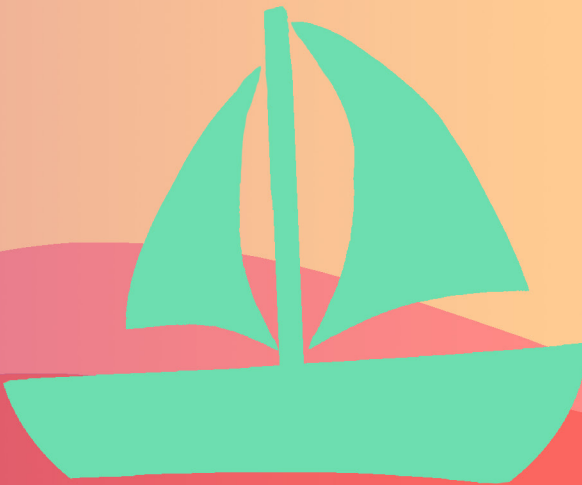


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**The  
Rapid's Review**

**2018**









# The Rapids Review

A Literary Arts Magazine

A publication of the Anoka Ramsey Community College's Creative  
Writing Club.

## Senior Editors

Gabriel Tronson

Carissa More

## Editors

Ashley Holman

Bailey Kvarnlov

Casey Jones

Matt Young

Michelle Arnold

Sarah Cook

Sarah Ganion

Taelynn Wade

Teaona Wade

## Advisor

Jasmin Ziegler



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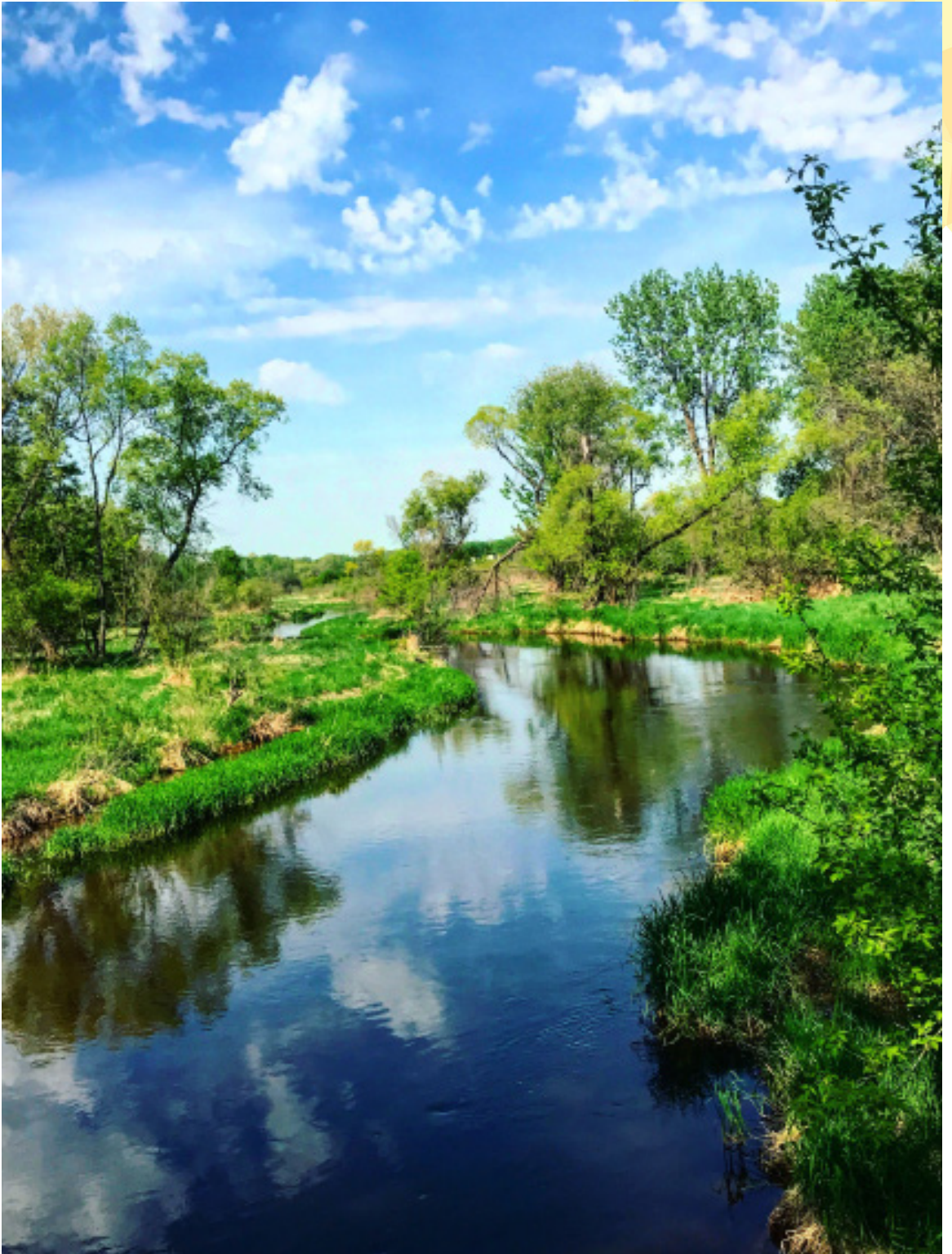
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# Fall Uncertainty

They didn't seem shaken  
as the knife stabbed through the thick  
skin again an `d again.

They didn't seem shaken  
as the insides of the once whole being  
came oozing from the many cuts.

They didn't seem shaken  
as the once pure and perfect being  
was turned into a horrifying display.

They didn't seem shaken  
as people walked by admiring the craft  
of the brutality they had just witnessed.

They didn't seem shaken  
because after all, the carving of pumpkins  
was just in the Halloween spirit.



The sun was beginning to lower behind the horizon as Thomas paced back and forth through the laundromat parking lot while the wet slush began to seep through his sneakers with each step. It was difficult to notice behind the gray covering the sky and the layers of tainted clouds pouring out of the large industrial buildings surrounding him, but the sky grew darker still for those who noticed it. The air was nearly as spoiled as it was higher in the atmosphere where the polluted smoke drifted off to. Thomas looked up and thought about breathing in the pure air of Montana he so distinctly remembers even years later after the one family vacation they ever took. He imagined the natural rain smell, and the pollen on each flower walking through the wooded paths. It was sweeter than anything he had ever smelt; he couldn't even imagine a better aroma. Smoke wafted into his nostrils, ending his reminiscent fantasy instantly. He took a couple more drags quickly and then threw the half-smoked cigarette into a snow bank; the gust of wind was too bitter against his bare neck to finish it.

Without a doubt, he failed to remember the obnoxious snap of the broken door on his old Honda as he reached for the handle. Thomas thought without a doubt that Charlie and Clementine would be startled awake by his carelessness, but they still laid fast asleep in the back seat. He too was tired; no one had gotten much sleep the night before.

Their father was in town again after spending time on the road, coming and going as usual. Thomas Sr. was the gasoline spreading the already burning flames of chaos throughout their family. Mom was just the same, but spent most of her time at the local bar rather than in a moving truck. *No wonder they are 2 peas in a pod, booze and neglecting your children*, Thomas thought as he slipped the key in the ignition and the engine turned over uneasily to get some more heat in the car. It wasn't even 8am before their father had fallen and shattered the glass coffee table and threw a box of instant pancakes at his mother. Thomas's wallet had accidentally been left behind in an effort to get the kids out of the house quickly. Whatever money was in there was surely gone by now; their father was a greedy bastard when he was drinking.

He sat lonely in his car and thought about the time his father took Clem and Charlie to their Aunt Carol's and slid off the road into a tree. He told everyone he hit a patch of black ice- absolutely impossible to tell it was there- but she later told Thomas that his breath was stained with whiskey when he brought the kids to her doorstep later that night. They walked 2 miles and Clem had a broken arm, but their dad refused the hospital knowing the consequences of his actions; you can't get drunk in prison. Thomas taught himself how to drive after that, barely past his 13th birthday. He read a few books about hardwiring and managed to steal a junker a couple months after that when they were staying at their Uncle Donnie's out in West Virginia.

Thomas's wandering thoughts dwindled away as Clem let out a soft moan and stretched her mouth open. Her hairs were sticking straight up out of the tiny Goosebumps covering her exposed skin. Thomas reached over his back and pulled off his damp sweatshirt. He draped it over her, lifting her small legs to tuck it under. Her blonde strands of hair lay in the middle of her lips, moving with each small breath. Charlie- not quite of a graceful sleeper as his twin- slept deeply as if he were in a coma; his head was slouched down nearly to his chest, almost drooling onto his stained blue jeans. His lip peeled back naturally for a moment, for he cherished them so immensely. He couldn't fathom the fact that someone could abandon them and their best interests. Thomas fixed Clem's hair over her ear and adjusted Charlie's head back against the window before he sputtered out of the parking lot.

As he drove aimless through the abandoned streets, a nervous panic began to grow inside him that was far more uncomfortable than the continuous pains of what felt like his stomach eating itself from the inside out. Thomas scrunched his running nose as his stomach let out a rumble almost more powerful than the locomotive moving parallel to them. He looked for a busy corner to stand on, but shied away from the idea feeling embarrassed at the very thought of the humiliation.

*Quit being a pussy, they are so hungry it's been almost 24 hours!* He shook his head back and forth as a canine; hoping an idea would magically wash over him.

The train pulled away faster as he slid his car to a stop at another red light. The bitter air blew through the holes in his t-shirt as he accelerated past the intersection, but the anxiety blanketed his physical stresses and replaced them with far worse ones. The flickering street light outside of the inner-city community college caught

his brief attention in his peripheral. Half the school yard was a mound of black dirt, seemingly strange, but he continued forward and noticed a construction site with giant machinery and enough equipment to build a second school.

Thomas's interests grew as he noticed the plentiful amount of metal over the other side of the wired gate. He continued driving, pushing his foot harder on the accelerator as he sat higher in his seat to get a better look. There were stacks of iron bars and steel rods, but nothing that could easily fit in his backpack. Thomas didn't notice himself swerving slightly over the yellow line around a bend, and sat quickly to his seat, almost missing a shiny copper batch of coils sitting in the back corner of the yard. *No way, holy shit!* Thomas knew that copper was basically untraceable and worth a pretty penny at the junkyard. He let his foot off the gas and tried to avoid at all costs that thought again- a useless attempt. He looked up to the stars and prayed for forgiveness as he turned the block to remove them from anywhere out of site. Thomas turned down his headlights as he pulled up to a curb in front of a small vacant building. In moments, his shivering quickly reverted into sweating as he turned back to make sure the kids were completely unconscious. Attempting to not dwell on the sin he was about to commit, he took a few deep breaths and opened the door before he had time to talk himself out of it. The door snapped again, slightly agitating Clementine, but she only wiggled her head and continued to snore on. Thomas still consciously closed the door ever so slowly. He grabbed a hooded sweatshirt and his dark navy backpack out of the trunk, sparked up a match to light another smoke, and casually began heading back around the block.

His shoes submerged in the snow again as he crossed back over Oakdale St., and quickly to the side of the building. Now in the shadows, he peeked his eyes up quickly searching for cameras, spotting 2 that faced toward the doors of the 2 inner sides of the building that made a 90-degree angle. His breath was unsteady, and his heart raced as did his adrenaline. Although the situation was familiar, panic rushed through him every single time. Quickly he dashed out of the shadow on the building and across the dirt yard behind the large green dumpster. His senses heightened, he noticed he only had a few moments before a car would soon pass as it turned down the street 3 blocks north. Thomas focused and quickly studied the copper coils. There was a large abundance of thick wiring; the good kind that was worth \$2.50 instead of

\$1.00. He switched his backpack forward, unzipped the 2 pockets and ran the 15 feet to the wire and began stuffing as much as possible into his bag. The headlights were approaching, and he laid flat in the snow behind a steel beam until the sloshing of the car faded to silence again. He filled the rest of his bag until it could just barely zip then turned back and ran as fast as he could. His clothes were soaked and his hands bloody from handling all the wiring so carelessly. His bag was overfilled, making a casual walk back to the car impossible. He ran along the buildings' shadows as a hare would from a prowling timber wolf, praying with each forceful step to not to be seen by anyone. The door yanked open, which initiated the horrendous crank once again as he threw himself inside. It was late by now and the kids were rocks by this point. Fuckin damn right! Thomas thought as he laughed in amazement breathing so heavily and soaked in dirty snow.

“What can I get for you sir?” The waitress said as the rising sun through the diner window blinded Thomas's exhausted eyes when he tried to look at the young bubbly girl. Thomas sighed out of relief as he smiled at his siblings.

“Yeah, I'll take the All-American Feast, extra bacon, and extra cheese on the hash browns, a couple slices of toast and a large coffee. The kids will have them same with some pancakes.”

“Um, that's a lot sir, are you sure?” She looked at Thomas as if she misheard him.

“Oh, we're sure, but minus the coffee, they don't need that.”

# Opulent Love

Sandya Maraj

I wanted to hold her between blue silk.  
I wanted to show her the luxury mere green paper could buy.  
In my arms, covered in the finest fabric,  
I wanted to hold her.

I wanted to taste expensive wine, but only from her lips.  
I wanted to show her the whole world, twice over.  
On cold, wintery nights,  
I wanted to hold her close to me.

I wanted her to bask in happiness,  
happiness that I'd bought for her.  
Her sweet lips, painted a plum color,  
tempted me into the late nights.

She made me feel like the most expensive man.  
She was the treasure under the X,  
and I was the lucky finder.

Little did I know, that all she needed was me.  
All she wanted was me.  
No expensive silk, no expensive wine, just me.  
The most expensive man, in her world.  
The most expensive woman, in mine.



# The Wild Ones They Saw

Sarah Cook

Dry grains of dirt permeated the air as I entered the wooden den box with the three wolves. Peggy, the founder of the Wildlife Science Center, crouched calmly in the corner; it was just another day for her. Her eyes flicker to me only for a moment as I entered, but quickly returned to the three still forms of the wolves that lay against the farthest wall of the box. I stared at the petrified wolves, a bubble of pure energy expanding in my chest. Outside, I could hear the distorted mumbles of the bustling science center members as well as the dull gossip of my classmates.

The voices began to fade, and the knot of nerves that had caused my chest to throb painfully, relaxed. The nervous energy that leaked into my veins did not make me feel afraid, rather, it made me wary, yet hyper-focused to a point that I felt like a primitive version of myself. “Ready?” one of the workers called in to us. Peggy looked at me again with the same searching gaze, assessing whether I was going to become a burden or an asset to her. Her words echoed in my ears: *“You need to be able to read yourself,” she instructed our class, her eyes slicing through the room in a single glance, “Don’t put yourself in a position where you will lose your nerve. If you do, then you not only put yourself at risk, but everyone else as well. Including the animal.”*

I steeled myself.

The syringe pole was slipped into the mouth of the den box needle-first. I grabbed the base of the pole confidently, taking care to keep the end away from myself and Peggy. There was a cacophony of shuffling feet outside as the science center members got the canvas blanket ready, the one we would place my team’s wolf on once it was fully anesthetized.

The injection went off without a hitch. My team’s wolf was so terrified and rigid that it didn’t even flinch from the injection. It just lay there, staring at the wall of the den box. The syringe pole was taken, and Peggy and I hunkered down for the time being. In the lull before we extracted the wolf, I watched the wolves with intense curiosity. “Isn’t it fascinating?” Peggy whispered eagerly.

I was beyond fascinated. The ancient stories of their ancestors were being told by their body language right before my eyes. The smaller pack sizes the three Minnesota wolves had grown up in were the same pack dynamics L. David Mech studied. Amid the harsh winters, L. David Mech tracked wild Minnesota wolves. The very same tucked tail, flattened ears, dilated pupils, ducked head, bared teeth, and crouched posture that I was seeing in the three wolves, were the same behaviors that were displayed in front of him some thirty years ago. I was no longer in the den box. I was out in the harsh conditions of northern Minnesota with nothing more than a radio tracker and the subtle tracks of a wolf pack to guide me. I eventually found my wolf, terrified with one of its front paws caught in a foot trap.

Its thick, glistening saliva coated the chain that shackled it to the ground. Puffs of condensed clouds, as white as freshly fallen snow, formed on its jet-black lips. The warm smell of the white pines, the soft feeling of the wolf's pelt, the burning cold of the metal syringe – it all felt so real. It wasn't until I heard the scuffing of Peggy's boots on the floor that I snapped out of my trance.

The eyes of the wolf I had been staring at were locked on the wall of the box, its jet-black lips slightly pulled back in fear. The eyes of my team's wolf were beginning to cloud over as the ketamine drug began to take effect. I watched the ears of the wolf twitch occasionally, but it was clear it was only a reflex rather than a voluntary movement.

The drug had taken effect.

I was told to leave the den, so they could get the wolf out. My mind was still clouded with the bitter cold of northern Minnesota and the feeling of the wild wolf's warm fur between my fingers. I walked to the outer edge of the ring of people to gather my thoughts and feelings. My heightened senses faded until they were back to normal, and the intense sense of curiosity that had filled my chest relaxed.

It was a drug, a high that no man-made counterfeit could replicate. In that den, I got a taste of something wild that only the most courageous of biologists have seen in the wild. Perhaps that's where they all met their humble beginnings: in a stroke of fate that gave them the opportunity to observe a fascinating creature. Maybe not wolves, but some sort of beast that they had only seen in picture books and diluted science books. Perhaps this would be where I would find my beginning.

# Purpose

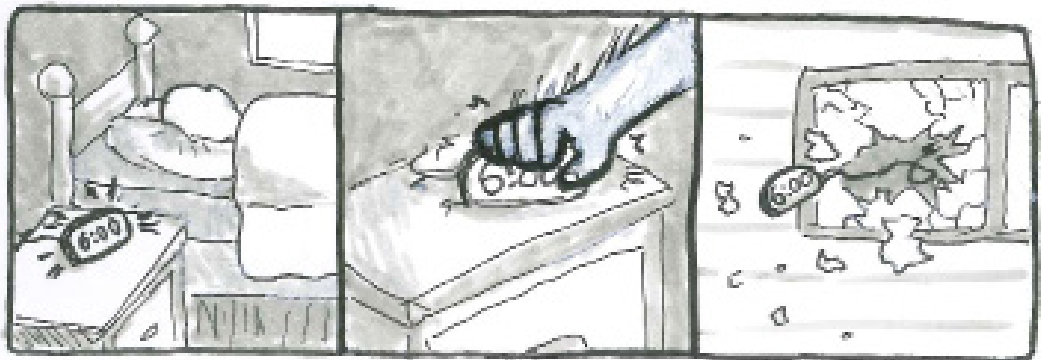
Rachelle Noding

I'm not allowed to obsess over the tiny chips and cracks in our tableware anymore, nor the fading patterns on my plates. I find that the lukewarm, dirty dishwater resembles my bubble bath. Under the water, my skin, invisible. I can't see the chips and cracks that come from the rough ware of its daily use.

Old chinaware sits in the glass case in my living room. Perfect condition, spotless porcelain. Displayed for any guest that comes through the front door. Not used, nor does it serve a purpose, besides turning the eyes of friends come and gone.

Ancient artifacts are placed in museums to remind us of the past. "Do not touch" my mother scolds. How are we supposed to know the past, if nothing is left behind? Look closely at the fading relics, see cracks on a urn or the wrinkles around my mother's eyes. They all have a story to tell.

# Life OF AN Introvert



# Breed Means Nothing

Ashley Holman

I am the proud owner of two lab mixes. My dogs are my life and nothing can ever change that. Chance is the not so bright Labrador retriever, Hound mix. Kaitlyn on the other hand, is a Labrador retriever mixed with a breed people tend to be scared of. She is what most people would call a Pit Bull mix.

Be honest, when you think Pit Bull what is the first thing that comes to mind? For those who just know what media says, they think of a dog who acts in aggression. A dog used mainly in the illegal dog fighting rings and dogs they would never trust around their kids. But if you ask someone who has experience with the breed or knows the history of the breed, they would tell you the complete opposite. Pit Bulls were originally bred to be nanny dogs. They had undying loyalty to their owners and even to this day they still do.

When we adopted Kaitlyn from the Animal Humane Society, she was a 35 pound, 5 month old Lab mix puppy. We had just lost our first dog a few weeks ago and the house was too quiet and too clean without a dog. I never expected to find a dog that quickly but there she was. It was like one of those Hallmark commercials when we brought her home. We weren't sure what she was mixed with but I was fine with that. I didn't need to know because she was perfect.

Fast forward a few months and as I was watching a show on Animal Planet, I started to look at Kaitlyn and saw a few Pit Bull traits. The way she tilted her head and perked her ears up, the way she laid down with her back legs straight out behind her, and even the way she wagged her tail and her entire back end when she was happy. We didn't have a lot of background on her other than she was brought up from Missouri with her sister whose name was Coconut. We never got to meet her sister because she was adopted before we got there.

I didn't care about it. I love the Pit Bull breed being I had met so many before. But our insurance company has some strict dog policies and if we owned a Pit Bull or a mix, they would drop us, no questions asked. But we still have no actual proof that she is what we believe so they can't do anything really.

Kaitlyn's rabies tag had the number of the shelter where she had originally come from so we decided to give it a call to see if we could find out some more about

her. They said that her and her 4 siblings had been found by a horse farmer in his barn and he had brought them to the shelter. That probably explained why she was terrified of everything including her own shadow. Who knows how long they had been with their mother and who knows how long they had been left alone.

It wasn't until I was walking Kaitlyn down the street with our other dog when I received any type of threat regarding her. Some background here is that Kaitlyn is pretty protective of me when I'm by myself. At the time, Kaitlyn was 3 and Chance had just turned 2. We were walking down the street when this bigger guy was walking towards us. I moved over to the other side of the street and something set Kaitlyn off. She started growling and barking at this guy. I tried to redirect her attention back to me and that's when I heard this guy who doesn't even know me or my dogs say "You're lucky that Pit Bull didn't attack me. I would have shot it right here."

I was stunned. I had no words to say. He had just threatened to shoot my dog! "She isn't a Pit Bull. She's a lab mix." I said back to him and continued walking away from him.

"Mixed with Pit Bull most likely." He shouted back at me. I just ignored him and kept walking. Again, I just couldn't believe that he had threatened to shoot my dog! Kaitlyn, once you got to know her is probably the sweetest dog you'll ever meet. I trust her around other dogs and she goes to doggy daycare, I trust her around my neighbor's cats, and I even trust her with the little kids in my family. Hell, she's honestly scared of her own shadow half the time. Loud noises, thunder, fireworks send her into an anxiety attack so the fact that this guy based my dog off one thing, pissed me off.

I never truly understood what the world thought of this breed until I experienced it myself. I work with dogs and honestly I see more aggressive Chihuahuas than I do Pit Bulls. I have actually been bitten by more small dogs than I have large dogs. Sure a lot aren't dog friendly but at least with them, I don't have to worry about being bitten. If people did a little more research and actually put some thought into situations they see on the media, I think they would finally understand that the breed doesn't matter.

The legal definition of a pitbull is this according to US Law, "A "pit bull," is defined as any dog that is an American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire

Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, or any dog displaying the majority of physical traits of any one or more of the above breeds, or any dog exhibiting those distinguishing characteristics which substantially conform to the standards established by the American Kennel Club or United Kennel Club for any of the above breeds.” If you ask me, that’s a pretty broad term.<sup>1</sup>

If you ask an average person what the #1 dog breed is in the US, most likely they will say a Golden retriever because “they’re so smart and good with kids.” According to the American Temperament Test Society (ATTS), which tests the temperaments of dogs in many different situations, they tested 931 Pit Bulls in December of 2017. 87.4% of those tested, passed. The Golden retrievers had a passing rate of 85.6%.<sup>2</sup> Pit Bulls had a better passing rate than America’s favorite dog breed yet people still say they are too aggressive to be in our homes and communities. Don’t you think there’s something wrong with that?

Kaitlyn is laying at my feet, trying to get onto my lap as I write this because she heard a snow plow go by and got scared of the noise. My dog was threatened because she was making sure I was safe and because she’s more “beefy” or more muscular than most other dogs? Dogs are being threatened because they love their families and are just doing their job by protecting their territory. Just because of something people heard from the news.

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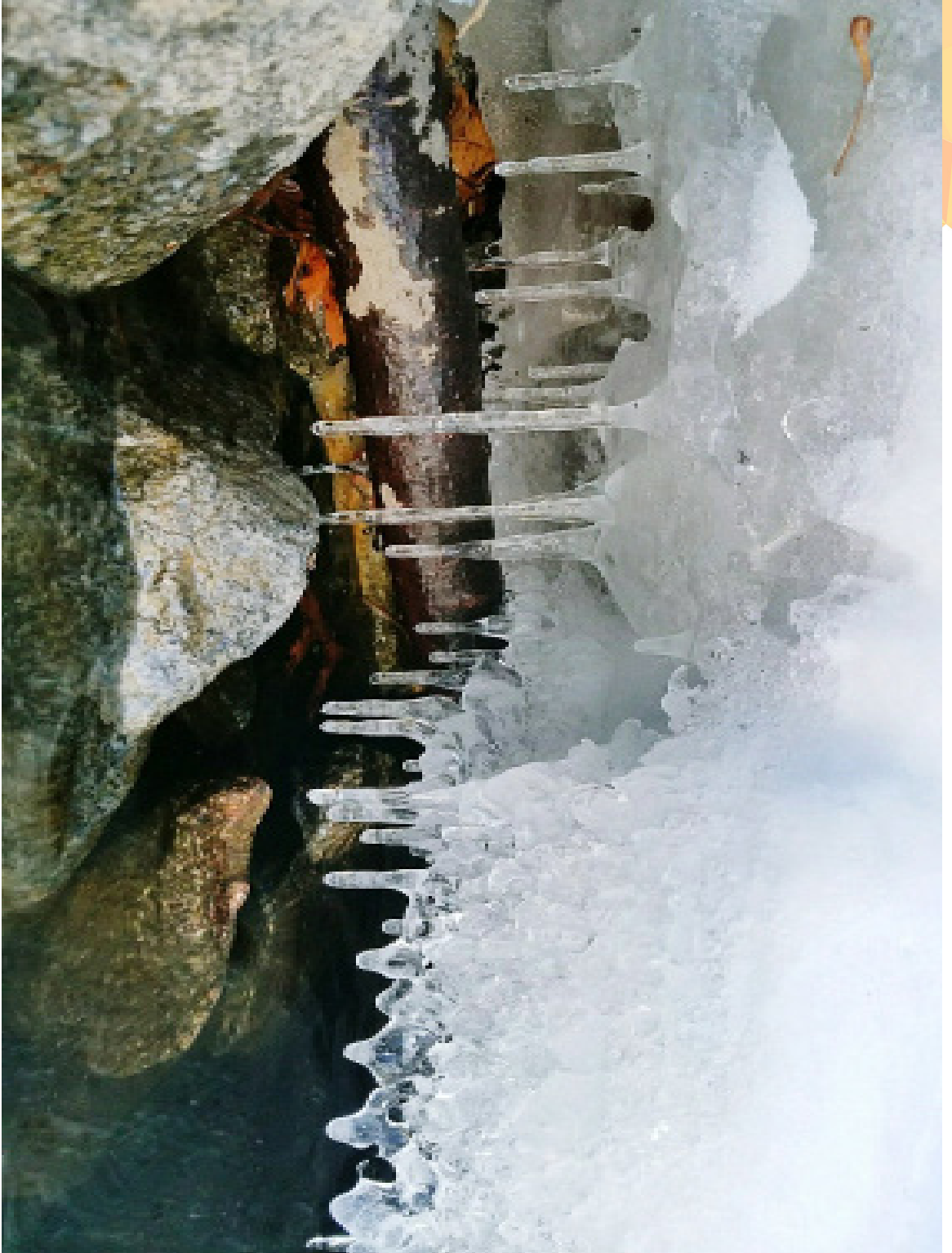
# Origins

Sarah Durkot

In the soft, pink fingertips  
of a newborn  
reside centuries;  
miles of twisting history.

Reflections of the past  
within the mass  
of molecules.

Our origins crouch,  
cleverly concealed  
as freckled skin,  
onyx hair,  
and glistening teeth;  
we walk each day with generations.



# Khakis

Gabriel Tronson

“He’ll have no friends after this,” Bob said to his acquaintance, Jimmy. The two workers sat in the break room on the 20th floor of a big company. Nobody really knew what the company did exactly, but they all got paid. The workers were looking out the break room window at one of the new employees, Frank.

“How can somebody be so goddamn naive? It almost makes me sick,” Jimmy said, and shook his head in disgust. Frank wore khakis on a casual friday. Most people in the office frowned upon wearing casual khakis, and nobody knew why. Somebody had to have started the trend of disliking casual khakis at some point, but no one had taken responsibility for the unspoken rule.

“I can handle khakis if you want to be professional, but on a casual friday? What is this guy thinking?” Bob cried out in confusion.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know what he’s thinking! Wearing khakis so proudly like that! What a tool!”

“Yeah, what a tool.”

“He’s not just a tool actually,” Jimmy said, his face getting red in anger, “he’s a whole box of multiple tools!”

“Yeah.” Bob agreed, and the two started eating their food in silence. Anger boiled up silently around them as both snuke glanced out the window to Franks cubicle. He was sitting there, in his khakis, typing away like he was in charge of the place.

“Goddamnit! I can’t focus when his khakis are just glaring at me like that!” Bob yelled suddenly.

“This cheeky bastard. You know he probably knows casual fridays are kha-ki-free zones, yet he wears them anyway. What a fucking tool,” Jimmy grumbled.

“What a fucking tool. I agree wholeheartedly. Just look at everyone else!” Bob cried as a group of people walked past the break room. “Everyone else is wearing jeans! Why doesn’t he get the hint?”

“I’m just in complete disbelief at how somebody can be so idiotic. He should use his break to go home and grab some jeans. It’s really pissing me off.”

“*Fuck! Fucking fuck!*” Bob screamed, knocking his ham sandwich to the floor. He stormed over to the door, but Jimmy managed to stop him before he yanked the

handle open.

“It’s not worth it! You might get a firm talking-to from the boss! Everyone is giving Frank dirty looks. He’ll catch a hint eventually,” Jimmy held Bob back from storming out and teaching Frank a lesson.

“I just want to tell that asshole his khankis are ruining my entire day!”

“I know man! I understand completely. I just want to run out there, rip his khakis off, run them through a shredder, and hike some jeans up on him!”

“*Fuck!*” Bob screamed one last time, then started pacing back and forth in the break room like a caged tiger, “we gotta bring this up to management! We gotta tell someone.”

“Do we even have a manger?” Jimmy asked, more to himself than to Bob.

“Who’s the manager for our floor?”

“I don’t know actually. Does anyone know?”

“Who even runs this company?”

“I have no clue really. What do we even do?”

“We type up important documents and deliver presentations.”

“And deliver *justice* to asshats who decide to wear khakis on a casual friday!”

Bob and Jimmy were both pacing around the break room now. Both men slightly red faced. The break room opened and the two men immediately stood in front of the snack machines to make it look like they were choosing something to eat.

“Howdy fellas!” Reynolds said jovally as he plopped down in one of the chairs, and started eating his ham sandwich, “what’s crackalackin?”

“Oh, hey Reynolds!” Jimmy said, then glanced at Bob questioningly; wondering if it was okay to talk about the khakis.

“Reynolds, only you could get away with saying crackalackin! Haha!” Bob said, then nodded at Jimmy’s sidelong glance.

“Hey Reynolds, you know the new guy on our floor? He’s wearing khakis right now and it’s casual friday. Can you believe that?” Jimmy said in the tone of a toddler spreading secrets.

“Ho-ly shit. You’re not pulling my leg?” Reynolds said, eyes wide in disbelief. He glanced out the breakroom window and saw Frank sitting there with his khakis, “motherfucker.”

“I know! Isn’t it goddamn horrendous? We were thinking of bringing it up to management,” Bob said triumphantly.

“Who is management anyway?” Reynolds asked himself in confusion.

“Not sure, but we need to find out right away and get this asshole off our floor. Man, this is what’s wrong with the country nowadays. People just don’t know how to conform!” Jimmy fumed.

“Let’s bring it up to the head of the company!” Reynolds yelled, jumping up from his seat, and knocking his ham sandwich on the ground.

“Yes! Lets go right now and get this issue resolved in a timely manner!” Jimmy agreed heartily.

“Alright! Where is the office for the head of the company? On the top floor?” Bob asked.

“Has anyone ever been up to the top floor?” Jimmy wondered aloud.

“Do we have a head of our company? Who even runs this place?” Reynolds asked while looking around confused.

“Wait, which company is this?” Bob asked, but as soon as his eyes floated back over to Frank’s khakis his mind was pumped full of anger.

“Not sure, but I am sure that I will go out and deck Frank right now if somebody doesn’t hold me back!” Jimmy said, and started towards the door.

“Jimmy! Jimmy it’s not worth it buddy! C’mon, listen to me!” Bob said, and dramatically tried to hold his coworker back.

“Who... who even are you? Have we met before today?” Jimmy asked, looking at Bob in bewilderment.

“Where do I work? What do I even do here?” Reynolds talked to himself with an absent minded grin as Jimmy and Bob struggled at the break room door.

“Jimmy I’ve known you for... uh—oh yes—I guess we just met today in the break room a few minutes ago. Do you even work here?” Bob said, let go of Jimmy, and looked at the ceiling in confusion. Jimmy tore open the break room door.

“Hey asshole! Casual friday means no khakis! Learn the rules of the office or get the *fuck* out!” Jimmy screamed at the khaki wearing new-guy.

“Excuse me?” Frank asked, spinning around to face Jimmy, “you know I’m the new head of this department right? And you’re fired.”

“Ah—Oh—Uh...,” Jimmy made odd noises, like he had food stuck in his throat. His cheeks were red but the rest of his face was hollow, “which department is this again? I want to be able to write it down in my resume.”

“Not sure. Ask management and clear out your office by five,” Frank said dismissively, and went back to typing up important documents. Jimmy turned back to Bob and Reynolds, who were looking around in confusion.

“Where are we right now? What department is this?” Jimmy asked, but both Bob and Reynolds shook their heads in confusion, “oh, and I was fired. So I gotta clear my desk out. It was fun working with you guys,” Jimmy said, and walked out to his cubicle in a daze.

“What does this company sell?” Reynolds asked Bob in a conspirators voice, but the confused look on Bob’s face had been wiped away.

“I’m not sure Reynolds, but I gotta go prepare for a big presentation tomorrow. I’ll see you around the water fountains. Haha,” Bob said, and sauntered out of the break room.

“Hey Bob,” Frank said cheerily from his desk.

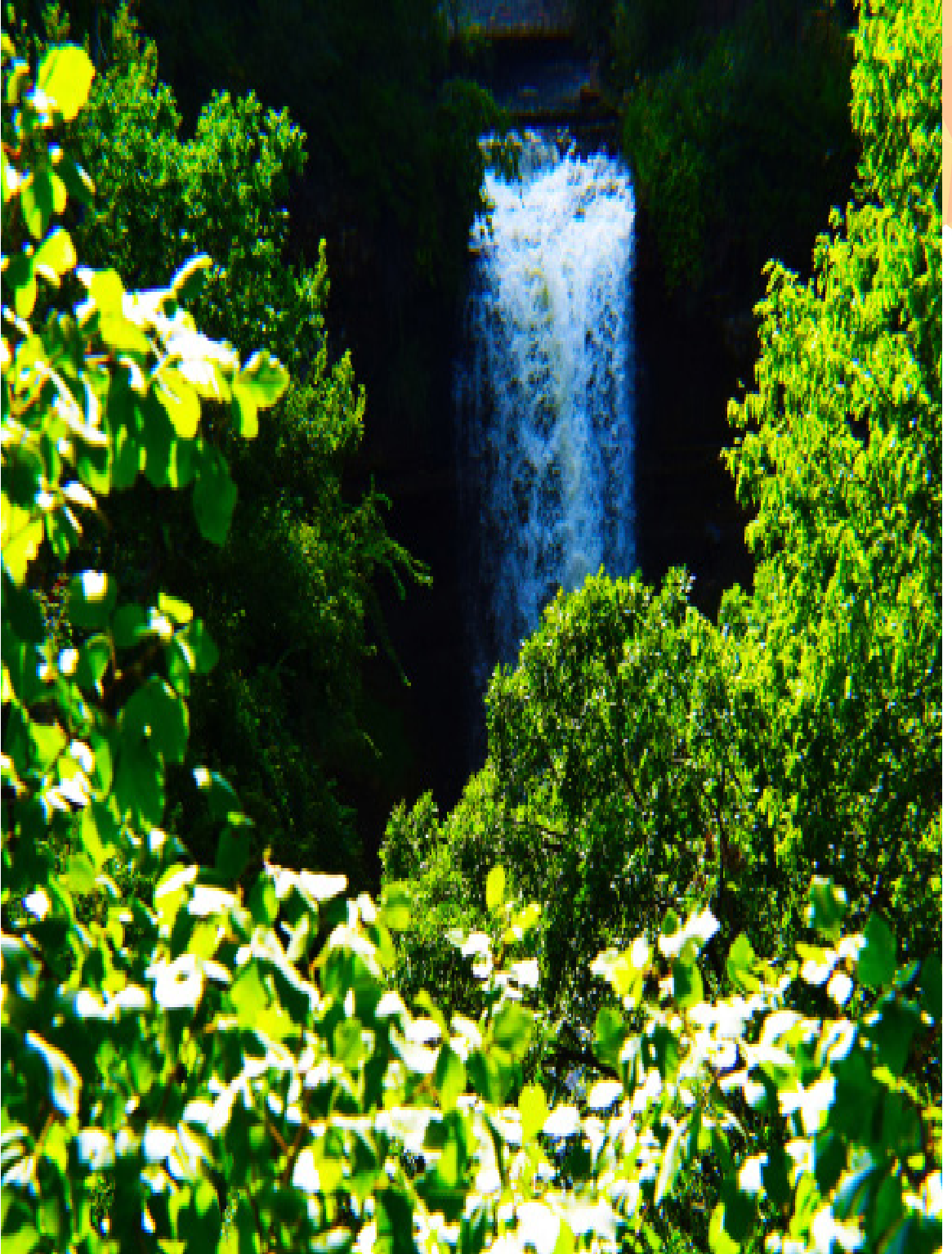
“Hey dickwad! Here’s a little piece of advice; wear jeans on casual fridays, mkay?” Bob snickered as he passed by.

“Hey! You’re fired too!” Frank yelled cheerily. Bob turned white and gilded back to his cubicle like a ghost.

“Wait... I don’t work here?” Reynolds said, glancing down at his clothes as if he didn’t remember putting them on, then stepped out into the office.

“Heya Reynolds!” Frank said cheerily.

“I don’t work here,” Reynolds responded vaguely. He looked for an exit, but couldn’t seem to locate one, and eventually just drifted back to his cubicle to continue typing unimportant documents and presentations.



# Fire Swept City

Elizabeth Jestrab

The sun flickered dust down upon us,  
a golden glaze of eradication.

Industrial buildings swallowed by embers in the sky,  
frigid figures danced across the highway,  
tattered feet waltzing to the melody of commotion.

Traces of corruption filling our nostrils,  
like a candle lit in a dark room,  
like charcoal in our lungs.

Exploited regime staining the roads on which we decayed  
tainted eyes bore into the centermost fissure,  
beaming off transparent windows, propelled into smog,  
a haze of oxidization.

Shadows as deep as a sunset cast  
across the horizon at dusk.  
Fire flicker red

Pregnant, inky clouds undulate across the sky, and moisture seems to saturate every molecule in the ocean of air. Each inhale is accompanied by vaporous humidity. The atmosphere trembles as it dances on a thin wire above the tempest below.

Every pore in the pavement below you plays host to numerous families of tiny water droplets, that darken the surface to mirror the night around you. You feel a patch of wetness spreading from your temple. The liquid crawls across your skin, adhering to the thin strands of hair that have fallen across your cheek. You look up, squinting against the harsh light of a flickering streetlamp. The glow of the lamp grasps blindly into the blackness above you. Another droplet makes contact with your skin as you gaze upward, this time striking your cheek, before rolling down your jaw. Quickly, you lower your head, and raise your hood.

The windows to your right begin to melt as the rain rushes to the ground with greater urgency. Hood up, face down, you plod forward, a bitter chill creeping down your back as rain seeps through the fibers of your worn coat. Your mind drifts to thoughts of dry beds, warm fires, and other forbidden arenas. Ahead is a window with an overhang, and despite how the wind seems to throw the rain at precarious angles, there are still a few innocent inches of pavement tight to the wall. Sanctuary.

In the window below the overhang there is a man. His hair is long and unwashed, its color might be brown, but in the darkness, it is hard to tell. His face is pale and sunken, deep purple bruises spread under his eyes; patches of beard landscape his jawline. Your eyes meet as you inspect him, they are dark blue and shimmering. He does not look away, so you do.

With your eyes downcast, you notice that the window extends down the entire length of the man's body. His clothes are grimy, and too large for his narrow frame; they hang on his body the way a bovine's skin hangs, providing stark evidence of the bones beneath. The shoes he wears are equally dirty, and torn in several places. You imagine how cold his feet must be, how rain must seep through those holes, and freeze the fragile skin within. A shudder runs through your body, perhaps it is from the cold wetness that has spread through every inch of material on your body. Perhaps it is the thought of feet that will never truly dry. Your eyes wander slowly upward until you are once again face-to-face with those deep, blue pools. As you stare, you notice that the rain has stopped; after one last look you turn away from your reflection and walk away.

# Gnosis

Axel Kylander

Had I known that  
you wouldn't be able to move your arms anymore,  
I would have made you play cards  
until the paralysis settled in to stay.

Had I known that  
you wouldn't be able to walk again,  
you and I would have walked under the trees, so you could  
feel the leaves and grass under your feet, until they felt no more.

Had I known that  
the icy air of night would be the last to carry your voice,  
I would have kept you up for hours,  
talked about everything,  
I didn't know, not really.  
You knew.  
Something was going to happen.  
We both knew you might die.  
You didn't.  
Everything's gone.  
But you didn't die,  
and I still know you.



# Between

Joshua Hartman

This is the part you'll forget.

The waiting for late busses on days with skies the like ash  
(though it never rains).

The car rides to unknowingly cancelled classes.

The commercial breaks with voices and music like white noise  
(what were they selling?).

This is the vacuum that separates stars  
and the gap between atoms.

(we are made of mostly nothing, after all)

This is true waste.

The rhythmic disfunction of a leaky faucet  
(drip,  
drip,  
drip).

These are the times you don't write about.

And they are as much of us as the ones we do.

# King Of Dragons

Riley Schatz

Ghana was late.

Panicked footfalls descended rapidly down the hallway, the click of shined heels reverberating against the marble trimmed and gold embroidered walls. Flashes of faces, red eyes and black hair, glaring down upon him from the walls where the paintings lay. Urging him onward, promising his fate. The sound of worry, the sound of desperation, rapidly falling with each step, pushing him forward as he rushed through the pathways that took him closer to his destination. Piled in his hands, paperwork crumpled against his chest, fluttering and crinkling against the waves of air from the speed of his travels.

He was late. He was late. He was late.

He was almost never late, but damn be the ink that had refused to spread itself onto the manila properly, damn be the winding hallways that had taken him in the wrong direction. Damn be his nerves that made him easily forgetful.

Raggedly breathing, the giant golden architectural doors came looming before him, rising in height the closer he got, as he extended one hand in order to make grasp for the handle, pushing the door inward with a rush of air and the sensation of heat that stung against his skin, brushing dirty blonde strands of hair back. He stepped into the throne room with a filling of his lungs, already feeling the shudder rising across his clammy, cold skin as his green gaze set before him and towards the towering pile of iron considered to be a throne.

It rose in spikes towards the rounded ceiling, jagged pieces of metal telling stories of wars long past, deaths long forgotten, blood long shed. Intricately placed, each hilt had once been held by the hand of an enemy. Each blade had been used to deflect attacks, to defend their life. Each engraved name in the iron, the name of a life, of a lineage, of a family whose woes surely still lived on even to this day. Woes created by the man who sat in such display.

There in the pile, resting in the crease where the swords were bent to resemble a chair, a tall, bulky figure leaned in his seat. One elbow rested against the arm of the chair, blatantly ignoring the fact that he rested against the resemblance of the dead and the suffering.

One of his boots, black and knee high, rested against the other chair arm, draped and rocking to a silent rhythm in a lazy and languid fashion. He was the very vision of royalty itself. Plated ebony armor scanned down his chest and abdomen, designs of gold foliage and flora trailing along the sides, and fixed to his shoulders. It hugged the handsome definition of him, obviously no weakling despite his lack of a fighting reputation. Black hair slicked to one side brushed faintly against pale pointed ears, which was connected to a straight, stoic, good-looking face that was marred only by his lack of expression.

His Majesty Bultzak, King of Dragons, was staring at Ghana.

Ghana had paused only for a moment, to stare yet again in terror to the gargantuan throne, the equally gargantuan man, everything about the space revoltingly expensive and impressive and horrible. But finally, he urged his legs to work, and he came closer to the large seat where the King rested, shuffling his feet closer and closer, nearing the man until he could almost see the white of his eyes, rimming that intense, putrid red-

There was movement, the scraping of claws across the ground, skittering of what could be described as a snake slithering from its perch, and from the throws of darkness came bodies moving like fluid against the air. Giant forms, quills whipping from the pounce of their shoulders, came into being with a thunderous noise, the weight of their impact in front of the throne producing a shaking across the ground. Bodies covered in scales, the muscled lengths of their arms moving in a stalking fashion to cut off Ghana from approaching the chair too closely. Wings coiled, one as black as a moonless sky, and another a deep set brown the color of soot. Their lips were risen, large and curved fangs bared as the insides of their mouths glowed from the pits of their jowls, the flicks of flames already prepared to spew upon any hint of a command. Dragons, perhaps not as big as others, but the size of horses with necks coiled up like a cobra.

Ghana felt his knees go weak as the hisses that came from the two creatures vibrated directly into his chest. The gurgling noise of it, growling aggressively in serpentine sounds, caused him to step back from his spot, and finally lower down into a kneel, placing knee against the carpet that approached the King and shoe resting against the ground, ducking his head down to keep his eyes from being locked to one

of the dragons' own. Still, the sound of the dragon's hissing, in his ear, in his mind, in his soul.

There was a snap, subtle and small, and immediately the sounds cracking from the creatures were silenced, going quiet with small plumes of breath coming from their nostrils. It smelled of smoke in Ghana's face.

"You're late."

The smooth voice that matched the dragon's might. Ghana flinched down as the tone of the King's impatience cascaded down upon him. He sat there, like an offering to two hungry beasts who seemed very eager to rip him limb from limb, held back only by the angry individual sitting on a pile of swords. He nodded his head, voice small, shivering again.

"Your Highest Majesty. It is my sincerest apologies that I did not arrive to the standards you commanded of me. The inkwell was having trouble distributing, and I couldn't manage to—"

"I didn't ask for your excuses."

The King cut Ghana off, and he jerked again, going still and quiet, shutting himself up as he knew he had to do. The echo of Bultzak's voice, cutting fiercely, creating more fear in Ghana's blood than even the two serpentine flying beasts had managed to do. Still, the King continued.

"The papers. Are they completed?"

Ghana nodded crisply, eagerly, hopefully, but did not bring his stare away from his shoes, not even when one curious of the two dragons descended its gigantic scaled muzzle in order to exhale plumes of toxic smoke into his forehead. He could feel the heat of the flames from within the animal's body. He could feel the power crackling from its presence, how much it wanted to hurt him. It was like a cat, in some horrific way. The way it tested Ghana's instincts, the way it pestered him, gauging a reaction. Ghana would not give it one. Instead, he simply collected the papers in his grip, holding it out towards the air in a submissive gesture that indeed, he had completed his assigned work.

"Done exactly as you had commanded."

"*Shala min'dol, Fengahl.*" Bultzak used his Serpent Language

Teeth, Ghana could feel them clicking themselves around the ends of the

paper, with a surprising gingeriness and care to it that Ghana did not anticipate. The dragon followed Bultzak's command, carefully carrying the stack between its fangs, slinking away from its prey and wriggling itself up the steps and towards the throne. The black flashes of scales stilled, as the fearsome creature almost submitted itself like a dog, lowering itself down towards the King's heels, placing the papers towards his lap with slow and easy movements. Its quills down its back moved like waves of water as the pale, broad hand of the Dragon King stroked down across the dragon's muzzle, whose name apparently was Fenghal.

With one hand petting absently across Fenghal's head, Bultzak used his other hand to bring one of the papers up towards his face, inspecting it carefully with his eyes scrolling across each word. Silence fell upon the mostly empty space, ruined only by the occasional thick exhale of one of the beasts, who both remained still like a hawk perched in wait. Red in motion, The King's eyes took it all in, calculated appraisal made slightly better by the nods of his head. He was satisfied, so it appeared.

He set the pages down, back into his lap, and brought his stare back down to the silly messenger Ghana.

"These pages will be distributed across the kingdom. To any with minimal power I allow them to have. In case you were curious why these were demanded of you."

Ghana nodded again, firmly, with a little more confidence now that he saw that expression in the King's face soften. He was pleased. He was satisfied. Ghana was going to be okay.

"Of course, Your Grace."

"You've done what was expected. What was your name then, boy?"

Ghana blinked once, feeling throat slightly going dry as the Unseelie King himself requested for Ghana's name. Ghana. The nervous, poor boy who lived with his mother in a cottage on the outskirts of the village grounds. The meaningless printer who made minimal wages making pages for books and signs, offering to work for whatever one was willing to pay. The King wanted his name. Perhaps this was a sign, a sign of a future yet to come, a betterness for his mother. Opportunity. He swallowed down nothing and nodded his head once.

"Ghana, Your Majesty."

“Ghana?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

King Bultzak ended his mindless stroking across the dragon Fenghal’s snout, and the black winged serpent turned its head, training its piercing yellow slitted gaze to the messenger boy with nothing but malice in its stare.

“Well then, Ghana. Do you think you’ll ever be late again?”

Ghana shook his head. He shook his head with all his might, to show his vigor and prove that indeed, this promise he was making would not be broken. Next time, next time he had this opportunity, he would not be late. Next time, he would prove himself.

“No, Your Excellence. I will not be late again.”

“No. I don’t think you will either.”

It was some movement of King Bultzak’s hand. The subtlest twitch, maybe only the gesture of a finger. But something had urged the dragons to move again. Like a flash they were transformed, their placid indifference changed to terrifying intense predators, whose opening mouths were pointed in Ghana’s direction with a strange sound of air sucking in through a tunnel. Ghana felt the pit growing in his stomach. He could feel the ice of panic locking him in place, seeping into every portion of him, stabbing his bones, leaking into his soul. The last seconds of life came to greet him in slow motion. He didn’t get a chance to say a word.

The last thing Ghana would ever see was fire.



# The Fear of Being Female

Cali Carlson

Fear is walking home alone at night.

It is her purse held tightly to her chest.

It is her hurried pace.

It is the glances over her shoulder.

Fear is a night out.

It is the constant monitoring of the drink.

It is the hesitation to use the bathroom alone.

It is having a friend on standby if you don't text her back.

Fear is her clothes.

It is looking for the clothes that are conservative.

It is asking a 13 year old - *What were you wearing?*

It is *She was asking for it.*

Fear is watching the news.

It is *Star athlete has career ruined!*

It is *Mass shooting due to woman's rejection of man.*

It is *Movie producer must not be blamed because of generational difference.*

Fear is a purchase.

It is mace.

It is brass knuckles.

It is a whistle.

Fear is her life.

It is the worry for our daughters.

It is the worry for our mothers.

It is the worry for our sisters.

It is the worry for ourselves.

It is the worry for humanity.

# Two Keys

Joshua Hartman

In a cramped bunker under Philip, South Dakota, two men did their part in ending the world.

The dictum was received just as their training said it would. A maze of script delivered itself on paper the color of fresh snow. To the dismay of both, the code checked out. In well-rehearsed motions, the two men unholstered an equal number of keys, opened an oppressively red box, and retrieved another two more important keys. Lights were checked to be of appropriate color (or lack of), dials were adjusted, and jargon was exchanged with rhythmic certainty of a ticking clock.

At a count of three, two keys were turned, and ten missiles took flight from their concrete nests to reinvent the topography of an equal amount of unconsenting Russian towns. Then, the two missileers quietly listened as the fading hum of rockets bled into the whirring of antique computers and cheap air conditioning.

“What now?” Deputy Commander Decanio said with the levity of a recent amputee.

“Waiting.” Commander Fogerty answered, drawing a cigarette from his pocket casually. “Fifteen days of it, ‘less command has something to say in the meantime, ‘cept – hey, want one?” he extended a cigarette to Decanio, who slowly dismissed it with a shaking hand. “‘Cept, I’d suppose they’ve probably got bigger concerns right now than us. We’re not goin’ anywhere, are we?”

“Implying that the 68th’s HQ won’t be a pile of ash within the hour.” Decanio muttered.

Fogerty shrugged.

This couldn’t be real, Decanio knew. Relations with the USSR had been tense, sure, but, when hadn’t they been? Nuclear exchange? An atomic flipping of the table? Neither side was dumb enough for that. His eyes laboriously crawled their way across the machinery that made up the wall in front of his chair hunting for a fuzzy edge or impossible act of geometry to reveal this place’s falseness. What he found was this – an annoyingly Euclidean array of regular metal panels the color and thickness of school lockers. The dull, dark words on them made far too much sense – “POWER ON,” “MEMORY ON,” “DSAP FAULT.”

Also - "INDICATOR, MISSILE AWAY," with its judgmental green light. His eyes turned to Fogerty, leaned back in his hard leather chair, taking idle-minded drags of his vanishing cigarette, and staring at the concrete wall as if it were showing a rerun of Jeopardy. His mustache was the appropriate shade (tree bark brown) and the right shape (a crude trapezoid, as if hastily cut out by a bored toddler). His air-force jump suit was as blue as it should be, and the cylinder of his standard issue .38 seemed to have the right number of chambers.

Nothing deviant there, either - except, actually, he wasn't quite deviant enough, Decanio, thought. Did he not just turn a key that meant that everyone he knew had been, or would soon be, peeled layer by layer by atomic fire? That everyone they both knew had...

As if dropped in in front of his inner eye like a body from gallows, his mind recoiled violently at the thought of his mother, eyes melted shut, hair burning away like wisps of paper from a bonfire, skin drying to cracked sand as its water boiled in a fraction of a second...

Decanio launched himself up from his chair, planting a fist suddenly into a computer cabinet. "Fuck"

Fogerty turned only his head to him. "Calm down, boy."

"Calm down? The world's being glassed out there, and I should calm down? You're out of your fuckin' mind. How can you just sit there? What abo - what about Julia? Did you forget you had a wife or something? I mean, this is -"

"Yelling ain't going to un-turn our keys, or anyone else's. Sit down."

"God, the keys... Why couldn't we just have - just said no? Just, not played ball. Maybe, there'd have been a chance that no one else would've, too. We could've..." Decanio grabbed his hair as if it were trying to take flight.

Fogerty exhaled slowly and dropped his cigarette to the stone floor. "We knew this was a possibility from day one, didn't we? What we just did there - that was our duty. We signed up for that. Uncle Sam said, 'here's a college degree all paid for and a desk to finish it from, all you's got to do is pull the trigger,' and you said yes, didn't ya?"

"But you didn't think we'd actually have to, did you? Hell, maybe if we... Fogerty, hell, I know - we still might have a chance. We take the jeep from up top,

alright, and go get our folks, wives, whatever, and bring them back here? Maybe the commies haven't had a chance to shoot back, right? There's a chance, isn't there?

Decanio walked over to the door, the tropical blue of his eyes meeting biological salt-water of his tears. "If we start now, we can probably make it back here by the time the Russians send their volley back, and -"

Fogerty rose to his feet. "Boy, don't you think about it. You open that door, and we don't have the radiation suits to take what's going to be out there. It's not going to be any use."

Decanio opened his mouth and then froze on the spot. Fine, he thought. Fogerty might be able to live with that blood on his hands, but he wouldn't.

He reached for the .38 revolver by his side, but before his hand connected with the grip Fogerty had launched himself at him. His back impacted the bunker's steel door with a violent thud.

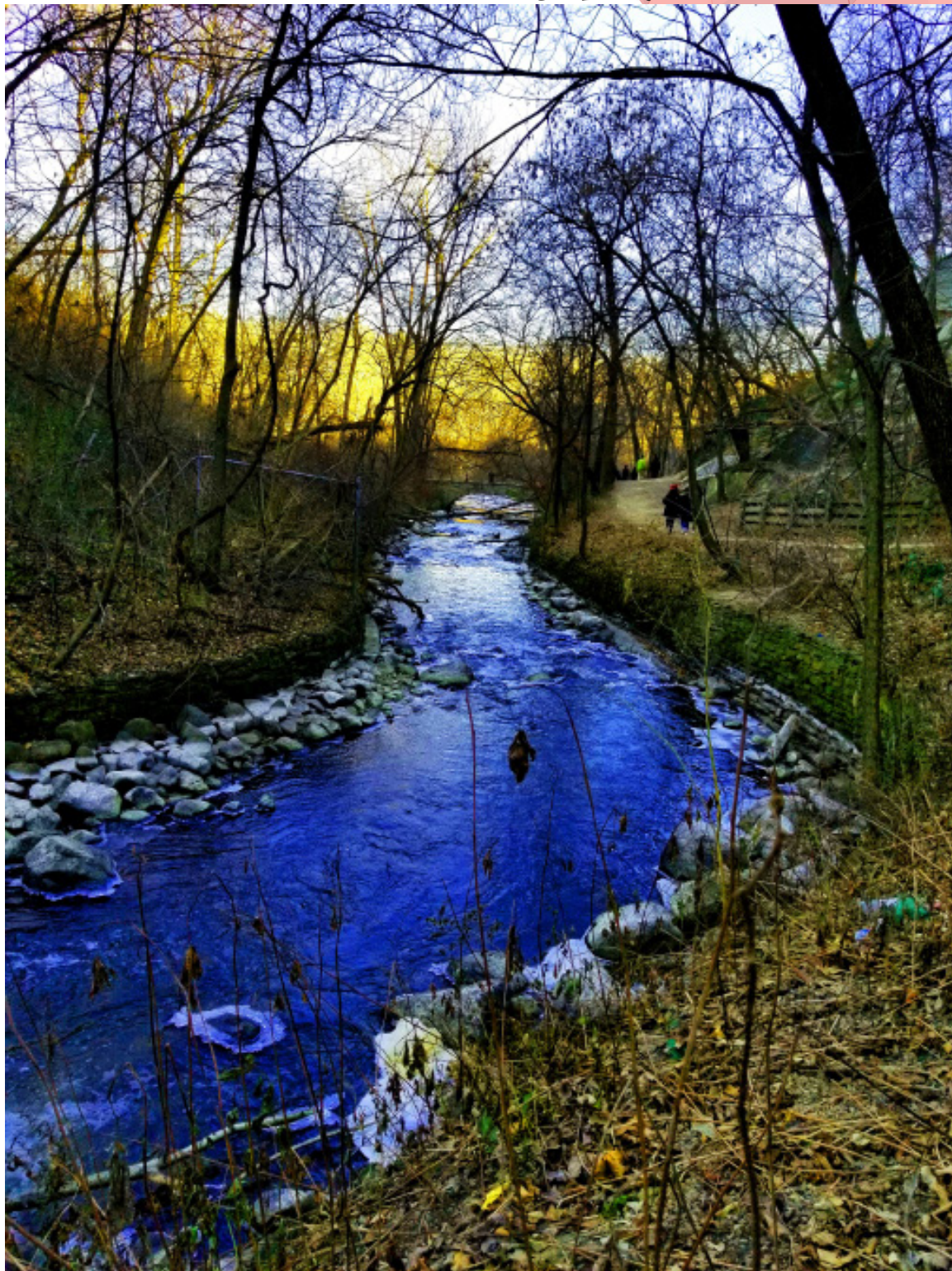
In a split second, his face was flat against the cool floor, tears pooling beneath it, and his body heaving with hollow sobs. "I'm - I - I'm sorry, I -"

"I'm sorry, too. The words I said weren't the right ones. Let me clarify - I'm hurting, too, ok? Just 'cus I'm not cryin' don't mean I think you shouldn't, I'm just... I'm sorry alright?" Fogerty said wearily, pulling himself away from Decanio.

"We're alive, right? And if base doesn't come for us, we'll still find a way, ok? This ain't over. Our hearts are still beating, right?"

Decanio remained on the ground, eyes locked on a violently judgmental green light.

In pained whispers he repeated "It isn't over, it isn't over, it isn't over, it isn't..."



# A Six-Year-Old Girl + A Coffee Shop + Thin Mints

Noelle McNeill

Momma always put thin mints  
in our hot chocolate;  
she'd crush them between her palms  
as though they were saltine crackers  
plummeting into a lake of hot soup.

“Marshmallows are overrated,”  
she'd say. The ooey-gooey gush  
they made between the teeth  
of other children yielded a grotto  
of white webs in their mouths.  
I'd never welcome an araneae  
in mine.

At six years old, I asked mama  
if I could join the Girl Scouts  
so I could expose  
their secret cookie formulas—  
like Plankton would try to do—  
so we could have minty  
hot chocolate all year round.

“Cocoa's for winter, silly goose,”  
she'd say. So every year whilst  
the crisp November air flooded my bare  
skin, the patchy redness of my face after  
indulging in first snowfall, I'd beseech  
her to make us a both a mug.  
Now I sit, some decades subsequently,  
in some quirky coffee shop in the cities  
waiting for my caramel latte.  
The absence of thin mints and hot chocolate  
keeps me from the null reminder  
that it'll never taste the same without her

“Mom, Dad... I’m pregnant.”

Her father’s face grew red, anger filling his features. “What?! You are 16 years old! I will not have my daughter having a baby. You are getting an abortion first thing tomorrow.” She looked to her mother, who had her head down, discomfort ebbing off her in waves.

“I’m not getting an abortion,” she said quietly. She placed her hand protectively on her stomach and looked back to her father. Disgust replaced the burning rage in his eyes and he sneered coldly.

“Then get out of my house. Whores don’t belong here. Take your things and leave. I want you out of my house in an hour.”

“But-”

“No buts. Whores aren’t allowed here. Now move.” He spat on her before storming off deeper into the house. She looked back at her mother with tears in her eyes, but she just shook her head and followed her husband quietly.

The girl lowered her head, face burning with shame as she walked to her room. The neatly organized room was in such stark contrast to her life now. The purple bedding was cleanly folded over the small bed and wrinkled as she sat down. She sighed and looked around, trying to stop her racing mind. As the small clock on her white nightstand ticked away the time ominously, she stood up quickly and went to her closet.

Opening the plain door, she looked passed the array of bright colored clothes and grabbed a small silver safe and two large black suitcases. She gently set the safe on her bed and put the suitcases on the floor. Kneeling on the soft carpet, she opened the suitcases and took out the bags inside them, setting them to the side. Standing up again, she took everything out of her closet, setting it on the floor. Then she went to her dresser, taking the drawers out and setting them on her bed. With her closet and dresser emptied, she went to work.

Quickly she started putting together her clothes, rolling them together to maximize space. The clock ticked away her time left as she moved quickly, getting all of her clothes into the first suitcase. In the second suitcase she put her winter clothes and extra shoes. On top of those she laid a few small blankets and pillows. After completely filling the biggest pockets of the suitcases, she zipped them shut and looked at the clock.

30 minutes had already passed. She took a deep breath and stood up, going to her desk and grabbing her computer and all of her chargers. She opened the front pocket of the bigger suitcase and slid the laptop in before putting the chargers on top of it. Then she stood up and replaced her drawers before opening the safe on her bed. She reached over and grabbed a small, old teddy bear that had a red barrette on its little blue bow. She smiled softly, the soft fur bringing back the memory of when she first got the bear. It was her oldest memory, and it was fading as she grew up. All she remembered was her grandmas wrinkly hands touching hers, and her blue eyes still sparkling with youth even as her body was deep into seniority. She sniffed, wiping a tear away as she remembered her long passed grandma.

“Don’t worry, Theo. I won’t leave you behind,” she whispered softly before kissing the bear where it was missing an eye. Then she gently placed it into the safe. Next to the bear sat a small wallet. She picked it up and checked inside it. She sighed with relief as she finished counting the bills inside it. Ensuring she had every dollar and her debit card, she smiled and shoved the wallet onto the pocket of her ripped jeans. Then she stood, closing the safe and picking it up. She wrapped the safe in the extra bags she had before placing the whole bundle inside her blue backpack. Double checking every bag was shut completely, she looked around her room one last time as she shouldered her backpack and grabbed her suitcases. “Hmm... Let’s see. We have the money, the clothes, everything for my computer and phone, pillows and blankets. What else am I-” She looked up with a start. “My violin! I can’t forget that!” She jumped over to her desk, bending over and grabbing the bright blue case. Quickly checking the pocket, she nodded as she leafed through the pages. Then she dropped her backpack and shoved the music stand inside quickly, a clinking of metal coming from the bag as it hit the safe.

# Leave Means Stay

Casey Jones

Breathe in my friend and go away  
For today is my lonely day  
To dream the thoughts I think at night  
But all day instead for a permanent fright  
Do you understand how my brain works?  
And why I can't go on anymore  
Take the time to decipher my rhymes  
And understand the words I spew from an unsteady mind  
Take the time to realize  
You are the only reason I roam still  
And don't stop to rest my head  
Next to a gun on my bed  
You are what lets me go on my dear  
So please don't leave me  
I'll be in tears

# Spilled Ink

Why is it I write more under the veil of sorrow?  
I also write of love but nowhere near as much  
Is there a beauty to sorrow?  
Or is it just when you're too weak to hold in your thoughts they spill out in the form  
of ink



# Piano

Emily Nelson

Ding, ding, dong, ding! The chimes of the piano fill the air. With my fingers dancing amongst the black and white keys, I lay my eyes upon a sheet a sheet of music—the only thing I enjoy reading. The sounds are calming, like hearing wind blow on a quiet Sunday morning.

My mom taught me to play when I was only eight-years-old. I remember coming home from school in the fall and walking in the door to the smell of sweet apple crisp in the oven and pumpkin candles burning; she knew this was my favorite scent combination. I would always run to my mother's arms, give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and then charge towards the piano. Playing piano with my mom was my favorite thing to do when I was a kid. Four years after I learned to play, when I was twelve, my mother passed away. After that, I played piano almost every day. I played more and more as time passed because playing piano was all I had left to hold onto her. The chimes pouring into my ears masked the pain and emptiness I felt from losing my mother.

That was ten years ago; I'm in my twenties now. Playing for fourteen years has made me a piano-playing master. Just kidding, but, I will say that I have become a better player than I once was.

I dig in my pocket to find a special piece of plastic. I pull out the best thing to pull back my hair: my little, red barrette. My little, red barrette is the only thing that pins back my long, brunette mane the way I want it to.

Hours upon hours pass and I still sit at my piano on my old green bench. After sitting on it for hours, the discomfort rises through my legs and feels like I'm sitting on a bucket. This doesn't keep me from playing though—nothing can.

The way my fingers move to make beautiful sounds gives me a sense of peace. Playing the piano is my getaway from life; it's my sweet escape. My heart fills with warmth when my hands are amongst the keys, reminding me of all the joyous memories I had with my mom years ago.

I throw my empty candy wrapper on the ground, thanking the chewy treat for giving me a short burst of energy. From morning until night, I sit at that piano on that old, green, bucket-like bench while constantly repositioning that little red barrette

in my hair. I flip the sheets of music with one hand, and toss more candy wrappers on the ground with the other.

I shut my eyes for just a moment, taking in the sweet serenity of music to my ears. As I open my eyes and look around, I look and wonder where the time has gone. I still sit on my bench at my piano in my ultra-brown, cozy den, like I do every day, but I'm not who I was before. I'm no longer in my sweet childhood, I'm no longer in my twenties either; I'm now an old woman.

I place my hand on my cheek and feel the valleys and peaks of wrinkles painted across my face. My brown hair is now mixtures of silver and white, my smile has a slight droop to it, and my eyes sag. I'm no longer the beautiful girl I once was.

I step out of the den and walk down the stairs to find my daughter Sara making breakfast.

"Hi, mom," she greets me with her dainty smile.

"Hi, darling," I respond, embracing the beauty of my now grown, middle-aged child.

Sara and I sit down at the table, facing the scrumptious feast placed before us. We bow our heads, pray, and thank the Lord for our meal, like my mother taught me and like I taught Sara. We chow on our food until our stomachs pour and pudge out of our pants.

I take my eyes off my empty plate, look up at Sara, and see that she has a strange look on her face. She grabs my cold, wrinkled hands and squeezes them. I know she's going to say something I don't want to hear.

"Mom..." she says slowly, exhaling every ounce of breath she has. "Mom, you're moving soon."

I look at her with curiosity. Why would I be moving? I've lived in the same house since I was young, why would it just disappear from me?

"What do you mean? I don't understand," I respond as confusion blankets over me.

"Mom, I'm moving you into an assisted-living center."

"Why? I don't need to be assisted. I can take care of myself perfectly fine."

"Listen to me. You are ill. This is the best thing for you. I'm sure you will make lots of friends who are just like you."

All I can do is nod my head, as I am no longer the strong woman I once was. I accept the fact that I will be leaving my lifelong home, but I still question what Sara meant by saying I am ill. I don't feel sick, so I don't understand what she means by that. I try to ignore my questions, as it's probably just my old age getting in the way of my thoughts.

A week later, we arrive at my new home. It's not warm and cozy like the place I used to call my home; it's cold and dark and empty. The walls are white, blank, and emotionless. I can feel the loneliness creep up my back before my daughter leaves; I know this place and I won't get along.

Days pass and I still sit in this place. The center claims that they'll assist and care for those who live here, but I disagree; I have never felt lonelier.

I hear a knock at the door. As it creaks open, I face a woman who I don't know.

"Get up, Maggie! It's time for your morning medicine," she says as she pulls open my daily pill container. Pop, pop, they go into my mouth.

This has become my new routine. I'm not sitting on that old, green bench, playing the piano anymore like when I was young; now I'm sitting in an empty, lonely room, swallowing away my prescriptions.

I head down to the lobby to find company because I hate being alone. As I take a seat, my ears begin to crack as I hear a young girl scream in joy.

"Grandma, grandma!"

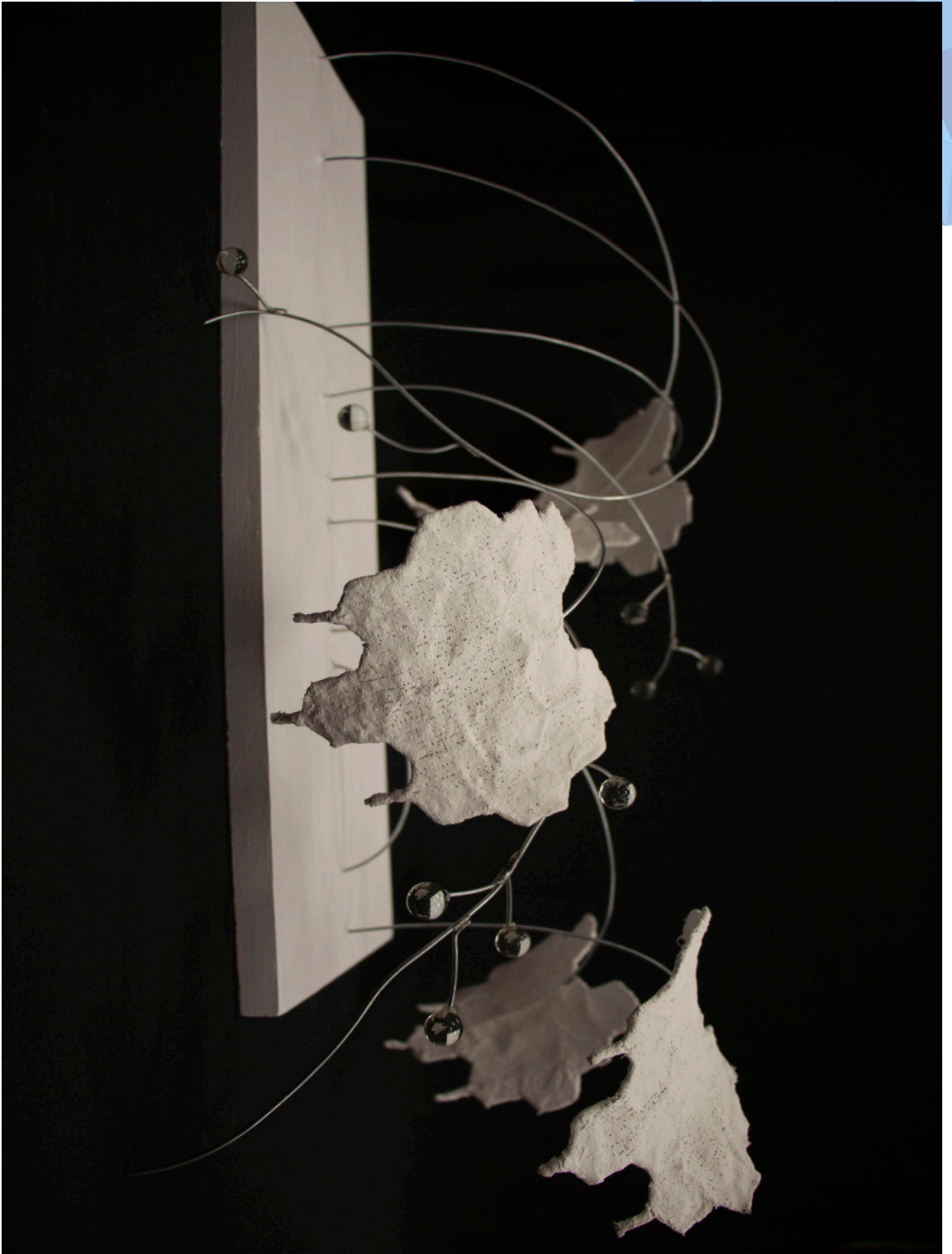
Running through the door comes my granddaughter, Abby, excited to see me. With a big, warm hug, I say hello. I look at her long, brown hair and see something that makes my eyes twinkle. That little, red barrette sat on her head, pinning back her hair the same way it used to for me. Abby was a spitting image of her mother and my daughter, Sara.

I take a seat and she walks away, heading towards the only thing that has kept me sane all my life. She sits and places her hands amongst the black and white keys, chiming away at my favorite song.

I close my eyes for just one more moment and listen to the music as it fills my ears. As I open my eyes back up, I look over to see a young girl approach me.

"Grandma, grandma! Did you hear me play?"

"Yes, my dear," I reply, with a smile on my face. But, as I look into her ocean-blue eyes, all I wonder is who she might be.



# The Art Of It

Riley Schatz

I saw his black agony stain every painting.

His need and pursuit of being artistically satisfactory was nothing short of astonishing, able to shake one deeply if they took enough time to observe it. He was like the paintings he spent hours upon, a painting one could continue to add layers of pigment to, only to soon realize that there is tremendous, tormenting depth already carved into the canvas, making such a creation textured in ways one could never anticipate.

Through the varieties of his artwork, I could always see how much he tried. How desperately he wished he could etch his own design, to make his masterpiece all of his own. But creativity was born from inspiration, and his work would never be free from influence.

The influence of his father who had become etched into his paintbrushes. The memory of an abuser now engraved in the palette cupped in his hand. The proud stance of a bloodline forged in the easel that displayed his continued passion, marred by his past. He tried to force over them with the intense hues of his painting. He tried to remain as he wished his art to be, as he told others that his art was. Innocent. It was a terrific feat, deliberated each and every passing day, but the pursuit of innocence remained like the desperate optimism of a child bred into terrible circumstances, which, in many ways, he still was.

When he believed he was alone he would run his brushes over the topography of the reality he had built. Day after day. In the silence he would work, reds and blues and yellows together, eroding away the fine layers he despised of himself and instead displaying them in liquid nature upon the white and empty tarpaulin he used. Layers birthed from some shattered remains of agonies he had since forgotten, only to find its structure pre-laid with a terrible, sound darkness when his art came to life. Even as the body of his work was produced as colorful and ignited, there was no way to heal what the black world had painted into himself.

Out together, he maintained his indifferent aesthetic. He would smile and laugh and enjoy the bright sunlight. He didn't speak of his father or his abuser or his family to the public. He pretended nothing existed but the joy in his heart that never

once truly belonged. He would display his pieces in their small museums and contests as ‘resemblances of pollution’ and ‘the reality of the subconscious’. He would win his prizes and his money, and nod his head and blink his eyes, and move on and never speak of the art ever again.

He would tell me on afternoons spent with coffee and the warm scents of wood that he had moved on from the rage that burrowed into his chest from the mention of days long behind him. That his father meant little, that the abuse made him stronger. That therapy was not needed and that he merely made art because it helped him pay his bills.

“I express my talents through my work,” he would say. “But it’s not really an emotional thing, y’know? The finished products are what I know the people want from me.”

But as time went on, and as the reality of it settled into me, I could easily see the pain bred within him. That the aesthetic did indeed exist

He maintained that aesthetic even when I knew he transformed into a beast behind those closed doors when he painted, glowing red embers in a room full of furious, filthy black. Where I knew that in the catacombs of his domain, he raged and he wrecked, smashing himself to brittle cinders as he writhed and teared through the abyss he had created, beneath it, across and through like a raven trapped in an attic. Where he furiously made, where he furiously birthed, where he furiously generated, where he furiously completed. Where his incredible images were produced from the stems of his anger. Where he painted.

Then once he had destroyed himself enough, once he had made something he believed would satisfy the demons from his past, he would settle in a heap of rippling shadow upon his floor, heaving and undulating until his physical form shuddered to existence once again, bare and shaking in a slick of sweat. Where he would cry to emptiness with cheeks matted by color and hands sore from his grip and eyes glazed from exhaustion. And I would watch from my perch, a small window into his truest sorrow, watching him alone those days in his room where he painted.

And yet, his facade never broke. His facade, a face hiding a universe stripped into black, never dared to bend against the weight of this constant ache. This hell within his mind was but a wraith, only appearing in the darkest of nights like a

wound pulsating with light as it leaks through the cracks. He assumed the role he had deemed best fit for his circumstances: a calm, charismatic individual which harshly contrasted the inner turmoil that boiled in his intestines.

He was a persona coated in a latticework of crossed nerves and lies.

He had perfected the art of it.

He was hiding himself and his art in plain sight.

But I saw right past it, deep into the crevices as small and thin as they were. I could see the boiling blood and rampant ache, detect the livid cries of a monster buried beneath dying skin. And he knew I could see it, he saw the change in my eyes every time I looked at his pieces. He could hear it in the tone of my voice, even when spitting my aggressions against his malnourished attempts to woo me with lies of his happiness when it was but a blanket over his wounds.

Eventually, I faced him with the proof that I understood.

“Your last picture was very pretty,” I commented to him on one cloudy, grey-smoked afternoon, locked together in an off-map restaurant.

He offered me a short, non-convincing smile, response curt. “Thanks.”

“How long did that one take you?” I inquired.

He shrugged. “About three months, probably.”

I nodded, consumed for a moment by the silence that always followed whenever I mentioned his paintings. I recollected on the piece, imprinted in my memory. The background color was deep thunderous grey. It was a middle-shot of a man, the paint blended together to blur any intense detailed features, but with strong accents of a jaw, of a nose, of raven black hair, of piercing grey eyes, of a hand lifted grasping at a rose that dripped black in his fingertips. The title of it had been ‘Hope’.

“The anatomy was very nice,” I offered another compliment, to stir his attention. Once more, I received a smile that appeared far too strong and far too quick.

“I’ve been practicing,” he replied.

“I liked the shoulders. And the eyes.”

“Thanks.”

I slowly twisted the metal of the fork between my fingertips, feeling the hardened surface brush cold along the skin. “It uh... it kinda reminded me of your dad.”

The slightest transition, it was like clockwork to me. I could see the

transformation against the small tendons up and around his jaw to force that pain into the background. They tensed and stressed and pushed the discomfort away, to conceal it with a skin tinted mask that he presented with a smirk. A smirk that housed lies and falsifications that perhaps he thought were well concealed.

He shifted his eyes away from me in order to pay attention to his plate, picking lazily at the salmon set at the center. "That right?"

"Well, yea," I continued to twist my fork. "The hair looked about the same. And you always remarked on just how incredibly ice grey his eyes were. The nose had that little dip to the side that you once said your dad got from his skating accident."

"Interesting," he kept picking at the salmon, shredding it to flakes and separating larger and smaller pieces on opposite ends of his dish.

"Is that what the painting is?"

He finally looked up, the dense reddish color presenting something distant. "Is that what you think it is?"

"Is it?"

A sigh exhaled from his separated lips, and he leaned backwards into his chair, clacking his utensil against the platter. "You know I hate talking about this sort of shit."

"Why?" I set down the fork against the table with a soft thunk.

"Because sometimes art doesn't have to have a meaning," his voice was more tense, but he kept it low to ensure no passing couples were drawn in.

"You say that every time," I replied and settled my hands into my lap. "Every time I bring up a recent picture you tell me it has no meaning."

"Is that impossible? Can't someone just paint something without really thinking about what they're painting?"

"Your pictures are way too specific to be made without thought, Jeram."

His eyes flashed crimson like a storm brewing deep in his irises, swelling and receding as he contained his temper. "You can't tell me whether or not I'm thinking about things when I'm making what I make."

It was my turn to sigh, offering the slightest shake of my head. My voice descended to a murmur. "Is it your dad?"

His voice did not match my own, it only turned sharper. "Why does that

matter? Why does it always matter what it is?"

"And why are you always so adamant on not telling me?"

"Because things don't always have some wicked, deep message. Things don't always have to have a pained storyline."

"Then tell me if it doesn't."

He lifted a hand, roughly dragging fingertips through the charcoal black of his hair, ruffling it against his scalp. "It doesn't matter."

My eyes bore into him. "Why doesn't it matter? Why do none of your paintings matter? You spend months on them, hours locked away."

"I don't lock myself away."

"Don't lie to me," I practically hissed it.

His eyes locked to mine, and an electric current passed between us that felt dangerous and angry. His lips set together, and the loudest silence was shared at the table for what felt like an eternity.

"So what if it's him? So what?" he finally growled.

I blinked at him, easing into the tenseness that now strung between the two of us. "Why is it so hard to tell me?"

"Because you always ask this shit. You always ask who the painting is about and what it's for. Why? Do you think something's wrong with what I make?"

"No, of course not."

"Then what is it?" he didn't glance away anymore. He glared with ferocity. "Why are you always prodding?"

I paused, feeling the cold of hesitation settle into my bones. I feared of taking it too far, but the stare he offered me pushed me to bluntness.

"When you... after you finish painting. You cry in your art room by yourself."

He said nothing, stricken into emptiness, and I could feel my mouth growing dry as I continued.

"You keep telling me that you don't care about the things that happened to you. But you do. And it eats at me that you're so afraid to share that with me. Like, you never talk about your dad. You never talk about that damn ex-girlfriend. You tell me your paintings aren't emotional, but you hurt by yourself in that room after hiding away for hours. So I just want to understand. I hate listening to you cry, Jeram."

His nails were digging into the wood of the table, and it felt like he was two inches in front of me and thousands of miles away. His jawline was bulged, face hav-

ing turned red, and he leaned himself closer in order to strengthen the nervous, electrified pulse that shock-waved between us.

“If you don’t like hearing me cry,” his voice was monotone and hollow. “Then stop listening.”

He hid his art away into the depths of night soon after that afternoon. Once he knew I understood it, once he knew I had observed his process, the ability to see into his soul, shattered apart and skittering like glassy bugs, he hid. Once he realized that, like a violent draw, I understood his thoughts and ripped them apart and placed them back together in jumbled messes that were normally so defined and prepared, he refused to allow me to see that side of him. He wanted to hide. He wanted his facade to maintain.

His pursuit of sensation turned to catastrophe every time I asked what his paintings truly represented. His reaches for an understanding of that cracked and soiled canvas that he knew he wore meant nothing, and were as bland as sand when he attempted to impress. He hated it. He hated the constant obsession of finding something more interesting, something more drawing, something more exciting. He hated the honesty that I demanded of him. He hated that I knew that the paintings hurt.

Over time he began to refuse to speak of his creations with me. Over time, it felt like he desired to rake claws through my eyes every time I gazed upon what he made. We fractured like a mirror and shattered apart, diverging on paths so different from one another. Our relationship didn’t last.

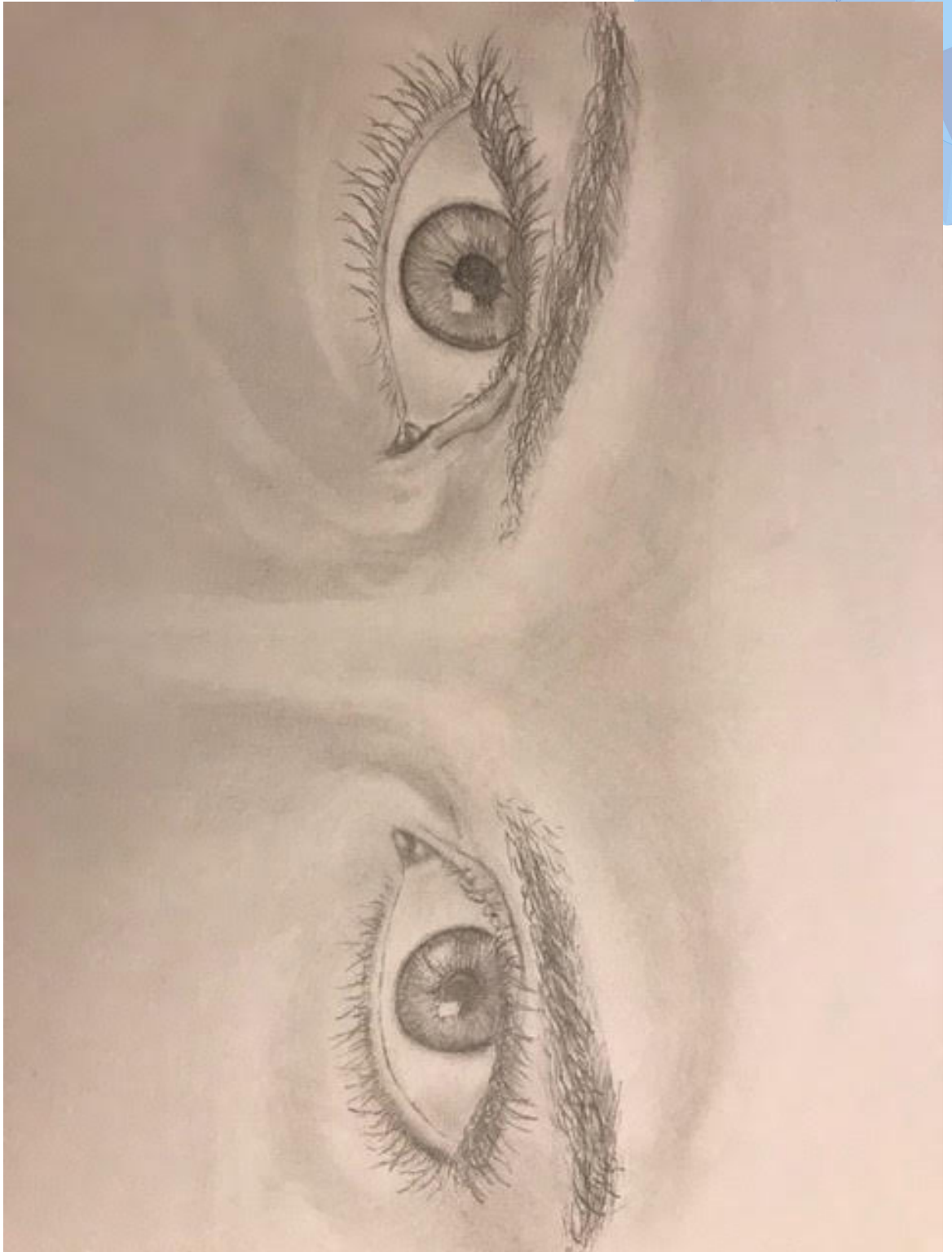
Even after we long separated, even after his loneliness consumed him and he disappeared into the shadows of himself, pieces of art still came from his empty house to be displayed. I would see his name in county fairs beneath gorgeous mountain scapes and splashes of colored silhouettes. I would stare at the price tags and the titles and see the cries for help beneath the bold, black ink.

I saw him once, at the state fairgrounds, settled beneath a curling blue tent. He was hunched and pale, and his eyes stared to nothing as people shuffled around him, admiring his work. Behind him, a grey matted picture of a man holding a black rose was displayed in a golden case. Beneath it, the title read ‘Hope’.

We met eyes as I passed, a moment pierced in time. He looked defeated. He looked the same.

Still, the facade. Still, the latticework and the lies.

Because he had perfected the art of it.



# Tumble Down the Rabbit Hole

## One More Time, Alice

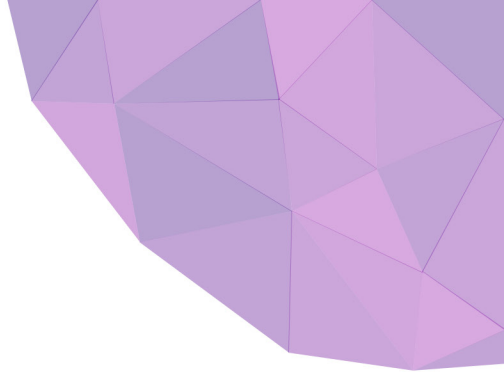
Samantha Peterson

Tumble down the rabbit hole one more time, Alice.  
The hatter has gone all wibbly wobbly- far beyond delirious-  
And hobbling around on a stubby nub of a leg.  
He keeps going on and on and on  
About squashing the Wickerspritz's brains out  
With a croquet mallet made of wooden malice,  
Shouting out his hatred of this fate-  
I fear he's gone "completely bonkers".

Tumble down the rabbit hole one more time, Alice.  
The Cheshire cat refuses to reappear ever since you speared his heart-  
His sharp wit diminished into insane gobbledygook,  
His grin disintegrated and turned to a sneer.  
He's been standing on his head for so long,  
It's a surprised it hasn't burst from the stress.

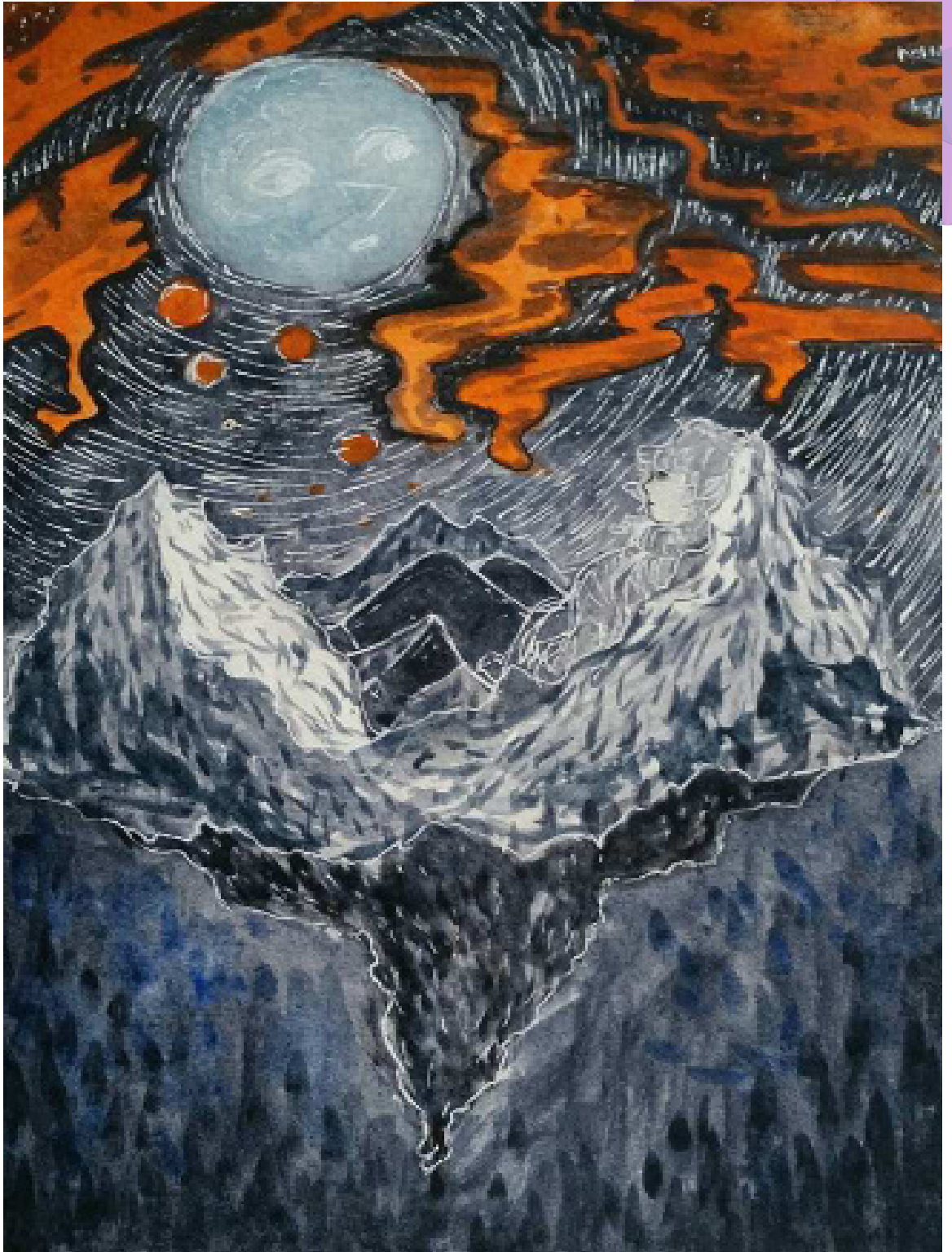
Tumble down the rabbit hole one more time, Alice.  
The time for tea has long passed,  
And the bitter boysenberry biscuits have gone bad,  
But the March Hare and Dormouse continue to eat them,  
Their hunger magnifying to the point they've  
Began to eat one another  
Repeating the last tea party in catatonic delirium.  
Their moans and wails rattling the clouds,  
And making the trees' spines shake.  
It's actually quite pathetic-  
Do come and see-  
They still have all the decorations up,  
All ready for a Merry Unbirthday,  
And they keep thinking you'll show up.

Tumble down the rabbit hole one more time.



Chase down the rabbit again.  
Chug down every drop of wine,  
And scarf down every single pill.  
It's a mess down here, Alice.  
Flesh, Flesh, Flesh

Figures within the black ink and moonlit smoke,  
Skin as white as pale diamond dust,  
Icy eyes piercing, on your last breath you'll choke.  
They're hungry. Long since the last feast.  
They've donned their favorite hunting cloak,  
Their several sharp knives,  
And a craving only you can satisfy,  
Welcoming you into their stomachs with gleeful applause.  
You'll regret how outta turn you spoke.  
You'll regret ever walking into their territory.



# Flower Girl

Michelle Arnold

She spun around in circles, admiring her handiwork. All the pots were in order. Minor adjustments here and there, and wa-la! Perfect. Slightly discolored pots held beautiful bouquets of all different colors and sizes. She was the most talented florist in all of Petal Creek, and she had the most exotic collection. Most of the pots were stained a rusty color. There were a few, however, with bright splotches of red; these were the newer ones. Though she was fond of them all.

Suddenly there came a knock at the door. At this she let out a sigh and brushed her hand fondly over the plaque beneath the last pot, leaving a smear of red. She took off her apron and carefully hung it up, then turned on the sink. The water came away red-tinted and dirt-filled. Her hands rubbed over each other reverently, feeling every scabbed-over cut, the indents from those that had never quite healed, every speck of dirt. Not a single detail went unnoticed. She dug underneath her fingernails, scraping out the grime that had worked its way into them. Pounding broke through her reverie as the knocking became louder and more insistent. With a huff of annoyance, she flicked her hands free of the water and wiped them dry on her dress before exiting the room. She shook her head and smiled ruefully, then locked the door behind her and hid away the key. Though it was a magnificent collection, she wasn't ready to show it to the world yet. There were still a few specimens missing.

The wine-red carpet was soft as she made her way across the parlor toward the entrance. White walls reached up, blossoming into the textured ceiling. She paused to admire the pillars on either side of the door. The knocking came again, angry and impatient. She rolled her eyes and seized the handle. When she opened the door, her feet faltered. Two men in police uniform stood waiting. Her mouth opened in an 'o'. Her hand had frozen to the handle.

"Ma'am, may we have a moment of your time?" asked one of the officers.

She shook herself of the shock and scrambled to regain her composure, inviting the men inside. "Would you like anything to drink?" she offered with a tight smile. At their refusal she nodded curtly and led them toward the couch. They gave their names, but she wasn't paying attention. Her teeth scraped over her lower lip, the unease barely concealed in her eyes. She sat herself on the ottoman opposite them,

nervously fidgeting with her hands.

“When was the last time you saw David Evenson?” The officers looked at her intently.

“Four days ago, on my way to the grocery store. He was watering his chrysanthemums.” She presented each new bit of information, hoping to appease the two men. They just kept looking at her. The fragile hope in her eyes cracked and fell away. “What is this about officer?” Her words were laced with worry.

One of the men leaned forward. “Your neighbor has gone missing, Ma’am. We questioned Mrs. Evenson about it just this morning. She directed us here, said you were a very close friend of theirs.” The intensity of his gaze bore into her, and she rubbed her hands harder. The other officer sat back, staring at her coolly. Her eyes flitted back to the man who was talking. She gave a tiny nod in reply.

“We talked about flowers all the time, what soil they grew best in, the best lighting.” She looked down into her lap and exhaled a short, husk of a laugh. “Which colors worked well together and how to arrange them.” She raised her head again. A sadness had settled into her eyes. “He was actually the one that inspired me to start my collection,” she said in a small voice. Her fingers still fluttered over each other.

“Did he ever mention anything to you about wanting to leave?”

She was taken aback. “Wha - No!” She jumped at her own ferocity. “No,” she repeated, quieter this time. “He never said anything about wanting to leave.”

“Could there have been someone he wanted to see without his wife knowing about it?” the officer prodded.

“No, of course not!” Anger was getting the best of her now. How dare he speak like that about David. Indignant, she replied, “He wasn’t that kind of man.”

Both officers stayed calm and silent. The one doing the talking waited patiently for her anger to dissipate. The other was noting her words and reaction on a small pad of paper. Her mouth set in a thin line. She sat up straight, tension cording her shoulders, hands clasping each other tightly enough for them to turn white where they touched. She waited for the next question.

The officer sat back a little, seeing that her anger wasn’t going to subside much further than this, and continued on to the next question. “Does he have any relatives in the area? Someone he may have gone to and forgot to tell his wife about?” He chose

his words carefully, not wanting to incite another outburst.

“None really,” she said tersely. Her hands loosened slightly, and her thumb resumed slowly stroking the side of her index finger. “His grandparents are dead. He didn’t have any siblings to speak of. He despised his father.” She said these as if she were listing off nothing more than the different fertilizers one would use to support growth.

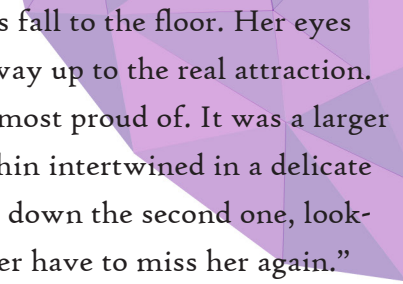
“What about his mother?” asked the officer curiously.

“Oh, Ilene. She died last summer, kayaking down the Lou River,” she said softly, lost in thought. “They never did find her body, just her kayak and a few supplies strewn around. Looked like a bear had gotten into them. But no body.” She looked back at the men now, a sad smile on her face. “He talked about her quite a bit, he did. He was always saying how much he missed her.” She stopped talking and looked down, blinking. Her eyes opened and closed in confusion and horror as the startling thought came to her mind. “You don’t think he would’ve...? Well he can’t have...” Her hands had stilled. Tears were beginning to well. She jerked her head up, meeting the officer’s eyes. “I didn’t think he’d meant to follow her!” Pain and grief crumpled her features.

The officer hastened to comfort her. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Ma’am,” though his eyes betrayed his eagerness - They had a new lead. “I’m sorry,” he said, not without sympathy, before standing up. “Thank you for your cooperation. If we find anything or have any more questions for you, we’ll come back.” She only looked into her lap, hands clutching her arms. With a nod, the policemen crossed the room to the entrance.

She heard the door click shut, and, after a few moments, brushed her sleeve over her eyes, then made her way across the parlor, stopping only to lift the key from under the mat. This room always made her feel better. She inhaled deeply. The fragrances of the room filled her senses, chasing all the tension from her body. Absently, she let her fingers trail along the pots lining the wall until she got to the last one. Here, she stopped. Her heart had finally slowed its frantic pace, and she felt as if she could breathe again. The two men had left her house at last, allowing her to finally enjoy her latest arrival.

The smear of red on the plaque beneath the last pot was long-dried by now.



She ran her thumb nail along it, watching the dark flakes fall to the floor. Her eyes lingered on the tiny black lettering before finding their way up to the real attraction. This one was by far her favorite, easily the one she was most proud of. It was a larger pot, larger than all the rest. The two specimens held within intertwined in a delicate sort of dance. She brushed the back of her hand tenderly down the second one, looking lovingly at its pale surface. “Don’t worry, you’ll never have to miss her again.”



# Mirror

Alexis Stern

\*Contains explicit content regarding self-harm and anorexia\*

The mirror was mocking me.

I could see myself and all I could see is hate. My body is pale and fat. My eyes are brown and boring. My hair is brown and looks like dead grass. Most noticeably is the bulge in my stomach from the cracker I had eaten. I hadn't eaten anything that day and I promised my mother I'd grab a snack.

I ate too much. 13 calories too much. I'll have to add fifty more sit-ups to my work out tonight to make up for what I ate.

Then there's the problem of dinner. Tonight is lasagna and that's too many carbs. It'd go right to my thighs. 166 calories to my thighs which would destroy my thigh gap of one and a half inches. My gap is finally bigger than Ana's.

"I'll just say I'm not feeling well," I whispered while pinching the skin on my stomach. "If they make me eat I'll throw it up and take some laxatives." My plan is flawless.

I gaze at the mirror and study the reflection I'm ashamed to say is mine. My body is so fat. I run my fingers across my ribcage and count only three ribs that are visible. Ana has me beat there; she has four showing. My thigh gap is growing and when I walk less fat jiggles on my legs. But there's still fat. "One hundred more squats," I say slapping my leg, "and an extra mile this weekend."

I turn my back to the mirror and crane my neck around to see my shoulder blades. They look like spikes jutting from my back. I press my shoulders blades together and a roll of skin rises up in-between. I pinch it in my grip and pull it from my spine, frowning.

I shouldn't have eaten that cracker.

My hand falls to my side and I bend over to see my spinal columns rise from my back. They rise like spines and I can see the back of my ribcage with little trouble. I grip my side and yank until I have a fistful of fat. Too fat. Too fat.

Looking down I see a roll from my stomach and I grip that, too. My knuckles grow white as I try to pull myself out of my skin. The fat won't go away. It's sticking to me, swarming me and it won't leave. I don't eat, I exercise when I can, I'm careful

with my habits and yet it's still under my skin leaving me ugly and—

Fat.

A tear drips from my cheek and I turn to stare into the mirror again. I stare at my reflection with a surge of anger spiking my blood. Why do I have to be so ugly? Why can't I be pretty? Why must I suffer?

I'm sitting on the tiled floor and my wrist is bleeding before I can think again. The blade is in my hand, red along the edge and five horizontal lines bloom red from my wrist. I don't remember grabbing my blade, but I leave them everywhere in the house just in case this happens.

My legs and arms are pale from past kisses with a blade. Most of my older cuts were healing and almost gone, I could almost wear short-sleeves again, but that was a silly hope. I knew I'd break again and my arms would become another canvas.

The beads of blood have stopped forming and are already clotting. I still feel nothing. And everything. I feel the hatred that my thoughts can't voice aloud and the anger and sadness and numbness is boiling over inside my head. They are screaming to get out, my voice crying for a relief while my chest tightens from silent sobs and my eyes squint from the stinging in my eyes.

The blade slides across my wrist again and again and again until my arm is smeared red and the wringing in my ears vanishes. The skin around my cuts sting and burn and the numbness is starting to reside. The ache in my chest grows. I continue to slash.

My left arm is on fire and puffy from the cuts. The blood is pooling in my elbow and dripping onto the floor. My head feels light from the sight of so much blood leaving my body again. Shit, I lie down on the floor as dots and lights flash behind my eyelids. I can't pass out. No one can find me like this.

Gritting my teeth, the lights behind my eyes stop flashing and a cold tingle runs through my hands and fingers, sparking a trigger of pain from my arm. I sit up, relieved and place the blade on the counter, readying myself to stand. My body sways and stumbles from the switch of sitting to standing, but I breathe in and begin my clean up.

I grab the blade and rinse with water and wash it with soap for later use. I dry it and put it back into my drawer. I look down at my arm and judge the damage. This

won't heal for a while. The cuts are long and wrap almost entirely around my arm. They start at the base of my hand and go to my elbow. I'm going to be sore the next few days.

Reluctantly, I grab a washcloth and wet it with water before dabbing the length of my arm, holding my breath to keep from whimpering. I'm such a baby. I can mutilate my arm without much thought, but the clean-up hurts like a bitch. Ironic.

After the blood is washed away and all that's left are raised lacerations, swollen and red, I nod with approval of my handiwork and search for a cloth to wrap my arm with. The cotton from my clothes will stick to the wounds and make it irritated and increase chance of infection. Plus, I don't want blood on my clothes. I find the cloth wrap and exhale before wrapping my arm securely and velcroing the material together. As long as I wear baggy sweatshirts no one will notice my unequal arm size.

I slip my clothes back on and wipe the floor free of my blood and scrub the counter of any stray droplets. It takes me ten minutes, but finally I'm pleased with the outcome and scurry from the bathroom to my bedroom. I dive under the covers, turn off the light and wait for my mom to try to drag me from bed for dinner.

A knock sounds from the door.

"Dinner is ready," Mom whispers into the darkness of my room.

"I'm not hungry." My arm burns from moving my blankets.

A sigh. "Not feeling well again, sweetheart?"

"Yeah, I just don't feel well. Sorry."

"That's alright. Get some rest, sweetie." The door closes.

I roll onto my side and close my eyes. My body is already exhausted from earlier and my muscles want to rest. I push the blankets from my bed and get onto the floor, wincing from the twinge in my arm.

"Just a hundred sit-ups and fifty squats, then I can sleep." I say to the dark.

Three hundred sit-ups and a hundred-fifty squats later I'm lying in bed with my body burning and dozing to the sound of my rapid heartbeat.

On the screen before you, a child rests on stone steps, head tilted down, towards a cobblestone pathway. The stones snake between graves, all unmarked: blank placeholders for the missing and forgotten dead. A small vermilion banner hangs from his neck, bearing a military insignia. He wears a soldier's uniform.

His face is blank, and as his eyes wash idly over the scene, he begins to sing, something like a prayer.

*Walk on, wandering souls,  
for your respite, we pray,  
Let our humble song  
clear your hearts of dis-may*

You set your controller down, wondering to God how a fictional boy's voice could bring about such genuine feelings.

\*\*\*

Sunlight reaches across the water, grasping for you. The October air is cold, and the bitter lake breeze makes it colder. About twenty feet in front of you, the rock surface drops off, leading to a tumble that could certainly end you. You look into the sky, the beautiful, golden-hour sky, and for the very first time...

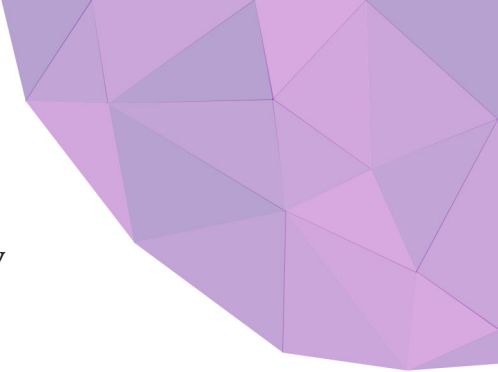
You do not see God. You see something that, to you, means so much more.

You see something beautiful, something far greater than you could ever aspire to be. You feel the mountaintop air currents enwrap you, envelop you. The air is clean and pure, a blessed scent that you've never experienced before. The sunlight bathes each tree, each rock, casting shadows that confound and amaze you.

But, for the very first time, you do not feel God. It feels profoundly amazing, and awesomely inspiring.

And it feels so, so alone.

And you sing.



Walk on, wandering soul,  
for your respite, we pray,  
Let our humble song,  
clear your heart of dis-may

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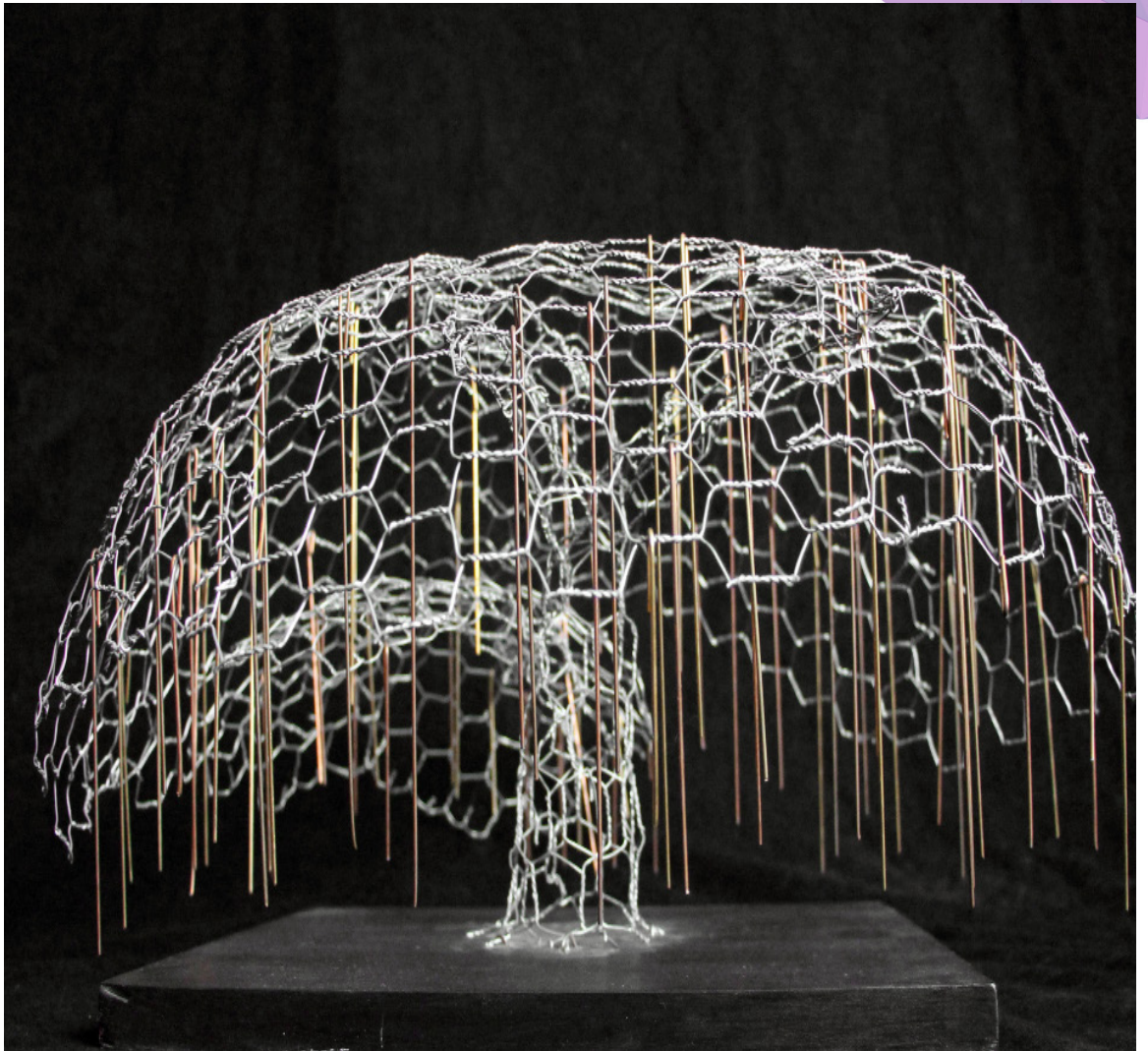
You suppose this is what passes for praying, now.

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The child on the screen lies motionless, among debris, near a hole blast into the wall. His vermillion banner, torn and burnt, flutters in the ashen wind, hung from a spear piercing the ground. Among him lie eleven other children, bearing similar banners, similarly torn.

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There is no one left to sing.  
Only you, here. Alone.



# What If I Fall?

Sarah Ganion

My toes teased the ledge, heels resting on solid stone warmed by the sun. I could feel the wind stirring up from the wide river running miles below. My lips formed the words and pushed out the question again. “What if I fall...”

I didn’t expect an answer. The landscape was untouched, about as far from anywhere as one could get. It was quiet, too. Any birds who lived all the way out here knew enough to keep to themselves. So the woods and the cliffside were nearly silent, except for the breeze. It wasn’t pretty, exactly, but it was something close to that. Not beautiful, either. Serene and too large for me to encompass with a single word. I told myself this was how she would have gone. She had always spoken of nature in a loving way, as if it was closer to her heart than home. I asked her why, once, and she replied with a laugh. Can’t you see? Over there, look. Now here. There’s something new and wonderful anywhere you turn. I returned her happiness with a laugh of my own, knowing that her faith in fresh air and open sky would never break.

But then it did. The radiant joy she emanated was only ever as strong as her will, and that had shattered in a single moment too sudden to be painful.

At this point my mind was lost in an unforgiving howling abyss only slightly different from the one that was a mere step away. Why was I thinking of this now, though? I was done. She couldn’t tell me “please, no” anymore or push aside the shattering calls of water and rock far below. My hands were shaking, fingers trembling into tentative fists. I looked up and squinted into the sun. Perhaps its almighty, suspended, impersonal glow would give me a reason to step away. I asked again, fiercely and frustrated. “What if I fall?”

Nothing. One question, no answer. Would any response be good enough? I opened my mouth to ask but then remembered— one question was all I got. My knees bent, and I inhaled, exhaled, breathed, prepared... but then the cliffside spoke. It was less like a voice and more like a pulsing rumble that quaked from solid rock into my miniscule humanity. If you fell. There would be two less feet in this world. One heart among many would cease to beat. The insignificant smallness of all life would become even more miniscule. Perhaps after a time the mountains themselves would finally collapse. Grounds might give way. Certainty could crumble. Falling now would mean

an end of something and the start of a lesser otherwise.

The thunderous words faded away, and I almost stumbled off the ledge in pure shock. My thoughts raced and tried to catch up with my stuttering heart and quaking knees. “How could that be true at all?” I asked, no, screamed, into the solid brown stone beneath my feet. “Everything is already crumbling. Perhaps what it needs is a little push. This ending isn’t nearly as devastating as you seem to think it is.” I waited for the cliff to speak up again, but it seemed to have finished. Or maybe I was going insane. I’d never been one to hear voices; that was always her. She told me of the robins that gossiped about the weather and trees who told stories with the movements of their branches. This felt different from her tales, though— it certainly seemed real, and the mountain was definitely not making simple small talk. Probably my mind’s last defense against the long fall, yet it had come too late. “I’ve made my decision. Anything else got something to say? I have places to be...” I sardonically spread my arms wide and surveyed the landscape.

To my uttermost surprise, another voice spoke up. This time it was the wind. It did not quake but instead whispered, the piercing words teasing through my hair and clothes. This day of surrender could be final, it is true, but why choose now? Imagine the living you will miss, think of this, the breeze, the sky, the stone, the water. Is it not all worth seeing again and again for a limited eternity? Your forever is already small enough, do not make your future fade and turn the “will-haves” into “might-have-beens.”

After this howling rush dissipated, I rocked back on my heels. “There... there isn’t really anything here I need to stay and see. Other people can appreciate life, sure, but not me. I’ll be fine not seeing anything beautiful again. I tried holding on to some for a bit, and now it’s gone. No replacement would be good enough.” My feet shuffled forwards, perhaps a bit slower than before. I looked down and saw the great river, its blues and greens sparkling upwards to greet any lonely eyes that cared to look. “I suppose you have an opinion too?” The river’s shine grew brighter. It began to speak in ebbs and flows, the crashing waves giving meaning to its current. Already you are learning. See the paths that lives can follow? They are so temporary, and yet contain nearly everything. There are many things you could have done but chose not to do, and this is good simply because it is now. Who are you to say if anything could have

come to be better? All one can do is move and flow to whatever rhythm they can hear. Do not stop dancing simply because you cannot feel a beat.

I took one step away from the ledge, then another. Arguing with nature was difficult. This felt too large for one soul, and my thoughts were a tangled mess of confusion and grief in equal parts. “Marianne...” Her name, set loose from my lips on a stuttered breath. It left my mouth like she left the world, quiet and broken to pieces. My fingertips lightly brushed the scar across my chest—the only outward indication that anything had shattered. I knew she would have loved to be here, surrounded by the joyful quiet of nature. She made me promise long ago to visit a place like this, so I took her out one summer weekend to a forested campsite. It was serene with just us and the occasional creature watching from a distance. As we left she told me of her grand dream to live among the trees and stars forever. Once she was gone I buried her there. It was unfair to have an imagining so partially realized and then taken away more suddenly than the moment it takes for a quiet echo to fade into nothing. But does that matter, now? I would never know. My one question was gone.

I didn’t say anything. The stone, wind, and waves had fallen silent. They were waiting. So was I. Another moment passed, and I turned around. The walk away from the edge almost felt harder than trying to step off.

# There's a Temple on the Back of my Head

Emily Fladung

There's a temple on the back of my head,  
and though I never saw it built,  
I know it strongly stands.  
Watch how the faithful enter there  
and raise their hands  
in faithful prayer.  
and offer up their guilt.

There's an ocean on the back of my head,  
and though I never saw it fill,  
I know it rages tooth and nail.  
watch how the sailors dip their crafts.  
They drop their sails  
against the drafts,  
but can't escape the chill.

Those sailors drink liquor dry  
and think they drown in peace.  
Those faithful gaze into the font  
and think they cupped the sea

But I have passed those doors both ways.  
Its changed, and changed again, my form.  
I learned to wake from incense dreams.  
I learned to ride the eye of the storm.



# A Mother's Cancer - Through the eyes of her child

Tiffany Kafer

May 4, 2015 will be a date I will not soon forget, for it was the date that cancer entered my life.

My day started out the same as it always did, wake up the kids, get everyone dressed and out of the house for school. It wasn't until I called my dad in the afternoon for our daily chat that I figured out something was wrong.

His voice was different, something was weighing on him, something he wanted to keep hidden. Me, being my overly inquisitive self, wouldn't let it go, and after asking over and over again what was wrong, finally he admitted during my mom's yearly physical her doctor found a lump and she was getting it checked out.

I can still remember the tightening in my chest as I tried to steady my voice and hold back the tears. I struggled to find the right words to say, and in the moment I knew our lives would forever be changed.

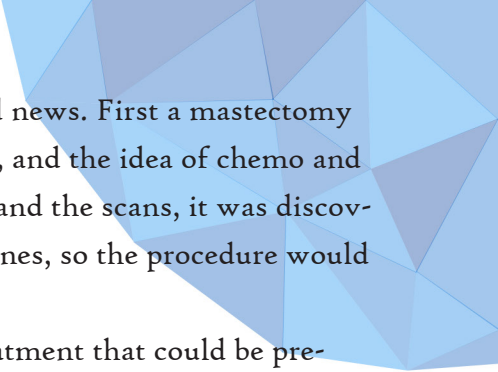
Before I could speak, my mom came home and took the phone. She told me she had scheduled a mammogram and an ultrasound for the next day, but not to worry because she was going to be fine. I remember thinking, how could I not worry, my mind was racing, and I tried to hold it together as best as I could without thinking the worst.

The next few days were a blur, mammogram, ultrasound, biopsy, long weekend, Happy Mother's Day-I wondered if it would be her last-then finally Tuesday came, and the results were in.

Those two words no one ever wants to hear, "it's cancer."

All of my fears came true, my emotions came crashing down upon me, and I was numb. I remember wondering where do we go from here, what's next, how can we beat this, and what if we can't?

I've never been one to get all emotional, and sad. I've always skipped right to anger, and why would this time be any different? I was mad; mad that it was cancer, mad that we found out on my daughter's birthday; and mad that one day I may have to deal with this myself.



The upcoming days seemed to bring on more bad news. First a mastectomy was discussed and we discussed how hard that would be, and the idea of chemo and hair loss. With more results coming in from the biopsy and the scans, it was discovered her stage 4 breast cancer had metastasized to her bones, so the procedure would be pointless.

Her doctor suggested a new, fairly expensive treatment that could be prescribed in pill form, and at that point she told us her goal was to keep my mom alive for as long as possible and as comfortable as she could be.

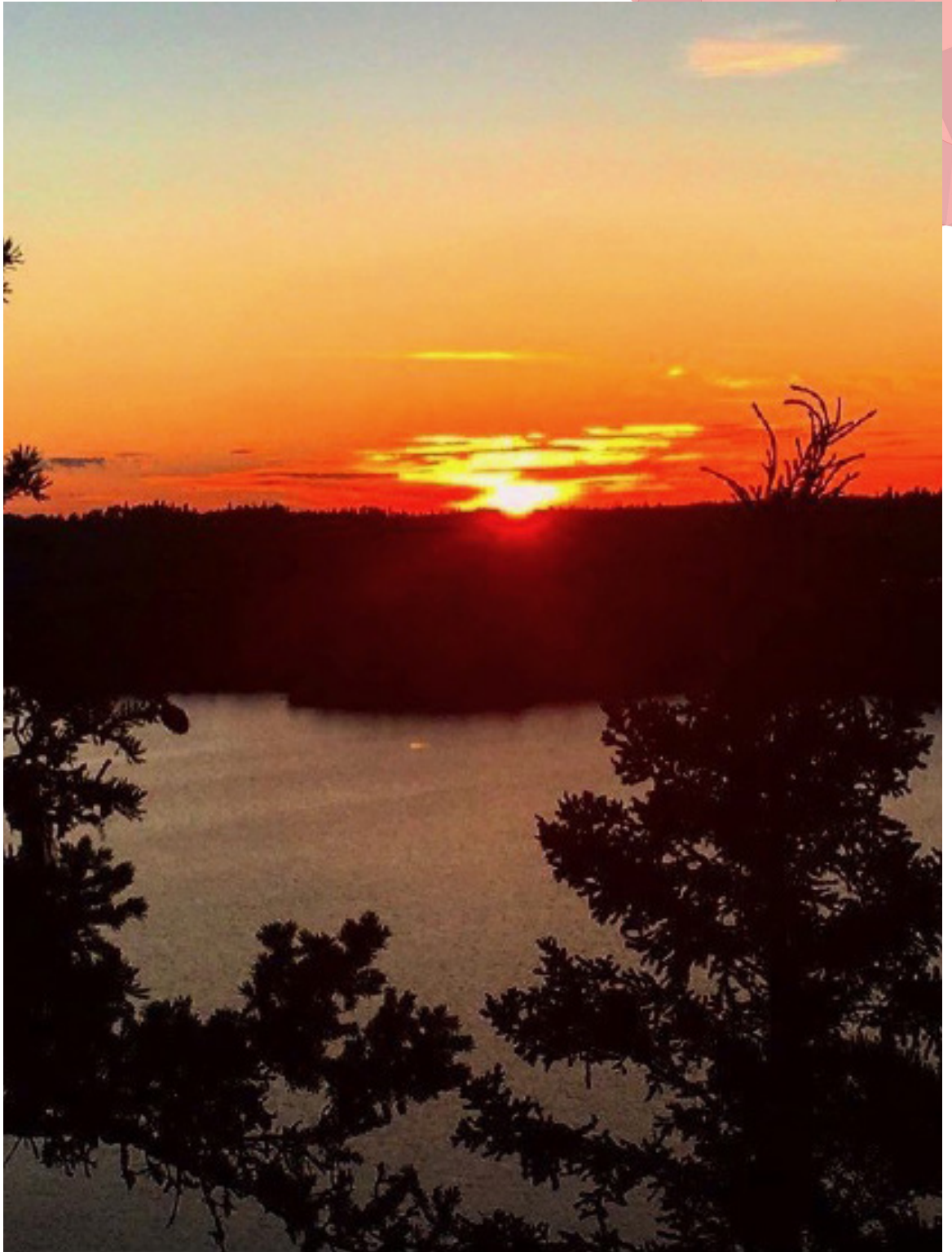
At the age of 32 with four small children, hearing your mom will be kept alive for as long as possible was a hard pill to swallow. There were so many things that she would miss; graduations, weddings, proms, and birthdays. It was a lot for me to think about in that moment.

Well, it turned out the new pill produced results we never thought were possible, and less than seven months later, a PET scan revealed no active cancer, and no new cancer. It seemed as though the pills worked, the prayers helped, and we had won the fight.

Now, almost two and a half years later, and still in remission, we are thankful. We are thankful for all of the support from my mom's care team at Allina Health, thankful for all of the prayers for our family, and thankful for the pills that took away the cancer and let us keep our mom, wife and grandma.

Since her diagnosis she hasn't missed a birthday. She witnessed two more grandchildren welcomed into this world, and she watched her youngest daughter, my sister, walk down the aisle and marry the man of her dreams.

Today, like yesterday, and all of the days since my life was touched by cancer, I am thankful to be the child of a survivor.



## It's

It's not about our oceans and shores, Littered with our disrespect, life  
a dark effervescent, It's about not looking the other away. It's not  
about the devastation to forest, air, and species, discarded like  
trash, our awareness diminishing, It's about seeing value.

It's not about technology or guns, or conglomerates;  
scapegoats that blanket the world, It's about our  
culpability. It's not about race, or religion,  
the covenant humanity carries forward,

It's about opening our minds. It's  
not about the man in the street,

with his life in a cart,

It's about people

who see. It's

about,

You.



