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HORIZONS

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF
WAUBONSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Horizons, this year, has been a journey of finding something new. Whether it be the first graphic narrative we have ever had, a lot of firsts for our cover design choices, and the first time taking on leadership responsibilities for some of our staff members, myself included. We were all searching for something new, something to set this year apart, and the submissions we received were just the type of innovation and perspective we were looking for.

Horizons is not only our literary magazine, but a way to uplift the many artists, writers, and musicians that truly make our college and our community shine. The works that we have received this year were stellar, and I have no doubt that many of our submissions will be the start of a fruitful journey for those who submitted them. Though not free of hardships, this magazine has allowed all of us, from submitting authors to editors, to grow, learn, and hone our literary skills. These will no doubt serve us well in any field we choose. This opportunity is not taken for granted by myself, nor my associates, and we are grateful for being appointed to our positions.

On that topic, I cannot thank my fellow *Horizons* staff members enough. From the editorial committee, who allowed us to be impartial and fair in our grading of work, to our graphic designers who have made this issue truly stand apart from those before it, to my wonderful team of managing editors who have helped me in organizing the departments of our labor, and in picking up any slack. I must also mention our faculty advisor, Dan Portincaso. Without his support and guidance, this magazine, or even the Creative Writing Club itself, would not hold the power they do now. I would also like to extend another round of gratitude to our Skyway submissions, as well as our general submissions, for giving us such wonderful material to work with. This would still be impossible without you.

This year's magazine will no doubt hold a special place in my heart. All the experimentation we did to make the magazine just right, the adventure we had to get it ready to print, the late nights to get our proofs in order, the culmination of all that hard work is now seen in the book you hold in your hands. Maybe, it will hold a place in your heart too. I wholeheartedly hope you enjoy the 25th edition of *Horizon's* literary magazine, and I cannot wait to see what our talented individuals here at Waubensee create in the coming years.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Regelbrugge

Editor-in-Chief

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BURN SPECTACULARLY

POETRY BY JORDY KOENIG

You can't remember where you came from,
Lost into yourself.

Look where you've ended up:

Strolling around a daydream.

Cause while you were losing yourself in colors behind your eyelids,
The heel of your palms pressed to your eyes,
Your toast is burning.

Kid if you don't get yourself unstuck from your daydreams soon,
The kitchen's gonna catch on fire.

Don't you care about the fact that your toast is burning and that
you're losing time?

Don't you care about the smoke filling the house and how you're
losing time?

Don't you care about yourself and how you're losing time?

A dream is making its way home,
To you.
Losing yourself again in its suspense and embrace.

This is where you belong.
Where you were meant to stay.
Lungs come to a rest in the cage where they nest.
The heat like a hug you've forgotten.

If you were going to burn,
You were going to burn spectacularly.

A MEANINGLESS STRUGGLE

FICTION BY ADEMIR AVILES

Content Warning

This story depicts war and graphic violence.

The clouds are so gray and dull that pools of blood shine more light. Muddy terrain that one wrong step in is a death trap. The battlefield is littered with ruined buildings so destroyed by bullets, explosions, and punctures that they'd be more hospitable unfinished. Scattered across are empty magazines, bullet shells, and guns left by the soon-to-be-dead soldiers, or the rotting corpses beside them dressed in a variety of green and brown military uniforms.

"Get down!" a voice screams, tackling me down.

The person who tackles me keeps my face planted on the floor as puddles of mud erupt into mini geysers. The onslaught stops, and the person spares no time yanking me out of the mud; I pass my hand across my face, wiping only some off.

Coming back to my senses, I struggle to unstick from the brown sludge. The boy gets behind me and wraps his arms under mine. He pulls me up with all his might. My legs begin to tear free.

Just as we get up an onslaught of bullets continues raining; we're able to get my feet on a proper footing. Without a second to lose we bolt to the nearest barrier. We reach a small brick wall to the left.

The lethal rain keeps coming; I look in front of me from where they're coming, but all I can see for two football fields away are muddy brown plains with sandbag piles, barbed wire, divots, and chunks of metal scattered about. Looking farther ahead in the wrecked forest, the tops of trees are scorched, some look like tumbleweeds or pit traps for giants, and many appear to have chunks bitten out of them.

We get to the bare minimum of safety; we're stuck at a

dilapidated brick wall that's on its last legs. Laced in two inch-deep cracks, with enough holes to make it look like a bee hive, glazed in mud, and for each shot, it stomachs dust, and rubble flies off.

I take a good look at my savior, the young boy with amber eyes, peachy pink skin, and a skinny build looking down and catching his breath: Mackenzie.

The rattle of the guns and shocks from explosions still continue, unwavering.

I look over. "Thanks for saving me back there, I owe you."

"What?"

"I said thanks!"

He pauses for a moment, and with an ear-to-ear smile he raises his thumb. "Don't worry about it, no problem."

It's really absurd to believe he's a soldier; death hunts him down every second, yet he's as cheery as ever. I get that he's only been in five battles so far but he's either tough as nails or a complete idiot.

We continue to hold out under the siege of fire. Stray bullets strike the wall but otherwise, this wall will do. Getting ambushed from both sides is possible considering it's easy getting around our shield but it's better than getting wasted in an instant the moment we run out.

"Hey, how long are we gonna stay cramped here?"

"Don't know."

"But ain't it better we move out and do something rather than nothing?"

"No, it's safer to hold out; there might be enemy snipers that could take us out in a second."

"Oh you're right, ok then we'll wait here for the order then."

It's unnerving, having to wait till we hear some sort of orders. Mackenzie's got the walkie strapped to him but we can't make any calls unless absolutely necessary. To kill time I look around at our surroundings. Back against the wall, I look ahead at the town

before us, the one we call a battlefield. Walls and buildings were left in shambles, barely recognizable, sandbags toppled over each other, some spilling, the barbed wire seemingly scattered about without purpose.

To think this once was a small town hidden away in the lush green southern countryside of Osozerepyos and now it's been reduced to this. Where puddles of rain, in which children played and frolicked, now have been replaced with pools of blood where soldiers pass, hoping theirs won't fill the next one. The small candy shops where parents would drag their children away from are now sanctuaries where hope remains for the building to hold

“All of this beauty was ruined and tarnished because those monsters weren't happy with what they had.”

out just a bit longer, just long enough that it doesn't collapse from the shocks onto the people taking refuge inside. The places of worship, the church and the bar, one for praying for the blessings of god and the other to worship and to pay respect towards those they lost, just before they take a shot of whatever alcohol they could scavenge,

set their cups upside down on the counter, and make their way to the outside, praying they won't have to see god just yet.

All of this beauty was ruined and tarnished because those monsters weren't happy with what they had. They saw our nation and its lands, people, joys, homes, and lives. They wanted it. But we were in the way and had to go.

None of this ever had to happen, so many men didn't need to die. This is all their fault. This war shouldn't have ever happened.

I lost track of how long this has been going on. How long has it been since it's been home? But it's long enough to see people I knew, ate with, who I trusted my back to, called my name, its been long enough to see the curtain draw on each and everyone of them. They all died meaningless deaths; their cause was naught, but their efforts were. They were sent to fight just like this, that will never have a true victor, that will never be written into any

textbook. They were sent to die for a stalemate, for a plot of land that flickers between being lost or regained like a car with a faulty blinker. They fought more for their lives than they did for victory.

How many of them had to shed their blood; I lost count of the number of times I saw grown men cry for their mothers in their final moments. I've heard it so much that it should be white noise by now but it still always stings just as much as the first. How many of us had to lie straight to the faces of our loved ones that "I'll come back soon" just after hugging them goodbye?

The silence is broken as fuzzed crackling creaks.

[Oscar 4, Papa 1, over.] A coarse voice calls out.

Mackenzie panics as his arms zip around, patting himself; his right hand reaches the holster on his right thigh, where he unclips a camo-green walkie-talkie and quickly pulls it close to his mouth. "Oscar 4, Papa 1, over!"

[Oscar 4, Where are you positioned? Info, over.]

He gulps, looking around at all sides, sweat drips down his face. "Imma at uh... um at—"

I can't bear to watch this, so I snatch the walkie and click the button. "This is Kilo 12, Kilo 12 and Oscar 4 positioned in division C16 West, over."

Mackenzie stares straight at the sky as his face turns red.

[Kilo 12, Can you see plains? Info, over.]

"Give me a second, break, over."

I'd like to look at them myself but just one peak over will leave just Oscar 4. I rest a fist against my mouth. I mentally go over the list of my current belongings but nothing is going to help me. I had to ditch the mirror I had a while ago.

"You wouldn't have a mirror on you, would you?"

He shrieks as he begins to pat himself down once again, this time reaching into every single one of his compartments. He eventually pulls out and hands me a mirror that's no bigger than half a graham cracker.

With the mirror in hand, I slowly inch closer to the wall's side,

carefully holding it in front of me. I angle it, rotating its right side slightly towards me. With that, I'm able to gaze upon the mirrored reflection of the plains I only got mere seconds to look at earlier.

In the reflection, it's still the same sloshy muck with leftovers scattered behind. I move the mirror more toward me so that I can see more of the left side of the battleground; same scene, the same scraps as before. The sheets of metal, however, don't look like they came from tanks, not a single tire track in sight. More complex shape, with no long flat surfaces that a tank would have, and pieces have flat sides that split quickly into edges, corners, and panels. Huge chunks look like they came off large mechanical insects, with legs close to those of a praying mantis. Capsule-like sections the size of an entire car with remains of rifle-like turrets mounted on both sides.

"Papa 1, Remains of nothing but RCs spotted, over."

[Kilo 12, are you sure? What models? Over.]

"I verify, 0 tanks, only RCs of mantis models. I saw enough for 14 units, over."

[Affirmative. Stay in that area, keep us informed, and keep cover, Papa 1 out.]

"Acknowledge, Kilo 12 out."

Handing back Mackenzie his walkie, he apologizes, "I'm sorry I wasn't any help. Thanks," sluggishly clipping the walkie back on.

"Don't bother apologizing. You heard the sergeant, we know our orders now so just be more informed for next time."

"Thanks, but are they really using only nothing but RCs?"

"Yeah, and considering it's those monsters, they'd absolutely be using reaping coffins, but to this extent is baffling; they really are trying to slaughter us all."

His head looks up at me "Wait, I thought RC stood for "Reaping Cloud"? That's what I was taught back at camp."

"Well you're right, but "reaping coffin" is just what we soldiers call them, "Reaping Cloud" pilotable war machines come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The shape of a man, animal, insect, fish,

or even something beyond those, it'll always take lives. We say "coffins" because no matter what, piloting one will always be like walking into a coffin. Those things are guaranteed to bring death to all who come across them, even the pilot. "

Mackenzie's eyes and mouth sunk down. "If they're that deadly, then why sacrifice so many of their troops?"

"Because the Teleophian army doesn't care about their men, they don't care how thin that armor is, they only care about how many of us they can slaughter before their soldier dies and another takes their place."

Neither of us say anything. Mackenzie pokes his finger into the ground, I rub my eyes, the gunshots can still be heard. The wrenched smell of gunpowder and smoke burns my nostrils, but otherwise this moment feels quiet.

"It's messed up that people can just do something like that."

"It's right up their alley, they're carnal savages, after all, they speak like them and act like them, haven't you heard what they do with their dead?"

He looks towards me, raising an eyebrow, his eyes widened. "No, what do they do with them?"

"I hear they pile up the corpses and once they have enough they set them ablaze. Then they proceed to dance around them, happily singing and cheering."

He pulls back, his eyes narrow. "That's horrible, burn the body then the soul can't return to god, the dead have to return back to the soil."

"Exactly, they're just devil worshippers, they don't believe in god. We aren't fighting anything human."

"Maybe all that worshipping really makes them into monsters, ya ever see one without the gas mask on? All the flyers back home show'em with teeth like a shark, pig heads, and big pointy ears."

"Is that how those boars look? I haven't seen one myself but that wouldn't surprise me. Here I was thinking they must've been

born with those masks on with how glued to them there are. I chuckle. "Honestly that just makes this easier."

His head tilts. "In what way?"

"What we're fighting isn't human. It's a lot easier to kill something that isn't human than if it is."

"Can't be that much easier, is it?"

I pause and take a moment to think of a way to explain it to him. "You said you were raised on a farm with animals right?" He nods. "Then at some point, you would've had to put them down." He agrees. "I'm sure you felt bad about putting them down, but you at least have to agree that it be easier to pull a trigger on a horse than a person like you and me." His mouth opens, revving up a response but it goes slack, his words don't come out, his eyebrows lower, giving a confused look. "Then what we're doing here is no different, we're just killing beasts, not humans."

Looking back, "I guess your right," he wearily agrees.

Time passes, and no matter how much time went by the sky refused to get any darker. Mackenzie and I take turns using the mirror to see behind us. The sergeant did call and relayed to us that reinforcements would be coming our way, but that didn't illicit anything though.

Time passes. Sometimes I take out my golden heart-shaped locket and open it. Inside of it on both sides, are pictures of the two young black girls with curly back hair, a coffee complexion, and smiles warm enough to melt iron. My two girls back home, waiting for their father to come back from the war. It only makes me want to end this sooner and go back to them. Maybe, if I'm lucky I might be able to walk them both to their first day of 2nd grade.

Soon enough to my left, I spot a group of four soldiers in the same brown uniforms as us, heavily armed, and well-equipped, their knees are just bent as they pass in an organized line through the jagged streets. They make it to the street corner. They're around 20 yards from us, luckily the remains of the building in of

them block the boars from spotting them. The one in front raises his hand, having it parallel to the side of his head, he holds out the sign to stop and waves it back and forth "Come," he signals.

I respond by making an upside-down gun sign with my right hand and pointing it in the direction of the enemy to notify the men that there's an enemy far away shooting at us.

He turns, seemingly saying something to them, and they proceed to set up and fire a mortar. They all crouch down immediately, wrapping their arms over their heads.

Mackenzie lifts himself up, maintaining a crouched position "So are we gonna be stuck here or are they telling us to run?" he perks up.

"Run!"

In an instant smoke erupted from the mortar's hole, it jumped as an ear-ringing blast simultaneously boomed. The sound of a whistle soars through the sky just before the mortar shell let out a war cry strong enough to shake the rubble off our wall and throw dirt and mud high into the gray sky.

We both clutch onto our guns as we rocket off in the soldier's direction. Each step we make is a gamble. We have to tear our feet out of the fatal clutches of this graveyard as we sink in for every step of fate we take. We're able to keep a great fast pace although Mackenzie is able keep in front of me.

I go for another dash. I find myself tugging myself forward but I don't move. Without a second thought, I flash my sight over to my feet, my left foot is a little seeped in but it's not stuck. But the right, the mud's hooked itself onto me. It won't let me go. It really wants me to die.

My rifle falls to the floor as I release a heart-wrenching screech. In a second the upper part of my left arm is overloaded with excruciating pain. I don't have to see it, I know a bullet pierced through the uniform, drilled its way past my skin, and implanted itself into me, tearing every muscle strand and blood cell in its way.

My right-hand squeezes at the wound. It hurts. It hurts so much, the pressure is incapable of helping. My uniform darkens, my dark hands are glazed over with a flush of crimson, and my blood flows down to the ground where a new puddle of blood will be formed. I'm going to die here, this is the day, at the hands of monsters who I couldn't even see.

I feel something cold and flat run down my boot, it urgently forces itself against the skin of the boot. It goes through, and a peach hand snatches me by the collar and pulls me forward. The boot won't budge, but my bare foot doesn't care as it slips out and onto the slushy cold mud. The hand continues pulling me forward, we're crossing at a pace faster than before.

We cross the remaining distance. I'm thrown into the arms of two soldiers, the person attached to the hand falls to the ground, letting out an enormous gasp for air. The soldiers squeeze at my arms, wrapping a white cloth at the wound and they rest me against a wall.

The leader approaches me as the firing stops "What in god's name are you doing? You want to die? Don't stand there, at least try to escape! I've seen men in the same situation as you, with leg wounds still try to make it out to tell the tale! You're lucky your buddy saved you." he points his thumb at the expended Mackenzie laying like a starfish, taking deep rapid deep breaths. "Reinforcements are only a few minutes away, heck you can even hear the tanks rolling this way."

He gets quieter the more he talks, getting foggier by the second, my head starts to nod like a bobblehead, and then everything turns black.

I wake up on a hard flat bed with a metal bar frame, I hear groans and grunts of pain from soldiers resting on beds like mine. Many have their arms, legs, heads, or waists bandaged up in white cloths. Getting up the pain in my arm irks me, and I got treated as well. Seems I'm in a tent, given the ceiling and walls are both made from the same smooth black tarp-like material.

From across the tent, a woman in a white gown approaches me, tells me I'm all good, and shoves me out through the entrance.

The sky's dark. In the streets, cone tents are stationed sparingly throughout, and lanterns placed on wooden crates mildly illuminate the floor, however they're mainly beside tent entrances, looking around, seems in some buildings soldiers gather around talking among themselves. Troops pass by, some taking strolls going from one tent to another, some carrying crates, food, and even arms, and others going up and down in straight routes with their rifles hugged against their chests, most likely patrollers.

“Troops pass by, some taking strolls going from one tent to another, some carrying crates, food, and even arms [...]”

The night seems as chaotic as the people, I walk around, and maybe I can find someone to explain what we're doing now. As I'm walking I realize that I still have my uniform on, the left sleeve was cut off entirely, they removed the vest, and I don't have my helmet on anymore leaving my trimmed head exposed to the chilly air. But I did get a new boot, so at least my foot is nice and toasty.

To my shock, I get a slap on the back, and I turn. Before me, with only his left side illuminated, Mackenzie, greets me “John! it's great to see ya didn't kick the bucket” he cheers.

My eyes soften at his remark, we walk closer to the light and sit on the nearby empty crates, “Gee, thanks, I almost died you know. I appreciate the enthusiasm but next time tone it down a little, say that to the wrong guy and you'll find yourself on one of those beds too.”

“Ah but you ain't dead, they nussed you back to good health, didn't they? Sure that arm don't look too great but you'll live.” He retorts.

“I'll let it slide only because you saved me, okay... But no really, thank you.” I look straight at him “You saved me two times today. When I got shot and stuck I really thought it was the end,

I could only contemplate on the pain and how I was going to die, I thought I was going to end up like the rest. You could've continued on saving yourself but you didn't. I get to live another day because of you. I owe you more than I could ever pay you back, so just know I'll never forget it."

He starts to rub his eyes a little "I got something in my eyes" he snuffles. "Don't worry about it, you woulda done the same for me. Sides I owe you a lot for always covering for me, and keeping me from getting myself killed. Momma and Poppa always told me to pay my debts before it's too late."

He really does act like a kid sometimes but it's still admirable that he refuses to lose that sunny nature of his.

"So, now what? Are we going to be stationed here for a few days?"

"Yeah, we will, everyone sides you."

"Why?" I inquire.

"Ain't it obvious that you're getting discharged?" he says bluntly. "Well at least for the time being, once that wound heals they'll probably bring you ba--"

Bells ringing cut Mackenzie off, and nearby tents combust into flames, leaving everyone inside reduced to ashes. The building bursts into fire and sends shockwaves that rock us to our feet as bricks fall on top of us.

I try to shield myself with both arms but the pain's unbearable so I only use the right. I still get hit by pebbles, they sting but nothing major. The blast brushes a storm of dust, flooding the air, and visibility gets diminished significantly. The gray dust makes it too hard to see, what doesn't help either is smoke emanating from the tents.

Screams and gunshots come around from all sides, and puddles splash as soldiers run across them. I can only see the flames burning away at the building and tents, and the shadows of people. I switch focus back to the crates. I run towards them, only to find a still-breathing Mackenzie huddled on the ground,

coughing his lungs out. I grab him by his shoulder. I can barely lift him up, but he manages to pull himself together.

From the darkness, a man's voice cries with all his might "RCs incoming!"

We look towards the left where the scream came from. There the silhouette of a demon stands above the flames of the medical tent, holding itself up with its boxy rabbit-inspired legs, connected to a flat but slender humanesque body with arms extended out like a mantis but having barrels instead of hands, and all that linked to a dome on top that's lit up in faded yellow light with lines all across it making it seem like a fly's eye.

The face of a soldier lights up from the blasts of his rifle, he howls towards the beast, his hand glued to the trigger. He walks towards it, continuing to fire. The bullets ricochet off the demon's skin. It screams with roars of its pistons, it approaches forwards, and its barrels light up. The soldier is mowed in an instant, tearing his corpse into a honeycomb.

The barrels don't stop, blindly the fire into the streets. The people running are shredded in half, and those returning fire have their chests torn open.

The demon erupts into flames, its whole body sent flying back. From the other side a tank treks forward, stopping right in front of us and it takes another shot into the darkness. I regain my composure and try to get out of there.

We're thrown against the wall only to witness it burst and collapse under the pressure of a second RC crushing it with its landing. It bends down lightly, recovering from the recoil. It gets back up and continues forwards shooting whatever it comes across. The world shakes as my body forcibly jumps into the air as two more RCs take steps, and pass by, setting ablaze to the leftovers of the first.

I'm pinned against the wall. I look down. Thankfully my legs are still attached, but after that, I notice a sheet of metal protruding from the right side of my waist. I know that means something but

for some reason, I'd rather not think about it, my vision gets blurry however unlike before when I close my eyes, a fluid runs down my cheeks and clears them up. Moving my body causes my waist to sting, so I'd rather just sit here upright.

"Ma. Ma. ckenzie" my voice cracks "you there?" It's hard to breathe. I try to breathe more but it doesn't help.

"Yeah." I gaze over to the right and spread out on the floor not moving. It is hard to see him in the darkness, his outline somewhat noticeable though, and his sobbing as well "It's cold, pretty cold."

"Hey John, when this over, what do ya think yer gonna do?"

Please don't ask that, not now.

"I'm going home, I've got a husband and kids back at home waiting for me, they're crying fountains by now I'm sure."

"Oh, well when this finishes could I stay with you for a little?"

"Odd request, but you're more than welcome. Don't you want to go back home?"

Home, why does that sound so nice? If it's so nice why does it feel like my heart is being ripped out of me every time I think about?

"Don't get me wrong, I do but..." he bawls. The sniffing, and crying gets stronger "but when I get back home. Momma and Poppa will be waiting home for me with a butt whooping of a lifetime!"

You are unmistakably a child, of all the things you're worried about that's what's got you scared?

"You can stay a day, but have to call your parents and then go home the next day."

"You don't get it, I need time to prepare, Poppa's really scary when he's angry but I'm more scared of Momma. When she's mad, she's so scary that even the devil keeps away."

"I get you're scared, but it's not like you had a choice but to serve, most of us didn't, they have no reason to be mad at you."

"I did this willingly, they were against me joining right from the start."

"I guess I can understand that. I'd be against my kids going as well. But they can't be mad at you for your own decisions, you're an adult choosing his responsibilities."

"The problem is that I left without saying a word, I shouldn't even be here!" he whimpers.

"What do you me—"

"I'm 17! I'm 17, I snuck off on one of the night buses and convinced the recruiter I was 18 with a fake ID I had a friend acquire for me."

I always considered you a kid, but who knew you actually are one.

"You pea-brained country bumpkin. Of all things ,why'd you that?"

"I'm sorry, I just... I saw they needed troops on the news, papers, and the radio they all said we were getting pushed back, and that they needed more troops. I thought if the Teleophians kept pushing then my folks would probably be in danger too. I just wanted to protect them. I didn't wanna lose em to a buncha of monsters... John if I die, you'll tell my parents sorry for me right!, I live a—!"

"No!"

"But!"

"I'm not apologizing nor am I getting a bearing in your place, you'll pull... so you say it to them. I'm sure that after the doctor tells you the damages to your rear, your parents are going give you the warmest welcome home of a lifetime." I feel my heart tearing itself in two from saying those words

I know lying is a sin. I couldn't care less. I'll take the consequence with open arms. It's the only thing I can do to make him feel any warmer. Besides him is a puddle reflecting the light from the flames, it continues to get bigger with no signs of stopping.

"You know, you're a good kid, you've got the heart of a lion with the loyalty of a wolf, if my kids grow up to be just like you,

then I really wouldn't mind that."

"Ohh"

He stops responding. He's gone dead quiet, seems like he's getting some rest, he was one step ahead of me I was just about to tell him to. I look down at the wound, it's oozing in red and everything below is stained in it, the stinging transformed into torturous, mind-breaking, 10-inch deep knife twisting agony. I would scream, but it seems I don't have the energy to. As I look back up to the remains of the burning tank, I feel sleepy. I don't want to. I've done nothing. I've accomplished nothing, and if I go to sleep now then I'll fade into nothing.

My eyes slip, and everything fades darker, I want to pull out the locket one more time but can't. To die to a group that can't even be called people is a tragedy, a real tragedy.

I'm sorry girls.

A RUNNER'S ANXIETY

NON-FICTION BY PAYTON HEIDEN

My heart pounded in sync with my shoes hitting the ground. One, two, one, two. One breath in, one breath out. This is what I've been preparing all season for, but yet I still feel so unready. It was probably a normal feeling for all runners, but for me it always hit different.

No matter how much I run, no matter how fast I go, I still don't feel like I'm good enough. I'd run so many races, run for so many years, and yet the feeling always seemed to creep up on me every race. There was always that fear of disappointment, the fear of being judged. You're going too slow. You're a failure. Your teammates are going to hate you. Your coaches are disappointed in you. Your family doesn't think you're good enough. My breath had picked up to match my whirlwind of thoughts. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't breathe! There are people up ahead and they are going to see you and they are going to laugh at you. She's a runner? What a joke! She looks fit, she should be way faster than she is. My eyes darted over the people one by one. Just because they weren't looking at me didn't mean they weren't judging me. I was at the back of the race as per usual. They were definitely thinking I was slow. Why was I even here? I should just give up right now. I should just walk off the course and be done. I shouldn't be here, I don't belong here. I'm not strong enough for this.

No. You're stronger than you think. You see everyone else in this race? Chances are they're not doing the same thing you're doing right now. You're doing something that you know is making you anxious, but you're doing it anyway because you love it. You challenge yourself every single time you step up to that starting line and do something that scares you a little. You fight your fears because you know that if you can do this day by day, then you can do anything that scares you. So your teammates might

hate you? Who cares? This sport is more individual than it is team-related. You're scared of your coaches being disappointed? They've already told you that they understand your situation. You think your family doesn't think you're good enough and yet they're here every race they can be to support you. They might think you're a little slow but they're always there to cheer you on and see you do your best. Your boyfriend tells you after every race that he's proud of you and even if you're not happy with how you did, he tells you that you'll kill it next time. And everyone else in the crowd? They're irrelevant to you. So what if they judge? They aren't the ones running this race. They aren't even there for you. The only people whose opinions matter came because they want to support you even if they know what might happen when you reach that finish line. And even then, their opinions aren't the most important. Your opinion of yourself is.

I worked to get my breathing back in check and lower my heart rate from its fast pace. I could do this. Everyone's pace was different and this was mine. I may be built for sprinting, but here I was running a distance race because it was something I loved despite the anxieties and the puking. One foot, two foot, one foot, two foot. One breath in, one breath out. Your anxiety may be high, but you've got this. You just have to push through like you always do. I might not get my fastest time ever, but that wasn't the most impressive thing to me. Winning the inner fight and getting through this outer fight because of it would always be what I was most proud of.

There was one more turn and then the final stretch. There were always so many people surrounding the finish line to see the exciting finishes. How you finish is up to you. You may be dying and tired inside, but do you have enough in you to pick it up and finish this race? Will you lose the inner battle and throw up before you pass that line? Faces began to blur as I ran by them, but my pace wasn't increasing. There was one person ahead of me that was reachable if I sprinted. Did I have enough in me to catch them?

Screw it. Who cares if I throw up after the race?

My strides got longer as I went faster. One foot, two foot, one foot, two foot. Remember to breathe as you sprint. You're catching up to them, keep this up. The faces got even blurrier and I stopped hearing all the screaming of the people around me. The only things I saw were the jersey of the girl in front of me and the finish line. The sickness in my stomach was rising up my throat, but I did my best to ignore it. I couldn't do it, not now. You're almost there... got her! Now you've just got to get to that finish. I did my best to make sure my strides didn't slow as one foot and then the rest of my body passed the strip on the ground. The workers for the race ushered me along as more runners finished the race. Looking at the smiles on the faces of my family, I couldn't help but smile through the deep breaths and sweat.

I did it.

I won the battle.

SUBURBAN WITCHCRAFT

POETRY BY JAEDEN BAEZ

The sun recites a glittering incantation on a daily basis
using powerful spells to mold the morning mist
creating mental illusions with a glance

The trees watched the fiery sage breathe life into a metal husk
the cloth seats donning consciousness
the air inside crackling with revived memory

The leaves sing their prayers to the rhythm of the breeze
the coyotes end their shift concealing the town's aura

As the suburban sun sets, the wind whispers my conscience out
of my body
my dog pulls my form away from me
my senses grant me awareness of the nuclear buzzing of families
and the stranded victims of the malicious residence

JIM IN COLOR
ARTWORK BY CARLOS MARTINZ



24 x 18 in.
Pastel on Paper

MARTINZ 31

A DRAGON'S JOURNEY HOME

ARTWORK BY MADDIE RIZZUTO



60 x 72 x 1/4 in.
Acrylic/Mixed Media

TOXIC
ARTWORK BY WYLDER SCHEFFLER



17.75 x 24 in.
Oil on Canvas

SCHEFFLER 33

DYSFUNCTIONAL ALARM CLOCK
ARTWORK BY JUNO OVERTON



10.5 x 6.75 x 3.5 in.
Mixed Media

34 HORIZONS

THE CARNIVAL CHILD

FICTION BY CARSON BUSBY

I follow the freckled, red-haired child through the crowd of beautiful figures, styled, pierced, and tattooed, all in their summer night attire. Her unusually delicate hand intertwined in mine as she led me on. The scent of fresh-baked funnel cake, hotdogs, and popcorn fills the air from all directions, keeping my head on a swivel. The child's piercing emerald green eyes glance back over her shoulder to make sure I, the stranger, am still following her as promised. The shudder of cogwheels turning, twisting, and rolling gradually becomes louder as rides come alive alongside me. Glass bottles clink in the distance as rings loop around their necks, and another winner is declared. The luminescent colors of the strobe lights lining the carousel make the fair-skinned child shine brighter in the dark surroundings.

We trample along the faded grass on the way to who knows where. Suddenly, Little Red breaks from my grasp and bounds cheerfully into the night, giggling wildly with excitement. Her strides elongate as she runs faster into what I think is the uncertainty of darkness. With the smells and lights faint behind me, she enthusiastically halts at a splintery dark oak door at the edge of the festival. The door stands as the gateway of a small worn-down shack, no more than seven feet tall, four wide, and four deep. And though impossible-seeming, the shed was not present just moments prior. The girl's flashing eyes flicker from me to the frail, mysterious hut and back again. She flings the door open and golden beams tear through the abyss of darkness as if her treasure lay beyond the doorway. Slipping inside with a lasting smile, the child is swallowed whole by the portal.

Approaching the building further, the voices of the carnival seem to fade even more as the carnival's fragrances dissipate in the air along with them. I open the door with excitement, hoping to see the wonders that the unusual child saw. In the dim light, I make out the dangling ceiling lamp swaying left and right,

flickering before it sizzles on and blinds me. The wooden walls of the shack instantly fade away, replaced by nature's beauty. What a sight to behold.

Looming before the land, mighty oaks stand tall, swaying in the wind. Nearby silverfish swim freely in the clear blue stream. Flowers of every color imaginable are strewn about the land, creating a picturesque landscape. So engulfed in the land's attraction, I don't notice as the doorway behind me shrinks slowly, withdrawing me from the world before. The red-haired lass is seen on the other side of the brook, frolicking in faded lavender flowers in the middle of the prairie. The warmth of midday sunshine hits my shoulders, reminding me of summertime as a kid. A strange *deja vu* hits me, but I rub it off as I rush out to meet the child who's taken me to this Heaven. She takes my hand and twirls me with ease. I dance familiarly with her under the big blue sky, which houses cotton candy-like clouds and majestically colored birds. Though my dancing partner led me to this unknown place randomly, I feel comfortable in the universe of sun and nature, and in the company of this stranger.

When at last, I see the flowered prairie for what it really was. I pinpoint where the colorful carousel took the place of the stream, and the towering trees became the Tilt-O-Whirl ride. Where the lush grass was turned to gravel and the vibrant yellow, orange, and violet flowers became crushed beneath the soles of thousands of families visiting the carnival every year.

Before I know it, I recognize the stranger before me. From the way the freckles spotted up her neck and ended at the cheeks, to the star-shaped birthmark on her forearm. And how her nose lay softly between the unmistakable green eyes. There I stand, dancing in a field with my younger self.

STAR BREAD

POETRY BY LYDIA QUATTROCHI

Clots of yeast droplets
awaken in warm water
just as the skirts of
black space
sprinkle the shyness
of stars.

Sharpened by rain
white as rice
swaying like so many
windy fields in summer—
I hunger to eat
the stars.

If I could
I would let the stars expand
beneath a soft towel in a bowl
knead the stars
with the fragile flour
of my fists
and bake for you
a loaf of
star bread.

I hunger
and there are so

few stars
to find my way
bellies still swell
and we still crawl
on the ground.

Had I the bread of stars
I would spread your table
with thick slices
butter and milk
we would stuff our cheeks
and empty the sky.

So high above us
the table of constellations
Andromeda still twirls
a baby bear beside
his dipper still smiles.

I will spread
my words in songs
on your table
and become my
own constellation
I will feast on
my endless
hunger and
longing.

THE LINE

POETRY BY DARIAN HOLDA

The Line I spy at the end of the sky,
The Line at the end of the sea.
The Line in the sky that caught my eye,
The Line is everything I want to be.

But the Line is fleeting, always reaching but never meeting,
More impossible to cross with every defeat.
The repeating competing for a goal with no completing,
Reaching the Line would be bittersweet.

The things we've lost on the way to the Line,
The lives that will never be the same.
Will it be worth the cost and all of the time,
We lost ourselves to play the game.

You crossed the wrong lines, your world was darkened.
You paid a price for the souls you bargained.
Burdened by the six feet of dirt on your chest as it hardened.
But for your transgressions I hope you'll be pardoned.

You never had a chance, condemned from birth.
Unable to make them see your true worth.
You tried to fight against your circumstance,
But now all you do is lie beneath the earth.

You made your choice, we can learn from your mistakes.
You lost yourself as you tried to raise the stakes.
I know if I could believe in myself I can cross the Line as
planned,
If only I had believed in us we would have crossed the Line
together, hand in hand.

But unlike you, I can continue.
I will, I must.
For you.
For us.

RATE YOUR EXPERIENCE

FICTION BY BOW MITCHELL

Content Warning

This story depicts suicide and suicidal themes.

Everything went black. That's how they always describe it in the media. One moment you're alive and then the next ... boom you're gone. Fade to black. Well, from experience it's more of a fade to white. I really wasn't expecting much. I had never been the religious type, and I had already resigned myself to nonexistent when I jumped. But the moment I hit the ground it wasn't the cessation of existence that I was expecting but a sudden dull throbbing and a white light. I was in a room, an office judging from the off-white walls, fluorescent lights, the heavy looking wooden desk which took up the space in front of me. The low buzz of the lights was cut through only by the sound of pen on paper. A man... woman... person? sat across from me. I couldn't quite make out their face. It hurt to try and piece together, like trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle in my head. What I could make out of them was their clothing. Somewhere between a business suit and a robe whose white cloth obscured most of their form save for their head and hands. Most of their lower body was obscured by the desk between us. It took a moment for me to collect my thoughts as my eyes darted around the room and my heart beat rapidly as I settled into my current situation. The person in front of me continued looking down at a stack of papers disregarding my presence as they set about filling out what looked like legal forms. It could have been anywhere from a few seconds to an hour before I called out to the individual.

"Where am I?" No response.

"Who are you?" Then a more pressing question surges forward in my mind.

"Am I dead?"

"Yes," the individual responded curtly without stopping their work.

"Is this heaven?"

"No."

"Then this is hell."

"Also no."

"Then where the fuck am I?!" I bit back, becoming irritated by their disregard of my presence. Their eyes angled towards me, their head still angled towards their work. It seemed I at least got their attention. They relaxed somewhat back into their chair focusing their eyes on me, their arms resting on the desk with fingers steepled together.

"Welcome to The After. I'm sure you have many questions; but first we must cover a few matters... it's all just standard procedure," they stated matter of factly. I was still irritated by the way they were talking, but at least now we were getting somewhere.

"First, just to confirm, state your name, date of birth and age at death." I mumbled back my response as they checked it against some forms they were looking at.

"Thank you. Now I would like to ask you a simple question." I nodded for them to continue.

"On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your experience?" What? I stared at them for a moment, not quite understanding the question.

"Rate my what?"

"Your experience of life. I need you to rate your experience on a scale of one to ten." As the reality of what I was just asked started to settle in, I could feel irritation welling up in my stomach. What kind of question is that? I couldn't believe they were seriously asking me to fucking rate my entire life, let alone on a scale of one to ten.

"As the reality of what I was just asked started to settle in, I could feel irritation welling up in my stomach."

"You ARE aware of how I died."

"Yes."

"Then what do YOU think I'd rate my fucking life!?" I yelled back at them, lurching out of my chair. Their expression never changed, at least what expression I could make out from their confusing face. Their eyes simply followed my ascent from the chair.

"It is simply standard procedure." Nothing. There was nothing in their voice. I would call it disinterest, but I couldn't even read that from their tone. Their words felt so rehearsed like they'd heard this question a thousand times and expected to hear it a thousand more.

"Could you please sit down now so we can continue with the procedures? If you cooperate they won't take long." I stared down at them as their eyes drifted back down as if motioning me to sit. The fury I could feel on my face just moments before quickly drained away. I felt so tired. Was this really what the afterlife had in store for me? What it had in store for everyone? I chuckled lightly, a broken noise. It sounded more like something deflating. I sat back into my chair now locking eyes with the person before me. Sitting there a moment in silence, I could tell they were just waiting for my response.

"I asked you before if this is heaven or hell."

"Neither."

"No," I cut them off. "This. This IS hell." There was a moment of silence before an almost imperceptible noise broke through. Was that a laugh? Are they smiling?

"Now I think that is enough questions for now. You will have plenty of time to ask more later. If you could please answer the question, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your experience?"

**** If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please call or text the National Suicide Prevention Hotline by dialing 988 ****

FLOATING CARGO

(DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T)

POETRY BY JUN GARCIA

Content Warning

This poem depicts incidents of racism.

someone once took thirty seconds out of their day to stop,
bow with folded hands at a perfect 90 degree angle,
and say, "kon-nichi wa."
what's funny is how they only took one glance at me
and decided i was japanese

people only see surface-deep;
they wouldn't know, that
beneath the skin, my blood holds history,
that my family is from the philippines archipelago.

thousand islands, they call it.
thousands of people in my bloodline,
the first generation on a boat to america,
slowly losing touch with their culture
as they grow older

as the children of immigrants,
my cousins and i are still losing our cultural roots,
as if bleaching our own blood until it's white.

any leftover red will drip from our relatives' noses
(kasi pagsasalita akong mag tagalog)
as we forget the native tongue.

it doesn't matter if nakakaintindi ako, pero kaunti lang
even though natuto akong mag tagalog

it doesn't help that we hold different beliefs than our elders;
it is disrespectful,
and because disrespect is always met with consequences,
we get scolded for drifting
as if we are cargo in a shipwreck,
confined to the ninety degree corner in a closed, cramped crate;
and we're lucky if they don't babak us with the nearest object.
and let me tell you:
none of us are strangers to discipline

and i still have yet to mention: the importance of assimilation

from the moment we set foot into a school setting,
we are named a range of slurs, derogatory terms,
called chinky, ostracized because of our eyes,
to which our own teachers turned a blind eye,
but that's a story for another time

peers mocked us with "ching-chong"

and in the sandbox, they joked about digging to another country
(they told me, "dig back to china"),
(i'm not chinese)
the most creative one, when a kid said,
"ship yourself back to china in a box."

could you imagine the shock when they receive this export?

not even the pacific islands would claim the box, due to the
appearance of its contents.

they only see the 10% above the current,
where holes punched in the wood reveal
the yellow skin of bananas, or eyes shaped like almonds.

supposedly, we can choose our cultural identity; the harsh
reality:

waves shove us left and right; we're constantly shut down,
told to shut up, never make a sound, even if we were to sink

like trees, our cultural roots are a place most of us have never
seen,

but our bodies are imports of handpicked bananas and crates of
coconuts.

we can try all we want to find a home in either place, but there's
always a catch;

we'll never be let out of our crates if we wash up the shore of an
asian country;
or we settle on america's soil, which will take us in, at the cost of
our culture—

if we even had one to begin with.

UNTITLED

POETRY BY KEVIN BLOCKER

Content Warning

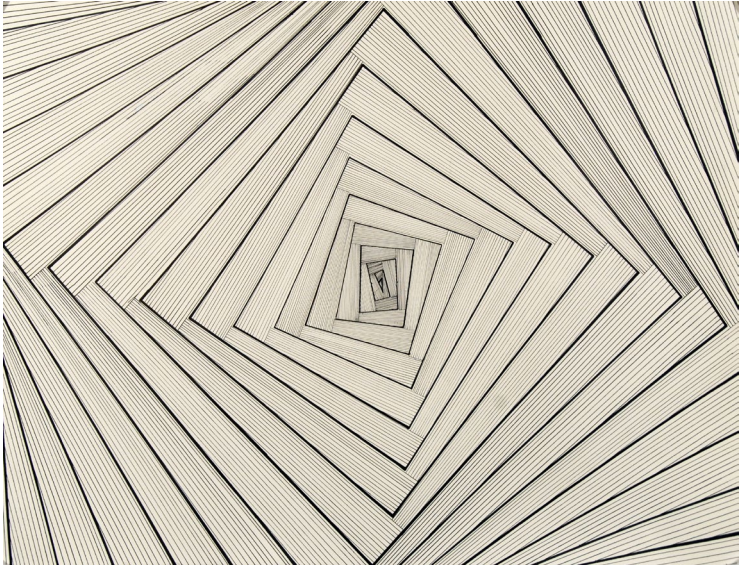
This poem contains suicidal ideation.

Fleeting thought of suicide
Who would care if I died?
No one here would shed a tear.
For only a stranger am I.
Then came to mind
My love, so kind
The care that's shown in her eyes
So here I stay.
The thought, now away.
Never wanting to die.

**** If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please call or text the National Suicide Prevention Hotline by dialing 988 ****

THE LINED VOID

ARTWORK BY NEDIA BAJLOZI



18 x 24 in.
Ink on Canvas

BAJLOZI 49

YEARNING

GRAPHIC NARRATIVE BY WYLDER SCHEFFLER





WALKIES

ARTWORK BY SARAH REAVES



16 x 9 in.
Ceramic and Wood

52 HORIZONS

FORSAKEN DEATH

POETRY BY LIZETTE VALDOVINOS

Content Warning

This poem contains graphic depictions of death.

Denial

I walked into a nightmare.
My mother was sprawled with her organs obliterated
The monster munched and devoured
Our food is confiscated
All I could do was cower
Reached for my brother's baseball bat
With my eyes shut I swung
And swung until it was no more
The house was silent
I don't want to see more gore

Anger

I went up to my sibling's room
My sister was in the corner
Shuddering and crying
Pigtails covered her delicate face
I gave her a tight hug and asked where is her brother
She pointed to the wooden closet door
Death had bit him in the shoulder

I escorted Loretta outside of the room and wiped her tears
He is NOT going to be one of them
I whispered an apology in his ear and carried him
I explain we are going to leave in my car and to pack up

Bargaining

I set him against the backseat and took out my first aid kit from
my trunk
Life was leaving and death slowly started to consume him
No, no, please
I yanked the sweater off my waist and put pressure on his wound
Am I going to die? He asked
No, you're going to be fine. I just need more time.
I asked what happened
Monster attacked Tommy and me.
Mom put Tommy in the closet.
Mom was fighting the monster.
She continued
Mommy was screaming,
I cried and she told me to hide.
I got scared.
Where did it hurt you?
She showed her wrist.

Depression

...Reina, is that you?

I drove for it seemed like ages

I adjusted my mirror and my brother blinked

His breathing was slow

Loretta was asleep beside him

Yeah, it's me.

Everything hurts...Everything hurts...

I'm sorry. Every hospital is full.

There's another one in a few miles

He nodded in relief

I began to call everyone on my phone but to no avail

On my field of view I see a man in a sweater limping, waving for help

I can't risk it. I promised. It could be a trap.

I was right.

As I took a left turn,

He ran and took out a gun and another car started chasing behind me

Bullets sprinkled my car and I pushed the gas until I didn't see the car

I pulled into a forest preserve

The only way I could tell it was Loretta was her pig tails

Soaked and sopped in blood

And her purple coat with fuzzy cat ears

Her shoes were lavender, as soft as her voice when she sang her favorite song

“Three Little Birds” by Bob Marley

Pieces of her scattered across the back seat

For Tommy, his face was no more.

his Minecraft watch stopped at 3:18 pm

At four o'clock, he would have had his favorite snack: goldfish and grapes

His hands, in which he used to color and paint masterpieces

I'd hang on my fridge after every visit

Now stained in burgundy

The car reeked of death.

I looked at myself and saw a wound on my side.

I don't have much time left.

Acceptance

My head was hot

Time is not on my side

I am crass

Who knows how much time I have?

In myself I confide

I found a forest, calm and serene

Its leaves sing with ease with the majesty of the trees

I carried Loretta, my wound spilled and oozed

Speckles of sunlight peeked through

I placed her down
And clutched her hands together
Pulled her coat over her crown
And said I'll remember you forever.

I went back for Tommy
For a moment I hoped he was awake
But I understood,
as my blood coated and my vision began to fade
I held him close and gave him a kiss
And set him beside her
Hopelessly wishing he is at peace

Out of my trunk I grabbed two blankets
Covered their faces
I made their graves
So they won't be nameless
I wrote with pen and paper
I scattered the graves with moss, leaves and colorful flowers

"Loretta and Tommy.
Life took you too soon. She is the sun and he is the moon. Our
memories will be the stars across the sky above our forsaken
doom."

AND THEN, “TERROR MADE ME CRUEL”

FICTION BY EMMA HARVEY

Awarded Second Place in Fiction at the
2022 Skyway Writer’s Festival

I stood washing the dishes as I watched my child. My strange child. I stood washing the dishes as I watched the petite girl with the curly dark hair in ribbons. My jeans were growing damp with the splashes. My fingers had long gone pruney in the icy soup of suds and disintegrating remains of dinner. I scrubbed the prickly sponge against the plate.

I stood watching my strange child as she lay on her stomach in the living room. Her pink tights clashed with the green and purple floral dress she wore. My stomach churned as my strange child appeared to be nothing more than a vomit stain upon my white carpet. I scrubbed the sponge against the plate.

“Mama?” My strange child tore her eyes away from the textbook that lay before her, like an offering made before an angry god. Her eyes fixed on me. Her eyes, one green and one gray were fixed on me. I squirmed like a schoolchild under the gaze of my odd daughter. “What is it you want most in the world?” I scrubbed the plate.

“Why do you ask, darling?” I smiled down at the dishes, my knuckles were cracked and once they dried, they’d surely bleed. I wondered for a moment if it was possible for my strange child to bleed.

“I don’t know.” My strange child focused her attention back on her textbook. I wanted to laugh...or cry. She was only born four years ago! She was born four years ago and entertained herself by reading my old college textbooks! I scrubbed. “Mama? Aren’t you finished with the dishes yet?” I swallowed the sudden urge to drain the sink and run.

"Almost, darling." I stood, washing the dishes and watching my strange child absorb the history of the scientific method. I finally freed the plate from the imprisonment of my grip.

"I think I know what you want most in the world." I swallowed my breath, taking the ratted and foul-smelling kitchen towel in my hands.

"What is that, darling?" It scraped at my raw skin as I dried my hands.

"You want Dad to can come back." I bit my lip, wringing the towel that scraped at my raw skin as if it were an open throat. Turning her green and gray eyes up to me, my strange daughter stared at me. I froze as I always did when she looked at me this way. It was as if I had become a lab rat under her scrutiny. I suppressed the urge to cover my chest with my hands- she made me feel so bare.

"Now, Cassidy. What have I told you about looking at people like that?" I chastised, wringing the towel that scraped my skin so.

"You talk to him when you look at his picture and you stare at the door when you watch the news. But they don't know where he is." Her small eyebrows pinched together. "Do you think that they got him?"

"Cassidy!" I scolded, whipping the hand towel onto the counter. "I've told you to stop reading people like that. It's not funny and it's not okay!" I shouted; my throat burned with a barricade of unshed tears. My strange child seemed to shrivel back into herself, eyes wide as the sippy cups I'd cleaned over an hour ago. "Your father is going to come back. He's very strong and very brave and when the fighting is done, he'll come back. I don't ever want to hear you say otherwise again!" I stood, watching my strange child through glassy eyes. Her red-ribbon lips quivered as her face contorted into a grotesque sob.

"Mama." She whined, sounding exactly like a balloon popped that squealed its last as the air fled from it. Laying over my

textbook, my strange child began to weep. "Why would Daddy leave?!" She wailed. "I want Daddy!" Hidden behind the curtain of her dark locks, she repeated the dreadful cry. Over and over and over again she repeated it.

Finally, I had no more resolve in me for my little Cassidy. I stepped across the squishy carpet to kneel down beside her. Pulling her into my lap, I threaded my fingers through Cassidy's hair. "Daddy will be back soon." I soothed, remembering the way her father used to comfort me in the months after I had her. For weeks and weeks after Cassidy was born, I lost all will to live. Nothing could bring me back- not a smile from my strange infant, a kiss from my husband, nor a sunny day. It seemed as though life had lost its glamor. Yet, my husband's embraces became vows that he would take care of everything and fix it all. And he always did, though I cannot say he didn't complain.

"Yet, my husband's embraces became vows that he would take care of everything and fix it all."

After far too long, my strange child quieted and began to fiddle with the hem of my T-shirt. I watched her, small worm-like fingers twisting and tapping against my stomach. I sat, watching her until I was sure it would drive me insane. I pulled my daughter off my lap and stood, straightening my back. "Why don't you go play in your room, my darling? Play with your music."

The little girl with the red-rimmed eyes nodded and I watched her as she scurried up the stairs. Sighing, I picked up my textbook from the carpet. I stared at the volume. "She's only four!" I spat. "She can't even lift it." My attention was drawn to the door as a knock echoed through my house.

My eyes found my watch- it was shortly after seven. Amanda was late. I tried to hide my irritation as I opened the door to greet my friend. "Hi, Carmen!" She beamed. "Good evening." My fingers clenched on the doorknob still.

"Sorry if I'm a bit late but I have everything." I stepped aside,

fingers sticky against the doorknob, to allow Amanda in. The stench of her vanilla-scented lotion flooded my home. The large grocery bags balanced precariously in her arms and I watched as my friend wobbled to the kitchen table. I turned my head to the stairs at the sounds of violin music. I was glad Cassidy was upstairs.

Amanda brought all the bags to the table and I watched her as she did- her red ponytail swishing like a pendulum wailing "tick-tock," as she traveled back and forth: "tick-tock," Her motion was out of rhythm with the music; music that my strange child forced from a violin that used to be mine, a miniature violin that I hadn't even handled until I was double her age! That was after my parents' divorce: when my father hardly even remembered to pay child support and my mother was far too engrossed in her romantic pursuits to care for the needs of her own child. Amanda's ponytail continued to swing in dissonance and I wanted to rip it out.

She approached me. Her arms crossed casually across her chest and my palm felt moist against the doorknob. "Carmen?" She began. Her eyes trailed upstairs for a brief moment as if she was worried my strange child might overhear us. "Did you take Cassidy to the library yesterday like I suggested?" I clenched my jaw in irritation. Amanda was always doing this telling me what to do. She didn't understand my strange child as I do. She didn't understand how hard it would be for me to bring her outside. To have to face all those perfect women with their lovely children who were innocent and stupid, the thought sickened me. I simply couldn't watch them in their normal and perfect lives with the normal and perfect children I was denied.

"She wasn't behaving yesterday." I wanted to slam the door in Amanda's face. I wanted her out of my house now. Amanda's lips puckered sourly and I swallowed the urge to slap that look off her face. The violin music sliced through the air with the violence of the blow I didn't strike.

"She might have been bored. Any child would be after being locked up here for almost three years. Especially one as bright as Cassidy."

"How much for today?" I smiled, feeling very much like a leopard baring its teeth. I wanted her out.

"Two hundred." Amanda sighed, shoulders heaving as if she were sobbing. The violin music that echoed through the house sobbed for her. Briskly, I took the box of cash from its place atop the cabinets. I wafted through the bills with the delicacy of a cat toying with a dead mouse. "Have you heard anything about Afghanistan?" I bit my lip, the violin shrieking in a shrill vibrato from upstairs. I could have danced my fingers through the feather-soft bills for hours pretending the perfectly performed melody was mine but ripped out the two hundred-dollar bills with all the finality of a pulled trigger. I didn't want to talk about my husband in Afghanistan and I didn't want Amanda thinking about my husband in Afghanistan.

"Here. What you came for." I spat, shoving the bills in Amanda's face. Her eyes widened as if I had hurt her. The expression reminded me so much of my strange child that all I wanted was to remove this intruder from my presence. Luckily, Amanda wasn't too dull and shuffled to the door- taking her cloud of vanilla-scented lotion with her.

The violin music rumbled through the house with the ravaging

"The violin music rumbled through the house with the ravaging hunger of a ravenous predator."

hunger of a ravenous predator. It trembled and groaned, crying like wounded prey before ricocheting back to create a duet of violence- a struggle for power as if the piece was a duel between two different violinists instead of the result of the focus of a child. A child! I shook my head before checking to make sure the door was locked.

I floated to my stairs, curiously drawn to the music. Or perhaps I was drawn to my strange child. Perhaps I wanted to hear better or

perhaps I wanted to make her stop. My wandering eyes landed on the computer in the next room- my strange child's office. Imagine it, a child not even four feet tall with an office! Creeping closer as silent as a viper, I leaned in the doorway.

My husband's abomination, it was an unnatural sight! The scribbled stick-figure drawings characteristic of every child littered the gray carpet among answered algebraic calculations I hadn't been able to complete until high school. Scientific beakers sat next to a pink iCarly purse. Shakespeare rested amongst bouncy balls. A dollhouse proudly stood beside the piano bearing Mozart on its chest. I smiled, thinking I might vomit.

Even as an infant, my strange child understood things no child should yet comprehend. Though she didn't walk until months after her first birthday, my child recognized faces, shapes, objects, and colors with fluency before she was even 6 months old. She spoke before she walked. She spoke in complete sentences. Imagine it: this tiny thing crawled up to me and calmly explained in that misshapen way toddlers communicate with, that "I want more water please." She constantly pointed out everything in sight asking, "What's that?" "Who's that?" "What's this?" Her enthusiasm made my heavy head pound. My husband took care of her in those days: when she was young and I had such blues that I couldn't arise. He always took care of us both.

The violin screeched upstairs as it continued its war of good and evil. This weeping music awoke a gory battle in my chest and I decided I wanted to make her stop. My strange child was trying to kill me, I was certain of it. I stepped onto the stairs, watching my wrinkled fingers, still saturated from the sink's soapy soup, slide across the railing like Eden's serpent.

The door was open and I stood, unnoticed as a sniper as my strange child continued her melody. It was wretched and yet beautiful in a sickening way to observe her brilliance. My palms were sticky. Her stubby arms made dramatic swoops in her efforts to swing the shrunken bow to the correct positions.

My child's back was turned as I stood in the doorway, palms sticky. "Darling." I had meant to call but my voice only squeaked. Remarkably the odd little person heard me. She turned, eyes wide in anticipation though her red-ribbon mouth was turned down as if she had a reason to be angry with me. I felt suddenly cornered and checked the door was open over my shoulder. It was, of course. Feeling foolish, I straightened my spine, looking down my nose at the small thing. "I would like for you to stop playing now," I stated, firm and calm as a mother should be. The thin eyebrows of my strange child lowered like blinds over a window- covering the violently joyous light.

"No." My stomach sank into my shoes and my skin burned as if I were submerged in angry hot waters. Her wide eyes were on me. Her eyes were watching me and I was overcome by a feeling that I felt whenever the news was on or when I stepped outside and was accosted by the sickening activity of life. I clenched my sticky fists, crossing my arms underneath the wild beating inside my chest.

"Darling," I warned, feeling very much like any warning should've been directed at me pinned under her sharp gaze as I was. The round cheeks, pink as if she'd been struck, puckered her lips into a distasteful angry expression. Those eyes continued to stare into me- those cursed mismatched eyes resembling marbles sewn into the skull of a dead stuffed toy. Those eyes were daggers that slashed the skin from my bones and my mouth felt dry as it does after a long night of snoring. I could feel every beat of my fluttering heart and every gush of blood forced through my veins.

"No, Mama," Those eyes filled with tears. Those rag-doll eyes shone but continued to puncture my very soul, like headlights that skewer the night's shadows. My heart thundered, a drum locked inside my chest, and I stared at my strange child. Certainly, with an odd expression on my heated face, I watched my strange child.

"No?" I all but whispered. My hands trembled in their fists

reflecting the tremors between my lungs. She just stood there. My strange child just stood there so I struck. Akin to a viper, I lashed out to my violin, swiping it away with the ease of a skilled thief. Words erupted from my lips in quakes. "Cassidy, you will listen to me! You are my child and you will always obey me! You may think you're smart, my strange child, but everyone will hate you for it!" Hot tears began to slip down my cheeks, blurring my vision as if I viewed the world through a shattered mirror. A foul taste flooded my mouth, burning like the adrenaline that coursed under my skin- there were hordes of fire ants under my skin! "Why can't you just stop ruining my life and be normal?!"

Inside my chest, underneath my flesh, upon my face- all I felt were the waves of fire ants! I opened my eyes, not realizing they had been closed and saw my child. She had stepped away from me, just out of reach. Her eyes were wide and frightened, her little mouth open as if she were being strangled. Boiling tears continued to stream down my cheeks without permission. I leaned my head against the doorway, hiding my face from view- hiding from the horrible thing I knew I had done. But perhaps it needed to be done. No one could expect me to live like this and my husband wasn't even there to care for me! I heaved, choking on oxygen like a netted fish, as I sobbed. I sobbed in shame, anger, and terror. "Oh God, what have I done?"

"Mama?" My strange child's voice was hardly audible, perhaps she'd called me a few times before I heard. I would not have known- her voice was as faded and vague as Amanda's wretched aroma which still lingered within the air. I allowed my eyes to slide closed.

"What?" I moaned, the cry of a ghost. For that's what I was, I was a ghost by every sense of the word. And what did that make my strange child? What did that make this grotesquely brilliant spawn? My throat ached as if a knife had been jabbed through it, my tears were the blood that poured from such a wound.

"I know what you want most." A heavy breath slid through my mouth, washing away the pain clenching my gut. I faced the girl. Her face remained wet though any signs of distress had been wiped clean. Her peculiar mismatched eyes were empty as a field after a fire and her wide gape had been replaced by a clenched jaw. The low set of her eyebrows did not belong to a child but someone much older, someone much more ruined. It was as if in my momentary carelessness my strange child had caught up to the years displayed by her intellectual prowess; as if my words had the power to remake.

"And what is that, darling?" I whispered. Oh, how my hands were shaking!

"You don't want me." The breath was ripped from my lungs. Though her face had turned to stone, my daughter's gasps betrayed her sobs. My mouth was dry and I fantasized about how it would feel to drown. My lips trembled. Sliding down the doorway, all I could think of was how I must have looked like a crumpled flower. But my tears were gone. I pressed my palms against my face, the pain felt better than the pain inside so I didn't stop. Lazily, my head rolled to gaze upon Cassidy's petite form. I wasn't going to tell her she got it wrong. My strange child had never been wrong.

ME, THEM, AND US

NON-FICTION BY IULIANA TINGAEVA

One of the questions my mom asked me when I called her from America for the first time was “How are you eating?” Back then I got really confused with the question. We hadn’t been able to see or talk to each other for two months, why would she ask me about that of all things? I turned to my dad, sitting behind me, listening in to our conversation. We didn’t have any chairs or a dinner table in a two-bedroom apartment, so he was eating his dinner sitting on the floor. He ate pelmeni, a traditional Russian dumpling-like dish made of boiled dough with meat inside. They were store bought, of course. My dad can’t cook and I was only ten years old. I didn’t want my mom to worry much so I told her that I’ve been eating good. I’ve mostly been eating pre-made meals from a Polish deli down the street. A small deli with mostly Slavic produce- spices in square paper packets instead of plastic bottles, dried herbs hung on the wall, and sales ladies who understood but didn’t speak Russian- was an oasis, a safe haven that was the most familiar thing to me in this country. Their pre-made borsch didn’t taste like the one my grandma would make. I found it delicious, however, not even because it was genuinely good, but because it was something that wasn’t strange like everything else.

Going to elementary school and experiencing American school lunches was very strange. For the longest time, I couldn’t figure out the concept of Capri Suns. I couldn’t figure out, why American juice came in packets instead of little carton boxes? And why did every kid have one? Was it an unspoken rule to bring one to lunch every day? I looked at my own meal which I brought from home, consisting of cooked buckwheat. Buckwheat is very popular and most importantly, very accessible where I am from. It is relatively easy to cook so my dad bought multiple packs from a Russian market and that is what we would eat for a few days at a time. American kids’ school lunches actually seemed like they

were made for children- peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, grapes, and the metallic, colorful Capri Suns. I thought that it all looked like the little toy food that sometimes comes with a kitchen set that little kids play with. Even so, their lunch looked more presentable for an elementary school in rural Illinois than mine did.

“What’s that?” a girl sitting next to me asked, peeking into my lunch bag. It wasn’t mocking or demeaning necessarily, but it was obvious she was wondering whether I was actually going to eat that. I didn’t know what to answer because I had no idea how to say “buckwheat” in English. I “hum” and “um” while searching for a possible substitute word and finally settled on telling her that it’s “just Russian food.” I didn’t necessarily feel embarrassed. I didn’t really feel shame back then, I had too much going on in my life to feel any shame or embarrassment.

I couldn’t get used to the American lunch system. In Russia, all classes, one through eleven, go to the same building for school and all have lunch at the same time. You eat what they serve you, and if you don’t like what they serve then you simply don’t eat. This might sound controlling, but at the same time there was a strange sense of comradeship in it. If the dish for that day was something everyone disliked, then at least the irritation was shared by everyone. If it was Friday and zapekanka was served (a cheesecake-like dish topped with sweet, condensed milk) then there was a feeling of cheerfulness, and the cafeteria would be filled with chatter for the rest of the lunch period. Here in America, the only person I could share the joy and authenticity of eating my country’s food with was myself.

One day I woke up and went to the fridge to find something to bring for lunch that day and found that there was nothing to bring. The fridge was completely empty. I scrambled around and found half of a cucumber and some bread in the pantry. Not really having a choice, I packed both in my little container. During

the lunch period, I remembered what was in my lunch bag and hesitantly opened it. I noticed the bread had gone sort of moldy. I closed my lunch bag and sat there. I felt almost betrayed even. All this suffering of moving countries, jumping from poverty to poverty and this is what I got. I looked at my classmates with their Capri Suns. It didn't matter what kind of life I was living before in Russia. At that moment, I understood that I was set up. America was going to eat me alive. After all that glamour and romance that you read about in magazines and see in Hollywood films, this was the reality.

Even after eight years, I didn't necessarily feel at home- at times I would feel so homesick I was ready to walk back to Russia barefoot. It didn't make sense. During my childhood, I remember we couldn't afford to indulge in any sort of luxury. Buying fruits like apples or tangerines was only for special occasions. Here, people just have them on their countertops as a sort of decoration. So what was I even missing?

It wasn't until my mom and grandma moved in with me that Russian food finally started to taste like Russian food again. I found out that abundance numbs and desensitizes to an extent, while deficit makes you constantly restless. I stopped trying to force myself to feel "at home" and decided to find some peace instead. I started trying to make Russian recipes. I started to sit down with my family to make pelmeni like many people do in Russia as a tradition. Something that was once the only option was now like an invisible string stretching across the Atlantic Ocean, leading me back to my roots. The mental torment subsided and for the first time in eight years, I felt at peace.

RAGE ON, SISTER

POETRY BY LYDIA QUATTROCHI

Awarded Third Place in Poetry at the
2022 Skyway Writer's Festival

Rage on, sister
and get down to the water.
Though the river's darkness
wrestles a thousand drowned dreams
in the songless night,
moons of the murky darkness,
it's never far from star reflections,
and though in the mirror, your face darkens
into the slap mark of your own hand,
rage on, rage on.

Rage on, sister
and pour the fallen crows
of inky stain
on the white wall of a page
embrace the haunted,
the fatherless, the exile,
the empty glass, the shattered glass,
the shattered water,
the tangled smile through clenched teeth
the ache of tears like fruit.

Rage on, sister
you who choose to hide away

and let all things pass
like rivers
in your eyes of water.
Rage on, sister
and remember to be kind to pain
and when you find
another sleepless child
take her hand—
take her hand, for you'll find a mirror
in the care of her hand
find it in the pain
of each other's souls.
Rage on, sister
and get down to the water
you'll get down to the water
and find it in the
smile of the water.

MILKSHAKES

FICTION BY PAYTON HEIDEN

The time 10:50 appeared on my car's radio. Letting out a soft sigh, I turned the key in the ignition. My car's engine turned off, the only sounds coming from my radio and the video playing off a social media app on my phone. Another day alive, another day at work. I grabbed my hat and my apron off the passenger seat and exited the car, locking the vehicle on my way to the door of the building. I was the only opener today, meaning I'd be by myself for a few hours unless the boss stopped in. Unlocking the door and flipping on the lights, I made my way to the office and dropped off my phone and my car keys. Putting on the hat and apron came next. I counted the register, unlocked the front door, found the necessary utensils for the day, and all other sorts of boring things that happened every day with every opener at this job. Considering it was a Monday morning, there probably wouldn't be many, if any, customers during my shift.

I was proved wrong almost immediately.

With my job, we served four things: fruit water, yogurt, popsicles, and ice cream. I knew how to make two out of the four. One of the responsibilities of the morning shift was to make the fruit waters and the yogurts so they were always fresh and ready for customers to eat and drink. If those went bad and a customer were to order it, that could lead to a bad review which we didn't want. I was in the middle of making a water when the first customer walked in.

I greeted them as I pulled on the standard gloves. They eyed the ice cream as most customers did before telling me their order, "Can I have a strawberry milkshake please?"

I couldn't help but smile, "Excellent choice."

Walking to the fridge, I grabbed a milkshake cup and the milk. I filled it up with the appropriate amount of milk before scooping the right amount of ice cream. I put it in the machine, blended the

two ingredients together, and put it in the right size cup. I asked about the whipped cream and cherry before popping in a straw and handing it to the customer.

“Anything else I can get for you?” I asked.

“Nope, that’ll be all.”

I rang up their order, they paid, and I waited for the magic to begin. Now every job has some sort of specialty dish, something that marks them different from the rest of businesses like them. Our dish was our milkshakes. Most people hadn’t discovered them due to poor advertising on our part, but once the media caught hold of them, I knew we’d start having a ton of business for them.

The customer took a sip of their milkshake and the flowers around the room bloomed a little brighter. The customer didn’t seem to notice and just walked out the door. Had they realized and started to get too excited or scared, more flowers would start to bloom or grow taller. But since they didn’t work with what they were just given and just left, the flowers went back to their usual appearance.

Our milkshakes gave the customers superpowers. Each ice cream flavor gave them a different kind of power. None of them were dangerous, we didn’t want a lawsuit against us. But they were a fun little surprise for those who didn’t expect it and the initial reaction was always hilarious. The powers only lasted for about an hour after each sip before they wore off. Making the milkshake itself was sometimes a pain, but seeing the look of wonder at every power made it so worth it. I didn’t know what power every ice cream had, but the most popular powers I knew by heart.

I cleaned the milkshake machine before going to the back and washing the dishes. I dried them and brought them back to the front. Then I went back to the front and

“I didn’t know what power every ice cream had, but the most popular powers I knew by heart.”

continued to make the water. By then, the clock read 12:15. I had three hours and forty-five minutes left for my shift. Just as I finished doing the math, the door alarm went off again, signaling I had another customer.

I once again went to the front, greeted them, and pulled on a new pair of gloves. The lady gave me a tight smile and went back to looking at the ice cream, "Can I have a chocolate milkshake?"

"Yes ma'am," I told her and got the ingredients ready again. I did the same routine of adding the milk, scooping the ice cream, pouring it into the cup, and adding the extra ingredients. I asked if that would be all, rang her up, and then waited, once again, for the magic to begin. This one wouldn't go unnoticed and I hoped this lady didn't have anywhere important to be. If she couldn't control this power, she'd be here for quite a while.

As soon as she took a sip of her milkshake, she started to rise up. At first she didn't seem to notice, but as she went to take a step towards the door, her feet didn't hit the ground. I let out a small laugh at the look of pure shock written across her face.

"What's happening?" She asked as she rose higher and higher in the air.

"Take a deep breath and focus," I instructed, "Then think about what you want to do."

She did as I asked and slowly started to float back down to the ground. She still held her milkshake in her hand, but it was slightly shaking.

"Thank you," She breathed, "I'd heard about what happens when you get a milkshake here, but I didn't believe it. That was... pretty amazing."

"Well, you have these powers for an hour after your last sip of the milkshake so use it wisely," I smiled at her.

"I will, thank you!" And with that, she was gone.

I'd been trained on what to do if the customer started freaking out about their newfound abilities. It was always a fear the boss

had. He knew of the negative outcomes should these milkshakes be released to the public. While half the population would think they were cool, the other half were likely to think they were dangerous. He didn't want a controversy to arise just based on our milkshakes, so that's why he kept them on the downlow. Some of my coworkers thought he was overreacting about the whole thing, but I honestly understood. Those overprotective parents could see this and start panicking. There was the possibility that someone could get injured. I urged him to advertise these, but also put a warning label on the advertisement so the customers knew the risks.

I had just begun to clean the machine when the door opened yet again. This time, it was a family of four.

"We'd like to order four milkshakes please," the mother said.

I looked at the dirty machine, which only had enough slots for three milkshakes at a time. One of the slots was already dirty from the milkshake I had just made.

"Give me about five minutes please," I told them and quickly rushed to clean the machine. I didn't even wash the cup, I just threw it in the sink and grabbed a new one off the supplies shelf. I looked at the time and saw it was only 12:30. This was going to be a long shift if it continued like this.

I got everything done that I needed to and then asked what each of them wanted. I had another chocolate, a rainbow, another strawberry, and a chocolate chip. The father was the one who got the chocolate, so within seconds of receiving his milkshake, he was flying in the air. The mother got the strawberry. She was playing with the flowers, making them grow. One of the sons got the rainbow. That made his eyes change colors with his emotions. They were currently a bright yellow, meaning the young boy was very happy. Chocolate chip gave the other, older son super senses. He was currently going through one of our books of scratch and sniffs with his newfound, enhanced abilities.

As I cleaned the milkshake machine, I watched the family having fun with a small smile. I didn't know the science behind our special milkshakes if I were to be honest. The boss had explained it to me at one point, but I stopped understanding when he started going deep into science terms. Or maybe they were simple science terms. I was more of an English kid, so science was definitely not my thing. There were two things I did know about the science of the milkshakes though. I may not know the reasoning behind those facts, but I knew the facts. First, the milk was what triggered the powers to appear. I didn't know why since the ice cream itself was made with milk, but it had to be the trigger since it was the only ingredient blended with the ice cream to make the milkshake. Maybe it was the amount of ice cream added to make that reaction? Second, mixing two flavors within a milkshake resulted in no powers. The two ice creams offset each other and while they may result in a tasty milkshake, they also resulted in a magic-less shake despite milk being added.

The front door chimed once again and I was back to making milkshakes. For the next few hours, I was nonstop, making milkshake after milkshake. I was very confused as to why that was the only product I was making; nobody was ordering ice cream or popsicles. This was very unusual, most days I only made a milkshake or two. And with this amount of people ordering them, the dining room area was pretty chaotic. There were people

“When the rush ended, I was finally able to get the mass amount of dishes done and take a breath.”

zooming around using the superspeed they got from their mint chocolate chip ice cream. Harmless orbs of light were flying in the air from the cookies and cream. The bubblegum gave some an elongated tongue like a frog's. The rush didn't end until around 3:30. When the rush ended, I was finally able to get the mass amount of dishes done and take a

breath. That was definitely the most insanity I'd ever dealt with in

a morning shift before.

My coworker came in at 3:50 to release me from my shift, "How's it been today?"

"It's actually been really busy. A lot of people have strangely gotten milkshakes. The dining room is in absolute chaos right now!" I answered, wiping the sweat off my forehead.

My coworker grimaced, "When you get in your car after your shift, check the workplace social media."

I tried to get the meaning behind that sentence out of her, but she kept her mouth shut on that matter. When 4:00 hit, I clocked out of the system, grabbed my stuff, and went to my car. I found my work's social media immediately. There was a new post time stamped an hour after my shift had started. I read over the post and it all came together.

"Come try our super powered milkshakes! Each flavor gives you a different superpower! Don't believe us? Come give one a try!"

There was a disclaimer at the bottom warning of the possibility of injury and the how long the effects of the superpowers lasted. That's why there were so many customers today and why all of them ordered milkshakes. The boss finally decided to advertise our specialty and didn't warn me about it. I was just glad that I didn't have the night shift tonight or work at all the next few days.

Work was about to become very, very busy.

LOST AND FOUND

POETRY BY NICHOLAS REGELBRUGGE

Lost
Lost and alone
Lost and alone and stressed
Lost and alone and stressed and angry
Lost and alone and stressed and angry and sad
Lost and alone and stressed and angry and sad and
overwhelmed
Then, I wasn't alone
Lost and stressed and angry and sad and overwhelmed
Then, I felt calm
Lost and sad and overwhelmed
Then, I let go
Lost and sad
Then, I saw her smile
Lost
Then, I wasn't lost anymore
Calm
Calm and content
Calm and content and happy
Calm and content and happy and united
Calm and content and happy and united and
Found

REWIND

POETRY BY LIZETTE VALDOVINOS

I walk up to my CD player
Deciding which scene
To play and put on my TV
My sinking tired eyes search for the remote
And a thick blanket when I get cold

-click-

Your smile shines as we play
Dolls and toys, as we waste the day
I miss your small hands
I miss your laugh
Until I see you again, these memories play in my mind,
Are all I have

The way you twitch your nose and focus when you blow bubbles
in your milk

I didn't realize how big this change was until.....

The way you stim, flap your hands, and sing.

I can only hope you are growing and empowering yourself with
who you want to be.

I'll see you again.

Whenever there is a will there's a way.

Just wait.

We will be reunited someday.

FULL BLOOM

ARTWORK BY JACQUELYNE ZAVALA



8 x 10 in.

Gelatin Silver Print

ZAVALA 81

SWALLOW

MUSIC BY KISSING WAX FIGURES



Genre: Ambient, Electronic

Instrumentation: Trumpet and sampling/
electronics

URL: [https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=VmDNc0kqpP4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmDNc0kqpP4)

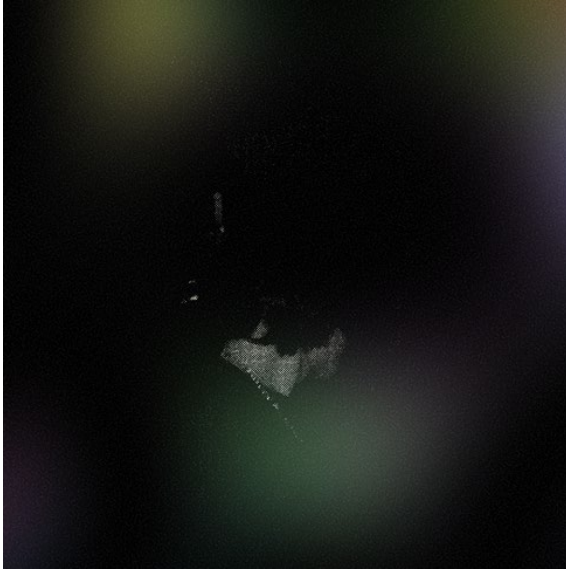
**LISTEN TO
THE MUSIC**



bound by branches and leaves,
pillowed by the earth,
split open by rocks,
and taken by the sea,
swallow me whole,
please.

LENS

MUSIC BY SHYFACE



Genre: Ambient, Electronic

Producer: Ryan Le

Mixed and Mastered: Ryan Le

URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INhoVPS-NCU>

LISTEN TO
THE MUSIC



SHYFACE 83

LAURON 2

ARTWORK BY JEZREEL CULASINO



18 x 24 in.

Graphite on Paper

84 HORIZONS

OREO

NON-FICTION BY PAYTON MCCULLUM

Content Warning

This narrative depicts incidents of racism.

Oreo. Oreos are good. An unbelievably simple, multi-million dollar idea that anyone could have come up with, and quite frankly, I'm a bit upset that I didn't think of it first. Black, rich chocolate on the outside. White, sweet vanilla cream on the inside. Which brings me back to that fateful day, back in second grade, on the elementary school playground, having a deep, philosophical, second grade conversation with a group of my friends, as all second graders do. I don't know how we reached the topic, but eventually we were discussing race and stereotypes, with our limited knowledge of the world. That was the first time I was called my most loathed "nickname."

"You know, you're the whitest black person I know," he said to me, laughing. "You're like an Oreo, Black on the outside, White on the inside."

As a young, black kid, I had no idea how to react to such a statement, so, like so many times before and after, I smiled and laughed. Fake it 'till you make it. A skill I've developed in my eighteen years of life as a Black man is that the worst things that will be said to me, to my face, aren't the outright racist, "call me an N-Word and go back to your country," kind of statements, but the casual, backhanded remarks that downplay my successes and character simply because my skin is dark.

I like to call it "Passive Racism."

Passive Racism is rampant in our society, and in my experience,

far more frequent in suburban areas, dominated by a white population. Already, a person of color just naturally seems out of place, due to the lack of diversity, which is a cause of the issue itself. These people will spend a large and important time of their lives surrounded by people who think, talk, act, and look like them. As a result, they will grow used to a lifestyle that lacks diversity in the form of different ideas, different cultures, and different views. Even worse, is that the most experience with another group of people will be what they see portrayed online and in the media. The ghetto rapper with a diamond chain, designer clothes, and a nice car. The “annoying” basketball player who won’t “shut up and dribble” who’s always talking about societal issues. The bad kid on TV who’s troubled because their dad left them at a young age. The bougie black girl with long, braided hair who’s constantly finding something to yell about.

Whether we realize it or not, these rather negative portrayals of African American people stick in people’s minds, setting up a false expectation of how they feel that Black people act like. As a Black person, you’re not supposed to be quiet, soft-spoken, intelligent and articulate; all these traits are naturally associated with a White person. Instead, you’re expected to be loud, rambunctious, impulsive, and irrational. You’re supposed to be great at rapping, not reading. You’re supposed to play basketball, not soccer or golf.

When you are fed false caricatures of an entire race for a significant portion of your life, unfortunately, you will start to box them into a barrier of how they are “supposed to act.”

And when they deviate from your subconscious perception of them, when they act against your stereotypes and are inconsistent with your labels, they can’t be Black.

"You don't talk like a Black guy."

"Do Black people even play volleyball?"

"What do you mean you don't listen to (insert miscellaneous Black mainstream artist)? Who do you listen to then?"

"You're the whitest Black guy I know!"

"You act so White!"

"You're an Oreo."

An Oreo.

Black on the outside, White in on the inside.

I'm not Black because I don't fit within the parameters of your stereotypes.

My blackness is compared to others, and ultimately diminished because I grew up in Oswego, Illinois, not the slums of Chicago.

I'm White because my father is present and active in my life.

I'm an Oreo because I am well-spoken, educated, and polite.

Regardless of what I do in my life, as an African American living in the suburbs of America, my blackness will always be put under a lens, studied, before being compared to the caricature of the "Typical Black Man" that is portrayed in the media.

In Oswego, Illinois, I'm not a student, a worker, an athlete.

I'm, quite simply, a Black guy.

And with that, comes the expectation for me to act a certain way, rather than be given the chance to be my own self.

Instead of being an individual, I'm grouped in with every other Black person, and measured on a bogus scale of how Black I am based on others.

None of it matters.

I'm a human, just the same as everyone else.

I'm just as Black as my aunt who went to school to be a school counselor in Texas.

I'm just as Black as Michael Jordan.

I'm just as Black as the kid who's living through the school of hard knocks in the ghetto of New York.

I'm not an Oreo.

I'm not White because I play volleyball, not basketball.

I'm just a man with dark skin.

I am an individual.

And it's about time people start viewing me as such.

LION-HEART

POETRY BY CORA DOWGWILLO

I don't want to alarm you
in fact, I don't even want to harm you
I may have a barbed wire halo but
that don't mean I'm a devil
I have some wicked in me but
honestly, I think my soul is pure
corroded metal, oxidized copper
every day passes with a heavier weight
thought I was getting better but I prayed too much
calling on Lucifer and God all at once
but no one listens to a woman who cries
flat on her back on a pavement drive
basketball thrown against a garage
withstanding under emotional barrage
her head is spinning, she can't draw air
she runs shaking hands through her hair
inferno of thoughts racing down her skin
her skull feels like it's made of tin
her feet pound the asphalt as she roars at the stratosphere
she wants what they promised but they prey on fear
so she picks herself up and she stands up real straight
squares up her shoulders and twists her waist
her judgment to be made and laid
rejecting all of her demeaning fate
and she yells, "I AM NOT AFRAID."

EVEN THE WORST STORMS PASS

NON-FICTION BY MEGAN PREITE

Content Warning

This narrative depicts miscarriage and child illness.

I could hear the crashing of the medical equipment. It felt like I was stuck in a tin box with dominos inside. I bought my sons those domino sets before. They loved to build rows of them and knock them down. I was the domino now.

"Miss?" a man's voice asked.

"I'm sorry, what?" I replied.

I had never been in an ambulance before. It was cold and uncomfortable. Void of any hope. Every bump felt like we were off-roading, only this adventure was not fun. I could hear communication coming from radios and the occasional siren from the ambulance.

"Miss, how old is your daughter?" the paramedic asked me.

"Umm, we just got home from the hospital. She, she's 10 days old." I replied. "Will she be, okay?" I asked holding back tears.

I suffered three miscarriages in a row before getting pregnant this last time. My husband Igor and I knew this would be our last baby. I woke up every morning feeling like the wind had been knocked out of me, and I could not catch my breath. The losses already held me hostage daily. Igor did his best to comfort me during a time when I was not the most lovable.

"Meg, this isn't your fault." He would plead. But what if it was?

My friends were posting pregnancy announcements on social media with them cradling their perfectly rounded bellies while walking through a meadow: fingertips touching the tops of wildflowers. You could feel their joy. I did not feel joy during this miracle pregnancy.

Igor and I wanted a girl, but you are not supposed to say that, especially after three miscarriages. "We will be happy with

whatever the baby is, as long as it's healthy." That was always the more appropriate response. Hearing your baby's heartbeat for the first time is an adrenaline rush, like finishing a marathon. It was a girl! It was thrilling and paralyzing at the same time. Fear is a powerful emotion, and it can overtake you in a moment. That fear controlled my relationship with our two boys, Jack and Henry, even if they were too little to comprehend what mommy was going through. I was not present enough for them, but I was lucky to have the support of an amazing husband and a family to help with the boys when I could not.

I reminded myself daily to be grateful. This sweet little girl should be bringing me out of the eye of the storm, but I felt like I was drowning in it.

I went into labor four weeks early. My contractions came quick, and they came with a vengeance. As Igor drove me to the hospital, a sense of fear rushed over me. "What if she's not okay?" I asked myself. I had complications with my first two pregnancies, so my doctors did not want to take any chances. Before I could process what was happening, I was already on the operating table. Despite having an emergency cesarian section, everything went smoothly with the delivery. Amelia was the most beautiful baby I had ever seen. She came out with a smile on her face that could light up the entire universe. She already had Daddy wrapped around her finger and I could hear my husband whisper things to her like, "You can have anything you want." Igor's always been the best dad.

When we got home from the hospital, I struggled with wanting to hold her. I did not want to interact with her, and honestly, I wanted to be left alone. I would keep telling myself, "Just get through today. Tomorrow you'll feel better." I hated myself for not feeling gratitude because there were a million other women who would have killed to be in my place. One morning after feeding Amelia, I laid her down next to me on the bed. A few minutes

passed and I heard a gurgling sound. I looked over at her, and she seemed like she was choking. She was starting to turn a pale shade of blue. I started screaming to Igor, "CALL 911! CALL 911!"

"This is somewhat normal with newborns." The paramedic tried to sound convincing.

I looked over at her, she was in a mobile incubator. It was a small box, with a clear case. She looked like an antique doll at a museum.

"We just got home from the hospital?" I said confused.

"I know. I'm sure she's fine." The paramedic replied.

Amelia was admitted into the Pediatric Unit so a team of doctors could run tests and observe her. Igor and I watched for hours, as nurses tried to find a tiny little vein for an IV. The blood-curdling cries that came from this happy little girl, immobilized me. As nurses ran in and out of the room, I was in shock. "What if I lose her," I thought to myself. It was not supposed to be like this. I should be at home cuddling her, looking at her for hours in

"Instead, I was looking at her in an all too familiar hospital bassinet, attached to so many wires[...]"

awe of her perfection. Instead, I was looking at her in an all too familiar hospital bassinet, attached to so many wires it was almost impossible to hold her.

Amelia ended up staying in the hospital for five days. They found that her heart rate would drop drastically low when she ate, and they had no explanation for why.

"What do you mean you don't know?" I would stutter through tears.

"Sometimes we don't know why these things happen." Doctors would tell us.

My fears had shifted from my previous losses to the idea of losing my daughter. I slept in the hospital bed next to her, while Igor slept on the plastic pull-out couch that was as ugly as it was uncomfortable. Jack and Henry stayed with my parents, thinking

they were on a cool vacation. I had preferred it that way; they should not see us like this.

My husband and I were waiting for a formal diagnosis for six months, but it never came. One day, the choking episodes just stopped. She began to thrive. I knew then, I needed to find support to process these traumatic events so that I could find peace in my loss and joy in my daughter. It is hard to ask for help when you need it the most. Ironic, isn't it? Storms can destroy everything around you. Grit is what helps you rebuild. Sometimes grit is just recognizing you need help. I would never want any parent to experience what we did with Amelia, but those events lead me to the emotional help I desperately needed. As parents, we teach our children about life, but sometimes they teach us about how to live.

An unknown author said, "The greater your storm, the brighter your rainbow."

It cannot rain forever.

You persevere even when it feels impossible. You may just get a little wet while doing it.

TIME

POETRY BY NANNERS FAULKNER

Time, your thorns

Pricked til the beams of screams

Shone onto

The key to ultimatums:

The root of a beehive's milk.

Might it be honey or money?

Please tell us *Time*.

The leaves parading down our very beings
and the whirlpools forming in our tear's viaducts
are soon to be your memories.

Those forgotten by you
don't remember how to cry.

But they too must
have echoed screams like us.

They may have bled like us.

Time- the one true north,
please anoint us with knowledge.

With your power, *Time*,
we can outwit our wars.

So in our own eyes
we may live immortal.

Your devotees conquers of
life to be loathed.

Please *Time* rain down on us blessings of truths.

Time, please grant us your petals.
Let us walk on them
down the aisle of judgment.
We will be found worthy of all.
Please grant us something!
We beg of you, *Time*.

MEMORIES WITHIN THE BAMBOO KRATIP

NON-FICTON BY EH HSER

He would often reminisce about his life in his native land, through his stories and the way he viewed life. He often wished how he could simply go into the forest to hunt for his food, like how he did in the tropical rainforest of his native land. He often hoped to always have the ability to set his foot on the rice field, and see the elephants pass by. He always wanted to one day bring his family back to his beloved Thailand.

Summer is one of my favorite seasons. Not only for the wonderful sun, but for the ability to take a break from school and to take vacations with my family. However, the summer of 2021, was an emotional summer for me and my family. It was our first summer without my father, who passed away from Cancer in 2020. That particular summer was filled with a lot of emptiness and loneliness.

I remember that summer I woke up in the morning and smelled a sweet bamboo smell coming from the kitchen. Very puzzled, I got up from my bed with a glimpse of hope that it was father, only to see my mother cooking my fathers' signature sticky bamboo rice, also known as Kratip in Northern Thailand. At that moment many memories fluttered in my heart of my father preparing this dish every summer morning. I remember going outside to my backyard to look at my fathers' garden, to see all the vegetables he had grown. My father loved gardening, it reminded him of his old life in Thailand. He would work endlessly, from the early morning to the evening on his garden so that he could have fresh vegetables for his family. In the morning, after he finished watering his plants. My father would quickly wash up to start

preparing food for the morning, before anyone woke up. He loved preparing Kratip. Because me and my siblings were not raised in Thailand, my father would always joke that this was the closest we would ever get to Thailand.

As a kid I was not fond of sticky rice, I was more into “American” food because that was what was around me. To me it seemed like the normal thing to eat and a way to not be picked on by my fellow peers. However, as a teenager I started to realize that I enjoyed flavor, and that I cannot simply just eat plain stale bread, cheese, and some type of meat. Having said that, I started to enjoy my fathers’ sticky rice more. And near the last days of my fathers’ life, even though he was extremely weak, he managed to have the will power to prepare his Kratip for his family to eat in the morning. When I think of this, I often beat myself up for not appreciating my fathers’ cooking.

My father prepared his Kratip just like how anyone in Northern Thailand would. However, with a twist, because we come from the indigenous Karen tribe in Thailand, our style of cooking differed from the way the Thais would prepare it. The only common denominator that we have with the recipe is that the main dish is sticky rice, but the side dishes differed. My father would begin by blasting his playlist of his favorite Northern Thai songs in the kitchen, to get him in his full element to begin cooking. My father would soak rice grains in water overnight. Then in the morning he would start by filling up the rice steamer with water and place it over the stove, to let it heat up and boil. Then he would grab his bamboo basket and place it on the rice steamer and fill it up with the rice grain and cover the top with a pan lid. While the rice was cooking to form into sticky rice, my father would prepare his main side dishes. He would fry Tilapia fish till it was golden. Then he would make a special spicy and sour sauce that he would drizzle

over the fried fish. Sometimes he would fry the fish using bamboo stick, in the backyard because we have an outdoor fireplace.

His next side dish was a masala curry, either using beef or chicken. He would begin with pounding garlic, white onion, and dried Thai peppers in his mortar and pestle. Then he would gently pour oil in the pan and add in the pounded materials and salt, masala, and many other South-East Asian spices. Once, the sticky rice was done cooking, my father would transfer that into the bamboo Kratip, to be served to eat. If he had some sticky-rice left over he would make a banana sticky rice desert called Dah-Gwee-Tha Mee le, that is wrapped in banana leaf and steamed.

Every summer that I ate my fathers' Kratip, I felt as if I was in Thailand, eating it in a bamboo hut near the rice field. The Kratip that he made, in a way it seems as if he wanted me and my younger siblings to live vicariously through the food, almost like a time machine to his upbringing in Thailand. Kratip is important to me because it simply shows my fathers' love for me, through his cooking. Whenever I eat sticky rice in a Kratip, it automatically brings me back to of comfort. It brings back the many memories that me and my father had every summer. It reminds me of his smile and excitement to prepare this delicious food for my family.

Food will always be here, some way shape or form. But the cook behind the food can be gone with a simple blink of an eye. However, the memories attached to their food will last forever. My fathers' Kratip not only is a remembrance of him, but a reminder to myself to love and appreciate the loved ones who are still present with me and their cooking. Lastly, to appreciate where I come from and to never forget my roots.

STILL LIFE WITH A FRIEND

ARTWORK BY OLIVIA KOWALCZYK



18 x 20 in.
Oil on Canvas

KOWALCZYK 99

WHEN WE COLLIDED

ARTWORK BY JACQUELYNE ZAVALA



8 x 10 in.

Gelatin Silver Print

100 HORIZONS

FALLING LEAF

ARTWORK BY JOHNNY LO



10 x 10 x 5 in.
Wood B-Mix

LO 101

DARK RED

ARTWORK BY ORIANA ROSALES



26 x 48 in.
Oil on Canvas

102 HORIZONS

NATURE WITHIN

POETRY BY LIZETTE VALDOVINOS

We don't judge the serenity of the summer sunset
Nor compare to the sweet sunrise
One doesn't criticize the cracks and ridges of a gracious tree
Or the butterflies' luminous wings to their demise

Rustic and colossal canyons don't apologize for their dimensions
and cracks
The silver lightning is not shy when it strikes
Nor the roaming thunder when it claps

Coconut appears as always with frizzy frilly hair
Crisp, colorful apples never hesitate to hide their spots and dots
Juicy oranges glow with their pitted skin, do they not?
Why put ourselves down and compare?

Her hair was the sinuosity of a river
And brown as the soil curled beneath her feet
The face is pitted and imperfect
With wrinkles subtle as a shallow stream

She holds the patterned veins that are strong as roots
Her detailed skin was like ripples of an ocean
Her scars tell stories and speak of her truth
Her mind is an elixir of imagination and notions

We are subtle summations of nature
With our bodies and scars
Why waste our time judging?
When the time is ours?

ATOMIZED

FICTON BY CORA DOWGWILLO

She imagined, in the spaces and rests his breath left in the quiet symphony of the two A.M. molten-ink morning, that he was dreaming of her. Perhaps it was with pearly-hazed blindness or a shiver on his tongue — as long as it was of her.

Dust motes, detritus of a life on their way to settle in the crevasses of the bedroom, fell into the silver luminescence dripping through the cracked window that was perched above the rusty fire escape. She stared at those dust motes as they collided with the liquid pale light, those pieces of dead skin cells that came from him and her and (mostly) the outside world. Maybe each of them contained its own little bubble, its own little room that it kept its heart in. The lavender plant that she kept in a perpetual cycle of life and near-death and back again was growing beneath the window, the scent mingling to create a haze of summer rain and spent Marlboro cigarettes from the neighbors that roomed below them. She imagined the thin and fleshly people blowing rings into the darkness of a star-shot sky, the dim orchestra of a midnight city reminding them that there was more than today to live onto. Or maybe she was being too hopeful — but it was better than being pessimistic.

His bare skin was warm as he sighed through his mouth and rolled closer to her, his eyes still too heavy-lidded with his twilight slumber to wake. Automatically, his lean, moonlight-bleached arm came around her waist, flat against the bed though she was, and her soul lifted its weary head at the welcome contact. The sex-softened sheets were twisted around her legs, but she didn't care — despite the coolness of a night-crowned deity's breath as it flowed into the room, pin-points of sweat were erupting on the back of her neck, tucked beneath her wild, gold-spun hair. She listened to the echo of his steady breathing, modifying hers just to hear it line up again in a rhythmic consultation between lovers' souls. She wondered what they were whispering to each other in their space of the Unknown, filled with indescribable emotion

and cosmic tethers. Maybe they were conversing about the sound of an unborn child, or how lovely words could sound if there was enough pain that the words sharpened, or even the color of love. Perhaps they weren't simply communing — maybe they were singing. Maybe it was like the song of whales, deep in the vast, reflected-blue of deep oceans, just quieter. A shared secret that tasted like peach-flavored Crown, chlorine, and the fourth of July.

The ceiling mottled itself with the moon, beading itself into pictograms that changed the closer she looked at them, illusions in the cycles of the massive space rock that orbited the very room they occupied. The rest of the world had fallen away — the city outside was merely a mirage, the cars speeding down the rain-slicked black asphalt nothing but a soundtrack to their peace.

Her eyes turned to his serenely divine face, a mixed mosaic between an angel of death and a mortal red-blood. Her fingers twitched with the urge to reach out and touch the light that slatted through her lover's eyelashes and fell upon his cheekbones, just to make sure it wasn't tangible enough to wake him, but she was far too ungentle to do that. She didn't trust herself not to break the antique Victorian porcelain of his skin, already seamed and veined with shattered gold as it was.

A dog barked somewhere outside, and her fingertips traced the slender bones of his hand, tight against her ribs. She imagined the universe-old energy seeping through their bare-skinned contact, pulsing down through her unsightly blood and bones and marrow to reach something deeper, perhaps the same Unknown space her soul drew from.

Her thoughts spooled outwards, feeling every particle of the history-rich air against the dew of her sweat-sheen, burnished skin radiating moonlight itself. Idly, she wondered at the whereabouts of her phone, which probably had a worried missed text from her innocent sister and an angry text from her best friend.

The bed seemed to stretch beneath her, and the bluish hue of salvation that marked the edge of the dark quivered across the room, differentiating from its uniform straightness when interrupted by an object, such as his desk chair, a pile of clothing,

and her backpack. Each had varying and contrasting fogs of blue, highlighting, shadowing, and contouring the folds and wrinkles of it. Things alternated between blending into a pile of woolen shadow when she looked too closely and slicing clearly against the enchanted netting of the small hours.

She jumped as her lover brushed his finger pads across her knuckles. Fiercely, she wished his fingerprints could be welded there, forever claiming her in quiet reverence as his body shifted, molding her body to his as a tired body settles into a beloved armchair.

His voice was raspy with sleep and near-intelligible, hung dangling against her ear for her to decipher in the twilight. "Why are you crying. . .?" he asked in a questioning murmur, his dark eyes spilling open just enough so she could tell of his wakefulness.

She laughed, just a little. "Because I love you."

He made a low rumble in the back of his throat, like a miniature landslide down a miniature mountain. He was the god of his own little inner world, full of tiny settings and bigger miracles, and it lived amongst his bones like fungi clinging to a tree.

The young woman, poured metallic in the white glow emanating from the window, wasn't worshipful — at least, intentionally. She was just caught in a never-ending state of absolute awe that he existed. It was like sifting through millions of malachite-colored, oxidized pennies, and finding a serendipitous gold coin, worth everything. It had been so sudden. It had tripped her, she had gone crashing down into the swaying, ombre cobalt shades, and she came up on the other side of the water with one clear thought: There he is, the man my heart belongs to.

"Do you remember how we first met?" she asked sleepily of him. "Tell me what you saw, again."

A huff of humor. "Again, huh?" He tugged on her pale waist, and the woman curled onto his chest, eager to relive one of her favorite memories through his gaze. She lifted her head to watch the mesmerizing way his mouth moved as he spoke in a low murmur. "You were throwing a summer pool party, possibly for Independence Day, the one where we all drank that peach liquor?"

I wasn't going to go when my buddy invited me, but I felt irked by it, so I eventually said, 'What the hell,' and came anyway. I saw you... I spoke to you... and then I touched you, and suddenly, I wasn't alone in my soul. There was a tether, and it led to you, and you became my gravity. You were — are — my Sun, and I am your Earth." A hue of nightshade bled around the white ingots of his teeth, defining a smile, and he paused to reminisce. "It only took two weeks before you were mine, and I felt like I was forever altered. I will never love anybody as I love you." Implications wreathed his last sentence.

Behind those words, she saw the afterimages of a rocky past, full of tear-glittered nights and violent screaming in a car, blinded by an utter void in her heart and endless crystalline pain dropping from her searching eyes. She saw too many ends and too little joy, and the emptiness that comes after seeing heaven in a dream and waking in hell. She saw meeting and parting from him, pulling like the gravitationally-affected tide, and months of silence, repeated more times than she wanted to count. But it was true for him and her both. No other relationship had ever come close to the intensity, the complete wholeness. They would never love anybody as they loved each other.

"Sometimes I wonder how I can stand it," she whispered. "Knowing that there will be another end."

An exhalation of breath seeped over his lips. "There's always an end to everything, my love. Maybe, this time, it won't happen until we are both old and gray. Maybe we'll figure it out."

"It's so easy to be optimistic now," she responded, more to herself than her lover. She pulled a work-callused hand through his ebony hair, and he closed his prismatic sky-hued eyes.

"Why do we do this? Besides love. Do you ever wonder why we feel so strongly about each other? Why we let it break and build us up?" he asked, his phrases shaping themselves to the floral-and-smoke air.

It took her a while to respond, wrapped up as she was in her celestial imaginings. Her mind meandered over fantastical concepts: maybe they were meant to be, ordained in the

undeciphered stars. Maybe they were two halves of the same soul, and one of the lucky pairs who had found each other. Maybe they were gods, playing pretend, and they had just simply forgotten.

She settled for this: "Hope. Hope is why we let this happen. Because we both hope for the same end, and as long as we both want it, I believe that we will get there."

His lips brushed her hollowed temple. "You're right."

"Well, of course," she murmured, a lift upon the right corner of her mouth.

A humming laugh stirred the hair on her scalp, and against her skin, she felt his mouth curve into a lazy smile. It felt like ultraviolet light shining upon her, to know that she could make him happy. "I see you. All that you are, all that you have been, and all that you will be. Hopefully, one day that will mean you will be my wife."

She parted her lips, syllables rolling up her throat, and something suddenly and viciously hooked her eardrums —

The woman woke with a shudder to her 6 A.M alarm, alone once again in the bleary haze of a gray Monday morning. The watery smog of the never-reached tomorrow made the young woman want to fall back into her paradise, but the world turned upon its axis once more, and she was just a cell within the ecosystem. She reached out and clicked on her phone, and his face smiled upward, hers next to his in an open-mouthed, careless laugh. It had been taken the day before the car accident.

"I see you, too," she whispered, and got up to face another blank space in her timeline, the essence of last night's dream just a ghostly warmth in her heart to keep her burning until she saw him again.

MYTHICAL MALADAPTIVE DAYDREAM

POETRY BY JORDY KOENIG

I've broken my mother's back a hundred,
a thousand times,
carelessly stepping on sidewalk cracks.

A clueless kid skipping down small-town streets,
someone take his head out of the clouds.

Defiant as Icarus,
a child who craves the touch of the stars.

I remember astronomy,
I know full well that the sun is also a star,
defiant in the sky.
What I keep forgetting is that my wings are made from wax.

In my daydreams I fly straight into the eye of the heavens.
For once I am not cold.
Defiant as the sun itself am I when I crash through its center,
and emerge unscathed on the other side.

Hunger and misery cannot reach me here,
rising steadily above the eye of the skyline.

I'll let the sun sanitize me of all the rotten things laying dormant
inside of me.

Clean and defiant and beautiful and burning from the inside.
I am a man-made angel.
A creature of the sky.

I crafted myself into a modern era Icarus and I'll write myself into
history,
as a myth of my own making.

HOME

FICTION BY ANNIE POKRYFKE

The Wilson Manor was quiet tonight.

The old rustic walls set tall and heavy in the winding hallways, and the wooden floors rested quietly under the ghost of once prodding feet. The sun had set many hours before and left the windows that sat stoically in their frames, dark and cold. The thinnest sheen of frost could be seen upon the glass as headlights from late-night drivers passed over them, like a lighthouse calling home lost ships at sea.

The heating system roared to life now and then, sending a wave of warmth through the empty rooms as the calm of night settled into every nook and cranny. Artificial light emanated from open spaces like yellow beams of sunshine amid a cold stillness, lamps that the careless inhabitants of this space had left on. The library had been left in almost collected shambles; empty amber bottles littered the tabletops and cold floors, and books lay open and marked for the information they held. Notes and papers were strewn out in a manic fashion as each line written out in fine print captured the lore and answers the author sought. Images of terrifying creatures and angelic hosts danced over time-worn pages from books so old the titles were lost to even those who had once written them. Tales of men and women of old, fighting against the creatures of the darkness, seemed to leap from the soft pages as distant lamplight gave new life to the age-old fight of good and evil. The library was silent, in shambles but held together by the life that filled it in the daylight hours.

The garage held a hushed multitude of cars, each paint job glistening in the overhanging lights. Metal bodies from a multitude of years and styles remained motionless in their parking spots, some never to leave the comfort of the garage. One vehicle, however, sat out on display amongst the others; the thin coating of mud along the rims and worn tires told a more adventurous

story than those only parked for display. The glistening black frame and tan interior held more stories than the most well-versed history books. Dents and chips, scratches and tears, each containing a tale of danger and familial love. The seats had carried the weight of saviors and gods, mortal men and hosts of heaven, though the front seats had grown accustomed to the frames of the two men who often sat there. The rustic muscle car served as a house on wheels as it ventured to the far reaches of the country it was placed in. More than a house, but rather a home; Home to the lost souls that passed in and out of its interior, home for two scared boys that held the weight of the universe on their shared shoulders. In a world of constant change and loss, this car had remained, much like the love that built it.

A dark hallway within the rustic manor was lit by a blue light emitting from behind a closed door. The small sliver was cutting through the darkness that had settled in the early morning. A sturdy oak door stood proud against its base, parts of the dark wash worn down from frequent slamming and knocking; the dark doorknob was worn to a shining gold from hands wearing down on the surface.

Just beyond the door, a tall frame sat upright on a proportionally small mattress, the cloak of night covering everything but what the blue computer light could capture. Sharp yet soft features were outlined by shadows and artificial highlights of white and deep blues. Brown eyes captured the dancing screen as a smooth gloss overcame them; the images he looked through held a heavy nostalgia and remembrance within them. The early hour of the morning set a lazy trance over the tall man as his calloused hands clicked the laptop's touchpad at an almost rhythmic pace. The small screen changed from click to click, each new moment holding faces from times long past.

Smiles filled his sleep-weary vision as he felt his own lips curling to meet each expression.

Memories flooded the still air like a summer breeze in the

dead of winter; he could feel the energy of them dancing over his skin, tears brimming in his eyes. He sighed as images of his brother joined by family long past filled the screen. He noted how young the man he had looked up to all his life looked in each image, only noticeable by how his eyes wrinkled and his choice of clothing. The fiery twenty-something boy on the screen was almost a carbon copy of the seasoned soldier just down the hall. The brother he woke to greet each day noticeably lacked the spark evident in his young counterpart. Years of hardships and loss, learning and forgetting, had no doubt drained both men, but none more than his older sibling.

His brother, Gabe, had taken the brunt of their problems growing up, the duty of the older brother. He carried the weight of every past battle and failure in his aching heart, refusing to share the pain he felt, scared that if the world knew his torment, it would turn its back on him. Scared that if he opened up and let out the beast that lurked in his soul, everyone he had come to love would see him the same way he always saw himself; a monster.

Gabe, in the dated images, seemed to be filled with a sense of childlike hope that would later be taken from him piece by piece; his hands were more rounded and smooth, his hair lighter and noticeably full of product. The people by his side varied from young women, long lost to time, and older men whose very continence spoke of the father-like role they served in his and his brother's lives.

Old baseball caps and worn leather brought back feelings and smell that Alec had long forgotten. His old and empty room was all so suddenly filled with a life he hadn't felt since his youth, the sudden change in atmosphere adding weight to his broad chest as he struggled to keep his staggering breaths at bay.

His honey eyes filled with tears as he looked at photos of him at an age that seemed eons ago, a new teenager with shaggy hair and a smile that hid the confusion and pain he harbored for years untouched. He looked at the frame of his hardened father

standing beside the man he considered more of a dad than he could have ever been. He noticed the look in his father's eyes and how that same look could be seen in his gaze now; years of fighting and destruction had given him a small glimpse of what Mark, his father, had lived through all those years ago. All the loss he carried in his bones from his own adult life gave Alec a sort of solidarity with his father's memory. He now understood the motive behind the madness, the reason Mark had pushed him and his brother to their breaking points time and time again, the reason for the drinking and the distance.

Alec had lived through things he wished he could forget, things that would plague his mind until his aging body gave out, things that he undoubtedly knew his father had also seen. But, at the age of eleven, every motive and hardship he now understood could never explain why Mark was the way he was in Alec's young mind.

He clicked past the image of his father, leaving the feeling of anxiety it had brought behind. The soft clicks of his weathered hands on the keypad resumed their rhythmic tone, and the world continued around him.

The walls outside Alec's door groaned into the night, the life they held day after day silenced in the early hours, but the last room on the left was bursting with life. Life from years of growing and changing. Life from souls mingling and residing safely in one another. Life created by love so deep and pure that not even time itself could keep it confined to one single point.

Alec sat upright and alone in his room, but he had never felt so surrounded, surrounded by the memory of family and friends that he had never felt closer to than he did at that moment.

The Wilson Manor was silent tonight, but as the stream of blue light was snuffed out from under the door of the last room on the left,

the old halls had never been so alive.

NOIR
ARTWORK BY MADDIE RIZZUTO



18 x 20 in.
Charcoal on Paper

RIZZUTO 115

RAGS

ARTWORK BY JEZREEL CULASINO



18 x 24 in.
Charcoal on Paper

THE MACABRE TEA PARTY

ARTWORK BY OLIVIA KOWALCZYK



8 x 10 in.

Gelatin Silver Print

KOWALCZYK 117

FAREWELL

ARTWORK BY JEZREEL CULASINO



18 x 24 in.
Charcoal on Paper

118 HORIZONS

STARS

POETRY BY LYDIA QUATTROCHI

Stars defining darkness
darkness defining stars
the night is full of us

and though I raise
scanty rice from dark bowls
to my cracked lips
I believe in stars
that they will find a place
to be themselves only
an image free of darkness

and though I raise my pen of
dying ink
to write pages and pages
I believe
each word is a
soul
a beginning and end to itself
each word belongs to itself,
not to the page,
as stars do not belong to the rain
that hides their sad, indefinable faces.

Stars defining darkness
darkness defining stars
the night is full of us
though I am placid,
my words contained in my own mind,
I believe and hope I will see my words
chase all the winds
in changing canopies
laughing, running,
burning, fleeing
tearing pages

in a part of me
where there will
one day be stars.

DEAR DREAMER

FICTION BY BOW POLITOWICZ

Dear Dreamer,

You did something incredible, but you'll never remember it.

I don't have much time, however, I can't let you go without ever knowing all you did for me. You might find this odd and you may not even believe what I'm about to say.

Even still, hear me when I say this: you saved my life.

You woke up in my people's realm.

You called out to us with words I will never forget.

"Is anyone here?" you shouted, "Are you alright?"

I opened my eyes for the first time in so long. My body ached as I stumbled to my feet and hurried for the door of my house, or rather where my door used to be. My heart pounded, head rang, vision blurred. Everything screamed in my body for me to slow down, but I refused. My own smell made my eyes water, my deteriorating clothes stuck to my oily skin, and my hair stuck together in itchy clumps. What would they think if they saw me? I thought. But it didn't matter.

I needed to see. I needed to know it wasn't in my head.

And there you were.

Someone had entered our world again.

You stood, surveying our decrepit world. Your face etched with warm empathy that brought even more tears to my eyes.

You should know this had not happened in longer than we

"Our realm used to have fresh cotton-candy air, soft shiny grass, skies like an oil painting, joyous people[...]"

could remember. Our realm used to have fresh cotton-candy air, soft shiny grass, skies like an oil painting, joyous people...

And then there were the boxes.

These boxes filled the fields of our land, scattered like bright pink checks on a swaying fabric of green. Every morning, we would go out to unlock the boxes, open

them, and wait in sweet anticipation. Dozens after dozens of dreamers would lay, one in each box, asleep in their world, but traveling to our land.

Then they would open their eyes to wake and explore our world for themselves. We would showcase the limitless joys and wonders of our home so they could feel what we experienced every single day, and in return, they would go to a chamber in the heart of our land and grant us some of their power. That little amount of energy kept us and our land alive.

But then they stopped waking.

We continued to open our boxes day after day, week after week, year after year...but they would lay still. They basked in the glories of our realm in their minds, but allowed us nothing in return.

Then our death began.

The skies clouded. The grass perished. The air thickened and stank. Our boxes faded and cracked, no longer the cheerful blush they used to be.

Pain, like a plague, engulfed our people. Everyday our bodies weakened. Patience thinned. More and more, our anger inflamed. We choked on our torment.

I'm ashamed to admit it but... we tried to wake them by force.

We lifted the boxes' lids and screamed for them to open their eyes. We shook the boxes and struck the bodies of the travelers with what little remaining might we had.

They didn't twitch a muscle. They smiled in their sleep and would not wake. We gave up after that.

Staying in what was left of our homes, we slept to ignore the anguish as best we could. We stopped opening the boxes. Even if someone did come, one gift of power would not be enough to save us now. Perhaps capturing someone would rescue us, if we drained them of everything they could give. Still, we thought no one would ever wake up again.

Inching toward death affects the mind. It had ravaged ours. And we surrendered to it. But then you came.

You not only woke yourself, you opened your box. We didn't even know that to be possible. You came looking for us. You didn't care about the filth and stench that filled our world. You stepped into our fields of dead grass and gray skies without hesitation. What did you see that made you want to help? What could you sense in us? It couldn't have been good. We had lost that a long time ago.

We kidnapped you.

We imprisoned you.

We treated you like nothing.

You didn't fight us.

We told you why we needed you. We tried to convince ourselves that torturing you, stealing all your power, would bring us joy.

You still didn't fight us.

You said you understood. That now you knew why you were drawn here. That we were in trouble and needed help. Help that you could give.

We couldn't understand your want to help and willingness to suffer. Where did they come from? How had the world not stolen them from you, yet?

We decided to put you in the chamber and drain you of your life slowly over time. It would last us a long time, maybe even bring us to our full early glory.

Nonetheless, it would hurt you greatly and wouldn't even last us forever. But maybe, we thought, we could find a replacement before you died.

We tied you up and locked you inside what would one day be your coffin. You didn't say a word. You didn't do anything at all.

“We tried to convince ourselves that torturing you, stealing all your power, would bring us joy.”

My people left and went to rest, rejoicing that our pain would start to fade in the morning as the demise of our dreamer would begin.

But I couldn't sleep.

You haunted my mind.

I hated you.

I despised everything about you.

You reminded me of us. Before. And the only thing I hated more than you was what I had become.

“You reminded me of us. Before. And the only thing I hated more than you was what I had become.”

You came and forced me to remember something. I am writing this to remind you of something, as well.

You led me to recall what brought me joy in the first place. It's true I want to enjoy lush grass, clean air, fresh clothes again. I want to be happy in my home. But as much as I want to gain what I lost... I want more to never lose what little I still have. What is infinitely more important to me is my sense of self.

If I shut my eyes right now and decide to live at the expense of others, just like those dreamers who took everything from us, I will never be able to be happy with who I am. And this is why I carried you on my back and rested you upon the box you had so miraculously opened. And after I finish writing this, I will place it between your palms so that you will remember what you did for me, for us all, when you awake with it in your grasp.

I know this ending may disappoint you. No doubt, you wanted to save us. Yet, do not blame yourself for our eventual rest. Hurting you would not end our suffering, it would just pass it on to another. And when you died, we would be forced to find a new victim. I will not be a cog in such a cycle.

I have remembered the feeling of peace, which has felt so far for so long. My guilt is melting away. This is my saving. So now I will save you.

Even if you never recall me, my voice, my face, or my home, remember this: you, somehow, have this gift to do good. To be kind. I couldn't let that die, here, for our selfish gain. I beg you not to waste it. And don't let it hurt you either. Sometimes to save others, you must save yourself.

On behalf of us all, thank you. The stars in the sky have never looked so bright.

May you wake in peace,
Rithulen Keeper of the Keys

YOU DON'T DESERVE A NAME

POETRY BY CLAIRE CHEVALIER

Content Warning

This narrative depicts themes of sexual assault.

I was crying before, not that you could tell considering the torrential downpour surrounding me as I sat on the curb. Alone.

Seventeen years I had gone, walking these streets, playing outside – without a worry. Seventeen years.

But that summer even my mom said I should watch out. I was a “late bloomer” as she called them and for the first time, I actually looked my age.

So, there I was, on the corner of Hawk and Bloom, the two streets where our lives intersect. For you were on Hawk and I was on Bloom. So, I thought if I sat here, you’d come. I’m not sure if you ever did though.

Fifteen minutes into me sitting there I saw *It* walking down Bloom, towards me. I lived in a typical suburban neighborhood so naturally; I wasn’t too worried. I should have been.

It took slow, heavy steps that increased rhythmically will my heartbeat. *It* was tall, probably around 6 feet. A detail I should have remembered later.

It was finally at the curb, feet the size of my thigh and I know I’m not safe. But somethings keeping me frozen in place, and it’s you. The hope I have for you to come running down

your overgrown lawn to me, overpowers the fear and *It's* jagged breathing is giving me.

So, for a while, I did blame you, for not being there to protect me the way you always said you would. But the night I showed up to your door soaked in cheap vodka you told me that it wasn't. You said it was my fault for thinking everything happens the way it does in movies. You said this wasn't like the movies. You said I was nowhere near a movie star. After I drunkenly stumbled home, I thought about what you said. And I thought about what *It* said too.

"We're making a movie, you're my star". *Its* voice haunts me at times, times like these especially, times where you shut me out.

Looking in the mirror I realize I no longer want to be anyone's star, not even my own. I look at my long blonde hair that I'd been growing out since seventh grade, so you'd notice me. I grab a pair of scissors and debate this. It seems too easy to just cut it all off.

It seems too *painless*.

For the next two hours I scream as I rip patches of my hair out of my head, leaving some, hacking some. My face is dripping with tears, and I can't see anything through the blurred vision my mascara has caused. I take off all my makeup and look at myself, hideous.

Now I am no one's star.

I dropped out of school two weeks later. Mom said it

was doing more harm than good. But she didn't know that it was the only time I got to see you. That those glances through the crowded hallway are all I have left of you, and she took that away.

I feel anger towards anyone around me. Mom tried to take me to counseling. Her name was something boring, Dorothy or whatever. She asked the same question as everyone else.

"What happened to you, Catherine"? Even my own name disgusted me. Mom occasionally slips up and calls me Cat, the nickname you gave me in second grade when I brought my cat to school on accident. You thought it was hilarious. From that point on, I was Cat. I liked being Cat. I was happy with being Cat. Until *It* ripped away everything about me, including my name.

"Purr for me, kitty".

I am no longer Cat.

Mom keeps trying to get me to go out with her. She wants to go out to eat. She wants to go to the mall. She wants me to call my friends back.

I can't leave the house, *It's* still out there. They haven't caught *It* yet. *It* could be anywhere. *It* can't be in my attic though. The room where you first told me you loved me. Also, the room where you said it the last time.

You couldn't handle this, and I can't either.

I woke up in the middle of the night to a banging on my window, I thought *It* was here. That *It* somehow got past the

police car parked in front. My puffy bloodshot eyes squinted to see if my mind was playing tricks on me. They weren't. You were there. It was cold outside, you were shivering.

"Cat....."

Didn't you learn anything?

"Don't call me that", my voice is shaking, and my mind is full of memories of you.

"Cat – sorry – Catherine, what did you do to your hair"?

The expression on your face showing disgust and fear.

I had forgotten.

I had forgotten that people don't expect you to look like this. I had forgotten that emotional trauma isn't supposed to become a physical attribute you now live with.

I didn't know how to answer. How could you understand? Our brief encounter ends with me stammering and slamming my window shut. I am in tears, clawing at my skin. *It's* voice on a constant loop in my head.

"I'll never forget you".

A FOND FAREWELL

NON-FICTION BY PAT MILLER

Have you ever had a moment with someone that could change you in the greatest way possible, only for them to be gone? That is how I met Weston Tolliver. In 2017, in the middle of summer, my cousin named Jesse and I were excited and planned to be able to go to one of the biggest events in the state at the time. Chicago Open Air. It was a huge heavy metal music festival hosted at Toyota Park in Bridgeview and had huge named acts playing, and gourmet food catered for three whole days. After countless amounts of begging and busting my ass in school to get the needed grades the months prior, I finally had that chance.

It was my first festival and I had worn my usual black band t-shirt with a hideously illegible font with even more hideously drawn art and a jean jacket I had cut the sleeves off with scissors and had handsewn several colorful embroidered patches of various bands and artists I liked for that show. On the way over, however, Mom was extra cautious and had “prepped” my cousin and me about her “expectations” in her broken way of speaking “Spanglish.” Talking about where we should be, what to do in emergencies, that we were not to drink or do drugs, and where to meet after. She made exceptional care to especially drill how I am supposed to “take care of” Jesse since he was visiting us in the states from the city of Toluca in Michoacan, Mexico. He and I had wordlessly looked at each other and agreed that would not be the case. I was 17 and he was 16 and the venue was going to be the safest part of the whole town.

On that car ride over she had made her point across and started to talk to Jesse about his potential career choices. He had figured it out saying he was planning to become a doctor, when she had gone to me, I just looked up confused for a moment before she asked again “What are you planning to do when you get out of school hijo?” she said. “I don’t know” I responded. “You

like to argue with me all the time. You should become a lawyer or something," she joked as she pulled onto the street that led to the stadium. "I don't think I want to be a lawyer..." "Well, what do you want to do then mi vida?" She asked "You are smart you can do a lot. It will help the family." I wanted to say something at the time and let out the frustrations I had with her. It was better to remain silent, that way I could avoid an intense shouting match that would happen every time she tried to bring up the topic, only to have her decide to ground me and ruin Jesse and I's fun.

Both of us waited to get in, it was early in the morning, but once we entered the gate and went up the stairs of the stadium it all became a haze of suffocating heatwaves, we met up with friends who were going to be there and had sticky brown sugary drinks, and not-so gourmet food as the show advertised. I felt like my body was entering into a crash from sonic overload from the heavy beating of double bass drums, squealing guitars, the low demonic screaming, and angelic singing of the bands. It was all contrasted by the bright burning bright yellow, blue, green, and red heat-inducing stage lights, pulsing lasers, and the loud crackling firework displays.

When the concert started to reach its apex, playing its last bands I felt finally worn down and told Jesse I wanted to leave early. He had told me he wanted to stick with the friends we met up with and that he would catch up with me at that restaurant we discussed earlier with Mom, and I left. I passed through crowds like going through a raging river flowing downstream the same stairs we took to get into the venue and after some careful maneuvering, I suddenly felt major relief was over me. The air was much colder than inside the venue, and the sun finally started to set, creating orange, purple, and red streaks. It was a Zen-like serenity that I took the moment to appreciate only to return to that reality and start walking across the gravel parking lot that surrounded the stadium.

When I had gotten to the restaurant, I had taken the time to look at its exterior. It was a Mexican restaurant made from simple concrete and decorated with pale blue and white signs called Taqueria Los Magueyes. In English they advertised “the best steaks” and the rest was in Spanish which I stubbornly refused to learn at the time. I sat there and contemplated going in – briefly interrupted by a woman going around and begging, carrying around a brown paper bag and holding a yellow box of various candies including strings of cow-tails. She came up and laid on the guilt thick and me being the push-over and no experience in that “tactic” I opened my wallet and gave whatever few spare dollars I had left over.

After waiting around a lot longer, it finally got too cold for me, and hunger started to creep in. I decided to finally go into the restaurant and finally get something else to eat. The restaurant had a warm ocean-like blue and green interior with seashell designs and watery waves. I was sat down by a host and looked through their menu when I realized that everything on their menu was not small. On their beverage menu, everything was huge, they advertised massive chalices of bloody orange liquid with tens of shrimps along the rims of their cups. They also showed off whole crimson lobsters on a massive tan porcelain plate. Not the tails, not just the claws. Massive whole lobsters.

All the choices I could make out that were not written in Spanish were overwhelming, but the items on that menu were more expensive than I expected, and I only had a small amount of money left over in the budget for that day. When the waiter came and asked me what I would like I tried my best to verbalize I wanted water and a simple tostada meal, which is simply a hard-shelled flat-fried corn taco that was loaded up and spread out with refried beans, lettuce, peppers, and cheese. Being a fussy eater, I knew I would have to pick most of it all out. The waiter came back with that ice-cool water, and I suddenly felt a massive

wave of relief and finally relaxed all the tension from the festival.

"Hey man." I looked over from where I sat and in front of me was a tall, muscular, tanned man with black hair tied up neatly in a hair bun. He also wore a black band T-shirt with black sunglasses hanging loosely around the neck of his shirt. He smiled and asked, "How's it going?" I paused and responded flatly "Nothing much, just got back from that concert over there..." I started to tense up and feel awkward again. "Oh, yeah? I had to get out there as well. I was starving man, but my friends really wanted to see KISS." He smiled warmly and took a bite of his food as I nodded in the affirmative, listening but cautious and hoping my food was coming. I looked over and said "Yeah, I am not a major fan either, so I just took off early. Now I am waiting for my cousin and Mom to come to pick me up." He ate his food and then waved me over, motioning me to sit down with him. I did. "Weston" "I'm Patrick." He took a final bite of food, wiped his hands with a napkin, and offered his hand and I shook it. "Pleasure to meet you, Patrick." he started to eat again, and we started talking casually, the waiter came out with my plate of food, saw I had moved seats and then looked to Weston and asked him "Is he bothering you?" Weston assured the waiter I was cool.

Because of my palate, I did not really get to enjoy or really savor or remember what I ate. I remember how it looked, especially after the avalanche of veggies, and spicy peppers started to pile next to the vibrant nuclear waste green of guacamole, but I was more interested in who Weston was. I was immersed in our conversation and saw him as someone who was awesome. He and I talked about coming to see the awesome bands and having an exciting time. I learned he was from out of state and came with his own friends. He offered me more food and offered to pay. I really felt blessed as I ended up with something more delicious. A charbroiled steak with rice, refried beans, and grilled jalapeno pepper.

We talked for what felt like hours but was only a fleeting

moment as we discussed our shared politics and chatted about movies and music. Weston began to open up to me and discussed his history and life in the Marine Corps – joining right after 9/11 and being a part of the Invasion of Iraq and his future careers. He talked to me about how he joined the MMA as a sport to release his aggression. He rode motorcycles which I thought was exceptionally cool. He was a part of several charities working with the homeless, a Big Brother program for urban youths who need positive role models, and Toys for Tots. I was completely enamored with his story. He was a stranger but the way we talked, and his stories made me feel inspired and motivated.

As I sat and chewed through that juicy steak he sat up and asked me “Well Pat, what about you? You’re young, what are you doing? What do plan to do?” I remembered what happened earlier that day with my mom in the car. Suddenly the comfort and calm were ruined by tension and sudden anxiety and stress. She was from Mexico, she immigrated and met my dad, and he always accepted that I felt like I did not belong in the careers Mom was choosing for me. I realized it came from cultural stigma to ensuring the children can support the family and be successful. I answered honestly. “I don’t really know. I guess I’m going to be a lawyer? It’s what my mom wants, my cousin is being a doctor, but I am more interested in art. Movies and writing.” Weston scratched at the table, looked at me, and then spoke “Well...” he began, letting it linger in the air. “In my experience, I always believed you shouldn’t just do something for the sake of just doing it. You also shouldn’t just do it for the sake of payment or something to make someone else happy like that. You should do something that changes people for the better. Something that makes them feel good or helps the most people you can. Always try to make a positive difference to someone, whether you or they know it or not.”

Looking back, it seemed obvious but at that moment. I felt that

sense of nirvana again. Calm Zen-like serenity. A unique way of thinking that resonated with me. The restaurant felt like it was in a lull after that. The water tasted even better. Weston generously picked up the check for the both of us, we exchanged Facebooks and we walked out. It was still cold as the sun had finally set. Weston stayed with me longer as my cousin Jesse met up with me finally and Weston would leave. "If you ever want to just talk, just do it. I want to know what you end up doing and how you are changing someone's world." He said as he left.

Years later, I still occasionally think about that weekend. A lot happened that weekend, I met Ozzy Osborne and saw a lot of great acts and met more wonderful and colorful characters. The chaos of the concert became calmer. Importantly, I still remember Weston and our conversations in that restaurant. To this day, his coolness, charm, and stories of his experiences inspired me greatly and he became a role model to me. I wanted to check on him and see how he was doing lately.

I learned he died Tuesday, March 23rd, 2021. I felt like I had taken that moment for granted, I felt devastated to know he was gone. To everyone who knew him closer than I had so many more memories and kindness for him. I just felt hollow, feeling guilt and regret because I did not check on him as often as I felt I should have. I believe Weston, however, would say something I would find profound and would tell me to keep going forward. I will always remember the chaos of the concert, the summer heat, and Taqueria Los Magueyes. More importantly, I will always remember Weston.

CICADAS

NON-FICTION BY LILIAN DRENTHE

They first came around when I was little.

It was summer— always in the summer— when the air would be humid and suffocating, easy for them to capture and slide between their wings to incite their cacophony of screeches. All the while, blue-collar workers busied about outside various homes and stores, maneuvering machinery that beeped constantly in a rhythm to provide for the groans of metal as its melody.

It was always throughout the summer when people would stand around and chat with shapely ground meat sizzling over whipping flames that popped and crackled until they would silence themselves, only to stare up at the sky as more flames whistled their way through the air, snapping into an outburst that shattered eardrums.

The cicadas visited then too, even when I was already inside, little, trying not to cry as I attempted to shield my tender ears from these frightening sounds.

This was fine, of course; when there was no school to fill in the arid, empty void that was summer, people found their own ways to provide the boisterousness that children in containment would bring.

Except I started witnessing more cicadas as I got older, rather than the expected disbursement of them.

When the air got colder they never seemed to leave, taking residence in the resonance of tubas and sousaphones, buzzing about the air whistling from flutes and mishandled clarinets, duddering about drums as mallets slammed back and forth, back and forth, one two, one two...

The once joyful rowdiness of the academic lifestyle drowned me as pre-teens twice my size bustled about the hallways, those same insects flying across my vision from the mouth of a peer who barked a wakeful laugh.

And even in the dead of winter when it was cold, stale, without the thick sultry air and the constant outdoor barbeques, I began

to hear them humming through the walls with the beat of never-ending festive tunes that rang congruent chants of holiday cheer.

Sitting down for Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve dinner only rested once to say grace, then the cicadas found a new interest in hovering over the dinner table, buzzing with my aunts as they chattered endlessly about the neighborhood, family, and holidays, and I would gobble down my food hoping politics would never be mentioned; the cicadas would shift their tune to sharp, harsh chirps with heavy pauses of disagreement, and the air would become summer-heat suffocating, but for a different reason.

This would start to leak into any family gathering. I blamed myself immediately and tried to segregate myself from my rambunctious family members and, therefore, the cicadas. But my little cousins, innocent, who I try desperately not to blame for their behavior, would follow me and bring the cicadas with them.

A shriek of joy or temper? Another cicada squirmed through their vocal cords and towards me. Endless cries of a tantrum because of toys or sweets that they already had too much of? The cicada released from their throat screamed, and all present cicadas screamed with them. I felt little again, hearing fireworks for the first time. I wanted to scream at them, I wanted to cry and huddle into a ball, I wanted to lash out and strike and smack and have my own tantrum. I wanted to be five again so I could tell someone about the vermin infesting my ears and life, I wanted someone to make them go away.

But I couldn't do something like that. Not to my peers at school who I already felt ostracized by during my middle school years when I would take note of cruel snickers and annoyed looks that I didn't want to see again if— or when— I broke down. Not to my aunts, uncles, and Nana, who care for me, even when they didn't understand, because they were family and I still loved them, and I didn't want to risk the possibility of snarling at them when they'd heartily try to help in vain, or glance at me with perplexion in their eyes because of how mad I sounded. And I sure as hell never wanted to hurt my little cousins, who became who they are now because of parental influence and not of their own accord. So, I

would silently stew with my infestation around me.

But it was getting worse. When my parents would arrive home or need help with something, they'd whoop with the sound of my mother's shouts as she called up to say hello, and suddenly I'm irritable instead of welcoming. This would also happen when I'd be playfully teased by my father or asked to do a simple chore, and I couldn't stop myself from snapping at them as just a couple of those bothersome bugs crawled up the back of my neck, making my hair stand up.

I'd apologize afterward, even though sometimes I selfishly didn't want to. But I was convinced that it was my fault and that there was something wrong with me, and when my mom told me this was normal it only made me more frustrated. How can it be normal to want to scream at your little cousins for being kids? How is it normal to become resentful towards loved ones during the holidays just for talking amongst each other?

I knew she was trying to help. She didn't want me to feel like I was crazy. I learned later, when she was overloaded at work, she heard and saw the cicadas, too. And I started to talk to her more about my cicadas, and she would talk about hers, too.

And slowly I built a circle.

I became closer to my older cousin, who I've known all my life, and I noticed that she had her own cicadas, tied to unspoken events that caused her to become as quiet as she is now. We would talk about what was bothering us, we'd rant through messages so our friends wouldn't be alerted because we still had that part of us that didn't want to become bothersome. But we found refuge in each other so we wouldn't break down from the buzzing in our heads.

The rest of my friends helped as well. The few good people from high school I'm still connected with deal with cicadas all the time. They try to put earbuds in to block them out, or everyone tries to collectively quiet everyone down. Success is limited, but there are good days and better days when we succeed.

CWC Is On Discord!

Join our Discord Server:



Contact Dan Portincaso at: dportincaso@waubonsee.edu
Webpage: www.waubonseeclubwritingclub.wordpress.com

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The Creative Writing Club is 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 sometimes travels to a national writing conference. Join us!

Hybrid Meetings:

Every Wednesday 12:30
P.M. – 1:30 P.M

Check with Student Life
Office (STC 126) for room
location.

Zoom:

<https://waubonsee.zoom.us/j/94068124898>

Meeting ID: 940 6812 489



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