

LEGACY



unspoken

XVIII

2021

UNSPOKEN

Legacy XVIII 2021

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Sarah Belles
Adam and Eve
Watercolor, Ink, and Acrylic
First Appeared in 2015

Acknowledgments

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We are also very grateful to RACC faculty who foster intellectual curiosity and creativity in their students and encourage them to share their work. A special thank you goes out in particular to Creative Writing professors, Joey Costello and Stephanie Anderson, and current and former art faculty, who have always supported *Legacy*. We also thank Jamica R. Andrews, Student Life Coordinator, for working behind the scenes, creating a safe space at RACC for clubs to exist.

We are grateful for the contributions of Nicholas Fulwood who served as Editor-in-Chief for much of last year. While not listed here individually, we also want to express our gratitude to the former *Legacy* members who participated during the initial development of this year's journal. We also want to extend a special *thank you* to Kha Nguyen, *Legacy's* former layout/design editor, for his tremendous support in bringing our ideas to life. His input was invaluable and we want to take a moment to recognize him for supporting the work of the journal with his guidance.

This period of our college lives has been filled with many downs, but our time at *Legacy* is worth it. Putting together a publication is much harder than we thought—but much more rewarding than we could have ever imagined. We feel accomplished and for that we are thankful to those who have been a part of us getting here. A special *thank you* goes to Dr. Bahar Diken, our faculty advisor, for supporting the creation of *Legacy* during this complex time and for her continuous commitment to the success of our journal. Finally, we dedicate this work to all RACC students whose work we are honoring and celebrating here. We hope this volume, limited as it might be, continues their tradition of excellence.

To the Reader

This year has provided us with an unusual amount of space apart from each other and made us wonder how to fill in that space and connect with others. Maybe now, more than ever, we realize, we need to turn to the arts to communicate from afar. There are voices of all sorts that are yet to be shared—unspoken. Voices that are meant to be shouted or whispered. And we, the staff at *Legacy*, wanted to create a safe space to amplify those voices and messages—and extend an invitation to the reader to join in.

Unspoken is often defined as merely the absence of speech. And as such, it makes way for the negative, bringing “insignificant” or “unworthy” to the forefront. And ignored. Or it implies unspeakable things (surrounded with quotation marks). And avoided. Thus, the unspoken remains unsaid. But we have settled on it as our theme, because we see that it actually offers unasked opportunities. As it is yet unsaid or unvoiced, the unspoken comes with surprising possibilities for connection, empathy, and perhaps wonder.

We are thrilled with the pieces that make up this year’s *Legacy*—pieces that stand alone yet come together within these pages creating a sense of togetherness. Inspiring, vulnerable, and sometimes hilarious, but always worthy enough to share—they make us feel at home. Open, non-judgmental, and unafraid—they make the unspoken visible. We have created this year’s *Legacy* to do just that: to render the unspoken, allowing student writers, poets, and artists to become present within our journal. With no fears of judgment stopping their hands. Leaving nothing important unsaid.

The Art of Gift Giving

Nicholas Fulwood

If I had to present a present worth presenting,
I would present you with your life,
Laid out like a constellation,
With vast seas of black,
And beautiful pinpricks of light,
But then you would be overwhelmed,
Crushed by moments.

If I had to teach you a lesson worth teaching,
I would teach you how to learn,
With every breath you take,
How to adapt and change,
But I would rob you of the true lesson,
Of the pain and the wonder.

If I could sing you a song worth singing,
It would be sweet,
A tear-stained smile,
The lilting curve of the melody,
Would match the curve of your face,
But then,
You might sing it too much,
Lost in the love on your lips.

If I could steal something worth stealing,
I would rob you of your fear and doubt,
And watch,
As you stumble blindly off the cliff,
And I would cry.

If I could create something worth creating,
It would be a shield,
To protect you in battle,
But then,
Who would I compare scars with?

If I must give a gift worth giving,
And give it I must,
I would give us some time,
To sit,
And talk for a while.

Seeking Self-Worth



What makes us doubt ourselves?

Alexis Harris

I found myself listening to the confessions of a friend who had my utmost affection. I had always viewed her as the embodiment of kindness—and admired how she had dealt with the darkest parts of her life and how well she carried herself despite all that she had faced. I listened solemnly as she described her experiences and spoke about herself but was quite startled to hear the word “broken.” I reeled at the thought of anyone calling her broken. Yet, I could tell from her story that a part of her believed what others had the gall to call her. I struggled to find something to say to shake that doubt she kept with her. I was baffled that she could not see in herself what I did: a young woman with a heart of boundless compassion, who never criticized others for their innocent flaws. I could not understand how someone like her, someone with the inner strength of an army, could affirm such insecurities about herself.

I have seen this doubt, this devaluation of one’s self in so many that I wonder how people with seas of differences that separate them all seem to break down to the same doubt. I wonder why the closest people to them, themselves, fail to see the best parts about them. And as I think about this doubt of one’s self, I remember another friend who sits close to my heart. I remember him arguing with me whenever I praise him, denying my compliments and deflecting my admiration. He has been by my side through my best and my worst, consoling and comforting me when I falter, and cheering me on when I succeed. I can see his intelligence and ambition clearly even through his storms of indecisiveness. I can see his love and compassion even when his consideration for others causes him to stumble haltingly in his words or actions. With these faults, however, come beautiful traits that create his worth to me.

Yet, he questions why I would spend my time with him when, in his eyes, I could easily be spending it with anyone else. He often breaks off into a tangent of praise for me only to contrast himself to all the good that he sees in me. I can’t help but get frustrated. How could he not value himself like the very air he breathed if he thought so highly of somebody like me?

How could I possibly compare to him? I, cold and distant with walls scaling towards the sky and standards that soared even higher, someone who is highly analytical with too few emotions and not enough smiles—who, when her friend confided in her on such a sensitive experience, failed to see the sense in words of comfort. I suppose I doubt myself in the same way at most times.

I preach that we should value our selves more than what others think of us, yet in practice, I find myself often questioning how others see me. As much as I encourage myself to see the best within me, there is, in my quietest moments, a shackle of doubt that impedes this resolve. This doubt, like a lonesome ghost too fond of company like its own, always visits me when no one else is around. Even in the company of others, the whispers of doubt haunt me, and I become uncertain of my ability to fit in with those around me.

Yes, I doubt myself. I try—but often cannot keep up with the emotionally vivid people that I have noticed myself befriending. Would they eventually grow tired of accommodating to my apparent apathy? And fear sinks in during these doubtful moments. If I question my worth, as others do their own, I must consider then that maybe they too wonder at my doubts about myself. Perhaps it would frustrate them if they knew how uncomfortable their compliments sometimes make me feel. If I can so easily give voice

to my doubts, however, then maybe with effort, I can learn to hear their praises, and perhaps see in myself what others do, embracing all my faults, all my virtues, and all that lies between.

Perhaps this universal doubt that we all seem to share connects us more deeply than routine interactions. Yet, there often remains a distance of sorts, making it difficult to connect. There are, however, those few people who have managed to build bridges and make connections with me across the rifts that frequently feel isolating. They are happy, honest, giving, loyal, compassionate, sympathetic—most of which I do not believe I deserve to be labeled with. But they believe I do. I find these beautiful people doubting what shines clearly to me and all those around them. How could they not see what we do? How could I not see what they see in me?

I wonder why we feel so compelled to stare at the features of ourselves that we feel most insecure about—why we often let one of our biggest and most intimidating obstacles be ourselves. What makes us doubt ourselves? I can't imagine that we were this hesitant to claim our worth from the start. Maybe it was the pressure and expectations pushed on us all as we grew up; maybe it was the trauma from bad experiences or the people that surrounded us at one time or another? I can't say that I know the answer. However, I wholeheartedly believe that we all have worth and that if anybody should put effort into seeing it, it is us ourselves first and foremost.

Regardless of origin, we all have a place in this world and our actions have the potential to affect others. Within an expansive, fast-paced world, however, our importance can become easily muddled and quickly be forgotten. Struggling to keep up with a world that disregards whatever our past experiences

may have been, a world that expects us to keep in stride despite all turmoil, it is not always easy to keep sight of our significance—and it goes unnoticed at times. It is only when we slow down and take the time to see it, can we begin to appreciate not only ourselves but the significance that our actions have for those around us. We have weight in others' lives and they have weight in ours. If we can see the beauty in the people around us and, surely, if we try to notice their importance in our lives, we can learn to acknowledge our own worth. Yes, this world speeds endlessly on. I want to believe, however, that if I give myself the time to slow down—take a moment and push my doubts aside, then I will see that I have worth in the grand design. I just need to look more closely to appreciate the detail.



Cheyenne Getz
Calm
Pencil

One Wee Small Hour

Molly-Kay Miller

On chilly dark nights,
when clouds enshroud the Moon
in a velvet cloak,
the icicles hang
in the trees with foreboding.


When we are very still,
we can hear the hooves of unicorns
and sense the presence of gargoyles.

As the Sun breaks at dawn
making crimson clouds,
the gargoyles set the pace,
some chasing, some racing
the unicorns away into time.



Alexis Surdesky
Dioskouroi
Ink

Two Ships



The vast field of blue stretched
out around the ship all the way to
the horizon.

Alex Lupold

Ted clambered up the main mast of the *Leviathan*, a piece of hardtack and a mug of water clutched in one hand. The massive, dirty white expanse of the main sail billowed out to his right until he passed the top of it and had an unobstructed view of the Atlantic Ocean. The vast field of blue stretched out around the ship all the way to the horizon. It never failed to impress Ted. *Two weeks ago*, he thought, *I was cleaning a stable in Boston. Now I'm on my way to England!*

He popped his head into the crow's nest where a sailor named Martin was stationed. "Martin, lunch!" Ted called, but there was no response. As he climbed all the way into the nest, he saw that Martin was standing at the port side, looking through the spyglass.

Ted was about to ask what Martin saw, but Martin dropped the spyglass from his eye, yelled, "Ship ahoy!" and frantically dashed past Ted, ignoring his lunch and heading down the mast as fast as he could.

Ted set down the food. His curiosity had been piqued. He placed the spyglass to his eye and scanned the horizon until he saw a ship heading toward them. He focused on it and froze when he saw its flag: the skull and crossbones.

"Mother of God," Ted whispered. He stared at the black flag blowing in the breeze, seeming to mock the English flag hanging from the *Leviathan's* mast just above Ted's head.

Pirates.

Down on the *Leviathan's* deck shouting arose, breaking through Ted's haze of disbelief. Martin was yelling, "Cap'n! Pirates, port side!" The deck burst into a clamor as the crew heard him.

Ted scrambled down the mast. As he dropped the last few feet to the deck, one voice cut through the noise.

"Hold yer damn tongues!"

Captain Oscar Barn was standing on the poop deck at the ship's stern, scowling. "This ship," the captain bellowed, "is not about to be taken by a cluster of sea-rats with a black flag. I swear by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph that we will see our destination. We will prevail over these scums, reach England, and by God we will make it back to Boston after that. We *will* see the colonies again. Now prepare for battle!"

The crew let out a unified "aye-aye!" and began to rush about as Captain Barn shouted orders.

"Open the gun ports. Prep the guns. Every man, arm yourself." As Ted ran for the armory, the captain was still yelling. "Conrad, Martin, get up in the rigging and open up the topsails. We need every bit of speed this blasted breeze can give us. John, get up in the nest and watch those bloody thieves. And someone get me some damn rum!"

Jimmy the cook was distributing weapons in the armory. As he passed Ted a flintlock pistol and a cutlass, along with some powder and shot, Ted's mind raced in a panic. *What am I doing? I'm fifteen. I've never been in anything more intense than a fistfight, and now I'm about to fight pirates? Although he never would admit it, there was a tiny piece of Ted that was regretting joining the Leviathan's crew. My first sea voyage, and the ship I'm on is attacked by pirates. What terrible luck. He tried to think positively. I've been taught how to fight. I can use a sword and pistol. Maybe we'll outrun the pirates and there won't even be a battle. Unfortunately, pessimism fought back. I'm no soldier. And we're a cargo ship! We're big and heavy and have a cargo hold full of lumber. They'll catch us. We'll have to fight. How can I do that? I've never killed anyone. I don't want to kill anyone.*

Ted stuck his sword and pistol in his belt and took a deep breath. He smelled wood and tar, salt and

gunpowder, sweat and the faint odor of rum. He tried to calm his frantic thoughts. *I've never killed anyone, but now I'll have to. It's us or them, and both sides will be fighting their damndest to see themselves to victory. I have to do my part.*

It didn't make him feel any better, but at least his thoughts had calmed down. As he headed back up to the deck, he grabbed some rum for the captain.

When Ted joined the captain to deliver the rum, he saw that the pirate ship was much closer. A *slump* came from above as the last of the *Leviathan's* topsails opened, but Captain Barn shook his head. "Won't be enough," he told Ted. "The wind is in their favor, and we're laden with cargo. They'll catch us soon." The captain looked Ted in the eye. "Boy, I'll need my sword and musket."

Ted saluted. "Aye, Cap'n." He rushed off the poop deck and opened a door, headed for the captain's quarters, hesitating slightly. Captain Barn's cabin had always been off-limits to the crew, but now Ted had been sent there. He opened the door and entered.

The cabin's interior was remarkably simple. Captain Barn was a pragmatic, no-nonsense man, and this philosophy clearly extended to his living space. Some captains treated themselves to frill and fancy things, but Captain Barn only had necessities: a bed, a desk with several charts, a sextant, and a compass, a few chests, and his sword and musket. Ted grabbed the weapons and took them to their owner.

After checking his musket and loading it, Captain Barn took his sword and strapped the scabbard to his left hip. "You know what this is, boy?" he asked. Ted shook his head. The captain drew the huge sword, its four-foot blade gleaming in the sunlight. "Your Celtic friend Conrad would probably recognize it. This is a claymore, a weapon from the highlands. The Celts are

a damn stubborn lot, but they know how to make a blade." With the hilt included, the sword was almost five feet long. A lesser man would struggle just to balance it, but Captain Barn stood well over six feet tall and raised the sword over his head with no visible effort. "*Leviathan!*" he thundered. "To battle!"

The crew erupted in a storm of battle cries. Captain Barn picked up the mug of rum with his free hand and raised it to his crew and then tossed it back all at once. "Let's give these sea-roaches a taste of lead and steel. Those blighters are nearly in range. Battle stations!"

Ted grabbed Conrad. "Come on. Let's get to a cannon."

The portly, red-headed Conrad nodded. "Aye! Let's give these buggers a good beating." His thick Celtic accent mangled the words as he spoke quickly, but Ted understood him. They ran down to the gun deck and joined the other men who were prepping the guns. Ted made sure their cannon had powder and then retrieved a small torch from a man who was lighting them and passing them out to crewmembers. While he did this, Conrad hefted a cannonball and lugged it to the mouth of the barrel, where he sent it rolling down to the powder. Ted glanced out the gun port but couldn't see the pirate ship, so he ran up on deck to check its position.

As Ted was emerging from below, John up in the crow's nest screamed, "Cap'n! They've got a cannon on the forecastle!" He had barely finished the sentence when there was a *boom* and a cannonball hurtled past Ted, smashing through the railing on both sides of the deck and splashing into the water on the starboard side. Ted felt the wind as the ball blasted past him and he jerked back, stumbling and falling onto the deck's hard wooden planks.

The sea makes all men equal.

As Ted scrambled back up, Captain Barn swore: “Damn filthy sea-dogs! Blow holes in my ship, will you?” Then he shouted, “Brace yourselves men!” and spun the wheel as fast as it would go.

The *Leviathan* tacked quickly to starboard, making such a sharp turn that Ted and some of the other men lost their balance and tumbled over. Captain Barn had turned the ship so that it was facing the same direction as the pirate ship was. This presented the much smaller target of the stern to the pursuing ship. Captain Barn looked around and saw Ted near the hatch to the gun deck. “Ted!” the captain yelled. “Let the lads know that now those scums will have to come right next to us. Be ready to fire when their broadside is aligned with ours!”

“Aye Cap’n!”

Ted ran back down to the gun deck. “Fellas!” he called. “They’ll be coming up next to us, broadside to broadside. Whatever side they’re next to will fire when the ships are aligned.” The crew responded with various affirmations. As Ted rejoined Conrad, he felt strange. Something he had heard an old sailor say years before back in Boston popped into his mind: *The sea makes all men equal.* Ted had wondered what it meant then. He now understood. *On this ship, I’m on equal footing with men over twice my age. No matter how old we are, we’re all equal in that we’re all sailors.*

A tense silence fell over the *Leviathan* as the pursuing ship grew nearer. And the silence amplified every sound. The ship’s creaking of wood and rope had never seemed louder. Someone sneezed and everyone else jumped in surprise. Conrad was very softly humming an unfamiliar tune. Ted fiddled with a short piece of rope that had been lying near his cannon.

The shouts and jeers of the pirate crew eventually drifted into hearing range. Ted looked out the gun port and saw that the pirate ship was coming up on the *Leviathan*’s port side, the side he and Conrad were stationed on. Ted hurriedly checked the cannon’s fuse and made sure one more time that the barrel was aligned with the gun port. When he looked up, he saw that the pirates had caught up to them. There was a gun port directly across from Ted and Conrad’s, and Ted could see two men in the same positions as them. Ted froze. *I can’t do this.*

From above came the sound of both captains yelling “Fire!”

It was like Ted was watching himself do it. He watched as his hand lit the fuse of its own accord and then he and Conrad ducked down, covering their ears. It turned out that the *Leviathan*’s crew had been just a bit faster than the pirates to fire their cannons.

Boomboombaboomboombabbaboom.

Ted felt his bones shake as the cannons went off. One cannon jerked back and shoved him over, causing him to knock his head on the deck and dazing him for a few seconds. Ted shook his head and straightened up, looking through the smoke and out the gun port. The cannon that had been aimed at them was wrecked, its gunners nowhere to be seen.

“My God,” Ted whispered.

Conrad was also staring out at the port. For once, the talkative Celt was silenced.

A single word echoed in Ted's head as he looked at the wreck of pirates' cannon: *equals*.

The gun deck was stirred into action by the sound of shouts from above. The pirates were boarding the *Leviathan*.

"Ready your weapons boys!" someone yelled. The gun deck crew charged up from below, Ted hastily drawing his sword. The melee had begun.

As the gun deck's crew emerged from below, Captain Barn took the offensive on the pirates. He shouted, "Get off my ship you filthy bastards!" and left the wheel, swinging his claymore and cutting a pirate down. The captain dove into the fracas, a sight which lit a fire under Ted. He yelled a wordless battle cry and charged, using his sword to block a pirate's blade. The man glared at him and bared his teeth, a yellow patch over his unruly beard. Summoning up memories of his sword-fighting lessons, Ted mentally recited the moves as he executed them. *Block. Parry. Stab. Block. Slash*. The slash connected, slicing the pirate's leg. Blood leaked onto the deck and as the pirate stumbled, Ted steeled himself and drove his cutlass into the man's gut. With a groan, the pirate toppled over. As he went to yank his sword out, another pirate charged Ted, and Ted reacted instinctively. He pulled his pistol from his belt and fired. The shot hit the pirate in the chest, knocking him back over the railing and into the sea.

Ted stood still in the middle of the battle. He looked around, feeling as if it was in slow-motion. Captain Barn was dueling a pirate claymore-on-musket. Martin dispatched a man by cutting his throat. Jimmy was stabbed from behind, the blade sticking out of his stomach. Conrad was fending off a pirate competently, but another pirate was coming up behind him.

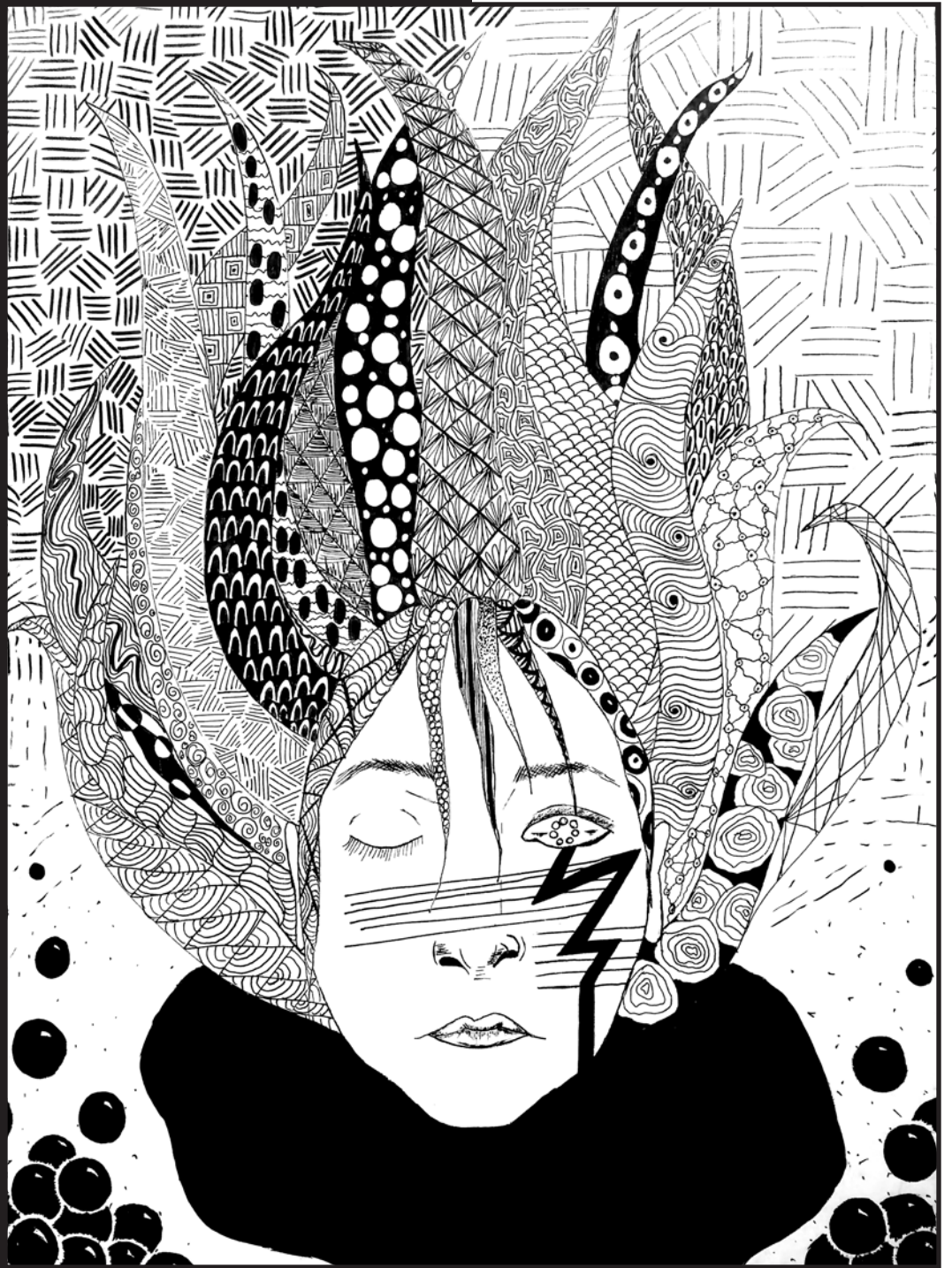
With a yell, Ted ran to his friend and intercepted the sneak attack, blocking it with the muzzle of his pistol. *Slice*. He cut the pirate's wrist, causing the man to drop his sword. Ted and Conrad dispatched their opponents at the same time.

Conrad turned to Ted. "Oi! Thanks mate!" Ted started to respond, but a bellow sounded from behind them. They whirled around and saw a huge man charging them, holding a hatchet in the air. Just before he crushed them, there was the sound of gunfire and the man's head snapped back, a hole bored through his forehead. Ted's head whipped around and he saw Captain Barn holding his still-smoking musket in his right hand. His claymore was still clutched in his left hand. He must have fired the gun one-handed and hit his target. Ted was amazed.

Captain Barn nodded at Ted and Conrad and swung his sword and lopped a pirate's arm off. The raider fell over, and Captain Barn ran and stepped on his back, launching himself in the air. As he jumped, he tossed the musket aside and gripped his sword with both hands. In the instant, Ted saw the target.

The pirate captain turned and saw Captain Barn charging. Captain Barn roared at the brigand, the raised claymore flashing in the sun as he leaped toward his rival. He landed on his feet directly in front of the pirate captain and slammed the massive sword down, cleanly removing the pirate captain's head from his shoulder.

The battle came to a stand-still, all eyes on Captain Barn. He kicked the severed head over the railing and pointed his sword toward the pirate's vessel and bellowed, "Get your filthy thieving pirate assess off my ship!"



Ruth Mitchell
Distractions
Ink on Canvas and Acrylic

The pirates fled, abandoning the *Leviathan* and scurrying back to their ship. As the *Leviathan* turned back on course and the pirate ship sailed in the opposite direction, Captain Barn kicked the pirate leader's headless corpse. "Send these greedy rats to the depths." Together the crew heaved the pirate bodies over the edge. Nine pirates had been killed, while the *Leviathan* lost six sailors. The sailors were given coffins before being lowered into the water. Ted stared at the bodies. Jimmy, Bill, Aaron, Jack, Sam, and Joe. He hadn't known any of them very well, but their losses still hit him hard. *The sailor's life isn't just about being on the ocean and running a ship. Sometimes we have to fight. And die.*

After the bodies were taken care of, Captain Barn ordered, "Martin, pour every man a ration of rum." He then turned to the men, each now with a cup of rum in his hand and raised his own. "I drink to you, my steadfast and victorious crew, and to the six who gave their lives for this ship. May they see God in Heaven." He raised his claymore over his head and thundered, "*Leviathan, I drink to you!*"

The crew all raised their rum and shouted "*Leviathan!*" The ship drank as one.

When he had swallowed the last of his rum, Ted looked out over the sea, where the pirate ship was a dot in the distance. He hoped that they were drinking to their own fallen brethren. *I guess that's what it really means. The sea makes all men equal. We lost shipmates, and so did the pirates. The pirates killed people, and so did we. So did I. We're the same.*



Annadore Fern
Shakespearean Flaw
 Watercolor and Ink
 First Appeared in 2018



Alexis Harris
Untitled
Digital

Sonnet of the Storm

Austin Graczyk

The quickest flash of heat. Behind, above.
A newborn bolt, a Summer's grand return.
A storm to shake the sleeping rain of love
Forgot, from fallow seasons sick with spurn.
I never thought I'd feel this way again,
Since Winter wipes warm lightning from its sky.
If storms are ardor's reawak'ning, then,
The honest truth is: Better I should die.
To see the light but never feel the heat
And yearn that lightning strike me where I stand
To crave an immolation, clean and sweet
Will always be my one, unmet demand.
I wait, awoken by the storm, and pray
That lightning and that love burn me away.



Sandra Eve McElroy

Fear

Pencil




Cheyenne Getz

Clown

Pencil

Cage Match



Her eyes snap open, bright yellow irises with pinpoint pupils taking over most of what's inside and looking entirely wrong in a face that's still human.

Austin Graczyk

The night air is so thick you can't draw a deep enough breath. The wood railing under your hands feels damp enough to split, but you don't take your hands off it. Off the porch to your left—it would be to the right, if you were facing the bar from the empty country road—is the continuous sound of electric snaps and pops from the bug zapper.

You hear the muffled sounds of too-deep barks and yips coming from behind you—under the basement, in the pit. It's a few nights before the full moon. The fights always hit a fever pitch as the drugs and the moonlight brawl to decide which one will take control of the new pups.

You fish in the breast pocket of your flannel for a cigarette, but one, two, three—all matches fizzle and eventually snap as you try to light them in this humidity. You step off the porch to your left and into the pool of blue light.

The gravel feels pasty and hot, even through your boots.

You manage to scatter the assorted gnats and mosquitoes away as you lean your face in and aim the cigarette through the thin wire grating. A second later, you pull away, an orange light between your lips and the taste of vanilla smoke blown back into the air.

As quickly as you scatter them, the bugs line back up to die.

Four nights prior, there had been a knock on the door of your room. When you opened it, the normal noise of music and drunken customers came up from the bar, and Douglas walked in, his hair closer to white than silver, now, after the past few months.

"Tell me you have something," you said as you shut the door and locked the world out again.

He rubbed the back of his neck and shifted his Buddy Holly glasses up his nose. "I think I'm close.

There are multiple tests running. They should be conclusive by the end of the week."

You let out a bigger sigh than you had expected. "Good. We can't risk getting to another full moon with the kennels so packed. Even if it inhibits the change for just a few hours, we can rotate it through the group."

He shifted on his feet, the edge of his hair shining beneath the single bulb in the center of the room. "If worse comes to worst, we can always move some of them into the pit."

You put a hand over your mouth and then dropped it again.

"I know you don't want them that close to each other, but—"

You raised the same hand at him to cut him off. "Keep working. Then I'll decide what to do. The pit is our last resort, and only for pups. No one too experienced. No one who could try to go 'alpha' on us."

He nodded and made for the door. "Of course. The last thing we need is someone trying to rally them."

"Douglas," you called over your shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Whoever you've been using in the tests—have one of them go up against Lillian tonight."

He turned back to fully face you.

"I want to see how they do. And it's been too long since we've put Lillian into the ring. She needs it—and so do we."

He shrugged. "It's your call. I'll have them set up as the first fight. And I'll pull a new pup for the next tests."

You nodded and turned back around. The bar sounds started and then stopped as he left the room.

As you finish the cigarette and stomp out the butt, you can't help but remember the fight that happened that night. It was always a surprise for the crowd to watch Lillian go from the archetypal grandmother-figure to the most vicious wolf any of them had ever seen.

The pup that Douglas had been testing on never stood a chance. But first-timers had taken the four-to-one odds on her and made it the bar's most profitable night that week.

The door to the warehouse behind the bar opens, and a figure sidles up next to you in the blue light and stands there for a minute.

"Irma," Douglas says.

You look over at him.

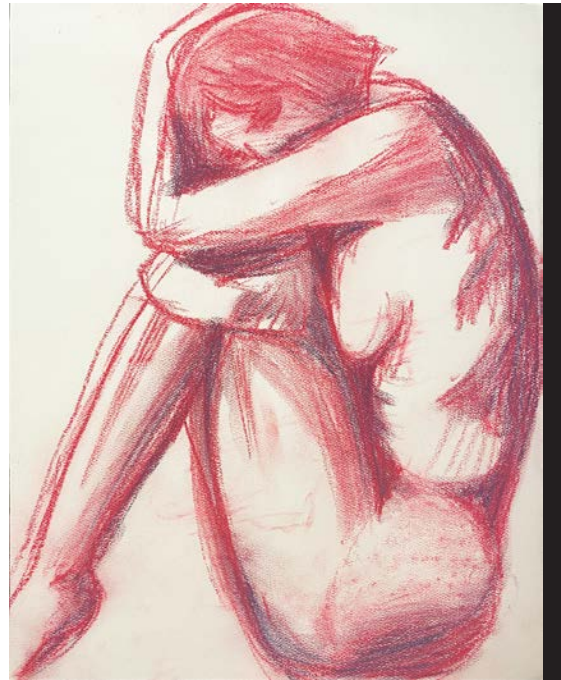
"Come see." He nods towards the warehouse and starts off.

You let out a breath and tear yourself away from the bug zapper. Inside the warehouse, you follow Douglas down a narrow staircase in the back room and through two sets of locked doors. Beyond them, the rooms and hallways change to stark white and medical under fluorescent lights, looking wrong compared to the old country warehouse and solitary bar above.

You always take care not to knock anything over in Douglas' office. It was built for him—human, too small—and packed full of medical samples and textbooks.

He pulls aside the curtain on the wall opposite the door and says, "Could you turn off the light?"

You do and then walk over to look through the window, down into the operating theater. You roll your shoulders at getting near the silver window frame, but in human form it's at least bearable.



Stephanie Villegas Del Valle

Dolorous

Pastel

The man on the right is twisting and writhing on the bed, coarse hair breaking out everywhere.

The operating theater has two gurneys, two unconscious men, built about the same, both with an IV in each arm.

“They’re new ones,” Douglas says. “Left is getting my newest formula. Right is getting saline.”

You watch as an orderly locks cuffs around the wrists and ankles of both men, securing them to their gurneys before he begins the first IV on each of them. After the bags empty, the orderly begins the other two drips and leaves the room.

“And that’s the standard formula to induce transformation,” Douglas finishes.

You lean closer to the glass. The man on the right is twisting and writhing on the bed, coarse hair breaking out everywhere.

The other one stays still.

You hold your breath as ten seconds pass. Thirty. Ninety. You breathe a little again.

Even as the body on the right bulges, elongates, screams in his unconscious state, the one on the left lies silent.

As the transformation on the right ends, and the bones re-fuse and pop into their new sockets, the wrist cuffs strain against the wolf they are holding.

“How strong is this?” you ask Douglas, pointing to the man on the left. “How long will it fight the change?”

“We gave him a higher dose of the blocker than of the transformation serum. It should hold out until both are gone from his system. There’s no way to test it against a natural shift without a full moon, though.”

You nod.

Douglas breaks away and speaks for a minute into a radio, and the orderly comes back in. He gives the wolf two shots from a tranquilizer gun and then wheels the gurney out of sight.

You back away from the window. You stay silent for a minute, even though you can feel Douglas’ eyes on you. “You did it,” you say after a long minute.

“I think so.”

You slip into his office chair, the world spinning just a little around you. “How soon can you make more?” The math starts running in your head. If they could even get a dozen doses before the full moon, the kennels would be just safe enough, and—

Douglas’ voice snaps you out of your thoughts as he turns the lights back on. “I already started production. There should be enough to cover three quarters of the pit wolves within the next two days.”

You blink. “Wow.” There’s another silence until you hear the office clock tick slightly louder than normal. “It’s five. I should go shut down the pit and get some sleep.” You stand to leave but stop and clasp him on the shoulder. “I knew I could count on you.”

He smiles and pats your back as you leave.

The room where you sleep now was your father’s. You had to go through it every night to get to your childhood bedroom. You used to watch through the keyhole as Daddy talked with Douglas after your bedtime.

“I think we should change Lillian’s odds.” The smallish blond doctor pushed his Buddy Holly glasses up his nose. “We could make a killing off newbies.”

Daddy ran a hand through his coarse black hair. “Alright. If we’re doing this, we might as well go all-in on it. Give her three-to-one.”

Things you didn’t understand. Words that didn’t make any sense.

“Alright.” Douglas’ old-fashioned pen, hidden from view but still scratching the paper loud enough to hear.

And, once a month, Daddy would say, “If I’m not back by noon, you know what to do.”

“Check.” Douglas, those nights, would almost never move off the couch, marking the hours aloud, and then passing out until Daddy came home in the morning.

Ever since Momma died, Daddy wouldn’t read you stories about the Big Bad Wolf anymore.

The pit is closed down before sunrise, and you make your way to the kennels. The two wolves who fought tonight are both still alive, even if one is breathing shallower than the other. They’re in the holding room between the pit and the kennels.

The long hallway lives up to its name: both sides lined with tight cages stacked three on top of each other. All silver, all solid, and your skin pricks a bit when you walk in. The door shutting makes some of the cages rustle a little.

Most of the people inside skitter away from you as you walk past. You pass two of the night guards, both walking up and down the kennel hall at opposite ends, and they nod at you.

In the very middle of the hallway there’s a door to your left. It takes a while to find the key on the crowded ring, but you always do.

Only one of the three cages in this room has a

resident. You talk with her for a while—probably longer than you should.

It was so perfect it looked fake. It looked like a joke.

Your father, at the top of the stairs, clutching his heart, doubling over, and falling down. The paramedics said the heart attack had killed him before he reached the landing.

You were twenty.

It was the only night you had ever seen Douglas look scared. His fingers shook as he swabbed your upper arm with alcohol and then threw the cotton ball into his office trashcan.

“Breathe,” you said to him.

“I wish—” he stammered. “If there was any other way to keep things in control—”

“I know.” You shut your eyes for a second. “Do it.”

He strained to keep the needle steady as it went into your arm.

There was heat—pressure. It ran through your whole arm, and then soon it was all over your body. The needle left, and you felt Douglas put a gauze pad over the spot.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

When you opened your mouth to answer, you vomited on yourself. You stumbled out of the chair and retched again, into the trash can this time.

“This is normal,” Douglas said. “Clinical infection like this doesn’t leave the body with an open wound to focus on. It’ll fight the transmission. Not like a traditional attack.”

When the next wave of vomit stopped, you wiped your mouth and managed to ask, “How long?”

“The vomiting? About twenty-four hours. The

It was so perfect it looked fake. It looked like a joke.

full transformation? A few days, maybe a week. It depends on your system, your—your father's infection was slow."

"What comes after—" You dry-heaved into the trash.

"You'll get hungry. Massively, monstrously hungry. And everything you put in is going to get turned into solid muscle. Your senses will sharpen. After that, you'll be antsy until the full moon comes. Your body will be getting ready for it."

"And I'll transform." It could have been a question; it could have been disbelief in someone who didn't have as much knowledge. But it was just a statement. A fact. A fact of what your life was going to be now.

"Yes."

"Will it hurt?"

He didn't answer.

"Douglas." You vomited.

"Based on the pups we use for the cage matches, the first transformation is the most violent."

You snorted hard to get stomach acid out of your nose.

"You'll have to stay in your father's special room in the kennels. It's the only place you'll be safe."

You rested your head against the cool metal on the rim of the trash can, just breathing through the moment of peace. And then your body started fighting again.

You go back down the long kennel halls—back to the room that you need to unlock, with the three cages on the right side.

You stand in front of the last one. Unlike the small ones out in the hall, this one has a bed, a calendar, a desk, the basic furnishings to make the occupant feel human.

Inside is an older woman, the archetypal grandmother form housing the killer wolf underneath. Cross-legged on the bed with her eyes closed.

"Full moon tonight," you say to her as you lean against the opposite wall.

There's no response.

"Bar's closed. Douglas is in my room, waiting for sunrise. Same as he used to." You close the gap and grab onto the bars, and your hands prick a little at touching the silver.

Still no response.

"How far are you getting with that? After all these years, I mean. Any control yet?"

Her eyes snap open, bright yellow irises with pinpoint pupils taking over most of what's inside and looking entirely wrong in a face that's still human. After a blink, they go back to normal.

"Jesus Christ, Lillian. Give a little warning next time." You let go of the bars and pace a little in front of the cage. After a minute, you stop and pull the fat envelope from your back pocket. "Moonrise is in an hour. I'd read this before then."

You set the envelope on the ground between two of the cage's bars and slide it towards her.

You go outside, through the kennels and Douglas' lab, out of the warehouse. You use the bug zapper to light a cigarette without even trying to spark a match. It would be a waste, anyway.

You stand there long enough to smoke the rest of the pack.

After a while, your watch alarm goes off. A press at your wrist silences it, and you grab one of the two syringes from the breast pocket of your flannel. It stings, but the milliliters of liquid go in smooth.

You don't know what to expect. To feel drunk, maybe? Or at least to feel the wolf resist a little. It's like nothing at all is happening.

The moon crests over the horizon, and it's a big one, and a harvest moon, and the first one you've seen with human eyes in damn nearly two decades.

You force yourself to break away. You walk through the empty bar, down into the basement and then beyond, into the pit.

The room looks bigger when no one else is in it. The circular silver wire cage alone could eat the whole area of the bar above, no question, and the stands, raised up two levels from the front row, could probably do the same. You've never actually bothered to measure.

You start flipping switches to turn on the overhead pit lights—*click*—the house lights—*click*—and the betting area lights—*click*. 36+

The silver on the lock stings. It's purer, stronger. It needs to be, to make sure the wolves fighting inside don't break out.

You walk into the arena and lock the wire grating behind you.

As you do, you hear one of the floor hatches unlock, creak, and clank open towards the center of the pit.

You put a hand through the chain links and hold on, feeling it burn a pattern into your palm, and you just stand there, listening to soft steps come up on your right side.

You watch as old fingers lace into the silver, the same as yours do. After a breath, you say, "You should see the moon. It's beautiful."

"It always was."

You stand there a second, until you can't stand the pain in your hand and take it down. The burn marks look bad, but they won't be there too long.

"I think it's admirable, what you're doing," Lillian takes her hand away, too. "You and your father caused a lot of grief with this place. I think this is a good way to go out."

You tense up a little. "Oh?"

"I wouldn't have guessed. All those hours you spent at my cage, talking like you were lecturing to yourself. I didn't think you'd actually want this to end." She pulls out a piece of paper from her pocket.

The letter you'd written and passed her earlier, along with the small amount of blocker in a syringe and the key to her cage.

"I can feel the moon calling. The dose you gave me was just right." She takes a deep breath and rolls her shoulders a little with her eyes closed. "It should happen soon."

"Funny thing about *'should'*." You grab the other needle from your breast pocket and drive it hard into her shoulder. "Doesn't always come true." The serum goes in slowly, her changing muscles fighting it for a few seconds.



Allyson Finney
Know Where
Photograph

Did you ever wonder why Daddy never killed you?

For the first time since you've known her, you see true fear in Lillian's eyes.

Still holding the syringe with your right hand, you push her to the ground with your left, and the needle tip breaks off in her arm.

She hits hard, and you wonder if a hip broke. Probably would have, if she were human. She tries to scoot back, away from you and towards the hatch she came out of the kennels from.

"Nope." You cross around her and slam it shut with your boot. "You know, I thought about it for years." You start pacing around her, following the round edge of the pit. "I wondered if the world would be better off without me."

You make it back in front of her and stand on her with one foot to pin her down. "My letter was convincing because everything in it was true. I wanted to die. I wanted to die the same way my mother did." You push off her and back away a half-step.

She tries to scuttle farther backward.

"You don't remember it, but I wonder if your wolf does. Was it teeth? Claws? Did you just run into her hard enough to break her? Is that why she was never one of us?" You feel your eyes well up a little but force it back.

"Irma, please." Lillian's voice sounds less like words and more like a gurgle. Still on her back, she's nursing the open wound on her shoulder, but she's stopped moving.

You feel the blocker starting to wane. "But that letter wasn't the whole story. Did you ever wonder why Daddy never killed you?"

The question was half rhetorical, but you wait for an answer, anyway.

When there is none, you keep talking.

"He was afraid he'd lose everything he'd become. Like vampires are supposed to, you know? When you kill the sire, the fledgling becomes human again. I don't think that'll happen, but I don't think I care either way anymore."

You feel the muscles in your legs start shaking.

"Irma, you don't have to do this. We have something good, here." She shoots puppy-dog eyes, playing up sympathy and trying to come off as weaker than she is.

"Liar." You walk over and press down on where the syringe is still broken off in her arm. "What happened to me 'causing a lot of grief?' Hmm?" You let her go and back off a little.

You can feel your heartbeat picking up. "It's not that Daddy enjoyed being like this. He didn't. He kept it, and he kept you alive, because he wanted to make something better for me. And we have. Him, and me, and Douglas. We've taken the mess that you started, and we turned it into something for *us*, do you understand?"

And to you, it looks like she does. It looks like she finally understands what it felt like for all the wolves she killed—all the people she killed—in the ring, and before that.

You snap your teeth as you continue to fight the transformation, just for a little longer. "Any of us could have walked into your cage and put a piece of silver through your heart whenever we wanted. But I wanted you to go out like this."

Your breath speeds up. Your voice sounds lower, getting more into the growl. “I wanted you to know that from the moment—the *moment*—you started all this, there was only one way it could end.”

You stop fighting. And the first howl is loud enough that all the wolves down in the kennels answer.

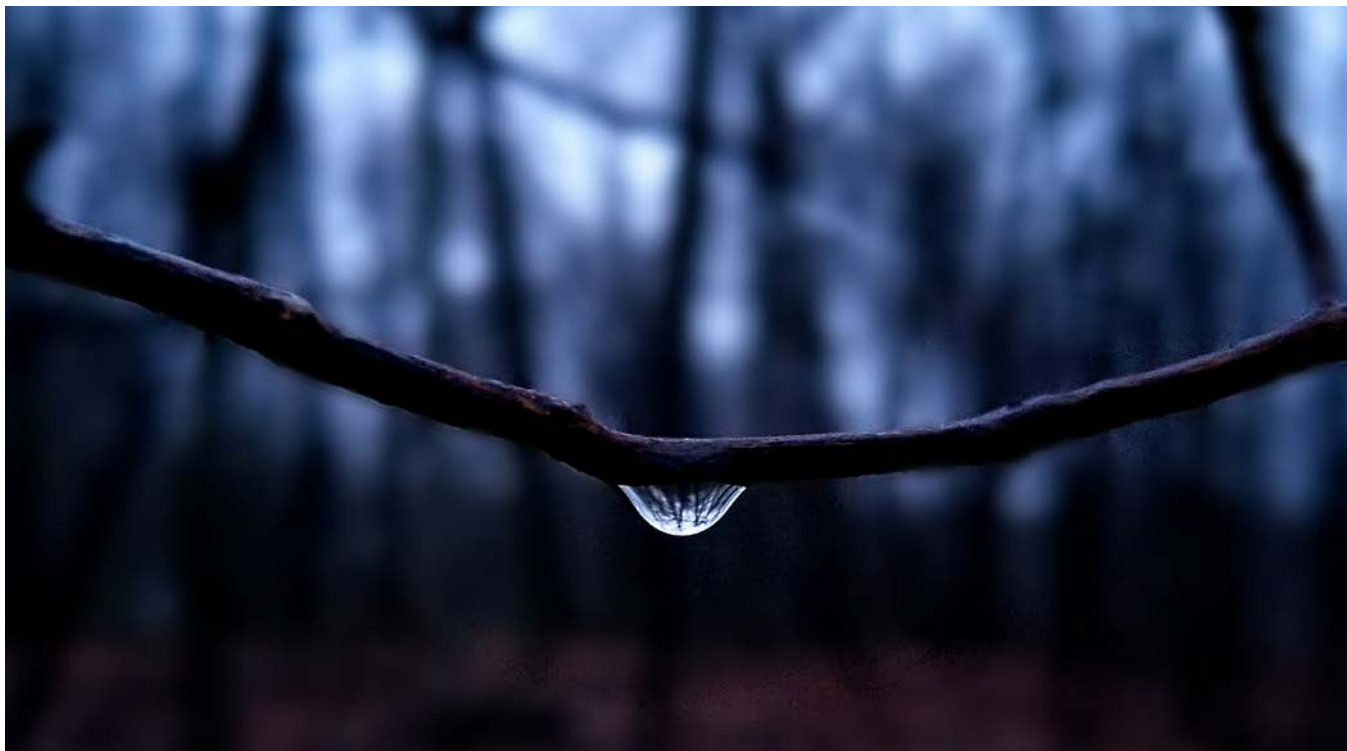
You never really remember what happens when the wolf takes over. You get flashes, but mostly it’s bits and pieces of the cage you lock yourself in, of the wolf

trying to bite the bars and getting hurt by them. This time you have those same flashes, but there’s a little more in there to break up the monotony.

You come out of the oblivion, waking up naked on a cold floor that’s still stained red, littered with bits of bone and muscle and organs.

After a second, someone covers you in a blanket. “I’ll get someone to clean this up,” Douglas says from above you.

You sigh a little, content for the first time in a long time. “No rush.”



Robert Bara-Popa

Isolation

Photograph

Crystal Santana
Freedom
Ink and Pencil



Crossroads


Taylor Griffin

I used to gaze at the stars hidden in the dark abyss of your irises.
Now when I look into them,
I see the unsettled ashes of a snuffed-out fire.
And my bones,
they tremble at the thought of you,
aching from the ghost of your touch.
My pursed lips dare to form words I cannot speak,
as I watch you on the other side of the crossroads.
Dragging boulders by my shackled ankles,
I take the first step in the opposite direction.
I want to shrink back into the walls of your chest where I once called home
But when I turn to reach for the calloused hands that once held me tight,
I am greeted only by darkness.

I punch a hole through my own chest,
the moment I start to drag my bleeding feet
down the mile-long stretch of pavement laid out before me,
away from you.
I will always hold the bitter taste of longing and sorrow
when my mind finds itself racing along the curves of your smiling lips.
But I must keep treading over stones
to reach the light at the end of this road plagued by darkness.
I glance one last time over a slumped shoulder,
hoping there is light awaiting you too.

Blue

First Appeared in 2015



Even when her body and mind
were failing her, her hands still
found a way into mine.

Lauren Jones

What I remember the most is her blue veins peeping through her thin white skin, so thin that you could see every vessel inside of her. It is as though the inside of her was at war with the outside. And I wanted to save her—help her through the murky waters of her mind. Somehow, I wanted to gain a sense, any sense of completeness, as if it were possible to be complete with no aspect lacking—no gap in one’s identity. She was a big part of who I was and I wanted her to remain as me. I wanted to believe what they always said was true: “Things will get better.” But I never truly believed in *better*; I believed in good days and bad, like a toddler trudging her way through kindergarten. That is how our days, good or bad, proceeded with whispers of “How is Nana?” Sometimes I felt as though she was washed out to sea, and the ocean played its tricks and lured her into its frothy depths. And I wanted to save her.

She was a popover-making queen, a bona fide movie star; she had all the glitz and glam of Jacki-O with a homemaker’s touch. The home she had made for all of us was inviting but as chaotic as could be with ten children and many grandchildren. What I remember the most were those hands, inviting each puzzle piece in, until she realized it would not fit, and thus rejecting it—but rejecting it ever so daintily, so gingerly, putting one down and picking up another in a sort of haphazard dance of disjointed puzzle pieces. When the tide got rough, the puzzle pieces went away, and their dance was ceased. These were the sad times.

The sad times gave the hands a beating, poked and prodded, but still somehow, even beyond all the destruction, they remained the same. The family room became her hospice room, which, even with the finished puzzles hung up on the walls, did not feel the same. It smelled sterile, like a hospital, and lacked the

quirks that were always found in my Nana’s house. I sometimes felt myself drowning in the depths of the frothy ocean of her mind. The hands, however, were always there to find me and I would welcome them back.

But I refused to welcome death, just as I refused to dive deep into the sea. I refused to accept that everything was changing. The puzzles were taken down off the walls. Goodbyes had to be said. The hands that I knew so well were changing too. I would try to memorize every inch of those hands that I loved so very much, every blue vein, trying to study them so when the inevitable happened I would remember. 1 squeeze. 2 squeeze. 3 squeeze. I love you. To me those hands were comfort. Even when her body and mind were failing her, her hands still found a way into mine. Together they locked, and, in my mind, they will always stay together.



Allyson Finney
Watch Tower
Photograph


Translucent

Lydia Reiss

A quiet mouth, a loud mind
The words foam out the sides
Creating puddles of disillusionment
Teardrops succumbed to ripples of regret
A blurred reflection of a man
Unrecognized, staring back at me.

A closed mouth, an open mind
Bugged eyes and scraping teeth
Black and bruised
A colorful body
A deep soul
Inside a deconstructed shell of a man.

Jenever



Six hundred and forty fish later,
the only thing I know is everything
you love will die. The first time
you meet someone special, you
can count on them one day being
dead and in the ground.

– *Chuck Palahniuk,*

William Allen

As January ushers in a new year, the misshapen head of the Y2K bug begins to crown while the world anxiously awaits the apocalypse that inevitably follows. The icy hands of January pull this monstrosity from the womb of time as clocks strike midnight only to reveal the bloated stillborn corpse of man-made negligence. A triumphant sigh of relief blows across the nation with a force that would make Old Man Winter flush in envy.

Four months later as Doomsayers fixate on their next tragedy, spring launches a campaign on schools everywhere, leading a host of restless children towards summer vacation, and I'm celebrating my tenth birthday. The 'big one-oh', my grandmother calls it. My mother refers to it as "hitting double-digits." I'm not entirely sure my father shares the same enthusiasm for my decennial achievement as my mother. I'd like to think he does, but I'm not holding my breath.

In the years leading up to this point, my father had grown increasingly distant. He became a ghost, haunting our home in a bitter wake of juniper berries and cigarette smoke. As time went on, the thin sounds of his footsteps seemed to isolate themselves to the second-floor bedroom of my parents. The lively man that would kick off his work boots in the entryway of our house and let my sister and me climb him like playful squirrels up oak trees had turned into nothing more than a lump under a blanket. Even though I didn't question his distance at the time, it sat simmering on the back burner of my mind.

Months pass by and school children reign the streets in the name of summer. The July heat shimmers off the black asphalt patches of Maple street.

"Car!" the shrill voice of a small boy covered head to heel in scabs and dust screeches to his friends like a meerkat warning its mob of a prowling predator.

On our porch, surrounded by a pile of bags containing everything an eight-year-old girl could think to pack on a trip to Grandma's house, stands my little sister, Stephanie.

"That's Mammy and Papa!" she squeals in delight as she picks up all her bags at once, using every bit of strength that the first sighting of grandparents seems to give kids at that age.

I pick up my skateboard and say goodbye to all my friends, the soldiers of summer. Some I have known my whole life, trudging to school alongside me, waiting for what seems like an eternity as the last detention bell resonates through the building and they come flying out their classrooms like bats out of hell. Others I barely know, friends of friends or cousins just visiting.

A lanky eleven-year-old boy, redder than the ripest tomato you've ever seen, dripping with sweat, shakes my hand. "When're you coming back?" he says, wheezing and out of breath. "I'll bring my controller over and beat your ass in Mortal Kombat."

"I don't know," I say, wiping the dirt from my hands onto my jeans, "Usually we only visit on weekends. I don't know why they're picking us up in the middle of the week." I toss my skateboard and a backpack filled with clothes in the back of my grandparents' van. By the time we reach the city limits, the air conditioning has already dried my t-shirt.

I've always loved going to my grandparents' house—watching the scenery change from bums and slums to barns and farms. Even if you fall asleep on the ride there, the musky smell of cow manure and grass invades your dreams, assuring that you are miles away from the city.

Their house is big and filled with decades of collectables that my grandfather and uncles have

picked up over the years. Odd knick-knacks and creepy dolls that my grandmother likes to collect greet you at every turn. Those big rooms and long hallways turn into the small town of Hope, Washington, as I, John Rambo, leave a wake of vengeful carnage along my path. Cabbage Patch Kids dolls and Nerf darts litter room after room as I search for the perfect hiding place to take out Sheriff Will Teasle. Gun in hand and vindication close to heart, I make my way towards the coat closet of my grandparents' game room. Teasle's time is about to run out.

"Never listen to a knothole lest you be vexed." I don't know where this saying originated, but I feel it holds true, especially here.

Clack, the sounds of billiard balls making a break ring through the room.

"Fucking hell! Scratch. Ain't that bout a bitch?" Earl says, in a raspy voice that only years of cigar smoke could mold.

Issy stands, pool stick in hand, "Keep playing like that and you're gonna pay off my truck before the night's over." He laughs, baring a twisted shit-eating grin.

A trio of beer cans sing in synchronized harmony as they open.

"Remember, you gotta beat me, Baby Huey," Kevin cracks at Issy with his almost signature smugness. "I'll put the money towards the room and board that you owe me."

Hidden in the shadows of the coat closet, I giggle to myself thinking of how much my uncles remind me of the hyenas from the Lion King.

"So, has the kids gone to see Bill, yet?" Earl asks, his eyes fixed on the bubbles of beer on the rim of his can.

Issy chalks the end of his pool stick. "Pam asked Mum not to tell them yet. She's hoping he'll recover."

"Fat chance! He's been drinking himself to death since William was born. No way you can recover from a fuck up like that," Kevin adds. "Would you hurry up and shoot already, butter ball. I ain't got all night!"

The blood rushes to my ears as my heart pounds and sinks to the pit of my stomach making it churn. I take a big wheezing breath that stutters in my throat as I try to calm myself.

Earl takes a swig of his beer and sits it on the edge of the pool table, "Ack! Don't talk that way, Kev. You're a real asshole, sometimes, you know that?"

Kevin lets out a smug gasp. "Moi? An asshole?" He sighs and begins to line up the cue. "Mum told me the other day that Pam called and said Bill looks like something out of a George Romero movie. Dead bloodshot eyes, skin and bones, clawing at anyone that comes close. Real horror movie shit. Five ball corner pock."

I hold my breath, throwing open the closet door and keeping my eyes focused on the dirt-covered shoelaces as I swiftly make my way out of the game room.

Thack, thack, thack. The cue ball scratches, bouncing across the smooth green felt of the pool table. "Never listen to a knothole lest you be vexed." I am vexed.

Later that night, I ask my grandmother if what my uncles said is true. She hesitates to answer me for a while, but eventually she gives in.

Her old bright eyes grow glossy behind the Coke bottle lenses of her glasses. "Daddy is very sick," she says. "He had to go to the doctor. They're working on making him better and your mom wants to sit with him while he gets healthy again." A lump forms in her throat as she feigns a smile.



"I'm not a baby. Don't talk to me that way. It's because he drank too much, isn't it? Now he's dying. That's why we can't go see him. He's gross, isn't he? Like House on Haunted Hill? That's why you haven't told us. That's why mom didn't tell us." Every bitter word I spit at her builds an aching pressure behind my eyes and in my throat.

The unfiltered accusations of a ten-year-old boy about his dying alcoholic father cut through my grandmother like a hot razor through wax. Tears begin to pool up in the wrinkles under her eyes, making them even more noticeable through her prescription lenses.

"Your mom told us not to tell you." She chokes. "I'm sorry. When she calls, I'll ask her if we can take

you both to see him." She takes her glasses off and starts to weep. This is the first time I've ever seen my grandmother cry.

I don't know if it is what I said to her that made her cry, or if it is because what I said holds true. She keeps her word though, and within the next week we are on our way to the hospital to visit my father.

My mother meets us in the lobby of St. Joseph's hospital and wraps her arms around my sister and me.

"I missed you guys so much!" she says as she embraces us. Her cheek feels clammy when it brushes against mine. She takes our hands in hers and walks us to the elevators. My mother presses the button that calls the elevator that will soon carry us to my father,

and I will tell him stories of grandma's house, reuniting us as a family again. As the elevator grows closer, my mother's smile begins to dim until the doors finally open and her face twists into a grim tremble.

The elevator chimes as if to say "Ding! This is what you wanted! Ding!"

A musky wave of cow shit and industrial disinfectant lingers in the air everywhere on this floor. The combined whispers of doctors and nurses going over charts slowly turn into white noise cranked at full volume as we make our way to the nurse's station. A male attendant dressed in somber green scrubs takes our names and escorts us to my father's room.

My mother slowly pushes the door open, peeking her head in.

"Is daddy sleeping?" my sister asks as she tries to push past her.

Unsure, my mom steps into the room cautiously. We are close behind her.

The light is dim where his bed is, almost off. The rest of the room is pitch black and that musky smell from the hall seems to only get stronger the further

into the room you step. I begin to walk toward the dim light where he lies. Bags of fluids and tubing reveal themselves one by one from the blobs of shadows they once were. Under the dim light I see him. I see the yellow eyes that stare back but do not see me. I see his withered body shake like a cup of dice with every breath. Tears begin to swell up behind my eyes as my mother pulls me away from him. *This isn't my father. It can't be.* The man that would smell so heavily of cigarettes and juniper berries now gives off a pungent scent of C. diff and iodine.

I learned a lot that summer of 2000. I learned that I wasn't as prepared as Doomsayers or as strong as John Rambo. That the bluntest words can pierce just as well as the sharpest knife. I learned the meaning of a double-edged sword and never to listen to a knothole. I learned about death.

My father died in St. Joseph's hospital, a few days after our first and last visit as a family. He was a good man before he waded too far out into the bottle and drowned.

I still miss him.



Crystal Santana
Playful
Acrylic

Angela Bagenstose
No Sense Crying over Spilled Ink
Enamel



Take me Dancing



The extra rooms sat empty but clean, ready for the visitors that rarely came.

Nicole Wallace

Dolores Kitchard had cancer. That was what the doctor had just finished telling her. He used medical jargon and discussed staging and treatment options, but the words meant nothing to her. She had gone to the appointment to get the results of some routine tests. She found that she wasn't surprised when he broke the news. It seemed to her, if you lived long enough, a cancer diagnosis was inevitable. Dolores was just over seventy-one years old—though she didn't feel her age. She had not experienced any symptoms or warning signs. Still, she felt oddly calm. Possibly she had just grown tired of living alone. To her, loneliness was the worst affliction. What else did she have to do but die from cancer?

Shortly after returning home from the doctor, she sat in her kitchen wearing her thick reading glasses. An opened novel sat on the orange Formica table in front of her. The table was a relic from the 70's that she always meant to update. That morning, which seemed exceptionally long ago, she had anticipated returning home from her appointment so she could get back to this very book. It was a mystery, her favorite genre, and it had just started to get exciting. Now as she stared at the pages in front of her, bitterness instead of pleasure crept through her.

She had always dreamed of writing a novel. She had published a few stories in ladies' magazines when she was a young mother. Harvey used to mock her for keeping a small notebook with her for when inspiration struck, and for her hours spent writing when everyone was asleep. Somehow, in the years between changing diapers and chauffeuring the kids to activities, she had never gotten around to attempting her novel. It was easy to put it off until a later date. Now she realized, there was no time left.

Her cancer diagnosis was the ultimate deadline. She closed the book and turned away from it. Now it was too late.

Dolores lived alone in a four-bedroom ranch house. The extra rooms sat empty but clean, ready for the visitors that rarely came. The house was tucked away in the safety of the suburbs, the neighborhood further protected by a gate. Was the gate really to keep undesirable people out or perhaps to give the inhabitants inside the illusion of safety? Every house looked identical, and occasionally a neighbor pulled in the wrong driveway, confusing it for their own. Each lawn was kept shortly clipped through the threat of a fine, leaving each yard looking artificial. Her late husband Harvey had picked the house. Dolores had loved it when it was full of life and activity. Now she wanted something smaller, something less empty. She was struck with a sudden urge to sell it. She paged through a thin edition of the yellow pages and left a message for a realtor.

Harvey had died of a heart attack eight years before. After he passed, she thought about getting a pet. A dog might have been too much work, but a cat could have been good company. It would have given her something to take care of again. Harvey had abhorred animals. He would always tell Dolores that having pets was a waste of money and they would ruin the carpet. He didn't care for children either, but that had not prevented them from having three. But Harvey lacked the warmth that a father should have. Still, he had dutifully put the food on the table and paid for the kids to attend college. And for what? It was just a chance for him to complain to his friends about how two out of three flunked out after squandering their tuition.



Dolores realized too late that she hadn't truly loved Harvey.

Her youngest daughter Isabelle had decided to follow her dream of being an artist. She moved to New York to eke out a meager existence with the rest of the starving artists. But she was happy. Isabelle was probably happier than Dolores had ever been. It seemed almost everything in her life had been the wrong choice, except for her children. Now even they were gone. It was such a blessing and a curse: the way babies grew up and would eventually leave you behind. She was proud of Isabelle for defying her father and pursuing her dream. Maybe Dolores could have been an artist, but the thought of it seemed so silly and reckless. But there her daughter was, with paintings displayed in galleries and some of them even selling for a small profit. Isabelle managed to find a way to avoid the fate of living the ordinary life her mother had and Dolores wished she possessed half of her daughter's bravery.

Dolores decided she was not in the mood to read her book. She started to have a panicky feeling but pushed it out of her mind. She thought maybe watching one of her shows might calm her nerves. Her oldest daughter, Victoria, had set up a box that allowed Dolores to watch her favorites any time of the day, with no need to consult the TV Guide. Victoria had hooked her on the mindless show, *Dancing with C List Celebrities* or whatever the silly thing was called. She remembered how much she had loved to dance when she was young. Her first date with Harvey had been to a dance hall. He was tall, well-dressed, and

handsome. She had fallen in love almost instantly as he held her close and spun her around the dance floor until the world whirled. Looking back, maybe she was just exhilarated by the exertion and not in love at all. Harvey had never taken her to that dance hall or any other again, no matter how many times she hinted or downright asked. Another reason she enjoyed the show was that Victoria would call once a week so they could critique the performances together. Dolores was grateful that she called at all. Her son, Max, never called. He was supposedly the success of her brood, graduating with honors, working in finance and telling people what to do with their money. He had convinced Harvey to get a life insurance policy, which, thank the Almighty Lord, came in handy after his passing. She was able to keep the house and pay the bills. At least money would not be a concern if she budgeted carefully. But couldn't Max call his mother occasionally?

Dolores realized too late that she hadn't truly loved Harvey. He wasn't the person he seemed when he was courting her. By the time she figured this out, they were already married with a baby on the way, and it was too late. She didn't think Harvey loved her either, but he seemed to love the idea of her. He wanted someone to display to his coworkers like a prize and a wife to do his laundry. She wondered how it would feel to know that someone truly loved her, not only for what she could give them but someone who loved her just for herself. It wouldn't have changed much she

decided, and she still had her family. Despite his many failings, at least Harvey had given her that much. They had lived in a beautiful home and vacationed on Long Island every year in a house overlooking the beach—but she and the children would always long for the affection Harvey couldn't provide.

She couldn't stop her mind from wandering enough to focus on the television. With the TV still on in the other room, she mindlessly paced the kitchen looking for a purpose. She normally enjoyed staying in her house, but now she needed to get out. The walls seemed to be suffocating her. The house itself was too silent with only ghosts of the past inhabitants left inside. She considered calling her children to break the news but perhaps that was something that should be done in person. Instead, she decided that she might go to the Farmers' Market since it was Senior Discount Day. There was a 10% discount for anyone over sixty-five and she shouldn't miss saving money despite the surprising news she had received.

She had just walked into the market when she saw old Mr. Blakley standing down the aisle and carefully examining an avocado.

"Oh dear", she exclaimed. She tried to turn in a different direction, but she was too late. He had spotted her.

"Ms. Kitchard," he called out, just a bit too loudly as his hearing wasn't what it used to be. He started walking towards her, surprisingly spry for a man his age. He had a friendly, open face, which some might consider handsome. He was a pleasant man, and she enjoyed his company but not his interest in her. He had helped her after Harvey's death. He would come over to fix things around the house and had always been a wonderful friend to her.

"Have you considered my offer to take you out to dinner?" he asked her.

He had been a widower for almost the same amount of time she had been a widow. He had lost his wife due to complications of the flu less than a year after Harvey had a heart attack. She believed it was pneumonia that finally had taken her.

"Oh, Mr. Blakley, what a wonderful offer but I haven't the time."

This had been the third time he asked her to dinner, and each time she made up an excuse. Even though she liked him, dating at their age like teenagers seemed ridiculous. No, she certainly couldn't accept even if she wanted to.

"Mrs. Kitchard, is something the matter? You don't seem yourself and you look a bit flushed," he inquired.

She held back the urge to burst into tears and fling herself into his arms. She raised her chin slightly to keep her sudden emotion at bay and replied, "I'm fine." She was unsure if she was trying to convince him or herself.

After she completed her conversation with Mr. Blakely, or Richard, as he always urged her to call him, she browsed the market. She tried to distract herself by selecting the best produce. Not being able to think of anything else to do, she resigned herself to heading back home. As she crossed the threshold, she heard the phone ringing. She scrambled to put the groceries down. She hoped it was the realtor, eager to rid herself of the burden of the house. She doubted she would make it to the phone in time, but it kept ringing. When she answered, a frantic sounding woman was on the line.

"Mrs. Kitchard, I'm so glad I reached you. I'm very sorry to tell you this but there has been a terrible mistake," the woman said.

“Mistake, who is this? What kind of mistake?”

“It’s Beverly from Dr. Winston’s office. The lab called and there was an error.”

“An error,” Dolores repeated dumbly.

“Yes. Dr. Watson tried to call but couldn’t get through. He left for the day, but I didn’t want to leave until someone got through to you. The lab contacted us, and it seems that the results were a false positive.”

Dolores seemed unable to do anything but repeat back the words Beverly was saying. “False positive” and then “No cancer.” She sat on the couch and found herself momentarily unable to process the conversation. She should call her daughters. She

needed to talk to someone. She was not dying. She realized that she still had time but was unsure what to do first. She decided she would get a cat. She could even try to write a book. Thoughts raced through her mind and almost overwhelmed her. There were so many things to do and not a moment to lose but she wondered where to start. Then an idea popped in her head. She searched her pocketbook for a phone number and dialed. “Hello, this is Dolores Kitchard. No, I haven’t changed my mind about dinner. Instead, I was wondering Mr. Blakely, I mean Richard, would you take me dancing? Yes, you may pick me up. I’ll wear a red dress.”



Olivia (Leaf) Crandall
Fantasy
Watercolor

Bus Stop Ballet Beauty

Nicholas Fulwood

I was listening to Johnny Cash,
Eating white trash,
Waiting at the bus stop,
When I saw a girl,
Spinning like a top,
Ballet dancing,
Carelessly prancing,
And I thought,
“She can’t be bought,
Or sold,
Or traded,
But If I could steal a moment of her time,
I’d be a rich man.”

Then,
She looked at me,
Bobbing my head to hip hop,
And I froze,
From head to toes,
And shivered,
Under her icy stare.
She cut me with an already bloody knife,
But then again,
That’s the story of my love life.



Crystal Santana
Sad and Angry
Acrylic

Rhyme for Tots: Christine Maghee

Sarah Belles

Christine Maghee had a bump on her knee, no bigger than maybe a gnat. She got it, you see, when she fell from a tree after trying to rescue her cat. But as the day passed, the bump swelled up so fast she could see it beneath her bed cover. In the morning she gasped when she saw it at last, cuz it looked like the head of her brother.

Titus Maghee, was the naming of he, of the boy that is, not of his double. A monstrosity, which would lead her to plea for an answer that might solve her trouble. She looked to the sky but there came no reply, not a word to hear, nay not a whisper. So, grabbing a pen, Christine tried instead, to open it up like a blister. She aimed for the eye, without knowing why, while hoping that she was just dreaming. It stuck with one try, and Christine had to cry when the head on her knee started screaming.

Her mom showed up quickly, then felt very sickly at seeing her daughter that way. So, she ran for a knife and she swore on her life to cut the protrusion away. When she came back, the head had turned black. It was draining all over the floor. Then she fell with a thwack as a matter of fact, and she slid all the way out the door.

Then Daddy appeared, and he gagged as he jeered, for the smell of the stuff made him vomit. A stain he'd recall, because later they all would be forced to clean up using Comet™. He rushed forward then, and he pulled out the pen, and he scooped up his poor frightened daughter. But Dad skidded around while he moved cross the ground, until he eventually dropped her.

They all were a mess, in the midst of distress, just when Titus arrived with a fright. He stood in the hall, not believing at all that his eyes could behold such a sight. So, he went to the phone, just a youngster alone who was able to call 9-1-1. And in a minute or two an ambulance flew to sort them all out, one by one.

The doctors on call were simply appalled when the family described the disaster. Yet the only solution they reached in collusion was to wrap up her knee in some plaster. They gave explanation without hesitation that the bump would in time disappear. Just as long as Christine could leave the head be, it might clear up in under a year.

The only thing for it, although she deplored it, was to follow what she'd been prescribed. And to her surprise, it went down in size, but she wondered if it really died. Now Christine Maghee has a scar on her knee, no bigger than only a scratch. She's waiting, you see, if in time there will be a brand new brother to hatch.

Moral: *Let the damn cat get itself down*

Leaves of Gold

DJ Plante

Shall I lament the leaves of gold?
Or rue the coming winter cold?
The dance of seasons intertwines,
Eclipsing each within their time.
When short-lived Aestas* ceases breath,
Who am I to mourn her death?
Would she long for me to stay,
If I grieved her passing, mourned her way?
Shall I lament her leaves of bronze?
Or dirge the coming winter's dawns?

I must winter, days untold,
In step with twilight, in her hold.
I must wait the waning light,
A declining dervish, softly lit.
And I will wait the days yet come,
Knowing endings are their sum;
Exhausted embers, each in time,
Soon extinguished from within.
I shall not lament the frozen ground
Nor the fate to which I'm bound.

*Aestas, the Greek goddess of summer.

Rachel Schiefer
Weird Man
Pastel






Shawn C. Rutkowski
Thirst
Photograph
First Appeared in 2012

Charlie

First Appeared in 2016



It's the type of weather that gives birth to the flies that swarm around your head and drink your sweat before eventually eating you alive.

Sarah Belles

In the sticky heat of a southern afternoon, there is a boy standing behind an old auto body shop, surrounded by dirt and gravel and steel. He is alone: a dangerous scenario, because when he's alone his mind tends to go places he doesn't want it to. His brain, as a separate entity, likes to think about the things that hurt the most—like being held back twice in school or being the tallest kid in the second grade. It's bad enough when kids his own age make fun of him, but when those kids are smaller than him, it's so much worse. But now is not the time to dwell on those sorts of things; it is time to wake up.

Letting himself out of the confines of his own thoughts, he rejoins the secular world, a place where senses exist and there is no room for anything other than what is physical. Charlie is standing there, quiet, motionless in the heat, in the damn musky heat—the kind that penetrates you to the bone and makes you want to pull off your own skin. It's the type of weather that gives birth to the flies that swarm around your head and drink your sweat before eventually eating you alive.

He is busy there, his eyes open, absorbing the sights all around him, which is the first step towards waking up the rest of his senses. There are trees growing a small distance from him, though not many—just a pathetic little cluster of pines planted behind the shop to give the boys of the auto body a feeling of rustic privacy, whatever that means. But that was obviously done some time ago. The shop itself is in disrepair, as Charlie's wandering eyes rediscover. The roof is a rusted tin mess, the walls a cascade of peeling red paint over rotted wood, and above it all is a black sign with white letters that read, "Jim's Auto Repair." The J and the O are partially obscured due to exactly five bullet holes, three over the first letter and

two over the second. Charlie stops for a moment to count them. He has to do this, or he won't be able to move on. He does the same with the cars sitting about the yard.

1...2...3

Just as it had been last week

4...5...6

And a month before that

7...8...

All these motorized beasts of burden are dead, their bodies decaying and dissolving into the ground beneath them. Charlie feels a small pang of sympathy for them. It hurts just to know that these four-wheeled creatures who once guzzled oil and belched smoke will never again feel what it is like to have a mechanical heart burning away inside of them, giving them speed, giving them purpose.

This idea hits home with Charlie, since he too has no purpose, at least none that he is sure of. On the other hand, he is sure his mother *doesn't* have one. She never does anything, not dishes, not laundry. Grandma is the one who does all that. The only thing his mother actually does manage to do is her makeup. He'd watched her put it on enough times to know.

Silent and hidden, he'd often stand in her doorway with his eyes transfixed and fascinated, staring at her as she placed the lipstick on the bottom left corner of her lower lip. He'd lick his own lips in anticipation as she gently pressed the tube down and moved it right. Then she'd push it up to the middle of her top lip, stop, and put it back practically in the same spot again before moving it left. Though her lips were already very red, she'd always repeat this two or three times.

Charlie blinks and tries not to think about it anymore, annoyed that he slipped away for a moment.

He takes a moment or two to compose himself, pulling in a deep breath and tasting a mix of dust and salt from his upper lip.

He is in the real world now and thoughts are not allowed in the real world. He takes a moment or two to compose himself, pulling in a deep breath and tasting a mix of dust and salt from his upper lip. He holds it in for a while, like someone readying himself for baptism. He counts to ten and lets all the air out in one long gust from his nose and mouth. Finally, he is able to begin.

His body has been numb, but as it moves forward, he can feel it come alive with delicious little shots of electricity. He tingles as if there are lovely little bugs crawling up his legs. Half-listening, he can hear his shoes make scraping noises as they walk across the yard, one foot continuously leading the other in a strange parade, kicking up gravel and sending it to places he can't see. Soon, his feet bring him before a body even more motionless than his was just a few minutes ago.

Charlie looks at it, squinting his eyes against the bright sunlight. The body lying there is that of a dog or at least it was at one time. Do things remain the same when they're dead? Or do they just become meat? Or nothing at all? In any case, this animal was clearly male, its un-spayed sex organ leaning unapologetically against its inner thigh—that is, if dog parts can be described the same as human parts. He was a big dog, an old one as well, but that's not what Charlie really cared about. What held his interest so completely was

the pink folds of intestine pushing their way out of a gash in the dog's bloated and exposed tummy.

Charlie draws closer and studies the opening, running from the chest down to the belly button. Do dogs have belly buttons? He doesn't know for sure. The flesh of its stomach is jagged and rough, sloppy. It must have been cut by someone in a hurry, maybe afraid, or maybe just eager to get the job done. His gaze wanders up from the gruesome spot and stops just over the dog's face. Its mouth is hanging open, with a pink tongue sticking out to one side, just like pink entrails. It's almost as if it had been killed while panting. But for what? For its killer or the heat?

Focusing just beyond the features of this animal, Charlie sees that there is a considerable amount of blood pooled around the head. He spotted it on the way over but didn't pay it much attention. He chose to ignore it since it wasn't the most interesting thing there. Hooking a finger in the collar, he lifts the dog's head and sees that the throat has been slit deeply, cleanly, quite unlike the stomach. Charlie sighs and lets the head drop. It looks like it stayed still for it as if it had trusted its killer.

At that moment a black fly buzzes down and lands right smack on the dog's eye, which is glazed over and turning white. Charlie shoos the nasty little thing away in a small act of kindness, wanting to preserve a tiny bit of dignity for the dog, as he

is in such a compromising position. He figures that the dog deserves a stay from the squirming progeny of insects for at least a little longer. An honorable intention, certainly, but in the passing of a mere three seconds, young Charlie is making a hypocrite of himself, pointing a finger at the deceased and saying, "Play dead..." A smile follows, but it doesn't take long for him to realize that his joke was made in bad taste. "Sorry," he says in all sincerity. "I didn't mean it." Then he waits for what he doesn't know. It isn't as if he actually expected the dog to answer back, "Oh, that's alright," and wag its tail at him. Though it would have been a nice gesture.

After that brief but awkward moment passes, Charlie scuttles ten or so feet over to a pile of scrap metal in search of a tool to begin working. He finds an iron rod, colored red with rust. He picks it up and looks it over in his hands, not knowing what it was or what it might have been used for. He only knows or cares that it will be useful to him. Walking back, his grip on the metal tightens in anticipation, rubbing the rust off with his sweaty little hands. This is the part he has been waiting for.

Using his instrument of choice, Charlie opens the gash in the dog even wider, giving him the opportunity to see inside, the chance to view everything as it was supposed to be, all fit together in perfect natural order. As has been his intent from the start, Charlie ruins this order, this divine arrangement of organic machinery, by hooking the lower intestine with the end of the rod and pulling it out into the daylight. A froth of blood comes seeping out as he pulls, some of it sticking to the bowels as they slither out of hiding, the rest seeping into the dry, thirsty earth. Charlie keeps pulling until the whole twisted mess is laid out before him.

Next is the stomach, and then liver, though they can't be brought out very far, only separated from each other. Then he exposes the kidneys from their fatty capsules and digs the bladder up from the pelvis. Things stop there, however, because his tool is unable to get through the elastic barrier of the diaphragm. After a few goes at trying to poke his way through, he quickly concedes that there is no way he is going to get a better view of the heart or lungs without a sharper tool. Even so, cutting the diaphragm would mean that he would have to reach inside the dog to do it, and he can't risk getting any blood on his hands. Limited, he tries to satisfy himself with what he can examine.

With this macabre display spread out before him, he pokes and prods the innards with one end of the rod, studying their shape, color, size, everything, hoping in some way to understand why form follows function. In the end, this exercise leaves him without answers. No matter how long he looks at a kidney, he still can't figure out how it works or why it looks the way it does. Or why God gave kidneys to dogs in the first place and not to worms. He had wondered these sorts of things before, when his cat used to bring home dead birds, leaving their half masticated little bodies on the front porch for him to find. He had studied them too, and their insides were the same as dogs. Well, nearly the same, but the why is what he really wanted to know.

Aggravated, Charlie takes the rod and painstakingly shovels the organs back into their cavity. He barely finishes this task when he hears two bubbly little voices chatting and giggling incoherently. This sends him into a panic, afraid that if someone were to see him and the dog, then they would think he had killed it. And then he'd be in trouble, and everyone



Justina Baez
Weeping Flower
Watercolor

would talk about it and say nasty things about him. They'd hate him more than they hate him now. That can't happen; Charlie won't let it happen. He is a good boy and good boys don't get into trouble. Thinking quickly, he grabs the dog by the collar and begins dragging it across the yard to the nearest car. He stashes it behind one of the front wheels, then turns, and tries to make a run for it.

Charlie makes it about halfway across the yard before stumbling over something. He looks down briefly and sees that it's a knife. Its handle is clean, but the blade is covered with blood and dirt. Now the voices are close, and if he runs, they'll see him, and when they find the dog, they'll know for sure that he did something wrong. Picking the knife up, he sticks the handle in his back pocket and hides the rest under his shirt.

Charlie is standing perfectly still now, watching as two little girls ride their bikes past Jim's Auto Repair. He knows them from school and hopes beyond hope they won't notice him, though it's already too late. One of the girls, Amber, decides to turn her handlebars and pedal her white rubber tires up to him. Her friend, Christine, does the same, like an ant following its queen. Girls always seem to do that. One of the secrets which all boys know is that girls share a collective brain and move according to

the thoughts and whims of one another. And that's not what he thinks; it's what he knows.

"You're not s'posed to be here!" shouts Amber, angrily biking her way over. "There's a sign out front, *no trespassing*, can't you read?"

Charlie doesn't say a thing. He just grinds his teeth and returns her glare. He always thinks she is a pretty girl—unfairly perfect with big blue eyes, freckles, and shiny blond hair held back from her face by two big plastic barrettes. Her friend is a brunette with a grayish complexion and a wide nose. He doesn't like those types of noses.

"You're gonna be in trouble, ya know. Your mama's gonna whup you good when she finds out you're here," says Amber.

"You gonna tell?" says Charlie, almost as a challenge.

Amber takes a moment to consider, her blue eyes narrowing, surprised that some little nothing in the school's social strata didn't go straight to begging or at least tearing up a little.

"Nah, I ain't gonna tell," she finally decides.

"What about her?" He motions with his chin, pointing out the other girl.

"She won't say nothing either, will ya, Christine?"

There comes no answer, as her friend is busy looking over her shoulder at something in the background. Amber gears up and strikes Christine in the ribs with her elbow.

One of the secrets which all boys know is that girls share a collective brain and move according to the thoughts and whims of one another.

“Well, are ya?”

“Ow! What?” says Christine.

“I said you ain’t gonna tell, right!”

“Okay, I won’t tell, geeze!” whines Christine, rubbing the sore spot on her chest.

“See, we ain’t gonna tell...”

And just as Charlie is feeling a sense of relief, she adds, “But you gotta gives us a dollar each, ok?”

He feels his stomach drop down to his knees. Now his voice is meek and pleading like Amber expected it to be.

“But I...I ain’t got any money!”

“So,” she says, crinkling her nose up in contempt, “ask your ma or something. You can pay us Monday at lunch.”

She turns her wheel, ready to speed away from weirdo Charlie when unexpectedly:

“Hey, kid,” says Christine, breaking free of toady protocol, daring to speak without first being spoken to. “What’s that puddle over there?”

“Oil,” says Charlie, a little too quickly. Why not? It’s certainly dark enough to be.

“Don’t look like it to me,” returns Christine with an attitude.

That’s it; they have him. He’s sure of it. He’ll be in so much trouble. What is he going to do? Unknowingly, his hand goes under his shirt and grips the blade handle.

Amber rolls her eyes. “Whatever, it don’t matter anyhow,” she says, dismissing Christine’s skepticism. “Let’s just go back to my house.”

“But you said you wanted to show me something?” says Christine, puzzled.

“Shut up, will ya! I don’t want *him* knowing what we’re doing! Now c’mon!” She barks this last order before speeding off on her bike.

Afraid of being left behind, Christine scurries to turn her bike around and get her feet on the pedals. With everything in place, she rides off, leaving Charlie in a cloud of dust. He barely waits for the cloud to settle before taking off on his own.

Returning home that evening, ten minutes after supper began, Charlie knows he’s in trouble. He does his best to enter through the front door without making any noise. The hinges always creak, though, no matter how much he wants them not to. And they do this time as well, sounding the alarm.

“Charles, is that you, boy?” says the gruff voice of his grandfather from the living room.

The old man is sitting in his recliner, pants undone in front of the TV while eating a plate of fried chicken. Only he is allowed to eat his meals like this, in the living room. Everyone else has to sit at the table.

“You’re late.” He looks at Charlie over the rim of his glasses and wags a finger, motioning for him to come over. “You know how your Gram is,” he says in a grave tone. “Now, my suggestion to you is to go in that dining room with your head real low, and when she says anything to you, the first thing outta your mouth better be an apology. Don’t make no excuses, just say you’re sorry and that aught ta see you through. Good luck.” He uses his fork to wave Charlie away and returns his attention to the seven o’clock news, buzzing its broadcast across an aging Zenith.

Charlie does as he’s been told, feeling nervous and apprehensive as he walks through the kitchen and into the dining room. His mother and grandmother are both there. His mom looks up at him for an instant but goes right back to eating. Grandma, on the other hand, is sitting stiffly in her chair, her plate

lying before her, full—untouched. She isn't someone who believes in eating without everyone present. She turns, finally acknowledging his presence with a nod and a look of displeasure.

"Seven o'clock, Charles, that is when we sit down to eat in this house. Not five minutes after, not ten minutes after, *at seven*."

"Sorry, Grandma," he says, taking his grandpa's advice.

"My dinner is almost cold, and so is yours. If they got cold, I'd have to throw them out."

"Sorry, Grandma," he says again.

"I don't enjoy wasting money, much less making a dinner for someone who doesn't have the sense or courtesy to be on time."

"Sorry, Grandma."

"Please stop saying that!" she snaps, throwing her napkin on the table.

Charlie takes a few steps back and almost apologizes again but catches himself just before he does and bites his lips together. His grandmother stares down at him with a narrowed glare, her mouth pinching into a thin line of red.

"I suppose you've been playing in the dirt, like a little pig," she says. "Go on, show me your hands."

Reluctantly, Charlie approaches and brings his hands up, presenting them to her, palms outward. She grabs them and pulls him violently towards her. It takes only a few seconds for her to throw them down in disgust.

"You're not eating until you wash your hands," she says. Grabbing him by the shirt, she drags him over to the kitchen sink. Turning only the hot tap on, she lets it run for a moment so that the bad water runs out first and all that comes out afterward is clean. Satisfied that only pure, hot water is running,

she sticks Charlie's hands under the tap. His face turns red as he holds back a scream. Screaming would only make it worse, and he knows that everything will be over soon anyway. Once his hands are thoroughly scrubbed, he is allowed to sit down and eat. However, he is under strict orders to go right upstairs to bed when he is finished. But Charlie has trouble eating with the thought of the dog's corpse just lying behind the wheel of that car. He feels like it is waiting for him, as if it were lonely without him.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it?" says his grandmother, snapping him out of his world of thought. "You've taken maybe two bites. You dislike my cooking that much?"

"No, Grandma. It's good—it's good," he assures her, suddenly shoveling spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth with a raw, red little hand.

She looks on, disgusted. "You eat like a pig, you come home dirty like a pig, you're a dirty pig, you hear!" She shakes her head. "Might as well have just raised a little porker."

Something like a grimace comes across his mother's face then, but she says nothing. She just looks at Charlie for a moment with large eyes that seem to have something sad about them. She gets up and quietly leaves the table.

"Where are you off to?" asks Grandma, putting her fork down.

Still on her way to the door, his mother doesn't answer; she just keeps moving. When she is gone, Charlie's grandmother shakes her head and dabs the corners of her mouth with the crisp edge of her napkin.

"Now, if you want a pig, there's a pig for you," she says. "She's going out, most likely trying to find you a new daddy, but she'll probably only bring home a new brother."

This confuses Charlie, and he begins to imagine a large store with babies and men set atop long racks, all wrapped up and boxed and marked with a red sticker that says 'SALE' in bold letters. If they sold people, maybe they sold hearts and lungs and skeletons too, and maybe a book about how to put them all together. He wishes.

His dinner finished and the dishes done, Charlie is rushed upstairs for bedtime. There, up in his room, his grandma reads to him in the last minutes of remaining daylight. She reads in a soft voice, using one hand to hold the book open and the other to stroke his hair. When the story is done, she kisses him on the forehead and says a prayer to the angels, asking them to protect and watch over him while he sleeps.

"You're a good boy, Charlie," she says.

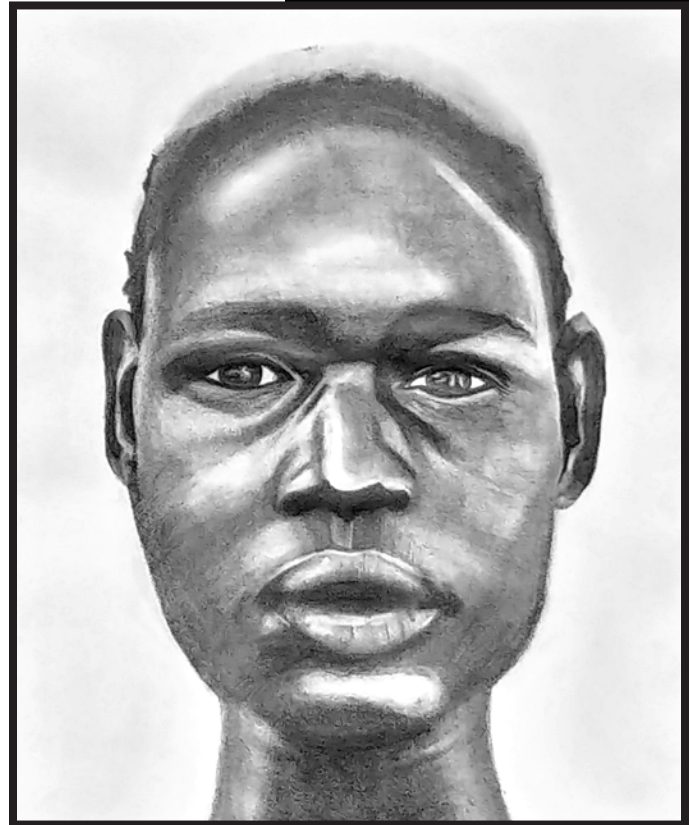
"I know," he says with a smile, and it makes his grandma chuckle.

"Don't let it get to your head, now. Love you, baby boy," she says just before turning out the lights and closing the door.

For some time, Charlie just lies there in the darkness, feeling warm, feeling like he actually matters. And in this moment of soft serenity, a small, slick figure hops up on the bed and climbs on top of his stomach.

"Maisy," he says in recognition, stroking his cat along its back and down its tail. The motion itself winds up sending him to sleep. The soft fur between his fingers is one of the best feelings in the world, though far from his first favorite. Before his eyes close for the last time that night, he thinks of the dog. It'll be spoiled tomorrow. By daylight, every crawling thing in creation will have had its turn at it, and what will he be left with? Clearly, something else has to be found.

Cheyenne Getz
Black on White
Pencil

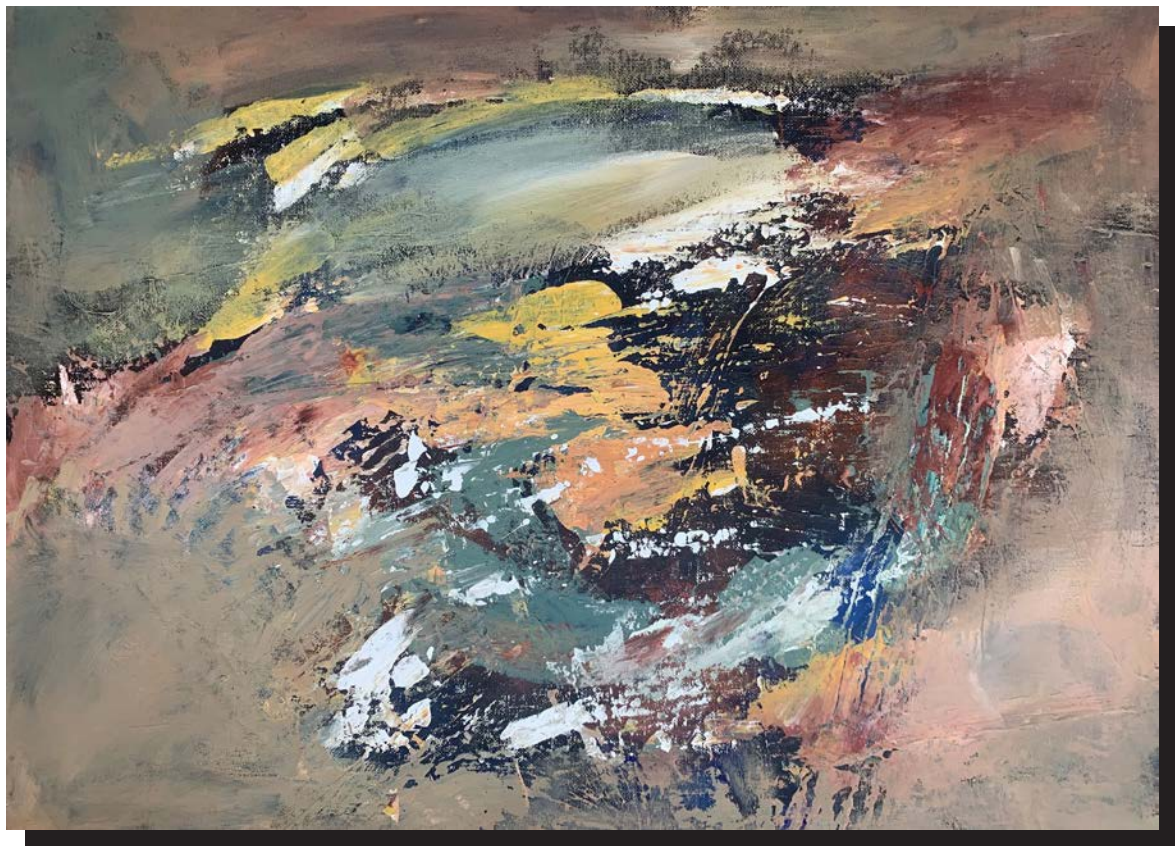


The next morning, Charlie wakes up early and rides his bike back down to Jim's Auto Repair. Along the way he passes by one of his neighbors who is out in his robe. He's whistling and calling the name "Pawley" over and over again. This is a man that Charlie knows well and likes well. He has a good number of pets and always lets young Charles play with them as often as he likes. He knows, and is often astounded, that the man has in his possession: four cats, seven hermit crabs, two birds, a turtle, a rabbit, and... something else. Charlie pretends not to remember what the last animal was; there were sixteen animals, sixteen and no more. He speeds past the man, partially in fear, partially just to get where he's going.

Once again Charlie is standing in the middle of the yard behind the old auto body shop and, though the sun is still low in the sky, the morning affords him no coolness—no brief gust of wind to soothe his body from the heat of early September. Charlie looks over at the car where he placed the dog's body. He wonders what it looks like now that the bugs and rats and all other sorts of critters had the time to do what they do naturally. Not to worry, he'll find out later. Right now, he has work to do, and the very thought of it makes his hands clench in anticipation. One hand around a small hacksaw, which he took from his Grandfather's toolbox, and the other around a burlap sack. He keeps a firm hold on it as the sack shuffles about, whining and meowing ever so slightly.



Sandra Eve McElroy
Barn Owl
Pencil



Crystal Santana
Spry Ship
Acrylic



Christopher Barrera
No Objections
Acrylic

Christopher Barrera

Strokes of Life

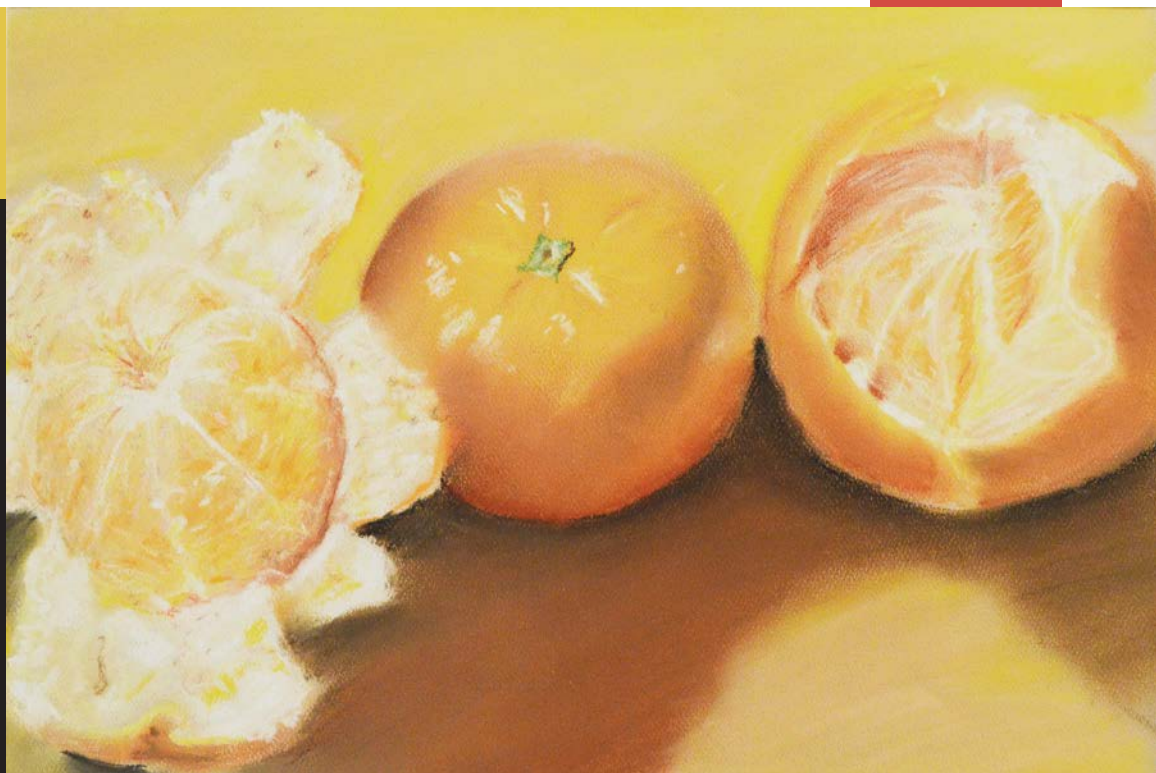
I am inspired by older works of art that possess some kind of enchantment. I approach every piece with the goal of perfection. Every brush stroke, color, line, all is for that exact resemblance to real life. Though striving for perfection is common among artists, for me it becomes a game of insanity—as every bit of detail must be perfect in its resemblance to a real object or person, or to an image in my own abstract mind. My still-life pieces all have a realistic touch, each in one color dominating the composition and enhancing the overall work. On the surface many of them are still and silent. They do not reflect the internal struggle I often face when replicating them as I hide that side of my work.

Tension

But next to those still pieces are my portraits and “Red Death,” which represent an antithesis to my usual approach. Instead of harboring the immense idea of perfection, I sometimes take a more abstract and relaxed attitude—still trying to hold on to my principles but being a bit more forgiving. And I struggle with the tension between these two approaches. Perfection is my way of life. It is how I try to live. I cannot object to failure. Just press on and wait to the end. “No Objection” is a personal piece. It somehow reflects the struggle that I experience. It reminds me that perfection is not really attainable and that I should break away from it.



Irresistible
Acrylic



Extraction of Sweets
Acrylic

Ambiance Field
Pastel



Red Death Ink and Pencil





Capirucho
Acrylic

Ready to Ball
Acrylic





Self-Projection

Christopher Barrera

Acrylic

The Taste



I know it's a dream—and even in the dream, I know something is wrong.

Elena Moyer

I'm dreaming. I know I am, but it's not right. Somehow *something* isn't right. I frantically look all around me, trying to understand what's wrong. I move briskly through the trees, throwing my head around in rushed motions trying to regain a sense of direction. The trees stand tall, almost mocking me with their sense of security. The leaves, showing off their beautiful shades of reds and oranges, break off the branches and descend towards the ground. My breath quickens. I close my eyes and feel my skin grow cold under my clothing. *I shouldn't be here*, I think to myself. *I shouldn't be anywhere near these woods.*

As I blindly rush through the stiff trees that tower above me, I remember walking back to my apartment from the bookstore where I'd worked for the last four years. I can still hear the clanging sound my keys made after I dropped them on the stand just beside the front door. I didn't even bother with dinner. I climbed right into the bed that just barely fit against my dark grey walls.

I know it's a dream—and even in the dream, I know something is wrong. It's almost like I'd had a vision of this situation before. I feel the hair on my neck extend, making my whole body grow numb. I'm nervous—yet I don't understand why. It feels as if something is screaming at me to wake up and turn back around before my sleeping mind makes the mistake of going any farther.

I stop abruptly when I see a shadow of movement zip through the dark trees. I stare, but whatever it is, it doesn't move again. I move my attention from the trees to the floor of sticks and dead leaves, noticing I'm walking on a large distinct path. *This is probably my only way out of this nightmare.*

As I begin to walk on, I hear a deep chuckle from the same spot. *What the hell? This is a dream*, I tell myself. *Nothing can kill you or injure you in a dream.*

I take a nervous breath and hold on to the hope that this is in fact a dream and I'm safely asleep in my bed at home. I decide to continue to follow the path as it moves up a hill.

As I near the top, the trees separate in a small clearing where I can just see how vast the land before me is. The river is the first thing I notice: it zigzags down the hill and leads out through the valley of the mountains that surrounds the forest. The stretch of water goes farther than my own two eyes can see. Above the outline of the mountains and just beyond the trees, the sun begins to set.

If this weren't a dream and if I were in any other situation, this very sight would take my breath away. I would be standing like an aspiring artist admiring the best painting in an art museum. But it is a dream that feels frighteningly real, so the sight before me only increases my nerves. *I just want to be home. I just need to wake up. Why can't I just wake up?*

It's the beginning of October. If I had to guess the time based on the sunset, I would suppose it is around 7, late evening here. Though, I still don't know where 'here' is yet. I rip my stare from the sunset and look back down towards the valley just in time to see the rapid movements of the shadow reappear. But this time, the dark mystery doesn't hide behind a tree. I can clearly see it's a shadow of a person, not an animal or branches in the wind.

"Hey! Up here! Can you tell me where I am please?" I scream down, hope igniting all over my body. "Please, I know I'm dreaming, I must have conjured you up to help me out!"

The shadow kneels to what looks like a reddish log. He doesn't lift his head to the sound of my voice. He only stares at the log and brushes his red-covered hand across it. He wears a jet-black leather jacket and equally dark jeans. The red on his hand is the only bright color on the man.

"Hello? Can you hear m—"

The shadow slowly lifts his head. His grim eyes stare right into mine.

No, it can't be! But - how can... it... be?

The shadow staring back at me is me, only in darker clothes with deadly eyes.

I can't remove my gaze from his, or my shadow self's eyes. I can only watch, frozen in place, as a slight grin slowly surfaces on his face.

He stands now, providing a clear view of the log.

That's not a log at all, I think, as a bloody female body is exposed to me completely.

My shadow self chuckles. The half grin becomes slightly larger as each sinister giggle leaves his mouth. He wipes his bloody hands on his jacket and reaches for something in his pocket with his left hand. His bloodstained right-hand motions towards the remainder of the path ahead. He doesn't speak—only mouths the words, "Keep going," and straightens his pointed finger.

I stumble back in horror and slam my eyes shut. *Please god, please just let me wake up from this nightmare. I don't know what's going on. Wake up. Come on Dan, just wake up!*

I snap my eyes open in hopes of seeing my flat screen TV hanging on my bedroom wall. Instead, I'm greeted by the same haunting trees and darkness moving in closer. I regain my composure, persuading myself that I only saw a figment in my imagination, a pawn in this game of never-ending nightmares.

Grabbing onto a thin branch, I pull myself up and just as I expected, the shadow of myself is gone—and so is the deceased body. I shiver harshly as the sun's warmth starts to fade away. I feel colder than I should, even with the large blue sweatshirt wrapped around me and the thick khaki sweatpants hugging my legs. My body convulses in cold jerking motions as I walk through the unfamiliar landscape before me. It isn't the woods from my childhood where my sister and I would play for hours in a day. Nor is the one my apartment rests on now in the Pacific Northwest where I have my own walking trails embedded in the ground, making sure I always know the way home.

As I walk, the feeling that something is lurking grows stronger with each step I take on the trail. I feel the dirt between my toes, tickling my sensitive skin. *Gotta remember to put socks on before going to bed.* I continue walking as if I know exactly where I'm going, even though I've never been here before.

My thoughts of the shadow grow louder as my legs seem to carry me to where I need to go. *Why am I seeing a dark version of myself? Am I actually dreaming, or could I be sleepwalking? God, I hope I'm just dreaming.*

My thoughts snap off in an instant when I see him again. This time the shadow stands directly in front of the path, about five feet in front of me. This time his face is covered in blood, but the grin remains. He mouths the words, "You're almost there," and raises his eyebrows. He spins his body so I could walk past.

"What do you want from me?" I scream at him.

He doesn't answer—only keeps his eyes locked with mine. He then steps backwards into the depth of the woods, disappearing into a patch of thick fog that has settled down upon the trees.

As soon as my eyes move from the trees back to the path, I am startled to see a small log cabin resting where the shadow once stood.



No shit! I have been here before.

I'm frozen, standing silently still. I know exactly where I stand. I recognize the small, weathered log cabin. The fog is thick around the beaten-up wooden boards that hold the structure together. The cabin sits on the edge of the riverbank, facing me. There are two dark windows and a rusty old front door that stares at me, waiting. I move in closer and notice that the blinds are shut. *They weren't shut the last time I was here.*

The thought alone stops me in my tracks. *The last time I was here? Why can't I remember exactly why I've been to this place before? I just know I've been here before—almost as if in another life.*

I don't dare go inside and face what has brought

me here—not yet. Instead, I move to the other side of the cabin and investigate. A long porch wraps around at least half of the moss-covered cabin and faces the river. The structure looks very unstable with old decaying wooden boards. Only a few things rest on the porch itself: three broken chairs and an old end table with an ashtray on top that is overfilled with cigarette butts.

I risk going onto the porch, fearful of the front entrance, to enter through the back door. I slowly make my way to one of the chairs first and notice that there is not a single piece of dirt or dust on it. I glance to the left and look at the remaining chairs. All but one chair is clean: broken but clean. I look

towards the door, trying to gain enough bravery to step through. I'm interrupted by my own voice before I move forward: "You've made it, Danny boy." My shadow self sits on the only clean seat out of the three. He reaches in his pocket with his bloody left hand again. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes, staining the white packaging with blood red smudges.

I don't dwell on the shadow sitting there blowing smoke in my face. I instead swallow my ever-intensifying fear and walk towards the door. My shaky hand reaches out for the doorknob, but before I even touch it, the door swings open with such force that I startle back in fright falling backwards.

"Welcome back, Danny!" I hear a slow chuckle from inside the darkness of the cabin.

I can't breathe, but I still find a way to quickly get back on my feet, understanding now that this was the danger I felt before.

"H-How do you know my name? W-Who are you?" I whisper.

"Now Danny, is that anyway to address ya father? Whadda need? A fuckin' invitation? Get ya ass inside and say hello to us boy." I hear the man breathe back. He hasn't moved into the light yet, but I can physically feel the smile on his unknown face.

I take a step towards the door, not entering just yet. I take one long breath and try to regain some control.

"My father died fifteen years ago sir. I think you're mistaken,"

I step just a little closer to the door and suddenly feel a strong tug on my sweatshirt. The force is so powerful that it pulls me inside the cabin and throws me onto the hard ground like I weigh as much as a piece of paper. I smack my head against the floor with a loud thud.

"What the fuck! Who the hell are you!" I scream as I reach for the throbbing on the back of my head.

All the control I thought I had is now lost. The door slams shut, and the entire cabin goes dark. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust, but I can still barely see a thing. I can just make out the man's dark outline walking around me in a circle like I was his prey. The throbbing in my head begins to fade but my fear of the man does not.

"Now, are you gonna sit there and shut the fuck up now? Or should I go get Jerry? I know that boy would love a word with you."

I don't say a word, fearful of who Jerry is and what exactly Jerry would do to get me to stop talking.

"Well, alright then." The man who calls himself my father walks towards the window blinds and pulls them apart. "We were wondering when you'd find your way back here." The old man keeps his eyes towards the window, watching the fog move around the trees and bounce off the water of the river. "Jerry didn't think you had the *taste* like us. He was fixing to hunt you down and butcher you for all that you know."

All that I know? The old man turns his attention from the window towards me. "But shit I told him you'd find your way. Once they get a glimpse, they always come back."

The man walks towards a well-worn recliner. Before he takes a seat, he reaches in his pocket for his pack of smokes, pulls one out, and lights it up. He takes a seat in the chair and inhales a long drag of smoke. "Yup, yup, they always come runnin' back, even you with ya weird ass blackouts or whatever ya call em."

Blackouts? I don't have blackouts.

He's furious but still has that sickening smile on his lips.

The old man takes another lengthy drag from his cigarette, burning it close to the butt end. "These things kill ya, Danny. Remember how many packs a day we'd blow through when you were here last year? *Phew*, I'd reckon a good amount especially on the days after a damn good hunt. *Shit* probably like two a day I reckon. You still smokin, Danny boy?"

"I've never seen you before," I quietly answer. I keep my eyes on the floor and slowly scooch my way back towards a wall to sit a little taller.

"Don't you give me none of that shit you gave the last time you were here boy! You were here a plenty and seen me just the same!" He yells sitting up in the recliner, his long skinny finger pointed directly between my eyes.

"Phew, now Danny, ya almost got me mad there, kid. You know how I get when I get angry. I don't like it when you decide to come on back around but act like you ain't knowing where you are or who I am. Boy, I basically raised you when Jerry brought you on back from that school after he saw ya nearly kill a kid on the playground. Phewie, how long that been now? I'd reckon bout seventeen years by now."

I stay silent. I try and piece together the mystery of my past and how this man, who says he's my father, knows my name. *Am I still dreaming? Is this conversation even real?*

I scope the room but before I can get a good look of the place, the shadow sits in the corner adjacent to mine. He puts his bloody finger to his lips and makes

a *shhh* sound. He then mouths the sentence, "You have too," in slow concise movements. The shadow licks his lips and moves his attention towards the old man.

"Jerry's been fixing to go hunting, but he just aint got the skills like you do, kid. I won't even let him bother. In fear he'll slip up, letting them coppers know what we've been up to out here." He doesn't move his eyes from mine. "Hell, how long's it been since we even had a hunt. I reckon the last time you were up here. Mhm, we sure are getting damn itchy to have another *prize* lying on our table."

"Prize?" I ask. "What do you mean by prize?"

"Those fuckin people that always stomp on our land, trynna get purty pictures of the *purty* landscape. Shit—if I wasn't so old, I'd be draggin them in here myself. But hell, that's why we brought you up here the first time and *woooo weeee* did you have a taste for that."

The taste! Just like the shadow said.

"Taste of what!"

"The taste for killin' boy! Hell, you fuckin' loved it if I remember right. I was damn surprised when you ran off one night. It was like a whole other personality came through, sayin' you didn't know where you were, tyna act all righteous and shit, tellin' us to get our hands off the poor girl, blah blah."

"No! This is a dream. You're lying to me! I don't bring people here for you. I'd never hurt a person. Never!"

"Well, ya fuckin did and you loved it." He screams



Crystal Santana
Warmth
Watercolor

and stands up from his chair. The back of the recliner slams into the wall. He throws the half-finished cigarette directly at my face.

I frantically get the embers off my clothes and move as far away from him as I can.

“Every goddamn time ya waltz on back through the doors and act like ya don’t know who we are or what you done. One minute it’s ‘who are you’ and the next it’s ‘Bo, which one should we grab?’ Dream this, dream that! Well, fuck your dreams boy. This is a *nightmare!*”

He’s furious but still has that sickening smile on his lips.

The shadow slowly stands and begins to move towards me. He gets within a foot of me and paces back and forth, never allowing his eyes to move from me.

I can’t move. I can only close my eyes and cower.

I hear Bo snicker and walk into another room. “How bout you just let me know when you stop acting like a confused lil bitch and we can get to work. I know ya miss the hunt. You wouldn’t be back here if ya didn’t.”

I’m ready for this nightmare to be over. I just want to be back home. I keep my eyes closed but feel the presence of my shadow. I can feel his hot breath on my frozen features and the smell of his stale cigarette seeping into my pores. He chuckles only inches from my face and places one of his firm hands on my shoulder. “Hi there, bud! I’m your old friend Dark Danny. Remember me?”

I feel a strong pressure force its way throughout my body, taking over me. I slam my eyes shut tighter. *Just take me home. Please take me home!*

I fearfully open my eyes and am surprised to see the familiar gray walls of my room in my own

apartment. I turn to my left and look towards my alarm clock: 8:09am.

“Holy hell! it was only a dream! Oh, thank you, god.” I say out loud laughing a little.

I remove the sheets from my body and jump to the floor, only to hear the splat of mud beneath my feet.

“*What the-*” Hysterically, I lift the sheets from my bed to see exactly what I was afraid of - an outline of mud from my feet. Everything about the dream comes crashing back like a smack in the face with a hard metal shovel.

“You just let me know when you stop acting like a confused lil bitch and we can get to work. I know ya miss the hunt. You wouldn’t be back here if ya didn’t.” I hear the voice ring throughout my ears.

“No,” I breathe, “No! Fuck, fuck, fuck. No. I was there! I was actually fucking there!”

I rush out of the room, slam open the front door, and run to my car. I don’t even bother locking the door. I just need to get out of here.

I jump in my car and take off down the gravel road. I have no idea where I’m headed but I know I’ll be gone for a while.

I watch as each sign passes my speeding car, making my mind grow fuzzy. Dark visions begin to cloud my mind. I start to go into a trance-like state, allowing my mind to flood with images of a knife moving up and down into a body.

Snip bits of Bo and Jerry break through, standing around the body with me, spots of blood covering their grins. Suddenly there it is—seeping through as quickly as the car is cruising: *the taste for the kill*. Everything inside me lights up. I remember the feeling. I remember everything. I remember the hunt for people. Anyone who dared come into our woods would surely get the sharp end of the knife.

I know where I need to go. Dark Dan will take me.

“You get ya shit straightened out?” Bo sits on the chair on the old porch, smoking a cigarette. I reach for his pack from the end table and light one up for myself. I watch as a small smile creeps onto the old man’s face, clearly already knowing the answer to his question.

“Fuck you, old man.” I say with a similar small smile on my own face. “You’re ready for me to go get you a *prize*?”



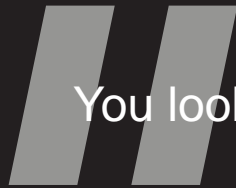
Sophia Vojtasek
Grizzly Cub
Ink

The Red Dragon

Lydia Reiss

She sits in a chilled metal chair
her legs crossed.
Chin ascended to the sky
she takes a deep inhale
of the misty, morning dew.
A Yves Saint Laurent cigarette in her mouth,
resting perfectly in the gap between her teeth
avoiding the precise outline of lipstick.
Puckering her lips around the cigarette,
she inhales, holding in the smoke.
Hand shaking anxiously
Blood-stained finger tips,
rest uncomfortably on her lap
She exhales.
The smoke warps into the image of a dragon,
swimming in the wind.
Its tail coils around its body until
the illusion strangles itself into inexistence
as it slowly dissipates into the mist.
At last, one of them is free.

Crumb City Diner



You look like you've killed a man.

Lydia Reiss

The clock on the dashboard read 3:42 am. He had been driving for six hours straight with no bathroom breaks, nothing to eat or drink, and no rest. The trip was becoming unbearable, his eyes sensitive to the headlights of passing cars. He wiped his hand over his face and pulled up on his eyelids as he tried to remember the last time he'd had a cup of coffee.

A bright neon sign up ahead directed his attention off the road as it glaringly contrasted with the darkness of the night. "Open 24 hours," it read. *This must be a sign from God*, he thought. He switched on his turn signal and pulled off the main road into the parking lot of the sign's accompanying diner, his stomach aching for any morsel of food.

A bell above the door chimed and the tired hostess looked up from her phone, greeting the man who had just walked in. "Table for one?" she asked, sorting through the menus in front of her.

The man sarcastically looked behind him and then back at the hostess. "Well, it would appear that way"—and he dismissively added, "I'll just have a seat at the bar."

She shrugged, putting down the menus and drawing her attention back to her phone. The man took a seat at the bar as a waiter came up to him asking for his order. "A coffee and a cheeseburger with a side of French fries." He couldn't be more American than that. When the coffee arrived, he gulped down half the cup and sat back on the barstool, taking a deep breath. *It's okay. You're safe here*, he thought to himself as he scanned the seating room for sharp looks from any of the customers. Nobody was paying attention: not the young girl in the booth in the corner and nor the man a few stools over arguing on his phone with a motel clerk.

He sighed and took another sip of his coffee. He noticed the girl in the corner booth toss something at the empty seat in front of her. Her back was to the man as she furiously scratched away at something before throwing yet another object at the seat. He directed his attention to the hostess to see if she'd noticed, but she remained hunched over her phone, completely oblivious. The man picked up his cup of coffee and made his way over to the girl's booth, taking a seat across from her. She didn't flinch—didn't even look up. Instead, she slowly pulled the napkin from under her hand onto her lap, away from the man's view. The waiter followed the man to the booth and placed his burger down, ignoring the girl's presence. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, I'm okay." He replied, forgetting about his empty cup of coffee.

The girl looked up at his plate of food, her face a flushed white.

"Would you like some fries?" the man offered. "You don't look too well."

"I ate—thank you," she snapped.

There was a moment of silence as the man chewed away at his cheeseburger and the girl carefully studied him. He took one bite after another, quickly shoving as much food in his mouth as he could before finally swallowing.

"You don't look too well yourself," the girl noted, her eyes challenging him.

The man almost choked on his food and waited to catch his breath before replying. "What makes you say that?"

"You look like you've killed a man."

The man stiffened in his seat and put down the burger. "Oh, yeah?"

The girl drew her attention back to her lap. “I don’t know. Why else are you eating at this town’s shittiest diner at 4:30 in the morning?”

“I’m from out of town,” the man explained. “I was driving for a while before I got hungry. So here I am.” He picked up his burger and finished the last of it. “What are you doing at the town’s shittiest diner at this time in the morning?”

“Running away,” the girl said defiantly.

“Running away, huh? What were you writing?”

“Writing?” She looked at him sharply. “Why?” She asked, growing defensive. “Were you watching me?”

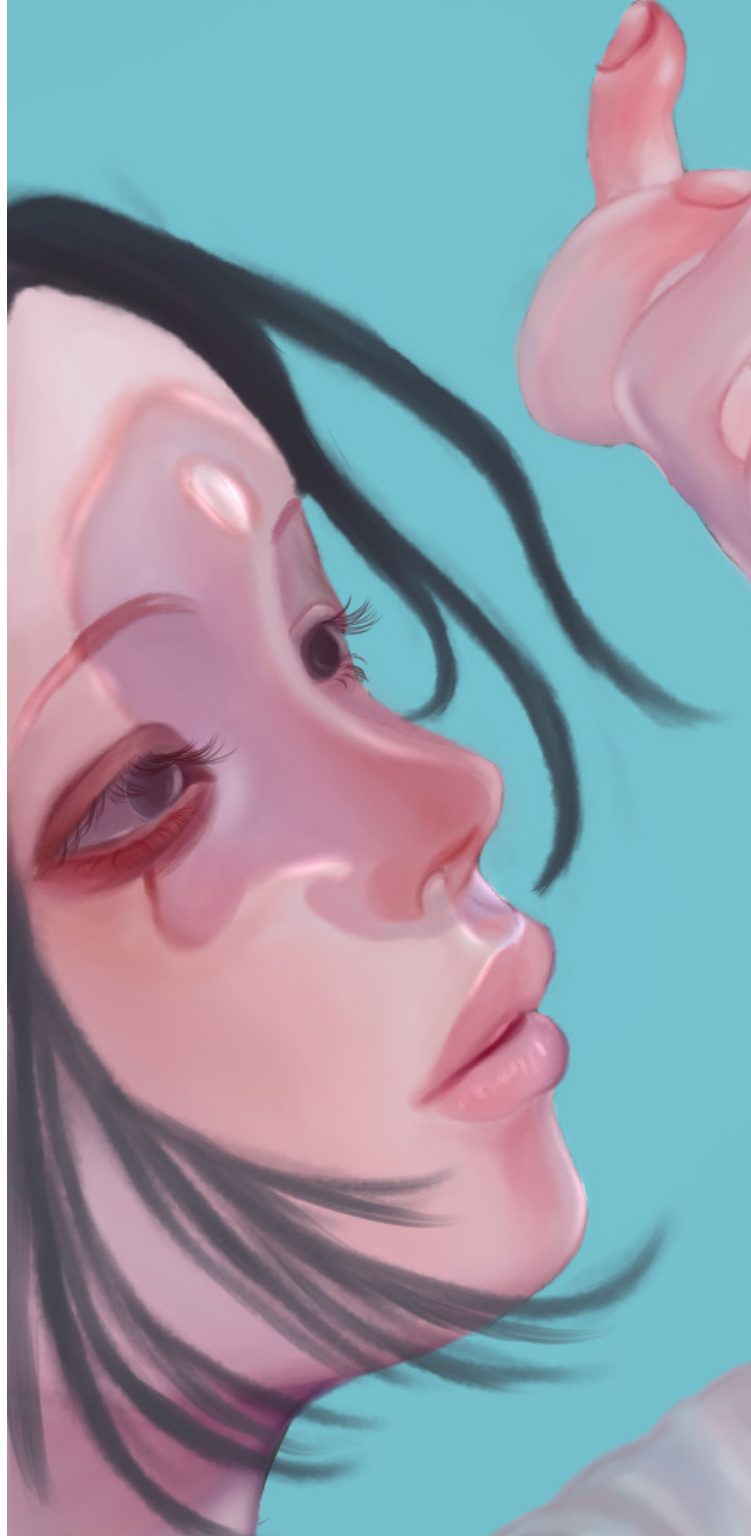
“I just happened to be scopin’ the place when I saw you throw something at this seat.” The man quickly looked underneath the table, remembering why he had sat there in the first place. He picked up a crumpled-up napkin and unfolded it. The girl flung herself across the table, grabbing it out of his hands before he had a chance to open it.

“What were you writing?” he repeated.

“A suicide letter,” she didn’t hesitate to say as she looked down at the napkin. “It’s not ready yet. I’m still tweaking some things.”

The man didn’t respond immediately. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. After a moment, he folded his hands on his lap and looked at the girl sympathetically. “You don’t have to do that,” he finally stated, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “Any of it. The letter. Dying. It’s a permanent thing, you know.”

Lilibeth Familia Lugo
Thoughts
Digital



Several hours passed by as the man and the girl continued talking, both picking away at a plate of bacon the man had ordered for them. The diner had filled up with people awaiting their breakfast and sipping away at their coffee while they watched the news on the large TV screen in the dining room.

“You promise me you won’t go through with it?” The man stuck out his pinky finger to seal the oral contract he’d proposed.

The girl hooked her pinky around his, smiling. “I promise.”

Their conversation was interrupted as the television got louder. The hostess stood in the middle of the dining hall, the remote in her hand. Turning her gaze to the TV, the girl in the corner booth noticed that everyone else in the diner was doing the same.

A news reporter was on the screen. “If anybody

has seen or knows the whereabouts about this dangerous suspect, call this number immediately.” A snapshot of a man who had just robbed a convenience store, killing the owner in the act, was displayed, remaining onscreen for some time with the number displayed just below it. The hostess turned down the volume again as everybody returned their attention to their fellow diners with an exciting new conversation for their table. Pulling out her phone again as she walked back to the front desk, the hostess said aloud to nobody in particular, “I’ve seen that guy before. I swear it. He looks really familiar.”

Feeling disoriented and nauseous, the girl slowly turned back around to the man sitting across from her, but the seat was empty. He had left no trace of ever being there, not even a crumb.



Allyson Finney
At the Gates
Photograph

qWilted


Wilberto Ortiz

As the sun begins to rise,
I hold on tighter in attempt to keep her by my side.
But she rips me off and leaves me without purpose.
I am nothing without her.
Darkest are the hours when the day begins,
For lifelessly alone I lie.
Sometimes unkept, other times in shape.
When she arrives with day's end,
My misery is put to rest.
She undresses and rejoins me in the serenity of night.
The comfort of her gentle figure caresses the fabric of my essence,
Knitting the fragile fiber of my elation.
Though it all unwinds when the sun rises again.
But she always comes back, and I always forgive her,
For without her body,
I'm just a blanket in distress.



Robert Bara-Popa
Taken by the Wind
Photograph

Haunted by an Angel



Eventually, the sounds of the highway faded, leaving only the rustling of the trees and the songs of birds.

Nina Spohn

Her hands trembled—their grip too weak to hold the steering wheel properly. Erika had just left her third shift job and was on her way home, the fog of sleep drawing over her consciousness like a curtain. By the time her brain registered there was something in the middle of the highway, it had already thudded beneath her truck. She snapped to attention at the sound and slammed on the breaks.

It must be an animal—an animal.

She used her palms to guide the truck into the breakdown lane and parked, then grabbed her flashlight from the glovebox. It was still a while before sunrise and dawn was just a faint glow on the edge of the horizon.

Erika climbed out of the cabin of the truck on unsteady legs and squinted through the glare of headlights at the front of the car. The sight of blood splattered on the white finish made her stomach churn. All she could think of was how she had seen the same thing on her father's car nine years before.

She looked around the body of the truck at the form that lay some hundred feet away, just off the road. It wasn't large enough to be a full-grown deer, nor small enough to be a raccoon.

There is no reason why a child would be on the highway at 6 in the morning. This isn't the same. Erika convinced herself, but she chewed her bottom lip anyway. Nine years before, one of her classmates had been hit in the afternoon while walking home from school, right at the curve in a road where trees on either side created a blind spot. Some people took that turn too fast. Everyone in town was convinced Jonah's hit and run had been caused by someone just passing through, but she couldn't forget what she had seen on her father's car.

As she walked to the body, a few cars zipped past her. The roar of their motors rang in her ears and vibrated in her ribcage, but she ignored it. She tried not to think about Jonah—or how her father might have driven away. At the sight of an elongated skull, the knot in her stomach eased.

It was a fawn. The spots on its back were bright in the beam of her flashlight. Its eyes were so wide that the whites were showing. Its face looked as though it had turned, with a decided jerk, to look at her, to ask her why.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed, crouching to the ground and reaching out to run her hand across the back of its head. She meant it as a comforting gesture, but the fawn curled away at her touch, its front legs churning the air and scattering the fine layer of gravel beneath. Its back legs were completely still.

"It's okay. Calm down." The lie would have offered some measure of comfort to a child, but the fawn only screamed. It was still a baby, so innocent, clean of the sin of the world and yet, here was a beautiful future stolen in an instant. Just like Jonah.

Erika tried to remember Jonah fondly. He was the ten-year-old boy who sat in front of her in fourth grade, always looking for a new joke to tell. She tried to hold on to the image of his freckled cheeks and his gap-toothed smile. Even then, that image was soon replaced with the memory of the pale, lifeless boy she said goodbye to in a casket.

The day he died had been just like any other. She remembered him chatting away with his friends before the bus arrived after school. He walked home as usual, his backpack hitched high on his back and his posture poor. His sneakers scuffed the road and he looked both ways before crossing the street.

As she watched the speed gauge climb, she thought idly how her father might not have stopped the car.

She remembered the next day in class, where she watched the students trickle into the room one by one as the seat in front of her remained empty. She could remember how her teacher's voice broke when she told them he was gone, and the wails of confusion that followed as a fourth-grade class tried to grapple with the concept that one of their own had ceased to exist. And the date written in loopy scrawl on the board—the realization dawning that his death was real. He was gone.

Back then, when Jonah had been hit by a car, the local paper said his body had rolled into the ditch at the side of the road and into a bed of leaves. How many cars passed without seeing him? How could her father have looked at his body and then driven off? Jonah must have died cold and unconscious. Erika blinked away tears and looked away from the fawn for a moment.

Outside the beam of her flashlight the world was black. The highway reeked of gasoline and the cold from the asphalt seeped into her boots. It was a horrible place to die. The body would likely sit in the sun for a few days and perhaps get run over again. She knew there was no proper burial awaiting this fawn, just a place among a pile of corpses in a roadkill collection truck. It wasn't human, but it was still someone's baby.

Erika leaned down and scooped the fawn into her arms, surprised by how heavy it was, and struggled to carry it back to her car while it whined, front legs twitching. Blood trickled from its nose and the hind legs flopped uselessly at her side. There was no chance

of saving the poor creature. It probably wouldn't last the car ride—and without the use of its hind legs, it couldn't survive in the wild.

After laying it in the bed of her truck, Erika climbed back into the cabin, cranked up the heat and pressed her hands against the vents, burning the cold out of her fingers. An earthy, wild smell clung to her jacket and hands. Rather than be disgusted by the smell, she found it comforting.

Not a person, not a child, not Jonah.

And yet still my fault.

The thought pinched her breath in a different way than simply seeing the injured fawn had. There was no way to apologize—to make it understand that it wasn't intentional.

Erika put the car in drive and pulled back onto the highway. There was no way to make amends, but at the very least the fawn deserved a proper burial. The next exit, she decided, she would pull off and find a forested area to bury it. As she watched the speed gauge climb, she thought idly how her father might not have stopped the car. He may have only spared a glance to the rear-view mirror at the body and then forgotten about it before the next mile marker.

There hadn't been Halloween the year Jonah died because the whole town mourned collectively. Even her father, as he continued to toil away in his auto shop, wasn't humming as he worked. After she saw blood on his car the day Jonah had been hit, Erika watched him closely. He didn't play the radio or savor his coffee. The stubble on his face grew longer and

the bags under his eyes darkened as the days passed. She wasn't looking for anything specifically. She was just trying to understand, struggling to reconcile the perfect image she had held of her father with the man who had hit Jonah at that curve in the road and driven away.

Erika had once wanted to be like him. As a child, before Jonah died, she would hold one of his calloused hands and marvel at the way his fingerprints were lined with black. She would climb on the stepstool in their kitchen and wash her hands with the orange scented pumice soap her father used after a day in the shop. She would roll up paper, leaves, or even gum wrappers like cigars and pretended to take a smoke. Growing up without a mother, her father was the entirety of her world, her best friend.

Yet when she first saw the blood on his car and the blonde hairs stuck in the grill, she didn't know how to ask him what it was. Overnight, the perspective she had held of her father shifted. The awareness that her father was most likely the hit and run driver created a rift she did not know how to mend. As she grew throughout the years, her father's face creased with lines—yet the depression that seemed to cling to him after that day loosened a little every year. Even so, she didn't know how to ask. In all her favorite books and movies, there was an easy answer: a right and a wrong—but Erika didn't have the first idea of what to do. And now, nine years later, she still kept the knowledge closed in an ever-present pinch behind her ribcage.



Perhaps he didn't die crying, cold and alone, but softly and peacefully?

The first exit off the highway was a tight curve. Erika heard the body in the back smack into the side of the truck and she cringed, hoping that the poor fawn had passed on and couldn't feel anymore.

The roads beyond were lined with trees that stood like arches, their branches only just budding with color in the growing light of dawn. After finding an area off the road large enough to comfortably park, she shut off her truck and leaned her forehead against the steering wheel. Her shift the night before had been long, and a wave of exhaustion hit her. Erika was sure at this point that she didn't have the strength to dig a hole deep enough for the fawn. In fact, she didn't even have a shovel, just the emergency hatchet she kept tucked behind her seat, and that would take hours. All thoughts of a nice burial were banished from her mind.

Still, leaving the body in the woods was better than leaving it on the highway. That thought comforted her, at least.

She climbed from the cabin of the truck once more and popped the handle of the door in the back of the truck. Blood streaked across the bed of the truck, but the fawn slumped on its side, its flanks still rising and falling with breath. Its glossy, black eyes blinked at her.

It was still alive. The guilt was enough to make her breathless.

"Hey," she whispered, picking up the fawn as gently as she could, making sure to wrap an arm under its front legs to distribute the weight properly. The

fawn grunted in her arms but didn't scream. Somehow, it had calmed down from earlier. Whether that was a sign of it dying, Erika wasn't sure, but she began to walk into the newly sprouting forest.

She picked her way carefully over branches and rocks, stepping lightly so that she didn't jostle the injured creature she was holding. A gentle wind threaded through the trees, carrying the sweet scent of spring. She looked down at the fawn again: its nostrils flared into the wind—and it looked serene. Perhaps, after hitting Jonah, her father saw him this way? Perhaps he didn't die crying, cold and alone, but softly and peacefully? Would that have made it better, like the fawn being so at peace made her feel better? She wasn't sure.

Eventually, the sounds of the highway faded, leaving only the rustling of the trees and the songs of birds. The forest floor was coated with the soft, decaying leaves of last autumn. This seemed far enough. She crouched down, shifting the fawn in her arms to lower it onto the ground. Its head swiveled around and its eyes darted about. Two hooves paddled gently against the leaves, almost like it was swimming. She wanted to think the fawn was at peace and wanted to believe this was the kindest thing she could do for it.

Erika turned around to leave. She was feeling some of the heaviness in her heart subside with every step she took. And then, shattering her delusions, she heard the high, keening screams of the fawn yet again. She wanted to run and leave the shrieks that she had caused far behind. But those screams would haunt her.

It wasn't a human child, but it was a baby, terrified and alone. She couldn't leave it behind, and yet what would her staying with it solve? It would still suffer; it would still be scared.

There would be no easy way to end the fawn's suffering. There was a hatchet in her car. It would be a painful death, but quicker than the alternative, surely? Erika had never fileted a fish, let alone something like this. Briefly, she imagined the blood, screams, and twitching, round eyes of its severed head. Her stomach rolled. No, she didn't have the heart. Even if it was a mercy, she couldn't.

She turned around to look at the fawn once more, greatly torn. She was feeling a strong urge to leave it all behind but finding it difficult to do so. She had thought her father was a cruel man, but perhaps he didn't have the answers back then either. Maybe he saw Jonah's body and could only think of his daughter waiting for him at home.

Erika could imagine him sitting behind the wheel just as she had done earlier, shaking and unsure. She could see his rough hands reach out to Jonah in the ditch, to check his pulse, to find him dead. He might have climbed back into his car thinking about what his daughter would do without a father, and then, with the same feelings Erika had after she hit the fawn, driven away—haunted for life. When she thought that way, the judgement she had harbored burned away to an empty ache of guilt.

Finally, so far from the little girl she had been then, Erika walked the distance back to the fawn screaming in the leaves. She sat down beside it, the ground cold beneath her jeans, and pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. She still had cell service, and she scrolled through her contacts to find her father's number. With one hand smoothing the silken fur on

the fawn's haunches and the other holding the phone to her ear, Erika looked up at the bright blue sky that had woken above her. The phone rang once, twice, three times. On the fourth ring, he picked up.

"Erika?" His voice was slow and groggy as if he had been asleep. "Is everything okay? What on earth is that noise?"

"I'm okay. That's a deer. I hit it on my way home from work." She found that she was strangely calm. She wasn't the Erika from nine years before, but she also wasn't the Erika who had been ready to abandon the fawn only minutes before. "I'm going to need some help taking care of it. Its hind legs aren't moving."

"Okay, bud. We'll do our best, but it will probably die anyway."

Erika closed her eyes and felt the rise and fall of the fawn's breathing beneath her hand.

"Dad, do you remember Jonah?"

There was a pause, and then carefully, slowly he said, "I do."

"Back then, I saw the blood on your car before you washed it off. You hit him, didn't you?" She tried to keep the accusation out of her voice, but she couldn't think of a neutral way to ask.

He sighed and mumbled, "Can you just come home so that we can talk about it?"

She looked down at the fawn next to her, knowing that she didn't have the will to leave it alone to die. Maybe that wasn't what it wanted. Perhaps having a stranger tend to it during its final hours would be too stressful, too bizarre. Except, she wouldn't feel right otherwise. If she did not compensate in some way, the memory of the fawn screaming in the woods would follow her for life.

"I'm on my way home."



Sophia Vojtasek

Gaze

Pencil

Disillusioned Blasphemer

Nicholas Fulwood

Sometimes, when my will goes weak,
I wish, on my deepest conviction,
That I believed,
As they believe.

Atheism stings,
Like a crumpled birthday card,
From a father who pays bills,
But whose soul is in debt.

The cynicism is cold,
Logical debates against an illogical lover,
Who sings with abandon,
Hair drifting, twirling, through the air,
While I analyze the message of music.

Blind faith, in anything,
From god to government to people,
Comes slowly,
Like the dawn,
And when it leaves,
The stars are like icicles,
Spilling frost onto my soul.

I miss the magic and the fervor,
Blindly raging into debate,
Froth flicking from my lips,
But in the end,
I am a student of the soul,
Learning from my silence,
As I'm yearning for the violence.

Sandra Eve McElroy

Identity

Pencil



In Dreams

Nicole Wallace

My eyes grow heavy and start to shut,
such effort to keep them opened up.
I try to blink but start to sink
into the deep beginnings of sleep.

I think a while in abstract ways,
my mind floating through the haze
until I drift beneath
the conscious phase.


New thoughts arise, as cognizance dies,
in ways so unexpected
Perchance to dream in that in-between
and journey without directive.

I never fly but where I know
until my lids drop.
Now that I've seen the world of dreams
I never want to stop.

In these dreams, all that I've seen
such interesting perspectives.
Undoubtedly, no mirror be
ever so reflective.

Left deep inside and down below
half-remembered and half-forgotten,
The lives I lead cannot be seen
beyond the world in which I dream.

Looking Deeper: The Meaning of Godzilla



History shows again and again how
Nature points out the folly of men.

- "Godzilla," Blue Oyster Cult

Alex Lupold

Symbolism is a tool that we have utilized throughout our history and grown quite adept at using. Before science was advanced enough to explain the world, myths or symbolic stories were the imaginative attempts to solve the mysteries of life. Symbolism, in fact, is inherent in almost every aspect of life, making our minds flexible enough to draw unexpected connections and see the world from a new perspective. Movies, in particular, as a visual mode of expression, are a widely shared source of symbolic storytelling—and as such they serve as fictional representations of real-world concerns and issues. One of the most famous examples of all time is a towering reptilian behemoth that periodically crushes cities and spews radioactive flame from his mouth. The most successful movie monster of all time, Godzilla, is more than just a big creature who inflicts massive amounts of property damage. Throughout his long career, Godzilla has represented different threats to mankind and his movies have made compelling statements on our society.

In 1954, director Ishiro Honda released *Gojira*, a movie about an enormous, radioactive beast that laid waste to Tokyo. This very first Godzilla movie portrayed him not as the heroic defender of Earth that he became in later movies, but as a horror of man's own creation. Atomic testing awakened a prehistoric animal and mutated it into a colossal monster. Angered and provoked, Godzilla begins to attack ships before finally coming ashore, breezing through the military, and blasting the center of Tokyo into rubble. After his rampage he returns to Tokyo Bay, leaving radiation in his wake.

In this movie, Godzilla represents the atomic bomb. He has all the characteristics of a bomb: unfeeling, impossible to be reasoned with, and

unstoppable. Since he is taller than many buildings, his atomic breath comes from above, much like a falling bomb. After he leaves, survivors have radiation poisoning, and his footprints trigger a Geiger counter. In “What Does Godzilla Mean? The Evolution of a Monster Metaphor,” Mark Jacobson suggests that *Gojira* may also represent Japanese shame after World War II:

It was less than a decade after the war . . . The emperor was deposed, stripped of his divine status. The homeland islands were occupied by a massive, doughy race of loud-mouthed, baseball-loving lugs that propriety demanded be treated as the rightful victors . . . Shame-ridden self-flagellation was in order, and who better to supply the rubber-suited psychic punishment than the . . . big fella himself? (2)

In *Gojira*, Godzilla symbolizes an American invention, and the movie itself may describe the helplessness Japan felt. They were defeated and humiliated. *Gojira* was a way of documenting this in an indirect way.

As Godzilla movies developed, the monster did too, and new allegories found their way in. *Godzilla vs. Biollante* was released in 1989 and it tells the story of how Godzilla goes up against a monster even larger than himself, a massive plant-animal hybrid dubbed Biollante. Biollante is a man-made monster, born from a genetic experiment that combined the DNA of a human, a rose, and Godzilla.

Biollante and Godzilla's clash is used as a warning about the dangers of genetic experimentation. “Japanese Environmentalism in *Godzilla vs. Biollante*” by Bond Benton and Tracy Mariofote digs deep into the meaning of the movie, in which Godzilla represents nature fixing as mankind's mistake:

“Human arrogance demands punishment from the natural world. The rise of a reborn Godzilla creature to battle Biollante . . . was assured by Dr. Shiragami’s violation of the natural order, the combining of human, plant, and beast” (6). Godzilla is nature’s way of destroying a man-made horror brought about by genetic experimentation.

Godzilla movies have also been political commentaries. 2016’s *Shin Godzilla* is a Japanese reboot of *Gojira* with a storyline to fit the modern day. In this movie, Godzilla emerges from Tokyo Bay and starts smashing his way through Tokyo. As the crisis grows more severe, with Godzilla laying waste to huge swaths of the city, a team of politicians and scientists eventually figure out a way to stop Godzilla, but only after he has inflicted major damage on Tokyo.

All this destruction is used in *Shin Godzilla* as a critique of Japan’s current political system. In “Political Monster: The Secret Messages in Godzilla Movies,” Jordan Zakarin describes the political officials as people who “putz around, concerning themselves more with the procedural rules of their emergency meeting than with the chaos enveloping their country” (1). The Prime Minister tries to do something about Godzilla, but procedures and protocols hold him back, along with an overall desire to avoid using military weapons in the city.

“The film’s young hero,” Zakarin notes, “is a defiant government deputy minister who works around bureaucracy and calls the JSDF [Japanese Self-Defense Force] ‘the last fortress against Godzilla’” (2). This flies in the face of Japan’s long-standing pacifist attitude and makes a statement that Japan’s future demands a departure from the past. The team that figures out how to stop Godzilla has many young members, while the Prime Minister’s cabinet is

mostly older and holding on to traditional principles and approaches. *Shin Godzilla* advocates for a newer, fresher political system.



Sandra Eve McElroy
Bald Eagle
 Pencil

Godzilla movies are not always about man-made dangers. The American-made 2014 movie *Godzilla* takes a different approach to the monster and his meaning. In this story, Godzilla is a prehistoric animal that was an apex predator in the past, feeding on the earth's natural radiation and maintaining the natural balance of life. He went into hibernation millions of years ago but emerges in the modern day to hunt down two monsters known as Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organisms or MUTOs that have hatched and threaten to overrun the planet. This version of Godzilla is in no way made by man. He is completely natural, and even an atomic bomb launched at him had no effect. The character Dr. Ishiro Serizawa states: "Nature has an order. A power to restore balance, I believe he [Godzilla] is that power."

In *Godzilla*, the monster represents the forces of nature that humans can do nothing to resist. The author Ethan Sacks says in "The New 'Godzilla' Reflects our Current Fear of Nuclear and Natural Disasters" that "The swath of destruction they [the monsters] leave in their wake is evocative of news footage from . . . Hurricane Katrina and the 2011 tsunami" (1). When Godzilla comes ashore in Honolulu, his colossal bulk causes the ocean to encroach on the city, flooding the streets as he strides through the devastated metropolis. Water washes before him all the way to an airport where he confronts one of the MUTOs. His feet slam down with the power of an earthquake before he bellows his screeching, thundering roar. As the character Dr. Vivienne Graham describes him, Godzilla is "the top of a primordial ecosystem - a god, for all intents and purposes." This Godzilla embodies everything about our world that we can't control.

There is no denying Godzilla's success. The Godzilla franchise is the longest-running movie

franchise of all time, celebrating its 65th birthday this year. But why is Godzilla so popular? Why does a creature that destroys buildings and kills hundreds of innocent people garner such acclaim? Godzilla was the product of a broken nation. Japan was brought low when World War II ended, humiliated by the United States. *Gojira* was an outlet for that, illustrating the frustration and helplessness felt before the country that defeated it. But Godzilla has persisted long past that shameful period of recuperation and is still popular. Mark Pyzyk puts forward an interesting theory in "Hey Godzilla, Why Are You Such a Giant Cultural Symbol?":

Godzilla represents a means of escape from modern society. Godzilla is the great leveler. Destroying Japanese cities is what he does. Tearing down the artificial, materialistic veneer of modern life is perhaps the secret wish of many Japanese, just as it is the secret wish of many North Americans and Europeans. From this point of view, the Japanese' love for Godzilla stems . . . from . . . a hatred of the realities of contemporary pop-culture, based as it is in hollow materialism and US-imported ideas of the consumer lifestyle. (2)

Maybe Godzilla is so popular because he gets to do what we can't: he destroys what he does not like. If he is angry, he smashes things. Perhaps we live vicariously through him.

It seems that the symbolism of Godzilla often boils down to one core concept: fear. *Gojira* represents fear of the atomic bomb. *Godzilla vs. Biollante* shows fear of genetic manipulation gone too far. *Shin Godzilla* is the fear of an inadequate government in times of crisis. *Godzilla* embodies the fear of natural disasters,

those things we can't prevent. If Godzilla's character represents the destruction of the flashy modern culture, it exists because of the fear that we will succumb to this culture. Fear best sums up Godzilla because he is almost never defeated, and when he is, some sacrifice is required, such as in *Shin Godzilla* when purposeful destruction of many buildings and trains by humans is necessary before the monster is incapacitated. Godzilla seem to embody all our fears: fear of what we can do, fear of what we might be able to do, fear of what we can control, and most importantly, *fear of the uncontrollable*.

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Octopus

Benjamin Deluca

I am weightless
Dwelling in the bottom of an abyss.
There is no floor, just darkness.
My two arms turn into eight and yet,
flounder independently,
grasping for something solid.

The liquidity of life is laborious.

I yearn to empty out the cloudiness of my mind
into the ocean of uncertainty with an instinctual ink.

I look at a tentacle,
suction cups useless with nothing tangible to hold.
Maybe, the suckers are strong enough,
if I envelope them around my head
I could pull apart my skull
relieving the pressure in an instantaneous eruption.

Amputation - not an option.
I am not the starfish who can regenerate limbs,
Attempting to tame the tentacles,
hoping they weave into beautiful braids,
instead of gnarled knots of uncertainty.

I look above me.
The faint halo of sunlight wanting to reach me,
yet unable to penetrate the cold dark waters
that protect me from the illusion of safety.

The liquidity of life is intimidating.



Matthew Risell
Rust
Photograph
First Appeared in 2012

The Orb

Nicole Wallace

Mortal eyes open and adjust to the glare,
as an amber orb ascends the throne.
Divinity's brush sweeps the sky
and marvelous hues radiate from eternal palette.

A dawning glory, with sweet promises
dripping from its lips.
Foretelling the origination
of a new ode, yet to be writ.

Surprising designs begin to emerge
under soft illumination.
The conception of a tale
unfolds with startling complexity.

Regardless how it progresses,
its conclusion inevitably comes
as the orb dims and falls beneath the earth
to slumber and rekindle.

The mortal eyes close and brace for the return
of the blind darkness,
before sinking into the depths
of the great unknown.

Synch or Swim

Bryan P. Baker

I fear the revolution will not be televised
Because most of you have been tele-vised
So unknowingly dumbed-down and hypnotized
Gamma-rays pulsing have rendered most pacified
Between that and the florescent lights
And the... but I'll leave that for another time.
You've been stupefied under the guise
Of big brothers' incessant watchful eye
Believing the false promises they so willfully supply.
Stop thinking you'll be nothing more than what they can provide
Because it's quite an unsettling unconscious suicide
To know the freedom to be oneself is being so forcefully denied.
Honestly, I'm baffled by the lies most allow themselves
To consume and conquer, wither and die.
So on and so forth.
"C'est la vie," right?
Seriously - no seriously, there's more to life.
It's like you're all just innocent by-standers in your own lives.
Ignoring the facts, you're haphazardly being victimized.
Psychological warfare has rendered most terminally blind
Brains hi-jacked on an information overload drive-by.
Neurons and synapses have damn near red-lined.
Ironic - Snapchat filters have left real beauty behind.
Capable minds take a back seat to thumbs on overdrive
In pursuit of Instagram hearts and Facebook likes.
Transient satisfaction fills the void in time.
While my empathy pleads for the kidnapped lives
I wonder how long this magic trick will survive.

Racism is a Meme

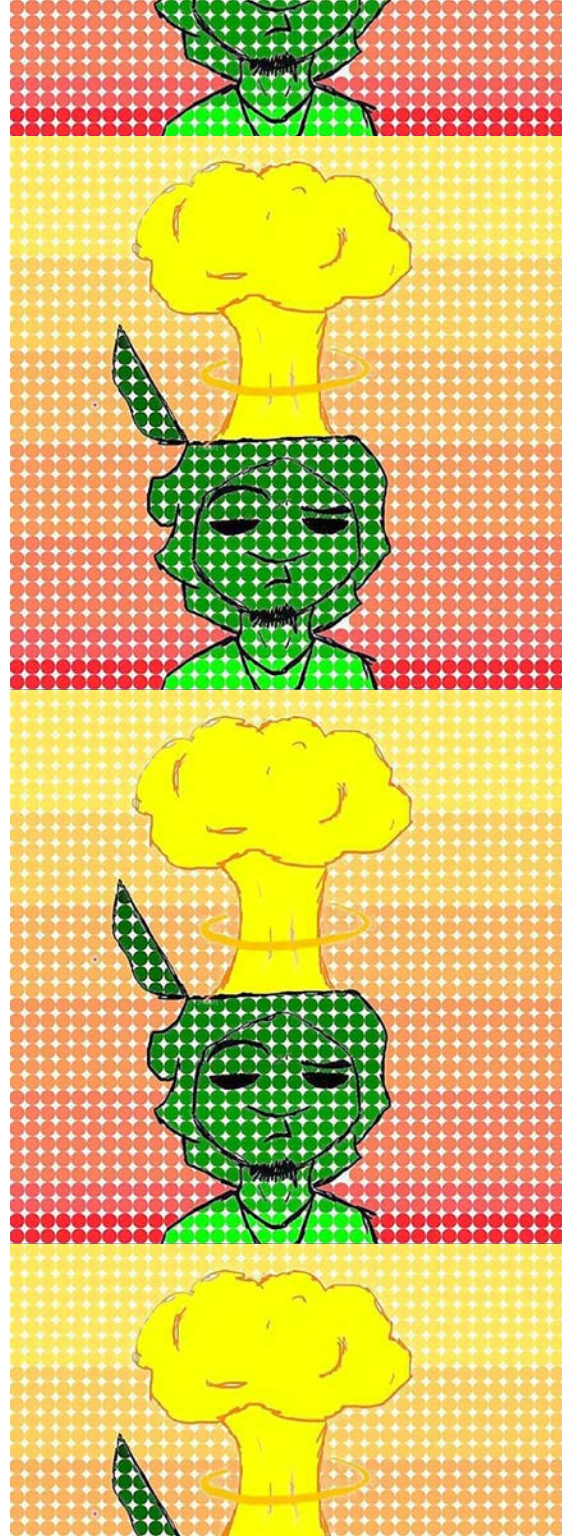
Christopher Smith-Thompson

Racism is a meme that I and my friends laugh at.
A sum of funny words mixed with racial slurs
Traded back and forth for us to react at.
A bunch of multi-toned faces, stereotyping each other's races,
'Cause these days
It's so funny to sound racist.
I'm not ignorant though.
I understand the history.
The word's origin and meaning to me
Is no mystery.
I get the strange fruit hanging from trees
And all the blood on the leaves
And all the chaos and lives lost
Before we were set free.
But see, that was the past
And I'm not one to make bad moments last.
So instead of feeling uncomfortable
I think we should just make each other laugh.
For example:
It's funny to see YouTube videos of white people dancing
With little to no rhythm.
It's funny to see black folks act ghetto and ratchet
With no shame or verbal filters.
It's funny to spot the smirks from folks laughing at what I say
Versus those that are slightly uncomfortable and just a tad on edge.
It's funny.
How I have to distance myself from certain neighbors
While riding the elevators.
It's not due to my stress.
It's just that sometimes I notice
That when I do
Women tend to clench their purses less.
It's funny.
How I can speak with clean communication
And clear verbal pronunciation
As if I were somehow educated.

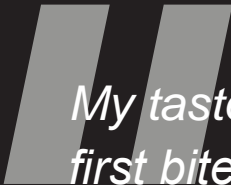
Because to me it's speaking right
But to others, it's speaking white.
Speaking of white
It's funny how some of my white friends
Don't get the concept of white privilege.
But that's okay,
Because half the time
I don't understand the concept myself.
It's funny.
How people would rather handle situations themselves
Because they feel safer than calling the police for help.
How? How can you feel unsafe when the cops are on dispatch?
When the words 'protect and serve' are branded right there
On their badge?
How funny is that?
To me,
It's beyond funny.
See, I'm just a young black minority
Working towards his college degree,
Without a criminal record or felony.
And nine times out of ten,
I can walk the streets, day or night, rain or shine,
In peace.
Nine times out of ten, I can barely notice
When that cop car is passing me.
But the real punchline,
Is that rare one out of tenth time
When I am for some reason stressed out
And slightly terrified
I feel myself walking straighter
I smile and wave like a friendly neighbor.
I want that officer to realize
And have no doubt in his mind
That I am not to be considered a threat in his eyes.
I let him see my face

Myron McMilan
Mind Blown
Digital

So he knows that I'm not some other guy
Some nameless dark-skinned description of a man
Wanted for a crime I never committed.
Sometimes I just want to make sure he knows
That I don't seem out of place
Where he needs to exit his car
With his hands placed on his waist
To unholster a firearm
'Cause right or wrong
He just wants to make it home safe.
And he could have sworn
That cell phone in my hand
Looked like a gun in every type of way.
How funny is that?
That it's my responsibility to survive and thrive
'Cause I ain't got no time to see
My mamma cry.
And I ain't got no time to be
A 'wonder why another brother had to die'?
And I ain't got no time to become
The new rumor.
Our new day and aged version of dark humor.
How funny is that?
Correction--
How funny is black?
'Cause sometimes it seems
Like our lives are just a comedy act
And while sometimes it seems like my life is teetering
On a thin line.
The rest of the time?
I laugh.
And I laugh and laugh
And I laugh for hope
And I laugh to cope
And I laugh so damn bad.
'Cause racism is just a meme.



Spanish Enough?



My taste buds danced as I took the very first bite of my new life. The texture, unlike any other, was creamy, smooth, and exciting. Sprinkled with a bit of salt it became irresistible and undeniable.

Isis Cruz

Growing up I took Spanish lessons in school and did pretty well. When prompted, I could ask if I could use the bathroom or what the date was: “Me permite usar el baño?” and “Cuál es la fecha de hoy?” respectively. However, the moment I left the classroom and took the school bus home, there was no need for Spanish. It was not my native tongue, nor the most prominent culture I grew up with. This idea did not bother me until the day I spent with my Hispanic boyfriend’s family.

About a year into dating, the differences between how my boyfriend and I were raised were pretty apparent. I grew up in a Pennsylvania Dutch household with meals consisting of loads of starch, whereas he ate rice and beans with every meal, and enjoyed chicken feet with hot sauce and occasionally ate chicken gizzards. Though never interested in the latter of his choices, I was persuaded to try avocado for the first time at his house. Upon taking my first bite, I was immediately filled with a sense of wonder and shame for never having tried the delicious fruit. This shame was only intensified by the wide eyes and open-mouthed looks from my boyfriend, his mother, and his grandmother. How was I expected to have knowledge on traditional Spanish foods when I grew up with my Pennsylvania Dutch single-parenting mother? Sure, I identify as Puerto Rican, but in essence, was I really Spanish enough? The overall conclusive answer to this question was “no.” I had no example of how to be Spanish and experiencing the taste of an avocado led to the realization of the cultural deprivation the absence of my father caused. What should have been an exciting new experience turned into a heart wrenching realization. I was different, I was ignorant, and I was lost.

When filling out important government papers, I always check the box “Caucasian” and “Hispanic” in the section on identity. Though growing up fifty-fifty with one parent missing from the equation, crucial information on one’s identity can be left to interpretation by the child. In my case, the Hispanic influence I was meant to receive from my father was nonexistent. Despite him being in and out, showing up whenever was beneficial for him, he never passed on family secrets or tried to teach me Spanish. Since I was raised by my mother, who is 100% Pennsylvania Dutch, I showed more cultural characteristics of the Caucasian aspects of my family. My diet was limited to what my mother knew how to cook and what she personally enjoyed.

My mother taught herself how to make Spanish foods, but there was always a lack of authenticity to what she made. Her rice was never salted enough and lacked the fresh flavors of a properly broken in Caldero. Her pernil was overly juicy, causing some of the flavors to get lost in a water-based soup. And for some god-damn reason, she always put parsley into everything she made. Not to mention, my mother stuck her nose up to anything out of the norm. For example, she would never consider cooking anything fishy such as Bacalao. The possibility of having any kind of meat that wasn’t a breast, thigh, or chop was off the table, and there was no way my mother was going to slave in the kitchen for hours making homemade Alcapurria when she couldn’t even stand the taste of them. All of these factors in play resulted in me tasting traditional Spanish food, an avocado, only when I was sixteen years old.

The day was warm and filled with sounds of school kids making their way home. My boyfriend and I were trying unsuccessfully to find an after-school snack and

decided to ask his mother for her recommendation. “Nene, there is aguacate in the fridge. You can eat that with some crackers or something,” she said. I waited patiently off to the side, being unfamiliar with the food in either Spanish or English, not wanting to draw attention to the fact that I had no idea what was going on. Excited, my boyfriend turned to me and asked if I wanted avocado. Oh boy, I thought, here it goes, no avoiding this. My face warmed from embarrassment, I replied, “I’ve never tried an avocado before; I don’t even know what it looks like.” Blatant shock, evident on the whole family’s face, followed this admission. As if they realized they might be hurting my feelings, they closed their mouths and continued on with whatever they were doing.

I watched in fascination as he took a knife and gently glided it down the side of the avocado, meeting back at his entrance point effectively halving the fruit. With a slight twist of his wrist and a pull in the opposing direction, he revealed the beautiful green color of the avocado meat as well as the giant pit in its center. In one swift motion, he jammed the knife into the avocado pit and twisted it out, setting it aside for his Grandmother to plant. Still setting in the skin, he cut long-ways strips out of the avocado meat and then used a big spoon to masterfully deposit the creamy goodness onto a plate. With the slightest bit of salt, our after-school snack was ready. From the first bite, I knew my life would never be the same. I was determined to educate myself on Spanish culture and how to make traditional foods.

A simple Google search resulted in lists of well-known ingredients popular in the Spanish community. This knowledge, however, is nowhere close to being enough to be considered fully educated. If so, try to make a pot of rice and beans. I guarantee

the first time it will either be too hard, too soft, or flavorless. The hard-work and dedication involved in making dishes that have been around for decades is not to be underestimated. Hard to believe what I am implicating? The steps to enlightenment are simple: try the food, experience it, and understand the love incorporated in the cooking process.

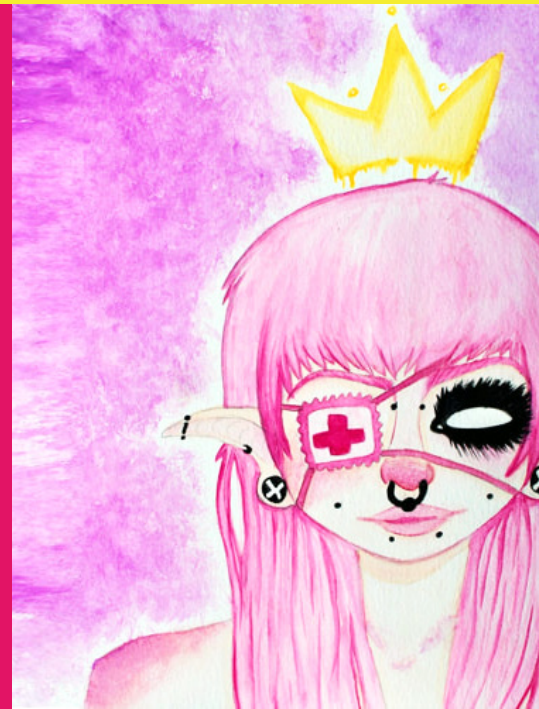
In the Pennsylvania Dutch community, a typical meal includes: some kind of starch in potatoes or pasta, an all-American vegetable in corn or green beans, and a protein, generally from a cow or pig butchered on the family farm. Lost to this way of living is all signs of rice or exotic spices such as Sazón or Adobo. Even though the differences in foods of both cultures sometimes negatively affect each other, I thoroughly enjoy each. Both incorporate distinct ingredients and use different methods of cooking, as well as serve different cultural purposes throughout families. Though at the end of the day, food is food. This fact in itself proves the idea that all food is related and must share similarities.

It is, however, hard to consider Spanish culture and Pennsylvania Dutch culture sharing anything in common, especially in the area of food. Though when the processes are broken down to the core, this idea explains itself. Preparation in both include the making of homemade ingredients. For Spanish communities this involves the cutting of many peppers and the sting of onions causing tears to fall. It is picking fresh Cilantro, mincing it fine, and throwing all the ingredients in a blender to create beautiful green batches of fresh sofrito. On special occasions, a freshly butchered chicken and homemade dough for Empanadas may be prepared for the main course.



Justina Baez
Optimistic
Watercolor

Olivia (Leaf) Crandall
Strawberry Switchblades
Watercolor



For a big family gathering in a Pennsylvania Dutch household, the best cuts of meat are salted and peppered and thrown in a crock-pot for slow cooking. Pounds and pounds of sticky dough is made and rolled for fresh Chicken Pot-Pie noodles, along with a whole separate dough for homemade Corn Pie. Of course, the corn filling is only made with the yellowest kernels picked from the garden. When walking into a home of either Spanish or Pennsylvania Dutch family, it is guaranteed that something you eat was made from scratch, either the seasonings themselves or the crispy, flaky dough found in most Dutch meals.

The experience I had with avocado sparked a fire in me to learn how to create beautiful traditional Spanish meals. Not only did the experience encourage me, but it allowed me to create my own way of cooking. As I learned how to make Spanish dishes and became comfortable with the idea of combining my two cultures, I started to produce new hybrid-foods. I was finally teaching my boyfriend something new about culture. At first, he was confused when I served him Spanish Sausage Stew, a traditional Pennsylvania Dutch meal with a Spanish twist. Though upon taking his first bite, he was delighted with the new taste. Surprise came over his face when I explained to him how I was going to take my Great-Grandmother's Chicken Corn Noodle Soup recipe and replace the starch with rice. But he ate two heaping bowls when it was done. Then, I blew his mind with my idea of taking my mother's meatloaf recipe and combining it with his mother's meatloaf recipe to create something totally new. It was creamy, rich in flavor, and had a great balance between sweet and spicy. It was fair to say that we were growing culturally together.

No longer am I the girl who questions, "Am I Spanish enough?" I have found my way to my Spanish roots through the people I love and created new traditions through balancing the two cultures that reside in me. Along the way I have even picked up some home-gardening tips. Did you know you can grow your own avocado tree right at home? Simply take your pit, clean it, and half submerge it into a vase with toothpicks holding it up. Veiny roots will eventually start to grow out, and a stem will sprout from the top.

After all, I did not need my father's influence. I am Spanish enough and I only had to prove it to myself. After this journey, I can confidently say, my future children will never have to question their identity. My traditions will be passed down to them and passed on to future generations. They will know how to make homemade mashed potatoes and rice and beans. We will all proudly celebrate our roots during Hispanic Heritage month. They will know they are Spanish enough and be proud of both their Pennsylvania Dutch and Hispanic roots. And they will know the celebration of the avocado started this whole cultural adventure.

Seasons

Madelyn Richardson

Red leaves fill the trees
Campfires burn through the air
Whispering, "Welcome."

Winter snow descends
The cold grip clenches my soul
Pulling me away.

Pink peonies bloom
Their petals basking in light
Dancing in the sun.

The summer wind blows
Mosquitos kiss my warm skin
Craving for more.

Her beauty is vast
Her landscape is like fine art
She is mother earth.



810150 R NUNEZ

Rafael Nunez
ouch!

Watercolor and Ink
First Appeared in 2014

Delaney Muller
Roses in Ice
Photograph
First Appeared in 2015



Ali Young
Need a Light?
Photograph
First Appeared in 2018



Umbrella

Kristina Hartz

My mom held an umbrella
The day I came to be
Even when there was no rain
She kept it over me

As I started changing,
The umbrella stayed the same
The friends I had held umbrellas, too
And no one found it strange

Until one day it hit me
Fast, from out of blue
A raindrop so determined
To cloud my view

The cold, wet drop was shocking
And chilled me to the bone
I couldn't see it coming
If only I had known

That day I had discovered
My naive peace of mind
The thing that kept me covered
Had also made me blind

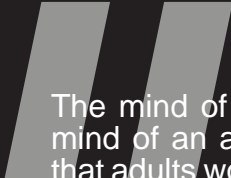
Me

Alex Torres

What is it that you see?
When your eyes gaze on me?
That I'm a girl who appears ordinary.
But I'm more than what I appear to be.
Inside, I'm as complex as a puzzle.
But some people don't see me that way.
In their eyes I look normal.
But I have so much to say.
My senses are incredibly heightened.
In sight I see everything brightened.
Sometimes I don't like being touched or tightened.
Changes make me overwhelmed and frightened.
My ears get agitated by a screeching pitch.
It weighs my brain like an anvil.
Sometimes it makes my body twitch.
It makes me look like a crazed squirrel.
Now you see my eyes look up high.
Looking up at the clear blue sky.
You scratch your heads and wonder why.
You look up and think, "She saw a plane or a butterfly?"
What I see is more different than you think.
Please, don't try to read my mind.
Just because I don't respond or blink.
It does not mean that I am unkind.
Be patient, be calm and understanding.
Because grunts and complaints aren't helping.
Being negative won't solve anything.
Because what I am is worth celebrating.
So, what is it that you see?
With new eyes gazing on me?
That I'm creative and extraordinary.
I am what God created me to be.

Why Should I Care?

2021 Winner in Non-Fiction
Berks County Young Writers and Artists Competition



The mind of a child is so much more unique and vibrant than the mind of an adult. Children can come up with many complex ideas that adults would never think of. The way a child approaches an issue is much more creative than the way that an adult would approach an issue. I envision the audience of this piece to be of all ages—but particularly children, who are the least responsible for climate change, yet will bear the greatest burden of its impact. I hope my story helps give them the push in the right direction that I was never given.

Zoe Banks

9th Grade, Exeter High School

Ever since I was a little kid, I have wondered why I should care about climate change. *It doesn't bother me. Why am I supposed to care? As long as it snows in the winter and is hot in the summer, what is there to worry about?* My teachers constantly told me to watch out for climate change as if one day it would run up to me on the playground and punch me in the face. They spoke about it as if it was a lion that had escaped from the zoo or a bully that did not have enough kids to pick on. "One of these days climate change is gonna sneak up on us. One of these days it's gonna get us." It was always just warnings, but no one ever taught me what climate change even meant. How was I supposed to care about something if no one told me what that something was?

Around third grade, the only idea I had of climate change was "the Earth is getting hot." I still didn't know of any issues other than it was getting hotter in the summer. I didn't mind that. I enjoyed swimming and going to the beach. Once I started fourth grade, that was when all the talk about air pollution developed. Finally, I was getting some answers on what was happening to our Earth. We learned about the causes and effects of air pollution on climate change and we learned about how bad Earth would become if we didn't do anything. It worried me to think that my life could be cut short because of it. I was frightened because there was nothing that I, as a ten-year-old, could do on my own. How was one little kid supposed to save the world from a death that had been years in the making? I felt hopeless knowing there was nothing I could do.

I tried to talk to my friends who didn't seem bothered by anything. I told them about the effects of climate change. They didn't understand the risks of our future like I did. They told me not to worry

about it, because the adults would figure it all out. I was too young to do anything. I researched different things that people were doing all over the world to try and help solve the issue of climate change. I read many articles and watched many videos to see all the different things people were doing to help. Eventually, I gave in and put my trust in the adults that I didn't know I was supposed to be trusting. I stopped myself from worrying and distracted myself from fear by filling my mind with other things like singing and dancing.

By fifth grade, no one really spoke about climate change anymore. It seemed like a non-existent problem. It was the least of my worries and it seemed that way for everyone else. I was so busy with school work and all my other activities that I barely thought about climate change. The only time it would pop up in my head was when I would drive to my dance class and see the Limerick Generating Station blowing puffs of smoke into the sky. I never knew where they came from or what they were for, but every time I saw them it sent shivers down my spine. I tried not to remember all the horrors I had learned.

Finally, in the spring of 2018, I started to see the effects of climate change playing out with my own eyes. The first alarming thing was the wildfires that began to spread. Almost every day more and more homes were burning up. People were losing their belongings to the fires. Some were even losing their lives. I lived in Pennsylvania so there were no fires near me, but I do remember walking outside to see the sky turned to a darker, dirtier color. If I was almost 3,000 miles away from the fires, I could only imagine what other states and even countries closer to the fires were experiencing. Even though I was fortunate to live in an area that didn't have to experience such bad fires, I

was still scared for the world and extremely sad about what other places were dealing with.

Spring of 2019 was when all the hurricanes started. Bad hurricanes. Many were destroying homes and clearing lands just like the fires had done. My 7th grade brain was still trying to understand what any of this was. Looking back on it now, I can see that it was all an effect of climate change. At the time my priorities were to help the survivors of the hurricanes—specifically, hurricane Dorian, which struck the Bahamas with category five winds, killing over 200 people. I sent out relief kits to help those who had lost their homes or their belongings. I told myself we had to help the world before we could fix it.

The fact that all of these disasters were a result of climate change didn't hit me until the winter of 2019. Unlike previous years, we had no snow. I remembered back to when I was a child and I thought that there was nothing to worry about as long as it snowed in the winter and was hot in the summer. I told myself everything was okay, because I didn't want to fall back into worrying so much about everything. Covid-19 cases rose in March and so I was left alone at home with only me and my thoughts. That summer brought record high temperatures and the fires started up around the world again. It got me thinking about climate change again and, even though I wanted to, I couldn't ignore it this time. I had nothing to distract myself from it, and trying to draw my attention away would just be selfish. I thought back to the fourth grade when I was told I was too little to do anything. *I'm fifteen now. What am I supposed to do?*


Right now, Earth is in a desperate need of help. If we want to see our future, we need to help it now. We can't wait any longer. The temperatures will rise, causing droughts and heat waves. Hurricanes will

continue to grow and get worse, wiping out lots of land and taking lives. The sea level will rise due to the melting of glaciers, flooding many communities. Wildfires will become greater risks than they already are. Most regions of the U.S will experience economic change due to the loss of supplies. Regions like the Northeast and Midwest will have extreme heat and heavy downpours, while other parts like the Northwest and Southwest will experience extreme droughts and insect outbreaks. Climate change will put agriculture, ecosystems, and our health and well-being at risk.

Maybe if I hadn't given up when I was little or maybe if someone had actually educated me on what climate change was and how it was impacting our Earth earlier on, I could have done something. If I had started when I was little, I could have helped spread the word about climate change before it got as bad as it is. If only I had done something when I first thought, "Why should I care about climate change?" *But I'm fifteen now and I know what I'm supposed to do.*

Old Friends

2021 Winner in Poetry
Berks County Young Writers and Artists Competition



Nature has always been therapeutic for me. Whether it's the beautiful colors of the sky at sunset, the sounds of birds chirping early on a spring morning, or the vastness of the ocean and all the mysteries it holds, the planet never ceases to amaze me with its beauty.

I find it incredible how everything simply works. We wouldn't think about the photosynthesis occurring in plants, converting carbon dioxide to oxygen and providing the plant with glucose it needs to survive. We wouldn't think about how the clouds formed above our head. We wouldn't think about the perfect ecosystem of a small pond, with hundreds of parts that all rely on each other in a perfect balance.

Unfortunately, we have been disrupting the balance. Our planet is now calling us for help, but I am afraid we are too disconnected to hear it. I hope my poem inspires the reader to reconnect with nature. I truly believe that the more we observe the wonders of nature, the more we will realize how much we need it as a vital part of our survival and well-being.

Anya Whitman

11th Grade, Exeter High School

Old Friends

Anya Whitman

You and I were once friends:
I loved you, you admired me.
You explored me to my furthest ends,
Yet so much you didn't see.

We laughed as you ran through my fields,
Your bare feet dancing on my soil.
I carried you with the water of my lakes
Like a child that I'd spoil.

I kissed you with the sun rays,
when you rose to watch the sky.
I painted with my brightest colors,
to impress your peering eye.

And when you gazed upon the stars,
My breeze whispered in your ear:
"There's a million planets way afar
But none have what is here."

Everything was all for you:
From each flower that I bloomed
To my oceans' crystal blue.
All of me you understood.

I showed you all the life I held
From fish to birds to bees.
I provided all I could for you
For your shelters made with trees.

But soon I felt something change.
I suppose, the way we talked?

You started taking more and more.
Spending time with me you stopped.

You no longer just admired
But got greedy for my treasures.
And when you kept on taking,
I cried with deep displeasure.

After all that we had been through,
All the love for you I shared,
You made things so unnatural
Like you never even cared.

I looked to you in desperation
When I felt I couldn't breathe.
You didn't stop to help me.
Why'd our friendship have to leave?

I don't think you're completely lost,
And my love for you is the same.
For you were once my closest friend;
My tenderness remains.

I think that soon you'll realize
The foul of your ways.
I hope that you will see the costs.
I hope you start to change.

So, when you decide to come back
And be the friends we used to be,
I'll take you in with caring arms.
Once again, wild and free.

The Earth is Crying

2021 Winner in Art
Berks County Young Writers and Artists Competition



The rain, filled with acid and *despair*, pours over the girl sheltered by her *fragile* umbrella. The declining future of our planet is represented by the grayscale tones illustrating the doomsday that awaits us—if we choose to further this path. The only color in the piece is the vibrant, eye-catching red of the girl's shirt highlighting the danger caused by our own failings. But it also shows that the central figure in this despondent image still has *hope*—that she can still *change* the world and bring the color back in.

Brittany Truong

11th Grade, Exeter High School



Editorial Policy

Legacy is an award-winning journal produced by students of Reading Area Community College. Since it was founded in 2001, *Legacy*'s goal has been to serve as the college's creative outlet and provide a showcase for the excellence achieved by RACC students. Through prose, poetry, art, and photography, *Legacy* reflects the diversity and richness within the campus. As it is a student-run publication, *Legacy* also provides an excellent opportunity for students who choose to serve on its team to gain hands-on publishing experience.

Legacy is published once a year and available free to all members of the college community. Submissions to *Legacy* are accepted year-round from current RACC students and recent graduates (alums no more than five years out). *Legacy* welcomes all genres of writing – poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, personal and researched essays, screenplays—artwork, and photography. We also welcome hybrid texts, excerpts from longer prose pieces if self-contained, mixed-media art, three-dimensional works of art such as sculptures, and original musical compositions.

All work must be submitted with the proper submission form. A separate form must be submitted for each piece. All rights, including e-rights, are reserved by the college and *Legacy* has the right to use any work in whole or in part in promotional materials including posters and online postings. Copyright for individual works reverts to authors and artists upon publication. Any reprint of prose, poetry, artwork, or photography in a new edition of *Legacy* must receive permission from the student authors and/or artists. Opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the editors, the general staff, or the college.

Every piece submitted to *Legacy* is reviewed and discussed by the staff—members of the club and the students enrolled in *Publishing Practicum COM 125 and COM 126*. The staff discusses each submission extensively and debates its merits before putting it to a final vote. The final vote determines which works will be edited and published. Student identities remain anonymous throughout the selection process in order for the staff to remain unbiased. The *Legacy* staff reserves the right to edit any submission to ensure clarity and accuracy of language, develop its effectiveness, and enhance its artistic appeal. After the final vote, the staff discusses possible edits and sometimes works with student authors and artists with the goal of helping each piece reach its highest potential. The edited pieces make up the content of the journal. Only those authors and artists whose works are chosen for publication are contacted.

Colophon

The eighteenth annual volume of *Legacy* was designed using Windows-based personal computers. The software used in this production included Adobe InDesign CC, and Adobe Photoshop CC. Volume Eighteen was printed by Intellicor. The cover was printed on 100# Sterling Premium Matte cover stock using a 4/1 color process in an 8x8 inch format. The body of the journal was printed in black and color ink on Accent Opaque Smooth 70# Text paper. The font for body copy was Arial. The font for the titles and authors/artists of submitted work was Cormorant Garamond & Arial .

LEGACY

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