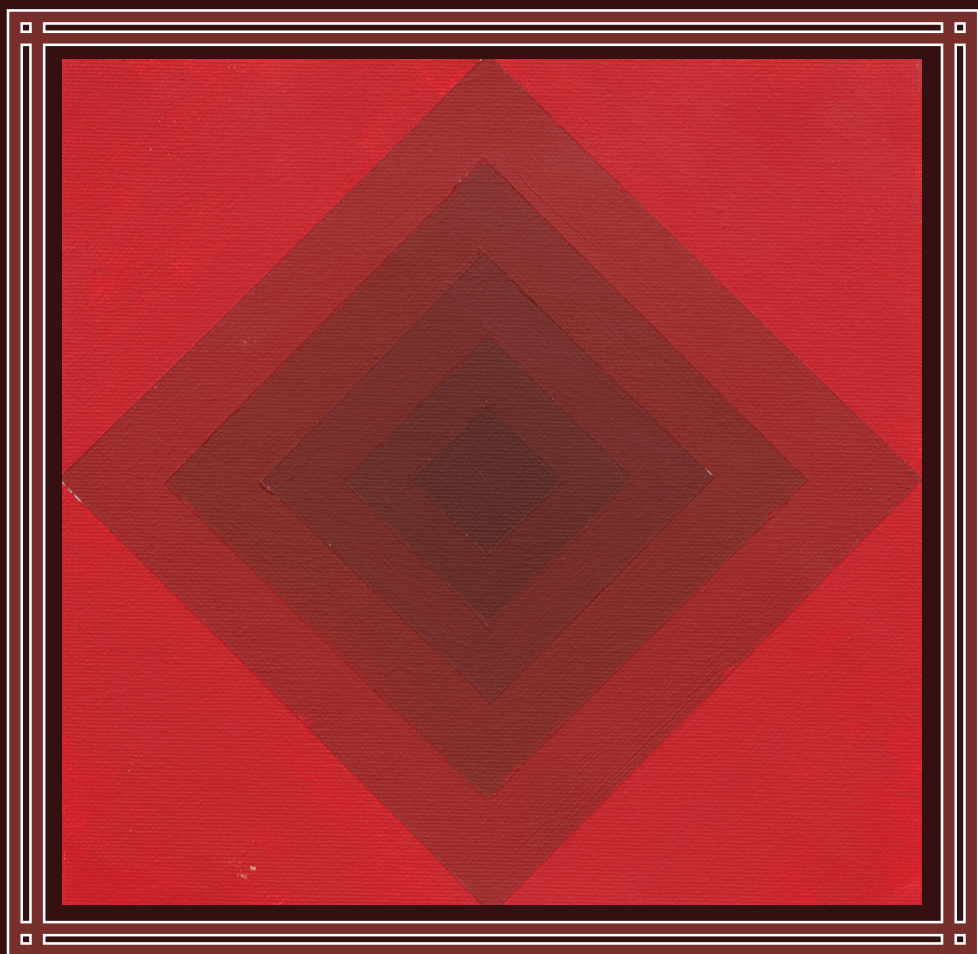


HORIZONS



HORIZONS

The Literary Magazine of
Waubonsee Community College

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EDITORS' NOTE

This year, *Horizons* was a huge undertaking. Starting later meant a new set of challenges for our new members and old members alike. It took our team coming together to work hard to deliver an amazing magazine. Through perseverance, hard work, and some sleepless nights we were able to overcome that adversity and release a professional collection of the best artistry the Waubonsee student body has accumulated.

We would like to extend our deepest thank you to everyone on the editorial staff who took the time to read all the submissions during spring break, selected the pieces that best fit, edited all the pieces and helped guide and build the framework for the magazine. Secondly, we want to extend our thanks to the graphic designers who played an invaluable part in leading the charge into more experimental and creative direction for *Horizons*. Lastly, we would like to thank our faculty advisor Dan Portincaso, who guided us, and assisted us through the process of making the best magazine possible. He has been the staff's biggest supporter and inspiration, and we thank him for pushing us to be our best.

Finally, we would like to thank all the writers, musicians, and artists that shared all their hard work submitting to Skyway and *Horizons*. Without them we wouldn't be able to make any of this possible. Art, whether it be storytelling or painting or music, is a quintessential human tradition that offers an appreciation into our culture and values and brings communities together. Those who contributed their

art to this year's magazine have helped shine a light on the Waubonsee community. As authors and artists ourselves, thank you for supporting us for the 27th volume of *Horizons*.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Hernandez
Abigail Kleimola
Pat Miller

Editors-In-Chief

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Horizons would like to thank the students who submitted their work for consideration this year. We also want to thank the student editorial committee for reading through submissions during their spring break and discussing them when we returned. *Horizons* would also not be what it is today without the dedication and work of members in the Creative Writing Club at Waubonsee.

We want to especially thank Dr. Danielle Hardesty, Dean for Arts and Humanities and Mary Kloss, Administrative Specialist for Arts and Humanities. Their support for and commitment to the magazine ensures that the student writers, artists, musicians, and designers at Waubonsee have a vibrant publication that gives them professional experience and showcases student talents and skills.

We would also like to thank:

Todd Laufenberg, Assistant Professor of English, for his reliably excellent work with the Skyway Writing Competition, a wonderful opportunity for Waubonsee writers and vital source of submissions for this magazine.

The English and Developmental English Departments for encouraging, teaching the writers of the future and for helping spread the word to students about *Horizons*.

The Art Department, for inspiring and teaching the visual artists of tomorrow, including *Horizons* in First Friday events at the Aurora campus, and their work with the Skyway Art Competition, from which the art in this issue was selected.

The Music Department who is committed to musical excellence for their students and connecting them to this

publication.

Purchasing Manager, Theresa Larson, for her unparalleled guidance through the purchasing process.

Michelle Dahlstrom, Student Life Manager, and Madeline Croft, Administrative Specialist for Student Life for their guidance and support in organizing events and meetings, and for creating an environment at Waubonsee that inspires the student leaders of tomorrow and engages them in community building for a better tomorrow.

The Marketing and Communications department for their ongoing support and Anders Lindell, Marketing and Communications Web Developer, and his team, for expertly managing our website.

Alphagraphics of Aurora, our printing company, for consistently producing work of the highest quality and mentoring our designers through the publication process.

And last, but certainly not least, we would like to thank all the college faculty, staff, administrators, students, the college president, and the WCC Board of Trustees for providing an environment that facilitates and enhances the growth of the literary arts at Waubonsee.

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Awakening

Saniya Berry

I was a house locked from the inside,
The key lost long ago beneath layers of silence.
Behind the frosted glass, the curtains hung heavy, locked in
a moment where nothing shifted.
Concrete walls, hard and moving, became the only thing I
trusted.
The door rusted shut, impossible to penetrate. I thought
never to be opened.
But then you knocked, patient and steady— a sound un-
heard, yet somehow known,
Reminding me the door was mine to open.
I held the key all along, but it took your touch to turn it.
Your words, like water, broke through the walls I built;
Your hands, warm like spring, slowly thawed the glass that
kept me hidden.
Each moment with you was a stitch carefully woven into the
quilt that now wraps around my soul, warm and unyielding,
offering me rest without fear.
And now—
There is no bolt, only the open air where walls once stood,
unguarded,
Basking in the warmth of being seen.

COLLAGE

Grandmother

Haley DePauw



Collage, 14"x11"

CERAMICS

Blue

Jenny Sampson



Ceramics/Clay, 11"x13"x5"

The Cold Road

Pat Miller

Content Warning: This Narrative Depicts Graphic Violence, Blood, and Gore.

“Along the cold road, we seek our redemption...”

A phrase for the penitents and who have been forced to walk the path to this ancient Imperial prison colony ran through the mind of the mercenary captain, Julian Wolfsbane and the men he led, a part of his mercenary company *The Red Iron* stopped along the frozen road, where they laid tired, travel-weary, horrified eyes on the massive corpse tree. The pale tree held corpses aloft that hung precariously via rope and torn-out entrails. Bodies of emaciated husks of men, women, and children scattered all around, with skin ripped and sewn into the very wood of the tree. The fetid stench of rot and expelled waste was beginning to overcome Julian Wolfsbane, his long white hair and crimson cape blowing in the vile wind. The old man hid behind a facade of stoicism but deep inside his soul he was mortified and angry, his eyes resting on the desiccated skeletal face of a young woman, trailing cold frozen coagulated blood to the dyed red blanket of white.

“Gods...” Julian muttered under his breath as he hid his nose and mouth with an old hand-woven scarf tucked under his worn down plate armor, as a large shadow approached behind him.

“We’re still miles away towards Tanelorn’s Wall, we should move on” Julian knew her name as Jocasta, the guide he hired to escort him and his men through the vast eternal winter. She was a tall northern woman clad in hides bearing a pin with a symbol of two axes coming together on the lapel of her coat that hid over her chain armor.

“These people were probably caught in the mist. Better to leave them.” Julian furrowed his brow in disgust.

“Mist? What could mist do to these people?” He asked, covering his mouth and nose with the scarf. Jocasta looked down at the old man.

“It’s not what it could do, it’s what usually is in it.” Jocasta leaves ahead, leaving Julian to stare at the pale tree.

“To the hells with that.”

In defiance the old man barked orders to his men so loudly his voice carried over the screaming winds to take off the corpses from the tree.

“You’ll damn these men!” shouted Jocasta but Julian ignored her and threatened his men with whippings and no rations to do as he commanded. The frozen over ground and harsh icy field made it impossible for their shovels to pierce into the ground to create graves.

“We cut them down! By the laws of the Trinity, if the dead cannot be buried - they must have their soul released into the sky by fire!” The mercenaries dug into their carriages to use the remaining oils and tinder they had left; they took the bodies and set them onto a huge pyre and began throwing oil at the cursed tree. Julian removed a glove off his left hand tucked into the breast of his plate armor and unsheathed his sword ‘Amelia’ - a Kastimerian steel longsword with blue leather wrappings and a custom made silver pommel with an etching in elvish. He raised the edge of the blade and placed it gently into his palm, his palms scarred by numerous self-inflicted blade swipes. Julian began muttering in hushed tones words of magic, and in one fluid motion he swiped his blade across his palm and his blood became like flaming oil onto his sword causing it to magically burn.

“We are baptized twice, once in water, now once in flame, as we carry the fire of the goddesses inside us until we stand before them in judgment.” thought Julian.

In one strike he slammed his sword into the ground and the flames shot forward and lit the oiled bodies and set the tree ablaze. As the fires raged the company stood quiet over

the flames, some gave the dead their last rites, and Julian stared into the fires as the bodies of men, women, and children were placed with the last being a newborn, swaddled in cloth, baptized, before being casted into the flame.

Julian felt sick as his heart began to be filled with hatred at whatever that could have done to those who were innocent. Jocasta brushed her own ginger hair out of her face and stood stoically watching the fires.

“The dead haunt these wilds, and their evils have swept through and cursed these people. Now you and your men are cursed and you’ll bring death to you and your men.” Julian’s face finally twisted to match the anger within, he tried to swallow it but his own body betrayed him revealing his anger to the northern woman. She placed a hand firmly on Julian’s shoulder. Julian suddenly felt as if he had returned back to the earth.

“I know your heart is filled with anger. These things in the mist feed on the dead and kidnap people from our homes, our cattle, the animals we hunt for food, men, women, children...” Jocasta’s voice broke, swallowing down her pain to not allow a crack in the wall she had built for herself.

“We would find them consumed. Even those who lived had their mind broken, and soon their bodies would be broken and transformed into something we have not seen. My husband was once taken into the night...” Jocasta’s voice trailed off.

The two would look into the fires as the flames purified the bodies. The rotten wind began to clear away and its howling screams began to grow calmer. The night began to

creep over the mountainside and devour the afternoon.

“We best get a move on, we’re nearly close to your wall,” Jocasta said, the old man acknowledged and he suffocated his flaming sword into the snow and sheathed it. He patched his hand with bandage and glove and mounted his horse, venturing deeper into the north.

The company trudged through a frozen valley of ice and spires of rock that curved above their heads. Gently the snow began falling as the orange of the late afternoon began burning itself away becoming shades of pink and purple with splotches of red like blood on the horizon. Julian kept his mind busy, calculating what little supplies his company had left available.

Mistburrow’s castle served as a sinister blemish that marked the grievous sins of the old empire’s decadence and ruthlessness but now the castle laid decrepit. It could have remained a grim reminder of the empire of old but in its death had begun to serve as a bright vigil for the locals that have taken the abandoned castle wall’s stone and used it for bridges and homes.

Julian and his company finally were able to take a deep breath and relax as they began to unhitch horses, the chilly mountain air and the village’s warmth was small comfort to the old man. Julian began to make his way up to the remains of Castle Colonna to greet the keep’s warden. Julian was cautious as he approached the wooden stairs that felt as rickety as himself when he approached the office of the warden, knocking a gentle nursery rhythm.

“Come in!” shouted a gruff voice.

Julian entered and felt caught off guard as a sudden wave of nostalgia hit him as he suddenly shouted, "Beren!" and practically leaped at the elven male, a warrior like Julian but with an air of elegance to him, with long black hair and an athletic youthful body but his one good eye betrayed a worn down wisdom. Julian hugged his old friend, an elven warrior, and former companion in the days when Julian was younger and an adventurer before forming his mercenary company oh so long ago. Beren met his best friend with a smile that matched Julian's own warmth as they both embraced and laughed.

"It is so good to see you, my dear friend, it has been way too long. You look, well..." Beren paused in an attempt to not offend his old friend as Julian raised his hand to almost stop his elven friend from talking.

"I know, I know. I am old, I feel it too...meanwhile, you have yet to appear what...nearly 200?" The two let go as they both adjusted themselves

"You humble me, Julian, I never expected you to arrive at the northern pass. I believed by now you would have settled along the Gold Coast." Julian sighed as he took a seat in front of Beren's desk, taking a look around at the spartan accommodations as Beren found a good bottle of liquor to pour for the both of them.

"I came because I needed to settle some things, a debt if you will. My company and I have hit a rough patch. Contracts ceased flowing like wine and the only thing we could muster was to trek miles from the comfort of the southlands to the north and make a garrison." Beren listened as he poured a drink out to Julian as Julian aired his woes, they

clinked their glasses together in salute and downed them. The slight spice burnt in their mouths before it flowed smoothly down. The Old Men celebrated well into the evening speaking of old memories and good times, until the conversation turned.

“Forgive me Julian but I do have a matter that came to my attention before you arrived, but I think you’re still the person I need.” Julian drank his newly refilled glass of whiskey, this time slower as he allowed his old friend to speak.

“Have you heard rumors of horrors within the mist?” Asked Beren. Julian ceased his drinking as his expression quickly grew to anger.

“Heard? I have apparently seen it. A mist that takes people and strings them up onto trees?! And these Northmen do nothing because they believe they are cursed?” Beren nodded but allowed Julian’s fires to temper once again. Julian looked at the glass of whiskey, used his gloved finger to trace along the rim of the glass.

“My guide says there is something within that takes people, that they become...consumed.” As Julian spoke. Beren stood up and paced his spartan office.

“My people here were attacked a long time ago by the same things you describe. I also thought of it as a tall tale but we had actually captured one. The blacksmith. He was taken in the middle of the night and our scouts had discovered him eating the flesh of the dead we assume he killed, he wore their intestines and bones but there was something else Julian. He had spores and roots growing out from him.” Julian mouthed the word “spores” but as

he attempted to comprehend what his elf friend was saying. Suddenly bells and shouting arose, causing them to stand and open the windows. Julian had a hard time being able to pierce through the night as snow fell, Beren was able to seize a spyglass and peer into the distance - shouting began to be heard all over the court as soldiers of the walls grabbed spears and guns and take the stage preparing for an attack as Berens bellowed out "It's a child!"

A young boy was running in the cold, with deep bruises and lacerations across his body, wearing scraps of cloth and nearly naked, running through the heavy snow as fast as his tattered feet were able to carry him. He was intercepted by Julian at the wall. The boy couldn't speak as his tongue was cut out. Julian wrapped a blanket and cradled the boy into his arms but he was overcome by frostbite and plague, his spirit given up. Julian, overcome with a sudden horrid pain deep in his heart. He had not known the lad, but he felt an utter pain deep within him, a feeling he could not overcome.

Hatred.

No one came for the boy. Julian was the only one there to still give the boy his rites and burn his body, allowing his soul to escape into the embrace of the goddesses. Bleak winds shuttered the rotten wood blinds of the cathedral as Julian sat watching the flames in silence, Providence had brought he and his men here along the road, It was not only because he had to maintain his company, it was because he had to seek a penance. In his youth he had slain vile sorcerers and foul warlords, but he also allowed many fine men to fall onto his sword. Julian would find his redemption, or die.

When the storm had begun to die down, Julian took his leave and wrapped himself in his cloak, grabbed his equipment, and began his trek into the boreal wasteland, following the boy's path before it was covered fully. It led him deeper into frozen wood for hours, crossing the frozen wastes, leading into the mouth of a cave, formed like a screaming mouth. Julian immediately felt a sudden deep pit in his stomach, goosebumps across his back stuck up as Julian felt a presence within, something ancient, something evil. Julian would once again unsheathe his sword Amelia and grip the regal blue leather handle tightly as he placed the edge of the blade onto his palm. He uttered his prayers once more this time with a conviction he had not felt in a long time, one that made him feel like a younger man, In one swipe across his scarred palm, the blade once more ignited with his the strength of his faith, taking his blood into a bright flame that bathed his sword. Julian, finding his breath and courage, stepped inside the cave's maw.

"The paths from hell to heaven are often paved along a cold road, And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up our heads... for our redemption draweth nigh. Along the cold road, we seek redemption."

Julian uttered his prayer, as he delved deeper into the cave, however as he delved the cavern's interior went from jagged stones and began to twist before his eyes, the caves brought to Julian the smell of rotten meat, and eventually he came upon a huge antechamber and within it revealed an altar of flesh, several bodies were splayed, like angels with wings of skin, being force fed flesh and bone. In the center, was a beating heart shaped like the great white elder wood

tree that Julian and his men burnt. It was pulsating, Julian felt he was being watched as his light scared away the darkness that tried in vain to consume him.

As Julian stepped further he began to hear a wailing, a man's voice, Julian followed it hoping amongst the living horror was someone alive. As he went further he found a man with ginger hair but whose back was ripped open like wings. He had no eyes - they were ripped out. The man was embedded into a living breathing exposed muscle, nestled as roots to the tree within, amongst them, thousands more people, Julian investigated further, these people had become monsters, emaciated, with huge claws and faces of bone, feasting on the dead. The man tried to speak but only whispered.

"Just put an end to me by the gods." Julian admired the man's defiance and spoke to him softly.

"I am not here for you, I am here to cleanse this evil." There was a quiet laughter from him.

"You speak with a fire like my wife, Jocasta." Julian stopped him from speaking.

"You are her husband?" Julian asked. The man nodded, Julian attempted to try to free him, taking a knife from his sheathe and trying to cut the vines, but as Julian began the cavern shook like an earthquake.

"My name is Erik, for years we were cursed by mist, and in the mist, this heart of darkness has taken people from their homes, and turned them into creatures, become like a nest... I thought I could feed it, give it what it wanted to stop it, but it kept getting hungrier and hungrier. Until it took me, as its heart, but I can sense a flame. No matter

what I do I do not deserve an eternal peace, but if I can do just one thing, please I beg you to carry a message to my wife, and to end me and set this whole place ablaze so It cannot feed...”

Julian stepped forward and the man whispered his message into Julian's ear. Julian then raised his blade and plunged it deep into Erik granting him freedom. Julian stepped back as the cavern began to shake, his sword, Amelia, ignited Erik's body, as his body acted like a tinder, spreading like wildfire setting a thousand souls to be released as Julian began to flee. From the darkness a tendril of muscle grasped onto him tripping him and dragging him into the inferno. Julian pulled his boot-knife and stabbed and stabbed. Within the fires Julian heard an ancient voice in an unknown daemonic tongue. He turned back and saw within the flame, all the faces of the many men he had killed, that he would be remade into this thing's image. Julian kept hacking with his dagger, finally forcing it to release him allowing Julian to escape.

The old man crawled his way out, and got to his feet, the smell of rancid meat permeated the inside of the cave, smoke leaked out towards the early morning sky. As Julian journeyed back to the castle.

He walked past men preparing to leave in almost a stupor, Jocasta stopped him. Julian smiled as she put a hand on his shoulder and gave Jocasta Erik's message for only her ears as a heavy silence fell between the two. Jocasta felt an odd comfort as Julian got onto his horse, the weather finally allowing the sun to pierce through.

“Along the cold road, we seek our salvation...”

PAINTING

The Pisces That Can't Swim

Emilia Chavez



Oil Paint, 28"x20.5"x1.5"

CERAMICS

M

Hailey Casburn



Ceramics/Clay, 9"x5"x2"

PAINTING

Anguish Jenny Sampson



Oil Paint, 24"x30"

Fractures

Margaret Fox

I've broken seven bones. My dad always says it is because I never drank enough milk when I was younger, but I think that's just something parents say. I've broken enough bones that I don't even need to go to the doctor's to know if I broke one or not, I just know. You never feel that the bone is broken at first, there is so much adrenaline pumping through you that it almost doesn't hurt, but there are little signs that are the same every time. You will feel weak, almost numb, and moving it feels a bit like rubbing two rocks together. It feels ginger, almost bruised, but if you put it at a certain angle pain will shoot up through your body. It's not a fun feeling, but at least your cast will look cool.

I. The Left Elbow

This was my first broken bone. We were at my cousin's high school football game. I hated football. Still do. My siblings and I had begged my father to let us play at the playground near the football field. He had finally agreed, and my Grammy and Uncle Steve tagged along with us. My brother had my little sister and I running around the playground in

an elaborate obstacle course, one to rival *American Ninja Warrior*. It was the final race, a competition to climb the rope ladders the fastest, and it was on. We were halfway up, and I was just a step higher than my sister. I could have sworn someone had called my name. I turned around to see who had called to me, and I felt the wind whipping past my ears as my body thudded onto the ground.

II. The Right Wrist

I ruined my brother's birthday. It was a cool summer day when my sister and I decided to take a walk. She wanted to push our American Girl dolls around the block, and I wanted to ride my Razor scooter. We were halfway down the street when the sky started to darken. We decided we had to move faster. I didn't often ride the scooter, so I wasn't very adept at maneuvering the toy. We had made it amongst the uneven sidewalk blocks faster than we realized. There was a loud crack as the front scooter wheel hit the unmovable cement block peaking just above the others, and I felt my back meet the sidewalk. My sister said it was almost majestic the way that I flipped over the handlebar. I lay on the sidewalk for what felt like hours as my sister ran home to get my parents. When my dad arrived in our minivan to pick me up, I thought it had started to rain. It was just my tears running down my face.

III. The Nose

This was one of the dumbest breaks I had. My grandparents were coming to visit and I was running out to meet them. Nothing was obstructing my step, yet I managed to catch

my foot on the smooth blacktop. My dad said I didn't even try to catch myself, I just landed face-first. Even after the doctor set my nose straight, it will forever be a little bumpy.

IV. The Left Palm

This time I did catch my fall. My school had a narrow back stairwell, and the steps were a little creepy too. My friends and I had been chatting and goofing around as we walked up, and I wasn't watching where I was stepping. I felt a tug at my shoe, and I saw the next step rushing up to meet my face. I moved my hands just in time to catch myself, but my palm hit the edge of the stairs. Hard. My friends still claim they heard that break. The nurse didn't believe me that it was even broken until I came back the next day in a cast.

V. The Left Elbow (Reprise)

I always start this story by saying I fell out of a car. I used to go to church in this little khaki skirt/sweater combo look from Lands End. I was very attached to the whole vibe. We were in the parking lot of the church, climbing out of the unmoving car. My sister was sitting on my sweater in the backseat of the minivan, so like a sister, I began to yank on it. I swear my sister timed it, no matter how much she denies, but as I leaned back to pull harder she stood up. From the other side of the car, my dad just saw my feet up in the air as I fell down. Broke it in the exact same place on my elbow. And now I'm double-jointed.

VI. The Right Ankle

Thinking about this break always makes me a little queasy. I was a swimmer for the first eleven years of my life. You'd think that means I would be good at it. You'd be wrong. It was just a 50 freestyle - the easiest event in the swimming lineup. Just there and back. It wasn't a significant meet in any way, the only thing of note was that both of my parents were there. That's odd because my mother traveled for work, so it wasn't often she was in town for a regular home meet. I did my pre-swim routine: cap, then goggles, then readjust my goggles, take off cap and goggles because it now feels weird, cap again, goggles again, then three deep breaths, and shake it out. Simplicity at its finest. The block felt fine, and there were no problems with the start of the race. Two whistles and a beep. I raced as fast as I could, drifting into the middle of the swarm of swimmers in the lanes. Again, I wasn't very good. I got to the end of the pool and saw the T on the floor under the water. One breath, three strokes, then flip. My strokes were apparently a little long that day because as I flipped my face narrowly avoided cracking against the paved wall. My foot wasn't so lucky. I felt the gutter connect with the front of my ankle, right at the bend, and a sharp pain. As I continued the race, my foot felt loose, like I was about to kick it off. I was disqualified from the race because of my flip turn, and my foot felt sore, but I was walking just fine. I actually walked around on the broken ankle for a few weeks before I finally convinced my father to take me to the Orthopedics. My ankle still hurts sometimes during hockey practice.

VII. The Right Elbow

I barely even count this break. I didn't even need a cast for it, just a sling for a bit. It was during intramural broomball, and no one else had on elbow pads so I figured I'd be fine. I wasn't. We played against a bunch of adult adults. Like old guys adults. They were mean, but I was meaner. My strength in broomball is being annoying. I'll get in anyone's way if I can run up on them fast enough. One of the guys I was messing with didn't find it as funny as I did. I was battling with him for the ball and felt him hit me with the butt of his broom right in the chest. I slipped backward and landed on the ice, elbow first. I walked around with a makeshift sling and ice for a week before getting to a doctor. It was barely a crack and I just needed to keep it elevated for a bit longer. Honestly, it looked worse than it was. This was the first time my dad wasn't the one to drive me to the doctor. That hurt the most.

Even though the aftermath of the break feels the same, the moments leading up to it can be vastly different. It's almost funny to me what causes a broken bone. I've fallen down a flight of stairs with nothing more than a scrape, I slammed a car door on my hand and only got a bruise, I've even been slammed into the boards by a six-foot-three giant on hockey skates and I walked away like it was nothing. But one trip, one slip, one misstep, and you're in a cast for 4-8 weeks. No matter what the accident was, you're going to be in the same place, under an X-ray machine.

PAINTING

Colors

Gianna Yovan



Acrylic on Canvas, 11 7/8"x11 7/8"

MUSIC

Pretty Gritty

Mad Mack 182



Title: Pretty Gritty

Composer: Mad Mack 182

Performer: Mad Mack 182

Genre: E.D.M.

Instrumentation: Loops on Launch Pad - Electronic

Recorder/Producer: Mad Mack 182

Engineer: Mad Mack 182



A Midnight Dialogue

Clair Arndt

Bedroom Interior. It's night out and rain is pounding on the lonely windowsill. There's a bed stage right, a dresser up stage. On the dresser is a pitcher of water, a cup, and lamp, and the door out stage left. John Philosophy is in bed asleep wearing a blue night gown and cap.

John Philosophy: Honk mimimi. Honk mimimi.

John slumbers as a demon sneaks in through the window and sits on his chest.

Arzimoth: Nya!!! It's Arzimoth, the demon. Your soul is to be gobbled up as I drag you to the lowest pit of hell.

John Philosophy: Huh... I'm sorry what? Oh my, how did you enter this house?!!!

Arzimoth: Did... did you not just hear me? I'm a demon... who wants to eat your soul. *He turns away and snaps back with a scary mask.* OOOOGAAAAA
BOOOOGAAAAA

John gets up nonchalantly and grabs the pitcher pouring himself a glass of water.

Arzimoth: OOOOOGAAAAA
BOOOOOOOOOGAAAAA

John moves back to the bed.

John Philosophy: Yes I heard you the first time. So what are you going to take?

Arzimoth: Jesus Christ old man... *Arzimoth spits fire.* Owowowowww. I hate those words. Why did I say that? Anyway, I'm stealing your soul.

John Philosophy: Ok... and what do you mean by that?

Arzimoth: What do you mean, what do you mean?

John Philosophy: Well what is the soul? Like what are you specifically taking from me?

Arzimoth: You know, your soul, like the uhm, hold on. *He turns around and opens a book titled "Soul Stealing for Dummies."* Aha! Yes you see I'm supposed to kill you and then I get your soul before dragging you to hell.

John Philosophy: Ok, but how?

Arzimoth: I eat it?

John Philosophy: How?

Arzimoth: Do you not know how to eat? Damn, you are dumb!

John Philosophy: Now I do, I just want to know how one eats a soul. Is it a solid, liquid, or gas? Do you eat it raw, grill it, broil it, or does it fit in the microwave? I guess I just want you to define what a soul is.

There is a long awkward pause.

Arzimoth: Fuck you, man.

John Philosophy: Why?

Arzimoth: Because I hate you, duh.

John Philosophy: Why do you hate me?

Arzimoth: Because I want to.

John Philosophy: Why?

Arzimoth: Because I want to go home.

John Philosophy: Then just go home.

Arzimoth: I can't!!

John Philosophy: Why not?

Arzimoth: CAUSE MY BOSS WILL GET MAD AT ME!!

John Philosophy: Heh... so this is a job?

Arzimoth: I... I mean, yeah?

John Philosophy: So do you want to do this?

Arzimoth: Not really.

John Philosophy: Then why are you doing this?

Arzimoth: Because I have to.

John Philosophy: Why?

Arzimoth: Because the devil will get mad at me?

John Philosophy: So what?

Arzimoth: So what? SO WHAT? You know he's the Devil... from the bible?

John Philosophy: How do you know that?

Arzimoth: Cause I've seen him... duh?

John Philosophy: Oh... well in that case I'm the god Oden and I say you can't eat my soul.

Arzimoth: NO YOU'RE NOT. YOU CAN'T SAY THAT!!!

John Philosophy: Why not?

Arzimoth: Cause you can't just say you're a deity and expect me to believe you?

John Philosophy: I mean you believed the guy who claimed to be the devil?

Arzimoth: Well duh, he looks like the devil! He was red and had horns and a pointy tail.

John Philosophy: Well I have a beard and am old just like Oden. Therefore, I am Oden. Along with that, you're red, have horns, and a pointy tail... are you the devil?

Arzimoth: How dare you say such blasphemy!!

John Philosophy: I mean you can't prove it. I mean you can't even prove what a soul is, if anything I have more proof it doesn't exist.

Arzimoth: NO!

John Philosophy: Sure I can. I've never seen a soul or felt a soul or

touched a soul or anything, so for all I know it's not real.

Arzimoth: Of course it is! How else are you alive?!

John Philosophy: The blood in my heart is pumping, my electricity is wrapping around my nerves... that is, if I am even alive.

Arzimoth: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?!

John Philosophy: Well, be honest, did you know I existed before tonight?

Arzimoth: No?

John Philosophy: Exactly because I didn't exist before we started talking. I'm just a figment in your mind.

They stare at each other for a painfully long time

Arzimoth: ...really?

John Philosophy: Yup.

Arzimoth: Shit man... uhm, I uh need to think some things over... bye

Arzimoth sulks out the door

John Philosophy: Thank me, he's gone.

Her Favorite Color is Purple

Hannah Faulkner

She's older than me by a few months;
has longer legs, and prettier nails.
I look at her and fall in love
With all that a woman can be.
A girl made of moonlight and french pastries.
I listen to every word she says like she's my best friend.
Buy clothes that remind me of her and pretend to be just
as wise.
I do everything I can to be another angel.

But then I watch her go out at night.
Another club, another fight-
breaking herself into dust.
In the mirror she can't see
the way her eyes look like caramel candy,
or the way her smile is more beautiful than all of Aphro-
dite.
She tapes herself together,
but she's not the same.

She wears tight shirts, short skirts,
anything a man would think is hot.
And she's beautiful but now she's having

Second thoughts about dessert
About her weight.
She's on display walking down
to the bus stop.
Some say she's just mature for her age.
but those that know,
cry out in Rage.
Who was the one that made her feel this way?
Why is she less of her
And more of what she used to hate.
Why has she changed herself
So much, where were those cuts made?

I love her regardless,
but it pains me to stay quiet about
How she must have been betrayed,
and made to feel useless
if she wasn't the prettiest.
To still want attention
from someone that's not worth it.
She is hot and sexy and perfect.

I know someday she'll say too
"It wasn't worth it."

CERAMICS

Giggles the Clown

Kara Harger



Ceramic, 21"x27.5"x12.5"

CHARCOAL

Still Life with Lightbulb

Eric Scheidler



Charcoal Reduction, 18"x24"

Silent Healing

Sofia Resendiz

It was my third day of clinicals as an EMT student. By then, I had seen a variety of patients and was becoming somewhat familiar with the Emergency Department. Still, every alarming phone call to the nurses' station about an incoming patient made my stomach tighten.

The charge nurse answered the ringing phone and put it on speaker so the staff could hear. A paramedic's voice came through: calm but direct. He explained he was en route with a young female who was experiencing a "mental crisis" and needed a "psych evaluation." We'd seen this kind of patient a few times already, so it wasn't anything new. But this one stood out more to me than the others; I saw myself in her, but I didn't know it yet.

Minutes later, the medics came through the sliding doors, pushing a stretcher with a young girl. She wore a grey zip-up jacket, the sherpa lining matted and dirty. Her light brown hair was in a messy bun, with strands hanging over her blank face. I noticed her Snoopy pajama pants, and for a moment, I thought, "I have those pants."

They wheeled her into a room, beginning the transfer of care protocol: explaining what had happened, why she was there, and relaying her vitals.

The paramedic began, “17-year-old female...” She was two years younger than me.

A nurse had asked the girl to remove her jacket so she could take her blood pressure. She hesitated but complied. As her sleeve slid off, her arms were revealed—covered in self-harm scars, intricate webs that stretched from her wrists to her shoulders. Some of them still had dried blood, clearly fresh.

I was only observing at the time, occasionally helping with vitals, but something felt wrong. I kept wrestling with the thought of how my presence might make her uncomfortable—maybe I should leave—but it was my job to stay.

A few minutes later, her father walked in. As soon as he stepped through the door, the air in the room shifted, like a weight had been lifted. The tightness in my chest eased, and I saw the girl’s shoulders relax, just a fraction. It was subtle, but the tension that had been lingering was instantly replaced by a quiet calm. I could feel that change, and I couldn’t help but think that she could feel it too.

He embraced her, his voice soft and full of worry, assuring her that she was going to be okay, and that we were here to help her. She responded

with a quiet, “I know,” but the look in her eyes told a different story. Her gaze was distant, filled with a sadness that seemed to distance her from everything around her. It was as if she didn’t fully believe his reassurance, or maybe she just couldn’t let herself hope.

Thirty minutes later, a nurse and I returned to check her vitals and draw some blood. Her father had pulled up a chair and sat right next to her, his arm around her shoulders as he gently moved the strands of hair from her face. She stiffened at his touch, a subtle rejection in her body language, as if his affection had become a burden to her. It wasn’t that she didn’t want his love; it was that, perhaps, she couldn’t accept it right then.

That unsettled me.

I felt guilty for admitting that to myself—that here was a father, so desperate to comfort his daughter, and she was pushing him away. There were so many young women who would give anything to have that kind of love. Yet, she couldn’t—or wouldn’t—accept it.

Then I remembered that she was sick. She was hurt. Maybe she didn’t know how to show her dad that she appreciated him, or maybe, in her own way, she did, but the pain she was feeling was so deep it made it hard to accept anything good.

The healer in me wanted to believe that, despite her resistance, she did value him, but just couldn’t accept comfort in that moment. The little girl in me wanted to scream at her to hug him back, because I knew exactly what it felt like to be in the hospital, wearing the Snoopy pajama pants—only I didn’t have a father there to offer his love. I couldn’t help

but think of the nights I was alone in the hospital, longing for that kind of comfort, but it never came. There was a rawness to her rejection that hit me deep, but watching her turn away from the very thing I had craved made my heart ache in a way I hadn't expected.

I didn't say anything. I didn't offer advice or try to intervene in their moment. There was nothing I could do or say that would make her feel better or change how she was processing the situation. All I could do was stand back, observe, resume taking her vitals, and respect her space.

I wanted to tell her father that sometimes, even when it seems like someone is pushing us away, they need us more than ever. But I couldn't, because I knew that right now, the most important thing was that she felt seen, heard, and understood in her own time and on her own terms.

As I watched them, the father's quiet patience and her resistance spoke to me in a way that words never could. It reminded me that healing isn't always immediate or straightforward. Sometimes, the most we can do is sit in silence, offering our presence when it's needed, and trust that in time, the wounds—both physical and emotional—will begin to heal.

This, I realized, was why I wanted to be a first responder—not just for the trauma, the blood, and the quick thinking in emergency situations, but for the moments like this. For the chance to help people in ways that go beyond just treating physical injuries. To be there in times of vulnerability, to offer a little bit of comfort when it's needed most, and to be a steady hand when the world feels uncertain.

I understood that the job isn't just about responding to

calls or saving lives in dramatic ways. Sometimes, the most powerful thing you can offer is your presence and compassion. It's the way you listen, how you give someone space to feel without judgement, and how you stay calm in the face of someone else's pain. Those things don't often get the recognition that they deserve, but they're often the most important.

And though I didn't say anything, in that silence, I hoped they both knew they weren't alone. The room was filled with quiet understanding, the kind that words can't capture, but can only be felt.

Now that I'm an EMT, I understand more than ever what the job is truly about. It's about the moments when you step into someone's life during their hardest times and offer them more than just medical care. I understand now that healing isn't about solving the problem; it's letting them know that they aren't solving the problem alone.

COLLAGE

Where We'll Go

Amalia Muñoz



Collage, 14"x11"

WIRE

Sole Marks

Haydin Hampton



Wire, 4"x11.5"x4"

PAINTING

A New Outlook

Christian Mattern



Watercolor and Pen, 30"x32"

The Deer

Sydney Weeks

We are the deer in the forests and the fields
Constantly hunted by man and beast.
For the meat and the fur of our bodies
Is put on display so the hunters can feast
With their eyes and their teeth.

Put my head on your wall so I can see
The sins you commit in secrecy.
But don't ask me how I feel.
Afterall, I am just the head of the deer.

Technicolor

Lynleigh Ufen

Every childhood memory I have is in vibrant technicolor. I remember everything like it was etched on my mind. The fantasies I concocted, the dreams I once had, the vibrant green of the leaves on a tree that used to be so far from my reach.

As a young adult, I've begun reflecting on the summers I had back home, or the last real ones, anyway. The ones with my friends around. The ones where we went to the park merely to pretend it was our kingdom, the summers we had no qualms about getting chalk all over our hands and clothes while we crawled around in the dirt. The summers where we thought we were grown but we were really just seventeen.

It's a big jump from seventeen to nineteen.

Being able to think of only the summer sun on my shoulders and the times when I could convince my parents to let me have friends over for the fifth time in a week without doing any chores are things of the past.

My days have become consumed by screens and notifications and emails and the pressure to move on to the next thing. I'm tired of the next thing. I want to freeze time for a day just to catch up on a

NONFICTION

month's worth of going to sleep at two in the morning. I ask my teacher if this is how it's always going to be.

"After college, all you have is work for the rest of your life. It never changes."

If that's the case, why didn't I get encouraged to live more as a teen? As a child? Because as far as I can remember, all I've done is study and prepare and get told I still wasn't the perfect student. To watch all my friends earn awards and achievements and prizes I only dreamed of being able to win.

I want to go back to my childhood, with its technicolor memories. I want to pretend I'm a fairy instead of someone doomed to the prison of a 9-5. I want to go back in time and talk to my younger self, tell her to dig her hands in the dirt, and plant a garden to come back to instead of being too afraid to get mud under her nails. I want to tell her not to give in to the fear that one certain girl would notice and tease her for being dirty, because now that other girl doesn't even remember our name. I want to tell her to forget that girl's name so that I might do the same.

I want to let the chlorine waves of a pool wash over my head in a way that drowns out all the noise. I want to be a mermaid. I want to pretend the lifeguards were in love with me, the way I used to before it was awkward because they were just people I knew at school.

I want my phone permanently turned off. I want to quit my job. I want to feel connected with friends again, instead of only talking to most of them once every three months. I want summer back the way it used to be.

In technicolor.

Dandelion Pluck

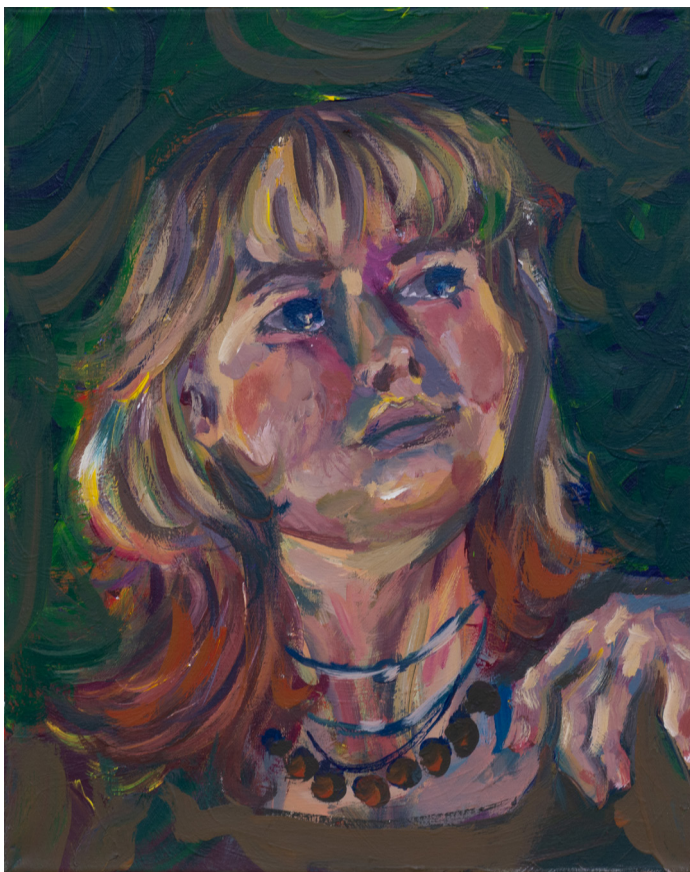
Audrey Karadimos

I am made from different elements.
From my personality,
To my qualities.
There's so many little pieces that fill in to
complete me.
I have learned that every little piece of me is
viewed differently,
This part is magical and cherished,
This part is sin and outcasted,
This part of me was ripped and torn to bits,
Left dangling and jagged.
There are some parts of me that are beautiful
and treasured,
There are some parts of that hideous and
despised.
There are some parts of me that are scarred
and tainted,
There are some parts of angelic and alive.
All these pieces making the entirety of me,
judged separately,
Loved and hated.
So when I am whole,
How can I be loved,
When parts of me are unrequested.
Pick me apart,
Find what you love best,
Throw away the rest.

PAINTING

Portrait #1

Emilia Chavez



Acrylic on Canvas, 20"x12"x5"

STONEWARE

The Rape of the World

Victoria Smith



Stoneware, 8"x8"x24"

Amour Immortel

Breanne Berenyi

Whispers filled the museum halls as groups of people wandered about, enjoying the centuries of art around them. The museum was surprisingly busy for a Tuesday afternoon and the final tour before lunch was almost thirty people, three times the normal size. Nonetheless, the docent dove deep into the history of each piece as she led the group, taking extra care to answer as many questions as she could with each display. She couldn't stop glancing at the clock, however, shocked at how much more time each tour took with all the extra people.

Just a few minutes before noon, they reached the final piece. It was a man holding a beautiful woman to his chest, almost as if she was the love of his life and he'd just lost her, sculpted of stone. "Alright folks, it's time for a personal favorite of mine." She paused to let them take in the statue before she recited its history for what must have been the thousandth time.

"This is the statue 'Amour Immortel.' The sculptor is still unknown and there hasn't been any real progress in the search since the early nineties. It's suspected to have been carved in the early sixteenth

century, somewhere in France. It was donated to the museum almost twenty years ago from a private collection, they themselves didn't have much information on the sculpture other than what they believed to be a myth. I called it a romantic tragedy the first time I heard it." There was a ripple of oohs and aahs from the group at the idea of a story.

"Once there was a prince who'd fallen in love with the daughter of a witch after stumbling across her in the woods. At first, she'd been hesitant to talk to him, a handsome lonely stranger, but he kept coming back to see her day after day. He'd been far too enamored by her beauty not to. After weeks of secretly meeting with her in the woods, the prince began to realize his feelings for the maiden. Not only was she ethereal, but in the time they'd spent together he'd been happier than he'd ever felt before. There had been several times his father had remarked on his mood, and the prince couldn't deny how much she made him laugh." The docent watched the faces of her tour group as they devoured her words. There were many gooey smiles as they went from watching her speak to watching the statue as if it was telling the story itself.

“And so, he began to truly court her, showering her in gifts. First flowers and trinkets, then jewels and dresses. Though none of it had been necessary because she was already in love with him too. But as the gifts grew in extravagance, she could no longer hide them from her mother, especially after he’d asked her to marry him. Before they parted that night, they agreed to finally tell their parents.

“Once the maiden had told her mother that she was to marry the prince, the witch fell into a destructive rage. Meanwhile, the prince’s parents were already fast at work preparing for the wedding, eager for grandchildren. The next day, when the prince went to meet his new fiancé in the woods, she wasn’t there. He waited and waited, hoping she’d show and growing more anxious the longer he sat.” She paused again, this time to catch her breath. The anticipation in the room was palpable as the group awaited the rest of her tale.

“By lunch time he found himself wandering around the woods, calling her name in hopes of finding her. He knew she couldn’t live too far having met him daily in the woods, and he was right. Before too long he stumbled across a house that looked just as she’d described. After several minutes of insistent banging, the maiden’s mother answered the door. But before she could say a word, he was past her and in the house looking for his love.

“He found her in what he assumed to be her room. She looked as if she was asleep in bed, but she was far too still, even the rising and falling of her chest. He tried waking her, shaking her, calling her name. Nothing worked. He hugged

her to himself on the verge of tears as the witch made her way up the stairs. When she realized who the prince was, her rage returned and she began to cast, leaving him no time to act. By the time the words had left her lips, the prince and her daughter sat there just as they had been. Together, as stone, forever.”

For a moment the group was silent, before the sniffles began and many shuffled for their tissues. A round of applause echoed off the walls as the docent gave a small bow to the crowd. She smiled as she glanced at the clock and found she’d finished just in time for her break.

As the group of guests scattered through the hall and out the front doors, an elegant looking couple stayed where they were. They were silent for several minutes as they stared together at the statue. She admired the details of the sculpture and its craftsmanship as he turned to look at her smiling.

“You know I still can’t believe you made your mother a witch in that story. I don’t think I’ve met a nicer woman since.” The man reminisced with a chuckle as he spoke.

She swatted at his shoulder playfully with her clutch as she smiled back, “I can’t believe you carved my nose crooked and my eyes so close together!”

They were both snickering now as he pulled her into his side and started towards the door. “Well we wouldn’t want people recognizing us, love.”

Valet Ball

Marilyn Gans

FADE IN

INSIDE THE NEWS OFFICE - EARLY MORNING -
SOMETIME IN 1980

Mitchel Mitchelson waddles hastily through the door. He is disheveled, nervous looking, and huffing and puffing as a smoky cigarette is fuming between his clenched teeth. A cameraman is following him from behind his head, showing him clumsily make his way through the news building in a fret. People in professional office attire are bustling around him: some with papers stacked in their arms, and some with phone wires practically coiled around their heads in a mad frenzy. The room is swarming with the sounds of phones ringing, people shouting over each other, and the furious clicking of typewriter keys. Mitchel is heaving through the madhouse of an office, his suit (which is too loose in his arms and too small in his torso), squeaking and scraping with every step (further adding to the cacophony).

MITCHEL

Speaking through his lit cigarette, with a nasally tone
My GOD people can nobody get *anything* done around here
without cleaning up after themself...

Before finishing his sentence, Mitchel trips over a short desk placed right in front of him and nearly tumbles out of a nearby window. Before he falls to his demise, however, another office worker trips and falls in front of him instead, blocking his fall and tumbling out the window in his place. This is a quick sequence.

MITCHEL

Shocked

Um....UM...WHO put that desk there? Did you see me almost fall to my *death*, people? What kind of establishment is this anyway?! We're running a business here! A *renowned* establishment! Let's act like it!

From the corner of the screen, a woman with humongous permed blond hair appears with a clipboard in her hands, and a blank look on her face.

WOMAN

Sir, you go live in two minutes.

Mitchel spins around in a panic, still slightly disheveled for almost falling to his ultimate demise.

MITCHEL

Stuttering

WHAT? YOU SAY WHAT? WE GO LIVE IN THREE MIN-
UTES?

WOMAN

Unfazed

...no, two minutes...

MITCHEL

I KNOW WHAT YOU SAID! WHO'S IN CHARGE OF
THIS SCHEDULING?

WOMAN

Unfazed

...you are, sir...

MITCHEL

Tripping over his words and sweating profusely

I DON'T EVEN HAVE MAKEUP ON YET! Where's that
makeup girl, MARGE? MARGE?

WOMAN

Still unfazed

Sir, you fired her yesterday.

MITCHEL

I DID *NOT* FIRE...oh yes I did...let me...

He spins around desperately looking for any sort of styling tool to groom his undone slick back combover. Grabbing a brush out of a nearby woman's handbag, he begins slicking back his hair at lightning speeds before throwing it back in her bag. The woman in question looks distraught at the fact his hair oils are all over *her* brush now.

MITCHEL

Clapping his hands

OKAY LET'S GO! CHOP CHOP!

Mitchel and the woman with the clipboard and humongous permed blond hair stumble out of the frame, tripping over random office workers and phone wires as they exit.

SCENE CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

INSIDE THE NEWSROOM

The two make their way into the newsroom, where large cameras are already set and ready to begin rolling.

Mitchel sits down in a huff behind the oversized newsdesk, sneaking a peak at the teleprompters placed conveniently directly below the respective lenses.

MITCHEL

Sucking in a large huff of smoke from his friable cigarette

Okay, let's get this presentation rolling, shall we? Start the cameras, Mark.

Nobody stirs. A few seconds pass and the silence gets loud.

MITCHEL

MARK!

MARK (THE CAMERAMAN)

We've been rolling for about twenty seconds, sir...

Mitchel looks directly at the cameras, gulps, and nervously puts his cigarette out in an ashtray.

MITCHEL

Taken back

I..uh..hello ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the morning broadcast from the SNCN (Sham News Corporation Network), where we reliably bring you the top stories,

directly to your screens at unprecedented speeds. (he smiles nervously). During today's telecast, we will be talking about the hot scoop of the day, yes, a story about how a local blind man fully regained his sight through drinking a magical new product (he squints his eyes looking at the teleprompter) *Sight-4-You, The Right-Thing-To-Do*. Our onsite reporter, Susan Lauderdale covers the story.

Mitchel sits back in his chair, waiting for the cameras to shut off. After a few moments,

MITCHEL

To the cameraman

TURN THE CAMERAS OFF MARK.

SCENE CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

OUTSIDE IN A BUSY DOWNTOWN - EARLY MORNING

News reporter Susan Lauderdale stands in front of a news camera, a wide (fake) smile on her face. Beside her, a man stands by holding a large blue soda-like bottle with the words *Sight-4-You, The Right-Thing-To-Do* listed on its label.

SUSAN

In an upbeat tone

Are we rolling Bob? We are? Okay. (Facing the camera) I'm standing here, Mitchel, in the crowded downtown streets with the man who claims that after drinking this new product called *Sight-4-You, The Right-Thing-To-Do*, he magically regained *all* of his eyesight after being blind for his entire life! Isn't that just *wild*? (Turning to the man) What exactly is your name, sir?

Susan puts the microphone up to the man's face.

BUTRUS

Um, Butrus, Butrus Huckels

SUSAN

Your name is Butrus Butrus Huckels, I see?

BUTRUS

Awkwardly

Um, no, it's just one Butrus, you see.

SUSAN

Mr. Huckels, what is it like to finally have eyesight after living your *entire* life without it? It's a very unique experience, I must say...

BUTRUS

Yes, you know it's been a big change for me. There are so many
ugly people out there that I have to look at now, you know?

And I mean it really ruins my day that...

SUSAN

Interrupting him

You mean how some people have ugly personalities in this
world that...

BUTRUS

Interrupting her and going on a ramble

No, no, I mean some people really are just *bad* to look at, in,
in the visual sense I mean, and I don't think the makeup helps
a lot. I mean look at *yourself*, your foundation barely matches
your skin tone in the slightest, and did you know that you
probably should change your lipstick color because it's really
an eyesore? Like did you know that?

SUSAN

Well I use natural cosmetics taken from select plants and...

BUTRUS

Interrupting her

Well there's your problem, honey, did you think I regained my
eyesight from *natural* ingredients?

This drink is like pure synthetic petroleum from some lab out
in Uzbekistan for all I know...

SUSAN

Did you hear about the petroleum that went missing?

BUTRUS

Raising his eyebrows

Say what now?

SUSAN

'Said you hear about the petroleum that went missing?

BUTRUS

I...

SUSAN

They sent out search parties to patrol the area...

Susan starts cackling at her horrendous joke.

BUTRUS

Shaking his head

I didn't see that one coming...

SUSAN

Still laughing

Well you were blind for so long, how could you?

BUTRUS

Taken back

Yeah... I guess I walked right into that one didn't I?

SUSAN

Laughing harder

I bet that used to happen a lot.

Butrus's smile drops.

SUSAN

Still laughing and cackling

Well that's all I've got for you today, Mitchel, back to you!

SCENE CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

INSIDE THE NEWSROOM

Mitchel is staring at the cameras with a look of disbelief as to what he just witnessed.

MITCHEL

To the camera

Well, um, thanks for that, Susan, exhilarating story. Next up, we have just received news that a group of rebel car valets working at the nearby casino have hijacked up to thirty cars, which they are using to play what they call, valet-ball, in the parking lot. Clearly a pun on the popular sport, volleyball...it's a violent scene, ladies and gentlemen, as nearly fifteen people have been stampeded and run over in the street lot, and the property damage is getting to be quite extreme. Here on the phoneline, we have news reporter Deerin Headlout, who is reporting from the scene. Deerin? You're on air.

Mitchel grasps a telephone in his hand, waiting for Deerin to respond on the other line.

DEERIN

From the phone

Well, Mitchel, it's a horrifying scene here at the casino, as cars are zooming around the parking lot from nearly every direction. Even just a few minutes into this extreme incident, more than fifteen people have been run into by these valets gone rogue, and no amount of law enforcement on-site seems to be combating their series of growing assaults. Even the national guard has arrived at the scene and...and...oh god...

OH MY GOD...LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OH MY GOD

MITCHEL

Anxiously clutching the phone

What's happening over there, Deerin? What's happening?!

DEERIN

Screaming his head off

OH MY GOD LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THEY'VE
BLASTED THROUGH THE NATIONAL GUARD! THEY
ARE LEAVING THE PARKING LOT! OH MY GOD! NO
SOUL IS SAFE IN THIS TOWN LADIES AND GENTLE-
MEN! LOCK YOUR DOORS! LOCK YOUR WINDOWS!
THEY'VE...

MITCHEL

Deerin? DEERIN? What do you mean they've left the parking
lot? What do you mean by that Deerin?

DEERIN

Cutting in and out on the phone

DEAR GOD LADIES AND GENTLEMEN IT'S LIKE THE
PITS OF HELL HAVE BEEN OPENED! TEN BUILDINGS
HAVE BEEN MERCILESSLY RUN OVER, (the sound of
people screaming, sirens, and collapsing infrastructures

can be heard in the background) WHATEVER YOU DO
DON'T GO INTO THE STREETS! I REPEAT! WHATEVER
YOU DO DON'T GO INTO THE STREETS! I REPEAT! I...
AHHHHH

The phone clicks. Mitchel sits in a confused, concerned silence
with the phone in his hand.

MITCHEL

Politely

Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, I'll be right back.

Mitchel stands up from his desk and leaves the newsroom
while the cameras are still rolling. A camera follows behind
him as he walks through the different busy office rooms and
towards the front door of the building.

SCENE CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

THE OFFICE PARKING LOT

Walking outside, he is greeted by the sight of the warm sun,
green grass, and the sounds of blowing wind and birds chirp-
ing. Throwing his hands up in the air, Mitchel sighs.

MITCHEL

To himself

Don't go into the streets he says...lock your doors and windows
he says...the gates of hell have opened he says...what kinda
people are we hiring anyway?...

As Mitchel turns around to go back into the news building,
however, an explosion erupts in the parking lot and cars go
zooming by at one hundred miles an hour (with sirens and
screaming voices to accompany).

MITCHEL

With comedic shock

AAAAAAA

SCENE CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

INSIDE THE NEWSROOM

Mitchel waddles back into the newsroom, sweating profusely
and looking dazed.

MITCHEL

Exasperatedly while waving his arms

Roll the cameras, Mark.

MARK

Sir, we cut to our commercial breaks in like ten seconds...

MITCHEL

Angrily

I SAID ROLL THE CAMERAS, MARK...

The news cameras turn on.

MITCHEL

Ladies and gentlemen, do NOT under ANY circumstances leave your homes, I repeat, do NOT under ANY circumstances leave your homes, even for ONE SECOND! There is a violent takeover by valet-ball playing terrorists that have taken over the entire town and there is NO stoppi...

SCENE ABRUPTLY CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

SCREEN LIGHTS UP WITH THE WORDS “SNCN COMMERCIAL BREAK”

(Commercial Sequence Begins)

A woman is walking down the street. Her hair is perfectly neat, and she is dressed to the tee. Out of nowhere, another woman with the most atrociously matted and frizzy hair you’ve ever seen pops out.

MATTED HAired WOMAN (DAMAGITA)

To the camera

Are you tired of looking like you just rolled out of bed in the morning? Like you've never even been in the *vicinity* of a hair-brush in your life? Like you've never taken the time to look at yourself in the mirror? Well, then it's time for you to invest in Damagita Hair Care Products, to get hair *just* like mine. (She turns to the woman with the actually perfect hair). Hi, I'm Damagita, creator and CEO of Damagita Hair Care Products. I think you would really benefit from using our specialty shampoo and conditioner set, tailored to your needs, which are many.

Scene cuts to show a before and after picture of the woman with perfect hair to the most extremely matted and frizzy hair imaginable. Damagita provides a voice over.

DAMAGITA

As you can certainly tell with these select before and after pictures, Damagita Hair Care Products rejuvenates your hair with its hydrating and cleansing formula, so much so that you'll never look the same ever again. That's our guarantee.

Scene cuts to the woman who used to have nice hair standing in front of the camera (with her newly matted hair) smiling.

DAMAGITA

Offscreen, behind the camera

Go

WOMAN

(after a pause) I've never received so many looks in my life! I've
become quite popular!

Scene cuts to show the woman with the newly matted hair
running through a field with her while Damagita provides a
voice over.

DAMAGITA

"Damagita Hair Care Products. So Beautiful The Entire World
Will Know"

SCENE CUTS

SCENE BEGINS

SCREEN LIGHTS UP WITH THE WORDS "SNCN
MORNING NEWS SEGMENT"

SCREEN LIGHTS UP WITH A COUNTDOWN OF 3, 2,
1,

Scene opens to show the newsroom on fire. The sounds of
people screaming can be heard, along with sirens, car

engines, and collapsing infrastructure. Mitchel is standing on top of his desk waving his arms around.

MITCHEL

At the top of his lungs

MARK GET THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER!!! GET THE FIRE
EXTINGUISHER!!!

Camera shows Mitchel jump from his desk onto the floor, which then follows him from the back of his head as he runs throughout the office building. All around him, people are shrieking and running in random directions. Flames and smoke are everywhere, and people yelling things like “THE BUILDING IS GOING TO COLLAPSE” and “LOOK OUT” and “JUMP OUT OF THE WINDOW” can be deafeningly heard. Mitchel turns to the camera that’s following him and says...

MITCHEL

WELL EVERYBODY, THANKS FOR TUNING IN TO
SNCN MORNING NEWS! IF WE SURVIVE THIS, WE
HOPE YOU’LL TUNE IN TO OUR AFTERNOON SPE-
CIAL WHERE WE INTERVIEW RENOWNED ARCHE-
OLOGIST IBEA DIGGINS, AND WATCH MARTA
STLAVAT’S FAMOUS AND CONTROVERSIAL COOK-
ING SHOW! GOOD DAY LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!
(he looks the other direction) OH DEAR GOD THE ROOF
CAVED IN!

END

TERRA C.

Overflow

Mauricio Patino



Terra Cotta, 28"x8"x8"

PAINTING

Untitled

Nathaniel Yakushina



Acrylic on Canvas, 9"x9"

Silas Chevalier

Kain Helm

A fight broke out between the bar-goers. Punches thrown left and right among the two drunk patrons as the thrill-seeking crowd cheered them on. A dreary man watched, slumped in the corner of the bar. He was slouched over in a worn-down booth with an empty expression, sipping on a glass of some smokey alcohol. Most of the cheery bar tended to ignore the man, who was regularly in that shadowed seat shoved away in the corner. He sighed, reluctantly downing the rest of his glass, shoving his way out of the bar with his hands buried into his pockets.

The man, Silas Chevalier, a known hunter for hire among the various towns within the territory of Aion and the Central Expanse. Not as much known for his skill as for the power he wielded. Sigils, strange mystical circles that granted the user power beyond any a human could naturally wield, at a price. These sigils were carved into his skin, resulting in the permanent raised black scars that formed what some might consider 'evil marks.' He walked with a slouch, the same way he sat, his walk slightly lopsided from the alcohol in his system. Black hair fell over his eyes as he continued on, the magical streetlamps brightening for a short period as he passed them, before flickering out again. He gave a deep, heavy sigh, reaching out a hand for seemingly no reason, palm up.

Suddenly, a flickering red flame burst forth above his palm. It raised into the air and burned like a bonfire, before ceasing as fast as it appeared. A white letter fell into Silas' awaiting palm, sealed with golden wax. He spoke with a hoarse, exhausted tone.

"Again? Didn't I just clear away their supposed Centaur problem? Damn richies, always flaunting their money to prove their 'superiority.' Least it pays for my continued existence."

He continued to make his way home, a small apartment shoved into a run down building. Green and lush vines slowly break apart the bricks as they climb up the walls of the place. He forced the rotting oak door open with the old, rusted key. The door creaks as he makes his way into the musty and stale room. The dull tan walls littered with little cracks, a few bugs skittering across the floor. His steps across the carpet in the living room sent up a small cloud of dust. He falls to the old mattress of his bed, the springs poking through the cloth in a few spots.

Tomorrow will be another day. A day where he had to work, yes, but there was rarely a day where he didn't anymore. It would be a two day ride to Prosperity from the town he was currently in, and he would have to stock up

on supplies before he left. Hopefully his stallion would be a bit more tolerable this trip, after getting a few nights of rest and relaxation, as he had been very irritable as of late.

He stared up through the ceiling, thinking over the events of the day, and the work he still had yet to do. Everything had been busy lately, and being busy was never a good thing. Why? One might ask. Silas was well aware from past experience, being busy always brought trouble. He does not mean the kind of busy where he gets a commission every few days or so, no. This was normal, this was good. People always had problems, and someone had to solve them, might as well be him. Especially since he was paid for his troubles, quite handsomely in fact.

The kind of busy he means is the busy where a new commission comes in every day. Where he was swamped and drowning in the work to prevent chaos and carnage. Work for him was not done behind a desk, he was instead hired for his skills in problem solving, of getting rid of the supernatural or demonic entities which plagued the land. Particularly, he was hired to rid the land of the Corrupted.

The Corrupted were mangled and twisted beasts, only vaguely resembling whatever they were supposed to be originally. Sometimes there were animals, now mindlessly driven to hunt and kill and *spread*. The worst ones were those who used to be humanoid. Whose minds were still present, but warped and fractured. Most Corrupted had wounds, or some sort of orifice that dripped a viscous black liquid. A liquid which burned through plants and flesh. A liquid which haunted the dreams of many, especially those in the city of Despair.

He sighed, long and low as he let sleep take him, having thought far too much for one day, in his opinion. The sounds of the city continued outside his window, the trot of equine hooves, the chatter of people as they quietly walked the streets at night. The loud sounds of singing and music from clubs and bars. Yet, in Silas' room, it was a paused moment in time. The silence of a coming storm.

The black and gray percheron trotted down the thick, foresting path. It's saddlebags full of rations and supplies for what was likely to be a long trip. Silas rode upon its back, settling himself into the saddle once again. He was close to Prosperity now, the ride to his destination being entirely uneventful, other than a few muggers. The golden and marble gates approached quickly as he left the quiet serenity of the forest. The city stood tall and grand, towering over everything else in the area with its domineering spires and castle. The streets were clean, strange for a city of this size, and children played on the sides of the streets. Merchants called out their wares and prices. Specialized dogs, white and pure with thick furry coats that did not help with the heat, ran beside the children or sat by the sides of their owners. Carriages rolled through the streets, carrying fancy people in eccentric clothing. Clothing with far too many ruffles and lacy to be comfortable. Suits that are tightly tailored to the male form to show off muscles and stature. While Silas quite enjoyed fashion, even he acknowledged these clothes to be far too extreme, far too much to wear. He continued on, past the markets and the homes. He

approaches the looming castle, its spires blocking the sun and casting everything below into shadows. The grand oak-en front doors part for him, guards in heavy metallic armor stand either side. He slides off his steed, the horse trotting away as a stable boy rushes in to care for him.

Each of his steps echo within the entrance hall of the castle, the high ceiling bouncing the sounds around, mixing and tangling them until they sound like the calling of angels from the heavens. He kneels before the grand and golden throne, an aged man sitting upon it. The man's back was straight and firm, his chin covered in a light gray stubble. He was cloaked in the finest silks and furs, dressed up to look like a warrior general, only this man has very fought a day in his life. In fact, it was doubtful he even made his own battle plans or made his own food. The rich were always so pampered. The man spoke with a clean, even voice. His tone deep, controlled, and commanding as a king's should be.

"Silas Chevalier. Inquisitor of the Corrupted lands. You know why you have been called here, yes?"

"No sir, I am quite unaware of why I have been called to your capital city."

"Well, allow me to enlighten you."

The king snaps his fingers, a servant on the side bringing forth a scroll of paper, offering it to Silas with a bow before scurrying back into the shadows. Silas opens the scroll, looking over the wording and the roughly drawn picture of a beast.

"This is a beast that has wandered away from the Black Shore and has been harassing nearby villages. Importantly, it is also wandering closer and closer to the City of Prosperity by the day. I believe it must be put down before it gets

within sight of the city.”

Silas examined the image more. It was a hideous thing. What once might have been a wolf or some sort of canine, now horribly disfigured. Its own flesh hung from its head like ornaments on a christmas tree. Its eyes sunken into its own skull as its rolling flesh hangs over its eye sockets. Its teeth jutted out of its jaw, gnarled and sharp, like knives used for skinning animals with particularly tough hides. As with most Corrupted, viscous black liquid streaked down from where its eyes were, from underneath the excess of flesh. Its limbs were twisted and bent resembling a gnarled tree. How it even moved seemed almost impossible, as it looks so broken. If it had been a normal animal, it shouldn't have been able to move. There, luckily, wasn't much of the creature drawn out on the page so he didn't have to look over all of it. He turned back to the king.

“So, this is the thing you want me to hunt, yea?”

“Correct, Sir Silas. We need the creature disposed of.”

“What is the payment?”

“Sixteen golden coins.”

That many? That was more than Silas made on a normal commission, usually being around seven silver coins.

“We have a deal. Half upfront, per usual.”

“Of course.”

The king nodded, with a snap of his fingers. The servant brought forth eight gold coins, quick to retreat once more. Silas took it, giving a final bow and he turned around and left. His cloak billowed out behind him as he walked away. His steed was being brought to the castle entrance as he left, freshly fed, brushed, washed, and watered. His steed snorted,

trotting over to him, allowing him to swing his body into the saddle. With a quick check to make sure he had everything, including the flier of the beast, he took off. Canter-ing slowly through the town, he only stopped to grab a few overpriced supplies from the shady and unmemorable store keepers. He hated buying from here, but supplies were sup-plies.

He exited the way he came, through the golden gates of the city, into the dreary cold of the empty fields around. Nothing but their tall walls and the fields of nothingness for a few miles in each direction. The road led away from the city, ultimately leading towards the only other major city of Aion, Despair. He would not be visiting if he could help it. That city was always overrun with Corrupted beasts. With that, he began his ride towards where the creature was ru-mored to be roaming, guided by his map and the directions from the king.

It had only been a few hours ride at most, his steed gal-loping along steadily and easily keeping pace. The ground seemed to suddenly shake, rumbling and trembling like an earthquake. He slowed his steed, sliding off the saddle. Per usual, even the thought of such a beast did not frighten the hardened-horse and he went off to graze. Silas was left alone as he crept towards the impending danger with a hand raised above his sigils.

The beast he was seeking was even more repulsive in per-son. It reeked of decay, an ever present rot in the air with a distorted and deformed body. Bloated and dripping an

almost acid-like substance, it burned the grass below spreading its rot and destruction. This was why no one would willingly take on these things, so afraid of turning into a disgusting creature or touching its malformed body.

He activated his sigils.

Its head snapped to him, its disconnected jaw widening as it retched a spray of that acidic black liquid at him. He cursed. Shit. It must be able to sense magic, since it definitely couldn't see him. It shouldn't be able to see him. Yet, as he ran, the creature's head followed him, dragging its bloated corpse of a body across the ground. It seemed to be missing its back legs, rotted away like the rest of it. The slams of its clawed front paws, more like a lizard than any sort of canine, raked the ground. It screamed. Not howled, not whines, not anything natural. A blood curdling SCREAM that echoed even without any walls. Like nails on a chalkboard. The scream of grief.

This thing needed to be put down. Silas ran, launching force an attack of ice and fire, burning the decaying body of the creature and freezing its front paws to the ground. It retched again, the liquid hitting the ground in a splatter. Some hit Silas' arm. He hissed, resisting clutching the acid wound so as to not spread it. He froze his arm, right over the burn. It was painful, but would function until his regeneration could take care of the worst damage.

He released a wave of fire at the beast, lighting its decaying flesh on fire. The smell of burning flesh filled the air, wretched and disgusting. The creature screamed, eerily

human. It echoed across the empty farmlands. Silas didn't flinch, keeping up the swirl of fire, the earth itself moving to further trap the animal. Soon, the screams died down, along with the flames. It left nothing but the charred bulk of the beast in its place, black liquid oozing onto the ground below. It was like an infected wound, leaking puss from the slightest touch. Silas sighed.

"Why'd the damn thing have to be so messy? I'm not paid for cleanup."

He grumbled a bit more to himself. How unfair. It was certain that he would have to be the one to clean up the filth left behind by the Corrupted, it was usually his job. With a bit of magic and roughly 30 minutes, nothing was left behind of the beast other than some ground damages. Not bad, in Silas' opinion. Usually they took longer to decompose, even when assisted by magic. He called over his stallion, ready to make his way back to the kingdom.

From the bushes someone else was watching. Not from the kingdom, no, someone foreign to Aion as a whole. They pulled up a telecommunication rune, activating it.

"Sir, the beast has been finished off. Silas is making his way back to the kingdom now. Should I intercept?"

"Yes. Make him the offer we discussed, only add anything if he refuses. We need him on our payroll for the next stage of the plan."

"Understood."

The rune shut off, the stranger sneaked through the bushes. He rushed ahead and placed himself in the center of

the path, ready to meet the Corrupted Conqueror. He trotted down the dirt and gravel path on the back of his steed, stopping in front of the man.

“For what reason do you wait, traveler? I thought the area here had been evacuated.”

“I’m sorry to intrude, sir, and no, the farmers simply fled the area as the beast approached. No one was evacuated.”

“What!??”

Despite Silas’ shock, the stranger moved on without pause.

“Knowing this, I’m assuming you know how terrible it is, how corrupt it is for the king to have done this. Leaving his people to the beast, while he is safe in his gilded walls.”

There was silence on the path, the trees surrounding the road blowing in a slight breeze.

“On that note, I have an offer for you.”

“What kind of offer?”

Silas seemed curious, yet suspicious of the man’s motives. It wasn’t often he got a second commission while just finishing another, but it would not be irregular or strange.

“My boss wishes to employ your help with some of our problems. We understand that sometimes you operate outside of the word of the law, and we would like to employ you to do that.”

“Ah. Illegals? Contraband? What is it?”

“We desire you as a detective for our company. We have plenty of enemies, and we want to make sure that we can

establish new trade routes and deals without the hitch of either law enforcement or others betraying our company.”

“What’s the pay? What are we looking at?”

“Per commission by our company, you will receive twenty gold coins. Ten more gold coins if the job is particularly hazardous.”

Silas thinks about it, seriously thinks. That is a pretty hefty sum, far beyond his usual pay grade. Would it be worth it? This man was strange, shady and untrustworthy. Yet, some simple contracts could ensure Silas gets his pay, and the job didn’t sound half bad. Better than this stingy pay from rich folk hoping to get some cleanup services for cheap. He makes his decision.

“You have a deal, but I want this drafted in a contract.”

“It’s only fair.”

The man produces a contract on the spot, offering it to Silas. He gets off his steed, taking it from the man. He looks it over, from beginning to end. No hidden requirements or fees. A clear, set payment with the open ended option of choice. He will have the choice to accept or decline a commission from this ‘boss’. Not a bad offer. Not bad at all. Silas produces a quill, a magical one made to never run low on ink. He signs his name on the bottom, handing it back to the man before him.

“There. Signed.”

“Here is a telecommunication rune. We will be in touch.”

With that, the man returns to the woods. Such a strange man. Silas got back on his horse, continuing on his way.

He arrived back at the kingdom, the golden gates opening for him as he made his way through. Not a thing had changed. Still the same boring people, still the same boring streets. Or maybe, it only felt that way after the man's offer. A true adventure to come, one that he actually looked forward to, for once. After his short walk, he stood before the King. He took a knee.

"The beast is slain. I made sure of it. I will require the rest of my payment."

"Of course."

The sly king spoke, the servant bringing forth the payment for Silas.

"Thank you my king. It's been a pleasure, per usual."

"Farewell, Sir Chevalier, may your adventures bring you wealth."

Silas stood up, taking his money and his leave. His arm twinged as he moved. The ice had melted since the battle. His wound wasn't great, and would require some aloe gel to finish healing. He could pick some up before he left. More than anything, however, he looked forward to the future. This deal had been substantial, and now he only waited for their call. There was money to be made, which meant Silas could hopefully retire much sooner than he expected. It would be nice to lay back and enjoy his wealth. He would look forward to that day, much more than any adventure. The future was looking up, and he'd have only to follow its golden path.

Cover Up

Destiny Mitchell

Aht Aht

Where do you think you're going All expose?

Letting everyone know what you got

Showing your goodies.

You must want the wrong attention.

Cover up!

Cover up

Hmmmm, cover up

What do they mean, cover up?

What do they mean, cover up!

I've been covered up for as long as I can remember.

I've covered pain

I've covered up trauma

So

Much

Trauma

I've buried memories

I've buried deaths

I've buried internal death

Cover up?

I've always protected me

I've always protected those around me

I've put my already wounded body on the line for sake of
covering up

I have scars that no one can see

So if you asked me
I'm covered up pretty well
Goodies huh
Life is crazy.
Nobody thinks alike.
So many judgments on the same topic.
Everyone is very opinionated.
Nobody's mind seems to inquire themselves.
So I ask
What is covering up to you?....
Is not "covering up" a woman you perceived to be promiscuous for showing a little cleavage, does that make her a cold blooded freak?
Is being modest pulling her shirt all the way up to her neck till she's sufficing gasping for air and passing out from a heat stroke?
As a woman I keep covering up everything.
Why do I not deserve respect no matter what I look like?
Humm, cover up
They say.

Nostalgia

Gina Danca

Eating an ice pop like a child.
 Kind of free, kind of wild.
 Trees aglow; sun kissed nose,
 Running through grass; running the hoes.
 No need for socks or shoes.
 Forgetting time and the to-dos.
 Trampoline your troubles away.
 Forgetting to leave; deciding to stay.
 Open expressions; wide open smiles.
 Biking without knowing how many miles.
 Songbirds' music fills the air.
 Purple flowers flaunt their perfume without a care.
 Human as we are, visiting our younger reflection, while
 being 22.
 When the world was bright & open, and our eyes were too.
 The irony, the great reversal,
 How when you're tall you see less than when you're small.
 Guess when we're pointed upward there feels no need to
 notice what's under our noses.
 Like a torch flickering but stuck in one of its dance-like
 poses
 Let us plant our feet,
 Yet never stay too rooted that we never spread the fire and
 heat.
 Even when we stop growing, our hearts never do.
 Even with each growing pain we expand our world and
 become something new.

CHARCOAL

Under the Trench

Daniel Alvarez



Charcoal Reduction, 19.5"x25.5"

CERAMICS

The Water Calls Me (Birdbath)

Jenny Sampson



Ceramics, 5"x12"x12"

Prison Culture

Jonathan Hernandez

When people find out I was locked away, almost everyone asks, "what did you do?" I don't remember one person thus far who I opened up to about my incarceration asking me what I feel is the better question. The better question, I feel, stems from a place of survival to tell you the truth. This nature is in our ability to survive from waking up, what we eat to what we want to eat and do the things we want to do. We accomplish these small feats without considering the restrictions. Prison has many restrictions. As you can imagine, a person on the streets can literally go into a grocery store and pick something up they like and eat it right there if they desire, whereas in prison it's not even considered possible.

Inside the prison walls of confinement a better question, if you want to dig into the truth is, "How did you do it?" My family sometimes asks me during times it feels like they seem to have more on their plate than me.

I was locked up for 11 years- 10 years, 9 months and 4 days exactly. I began in the juvenile center fighting my case, then 13 months of going back and forth to court from my jail cell; I took 12 years as the best option out of doing more time. I was immediately transferred to juvenile detention, like a prison for kids. Then less than one day after my 17th birthday, I began the process of going

to adult IDOC. IDOC or the Illinois Department of Correction, I feel, changed in many ways big and small over the years I was incarcerated. Many years before, I remember listening to stories older guys would reminisce on because of the ways things were today. I used to listen to stories about how back in the 90's men would bring their families to picnics. Inmates with their wives and children would be on the yard together for hours eating food their families could bring in or buy from available stationary places. They described eating pizza, burgers, and ice cream as something that used to be a norm whereas today none of that is provided apart from the visiting center. But that's nowhere close in comparison because everyone in the visiting rooms can't even stand up unless it's time to leave or use the bathroom. I even heard of how even the clothes that individuals could wear, changed. Today the majority of individuals in custody wear polyester pants and shirts that were sewn by those also held in custody. Many things like wearing jeans to smoking inside prison walls and even things on a larger scale such as the death penalty were put to an end to prisons in Illinois.

Talks like these described life then as a thing being "Open," essentially so anything goes between individuals doing almost anything they wanted in order to live comfortably. A small example is guards doing a count of everyone in custody, imagine yourself living in the early 90's or 80's and you're in a cell with five other people where just two people are housed. The individuals respected guards enough to tell them how many heads were in the cell. Today a guard would most likely immediately want to remove them from the cell

and write a "Ticket," so everyone is ticketed. This is like a referral you'll get in highschool. The punishment can restrict commissary purchases, phone calls, or anything the hearing committee wants to impose. Most consequences depend on the *individual's track record* of infractions. Keep in mind, the flexibility of punishment imposed also varies for the type of ticket a correction officer *wants* to enforce. These changes, in my experience, I believe were created to oppress people who are locked away. After Covid, cameras were installed in hallways inside of the units and dayroom areas so internal affairs simply would rewind the camera if they ever got a whiff something happened.

I felt after cameras were installed, phone calls began to cost less per call. Another thing to keep in mind is that prison calls are always monitored so it's personally like in your subconscious someone could be listening. Was prison culture under the system's control? I would say yes to this. So how did I do it? To save his name, he was an individual in custody and was sentenced to 20 years for murder, both of us had something in common. We were young, catching a case, and both of us took a plea deal accepting our fates avoiding a harsher punishment, such as life in prison.

I was in Danville, Illinois and at Danville correctional center. We met on my first day. He asked me if I had my basic everyday necessities. He gave me my first week of essentials and some food. I remember the conviction in his voice, a sound conviction of a person that knew and understood what he wanted to talk about and say. I told him he was a man of god and his response was that he was an atheist.

He spoke about faith with a passion and to this day I have letters he sent to me after I transferred one day out of Danville out of the bloom. One thing he wrote that struck a chord of truth about his view on faith for mankind all over was “You get out of life what you put into it. If you put much effort you will be returned much, but if you put little effort you will be returned little.”

Anyway we spent hours talking through the crack in the door. He essentially showed me the “ropes,” on what’s required to survive. Some things seem like common sense, you wake up, brush your “grill,” he calls it wash your face and make your bed were absolute musts. It was sad and very easy for someone that didn’t do these things. It was psychological because being locked up requires a different mental approach to keeping up sometimes with regular everyday things.

I am blessed to have met this man. At the time I believe he was close to his release date. The wing I was living on was receiving basically for people coming in preparing to go into a unit in general population because I was 17 years young at that time.

Known as janitors out in the free world we called porters and those other individuals housed permanently as porters I got to know as good people. They were selfless and showed me better strategies to conduct myself than lashing out when something didn’t go in the way I expected it to go. A law was passed so 17 year olds weren’t meant to interact with 18 year olds and adults, this was why I had to talk through the crack of the door.

In conclusion “How did I do it?” I feel was believing my actions, the positive ones took me toward my end goal. On September 22, 2023 I was released with a goal I met of going home and being with my family again.

CERAMICS

Golden Cracks

Mauricio Patino



Ceramic Raku/Red Terra Cotta, 3"x7.75"x7.75"

Into The Forest

Melissa Schlau

Content Warning: This Narrative Depicts Themes of
Sexual Assault

Long ago there were rumors that encircled a small village about a witch who lived deep in the forest. She was said to have carved a home for herself inside the immense trunk of a remarkably old, twisted tree. The tiny, creeping, crawling things which infested the hollow before it was declared a home were swiftly excised by the witch's dark magic. Her candles emitted an ever-flickering black flame, neither extinguishing for rain, nor for whipping winds. The candles seemed to act as wards of some kind, though whether they kept danger away or locked it inside depended on who happened upon them. The tales of the witch and her black perfume, her sharpened claws and razor teeth, her misty gray hair and sickly skin, her ember eyes with empty sockets, were all well known by the locals. It was common knowledge that the witch had been banished from every village surrounding the forest due to her questionable magic and unbidden power, though none could recount exactly what had transpired to cause her unceremonious exile.

Despite the locals agreeing about banishing the witch from their turf, the forest was not owned by any one particular village. It was a middle ground of sorts, unclaimed

by men. Because no one village took ownership of the forest, it became the witch's dwelling, and word of her quickly spread like a poison. It was said that she ate little children who wandered too far from their homes. It was said that she captured men who ventured through the forest, trapping them before they could take her and burn her at the stake, as so many of the townspeople had demanded. Rumor had it that she refused to hand herself over to such a fate, and would keep the hunters she slayed in the trees, hanging and painted with black ink, like gruesome decorations.

Some adventurers managed to sneak deep enough into the forest to catch a glimpse of the witch, though that was as far as any man who lived to tell the tale had ever gone. There were murmurings of her cursing the forest, for she was not the only thing that dwelled there which could bring a man to his knees. Some claimed the place was haunted, that they saw visions of impossible things, or that they were chased by looming figures and horrifying shadows. Some who fled the forest returned to their villages acting as if they had been possessed, chanting incoherently in unknown voices, a wild and unnerved expression overwhelming their features as their eyes remained blank like voids.

As fear of the witch compassed about, the neighboring villages warned their people to avoid its depths at all costs. If they had to travel, it was urged that they take the long trail around the forest, avoiding it and the witch entirely, so that their lives may be spared. The children were told that if they went too deep into the forest, they would undoubtedly never return again. Things remained that way for a long

long time, and it seemed that as long as no one bothered the witch, she would not leave her home to seek vengeance on those who had threatened to reduce her to nothing more than a pile of ash. That was, until one fateful day, when a curious woman decided she had to see the witch for herself.

Lorin was just another wench at a local tavern in Foolshope. She served men their ale and their bread and their meat and often had to serve herself on a platter as well. Men were unable and unwilling to listen when a woman told them no. Perhaps every woman knew that in the recesses of their minds, but Lorin knew it on a different level. When the ale ran through their veins, many men turned into savages and barbarians. Even the knights and lords would befall this fate, becoming beastly, fueled by the evil no longer caged within them. They took what they wanted with almost no concern for any consequence.

Lorin had fallen victim to countless men in her young age of twenty, all of whom had no regard for her wellbeing after they were finished with her. Once they were sated on their lusts and in a drunken stupor, she would hide, hoping that they might forget about her. In most instances, they would wake in a trance in a rush to leave and return to their posts, or positions, or wives, as if nothing had ever happened. And so, the cycle would continue. None of the barmaids spoke ill of their patrons, for even if they had, the owner of the tavern, Glenn Horn, would give them a slap on their backsides with his sweaty, meaty palm, and tell them to get back to work or lose their pay for the day.

The women who worked in the tavern were treated like tools to be used until they were completely worn and could then be discarded. Some women were so badly bruised and bloodied after occupying a room above the bar with a brute that they had to apply healing salve for days before they could return to work. Eventually, Lorin confronted the other barmaids, whispering so as to not be overheard by Glenn Horn. "We should not tolerate being treated like this. We must do something to put a stop to it!" Despite her efforts, none of the other women were willing to take any risks. They all needed their jobs, and were typically rewarded with coin for their troubles. Apparently minimal compensation was worth all the unpleasantness.

Not to Lorin, though. After her latest run in with Benedict the Bold, a knight who went out of his way to find her in the morning after taking advantage of her the night before, pulling her by her raven hair and dragging her from the closet she had been hiding inside, she snapped like a ramshackle branch. This treatment... it was worse than how animals prepped for slaughter were manhandled. Unlike animals with no voice to speak their protests or beg for the freedom that they deserved, the barmaids chose to keep silent. Except for when they cried. Lorin was tired of crying, though. She held firm with the determination that something needed to change and even if none of the other tavern wenches supported her, she had to fight back. Instead of allowing him to drag her up the stairs, Lorin ripped her hair free of his grasp and clutched onto his hand with her own, bringing his flesh to her teeth. She bit down roughly,

enough to stun him and flee.

The witch that resided in the forest and supposedly cursed the land was little more than a fable when Lorin was growing up. She had her doubts about the validity of the tales, but the stories were enough to keep her from exploring the forest for herself. Now, however, she felt that the witch may have been her only chance to rid Foolshope of these men, to get her revenge on those who had mistreated her. Perhaps the witch would sympathize with her situation. Maybe she would even teach Lorin how to curse men or defend herself against their pervasive attacks. It was a chance she simply had to take, knowing that she could not live another day with things remaining as they had been.

Locking herself in her room, still tasting blood on her pale lips, Lorin secured her raven hair in a thick braid, then wiped her weary emerald eyes. Lorin had a few things packed the morning after her beating from the man who every other, more respectable woman, called a valiant knight. She quickly tossed the strap of her satchel over her shoulder. Her cheek bloomed purple, and her left eye was webbed with redness. She had scrubbed herself raw after it happened, desperate to clean the grime that his finger pads had left behind. Now, dressed in a ratted, hooded cape that concealed much of her face, she climbed down from her window, ignoring the pounding and screaming coming from the other side of her door. She was ready to venture into the forest, to meet the witch who she longed to learn

from, who she silently admired for not allowing any man to lay his hands upon her.

Without question, the forest was scarier at night, yet even in the daytime with rays of sun cascading through openings between leaves that towered above, it was still every bit as chilling. Or so Lorin could only presume considering she was never foolish enough to venture beyond the tree line. Not before this day, anyway. With the sun peeking over the hills in the far-off distance and slowly ascending further into the clear blue sky, she figured that the light was on her side, at the very least. That was, until she traversed far enough into the forest that the canopy of leaves above her seemed to shroud her in darkness, welcoming shadows and blocking out any hint of radiance.

Lorin had no map to guide her. Even if she had directions to follow, no one knew where the witch's tree house was supposedly kept. No one had been willing to entertain her idea to find the witch and several women had tried to convince her not to go, assuming that the witch was not to be trusted. The only company that Lorin kept while trekking through the forest were the strange noises that somehow ricocheted all around her, and the glimpses of shadows that just barely flashed at the corners of her eyesight. She continued to walk when her shoes caused blisters against her heels, when blood trickled past her soles. Ignoring the pain in her legs and the panting of her breathing, she carried on, certain that the witch was her only hope. Not just for Lorin, but for every woman of Foolshope.

Since the dawn of those stories about the witch, villagers

knew to stay away. They knew better than to stray into the forest or to let their curiosity get the better of them. Eventually, there were no villagers willing to step foot within the forest. It was almost as if the forest itself had been waiting in a dormant state, holding a collective breath while waiting for someone to cross the barrier. But who would leave the safety of their feeble homes, cross over into the witch's terrain, and expose themselves to uncharted land where no boundaries protected them? When Lorin drew closer to the largest tree with the biggest trunk, which she estimated to be somewhere near the very heart of the forest, the atmosphere started to change. Her gaze strayed from the base of the twisted tree as she fought the dizziness that roiled through her head.

She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on edge, as if a presence were looming over her, never close enough to actually be seen. A flash of darkness played at the edges of her vision, but when she whipped her head to investigate, it suddenly vanished. The wind whispered to her, a breath caressing her alabaster skin while a voice so deep it was almost indecipherable told her secrets of unknown weight. She thought she heard a shrill shriek from far away, then a guttural growl just a few feet away. Lorin pressed onward, shaking with fear but too deep into the forest to turn around. Tears burned the rims of her eyes. It was then that she realized she should have been unrolling string, tying small knots around low hanging branches so that she would have a path to get out again.

But after the shadows surrounding her started to take form and shifted into the figures of men, Lorin realized she was lost. Spinning away from the shadows, cursing under her breath, she haphazardly jumped over sticks and leaves, finding a large trunk to hide behind. Stilling herself, she breathed deeply, her hand on her chest as she leaned absently against an enormous tree trunk. Just as she was in the middle of trying to convince herself that the shadows were figments of her imagination and the whispers were nothing more than her mind playing tricks on her, she heard the undeniably real voice of a cackling woman.

“What brings you this deep into the forest, dear?” It was the witch. Her voice was two-toned; one sounding rough like leather, the other sweet as honey. Her hair was white and full of tangles, like spiders had braided webs and made nests there. The wrinkles of her face were firmly etched into place, almost appearing as if someone had cut them into her very skin. She had eyes that were ghostly blue, but there were no pupils within them, and the space around them was devoid of color completely. Her smile was menacing, for just under those curved lips were her jagged teeth. Lorin gasped and staggered backward, tripping over a stump on the ground and causing a pile of leaves to skitter about beneath her. “Oh,” she began, after realizing who the woman must have been. “I’m sorry, you frightened me a little. I had thought I was lost...” Glancing around, she noticed that the shadowy figures had disappeared. Upon closer inspection, Lorin was fairly certain that the shadows on the witch’s face were what contorted it into evil.

“I am here to see you, the witch of the forest.” She paused, gulping back the rawness circulating in her throat as she slowly rose from the stump she was awkwardly draped over. “Me?” The woman cackled again, pointing to herself with an impossibly long nail that curled at the very tip. “A witch?” She questioned. Her gaze narrowed as she drew in even closer. Lorin humbly bowed before the woman as if she were a member of royalty. “Please, forgive me for intruding. I just had to see you because I heard stories about you that I hoped-,” she paused, straightening up to look directly into those blurry, cloudy irises. “That I hoped were true... and that you might be willing to teach me how you so fearlessly defeat men.”

The old woman looked at Lorin closely, silently staring at the blotches of purple and red that blemished her fair skin. Standing against her silent scrutiny, Lorin held her breath for what felt like too long. “And what makes you think I must be a witch in order to defeat men, girl?” Lorin was struck dumb. Her lips parted, but no words sprang free. “What is your name?” The old woman asked coldly. “Lorin,” she replied earnestly after audibly gulping. To this information, the woman only nodded once. “I am Thalia,” she finally said, turning away from Lorin and toward her ancient tree. Pausing, she said over her shoulder, “I am no witch. That is merely what they call me.” She cackled darkly. “The King’s guard couldn’t bear that I escaped their prison cell so long ago and have sought revenge against me ever since. The forest protects me.”

Thalia led the way inside the carved-out hole of the grand tree, beckoning Lorin to follow. Lorin blinked after the woman's shrinking form, her brows knitting with confusion. So, every story about the witch of the forest was a lie? But how could that be? Was this woman lying about who she really was? Despite her hesitation, Lorin willed herself to straighten her spine and followed after the woman. Perhaps she was a fool, as some of the other barmaids had not so subtly suggested. Maybe she should have listened to Glenn Horn and learned her place, no matter how atrocious the treatment. All Lorin knew was that her fate rested in the spindly fingers of the forest woman, Thalia.

Weeks later, the women of the tavern grew concerned that Lorin still had not returned from her silly little quest. Some of the men who preferred Lorin's company over the other women had inquired about her absence. They were told rather pointedly by Glenn Horn that Lorin's whereabouts were unknown. The tavern manager never seemed to care too much about her disappearance. The barmaids were able to convince the men, after they had gotten plenty brave from a few tankards of ale split amongst the camp, to go and search for Lorin. The party was led by none other than Benedict the Bold, who needed little convincing to take charge. The group of men entered the forest soon into their search for Lorin. Benedict the Bold valiantly led the group to the witch's tree, and when he threatened to burn them both alive by setting the trunk aflame, Lorin emerged.

Her once emerald eyes appeared icy as she faked a smile at Benedict. Raising a hand, the tips of her fingers con-

cealed by shadows that appeared to flicker like a flame, she watched as the roots of nearby trees mimicked her, setting the feet of the men on fire. Thalia emerged then, her depthless eyes flitting from the men in armor to the maze of roots beneath them. Those roots stretched up from the ground, wrapping a deadly grip around the men's legs to keep them firmly in place. Lorin watched with a smirk on her face which was almost as twisted as the tree she called her new home. The flames raised until they engulfed every man entirely. Lorin radiated in the incandescence as she watched them all scream and sob.

“How poetic it is to know that ours are the last faces you will ever see,” Lorin whispered, knowing that phantom voice reached Benedict's ear moments before he was charred. And with that, the men met their demise in the very same manner as the one intended for so called witches. Mounds of armor were all that remained of the men, their heaps of ash scattering along the foliage of the forest, until a gust of wind carried each speck far, far away.

Alaska, My Wistful Reflection of a Perpetual Twilight

Crissa Cabanlig

Last summer, I returned home to Illinois after a trip that widened my perspective on the way I continue to view the world. I spent ten days in Alaska, which, in hindsight, had not been enough time to explore the simple pleasures that came with its landscape, but was enough to satisfy an urge I never knew I had.

I was accompanied by my eldest brother, Christian, who had spent three remote years mainly in New Zealand, and traveling through South Asian Islands, before settling down in the Last Frontier. With us was my boyfriend, Zach—a nice, swell young man with shaggy hair who made great first impressions due to his charismatic nature and easy-going personality that mollified my anxieties about being in an unfamiliar location. Zach had never traveled anywhere far before he met me, besides a few states surrounding Illinois. I was glad to bring him to a place far outside of where we lived, glad to share an amazing experience with someone who understood me more than I knew myself.

We stayed together, in a white, teardrop camper that was large enough to accompany two people.

It was located on my brother's property, which was a flat piece of land surrounded by earthly-colored mountains. It didn't matter which direction you faced—whether north or south, surrounding us and the rest of the six thousand other residents living in Palmer, Alaska, were gargantuan-sized mountains—Almost as if I were picked up and placed right into the center of a painting. It was the end of August, which meant it would be raining most of the time here. The tops of each mountain could be seen briefly through a sheer curtain of an ominous mist, but I knew they were there standing black and tall and jagged, with sharp, rocky edges and streams of water running down the sides. I could see the dark, pointed trees that slanted against the angled terrain, covering the mountain like a blanket made of evergreen. I felt small and had a child-like realization that there really is a world outside of what I know.

Opposite from the camper, was Christian's house—a baby blue cottage, which appeared much smaller from the outside than upon entering. A tasteful manner of delicate flowers surrounded its perimeter and a few pots of assorted herbs were placed just by the front door. Behind the cottage, was a garden that looked ready to be harvested. A bundle of tomato vines, red cabbages, and bell peppers still looked vibrant even in the misty haze of an Alaskan rainy season.

We spent most mornings making banana pancakes and filling the entirety of my brother's cottage with its aroma. Oftentimes, we biked to a local farm that had a giant red, stereotypical-looking barn and fields of rows with different vegetables where you would have to get your own wheelbarrow to place your harvest in. We would leave with pounds

of broccoli, sweet potatoes, green beans, and zucchini. I would cook for every meal, using whatever we brought home. From the ground to the stove, like an endless way to keep your fulfillment satiated. Before, I had never been one to cook, but since then, I often do so by harvesting from my own mini garden, with Zach by my side to clean up my mess.

When we hiked, it never came easy. Most times, the rain never stopped, soaking us until we were as wet as a leaf. Trails were rugged and muddy, but never bleak. Most hikes were uphill, slippery, and uneven. High places scared me, made my heart beat out of my chest like a drum, though I found my fears slowly dwindling away when I reached the top of each summit, like curtains being opened. Each view was unique but always came with a dazzling scene of glaciers, bright blue iridescent waters, and passing clouds that you could reach out and touch. My favorite part was the stillness of the world around me, breathing in the glorious untouched air and listening to the sounds of the wind brushing through the trees. And that was it. Just the wind and my own breathing. I would peek over at Zach and I would catch him already looking at me—Smiling like he knew something that I didn't.

Each night, we stayed up long until the sun set by the horizon, listening to the tweedle of the birds and the soft pitter-patter of rain tapping against the camper's tin roof. One night, around ten o'clock, Zach and I wandered out to a field of blueberries that strayed a few blocks down a long, windy road. It was one of the first times I had ever experienced such a bright periwinkle sky at that hour, And

I could finally make out a few constellations clustering into Orion's belt and a twinkling dot that I knew was Saturn. We picked enough blueberries until our satchels became full and another round of light showers would sprinkle onto us. I, unperturbed and mostly used to the moist weather, let the rain drip onto my glasses all the way back home. I listened to the sweet sounds of the wind brushing through dense trees and wondered how I could ever handle the time when it came to leaving.

We walked hand in hand in silence, under a dazzling midnight sun and the tender illumination of the moon. An incomprehensible wave of emotions passed through me like a ghost. I wondered if I could stick it out like my brother, in such a remote place where your eyes seldom met clear blue skies—If I could provide myself with the necessities needed in the lifestyle that Alaska demands. We walked hand-in-hand along the banks of the Pacific Ocean—Soft waves lapped against a stony shore like a constant pendulum swing. I couldn't help but long for this land, with its wild beauty and solitude. It tugged at something deep within me—a yearning for unfamiliarity and a life less ordinary. The chill of the night had caught up to me, and I thought long and hard about coming back to Alaska, even before the trip had a chance to begin. I couldn't help but feel the gravitational pull, like a promise of return—if there would ever be a time when the waves of the ocean would be sent out to sea, never to come again.

Echoes of Silence

Kevin Bustamante

3rd Place Winner in Fiction at the
2024 Skyway Writer's Festival

Content Warning: This Narrative Depicts Racism

Part I

Chapter 1: Silver Town

The setting sun painted the calm farm plains of Pueblo Plata with golden hues. Mateo sat on the worn steps of his family's adobe home. Watching the horizon swallow the day. The comforting scent of his mother's cooking filled the air. Usually causing him to stand next to her, waiting for a fresh tortilla sprinkled with salt. However, the weight pressing on his shoulders stifled his appetite tonight.

"Mateo, ven a cenar." His mother called softly. Luz was standing in the doorway, her eyes giving away a mix of sadness and determination. "Coming, Mamá," he said, forcing a smile. His father's throat cleared with a noticeable rasp, breaking the room's silence. "Mañana, we leave before dawn," Enrique stated, his voice steady but strained.

Mateo swirled his spoon, thinking of friends and the beloved pets he had to leave behind. "Why do we have to leave our home and go?" He whispered.

Luz stretched across the table with her hand on his, and Mateo felt her motherly tenderness. "There are more opportunities for you in the United States. I know it's not what we want, but it's what we need," she added, her voice catching as if she were trying to convince herself too. "Would you like to stay here and continue eating those lentejas?" She said it teasingly while ruffling his hair.

But this is home," Mateo whispered, his voice breaking as tears welled up in his eyes.

His father escaped with a heavy sigh, carrying the burden of his impending departure. "Mateo, I know it's challenging for you to understand. When you're older and have children, you'll understand the situation." He added, "Plus, you know, Los Darios are looking for us."

"Enrique! Don't scare him like that!" Luz snapped.

There was a pause, and tension filled the air, shattering the silence his father had started. "Mateo, we are farmers, and we are decent people. We will never allow someone to come into our lives and dictate how we should live or force us to do undesirable things. Can you understand that hijo?"

Mateo nodded his head, trying to convince himself that he understood. His father went on, "Good, if you can understand that you're becoming a man." Enrique grinned proudly and added, "Los Darios came and wanted us to use our farm and grow undesirable things."

As the conversation intensified, he looked at his mother, noticing deep concern etched on her face. Enrique explained, "We refused to do what was wrong, and they are now looking for honest, hard-working people like us. Now we must rely on Jehovah, God, for safety and go to Estados Unidos."

Mateo glanced at his mother once more, waiting for her to explain. But her lips tightened, and her eyes flickered toward his father, as if there was more to the story he wasn't telling. He felt it then—the weight of something darker beneath the surface. The mention of Los Darios sent a cold shiver down his spine. He didn't need to know more—they were men to fear.

He couldn't imagine his calm father standing up to them, but here they were, about to flee their home like prey. He squeezed his mother's hand, closed his eyes, silently praying for strength.

Chapter 2: The Day That Never Comes

"Mateo, wake up!" The rushed whispers were urgent. "Mama, what is going on?" As they dug him out of bed, his anxiety grew. "They're here; Los Darios are searching for us. Hurry!"

A chill ran down Mateo's spine; he tried his best to get dressed and put his shoes on. He dashed to his closet, frantically yanking out a backpack. "Leave it! Let's go!" his mother whispered desperately.

Enrique moved swiftly through the room's darkness, the sound of tires drifting across the dirt approaching his family's farm. "Let's move quickly and stay close," he whispered.

Mateo's heart thudded like jungle drums as he followed his father's lead. Mateo's mind drifted to his favorite action movie.

Mateo felt his heart rate increase as he listened to the rustling leaves outside. He saw light beams searching for any indications of life as a bitter taste crept into his mouth. He had a strange feeling that this was the start of a thrilling and dangerous adventure. Mateo experienced a blend of excitement and apprehension as they quietly moved towards the door.

Enrique led them through the cornfield, the moonlight their only witness. Mateo's heart pounded as sweat beaded on his forehead. They crossed the field and reached the other side, where shadowy figures were waiting for them.

As they approached, the moon's light illuminated his grandparents' faces. His granddad, Rafael, and his grandmother, Solana, came over to join the family.

Rafael spoke soundly, "There's a car waiting across the forest; it'll take us to the city, and a bus will make it harder to track us." Rafael lit his cigarette, his face calm, unfazed by the danger.

Solana grabbed Mateo's hand. "Mateo, remember how to get to Doña Cuca's store?" Mateo nodded. "Mijo, why don't you guide us through the forest? We'll follow you." She added. Mateo's mind started racing with memories of the journey to Doña Cuca's store. He took the lead confidently, knowing that his abuelo's teachings would guide them safely through the forest.

The only thing he couldn't shake was the idea that a coyote could come at any time and take him. He pushed the thought aside and pressed the forest, Mateo remembered his abuelo teaching him to navigate the twisting paths.

The forest foliage rustled against Mateo's legs, leaves crackling in the night air. Every snap and crackle felt too loud, like the noise would give them away. The scent of damp earth mingled with his grandfather's cigarette smoke.

As they approached the store Enrique stopped everyone. "Everybody waits here. I will ensure our safety; when you see the signal, hurry to me."

Mateo watched Enrique stalk across the forest and disappear into the dirt road. Suddenly, everyone caught sight of a vehicle blinking its lights twice. "Let's go!" Rafael ushered everyone to hurry to the vehicle.

As they hurried toward the van, Mateo's heart pounded and his mind started racing—What if this wasn't the right vehicle? What if the driver was one of them?

Mateo groaned weakly, greener than the van's color. He gathered the rest of his strength to make it to the bus terminal. Everyone else reluctantly got back into the van and waited for the driver to regain his composure. Mateo's eyes grew heavy as exhaustion took over.

After sleeping for hours, he woke up to the van breaking hard, everyone stirring around him. The van's door abruptly opened, and men with guns began forcefully pulling everyone out of the vehicle.

Disoriented, Mateo looked for his family, only to find them nowhere. Men shoved him onto the ground, demanding answers. The men started dragging him across a field and threw him in front of a coyote. The men patiently awaited his demise. The men's faces blurred in the moonlight, and the coyote circled, its sharp fangs gleaming. Mateo's heart pounded as he struggled to breathe, unable to scream.

Someone called his name in the distance. "Mateo...Mateo...hijo... Mateo, wake up."

He jumped up and bumped his head on the side of the van. "Ow! Where am I?" His eyes adjusted, and he saw it was nighttime. He couldn't believe he was dreaming. In the dream, the ground felt solid beneath Mateo's feet, the stones jagged and unyielding. But when he looked up, the stars glittered in the dark sky—so far away, almost untouchable. He reached for them, but the men pulled him back down to the cold, firm earth.

As they neared the terminal, Enrique glanced at the mirror—a steady set of headlights trailed behind them. He didn't mention it to Luz or Mateo; Enrique's grip tightened further as they neared the terminal. Then, just as they reached the turn-off, he saw a familiar logo emblazoned on the side of a van parked just outside the terminal. His heart sank; they were here.

Chapter 4: Crossroads

The heat was relentless, pressing down on Mateo like a heavy blanket. The desert sun seared his skin as sand crunched beneath his shoes. The Coyote led them forward silently. Mateo's family trailed behind; their breath raspy under the relentless sun.

They had been walking for what felt like days. Mateo's mouth was dry, but thanks to the small stash of water and food in his backpack, he was better off than most. He handed his mother a canteen from his backpack.

"Here, Mamá," he whispered, watching as she took a grateful sip. "Vamos, faster!" the Coyote hissed, glancing back.

His heart pounded in rhythm with his feet, each step carrying them deeper into the desert, closer to the border. But danger was lurking.

The roar of an engine broke the stillness, sending dust swirl-

ing into the sky. Mateo's stomach knotted.

Los Darios.

A chill ran through him—colder than his sweat. Enrique cursed under his breath, and Rafael's face hardened.

"They followed us," Enrique muttered. "They caught up to us when we stopped the van!" Struggling to keep his composure.

Panic spread, and the Coyote yelled for them to scatter. Gunshots rang out, echoing across the desert.

Mateo flinched, dropping to the ground in fear as his father pulled him behind a rock.

Los Darios closed in, firing at anyone who ran. Mateo's ears rang from the noise, and his body trembled. He peeked over the rock, and saw Rafael fall, clutching his chest as blood darkened his shirt.

"No!" Mateo screamed, lunging forward, but Enrique grabbed him by the arm. "I'll go to him; you follow your mom!" Enrique yelled, dragging Mateo along.

Gunfire erupted, and a traveler fell beside them, motionless. Mateo turned to see Mexican military driving up in pickup trucks with machine guns mounted on the bed of their

trucks, shouting warnings at Los Darios.

Luz sobbed quietly as they stumbled toward the only hope in sight—the border wall, barely visible in the distance.

Coyote led them, urging them forward with wild gestures, but his voice was barely audible over the gunfire and Mateo's thudding heartbeat.

They ran, dust swirling around them, the fence looming closer. Mateo's lungs burned, but he couldn't slow down.

Los Darios directed their attention to the military trucks opening fire. Mateo watched the battle unfold; they just had to cross, he thought.

They reached the fence, the fence towering over them like a gateway to another world. The Coyote swiftly and agilely scaled it with ease as Enrique caught up to them.

"Solana stayed behind with Rafael." He spoke with strain, his face revealing the harshness of his decision. Enrique climbed over the fence meeting the Coyote on the other side.

"Come on, Mamá!" As he climbed halfway up the fence, Mateo encouraged Luz.

Luz struggled, her hands slipping. She reached the top, cutting her hand on the rusty metal. "Enrique, help me!" She yelled and recoiled, her foot catching on a wire. Luz lost her

balance, screamed, and tumbled towards the ground, landing hard on her ankle with a sickening crack.

“Mamá!” Mateo rushed to her side. Luz’s face contorted with pain as he tried to help her stand, but her leg wouldn’t hold her weight. Enrique helped Luz to her feet as he frantically shouted, pointing at the distance, but the new sound of immigration vehicles speeding toward them drowned out his voice.

“Run, Mateo! Run!” Enrique called, but before Mateo could move, the Coyote grabbed him by the arm and yanked him into a nearby thicket of shrubs. He shoved Mateo to the ground and quickly covered them with dead grass and leaves.

Mateo lay still, watching through the bushes as immigration officers surrounded his parents. He wanted to scream, but fear held him silent.

The officers shouted at foreign commands. Mateo watched as they shoved and dragged his parents, tossing his mother into the back of a vehicle with her face twisted in agony and forcing his father to the ground with his hands behind his head and guns aimed at him.

Tears blurred Mateo’s vision, but he bit down hard on his lip, forcing himself not to make a sound. He wanted to scream and run to them, but the Coyote’s iron grip held him in place. “Quiet,” the Coyote growled, his eyes scanning the horizon. “If they see you, they’ll take us too.”

Across the fence, Mateo's grandparents were still on the other side. Solana held her hand to her mouth, watching the scene unfold, while Rafael lay motionless in the sand. Mateo's heart broke.

The authorities ripped away his family in one breathless moment, taking his parents, leaving his grandmother behind, and his abuelo... unresponsive.

The desert was silent again, but this time, the silence felt heavier than ever.

Part II

Chapter 1: Study Hall

Mateo woke to the sharp, artificial blare of his alarm clock. He groaned, reaching out to slap the snooze button. The sound still felt foreign to him—jarring and impersonal, unlike the soft, familiar crow of the roosters back in Pueblo Plata.

The cold tile floor beneath his feet sent a shiver through him as he reluctantly got out of bed. His morning routine was mechanical—shower, brush teeth, get dressed. The only thing that brought a spark of familiarity was his cereal. It was small, but Mateo found comfort in the sweet crunch, a small moment of joy in a morning he dreaded. He grabbed his backpack and headed out the door. His uncle, Jorge, looked up as Mateo shuffled past, saying a quick goodbye.

“Don’t be late,” Jorge called out.

From across the room, Susan, his uncle’s wife, shot Mateo a cold glance. Clean up after yourself. I’m not your maid.”

Mateo didn’t bother responding; Susan treated him like an unwelcome guest in her own home. Her son, Robin, his half-cousin, was the favored child, lavished with attention by both parents, and he never missed an opportunity to remind Mateo of his superior circumstances.

The bus was crowded, but Mateo sat alone, the words around him a blur.

He hated feeling so lost—so small. Back home, he had been confident and proud of his place in the world. Here, he was nothing more than a stranger.

The day stretched on; every word spoken around him blending into an unintelligible murmur. He watched his classmates raise their hands, answer questions, laugh, and connect—all things that felt impossible to him. The language barrier was more than a wall; it was a cage, keeping him isolated, even from those who might understand.

Kids snickered behind his back, and some, like Ivan, made sure to confront him head-on. Ivan was born in the U.S., but his parents had immigrated like he had.

Today, Ivan and his friends thought it would be amusing to

fill Mateo's locker with cans of beans.

"Hungry, bean boy?" Ivan sneered, shoving a can into his chest.

He wanted to say something, anything, but the words stuck in his mouth. His English wasn't proficient enough to defend himself, and his Spanish would only make things worse. Ivan's taunts resonated deeply with Mateo, as he recognized a reflection of himself in Ivan, a person with similar origins who effortlessly blended in.

Mateo found solace in math class. Numbers made sense in a way that language didn't. Equations, formulas, and patterns were universal. His teacher, Mr. Anderson, noticed, too.

Though the man didn't say much, he often gave Mateo a small nod when he finished his work early, acknowledging that Mateo was excelling.

There was also Elena, a quiet girl with dark eyes and a kind smile who sat behind him. When the teachers refused to translate, Elena assisted him. She didn't mock; she simply understood.

"You're excellent at this," she said, whispering behind him. Mateo shrugged. "This is the only thing that makes sense lately."

Elena smiled. "If you need help with other things, I can

help; just let me know.”

The last bell rang, and Mateo found himself walking home in the same silence he had left in the morning. His feet dragged as he approached the house, feeling the weight of another day of isolation.

He sat on the bed, the dim light filtering through the window. The laughter and the cans haunted his thoughts, the loneliness almost suffocating.

As night fell, the house grew quiet. Mateo lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, only the clock ticking. Sleep didn't come easily, but when it did, it was filled with dreams of home—dreams of the roosters' crow, the open fields, and the stars above him, so far from the life he now lived.

Chapter 2: A Small Victory

Mateo sat in the back of his math class, his focus sharp as Mr. Anderson scrawled equations across the board. He finished his work quickly, managing to scribble down the last answer before anyone else did.

While waiting for the class to catch up, Mateo noticed Ivan a few rows ahead of him, hunched over his desk, looking over to his friends for the answers. Mateo couldn't help a small twinge of satisfaction watching Ivan struggle.

As the bell rang, Mr. Anderson called out to the students who were packing their bags. "Mateo, could you stay behind for a moment?"

The classroom was now empty, except for Mateo and his teacher. Mr. Anderson approached him, a rare smile crossing his face. "You've been doing well, Mateo. Have you thought about the state math contest?"

Mateo blinked in surprise. "Me?"

"Yes, you," Mr. Anderson said, handing Mateo a flyer. "There's a statewide competition coming up. I think you'd have a decent shot. You don't need perfect English to solve equations, right?"

"Mateo, wake up!" The rushed whispers were urgent, and sleep had been hard enough earlier. "I'll think about it," Mateo replied quietly, slipping the flyer into his pocket.

Later that day, Mateo would walk down those hallways, his mind lingering on that contest. Familiar doubts crept in, but this time, so did something else: hope. This was his calling; this was something that truly belonged to him.

However, by the time he reached his locker, the small spark had vanished. Ivan and his friends were present, beaming with joy.

Bean boy, you think you can win that contest?" Ivan sneered, shoving Mateo into his locker. Mateo froze. How did they already know?

"You really think you're going to win? Even though you cannot speak English, do you believe you're intelligent enough to defeat us?" Ivan sneered, his friends laughing behind him.

Mateo experienced a sensation of his words becoming stuck in his throat, a feeling with which he was familiar. He hated this feeling of powerlessness.

Ivan's laughter continued to reverberate throughout the hallway as he left, leaving Mateo's anger simmering beneath the surface.

That evening, Mateo stared at the flyer. Doubts swirled, but a new voice—one filled with hope—began to rise.

He fished for his phone and dialed the number he had committed to memory. The ringing tone resounded in the stillness of his room; then, after what felt like eternity, a voice answered from the other end.

"Mateo? Is that you?" The voice passed through the speaker. "Mamá," Mateo breathed. Luz's voice softened. "I miss you, hijo. How are you?"

Mateo hesitated. How could he explain everything—the bullying, isolation, the contest? It all felt too heavy to put into words. But instead, he asked, “How’s grandpa?” Mateo asked. Luz sighed. “He’s recovering, but weaker now.”

Mateo closed his eyes, with relief mixing with sorrow. His grandfather, Rafael, was a survivor, but the journey had changed him, just like it had changed him. “I’m glad,” Mateo whispered. “I wish I could see him. I miss you all.”

“We miss you too,” said Luz, the inflection in her voice trembling. “Stay strong, Mateo. Jehovah is with us, even in tough times.”

Mateo nodded, though his mother couldn’t see it. “I’ll try, mamá. I’ll try.” As he hung up the phone, Mateo looked back at the math contest flyer.

His family had sacrificed so much for him to be here. He owed it to them—and, more importantly, to himself—to keep pushing forward. Mateo folded the flyer. Tomorrow, he will enter.

Chapter 3: The Path Ahead

Mateo sat at his desk, furiously writing notes in preparation for the math contest. Mateo found more solace in the embrace of the numbers.

A spark of confidence flared to life in his chest for the first

time since he had left home. Though he had often felt out of place in every setting, this time he really did belong. Elena found him sitting alone, working out his math problems gracefully at lunch.

She slid into the seat across from him and clattered her tray cheerily against the table. "My gosh, you're really diving in, aren't you?" She leaned forward to peer at his notes.

Mateo nodded pensively. "I'm feeling a bit anxious yet have practiced enough to understand the English part." A bright smile continued radiating from Elena. "You will excel. I'm confident you will."

That afternoon, as he strolled down the hall, Mateo caught sight of Ivan, arms crossed and wearing a self-satisfied grin. As Mateo approached, Ivan mocked, "Think you can win, bean boy? Don't embarrass yourself."

Mateo attempted to avoid the conversation, but Ivan once more positioned himself in front of him. "This isn't your place, bean boy; you are not like the rest of us." The words struck Mateo with force.

He had listened to them countless times, yet today they resonated deeper. Mateo clenched his fists, boiling fury within him. He had heard these words too many times, and he was done staying silent.

Yet, a change stirred within Mateo. At this moment, Mateo's call to his mother, Rafael's promise of survival, and Elena's

gentle encouragement wove together seamlessly.

Mateo raised his head, his eyes unwavering. "You might not accept me," he said, his voice stronger than he expected, "but I'm proud of who I am, unlike you."

As he spoke, Mateo realized that the fear he had carried for so long was beginning to dissipate. He wasn't just standing up to Ivan—he was standing up for himself, for everything his family had sacrificed.

Ivan blinked, momentarily stunned by Mateo's unexpected reply. An electric tension charged the atmosphere for a fleeting instant, enveloping them. With a frustrated huff, Ivan brushed past him, as if the words held no significance at all. Yet they did. Mateo was aware of that.

As dusk fell, Mateo toyed with an abacus, his mind drifting to his parents. The memory pulled at his heart, a mix of sorrow and hope.

The heat from the room's lights reminded him of the desert. The feeling of exhaustion pulled at him again, and suddenly he was back there, in the vastness of the desert, with sand crunching underfoot and fear in the air.

The Coyote moved ahead, silent and swift, while Mateo trudged on, the sand biting at his feet and the cold desert wind stinging his face.

As darkness fell, they reached a waiting car and sped off, the night swallowing them whole. They came under the cover of night, with the coyote guiding them toward a house.

Mateo's heart raced as he stepped into the unknown, a thrilling sense of fear enveloping him. A woman with a stern face led Mateo into a cramped space filled with other children. She shouted at a crying child before slamming the door shut.

After a few hours, the woman reappeared and seized Mateo by the arm. The woman pulled him outside, headlights blinding him. Through the glare, Mateo saw Jorge and Susan for the first time.

The memory of the desert reminded Mateo of how far he had come, how much he had already endured. If he could make it through that, he could face whatever lay ahead—even Ivan and the contest.

The following morning, the contest was approaching, and although the nerves still gnawed at his stomach, a subtle confidence had begun to blossom in his heart. Not every aspect of life was within his grasp.

As he gathered his things at the end of class, Mr. Anderson waved him back to his desk. "You're ready, Mateo," he declared, his voice brimming with assurance. "I'm confident that you are." Mateo offered a faint smile, aware of the chal-

lenge that lay before him and reflecting on the journey he had undertaken.

Chapter 4: Trials and Tribulations

The day of the contest had finally come. His palms were slick with sweat, his stomach knotted. What if he failed? What if all his family's sacrifices were for nothing? Mateo inhaled deeply, pushing the thoughts away. Mr. Anderson's nod steadied him, and Elena's earlier smile reminded him he wasn't alone. He couldn't let them down.

The air thrummed with excitement. Mateo settled into his seat, striving to calm the rapid thumping of his heart. From a few rows back, Ivan wore a smirk, yet Mateo steadfastly avoided glancing in his direction.

As the contest was announced, everything else slipped into oblivion. The numbers twirled across the screen, and for the first time in weeks, a sense of calm washed over Mateo. He was in his element.

As the last round concluded, Mateo cast his gaze around the room. Students murmured softly, sharing furtive glances, and playfully nudging one another. He observed Ivan, radiating an air of overconfidence. Mateo brushed it aside, immersing himself in his tasks until the timer chimed its final note.

The judges meticulously counted the scores. Mateo perched on the edge of his seat, his fingers quivering with anticipation. Then they revealed the results, leaving his name unsaid. He stood there, astonished, as Ivan and a handful of others beamed with joy while accepting their awards.

The sharp pang of defeat struck him with an intensity he hadn't anticipated. As the crowd started to thin, a judge leaned in towards Mr. Anderson, murmuring a few words. Mr. Anderson's expression grew serious as he gestured for Mateo to step nearer.

"A mistake has occurred," Mr. Anderson murmured softly. "An error?" Mateo inquired, his heart racing with anticipation.

The judge advanced with purpose. "Some students cheated," the judge said, glancing at Ivan. "We reviewed the footage and adjusted the scores."

As Mateo emerged victoriously, a hush fell over the room as the new results emerged. Mr. Anderson smiled. "You did it, Mateo. This is your moment."

Mateo stood in silence, a torrent of feelings surging within him. Ivan stood still, pale. Mateo didn't care—he had proven his worth to himself.

As the sun dipped below the horizon and the auditorium

began to clear, Mateo stepped outside, tightly grasping the prize money in his hands. The afternoon sunbathed the school in a warm, golden glow, and for the first time, Mateo sensed a burden easing from his shoulders.

He punched in the well-known number, and after a handful of rings, Luz's voice came across the line.

"Mamá, I won." Luz laughed; her pride was evident. "I knew you would, hijo. We also have good news; we will see you very soon!"

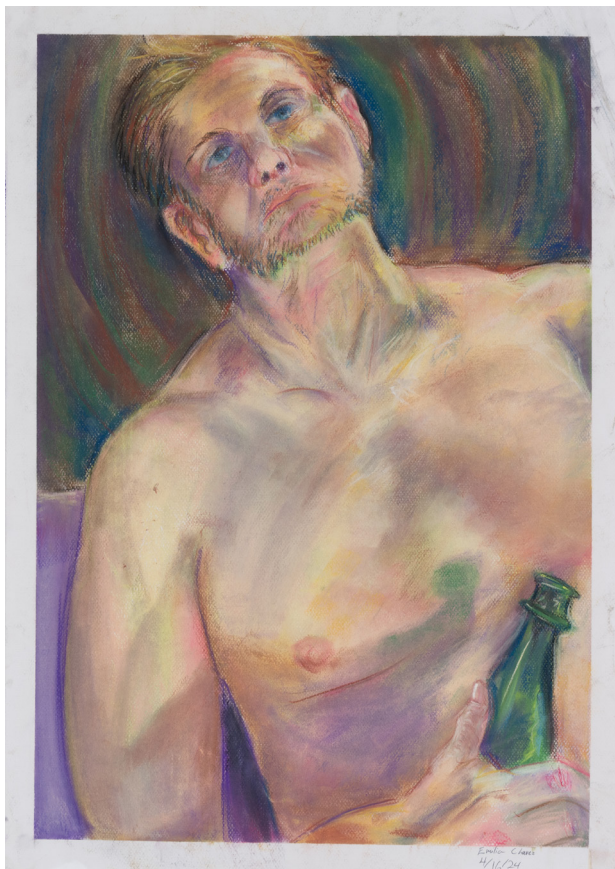
Mateo beamed, a wave of pride washing over him. He had brought pride to his family and found a sense of belonging in math and himself.

After ending the call, he gazed out at the horizon. The future continued to be a complex fabric of uncertainty, filled with unresolved challenges. For the first time, he sensed he was prepared to confront it.

PASTEL

Male Portrait C #1

Emilia Chavez

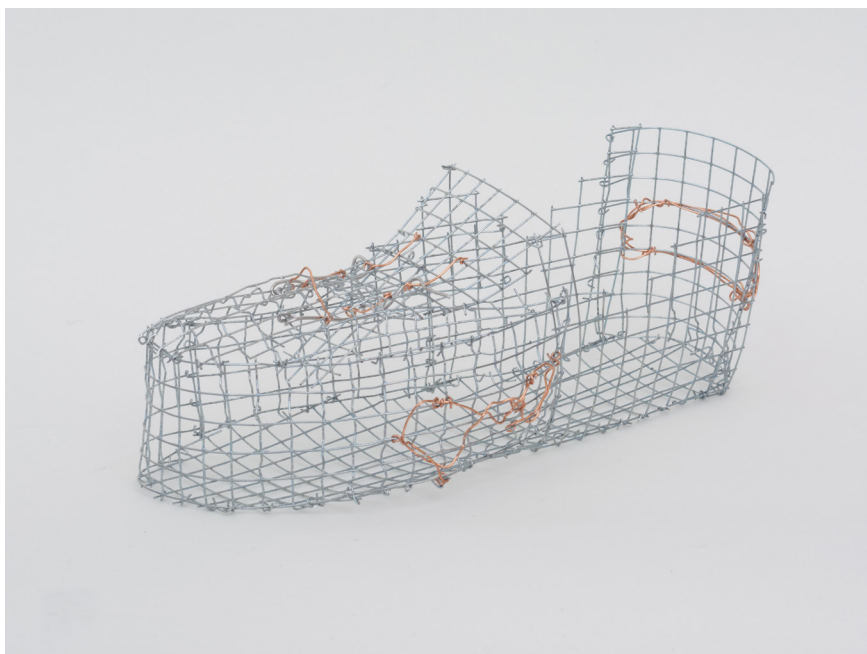


Pastel, 24"x20"

WIRE

Running Shoe

Joe Kozlowski



8"x10"x5"

Space Between the Pieces

Ashley Vanderhoff

Evangeline met her first boyfriend when she was nine, and in the twenty-one years that followed, she never once spent a moment alone. She didn't stay with him, of course. He had been a whirlwind of chaos and light and clever pranks that bent their classmates over with youthful laughter. Evangeline, once quiet at the age of eight, had burst open with her own vibrant light upon meeting him. But after only three months, he left her for her calm cousin, Cece, who was in the grade above. Her next boyfriend was a reserved boy from the cafeteria who'd sat next to her the day her heart had been broken. He enjoyed listening to country music, and his father owned a ranch with chickens, cows, and a couple of pigs. Evangeline finished elementary and started middle school wearing cowgirl boots and adopting a southern vocabulary that greatly juxtaposed her parents' Boston accents. It was at seventeen that Evangeline met Issac. Issac began each day listening to NPR podcasts and reading the *New Yorker*—religiously submitting to their caption contest, chuckling at his own entries, only to scoff when he wasn't a finalist. After seeing Evangeline once in the hallway, he adapted his morning routine to deliver flowers to her doorstep, wooing her until she traded *y'all* for *you all*, became enamored with the ideals of left-leaning politics, crosswords, and humorous cartoon

captions—it was just appalling that Issac never won. Evangeline married Issac at eighteen, right after graduating high school, and the two moved to a small home just north of New York City, near the sea. The two lived together happily—until a rainy day when a semi-truck struck his car head-on, killing him instantly.

The following months after Issac's death Evangeline had a job to do. Her days were filled with family and friends, doctors and lawyers, coroners, and police. She arranged a funeral, selecting the same flowers he had sent her so long ago, and filled his eulogy with quotes from East Coast authors and journalists. It was only after the demanding workload of death had settled that Evangeline found herself sitting in an unsure quietness. In the absence of Issac's voice, her mind flashed slivers of pictures and phrases that were almost recognizable, almost recollections of him—guesses at what he might say in this very moment, but nothing coherent stuck together. She tried to listen to NPR, but she grew bored too quickly. What was the point when she couldn't talk to Issac about it? When the *New Yorker* was delivered to her home, as it was every week, she opened it to the latest cartoon, but her face distorted at once—Issac's entry should have won. Issac's entry would have won if he had written one. Issac would have written one if he hadn't died.

Theo came to stay with her three months after Issac's death.

"You need to find something to do," Theo's tone had always been more like a mother's than that of a sister's—cautious, patient, afraid to push too hard with the consequence of withdrawal. "Something that's just for you."

"I have plenty of things I do. I've always had things. They just—hurt right now."

"You need to find one that doesn't hurt. Something that doesn't have him in it. Something that's just yours."

Evangeline didn't have such hobbies.

"I have a book you could read. You know I don't read much, and I know it isn't like any of those essays Issac and you enjoy so much. But I read this one, and it's good."

Evangeline didn't feel like reading. She felt like crying. She took the book from her sister anyways, settled down into her soft armchair next to Issac's—chairs they were supposed to grow old in together, and started to read.

Her sister had been right. Issac probably would have hated this book.

It had way too much fantasy, the main character too unrealistic, and the average word length was much too short. But surprisingly, Evangeline found the break from the flowery language she had shared with Issac for so long refreshing. It was a story about a young girl, only twenty, who despite working as a hired hitman since twelve, had a love for knitting. It seemed a ridiculous concept, and the book wasn't particularly descriptive when it came to describing the act of knitting, or anything, really. It spent more time describing the room in which Evangeline's protagonist knitted projects piled up. But to Evangeline, this simplicity offered her a strange truth: it wasn't held down by useless words, and she was left with only real actions.

Knitting. Knitting felt like a good hobby to her, something simple, steady—like a way to regain some motion in her life. But as she let the book fall into her lap, staring out

into the room, and imagining her hands hovered over the yarn, Evangeline realized she couldn't even begin to mimic the correct movements of a knitter's hands. She didn't know how to knit, and that small, sharp truth struck her with the weight of a thousand little failures. It was a grief she hadn't expected: not the loss of Issac, but the loss of something she'd never had. A skill, a skill she wanted to learn, but had no one to show her how, no one to be proud of her accomplishments because they knew firsthand the hours and focus it took to knit something beautiful.

The grief, pooling in her gut, forced her to her knees, she thought of her protagonist's world—her knitting—fading into the darkness. She would never be able to do this. And that realization, at that moment, hurt almost more than anything else.

It was on the ground that Evangeline spotted a dusty pile of puzzles beneath her and Issac's TV stand—her TV stand. She wondered when Issac had put them there, if they were meant to be decorative. She knew how to put a puzzle together, and at that moment, it felt like a reassuring idea. If her protagonist grounded herself after death through knitting; Evangeline could do it with puzzles.

Evangeline knew her environment had to hold just as much importance as the act of doing her puzzles. She needed her life to mimic the tone of the book which offered her apparent answers. Rough oak covered the dark room on the second floor of her home, and the soft rays of dim sunlight cast shadows, stretching out like a tangle of black insect legs on the floor, illuminating the dust dancing in the air—so slow around her it was as if time itself were slowing down,

and she could finally take a breath without panic — panic that each breath was another breath farther from Issac. The carpet was worn beneath her feet. They had meant to renovate this room in the fall, but the money had slipped away from them, and now it sat there faded — a dark purple, sinking into a diminished chord, full of stains and faded floral patterns. One stain, a few inches from where she sat each day, should have been a reminder of her and Issac's first night in this home, they had danced throughout it, spilling wine from their glasses.

Evangeline's first puzzle was a seagull drifting alone above a stormy sea. The pieces, still in their box, felt impossibly small in her hands. She emptied the pile onto the table, the cardboard clattering with the sound of the pieces scattering like forgotten memories. A gust of wind stirred the open window, bringing with it the distant scent of salt from the ocean. She propped the box against a wall so she could study the hues of blue, the glowing moon, the tall waves and distorted white, frothy patterns.

She started with the frame, her fingers moving over the edges of the pieces with efficiency. Corner, corner, edge—click. The rest of the pieces lay around her in a chaos she couldn't make sense of apart from piles corresponding to each of their colors. But most of the pieces were blue, too similar in shade—nothing was distinct. The space between them grew disorganized.

The sky in the puzzle was dark, gray, a single lightning bolt streaking across the sky. The seagull stood alone, caught in a violent, churning sea. Its pieces were easy to assemble: a distinct shade of white, and she finished him next,

placing him in the center of the frame.

Her fingers stilled, lingering on a dark blue piece, just slightly different from the others. She leaned in closer, studying it, the quiet tick of her breath the only sound that filled the room.

Outside, the wind picked up again, and the far-off sound of waves crashing on the shore felt like a distant echo. Evangeline reached for another piece, almost mechanically, as if it could soothe her, as if it could pull her out of whatever haze had settled over her.

But the pieces didn't fit.

She stopped again, her hand resting on the table. The edge of the frame was nearly done, but the space between it and the bird was endless. The seagull flew into nothing. The pieces that could make it whole weren't there.

Evangeline couldn't fill the gap.

Evangeline. She took solace from the moments in which she could rest her hand in her lap and just stare and study her pieces. *Evangeline.* She was getting lost in the endless gray of the table. She needed to get lost in her waves, her thunderous storm, her lone seagull. *Evangeline.* She wasn't thinking about Issac at all, about showing it to him, she was alone—just like her protagonist, but the puzzle pieces kept her company, kept her calm.

"Evangeline, Jesus, can you hear me?"

Evangeline startled towards the voice of her sister, her gaze snapping and refocusing on the mess of dark curls and bright red lipstick, large sunglasses.

"You've been up here for almost five hours now. What have you been doing?"

“A puzzle.”

“Mm.” Theo bent over her sister’s shoulder to look at her progress, Evangeline hadn’t made the progress one would expect after five hours. “It’s kinda sad, isn’t it? I mean is he gonna be okay flying in that storm?”

Evangeline hadn’t really thought about that. She assumed probably not. Issac hadn’t been.

“Uh well, I thought we could go down to the beach. I think you should get some sun.”

Evangeline didn’t want to get some sun. She wanted to work on her puzzle. Wasn’t that what her sister had wanted at first? To get some hobby that wouldn’t remind her of Issac. How hard was it to be consistent with what you wanted?

“Okay.”

“Alright! Sounds good! Do you, uh, need to get changed or—it’s nice enough to swim.”

“No, I don’t think I want to swim.”

“That’s okay, I wasn’t sure I wanted to either.”

Theo looped her arm around her sister’s and hauled her up. “I packed a towel to sit on, an umbrella, and some snacks! Think we need anything else?”

“No.”

The walk to the beach was short – only about fifteen minutes. Despite the short walk, Evangeline rarely went to the beach.

Issac hadn’t been a fan of swimming or sand. He just liked that they were close to the city.

“Nice day huh?”

Evangeline nodded. She was still in a sort of daze; a specific tone had fallen over her thoughts, and she didn’t want

to disrupt it with some needless small talk. She felt somber, her puzzle calling out to her, and she felt a sort of comfort that it was waiting for her at home.

In the meantime, she felt a strange pull to enjoy the fresh air, to not let the ocean remind her of her puzzle. It was a sort of awareness of her surroundings she had failed to appreciate her entire life. Maybe it was Theo's insistence, or maybe it was the weight of the silence, but as the women's path sloped downwards, and Evangeline started to spot the sea, she noticed how the sky looked down at the water and how the water looked back at it: how they reflected one another.

It was beautiful. She noticed the tall strands of prairie grass lining the sea edges, reminding her of when she was young, she must have been six or seven, and how she used to get lost in the fields near her childhood home. It made her feel alone, but not lonely. She felt the gravel beneath her feet, how it crunched under her boots, and it reminded her of cooking: dicing carrots, mincing garlic, crushing pecans. She could almost smell the gravel, but she couldn't, of course, distinguish the scent of food from the rocks, so she smelled the natural world around her instead. The musty smell of the water, the rich scent of the dirt pleased her, filling her with a sort of pride in noticing, and enjoying, the small things in life.

The sisters reached the beach, close now to the water's edge, it was busy today – many people were out. As Theo spread the blanket across the sand, Evangeline noticed the family closest to them: a young woman and man with their small child. The boy trampled across the sand and towards

the water: kicking it aggressively and sending grains and wet clumps flying in all directions. It, at once, shattered Evangeline's trance, shattered the tone of her thoughts, shattered her desire to go back and complete her puzzle. She felt an anger beginning to build: first at her sister for dragging her out there, then at the parents for letting their child play so obnoxiously, and finally at her own helpless tears that began to well in her eyes. She couldn't do this. She didn't know what she was supposed to do, or how she was supposed to act. This was perhaps the most time she had spent with her older sister in over twenty years, and she didn't know what to do with that either. The boy began to shout, and Evangeline angrily swept her eyes back over him, only to realize he was pointing and screaming at a seagull: plastic wrapped around its neck. *My seagull*. It was a silly thought. She wasn't quite sure she understood what she meant by it, if it meant anything at all.

The parents rushed for their boy, the mother snatching him up as he attempted to reach for the seagull, the seagull snapping back. The father, cursing and uncoordinatedly kicking towards the seagull, his foot only striking sand in front of it—causing greater distress for the bird. It couldn't fly, Evangeline realized. People passed by and offered glances of pity, others hesitated at the scene but ultimately continued—deeming it too dangerous to help, others ignored it entirely. Issac would have fallen into the second category. She could almost hear his response now: "This is exactly why we need to spend more money on park rangers, not soldiers." She cut the line of reasoning off quickly, if Issac had been there, it would have gone on forever.

The bird stumbled closer to the sea, and Evangeline felt a spark of panic in her chest. The waves stretched out dangerously close to the seagull, kissing the shoreline before retreating into itself. She was the sea; she didn't want to be the sea.

Evangeline didn't think, she just moved—towards the bird, towards the ocean, towards something that seemed as lost as she felt. Theo's voice called out to her, but it barely reached her over the thunderous sounds of the waves, filling Evangeline's ears and building the pressure in her chest with each step. Evangeline's chest felt so tight, but she wasn't afraid of the bird; she was afraid of everything else: the choking silence that filled her house even when Theo was home, the emptiness of the rooms, the puzzle that she didn't even care to finish now.

She was drawn to the seagull with urgency, a certainty, like how she had once been drawn to Issac's certainty, to the way he had filled every space, making it easy to convince herself she thought she understood how life should be lived. But now, there was nothing. So, she did what came naturally: she reached out, and for a moment, everything seemed easy.

The seagull's frantic struggle slowed as she freed it. Theo's yelling was louder now, but Evangeline still couldn't make out the words, her own thoughts too loud. Everyone was so silly, she mused. The bird was thrashing in her arms now, but it wasn't as if it was overpowering her. In a few simple twists, she had torn away the plastic, and now she stretched her hand outwards—towards the sea and pushed the bird

into the air; the seagull taking flight instantly over the blue, frothy waves.

“Damn you made that look easy.” Theo was standing next to her now, chest rising rapidly. “I thought it might bite you.”

“Why would it do that.”

“I don’t know, wild animals get scared. You gotta be careful.”

“I feel like I’ve been careful my whole life.”

Theo glanced at her sister, eyes raised, a small uplift to the corner of her lips.

“You never seemed careful to me; you seemed more scared.”

Evangeline scoffed, “Scared of what?”

“Scared of being alone.”

Evangeline watched the seagull’s shape grow smaller and smaller, making the ocean seem so much bigger. It didn’t look scary though, it looked kind of nice, kind of peaceful. She wasn’t too sure yet.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I Saw You Last Night

Hannah Faulkner

By the side of the road
someone put up a cross;
It was not yours.
But the roses were orange
Like the ones I have framed
With the words no one will say
But the newspaper page.

Everywhere I look
-The parking lot, the kitchen, your favorite song-
there is a piece of you.
I wish for each place to be a clue.
Yet, I haven't found where you've gone.
I think about you every single day.
What colors were your feelings, red, green, or gray?
Everytime I leave flowers I realize how scared you must
have been.
How did you conquer your fear of death then
and why couldn't you conquer the rest?

When I saw you last night
I tried to cling onto you.
But, you weren't even there.
I knew I couldn't reach out to you,
I've already started to forget your laugh.
It's not fair.
I still want to hold on.

I am not the person you cared for the most.
Yet I act as if my mourning means something
to you-but maybe it's only for me.
Does anything I do help you to know
You were and still are loved?

*-This whole poem is probably just a conversation with myself.
But on the off chance that it is not:
I love you, I miss you, and I hope wherever you've gone you are
happy.-*

Insatiable Hunger

Alexandra Lemke

3rd Place Winner in Nonfiction at the 2024
Skyway Writer's Festival

My mother has always told me to take caution, that I would be hungered for and sought after. I, ever so naive and sick of her constant caution, pushed her words to the side; as I've come to make a habit of. I myself was starved, my own hunger blinding me. I let it lead me as I reached out to find what I so desperately believed I needed. This growing need and feeling was what drove me, what pushed and pulled at my very sanity.

I was engulfed in this esurient state, unable to find what would truly satisfy this hunger I sought after. But then there it was. There I was. There he was. There we were. February 14th, 2024. We had gone back and forth on where to go for dinner that night, I'd always been such an indecisive person and at times I knew he was the same as I. It was both of our first Valentine's Day and we were ever so exhilarated and somewhat tainted with nervousness. Though we (more so me) had finally settled on some small hole-in-the-wall restaurant I really liked. Indescribable emotions coursed through me as I awaited him to

come get me. Getting ready was a flurried rush as I felt so dazzled for the night ahead. And as the doorbell rang, I let my breath slip quick past my lips as I rushed for my shoes, grabbing them in one quick motion with his gift in the other hand. My hunger inflamed beneath my skin; decorated in my favorite black velvet lace dress. I felt too warm, unsure what the cause was as I raced into the front room where he waited with my presents and open arms. To be in his very presence I could feel the hunger satisfied. After quick goodbyes to my parents and his hand in mine, we were quickly in the car on our way to dinner. The hunger-back again-bloomed in colors and visions, unsure exactly what I could even be hungry for.

In a quick blur, the car ride was over, the cool night blew softly as I clung to the black fur coat that adorned me. Despite the cold we had taken pictures in the parking lot, the wind vicious to my hair. Though I felt as if I were gleaming, the flurry of emotions coursing through my body dazed my mind in infatuation and adoration, I could feel it all distorting my senses and my grasp on everything around me, all I knew was that his hand was tenderly in mine. I suddenly realized in the blink of an eye and the step of a foot that we somehow managed to make up our minds as our order had been placed as he sat across from me at a booth. I could not remember exactly coming from the parking lot to where we sat now. The restaurant was small, the walls lined up strangely and at certain angles looked as if they could close in on us. The atmosphere was all too warm and the color

palette of the interior was of a dull warm tone. To no surprise, the smell of grease was evident as this place was notorious for their wonderful food but their unhealthy choices, what would one night hurt? Wandering my eyes about the restaurant, I suddenly found my eyes on his, the warm cloudy lighting seemed to take the cool tone out of his usual frosted blue stare. A streak of hunger surged through me once more as I felt the smile stretch on my face. The hunger didn't subside as I suddenly realized our food was in front of us, a heavy smell of grease and salt steamed up in small white wisps of air. My hunger was halted for a moment as the food fell warm on my tongue, almost burning me at the urgency to fill my starvation. And yet all I could really consume were the words he spoke, the small giddy and nerve wracked movements he impulsively made. The food had a savory taste I had grown fond of, yet I salivated at his words in hunger for his voice to continue. Strangely as we finished eating, I still felt such hunger in me, physically full but a hunger resided. This hunger was a striking moment for me, the very spark of what I would come to acknowledge and understand in the future.

It took me quite a long time to figure out what that hunger stood for. It twisted in my mind the hunger that grew with each day, and the fulfillment I would suddenly feel around him. It hit me about 3 months later as I was losing everything I had. I was ravenous for love, I was devoid of the type of love I was looking for, for so long. But I had it, wrapped in my arms and held in my hands, staring into my eyes and comforting me softly, my hunger fulfilled. And too

suddenly I was starved once more, a starvation that food couldn't even begin to satisfy, a hunger so deep in my soul I felt nauseous at the thought. I brought my plate to my mother looking for anything to satisfy my hunger, something to soothe the excruciation I felt, and she looked at me in such a way that hurt, that starved me further. It was then my mother told me this was all my doing, everything was of my own destruction and at the end of the day, I'm just a piece of meat to others. I realized how she looked down on me then, my hunger to the brink of killing me as I felt starved of all love, I choked on the aftertaste of what I once had. Swirls of a distant passion and newfound hatred soaked my tastebuds. The lingering flavor turned sour in my mouth as I could no longer distinguish the root of it.

It was then I realized starvation was my fulfillment, I am but a starved creature seeking any glimpse of the fullness I once had. I am ravenous of the feeling I so desperately cling to; the memory of the feeling blurs and I cling tightly. Perhaps this was my ultimate demise, the realization that I am to be hungered for but never truly able to satisfy my own hunger. My desperate attempts to grasp it all to stay in place faltered as I realized I would never rid myself of this bitter aftertaste. I am full, full of insatiable hunger.

The Pale Maid

Justin Drapinski

As I took another step by the lake where the frogs no
longer croak

I saw her sitting atop that great and barren old oak
Staring at the solid lake that lie below

When a sliver of her snow-like hair against the black did
glow

As she sat ever so gently there in a daze
She began to slowly turn her pearlescent gaze
My heart commanded my foot be stalled, and my breath,
bated

Frozen, I waited as half of her smile came into view, this
too, illuminated

As I stood in my tracks in the freezing cold
I glimpsed a tear begin to roll
Distorting the cheek that lie beneath, so pale and white

At once with this sight did my wintry heart ignite

As she raised her hand to wipe the tear
She spotted me still, and I braced for her leer
But she didn't recede nor grow darker nor dimmer

And within her eyes came a glimmer, a sight in my mind
that still doth simmer

As I chanced the cause of the sorrow in those eyes
I took one step more to my own surprise
And cried to her through the icy black

Still I rack my mind over what she called back

As she parted her lips her voice filled my ear
She told me to wait, that she'd always be near
To listen carefully by the shore of the sea

For there she would be with the waves, calling out to me

As I shouted again to ask her intent
I couldn't help but weep and lament
How her shining visage began to fade

Long awake that night I laid with my heart aflame, long-
ing for when I'd again see
The lovely pale maid

The Great American Drive Through

Ashley Vanderhoff

Early in the morning, my McDonald's drive-through window was typically shrouded in calming darkness, masking problems exposed in the daylight and providing a slow, easy start to the day. But our late opening on that first day of January had allowed the sun time to escape from beneath the horizon. As I opened my window to the first customer of the day—the first customer of the new year, I noticed how the morning sky was flooded with peach, rose, and coral: cotton candy clouds streaked across the color. This was my first mistake.

"Heeeelllllllloooooo, you guys seriously couldn't fucking take my order one minute before you opened? I'm already late to work; why the fuck would you open at 8:00?"

I had expected customers to be in a better mood on the first day of the year. I guess I was counting on some leftover dopamine from the night before—people high of the anticipation, that pretense of a fresh start. But really, it doesn't change anything. People make resolutions to be healthier, exercise more, visit family, drink less, and shave three strokes off their golf game. They make plans to vote, start hobbies, read books, laugh

more—and of course, improve their short game. But those resolutions? They're usually just the kind of lies we tell ourselves. We live our lives all the same. If anything, this guy acknowledged that truth head-on. No grand celebration of the passage of time would stop him from being his usual-asshole self. I apologized, took his money, and sent him on his way.

My coworkers mocked him when he was gone; I didn't (for once). Angry customers were quite common. It was easy to adapt to the hatred, to find moments of humor in their tantrums. But I was sad. This was sadness, not for myself or the man (I can admit my frontal lobe must not yet be developed enough to care that rudeness is a product of deeper issues). No, this was a quiet sadness washing over me, and I couldn't help but think: This is what we fucking lose it over now? One minute extra waiting for a shitty pancake? We grow resentful when we tell ourselves to stop at McDonald's—even though work is twenty minutes away and starts in fifteen—everything will all work out in the end, and it doesn't? We used to get polio and smallpox. Children didn't have time to go to school because they were working. Men were drafted to wars they didn't believe in. Women died constantly in childbirth. I do think getting frustrated at trivial things is a part of the human experience. When my phone refuses to connect to my car's speaker after a long day at work—it ignites a sort of insanity in me. And I catch myself thinking, maybe I've crossed some event horizon, adrift in space, unaware. I could still be floating in that black hole—so it's not a place I'm heading towards; it's the end of time itself. I still don't curse the stranger I happen across.

The sun continued to cast new shadows over the following hours, the gentle wind, a calming presence. The day seemed peaceful, almost sleepy, and the customers, for a while, mimicked it. That was until a harsh wind must have carried along a force that not only shook trees and rattled windows but bit through layers of clothing, spreading misery and discontent.

In her defense, she was terribly unlucky. She was blind and couldn't read, so she couldn't see on the menu, the storefront, or the sign in the drive-through window that clearly stated breakfast ended at 10:30 am. On top of that, the gas in her tank must've been dangerously low because she insisted that every other McDonald's nearby served breakfast all day. She was also deaf — she couldn't hear a word of my explanations about our policies and kitchen procedures. She never said any of this, but I pride myself on reading people. She left after ordering a hamburger and a small fry, using “fucking” in between every word. And once she was gone, I had my own profound thought: What the fuck am I doing here?

When I think of philosophers hunting tirelessly for the meaning of life, I am quick to picture men locked away in their studies thinking hard about thinking, or scholars traveling across countries to examine relationships between cultures, or even one of those coming-to-age movies where a group of teenagers runs away from home to discover who they really are.

But why should one have to remove themselves from

society, from distraction, and go on grand adventures and trips of self-discovery to explain away the meaning of life and existence and purpose? Shouldn't that question, if it should or needs to be answered at all, be answered amid our regular lives? During the mundane tasks that take up most of our days or when we are surrounded by people capable of applying meaning to the world just as we are? That's how we spend our time, so it must mean something. And what is more perfect—more representative of the culmination of the American spirit, than a fast food drive-through being a literal and figurative window into our purpose?

The next customer also had “fuck” in her vocabulary (normally, these would be rare occurrences, but the people were going for a record this new year). She was enraged even as she pulled up to the window. It could have been that whoever had taken her order had been rude, and she thought it was me (most of our staff consisted of those who'd been fired from the Culver's next door, so in the people's defense, we really didn't have the best service).

Her face was distorted: pursed lips, a blush creeping onto her neck—most likely from her rapid breathing, and narrowed eyes—an intense stare as if she was on the brink of crying out. I read her back her order. She continued her stare. The anger, unlike that of a bad day or recent argument, seemed personal. It was directed, cast onto me with piercing eyes.

I handed her back her money, and turned to grab the receipt.

“Excuse me.”

I turned to look at her. “Yes?”

“What do I want?”

My mind jumped briefly to a podcast I remembered in great detail, in which physicist Brian Cox pondered the same question. I have thought about the quote quite often since that day.

What is self-evidently true is that meaning exists [on Earth] because it means something to us. Meaning emerges from configurations of atoms which is what we are. Should we consider ourselves extremely valuable in that respect: What more do you want? When I see people [say] ‘I want more than that, there must be more to it.’ What do you mean? The ingredients in our bodies were assembled in the hearts of long-dead stars over billions of years and have assembled themselves spontaneously into temporary structures that can think and feel and explore and then those structures will decay away again at some point and in the very far future there’ll be no structures left. So there we are. We exist in this little window when we can observe this magnificent universe.

She continued her stare, great anger evident. I finally just said it; I was tired of being confused.

“What else do you want?”

“Lets see, maybe my fucking receipt?”

Ah yes! A receipt! How could I be so silly and stupid and ridiculous. Copernicus proved to us that the simplest answer is often correct, as when he reasoned the planets orbit the Sun. Schwarzschild said the same to Einstein when proving the validity of his field equations of general relativity. If the simplest answer really does tend to be the most

correct, maybe this lady was on to something. Without her receipt she couldn't leave, she'd have no motion, no purpose in her life. She would become one dimensional, all magnitude and no direction, and she couldn't possibly continue on. Of course that was the answer. Of course she should be frustrated.

People pray to Gods, follow religious codes, and believe in a spiritual realm. They think about the soul, study the physical world, and search for natural laws. They wonder about free will, give purpose to their actions, and find meaning in their choices. Some refuse to search for answers at all, while others embrace life fully and find it absurd. Some become lifelong learners, valuing what makes each person unique. But what are the clues for determining our purpose, something that could be foundational for each of these theories and thoughts?

Receipt-lady had been frustrated. If frustration stems from obstructed goals and results in anger, why would we become angry at something that didn't carry a substantial amount of weight?

My next customer was a sweet, old woman—you can, with enough experience in service—tell in an instant if older adults will be kind or unpleasant. Her grandson, sitting beside her in the passenger seat, was restless with excitement. As I glanced at the screen to check her order, I saw it was a simple ice cream cone. A \$1.50 order after a twenty-minute wait (thanks to our kitchen staff, who were from that same Culver's), yet she didn't seem frustrated at all. Maybe that was the key. Perhaps the goal in life is contentment. We all face unique moments of frustration, but when

we embrace peace instead, we bypass that complexity. By accepting what is and living with contentment, maybe we are harnessing our purpose.

Most people might already do this if that is what it means to be content. Living without ever being content can make you miserable. Only—if you want something enough so that you are never quite satisfied, that births innovation, doesn't it? And isn't that the whole point of meaning—in-ovation, and civilization—something so uniquely human it's what allows us to wonder why we are all here in the first place? Because before civilization, humans were separated, not by imaginary lines on a map but by real physical hurdles of the mountains, seas, and deserts. These were people who, not content to be alone, conquered them.

Half of my shift had passed, and my headache seemed like evidence that I was probably thinking in illogical circles, delusional from the boringness of my morning. I wasn't sure I cared what the purpose of life was. I read in a pamphlet once that it was *enjoying the passing of time*, and that seemed good enough. Some people enjoyed time by being in nature, others by effecting change. Society continues to grow—for better or for worse, and we keep fighting and arguing and laughing and crying and loving and fucking. All these people passing by my window were living lives so uniquely different, it was hard to argue we could all possibly live according to the same purpose.

I was taken off the drive-through to save the kitchen shortly after I had decided this. We were desperately behind. The music, combined with a full screen of orders and frenzied staff, ripped me from my thoughts. I was suddenly

completely and utterly in the moment—my head bobbing from the music, my hands assembling sandwiches, my eyes glued to the screens, and my thoughts on Big Macs and McChickens and McDoubles and dozens and dozens of nuggets. I no longer had that sense of sadness or dazed wonderment. Instead, I recall feeling happy. At the time, I attributed it to the rush of being thrust into action—even at a place like McDonald's where turning out efficient, adequate work left me with a sort of satisfaction. Now, and perhaps this is my new perception of happiness when thinking back on this day, I more correctly identify the cause. The most routine job, a dismal restaurant, nasty customers—they were all perceived negatives, but I feel a sense of relief that despite it, it all sparked thoughts of galaxies, purpose, and passion—and that was simply wonderful.

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