

# THE RAPIDS REVIEW 2025



SPLIT ROCK LIGHTHOUSE  
TWO HARBORS, MN

# The Rapids Review 2025

A Publication of Anoka-Ramsey Community College's  
Creative Writing Club

## *The Rapids Review* Mission Statement:

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

## A Note from the Editor:

My snowy cat Qanuk rubs against my face as I type, her white hairs loitering on the keys of my Dell laptop. She's my own assistant editor, supervising my tiny edits with an aloof stare, both of her paws resting on my dominant hand. It's *Ratatouille*-esque, except the scene takes place in a cluttered bedroom in Minnesota, not a highly rated restaurant in Paris. Yet, even as she bounds away through the midnight-cloaked door, I am grateful for her invaluable help.

I believe I speak for everyone involved in *The Rapids Review* when I say that we are overjoyed to share our work with you. Every step forward on this journey has been exciting, even when that road came with winter-carved potholes, spring sicknesses, time-constraint mountains, sleepless nights, and no small amount of stress. I'm grateful for our team's invaluable assistance, the people at ARCC who keep this publication going, and our community of fans. Thank you for making our dreams possible.

Sincerely,

*Daisy Johnston*

Front Cover: *Autumn Afternoon at Split Rock*, Jessica Hanson

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\*=Indicates Editors' Choice Award Recipients

# Falling

By Isaiah Rogers

---

The wind nipped my face, cooling the tears around my eyes.  
Leaves rustled softly around like small orange whirlwinds.  
My feet tapped slowly on the bridge as water swirled  
a few dozen feet beneath. As I leaned against  
the rusted rail and stared out at the trees,  
the water, all shining like the stars in the  
night sky, I dreamed about how it would  
feel to fall. The rush of wind, crack of  
bone, the cold of the water, the pain,  
the wait. The aftermath, a hospital.  
If they took too long, a grave.  
I performed for myself  
a circus; a tightrope  
in an empty tent.  
Water filled my  
lungs, eyes.  
Not unlike  
a dream  
to fall  
and-

Yet I woke up.

# A Truck Driver Broke My Heart

By Eric Linder

---

She was a belching truck driver who crushed Five-Hour Energy drinks and hearts. Riding shotgun from one pit stop to another, I watched as liquid stress perspired from her forehead like sweaty rain. The biggest mistake I made was thinking I could be her destination.

*I ain't looking for no stack of bricks out of you good buddy,* she said, while gas station taquitos from inside her mouth showered the car's floor.

I called her a Lot Lizard, pointing out the yellow stains on her white t-shirt and the litter spilling from her cupholders and mouth. I didn't see her hand until it covered my face, leaving a sting that made my lips throb as I rode the Greyhound home.

I keep looking back, forcing myself to remember, so I can confront the truth about who she really is and finally let her go. The rants I expected to resent now resonate with raw authenticity, and where I thought her crudeness would push me away, I instead found myself admiring her shamelessness—how she was freer than I ever could be. I wonder whether she's paying the water bill, reading the mail, or roaming Wally World to trick another poor man into thinking she's interested—and that he's enough.

# How to Create the Perfect Morning with a Broken Mug

By Saad Ali

---

Begin with the quiet of the kettle. Repeat it three times—  
an affirmation rumbled under your breath.

This morning is your own — this morning is only yours.  
before email piles up, before the world awakens.

Pick up your favored cup,  
the one with a brown glaze and chips in its edges,  
one that nobody else would dare to use.  
Don't hesitate to take it all at face value, the power in its wounds.

Let's say it applies every morning you've ever experienced:  
frigid coffees, Sundays, deadlines into the night.  
Let's suppose this mug has seen it all —  
its crinkled edge, a souvenir, a personal diary.

Pour the coffee; let the steam flow—  
gift, a prayer in the dawn.  
Draw your finger into the hairline crack and push it in.  
It proudly bears this wound, as do you.

Perhaps a year ago, in the dead of winter, it broke.  
But you preserved it, repaired it, left it the way it is.  
To love is to realize that something is imperfect,  
but to have it each morning, nonetheless.

Drink off the edge, chew the soft rim—  
each day an unspoken rebellion against vulnerability.

You know it might crack, but it doesn't.  
And this is how you get through the every-day rain:

Accept the cracks first. Then drink slowly,  
as if you were drinking coffee for the first time.  
Even on the hundredth, let the flames burn.  
Bring in the fresh morning air through the window.

Look how the crack reflects back to you, stubborn—  
a scar that doesn't stand in your way.  
So when the world churns, when noise presses in, just listen.  
you're already fortified, already whole.

# Consider What Was Once So Honest

By Barbara Goodboe-Bisschoff

---

Philosophers may agree,  
we have mutilated the world.  
The world of laughing seas,  
and glacier-filled mountains.  
Of rural fields of by-gone grain,  
and bubbling streams.

They may say there were demons at play,  
and Revelation is on the horizon.  
Throngs of silent observers,  
blind to all the beauty that abounds,  
look to the silence on the roads,  
and lack of birds flying overhead.

Remember a simple childhood,  
a million miles away.  
Consider what was once so honest,  
is now in total decay.  
Think back on dreams of yesteryear,  
and put them in perspective.

Now turn around with eyes wide-open,  
and see life for what it is.  
Now take the time to smile and laugh,  
and find the truth herein.  
Now cherish the childhood memories,  
but leave them in their place.

# Confinement

By Greta Cady

---

I gaze out my bedroom window—  
the world looks so bland from here.  
The houses all wear the same sad expression on their pale faces,  
the lamp post exhausted from its repetitive, restrictive daily  
schedule.  
I see the street disappear into the distance,  
but I am convinced it leads to a dead end with no escape.  
If I go too far,  
the road will swallow me whole  
and spit me out right back into my dark,  
cold room, where I spend my time daydreaming  
about the world beyond.  
The snow on the ground sits there,  
soaking in its own misery,  
just waiting for its life to be brought to an end.  
I can relate to the grass that lies beneath the snow.  
We are both restricted and suffocated,  
patiently waiting to see brighter days,  
waiting for the world to be revealed once again,  
its vivid colors blooming with life.  
I feel as if I'm trapped in a snow globe,  
with people inspecting me,  
my world so small that the maker could only fit the most minimal  
detail.  
I sit here, counting the seconds until I can break free,  
until the snow globe shatters  
and the world outside bursts in,  
vibrant and alive.

# A Cup of Mud

By Emma Folska

---

Where I pour a dark roast,  
steam rises with a

w  
h  
i  
s  
p  
e  
r

of a memory that I can't paint.  
While the mug warms my hand,  
its heat can't reach my chilled soul.  
An image of you, eyes locked on this  
same ceramic hug, bent in pain from a  
silent threat that wouldn't care for  
goodbyes. *The news and some mud,*  
*how I begin my mornings and end my*  
*nights!* You still said, smiling  
through the sting of that thorn.  
That was our last night together,  
brewing some coffee, deciding  
if you want any of my creamer.  
You said that if I found joy in it, you'd follow suit, savoring it as I did.  
That was the last night light danced in my cup,  
now, my coffee runs black.

# Sour

By Emma Helmer

---

Wake up far too early  
for today or any day really,  
an orange ripped  
from the tree before earning  
its color, appearing  
as some strangely large lime.

A testament to a lack  
of patience, a desire  
to rip the umbilical cord,  
die in utero.

We had our time.  
I'd like to have it back.

Turn off the blaring,  
pulsating alarm which  
ruptures ear drums.  
Remember to stretch the membrane  
back across them later.

Eyes roll far back  
as they absorb, fading  
into the skull,  
leaving an empty hole.  
Ignore years of history  
that once served their purpose  
turned sour.

Can't go back—maybe

I'll disappear instead.  
Skin fades away,  
leaving nothing behind  
but a stain on the bed  
that says, "I was here."

# Empty Vase

By Maya Scianna

---

Tears fell down your pink cheeks, buttercup flowers wilted in my fragile hands.

You were not mine to take, only to lose.

You said you couldn't meet my unreasonable demands,  
but it was all just a ruse.

You were a library book to check out,  
to return. I was the translucent flower vase  
that existed to contain liquid, but without a doubt,  
those flowers would soon dry out and go to waste, out of place.

I was the glass that shattered;  
my water always slipped through the cracks,  
but none of that mattered.

So she knocked me down with an axe,  
and became the soil where you continue to grow,  
but I hope you know, I was able to take the blow.

# The Author's Autobiography

By Lily Homan

---

Stories dance across our mind's eye,  
miniature movie reels only we can process.  
But our attempts at transcription falter,  
as limp as overcooked noodles.

They can only wonder about us  
and the things we envision.

What gives us the audacity  
to spin worlds like sugar  
but never divulge?

Shivering in Narnian cold,  
they traverse this world  
unaware of the warmth missing:  
the blaze of creativity that's cupped  
within our mittens, unshared,  
and afraid of being devoured  
by the mundane.

We hole up, snuggling in our nooks,  
oblivious to our access to golden sunlight  
as we wait for the coming snowfall  
required to strike our genius.

# This Sadness

By Norah Lee Parker

---

You are trying to make it through college and  
I am complaining that my meds don't work anymore and  
I spent January on the couch.

You are trying to make a life for yourself.  
Eat when you're supposed to, sleep when you're supposed to,  
always stay neat and kind.

And I am spilling my guts out gracelessly and  
wrestling with this life that I have to live.  
I am not like you but I wish I was.

You say *I love you* but what if you mean *I'm so glad I did not end up like  
you*.  
You live so gracefully, so purposefully. And  
I am throwing receipts on the floor and pulling my hair out.

This sadness has etched itself into my skin and  
lines my fingerprints like dirt.  
I can hear it ringing in my ears every night as I try to sleep.

# My Mother's Glasses

By Anisa Ali

---

My mother's glasses are sturdy black frames.  
The lenses are thin and dainty,  
secured inside the circular structure.

These glasses have been in her life longer than I.  
They have seen her college sorority days, her lovely  
summer wedding with my father, and have even been present  
At in the hospital rooms where my six siblings and I emerged from.

Yet, these glasses were not present when my mother needed  
guidance.

When she had to flee Somalia, she saw horrors  
and terrors through blurred eyes, and the  
streams of tears were not helpful.

Her glasses were not there when she came to an  
American Society, where being thick and black was not  
acceptable.

I have always seen these glasses in my life, they  
were the first Lenses I saw when I came into  
this world. Every visit to my crib,  
Parent Pickup drop offs, and all the way to my first day of high  
school.

I have seen anger behind these glasses, tears, and  
wrinkles from smiling. My mother's glasses guide her,

the same way she guides me.

Even though they have not been there her whole life, she has been for mine. She is the sturdy, black frame of my life, offering me a dainty outlook into this world.

# Thirst

By Fatima Syeda

---

The old faucet is dripping—

*Drip,*

*Drip,*

*Drip,*

I stare at the *Drip*.

Taunting me to give in—

to just take one poisonous sip.

My tongue is covered in an invisible dust,

and stuck to the roof of my mouth—

like a desert that has forgotten the taste of water,

but not its unquenchable yearning.

I can hear the whispers of water flowing within the walls.

I can hear the groaning of old, rusted pipes—

a plentiful haven just out of my reach.

I imagine pressing my lips to the faucet,

taking a long and desperate sip.

The water would flow between my teeth and under my tongue,

then gush down the hollows of my throat—

a waterfall surrendering to the fall.

I imagine it flooding down to my stomach,

bringing my organs back to life...and then death.

I look at the water with an indescribable yearning—

like a lost child searching for his mother on a dark night;

the way a caged bird aching to spread out its wings and meet the sky;

like a forgotten soul craving for human touch.

I lick my dry, cracked lips—

cratered like the surface of the moon;

shedding like a hairy cat;  
dry like an abandoned carcass.  
I can taste the blood from my lips pooling on the edge of my tongue  
Metallic.  
I hover my hand around the faucet  
knowing, knowing knowing—  
the moment I turn that handle,  
the moment I give in, I will not be able to stop.

# How to Make a Paper Boat

By Karen Yang

---

First, find a piece of paper.  
Press flat with your palms.

Then, fold the paper, let your  
mind take over, let it captain  
your moves like the captain of  
your soon-to-be boat.

Listen hard to the *schlifffff* of  
the paper as you drag your  
nail down the creases.  
Drown out the waves of  
conversation around you.  
Let your heartbeat anchor you.  
Focus on folding up the bow of your  
boat in place, instead of the tsunami  
of bodies swelling and rippling  
around you.

Lastly, pull out the sides of the paper,  
reveal your boat.  
Hold on to it tight,  
use it to evacuate.  
To float away.

# City Tree

By Mayr Boros

---

City tree, city tree, what do you see?  
I see the world just looking at me;

Little ones, little ones, walking all around,  
Some from many nations, all on common ground;

City tree, city tree, what do you hear?  
I hear the Chickadee, her mystic voice so clear;

Little ones, little ones, harsh words make me ache,  
They stick tight to my leaves and I begin to shake;

City tree, city tree, what do you smell?  
I smell a bakery; it fills the air a-swell;

Little ones, little ones, pollution lives so long,  
Waste clings to my branches, the air today is wrong;

City tree, city tree, do you need my care?  
Wrap your arms around me, without you, I am bare!

# Secret Stationary Stationery Sex

By Daisy Johnstun

---

Inspired by Sara Littlecrow Russell's Poem *I Will Take Anyone to Bed (Poetically Speaking)*

I will take anyone to bed, materially speaking, of course.

I'm inseparable from colorful Post-it notes as I lustily mark them up on my desk,

with one eagerly waiting its turn when I've finished my crazed, quick strokes.

I've solicited shockingly nude pages from shy notebooks that tremble as I fill their insides with my powerful ink.

I crave the thick, gripped feel of a Paper Mate Ink Joy gel 0.7 in my grasp,

but if I'm not careful, it'll blister my palm from the dry friction.

I lust after elongated, slim pencils that range in color and size: pale, ridged, tipped, textured, they all beg for my fingers regardless.

The mechanicals take my lead and I shake them to their core, while old-school ones must be pinned down as I carve into their bodies.

Dirty visions of crisp, bare, clean, snowy papers control my head;

I have the naughtiest ideas on how to ruin their image with my careful caresses.

A playboy of all trades, I woo highlighters into my bed,

where we take turns feeling up a book, exploring secrets and fantasies.

I handle addictive, heady-smelling Sharpies with extreme care, as they might leave unwanted proof of their existence on me.

I stroke the whiteboard in my room, teasing it along all edges as I constantly jot, pet, and leave my traces along its body.

I long for the sharp shears that smoothly, sexily scissor just for me, the tapes that reveal just how I like to restrain things against my walls,

and the erasers that I bang ferociously to hide my mistakes.

This stationary stationery is my secret sex life.

# The Train of Thought

By Aurora Monthony

---

The train of thought was not a linear thing. It made many stops, picking up an array of colorful passengers along the way. It followed no track, and it rarely stayed in one spot for too long. It must have been a magical thing, for it appeared just when one needed it, heralded by its equally abnormal conductor named Reginald. “Hop aboard!” he’d call as the train descended from nowhere and left again for everywhere. “Off we go, Constance!” were his departing words, said as he straightened his monocle and affectionately patted the train. No one had ever seen another person engineering the train, so they had to assume Constance simply was the train itself, cheerfully honking its horn as it set off again. By all accounts, it had to be sentient in some way, for no one ever saw Reginald actually driving the train.

He’d walk down the aisles, tipping his hat to his guests, punching tickets (which seemed to materialize out of thin air the moment he called for them), and adjusting his ever-changing tie. In fact, he must have had a collection of ties so large it could fill an entire train car on its own! However, strangely, though his tie design changed with every blink, no passenger had ever seen the swap. Every so often, a bell would ding, its source indistinguishable, and Reginald would smile and say, “Teatime!” At this, he would remove his conductor’s hat and reach in, pulling out a teacup which was full to the brim with tea, and taking a long sip. “Ahhh, that’s the stuff,” he would say approvingly, and put the teacup back into his hat. Then, he would tip the hat back onto his head. Not once did the tea ever spill down his head, and not once did he ever seem to refill it, yet it was always full the next time he took it out.

Stranger still, the teacup was not the only thing which resided in his hat. Occasionally, Reginald would frown and reach for his cap, which had begun to squirm. "Well, well, Dandelion," he'd say fondly as he removed a small, white rabbit from the hat (which seemed to hold no special pockets nor was it large enough to hold both a rabbit and a teacup), "I suppose you can come out and play." The rabbit was quite a hit with the passengers, who were easily swayed by its big ears and quizzical face. Quite often, Reginald would hand the rabbit, which was quite tame and friendly, to a nearby child and ask if they'd mind watching him for a while. When the small rabbit had worn himself out, Reginald would again remove his hat and replace the rabbit back inside, which always startled some people, but Reginald assured them he was quite content. Then, whistling casually, he would walk off.

If he was ever in a hurry, he was quite good at pretending he was not, for he never seemed to rush anywhere, no matter the occasion. Of course, nobody who rode the Train of Thought was ever late to where they needed to be, no matter how far of a journey they had to make. Should a passenger look out the window, they would be surprised to see a rather uneventful landscape looking back, though never one which was quite the same upon second glance. Ask the conductor about any of this, and he would simply chuckle and say, "Well, you can't expect it to wait around for you, now, can you?" In fact, any question asked would be answered in a similarly whimsical and vague fashion, with few exceptions.

One such exception was the answer to what would happen if one were to break Reginald's rules, of which there were just two; don't stick your arms out the window while moving, and don't try to get to the back of the train. To this, his face would darken, and his tone would grow serious. "You could get lost," he would say ominously, "like Terrence, and who knows how long it could take to find you." When asked who Terrence was, and what exactly happened to him, he would shrug and say, "He was a rule-breaker. I

warned him not to try to go to the back of the train, but he could not be stopped. I tried to find him, of course, but it was too late. He could not be found.” No further questioning revealed any useful information, so the passengers simply had to wonder. Perhaps, some did not entirely believe him, but none were quite curious enough to test it out for themselves.

There was just one other question to which Reginald’s face would grow so somber. If asked what his middle name was, he would shudder and say, “Ah, it’s dreadful. Horribly embarrassing.” Further questioning would reveal his wish for it to be Octavius, and even further prodding, though not many were willing to go that far, could drag his real middle name from him. “Ugh, fine, it’s Bob, but you can’t tell anyone, alright? I’ll be ruined if word gets out about such a thing!” On this matter, no one could understand just what, exactly, made Bob such a burdensome middle name, but regardless, Reginald’s mind could not be changed.

His age, too, was nebulous, though he had to be older than dirt if his stories of living alongside the dragons, or even the invention of teacups, were to be at all believed. Of course, even if they were not, the fastest way to end a train ride was to ask his exact age. “Old enough” was his first response, but if pressed, he would say “Oh, those units of time are so finnick. I’d love to tell you, but your stop is here! Hope you come by again soon!” and sure enough, the train had pulled to a stop at their exact destination. “Toodle-oo!” was his goodbye as the befuddled passengers exited. The train would then lift off and fly away, disappearing behind a tree as it went. No amount of checking behind the tree made any difference either, as the train and all its occupants had come and gone, never to be seen again until the next time someone out there needed to go someplace else.

# Tulips and Children

By Mackenzie Fischer

Audience Trigger Warning: Child Loss

---

My finger brushes against the fierce pink petals, delicately firm and smooth against my skin. In the center lies a small golden circle of pollen. The wind blowing through the garden bends the green stems. A slight chill hovers in the air, as the last remnants of winter stubbornly hang on. The flowers are healthy, growing under my love and care. They are my friends, and, like any good friend would do, they listen to my dreams and regrets, as well as keep the one secret I've never told anyone.

The tulips are bending in unison, like an orchestra preparing to play their first song. They probably know more about me than I do.

The roots, thin stems, and pink petals know about the dreadful doctor's visit all those months ago. They know about the tests that were performed and the fateful call in the middle of the night. The flowers had drooped with me as I fell to the ground, tears down my face and clutching my phone tightly in my hand. They were the one source of comfort I had in that nightmare of a time.

Today is watering day. I wrap my hand around the curved handle of my rusty watering can. Blue paint is coming off in small specks. I tilt the watering can and the water comes out in a cool rush, seeping into the nutrient-rich soil. I tap a finger against the dark brown dirt, feeling the slight moisture, a sign that enough water has been given.

"Addy, your tulips are fine," a tenor voice speaks from behind

me. “We gotta get going.”

“Just give me a couple minutes,” I reply, my lips twisting into a slight frown. The thought of leaving my tulips leaves me with a heavy stone in my stomach. I’ve put in a lot of work and time into making sure they grew into the strong, healthy flowers that they are now. Leaving them feels wrong. Besides, I haven’t finished watering them yet.

“Addy.” The voice draws out the *y*.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to keep the insult brewing in my head from leaving my mouth. I know that Seth means well, but sometimes I wish he would understand the feeling I get whenever I leave my tulips.

I turn to face Seth, my best friend who I met in college and my coworker, tucking a strand of chestnut hair behind my ear as I do so.

“Do I have to?” The question comes out more as a whine.

“Seeing as it’s all professors and it’s required, I’m gonna say yes,” Seth says, crouching down next to me. “Besides, it isn’t like it’s an all-day event. Just the afternoon. It’s still gonna be boring, but it’s somewhat short.”

“Still don’t wanna leave my flowers.” I sigh, still reluctant to leave for the meeting. I’m sure it’s about stuff I already know, but the college always makes it mandatory for everyone. It’s irritating that one of these meetings always happens around this time, when my tulips are in full bloom.

Ever since I was a little girl and saw my neighbor growing the bell-shaped flowers, I’ve been captivated by them. My neighbor was the one who taught me how to prepare the bulbs, how to water them, and which soils were the best. Even now, his voice sometimes

rings in my mind, reminding me of the best ways to take care of my garden and its residents.

“You should bring some of those in sometime to decorate your office.” Seth reaches out and touches a petal with the gentleness of an elephant. I almost reach out to slap his hand away from the tulip in question. Did he damage it? He better not have; otherwise, he owes me a new plant.

“Don’t touch them that roughly. You could damage the plant,” I complain, pushing his hand away not too gently.

“Ah, yes. I wouldn’t want to ever hurt your pretty, pink flowers,” he says, voice rising up and down in tone.

“They’re my babies, so back off, sir.” I stand up and force Seth to stand with me by grabbing his arm at the elbow and pulling him upwards.

Together, we walk on the gray cobblestone path to the glass door that leads into my home, our shoes leaving faint footprints in the light dusting of dirt that’s on top of the dark path.

My mind thinks back to the comment I made about my flowers. I pause at the threshold. I open my mouth to say something, dangerously close to revealing my secret, but I close it, feeling as if some unseen force is preventing the words from being spoken.

They’re my babies.

The words make a sob crawl up my throat, but I swallow it back down. Now is not the time. Especially in front of Seth. He isn’t even aware of my secret yet, and I’m not sure if I’ll ever tell him.

For years, Seth has joked about my crazy flower obsession, complaining with a pearly grin on his face that I love flowers more than people. That I take care of the tulips more than I take care of

myself. That if I could, I would never work another day teaching biology at the college.

“If only I could,” I say quietly, so only I and the flowers can hear. The tulips bend towards me, as if nodding in agreement with my words.

The closest thing to a mother I’ll ever be is the caretaker of the flowers. And as the summer comes and the petals become dry and frail, I’ll do my best to keep them alive for as long as possible. Then, I’ll mourn them like I do every other year.

I can’t avoid the loneliness, and I can’t avoid their departure. It’s the sad cycle of life and death I must go through.

“Addy!” Seth calls from inside the house, blissfully unaware of the inner turmoil I’m facing. “I wanna stop at Starbucks along the way!”

We indeed stop at Starbucks along the way, picking up coffees that wake us up long enough to get through the meeting.

All through the meeting, my mind is unfocused, and my fingers are wrapped around the coffee cup tightly, betraying my anxiousness. My mind keeps looping back to my tulips, wondering if they’re okay and hoping that they’re still thriving. Seth keeps sending glances my way, curiosity and worry in his eyes. Multiple times, he leans in as if to whisper a question into my ear, before deciding against it and returning to his original position.

When I get back from the meeting with the other professors, the tulips are yellow at the edges.

# Folding Laundry

By Chloe Betterman

Audience Trigger Warning: Child Loss

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The living room floor was blanketed with clean laundry, piles and piles of clothes dumped haphazardly onto the carpet. In the center sat Anna, currently picking out her blouses from amongst the mess and throwing them onto the couch next to her, each landing on top of another with a gentle thump. Her husband, John, walked into the room then, glancing at Anna before plopping down on the floor in front of her. He immediately began sorting through the clothes between them, throwing one of his stray socks towards a pile forming in the corner of the room. They sit in silence, slowly digging at the mountains around them.

John takes a deep breath.

"We should talk about the funeral."

His words hang in the air as Anna tosses a pair of jeans onto the ottoman. Not looking up, she says, "We should."

Another silence falls over them. Anna continues to sort as John stills. She avoids his gaze as he silently wills her to look at him. Momentarily admitting defeat, he throws a pair of underwear towards the doorway. They both know what the other is thinking. They need to have this conversation, but it's a hard one to start, so they continue to sort. Bras, t-shirts, hoodies, and tank tops soar through the air, landing with accuracy that would make Stephen Curry proud. Soon, all that is left is a lone pink sock. They both reach for it. Anna finally looks up at her husband, her eyes misty with unshed tears.

"I think she'd want to be buried with Mr. Onion."

Anna lets out a wheezy chuckle. "Our garden gnome?" She shakes her head at the ridiculousness of the idea, the ridiculousness of their eight-year-old.

"You're right," she comments, scooting towards a pile of jeans, picking a pair off the top, and smoothing it out on the carpet.

John follows her lead, crawling toward the pile of his underwear. "I bet she would love for us to set some up around the sanctuary too. Sit a couple in the front pews."

They fall into silence again, folding their respective piles of laundry. They each do their own clothes because each has a particular way of putting clothes away.

"Mr. Onion would keep her safe," Anna finally states, topping off her folded pile of jeans. She moves onto her socks, drawing one at random and searching through the pile for its match. "I think she'd want to wear her blue sweater, the one with stars on it."

"I think that's a great idea." John moves onto his dress shirts, sliding a hanger through the neck hole of each one.

They continue like this, exchanging short statements about what color Bella would want her nails painted, whether Bella would want pigtails or bunny tail buns, the hymns Bella would want to sing along to from up in heaven, as the piles of laundry vanished from the living room floor. Anna and John carry their folded clothes into their bedroom, where, as they tucked things into drawers, they discussed Bella's favorite foods. John made a mental note to ask his mother to bring her famous potato salad. When everything was put away, they stood back to admire their clean bedroom; the spaces that were previously cluttered with baskets of dirty laundry waiting to be done were now freed.

John wrapped his arm around his wife.

"I'm sorry," she choked out, turning into his shoulder,  
"There's just so *much* to think about."

"I know," he murmured into her hair, " But we'll get it all  
sorted out. One step at a time."

# North Pier Storm

By Jessica Hanson



NORTH PIER LIGHTHOUSE  
DULUTH, MN

# A Stunning View of Alaska on a Day off and the Mutual Understanding That We'd Rather Be Here with Someone Else

By Eric Linder



# Bayou Tiger

By Jessica Hanson



# Comp

By Tanner Loe



# My Sister

By Sierra Wehmeyer

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# Amethyst for Catherine

Mayr Boros



# Roots

By Tyler Bachmeier



# The Mississippi Begins at Itasca State Park

By Chloe Betterman



# Mary

By Tanner Loe



# Before They Let Go

By Eric Linder



# The Lighthouse Keeper's Blanket

By Chloe Betterman



# Kenya

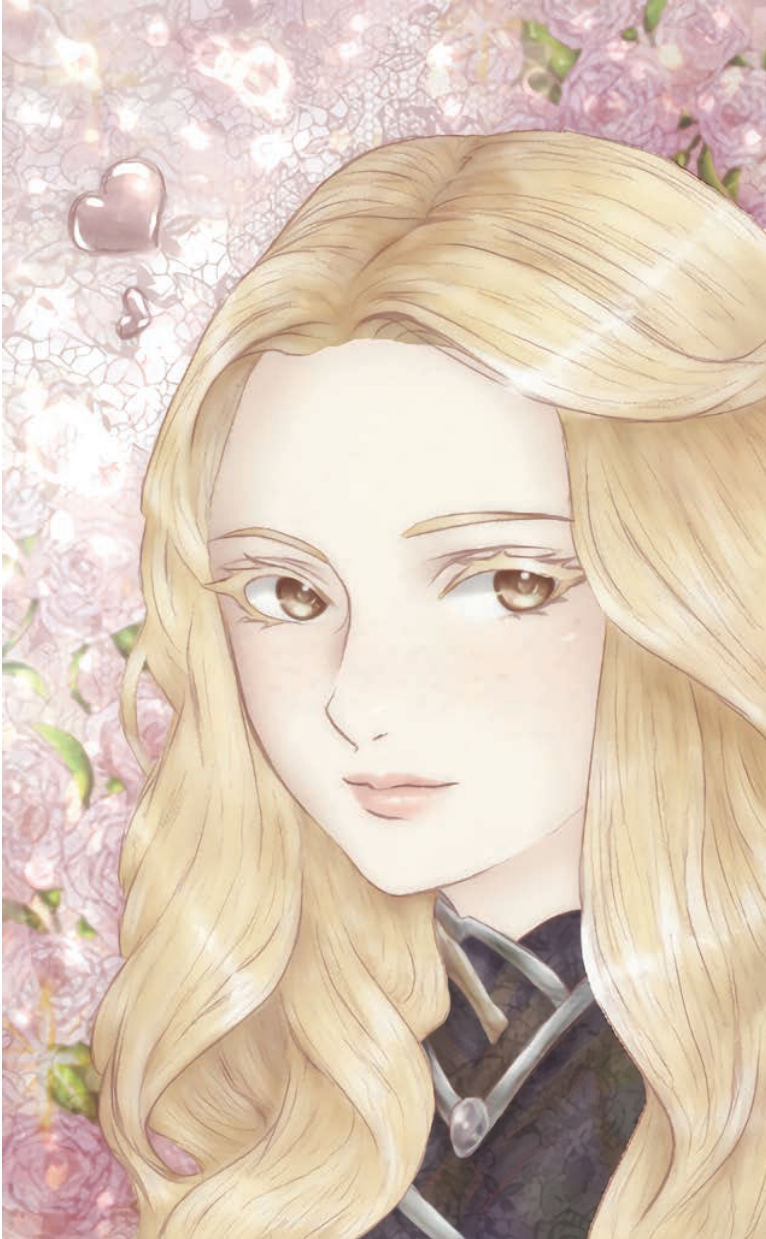
By Eric Linder



# Pastel Glow

By Sierra Wehmeyer

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# Come Here Sugar

By Tyler Bachmeier



# Gorge

By Tanner Loe

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# Behind This Door, What the Neighbors Never See

By Eric Linder



# Fox

By Calleigh Haglund

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Sweat stings my eyes as I struggle. The sun sets, the dirt turns dark orange, and the skies are near purple. Still, I'm wiping sweat from my eyes every other second, and the sunburn on the back of my neck is beginning to sting. Within an hour, it will be bright red, no doubt. I'm stuck in a trap of some sort. I don't know what type of trap this is, and, quite frankly, I don't give a damn. Right now, I just want my leg out of this stupid, rusted, godforsaken trap. I take a breath—the pain's only going to get worse as the adrenaline fades. I need to think. I need to get out. I tug on the rusty chain that's keeping the trap stuck to the ground. Nothing. I wipe little rust flakes on my shirt before trying to wrench open the trap; it doesn't budge. My leg's pinched between its jaws just an inch or two above my ankle; luckily, there were no teeth. There's no bleeding; however, it hurts badly. I huff and stop trying to pry the trap open. I'm just tiring myself out more trying to escape, like a damn animal.

Hours earlier Dad had sent me into the woods to "look for evidence that those damned poachers were stealing our good meat." Oh boy, did I find some evidence. I had been walking around our woods for a few hours, and it was just starting to turn to dusk. I figured I'd head home—I was tired and could feel the sunburn on my shoulders beginning to form. I regretted not wearing something with sleeves on a summer day like this. The little rocks that got in my shoes were getting annoying; they felt like the burrs that would always cling to my clothes. Speaking of which, there were many of those stuck to my jeans. I walked back a different way than I had come and then... the trap. I felt it before I saw it: a bright burst of pain that felt like I was being bitten. Only, most things that bite usually let go at some point. This trap, one that didn't match ours, wouldn't let go.

Using my foot that's not trapped, I hit the rusty chain with my heel, hoping it'll do something, anything. The chain doesn't break. I didn't think it would, but I still hit the ground a couple of times with my fists, throwing myself on the dirt and whining like a toddler. I grit my teeth, and I pull on my leg. It does nothing but make it hurt more.

The sky is purple and dark blue when I look up at it. I think that being stuck in a trap is like being grounded by Dad in a way; you can't go anywhere, but the world continues to move. Only, being caught in a trap hurts a whole hell of a lot more—it also makes you feel like an animal. Expecting that I won't be going anywhere, I lie on my back so that I can see the stars start to appear like specks of dust coming to settle in the sky. I breathe. I focus on breathing rather than the pain in my leg. My leg feels like it's being slammed in a door, so I focus on the soft sound of crickets who have just woken up. The sunburn on my shoulders starts to ache and itch as the little rocks on the ground scrape against it. I focus on the smell of the night instead. Cool, crisp, fresh. There's the smell of trees and dirt and grass and—

I hear footsteps, nosy ones that overpower the sound of the crickets. A light flashes in my eyes, and I put a hand up to block it. Then there's a voice, an annoying, overbearing one that I recognize. I groan, rolling away from the sound, but I don't get far. The trap that's locked onto my leg is being really annoying right now. Also, painful.

"Fox!" my dad yelled. "Where the hell have you been? I said be back before dark. Are you trying to get eaten out here? Poached even?"

I shake my head and use my free leg to tap against the trapped one. I'm going to have a terrible bruise in the morning. The light leaves my face; a second later, Dad sighs long and loud.

"Got yourself into another mess," he says. I can hear his shoes drag against the ground, kicking up dirt as he walks. "Can't bring your dumbass anywhere, can I?"

Dad sighs again.

“Well, that’s an odd-looking one, definitely not one of ours. Damn poachers. A little too big to be a fox trap, I think. No teeth, lucky you.”

I don’t feel lucky.

“Let’s see what I can do. Sit up, boy! Hold this.”

I do as Dad says and hold the light. He takes the trap off my leg with little trouble.

“There, you’re free,” he says when he’s done. He pats my leg, and I wince. “Don’t be dramatic; you lived and didn’t lose a drop of blood.”

He takes the light from me and stands up. He doesn’t offer me a hand, but he does laugh.

“You know, you could have chewed your leg off just like a real fox. God, I still don’t know what your mother was thinking of naming you that. What a ridiculous excuse for a name. Well, come on then, ‘Fox.’ Let’s go.”

He pats the side of his leg to beckon me. I haul myself up and walk as best as I can back to our house. Dad mumbles something about calling the authorities because poachers are putting weird traps near our house. When we get to the house, the sky’s as dark as the shadows in the forest, except for the little white stars. Dad says to open the door for him. I do, and he says, “Good Fox,” like he’s speaking to a dog, before going inside. I glare at him while he walks in. Dad heads to his room, and I start to go to mine.

“Fox, if you get caught in another trap, start hollering, alright?” Dad shouts from his room. “If you’re gonna get caught like an animal, you might as well howl like one too.”

I hear his door close, and I stand there for a minute. My room is a few steps away; I take those steps slowly. The clock hanging on the wall in the kitchen is loud enough that I can hear it from my doorway. Tick, tock, tick tock. What time is it anyway? I open the door and see the bag that’s sitting on my bed. I packed it full earlier; it’s a miracle that I was able to zip it closed. I grab the bag and

swing it over my shoulder without a second thought. I close my door quietly when I leave. In my head, I can hear my dad telling me, “You’re sneaky like a fox; that’s not a good thing.”

The car keys are on the kitchen counter. The clock is louder now. I don’t check the time. It doesn’t matter; right now is perfect. I take the keys and head to the garage.

Again, I hear my dad saying, “Foxes steal; that’s why I don’t like them.”

I get in the car carefully, trying not to bump my hurt leg. I throw my bag onto the seat beside me and thank the heavens that I didn’t injure my right leg. Keys in the ignition, start the engine, and I’m on the road. I don’t know or care where I’m going; I’m just going. A mile or so from the house, I smile to myself and think, “An animal can’t drive, can they? But a Fox can.”

# The Treehouse

By Ajla Zec

Audience Trigger Warning: Mentions of Death

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Once the car in the driveway backed out and went along its way, the kid and I stood out for a while, continuously waving toward the parents driving off into the sunset. The orange light stretched across the sky and cast shadows on the pavement. Not saying much, the kid turned and headed inside. Following along, a silence settled in the once bustling house. The scent in the air inside was of the smell of crayons, paint, and paper.

The boy ran towards the living room and plopped down onto the floor next to the table. A bunch of colored crayons and single pieces of paper were thrown all over the place and table in a disorganized manner. Spread out, some crayons were broken in half, with their labeling chipping away through use. Walking towards the boy, I leaned over to see what the boy was hastily drawing on wrinkled paper. His tiny fingers gripped the yellow crayon, making his palms become red, and his control trembled across the page. A yellow house was drawn in the center of the paper, with a large oak tree in the background. The boy added a few more scribbles to create a ladder placed against the tree, connecting to a wooden box near the top of the tree. The crayon strokes were uneven, due to his quickened pace, almost making certain items stand out more than the details.

I asked the boy if he wanted a snack, but my words barely reached him. The everlasting silence continued. The plain white paper with directions on it warned that the child did not talk much, or at all, which was unusual for a boy of his age.

I settled myself beside the boy onto the couch next to the TV

remote. I leaned back and turned on the TV, preparing to switch the channel to a kids' show, when the boy shot up with a paper in his hand and handed it to me with a beam on his face. Besides the ladder, a small stick figure lay sprawled in a pool of blood. I glanced towards the boy and his drawing, before my eyes stared into his large, curious green eyes. Using his finger, he pointed to the boy in the drawing, then towards himself. My hold tightened on the edges of the piece of paper, the crumpled portion sharp on my skin.

As I sat, glancing between the boy and his drawing, the memory of my brother's death returned to me. The air around became harder to breathe while the living room around me became less out of focus. His lifeless body next to the ladder. The same ladder. The same tall old oak tree. I had been waiting for him to climb up to jump-scare him. I felt a punch to the stomach, and my lungs stopped functioning fully. I used the drawing to cover my eyes from the boy as droplets of water fell down my cheeks. A knot formed in my stomach that felt enormous enough to explode, but my heartbeat also began to pound, quickening with each thump. I closed my eyes, trying to stop myself from crying, but the memory kept playing in my head.

The day was hot, thick with the scent of grass and sweat. My small body crouched down enough to hide from the large opening of the treehouse. My hands pressed on my mouth, containing the small giggles bubbling up from my throat and a few snorts from my nose. When his hand finally reached the top of the ladder and he popped his head up, I jumped toward him with a scream. His hands, clenching onto the ladder, loosened. He fell. The sound resembling a basketball contacting the ground echoed in my mind, a dull, heavy thud that continuously rang in my ears, never really stopping. My body had locked in place. My jaw fell, but no sound came out for a while, staring as a pool of blood formed around his head. The sight of him sprawled beneath the tree burned itself into my mind and soul. Every time I had closed my eyes, the accident would be etched

right into my sight. Again, and again.

Then, that was when I felt arms around me, grounding me to the present, and I opened my eyes to see the boy holding onto me tightly.

I held on too.

# The Phonetics of Survival and Becoming

By Eric Linder

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I remember the school bus would rumble with the sounds of children spitting gossip about teachers and debating each other over their parents' politics. I became a professional observer, taking notes about social conduct, and making a rule for myself that I would have to keep my mouth shut, if I wanted to survive. My ears remained open in every direction so I could stay attuned to the current conversations and avoid danger. The older kids sat like perched birds hungry for their next victim and with a cynical sympathy, I watched a naive, freckled-faced boy get gobbled up and blamed him for not being awake to the social dynamics and abiding by them. Kids with red hair were called "soulless," which I always thought to be a strangely poetic insult. Delinquents called kids with big noses "ass sniffers" and more intelligent, yet absurd students professed that their huge snouts must be a sign of evolution. They went on about how their great grandparents must have been cocaine addicts and that their family's bodies naturally adapted to sniff more of that "sweet, sweet nose candy." Amid the verbal crossfire, I concealed my secret, swallowing my speech and wrestling with self-consciousness.

Day by day, I worked tirelessly to appear socially acceptable and well-off, but the reality of being socially evaluated constantly caused me to be too intensely aware of myself. I would raise my pointer finger up slowly, trying to be discreet when tracing my ears that I considered too large, wondering if anyone was looking at them, imagining my visual appearance to be akin to a caricature. From fixing a loose piece of hair to holding in a cough, all of my actions were scrutinized and constricted.

Occasionally, inevitably, my eyes accidentally drifted into an older student's line of sight, which they mistook for an invitation for comments and casual jabs. My silence often provoked assumptions

and further remarks, but the conversation sped on, and I achieved a momentary invisibility.

Within this withdrawal into myself, I unknowingly and instinctually began cultivating a rich inner world, using my imagination like a chisel against stone, carving out a private cavern, deep and silent, where I could slip away from the crowd. At first it was empty. Then, bursts of emotions and thoughts shaped into Kafkaesque murals—my attempts to find meaning in a world that seemed, from a distance, harsh and impenetrable. But the more the walls transformed, sprawling with romantic fantasies, it became harder to practice active disengagement in a world that I now longed to live in.

And so, on the bus, in my usual state of hyper awareness, I observed a lively conversation unfold nearby. They were like jazz musicians, knowing the perfect time to follow the small-talk script and when to improvise.

Without thinking, I opened my mouth.

What came out was incoherent, off-key speech that resembled a monk breaking a vow of silence only to hear his voice echo throughout the monastery, distorted and shameful. Like that monk, I listened, hearing my vowels and consonants collide awkwardly, words not properly formed due to my disobedient tongue, each syllable a betrayal to what I meant to say. I painfully became aware of the jarring spectacle I was performing as I watched the faces around me transfigure, eyes filling with light, mouths beginning to grin, laughter swelling—a juxtaposition of warmth and sharp criticism, sounding bizarre and almost otherworldly. Shifting in my seat, I absorbed it quietly.

When my parents told me speech therapy was being offered at school, their excitement couldn't reach me. To me, going to a specialty class was just further evidence that I was an outsider and always would be. I walked into that small room, grasping my hands nervously, and was surprised to see four other children smiling with playing cards in hand, passionately speaking unintelligibly. At the

center of it all was Mrs. O, swirling a teabag in her cup, her presence steady and sure. I hesitated and observed how she responded to the other students closely. She didn't look down at them like a judge or loom like a predator. Instead, she listened with genuine care to each kid's struggle to pronounce the words on the playing cards, encouraging them through each strained syllable—like a composer guiding an orchestra of amateurs.

At first, I listened, and my admiration grew for their genuine efforts and Mrs. O's kindness. Slowly and apprehensively, I added my voice to the chaotic, unusual symphony, learning to laugh at the strange instrumentation that I and the other students produced. Mrs. O watched us, pleased.

I continued going to speech therapy, committed to learning, while all my teachers consecutively pushed to have me held back. I overheard my parents on phone calls and in meetings, insisting that I shouldn't be left behind—that it was a speech problem, not an intellectual one. But they didn't know fully. My teachers didn't know. In class, I was constantly walking up to their desks to ask questions they couldn't understand. They struggled to assess my reading level or comprehension without the ability to communicate with me. I could hear their frustration in the way they spoke about me. One of them told my parents, exasperated, "I can't understand him. How am I supposed to teach him? He's making my job harder. He's disruptive to the other students."

Years of feeling misunderstood weighed on me—my thoughts, feelings, and ideas always lost on others. It was like speaking a language no one else could understand.

Middle school brought another hurdle. The speech therapist there quickly grew frustrated with me, mistaking my struggles for a lack of effort. She bought a machine meant to help me roll my r's, and when I still couldn't, she singled me out from the group.

Desperate, my parents went to Mrs. O to ask if she would continue lessons with me. She agreed, and so she and I kept at it,

meeting beyond her work hours in a half-lit school late each evening.

Mrs. O and I did flashcards and practiced specific pronunciations, but she didn't stop there. She opened the floor for me to talk about my life. I told her everything—talking about school, often exaggerating my athletic accomplishments in gym class, my friends, embellishing the amount I had, and all my other sprawling observations and daydreams. In those moments, I now realize that I was processing life in a way I never had before. And as I spoke, she encouraged me to engage more with the world around me, to participate in life rather than just observe it.

The words started to come easier, though I still spoke softly. For years after—and still to this day—there is some apprehension when I go to speak. But during that time, a belief took root in me that I mattered, and therefore, my voice mattered. Words, once a source of shame, became a place where I search for meaning.

I relinquished my romanticized visions about my life in childhood, which is a normal stage of human development where people travel from naivete to cynicism when exposed to pain and suffering in the world. But it's not hard to see that when people don't move beyond cynicism toward hope, they end up resentful, bitter, and hopeless, rolling their eyes at anyone who, in their view, "doesn't know how the world works." Without the help I had, I'm not sure if that's where I would have ended up. I've come to believe that no matter what happens to us, it is paramount that we live remarkable lives and gain back what was lost, rediscovering the beauty and goodness that exists in the world despite everything.

# Twisty-Tie Buck

By Myles Helmin

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My heart is racing as I carefully watch a whitetail deer bound through the woods, crunching through the buckthorn, weaving around the willow trees. I wait, eagerly observing for any signs of slowing down or injury. As the deer hopped further and further into the snow filled woods, its silhouette started to disappear, taking my confidence with it. The truth is, this is the moment I have been waiting for, for months.

The first snow of the year happened; I knew archery season was winding down. Naturally, the white blanket of snow provides extra visibility for seeing the deer's brown fur coats as they slowly mosey through the woods from their bedding area to their feeding area. This was extremely exciting as I had been prepping for this by dialing in the sights on my bow and scouting the woods for deer signs and activity.

So, I made the obvious decision to go hunting. I waited until about 4:30 before putting all my camouflage on, grabbing my bow, and making my way out to the 80-acre woods behind our house. As I walked across the wide-open field, I could hear the crunch of the snow underneath my boots and feel the cold, brisk wind biting into my cheeks. As I kept getting closer to the woods, the advantage that the snow gave became clearer and clearer. My footsteps were quieter, and I could see all the fresh animal tracks without even trying. The woods seemed to no longer just be a wall of scrawny bushes mixed with dull brown branches, one indistinguishable from another. Instead, it looked like a scene out of a Hallmark movie where every branch is covered in a coat of snow and the small branches are being pulled down by their newfound weight. I took in the scenery as I quietly

snuck through the woods, carefully avoiding noisy things that might snap if I step on them: sticks, branches, twigs, leaves.

As I quietly approached the tree in which my stand hangs, I noticed that the tree stand seat was left down and was full of snow as well as some small branches that had fallen on it. I slowly approached the tree and attached my bow to the rope that was tied to the tree stand which was meant for hoisting up your bow once you have climbed up the tree. I then started climbing up the pegs that were tied to the tree. I put some of my weight on the first peg, and it made a squeaking noise. Hearing this, I immediately cringed out of fear that a nearby animal would hear. I continued to climb as silently as possible until I reached the main platform. I started pulling my bow up, hand over fist, guiding it by slightly spinning the rope in the opposite direction that the bow is spinning, trying to keep it from hitting the tree and risk knocking the sights off. Once my bow was safely in my hands, I untied it from the rope and hung it on a broken limb of my tree.

Now, the hunt really began. I slowly started scanning the woods around me like a hawk looking for prey, looking for any broken silhouettes or sudden movements that might give away the position of a whitetail. The woods were silent and peaceful. My worries, insecurities, and problems all faded away. My mind remained clear and focused on the hunt. Out here, I was not a college student or a construction worker; I was just a part of nature participating in the most primal process known to man: the circle of life.

As I peered into the woods, I spotted some movement in my peripheral vision. I slowly moved my head in the direction of the movement, so as not to draw attention to my position. It was then that I spotted a whitetail deer gently nibbling on a branch, its long pink tongue reaching out and then pulling the end of the branch back toward its small black snout. I could tell the deer was young by its small frame and underdeveloped antlers. I knew this

deer was too young to harvest. So, I contently watched it, grazing from one plant to another, making its way out of my sight, slowly.

After about an hour, this hunt was starting to feel like a lot of the others: a sighting of an immature deer, or no deer at all, then the anticipation of seeing another slowly fading away as the sun starts to dip beneath the trees and the cold starts to set in and pierce into my clothing, while I lose feeling in my fingers and toes. Just as this feeling was sinking in, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a slight movement from near where I had seen the fawn. I slowly glanced over to see the broken-up silhouette of a deer slowly walking straight towards my tree. I could tell this deer was much larger than the one I had spotted previously and had more noticeable antlers.

I started slowly and smoothly moving my arm to my bow. I put my hand on the cold grip and gently lifted it off the snapped limb it was hanging on. My breathing started to become uneven as I could feel the adrenaline start to build. As my nerves grew, my legs felt weak and started subtly shaking while I fought to stand as still as possible. The whitetail continued to make his way over to my tree stand, still totally unaware of my presence. I drew an imaginary line in my head following the deer's path to guess where the deer would pass me. I looked for a tree in between myself and the deer that would temporarily block his view of me. Once I spotted one, I made a plan to draw my bow as soon as the deer's head passed behind the tree.

Suddenly, the pressure was really on. The outcome of this hunt depended entirely on the next few seconds. If I couldn't make a clean shot, I would risk missing the animal and going home empty handed, or worse, injuring the animal, which is one of the worst feelings possible when hunting. All these thoughts were going through my head until the deer passed behind my planned tree and it was time to draw my bow back. My bow was set to about 70 pounds of resistance, so as I pulled back, I could

feel all the muscles in my back and triceps tense up as my arm came all the way back to my cheek. I was now at full draw. The timing was perfect. The deer's head had just reappeared on the other side of the tree, as I had planned.

Now, my focus was entirely on my sights. I centered the deer in my sight picture and placed the main pin over the deer's vitals. My arms started to get sore from holding my bow at full draw, but I had to wait until the deer was still or at least moving slowly. I continued to follow the deer's vitals with my sight until it slowed down slightly, about 12 yards (36 feet) away from me. The sight on my bow was becoming less and less stable due to the growing soreness in my arms. I made one last subtle sight readjustment as I slowly released the string, and then, THWAP! My arrow glided through the air with almost no resistance and made clear contact with my target. My heart started racing twice as fast as before. I watched intently as the whitetail immediately started bounding through the woods. The deer was quickly moving further and further into the thick brush with no sign of stopping, until it completely disappeared.

I started second guessing my shot, wondering if maybe I hit too far back or maybe I didn't hit the deer at all. My heartbeat began to slow down. I thought about the disappointing walk back through the cold, dead woods with no food for my family. I thought about the embarrassment of telling my father how I missed a deer that was standing only 12 yards away. As these thoughts began to creep in, I caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye. I looked over and saw the deer was back where I originally spotted it. Except this time, he was lying on his back, lifeless, surrounded by bloodstained snow.

The adrenaline kicked back in, and I clumsily climbed down the tree as fast as I could. I ran over to where he was lying and knelt down beside him. His light brown fur coat was warm to the touch, soft and smooth. There were white fur accents around his eyes, snout and chin. His antlers were small, solid and

slightly damaged from fights with other deer. I inspected his wounds to see where my arrow hit him, and I find a good clean hit straight through his vitals. I was instantly relieved upon seeing this. The pressure was all gone. Now all that remained was the excitement of all my hard work paying off, the joy of being able to provide meat for my family, and the slight sadness and empathy that comes with harvesting an animal.

I paused to take in the moment for a short while before dragging the deer back to the opening by my tree stand where I shot it. I grabbed my phone and, with my hands numb from the cold, called my dad.

“Hey, you want to bring the four-wheeler? I got one!” I said.

“Good, I’ll be out there in a second,” he replied.

My voice was still shaky from excitement as we got off the phone. In just a few minutes, I could hear the rumble of the four-wheeler’s engine and what sounded like a rhinoceros tumbling through the bushes from the noise of branches being sucked under the frame of the four-wheeler as it rolled over them. I could see my dad’s tall slender figure emerge from the woods as he drove the bright yellow four-wheeler over to the deer with a smile on his face, his blue eyes twinkling with pride.

“Good job, buddy!” he said as he got off the four-wheeler.

I recounted the whole story to him. He was proud and very happy that I got a deer. He nicknamed the deer “Twisty-Tie Buck” because the only thing I could find to put the tag on its antlers was a twisty tie I had laying in my pack. Also, the base of the antlers was small enough to comfortably fit the twisty tie around it. He thought this was very funny. I could tell by how much joy he found in calling my deer a “Twisty-Tie Buck” that I would be hearing about this for years to come.

My dad started to field-dress the deer, and I went to look for my arrow. Once I found it, I returned to my dad, and he was already about done. I helped him finish field-dressing and tied the deer up to the four-wheeler with an old leather dog

leash. Then, I grabbed my bow and hopped onto the back of the four-wheeler.

As we made the trip out of the woods, I watched the deer's body glide across the snow as the four-wheeler pulled it. The visible condensation of the warm air coming off the deer looked like steam rolling off his back. This sight reminded me why I put so much work into this. The satisfaction of a successful hunt and the memories made with family makes the challenges, disappointments, countless hours in the woods, and frozen fingers and toes all worthwhile.

# Life of the Seas

By Ash Hiles

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There's nothing quite like the ocean.

The sky, while wide open, is too empty of life. Space, while just as open, deadly, and beautiful, is also rather barren of life.

Swimming in the ocean exposes you to a fraction of some of its wonderful life. The aquarium gives you a better glimpse. Snorkeling is also a longer glimpse. But that is all these are. Glimpses. To truly know the ocean, to see and experience what it has to offer...well, that requires diving beneath the deep blue waves to the rocky reefs below.

SCUBA diving offers that perspective like nothing else. As a certified open water diver, I have access to the ocean in a way many people do not. Even experienced divers will say it's not like anything you've ever experienced before. I have to agree. My first saltwater dive was one of the most incredible things of my life and an experience I will never forget.

I'll start with the descent. I take one big step off the back of the boat- a giant stride, it's called in "Diver Speak"- and plunge into the water, which is cold at first, but thanks to my wetsuit and the fact that I'm in the tropics- specifically Key West, Florida- I soon warm up. I grab the guideline and follow the other divers down. My mom is waiting for me, just below the waves. I slowly deflate my BCD (Buoyancy Control Device) and follow her down the rope, slowly. The ocean floor is maybe thirty feet below us. Teal water stretches around us. Dark black rock reaches up in small humps and clumps across the floor, but the majority is white sand. I see a fish, a parrotfish, and grab mom's arm to point it out. She smiles and nods, still going down. As she told me later, "she's seen it all before." But

this is new to me, so I spin, gesturing in a circle at the new, alien world that is only a few feet from the one I know well. We continue going down and meet the others at the bottom. The group spreads apart a bit, but all the divers are still close to each other. The buddy system is the number two rule of diving, second only to the rule to keep an eye on how much air you have left. Now we begin the dive in earnest.

The person I follow is the dive master. They always know the area, and thus, the coolest things to see. As we swim around a bunch of rocks, I find myself looking down at a strange arrangement of gears, about five feet long, resting on the bottom. It's a winch of some kind, from a ship, which I again learn later. We swim on. We are practicing a few diver skills, like neutral buoyancy, and some hand signals. (Diver hand signals mean different things from ASL ones; do not mix them up.) Then we swim over another rocky bit to a large patch of sand. And there, below us, covered in a thin layer of sand, lies the biggest stingray I have ever seen in my entire life. It's as wide as if you stretched out your arms on either side, as far as you could. It is gigantic. Just sleeping below us, nothing but its eyes poking up out of the sand. We carefully give it some space, leaving it be. I could have reached out and touched it had I wanted to. Maybe you've touched a stingray before, in a touch tank or pool, but never one as dangerous or potentially deadly as this one. It had its stinger tail intact.

As we swam around the reef, we saw other wonderful sights. A huge coral crab, munching on algae off the rocks. Scarlet lady shrimp wandering through the tiny crags in the reef. And the many blue tangs, like Dory, or a random squirrelfish darting about us before swimming away again. And off in the distance, a nurse shark slowly vanishes into the dark blue. Finally, we are running down our air supply and must leave this wonderful world behind, and so we ascend. We stop once, halfway, to make our safety stop, to avoid getting the bends (a kind of diver sickness), and then we continue to

follow the rope up. As my head breaks free of the waves, I switch to my snorkel, feeling the taste of salt on my tongue. At last, I haul myself up the ladder, forced to leave behind the amazing world and the life I have seen. It is not the last dive I would ever do, but it was the first. And because of that, I'll always remember it.

Since then, I've been on many dives, and seen many wonderful sights. Sharks- yes, real sharks, both nurse sharks and reef sharks, which are pretty chill. Giant crabs the size of two heads! Purple sea fans, waving in the current. Even a jellyfish, once. Humongous sea turtles, many types of corals dotting the rocks. Eels, Blue Chromis fish, and "feather dusters" -a kind of tube worm. Lobsters, remoras, barracudas, and even dolphins. I might have seen a lot over the years, but the wonder of that first dive never fades. The allure of the deep blue sea entrances me every time I dive in. If you ever get the chance to SCUBA dive, do it. That which lies under the waves waits for no one. But just wait, and you'll see...the wondrous sights beneath.

# Hands of Life

By Katelyn Zaiger

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My father has always been a large man. Maybe it is because he has always been bigger than me, but it is always on my mind when I stand with him. It makes me think of when I was little and walked with him. Running errands and walking across the parking lot, I would hold my father's index finger. It was all I could hold onto because his hands were so large and mine so tiny. His thick, rough, round, large fingers were where I was safe.

Even now, his hands and fingers still overpower my own. We sit down for dinner together, holding hands to say grace, his hands will cover my own. Still thick, rough, and large, but it proves the strength of my father. The strength in his hands in my own, I am still safe.

The years have rolled by as work comes and goes. He spends hours in the summer sun covering his hands in freckles, dirt, and grease. He is always working with his hands. Outside work comes to inside work as he lathers soap in his large, labored hands, washing the day's work away. The hours of car grease take three tries of intense hand scrubbing. He calls me over to help him squeeze more soap out for a fourth try. Just more work for his hands to do.

His hands would go up in the air when something went wrong. A bolt snaps, a board breaks, or a pipe falls on his head. First were always his hands, then a string of words would come after. But the first thing that was always back on the job was his hands. Covered in dirt, grease, mud, or tree bark, his hands were always working.

It was always after a project was done when the sweat was dried, the mud crusted, or the oil stained his hands, that my father

would stand back to look at his work. Hands resting on his hips, taking it all in. The next thoughts in his head on what needed to be fixed next, or how his hands could make it better. When his hands were done working, his face would relax, and a smile would appear with the mess on his skin. It was time to be done using his hands. To the sink with the soap, trying to wash away the stains from the day. His hands were now clean, thick, rough, and round. These are the hands of my father.

# The Noose

By Kaety Wesselman

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Slipping strands of loose locks into a diabolical bobble, Mom tries to charm the constrictor into an additional arc, but the thin thread snaps, shooting the marbles into my skull and leaving damaging dents behind. She reaches for a new noose and frantically fastens it, hoping to surpass the inevitable snap. Boredom beckons for me to break away, so I tug from Mom's touch. She pleads for me to pause; the particular style will be perfected promptly. I still, impatiently yearning to stir. My frantic feet are desperate to dance my role in the recital. With the noose now numbly secured to my scalp, I may navigate my own neck again. Free of fingers in my hair, Mom now aims a canister of sticky spray at my cranium. With a long sweeping *shush*, my eyes are stung by the sweet-smelling smog. I self-soothe by squinting and blinking in rapid succession; the prickle shall pass. The two nooses on my noggin will now be spared by my heedless horseplay. As the pulsing pain near my brain passes, I am prepped to perform at the rehearsed recital.

In 2019, tickling threads of hair trail my neck as I settle into bed. I move them, but they find their way back into the fold, brushing my skin unpredictably and making me believe a bug has made its way onto my body. I shake the phantom pestering off as I sit up and gather my bountiful brown hair into a messy bun, tightening the tie that will keep the noose of hair from slipping around my neck. Before I bring myself back to bed, I brush the buzzed patch behind my ears to admire the effortless expression. Over the next two years, the line where the long locks become short splinters rises relentlessly. The elastic on my wrist remains the only respite from the dangling and damaged head of hair I have no hunger to tend to.

Now I'm dedicated to a shorter hairdo and my wrists are unbound. Not a single hair harasses my neck or shields my sight. It's no longer tightly tucked atop my head as if packed away and forgotten in the attic of my body. My hair lounges and sprawls in stylishly unkempt waves and curls, carefully groomed away from my ears. Now I care for it constantly and tend to the state of it tenderly. I grumble when it's having a bad day, and I peer at every reflection of myself when it's having a good day. The scrunched stream of hair is proudly a part of me, not apart from me. With one cut, the noose was undone.

# An Answer for You and Me

By Max Saguindang

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Dear Maxine,

It's been a while—a *long* while, actually. I found your letter, the one where you wrote to me about five years ago. The kind where you write to “your future self,” asking about various stuff: meeting new people, if there's hoverboards yet, random things like that. I was supposed to respond to you, but then a little virus named COVID-19 happened. No—I'm sorry. That sounded like an excuse. I still kept you around, the letter I mean, tucked away in a drawer upstairs in my old room. Just... couldn't let it sit there collecting dust.

It's late now, but I just picked up your letter. It had no creases nor signs of any faded markings. I reread what you wrote, over and over again. It was short, the handwriting was crooked, and there were some misspelt words here and there. I smiled a bit and raised a brow, but I didn't put you down. Thought I should finally answer—perhaps for our sake.

You asked about high school. First and second years were fun—everything was new, but we were still surrounded by the same old faces. *We*—no—*I* tried to change us. I reached out first, made new friends, changed our style, and even let go of some old hobbies. I know you'd hoped we'd have a boyfriend by then, despite how much we... *dislike* our dark black hair in the sea of blonde hair. I hate to break it to you, but we didn't. All the exciting and scary things you hoped would happen, like in those movies, didn't. *We* were just... trying to find our flow. They were fun days, but it was hard watching everything move on as we stood still, trying to find a place within that flow. Maybe, at that time, it felt as if I was stuck, but now? I think I'm okay with it. At least, I'm trying to be.

Friends? Oh, well, I'll just say we didn't keep all of them. We had a big friend group that split during the pandemic and continued to split down from ten to only the four of us. We gained another group, and we're still in contact with half of them. We jumped around a lot to find another flow, but that feeling didn't always go away, even when we sat in the same room. Don't worry, I want nothing but the best for them. I used the earrings she gifted me, clipped the surprise secret Santa keychain to my bag from him, and the skincare lecture she gave me. Just... didn't have the heart to forget them.

You asked about big moments? Nope. We didn't accomplish anything, win any giant awards, or become the big gossip rumor anywhere (thankfully). I don't think this is what you meant when you wrote this though. I know you were wondering if we "made it," if that hole we grew felt any smaller—it didn't. Truth is, there wasn't a big moment. We didn't win, nor did we lose anything. We were just there—existing. Sometimes that's all we could do, even if it didn't feel enough.

I'll admit, we haven't been... okay for a very, *very* long time. That pen of ours hadn't been picked up until after high school. Of course, we didn't exactly "find love" the way we thought, but we picked up another book again, listened to our old music, and fixed that broken paintbrush. Our bedroom is cleaner, and we're trying to keep track of our own physical health. It's been too long, and we didn't realize how much we missed it until we started moving out of our loop we were stuck in. It took us a few steps back to retrace our way, one small step forward at a time.

I ran into a professor I had last year. We didn't really have any good teachers, did we, you and I? I thought this professor was kind, so I said hi first. They smiled, and I smiled back. They then asked how I

was doing. I couldn't exactly remember what I'd said that time, but I think it was something around the lines of "better." That's what nowadays feels like.

And we didn't think we'd make it past 21, did we? That's one of the questions you asked. Don't worry, we had fun and drank some soju with close friends. It was mixed with Sprite, so I couldn't taste the soju much. Our parents? They asked what I wanted to do. The old buffet we always went to closed during the pandemic, but it recently opened again, so we ate there for the first time again. When we sat at the table, the family didn't talk much. Picking up pieces of ourselves wasn't so easy.

So, I went and did it, yes—I took another step forward. I told mama something, about what we've been doing, how my work shift has been going, and of writing a story. The look on her face didn't change one bit, and she didn't change overnight, but then, she seemed more open with us, laughing over small talk and going on shopping sprees. I felt then that maybe our old bond—or a better one—would come back again. That, alone, made everything feel a little more okay.

Everything's changed, and some things haven't. We're adults now, but has everything gone as we hoped? No. Maybe that's what you were really asking; not the success or love—but whether I've learned to be okay with not having all the answers. Honestly, I'm still learning. That empty feeling comes back sometimes, and I wonder if I'm okay or taking the right step forward, but I'm still here.

And for me and you, that's more than enough.

With love,  
Max.

# A Lost Memory

By Maya Scianna

Audience Trigger Warning: Suicide

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I'm picking at the skin around my nails while the students around me are chatting. Our US History teacher steps into our class that's mostly made up of freshmen students ten minutes late. An unreadable expression on her face replaces her usually over-enthused demeanor; her lips become a thin line. She smooths her long, black skirt and clears her throat. The other students go silent and face the teacher. An uneasiness fills the atmosphere. She hesitates but then shakes her head and slowly tells us how a student in our class took his life, her breath catching on the last few words.

My eyes fall to the now empty metal chair and the two heavy history textbooks in the metal basket underneath the chair that will now belong to someone else. I think about how I'll never pass by him in the claustrophobic, crowded halls or see him at the round table adjacent to mine at lunch. I know I'm supposed to feel something, but I'm unable to. Someone in the back corner of the classroom lets out a sob that echoes throughout the room, breaking the silence. I jump in my seat, turn around, and see a blonde girl with her two friends hugging her on both sides. One buries her face in the blonde girl's shoulder. Her face is red, but her skin and eyes are dry from the lack of tears. She shakes like a chihuahua and covers her face with her manicured hands. I've never seen her speak to the boy in the five months we'd been in this class.

The rest of the day passes in a blur; I hardly remember the faces of the people I see or the contents of my other classes. The news catches faster than the flu until multiple rumors are spread. The most popular rumor was that he killed himself because he was gay and his family wouldn't accept it.

I think about how a few months ago, I'd seen the boy in Walmart with his mom while I was with mine. I wonder how someone so pretty could be so hateful. She'd looked so kind and confident, like she could do anything she wanted just by flashing a smile at someone. I'd admired her straight, jet-black hair and bold blue eyes that matched his and wished I'd had hair just like hers. I was too socially awkward to walk up and say hello; I was like a statue, staring straight ahead and unable to move. He didn't even look in my general direction as we passed by. Neither the boy nor his mother was speaking with the other, and they were facing separate directions. I finally decided that I didn't know anything about them, and there was a good chance that most of these rumors didn't know them either.

I think about my friend who had a crush on him, how she didn't know him either. Neither of us acknowledge the tragedy when we sit together at lunch at our usual table. She twirls her brown, curly hair around her index finger and stares at the glass block windows. I don't look at the empty lunch table across from us as if ignoring it will make the situation disappear. I let my eyes unfocus on the tan concrete walls and pretend I'm not there.

On the bus ride home, the two girls sitting behind talk about the memories they'd had with the boy at parties. They say he'd always been alone in the corner, a wallflower. They make a promise to each other that they will pay attention to the signs of a depressed person more. I think of myself; I'm almost always isolated, called quiet and strange, and never invited to anything. I wonder if anyone would be as distraught if I were to disappear. If anyone would even notice other than the teachers who look at the class lists. I wonder if my one friend would find a new one as quickly as she'd found a new person to crush on.

After a few weeks, no one discusses him anymore. His memory becomes a draft that goes unnoticed. His name is forgotten as easily as the textbook chapters we read every week.

# So I Set Free My Tomb

By Claire Aguirre

Audience Trigger Warning: Child Sexual Abuse

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Rap has never been a genre of music that has garnered much respect, at least from the critics on the outside looking in. People turn their noses up at the mention, already formulating a stereotype in their mind: a young black man, dressed in a “wifebeater,” low hanging jeans, and glinting jewelry, rapping about drugs, alcohol, money, sex, violence, or any other vice, lacking any sort of decorum or decency as he parades about, throwing up gang signs, surrounded by throngs of women dressed in skimpy clothing. Purists refuse to call it real music. Others call it plain degeneracy. Very few challenge themselves to dig deeper, to truly experience the genre, that of which is a powerful art form that combines an utmost display of poetry with raw, authentic expressions of life; all lost, however, to some folk, on a crude word.

Rap continues to fall on deaf ears. What a blessing, therefore, that I was drawn to listen, unburdened by the opinions that surrounded me. One artist especially pulled me: Kendrick Lamar. His work was masterful, beautiful, acquiring my praise every time. It was May 13 of 2022 when his album *Mr. Morale & The Big Steppers* was released. It was late in the evening when I had given it a listen; the setting sun filtered through my cracked window blinds as I plugged my earbuds into the headphone jack in my phone and proceeded to allow his words to touch my soul. One song, however, had stood out in a way that I would have never been able to expect: a track titled, “Mother I Sober.”

Amidst the complex, bold sounds of previous tracks, his now soft, pensive voice had grabbed my ears and forced my attention

more than any hard-hitting, fierce song ever could. I followed that voice, my steps intrigued yet uncertain, my footprints light against gravel leaving nary a trace as it led me down a path of unearthed trauma. The voice was vulnerable, whispering details of his past; "Did he touch you Kendrick?" his mother had asked. "Never lied, but no one believed me when I said, 'He didn't.'"

I stop in my tracks, my feet scuffing against the gravel at my halt. The voice floats on, fading in the distance as it leaves me behind. "*Did he touch you Kendrick? Never lied, but no one believed me when I said, He didn't.*"

My mother had asked me a similar question when I was a young teen. I had never been one for physical touch, jumping away from lingering hands and prodding fingers as if they were hot coals. She had thought it worrisome, but did not pose the question until I had broken down in tears after a stranger had accidentally brushed against my breasts. As I lay curled on my bed, sobs racking my body, tears dampening my skin, I had told her no.

I was sat in a hot tub in the midst of persons much older than I, faces I did not recognize. I remained quietly to myself, like a small, grey mouse curled in the corner as the gentle, warm water bubbled around me. Amongst the strangers, one man was beside me: old and grey haired, his face wrinkly and his skin flabby and sheer. His eyes, dark and dead, caught my own, and he smiled. He leaned forward, his pale skin peeling off of the concrete edge he sat against, and struck up a conversation. My body wanted to shift away; I could feel how the hairs on my arms and on the back of my neck jumped up and veered sideways, trying to pull me in the opposite direction, a million little tethers struggling to drag me off. But his voice was inviting, disarming; cheese on a mouse trap, as he leaned closer still. It is then when my memory fails me; things start to blur around the edges until everything ebbs away into blank space, fading like an elusive dream. I do not know what happened next; the ending evades

me like a final page having been torn from a book, with only suggestions left in its absence. Suggestions, such as my aversion to touch, or such as the way that, ever since that day, I could not bear the thought of wearing a two-piece swimsuit. Suggestions that hinted at repressed trauma.

Suggestions I had not paid any mind to, because until hearing that song, as I stood on the gravel path, three months away from turning 17, the memory had been all but forgotten; dead and buried with the tomb sealed tight (“Child Sexual Abuse”) (“Work Through Trauma Denial”).

That song, however, that voice—it had led me down a path long since travelled— a path I had thought was for *Lamar*, not for me—taken a shovel to the burial site, excavated the tomb, and shifted the lid ever so slightly. To this day, I still have not pulled the lid back fully; I stare at the sliver of the opening now present, never looking away, yet never moving a muscle. Perhaps I never will; perhaps the tomb will remain ajar, its contents never fully confronted. But to all the critics of rap music, know that it has brought me comfort, the comfort of feeling seen, the comfort that comes with being laid bare, with being unearthed, if not yet fully, but recognizing what is there.

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