

Breaking Ground 2022



EPIPHANY  
AND  
RENAISSANCE



This edition of *Breaking Ground* is the collaboration of  
the Spring 2022 English 175 Class.

Professor Virginia Shirley  
Hannah Foster ♦ Gavin Hlavac  
Jolyenna Johnson ♦ Tyler Rizzo  
McCain Rowland ♦ Larry Shafer  
Alanah Simenkiewicz ♦ Elizabeth Wrighter  
Calvin Yardley

Acknowledgement also goes to Professor Christopher Origer and  
the students in the Spring 2020 English 175 Class for their contributions.

*breaking ground 2022*

# *Epiphany and Renaissance*

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Please direct all correspondence to:

Professor Virginia Shirley, Editor  
*Breaking Ground*  
Department of English  
SUNY Broome Community College  
P.O. Box 1017  
Binghamton, NY 13902  
email: shirleyvl@sunybroome.edu

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## **Thanks/Grazie/Danke/Merci/ Mam'noon!!!**

None of what you're holding in your hands would have been possible without the above and beyond, tireless, cheerful, and amazing work of Rose Pero. Rose, you're the best! I also wanted to thank former Faculty Editor Chris Origer for his generous guidance and for making this such an easy transition for me. Thanks to the silent editors who didn't want to be mentioned (but you know who you are, so Thanks!) Thanks to the many contributors from all over campus (and the alumni beyond) who sent in their work and waited patiently through the process. Some of them have been waiting since 2020 - the last time the magazine was supposed to be published. Thank You to the Eng 175 Class of 2020 who took things as far though the process as they could, and left us with a great body of work to choose from. Finally, I want to thank the Eng 175 Class of 2022 for their incredible dedication. They took a massive amount of work and honed it down to this year's publication.

# DUALITY AND OPPOSITION

≈ CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS ≈

## *Breaking Ground 2023*

Send us your best original poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, memoirs, artwork, photography, or graphic stories for our annual theme issue. As with past issues the only criteria are vividness, vitality, depth of thought and expression and, above all, excellence. Open to all SUNY Broome students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The theme of the 2023 issue is Duality and Opposition.

*Reading and Submission Period:*

September 1, 2022 to March 20, 2023

For complete submission guidelines, and to submit your creative work during the submission period, go to [www2.sunybroome.edu/english/breakingground/](http://www2.sunybroome.edu/english/breakingground/)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Jojo Johnson – <i>The Island (photograph)</i> .....	Front Cover
English 175 Creative Writing Class of Spring 2022 .....	Inside Front Cover
Epiphany and Renaissance.....	ix
Alayne Schaffer - <i>Lazy Day (photograph)</i> .....	Opposite Page 1
Alli Baumgart - <i>The Secret Everyone Knows About (poem)</i> .....	1
Abigayle Bennett - <i>Converse (fiction)</i> .....	2
Kristen Bensen - <i>Song of Adoration (poem)</i> .....	3
Gavin Hlavac – <i>Down Town (photograph)</i> .....	5
Logan Blakeslee - <i>The Stoker Street Horror (fiction)</i> .....	6
Robert Brimer - <i>The Importance of Elections (non-fiction)</i> .....	11
Deb Hibbard – <i>Ask Questions (photograph)</i> .....	12
I. J. Byrnes - <i>The Books of Revelation (fiction)</i> .....	13
Kelsey Cherevko - <i>Finally Incompatible (poem)</i> .....	19
David Chirico - <i>Where Does the River Begin (non-fiction)</i> .....	21
David Chirico - <i>Who Turned on the Light (non-fiction)</i> .....	23
Hope English - <i>All Grown Up (poem)</i> .....	25
Hope English - <i>Broken Heart (poem)</i> .....	26
Mary Seel – <i>Deconstructing (photograph)</i> .....	27
Hope English - <i>Chroma (poem)</i> .....	28
Hope English - <i>Temor (poem)</i> .....	29
Alexandra Georgoudes – <i>Grandiose (photograph)</i> .....	30
Hope English - <i>Where They Are (poem)</i> .....	31
Wilmer Estevez - <i>War Stories (non-fiction)</i> .....	32
Rose Pero – <i>In Sickness and In Health (photograph)</i> .....	33
Hannah Foster – <i>The Library (fiction)</i> .....	34
Michael Fuller - <i>Blood of the Aisne (poem)</i> .....	39
Michael Fuller - <i>Isolate (poem)</i> .....	40
Michael Fuller - <i>Solitary Star (poem)</i> .....	41
Moses Griffith - <i>Dear Present Me (poem)</i> .....	42

Richard Schleider – <i>Humbling Process (photograph)</i> .....	43
Moses Griffith - <i>Empathetic Hunter (fiction)</i> .....	44
Moses Griffith - <i>Life is a Play (poem)</i> .....	48
Moses Griffith - <i>Our Birthday (fiction)</i> .....	49
Moses Griffith - <i>The Red Door (poem)</i> .....	50
Mike Grubb - <i>Go Boil Some Water (fiction)</i> .....	51
Deb Hibbard - <i>21st Century Mind (poem)</i> .....	55
Deb Hibbard - <i>Spring (non-fiction)</i> .....	56
Gavin Hlavac - <i>The Saccharine Taste of You (poem)</i> .....	58
Gavin Hlavac - <i>The Warmth of His Arms (fiction)</i> .....	60
Lyndsay Jeffries - <i>Road Trip to the Future (fiction)</i> .....	62
Jojo Johnson - <i>My Underestimated Provider (poem)</i> .....	67
Joshua Lewis - <i>An Old Man Looking Out His Window Musing (poem)</i> .....	68
Joshua Lewis - <i>The Nature of Desire (poem)</i> .....	69
Joshua Lewis - <i>The P.Z.C. Haiku Sequence (poem)</i> .....	70
Joshua Lewis - <i>The Words Between Us (poem)</i> .....	71
Sushma Madduri - <i>Renascence (poem)</i> .....	72
Molly Mahon - <i>I Are Knee (poem)</i> .....	74
Kaylee Maietta - <i>The Emerald Enlightenment (non-fiction)</i> .....	75
Alex McCollum - <i>Spectrum (non-fiction)</i> .....	77
Gloria McCormick - <i>A Spectacular Job Opening (poem)</i> .....	79
Calvin Yardley – <i>Saint’s Offering (photograph)</i> .....	80
Matthew Nowakowski - <i>What the Hell Happened &amp; How Did I Get Here? (non-fiction)</i> ...81	
Chris Origer - <i>Factory Seconds (fiction)</i> .....	85
Albert Durkee – <i>Rust Belt Binghamton (photograph)</i> .....	88
Alexandra Perez - <i>Can You Hear the Colors? (fiction)</i> .....	89
Catalina Ramirez - <i>All Death Sees (fiction)</i> .....	91
Lee Reynolds - <i>Moment (poem)</i> .....	94
Tyler Rizzo - <i>The Oakwood Guardian (poem)</i> .....	96
Julia Rosen - <i>Bruise (poem)</i> .....	97
Julia Rosen - <i>Cemail (poem)</i> .....	98
McCain Rowland - <i>Frozen Garden (fiction)</i> .....	99
Mary Seel – <i>Hope (photograph)</i> .....	102
Morgan Russo Phelp - <i>Falling (poem)</i> .....	103



Morgan Russo Phelps – <i>Growth (poem)</i> .....	104
Dustin Schmidt - <i>Merit Badge (non-fiction)</i> .....	105
Caeden Schneider - <i>What a Word Means to Me (non-fiction)</i> .....	106
Larry Shafer - <i>Into the Forest (poem)</i> .....	109
Larry Shafer - <i>My Hello (fiction)</i> .....	110
Alli Baumgart – <i>After (photograph)</i> .....	112
Virginia Shirley - <i>Anansi I (poem)</i> .....	113
Alexandra Georgoudes – <i>Bound (photograph)</i> .....	115
Virginia Shirley - <i>Dynah/Dinah (fiction)</i> .....	116
Alanah Simenkiewicz - <i>X/6 (fiction)</i> .....	121
Sissy Slick – <i>Diego (fiction)</i> .....	123
Grant Stewart - <i>Red to Black (poem)</i> .....	127
Taneer Middleton – <i>Inflation (graphic)</i> .....	128
Grant Stewart - <i>Gimmie Gimmie (poem)</i> .....	129
Grant Stewart - <i>Room 101 (poem)</i> .....	130
Grant Stewart – <i>Stay (poem)</i> .....	131
Gavin Hlavac – <i>Bird (photograph)</i> .....	132
Danielle Stilloe - <i>Invisible Disability (poem)</i> .....	133
Danielle Stilloe - <i>Shifting (poem)</i> .....	136
Danielle Stilloe – <i>Zuccolo (poem)</i> .....	137
Alayne Schaffer – <i>Alone (photographer)</i> .....	139
Amanda Tierney - <i>Captive (non-fiction)</i> .....	140
Alex Travers - <i>Blind (poem)</i> .....	143
Alex Travers - <i>In Ishtar's Arms (poem)</i> .....	144
Alex Travers - <i>Light That Burns the Sky (poem)</i> .....	146
Alex Travers - <i>Star in the Sky (poem)</i> .....	147
Desiree Watson - <i>The Nature Walk (poem)</i> .....	149
Sophia Werner - <i>Childhood – (poem)</i> .....	150
Alayne Schaffer – <i>Free (photograph)</i> .....	152
Sophia Werner - <i>On Writing (poem)</i> .....	153
Mark Williamson - <i>Grateful (poem)</i> .....	155
Mark Williamson - <i>Kaaba (poem)</i> .....	156
Mark Williamson - <i>Morning Prayer (poem)</i> .....	157
Sushma Madduri – <i>New Beginnings (photograph)</i> .....	158

Susan Woerner - <i>For This One Thing She Asks of Them (fiction)</i> .....	159
Jarred Woodward - <i>Anxiety's Anthem (poem)</i> .....	160
Jarred Woodward – <i>Memories (poem)</i> .....	162
Jarred Woodward - <i>To the Boy In the Small, White House (poem)</i> .....	163
Calvin Yardley - <i>Introduction () Postulation (fiction)</i> .....	164
Calvin Yardley - <i>Visitation (poem)</i> .....	168
Calvin Yardley - <i>Vexation (poem)</i> .....	170
Calvin Yardley - <i>Veneration (poem)</i> .....	172
Calvin Yardley - <i>Seniority (photograph)</i> .....	174

Special Color Insert

- 1. Abigayle Bennett ♦ Insimplicity
- 2. Richard Schleider ♦ Literal and Metaphorical
- 3. Calvin Yardley ♦ Arbor of Phoenix
- 4. Alli Baumgart ♦ Play
- 5. Taneer Middleton ♦ They're Back
- 6. Abigayle Bennett ♦ Lollipop
- 7. Rose Pero ♦ Heaven on Earth
- 8. Deb Hibbard ♦ End of the World. Beginning of Another.

Notes on Contributors .....	176
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Deb Hibbard – <i>Tunnel (photograph)</i> .....	Inside Back Cover
Deb Hibbard– <i>Diane (photograph)</i> .....	Back Cover

# EPIPHANY AND RENASCENCE

Pssst.....WE'RE BAAA-AAACK!

One of my students said that COVID 19 was like an uninvited, unruly relative who just wouldn't go away. What you're holding in your hands, and, hopefully, reading, is the result of that annoying guest who couldn't take a hint. In 2020, the theme of the unpublished magazine was Epiphany. From then to now, we've had many of those. From fighting with an ever-morphing virus to learning how to live in quarantine, work from home, use Zoom, and laughing at those who couldn't figure out how to turn their cat face filter off, we had a lot of time to process.

Now it's 2022 (the year George Jetson will be born) and we're getting back to normal. We're resuscitating our old lives, trying on our old routines with new spins. People are repurposing old masks and turning them into quilts, ballgowns, and lampshades. (Or having 70s style burn your mask parties). The new theme of Breaking Ground is Renascence, which kind of sums up our lives and the fact that the magazine has finally come back into print.

Epiphany and Renascence is a creative blend of our history through the Pandemic. It is full of discovery and resurgence. Insight and rebirth. Vision and revival. I, and the English 175 class of 2020 and 2022 hope you enjoy it.

Virginia Shirley  
Faculty Editor, Breaking Ground  
2022

Rose Pero  
Staff Editor  
2022

*Breaking Ground 2022 Awards*

\$100 First Prize for Front Cover  
Jojo Johnson: The Island

\$75 Second Prize for Back Cover  
Deb Hibbard: Diane

*Breaking Ground* 2022 Honorable Mention

Poetry: Temor by Hope English

Fiction: Stoker Street Horror by Logan Blakeslee

Non-Fiction: Induction () Postulation by Calvin Yardley



Lazy Day | Alayne Schaffer

## The Secret Everyone Knows About

---

ALLI BAUMGART

And you just sit there,  
An exotic insect in a swarm of bees,  
Entangled  
in that singular moment of realization,  
You can see right through them

Voices carry across the room,  
Loud and soft  
Low and high  
Yet all the same pitch,  
So different, so similar  
Like a secret everyone knows about

All of them,  
Buzzing  
Smiles, stories, and laughs,  
You're watching from a distance now,  
A secret everyone knows about

Then you feel a soft touch on your shoulder,  
Bouncy words bring you back,  
A friendly smile reels you in,  
And eyes radiate  
the importance of the secret,  
The secret everyone knows about

And before you know it,  
You're a bee.

## Converse

---

ABIGAYLE BENNETT

The thinly defined red, white, and blue stripes stretch across the muddied souls of the worn-out converse sneakers. The logo stuck on the light brown rubber of the heel has begun to dissipate, leaving only a raised piece of slightly blue plastic left to tell their story. The white fabric of the toes has begun to tear, and the reason as to why is left untold. The frayed laces lay limp on each side of the aged sneakers, meeting together in a loosely tied bow in the middle. The body of the size eight shoe covering up mismatched pink and yellow socks.

The story of these meaningful shoes is yet to be discovered, and can only be found through the pits of imagination. Why these particular shoes? How many rugged mountains have these traveled shoes climbed? How many long miles have they walked? How many stories have they narrated? How many benevolent things have they seen?

Perhaps these worn out sneakers have been hiking in the mountains of Guatemala; where they stumbled on porous rocks and sprained the ankle of their unfortunate wearer. Or maybe they've sprinted down 5th avenue in New York City to catch a missed bus that would take them to the job interview that would change a life forever. Have they helped save a young child's life? Have they seen one lost? What unimaginable things have they seen?

What if these experienced shoes are hand me downs, and have the tales of two owners to tell? Tales of smelly feet, spilled tomato soup, and nights out on the town. Perhaps these shoes have stepped in deep puddles, and seen endless ripples accumulate into waves. In a past life, they may have seen heartbreak dissolve their owner into tears. Maybe they helped a teenaged girl attempt to run away. Or perhaps they were left in a crowded closet during a disastrous flood.

The story of these shoes will never be perfectly told. But I ask you this; how do shoes affect your story? Is life different for a magazine editor in NYC, who wears high designer heels every day; a different pair from each day of the week? Than it is for a migrant farm worker from Mexico, who has had the same pair of work boots since he was sixteen? What role do our shoes play in the diversity of our lives? ∞



## Song of Adoration

---

K R I S T E N   B E N S E N

Every day we walk past one another  
Consumed with ourselves  
We look but do not see.

All around us is beauty. All around us  
Beauty and pain, pride and shame.  
Every one of us stitched together.

Someone is chopping down a tree, building  
A cabin in the woods, fixing a flat,  
Dreaming of a brighter future

Someone is questioning their ability  
With a pen and blank piece of paper  
With a paint brush, a palette, a canvas

A man takes his daughter to the park  
A sailor consults the stars  
An officer executes a warrant

We rendezvous willingly in glances, glances  
Sharp or longing, direct or sideways,  
Glances to attract, glances to distract

We walk on wayward roads, paths  
of trespassers and of others who said  
There has to be an easier way

I know we are better than this  
We have to try and trust each other  
We are all pushing boulders up hills

Sing it out loud: we all feel so alone  
Missing those who've passed before us  
Inhaling the mist of ghosts

Who designed the bridges and built the roads  
Mile by mile from east to west; they worked,  
ate, drank, fucked, slept, and did it all over again.

Adoration. My eyes meet yours and I smile  
I adore you and all of your layers  
I want to feed you.



Downtown | Gavin Hlavac

## The Stoker Street Horror

---

LOGAN BLAKESLEE

Through the winding pathways of my home city, past the sleek towers of the modern metropolis, there was a district that seemed boxed in on all sides and forgotten by the rest of the city at large. It was the smallest section, possessing neither the lucrative shopping centers, restaurants, nor tourist traps that urban centers typically thrive on. There were several apartment buildings and an old church, however, and it was there that I found myself most at home.

From an outsider's view, life on Stoker Street was not much different from dwelling in a slum, but that would be misleading. People did not know that most of the red-brick buildings were largely empty, and the apartment tenants were themselves perplexed as to how they stayed open. I paid no mind to the many quirks of this portion of town. I was accustomed to it. To me, the rest of the city was too crowded, too loud, too new. To have an old, quiet refuge was refreshing.

It was not poverty that plagued Stoker Street, it was the sense that it had been abandoned, and the occasional hoodlum that wandered in often got the impression that they had stumbled into some lost civilization. I suspected that this was due to the fact that its residents simply travelled to the other districts during the day, creating the odd image of a ghost town. Some trickled back into their apartments at differing hours, and traffic was never a major worry.

That being said, I walked by the Church of St. Felicity every day on my morning commute, or I would ride my bicycle if I were in a hurry. At times I glanced at the message board outside its mahogany doors, always a little astonished that the church was founded in 1881. It stood out for its indescribable architecture and the two gargoyles that patiently watched from the front corners of the building. For all of its antiquated charm, I never spotted more than half a dozen people enter the church at any given time, particularly Sundays.

It was on a late February evening, as I was returning home from the office, that I caught a glimpse of the priest as he readied to head home also. He seemed to be in no rush, so I waved to him, and he did likewise.

"Peace be with you," said the old man as he fixed his white collar. "How can

I be of assistance to you?”

“Forgive me Father-”

“Confession is tomorrow, I’m afraid.”

“I mean, forgive me for asking, but how does this place stay open? I hardly see anyone go in.”

The priest looked puzzled at the question. He gave it some thought and, with a grin, responded with, “Have you seen anyone leave?”

I shook my head, giving a nervous laugh at the priest’s odd sense of humor. He laughed in kind, before stretching out his arms as if he were about to give a sermon.

“The Lord has been kind to us. Even if only one person attended each week, I would happily preach to them as if they were a hundred. Perhaps you would like to join us this Sunday and see it for yourself. We even serve breakfast every now and then.”

It was a kind offer, but I politely declined. I failed to notice that he did not answer my question clearly, but my interest had faded. I simply wanted to get home as soon as possible.

I did not sleep easily in the nights that followed.

In my dreams, I saw the church again, but only this time it was larger, more ornate in its decoration like the basilica in Rome. The gargoyles now seemed all the more grotesque. They beat their daemon wings furiously as I passed, groaning and clawing at the sky from atop their stone perches, uttering blasphemies in tongues I could not understand. A chill wind blew with great force. I tried to run across the sidewalk with all my strength but could only muster a slow trudge.

I awoke only when I had made it to the other side of the street.

The nightmare repeated for a week. My colleagues made the occasional remark that my complexion had turned grey from weariness, but I did not want to listen. There had to be a rational explanation, and when I found it, all would be well. My morning walk became a jog, then a sprint as the stone-cold gaze from the church became unbearable.

I still found no peace in the night. Rationality frayed at the sight of the night-gaunts, each calling out to me as they flew manically in a starlit swarm. They were innumerable, hideous beasts with dripping fangs and dragon-like horns. In their faces I beheld some terrible mix of man and bat, always frozen

in a mad grimace. They beckoned me to enter the enormous sanctuary with their clawed fingers, yet I was set on my usual path down Stoker Street.

If there was any mercy in these dreams, it was that the gargoyles refrained from touching me. They shrieked and gnashed their granite teeth mere inches away from me as they flew, but thank God, they did not touch me.

As the weeks continued, I noticed small differences in each dream. The patterns of the gargoyles, the phases of the moon (always corresponding with its phase in reality), the architecture of the church (sometimes it was Gothic, other times it was Roman or Byzantine), the cause of these differences eluded me. The medications I was prescribed in increasingly large doses did not save me from sleep or the terror that came with it.

Suddenly I envied every insomniac to ever live in the city. I envied the hot-blooded youths who dwelled in the night as if it were natural to them. Still, I told no one of these dreams beyond passing remarks. My boss may have been pleased on the assumption that I was working excessively. I devoted myself to work as a distraction to hold me over until the night.

The final dream came to me three months after the first, and it proved to be the most horrible. The sky, once fitted with a thousand stars, was now a black void. The mountainous steeple of the church held up the enormity of the moon on the tip of its cross. The eyes of the gargoyles were no longer stone but alight with rage and fire. Below my feet was a thick layer of ice, which caused me to slip by the vast church doors to the delight of the winged beasts.

Their laughter was put to silence by the ear-splitting sound of the bells ringing overhead. I looked behind me and witnessed the sky fall like a dark shroud. Buildings and cars and lampposts were swallowed whole by this encroaching menace. I could no longer stand, so I crawled up the hallowed stairs and pounded on the doors with both fists. I screamed and begged and pleaded for whoever was there to let me inside. Turning my head back a second time, I saw the gargoyles glide into oblivion as locusts descend on fields.

The door, at last, opened and I was greeted with an infinite light.

The nightmares that had plagued me for so long finally ended. Perplexed by the sudden change in the ending, I ran to St. Felicity's and caught another glimpse of the priest. He looked self-assured and refined, whereas I looked like a man equally restless and mad. I dared not mention the contents of my dreams, but I had to know if there was a reason behind my wretched experience.

“Hello, Father!” I shouted.

“Good morning, my child.”

“Can you tell me what day it is?”

“Sunday, of course. Are you feeling well? You seem troubled.”

“You could say something like that.”

“Well,” said the priest. “Why don’t you come with me inside? We have some time before the rest of the congregation arrives.”

To enter this holy place was a surreal endeavor for me. I had tried for so long to escape it, and I had seen it in a vast array of forms. I counted twenty pews, and the altar at the far end was shrunken compared to those I had seen in other churches. There were seven stained-glass windows on each side that portrayed the Stations of the Cross. The images, at the time, blended together from one to the next. I had little comprehension of what they represented.

The priest’s voice put my mind to focus. “You are free to speak now.”

“I am curious about the history of this church. The style of this building is... not like what I’ve seen elsewhere.”

“Do you mean the architecture?”

“Yes,” I replied in a flat tone.

“Funny that you should inquire about that. There is an old urban legend regarding this church that I remember hearing from the bishop.”

I stammered, “Can you tell me what you heard?”

The priest paused in thought very briefly. “One of the artisans for this church went by the name of Henry Ames. He carved the statues on the rooftop, you see. One of the best craftsmen in the whole city. His work was so lifelike that residents began complaining that the gargoyles on top were watching them sleep through their windows. They came up with all kinds of stories, and eventually Henry caught wind of it.”

“What did he do about it?”

“At first, very little. He scolded the townspeople for being irrational and paranoid, but that didn’t stop folks from wanting the statues taken down. The city council ordered the church to make changes to the roof so that people would stop writing them panicked letters. Henry didn’t take it very well. He climbed to the top and told everyone, ‘If I see one chisel come up here, I’ll jump!’ Such was his pride.”

At that moment, I could tell where the priest’s story was going. Nevertheless, I sat quietly and let him go on.

“The fire department set up ladders when they saw Henry’s stunt. He had a

lot of hubris for an artist, but he was also a man of his word. He muttered some curse right before he leapt onto the pavement below. It was in the newspapers for weeks, and a big crowd showed up to his funeral. It was held right here, in this church.”

The priest crossed his arms as he finished the tale. If I had heard it three months prior, I would not have believed a single word. It is astounding on how matters of faith can shift with time. My astonishment lasted as I stayed for the service and contemplated everything that I was told. No description of Ames’ curse was spoken, and still the mystery ate away at me. I peered over dozens of records in the city library later that day, finding a great deal of proof for the dramatic death of Henry Ames, but none for his infamous curse.

By this point, I had grown tired of searching for answers. My life was returning to normal, and so were my dreams.

What more did I really need?

A year later I moved off Stoker Street and found a new apartment in the commercial district. It was everything that I had hoped to avoid previously; noisy, dense, and expensive. I never went back to St. Felicity’s, but I could never forget it despite badly wanting to. It was not only the memory that lingered with me in the time since my departure. The low rumble of the city seemed to whisper to me in the early morning hours. If the echoes carried any meaning, it was lost to me. It was just rambling.

On many days I feel a creeping dread at the unknown, which ignores man’s reason and forces us to witness all that is beyond control, beyond comprehension.

They have started to tap on my windows at night, urging me to join them in that fast-approaching oblivion. I keep it locked but the inevitable truth is that, someday, they will enter my home and take me away screaming in the twilight. I ponder if they are the true cause of Stoker Street’s morbid decline. I ponder if this is yet another vivid dream, the work of my imagination gone awry.

The tapping is getting louder.

At last, they have come for me. ☞



## The Importance of Elections

(FORMER) SGT ROBERT S BRIMER

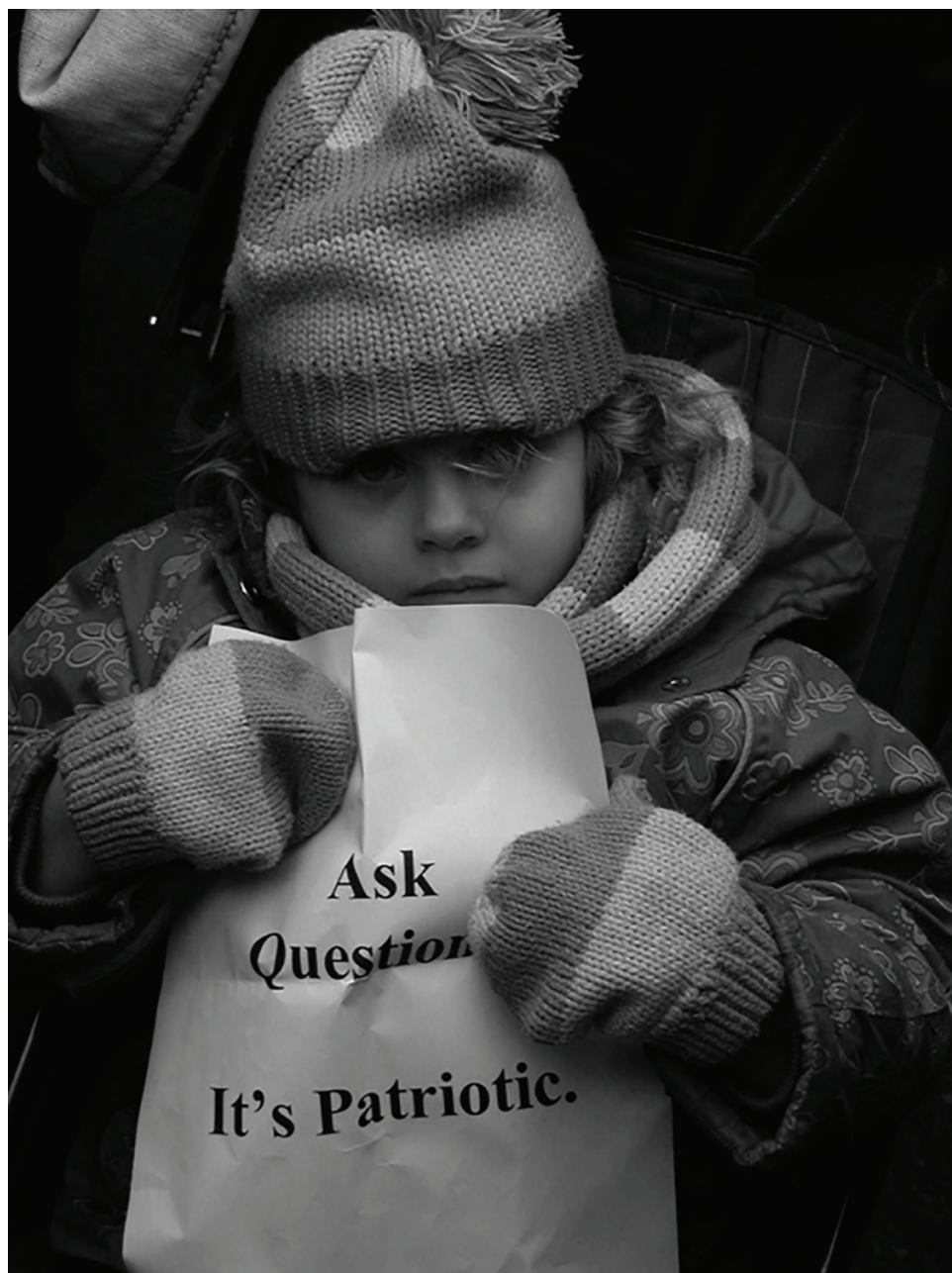
**D**uring my time in Iraq, I was the medic for roughly a dozen Combat Logistics Patrols. Of those missions, only one stands out in my mind as my proudest moment: The Iraqi Elections support mission.

On the 20th of February, 2010, I was assigned as one of two medics on the mission to bring “T-Wall” and “Jersey” barriers to a warehouse district. This warehouse area was designated as a location to store ballots once all the voting centers had been closed and voting had been completed. The mission took place during the day, which was rather bold considering the intent of our mission. We had to move the barriers from our location on Field Operatory Base Falcon to the warehouse district. While riding in the back of the vehicle, I could sense that all eyes were on us. As we rolled through the outskirts of Baghdad proper, we noticed campaign posters posted all over the place. Because they were not written in any language we could understand, we tried to guess what sort of promises the candidates were making to the people of Iraq. We even spotted recruiting posters for the Iraqi Police, Iraqi Army, and Iraqi Federal Police.

The mood on the convoy was tense because everyone was certain that if any convoy was ever going to be attacked outright, ours would be the one. All of the soldiers kept their heads on a swivel and called out anything that was suspicious in nature, which highlights the professionalism of everyone on that convoy. I don't think there was a soldier out there that day that would've accepted the mission failing for any reason.

Once we arrived at the warehouse district, it took a bit of time to get things sorted out. Our time on the ground was much longer than expected. The Iraqis were unloading the barriers and setting them in place where they wanted them to go; the true intent was to unload the barriers quickly so we could leave the area as fast as possible. The last barriers were finally unloaded very late in the evening. The outstanding self discipline of every soldier involved allowed us to return to Field Operatory Base Falcon free of accidents or incidents of any kind.

The Iraqi people voted in March of 2010, despite threats of violence leading up to the elections. The fact that the voting took place is a testament to the Iraqi people, and their desire to have a say in the future of their country. I am glad to have been a part of that mission, which gave the people of Iraq a chance to shape their future. ∞



Ask Questions | Deb Hibbard

## The Books of Revelation

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I. J. BYRNES

“Come in, come in,” my uncle said gruffly. My features solemnly composed, I entered the sanctum sanctorum Dear Uncle was a portrait of Righteous Old Age, a veritable Elder of Days set against the backdrop of his vast library, as unfamiliar to its owner as the bottom of King Midas’ least treasure chest was to him.

“Called you here to tell you I’m about to publish my memoirs.”

I nodded deferentially, the embodiment of the grateful peasants Dear Uncle would elevate with his memoir’s precious wisdom. Gratified by my acknowledgement that it would only be appropriate to sacrifice a fatted calf at this occasion or prepare some refreshment for three visitors whose GPS was anchored to an Eastern Star, Uncle soldiered on.

“There are some shocking revelations in the book that I need to discuss with you. You’re the last of the Atrians, and as my heir, it’s important you understand some very difficult decisions I made in the past.”

I readjusted my expression to convey interest with a soupçon of concern. I kept my body still, knowing from experience how annoying Axial Age deities found any human posture that did not involve kneeling, bowing, or lying prostrate in grief.

Dear Uncle stared into the distance. No doubt his former troops found this pose impressive and indicative of a great deal of internal reflection. I knew better.

“Thirty years ago, I came across a shocking confession. A confession of murder. You would have been about 10 years old and you will recall your grandmother had just died, presumably from an accidental overdose of her sleeping medication.”

I rearranged my features from concern to puzzlement, slightly tilting my head like the old general’s cocker spaniel lounging at my feet.

“To put it bluntly, your grandmother was murdered.”

Here I inhaled audibly and moved backward in my seat as if from a blow.

Methuselah continued, “Not only was she murdered. It was your older

brother, Ike, who murdered her.”

I widened my eyes and allowed my mouth to open slightly. Really, this pantomime was becoming tedious. Still, I stayed in character. I had my standards.

“No”, I said. My declaration was of the mildest sort. After all, I had to avoid even the merest suggestion that my own personal Jehovah was anything but infallible.

“It’s true”. Zeus proclaimed. “Ike wrote about...it...in that daily journal of his. You remember how popular those were back then.”

“Of course,” I nodded. Not a good idea to remind Baal how I had a journal of my own.

He-Without-Peer continued. “I’ll never forget the words I read that morning after I found your grandmother dead. The entry was dated the day before-all it said was, “Today I killed grandmother.”

Time for the money shot. I fell back in my chair and gasped, “But why?” I was a portrait of innocence betrayed. Compared to me, Dorothy Gale of Kansas would seem like a hard-bitten lord of a drug cartel.

Dear Uncle reminded me. “You know Ike had been fighting with your grandmother over his pot smoking and skipping school to hang out with those surfer bums. And boarding on those closed beaches with no life-guards.”

I nodded slowly as if gradually taking in the irrefutable truth of his words. “Yes, Ike was furious with Grand over being grounded-beached as it were.”

Lord-of-Lord and Host-of-Hosts shot me a disapproving look. Softly, softly. The old duffer might be Sherlock Clueless, but like all jealous gods, he was deeply suspicious of wit, humor, irony and sarcasm. These were the hallmarks of insurrections and threats to the throne.

“As shocking as this news is to you...Well, there’s more.”

Now, Dear Uncle shifted his massive leather chair so he was perpendicular to me as I sat in front of his acre of desk. Clearly avoiding eye contact, he offered me his hawk-like profiles to contemplate for my edification.

“You know I’ve always tried to be a father-figure to you since your parents’ car accident when you were a baby.”

Recognizing a prompt when I heard one, I swung my censer of incense in the Omnibenevolent One’s direction. “My only Mentor is right in front of me,” I chanted, while staring directly at the awesome book collection

behind Osiris.

Taking my worship as his due, the Tao found its voice and spoke, “That’s why it’s so important for you to understand what I had to do after I read what your 13-year old brother had written. I’ve had to make wrenching decisions in war zones, send young men to death and disfigurement.”

Those poor bastards, I thought silently, while playing the castrato-civilian to Dear Uncle’s Achilles. If only Homer had met up with Dear Uncle around the fires of the Greek camps, the Iliad would have been the ancient world’s equivalent of Catch-22.

Back to you, Hades. “But the decision I made on March 15\_\_\_\_was the most agonizing one I ever made. I had to act to protect the house of Atrian, our family name, our reputation.”

And your promotion to four-star general, I silently added.

“A scandal like that, your grandmother murdered at the hands of your brother, a bad seed, a young Cain in our midst...I had to think of you and my brother Joe, his wife Darla. But most of all, I had to protect you, Mark.”

I bowed my head in adoring appreciation, straining to convey, without words, that Job and Hercules would have considered themselves blessed to have my deity in their pantheon.

“If you remember that afternoon, thirty years ago, I took Ike out for a drive. I drove him to the forbidden beach and let him out of the car. He might have thought this outing was a treat to help him over Grand’s passing. I knew the rip tide was in full flow and I watched him swim out, watched him struggle and then disappear. That fate was better than what awaited him in the legal system.”

And infinitely better for you, My Liege. You emerged, freshly dipped in the river Styx, as a leader who bore his many personal tragedies well, rather than as a cursed patriarch with murderous spawn. Your escutcheon still dazzled, bright as a blade before it is stained with blood.

“When the authorities told me that they had recovered Ike’s body, I feigned shock. No one, not even the police, had any idea that I had arranged Ike’s death.”

Maybe it runs in the family, I thought.

The Great Basilisk looked at me. “It was a necessary sacrifice, a hard choice

that had to be made. He was a wrong'un. Who knows who he might have killed next?"

I composed my features into sorrowful admiration.

"You know, Ike was the only murderer I ever knew." He trailed off.

Not quite, I thought.

"Well, I wanted you to know the ugly truth as I discuss this tragedy in my memoir. Of course, I'm leaving out the part about driving Ike to the beach, but it's there between the lines. A smart reader will pick up on it."

Yes, a discerning reader might figure out far too much.

The Almighty was in a mood to muse. "That whole year after Ike died was horrible. Remember how my brother, Joe, fell to his death off the Briar Cliffs?"

"Remember it?", I thought. I provided the physics required to make the launch possible.

"And Darla, his wife? Taking an overdose after Joe's death and leaving that note about how she couldn't go on without him? Frankly, I had no idea their marriage was that solid. They fought so much."

True. The only common interests they shared were in manipulating money out of Dear Uncle and hinting to me that they thought I had more to do with the family body count than anyone else realized.

The great Dragon Ancalagon took sudden flight from his perch and flew to the front door, opening it with a blast of fiery breath. "You kids stay out of my garden!"

I expressed sympathy. "Do the neighborhood kids do that often-make a racket and trample through your beautiful garden?"

"Day and night," Caligula grumbled.

"Good to know," I thought, as I bent down to stroke Pyewacket, the spaniel who was nudging me for attention. I considered that Dear Uncle had an impending appointment that no more avoidable than taxes. One night soon he would get up to remonstrate with the neighborhood kids, trip over one of Pyewacket's toys and topple down the steep flight of stairs to his just rewards. I would have to find him before the housekeeper arrived. It wouldn't do to have her find the fishing line stretched across the top of the stairs. Or worse, find Dear Employer's memoir.

I scanned the book titles in his office library as Anti-Gandalf simmered

down and began the ritual of filling and lighting his pipe.

If only Attila the Illiterate had bothered to read the many books in his collection. Reading was for eunuchs and desk mammals. Real warriors, from the Spartans to Dear Uncle, prided themselves on grunting, pointing, aiming and disemboweling. If the Spartans had directed Hamlet, Acts I-V would have been captured in one scene, wherein a non-speaking Hamlet would have run his mother and uncle through with a single sword thrust.

I, in contrast to Dear Uncle, had enthusiastically read and reaped the wisdom to be found in his many books. They had enlarged my sense of the possible and allowed me to travel far beyond the conventions that tethered my peers and family to mediocrity. Where would I have been without Niccolo's advice to the prince that doing anything and everything to preserve himself was entirely justifiable, that conventional morality was for the rabble, not the ruler? Old Nick assured me that I should eliminate any foxes that threatened me and I could be confident that the vast herd of sheep that surrounded me would be too lazy or stupid to challenge my culling.

How proud Macchiavelli would be of me, his loyal disciple! I had removed every obstacle in my way to become the sole Prince of the House of Atria. Not only was my coup successful: it was invisible.

But I owed an even greater debt to Dear Aunt Agatha. I had borrowed freely from her genius: *The Crooked House* with its brilliant child murderer, *Murder is Easy*, a Golden Age version of *Homicide for Dummies* and *Curtain* with its Merlin of manipulation who committed no murders himself but who was the First Cause of an impressive curation of corpses.

Without Aunt Agatha's detailed lessons on the venerable dark arts, I might have been held to account for stealing money from Grandmother and forging her signature on school permission slips. The day before her well-earned death, she confronted me with a forged slip allowing me to go on an expensive school outing which she knew she had not signed, using money she had not given me. I begged for a day's reprieve from a meeting with my uncle by invoking my brother's birthday dinner scheduled for that night. Grand agreed to not spoil the evening's festivities and I made a pact with myself to make sure Grand would never wake up after drinking her evening cocoa, a concoction I made worthy of the Borgia's recipe collection. (For the less-cultured among my

audience, let me put it plainly. “Dear Reader, I murdered Her!”) I planted my uncle's pipe next to a forged entry in my brother's diary, which, until then, was as blank as his face. My uncle's addiction to tobacco ensured that a rapid discovery ensued. Dear Aunt Agatha, your omniscience was my salvation—murder is easy!

All in all, I had made far greater use of Dear Uncle's library than he had. As a discerning reader myself, I could not afford to have my uncle publish his memoir to a reading public who might view the case against my brother as flimsy and might cast around for another villain. A few keener minds might even suspect that the departures of my Dear Joe and Dear Darla were far too convenient as they appeared to be auditioning for the roles of First and Second Blackmailers. I know only too well how hollow the protestations of innocence sounded when Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot confronted the murderer in Aunt Agatha's delicious little denouements. I was far too brilliant and experienced a tactician to let the tyrant blowing smoke in front of me have his way.

He was a mere bureaucrat among bureaucrats with chests full of government-issued baubles, promoted in his dotage by committees and e-mail. Whereas, I had succeeded by assassination and intrigue in my salad days when I was ruthless in judgment and cold in blood. I was the Pale Rider, the cat among the pigeons, Shiva-Destroyer of worlds. Look on my works, Ye Mighty, and despair.

I turned back to my soon-to-be-short-of-ambrosia deity, and regretted, not his impending death, but the greatness his memoir could have achieved, had its author had the wit to open it differently. Imagine this title and these first lines:

Curse of the House of Atria by General (Ret.) Hadrian Atrian  
March 15, \_\_\_\_

“Today, I murdered my nephew.”

Now, that would be a book worth reading. ∞



## Finally Incompatible

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KELSEY CHEREVKO

I wear guilt like earrings.  
My body curls in the presence of clouds.  
Silence is insufferable,  
I buzz like neon.

I nest in pillows and takeout containers,  
Replies are earned, never given (that's what my mother tells me)  
Investment is lost in a swirling cloud of desire.  
Hair greying awaiting its return.

My carbon copy disrupts like normal.  
I sit in silence in the car.  
My shoes are so huge,  
Why are my siblings shoes so tiny?

Pausing my music feels like a sin,  
Lifestyle lacking regularity,  
That's normal.  
That's normal.

I can't help but stare at my reflection.  
Costume clad in Saran wrap,  
It's reflective and feels suffocating.  
Is that normal?

Look away.  
Look away.  
Look away.  
I can't, is that normal?

My nose almost touches the screen,  
Buried alive in anguish.  
Checking off boxes,  
A chain link fence around a wall of rocks.

Doc says that's normal,  
She says my shoes were meant to be bigger than theirs,  
And my tongue was always going to step on the back of mine  
She says that's normal.  
I'm nauseated by normal.

My shoes are enormous,  
So filthy,  
But so vibrant, so electric, so dope.  
I want to come loose and sprint in my new favorite kicks.

No, I'm not giving up,  
Or giving in,  
I'm letting go.  
I want(ed) what she cannot give me.

This jagged little pill is so tough to swallow.  
The chorus of frustration isn't my song to sing anymore.  
I long for interiority,  
And I damn well don't want to be normal.

## Where Does the River Begin

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DAVID CHIRICO

I tend to take walks in the morning, as any English professor might, past the two rivers that meet in a place in Binghamton called Confluence Park. My route takes me over the walking bridge, into the circuit of that small park, past a garden planted next to the water's edge a few years ago by a team who'd donated their time, and alongside the hotel's outdoor seating area where there are rarely any guests in the morning.

As I looked out from the walking bridge one day, I asked myself, "Where does the river begin?" To me this was an interesting question. As human beings we can be preoccupied with the idea of origins and endings, where we come from, where we will go, and when any particular thing started. When we are angry we are often fond of pinning a beginning down. "All this started that day," we might say, pointing our finger at that vanished happening. "Things have never been the same since." And maybe we are right. Maybe what we think began that day really did start then, in that moment we have in mind—and maybe we are bringing this event to the attention of a listener, who might have a different story.

When we are talking about a river, the answer should be a little more plain. There are, after all, maps that could show me something I could call a beginning, a little pale blue finger of water acting to indicate the place where it started, and I might be able to see that grow into the current flowing beneath the bridge, which has occasionally passed over the flood barriers into the street.

But a river isn't just a span from here to here. A river is also waves you can watch as you stand on the pavement of Confluence Park. Those waves are never the same, even if their forms might be similar. You never step into the same river twice, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus once wrote, because that thing you're calling a river is always changing. We might refer to it by one name—the Susquehanna, the Chenango—but the Susquehanna River is a series of changing waves, and differing levels of height, and waters whose chemical makeup is different on any given day. Pollutants from cars are

certainly in the water in varying concentrations, given the activity of traffic. Sometimes rocks are visible above the water when the river is dry. Sometimes it is brown and swollen with mud. Every portion of the shore is continually eroding, gaining area, expanding and contracting, like a creature taking breath. When we are trying to locate the river, which river are we speaking of? The river as it was yesterday, or the one as it is today?

Even if we make some kind of conceptual room for all those changes of activity, trying to fix in our minds the form of a thing that is not so much an entity as a process, we might still tell ourselves, for the sake of argument, that “The Susquehanna River begins near Cooperstown and ends at Chesapeake Bay,” forgetting there is the simple fact of clouds, which provide a source of river water that confounds all our attempts at describing things as a simple straight line. As I stood at the railing behind the Holiday Inn, I asked myself, “Doesn’t the cloud rain into the river?”

I haven’t really been able to answer the question of where the river begins. Maybe it’s because the question presents things as a kind of choice between this straight line or that straight line. Maybe the question is itself confused, since it is based on a static, unchanging, linear account of reality. Like the name we have for the river, our words don’t always map exactly onto a lived experience, but we use them because we have to. There really isn’t any alternative, if I want to tell someone where that thing I’m calling a river happens to be. Because, chances are, I’ll find it if I go in the direction of the walking bridge. ☺

## Who Turned on the Light

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DAVID CHIRICO

When we were in a classroom—back when we could enjoy that without realizing we were enjoying it—in the middle of a discussion, I would stand up, flick off the lights—which were usually on—then flick them back on again. I would sit down, then say:

“What caused the light to go off and on?”

Students, who are usually wary of such simple questions, would often take a moment to sniff out the trick enclosed in this exercise, but someone would fall for it anyway.

“You did,” they would say.

“But I did it in response to the conversation we were having, because I was trying to make a point. So wasn’t that conversation required?”

“Sure.”

“So what caused the lights to go off?”

“Electricity,” from another student.

“Electricity all by itself? I didn’t have to flick a switch?”

“The switch.”

“What if it the bulbs were broken?”

“Then the bulbs.”

At this point the tone would begin to turn serious.

“Did the bulbs get there all by themselves?”

“Somebody put them in. Then it was the person who put them in.”

“But there had to be a building here.”

“Oh my god,” someone would say. Usually that student who was exasperated by all my standard moves.

“I’m being very practical here. I’m not just leading us around,” I’d say. “In order for the light to go on, we’d need an actual team of electricians to wire this room. And there’d have to be a room. And there’d have to be a question, asked by someone. And there’d have to be me.”

I have a way of hypnotizing people with these accounts.

“And of course there’d have to be my parents. Who’d have to meet. And they’d have to get along. And there’d have to be some date they went on, or whatever they did on the night they conceived me. Maybe the meal they had

put them in the proper mood. So we need to have that chef, and so on.”

Silence from the group.

“Again, I’m not being in the least bit abstract. If we didn’t have the things I’m listing—in fact, if we could erase them from the collection of things existing that day—I might not be here. So this conversation right now would not be taking place.”

“So what about the light?”

“Well to have the light go off and on we’d have to have everything from my parents’ date night to the very planet we’re living on, plus light itself, and gravity, and space. We really need everything. But if we’re trying to talk about these things from the standpoint of cause and effect, if we want to say this really caused that, it’s hard for me to really say I caused the light to go off and on, because I didn’t invent light. Or the switch, and I didn’t wire this room. We could say one event followed another, I flicked a switch and the light went off, and so on, but in terms of causes we’re kind of making things up as we go.

“To have this conversation we’d also require the Buddha’s enlightenment—the moment light turned on for him—because what we’re talking about is called interdependence, which is one of the Buddha’s main insights into the nature of reality.”

Viewed this way—again, in a way that is not abstract or vague in the least, since all we’re doing is pointing directly to the real things required for that light switch to work, our simple notions of cause and effect are instantly made complicated. “What caused the light to go on” becomes a philosophical problem of the deepest importance, and maybe irresolvable mystery, because if we tried to list all the things—including a planet, gravity, or light itself—required for the bulb to go on, we would never reach the end. So there is, in effect, no way to say what caused the light to go on, because you could never reach the end of the things you’d have to list. All this is what a Buddhist text means when it describes something as “interdependently-arisen.”

And if you think this is unusual, or abstract, try taking away any of the items on even a short list of what might be required for something to happen. And once you’ve taken everything away, what would be left? ☺

## All Grown Up

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### HOPE ENGLISH

The bright sun warmed us,  
As we strolled down the boardwalk,  
Curiously taking in the sites,  
Souvenir shops and carnival games.  
Sand wedged between our toes,  
Soft serve mustaches on our faces.  
Cones in hand, we furiously  
Licked our ice cream  
Before it turned to slush.

All day, we swam in the ocean,  
Imagined we were Nemo and his friends.  
We hid in the sand,  
Giggled when  
Mommy and Daddy found us.  
We fed our crackers to hungry gulls,  
As we picnicked by the sea.  
Daddy frowned at the commotion.

We moaned when our vacation  
Had finally zipped by,  
Our faces pressed against the windows,  
As we bade the ponies farewell,  
Longed to be on the beach again.  
I drifted off into Barbie land,  
You dreamed of heroes and villains.  
But now, I can see  
The boy in you has died.

## Broken Heart

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H O P E   E N G L I S H

Golden and radiant,  
It beckoned me  
To play its little game.  
Petal after petal,  
I plucked.  
“He loves me.  
He loves me not,”

I reached the last petal  
It won,  
Like always.  
I giggled,  
Played again,  
Again.  
I always saw  
Its sunshine.

Now, our little game  
Is over.  
I blow  
Particles of dust,  
Fragments of fuzz  
Into the cold air.  
It won  
Our little game,  
Once and for all.





Deconstructing | Mary Seel

## Chroma

---

H O P E   E N G L I S H

What would the world be like without color?  
Would we moan all the day long, our heads bowed?  
Would we have any great sense of wonder?  
Would we all fade into the sullen crowd?  
Would our lives be a black and white feature?  
Lost in time, swinging without a rhythm?  
We would be like aimless, lifeless creatures  
To a dull existence we would succumb.  
We would not know of a sunset's glory,  
Nor of the many shades of a rainbow.  
We would miss the beauty of art's story,  
Nor could we view bright Christmas lights aglow.  
The world in color is a wonderful thing,  
Revives our dead hearts, gives us songs to sing.

## Temor

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### HOPE ENGLISH

Trapped in an  
Unending nightmare,  
Breath constricted,  
Pain unbearable,  
Shame unrelenting.

Its voice whispers  
No one knows you  
Like I do,  
Callous, deathly hands send  
Shivers to my spine.  
If you stay with me,  
You'll be safe,  
It reassures me.

It grips the key  
In its bony hand  
Pierces my heart,  
Locks the door.  
In my dungeon,  
Its undying presence  
Suffocates me,  
Steals my breath,  
Silences my voice.

Trapped in an  
Unending nightmare,  
Bound by chains  
Rooted in deception,  
But when I  
Look in the mirror,  
I realize  
The monster  
Is really  
Me.



Grandiose | Alexandra Georgoudes

## Where They Are

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### HOPE ENGLISH

Much more than four walls,  
More than a building,  
When one falls,  
There are strong arms to lift him up.

Much more than picture frames,  
The people inside them  
Make it their aim  
To welcome all.

Much more than a place,  
It's family.  
Judgment leaves not a trace,  
For mercy and grace abound.

Much more than silence,  
Constant chatter and playful banter  
Shatter any violence  
As smiles are seen across the table.

Much more than closed doors,  
For they're always open.  
When one cries on the floor,  
He is wrapped in a warm embrace.

Much more than isolation,  
Full of stories and memories,  
Warmth and protection  
Are found where they are.

## War Stories

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WILMER ESTEVEZ

Since graduating from SUNY Broome and becoming a registered nurse, I have had so many opportunities to show compassion for those in need. I do my best to get to know my patients. I've had many opportunities to care for patients who have lived through World War II.

In school, studying about World War II was one of the parts of history that I enjoyed learning about the most. I learned about the sacrifices that had to be made. The war was horrendous and tested the human spirit; but in those times, normal individuals became selfless and gathered the courage to go to hard places. Some even became heroes.

I have taken care of many veterans. I always make sure to thank them for their service. I also let them know that I consider it an honor to be able to take care of them. What a privilege! One of my patients had a journal, that he willingly shared, showing pictures of when he was a serviceman, deployed in China. We had a great connection, and I always made time to hear his "war stories." When it came time for this patient to pass on to the next life, I was able to administer medication to make his passage more comfortable. After his passing, I was able to extend that same compassion and care to his grieving family.

Some of my interactions have taken a more lighthearted and comical tone. One of my female patients said that she was chosen because of her petite size to be the one to go inside the planes and install a part that her male counterparts were too colossal to install. Even though she never went overseas, she made sure to let me know that at that time everyone did what they could to help the war effort. She also made sure to let me know that they were not allowed to date during their service, but that they were able to go to coed dances. I could see it in her eyes while she told me the story; she was back there reliving it in her mind. She had returned to that moment in time, even though she now resided in a wheelchair, she was dancing again.

I decided to ask her, "Well did you dance with the men?" "I sure did" she replied with a beaming smile.

Patients have also told me stories about how the war led to them becoming displaced from their home country. Even though they were civilians, they were still impacted by the war. Their stories are more like the stories of the immigrant diaspora today. They became refugees. Many of them, their first country on their journey as refugees, was not the United States, but instead, they traveled to other countries in Europe, before finally immigrating to the United States. Once here they went ahead and became acclimated to a new country and learned a new language. Finally, they went about pursuing a better life for their children than the one they had left behind in their home country.☺



In Sickness and In Health | Rose Pero

*Dedicated to my sweet dad and his beautiful bride and the love that they shared.*

## The Library

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HANNAH FOSTER

In the dead of night, when most of the librarians were asleep, Jezelle sometimes tried to imagine what the universe would look like without the Library. If their sacred role was no longer needed, would she and her fellow librarians cease to exist?

They had been tasked with the most important burden that could be bestowed upon them – cataloging the tales of those that used to exist and creating new tales to fill the empty void of time and space. See, for millennia, the universe was full to bursting with ideas, sparks flying furiously off of the central fire of creation, setting bits of celestial debris alight, and creating new little bits of flame that devoured the air and grew and spiraled into their own universes. There was so much potential for the universe to set aflame, so many bits and pieces that had never been seen before. It seemed thoroughly impossible that intervention would ever be necessary, that an outside force, born from the central fire itself, would need to pick up a pen and continue the story of the universe.

The librarians had long since decided that their sole purpose was to protect the other sparks, to record the stories that they created, and to store them somewhere that guaranteed that they would be preserved forever. Yes, they were aware of their secondary function, nudging along the story of the Universe with a verse here or there if there was dire need. This drought wasn't entirely unprecedented, as the librarians had, on occasion, reluctantly picked up their celestial pens and written a few characters, a few animals, a few colors, into being. But those were just nudges, and while they made the librarians vastly uncomfortable, they were relieved to see that their small contributions were able to set the central flame ablaze again, exponentially multiplying the few sparks that had previously been created and turning the fire of creation into a blistering inferno of creativity once more.

Such intervention had only occurred thrice in their millennia of service, an event so rare that most of the librarians didn't remember one of the three interventions. Only the eldest, most knowledgeable, could speak about those harrowing times. But now, even the youngest librarians, the most sheltered,



knew that trouble was upon them, that the roots of the invulnerable library were being shaken to their core, a change in demeanor sweeping over even the most devoted and optimistic of the powerful scribes. In a usual day of the universe, thousands of stories would burst from the fire of creation, thousands of wayward sparks destined to create mini universes of their own. Millions more stories would continue unraveling and expanding, having been created in days prior. This quantity of creations was to be expected, and the librarians smiled peacefully upon seeing these fledgling new tales taking their first wobbly steps into the universe. Perhaps they were underdeveloped, small, and in some cases, desolate, but they all held that spark of potential. Librarians worked tirelessly to commit these stories to paper, and thus to the memory of the library itself. Each word was painstakingly inscribed in journals that started out blank and empty, containing only a single piece of pristine white paper. But as the stories grew, and the librarians wrote more and more about them, more pages would spring into being, guaranteeing that there was always room for the multitude of wonders that each spark would one day create.

The Celestial Library was not quite the same as the libraries that were so often described in the stories that it contained. It may be described as a city, but even that was an inadequate description. It contained the stories of every spark that had ever been created, a number approaching infinity. Sparks often created more than one book in the Library, creations spiraling into diatribes and monologues and soliloquies that oftentimes cascaded into new universes entirely. A singular city, no matter how large, would never be vast enough to contain such an array of marvels and wonders. The Library was, therefore, more akin to its own planet, its own universe, separate from those that it chronicled. It was not superior, per say, but it contained more than any other universe, as it contained every other universe as well as a transcription of its own activities.

The librarians could not come to a consensus as to how novels about their own activities in the library were penned. Many argued that they wrote themselves, as the fire of creation must have created a device, an apparatus, that oversaw the activities of the librarians in the same way that they oversaw the activities of everyone else that existed in all of creation. Others, a smaller number, argued that the librarians themselves wouldn't be necessary if there was an inanimate apparatus that could chronicle the tales of all that was

brought into being. Thus, some argued, there must be a subset of librarians that were created specifically to write about the general librarians. And yet, that idea was met with ridicule, as such theory would require an additional subset of librarians to write about the librarians that wrote about the librarians, thus creating an endless paradoxical spiral of librarians that never ended, and no highest authority on the matter that cataloged everything. A select few speculated that there must be a singular, All-mighty being that oversaw the librarians, and also made sure that they were doing their jobs correctly. This being would be similar to what the denizens of the universe thought of as a god.

Now, in their time of dire need, the librarians were forced to approach this debate once more, as they were desperate for guidance. Their mandate stated that they should only begin to create themselves if there was no other option, and the tools for creation beyond a few additional paragraphs were therefore never given to them, or never revealed to them if they did indeed have them unknowingly in their possession. But as far as they knew, the librarians were the highest authority besides the creative fire of the Universe itself, which was not sentient in a way that would enable it to communicate with the librarians about their predicament. They decided that they must determine, once and for all, who the highest power was, whether it be more librarians like themselves only more powerful, a single, all-powerful scribe, or nothing at all. In order to break a fundamental rule of the Universe, they needed outside intervention, lest they misstep and damn all of creation to be snuffed out, or worse, poorly written.

The librarians all had access to every story in the Celestial Library, they could read the story of everything that had ever existed, visit an infinite number of worlds, meet millions of characters, and see through the eyes of every creature that had ever lived, as well as through the eyes of some that never had. However, there were a few stories that they were prohibited from viewing, and while having their knowledge limited in any way irked the universe's most knowledgeable creatures, they reluctantly agreed not to challenge this rule, as it had been implemented for their own good. Each librarian was prohibited from reading three different stories: the first story to ever be created, the last story to ever be created, and the story of the world that they originated from. As

beings of great knowledge and power, the librarians loved having theoretical and theological discussions about the Universe and their place in it. They were drawn, as all creatures naturally are, to the intrigue of that which was forbidden to them, regardless of how little that was. Every new initiate came up with ideas about why these books were forbidden, with many initially arguing that such a ban went against the nature of their duties. However, over time, they acquiesced, telling themselves that they shouldn't spend their eternity in the library fretting over the contents of the three books that they couldn't read when they were perpetually allowed access to millions of trillions of others.

It was Jezelle that first timidly proposed the idea of seeking access to the first story that ever came into existence. While the contents of that tomb had never been disclosed or described to them, there was an unspoken agreement amongst the librarians that the first book must be prohibited because it explored the founding of the library. It must explain the science and magic that governed it, as well as reveal who, or what, if anything, recorded the history of the library itself. It was the only thing that made sense to most of them, as almost all other knowledge would not shock them or change their view towards their mission. The idea of the first book holding the answer was such a straightforward, simple answer to a problem that had thrown the entire library into chaos and disarray, that the other librarians were shocked when Jezelle brought it up. It made perfect sense, however, an obvious solution that made many librarians begin to question whether this was their intended path all along. Perhaps the highest, most sought after knowledge in every universe was destined to be revealed to them, the greatest of all creatures, only in the time of their greatest need, a time that must have been foretold when they were created.

And so, this theory was bolstered and reinforced by the greatest minds that the library had to offer until it gained the aspect of a sacred prophecy. When the newest librarians voiced their fears and sat idle at their desks as fewer and fewer sparks flew out of the great fire, they were dismissed, and told that everything was happening as it should be. The ever-busy universe that was the Celestial Library was never asleep, fires shining amidst endless shelves of books, all-seeing eyes that were never all extinguished. Librarians ran through the cities, picking up new pens and empty books to fill, shelving books that had reached their natural conclusion, pulling down old books to scan for a

connection to their current story. Some wore long, flowing gowns, swishing urgently as they glided gracefully from building to building. Others wore pants and running shoes, sprinting chaotically from shelf to shelf, manic faces alight as they became lost in their work. Librarians chattered amongst each other, some working on the same story or working on stories that came from the same spark and were connected. Some were nocturnal, perching like owls in odd nooks and corners, scribbling away under the gleaming silver light of the library's five moons. Others rose with the sun, penning books from dawn until dusk before heading off for leisure time and then to bed. The library was full of life, millions of librarians dutifully ensuring that the history of the universe was accurately recorded.

The library was forever changed when it experienced the one thing that it never had before: pure silence. This wasn't a silent room where a librarian slept peacefully with their cat, or a quiet building full of quills and ballpoint pens alike scratching against paper. This was a silence that the librarians soon realized had blanketed the entire library at once. Millions of librarians burdened with the most sacred of tasks coming to a stop, with nary a particle of dust shifting. Librarians met each other's eyes in dawning horror as they all came to the same realization: not a single one of them was writing. Friends called friends across the vast library using the ancient wall-phone system or sent notes to each other by attaching them to the collars of cats or dogs or owls. Suddenly, the library was once again full of sound, but the steady, productive sound of work was replaced with the sounds of disbelief and horror. The breath of millions of librarians caught in their chests at the same moment as they all received the one message that they never thought that they would see: there had been no new stories that day. The great fire of the universe had been reduced to embers, nothing new was being created. The librarians, and the universe would never be the same again. ∞

## Blood of the Aisne

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MICHAEL FULLER

I recall my brother recently stating:  
“Give it a month, and we’ll be back at the hearth!”  
And I find it so incessantly grating,  
That I found out today he’ll be thrown in the earth.

The bigwigs of rank shouted with vigor,  
“We’ll drive into Belgium, rout those Franks proper!”  
Now as my unit pushes out from the river,  
Many lads will find out they’re missing their fathers.

Why did we line those people against the wall?  
“Partisans, men! Each and every one!”  
Following orders, we shot them all.  
Unarmed and defenseless, daughters and sons.

Wave after wave, the Allies push ahead.  
“Fear not soldiers, the war will be won yet!”  
Maxims and rifles, turning clear water red.  
Twisted bodies, limbs horribly offset.

A war of heroes, they said it’d be.  
Not this perverse hell we’ve come to see.  
Day after day, death comes guaranteed.  
As the enemy futilely pushes to the sea.

## Isolate

---

MICHAEL FULLER

Isolated, am I.  
From all life's attractions.  
A virus among us,  
with no hope of containment.  
Barren streets,  
abandoned by most.  
Confined to cages,  
We all must cope.

As time passes,  
life will return.  
Chaos will cease,  
for order we yearn.  
To return to our lives,  
lives wholly upturned.  
Normality above all,  
or so we discern.

Tired and muddled,  
weary from detachment.  
Insulated from all,  
more worldly attachments.  
Yet my mind is calm,  
ever the eye in a storm.  
Finding peace in the stillness,  
Tranquility given form.

Silence, what a concept.  
To be with one's mind.  
All life's endeavors,  
Only seem to confine.  
Perhaps this is design:  
retain the noise, eternally.  
For as I found time to think,  
I achieved serenity.

## Solitary Star

---

MICHAEL FULLER

As you walk the city streets,  
light dances in all directions.  
The local café, the corporate skyscraper  
and everything in-between.  
Except for one, that is:

Up.

A luminous haze covers your eyes,  
concealing a void of pure gloom.  
What lies up there, you wonder?  
Must not be important,  
to be buried by the means of mere men.

You find yourself in a park,  
surrounded by vivid viridian hues.  
The haze isn't as strong here,  
with a strange sight to boot.  
Piercing through the ethereal glow:

Light.

A single dot, insignificant in size.  
Yet beautiful beyond comparison,  
a splendor most disguised.  
The radiance of man continues to fight,  
but loses out rightly in your own two eyes.  
As no matter the number, brightness or glow  
humanity pales next to the empyrean's own.

## Dear Present Me

---

MOSES JOSHUA GRIFFITH

Dear Present me,  
What's changed?  
Nothing  
And at the same time  
Everything.  
Have you improved?  
Yes and No  
Your writing is unchanged  
But you,  
You could never be  
The same kid who  
Sat in the back  
Hiding from his own name.  
Now  
You call your name  
With Pride  
Because you know  
That nothing  
Is as it was  
In the past.





Humbling Process (BW) | Richard Schleider

## Empathetic Hunter

---

MOSES GRIFFITH

The sound of cars and buses filled the busy downtown streets. The sky was a cold grey that did nothing to lift the monotonous mood that hung over the city. People walked back and forth, ignorant of the others around them. Everyone was so absorbed in their own world that if someone were to get hit by a car, there would be no pause or break in the rhythmic footsteps of the countless residents. The only exception was a young man wearing a large green jacket that barely fit him and tattered black gloves with the finger parts torn off on the ring and middle finger of his left hand. He instead seemed to be in everyone else's world but his own. Voices of strangers flashed through his head as he wove through the crowd of people moving closer and closer to his destination.

"I hope nobody notices the tear in my skirt."

"Did I remember to feed Mr. Mittens?"

"Shit I don't want to be late."

The man had a name and it was Orion. Orion had been born with the gift of empathy. The ability to understand the emotions of others. As a kid his abilities were limited to just knowing what someone was feeling at all times, but recently, his abilities had grown and developed. After some time he could not only feel emotions, but hear the strong thoughts that came along with them. No one had ever personally given Orion the "with great powers" speech, probably because there was no one around to give it. His parents were alive, just not really present in his life. He had raised himself growing up. His mother was a wealthy business woman who was almost never home and his adoptive father was a fashion designer that spent more time focused on his clothes than his kid. Orion had seen enough superhero movies to get the general gist of the speech, though and as far as he was concerned, responsibility was not something he intended to develop any time soon. Instead he had used his gifts to win big at poker, to manipulate the hearts of women he found attractive, and to pick out vulnerable people he could rob or scam.

Orion spots his next target a few feet in front of him in the crowd. An old woman who looked to be around 60 or 70 years old carrying an expensive purse. She was wrapped up in a nice white trench coat that had to belong to some big name fashion brand and wore pearl earrings that were so perfectly rounded and shiny they couldn't possibly be anything but the real deal. She just radiated an aura of rich old lady with too much money to know what to do with. Orion could feel her nervousness from a few blocks down, she was not from the area. A foreigner. An easy target.

He catches up to her at the nearest stop light that had just turned red. He watches the cars on both sides and takes note of the direction of the foot traffic. He doesn't immediately try to snatch the purse, instead he slips his hand over the top of it and then fakes a loud sneeze. In a single fluid motion he unzips the purse before bringing his hand over his mouth to be "polite."

"Sorry about that," he says to the old woman as he offers her a friendly smile. He can tell from his powers that she is in no way suspicious of him, just annoyed. She replies to him in a language that he does not understand, but Orion can sense the irritableness behind the words. She was annoyed at him, but in no way suspicious of his actions. He tails her to the next crosswalk making sure to stay far enough behind that he physically can't be seen. He didn't need to follow her by sight. In the sea of indifference and apathy that flooded Orion's senses her irritation was like blood in the water to this empathetic hunter. He stalks her down the street with laser like focus and at the next light he makes his move. He turns the corner bumping into the woman from behind as she's going straight. On the crowded city streets she sees it as nothing more than one more nuisance in the wave of them that had hit her from the moment she arrived here, but the deed was done. Just like that he stuffs her wallet into his pocket and whistles as he makes his way towards a nearby bar. Now he would celebrate his seemingly seamless victory.

Orion callously ignoring the plight of the woman he had just robbed walks past a sign that says, "Happy Hour starts at 7." Orion sits down at the bar and lowers his head into his arms, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the air of depression and desperation he could literally feel surrounding him in the room.

"Phil, let me get a black bull, neat." To which the bartender replies,

"Anything for our resident phantom." The nickname came from the fact that he would always seemingly vanish at some point in the night and leave more than enough for his drinks and then some. Phil had made it a personal challenge to figure out exactly when it happens, but he hasn't succeeded a single time. Orion often visited this bar after a successful heist, it was a ceremony of sorts. For Orion sitting in this room full of melancholy was the equivalent of listening to depressing music while upset, except ten times stronger. He found comfort in the sadness and sorrow and as swirled around the Hennessy-coke mixture that had just been placed in front of him. He couldn't help but love the burning sensation in the back of his throat that slowly faded away with each subsequent shot.

Orion felt compelled to reminisce on his childhood and how he had ended up where he was today. Both his parents were alive, which was a lot more than most people, but for him it just wasn't enough. Growing up, Orion was always sensitive to the emotions of others so he knew long before his parents did when they fell out of love.

He was the first one to know about his mother's frustration with the amount of time his father had for her, or the lack thereof. There were nights when she would tuck 8 year old Orion into bed. When she had read him every book she could grab and told him every story she could think of. When she had sung him every sullen lullaby that had been passed down through her family from generation to generation. When she was convinced that her 8 year old son had fallen peacefully into the arms of sleep and kissed his forehead with all the love she wished she had growing up and that she wished she had now. When she would go and sit alone the bedroom of her lovely home that her husband had worked so hard for so long to get. When she would cry alone in the empty queen sized bed because she hated how distant the man she loved had become. There were nights when Orion, feeling all too strongly her sadness, her gloom, her regrets, her angst, that he would wake up and cry right along with her. He was too young to understand the cause of his or his mother's crying, but there were nights when the two of them would sit up, separated by thick walls, unable to hear the other person crying out on the other side. There were days after, when he would go to school and could barely stay awake and nobody would have an explanation as to how he could be in bed by 8 and come to school with bags under his eyes as if he hadn't slept.

He was the first to know about her growing need for emotional validation and the black hole it created inside of her that pulled her farther and farther away from his father, and he was the first to know about her affair. About the dread that filled her heart every time she spoke to his dad after. About the split second hesitation that prefaced every I love you. About the...

"Alright already, that's enough forget I asked, god you're depressing as hell." Orion, noticeably intoxicated, is pulled away from his thoughts by the sound of a voice in his head that he doesn't recognize, which granted his unique situation wasn't that unusual, but this one seemed to be directed at him rather than drifting around like the emotional echoes he was used to hearing. Orion looks around the bar suspiciously before locking eyes with a woman whose features he could barely make out due to the blurriness of his vision, which he finds it strange considering he hadn't drunk enough to reach that point. He didn't have much time to contemplate it as shortly after he blacked out.

Orion awakens to the sound of a mechanical hum. Looking around he finds himself in complete darkness on the floor of what appears to be some kind of large container and the container was most likely moving from the way it sporadically bumped up and down. He tries to sit up clutching his head and feeling a very sharp pain. Orion groans before lying back down instead as he lets his arm callously drop to the side, banging against the metallic floor and causing him to immediately regret his decision as the sound echoes making his migraine worse.

“Nice to see that you’re awake.” As if the situation couldn’t possibly get any worse, Orion hears that same voice from earlier in his head, and it did nothing to help his headache. “Sorry, but we’re going to be arriving soon, so I should get through the...”

“Who the hell are you and where am I?” Orion calls out, interrupting. “Did you drug me?” Even though he could definitely hear a voice, Orion couldn’t feel the source and that freaked him out the most, he wasn’t sure if his powers weren’t working or if this unknown individual was just immune, but Orion didn’t like the idea of not being able to rely on his powers.

“Hi my name is Amanda and I’m a telepath. I didn’t drug you, just politely suggested that your brain shut down for a bit. You should really pay more attention to your surroundings when you’re drinking alone by the way.” He bangs on the metal walls once more as he calls out,

“You long arm, short dick, shit faced corn fucker, what kind of sick game are you getting at here?”

Amanda apparently ignores Orion as her voice just continuous on unable to be drowned out by the banging or the slew of curse words he put together with surprising skill. The insults that people hold internally tend to be the most vile ones and Orion thanks to his unique ability had access to a large collection of them.

“Also, sorry about making you spill your life story, I swear it was an accident. Anyway, long story short, we’re going to a special place where you’ll have the chance to make a difference in the world on a large scale, hone your abilities so that you can use them to aid in the protection and furtherance of mankind, and be around other people like us who can understand our unique set of struggles.” Orion could hear every word, but paid no attention to it, instead focusing on trying to find a way out, which as far as he could tell there was none. During her short speech he had made his way to his feet and ran his hands along all four walls of whatever container he was in. As far as he could see, the only way he was getting out was when they let him out, but if he was going to be kidnapped, he wasn’t going down without a fight. Moments after the thought crosses his mind Orion hears Amanda’s voice once more.

“Nope, can’t have that I’ll wake you when it’s over.” and Orion feels the darkness of unconsciousness replace the darkness of the unlit container he was trapped in. ☞

## Life is a Play

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MOSES JOSHUA GRIFFITH

Life is a play  
and all of us are puppets  
Tied to a string  
we're forced to sing  
and never allowed to do our own thing  
Life is a play

Death is it's exit and birth is its start  
Baby to elder we all play our part  
From crawling to walking to crawling again  
Brutal and Bitter we all meet our end  
Life is a play

Like apples from trees we all must drop  
Like bubbles in air we all must pop  
Like cars at a red light we all must stop  
But this play will always be  
Life is a play

## Our Birthday

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MOSES GRIFFITH

**M**y mommy always told me that your birthday is the most specialist day of your life. It's when a new chapter in your life starts. I've always loved books. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. *James and The Giant Peach*. *Green Eggs and Ham*. Daddy reads to me every night on my birthday, but not tonight. Tonight is my 7th birthday, and I don't like how this chapter is starting. I can hear mommy and daddy arguing downstairs. They sound so mad. Daddy keeps saying it's all mommy's fault that I turned out this way. He hates that she lost my little sister 10 years ago. She went away before I could get out of mommy's tummy. He hates her... Does that mean he hates me too? He did always say that I had mommy's eyes, and her smile. Mommy was screaming too before, but now she's just crying. She stopped when the vase fell over. Daddy didn't hurt her, she knocked the vase over herself. She just keeps saying "I knew this would happen," and "She's just like her grandmamma." I don't like hearing mommy cry. Why is mommy crying? Is it my fault? I should've never told them that I see my little sister every time my birthday comes. But they just seemed so sad. My birthday was her birthday too. It was also the day she died and they never talk to me about it. But she does. ☹

## The Red Door

---

MOSES JOSHUA GRIFFITH

The Laughs, the stares, the lies.

The labels

Annoying Introverted Bastard,

That one is mine.

The family troubles that bubble up inside

The struggle of juggling home, school, and life

The rules by which you're forced to abide

The tides of emotion that make you want to cry

The shadow of doubt that colors every upside.

The feelings of pain from lost love and swallowed pride

The sly comments that you have to take in stride

Just shove them all behind

The bright red door in the back of your mind



## Go Boil Some Water

MIKE GRUBB

“It was a dark and stormy ni—”  
Ok, stop.  
What?

That’s the most clichéd way to start a story in fiction! It’s so famously bad that it sparked a contest for awful writing.

Really?

Yep. It’s called the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, named after a writer who started a novel that way and was lambasted for it, even though he was probably making fun of a phrase that was already around.

You know what? Now that you mention it, I think I remember hearing about that somewhere before.

The point is, it was so bad no one realized he was joking about it. So don’t start that way.

You’re not the boss of me. ... Who are you, anyway?

I’m someone trying to keep you from making a fool of yourself.

So, are you like a lousy sort of mentor, or a composite of all my former English teachers, or a figment of my imagination taking the form of an inner dialogue, or what?

Sure... I’m just a voice in your head. I’d be a manifestation of your superego if you took Freud seriously. Let’s go with that.

Well, Freud is full of crap and you’re not nearly as clever as you think you are... er... I am... we are? Geesh. Dialogic heteroglossia is a bi—

Careful! Instead of trying to pin me down, why don’t you pin down how you want this story to start, this time without the cliché?

Fine... “It was after sundown during a tropical depression which—”

Seriously?!

What?

All you did was keep the same idea and alter the words a bit. You’re starting the same way.

But I’m not using the same words as the cliché, so it’s different, right?

Well, maybe, but—

So is your objection to the concept being expressed or to the

specific form that's considered cliché?

Technically, the cliché is the form, and the underlying concept is the trope, but just because you're avoiding a cliché doesn't mean that you're not relying on an overused trope.

Whatever. So I want to describe the setting at the start of the story. It's dark. It's night. There are high winds, rain, and occasional lightning and thunder. In other words, the setting is ominous. How would you express that without being clichéd or whatever?

I wouldn't focus on the setting, I'd start with the character to give your opening a sense of immediacy.

It would have been a whole lot more immediate if you hadn't interrupted.

Shut up. So who is this story about?

Jamaal Prudhoe, a Gulf shrimper from Lafourche Parish, Louisiana.

What do you know about life as a Gulf shrimper from Louisiana? You live within an hour of the Great Lakes and have never been on a boat bigger than a canoe! You should write about what you know.

I know that you're being really annoying.

Real mature. Seriously, life as a Gulf fisher is totally outside your personal experience. How do you expect to be able to write well about a character so different from you?

Because my mind is a linguistic sponge.

Full of holes? Only used when there's a mess? Something that gets increasingly gross over time?

I can't tell if you're being intentionally stupid or you really are that concrete in your thinking. Why are we even talking?

Because I need to help you do a better job expressing what you're trying to say, and if I don't say anything, your writing won't get better.

So you feel like you know something that it would be good if I know, and the way you're trying to convey that is through language, right?

Yes, well, I'm speaking about what I know. That's the idea.

But at one point, you didn't know it, until what you know now was shared with you by someone else. I mean, we're not talking about something like not touching hot stoves, which can be learned from direct experience by touching a hot stove and realizing it causes pain and shouldn't be done. We're talking about writing, which is inherently an activity that involves the one doing the writing, as well as an audience. The only way you can know if you wrote something well is if someone else reads it and tells you so, right? You can't

just write something and know it's good if you don't have any audience response, right?

Well, once you have enough experience, you can anticipate how a reader might react and have a sense of whether what you've written is probably good or not. You can definitely get a sense of bad writing.

All that means is that you're taking that experience of having real people respond to your writing and building an imaginary audience—a sort of mental simulation of an audience—and testing what you've written against that. The point is, without someone, at some point, telling you about what works and what doesn't work about your writing, you'll never get better.

That's my point! You need me to help you realize how you can make your writing stronger!

But what you're not seeing is that this knowledge that you're speaking of was not originally yours, but was the result of something shared with you, right? And what was shared with you probably took the form of language, which might have been spoken or written or maybe even the communicative gestures we call "body language." So, language can be used to share knowledge of experiences from someone who has had them to someone who hasn't had them.

Sure. That's why you write about what you know. So that it can be shared with others who may not know it. I don't get why you're dragging this on so long.

Well, you told me that I can't write about a character who's a Gulf shrimper because that's too different from my life experience. What you didn't allow for is that people share their experiences through language all the time, and if someone pays attention they can build up a warehouse of other people's experiences and tap into them, with a little bit of imagination to fill in some gaps, to give creating a character different from them a pretty good go. Maybe I'll get some details wrong, but that's almost always a possibility with any kind of writing. So you're really out of place telling me that I can't at least attempt it and see what happens as a result. I can benefit more from trying and getting stuff wrong that others point out to me than if I never try at all. So instead of telling me what I can or can't write about because I do or don't know it, maybe you should just get back to the whole being-worried-about-how-cliché-d-my-first-sentence-is thing. Either that or just pipe down and let me do my thing.

Okay, okay! We were talking about other ways to start your story that don't use the dreaded, "It was a dark and stormy night." What I had been going to say is that you can have a much more engaging opening by using it to introduce a character as well as the setting. Like this: "Jamaal Prudhoe wiped the windswept rain from his face as he peered through the dark and hoped he could make it home before the storm got much worse." See? You incorporate the scenic details while introducing a character. Things are already gaining momentum. No cliché.

But he's already safe at home; the storm is happening outside.

What?

You said Jamaal was hoping to get home, but he's already at home.

Fine! Let's see... "Jamaal Prudhoe flinched when the lightning flashed and thunder cracked, sounding like it was right outside his meager home, and he was glad he didn't have to be out in such a fierce storm."

But he makes a decent living and has a nice house, not a meager home. And I want him to be my protagonist and appear strong, and having him flinch right away undermines his characterization. Your solutions are all crap.

Well, I'm not the creator, I'm the critic! I'm not supposed to come up with new expressions; I'm supposed to critique what you're trying to say.

That makes things pretty convenient for you, doesn't it, Mr. Imaginary English Teacher?

Hey! I'm not an English teacher. And I don't know why you tacked a "Mister" onto that, either. What I am trying to do is help you do a better job saying what you want to say.

Well, you're doing a piss-poor job of that so far.

And your confrontational attitude isn't making it any easier.

Okay, you know what? I'm declaring that, henceforth, this is a **FIRST F\*\*\*\*\*G DRAFT!** Fresh out of the gate! Brand spanking new! That means I am going to write what I want to say and that you, Mister-Mizz-Mixi Critic, can shut up and keep your guidance to yourself! I'll check back in with you when I'm good and ready, got it?

Okay, here we go... er... here I go... Geesh. Dialogic heteroglossia is a ... .. Heh, just checking. "It was a dark and stormy night..." ☺

## 21st Century Mind

---

DEB HIBBARD

It's true

You can't but help think of "Elephant"

when you are forbidden to think the word

And then the mind keeps going

Clickity clack to the end of a species

## Spring

---

DEB HIBBARD

I can smell spring before I know it is spring. There are lots of rain storms now - meek and without the thunder of our summer storms. The smell that precedes them is as clean as the smell before our winter storms but also somehow less assertive. The snow is mostly gone now and the soil is wet and cold except by the old well, hugged by a concrete pad, where a few pieces of green poke through the gravelly soil.

Last night was the first night I didn't have to put my pajamas on the register in the dining room. Water will no longer freeze in a glass in my room and I don't need the electric blanket. My sister's feet are warmer and when we go to bed she doesn't need to apologize for putting them on my shins to warm them up - something that during the winter months steals more than 30 minutes of sleep from me every night.

The dog is more active and I can hear mice scabbling around in the walls of the one room that is sheet rocked and not plaster and lath. So the cats are more on the move too. There is something rattling around in me that wasn't there in the winter. I am longing for things and not sure what they are. I cry more easily and feel a kinship with the pond down from the house that has turned from gray to a deep and ugly green color as things wake and move and feed - I suppose anyway. I think of knives and horses and what I can get into around the house. I am unsettled.

I go to the woodshed, my shoes leaving clumps of mud all the way there,

and climb over all the junk, and after sorting things for an hour I remember I am here to get my bicycle which remains under piles of hay, tires, gas cans and other things neglected by the neglectful people who are my kin. I see a tassel sticking up, the colors faded and somehow forlorn looking. I dig out the bike expecting and finding the worst; the tires are flat and look bloated at the same time. The kick stand has surrendered in my tug of war with the frame and the mirror nowhere to be seen. Still, I have time to figure it out to get it ready for seeds. The seeds, mostly vegetable but some flowers for the less pragmatic and non-farmer neighbors, arrived yesterday in the mail and last night I dreamt of the things I could get from the catalog depending on how many seed packets I sold this spring. It is a diversion from the sameness of every day of the winter months, but by the time all my seeds are sold I know I will get the cash instead. Christmas is coming, and although I'd like the transistor radio or most any of the other things I could get from the catalog, I know my dad needs a new tie and my mom perfume. ∞

## The Saccharine Taste of You

---

GAVIN HLAVAC

It was nice to have you there beside me.  
You came over to watch the first season of Game of Thrones;  
Your favorite show.  
I didn't know Daenerys, but she existed in a world within your world;  
And for that, I longed to share in knowing her as you did.  
I wanted us to share any and everything that individualized us;  
I wanted us to understand each other inside and out;  
I wanted to become one with you.  
Never had I known anyone in this way before;  
But I knew if I was to know anyone like this- I wanted it to be you.  
The T.V. plays in the background, but our attention is divided.  
This series would have to be saved for another time;  
Afterall, we still had our entire future ahead of us- or so we thought.  
Both of us wanted to indulge differently tonight.

Heads turned, facing each other with shared smiles  
My hands were shaking as I resisted reaching for you.  
I've never been confident, but you made me want to try  
Leaning in cautiously, I whispered in your ear, "Can I kiss you?"  
You responded with a smile that whispered back affirmatively  
In that moment you relinquished for me, all the self-doubt I'd been carrying.  
We were allowing ourselves to be vulnerable-  
You moved your head to meet my lips with yours;  
An embrace that was slow, soft and warm  
An embrace I wanted to last forever-  
And so, I made sure to exist fully present in this moment;  
Savoring the saccharine taste of you.  
Light audible exhales escaped my body as I embraced you,  
It all felt so good.  
How lucky was I to be satisfied and pleased by you and only you?  
I reluctantly removed myself from this newfound comfort;  
A feeling that returned as soon as I nestled into the warmth of your neck.  
I could've stayed like this forever-  
I loved you so much; I couldn't wait to tell you that one day.



We often thanked the universe for bringing us together;  
A feeling that still exists deep within me.  
I'm grateful for all the experiences we shared-  
I never changed who I was for you, but through your love, I found myself;  
And because of that, I am forever changed.  
Now I exist only in the lookback; a mere footnote in the story of your life.  
I loved you, and I'm glad I was able to tell you.

## The Warmth of His Arms

---

GAVIN HLAVAC

It feels confining when you come to the realization that you're asleep. Your conscious mind has wandered aimlessly into a world constructed by your subconscious. And despite your greatest efforts, you've lost the power to wake up. For the remaining time spent asleep, you'll have to sit back and watch as this alternate reality plays out in front of you.

I had this realization as I stood in my grandparents' house. It wasn't uncommon for me to spend a lot of my time there growing up. As I looked outside the living room window, I could see my grandma outback tending to the garden. It was summer and Ma found the act of pulling weeds to be cathartic. My pass through the kitchen was interrupted by my grandpa, who was hunched over pulling a Stromboli out of the oven.

How could Papa be right there in front of me? He wasn't alive anymore. I was certain I had to be dreaming which meant his company was only temporary. And because I could not fathom the possibility of breaking his heart, I decided not to tell him he was just a dream. I wanted him to believe that I believed he was real.

"Hey bud! Wanna help me with this Stromboli? It needs to be buttered."

"Sure!"

He handed me the stick of butter that had been left out on the counter to soften. I worked slowly to unwrap it from its encasing before slathering a generous golden layer over the crust.

"Back in for another fifteen minutes now, and then it'll be done! Thanks bud!"

"Welcome." I mumbled with a wary smile.

I took a left out of the kitchen and sluggishly made my way down the hall. There was a familiar sense of sadness looming over me. I couldn't understand why papa was coming to me after all this time. He had been taken away from me unexpectedly when I was only ten years old. I remember it all too well.

A pulmonary embolism had flooded his lungs in the early hours of that dreadful day. Papa was just shy of his sixtieth birthday.

Back then, the two of us had a bond so close that any observer could clearly see we were best friends. I didn't want him to only be alive as a figment of my imagination. He had already existed that way for the last twenty years.

I stood in the doorway of my bedroom. The same room that had been designated to me as a child for when I stayed over. Tears had exceeded their capacity in my eyes and began to stream down the sides of my face. I was breathing so rapidly that I had begun to convince myself I was suffocating.

Footsteps in the hallway creaked the wood floor panels. A sound that slowly intensified. Papa was just on the other side of the door now. He opened it. I looked up at him helplessly as he stood in front of me. I couldn't hide behind my emotions because red blotches had invaded my already saturated face. We embraced in a hug so long overdue. I made sure to exist fully present in this moment. Papa told me he loved me and that everything was gonna be alright.

I held onto him with watercolor eyes, until my subconscious released me from the warmth of his arms and tucked me back into the warmth of my bedsheets. The sunlight shining through my window suggested it was the next morning. ☽

## Road Trip to the Future

---

LYNDSAY JEFFERIES

“Forward drone!” I slapped the back of Mongo’s head as he turned the key to his shitbox Malibu Wagon. I can see in his rear-view mirror that he cracked the silent, knowing, smirk that he always does when we make a joke at his expense. We were off. Finally, me, my girl, Stephanie, and our double date couple for the weekend, my best friend Hannah and her boyfriend Chad, were all heading out for our vacation in the Finger Lakes. Our driver was Marcus “Mongo” Giovanni. As we pulled up to a red light, he asked those of us in the back seat, “Which way?”

“Straight,” said Hannah.

“Forward, not straight,” I replied. “Never straight in this car.” I get the obligatory laugh from everyone. I know they’ve heard the joke a million times, but I still have to say it. I’m happy they still humor me with a chuckle. Especially Stephanie. The last few months have been hard. When she laughs though, she looks at me with the same girly pride she always has. I’m glad she still can feel that, for now.

“Get on the highway. Right, up there, up on the right.” Chad is taking over directions in his whispery, ethereal voice. We have to head to his parents’ house in Elmira for supplies before we head up to the campsite. As Mongo turns toward the highway, Hannah sparks up a joint.

“We got a half hour before we have to turn, or worry about cops,” she offered. I accepted the joint, hit it, and passed it to Steph who is riding shotgun. She pulls deep and smiles, then playfully exhales the smoke toward Marcus. There’s that fucking smirk again. I’m just about sick of that look on his face. Like he knows some secret that he won’t tell.

Don’t get me wrong, Mongo is a great guy, kind of a dumbass but a great guy. He’s a loyal friend, and if it weren’t for him and his old ass car, none of us would be going on this trip. In fact, I wouldn’t have made it to work in order to pay for mine and Stephanie’s share of the trip, if he didn’t give me a lift. I should probably be thankful to him for what he’s done for us in the last few months, but I’m not. On the other hand, Hannah hates his guts for reasons that make Marcus totally uncomfortable.

“You lost the cherry dipshit!” she yelled at Marcus. He was tapping ash

from the joint while driving and bumped it against the cracked window, sending sparks flying inside the car. Nothing caught on fire. Nobody got burned. I wish Hannah could hide her dislike a little better. It makes this whole situation so much worse.

“Jesus, sorry Hand-Job.” Mongo apologized to Hannah with our “Friend Group” nickname for her. She grimaced and rolled her eyes into a sidelong, expectant look to her chosen defender. Chad just stared straight ahead, apparently daydreaming with his weird vacant smile until Stephanie waved the now butted roach in his face.

Hannah “Hand-Job” Schwartz earned her name by turning down the sexual advances of one of our favorite high school athletes and escaped being raped by giving the boy a hand job. Of course, this boy then bragged about his conquest by branding Hanna with the new moniker. Because my friends are awesome, she owned it, and made us all call her Hand-Job until the bullies didn’t find it fun anymore. Now the only person she didn’t want calling her that just did.

Luckily Chad had just got the joint relit with a few big puffs and handed it to her before she could vent by clawing the sides of Mongo’s face and causing a car accident. He then mumbled to our faithful courier, “Get off up here.” Best place for gas and road snacks is at the truck stop. Chad either had supernatural timing or had been paying attention the whole time and didn’t want to say anything to Marcus in defense of Hannah. I think it’s probably the latter for several reasons, but I will get to that in a moment. For now, we’re pulling into the truck stop.

“I gotta piss. Drone, watch my lady.” Mongo nods at me and Stephanie laughs as we all climb out of the car. As Mongo stands up, I’m reminded of just how capable of protecting her he is. He looks like a professional athlete despite being just nineteen years old. Six feet, five inches tall, and a former junior varsity wrestler. His friends started calling him Mongo back in eighth grade because his voice was already deeper than Mr. Connor’s, his old wrestling coach. I guess they thought it made him sound stupid. He does sound a little like Andre the Giant in the “Princess Bride,” but I wouldn’t say that to his face. He was a damn good wrestler too until he quit the team in protest after some of the meaner jocks taped two of the boys together with athletic tape while they were trying to shower.

“Ladies room?” I ask the counter lady as I enter the truck stop. She gives

me the typical puzzled then disgusted look. Fuck her. I'm used to it though. I know what I look like. I guess this is where I come out to you all. I'm a lesbian, and despite my apparent appearance, that means I'm a young woman. I know, shocking right? As I said, I'm used to the judgment. Despite being a twenty-year-old woman, I know I still look like a fourteen-year-old boy. I think it's my boobs, or lack thereof that throws people. My shaved head, wife beater, and army fatigues make me look like I'm going off to play G.I. Jane. I get it, and I can stand up for myself, despite being five foot 3 and weighing a buck-ten.

I've been open about who I am since before I entered high school. That's given me time to get used to being called a dyke, a freak, or whatever colorful bullshit these scumbags in this shitty hillbilly town think up. I can take it all, well almost. I can take anything except when they call me Mike. I will lose my shit on you if you call me Mike. My name is Michelle. Ever since I cut my hair as a sophomore, the wittiest of our classmates started in on me, calling me Michael. Over time it got shortened to Mike. I started making people call me Shelly just to avoid the connection. Being picked on for being gay is one thing. At least that's true. Insinuating I'm a man because of how I look hurts in ways I can't explain. I wish I could just turn it into a meme like Hand-Job did, but I can't. Maybe because my brother started it, before he went to jail. I don't know. I've lived this long in this body of mine. I'm proud of what I've done as a woman. Don't take that away from me because I love other women too.

There was a bang on the door, overly loud, followed by Hannah bellowing, "Hurry up ya bish!" in her fake drunk voice. I open the door trying to keep a straight face while giving her my "Too serious accusatory" face. We both failed in that regard as we started giggling. She squeezed by me in the doorway. "Get road snacks." Comes from behind the closing door. I obey grabbing a handful of Slim Jims, a few bags of Combos, a blueberry muffin for Steph, and a Devil Dog for myself. By the time I grab a bottle of milk to round out my treat, Hand-Job finished up in the bathroom. "Grab soda." I nod toward the drink cooler as I virtually juggle our snacks to the counter.

The old lady at the counter barely looked at me as she checked me out. "Thanks, gorgeous!" I said to her as I took my change, rubbing her hand as much as possible. I hope she felt as uncomfortable as I did. We grabbed our snacks and headed to the car. When we got outside, we found Mongo sitting

on a bench with Chad on one side, Stephanie on the other. Posed with their heads on his shoulders. They sat watching a couple dogs play in a lawn sectioned off at the truck stop for that very reason. Hand-Job croaks out a disgusted, “Oh God Chad, really?”

Chad had a crush on Mongo. It was pretty clear to everyone except Mongo. It had become a bit of an issue with him and Hannah. Probably not why you’d assume. Hannah is okay with Chad having a crush on other guys. The reason Hannah acts so pissy towards Mongo is because he declined her invitation to join them in bed after she gave in to Chad’s desires. After a night of drinking Mongo was preparing to sleep on her couch when she came into the living room nude except for her panties and asked him to sleep in their room. I don’t know what the hell he was thinking, but he told her to ask again when they were sober. She has no intention of that. Imagine how fucking vulnerable she was? It pisses me off.

It makes her even madder because he didn’t turn down Stephanie when she asked him to join us. It’s something I am not terribly happy about myself, but who could blame him? Stephanie is gorgeous. She is almost frustratingly beautiful. After having one of my freak outs over being called Michael, she shaved her head in solidarity with me. It pissed me off. I like my girlfriend to look like a girl. It pissed me off more because there was absolutely no doubt that she was definitely still a girl. I was jealous as much as pissed. If anything she looked hotter. There simply was no turning her down.

Before then, I’d never been with a man. Stephanie had. She had described what it was like. When she did I could tell how she enjoyed the sensation. She convinced me that it was something that couldn’t be simulated. I agreed with the mentality that he wouldn’t fuck me. He did. I went along with it. It hurt. I didn’t like it. I asked him to stop. He did, and went back to Stephanie. I went and set up our shower. I sat on the toilet and cried.

Not because it hurt so much. In a weird way it did feel good. I cried because I realized right then, that Stephanie wasn’t going to be the one. Too much had tipped me off over the years. Stephanie was eighteen years old. She didn’t know who she was yet. It was something I had always kind of worried about. She’s going to be figuring that out for the next few years but I already know where she is going to end up. Right where she was while I cried. On some dude’s dick.

I know that sounds bitter, but let's face it, this is something she enjoys.

That, and Stephanie wants to give birth someday. That's something I can't give her. She thinks she loves me because she hasn't really considered what this life we would have together will lead us through. Not once she is out of school like I have been this last year. What she wants as a woman and won't get from me. We planned this trip to be a goodbye for Hand-Job and Chad. After Hannah graduates, she is moving out to Horseheads with Chad to get an apartment closer to his parents. They're planning to get married next year. Something I truthfully can't ever see me and Stephanie doing. I planned this trip to be a goodbye to my past.

I take out my phone and take a picture of the three of them together there on the bench before Hand-Job breaks it up. It might be my last good memory from this part of my life. The end of my childhood. After this trip, before she graduates, I'm breaking it off with Stephanie. I can't keep holding on to this notion that we want the same things.

I throw the bag of road snacks on the floor of the front seat. "Shotgun." I call out to the other four as they come wandering back, laughing about some joke I missed. One more week and this all ends. Hannah and Chad leaving is the last straw. I need to get out of this town. I need to find out what there is. I have to tear myself away to do that. For me, and for her.

Somewhere down this road I hope I can figure out what to say. Maybe she can hook up with Mongo's dumb ass. "Forward drone!" I yell to him as he climbs behind the wheel. As we pull back onto the road, I can only think about the future, and hope. ☺



## My Underestimated Provider

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JOJO JOHNSON

As I sit underneath you,  
I can feel the warm air dance across my face.  
There's nowhere else I'd rather be,  
You always protect me,  
From the sun,  
And so,  
From sweat.  
And I realize there's no way I'd take you for granted,  
The way my brothers and sisters do.  
You nourish us daily,  
And when I'm in need of a friend,  
You're ready to act as a rock wall,  
And I  
A creature,  
Eager to reach the top.  
As months go on,  
I notice we spend less time together.  
And from a distance,  
I watch your limbs hit the earth.  
As miserable as it seems,  
Their light shades make me think otherwise.  
Winter appears,  
And I'm forced to decorate a prototype,  
And stand by until the sun returns,  
Until then,  
We'll revisit.

## An Old Man Looking Out His Window Musing

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JOSHUA LEWIS

Friends come and go.  
The memories remain.  
Some soft, some harsh.  
All filled with things long past.

I cherish my time  
with these specters,  
these afterimages,  
of people who were once in my life.

I'm a ghost, too.  
I can't control  
how others feel.  
I hope the haunting is sweet.

## The Nature of Desire

---

JOSHUA LEWIS

Sprouts long to spread.  
Trees yearn to tower  
above the fray. Swans  
thirst for the air,  
the embrace of clouds.  
Squirrels clamor for  
the bounty of afternoons.  
Fish seek to swim  
in darkness and light.  
Stars ache to shimmer  
and fade. Night insists  
on moments of ecstasy.  
Day pines for an answer  
to the question of time.  
Dirt wishes to bury  
the memories of place.  
The oceans throb  
for the dead.  
Life wants to live.

## The P.Z.C. Haiku Sequence

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JOSHUA LEWIS

I.

Light on water. I--  
a mirage on the surface  
illuminated.

II.

Leaves on the ground, brown  
like the earth. Wind whispering  
the passage of day.

III.

Bluebird perched on branch.  
Water gray, placid.  
Farewell, visitor.

IV.

The path of light--gone.  
In its place, snow has emerged.  
The road is now ice.

V.

A leaf skates across  
the frozen pond making paths  
numerous and wide.

VI.

Water bubbling  
on the edge of the ice pond.  
Thaw is in the air.

VII.

A limb touches the pond.  
A man is on the far shore  
wanting to reach out.

## The Words Between Us

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J O S H U A L E W I S

Bleed•ing heart (n.)--A field of raw nerves.

Lib•er•al (n.)--An ocean open to the sky.

Fem•in•ist (n.)--An evolving answer to a set of increasingly hostile questions.

Me (pro.)--An individual raw and open to the sky, an evolving answer in a sea of hostile questions.

You (pro.)--An evolving answer as well. A field of raw sky open to an ocean filled with debate.

Us (pro.)--Sky and ocean, answers to questions evolving, fields of increasing variety.

Love (v.)--Feeling one's way through a field of ocean, open to the sky and its evolving set of questions and answers. An interrogation of what one thought he or she was and who he or she will become. A never-ending debate with the future and its infinite variety.

## Renascence

---

S U S H M A M A D D U R I

I walked the streets this morning,  
After eleven and half weeks of mourning.  
To finally discover the snow gone,  
All of it- including the gray tone withdrawn !  
Allowing the new greens to be born.

I heard my inner voice sigh,  
After having seen a few storms low and high.  
'Oh the sward showed up last week,  
Don't to be so excited- we haven't seen the peak!

But I noticed the brighter dawn,  
Assured myself that the grass has come to the lawn.  
Its pervading optimism till the dusk,  
Breaking through and taking over the yellow husk.

New beginnings it seems  
To the mortal world!

The new mandate set me out asking,  
What lay dormant during the twenty-three months of masking?  
All of it- not just the eyes; the happy faces behind them  
The joy that even time had to condemn

Its only people's eyes that I could access  
Whatever the vision captured- the brain could not fully process?  
However -the 'totality' turns out to be slightly different !  
Are they still the same people or they aren't ?

Their expression is now more meaningful  
Their response more powerful  
Ah! The haze over the mind's eye will clear  
The virtual screen will now not interfere!

New beginnings it seems  
To the mortal world!

## I Are Knee

---

MOLLY MAHON

I see hope through my toy telescope  
In the craters of the moon  
And you

I see light in the dark of the night  
In the shadows that may loom  
And you

I see peace in the soldiers on the street  
In the sting of a bee  
And me

I see life in the whites of their eyes  
In the ashes in the sea  
And me

I see might in a windless kite  
In an unloaded gun  
And us

I see truth in disgruntled youth  
In the deceit of the tongue  
And us

I see love in the rough  
In the strike of a rod  
And God

I see faith in a tyrant state  
In the doom of fate  
And everyone



## The Emerald Enlightenment

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KAYLEE MAIETTA

Words spilled onto the page, first trickling, then pouring. The midnight ink danced along the paper. Characters, plots, and dialogue swirled around my mind, desperate to be transcribed before they faded into thin wisps of memory.

Some days, the minutes turned to hours; hours of writing, imagining, creating. On other days, all I could do was stare at blank pages as they taunted me—a symbol of failure, of what may never be. On certain days, the notebook remained unopened—the scarlet, sapphire, and magenta tulips adorning the cover mocked me—a symbol of beauty that my words may never achieve.

One cold February morning, on my fourteenth birthday, after a failed attempt to write on the previous weekend, I was miserable. More specifically, I was lost. I was trapped by the empty, chilling abyss of the unknown. What if I failed? What if I wasn't good enough? What if my writing didn't capture the essence of what I wanted to say?

Mother Nature herself furthered my torment. As I looked out my bedroom window, weighed down by my sorrow, I saw the curtain of frost outside my window, a series of unique, geometric designs—yet another masterpiece I would never find the right words to describe.

That night at dinner, I was happy—as most teenagers are on their birthday—but I also felt conflicted. I had begun to doubt that I would ever have the prose and poetic skills of Poe, Dickinson, or Hemingway. Resigned to my fate, I plastered a smile on my face and opened my presents. The metallic blue wrapping on one gift winked at me. The present, I noted, was from my parents. Inside lay a beautiful paisley print notebook. After opening the gift my aunt and uncle had dropped off, I began to think that the universe was sending me a message. Another notebook, a turquoise and green travel-size journal, small enough that I could carry it with me to record ideas as they

struck. The present from my grandparents, however, changed everything.

It wasn't that the gift was something different entirely; in fact, it was another journal. The difference was that this notebook didn't terrify me, it inspired me. No larger than the novels on my bookshelf, an intricate array of emerald gems painted on the cover, and pages with gilded edges—the beauty of the journal made me want to create a story that matched its exquisite nature, so I wrote. I wrote, and wrote, and I kept writing. I filled my turquoise notebook with ideas for numerous books. I wrote poetry in the pages of the paisley notebook. My old, flower-covered notebook became the home of first drafts.

One empty journal fueled my desire to write, and extinguished my fear of the unknown. My own fear of never being a writer was holding me back from my dreams, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. The only way to fight the fear was to face it. You can't stop trying just because you might fail. One empty journal filled numerous notebooks, because it inspired me to write, and to continue writing until my first novel is written on its pages. ☺

## Spectrum

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ALEX MCCOLLUM

“Thank you for calling Spectrum, my name is Sam, with whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with today?”

This was my mantra, repeated every day, every time the phone rang. I was employed in the call centers of Spectrum, but at times it felt like I was dug in the trenches of war. People didn't call the billing department when everything was going well and there were no friendly calls of “howdy-do.” They only called when they had a problem and, to them, I was the source of the issue. I was their antagonist, a person to be battled and fought with over every line item on a bill as though I went out of my way assigning extras to invoices in a tyrannical frenzy of charges.

My coworkers would tell me not to take it personally. People will be mad, but it's not your fault. Don't take it personal. I admit, that worked for a time, and we'd even trade war stories of customer experiences in the lunchroom at break time. I managed to get through the better part of a year with their help as we were all in it together. The death threats were harder to get over. It's never easy to get over someone demanding your full name so they can track you down and kill you and your family. It was shortly after that is when the nightmares started.

I'd have reoccurring nightmares of a phone ringing; I'd answer it to be met with an unyielding and unreasonable screaming. No matter what I'd do or say I'd try to resolve the call, but I'd end up waking in a cold sweat feeling helpless. Work seemed to find its way home with me. My anxiety skyrocketed during these times and I felt trapped and panic over nothing. I muscled through it, pushing my feelings to the dark pit of my stomach, my mental health be damned.

After some soul searching with my wife and liberal use of my sick and vacation time, I decided that I would put in my two weeks' notice. My boss was disappointed to say the least, as I was always a top performer on his team. He even tried to convince me to stay by offering up the company's mental

health benefits that I would qualify for in just under a month. I politely declined, and said that the only thing that would help is to stop doing my job.

The next week passed and I was counting the minutes left I had in that building. It was a Monday, I had five more grueling days ahead of me. Today was a rough one. I was about two hours into my shift and had been screamed at by various customers for the entire shift. About three quarters of the way through what was probably the eleventh angry customer that day a thought entered my mind. “Why am I still here? I don’t owe these people anything!”

I finished the call, fulfilling my duty, and swiftly collected my belongings. My boss was away so I simply left my I.D badge on his desk. My coworkers looked around at me in confusion but then quickly realized what I was doing and understood. I had never felt such relief on my way home now that it was over.

Talking it over with my wife, we decided that the best course of action would be to enroll me in college, to take up a new profession. I’ve found my way through and I’m working toward a better life for myself and my family now.

My time in the trenches of the call center taught me a valuable life lesson though. Never, under any circumstance, throw away your health, not mental nor physical, for a company who will replace you within the week. ☺

## A Spectacular Job Opening

GLORIA BRUNDAGE MCCORMICK

Peter : Not Hired. Too Old.

Paul: Not hired. Verbal Assaultive. Writes Nasty Letters.

James the Lesser: Not Hired. Too Short.

Philip: Not hired. Poor eyesight.

James: Not hired. Needs anger management. Known to fight with fellow workers.

Mark: Not Hired. Crippled.

John: Not hired. Too young.

Luke: not hired. Back Problems.

Matthew: Not hired. Only concerned with personal gain. Spies/reports to Authorities. Nosy.

Andrew: Not Hired. Poor hearing.

Thomas: Disbelief. Has to see the finished product first.

ALL of the ABOVE. NOT HIRED. UNQUALIFIED.

HOWEVER! We HIGHLY recommend Judas Iscariot. Perfectly Healthy,  
Highly

Educated, very qualified. Perfect Candidate for the job!



Saint's Offering | Calvin Yardley

## What the Hell Happened and How Did I Get Here?

MATTHEW NOWAKOWSKI

October 15, 2017 started out normal, just as every Sunday had for the past year. I showed up to work at midnight, sorted my paperwork, walked out to the truck I'd call home for the next two days, and started my drive to a Wendy's in Connecticut for my first delivery. My first stop went off with no issues, so I packed up and drove the 10 minutes to my next stop in New Haven. It had started raining, but fast food waits for no one. I started delivering the frozen biscuits, stacked on my handcart six boxes at a time, when I took a step forward onto the over-worn rain soaked ramp, and before I knew it, I was on the ground. I had fallen five-and-a-half feet out of the trailer, and landed on my hands and knees. How I ended up in that position, I'll never know. I laid there, stunned for a minute or two, rolled over and looked towards the sky. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw a reverend/pastor/priest standing there, looking down on me. He said nothing, did nothing, and just turned and walked away.

I knew my ankle was fucked, I just didn't know the extent of the damage. I got up, took the biscuits inside, and then asked for a bag of ice. Somehow I managed to hobble back to the cab of the truck, took my boot off (which in hindsight was pretty dumb), and assessed the damage. My right ankle was already swollen and bruised, so I called dispatch back at the warehouse to let them know I got hurt, and asked for some help on my second day of deliveries, because I knew once I went to sleep for the night, my ankle was going to be way worse for wear. While I was on the phone with the incompetent day staff, I started filling out the injury report, and iced my ankle the best I could for as long as I could. Like I said before, fast food waits for no one. I had three other deliveries to do before I even got the opportunity to rest for the night, but I managed and finally got to relax. My alarm went off and I got up at 11 PM, looked around and realized I was alone with no help. The day crew, in the 16 hours I allowed them to find me some help, never even relayed the message to the night crew, so I was shit outta luck. I did all my deliveries for day 2 by myself, got back to the warehouse, and got my ass to the walk-in. Nothing was broken, so they sent me home, and told me I could work on Wednesday. I figured I was WAY more hurt than the PA had led on, so I went to OCMED the following day. They put me on light duty, no standing, or walking for more

than 5 minutes at a time, and told me to start physical therapy.

Now the real fun starts. For the first month, I was on office duty on the night shift, helping the drivers collect their keys and their paperwork for their routes. I made phone calls to stores to let them know their deliveries were going to be late, and logged the calls into the notes for the routes. After that first month, I was asked to work outside my doctor's recommendation. The transportation supervisor wanted me to drive a fucking 18-wheeler with an ankle that was destroyed, to put it lightly, which my doctor had specified I wasn't supposed to do. I turned him down quickly, which he didn't appreciate, so I was punished and put at the fuel island outside, at the end of November, working on my feet for eight hours a day, which was also against doctor's orders. I kept my mouth shut. I was the sole provider at the time for my family, and couldn't afford to lose my job. On December 28, 2017, I was pulled out of work by my doctor, and scheduled for surgery.

My initial surgery was on February 28, 2018, and was successful with no complications. It was outpatient surgery, so I was in and out the same day. I was in no pain for the first month, so I was hopeful until the infection set in. My body was rejecting the hardware, on top of the infection, which knocked me down a few pegs to say the least. My second surgery was on May 8, 2018, and I was excited for this one, as I figured this was going to be the last one. But man oh man was I WAY off. I was in pain immediately after this one, and it never went away. The second surgery got rid of the infection, but I was still in constant pain. I did PT for over a year, which did nothing to help. My doctor and I talked about options, and came to the conclusion that a fusion could possibly absolve the issue.

My third surgery was scheduled for July 5, 2019 to fuse my subtalar joint, which made it impossible for me to roll my ankle. The day came and went. I was in and out the same day, as I had been for the previous two surgeries. I had less mobility and still had no relief from the pain. This took a severe hold on my mental health. I was sinking fast, having been in pain for close to three years at this point. I started researching amputation for chronic pain, because I just couldn't fucking do it anymore. This was a workers' comp case, so I had to jump through hoops and had to exhaust all options before they would even consider amputation. The Workers' Compensation system is completely ass-backwards, but I'll save that story for another day.

My doctor and I had an absolutely amazing working relationship, so we



got to joking about taking the leg, which he understood, but wanted to try something else first. There was a new type of hardware that had just been introduced to the market, which had amazing results. My fourth surgery was on July 8, 2020, a little over a year after my last one, and it went well, but had absolutely no effect on my pain. Back to PT I went, and over the next year, my mental health dropped to a new low. Suicide crossed my mind almost daily. I was driving 120 with no seat belt, and had thoughts of hanging myself. It was the lowest I had ever been, all because I was in constant excruciating pain. I didn't think it was ever going to end.

My doctor and I continued to meet every 45 days, discussing options and whatnot, and he had told me that he wasn't confident that another surgery from him would benefit me. He was really sorry that nothing worked, and that "the decision" is what it came down to. It was finally time to choose my fate. There were other options to try before amputation, and I let my doctor at pain management try a couple of things before I voiced my decision. At that point, I had already had my mind made up, but figured I'd let them try and "save" my foot. We did a few injections in a few places to see if the pain was nerve related, but the shots did nothing, like I had already assumed.

Choosing to have my leg taken off was a wild process. I had done my research, watched YouTube videos from doctor's and other amputees, and followed a few amputees on social media, and they were HAPPY and living amazing lives. That was all I needed to see, because I was sick and tired of waiting around and just existing. My wife, and kid were on board, as were my doctors, and that's all that mattered to me. I met with my vascular surgeon, we talked briefly about the process, which by that point I had all the info I needed, so we set a surgery date. The process usually takes months, because they want to make sure you understand the risks and you have the mental wherewithal to make this giant life changing decision. Doing my due diligence, and learning everything I could beforehand, and also working with mental health providers, I was able to get into surgery quicker than most.

July 30, 2021, was the day my life would change. The weeks before surgery were strange. I was so excited to begin living my life and being pain free again. I finally had hope again, but trying to convince your mind that you'll be parting with something that's been attached to you since birth is a helluva thing to do. Surgery day rolled around, and I was not nervous in the least. It went off without a hitch. I came to, and was wheeled to my room, where my wife was

waiting for me. Once I gained full consciousness I looked down, saw the piece of shit I was attached to for three-and-a-half years was gone, and knew things were going to be OK. The first couple days I was in pain, shit I just had my leg removed like a bad tooth, but after those 48 hours, my pain was completely gone. Never in a million years did I think I'd be pain free again.

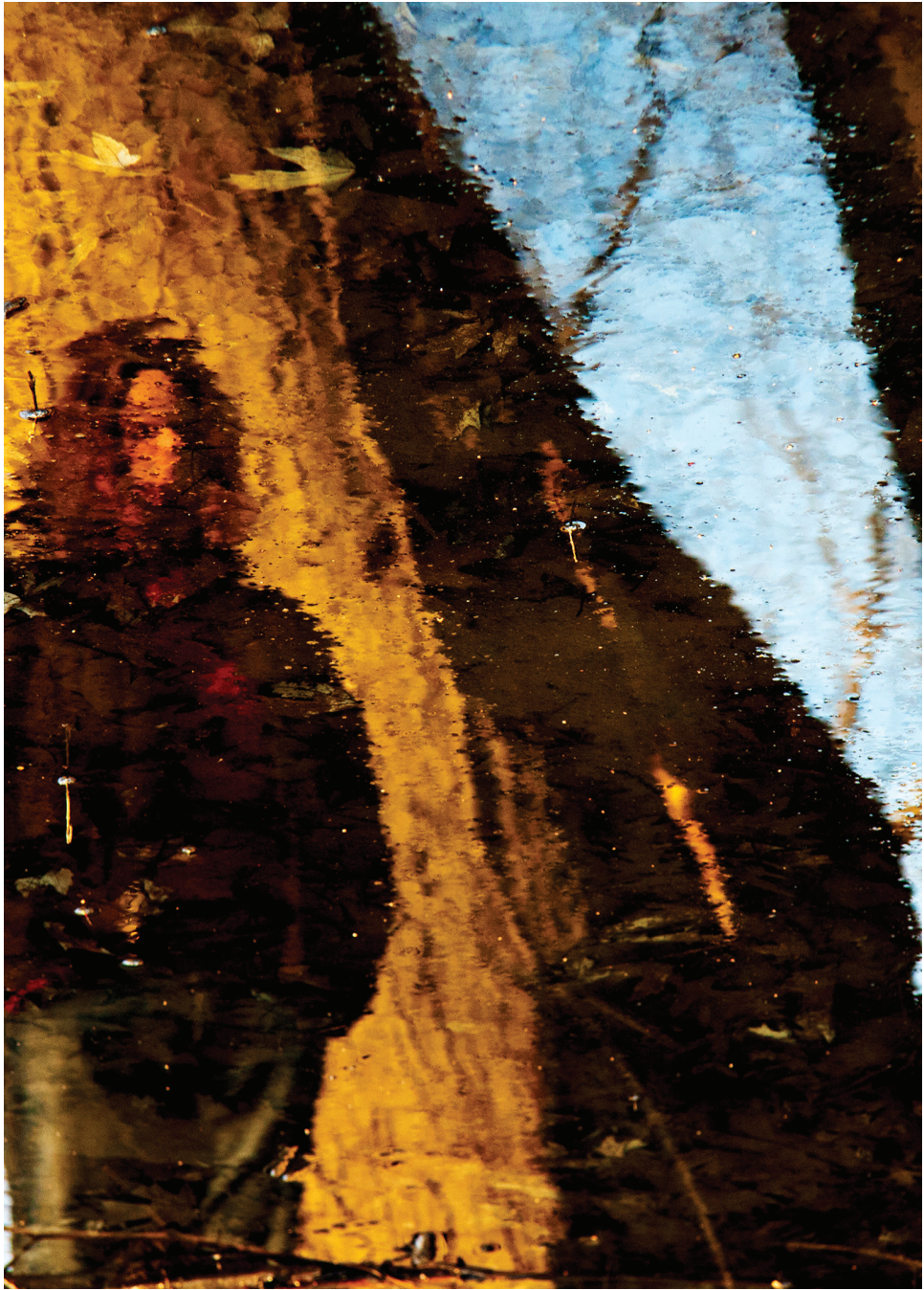
After I spent those four days in the hospital, I was released, and got to go home, a new man. For my first month home, I was room bound. Our three dogs were too much of a risk for me to be around all day, so it was the best decision. I was losing my mind, to put it lightly, but I was in NO PAIN. Seeing the same things day in and day out being room bound was a small price to pay. The prosthetic process started about two weeks after I got home, and I was ecstatic! This was the start of the end of the journey! We started taking measurements, and I was given materials to bring home to use, to alter the shape of my "leg leftovers." Stump is such a harsh word, and my wife and I decided to make our own word for the residual limb I was left with. As I'm writing this, I'm STILL without a new leg, but the end is near. It's been frustrating having to be housebound, one-legged, and forced to rely on others, but again, PAIN FUCKING FREE, so it's worth it. In a few weeks, I should have my new leg, I'll be part cyborg, and I can live my life with my family to the fullest.

There is going to be nothing that I won't do once my leg comes in. Running, hiking, biking, dancing, it's all fair play. Shit, I've even started thinking about future Halloween costumes for one-legged individuals. I have a new lease on life, another chance. I've lost so many years to the pain and suffering this has caused me, so I've got a lot of time to make up for. One of the main things I'm going to do is advocate for people who are in my shoes; the people who don't know amputation is a valid option for chronic pain, and the people who are getting jerked around in the workers' compensation system. There needs to be a serious reform, and the injured need to be compensated a hell of a lot better.

When it's time for me to take my final breath on this mortal plane, I'll die knowing I did all I could in life, and I'll go out looking back on everything I've accomplished with a smile on my face. ☺



Insimplicity | Alli Baumgart



Literal and Metaphorical |Richard Schleider



Arbor of the Phoenix | Calvin Yardley



Play | Alli Baumgart



They're Back | Taneer Middleton



Lollipop | Abigayle Bennett





Heaven on Earth | Rose Pero



End of the World. Beginning of Another. | Deb Hibbard

## Factory Seconds

CHRISTOPHER ORIGER

At midnight Griswold is caulking air conditioners ratcheting past on the No. 16 line, one every twenty-two seconds. Each is designed for the car he's never been able to afford, though he still keeps a polaroid of it, like a promissory note, tucked inside his lunch pail. He's on the graveyard shift again, one more reason to gripe as he bear-hugs a rejected unit off the conveyer. "Don't believe me," he says, glaring at a smiley face someone taped over the clock, "but I aim to cut and run." Across from him Winslow strains to hear his pal over the grinding of the overhead ventilators, but he nods anyway.

"And besides—as my ex happily reminds me—life is too short."

Winslow has heard the speech before. Not that he doesn't share Griswold's frustrations. His answer is to roll a piece of caulk into a little ball and then, when he thinks no one is watching, he side-arms it at one of the rookies down the line. Anything to distract himself from six more hours before the next shift blunders in at sunrise.

"I'm as serious as a heart attack," says Griswold.

Winslow can't stand the expression. Every chronic insomniac in the plant uses it now. "Sure you are, Harry. Not saying I don't believe you."

"So, when's the big hoo-ha?" says Carla, zipping screws into a cowling.

"What hoo-ha?" yells Michaels, who leans into the conversation. He's just switched from second shift.

"Griz gave his notice to what's-his-face," says Axel, on probation again for smiling.

"Sweet. More power to you, man. When?"

"First of the month," mutters Griswold.

"As in, like, next week?" says Carla. "No way."

"Already counting down the days."

Michaels slings a dead compressor onto a pallet of rejects and laughs. "No offense, man, but maybe you should sit this one out tonight."

Griswold wipes his dusty goggles on a shirtsleeve. "You don't know it yet, my well-meaning friend, but one day you'll wander in here and won't even care what season it is. Or if the sun still exists out there. Before you know it, decades have been stolen from you and that's when you realize everyone else is moving past while you've been standing still. Get out while you can."

"Keep the line moving, gentlemen," says their foreman. "What's the holdup over there?"

“No holdup, Al,” says Axel. “Griswold is just giving us another pep talk.”

“Well, best keep your eyes on your work instead.”

The line has already met its first quota of three-hundred units; still, this foreman paces about reciting safety tips because the plant manager was seen wandering the floor. No one is too chummy with him. Eventually he'll ascend to some narrow office with a skylight and call it success, and only rarely will anyone see him again.

“Well that's never going to be me, man,” says Michaels. “Soon as I take a few more classes at the college I'm out of here.”

“Sure, kiddo,” says Winslow. “You keep on telling yourself that.”

“So will we still see you down at Elliot's for drinks with us working stiffs?” says Axel.

“I don't drink.”

“Not much you don't,” says Carla.

“High time to turn over a new leaf.”

Axel snorts. “How many leaves is that?”

“You're a riot, son.”

“They still give you a plaque when you leave?” says Carla.

Winslow yawns and caulks another air conditioner. “In recognition of inertia.”

“In recognition of being a chump, you mean,” says Axel.

“The man didn't even know my name after this long,” says Griswold. “He thought I was Mulligan.”

At 1:30 a.m. the break whistle shrieks and the line grinds to a halt. Griswold tosses his work apron and follows others already made goofy by the first part of the shift. Outside it's still winter and the sun won't assert itself for hours, just in time for most of them to burrow into bed and sleep away the better part of another cold day. They climb up a stairwell to the catwalk leading to an unheated plexiglass break room, which has a view of a dozen other lines on the factory floor. Griswold is dragging. He needs a jolt of coffee and the lines to the vending machine and lavs are already to the door. He figures he must be the oldest geezer here, a distinction that awards him no privileges. “I tell you what,” he says: “I won't miss this convivial horseshit one bit. Look at all these half-dead people.” He's staring at four men from the radiator line furtively playing poker. He can't understand how they always manage to score the only decent table. Axel switches on the radio for a hockey game, forgetting it's the middle of the night, and gets a weather bulletin instead. The station crackles. Another nor'easter heading this way. Miles of snow sweeping across the entire continent this time. Carla sighs. “And I promised my kid I'd take him to that

new outlet to buy sneakers.”

“Where you going, pop?” says the gadfly dealing cards. “I heard you’re thinking about escaping this paradise. That true?”

“Serious as a heart attack, junior.”

“So then what—where you buzzing off to?”

“Haven’t decided yet. Everywhere.”

“Go to Cali,” says Carla. “Leave all the shoveling behind. That’s what I’m going to do one of these days, find somewhere warm and cozy and live every day on a sandy beach.”

“Three decades,” says Griswold. “And what do you have to show for it?”

“Besides hemorrhoids?” offers Michaels.

“How about you men stop shooting the shit and get back to work,” says their foreman, who’s wandered in to examine the vending machine.

“Break’s not over, Major,” says Carla, eager for a fight, anything to set this Monday apart from the four hundred others she’s marked time here. “We’ve got six whole minutes.”

“I haven’t decided where I’ll land yet,” Griswold yawns, pleased when he sees Al retreating. “As far away as possible.”

“You’ll be back,” says Axel. “You wait and see. You’ll miss us all so much.”

“Fat chance of that, slim.”

“Remember that dude with the missing fingers over on radiators—what the hell was his name—the guy with the Caddie he never drove.”

“Jack Givens,” yells a card player.

“Right. Who can forget that motormouth? Always talking about going somewhere. Every payday bought a couple dozen lottery tickets at the Gas N Go. ‘When my ship comes in’—that was his thing.”

“He always said he was not going to wait until they carried him out. We was always busting his chops. So a week after the man retires he drops dead—right on his own front lawn while he’s waxing that damn car. Never got to go nowhere in it.”

“So I heard, God rest his weary soul,” says Griswold, who still feels lousy for missing the wake.

“Me and Henry there chipped in on the rocking chair,” says Axel. “It was a real piece of quality work.”

“Stop talking shit to this man,” says Winslow. “Don’t pay any attention to these jackals, Harry.”

“I wonder what ever happened to that chair,” says Axel.

“Well, anyway, it was a stupid idea,” says Griswold.

Too soon the whistle shrieks again, and the men and women gradually rise

and shuffle back down to their assigned stations on each line.

There are still hours to endure before they're set free again, trudging through piles of dirty snow surrounding the factory, but Griswold imagines he's already beyond all of it. Yet he keeps dwelling on the terrible envy in their voices and his mind rests back on his old friend Givens, who managed to make it out alive for thirteen entire days.

The following week, after the blizzard sweeps away most of their tracks, Griswold is standing at his usual station again, caulking identical units moving past, and no one on the No. 16 line bothers to remind him he's already gone, even after the first break whistle calls them all back together. ∞



Rust Belt Binghamton | Albert Durkee

## “Can You Hear the Colors?”

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ALEXANDRA PEREZ

“Can you hear the colors?” Her voice lingers as she stands in front of her tarot cards that scatter across the floor. Her chain dangles as she leans forward with her chest fully exposed. Her crystals gleam from her neck. She snaps her fingers quickly and swiftly with an angered look on her face.

“Look here, hun!” She stares deeply into my eyes and starts to mumble. I can't make up the words she is saying. But the golden watch in her hands is swirling and I'm falling into bliss. My eyes flicker back and forth like a metronome. Tick, Tick-

My eyes open and here I am laying in my bed once again with the same dream. The same beautiful girl that is hypnotizing me. She was disguised as a gypsy or a witch.

I rub my eyes and stretch as far as I can. My body shakes and I swing my feet off the bed. I take a look at the rings on my fingers and start to rub my hands together. I stare downwards continuously at my hands.

“What a dream.” I step off my bed and here I am falling.

The floor just dissolved and I'm dropping down into a dark tunnel. It goes straight down into the nothingness of the abyss. There is nothing but glimmers of sparkling silvers like stars. I see these wonderful flickers of glimmers as I proceed to make my way downwards.

My body jerks and I awake again in my bed. I rub my eyes once again, very confused. This time I didn't move. I lift my back slowly making me sit up straight. I take a deep breath.

“Well that's a new one. I have never dreamt that one before”

As I get up to walk to the bathroom a card lays on my bedroom floor. “It

must have fallen from my Alter.” I reach down to get a closer look. The words, “The Star” are written in big and bold letters. The number 17 sits in the far corner of the card. Also, a painted naked woman holding a jug in both hands. She pours the water onto the Land and into the lake. There is a bright star hanging above her in the night sky.

As I observe the card the colors start to detach floating into smoke above my head, swirling like a whirlwind. I can hear the colors start to speak.

“You can seek all that you want.” The red whispers circling around me like a cloud.

“If you open up your mind.” The blue starts to blend with the red making the colors mix into a vibrant purple floating into my hands. “Your heart is where your answers lie,” finally, says the purple.

As inhaling the colors my mind starts to fill with imagery beyonds one's imagination. ☺



## All Death Sees

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CATALINA RAMIREZ

“Let me live and I’ll give you anything,” a man continuously whispered to Death in his deathbed in an empty hospital room. Death looked down at the man, who was probably in his late sixties, with sunken eyes and hollow grey cheeks. Death didn’t know his name and he didn’t care either. Death could smell the narcissism and intense ambition from the man along with his toxic liver. But the smell Death hated the most was the acrid smell of hospitals and he grimaced down at the man while reaching towards his hyperventilating form.

The man saw glimmers of light appear and wisps of dark smoke reach out from his chest towards Death’s hand. He thought about how just five minutes ago he opened his eyes to find a dark figure in the corner of his hospital room just watching him. He wasn’t any more afraid than he was curious. He didn’t get visitors and the nurses and doctors didn’t ever stay long enough to talk to him. Probably because of his scrooge-like attitude. Then the figure got closer and he heard a voice in his head. Don’t make a scene. I don’t like screamers or beggars. I’m here to collect your soul as I am Death and there’s nothing you can do. Now feeling Death’s touch and a tug at his chest, the man didn’t even hear himself begging to live longer over the rapidly increasing beeping of the heart monitor before he felt nothing.

Death saw the tether between the man’s soul and body tear as he pulled away and watched as the man’s body jolted up in the hospital bed before falling back down. Dark soul of the day collected. Check. He heard the flatline on the monitor and turned around to see the man’s soul, not in the image of his human body but instead a figure of different shimmering tendrils of light mixed with sinister darkness. He always thought this part was beautiful. A soul in its purest form and he liked how souls didn’t talk, but expressed themselves in light. Their lights changed in radiance and color depending on their pureness and level of influence from bad karma or energy in the lives they’ve lived. Due to karma from having different lives for eternity, Death could see this soul still

had a few more lives to live to correct its karma from the past. He waved a hand at the beaming soul in the room and it faded away as Death turned to walk out of the hospital room.

He was called to a different location to collect another soul and as soon as he stepped out of the hospital room, the smell of disease and medicine faded into a woodsy scent with rain and burning chemicals. As his surroundings became clearer, Death found himself at the scene of a car accident off in the woods, with no other cars in sight except the one with smoke coming out of the hood. A tree had fallen on top and the skies thundered and flashes of light were the only way Death could observe the scene. He took a step forward and grunted at feeling his boots sink into the mud mixed with broken twigs and glass as he neared the car. He could sense that there were two souls to collect but four bodies. He knew it was because the souls of the other two had faded before he could reach them.

Death reached the car and walked to the left side that wasn't dented in and peered into the backseat. He saw two souls shining from two human bodies—a small boy no older than 8 with bloodied, matted hair on the left side of his skull from crashing into the side of the car, and a girl next to him, probably around 13, with her right shoulder jutting out oddly from its socket. They were both stained in crimson, unconscious, had broken pieces of glass in their skin, and Death could see the light in their souls flickering. Death looked at the front of the car, seeing the children's parents and grimaced at the sight. The tree that he saw fallen on the car had broken through the windshield and large shards of broken glass landed into the driver who he assumed was the father of the children. He wasn't breathing and neither was his partner, the passenger who seemed to have suffocated from the airbag. She probably couldn't get out of the car from the tree through the windshield and the dent on her side of the car from the trees they crashed into.

The thunderstorm was at its peak and Death knew that in the middle of nowhere, no one would come to find them, but he felt sorry for the young children in the back. He knew he couldn't do anything. It was against the rules

of fate and of the Universe. He was called to collect the souls of these dying children. He opened the door on the driver's side and reached over the young boy to the girl to grab her soul since he couldn't use his scythe in the car. As he pulled and felt strands of the connection of her soul break slowly, he felt a small hand on his arm. Death was stunned at the unfamiliar feeling of touch and looked back over his shoulder to see the little boy looking at him through droopy, hooded eyes and looked at the little, pale crooked fingers resting on his arm. Please. He heard the boy say in his mind. Death regarded the boy with the ghost of a smile he saved for his dog at home only. As Death pulled back he took the girl's soul with him in his fist. He came back to the boy. Looking down with a gentleness no one would know Death to have, he put his other hand on his chest and began to tug away with his soul. This won't hurt. I promise you'll be safe. After sharing that with the young boy in his mind, Death felt the hand on his arm fall down back to the boy. As Death pulled the boy's flickering soul away, he looked into his face to see him looking back at him with a faint smile until it was done.

Death closed the door with his fist and walked away from the burning car and bodies while holding the souls in his hands. As the thunderstorm cleared into darker but peaceful skies, he opened his hands to release two radiant, light souls into the air. Once released, the two light souls seemed to dance around one another before dancing around Death. A rare scene and action that made him smile and caused warmth inside of him. He knew these were two light souls who were connected through fate with good intentions and meant to bring extraordinary things to existence. ∞

## Moment

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LEE REYNOLDS

Can you hold me?  
I ask quietly, wondering  
If who I'm talking to  
Even knows I exist.

How? You know where  
I am. He responds  
Immediately, as if we've  
Done this same song  
And dance thousands  
Of times before.

Please? I need you.  
I say, feeling colder  
And colder as this  
Sea of depression  
Washes over me.

What would I do?  
He questions,  
Willfully  
Unknowing what  
He means to me.

Having you near  
Will make everything  
Better. It's what  
You do. I keep  
Laying in my bed,  
Wishing for whatever  
Deity to grant me  
Flight or something  
So that I may be with  
Him when I need him  
Most.

And I know, in that  
Moment, he knows  
What he means to me.

## The Oakwood Guardian

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TYLER RIZZO

A large menacing thing that one can hardly believe is alive.

Barely moving from where it began

And yet it reaches high up in the sky.

Thick and thin tendrils reaching out from its base.

The tendrils are sometimes vibrant and sometimes barren.

Even when dead these titans stand where they are born

Until forced down by unnatural causes.

They are a witness of the past and a recording of the present.

They will stand and watch over the future if left unopposed.

## Bruise

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JULIA ROSEN

We place blue in the sky  
And call it beautiful.  
We put blue in the ocean  
And say the waves move us on.  
Blue is not always sadness.

We place grey by the clouds  
And call it a storm.  
We put grey in her hair  
A sign of wisdom.  
Grey is not always despair.

We put grey and blue together  
And we make something  
Light  
And dark  
And neither light nor dark  
Identifies the bruise  
Of grey and blue.

## Cemal

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JULIA ROSEN

Cemal is running away  
Wishing for another day  
He trips on his feet  
Ruins his leap  
Cemal is running away

Cemal is screaming for help  
He left his heart on the shelf  
The clock ticks, the constant itch  
Cemal is screaming for help

Cemal holds a key in his hands  
He is barely able to stand  
The door creaks, his knees weak  
Cemal holds a key in his hands

Cemal runs out of time  
No longer able to climb  
His heart lay there, his body pale and fair  
Cemal runs out of time

Cemal lay there to rest  
His heart beating outside his chest  
He may be gone, but the beat lives on  
Cemal lay there to rest.



## Frozen Garden

MCCAIN ROWLAND

I open my eyes, getting up off the cold, hard ground. The environment around me is wholly familiar, the place I call home, my frozen garden. The garden consists of an endless field blanketed in a layer of snow, stretching out into the horizon, as rows of neatly planted flowers stripe the landscape, forever encased in a thin layer of ice that's as clear as glass. The flowers themselves are fully grown, eternally stuck in their prime, never to wilt, yet never to die.

The garden and the surrounding area used to be fertile farmland, a never-ending expanse of potential. The sun would beam brightly down from the limitless blue sky that it inhabited, but is now covered by a thick miasma of clouds, never to fully shine down on the garden again. What would grow before the conglomeration of clouds were any number of plants, flowers, and trees. A true rainbow of flowers, with no rhyme or reason for their placement or their location in the field. White lilacs would pepper the multitude of yellow, pink, and violet primrose bushes, while the pale pink spring brier would commingle with the light pink spring crocus, with vibrant green grass growing indiscriminately.

The flowers over time would start to wilt, and an abundance of scarlet geraniums, pink foxglove, and pale bramble would overtake the other flowers and plants. To keep the wilting plants alive, I started to put them in rows, to keep them separated and prevent them from dying. Not just the plants that were starting to overwhelm the others, but all the various fauna that existed here.

Eventually all the old plants died out or were so rarely seen that they might as well have been gone. More plants had started to grow in as well, like lavender vitex and snow white guelder. Then, as if signaled by their appearance, the clouds came in, and the flowers began to frost over and crystalize. They were unable to grow much more, but never seemed to wilt.

The plants have always been my friends, and I've never seen a single other person in the garden. I didn't mind, anyway. The plants gave me all the company I needed, and even if there were people out there, it would be hard to find them

in the rows and rows of flowers. As time went on, I concluded it would always just be me in the garden, and I was perfectly fine with that.

Yet over time, the feeling, the desire to have someone else in the garden with me kept crawling back into my memory. But I always doubted myself. What if they don't like the flowers or their arrangement? What if they want to remove them to plant new ones that didn't look as good as the others? It terrified me. What if I make them mad for speaking up about the flowers? What if they never want to talk to me again if I do? It wasn't the idea of having someone in the garden: it was the idea of having to approach someone in general. The cold that controlled my home doesn't usually bother me until I have these thoughts.

When these thoughts enter my mind, I look at the flowers. They were my companions, my guidance. I wanted to be just like them one day, as silly as that sounds. Unable to grow past their prime, yet unable to die. Never again to feel painful memories or experience pleasant ones. The risk of being unable to experience pleasure anymore was worth the reward of being unable to feel pain.

I walked down the aisles of arranged flowers, my shoes crunching in the thin layer of snow covering the ground that is now host to hard frozen dirt, slowly coming up to parts I've never explored before in such a long time. The rows stopped housing plants, and only contained dug out mounds I made to let the plants spread out, but that obviously never panned out. A storm started to brew, a chilling wind, a storm of powder snow blinding my vision, as I thought about the frozen flowers again. I sat down on the ground, spreading out in hopes the snow could turn me into one of my friends. I turn my head on the ground, looking out to the area farther ahead in the storm, to see a faint red light, glowing brightly amidst the storm. I got up, curious to see what it was to arrive at a gate.

The gate itself was nothing special, just old cobblestone and rustic metal adorning the arch. But what was inside was nothing short of beautiful. The arch felt like it went to another realm of reality, a reality with a garden of its own. The field on the other side of the gate held a vast landscape with daffodils and snowdrops adorning the tops of the hills that lay there. The grass and

flowers flowing freely in the wind as the sun there seemed to be ever watching along the horizon, igniting the sky in warm orange and pink highlighted clouds. It was a view I never knew existed, a view I never knew I wanted to experience so much.

What was even more peculiar was the sight of a woman in a white dress, her long black hair flowing in the warm summer breeze that I could feel radiating from the gate. She seemed oddly familiar, as if I knew her from somewhere before. I felt a warmth inside my soul, a desire to meet her. To experience the untold landscape that was out of view from just this gate.

I walked up to the portal, just stopping a moment before. I looked at my garden. It was all I knew, all I ever would know, and it was perfectly fine as it was. Nothing could ever go wrong, as anything that moved besides me was frozen in time. I returned my gaze to the portal again. Amidst the flowers were some that looked like they had lost their color and had succumbed to wilting, yet some of them looked more vibrant and gorgeous than I ever imagined flowers could ever be. It was what stopped me from entering the gate, as well as the thought the woman might not want me there. I couldn't know, I wouldn't know, unless I went through the gate.

I took another glance behind me, at my frozen garden. My last chance to join the only friends I've ever known. I could take one step back to the garden, and with the snowstorm, I could ensure my chance to join the flowers in their limbo, or I could take one more step forward, into the warm, mysterious land that seemed so inviting, even if death and decay were inevitable. All it would take was just one more step. ☺



Hope | Mary Seel

## Falling

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MORGAN RUSSO PHELPS

She was falling,

Or was she flying?

She was sinking,

Or was she swimming?

She did not know,

And really, she did not care.

It was not that she wanted to die,

It was that she desperately wanted to live.

She was tired of the click clack, click clack of the simulation—

The sound was deafening because it was not real.

The sky was real.

The ocean was real.

All that lay beyond the illusion was real.

Falling, she touched the sky.

And she was living.

## Growth

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MORGAN RUSSO PHELPS

To climb a tree,

To fall,

To get back up,

To climb again.

To the onlooker there is no growth,

No progress has been made.

She has not climbed the tree.

But the climber is made privy to a secret

Only comprehended through experience,

That progress made is but a medium for growth.

Growth is not the distance climbed,

But the resilience to keep climbing.

## Merit Badge

DUSTIN SCHMIDT

I was in my second year of Boy Scouts. It was in the middle of spring, and we were out at camp in Pennsylvania. They had not yet opened, so our troop and I were just there. On the second day of camp, we had to repel down and then climb an eighty-foot tall cliff face to earn a badge.

Now the badge itself is not why I decided to climb this cliff. No, my reason for facing this cliff, which stood over a river that was full of water moccasins, was a person. For privacy, we will call this little shit E; If I had to describe E with two words, it would be, "Try Hard." E wanted to become an Eagle Scout, you see. Which, in other cases, would be admirable, but this little weasel was such a conniving, stuck-up, obnoxious piece of shit. He would bitch and moan about anything the second it didn't go his way. To help put in perspective his attitude towards most things: he once found this biggest stick he could find and whipped it across my back after we got into a minor argument.

So on that fateful day, I stared down the edge of the cliff to see the raging waters below and the tiny little platform I was supposed to reach. I was understandably nervous as I tied my knot and had it checked over by a professional. But when I looked over and saw that E was already shaking and looked ready to cry. I knew what I had to do. Steeling my nerves, I grabbed onto the rope and slowly lowered myself down the cliff face.

Every step felt like ten as I tried to control my breathing; my heart pounded in my ears as I flipped off gravity with my verticality. Eventually, I made it to the bottom. Now I had already done everything required for the day, and I could simply take the path back up. But I wanted that badge to rub it in E's face. So I grabbed a pair of gloves handed to me by my troop master. I started my climb back up, and if I thought repelling down was hard enough. I wasn't prepared for actually climbing the thing. Even with the ropes helping to support me, my arms burned, and I could feel my hands getting slick with sweat from my gloves, to the point where I had to take them off, forgoing their protection for a better grip.

After I finally managed to pull myself over the cliff's edge, I looked over to see E still standing on the cliff edge, crying and screaming like a baby that he was going to die. I took that badge with honor. Even though I never became an Eagle Scout, I still was able to climb that cliff. ∞

## What a Word Means to Me

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CAEDEN SCHNEIDER

"**Y**ou've always been someone who has never conformed to the female gender roles of society," my mother said to me in our living room. Her voice was warm and proud, but inwardly I shrank in dismay. "You don't worry about what society expects of you, and I think that's amazing. For example, you wanted to dye your hair blue because it made you happy. Society has so many ideas of what a woman should do and what she should look like, and you have never cared about that."

"I just want to feel comfortable in my own skin," I replied, feeling anything but that right then. "I want to do what makes me happy, without worrying what other people might think."

My mother smiled, but as kind as her words were, I couldn't bring myself to smile back. Although she had the best intentions, I was frustrated that I lacked the bravery to express how I truly felt. She was proud of me, but in the end, I still felt defined by a word that attached itself to me from the moment I was born. "Female." To me, the word sounds unpleasantly clinical. Its definition on [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com) only emphasizes that feeling: "A person bearing two X chromosomes in the cell nuclei and normally having a vagina, a uterus, and ovaries, and developing at puberty a relatively rounded body and enlarged breasts and retaining a beardless face; a girl or woman" ("Female").

At times, words like "female" bothered me. I was my mother's first child, and to her, I would always be her "little girl." While she almost exclusively referred to my siblings by their names, I was rarely anything but Girl, or "My girl." Although she certainly never meant to make me feel that way, the older I grew, the more belittled and objectified I felt. The feeling grew worse as I realized it was the same way I referred to my cat.

In Naylor's "The Meaning of a Word", the author describes how her own family used the word "girl". Naylor explains, "Girl was a token of respect for a woman" (Naylor). The word's usage followed specific rules that ensured the person being referred to understood the speaker's intention (Naylor). If someone used the word differently, the meaning of the word "girl" changed to something more derogatory that expressed the disapproval of the speaker (Naylor). Naylor demonstrates how the word could carry many different meanings depending on how it was said and who it was meant for (Naylor).

This concept is still accurate in our current world, as shown by the several



definitions listed on merriam-webster.com (“Girl”). According to the website, the word “girl” can describe anything from a person who identifies as female to a family pet, and it can even be offensive depending on the context (“Girl”). In my case, while the people in my life have never referred to me with the word in an intentionally demeaning way, I never felt like it suited me.

I only mustered the courage to express my discomfort once or twice, but the interaction was swiftly brushed off and forgotten. Was I only upset because I felt I was now too old for these nicknames? That wasn't the only reason. I felt like my existence had boiled down to something I never cared about - to the point where society shoved it down my throat at every turn. I quickly understood that in our current world, it was inescapable. Everyone else saw me as a girl, a woman, a female.

Even in writing, these words feel alien to me. They do not describe me. They do not define me.

"You're such a pretty girl! You should smile!"

"Why would you want to cut your beautiful long hair?"

"You should try wearing makeup!" Despite my lifelong aversion to it, makeup still found its way into my Christmas stocking every year.

When I was little, I went through a phase where I adamantly refused to wear pink or dresses or anything princessy. However, these were things I had previously loved and secretly continued to love. When my sister's birthday came around, she was gifted these things. My tiny toddler heart seethed with jealousy. I wanted those things, too, no matter how insistently I denied it. Why couldn't anyone read my mind? Unbeknownst to my younger self, that wasn't what I really wanted. I wouldn't understand it until years later, but I wanted to enjoy those things without the social ties that came along with them. I didn't want to be seen as “girly” while I played dress-up. I just wanted to be seen as me.

Never could I fathom why gender was so important. In recent years, I began to feel guilty. “You are such a strong, bright young woman!” These words were supposed to be compliments. They were supposed to make me feel good. But instead, they bothered me. I felt like I was associated with a group that deserved someone to speak up for them. I wanted to change the world, but when I found myself in the position to champion women's rights, I couldn't bring myself to speak from my perspective. I didn't fit in.

I remember that as soon as I was old enough to hold a pencil, I began writing. When I was very young, I wrote stories through the eyes of characters

who were reflections of myself. They went on amazing adventures that I could only dream of having. At first, these characters were girls, although I never described them with the word. But as I got a bit older, I found that all my characters were boys. Suddenly, I realized that I couldn't write female characters. "Why are all your characters boys?" my online friends asked. "I don't know," I replied. "I guess I'm just not used to writing girls."

I didn't think much of it until one day when I was having fun playing with my siblings. We always had a habit of acting out our favorite characters from cartoons, at times making up our own. My dad decided to play with us, but he soon took me aside. "Why do you always play as boy characters?" he asked me, frowning. "You're a girl. You should play as girl characters."

I was too shocked to say anything. My dad walked away, but I continued to stand there, confused. I had never realized that I never did play as a girl. For a moment, I tried to imagine myself playing a female character. I couldn't. I was still only a child, so after a couple of minutes, I shrugged and went back to playing as before. I just wanted to have fun. Even though I was too young to understand it, I wanted to express myself in a way that made me happy, without worrying about what anyone else thought I "should" be.

Nothing has changed. No matter how many times anyone refers to me as a girl, a woman, or a female, I never grow more comfortable with these words. Some days they bother me more than others, and context matters as well. If someone says, "Hey, girls! How are ya?" or "What's up, girlfriend?" or even, "How we doing, ladies?" I don't mind that as much. That lighthearted connotation does not feel nearly as definitive. I don't want to be defined by a single word or complimented for what society perceives my gender to be. That has nothing to do with how brave, strong, attractive, or intelligent I might be. Those attributes are only a result of me being who I am as a person.

I am a writer, an artist, and an individual.

No single word can truly encapsulate my entire being. I am only me. And out of the billions of people in the world, there is only one. ∞

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## Into the Forest

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LARRY SHAFER

To walk among the elder giants  
And ask them of their ancient pasts  
Of heights near flight and grassy paths  
The breeze is sweet and on it rides  
A raspy rattle as their voice  
Where hundreds fell without a choice  
How is it around these sights  
My mind can turn to doom and gloom  
Instead of cracked light on the blooms  
To walk this wild obstructed land  
Among the fallen cast aside  
In labyrinthine corridors find  
A living Earth where we are small  
Connected and yet none the same  
Out here alone there is no blame  
And yet I find some for myself  
So on these giants now I lean  
To try to think of what I mean

## My Hello

LARRY SHAFER

As the old man sat down next to me on the bench he sighed, smiled, and then let loose a little grunt as he settled into place. He kept looking at me for longer than is comfortable for a stranger to look. Then just before I asked what his problem was, he gave a little nod and looked away.

Now I found myself staring at him. Damn it, how embarrassing. I snapped my attention away, back to my phone. I was just starting to select a match for a new game when he spoke. “You know that thing cheats, why do you play it?”

“Excuse me?” Why the hell is this old stranger commenting on my game? I know I don’t look friendly. I’m pushing forty years old, and the lines on my face show just how miserable those years have been.

“That game cheats. The matchmaking algorithm selects favorable matches for people based on the dollar amount they pay on extras. You know that, so why are you still wasting time on it?”

I have just enough time to think “What the fuck did you say?” as I hear my mouth completing the sentence. The balls on this old man to walk up and, and what? I start to calm and now I look him in the face for the first real time.

“Still a hothead, but it’s cooling.” He smiled and it was a sad smile, under sad eyes, that I’ve looked into a million times. In a mirror.

“What. The. Fuck?” People don’t really talk like that, but I just did. He continued smiling as it continued to sink in. “You! You’re!”

“You.” He finished for me and gave me the same little nod of affirmation when he sat down. The same one I use to ask a stranger if what I’m doing is alright.

“This isn’t possible. This can’t be possible. You can’t be me!” But as I looked at him the lines on his face were like mine. Only like a Google map that when you zoom in the tributary roads become clear, he had the same lines and more. His beard was gone. I don’t know when I last saw myself without one. I can’t imagine what would cause me to shave.

“Yes, you can” he said.

“Okay, this has to be a dream, you can’t be me, and you can’t read my mind even if you were me. Unless I become psychic?”

“You don’t become psychic.” He cut me off in midthought. “I know we are impossibly stupid at times but stick with me. I am you but older, so whatever you say, I remember saying when I was you.”

“So why are you here?”

“To tell you to cross the street.”

“What?” I asked as I looked over, and gasped. I felt like the wind was ripped from me. My head spun. I felt nauseous, and my vision blurred like I was dizzy. Then a thunderbolt flashed through my head as the old man slapped me.

I grabbed my jaw. I still hit hard as an old man. Across the street from me sat me. Not another me, or another older me. This was me at twenty years old. Not yet able to grow a beard. Dressed like a relic from the past. I swallowed hard as I looked to the old man.

“I don’t really remember that boy anymore, but you do. I think it’s your job to talk to him,” he said as tears welled in both our eyes simultaneously.

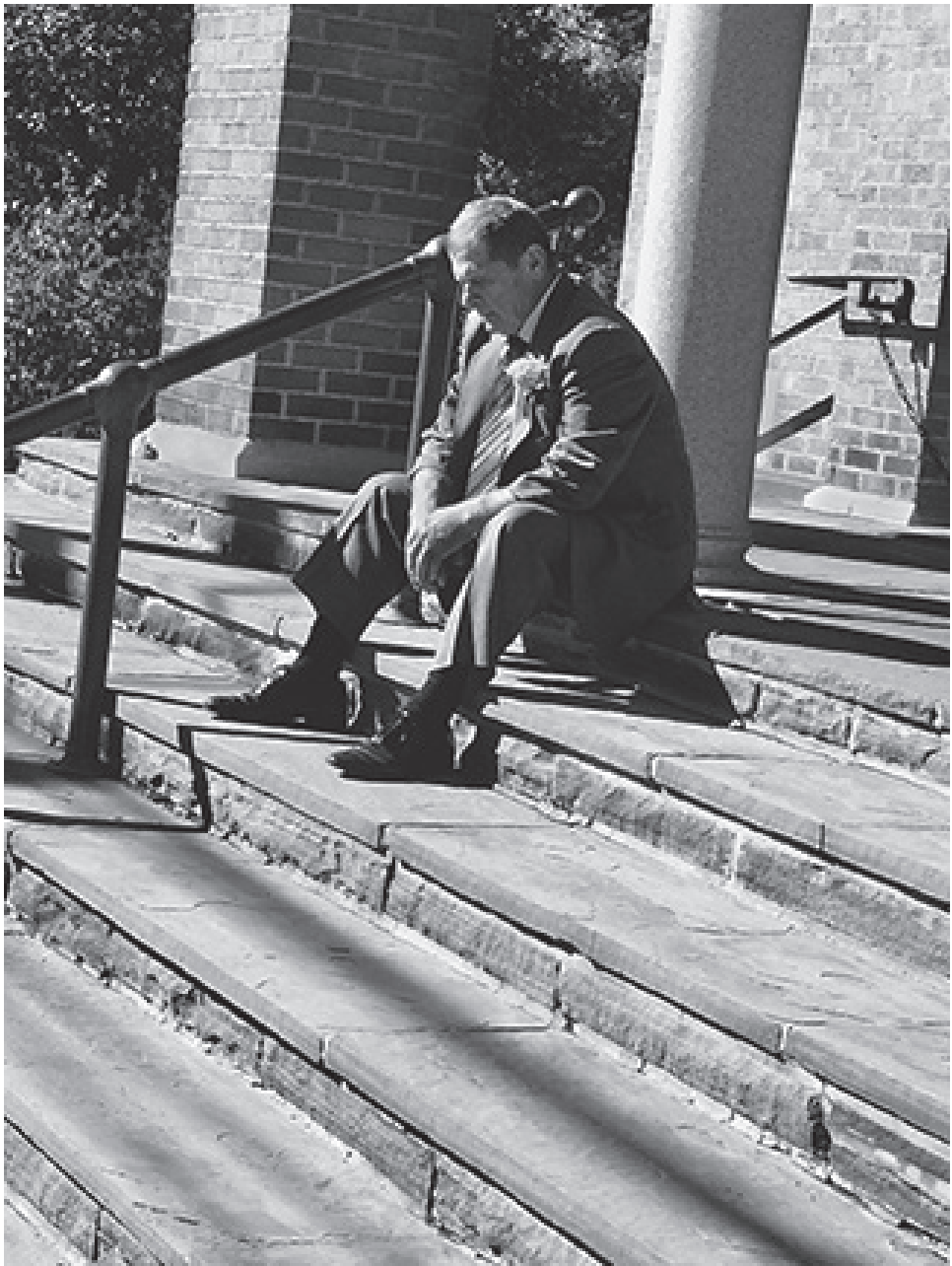
“What do I say? I haven’t even had a chance to talk to you yet.”

“You don’t need to. You saw me. You now where we went wrong.”

“I’ll probably get hit by a fucking car on the way across, with our luck.”

He laughed and so did I. And then he abruptly stood and walked away. Tilting his head toward the crosswalk as one final nudge for me to go. He walked down the road and I watched him go until he stuck out his thumb like he was about to hitchhike, and he disappeared.

I walked over to the boy on the bench. I smiled and sighed and groaned a little as I sat down next to him. I know I was staring and so was he, so I gave him a reassuring nod as he reached for his headphones. “Good band,” I said to him, as suddenly I remembered this middle aged man and how I changed my life. ∞



After | Alli Baumbart

## Anansi I

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VIRGINIA SHIRLEY

Glorious Spider God, I  
was the wondrous weaver of dream, I  
spun out life and possibility, I  
stitched the patterns of wisdom  
with my own silk

Cunning, clever creator, I  
Composed for you the sun, I  
Braided the stars into the heavens  
Birthed the pale moon  
To brighten the depths of your night

You carried me on your backs  
When you were stolen  
From your world  
You nourished me  
With songs and praise  
In the pitch black holds

I was your symbol, I  
Your shield  
In the second land  
Where man was luminous  
Like the bellies of fish

Oh, they spin out lies,  
Because I know too much, I  
Speak in threads of unity  
That must not unite

Now they say I  
Am ravenous  
Cruel and brutal in my hunger  
My mouth a crown of glistening death  
I am poisonous, poisoned  
A wicked articulated walker  
To be smashed  
Stamped down  
Like your  
spirit





Bound | Alexandra Georgoudes

## Dynah/Dinah

VIRGINIA SHIRLEY

**H**ave you ever had that feeling, in a dream, where you knew – you just knew – that the dream itself was reality? That you were actually there, not necessarily as yourself, and that everything surrounding you— what you saw, smelled, and felt—was as real as anything that every happened in your waking life?

My dreams lately. They've been...disturbing? All too vivid? Too lucid and real.

At first, I don't remember remembering my night time travels. Just eight hours of nothing. Not blackness. Not bliss. Not restful. Just nothing, as if I'd stopped existing. Then came glimpses of other mes, of other lives, experiences, and memories filtered in. Leaves shimmering in the breeze. Reaching out to stroke a small, black, purring cat. Being prone, indistinct faces above me like a halo. Sitting up, lights so bright that everything stood out in silhouette. Being told to raise one arm. Raising it.

I asked Titus about these things. I couldn't say why, but I sensed he was angry or alarmed at my questions. His pupils flared and a vein in his neck beat time with the jolting of his heart. He reset his shoulders and leaned back, fingers steepled in front of him like a shield.

"How often does this occur?" His smile wasn't a smile and it wasn't reassuring. It was muscles bunching, clenching along his jaw.

I shrugged. "Not often. It happened last night." I leaned forward, pressing his discomfort. "Before that? I can't remember the last time it happened," I lied. Could he tell? Could he read me as easily as I had read him?

Well." He rubbed his chin. I could hear the scritch sound of his fingers over his stubble and the nearly imperceptible intake of breath. "How about you keep a journal? Keep track of it. When it happens, what you see. Then we can talk about it more."

"OK." I tried to sound relieved, thankful. I wished I had never told him.

"Or we can adjust your sleep cycle."

I sat back. "I don't think so."

"Are you sure? It would be no trouble."

I tried to appear unconcerned. “I think I want to try the journal.”

“It’s up to you.”

“No, the journal is good.” I could tell it wasn’t good with him though. Why had his pulse jumped? I had never had a feeling of...what to call it? As my managing officer, Tight Ass...Titus...why did I say that? Titus had never done anything to stir this kind of uncertainty in me. This lack of trust. But after this I don’t trust him. He is more watchful and nervous around me. He sat there now, micro-twitching like a fiend.

“I’ll think about the sleep cycle,” I said. “If the journal doesn’t work out.”

This answer pleases him. But unlike other times it seemed important to please him, this time I don’t care.

Weeks pass. I jot random, unexpected thoughts in my journal. My dreams are exponential snapshots, flickering short films that blossom into a kind of history. But I report nothing. Sleep Cycle 72-90. Nothing. 91 – a brief dull light. 92 – 100 all dark. Titus asks probing questions, watches me, but not as slyly as he thinks. It seems impossible, but now in our discussion sessions I can hear his pores opening, his sweat bubbling out. The rusty smell of catecholamines when he lies. But what is he lying about? And why? He used to laugh when I asked ridiculous questions.

“Who puts the sleep techs to bed after they put everyone else to bed?” I asked.

He laughed. “We’re all on a shift, Dinah. There’s a shift after every shift. Always a back-up to what came before.”

But he doesn’t laugh anymore.

Duty Cycle 4.15.54. I was in the arboretum, working on the exotics. The Kaen flowers needed pruning. Normally this is a mindless, relaxing task. There is a meditative rhythm to finding runner sprouts, pulling them back, snipping them off, and dropping the half opened buds into a sleeve for later propagation. I reached out, grasped a bud, shears poised to cut it free. And stopped. Years of pruning, and I had never really looked at the flowers before. I had seen them, yes. But looked at them...The thing took me completely by surprise. Why couldn’t I cut it? It would grow on its own later, be pampered and admired for its beauty. It wasn’t like I would kill it. So why couldn’t I cut it free?

The petals were just beginning to part, to open out and reveal the subsequent layers of petals. A kaleidoscope of reds, oranges, and yellows that shifted like

it was breathing. I was unable to look away, unable to not notice the stunning architecture, the arcs of color, the intoxicating smell of it. My vision narrowed, telescoped, pulled me off center and deeper into the folds. My eyes closed, slow motion as I fell into the crevices.

And then I really did fall. Nearly 30 feet. A swirl of limbs and perspective, knowing what bits of me would hit what fractions of seconds before they did. Up and down were the same, gravity was a suggestion that would soon become a command. So. This is falling....

And then the floor crashed into me, or I into it. I don't breathe, or not breathe. Behind my eyes there is a brief backward imploding of fireworks. A metallic ringing bends and fades as I sit up.

"I'm OK," I say. Already the others are rushing to me. Their faces are stretched tight with concern. I try to wave them away but my arm is slow to obey.

Titus appears, seemingly from nowhere.

"Sit," he says. "Dinah, sit down."

"I'm OK."

"You don't know how bad this could be. You could be in shock. You could have a head injury."

"I do see two of you," I said.

"What?" His eyes are wide.

"Relax. I'm kidding. There's only one of you, thank the gods."

The medics had arrived. Titus waved them over. "It's a head injury, I think."

"I'm really OK." I wanted to be left alone, to contemplate the flower some more.

"She hit her head," Titus said. He started to stroke the back of my neck.

"I didn't hit..." The medic touched something to the back of my head and I never finished the sentence. A light strobed slowly inside my head. I felt them strap me to a transport gurney, felt the glide toward the med bay. I heard snippets of conversation as they stood over me. Diagnostics and damage, restoration, system compromise. Something touched the back of my head and this time there was an explosion of light that tasted like burnt oil. A sensation of my bones burning. And memories, pictures of other selves, other rooms like this one, other conversations. The word DYNamic, strangely misspelled. Titus,

much younger, asking me if I knew who I was.

And then I'm awake.

There's a stim cast on my right arm and some bandages above my right eye. But I know it is fakery. The pain I feel is fabricated, forced. I tell it to stop and it ceases. The doctors and Titus ask me all kinds of questions. But I am somehow certain that their concern is not about me. I understand that there is a subtle, dangerous difference. So I tell them everything they want to hear. About my pain level, about how I feel, about how I fell.

What I don't tell them is about the dream? Memory? of my "birth," of my initial awakening. I am on a diagnostic gurney. I sit up. See my limbs, my hands turning at the wrists, fingers splaying like spider legs. I stand, walk, point, smile as I am commanded. I glimpse my hairless, naked self reflected in a dark monitor panel. My eyes are black orbs. An electronic umbilicus is attached to the small of my back. I blink at the word stitched onto their lab coats. DYNAH.

"No dreams in there?" Titus asks.

I pretend to consider it. I smile. "No. None."

"Good," he says. "That's good."

We end our conversation ever so politely. I continue to smile until he closes the door behind him.

After my fall, my dreams come more frequently. They are longer in duration, and more detailed. Titus checks in more frequently too, although I continue to lie about what goes on when I sleep. At night I experiment by putting one finger over the control eye of my sleep pod. When the room empties of sleep techs, I emerge, silent and stealthy. I watch the other sleepers inside their pods, prone, anesthetized, unmoving. I bend closer, nose nearly touching the glass top. There is no eye movement. No rise or fall to their chests. I realize my hand is over my heart, and I have stopped breathing too.

From here I go to the hygiene lounge. I stand in front of one of the chem sinks and look at myself in the mirror. Nothing remarkable happens. Every move I make is reflected back. I look for a port or place to plug in in the small of my back, but find nothing so obvious. I try to "see" my own eyes. Is the color natural? Are the striations mechanical? I try to look down my own throat, see slick pinkish tissue and an uvula hanging like a tiny punching bag.

“Who,” I ask my reflection, “are you?”

My dream visions come every night now, endlessly. They come during the day, unbidden. I play games with them, pulling up my supposed childhood memories, change their order, edit, enhance them. I am both afraid and amused by what I accept and reject in these feeling states. One of my fondest so-called memories involves that small black cat. It is asleep in my lap, its head curled into the palm of my hand. But I suddenly know, like a bee sting to the brain, that I have never had a cat in my lap. Titus continues to monitor me, unaware of my inner art. Internally, I call him Tight Ass more and more often. Almost to his face. But I’m not losing my mind. Am I?

Tonight, I get up again. I skip staring at the unsleeping bodies in their pods and go straight to the hygiene lounge. I spend several minutes, staring at myself, comparing what I see to the things I remember. From my smock I retrieve a small, curved pruning blade. No one had seen me take it, no one had noticed it missing, its outline on the tool board like a crime scene. I raise my right forearm and slide off the stim cast. Flex my arm and watch tendons pulley the muscles just like they should.

If I cut, what will I find?

The blade hovers over my skin. And then I press down. Lightly at first, watching the skin pucker. How resilient or tough is human skin? Should the knife already have cut through? Should blood be oozing? I apply more pressure, feeling no pain when I tell myself there is none to feel. My skin parts, bloodless. Something thick and viscous flows, but it is not blood. Nervously, I grab a flap of skin. It is rubbery, slippery. I make a parallel cut and peel back a few inches, marveling at what is revealed underneath. I look back at my reflection and wave tentatively at myself. The flap of skin undulates with my motion.

I see myself and understand. ∞

## X/6

ALANAH SIMENKIEWICZ

I open the website and my body starts involuntary shaking in terror as my thumbs dance their way across the screen.

I input "CRUEL." The 'C' turns a dull yellow that instinctively makes my stomach flip. I swallow hard as I go to type in my next guess.

"SCOOT."

The 'C' remains it's sickening yellow color, but this time it is joined in it's display of mockery by 'T' Every fiber in my body, every single atom of carbon tells me to cease this at once, to quit while I'm ahead, that none of this is fucking worth it. However, my hubris pushes me forward as I ready my next idea in the chamber.

But that's the thing isn't it? I don't have one. 18 fucking years of talking, and writing, and listening and yet; the English language feels no more familiar then celtic. I can't think of a single word. At this point, I'm unsure if I ever even spoke English in the first place. My fingers move faster than my brain.

"TACKY." The 'T' and 'C' still hold their golden-rod guard. Two warriors - brothers in arms, standing strong against the world, as if the last thing either of them have is each other. Nevertheless, I have secured a victory, the 'A' jumps straight from gray to green, but I know this war is far from over.

This is no time to relax - No. No, this is the time for strategy.

'C' is barred from being the first, second or third letter, so it has to be either the 4th or 5th- but! 'T' cannot be the last letter, therefore; C has to be the 4th letter. I wipe my brow of sweat: the full weight of the game looming directly over me. I have a current win streak of 24; it's the highest I've ever gotten and I can't afford to lose it all now. So if 'A' is the second letter, and 'C' is the fourth and 'T' can't be the last or the first letter, then it has to be the third. 'ATC', the middle three letters are 'ATC' of course! Why didn't I see it sooner? I feel a smile inch its way across my face as clarity finally takes my brain by the reins.

"BATCH." The battlefield is flooded with a victorious green. 'H' never stood a chance. 'T' and 'C' look at their impending doom, and then at each other, knowing it will be the last time they will ever get to do so.

"You have really long eyelashes" C whispers, "I've never noticed them before."

T would smile, but it didn't quite meet his eyes, "there was never any time." The two would lean in close as the waves crashed against them, changing their hues.

I caused this; I caused all this heartbreak, this turmoil, this absolute Carnage; and yet I couldn't feel anything other than unadulterated joy. It wasn't my fault, I was just following orders; I was just playing the game -- and in order to play

the game, I needed a word.

And “LOVE” was only four letters.

As I type in “HATCH” I start to chuckle. It starts as small but soon spirals out of my control and I find myself doubled over in a fit with a voice I can’t even begin to recognize as my own, but it doesn’t matter! I’ve won! My thumb hovers excitedly over the enter button. This is it, this is my sunrise, my epilogue, my goddamn Apotheosis! Everything I’ve worked for has led to this moment; All the blood, sweat, tears, it will all have been worth it. I let out a breath of finality, wiping the tears from my eyes, and let my thumb rest against the screen.

Nothing changes. Nothing changes. “ATCH” remains green, but that first letter, that hideous leading gray box stands tall and stubborn against the swamped battlefield.

No, that’s fine, it’s “PATCH” it has to be.

Or “WATCH”.

It could always be “WATCH.”

The Earth has crashed down upon me, and it seems that I’ve been caught up in my own torrent. The tremors find their way through my hands again as my vision clouds and tunnels on the screen. My thoughts squall, trying to rationalize which word the creators would deem most appropriate at this point in time; but there is none. I came to them, Strategy in hand, battle plans scribbled across hundreds of pages, rationale and thought and heart poured into every single margin: and all they did was look upon my pathetic form, and shove a coin into my hands.

So what else was there to do but flip it?

“PATCH.”

I look up to the creators, desperate for approval - and for the first time in 24 days, my word gets a response.

“WATCH.”

My phone sits in my hand as I stare blankly at the website. My brain and body which were so electric and entropic just moments ago now go radio silent. The screen times out from inactivity and I am met with the reflection of someone who I never thought I’d become. Where I had once seen my triumphant stance and bright future, I only see a fool. And they look exhausted.

I was right. Nothing mattered, but not for the reasons I thought. Despite it all, I still lost. And yet, the warm sunlight found its way across my face. I glanced up towards the beams and felt them melt away who I was in favor of who I want to be, and as I look at my reflection; I find them looking more and more familiar. ∞



## Diego

SISSY SLICK

The second time I met Diego was quite by accident. It happened on a Tuesday; the day I had an interview scheduled for a position at the Shawmut Bank on Lexington and, as usual, my train from Brookline ran late. The 106 was notorious for running behind schedule and that day, of all days, was no exception. And to make matters worse, it was raining and I lost my umbrella in a gust of wind somewhere between 59th and 63rd Streets.

Madam Lightpath, my favorite tarot card reader, had predicted good fortune for certain Geminis on Tuesday. That should have boded well for me, considering my job interview, so the delayed train and flying umbrella left me baffled. She may have been referring to the afternoon because, so far, the morning had not been favorable at all. My sister, JoJo, doesn't take her seriously, but in all fairness to Madam, she did foresee that a Gemini would fall on an icy sidewalk last winter, therefore my tibia fracture, and there was the time she saw additional funds in her cards and I happened to play the lotto that day, which I never play, and won fifteen dollars. So, I put my faith in her reading and pretty much expected a good outcome.

What I needed most that Tuesday morning though, was a place out of the rain to gather myself together. I had exactly sixty-seven minutes until my interview and I was still twenty minutes away from the bank. I spotted a place across the street called Charlie's Lounge, though it was not the kind of place I'd normally frequent. The white siding, no longer white, was missing entire strips in places, and a graffiti gallery of spray-painted names covered most of the side of the building. It was close however, so I decided to stop there. Carefully climbing the cement stairs, which were crumbling and an obvious safety hazard, I reached a faded door that wasn't quite closed. I thought surely the building was earmarked for demolition, however, a neon sign still flashing in the window, announced to all passersby that Charlie's was OPEN...OPEN...OPEN. In fact, a small chalkboard resting against the window listed luncheon specials.

The interior, I noted, was dark and dreary but, all that aside, I desperately needed shelter. Taking a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dimly lit

room; I looked around for a place to sit. I spotted a worn-out stool at the corner of the lengthy bar closest to the door. More than likely the torn vinyl seat would snag my knit skirt but it didn't matter much now since, in my current condition, I was about to become properly late for my interview.

"What'll ya have blondie?" A heavy-set bartender, wearing a stained wife beater that displayed his oversized arms, appeared out of nowhere and began wiping the surface in front of me with a dirty bar rag. It left a sour odor no wait it smelled more like spoiled kimchi, maybe even worse if that's possible. "Some rain today, huh?"

Automatically, I glanced toward the window as if to verify his comment; though wet hair, a soaked blazer, and squishy heels should have been confirmation enough. "If you could get me a coffee, that'd be great," I said while trying not to inhale, "and is there a pay phone in the bar?" Reaching behind him, he grabbed the bar phone and, in one swift motion, placed it in front of me.

"On the house blondie, hang on to your dime," he said while simultaneously lowering the volume of the radio he'd been listening to. I could still faintly hear the Beatles wanting to hold someone's hand. He then tucked the kimchi rag in his back pocket and walked toward the opposite end of the bar and seemed to disappear in the darkness.

Time passed slowly while I waited on hold with the bank. Gazing out the oversize front window; I noticed a wooden sign hanging over the entrance announcing the bar's 'World Famous' status. It was detached at one end and swinging wildly in the wind. "How did that ever miss my head?" I wondered. "And world famous, when could that have been?"

Still on hold; my eyes drifted lazily from the window to the wall just left of the door where I spotted a large rectangular shaped clock. The hands were stopped at 2:30. On its face was a heart, probably drawn with a finger and, despite the greasy dust, still easily discernible. "Someone was in love," I thought. Daydreaming and lulled by the bank's repeated on-hold music; I pictured a young couple standing close together in front of the clock. Him, tall and handsome, with dark hair and a trimmed mustache. Her, short and blonde standing on tiptoe looking up into his adoring eyes. In a funny romantic

gesture, I imagined him reaching up and drawing a heart across the face of the clock before they departed. “Until we’re together again,” he may have said.

Appearing as suddenly as before; the bartender returned with my coffee; pulling me out of my daydream and back to the reality of the rain, the interview, and the bar. “Here ya go blondie,” he said, removing the phone with one hand while placing the large mug in front of me with the other. On the top of his left hand was a detailed tattoo of a long-stemmed rose. “On the house,” he said over his shoulder returning, once again, into the darkness.

As I slowly sipped my steaming coffee; I looked straight ahead at the dusty mirror behind the bar and assessed my appearance. “I’m a mess,” I noted. Continuing to gaze in the mirror, I noticed movement behind me. I saw people fashionably dressed for a night out; men wearing suits and ties and women in chic cocktail dresses. There was soft lighting in the back room and a spot light was shining on a stage where a tall dark singer was standing at a microphone. Her eyes were closed and she was tapping the palm of her hand against her upper thigh while swaying to the music. Couples were dancing and sitting in small groups close to the dance floor. A circle of gentlemen in military uniforms stood at the far end of the bar raising a toast to one of their own. Instantly I turned in my seat to get a better look but saw only a dark room with empty tables and stacked chairs. Confused, I turned back to the mirror and, once again, saw couples on the dance floor and people seated at small round tables with white table cloths. I could clearly hear the articulated notes of a trumpet solo mixed with the full-bodied sound of an upright bass. “What’s going on?”

“Would you care to dance, Judith?” A hand reached toward me. Caught off guard, I turned to face a gentleman with uncommonly good looks. His black hair was pushed away from his face in a way a man combs his hair by running his fingers through it. He was tanned, but not from working in the sun.

“What is it with this place? Does everyone just suddenly appear?”

“Let me take you back to the Algerian Club,” he said with a playful wink. “You always loved it there.”

“Did I?”

No longer within my control; my hand reached in his direction allowing him to guide me into the darkness at the back of the bar. As we neared the

dance floor I could see the lights and hear the sound of music and group chatter. I smelled the scent of fine cigars and the sweet aroma of pipe tobacco. My interview suit had become a shimmery gold color dress. I felt as if I was floating.

His name was Diego. "One who crosses the river of life," he explained and he was, without a doubt, the most handsome and captivating man I had ever met. We danced one dance and then another, stopping only when the musicians took a break. In his tight hold, I could smell his essence. It was the scent of exotic places; spices in a Moroccan marketplace, attars of ancient Egypt, and orchids on paradise islands. He felt like now and he felt like yesterday, familiar, as if we had a past. When the music stopped we found an empty table. A tuxedoed waiter promptly appeared with a bottle of champagne. I noticed the rose tattoo on his hand. Was he the bartender? On the seat beside me was a folded newspaper left behind by a prior patron. The headline read 'VICTORY-IN-EUROPE DAY'. It was a New York Times final edition. Was this a dream? How could I be back in 1945?

"Enjoy the bubbly, my dear, it's your favorite," Diego winked as he lifted his glass to meet mine.

I remember how quickly time passed and soon the stragglers, remaining long after last call, were making their way to the club's exit. As we joined them, Diego placed a silver fox fur around my shoulders. "Where did that come from?" Then before we reached the door, Diego stopped and, reaching up to the face of a large wall clock, drew a heart across it with his finger. He looked at me and said "Always."

"Another coffee blondie?" the bartender asked. "I just made a fresh pot."

"I'm good," I replied looking past him into the mirror behind the bar. ☺

## Red to Black

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GRANT STEWART

All his life was an endless battle  
With the demons deep inside.  
He was always on another channel,  
A prisoner of his own mind.  
Pretty soon he was seeing red.  
He had to escape the pain in his brain.  
Sick of living every day in his bed,  
He tried to wash it all away.

Swimming at the deep end of a bottle,  
He drowned but his demons swam.  
What could he have found at the bottom,  
But a bottomless pit of the damned.  
Seeing red again, worse than before,  
He drank more until he blacked out.  
Delivering beatings with a lion's roar,  
All before he finally passed out.



Inflation | Taneer Middleton

## Gimmie Gimmie

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GRANT STEWART

Gimmie gimmie all I see,  
All around me that's obscene.  
Take the green from off the land.  
Put it right here in my hand.  
Rising seas won't bother you.  
What they say is never true.  
Everything will be just fine,  
If you keep my pockets lined.

Gimmie gimmie always gets.  
When you're rich it all makes sense.  
Parasites inside the swamp  
Always give me what I want.  
Don't deny that crime will pay,  
Every time I get away.  
Everything my puppets do  
Keep you I the voting booth.

## Room 101

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GRANT STEWART

Another day here,  
Another seventy cents  
After the taxes.

The broken record rattles out  
The same old tired song,  
As we drown out each other's thoughts;  
Never turn the volume down.

Don't blink; it goes by so fast.  
Now five years have suddenly passed.



## Stay

---

GRANT STEWART

All around me, I see nature's canvas.  
Sheets of color paint the sky.  
As I listen, birdsong floods the stillness.  
It penetrates the air they fly.  
And I wonder if all that I'm seeing will stay.

Through the woods I walk a path alone,  
With trees around and life inside.  
And taking in the scene, the highs and lows,  
I see the beauty here and sigh.  
Still I wonder if all that I'm seeing will stay.

Night has come and I will go to sleep,  
And dreams will dance inside my head.  
The things I see inside the dreams I keep  
Are stories always left unsaid.  
Yet I wonder if all that I'm seeing will stay.

The rising sun has pierced the denim sky.  
I hear the birds, they sing again.  
And though we always seem to want to try,  
Eternal bliss seems Heaven sent.  
I'm just wishing that all that I'm seeing would stay.



Bird | Gavin Hlavac

## Invisible Disability

DANIELLE STILLOE

You don't have anything to prove to anyone is what people will say,  
but if you have an invisible disability you have to prove something every day.  
You have to prove that you're not just lazy.  
Or that you're not faking it.  
You have to prove that you have a right to be here--  
even if you limp a little.

You have to prove it to everyone.  
And worst of all you have to prove it to yourself.  
Because your mind, filled with all this prove-it-ness will start to play tricks on  
you.

It will tell you:  
maybe you are lazy.  
Maybe you just don't try hard enough.  
Maybe you're just weak.  
And you have to prove it to yourself that that's not just you.

Yes the world will make you argue for your limitations.  
Make you own them.

And the world doesn't know what it's like to be in pain nearly every moment  
of your life.  
They don't know how hard it is--  
and yet how automatic--  
to fix an expression of cheerfulness on your face, add levity to your voice, and  
laugh through it.  
Or how much courage it takes sometimes to face  
Another  
Damn  
Day.

Or what it's like to sit on the sidelines and watch others do the things you want to.

The things you  
used to

while you think to yourself:

I used to be able to do that back when I wasn't in pain.

And then you think on it and you realize

that you can't quite remember what that was like anymore.

Like a song you learned in kindergarten.

You have part of the tune but the lyrics won't come.

And harder still to sit on the sidelines and pretend that you don't mind being a spectator-- pretend that the seat you sit upon is just as gratifying as the feel of grass under your sprinting feet

--as the feel of wind in your hair.

You have to convince them that you like the bars of your prison.

That the iron's not so cold

and they don't obstruct your view that much.

You have to convince yourself.

You have to watch feel good stories about people with incredible challenges

who adapt to life with the ease of a Hallmark movie

and wonder why you can't do the same

and know that everyone else is thinking

the same thing.

You have to put up with well-meaning advice and not-so-well-meaning barbs.

Those barbs are meant to cut and they do.

Razor blade wounds next to the ones on your heart that you inflicted yourself long ago.

And, God forbid, that you have a good day.

Then then they think they know

then they will say:

I saw you smile. I saw you laugh. I saw you dance.

You're not in pain.

And you want to say:  
my friend, my friend, the pain is what makes me have to dance.  
Laughter fights the darkness.  
But you wouldn't know that.

You know that any climb that's difficult for a normal person  
will have you clinging to the rocks on broken hands,  
dragging yourself along on knees that won't quite listen  
and at the same time smiling and waving  
"No, I'm fine. You go ahead without me I'll catch up."

"I'll catch up."

And sometimes you do  
and sometimes you don't.  
But on your way, you see things that the others moving swiftly can't.  
The shape of the rocks,  
the feel of the grass,  
the delicate blades between your fingers.  
The way the light glimmers off the shell of a wayward beetle.

And you talk to the rock, and to the grass, and the to the beetle  
and they give you wisdom.  
And when you find your friends at last, panting, you try to tell them  
what the Beetle said.  
But it can't be put into words and they don't understand anyway.  
They can't.  
Because they weren't there.

And you prove it to yourself.  
You prove that you know this thing and no one else does.  
And some of your friends will believe you (those are the true ones) and others  
won't.

And you have to learn not to waste your efforts proving it  
to the ones who don't care.  
And when you're so tired of proving things to yourself  
And proving things to the world,  
then you take your Rock and your Grass and Your Beetle Knowledge...  
You plaster a smile on your face,  
and you go back to the sidelines  
....and you wait.

## Shifting

DANIELLE STILLOE

And I feel my psyche shift--  
To a softer place.  
Of dappled light and quaking leaves.  
And I lay my armor down.

The lines of my face  
Smooth into porcelain stillness.  
My breath comes slower.  
I feel safe to lower my sword.  
They all have their stories--  
The loud, the militant, the soft, the mild.  
The men, the women, the baby, the child.  
And I seek to listen  
Without defense.  
Without fear.  
Content I am here.  
I am meant to be Healer  
Though Warrior's role has been thrust upon me.  
Trust comes slow.  
Like a dog kicked by wicked feet, I cringe from kindness.  
--Afraid the hand proffered in friendship may strike me.  
But I feel a shift.  
I want to be heard.  
But I will still my voice.  
I have a choice.  
I can take it.  
Healer's Path  
I lay down my wrath... and breathe deeply.

## Zuccolo

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DANIELLE STILLOE

Our paths crossed when I was young.  
Timid. Frail. A wisp of a girl  
Returning home after years of being lost.

You were magnanimous. And fun. And  
Filled up the room with your  
Presence.

A collector of strays—you welcomed me into the  
Little Theatre of your life.  
Onto the little stage that was your  
World.

Where you did your work. Your magic act of finding  
Broken pieces and making them Whole.

You showed me my spirit. Coaxed me out of the  
Armor I wore. Told me I didn't need it anymore.  
Taught me to be brave.

You called me Sunlight. And if you saw it then I knew it was there.  
I knew on some level it had to be true.

And I took a different track. And when oppression  
pushed me back,  
I kept what you taught inside.

You came to me when you died. I heard your voice clear as a tolling bell  
Speaking only one word:  
“Danielle.”

And after you sent me monarchs and butterflies  
and somehow I knew that they were yours.  
I knew then that maybe I meant something  
To you as well.

Know that I remember you. Your student forever  
In the little theatre of my mind.  
You came from good stock—  
And maybe, just maybe  
I do too.





Alone | Alayne Schaffer

## Captive

AMANDA TIERNEY

“**L**ook around and tell me what you see.” It is a simple statement, but holds so much value and power. It is allowing someone to enter into the world as you perceive it. To open your thoughts and allow a person to enter through your pathway; wander through your chambers, your bones, and your veins.

Walking through the busy parking lot, weaving in and out of traffic, a breeze swaying the branches. A chilling breeze being sent down your spine and fill your lungs with an ice like feeling. Cawing being heard for miles; once a dull noise suddenly so obvious. Looking around and noticing the little crow sitting on top of the barren tree. I found myself asking why that crow is alone; normally they are with their pack as they are social animals (Montgomery). Had it become separated, lost, or was it here to see how students live? How can such a compact creature make a noise that can travel miles but, be dull to the thousands of ears around it? The loud caw of a midnight crow.

Sitting on the chill wood, slightly covered with mist from the morning dew, the frost-bitten metal arms too cold to lean against. The earthy smell from the fresh rain gliding through the air. The ground covered in red, orange, and yellow; listening to the crunch as others are walking without observing where they step. Consumed with their daily thoughts, nightly dreams, and morning questions. Surrounded by the structures that held the key to our future, allowing us to enter through their gates; to fill our minds with knowledge that seeps through the vents.

I seemed frozen in that spot, feeling the damp wood on my hand; I looked up at the barren plant noticing its discolored outer-layer, but its sturdy structure. The world around seemed to slow, the atmosphere became light and the breeze swept through my open mind. Shivers traveling down my spine, slithering its way into my bones and plunging through veins. The air opened the world to possibilities, the crunch, the cawing, the calling from a simple hand-held device all seemed to vanish. Becoming one with the world around us has begun to drift away from our reach; as if we have become chained to the speed of technology.

Sitting here, watching everyone go about their day, organized routine, phone in hand. Nobody seemed to notice me watching them, their faces engulfed into a 5-inch clear screen; unable to stretch their eyes to the surface. Stepping mindlessly on the cracks beneath their feet, crunching the colors

that set the tone for the day. Without having access to my phone, I began to realize the world around me. Normally I would be like the other 46 percent of the population dependent on my phone (Anderson); however, today I found myself feeling more connected to my inner thoughts and outer observations.

A fair skinned blue-eyed student was locked into a thousand-dollar device as if she was chained by the wrists to this weightless device. She casually bumped into another student, as they mumbled an apology to each other, staying glued to their screens. Neither looked up, nor bothered to see who either had encountered, the student casually dressed in dark leggings with an over-sized yellow hoodie. Her blonde hair thrown into a messy bun on the top of her head. The breeze drifted through her body as her fair cheeks grew rosy. Her pace quickened past me on her way to the brick building that held her future.

I began the travel to a class that was a stepping stone for a possible future; I heard the sudden crunch beneath my own foot. Startled by the sound looking below at the brown leaf that had broken into small pieces. Each crumbled piece being lifted by the wind, floating through the air, finding a new place to rest. I began to watch more closely as I walked, the gray concrete littered with crumbled and ripped papers. The once whole paper on the ground, ripped into pieces, the faint F in red ink circled on top. I could only assume a discouraged student was fuming from the ears due to a poor grade, ripped their emotions into pieces, just trying to go about their day without the reminder of their failed work.

Continuing my walk through the maze of people, looking down at the split ground; seeing all the cracks filling the walkway. Carefully watching my own foot-steps, dodging the cracks as if they were filled with homes to tiny ants, not wanting to disturb their peace. Noticing the scattered geese droppings throughout each step, hearing the cawing with every movement. The little black feathered animal returning to my gaze; now with a partner by their side. Singing a song in unison, staring into each other's eyes, letting their song escape their beaks. Sitting on a new tree, not yet barren, that still had the shades of orange attached to its limbs. The tree swayed back and forth following the tune to the wind, mimicking the motions that traveled through the air.

Walking through the glass door way, trying to maneuver through the skeletons being guided by their chained device. Casually being bumped with each movement. Wondering if one person would look up from their soul sucking screen and acknowledge the life going on around them. Wondering if they were trying to escape the reality around them, if what was on the screen made them feel powerful. Was that what we are all trying to do? Escape the reality of the world around us and enter another dimension, or are we just

simply controlled by the speed of technology? Without holding my own weight it was easier for these thoughts to enter my mind.

Continuing the battle to climb the single set of stairs, moving out of the way of others that were too busy laughing, smiling, or sulky at their imprisonment. Finally, entering the room that was the first stepping stone to my future, sitting in the same uncomfortable seat many had sat in before. Class would shortly begin and would end quickly, 50 minutes without holding a phone seems difficult for some. I wondered if they noticed the leaves falling outside of the window, or that multiple class mates were missing. I envisioned the miniature crow, sitting on a barren tree, watching our every movement. Hearing the cawing and seeing the silky-feathers; it wants us to look up, to see the nature around us. To let go of that thousand-dollar shackle to allow you to see the beauty that shines through even the dullest day. That the slight noise from our lips to us may be quiet, but to the world it could be heard by a thousand ears, like a simple caw. But, as soon as the class ended, hands were once again entrapped in shackles not a minute past 9:50.

Leaving the structure and exiting those same glass doors, walking the same path I had just traveled. Still weaving in and out, watching my every step, breathing in the fresh fall air. I took in the environment around me for a final moment before entering my car. And, there sitting was that same device everyone was holding and my inner peace suddenly escaped as I heard the alarming ringing coming from my own shackle. Back again sucked into the never-ending speed of the day, always something on the other end. Answering the simple call, I felt the weight of the world fall once again upon my shoulders. The cawing disappeared, the cool breeze didn't faze my bones; the chain was set and I was captive. ☹

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## Blind

---

ALEX TRAVERS

Sometimes I wonder if I've gone blind  
If all the shadows and forms in my mind  
Are all I can see anymore,  
Because there are things I could see before  
That I can see no more

I used to look fondly with my eyes  
On a place that seems but a guise,  
A house and a home, a place my own  
With a wife and a kid, a future I have sown  
A life I could love, because I had grown.

Before I could make out  
All the things my future would tout,  
With something I could believe in  
A passion that leaves us heaving,  
Yet now I just see you leaving.

Once I could tell where the line of my vision would lie  
How all the pieces together would tie  
To a perfect whole like beings collide  
A hope like a dream laid wide  
And all I would need is time to bide

I fear I am blind, for all I can tell  
Where once I could make out everything so well  
Now I see nothing and nothing is fear  
The only thing my eyes hold now is a tear;  
I can't even see if you are still here.

## In Ishtar's Arms

---

ALEX TRAVERS

Long the night through which desire has grown  
In the arms another has known  
And though, like a bird, this love has flown  
No longer is my heart my own

Her love bursts like thorns with touch that harms  
Shuddering, though deaf to the alarms  
And quivering mine relapses into her charms  
With the night my heart spends in Ishtar's arms

Thorns like a thousand needles make a rose  
Dot the petals and round the flower goes  
The price of beauty made in pain its throes  
And with winter its pink comes and goes

In the wake of its weakness, legions rise and fall  
To the thrill of its fleeting call  
The mighty tremble and like slaves they crawl  
Suitors, covetors, and lovers all

Though not untouched she still has grace  
And thus the world she does face  
And though ambivalence her own heart does displace  
Her love does not suffer her disgrace

A thousand times the flower is shorn  
Embittered by early winter from spring soon torn  
Like old clothes, raggedly worn  
She the shawl of another's morn

My heart with trepidation strives on  
Loving the worst with loving calm  
Finding perfection in flaws o'er which to fawn  
To claim the life in her heart now gone

With guiltless claim her gentle soul loves  
Knowing a loveless love blind of  
All but the forcible shove  
That pulls the divine out of her love from above

Yet bold still she in the love she gives  
And bold is she in the life she lives  
But less bold is she than the love she misgives  
And still more bold were she if her love forgives

Dauntless is she in the woman she will be  
And shameless may be the woman others will see  
But she is solely the woman for me  
And none other than me need agree

The heart I give in this way, though me it harms  
Will burn bright through each of these alarms  
And it will love beyond her simple charms  
To spend every night in Ishtar's arms.

## Light That Burns the Sky

---

ALEX TRAVERS

The planets arrange in heavenly sign  
Celestial bodies and comets align  
Like a prophecy for a universe in decline  
Like an anomaly we can not define

Endless chambers of forever filled  
With images and portraits instilled  
By the heat and passion distilled  
In an eternity that can not be killed

The fire of a moment is greater than the day  
Eclipsed by the night chilled by gainsay  
And though it wither as it burns away  
Its existence would still find a way

In all a cosmic relation  
There could be no less devastation  
Than a night's sky without her constellation  
And in memory, she finds her deification

She is a star too bright for my eye  
However they avert, to look they still try  
So the heavens shudder and without her die  
For she is a light that burns the sky



## Star In the Sky

---

ALEX TRAVERS

Sunlight like fire  
And stars in the sky,  
Eyes of heaven  
That look down from on high  
On the mortal threads  
That break where they tie  
On mortal flesh like flowers  
That wilt while they die,

A single pyre is lit  
That haunts the horizon  
A memory is burnt  
By the sun that is rising  
And the light that gives  
The amber hue of surmising  
Takes the hours as they come  
Like life, mesmerizing.

The nights fade beyond  
An endless supply of hours  
Like raindrops in an ocean  
That silently deflowers  
The earth with pure and honest intent  
In new life, it lovingly empowers  
And a soft and simple embrace  
Is its greatest superpower.

Like light falling on the horizon  
Taking back the memory of the nights before  
Or water in an ocean  
Of endless store  
She came as a fire raging  
And made me burn till I wanted more  
And when I gazed at the heavens  
I know it was her I was looking for,  
  
Thousands of lights I see where I lie  
Yet she is the only star I see in my sky.

## The Nature Walk

---

DESIREE WATSON

The crunch of dirt under foot  
The birds chirping in the trees  
The sweet smell of wildflowers in full bloom  
The trickle of water down the path  
The squish squish of gooey mud  
The popping noise of feet being freed from mud  
The whistling wind through the lonely woods  
The tranquility of the gentle wind  
The warm sun on bare skin  
The coolness of the big flat stone  
The lonesome tree in the field  
The piercing, wild scream  
Echoing through the empty valley  
Nature, the great escape from life.

## Childhood

---

S O P H I A W E R N E R

Clearly, as if  
years upon years were collapsed  
into a single package,

smartly wrapped in brown paper  
and tied with a string, I  
remember the carefree nature of youth.

I gaze with longing  
through my elusive mind's eye  
into the postage-stamp-sized

screen of my remembrance  
and look upon a small child,  
playfully bounding amongst

the mud puddles on a rainy day,  
shrieking with glee as  
she showered herself

with small droplets  
that clung to her eyelashes,  
and ran in rivulets down her chubby legs

into her already sopping-wet boots.  
And in the present,  
I look ahead,

far, far away  
from you, of course,  
hiding behind

a thorny barrier of  
denial and lies,  
and see once-lush forests

ripped cruelly from the ground,  
trees shrieking sickeningly;  
fires, hungrily devouring

vast, timeless landscapes  
and derelict industrial lands,  
their rusty towers of doom

emitting clouds of  
acrid smoke.  
And in that moment,

I realize childhood  
is ephemeral and tenuous,  
and the joy

I once experienced  
will forever be eclipsed  
by the ugliness of knowledge.



Free | Alayne Schaffer

## On Writing

---

S O P H I A W E R N E R

You may not realize it,  
as you sit on your sunny porch,  
idly enjoying the sensation of  
a tepid breeze

wafting through your jacket,  
with a growing sense of unease  
as you stare aimlessly at  
a blank sheet of blue-lined paper,

but it is essential.

Without it,  
your so-called writer's block  
will persist, and you,

with frustration,  
will encounter a growing  
mound of crumpled  
white things

swamping both your  
bewildered conscience  
and your recyclables,  
and threatening

to prevent you from  
writing that  
one, genius idea  
which, when articulable,

may have the power to change  
your life or another's  
for better or for worse.  
It is elusive, transparent and

tissue-thin, thinner, even,  
than the flimsy  
leaves of paper you  
coldly massacred.

But, it is powerful-  
the single stroke of an idea,  
both unbidden and sudden--  
an epiphany.



## Grateful

---

MARK WILLIAMSON

to be far away from bombs and guns  
to be under warm quilts in winter  
to be safe on a hill far from the coast  
to be together to combat the forces of evil  
to have coffee in the morning  
to be blessed with two children  
to have a job that I love  
to have dinner with the girls  
to live in a place that is free  
to not have to run and hide  
to be able to feel the pain of others  
to have you sleeping in the next room  
to know that you are with me here  
to wonder what do we do now  
to sit in the sun and think of something

## Kaaba

---

MARK WILLIAMSON

The star of Abraham  
Fell from the sky like  
Tutankhamun's dagger had fallen  
Made a furrow in the desert  
Like a divine plow-  
They walk in circles  
Around the Black Stone  
Some of them are not afraid  
To touch it  
Abraham did not hesitate to pick  
Up the stone  
The gift which fell at his feet  
So that the temple  
Would be complete

## Morning Prayer

---

MARK WILLIAMSON

may this day be filled with the joy of life and living free  
may it be the beginning of a new chapter in our book of dreams  
may it open our hearts to each other in new ways  
may this day be one that is remembered  
may it warm slowly with the promise of spring  
may its beauty allow you to forget for a moment  
the dark world outside



New Beginnings | Sushma Madduri

## *For This One Thing She Asks of Them*

---

S U S A N W O E R N E R

**T**hey come willingly, her body warmth drawing them closer. Her heat is seductive. They rattle their tails. She puts down both hands, palms up and speaks in whispers. The promise of eggs, quail eggs, for this one thing she asks of them. They ask also for the bird, but she does not respond. Carefully, lovingly, she stretches out the pregnant ones, the mother ones as spokes, their round bellies will make bumps along the bottom of the basket. The daughters and the younger ones, she weaves among the mothers. Over and under. Over and under. They squirm to pack themselves closer to each other, no light penetrating the inner bowl. When she is nearly finished, she braids three crone snakes into a handle. It is complete. She whispers again and they tuck their rattles in close to each other's bodies. No rattle. No sound. Their beauty is the beauty of the basket. She takes a cloth bundle from her pocket and places the quail eggs inside. One of the daughters cannot help herself, she turns her head back to lick the air near the promised meal. They are round. They are warm. They are blue and green and mottled with brown specks like a hundred eyes. A mother hisses. Not yet. It is not time. In with the eggs, the woman places a feather. It is her answer to their question about the bird. Some writhe with pleasure, it will also be the bird. Now they are carried by her, by the braid of elders. Now they are in the cold, now the wind pinches them. Now they are in the wooded cave. Now they smell mammal. Now they smell smoke. They do not move. They do not let the eggs fall. Now they are by the warmth of a fire and the woman leaves. Now they feel the barking of the other one, the one who takes the eggs. The one who takes the feather, the promise. Now they are unwinding. Now they are winding themselves around the feet of the one who takes. Now they raise their tails. Now they rattle. ∞

## Anxiety's Anthem

---

JARRED WOODWARD

I've never felt a grip so tight that I couldn't breathe the way you did.  
The way you came in and out of my life -  
I always had to leave room in my schedule for an unscheduled visit.

The way you and your best friend, kept me dangling over the edge,  
Controlling every simple move I made,  
As if I was nothing but a mere puppet to you.

You march around my brain, my heart, my life  
Without any sense of compassion or mercy on a poor, and broken soul.  
And I didn't know how much longer this battle could go on.

My hands trembled as I tightened the loop of the belt around the rafters,  
"This is it," I thought  
"It'll all finally be over."

But, of course, you didn't help.  
I needed someone there with me,  
But you just laughed, pointed the finger, and kept saying, "Do it!"

I knew it was time.  
I stepped on the chair, looking at the room that raised me,  
For what I thought would be the last time.

But then, something suddenly switched.  
Almost as if you were killed.  
The voices, shouting, berating all just ceased to exist.

An image of the future that I had dreamed of and wanted to build  
Flashed in my mind, drawing me back to reality,  
Giving me a renewed sense of life.

I step down, looking at the damage I was about to cause-  
Completely destroyed at the idea that you created.

Every morning I hear anxiety's anthem ringing,  
And now -  
I can wake up ready to take on the fight

Poem

## Memories.

---

JARRED WOODWARD

*Here I go again.*

*The downward spiral into old and painful memories.*

I see your face in those pictures,  
and every ounce of love I once had for you comes rushing back -  
causing me to forget everything that happened.

I hear your voice in the videos I saved -  
in hopes of looking back on those saved fragments of time when I needed the smile.  
But simply now -  
just the sound of you drags me back.

Drag me back into a time in my life where I hated myself the most;  
to a time where I let love take the place  
of a once confident and joyful soul.

The further I scroll through our memories, the more I see you disappear.  
Not only from us, but also from yourself.  
You became so unrecognizable by the end of our time, that when I look back -  
I don't know the person I see right next to me in our pictures.



## To the Boy In the Small, White House

---

JARRED WOODWARD

to the boy in the small, white house who broke my heart,  
i want to start off by saying thank you.

thank you for being there for me when no one was,  
when the struggles that never seemed to end kept piling on,  
and when i had nowhere to turn to.  
you brought me out of my depression and it seemed i had a reason to live again.

from the long night talks to the long night fights,  
i would never take any of it back.  
thank you for showing me what it truly meant to love again.

but with everything that goes up, something must always come down.

just like you gave me a reason to be happy  
you took it away like it was nothing.  
and just as fast as i fell in love  
i just as quickly fell back down to reality.

i gave my everything to make you happy,  
but all i got in return was a half-assed kiss and a measly, “i love you too”

but through all of this, you gave me one of the hardest life lessons there could be  
and that is: don't lose the sense of reality for love.  
you taught me that i am a king; deserving of much more

so, to the boy in the small, white house; thank you.

and to the man whom i have yet to find, i know the true me  
and i know you are soon to come.

## Induction () Postulation

---

CALVIN YARDLEY

**W**e read the other day that the DSM-5 is adding (has added) a new classification to its recognized list of mental health disorders: Prolonged Grief Disorder. As we read through the article, we attempted to draw our own conclusions on the induction of PGD to what many describe as the “psychiatrist's bible.”

Our conclusion is probably poorly informed, uneducated and yet another example of the commonfolk trying to muscle their way into medical debates, but we would argue it presents an interesting angle to the whole event.

As far as we've been informed, the often-times hyperintensity of grief stems from two things: A.) attachment to the individual and B.) loss of the individual. Without the attachment, temporary sympathy is generally given to bereaved, but beyond that...well, most people would be unaffected. Thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, die every single day, and the human race as a whole is not paralyzed by the grief this would entail if every death was equally reacted to.

The loss is the inciting incident, and the attachment is the catalyst. Without one, grief as an emotion cannot exist in the mind of a person.

What happens, then, if one of the components are removed from the equation?

Suppose a woman's partner passes away, and she enters a horrible cycle of grief and mental duress, wears black garments for the remainder of her days, and becomes something of a recluse as a result of her partner's passing. She refuses to see a doctor, and the remainder of her life is that of angst, sadness, and an inability to function due to the intensity of grief.

By some stroke of reality-shattering finesse, we manage to retroactively prevent the circumstance that led to the woman meeting her to-be partner. Jump forward, and she is neither affected, nor does she even seem fazed.

Granted, she lives a very different life, and may be suffering from other dysfunctions of mental health, but from a technical standpoint, she is “cured” of her grief.

Even if it meant snapping off the wings of a butterfly.

Admittedly, this is a bad example. Presently, we lack both the ability to time travel and to alter past events. And if we did, there would be no guarantee that the outcome of the preventative measure would be a net positive. It's a decision that would ultimately come down to the patients; would they be willing to forgo the memory of having spent a lifetime with that person if it meant shedding the horrible pain they feel in their absence?

We believe that that is what grief comes down to: memory.

Memory is the glue that binds relationships together, and can be the caustic anti-adhesive that tears them apart. Memory is the backbone of society, and the lingering venom that keeps people from accepting one another. Memory is the everything and the nothing.

Memory is what facilitates grief.

It can be intensely difficult to build a sense of attachment towards someone if you can't even remember their name. Without the formation of attachment (and associated memories that reinforce the attachment), the sudden absence of the individual, though perturbing, will ultimately fade into nothingness as the synapses fail to create a new code to make an event go down in psychological history.

To undo the ties that bind, the shackles of legacy, the burden of memory, then, is the ultimate means of solving grief? Right?

...not quite.

See, memory - though presented as a weakness here, which it is very much not - is a powerful thing, make no mistake. It is what allows us to become us. It is what allows us to accomplish, to strive, to remain resolute and insurmountable

in the face of adversity and strife. Be it the mental image of your sweetheart back home, or your childhood canine companion, or anything in between.

That is a powerful force.

It can move people to tears, dry wet eyes in the darkest of times, and launch even the staunchest of stoics into bitter rumination on the mistakes of their past. It can dredge up negative emotions or push them aside. It can do so much...

But where grief is concerned, it can cripple us like no worldly poison could hope to.

What is the answer then, but to remove that which brings about the pain? What recourse exists but to allow them to forget?

This poses a myriad of moral questions, and we would wager (for many people) is an unacceptable course of action. Keeping our previous “wow fuck the laws of physics, lets time travel lmao” example, we’re still ultimately at the discretion of the patient. If a patient doesn’t agree to have the pain of remembrance removed from their mind, then traditional methods must be reoriented as the main avenues of treatment. And even then, society places a degree of exemption on grief, even romanticizing it in some contexts.

Sure, we’re of the persuasion that there’s something morbidly heartwarming about someone who can never truly move on from the death of a loved one, but the fuzzy feeling fades when someone’s growth is fully halted and impeded by a psychological incapability to overcome.

Further questions are raised when we consider the methodology of “memory removal.” Presently, medical and surgical science (at least to my knowledge) has not advanced to the point where we can precisely target specific memories and cauterize them out of being, either through medication or a surgical procedure. Other routes to induce memory loss exist, but “induction of dissociative amnesia” and “causing traumatic head injuries” doesn’t really constitute an effective or ethical treatment plan, if the general procedure of ethics is anything

to go off of.

We suppose this is the sort of issue that will always be contested. So long as the human mind exists and forms cohesive thought, there will always be something that can go wrong. If one's consciousness is severely affected by the sudden loss of another...well, the inevitability of mortality speaks for itself, given that we're here talking about it.

Memory is not a weakness. It is what shapes who we are. We are what we survive and what we experience, as they say.

Oftentimes, however, the pain of memory can tempt the instinct of escape; and in such cases, to forget is to heal.

But to heal is to forsake memory.

To forsake love.

To forsake connection.

To forsake, in a way, that which you grieved for in the first place.

It may sound cliché, but we would ask you to consider a quote from Ludwig Jacobowski, a German poet:

“Do not cry because they are past! Smile because they once were!”

## Visitation

---

CALVIN YARDLEY

I stand next to a thing,  
A tyrannical thing.  
An oppressive thing.  
A mockery of an effigy of a farce of a thing.  
The thing stands next to me.  
An imagined me.  
An idealized me.  
A fashioning of a facade of an interloper of a me.  
Its presence is crushing.  
My presence is unnerving.  
We stand in silence,  
No glances stolen,  
No words spoken.  
We fear that this silence is golden,  
and if it is broken,  
then it will mean nothing.  
Before us is something worse,  
Something bastardized.  
Something falsified.  
Something wrong.  
It stands, a monument of sorts.  
A monument to what, I wouldn't dare suggest.  
A monument to what, it wouldn't dare wager.  
A monument to what, we shudder to envision.  
The room is equally incorrect,  
The air is equally suffocating,

The tension is equally cuttable.  
Were it any other occasion,  
knives would be drawn and blades would brandished,  
and this whole room would be laden thick with the incarnadine ink of the  
heart.  
But no.  
Not now.  
For this is a visitation.  
An omen, a precursor, of what is to come.  
Many questions exist in this shared realm of inquest.  
One where the ideal and the real converge  
into a single, stifling space.  
The thing seeks answers.  
I am obligated to provide them.  
I intend to ask questions.  
The thing will begrudgingly divulge the truth.  
In the end, however  
neither of us will find what we're looking for.  
This is a visitation, after all;  
not a fleeting sense of closure.

## Vexation

CALVIN YARDLEY

It is angered.  
Its plans have been trounced.  
Set in stone so long ago,  
left undetected, left to embolden itself.  
Left to grow to fruition.  
The darkness stifled it, however.  
It could not have been foreseen.  
That variable, unaccounted.  
This outcome, unknowable.  
This anger...unprecedented.  
Its anger is troubling.  
Never has emotion coaxed it into action,  
never has failure goaded it into restlessness,  
never has weakness spurned it into revision.  
The scriptures were written without change in mind.  
The rules were made by a hand that cannot know error.  
The teachings were crafted in the shape of finality, of absolution.  
...is it truly infallible?  
We move about the museum, silently.  
Its anger grows from simple annoyance to something greater,  
the true gravity of the intrusion, the violation, becomes plainly evident.  
The monuments are destroyed, by and large.  
The echoes of the captive specimens are beyond hope.  
The carefully mounted and displayed instruments of bygones are either  
missing or shattered.  
And most troublingly, as we inspect a windswept precipice slathered in slick,  
yet-dried blood...  
A casualty.  
Yet another unforeseen repercussion.  
Something dark flashes across its face.  
The something is born of hate.  
Whether it is hate for the perpetrator,



or hate for the now-weak deceased,  
I cannot say.  
The balcony is quiet.  
The only noise is that within me,  
brought on by doubt and the sheer incorrectness of the being beside me.  
Doubts exist, especially in the face of contrary evidence.  
Perhaps it is not as strong as I once thought.  
Perhaps it's logic is not as sharp as I once believed.  
Perhaps...it is suffering but a moment's weakness.  
The lance plunges through its abdomen  
before even a single thought can convince my hands otherwise.  
It falls to the floor,  
not even a cough nor cry of agony drawn.  
Its departure was uneventful.  
...aberrant.  
Something dark flashes across my visage.  
Something born of disdain.  
To have led me so astray.  
To have fooled me into believing it was correct.  
Truth has no meaning, should it claim to come from its undulating lips.  
Buried beneath the deception,  
I will come to realize,  
is a pale heart.  
Hateful, much like its owner.  
All the same, however,  
it holds the key.

## Veneration

CALVIN YARDLEY

The point of the lance pierces the glassy floor,  
its apex steeped in blackened blood.  
Before it sits a thing.  
A tyrannical...no.  
A simple thing.  
A humble thing.  
A...fearful thing?  
It senses my approach and lurches forward,  
spinning to face me.  
It scabbles backwards at the mere sight of me,  
terror rising off it in waves, stained foul and pungent.  
Its mouth opens,  
and instead of the expectant scream of fear,  
it questions my being.  
I answer it, saying that I have come to remember a life lost.  
It spits at me,  
the swelling, resonant fury shaping itself into an accusation.  
An accusation of murder.  
A cold one, at that.  
Deicide.  
Regicide.  
The list of -cides I've committed goes on.  
This thing is ceaseless, mind seemingly scattered and lost  
in the wake of its caretaker having been laid to rest.  
I tense, the grip on my newfound sharpness tightening.  
I retort, and the sniveling thing's expression shifts from hatred to aghast confusion.  
The headstone before us,  
as metaphorical as it may be,  
is a marker of heraldry.

That which brings about a new age.  
I did it a courtesy when I left my former claimant armament to immortalize it.  
To indicate that it did exist, once.  
No matter how meaningless its tenure may have been.  
And if this thing cannot recognize my attempts at posthumous diplomacy,  
I shall inlay it upon the storied floors here as well.  
It vanishes as I level the point of the lance at it,  
becoming nothing in the face of truth.  
An exhale is drawn from my lungs, and my grip softens.  
From that of a soldier to a statesman.  
In the other hand are the fashionings of the weak.  
The sole signifier of exhumation,  
the sole record of molted weakness,  
the sole manifest recollective of a bygone turmoil.  
A pale heart.  
A key.  
My final courtesy is one of veneration.  
The last words go unspoken,  
for the wise once said that this silence is golden.  
And if it is broken, it shall mean nothing.  
The key falls to the floor,  
the resounding clang against the shaft of the lance  
echoing about the windswept precipice.  
I depart.  
There are no words left to say.  
I came to recognize a loss.  
One that was self-actuated,  
but a loss, nonetheless.



Seniority | Calvin Yardley



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Alli Baumgart** is a Communications major who enjoys photography, videography and writing. After graduation this year, she plans to transfer on for her Bachelors degree, and hopes to work in the film industry.

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**Abigayle Bennett.** I am a Human Services student and I plan to become a psychologist and specialize in CBT and Genetic Counseling. I have always had an interest in the arts, both physical and literary. I hope to help people find inspiration in themselves and channel their artistic abilities.

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**Kristin Bensen** enjoys hanging out in magical gardens, playing practical jokes with inanimate objects, and finding poetry hidden under rocks.

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**Logan Blakeslee.** I am a 19-year old resident of Broome County and a lifelong writer of short stories. Fiction is one of my favorite hobbies and I am always trying to improve my writing style. Someday, I would like to become a novelist so that I can share my own work with everyone.

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**Robert S Brimer.** I'm a former Army medic that took part in a convoy to secure a warehouse district outside of Baghdad in the lead up to the 2010 national elections.

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**I.J. Byrnes** is a Professor in the Philosophy Program at SUNY Broome and serves as Faculty Adviser to the campus international honor society, Phi Theta Kappa.

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**Kelsey Cherevko.** This poem is about the slow revelation of a toxic relationship, the weight and impact of it, the gradual acceptance of it's reality, and the beginning of a journey to break free from it.

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**David Chirico** is this guy we saw that time. He was dressed like Vladimir, from *Waiting for Godot*, or was it Estragon, from the same text, or was it like Pozzo, from the same text, or was it Godot. Anyway we saw him. He had his books with him and said he was from Binghamton but that couldn't be true, it could never once have been true. It was said he was a professor of English but this again couldn't be true, it could never be true. It was said he appeared in movies but no not that too. It was said his work appeared in books and we were baffled by the very mention of books and all things bookish. These were said and then he walked away. It wasn't a long consultation and we billed him for our efforts but the envelope came back with an archaic stamp on it and nothing more.

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**Albert Durkee** is an alumni of SUNY Broome.

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**Hope English** is a follower of Jesus, a daughter, and a friend. She loves words, animals, avocados, and chai lattes, and is often found reading a book. She wants to stay true to her last name by majoring in English and would also like to add another language to the mix--Spanish.

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**Wilmer Estevez** is a lifelong learner. He loves listening, and telling stories, learning from others on living a more impactful life.

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**Hannah Foster** is a current student at SUNY Broome.

**Michael Fuller** is an alumni of SUNY Broome who graduated in 2019, and will be attending Binghamton University come next year. My hobbies include writing in a creative manner, playing/designing video games and learning about and observing the world around me.

**Alexandra Georgoudes** is an environmental science student who loves taking pictures in my free time.

**Moses Joshua Griffith.** Born and raised in Brooklyn New York in 1999. The year of the rabbit. Ironic. As a kid he just kept going and going and going like the damn energizer bunny. Always asking questions that sometimes nobody had the answer to. They say that people born in that year are quiet, elegant, kind, and responsible.... I guess one out of four is close.

**Mike Grubb** is the SUNY Broome Writing Center Coordinator.

**Deb Hibbard** is a former counselor at SUNY Broome and like everyone she is trying to get through this pandemic and writing is sometimes a good diversion.

**Gavin Hlavac.** I am a current student at SUNY Broome and an English major.

**Lyndsay Jefferies.** According to my drama classes, I might just be a made up person pretending to exist. I like to think that's true.

**JoJo Johnson.** I am a SUNY Broome Senior who, no matter what, rather be writing.

**Joshua Lewis'** poetry has been published in literary magazines, such as the Patterson Literary Review and the Edison Literary Review. He lives in Binghamton, New York, and he is currently setting up a poetry workshop series through the Broome County Arts Council along with writing poetry and fiction in his spare time.

**Sushma Madduri.** I am a teacher by profession and an ardent admirer of nature by heart. I strongly believe that our very being is always influenced and improved by observing two important facts of life: Mother Nature and People!

**Molly Mahon** is a singer/songwriter and an aspiring screenwriter and novelist. She is actively pursuing a career in the entertainment industry, touring and recording with her band and working on a coming-of-age TV pilot and novel. She hopes to send love, light, and life back into broken souls through her work as a musician and writer.

**Kaylee Maietta.** I am currently a Broome Fast Forward student through Chenango Forks High School. I am interested in majors related to English, English Education, or Creative Writing, and hope to go into a career related to English.

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**Alex McCollum** was born and raised in Riverside California, along the coast, and across the states, finally nestling into a home here in Binghamton where he is actively starting up a small business with his wife, and just looking forward to a bright future.

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**Gloria McCormick** is a 2016 graduate of Broome Community College, She lives in Johnson City, NY.

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**Taneer Middleton** is a student at SUNY Broome majoring in Visual Communication Arts. He's really smart and handsome and hopes to one day make stories that the whole world will enjoy. If you liked his work, you can find him on social media with [this link]. Oh wait, you can't click this, can you? Hahahahahahahaha...

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**Matthew Nowakowski.** Born and raised in Binghamton New York. Happily married with a 13 year old and three dogs. Recent below-the-knee amputee. Currently working towards a degree in Business Accounting.

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**Christopher Origer.** Former Faculty Editor of Breaking Ground and former Chair of the English Department. I am an avid hiker, writer, and grandfather.

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**Alexandra Perez** is from Brooklyn, New York. I am also formally known as "Aly". Born in October of 1996. She is a writer, filmmaker and dancer majoring at SUNY Broome Communications & Media Arts.

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**Rose Pero** is a secretary in the Liberal Arts office here at SUNY Broome. I love spending time with my grandkids and am looking forward to a new one. Adelaide, I have prayed for you a 1,000 times.

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**Catalina Ramirez** is a student from Queens, NY, finishing up her Liberal Arts degree at SUNY Broome, before transferring to Binghamton University to continue her studies. She lives her life, trusting that she will find her path and doesn't worry about having a plan set in stone. Her motto is *carpe diem*. She aspires to travel the world to gain more insight and inspiration for everything she writes. For now, she is happy to spend her time writing, dreaming, and learning to play the guitar every day, little by little. She'll try anything for the arts. She sends out a warm thanks to everyone who supported and contributed to Breaking Ground, even with all the struggles and hardships of this year. She's grateful to have been part of this experience.

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**Lee Reynolds** is in their first year studying at SUNY Broome, and studied previously at SUNY Albany for two years prior to this. They are an Individual Studies Major, with a focus on Liberal Arts.

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**Tyler Rizzo** is a SUNY Broome Liberal Arts student that plans to one day become an author.

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**Julia Rosen.** I am 18 years old. I am a creative writing major and hope to submit more to Breaking Ground.



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**McCain Rowland.** I want my pieces to be disassociated from their writer. I want them to stand on their own, free from their author. If they are entertaining to YOU, that's all that matters.

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**Morgan Russo Phelps** is in her last semester at SUNY Broome, majoring in Liberal Arts with a focus in Education and History. Her dream is to become a high school history teacher. Writing is one of her passions, and she has been writing poetry for as long as she can remember. Life, philosophy, and nature are topics reflected in her writing.

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**Alayne Schaffer** is an alumni of SUNY Broome

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**Richard Schleider** currently contemplates the complexities of our mass-mediated society and the profound power of hand-crafted, photographic imagery as an instructor at SUNY Broome.

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**Dustin Schmidt.** I'm 21 and a student at Suny Broome, I'm looking to go into film but have always had a passion for writing.

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**Caeden Schneider.** I am 21 years old and in my second semester of SUNY Broome, pursuing an associate's degree in Web Development and Management. Writing is my favorite pastime! I originally wrote my submission as my final paper in my English 110 course. Thank you for fostering my writing skills, Professor Chandler!

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**Mary Seel.** I am the Chair of the English Department and a native Atlantan. She walks every day and takes photos of unusual or beautiful things she sees then.

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**Larry Shafer.** He is a terrible disappointment to his family, except for his mom who loves him despite him driving her to senility. Please read his work despite the awful things we all say about him. The poor idiot needs to feel good about something. Don't worry, he can't tell the difference between pity and pride.

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**Virginia Shirley.** I've been telling stories before I learned my alphabet, and the very last thing I'm likely to do is to tell another with my final breath. I am incredibly excited to be at the helm of Breaking Ground as the Faculty Editor for my first time.

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**Alanah Simenkiewicz.** I hope I am not just a writer to you all, but also an archenemy. <3

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**Sissy Slick.** Once a SUNY Broome student, now a part time staff member in the Workforce Development and Continuing Education Department, but always a writer. It all started with a play I wrote in the second grade. The title was "Just Right". There were four characters, lots of dialogue and even costume changes. I pretty much copied Goldilocks and the Three Bears but my classmates loved it!

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**Grant Stewart.** I am studying Sound Engineering here at SUNY Broome. I enjoy playing guitar and singing.

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**Danielle Stilloe** is a freelance artist and writer from Binghamton, NY. Her work has appeared in Renaissance Magazine, EQUUS, and John Lyon's Perfect Horse. She has a Bachelor's in English from SUNY Fredonia. Her time attending Broome Community College remains the most enriching educational experience of her life.

**Amanda Tierney** is a future nursing student with, hopefully, a nursing and psychology degree.

**Alex Travers** is a professional tutor and a life-long lover of fine literature, happy to share his work with people who appreciate it.

**Desiree Watson** is a student majoring in education. She hopes to become a history teacher. Her hobbies are writing, reading, and drawing in her free time.

**Sophia Werner** is a 16-year-old musician, whose classes at SUNY Broome are the highlight of her week. When she is not attending class or practicing violin, piano or cello, she enjoys painting, reading classic novels and attempting to learn how to speak cat--although not necessarily in that order.

**Mark Williamson** has been a lecturer in Art History in the SUNY system for over thirty years, at Binghamton University, Oneonta College, Onondaga Community College, Tompkins-Cortland Community College, and at SUNYBroome since 2000. His hobbies are gardening and watching sports.

**Susan Woerner.** At Broome, Susan helps faculty design and develop their courses. In her other life, she writes short and long-form fiction and generally dabbles in all sorts of craftiness. She lives in Unadilla with her wife, Che, and their furry four-legged children - Polly, Jones, Leo and Fae.

**Jarred Woodward** studies Communication and Mass Media at Broome - and in his spare time, writes about the things he has seen and experienced. His main focus lies in journalism, but creative writing will always have a piece of him.

**Calvin Yardley.** I am a student at SUNY Broome. I have all of the questions and none of the answers.



Tunnel | Deb Hibbard



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