

THE RAPIDS REVIEW 2026



The Rapids Review 2026

A Publication of Anoka-Ramsey Community College's

Creative Writing Club

The Rapids Review Mission Statement:

Anoka-Ramsey's Coon Rapids Campus Student Literary Magazine, *The Rapids Review*, is dedicated to publishing and recognizing a wide range of excellently crafted work by our student writers, who come from a diverse background of experiences, abilities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, ages, and religions.

A Note from the Editor:

I'm not the first to say that this was a bit of a challenge. Imposter syndrome- feeling like a fraud- was one of the things I personally faced. And yet, I look at the writing people have submitted, and the work everyone's done, and I am proud. We've done it. I could never have combed through all the submissions without our fantastic group of editors. All of them are on the back page- please check them out, I would be lost without them. Even if some of them like to plan a rebellion against my "club dictatorship" here and there- not naming any names...Siren...but seriously, I love you guys.

And, to all of you who now hold this finished copy in your hands, I hope you enjoy it. It was a lot of work, a lot of time, some tears, and some frustration, but also some laughs.

Sincerely,

Ash Hiles

Cover: Narcissus Reincarnated by Siren Pearson

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Poetry

Neverending Stonewall

By Norah Lee Parker

(Editor's Choice)

Cover your hair

 bright purple maniac 80 degrees
(and you'd better wear a hat)

 Melt into
the river if you have to

 Be the water they drink
the pavement
they

 sink
 into If you drop in the street
 don't let them scrub away
your trampled bouquets of...

 hope? Blue-burning r a g e?
(will it mean something?)

 Shut down your phone
Facial recognition
Biometrics driver's license.

 Stay safe by being n o b o d y
 U n recognize a b l e
they will shout at you
as you shout

old latex lungs
losing air
dumbass kid goddamn faggot dyke

you are too young to know
who you are
Bullet-proof vest
chinaware skull
Hide Narcan in your shoes
rip out your nose ring and
cover up your stick and poke
from age 16 – back when you
would have died for
nothing
Brace for the sharp
shrapnel
setting in
straighten your shoulders when it comes

too stupid to know if you're a boy or a girl
God's Great Mistake
mentally ill

A B C/L M N O P community, that's what I call those
homosexuals

unethical, immoral even

C R A Z Y!

*Why would you spend three hours in the
streets yelling?*

What would you know about hate?

What would you know about pain?

Knotted Passions

By Chloe Betterman

I have spent hours swiping through shelves
at Joann Fabrics, picking through option after option
as if they were the sultry depths of Tinder,
pink-hazed vision scouring each aisle for perfection.
Which yarn would I take to bed tonight?

Big Twist has always been a classic lover; gentle
yet reliable. We lounge on the bedspread in soft orange
lamplight, my head cushioned against his flat pectoral
as strong arms hold close my waist and nimble fingers
thread between my legs. He knows just how to unravel me
after a long day.

I seek out Red Heart for rough and dirty tramps. Blushing skin
rubbed raw or tangled knots holding me
down; I don't care. I will succumb
to whatever way he ties me, so long as I'm keening from pleasure
by the end. My only thoughts of his acrylic vibrance
and the pumping passion to come when he takes me.

Lily must be finely wined and dined
before she would ever think about giving me her sugar
and cream. It takes finesse, but eventually I can twirl her
delicate form around my crochet hook, caressing it inside
her skin again and again until she settles with content
across my flushing chest.

Bernat is way too big.

I'm sorry, he just is. Occasionally I think myself a size queen, that I can handle the challenge, let his girth push its way into my body. It's tedious, tiring, and leaves an absolute mess with the copious amounts of stuffing, but to be pulled against his plush after the strenuous work, when my body is nothing more than a pile of limp threads, is like settling into the valley between two velvet mountains.

Bad Body

By Norah Lee Parker

Doctors hand stamp negative test results on my forehead. Add on a disclaimer (*there's nothing wrong with you*). Take a Zofran and be on your way. (*Maybe you're making it up?*) See a specialist sliding tubes into your veins, collecting your blood like a bad omen. They will tell you nothing is wrong (*it's all in your head!*) and leave you crumpled on the sales floor of a Walmart. But you just need to go outside! See the sun! Filter the stress from your pores into orange plastic bottles. You just need vitamins! Or the Holy Spirit! Not another night in the emergency room coming home from another strangling *you're too young for this*. It's that damn phone! The Wi-Fi! The EMFs! It's the microplastics! The pizza! The bag salads! Doctor, I've done all I can. (*There's nothing we can do. You've got a clean bill of health!*) Maybe it's a bad body with rotting cells and fraying tissues. Maybe it's a bad world to have a body in. Maybe it's the eleventh doctor you've seen this year (*you're perfectly healthy dear*). I'm on my hands and knees scrubbing the floor of my stomach clean. I'm trying to rewire my DNA into something that works, avoid the sharp sparks and ignore the smoking breaker box. Still, I will climb into my bones and rearrange the atoms. I will cap every nerve ending with a softer life than this one. Take my brain out for a rinse (have you tried turning it off and on again?) Plug my ankles into the *get-well-soon* sockets and recharge the leaking batteries eroding the base of my skull. I am well acquainted with the retina-burning lights,

shoulder-jamming beds, choking metallic water. I've spent one too many nights sleeping in a spaghetti tangle of cords, IVs, and hopelessness, another doctor's letter hammering my forehead (*we don't know what's wrong with you*).

///

Doctors

tell you
leave you crumpled

like a bad omen
it's all in your head!

need

into orange plastic bottles. You
the Holy Spirit! Not

damn phone!

I

Doctor,

got a

bad body

I'm

trying to rewire
avoid

and ignore

rearrange the

atoms I w a n t a softer life than this

Take my brain

my

eroding

skull. I am well acquainted with
nights
in a tangle of hopelessness,

///

got a bad body
try to rewire a softer
life of hopelessness

Sin's Paradox

By Cecelia Lang

I'm a wanderer
 living like deer
in the drying seasons.
My mind escapes me -
 obsesses, suppresses
 the messes,
surprises like wild guesses.

I flee full of
 fleas
maybe I'm a freak
but I'm *free*.

The light shines
in the reaching,
 breaching, looming darkness.
The only thing seen for
 miles;
the only thing that satisfies
my free will.

The light captures my essence -
but leaves me
 hollow and dead.
It leaves an outcry

of dry why's
and an unappealing larceny
of pure
innocence and curiosity.

White

By Rebecca Applegate

A blank page full of possibilities.

Screaming at us to fill it with words yet to be conceived.

Its blankness is as white as the snow that refuses to fall.

Its glaring brightness is a stark contrast to the fading sunlight.

The exquisite words stuck in our fingertips, unable to escape.

The musical language stuck in our throats, refusing to come out.

Here we sit, white in front of us.

A storm of ideas brewing just beneath the surface.

Fingers hover above the keyboard, maniacal smile upon our face
while the light slowly fades from the window and our soul.

The white sheet of paper taunting us in its pristine form,
not a single mark upon it to blemish its purity.

Pacing, glaring out the window as darkness continues to fall.

Our steps thudding on the wooden floor in beat with our heart.

Thud, thump. Thud, thump. Thud, thump.

Both becoming quicker and more erratic as the panic takes us over.

Failure, that is what this is. We are a failure!

The once florid richness of our silver tongue and golden fingers of our past,

have now become the florid shame of our current selves.

Trapped in here, a prison of our own making.

Stuck inside with only ourselves for company.

A Life of Mo(u)rning

By Siren Pearson

Gray is my truest color
not the grayness that is silence
rather the one of a fresh start
Not the blandness of sterility
but the beginnings of beauty

On my most humbling night during
its cocooned transition
before my loveliest day before the
screeching alarm
after even the chirp of the cricket
was done weeping
before the morning takes its first sorrowed breath
after the light dusk has been laid to rest
between the void and the living
there is
peace

My peace refuses to come on its own
It must come in a much
larger wave
of caffeinated stress
or time deprived mourning

I love my peace but
what surrounds it is hard
on those nights of scrambling
doing what wasn't before those mornings of waking

to forget

it

a l l

again.

My peace is but a *flash* of itself

lightning when the sun is

most blinding

or dark clouds with only a

silver sliver moon

Only ever visible for as

l o n g

a s

I

a m

with the taste of the blankness

in the vast emptiness of the city

My color of in between depicts

more me

than I do I am

new beginnings I am

fresh starts yet

so rarely do I see the

me that

is me

Yes, Even the Cold

By Siren Pearson

I wanted to hold her between blue lips
wanted to
die alongside her in the cold ocean
or to dye our hair that of the same emboldened hue
I wanted to hold her between blue skies
from one day
to the next
and the next
until every shade of the day
has been gloriously
experienced
until even the shades of long forgotten
ghosts
become jealous
of
our
love.
I wanted to hold her between the blues
from song

to beautiful
song
as butter-smooth jazz
re-enters our ears
again, and
again, and
again,
until the notes became letters
stuck to the fridge
and each rest
a chance to breath
before the next
loving,
devastating
kiss,
each
with blue lips
from the cold
or from the dye
when we die together
but moved on
too easily
but now,
I long to once again hold her between blue fingers

for I would bear anything again,
yes, even
the cold,
for her.

Art

Peace

By: Kayleigh Schwabke



Vulture

By Abigail Johnson



Bullfrogs Laughing In The Brush

By Chloe Betterman



Opalesque

By Chloe Betterman



Bird Banding

By Gabrielle Niblo



Fiction

Iris

By Faith Laudenbach

(Editor's Choice)

Envision a pastel blue sky, soaring across endless terrain, so high up that even those metal winged creatures can't match the magnificence of you. Gravity has no hold on you. Diving and swirling in the sweet wind, it ruffles your jet black feathers. Extending your claws, descending to the surface of a crystal clear lake, *Splash*. Emerging with a silver scaled dinner. Landing on the tallest pine to enjoy your catch. Yellow piercing eyes take in the memorizing landscape, watching for anything that moves. From your perch, you witness the last of the world's beauty. Large towering mountains, patches of grassland both marsh and tall grass. Warmth from the bright sun, shining its beams through the canopy. A bubbling brook echoes through this silent forest, carving its way through the land. *Snap! Swish*. Your attention turns to an unknown noise. Your white head tilts in its direction. A hiker has noticed your presence, you spread your vast wings and take flight. You can go wherever you wish, perhaps you will find a wooded area and annoy some blue jays or scan the horizon for those ever growing ant hills that give off light. Where will you see next?

Grazing in a luscious green pasture. The spring grass is sweet and tall. Clover and meadow flowers dancing in the breeze. Your eyes soft with

multiple hues of brown, mirror the surrounding area. You notice your fellow pasture mates, the birds in flight, watching ants move along the ground as you graze. *Clink*. The sound of the rancher's gate opens. You raise your head, the others do the same. A few begin to run, a silent race has been announced, who will get to the gate first? You join in, the scenery blurring as you run. The rancher stands alone at the gate. You arrive at the fence next to him, he pats your head. His soft voice giving you praise. You are led into the barn, a worn leather saddle is placed on your back, you are fitted with all your other tack, the rancher adjusts the cinch at your side. And soon you are off to the fields. See this wide open valley is your home, and every day you go out to find cattle wondering the fields as they please.

You chase and stop, spin and run, and chase and stop. Turning the bulky black cows together on their journey to another pasture. Dust kicks up as you ride farther into the late afternoon. Soon the sky changes into many hues of colors. The humans make camp and gaze up at a pitch black sky and point out constellations of stars. You are standing tied to a long line of rope, ears flicking at the nearest sounds, taking in your new environment of the night's camp. You breathe in the smell of cedar burning and come to the notion that there are others like you tied on their own ropes not too far away. The damp smell of rain flows through the air. Clouds roll on the horizon hinting the incoming storm. Taking no heed to the change in weather, you go back to grazing on the sweet spring grass once again. How far will we go tomorrow?

You could spend most of your life roaming the streets or traveling across the large fields of growing crops, to eventually get back to where you came. Wandering is your favorite pastime other than sleeping in the sun, in front of a window or on the farmer's porch. You do as you like. Sometimes you like people other times you refuse any affection because it's your "me time". You have the tendency to explore either by taking a stroll to the nearest neighbor's house or you find something that peaks your interest like chasing a string, standing guard over the children of the farmer's house, and pushing anything you find off a ledge. Being mysterious is your best trait, the humans will never know your next move. Who knows? Maybe you are talking to spirits and warding off the bad ones with the power of your 3 Am zoomies. Whatever it is you are very fond of the humans that take care of you. You often enjoy giving cuddles and making sure your human is awake at the right time in some cases even before dawn. You keep the house a tight knit system, your human would be lost without your fluffy guidance. Who could ask for anything more?

You have the most adventurous spirit. You love to dance in the summer rain, jump in muddy puddles in your rubber boots. Scan the night sky for constellations and northern lights. You look around the world in ever changing wonder. You notice the small changes of the seasons, winters biting wind and slow snow fall, make the top of the trees start to bud as grass pops up to cover the land in green. You listen for the birds and their songs. You enjoy watching the sunsets, and how

the environment around you turns gold. Beaming off of you to the flowers on the ground and illuminating the tops of old oaks. You enjoy watching the silver fish swim in the creek, listening to Mother nature's voice while hiking, and always enjoying the presence of others and their stories.

You have the carefree and whimsical imagination I look forward to hearing. You want to explore the world, you want to see so many things, and you want simple moments and memories that will fill your wonderful life with excitement and delight. What inner world do you wish to tell?

For the Love of Emmie

By Aurora Monthony

Martin watched his young daughter wobble around the parking lot on her newly-training-wheel-less bike as he tried fruitlessly to get ahold of his ex. He'd already called three times, but sometimes she got in one of her moods where she wanted him to "work for it," so he raked a hand through his untamed brown hair and jabbed the call button a fourth time. This time she answered on the first ring, deepening his annoyance. It hadn't been so bad when they were actually together, but now that they'd been separated for almost a year and a half—and the only reason he still called her was to handle stuff with their daughter—it was far less endearing.

"Hello~o!" she said cheerfully into the phone, as if she hadn't just ignored his last three calls. He ground his teeth but managed to keep his tone neutral.

"Hi Rachel." Okay, perhaps he sounded a little fed up, but really, why did he still have to cater to her stupid whims?

"What do you need? I've got a nail appointment in twenty minutes, so I can't talk long. I'm getting French tips!" He got the

distinct impression she was holding her hand up to the phone as she spoke, even though he could see neither her nor her nails. He rolled his eyes at the cloudless sky, glad she couldn't see him, either.

"That's great." He really didn't give a rat's rear end about her nails, but he couldn't risk her getting pissy on him and hanging up before he could talk about why he'd called, so he tried not to irritate her. "I just wanted to make sure you were still gonna pick up Emmie tonight? It's your weekend with her." He drummed his fingers on the nearby railing as he spoke. She'd already forgotten once and flaked several others, so just assuming she'd be there was a no-go.

"Oh... right. Um-" she cut herself off, and he listened to the rustle of something papery she was digging through. "Actually, I don't think that's going to work."

"What?" Martin gripped the phone tighter and took a deep breath, trying to maintain his composure. "Why not?"

His ex sighed. "Well, Brandon's staying over—his job's been treating him terribly, you know—and he just needs a nice, relaxing weekend. And, you know, Emmie's kind of, um," she paused, clearly trying to find the least offensive way to besmirch their daughter. "...a

little much sometimes!” Martin glared at the empty space in front of him, vaguely aware of said daughter just out of earshot.

“What are you talking about? Emmie’s a kid,” he said icily, watching her skid to a stop at the far edge of the parking lot. “She’s gonna be hyper sometimes. But she’s not some little demon; she listens when you tell her to be quiet; she does what you tell her to. She doesn’t even cause much trouble to begin with!”

“Ugh, it’s just not a good time, Martin!” Rachel insisted. “You know Brandon doesn’t like little kids very much, and we’re just not going to be able to have a good time together with her around! Just tell her I’m sick or something!”

Martin clenched his free hand around the railing. “First of all, you said that last time. You haven’t seen her in *weeks*! Now you’re just gonna ditch her because your lame man-baby boyfriend can’t accept he’s dating a woman with a kid?” he asked incredulously, unable to be nice any longer.

“Brandon is not a man-baby! He’s just having a tough time! And I’ll see her next week, okay?” Rachel said sharply. Martin seethed.

“Will you, though? How do I know *Brandon* won’t need you all to himself again next week?” he demanded. “How long do you expect me to keep making up excuses for you? How long are you gonna make Emmie be second-best to your stupid, selfish, loser boyfriend? And how long do you think it’ll take her to figure out that she *is*? She’s not an idiot, Rachel!” He was really getting worked up now, and his voice rose unconsciously. “She’s actually really smart, which you would *know* if you ever bothered to see her! One day she’s not gonna be so little and forgiving anymore, and when that day comes, I want you to remember this call. When she gets older and realizes what a selfish person you are, I don’t wanna hear you complaining about why she doesn’t want to spend time with you, because this is why!”

Martin sucked in a breath, furious, and forced his voice back to a calmer tone. “You know, when she *is* with you, I miss her terribly. Every time she’s gone, I think about all the time I’m missing with her and all the stuff I can’t do with her ‘cause you’re supposed to have her most weekends. I get to be the bad guy who takes her to school every day and makes her do her homework. You’ve got the fun part, and you *still* can’t be bothered? Thanks a lot, Rachel.” He was being mean now, he knew, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Rachel made a little sputtering noise.

“That’s not fair. I’m trying my best!” she shot back. “Emmie’s not the only one I want to spend time with, you know! And you don’t understand! She likes you better! She *behaves* for you! But she always talks back to me! She never respects me!” Rachel’s voice had taken a distinctly pouty edge as she spoke. “And you wouldn’t know anything about balancing kids and a love life; you haven’t even been on one single date since we broke up!”

While true, Martin found the insinuation insulting. He had purposely avoided dating so he could focus on his child. She was at a critical stage in her young life where things were changing; losing teeth and settling into school and getting her training wheels off her bike, and she already had to deal with split parents and Brandon, who was just about the biggest weasel Martin had ever had the displeasure of meeting. He didn’t need to add to that chaos. Unfortunately, he knew that, to Rachel, him saying his first priority was to his daughter would be understood as him not being able to find anybody, so he sighed and gave up on the argument.

“You know what, Rachel? I’m done. Have fun with Brandon. Call me if you ever get your head out of your butt and decide you want to see your daughter. In the meantime, I’m not going to assume you’re

gonna be around for her or sit around waiting for you to be. Goodbye.” He hung up before she could respond, weary of her excuses, and jumped when his daughter tugged on his sleeve.

“Daddy, look! I can ride all the way around the parking lot now!” she announced. Martin blinked, pulling himself out of his rage.

“Really, kiddo? Show me.”

“Okay!” Emmie happily set off, feet on the pedals, and started down the lot. She coasted most of the way, but he smiled anyway, happy to watch her pedal unsteadily back to him. When she finally made it, he put his hand up for a high-five.

“Nice job, pumpkin! That was awesome!” He watched her grin with glee (revealing the missing front tooth she’d shown him so proudly) as she slapped his hand. He groaned in mock-pain and shook his hand, pretending her strength was so incredible it had wounded him, and as she giggled at him, he wondered how Rachel could stand to miss out on this. He shook his head a little as Emmie got back on the bike. Rachel wanted nothing to do with her daughter? So be it.

Martin would take Emmie to the corn maze this weekend, like her mother was supposed to, and let her get all the “unhealthy” greasy

snacks she wanted and bury him up to his nose in corn kernels. Just this once, he'd be the "fun" parent without remorse. If Rachel wouldn't be there for Emmie, he would. And the next time she did

Coffee That Jogs My Memory

By Chloe Betterman

I sit at the café Saturday morning, our café, in our booth, overlooking the lake. I sip my coffee and glance at my watch. I check my phone and read your last text, sent ten minutes ago.

“Traffic! UGH! 10 minutes!”

I chuckle and look out the window, watching a pair of canoers tip into the water, frantically splashing for shore. I smile, remembering last summer when you tipped your kayak. Trying to steady yourself, you reached for mine and we both went toppling in.

Suddenly, you're sitting in front of me, hot tea in hand, telling me about the cat you saw on the side of the road. That's why you're late. I tell you about kayaking and we agree we should brave the St. Croix again. You show me the new shirts Target just got in, and complain about how hard the material is to fold. I ask you to sneak one home for me. I tell you my mom came to visit, and you remind me to ask her why, of all places in the world, she picked Oklahoma to move to. We sit there for hours, playing our weekly game of catch-up,

exchanging *Did I tell you?*s and *You'll never guesses* until the waitress brings the check. She sets it in front of me. You reach for your purse, as if we don't already know you never carry cash. I laugh and tell you it's my turn to pay anyway.

I take out my wallet and am surprised to see only my coffee listed. I look up to tell the waitress about the mistake, but then I see your empty chair and remember why you were late that day two weeks ago. You didn't tell me about the shirts at work; I saw them when I went to clean out your locker. I didn't tell you my mom visited, or that she's moving back now, to keep me company. You didn't tell me about the cat; the police officer who found you on the side of the road did.

The Girl in the Woods

By Aurora Monthony

Don't disturb her, passerby; it's dangerous. Those eyes, so serenely shut, should not be unsealed. The song on her lips, so sweetly serenading, is not lovely, but lethal. Feel the goosebumps on your flesh when she turns her fair face—and flee, fast!

Her greeting is not pure, but poison. Her smile is not sunny, but sinister. The way she glides, weightless, over the grass, whispers not of grace, nor whimsy, but an imminent warning. Do not shake her outstretched hands, naive one—soft though they may seem! You must understand that the swish of her unbound hair and ebony dress emanate not elegance, but urgency! Don't linger, lest you have the choice no longer!

Her eyes, snapping open, have ensnared you in their sight. They glow, gleaming in the dark. Her gaze is golden and gorgeous, but not at all gentle. Not warm, but wicked. She is a hunter, not harmless, and the prey has been handily captured. She is not magnificent, but a monster, and she moves in. It is too late now to leave, to pretend you haven't

seen. You can't even look away. But it matters not, poor adventurer;
that's the last mistake you'll ever make.

Cold Waters

By Ash Hiles

The sand is soft.

As the sun dips below the horizon, it grows cold, losing its heat from the day.

The cool of the night breeze rules the beach now.

The water stirs as I step in, lapping excitedly around my bare feet.

I glance over my shoulder back toward the beach, golden, red-brown braid brushing over my pale skin.

Luminous in the moonlight, she watches me. Short hair, so different from my own. Dark brown. It blends with the night.

Her eyes glint green. She blinks, and then she's gone, vanished into the night again.

This is not the first night I've seen her.

This will not be the last night I see her.

But this marks a year.

A year since I lost her.

Pained recollections tumble about in my brain, before going still, like the water around my legs. Not a ripple disturbs the lake now.

Smoother than glass, clearer than a diamond. In the light of the stars, it's black, hiding its secrets under a mirror.

I try in vain to pierce the veil. A glint catches my eye.

Ah. At last.

The silver necklace winks up at me from the sand. It hasn't moved from its place since she threw it. Or maybe she dropped it.

No one knows.

Well.

She knows.

But I can't ask her now.

I wonder, if I had managed to see beneath the surface, back then, would something have changed?

But I didn't.

Instead, I peered beneath the lake a year ago today.

Drifting in the gentle lake currents. Swaying amidst the fluffy strands of seaweed, as though she had become them.

I suppose she did join them.

The fish twined through her fingers and flowing dress like the seaweed, after all.

Eyes closed.

Hair drifting.

The ring on her finger reminded me of the pale scars on her wrists.

I dip my fingers into the water to scoop up the necklace. I feel the cold.

Her skin was always cold, no matter the season.

Even in the heat of summer.

Just like it had been that night.

Her heart had been cold at first.

It thawed three summers ago.

A warm flame, so different to the ice cold now. Hot as an inferno.

Too hot.

It became a bed of cold coals, waiting for heat to be returned, so it
might flare again.

But it lay cold, unattended. And it froze over.

Slow, and unnoticed, as frost crept along the empty ashes.

The necklace sits, cold, in my hands. I clutch it. I press the ice cold to
my lips. Warmth, returned.

Too little.

Too late.

The silver necklace mists briefly, before the cold creeps over it again.

All I have left to offer.

I cradle it in my hands.

I glance over my shoulder again.

She's there.

Watching.

Waiting.

Gently, I let the necklace slip from my fingers into the water again.

There's barely a sound as it slips beneath the black mirror.

Ripples.

Stillness.

She nods. Then she's gone.

I was wrong.

That was the last night I saw her.

Creative Nonfiction

Just Another Statistic

By Yuri Ryuugawa

(Editor's Choice)

The first week I moved to Cambridge, Minnesota, I was awe struck. My mother's newest husband was white and upper middle class, the kind of class that can feel comfortable living on a street with several cops. We moved into his house, and the muti-story houses were identical even without a housing association. Every lawn was green and manicured, several homes had more than one car in the driveway, and some had cliché American-dream picket fences. It was only when you looked closely, like at the peeling paint on the back decks or picket fences, that you would see that not everything was picture-perfect. Yet, it was nicer than any place we had lived in over a decade.

The carefully curated scenery only put me at unease. I knew part of my unease came from the feeling that my family and I didn't belong here; we were making ourselves a target by crossing financial classes. I hadn't seen most of our neighbors, but I knew the neighborhood was predominately white, and that wasn't new to me. Before moving to Minnesota, my brother, my mother's ex-husband, and I made up three

of the five people of color in the town. So, I wasn't surprised that my mother felt right at home, as if the fancy hot tub and two-story house was enough to shield her children. Despite having two black children, it never occurred to our mother that we experienced things she would never. Especially my brother.

The day I moved in my belongings, I stared at the cop car parked several houses down from ours. The shine in its polished exterior reminded me when the constant fear in my gut formed. My brother was only six and I didn't tell our mother about the stolen dominos he showed me with apprehensive giddiness. I was only two years older, but even then, he looked fragile to me with a scrawny physique and awkwardly long limbs. When he was ten, I never called out his lies in front of the friends he wanted to impress. When he told his wild tales right in front of me, it was as if he knew I had his back, and I couldn't betray his trust even when I saw him break others'. When he was fourteen, and I found the meth pipe in his room, it was too late for me to speak up. By then, my mother and I had learned to always keep our rooms locked or our things would be stolen for money. My brother had become a regular at the pawn shops in town, the employees shooting banter with him like he was an old family friend. At night, when I let my ruminating thoughts overwhelm me, I wonder if

anything would have changed if I spoke up sooner. If I had told my mom how bad the lies and stealing had gotten, would she have stepped up as a parent? I stopped playing what-ifs when years later I realized how many cards were stacked against us, and that low-income children like us were at a higher risk for disorders like depression or anxiety (Assari).

Perhaps that's why my mother and brother adapted to our new lives with ease. The unease we felt was our normal by then, a given. So, when a car burglary occurred on our block, the car owner saying she saw a black boy do it while her pale skin glowed under the moon, it wasn't a complete shock that the off-duty police neighbor knocked on our door. It was well past 2 a.m. and my brother had been where he was supposed to be for once the entire night; he had been in bed. My mother and her husband explained the same to the officer at the door; it did not sway him. I imagine his face was twisted in anger, his hand turning ever whiter as he clutched his baton and pushed past my mother and her husband. Since all the houses were modeled nearly the same, the officer wasted no time marching up the stairs even in the dark, opening the first bedroom, the one that happened to be my brother's. I heard my mother shouting and a muffled thump from the next room over.

“What the fuck?” I heard my brother cry out. He was six feet tall despite only being fifteen. His addiction and his skin color made his face appear more grown, but he reverted to a child in that single sentence. I didn’t waste any time throwing off my blankets. I didn’t have on a bonnet, my curly hair untamed, but I ignored the shame of my exposed hair as I threw open my door.

I expected to find my mother or her husband fighting with my brother, my muscle memory ready to protect him from another of my mother’s poorly chosen men, even if my brother was in the wrong. Instead, I saw our neighbor, dressed in nearly black pajamas that blended in with the shadows of the hall, a baton in a ghostly hand, dragging my brother down the hall by the back of his shirt collar. I froze. My brain did not know what to do with this uncharted scenario; there was no script or role for my brain to follow despite the several poor interactions with police we’ve had before. My brother had faced threats, shouting used as intimidation, and false arrests from police, but none had used physical force before then. At that point in my life, I knew it by pure luck. Every time my brother broke a crime, he danced with death, and I knew the ball would come to an end. But hundreds of people were not so lucky. In 2019, despite Black people only making

up 13% of the U.S. population, they accounted for 26% fatalities by police (Schwartz). Of that 26%, 36% were unarmed (Schwartz).

Pushing down the panic that my brother would become a part of those statistics tonight, I followed the officer pulling him several feet behind, walking on the sore tips of my toes. My mother was crying, yet her husband held her back. I could feel confusion, fear and disgust mixing like soured milk left out too long. Despite all the years of protest from my mother that she didn't know about the physical abuse my brother and I faced, and all the claims that she would make sure it never happened again, she stood there in the arms of her new husband, the sound of her sobs the only protest. She did not reach out to grab my brother as he was pulled right past her.

My brother was taller than me now, but he was still as thin as a stick with awkward long limbs. Those long limbs seemed to know exactly how to hold up his body as he was dragged. Or his fear made the choice for him. He didn't fight back. Instead, his legs rushed to keep him upright as the officer pulled him outside and to the street where the woman crying Black boy stood. My mother and her husband chose to stay back, their faces glowing white in the shadows, but I followed my brother outside. The pavement of our driveway was still warm from

earlier in the day. The officer either ignored me or didn't notice me. He hadn't even looked at my brother as he dragged him, his eyes were locked forward as if he were on a mission only he could see. Shame rolled in my gut as I was too much of a coward to interfere with an officer breaking the law, but I'd be damned if I left my brother alone.

When the officer met the robbed woman in the street, he presented my brother like a hunting prize. My brother was taller than the officer, but he hunched himself over, making it easier for the officer to keep his grip on his shirt. It occurred to me that I should have grabbed my phone before I left, so that I could record this. But I couldn't leave to get it now. The knot in my throat became painful as I waited, eyes glued to the back of the child I helped raise.

"Oh god, it's not him. I'm so sorry," the robbed woman cried, her tears already falling, as if she had been the one hit with a baton. "The man who broke into my car had braids." As if pulled by a string, we all looked at my brother's short, curly hair. Barely half an inch of growth. The officer made a sound as he sucked on his teeth.

"Sorry about that. Looks like there was some miscommunication," the officer said. He patted the back of my brother's neck, trying to smooth

out the stretch of his shirt. He didn't sound sorry, rather he sounded annoyed, like when my mother's husband accidentally spills his coffee on his overalls. Was assaulting for-once-innocent black boys in their homes an annoying job?

"That's okay," I lied. It was a habit. The officer didn't look startled, barely glancing my way, making me believe he knew I was there the whole time. I waved for my brother to come and held my arms wide open as he ran into them. He crushed me in a hug as he towered over me, but he felt small.

"You good?" The officer asked us. My brother didn't answer.

"We're good." I patted my brother's back and pulled him back home. The officer didn't say anything, as if he was confident we wouldn't make a fuss about this. I hate that he was right.

I lead my brother back to a house that does not feel like our home anymore, glancing back at the officer every few moments. He stands in the street with the woman, both of them watching us and lost in whispers. When I look at the threshold of our house, I see my mother and her husband mimicking the same. And still, my brother bolts from my arms to our waiting mother. I'm left frozen and feeling cold. My

brother danced with death, and once again the performance continues. Eventually, the curtains will close, and I wonder if it will be from his old age or at the end of a police officer's Glock.

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My Grandparents' Cabin, Long Ago

By Aurora Monthony

My grandparents' cabin was always called thus, but "cabin" was a generous term. "Trailer of microscopic degree" might have been more appropriate. For just the two people which owned it, the size was okay, but when my parents, siblings, and I came up, too, the seven of us scarcely had room to breathe.

There was only one real bedroom, which my grandparents occupied. Now, by "bedroom," I really meant *bed* room. The bed took up ninety percent of the entire area, with one small path on each side to get in and around it. Their puffy comforter was almost always folded down to the end of the mattress, leaving just one velvety blue blanket pulled up to the pillows and a fake brown bear rug in the middle of it to greet us when we walked in. The bear was more of a stuffed animal, really, and not scary at all. I used to lay on it and press my face and hands into its soft fur.

My grandfather's cowboy hats hung on the wall at the end of the room, next to the thin blue curtain "door" which blocked it off from the rest of the place. Pushing aside the curtain led to a tiny hallway, just a few feet long. It was so narrow that, even at eight years

old, I could lay both palms flat against each thin wall. On one side of the hallway was a closet that was almost always shut, stuffed with jackets and clothing and whatever else would fit in it. On the other side was the bathroom, which also had just enough room to turn around. It had a sink with a plastic cup full of toothbrushes on it, a little cabinet behind the mirror I had to stand on tip-toes to see, a toilet that only flushed if the water was working (which was rare), and a tiny shower which held buckets of stored water to wash and use. If someone else had to use the bathroom, there was only one option—the outhouse. Wooden and full of spiderwebs, it smelled like moth balls and pee. The seat hole was quite wide, too, and I feared falling in if I didn't hold on to something. I worried, too, about the eyes that gleamed at me from the dark, even if they were only deer and squirrels.

The other end of the hallway led to the other room, which was split into living room, kitchen, and dining room all at once. Directly beyond the hallway was the couch, which had firm cushions and firmer springs, and an abundance of stitched loon pillows piled into each corner. The window above it was always smudged by the handprints of my little brother and sister. The couch folded out to be a bed, which was where my parents slept—poorly, according to my dad, who always complained that it hurt his back.

I, forced to sleep ten feet away, complained that he snored too loud. All of us kids were stuffed into one area nearby, and therefore, had front-row seats to my father's nightly sawing of logs. Other than that, I loved where I slept: the "table-bed," which really was cooler than it sounded. The table part lowered down to lay flat against the seats, and the cushions from those were put on top to make a makeshift mattress. I had to make sure I laid down carefully, so I didn't smack my head on the greenish beige countertop behind it. I woke up every morning to my grandma coming in to make breakfast, or, occasionally, to the sun beaming directly in my eyes if I failed to properly adjust the finicky curtain over the window beside me.

My brother slept beside me on the floor, wedged in between the refrigerator and the table-bed. The cushion he slept on belonged to a lounge chair outside. My sister slept in front of the couch on a different cushion. In the beginning, she slept in a stiff, meshy blue playpen, but once she grew out of it, she was relegated to the floor as well. To one side of where she slept was a tiny tv, which was staticky and only able to play a few channels, on a good day. On rainy days, we'd fill up the trailer with the smell of microwaved popcorn, extra buttery, and crowd around to watch WordGirl.

There was no room to walk around each other, especially when the couch was folded out and my siblings were spread out on the floor, so we only stayed inside when we had no alternative. The rest of the time, we were outside—us kids were playing in the mountain of sand on the crinkly blue tarp, running through the ankle-tickling grass and around the fire pit, or lugging our black sand toys bucket, which lived in the musty old shed, down to the “beach,” which was also generously named. A small pile of sand carved out of the dirt, extending into the lake. We’d put our swimsuits on and grab the rubbery black tubes from their stack, then paddle through the slimy weeds and muck. We’d dump out all the sand toys and fill the black bucket up with water, then catch frogs to put in it.

We’d pull them from the edges of the long sawgrass near the water, which cut our fingers if we grabbed it wrong, and snatch them from the lily pads they hid beneath, thinking themselves invisible. And sometimes, from the grass, we’d corner the rare leopard frogs, with their spotted coloring and super speed. I was the only one fast enough to grab them, unless my brother had a net. All were put into the bucket, where they’d float like flotsam on the surface and watch us warily until we’d caught so many they began to climb on top of one another and try to make their escape. Then we’d let them go again,

dumping the whole pile into the shallow water and watching them all flow out.

Other times, we'd catch minnows. We'd take the smaller, white buckets meant for scooping sand, dig them down into the lake floor, and wait for the silvery minnows to get curious enough to check them out. We'd stand there until, eventually, one would swim into the bucket, and we'd yank it up, victorious, water sloshing over the edges. Either that or we'd give up; my sister would get bored and lose concentration, or my brother would get hungry, or I'd have to stand up, back aching from poor posture or scalded from baking in the hot sun, and, inevitably, send the minnows scattering like leaves in the wind.

When we had to eat, we'd sit at the table outside, beneath the shade of a gazebo, zipped in under the mesh meant to keep mosquitoes out. They'd buzz at the flaps, smelling our scents and licking their tiny mosquito lips, unable to find a way in. It didn't stop the spiders, who skittered across the brick floor and caused us to draw up our bare feet onto the benches. It didn't stop the moths, either, who built fuzzy white cocoons in the corners. We'd wash our feet off in the plastic pink foot-washing bucket and crowd in at the table, getting splinters in our butts, and devour our lunch: hot dogs in doughy buns slathered

with too much ketchup, Cheetos that stained our fingers orange, shiny grapes which looked sweet but too often were sour, apple juice in little boxes sucked obnoxiously through tiny straws. When the adults ate with us, we barely fit on the benches all together, and we had to space out who sat where (so the table didn't tip and take us all down with it).

Sometimes we sat around the campfire and cooked s'mores. I made my brother or mother make them for me, because I didn't like how hot the fire was on my face. Still, it was risky business, because my brother liked to charcoal brick-etted his marshmallows and I did not enjoy the taste of char. More often than not, even when making one for me, he'd stick it too close to the flame, turning the whole thing into a smoldering blaze. Sometimes I thought he did it on purpose so that he could have another marshmallow, knowing I wouldn't want to eat it like that.

When we had to go inside at night, under the twinkling stars and chased by hordes of mosquitoes, we'd pile into bed and wake up the next morning itching like we'd bathed in poison ivy. My grandma would take her handmade white paste from the bathroom, secure inside its yellow pill-bottle container, and lather it on our arms to relieve the pain and the urge to scratch off several layers of skin. It

smelled slightly minty when she unscrewed the cap, and it was cool and smooth on the skin where she smeared it like paint.

That was a long time ago, now. The old trailer was taken away years ago, and a replacement cabin was built which actually deserved the title. One *bed* room grew to three bed *rooms*, plus an actual kitchen and living room. The tv was upgraded, too, and placed on the wall like a proper thing, with more than three channels and twelve pixels available to use. The pile of sand was disposed of, poured into the “beach,” which somehow remained just as ragged as always. The inner tubes flaked away and were thrown out, and we stopped wading through the muck. The gazebo was torn down along with the trailer, and we got used to eating meals indoors or on the porch. The outhouse, long unused with the addition of always-running water and two bathrooms, became nothing but a home to spiders, and sometimes, wasps.

We never stopped catching the occasional frog or minnow (a skill we became far more adept at with nets and patience), and the sand toys bucket never stopped holding them. The campfire, too, remained, and though I finally started to cook my own marshmallows, sometimes when I didn’t feel like being eaten alive by trillions of mosquitoes, I’d still ask my mother or brother to make them for me. At least, though

his preference still was blackening his marshmallows to lumps of char, my brother had learned how not to burn them to a crisp accidentally.

Although the convenience of the house; the beds with real mattresses and frames, the living room big enough to spread out in, the kitchen with a proper oven and countertops, was a nice upgrade, how could I ever forget sleeping contorted into a pretzel on the table-bed, tripping over my brother if I had to get up to pee in the middle of the night, and trying not to die of heatstroke when the doors had to be closed with all of us trapped inside? My childhood was nestled in those trailer walls, woven in between the blankets and loons, and buried with us in the sand. It was slipped between the cracks of blinding sunlight into my eyes, packed with us onto the benches, and wiped onto our skin with every swipe of anti-itch cream. It was there, and then, and no amount of comfier couches or indoor plumbing could ever change that.

Living History

By Tyler Weeks

My brother and I squirmed in our seats at lunch, picking through sour cream and onion potato chips to figure out which of us boasted the largest. Soon, the plate clock hanging on the dining room wall would tick over into free time, signaling the start of our afternoon freedom. Though our mother had commanded us to behave, no warnings could have possibly quenched the thirst for our coming adventures. Like a jack-in-the-box leaping from its cell, we put on our adventuring hats and raced outside, attacking the piercing sun with our smiles. Though our backyard had served me well for the eight years of my life, we had another place on our minds that would top any bland day of play: the creek. Reaching this haven of crisp, clean air was no easy feat, but the journey only added to our love for it.

“Come on,” my brother urged from the edge of our property, sliding between two corn stalks and into the sea of green. “If we go right now, we could make it to the second rock pile.”

My eyes lit up almost as brightly as the sun cooking our tanned skin. We had only ever reached this fated checkpoint with our grandma, when the crops were not nearly as tall. An expedition this

deep into the summer seemed risky. “I don’t know... we’d have to go fast.”

“There’s nothing too hard for Jake and Ty’s adventures,” he replied. I thought back to all the different episodes of this imaginary show of ours, each pointing to a different outing.

“Why am I always said after you?” I complained, engulfing myself into the corn stalks.

“Think about it—it just wouldn’t work. Try saying Ty and Jake’s adventures.”

I did, quickly realizing how poorly it rolled off the tongue. Never willing to admit this, we pushed on in silence. “Whatever. Let’s just get to our base.”

We could not simply plant our feet in the squelching mud of the creek, though; a nearly endless supply of corn stood between us. Depending on the season, I viewed this maze of agriculture less as protection to our stronghold and more of a disadvantage. Had we decided to go before these stalks towered over us, I had to serve as a lookout to confirm our secrecy. Calling ourselves international criminals was a slight stretch, but the last thing the farmers next door wanted to see were two mischief-makers using their crops as a playground. Yet not even John Deere tractors with tires taller than us

both would scare us away. Self-proclaimed survivalists with “decades of experience” under their belts are hardly bothered by a bit of corn.

“Bear Grylls here, back at it again with another video,” my brother imitated in his best British accent, not half bad for eleven years old. His spiky brown hair was not quite up to par with the survivalist’s, but it was enough to fool me. “We’re here deep in the Amazon jungle.”

“Aye, mate,” I replied in a horrific Australian accent. “Keep your eyes peeled for vipers.”

Who we were putting on this show for and to what cameras, I had no idea. Not even the corn stalks we trekked through could have reached as far as our imagination. Our creek-turned drainage ditch took on a variety of forms—the naval base for the next world war, a classified spy hideout, a major trade route. In every scenario, the only cure to the blinding sun rays overhead was the creek’s life-saving water. Using Marco Polo as direction, we bulldozed our way through the jungle of agriculture, feeling the scratchy stalks and leaves against our arms. They felt harmless in the moment, but our skin would later burn and require the soothing aloe grown by our mother. Right now, our only goal was navigating to the land bridge connecting both sides of

this creek. The gentle trickle of a culvert announced our proximity, giving us a ladder to scale the miniature hill down to its waters.

“Looks like there’s no easy way down,” my brother said, his eyes avoiding the obvious path our feet had trekked down many times before. “We’ll have to use the vines.”

“No biggie,” I spoke in a continued Aussie accent, gripping some durable tallgrass as a belay. “I didn’t climb Mount Everest for nothing.”

To provide a break from the summer’s heat, we camped out in the grooved tunnel near this descent, backs pressed against the cold, sloped curve of steel. Getting up too quickly caused a similar throbbing in our heads to a hasty rise in the morning. Now equipped with a pair of headaches, we had even more reason to navigate these waters slowly. With a mission to explore more of the area, the two of us gingerly stepped into the shallow stream and began our trek. To avoid the chores or reduced free time our parents would punish us with at the sight of our completely soaked pants, navigation was of utmost concern. Rocks and gravel gave enough leverage to advance up the shimmering stream and avoid algae and other mystery goop. Had we the brain cells to bring boots, the two of us might have noticed the water level creeping close to our rolled-up jeans.

“Stop,” my brother blurted, holding up the same fist signal used by the military. I immediately halted, suppressing a yelp at the object digging into my big toe. “That right there,” he said, curling his dirt-stained finger out to an obscurely shaped stone, “is a piranha. The teeth of a dragon, them things. Had one bite big toe off back in ‘Nam.”

I suddenly became more aware of the rock beneath my own foot, half afraid I had mistaken it for a chomper. “Wait a minute,” I quizzed. “How’d it grow back, then?”

Oblivious to this question and the water’s pull, we waded past walls of thick grass, whose scratchy contents provided further protection from the elements and looming corn stalks. The subtle trickle of water leaking out of the culvert would fade, leaving us with our lackluster depth perception and navigational skills. Using landmarks, it became much easier to track our progress to the rock pile that would end this episode of Jake and Ty’s adventures. The charred stump of an oak tree, a massive rock used for mermaid perching, the occasional pipe spilling water into the creek—all these markers helped guide us through the jungle of our Minnesota landscape. When paired with the corn, oak trees looming tall above us provided refuge from the sun. Equipped only with each other’s company and the occasional

algae or plant that slipped through our toes, we pressed on, smiling all the way. Where plants survived, the two of us thrived.

Yet now, as I sit outside gazing at this creek in my junior year of high school, something has changed. I am now eight years older. My brother has graduated and works a full-time job. I've moved from imagining world wars and naval bases to writing about them. And though the creek has held steady in terms of water level, the field's towering corn stalks no longer protect us from the threats of prudent farmers. It wasn't the crop type that removed the magic of our childhood adventures. Though the culvert still pumps out water, the bathing rock stands its ground, and the memories remain, the realization that so much of this water is runoff seems to taint my mind just as much as the creek. The abundance of pesticides used in the crops turned this once thriving place for plants and life into something not even rambunctious eight-year-olds wanted to wade through.

Whether from natural causes, environmental degradation, my faded childhood, or all three, the allure of the creek has left. The once-towering oak trees of protection and shade are now stumps, their rings being whispers of their former glory. Exploring so much of the creek may have naturally lessened its mystery and wonder over time, but more was happening. The place that originally served as our dedicated

swimming spot now has a prismatic tint of oil, its film of colors distorting the surface. Throwing in a rock causes concentric ripples of color to dissipate through quite like our desires to visit there. Though the core elements remain—the trickling water, rocks that carved into our calloused feet, and unmown grass—it has lost something that no amount of agriculture will restore.

Thus, I turned back to something I knew to be constant and pure: imagination. If less than a decade's time had proved so significant, what might it have looked like twenty, even thirty years ago? Was the rotted stump sprawled out in an oak tree of incredible magnitude, mirroring those of the Amazon before sunlight-hungry farmers maximized their crop production? Did the water level meet the crops, serving as a naval base for corn and soybeans? Most of all, did life beyond that of two adventurous youths thrive here, or was the joy squeezed dry, fading out like the trickle of a culvert until nothing but the echo of childhood memories remained? Setting these questions aside, I grabbed my keys and sped into town, the car's emissions invisibly spilling into the air like the runoff of a choked-out drainage ditch.

Your Father's Face

By Victoria L. Allen

You're starting to forget your father's face. You're starting to forget his paprika, salt, and pepper goatee. You're starting to forget how bright his blue eyes are. You still keep the picture strip, dingy and crinkled, under your pillow next to the book that he asked you to read, and you pray every night that he will make it home safely.

When he left you remember thinking that he was going to come home the next morning and you would find him sitting at the coffee table with his blue translucent navy mug, the kitchen smelling like bitter coffee as he listens to the news on the radio. But that never happened. You woke up and went downstairs and he was not there. The shower was not running, the radio was shut off, and the garage was still void of the blue Durango that once sat there ready for any trip that he might take you on.

The house was still before your mother came from her room then all at once it was busy. All at once the other two kids came downstairs and the kitchen was bustling with life and pancakes and the sweet smell of warmed corn syrup and powdered sugar. It all felt okay

then. Now you sit in your bedroom, dreading the next day of school and writing another letter to your father that will be added to the stack in the back of your closet. It will begin to smell musty like the others and the paper will begin to yellow. The ink will leak from its position as you cry over the letters before returning them to where they hide. Another night goes by and another letter is written, another tear shed, and another shred of hope lost.

You make the trek to the kitchen for a glass of water from the leaking faucet only to find your mother sitting at the kitchen table with a photo album resting against the orange wood in front of her. You see her quickly wipe away her tears as you round the corner with silent footsteps and grab a glass. “What’s wrong?” you ask.

She only responds with “I miss your father, is all. Why are you awake?” You raise your empty chipped glass in response. She gives a nod of acknowledgement before letting a stretch of silence pass over you.

The smells of grilled cheese wafts from the seared pan you used to make dinner that night. You remember your father teaching you how to make it and adding an extra slice of cheese into the sandwich for you while your siblings weren’t looking. You remember the way he

lifted you to sit on the counter while he warmed the tomato soup and asked you what you wanted for dessert: pudding or Jello. The smile that would light up his face when you answered pudding, just like you always did, made the kitchen look dim in its current state.

Your mother asks, “Would you like to see some pictures from when we were younger?” and you sit down to look with her as her fingers adorned with nails that have been gnawed on, page over the pictures. You don’t look at your mother in these pictures, only your father as you watch him age more and more. You don’t hear your mother’s words as she explains the details of the pictures. You can only imagine your father as a young person without a worry to burden him. Your mother assures you that he will be coming home, we just don’t know when yet. We don’t know when. We haven’t known when. We don’t know if he will come home, but we can hope.

You wait for passing weeks, then months. You imagine a big entrance with everyone welcoming your father home as he beams his bright smile at you and picks you up for an embrace. You are cleaning the living room, bringing the pillows that you slept on the night before from the leather couch to your neglected bedroom. Your mother yells to you saying that you forgot something and you obediently follow the

stairs back down. From the living room you look for your mother, calling out to her because the living room is spotless now. She answers from the front of the house, and you follow the chime of her voice. As you turn the corner with soundless steps you find a man in a uniform.

He has a beard now but it is still paprika, salt, and pepper. You feel as though you are dreaming again but all at once he speaks “Are you making a mess again?” and the air is sucked from your lungs as barbed wire restricts your throat, not allowing you to get out the sarcastic words that you want to say back. Your eyes sting with the threat of tears as you take in your father’s appearance. His cover is now removed revealing his short hair standing messy in the dawning light, the way that he stands with a slouch, and the pink scar across his forehead.

You want to run to his arms, but your legs won’t move. He watches you with his own tears pricking at the outer corner of his bright blue eyes. He crouches down and gives you that trademark smile as he opens his arms for you. Finally, your legs oblige and rush you forward as you throw yourself into his arms. He smells of oil and sandalwood just like always and his arms are strong around you. Your tears turn the light blue of his shirt to a darker shade, and your sobs are

loud enough in your own ears that you expect the neighbors to complain, but it never comes. You rest in your father's arms as he picks you up and takes you to the living room where your siblings wait with knowing smiles on their lips.

That night you make your fathers favorite meal; mac and cheese with cut up hot dogs and too much pepper. He tells you stories, but only the good ones you will later find out, as he shows you pictures that he developed of beautiful landscapes and plenty of the ocean. You add them to the collection of pictures that you keep under your pillow just in case he is ever called to serve again. Just in case you start to forget his face again.

Shattered Glass

By Isabel Baumgart

I feel torn in much more than two. My body splits like shattered glass as I struggle to show who I am. The flesh and bones that resemble what I call myself have betrayed me. I don't know how to show my people who I want to be. Friends and family can only know so much, and they will never know me completely. Somebody who is always happy and kind, that's who I want to be. Somebody who never shows the emotions rising in her although they feel like the bubbles foaming in a cold glass of soda. They know that I am not perfect, but they can't see the full concrete rubble that is me. How can I show the people that I care for that I need help but never their sympathy? If I cause my friends to worry for me, then how am I any better than the worst of us?

My grandma was diagnosed with anxiety when she was sixteen. My mom wasn't diagnosed until she was twenty-seven. I was diagnosed when I was nine. We have our own winding journeys that twist and turn in many painful and glorious ways, but too many things have been repeated over generations. And too many things have been lost from the past.

On the outside I am sunshine. My mom and grandma are too. My clothes are scattered in all colors of the rainbow, twisting, twirling, on the canvas of cheap cloth and garage sale finds. I put on my brightest smile and complain about the menial problems of teenage life. I hug my friends as tight as I can when they aren't doing well, and I listen, really listen, when the people around me talk. I wear colorful clothes so people remember who I am. Remember that I am here for them. Remember that I am here. If I don't stand out with the clothes that are loosely draped across my frame, how will I be separated from the colorless blob of humans that surrounds me at school? I can't let that be it.

My mom instead hid away, pushed herself inside. She was quiet, not knowing what the world would think if she brought her true side out. She hid in flannels and jeans. She hid her feelings away, not wanting to stand out in her blob of humans at school. My mom told me, "I was definitely the listener in high school." She was able to make her friends feel cared for.

My grandma followed a similar path, pushing down her own emotions to spare others. As a teenager she did her best to stray from her comfort zone and try new things. She noticed things and to this

day she still remembers things from so long ago. “It must have been senior year. I had this close friend and she decided she was going to join the popular group... I remember the day when she didn’t sit down with our group.” Unfortunately, at the time she was raised, having any mental illnesses was stigmatized and thought to be wrong. As she grew older she realized she needed help but didn’t get real help until she had reached sixty.

I have done my best to make what I have my own. My body is not something that I can control, but it is a part of me. Weight doesn’t matter. Size doesn’t matter. What matters are the things that make me, me. My brain matters. My hands matter. I work hard in school, absorbing the information I learn so that people will judge me for my brain, not for what my body looks like. I use my hands to type, to write, to sew, to crochet, to play my instrument because I want to be known for my skills, not for the weight of my body. My hands slip across the page as I write this, not perfectly, but with the confidence of someone who writes so much that even though I make plenty of mistakes, I refuse to let my hands sit still.

My body has never been perfect; I get sick often and I’m a little shorter and a little heavier than most girls my age, but I refuse to be

held down by those things because those aren't the things that make me, me. Because my body is not me.

When my mom was young her classmates teased her for being skinny, though as she approached high school, she began to worry about the changes in her body. When my mother tells me this, I picture a pack of teenagers growling and pawing, gearing up to attack. Kids are cruel and hateful. My grandma told me, "I didn't like when people were put down... I didn't like when people picked on people." I only wish that they had each other growing up, as I have both of them now.

When I hear my mom and grandma talk about their childhood anxiety I feel frozen in awe. How much have things really changed? My grandma was told that anxiety was a bad thing, my mom didn't know that what she had was anxiety, and even my natural reaction is to push down my feelings in front of others. As the three of us grow and change we have been finding ways of expression, though all of us share the joy of writing. The ability to spread the joys of life, leaping thoughts across the blank page as if spreading ashes across freshly fallen snow.

Over our generations—and starting earlier too—we somehow have managed to keep these traits. Traits like kindness, empathy, and understanding; but also traits like anxiety, fear, and perfectionism. These patterns appear over and over again in my family, spreading across the canvas of my family tree just as the bright colors spread across my own clothes.

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