

THE WORKS

The arts publication of Sauk Valley
Community College



Fall 2021 and
Spring 2022

The Works

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*2021-2022 Student Art Contest
Winner*



Childhood Dreams

by Jessica Payne

2021-2022 Student Art Contest

Honorable Mention

Walking Along the Path

The sharp breeze around my ankles nips at the naked skin
My eyes, covered only by thin, plastic framed glasses, water in pain
This landscape, frozen in magnificent sculptures, glisten with fresh fallen snow
The trees, tall and towering, like ethereal giants watching over our tiny movements

Walking down the frozen path, I step, footstep to footstep, in the prints that you left behind
And looking ahead, I see your coat, thick and padded, and hat, yellow with a puff on top
You told me that you have a big surprise for me at the end of this long, winding path
And honestly, just being with you is enough of a treat for me

Aside from the glowing lights that string along our path, the world is dark
And beyond the warm yellow glow of the lights, the snow paints a beautiful, ever-moving picture
And this picture, so beautiful yet so simple, seems to be painted only for us
The end of the path comes into sight, and I see the surprise that you are giving me

A warm and cozy cabin, lights already on and fire already in the hearth.

-Matthew Long

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2021-2022 Student Art Contest

Honorable Mention



Crispy

by Micah Green

Fall 2021 - Spring 2022 Issue

2021-2022 Student Art Contest *Honorable Mention*



Floating

by Jessica Payne

2021-2022 Student Art Contest

Honorable Mention

The Devils in the Bellows

by James Hutchison

Amelia awoke with a start to a freezing draft that was drifting under the heavy wool comforter. She gently kicked and squirmed in an attempt to block the chill but it was to no avail. It took a moment for it to click in her groggy mind that it shouldn't be that damn cold in her bedroom to begin with; maybe the fireplace had gone out?

"Goddamn it," she whispered, careful not to awaken her husband, Rory, who slept soundly next to her. He had a proper job, after all, and would be grumpy if he had to get up before it was time.

She slipped out from under the covers as quietly as she could manage, sliding her feet into her fuzzy house shoes. The room was even colder than she realized and her breath steamed against the stillness of the night. She swore once more under her breath as the sleepiness was replaced by frustration and she began to mentally troubleshoot her situation. As she stood, instinct guided her to the window to peak out into the world; the same instinct that had kept her alive in the past, back when she was a soldier.

It was the middle of a nasty winter on the outskirts of Manhattan and the ground was hidden beneath at least three feet of ever-falling snow that silently drifted down like tiny, fat feathers. The street lights in the distance gave off an almost sickly amber color that always made her uneasy. It was another hold-over from the war a decade and a half prior; some colors would be ruined forever.

"Perimeter clear," she thought with a silent chuckle.

Amelia then turned her attention to the dark room. She could see just a little bit better than most people but that didn't stop her from lamenting her lack of darkvision. To her surprise, she could see that the door to her bedroom stood ajar. She immediately turned to check the bed for Rory, assuming he must have already gotten up before her to see why it was so cold and, sure enough, his side was empty. She realized that, in her attempts not to wake him, she hadn't noticed.

Suddenly, a peculiar sound echoed from beyond the bedroom door that sent goosebumps down her spine.

"The fuck was that?" she wondered aloud.

Just as it occurred to her that an outside door must also be open for it to

be so cold, another shrill sound that was much louder than the first seemed to emanate from somewhere else in the house.

“Babe?” she yelled loud enough to be heard downstairs, but there was no answer.

Amelia’s heart raced a little faster as she passed through the bedroom door and onto the balcony that looked over the living room. A lamp sat nearby on a table and she waved a hand and it fluttered to life, spilling light into the darkness around her. She looked over the balcony just as another sound, this time clearly a scream, pierced the stillness of the cold house.

Instinct took over once more as Amelia reached her right hand down towards where a sword might hang in a sheathe around her waist. She wore simple pajamas and was unarmed, but that didn’t stop her from grasping with her fingers and pulling with the same speed and violence that she would if she was in combat. A brilliant golden light accompanied by the sound of a tuning fork blasted into existence and in her hand she wielded the mighty sword, Sorrow’s Oath.

She sprinted down the stairs towards the scream shouting, “Rory!”

Another scream answered as she turned left into the kitchen and saw another door standing ajar that led to the outside parlor and from there, the entrance to the mausoleum prison. She could see Rory standing and facing the entrance to the mausoleum and, surrounding him, a pale pink light. She could’ve sworn her heart stopped in that moment but time certainly slowed. Some colors were ruined, after all.

“Magic,” whispered her thoughts.

She reached Rory just as he turned to face her, mouth agape in another scream that would have shaken the resolve of a lesser person. He reached towards her but it wasn’t the loving embrace that she had grown accustomed to but rather a clawing, raking attack. She dodged to the right using the weight of Sorrow’s Oath to counter balance her momentum and Rory recoiled with a gasping cry as the sword grazed his flesh which seared black and sizzled on contact.

“Rory no!” she cried as her tears welled up with horrific understanding.

But Rory had gone and lurching around in front of her was a horrible monster that had taken him, mind, body, and soul. The beast snarled and struck out at Amelia once again but she was too well trained to die like this, love be damned. She pivoted to the right again, spinning around Rory’s body and driving Sorrow’s Oath through his back and out through his sternum. Screams echoed against the night one final time as Amelia wrapped her free arm around Rory to control his fall, and they slipped to their knees together. As the life of the monster faded away, Amelia rested her head on his shoulder and began a sorrowful wail.

--

“Are you sure?” asked Rory.

Amelia stood only a fraction taller than the man she had just proposed to, just enough to look down into his pale green eyes and see the conflict reflected back towards her.

“This is what I want,” she said matter-of-factly.

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She held his hands in hers waiting patiently for him to say yes so she could shove the ring on his finger and squeal with excitement. Rory started to speak but her keen senses knew immediately the word he was about to speak wasn't "yes," so she quickly put her finger over his lips.

"I know all of that, Rory," she assured. "I've been doing this shit a long time. I've almost died a hundred times on a hundred battlefields and I did it all alone because that's what I wanted. And now..." she let her voice trail off and let her finger fall from his lips.

"You could teach me to spar i..." he began before Amelia cut him off shouting, "Rory!"

"Yes! Yes of course I want to marry you!" he yelled in excitement.

Amelia's squeals echoed around them as she drove the ring onto Rory's finger and embraced him with a kiss. They danced and twirled and sang and Amelia knew in that moment that she'd never been happier.

--

Amelia sat for a long time holding the weight of Rory's corpse. Her knees must have ached but she didn't notice. Her eyes were puffy, her cheeks were slick with frozen tears, and everything else from her ears to fingers burned against the blistering cold wind. The rest of the world around her continued on silently, unaware and uncaring that she had just taken the life of someone she loved more than anything. She stared blankly towards the open door that led back into the home that Rory had built with his own hands and her mind raced with every emotion that every memory she had made with him evoked.

Movement startled Amelia out of her near-catatonic state and her right hand tensed around the hilt of Sorrow's Oath as if to prepare for attack, but it wasn't a fresh horror sent to drive her into madness. She looked down and realized the body was crumpling in front of her as if it had been charred by fire. She pulled Sorrow's Oath free from the pile of smoldering bones and flesh and the blade still sung with an eerie ring. It was clean and gleaming as if it had never been blighted by death.

"Necromancy," whispered Amelia in realization.

Bolting to her feet, she stared at the disintegrating mound until it turned to ash and then slowly looked over the sword that had cause the destruction. Her mind shifted from the numbness of losing her beloved Rory to what it all meant. Sorrow's Oath burned with holy hatred for the undead with all of the divine power that coursed through its heart. It existed solely to oppose the power of necromancy and willed to smite undeath with the ruin of ten thousand searing suns.

Amelia loosened her grip and the sword vanished as if it had never existed and only seconds passed before she began to notice the tingling of her skin as it slowly froze against the icy wind of winter. She turned to face the entrance to the mausoleum and considered whether she should check for more unholy magic coming from below, but the mighty lock and chains that blocked the way seemed unbothered by all of the events of the night. Raising a hand towards the lock,

Amelia made a slight gesture and muttered an incantation under her breath. Her eyes glowed a faint blue and her vision clarified to reveal the faint magical aura that permeated the lock and chains.

“Still there,” she thought.

She wondered if it was possible that the evil within could be responsible for what happened to Rory but dismissed the thought as quickly as it formed. The inhabitants had slumbered for centuries and been guarded by countless members of the clergy before her. There was no reason to believe they had awoken tonight if the shackles were still in place.

Satisfied that the mausoleum hadn't been entered, she wrapped her arms tightly around herself as she had become fully conscious of the cold and walked away from the locked door and ashy mound of bones before stopping suddenly and bending down to the ashes. Reaching out a hand to the embers and brushing some away, she found Rory's ring that she had given him thirteen years ago. She slipped the ring onto a finger and whispered through a cracking voice, “I'll see you again, my love. This I promise.”

Amelia sat on the couch for a long time wrapped in a blanket and sipping on a hot cup of tea. The fireplace blazed across the room but it hadn't quite made the house comfortable yet. She stared into the flames for a little too long and tears threatened to flow again, so she looked away, careful not to let her gaze rest on anything that would make her think of Rory's face. She had to focus. She had to think. She had to plot.

It was the light from the rising sun that jolted her out of deep thought. It broke through the house from her left, the same direction as the mausoleum, and rose into the eastern sky like an angry god. Legends say it used to burn the sky with a pale blue color back when dragons ruled all that was above, but those were just tales to Amelia. She had only ever known the scarred sky and its pinkish red hue. Some colors were ruined forever.

“Evahr?” said Amelia into the phone.

“Yes? Hello?” answered a smooth, sleepy voice.

“I'm sorry to call so early. It's Amelia Hulford.”

“Hulford? The paladin?”

“That was a long time ago but, yes.”

“A long time to you, maybe,” chuckled Evahr.

“Right,” she replied.

“It's been, what...”

“Sixteen years,” answered Amelia.

“Ah, yes. I remember... One of the Eighlots.”

Amelia started to answer but held her tongue.

“I'm sorry. That was unnecessary,” resigned Evahr.

“Evahr, we weren't really close in those days, but I had hoped that I made enough of an impression that you'd be willing to help me with...” her voice trailed off.

“A problem,” filled in Evahr.

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“You were one of the few who was willing to share your knowledge with your... lessers.”

“That’s rather harsh,” said Evahr rather indignantly.

Amelia took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“What is this problem, Amelia?” asked Evahr. “It’s unusual to call up wizards as the sun rises, even if you do have a passing acquaintance.”

“Necromancy,” blurted out Amelia a little too quickly.

“What did you say?” answered Evahr, bolting up from his bed.

There was silence for many breaths as both parties considered the use of that word. He didn’t really need her to repeat herself.

“Evahr?” asked Amelia cautiously.

“Are you telling me that you have encountered necromancy?”

“Something happened to my husband and...” she trailed off as her voice cracked. “...he was possessed or overtaken by something. I killed him with Sorrow’s Oath.”

There was an uncomfortable pause before Evahr said, “I think I understand.”

“He burned,” answered Amelia while choking through tears.

“The sword that would raze the undead with holy flame,” recalled Evahr. “Did you call me because you want to hide this from the Clergy?” he asked curiously.

“No. No, that’s not the point. I’m worried that I can’t bring him back.”

“Bring him back?” repeated Evahr.

“It wasn’t his time.”

“That’s... extreme.”

“What are you saying?”

“Resurrection magic is... expensive, Amelia. Never mind that; it’s virtually impossible to access. You know this. Hell, you know why?”

“I don’t care. I’ll do what it takes.”

“To what end? If you go against the clergy, you could fall very hard.”

“I don’t care!” shouted Amelia.

There was silence for a while as Amelia struggled to calm her breathing.

“I’ll ask again. Why did you call me?”

Amelia didn’t answer so Evahr continued:

“As I recall, you’re oath bound to the Dawnfather. Your husband was... transformed... and you killed him. If your intent is to resurrect him—consequences be damned—you’ll have to find a way to acquire the magic. This is not my expertise. I don’t raise the dead and I certainly don’t have standing with the Clergy.”

“I killed him with Sorrow’s Oath, he can’t be brought back at all if the legends are true.”

“I can’t do what you’re thinking, Amelia.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

Evahr sighed heavily into the phone and began to speak before pausing. His mind raced to a time long before Amelia would have even been born and old

feelings and regrets washed over him.

“I can’t,” he said simply.

“Fuck.”

“Even if there was a way to use the divine to return his soul to a body, the clergy won’t allow it.”

“They could do it for me. I’m the fucking Champion of the Bellows.”

“I... I suppose you could ask.”

“Will you go with me? You know more about necromancy than most. Maybe you can figure out a way for it to work.”

“If I do and if they agree and if it has any chance of working, how in the hell do you intend to pay for it?”

“I’ll offer a return to active service.”

“Active? You’re not a young up-and-coming soldier anymore. You think you can just throw on your armor and jump unto a battlefield and not die immediately?”

“I have to fucking do something, Evahr!” she screamed into the phone. “I have to try.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then I will do it alone.”

“By the gods, Amelia. You could die, or worse, fall from grace. You’re willing to risk losing everything you are?”

“I have served the Dawnfather and the Clergy loyally my whole life and in return I have seen greatness, I have known triumph, and I have known love. I will not allow Rory to be taken from me.”

“Fine,” said Evahr with resignation. “Tell me where you are.”

“West Manhattan on the outskirts,” answered Amelia. “Sanctum 603, Mazeroughts.”

-

Amelia knelt on the floor in front of the stone alter and offered incense. The intense scent filled the small room quickly and permeated every pore of Amelia’s body as she contemplated her coming actions and the consequences it would have on her standing with her deity. Evahr was right; if she disobeyed the Clergy and the holy laws regarding resurrection it would mean a broken oath and a hollow soul.

Her eyes drifted up the face of the statue of the Pelor, the Dawnfather, and she wondered if the god was looking down upon her in her time of sorrow. She considered saying a prayer but decided instead to keep her thoughts of what happens next to herself. She wouldn’t risk falling from grace just yet if Pelor happened to be looking her way.

Standing, Amelia walked to the other side of the small room and stood before her golden suit of armor; it hung on an armor stand and gleamed in the faint light of candle fire. The armor, as well as Sorrow’s Oath, had been gifted to her by the Clergy the same day she took on the title of Champion of the Bellows. Her hand touched the metal surface of the armor and she whispered its name, “Sorrow’s Bulwark” and suddenly the magical sigils that traced the entire surface

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of the metal burst into life and flooded the room with brilliance. She turned away as the light faded and the same feelings she had experienced over a decade ago resurfaced. The gifting of these armaments was bittersweet for it meant that she had stepped down from active service and been assigned a permanent home duty guarding one of the hundreds of mausoleum prisons dotting the landscape of Manhattan. She'd never again walk on a battlefield or stand upon the corpse of a would-be devil-god.

The doorbell was ringing when Amelia emerged from the basement armory. She quickly opened the door to find Evahr standing in the gently falling snow.

"Oh, hi," she said with a gentle smile.

"Hello," answered a tall, slender elf with his own smile.

Amelia gestured him inside and pointed to a nearby coat rack.

"How was the trip?" asked Amelia.

"Slower than I would have liked. The airports in L.A. are dreadful this time of year."

"Even the teleports?"

"No but I still had to wade through a sea of tourists and holiday travellers."

"I guess I assumed you would just teleport yourself."

"Magic is expensive," he replied with a chuckle.

But Amelia's attention had already returned to a mountain of tomes and scrolls she'd laid out on the coffee table. Most were open to specific pages and, with a quick glance, Evahr could see that Amelia was researching everything from undeath to resurrection.

"Have you found anything useful?" he asked.

"Not really. I can't find much on the sword but, what I have found suggests the magic in Sorrow's Oath is a divine decree."

"That will hurt our chances," said Evahr with a wince.

"I know I know," sighed Amelia. "Any ideas?"

"Not immediately. If the magic is a divine decree, then no divine magic that I know of can counter it."

"Not even a miracle?"

"I can't say for sure. The Clergy would know."

"I scheduled an appointment with High Priestess Donia. Maybe she knows something we don't."

"Doesn't hurt to ask."

Amelia sat on the nearby couch and dropped her face into her hands and Evahr moved to the couch and sat opposite her. Comforting people wasn't something he was accustomed to.

"Um, I'm not really sure what help I can provide but I'll do what I can," said Evahr.

Amelia lifted her head and looked at him for a moment.

"You were there when the gods descended, weren't you?"

"I..." began Evahr, startled. "Yes. It was terrifying."

"Tell me about it?"

“I don’t know what I can say that you didn’t learn from the Clergy. It’s in all of the history books.”

“Tell me, please.”

Evahr sighed heavily and rubbed his hands on his face before taking out a flask with finely engraved lines shimmering on its surface. He took a deep drink and passed it to Amelia who also took a drink.

“Fruity,” she noted.

“I prefer it sweet.”

Evahr sat and waited, hoping that Amelia would relent in her request but she continued staring at him, patiently waiting.

“It was the seventh year of the war and most countries had allied and pooled resources just to keep us on an equal footing with the forces of the nine hells but it just wasn’t enough. They had one thing we didn’t; infinite resurrections. Sure, fallen devils are usually demoted but that didn’t work in our favor. Those who were demoted simply fought harder for glory when they returned to battle and those that had been promoted in their stead fought equally as hard to hold onto their new-found authority. We realized that the only way to have any chance was to use the same tactics. We had to resurrect our own forces as fast as they fell. Since we couldn’t train clerics fast enough to keep up with healing demands, it was more efficient to assign a few clerics to permanent resurrection duty. This relieved some of the pressure from those assigned to the main battle front as we could just transport the fallen to the rear, resurrect them, then reinforce the front lines.”

“Conveyor belt resurrection.”

“Exactly. And it worked because we could do the ritual faster than the devils. Turnaround time for our forces was about a third of that for the devils. We started pushing them back to the Bellows until we ran into another problem...”

“Resources.”

“We had to sacrifice much to fuel the resurrections. People who were already malnourished started starving. The economy started to collapse as the prices for diamonds inflated to astronomical numbers. Mines couldn’t keep up with demands. We resorted to using less powerful resurrection magic but the cost of doing so was horrific. Every time a soldier was resurrected they would come back a little... less.”

“And then...”

“The Raven Queen. She led a few of the other gods to our front door and decreed that we had violated the sanctity of death and upset the precarious balance. She compared our mistake to necromancy and demanded a thousand years of restitution for our misdeeds.”

“I didn’t know about the necromancy,” said Amelia in absolute shock.

Evahr took another drink of his flask and continued, “We were horrified. The Clergy acted immediately and banned all resurrections out of fear that the gods would take it away completely. We shifted our resources to healing and created the Apostles Sanctuary to learn and teach the ways of healing as fast as we could manage.”

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“Then came the Eighlots,” said Amelia with a groan.

“They were our saviors. Pure of heart children gifted with divine power. A weapon from the gods to aid us against the Nine Hells.”

Amelia reached and grabbed the flask from Evahr’s hand and drank deeply from its infinite contents.

“Fucking traitors,” she said, slamming the flask onto the table.

Evahr’s brow furrowed as he considered Amelia who face had turned away to face the direction of the mausoleum and the pile of charred bones that was once her husband.

“Amelia, I don’t know where this path you’ve chosen is going to lead you but...” he paused to consider his next words. “The Eighlots refused to except the hand they were dealt.”

Amelia’s head snapped around to face Evahr and she opened her mouth to speak, or perhaps yell at the elf but no words escaped. Instead, tears began to form and she reached to the table to brace herself. Evahr placed a hand on her shoulder as gently as he could muster and said, “It is not my place to say whether they, or you, are right or wrong. I’ve done... terrible things in my long life. I merely want you to understand what’s down that path.”

“Our appointment is soon,” said Amelia, clearing her throat and sniffling. “I need to get ready.”

She then stood and went upstairs leaving Evahr alone. After a few minutes, he decided to take a look around the bottom floor of the house as well as outside and cast a simple spell that would expand his vision to see things that wouldn’t normally be visible. Eventually he stepped into the freezing cold that awaited him outside and approached the blackened remains of Rory. He stooped down and looked them over for any hint of magic but whatever was once there had long passed. He then stood and walked towards the enormous structure of the mausoleum prison and carefully let his vision trace the magical energy that infused the mighty chains and lock that covered the entrance. The chains glowed bright with all manner of protective enchantments meant to keep whatever was inside from ever walking the land of the living again. After a circle around the structure, Evahr was satisfied and headed in side where he found Amelia dressed and ready to go.

“I took a look over the prison. Didn’t really see anything out of place.”

“I had hoped it would be that simple,” replied Amelia.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok, Evahr. Thanks.”

“Shall we?”

With that, the two left the home and found a lime green Prius sitting in the driveway.

“Is that yours?” asked Amelia.

“It’s a rental,” answered Evahr.

“There’s something comical about a four-hundred-year old wizard driving a lime green Prius.”

“Magic is expensive,” he said dismissively.

“Right. Well, I’m driving,” said Amelia and walked to the old Chevy truck nearby.

“You drive a rust boat,” quipped Evahr.

“It’s old like me,” returned Amelia.

The vehicle started with a roaring groan and shook a vibrated a little more than Evahr would have liked but there was no denying the machine had personality as Amelia guided it onto the slick streets of Manhattan.

The distance to the Divine Cathedral wasn’t particular far, as the crow flies, but the narrow roads, snowy conditions, and crowded byways stretched the time being shaken by the ancient land vehicle to its maximum. Evahr complained several times about the noise and rattling teeth but Amelia let the steel monster take her back to the old times riding atop the mighty siege engines she’d often rode into combat. It was a miserable experience. She wore simpler armor back then; less padded and bulkier, so the incessant vibrations of the tracked tanks shot through her with virtually nothing to keep her brain from bouncing around inside her skull.

She missed it. She missed the weight of that shitty armor and cacophonous BOOM of the main cannon. She missed charging into hordes of devil-kin at the front of ten thousand battle-hardened soldiers.

It was the scent of magic as conscripted battle mages rent the fabric of reality asunder, pulling meteors from orbit and dropping them on legions of the enemies of mortals across the world.

It was the fresh faced clerics screaming in abject horror as they tried to gather their wits enough to heal the wounded faster than the enemy could cut them down.

It was the battle drummers chanting hymns of empowerment over the din of battle. Most were college kids who would have preferred to be musicians or comedians but, usually, those dreams were limited to performing for soldiers between battles to keep moral up.

Amelia tried to avoid letting her mind drift too far into those old times. Other memories lurked there that she’d rather forget; the smell of necromancy; the Eighlots.

“Hey!” yelled a voice that snapped Amelia back to reality.

Her foot hit the gas a little too quickly and the back tires on the steel vehicle spun just enough to move her halfway into an intersection before she realized she had been stopped at a four-way crossing and then zoned completely out. Slamming on the brakes she yelled, “shit!”

“Whoa, it’s ok!” assured Evahr. “Looks like you got lost there for a second. You ok?”

“Yeah, fuck. Yeah I’m fine I’m fine.”

Suddenly they heard the horn of the car behind them.

“Right,” breathed Amelia and then eased on the gas again.

When the pair turned the corner onto the street where the Divine Cathedral split the heavens Evahr let out a gasp.

“Fuck’s sake,” he said.

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“What?” asked Amelia.

“I haven’t seen it since... well a long time. Bigger than I remember.”

“They add the that central spire last year. It’s connected with five others around the city.”

“Connected how?”

“Forms an antimagic dome around the city if they need it.”

Evahr didn’t answer but his head slowly turned away from the spire and towards Amelia.

“I know,” she said in response. “I know.”

The two were greeted at the massive steel doors that guarded the entrance to the cathedral. Evahr took a moment to appreciate the sheer level of magical protection the doors and walls of the cathedral provided those within. At first he considered how much sense it made to have that much protection for the clergy within but his mind soon wandered to the darker side of such few people holding that much power. “No one is safe from corruption,” he thought.

Being led inside by a humble acolyte, Amelia and Evahr walked a few paces behind, taking in the recent renovations and divine inscriptions still being inlaid in diamond dust.

“Fresh protection charms,” quietly mused Evahr.

“I didn’t know they were doing all of this,” whispered Amelia in return.

“Seems like they know something we don’t.”

Amelia didn’t answer but shot a knowing glance to the wizard.

Eventually, the acolyte stopped in front of a set of simple, wooden doors and gestured for the pair to enter and waiting inside an equally simple office was an elven woman with slightly graying hair and dressed in the garb of a holy cleric of Pelor.

“Amelia!” said the elf with a bright smile.

“High priestess Donia,” answered Amelia with a slight bow.

“There’s no need for that, young lady,” answered Donia with a chuckle.

“Very well, Donia. This is Evahr Nil’ethel. He’s a friend and a bit more knowledgeable on the things we discussed by phone.”

“Elder,” said Evahr in the elvish tongue and a gentle bow.

“Welcome, Evahr of the Endless Night,” returned Donia in the elvish tongue.

“You know of me?” asked Evahr, reverting to the common tongue.

“I have lived long. I know many things. Please, both of you sit.”

“Donia,” began Amelia. “Is something happening?”

“Whatever do you mean?” answered Donia.

“The spire, the fresh protection charms in diamond dust, the sense of... preparation around this place.”

Donia leaned forward and placed her arms on her desk.

“The clergy is always in a state of preparation,” she said, never letting the smile drop from her face.

“Right...” said Evahr.

“On the phone you spoke of something personal that you needed the clergy’s aid with. What is it?” asked Donia.

Amelia took a deep breath and then replied, “My husband was killed. I don’t know by what. I’ve come to request access to resurrection services.”

Evahr internally braced himself, shocked that Amelia spoke so direct to the high priestess.

Donia sat back in her seat and put her fingers together under her chin and seemed to settle into a state of contemplation. She wasn’t expecting such an absurd request nor the manner in which it was requested. She also knew she couldn’t even consider bringing a common person back from the dead even if he was the spouse of the Champion of the Bellows. Whatever her answer was to be, she knew she had to tread carefully; Amelia may have rejected the path of the Eighlots in the past but who was to say what she would do this time?

“Amelia...” began Donia. “...this is a difficult request,” she paused to gauge Amelia’s reaction but the old paladin simply looked on.

Donia leaned forward and continued hesitantly; “The laws can’t simply be bent because... th... I know how much it must hurt to have lost your husband but the gods have decreed that the dead must stay dead. We bent the rules already and now we pay the price.”

There was a long silence that started eating at the edges of Evahr’s mind. He swore he could feel the temperature rise to his left where Amelia sat a few feet away.

“Perhaps the circumstances of R... of the death would allow a caveat?” said Evahr cautiously.

“Circumstances?” responded Donia, snapping her eyes to Evahr.

“Amelia?” asked Evahr but her face rested in her right hand as she leaned on it.

“Um...” began Evahr. “We think he may have been killed by some form of necromantic magic.”

Donia abruptly stood from her chair and leaned onto the desk with both arms.

“The mausoleum?” she asked in a panic.

“We don’t think so,” answered Evahr.

“Then what?”

“We have no idea but what we do know is that it happened in the dead of night and when Amelia discovered him she was forced...”

“Evahr,” said Amelia quietly.

“How?” asked Donia.

Amelia stood suddenly and with a mere wave of her right hand Sorrow’s Oath blinked into existence with a fading ring. She then pointed the tip of the blade at Donia who slowly sat down and away from the relic. Amelia took a partial step forward and as her eyes began to water and through gritted teeth she said, “I. Killed. Him.”

“Amelia, please, I didn’t know,” said Donia as she fought the urge to panic.

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“Help. Me,” said Amelia. “Please,” and the tears she had managed to keep at bay flooded from her face.

“I can’t, child. The magic of the sword can’t be undone. There’s no way.”

Amelia slowly lowered Sorrow’s Oath and loosened its grip.

“There is a way,” she said simply and stormed out.

-

“You’ve always been very mum about that building in the back,” said Rory.

“It’s just a creepy coffin full of corpses, babe,” said Amelia dismissively.

“It’s a huge stone building surrounded by magic and chains with a retired paladin guarding it to her grave,” he said with a slight uptick in his voice.

“And you thought I was gonna give it all up,” she said with a laugh and booped him on the nose.

“What’s in there!?”

“Why do you wanna know so bad!?”

“Because I’m a normal guy and normal people wanna know shit like this!”

“You’re not as normal as you think. You married someone who could smite you if you pissed her off.”

“You say that way too often.”

“Because it’s truuuuue.”

“I’m gonna knock on the door.”

“Wait what?”

But Rory had already stood and walked off heading in the direction of the mausoleum.

“BABE!”

“I’m just gonna knock,” he said, increasing his speed into a jog.

“No, wait!” cried Amelia as she gave chase.

“I’m so fast!”

“Rory you can’t do that!”

But Rory was already standing in front of the imposing structure by the time Amelia caught up to him.

“Just a knock,” said Rory.

“Uggh why are you so obsessed with this building. It’s been sealed for centuries!”

“I didn’t always want to be a carpenter, ya know?”

“What?”

“Growing up during a war makes a boy want to fight. My dad used to say, ‘the problem with fighting, boy, is that you also have to bleed.’”

“Strange but I guess that is technically true.”

“Hm. Yeah. He didn’t want me to fight because ‘some people have to keep what hasn’t been lost from falling down.’ He was a bit simple.”

“What’s wrong with simple?”

“No, nothing, I just... I guess I get into my feelings sometimes and figure if I at least know a bit more than normal folk than that makes me a little less... simple.”

“Vampires.”

“What?”

“It’s vampires. Some ancient family put down a long time ago by the Clergy.”

“Well, why not just kill them?”

“Apparently they know things that no one knows anymore.”

“So, they’re hard drives?”

“Sure, I guess. Hard drives that can infiltrate society and rot it from the inside out.”

“That’s dark.”

“They also raise zombies and drink blood.”

“That’s not gonna help me sleep tonight.”

“Don’t worry, my love. I’ll save you.”

-

Amelia was already sitting in the truck when Evahr caught up to her. She gripped the steering wheel so tightly that the skin on her hands had turned white with the tension.

“Why can’t you make a wish,” asked Amelia the instant Evahr sat in the seat next to her.

“Uh, well...” started Evahr, completely caught off guard.

“A wish could fix this,” she said, choking through tears.

“I lost it,” he said, finally.

Amelia didn’t speak but turned to face Evahr with shock written on her face.

“It’s gone. More than a century ago.”

“Fuck,” she responded with a deep sigh. “What did you wish for?”

“Something personal. Something very dear.”

“A person?”

“A person.”

Amelia looked away from Evahr and wept for a long time. Even Evahr, ancient by human standards and as resigned as any elf, allowed his own mind to travel back into memories he’d really rather not relive. The pair sat quietly for a time save for the howling of the wind and snow hitting the outside of the rusty old truck and the occasional sniffing.

“Take me to hell,” said Amelia, abruptly.

“What the fuck does that mean?” asked a startled Evahr.

“I know you can at least do that.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“The City of Dis. Take me there.”

“Amelia that’s insane. That’s insane!”

“Either you take me or I will find another way.”

“You can’t pay that price. You can’t. It’s one thing to fall from grace but to do... that?”

“But it will work, Evahr.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I have to try.”

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“Fuck. FUCK!”

“I’m valuable to them. They’ll give me anything I want.”

“And if you succeed and bring him back, what then? Will you tell him you’re burning for eternity as some devil’s slave so he can live forty more years and die of old age or will he just have to figure that out on his own!?”

By then Evahr was shouting but Amelia didn’t flinch.

“What would you do?” asked Amelia. “What did you do?”

“I…” he started but faltered. “I don’t have what I need for the spell,” he said in resignation.

“I have an attunement rod.”

“You have an attunement rod for the Iron City of Dis?” he asked in disbelief.

“It’s at ho… it’s at the house.”

“Fine but I have one request.”

“What?”

“Sleep on it? Please. One night.”

-

The return trip to Amelia and Rory’s lifeless home was slower. The mix of snow and sleet whipped into the city with ferocity and made the roads slick enough that the monstrous vehicle slid more than a couple times as it was guided through the narrow streets of lower Manhattan. Evahr had sat silently for several minutes gazing out the window when they came to a stop behind some traffic that was building ahead of them, and he was forced to take notice of the homeless people down a lowly-lit alley between two towering cathedrals to the deities of the world. It was an unpleasant sight that made his stomach turn.

“It was for love,” said Evahr, snapping the silence.

“What?” returned Amelia.

“My wish. I used it for love.”

“Oh. I…”

“I haven’t known peace since.”

“What happened?”

Evahr was silent again as the traffic began to move and the rear tires spun for a split second before finding purchase on the quickly icing roads. He peered down the alley once more into the darkness where a multitude of the poor and helpless were huddled against the storm and pressed his eyes shut tightly.

“I was married,” he said finally.

Amelia started to speak but quickly stopped. She was worried the wrong words would silence the elf.

“His name was Bobby. He was human. It was a lifetime ago for someone like you, but it might as well have been yesterday for me. I met him when I was a child, and he was just becoming an adult. I was so in love. My parents tried to warn me that it was folly to give myself to a human, but I wouldn’t hear it.”

Evahr was silent again as they came to a stop at an intersection. The light was green, but the road was blocked by a fleet of trucks already salting the roads. Amelia looked at Evahr to see if he seemed done speaking, but he was staring

ahead into the lights.

“How old were you?” she asked.

Evahr’s head spun around to face her as if he’d been lost in thought.

“Oh, 17.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah. He was 19. He tried to mug me.”

Amelia tried and failed to suppress a laugh.

“It’s ok to laugh,” he said with a smile. He was living on the streets and thought an elf dressed as well as I must be rich.

“Were you?”

“Close enough. I fed him and rented a room for him for a few days. It was a whirlwind after that.”

“I can only imagine if he was worth a wish,” said Amelia.

“Yeah...” replied Evahr as his gaze slowly faded out into the storm. “He wasn’t killed, if that’s what you’re thinking. He just did what humans do. Got old. I was barely an adult and he was passing on from this world.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So were my parents.”

“So, you...”

“You can’t be hasty with a wish, Amelia. It requires a calm mind. Precision. Steady breaths. All of the things I wasn’t as he lay dying of old age and all I could think was ‘I have the power!’”

Amelia chanced a long look at Evahr despite the intensifying storm.

“I rushed it. My ambition and grief came out of my mouth like vomit.”

“It didn’t work?”

“Of course it worked.”

“I... don’t understand.”

“He’s still alive.”

Amelia gasped as she began to understand.

“Still alive. Still aging. Forever.”

-

The rising light of the morning broke just a little bit too quickly for Evahr liking as he allowed himself to drift out of his deep meditation and back into reality. He’d spent the night traversing the receded places of his own memory looking for anything that could explain the path he’d agreed to take with a stubborn paladin that was literally hell-bent on following in the tracks of the rest of the Eighlots.

Evahr was sipping on a cup of tea when he heard the thunderous clanking of heavy armor plating slamming around downstairs. He sighed and dropped his head at the sound; he knew what it meant.

Finishing his tea, Evahr followed the sound to find a small armory in which Amelia was donning a massive set of plate armor that looked as if it still bore the dents and blood from whatever battle it had last seen.

“I’ll ask for a wish spell and trade as little as they will accept,” said Amelia as she locked a leather strap in place.

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“Did you even consider...”

“No,” said Amelia, cutting him off.

Evahr simply sighed.

“Here,” she said and then tossed him a two-pronged piece of metal.

The metal was warm to the touch and bore deep markings down the side that signified its use.

“I’m ready,” said Amelia after a few more minutes.

“I suppose you are. Last chance. Last chance to move on.” he said in a pleading voice.

Amelia answered by drawing a longsword from its sheath and affixing a shield to her opposite arm.

Realizing the decision was truly set in stone, Evahr stepped forward and began chanting ancient words that made the room around them seem to swirl and bulge and distort. Symbols appeared in the air tracing behind the metal rod that surrounded them in a sphere of magical energy and all at once the two disappeared from the small armory and were inundated with horrific, oppressive heat.

Amelia wasted no time picking a direction and marching off. She offered no words to Evahr but spared a glance over her shoulder and a nod of her head. Evahr fell in behind her, keeping pace and staying close enough that they could defend each other if they came under attack.

While Amelia didn’t seem concerned, Evahr certainly noticed the denizens of the Iron City cowering in the shadows cast by the red glow emanating from what could maybe be called a sky where fly hundreds of winged creatures to and fro. Some were huge and armed with jagged spears while others were tiny and could be mistaken for birds at a distance, but Evahr knew better than that.

Hordes of monstrous creatures lined the edges of the streets, most of which were chained in some way or another to each of as well as to a slave master and it was those slave masters that most concerned the pair, even Amelia.

“Pit fiend,” whispered Evahr as they drew close to a huge, winged creature.

It stood over nine feet tall and held a series of chains in one hand. The other end of the chains was attached to creatures so utterly grotesque that the pair looked away lest they become sick. The creatures were little more than masses of contorted flesh with spindly arms and legs jutting out at haphazard angles and their faces seem comprised of many faces mashed together to become individual writhing monsters.

“What mortal scum this way comes,” emanated a deep and harsh voice from the direction of the pit fiend.

Amelia and Evahr froze in place—one tightening her grip on her weapons and the other preparing magical components.

“I’m looking for Sudar,” said Amelia.

The pit fiend slowly approached, yanking hard on the chains causing the slaves to groan in agony.

“Sudar?” replied the gravelly voice. “I know you,” he said as his mouth contorted into a grin.

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“That means nothing to me, beast,” retorted Amelia.

“Something tellssss me it soon will,” answered the pit fiend with a raucous laugh. “Sudar awaits you in Hadar’s Embrace, Champion of the Bellows.”

“Awaits? What does that mean?” said a somewhat panicked Evahr as soon as they were out of earshot of the devil slaver.

“I don’t know,” answered Amelia.

“Amelia now is not the time for falsehoods.”

“I’m not lying!”

“How could she know you’re coming?”

Rather than answer, Amelia simply picked up the pace walking ahead of Evahr. To the wizard it seemed as if she knew exactly where she going and in shorter time than he had imagined Amelia came to a stop in front of metal door covered in the language of devils.

-

“I know I know. I shouldn’t be down here,” said Rory.

Amelia chuckled as she stepped into the armory beneath their home.

“No, you shouldn’t. He might get upset,” she said jokingly while pointing at the statue of Pelor.

“Right. Uh...”

“I’m joking, babe. But I am curious why you’re down here.”

“I guess it’s all kinda mesmerizing. My wife, the Champion of the Bellows and her golden armor, magical sword, and eternal shrine to her god in the basement.”

“Heh. Those were the days.”

Rory turned and embraced his wife picking her up off the ground with a powerful hug before putting her down and letting his expression twist into seriousness.

“Can you tell me about it? Or is it like some weird magical secret?”

“It’s not a secret it’s just ancient history.”

“Ok so... I know the Bellows; the forges built by the devils when they invaded.”

“Mhm. Basically their base of operations for the invasion.”

“And you led an attack? What happened?”

“Not an attack. The attack. The Eigh... Uh, we had pushed them back to the hellgate at the Bellows and gambled that, with enough strength, we could break their offensive.”

“Right. Don’t talk about them,” said Rory with a whisper.

Amelia rolled her eyes and continued:

“We led a hundred thousand troops into the fray. I came in on an airship with a smaller force of five thousand. We shock-teleported from the airship right on top of the commander’s fortress.”

“Holy shit. You took down the commander of the entire invasion? Can you say who it was? The clergy’s records are so sparse.”

“Her name was Sudar.”

-

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“She’s in there,” whispered Amelia.

“Amelia what’s going on?” pleaded Evahr.

“It was her. After all this time she came for revenge.”

“What? What does that mean?”

Amelia’s shoulders dropped from their tense position and she seemed to relax.

“The Battle of the Bellows. I sent her back to hell.”

Evahr’s eyes grew wide as he realized what Amelia was saying.

“She... she did this?” he asked quietly.

“Turned my husband into a monster knowing what I would be oathbound to do. Betting that I would take the path of the Eighlots.”

“Which would lead you right to where she would be waiting?”

Amelia looked at Evahr and for the first time a gentle smile spread across her face. But the wizard knew better than to think it was joy.

“You can still walk away. Right now,” said the elf.

“You know I won’t do that,” she said with a gentle chuckle and turned to face the door.

The iron door was heavy and its surface burned like flame as Amelia forced it open and stepped into Hadar’s Embrace. The stench that hit the pair in the face nearly overwhelmed them both and Evahr doubled over dry heaving. The interior was smoky and dim as the only light source seemed to be a massive stone pot containing molten metal. The heat of the city was already nigh unbearable but the inside of the building felt like being dunked in boiling water.

“Welcome, champion,” said a feminine voice that easily emanated across the room from a horned silhouette.

“Sudar,” answered Amelia.

“Oh, you remembered,” replied the voice with a chuckle.

“Something tells me you know why I’m here.”

“Why, to break your oath, of course.”

Amelia tensed at the words as she slowly approached the silhouette.

“It’s very clever...” began Amelia with heavy breaths. “...this trickery.”

“I’ve had a long time to make plans. You were so easy. I just needed the right hook.”

“I want him back.”

The silhouette leaned forward revealing a devil-kin creature with deep crimson skin, horns that wrapped around each side of its head, and eyes that began to glow and swirl with bright orange color.

“Let’ssss make a deal,” hissed Archdevil Sudar.

Amelia sat across from the devil and Evahr sat beside the old paladin trying his best not to sear his flesh to the hot stone. Almost immediately Sudar produced a flowing piece of fleshy parchment with a wave of her hand and it floated to the table.

“I see you were prepared,” said Amelia.

“Well, I can’t see the future,” hissed Sudar in response.

Amelia looked over the contract laid out before her and quickly found the

offer.

“No. I don’t just want his soul,” said Amelia.

“Oh?” responded a curious Sudar.

“I want a wish spell. I will return him to full life.”

“Your wizard friend can’t do that for you?” replied Sudar mockingly.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Well that changesss the termssss don’t you think?”

Amelia took as a deep of a breath as the inferno around her would allow before saying, “Whatever it takes.”

“Hm,” replied Sudar with a slow grin. “Happy day.”

Amelia and Evahr watched as Sudar took out a stained red quill and began writing on the parchment and immediately the words began to shift and change to meet the new terms of the contract.

“Satisfactory?” asked Sudar.

Amelia took a moment to read over the terms and then looked at Sudar.

“The spell? I want to see it before I sign.”

“So untrusting,” quipped Sudar.

“I want to see it,” Amelia sternly.

“Ugh. Fine. But no touching,” chuckled Sudar.

With another magical wave of her hand a scroll slowly materialized in her hand that glowed with faint light from its rolled page.

“Satisfactory?” hissed Sudar again.

“Yes,” answered Evahr followed by a booming explosion.

It was lightning-fast movement—a flick of the wrist—and a pebble sized orb flew from Evahr’s hand striking the nearby stone wall with powerful fireball that rocked the foundations of the building throwing both Sudar and Amelia to the ground. Rubble fell from the ceiling followed by the whooshing sound of blazing hot air and underneath the cacophony a voice could be heard screaming, “RUN AMELIA!”

“Stop them!” screamed Sudar in a shrill voice.

Amelia was already scrambling to her feet and making for the door when Sudar appeared in front of her brandishing dual scimitars and striking out with a scream. Amelia dodged backwards as much as her heavy armor would allow but the scimitars raked across her breastplate carving deep grooves in the metal and drawing blood from underneath.

“You will not leave here!” screamed Sudar.

“Dawnfather, forgive me and guide my blade!” cried Amelia driving her sword into the air as a blinding light swirl through the darkness and around the blade. Amelia swung the old sword with all of her might and drove it through the shoulder of the Archdevil who was struck with the divine power of Pelor. The sheer magnitude of radiant energy was enough to scatter the lower devils pouring in through the doorway and slam Sudar into a nearby wall with a mighty crash. Sudar screamed more orders to the lesser devils but Amelia charged through them using the mass of her armor like a battering ram.

Outside the streets of The Iron City of Dis were awash with all manner of

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colorful magic as Evahr battled a horde of devils. The wizard was surrounded on all sides but his face was alight with maniacal laughter.

“Amelia! To me!” screamed Evahr over the squealing of devils being torn apart by magical force.

Amelia charged forward swatting away enemies with her sword. From her left, the pit fiend they had encountered earlier swung a monstrous weapon that seemed to be made of blood and bone but the old paladin called upon her skill from days long past to brace herself against the blow and trusting her ancient armor. The fiend’s sword struck across Amelia’s shield and exploded on impact sending broken shards hurtling through the air and impaling a few nearby minions.

With a final grunt of effort, Amelia stretched out a hand towards Evahr who had nearly completed the casting of a spell and they were both ripped out of existence and slammed into the living room of the house Rory had built with his own hands and, for a moment, they could still hear Sudar screaming across the void.

“You fucking owe me,” said a gasping Evahr before falling into laughter.

Amelia bolted upright and screamed, “The scroll! Do you have it!?”

“You were going to sell your soul like an idiot,” continued Evahr, still laughing.

“Evahr!”

“Calm yourself, Amelia.”

He then reached into a leather bag on his belt and pulled out the scroll and Amelia gently took it from his hands. After a moment of staring at the most powerful piece of parchment she’d ever held her eyes turned back to Evahr.

“You could have taken this for yourself. You could have abandoned me to fix your own mistakes.”

“I know,” replied Evahr. “But I would have to betray an unstoppable paladin who would betray her oath to set things right.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“No, Amelia, but it’s a good enough reason, eh?”

“You saved me. You saved Rory.”

“You said Rory didn’t deserve to die like he did. What you didn’t realize is that you didn’t deserve to die like that either.”

“She’ll retaliate.”

“Devils always do.”

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POETRY

TO SAY WHAT YOU MEAN WITHOUT REALLY SAYING
WHAT YOU MEAN

Sestina: Come Clean

Breakfast crumbs I brush away
from a shirt newly retrieved from the wash.
My shoes are dusty, and they need a shine,
I can't do it now, so I put on my coat.
I hear my wife sigh as I look at my watch,
and walking out the door I see my child wave.

It tugs at my heart that sweet little wave,
and a tear trickles down, I feel I should brush it away,
and away goes the time as I look at my watch.
I have no place to go except to the mall or car wash,
or a park or a park bench where I lay down on my coat,
and rest and enjoy the day and let the sun shine.

It is getting harder to pretend and to rise and shine,
every day to drive away and try to wave,
to brush off my shirt and put on my coat,
while guilt slithers over and carries me away,
so rudely, all the while I am expecting it to wash
over my mind so that I will confess while they watch.

Sitting at the park there are a lot of people to watch,
and they don't care if my shoes have a shine.
I am sinking into this new life;, feeling it wash
over me, rolling over me in wave after perfect wave.
Suddenly a voice comes from far away,
"Go home, go tell them, go put on your coat".

There is more to going home than putting on my coat,
but there is more to pretending than glancing at my watch,
It takes more to convince me than a voice from far away,
but I know if I ever had a halo it would cease to shine.
This life is loneliness and it washes over me like a wave.
Some pain comes in but more goes out and in the end it is a wash.

The time is here to come clean and to wash
away the deceit that will cheat my family and coat
my throat with many lies while I wave
goodbye and drive away while I watch
my wife sigh and my child wave while I shine

in their sight while crumbs and tears I brush away.
My wife asks why I smile and wave, while they watch,
as I put on my coat and I always shine,
She knows, she sighs and will wash my crumbs away.

-Debra Tennison

i know that God exists because i've held Her in my arms

I am thoroughly convinced you are otherworldly.

You are not human.

You're an angel in the form of a human, roaming this Earth in search of souls to nurture and care for.

I don't understand how the stars could have aligned so perfectly to give me the privilege of meeting you.

I have felt the euphoric effects of your touch; sometimes I believe I'm hallucinating when you hold me.

You've taken mercy on my soul and have allowed me to feel new emotions I didn't even know existed.

An entity beyond human comprehension, your energy and intentions have been nothing but pure.

Sometimes I worry that my baggage will taint you.

Yet, you do not judge me or hesitate even with the knowledge of all I've done.

Only proving furthermore your range of kindness.

-Kaydence Braugher

Geyser

The air is scorching and thick with the pungent smell of sulfur as I step along the path
Worn planking groaned beneath my feet, crying a warning to heed
Many have taken that same path before me
I continue

My eyes sting as I glance around
The air is becoming heavy on my chest
Bordering the path are acidically vibrant, bubbling pools
They hiss and pop, spitting with violent taunts

My throat gags at the acrid stench
It spreads like a disease, rotting in me
I quicken my pace
All around me rumbles and boils in anticipation

I start to run with wild eyes
I see the end
My chest heaves, lungs poisoned

I reach abrupt end of the path, body lurching forward
The air howls and taunts, pushing me closer to the edge
My mouth gapes open as I shake, ready to explode

A burst of water screams before me, popping off into the air like a firework
A geyser built up from the pressure and steam
I fall back as the water tumbles down, showering me with the sensation of release

I close my eyes as we sigh in unison
Resting for now

-Alyssa Devine

The Alkaloids

Scopolamine and Atropine

It was like thorns crushing my crown.
Some magic swelling scary thing built of furry shadow,
piercing reflective eyes through dangerous deadly night.

This confusing cacophony of voices overlaid;
a dozen bands of tape rolling, dragged across
a panicked river, the space between my ears.

I forgot why I came.
The sound of language might hurt worse
than my sick skin sludge or hot orange acid rain.

As good as these compounds may feel tonight,
I'll absolutely suffer the alarm clock tear, or else
some terrible ripping through slow, thick time.

Is this potion, this poultice a jealous poison?
What regret makes white morning somber?
What behavior do you mourn? Malice, whimsey?

Chemical retrocognition. Torn into two times.
Bilocation- Then and now, boredom, or chains and enlightenment.
Crawl out and hide from the skin barrier that protects you.

If I stand here silent in the wind
on a mossy shoe, I'll know it is you.
You whisper over the roaring sea.

The ground may claim and eat your body
and store your inactive bones.
The ether conducts only your spirit circuitry.

-Nic Bullock

icy breeze

shivering sharp breeze
a flake of snow dances past
in the dark of night

-Matthew Long

visions (in the style of sylvia plath)

when i shut my eyes at night
and the visions of you fill my head
your flesh and bones
your eyes and hair
you are such a sweet dream
it is always a surprise
when i awaken
that you are not just a vision in my head

-Matthew Long

The End Befalls Us

Hold me Mother, rock me, tend to my heart
You aren't supposed to bury me
my lover was to marry me
but, now, my battle-kin will carry me

Hold me Mother, rock me, tend to my heart
The fire peels back the blue skies
the roar of the Titans brings our demise
the world shudders and shakes as it finally dies

Hold me Mother, rock me, tend to my heart
Now you're flying away from this place
passed the moon and the stars of the void of space
Run, Mother, while they come to take your Grace

Hold me Mother, rock me, tend to my heart
Keep me close as you fly so high
don't ever forget it's ok to cry
Run, Mother. This is my last goodbye

-James Hutchison

Elephants

Heavy

With the weight of a thousand elephants

Sitting on my chest

And on my shoulder

Buckling my knees

Straining my back

Rushing me to the ground

I just want to stand

I just want to take a deep breath

I just want to roll my shoulders

And smile

~I wish I could handle the weight of my life with more grace

-Jasmine Lilly-Lee

A Ministering Mind over Messy Matter

The blurry-eyed gaze draws down on a whitish-gray trail—a snail—the slime of A tell-tale sign—the regurgitation of a teen-ager the night before. The internalized, unspoken whine, “Why do I have to be the one to clean this up?”

In the early morning hours—the Undulating, intestinal hiccup followed by an even more ominous silence. The dog expels, expurgates the contents. In a somnulistic trance—half awake and aware of what I face: it comes down to me. It’s my task. I’m the one who wipes, removes the traces of canine excess, the citron cesspool of bile bubbling on my hallway floor. I can’t help mutter, “Why do I have to do this?”

The maternal nurse in me who deftly extracts a mauve mesh of blood-soaked gauze from my child’s emptied molar sockets. Or night after night tenderly applying new dressings on a ruddy sinewous surface where skin had been. Eventually knitting slowly back together a new surface of skin where the rest had been surgically removed. When did I become the “nurse,” refreshing bandages, ointments, gauze, wraps, tape? No formal training, but I do what is needed, what is required.

What stage of adulthood is this? Three strands of consciousness interweave at once—the regressive strand—the young child in me who wants to cry out, “Not my mess. You clean it up.” The strand of the emerging adult who cleans, tends to and with the numbed acquiescence of some who submit with no joy to the execution of dark deeds made light again.

This role requires me to be blunted to the full horror of human mess, that same adult who accepts without question, “This is my fate.”

But finally, full maturation arrives with the recognition of the act of love that allows the perfunctory, the mundane repetition of ritual cleansing to transcend and become the act of fully present love, caring, all done because it is love: wiping, cleaning, sanitizing, blotting, healing. Ministering to messes is the destiny this mom embraces, despite the occasional groan and grimace.

-Ruth Montino

A Dying Heartbeat

When one life lived to love in vain,
And footprints ran to embrace the pain.

Helplessly clinging to those eyes that smile,
Holding onto promises made, so I stayed awhile.

Diamond promises sprinkled around,
like crystal flakes falling on frosty ground.

Trusting and taming the “no” in spite of the doubts,
Trusting, instead of hearing, ignoring the shouts.

How wrong, how staggeringly wrong this one.
But when your heart is on fire you choose not to run.

The wrong that roils up and bubbles and oozes,
It’s black and treacherous and it lands where it chooses.

But there are rainbows in those eyes that smile.
So I bow my head and I walk on for a while.

Afraid to stop to know what’s true,
Afraid to go when I finally do.

Gentle hands held scarlet blossoms of delight.
Hands that were lovingly doing what is right.

Too soon it appears it was a masquerade,
and those gentle hands became a silver blade,

that slices through bone and flesh and tears,
that steals the youth and takes the years.

Hands that stole a tender beating heart,
drug it through broken glass for a start,

Left a scarlet blossoming on a snow white linen shirt,
And left the heart to perish in the rain and in the dirt.

A coppery tang arises from that little broken heart,
The scarlet flows around it like a gruesome work of art.

The dying heart lay beating out its final precious song,
The heavenly ending music from the love that went so wrong.

-Debra Tennison

Spirit in Blood

You'd never lie to me, even if the truth hurt.
You've been mostly all I've had, a sacred space
where I could feel safe. Where I could laugh.

I told you that I'd haunt you when I die.
Lay out traps before you, so you'd fall
into success and intuitive wisdom.

I do hope I die before you do. I can't,
I don't want to be here without you.
I do know how selfish that sounds.

You always seemed so much stronger
and wiser than me. You cut out the path
for me to follow. You painted the signs.

Gods and religions are images and songs,
the latest records, changing eras of aging artists.
You learn, I learn, and we compile piles of ideas.

Our mother said that you were lucky she didn't abort you.
It was me and she and the rest of the world who were lucky.
Lucky to have you here in flesh-imprisoned spirit. My guide.

I dealt out tarot cards, but you were better at reading them.
I was a temper-tantrum child overwhelmed and confused by feelings
and you told me to just say what I felt. How simple and profound.

A joint custody between sister and lover, my inanimate bones will be.
Skin absent of the magic that springs forth elastic regrowth
and personality cohabitating with mitochondria, all locked within cells.

-Nic Bullock

alone.

i look up at the stars
bright & shining
as i sit down here
alone.

i would be a dull star
overthinking how to shine
trapped in my own mind
alone.

it's like a black hole
swallowing up hope
forcing me inside
alone.

sometimes i like it here
the occasional stillness of my mind
sometimes i dream up okay things
up here in my mind
alone.

i am adrift in my own galaxy
in awe of what's around me
but i am learning
i can't be friends with stars & planets
alone.

maybe it would be nice
if i could find
someone to share my mind with
alone.

together.

-emily lenore

A Riddle in Time

Did you not worship me, once upon a time?
Did you not bring goats and rice and seeds?
You said your love for me would never be forgotten
You said your children would forever spread my word
Yet, here I stand amongst the corpses beneath the soil
Here I walk against the oncoming storms of spring

I gave you life as if from a spring
My gifts to you were like those from a lover; always on time
It was by my grace that you were raised from the soil
and sat upon the throne of the earth to spread your seeds
Even so high, you looked higher still and claimed the word
of my truth was no longer relevant, so it was lost and forgotten

Oh, what beauty you could have achieved had you not forgotten
that there is more to happiness than what you perceive to spring
forth from what is old and simple such as that single word
Live was my command, but you lost yourself trying to time
the moments of your life and now you fade away like lost seeds
caught in the winds that never made it into the soil

You weep and scream obscenities at the sky as if the reasons you soil
yourselves like babes should be overlooked and forgotten
You travel through life against the flow as the salmon that seeds
and dies lives only to fight for a single chance to spring
forth from the river and be caught in the jaws of the passing time
You were supposed to walk alongside me. I gave you my word

I realize now that it was my fault for giving you such a simple word
by which to grow into the light of the world from the fertile soil
I only meant to let you live freely, not trap you in the finite time
between the first and last moment you beheld the light only to be forgotten
when oblivion takes your heart and leaves those you love in the spring
I wanted you to grow into your own light. That's why I gave you the seeds

You were never meant to ask me why I gave you the seeds
to infinite possibility confined only by how you defined my word
You were meant to see your end as the catalyst by which to spring
passed the bounds of your world from the soil
You were supposed to learn that through death, knowledge isn't forgotten
but passed on to be reinterpreted by your own offspring throughout time

I gave you the seeds and you planted them in the soil
I gave you my word and like me, it is forgotten
I gave you the spring and you did as you should have and left me in time

-James Hutchison

deep in the ruins

i sit here alone in the ruin
the air smells wet, moldy and dirty
i feel in my pocket the weight of the loose change
i have to find some way to get out
of this ghostly old mine

far below me i can hear the sloshing of the monsters deep in the well

i think to myself, oh well
this isn't the first time i have been in ruin
although never before this has the fault been entirely mine
my soul feels used, strange, and dirty
and more than anything i want to get out
if only to find a way to make a change
now if i am to make a change

and get away from this dark and monstrous place, well

i have to find a way out
of these musty, dripping ruins

i look down at my pants that are saturated through and dirty
but still, despite everything, they are mine
as i begin to climb out of the mine
my heart rate starts to change
and the air gets lighter and less dirty
the sounds of the monsters, churning deep within the well
gets quieter as i climb from the cavernous, sunken ruin
and i dream of seeing the light at the top and of getting out

as i climb and climb up the jagged rocks, i can feel my strength, once present
and powerful, giving out

the feeling of hunger from the dark depths of the mine

creep towards me like tentacles, belonging to a creature living deep in the ruins
and suddenly the weight in my pocket feels like two hundred pounds, not a
handful of change

and i feel the fear of falling back, deep into the crumbling well
and submerging into the cold water deep below me, filthy and dirty
was this what i was doomed to, a short life of swimming in a well, drowned and
dirty

knowing that no matter how hard i fight, i will never get out
of my new graveyard, swimming with the monsters, far below in a well
in this hole, where the creatures lives, the only hearts beating, theirs and mine
and when my hand slips on a stone, slick with moss and water, my perception
begins to change

and maybe this place is not the ruin

.
.
.

and here in this dirty cave, deep in the mine
knowing i'll never get out, and knowing that nothing change
getting to spend the rest of my short life in the well, i realize i am the ruin

-Matthew Long

Thieves

Inside of every gay man is a sassy black woman.
Being called a “Faggot” doesn’t mean that
you’re free to steal more black girl magic.

I thought I was illuminated.
But she told me, “You can’t carry all the light.”
A loving lesson, to just shut the fuck up sometimes.

When I evaporated like white hot
chemical milk bubbling hell, I heard him.
His Majesty of Malice said to her, “Follow the North Star, bitch.”

Medusa’s beauty. Reduced to a weaponized severed head
hangs as proud serpentine conquest. The stony gaze
hard granite-white phallic law, disgrace unbending.

I don’t need a tarot pack to know
that my house is burning down.
Cradle a crow in your lethal lap.

Meanwhile, there are people who
like to get upset about things
like the words “moist” or “equality”.

-Nic Bullock

To Love and Death!

Oh! I have wounded myself! Dear Gregor, why must you slip passed the gates of doom and leave me alone? We were to waltz into the night together, hand in hand, but your frail breath in your final days only warmed the icy hand of death as it clasped around your soul.

Come now, unto me, bitter death, old enemy!

The world turns on, infinite, and I turn with it, hastily beckoning the stars to fall upon me and end my suffering. My days are endless, my nights eternal. I am forever! 'Tis a bittersweet respite to feel the embrace of a lover while holding their own demise between us.

Come now, unto me, bitter death, old enemy!

Your light burned through the windows to my soul and pierced the veil I wore to shield me from myself. You loved me as I loved you. Your flame made my curse feel as unto a blessing until the very moment the Reaper waxed jealous and stole you away.

Come now, unto me, bitter death, old enemy!

Verily, this is not the first time I dared to allow a mortal to hold the weight of my desire. Beloved Sarah! Rosaline! Haelfor! Each one a lighthouse to the wandering gaze of one who swore to remain alone. They have danced in my arms, kissed my cheek and wiped away my grief.

Come now, unto me, old death, bitter enemy.

I am ever the fool. If I were as wise as the passing time I would guard myself against the passion of another. I would prefer to feel nothing. But I am not wise! To live without love is to live as the dead, decaying and forgotten. To die is to never love again. Should I love again, Gregor? Or should I rest in oblivion?

Come now, unto me, old death, bittersweet enemy.

-James Hutchison



Untitled Photographs

by Mark Jordan

Obscured for days as
The sea releases wave after wave
into the sky
To form the contours of The Great One.
The snow falls.

The snow falls.

Compressed by younger snow
Ice grows thick and thicker.
It grinds and carves
the contours of The Great One.

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Beneath, like two Grizzlies
battling for a sow,
rock pushes and shoves and
shakes the ice of The Great One.
The rock rises.

The rock rises.

It strains and shapes the contours
Of The Great One
growing to become the sky.

For hundreds of storms
Caribou have gazed at the Mountain.
During the long journeys of ice
Ravens have left their shadows
Dancing on the snows.

For an eternity of rock collisions
Wolves have echoed off
The white parka of
The Great One.

The Great One is sky.
The Great One is earth.
The Great One is sea.
The Great One is wind and storm.
The Great One is legend and mystery.
The Great One beckons and breathes.
The Great One nourishes and destroys.
The Great One whispers and roars.
The Great One is Artist, Shaman, Prophet and Composer.

The Works

For generations those who were
Nourished by Caribou,
Nurtured by Raven,
And measured by wolf,
Sang the story of Totson, Sukala, Yako, Ses.
The Story of wave turned to rock.

The Song of The Great One.

-Mark Jordan

PAINTING AND DRAWING

USING THE HANDS TO MAKE MARKS AND
SPREAD COLORS TO COMMUNICATE
IDEAS AND FEELINGS



It Won't Stop

by Paige Twidell



Self Portrait

by Scarlet Soto



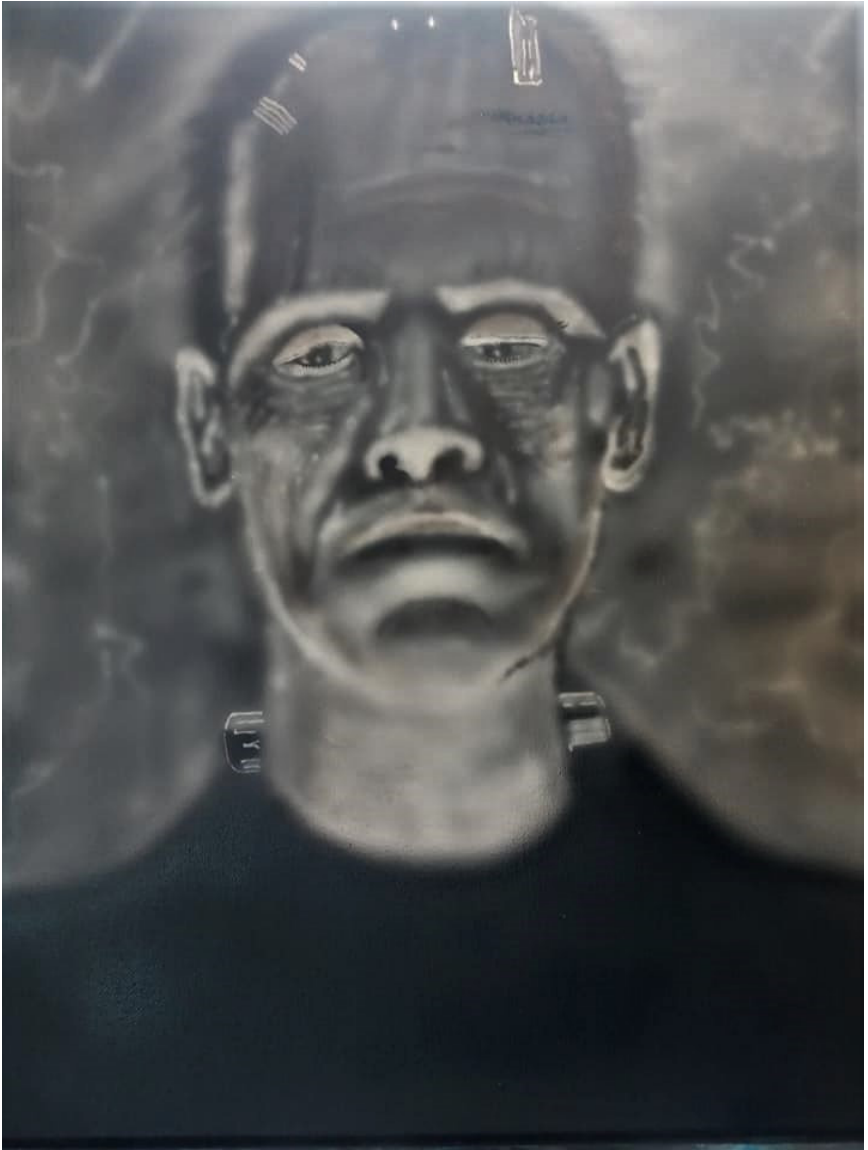
Raven

by Micah Green



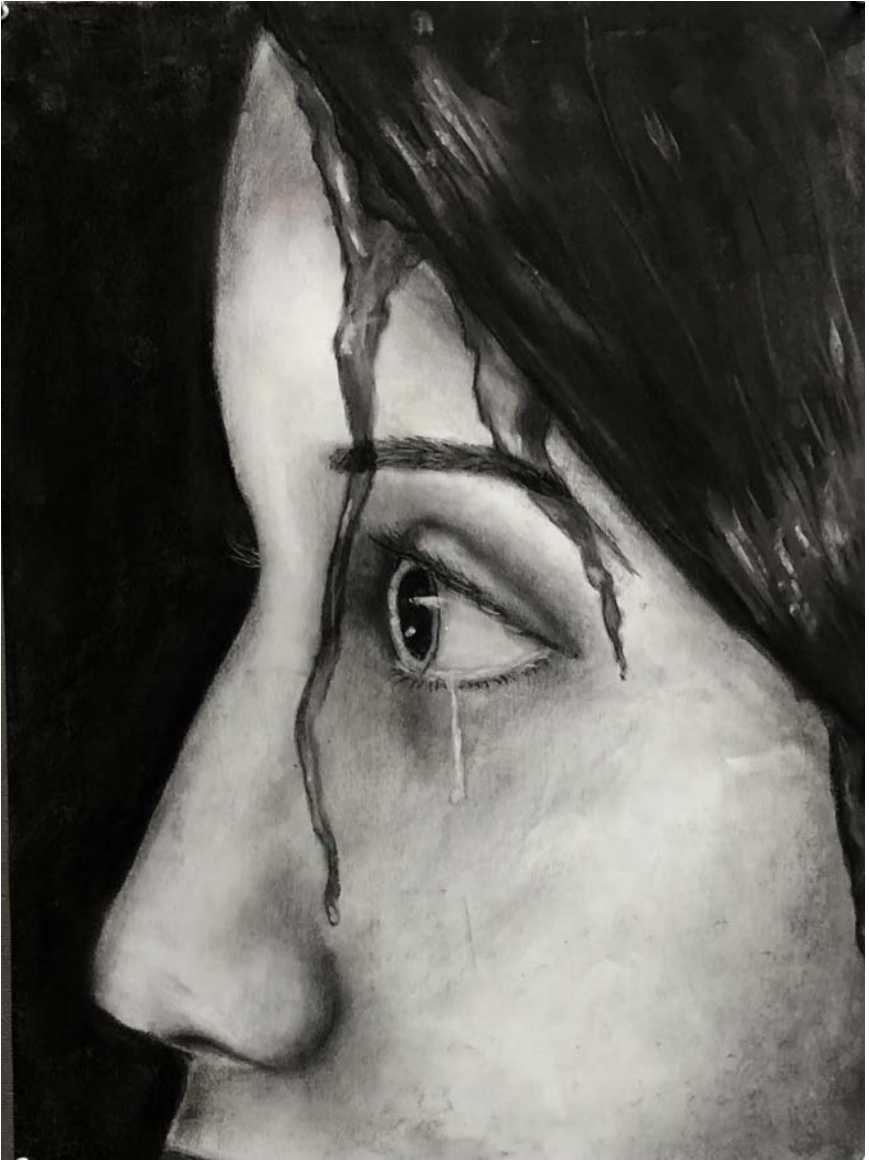
archetype #1 the arch

by Glenn Bodish



Frankenstein

by Joseph Magana



Carrie

by Sarah Page



Untitled

by John Taylor



Memories Made

by Scarlet Soto



Longing

by Paige Twidell



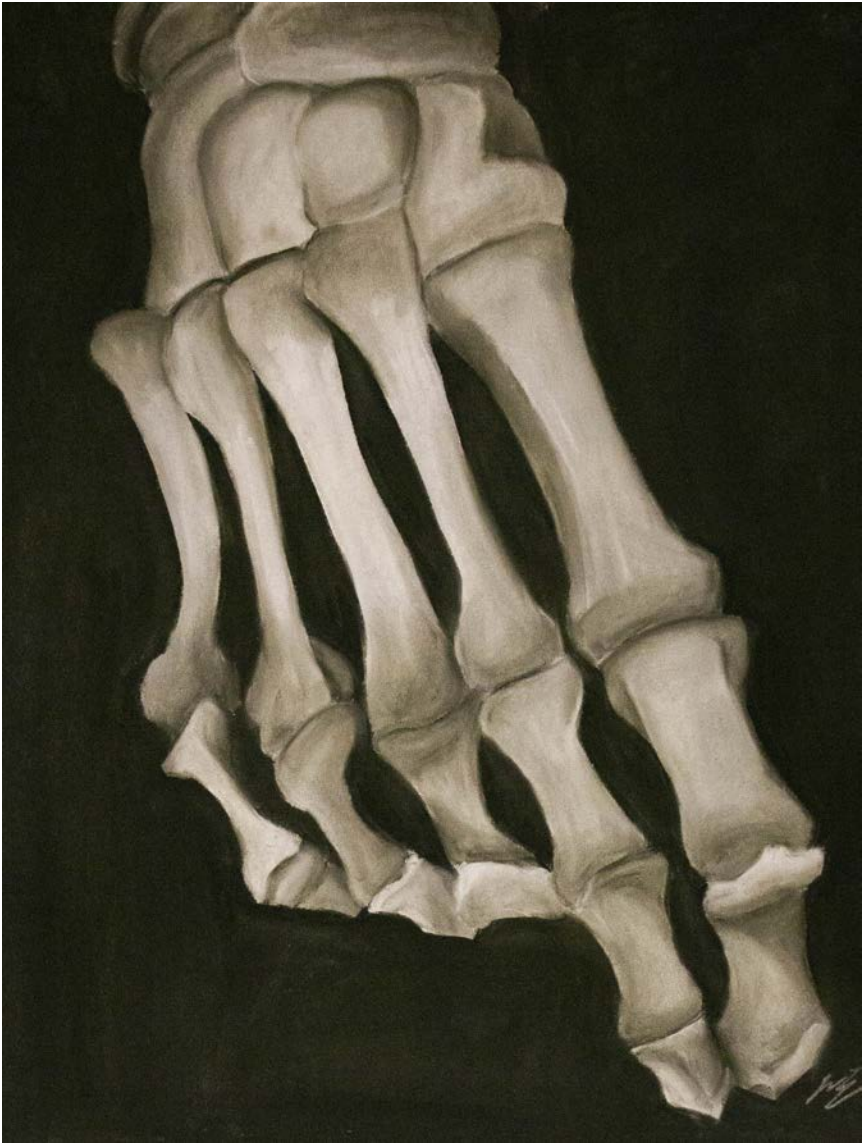
Skeleton Gesture

by Ricardo Ortega



*Vessel-Kraken of the
Depths*

by Joseph Magana



Untitled

by John Taylor



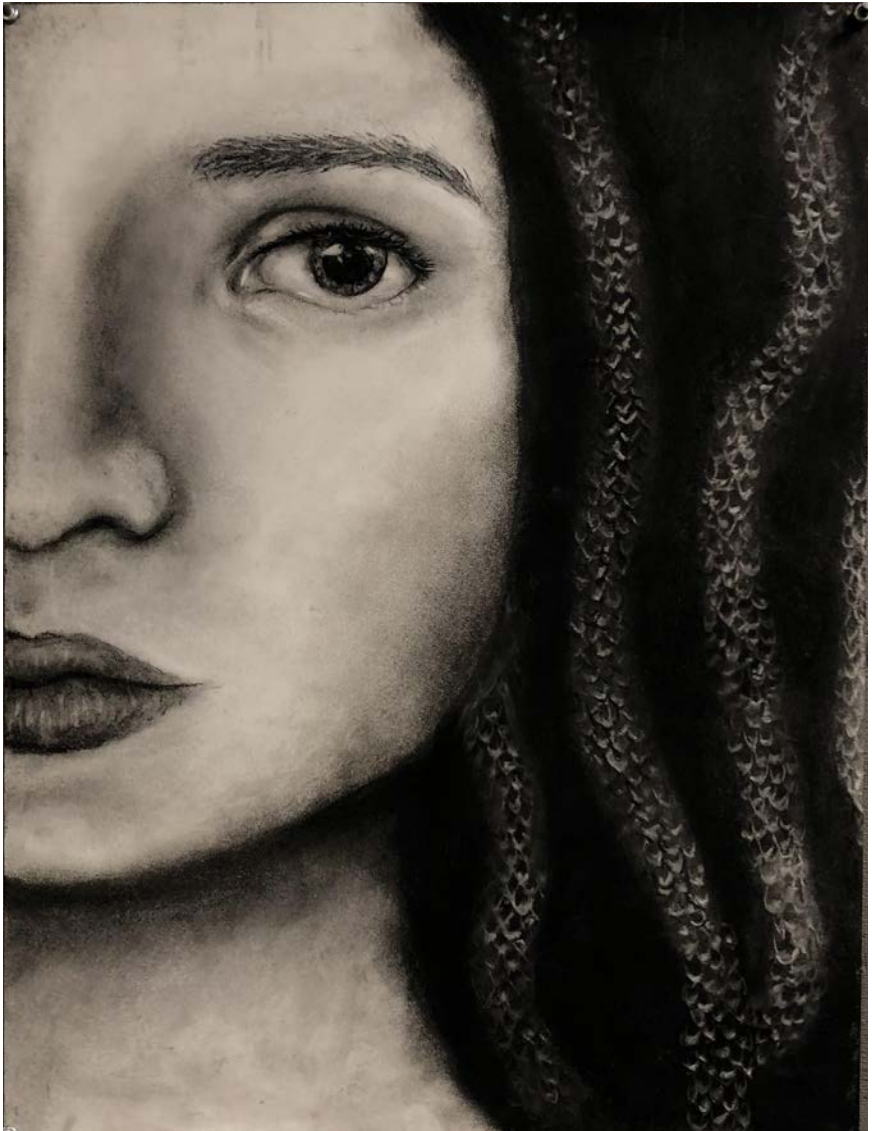
Roof

by Micah Green



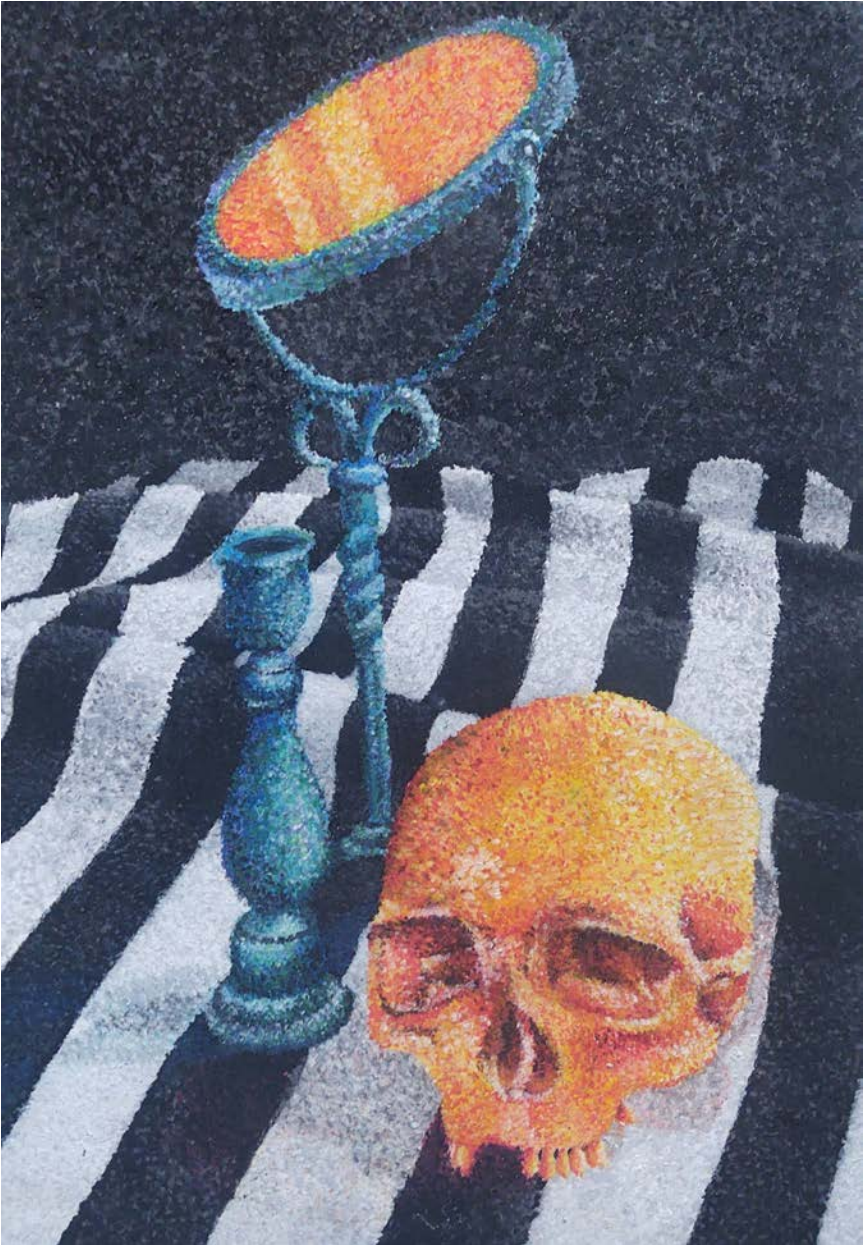
Sunday Afternoon

by Jessica Payne



Medusa

by Sarah Page



Self-Reflection

by Paige Twidell



Technicolor Study

by Sarah Page



Wonderland Nights

by Joseph Magana



Afternoon Stroll

by Jessica Payne



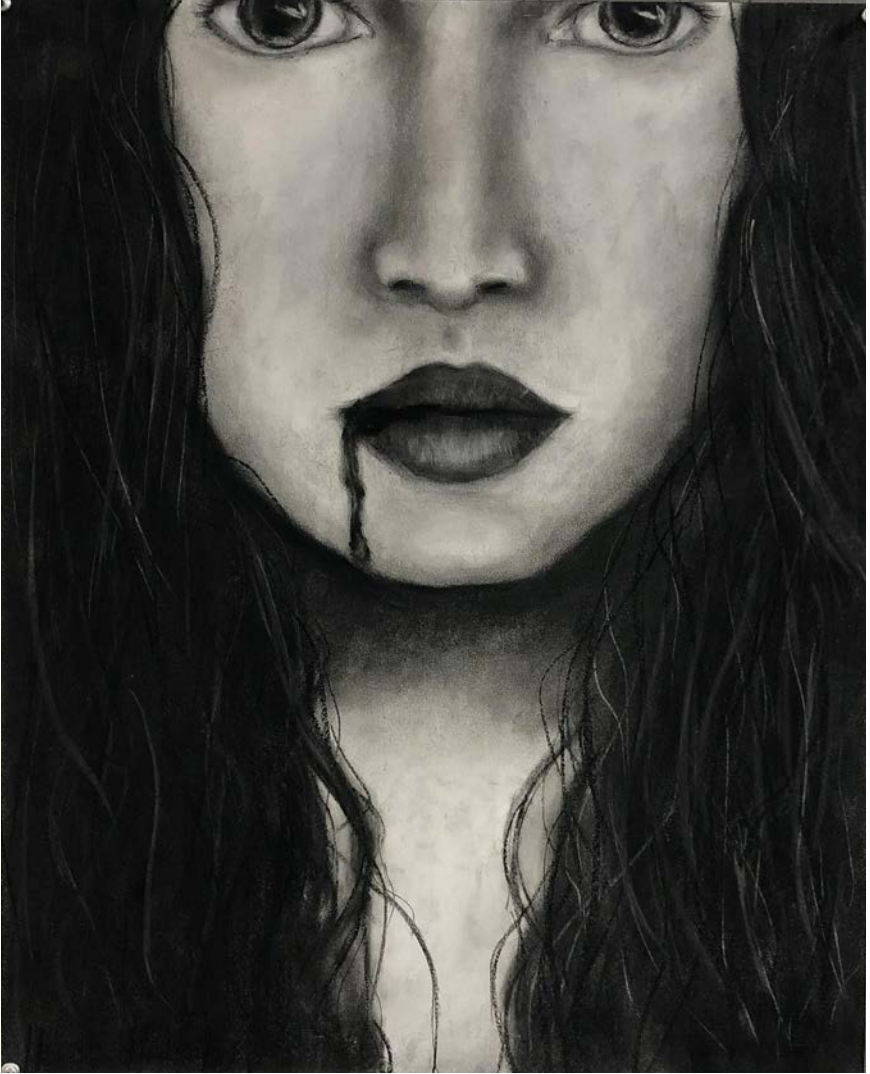
Connect

by Micah Green



Untitled

by John Taylor



Jennifer

by Sarah Page

PROSE

IMAGINATION TAKES FLIGHT AND LANDS ON PAPER

The Window Man

by Tom Terranova

When I was younger, around the age of thirteen, I stayed home alone a lot. My dad was out of the picture and my mom worked nights to support me and my sister. It was about eight p.m. on a stormy Friday night in September. My mom was working, and my sister went to a sleep over. This was my favorite night of the week. I would join my friends in an Xbox party and play video games all night. We would eat junk food, laugh, and have a great time.

Around ten o'clock, I had an aggressive chill run down my spine, and I felt as though I was being watched. I think it was the storm that was making me paranoid, but I couldn't stop glancing at my window. I must have done it twenty times at this point. The last time I glanced was the moment my heart dropped. As I looked, the power went out, and the moonlight illuminated the shape of a man standing at my window. I only saw him for a brief second, but what I saw still haunts me.

He was peering at me through the curtains and ran when we made eye contact. I ran to all the doors to check if they were locked and they were. I didn't want to call the police because they would call mom at work. She would be mad if she had to leave work for this. I aggressively flinched my whole body when I heard someone pound on the front door. Three knocks, and a man with a deep voice said "DoorDash for James.". "How does he know my name?" I thought while mid-panic. "I didn't order anything." I said nervously. He loudly dropped the bag he was carrying, and walked away. I heard a car start and drive away. I opened the door and saw the bag. I didn't know if I should open it or just forget about it. I went in my room and locked the door.

About an hour later, I heard a loud breaking sound, and knew immediately it was the glass in the front door. The lock turned and the door opened. I quickly and quietly turned off my light and hid in the closet. I could tell he was wearing heavy boots. I could hear his footsteps get louder and louder. He was checking every room. I got my phone out and called the police. I told them there was a man in my house and they told me to stay quiet and police would be there in two minutes.

The footsteps grew louder until they stopped right outside my door. He

The Works

knocked and said “James, open the door.” He kicked the bottom half of the door by the time the police came in. I heard a scuffle that quickly ended with the noise of handcuffs. I came out of my room to see the man. He was about six foot four inches, and probably 240 pounds. He was visibly dirty and strung out. He looked at me on the way out and said “I’ll see you again, very soon.” My heart dropped again. I haven’t seen him since then, about a decade now. But some nights I think of what he said. “I’ll see you again very soon.”

The Fleeing

by Debra Tennison

The child peeked out of the doorway of his room. As he stood there rubbing sleep from his eyes he wondered what it was that woke him. There was noise, lots of noise. There was clattering, people shouting, running and doors slamming. The sounds were coming from somewhere or everywhere. He heard footsteps, running up and down the hallways. He heard voices, angry voices, and they were getting louder and sounded as if they were coming his way.

He quickly pulled back into his room.

“Where was Kaila, his nurse?” he thought. He looked around the room but her pallet near his bed was empty. He wasn’t awake enough yet to feel afraid, but instead, only curious. The voices, the noise and the steps were coming closer. The boy looked around his room, unsure what he should do, then quickly climbed back into his bed, and pulled the coverlet up over himself. His childish mind telling him, surely, if he can’t see, he cannot be seen.

Just then two men burst into his room. They were speaking low to one another as they looked around the room. Spotting the little mound in the bed, one of the men grasped the coverlet and flung it back to expose the youngster to their sight.

To the boy, “quickly young prince” said the first man, the tall one. He indeed was very tall. The little boy had to crane his neck way back to get a good look at the man. He was dressed head to foot in black, from his boots to his hooded cloak which was pulled up over his head. With only several candles burning and a low fire in the hearth, the stranger’s face was all in shadow. Fear began to creep up over the boy like a cold hand wrapping itself around him. He laid there as if frozen, unable to move, unable to speak and he was finding it increasingly difficult to draw in a breath. “Now, young sir!” said the tall one impatiently, grasping the boy by the arm and pulling him from the bed. The lad was now up close to the hooded stranger, his iron like grip holding the boy in place. The boy could smell smoke and sweat and horse on the man.

The second man, much shorter, somewhat stocky and dressed all in dark clothing similar to the tall man, was moving around the room, throwing open cabinets, pulling out items of clothing, and tossing them on the boy’s bed. One

The Works

last look around and the sturdy thickset man appeared satisfied. He had a bag of sorts with him, and he was pushing the clothing items down into it, without any effort towards organizing the contents. All the while the two men kept up a conversation in a foreign tongue that the boy did not understand.

Lastly a third man entered the room. He was almost as tall as the first man though fair and bright in contrast to the dark hooded stranger. Golden curls covered his head and reached nearly to his shoulders and even in the dim lighting the boy could see his eyes were a brilliant blue and his clothing was the color of autumn leaves and appeared to change colors as he moved about. He came into the room with Kaila, the boy's young nurse, following closely behind. The little boy broke free of the hooded stranger and ran to his nurse, hiding his face in the folds of her dress.

The man in shadow turned to the nurse, "Dress him and do it quickly! There is little time!" he said sharply. She did not answer him, simply gave a curt nod, and turned to the young boy pulling him over to the bed.

Taking his small round face in her soft hands she looked into his eyes. He is so small she thought. This is all so much for one so young. The little boy looked to his nurse and was reassured by her calm manner. "My sweet, my prince, we need to dress you for a special trip, for an adventure. You do like adventures do you not?" she whispered. He nodded slowly and felt his fear beginning to slip slowly away and curiosity again taking its place. He nodded more enthusiastically, smiling and she returned his smile.

He had always liked a good adventure. He and his closest friend Dierk had many adventures in the castle. Just yesterday they had searched all morning until they found where the old kitchen cat hid her most recent litter of kittens. Mangy old thing had hissed and clawed at them, even giving Dierk a long bloody scratch down his arm. "She can be our dragon," he had told Dierk.

"And her kittens, well her kittens are the dragon's gold!" Dierk and nodded in agreement.

"Yes", the boy thought to himself, he did like a good adventure.

"Where am I to go for this adventure?" he whispered, eyes sparkling.

"That's what makes it an adventure." she answered. "You will find out when you get there. Now let us get you ready".

Kaila noted the restive manner of the men in the room and began to quickly dress the young boy in his traveling clothes. First warm woolen breeches, thick knit hose that she tied securely at his knees, then singlet, shirt, and gambeson. The gambeson was a perfect miniature of his father's, complete with family coat of arms and she smiled as she slid it over his head and adjusted the fit. The fabric was soft and silky like a lamb's ear. The deep green fabric was a perfect complement to the boy's dark hair and chestnut-colored eyes. Crimson red detailing at the neck and hip seemed to frame the tiny Coat of Arms on the chest.

The youngster finished sliding into his heavy boots as Kaila made to pull his cloak around him. At that moment the shadowed man came over to them and grabbed the nurse by the elbow and hissed "woman, not that! Think!" he said pointing to the brightly colored gambeson. Then not unkindly, "does he not have

something more...appropriate? Find him something dark, and make sure it is padded for warmth.”

The boy looked up into his nurse’s face and saw the color rise up her neck and into her cheeks. “Yes, of course, forgive me sir”, she answered and pulled the gambeson up over his head. She paused looked from the gambeson to the men and saw the three had retreated to the corner of the room, their heads down, speaking in low voices. Instead of placing the item back into the heavy wooden wardrobe, Kaila quickly rolled up the gambeson and pushed it down into what was to be the boys traveling bag. At the wardrobe she pulled out a thick dull brown tunic and slid it over his head. Fitting the traveling cloak around him she fastened it at the neck and stepped back. She continued to smile but her bottom lip quivered slightly, and the boy saw tears beginning to pool in her eyes.

“Remember me young Prince as I will remember you”, she said as she placed her hand over her heart. “Remember I loved you and served you and will always keep you here, in my heart.” Kaila leaned over and placed her hand on his small chest, over his heart, and whispered, “Keep me here young sir.” His heart was beating against his chest like a little bird trying to escape but he nodded his head. Noting that the boy was beginning to look a little fearful, his brows drawn down and lower lip beginning to tremble, Kaila quickly straightened up and smiled and said in her usual cheerful manner, “now then Theo, it is time to begin your great adventure”. The boy smiled again, looking relieved. The two exchanged a brief hug. She continued, “You stay with these gentlemen and do exactly as they say...exactly as they say, and I shall come to you and see you as soon as I am able”.

The stocky man grabbed the bag from the bed, tied it close and headed out the door followed closely by the hooded man who had the boy firmly by the hand. The youngster looked back once as he was taken from the room. Kaila smiled brightly at him and with a wave of her hand he was off.

The tall man with the handsome blond curls followed, but not before turning to Kaila, pulling her close and planting a quick kiss on her now trembling lips. He loved the smell of her, floral and sweet. He loved the sight of her, her delicate porcelain features. He always thought they would be together, share a life together.

“I am coming back for you my love, as soon as it is deemed wise.” he said. A sob finally escaped Kaila. “Gerald, keep him safe! I will delay them as long as I can”.

Gerald grasped her hand, so tiny in his own and pleaded softly, “I don’t like this, you should be coming with us. It is not safe for you here.”

She answered him firmly, confidently, as she was pressing him out the door into the hallway, “Go now. I am only a servant; I have nothing to fear”. After one last lingering embrace Gerald turned and made his way down the hallway, quickly, silently. He was gone and out of sight, before Kaila slid to the ground, her composure melting into the tears of a broken heart. She knew she would be dead before sunrise.

Stories for Little Boys

by Noel Berkey

The TV show was scary. In it a bouncing ball made its way down some stairs of a big house all the way to the basement, bouncing around a couple corners too. The house was empty, and shadowy, and the walls were mostly bare beams, with bits of plastic stapled or nailed on some and flapping around in wind gusts coming through a window someone had left open so long that it could no longer shut.

The boy sat alone and watched the show with intense interest, his mouth open and eyebrows arched.

This bouncing ball was mysterious and all the more spooky when a grumpy detective who was basically brought to the house against his will, claiming he was done with such goings-on, and more or less drank beer all day, eventually discovered that a little boy was buried in the basement. That's what the ball had apparently been trying to reveal. And this detective, who also had a huge mustache that got food crumbs and other junk stuck in it, was the only one who could make sense of the house's mysteries.

The mom of the boy watching the show was in her room reading one of her books. She was young and still trying to figure out who she was, and so she read a lot. It was helpful. If her son watched TV in another room, all the better. It kept him quiet and she could focus on reading.

All through the commercial break transitioning to the next show, the boy didn't really see or hear what was being advertised. That ball kept bouncing down the steps of his spooked imagination. The mistreated boy found buried in the basement could have easily been him, he reminded himself. Just how it was that the dead boy guided that bouncing ball escaped him somehow, but it happened clear enough.

He fell asleep on the couch and there was a news report on TV about somebody shooting a bunch of people. He wasn't awake during it, but that was

for the best. He had been spooked enough by the bouncing ball.

When his mom woke him later he shuffled to bed half-asleep. First, he looked under his bed a couple times to make sure the dead boy wasn't there. Then he checked the closet, and made sure the closet door was shut tight. Then made sure his bedroom door was open a crack. Then he closed his eyes. Then he opened them. Then he closed them again, mostly.

A week later his uncle died while vacuuming some rugs at home. The boy's aunt, his mom's sister, had recently divorced him and moved in with another man. Everyone thought it was sad that his uncle died while vacuuming. Even the boy thought it was sad. He didn't particularly like him though. He remembered one time his mom said he was a jerk, and how she was angry when she said it. Even so, the boy did feel sorry for his older cousin, who had come home from school to find his dad sprawled awkwardly and lifeless on their living room floor with the vacuum still running.

For most of the funeral his cousin was acting normal enough. He was just a teenager though, and his dad dying while vacuuming didn't make a lot of sense, or his mom moving in with this other man. So he tried to lift his own spirits, but didn't really succeed. "See that building over there?" he asked the younger boy, lifting his chin to a section of the cemetery nearby on a slight hill.

The boy saw it. The windows looked dirty, and the cement walls were stained with ghostly hints of ivy residue.

"They stack the caskets on shelves in there," the older boy said, pausing briefly to let that marinate in his cousin's imagination. "One night some guys from school were trying to break in, these older dudes with issues." He paused here again and grinned awkwardly before adding, "But they saw a shadow crossing one of the windows." His laugh that followed was as odd as his grin, and he looked kind of uncertain. "They couldn't run out here fast enough." He laughed again for a second, almost in wonder, but it sounded like something stuck in his throat. And then he suddenly broke down crying pretty hard.

The boy figured it was likely because his cousin's dad was in the casket and all of this was getting real. He couldn't help but think of the bouncing ball at that moment, or a shadow crossing the window from inside that building full of dead people over there.

After the funeral was over and the boy and his mom were walking to her little car, they passed some really old gravestones. Some so old and covered in grime you couldn't read the names or dates. His mom mentioned that those poor people couldn't be more forgotten. "No one has probably said their names in a hundred years or more." She seemed to think about this, then added, "I suppose that's bad."

The boy thought it sounded bad. Seeing a fancy gravestone with a crucified Jesus atop did not help comfort him.

"And to think, they just lay there in the dark while the world changed," she further noted in an almost light-hearted way.

The boy wished they could get to the car so she would click on the radio and stop saying this kind of stuff. He saw they still had to pass a few more

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gravestones. These were old too, in a section nearer the entrance, but here you could read the names and dates. One was simple. It was for a girl named Emily, aged only seven, the boy's age. She had died more than a hundred years ago. He could do the math. The boy's mother grabbed his hand now and slowed down. "I wonder if it was a rainy or sunny day when this little one got buried," she pondered out loud. "Poor thing."

That night the boy watched more TV by himself while his mom read a book in her room. He thought about Emily, what color her hair might have been, what her voice might have sounded like, whether she was pretty or plain, had freckles, what color her eyes were, but mostly about how she died. There were lots of ways you could die day back in the old days, he figured. His mom had given him a book about the Wild West. There were pictures in it of dead cowboys with bullet holes in them. They looked peaceful all propped up on display in their slim wooden caskets. Some had coins placed on their eyes. Emily had lived around that time and could have fallen off a horse, easily. Or fell down a well. Or got shot by a stray bullet or arrow in some crazy war he would have to learn more about at school someday.

He tried to find funny stuff to watch before he went to bed because he didn't want to be scared when he shut out the lights. He watched some shows where adults wore colorful clothes and said things he didn't really understand, but a lot of people were laughing, so that made him feel good somehow.

He soon drifted off to sleep on the couch. When he opened his resting eyes, he thought he saw his uncle, who appeared to be sitting nearby on an unfamiliar green chair. There was an odd wrinkle developing across his face too, and the boy couldn't help but fixate on it. Something about it didn't seem right. Not really. The boy was confused somehow, and beginning to realize why. There was a subtle grin spreading across his uncle's face, or maybe it was the wrinkle the boy had been fixated on. It was hard to say whether the man, who now maybe somehow really didn't look like his uncle, was leaning toward him or leaning back. There was a gleam of light on his forehead that didn't move. He was silent too, and the expression he wore was strange.

The boy was trying to scream. He was trying, really trying . . . but could not.

And that's when his mom woke him with a startled look on her face. "Are you okay, honey?" She seemed spooked. "That sound you were making was creepy." She shivered when she said this.

He told her what he saw in his dream. Part of him was scared when he said it out loud. But part of him felt comforted with relief. His uncle wasn't really there. Just in his head. Someone who only looked like his uncle. Whatever that meant.

He wanted to be a big boy and forget he could dream such things but decided to ask his mom if he could sleep in her room, just for the night. He liked it in there, and today had been an odd day. She had a big bed and they could each have their own side. She liked to play the radio sometimes too. And she would be there with him. He wouldn't be alone in the dark hiding beneath his

covers.

He settled in and they said goodnight. But she stayed up a bit longer. The soft glow of the lamp on her side of the bed revealed her reading a book titled *Shadows in the Dollhouse*. The picture on the cover highlighted a bloody knife and a couple dolls with big eyes that looked scared. His mom was really focused too, near the final chapter it looked like. The expression on her face reminded him of that time a year or so ago he had thought she was someone just acting like his mom, one of those clone-type creatures that would stare off into the distance. He looked away out the window on his side of the bed, then closed his eyes. Then he opened them after a bit. His mom was still turning pages. When she eventually turned out the light, he closed his eyes again, mostly.

At school the boy and his classmates received their copies of the weekly newspaper for kids. This was one of the highlights of school for him. News just for kids. He felt important reading it. On the cover of this issue there was a close-up picture of a pretty weird looking bug with beady eyes sitting wide apart on its ugly bug face. The boy read that this was a cicada, that a bunch of them were currently underground, like they were dead, and had been there longer than the boy had been alive. Within weeks though they would crawl back from the dead, more or less, and use their little arms to dig out of the earth, then take in the scene with their creepy eyes. The boy could see all of this too. He could imagine the crazy noise they would make when trying to make baby cicadas, how loud it would be.

A classmate pointed at the picture and said it looked like the alien that crawled out this guy's stomach in a movie he watched. "It was pretty freakin' cool!" he said. Another mentioned it looked like something that would crawl into one of your ears and lay an egg. He said it probably grew weird teeth that crossed one another in different directions, that it would likely use these teeth to eat a tunnel through your brain before flying out your other ear. That wasn't in the kids' newspaper though. Not even close. But that's what this one kid claimed. Everyone sitting near, just a few boys in the back of the classroom, said that sounded pretty awesome.

One night soon after the boy would find his mom guiding him to his bedroom and then kissing his cheek before leaving him alone in the dark. Half-asleep, he would make sure to go through his routine of looking under the bed, checking the closet, shutting that door and leaving the other open a crack, then doing basically the same with his eyes.

Later, as he slept, if you found yourself standing in his doorway, you might notice him begin to shift about where he lay. Moving closer, very slowly, being careful not to wake him, you might hear him begin to moan. Even closer still, lingering directly over him, quietly regarding him in the moonlight, you might observe his eyes darting side to side beneath their lids, a sheen of sweat across his forehead, the muscles on his little face revealing a panicked expression.

At this point he would open his eyes wide and somehow manage to suppress a scream.

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He would try to comfort himself in the dark afterward, wanting to be a big boy, before realizing how windy it was outside. A limb from a tree near his window would start tapping and then scratching the siding. These sounds would punctuate the night, mingling with the howls and moans of the wind, like they had their own story to tell.

Haunted

by Tom Irish

My ears are nearly numb and the tip of my nose is dripping as I come onto the back porch and open the kitchen door. Even though it is not yet Halloween, we have had an almost freakish drop in temperature. It is well below freezing, and I had gone to walk the dog completely unprepared. The cold has crawled into my hair, caressed my beard, stuck a hand inside my shirt and tweaked my nipple.

The dog stands with her nose pressed against the door jamb until the kitchen door swings open, and then she slips noiselessly inside and disappears completely. The kitchen is dark and silent, but something makes me stop and scan the whole room.

There is a diminutive figure facing into the northwest corner of the room. It stands there in ghostly, monk like silence. I step inside and swing the door shut behind me, but it still doesn't move. I hesitate, and then step forward slowly and softly. When I reach the figure, I kneel down and slowly reach out my hand, but I stop before touching it. I whisper "Jay. Hey, Jay?"

There is no answer. The rest of the house is completely, eerily silent: there is no muted television, no running water, no dog nails clicking on the hard floor. It is dim in the kitchen, but my son's ear seems slightly redder than usual. And he is so still, so silent. "Jay? Honey?" I haven't called Jay "Honey" since he was three. He remains perfectly motionless, and the shadows of the kitchen lie on him like satin.

I open my mouth, shut it, and then open it again. Slowly, I scoot forward so I can see more of his face. His cheeks hold the same reddish blush that his ears have, and his eyes are closed. His eyelashes lie on his cheeks lifelessly. I feel like he is completely asleep, and also somehow aware of me. "Jay? Are you awake?"

I feel a sound rising in the back of my throat. I grab it and swallow. I start to reach out, and then feel the lump rising again. I have to put my hand

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over my mouth and duck my head to keep from making sounds.

I don't touch him until I feel that I am completely under control. Then I lay my hand gently on his shoulder and say "Jay . . . wake up, kid." He doesn't start or flinch. His face remains a marble sculpture. The set of his shoulders reminds me of the time that he was four and had stood before his goldfish bowl after the fish died, singing a nonsense song under his breath and not crying. After a second or two I start trying to figure out what to say next. Then his hands move. They float towards his waist, slowly at first, and then with more unfathomable purpose. I suddenly whirl around, see that the kitchen is still empty aside from shadows, and then turn back to my son.

His hands go to the waistband of his pajamas, pause, and then slip inside. I snort, blink, and then I see his penis. He has pulled it out, and as I watch, urine arches out of him and splatters against the wall. It rebounds and wets everything around him, mostly ending up on the floor or inside our low, plastic recycle bin. It beads up on aluminum cans, soaks into paper envelopes, collects in cockeyed plastic takeout containers.

Jay's eyes are still closed, but the kitchen is no longer silent. A strange, repetitious huffing sound bursts from my throat, and I begin to feel pressure in my chest. My hand floats to my mouth and I can feel my own hot breath rushing around my teeth and my tongue. I don't know why I'm laughing, and I don't think I can stop.

"Jay! Heh heh . . . what are you . . . Jay, stop peeing, buddy! You're peeing on the . . . heeeee heh heh . . . honey, you gotta go up to the, heeeeeeeeeeee, the potty."

Jay turns his head towards me, but his eyes remain shut, and his face is motionless. "Are you awake? Jay? Heee heeeeeeeeeeeeeeee." His urine slows, and then stops. For one second Jay stands there motionless, hands at his waist, penis dangling, face turned towards me and still rigidly blank. The weird, choppy sound of my laughter swells and fills the kitchen. And then Jay's face crumples. He starts sobbing and he reaches for me, grabs me in his sleepy, little-boy bearhug, and I can feel one hot drop of pee fall onto my pants and warm a tiny spot on my frigid thigh.

I hug him back as best I can, but the laughter continues to lurch out of my lungs. I try to swallow it, bite it back, I wrestle with it like Jacob wrestled the angel, but I can't get a grip.

Jay is crying almost as hard as I am laughing. His grip on me tightens, and his eyes finally drift open, just a little bit. He manages to choke out "I h-h-h-had an a-a-accident!"

I throw my head back, open my mouth until the tendons in my jaw are creaking, and howl. The sound fills up the kitchen and banishes the shadows, then charges down the hall and through to the rest of the house.

Recovered Pirate Journal entry

by Tom Terranova

The year is 1704. I found myself on the ship of the great Captain Martinez. The golden age is nearing its end. Rumors pass in the ports, and lately the talk is of the military. They are starting to outlaw piracy. We all thought it would never end, but its falling.

Yesterday was supposed to be my last day as a pirate, and I guess that remains true. Not how I saw it going, though. We set off for Jamaica from the Bahamas two weeks ago. As we neared the island, we saw black smoke in the distance. We ventured closer to it, and realized the ship was sunk by the British Royal Navy. I told the captain that turning back is our best option. The captain shouted “The day I bow to the conformist is the day I die” as spit flew from his chapped lips, landing on his grey scraggly beard. He was true to his word.

As we closed in on the scene, a barrage of cannonballs flew from the massive vessel directly at us. The deadly accuracy of the Navy caused a panic on our ship. We ran away wounded, but it wasn’t even close to over. They chased us for four hours until they caught us 100 yards from an uncharted island. Both ships anchored, a fight to the death began. From what I saw, the British Royal Navy won quickly, only losing a few men.

I didn’t see the fight, but I saw the result. The ship I gave many years of my life to was burned in front of my eyes. The crew I knew had all been killed on our ship. Four sets of ten sailors checked the island for survivors. I’m glad to say they didn’t come close to finding me hiding in a small cave under a large rock wall. They didn’t want to carelessly wander through this wilderness, but I had to risk it.

The reason I’m alive is because I saw an escape opportunity. I wrote this note so my story could be passed along. I don’t think of myself as a coward, but I do wish Captain Martinez would have listened to me. I’m stranded. Its likely nobody will ever find me alive.

Phil

by Debra Tennison

Phil's disappointment in life was as raw and cutting as the weather. He turned his collar up against the wind and pressed on. Twenty years on the streets had left him hollowed out like dried out wheat husk. His eyes were dull and lifeless, much like his steps as he plodded on. To the people on the street, passing him by, he was just one more worthless bum. "Get a job", mumbled a sharply dressed thirty something as he passed Phil by. That man was still in the flow, still swimming in the people river as Phil had described it. That river flowed from a home to work, to meetings, to drinks with friends and back home again. Phil didn't respond to the man. He just kept shuffling on, going against the flow.

Life had not been kind to Phil. There had once been a day when Phil was that sharply dressed thirty something, mumbling at the homeless man to "get a job". He wasn't part of the people river anymore. He was the rock in the river now. The rock that interrupts the flow, that bends the water and causes the river to slow down or change course. He was the sad faced loner that with a story no one else wanted to know. He paused in front of a high-class store front. He had spotted the stub of a discarded cigarette and bent to pick it up. He fished around in the pocket of his well-worn pants and found a lighter, a treasured recent find. His tobacco yellowed fingertips shook as he lit up the little stub, drawing in the smoke slowly, dreamily, before releasing the curling, swirling cloud that circled his face before fading away.

Looking into the storefront window, Phil saw a man he no longer recognized. His ratty old cap was pulled down low to his brow. Salt and pepper wings of hair peeked out below the cap. A stone-grey beard hid what used to be the face of a "fine figure of a man". Phil reached up and scratched his bearded chin. This was the man he knew now. Three layers of worn out, worn thin clothing hid what was now a too thin, too gaunt, lanky frame.

A broken New Years resolution twenty years previous had caused the loss of his home, his family, his job, and his will to live. Here he was, twenty

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years later, no home, no family, no job, but sadly still living. Love and luck can turn on a dime. That was Phil's story. He did not reminisce. Those memories were white hot knives cutting his soul to the marrow.

There was once a day when Phil was living the high life, not one life but two. Home and family, two children and a devoted beautiful wife, then there was his other life...women, party, drink, drugs. His wife and then his boss had given him ultimatums. There were too many broken promises, too much dishonesty, and he was given one last chance to redeem himself. He wanted that, he really did, but the pull was too strong. That New Year's Eve, twenty years' ago, he had held his wife tightly and promised her he would change and become the man she had married. His resolution was made with all the sincerity that a broken man can make. One week later he was passed out, blacked out, drunk in a seedy motel room. The inevitable cascade of events and consequences that followed had taken him to the place where he was today. He was now reduced to the man that would smoke cast off cigarette butts found on the street, reduced to the man that carried all his worldly possessions in the pockets of his filthy tattered pants.

Phil continued, slogging on down the busy street. Arriving at the corner, along with a crowd of other pedestrians, he waited, they all waited for the light to change so they could cross over. Phil thought to himself how like a herd of livestock headed to market they appeared. They shuffled and nudged and moaned and groaned and milled about.

As he stood there, a single thought niggled his brain. One or two little steps out into the street and it would all be over. He stepped forward, eyes down, toes at the curb. He waited. He could do this. He stepped down off the curb. There was the sound of restless murmuring from the others waiting at the light. "What's he doing?" asked one woman looking around at the crowd. "Hey Mister!" came out of the crowd. "The light hasn't changed yet!". Two cars flew by tapping their horns. One more step, he thought, one more step. No one moved to intervene. No one put a hand out to stop him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry", Phil mumbled to himself. He was sorry for the grief and pain he had caused all those he cared about. He was sorry he was about to take the final step that would end his own pain.

The light changed, the crowd pressed forward, pushing by Phil without another word. They moved forward dividing themselves around Phil, the rock in the center of the people river.

The Works

PHOTOGRAPHY
AND
DIGITAL ART

BEAUTY FOUND IN THE WORLD AROUND US



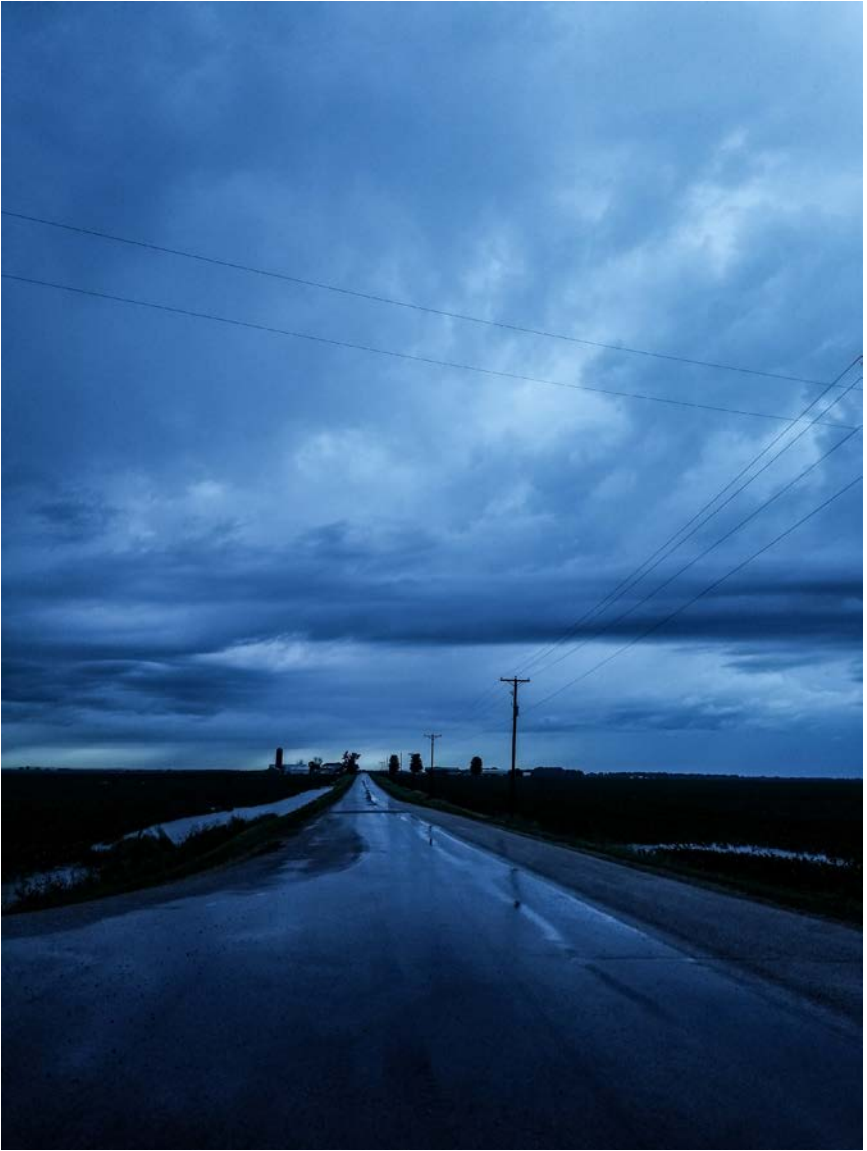
Untitled

by Raven Day



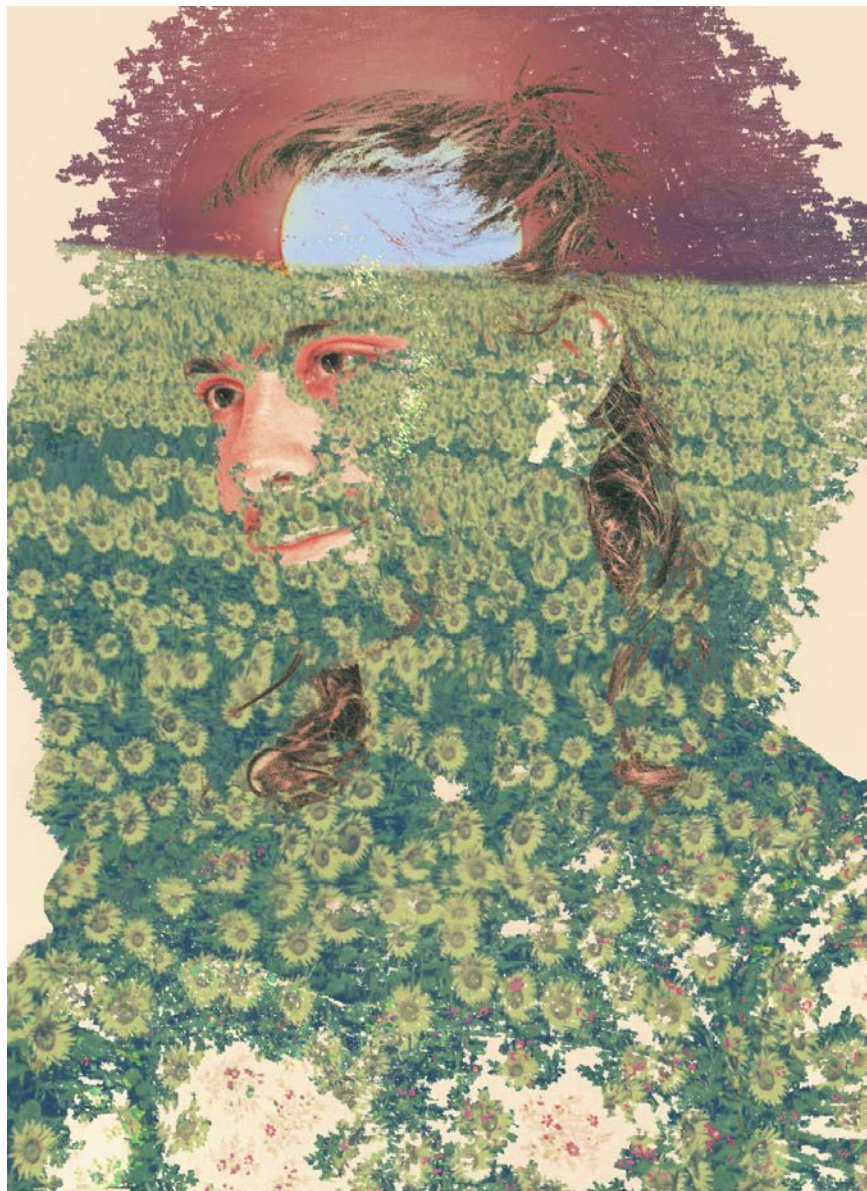
butte alley series #3

by Glenn Bodish



Rain

by Ricardo Ortega



Untitled

by Raven Day



butte alley series #2

by Glenn Bodish



Untitled

by Raven Day



Let Me Drive the Boat

by Ricardo Ortega

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DRAMA

VISUAL ART MEETS STORYTELLING

Losing At Game Night

by Micah Green, Matthew Long, Margaret Oswald, and Debra Tennison

CHARACTERS

ALLIE - Young woman, working her way through college

JOHN JR. - Allie's boyfriend

MOTHER/ROSE - John Jr.'s mom

FATHER/JOHN SR. - John Jr.'s dad

JUNE - John Jr.'s 10 y.o. sister

MELANIE - John Jr.'s 12 y.o. cousin

SUSAN - John Jr.'s married older sister

MARK - Susan's husband

SETTING: The upper middle-class home of John Sr., Rose

When: 7 pm on a Friday night.

SPOTLIGHT STAGE LEFT

(Allie and John Jr. enter stage left, in front of closed curtains. They walk to center stage, hand in hand.)

ALLIE

(Appearing a little stunned as she looks around.)

Johnny! You didn't tell me you had money. I mean, look at this place!

JOHN JR.

I don't have money. My family does but it's no big deal. They're just normal people. You have nothing to be nervous about.

ALLIE

Johnny, why didn't you at least give me a heads up? I would like to have been prepared for this. I didn't even wash my hair.

JOHN

It's just gonna be family. My parents are the most laid-back people you'll ever meet. My sisters are cool, though my brother-in-law is a bit of a dick. You'll have a great time, you'll see.

(Still holding Allie's hand.)

ALLIE

Please don't leave me alone to fend for myself amongst strangers? Can we leave whenever I want to, whenever I say I'm ready to go?

JOHN JR.

It's hard to believe that we've been dating for two months now. I've wanted to introduce you to the family for a while. They're going to like you as much as I do. You're worrying way too much. Next time though, hmm, maybe just put on a little makeup and uh, no ripped jeans.

(Looks at Allie's ripped jeans.)

Mother hates ripped jeans.

(Smiles.)

ALLIE

That would've been good to know before we came here. And for the record, I do have makeup on. When I'm ready to go, can I give you some type of signal?

JOHN JR.

You know Allie, you need to dial it back a notch. I said what I said, okay?

(John lets go of her hand and turns away.)

ALLIE

I'm sorry Johnny. I'm just a little out of my element here.

JOHN JR.

Like I said, it's no big deal.

(Smiles.)

Everyone will love you.

(Knocks on the front door.)

They need to get to know the future Mrs. John Jr.

ALLIE

The future what?? Wait, what!?

LIGHTS, CURTAINS UP.

(Center stage, John Jr.'s family is gathered around the dining room table chatting.)

JOHN JR.

Hello, everyone! The party can now get started!

MOTHER

Oh, hello, kids.

The Works

(Wine glass in hand.)

FATHER

Oh, Rose, don't pester the poor kids. Give them a chance to breathe. We haven't even been introduced, and you're already nagging them. Hello, dear, I'm John .
(Extends hand to Allie.)

And this here is my lovely wife Rose.

ALLIE

(Shaking John's hand.)

Hi, it's so nice to finally meet you both. I've heard so many things about you.

FATHER

All good things I hope.

ALLIE

The best.

SUSAN

I'm Susan, John Jr.'s older sister. It's great to meet you, Allie. I can't believe Jr. has waited so long to bring you around. This is my husband, Mark.

MARK

Nice to meet you.

ALLIE

You, too. And who do we have here?

(Smiles to the two young girls sitting together.)

JOHN JR.

This is my sister, June, and my cousin Melanie.

ALLIE

It's nice to meet you both.

JUNE

John Jr., which one is this? Hannah or Grace? Or is it Rachel?

JOHN JR.

Okay, that's enough out of you. June is ten years old, and likes to be a menace in any way that she can.

MELANIE

Well, I am twelve years old, and I would never act so childish. It's wonderful to

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make your acquaintance, Allison.

ALLIE

You can call me Allie, but it's nice to meet you, too, girls. Johnny. didn't tell me that tonight was a family party or anything. He had just said it was a fun little game night. I am so glad I finally got to meet you all, though.

SUSAN

Well, what do you mean? It is just game night.

ALLIE

Oh, I guess I just didn't expect so many people.

FATHER

It's just the regulars here tonight. If you want to see a real party, you should see us on Christmas Eve.

JUNE

Ok, ok. Can we play now?

JOHN JR.

Alright, what's on tap for tonight?

(Everyone sits down at the table.)

MELANIE

June and I were thinking we could play Uno! It's our faaaaavorite game. We've been talking about it all day, haven't we, June?

JUNE

Yeah! We wanna play Uno!

JOHN JR.

I don't think so. I was going to say we should play Scrabble.

MARK

Scrabble sounds perfect!

SUSAN

I like that idea.

MELANIE

But what about Uno?

JOHN JR.

The Works

Three overrules two, which is too bad for you!

ALLIE

C'mon. Let's play what the girls want to play.

JOHN JR.

Why would we do that? Uno is single handedly the most boring game, and I just don't want to.

ALLIE

Oh come on, Johnny. They're only ten.

MOTHER

(Nods head and sips wine in agreement.)

MELANIE

I'm twelve.

ALLIE

And twelve.

JOHN JR.

Just because they haven't graduated out of middle school doesn't mean they get to decide what we're going to play.

ALLIE

Don't you think it's a little ridiculous to argue with some ten year olds?

MOTHER

(Pours another glass of wine.)

MELANIE

I'm twelve.

ALLIE

And twelve year olds.

FATHER

Actually, Allie, Junior's right, here. Three overrules two, so it looks like we're going to be playing some Scrabble tonight.

JUNE

But I wanted to play Uno!
(Begins to cry.)

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SUSAN

Well, that's too bad, sweetie. Now either quit your crying or go to your room.
No one wants to listen to you whine.

MOTHER

(Raises glass in agreement.)

SUSAN

Mark and I will be a team. Allie and John Jr. Mother and Father. And...
(Pauses.)

June, are you playing or not?

JUNE

(Sniffles and wipes her nose.)

I'm playing.

SUSAN

Okay, then you and Melanie are on a team.

JOHN JR.

Let's get this started.

BLACKOUT

(Family shifts around in the darkness, adjusting to look like they're halfway through a game.)

LIGHTS UP

MOTHER

(Head in hands.)

JUNE

You're the one who cheated, not me!

JOHN JR.

How could I have cheated, you're the one passing out tiles!

ALLIE

Why don't we try a different game?

JUNE

It's not fair for you to use words other people don't know!

The Works

MARK

That's rich coming from the girl who's been hogging tiles the whole time.

SUSAN

When you hog the letters, that ruins the game for everyone else.

MELANIE

(To Allie.)

We take Scrabble very seriously.

JOHN JR.

If you hadn't cheated Allie and I would have won the last game. I was this close to playing 'oxen' on the bonus square when we 'ran out' (finger quotes) of tiles.

MOTHER

John...

FATHER

(Holds up his hand to shush Rose.)

Junior, June, that's enough fighting. June you should know better than to cheat if you're not sharp enough to keep from getting caught. John, even on the triple word square 'oxen' wouldn't have given you enough points to win the last game, so I don't want to hear about it any more.

JUNE

I didn't cheat!

(JUNE stands up and flips the board, scattering the remaining tiles.)

MOTHER

(Drinks.)

(JOHN JR. and FAMILY freeze.)

BLACKOUT

SPOTLIGHT on ALLIE

ALLIE

(Beat)

I can't believe I skipped washing my hair for this.

LIGHTS UP

(FAMILY resumes fighting.)

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SUSAN/MARK/JOHN SR./JOHN JR./MELANIE

June!

JUNE

I'm not a cheater!

JOHN JR.

Then why'd you cheat?

JUNE

I didn't cheat!

MARK

You can't deny the physical evidence. We saw the extra tiles you were holding under the table, we know what you did. You should apologize.

SUSAN

It's really pathetic that you'd throw the game board just because you're losing.

MELANIE

So childish. Honestly I'm embarrassed for you.

JUNE

Ugh! I hate all of you!

(Runs off stage.)

MELANIE

Uncle John, Aunt Rose, thank you so much for having me but I should go, I have to wake up early in the morning for practice.

FATHER

(Picking up Scrabble tiles from down stage.)

So how about one more game with no teams?

ALLIE

...

FAMILY

YEAH!

(BLACKOUT)

(Curtains close. John Jr. and Allie stand center stage outside the closed curtains).

SPOTLIGHT, CENTER STAGE

The Works

ALLIE

(Digging through purse.)

You know Johnny, your family is very intense, and I do mean VERY intense!

(Still digging in her purse, not making eye contact.)

I'm not sure that we're a good match for each other, all things considered.

(Retrieves her phone from her purse.)

JOHN JR.

Wow, where did that come from? I thought we all got along great. It was all in good fun, right? Let's head out now and tomorrow we can discuss it over coffee.

(Pulls car keys out of his pocket.)

ALLIE

Really Johnny, there's no need.

(Tapping on her phone.)

I just called for an Uber. You can stay here and umm, well, you can stay here.

JOHN JR.

What do you mean? Just cancel the Uber and I'll take you home.

ALLIE

I mean it. I'm taking an Uber home and you can stay here. Your family, and to be honest, you included, are a lot for me. I just don't think this is going to work out. I'm not ready for some type of long term commitment. That whole "the future Mrs. John Jr."?

(Makes air quotes.)

Well, it sort of freaked me out.

JOHN JR.

Allie, cancel the Uber because I'm taking you home.

(Looking angry.)

Just get in the car!

ALLIE

Johnny... John, I'm trying to tell you nicely that we are done. What I witnessed tonight convinced me that we are not a good match, and I don't want to see you again. I can't say it much clearer than that.

JOHN JR.

You must be tired. Call me when you get in tonight then.

(Big smile. Reaches out for a hug.)

ALLIE

(Pulls away and steps stage right.)

John, I'm not calling you tomorrow.

(Turns to go. Looks back over her shoulder.)
Or ever.

JOHN JR.

Okay then, get some rest. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

(Allie exits stage right, John Jr. exits stage left.)

BLACKOUT

A WORLD OF DREAMS IS
IN YOUR HANDS!



Sauk Valley
Community College