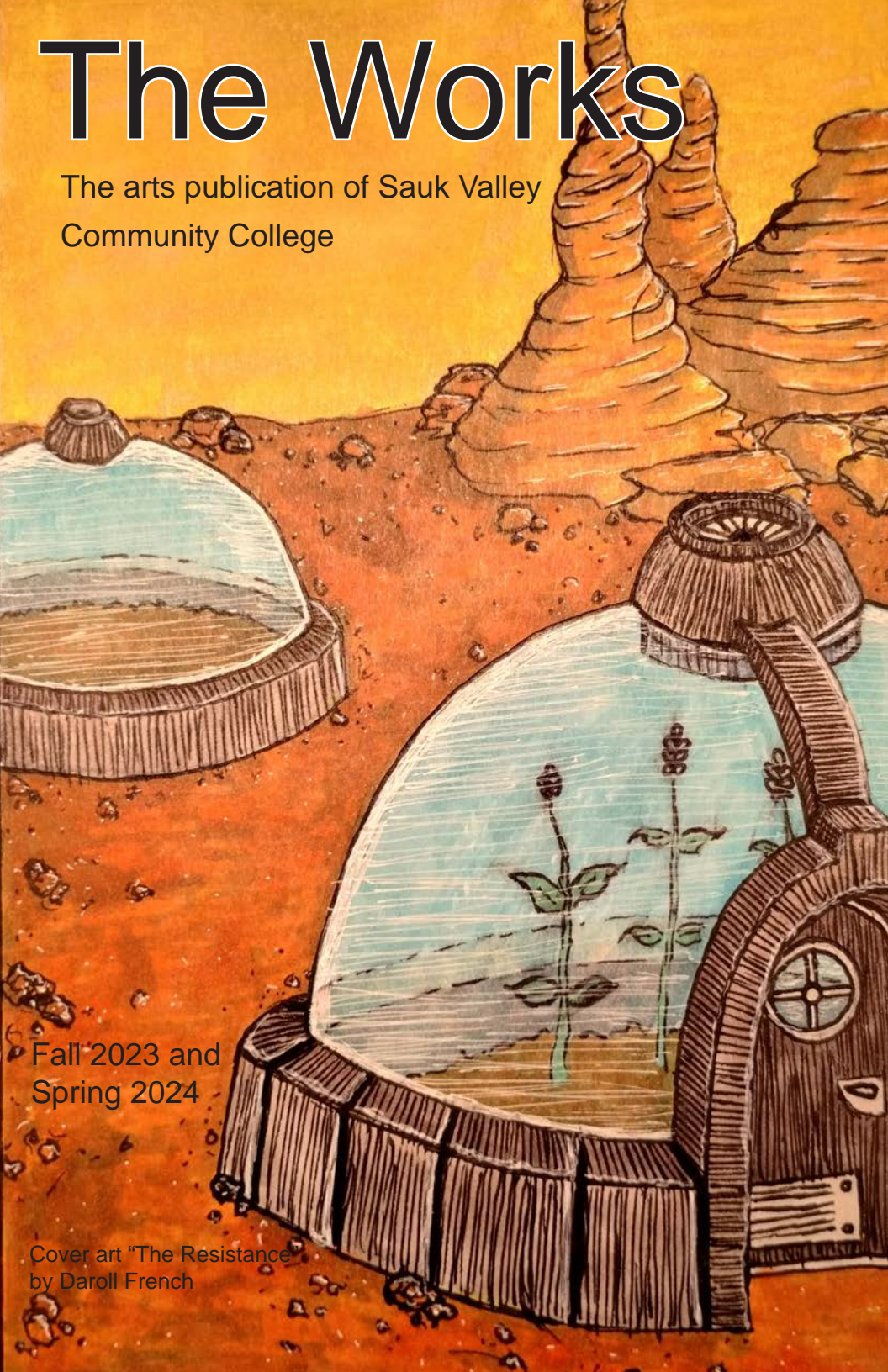


The Works

The arts publication of Sauk Valley
Community College



Fall 2023 and
Spring 2024

Cover art "The Resistance"
by Daroll French

The Works

2023-2024 Editorial Staff

Austin Adams
Hunter Buser
Jasey Green
Kylie Lenninger
Login McIntosh
Jace Murphy
Adam Reed
Zari Stoeker

Faculty Advisor

Tom Irish

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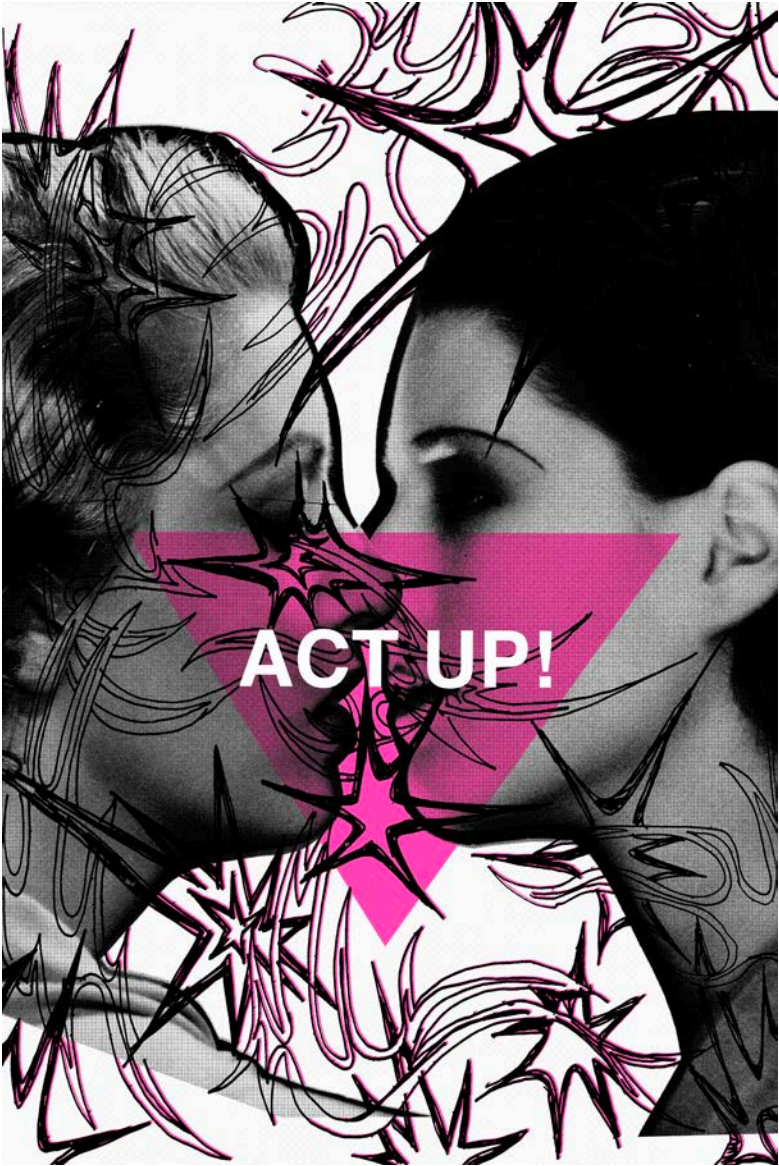
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Act Up

by Alexis McConnell

Sugar and Spice

I've never understood a man who enjoys ghost peppers.
Stinging heat in the back of the throat, eyes watering, his molten cheeks blooming.
It doesn't seem worth the effort.

I've never understood a woman who eats ice cream.
Clinging sugar on cold lips, teeth eroding, her sleepy eyes closing.
It doesn't seem worth the calories.

I understand waking up and going to work in the morning.
Scratching pen on crisp paper, cars droning, crisp ties cinching.
Absolutes and certainties are worth the effort.

I can't understand
I can't understand how she could leave things

unfinished
wilting roses in a forgotten garden
whispered promises old christmas lights blinking in july
doesn't seem worth starting in the first place

I'll never understand
a person who lets themselves fall in love,
shattering goals once held dear
resolutions crashing desperate heart
flailing

Doesn't seem worth the pain.

-Jasey Green

Editor's Pick

Castle Dracula

by Michael Jenkins

The suffocating fog outside made Eddie feel like he had just stepped into an old Nintendo 64 game. It brought him back to his childhood; to cold nights huddled under a thick comforter draped over a tiny, muted CRT television to keep the light from getting out of his bedroom, because without a memory card, turning off the console meant starting Castlevania over from the very beginning. Including decrypting that bullshit magic dynamite level all over again.

He knew now that Castlevania 64's collapsing stone bridges and chunky polygonal spike pits splattered with cartoon blood were buried under an impenetrable white haze, even indoors and underground, so the ancient hardware had an excuse to unload everything not immediately next to the player and avoid choking half to death from rendering more than a handful of objects at once.

Still, the pale yellow halos of the streetlights dissolving into the emptiness ahead left him anticipating Dracula's Castle condensing from the mist, the crashing of thunder and crescendo of violins still fresh in his mind. Instead, he found nothing but empty streets lined by melting slush piles and still naked trees. And, at the only stop sign between home and work, his old elementary school.

Driving past this place now turned his blood to stone. He knew from walking by here before that all of the old playground equipment was still in place, though the clownish colors had faded, paint peeling and metal rusting in the elements.

The whole blacktop behind the building had been fenced off, the gate locked by a chain that he thought could've had a past life dredging up shipwrecks. The fence was peppered by brightly colored signs angrily threatening to prosecute trespassers and warning of 24-hour video surveillance. And behind all of that, the playground was entombed behind another fence, marked by a sign he couldn't read, but didn't look friendly.

Eddie parked in a back corner of the gas station's lot, and sat still for a minute, alone in the empty fog. He might as well have been inside Dracula's castle right now. No, that wasn't fair. At least Dracula's castle had a few angry skeletons and fire-breathing vampires occasionally.

Stepping out of his car, he could just barely make out the shape of the

elementary school sleeping in the white haze down the street, and he wondered if his neighborhood had really gotten that bad since he was a kid. Was he just not paying attention? He'd once made the mistake of simply saying the words "cool snowboard" to a little girl while on a walk, and her mother reacted as if he'd been carrying a chainsaw and bloody garbage bag. Maybe he had a drug dealing doppelganger in the neighborhood.

Eddie sighed, and walked for the gas station door, but jumped as somebody rushed through ahead of him. He must have missed Alice dashing up behind him. Even though it was almost 40 degrees outside and Eddie felt like he barely needed a coat, Alice was pale and shuddering like she'd just chiseled her way out of a glacier behind an Antarctic research station.

Though, Alice had always been ghoulishly pale, even when they were in school together. Or, in school next to each other, rather. Alice was two years ahead of him, so they'd never really talked to each other. But it was hard to miss Alice in a crowd, especially once she hit high school and started wearing baggy black clothes, and dark makeup, and a hair dye that his sister called "Ronald McDonald Red".

"Why does it always gotta be like this?" Alice hissed under her breath. She turned back to Eddie. "Where the hell is your coat?" She asked, seemingly offended.

Eddie just shrugged.

"Something really wrong with you," Alice said morbidly. "You got walrus DNA in you or something?"

"I mean, when I was in high school, I lived in a place where my bedroom temperature could go even lower than this in the winter. Low into the 30s some nights."

Those words dragged a rusty hacksaw through Alice's spine.

"No," She said forcefully. "Hell no. You keep that ice demon bullshit somewhere very far away from me."

Eddie felt a sudden, strange tightness in his chest watching her fumbling around with a pair of disposable hand warmers. Her eyes were still sunken and dark and tired, like she hardly slept. She still tried to hide her bony figure underneath clothing a size or two too large, and her eye shadow and black lipstick gave her a face like a cartoon skeleton. While Eddie spent the last decade watching the rest of the world slowly transform into a bizarre, alien nightmare beyond satire, Alice stubbornly stood still, like a haunted obelisk buried in a corner of some secret crypt. She lived in a world where time simply did not exist.

Eddie walked past rows of chips and candy bars towards the kitchen. His job consisted mostly of making pizza and donuts for stoners, night owls, and cops on the overnight shift. It was a job he could mostly do in silence, following instructions from a computer and handing boxes to people when they came in. There were some nights he didn't need to speak at all.

Occasionally, he'd walk out of the kitchen looking for something to do. He'd absently push a broom around, straighten out merchandise, or take over the register while Alice was in the bathroom. Especially because whenever it was

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cold, or even just almost cold, Alice could take a two minute bathroom break fifteen or twenty times during her shift. He didn't mind; it kept him busy, and he was terrified to pry into what he could easily imagine being some embarrassing medical issue.

So he left her alone. Even though part of him felt like he shouldn't. He hadn't put in any effort into extending any friendships past high school, and his house was now empty. His whole immediate family had all, one at a time, moved out of the state in different directions. For human connections, Alice was the entire list, and their interactions often ended at trading a sleepy, unenthusiastic "yo waddup" at the start of their shift. Sometimes. When they could both be bothered to.

Eddie looked out of the kitchen. The building was still swallowed by darkness and fog, but the clock said the shift was over in about a half hour. If he was going to interact with another person in any meaningful way, he was running out of time to do it.

Alice leaned against a corner in the back, directly under one of the fluorescent lights. While he would sometimes see customers playing on their phones, Alice would dig up an old Gameboy Advance from her jacket pocket. He'd seen her before playing old games with long gaps between save points, with the battery cover missing like a some kind of deranged lunatic. She didn't even put tape over the back or something. She was always one wrong move from chasing a pair of AA batteries across the floor and losing maybe hours of progress. Whenever she reached for her pocket, Eddie felt like he was going to have a heart attack.

He walked out of the kitchen. She didn't notice him. He glanced around awkwardly like a lost child. He wondered how other people were able to just walk up to somebody and start a conversation.

He stepped over that direction without looking at her, trying to appear focused on straightening out bags of beef jerky. Still poking around at the snacks, he said the only thing he could think of:

"It's cool that you still have an old Gameboy."

Alice looked up at him blankly for a moment, then silently turned back down to her game.

Well, that settled it. He was going to live the rest of his life alone after all. At least it would be easier than learning how to talk to people.

"I've probably got one sitting in my room somewhere," Eddie continued, mostly out of inertia.

Alice looked up again, with less murder in her eyes this time.

"People are too quick to throw shit away," Alice said.

Eddie nodded in agreement. "I mean, I've still got mine somewhere. I just don't have too much use for it anymore. That thing saved me from so many long car trips when I was younger," Eddie said.

A knowing smile flickered across Alice's lips, but she quickly swallowed it.

"There's no backlight on that thing either, is there?" Eddie asked.

Alice shook her head.

“I don’t know why playing a game with no backlight just kinda hits different. Playing Castlevania on a TV isn’t the same as trying to play that during a blackout only by the light coming from the fireplace.”

“Whoah, hold up!” Alice grabbed onto those words so hard she nearly knocked Eddie over. “You got a fireplace in your house still? Like ... a real one?”

“I ... uh ... a “real” one?” Eddie asked. “People have fake fireplaces?”

“Yeah. I don’t know why people get fake ones. They make these stupid fuckin’ ceramic logs with holes punched in ‘em for gas burners. You got the real deal, though. Right?” She sounded awe-struck, for some reason.

Eddie looked around like the beef jerky next to him was packaged with an explanation.

“I mean ... yeah ... I don’t know why that matters, though.”

“What’s that thing you said? It “hits different”?” Alice asked. “It’s just that. Burning wood just hits different. My apartment fuckin’ sucks, dude. I can’t burn shit around there. I got nowhere to do that. It’s been forever since I’ve had a bonfire. I can think of a lot ‘a people I’d murder to have a fireplace.”

“Well, if it means keeping a knife out of my back, we can start a fire after work. If you wanted to, I mean. I don’t know ... It’s not weird to invite a girl over to hang out, is it?”

Alice gave him a curious look.

“I mean ... I don’t know ... I’ve never been good at figuring this stuff out ...” Eddie mumbled, turning red.

“Technically, Eddie. I’m technically a girl,” Alice corrected him.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Boy, I spent my entire high school years hangin’ out with the boys out in the woods, gettin’ into fights, jumpin’ off ‘a stuff, an’ throwin’ shit in the river. We had people at school knew my face but not my name, they thought I was a dude. I started wearin’ makeup an’ grew my hair out, they didn’ think I was a chick, they thought I was a gay dude.”

“Ohhh... kay ...”

“You ever feel the air change when a bunch of guys are hangin’ out drunk at 3 AM? It’s always 3 AM for me. Get it?”

“Sure,” Eddie said. “I guess so.”

“Good enough. Long as you’ve got a fire, we can hang out after work.”

Eddie normally wouldn’t bother to leave his car running to warm up, but Alice threatened to “snap him like a Kit-Kat” if he tried to get her into a cold car like that. He sighed, and started his car anyway. It was the same old beat-up rustbucket he had been driving in high school nearly a decade ago. Alice seemed to recognize the blue car with a black front bumper, and silently smiled with respect.

Even with the heat cranked all the way up, Alice was chattering and wrapped up in a winter coat she wore over a second jacket. It was now 41 degrees out. Eddie’s phone said it was the warmest February 3rd ever recorded in this area, for the third year in a row. It was still warm enough to be foggy, and

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she looked like she might freeze to death before they finished the six minute car ride. Eddie figured she must just feel the cold differently.

As they stopped at the intersection by the elementary school, Alice squinted through the fog, and the sight of the fence seemed to shake off the cold.

“What the hell? When did they put that fence up?” She asked, offended.

“I don’t know. A long time ago, now.”

“That’s bullshit!” She whined. “The next closest playgrounds are all, like, a half hour walk away. That might as well be ten years by little kid standards. My mom used to be a teacher there, you know. She used to hang out on weekends or after school some days so kids could have somebody to watch them. Why is it so important to keep kids out on weekends?”

“I mean, they put a second fence around the playground equipment. I don’t think anybody is allowed to use it at all anymore,” Eddie said.

“Motherfuckers,” Alice hissed. “You know, if Mom saw this shit, she’d suplex the entire school board to an early grave.”

Eddie parked in front of his house, and Alice turned to him and smiled.

“Mom also used to be a stunt wrestler. She kept a championship belt on her desk so the kids and the principal knew not to fuck with her.”

Eddie unlocked the front door while Alice huddled behind him impatiently, shaking like a T-Rex was sprinting at them. She rushed into the living room behind him, and slammed the door emphatically.

He started pushing back the giant TV and its stand to get to the fireplace, and Alice silently rushed over to help him. He didn’t bother to turn on the living room light, and she didn’t bother asking him to. The room was barely lit with whatever bits of gray, pre-dawn light the sky could sweep between the gaps in the curtains, dusty bookshelves and paintings of wolves howling in the snow barely visible along the walls.

Alice sat down on the carpet expectantly, staring into the brickwork like she was waiting for a doctor to tell her if she had cancer. Within a few minutes, the room was soaking in soft, orange firelight.

Eddie stood around for a minute, trying to figure out where to sit, then just collapsed onto the faded green couch behind Alice. An awkward silence strangled the air in the room. Alice didn’t say anything, didn’t look at Eddie. She just sat there in the middle of the floor, staring intently into the flames and blindly fidgeting with her fingers. She looked like she might pass out from starvation.

“Hey, are you alright? Do you, like, need something to eat or anything?”

“... ..”

“Alice?”

“... Huh? ...” She asked, still staring at the fire.

“Food. Do you want something to eat?”

“No ... I’m fine ... I’m fine ...” She repeated weakly.

“Suuure ...” Eddie said quietly. “Look, I’ve barely eaten today. I’m gonna get something. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“... ..”

Eddie stood up off the couch, and walked into the kitchen, closing the door behind him. He sorted through a couple of cabinets, pushing aside boxes of dry macaroni and soup mix, looking for something that needed even less time and effort. He started back out of the kitchen holding just a can of ravioli and a fork, but stopped when he saw the light flickering and growing dim under the door. He quietly cracked the door open, and peeked into the living room.

Alice had crawled close to the fire. On all fours, she had opened her mouth wide and was inhaling a steady stream of flame.

“Cool fireplace, huh?” Eddie called loudly, pushing the kitchen door open all the way.

Alice shrieked, and fell on her side, staring up at Eddie, petrified. The firelight burst again to fill the room. Her face twisted rapidly through anger and shame. Still, she didn’t say anything.

“So, you’re a thermal vampire, huh?” Eddie asked, taking a bite of room temperature ravioli straight out of the can.

“And you’re a member of homo sapiens,” Alice sneered. “Fuckin’ dweeb,” She hissed, furious.

“I guess I should have figured that out by now.”

“Yeah ... well ...” Alice turned away slightly. Her voice seemed wounded. “It’s not something you really bring up. You don’t know how people will react. Some people got some weird baggage about Embers. You kinda just have to pretend like you’re normal. As soon as you say it out loud, suspicion goes away. Now everybody knows what you are, and they feel confident treating you different over it.”

Eddie gave an understanding nod, and took another bite of ravioli.

“And don’t ... don’t tell Maunch about this,” Alice said grimly. “I’ve heard him ranting about Embers and demons and the book of revelations and the rapture and shit. If he figures this out, I’ll be lucky if he just shoots me on the spot. Better than losing my job and freezing to death on the street ‘cause I can’t make rent.”

“If Maunch fires you over this, don’t fucking freeze yourself to death,” Eddie told her sharply. “I live alone in a three bedroom house. If you need walls and room temperature, I’ve got more than enough. And if you need a place to burn something every once in a while, I’ve got a living room and fireplace I never use. Just say something, and we can hang out after work again.”

“Yeah ... cool ... okay ...” Alice said, any expressions of gratitude apparently not in her vocabulary at all.

“Are you sure you don’t want something to eat?” Eddie asked. “I can make something for you. I mean, something simple. It’ll be like, ten minutes maybe.”

Alice stared at him awkwardly for a while. “I ... I guess so. Just ... anything hot is fine.”

Eddie went back into the kitchen, and closed the door behind him. He felt weird watching her do ... whatever her thing was, but he didn’t want to tell her she needed to starve because of that. He stood around by the oven, waiting

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for a tray of chicken nuggets and french fries to heat up, trying not to look at the flickering under the kitchen door.

He came back twelve minutes later, carrying a paper plate full of junk food with him. Alice had moved back from the fire, sitting down with her legs tucked against her chest. Eddie thought the fire had gone down more than it should have in that time. He tossed some more wood into the fire, and sat down next to Alice.

She looked over at the plate, then looked up at Eddie like a disappointed mother.

“Really? You eat like a fuckin’ toddler,” She told him. Then, she smiled a little. “I mean, I eat the same crap most of the time.”

“And fire, apparently.”

“No,” Alice corrected him. “That’s different. It’s not food.”

“Sorry. I don’t really get this. Nobody’s ever explained it to me.”

“Really? Where the hell did you go to school?”

“The same one you did, remember?”

“Oh ... Yeah, never mind. That’s right,” Alice sighed. “I can’t make my own heat. I gotta pull it from somewhere. But, like ... a lot of heat. Way more than a normal human needs. Anything cooler than straight up fire is tough to pull from. And fire isn’t exactly easy to get ahold of. At least not where I live or work, anyway.”

“Don’t you have, like a stove or something? And, I mean, they sell lighters at gas stations, right?”

“Oh yeah, methane and butane are awesome fuels,” Alice snarled.

“Hey, about the next time you get thirsty, you go slosh around in a mud puddle and wring your socks out into your mouth? That’s some filthy fuckin’ fire. It’s gotta be a real dark day for me to resort to that.”

“Sure ... I guess so ...”

“This is why winter is so hard for me. I can’t hold onto the heat well either. If it gets below about 75 or so, I’m gettin’ chilly. If it gets below about 50 or so, I might just freeze to death. Below freezing, and I could be dead within minutes. I’m fuckin’ scrapin’ along by trying to burn toothpicks and paper towels and shit in secret. It’s like trying to not starve by eating one raisin every two hours.”

“So ... what are you doing this far north? Shouldn’t you be in, like, Florida or something?”

“Hey, shouldn’t you be in South Africa or something?” Alice growled. “Why don’t you throw your entire life in the trash and go start buyin’ up slaves to start runnin’ a diamond mine? You could get rich doin’ that! So what are you doin’ cookin’ pizzas at a gas station?”

The room went silent for a minute. In the quiet, Eddie thought that sitting in the firelight, Alice looked much less like a skeleton and much more like an actual person. He wondered if it was the light, or the fire that was doing that.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said softly. “I already got my dad pressurin’ me to move down with him and my brothers. He’s always goin’ on about the end times

and bein' God's chosen people, and I just do not give one single atom of fuck at all," She glared down at the carpet, and looked like she might cry.

"I don't need that shit," she continued. "I don't need race riots, and segregation turf wars, and corpses burnin' in the streets, and people screamin' about scripture and revelations. I don't care! Oh my GOD I don't fuckin' care! I know the world is a hellhole and we're all gonna die. We were all gonna die already anyway! I just want to hang out, eat pizza, and play Zombies Ate My Neighbors. You know?"

"You know, I think that's the cart in my Super Nintendo right now. Probably have a second controller boxed up down in the basement somewhere too," Eddie said.

"And you waited this fuckin' long to bring that up?" Alice asked, betrayed. "Get that shit out here!"

"I think the hardware is too old to connect to the big TV out here."

"Do you have one it will connect to?"

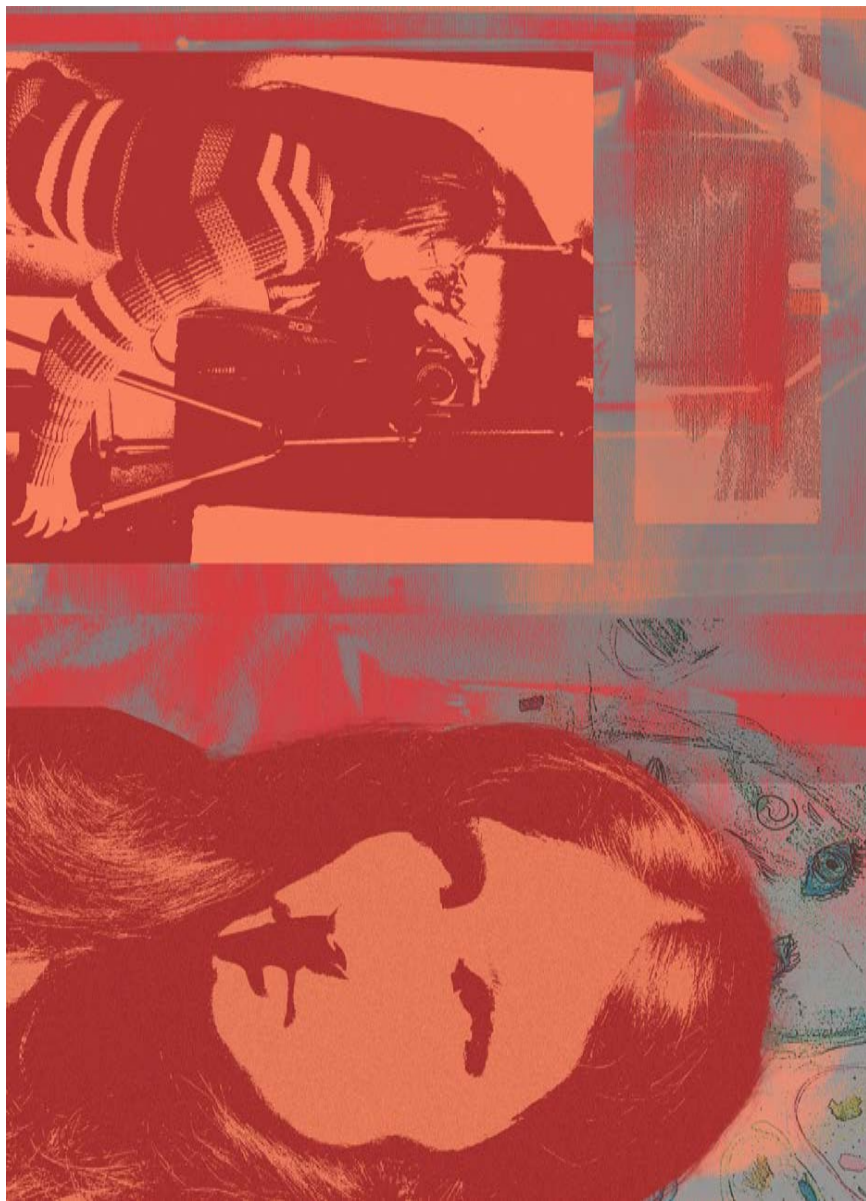
"Yeah, but it's one of those big, heavy CRT TVs. It'll be a pain to drag it out here."

"Aww, don't worry Grandma, I'll help you carry it," Alice leered at him.

Eddie smiled. It would be nice to have somebody in the house with him again. They set the ancient TV down on the floor by the fireplace, and they both laid down on the carpet. Alice grabbed the heaviest blanket she could find from a spare bedroom, and wrapped herself up on the floor like a goth burrito.

Soon, the room was full of old 16-bit music, the glow of an even older television, the smell of bargain bin chicken nuggets, the subtle warmth coming from the fireplace, and ribbons of early sunlight cutting the fog away from the streets outside.

I love the sense of humor throughout the story, the analogies of thermal vampire and walrus DNA. It was a very comedic short story. -Austin Adams



Untitled

by Grace Howell

Hiding in a Lion

Here's the deal with hiding yourself.

You little sheep, you cry, you run. The bared fangs and the sharp claws keep you on your toes. You want to rest. The ferocious beasts of the land keep you frenzied. Keep running.

How could a beast fall? The strongest of them all. A lion. A carcass on the ground. Untouched aside from mother nature herself.

A hiding place.

A resting place.

Get in little sheep. Pull the skin closed.

No one will think twice.

No one will know.

Hide little sheep.

Don't let the rotting show. Don't let the bones break. Don't let anyone in. No one likes a fake. It's been too long. This is who you are now. Don't get too close anymore, you'll remind them that this isn't you. Whether they've forgotten or just don't care anymore, it doesn't matter. You won't be well received.

Hiding in dead things is never a good idea.

You knew that.

You knew that.

You knew that.

You knew that.

You should've known that.

How do you survive, little sheep, when the world is run by lions?

-Jeni Melzer

Sagging Susans

After all was gone
Seed took root
Penetrating
Searching

Nurtured by the sweet sun's light

the seeds became weeds

long

stretching

with no end in sight

wrapping

and

twisting

around all that is near

Adapting to cold nights and weeks without

water

no rest in sight

determined to find what more there is

to life

to living

to forgiveness

to peace

And then the rain came

cleansing worries

gifting the tools to persevere

She encouraged the weeds

to stretch

toward the stars

remembering the drought

for the lessons it taught

not the hell

it perpetuated.

The lanky weeds

met the sweet sun

where she sat,

ripe

with understanding

sagging heavy with the fresh blooms

of soft yellow

and ruby red petals

black eyes poking

from the center

reaching to greet her.



Raven Queen

by Joseph Magana

Keys

by Katherine Kinney

My legs became long sticks of jelly as I took the stage, applause erupting all around me. My heart pounded out of my chest, and I found myself hungry for air despite long, deep breaths. My eyes were glued to the bench several feet before me. I resisted the urge to sneak a hasty glance at the audience. Even the slightest wrong look could expose my fear and ruin the entire performance before it even had a chance to begin. I continued placing one wobbly leg in front of the other and began wondering if reaching the bench was even possible. The weight of the audience's scrutinizing eyes was unbearable. I tried to remain conscious of my movements, but all I could focus on was my heart thumping rapidly throughout my entire body. As I finally approached the bench, the piano suddenly seemed a colossal, unfamiliar piece of equipment. I seated myself and shakily placed my hands on the massive instrument before me.

Just a few hours before, I had been sleeping peacefully in the seclusion of my bedroom, unconscious of the anxiety that would entrap me when I awoke. The alarm clock had been my captor, screaming 6:30 in bright orange digits and a series of obnoxious beeps. I swung blindly in the direction of the incessant noise, slamming buttons until it ceased. Satisfied, I lay back down and nestled deeper under the mound of plush blankets. Squinting up at the ceiling fan, a frown crept over my face as I struggled to collect my thoughts. Suddenly, it hit me. Today was the day. The day I had been anticipating for ages and dreading for the past month and a half. Today was the day of my piano recital.

Jumping out of bed, I began getting ready in a frenzy. I would need any and all spare time to practice my solo. A whirlwind of doubts and anxieties struck down my confidence like a bowling ball knocking over pins at full speed. What if I forgot how to play my piece? After all, I'd only been taking lessons for a matter of months, and "Puff the Magic Dragon" was a difficult song to play, at least for me. What if I played a wrong note? That could render my whole performance an utter joke. What if I tripped and fell on stage? Laughter would surely erupt from every end of the auditorium. What if the other performers were better than me? This thought in particular sent my heart racing. I stared blankly at the fearful girl looking back at me in the LED mirror. With a heavy sigh, I retrieved

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the powder brush that I had unconsciously dropped and continued applying my makeup. I would have to look perfect. Everything must go perfectly.

Each bump in the road made my stomach churn. I never get carsick, but this drive was particularly jolty and made me consider jumping out the backseat window. Surely anything would be a better alternative to arriving at our dreadful destination. I couldn't keep myself from fidgeting. I was struggling to breathe as it was, and the seatbelt was strangling me. My family's conversations seemed distant and unclear. Gazing out the frosted window, I kept my focus on my performance, envisioning how I would play. My mind cycled through an endless series of worst-case scenarios, each worse than the one before. A disastrous outcome seemed increasingly likely with each passing moment.

The church door seemed a hundred pounds heavy as I struggled to swing it open. My eyes went to work surveying the lobby. Four large tables held an assortment of plates, drinks, and food warmers for after the event. Just the thought of food twisted my stomach into a tighter knot. A few clusters of parents, students, and teachers lingered around talking, even laughing. I wondered how they could appear so calm. I doubted that I could muster up the confidence to laugh if approached by anyone. If I could just make it to my seat, maybe I would feel a little better or, at the very least, a little less like puking. Attendants stood near the auditorium entrance, directing guests to their seats and ushering performers backstage. With one last glance towards my family, I approached one of them, certain that I was about to be led to my fate.

My heartbeat doubled in rhythm as I was led down a dim, narrow hallway to a group of benches backstage. Climbing up a few rows to reach my designated spot, I was certain that my anxiety was apparent. It felt as though I were holding a huge sign declaring my doubts to the world. Of course, the other performers judged me as I passed. Having played for years, they surely equated my fear to inexperience and dismissed me as a nobody. Most of them were even younger than me. Would I be the eldest and worst performer? The sight of my piano teacher provided temporary relief until I considered that a poor performance would embarrass her as well as myself. I would doom us both to fail.

My entire body broke out in a sweat as the event commenced. With each performance, I slid further leftward down the benches. I paid little attention to the performers, but just enough to see that they were good. Placing my hands flat against my knees, I performed the solo over and over again, slightly pressing each finger into my clammy skin as though it were a piano key. I continued sliding over until suddenly, I found myself in the front row. My focus went from practicing to concealing panicked breaths. I did everything I could think of to distract myself from reality. Before I knew it, there was no longer anyone seated to my left. I was next. Was I really going to go through with this? My heart plummeted as my name was announced. In a daze, I rose from my seat and faintly made that endless trek to the piano bench.

So here I found myself seated in front of a massive instrument before a crowd anticipating a spectacular performance. One I feared I could never deliver. My hands shook like treetops during a violent storm. Positioning them

on the piano, I closed my eyes. I had only a brief moment, as the announcement applause was already dying out. I tried to clear my mind of doubts. I told myself it would all be over in minutes. I was sure my heart would burst as I pressed the first key. Almost mechanically, I continued to play as slowly as the tune would allow, focusing intently on where to place my unsteady fingers. I tried not to even breathe. My anxiety doubled with each passing note. As I neared the end, the pressure to deliver a perfect performance became insurmountable. Just a few more keys and I might be spared total embarrassment. I could feel the faintest hint of excitement coursing through my veins. I had only one note left. My finger slammed the key with undue pressure, causing the note to reverberate throughout the room. Lifting my fingers from the instrument, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had done it.

Disbelief clouded my thoughts as I rose from the bench and turned to take a bow. Facing the front of the auditorium, my eyes took in the audience for the first time. As I scanned the room, the faces that met my gaze confused me. They were different from the ones my mind had insisted upon. Somehow, they seemed less severe. They appeared softer, even more human in a way. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if my performance hadn't been perfect. What would have happened if I had played a wrong note or tripped on my way to the bench? Something told me that I would still be receiving this overwhelming ovation. That my instructor would still be clapping with her thumbs high in the air. That my life would have gone on after all.

Retreating to the benches, I prepared myself to sit back and enjoy the remainder of the event. Yet, something kept pulling my eyes away from the stage and over to the upcoming performers. The closer they drew to the stage, the more they began fidgeting and rubbing their hands together. I began to wonder if years of practice really do deplete doubts and anxieties. I felt an overwhelming desire to get up and give each and every one of them a pat on the back. If I could only reassure them that they would make it through, regardless of today's outcome. The performance wouldn't define them, neither as a player nor as a person. They should let themselves go and enjoy the performance. Suddenly, I caught myself smiling. To my utter surprise, I almost wished that I could go out there and replay "Puff the Magic Dragon." Only this time, I would have fun.

Editor's Pick

Physics and Buddha and the Right People and the Right Things

"I made every effort to be a good person--
I practiced Buddhism and studied physics.
I met the right people and did the right things."
- Jack Jones, handwritten letter before his execution

I.

Jack Jones: pronounced dead at 7:20pm,
executed by lethal injection on April 24, 2017,
in Arkansas; one of four men executed
in a weeklong span.

The New York Times reported:
"Arkansas had planned to carry out eight [executions] in 10 days,
the biggest concentration in the United States in decades,
because its supply of one of the drugs [midazolam]
has an April 30 expiration date."

II.

In Mass Effect: Revelation,
the turian spectre Saren Arterius continually says
he doesn't kill without a reason,
but he can always find a reason.

An expiring drug might be
as good as any,
if any can be good.

III.

In 1995, Jack Jones raped, beat, and strangled
one Mary Phillips, who did not survive the encounter;

Jack Jones also strangled Lacey Phillips, Mary's daughter, age 11, until she was unconscious.

Before his injection, Jack Jones said,
"I am not a monster; there is a reason those things happened that day.
I am so sorry, Lacey. Try to understand.
I love you like my child."

Jack Jones, a 52-year-old man
who ate three Butterfingers and drank fruit punch
as part of his last meal.

IV.
Stephen Crane describes
blades of grass standing before God,
pleading their case for entrance into heaven.

I can hear one saying,
"I practiced Buddhism
and studied physics."

The best blade of grass
does not plead its case.
Even the best blade of grass
does not have a case to make.

V.
Physics and Buddha
and the right people
and the right things.

How we convince ourselves
of meaning
of purpose
of progress
of redemption
of recourse.

VI.
Job cries out,
"Man who is born of a woman
is few of days and full of trouble.
He comes out like a flower and withers;
he flees like a shadow and continues not.

The Works

And do you open your eyes on such a one
and bring me into judgment with you?
Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
There is not one.”

Eliphaz replies,
“Are you the first man who was born?
Or were you brought forth before the hills?
Have you listened in the council of God?
And do you limit wisdom to yourself?”

VII.

Witnesses state it took 45 minutes
of the executioners trying to insert the central line
into Jack Jones’ neck
before they gave up and placed it elsewhere on his body.

Some report seeing Jack Jones’ lips moving,
possibly gasping for air, in his final moments,
an indication the midazolam may not have worked.

VIII.

Are we grass or flowers or dust or shadows?
Does it matter?

We toil and struggle,
creating and destroying in the same breath;
we beg and plead,
and tell you not to judge us
too harshly.
There is a reason those things happened.

Condemning a killer to death
may seem just,
but it means his blood is on our hands,
and the damnation of his soul
on our conscience.

IX.

Brian Sella is ringing in my ear:
“I imagine one day things settling,
and I think about what that might be like.”

X.

The plank in my eye
prevents objectivity;

may it not prevent
my continual seeking
of things I'll never find:

Physics and Buddha
and the right people
and the right things.

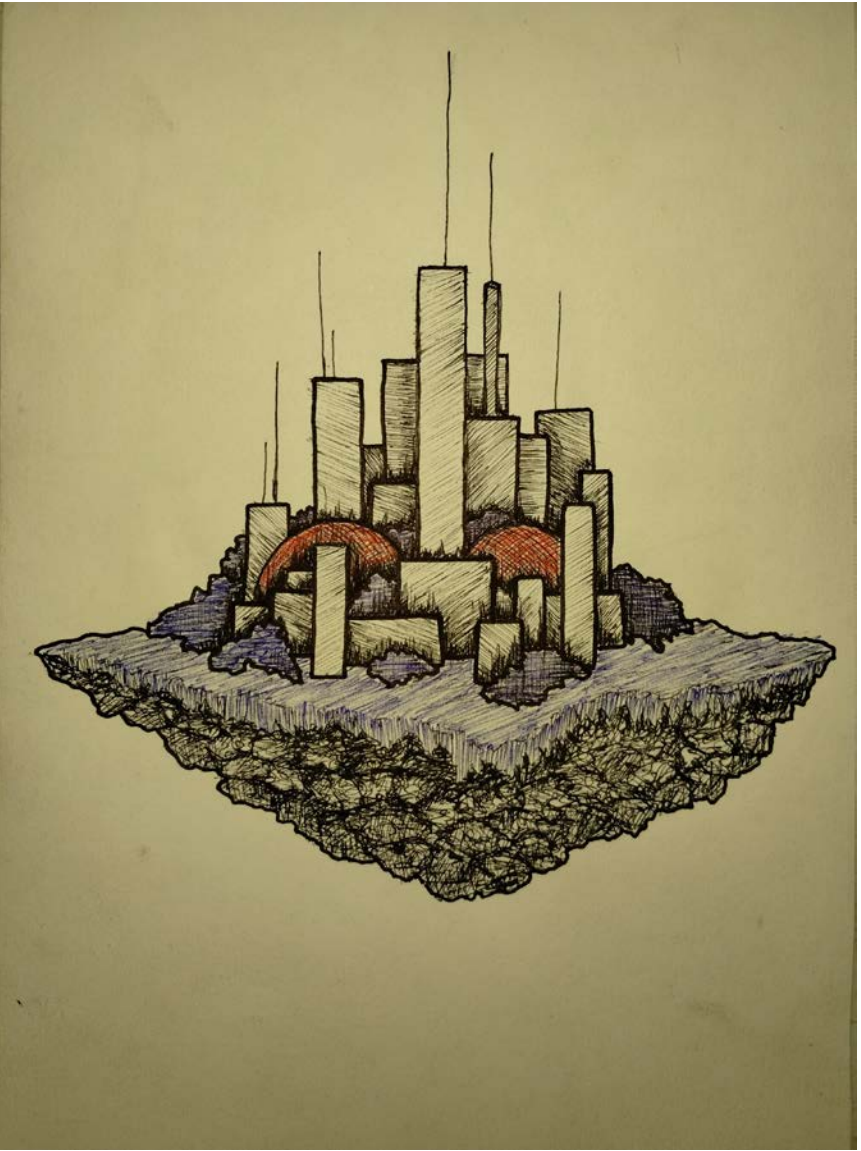
-Zachariah L. Forkner

The flow from idea to idea in this piece is entrancing to me. 'Physics...' ends not with condemnation or absolution of any of the subject matter (which would be easy), but with a quiet self-reflection, and the determination to search for things bigger than oneself. -Jasey Green



Untitled

by Grace Cochrane



Floating City

by Daroll French

Scarred Roots

I hope this letter finds you well.

We sat across from each other at the table
last week, and the air was stretched thin, ready to pop.
I couldn't communicate precisely where our problem had its roots
and I desperately claimed that it was because I needed more time
Now, I'm ready to take a stab.

Your words have always been able to stab
holes that fracture my heart and, well,
I thought I wouldn't let your help hurt me that time.
But I write to you because staring down our wounds isn't something we can
afford to table.
Even when fire burned you down to your roots,
tears and hurt bursting, you hid behind a sip of your pop.

I think back sometimes to when colors would pop,
when twigs and stones under bare feet would stab
We'd cry and then laugh when we'd jam our toes on tree roots.
One day after school we found an old well,
and next to it we'd read books together on a picnic table.
It was splintered and damp, but we were happy to stay for a time.

Now we're grown and we don't have any time.
We don't do books or afternoon walks, so we listen to pop
while I slave over spreadsheets and you draw up a lesson plan or a math table.
I grandly presented a red rose once and asked if you could stab
out a pinprick of time so I could treat you well.
You said there was no time, and I wondered what had shriveled our roots.

I think, for me, the problem goes back to my roots -
my years of youth comprised of muddled time
where up out of nowhere a fight would well
and I'd try to drown out the noise until my speakers would crackle and pop.
Then it would be quiet and the silence would stab,
One parent running away, the other crying at the kitchen table.

So when I think about last week, when we sat at our own table,
both of us baring teeth over scarred roots,
I realize that I want, more than anything, to stab
out my pride and see if we can't make time
to challenge our differences and see if our colors can pop.
And if we can't, maybe it's just as well.

But I write to say that I'll fight for us to be well, even as I think of your red eyes
across the kitchen table.

I think that we can shift and jump together like pop rocks, that we can change
our roots.

We can use our short time, and learn to love in a way that doesn't stab.

-Jasey Green



Untitled

by Loki Gleissner

The Road to Success

By Tristan Oelrichs

As I open the door to the DMV, the crippling anxiety of taking my driver's test suddenly hits me. All my built-up confidence over the last year disappears in a split second. My legs begin to wobble and sweat beads on my forehead. All my past worries of failing my driver's test resurface in my mind. I really want to leave, but I know deep down that if I want to succeed, I need to push through and fight my sudden trepidation of failing my driver's test. While I wait in line to talk to the DMV's receptionist, I can't help but think back to when I first started practicing behind the wheel. I had started out not knowing how to start the car. As I learned more, I knew how to use the gas and brake pedals. I eventually knew all the rules of the road and fine-tuned my driving skills. Even though I know how far I have come, I don't think about any of the improvement I have made over the course of the last year. My mind is stuck on the errors I have previously made. I can't help but think back to how I felt when I first started learning how to drive. Back then, I was a nervous wreck behind the wheel and had zero self-confidence. Thinking about this makes me feel sick. All I can think is, how am I going to pass this test? At this moment, my confidence feels just like it did during my first-time driving.

After a short time waiting in line, I'm up next. When I realize this, my anxiety flares up. My right leg begins to bounce, and I fiddle with a coin in my pocket. I am itching at the chance to leave. This is my last opportunity to back down and not take my test. As I start to talk myself out of taking the test, I hear the receptionist say, "Next please!" There is no going back now, I think to myself.

When I get to the receptionist's desk, I first go through the lengthy process of providing legal documentation. At least I'm not thinking about the test for the time being, as I am too focused on what is happening in front of me. What snaps me out of this temporary, relaxed state is when I realize it is time to get my picture taken. I realize that this is the last step before I must take my test. I don't worry about how I look for the picture like some people do. I can't care less about this because my mind is suddenly bombarded with what not to forget during my test. Don't forget to signal! Don't forget to check your mirrors! I

The Works

can't hold back these thoughts, but then, the picture snaps, and the light fills my eyes.

While I wait for a driving instructor to accompany me on my test, I am stressing out. Thoughts of previous mistakes haunt me in this moment. I really don't want to fail, but the outcome relies all on me. I am alone during the test. No teacher, no parents: just me. The thought of being on my own for this is scary, but in a way reassuring. It is one of the first major milestones in my life I must achieve on my own. The freedom that obtaining my license could provide me with would have a substantial impact on my future. Just the thought of this alone feels liberating, causing my anxiety to slowly calm down. I can finally have a few minutes to collect my thoughts before the test begins. I push away the rest of my nervousness of taking my test by quickly going through all the necessary procedures for driving in my mind with the time I have left waiting. After ten minutes, one of the driving instructors is ready to test me. We walk out into the humid, summer heat to my 1987 Buick Century and take a seat. Mentally, I'm freaking out. This is finally happening. After over a year's worth of practicing, I'm taking my driver's test. I briskly reflect on any last-minute information I think I will need before my test begins.

The instructor tells me to drive whenever I am ready. Before I back out of my parking spot, I look over my shoulders and check the mirrors the proper number of times. While doing this, my eye catches a glimpse of the instructor and of the clipboard with my testing paper on it. My heart skips a beat. The nerves and anxiety that I was experiencing earlier come back. Seeing the actual test paper makes me feel uneasy. What exactly is on the test? Will it be different from anything I've practiced for? I can't help but question my skills leading up to this point. These thoughts make my hands sweaty, and I tap my index finger rapidly on the steering wheel. I make sure to not let my nervousness get in the way. I take a deep breath, wipe my hands on my shorts, and back out onto the road.

As I start driving down the road away from the DMV, I focus only on what I need to do. I'm nervous, but I'm not going to let it affect my performance. This test is too important for me to mess up. After I drive down the road for a bit, the instructor tells me to take a left onto a residential road. This is where the test begins. I tell myself this, but it doesn't bother me. I focus on the task in front of me instead of letting my intrusive thoughts mess me up. What I do instead is keep my mind clear and remind myself to keep calm. It is just like any other drive I had done before.

On the residential road, the instructor tells me to turn into an alleyway. As I turn, I think to myself that this is a strange part of the test. I have only practiced in an alleyway one time. Is this really that important? The instructor tells me to back onto the road I just have turned off. Right before I do so, I see a sidewalk. The sight of the sidewalk makes my anxiety spike. I don't know why I feel like this. Am I missing something? Then, as I am backing out, I remember that I must stop before the sidewalk and before the road. I do this and realize that what I've just done is going to be the hardest thing on the test, even though it

was a piece of cake.

The rest of my test is a breeze like I thought. I drive around confidently like I normally would when I practiced with my dad. I realize that as I'm driving back to the DMV, I have most definitely passed with flying colors. Why was I so scared? This had to have been one of the easiest tests I have ever taken. As I pull back into the DMV, my stomach churns. I can't help but feel this way even though I'm confident I have passed. As I turn my car off, the long-awaited results are in. The instructor smiles and tells me I have passed and received a perfect score! On the outside, I smile. However, on the inside, I am ecstatic. I have finally done it! All my hard work has paid off in the end.

Funnily enough though, as I step out of my car, I hadn't anticipated this test being about more than just passing, but it was. In my mind, it was about the entire journey leading up to this point. Not just any journey, but a journey filled with me hurdling obstacles, conquering fear, and most of all, emerging stronger on the other side when faced with adversity.

Laundry

She tore frantically through the hamper
and all the other clothes that needed a wash,
looking for that specific shirt for her husband.
“There wouldn’t be such a large pile
if you would spend more time doing laundry!”
he yelled. Ugh. He’s the cause of the soil.

She longed for life before the soil,
free to chase dreams without a man to hamper
them. Now life was just a cycle of laundry
to do and dishes to wash,
with dreams buried at the bottom of the pile.
And then there was her husband.

He began as a charming husband,
dancing barefoot upon the soil,
their shoes tossed into a pile,
with no limits to hamper
their dreams. It hadn’t yet come out in the wash.
There was still only clean laundry.

It took her doing the laundry
to discover the unfaithfulness of her husband.
It was a shirt he tossed in the wash,
Seemingly oblivious to the soil.
She found it in the hamper,
hidden on the bottom of the pile.

He said he didn’t know how it got in the pile,
the shirt wasn’t even his laundry.
But who else would put it in his hamper?
No one besides her husband.
It was a lipstick mark, the soil,
something difficult to get out in the wash.

She was tired of the surprises found in the wash,
and the evidence he contributed to the pile.
Did he know she had found the soil?
He said spend more time on the laundry!
That was the downfall of her husband,
Now only her laundry filled the hamper.

It was just like washing the dirty laundry
as she made a pile of dirt over her husband.
He joined the soil, and she emptied the hamper.

-Emily Lenore



Untitled

by Sarah Rubio



Untitled

by Grace Howell

Bewitched Bitch: A Premonition at Parkway

By Kylie Lenninger, Adam Reed, Hunter Buser, Jace Murphy

Characters:

Bobby “Bob” - Old drunk
Rodrick (Roddy) - Rich egomaniac
Melissa - Waitress
Marcus Jr. - Cook
Beatrice - Cook

Minor Characters:

Rodrick’s dad - Father of Rodrick, probably on the board of Apple
Patrick - Rodrick and his father’s personal chauffeur, one of many
Marcus Sr. - Marcus’s dad

Setting:

A diner in Southern California in 2002. The diner was opened in the 1950s, renovated in 1982, and is closing in ten days. There is a generator out behind the diner that is from 1971. The staff are actively talking about leaving and there is a hole in the ceiling of the bathroom that lets you see the sky.

(As two friends are walking out of Parkway diner, Rodrick enters the diner.)

Rodrick
Anyone have a phone?

(Silence.)

Anyone!?

Melissa
Can I help you?

Rodrick
I said does anyone have a phone? Are you deaf or just stupid?

Melissa

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(She stares at him blankly for a moment.)

Yeahhh... right over there.

(She points to the busted phone, and Rodrick storms to it. While Rodrick is on the phone, Melissa pours Bob another cup of coffee.)

(Bob takes a metal canteen from his jacket and pours a few drops into the coffee.)

Marcus

This is what I have to deal with. At least we're closing soon.

(Marcus throws another plate into the sink, while Beatrice is flipping burgers.)

Beatrice

Awww, aren't you gonna miss me Junior?

(Marcus rolls his eyes, he then watches Rodrick while he throws his temper tantrum.)

Rodrick

Wait, you're not gonna come get me!?

(Rodrick's dad replies over the phone.)

We will send someone to go get you. You. Better. Not. Send. Patrick! I won't have it after what he did last time.

(He points his finger for emphasis.)

Bob

(He takes a sip of his alcohol/coffee mixture and keeps his focus on the counter-top instead of Rodrick.)

Would you kindly shut the fuck up?

Rodrick

(He quickly turns his attention to Bob.)

What did you just say to me, old man!? Do you know who my father is!? Do you know who I am!?

(The entire staff turns their attention to Rodrick.)

You people make me sick, you live in this filth, you eat this and call it food, drink this garbage!

The Works

Bob

(Bob walks up to Rodrick, staring him down the entire time. Bob grabs the phone from Rodrick and hangs it up.)

(Bob turns around, walking back to his seat.)

Rodrick

(Rodrick goes and grabs his shoulder to turn him around.)

Bob

(Bob doesn't flinch, he huffs while turning. Bob grabs Rodrick's wrist and throws him onto the ground.)

Rodrick

(He gets up with tears in his eyes, huffing and puffing. Rodrick takes a seat in a booth in the center of the room.)

Melissa

(Walks to Rodrick and places down the diner menu.)

Is there anything I can get ya, honey?

Rodrick

(The menu is instantly tossed aside onto the floor.)

Crab rangoon, a bottle of Dom Perignon, and make it quick.

Melissa

(She looks at him puzzled, staring at him for a moment.)

We have spam and eggs, and Bud Light.

Rodrick

Do you make a goddamn thing here?

(A beat of silence.)

I'll take a cheeseburger.

Melissa

(She smiles at Rodrick passive aggressively.)

That's all you had to say honey.

(She walks to the back, stopping near Bob to top off his coffee. The coffee is

already mostly full.)

Oh, I forgot I already did that for you.

(Melissa gives the cooks Rodrick's order, then returns to the counter of the kitchen.)

Beatrice

(A repetitive ticking noise starts.)

Do you hear that?

Marcus

Are you sure your hearing aids are working?

Beatrice

Damn sure they're working, Marcus.

(A beat of silence.)

(The ticking noise grows louder, turning into a loud sputtering.)

Get your ass outside and go check that generator!

Marcus

You think I know where that generator is, grandma? I only started working here two months ago when dad asked me to.

Beatrice

(Rolls her eyes.)

I'm too young to be your grandma, thank you very much! I'll remind you that I am the same age as your father, Junior. Why, I've been 28 for the last 29 years. Say Melissa, honey, can you go check it out?

(Melissa stares off into the distance, unanswering.)

Melissa?

Melissa

Bea, I don't know where it is either.

(Marcus whispers a laugh, Beatrice sighs and goes to check it out herself.)

Marcus, can you bring that asshole his food for me? He's giving me a headache.

The Works

Marcus

(Marcus picks up Rodrick's finished plate and approaches his table.)

Here you go 'sir', fresh off the grill. Enjoy.

Melissa

I'm gonna go check on Bea.

(She leaves the room.)

Rodrick

(He takes one bite of the burger and throws the food on the ground. Standing to stomp on the food.)

Why don't you try again and go make me another burger? In fact, don't do that, I don't trust you to do that. This isn't even edible! This establishment is a sham, and you my friend aren't even a dime a dozen cook. I'd hire you just to have the satisfaction of firing you.

Marcus

Well well well, the pretty boy wants to get his ass knocked to the ground again. You like being thrown around? Hey Bobby!

Bob

(He grunts, but otherwise does not respond. He continues to drink from his coffee/alcohol mixture.)

Marcus

(Melissa returns and approaches Rodrick's table.)

Oh you're back. How's things going with Bea?

Melissa

Well I went up to the roof and well, Beatrice is dead. Poor gal fell through the hole in the bathroom ceiling.

(Melissa once again fills up Bob's cup with coffee.)

Marcus

Welp, that's a shame. It was about her time anyways. I'm gonna go wash some more dishes

(He returns to the kitchen.)

Rodrick

Um, what? Dead!? She's dead!? Who's Beatrice!? What do you mean Beatrice is dead!?

(Rodrick frantically looks around the diner for answers.)

Melissa

(With a new menu in hand, she reapproaches Rodrick's table.)

Is there anything I can get ya, honey?

Rodrick

What do you mean is there anything you can get me? We already did this, I was just fed the worst burger of my entire life. This doesn't make any sense, is this some kind of prank? Hahahaha- okay funny joke guys, you really got me there. What are we doing here?

Melissa

I'm just taking your order, sugar. Is there anything I can get you to drink?

Rodrick

Just another half hour Roddy, it'll be fine...

(A beat of silence as Rodrick gathers himself.)

I'll take a... Coke Vanilla.

Melissa

We carry Pepsi. Is Pepsi Vanilla fine?

Rodrick

(Burying his face into his hands.)

Oh, my, fucking, god. You genuinely cannot do anything I want here can you? Not a single thing has been done right here, I got into a car accident and you don't even have Coke Vanilla you good for nothing...Just get me my drink.

(Melissa walks towards the kitchen to give Marcus the drink order.)

(The ticking noise increases in pace and volume once again.)

Marcus

Hey Melissa, you hear that too, right? That ticking sound.

Melissa

Oh it's probably just that old generator up on the roof, would you mind taking a

The Works

look at that sweetheart? Shouldn't be anything too serious. I'll go take this drink out there.

Marcus

Sure thing Melissa. I'm going to get more ice out of storage when I get back.

Melissa

(Melissa takes the Pepsi Vanilla to Rodrick and sets it down on his table.)

I'll be back in a bit to take your order, hun.

(Melissa returns to the kitchen area and returns with a pot of coffee to refill Bob's cup.)

Rodrick

(He takes a drink of the Pepsi Vanilla.)

I've never even heard of Pepsi Vanilla. This tastes like shit.

Melissa

I'm gonna go check on Marcus. Make sure he's all good up there Bobby. Just holler if you need anything.

(Bob grunts in acknowledgement, then fills his cup with more booze when she leaves.)

(A beat of silence passes, and then another.)

Rodrick

Hey, old guy.

(Bob grunts again, his attention has not turned from the countertop of the kitchen bar.)

You seem like the type of schmuck to be a regular here, that whole Beatrice thing was a prank, right? I mean this building isn't up to code. I could get the health department right now and shut this place down but... I mean, what kind of sick freak jokes that one of their cooks died on the roof and fell through to the bathroom?

(Bob does not respond.)

Come on man, give me something here.

Melissa

I'm sorry Bobby, but Marcus isn't gonna come back here anymore. I found him

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dead, stuffed into the icebox of all places! I know he hadn't been here long, but he was a good cook, wasn't he? A shame. Bea and Marcus did everything together.

Rodrick
Ha, yeah right.

Melissa
Oh, a new customer.

(She smiles sweetly at Rodrick.)

I'll be right with ya' hon. Let me just get you a menu real quick like.
(From behind the counter Melissa fills up Bob's coffee, grabs a menu, and heads to Rodrick's table.)

Is there anything I can get ya, honey?

Rodrick
Okay. What the fuck is happening? How did that happen? This is the third time we've done this, and I don't think this is a joke anymore. I have so many questions. Please, what is happening!?

Melissa
Well sugar, tonight's special is the ribeye steak and mashed potatoes served with your choice of soup. They've also got a show tonight, down near the mall. If you take Mariposa, it's the exit on your way out of here. Now what can I get you to drink, sweetie?

Rodrick
I don't understand what's happening here. Gramps, why don't you care!?! Are you hearing this? Two people are dead. Why in the fuck don't you care!?! And you! Where are you even from? You talk like some hick grandma from Georgia. We're in Southern California? Every time you take my order someone goes to check on that generator up there and you go check on them and find them dead!

(The ticking noise of the generator has become almost deafeningly loud.)

What the hell do you want!?! Who the hell are you!?! What is going-

Bob
Melissa, dear. I'd like to buy the young man a Reuben sandwich and a Coke.

Melissa
That sounds great sweetheart! Classic or New Coke?

The Works

Rodrick

I thought you had Pepsi!?

Bob

New Coke, Mel.

Melissa

I'll be back with that before you know it Bobby.

(Melissa smiles, refills Bob's coffee, and heads into the kitchen.)

(Bob turns his full attention to Rodrick.)

Bob

Son, let me talk to you for a minute.

(Bob gets out of his seat and joins Rodrick at the booth.)

You were right to call me a regular here, I've been coming to this diner since I was a young kidnabout your age. Just before I got drafted in Korea, and when I started coming back when I returned from Vietnam. This place hasn't changed one bit since I first came here.

Rodrick

That's great... Bobby? Why the hell are you telling me this?

Bob

Son, I don't think you were listening to what I just said. Let me try that again. This place hasn't changed one bit, not at all, since I first came here. There was a renovation here back in '82 that was supposed to take place. It was going to stop this place from closing down, ten days till closure they said.

Rodrick

So what happened? I thought it was already ten days from closing right now? This place feels like it has one foot in the grave.

Bob

Hah! You can say that again. This place, it's been ten days from closure for the last two decades. Every day I come in and sit at this bar and drink a coffee till close, and every day is exactly the same. That is, until you came in here.

(A beat of silence, save for the ticking of the generator.)

Have you noticed, son, that every time you spit on this establishment, that generator gets louder? I've only ever heard it do that once before. August 4th, 1982. I

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had come into some serious money after my uncle passed away from lymphoma. I wanted to remember his life by heading to one of our favorite spots, Parkway. The food that day was awful, it was run down. That was today, ten days from shutting down.

(There's another beat of silence as Rodrick processes what he is being told.)

Everything you've done, I did. I know how this day plays out because it was the start of all this. I was just like you once, Rodrick. It's up to you to break the cycle here, be the better man. Be the person you need to be.

Rodrick

That's coming from an old man who drinks his life away.

Bob

You know kid...

(He pulls out a flask and takes a swig, ignoring the mug entirely.)

Don't listen to me, I know eventually you'll look back at this, at me, one day you will be just like your shitty father.

Rodrick

He's not shitty...

Bob

Yes, he is, and so are you. You need to break the pattern, you need to do better for yourself.

Rodrick

But, I don't know how. I just want to be noticed...

Bob

You are, kid, just not in a good way. Eventually you will understand, you will do better.

(Rodrick stares at Bob as if he grew two heads, but nods in agreement in understanding.)

(A faint humming can be heard despite the generator's overwhelming noise. The kitchen doors swing open as Melissa enters with a plate and New Coke in hand.)

I don't have much more time. Just follow my lead and whatever you do, don't interrupt me. Just keep eating, and you'll be fine.

Melissa

The Works

Here you are sir, one Reuben sandwich and New Coke. You know personally I prefer Classic Coke.

Bob

I have to agree with that, Melissa. It may be a bit cranky of me to say this, but they don't make it like they used to, do they?

(After a light kick to his shin from Bob, Rodrick starts to eat his sandwich slowly.)

Say I remember back from when I was in the war, all I dreamed about was coming back here and having one of these fresh Cokes.

Melissa

Aha! I can remember it clear as day, you and your uncle would come in here almost every weekend and get yourselves a Coke and a cheeseburger. You were such a sweetheart back then, Bobby.

Bob

It's a real shame he's passed, isn't it Melissa?

Melissa

Very much so.

(A beat passes.)

Bob

Melissa... It's time.

(Melissa shakes her head in disagreement, but Bobby nods.)

It comes for us all Mel. You can't cover your eyes, you can't plug your ears. It's time. We had a good run, but this cannot continue. The time I've spent here with you has been wonderful.

Melissa

(Lightly sobbing.)

It can't be.

Bob

You've known it was since he walked in. It's time for us to leave, and to finally end this.

(The generator reaches the fastest, loudest it can before stopping for a few mo-

ments.)

(A blinding flash of white soundlessly encases the room before a complete and total blackout, the sounds and tremors of an explosion shake everything.)

Rodrick

(Rodrick is completely alone inside the diner, everything is silent.)

Hello? ... Bob? ... Melissa?... Is anyone here?

(The silence continues, he gets up and begins searching for anyone.)

What the hell... Why does everything look so clean now? What did I do?

(As he does something that compels him to leave a small tip on the table.)

(Before he exits the door he looks back at the diner.)

Um...thank you for your service...

Rodrick's Father

RODDY!

(He shouts at his son.)

Come on, we'll be late for dinner with the Wozniaks if you don't get out here soon.

Patrick

It's good to see you, young Rodrick.

(Patrick holds the door open for Rodrick and his father.)

Rodrick

... It's good to see you as well, sir.

(Rodrick's father looks at his son in confusion.)

Rodrick's Father

What the hell's wrong with you? Get in the car. Speaking of cars, which one did you wreck?

Rodrick

I think it was... I think it was the CL600?

Rodrick's Father

Oh, so it was one of the cheap pieces of shit, eh? You are entitled to far better

The Works

than that. Now c'mon, we gotta get moving.

(Rodrick is hurriedly ushered into the limo by his father.)

Patrick, get a move on. I'd hate to keep Steve waiting any longer. Take us to the airport and make it quick or I'll fire you.

(Before they are able to drive off the car engine sputters and breaks down.)

(Many moments of silence pass, birds chirp faintly in the distance and cars drive past the empty diner.)

(A sedan from the 1950s pulls up and parks in the parking lot, two friends exit the car.)

Marcus Sr.

Come on, Bea. I promised you I'd take you out for dinner tonight. It's this brand new place, they call it Parkway Diner.

Beatrice

Oh alright! I do love a good meal. Oh hey, they're hiring! I think we should look into that. We'd make a great team, wouldn't we?

(The two friends walk into the Parkway Diner.)



Cloud Breather

by Joseph Magana

Editor's Pick

Green Glass, Shattered Glass

Cold air hit me as I entered the room, shattered
glass covering the floor, scattering light
across the ceiling. Outside I heard children, a son
calling for his father. On the ground lay a bat.
Clearly, he'd dropped it, and it lay where it fell.
Green grass surrounded it, some caught under, bent stalks.

A moment passed in which I didn't care about the cold room. The stalks
caught my attention in that time, passive plants, their life shattered
by a small boy dropping his club. Sure, it wasn't heavy, but the grass fell
nonetheless. I couldn't see the broken blades, unable to catch the light,
unable to heal the torn fibers, but I knew they were there. A bat
over grass that didn't know it was damaged, still trying to soak in sun.

How futile were their efforts, I wonder? Like the child calling to his father, a son
trying to fix a mistake that he didn't know how to solve, guilt haunting, it stalks
a child fearing punishment. I do not wish him harm, we all have a gallery of
mistakes, bats
in caves like skeletons in closets. I still feel bad for the grass more than my
shattered
glass. The splashes of sun on my ceiling are a quiet reminder of the dying grass
outside, light
falling up as the world mourns simple plants. Upon my ceiling, grieving golden
shards fell.

As I stood there, my view silently flipped, and into deeper thought, I fell.
Isn't it funny how the world grieves quietly? I think about it sometimes, I am
someone's sun,
and they would grieve me, certainly, but the world has its own silent ceremonies
for all lost light.
It keeps tiny imprints of life in its history, even the most insignificant plants
preserved, stalks

pressed into dirt and made into fossils in the dark depths, egg shells shattered but kept in memory, the silent preservation of things once alive. I once again see the fallen bat.

How many ceremonies does it hold each day? A soft breeze for a dead animal, a colony of bats taking flight over a scorched section of forest, the cycle of life hardly shattered. Trees standing alone and stripped against their companions that fell. The next morning as the first rays of day fall across the damaged forest, the sun falls on a silent predator already looking for prey among the charred stumps, it stalks a fluffy bunny. The rabbit is unaware of the world mourning for it, happy in the dawn light.

The predator amongst the stumps strikes, silent, and the rabbit's life slowly fades, a lost light. Just as the rabbit went quietly, so too does the grass, so too would I. I hope I get a flight of bats, or maybe ravens when I go. Going quietly would not mean without style, after all. I stalk the night as predators do, feeling powerful, knowing that one day I will fall, but I won't be felled without a fight. I still want to enjoy life as the boy does, despite his mistakes. Playing in the sun is worth a few accidents. His father is at my door now, and the window lies in pieces, shattered.

I find I don't mind. I know the world holds its ceremonies, sun on the ceiling for grass that's fallen. A boy's father is apologizing for damage, a bat lay forgotten on the grass, and shattered glass is scattered on my floor. I begin to stalk life, hunting to find joy in every day, in dark and light.

-Loki Gleissner

This poem is not only written using a complex form--the sestina--but it's full of vivid images and dense with complex ideas. This piece examines everyday situations and ideas and thoughtfully arrives at a unique take on a surprising idea. This is a beautiful poem. -Tom Irish

Street Dweller

Walk past him
His cheeks taugt; his waist so slim

Don't acknowledge his existence
His survival; measured by persistence

Just one more crazy
Label him as lazy

Never meet his eye
No surprise; another low life

All he wants is a bite to eat
Keep staring at your feet

Rebuke at his discomfort
Like there is no way to subvert

Now leave him in the past
Another social outcast

-Tasha Selden

Haven

by Katherine Kinney

When I turned eleven, part of my birthday present was getting my own bedroom. Having dreamed of being grown-up for as long as I could remember, this was just about the biggest thing that had ever happened to me. Of course, I was only getting the tiny downstairs office, but at least I no longer had to share the upstairs with my older sister. I was finally getting my own space to decorate my own way, fill with my own belongings, and do my own thing in. After all, I was eleven now. I was not a little kid anymore, and it was high time I finally got a chance to prove it.

I set to work at selecting the perfect paint shade, which was no easy task. I was too old for a baby pink color and needed something sophisticated if the room was to be mature-looking. Although I wanted to do all of the work myself, I was too short and reluctantly settled for painting along the baseboard and around wall outlets. With each brushstroke, the azure-colored walls were slowly overtaken by a taffy pink hue. My inability to do all of the painting fueled my determination to do the designing myself. I found sheer pinkish-white curtains for my two little windows and a pink, floral quilt that matched splendidly. The final and most important step of all was decorating. With an inordinate amount of carefulness, I distributed my treasures throughout the room just so. Upon completion, I surveyed my room with a satisfied sigh and a beaming smile.

My bedroom instantly became my chief source of pride. Not only was it exquisitely decorated, but it was also proof of my maturity. I began doing everything there. I struggled with math problems at my corner desk, played with dolls on the shaggy carpet, and watched movies on a portable DVD player. I proudly called the room my haven and made sure that everyone knew it. Visitors filled me with uncontainable excitement, as I hoped they would wander down the hallway and stumble upon my grand showcase. I looked for any reason to have a sleepover with cousins or even my sister so that I could play hostess for a night. I had never felt so proud to be grown-up.

Soon enough, I learned that being grown-up was not all fun and games. As I lay awake at night, I found myself utterly alone, and my fearful mind transformed the room into an unfamiliar place. Moonlight shone through the sheer curtains, creating dancing shadows which I swore were monsters ready to attack.

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The neighbor's back porch light pierced the darkness as I held my breath, certain that a stranger was outside the window with a flashlight. I considered turning on my lava lamp to eliminate the darkness, only that would certainly send my room up in flames after I fell asleep. So, I lay there teary-eyed, burying myself under a mound of blankets with a racing heart. I had never considered that being grown-up also meant defending myself against such dangers. Considering myself too old to be afraid, however, I did not express my fears to anyone. Instead, I poured out my tears to my little haven.

Some time later, just after my fourteenth birthday, my room began to seem unfamiliar even in the daytime. My perspective of maturity no longer seemed to consist of pink flowers and princess dolls. I decided to redesign my little haven, desiring an edgy look that was more in sync with my maturing personality. Fortunately, I had grown taller since last time and was able to do most of the work myself. I settled on a bright lavender hue, determined to leave behind my taffy pink color as well as my childhood. Accenting the room with a pistachio-green color, I designed a unique bedspread and hung sheer purple and green curtains. My little corner desk made way for a large vanity dresser, and my childhood treasures were boxed up. The finished look appeared ten times more mature, and my passion for the room was reignited.

The room being my strongest display of maturity yet, I continued to do everything there. However, things were a lot different now, as growing up had brought forth certain changes. I now spent countless hours engrossed in a phone and TV, having traded away my dolls and DVD player. With the exception of my friends, I regarded all visitors with unwarranted aversion, having lost the desire to give room tours. Sleepovers and parties no longer caught my attention unless they were being held at someone else's house. After all, nothing screamed grown-up like a night away from home without my family. When I was forced to stay home, I locked myself away in my little haven, which served as my sole source of liberation. I had never longed for independence so deeply.

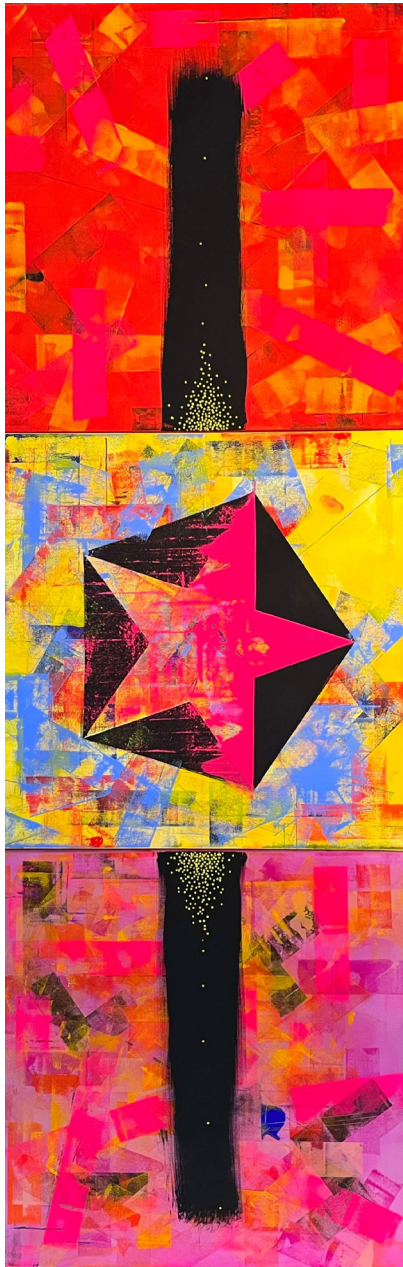
In addition to changes in my interactions, growing up also brought forth new dangers. As I lay awake at night, my mind still transformed the room into an unfamiliar place, only now it provoked emotional demons rather than physical ones. Moonlight shone through the sheer curtains, reminding me that the sun would rise in just a few hours and punish me with another endless day of anxiety. The neighbor's back porch light pierced the darkness as I held my breath, feeling as though someone was shining a spotlight on my insecurities. I considered turning on my clock light to eliminate the darkness. However, the thought of being able to see my timid reflection in the vanity mirror repulsed me. So, I lay there troubled, burying myself under a mound of blankets with an uneasy heart. I had never considered that opening up to people other than my family would cause such apprehension and self-consciousness. Ashamed to be so intimidated, however, I refused to admit my doubts. Instead, I poured out my troubles to my little haven.

A month after my seventeenth birthday, that familiar feeling of unfamiliarity crept back into my room once again. The aura of edginess and isolation no

longer felt like me, and I now sought an atmosphere of serenity and comfort. I decided to redesign my little haven one last time. Oddly enough, I welcomed help in getting the work done this time, despite finally being capable of doing it all myself. An ivory hue slowly overtook the physical walls, demolishing the emotional walls my teenage self had constructed in the process. Black was my new accent color, and I found a chic bedspread with matching drapes. With no regard to the impression it might give others, I decided to incorporate some of my long-lost childhood treasures into my new design. When finished, the room acquired an elegant yet familiar look that filled me with contentment. And somehow, that was all that mattered.

For the first time, the room served as a source of comfort rather than a display of my maturity. I no longer needed visual affirmations of my maturity, for my lack of spare time sufficiently provided me with unwanted reminders. A constant whirlwind of college assignments made me yearn for the days when playing with dolls and watching movies on the bedroom floor were my top priorities. Endless work shifts left me longing for those boring nights when I was stuck in my little haven with nothing to do and nowhere to be. It seemed I was growing up after all. Only, it was happening suddenly now, and I no longer felt so confident in my ability to face the trials of adulthood. I had never anticipated that I would wish for time to slow down.

In growing up, I conquered the demons that had tormented me for all those years. As I lay awake at night, my mind no longer transformed the room into an unfamiliar place, but it did give me cause for reflection. Moonlight shone through the drapes, filling me with wonder at how quickly days and nights fly by. That back porch light pierced the darkness as I held my breath, reminiscing about memories of the previous neighbors who had passed on. I considered turning on my night-light to eliminate the darkness, only I seemed to strangely enjoy it now. So, I lay there smiling, burying myself under a mound of blankets with a content heart. Although I had always been proud to call the room my haven, I felt a deeper appreciation for it somehow. It had remained a faithful friend over the years, sticking with me throughout all of my juvenile endeavors and dramatic outbursts. I began to wonder how I could have ever taken so many of those carefree childhood days in my room for granted. However, I did not dare express my regrets to anyone, not a single soul. All those restless times in my little haven would be our secret.



Pink Star

by Glenn Bodish

Edge of the World

Molten earth reforms into
another piece of land
Fauna roamed, and flora grew
the islands did expand

One day the mighty mountain roared
piercing through the night
ashes flew, and lava poured
and all was set alight

The chaos reached the oceans blue
and crept across the sand
Once more, the earth reforms into
another piece of land

-Adam Reed

The 19th

You will never believe who they put in charge,
with the decision being so precise and sharp,
it is hard to believe that's what they thought was right.
Especially after all that's been written and read.
We wonder how she felt as she heard her phone ring,
even after everything was put into play.

Now we can't let the children outside to play,
no more battles with infantry to lead the charge.
Just a woman whose worth's weighted in a ring,
without regard for education and intelligence no matter how sharp.
They didn't care if she was well traveled or read,
or if life could be defined in left and right.

Just if morals were written in the right,
and puppets had their parts to play.
Because she speaks a language he can't read,
the price of admission was upcharged.
So their picture perfect image stayed sharp,
and the roses stayed in their ring.

Wouldn't want the alarms to ring.
To shout and scream what's right,
with a voice so malefic and sharp,
it would inspire the poets to write plays.
Ones that made waves and sent electric charges,
through theaters and up carpets stained red.

There would be articles on papers to read,
about a fight taken out of the ring,
to the cities, and the homes, and the ones in charge.
A fight that lacked the rights,
to have a part in their play
that ends too sharp.

But this message should not cut so sharply,
her goal was not to have faces turn red,
or have pawns move out of play,
just for when the next phone rings,
they will know the right words to write.
And the theater's admission won't charge.

The words won't cut so sharp, and the alarms won't have to ring.
All that their children will read, will not only be true but right.
For this was never a game to play, or a matter of who's in charge.

-Monica Healy

Structural

by Tom Irish

Danny kept calling it a “structural.” It was the first thing he said when he came outside in the whirling snow, wading through the foot that had already fallen, flakes building on his hood and the shoulders of his parka like frost on a window, and he came up to Donnie and Donnie said “Let’s have a snowball fight” but Danny replied “no, I want to build a structural. Let’s build a structural over there, under that tree!”

Donnie followed him over to the tree he had pointed to and said “What’s a structural?”

Danny said “A structural . . . just any kind of structural. It can be our fort.”

Donnie looked down at his own gloves. They were crocheted, and they were already caked with icy wads from the snowballs he had been throwing at stop signs and trees, and once at a squirrel. His hands were stinging and wet, but Donnie didn’t want to go inside. “You mean a structure? That’s stupid. C’mon, let’s have a snowball fight! We can build quick forts if you want to and then try to take each other’s forts, like a war.”

Danny turned around. Donnie couldn’t see into his hood past his scarf and the fat flakes falling between them. Danny said “I don’t like getting hit by snowballs. Let’s build, like, a really big structural. We can sit in it and nobody will know we’re in there!”

“What the hell, man? That’s so dumb. What would we do in there?”

“I dunno . . . we could like, tell scary stories. Or we can just talk. It can be our secret structural that nobody knows about. C’mon, man!”

“Dude . . . the fucking word is ‘structure’ and that’s stupid. Why do you even want to do that? Do you want to touch my junk, is that it? This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Donnie kept looking at Danny. He didn’t move, didn’t speak. Donnie went on. “I’m going to tell everybody what you said, that you want to touch my johnson.”

Danny finally spoke. “What? I didn’t say that! I just wanted to build a struc . . . a snow structure. With you. Because we’re best friends.”

Snow whirled down all around them like they were standing in the mid-

dle of a magic spell. Donnie's head was buzzing. Later he would think about that buzzing and wonder where it came from, what it meant. But outside with Danny he couldn't think at all. He just wanted to have a snowball fight.

"I'm not your friend, asshole. Go sit in your pile of snow and touch yourself. I'm going in. Fucking freak."

Donnie left. His hands were cold anyway, and he was ready to go inside. He thought he heard Danny crying behind him, but he wasn't sure. Sound was tricky in the snow.

The Works

Editor's Pick



Tedsqunny

by Jace Murphy

One of the many goals of art is meant to invoke emotion. While I do enjoy pieces that make me feel anger or sadness, my preferences are more for happy pieces. This piece gives me joy for the kid in my heart. Also I tried very hard to get this piece on the back of the magazine so I really think it needed some form of spotlight. Thank you to the artist that put a smile on my face and made my day. -Login McIntosh

Untitled

I'm running as fast as I can
I'm so close, to feeling the touch of her hand
I'm running out of breath, but I'm still going
Where nobody will end up knowing

I pick up the pace, I'm almost there
Only to be shocked with a scare
She caught me, she has me now
I know I'm in for a beat down

Good grades are what mother wanted
But what was seen, made her vomit
An F on my report card, oh I was scared
I bolted out that door, running, and losing air

-Hunter Buser

The Spirit of Calamity

by Austin Adams

Not all things are what it seems. Reality is something that is rarely questioned, let alone talked about. What is the ultimate purpose of life? What is our purpose in life and why are we here?

I myself have battled in even the worst of storms. I have faced days that were gray and grim, some darker than others. I have learned more about myself than I once knew. Autism is strange and still riddled with mysteries we have yet to discover. A mark, one that cannot be seen, but felt spiritually. The mark of demise, the mark of death. Our lives sadly are cut short due to many things we battle. Let alone the mortality rate is 51% higher than average and die 5 years earlier than normal, sometimes more. Natural causes, suicide and accidents being the major causes. Drowning, asphyxiation, injuries being the top 3 in deaths.

Quite sad, isn't it? It is. A mere tragedy to hear and know that someone who may have left an impact perishes far sooner than you. The average age is 39, which honestly is quite early, too early personally. When my one grandmother succumbed to cancer and a stroke in May of 2019, I felt a massive shift of emotions from just grief. Rage, anger, despair, hopelessness. All of them consumed and altered my nature for the few years that followed.

I was not myself, I was in pain. Broken, warping everything around me. My beliefs, my hopes, my dreams, all turned to the void. A ceaseless entity that only consumes pain and suffering, with no regard for itself. I met that entity, related to it, nurtured and raised it. Now I'm a living fragment of it. Only last semester did I rebuild and discover more of myself. I began to even question why the events of my past occurred the way they did, why it had to happen, and what if said events didn't happen? Now those shroud some space in the mind, a philosophical mess. A doomsayer or one who warns of impending doom? What am I with that? The inner mischief inside me, the urge to playfully spook others, why has that remained?

Well, that is something I will eventually discover. What the rest see of me, is their eyes, not mine to fulfill. What they devise of my creation, my existence, my personality, everything is up to them. If you see me as a monster, then so shall it be. See me as a harbinger of doom, so shall it be. Your choice of

actions lies on you. I have battled a harsh life, rigid and stubborn to the bone. My heart and soul, filled with a craving for chaos; harmless, playful, chaos. The visions I am consumed with, both good and vile, I try to avoid and mask what's grim, only spreading the good around.

Older friendships fading, with some inner rage escalating, a rage of why were they not there for me, when I was there in the past? In their darkest hour, I was there, but I was left behind. Was I a joke, a mockery, a pest? Why did I get shrugged off without a care in the world, breaking my trust? Why should I forgive? Why can't I forgive that easily? Is it what God made me of, forged from savagery and primitive instincts from tooth, claw, and bone or something else entirely? Was the tales that we had from our youth really what had happened or is there more than what meets the eye?

What caused me to have a change in my traditions, my actions, everything? It was him, he knew my old life was beyond saving, and tried to clear me of what was me. Having me walk through the infernal fires of light, leaving but a shred of my former self. The rest of whom I once was, left to rot, left to roam in darkness never ending. I try to wonder why it felt that he has abandoned me for so long, only to come to me now at my final hours of childhood, of youth just to take me away from the grasp of hell itself, urging and pushing me to never look back, only run from it. To become a fighter for peace, a fighter for balance and harmony itself. End the inhumane bloodshed, the injustices, the impurities. "Bring them to me to deal with." the Lord said to me. "Rise and begin again! Be one with the night sky and the omnipresent stars that paint the sky. Soon you shall join them to watch the universe evolve." Was that humans ultimate fate? To be one with space and time itself?

Surely that couldn't be the heaven we all dreamed of, right there in front of us. Just outside the confines of the planet we call Earth. Maybe, just maybe, if we could- We could hear the ghosts of our ancestors, the shining stars that are the night sky. The moon, are there actually children on it, waiting to be gifted life? Perhaps there's more to space than what we once thought, a deeper meaning between the Earth, the sun, moon, planets, and stars alike. This solar system must be older than what we believe. Maybe there are other universes like ours, we were just lucky to remain, the genesis and book of life itself. Endless possibilities and limitless power, in the palm of our hand. We have to keep striving, keep marching, keep pushing to find the ultimate potential inside all of us.

Was the motive behind what I had already done for a purpose? It is. I myself may not see it yet, but will soon be given the sign from above. We are always watched closely, yet we can't see them, hear, or picture. You may think my mental fortitude has been obliterated, I think not. Rather, feel more atone with myself than I once was, slowly, finding the purpose, my purpose. I was to leave impacts, ones for good. Sunday evening, I spoke with my mother about some inner thoughts, one was what if I did attend a school I first looked into. A preparatory college school, what if they did accept me and what events would have been forged to lead to today? Maybe I won't know now, but hopefully, the Lord would be gracious enough to satisfy our curiosity, our thirst for knowledge

The Works

of alternate paths, alternate timelines, alternate endings. It must be possible, I have even begun to ponder the thought of my grandmother's passing and if there was a bigger reason why she's not here today. What would she have done, knowing the universe will be all shrouded with fear, controlled with a hunger for violence, was that all intended as an obstacle for humankind? It had to be, or was it? We may never know. Some philosophical beliefs will remain eternally unanswered, while others can or have been answered. I may not be the once booksmart worm I once was, I have come to accept it, others who know me have to face the reality. A reality that inevitabilities do and will happen no matter how much we try to avoid. We will be forced to fight one in order to be closer. Some realities, even darker ones we must face if we want to grow closer to the Lord.

That is why he stages these events, puts tragedies and sad moments in our lives, is for us to resolve and reflect upon ourselves. I am still finding what to redefine myself as, or is that worth the effort? To be considered by a new name, a new title, that is for fate to decide, not me. My once found passion in music, while its flower may have wilted, it will soon blossom once again. Time heals all wounds, time tells everything. Without time, life wouldn't exist, nothing would exist. While I may have a blazing passion to write stories, entries of my internal thoughts, it is an art. An art many don't count. Art can be found through nature itself, art can be manmade. While manmade art is what we are exposed to, natural art is special. The uniqueness of natural art has the elements of nature work to create the wondrous beauties of nature itself. From gravel trails to dense forests, nature can make art itself, we tend to miss it or not perceive it so easily if it doesn't catch prying eyes.

My relationship with life and God remains on rocky terrain. Living a rough, painfully torturous life, of what feels like endless torment, being subjugated to one's own mind. I know I'm going to die sooner, so can't I just get some time where life's just simple, basic, and don't have extreme pressing demands stabbing your eyes, heart, and mind alike? Why God, why do you love suffering? Why do you just crave it if you're meant to be "all good". Such entities would never do such a thing, and rather try to rid it all. Consume your anguish, burn your agony, flush your sorrows. Entities of pure light, only crave to make the world around them brighter, being the sole sacrifice to wear all the burdens. I think I get now why Jesus did what he did. He was perfect, yet our foolhardy ways, our plagued instincts, ruined our one chance at ultimate redemption. If I was God and saw you kill my actual child in cold blood, I would never forgive, no matter how many generations pass, each brings new vice to ravage the meaning of joy. Sooner or later the Earth will have no burning sun or silver moon to light the sky, just perpetual darkness. Why do we just choose to show our hubris amongst one another and to God?

Knowing how limited human lifespans are and how much we crave to control the light, the norm, everything. The deadly sins, are we just living embodiments of it? We are, the media embodies all. Will we soon have human deities living where they control every important aspect of life itself? Possibly, God may assign such powers if he wanted to. Create more "perfect" beings, only

superior to Jesus. Jesus was the embodiment of God, a friend that we slain in a gluttony for power.

Multiplying food, commanding spirits, talking to the dead, walking on water and converting it to wine, manipulation of weather and the animal kingdom, reviving the dead and ultimate power over death? Why, why did we slay the sole demi-god? Was it lust for revenge for Adam and Eve? It has to, we all descend from them, the makers of sin, the makers of foolishness. If we didn't evolve from apes, then humans regardless evolved from those two old, meaningless humans! I felt that I had died, and yet, not. Was this what Christ himself felt? Am I just a lesser incarnation of him, just wielding the final power, incapable of dying easily? Maybe. Maybe I am a fragment, we could have more.

Some enigmas about myself, I began to discover and wonder personally. Why have I transitioned from music to storytelling? What transpired for such a shift of fiery passions? I was gifted with music, yet I've fallen out of favor to do it during some stages of my life, feeling a small ember touch it. I use music now to help me set the mood, allowing a greater focus. Even the works I have done, only improve with time and learning from what could have been better. In poetry, I had to heavily adapt and change my strategy with each passing work, even fiction. Despite I knew a fair handful to fiction, there were still things that helped me not only improve it, but expand my borders and challenge myself to push further. "Per aspera ad astra", personally a great quote in Latin, to be reminded that we can persevere through even the hardest obstacles. Through hardships to the stars, fly high, and never look back. Some moments in our past are safe to revisit as lessons.

Throughout my now 2 years of story writing, I've had no personal favorites as every character has some mild resemblance to me. Either it be by name, personality, etc, it all ties back. Some characters are not me entirely and are their own being, some still are separate, but have some minor tidbits of me, and some reflect one major trait of myself. I have begun to wonder with the one book I hope to publish soon as to what would have to be edited in the final version? It's too soon to think of such yet.

House of Cards

I found my deck of cards today
and decided to build a tower
And within the hour,
the tower was built up high

Some people saw my cards today
And decided to help with the tower
And within the hour,
The tower could touch the sky!

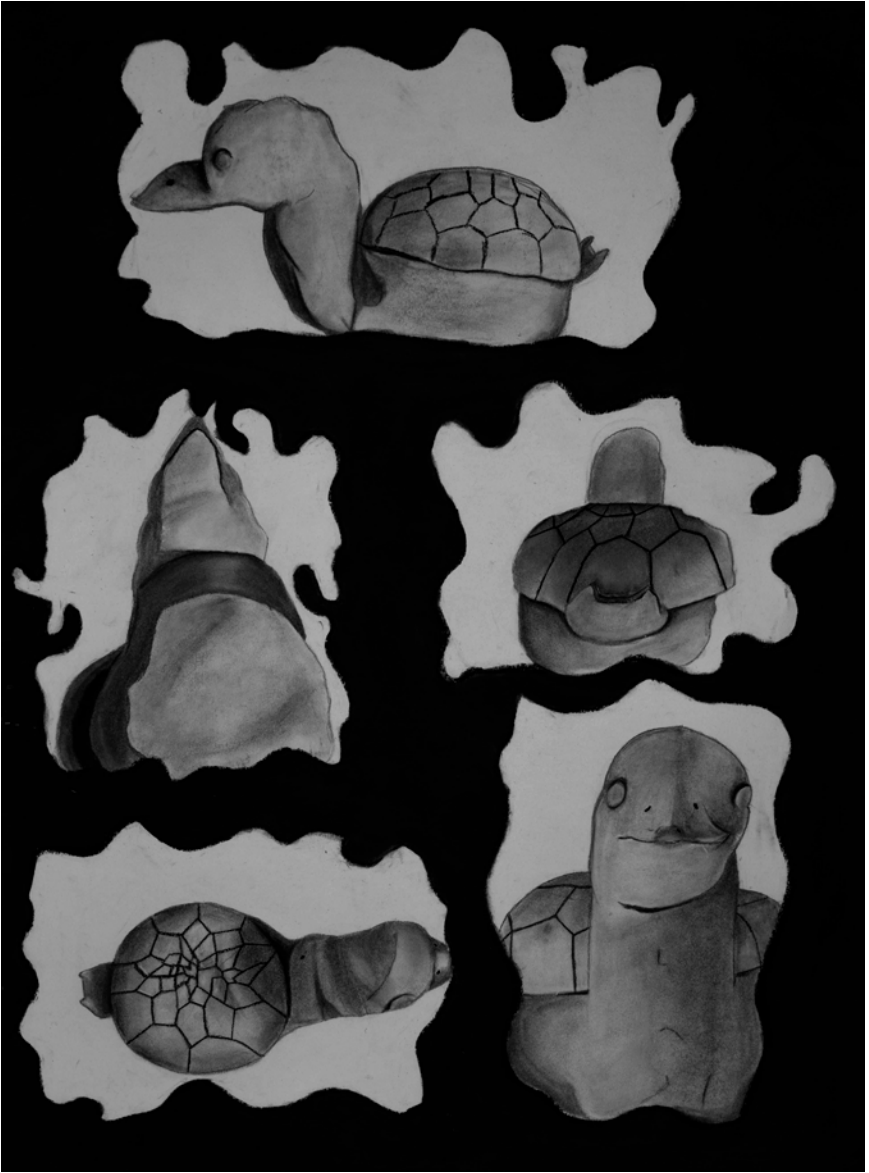
Someone removed a card today
And destroyed the whole tower
And within the hour,
Everyone was gone.

-Adam Reed



Star Eyes (Literally Speaking #1)

by Jasey Green



Turtle Duck

by Miriya Jones

Too Close

I hate when they stand behind me
Just a whisper away
The breath on my neck
The bumps on my skin
My heart beating out of MY chest
The feeling of fear
The lack of respect
Years of endured toxicity
The giggle of laughing it off
The indignity of shuffling away
Tell me why it is I who feel ashamed
The lack of empowerment
The timidness of youth
The me today would not stand for it
Please back up
Give me my space
You are making me uncomfortable
I owe you no grace
Move along sir
In not part of your chase

-Tasha Selden

Untitled

“Never trust your thoughts after 9 o’clock at night.”

Is what they say.

But what if 9 o’clock at night is the only time I have thoughts?

I think in my day, yes. But I don’t have thoughts. A superfluous juxtaposition, maybe an exaggeration- dramatic whining, even.

But when I wake,

I think that I could go back to sleep.

I think that I wish I could go back to sleep.

I think that I won’t have time to eat breakfast, because I woke up late.

I think that I have to change from my night clothes, so I don’t look lazy at school.

I think about the fog as I drive,

the way the streets are empty before 7 o’clock,

the way the sunflowers in the field are wilting.

I go about my day, thinking. Nothing ever stays longer than minutes. Rarely they even last seconds.

I used to have endless thoughts, sticking to my brain stem and growing like vines in the crevices of my brain.

I think in my day, yes. But I don’t have thoughts anymore.

I will wake,

Thinking of sleep, breakfast, clothes, fog, and sunflowers.

And as I go about my day thinking, with nothing staying longer than minutes (rarely even seconds), I will be in class, then in the car, then at work.

Then I will be home, and it is 10:47 at night, I haven’t eaten anything but a granola bar all day, and similarly, haven’t had a thought to feed me.

When I sit down at the dinner table, thinking of the reheated leftovers from family, I will open a device of mine, and put on something to watch.

Because I need something to do, where I 'don't have to think'.

I end up not watching it anyway.

Because I start to have thoughts.

It's 11:24 at night.

Far past 9 o'clock at night.

I 'shouldn't trust my thoughts after 9 o'clock at night.'

But my thinking about the leftovers made me think of my mom getting off of work late, throwing something together for dinner that half of my family will refuse to eat, which makes me think of my little brother and his frustratingly picky taste, which makes me think of how far he's come, which makes me think of how fragile we all are, which makes me think about what it all means.

How quickly all of my thinking has turned to thoughts.


These ones stay.

It's 11:29 at night.

It's far past 9 o'clock.

-Ocean Ramirez

Did you Know?



In Ohio, a 10 year old woman, who was raped, was denied an abortion.

Untitled

by Grace Howell



Sighting

by Glenn Bodish

‘wasteful’

they said my feelings were a waste.

and if you are what you eat,

am i not what i feel?

and if my feelings are a waste,

am i not one as well?

-Emily Lenore



Wolf Songs #1

by Joseph Magana

To the End

By Kylie Lenninger

I awoke to a shining vibrant sky, the colors of sunrise lay across the stone walls, the sun peaking over. Dazed and confused, I struggle to open my eyes. I lay there as my senses slowly came back to me, the pain increasing along with my awareness.

Attempting to get up, I shield my eyes from the newfound light. Immediately scanning the small opening I was in, my body grew nervous from the unfamiliar surroundings. The dusty ground is covered in leaves and bugs. There was no sign of grass as if the trail had been walked on a million times. Vines draped the walls climbing through each of the crevices, grouping at the ground. The weeds at the bottom were growing so tall that they nearly reached my knees. Above the wall, mountains peaked over, staggering across the horizon. Everything was so beautiful.

Struggling to get up, my knees wobble trying to hold my weight. Nothing seems broken but it sure feels like it. Steadying myself against the closest wall ignoring the bugs that crawl there, I finally notice the others on the ground. Two men and three women, all unmoving, they all seem pretty beaten up too.

“Hello, Player One.” A light airy voice spoke. Scaring me from my delusional state I jump and turn my attention to the new figure. He stood across from the people on the ground. He was a thin, short man dressed in what looked to be a suit. His bright orange hair reflected the sunlight shining down and his white eyes almost glowed. “You’re the first to awake, so I shall explain the rules.” He spoke smoothly, “You’re now in Kalgan, one of the longest mazes in this world. Your goal is to reach the end before sunset, that’s when the hunters come out.”

Hesitant to speak to the unusual looking person I rasp, “I don’t understand how I got here. Who are you? Who are these people?”

“My apologies Player One, I am Erkus, the keeper of Kalgan, and these,” he gestures to the people on the ground. “Are players just like you, though you can work with them I advise against it.” He flashes a toothy smile showing all his sharp teeth. “For whoever reaches the end first, will be the only survivor.” I start to panic, slowly inching away as he speaks again. “It’s okay to be scared Player One, you should be, as your time is running out. It’s already

half past seven,” he says as he glances at the watch on his thin pale wrist. “The others won’t be far behind, so I advise you to get going now, you have a long journey.” I start sprinting to the closest opening, ignoring my surroundings and any signs of danger.

As I reach a dead end that feels far enough from Erkus I sit against a stone wall. I should’ve asked more questions, and shouldn’t have allowed my panic to take over. I have no clue where to start, I should at least try to comprehend how I got here. The last thing I remember was going to bed, but I can’t remember anything. Enough dilly-dallying, getting up I hear a scream in the distance. The others must have woken up. What Erkus said dawned on me, there would be only one survivor and the others were my competition. I needed to hurry before more people wake up.

I’ve seen this corner before. The dead end splits to the right and left, and before you turn right, three claw marks sit engraved into the stone wall. I turned left because of them. I don’t know how I managed to end up here again. Ending up in a maze wasn’t on my to-do list today. Sighing heavily, I head to the right. I would have never thought mazes were this hard. Everything looks similar and just when I think I found a new path it leads me to the same place. It’s getting dark out too. Hopefully, I’m not too late. Stumbling my way through the overgrown path. I reach another corner, and before I turn something moves out of the corner of my eye. I jump back in hopes of hiding, only to see Erkus.

“Hello again, Player One. You don’t look so good. No Need to worry, I came bearing good news!” He spoke so quickly that it immediately put me on edge. “Player Three made it to the end! Of course, as stated to you in the beginning there would only be one survivor.”

“Wait! No! I will do anything! We were barely given any time! How are we supposed to find the end in such a big maze?!” I wasn’t ready to die, it was unfair.

“I apologize, but I have better news! I won’t be the one killing you this time!”

“What do you mean!?! Wait, this time?”

“Excuse me, I wasn’t supposed to say that. As you see this isn’t your first time here, but seeing as you failed more than three times you won’t be making it out this time.” He talked with a hand over his heart as if he felt guilty for what was happening to me. The cruel smile on his face spoke otherwise. “Try to survive as long as you can, Player One. The hunters are coming.”

“Wait!”

“Goodbye, Player One. You were my favorite,” smiling sweetly he takes a few steps back.

“No, don’t go!” Just as I said that I heard a howl in the near distance. Turning to see if anything was near me was a mistake. As I turned back Erkus was gone. Another howl sounded, this time closer. Without a second thought, I started to run. Tears rolled down my face as I tried to make distance between me and the hunters. I tumble over the vines and scramble past the corners. All my

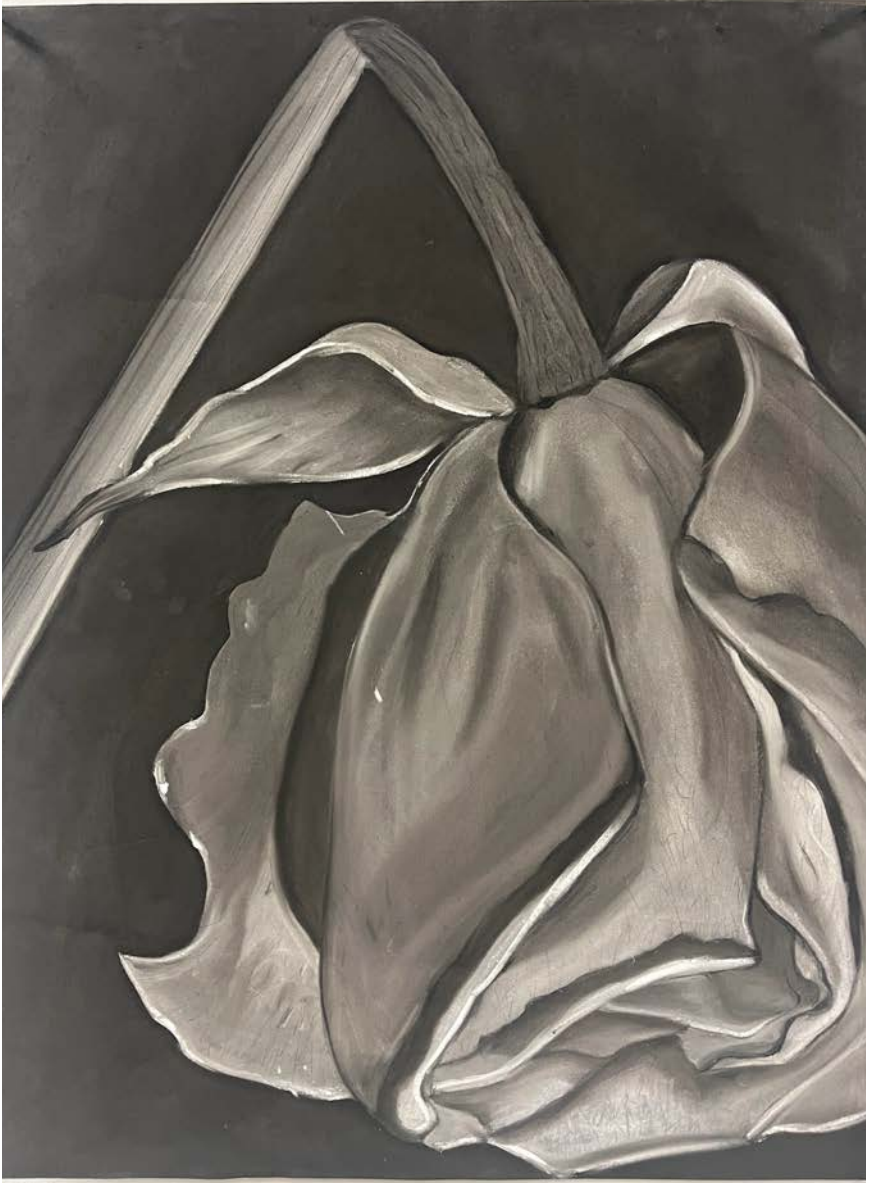
The Works

efforts went to waste as something hit my body, knocking me over. I reach out in hopes of catching myself on something. With no luck, my head hits the ground and everything goes black. I awoke trembling, heaving deep breaths, and sweat pouring down my face. I reassured myself that it was just a nightmare.



Love Pond

by Miriya Jones



Untitled

by Grace Cochrane

The Right to Be Silent

I am told that my voice has power.

Power to build up cities, destroy barriers.

Power to bring people together, tear them apart.

I am told that my voice is unique and I must make myself heard.

My voice is an ocean, hiding depths unknown beneath the surface.

My voice is a ship, lost among the waves.

My voice is a lighthouse, a beacon to let others know where I stand.

I am told that I need to raise my voice.

“I am scared,” I reply.

“Speak up,” they say. “Your voice is a weapon to get what you want.”

But tell me, please, what happens when I open my mouth

And a monster crawls out.

-Jasey Green

please

before you make the choice,
before you write your goodbyes,
before you commit your final act
that can't be undone,
please, think of this:
nothing is forever,
not even your pain.
the answers you seek in death
are not guaranteed.

please, think of this:
all the things you love to do,
the things that bring you joy,
you will never do again.

please, think of this:
all the sunsets you will never see,
the places you will never go,
the people you will never meet.

please, think of this:
the ones you love,
who love you back,
where will their love for you go?

please, think of this:
the hole that will be left,
the space you will no longer occupy.
what will fill it?

please, think of this:
all the versions of you.
your past selves,
the person you once were,
and your future lives,
the ones you have yet to lead.
you are killing them too,

taking them with you
to an early grave.

i may not be able to
convince you,
but please, think of this:
there are many who
will come after you,
who feel the same pain.
who will give them hope
if you're not around?

-Emily Lenore



Lotus

by Lilyan Toppert

Flaming Weather

The sun's shining bright. Hundreds of people receiving mosquito bites.
People sweating everywhere. Towels wrapped around their hair.
Burning sand with burning feet upon, hard not to beat on.
Dog lets out a loud pant. So easy to find a drooping plant.
Snow melts. Mud easily smelt.
Can cause a lot of blotting. Vegetable gardens rotting.
Could cause sunburns. Better not return.
Thermometers are all red, with people lying dead.
Damaged roads with no toads.
Can cause heart disease; you won't be pleased.
Dead grass with very little mass.
Unfortunately, weather nobody can defend. That's the end.

-Jace Murphy

Page 66

by Zari Stoker

There's no way I've been struggling with this assignment for this long. Why does my phone say it's past 11 pm? How did I not realize I'd been at the library for almost six hours...

All of these thoughts occurred to me after checking my phone, which hadn't gotten any notifications in several hours. I remembered I was supposed to meet my parents at home for a movie night, but they'd probably be asleep by now. This assignment took up so much of my brain space that I completely forgot about the time. Why did this professor have to be so complicated? The number of times I got stuck on something and had to double-check the instructions probably took up half of my time here. After being in the library for this long, I only finished a little over half of the project, but the rest will have to wait until tomorrow.

I started packing up my things, putting my laptop, notebook, pencil, and too many other miscellaneous items into my bookbag, and putting on my jacket before double checking I had everything and heading towards the entrance.

I thought I smelled something as I walked towards the doors to leave, maybe some kind of gas leak. It was definitely not a good smell, but I could do nothing about it.

My assignment once again became the focus of my attention as I entered the chilly night air. It was a little foggy out, probably from drizzling on and off all day. I couldn't even go a full minute without having to pull my sleeves and hat down to try and feel somewhat warmer. I had struggled to get a start on this assignment, and now that I'd started, the middle bits weren't getting any easier. Finishing my assignments has always been the most challenging part, so I'm sure this one won't be any different. I typically didn't freak out this much about one single project, but this professor decided to make it worth almost our entire grade: If I don't get this one thing right, there won't be anything I can do to save my grades after that.

I was almost halfway home when I noticed there were a few people up ahead of me. I couldn't tell how many people or anything about them, but since it was nearing midnight, I moved to the other side of the road just to be safe. I

pulled out my phone and pretended to be on it while just slightly speeding up my walk. As I got close enough to see, I could tell it was a group of four men, not too old or too young. I'm not very good at guessing ages, though. All of them were taller and somewhat stronger looking than me, so with my phone in one hand, I used my other to reach into my inside jacket pocket and feel for my pepper gel. Just my luck; my hand doesn't feel anything. I must've forgotten to put it back in when I washed this jacket last. I was starting to pass them, so I risked a glance, and thankfully, they weren't staring or, God forbid, approaching me. I thought I caught one of their eyes, though, so I decided to try and call a friend, even if they wouldn't be able to do anything for me besides talk.

The phone only rang once and a half before Max picked it up.

"Hey, what's up?" he answered, sounding fully awake, of course.

"I love that I can always count on you to have a terrible sleep schedule," I replied, not realizing how out of breath I was until I started talking. "I'm just walking home from the library, and some guys are standing across the road from me. Can we talk for a few minutes until I'm home?"

"Yeah, of course. I was about ready to give up on this math problem and start my nightly Netflix binge sesh anyway. Were you working on that project worth a little too much of your grade at the library just now?" He talked to me about that for the next few minutes until I could see my front door, and I let him go to watch his movies.

When I got inside, I put all my things from my bag in their respectable places for the night, leaving my laptop open and project stuff on my desk. I also found my pepper gel and slipped it back into my inside jacket pocket where it belonged, just in case.



Good Memories

Fading

by Miriya Jones

Editor's Pick

unrequited

it's the ache in my chest
every time i see you.
everything i wish i could say
bubbles up inside,
catches in my throat
never to be said.
i ignore my thoughts,
never to let them become
spoken words.

someday,
maybe,
i will be brave.
but for now,
my feelings will remain,
kept locked away,
never to see
the light of day.

-Emily Lenore

I felt genuinely connected to this poem, it is beautifully written. The message that stood out to me was one of resilience and perseverance. I felt very inspired by this poem. Many people could benefit from reading it, especially if they sit and reflect on it for a minute. <3 -Zari Stoeker

Rain Boots

by Jacob Michael

Sara could hear the rain hitting the roof of the house from her bed. It was a Saturday morning and all she wanted to do was play outside. Considering it was a summer month, what else was a little girl to do... Sara put on her snug baby blue raincoat and ran to her mom to ask if she could go outside and play, her mom said, "Sure honey but its pouring outside so I'll go with you, let me just grab my coat before we-. Honey, where are your boots?" Her mom said staring at Sara's bare feet. Sara realized her mistake and without a word, charged into her room to look for her rain boots. Under her bed, closet, toy bins, and even book shelf. The boots were nowhere to be found. "I can't find them, she mumbled to her mom.

Sara's mom then went on a hunt for the boots. Sara shadowed her mom's every move hoping her mom would find them like she always uncovered a missing toy or fixed something that was broken around the house. Mom could do anything in the world! usually. But after some time, mom came up empty handed. "Honey we can't go out there with out your boots. Last time you got a cold." her mom finished. "But maybe we can for just a little bit. Please?" Sara said staring up at her mom, pleading. Her mom sighed, "Not now honey. If the rain stops, then we can play later.", mom crouched down to Sara preparing a last word, "Ok?", "Fine." Sara said biting her lip and sauntering back in the direction of her room.

She entered her room and closed her door with a slam. Tears began to flood onto her cheeks as she climbed up on her bed. Laying down, Sara peered out her window, and watched the rain drops on the window pane fall, merging with others to create larger raindrops. The next thing Sara remembered was the noise of her door opening and her mom saying, "Honey, the rain stopped. Wanna go play?" She didn't realize she fell asleep. But when she rose to look at her mom she was laying in her bed listening to the rain hit the roof of the house.

When Sara sat up she wasn't in her baby blue rain coat anymore. Instead, she was laying in her pajamas as she was just this morning. She jumped out of bed and put on her rain coat. Running to her mom she began to plead. "Mom I know you said we have to wait but can we just go outside for a few minutes?" Her mom ignored her this time. Acting as if Sara didn't even exist. She approached her mom and tugged on the sleeve of her shirt. "Mom?"

Sara said. "What?" her mom said with a snip. "Can we go ou-" Before Sara could finish, her mom interrupted, "No we can't today. Its all she wants to do. How about you take this and I'll think about it."

Her mom handed her a small see through plastic cup, "Whats this?" Sara asked with a wrinkled brow. "Your pills, you got a cold from going outside the last time." Her mom said without looking at her. "Take them." Sara attempted to but spit them out on the floor. "They are too big." Sara said trying not to close her mouth to taste the chalkiness of the pills. Her mom flailed, and after some time, produced another small see through cup; But this time with an extra, slightly bigger cup filled with water. "Take them." Her mom said now in a cruder tone. Sara put the pills in her mouth and grabbed the water cup, the pills hit her teeth and each other, creating a clicking noise that only she heard. She took a large sip of water and the pills washed away.

"You do this every day, its not so hard." Her mom said still not looking at her. "Every day? What do-", "Ok go back to your room now Sara." Mom blurted out, Interrupting Sara. Sara returned to her room with her head down and tears falling onto her cheeks. Everyday? I'm not sick everyday. Sara thought walking into her room. She didn't bother closing her door, she just climbed into her bed, not bothering to look outside this time. After a time, Sara was asleep.

When she woke up she, again, heard the sound of rain fall on the roof of the house. In her pajamas, she didn't bother putting on her raincoat. She walked out of her room to find her mom but instead her dad was sitting in the place her mom usually does. "Wheres mom." Sara asked looking around the room. Her dad looked at her and snickered, "Uhm, mom went to get some... groceries. She should be back later so why don't you go back to your room and I'll let her know you asked for her.", Sara took a deep breath, "Can we go outside?" she said staring at her dad's face. Shocked, her dad hopped off his chair and touched her shoulder, "No. uh, ma'am let me take you back to your room." he said while leading Sara back to her room.

"But I want to go outside." Sara whined. "A wanderer" He mumbled. Sara was confused why he wasn't acknowledging her anymore. Whats a wanderer? Sara wondered. Its like her dad was talking to someone else that wasn't there. Entering Sara's room, her dad put her in bed and tucked her in. "I'll let your mom know you asked for her ok?" Her dad said walking toward the door and shutting it behind him. Sara ran to the door and tried to open it. The door was locked. "Dad?" Sara said. No response. "Dad! Wheres mom at?" Sara said banging on the door. For a time Sara continued this behavior until eventually, the next thing she remembered was waking up in her bed; But this time there were no sounds of rain hitting the roof, just a man sitting at the foot of her bed.

The man looked familiar to Sara but she couldn't tell why. "Where's mom?" Sara said nervously. The man peered up from a clipboard he had in his hands. "She passed away Sara." the man said with a deadpan expression. Sara began to sob uncontrollably. "Wha- what about my da-", She tried to speak a couple of times but was interrupted by her own fits of crying. "For fifteen years you've been here Sara." the man continued. "You aren't a little girl, you are

The Works

sixty- five. What you imagine as your childhood home is this nursing home Sara. I am your doctor, Dr. Harivara.” At this point Sara peered up from her wet hands and looked at Dr. Harivara, he was writing something on his clipboard. “Your hallucinations have been recurring much more frequent recently. I will prescribe you a higher dose of memantine as well as add a cholinesterase inhibitor to your prescription. Have you been feeling dizzy at all recently?” Sara realized her mouth tasted sour and was dry, in a scratchy and shakey voice she said “I don’t know.” Dr. Harivara looked down at his clipboard again. “Ok.” he said. “Any bouts of depression, feeling upset, etc?” Dr. Harivara said staring at his clipboard. “I said I don’t know sir.” Sara said on the verge of crying again. Looking up from his clipboard and standing up from Sara’s bed he said, “Ok Sara, if you have any issues with your prescriptions let your nurse know. Otherwise I’ll be in touch with your nurse to see how those hallucinations are, bye bye.”

After Dr. Harivara left, Sara began to sob harder than before. When she stopped and lifted her face out of her hands, She noticed that her hands were pruney. Like she had just taken a long bath. When she looked around her bed it wasn’t her bedroom anymore; But a hospital room that she had never seen before. After what felt like hours of more crying atop her confusion, Sara was exhausted. She laid back down in her bed and soon fell back asleep.

When she woke up this time, she heard the sound of rain falling on the top of her house again. Excited, she flew out of her bed and threw on her baby blue raincoat. With bare feet carrying her forward, she opened the door of her bedroom determined to find her mom and ask if she could go play in the rain for a while.



Self Portrait in Blue

by Joseph Magana

Editor's Pick

Definition

When I'm assertive, you find me condescending.

When I ask for results, I'm demanding.

If I ask for help, you say I'm incompetent.

If I cry, I'm putting on a show.

When I display aptitude, you need to ask a man.

When I admit fault, I'm a defeatist.

However, I'm blessed

knowing

you don't define what I am.

-Kelsey Head

I love the message it conveys. I like the words used to not only amplify the meaning but also get the point across. My favorite line would have to be the last one. It's true others can't define who you are, and you shouldn't let anyone tell your story. -Kylie Lenninger

Hot Wings

Grinning teeth bared wide.

Posing, flexing, strength.

Glass half full. Wings ready to fly,

Drenched in tar.

Crunch, munch, lunch. Tangy sweet goodness. Yummy, tasty, Pain?

Oh no!

Snot, Sweat,

Tears.

When it rains it pours

Milk, Milk, Milk.

The cap is stuck tight.

God forsaken me.

-Login McIntosh



Mechanism

by Alexis McConnell

Dogs

Dogs, one of nature's most skilled animals.

A strong sense of smell; can smell the people around
them or dog treats nearby.

Can catch criminals who have gone awry.

Throwing tennis balls all the time and jumping as high as a
fence. Know how to save people in suspense.

Always sit when told.

Time for their talent to unfold!

-Jace Murphy



Untitled

by Grace Howell



Marooned

by Daroll French

Editor's Pick

Our Little Friends

We give, he takes.

Strong little man.

We put a mountain on his back, make him run.

Fill his lungs with oil and tar

crack his foundation, watch him sink.

What little friends we are,

who screech and howl and claw.

Scratch away his fun and rub in salt.

Slow his mind, let him crawl.

She gives, we take.

Fierce little

woman.

We poke her sky with a thousand little needles

squeeze the pinpricks, watch her light ooze.

Boil her blood and wring her heart.

What little friends we are,

who wriggle and tear and wail.

Twist her words into serpents and push them down her throat.

Swirl metallic red through the eyes.

Take them down winding tunnels.

Don't let him breathe.

Don't let her speak.

Feed them their own sparkling lies through cracked mirrors

and show them souls that warp and refract.

No one will see him when his flesh is chill and swollen.

No one will hear her as she crisps and crackles.

Selfish souls, so beautifully like our own.

don't let him hear don't let her see don't let
them
touch

Silly little lovers.

Don't let them think that love can come without a price.

Their little friends will know,
and we will laugh.

-Jasey Green

This is one of my favorite poems I've ever read and I think it's all because of the last half starting with the line "Don't let him breathe". The way this poem drifts from side to side to speak about the two subjects and then meets in the middle to talk about them together. Apart from the formatting, the imagery is also vivid and fantastic. There is no other poem that makes me feel, react, or imagine how this one does. -Adam Reed



Illinois Landscape

by Alexis McConnell

The Letter

by Jenni Metzler

I have no idea how to start this, so I guess I'm doing this. I don't even know if I'm ever going to give this to you. But my therapist says that writing my feelings down is helpful so here we are. I don't know where to start so I'll start with the first time I told you I liked you.

It was the hardest thing I've done to date, and I've done some crazy things since then. I'm not sure what I expected to happen when I told you that. Maybe I was hoping you'd actually see me for the first time in a long time. I'd been struggling with my crush- that word sounds so juvenile but there's nothing else to call it- since October. For a moment or two I thought we had a chance. I thought you'd get over messing around and come back to me (not that I had you in the first place). But you never did. I even confessed to you a second time.

Nothing; not even a response.

So, I told myself to let it go. People were telling me you weren't someone I should like that much anyways, and it was clear that you were over it. I shoved my feelings deep into the back of my mind and pretended like I was done. I even tried dating someone else. But it was all fake. I only thought I liked him because he was kind of cute and gave me attention. In reality I was trying to distract myself from my feelings for you. I don't understand why they won't go away. I try and try and try, but my mind always comes back to you.

You are the only guy I haven't lost interest in after they showed interest in me. I don't go a day without thinking about you. Your beautiful eyes pulled me in and now I'm drowning. Your soft hair is constantly on my mind, and I just want to be in your arms again.

I'm so sorry for how weird and awkward this must be for you. Just know that I don't expect anything to come of this. All I need is closure and this is the best way I can do that. I feel like there's so much more I'd like to tell you, but my mind is blank now.

Jumping Worlds (Dimension Diver)

I sat

In a room, with a friend, anywhere, nowhere. I smiled, probably
looked a little manic. I couldn't think, but at the same time I was
flooded with thoughts.

He asked me questions I could easily answer, but had no answer to.

Standing on a blank plane
Nothing ahead or behind
Beneath was a rainforest and yet it didn't exist right then
It was calm but not
A coating over everything trying to exist and leaving nothing but a blob of
jelly
As reflective as it was translucent and containing everything felt
Nothing
And the illusion of nothing

I said so. I told him I could feel nothingness, but it wasn't the bad
nothing. It wasn't the abyssal void of complete numbness, no.

It was closer to a structure.

A shield, he suggested. A coating over the things I didn't know how to explain.

The small blob was something else entirely, a show of a lack of everything
supposed to be in that white space.

I stop thinking about that space. I focus on the sheet in front of me, the chairs
in a circle in the room. I don't focus on the thought of speaking,

I'd cease to be in that room with him.

Flickering and fading
Attention drawn by the lack thereof
Lost in thought and staring into the gray sky beyond the white
The shield exists and doesn't
Imagination against a real blank sheet ahead

"Thousand-yard stare, there," he jokes. I'm back,
but I never really left. I was jumping between my eyes and my mind,
I explained as much. I saw him the entire time I couldn't.
Paradoxes. That's explained my mind lately. He knows.

My hands clutch each other and twist, over and over, I wasn't aware
of when that had started. I didn't say that.
He'd worry.

Again
Lost in an invisible labyrinth written flat on a white plane
Where to start
Where to go
Brought back to the chair
Brought back to standing on a blank shield
Switching and fading and flickering
Concepts covering reality

He asked me to think, before I went. Think about why the shield is blank,
and why it's there. It would take a while, but the answer was worth finding, he
said.

I knew the drill, I bade him farewell, I watched him go his way.

And I fell. Not in love, not apart, no.

I fell over.

At least, nearly.

The blank world invaded my vision as he left and I stumbled, staring into nothing.

The shield became more than a platform, swallowing me as I tried to walk.

Last time
Has to be
Can't see
Vision usually helps with walking
Breathe
Music helps
Earbuds have music

I clawed my way back to the surface, and the surface had changed.

In my mind there was a rainforest, vibrant as ever.

I was reaching for a wall, my balance precarious for a long moment.

At least I could properly see now.

The rainforest receded, and its existence felt correct, unblocked. Good. Now to keep the

music on, and not stray back to the imagined places.

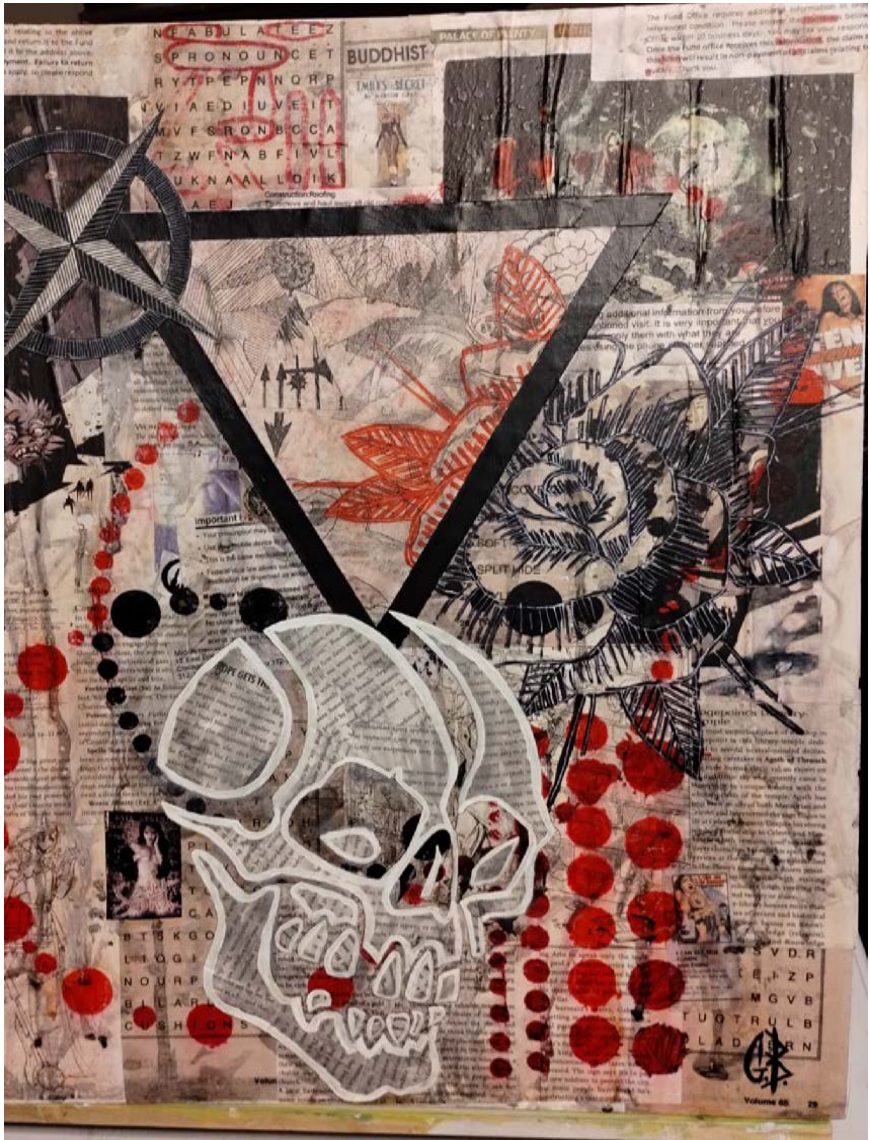
I guessed the shield didn't reduce impacts, it only reduced the danger of those impacts.

Live and learn, I suppose. It kept me going enough.

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I wanted to tell him, about the rainforest and its vibrance. To share that I was
paying
attention now and that there was more than a shield.
I had to wait. He had things to do, and so did I. I knew he'd be proud.

-Loki Gleissner



Pasted Trash

by Darroll French

The Works

Editor's Pick



Fix it

by Alexis McConnell

This piece represents how we can't always put the pieces together. It says to me, no matter how hard you try, meaning the quality and the amount of effort you put in, sometimes it will all never fit together and work out in your favor. It's a part of life that people need to accept, that failure occurs in our greatest works. Great Job! -Hunter Buser

Dog and Rabbit

I will be strong now that you're gone.

I've got to keep going can't worry what others think,

all the time knowing I have to be true to me.

Though it's hard to think they judge success based on some regurgitated mess,
but you know the dog would have caught the rabbit if he didn't stop running.

The dog would have caught the rabbit if he didn't stop running.

And, I know that even when I go to sleep there's a fire that burns inside me.

You know the dog would have caught the rabbit if he didn't stop running.

-Kelsey Head

Florence's Failure

By Austin Adams, Jasey Green, Login McIntosh, and Zari Stoeker

Characters:

Florence- the main character

Linda- mom

Jack- dad

Riley- roommate

Felicity- sister

Lilly- best friend

SCENE 1

SETTING: A college dorm room.

AT RISE: Florence, Linda, and Jack walk into Florence's dorm room carrying boxes and a suitcase

LINDA:

Oh, this is nice. Is it just you staying here?

FLORENCE:

I have a roommate. I think their name is Riley.

LINDA:

Couldn't it be bigger?

FLORENCE:

The room is big enough for two people.

LINDA:

Is Riley a boy's name or a girl's name?

FLORENCE:

It's a girl's dorm, mom.

LINDA:

The room is a little cramped, don't you think so, Jack?

JACK:

It's not that bad. It fits two beds.

LINDA:

I can't wait to see the new bed sheets on your bed.

JACK:

Let's get them on out and get you unpacked then.

(The room is unpacked. Linda and Jack have left, and Florence is admiring her new room when Riley walks in)

RILEY:

Hey, roomie! I love the bed sheets.

FLORENCE:

Thanks, my mom got them for me.

RILEY:

Really? Where'd she find them?

FLORENCE:

Maybe Portugal? Or Dubai. I'm not sure.

RILEY:

Oh.

(Beat)

That's nice. What's your major?

FLORENCE:

I'm not sure yet. I'm just taking a bunch of classes to see what sticks. What about you?

RILEY:

Economics. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it yet, but I love numbers.

FLORENCE:

I don't think that's really my thing, but I respect that. Are you in any extracurriculars?

RILEY:

Um... track and field, cross country, softball, basketball, golf, chess club, science club

(Riley takes a deep breath)

...and I'm a mathlete and president of the student government. I've had to cut back this semester.

FLORENCE:

Wow, I'm never going to see you am I?

RILEY:

Probably not. But here is my number, and you can DM me on Instagram if you need me for anything.

SCENE 2

(Florence trudges into her dorm, and throws her bag aside.)

FLORENCE:

Why did I do this?

(She goes to her desk, closes all tabs on her laptop, and slams it shut)

Why? I can't do this.

(She throws herself on her bed)

(A faint static noise begins to play)

RILEY:

(Enters the dorm room and gets straight to her work without a peep)

FLORENCE:

Can I talk with you?

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RILEY:

I wish I could, but I'm very busy. Have all these papers to get through. Maybe sometime later?

FLORENCE:

Okay then. I-I'll just leave you be in here.

(Florence goes into the hallways and lets Riley work in privacy)

I started off great, and now it's all slipping away. I can't do this, b-but I can't give up on Mom and Dad like that. Right? They'd be upset if I just backed out now.

(Florence sees her sister's calling her and picks up)

Yeah?

FELICITY:

How's college going?

FLORENCE:

(False joyful attitude)

Fine. I'm just so busy having fun here. Mom and Dad are doing well? There are just lots of classes to go through in so little time.

FELICITY:

Are you sure? You don't sound that happy.

FLORENCE:

Yes. I'm fine. 100% excellent.

FELICITY:

Wonderful! Are you able to answer Mom's call tonight?

FLORENCE:

Yeah.

FELICITY:

Great, talk to you later.

(The phone line goes dead)

FLORENCE:

I can't let them know; I can never let anyone know.

(The static grows louder)

(Florence declines a call from Lilly, who leaves a voicemail)

LILLY:

Bitch, what's your problem? Are you so busy at college that you can't answer your best friend? I need to talk to you, and I need to hear your voice. Call me back when you remember how important I am to you. I hope you're doing okay; love you.

(Beep)

FLORENCE:

It's totally fine... Everything's just great... Me, and my work... Just me and my work...

(Florence has thrown papers, clothes, and wrappers everywhere)

RILEY:

Okay. I'm just kind of worried, you know?

(Florence ignores her as she can only hear the static)

FLORENCE:

I just can't do it. I'm a failure. I'm hopeless.

(Florence begins to cry softly, huddling into a small ball, rocking back and forth on her bed)

Why'd I do this? Why? This was so stupid of me. I'm the most useless sister ever.

FLORENCE:

(waking up, crying in her room softly)

Leave me alone, sister. Please. I don't want to talk.

(Florence keeps declining calls from her sister and further destroying her room)

I can't do this, I can't do this.

(As she heard Felicity come down the hall to her dorm, she knocked on the door, waiting for a response, but got nothing after many attempts)

SCENE 3

SETTING: Florence's dorm room

(Florence sits on the floor, staring out at the audience blankly. The room is a mess, and the static is loud and constant. Her phone is ringing.)

(Knock knock knock)

FELICITY:

Florence, I know you're in there. You either come open this door, or I call someone to kick it in.

(Florence doesn't move, and the static gets louder)

FELICITY:

Florence. I don't have time for this bullshit right now. It's a five-hour drive, and I need to pick up my kids at 6.

(Florence drags herself up and opens the door. Felicity immediately gives her a crushing hug and then draws back. The static gets quieter)

FELICITY:

(Angrily)

Where have you been? I thought Mom and Dad were sending you to college, not into a black hole.

FLORENCE:

I've been busy.

FELICITY:

Are you so busy that you can't spare a minute to take one of Mom's calls? Or Lilly's? You're ignoring people who care about you and worry about you.

FLORENCE:

There's just been so much, Felicity. I just-

(Florence starts crying. Felicity guides Florence to her bed, where they sit, and she holds her)

FLORENCE:

(frantic and still crying)

I've been hearing static, Felicity. I can't think through it. I have so much work,

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and so many responsibilities, and the teachers expect so much from me. I've been having nightmares every night about screwing up and failing all my classes. I only have a C in advanced chemistry, and it's dropping every week. I know Mom and Dad want me to stay-

FELICITY:

Then don't.

FLORENCE:

What?

FELICITY:

If college is making you this miserable, then drop out.

FLORENCE:

I... I can't! What will Mom and Da-"

(Felicity sits back and interrupts Florence)

FELICITY:

Mom and Dad don't give a flying fuck about what you do in life. They just want you to be happy. This-

(Felicity waves at the dorm)

This is not making you happy. Come home if that's what you want.

FLORENCE:

I feel like a failure.

FELICITY:

Just because you've failed this one thing doesn't mean you are a failure. Failures don't work this hard and keep their chins up for as long as you have. You tried something, and it's not working out right now. Mom and Dad won't be happy about the money, but they care about you more.

(Felicity hugs Florence again)

So come home and feel like a failure around people who love you.

SCENE 4

(Florence sits at the dinner table with her mom, dad, sister, niece, and nephew)

LINDA:

Jack, do you have to chew so loudly? I can't hear myself think.

JACK:

Sorry, Linda.

(he chews significantly faster)

LINDA:

Felicity, how are these two doing in school?

FELICITY:

They're in first and second grade, Mom. Ask me again in a few years.

LINDA:

Sorry, sorry. I just want the best for my grandkids.

(Florence's phone rings)

FLORENCE:

I'm going to take this, excuse me.

(she goes into the living room and sits on the couch to answer it)

FLORENCE:

Hey Lilly, I missed you.

LILLY:

Yeah, long time no chat. That tells me college didn't go so well for you. When can we meet up and talk about everything?

FLORENCE:

I'm honestly not sure. I'm gonna need some time to mentally recover from everything that went on, but I'm down to try and tell you about some of it over the phone if you have time.

LILLY:

I literally always have time for you. That's what I've been trying to tell you!

FLORENCE:

I know, I know, it's just so hard to ask for help sometimes, you know?

LILLY:

Especially when it's always been in the other room or down the street, right?

FLORENCE:

Yeah, you're probably right. I usually just yell when something goes wrong. It's more challenging to call and admit it, I guess?

LILLY:

Don't worry about it too much. A lot of people struggle with asking for help. You just need to work on knowing your limits and sticking to them before jumping into something that big.

FLORENCE:

College in another state is a pretty big deal, isn't it? Maybe I should've tried harder to take you with me.

LILLY:

(laughs) I wish. But how bad did it get? What was the worst part? The big breaking point that made you come back.

FLORENCE:

Besides being terrified of my sister's reaction if I didn't?

(Lilly says "mhm" and "oh no," lightly laughing at the appropriate times)

I actually don't think I had a breaking point; I'm not sure how far I would've gone if she hadn't come to get me. It just kept building up slowly over my time in that dorm. It didn't help that my roommate was one of the busiest people I've ever met, and she balanced it all perfectly. (She pauses to reflect more on Riley) I wanted to get close to her so badly, but I couldn't hold her back like that. I can tell you more about her another time. (she takes a deep breath) I don't know if I'll tell anyone else about this, but there was this static noise I started to hear. Any other noise or responsibility had to fight hard to be heard, and I lost track of everything. I'd never heard it before, and it was ignorable at first, but as the pressure and loneliness grew, so did the noise. It only started to quiet down when I listened to my sister practically begging me to come home. (she finally takes another breath and is fiddling with the edge of a blanket) And up until you called me, I thought it was gone, but since I said all of this to you, I can actually hear

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even more clearly; I really needed to get that off my chest. (final deep breath)

LILLY:

I'm really glad you felt like you could talk to me about all of that. It seems like there's more you still need to work through. We definitely need to talk face-to-face soon. In the meantime, maybe look for a therapist to keep you on track.

FLORENCE:

Now that you mention it, maybe I should...

LILLY:

Please don't hesitate to call me if you need anything; there's nothing wrong with needing help. I love you, Florence.

FLORENCE:

Love you too, Lilly.

(Blackout)

THE END

Untitled

I may never know your favorite color,
Or how you like your toast,
If you prefer a view,
Of the mountains or the coast.
I may never know your strength,
Or if you crumble when you're weak,
If you prefer silence,
Instead of hearing someone speak.
Among the things I may never know,
The saddest of all is the one thing I do,
That we existed at the same time,
And I never told you I loved you.

-Kara Ellis



Back cover art by Tyler Sharp



Sauk Valley
Community College