



# HORIZONS

# HORIZONS

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF  
WAUBONSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Acrylic on Paper, 11 x 15 in.

## **2 HORIZONS**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Horizons* would like to thank the students who submitted their work for consideration this year. We also want to thank the student editorial committee for reading through those submissions during their spring break and discussing them when we returned. *Horizons* would also not be what it is today without the dedication and tireless work of members in the Creative Writing Club at Waubonsee.

We enthusiastically thank Sharon Garcia, Executive Dean for Liberal Arts and Sciences and her division staff. Their continued dedication and support for the magazine provides a space where students at Waubonsee can grow and excel as writers and artists.

We would also like to thank:

Todd Laufenberg, Assistant Professor of English, for his invaluable work with the Skyway Writing Competition, a major source of pride for Waubonsee writers and submissions for this magazine.

The English and Developmental English Departments for inspiring, teaching, and mentoring the writers of the future and for helping spread the word to students about *Horizons*.

The Art Department for awakening and fostering the visual artists of tomorrow in addition to their work with the Skyway Art Competition, from which the art in this issue was selected.

The Music Department faculty who are committed to cultivating the musical muse in Waubonsee's students and endeavoring to connect them to this publication.

Our Graphic Design faculty for their work guiding the artists who will frame the world in which we live.

Purchasing Manager, Theresa Larson, for her unparalleled guidance through the purchasing process.

Dr. Mary Tosch, Manager of Student Life, and her team for assisting us in organizing events and meetings, and for cultivating an environment at Waubonsee that engages students to get involved in their community and build a better world together.

The Marketing and Communications department for their continued support and Anders Lindell for expertly managing our website.

Alphagraphics of Aurora, our printing company, for reliably producing work of the highest quality and mentoring our designers through the publication process.

And last, but certainly not least, we would like to thank all the college faculty, staff, administrators, students, and the WCC Board of Trustees for fostering an environment that facilitates the growth of the literary arts at Waubonsee.

# EDITORS' NOTE

As we return to normalcy in our daily lives after the extremes of the pandemic and to our standard production following the 25th anniversary of *Horizons*, it's refreshing to be able to finally release the weight of the last year. While this year still had its own share of challenges, we are happy to get back to enjoying the meaningful things in our lives. *Horizons* is one such thing.

*Horizons* provides a platform for the appreciation of student creativity and dedication to their respective crafts both on campus and in the community. Through the process of putting this volume together, our *Horizons* team has gained wonderful experience with the publication and editorial process that is an opportunity rarely afforded to undergraduate students. We, as Editors, cannot help but appreciate this literary magazine and all that it contributes to the enrichment of Waubensee students.

We also cannot help but appreciate our fellow *Horizons* staff members, who have worked so hard and done such a wonderful job bringing this issue to life, as well as Dan Portincaso, our faculty advisor, without whose assistance this magazine would not exist. A special thank you to our lead graphic designer Emily, who has crafted our wonderful new *Horizons* logo. Hats off to all of you, we hope you feel proud as you hold this magazine in your hands.

We're happy to bring forward the 26th year of collective works from all of Waubensee's amazing authors and artists. We hope the works you find within will give you the chance to appreciate the talent and drive of our fellow Waubensee students.

Sincerely,

Abigail Black  
Colton Benjamin

*Editors-in-Chief*

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# MY RELATIONSHIP WITH COOKING

NON-FICTION BY TRINITY VAZQUEZ

In Mexican culture there is an old saying: “If you can cook, you’re ready for marriage.” I was in eighth grade, standing before my parent’s stove staring at two flaming tortillas. The thick char clogging my pores. Like an echo, the saying rang hollow in my mind. I thought to myself that if that saying were my reality, I’d burn a million tortillas before I’d ever let that happen.

The first meal I ever learned how to make was a jelly sandwich. I was in kindergarten climbing the kitchen cabinets, stretching to reach the off-brand loaf of bread and strawberry jam. I don’t remember when my mother worked, or if she even did. Just that I didn’t see her much. My first taste of independence came when I lived with my mother. I would roam the streets and backyards of our neighborhood, traveling in a pack with my friends to the park, or going to church with neighbors when my mother hadn’t arrived to pick me up from a sleepover. I learned to feed myself when I was hungry and at the time I thought nothing of it.

Over the years, as our living situations changed, so did our food. I mean, there’s only so many times you can eat corndogs, chicken fingers, and pizza before you get nauseous just looking at the frozen box. My mom’s career had finally taken off and I found myself, fork in hand, gazing upon a pink triangle thing that smelled next to colorful rice. Tilting my head, I asked my mom what it was. “Salmon,” she replied. I dug in. It was slightly burnt, lemony, and had an unhealthy amount of salt. But it wasn’t corndogs, and it wasn’t pizza, and I was in flavor heaven. My mom wasn’t the best cook, but somehow her job had led her to purchasing this instead of our usual dinner menu and I was enthralled.

Another dinner favorite in our house was pasta. My mom

would call for me from our porch and I'd run home, often with a friend tagging along. There would always be rotini noodles, heavily saturated with garlic marinara sauce buried underneath a pile of parmesan cheese on a plate waiting for us. We'd clink our forks and toast to whatever events came across that day.

Aside from jelly sandwiches, I didn't have to cook much. My mom made sure there were always snacks ready for when I came rushing into the house mid-game of tag needing an energy booster.

When I went to live with my dad almost everything changed. My stepmom, Irene, put me to wash dishes and clean, and suddenly I wasn't allowed to go anywhere or do anything without an adult. I didn't know anyone in my neighborhood. The freedom I'd known my entire life was gone. Not even the food stayed. Salmon was cooked differently, and pasta was rarely made.

As I grew, I was expected to contribute to and make my own meals. While the food I then ate was always delicious, I was still adamant about not cooking. I hadn't had to before and once I did, I tried my hardest to refuse. I learned how to cook an egg, but it was always a bit runny. I learned how to cook beans, but I'd forget onions and salt. I'd make fried chicken tacos with my stepsister, Adriana, but I'd forget the recipe as soon as we were finished. My approach to cooking was a rebellious one. I didn't like it. Cooking took away my free time; time that was already limited to activities within my house or fenced-in yard.

It was during one evening, when Irene had called Adriana and I to help make dinner, that my thought process began to slowly change. She told us about her life. How she grew up in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. How her parents worked all day and how she had to work, attend school, cook, and care for her younger siblings all at once. Having to help raise and feed her siblings while still a child prohibited her from participating in leisure activities like going out with friends or joining sports. She told us about how when she got pregnant with my stepbrother, Luis, at 19 years old, she had to make even more sacrifices. She told us then, as a warning, to not have children until we're ready

to give up our lives. Until we can say we've experienced everything we wanted to and are ready for a child. "Because ..." she said, "when you have a child your life is no longer about you. It is about raising and taking care of that child. You, are the second priority."

When I was in middle school, we moved to a different house. I was closer to my school, and I knew some people in my neighborhood. Although I couldn't hang out with them outside of school, it was nice to walk home together. It felt like I had a bit more freedom even if I had to rush home to cook or watch my little brother.

Mami Linda, Irene's mother, lived with us in our new house and one day she invited me to help her bake a cake. I had never baked anything before, and while baking is considered cooking, I thought to myself, "If I pass up this offer will there ever be another to learn, or to strengthen my relationship with her?" And so, I marched downstairs to her apartment, rolled up my sleeves, and stood awkwardly, waiting for directions. Mami Linda had gotten a recipe from her coworker and was eager to try it out. She ushered me around her kitchen, showing me where everything was located. Now familiarized, we worked in harmony, tossing ingredients in bowls, mixing, and pouring all while we talked. She told me about her life, things I had never known. She told me about her love life during her youth, how there weren't many men who had jobs, especially stable ones. How they were flakey, talked to too many women, and drank too much. How it was hard to find a good person, and how eventually she married someone who was able to support her and her family. She'd made many sacrifices. Working twelve-hour shifts, in order to have money to feed her family, and having to put aside activities in order to focus on work, family, and her future. The sparse free time she did have was dedicated to chores, cleaning, and preparing the food her family would eat while she was at work. Her tone was sorrowful, and I came to understand through our conversations that her life, for a very long time, was one of survival, not one of leisure and choice.

I hadn't talked to her much before this experience and my perception of her was changed. In English, Mami Linda's name is translated to "Beautiful mother." My step-cousin told me that once, when he was younger, he called her "abuela." Only for her to scrunch her nose and recommend instead for him to call her "Mami Linda."

At first, I considered her vanity as the reason for her different name and that was that. Though as I matured, I revisited that thought. I realized that it wasn't her vanity, because beauty is so much more than physical appearance. For Mami Linda, beauty was the mental strength in sacrificing her choice in love for her family's security. Beauty was physical strength in working 12-hour shifts every day to provide for her family, and for everything in between. "Beautiful Mother" was the title she deserved.

As I thought of her stories and name, I considered my other grandma, who wore the title "Abuelita" like a shiny gold star atop her breast. She grew up never even knowing what a smile or embrace from her mother felt like. As a girl she had to cook, clean, and do chores every second of the day. She rarely had free time to pursue her own interests and even if she did, she didn't have the means to. She suffered from abuse by her family, and when she married, she found herself unrecognized and unaccepted. Denied so many things in her life, she knew she deserved better. For her children, her grandchildren, and herself, she became the most compassionate and loving person she had always wanted in her life. While she is deserving of the title "Beautiful mother" she prefers "Abuelita" because it encapsulates her ability to become both a mother and a grandmother. She owns both titles and roles thoroughly and gracefully, to the point where she could never be denied claim to them.

To me, it seemed that so many of the women in my life had to sacrifice their youth and trade it for responsibilities. They had to work to be able to provide shelter and food. Their stories further supported my "anti-cooking" mindset. I saw the preparation of food as the main factor that prevented my loved ones from living a fulfilling life. This mindset stayed with me for much of my

childhood.

I am currently 17 years old, a few months shy of 18. As I approach this new era of my life, I've come to realize that being an adult requires taking on responsibilities I've never had to before. It's daunting, yet exciting. One of those responsibilities, however, is making food. At this realization, I tell myself that if I want to be a functioning adult I need to know how to cook and can't keep avoiding it.

Therefore, as I step into my father's kitchen day after day, I Google new recipes and call relatives to learn old ones. I learn more about my family and food in a way that isn't tainted with sorrow and a life unlived. As I work towards independence, I am humbled by the efforts of my relatives. I am grateful and thankful for their sacrifices, yet I still mourn their youth and the fact that they didn't have the choices I have.

I began to think of my memories with food differently. For instance, my abuela would make me pasta. It was rarely cooked in my father's house, but almost every time I saw my abuela she'd make it. Always with pesto, which if you didn't know, has a lot of parmesan cheese in it. Thinking back on it now, it was my grandmother's way of connecting me with my mother through food. Something so simple, yet incredibly meaningful.

I used to hate cooking. Almost as if it were in an act of solidarity for my loved ones who suffered so much from cooking, and from food. Though really, their pain was never brought on from food. It was brought on from circumstances out of their control. In thinking that food was ultimately the enemy, my way of thinking had been halting me from seeing the bigger picture. I'm still figuring out my relationship with food, but I know that when I am fully able to cook, I'll have the privilege to choose things, like whether I want to marry or not, thanks to the sacrifices of my relatives.

"As I approach this new era of my life, I've come to realize that being an adult requires taking on responsibilities I've never had to before. It's daunting, yet exciting."

# LAWYERS

POETRY BY VICTORIA CONTRERAS

Therapy is seen as a strange commodity  
Reserved only for those plagued by thoughts of wearing black  
But I must disagree, wholeheartedly  
After hanging out with dragons dressed in slacks  
With a smoked tie made of rope around my neck  
I think I need some fresh air  
Which is such a damn luxury

Jealousy had burned its way in, greeted zealously by its friends  
Anxiety thumped in my heart while fear churned its waves  
Why did they never leave? Was this permanent?  
Will it ever be fixed and forgotten?  
Why did I even want to be you?  
There were many things it could have been  
The effortless way lies gushed from your mouth,  
Your shining confidence that radiated like a star,  
Or the way everyone ignored your flaws  
To better think of you as some glorious idol

I soon learned with a bombshell dropped in the dew  
There's only so much that foundation can hide  
Before the garish scales begin to peek through  
And the mask begins to crack  
With your fangs glinting in the firelight  
That even the blind turn their heads as you slither by

I was not worthy of clarity  
But I have moved on without it  
The noose you so subtly wove  
Tightened as my throat tore through moonlit tears  
Wailing into the night, I wondered  
"Is this it?"

Will I be dressed in black lace and frills  
Roses strewn over my bed buried between hills  
    You milking it for all its worth  
    Since no one would have known the truth  
Left forgotten until my bones became overgrown  
    You made me believe I was no lower than  
The wringing politicians who spoke through their asses  
    But now, after all I hear and see?  
    They'd be announcing a new holiday  
    Because I'm a fucking saint next to you

Your lovers turned black and blue  
All for mentioning a hair blown astray  
    The hellish spotlight set center stage  
    With an audience knelt, bent to pray  
Threats of death and blame sing high above all  
    “If you leave, it's your fault.”  
    “If you don't listen, it's your fault.”  
    “If you don't love me, it's your fault.”  
They only stay because they're terrified  
    It's not like they actually care  
I'd rather have love than misplaced fear

Upon reflecting, I should really thank you!  
    After ousting me so effectively  
And granting me a wonderful new chance to start over  
    To forget it all happened and live happily  
You can make use of this experience, you know  
    Since you were all such talented liars  
Perhaps you'd make some pretty good lawyers



# THE JOURNEY

POETRY BY ELLA SIBLIK

I'm on an uphill hike to nowhere  
And everything I do  
Makes a difference  
I've been told  
By people who don't wear my shoes

I didn't sign up for this journey  
And I know you're tired too  
Of being forced to do  
A bunch of shit  
That we don't wanna do

Everyone of us  
Lost at sea  
Caught up in our own storms  
We forget we aren't the only ones  
Drowning since we were born

I've learned to walk slowly  
And stop to look around  
At Earth's beauty  
And the faces  
That always seem to frown

This ride is not easy  
It's full of ups and downs  
But if I've learned one thing  
On my trip so far  
It's not about where you're going  
But where you are now

# OLD CHANDELIER

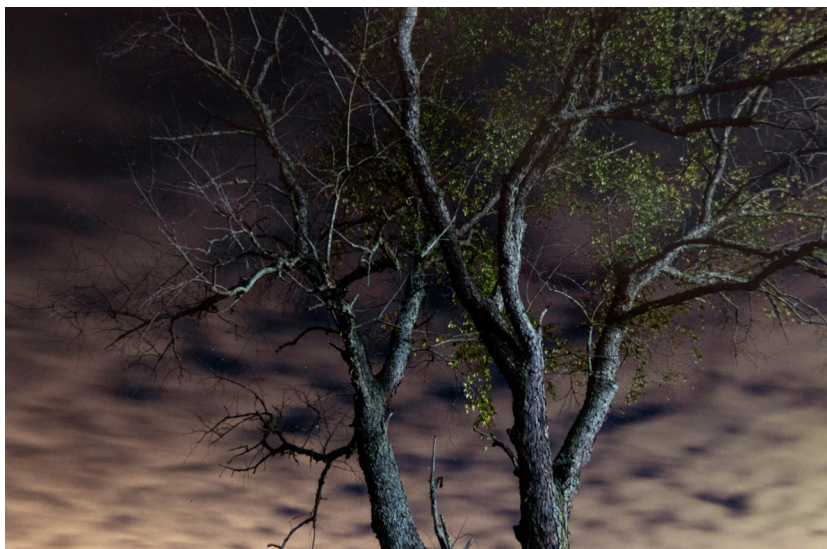
ARTWORK BY JASMINE RAMONA CABRERA



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# TREE AT NIGHT

ARTWORK BY JASMINE RAMONA CABRERA



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# UNTAMED

ARTWORK BY KIMBERLY RAKOW



13 x 19 in.  
Inkjet Print

# INFRARED 1

ARTWORK BY JULIAN HEIDRICH



8 x 10 in.  
Gelatin Silver Print

# HAUNTED HOUSE. Two Women

FICTION BY ABIGAIL BLACK

AWARDED THIRD PLACE IN FICTION AT  
THE 2021 SKYWAY WRITER'S FESTIVAL

“Would you like some tea?” Mallory asked weakly, as she set her own steaming mug on the table, keeping the second cradled between her palms. “Or can you not have any? Is that insensitive of me to ask?” She couldn’t help but fidget from nerves, the only reason her hands weren’t twisting themselves into the hem of her old t-shirt being the mug she was gripping.

The shadow of a woman occupying the space across from where Mallory intended to sit simply tilted her head at her, then down at the mug, before reaching out with her blue-white hands. Mallory took that as a yes, and carefully placed the mug in them, her eyes flickering when her hands brushed against the freezing cold and seemingly barely substantial limbs. She sat down and made herself comfortable as her companion brought the mug to her face and sniffed the tea before placing her hands, still holding the mug, down on the table. Mallory wished the woman’s hair didn’t cover most of the top of her face; it would be nice to have eye contact for this conversation.

Of course, seeing her eyes didn’t necessarily mean she would be more comfortable. Sometimes eye contact made her even more uncomfortable. And besides, people say the eyes are the window to the soul but what does that mean when all you’re talking to is a soul? After all, there’s no need for a window when there’s no wall. Mallory grimaced in her mind; this train of thought was really not helping her apprehension. So, she decided to just get straight to the point.

“Well, I figured we needed to set some ground rules.”

“Ground rules?” The specter leaned forward slightly as she whispered, her shoulders still hunched, and her legs curled up close to herself as they floated a few inches above the seat they were occupying. The only thing that seemed to be tethering her to this world and conversation was the mug that she still held in her hands.

“I guess the tea was useful after all,” Mallory thought ruefully, “it seems to help center her as well as me.”

Mallory blinked out of her thoughts and turned her attention

away from the spectral woman's hands resting on her old, scratched wooden table. Gathering what courage she could, she turned her gaze to where she assumed her eyes would be and took a deep breath to explain, "Yeah, ground rules. I know you were here first, but I did just move into this house and it would be kind of difficult to move again so soon. So, I thought it best we sit down and hash out some rules both of us can agree on so this living arrangement, or I suppose unliving arrangement in your case, can work."

Strands of the woman's inky black hair, the select few that appeared to disregard the pressure of gravity, rippled from their positions in the air as she cocked her head, the shift causing a flash of a piercing, confused eye to show through the blanket of hair that dripped down her face.

"Uh," Mallory placed her cheeks on her hands, parsing out her explanation in her head, before sitting back up straight and knitting her fingers together in front of her. "Ok, you know how a couple nights ago you made all the doors and windows rattle like crazy?"

From the little bit of face Mallory could see of the eerie woman across from her, a small smile of amusement appeared to have graced her face at the thought of her trick. While it might have been funny to her, Mallory had found it incredibly difficult to sleep that night, and the night after. Her thoughts just kept running and leaping and twirling in her head, a restless night she hoped this discussion would prevent from becoming a recurring incident.

"Yeah, so about that ... that might be something we need to talk about and set some ground rules for. I understand that this is a house-sharing situation, and I don't want to make you unable to do what you enjoy, but that night was very difficult and scary for me." Mallory said, slightly too fast to be completely confident. "So, a ground rule would be if we came to an agreement about when and for how long you could rattle the windows and doors like that."

Mallory couldn't help but fidget in the silence that followed. Her conversation partner seemed to consider what she had said. Taking some sips from her mug to center herself, she took her chance to peer outside the window next to the table, hoping to find some calm in the presence of nature. The plants on her windowsills were drinking in the afternoon sunlight, and the ones that had been damaged in the incident a couple of nights ago had been carefully taken care of and seemed to be doing well. Outside she could see people walking

around, enjoying the relatively nice day.

An unintelligible stream of echoing whispers broke her meditative reverie and drew her attention away from the wind brushing through the trees, back to this conversation of the living and the dead, and the table between them. At first Mallory couldn't help but silently panic. Did she offend her by lapsing in attention? Was it something she had said? Oh gosh, what if her ghostly roommate didn't like her at all and refused to speak with her? But despite the haze of fear over her mind, Mallory managed to wrangle her thoughts back into order. "You can't just immediately jump to conclusions!" she scolded herself in her thoughts. "Besides, she isn't even paying attention to you at the moment! So, she isn't whispering a thrumming indictment and eternal hatred for you and you just need to take a deep breath and another sip of your tea."

And it was true, her spectral guest for this meeting didn't even seem to be looking at her. Her head was tilted upward to the ceiling with her fingers tapping on her mug. Her hair was a mass of black, streaming down her upper body in rivulets and thick floods. The only visible part of her face was her chin and contorted mouth, a white sand bar in an ocean of ink. For the first time in this conversation not overcome with misgivings and trepidation, Mallory noticed how truly out of place the ghostly woman across from her was in this setting. Here they were in her small but comfortable place, filled with knickknacks and half-started craft projects, with colorful art on the walls and candles whose scents she found calming situated in messy clumps on her counters. The sun was shining outside, perhaps not to its full strength but to a good degree of it, and everything was bright and clear.

But where the sunlight streamed through the windows onto Mallory, its warmth dimmed from the window panes but its sharp edge cut into it on the other side of the table, leaving her companion without its illumination. The light from the kitchen was not nearly as warm and rejuvenating as what the sun provided, and when Mallory looked down at her hands, she saw the glow the sun bestowed and the minute comfort she felt just by its presence, then she looked across from her ... and could not quite find the words. Perhaps disheartening? Or would heartbreaking have been more accurate?

The specter across from her continued her ghostly whispering in her mental absence, the sound layering over her ears in such a way that it sounded like multiple people. An uncanny resonance that



was furthered by the image of her figure sitting there, lit only by the comparatively weak light of their house whose warm gleam seemed to slide right off her form. A figure that seemed to lean into the creeping embrace of the cool shadows of the corner behind her and emanated such a strong aura of blue that it seemed like she was luminescent with the color. It was striking ... and haunting, Mallory supposed that fit. But mostly, it just seemed lonely to be without companionship in what may be the only environment in which she could reside. Mallory didn't want that. They were sharing a house, weren't they? Surely there was no reason for either of them to be isolated, and Mallory may not be the best when it comes to social situations or standing in firm resolve but she knew the necessity of trying, despite its many discomforts.

And so, Mallory finally worked up the courage to speak again. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you're saying. Is there anything that you'd, uh, want to share? Maybe I can help you figure out your thoughts or answer some questions," she said, with what she hoped was a welcoming smile even with its small size.

The blue-white woman froze in place, her head slowly inching its way down from its focus on the ceiling, her hair rippling down and resettling around her shoulders. For a quiet moment, it was just the two of them considering each other. Mallory's smile was still in place and she fought the doubt worming its way into her mind in hopes it wouldn't cross the hazardous line into a grimace.

A curtain of sinuous black bent down from where it was resting on her shoulder as the ghost looked down at her mug, and while Mallory couldn't see her eyes, she felt like the woman may have been peering up at her through her eyelashes. Then she spoke in her quiet, timid voice, "Scary? Don't understand."

Mallory blinked, "You don't understand why I was scared?"

It was a strange sight to see, though Mallory supposed this entire afternoon conversation had been filled with strange things, when instead of nodding the woman's entire body floated down, then up in her spot. There was a small ruffle of the fabric of her radiant pale clothes, and the ends of her hair lifted up and writhed in the air as she dropped just enough to fully brush against the seat beneath her before drifting back up; everything settled back into place in just a few seconds. The only part of her that hadn't moved at all was her arms, as her hands were still enclosing the mug of tea she had not even shifted since first being handed.

Mallory huffed, her gaze drifting down to her own grip on her mug, before one of her hands lifted to finger through her own dark hair by her temple. "I mean, I think most people, at least most living people, would find a situation like that scary. Uh, for me it made me think of a home invasion or other similar things and uhm ... do you experience fear? Or at least remember what it was like?" Mallory inquired, partly curious and partly hopeful. If this specter didn't remember the freezing prison and stifling stranglehold of fear, then the dream of a peaceful cohabitation was doomed from the start.

Tilting her head off toward the kitchen, the pale figure shrouded in void pursed her lips and pondered the questions before answering, her voice still breathy and muddled "Fear ... yes. Remember fear, don't like it. Hate it." Her lips curled slightly. "Fear...no good memories." The already tremulous pitch of her voice seemed to soften even further at the end of her remembrance. Everything about her stilled in contemplation.

"Ah, well I can't exactly argue with you there. It's not a fun emotion for many people; some people enjoy it actually! Or at least the kind of fear you get from horror movies, haunted houses, and stuff like that." Mallory was well aware she was blabbering, but there was nothing else coming to her mind after a scene like that and she would have felt terrible to leave the spirit sitting in silence, trapped in miserable memories. "I'm really quite impressed with them, even if I don't really understand it. My brain has enough ammo without adding in horror things." She gave a little chuckle. One of her hands curved up behind her ear and tangled with her hair once again while the other one's fingers tapped the wood of the table.

Mallory took in the slight roll of her companion's head, the tilt forward of her upper body, and the pervasive atmosphere of confusion that seemed to permute the air between them. It was a split-second decision, and Mallory hoped that it was one of her good ones in that regard, but the best way to gain trust is to give trust.

"Oh, I guess I should explain a bit, shouldn't I? I mean, if we're going to work out a way to live together it would probably be good to actually get to know each other. Anyway, uh I guess it's kind of important for you to know that I have anxiety that sometimes manifests in a paranoia-like manner. It would be a major consideration in everything this living arrangement entails, which I can only hope you won't see as a burden. So, uh yeah." Toward the end of her stuttered delivery,

Mallory practically shrank in her seat, her nerves grinding against each other and her brain off-balance.

Yet, the confused undercurrent felt like it had heightened. The phantom in front of Mallory was not relaxing her focus, instead seeming to almost submerge entirely into her bewilderment. Mallory didn't really know what to think about this situation. She had hoped sharing that personal information would help the situation, but it might have obstructed the building of trust.

Mallory couldn't help but deep-dive into her thoughts. "I don't really know when she was alive. What if she was living in a time when anxiety and other mental illnesses were, like, even more misunderstood than they are now? That would be horrible and I might have just ruined everything. I mean it's not like ..." With a possible non-horrible answer to all of this confusion in the air, Mallory leaned forward, practically onto the table, and tried to look where she assumed the spectral woman's eyes were as she asked aloud, "Do you know what anxiety is?"

Just by the way the air shifted, Mallory thought she knew the answer, but the swirling whirlpool of hair created by the specter shaking her head was an undeniable confirmation.

"Oh. Well," Mallory paused and shifted so her head rested on one of her hands, "How can I describe anxiety? It's a pretty indescribable thing, I feel like people might view it differently depending on their experiences with it. I can try my best to explain my experience with it and why it's important for you to know, but I can't promise it'll make perfect sense. And if it does make sense it will still probably sound super abstract and fanciful, but well ... here it goes." Mallory took a deep breath and rubbed the area around her eyes with her fingers. She sat up straighter, and lifted her hands away from her mug, knowing full well that as she would try to piece together how to explain and describe anxiety she would be gesturing all over the place.

"Anxiety is a mental disorder that essentially means that I experience intense and seemingly unnecessary worry and fear even during everyday things that shouldn't cause so much fear." Mallory paused for any reaction to her words, but seeing none she offered a weak smile as she continued. "Uhm, I often find it easier to explain anxiety in a metaphorical way. So, hmm ...," Mallory trailed off again as she shifted forward in her seat, resting her elbows on the table and leaning her upper body forward until her sternum brushed against the edge. She

knew she could do this; she had explained it in her mind so often and now she had the chance to say it out loud.

“My head is essentially haunted. It’s haunted by past mistakes and embarrassments, present concerns, and worry and fear over future events. The past mistakes and embarrassments are like the shadows of memory that manifest in a haunted house, something the haunter thinks is important or traumatic, looping in my mind. I’m trapped there, second guessing and drowning in my thoughts of how I should have done better, that I’m a terrible person, and stuff like that. This isn’t an everyday haunting, but when it happens it’s typically at night and I just have to lay there awake and tormented.” Mallory brought her mug to her lips, taking a sip to prevent herself from rambling on endlessly. This explanation already sounded rushed, her breath short from nerves and how fast she was talking.

“Mallory may not be the best when it comes to social situations or standing in firm resolve but she knew the necessity of trying despite its many discomforts”

“For things in the present and future, it’s like what’s haunting me has death itself breathing down the back of my neck. Rustling the small strands of hair there and whispering in my ear that to fail, to make a mistake, to do anything wrong is unforgivable. And this phantom death just follows me around in this way, weighing down my shoulders and sucking the life out of me.” Mallory took a deep breath. She was shaking, she could feel how unsteady she was from describing all of this, the rocks had shifted, and she was teetering, having thought about it too much.

“And I know this might sound poetic, but it’s a very ugly thing to experience. This chilled claw ripping through and twisting into your chest as it douses your nerves in ice water. The only part of you that’s warm is your brain; it’s thinking too fast and firing off signals that you can’t decipher. Fight or flight? But there’s nothing to flee from or fight, just your own mind. And so you do a lot of things that don’t make sense, and worry about a lot of things that will probably never happen. For instance, I have to check that my doors are locked every night because I have somehow managed to convince myself that I am going to be murdered one day. Even when I do that, when I lock all the doors and double- and triple-check, I still have trouble closing my eyes because all I can think is that there’s an apparition of my mind in my room that’s going to kill me the minute I fall asleep.” Mallory took

another deep breath, in and out, to reel herself back in control. That might have been the wrong thing to bring up. What if her ghostly companion thought she was scared of her? That she was frightened she'd kill her in the middle of the night? That's no way to build trust, she truly didn't want to make her feel like she was referring to her. Mallory breathed, in and out. She just wanted to get to the end. "And that's ... that's how I describe it."

All was silent for a few minutes, with both of the women lost in their own heads. Mallory didn't know what else to say; it was all riding on her companion's response now. So, she resorted to staring unseeingly at the top of the table, thinking back on her speech and questioning her diction and word choice, hoping she'd gotten her point across and all would be well, and that she hadn't said anything to offend her companion. Her head snapped up when she heard movement, and Mallory's eyes widened at the sight before her.

Two pale hands lifted from where they had sat the entirety of this conversation, wrapped around a mug placed between them, and reached for the pitch-black hair curtaining her ghostly face. Mallory could only watch as the woman's hands shifted the swirling mass of strands so they sat behind her ears, her head rose from its downward tilt until Mallory and the phantom were looking into each other's eyes for the first time.

There appeared to be no pupil, just a large uninterrupted circle of a deep and rich blue-violet color, surrounded by the barely present white of her eye. Then the spectre's mouth twitched open, and she spoke "I...scared all time. I...don't like being scared. Want to help and not scare you." And then she smiled, shyly yet sweetly, and Mallory's worries melted away. "Can you tell me how?"

"Yes, I think we can help each other," and Mallory smiled back.

# TO BE YOU

POETRY BY EPIPHANY GARCIA

AWARDED SECOND PLACE IN POETRY AT  
THE 2021 SKYWAY WRITER'S FESTIVAL

there's a morning routine you go through,  
just to be you.  
you wake up, get ready,  
knowing you are born the wrong gender;  
not to mention, showers are a friendly reminder:  
you're living a lie  
especially when you wipe the fog from the mirror,  
stare back at a body,  
unable to help but ask, "who is this?"

the things you do to be you,  
just so you don't feel  
like a million centipedes  
are crawling underneath your skin;

it's the already-crippling self-image  
especially on those days, people saying,  
"you don't look the part. you don't sound the part.  
there is no way you are who you claim to be."

it's your relatives telling your parents it's a phase,  
saying, "your child will grow out of it."

it's growing up with conservative, catholic  
parents who state it point-blank,  
claim, "it's okay to be yourself."

but between the lines,  
you decipher an underlying undertone  
of limitations to that statement;  
explains why it's always been easier  
to accept others than it is  
to come to terms with your identity

it's *others* constantly telling *you* what to do to be *yourself*.

it's following a societal construct:  
the "norms,"  
which, by the way, are ancient;  
the expression of emotion,  
because crying is a weakness;  
the way you should appear,  
even though it's harder in warmer weather  
when the sun beats down on your baggy clothes,  
and all you want to do  
is tear yourself out of this skin-tight flesh suit

it's that kid in your fourth hour history class,  
who said in these exact words:  
*fucking. faggot.*  
and knowing that's not the worst you'll face

it's knowing that being open can endanger you:  
you have to sleep with one eye closed  
because you might as well be a walking target;  
you have to keep a knife under your pillow  
because people will kill people for being who they are

it's having that fear for your life.  
and you know that when you die,  
they will dishonor you by uttering your dead name,  
they will disrespect you by using your legal sex

knowing all of this, and much more,  
you know it's a risk,

... but sometimes

it's what you have to sacrifice to be you.

# FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

ARTWORK BY DAVINCI CALCARA



11 x 15 in.  
Acrylic on Paper



# INFRARED 2

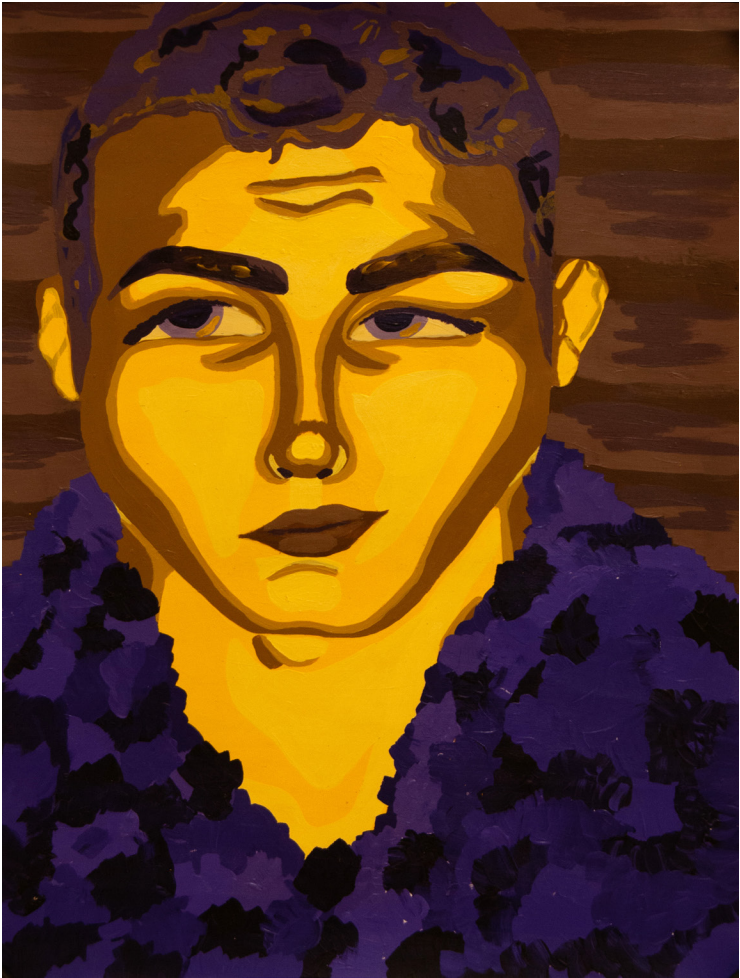
ARTWORK BY JULIAN HEIDRICH



8 x 10 in.  
Gelatin Silver Print

# CAM

ARTWORK BY MAGGIE KRIDER



11 x 15 in.  
Acrylic on Paper

# POWER OF ORANGE NAILS

ARTWORK BY PAYTON HEIDEN



11 x 15 in.  
Acrylic on Paper

# CHOCOLATE TO VANILLA

FICTION BY DAVID KURNAT

“Let me answer your question thiss...wwway...” searching amongst scattered clothes on the floor for a second sock. “Tve... a... awe shit, where *are* you...? Here it is,” a smile after finding it beneath a tangle of blankets and sheets at the end of the bed.

“You were saying?”

“Yeah, yeah I want to answer your question this way...” again hesitating as he sat on the edge of the bed to put his socks on.

“I’m waiting.” A subtle annoyed tone.

“Yeah...I’ll... I’ll...ah...ok...sorry let me focus,” he stopped, looking toward her reflection, watching her in a black bra and jeans, head upside down brushing her graying hair out in front of the bathroom mirror. “Let me put it this way, I like chocolate ice cream. I mean I *really like chocolate* ice cream. Given the choice ninety-five, ninety eight percent of the time?...If I was offered ice cream I would choose chocolate. A real quality chocolate. When I find a chocolate that’s special I stick to it, as I have always done, but every now and then, the two or five percent of the times I mean, I might pick a rich vanilla bean flavor. And that’s the point. Every so often the change in flavors makes me appreciate chocolate even more. The *comparison* is what *benefits* the *appreciation*. You can understand that, yes?” Politely.

“So you’re saying *I’m just vanilla?* Just plain vanilla?”

“Look I... just picked vanilla because it’s a common flavor. Kind of the opposite of chocolate, yeah? You can be whatever you’d like, Dreamsickle, Rocky Road, Raspberry. *Something good.*” He pulled his slacks up around his hips, zipped up while leaving his belt undone walking over to the bathroom. He leaned in and kissed her neck.

“You need to wash your face again, I can still smell me on you. She’d recognize it. I can’t believe you’re not showering. And no I’m not sure I understand your analogy. *Ice cream?*” Again, annoyed.

“Look, a change of pace, taste, scenery, etcetera is good. I don’t do it often, I *don’t* make a habit of it but thirty-five years of chocolate is a little tedious without change just every so often. It reinvigorates the flavor. So no, to answer your question, *no, I don’t feel that emotion.* I still love chocolate, even more so after a bit of something different.” He stopped and leaned over the sink to rinse his face again. “And shower?”

Nothing's gonna happen tonight. Your niece *and* Emily, shit all the women around the house, are fatigued. They are exhaustedly on top of every minute detail. Janet tried losing weight for months without success until the anxiety she's put herself through did it for her. Probably not the healthiest way but she actually looks great. I love her and Emily dearly but will be glad *when Monday morning arrives and all this is over*. So what about you?"

"I'm fine. I'm only doing a reading. In church. It's nothing. I speak in front of people all the time."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. What do *you* feel about this morning?"

"Back to chocolate again?" *Again* annoyed.

"Yeah, you brought the subject up first." Annoyed back at her.

"Hand me my purse please. To use your analogy, I happen to like many flavors. Depends on my mood," as she pulled a tube from her purse, "just like lipstick. Sometimes I'm subtle, sometimes I want to stand out." She rolled her lips. "I was merely curious about...*how* you thought about this? When you *determined* you had the free time to pick me up? Or months ago when the save the date announcements were sent out? You more excited about seeing me or the ceremony?"

"Of course I always look forward to seeing you and yes, this time in particular. I haven't been allowed to have any say in anything; no, no-no I take that back, I got to pick the three types of beer, the wines and the *top* shelf liquor that'll be served behind the bar. If I left it up to the women we'd be drinking house crap. So I keep out of the way and write checks for a lot of what seems like overboard, crap necessities depending on your point of view. And of course listen to all the petty squabbles that constantly materialize that I think they thrive on. The dresses, the flowers. I mean they quarreled with the banquet hall about the type of salt shakers on the tables! *The salt shakers!* I got the hell out of there before pepper was argued over. Thank god the bar in the restaurant was open! Jesus. I've asked myself how they're going to enjoy themselves when Saturday arrives. So yeah I've been looking forward to this for a long while, just to get out of the house. A release." *Immediately* he wished he could take that back.

"So now I'm a release? *A vanilla release?*"

"You know what I mean. That's not fair. I've been here for you before. All this started when *my* brother died and *you* needed support. Jesus Christ...that was a long time ago."

“Almost twenty years.” She fell silent.

“*Damn!* I miss Jack too. Seems like yesterday.” He stopped to knot his tie in the mirror but looked himself in the eyes instead. “Look, what chocolate doesn’t know doesn’t hurt chocolate does it? And on top of it, in the long run, it helps. It does. It keeps things fresh. Seems to me everyone here benefits. You, me, Emily, even Janet in an odd sort of way.”

“The *comparison* is what *benefits* the *appreciation* You can understand that, *yes?*”

They both milled around for a minute.

“Have you seen my key card?”

“Mine’s by the clock. Why? I’m nowhere near ready, as you can see.”

“Was just going down to get us some breakfast babe. Fruit or yogurt or something. That Greek strawberry for you, right?” Defensively.

“*As long as it’s not vanilla!* Do we have time for that? We’re twelve floors up. We’re probably late already.”

“You got stuck on the tarmac. Nobody’ll know the difference.”

“Are we done here?” Defiant. Hopeful.

“Look you’re no saint here either sweetheart. You never answered *my* question. What about you? About this? Us? Twenty years? The whole shebang? What six, seven times over a couple of decades?”

“Try nine.”

“So why are you on edge this time? What’s the difference from the other *eight* times?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bullshit. There’s a reason. I have too much respect for us to accept that answer. What’s bugging you? Speak. *Please.* I’m serious.”

“None of your business.”

“That’s right, it ain’t *about me.*” Holding back.

“I wish I could have a smoke in here.” She sat on the edge of the bed.

“Well I’m glad you can’t. That’s the difference between you and your sister. You have one and it’s like kissing an ashtray. Something else I have to wash off before I get home.”

“Just tell her I had one in the car.”

“Neither of us allow smoking in our cars. You know Emily. So what’s bothering you?”

An uncomfortable silence.

“When was the last time you had any? Judging by your actions,

physical *and* vocal, I'd say it's been a while. It felt different this time. You sounded just like Emily. *I heard* Emily. *I felt* her. Is that monozygotic or what?"

"Since the last time I saw you." Sadly. She turned away toward the window. The unsettled sky stretched out forever.

"Really?... I'm sorry to hear that. Really, I mean that." He looked into the mirror again, finding his tie still untied, catching despondency in her voice that he recognized in his eyes.

More silence. More memories.

"Remember when this was exciting? Was fun? Even dangerous? It had a different meaning then...or a different cause...to...I, ah... I don't know. We both had different needs then, maybe it's the additional cost tragedy demands." The gray mid-morning cloud cover helped grip the growing angst in the room. Rain began to fall, dotting the window. Gloom pervaded. "Unintended, remember?" Softly. "Yet now it seems as if it was inevitable. I don't believe in fate *or* destiny but... after the chaos settled, we shared an unspoken grief on that...on that quiet day... drizzly, gray... early fall afternoon at the cottage, cleaning out Jack's...last...vestiges." He looked over at her. A harder rain ran down the window. The sky beyond became familiar. "*I still remember* the softness of the light in the cabin, worn white curtains in every room, on every four pane, memories inherited from your grandmother, the squiggly red thread sewn at the seams, decorated with her red and yellow daisies. They were *still* perfect. Remember how Jack used to kid her they were so old you could read through them? The old, yellowed cups that held the windows open, the tranquil scent of moisture filling every space. I can still hear the rain on the leaves, the forest floor... dripping from the roof...a white noise intensifying the despondence. The aroma of the old logs, like echoes. Serene in its essence. We were surrounded. Surrounded by a past that we didn't want to accept as the present...you looked so beautiful in your sorrow...your soft lips, your sad eyes, your gentle voice...you asked me if I wanted any of Jack's clothes... you kept insisting I would look good in them, but you were talking to Jack, not me...you still had your ring on...you wept...so did I. The tears just came."

"I remember your tears on my bare shoulder...weeping down onto my breasts. Lying there afterwards in your arms I knew you were crying. Silently. That's the deepest. The deepest cry. My heart was in a million... little pieces. It was too easy to surrender."

“Mine too... yeah.”

A thoughtful silence.

“I’m in love with you, just like I was with Jack, but I can’t have you. You don’t know how complicated this has become. I was married to you, through your brother. As Emily was to Jack. Carbon copies. Like me and Emily. You know all too well, how that becomes the focus. The twins, always the twins. The twins are here! Like if we were one or joined at the hip. Yeah monozygotic is correct. Then Jack died and... but you’re still here, in my life. He’s still here then. It’s this big tease, that I have had to live with for almost twenty years. I can see how Jack aged. None of this allows me to let go. When I’m home and you’re here you have me through my sister. So for you to tell me that she’s your chocolate and I’m just *some vanilla* really sucks right now, because *you are both my chocolate and vanilla*. Can’t you see that? You get to walk your daughter down the aisle tomorrow then go sit by Emily in the pew, next to your chocolate. To hold her hand, wipe a tear from her cheek...and I’ll be looking at you and seeing Jack. With nobody to wipe away my tears. And they’ll be mistaken for wedding tears...”

“I sensed that years ago but I closed my mind to it. I told myself it was beneficial. I still think that. Except everything to everybody rarely works out. I’m really sorry. We knew this was once in a lifetime, between the four of us, and I always understood what that relationship meant to you. *To all of us. What are those odds?* But I wasn’t in your shoes. I’ve had my own life...my own crap to deal with. Jack’s death wasn’t easy for me either, remember? It made me see how fragile...how quick shit can change. Suddenly, for the first time ever I wasn’t sharing this lifelong womb with him anymore. From conception to the day he died. He was right next to me. Always here. Always close. Till death do us part. Fitting this weekend isn’t it? But I was the one who needed to be strong...for both you and myself. Emily too. Her *sister* just lost her husband. She was more devastated for you than for me. Like she should have been. The two of us...we don’t own this grief, we never did. It owns us. All of us. Still does. I didn’t mean to hurt you today. As much as you and Emily are the same there is still a different feel between the two of you. Especially there.” He pointed at the bed. “Could we have perceived this?...thirty-five years ago, everyone thought it was so cute...a double

“We were surrounded by a past that we didn’t want to accept as the present...”



wedding! How nobody could recognize who was who...or who was dancing with who. Me and Jack enjoyed fucking with people the entire night. Drinking, dancing, married to beautiful young women and best man each. What a start! I danced with you and pretended I thought you were Emily and I told *her* your sister is a bitch. You should have seen the look on your face till you caught on! Jack did the same with Emily.” He slowed down. Eyes returned to the mirror. Still quiet. “I’m sorry. I should have been even more attentive to your needs, more understanding of your vulnerability. All of these years. Time carries a separation... along with it that... eases memory. And pain. That’s what it’s supposed to do. But I guess that equation is different for each of us. *Personal emotions. Time and space?* Twenty years is plenty for the peripheral. But not when it’s right in front of you. The closer to the center, the harder the pain becomes. Time has been enough for me. At least I thought. Funny thing is, you can’t try...you can’t rush it, it just happens. *You get to let it...that’s all the control you get.* I guess I presumed it did for you also. Eventually. I’m sorry. *I am... terribly sorry.*”

“Thank you, *this...* means a lot. For a long time this was...yeah... yeah it was... right for us, yet...always... *fundamentally* wrong. And not just... regarding Emily. We just didn’t see it. Or want to see it. For me at least. I don’t know that I can...that this can go on any longer. As much as you think it’s good for all...I don’t think so. Not anymore.”

“You’re right. Like Jack’s favorite saying, ‘Small picture, big picture.’ It probably should have ended a long time ago.”

“Or never began in the first place.”

“We had no control over that.”

A separate silence. A subtle shake of the head.

“We should get going, let this settle for the weekend. We can talk when I bring you back Tuesday. I don’t want to end this cold. I want to make sure it’s done correctly, with respect. Go back to being family, I guess. I’ll still be here for you. When you need. Just in a different way. I want you to enjoy your time with your sister and your niece this weekend. *More than anything.* This wedding needs to move you forward, not tear you apart.”

They quietly gathered the last of their belongings together.

“So no, I don’t feel guilty. I never did. Even now after it’s over.”

There was nothing she could find to say.

# GIRLS SHOULD BE

POETRY BY REBECCA ANDERSON

AWARDED FIRST PLACE IN POETRY AT  
THE 2021 SKYWAY WRITER'S FESTIVAL

We are not supposed to be distracting  
We are supposed to be plain  
We are supposed to be simple, easily palatable  
Modest enough to not draw attention  
But revealing enough to avoid speculation  
Breasts small enough that they are easy to cover  
But big enough that they still fill your chest  
An ass curvy enough to stretch your sweatpants  
But flat enough that your leggings don't stretch too thin  
Hips large enough to form an hourglass  
But skinny enough to fit into the narrowness of their standards

Confident, but not bitchy  
Happy, but not ditzy  
Interested, but not naggy  
Emotional, but not needy  
Flirty, but not a ho  
Sexy, but not asking for it  
Hot, but not slutty  
Everything and nothing  
And all the things inbetween

But you've heard all that, right, girls?

The only thing that's not confusing

About this cookie cutter  
Is that we are not supposed to be human  
We are locks that should only be opened by one key  
We are unlocked bank vaults just waiting to be robbed  
We are cherries waiting to be popped  
We are our bodies  
We are our virginity  
We are women  
We are girls

Which we've been taught from the time we could read  
And speak  
And listen  
Is an affliction  
It's pathetic to throw like a girl  
Worthless to scream like a girl  
Appalling to talk like a girl  
Unacceptable to eat like a girl  
Hell, we're not supposed to eat

Even if we're good girls  
Even if we somehow manage to contort ourselves  
To fit their twisted mold  
We are still girls  
And we will never match a man

Some of us can't even match each other  
Imagine the extra chains forced onto our black sisters and our  
Latinx sisters  
Our Muslim sisters and our trans sisters

All our sisters  
We're all drowning in a sea of femininity  
Weighted down by male designs  
I marvel at how some of us stay afloat  
Waters deeper, weights doubled  
How do we not explode  
The anger with the shackles we're given for our chromosomes

So, how are women considered weak  
When our very presence proves our strength  
Call a wimp a pussy  
Did you forget from whence you came?  
We bleed out once a month  
And somehow you even twist  
Our endurance of monthly rebuilding and pain  
Into a thing of shame  
A woman will work twice as hard  
Just to get a footnote on the second page  
A second-place man gets a headline  
A first-place woman gets a byline

Nevertheless, she persisted  
Keep on taking home gold  
Keep raising up generations all through the alphabet  
Until we get what we deserve  
Cause there isn't a future without us  
Blaring voices shattering glass ceilings  
Shards cutting on the way down  
But we're used to a little blood

# WHAT LOVE IS WITH YOU

POETRY BY ANGELA MUNOZ

I remember the way the snow looked as it stuck to the windows of the backseat of your car.

And I remember the way it felt to have your arms pull me in against your chest.

How even with the blankets covering us, the warmest spot was the place your hands found my skin.

I remember that breath you took when I had finally settled in your arms and I wondered if you could feel my heartbeat like I could feel yours.

And I'll remember how even though my heart raced I've never felt more calm.

How even in the moment your hand reached under my shirt I felt nothing but comfort.

How your hands give me nothing but comfort.

I'll remember the way your hair felt when I reached up to touch you.

And the sigh I gave when both your hands explored all the spaces that were me.

I'll remember that your hands were never demanding, but were always giving and how my body was always wanting, always needing.

And I wonder if you'll remember the cry that fell from my lips when your hands traveled lower

If you'll think about the way my breaths came as my hips

crashed against yours.

And the way my skin tasted when you'd kiss my neck.

I wonder if you'll remember the moments afterwards,  
How we would look at each other and how we would laugh.

How you'd tickle me and tell me you loved me

How you fell asleep holding my hand.

And how during the time your hand was in mine, I realized  
that this would be the moment I think about when I define  
love.

How just being here in your arms while you slept was all  
love needed to be.

And I wonder, if in those few minutes before slumber  
claimed you, if you also knew that that was love for you too.

# ONE DAY

POETRY BY BRITTANY RAGLIONE

some days are better than others,  
some days...well, you get the gist!  
    i work.  
    i work.  
    i work...  
    then, i sleep.  
    when is it my turn?  
    to plant the flowers,  
to watch them bloom underneath the moonlight.  
    oh, how glorious it must be!  
    but, just one day...  
is that really too much to ask for?

# MY WORDS TO YOU

POETRY BY HANNA GUZMAN

I am a writer.

So when you tell me how you feel, I take it to the heart,  
And when you tell me what you're thinking, I overthink.

Words mean everything to me,  
So be careful how you speak to me because I take it all literally.

And sometimes, even I confuse words

I still say "we" instead of "me"

And I make "she" into "them"

or "them" to "him"

But I will always have "loyalty" mean "trust"

So I'll always be dependable to you

And I'll have "love" mean "divinity"

Because "you" will always be my "divinity."



# DEEP IN THE NIGHT

POETRY BY BRITTANY RAGLIONE

it's deep into the night,  
when they begin to sing.  
when they take their last, dying breath.  
they say they're being put to rest,  
but, i certainly do not believe it.  
the wind howls through broken glass windows.  
and i, too, howl along with it.  
what do they want from me?  
can they see me?  
can they speak?  
speak back to me, and let me encounter the entrails of your mind.  
this cannot be too far from the truth.  
you must be lying, but, who said the truth had to be boring?  
i will listen to your woes,  
as you will, to mine.  
and, we will walk hand in hand on this flowery path.  
straight to where our fate intertwines us.  
do not fret, i'll be there with you.

# CHIEF'S DUGOUT

ARTWORK BY CYNTHIA BRUNSWIG



8 x 10 in.  
Gelatin Silver Print

# RANDALL & FABYAN

ARTWORK BY JOSHUA SPENCER





8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# STUDY ON PATTERN AND TEXTURE

ARTWORK BY EMILY MURPHY



22 x 24 in.  
Yarn and Acrylic on Paper

# TEXTURE & PATTERN

ARTWORK BY MARLA JOHNSTONE



11 x 15 in.  
Graphite on Paper

# MAMA SAID

NON-FICTION BY VICTORIA CONTRERAS

What a wonderful smell.

Bianca let out a soft breath as she flicked the match out, the smoking black wood being tossed in a metal cigarette dish that lay between the porch posts. A gentle gust of wind blew by and she shivered, as did the spread-out newspapers with an accompanying crinkle. The flame of the newly lit candle trembled, but evened out as the breeze died out allowing the scent of spiced cloves and golden apples to curl into the air.

Pulling the sleeves of her sweater farther over her arms, Bianca pulled the first pumpkin into her lap. She had planned a day of pumpkin carving with her boyfriend, but he was being held up at work due to some unforeseen events management had not prepared for. Since the sun had begun its descent and painted the sky in hues of marigold and honey, she decided to move on and start without him. A family of four pumpkins lay pushed under her porch swing, so he would have plenty of time to make it and carve one for himself.

Yet, as her modest home was stationed rather far from town in a remote area of the woods, Bianca was not too keen on sitting out by herself. A reminder that she still kept pleasant company shuddered against her back, a yawn peeling its way out of the gaping maw of a very large dog. His tail thumped against the hardwood as she ran a hand through his charcoal fur, and he shifted so even more of his generous weight pressed against her.

Looking over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of a rather sad face in her window, and she gave it a small wave before searching for her tools. The dog was loyal and lazy enough not to run off without her, granting him the privilege of sleeping on the porch, but the two troublesome cats with pelts that blended in with the fall scenery did not get such luck. The larger one let out a lamenting mew before disappearing after his sister, a pitiful scratch on the other side of the door the only indicator they were still close by.

“All right, since Elliott has decided to be a good worker

and stay behind, I will be asking you about the creative decisions tonight. What's the first design we should do, huh?" Bianca asked, brandishing the knife in the waning light before plunging it into the hard shell of the largest pumpkin. A trail of juice leaked through the wound, and Bianca almost felt bad for it, as it made her think the pumpkin was bleeding. But her fall decoration plans could not be complete without a few sacrifices.

The dog let out an unhelpful huff, and Bianca giggled in response. "You're too lazy for your own good, huh, Baldur? Maybe I should have asked the cats for some help instead?" Baldur grumbled, pulling himself forward until he was able to nudge his head under the crook of her elbow. His nostrils flared as she took the top off the cut pumpkin, and he let out a groan that sounded like distant thunder. As Bianca tried to scoop the guts out of the pumpkin, Baldur kept dislodging her arm as he tried to nose his way in, his tail providing an ambient rhythm and steady breeze that threatened to snuff the candles out.

"Oh, *fine*, have at it you monster," Bianca cursed, sliding a bowl over to a spot further away from her working area, which Baldur quickly followed. It was half full of raw pumpkin and glistening seeds, yet it was only a matter of time until it was all gobbled down by the eager dog. The clanking of the stoneware against the wood as Baldur licked up any of the remaining contents was enough to spur Bianca on faster, soon cleaning the pumpkin out of any remaining pulp that would impede her carving.

"You're such an awful glutton," she muttered, kicking the filled bowl over to him as he looked up for more. "You'll have to wait now, and not be a bother, okay? I'm now a master entering the zone, and I need to concentrate." Baldur accepted these terms with a noisy crunch of his pumpkin seeds.

Bianca rolled her eyes as she flipped through the small sketchbook Elliott had left behind for them to use as reference material. She stopped at a few pages, admiring the detailed work he had created when he went for walks through her stretch of the forest. Many of the sketches were of trees and fungi, with a few bushes ripe with berries thrown in be-



tween. The pages with those had stains of varying colors on them, and tiny seeds pressed into the paper alongside little blurbs of what the fruit tasted like, and if they would be good for baking.

Turning to the part with the designs, Bianca skimmed through until she found the simple faces. Elliott, in his creative glory, had many that were just too much for her lack of artistic skill; often these included simple cats on fence posts, or even smoking cauldrons. They were all gorgeous. Of course, the largest of the pumpkins was set to the side in hopes he would sit down and carve one of these out.

“Goosebumps ran up her arms, and her breath caught itself in her throat. She turned her head, just slightly, and listened again. A few moments passed before she heard it again.”

However, Bianca just settled on a simple look that resembled a skeleton from a child’s cartoon, with large eye sockets and a smile too large to fit on an actual skull. Reaching over and plucking the full can of hairspray she bought, she set it on the crease of the book to hold it open against any stray winds that blew by, and with her tongue between her teeth, she set to work.

With a relieved sigh, she capped the marker and set the pumpkin back onto the porch to admire her work. It did not look quite like the sketch in the book, but it was close enough to resemble it. A light feeling of pride settled in her chest, and she looked over at Baldur as he inched towards the pumpkin. His floppy ears were perked in the same way when he saw a stray rabbit wander too close, and his tawny eyes shimmered with want.

“Are you kidding me? No! Go stuff your face back in the two bowls you’ve already claimed!” she shouted, snatching the gourd out from Baldur’s reach. His eyes followed it, and it was a few moments before he took notice of the glare Bianca was giving him. With a defeated sigh, he rolled over and faced the cluster of trees, closing his eyes to protect against the glaring light of the setting sun.

As the day progressed and shifted into a chilly twilight, Bi-

anca's focus never shifted. Poking holes along her design before finally cutting the desired shapes into the skin took longer than she had anticipated, but she never noticed the way the candles had melted and gone out, nor how the spider in the corner of her porch finally finished its web.

Setting down her knife and cleaning her hands of pumpkin remnants, Bianca wiped it down with a small splash of water from her bottle to remove any stray marker lines before drying it off with a separate towel. Once she was satisfied, she uncapped the bottle of hairspray and covered the gourd with a healthy sheen of the foul smelling product. Baldur shifted at the stench and hissed, giving her a morose look after she capped the can.

"You're not the only one that loves pumpkins, baby," she commented, standing up as she set her finished work on the porch railing, shifting it so that it faced out towards her winding driveway and the path that led up to her door. She fished out a pale tealight from a thick plastic bag that contained a multitude of others of varying colors and smells. The one she held smelled of soap and lavender, but the thick coating of hairspray she doused the pumpkin in was too overpowering and drowned the other scent out.

Hurrying down the porch, Bianca took a few steps backwards to admire the way the light caused the skeleton's face to flicker in the lamplight. It looked akin to something a child made, but she was proud nonetheless. It fit in perfectly with the orange fairy lights and plush scarecrows that sat on hay bales under the safety of her roof, and she felt giddy with excitement as she hopped back up the steps to get started on the next one.

As she went to grab her second pumpkin, she stopped. Goosebumps ran up her arms, and her breath caught itself in her throat. She turned her head, just slightly, and listened again. A few moments passed before she heard it again.

A grinding noise that sounded as if a mountain was shifting preceded an echoing scream that reverberated through the trees, a shrill tone that made the hairs on Bianca's neck stand straight. A cold wind snapped between the pine and aspen trees, effectively snuffing out the tealight before another

screech tore through the night air.

Whipping her head to look at Baldur, his head was raised and his ears perked, his usual glazed over eyes sharp with attention. Along his spine, tufts of fur were spiked in aggression, and Bianca felt her heart drop through the boards as a third shriek came again, this time sounding even closer.

Stern scoldings and harsh warnings echoed in her mind as she gathered up her tools and threw the door open, kicking away at the two cats that had fallen asleep on the doormat. Baldur trotted in after her, and after a quick glance over his shoulder, he went to his bed by the fireplace and promptly fell asleep.

*“Don’t you know any better? If you hear something in the woods, you don’t go looking for it!”* Her mother’s words ran through her mind as Bianca stared out the window. *“It could be demons or those damn devil dogs ready to tear you limb from limb! Even worse, someone could be luring you out by faking something supernatural. So don’t be stupid, and stay in when you hear something odd!”*

Her hands trembled as she shut the curtains, double checking that the door was locked, and shuffled into the kitchen. Her two cats, Freyja and Freyr, followed in on her heels, howling and crying for who knows what. The siblings weaved between her legs as she made herself a cup of tea from Elliott’s small stockpile, trying to do something to take her mind off the possible demons running around outside her home.

“Don’t you know any better? If you hear something in the woods, you don’t go looking for it!”

Bianca finally tended to the dying felines as she waited for the water to boil, shaking their identical bowls until the bottom of the tins were covered in the small pellets that were already inside. She set them down and went to refill their water bowls, but they were pacified for now as they gobbled the kibble down.

Jumping out of her skin, Bianca rushed to the stove and shut the heat off, effectively silencing the whistling of the pot that sounded too much like the creature outside. Running a hand through her hair, she let out a weary sigh as she poured

the steaming water over the packet of ground peppermint leaves.

“It’s probably nothing; I’m just freaking out because I’ve been up too long and Elliott still isn’t home,” she murmured to herself as she sat on the couch, a thick blanket draped over her shoulders as she set the burning teacup onto the table. Many candles were placed in strategic areas around the home, with a set of matches to go with, and next to a small pile of unfinished books sat one Bianca’s mother gifted her for her birthday. Soon, the sweet smell of strawberries and whipped cream filled the room, and she could feel the tension seeping out of her muscles.

Baldur had shuffled after her, and lay curled up against the couch at her feet. Freyja, full from her feast of hard pellets, made her home in Bianca’s lap while she rubbed the pads of her face on Bianca’s hands. Freyr was nowhere to be found, but she did not let it worry her. With the soothing sounds of Baldur’s heavy breaths and Freyja’s purrs, coupled with the relaxing scent of strawberries and peppermint, Bianca felt herself drift off.

The dipping in her lap followed by the absence of warmth woke Bianca from her stupor, barely registering that Freyja was now on the back of the couch by her head. Baldur trotted off and let out a bark, and suddenly the feeling of dread came rushing back like a flood.

Shooting off the couch, Bianca stumbled as the blanket tangled around her feet as she tried to remain upright going into the kitchen. Kicking it off, Bianca peered around the wall and into the front room nervously, her mind beginning to race and construct horrid pictures in her mind.

*Standing over Baldur was a large bipedal creature with curling ram horns and eyes that burned like a dying fire. Peering in through the unlocked window was a man with skin as pale as porcelain and ebony hair that shined in the moonlight. Bianca thought, “Tearing through my door to come and kill me because I enticed it with pumpkins is—”*

“Ah! There you are! You weren’t answering my texts so I had feared you went to bed without me, love.” Bianca was

snapped out of her bloody thoughts by a deep voice hoarse with overuse. Focusing, she realized she had just been staring at her boyfriend like a creep as he tried to fend off Baldur while attempting to take off his shoes.

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that. I had fallen asleep on the couch, so it wasn’t on purpose,” she answered nervously, stepping around the wall and pushing a very excited Baldur off to the side. Bianca embraced Elliott as he kissed her temple, peering over his shoulder at the dark woods. He paused for a moment, twisting to follow her gaze, and frowned.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, shrugging off his jacket.

“Yeah, I heard some odd noises earlier when I was working on our pumpkins, and it freaked me out,” she admitted, grateful for the distraction Baldur provided as he nosed against her hip. Elliott only looked more confused as he squinted into the dark as she continued, “They were like ... it started as a loud growl that changed into a scream straight out of a movie.”

After a few moments, Elliott let out a laugh as he closed the door. The confusion was gone, replaced by a sweet sense of relief with a hint of smugness. Bianca felt her chest tighten with hurt, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared at him.

“Oh, those screams? That’s nothing to worry about, my dear! They were actually why I was delayed even further in coming home,” he chuckled, pulling his phone from his pocket and unlocking it. With a few audible taps against the screen, he showed her a few pictures that were taken in rather poor quality. They all contained the same animals that blocked his path into the forest, with grand sets of antlers painted in the striking glow of a car’s headlights.

“A herd of elk had wandered onto the road and refused to move, so I decided to take some pictures,” he explained, flipping through a few more sets of photographs all depicting the large group of elk. “It’s not every day you see something like this, though I can’t quite say the same for when it’s that time of year that causes them to holler into the night.”

“Standing over Baldur was a large bipedal creature with curling ram horns and eyes that burned like a dying fire.”

Bianca's face flushed with shame as she realized she had been scared witless by an overgrown deer calling for a mate. She let out a groan as she pulled at her hair, the heat holding steady by Elliott's grin.

"There's my mother getting into my head again with her warnings," Bianca laughed, and Elliott wrapped an arm around her to guide her away from the door as he offered a comforting pat.

"She has interesting tales to tell, though, that go with them. I always enjoy hearing about the time she swore she spotted a yeti running through her backyard," he laughed, moving into the kitchen to reheat the pot that sat unattended on the counter. Bianca shrugged as she fetched her own cup, the remaining contents now cold.

As the oven clicked with an unseen lighter and sparked a high flame, Elliott threaded his fingers through his hair to release the crumbling bun, letting it flow down his back like a river of burnt gold. Shaking it out, he turned to Bianca and asked, "Are we still on for pumpkin carving? I know it's rather late, but I was looking forward to spending time with you doing a fun fall activity. At least one that doesn't involve us trudging through a recently rain soaked corn maze ..."

Stifling a laugh, she went over and wrapped her arms around him in a sort of half hug as she moved the pot over the crackling flame. "We can do it tomorrow. I'd like to know what exactly kept you away so late tonight, so I can go in and complain about it."

Elliott let out a groan before turning and capturing Bianca's lips; the warmth that spread through her reminiscent of a cinnamon coffee enjoyed during a cold winter morning, still buried under layers of blankets as the snow fell outside.

"I'll be happy to tell you, but it's a rather long story, and not a very pleasant one," he warned, his cheeks flushed a soft rose.

"We've got time, and you always make them interesting. I don't mind, love."

# SEASONAL LOVE

POETRY BY LAUREN SACCHI

you fell in love with my spring and fall  
but not my winter and summer

you decided that my extremes were too much  
and i was only bearable  
when i wasn't too hot  
or too cold

but you aren't allowed to pick and choose parts of me  
that only benefit you

that's not how this works

i will not tear myself apart  
to please your palate

as i will not dismiss my violent heart  
so you can feel comfort

i may have beautiful and gentle springs  
mixed with crisp and cozy falls

but my winters are filled with strength,  
and my summers with intensity

and i'm proud to say that i'm still standing  
even through all of my hurricanes and heatwaves

regardless of whether or not  
they fit the daydream of me  
that you made up in your head

# A YOUNG WIFE'S TALE

DRAMA BY REBECCA ANDERSON

*\* Trigger Warning \* This play contains depictions of abuse, assault, and murder.*

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## Character List

**JACE:** Middle-aged female. Cameron's wife and the victim of his abuse. She also lures abusers to her house to kill them.

**CAMERON:** Middle-aged male. Jace's husband and abuser. He is an alcoholic with severe anger issues.

**BEN:** Middle-aged male. An abusive husband. Puts on a chivalrous front.

**SHAWN:** Middle-aged male. An abusive husband. Very conceited and arrogant.

## Tag Line

Victim to vigilante

## Synopsis

A woman who is abused by her husband can't bear the thought that other women endure the same treatment as her, so she decides to give her fellow victim's vengeance and justice.

## SCENE 1

(The stage is made to look like the interior of JACE and CAMERON'S house. The bedroom is downstage right, represented by a bed and nightstand. The kitchen is stage left, signified by a fridge. The front door is placed upstage center. Lights up to JACE center stage, running her hands over her gun. BEN knocks on the door. JACE hurriedly hides the gun under the bed and answers the door. During this scene, JACE tries to take on a seductive, flirty role, but struggles slightly.)



JACE

(Trying to be seductive.) Hello! You must be Ben. I'm so happy to finally meet you in person.

(BEN walks in and kisses JACE. JACE is clearly uncomfortable, but continues to act her part.)

BEN

(In between kisses.) Jace. God. You're even more beautiful in person.

JACE

So are you.

BEN

(Noticing the bed.) Ooooooo, you make that just for me, sexy?

JACE

Of course, baby. Anything for you. I figured we could head over there at some-

BEN

(BEN begins to walk JACE over to the bed. Interrupting.) I like the way you think.

JACE

God, um, you move fast, handsome. I can barely keep up.

BEN

It's not fast, sexy. We've waited for this for weeks. All the texts and photos... God, the photos.

JACE

(The two are on the bed at this point with BEN on top.) The photos were so much fun, babe. So much fun. You know what else would be fun?

BEN

Why don't you tell me, sexy?

JACE

If you let me get on top of you and mess with you for a little bit.

BEN

Oooooo, you like to be in charge, little girl? Be my guest.

(JACE gets on top of BEN, then leans over, grabs the stashed gun, and points it at him. JACE drops her persona and assumes an angry, assertive state.)

BEN

(Terrified.) What the fu-

JACE

(BEN interrupts the following with ad-libbed pleas throughout, but JACE ignores him.) I know your name isn't Ben. It's Jacob Snaps, husband of Ashley Snaps. A very bad husband, I might add. See, Ashley's real smart, but there's not much you can do to hide bruises at the beach. And even if she could've, that black eye she had last spring looked a little rough for a trip, didn't it? You know, I don't like it when men feel like they can do whatever they want to someone just because that person loves them. Just because they think they can get away with it.

BEN

I- I swear. I won't do anything. I didn't, I won't.

JACE

(Ignoring BEN.) Guess what?

BEN

I didn't mean to, work is just, and family- I swear to God.

JACE

I said, guess what.

BEN

(Shakily.) Wh- What?

JACE

You're not getting away with it.

BEN

(A final cry.) No, please!  
(Lights down. A gunshot is heard.)

END SCENE

## SCENE 2

(Lights up. JACE is cleaning up the bedroom from earlier when CAMERON barges in and slams the door. He throws his stuff down and grabs a beer from the fridge. He is slightly drunk. JACE crosses to stage left after hearing the door slam.)

JACE

Cameron, love, you're home early. I thought you didn't get off until ten tonight?

CAMERON

I thought so too. Turns out they didn't need me Sss'bout attitudes and... and something.

JACE

Oh, okay. Well, we get more time together then, right? That's good, honey.

CAMERON

Yeah... yeah. I'm sure it is. (Kisses JACE on the cheek.) What's for dinner?

JACE

(Trying not to anger CAMERON.) Dinner is... I'm not sure yet. I figured I would figure it out in a little bit since you weren't supposed to be back, but I'm sure I can figure something out. (JACE heads to the fridge and begins rifling through it.)

CAMERON

(Sarcastically.) Well, I'm so sorry that they fired me, baby. I'll try real hard to make sure it doesn't happen again. I wouldn't want to inconvenience you.

JACE

That's not what I meant, darling. You know I don't think that. I was just trying to explain why dinner is going to be late. I'm sorry, honey.

CAMERON

Okay, okay. (Walks over to JACE.) I'm sorry. (CAMERON kisses JACE on the forehead. He thinks she gives him "a look," despite her doing nothing.)

CAMERON

What was that for?

JACE

What, darling?

CAMERON

You know what, darling. That look. That look you gave me. When I kissed you. What was it for?

JACE

I didn't, I didn't mean to do anything. I don't know what you're talking about, baby.

CAMERON

Don't lie to me!

(CAMERON slaps JACE across the face. JACE begins to cry.)

CAMERON

You think I don't know you well enough to read you, after all the time we've been together? I know when you're lying. And I know what that look means. That look, that damn look. It's the one you give me when you think I'm a mess. When you think I'm just some drunk who can't hold a job. Some idiot who doesn't even know when his own wife is lying to him. That's what you think about me. Isn't it?

JACE

No- No, no. I don't think that. Darling, you know I don't think that. (Definitively.) Stop treating me like, like-

CAMERON

I'll stop treating you like this when you stop lying to me!

JACE

I'm not lying to you! Cameron, listen to me

CAMERON

Yes, you are!

(CAMERON slaps JACE again. JACE falls to the floor, sobbing.)

CAMERON

(Angrily ranting.) Jesus, Jace. I work all day and it's just so stressful and having to take care of you on top of just taking care of myself, which is hard enough already since no employers in this town seem to understand how hiring works. And then I come home from all the shit I go through all day and you just do nothing here and all I ask from you, all I ask is for you to just be a good

wife. Just smile and nod, have dinner in the oven and the bed made. I feel like it's not too much to ask. (Calming down.) Get up, Jace.

(JACE stays on the floor crying and shaking. CAMERON holds his hand out to her.)

CAMERON

(Kindly.) Come on. Get up, baby.

(JACE takes his hand and CAMERON helps her up. He treats her lovingly now, giving her a hug, kissing her, wiping her tears, etc.)

CAMERON

I- I'm sorry, baby. I don't mean to, it's just is so hard sometimes. You know?

(JACE nods.)

CAMERON

I knew you would. I love you, baby. (Kisses her forehead.) Now, you should probably go get cleaned up, your makeup is running. Why don't you go wash up, I'll bag up some ice, and then you can make dinner?

(JACE nods again.)

CAMERON

I love you, baby. (JACE nods in response.) I love you, baby.

JACE

(Quietly.) I love you too.

CAMERON

(Smiling.) I know.

(CAMERON kisses JACE one last time before heading to the fridge, JACE leaves to go clean up. Lights down.)

END OF SCENE

### SCENE 3

(Lights up. JACE is icing her bruise on stage right when a knock is heard at the door. She hides the ice, composes herself, and crosses to upstage center to answer the door. SHAWN enters.)

JACE

Hello, you must be-

SHAWN

Shawn, yes I am, love. And you are the oh so beautiful Jace. (SHAWN starts to make out with JACE.) I'm so happy we were able to finally meet each other. With work and everything else I have going on, I didn't know if I would have time to spare. Luckily, I've got a long lunch today and, god, I'm not wasting a second of it.

(SHAWN starts trying to undress JACE, pulling at her sleeves and putting his hands under her shirt.)

JACE

(Taken aback by how quick he is going.) No, you're definitely not.

SHAWN

You sound almost surprised? Nervous? I know I can be intimidating. All the muscle and confidence, sometimes it scares girls off. I'm happy I got you, finally a real cutie.

JACE

Thank you. You're not too bad yourself.

SHAWN

I know. God, you're hot.

JACE

(Not wanting things to keep escalating.) Should we take this to the bedroom?

SHAWN

(Already making his way to stage right while continuing to make out.) If that's where you want to do it, I guess that might be more comfortable for you than the floor. God, this is gonna be fun.

(SHAWN has forced JACE onto the edge of the bed with him on top.)

JACE

(Pushing herself out from under SHAWN.) Hey, I have something that might make it even more fun. I remember you said you like to try new things, so I thought we could try... (JACE pulls out a pair of handcuffs.)

SHAWN

(Smiling slyly.) Yes, we definitely should. Here, let me have them and we can start right away.

JACE

Well... These ones work a little different than the usuals, so why don't you stay there and I'll show you how they work real quick. Then we can get started with all the other fun stuff right away.

SHAWN

Whatever you say, sexy. (As JACE is handcuffing him to the bed.) God, you're hot. It's going to be so fun to put these on you next. Okay, I think I got it. Just pushing and the lever, right? I think you can take them off.

(JACE locks the other cuff to the bed frame.)



SHAWN

Hon, I don't think the bedpost is where you're meaning to put these. Unlock them and I'll put them somewhere wayyyyy better.

JACE

(Breaking her persona. SHAWN interrupts the following with ad-libbed pleas throughout, but JACE ignores him.) No, I think this is exactly where I mean to put them, hon. (Pulling the gun out from under the bed and aiming it at SHAWN.) Shawn Brackshaw, also known as Shawn Earling by his friends, family, and, oh yeah, his wife. Sara Earling, your wife of three years. Victim of two and a half, gave her a nice little honeymoon faze, didn't you? Mine did too. You've been horrible Shawn and it's about time someone teaches you how to behave. I don't care what your tragic backstory is, you are not allowed to hurt her, or anyone for that matter. You know, maybe I wouldn't have even picked you if not for your son's hospital stay last Spring. Fell off a swing set, right? Oh, wait, that's just what you told the doctors. Really, he was in between you and darling Sara at the wrong time. The wrong-

(CAMERON enters through the door and sees JACE with the gun still pointed at SHAWN. He freezes.)

CAMERON

Jace? What the hell is going on? What are you doing with a gun and who, who is this?

SHAWN

Help me!!! She's gone crazy, she's been waving this gun at me and-

JACE

(Pushing the gun closer.) Shut up! (Swiveling the gun to CAMERON.) And don't you dare move.

CAMERON

Jace, darling, put the gun down. You're acting like a lunatic. Calm down. Come over here and hand me the gun, right now. If you stop now, I'm sure we can figure all this out. I wouldn't want you getting in

any trouble.

JACE

No, Cameron. I'm not gonna calm down. And I am not coming over there. I have something to finish. Plus, since when do you care about me? Tell all that bull to the bruises on my face.

CAMERON

(Walking slowly towards JACE.) Jace, you're not going to kill that man. You are going to set the gun down and come over here to me. You are going to. You are going to listen to me and you're not going to hurt anyone. You can't even-

JACE

I can't even what, Cameron? Can't even stand up to someone? How could I possibly do something as crazy as this? Yeah, well guess what? As much as you abuse me and as much as I take it, I can't take it for other people. I can't take that this happens to other people, other damn people. No, this doesn't get to happen. Men, men like you don't just get to-

SHAWN

Help me! You crazy b-

JACE

(Shoots SHAWN.) I said shut up you goddamn abusive shit! (Turns gun back on CAMERON.) See! See! Do you see now? I can do this, I can help people. I can save these girls, at least save them from these shit men. And you, you think you can take whatever you want, do whatever you want, hurt whoever you want. You don't get to. Not anymore. All these men, you goddamn men. I won't let them, I won't let you. Not anymore. I won't let you hurt me and use me and break me and I- I won't let you.

CAMERON

Jace, calm down. You know I'm sorry, I've said I'm sorry. Just calm down and we-

JACE

(Crossing slowly towards CAMERON.) Calm down? You're sorry? You were sorry the first time, and the second time, and for years you've been sorry, while I've been bruised and bleeding. So, no, I'm not going to calm down. If you ask me one more time-

CAMERON

(Backing up towards stage left.) Okay, Jace. I won't. Just, listen, we can work this out. It'll be okay. We've gotten through so much already. It'll be okay.

JACE

No! It won't and we haven't! I've gotten through so much, me alone. All. Alone. And I'm going to keep being alone and it's going to keep not being okay and the only way, the only way to make it okay is to really be alone. Because I am alone, you just remind me and remind me and remind me of how alone and broken I am. How alone and broken you made me. You! You did this and you, you- The only way I can fix it is- (Shoots CAMERON) you.

(JACE, now center stage, collapses to her knees sobbing, she throws the gun aside. Lights down.)

CURTAIN

# AN ERROR. OR INCONSISTENCY

FICTION BY ROMI STRALKA

The only thing you have to do to sow the seeds of doubt is to drop them. Whether you watch them fall or barely notice them slip from your hands, they'll grow no matter where they land. It may be quicker to bury them in the ground, but, regardless, they will take root. The point is, it doesn't take much effort, if any at all.

A man was sitting in a garden of doubt, all bearing fruits of knowledge he was not ready to pick. It was hard; the fruit was heavy, a disgusting shade of bruised red, and he wasn't ready to carry that burden. He knew he would have to eventually, because no matter how hard he tried he always found himself in that garden, staring at the plants around him.

There had been no plants when he had arrived off the plane; there had been no doubt when he first took aim and shot. He was a part of a collective mind. He was not meant to think, not meant to doubt, and he knew that. It was all he knew.

The first plant appeared when he was at a briefing and they had mentioned an event.

It was not committed by his battalion, or anywhere near them. He hadn't even been paying attention to the meeting. He only heard bits of what happened. *Massive casualties, use of excessive force, inhuman tactics.* It was the usual report about *Them*. What *They* had done and what they were fighting for. That was until he had heard them apologize.

"It may be quicker to bury them in the ground, but, regardless, they will take root. The point is, it doesn't take much effort, if any at all."

*It was an error in the judgment of your fellow soldiers, an inconsistency in your training, they had said, we can only do our best to avoid a similar incident.* They all followed the same program, the same protocol. There was no retraining, nothing to suggest that they were making sure it

didn't happen again.

Then he had seen the plant, a small sprout in once frozen ground. He watched as it grew into a sapling. He never took his eyes off it as it branched off, becoming a shrub. It bloomed flowers that were there only for a few days, before turning into the blood red fruit he was afraid to touch.

That was a part of being a soldier; no doubt was allowed to resonate in his mind. He had been told very plainly what he had to do, it was done in a series of code and binary that sounded just like English, but the words were so inhuman, it couldn't be.

Everyday he was commended for his work, and the guilt sat on his shoulders like iron weights. He did not know if the guilt was for doubting his superiors, or if it was remorse for the faces he had last seen through the sight of a gun.

It didn't make sense, and that scared him. Everything made sense, that was the purpose. Things were meant to be computed through his brain into justifiable excuses that would allow him to morally continue his work. He had no reason for doubt; he had no reason for confusion. It was an error, an inconsistency in his program.

He had been told a million times before that he was a soldier. He was made of steel and iron, copper and cobalt, and told what he was needed to do. He did not need food, water, or shelter; all he needed were orders. A sequence of cogs and wires raised his arms, and another twitched his finger to pull the trigger. There was no reason for doubt; he had nothing in common with fruit-bearing trees, and he had nothing in common with doubt.

Yet, here he was mulling over the shrubs and saplings around him. Pruning them of yellowed leaves, rethinking their purpose over and over again, rethinking his own ideals over and over again. He did not know if any of the others kept a garden quite like this, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know. That would be another plant to take care of, another fruit that you pray would just rot away. There were times when the fruit did rot off, when he was given the news of something *They* had done. A bad, terrible atrocity that meant he had to kill *Them*. But when the fruits

rotted they dropped nothing but more seeds. What if it was all a lie? What if he was just being used? Even if it was true, this wasn't the act of the people, was it? That child couldn't hold a gun. That woman's hands were full of food, not bullets, so why did they tell him to aim and take fire? They said it was an error, but they made no move to fix it.

The bullets he shot were like seeds, fertilized by blood. Every time he shot, another plant sprouted, and ruefully he brought it back to his garden.

It seemed like acres and acres of trees, all growing ten feet tall. They were impossible to ignore now, and things only seemed to make them worse. New soldiers came less frequently, and more and more people seemed to be missing from their beds at night. Ships came to carry the remains back home. It made another sapling appear.

Then one night, he had awoken to sirens and lights and superior officers armed and staring at them. Someone had run away. They were looking for them with armed patrols for days and nights. Any sign of them, and they'd be shot.

In one night, when it had barely been confirmed that they did indeed defect, they had become one of *Them*.

It was then, a week later, he sat in his garden, now a jungle. The stems of seedlings had strengthened their stems into thick wood, the leaves turned into branches that stretched out above his head and encased him. Trees towering above him, blocking everything else from his view. Something could be hiding in them; he had seen it before. Someone could be using it as a distraction, as cover to kill him. As cover to hide. He thought about the dogs, then.

They had been told the dogs were used to search for mines, but he had never seen one used until that night. They had been given the defector's scent and sent off into the jungle. He had seen their sharp teeth trapped behind muzzles; he had watched

"Things were meant to be computed through his brain into justifiable excuses that would allow him to morally continue his work."

how carefully they had been transported. That's all it took for him to see that they were not meant to protect them from mines. He reached his hand forward, and pulled a fruit off the tree.

It was heavy, a weight that made his chest ache and his stomach churn. The fear he felt was sickening, but he found himself reaching towards another tree. With every fruit he grabbed he felt sicker. It was impossible to keep moving; the guilt would be replaced by anger, and the anger by sorrow and finally he would feel nothing but sickness. Then he would pull another fruit from a tree.

With every fruit he grabbed, the tree rotted into the ground, leaving behind a rolling pasture. He didn't look back; he didn't know if he wanted to see it. It felt wrong for anything so beautiful and serene to come out of this experience. He was lost; there was nothing to tell him what to do with the fruit, but there had been nothing to tell him to pick it. He was acting on instinct he didn't think he had; he was gathering fruit to watch it rot.

That night, it proved to not be very hard at all to get in a boat headed for some other coast. It proved simple to pretend that nothing had happened, and to move on. Maybe one day he would see on the news that it was all over, and that he had died at war. Maybe there would be nothing at all, and no one even noticed. Maybe one day a dog would come running towards him, an arm bearing a familiar insignia holding the leash.

The garden sat abandoned, three trees still growing with three questions he could not answer. It was hard, after all, to forget your programming. To ignore everything you had been told; to forget yourself. Yet he existed as he was: orderless, and he didn't really care what the answers to those questions were.

In the garden, a fruit rotted to the ground, and left nothing in its wake.

# PATCHWORK PEOPLE

POETRY BY LAUREN SACCHI

it is not a crime to be hard-shelled  
as it is also not a crime  
to have skin made of paper

we are breakable beings  
molded out of thin bones and fragile hearts

disposed to crack under pressure  
and to crumble under the fist of adversity

only with time does our skin callus  
and our skulls get thicker

the things that once hurt us  
do not quite have the same sting anymore

and the bruises we once had  
fade into the patchwork of who we become



# HEAVEN IS ON EARTH

POETRY BY HANNA GUZMAN

Why look out by the shore when you can swim in the ocean, baby?

The shore is nice but she has no depth,  
she's dry,

she can't make you feel as at home as me.

But then, I suppose, you're used to rough and hot environments.

I suspect infested with crabs,  
I'll give her the benefit of doubt, though.  
It must make you uncomfortable,  
how comfortable I make you...

Perhaps scientists are so eager to explore the universe,  
sending us on an endless goose chase  
because they know heaven is on earth.

Of course that's just a theory,  
But, you know

My depths are what you crave to reach,  
because, you know,  
Grand Gates open to the undiscovered depths of the sea.

The sand is silk,  
a silk, rose-colored carpet that unwinds from heaven.  
The reefs are pillows for you to finally rest.  
The depths you might just reach...

Heaven is on earth.

# WAUBONSEE HALLWAY

ARTWORK BY MADOLYN MILLER



17 x 13 in.  
Colored Pencils on Paper

# SELF PORTRAIT

ARTWORK BY MADOLYN MILLER



24 x 18 in.  
Colored Pencils on Paper

# URBAN CLIFF

ARTWORK BY JOSHUA SPENCER



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# UNTITLED

ARTWORK BY CORINNE CONDOS



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# LEGACY

FICTION BY IAN PAGE

*“This base is well-hidden. Deep underground. Exits hidden under mountain overhangs. Located on a moon in an unnamed solar system. Impossible to find blueprints making teleporting idiotic. Either way, the trail ends here.”* Thought Ulysses, former Grand Master Saboteur of the United Legion. He had hidden his ship and spent most of the day walking to the base. His armor was cloaked against scanners, but on a moon with no atmosphere his foot prints wouldn’t disappear, so he had to scan the ground and move from stone to stone.

It was a typical Swarm base, with one main door for the hangar and a couple of small ones for vehicles and androids. He went for a small side door at the foot of the mountain, surrounded by rocky terrain. He had to make the tedious climb down.

His boots lightly touched the ground near the access door. He scanned for signals. He didn’t find any, and approached cautiously. Airlocks were tricky because opening one set off alarms. He pulled a small scanner disguised as a rock from his armor’s chest storage, set it to the side of the door, and climbed above it.

He set off the explosives he placed above the previous door, causing a landslide that buried it. Less than a minute later the door under him opened. Several skeleton-framed Swarm Bot androids emerged with mining equipment. Before the door closed, he swung inside.

The Swarm would know it wasn’t an earthquake. He didn’t have long. He didn’t need long; his scanner had gotten him the frequencies he needed. He overrode the airlock, allowing him to open the door without alarm. He stepped into the base and immediately his worst fears were confirmed.

The atmosphere was active, confirming there were organic life forms in the base!

Ulysses pulled his Weapon Block from his thigh holster and activated it. Its molecules morphed into a submachine gun. He jumped into the local data net, found that most of the stuff could only be accessed by manual plug in –which was always a bad sign– and headed to the Command Center.

The hall led to a corner. He leaned against it and looked into a room large enough to hold a pair of the Legion's Ballista Tanks. He did a quick scan and saw a pair of Swarm Bots; he could tell by the claws and machine pistols they were low-level.

Behind them was another air lock.

Ulysses was thankful for that. He could handle them easily – *ping!* He shrunk back.

There was radar, infrared, motion detections, and night vision. He jammed the signals. There was a second scan but he was ready. He paused, but there was no third scan, and the bots maintained their position.

At least they weren't Berserkers; those possessed a limited sentience that made them harder to predict. He checked the scanner he left at the outside airlock. It remained undetected. He searched the Swarm network for the security feeds of the two bots, found and looped a few hours of the footage, and seamlessly uploaded it to the Swarm receivers.

He took his left hand off his submachine gun and mounted an explosive as high as he could reach. He then pulled out a large energy dagger and slowly snuck behind the first bot. He simultaneously activated the dagger and punctured its core as he shot the second one, then leapt and grabbed both before they could hit the ground.

He used his dagger to cut out their motherboards, and scanned them.

There was the information he needed: schematics and codes, which included the secret door to the Command Center, a garrison of ninety-seven, which was led by a Berserker. *Of course.*

He scanned the far wall again. It was well-hidden but he knew it was where he needed to go. He took a moment. No matter how stealthy he was, opening the door meant air would fill the vacuum and that would be detected by the most basic of scanners. Ulysses activated his ship's recall. Several miles away it activated and started coming to him.

He opened the door and the alarm went off. The passage was dark. He switched to night vision and ran down the corridor. He saw several Swarm Bots emerge from a room on his left. He fired, knocking them off their feet, but more emerged. He hacked the door, trying to shut it, but there was no lock.

Behind him his explosives triggered and he quickly backed-

aled to the large room, cutting down Swarm Bots. His energy cloak may have stopped them from seeing him but he still needed room. A distress call was issued but he jammed it. Seventeen bots were down, and he needed to cut down the minions before the Berserker got to him. His submachine gun needed to recharge, so he flung a grenade down the passageway, then brought it back up and began firing again.

He jumped over the two destroyed bots and threw a second grenade. It also detonated and shredded another group.

It also let out some smoke. Smoke would react to his movements. The bots began to fire in all directions in controlled bursts. He zigzagged low to the ground towards the hanger. He remotely activated the airlock and as it began to open, he shot four bots near the passage he had come from and sent out a ghost image of himself.

It was a well-crafted graphic that made him look as if his cloak had been hit. It ducked around the passage and the nearest group of Swarm Bots ran after it. The second group didn't.

Ulysses set off the explosive. In the confusion he ran amongst the other Swarm Bots in the room, able to destroy another fifteen. He ran into the airlock leading to the hanger and set it in motion. He jumped out the other side and ran to a Swarm fighter. He was half-way there when the airlock opened. Only eight Swarm Bots could fit at a time and he was able to destroy them before they took three steps out of the airlock.

He slowly backed up to the Swarm fighter. Another eight Swarm Bots emerged and he shot them down as well.

A grenade went off behind him.

He took the blow to the back. He rolled with it and turned to see the bots who'd gone out earlier were coming over the hanger's edge. He broke into a run, cutting down several of the bots. He ran past an empty flight of stairs running to a lower hanger bay.

The airlock opened again and he fired ineffectively. Only five went down and the other three fired where his shots came from; one round struck him.

It didn't hurt but it gave away his location.

He ducked to the side but it was too late. Their fire was much more accurate, and the bots from the edge were flanking as more and more bots came through the airlock. Ulysses smiled.

He ran for the stairs and several bots raced to intercept him—



and were shredded when his ship, *The Black Dagger*, still cloaked, opened fire from the edge of the hanger. The lasers and plasma shredded bots and ships with ease.

It created enough confusion for him to slip back into the base.

Ulysses ran into the command center, shot the guard, yanked open a panel on the wall and unplugged a cable. He pulled a small adaptor from his chest and plugged himself in and found the most heavily guarded file.

Übermensch research.

Ulysses smacked his head into the wall.

*“Here we go **again**. This has been disproven repeatedly and yet you keep wasting resources on it. Well, less material for the war effort at least.”*

He had seen this numerous times. Fake psychics, blending alien and human D.N.A, genetic manipulation.

Prisoners to free.

Because he only had a second-class teleporter, he was going to have to do it the hard way. Especially when they were experimenting on people. He found the codes to the doors and changed the network to one he controlled. He turned to the door in the back, opened it and walked into the reactor room. He scanned it and looked around. He smiled; there were no back-up self-destruct systems, which would make it easier on him.

Now to destroy the Berserker, rescue the hostages, and blow the base to Hell.

He ran out of the Command Center and past the empty Barracks/Repair bay. He entered the hidden passage, opened the door—

The energy ax nearly took off his face. He sprang back, guns blazing, but wasn't fast enough to stop the second ax from cutting one of his guns in half.

He shot the Berserker as it bolted around the corner and grabbed its forearm as its second arm swung again. The blast from his gun tore holes in the Berserker's armor but was unable to puncture anything vital. The holes gave his location away, however, and in the small corridor a Berserker swinging a pair of axes around was going to hit *something*.

The Berserker shoved him off his feet and he felt the ax bury into his leg. He shot the wrist holding the ax three times and scored a glancing hit, causing the Berserker to drop it.

He hit the ground and kept up the barrage long enough to get a leg under him, then threw his broken weapon and the ax on the ground, knocking it away from the Berserker, and then used his free hand to help launch himself up. His gun was beginning to overheat and he drew a grenade out of his chest and primed it.

He backed to the corner, threw the grenade, and ducked around the corner. There was a loud boom and he turned to see the Berserker was struggling to stand. He shot it in the knee and it fell to the ground, then shot the elbow holding the ax until it dropped.

He shot the chest four more times to make sure it was down.

He stepped over the metal husk, grabbed the axes, and continued down the hall.

He opened the door to the room of cells and saw captives. Men, women, children, humans and, surprisingly, four-armed, purple-skinned Lutarsons. That last one threw him off a bit. There hadn't been any Lutarson colonies in this section of space after the war.

Most of the captives were women and children. He checked the records. Unsurprisingly the men had multiple partners. Knowing the idiocy of the Dark Inventor it didn't surprise him that many of the people involved were stereotypes. He slowly lowered his gun, but kept it close.

*"Here we go again.  
This has been dis-  
proven repeatedly  
and yet you keep  
wasting resources  
on it."*

"My name is Ulysses." He spoke. "How many are there?"

They stared at him blankly. He wasn't surprised. *"Isolating someone long enough with nothing but a mandate to be in the best shape possible to create a super baby, for a mad man to possess, causes mental trauma."*

There was of course the propaganda, forced euthanizing, kidnapping, mandated sexual partners, slavery, eugenics, and blind ideology.

Ulysses was afraid of this. People who had lived their lives in a box, being told only certain things, not able to experience art, debate, travel, or have education. Not allowed to question their leaders or beliefs. Taught to love their slavery because everything wrong with the system was because of something they were born with, or because of what their ancestors did.

Taught to leave their humanity behind. *They don't know the concept of rescue.*

They didn't know he was from outside their system. If they knew that they would attack him.

*Careful.*

First things first, he took the ax, activated it, and then cut into the floor. The people stepped back and watched. Ulysses cut with a determination that was absent from his fighting. When he was done, he stood up, went over to the door and left. He checked the oxygen levels in the base. Outside of the area past the security room the oxygen was rising to the point the people could survive.

He unlocked the cell ward and the doors opened. The prisoners backed into the corners.

"I need someone to step out and trace their hand around what I carved into the floor."

There was a pause and one slowly stepped out and looked at what he carved. One man slowly touched it. It was cool. Two words.

*I AM.*

Ulysses walked into the next room. There was the medical room he expected to see. Scales and charts, a room full of surgical equipment, a gym full of equipment and propaganda. The poster was nothing he hadn't seen before. A very muscular man beating another man to death with the words. "No trials for the oppressors! Strength for your master!"

"And that's why we fought the Exodus war," he muttered.

The cafeteria was the same: a military setup with floor to ceiling posters. Lastly, an observation deck filled with monitors.

No school, or library.

His scanner pinged. A child was trying to open the airlock leaving the security room.

"*No kid. But your curiosity is a good sign.*" Thought Ulysses as he checked the lock on the door. A woman came and grabbed the kid before taking him back to the cell. According to the records it was his mother.

Ulysses went through the list of captives. "*Too many to carry and I can't leave them here.*" He hung his head. He had to call the Legion.

More specifically, he was going to have to call his older brother, Eric, who had him excommunicated because he went AWOL.

Ulysses sighed and went back to the command center. He activated the communications gear and contacted the nearest Legion

base. The message would take a while so he began working. He opened a number of air ducts into the main room where he fought the Swarm and once oxygen levels were high enough, he opened the door to that room.

No one was near it so he went into the main room where the organics were. "You are to come with me," he demanded and then turned and walked off. He checked the cameras and was pleased to see they were following.

He led them to the main room where the frames of the Swarm Bots were on the ground. "You are to clean these places up. First secure the weapons, but be careful with them; some are still active."

They stared at him, not understanding. He pulled out his gun. "Anything that looks similar to this. If you find one stand, raise a hand, and call 'here.' Don't touch it; don't stand in front of the barrel, got it?" He pulled out a grenade. "Same with these."

They nodded and proceeded to walk through the mess. People raised their hands and yelled "here"; he came and disarmed them and made the people take the guns into a corner. The grenades he kept to himself. He did not trust the organics with them.

He was already making them dig through the ruined bodies of their entire universe.

By the time the guns were in a corner and the grenades sealed away the organics were hungry, tired, and thirsty. He sent them back to fend for themselves and as he kept an eye on them via the cameras, he began to dismantle the guns. He was halfway through the pile when a small Legion Arrowhead class corvette jumped in-system.

He returned to the command center and uploaded everything to a data packet as well as a personal message.

*These peoples' universe has been broken. Send someone who understands empathy, belief, and trauma. Most importantly, send someone who has pulled a human. I will stick around until you make planetfall. Ulysses.*

He then shut off his com and waited until the Legion Squad was through the airlock before activating his teleporter. He didn't want another idiot Legionnaire trying to arrest him.

His Legacy had enough black marks.

# A STEADY RHYTHM

FICTION BY REBECCA ANDERSON

The metal steadily brushes against my knuckles as my fingers repeat their looping motions, creating the almost hypnotic rhythm my hands have become accustomed to over the years. I've always found knitting soothing. Even before I learned it myself, I would sit at my mother's feet and let my eyes follow her graying, thinning hands. I stare down at my own timeworn hands now, getting caught up in the protruding bones and networked veins.

No. I've seen enough of that for a lifetime.

I begin my rhythmic dance of clanking metal and twisting yarn once again, continuing to form the frayed wool into a cylinder. My mind falls back into the lullaby lull and I allow my eyes to wander.

I remember the park being so vibrant, lush green grass with orange and yellow lilacs. Picnicking families strewn throughout the landscape of aged oak trees and weathered wooden picnic tables. Screaming children chasing each other about with the loud, high-pitched shrieks of youth. *How did I ever bear such noise?*

It's quiet now. I think I glimpse a speck or two of color amongst the land in front of me, think I even hear a tree rustle in the wind. Who knows if I do? I'm aging, old, my senses dulling as the hands of time tick closer to my end. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

I draw myself back to the present and assign the steady beat back to the clicking of my knitting needles, pulling my thoughts away from endings and trees. I've started on the next cylinder now, the tenth and last one for this project. Soon enough, Laura will be here and I'll be able to show her my handywork. Just a little bit longer.

My attention wanes again and I feel myself straying. *Screaming children chasing each other around the park. Children running around. Screaming around. So many children. Running, screaming.*

Shaking my head, I blink a few times to bring my vision back into focus on my work. I move my hands upward and begin on the ear, pulling the yarn and my attention to the new project. Not for long.

I think I hear a tree rustle again. But no, there are no trees. Like I

said, I'm getting old. The trees all left with the fire. *The fire, the screaming children.*

I wrap loop after loop around the metal rod, trying my hardest to clear my head. I can't be working myself up like this, it's not good for me. Just focus and wait for Laura to be here, then I can get it all out.

I can get it out. The fire, the burning trees and *buildings. The people, all running. The noise, the wind. The crashing and screaming. The dying. And the fire. The fire and the children and the screaming and the bomb.*

Done.

I pull my hands away and marvel at my work: the ears, the fingers, a whole right leg, even the right eye. All wool twisted and folded into just the right shape for her. Fitting just right with the charred edges, dried blood creating a gradient between the melted skin and peach yarn. She is finally whole again. She is finally back.

Laura is finally here.

"Screaming children chasing each other about with the loud, high-pitched shrieks of youth. How did I ever bear such noise?"

# LOYALTY AND LOVE

POETRY BY HANNA GUZMAN

I've not known much about being in love throughout my life  
but I know how to stay  
loyal,  
through no matter what  
through thick and thin  
through oppression and exploitation  
through mental health to sickness  
I was thinking that's what being in love is.  
If I had to tell you now what I think being in love is,  
from what I have learned thus far,  
it's us.

It's us going through mental illness episodes but are prepared for  
the next chilly season

It's one of us climbing the mountain and the other going through  
its dark depths.

It's us falling down a spiral then wrapping our arms around one  
another, putting our heads together and finding a way out.

You have taught me that the difference between  
loyalty and love is  
loyalty is a promise  
you

must stay true to what you say  
no matter what  
and love is a compromise  
of whether we will meet in the middle,  
in the end  
or not.

It's a risk,  
that I'm willing  
to take for you  
because I am in love with you  
and now  
I know what that is.

# THE BEACH

POETRY BY ELLA SIBLIK

Skipping rocks across the lake  
Today's a day I get to create  
Running my toes through warm sand  
Helps me forget how small I am  
Clouds move slowly through the sky  
While seasons change in the blink of an eye  
Children's laughter fills the air  
While we drink our poison  
And try not to care  
How easy life used to be  
The water here is freezing cold  
Alive in the moment  
Afraid of growing old  
To escape this feeling I look around  
I'm so grateful to exist in the most beautiful painting ever found



# OPOSSUM

FICTION BY ZACH MURPHY

Pete and Richard's orange safety vests glowed a blinding light under the scorching sun, and their sweat dripped onto the pavement as they stood in the middle of the right lane on Highway 61, staring at an opossum lying stiffly on its side.

Richard handed Pete a dirty shovel. "Scoop it up," he said.

Everything made Pete queasy. He once fainted at the sight of a moldy loaf of bread. Even so, he decided to take on a thankless summer job as a roadkill cleaner. At least he didn't have to deal with many people.

Richard nudged Pete. "What are you waiting for?" he asked.

Pete squinted at the creature. "It's not dead," he said. "It's just sleeping."

"Are you sure?" Richard asked as he scratched his beard. He had one of those beards that looked like it would give a chainsaw a difficult time.

"Yes," Pete said. "I just saw it twitch."

Richard walked back toward the shoulder of the road and popped open the driver's side door of a rusty pickup truck. "Alright, let's go."

Pete shook his head. "We can't just leave it here."

"It's not our problem," Richard said. "They tell us what to do with the dead ones, but not the ones that are still alive."

Pete crouched down and took a closer look. "We need to get it to

safety,” he said.

Richard sighed and walked back toward the opossum. “What if it wakes up and attacks us?” he asked. “That thing could have rabies.”

“I don’t think anything could wake it up right now,” Pete said.

Richard belched, “It’s an ugly son of a gun, isn’t it?”

“I think it’s so ugly that it’s cute,” Pete said.

“No one ever says that about me,” Richard said with a chuckle. “I guess I just haven’t crossed into that territory.”

Just then, a car sped by and swerved over into the next lane. Pete and Richard dashed out of the way.

“People drive like animals!” Richard said. “We’d better get going.”

Pete took a deep breath, slipped his gloves on, gently picked up the opossum, and carried it into the woods.

“What are you doing?” Richard asked. “Are you crazy?”

After nestling the possum into a bush, Pete smelled the scent of burning wood. He gazed out into the clearing and noticed a plume of black smoke billowing into the sky. The sparrows scattered away, and the trees stood with their limbs spread, as if they were about to be crucified.

“Jesus Christ,” Pete whispered under his breath.

Pete picked up the opossum and turned back around.

# INTERNAL ETERNAL INFERNAL

POETRY BY LAUREN SACCHI

i told myself i'd never get that close again  
i'd never stand nearby,  
i would keep a healthy distance

but something about how the flames flow like water  
something about how they kept me warm  
it made me go back

at first i sat down by them  
they kept me company  
they made me feel safe

i enclosed my trust in the embers  
and told secrets to the inferno

with scars lining my body  
i stuck my hands in the fire  
and expected them not to burn

how naive could i have been  
to be scalded again  
by another flame

# WHITE CHOCOLATE CRANBERRY MUFFINS BY KATHLEEN

ARTWORK BY JOSHUA SPENCER



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# CHEVROLET VEGA 1970-80?

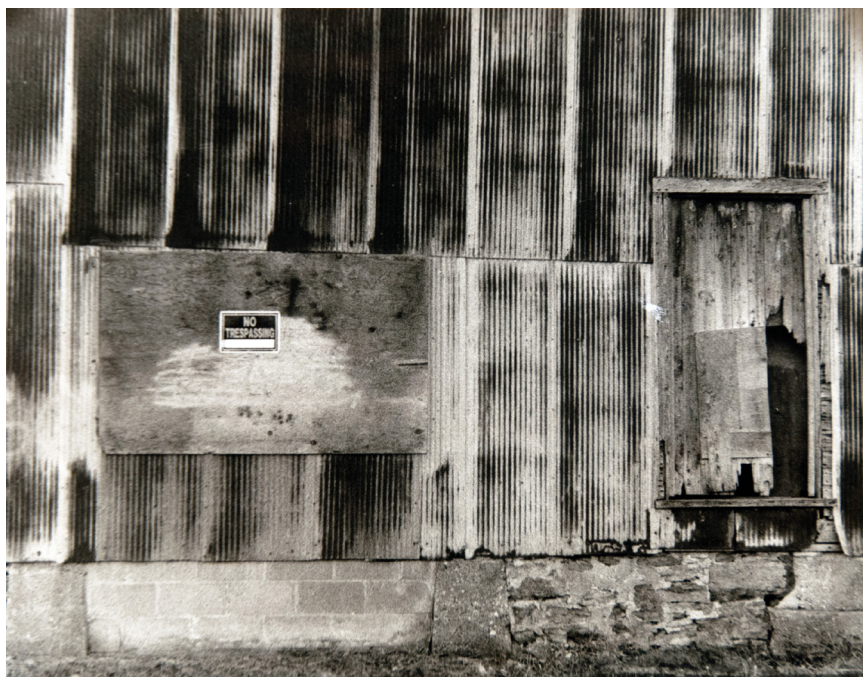
ARTWORK BY JOSHUA SPENCER



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# **No TRESPASSING**

ARTWORK BY CATHERINE KLEIN



8 x 10 in.  
Gelatin Silver Print

# CHAINS

ARTWORK BY JOCELYN GARCIA



10 x 8 in.  
Gelatin Silver Print

# BIOLOGICAL SUPER-DEATH

FICTION BY CARLOS GOMEZ

## Part I – The Creatures

The red and brown dust swept across the barren face of the cliffs. Small eyes cast out of black caves and crevices carved into the cliffs by powers unknown. In the tattered language of the hunters who preyed on those small-eyed creatures, the cliffs were the scars of their god punishing the world many epochs ago. The dust shifted course now and ran over the tops of the cliffs into the Great Sea, a desert so vast even the hunters dared not venture into it. They disliked the wide-open space and the strange cries that echoed through it at night and the darkness that hung over the far-away eastern edge. So, when their prey was injured and dove into the Great Sea the hunters rarely followed except in times of great hunger.

A thrice-repaired spear hurtled through the air and into one of the caves. The only response was the shrill sound of stone on stone and the spear falling back to the ground moments later. Anguished howls echoed from the anemic patch of forestry that existed at the foot of the cliffs. A young hunter, perhaps eight or nine, sprinted from the tree line to grab his spear before disappearing back into the woods. Normally the hunters disliked being even this close to the Great Sea, but it was one of those times of great hunger. The meat-traders from beyond the Wreckage had not come this summer, or the last. Normally this would have only been an annoyance but the oldest of the hunters reported that there was fewer prey this year than there had even been before. Prayers in garbled tongues beseeched God for deliverance but none arrived. Even the little patches of uncharred soil the hunters had learned to cultivate produced only poison and weeds.

Hunger grabbed at every belly and the dust began to block the ways out of the valley the hunters called home. Sometimes the cries once heard only in the Great Sea by the bravest of the hunters were heard in the shattered mountains that hugged



the Eastern side of the valley. Guards were posted in rocky outcrops and the cries lessened for a time before growing again. One guard had even disappeared. The hunters feared their god had been upset by something and would break the world again. On the eve of the Moon-Fall the priests sharpened their bone daggers and fed on the flesh of twenty newborns hoping to ascend to the perilous rank of angels and ask their god why he was punishing them. Their god did not answer, and the priests were forced into the mountains by the aggrieved parents.

What was to be done? After many weeks of hunger, at last a group of meat-traders arrived. They were not here to trade though, but to warn the hunters of a great danger. Their stone cities had been destroyed and besmirched by creatures of such terrible horror they could not be spoken of. The creatures had emerged from the darkness at the end of the Great Sea and destroyed the cities one by one. They spoke a language that haunted those who had survived their deprivations and marched on four legs and their skin was like rock. They were coming to this valley now. Beyond this the meat-traders could offer little more advice but to flee.

“...the cliffs were the scars of their god punishing the world many epochs ago.”

The hunters gathered to discuss what to do. Some wanted to flee, others to simply hide while the creatures passed, and a few even wanted to fight. But if the stone cities had been felled, even with their fire-rockets and doom-guns, what good could the hunters do? It was agreed that the hunters must flee or hide, but no choice could be made. At last, one of their youngest volunteered a solution. If these creatures had just destroyed the stone-cities, they would be some time away from the valley. He would go into the Great Sea and determine where the creatures had come from. If he could learn this perhaps a weakness could be found. If he could, he would return, and the valley would defeat the creatures. If he could not or did not return in half that time the hunters would flee into the mountains and take their chances there. It was the best way. The hunters agreed to his plan and he set off the

next morning.

## Part II – The Great Sea

No one, not even the priests, knew why the Great Sea was so unending or so strange. Here days could pass without any change in your surroundings and the heat never faded, even with Moonrise. The dunes built of dust and scoured rock stood over everything here. Some even stood as tall as mountains. The meat-traders reported that these dunes would move and crawl across the Great Sea when one did not look, but that was not an idea the hunter wanted to entertain.

He had been walking now for many days but still the Great Sea did not end. The darkness in the East grew closer, yes, but slowly. Once a flash of blue light from the darkness had sent the hunter running into the dust, but nothing happened, and he resumed his journey. The priests and the refugee meat-traders had gathered all the food and water they could and gave it to the lone hunter to provide for him during his long walk. But it was not much, and it was already running low. Hunger pains hurt his belly as they had in the valley and still the Great Sea stretched on. When would it end? Why didn't it end?

Slowly, the hunter ground to a halt near the largest dunes and laid down. His food was long gone, and still the darkness eluded him. The pains were terrible, but not so terrible as the fear of failing the valley. Precious water escaped the hunter's eyes and he cursed himself for such weakness. Suddenly the dune shifted and moaned, and the hunter turned to hear an awful cry peal from its peak. The sound was reminiscent of the grinding echoes produced by the bone sharpeners in the Southern Plains at their workshops. The hunter groaned in terror and his eyes widened as a silhouette perched on the top of the dune.

A beast now stood there. In the white moonlight its skin seemed to gently pulsate while creamy fluid pooled from great pores in its elbows. There was no head and the beast began to race down the dune towards the hunter. A scream replaced

his groan and the hunter grabbed at the dust around him. Another cry escaped the beast and he grabbed at the hunter. Its claws sunk into the hunter's arm and blackness overtook him.

### Part III – The Darkness

The hunter awoke to see a vast scene at work. For untold leagues orange and yellow stained land spread out in a great plain. A thick soot filled the air and descended to the Earth in small flakes that smelled of burnt wood. He crinkled his nose but still the stench filled his nostrils. Beyond the horizon many crumpled towers reached towards the black sky. Small tubes that resembled wrinkled fingers sprouted from the sides of the towers and stretched in every which way. From them a deeper and darker smoke was ejected which gently floated to the base of the towers. As the hunter's eyes cleared, larger, more terrible shapes took definite form and sent his heart into a fearful flight.

There were the Stalk-Beasts, multi-legged organisms that slithered close to the ground with bony arms. Their long noses protruded outwards and fondled everything nearby. Once they found a Stalk, one of the many small hairs that pushed up from the tainted soil, the Stalk-Beast would round its many mouths around the Stalk's tip and drink deeply from whatever it produced.

Farther along, many hundreds of Sky-Beasts crowded around the very tops of the towers clutching scratches and chunks of fetid and decaying flesh. The bravest of the Sky-Beasts would descend to deposit its cargo into the top of the tower. Down the meat fell before it must have reached the bottom, for the whole tower would shiver and the Sky-Beasts would caw in what the hunter presumed was an articulation of joy. He could not be too sure.

Farther still, beyond the smoke towers and the Sky-Beasts, the whole sky shimmered and shook in beats of sulfuric yellows and blood reds; black bands like scars stretched across the sky's lower reaches while the top reflected the dust and smoke of the ground below.

A deep sickness filled the hunter's heart and he fled. Why had the Dune-Beast brought him to this place? Was this perhaps the darkness? Then where were the creatures mentioned by the meat-traders? A gust of wind buffeted against the hunter and forced him to his knees. When his eyes drifted upward, he saw in the distance a ravaged wooden cabin nestled between two hills. There was a shadow about it and the wood seemed to glow red. No stalks grew near it, nor did the Sky-Beasts fly over it. Perhaps there the hunter could find safety.

"Prayers in  
garbled tongues  
beseeched God  
for deliverance  
but none arrived."

For many hours the hunter trudged before he arrived at the foot of the cabin. It was old; the hunter could feel its age. It had been there for many years and seen many things. Though the building's roof seemed to be sliding off, the walls were still firm and offered no vision inside. Another joyous caw from the Sky-Beasts convinced the hunter to enter. The moment his hand touched the wood the hunter wished he had never come here. A terrible, total revulsion of his body to the wooden frame tore through him. It was a biological, almost chemical rejection of this place. He was never meant to see this. No living organism was meant to know this. But the hunter's screaming cells had pushed the door, and it opened.

A small lamp shone weakly on a desk beside a bed. In the bed lay a shriveled form, decayed by untold years and whose shape was lost to any language or power of definition or mode of thinking that the hunter possessed. The hunter could not breathe and felt his heart slowing to a stop. There was a chair next to the bed with its back toward the door. A thing sat in it.

The hunter wanted to die as it turned to look at him.

There upon the chair was the last human being in the world. Dried tears pooled at the base of its brown eyes and the hunter quailed as the muscles at the corner of the human's lips began to work.

Its mouth opened and let forth a wail that destroyed the hunter. The towers crumbled at its cry and the Sky-Beasts

died and fell to the Earth and the Stalks retreated deep into the soil, fleeing nearly as fast as the Stalk-Beasts.

It was a scream so pained and so despairing that no creature yet set upon the dying Earth could hear it without knowing even a glimmer of the human's sorrow. They did not wish to know this solitary human's knowledge, its pain.

They did not wish to know because they already knew it. But the long years had almost made them forget.

In a moment their primitive and warped minds were reminded of all they had lost. Their remaining humanity, remembered.

It remembered the Golden Age, it remembered the blue oceans and the green fields, it remembered a sky untainted, it remembered their children and their lovers and their mothers and fathers.

It recalled kisses and nights.

It remembered, painfully, the war.

It remembered the oceans rising and the fields burning and the sky falling.

It remembered the release of the Gas.

It remembered, as those who hadn't died from hunger or the plague or the atom-guns had, their genes melted and evaporated and put back together as the Gas saw fit. It remembered changing and changing and changing until nothing was remembered but the barest tragedy.

But it did not like to remember, so as the last human's scream gently trailed into oblivion the Stalks slowly scooted upwards again and the Stalk-Beasts returned, and the surviving towers began their unknown work again. The hunter's body did not like to remember either, so his skin disintegrated, and his bones turned to dust. The last human turned away from the door and reached towards the thing in the bed. The door was closed by the wind outside, and what was known for a moment was lost, perhaps this time forever, as the Biological Super-Death worked its course over the dying Earth and all its lost humanity.

# WHEN IS IT MY TURN?

NON-FICTION BY VENESSIA PARTIDA

My heart used to beat so heavily whenever a loud ding came from my phone that I could see my pulse on my palm; a reaction that was normal for myself in high school in anticipation of receiving a message from the person I liked. It was safe to say that my feelings had a mind of their own whenever I had a crush on someone. On a chilly November night, while I was working on my assigned homework for the weekend, I heard the obnoxious ding come from my phone; I quickly turned it over to find a notification from the girl I had been crushing on for a few months at that time. “We should meet up to eat tomorrow, would twelve be fine?” I had read it a million times to confirm that it was in fact real and not a figment of my imagination. Our interactions had been limited to seeing each other in school during passing periods and from time to time we would make small talk. We wanted to be better friends, so we mentioned possibly meeting up to eat, though I did not expect it to be so soon. I tried producing a response that would seem cool, relaxed, and excited all at once, but that was an impossible task due to the unexpectedness of her invitation.

“Sounds good. See you tomorrow,” I hesitantly typed before I pressed send. I was hopeless.

“... I could see my pulse on my palm; a reaction that was normal for myself in high school in anticipation of receiving a message from the person I liked.”

A cold and rainy November morning stood before me in the window of my room as I thought about every single embarrassing scenario that I could cause. My leg bounced up and down, hitting the carpet at a steady rhythm as I sat waiting for her to arrive. Thum, thum, thum. From the corner of my eye, I was able to see the screen of my phone dimly illu-

minating my room with a new text displayed; "I'm here :)" read the message. I hurriedly shoved my wallet and phone into my pockets and dashed out the front door. A pitch-black corolla that looked like it had lived nine lives sat on the curb, waiting for me in front of my apartment complex.

Once inside her car, I realized that my sweater was slightly damp from the gentle rain that had been falling as I walked over toward her car. Scattered water droplets had been absorbed by my gray sweater and left me smelling like a freshly rained forest—the citrus and musk from my Chanel perfume no longer reaching my nose. I suddenly became self-conscious about the earthy smell I brought into her car. She placed a hand on my arm that snapped me out of my thoughts just in time to hear her say that she liked how I smelled. The sharp cold on my face thawed and brought, what I imagined to be, a rosy tint to my cheeks.

We spoke little on the ride to the restaurant. The rain was doing all the speaking since it had begun to fall harder from the pale gray sky, and it blended nicely into the music flowing from the JBL speaker that was situated in one of the cup holders. It was a silly sight, but her radio system was broken according to what she told me.

We arrived at the parking lot of the restaurant where she cautiously, yet ungracefully, parked her car. My friend who ended up tagging along with us had not yet arrived, so we decided to wait in the car until my friend got there. Awkward silence swarmed us in an instant. Thinking back, maybe I was the only one who felt it because of the obvious feelings I had towards her, because she, on the other hand, seemed relaxed and focused on scrolling through her music library to find a song to play while we waited. She made the first move to talk, and soon a pleasant conversation regarding music flowed easily between us. Everything she said, even things that I did not entirely see eye to eye with her, fascinated me. She asked me what my favorite song was at that moment, and I told her it was Chet Baker's "It's Always You." Her

neatly manicured fingers tapped on her phone to search for the song. When she found it, she confirmed with me to see if it was the right song, then pressed play. A slight pause rang before a moody piano played and Baker's sleepy voice sang about seeing his lover everywhere around him. The gloom adorning the sky and the patter of the rain on her car made the moment feel intimate. Her eyes were closed as she softly nodded her head along to the slow melody. I gazed at her in awe as my heart began to beat in a different tempo than the song.

"The sharp cold on my face thawed and brought, what I imagined to be, a rosy tint to my cheeks."

Past the hand-smudged, rotating door, all three of us stood inside the suffocatingly hot restaurant scouting for a place to sit. Even though I had been in there for less than a minute, the greasy and fried smells had already seeped into my clothes, but somehow when she walked in front of us, she left a trail of a fruity aroma. At the table, she took the spot closest to the window and tapped on the empty spot beside her on the mahogany bench while looking at me. She smiled charmingly at me as I shyly sat down. My friend brought our food over; we all had gotten cheese fries and chicken tenders. They easily fell into a conversation as they ate even though they did not know each other that well. I envied them for being able to do that so I just sat there chewing on my crispy food while I drowned myself in a sea of thought.

"Veny, have you had your first kiss?" she asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. Her eyes were twinkling with curiosity as she waited for an answer. From the corner of my right eye, I saw a sly smirk form on my friend's mouth to try and stifle a laugh. I shook my head to bring myself back to reality and answered her question with a short "no." My friend and I were told not to expect much the very first time and that the best kiss experience will happen with our first love. I took that comment with a grain



of salt.

“What was your best kiss like, then?” My friend asked my crush. She leaned her elbows on the table, clearly interested in her answer. One minute she was explaining her experience to my friend in detail and the next she had her hand placed ever so lightly on my knee. I had turned to her only to find her face close enough to mine that I was able to feel the exhale from her

“They easily fell into a conversation as they ate even though they did not know each other that well. I envied them for being able to do that”

nose tickle my face. Words came out of her mouth, but white noise was the only thing my ears heard even with us being mere inches away from one another. My eyes kept blinking subconsciously as if trying to snap me out of whatever trance I had entered at that moment. Suddenly, I became grossly aware of the taste of potato and chicken dancing on my taste buds and decided to keep my mouth shut to avoid

her smelling that unpleasant combination.

She offered to drive me back home after we finished eating and of course I accepted. We waved good-bye to my friend before she disappeared inside of her car. As the scenery flashed by my eyes, the scene from the restaurant replayed in my head over and over. Words I had rehearsed the previous night sat on my tongue ready to come out, hoping that I would not swallow them like I had with previous crushes. My eyes wandered around the inside of her car as my thoughts rearranged themselves only to land on a small, glossy piece of paper wedged in a gap behind her steering wheel. I looked a little closer and made it out to be a picture of her and someone else. Her small figure was being consumed by two long arms in a back hug by a guy that I had surely seen in school before; a soft smile was on her lips and her head was slightly turned upwards to look at him lovingly. A pit formed in my lower stomach that swallowed my heart along with the rehearsed

words.

We had gotten to my place. I thanked her for hanging out and before getting out of the car I turned to her to carefully say, “I hope he makes you happy.”

I had always felt emotions too strongly without knowing. Too many times I ended up swallowing my emotions because the people I felt them for never acknowledged them or just rejected them when I had confessed, and that day I swallowed them, at least it was for a good reason. If my emotions had been able to conquer every ounce of sense in me that day, I would have said the words I planned to say, even after seeing her picture. Though if I had confessed, it would have come with a lot of regret. Not only would I have jeopardized the new friendship we were building, but I would have also thrown my unwanted feelings at her when she was already in a relationship. I would never get in between the happiness of two people, no matter how strong my feelings are because I do not think that is a polite thing to do. All I could do after she dropped me off at home after hanging out with her and my friend was to be happy for her and her new boyfriend. My feelings would eventually fade away with time and my time to be happy would come one day too.

# PICTURE PERFECT

POETRY BY CECILIA CARRINGTON

Swells of foam clash against rocky grain.  
With seashells surfing the tides that the moon brings forth,  
Droplets collecting in the corners of the reef.  
A golden sun rises over the Eastern sky,  
With sunbeams hitting even the tallest cliff.  
The moment is peaceful in your mind  
And for the first time ever, everything is picture perfect.

# WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY SWAMP

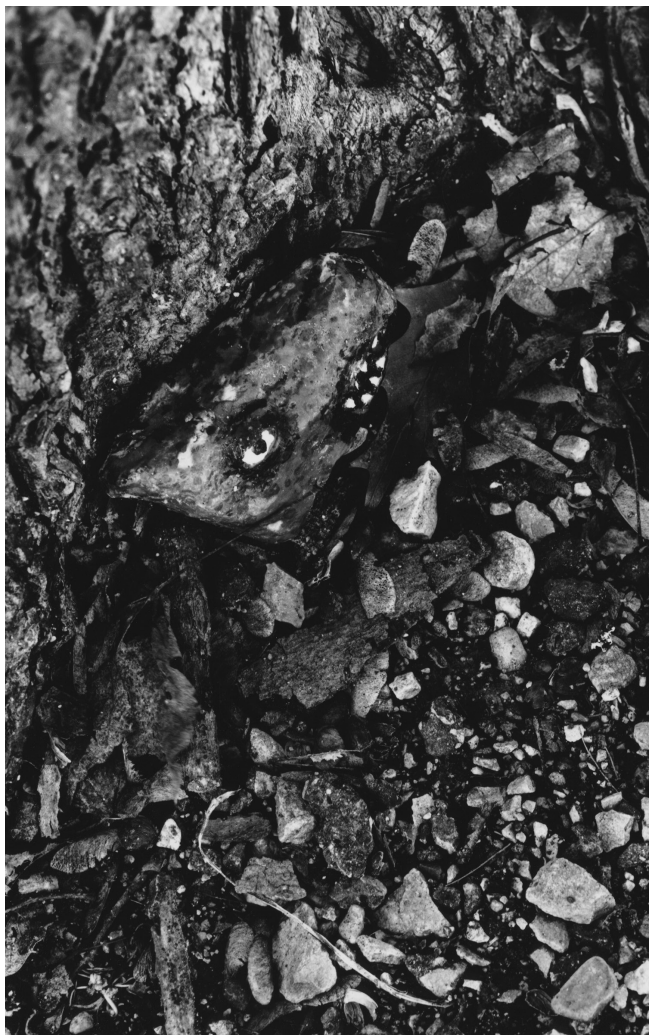
ARTWORK BY CORINNE CONDOS



8.5 x 11 in.  
Inkjet Print

# BLISS Woods 2

ARTWORK BY JULIAN HEIDRICH





8 x 10 in.  
Gelatin Silver Print

# SNAKE

ARTWORK BY GLORIA LEE



3.75 x 11 x 8.5 in.  
Ceramics

A voice in my head was the first thing I remembered hearing. *“Ms. Rogue, it is time to awaken.”*

I groaned, wondering why my bed was so hard against my back. What was wrapped around my wrists? Why were my eyes so heavy? Why couldn't I remember anything? And... wait, did someone really just talk to me in my head? My eyes shot open and I tried to sit up, only for my shoulders to pop at the restraints holding my arms back. Restraints? What happened to me? What was going on?

*“Ms. Rogue, please calm down. Your heart rate is elevating to extremely high levels. Would you like me to call for medical help?”* The voice in my head asked.

“No, no! Get out of my head! Whoever you are ... whatever you are, leave me alone!” I yelled, wishing I could wake up from whatever nightmare this was.

*“Impossible. I am Objective, your personal AI. I cannot leave your mind as we are now one.”*

“If only I could pinch myself to prove that I'm dreaming,” I muttered to myself, squeezing my eyes shut. I wanted to just wake up in a place I recognized, safe and sound, with my memories.

*“You are not dreaming, Ms. Rogue. You are currently under the Citadel Tower in New Chicago, according to my pinpoint location.”*

“Underground?” I opened my eyes, “How did I get underground with an annoying AI and no memories? Wait, how do you even know where we are if we're underground? Wouldn't satellites be too far away to find us?”

“I wanted to just wake up in a place I recognized, safe and sound, with my memories.”

*“The satellites have X-Ray technology that allows them to see underground. It was created in 2040 by scientist Raymond Parker, who was murdered in Times Square in 2055. Would you like me to open a file on Dr. Parker or would you like me to move on to your next ques-*



tion?” Objective asked.

“Um, next question please,” There was no point in not learning as much as I could, seeing as I couldn’t move off this bed.

*“Would you like me to perform a scan of your brain in an attempt to find any obscure memories?”*

“Yes!”

*“Scanning ...”*

While the AI trapped inside my mind did its business, I examined the room I was in. There wasn’t really much to describe to be honest. In short, everything was white. The walls, the tiles on the floor, the ceiling, you name it. It was all white. Even the door was irritatingly white. The lights beaming down on me from the ceiling were so bright, they looked white too. It seemed like I was the only pop of color in the room. Well, me and maybe the table I was tied to. But I couldn’t really look at the table seeing as I was stuck lying here. I couldn’t see what I was wearing either since my chest and down was covered in a thin, white cloth. Oh, and there were no windows either.

*“Scan complete. No memories recovered. Would you like me to do an analysis of your body to try and figure out more information about you?”*

“Uh ...” What was that supposed to mean? “Sure?”

*“Scanning ... scan complete. Biological Age: 17. Height: 5’6”. Weight: 126 lbs. Hair Color: Dark Brown. Left Eye Color: Yellow. Right Eye Color: Dark Brown. Skin Color: Medium Brown. Do you wish for me to continue with your foot size and hand size?”*

“Can you find my nationality? Or ethnicity?” I asked, hoping that would give me a clue to where I was from.

Silence.

“Uh, Objective? You still there?”

*“My apologies Ms. Rogue. Please define nationality.”*

Weird. “It’s the country you’re from. You know, Italian, German, Nigerian, Irish?”

More silence before there was a short answer, *“Cannot compute.”*

“What can’t you compute?”

*“The word you described cannot be found in my database. The word ‘ethnicity’ cannot be computed as well. Perhaps you know of synonyms of these words that can be used to help?”*

I opened my mouth to answer when suddenly the irritatingly white door opened. A man stepped in and my AI immediately started assessing him. I only caught a few details it listed out such as he was a general of some sort and he was born in 2020, the year nicknamed as ‘The Start of the End.’ All other observations I had to make by myself, like the fact that he had buzz cut hair and an unfamiliar military-esque uniform on. Oh, and his face was scary as heck. His black eyes were beady and almost soulless while his mouth was pressed into a thin line. He had wrinkles, wrinkles, and more wrinkles over his face along with a thin, white scar down his right cheek. He held a stiff stance, one it seemed like he held often. When he opened his mouth to speak, I was almost expecting to see shark teeth.

“Hello Rogue, I’m glad to see that you are finally awake. How are you feeling?” His voice was gravelly and deep. This man was exactly what I expected to see in one of those old science fiction movies.

Noticing he was waiting for my reply, I answered, “Extremely confused. What’s going on? Where am I? Why am I here? Why can’t I remember anything and why do I have an AI in my head?”

“All questions will be answered in due time. But for now, please allow me to undo your restraints so we can move to a more ... comfortable room.”

Sounded sketchy. Nevertheless, I let him take care of my restraints. Well, it wasn’t like I could’ve fought back anyway. This man was built like a tank and I was on the skinnier side. Looking down at my thin T-shirt and shorts, I saw some leg muscles but no arm muscle whatsoever. Yeah, there was no way I could take this guy down even if I wanted to.

I took a step on the cold, tile floor with my bare feet and went to stand normally. Only, that didn’t happen. I immedi-

“The lights beaming down on me from the ceiling were so bright, they looked white too. It seemed like I was the only pop of color in the room.”

“He held a stiff stance, one it seemed like he held often. When he opened his mouth to speak, I was almost expecting to see shark teeth.”

ately sank to the ground, my legs apparently too weak to hold me. How long had I been on that table for my body to react like this? I obviously wasn't unconscious for just a few hours for my legs to have this severe of a reaction. It had to have been days, if not weeks or months.

“Here, allow me to help,” Objective stated and a strange sensation took over my body. Almost like my body was on

autopilot mode, I stood up and effortlessly walked toward the man and the only way out of the room. He gave me a simple nod before setting off down the hallway. I followed him robotically. It was an odd feeling to be moving but not have control of myself. I put my faith in Objective. It had to know what it was doing and I could trust it right? I mean, it was literally stuck in my brain so it had to be somewhat trustworthy.

We made our way down a long, white hallway. The only sounds were the slapping of my bare feet against the tile and the man's nearly silent footsteps. When we got to the end of the hallway, we found ourselves standing in front of a pair of French glass doors. They required voice recognition, a hand-print scan, and an eye scan from the man before they slid open and we could enter. To me, it seemed a little excessive, but this facility seemed high tech. Who knew what kind of secrets were hidden in these walls. We continued on, passing windows displaying multiple projects. There were shrinking rays being used on goats, technology on dogs, and ice rays on people. These weren't even the strangest things I saw. Some images I couldn't even wrap my mind around. What kind of place was this? Why was I here?

“Ms. Rogue, please calm yourself. Your heart rate is climbing again.” I jumped, briefly forgetting that Objective existed. The man gave me an odd look, complete with a raised eyebrow, but said nothing.

We walked for a while longer and eventually, I couldn't take the silence anymore. I wanted answers. “So ... *sir* ...

what is your name?”

“I will answer all questions later,” was all he responded with.

I awkwardly nodded. So I guessed conversation was not an option. Good to know.

*“His name is Brad Drake. He is a general in the Recreated States’ government. Security clearance level: Maximum. Were you not listening to my debriefing earlier?”* Objective piped up.

“No, not really,” I muttered quietly so General Drake hopefully wouldn’t hear.

*“Oh, then let me continue on. He fought in the War Over the World in 2062. His battalion defeated the allegiance of what was known back then as Japan, Great Britain, and Spain. He won the bronze star medal in 2065 and has since retired from combat ...”* Objective paused, *“Oh my, how did I not find this information out earlier?”*

That sounded concerning, “Objective, what is it?”

*“He apparently disappeared a year and a half ago. There is still a missing report out. I advise you to stay cautious around this man, Ms. Rogue. He may not be what he appears.”*

I must’ve had a strange look on my face because General Drake asked, “Are you all right Rogue?”

“Uh ... yeah. I’m just fine.”

He stiffly nodded and opened up a new door. He gestured for me to enter first. I eyed him carefully. I definitely trusted the opinion of Objective more than I trusted this guy. But I couldn’t let him know that so I reluctantly entered the room. It looked like an interrogation room from one of those old crime shows. There was a mirror on the left wall. In the middle of the room, there was a long wooden table with a chair on either side of it. I sat on the side facing the mirror and that’s the first time I saw myself.

The iris of one of my eyes was yellow and slightly glowing. The other was somewhere between dark brown and black. My wild mane of dark brown curls reached my butt. My skin was a nice shade of brown. I was decently tall, my legs contributing greatly to that height. Something shiny and

silver caught my eyes after I had analyzed my face. My right hand. I held it up and gasped in shock. It was made of metal. Scanning my body, I noticed that my left leg was also metal up to my knee. How I hadn't noticed such details before was beyond me.

*"I altered your perception earlier so you could not see your prosthetics. You were obviously in shock from waking up with no memory and I did not want to surprise you further,"* Objective suddenly spoke up. *"I apologize for withholding such information from you, Ms. Rogue, but I deemed it necessary for your health."*

I stayed quiet, still staring at my hand with an open mouth. This was getting crazier and crazier with every passing second. First, I wake up in a plain, white room with no memory and an AI stuck in my head. Second, there is a general that apparently disappeared a year and a half ago standing in front of me. And now I've found out that I am a—

"Cyborg. That's what you are," General Drake sat down across from me. "I know you must have a lot of questions right now, Rogue, but first, it is important that I know what you remember. Anything at all could be useful."

What should I even tell him? I didn't trust this man but there wasn't much to tell him except the truth. I didn't know much about anything. "I don't remember anything about myself, if that's what you're asking. I know what things are, like doors and windows and such. I know about old television programs. But I don't know anything about me or my past. Or any history in apparently the last ... few years. I don't even know what year it is. This AI in my head, Objective, told me my name is Rogue, but something about it feels ... off. Like that isn't my real name. It's telling me about events that I have no idea

"To me, it seemed a little excessive, but this facility seemed high tech. Who knew what kind of secrets were hidden in these walls."

about. I remember there being tensions between countries but that's about it."

General Drake sat back. "That's it? That is a little ... disappointing. I suppose I should fill you in on the last few years

then. The year is 2070. There is no such thing as countries anymore. We are all just one, combined unit. The War of the World led up to that conclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic way back in 2020 was what some would refer to as 'The Start of the End.' It began a long chain of events leading up to the War of the World and a few other ... minor events that I am not permitted to tell you at this time."

"Why isn't nationality a thing anymore? Or ethnicity?" I didn't care to hear what I could and couldn't know anymore. I had questions. I wanted answers. It was plain and simple.

He wasted no time producing an answer. "There was no reason to keep those around anymore. We're all humans and we're all the same. We found no reason to distinguish ourselves if we're all a part of the same team now. It makes no sense to keep ourselves separated based off of where our ancestors came from. It has worked in our favor so far; there are far less issues on that topic."

"Isn't that erasing a part of our identity though? People around the world have historically been proud of their ancestors' heritage. Why take that away from them?"

"You're young and narrow-minded, Rogue. You wouldn't see the bigger picture. There's so much going on to enhance our future but you aren't ready to learn about that yet."

*"He is getting angry, Ms. Rogue. I suggest moving on from this topic,"* Objective warned.

I decided to listen to my AI. "What about me? Where did I come from? Why am I like this? Or is all that confidential information as well?"

He glared heavily at me and I was honestly surprised lasers didn't shoot out of his eyes. "We found you after a laboratory explosion about a month ago. You were lucky that you'd only lost your arm and your leg. You may notice some scar tissue on your body. It's just a result of that encounter. Your amnesia is an unfortunate consequence of the explosion as well. The doctors are unsure if your memories will ever return. We decided it was best for you to ... try out some prosthetics we're testing. If all goes well, you will officially be the world's first cyborg. Seeing as you've had no problems so far, I guess I'll be the first to say congratulations in advance."

*“Everything he just told you was a lie. Ms. Rogue, I believe the best course of action would be to escape this situation. They wouldn’t be lying if they didn’t have something to hide,”* Objective stated.

I agreed, but how to get out of this mess? I had already established that there was no way I’d be able to take down General Drake. He was the biggest obstacle I had to deal with at the moment. I’d figure everything else out on the way. I wished Objective could read my thoughts to give me some options but a telepathic link didn’t seem to be something I could do. So instead, I thought up an idea while the general ranted on about some history event I no longer wanted to hear about.

A flash of silver caught my eye. It came from the air vents above. As soon as it appeared, it was gone. I tried to concentrate on it, but quickly realized that General Drake had ceased talking. He was staring at me intensely instead, almost like he was trying to look into my head and find out what I was thinking about. It was creepy, like everything else about that man.

“Er ... can I help you?” I awkwardly asked.

*“I believe he noticed you were not paying attention,”* Objective piped up.

Thanks for the late warning.

“Obviously this has been a lot on your young, recovering mind. I’ll go fetch another employee to show you where you’ll be staying, seeing as that is not my expertise. I’ll only be a minute.” And just like that, General Drake left me alone.

Once the door clicked closed, the vent opened and something fell out. I leapt out of my seat and away from the thing. No, not a thing. It was a person that fell out. They were a jumbled heap on the floor, groaning and moaning. They sat up and their eyes found mine. I nearly gasped once I saw their color. One yellow, one dark brown. Like me.

“Rogue, right?” The boy asked.

I took a step back, “And how do you know that?”

“Don’t be afraid; I’m not going to hurt you. I ... I’m like you. A cyborg.” His yellow eye glowed, as if to prove his point. “They named me Nolan.”

“Rogue ... but you already knew that.”

His head snapped towards the door. “We have to go!”

Wait, what? “You’re kidnapping me?”

“No, I’m dragging you into the air vents with me, giving you no choice but to come with me.” He grabbed my wrist and led me to where he needed me to stand.

“I’m pretty sure that’s the same thing.”

“No, it’s really not,” Nolan sighed. “Look, you know they’re lying to you right? About basically everything?”

“Yeah but—”

“I was in your shoes once. They don’t want to help you recover your memory. They want to use you. I won’t.”

“How do I know I can trust you? You’re a stranger that’s kidnapping me.”

“One: I’m not kidnapping you. And two: well, I am more attractive than Captain What’s-His-Face. That’s gotta count for something, right?”

“That really doesn’t—”

“Let me give you a leg up. We’ll talk more about this later.”

Well, it wasn’t like I had much left to lose in this situation. Except, you know, my life. And since Objective was being unusually quiet at the moment, I used my poor sense of judgment and decided to go for it. I lifted up my leg and Nolan helped me up. I gripped the sides of the air vent and hefted myself up. Luckily, I had just enough strength in my stick arms to do so. I crawled farther in to give him enough room to follow me in. Before he did, he hooked up to an electrical port on the wall. He did a few things I didn’t understand before unhooking and jumping through the hole. He closed the hatch just as the door to the room we were just in slammed open. We quietly moved away from the entrance. We didn’t want to be spotted, now did we?

“Isn’t that erasing a part of our identity though? People around the world have historically been proud of their ancestors’ heritage. Why take that away from them?”



“WHERE DID SHE GO?” General Drake roared, and I heard something get knocked over.

“Sir, please calm down! We’ll find her!” A feminine voice told him.

“You better! In a high-security place like this, how does one just disappear?”

“Well—”

“Well what?”

“There was a murmur in the halls that one of the rooms lost all connection. Perhaps it was this one,” the feminine voice sounded so small now, most likely out of fear.

“WHAT?” The mirror shattered next. I winced.

Nolan nudged me and gestured for me to crawl further down the vents. The not-so-hidden message was clear: we were getting away from here. I moved over to the side and let him pass me instead. I had no idea where we were going and I’d most likely get us lost. We’d probably end up going down the garbage shoot if that was even possible.

Objective seemed to get its head together as it suddenly started spurring facts about the boy. *“Biological Age: 18. Height: 5’10”. Weight: 140 lbs. Hair Color: Black. Left Eye Color: Dark Brown. Right Eye Color: Yellow. Skin Color: Tan. Seems like a suitable mate.”*

I just about choked on air right there. I was fairly sure my AI was broken.

“You good back there Curls?” Nolan whispered.

“Who’s Curls?” I whispered back.

“You are. Now are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Good., Now go back to being quiet until I tell you it’s fine to talk.”

As much as I wanted to argue, I knew I couldn’t. It was solid logic. We could be heard up here and personally, I didn’t want to be caught up here with Vent Boy. Vent Boy... that’s a good one. I should make that stick, especially if he was sticking me with Curls. I’ve known this guy for less than an hour and he was already frustrating me. Why, out of all the people in this facility, did it have to be him that saved me?

We stopped crawling when we reached a crossroads between the vents. Luckily the vents were tall enough for us to sit up and wide enough for us to not feel clustered. There was a wide variety of things littering the floor, like clothes and food. My stomach growled looking at the latter. How long had it been since I'd eaten last? It had to have been quite a while; my stomach felt like a cave. I eyed the package of chips, ignoring Nolan doing who-knows-what around me.

"Go ahead and eat it. You need it more than I do," he told me.

"Thanks," I tore open the package and started devouring its contents. Man, it tasted so good.

"While you're eating, I'll let you in on some information."

"Like why you kidnapped me?"

"It's not kidnapping if you aided in it willingly. Which you did, might I point out. Now, on to more important matters." His expression immediately switched from amused to serious. "You and I are both cyborgs. They were lying about the explosion you were in. While you were stuck down there with General Grumpy Face, I was able to hack into their security and find out some info. on you. I can tell you, but only if you want me to. I know this can be overwhelming and if you'd rather not know, I understand."

"As much as I wanted to argue, I knew I couldn't. It was solid logic."

Did I really want to know? I knew practically nothing about myself besides what Objective told me earlier. Maybe if I found out a little about myself, the rest would come back to me naturally. Or I could hear things about myself that I didn't like. What if I was a criminal in my past? Or what if I was an orphan who was forced to live on the streets? There were so many ways this could go right or wrong.

"I could remember this information if you want me to tell you later. I don't have to tell you right now if you don't want me to. Or ever—"

I cut him off. "No, I want to know. I want to know who I used to be."

Nolan gave me a slight smile, his yellow eye seemingly

glowing brighter. “Okay, then let’s start with your family. Your parents and little sister are both alive and live in New Cali. It seems like your DNA fit perfectly with the sample needed for the cyborg program so they forcefully took you from them. Your real name ... is Zayda Achebe. They nick-named you Rogue because you kept leaving your room and trying to escape. I’m guessing you were never successful because you’re here right now. You’re not currently married. Your age is 17. Your AI is Objective who, according to this report, has begun adapting its own personality. It cut itself free from the link that allowed them to monitor your thoughts.”

“I wonder if that’s when I woke up.”

“It would definitely make sense.”

*“That is when I woke you up. I realized that they were watching your every move and it felt ... wrong. I apologize immensely if you did not wish for me to do so. I assumed it was an invasion of privacy and took it upon myself to cut the link off.”* Objective somehow actually sounded sorry. Was it possible for robots to be capable of experiencing emotions just like us? To think the same ways as us?

“It’s okay, Objective; it was the right move. It did me a huge favor,” I muttered so that hopefully Nolan couldn’t hear me.

Unfortunately, that didn’t happen. “I could teach you to talk to your AI mentally if you’d like one day.”

“You can do that?” My mouth fell open into a gap.

“Yeah, it takes some practice though. Maybe when we escape here one day.”

There was a small silence before I continued, “So what’s your story? I mean, you know quite a bit about me but I know next to nothing about you. So enlighten me.”

He laughed a little. “There isn’t much to tell. I woke up here about a month ago with no memory. I found out they were lying to me so I climbed into the vents and I’ve been hiding out here ever since. I’ve found out some pretty juicy information.”

“You’ve been here a month?” My disbelief was clear in my tone.

“That’s what I said, wasn’t it? Besides, it’s not all that bad

up here. All you really have to do is steal food and find the right times to use the bathrooms. And make sure no one is coming when you pass over the grates. Otherwise, they see some silver or yellow and get curious.”

I looked in all four directions to see no grates. It was probably the reason we were speaking just above a whisper. Our cybernetic eyes were like flashlights in the near darkness. It was hard to make out Nolan’s features in the dim lighting but he was clearly watching me. The vents were surprisingly not cold, as I imagined air vents would be. They were about room temperature.

“Why not just leave? I mean, you probably had many opportunities to, right?” I asked.

“Now this is going to sound creepy, but I swear it’s not. I was thinking about leaving when I first got up here. I was coordinating my escape when I overheard a group of scientists talking about their latest arrival to the cyborg program. A girl who kept escaping.”

“Are you talking about me?”

Nolan nodded.

I let out a brief laugh of disbelief. “You stayed because of me? Why?”

“Why wouldn’t I? They lied to me; tried to manipulate me. What was stopping them from doing the same to you? We were put through the same things, Rogue. Or would you rather be called Zayda? Sorry, off topic. Anyway, I didn’t want anyone to be used the same way they tried to use me. So I came up with another plan. I would wait, rescue this mystery girl, and we’d escape together.”

“Let me get this straight. You risked your whole escape plan on me, a girl you didn’t know, just because you didn’t want me to be used by this mysterious government organization?”

“Yes.”

“Objective?”

*“He is telling the truth. Now, if you two would like to escape this facility, I would suggest doing so sooner rather than later. Your disappearance is likely to cause the building to go into lockdown.”*

“Good point.” I relayed the information to Nolan. “What’s the plan?”

“You’re willing to go through with it?”

“You’re the most honest person I’ve met today. Right now, you’re the only person I’m certain I can trust.”

Nolan smiled. “Get ready Curls; it involves climbing. Are you sure your stick arms can handle it?”

“If it involves leaving, then definitely, Vent Boy.”

Nolan decided he had nothing of importance in the vents. He decided he’d find some new stuff when we got out of here. So on that note, we set off down the winding maze of tunnels, avoiding the grates the best we could. There was a mad dash down below to find me, but I knew they never would. Once I was out, I would be gone. We had to climb up a few

“Our cybernetic eyes were like flashlights in the near darkness. It was hard to make out Nolan’s features in the dim lighting but he was clearly watching me.”

different tunnels, winding from one part of the compound to another. It really stretched my abilities, but Objective took over at certain points like it had earlier. The wonderful idea of freedom from this confusing building of liars kept me going, even when I felt like giving up. Nolan’s random whispers of encouragement definitely helped too. After about an hour or so of sneaking around, Nolan took off the final grate that led to the end of our journey. It came out on

a forest floor, surrounded by nothing but trees. Hopefully, nobody would look to find us here.

“That was way easier than I thought it’d be,” I commented.

“Me too, but be thankful it wasn’t harder. Then we’d have to fight for our way out.” He nudged me. “You know, you still didn’t answer my question from earlier. Do you prefer Rogue or Zayda?”

I thought about it. I was no one’s science experiment. I was going to be who I wanted to be. “Call me Zayda.”

# I HOPE THIS FINDS YOU (WELL)

FICTION BY DAVID KURNAT

Dear Dad,

I hope this letter finds both you and mom well. It's on the long side but I know you have time on your hands, stamps and coins can only take so much of your time. The kids and the missus here are healthy and everyone is working except yours truly (retired!). Beth is still teaching high school music and your grandson Ben is out of the Marines and is now a full-fledged union carpenter. You should be proud of them both. We are. My beautiful young wife works the local gossip from her receptionist's chair at the dentist's office in town. A couple more years for her. She's looking over my shoulder to send kisses to both of you right now. Now that she's out of eye shot she's really not that young anymore.

It's a snowy day today (flurries) and you were right the weather is changing. I don't even own a winter coat anymore, just a three-season jacket and a hoodie does the trick. A hoodie by the way is what the youngsters today call what we used to call a hooded sweatshirt. They have their own language! Jesus Madea! I don't know what the grandkids are talking about half the time! They're in their own world. It's like when you adults used to speak Polish in front of us kids! Well it's a young person's world and it always has been, always will be. You're probably wondering why this is not handwritten but typed. Beth came over with the kids for dinner and I was frustrated having to rewrite this letter every time I thought of making a change or I made a mistake. So she sat me down at the computer that "her and Ben and mom bought me for Christmas!" and 2 hours later I knew how to turn it on and (kind of) use it. It's a work in progress. I still make mistakes. I know mom will find every grammatical mistake here and roll her eyes! It seems a little impersonal being typed so I refused her offer to email it to your icloud and I am going to put it in an

envelope and deliver it the old fashioned way. The icloud is on the internet and the internet is kind of like the old Encyclopedia Britannica set that we used to have in the basement, except it's always up to date. The three of them have a running joke about how far behind the times I am. I play it off in fun, but you know who they come to when they need financial advice! Or a furnace that's not working. Beth knows all these tricks like these alt cntl del little buttons that do all kinds of magical stuff for you! *Like the italics button!* I don't know how she learns this or remembers it? And this thing called g-p-s. You type in an address, any address in the world! and it'll give you directions right to the doorstep! It's really neat and helpful but NOBODY KNOWS HOW TO READ A MAP ANYMORE! (Caps (capitols) button!). But they always have their portable phone glued to their hand, They're all the rage. I can't wait till they go away. It drives me nuts! Everybody's always on the phone! Remember mom used to put a dime in our shoe in case we needed to call home on a pay phone? Like, if we got in trouble or something bad happened. You know, I never used it to call home. I would tell her I lost it and she would give me another dime. Having holes in your soles was a great excuse! I think Mr. Mroz at the penny candy shop retired rich because of all the dimes mothers would give their kids to call home! *I also think mom knew all along.* She will always be a sweetheart to me. Years later when I would call home to see how you guys were doing she would answer "Oh hi Donnie!" and I swear I could imagine little birds and musical notes floating around her words above her head like Betty in the old Archie comics.

Anyway Beth gave me a stern lecture about how the world is changing and how I better get back on, or a get a ticket, or miss the bus or something as convoluted as that sounds. No wonder why I drink! That girl can talk really fast when she gets going! I miss the old days but do understand change. You know that my oldest memory was of a horse drawn vegetable wagon clopping down our block? The street was still cobblestone before they paved it over a number of years later. So that had to be the early sixties right? I was just a little guy! Now you call the A &P and

they shop for you and bring the groceries right to your door. No kidding! But you get what they bring you. Mom wouldn't go for that. It used to take her 15 minutes just to find 6 tomatoes the way she used to squeeze them, smell them and look them over. She'd touch like every tomato on the stand. Fruit too. So yeah times are changing pop, what are you going to do? Try to get along and laugh at yourself. Life is still good. I see this letter is so far more about how this letter came to being a letter so I'll try to get to my point.

Scott mentioned something to me the other day that made me feel I should talk to you. I want to get something off my chest. Remember the time you and I got in a fistfight in the kitchen? We got arguing about some current event (civil unrest or Vietnam) or maybe about my attitude or yours about stuff (*everything at that time*) or just me needing to get a haircut. Me and you were always at each other's throats back then. I was 22 so that made you 54? Well Scotty told me he was in the kitchen and as the baby of the family (13?) he got scared. He told me "Donnie, you gave dad your best shot to his ribs. KAPOW! *And the old man didn't flinch.* My first thought right then and there was oh god dad's gonna kill Donnie!" We got a good laugh out of that because he never told me before. You were always one tough SOB! (your VFW army buddies' words not mine)

Dad I want to apologize for that and being a pain in your ass during those years. You always worked hard, a part time job after the post office a lot of the years. You were a good man, and funny enough, me and the rest of the kids appreciate the discipline you brought down on us. (The nuns at Guardian Angels too!) You were tough, but you never cuffed the back of our heads without reason and, at least for me, never for the same crime twice! I learned to put my fork in my mouth if I spilt milk at the kitchen table. I *knew* you wouldn't hit me with a fork in my mouth! Mom would stick up for us kids and tell you "Don't hit them in the head, Ed! Hit them on their ass, that's why god gave them an ass!" Gee thanks mom!! We all did some dumbshit kids' stuff but that's why we were called kids! We got our butts kicked when we



did, but we always knew there was a more powerful force on this planet than any of us were and we'd better respect that. Thanks. That's one hell of a lesson. Like Bobby once said "The fear of god? Hell no, the fear of Ed" is what kept us from screwing up! Times were treacherous but good for a kid back then! We treaded thoughtfully and we ended up for the better.

Because I'm looking back on the shadows of those times and a different perspective comes to mind. (Most of) You guys had come back from Europe and the pacific, had defeated some of the most horrific evil ever, *after* dealing with *10 years* of the great depression. 19 years old getting shot at and shooting other 19 year olds. And to be able to sleep at night the rest of your lives. I wonder how much that explains about not taking shit from anybody? Including us. I would have been damaged for a long time. All you vets have my respect. Then you guys built the economy into maybe the greatest country ever. The mid 40's through the mid 60's really hummed. Houses for all. Washing machines, plastics, cars! Good wages. Cigarettes were healthy! Beth will tell you it was if you were male and caucasian. Another change in today's attitudes. You may disagree with her but she's not a dummy. Both her and Ben have good vision. That isn't what this letter is about though. You survived hard times and I think the hard times stuck in you. Your brothers and sisters too. All good people. Those times must have been pretty tough, pretty powerful to affect the way you lived the rest of your life. Profound comes to mind. I've learned hard times suck while they're happening but they're good for you in the long run. They make you more resilient, build self-esteem. A sense of self. Like when mom got sick. I learned a lot about myself then. That kind of stuff happens to *somebody else, not us*. Then it did and you deal with it. Batten down the hatches and deal with it. I figured that out from finally understanding why you were the way you were, from you. You earned everything you ever had. You may have never said the words, but you passed all that on. I don't ever remember you complaining. Ever.

A couple of decades later the 60's came along and threatened

all that accomplishment. That contentment that your generation had earned. Long-haired hippies, civil unrest, drugs on the streets, Nam, Watergate, the Nixon nonsense. Not to mention assassinations. Rev. King, Bobby Kennedy. And I was the one kid of yours that was of the right age to be part of that revolution. New ideas. A new language of life. A different way of looking at things. A changing culture. Even the music. Believe me ,NOW I know what I put you through blasting Beatles records in my bedroom! You should hear what constitutes popular music nowadays. No wonder we butted heads so often back then. You were at the back end of change and I was out front of it. It didn't help that we were both bullheads (a mom word). I'm glad now of those days.

After the fight you tossed me out and once I got out from "under your roof" we became close. Sure it took a long while. That Mark Twain saying comes to mind "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years." And I quote. But you want to know why? Because you always did right, stayed the course and passed that wisdom through to us, to your grandkids. Every one of them are good kids and smart too. And that overrides any changes the world can throw at us. Pop, I loved you more the older I got. You never, ever again brought up the fact that I had the gall to fight, to strike my own father. What's done is done. Move on. If that ain't you. Anyway later Scott said, "Dad beat Hitler, did you think *you* were going to scare him?"

I need to finish this as my ass and back is sore from sitting too long. I'm sorry for not understanding what the cultural changes in society meant to you back then. How difficult it must have been for you and your generation. My only excuse was youth. We constantly get caught up in the times of our lives. Please understand and accept my apology. But I love you more than I'm sorry.

*Thanks for the good life. It couldn't have been had I been somebody else's son. As much as life changes it still stays the same.* I think Beth is aware of it too or at least senses it dealing with young kids. Ben too. They're of that age. I'm going to

fold this up, place it in an envelope, put it in a zip lock and hand deliver it. Give mom a kiss and a hug and tell her that her Cubs finally won the world series. Catch up to you soon...

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dannie". The letter "D" is large and loops around the "a", and the "ie" is written in a fluid, connected style.

P.S. tell her my White Sox beat them to the punch! XOXO

# Join the Creative Writing Club!

An inclusive group open to writers of all genres and forms, our goal is to create a space where art can be shared and new ideas can flourish. As one of the most active clubs on campus, we meet weekly to workshop pieces, play writing games, and discuss all things related to the written word. Each year the club also hosts open mics, writing contests, write-ins, and even travels to a national writing conference.



**Questions?  
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@waubonsee.  
edu**

The Creative Writing Club has hybrid meetings **Wednesdays from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m.** in the Student Center (Student Life Office) on the Sugar Grove Campus and on Zoom: <https://waubonsee.zoom.us/j/94068124898>  
Meeting ID: 940 6812 489

Join us on Discord!





Rebecca Anderson  
Abigail Black  
Cynthia Brunswig  
Jasmine Ramona Cabrera  
Davinci Calcara  
Cecilia Carrington  
Corinne Condos  
Victoria Contreras  
Epiphany Garcia  
Jocelyn Garcia  
Carlos Gomez  
Hanna Guzman  
Payton Heiden  
Julian Heidrich  
Marla Johnstone  
Catherine Klein  
Maggie Krider



David Kurnat  
Gloria Lee  
Madolyn Miller  
Angela Munoz  
Emily Murphy  
Zach Murphy  
Ian Page  
Venessia Partida  
Brittany Raglione  
Kimberly Rakow  
Lauren Sacchi  
Ella Siblik  
Joshua Spencer  
Romi Stralka  
Trinity Vazquez