTU).

Chadwick (Chad) McDonald works for Cookeville's Leisure Services Department, a long-time servant of the community and a creative at heart. While serving many years as the cultural arts superintendent, he helped shape the city's artistic scene with award-winning theatre, concerts, and dance. Now, as assistant director, he continues to work on providing spaces for the community to relax, play, enjoy, and reflect. In his free time, he enjoys creative writing and photography, capturing the beauty of everyday moments as seen along the way. He is honored to have his works published here.

Claire Harris is a senior at Tennessee Tech majoring in creative writing and professional communication. She primarily likes writing poetry and fiction and enjoys reading, listening to music, coloring, art, and horror. She loves writing free verse and persona poems.

Cody Bates, a Tennessee native, is a graduate English student at Tennessee Tech. A lifelong lover of the arts, he specializes in poetry, screenwriting, and all things literary (especially the Southern Gothic). Beyond the

pen, you'll usually find him obsessing over the newest video game in his ever-growing collection or enjoying life with his cat, two dogs, and soon-to-be wife.

Dani Hassler is a freshman at Cumberland County High School who plans to pursue a law degree in her future. She enjoys band, dancing, theater, and painting in her free time.

Elle Anderson is a graduating senior in chemical engineering with a minor in chemistry. She enjoys learning about animals and taking photos of them when visiting zoos.

Emmy Easterwood is a biology student at Tennessee Tech who loves to draw in her rare free time. She uses digital art to make many self-portraits.

Erika Robinson is a writer, health professional, and native Californian planting roots in Middle Tennessee with her husband and fur babies. When she is not writing, she enjoys exploring local coffee shops, perfecting soup recipes, and discovering new wonders in her garden.

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.

Gavin H. Stackhouse is a graduating senior with a BA in English, creative writing. He is obtaining a certificate in editing and publishing to accompany his degree. He is giving big thanks to the *Iris Review* during his time at Tennessee Tech (and beyond).

Gracy Luna is a senior at Tennessee Tech studying English with a concentration in creative writing. She loves anything magical: fantasy books, her black cat Loki, and her best friends. She aspires to be a librarian or own a cozy bookshop.

Jacob Hancock says, "*audentes Fortuna iuvat.*"

Jada Hall is a senior at Tennessee Tech. This is her second time being published by the *Iris Review* and she hopes that her work will continue to uplift and support women.

Jaylon Ward is a 22-year-old filmmaker and photographer based in Cookeville, Tennessee. His passion for visual storytelling began at the age of seven when he started filming weddings alongside his dad, who introduced him to the fundamentals of videography. Over the past two years, he's dedicated himself to refining his craft through research and hands-on experience. His ultimate goal is to direct and produce music videos for some of his favorite artists, bringing their visions to life through his own visuals and innovative cinematography.

Jenna Herrin is a freshman English major at Tennessee Tech University with a concentration in creative writing.

Jill Van Domelen is a current student at Tennessee Tech perusing a bachelor's degree in fine arts with a concentration in painting. Along with painting, she also works with multiple printmaking techniques. Most recently she has been exploring altered prints, seen in her pieces "On the Way to the Bookstore" and "Birthday Birds," which are featured in this issue. Jill's work is largely inspired by nature, a theme that has persisted throughout her career as an artist. She has been featured in multiple student exhibitions, including the recent student show in Tech's Joan Derryberry Gallery. She also participates in barn shows, art crawls, and festivals where her ceramics and bookbinding are often featured.

Julia Ramler is a 15-year-old freshman at Cookeville High School. She has recently won three art awards, and her painting "Cerulean Girl" will be published in the next issue of *The Blunt Space*. Additionally, she is participating in a group art exhibit called "Authentically Ours" at Vanderbilt University.

Kat Gardner graduated from Tech in May 2024 with a B.S. in engineering technology and is now a manufacturing engineer. She participates in open mics with Sawmill Poetry.

Katie Nelson is a junior at Tennessee Tech University, where she majors in English with a focus on creative writing. She discovered her passion for writing through poetry and strives to craft works with universal understanding and interest. Katie's collection of poems, *Constellations of Life*, was published by the Origami Poems Project. She continues to grow both academically and creatively.

Kaylee Savage-Cutcher is a second-year creative writing and visual arts student. They primarily write weird fantasy and love dragons and cats a little too much.

Lance Terwilliger is a fourth year English major with a concentration in creative writing. He loves to read and write nearly everything from the comically absurd to the utterly grotesque and hopes to do so for as long as time allows.

Lillian Brackett is a sophomore at Cumberland County High School in Crossville, Tennessee. She enjoys reading, writing, and doing anything music related in her spare time. She hopes to pursue a career as either a vocal instructor or performer after high school.

Linda M. White started haunting Tennessee Tech's campus back in 2017, and she plans to stay until retirement. Worship, whimsy, and walking through life with her soulmate bring her the most joy in life. To the wonderful being reading this bio, she leaves you with a

quote from “Sleepsong” by Secret Garden: "...may you need never to banish misfortune. May you find kindness in all that you meet."

Lorn Pup is an artist and comic enthusiast with a passion for upcycling and creating mixed media. His work often tackles themes of mental health, upcycling, and music. Using art as a way to process and express an array of emotions, his work manifests through many different mediums. By blending different materials and styles, Lorn Pup brings new life to forgotten objects. A lover of music, movies, and the outdoors, he finds inspiration in the world around him. Lorn Pup continues to channel his experiences into his art, embracing his unique journey.

Luz is a queer little artist with Tookish dreams.

Cookeville-based artist **Mallory Webb** has been studying sculpture art for the past five years. While originally beginning in printmaking, Mallory found a love for 3D work while taking a class in high school. Her main goal is to repurpose old objects and create new exciting pieces. Mallory's main goal through her work is to save vintage objects from ending up in a landfill. She incorporates modern aspects into vintage gems so they can find a place in anyone's home.

Mari Ramler is an associate professor in English at Tennessee Tech University. She teaches in the professional and technical communication program and

researches at the intersection of science, technology, and religion. She also writes creative nonfiction and poetry.

Mark Creter has worked for Tennessee Technological University for 32 years. For 31 of those years, he served as the artistic director of the Backdoor Playhouse, directing numerous productions, overseeing the theatre program, and teaching a wide range of theatre courses as a proud member of the department of English in the College of Arts and Sciences. Since being moved to the School of Music in the College of Fine Arts last year, his sole responsibilities are teaching multiple sections of introduction to theatre. Creter has directed nearly 100 productions over the last 35 years and is active in the Cookeville area theatre community both directing and acting. He is grateful to his wife, Jennifer Dotson-Creter, and their son, Gus Creter, for their constant and unwavering support and inspiration.

Martha Highers is a poet and creative nonfiction writer living on a small farm just east of Cookeville. She edits the creative nonfiction journal *Under the Sun*.

Megan Dunsmore is an environmental and sustainability studies major with a concentration in environmental science at Tennessee Tech. She spends much of her time outdoors, drawing inspiration from nature as well as the people and animals around her. Megan hopes to continue being inspired and creating after graduation as she pursues her career in the sciences.

Nathanael Newton is a duck who has been granted the gift of speech and human comprehension. Despite wishing he could have his simple aquatic life back, he has decided he might as well share some of his thoughts with the human race while he can. He can be found most consistently listening to an audiobook while running under the light of the cold, distant moon.

Rachel Wingo is the cultural arts superintendent for the City of Cookeville and an adjunct instructor at Tennessee Tech. She is a proud parent of two and stepparent of one, 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 a hopeless tinkerer.

Raniece Canady is originally from Brooklyn, New York. She is a mom of two amazing girls, she is a singer/songwriter and poet and a special education teacher. Her single “Bumper Sticker Kind,” is available on all streaming platforms.

Scott Moss was born in Ohio and has lived in eleven states plus Washington, D.C. A double major in English and history, he worked as a program analyst for the Department of Homeland Security, where he held a secret security clearance—frustratingly leaving him with stories he can’t share. An aficionado of 70s rock, classic science fiction, red wine, French food, dogs, and his wife, Scott has spent over fifty years chasing the perfect biscuit recipe, a quest he now doubts he’ll

complete (though his dogs happily devour the evidence). He believes writing, much like biscuit baking, is an art of persistence and imperfection.

Sophia Clark is a Nashville native who relocated to Cookeville while pursuing her studies at Tennessee Tech. A sophomore majoring in business management with a minor in event planning, she finds inspiration in life’s simple joys—whether it’s brewing iced coffee, experimenting in the kitchen, or basking in the warmth of a sunny day. She loves spending her free time studying in coffee shops, baking for her friends, and chasing sunsets.

Taylor Crabtree graduated from Tennessee Tech last year. She is a young writer and philosopher just starting her career. Her writing focuses on creating accessible material for people with reading disabilities, and she hopes to bring more love and understanding into the world with her philosophies.

Since the beginning of this century, **Tony Baker** has taught at Tennessee Tech, where he’s an English professor and director of composition. He enjoys writing alongside his students.

West Below is a computer science student, passionate about philosophy and theology. He considers himself a political refugee, having fled the collapsing utopia of the UPDRC, short for the United People's Democratic Republic of California. He is finishing up his last

semester at Tennessee Technological University and seeks to go into data science in a time when data is the new dollar. He has received a place on the Tennessee Tech Dean's List for academic achievement and has previously earned an associate's degree in natural science at Santa Rosa Junior College. When he is not either working or working out he is usually found in his natural habitat, a den in some dark, scientifically unexplainable void in an alternate dimension, playing video games and reading, writing, or arguing online.