

# The Works

The background of the cover is a complex, multi-colored quilted pattern. The colors range from deep blues and purples to bright yellows, oranges, and reds. Overlaid on this pattern is a central figure of a person lying down, possibly a child or a young adult, with their head resting on their hand. The figure is rendered in a textured, painterly style, with visible brushstrokes and a mix of colors that blend with the quilted background.

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# The Works

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# Untitled

by Lexie Perry

# A Moment to Read

by Kara Ellis

I patiently waited all morning for the moment I would be alone. The constant stream of questions and grievances from the rest of the household had left me drained, and in desperate need of the one thing that would bring me solace. I warmed up my coffee and headed to my chair. I noticed through the only window in the room, the sky shifting from a light pink to a dark gray and realized a storm was coming. The window would need to be closed, which meant the cool breeze that had been gently caressing my cheeks would end. I decided I would wait until the very last moment and then turned my attention back to the tragic tale of Miss. Amelia and her Sad Café.

As I went to take a sip of my coffee, I could feel the breeze had picked up outside. This pleased me and I decided to rearrange myself in the chair, so that I could sit with my bare feet outstretched towards the window. The contrast between the warm coffee mug that rested on my belly and the cold wind on the soles of my feet was like a perfectly tuned melody. I had the best of both worlds right in this very room. The sky was now shifting from a dark grey to a violent black, slowly robbing me of the light with which I was using to read. With a quick and sure pull, I tugged the chain attached to the small lamp on the side table behind me, being careful not to disrupt the mug still resting on my belly. A soft glow spread across the room and illuminated the pages in front of me, and I again turned my attention to Miss. Amelia.

Suddenly, I felt the coolness of a raindrop landing on my cheek like a gently placed kiss. Then another and another, until I could no longer ignore it and got up to close the window. It was then, as I stood with the polished window frame in my hand, that a giant wind rounded the corner of the house. Bending branches into ugly twisted shapes until one could bend no more and snapped. The force pushed it down and forward, right through the very window I still held onto. The impact sent me back on my heels as I tried to shield my face from the splinters of exploding glass and bark. In a matter of seconds, it was over, and I was left standing there covered in debris and tiny specks of blood.

My initial instinct was to leave the room, clean my wounds, and try to cover the window. Instead, I turned back to my cozy chair and started reading again. I needed to know what happened to her, Miss. Amelia. A rational woman, whose heart drove her to make very irrational decisions. I needed to know, in this room, in this chair, with this coffee mug beside me and this broken window

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in front of me. I could not bring myself to abandon this sinking ship. The harder the rain pelted my legs, the faster I read. The more the wind slapped me across the face, the more rooted I became in my chair. The chaos around me would be there whether I put the book down or not. I needed to know more about the mess that had become her life, which meant for now ignoring my own.





# Excerpt from “C’est La Vie”

by Michael Jenkins

When Bonnie realized she had been licking the ground, she wondered how long she had been there. Then, she wondered why she had been licking the ground in the first place. She stopped, and stared at the sidewalk, bewildered.

But wasn't it obvious? She had smelled some trace of food here. Maybe somebody dropped a burrito on the sidewalk and didn't pick up every scrap. She thought it was a burrito, anyway. She hadn't eaten all day, and had been searching desperately for some discarded scraps for hours.

But . . . why would she eat off the ground?

Then that question confused her. Where else would she eat?

That she realized she was licking the ground again.

Bonnie stood up, or at least tried to, but found she could barely keep her balance, and she fell back on all fours. She looked down as she fell, and yelped in shock. Somehow, she had become a dog.

But hadn't she always been a dog?

No. That wasn't right. If she focused, she could remember being in French class, sitting around the terribly improvised pool table in her friend's basement on weekends, falling asleep on her boyfriend's shoulder on movie night, finding a porch to sleep under when it rained, chasing squirrels through the park with the boys, and waking up early to dig around the dumpster for pizza and donut scraps from behind the gas station down the road from the church.

It was becoming clear to Bonnie that she hadn't been magically transformed into a brand new dog. This dog had already been here. And it seemed the dog was actually still in there with her. From sharing the same head, she knew her name was “Daisy”. As much as a stray dog has a name, anyway. Somebody must be calling her that often enough for it to stick.

Bonnie looked around, but as far as she knew, she had been projected into a dog on some distant alien planet. Everything looked like a sickly yellow or a shallow distant blue, everything else in shades of gray. She could also barely pick out any fine details. Daisy, it seemed, desperately needed a pair of glasses.

Bonnie poked around the sidewalk and the grass a bit, still giggling to herself imagining a dog with glasses staring at a vision chart and barking answers to an optometrist. But as she wandered around, lost in a world of strange, intense smells she'd never known before, she slowly pieced together where she was.

She could barely make out the sign, but she was certain that blur over there was the run down corpse of an old Burger King across the street. And over here, on the other side of a chain link fence, was a huge black pit. Much darker than it should be able to get at this time of day. It smelled strange, like a foul, charred stench. The only word she knew that was appropriate was “hellish”.

Suddenly, she remembered the fire. There was a piercing, punctuated shriek buried under a huge bang and a roaring rush of flames. Lots of

panicking, screaming, students ignoring what they'd been told during fire drills to shove each other to the ground sprinting for an exit or forcing windows open and jumping outside.

The flames were so impossibly black that they fucking sucked light out of the room. Smokeless and barely hot, as if it was made of hate instead of heat. And aggressive as hell. Tearing through brick and steel more easily than a regular, God-fearing fire would chew up wood and plaster. She remembered somebody splashing a water bottle at some of it, and that only made the fire angrier. It was burning the water.

Bonnie had found Ada trapped by the fire, trying and failing to smother a little patch of blackness gnawing at the side of her face. She had given up trying to escape, and had been cowering in the corner and sobbing uncontrollably. Bonnie felt sick seeing the fire kept in check on her face by her tears, as if the fire only relaxed once it was satisfied that it had hurt somebody.

She struggled to scoop Ada up onto her shoulder, and charged for the exit. The only way out now was through the fire. She had to try. She had no idea how she managed to stay on her feet for more than two steps with the agony tearing through her legs.

She suddenly lost all the feeling in her legs, heard a terrible snap, and collapsed on the steps outside, slamming both her and Ada onto the sidewalk. She looked back, and saw her left leg crumbling into black powder on the steps behind her. In just five seconds, the fire had chewed through her to the bone.

Lyra had run over to check on her, and Bonnie had just instinctively apologized to her. For what? For dying in a fire? Lyra chewed her out again for apologizing too much, and begged her not to let her last words be “sorry.” So what did she do? She apologized again and then died like a fucking idiot. She just had to say literally any word but “sorry”, and she couldn't even manage that.

And now, standing by the void where the high school had been, she realized that Daisy had been licking burrito crumbs off the black stain where her body had collapsed.

Bonnie felt weak. Almost sick. She tried to walk away. Just somewhere away from here. But she wasn't used to her legs. She could barely manage a stupid-looking slow waddle, the way a dog would walk if something were stuck in the leg of its pants.

*It's like trying to learn to ride a bike underwater,* she thought.

Eventually, she found walking was easier when she didn't think about it. Though, really, she was letting Daisy do the walking for her.

They walked down the sidewalk, though only Daisy was accustomed to wandering around blindly like this. She seemed easily distracted by random scents, and Bonnie started to get a sense of where the other dogs in the neighborhood had been.

Daisy seemed to recognize most of these dogs, though she knew them by their smell and not by their name or their face. She figured this must be the reason dogs always stop to sniff stuff all the time.

Soon, Bonnie was trying to take her mind off her hunger, too. Daisy hadn't eaten for a while, and she could catch hints of food hanging in the air. Some of it rotten, sure, but much of it was still perfectly edible. Bonnie realized she was mostly smelling this by the trash cans out by the curb, but Daisy wasn't big enough or dexterous enough to get into any of them.

It all smelled so fresh! Relatively speaking. At least bits of it, through the garbage stink. Bonnie thought about the time she'd seen somebody throw

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out half a pizza just because they didn't feel like eating any more of it and they didn't like eating leftover pizza, and she felt like breaking something.

It was maddening, to be starving so badly and surrounded by food destined for a landfill. Both Bonnie and Daisy knew they'd get yelled at for trying to get into any of it, and Bonnie knew damn well that it was all put there precisely because nobody wanted it.

*If I ever get out of here somehow, I'm throwing all my leftovers in the yard,* Bonnie insisted to herself.

Suddenly, Daisy started walking faster, tracking where the scent was stronger, until she saw a shape she recognized and sprinted off after it. Bonnie still found it hard to make out details through these eyes, but as she got close, she gasped lightly when she saw who it was.

Ada cocked her head in confusion; she was pretty sure she'd never heard a dog make that noise before. Still, she laughed it off, and leaned forward a bit in her wheelchair and put her arms out. Daisy jumped up to put her front paws on Ada's lap and smile at her like a big, happy idiot.

Bonnie felt like smiling too. She's alive. Thank God she's alive! The last she'd seen Ada, she was being carried off by paramedics, and Bonnie wasn't sure they could keep the hellfire on her face from eating her alive. She felt like crying. At least Ada was okay.

Still, though, it looked like Ada didn't make it out unharmed. The wholeright side of her face was stained an impossibly dark black, and there seemed to be some of that stain on her arm and hand too. Bonnie couldn't tell for sure, but she couldn't find Ada's right eye, and it looked like she had a hard time keeping all of her teeth in her mouth. Like some of her cheek was missing.

"Hiiii Daisy," Ada cooed, in a high pitched voice that Daisy found extremely comforting. Bonnie thought she sounded different. Not just that there was something clearly wrong with her lips or her cheeks somewhere. Her voice was slightly off, maybe a bit older.

*Ohhh shit . . . How long was I gone?*

"How are you, girl?" Ada asked, ruffling the fur around her neck with one hand and scratching behind her ear with the other. Bonnie suddenly realized Daisy was laughing uncontrollably. Though if she weren't in the same head, she would have thought Daisy was just breathing funny.

*Is that really what dog laughter sounds like? Huh . . .*

Bonnie needed to say something to Ada. To let her know she was okay. Well, "okay" might be a bit generous. She just really needed to talk to somebody about this. She tried to say Ada's name, but even something that simple was beyond her. Daisy's body just physically couldn't make sounds like that.

Ada made a funny face, then wrinkled her lips.

"Are you alright, honey? You're acting kinda funny."

Daisy suddenly hopped down, backed up, and sat on the ground, staring up at Biscuit expectantly.

"Aww, you're just hungry, aren't you? I bet you are!"

Daisy barked once, without Bonnie even thinking about it.

*She's such a smart dog,* Ada thought.

She turned awkwardly, grabbing the backpack hanging off the back of



her wheelchair. She unzipped the bag, dug around for a bit, then pulled out one of those bone-shaped dog biscuits.

Daisy waited for her to lower her hand, then snapped it up and started crunching it loudly. It was strange; Bonnie could tell it tasted like meat, but it was different from anything she knew. She figured it was more likely Daisy's taste buds being different than the biscuit being flavored like Sasquatch meat or something unthinkable like that. Still, she felt weird eating dog biscuits, especially with a dog's mouth.

As Daisy crunched through a second treat, Bonnie suddenly started thinking about Lyra. On one movie night, Lyra and Elaine had gotten bored of the lack of slapstick or explosions, and started an escalating series of dares to out-hurt-themselves at each other. Elaine had dared Lyra to eat a dog biscuit, and Lyra just laughed and crunched up a whole one without flinching at all.

Lyra had explained that she got curious when she was little and tried to eat one, and thought it was kinda bland, but not terrible. She admitted to sneaking them from a treat jar occasionally-

An overwhelming epiphany struck her like a goddamn thunderbolt. They'd been watching a movie about a guy sent off to war, who ends up in a hospital bed, mute, and blind, and paralyzed from the neck down. He starts communicating with his nurse by tapping Morse code on his pillow with his head, and that always haunted her a bit.

When they were little, she and Lyra had learned Morse code from the back of a cereal box. Their bedroom windows faced each other across Lyra's backyard, and they'd blink lights at each other in the middle of the night to stay up and gossip. Tapping messages to each other during class, or across the park, or to confide things they didn't have the strength to say out loud.

Bonnie couldn't talk, but she knew she could bark. She could blink, tap on the ground, she could still communicate. She had to get to Lyra's house.

No. She thought about it more. She had no idea how long she'd been gone. She had to hope that Lyra was still around, still lived somewhere Bonnie could find her, still remembered Morse code, and would make the crazy tin-foil hat connection that a dog she'd never met before was barking a code at her.

Still, it was the only thing she could think of. If there was anybody who had any hope of hearing her, anybody she needed to talk to, it was Lyra.

With tremendous effort, Bonnie managed to drag Daisy away from her precious Biscuit. Bonnie stared around intently for a little bit, trying to figure out which street she was on, then walked a few awkward steps in the direction of Lyra's house. Well, the last house she remembered Lyra living in. She stopped, then turned back to Ada and barked once. Bonnie kept staring at her, then turned back to face Lyra's house for a bit. Then she turned back and barked again.

She needed to make sure she didn't lose Ada. If she was wrong about Lyra's house, following Ada around was her next best bet at finding her.

"What's wrong?" Ada asked.

Bonnie fumbled back over to Ada's side. She ran forward a few steps down the street. Then stopped, looked back, then barked again.

"You . . . want me to follow you?" Ada asked.

Bonnie smiled, and nodded at her gently.

Ada's expression imploded like a collapsing building. She knew she'd never seen a dog do that before. She scooted forward to follow Daisy down the street, shocked that she kept slowing down and looking back to make sure she was still following.

*That is a SCARY smart dog,* Ada thought.



# Untitled

by Jenny Bumba

# A Choice Better Made in the Open

by Eliana Gale

Questions aren't meant to be asked. I go about my day, doing as I'm told, without ever opening my mouth. There's no point in resisting. Those who question and rebel, who hesitate when given orders, they end up punished or even killed. So why should I risk my life to ask questions? I shouldn't; that's all there is to it. Submit and obey those and power and I'll live a long life.

I constantly have to remind myself of this every time I feel a question on the tip of my tongue. I'm only fourteen, a boy who hasn't quite reached manhood yet. I should be allowed to ask questions, to understand the world better, but servants like myself aren't supposed to understand. As long as we do as we're told, everything will be fine for us.

So, I don't understand how I ended up here. I followed my master's orders to the letter. I hid the package amongst the tradeable goods in the back of the wagon, I set out on the journey to the capital city of Falgoth bright and early in the morning, so where did I go wrong? Surely, it must be something I didn't do correctly that caused me to end up as the captive of these bandits. There's no way my master, the great Lord Targus of the Provence of Talor, could ever be wrong.

Yet here I am, bound and tossed on the ground like a useless sack of potatoes. The bandits even killed the two knights sent to accompany me and protect the package. There was nothing I could do. I'm only a servant boy. I know nothing of the world, of fighting and bandits or anything else for that matter.

A scruffy-looking man with mousy brown hair comes over to where I was dropped on the ground. His worn, tattered clothes look as if they were once very fine and richly made, evident from the faded gold thread embroidery on his jerkin and the neat stitching in his dark trousers. He must have stolen them from some nobleman or a wealthy merchant. How despicable these bandits are.

"My sincerest apologies, Your Majesty, for the rough manner in which we've treated you," the man says, pulling out a knife and cutting away my bindings. "My men did not recognize you at first. I hope you understand."

A question pops into my mouth, but I quell it immediately. I am confused as to why he is addressing me as if I'm royalty, but I know better than to ask questions. Maybe if I do as they say, they'll let me go, I tell myself in the attempt to soothe my fear.

"You seem confused, which is understandable. I bet you don't even

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know who you truly are, my King.”

Once more, I have to stop myself from asking what he means. Lying still and avoiding eye contact, I hope he'll eventually give up and go away. There's nothing else I can do. Resisting will only lead to pain. I do not want to die or be tortured.

“Your Majesty, you do not have to be afraid. We mean you no harm. We've been looking for you for a long time since you disappeared all those years ago.”

There's such a strong part of me that wants to know, to understand what he's talking about. I'm a servant boy, and I've always been one. I'm not royalty in any way. I doubt I even look the part. I don't understand. I want to go home where I don't need to understand anything.

The man shuffles closer to me, and I flinch away when he touches my shoulder. “Forgive me, my King. I had to make sure you were real. We've all given up hope that we'd ever find you, but you've been so close all this time. Had we known that you were being held by that traitorous Lord Targus all this time, forced to work for him, we would've come to your rescue sooner.”

His tone and mannerisms are scary. Something about him just seems off, like he's not all there. He's dangerous, that's for sure. I need to be careful around him if I want to make it out of this alive and whole.

I can feel his dark eyes sweeping over me with such intensity that it sends chills up my spine. I shift backwards and push myself up into a sitting position. What does he want with me? Why does he keep referring to me as his King?

“You have your mother's eyes, I can see. And your father's straight nose. There's no mistaking that you are definitely our lost prince, the last heir of the true Royal Family, Aaron Sevikai.”

I gasp a little. How does he know that my name is Aaron? Who is he? Does he really believe I'm some lost prince? Some heir to the previous Royal Family?

The brunet man grins eerily, an unsettling look in his eyes. “The legends must be true. Your family truly must be blessed by the moon. There's no other possible way you could be alive to this day if you were not under her bountiful protection.”

Blessed by the moon? What does he mean by that? I want to ask, but I have to keep my mouth clamped shut. The urge to spout out all the questions swirling in my head is nearly overwhelming. I don't know how much longer I can hold back. I wish he would stop speaking in riddles and nonsense and just tell me what he wants from me.

The bandit straightens up. “Sit tight here, Your Majesty. I will have a more comfortable place readied for you. Now that you have been found, we can finally take back the kingdom from that wicked usurper, Lurik III. He will pay for his crimes against the Royal Family, and you will have your place back on the throne. At long last after these ten long years, the Sevikai reign will be restored and everything will be as it should be.”



He's insane. There's no way he can be in his right mind! How can he think I can take the throne? Is he actually going to try to overthrow King Lurik III? I'm just a servant boy; why am I getting caught up in all this? I just want to live a long, peaceful life!

After the man leaves, two other men in similar attire approach me. One of them lifts me to my feet while the other offers me a cup of clear water. Not knowing what else to do, I accept the drink and take small sips from it that quench the thirst I didn't even realize I had. Everything is happening so fast, and my mind can't keep up with it all. Is this really happening? Do they actually believe I'm this long last heir?

"My King, would you like some stew? It's nice and hot, and it'll fill you right up," a woman with long auburn hair offers as we walk into the main part of the bandit camp. Glancing around, I can see that they've been here a while, hidden away deep in the woods around Talor. Their shelters are made quite sturdy with logs, branches, leaves, and blankets that are so patched up that it's difficult to tell which pattern or color is the original.

The prospect of food makes my stomach grumble. I haven't eaten since this morning when I first set out. The sky above us through the tree branches is already starting to darken. So, with a small nod, I accept the chipped bowl she holds out to me. Not one to complain about any amount of food given to me, I don't even think about what might be in it before digging in. Thankfully, it tastes good and seems like normal vegetable stew.

"Your Majesty, over here," one of the men leading me around directs, gesturing to a tent-like structure near the center of the camp. "I hope these accommodations will be to your liking. We do not have much, but soon you'll have all the comforts and finery of the castle once more."

I dip under the blanket doorway and into the shelter. The inside isn't big, but it's surprisingly cozy. Furs of various kinds line the floor, making it a bit better than where I usually sleep on the hard ground by the kitchen hearth. They're only treating me this nice because they believe I'm some lost prince and heir to the Sevikai Royal Family. They'll find out soon that I'm just some lowly servant boy, I'm sure. I should try to escape if I can.

I poke my head out of the tent again, only to find the two men standing guard. The taller of the two of them turns to me and asks, "is there something you need, my King?"

I shake my head and retreat back inside. Disheartened, I sit on the fur-covered ground to wait. It seems my only option if I want to stay alive is to play along for now and look for an opportunity to get out of this. I don't want to be king. I know nothing about the previous Royal Family or court procedures. What am I going to do if I can't escape? Will they actually try to take over the throne? Do they actually want me to be King?

About half an hour of waiting by myself, the scruffy man with brown hair from before sticks his head into the tent, startling me a little. "My King, your loyal subjects wish to celebrate our success in finally finding you. Will you

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come out and join us?”

Knowing I really don't have any other options but to play along, I stand up and exit the tent-like shelter with him. A whole crowd of people await us outside, cheering as soon as they catch sight of me. There are men and women, old and young. All of them are bedraggled but have hints of past wealth. I'm shocked by how many of them there are in this one encampment. There could very well be enough for a small army.

A multitude of hands reach out to touch me as I'm led through the crowd. People smile at me and welcome me. People bow and press gifts of flowers into my hands. I don't know what to think anymore. Why me? Why is this being forced upon me like this? They seem so happy that I'm here that I'd feel horrible if I let them down.

The man brings me to an old stump that's been fashioned into some kind of mock throne by the largest campfire. Uneasy, I take my seat upon it as the crowd of people gather around. A little girl, no older than seven or eight, comes up to me and holds out a crown of flowers with a shy smile. Under the pressure of all these gazes, I lean down enough for her to reach up and place it on my head.

“Uh, thank you,” I manage to say. She giggles and runs back to a woman who might be her mother. There's a conflict stirring inside me. I don't want to be a king, and I certainly don't want to become a traitor to the crown. I have nothing against His Majesty, King Lurik III, and I don't have any memories of when the previous Royal Family ruled since I was only a little child.

At the same time, these people are so nice. They're treating me well and look so happy. They've even started dancing and playing music while others bring out food that must've taken them a lot of time to gather and prepare. All of this makes me feel a strange warmth inside. It's rare to see such joyful people. I feel like I'd be an evil, wicked, and cruel person to take this joy away from them, to be the cause of their sorrow and anger and disheartening.

It's overwhelming. I don't know what to do. A large part of me just wants to curl up and cry, but I keep forcing myself to smile all throughout these festivities. Why me? Why does it have to be me? Can't I just go back to being a normal servant boy with normal tasks and a normal routine?

Finally, everything starts to calm down. By the look of the moon in the star-spangled sky overhead, it must be well past midnight. The man with brown hair from before approaches me. “My King, your people grow weary, and we have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Would you like to retire first?”

“Uh, yes, I would like to,” I respond, stumbling a little over the words. “Um, I do not know your, uh, name yet.”

He bows low. “This one is Lord Magnus, chief advisor to your father, King Callix. Everyone here was once a part of your father's court, Your Majesty. We will gladly lay our lives down and serve the one true heir of the Sevikai Royal Family.”

Gulping back my unease, I nod. “Right. But I'm not a King.”

That eerie grin appears on his face again. “Not yet, Your Majesty. But

the throne will soon be yours should everything go according to plan in these next few days.”

“Right. Uh, I think I shall retire now,” I tell him, biting back the question I really want to ask: what’s going to happen in the next few days?

The woman with auburn hair who gave me the stew last night wakes me up in the morning. She introduces herself as Norma, a lady of the old court. With gentle hands, she combs out my hair and hands me a bowl of porridge, apologizing for the meager meal. I quickly tell her that it’s alright. After all, I’m used to this kind of food. I’ve eaten much worse than bland, watery porridge.

“Your Majesty, we’ve been saving these clothes for you. Once you are done getting dressed, please come out so we can start our journey to Falgoth,” Norma tells me, handing me a neatly folded pile of clothes. “If you require anything, I’ll be right outside.”

I nod, and she leaves me alone in the tent. I wasn’t able to get much sleep at all last night. There are too many thoughts in my head. Looking at these richly-tailored clothes fit for royalty, I know I don’t have any right to wear them. I’m not royalty. I’m not a king. I never wanted any of this. I was just fine where I was, living my life out as a servant boy in Talor.

The first of my tears drip down onto the soft fabric in my hands. I don’t allow myself to make any sound, not wanting to disturb anyone outside. It hurts so much, like I’m being split in half. One side wants to help these people while the other just wants to toss it all aside and go home. I know I should repay their kindness but not like this.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to steady. I don’t have any other choice. I’ve gotten too far in now. I’ll have to keep playing my part, no matter how much I’ll regret it in the end.

With that decision in mind, I begin to take off my old servant’s uniform, discarding the faded green tunic and brown trousers. The new clothes consist of a loose white shirt, a red jerkin with gold embellishments, and black trousers. There are even a pair of dark leather boots that are even finer than the ones I’ve had to polish for my master, Lord Targus. It feels wrong to be wearing such finery, but they’re actually pretty comfortable and not rough or itchy.

I give myself time for a few more calming breaths before stepping out of the tent. The two men standing guard and Norma all look me up and down and smile, nodding in approval. I guess I probably look more kingly than before. Still, a new outfit can’t hide the fact that in my very being, I’m only a servant boy.

“Ah, the clothes fit you well. A little big but they suit you, my King,” Lord Magnus declares, coming over to join us. He’s cleaned up as well, shaved even. However, his clothes are the same weathered ones from last night. He gestures off toward where everyone else is loading supplies into three big carts. “Come, Your Majesty. We must be off soon if we want to arrive in Falgoth in three days’ time.”

Lord Magnus leads me to a smaller, covered wagon that I recognize

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as the one that I drove yesterday from Talor. All the tradeable goods have been emptied from inside, replaced by furs and blankets to make it more comfortable. He tells me that I shall ride alone inside, and, should I require anything at all, just ask.

I hesitate before climbing up into the wagon. My mind thinks back to the special package Lord Targus instructed me to bring to Falgoth. Lord Magnus and the others probably have it now. I wonder what it was. After all, Lord Targus, my good master, told me to bring it straight to His Majesty, King Lurik III. I'll probably never find out, but it's nice to think about it and distract myself from the current situation.

The next few days are filled with non-stop traveling. They don't allow me to leave the wagon at all unless I need to answer nature's call. Norma brings me food and water every day, and Lord Magnus checks on me every once and a while, always asking if I need anything. When I do get to stretch my legs, I've seen that it looks like everyone is coming along, including women and children. They're really not holding back at all. They really think they can take over the capital city in one big attack? It's suicide!

Finally, late on the third day, Lord Magnus informs me that we're nearing Falgoth. He tells me to climb down from the wagon, and I get my first glimpse of the shining royal city. Its high stone walls and looming towers are magnificent. I've never seen something so huge and awe-inspiring.

"It really is beautiful, isn't it?" the former chief advisor says. "Soon, it will all belong to you, my King." He grins broadly at me. "Our plan is to sneak in the same way we snuck out all those years ago. Only the true Royal Family and a select few trusted members of their court know about the tunnels that run under the city. We will strike from two different sides of the castle. However, I will take you, my King, and a few others right to the throne room. While everyone else is taking out Lurik's loyal dogs, we will strike the head off the snake once and for all. Then, you will take your place on the throne."

This seems like a decent plan to me, but it's not like I know all that much about this kind of thing. I obediently follow him and the other men he chose into the hills around Falgoth. He leads us to a place where a lone boulder sits. The men push the boulder aside to reveal a deep hole. Torches are lit before everyone descends inside down earthen steps.

The tunnels are dark and rather damp, leading down deep under the earth. All sorts of icky things cling to the walls and insects scurry away from our torchlight. I wonder how long it will take us to reach the throne room from here. Still, we traipse on in silence. Gradually, the passageway gets nicer, carved from rock and drier.

"We're nearing the exit into the throne room," Lord Magnus informs us in a low tone. "Be ready. That usurper will likely put up a fight."

"Understood," the men all agree simultaneously.

The rebel leader turns to me. "My King, it would be safest for you to remain in the tunnel until I come back to get you. We wouldn't want you to get hurt, right?"



“Alright. I’ll stay here,” I respond. He hands me one of the torches before leading the rest forward down the tunnel. There’s a loud creaking, screeching sound and then light appears at the far end. Shouts ring out, but I can’t understand what they are saying. Sounds of metal hitting metal and screams echo down the tunnel to reach my ears. I can’t tell if we are winning or losing.

What happens if they fail? My mind whispers to me as another hour drags by. I try not to think about it, but the intrusive thoughts keep returning. If they fail, then Lurik III will surely send men down here. They’ll find me for sure. Then, he’ll have me killed. Maybe if I tell him that I was forced into this, he’ll take pity on me? No, I doubt it. I’m as good as dead if they don’t succeed.

A noise from up ahead startles me out of my intrusive thoughts. Peering down the tunnel, I see a figure making their way towards me. I stumble back a few steps and hold the torch defensively in front of me. Relief washes over me a bit when the flickering orange glow illuminates the face of Lord Magnus.

“My King, we’ve won our battle. Come, it is time to claim your throne,” he tells me with a grin.

My heart sinks once more. I’m not mentally prepared. My mind and heart are screaming at me not to go through with this, but it’s like there’s a string attached to me, pulling me forward up and out of the tunnel and into the huge, brightly lit throne room. When my vision clears from nearly being blinded, I see the result of the battle. The beautifully gilded hall is splattered with blood and strewn with the bodies of knights. Two of the men who were with Magnus lie dead on the floor as well. The remaining two men stand off to the side, holding a richly dressed man tightly. If I were to guess, that man is likely Lurik III.

I look to Lord Magnus behind me for an inclination of what I’m supposed to do. He reaches into his shirt and pulls out a blue glass vial and asks, “would you like to do the honors? This is an extremely potent poison made from a rare flower known as Dragon’s Breath. There’s no cure, and it will kill him in mere minutes. If it weren’t for him, you’d have grown up here in this castle, surrounded by your big, happy family. Think of all that you could’ve had if it weren’t for him.”

My hand trembles when I accept the vial. Can I really do this? Can I just kill a man? Who am I to hold the power over life or death? I’ve been a servant boy my whole life, and I don’t like this feeling of power. To make such a heavy decision, it scares me. I’ve never had to make such a choice in my whole life.

“I won’t allow it!” King Lurik III shouts, spitting blood and gasping. “I won’t allow one of you thrice-cursed Sevikaais to ever sit on that throne again! You all are a bunch of pathetic scum! Cursed! Twisted by the moon!”

Lord Magnus storms over to him and punches him hard in the face. “How dare you speak such vile words in the presence of the true king! You are nothing but a traitorous insect that only deserves to be crushed under his heel! The Sevikai Royal Family is blessed and sacred! Their righteous blood is on your hands, and today you’ll reap the punishment you’ve sown for yourself!”

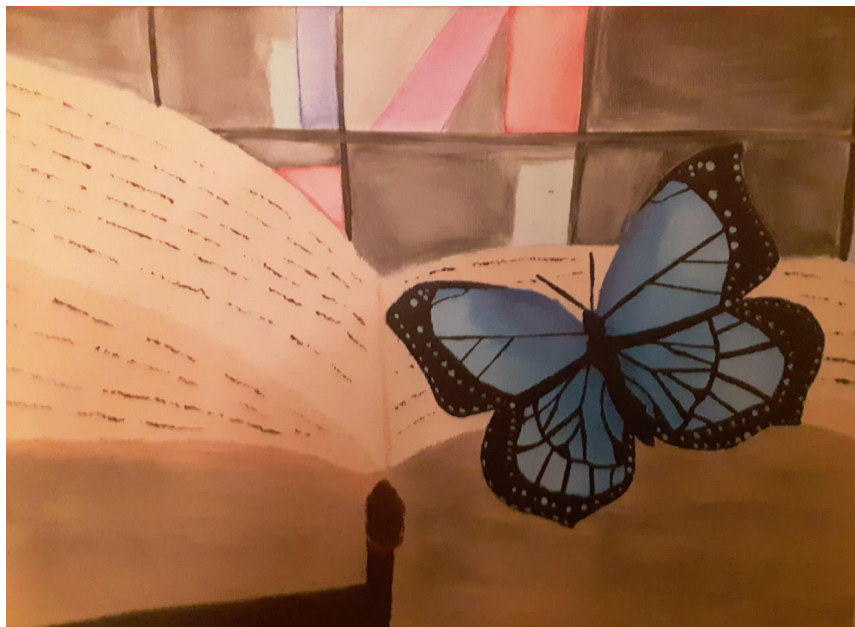
The beaten and bloody monarch yells more foul curses, and Lord

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Magnus returns them to him tenfold. Their verbal fighting is horrible to listen to, so I cover my ears as best as I can. I want to go home. I want this to end already. Please, why can't this all just be over? I hate this. I hate this!

"I hate this all!" I cry out, causing everyone to freeze and fall silent in shock. My eyes sting with angry tears. "I'm sick of all of this! All this fighting! I don't want to be king! I never wanted anything to do with any of this! All of you are insane! Why couldn't you just leave me alone!? Screw all of you!"

In the spur of the moment, without even thinking about what I'm doing, I uncork the vial of poison and down it all in one gulp.



# Untitled

by Miriya Jones

# I Am Man

I am Man  
Full of promises and desires  
Watch as I erupt,  
die,  
pray for miracles  
and love every little moment that eases my sorrow

Sounds like victory, doesn't it?  
And moments come  
I could count the seconds as they pass, but I want to do more.  
Utility is a mystery I adore.  
pondering if life is space-time defiance  
something like the aftershocks of love's earthquake?  
No matter  
I think you're reading this  
And I'm sitting here typing it  
with another moment  
and another  
and soon enough  
someone will be standing outside of an apartment building in Cleveland, Ohio  
yelling at other versions of themself  
about climate change.  
And making flyers about how emissions from factories  
cause radiation from the sun  
to be trapped in the atmosphere  
and global warming results!

the catastrophizing goes on and on and on  
in a big black font that says  
"please love me" to anyone who can read the language of desperation.

And all of this because everyone wants to be loved.  
And all of this because mankind  
could be better at  
mass mobilization and problem-solving.

Everybody is a martyr for the ultimate cause  
Of overcoming their loneliness.  
I guess that's the closest I've gotten to God.

It's the new religion of life lovers  
those people who are flowers blossoming  
wandering through a burning miracle of passing smiles  
to oblivion or a miracle.

And it doesn't have to be any more spectacular than it already is.  
That's what a lot of us figure out.  
Just committed to a silent watering in a cruel drought.

All of that came to me while pedestrians  
On the semi-busy sidewalks of Chicago  
gave me the stink eye  
Signaling, "we acknowledge your presence, and you can leave now."

So, I went away, wandering and wondering,

can humanity amount to the antonym of ruins?  
and while pondering this  
I toured the city and found  
Buildings made of bricks  
coated in uneven layers of white paint,  
dilapidated and chipping at the edges,  
with graffiti on the sides

and I was taken aback

**C**ause I couldn't tell if I was describing  
our foolishness  
or a thousand buildings I've never seen.

As far as I can tell  
Man needs to live meaningfully  
Or else it's dumb pain and pleasure

The body is full of persuasive dopamine and nociceptors,  
On a trip to see how the universe overcomes  
all these different flavors of hurt!  
hasn't it been astonishing?  
who knew love could so proficiently use people's fingers  
to perform the easing rituals?  
And we call the great practitioners  
doctors, artists, and mom.

## The Works

To say I understand how your muddled mind  
inches towards hope

Sounds presumptuous, but it's really the ultimate statement of faith.  
Promising another brain is breeding an ever more self-astonishing beauty.

Quick

Don't lose the plot

Love is the end.

Awakening some shared want in us.

tethered to the other shore

and without it

a circus of becoming.

Trust me

I'm also unsure at times if I'm psychic or if I'm psychotic.

Reality is reading one's own mind, so I guess the only way to tell is if we compare notes.

Sometimes seeing the odd juxtaposition of animal and divinity in man is a sigh  
of relief.

we can let our hair down and be awkward apes.

Doing our best to give.

All the while

I hope that there's another me in there

Who tends to the best in others.

What motivates us to do that?

Are we all good Christians

or is it simply the bills?

Either way

The idea of

walking and loving so well

that we forget we're doing either

might be the sweetest deal on this planet.

Maybe Jesus was onto something,



But this'll do for now,  
I am Man  
Hearing my brothers and sisters scream  
in many different timbres  
about love  
about question marks  
about the hungered pains of becoming.

I am Man  
An experience of self

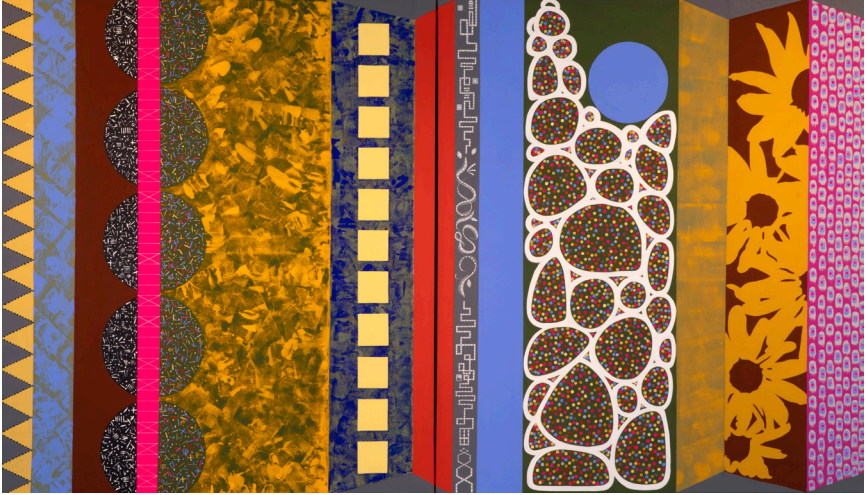
And finally, after long-winded oratories  
about life.  
Many times, performed without spectators.  
A brief breeze of humility washes over my eyes.

Now I accept the liberation of how screwed I am.  
the insightful prose manufactured by nerves  
of jubilation, can cultivate, like fertilizer of fecundity  
and that matters  
freeing from prison shackles of body alienation to the more real.

Driving towards the cure of the universe's fracture

always a dissimulation of the source.  
Dyslexic fingers skimming feelings.  
Commanding a mouth to utter  
"I dare you to follow me into what could be."  
And "I'm in love too."

-Mason Handel



# Entering the Multiverse

by Glenn Bodish

# Down the Rabbit Hole

by Brandon Clark

“No turning back now,” Jimmy said with a flashing grin as he heaped the handful of caps and stalks into his mouth. He had heard mushrooms didn’t taste very pleasant, and they lived up to the hype. The dried fungus was chewy and pungent. Jimmy couldn’t help but wonder if they were cultivated in someone’s basement or picked from an old cow pie as he sent the shriveled mass down his throat in a forceful gulp. He had never tripped before. It wasn’t on the evening’s agenda. But when Marco showed up at his trailer that Friday night, insistent that tonight was the night, how could he refuse?

It wasn’t hard to convince him. Jimmy had already killed half a bottle of malt liquor and a joint before Marco unexpectedly showed up, and he had nothing going on the next day.

“A whole eighth, just for you, my man,” Marco beamed.

“You’re not having any,” Jimmy questioned.

“Nah, it’s your first time, and I’m going to look after you the whole time. Fucking jealous, bud. I wish I could return to my first time,” Marco confessed.

Jimmy had always wanted to try shrooms but had always been too nervous. He had questioned Marco a thousand times about it, heard dozens of tripping stories, and now, Jimmy would have his tale to tell.

“What now,” Jimmy asked. “I don’t feel anything.”

Marco laughed hysterically, “It’s going to take about 30 minutes or so to kick in. I know! Let’s go to my buddy’s house. It’s the perfect place to trip, and he loves watching first-timers.”

With his inhibitions floating away in the warm July breeze, Jimmy climbed into Marco’s moss-green Jeep Cherokee and sped off into the night. It was a short drive, and Jimmy’s heart rate began to rise as they pulled up to the faded blue house.

“Paul is a good guy. You’ll like him,” Marco assured.

Marco walked through the back door without knocking, announcing himself as he strolled through the house and made his way to the living room.

“Paul! It’s me, man. It’s Marco. I brought a friend,” Marco yelled towards the front of the house.

“Marco? I haven’t seen you since that show you played last month. How are you,” Paul asked. “You and your friend grab a seat.”

Paul’s living room looked like a page ripped straight from the diary of some teenage stoner’s wish list. An oversized and second-hand L-shaped sec-

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tional sat in the corner. A slender girl in her early twenties with long blonde hair and green eyes looked up from the couch with a hazy smile. Across from her sat two battered red recliners and a massive home theater system. Besides those few humble amenities, the rest of the living room belonged to living creatures in glass boxes. A 50-gallon aquarium filled with fish of every color, size, and shape sat where one would expect to find a tv. Paul fitted the remaining spaces along the walls with tanks containing iguanas, snakes, spiders, and many other crawling oddities Jimmy had never seen before. Marco had been right about this place. It was fascinating. It was that very fascination that had kept Jimmy distracted from the onset of the mushrooms. And then, in an instant, he was aware. A sheer panic took over his brain as the tidal wave of intoxication came crashing down, pulling Jimmy into its never-ending abyss. Jimmy bolted for the back door.

“Where the hell are you going,” Marco shouted after him.

“It’s too intense, and I’m not going to be able to handle this. I got to make it stop,” Jimmy yelled behind him.

Jimmy made a wide stance as he braced against the tree with his left hand, shoving his right index and middle fingers into the back of his throat. Tears welled up in his eyes as his efforts produced only dry heaves.

“It doesn’t work that way, Jimmy. Get your ass back in here and chill out, dude,” Marco said, shaking his head. “You buy the ticket; you take the ride. There’s no going back now. You have to ride out the trip.”

“How long will that take,” Jimmy asked desperately.

“I don’t know. Somewhere between four to six hours,” Marco chuckled. A chorus of laughter echoed behind him. Jimmy’s heart sank as the horrific realization crept across his face. This wasn’t what he had signed up for – trapped in this eternal state. More panic. More terror. It was at this moment that Paul, who had been quietly observing from his favorite recliner, decided to step in.

“Jimmy, I need you to listen to me. I know how you’re feeling. Right now, it feels like you’re too high and that it’s going to last forever,” Paul said while firmly holding Jimmy’s shoulders.

“Yes! Yes, gods, yes,” Jimmy shouted. Before that moment, he couldn’t say it, but Paul was right. Jimmy was convinced that he would never “come down” again and that this state would last an eternity. The very thought made his mind recoil in terror.

“You’re just peaking. In about twenty minutes or so, you will feel amazing, my man, but I need you to chill out till then,” Paul instructed. “Put him in my recliner in front of the fish tank. That’ll clear him up.”

The sage-like stoner was right again. Jimmy’s worries disappeared when he sat down and locked eyes with all the moving colors. An ethereal neon glow faintly surrounded each fish. That glow began to engulf the fish, consuming them until all that remained were neon balls of light racing around the fish tank, leaving the smile on Jimmy’s face stretching from ear to ear. All previous fears left his body as Jimmy sank further into the recliner. Paul decided it was

time for some reggae. The musical notes danced across the air and brushed Jimmy's cheek. It was nothing he could see, but the feeling of the music dancing around him was as solid as you or me. It was difficult to tell how long he was in the chair. Time had no meaning now if it ever indeed did. Like the Hopi Indian tribe, his life felt like one long day with no past or future; everything that ever was or would be all happening in the now. Jimmy understood now – there was no life or death. Just the slow transition into different states of being. He had reached an epiphany when the music skipped, and his cosmic revelation sank into the sea of thoughts dancing in his skull.

"I need to rock a piss," Jimmy said as he headed for the bathroom. It was a plain white bathroom with small square tiles and a mirror above the sink. Jimmy gazed at his reflection and laughed. His fully dilated pupils reminded him of a cartoon owl, and he cackled in delight. As Jimmy stared at the mirror, he noticed small rippling waves beginning to emanate within the glass. "Wait, no," Jimmy thought as he pushed his fingers into the mirror. The glass did not break but absorbed his finger as straw into a milkshake. Jimmy pulled his fingers back to find them covered in a thick reflective goop. Childhood memories of finger painting danced before his eyes, and he smiled.

A flash of reality, and it was all gone. It took Jimmy's brain a moment to catch up, and the realization of his hallucination sent him down a rabbit hole of thoughts that left him paralyzed in front of the mirror. He spent some time frozen that way until Marco and the others began to call from the living room.

"What's the matter, bud," Paul yelled.

"I can't leave," Jimmy replied in an almost hushed tone. "They won't let me leave."

Paul and the others began laughing as they demanded an explanation.

"None of you are real, you see," Jimmy began as the others laughed harder. "I made you all up. It helps me deal."

"What the absolute fuck is he talking about," the blonde asked from her perch on the couch.

"I lost my mind several years ago, and they locked me in this padded room," Jimmy explained with an ever-growing grin. "This little fantasy world, and all of you, were created to help me escape."

The room exploded with laughter. All except Marco.

"I promise you can come out of that room. But you need to trust me, James," Marco assured.

"No one has called me James since mother died. You know that Margo," Jimmy said with a confused look. "Why would you call me that," he asked agitatedly.

Paul and the blonde were still laughing, but Jimmy could no longer hear them. It was as if someone had clicked their mute button.

"Because that is your name, isn't it, James," Margo asked while scribbling a quick note on her clipboard. Jimmy was confused now.

"It's Jimmy! Jimmy, Jimmy, it's Jimmy," he shouted excitedly. "God



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damn it, you know that, Marco!”

“Marco or Margo. Which is it today,” the long-time friend asked.

“James, you will never make sense of this until you start trusting me and step out of that room.”

The very mention of leaving the room rocked Jimmy to his core. He crumpled to the floor, hugging his knees and sobbing, “No, no, no, no...”

“It’s ok, James. That’s enough for today. You did good,” Margo sighed. She wrapped her honey-blond hair in a bun, collected her things, and neatly tucked them into her black leather briefcase before leaving the room. Later that evening, she sat quietly in her study, dictating the day’s notes.

“Patient #1107, James Cultier. His response to our psychotropic therapy sessions shows progress. However, after three years of work, Cultier still refuses to leave his room and continues to live in his fantasy world to absolve himself of the reckless actions that led to the death of his friend, Marco. Pick it up where you left off next week. Dr. Margo Paulson, signing off.”



# Gasline

by David Meyer



# Untitled

by Alexis McConnell

# February Brown

There was a question  
about me and you  
that I didn't have the words to ask.  
It settled in my mind  
and I felt it like a shadow  
slowly seeping  
and taking up space where words should be.  
At first,  
it seemed less  
like a black and hazy cloud —  
the sort that you associate with  
twilight, before your eyes have adjusted  
from light to dark,  
and more like the  
fine coating of gray dust  
that lands on your ceiling fan,  
accumulating slowly  
right before your eyes.  
But, my shadow  
thickened and spread,  
darkening and deepening  
from the muted gray dust  
to the wet brown of thawing mud.  
The more I tried  
to wade through it  
to find the words I thought I needed,  
the more I wondered,  
whether the question was even worth  
asking, even if I could produce the words,  
and the more muddied my boots became,  
with every crevice in their tread,  
filling up with February brown.

-Rachel Brunner

# In With The Dead

Keys on the counter, carefully cast aside only moments ago.  
The floorboards shift under the weight of thick boots.  
An oak bookshelf  
splintering at the corners,  
peeling away in slivers,  
but sleek in every other aspect.  
A decades old memorial of organisation,  
meticulously dressed in the eggshell calcium frames of the lowly,  
caught in an obsession not of their own.  
Crimson covered feathers,  
and dainty tufts of fur,  
Mod Podge preservation,  
against that very same oak canvas,  
all in disarray, but exactly where they're meant to be.  
The anatomy of one's own species, mapped out by their most fragile pieces.  
Circled carefully, every vein and artery known and loved by modern sciences.  
A tall, slender mannequin writhes, with porcelain stillness, in the corner  
stained hot, blood red,  
painted various hues, in all the places that matter.  
Pin poked pressure points dress it up just a little nicer,  
Like an evergreen clad with holiday tidings.  
The lights dim, as darkness overtakes each room.  
The lively one climbs into bed.  
Eyes half shut,  
exhausted and ready,  
for the slumber of a dead night.

-Ajayla Ries-Ennells





# Untitled

by Sydney Petersen

# Crap It's The Morning

Waking up in the morning,  
Packing my bags, rushing through doors,  
Feelin' like my head's in a ring of fire.

Falling behind is the same as a cliff jump-  
It isn't the fall that hurts, just the stop

At the end of my rope.

And even if I exchange my rope,  
Light the one I have on fire,  
Leave it behind and close the door,  
I'll still lose out in the morning;

The shots at my feet still make me jump-  
That impromptu dance won't ever stop.

But the march of time never stops,

It goes morning after morning-  
Hazy summer to winters 'round the fire.

I miss the days when I could just jump  
Rope on the sidewalk but now the rope  
Is hung on a hook by the door.

Still, there are things I adore

About out of the frying pan and into the fire-  
I'm free to drink coffee in the morning,

And Mother can rarely rope  
Me into jobs that don't stop,  
Yet still I'm without the energy to jump?

So I turn on music and make the bass jump,  
Hands in the air as I waltz out the door;  
Pretending I have wings so I don't need a rope,  
Pretending nobody could ever make me stop,  
Praying I don't wake up in the morning,  
Praying my life ends up better than a trash fire.

But hey! time to light the fires,  
Time to walk along the tightrope  
Of following passion and closing the door

On my future past this morning-  
I'm praying my heart won't stop

Once I take this jump.

So let's jump out the door,  
Maybe stop to look at fire,  
And jump a little rope in the morning.

-Samantha Zellers

# Perfect Person

by Cecilia Sagel

Gabe lived his life on a very strict schedule. He was up at five in the morning every morning and began his day by getting dressed, brushing his teeth, making his bed, and packing up his school books. Then at five thirty he'd begin to cook breakfast and at six it was time to get his sisters up. Rafaella would help him serve breakfast and Mila would do her best to set the table while he changed Eden's diaper and got her dressed. While they sat down to eat breakfast that was usually when their father would come downstairs. He was silent as he smoked a cigar and read his morning paper.

They always told their father good morning, but did their best to ignore him because he'd rather be left alone anyways.

At seven it was time to go. He would gather the girls, hurrying them out the door, Eden in his arms. They'd walk through the streets of New York, in their small gaggle as Eden tried to eat his school tie. Gabe would hold Mila's hand to keep from becoming distracted by the pigeons. Rafella held Mila's other hand as they made their way down the bustling streets, avoiding running into the three piece suits hurrying to try and catch their train.

The first stop was day care. They'd drop Eden off from seven-thirty in the morning and come back to pick her up promptly at three-fifteen. This morning it was more of a fight. Eden was perfectly happy perched in Gabe's arms babbling at women who cooed and waved at her, and she did not want to be handed over to the waiting caretaker. She screamed and cried as Gabe tried to soothe her into being handed over.

"No!" Eden screamed, Gabe winced as the child's wailing continued to rattle around in his ears.

"It's ok Eden, I'm going to come back for you just like I always do," he promised, bouncing her gently. Eden whined, burying her head in his shoulder, "I just have to go to school ok? But, if you can stop crying maybe we can do something fun when I come back to get you," Eden snuffled, wiping a fist across her eyes.

"Birds?" she asked, Gabe smiled,

"You wanna go see the birds at the park?" Eden nodded excitedly, "al-right, a trip to the park it is," he declared,

"Yay!" Eden exclaimed, giggling wildly, her tears long forgotten. Gabe chuckled,

"And if you're extra good today, I don't see why we couldn't get some ice cream after," Eden's eyes lit up, pressing her hands against her chubby

cheeks.

“Be good!” she exclaimed, Gabe smiled again, affectionately pressing kisses all over her face.

“I’ll be back after school ok?” he said, handing her off to the caretaker. Eden waved as they left,

“BYE!” she shouted, and her siblings waved back. And then they were off again. Gabe knew the way to school by heart. It was three blocks down from the daycare, take a left at the street lamp with a dent in it and then a right at the statue of a horse with creepy eyes. When they arrived Mila would go to her school building while Gabe and Rafaella watched, making sure she made it safely before they headed into their building.

School was monotonous but at least it wasn’t home. He did all of his assignments, aced all of his tests, and still had time to hide in the back corners of the classroom and sketch out a few pieces before it was time to move onto the next class. At the end of the day, he’d gather up all of his belongings, pick up Mila and Rafaella and they’d all head back to the daycare.

Eden would be there and waiting, happily deposited back into Gabe’s arms. And just as he promised, they went to the park. Eden and Mila chased the birds as Rafaella rooted around in the water, digging up shells that she stuffed into her pockets. Gabe sat and watched. It was moments like these where life felt whole. Where he forgot about the hole that his mother had left in his heart. This was where his peace was. With his sisters. The people he loved most in this world.

But as all good things do, it had to come to an end. The walk back home was mostly silent because they all knew what the night would be like. Gabe made dinner, and they were quiet as they ate with their father staring them down judgmentally from the end of the table. Mila would try to tell him about the spelling quiz she had taken and aced, but he was less than impressed. His first comment was how messy Mila’s handwriting was.

The look on Mila’s face made Gabe’s heart twist in agony. Later he would try to tell her how proud he was of her hard work, and how wonderfully smart and brilliant she was, but it wouldn’t replace the love she was craving from her father.

Gabe liked to think that he’d grown out of that need a long time ago. He’d tuck the girls into bed that night around eight and then set to clearing the house while his father sat listening to the radio. He did the dishes, swept the floors, tidied up the house and finally as he was heading to bed his father spoke.

“Gabriel,” he said gruffly. Gabe turned,

“Yes father?” he asked,

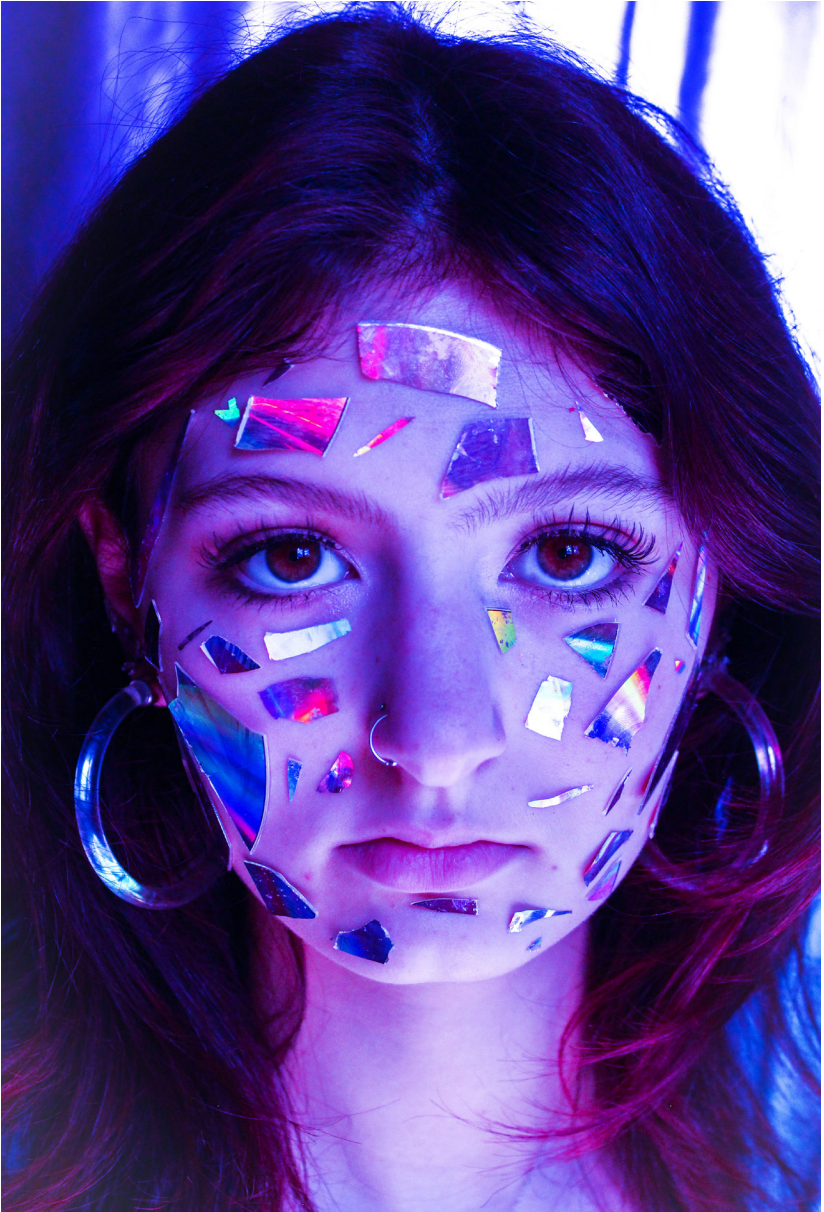
“You missed one,” he said, holding out a plate. Gabe’s heart sank.

“Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, taking the plate from his father and rinsing it over before putting it away.

As he laid down for bed that night, it became clear in his mind.

*‘I will never be enough for him.’*





# Untitled

by Grace Howell

# Untitled

The cool breeze sent a chill down my spine.  
We were only halfway up the hiking trail,  
But the view was already immaculate.  
We looked up ahead to see a small building off the path.  
The stone structure seemed out of place,  
Looking like an old castle or outpost.  
The inside was vacant, with only a couple of windows and walls  
As the divider between us and the woods around us.  
As we continued up the hill, the breeze became bitter,  
And the sun rose from over the mountain ahead.  
From this high up, the trees molded into a sea of green,  
And the few remaining patches of snow brought a contrast of scenery.  
After climbing the summit, we looked down at the hike we'd completed,  
And the same hike we'd make to get back down.  
We began the journey back to our car,  
With that same chill starting again down our spines.

-Adam Neumann

# Planned

by Tom Irish

The first time it happened was at two am, when you were sitting up with a warm beverage, wracked with insomnia and tortured by memories of the day. Noises had always echoed off of the hard surface of your kitchen, and this one was unmistakable; it was someone trying to open your locked door. Your eyes sought out the knob and it was unmoving at first, but you knew what the sound had been because it you had been waiting for it, expecting it for years. Then the tarnished knob rotated slowly, slowly. First a quarter turn to the left, then a half turn to the right. Your eyes went to the locked deadbolt. It looked shabby and flimsy in the dim light from above the stove, but it was definitely locked. The knob went back left and then back right, teasing, testing. Then, just as you were reaching for your phone, it stopped. You unlocked your phone screen and waited for the knob to turn again, for fumbling at the lock, for a furious assault of blows against the door, for stealthy footsteps. But instead there was pitch darkness out the window and perfect, blank silence in the kitchen. Your phone went dark and you waited. Later, your thumb hurt from keeping it poised to strike for so long. But you heard or saw nothing new that night.

The next day, when you finally got a short break and were able to check your phone, there was a single text message that said “I’m coming back tonight.” There was no name and when you tried calling the number, there was no answer and no voicemail. You thought about trying the number again on the way home, but decided that if the texter really wanted to get through to you, they would text again. Still, you asked a few friends whether they sent the message, and of course they all said that they hadn’t.

After dinner, you began to feel nervous. You checked the door to make sure that it was locked—it was. You called the number back a couple more times, and got no answer. You located a heavy flashlight and a butcher knife and carried them around in a canvas tote bag you found in a closet, just in case.

You streamed a few episodes of a television show, and made sure to pick something light and non-threatening. You struggled to pay attention, and when you used the bathroom you did so in the dark so that the exhaust fan wouldn’t come on and interfere with your hearing. You found that the sound of your urine splashing into the water in the bowl was almost as loud as the exhaust fan, and of course you couldn’t see anything. Your breath sped up and you found yourself straining to hear sounds that weren’t there. In the end the effort made you feel more frightened than just turning on the light would have. The next time you went, though, you did the same thing.

Around midnight, you finally succumbed to the exhaustion of your

missed sleep from the night before and went to bed. As you slid under your covers, another message came through that said “Still coming.” You spent most of the rest of that night checking your phone, getting up to check the lock on the door, and thinking about how so many classic ghost stories had three warnings before the coup de grace. The next day you were sallow, exhausted, and afraid of your phone.

But the next time it happened wasn't on the phone. It was three days later, and you had finally had a half an hour or so when you had been able to think about something else, to write off the texts as wrong numbers, the rotating doorknob as accident or hallucination. You took a shower and thought about what to eat for breakfast, who you might see that day, what you might do on the weekend. When you got out of the tub you almost didn't see it for the steam in the air and the way condensation drips down glass. It was written on the mirror, and fading fast. You had heard nothing while in the shower, no slinking footsteps, to telltale wet squeak of a fingertip. It said “Apologies for our missed appointment. Coming back tonight.” There was a signature, but it was unreadable. You stood there staring at it for a while. At first, your hand drifted up to your chin and you found yourself touching your lower lip. Your eyes darted to the closed door, to the clouded knob. A derisive chuckle escaped your mouth around your pinching hand. After that, you ran the shower again on full hot to try to add enough steam to sharpen up the signature, but the entire message was too degraded by then to read at all. You realized that you were delaying leaving the room. You steeled yourself and threw the door open, letting your towel drop to the floor so that your hands would be free, but there was nobody outside the door, nothing out of the ordinary.

That day you found yourself terrified of the bathroom and your phone, and also you engaged in some light flirting and finally completed a big project. No matter what horrors awaited, there was nothing you could do about them but wait for them to show up. But also, you speculated that there was something about the wording of the last message that pulled the punch a little bit. The whole thing was just wearing down that high-tension area of your brain, and you were going to go on with your life no matter what. That night, you fell asleep on the couch and woke to “I was here” written in ketchup on the kitchen counter.

The next day you got “Do you miss me?” and “We are ships passing in the night” via text. A few days later you found “Sorry to miss you again . . .” written in spilled sugar. Then you got a grainy but fairly flattering picture of yourself in a towel drying your hair that came in a blank envelope left with your mail. The last one was an email from an untraceable address that said “We will reschedule at MY convenience . . . when you least expect it!” At this point, you had gone through and eliminated all of your friends and enemies as suspects. It was too intense and personal to be random. You were fully convinced that it was not a joke, but . . . several of the messages definitely had the feel of the ridiculous. You had gotten comfortable locking the door only once per day again, and you no longer left the light off to pee. And yet, there was still a level of tension,

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a weariness to your receipt of the messages. Your household chores had suffered, and you realized that you were talking to yourself more often than normal. It was hard to know how you were feeling.

When you woke with a gasp from a dead sleep and saw the misshapen shadow standing in the corner of your bedroom, you felt relief even though you knew the terror was coming. You could feel swelling in your stomach and your chest, stretching your muscles and preparing them for fight or flight, but what you said was “Oh, so you finally decided to show up.” The shadow began to twitch and jerk inhumanly, as you knew it would, and then it was inexplicably closer to the bed, and then even closer. You heard a sound coming from it, a sibilant, snaky “Yesssssssssssss.” Your muscles were swollen to the point of being locked by this point, and you knew that you would neither fight nor flee; you were frozen for whatever happened next. And yet, you found yourself marveling that the next thing you said, possibly your last words in this world, were “Seriously? After all of that buildup, that’s what you’ve got for me?” It wasn’t the right thing to say, not even a little bit, but you really couldn’t help yourself.





# Skeleton Insight

by Paige Twidell



# Would you?

If I pushed my beating heart inside your open mouth,  
would you chew it up like bubblegum?  
Stretch it around your finger just to test the give,  
bite down so hard your jaw hurts,  
and I feel pity for you,  
only for you to spit my heart out on the ground,  
forgotten and colorless,  
wet motionless crud on the floor?  
Or would you chew it slowly,  
gently,  
savoring the metallic taste and feeling my heart's rapid beat,  
sliding your tongue all the way around it and sucking down on the bloody meat?  
Would you save it for later,  
tucked behind the shell of your ear,  
and then coax more flavor out from its well-used flesh,  
when the time for your next savoring grows near?  
Or would you blow my heart into a bubble,  
pop it mercilessly between your teeth,  
swoop it back into your mouth with your devious tongue,  
and blow it until it becomes so stretched and frayed,  
that it's useless to you?  
Would you?

-Amelian Mount



# Untitled

by Miriya Jones



# Untitled

by Alexis McConnell

# Solitude

The air hangs heavy in the sky devoid of bliss

The walls cold to a touch

Steel bars blocking any sense of companionship

Day after day night after night

The endless cycle goes on until there is nothing more

Time spent engulfed by the past

Years go by yet life remains in a perpetual state of despair

-Devrin Thomas

# The Race & The Storm

by Will Tallman

From the window of my room, I watched my dad as he performed the perfunctory ritual of packing the motorcycle for the long trip ahead. Though the summer day was mild and dry, without a single cloud looming on the horizon, the blacktop of the driveway was soaked with a layer of rippling wetness from the still-running hose that my dad had used to give the bike its requisite spray-down, creating a little river of water that split off into spidery tributaries that inched along as they raced each other to the grass. The word ‘raced’ had popped into my 13-year-old imagination as a means of current driveway-description for a reason – today, the father & son duo of John & Will Tallman would embark on their annual motorcycle sojourn to Milwaukee to watch the glitterati of the IndyCar racing world battle it out on the storied oval of the Milwaukee Mile.

We had made this trip for 5 consecutive summers now, and I was approaching an age where the thought of hopping on the back of the bike with my dad was beginning to seem slightly awkward. When I was much younger, I would wrap my arms around my dad’s torso, clinging on for dear life as we sped through the winding roads & highways, feeling small as I looked on with envy at the sidecars attached to other motorcycles that we occasionally passed along the road.

I was 14 now, and the once-natural act of clinging onto one’s father in a physical embrace, whether out of necessity or affection, had become significantly less appealing than it once was. I watched as my dad turned the spigot of the hose and listened to the pressurized squeak as the flow of the miniature driveway-river ceased its cascade. Leaning against the windowsill, face expressionless, ruminating moodily as my dad authoritatively slammed shut the side case of the glistening blue BMW R1100RS, whistling a familiar melody, which I could just barely make out as a song by the Eagles called “Get Over It”, one that I had heard blasting frequently from my dad’s garage stereo that summer. *You don’t have to tell me twice*, I thought. *I’m over it*. I sighed and lifted myself from the windowsill, put my Sony headphones on and pressed play on my Discman to cue up the opening track of Blink-182’s *Enema of the State* album, hoping to ward off the looming threat of the Eagles’ latest and greatest worming its way into my ears. I closed my eyes as the music poured from my headphones and pondered what the trip ahead might hold. Outside the window, the motorcycle returned my gaze with cycloptic curiosity as it stood wetly glistening in the sunshine – a loyal, metallic sentinel patiently waiting to serve its sole duty and purpose.

“Okay, we’re packed up, we’re pissed off, and...” my dad trailed off, grinning as he repeated the joke that he always made before our road trips. This mild profanity, quietly spoken yet not without enthusiasm, was symbolic of our imminent exit from the sanctity of the household realm – a roost ruled by my mom & her proclivities for banning even the most PG obscenity (along with “pissed off”, expletives such as “this sucks” and “piece of crap” were also on the blacklist). We were departing into the wild and exciting territory of the open road, where boys would be boys, and if a guy wanted to say ‘this sucks’ or ‘piece of crap’ or perhaps even utter an emphatic ‘fuck’ through clenched teeth, then why not? No mom around to tell us what to do! True, we might suddenly picture her face during the utterance of such imprecations and feel an obligatory flush of shame, but that’s nothing that a Hail Mary or two wouldn’t fix. Anyway, we’re guys, goddamn it, so let the curses fly and the ride begin.

As we drove through the backroads of rural southern Wisconsin, the annoyed reticence that had dominated my feelings in the hours prior to hitting the road had subsided into a nervous excitement about the adventure at hand. This lasted for an hour or so, when I began to feel drowsy, my eyelids suddenly leaden and seemingly impossible to keep open. I dozed off somewhere along the endless gray ribbon of Highway 45. In a reverie, I felt my legs give way and flutter skyward as we accelerated from a stoplight. My dad, sensing the shift in sternward gravity, reached back reflexively to grab ahold of me, stopping my descent as he quickly pulled onto the side of the highway.

“Thought you fell asleep there,” he said, his words muffled through his helmet. I replied, embarrassed and shaken, “No, I’m fine – I think – I...I guess I fell asleep for a second. I don’t know.” I trailed off, suddenly angry at the inquisition in spite of the fact that he really did sound concerned. It probably scared the hell out of him, too. A quiet moment of solemn contemplation passed before he spoke. “Well, if you’re okay, we should get moving,” he said. “If you start to feel tired, you have to tap me on the shoulder or something,” I nodded my head impatiently as he continued in the halting way he spoke sometimes, as if he were thinking very deeply about what he was saying even if it were something uncomplicated. “I’ve gotten sleepy on rides before too, and we gotta be careful out here.” I mumbled a nonverbal reply of affirmation as he leaned in closer, his hand on my shoulder and eyebrows furrowed as he struggled to hear me through his helmet. I completed my incomprehensible retort with a loud “OK.” Nodding approvingly as he clapped me on my shoulder one last time, he brought the motorcycle back into gear and we carefully threaded the bike back onto the highway. My heart was racing, and I felt an ugly glow of humiliation rise from the pit of my stomach as I wallowed bitterly, mentally berating myself for the childlike foolishness of letting myself fall asleep on the motorcycle.

The incident, however humiliating, had provided me with a fresh burst of adrenaline, and my senses were sharp and alert as we entered the milieu of West Allis. I felt the race-day energy pulling us towards it, and slowly, with much stopping and starting, we finally entered the 81st Street block that led to the State Fairgrounds entrance. My dad, in his helmeted and leathered



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disguise, deftly pulled out a wallet, handing a \$20 bill to the parking attendant. He traded us for a small paper ticket, and with great ceremony waved us into the carnival-like atmosphere of the fairgrounds. A sea of people floated around us; shirtless, overweight men, holding hands with sunglasses-clad women, ambled past us holding plastic cups of cold, golden beer, occasionally glancing and mouthing noiseless words of approval in the direction of our motorcycle. I felt a sense of pride at this, and played my role of the passenger nobly. We eventually came to a stop between two large and non-descript horse stables. We removed our helmets and shook off the rust from the road while stretching our stiff limbs appreciatively. My dad made no mention of my somnolent lapse from earlier, which I was grateful for.

We set off on foot towards the track as my senses awakened to the sights, sounds, and smells that swirled around me – a local band playing the theme from the TV show “Friends” in the distance, the aroma of funnel cakes and hot dogs, and the sweet scent of motor oil drifting through the air. High-powered engines roared in the distance as my eyes darted excitedly to a rainbow-assortment of merchandise booths, advertising the myriad colors and numbers of the racing teams on t-shirts, hats, coffee mugs, miniature Matchbox cars, and even belt buckles. Everything was loud and blistering with a festive excitement, and as my dad and I spoke to each other, we had to raise our voices and lean our heads in close to hear one another.

A PA announcer babbled unintelligibly, periodically cutting through the rising din of sound as the crowd assembled in the raceway’s stands. We found our way to our seats and settled down onto the aluminum bench of the grandstand. Before too long, I could make out the neon array of race cars as they slithered to the starting line, pushed along by their pit crews. In a rickety-looking tower adjacent from us, a uniformed man was clasping a fistful of flags – green, yellow, checkered, and even black – standing sentry-like and serious as he waited for the race to begin.

The cars took their place on the starting grid as the collective excitement of the spectators bubbled to fever pitch, ready to boil over. There was Jacques Villeneuve in his powder-blue Players Ltd. McLaren, the mustached Bobby Rahal in the hometown Miller Genuine Draft black and gold – and of course, the legendary Marlboro red-and-white Penske team: three motorized cigarette advertisements sitting vigil in the first, second and third positions of the pack. I bit into a now-cold hot dog as I squinted my eyes and tried to guess which of the Marlboro cars was Emerson Fittipaldi. Without warning, the track’s PA announcer began bellowing eardrum-shattering gibberish that echoed around the track unintelligibly, finally culminating with the ecstatic battle-cry of “GENTLEMEN, START YOUR ENGINES!” He shrieked these last four words as the Hydra-scream of 30 open-wheel IndyCars roared to life. I jumped with a start, covering my ears as I watched the countdown on the track lights – red, orange, green – GO. The cars lurched forward, and the race began.

The noise and action died down as the racers whipped around the other side of track, the PA announcer rattling off his commentary like an auctioneer on

cocaine until the fleet came roaring back through for the subsequent lap, and the sonic tidal wave rose again as the blur of the cars streaked by at an impossible clip. I couldn't make out the structure of the race, who was winning and losing, but I was swept up in the exhilarating drama as they tore past us, lap after scorching lap, periodically glancing up at my dad with wide-eyed enthrallment. There was a wreck somewhere between laps 50 and 60. Though it was a relatively tame one (I had once watched a driver's legs dangle from the torn-open bottom of his broken car on TV, before my dad switched it off with a sigh, exiting the room and leaving me wondering if I'd just witnessed my first crucifixion), I watched in awe as a rubber tire shot up and bounced violently against the steel-meshed fencing of the grandstand, then plummeted back to the concrete, rolling lazily onto the grass pitch inside the circuit where it tottered to a rest.

This circus continued for the obligatory 200 laps, passing by in a blur that felt like minutes. We sat through the post-race rituals were carried out, staying long enough to hear the disappointed voice of a 4th placed Michael Andretti echoing through the speedway "...but anyway, we got a couple of points." My dad laughed at this, and I was too tired to ask why this was funny. We sat in our seats long after the race had ended, my dad nursing his second bottle of beer as the crowd thinned and dispersed. The pit crews were packing up their gear, loading up giant trailers as they chatted amicably, while vendors carefully folded t-shirts and took down large colorful banners and disassembled their tents, exchanging pleasant goodbyes with racegoers as they reflected on the high-octane theatre of the day.

The energy of the race day had evaporated into a melancholy stillness, swept up into sky and drifting towards another speedway that loomed beyond the horizon, rich with the infinite possibilities of victory and defeat, solemn with the implications of life and death. The drivers' wives breathed weary sighs of relief that their husbands had escaped from another arena unscathed, and began reciting familiar, silent prayers as they moved onto the next one. The carnival was over.

As we walked back to the horse stables, I noticed that the Alice-blue sky of the afternoon had shifted rather disconcertingly into a wrathful purple-black. I turned to my dad, his face an inscrutable, tight-lipped mask as he occasionally glanced skyward, chewing a stick of gum thoughtfully. I'd lived in the Midwest for the entirety of my short life, and I instantly knew that this was tornado weather. "Do you think there's going to be a tornado?" I asked. "Dunno," he responded. *That's my dad*, I thought. *No one ever called him a Chatty Kathy*. However, I recognized this monosyllabic delivery as an indication that he was thinking, and if he was, it was better to not press him on the issue. We wheeled the bike into the cool, quiet emptiness of the horse stable to shelter ourselves from a potential downpour and began putting on our riding gear. My dad, ever-prepared, had packed a rain suit for each of us, but we had left the side cases that stored them back at the hotel. Eyes to the sky, we waited it out, watching occasional threads of lightning apparate in the distance as I squinted

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my eyes in search of funnel clouds in the distance.

The sky plunged from its dingy, amethyst purple into a charcoal blackness, and I felt the visceral razor of fear cutting into me, cold and sharp. My dad had seated himself on the motorcycle's seat, putting his helmet on, but he wasn't saying much. Hell, he wasn't saying anything. Which in itself wasn't unusual, but the situation was beginning to escalate into what might be a genuine emergency. I felt something nagging at me; a murky notion that had entered my brain earlier that day as I felt myself slipping from the back of the motorcycle, stealing its way into my psyche and lying in wait as I subconsciously fumbled in search of it. In one swift, immediate jolt, my mind found the string and pulled, igniting the light bulb of realization: I still needed my father.

In one swift moment of clarity and an overactive imagination, I recast my dad from this quiet and serious man whose music annoyed me into a reluctant hero solemnly sworn to the perilous task of getting us home safely. It dawned on me that we hadn't spoken to each other since I asked him if he thought it would storm. "Dad," I spoke tentatively, feeling the childish fear rise again in my stomach. He didn't hear me, or maybe he did (it was hard to tell with him) as he fidgeted with the straps of his helmet. He sometimes took a very long time to respond. I waited until he settled onto the motorcycle, the signal that it was time to ride. He hadn't heard me. I reached out and clapped my hand down on his shoulder in a reverse-role act of assurance. He turned to me with a start. "Dad," I repeated, more confidently this time. "Let's get the fuck out of Milwaukee."

It seemed practically suicidal to depart the comfort of the stable with its reassuring, sweet smells of horse manure and hay. As I lifted my gangly leg over the bike and sat down behind my dad, I thought of the time when our family huddled together in the basement while a different, long-past storm raged above, and he had raced out into the pelting rain to retrieve our dog from the kennel in the backyard. *He had braved that storm then*, I told myself. *And he's going to brave this one, too.*

The skies raged above as we departed the fairgrounds, my dad throttling the bike as we slowly pulled onto the eerily empty streets. There was a palpable sense of tension in the air – besides a few droplets of rain here and there, no downpour came, yet there was no sunny breakthrough either. It remained in a stony stasis, like a boxer staring unflinchingly into the eyes of his opponent.

The streets were nearly empty as we pulled out onto 81st Street. A series of cream-bricked duplex and quadplex homes rushed by in a blur, interspersed by an alarming number of bars that stood out conspicuously against the neighborhood landscape. A sign reading Cap'n Nick's dangled outside one of these, its neon tubing displaying the word 'OPEN' in fluorescent ruby-red, swaying in shaky defiance of the looming storm. We drove on, the air stifling, the wind blowing great powerful gusts of damp, cool air that moved the bike from side-to-side violently as we gingerly made our way through the streets.

Finally, we picked up state highway 83 somewhere outside of West Allis and pulled into a deserted strip mall, parking under the awning next to a

boarded-up store window. The black stillness of the sky engulfed this scene, and I pictured us through the eyes of a vengeful mother nature – two miniature, helmeted figurines standing helplessly in the vacant lot as we waited for the apocalypse to descend. My thoughts were interrupted as the city's storm sirens were engaged, the claxons blaring a heavy-metal version of the seven trumpets of the apocalypse as we huddled under the awning.

My dad removed his helmet and I quickly followed suit, eager for him to reassure me, to tell me how we were going to get out of here alive, and that everything was going to be fine, but he said none of this, his face once again drawn tight and contemplative, glancing up at the pitch-black abyss with the detachment of a TV serial cowboy. I felt a warm rush of affection for the man. *He's not afraid!* I thought, rejoicing deliriously. *Maybe he is, but he's not showing it. He won't let the storm win. We're going to be okay!* In that moment, I wouldn't have chosen Steve McQueen himself over my dad as a motorcycle-trip partner that day.

After a long pause, he finally spoke in the halting manner that I had grown accustomed to over my lifespan, speaking loudly and clearly to be heard over the blaring sirens. "My grandpa," he stated evenly, pausing for reflection, "...always told me that as long as its raining, there won't be a tornado." I waited for him to continue, but he had completed the thought. As he said this, I felt the dam of my emotions splinter and break – my terror, my anger, my distress, the juvenile annoyance of being too old for the trip and the freshly congealing guilt of underestimating my father – in one instant, cinematic moment they tore themselves from my exhausted teenage psyche, fluttering to the ground in jagged shards.

And then the rain came.

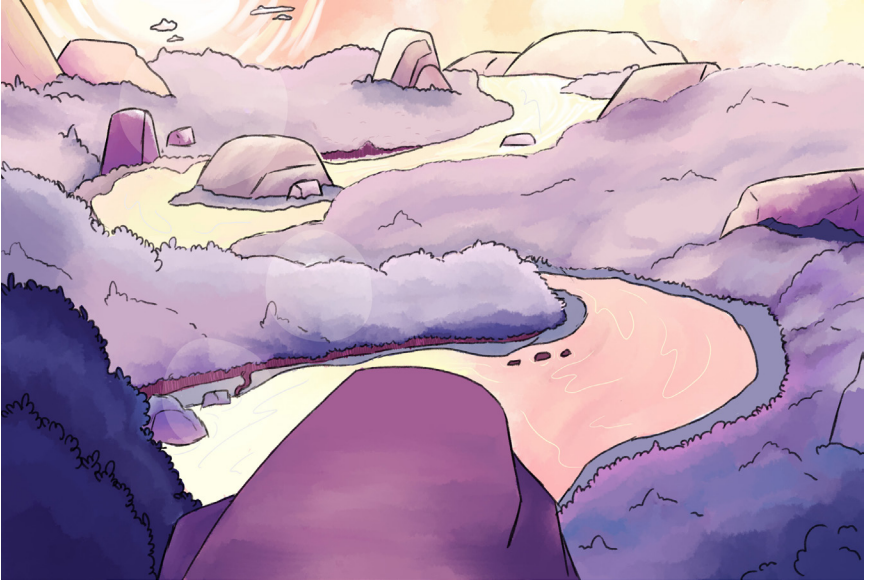
It was only a few droplets at first, but after a matter of seconds violent torrents of rain began to hammer the awning of the storefront. We stood silently as we waited for the downpour to abate. After a few minutes, the precipitous hammering of the awning above us seemed to thin and lessen in volume. I followed my dad to the bike and buckled my helmet back onto my head as he kicked the starter violently and started the engine, revving the clutch as he waited for me to climb aboard. As I did so, I looked back at the storefront in the same way I had to the front porch of our home when we began our journey. I felt a tugging sense of melancholy – we were leaving a shared moment behind, as significant as it was nebulous, and I felt like crying.

## Epilogue

Once we had safely arrived at the shelter of the hotel room, I again rested my elbows on the windowsill, gazing dreamily at the motorcycle just as I had before we left our house that early afternoon. The TV was on, and my dad was belly-laughing at the newest episode of King of The Hill. Shaking my head and smiling in bewilderment at the diametric contradictions of my father, I watched the glistening water bead up in droplets on the metallic hull of the motorcycle,

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just as I had in our driveway so many hours earlier. Our motorized steed stood bravely in its parking spot as I absentmindedly began mouthing the words to a familiar tune: *Get over it, get over it. Your momma's too skinny and your daddy's too fat, get over it.*



# She-Ralandscape

by Cecilia Sagel



# Just a Dream

by Sara Schroeder

Alice is almost unrecognizable to me. As I look at her Snapchat story I see a person I no longer know. Her blond hair is different from the dark brown color I so vividly remember from our high school days. Although the one thing I see hasn't changed is Alice's blindingly bright smile. She was always a very happy and radiant person, but she was shy around other people and had trouble talking to others. I see by her constant Snapchat stories that this fact has changed. She's no longer the person I once knew.

I first met Alice back in first grade. We were in the same class, and I wanted to be friends, so I went up to her desk and tried to make conversation. I remember what she looked like as if reliving the day. My memories of her are so clearly ingrained in my memory I could never possibly forget our encounters. When we met she had short brown hair with bangs, and a same goofy smile that I always loved. When we locked eyes I noticed her glasses. I'll never forget how adorable she looked. She was endearing. She reminded me of a small animal that one would do anything to protect from the cruel and unforgiving world. Although we didn't exchange many words upon our first meeting, I did say "Hello! Let's be friends!" We grew closer shortly after, as most grade school friends do. We were basically inseparable.

However, middle school was the beginning in a sense. The beginning of the end. This was when we truly grew close to one another. Those three years of middle school were adventurous, enlightening, and soul crushing. Alice and I would spend time at school together in class, and right after we would beg our mothers to let one of us go to the other's house. And on the weekends, more often than not we spent them sleeping over at one another's houses. We spent almost every weekend, the whole weekend, together. I cherished every moment we had together, but I also took them for granted.

Eighth grade was one of the worst years of my life. My ambitions and friendships were crumbling around me shortly after the year started. The arrival of Raven may as well have been slow-acting poison. Raven was the new girl, and it was the start of our last year of middle school. Alice quickly became friends with Raven, so I tried to as well, I succeeded. The three of us spent many nights hanging out or having sleepovers with each other. It was nice for a while hanging out with Raven, but She and Alice wound up being a poisonous mixture together. I was used to Alice's adventurous attitude, but Raven brought out a more rebellious side of her. They would constantly walk around town together, or sneak out and get caught doing things they weren't supposed to do and

lied about them to their parents. I was the one who was a goody two shoes and wouldn't be caught dead doing half the things they started doing, so a line had formed between us without me realizing. By the time I saw it, it was too late.

Our freshman year of high school had rolled around. We didn't talk nearly as much as we used to and were in completely different classes. At this point I could tell just how far our friendship had deteriorated. It had turned toxic. However, the nail in the coffin happened shortly after. One day on the weekend, Alice and I were hanging out at my house and I was having so much fun. Then Alice got a text message from Raven who said that if Alice didn't go to her house, she might cut or kill herself. It was a threat. Alice and Raven spent so much time together, yet the one day Alice chose to hang out with me, Raven couldn't stand it. And just like that, Alice abandoned me once again to rush to Raven's side. I didn't matter to her anymore. I begged her not to leave, but she didn't care anymore. I cried and cried because I was heartbroken that my best friend, my closest friend, no longer cared to give me the time of day. After this happened I got used to being abandoned by Alice for Raven.

During the latter half of our freshman year of high school, I had cut out Alice and a few other people who were sort of in the same friend group. From that point in freshman year, to the end of senior year, I spent my time as a loner. I had no school friends and would spend days hardly talking to anyone at all. At least I didn't have fake friends or people who would throw me under the bus in a heartbeat. Alice didn't even try to talk to me. Our friendship had died long before. I just didn't want to acknowledge it.

Alice had added me on Snapchat, this was shortly after I graduated high school. However, I don't know why. She tried to talk to me once on Snapchat, but nothing ever came of it. It was a bittersweet friendship. We were so close one day, and the next we might as well have been on different planets. I thought our friendship would last forever, but that was a naive way of thinking. Our friendship was like the changing of the seasons, fleeting. There one minute, changing the next, then gone. I don't hate her, but she left me feeling betrayed. She was once like a lifeline to me, and now she's nothing but an afterthought. Time changes people. Sometimes people grow apart, sometimes you weren't as close as you once thought you were. Friendship is as fickle as water. As I look at her snapchat story, I see she's doing fine. I'm doing fine too. We're both living our lives just fine, however some days I do wonder what could have been. I once thought we would be together forever. I guess forever is sometimes only a second, a drop in the river of life. The cycle repeats itself. Strangers turn to friends, and sometimes they turn back to strangers in the end.

# Left Behind

When I was six, I disappeared  
in the forest behind our home  
I wandered off to play  
and came across a gnome

He asked me to go with him  
and kissed me on the cheek  
In the grass he laid me sweetly  
where I drifted off to sleep

I dreamed of being a fairy  
like a feather small and light  
I dreamed of riding on the wind  
A tiny version of a kite

Though my feet were tiny  
my hands the size of a seed  
I stood tall and proud  
Though no bigger than a weed

My wings were soft and delicate  
they made music when I flew  
Melodies of love and beauty  
the only songs I knew

When he woke me from my slumber  
I started with a fright  
There was nothing I wanted more  
than to continue on my flight

I begged him to return me  
to the world of make-believe  
So I could live forever  
As a fairy among the trees

I knew I would leave behind  
an old world for a new,  
And the only clue remaining  
would be a pair of muddy shoes.

-Kara Ellis



# Untitled

by Grace Howell

# The Dramatic Irony of Authors

First off,  
you're not alone if you're aching.

That's the first thing I'd tell another me,  
the good golden rule follower I am.

Or I'd want to hear it from a cute girl on an odd night  
of company,  
sipping mimosas or hot cocoa  
smiling and giggling away  
a lie called fate

it evaporates the moment we realize change isn't what it seems.

Here I come  
reviving our hearts  
with conversations about squirrels, teddy bears, lemons,  
or any of the other things.

all the while,  
doing what souls do  
offering silence reassurance!

Some people send the message  
"you aren't alone in the fight"  
And others send the message

"It's a lost cause"  
But I think that life is only a lost cause  
When you give up on it.

an inner telegraph sends the request  
"show me I'm not speaking to a wall!"  
In all the spaces of silence.

And I do my best to help break it down  
And show them  
love is the way out.

See most the time I'm surrounded by  
The groans and moans of carbon copy lives



## The Works

who are enamored by the shadows on the wall  
And it makes me suspect that  
Ravings and insane people  
have gotten more common.  
or I'm becoming an adult  
and finally laying eyes  
upon the horror of a world that feels oddly incomplete.

I guess it's hard to tell  
if the world is changing or if you are.

"No one asked" another thoughtless person utters  
Well, I didn't ask you to have any control over my speech

But here you are doing it...  
be careful young one  
change your thoughts if they are the echoes of your bitterness.

And I don't mean to be persnickety  
I'm just pregnant with wisdom.

I know too much about what it takes to make the world better.  
I want to find the utility in fertilizing it all my life.  
And I think I did.

my whole life.  
In four words it'd be  
Incessant clamoring about estrangement.

And for extra credit I'd add  
figuring out how to lessen it.

Currently, I go to college and the classes feel like child's play,  
A sort of litmus test  
to see if the students care enough to give it their all  
and overcome social fears.  
Regret is the scariest thing.  
So, I'm getting over the hiveminds, death wishes, and infinite stupidity.

See death makes nobody "too cool for school."

Cause during moments

special children behold  
that the world is a beautiful rumor we can almost amount to.

and education lets this shine through for a moment.  
And if you don't think that matters,  
You don't know humanity.

I get tired of the lies  
So now I say get your hands off my potential  
Give me the liberty and resources  
and watch me go!

I know what ethics is

The deep intricacies of helping.

And god are we beautiful.

One thing to ponder:

Is the objectification of our bodies a form of escapism from the terrifying implications of the antipode,  
that we are all one subject?

And  
Wouldn't society run best if we harnessed the great and ethical minds,  
Useful to us  
To solve the common problems?  
I guess that's another ideal in my head.

---there's hardly an intermission in me---

But sometimes there's a new voice.  
Surprising me cause oh my god  
there are other cute humans right here!  
What a reminder to cheer up!

Writing is an outlet for the chronically alive  
dealing with the absurd reality of  
their excess elation.

Personally  
If I could live, I wouldn't need to write.  
Something called love exists

## The Works

And that's my ultimate impetus.  
I put my mind in the hands of God  
And everything is getting better.

A true writer is someone whose lived every life except their own,  
dealing with their capacity to create things  
that no one else seems to know about.

And if they acted it out,  
Starting to walk around like a maniac in jubilation  
Oh god, well you could imagine what  
our social contract would do to them.

I think your software needs to be updated,

Said God,  
And I'm here to help!

See I want to flutter into the world  
like a butterfly overjoyed by itself.  
we're slowly progressing towards a world like that  
cultivating it with each word.  
And I just hope the change occurs fast enough.

I hope that you'd want peace.

That is the power of speech.  
To make peace real.

Who am I?

I am a calculated explosion.

And a dictionary sometimes.

Page 1:

And by genius, I mean honesty  
And by aloneness, I mean incomprehension.  
And by duty, I mean I'll go where I am missing.  
And by spiritual loneliness, I mean what's apparent to you  
isn't apparent to others.  
And by success, I mean internalizing the world, then offering a better one.

And by a dating pool from hell,  
I mean a whole generation fearing vulnerability.

So on and so on.  
This cognition feels like a gift, curse, and responsibility.

See  
We could be paradise generators  
And it all requires us to not do  
What we don't like to see in others.  
this is the dramatic irony of authors.

-Mason Handel



# Untitled

by Jenny Bumba

# No More Birthdays

by Jace Murphy

Have you ever been worried about your birthday? Is your birthday not as special to you as it used to be? Maybe this story will help you. A young daredevil named James had a birthday coming up. He wasn't looking forward to it at all. His mother, Kaitlyn, came to him and asked,

“What do you want for your birthday, James?”

“Whatever you think I might like,” James replied. “Just kidding, I don't want anything at all.”

“Okay,” said Kaitlyn. “Would you like to take a trip to somewhere special instead?”

“No, I don't want to celebrate my birthday ever again” replied James, angrily. “I wish my birthday would go away forever.” Kaitlyn was confused. James had never been so uptight about his birthday before.

Early the next morning, Kaitlyn and her husband Ed woke up their younger sons, Spanish Jace, Joce, French Jace, Mini James, German Jace, and Gummy Bear Jace, so they could have a family meeting in the living room at the haunted house they live in while James was sleeping.

The whole family wanted to do something for James's birthday and they were coming up with some plans to figure out why James didn't want to celebrate his birthday ever again. “Fellas, yesterday James told me that he doesn't want to celebrate his birthday ever again, but I don't know why,” said Kaitlyn. Ed and the boys all gasped. “I want to continue to show James how much we care about him but that day is about him, not us,” finished Kaitlyn.

“I wish we could still celebrate James's birthday and make his birthday special again but I'd hate to disrespect his wishes,” said Ed. “What are we going to do?”

“Maybe James thought he got too many birthday presents last year,” replied Joce. “I don't think he had fun at his party last year.”

“Or maybe James doesn't know what he wants for his cumpleaños,” said Spanish Jace.

“I'd do anything to make James's birthday special to him again,” said Mini James.

“We shall all go to some stores together and maybe that will give James gift ideas, or we could all find out whatever else his problem could be,” said German Jace.

Everyone agreed to do that and they went shopping together later that day. The family walked into an aisle with cake ingredients and candles. James would be especially shocked when he saw candles shaped like numbers because



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they reminded him of himself getting a year older in a few days. He choked every time he saw the number candles. His family suspected that the concept of getting older was one the main reasons James was starting to hate his own birthday. James saw his dad and brothers walking into an aisle with cards in it while he and his mother were on their way to the bathroom. He assumed they were looking for cards for him, much to his disapproval.

After James's bathroom break, Kaitlyn asked him to look for miscellaneous items in the store that he wanted, but he didn't know why. James looked and looked all around the store and he saw a few snacks he wanted, but nothing inedible.

"I didn't see anything else I wanted," James told his family. "I guess there's nothing better to do than pay for my food and go home." Before they left, they looked at Halloween decorations, including a few ghost inflatables and statues. Whenever Joce saw those ghosts, he'd walk away with a sad face, much to James's confusion because ghost hunting was Joce's favorite hobby.

At last, everybody paid for James's food and they were on their way home. The whole family walked out of the store with sad faces, except for James, because he didn't see any birthday presents he wanted and it appeared to them that James was starting to become harder to shop for.

While they were walking to Ed's van, Joce, Gummy Bear Jace, and French Jace tripped over a heap of garbage somebody left in the parking lot and they all still had frowns on their faces.

"You guys are down in the dumps, aren't you?" asked James, laughing.

"That's not funny James," said Gummy Bear Jace, angrily. James's brothers and parents were all so upset, much to his confusion because they usually laugh at his jokes.

"Joce, how come you didn't hunt any of the ghosts at the store?" asked James while Ed was driving home.

"We're all in despair because you didn't see anything inedible you wanted," replied Joce, sadly. James thought his family was crying over spilt milk just because he didn't want any presents.

"I have no idea what the big deal with me not wanting presents is but I appreciate what I already have," James told his family. "I don't need anything new right now, I already have most of the things I want."

"We've gone to all the stores around here and James didn't see a single inedible thing he wanted," Kaitlyn whispered to Ed. "What else are we going to do?"

"I don't know," whispered Ed. "I'm afraid there's nothing left to do but go home and respect James's wishes."

The minute everyone went home, James slammed the doors, sat in his dark room for a while, and thought of some new stunts he could try. An hour later, James heard music, but he didn't know where it was coming from. He followed the music and discovered it was coming from Joce, Gummy Bear Jace, and German Jace's room. The three of them were dancing to the clean version of Wobble, one of German Jace's favorite songs. They were all singing along with

every “Yeah yeah get in there,” German Jace tried to sing the rest of the lyrics in German, and they were all having a great time. They were looking for songs that could be played at James’s birthday party if he were to have one and they wanted to see if James’s birthday problem was something to do with music.

“Fellas, what’s the commotion?” James asked his brothers.

“We’re practicing our dance moves,” said Gummy Bear Jace. “Wanna practice with us?”

James was too lazy to dance and he said maybe he’d dance later.

“Maybe this song will be appropriate for your birth...” said Gummy Bear Jace, excitedly.

“For my birthday?” asked James.

“For your bird,” replied Joce. “We decided to give you a pet bird as a surprise.”

“Gee, I’m flattered!” said James in surprise. “Just kidding, we have enough pets already and I don’t want to clean up bird poop.” He walked away to see what the rest of his family was doing.

“Oh great! We almost blew the surprise,” said German Jace. “And it looks like James’s birthday problem isn’t anything to do with music or dancing.” James went in the kitchen and saw Mini James and French Jace testing out some party games, including a balloon dart game and Pin the Tail on the Donkey, to see if they were still good enough for a birthday party and to see if James’s birthday problem was something to do with games.

“Mini James, French Jace, what’s going on?” he asked. “Looks like you two are having a party, but I don’t see any other signs of a party.”

“We’re tes...,” replied French Jace.

“I was gonna study for a test I’ll be taking at school tomorrow, but we got bored and decided to play some games we haven’t played in a while instead,” finished Mini James. “Wanna play with us?”

“I’d love to!” James replied. “But shouldn’t you be studying for your test, Mini James? It will help you get a good grade!”

“Studying is for nerds, games are a lot more fun!” answered Mini James. James did play along and Mini James and French Jace popped a lot more balloons from the balloon dart game than their brother. The two of them had lots more energy and a lot of fun. James played along and had fun until he got tired. He left the kitchen to see what else was going on. “Looks like James’s birthday problem isn’t anything to do with games,” said Mini James.

Next, James went into the living room and he saw Spanish Jace sitting on a soft and comfy couch with the family cat, George, reading a book with fun facts about birthdays to figure out what James’s birthday problem could be or how to make James’s birthday special again. Kaitlyn and Ed were both on the brown carpet floor, wrapping some empty boxes to see if James’s birthday problem was something to do with presents. The family dogs, Marley and Fluffy, were trying to chew on the wrapping paper and the other family cat, Kitty, played with the ribbon on the boxes. “Did you know that Diciembre 25th is the

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least common cumpleaños, and not Febrero 29th like I thought before?” Spanish Jace asked his parents.

“That’s an interesting fact!” said Kaitlyn.

“What’s going on here?” asked James. “Spanish Jace, why are you reading a book about birthdays? You already had your birthday, or cumpleaños, last month.”

“Feliz Cump...”, said Spanish Jace.

“Ahem,” went Ed.

“I mean, Feliz Navidad!” ‘corrected’ Spanish Jace.

“It’s not Christmas,” said James.

“Oops! I guess we were preparing for the wrong season,” said Kaitlyn.

“We thought Christmas was coming,” said Ed.

“I don’t know what’s going on here but I can tell you guys weren’t really preparing for Christmas,” said James. “Please tell me those presents aren’t for me.”

“Those presents aren’t for you, son,” said Ed. “Your mother and I are giving each other those presents for our anniversary.”

“We’re old and we forget a lot of things,” finished Kaitlyn. James was still confused. He had no idea why his parents would wrap anniversary presents in front of each other.

“Spanish Jace, why are you reading a book about birthdays?” he asked. “What does that have to do with Christmas or a wedding anniversary?”

“Nada,” answered Spanish Jace. “Gracias to this book, I learned some interesting facts about los cumpleaños and I gained a lot más knowledge if you ask mi.”

“Why on Earth is everybody acting so strange today?” James asked himself while walking back to his room.

That night, Kaitlyn and Ed put empty envelopes on the counter in the messy kitchen and pretended they were invitations to a birthday party, so they could see if the amount of guests was a part of James’s birthday problem. They wrote the names of some of James’s friends and relatives on them, as well as the names of some people they made up. Before James went to bed, he spotted the envelopes on the counter. He didn’t recognize the names on some of them. He assumed there were invitations to a surprise birthday party his immediate family planned for him inside the envelopes, much to his disapproval. “Don’t they remember that I don’t want to celebrate my birthday ever again?” he mumbled to himself. “There was enough trouble at my birthday party last year.” There were so many envelopes, James’s hands got full and he dropped some on the black vinyl floor. He threw some of them in the wastebasket, hoped that would make his family forget about his birthday and cancel the party, tired himself out picking up and throwing away a number of envelopes, decided to wait another day to throw away the remaining envelopes, and went to bed with his canine buddy, Marley. Fluffy ate some of the remaining envelopes on the floor.

The next morning, Kaitlyn and Ed saw some envelopes in the waste-

basket and some on the floor. It was obvious to them that the amount of guests was a part of James's birthday problem.

The amount of guests at James's party last year was WAY out of hand, much to his fear and frustration due to his hatred of crowds. While he was at school, some of his friends asked him about his birthday. Every time that happened, poor James stuttered nervously, fired himself out of a cannon, and away he went.

While the boys were at school, Kaitlyn and Ed signed a card for James under the names "Horatio and Petra Goodman" because they assumed James would be mad at them if he knew the card was actually from his parents. They put the card in the envelope and left it on the kitchen counter so they could see if another part of his birthday problem was something to do with cards.

When the boys came home from school, James opened the card and read it. He was so angry, his face turned red. After he finished reading the card, he went into the living room, stood up to his family, and showed them his card.

"I don't know who Horatio and Petra Goodman are but I said I don't want to celebrate my birthday ever again and I want it to go away forever," he said. "I was especially shocked to see the mention of me getting a year older. I don't know why you were all acting so strange yesterday but please, no more birthdays for me, no more aging, no more cards, no more parties, no more presents, and no more ridiculously large amounts of guests, period." This time, the family fully understood why James didn't want anything to do with this birthday business.

"Horatio and Petra are friends with your father and I," lied Kaitlyn. "Sorry for all we've done, you can throw that card away." James walked away and threw the card in the wastebasket.

"Now I remember, James's party was a fiasco last year," said Ed.

"There were way too many presents and guests, too much noise, and not enough cake for everyone," said Spanish Jace. "No wonder the poor guy doesn't want another cumpleaños ever again."

The next week, it was finally September 19th, James's birthday. James came into the living room, turned on the lights, and his extended family and a few of his friends shouted "Happy James Day!" There were appropriate decorations for a party at a haunted house, like ghost balloons, pumpkin rings on cupcakes, and more. Joce pretended to hunt the ghost balloons.

"Feliz James Day!" shouted Spanish Jace.

"Glücklich James Day!" shouted German Jace.

"Bon James Day!" shouted French Jace.

"What's James Day?" asked James.

"We thought instead of celebrating your birthday, we'd celebrate James Day," said Kaitlyn.

"It's just a random day to show how much we appreciate you and celebrate it."

"I heard days like this have a rule that you can't get older and that you

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can be as young as you want to be,” I said. “But don’t tell anybody outside of your family who’s not here about the James Day business, or they’ll think you’re crazy.” Yep, I’m friends with James and his family.

“Well I’ll be a monkey’s uncle!” James said, excitedly. “And don’t worry, I won’t tell anybody about all this.”

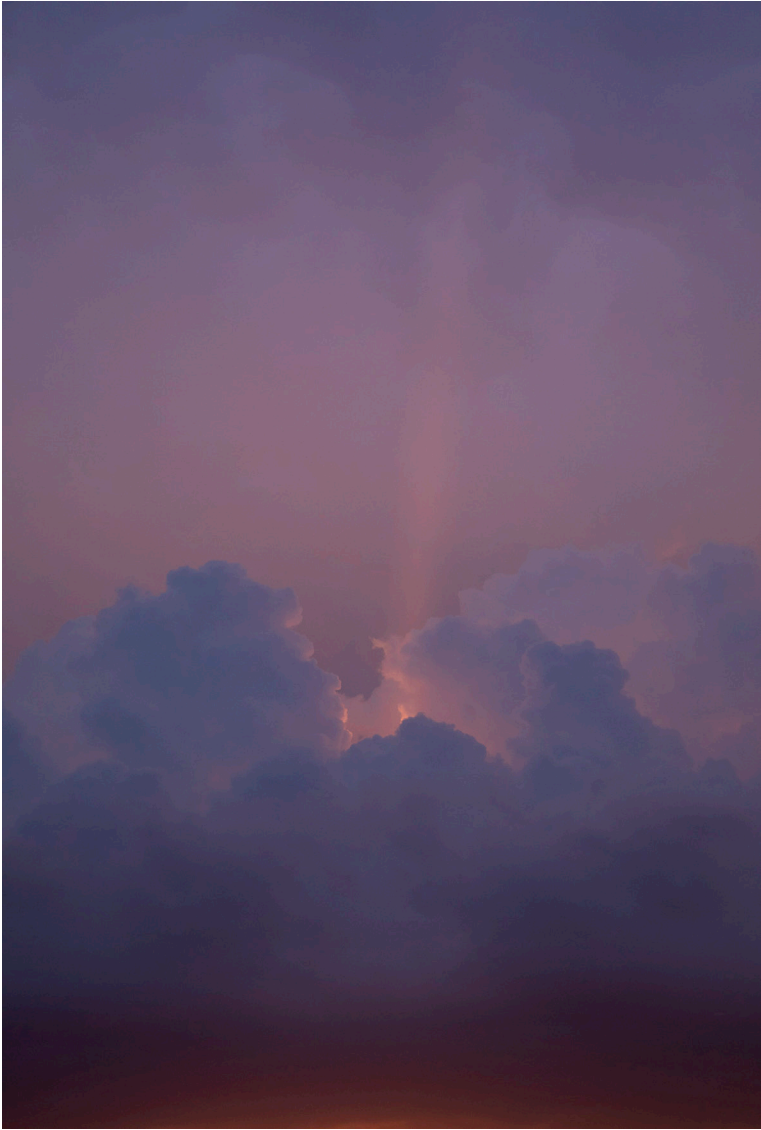
“You gotta see those cards!” said Ed. When James opened his cards, he saw that the word “birthday” was crossed off and James Day was written above it, much to his surprise.

“We weren’t sure if you’d still want any presents, so we thought we’d get you some just in case,” said Mini James.

“No thanks, you fellas can take them,” said James. “I’ve already got something much more important, you guys.” Everyone was touched to hear that, even Marley, Fluffy, Kitty, George, and the family goldfishes, Goldie, Buddy, Dorothy, and Fishy, who were all in the living room too. All of James’s favorite foods were in the kitchen. There was cake, cupcakes, cookies, chips, gummy bears, and more. “Boy am I hungry!” said James when he came into the kitchen. “I don’t know what to eat first.” While Gummy Bear Jace was getting a few things to eat, James told him “Don’t eat those gummy bears or else you’ll be a cannibal.” Everyone laughed. It was a joke.

Gummy Bear Jace used to be half human and half gummy bear, hence his name, but he’s missing his gummy bear parts.

Once everyone sat down, all the guests and James’s family sang “Happy James Day to you! Happy James Day to you! Happy James Day dear James, and you smell like one too.” Later that day, there was lots of music and dancing. Everyone had a good time, especially James, Spanish Jace, Gummy Bear Jace, and me, mainly because 1. It was James’s special day, 2. The three of us got to do our fabulous dance moves and get lots of cheers again, and 3. Gummy Bear Jace and Spanish Jace are obsessed with dancing!



# Light Beam Amongst the Clouds

by Glenn Bodish



The Works  
**Asterism**

A night sky,  
heavy and dark,  
swirls within her,  
until he walks in

His freckles,  
like a thousand tiny stars,  
spilt sugar across black marble,  
easing the darkness.

His smile,  
like radiant sun rays,  
soothing the unforgiving chill of night,  
eclipsing her heart.

His eyes,  
like crescent moons,  
twinkling,  
her very own guiding lights.

His voice,  
like a soft cloud,  
settling over the inky nothingness,  
blanketing her charcoal soul.

His kisses,  
like a gentle sunshower,  
rays of light breaking through her night,  
warm streaks of brilliance.

His arms,  
like a prismatic rainbow,  
reflecting in her black sea,  
spilling color into what was once an empty void.

-Hailey Rannfeldt

# Time Out

by Odile Blazquez

I turn over and open my eyes. Slowly, the shapeless blobs around me begin to coalesce into familiar shapes. “You need to get up,” interrupts my brain. Immediately, an avalanche of thoughts tries to take over, but my mind fights back and keeps them out. Not yet. I sit up in bed and my feet seek out my old beat-up flip-flops, my toes sinking into the indentations made by years of use. I head downstairs on autopilot.

I turn right to go into the dining room instead of left to go to the kitchen and stand at the window to look out at the pre-dawn. Across the street, the tall Scotch pine on the right side of my neighbor’s house is slowly emerging from the shadows and so is the birch on the left. I can make out dark splotches where I know the bark is peeling on that birch. In the summer, its delicate leaves tinkle like bells when there’s wind, but now it’s bare, the wispy branches motionless in the growing light. I watch as the branches suddenly sway just a bit, as if acknowledging me, and then go still again.

My eyes drift to the huge blue spruce in my front yard. It serves as an apartment complex almost two stories tall for a whole city of birds, providing them with warmth and shelter year-round. Jerky trembling of the branches here and there usually lets me know where they are, but not now. They must be sleeping in because not a needle moves on the giant tree. There is no sound at all. Nothing. No one is picking up a newspaper from the mailbox. No one is opening a garage to leave. No cars go by. No dogs bark to be let out. Nothing moves. It’s as if someone turned off the switch and time is standing still. It’s perfect. The agenda for the day tries to interrupt once more, but my mind again slams the door. Not yet. It wants a bit more, so I stay a bit longer.

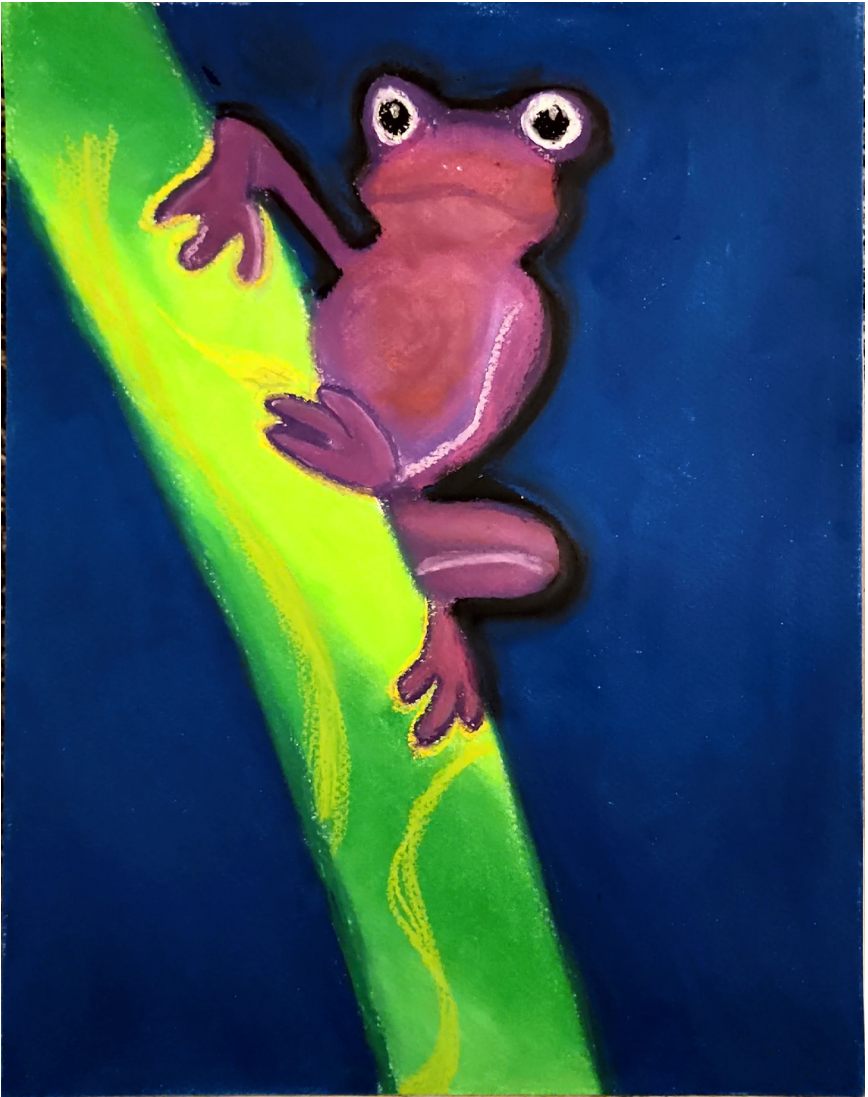
In the kitchen, I get the espresso machine going. The water gurgles happily as it flows from the receptacle to where it needs to go, and I wait for the explosion. It comes as soon as the coffee begins trickling out, the rich aroma bursting out and swallowing me whole, my insides giddy with anticipation. I add one tiny spoonful of sugar to my tiny espresso cup and stir. We bought the set in Italy. As we walked down the narrow cobblestone alleyways of the medieval town of Assisi, we found a little shop, no wider than a one-car garage, with gorgeous pottery in the window. The family had been making and painting all their pottery by hand for over one hundred years in the back of this little shop. I fell in love with these tiny cups and had to buy them. They’re perfectly round, smooth, shiny, and painted yellow and white with thin dark blue streaks that curl up at the ends.

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One sip and I feel the jolt. Strong, intense, and delicious. I swear coffee tastes better in my little Italian cups than in any other cup. I savor the aroma, the rich taste, the warmth sliding down my throat, the smoothness of my tiny cup. It's sensory overload.

I smile as I become aware of my kitchen, my counter, my stuff. I just left a place where everything is as it should be, where my brain is muzzled and life can't touch me, a place where I've been many times before and where I know I'll go back again, hopefully tomorrow morning unless I'm rushed.

My mind sighs in resignation and allows my brain to open the flood-gates, letting in the rush of deadlines, to-dos, plans, yesterday's conversations, clutter. The birds are up. I look at my faithful little old cactus by the sink, give it some water, and turn to leave.



# Untitled

by Lexie Perry

# Untitled

The cool breeze sent a chill down my spine.  
We were only halfway up the hiking trail,  
But the view was already immaculate.  
We looked up ahead to see a small building off the path.  
The stone structure seemed out of place,  
Looking like an old castle or outpost.  
The inside was vacant, with only a couple of windows and walls  
As the divider between us and the woods around us.  
As we continued up the hill, the breeze became bitter,  
And the sun rose from over the mountain ahead.  
From this high up, the trees molded into a sea of green,  
And the few remaining patches of snow brought a contrast of scenery.  
After climbing the summit, we looked down at the hike we'd completed,  
And the same hike we'd make to get back down.  
We began the journey back to our car,  
With that same chill starting again down our spines.

-Adam Neumann



# Untitled

by Sean Fitzpatrick



# Bringing Home the Dough

by Samantha Zellers

Bright light shone in her eyes, and Olive jerked her head back, hissing. “Seriously, what the heck?”

“I’m asking the questions here, not you, witch.” A male voice. So her kidnapper was probably male. Not a lot of information to go off of, but it was a start.

“You say that as though our society doesn’t practically run on witches,” Olive grumbled. “My name’s Olive, you know. You could call me that.” From behind the light, the figure paused, then mumbled to himself in a tone so low it practically scraped the floor. Olive closed her eyes, blocking out the lamp-light. There was no way he’d keep that on the entire time, right?

The internal conference ended as abruptly as it had begun, and Olive peered up at the shadowy figure on the other side of the room. “What’s the verdict?”

“I won’t take suggestions. Or criticisms.”

“Well alrighty then,” she murmured, internally rolling her eyes. “So really, what’s going on here? Kidnapping a lone female in the middle of the night, right out of her bed? I’m no lawyer, but I’m certain there’s some sort of law being violated here.”

“No more laws than you’re violating, witch.”

“Olive.”

“No more questions.”

Olive shrugged her shoulders, falling silent. No use antagonizing him.

“I want to know where you’ve hidden the stone.”

Olive raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“The Sorcerer’s Stone, witch! What other stone would I possibly be interested in?”

Olive instinctively went to raise her hands, but hissed again when the rough rope that’d been used to tie her up dug into her skin. “I have a lot of stones, okay?”

Then she paused, and blinked. “Wait, go back. What stone again?”

“The Sorcerer’s Stone! The secret to ultimate power, eternal youth, unlimited gold!”

Olive might’ve laughed if the situation had been less stressful. “I don’t have the Sorcerer’s Stone. As you’ve pointed out several times, I’m a witch. Transmutation’s not really my area of expertise, so there’s no way I could’ve made something like the Sorcerer’s Stone.”

“And why should I believe that obvious lie when I have plenty of evidence to the contrary?”

Olive stiffened. “What kind of evidence?”

“I ask the questions here, witch-”

“Not anymore, you don’t,” Olive cut him off, twisting her hand to cover the ropes and summoning a thin flame to lick them away. She stood and dusted off her tunic and leggings, then glared at the stranger. “Now talk.”

The figure tensed, slightly backing up. “I thought you said you weren’t a sorcerer!”

“All I said was transmutation isn’t my specialty. Are witches not allowed to learn conjuration?” Olive asked innocently, while inwardly growling. She hadn’t intended upon using sorcery so soon, but his allegations were... infuriating, to say the least; he had started to actually annoy her.

“No!” The figure retorted. “Witches learn healing and potions and-”

Olive waved her hand, cutting him off. “Whatever. There’s no rule saying you can’t learn multiple disciplines. We checked.”

“Well if you learned sorcery then obviously you could’ve learned transmutation! And the culmination of sorcery is the Sorcerer’s Stone!”

“No, really? I didn’t know,” Olive said dryly. “Be that as it may, I don’t know transmutation. The best I can do is change the flavor of my tea.”

“Then how do you explain the massive amounts of gold you keep spending?” The figure cried, outraged. “You live here for a year with no indication of wealth and then suddenly you’re buying the most expensive meals possible!”

Olive took a deep breath, her mind racing. What in the world was he...

Oh.

Oh.

Laughter rose in her like bubbles rising from a boiling cauldron. Her body shook, and she bit her lips to keep from smiling. “I’m buying bread with the gold, not meals. Just bread.”

“What’s the difference?” The figure huffed. Olive walked over to the spotlight, and flicked it off. Before the figure could freak out, she summoned several small orbs of light, which floated around the room and lit it up. Olive’s gaze flickered over her captor. A thin frame, skin an almost sickly color of white, relatively short, with a nose that’d been broken approximately twice... And dressed in dark red robes.

Ah. The local wizard.

“The difference is that I would eat meals, but I don’t eat the bread.”

“Then why do you have it?” The wizard asked, eyeing the orbs of light.

The witch shook her head. “It’s a bit of a long story, but clearly you have nothingn better to do if you’re running around kidnapping people, so what the heck, let’s get to it.”

She hoisted herself up onto the table and sat, legs criss-crossed comfortably. The wizard shrank back, face contorted. “What are you doing?”

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“Getting comfortable. I said it was a long story.”

The wizard was still frowning, but he pulled the chair she’d been tied up on over and sat down. Olive smiled and leaned back. “Now... Where to begin?”

“With the gold sounds right to me,” the wizard said. Olive’s nose twitched.

“No, no, no, that’s not nearly far enough back. Let’s see... How about when I first arrived in town?”

Olive didn’t consider herself to be very rich at all. Her new home was fairly small, and the most luxurious thing about it was that it had an area divider to separate her bathroom from her living quarters. The area she lived in wasn’t too cold to begin with, so the blue-gray walls kept her warm enough during the winter; it had sufficient space for her cauldron and a few bookshelves’ worth of second-hand tomes and ingredients, as well as a comfortable mattress she’d bought with what was left of her gold after purchasing the house. The patchwork quilts that covered the bed she’d sewed herself while she was living in her old quarters, and her fingers had been covered in pinpricks for months to show for it.

The house was small, but so was she, so she wasn’t about to complain there. The only bad thing about the space, she mused as she stirred the mucous yellow liquid in her cauldron with a spoon the size of her arm, was the garden area. The ground was incredibly infertile... But the potion she was making now should help with that. And if it didn’t, she was going to hunt down the hedgewitch who sold her the recipe and burn that presumptuous old hag’s eyebrows off before mixing the ashes into pig’s hoof stew and force-feeding it to the woman’s familiar.

Olive sighed. Okay, well, maybe not. But she agreed with the sentiment. She plucked a wooden bowl out of a nearby wooden cabinet and filled it with the brew. “Time to go test this out,” she murmured to herself.

Three paces from her door, she knelt down and tipped the bowl out onto the ground, muttering the potion’s corresponding incantation to the earth and feeling magic slip out of her reserves, like pouring water from a full pitcher.

“Well at least it’s doing something,” she said to herself, sitting back on her heels and watching the liquid seep into the ground.

“Caw!”

Olive jerked back, nearly hitting her head on the wall of her home.

“What the...”

“Caw!”

Olive twisted around, but couldn’t see anything around her. She tilted her head up and there, perching on her roof, was a sleek black bird. It tilted its head quizzically at her. Olive’s expression smoothed over, like pouring oil over choppy waters.

“Well hello there, dear,” Olive cooed. “Would you like a snack?”

The crow chirped, and Olive breathed out a laugh. Crows. The property had crows!

She stood and headed into the house. Her cabinets were about as fruitful as her garden at the moment, but... There!

Tucked away in a corner was a small loaf of bread left over from her travels. She picked it up and considered it for a moment, then blew a stray loose hair away from her eyes and headed back outside.

The crow had elected to remain on its rooftop perch, which suited Olive just fine. It was sizing her up now, and if it flew down it would probably be to steal her bread, which wasn't what she was after at all. Its stealing bread took all the agency away from her, and would lead to habits later that would be difficult to break.

"It's not much," she admitted to the crow, ripping the bread into a few pieces. "But I haven't had much time to settle in yet, so this is all I've got, unless you fancy a salad of dried herbs or a harvest potion."

She knelt down and placed the pieces on the ground, then straightened and smiled at the crow before walking back into the house. She would check in on the garden and the crow tomorrow. For now... She eyed her bare pantry before plucking her market basket from its corner by the door. She had some bartering to do.

"I still don't understand how this has anything to do with your suspicious abundance of coinage," the wizard interrupted. Olive flattened her hand and tapped the top of his head with the narrow side of it. He recoiled out of instinct, but Olive knew he wasn't injured in any way. If she'd wanted to hurt him, she would've, but she didn't. He was fine, and the sheep's wool he called hair had stopped her before she could even make contact with his skull.

"Be patient, young one. We're getting there."

"Well then get there already!" Then the wizard scowled. "And we're the same age!"

"You don't know that," Olive dismissed, waving her hand. "And stop interrupting me, unless you don't want to hear the rest."

The wizard sighed, running a hand through his thick, curly hair. "No, keep going."

"Thank you. Now, where was I? Ah, right. The first crow."

As it turned out, the crow hadn't been too picky about the bread, because when she got back from the nearby village near sunset, laden with materials and ingredients, Olive found the bread entirely gone. She smiled, pleased, and walked back into the house.

The next morning, the smell of warm bread permeated the house and leaked out the open windows. Olive glanced up from the stove where she'd been warming the bread for her breakfast when the rustle of feathers caused her ears to prick up. Six crows sat in her window, shimmering like soap bubbles made of midnight.

"Well hello there," Olive murmured, setting the bread down on her table and chuckling. "Does it smell good?"

The crow on the far right cawed, and Olive laughed. She took a butter

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knife and cut off two slices of the bread. “This is a special getting-to-know-you treat, understand?”

She walked out of the cottage and into the garden. The flock fluttered up to the roof, and Olive felt a smile grow on her face. She left the bread on the ground again, and headed back inside. “Note to self- get a bird feeding table.”

This practice went on for a few more weeks before the crows finally decided she was safe to approach. The switch she’d made to various fruits and vegetables on the third day had initially swayed their opinion of her, but it was easier than finding their own food and Olive made sure to leave out bread for the flock at the start of each week.

It was on Bread Day of week five that Olive received a disturbing surprise. The crows, as usual, fluttered to her window, and Olive prepared the same rye bread she always bought for them and took it outside, to the same spot she always left it. Nothing unusual there. It was later in the day, when she was working in the garden, that she noticed the Gift.

Olive, carrying a box of basil seedlings and headed to the newly-tilled soil, nearly walked past it. Her mind had been entirely focused on the seedlings, and which plants she would be dealing with next; almost too focused to notice a yellow gleam in the corner of her vision, but not quite. She paused, intrigued, and adjusted her grip on the box so she could kneel down for a better look.

There, on the ground, right where she always left the crows’ food, was a dirty golden coin next to a small blue-grey stone. The coin’s surface was covered in tiny nicks, like it had been chewed on by a ladybug. Olive’s nose twitched.

The fact that the crows had left her presents wasn’t confusing; she’d had the same kind of relationship with a family of crows where she’d lived last., and this wasn’t the first time the current flock had left her gifts. The stone was beautiful, really, the exact shade of the sky before a major storm, and she knew she would treasure it, but that was the thing- the stone was the kind of gift she’d anticipated. She’d received dozens of stones from her current favorite crows, usually in vibrant colors or interesting shapes. Sometimes they’d give her a leaf, or they’d leave her a wilted flower. But a gold coin?

Frankly, she was bewildered. So, Olive set down the crate of seedlings and picked up the stone and coin, then did the only reasonable thing she could think of.

She went back into the house and put the coin in her market basket. The town baker made fabulous bread rolls, and she was certain the crows would love some.

“And, wouldn’t you know it, they did,” Olive finished. “And somehow, crows are even more ridiculously intelligent than I’d figured, because somehow they figured out that leaving me gold coins was the way to get better food, and I honestly couldn’t tell you where they’re getting the things but surely they’re raiding a dragon’s hoard, because I’ve gotten enough coins to buy them a castle of bread.”

The wizard leaned back in his chair. “So, to be clear... You don’t have

the Sorcerer's Stone.”

“Nope.”

“And the reason you have so much gold is six crows decided to...”

“Make me their personal bread dealer, yes.”

He massaged his temples. “Well that’s a thing, I suppose.”

Olive laughed. “It’s pretty odd, isn’t it?”

“That’s the least of the words I would use to describe it, yes.”

Olive leaned back on the table again. “So, besides the whole ‘infinite power’ thing, why exactly were you so desperate to get the Sorcerer’s Stone? I mean, you did kidnap a person over it. And that person was me, so I think I have the right to know.”

“You’re going to think it’s silly,” the wizard said, sighing.

“I mean, yeah probably, but it can't hurt to tell me, right?”

The wizard groaned and buried his head in his hands. “Eyewursh try-nabuyah dersfrmeh lilshishtr,” he mumbled.

Olive tilted her head. “What was that?”

“I was... Trying to buy a dress for my little sister, okay? And...”

Olive bit back a smile. “And so you assumed, that because I use magic and suddenly have a large amount of gold, I somehow unlocked the secret to the single greatest puzzle to ever baffle mystical minds, and then you decided that a local town wizard would be able to take on the sorcerer who accomplished that and subsequently kidnapped her? I mean, your dedication and belief in yourself are astoundingly strong, but I’m rather concerned over your long-term well-being.”

The wizard sighed again. “My sister says I’m so focused on the big picture I’ve crowded out the details.”

Olive hummed in agreement. “Anyways, why were you so desperate for gold in the first place? If you wanted to buy your sister a dress, I’m sure the salary you receive from the local lords would’ve covered it.”

The wizard shrugged. “You’d think, but the local wizards’ pay has been cut almost by half. According to the local lord, they’re facing a budget deficit, which I personally think is code for ‘We accidentally skimmed too much off the top this time’, but I don’t have any proof so there’s nothing I can do for now.”

Olive frowned. “Well that’s rude. What say you we go teach him a lesson on respecting magic users?”

The wizard let out a loud, infectious laugh, which was strangled when he realized she wasn’t smiling. “Oh, you’re serious. That’s- that’s rebellion, Olive. We’re not supposed to do that.”

Olive frowned. “Well we’re not supposed to kidnap people, either, but here we are.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. “Actually, ignore that, it’s fine. Well, it’s not fine, but for the purpose of this conversation it’s fine.”

She sighed. “Look, if you want to buy a dress for your sister I’ll lend you some coin. Magic users have to stick together, after all, disciplinary differ-



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ences or no. But seriously, you should write to your wizard chapter and let them know what's going on with the local lords.

Even suspicion of embezzlement is a serious charge, and it's kind of you all's job to deal with that."

The wizard nodded slowly. "I'll do that."

Olive smiled, then hopped off the chair. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some grumpy birds to feed before they hunt me down and peck out my eyeballs for being late."

She paused before walking out the door. "By the way, did the local lords give an excuse for why they've been facing a budget deficit?"

The wizard shrugged. "Not really, he just mentioned something about a large amount of gold going missing from the castle coffers over the past year, and that we're to be on the lookout for a thief."

Olive frowned. Something didn't seem quite right... But she decided to just nod, and walk out of the room.

She was about halfway home before she realized what had been bugging her about what the wizard had said.

The crows.

"Aw, heck."



M  
Jones

# Untitled

by Miriya Jones



# Untitled

by Sydney Petersen

# While My Children Sleep

While my children sleep  
I kill the tiny, pale spiders on the living room ceiling  
using a battery-powered swatter that crisps them audibly  
with tiny orange and blue sparks.  
I carry each tortured, crumpled husk  
using the swatter as a makeshift gurney  
and bury it unceremoniously in the trash.  
Then I return to kill another,  
but before I do I turn off the kitchen light  
every single time.

The fly is proving to be a problem.  
The globule of diseased shit  
chainsaws around my head ceaselessly,  
and no matter how I flail away,  
cursing under my breath,  
I know that I won't get him  
and the spiders that I've missed  
will be too small to help out for a while yet.

If I didn't know that spiders are shitty parents,  
I'd wonder if they keep their kids up at night  
with stories of death and unnatural fire,  
or if they beg them to please stay off the goddamn  
ceiling for today, at least.  
Spider parents can't read the sticker on the swatter that says  
"Warning! Not a Toy! Keep Away from Children!"  
I keep it on a very high shelf when  
I'm not using it to kill the spider children  
who take several crackling sparks each to die.

-Tom Irish

# Before You Go

by Ajayla Ries-Ennells

*The air is crisp against my bare fingertips, tapping against the frigid metal park bench beneath us. My breath is slow, dissipating in unison with the building anxiety in my chest.*

*"I don't like how silent you are," I hear from beside me, and I let out another breath, harsher than the last. "What's in your brain right now?"*

*"...when did you decide this?" I asked, tapping harder against the metal, my heart beating just as fast.*

*"I-" a pause, a hesitation on the tip of his tongue, "Does it really matter when?" He reaches over to grab at my tapping hand, and I snatch it away before I realise what I'm doing.*

*His defeated recoil makes me want to get on the ground and beg him for forgiveness. The news he just shared makes me want to run.*

*"Yeah. Sorry - yes, it does. It does matter. Of course it matters. Why do you think it doesn't?" I still can't turn to face him. I see from the corner of my eye his frosty breath flowing away with the wind. He's still the calmest he's ever been.*

*"Pretty much when it became an option." Those words, like a truck run straight through my chest, I gasp and whip my head around to look at him.*

*"When it became an option? So you decided this as soon as you knew? You decided to go, to... to leave at the first opportunity?" He nodded slowly, guiltily. Now he's the one tapping at the bench post. My stomach turns, tears threatening to spill down my face and on to my coat. I turn back away from him and nod solemnly.*

*"Well, then, I guess there's nothing left to say. You've made up your mind." I stand up, one foot in front of the other, and leave him sitting there, still tapping on the bench.*

That was the first time we talked about it. About him leaving. About the end of us and the end of all things for as long as we'll ever know them. I can't help but fixate on how calm, how collected he had been the whole time. As if leaving was the easiest choice, as if it were the only choice.

The blooming dandelions sink under the weight of my bare feet, vibrant green grass and clovers tickle in between my toes. The Spring air is fresh, if a little cool. The blooms on the leaves appear swollen, almost ready to burst with the rebirth of shady green leaves. I follow along the winding path parallelling the riverfront, slowly, taking in the scenery of a brand new day. A great wall of concrete stones stands confidently beside me, and I follow it until it dips low

enough to climb onto. Steady, I make my way up each stone and sit on the edge of the wall, staring out into the open water. I continue to look around, taking in the sight of little violets and wildflowers barely opening around me. I pick one from its thin stem, and peel it open the rest of the way. Pulling a petal first from the right side, then the one next to it.

He loves me,

He loves me not.

Carefully, I pull the petals from their roots, holding my breath, and slowly letting it out.

Footsteps approach behind me, and a figure leans down over my shoulder.

“Whoever it is, that flower isn’t the fate of your relationship,” a peppy, soft voice says. The figure shuffles, sitting down with their knees tucked in, crossing over one another. “If they wanted to, they would. That’s my motto, at least.” I look up, meeting gaze with a sweet, familiar face smiling down at me.

“Hey, you!” I smile back, and take her in for a hug. “It’s so great to see you.” I pause for a moment. “How do you always manage to show up at the perfect time?” She laughs at that, and tucks her shoulder length hair behind her ears.

“Well, a little birdy told me you were having a hard time, you know how your mom is...and anyway, I thought I’d find you here. You always manage to make your way back to this silly little park when you need some thinking time.” I nodded, taking my aunt in for another hug, flower in my fingertips. A petal dislodges and falls down her burgundy blouse.

She puts a hand on my shoulder and pats me gently. I give her a half-hearted smile and look back down on the half-picked flower in my hand. I glance at the picked petals as they float away with the breeze. I toss the flower to the ground beneath us, and watch as it barely ruffles the grass under it, not even creating a shadow.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. I just saw you here and figured you might want someone to sit with. Even just for a moment.” She pats my shoulder again and sighs, letting her hands swing back to hold herself up as she stares up at the sky. “I think it’s nice to have someone here for you even if it’s not meant to be for forever, you know?”

I hear her plucking at the grass beneath her, gaze still fixated on the drifting clouds.

“Mm... I don’t know. Why would something good come into your life if it’s just going to leave anyway? Saves both of us the trouble, never having come around at all.” I mutter.

“Maybe it saves some trouble. Or maybe trouble is exactly what you need to make progress. Being the main character of your own life comes with the series of events that’s supposed to change you in the end, y’know what I mean?”

Her boots thump against the concrete ledge, drowned out as I replay her words over in my head.



## The Works

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It's raining. It seems like it's always raining these days. Large drops splatter against my windbreaker, pelting me like paintballs and staining me blue, and a little pink.

My rainboots stamp against the cracked pavement as I trudge through his neighbourhood. I can barely see, each house blurring with the downpour around me. I search for something, anything recognisable about his house in the soaked blurs of conformity. Finally, I spot a deep blue wooden mailbox, the only one in the entire neighbourhood of silvers and blacks and cracking plastic. I rush forward, water sloshing into my boots and soaking my socks, and dash underneath the awning of his front porch. My heart beats unsteady in my chest and I struggle to catch my breath. My hand lifts to knock itself against the large door in front of me, stopping mere centimeters from connecting with the material. I take a slow, deep breath, and tap two knuckles against the door. I let my arm fall back down to my side and wait for any sign of movement. Soon enough, there's rustling from the other side of the door, and I watch as the doorknob turns abruptly. I snap my head up and meet his eyes for the first time since that day. They're soft and zenith blue, staring me down like he's seen a ghost. Or the love of his life that walked away at the first sign of hardship.

"Hello?" He says, almost as a question.

"Hi." I reply, a lump in my throat stopping me from saying much more.

We stare at each other a moment too long, and I swallow my lump, doing everything in my power to not say 'nevermind' and run away. "I - um. I hated how I left things and you don't have to forgive me or anything but -" Before I can finish my thought, he steps towards me, cups my face in his hands, and kisses me. Butterflies swirl around in my stomach and I hesitate a moment, before kissing him back. Another moment passes, and he finally lets go of my face and pulls me in for a hug.

"I'm so glad you came back." he whispers, and I hear his heart, fast, and slowing down by the second. I wrap my arms around him tightly and bury my head further into his chest.

"Me too." I whisper back. We stand there for what feels like forever, but I don't mind.

The rain around us slows to a trickle, and the sun creeps slowly out of the clouds.

Everything is right again.

"Here, let's go inside." he says, pulling out of my arms and taking my hand gently. He leads me through the door slowly, letting go of my hand to continue on through the house and into a side closet. I look around, his house completely rearranged since the last time I was here. I don't actually remember the last time I was here. The furniture configuration has flipped. The TV is now against the wall where the couch used to be. All of his framed posters and family photos, now in a completely different position against the three walls. His video

game collection tucked away on a larger bookshelf than before, almost overflowing with various genres.

A rustling sound comes from the other side of the room, and a small grey kitten peaks its head from out of the blinds of a small window, just above another short bookshelf, filled with figurines and crates of CDs. It jumps down from the ledge and prances over to the closet, rubbing its head against his leg.

He has a cat now? When did he decide he wanted a cat? Before or after he decided to leave it? To leave everyone?

I'm snapped out of my thoughts by the closet door shutting, and he makes his way over to me with a small towel.

"For your hair." He says, beckoning me to take the towel from his hand. I grab it by the corner and nod. "Take your coat and boots off, okay? You'll be here awhile." I smile at that phrase, something he'd always said to me when we first started dating, because I was too shy to make myself comfortable in his space without permission before. I throw the towel over my shoulder, and lean down to pull my boots off. He disappears again, this time into the kitchen, a large bar counter makes easy access to watch him from the doorway. He pulls a mug down from the cabinet, and a box of green tea.

I continue pulling my boots off, leaning them up against the wall adjacent to the doorframe. Grabbing the towel from my shoulder, I use it to carefully rub the rain from my hair.

I'm sure it's already frizzy by now. I set the towel on a hook next to the door, and pull my jacket from my shoulders, hanging it on the same hook. I then make my way over to his long, L-shaped couch, and sit at the edge of it, careful not to get it too wet with my jeans.

He comes back, and hands me the mug he'd grabbed from the cabinet, and it warms my shivering hands. I mouth a quick 'thank you' and he sits in the velvet chair across from me.

He clears his throat, "So, what made you decide to come back?" His voice is completely neutral, just like his facial expression. Cool as a cucumber, just like he always is. I take a sip from the tea in my hands, and pull it back down into my lap.

"I just..." I take a moment to gather my thoughts, and say, more carefully, "If you're not going to stay, then I at least want as much time with you as I can get. Before you...go." I sigh, taking another sip of tea, just to have something to do with my hands. He stares at me blankly.

"What made you decide you wanted that?" He asks.

"Because. I love you. And if you're going to be taken away from me as soon as I get to have you, then I want you for as much time as you can offer me." I say, matter-of-factly, anxiety still shaking in my voice. His blank expression falters a bit with that, it almost looks like he might smile a little. He stands up and makes his way to me, in one swift movement, and leans down to meet me at eye level.

"Then by all means, darling." he says carefully, his gaze shifting between my eyes. He tucks my hair behind my left ear. "Feel free to take up all of

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the time I have left.” And with that, he kisses me again.

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I shout and plant my palms flat against his kitchen table, rattling the water glass next to me. “What do you mean Taylor Swift is an overrated musical artist? She’s a lyrical genius constantly criticised by the misogynists of the Hollywood music industry! The media has only ever seen her as a wife or a whore!”

He shrugs his shoulders and chuckles softly. “I don’t know love, I just think her writing is corny. She’s the picture perfect lover-girl.” With that comment, I shove his shoulder with mine and roll my eyes. He laughs again, this laugh leading to an abrupt coughing fit, as he turns opposite from me. He turns back to me when he’s finished. I stare at him for a moment, and he stares back at me. He shrugs his shoulders.

“You alright there?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay. Just a random tickle in my throat, no biggie.” He says coolly. I nod back, and resume the conversation.

“I think…” I pause for a moment, taking a sip from the water glass I’d almost spilled moments ago. “You just have no idea what you’re talking about. And you have zero poetic taste.”

“I think you’re just a sap for songs about romance and womanly insecurity.” He replies, waiting for me to finish sipping from my water. Then, he pulls my kitchen chair closer to his, leans over, and kisses my forehead.

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Fireworks explode in the background, lighting up the hundreds of people sitting on the grass like city silhouettes. Kids with sparklers run around, ooh-ing and aah-ing at the colours cascading down the skyline and falling away with dark clouds to replace them. My head lays against his chest as we take in the view.

“By far the best Fourth of July show yet!” He yells, and I nod in agreement.

“Definitely.” I reply, and sigh happily. We continue staring up at the night sky, illuminated by reds and blues and whites, whistling as they travel up the sky, and falling back down towards the horizon line.

I feel a long buzz next to my head, followed by the soft ringtone of a phone alarm. I move my head to check the brightening screen, but he quickly snatches it off of the blanket beneath us, and silences the alarm, before tossing it back next to us. I stare at the now blackened screen for a long moment, and lay my head back on his chest. His heart beat is quick, but slowing itself down. I rest my hand back on his chest, next to my face, and look back towards the sky. I feel my fingers subconsciously run over the ribcage I can feel through his t-shirt. Not sure I could ever feel that before. I ignore it, going back to the show still glistening above us.

“Here comes the finale!” Someone shouts from a few feet away.

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It’s noon on a shivering autumn day, the leaves tumbling along the crumbling paved roads. Oranges and reds and yellows coast by, floating around, carefree in the westward wind.

“Say ‘Cheese!’” An older lady shouts, snapping our picture. We smile brightly at the camera, and approach her slowly. “Oh, isn’t it just darling? You guys are the cutest.” She says, turning the camera around to present the picture to us. My hair flows nicely down my shoulders, and back with the wind, like those photoshoots of models with the fan blowing their hair back out of their face. I glance over at his figure in the picture. His thinning, tall frame stands confidently in a still frame. I trace my eyes down from his shoes up to his face, and instead of looking at the camera, he’s staring down at me, smiling from ear to ear. I look up at him lovingly, and grab his hand to give it a good squeeze.

“It’s perfect.” I say, and thank her as we walk away. We walk slowly through the narrow lines of pumpkins, an array of shapes, and colours, and sizes. I study each one carefully, looking for the perfect one to paint and display outside of our house. I spot a small, plump white one and squeal excitedly. “Wait, look at this one!” I shout, grabbing it up from the line. I hold it out in front of him and he studies it carefully. “What do you think?” I ask, anticipating his answer.

“I think that one is perfect, lovey.” He says, and I smile up at him. His eyes look a little tired and distant, but shimmering with happiness. For me.

“Well, it’s settled then.” I say to the pumpkin. “You’re coming home with us!”

When we finally get back home, he hangs our coats up in the closet, and I rush to pull the fresh paints we’d bought just a few days ago, for this exact occasion.

“Painting time!” I shout, sing-songy, grabbing a towel from the side closet. I head into the kitchen and throw the towel on the floor, shaking the paints out of the bag on top of it.

Behind me, I hear the coffee pot running, pouring clear water into my favourite tea cup. He places a green tea bag in it, and shuffles over to me, sitting cross legged next to the spread out towel.

“Here, darling.” he says, and I grab the tea from him, smiling softly. I set it down next to me, and turn to grab the pumpkin we’d picked out this afternoon, setting it in the center of the towel and scattered paints. I hand him a paint brush, and the orange pumpkin he’d picked, and rub my hands together like a criminal, smiling excitedly.

“Let’s get to it.” I say, and open up the dirty, dry paint covered palette. I pour out a little squeeze of the various colours, and get to work with my pumpkin. So does he.

After a long while, he sets his paintbrush down and dusts off his hands.

## The Works

“All done.” he says, a simple grin on his face. He turns his pumpkin towards me, a huge black cat face dripping from it. “Nice, right? Now show me yours.” He goes to grab my pumpkin in front of me, and I shake my head, quickly picking it up out of his reach.

“No, no! You can’t look at mine until it’s done!” I shout, holding the pumpkin away from him. He chuckles softly and puts his hands up in surrender.

“Okay, okay.” he says. “I can be patient.” He leans back on his hands, and hums a soft tune. I hurry to add the finishing details to my painted pumpkin, and throw down my paint brush.

“Okay...Done!” I say, ready to turn it towards him to reveal my masterpiece. “Don’t judge me when I show you, okay? You know I hate how my art turns out.” He puts his hand on his chest and holds up his fingers in a ‘Scout’s Honour’ motion, and nods his head. His hands look a little frail, and lighter than they used to be. “Alright...” I say, turning it around to face him. He looks at it carefully, a neutral expression on his face.

“Hmm...” He says.

“What? What is it? Did I miss something?” I ask, and he shakes his head.

“No, lovey. It’s perfect.” He says, and a sigh with relief.

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“I can’t believe how beautiful the Earth is.” I say softly. We’re lying on a picnic blanket in the middle of a browning field. The birds migrate above us, chirping and honking to each other as they fade into the distance. We’re parallel to each other, our feet extending out next to each other’s heads, hand in scrawny hand.

“Yeah, it really is something, isn’t it?” He replies, and squeezes my hand one, two, three times. The clouds pass by us, the sun shining down and making me squint in happy discomfort. We lay like this for a long while, silent, listening to the wind whistle around us.

“Doesn’t it make you want to stay?” I ask, sitting up to look at him.

“Lovey.” He says, still staring out at the sky.

“I just... Can’t you see all that you’d be missing if you left so early? I mean. Just look at everything. Listen to everything. Why would you want to leave all of this behind? All of...Us. Behind.”

“I thought we were over this line of thinking.” He says coldly. I can feel the frigidity of his words in my bones. Anxiety fills the empty pit of my stomach, and I start to feel nauseous. I can’t stop.

“How could you ever expect me to be over this?” I ask, misery written all over my face. “How could I ever be over you leaving like this? As if it’s your only option? As if it’s good for anyone in your life that will care when you leave?” He sits up, staring at me blankly. As if he’s looking at a stranger. As if he can’t understand where my hurt is coming from. “I just think we should talk about this more. I know you don’t understand and you think I’ll suffer less with

you gone but I just wish you would understand how much that is not the case.” The tears are flowing like a rainstorm now, and I hold back the snuffle in my nose so I don’t break down completely. “You can’t just leave me here, without you. What am I supposed to do with that? You are my first love, my only love. How am I supposed to get over that?”

“Lovey.” He repeats the pet name as if it’s going to mend all of my wounds. As if it takes away the weight on my lungs. As if it changes my mind. I can feel the bandaids in my heart begin to fall off. I run my knuckle across the apple of my left cheek, wiping away the tears I can’t stop from flowing anymore. He’s as composed as ever. “You are the love of my life. It’s an honour to know you, to have had you, even for a short while. That’s why I spent almost every one of my last moments with you. I’ve made my decision.”

“But you made it without me, without even considering how I would feel about it.”

“See, and that’s where you’re wrong because I did consider you when I made this choice. You think I’m being selfish, and while that’s partially true, I know that this will be the best thing for both of us. I’m not getting any better, and I refuse to force anyone else in my life to suffer miserably while I get worse and worse, until I’m not here anymore. I spent my best moments with the ones I love the most, doing everything I love to do. And now I am ready to move forward And...” His voice wavers, his eyes misty, for the first time. “And you can hate me for this for the rest of your life if you want. I won’t blame you. But I’ve made up my mind.”

I nod, my gaze still in his direction, but staring straight through him. I can’t decide if I should get up and leave or beg him to stay. Instead, I just say, “I’m sorry you feel that way.” and lie back down on the blanket.

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Months fly by and I can’t keep the days of the week straight anymore. I think back to that day on the riverfront, my aunt stopping by. Her burgundy shirt. That flower I’d picked. Her boots clanging against the concrete brick wall.

*“I think it’s nice to have someone here for you even if it’s not meant to be for forever, you know?”*

She said it so confidently. So sure of herself. Like it doesn’t hurt knowing that they’re not supposed to be here for you forever. That it doesn’t tear you apart, that when you’ll need it the most, when you have troubles you haven’t even begun to think of yet, they won’t be there to make you green tea and tell you your pumpkin paintings are beautiful.

I wish I knew how to let go.

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The rain drips onto my face, gliding across my eyelashes, down the bridge of my nose, across my rosey cheeks. The automatic door slides open in



## The Works

front of me, and I step out of the rain, the intensity of the overhead lights makes my stinging eyes throb, but I ignore the feeling. The open, white walls an unwelcome asylum. I step up to the line of check-in desks to the left of the door.

“How can I help you today?” Her cheery voice asks, and I smile dully.

“Hi, yes, could you point me in the direction of room 113E, please?”

She nods, floating around the desk and beckoning me with her hand. She leads me to a set of large, metal doors, and presses the button on the wall. The doors swing open, slowly, and she begins to rattle off directions that I’m not listening to. I nod, and almost instinctively travel down the hallway, scanning the letters to the right of each door.

109

111

113

I stand in front of it, the narrow wooden door. A single piece of paper sticks against it, but my eyes don’t have the energy to read it. I take a deep breath, one of many, lately.

This is it. Here we are. The crumbling of the world - of my world - lies right behind this door. A gateway to my misery. A gateway to his peace.

Thoughts run wildly through my head, echoing footsteps down the hall behind me grounding me back to the door, just inches from my face. I grab hold of the steel handle, bitter cold against my fingertips, and turn it downward, and open the door with a shaky push.

And then I see him. What’s left, at least. He stares emptily out the window, watching two birds float around each other. I glance their way, and the little grey bird, with twiggy feet chirps softly. The other one, slightly larger, darker grey and a few stray browns through its feathers, seems to ignore it, peering around at the blank sky above them.

I turn back to face him, and he’s already staring at me, as bright a smile as he can manage at this point. I bring my hand up half-heartedly in a wave, and I see his weak, almost transparent hand attempt to wave back at me. It makes me smile inside, a bit pitifully, I admit.

I approach him slowly, glancing from the corner of my eyes at the slow-beeping machines next to him. I can see his heartbeat on the screen, slow, cool, and collected. Just like he’s always been. How bittersweet. I turn back to him again, his eyes sleepy and hollow, a frail sparkle left in them of the lively man he used to be.

“Don’t pick at your fingers, sweet girl.” He says, looking down at my hands. I match his gaze and watch myself picking at the corner of my index finger. I clench my fists, letting them fall back down at my sides. “You can come closer, you know.” I nod, and stumble around to the other side of his bed, sitting down in the chair leaned against it. He shuffles around in the white sheets, turning to face me again. His dark brown waves a mess on his head, one curl lays softly against his forehead. It always reminds me of Superman when it’s like that.

“How are you feeling?” I barely manage the question out, the tears behind my eyes already threatening to escape.

He smiles softly, “Oh, just tired most days now. My only source of energy being the mixed fruit cups and as much Vitamin D as I can get from that window there.” He nods off in the direction of the large window, the birds still following each other around upon the gravelly roof.

“I get to watch them play all the time, though. They’re here almost every day now. It’s like the universe is taunting me.” We both let out a small chuckle at that, and glance into each other’s eyes. For the first time in a long while, I get to see it. His glimmer shines a little brighter, for just a moment. For me.

I soak it in for a moment, before breaking the silence.

“The universe is neutral towards your woes.” I say, which makes him smile.

“You always were quite the Naturalist.” He replies, extending his arm to grab my hand. I move my hand closer to his, and he intermingles our fingers, squeezing my hand once, twice, and a third time. I feel the tears welling up in my eyes, and blink rapidly to make the sorrow pass.

“I um... I wanted to just come and talk to you, you know. About everything. And I know you probably don’t care how I feel at this point —”

“Lovey.” he says, and a tear falls down my cheek faster than I can blink it back.

“But I just... I wanted to tell you that it’s okay. That I understand.” The pain in my head escapes with every vowel from my mouth. “I wanted to tell you that I’m not mad at you for leaving. And that I support you, no matter how I feel about what you’re doing.”

A knock on the door interrupts us, a nurse coming in with a basket full of something I can’t quite see.

“Sorry to interrupt. We’re ready when you are, okay?” She says, nodding towards the basket and setting it on the counter.

“Alright, thank you. You can get everything ready now, if you’re ready.” He replies, half-heartedly smiling at her.

“Yes, of course. I’m going to grab one more thing and I’ll be right back.” She says, and he nods back to her. She slips out of the room again, leaving us in another silence.

I look at his face, tired and pale. His eyes begin to well with tears.

Another silent moment passes, and the nurse returns with the solution they use to flush IVs.

“Alright. Are you ready?” She asks, and I can’t tell if the question is for me or him. A single tear rolls down his cheek, and he nods, extending his arm with the IV tube. I glance back at the basket she’d brought in the first time, a vial that reads ‘NEMBUTAL’ sits upright in it, with an empty syringe lying beside it. My heart drops into my stomach, but I breathe the feeling away, hard. This isn’t about me, this is his peace. His decision.

I turn to face the window, and squeeze his hand one, two, three times.

## The Works

The birds flutter around each other still, tweeting notes only they will ever know. Time passes by, who knows how long. I keep a steady hold of his hand, as his grip begins to loosen on mine.

When I feel ready, and when his hand slips from my grasp completely, as he lays peacefully still under white sheets, I stand up out of the chair next to his bed, and kiss him on the forehead one last time.

“I’ll love you forever, sweet boy.”



# Untitled

by Alexis McConnell

# I Will Never Be Enough

by Cecilia Sagel

Gabe lived his life on a very strict schedule. He was up at five in the morning every morning and began his day by getting dressed, brushing his teeth, making his bed, and packing up his school books. Then at five thirty he'd begin to cook breakfast and at six it was time to get his sisters up. Rafaella would help him serve breakfast and Mila would do her best to set the table while he changed Eden's diaper and got her dressed. While they sat down to eat breakfast that was usually when their father would come downstairs. He was silent as he smoked a cigar and read his morning paper.

They always told their father good morning, but did their best to ignore him because he'd rather be left alone anyways.

At seven it was time to go. He would gather the girls, hurrying them out the door, Eden in his arms. They'd walk through the streets of New York, in their small gaggle as Eden tried to eat his school tie. Gabe would hold Mila's hand to keep from becoming distracted by the pigeons. Rafella held Mila's other hand as they made their way down the bustling streets, avoiding running into the three piece suits hurrying to try and catch their train.

The first stop was day care. They'd drop Eden off from seven-thirty in the morning and come back to pick her up promptly at three-fifteen. This morning it was more of a fight. Eden was perfectly happy perched in Gabe's arms babbling at women who cooed and waved at her, and she did not want to be handed over to the waiting caretaker. She screamed and cried as Gabe tried to soothe her into being handed over.

"No!" Eden screamed, Gabe winced as the child's wailing continued to rattle around in his ears.

"It's ok Eden, I'm going to come back for you just like I always do," he promised, bouncing her gently. Eden whined, burying her head in his shoulder, "I just have to go to school ok? But, if you can stop crying maybe we can do something fun when I come back to get you," Eden snuffled, wiping a fist across her eyes.

"Birds?" she asked, Gabe smiled,

"You wanna go see the birds at the park?" Eden nodded excitedly, "al-right, a trip to the park it is," he declared,

"Yay!" Eden exclaimed, giggling wildly, her tears long forgotten. Gabe

chuckled,

“And if you’re extra good today, I don’t see why we couldn’t get some ice cream after,” Eden’s eyes lit up, pressing her hands against her chubby cheeks.

“Be good!” she exclaimed, Gabe smiled again, affectionately pressing kisses all over her face.

“I’ll be back after school ok?” he said, handing her off to the caretaker. Eden waved as they left,

“BYE!” she shouted, and her siblings waved back. And then they were off again. Gabe knew the way to school by heart. It was three blocks down from the daycare, take a left at the street lamp with a dent in it and then a right at the statue of a horse with creepy eyes. When they arrived Mila would go to her school building while Gabe and Rafaella watched, making sure she made it safely before they headed into their building.

School was monotonous but at least it wasn’t home. He did all of his assignments, aced all of his tests, and still had time to hide in the back corners of the classroom and sketch out a few pieces before it was time to move onto the next class. At the end of the day, he’d gather up all of his belongings, pick up Mila and Rafaella and they’d all head back to the daycare.

Eden would be there and waiting, happily deposited back into Gabe’s arms. And just as he promised, they went to the park. Eden and Mila chased the birds as Rafaella rooted around in the water, digging up shells that she stuffed into her pockets. Gabe sat and watched. It was moments like these where life felt whole. Where he forgot about the hole that his mother had left in his heart. This was where his peace was. With his sisters. The people he loved most in this world.

But as all good things do, it had to come to an end. The walk back home was mostly silent because they all knew what the night would be like.

Gabe made dinner, and they were quiet as they ate with their father staring them down judgmentally from the end of the table. Mila would try to tell him about the spelling quiz she had taken and aced, but he was less than impressed. His first comment was how messy Mila’s handwriting was.

The look on Mila’s face made Gabe’s heart twist in agony. Later he would try to tell her how proud he was of her hard work, and how wonderfully smart and brilliant she was, but it wouldn’t replace the love she was craving from her father.

Gabe liked to think that he’d grown out of that need a long time ago. He’d tuck the girls into bed that night around eight and then set to clearing the house while his father sat listening to the radio. He did the dishes, swept the floors, tidied up the house and finally as he was heading to bed his father spoke.

“Gabriel,” he said gruffly. Gabe turned,

“Yes father?” he asked,

“You missed one,” he said, holding out a plate. Gabe’s heart sank.

“Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, taking the plate from his father and rinsing it



## The Works

over before putting it away.

As he laid down for bed that night, it became clear in his mind.

*'I will never be enough for him.'*



# Untitled

by Miriya Jones

# Would You Still Love Me?

Would you still love me, if I didn't know the right things to say? If I honestly shared the thoughts racing through my mind every single day. Thoughts of laughter, thoughts of suicide, and all that runs between. Thoughts of you, thoughts of me, and the things that will never be. Oh love, would you reject me, if you knew I did not pray? But rather viewed the world in most unsettling ways. My thoughts consume me, shape me, and hold me hostage against my will. They move me to do the most wondrous things, while still asking what's it like to kill. Would you still love me, if I didn't wear this smile? But rather, asked for grace and shared true face while you held me for a while. Speak to me, oh love, of more than just your day. Not just hopes and dreams, but the very things, you fear will drive me away. Would you still love me, if you knew I did not love your mother? But rather, despised her disapproving eyes that never held you like I do. Oh, love, love me! For I fear I never will. And though the smile on your face tells me I'm safe, I still can't help but wonder, if you still love me?

-Brandon Clark



# Untitled

by Raven Day

# Surrender

idle whispers saunter by  
twitching hand met one steady  
dizzy smiles down by the bank  
our treaty formed  
not an affair, an alliance  
for you i might pray  
the calm before the  
an olive branch snapped  
it was winter  
i wanted to stay on your stairs  
now our touch lost in film  
a white flag stained  
your blood colors the bullseye on my heart  
your words rotten the truth  
but i turn, again, the other cheek  
our dove pierced  
idle whispers saunter by  
unlike you  
i keep my promises  
my liar, my lover, my enemy, my peace  
I will protect You

-Claire Crisham



# Draw something here!

Then take a photo and submit for future issues by  
emailing a jpeg to [litmag@svcc.edu](mailto:litmag@svcc.edu)



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