



*genesis*

# Contributors

*Evan Allee*  
*Chase Benson*  
*Ashley Bertram*  
*Ellie Bevan*  
*Tegan Blackburn*  
*Victoria Bozinovski*  
*Daylen Byrd*  
*Isaac Chaifetz*  
*Jaylee Chastain*  
*Joe Chimenti*  
*Emma Cremeans*  
*Monica Cunningham*  
*Leah Darden*  
*Elise Dobson*  
*Dex Fee*  
*Hayden Garris*  
*Dayanara Guzman*  
*Eris Hembree*  
*Sarah Hollcraft*  
*Elise Howe*  
*Caedence Jones*  
*Eswar Kamiseti*  
*Kim Kile*  
*Paige LaMar*

*Corlan McCollum*  
*Thomas McNeil*  
*Ginger Miller*  
*Levi Miller*  
*Sarah Montanez*  
*Xavier Neier*  
*Signe Nettum*  
*Mack Nigh*  
*Isabella Park*  
*Sam Pickett*  
*Shyama Prasad Dash*  
*Alicia Rump*  
*Elena Saorrone*  
*Amy Schleppenbach*  
*Robert Smith*  
*Valerie Snelwar*  
*Anthony Stewart*  
*Sophia Sturgeon*  
*Kira Taylor*  
*Elizabeth Terhorst*  
*Emile Tipton*  
*Ashley Vega*  
*Gabriella Weaver*  
*Maura Weber*



# genesis

*literary & art magazine*

*volume fifty-four*

*2025*

# Staff

## Managing Editors

Bailey Evans

Eli Witham

## Senior Editors

Hazel Blythe

Sophia Foster

Siren Hand

Maggie Hoppel

Emily Hostettler

Ian Janke

Alec Jarvis

Manisha Jukareddy

Alicia Langdon

Frank Nieto

Alexa Quezada

Alexandria Stocker

Savanna Williams

Alexander Wood

## Editors

Snow Brewer

Ryan Everton

## ENG-W 280 Apprentices

Tyler Brown

Maria Croddy

Kelsey Donovan

Parker Edwards

Dex Fee

Caty Bennett

Sarah Handlon

Ansel Hendrix

Morgan Hieston

Kaydence Hudson

Rachel Marks

Cameron McCreary

Levi Miller

Isabella Park

Kaila Richardson

Yessica Salgado-Quintana

Alysa Taylor

Ashley Vega

Emily Wagner

## Faculty Advisor

Sarah Layden

# Letter from the Editors

Thank you for grabbing a copy of our Spring 2025 issue of *genesis*. Each year, we are amazed by the talent and creativity of the contributors who bare their souls through their writing and artwork. There is beauty in this form of expression, and we are honored to have a hand in amplifying the voices of those brave enough to share their strongest emotions. This issue especially embraces a sense of perseverance as the arts become more important than ever. We are grateful for all of our contributors and editors who emphasize this need for human expression and understanding.

The writing and art found within these pages serves as a time capsule of modern existence. Our student contributors highlight the overwhelming feelings that we sometimes don't know how to explain, and through their complex narratives, we are able to feel a connection that goes beyond the everyday. Within these pages, you will find shared sentiments regarding an everchanging world, and we hope you find kinship with those who allowed us a glimpse into their creative minds.

We want to thank all of our readers, who have carried issues of *genesis* around campus in backpacks and tote bags or gifted copies to their friends and classmates. We would not be publishing our Spring 2025 issue without your continuous support. We would also like to thank our remarkable staff of editors, our fantastic faculty advisor Sarah Layden, and every single contributor who braved the submission portal. Thank you for loving *genesis*.

We are honored to share this issue with you.

Bailey & Eli  
*Managing Editors*

# Table of Contents

## *Cover*

Masque of the Red Death — Ellie Bevan

## *Art*

꿀 생강 (Honey Ginger) — Ginger Miller	8
In the Haze — Leah Darden	11
Dilapidated Mountaineer's Cabinet — Valerie Snelwar	16
Pictures of Lily — Robert Smith	34
Art is Having Fun — Monica Cunningham	38
The Human Heart Hasn't Changed — Emile Tipton	42
Marina — Robert Smith	58
Act Like a Lady — Ginger Miller	67
The Danse Macabre — Isaac Chaifetz ( <i>best of</i> )	74
Masque of the Red Death — Ellie Bevan	104
Totem for the Working Man — Robert Smith	110
Anointed — Daylen Byrd	124
Anomaly — Kira Taylor	127
Sister Golden Hair — Elise Howe	137
Pride and Joy — Robert Smith	141
Chair 01 — Joe Chimenti	148
Family — Emma Cremeans	158
Mend — Sarah Montanez	165
Behind the Gate — Anthony Stewart	182
Annie — Robert Smith	185
DUEL AT DAWN — Eswar Prabhath Kamiseti	188

Weightless — Sophia Sturgeon	191
Gossip — Emma Cremeans	195
Koi — Sarah Hollcraft	201
Herron Hallway — Paige LaMar	215
Man with Turquoise Necklace — Daylen Byrd	220

## *Creative Nonfiction*

My Mother's Dirt Cake — Signe Nettum	36
WANTED ADS — Xavier Neier	40
The Modern Woman — Ashley Noelle Bertram	59
Final Affairs from a Patient Suffering a Quarter-Life Crisis — Xavier Neier	105
An Alleged Asexual's 20-Step Routine — Evan Allee ( <i>best of</i> )	128
Along the Perforations — Amy Schleppenbach	150
Grieving in Advance — Ashley Vega	162
The Midnight Flight — Shyama Prasad Dash	186
(I) Wanted (My D)ad — Tegan Blackburn	193
Scum — Hayden Garris	217

## *Fiction*

Fighting Your Memory — Gabriella Weaver	12
Pineapple Chunks — Levi Miller	18
A Fine Line — Alicia Rump	43
In the Gales I See My Fate — Mack Nigh	68
Sammy — Elizabeth Terhorst	108
Dinner at Fabbro's — Hayden Garris	112
Call Us When You Need Us — Sam Pickett	142
The Sleepwriter — Evan Allee	166
The Vapor — Maura Weber	196
Full Moons Are Perfect for a Werewolf to Come Out (As Transgender) — Levi Miller ( <i>best of</i> )	202
The Intricacies and Eccentricities of Loving a Necromancer — Evan Allee	221

## *Screenwriting*

Punk Was Dead — Levi Miller	75
-----------------------------	----

## *Poetry*

I go there — Victoria Bozinovski	9
Genetics — Kim Kile	17
From Seeing Lisa Dying — Evan Allee	28
Threads of Peace — Dayanara Guzman	35
Body Art — Kim Kile	39
Teenagers — Elizabeth Terhorst	55
Created Equal — Kim Kile	57
In the Shadow of Magdalene — Elise Dobson	65

Pretty Ladies Shouldn't Cry — Ashley Noelle Bertram	66
7 Stages — Caedence Jones	72
This Land is Your Land,	
This Land is <del>My</del> Your Land — Evan Allee	107
Marlboro Reds — Thomas McNeil	111
Generations — Kim Kile	123
Southern Sweet — Eris Hembree	125
What the Bourbon Does to Him — Dex Fee	126
Marian — Elena Saorrone	138
Nightly Comparison — Isabella Park	139
Ribcage — Eris Hembree	140
Heart of Ohio — Corlan McCollum	147
Doomsday — Evan Allee	154
Fatal Development — Elizabeth Terhorst	159
Second Place — Hayden Garris	161
<b>Duality</b> — Hayden Garris	183
Muñeca — Dayanara Guzman	184
Gold Cross Chain — Dayanara Guzman	189
love languages — Evan Allee	190
Floodland — Elena Saorrone	192
Hopeless Songs to the Solar System — Jaylee Chastain	197
Cannoli — Chase Benson ( <i>best of</i> )	216
The Computed Image of Us — Isabella Park	229

<i>Artists' Statements</i>	230
<i>Information &amp; Acknowledgments</i>	242



**꿀 생강 (Honey Ginger)**

Ginger Miller

*13" x 16" Intaglio Print with Chine Collé*







## **In the Haze**

Leah Darden

*24" x 36" Digital Photography*

# Fighting Your Memory

*Gabriella Weaver*

I had never wanted to be a mother. I don't particularly remember the exact reason that I had made such a decision, but I know that I had done so at a relatively young age. Perhaps it was that I considered myself to have this big plan for my life and I thought a child would ruin that. Perhaps I was just a bit too selfish.

I wasn't very old when Mom sat me down and told me that I would soon be a big sister. If I'm being completely honest, I don't actually remember having that conversation with Mom. I mean I'm sure I did because when you're a parent having a second kid you kind of have to make the first kid aware of such a situation. What I do remember is me starting to help Mom more, especially once she became mostly confined to her bed. I also remember that on the night that Mom finally went into labor, after I had grabbed the hospital bag that we had packed for this moment, I laced up my brand-new pair of light-up pink and blue sneakers. I was so excited to show them to my little brother. I was determined to be an amazing big sister.

Though I think that type of big sister would have remembered more than I do. I thought that I could remember more. I wanted to remember more. I know that there was a time before it all got bad, but I'm sorry I just can't think of what that was like. Maybe it's easier to remember the hard times, but the more likely option is that I don't want to hope that those good times can return when it now feels like they never will.

Mom would be gone for hours on end. You and I would get off the school bus, run inside, grab a Pop-Tart or Go-Gurt, both off brands of course, and then retreat to our separate rooms in hopes that she would be home to make dinner. However, time went on and I eventually started thinking that I should just be the one to make dinner if Mom wasn't going to be around to do so. Once I started making dinner, I thought I might as well do the dishes, perhaps the laundry, and maybe I could ask you to take out the trash since you were getting old enough.

"You're not Mom. Why should I do what you say?" You asked.

"Because I'm here and doing everything else. I'm just asking you to do one thing."

I don't know what I did, but I did something by saying that. I still wonder what it would be like if I could go back and undo it. All of sudden you were screaming and throwing whatever was within reach at me. I ducked for a while,

but at one point I definitely threw something back at you. I don't know if it was me retaliating or what, but you just got angrier. Those things in your reach suddenly weren't enough and you started throwing your fists at me instead. This went on for likely half an hour before we both retreated to our respective rooms.

After sitting in my bed for a while trying to find an excuse for what just happened, I decided it would be best to go and check on you. I truly didn't care about the trash anymore, but I cared about my little brother. When I cracked your door open slightly that's exactly what I found. My little brother, you, were lying in bed, shaking, crying, looking more scared than I had ever seen anyone. I started walking towards you when you jumped up and hugged me.

"I'm sorry," you choked out.

"It's okay. Are you okay?" I asked.

"I don't know what that was. I don't know who that was. It wasn't me. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I think you're just upset and angry."

"I shouldn't be angry at you."

"It's okay. We'll be okay," I said as I held you until you cried yourself to sleep.

That's how the next four years went. It was me and you without Mom. When you first started having your episodes they only happened probably once a month, but it progressed. At one point it was every other week, then every week, and eventually it felt like it was every day. Nothing I said helped anymore. I can't deny that at one point I got angry too. My manner of dealing with our situation was accepting it and improving myself where I could, namely school. However, you refused to do such a thing, and I hated that you wouldn't just do what I asked. Over time, our mutual resentment only made your episodes worse until eventually I no longer saw the point to check on you afterwards.

Once I graduated from high school, I chose to go away to college. I left you with Mom. Admittedly, I think it was good for both of you. There was no one left to take care of the house or to serve as an intermediary to your growing issues. She was forced to be a mom again.

The thing about being in a new place is that it makes you long for those places that are familiar to you, even if those places weren't the greatest. At least that was the case for my nineteenth birthday when I had no friends at school to celebrate

with and all I wanted was to go home and celebrate with family. I worried as I hadn't really talked to you since I had started classes. Mom had started therapy and was working to rebuild our relationship via constant messaging and a couple of calls here and there. I figured that for the party Mom would gather grandparents and decorate the house in a theme she thought I would like while also fixing a meal that she claimed to be my favorite. She would be wrong about the theme and the food, but she would appear as the pinnacle of motherhood and hosting, and I knew that's what she really wanted so I didn't say anything. While I knew what Mom would do during the celebration, I had no clue about you.

On the day of the party, I walked our grandma who passed her mothering skills, or I suppose the more appropriate understanding would be her lack of mothering skills, onto our mother. I was in the kitchen, so can't say that I saw what happened to start the chaos, but I can remember what was said.

"What the fuck are you doing here," you yelled.

"That isn't how you should talk to your family," Grandma replied.

"Please not today," Mom begged.

"No cause why is she here? She's a terrible fucking mom with a fucking disgusting taste in men. Mom, you know that better than anyone. She needs to fucking leave."

At this point, I was slowly beginning to step towards the living room. Everyone that was at the party had obviously heard the conversation and I was starting to get embarrassed as well as mad. I had to say something. I knew that me stepping into the situation would only make it worse, because it only ever made it worse, but I couldn't stay quiet.

"Can I not have just one day? One day where you aren't the center of attention. Today is my birthday and I thought maybe you could just be normal, but I guess I was wrong," I said.

"Like you aren't the center of attention all the time. Sister graduated top of her class. Sister went to college. Sister is so amazing," you said mockingly. "Just shut your mouth cause you're no better than anyone else here."

"No, you shut your mouth. Don't ever act like I didn't work to get where I am. You have no clue what it's like to work for yourself and not have everyone cover for you."

"Whatever. If she's not leaving, then I am."

With that, you turned and ran out the door. Everyone turned to look at me and I fought back any tears that seemed like they might fall. I wasn't going to cry over you. When I looked at Mom though she was crying, and also contemplating whether or not to follow you out the door. Eventually, everyone went to either help look for you or just went home. I stayed and waited.

Later when you finally walked back through the door you were bloody, bruised, and tear stained, but I couldn't look at you for more than a few seconds. I wanted to see my baby brother. I wanted to see someone that in twenty minutes I could go check on and comfort, while also being comforted by, because I knew I wasn't alone in all of it. Yet, on that day, when I looked at you, I couldn't see my baby brother at all, no matter how hard I tried.

No longer did I have someone by my side. I was alone. You were alone.

I never wanted to be *your* mother. I'll admit that I tried to be. However, I know now that I never could have been that for you. I'm just your big sister and I wish that could've been enough.



## **Dilapidated Mountaineer's Cabinet**

Valerie Snelwar

*18" x 24" Ballpoint Pen*

# Genetics

*Kim Kile*

What part of me  
will be born in you?  
My father's nose  
sculpted like the statue  
of Jupiter?  
Or will your hummingbird flutters,  
summon a tornado of arms and legs,  
flipping like the gymnast I was?  
Will my hazel eyes win out over  
your father's brilliant blue?

You rest, head down, tiny feet pressed  
in my ribs,  
the roo to my kanga,  
stealing my breath  
before you even arrive.

A mother and daughter,  
tethered like hot air balloons  
by the strongest of cords,  
soon to be connected by only  
the genes we share.

# Pineapple Chunks

Levi Miller

As Link stares through the windshield at the red glow of the traffic light filtering through the sheen of a downpour, the only thought in his head is *what the hell am I doing in a car with him?*

“Oh, dude—this one’s my favorite!” Patrick says from the driver’s seat, cranking up the volume. Patrick says that about every song that plays on the alt-rock radio station. Link’s head aches in time with the drumbeat.

Ten minutes before he got into this godforsaken car, Link was rifling through the sparse contents of his fridge to scrape together a meal to watch urban exploration videos to. He deserved a restful evening after the thirty-minute phone calls he’d waded through at his job as a receptionist at the local urgent care. He nearly fell asleep on the spot when he shed his khakis for sweatpants. So, when the doorbell to his apartment rang, Link waited a minute before sighing heavily and answering the door.

Dripping rainwater on his doormat was Patrick Ryans, exactly how Link remembered him: highlighter bright shorts, knee-high rainboots, Misfits hoodie, and gel running down his face off his no longer spiked hair. The only new thing was the pathetic look of concern slathered across his face. Back when they’d been roommates, Patrick never looked anything less than confident, even when his actions caused Link physical pain via secondhand embarrassment. The only thing that stopped Link from slamming the door on Patrick’s sad face was the energy it would take.

Look, Patrick was an asshole. In the near decade they’d been friends, Patrick hadn’t held a job down for more than a month tops. He forgot to give Link a ride when he needed one, chatted up the girls Link called dibs on, leached off Link’s food supplies, and stole from Link’s record collection—just the record, not the jacket or inner sleeve, meaning they got all scratched up. But Patrick could also be incredibly compassionate. He’d stay late at bars chatting to strangers until they’d sobbed their entire life’s story into his sleeve and vowed to go back to therapy. A minute later, he’d break a guy’s nose for disagreeing with his music taste and Link would think *compassionate my ass*.

Link slid the worst parts of their friendship to the back of his mind when he was with Patrick, but the grievances piled up. Patrick’s impulsiveness and constant complaining was hell on Link and his undergraduate degree, causing Link to move in with Ada (his then girlfriend, now ex) sooner than either of them were

ready for. He graduated, thank god, but never made it into medical school like he wanted.

The space from Patrick had been worth it all, though. With his world no longer dominated by Patrick's whims, Link reanalyzed their friendship from a more objective perspective and discovered how much of an asshole Patrick was. Link made other friends, safer friends, and tried to let his and Patrick's friendship fizzle out like forgotten birthday candles drowning in their own wax. But Patrick doubled down, texting at all hours of the night and sending him so many memes he thought his phone would run out of storage. So, Link blocked him.

A week later at a New Year's Eve party, Patrick showed up and cornered Link in the middle of the living room to ask why he'd been avoiding him.

"Seriously, man." Patrick's voice rose, and he shifted from foot to foot. "Why are you being such a dick? Did I do something to piss you off?"

The ball was dropping on TV, and people around them were searching for a partner to kiss. Link felt their annoyed eyes bury under his skin. They were probably all wondering what awful thing Link had done to Patrick to deserve his fury. Link wanted to scream that he wasn't the problem, *Patrick* was.

"Just tell me how to fix this," Patrick whined.

The B-tier celebrity started counting down on TV, the chant echoing around them.

*Five, four, three, two—*

Something inside Link snapped. He shouted, "Are you that stupid? You can't be fixed, and I'm sick of trying."

Patrick's rage melted off his face, leaving behind burnt shards of humiliation as he excused himself from the party to the opening lines of "Auld Lang Syne." The people around Link fell silent, glares hot and sticky on his skin. He left soon after.

To Patrick's credit, he gave up on their busted friendship after that. The past few years went by without so much as an email. But then he showed up on Link's doorstep.

As Link answered the door, "What the hell are you doing here?" was on the tip of his tongue, but Patrick hugged him before he could say it.

“Ada told me,” Patrick said, destroying any other protests from Link. They stood like that for a minute in the open doorway, Patrick trying to hide his sniffling in Link’s shoulder and Link ignoring the wet spots it left on his ratty t-shirt.

Once his legs felt like they might give out under Patrick’s weight, Link asked, “Want to come inside?”

Patrick sat on the lumpy IKEA couch they’d bought together years ago. Link microwaved some water for tea.

“Didn’t know you still talk to Ada,” Link said over the buzz, watching the mugs dance around each other on the turntable. Ada had cut contact with Patrick around the time Link did and never mentioned a reunion. Course, Link and Ada didn’t talk about everything now, having suffered a relatively messy breakup. It was Link’s fault, he admitted—the struggle to get into med school and giving up on his dreams of being a physician took a toll on his ability to be a good boyfriend. Recently, he’d rebuilt a semi-stable friendship with Ada, who’d found her own happiness in a coffee shop she’d founded.

“Yeah,” Patrick said, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. “She got me a job at her shop.”

“You have a job?” Link asked before he could stop himself.

Patrick laughed. “Three years is a long time.”

“You dress the same,” Link said, settling back against the counter.

“Doesn’t mean I’m still the same stupid, jobless, record-thief,” Patrick said. “I’ll get those back to you, by the way.”

“It’s fine,” Link said. “I’m not really into records anymore.”

“Even *Dark Side of the Moon*?” Patrick asked.

Link paused, response dying in the back of his throat. “You took *The Dark Side of the Moon*?”

Patrick dried his hair on his hoodie. “Like I said, I’ll get it back to you.”

“Don’t.” Link’s fingers clenched around the countertop. “I don’t have a lot of free time for records anymore.”

Patrick’s face twisted. “Like you didn’t have time to tell me you got c—”

*God*, that song is fucking loud. Link's head pounds, pulling him back into the present, in the car with Patrick.

"Can you turn that down?" Link asks, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

"Oh—yeah, sure man," Patrick says, twisting the volume dial. "Right. Headaches. From the cancer and stuff."

Link sighs, wishing again that Ada kept her mouth shut. When he found out about the brain tumor, he told her first. He doesn't really have anyone else to tell, and he doesn't want his diagnosis to spread among acquaintances and strangers who'll tell him they sympathize to clear their conscience and bring him casseroles he doesn't want. He just got the diagnosis confirmed a week ago, and he has no idea what to do. As a pre-med student he'd studied all sorts of treatment plans, but it's different now that he's the patient. Besides, he doesn't even know what treatments his insurance will pay for.

"What are your odds?" Patrick asked, back in the kitchen. The microwave beeped, loud and cacophonous as a middle school choir.

"About seventy-thirty," Link said, thinking he should mop the floor sometime.

"Seventy you live?"

"Seventy I'll die."

That was when Patrick grabbed Link's hand and pulled him outside to his car, telling him they were going out. Link protested, complaining about the ache in his head and back, but Patrick assured him it would be quick, and Link was too tired to care.

So that was how Link ended up next to Patrick in his car.

"Is the temperature okay?" Patrick asks, hands tapping out the beat on the steering wheel.

"Stop acting nervous," Link says with a snort. "I'm not one of your dates."

"If this were a date, I would've pulled out my special date playlist, guaranteed to get me laid," Patrick says. "And you'd be wearing a G-string under those sweatpants."

"How do you know I'm not?" Link asks.

Patrick lets out a choppy, raucous laugh, the kind that used to get him and Link thrown out of classes, churches, and restaurants. “God, I missed you,” he says, wiping his eyes.

“Yeah,” Link says, fidgeting with a hole near the hem of his shirt to distract himself from the way his stomach sours. A few minutes later, Patrick whips the car around into a parking space, narrowly avoiding a station wagon to his left.

“We’re here,” Patrick says.

“Where’s here?” Link asks, squinting through the rain.

“You’ll find out,” Patrick says with a knowing smirk that reminds Link why he’d been friends with Patrick to begin with.

Patrick is like a firework: bright, colorful, exciting, and overall breathtaking. But he’s also extraordinarily loud, hurts your eyes if you stare at him too long, and leaves charred remains and the distinct smell of smoke in his wake.

Like the time Patrick thought it would be a good idea to break into an animal shelter. It was just before three in the morning and Link was supposed to be getting sleep before his organic chemistry exam. Patrick shot down all of his protests as he picked the lock on the back door with practiced ease.

The lock clicked open. “Ladies first,” Patrick said through the handkerchief covering his lower face.

Link entered the building slowly, tugging up his own makeshift mask. The shelter was low on funding—no security cameras or alarms that he could see. Then again, the second they got to the kennels the dogs started barking louder than any man-made alarm. The mix of types and pitches of howls in the echoing hallway neared deafening. Link wished very much to be at home.

“God, they’re just packed in here like luggage,” Patrick yelled over the roar, kneeling to stick a finger into the cage of a Doberman, who scuttled back, ears flat against its head. “It’s not right.”

“We should get out of here.” Link yelled back, eyeing a poodle that snarled like it was under demonic possession.

Patrick stood with a wildness in his eyes not unlike the kind he’d get when stuck on the final level of a video game. “They deserve to live,” he said, opening the doberman’s cage.

“Holy fuck!” Link slammed his back into the cage on the other side of the aisle from the large black dog, fully expecting to watch his best friend get his throat ripped out. But the dog didn’t move; it just shivered violently.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Patrick whispered as he crouched, palms outstretched in front of him. The dog stepped forward gingerly, then sniffed his hands. “You’re free, buddy,” Patrick said.

The dog stared at Patrick, then took off down the hallway. It stopped at the back door of the building, looking back at Patrick expectantly.

“Open the door for her,” Patrick said as he moved to open the next cage. Link did, moving slowly so the dog wouldn’t decide to take a chunk of Link’s leg as a to-go meal. The dog bolted into the night. Link hoped someone would find it before a car did. The shelter was miles from any major roads, but it was late and the dog’s coat blended in with the dark.

After the Doberman came a flood of dogs, big and small, slow and stumbling, some coughing, some howling, like a ragtag parade. If he hadn’t been so worried they would all get run over before sunrise, Link would have said it was weirdly beautiful.

Last out of the shelter was Patrick, carrying what looked like a disheveled mop. They ran back to their (Link’s) car and slammed the doors, out of breath in the front seat. The silence was piercing after the previous canine cacophony.

“Hey, bug-a-boo,” Patrick said, petting the mop, which licked him. Looking closer, it was a scraggly white dog with red-rimmed eyes, drooling on Patrick’s jeans.

“You stole one?” Link asked.

“Look at him. He’s sick,” Patrick said, gesturing toward the admittedly pathetic dog. “He looks like a strong breeze would kill him.” The dog whined as if agreeing.

“You should take it back,” Link said. “They know how to take care of it better than you.”

“It’s a kill shelter,” Patrick said louder, gently combing his fingers through the dog’s tangled fur. “The older ones, the sick ones, they’re first on the list. I left the puppies. They’ll get adopted no problem.”

“Oh,” Link said. He started the car.

“His name’s gonna be Joey. Like Joey Ramone,” Patrick said. “You like that, Joey?” The dog sneezed, the force of it knocking his head against Patrick’s knee.

“I think he’s deaf,” Link said as he pulled out of the parking lot, careful to check for any newly stray dogs.

“Perfect, he won’t mind if you turn the music up,” Patrick kissed Joey’s head. “Right, sweetie?”

Joey had lived with Link and Patrick for three months before dying of lung cancer or some other canine respiratory disease they couldn’t pay to fix. Putting Joey down almost killed Patrick, but Link reminded him it was better than living in pain. Plus Joey had spent the last few months of his life eating bacon and pizza with a human who loved him.

Patrick didn’t come out of his room for a week after. He turned his music up, but all the punk rock in the world couldn’t cover the sounds of his sobbing.

Bright, shocking, and beautiful for a moment, then back to smoke and melted plastic. Link wonders when Patrick will crash tonight.

Link follows Patrick through the downpour, focusing on his industrial grade orange shorts to lead the way. The sign above the building clears up as Link gets closer, and once he can read it he turns to Patrick.

“You took me away from home to go to a goddamn grocery store?” Link shouts to be heard over the rain.

Patrick shrugs and says, “I thought you’d be too tired for a strip club.”

Link almost laughs in incredulity.

Inside the store, Link shakes the water off his skin. He gives up on his clothes, which are completely soaked. In the television positioned to show them security camera footage, he sees the shadows under his eyes and his stooped frame, pronounced by his wet clothes. He looks like shit. He wonders how much worse he’ll look after radiation or surgery. He wonders if he’ll be able to afford either. For a split second he wishes someone would just put him down before it gets bad, like they did Joey.

Inside, Patrick speedwalks recklessly around the store, practically running down the other shoppers. A woman with broken sunglasses glares out of the empty frame as Patrick nearly knocks her over in the cereal aisle. Link apologizes for him, but Patrick is already in the next aisle over.

After tracking him down, Link grabs hold of Patrick's arm. "Slow down. What are you looking for?"

"You know," Patrick says, shaking him off.

"I really don't," Link says, more exhausted than ever. He feels like he's babysitting a toddler who hasn't learned fundamental conversation skills yet.

"You know," Patrick says again, firmer. He passes a tired-eyed man crouching in the pharmacy section with a fussy baby on his back. "Goddammit," Patrick hisses under his breath.

"Just tell me," Link says, pissier than he intended.

"Come on. You remember," Patrick says, heading for the dairy freezers. Link grabs his arm again, holding firm.

"Fucking tell me," Link says a little too loud. The tired father glares at him.

Patrick shrinks a little. "Pineapples, dude."

Link turns it over in his head. "Why the hell are you buying pineapples in October?"

"You seriously don't remember?" Patrick asks, suddenly sounding a little congested.

That's when Link remembers.

Back when Link was a pre-med student living with Patrick, he shared the health tips from class with anyone who would listen. Patrick, who had the immune system of a Victorian infant, received the brunt of it. Whenever Patrick got the flu, a sinus infection, or particularly bad allergies, Link cut up fresh fruit for him. Though it changed depending on the season, he most often bought pineapples on sale at a local stand.

"Vitamin C will boost that immune system," Link would say, plopping a bowl of fruit on the couch. "Makes your skin glow, too."

"Fuck off," Patrick would say underneath a mound of blankets and tissues even as he started eating.

"Cures all ails," Link would add.

Between coughs Patrick would say, “You sound like my mother.”

“That’s what I get for sleeping with her,” Link would say before dodging the pillow tossed at his head.

The fruit stand shut down a few years ago from pandemic-related problems. Link hasn’t thought about it in ages. He thought the whole thing annoyed the hell out of Patrick, the kind of habit someone only allows after years of friendship. But Patrick’s frantic eyes now plead with him to remember, hands hanging uselessly by his sides.

“I need to—” Patrick cuts himself off, clearing his throat as he surreptitiously wipes his eyes.

Link takes his hand and leads him across the store to the canned fruit aisle. Patrick insists on paying, digging through his wallet for the necessary five dollar bill after his card declines. On the drive home, Link turns the radio up, smiling as Patrick sings along with a voice that could make dogs howl and children cry. His headache isn’t that bad anymore.

The rain lets up to a sprinkle, the kind of mist that feels nice in warmer weather, so they sit on a nearby bench instead of heading back into the apartment right away. A dying streetlight casts just enough light for them to feel safe from mugging but not enough to hide the stars. A dog howls contentedly somewhere in the distance.

“Fuck,” Patrick barks.

Link looks up in alarm. “What?”

Patrick turns to him with a look of saturated horror. “I forgot forks.”

They stare at each other for a second before Link bursts out laughing.

“Here,” he says, pulling the tab to open the can before handing one to Patrick. “Drink up, Trick.”

“So stupid,” Patrick says, accepting the can.

Link pauses opening his own can. “You’re not stupid. It’s eleven PM, we’re all stupid.”

“Gee, thanks,” Patrick says with an eye roll. His face gives way to a pleasant smile all the same.

“Cheers,” Link says, clinking their cans together. “To our health. Mostly mine.”

“Eat your fruit, asshole,” Patrick says, tipping his own can back.

Link does. The pineapple chunks taste more sweet than bitter.

# From Seeing Lisa Dying

Evan Allee

Lisa's speech has slowed  
but her laugh is the exact same.

Imagine blowing bubbles and twirling with bare feet, grass between your toes,  
it smells like *day*.

One floats to you, chooses you, caresses your palm and reflects  
colored light back to you—blues, purples, pink.

You give this bubble more courtesy than a butterfly wing,  
you watch the bubble pop and the mist ghosts over your shins,  
tickles the baby hairs and seeps into your skin.

The form of her joy may change, but it is a perfume you rub into your pulse  
points, keep it close to your collar, take a hit whenever you see a color.

A stranger says,

“Something smells good,”

and you say,

“It is *day*.”

Lisa's joy cannot be washed away, not even when her  
“invasive and mean and terrible” cancer eats away at her brain.  
In spite of this, her laugh is the exact same.

Lisa's speech, as I'm used to, is quick; a lightning strike  
across the sunniest sky—and isn't it just *ironic* that she is a Cancer?

She is a woman of the moon, and she would have had the hair to show for it.  
A woman who was excited to grow old, grow her hair down her back  
and watch it fade from black to gray. She was looking forward  
to a full head of silver one day. The chemo and radiation won't steal her hair,  
but they will have to shave it anyway.

She likes to light candles for people struggling. Once,  
I lost my mother's class ring. She told me she lit one for me after I came to work  
saying, “It was where I always kept it.”

The day of her emergency brain surgery I lit one for her,  
not quite because I believe in that myself, but because she does,  
and she would have done it for anyone else.

Lisa found a pot shaped like a snail and thought of me. She jumped up and down  
like a child and hugged me. My friend recorded it. Her laugh is the exact same.  
Her mobility—well.

So you wake up on a Saturday and you can't use your right hand. Brows furrowed, writing scribbles, aiming for loopy handwriting, getting spiraled shells of gastropods. They glare up at you in pink gel ink.

Lisa called me tonight. She must have known I was worrying. I haven't heard from her since Mother's Day. She changed my name in her phone to my new name, and she couldn't remember what she put me down under. She said she had lost me.

"I'm so happy I found you," she said when I called back.

I missed her call by a minute and a half, but now

I have her laugh preserved in a voicemail, if worse comes to worst.

Her speech is lagging near the end of it, but her laugh, the same.

This high pitched, melodic thing, congruent to her maiden name, though she didn't like to sing.

"Did you get my happy birthday text?" I asked.

"Yes!" she said. "I have been so bad...at answering. I lose words . . . so easily."

For a woman who has always been so full of them, this is jarring.

This is a woman who wanted to be a grandmother more than anything. She tells her sons to hurry up and have grandbabies—she always talks about how much she wants grandbabies—because, "We're not sure how much longer I'm going to be around."

This is a woman who wanted to have chickens again someday. A woman who wanted to have a vegetable garden again. A woman who taught me everything I know about plants; this five-foot encyclopedia of botanics. She won a competition for that, once. She answered all but one question correctly. She was so pissed.

When people don't believe my advice for why their peace lily is exsanguinated, it feels like a disrespect to a legacy I was bestowed. I no longer have the privilege of checking with my source. Of calling her and asking, "What is this plant that came in today?" She would tell me, and she would say, "Here is how you take care of it. Send me pictures as it grows."

And of course I'm going overboard, I do that often. As you see, I'm already talking about her in past tense, as if she's dead. I get ahead of myself. I think, "I haven't written in a while. I should try to soon," and the next day, Lisa calls me, and her voice is slow like a tiny hole in a balloon.

Lisa laughs at her mistakes and finds ways to make people smile. She laughed at herself on the phone and she tried to laugh in person when she lost her words—

“It’s the ... um . . . . . the . . . . .  
. . . . .  
. . . . . oh, haha . . . . .  
. . . . . over on . . . the . . .  
. . . . . the . . . uh . . . . .  
. . . . . you know?”

and I say, “Yeah, Lisa, I know.”

I blow air into a punctured balloon. My jokes fly over her head, screeching as they deflate. The balloon weighs nothing, but its carcass lands with a deafening quake.

I don’t know if Lisa believes in reincarnation or an afterlife, I don’t know what the fuck is real and what is fake, but she will find me again. Under any name, in any life. As a mother or a stand-in when mine lives across the country. A woman I meet once and never see again, but if that’s how it has to be, then so be it, as long as I see her once.

And if that were the case, I would probably think about her every now and again and wonder,

“I wonder where she’s at today. I wonder if she remembers me.

I wonder if she wonders if I remember her.”

And will she remember me, when cancer invades the part of her brain I live in?

At the very least, Lisa, will you remember to haunt me?

Lisa likes ancient history and those videos of major home renovations; the estates. Mapperton Live, restoring ancestral homes and shit. The in-ground, 200 year old, algae infested pool becomes sparkling new—as sparkling as concrete can be.

She pulls the video up on her iPad to show me. They added twelve plant islands to the pool and Lisa teaches me about hydroponics.

Lisa tells me about this game she’s playing, and she’s the top player this week. And the next. She won a prize. It helped her collect the key to unlock the next room of grandma’s mansion. There are cracks in the tile, cobwebs and broken furniture, fucked up wallpaper, and work to do—at least there was *something* to do.

Her hospital room was barren.

There’s a puny screen attached to her bed, with a knock-off Bob Ross painting a landscape on mute.

“This is so stupid,” she laughed at the hospital.

“This is so stupid,” as she’s sobbing in pain.

“I love you so much,” smiling at the hospital.

“I love you so much,” crying at home.

“This isn’t fair,” after six hours of her organs wringing themselves like wet rags.

“*This isn’t fair;*” and, “Why?” and, “*Why?*”

What I learned from seeing Lisa dying is that death has no bias,  
and there is no fairness when you are tucked in its bed.

There is no way to make this satire. There is no joke I can crack  
or information I can scour for, just some books at a resale store. I don’t know  
if she’s capable of reading anymore. Which, it’s funny I focus on that,  
because she wanted to collect the first edition *Nancy Drews*.

The Grosset & Dunlap issues, starting from the 1930s. She only got one.

I have no idea if it’s a first edition.

She mostly has editions from 1986 to present day.

I have no idea if they are first editions.

They were on a top shelf she could not reach.

She asked me to put the books I bought her right on her tray table.

Will you remember to read them?

Will you remember it was me who got them for you?

Will you be able to see the words

through the black and red pounding of your skull?

Fairy Tale.

The Last Apothecary.

The Unfamiliar Garden.

Did I supply you with the last book you ever read?

Did you enjoy it?

Did you even have a chance to read it?

Were you even able to *lift* it?

Holding a cup of water, your hands shake like you have Parkinson’s—

Jesus fuck, would I rather you had Parkinson’s,

and then I would not have to remember you. Yet here I am, remembering you,  
and cursing Dr. James Parkinson for not coming to visit you.

She is so slow and small and crying for relief she doesn’t get. She gets  
legal heroin in a dropper and it tastes like *shit*. It’s the last thing she will ever  
drink and it looks like tar, she says it tastes like it too. She is crying  
as I close the door and I am not real and she is horizontal and bedridden  
and staring at the white ceiling like it is the bright light before death,  
or the retina-scorching center of a candle flame, or whatever you believe in, Lisa,

I don't know,  
I don't care as long as it helps with the pain.

Even though we know this is the last time,  
I say, "I'll see you,"  
and she says, "I love you,"  
and we *know* it is the last time  
and she has said *too many* goodbyes  
and I say, "I'll see you again."

So I will memorialize her in my neatest, handwritten ink, spray paint her on streets and become a knock-off Banksy. But I'm not doing it for activism, it's the link to a GoFundMe, as if funds will bring her back from the brink of an agonizing death. Headaches and blown veins and heavy breathing and then none at all, holding air in lungs that stutter, waiting on the "okay" from a tumor that steals a life more violently than an armed robbery, swelling her brain, overtaking 35 years of marriage and knowledge and so many amazing *things*.

She's an expert of greenery and blooms and she knows it's hard,  
but you *absolutely* have to smash the snail eggs in your tomato starts.  
"Those fuckers are so invasive," she says,  
"They can tear an entire ecosystem down."

How is it that her brain became the green tomato cursed to never ripen infested with pests that gorge themselves on the flesh of what she grew? And what is the purpose? What is the purpose then of all the knowledge, of all the dreams she possessed? Silver hair and a vegetable garden and chickens and Nancy Drew and grandbabies.  
She does not ask for much, just to live.

Is this just another gluttonous purge of precious growth; another oasis burned to ashes and shards of bone to fill a silver and black urn?

What I learned from seeing Lisa dying is that death can be a paradox of damnation and salvation. Lisa taught me this as she squeezed my hand and her pounding temple and pointed at five orange bottles with her eyes.  
She spoke very clearly. She said,  
"Maybe it would be better if I just got it over with."

Lisa, you died today  
so I watered my plant.

Took the 10-inch philodendron outside and drowned it. Stepped barefoot in the puddle it left and saw you standing with your face up to the rain, arms outstretched at your side, swaying. It was the philodendron xanadu, in the Araceae family which has almost 4,000 species (you were thrilled to share this information with me).

The xanadu. The one I've been neglecting since I got it. I think I got it to remember you. I visited you to remember you and when I came back I couldn't look at it. I almost let it die, like all of the brown plants in your room.

Before I learned that you died today, I woke up sick. My chest has been heavy all week, I know why. I hoped it was the seasons changing but it was a dust storm migrating from Arizona, carrying your name in scribbles. When I learned that you died today I was in the hot car after a hike. I don't go on hikes. I was expecting it to be more like a trail, but it was a hike, and I was outside, your favorite.

I was walking for a long time, swinging in trees and sprinting through creeks you would have loved to see. I was outside and it was green. There was a calm breeze, and you were dying, and I had a feeling.

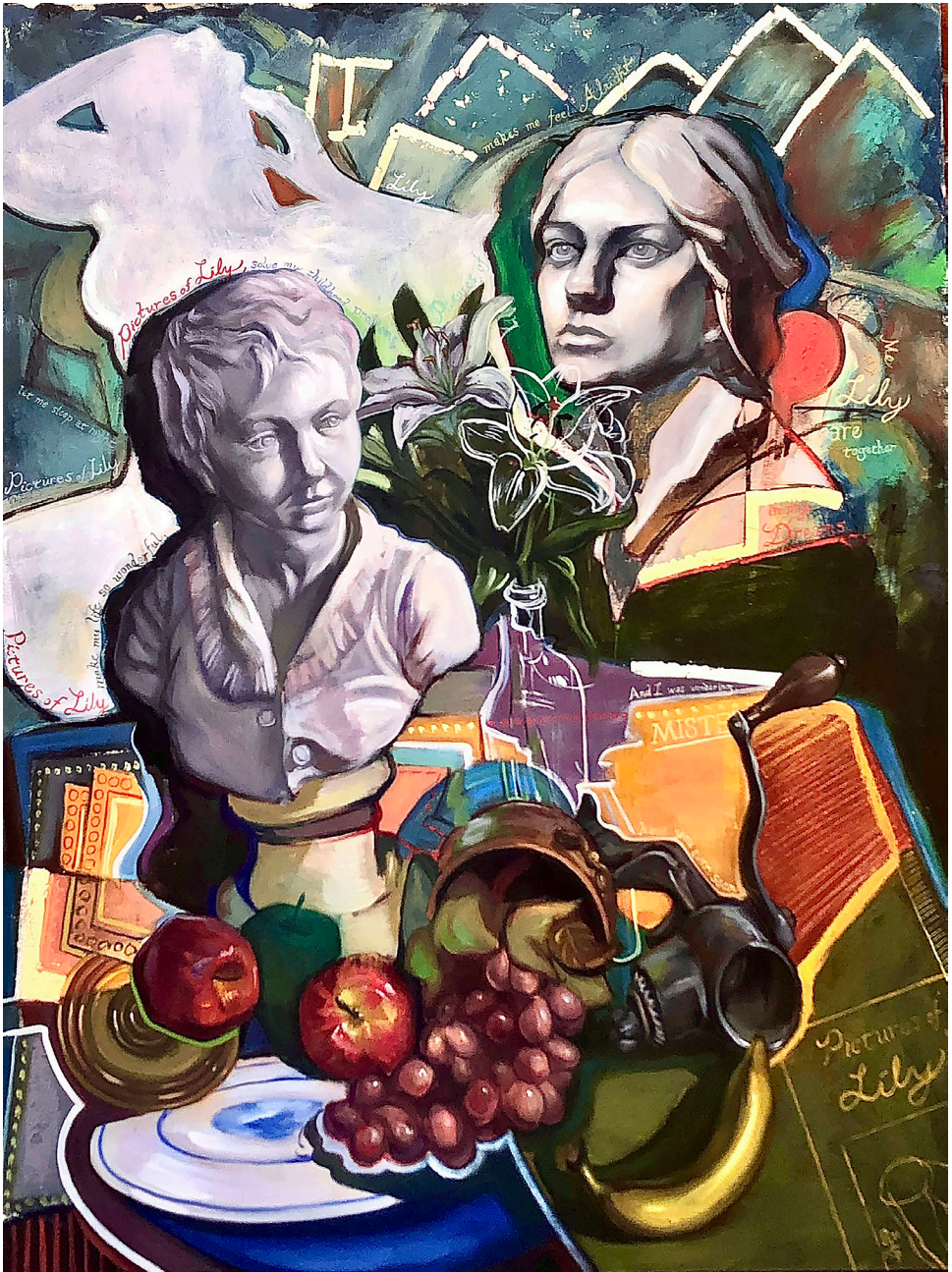
Lisa, you died on a beautiful day.

It was colored with your approval: green leaves, blue sky, pink and purple flowers, and the smell of the soil was so strong, and it all reminds me of you. The day did not blind me. It was perfect; bright enough for me to climb trees and a huge hill with spindly roots like stairs.

I heard you saying, "Oooh, you better be careful."  
I heard you saying, "I lit a candle for you."

And I can write about grief until it stretches to your premature grave, I can extract every memory of you like sap from a maple tree, make them into a book. The spine will be blue cloth, the pages brown with age, but God dammit, you will know it is a first edition just by looking at it. You will open it to the middle, stick your face in and sniff the old book smell we love.

You will know which tree I harvested the paper from.  
You will have carved your name into it with loopy handwriting.



## Pictures of Lily

Robert Smith

30" x 40" Mixed Media on Canvas

# Threads of Peace

*Dayanara Guzman*

*after Eduardo C. Corral*

Peace trickles down the stream after a roaring waterfall.  
Placing its fingers on ivory keys, peace plays Chopin's Nocturnes.  
In the fermata of the tune, peace finds tranquility.  
Peace floats inside my body, like swans on a lake.  
On a winter morning, peace sits on my window shaped like a snowflake.  
A flame kissing a cigarette after a party ignites a long-awaited peaceful drag.  
Simmering water on a stove has felt peace turn up the heat.  
At sunrise, peace savors café con leche.  
"Paz," peace says in Spanish after a week of chaos.  
Peace counts glowing stars over my bed.  
In the bristles of my hairbrush, peace smuggles its way onto my scalp.  
After jumping off a swing, peace brushes the dirt off my knees.  
Biting into caramel drizzled apples, peace rushes to my cheeks.  
I have found it in the world around me.

# My Mother's Dirt Cake

*Signe Nettum*

Ingredients: (Do not substitute anything — this is not a “I want to make it healthier” dessert recipe. You either have to accept your rotting teeth from this glorious sugar-filled creation, or never eat it. Your choice).

- ½ cup butter, softened
- 1 (8 ounce) packaged cream cheese, softened
  - Philadelphia is the way to go — my family has never been there, but they make damn good cream cheese.
- ½ cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 (3.5 ounce) packages instant vanilla pudding mix
  - Or one chocolate, one vanilla packet for any Midwestern family celebration, to appease the masses.
- 3½ cups milk
- 1 (12 ounce) container frozen whipped topping, thawed
  - Cool Whip or bust, we are but mere mortals to the vegetable oil gods.
- 32 ounces chocolate sandwich cookies with creme filling
  - Oreos are synonymous with the concept of cookie sandwiches and that is for a valid reason. Anyone who tries to use an imposter will be evicted from the kitchen for their blasphemy<sup>1</sup>.
- Optional: Gummy worms
  - Emphasis on *optional*. This is a mixture of creamy (pudding) and crunchy (Oreos), but if you want to add jaw-exhausting gummy worms to force your eaters to slow down and chew their food, have at it.
    - But I will be judging you through this article.

1. Chop cookies very fine in the food processor. The white cream will disappear.
  - a. If you let your child do this step, make sure that the cover is sealed properly.
    - i. Otherwise, you're going to have your Yorkie trying to lick up all of the cookie crumbs on the floor while your kid cries because they got Oreo crumbs in their face.
2. Mix butter, cream cheese, and sugar in a bowl.
  - a. Use an industrial mixer (Or my mother, the strongest person in the house).
3. In a large bowl, mix milk, pudding and whipped topping together.
4. Combine pudding and cream mixtures together.
  - a. Make sure that when you're done, you hand off the spatula and bowl to your kid; they will return with a licked-clean bowl and a chocolate-y face. No matter if they're four or twenty-four, your kid will have

chocolate on their face.

5. Layer in container, starting with cookies and cream mixture. Repeat layers.
  - a. Do not put too much effort into the display of this creation. This is not a soil measure in your Environmental Science class — this is a pudding cake that weighs in your stomach and makes you think that earthworms might have the right idea in eating dirt if it is this tasty.
6. Chill until ready to serve.
  - a. If you think you need two batches, make four.
    - i. My mother finally put her foot down when she caught my cousins going back for thirds and fourths — their excuses were that they grabbed small portions every time. She made all of them their own containers filled with dirt cake. They were intended to have it as a leftover from the event that they could enjoy when they went home.
    - ii. Right before my family left for the evening, each cousin gave her back their Ziplock containers. Two servings in each container, gone in one afternoon. They ended up using their fingers as spatulas to get every last piece of pudding.
      1. Moral of the story, double the batch, no matter what.



**Art is Having Fun**

Monica Cunningham

*12" x 24" Oil Paint*

## Body Art

*Kim Kile*

I have no need for tattoos  
for my belly's stretch marks grew stronger  
and bolder with each baby. Dots  
of chicken pox scars mark my cheek  
and jaw. A thin white line  
on my left pinkie the remnant of my sister's  
anger and a slamming door.  
A perfect line the width of a razor  
up my right shin, a shadow  
of my mother's BIC Lady Razor.  
Incision marks on both shoulders,  
battle wounds of motherhood.  
A canvas of scar tissue,  
created over time  
and catching the fade.

# WANTED ADS

*Xavier Neier*

## WANTED: Biological Mother

(Full-time position only)\*

Single, mid-twenties man seeks biological mother. Must be short, less than 5 foot 4 inches. Looking for matching thin strands of raven hair. Education: bachelor's degree or above, but all levels of education may apply. Preferably an educated artist with vibrant mural art in the Tijuana Cultural Center. Live in the *Playas* out west on the coast, far from rusted gates. Will take either a Christian or Catholic, not necessarily asking for a saint. Not interested in additional siblings, need full one-on-one attention. Husband is acceptable but will never be addressed as *papá*. English preferred for casual conversations.

*(Mi lengua materna no está bien, pero puedo aprender algunas palabras en español.)*

Not a dealbreaker. Needs to coparent with another man known as "dad." Expect territorial adoptive mother. May need to contribute to therapy fund. Must provide a minimum \$50,000 income. If your name is *La Llorona* or if you are vaguely vengeful towards your own children after a messy divorce, please skip ad.

*\*Importante: si se encuentra a la madre biológica, por favor contacte por teléfono. No se necesitan planes de viaje adicionales. Hasta pronto.*

---

## WANTED: Romantic Partner

(Serious relationship only)\*

Single, mid-twenties man seeks serious relationship. Must be slightly taller than 5 foot 4 inches. Bachelor's degree or above preferred. Fashion style: dark academia aesthetic. Noir-colored jackets, plaid, high-waisted pants, and wire-framed glasses. Your significant other will match the style as well. Open to wearing cross-shaped jewelry, as well as tattooed verses. Contact with new in-laws (certainly) optional. May encounter biological Spanish mother living in home. No additional language experience required. Courtship is three weeks trial-run before partner is expected to commit. Active listening required for trauma-dumping sessions when therapy is not available. Consistent reassurance mandatory.

Additional requirements include:

- Texting and Calling 24/7 (Prepare for 2:00AM Panic Attacks)
- Spiraling Conversations on Zillow Apartments
- Exploration for the Best Indianapolis Restaurants for Dates (\$20 per Meal Limit)
- Building Pillow Forts with Emotional Security Blankets
- Broken Cars that I Can Fix (Wheels Only)

Modest physical contact (handholding, resting on each other, prolonged eye-contact) is considered long-term commitment. If unsure of commitment levels, please skip ad.

\*Important: if the partner leaves after the 3-week mark, they are expected to cover the costs of the other's therapy sessions. 1 week of dating = 1 hour therapy session.



**The Human Heart Hasn't Changed**

Emile Tipton

*22" x 30" Copper Plate Triptychs Etching Printed on Paper*

## A Fine Line

*Alicia Rump*

Ryan's dad lay up in the ICU, having drunk himself into a coma. Miles from the hospital, down a turn-off from a country road, sat Ryan and his three younger half-siblings overlooking a shadow-drenched lake. Named Big Long Lake, though neither big, nor long, it was a familiar, bittersweet place they used to spend time at when they tried to act like a family. Before his dad and his stepmom, Sarah, got divorced. Back before they kicked him out. Before his siblings grew to hate him. Before all of this.

The hospital and their small hometown were out of sight, but the haze of light surrounding it acted as a compass north, in opposition to the moon and the dull ember of Ryan's cigarette. He watched a wisp of smoke trail up around his arm, over his shoulder, before it vanished behind him over the still water. Goosebumps lined his arms as autumn encroached on summer, and he hadn't thought of stopping for a sweatshirt in his rush here. Now, he wasn't sure why he bothered to rush at all.

A frog croaked in the distance, followed by a diluted splash, but it did nothing to break the tension chewing on them like leeches. Silence had followed them from the hospital, and it was his fault.

When the nurse shared details of his dad's condition, a wreck, broken bones, busted spleen, he'd remained composed. But it was their dad's ridiculously high .45 BAC that triggered his laughter. It was a bad habit, his go-to when tears weren't available, so it caught him off guard when his brother, Alex, punched him in response.

In the time it took to gather his bearings, security arrived and ushered them out until they could "calm down." Ryan had shoved his fists deep in his pockets, licking away blood, and happily obliged. His twin sisters, Max and Natalie, trailed after them, Nat apologizing to the thin security guard, while Max repeatedly tried to get Sarah to answer her phone. Their mom was on a five-hour time difference, living it up with her new husband in Wales.

Ryan saw this as an opportunity to shut his brother up and asked them all if they seriously believed Sarah would fly back for this. For them. It was callous. But so was Alex's comment that Ryan should fuck off back to Bloomington, that once their mom arrived their family didn't need him.

He kicked a stone and took another drag. He shouldn't have laughed.

When he'd received the curt call from Alex to inform him of the situation, he left straight from his job at Tony's automotive shop in only his jeans and a tank top to pick them up because it was Alex's car their dad had wrecked. Ryan was tired and on edge, and his shitty filter was extra shitty. It had been six years since his dad and Sarah had kicked him out. Now 24 years old, he was 115 miles from his bed, his dog, his life, and he felt the years as an anchor dragging him through the past.

His siblings were trying to kick him out again, as if it wasn't his dad up in that bed, as if this wasn't his family too. Always *them*, where he was always *him*, never included in *their* family. Even with Sarah on the other side of the Atlantic, they still wanted him gone, believed Sarah would be back simply because she had said she'd return if they needed her. It was a fucking joke, is what it was.

Now he wished he remembered to stop for more cigarettes. Their suffocating hope felt sick and cloying.

He stood away from them, looking into the night sky while they sat observing everything but each other. Natalie, now 16, watched the fireflies as they lit up around them. By Ryan's standards, she was the sanest of all of them, keeping quiet and trying to remain calm. She was holding up as well as someone could when their dad drank themselves to the brink of death, at risk of family services intervening, with a mom who may not give a shit.

Max's expression refused to communicate. Ryan kept checking, kept subtly glancing her way to interpret *something*, but besides checking her phone, and glaring, Max was tightly controlled. Proudful, in how she refused to look or speak to Ryan. She was stone.

Alex would barely look at Ryan, now only giving his sisters his attention. His anger was palpable, but he was stubborn enough to bite it down now, unwilling to react without another catalyst. Ryan hoped he felt a little guilty for his part in getting them kicked out. Ryan watched his fingers twist the hem of his shirt, again and again, his knees bouncing up and down. Restless.

How much had changed since Ryan saw them last? Was violence something Alex used to cope, or was it a one off? Was it Ryan, specifically, that drew his family to violence?

There was a time these kids looked up to him. When he was 12 and Alex was six, Alex followed him everywhere. Ryan hated it, too young to understand what a blessing it was. Then, when he was 18, and Alex was 12, and his sisters, Max and Natalie were 10, he got kicked out. They took sides, and not his. His only contacts were his dad, which was always a gamble between abuse and the spare

clarity of a sober mind, the occasional message from Alex when he needed money for something his dad flaked on, and the random, sweet “miss you” texts from Natalie that gave him hope that they still cared.

“This is fucking ridiculous.” Max mumbled from her perch on the back of the bench. She ignored the glares her siblings sent her way.

“Don’t say that,” Natalie said.

Alex sat up straighter.

“No, it is though. He’s laid up in bed with DTs, our mom is across the fucking sea, and we are here. Why are we here? What has this stupid lake ever done for us? Shouldn’t we be there waiting on news, or, I don’t know, at home showering and sleeping, considering you assholes got us kicked out,” She didn’t glare at Alex. No. Her venom was directed solely at Ryan.

“They’ll let us back in soon,” Alex said, acting like the calm, collected older brother he claimed to be. This was offset by how he looked down at his shoes rather than any of them and in how he switched from twisting his shirt to clenching his fists. Ryan kicked another stone and took another drag. Stubborn, the lot of them.

“Sure, but why are we here? Nothing good comes from this place. Let’s just go home.”

“Then we are even further away,” Ryan said.

“But at least there we have food, a shower, and can sleep in a bed until there are more updates,” Max said, and Ryan tried his best not to wilt under her glare. He was eight years older; how did her disgust have this power over him?

But she was right. Ryan knew this, but the ache in his chest, the memories of this lake when they all became a family, back when they were little and his dad was healthier, drew him here. Despite the last time. He didn’t want them to go home to the house where he didn’t have a bed.

Alex and him locked eyes and looked away quickly.

“The doctor wants us close by. Critical time period and all that,” Alex said.

“Yet they won’t let us in the room,” Max argued.

“Critical time period,” Ryan reiterated.

“Or, you’re an ass.” Max spit and sat back, crossing her arms, done with both of them according to the way she looked away and looked out over the lake.

Nat glanced at Ryan, then down at her boots, clearing her throat and speaking up.

“What if she doesn’t come home?” Nat’s voice trembled, cutting through the uneasy silence. Damn. Leave it to a fifteen-year-old to brave the heart of the problem.

Both Max and Alex’s shoulders pulled tight, while Ryan stopped fidgeting.

“She will,” Max said, though she looked away from the question.

“And if she doesn’t?” Nat pressed, sharper now.

“She’ll call when she wakes up. Don’t waste time speculating.” Alex said.

Ryan watched as Nat’s hands balled into fists. “What if she’s angry and doesn’t listen? What if she thinks he deserves this? What if all she says is ‘good riddance’?”

Alex leaned forward, his jaw tight. “Then that’s what she says. Would she be wrong?”

Ryan had to fight back another chuckle. It was ridiculous, all of it, even this. Their faith...it hung on nothing but hope. Foster care, social services, survival; the consequences if Sarah didn’t return for them. It was something they believed in because they needed her to, but it relied on faith alone. In Ryan’s opinion, none of her actions proved she’d care enough to return. She left them to their dad and that alone confirmed everything Ryan needed it to. She wasn’t shit.

They were fucked and they knew it, and still they protected her, refusing to admit it. But Natalie wasn’t abiding by this script.

“It’s been six months!” Nat’s voice rose, frustration spilling out. “What if she doesn’t come back, and she’s angry, and we’re left to pick up the pieces? What do we even say to her? What do we do?”

Max stood abruptly, pacing. “We tell her she’s right! It’s all messed up. But if he survives, then we’re fine, right? She doesn’t have to come back.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Nat leaned closer, her voice shaking. “It’s fucked up either way-”

“Don’t cuss,” Alex snapped, his tone sharp.

“—and if he doesn’t survive, will she come back? Please, Alex. Will she?”

“He’ll survive,” Alex said.

Nat stared at him, glanced at Ryan, then Max, before throwing her hands up and yelling, “there’s no proof of that!”

Ryan flinched. The idea that his dad, the only parent he had left, could die tonight, or tomorrow... despite his father’s fault, the idea was too heavy for him to bear. He sank to the ground to hug his knees, pulling in an empty drag of his cigarette to focus on something else, and tried to center himself here in the present. Not the future without his dad in it, and not the past where memories threatened to drown him.

He was vaguely aware of his siblings glancing at him, knowing that they, like him, were thinking of *his* mother. His loss, something they’d always walked around, unwilling to recognize. Now that death was on them as well, he could feel it like one great beating heart counting its last seconds.

Ryan’s mom died in an instant. A moment, a heart attack, when she was too young for anyone to have seen it coming. One moment, they were cooking together in the kitchen. The next? She dropped her freshly baked tray of those Halloween stamped pumpkin cookies and collapsed, unresponsive, while he sat with her for hours trying to get her to wake, sat with her until his dad came home and called for an ambulance, knowing it was too late. He knew death, intimately, even if he was only 5 at the time. He’d never rid himself of that anxiety, of that loss. They knew this, but this was their first time properly facing the weight of death. He couldn’t validate their fears, couldn’t put words to the pain and dread they’d never bothered to sympathize with.

“He might not,” he said, unsure if he was being vindictive or honest. “He may die. Expect the worst, be fucking grateful if he survives.”

They stared at him.

“Expect the worst. He dies—” He had to swallow. “And Sarah doesn’t come home. Anything more than that is a blessing.”

Alex shot up from his perch. “Shut the fuck up. You don’t get to say shit like that!”

Ryan stood, taking one last drag of his cigarette before flicking it aside and

standing to face Alex.

“Say shit like what? The truth?”

“You’re so...so callous! You act all high and mighty and righteous, but you don’t give two shits if she comes home or not so don’t act like you do!”

“Of course I care, you fuck. You think I don’t want her to, for your sake? You think I want to be here right now? We have no control over her or what happens to Dad. We are all stuck in this, together!”

Alex lunged forward and shoved him in lieu of an answer. So, he shoved him back. Alex stumbled and Max caught him, moving to get in Ryan’s face.

“I know he’s your dad too, but you’ve been gone for years, and you can’t act like you care nearly as much as we do since it isn’t your ass on the line.”

“He’s still my dad!” Ryan shouted, grateful for their isolation. “His BAC was .45. Most people don’t survive that shit, I’m just being realistic! I know I’m older. I know I’ve been gone, but that doesn’t mean shit! It’s simply more ammo for you—” He pushed her back by her shoulder into Alex, who was backing up into Natalie. “To use against me!”

“You’re always satisfied when they prove you right. This is just another example,” Alex said.

Ryan stared at Alex, and he couldn’t help the hysterical laughter that bubbled up and spilled over. He wanted to light another cigarette, but he was out, so he let his laughter run free until tears started leaking from his eyes, and he doubled over.

“You think I’m happy being right? You think, what, that I’m happy that she’s gone? That we are in this situation? Just because it validates that yes, he’s a drunk and yes, I think she’s neglectful? You think I’m happy about that shit?” He laughed again, wiping his eyes.

“Aren’t you? Won’t it make you happy if she can’t come home? You laughed! He’s dying and you laughed! You make fun of us for hoping she’ll come home, yet you’re laughing now! Why wouldn’t it make you happy if we are left to fend for ourselves like you were? Won’t you feel victorious?”

Ryan stared at Alex, stared as Alex’s words seemed to register in his head once spoken out loud. Alex took another step back as Natalie grabbed his elbow, biting her lip. Max shook her head looking guilty.

“Think about what you’ve just said. Do you hear yourself?” Ryan asked.

*Like you were.* They knew. They fucking knew that he was thrown aside. Knew he battled his dad’s anger and stood up to it. Knew their fights centered on his mom, both weaponizing her memory, his dad using it as a knife of disappointment, as another excuse to drink, and Ryan as condemnation against his father’s actions. They knew that Sarah disapproved of him, always had, and treated him as the scapegoat for her marriage woes. Blamed him, as a kid, for not telling her about his dad’s drinking problem that hadn’t existed prior to his mom’s death. They fucking knew, and still they blamed him. Still, they looked at him, not as an older brother, but as a vindictive adversary.

He remembered how he used to get in trouble every Mother’s Day because he didn’t want to celebrate Sarah when he couldn’t even get out of bed, memories of hugging cooling flesh and vacant, unstarving eyes swimming before his. How did they remember that? Were they remembering cursing him for picking them up when his dad was drunk, because he wasn’t their parent? He remembers their disappointment and feeling gutted by it. Did they think that made him proud? Were they thinking of the screaming match he had with Sarah when she turned a blind eye to his dad sideswiping a parked car when Max and Natalie were still in car seats? Did they think he was wrong for giving a shit?

Were they remembering the last time they were at this lake, the day he was kicked out, when Ryan defended Alex. It was their father’s birthday, and he wanted to go fishing; wouldn’t take no for an answer. The entire morning was shit, their dad slurring, slipping on mossy stones, blaming them for every fish he didn’t catch. All were unwilling to vocalize what they knew was true and their dad’s anger rose in the perceived judgement his drunk ass rightfully assumed. Ryan had his back turned to his dad, trying to secure the bait to Alex’s line before his dad noticed it was the third time he’d lost it. Alex’s hands were shaking and Ryan tried to calm him, but they could hear their dad’s tone growing impatient. When his dad decided they weren’t moving fast enough, when he moved into their space after throwing his net to the side, his purple face and glossy eyes let them know the situation was out of their hands. The fishing pole slipped through Alex’s trembling fingers and Ryan stood between him and their dad. He braced, thankful for Alex’s retreating footsteps when his dad threw his weight into a punch, a blow to the jaw. He remembers Nat yelling, and someone crying. Did they remember him getting up and fighting for the keys his dad stole as he yelled at the kids to get back in the car? What did they think of Ryan wrestling with his dad to keep him from the wheel, now that his siblings were scared and obedient in the backseat?

Ryan looked at all of them, each of them unable to look away as if they were all caught 6 years in the past with him.

Did they remember how long it took for him to get home? He never knew what occurred in the time it took him to walk, only that he nearly cried in relief when he saw the truck parked safely in the driveway. He hadn't noticed Sarah, not until she stopped him from walking inside to tell him his dad wanted him gone, and he had 20 minutes to collect his shit and get lost. Alex was 13 at the time, Ryan 18 about to be 19, and he hadn't been home since Alex asked him why the fuck he bothered, that he was wrong to agitate their dad. Blamed him.

"I've never felt victorious."

Alex had the nerve to scoff, and Max leaned to pull Alex towards the truck muttering "Let's just go," but Alex shakes her off.

"You left too, and you act like you are better than them. You've never loved mom, and you've always fought with dad. You've never cared enough to act like we are your siblings, always quick to run away and play the 'not my mom, not my family' card. You got to fuck off and leave us behind just like you accuse her of doing. What makes you so much better than either of them? Huh?" Alex yelled the last word.

"I was 18! I was also kicked out, if you don't recall, I wasn't allowed to stay! None of you fought that decision, or called to say they were wrong, or to let me know you wanted me around! No, what you said was that it served me right! Jesus, the fucking standards you all give me vs. the ones you give our parents is ridiculous, I can never be on the right side of anything!" He reached for another cigarette, remembered he was out, and cussed into the night, kicking another stone towards the lake. He couldn't see where it went, but he heard the dull splash as it sank beneath the water. His hands were shaking. "What would you have me do, if not fight with dad? Give him every cent he tries to wring me for, be it your car, Max's lunch, Natalie's band gear? Did y'all ever see that money? Did you want me to ignore everything and act like we were a perfectly happy family? Would you have me act like I think it's fucking mint that Sarah up and left? When my own mom died? You think I wouldn't have an issue with her abandoning you guys? Should I act nice, and take your shit, his shit, her shit, and smile? Would that be enough?" His chest was heaving.

"You all are my siblings too, but you've all acted like I'm a spare, like I'm not real or like I don't get to have a fucking say!" It was all coming out now. "I can't help that I'm older, that I'm not your mom's kid, that dad drinks, yet you all blame me for this! You guys all got to have each other but somewhere along the line you guys cut me out. I didn't leave you, I didn't want to, wouldn't, but you pushed me out!"

"Yes, yes you would. You did!" Alex wiped his nose.

“Last time I tried to come home it was you who told me to get lost. Last time I called dad he told me to fuck off. Last time I tried to get Max a birthday present she said not to bother because I didn’t get it in the fucking color she wanted, fuck, Natalie is the only one who has ever been even a little kind to me, but even you don’t bother if Alex and Max are around.” Natalie was crying now too. He focused on Alex.

“We were kids! You were older, and we were just kids!” Alex said.

“I was too!” Ryan yelled. Fuck, he still felt like a kid, and right now, he felt very, very young. “I was your age, Alex.”

Silence broken only by crickets, by their heavy breathing, rang loudly.

“What am I to do, huh? Where and what would you have me do?” His body was trembling now.

“You could come back?” Natalie said. Ryan stared at her as Alex gestured for her to shut up, and Max stepped aside, hugging her body. He thought of his job, of his dog. He thought of them and the phone call they were waiting on.

“If you’ll have me, I will. If you need me, I will be here.” He said, voice breathless. He wouldn’t be his dad. He wouldn’t be Sarah. Not if he had a choice. He thought of his mom and her pumpkin cookies. The last time he felt like he belonged somewhere. He ached for it, for their acceptance, for a chance to be there, and for his mom to relax in her grave knowing someone cared about him. For them to fucking hug him like they wanted him there or something.

“We don’t need you,” Alex said.

Natalie reached for his arm, but he yanked it away, turning his back on them. Max, still hugging her body, refused to look up from the ground.

Natalie looked at Ryan, her big eyes lost and he stared back feeling equally helpless.

Ryan wrapped his arms around his turning stomach, matching Max’s pose. He knew the words sitting on the back of his tongue were true, but they felt toxic, like speaking them out loud would be a sure way to get poisoned. Maybe they didn’t need him. But their dad was...dying. Despite how they knew he’d gotten bad, that he was rarely sober, home, and reliable, despite how much Ryan hated him...he loved him. Loved the person he remembered, before alcohol became him. He was his dad, his last parent, he couldn’t be an orphan at 24. Didn’t know how he’d continue with all of these issues between them unresolved and tan-

gled. His breaths grew tight, a wheeze, and he clenched his fists trying to breathe around the band squeezing his lungs. It wasn't that they needed him. He needed them.

"For fucks sake," Natalie said, ignoring Max telling her not to cuss. "Alex, get over yourself already. Fuck, Ryan. We feel guilty you dumbass."

"Natalie!" Alex hissed.

"Why are you acting like this?" Natalie looked at both Alex and Max who were staring at her. "Why are you acting like we haven't talked about it? As if we all don't feel like shit reciting the same crap over and over again? You remember that night, I know you do. We know he defended us, we know they kicked him out, we know dad's an ass, and we know mom left, and no I don't care if she's happier over there, it's still true. Why are we still acting like he's the bad guy? I'm sick of it. I'm SICK of having no one to rely on and the one person I want to talk to I feel like I'm betraying the two of you if I do, though I know you feel the same!"

"Nat."

"Don't Nat me, Max. Just be fucking honest."

The band around Ryan's lungs loosened, his eyes wide as he watched Alex's lips quirk into a little smile as he stared at their sister.

"Can you stop cussing? Please? It's weird when you do it." Alex said. The air around them lost 20 lbs.

"Oh, fuck off." Nat said, though her lips quirked with a matching smile.

Alex glanced at Max before letting out a huff and collapsing back on the bench, his body language defeated. He spoke. "That night, dad's birthday. I didn't mean to blame you for it. I meant to, like, apologize. Beg for you to forgive me for fucking up. But then I saw your face when you came upstairs. Saw the bruise. Your panic. It scared the fuck out of me. I heard dad's decision to kick you out. I was so angry, but I, like how could I go up against the both of them when it turned out that way for you? Before I knew it, I was angry with you for getting in the way, for calling out the problem, for not letting shit go and taking that stupid hit that wasn't meant for you. Still am, I guess." He grew quiet. "Know it ain't your fault though." Alex leaned over his knees, his hands gripping his hair. "This is all so fucked."

"After you left, it got worse." Max said. "Then mom left. It felt like we could

hear you mocking us from afar, laughing at us for turning our backs on you and choosing them. And if you were the good guy, that meant we were stuck with the bad guys.” Max looked up from the ground to stare at Alex. “We weren’t stupid, I’m not saying that. Just...every time you tried to be there, it proved how much we weren’t getting from dad. Every time you tried to help meant that you thought we needed help, and I couldn’t stand that either. Look at what it got you! It reminded us of that night, and how we let you down. Not to mention, at least for me...you’ve got to hate us at this point.” She looked away as her voice quivered.

Ryan gaped at them. That’s... “No. No, I’ve never hated you guys. Our parents, sure...but never you guys.”

Max sniffed, then ducked into her shirt to wipe away the tears that were falling at an increasingly quick pace. He wanted to reach out to her, felt it in his bones, but their past, muscle memory, kept him back.

“I told you guys he wouldn’t hate us.” Nat quipped. She flashed Ryan with an insecure smile. Alex just put his head in his hands.

“I don’t get how you don’t.” Alex said.

Ryan understood, suddenly, and felt his world shift to the left. It wasn’t *him*, and it wasn’t *them*; he was part of their family. Even if Ryan chose not to include Sarah. They were siblings, grew up in the same household, were equally affected. It was pride, and fear. This kid sitting with his shoulders hunched, as if their parents’ decisions were his to bear, blamed himself for the shit Ryan went through. Just as Ryan blamed himself for never being enough.

“It wasn’t your fault. That day. I’d do it again in a heartbeat. You were just trying to fish.”

Alex let out a self-deprecating laugh. “If I had just done it like you showed me-“

“It wasn’t your fault dude. Dad blew his top. Nothing you could’ve done deserved that reaction from him. You never needed to apologize.”

“I should’ve called.”

“It would’ve been appreciated.”

A ring cut through their eye contact, through the silence. They all looked at Max’s phone. The word mom flashed from the screen. In the panicked looks they all shot each other, Ryan felt his decision cement itself.

He nodded at her, braving their past to step closer. “Hope for the best, right? Regardless,” he looked at them all, “No one’s kicking me out. Got that? I’m not going anywhere.”

Natalie let out a wet chuckle and slid under Max’s arm. Her hand shook as she held up the phone. Alex and Ryan looked at each other as Max swiped to answer the phone.

“Hello?” Sarah’s tired voice cracked through the speaker.

“Mom,” Max went to speak but it was as if her throat collapsed in on itself, a sob swallowing the rest of her words.

Natalie ducked into Max’s shoulder and Alex stared at the sky, blinking away tears.

Max waved her phone for someone else to take over.

Ryan grit his teeth, but took a step forward. No one stopped him.

“Hey, Sarah. It’s Ryan.”

*I’ll always be there for you if you need it,* Sarah had promised them when she left. *Well,* he thought. *Time to prove it.*

# Teenagers

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

I'm tired of having a teenager for a mother.

When I was young and squishy,  
I giggled when you'd  
squeeze with your hands.

Chipped paint and nails,  
strands falling out of your  
too loose hair tie.

The bags under your eyes  
grew into your favorite shade of purple.

Your squeeze molded my hands  
thin and long, "perfect for piano"  
but, you'd cry when I tried to sing—  
that was your talent anyway.

Compression moved  
up my arms  
and around my chest—  
you gripped my throat.

I still remember  
standing a whole  
ten years tall and  
your crowned canines  
looked sharp enough  
to tear out my jugular.

I didn't ask you to help me  
with my math homework again.  
You weren't that good at it  
when you were in school anyway.

I filed my teeth to points  
with your clippers  
I stole from your bathroom  
when you were still at work.

I stole more than that,  
but it still doesn't feel like enough.

By seventeen, I was ready to  
give you bite marks  
to match the ones  
you left on me.

But, you still hadn't  
unhinged your jaw.  
It's hard to bite  
when you're still  
being bitten.

Eighteen, my bruises  
had started to fade,  
and the scratches  
I left on your face  
hid behind new freckles.

I think we forgot  
that teen girls don't get along  
especially when you force  
a wolf into Bo Peep's clothing.

Nineteen, almost twenty.  
I'm left with bleeding nubs,  
broken gums and eyebags  
your favorite color.

You even got me  
to dye my hair  
the same violent red.

You're ready to go another round,  
but I'm tired. I don't have  
the same energy  
a teenager does.

I'm tired of having a  
teenager for a mother.  
I just can't keep up  
with your youthful angst.

# Created Equal

*Kim Kile*

Our daughters live in fear.  
Freedoms our mothers earned,  
shredded like flesh  
glancing a coral reef  
in courtrooms,  
boardrooms,  
bedrooms.

Our bodies  
once revered,  
once worshipped,  
gutted like today's fresh catch  
on the news,  
social media,  
the Congressional floor.

Like an earthquake  
on the ocean floor,  
we shake the sediment,  
growing as a wave  
ever higher,  
ever stronger  
until we sweep out the status quo  
and return  
with a force so strong,  
we shape a new landscape,  
ripe for rebirth  
and a new generation.



**Marina**

Robert Smith

*16" x 20" Graphite Pencil*

# The Modern Woman

Ashley Noelle Bertram

“It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don’t think you’re good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we’re always doing it wrong.” – Gloria (from Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*)

## 1.

At maybe five or six years old, I met a new girl named Laura that had recently moved in across the street from my grandmother’s house on Barbie Court. While Grandma and the mother chatted in our front yard, I was spraying the hose to water her prized hydrangeas. She was shy, around a year younger than me, and had straight blonde hair compared to my frizzy ball of curls. We were playing around when I squeezed the nozzle on the hose just a little, enough to let a shower of tiny droplets down upon Laura on accident. The water quickly transformed into her tears as she complained of being wet just as quickly as I’d turned it on and off again.

My grandma harshly yanked the hose away from me and sprayed a cold, hard stream of water directly in my face. Perhaps a punishment that was soft to what she experienced growing up in a post-WWII world, lacking a thin switch or whooping belt to the backside.

“How do you like that, huh? Don’t do that again! Get inside!”

This time, it was my cue to cry. Dripping with water, I squeaked out an apology before running into the house to hide beneath the kitchen table. I was angry, apologetic, and scared of my grandma’s outburst.

*“I was playing. I didn’t mean to be mean,”* I chanted to myself in consolation.

When she stormed back into the house she continued her reprimand, “Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me? Did you like getting sprayed? No?”

Between sobs I was able to utter, “I—I—I I was just playiiiiing. I-I— didn’t mean it.”

“Quit your crying or I’ll give you a reason to cry, you baby. You’re fine. You have no reason to act like that.”

At the age of 32, I still think about this moment and what I learned: *It’s not*

*okay to feel how I feel*—or at least, it’s not okay to let others see it. This is one of many examples of how the women in my family are taught to tiptoe around on eggshells and turn the other cheek, condemning all those who don’t. My grandma grew up experiencing prejudice for being the darker skinned child of Welsh and Indigenous parents who were not taught that children had feelings. She was tough as nails because she had to be, especially when she entered relationships with men battling demons of alcoholism, infidelity, and indifference.

As I’ve grown older, I’ve learned that it is not just our family, rather there is something at large within modern society. Our men hide their poor behavior behind women’s fear of ridicule because they can, but more importantly, our women bury their feelings because they must—and the message continues that we *all* must. In Greta Gerwig’s 2023 film, *Barbie*, actress America Ferrera plays a single mom, Gloria, raising a young girl in a world that is constantly at odds with what it means to be a woman. Gloria shares a bold monologue about the societal expectations against women, including this line: “You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line.” I wonder if anyone in my grandmother’s life ever told her it was okay to be angry or to make a mistake, or even get out of line a little bit.

## 2.

I sat in the sterile patient room at Barrington Health Center for my one-week post-partum checkup at the age of 20. My body was uncomfortable—exhausted from sporadic sleep and my feeble attempts to get back to a “normal” schedule with a working partner and a newborn. My emergency C-section had been successful, but what I wasn’t prepared for was the aftermath.

“Hi Ashley, how have you been feeling this last week? And let’s look at those stitches,” my OBGYN said with a cheerful tone.

“Oh, uh, I’m okay. My body’s kinda having a hard time recovering but I guess it all looks okay. He’s doing great too.” I’d already relayed all this to the nurse, but by then I’d become accustomed to the two-step process of explaining to the nurse who greeted me before the doctor. I pulled my loose-fitting shirt up and yoga pants down a little to expose the 6” horizontal wound, whose stitches hardly had enough time to begin dissolving into the skin—another scarlet letter of my *new* life.

“Those look great! Just keep checking them each day and be sure to give us a call if they start to ooze or become infected, okay? Now, mentally, emotionally how are you feeling?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I’m out of the medicine from the hospital and I’m just

sitting around the house all day, I don't really get to do much. No one really calls to check on me." I answered quickly, but it felt like a loaded question. Internally I thought, *what can I say doc, everything has changed. I love my baby but it all feels so overwhelming. What if I can't do it?*

We continued through the list of standard questions before she determined that Zoloft would be a good fit for me. It had never occurred to me that I would ever need an anti-depressant, let alone that I could be experiencing post-partum depression just a week after birth. In 2024, it feels much more acceptable to discuss the reality of motherhood across all platforms, but being the first mother in my friend group, aged 19-21 in 2013, it felt unnatural and taboo. It was uncomfortable to have my entire life centered around this sweet little baby while everyone around me—if they even tried to be around at all—was still partying on the weekends.

The most interesting thing in my life had become engrained in motherhood, which I was expected to succeed in without a real support system, just a little pill to fix the chemical imbalance. Gloria puts to words the way I was beginning to feel, "you're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time." But it wasn't just my friends, the women in my family were also distant, despite being mothers themselves. There would be long stretches of time between hearing from my grandma or mother, causing an even deeper divide between my life before motherhood and after. But my entire life was now about taking care of my child, having no hobbies and limited social interactions, so what else was there to talk about?

### 3.

As a child, I longed to be a graceful and skilled dancer. If it weren't for my parents' low-income, I thought, I could have put in the hard work that was necessary to achieve this goal. One warm, summer day in the early 2000s, I rode shotgun with grandma in her blue Chevy van, travelling around the city of Franklin, IN running her errands.

"I want to be a ballerina; I want to dance around the stage!" I said wistfully, having recently watched performances like *Cats* and *Riverdance*.

"Well, I don't think that's going to work. You're just too big and too short to be a ballerina. Plus, those dancers start so young, you'd never catch up. I used to be thin like you and even then I couldn't have been one."

"Oh, but maybe I could start the classes?"

"Yeah," she scoffed, "like your mom is ever going to have the money for that. She can hardly cover the stuff you do need." Her criticisms of my mom, my

dreams, and any other woman were always just that, an immediate condemnation.

To be fair, it was the early 2000s. The ‘grunge-heroin chic’ look of the 90s turned into America’s Next Top Model anorexia but were really just later offspring of the ‘50s housewife aesthetic’ my grandmother grew up in. After little comments about my eating habits or how my clothes fit from Grandma and the other women in my family, I would spend hours watching thin models on TV, exercising incessantly, then binging hours later because I’d never be able to look like what I saw on TV. The voice that rang around in my head would say, *to be thin was to be beautiful, and to be fat was to be a failure*. It wouldn’t be until I was nearly 30 years old that I learned that plenty of other millennial women had felt the same way, or that my grandma, in all her anger, felt it too. *We weren’t good enough in our own skin*. There is always someone, somewhere (even within our own homes) who has something negative to say about the way our clothes fit, the way we walk, talk and cry.

Seemingly in response to the ‘Millennial Diet Culture,’ Gloria goes on to say, “You have to be thin, but not too thin.” The pressure to be *just enough* has always weighed heavily on me, in part because of the way the women in my family taught me about what the “right” body looked like. I look back at photos of the young girl I used to be and waves of sadness wash over me because the girl in those photos was certain she wasn’t thin enough or pretty enough; the girl I see when I look at them now is thin, at times too thin, but beautiful, nonetheless. I wonder why no one ever told me it was okay to *be okay* in my own skin, no matter what it looked like.

#### 4.

We sat in her kitchen, me on one side of the counter and her on the other, as she floured the surface to begin rolling out dough for our sweet bread. We spent many hours during my adolescent years doing just this. She would show me the proper way to prepare dough or how to can vegetables for the winter, hoping that I would take note, but the desire to be a ‘kitchen woman’ never really stuck—just the stories I would hear in between.

“Well, your no good grandfather slipped out on me during our honeymoon, drinking it up! Let alone, took off with some floozy after your uncle was born and then said it was my fault. Leaving me to raise two kids on my own. Anyway, here look at this, see how I’m doing it?”

My grandma, never a gentle woman when recounting the disparaging behavior of men after being scorned twice, had shared about my maternal grandfather before but not to this degree. The older I got, the more I learned about the misdeeds of men in my family and the toll it took. Nearly a decade later, Gloria

would boldly proclaim, “You have to answer for men’s bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you’re accused of complaining,” and answer for it my grandmother did. As a teen in the early 2010s, I wasn’t equipped with the tools to offer any sort of condolences other than a feeble, “Oh, I’m sorry. That is terrible.” To this day, little snippets into her past come out in casual conversation, seemingly out of nowhere, and switch topics just as swiftly. From everything to the alcoholic and cheating behavior of her second husband, my uncle’s DUIs, the “loser men” my mother has dated, and of course, the misdeeds of my son’s father.

I find that there is a stark difference between her experience as a young single mother and mine, shown primarily in the subtle shifts that have been happening between how we reflect on our experiences—not to mention I am still single, while by my age she’d already remarried. This new generation of women are starting to complain *justly* about the men that come into women’s lives no longer answering for their bad behavior—something my great-grandmother would never have done out loud; something my grandmother had to experience heartache to be able to speak out loud; something I am still fumbling my way through to understand.

## 5.

Gloria finishes her speech to a room full of Barbies with, “I’m just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don’t even know.” This was the mic-drop moment heard ‘round the world in 2023. I sat watching it months after its release in theatres, long after the discussion had already begun about what Gerwig had meant by it all. Countless reviews criticized the movie, though plenty heralded the thought experiment that it produced. Regardless of which side of the fence viewers were on, *Barbie* ignited a flame within me. If I have been so deeply affected by the “expectations of society,” then how could I have expected anything more from my grandmother and others of her generation?

Therapy and self-help books can now be found abundantly compared to the 1970s when she was in her 30s, teaching people of all kinds how to extend grace to themselves and how to stop tying themselves into knots to meet other people’s expectations. I have shelves filled with books on healthy relationships, self-acceptance, parenting, shame and family dysfunction. My grandma, as much as I love her and as much as she’s loosened her grip on anger, has none. I spent years fearful that I would end up as bitter as she was, but now I am starting to suspect I have all that I need to start living apart from fear.

What I find Gerwig’s greatest gift to her viewers was that we can break free from the mold and from the weight of expectations—from our expectations, not society’s. Countless memories highlight how our adolescence—and for some,

much of our adulthood—is dictated by thoughts like, “*if I looked like this*” or “*if I behaved like that*” then I would be lovable, then I would be enough. However, the older I get, the more I have started to ask what *I* really want, allowing that to be *enough*.

## In the Shadow of Magdalene

*Elise Dobson*

Father, I confess to a faltering faith.  
For I've bore witness to your Saint  
Magdalene for sale on East 38th.  
Money for pleasure, a biblical feint.  
The Virgin Mary carries latex love,  
a sanitized and sultry slut.  
There is no God in the blue above—  
but on her knees stays the beaten mutt.  
A pimped out sinner sold for an eighth,  
adorning only her Habit of self attain.  
Choral hymns stink of Catholic wraith,  
breath that reeks of poor self restraint.  
Father, I confess to sins hereof.  
My act of contrition washed down with rotgut,  
deliver me absolution from the Lord above,  
“Go in peace, you heretic smut.”

# Pretty Ladies Shouldn't Cry

*Ashley Noelle Bertram*

Or swear or spit.

I guess I'm not a pretty lady  
because tears pour heavy in the darkness,  
where no one can see to say such stupid things to me;  
where I swear to the gods and the seas  
that I'm over their shit, but I still love  
everything they have blessed me with  
just to spite them.

So, what does it really mean, not wanting pretty girls to cry?

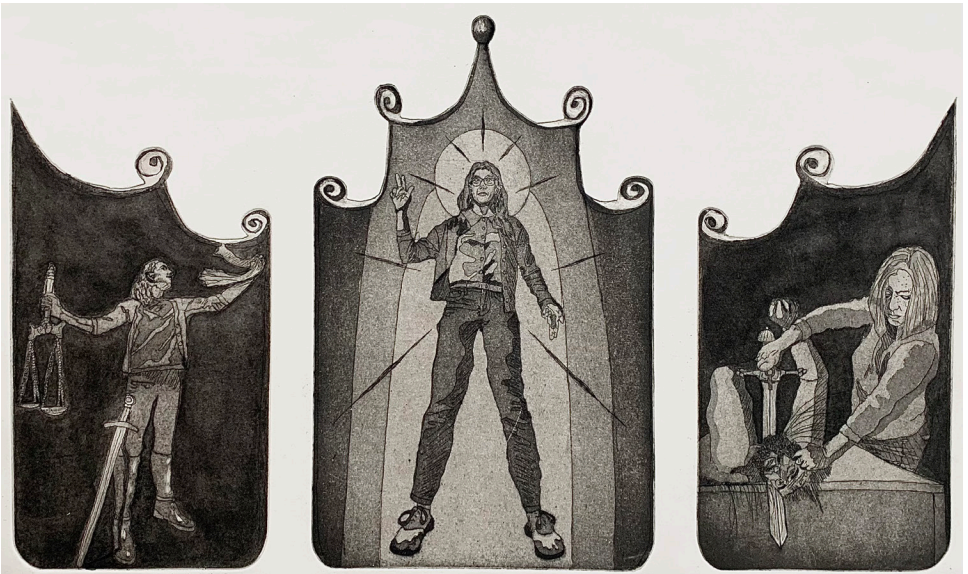
You think such delicate works of art shouldn't depict the realities of humanity—  
that all things in this life don't, in fact, suffer beautifully?

Go fucking figure.

Tell the men, I want my crystals and porcelain to be cracked and crumbling,  
like they've lived a life beyond dusted shelves and tea parties  
because that's what proves resilience is a force to be reckoned with.

Let the children smash them against the cold floor, loving them anyway.

Piece by piece they can be reassembled, and come morning  
they'll be twinkling in the midsummer sun.



## **Act Like a Lady**

Ginger Miller

*28" x 19" Hardground Etching with Aquatint*

# In the Gales I See My Fate

*Mack Nigh*

In the gales I see my fate, drifting effortlessly alongside me as she always has. I am tiny and helpless compared to her, compared to her compelling forces that guide me from place to place. But in the end I see no flaws with her logic. If she wants me here, flying above acres and acres of rolling fields and bustling human towns, then here I will stay. Here I will thrive.

I have seen my brothers and sisters, under guidance of the breeze, submit and fall to the ground below. They land on sharp blades of grass and glide down to the moist dirt, and the wind does not pull them back up. They remain there as tiny particles of white fuzz and a singular seed, but they call up to me as I continue to fly. “Do not worry!” They beckon. “We will be just fine on this ground! We will bloom into bountiful bouquets; we will turn these dull and lifeless fields into galleries of wonder! Our yellow petals will paint the earth in sunlight, and we will shine as we were always meant to! So go on—do not fret, and land on the ground when you no longer fear the stability beneath you!”

They tell me not to fear. I fear anyway.

The wind never lets me touch the ground. They let me see my siblings drift off, let me see them bloom into tiny dandelion flowers that dance and twirl in performances on the ground. But they never let me join. In truth, I am grateful for the winds that carry me high above the ground. Those muddy puddles and dusted heaps of soil will remain a mystery. But what a bliss it is to live in mystery. I am blessed to only know the wind, to only know endless change and distance from the world. Permanence cannot grasp me; I am free from it all, and I will be forever. I will always be changing, moving, leaping, flying. The ground will never rise to meet me, and I will never fall to its will. Never, never, never, never...

And then the gales guided me to the earth. Even when I pleaded to them, begged them to not let me be swallowed up by the darkness of soil and the shivers of rain, they persisted.

I touched the ground softly and watched the gales fly without me.

There is nothing beyond the looming grass above me. There is nothing hidden in the shadows of greenery. There is nothing above me, hiding in the dark rain clouds. There is nothing here, nothing but stillness.

There was no point in trying to stop the ground from consuming me. The wind

would not change my fate. I could not be lifted into the sunny skies anymore. The rain has already weighed me down. There was no viable choice but to submit to the ground beneath me, and though it was dark and cold and unknown, I let myself go to it and fall under earth's fine crust.

It wasn't so cold after that. There was darkness, yes, but there was warmth too. I could feel the ground warming under the sun's rays. I could feel the rain lifting off and evaporate into the clouds. I could distantly see the roots of grass stretch out to dig into the earth further, I could hear the birds and bugs that they were so blessed to see. And at that moment, in those days, in those eons of nothing but warmth and curiosity, I wanted to see and hear the world around me too.

Roots grew underneath me with quick instinct. They were feeble and stringy, but for now they could hold me. They could give me the courage I needed to lift from the ground.

I was more than a soft seed now. When I lifted from the ground, I felt larger. Different. Made of sturdy walls of cellulose that left me flimsy but strong. The grass over my head was no longer looming, but welcoming. Peaks of sunlight poked through, and I felt those powerful rays bless me with nourishment and love. I was loved here, somehow. I was loved by the grass. I was loved by the bugs. I was loved by the sun. I was even loved by the earth, whom I was so cautious of before. I was loved by them all, wasn't I?

More than anything, I wanted to love them back. I wanted to spread my roots through the ground, I wanted to grow my own leaves, I wanted to reach above and touch the heavens as I once had, but I wanted to bring them all with me. I grew so quickly I could barely recognize what my body had once felt like. Now I was a tangle of scattered leaves, protruding stems, mixed and mangled roots around the earth I once dreaded. Now I was amongst my new kin. I was one of them: a singular plant among a garden of affection. The fear I felt in the skies was gone, and there was nothing in my heart but curiosity and the brightest love.

So, this is what the ground was like.

My first flower bloomed unexpectedly. The blades of grass teased me for it, how I, once so fleeting and frightful, had grown so quickly around my new friends, and became so boisterous and confident that I bloomed a *flower* in this ground. But what a pretty flower it was, the one I grew. And what a treasured earth I fell on that I felt safe enough to bloom a flower.

Soon I grew more flowers, and soon new bugs flew over from the heavens to land on my soft petals. A bumblebee with heaps of pollen on her legs gazed at my petals. She rested her weary body on my body and spoke of distant gardens.

“Is the wind still kind?” I ask her.

She chuckles on my stem. “Even when you’re in the ground, with your roots tangled in the dark crust, you still think of the sky?”

“It is quite hard not to. All the wind has done has led me here.”

“And... do you miss it?” she asks, rubbing her pollen off her legs in idle thought.

“I think of the wind every day,” I answer, “but I do not miss it.”

She spoke of how the wind carried her and her sisters across meadows and gardens, some of which held my brothers and sisters. She carried the messages of flowers abroad and migrating butterflies in the sky. And she corrected me on one thing, only one, before leaving.

“The wind is not kind,” she claims. “That is not to say it is cruel, but rather to say it holds no regard for you. You just like to think the wind was kind because you have spent so long in it, drifting from place to place, event to event, with no rest in between. But now you are here, in the earth that holds you tight, with the grass that cheers you up, with the sun that wakes you every morning.”

“But if the wind is not kind,” I ask her, “why do I still think it is?”

The bee hums and shakes her wings against her body. “Nostalgia keeps us locked like that. You’re no different than any of us.”

Days pass, and more creatures and insects gather around me with their wisdom. The birds tell me of the nests they are building and the children they are preparing for. Insects hide in my petals and bless me for my coverage against their prey. And the blades of grass, who had been watching me grow from a frightened seed into the sunshine of their garden, are always laughing and watching the nights fade into the horizon with me.

And the earth holds us all. Though it is as indifferent as the wind, it holds us in our joys and comforts us in our sorrow. I do not remember why I was so afraid of this.

The end of summer approaches, and my petals shed slowly and meet the ground beneath me. I’m wilting. I’m dying. But it feels good to die here, surrounded by the ones I love. They will take care of me and hold me during my passing.

I have children by the time of my death. They're still growing on me, just reaching the end of their development, when I suddenly feel the last slips of my energy begin to fade. I know what will happen to them, but they are still so young and pure. I do not have the heart to tell them how the wind will tear them from me, will tear them from each other, will frighten some of them and overwhelm the others with joy. I cannot tell them about the ground they will soon find and the creatures they will meet. I will not try to predict which ones will be happy to find stability, and which ones will be so used to the wind that, the second they land on safe ground, they will panic and shriek and plead to not be left there.

But this message, this one final call, is one I will whisper to everyone still near me.

I love you. I, who was once so foolish and afraid, love you, the secureness in my life, with such intensity that I could not imagine my life without this love. I love you, dear blades of grass, whom I have bonded with and aided in our times of droughts and floods. I love you, insects from above, who gifted me with the pollen I needed to create my beautiful children.

And I love you, earth beneath me, the being I did not know I needed. I love you endlessly.

My children, who now fly away in the wind upon my dying breath, know forever that I love you.

# 7 Stages

*Caedence Jones*

I.

Breathe your first breath—inhale life;  
Open your eyes to a big, bright world,  
Full of new neurotic necessities not known.  
Unclench fearful fists to accept assurance  
Of Mother's love, serenading you sweetly.  
Fragile fingers reach out to the boundless blue,  
To say a happy hello to the sparkles that sprinkle the sky.

II.

Claim your first step with a steady stomp,  
& another & another & another.  
Giggle while you run from the mouth that feeds,  
Spouting gibberish until clarity configures.  
Learn to mirror Mother's mouth and speak softly.  
Whisper the word she yearned to hear.

III.

Skinned knees and sharp splinters decorate  
Your skin from black & blue asphalt adventures.  
The tragic tear of your first toy: stuffing spilt; thread undone,  
Fixed with fabric to join you on that first day,  
Tucked tightly in the comfy crevices of a backpack.

IV.

Colorful cartoons keep you endlessly entertained,  
Creating static that distracts from bitter exchanges  
Surrounding sudden separation of the family you've known.  
Ignore home to swing high & scream loud on the asphalt.

V.

Dance with dreams of the fruitful future,  
Hide the beautiful within masks, crafted from friend & foe.  
D.A.R.E. to be the teen that your youth had sworn not.

VI.

Magnetic melodies with blaring beats stretch deep into the night.  
Until the cries of your flesh ring rigorously, blending with the morning birds.

VII.

Breathe your last breath—exhale life.



## The Danse Macabre

Isaac Chaifetz

*Digital*

# Punk Was Dead

*Levi Miller*

FADE IN:

INT. BLAKE'S ROOM IN HER APARTMENT — AFTER MIDNIGHT

BLAKE DEAN (23 years old, cynical journalist bent on finding truth over sensation, and facts over superstition) wakes up in her bed, a sleeping bag on an air mattress. The rest of the room is just as bare-bones, with a few scattered papers and books. There's screaming from the next room. She scrambles out of bed and barges into the other room.

CUT TO:

INT. MELISSA'S ROOM IN THE SAME APARTMENT — AFTER MIDNIGHT

At a card table used as a makeshift desk, wrapped in fuzzy blankets sits MELISSA DEAN (15 years old, typical chronically-online emo kid with big emotions; she works out by obsessing over her favorite bands, younger sister, and legal dependent of BLAKE). She sobs, scrolling on her rickety laptop through a series of headlines about musician Shawn Ellis dying of a heart attack at 43.

BLAKE

Missy? What's wrong? Are you okay?

MELISSA

(sobbing)

He's dead! Oh my god, he's dead!

BLAKE

Who? Who's dead?

MELISSA

Shawn Ellis!

BLAKE crouches next to MELISSA and rubs her back.

BLAKE

Jesus, is that someone at your school?

MELISSA

He's — he's the drummer from Good Horror!

BLAKE visibly relaxes and drops her hand.

BLAKE

God, not that stupid band again.

MELISSA

(angry)

It's not stupid!

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Good Horror was instrumental  
to the pop-punk and emo sound  
the early 2010s —

BLAKE

Yeah, yeah, to the pop-punk  
and emo sound of the early of  
2000s —

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Early 2010s, Blake.

BLAKE

Thanks, Wikipedia. Can you explain why you were screaming in the middle of  
the night over some celebrity?

MELISSA

Shawn's my favorite member of Good Horror, and I never got to meet him!

BLAKE

You don't even know him.

MELISSA

Shawn was born in the suburbs surrounding Chicago on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1979, which is  
also the name of his third favorite song. He has three kids, aged three, six, and  
eight. He's been married to Jeanne Ellis né Kennedy for the past ten years and —

BLAKE

Okay. Okay. Borderline stalking, but I get it.

MELISSA

You don't.

BLAKE reaches out to set her hand on MELISSA's shoulder.

BLAKE  
Listen, Missy—

MELISSA jerks away from BLAKE.

MELISSA  
Don't call me that.

BLAKE  
Melissa. I've been trying to make all this easier for you.

(MORE)

BLAKE (CONT'D)  
I know you didn't want to live with me, but it wasn't safe for you there. Mom —  
she's not right in the head.

MELISSA stares at her laptop, not scrolling or reading, just sitting.

BLAKE (CONT'D)  
I'm trying. But you have to try, too. You can't wake me up like this on a work  
night every time one of your middle-aged obsessions kicks it.

MELISSA  
You're such a bitch!

BLAKE  
Hey!

MELISSA  
How can you be so casual about it? Shawn is dead!

BLAKE  
(yelling)  
I don't have time to care about him!

MELISSA shrinks back. BLAKE collects herself.

BLAKE (CONT'D)  
You don't remember what it was like. You were Mom's favorite. I got the worst  
of her.

MELISSA  
Maybe you should have left me there!

BLAKE steps toward the door, hurt but trying to hide it.

BLAKE

Just keep the music down.

BLAKE shuts the door. MELISSA huffs, then turns up the volume on her laptop and clicks on an already-liked video of Good Horror concert footage.

CUT TO:

The credits — a montage of grainy live footage, professional quality music videos, and behind the scenes vlogs to upbeat rock music (something along the lines of “Bang Bang” by Green Day or “Boy Division” by My Chemical Romance).

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — DAY

A few days later, BLAKE edits a news story on her laptop, sitting on a threadbare couch amid piles of papers. She pounds at the keys, frustrated. The apartment door slams, and she looks up.

MELISSA walks into the apartment, past BLAKE, and right into her room.

BLAKE

How was —

MELISSA

Leave me alone.

BLAKE sighs and goes back to typing. Her phone vibrates as a call from JEFF WORK (50s, newspaper manager) comes through. BLAKE answers the phone.

BLAKE

Hello?

JEFF (O.S.)

You got anything going on this afternoon?

BLAKE

I have to finish this piece on —

JEFF (O.S.)

There’s a big funeral. Local celeb, musician, probably coked out but they’re call-

ing it a heart attack. Can you go report on it?

BLAKE  
Who is it?

Papers rustle from over the phone.

JEFF (O.S.)  
Shawn Ellis, from that punk band.  
You know him?

BLAKE  
Not really. So what, a fluff piece?

JEFF (O.S.)  
Nope. He's famous. Funeral's gonna be ripe with fights and dirty laundry, gonna  
make for some great soundbites.

BLAKE frowns, setting aside her laptop.

BLAKE  
I'm not a tabloid writer, Jeff.

JEFF (O.S.)  
You're the best writer we have. You just need to write about something interest-  
ing, for once. God knows it would pay you better.

BLAKE  
I'm sorry, but scandalizing a dead man isn't that interesting to me.

JEFF (O.S.)  
Get that stick out of your ass, Dean. Four PM. I'll send a photographer.

BLAKE stares at MELISSA's door.

JEFF (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Alright?

BLAKE  
Four PM, okay.

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — AFTERNOON

BLAKE hops on one foot as she shoves on her shoes, now dressed in black formal wear.

BLAKE

Bye, Melissa. I'm going to a — uh — work thing. Won't be back until late. There's still some soup in the fridge, I think.

CUT TO:

INT. MELISSA'S ROOM — AFTERNOON

MELISSA is watching a Good Horror music video turned up to maximum volume. Still sobbing.

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — AFTERNOON

BLAKE

(sarcastically)

Love you, too.

CUT TO:

INT. ASTER'S CONVERTIBLE — AFTERNOON, SUNNY

TIN SUMMERS (short for Christian, 39, ex-lead guitarist of Good Horror, has clothes and a haircut like a suburban preacher and lives off past record sales) sits in the passenger seat of an open convertible, stuck in traffic. ASTER MCKEE (late 30s, ex-singer and rhythm guitarist of Good Horror, dressed formally for the funeral but clearly more of an unkempt guy with long hair, tattoos, and scruffy facial hair) sits in the driver's seat. TIN squints at the sunlight.

TIN

Got any sunglasses?

ASTER presses a button, opening a container inside the car.

TIN (CONT'D)

Thanks.

TIN looks at the pair of small, pink Hello Kitty sunglasses.

ASTER

They match your eyes.

TIN puts them on. Better than nothing.

TIN

How old are the girls now?

ASTER

Halo's three, and Dawn's coming up on five.

TIN

God, they grow up so fast.

ASTER

How about Abbie?

TIN

She's twelve. Goes by Abigail now.

ASTER

Oh, boy.

TIN

Yeah. She was too embarrassed to drive with me, went with Hunter and her kids instead.

ASTER

To be fair, Hunter's minivan runs, unlike your serial killer-ass truck.

TIN

It was working fine this morning! I don't know why it decided to break down at the funeral home.

ASTER

Maybe it wanted to get you and me in my car, alone.

TIN frowns at ASTER from behind the Hello Kitty sunglasses.

TIN

Where are your kids?

ASTER

Their mom's. She thought they were too young for a funeral.

TIN  
(surprised)  
You're separated?

ASTER  
Few months ago.

TIN  
Damn.

ASTER  
Yep.

ASTER drums on the steering wheel, clearly uncomfortable talking about it.

ASTER (CONT'D)  
Anyway, where's your chick? Haven't seen her in ages.

TIN  
Marla's dead.

Beat.

ASTER  
Oh, jeez.

TIN shrugs.

TIN  
Happens.

ASTER  
...How?

TIN  
Aneurysm. Three years ago. It was quick.

ASTER  
I'm sorry.

TIN  
Yeah.

They sit with that in silence for a second. It's awkward. ASTER opens his mouth

to speak, but is interrupted by a woman in the car in front of them: FANGIRL 1 (twenty-something, wearing Good Horror merch).

FANGIRL 1  
Holy shit — is that Aster McKee?

FANGIRL 2 (same age, same clothes) cranes her neck out the window.

FANGIRL 2  
What?! Where?

FANGIRL 1  
There — the car behind us!

TIN shrinks back in his seat.

TIN  
Shit. Not now.

ASTER eats up the attention, waving, blowing kisses, etc.

What? It's just fans.

TIN  
They hate me.

ASTER  
Come on. No one blames you for the breakup, anymore.

TIN  
You should see the blogs.

ASTER  
Why are you reading fan blogs?

TIN  
I get bored.

ASTER  
Well if you're bored right now, want to give them a show?

TIN  
Wh —

ASTER leans in and kisses him, quick. TIN pushes him away.

TIN (CONT'D)

What the hell?

ASTER

Not like we haven't done worse, in front of bigger audiences.

TIN

That's different. It was the 2010s. I'm not —

FANGIRL 1 jumps out of her car and approaches ASTER's side of the convertible.

TIN

(whispering) (CONT'D)

Oh god put the roof up Aster put it up put it up oh shit —

FANGIRL 1 and FANGIRL 2 reach the car. ASTER leans out of his window.

FANGIRL 2

Oh my god! Hi!

ASTER

Hey. How's it going?

FANGIRL 1

So, so good! I mean — obviously not, but — y'know?

TIN

You do realize you're standing in the middle of the road.

FANGIRL 1

Jeez, it's not like traffic is going anywhere.

TIN

Wonder whose fault that is?

ASTER

I think what our favorite guitarist is trying to say is that maybe right now isn't the best time. If you give me your emails, I'd be fine to talk with you later.

FANGIRL 1

Oh — sure. Here...

They type their emails into the phone ASTER hands them. TIN watches as long as he can, before snapping.

TIN

Our best friend just died. Just go.

FANGIRL 1 and FANGIRL 2 back away toward their car, a bit red in the face.

FANGIRL 2

He's just as much of a dick as they say.

TIN sighs. ASTER rolls up the roof.

ASTER

Sorry.

TIN

Not your fault. Unless you started that stupid rumor about the breakup.

ASTER

(under his breath)

Not much of a rumor.

TIN

What?

ASTER

Nothin'.

TIN

Look, I'm not arguing with you today. Shawn's dead. Let's just get this over with.

ASTER

So you can ignore me for another five years?

The car in front of them moves. ASTER shifts the car back into drive.

ASTER (CONT'D)

I'll be good if you are.

CUT TO:

EXT. CEMETERY — AFTERNOON

The casket is poised above the hole in the ground, covered in a variety of flowers. A PREACHER gives a speech in front a large tent. The seats under the tent are filled, the front row seating Shawn's WIFE, three KIDS, PARENTS, and sister HUNTER CARILLO (mid 30s, ex-bassist for Good Horror, adopted sister of Shawn, dressed in a sharp black suit and sunglasses, under which she's crying) and her husband and two kids, and Tin's daughter ABIGAIL (12 year old girl, old soul solemn expression). About a hundred other people stand nearby. Among them are BLAKE and GEORGIA (40s, photographer, bored expression) with SHAWN and ASTER.

GEORGIA yawns.

GEORGIA

So much for scandal and intrigue.

BLAKE

Shut up.

PREACHER

— and as Billy Joel said, “Only the good die young.” Looking at the life Shawn Ellis led, this is surely true.

TIN

(whispering)

Why'd he have to open his burial to the public?

ASTER

(whispering)

I think it's kinda sweet. It's just like him.

A nearby FAN shushes them. TIN frowns, but ASTER grabs his hand to stop his retaliation.

ASTER (CONT'D)

Ignore them. For Shawn.

TIN

(whispering)

I just wish —

A flash goes off. TIN and ASTER turn to look at GEORGIA, who still has her camera up. ASTER drops TIN's hand.

TIN (CONT'D)  
Are you kidding me?

ASTER  
Leave it.

PREACHER  
“Seasons don’t fear the reaper, nor do the wind, the sun — ”

TIN  
I can’t go to a goddamn funeral without ending up on the front page?

GEORGIA steps back, startled.

GEORGIA  
I — I’m sorry —

TIN  
Well, gosh, that makes it all better. I’m so sick of this. It’s like you think I signed my soul away. I’m still a goddamn human. I shouldn’t have to give up everything for people I don’t even know. I shouldn’t be afraid to go to a goddamn grocery store. I should be able to fucking mourn in peace because jesus christ, that’s my best friend in that box —

ASTER grabs TIN’s arm.

ASTER  
The kids.

TIN  
What — ?

ASTER  
You’re scaring the kids.

TIN stops to look at SHAWN’s and HUNTER’s kids, who are crying or close to it, then at his own kid. ABIGAIL shakes her head as if embarrassed and disappointed, then comforts the kid sitting beside her.

TIN  
I’m —

Everyone is staring at TIN. A few other photographers have their phones or cameras out. TIN turns on his heel and leaves. ASTER calls out after him.

ASTER

Running away. Just like always.

CUT TO:

EXT. CEMETERY — EVENING, AFTER THE FUNERAL

BLAKE corners GEORGIA outside the gates. GEORGIA smokes a cigarette, now unbothered.

BLAKE

Jesus, Georgia. Nice going out there.

GEORGIA

Not my fault that rich guy's an asshole.

BLAKE

The article doesn't need new photos. We still have some from past concerts and shit. This was completely avoidable —

GEORGIA

If you want another boring-ass article.

BLAKE

It's a funeral. It's not supposed to be a headline.

GEORGIA stomps out her cigarette, finally facing BLAKE.

GEORGIA

Listen, I know you've got some sort of complex or whatever.

BLAKE

B —

GEORGIA

That's for your therapist to figure out. Me, I have to get paid. And if I have to exaggerate some washed-up millionaire's gay affair to get rent money, I will.

BLAKE

It's not right. All people are entitled to privacy.

GEORGIA

Your sister — she'll be thinking about college in a few years, right? Might be nice to give her a chance at a degree.

BLAKE thinks it over, but stands firm.

BLAKE

I'm not using the picture in my article.

GEORGIA shrugs.

GEORGIA

Suit yourself. There are ten other writers in the office who will.

BLAKE sighs then walks to her car. A few yards away at the cemetery gate, ASTER watches with interest. He pulls out his phone and starts typing.

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — NIGHT

BLAKE kicks off her shoes, mood dampened as she looks around the bare apartment. Takeout bag in hand, she knocks on MELISSA's door. A sad Good Horror ballad plays inside.

BLAKE

I'm home. Brought some Thai, if you didn't want the soup.

MELISSA doesn't answer. The song ends, and BLAKE looks up hopefully, but moments later the same song starts playing again, louder.

BLAKE (CONT'D)

Okay. Good night, love you.

CUT TO:

INT. MELISSA'S ROOM — NIGHT

MELISSA glares at the door, then turns back to her phone where the lyrics for the song are pulled up. She's not crying anymore, but her eyes are red as she traces each word as it plays on the screen with her chipped black fingernails. At a lyric about standing up for yourself/doing what you need to do despite the disapproval of others, her face hardens. She pulls up a blocked contact labeled MOTHER and unblocks it. The music swells as she starts tapping out a text.

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — NIGHT

Just as BLAKE settles down and starts eating her Thai food, her phone vibrates again, another call from JEFF WORK.

BLAKE  
Dammit.

She clicks the answer call button.

BLAKE (CONT'D)  
Hello?

JEFF  
I don't know what you did today, but —

BLAKE  
If this is about Georgia, she was totally in the wrong and —

JEFF  
You got a book deal.

BLAKE knocks over her takeout in surprise.

CUT TO:

INT. MELISSA'S ROOM — MORNING, A FEW DAYS LATER

Sun streams in through the window. The room is empty, the closet open with a few bare hangers on the ground. One of the larger posters is missing, evident by the tape left behind on the wall.

BLAKE (O.S.)  
Bye, Melissa. I've got a big, big work thing. I'll be back late. There's fifteen dollars on the counter, get yourself some pizza.

CUT TO:

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE ASTER'S PENTHOUSE APARTMENT — DAY

BLAKE stands in a well-lit hallway, one hand poised to knock, the other holding a worn briefcase. She's wearing very stiff, formal clothes, hair pulled back in a bun so tight it must hurt. Her hand shakes.

BLAKE  
Don't be a dumbass.

She knocks, sharp and loud.

ASTER (O.S.)

One sec, I'll be there in — ugh, sorry...

ASTER opens the door wearing pajama pants and a holey 90s rock band t-shirt, his hair a mess.

ASTER (CONT'D)

Hi, you're the writer, right?

BLAKE holds out her hand to shake.

BLAKE

Blake Dean. Nice to meet you, Mr. McKee.

ASTER

God, I haven't been called Mr. McKee since boarding school. Aster is fine.

ASTER shakes her hand and leads her inside.

CUT TO:

INT. ASTER'S PENTHOUSE APARTMENT — DAY

The apartment is very lived in, cluttered with music paraphernalia and kid's toys. An orange couch in the living room sits two kids, HALO (3) and DAWN (5) watching a classic 80s slasher movie. The kids stare at BLAKE as she walks in. ASTER leads BLAKE to the dining room table in the next room, where a space has been cleared in the mess of papers (a mix of legal documents and lyrics).

ASTER

Sorry about having to change locations with short notice. I don't usually hand out my address to strangers, I promise, ha. My wife — ex-wife, crap — she won't babysit the kids until the divorce is finalized, and I didn't want to bring the kids to an office and this is all so sudden I didn't have time to find another babysitter who wouldn't be weird —

BLAKE

It's fine. I'm just stoked to be here.

ASTER

Oh, for sure, I expected you to be a fan of sorts —

BLAKE (CONT'D)

This is such a big job opportunity. I've never

BLAKE (CONT'D)  
Fan? Hell no, I hate Good Horror.

ASTER laughs.

BLAKE (CONT'D)  
Oh my god. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean—

ASTER  
No, that was my bad. I shouldn't have assumed.

BLAKE  
My little sister really likes your band, if that helps.

At the table, BLAKE sits and starts unpacking her briefcase, pulling out papers, pens, her laptop, and a tape recorder.

ASTER sits beside her.

ASTER  
I'm honestly relieved. Not being a fan makes you more objective.

BLAKE  
I guess, if that's what you want.

ASTER  
I wanted someone to write impartially. God, there's a hundred thousand people out there who would dig for scandal or push their own interpretations on me, but I want this to be on my terms, you know?

BLAKE nods.

BLAKE  
I get that.

ASTER  
So. How does this work?

BLAKE  
Well, what do you want the book to focus on? Past? Present? The band? Your life before the band? Your political views?

ASTER

Um...

BLAKE

Okay. We can figure the details out later. For now, how about you tell me how Good Horror started?

BLAKE turns on the tape recorder.

CUT TO:

BEGIN FLASHBACK: INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE MUSIC ROOM — NIGHT

A much younger ASTER, wearing a collared shirt and khakis with a neat, short haircut and tons of tattoos, walks up to a music practice room, guitar case in hand.

ASTER

Excuse me.

Leaning against the locked door is a much younger TIN, dressed like a raging punk with bright dyed orange hair and a dozen piercings. At his feet is another guitar case.

TIN

You're excused.

ASTER

This is my band's practice room, so could you leave?

TIN pushes off from the door and crosses his arms.

TIN

Well, buddy, you've got the wrong room, because my band is practicing here in five minutes.

ASTER checks the text on his flip phone, then looks at the room number.

ASTER

Nope, I was right. This is my room. I suggest you move.

TIN falls back against the door.

TIN

I'm not moving a goddamn inch.

ASTER

Move.

TIN

Make me.

SHAWN ELLIS (28 at the time, about to become the drummer for Good Horror, tall and strong, full of life, bright smiles, and whimsically curly hair) steps between them.

SHAWN

Hey guys! What's up?

TIN

Thank god, Shawn! Tell this twink it's our room next.

SHAWN's eyes pop out. ASTER turns to him.

ASTER

You know this asshole?!

SHAWN forces a smile, dropping one hand on both of their shoulders.

SHAWN

Aster, this is Christian, our boneheaded guitarist. Christian, this is Aster. The vocalist who's so kindly helping us out since Farrad left us for law school.

TIN's face drops.

TIN

Oh, shit.

ASTER

"Oh, shit," is right. And what kind of name is Christian? You play for a punk band, not an evangelical choir.

TIN

I didn't pick it. What the hell kind of name is Aster?

ASTER pushes his hair back, a practiced motion.

ASTER

It's short for Astrophel. Means star, like the one I was born to be.

TIN turns to SHAWN.

TIN

I have to work with him?

ASTER

You're no peach either, Tin.

TIN

Don't call me that.

HUNTER

You're so stuck with it, Tin.

HUNTER walks up to them, the most starkly different between now and then. Here, her hair is dyed purple and flat ironed into fringe, her clothes are striped and ripped, and she's smoking a joint.

HUNTER (CONT'D)

What'd I miss?

SHAWN

(to ASTER)

Hunter. Our bassist, my sister.

HUNTER takes a hit.

HUNTER

His parents kidnapped me as a child.

SHAWN takes the joint from her.

SHAWN

Adopted, Hunter.

HUNTER

Hey!

SHAWN

What did I say about smoking in the music room?

HUNTER  
Only during jazz?

SHAWN  
Exactly.

SHAWN puts out the joint.

HUNTER  
Jerk. So who's the twink?

ASTER  
I'm not a goddamn twink!

TIN and HUNTER laugh as ASTER fumes. SHAWN's smile strains.

SHAWN  
Great! You've all met each other now. And this is going to go great.

CUT TO:

INT. ASTER'S PENTHOUSE APARTMENT — DAY

BLAKE clicks off the tape recorder.

BLAKE  
I think that's a good start for today. Take a break.

ASTER's crying a little. He didn't realize.

ASTER  
Shit.

He sniffs. Wipes his eyes.

ASTER (CONT'D)  
Sorry. Guess it's a little too soon.

BLAKE  
You're good. Just start thinking which anecdotes you'd like to focus on, what kind of story you want to tell. I'll type this out and do some research, and we can try again in a few days. Sound good?

ASTER

That sounds perfect.

BLAKE

Alright, email me a time and date when you're ready.

They head back towards the door. HALO and DAWN are asleep, and the movie's credits are playing.

ASTER

Thanks. For not being weird about any of this.

BLAKE (surprised)

Of course.

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — NIGHT

BLAKE takes off her shoes, exhausted but smiling. She goes to the worn couch and opens her laptop to start research right away, not noticing the fifteen dollars still on the counter, untouched.

CUT TO:

INT. MAIN ROOM OF THE DEAN APARTMENT — MORNING, DAYS LATER

BLAKE knocks at MELISSA's door holding a plate of toaster waffles, half dressed for work, obviously mid-getting ready.

BLAKE

It's been a week since you've stepped out of that goddamn room. Seriously. You need to eat something. I don't care what celebrity died today.

She waits for a response. Nothing.

BLAKE (CONT'D)

Come on. I have a work thing in half an hour. Big project. Gonna make us rich.

Still silent.

BLAKE (CONT'D)

I'm coming in.

She barges in.

CUT TO:

INT. MELISSA'S ROOM — MORNING

The room is just as empty as before, albeit a little more dusty. There's a note on her desk that says "Don't come after me." BLAKE drops the food on the desk and reads the note.

BLAKE

Oh my god. Oh my god.

CUT TO:

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM AT THE OFFICE — DAY

BLAKE's ears are buzzing. Whatever ASTER is saying is muffled. Her hair is a mess, and her shirt is buttoned up wrong.

BLAKE

Sorry, could you repeat that?

ASTER

I was just talking about that thing Tin does on sta— hey, are you okay?

BLAKE shakes herself. Focuses.

BLAKE

Yeah. I'm sorry.

ASTER waits for her to continue.

BLAKE (CONT'D)

It's just been a rough morning, my sister kind of ran away —

ASTER

What?! Why the hell are you at work?

BLAKE

I — we had an appointment?

ASTER stands.

ASTER

And we can obviously reschedule. Do you need a ride to the police station?

BLAKE

No.

ASTER

So you've already filed a missing person case?

BLAKE

No, I —

She looks around, but there's no one lingering near the conference room.

BLAKE (CONT'D)

I don't need Melissa to get in any more legal trouble. She's got suspended from school again last month, and she's a step away from getting expelled.

ASTER

Nobody's arresting a kid for running away.

BLAKE

I know, but I just became her legal guardian a year ago, and she hasn't taken the transition well. She's probably going back to Mom's place.

ASTER

Okay. That's, what, a few miles away?

BLAKE

Mom's in California.

ASTER

Ohhh...

BLAKE

So Melissa may not be following every law to get there. She doesn't exactly have a car, or bus money.

ASTER

Uh-huh. Got it.

BLAKE

And I really don't want this to go to court again, because I have no idea if she'd choose me again.

ASTER  
Okay. No cops, got it.

ASTER's phone rings.

ASTER (CONT'D)  
Shit. Is it okay if I — ?

BLAKE  
No, yeah. Go ahead.

ASTER stands and answers the phone. BLAKE turns to her laptop.

ASTER  
Hello?

He pauses.

ASTER (CONT'D)  
Chicago police?!

BLAKE and ASTER meet eyes.

BLAKE  
(whispering)  
Did you call — oh my god, please don't say anything —

ASTER  
(CONT'D, whispering)  
I swear I didn't call them! They called  
me! I'm not going to snitch, I promise—

ASTER cuts off, now serious.

ASTER (CONT'D)  
What do you mean, desecrated?

Pause.

ASTER (CONT'D)  
Huh. Okay. Let me know what you find out. Thanks. Bye.

BLAKE  
Everything okay?

ASTER sighs and sits down heavily.

ASTER  
Someone dug up Shawn's grave. Took his body.

BLAKE  
Oh shit.

ASTER  
Yeah.

BLAKE  
(realizing)  
Oh, shit.

ASTER  
What?

BLAKE  
Nothing. Just — did they say when it happened?

ASTER  
About a week ago.

BLAKE  
I haven't seen Melissa in a week.

ASTER pauses, laughs.

ASTER  
Sure. Grave robbing, the latest teen fad.

BLAKE  
She's obsessed with Good Horror. One time I cleaned her room and accidentally swept up a bit of confetti she'd bought off eBay that was allegedly from one of your shows, and she wouldn't talk to me for a month. And the reason I had to become her legal guardian was — our mom was into some messed up shit. So whatever morals Melissa managed to inherit are probably a bit twisted.

ASTER sits.

ASTER  
Oh my god. You're serious.

BLAKE  
I don't want to jump to conclusions, but the timing fits.

ASTER  
Let me help.

BLAKE  
What?

ASTER  
To find her. And maybe Shawn. Maybe me and Hunter and Tin can talk her down, band to fan. Plus, I can bribe the cops to keep her out of jail.

BLAKE  
No. I can handle this, it's just family drama. Last thing she needs is to learn acting out gets her what she wants.

ASTER  
From the way you talk, she sounds troubled —

BLAKE  
And I'm her guardian, so it's my job to help her.

ASTER  
(gently)  
I know. But I'm not asking. This involves me too, if she really did...

BLAKE sighs, dropping her head in her hands.

BLAKE  
Fine.

ASTER stands, gathering his things.

ASTER  
Got it. If you're free now, we can go grab Hunter. She needs to know — it's her brother.

*Title of piece*

BLAKE stands, too.

BLAKE  
Okay. And, thanks. For not being weird.

ASTER smiles.

ASTER  
Anytime.



## **Masque of the Red Death**

Ellie Bevan

*12" x 18" Mixed Media Collage*

# Final Affairs from a Patient Suffering a Quarter-Life Crisis

*Xavier Neier*

If you are reading this letter, it means that my quarter-life crisis became an immediate end-of-life crisis. Cause of death was [REDACTED] alongside some abysmal luck, so there is nothing that you, the will executor, or anyone else that could have done to stop such an untimely, but common, demise. There are a few key items of my “estate” that I have explicit instructions for in the event of my death. As a freshly deceased person, I have no use for any earthly items, but I ask that these instructions are followed best to your abilities, for future use and benefits for those who are capable of handling my possessions.

My car, where the title of the vehicle is under my parents’ names, would obviously be returned to their possession. Thanks for letting me loan it Mom and Dad. Inside it, you will find some store returns, a cracked longboard, and fast-food napkins. Just throw them out to the closest trash can, one that’s big enough where you can shut the lid easily, unless you want racoons ransacking old water bottles and expired Kroger coupons. In my closet, you will find mountains of all the clothes that I either always, or never, wore. Do not let anyone wear my clothes, even if they are still usable. Even imagining now of a brother wearing my favorite American Eagle jacket or someone reusing my old winter boots feels like a bodily invasion, even as a dead person. Just get rid of them. For the green totes that hold baby clothes, old Mexican blankets, and my birth mother’s polaroid picture, please keep them safe and tucked away. These things I know are tethered to my soul, wherever that is now.

For my pitiful accumulated wealth, found in the physical safe in the basement with code [REDACTED] and in my bank account, is to be given to my sister, for the expected rising costs of living and for her future (now past) wedding with her fiancé. Sorry that I won’t be in attendance. And another sorry for the fact now that the money barely covers anything fun like cruises, anniversaries, or barely a decent Target shopping spree. Any furniture (bed, dressers, desks, chairs, etc..) can either be given to my sister and her fiancé, or, if passed, to other people in the family household, or, if passed, are free to be thrown out. Any other high-priced items remaining can be resold, with the money going towards my sister, assuming I never befriended a creditor and still maintain debt obligations. Make sure it goes to her and her only. My parents have plenty of money and my brothers do not need it.

Do not spend money on funeral expenses. For best burial practices, keep it simple and cremate the body and throw the ashes out to the natural outdoors. Do not keep the ashes (chronic fear of loose shelves), but discard them in a decent,

outside place. Being smushed into diamonds is not my thing, so anywhere outside that is not six feet in the ground is fine by me. Cremation is the only way to prevent anyone reanimating my corpse.

But if any of you feel inclined to go above and beyond, I would like to be returned to Tijuana, Mexico, and have my ashes scattered there. Either the front of the hospital I was born at, in their nature reserves where I may finally contact the native land I never knew or whatever the appropriate area of ash scattering in Tijuana is. Do not give my ashes to my birth mother. Do not return her baby boy in a jar in a plastic Ziploc bag. If she is found, tell her any of the good things of American living that she was able to give to her child. If she is dead, and her grave or resting area is found, ask surviving relatives of the other family if her child can be held by her one last time and that I can rest beside her.

# **This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Your Land**

*Evan Allee*

One year on E means, “Congrats! You’re not dead  
Yet!” There’s only a few more to live, so live wisely.  
Advocate for the muzzled congregates, degenerates,  
Miscreants; the poor, confused, brainwashed kids.

They’ve got their lives ahead of them, contingent behind  
Public-funded doors. If they aren’t dead by 18, maybe  
They can swing back-alley hormones. Maybe they  
Won’t have to, but maybe that’s wishful thinking.

Maybe the government’s bit carved their smiles  
All the way to Glasgow—and this isn’t mutilation,  
No. Not like that thing they call “top” and “bottom”  
Surgery. That’s where the line or the weapon is drawn.

It’s unimportant whether it is held by someone else’s hand  
Or the child’s own. It’s not like the Land of the Free is too our home.

# Sammy

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

Summertime was always my favorite as a child, but I'm not a child anymore.

During my childhood, my mother would drive my sister and I up to the beach house. We'd spend the summer hunting for seashells and skipping stones across the waves while Mom would gather wood for us to roast the fish Dad caught at work. It was perfect. It made leaving once Labor Day rolled around that much harder.

For years, in the middle of summer when the nauseous heat clung to the undersides of our bones, our mother's brother would come to visit. He'd arrive in the dead of night, the only time the heat was tempered by the promise of morning dew still smokey from the previous evening's campfire. His bags were so heavy, the straps dug into his shoulders in such a painful manner. The long tubes of iron hidden within the zippers and pockets rattled against his femur with each uneven step he took.

I always loved when he'd visit. As a small child, I'd run up to him and throw myself into his arms. There was something about his deep laugh that felt so comforting to me. Maybe it was only mid-embrace when I heard him laugh like that. We'd spin around, and once he'd set me down, he'd wrap his tri-colored polyester around me. I'd wear it so proudly—running around the house with it waving like a flag behind me.

He'd put his bags in the guest bedroom and give my mother an apple pie. It was cinnamony and sweet, but the doughy crust was salty. It flaked apart in my mouth and melted on my tongue. Mom would scold my sister and me for sneaking pieces of it before dinner, but our uncle would just smile and slide us slivers under the table.

He'd leave dirty finger prints on our mother's white plates. He always smelled like charcoal and sulfur, and no matter how many times he said he'd washed and changed, the dark powder remained under his nails and behind his ears.

Today, my uncle wakes me from my uneasy sleep. Seventeen years old, and I had long since outgrown the twin-sized mattress my mother bought for me the first summer we had the beach house. He beckons me to come hither, to follow him out to the beach. Rubbing my face, I stumble behind him. The sand is cool from the morning dew beading on the few strands of grass out this close to the ocean. Twilight still lingers, but the dawn is creeping up off of the horizon and

bringing the brilliant sun with her monstrous, muggy heat. He is sitting near the water, his legs and the waves all white with foam. I sit next to him, shivering until he strong arms me against him. My uncle points towards the sky where we can see birds fly across the dying dark blue –red cut through sky with white underbellies, chirping as they dance around each other’s beady hawk-eyes and eagle-like talons. His tight grasp is warm against the perilous winds rolling off of the waves, but it makes me think of when I would watch him and my sister huddled up on the shore all those summers ago.

As a child, I watched him wake my sister from her slumber every July, and they’d sit with the sand sparkling around them with the first light of dawn. There are still divots from my eager fingernails in the wood panelling of my window from when I would watch.

But, Liberty left so long ago.

Now, it’s just Uncle Sammy and me underneath an endless skyway.

Up close, and with the morning fog lifting up towards the fading smoke, Sammy doesn’t look how he did from my bedroom window all those golden years ago. His smile has hardened and his top hat has grown askew. Even his apple pie recipe has changed, and the changes remain unpardoned.

The iron barrels he keeps hidden under his bed no longer make my home feel as sweet, and the draft is to come sweeping through my house soon. I know Sammy will take me away as coldly and swiftly as he took all the other boys in our family. It will not be slow and searing like my sister’s departure.

As children, he promised her and I that as long as we stood with God in our hearts and him in our hands, we’d never fall. But, I fear I cannot trust in our bond anymore; I don’t feel safe nor brave in his arms. Yet, I long for the summers when I was a child with Liberty by my side. It pains me to say I do not love summertime anymore.



## **Totem for the Working Man**

Robert Smith

*40" x 60" Oil on Canvas*

# Marlboro Reds

*Thomas McNeil*

I gave up smoking this year.  
I am returning to purity, serenity,  
reborn as the final cigarette  
is engulfed, enraged, extinguished.

No more for me the ashy asses,  
confetti sprinkles of white and gray  
onto the floor of my green Corolla  
littered with empty Red Bull cans.

Wondering what to do on rainy days,  
when I run away and hide.  
Blasting The Smiths feels dull,  
and I find myself alone, never dry.

Missing that gross aftertaste  
while I console myself smokeless,  
hands searching for tangibility,  
eating Mamba fruit chews and a Slim Jim.

I still find brown, burnt butts on my floor,  
cloth seats covered in holes, stained by ash,  
when I'm crying and alone like a kid,  
needing semblance of something that lasts.

Two fingers feeling empty when I'm stressed,  
even worse when it all goes back to shit.  
No more for me the sad days, I say,  
with my clothes stinky, feeling like trash.

I am returning to impurity, pollution,  
jaded and unforgiving,  
reborn as her kid,  
inner child anxious, agitated, aimless.

And I see she's a kid too,  
sitting in the garage with a cigarette.

# Dinner at Fabbro's

*Hayden Garris*

I went to Fabbro's Steakhouse for dinner because big decisions are best chewed on with a fifty-dollar sirloin. The two-story, red brick building sat on the corner of High and Tenth Street. High Street ran south, decorated with a long line of dazzling skyscrapers and luxury apartment buildings where bankers kept their mistresses. Tenth ran perpendicular, its ends leading into crummy neighborhoods where dogs barked all night and mortality rates soared. On the drive over, I took High Street. I envied the success of those men leading double lives, armed in Armani suits, and driving Maseratis and Porches. They'd cracked the code my twenty-four-year-old brain still struggled with.

I parked my rattling rust bucket next to a pickup truck caked in mud. On the way out of the garage, I spotted a few nicer vehicles. Fabbro's took all shapes and sizes. Old money, new money, and working class families with shoebox cash saved for a special occasion. I still wore my work clothes, cheap blue slacks and a white dress shirt from Macy's. I needed to upgrade my wardrobe. *Phoenix has designer outlets, right?* God, Phoenix. The wild west. A full day of driving from Indianapolis. Insignificant compared to the countless days spent working toward success. I imagined the gritty taste of red sand, washed down every night with a bottle of 1975 Cognac. An oasis of opportunity waiting for me out there in the middle of the desert.

No, I'd wait to weigh the options once I had a table. The sooner the better. Friday nights were busy, so I half sprinted down the sidewalk. The sun had descended beneath the concrete wall of buildings, casting dark, rectangular shadows across the street. Golden light, shaped by white trim, glowed from the windows at Fabbro's. No line at the front door. My lucky day.

A jingle of metal caught my attention as I crossed the alley separating Fabbro's from the parking garage. The space between them was pitch black. I searched for the source while quickening my pace, but my shoe caught the next section of sidewalk. When I pulled back my foot, the ground came with it. I braced for impact. Maybe it wasn't my lucky day.

"Woah! I gotcha, I gotcha now," said a raspy voice.

A firm hand held onto my shoulder and pulled me up, away from the concrete. I stumbled before regaining my footing. My hero emerged from the darkness. Caramel colored eyes studied me from beneath a black stocking cap. He wore at least three fraying jackets and a pair of plaid pajama bottoms painted in stains.

His matted beard had started graying at the ends. When he smiled, cracks on his lips split open.

“Close one, Mr. Taylor,” he said.

“Hank, right?” I asked. I should’ve known. In my defense, I hadn’t been to Fabbro’s in a few weeks. Hank always stood outside, begging for money with a Best Dad Ever coffee mug. The last time I’d gone to Fabbro’s, I had one too many martinis. Outside, I almost stumbled into the street. Hank caught me and offered to help. We talked a little, from what I could remember, as he escorted me to the parking garage. I slept in my car that night and the next morning I woke up with the worst hangover.

“Yes, sir.” Hank nodded. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

“Yes, we do. How are you, by the way?” I asked.

He shrugged, glancing up and down the sidewalk. “They come and they go. You know how it is, Mr. Taylor. Some days things are alright. Other days, not so much. But I’m blessed. I’m blessed every day. How about you? How is everything with your lady friend?”

Leave it to drunk me to blab about all my problems. I ran a hand through my hair. “Well things are... they’re not anymore.”

Hank frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Something came up and I’m thinking it might be best to move on,” I said. Down the street, a laughing couple entered Fabbro’s. More would show up soon. “Listen, I have to get going or else the good tables will all fill up.”

“Of course. I know you’re a busy man. But say, you mind contributing?” He held up a chipped mug half full of coins and a few dollar bills. I grabbed my wallet and checked for any cash. Nothing. I sighed and shoved it back into my pocket.

“I only have my card.” I felt bad. Hank had helped me not once but twice now and I had nothing to give him in return. I doubted drunk me gave him anything either. In a world of transactions, Hank deserved something.

“It’s okay, Mr. Taylor. You go on in and get you a nice seat before they fill up. Stay blessed. Alright?” He began retreating back into the shadows. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Wait,” I said.

He stopped retreating and raised his eyebrows. “Yes, sir?”

“You hungry?”

He argued at first. I think he felt out of place being offered to join me for dinner. I understood. Mixing with higher classes can be intimidating and Hank sat at the bottom rung. But I didn’t offer just so I could pay him back, I admitted. Big decisions are best made with a second opinion. Our lack of proximity made Hank the perfect candidate. No bias. No stake. That’s what finally sold him. Always eager to help.

Inside, I drank in the view. Rows of tables dressed in white cloth sat all types: bargaining businessmen, bickering families, and bantering couples. Servers in stainless black uniforms danced around each other on polished wood floors, balancing trays of steaming food and sweating bottles of wine. In the back, behind the bar and through the swinging steel doors, Chef Alphonse Fabbro waved his knife like a wand and created magic. Aromas of butter, garlic, and rosemary made my stomach groan.

Unlike me, Hank seemed unimpressed by the spectacle. Smile lines fought against the frown tugging at his face and his eyes narrowed. I’d expected him to gasp. Or show some level of appreciation. All that time spent outside, begging for his next meal, you’d think being on the inside for once would at least lighten his mood.

“I shouldn’t be in here,” he muttered.

Before I could respond, the host came to greet us. She gave Hank a once over but said nothing. Then she grabbed two menus and asked us to follow her. People stared at Hank. One lady clutched her purse. We were given a table in a dark corner behind the restrooms. I should’ve argued for somewhere better but I held my tongue. I didn’t want to cause any problems.

Once we were seated, Hank set his mug on the table and studied his menu. I already knew my order. A nine ounce sirloin steak with asparagus and a baked potato on the side. Hank took his outermost jacket off and slumped back in his chair. Those caramel eyes stared out the window, onto Tenth Street and beyond.

“Have you decided?” I asked. He nodded without looking at me. “So what will it be?”

“Soup of the day,” he said. His clipped words lacked their usual, passionate

rasp. Maybe I'd made a mistake convincing him to join me.

A young server approached our table. Her black hair shimmered beneath the dim golden lights hanging above us. She stood close to six feet tall and her forearms were taut with muscle. "Good evening, gentlemen."

"Good evening," I said. Hank nodded without making eye contact. The woman smiled at us and gestured to the menus with a calloused hand.

"I'm Janelle and I'll be your server tonight. Can I start you two with something to drink? We have a great selection of wines and spirits. Our tap options are on the back," she explained.

"Water, please," I said.

"Water," Hank said.

"Alright, I'll be right back with those."

After she left, Hank turned to me. "So, what's this decision of yours?"

"Well, the consulting job I work at is offering me a transfer," I said. "Out in Arizona, of all places. It's actually where their headquarters is based. The job comes with new benefits: a fifteen percent pay increase, more paid time off, a free gym membership, and better insurance. This is all in addition to the benefits I already get."

Again, where I expected Hank to be impressed, his frown only deepened. "Well, Mr. Taylor, seems like the deal of a lifetime."

"It is. And you don't have to keep calling me that." I laughed. Although, if I'm being honest, I didn't mind being called Mr. Taylor.

"Truth is, I don't know your first name." Hank shrugged. "The night you came out stumbling, you told me to call you Mr. Taylor and nothing else."

"Oh." The more I learned about drunk me, the less I liked him. He sounded pretentious. "Listen, I'm sorry about all that. I don't usually drink that much and I probably wasn't in a good state of mind. Just call me Owen. Alright?"

"Sure, and you can call me Mr. Wright. Since I'm your elder and all." Hank chuckled.

I grinned and shook my head. "Okay, Mr. Wright, what should I do? Do I keep

working in Indianapolis or do I take my dream job in Phoenix?”

“Seems like you’ve already made up your mind,” Hank said.

Janelle returned with our drinks. Hank shifted back toward the window and crossed his arms. The source of his discomfort must’ve been the staff at Fabbro’s. I couldn’t understand why, though. Fabbro’s Steakhouse only hired the best. Hard working, professional, and attractive. Janelle fit the description to a tee.

“Have you gentlemen had a moment to look over the menu?” she asked.

“Yes, I’ll do the nine ounce sirloin—medium rare—with asparagus and a baked potato,” I said. Janelle nodded and turned to Hank.

“And you, sir?”

“Soup of the day,” he muttered.

“Okay, and any starters while that cooks?” she asked.

“No thank you.” I smiled and handed her our menus.

“Alright, I’ll have that right out.” I liked her eyes. Amber but lighter. Almost the color of Hank’s.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Can’t complain.”

I hoped the meal would lighten his mood. A belly full of good food can work wonders for anyone. I took a sip of water. Two degrees shy of freezing. Water would be different in the desert. More refreshing.

“So, you think I should take it?” I asked.

Hank scratched his beard. Flakes of dead skin showered his lap. “If you want. Seems like it’ll make you happy.”

I glanced around. The table next to us sat two men clad in pinstripe suits. One had a receding head of snow white hair. Frown lines deepened as his associate, a blonde man closer to my age, spoke in an excited whisper. I picked up something about a retiring executive and a new position opening up. Bankers, if I had to guess. A cutthroat industry since 2008. I almost went that route but jobs were scarce. Third-party consulting has more opportunity, although with greater risk.

I liked my job, but sometimes I wondered. Would things be different if I was that young kid, sitting across from a skilled veteran who weathered the housing crisis? A man of prestige, worthy of respect.

I looked back at Hank. "I think you're right. It's the best option for me."

"I never said that," Hank replied.

"Well wouldn't you agree?" I asked.

"Depends."

"On?"

"What are you leaving behind? You want the job and all it comes with. A blessing, sure. But what about your life here? Don't you have family here?" he asked.

"They live in Fort Wayne. I can call anytime and with the money I'll be making I can fly back whenever I want," I said.

Hank turned to me and set his hands on the table. His eyes sparkled in the golden light. "What about your lady friend?"

The eye contact made me nervous, but I can't say why. "What about her?"

"That's the question, isn't it?"

A laugh lodged in my throat. I took another sip of water. Three degrees shy of freezing. "I told you I'm not... I'm not settling. I want her to be happy, but don't I deserve happiness too? If I stay, she's just going to hold me back."

"From?" he asked.

"Phoenix. Opportunity. The next level." I forced a smile. "You understand."

Hank smiled back, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Oh yes, I understand. That's why you picked me, isn't it? Because I have an unbiased opinion."

"Exactly. Everyone I'm close to here would see things differently," I said.

"Probably out of selfishness, right, Mr. Taylor?"

His smile bothered me. It seemed fake, mocking almost. "Yes. Owen, by

the way.”

“I’ll stick with Mr. Taylor.” He waved a hand. “Now, if you want an unselfish opinion, I’ll give you one. Okay?”

“Okay.” I wished I were back at home. Then I could finish reading *The Essays* of Warren Buffet. The wise words of a modest billionaire always made me feel better.

Hank leaned back in his chair. “I knew Mr. Fabbro’s partner back in the day. Not Alphonse but his daddy, Emil.”

“I didn’t know Emil had a partner,” I said. Aside from the plaque near the front door commemorating his death, I barely knew anything about Emil. But I did know he’d opened Fabbro’s in the late seventies. He’d intended it to be a pizza place, but the vision shifted after they met a crowded market.

“He did. A young, penniless man with a community college business degree. He had big plans for Fabbro’s. Once pizza failed, he helped Emil turn it into a steakhouse. Not just any steakhouse either. One with class. One where all types were welcome,” Hank explained.

My ears perked up. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yes sir, Mr. Taylor. But the boy didn’t stop there. In 1996 he sold his share and invested in a few other startups. Within a few years he had millions to his name and owned equity in over thirty different companies.”

“Wow.” Rags-to-riches stories always motivated me. I almost excused myself to call my boss and accept the transfer right then. But Hank hadn’t finished.

“He had cars, tailor made suits, and a penthouse in New York for business trips. As his wealth increased, so did his appetite. He began cheating. Cheating on his wife, taxes, and even his own companies. He worked twelve hour days, using cocaine to keep up. The boy kept reaching for more and more and more. When the housing crisis hit, his companies felt the ripple. Half went bankrupt. A renewed sense of justice sent agencies hunting for crooks like him. They found him out and after a long legal battle they sent him away for four years and took every last penny. No one visited. He’d burned every bridge and his crimes impacted thousands.”

I’d heard similar stories. Rags-to-riches-to-rags. I never understood people like that. “Listen, Hank, I see what you’re getting at. Don’t get greedy, right? Don’t fall into certain traps. I’m not stupid, though. I understand—”

“You think the boy was stupid?” Hank raised an eyebrow. “You think he was born corrupt? Made decisions without thinking them over? People like him aren’t greedy because greed is an idea. He’ll never be the greediest. But a little greed is justified. A little cocaine is justified. Why? Because the next guy is always doing more. Three grams of powder ain’t nothing when Jeff over there is doing six.”

“Yeah, but don’t some people have good intentions? Like taking care of their loved ones? Setting them up for the future?” I asked. This conversation had started irritating me. Of course someone like Hank hated capitalism. I couldn’t stand people like him. Always blaming the system for their problems.

He shook his head. “You think it all came from a place of selfishness? He worked eighty hours a week to put himself through business school. Why? Because he grew up in a rundown trailer park with seven other siblings and a mom who struggled feeding them. But they didn’t want his money, so he gave it to his wife and daughter. Daddy became nothing but a checkbook. They knew about his faults too. So every time he visited home he had to buy back their love. But the love ran out before the money did, and no amount of zeros can make you a good person.”

“Very moving,” I muttered. I needed a drink. Maybe two.

Hank turned back to the window and our food arrived a minute later. Neither of us said anything while we ate. I’d heard enough. Taking him to dinner had been a mistake. Clearly Hank had a problem with success. If I were in his shoes, I’d probably feel the same way. Begging every day outside a restaurant whose cheapest option, the soup of the day, costed twenty-two dollars. At least I’d paid back my debt.

“So what happened to the wife and mother?” I asked. We’d finished our meals and I couldn’t handle the continued silence. The two men at the table next to us had left, leaving a half empty bottle of seventy dollar wine. I wondered if the busboys would hold onto the bottle and drink it after their shift for a taste of the good life.

Hank stared out the window, his caramel eyes following the dying flow of traffic. “When the boy got out, he went back to them and tried to start over. They divorced before he got locked up. But they made things work for a while. Until he fell back into old habits. His ex-wife kicked him out for good when she found a bag of coke hidden under their daughter’s mattress.”

“So he never changed?” Why didn’t that surprise me?

Hank faced me. His eyes were wet. “He wanted to. He really did. He tried to

be the person they needed, but he couldn't. He wouldn't. So, in the end, he decided it best to stay away."

Janelle came with the check before I could respond. She set the black check booklet on the table and rested her hand on top. "How did you enjoy everything this evening?"

"Very good, thank you, Janelle," I said.

Hank reached out and held his hand above hers, his palm hovering just millimeters from her skin. So close, but never touching. Their eyes met. "I'm proud of you."

Janelle's plastered smile faltered. "Do I know you?"

Hank wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. "No. I just thought it was important for you to hear that. Stay blessed young lady, and keep working hard. I'm proud of you."

"Thank-Thank you." She swiped away her hand from beneath his and walked off. Hank watched her until she disappeared into the kitchen.

In similar lighting, their eyes really were the same color. "You do know her."

He nodded.

"Is she your—"

"Not anymore," he said.

Hank put his outermost jacket back on, reached into the pocket, and extracted a thick wad of money. He set the roll of cash on the table. All one hundred dollar bills. At least a couple thousand dollars if I had to guess.

"Should cover the meal and tip. Good evening, Mr. Taylor. Stay blessed." He grabbed his mug, got up, and left me to chew on everything that had transpired.

How did I not see it? The eyes, the heartbreak in his story, and his fear of crossing the boundaries of his own exile. Shame washed over me. The shame of my ignorance accompanied by the shame of my envy. How could I have been so heartless?

I got up and bolted out of the restaurant. People stared. A few clutched their purses. But I didn't care. Outside, I looked for Mr. Wright. The sidewalks were

empty. I ran a hand through my hair. It doesn't matter, you have somewhere else to be.

I sped the whole way there. As fast as my old car would allow. I might've even run a red light or two. Luckily, the cops stayed away from Tenth Street.

As I entered a rough neighborhood, the sound of barking dogs greeted me. The sun had long gone down. I made sure my doors were locked as I crept past street signs, looking for the right one. Once I saw the sign for Prosperity Court, I turned. The house sat halfway in. White siding had yellowed with age. In the driveway, I recognized a familiar, beat up red minivan. She still hadn't replaced the back left tire. I shook my head as I parked behind it.

The porch light was on but the windows were dark. I got out and advanced toward the steps. Tangled wind chimes clamored together in the evening breeze. I opened the screen door and knocked. No answer. I knocked again. A light inside flicked on and a moment later the rusted lock turned. The front door creaked open, revealing an old woman in a bonnet and a nightgown. An unlit cigarette hung from her lips. She squinted up at me.

"Owen? What the hell you doing here this late?" she asked.

"Is Lilian home? I need to speak to her," I said.

"I'll go get her." She rolled her eyes and padded back into the house, leaving the door cracked. A moment later I saw a familiar figure approach the opening.

Red and yellow flowers covered her pajamas. Her pregnant belly stretched the fabric, tugging at the face of a yellow lily. Her steps were labored and she walked with a hand on her back. Tangled blonde hair framed her round face. Red and puffy bags sagged beneath her wide, emerald eyes. She stopped a few steps short of the doorway and frowned.

"What are you doing here, Owen?" she asked.

"I got offered a job in Phoenix," I said.

Lilian shook her head. "Good for you. But what do you want? You said you couldn't do this anymore, remember?"

"I know." I looked at the ground. "But I... I want to stay. I want to be here for you and take care of you. If you'll let me."

The door creaked. I closed my eyes, expecting to hear it slam shut. Then, cold

fingers touched my chin. I opened my eyes as Lilian tilted my head down to her level. Her eyebrows were raised but the frown remained. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to lose what we could have. I want to be better for you.”

“Prove it,” she said. Then she stepped back inside and slammed the door shut.

“Yes, ma’am.” I smiled. “Even if I have to beg.”

# Generations

*Kim Kile*

A dozen orange Nike boxes,  
the famous white swoosh  
splashed across the side,  
fill your closet from floor to ceiling,  
each with the same white tennis shoes,  
a deal too good to pass up, you say.  
The seeds of Alzheimer's sowed.

Golf shirts line the same wall,  
a pastel rainbow of tags  
hanging from unworn sleeves,  
saved for a someday that never comes,  
the golf courses never played again,  
as the roots of the disease take hold.

The hallucinations start  
before your words are gone,  
stinging accusations of affairs and lies,  
paranoid visions of being followed by secret agents,  
hate-filled rants you scream but don't recall,  
your love-filled marriage a distant memory  
while Alzheimer's sprouts, blocking love.

Too soon, the disease strangles your voice  
and trips you while you walk,  
until sitting and being overgrown is easier  
than fighting through the thickets.  
A non-native species,  
invading both your thoughts and actions,  
your "I love you" crowded out,  
dementia in full bloom.



**Anointed**

Daylen Byrd

*7" x 5" Chalk Pastel*

# Southern Sweet

*Eris Hembree*

A pitcher of black tea  
Bitter but refreshing  
Six spoons of sugar  
Tastes so saccharine

I drank so deeply  
Of that Southern sweet tea  
The sugar laced my lips  
And the caffeine filled my blood

It feels so sweet  
Warm like the blazing summer sun  
Ever present on my back  
Seen as the heat of the Southern God's gaze

My skin burns a sinner's red  
A carcinogenic weight of judgment  
Spreads beneath my peeling shell  
It's corruption has long since set in

Mold creeps across the pitcher's surface  
My lips sparkle sweet  
My tongue rots  
My blood runs thick with bile

# What the Bourbon Does to Him

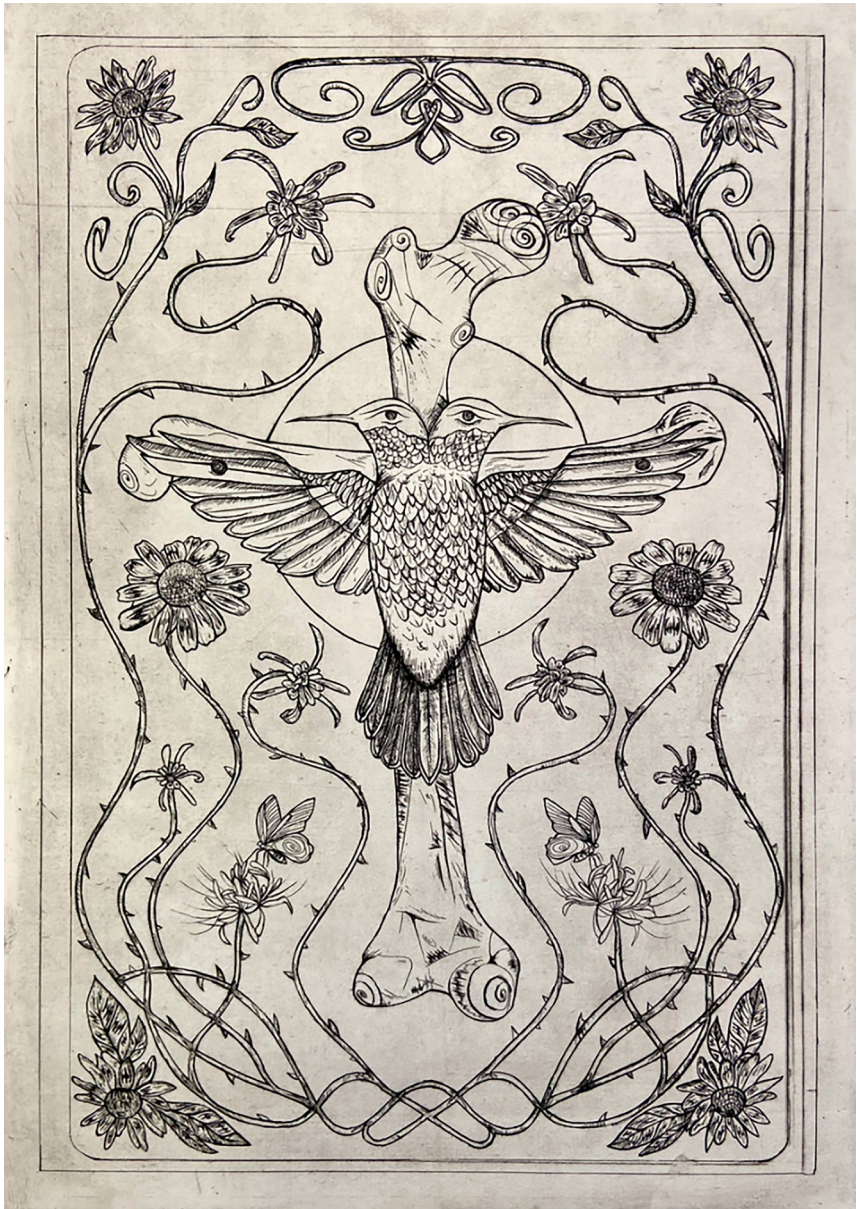
*Dex Fee*

I felt like  
I was getting him back  
but now I'm  
losing him all over  
again. Daddy's drinking vodka  
'cause he heard somewhere  
that Momma couldn't smell  
it on him, but the alcohol  
seeps from him—a stench  
you can't shower off.

He drinks himself  
a personable fool,  
friendly until the fuse sparks;  
then his anger manifests  
in fist-sized holes  
in the walls and broken  
televisions. I used to watch  
the images splinter  
as he stormed out of the room.

One night, he backed  
my brother's truck  
into the side of the house,  
drunk stupid. One day,  
he took a swig  
every time he passed  
the bourbon, running laps  
around the kitchen island  
for an excuse to circle back.

I don't know  
when I'll have to say goodbye  
to him, but I hope  
it isn't before  
he says goodbye  
to the bottle.



**Anomaly**

Kira Taylor

*12" x 18" Hardground Etching*

## An Alleged Asexual's 20-Step Routine

Evan Allee

### 1. Ask yourself, "Why is it called *masturbation*?"

Swallow that curiosity. You have lived many lives within one, so be mature. You cannot be stuttering and flushing over *those* four syllables when others require your utmost attention.

You have healed enough to know it's not so much the act itself. Moreso the act of acknowledging how the *weird feeling* lives in the area of your body where desire should be. You try and try to exterminate it from that area, because you don't think that normal people get those wires crossed. But in the same way termites are programmed to eat through the barriers of a shelter, you are the way that you are. You can't let the weird feeling make a home there. It will eat right through the foundation.

You'll think about the word *masturbation* for a bit too long. You'll think about it, and how it feels on your tongue, and how you're more curious about it than interested in it. You want to study it. It is highly likely these thoughts will kill the precarious mood.

Don't let it. You cannot let it. We all know what happens when curiosity gets the best of the cat, so let the cat get your tongue.

You have things to do—not things to prove. And you need a place to work.

### 2. Protect the purity of the stuffed animals.

Turn them around. Hide them under the covers. You don't want them to look at you differently after. You know they are not sentient, but you tense at the sense of any eyes on you.

### 3. Cut the engine. Kick it for good measure.

This is an exchange between two rusty gears; can't crank one out with the engine sputtering. If it's smoking, kick it again. If it's hissing, you're as ready as you'll ever be.

DO NOT OVERKICK—I know it's hard to hold back. There's a lot of resentment there; the thing is a piece of shit. I know it's only 23 years old and stunted in adolescence, but most of the time it gets you where you need to go. Be thank-

ful it hasn't imploded yet.

4. Think about how, if you were doing this with someone, you would need safe words.

No crazy shit. Really. Nothing crazy. Just the basic, spur of the moment, extemporaneous, *yes I love this, no I'm not scared*—*Green, Wait, Red*. You can't speak more than one syllable during sex, and your mouth refuses to form the word Stop.

5. Glasses off.

You imagine too much with glasses on and nobody present to point them on. You need to be in your head enough to *focus*, but out of your head enough to *enjoy it*, without the worry that you *won't* enjoy it alone or with another person, and what does that say about you?

Tuck that question away for later—remind yourself that you have nothing to prove.

6. Imagine Fantasy Partner.

Fantasy Partner needs no introduction.

They know what to do. Ease into it. Work up to it. It's not a race, but this time *you're winning*.

7. Do the thing. On your back—never from the back. No.

Nobody is there, of course. And yes, you're ace, but you still need a face to fill your fantasies, so you have to pretend you're looking at one.

When you catch your mind wandering—like phantom hands or the cacophonous reverberations of ceramics and glass and precious artifacts shattering—Fantasy Partner would pause. They would push your glasses up your nose and ask, "*Alright?*" and you'd nod, or negate, because now that you've admitted to a partner that you can barely do sex, and you've hypothetically found a partner who cares more about *you* than *doing sex with you*, you're comfortable enough to tell the truth; you shake your head.

(You have to think about *having sex* as *doing sex* because *doing sex* is an objectively silly way to say *having sex*, and you always make situations silly so you don't do something incriminating, like cry, or freeze, or [flash back and] accidentally deck them. *Then* you would cry, because the empathy was not stolen

from your body, and sometimes people love you, even when you pretend you do not love them too.)

Fantasy Partner wouldn't view this commonplace as a nuisance, because Fantasy Partner would *give a fuck* about you, and whether or not you're stressed during sex—

—hey.

focus  
why does it *feel like that*  
UGH  
NIGHTMARE  
better things to do with my time  
oh fuck i have homework  
and now i'm cold this is taking too long  
nothing to prove  
i  
COLD  
word  
i'm thinking i'm  
sudden  
thinking im thinking i'm thinking *stop*  
im thinking im thinking im *thinking*  
why so cold nervous  
is it  
that  
it's fucking FREEZING  
but i can't do *this* under the blanket because then i won't be able to use the blanket as a blanket because the blanket will remind me of *this* and i *really* like this blanket but when i'm done with *this* i cannot think about *this* because the blanket is a bayonet to wield when that *weird feeling* comes after i do or don't or might have or couldn't—  
that *feeling*.  
that shameful . . . not-shame.

that *you should be able to enjoy your own pleasure*  
shame.

that *but it's okay if you don't*  
shame.  
that *you should bring that up in therapy*  
shame.  
that *get up and run*  
shame.  
that *if you don't fight it you can still deny it it's not like it's violent*  
shame.  
that *"Are you suuure?"*  
shame.  
that *stay still get through it*  
shame.  
that *oh. sandpaper*  
shame.  
that *you don't need to feel ashamed*  
shame.  
that *it's been eight years WHY are you still ashamed*  
shame.  
that *you need to give yourself a break*  
shame.  
that *why does it feel like it happened yesterday?*  
shame.  
that *why did i let that happen to me?*  
shame.  
that *do not think like that.*  
shame.  
that *do NOT think like that*  
shame.  
that *why are you blaming yourself?*  
shame.  
that *no—why are you blaming a fucking kid?*  
shame.  
that *you were just a kid*  
shame.  
that *you were just a FUCKING KID*  
shame.

8. shame.

it is buried under a plethora of names. it stems into branches of manageable feelings like guilt or embarrassment or rage or depression or anxiety or envy or burnout or fucking nothing at all, but at the end of the day, the tree is thriving and you water shame's gnarly roots with the tears you refuse to shed—and you've had eight years to realize that removing the stump is not a one-man job.

do you realize that?

can you please realize that?

## 9. Rejoice.

You did it. You got through it—you finished, one way or another.

Now, imagine someone there to take care of you after. They know what to do, because they asked, and they can read body language pretty well, and they listen to you. They treat your body like an altar, or some other cliché to convey that they respect you.

But you've never been holy.

You cursed the priest at your baptism. You were three. You were overwhelmed and overstimulated and he had to flick the holy water onto your face like you were the spawn of Satan. You've been damned from the start.

Once, you were reading a book and the love interests talked about *body worship* and you know that you would fuckin' *croak* if that was attempted. You can barely take a compliment—and not in the batting-eyelashes, hand waving, coy playing, *Oh no, stop, no way, way, but the, Worship seems like a ploy for someone to get their way, way.*

*Someone* who is not you. *Someone* whose definition of *worship* is the reason you navigate a warship on what should be a calm sea under clear skies—yet *there you are*, hypothetically, safewording *RED* during vanilla sex because the steering cable for the helm was snapped.

[You are a kid again. It happened. And you're smoking cigarette butts in the bathroom of the mother of the kid you're babysitting, and the frogs are screaming in your place, and you catch your own eye in the mirror, and you say *Oh*.

And the mirror splits down the middle just as your smile cracks your face in half. Shards clatter to the tile and expose the catastrophe behind the fourth wall. It is First Dead You, in that pink knit sweater, locked in the script between pale lines nobody will read between, hurling a bottomless hoard of cherished objects and art and virginity and sentimentalities—things that shatter into sharp points—against a wall you thought was impenetrable. You know that rage cannot be sated, but First Dead You is a stubborn, feral little fuck, foaming at the mouth. First Dead You knows that—now that the wall has shattered—Dead You Two will move in soon. First Dead You makes room.

They cannot wait to meet you, Dead You Two.

Oh, and you just have to laugh. It's so *funny* that It happened, because it has to be. It's so funny that you're a statistic now, and you *can't* stop laughing. You *can't* let yourself stop laughing.

So you laugh until tears sting your eyes, and it's all just *so fucking funny*, and you cry tears of laughter and then eventually you're just crying. And you make yourself look at yourself so you can really take it in, in this twisted way where you need to see what pain looks like on your face one last time before you lock it away. This is the first and last time you are allowed to feel sorry for yourself, and you savor this moment because you know that when you leave this purgatory, it will be official. You will have died again—and *bitch*, you are going to *suck it up* and *pretend*.

The kid you're babysitting wakes from their nap. They knock on the door, like the director yelling *CUT*.

You pretend to be an actor, wiping your face, smiling, laughing. You're being praised for your ability to switch on and off so seamlessly. You stay humble about it, but you know you're the best. A true professional, really. It's like It never happened. Because It was scripted. It isn't real, and you brought the Big Breakdown scene to life, and *nobody* can do it like you.

And later, you try to direct your own at-home exorcism, but your mouth doesn't foam like it did—no, it overflows. Cum.

And you don't try it again.]

10. Get in the fucking shower. Now.

Turning your skin into red leather has never worked; it never will. Still, blood sprints to the surface of your skin and starts snapping like pigs in an overcrowded slaughterhouse, but a self-inflicted brand feels better than the memory of a hick-ey, so you turn the lever to the left.

...

But *you're* probably in a better mood now. All those endorphins and shit.

Fantasy Partner probably covered you up. Carried you to the bathroom. Set you on the counter while they got the water warm for you. They wait for you to calm down before pouring water over your head, and they tilt your head back so it doesn't get in your eyes. They know you need to see, and that you've been on

*Naked and Afraid* one time too many.

They would massage shampoo into your hair, unhurried. Wash your body with the cleanest intentions and do everything to help you feel unsullied. They are very loving. Very thorough—doing that *body worship* thing.

Have you gotten comfortable with them praising you out loud?

Do you believe their reassurance that your body is anything but a dueling ground?

Maybe they don't need to speak. Maybe they just clean and kiss your skin and that says more than enough. They know you cannot speak; that you are in some *pleasant* headspace, because they are Fantasy Partner and they treat you with reverence that is not considered high maintenance.

They probably love your body because it is *yours*—not an asset of yours—but because it is *you*, even in instances where they drool and your fist *cannot* unfurl around the treat. They probably don't see sex as a treat, because they don't see it as something they can earn or win. It's just one form of intimacy, and it is not everything.

They would wipe their face and run laps until that energy is expelled.

They would come back to you. You wouldn't even have to call them.

11. Dry off with the Big Towel, like you did as a kid.

The fluffy one you wrap yourself in for comfort you refuse to need. It covers from shoulders to shins. You are safe again, hiding under a comforter to stop the bad guys from getting in.

12. Glasses on.

Kick the engine until it's running again. It could sound like a growl or a purr—it's temperamental. You should know not to take it personal.

13. Pretend that it's Fantasy Partner dealing with everything—refilling your water, freshening the air.

Whether the room feels stale or not doesn't matter. Sometimes a room holds a convoluted feeling like lungs hold back the suffocating breath of a sob or a panic attack or how shredded arms hold the rest of the body together, tightly, desperately, because you can't kill yourself or your sister will be sad, and sometimes,

after a bad time, rooms have *that smell*. Incense and weed and silenced or stifled words. Sometimes the room grips its own throat and grapples for a window—

and the toys. Fantasy Partner would deal with the toys. They know you don't like looking at them.

14. Put on music.

Drown out the ringing in your ears with soft strings and cello or some other mellow playlist that you've curated. You don't want to get spooked, so set your lights to a pretty tune. Orange and pink for a sunset. Blue and purple for a full moon.

15. Sit on the edge of the bed and have Towel Time with the cat.

Pet him while he sits on your lap and purrs louder than the music. Scratch between his ears, the base of his tail, he likes that. Let him groom you. Do not think about how his tongue feels like sandpaper. He would never harm you.

Catch him as he becomes so relaxed he starts to roll off of your lap. He will nip your hand because he thinks you pushed him.

Love him even in this dissociated state, when he feels movement and reacts before he realizes it is you he defends himself against. Remember that he was a stray for his formative years—he grew up surviving. These instincts do not disappear overnight, if at all. Love him with the knowledge that he might never grow out of this primal self-protection. Love him for trying.

Love him for asserting his boundaries at all. Love him for telling you what he needs, though he cannot speak.

I don't need a Fantasy Cat. He is perfect.

16. Don the Emotional Support Sweater and the Specific Boxers that Fit Just Right.

This is a reward for your hard work. Wearing your ESS and your SBTFJR gives you the same feeling of being wrapped in a bear hug. They are soft and warm and the ESS is big enough that you aren't squeezed and suffocating, but it will not tangle you in fabric when you are sleeping.

This, you can control. This is predictable.

You think this might be your favorite step of them all.

17. Resituate the stuffed animals so no one feels left out.

The weighted dragon goes on the right. Weighted dinosaur on the left. They had to be switched recently. I am a right-side sleeper, and the dragon was not getting enough love.

The Squishmallows go against the wall, but the squid goes next to my head. I sling an arm over the other dragon, tuck them into the crook of my elbow, and hold the hoof of the triceratops.

Do not think about how it would feel to be held with this much consideration.

18. Pull the covers up to your chin. Try to fall asleep before the bad thoughts get in.

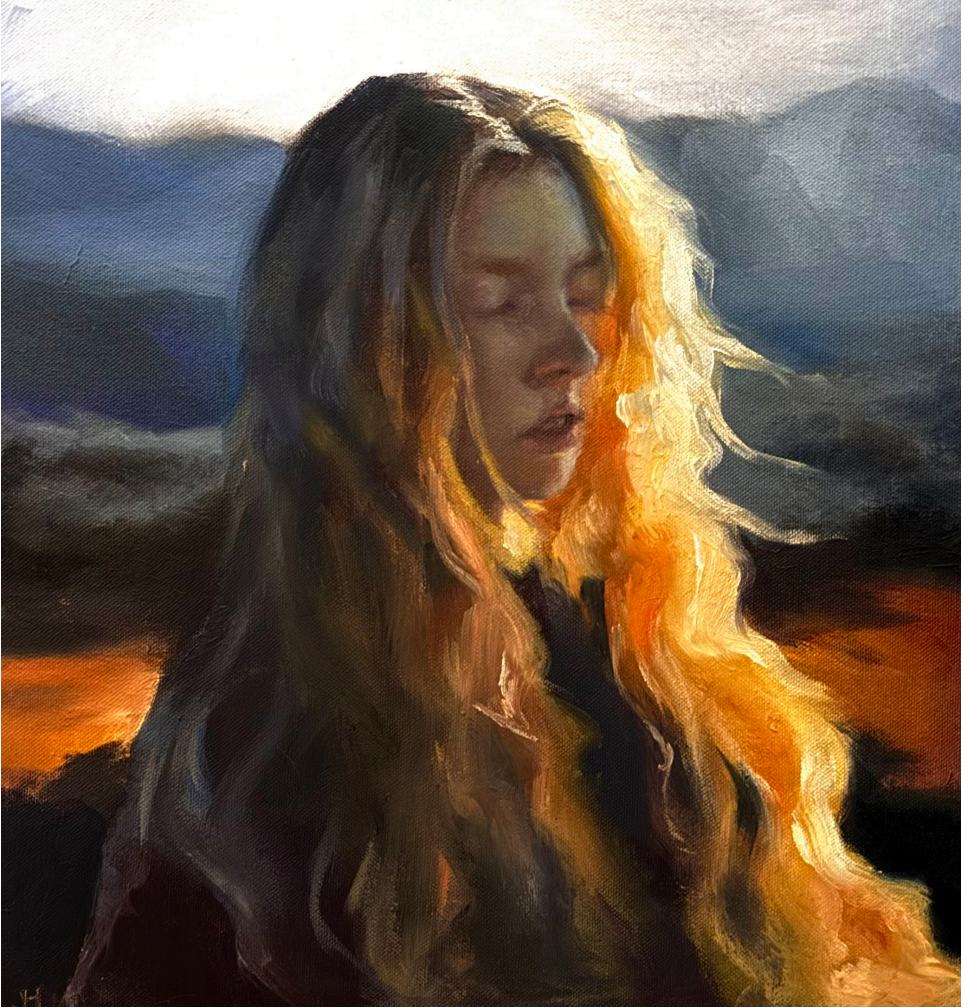
Sometimes getting off knocks you right out. Sometimes, you lay down with your stuffed animals and your cat asleep on your foot, and your *feelings*, and you wonder if you would *want it* with the right person, or if you only crave *this* and synchronized breaths and your hearts kissing as they thump against one another when you lay chest-to-chest.

You don't know what you want. You haven't since Before.

19. Ponder some more on that <sup>weird feeling</sup> and on asexuality and if you've always been asexual, or if it's just him again, asking—kind of singing—teasing, “*Are you suuuure?*”

20. Write about it. Again.

Write about how you're not so sure of anything.



**Sister Golden Hair**

Elise Howe

*14" x 14" Oil Paint*

# Marian

*Elena Saorrano*

In the sea of pouring rain  
Beneath the sheet of clouds  
I reach for you, pray with no shame  
Your absence plummets me further down  
Please sense my desperation, Marian

To the heavens, I wish to the stars  
To the seas, I curse to the waves  
I crave the day you stand near and not afar  
The day you appear before my clouded gaze  
Marian, please hear me cry for you

Marian, demand the seas to be merciful, Marian  
*Eins, zwei, drei, vier*, I count how I call you, Marian

The waters jolt and tug this ship  
I tumble and topple, waiting for you  
Above the raging seas, you softly drift  
I am fearful, for my end is not yet due  
Not without you, Marian, cease these waters

Thalassa has gripped me, now oblivion below here  
My final breath before plunging into the ocean  
*Zieh mich aus dem Meer*  
*Du bist mein Schutzengel, so schön*  
*Ich liebe dich*, Marian

Marian, the sea extinguishes my essence, Marian  
*Eins, zwei, drei, vier*, I count how I call you, Marian

You deny the depths of my soul  
My altar, my saint, my grace from the waves  
My yearning has ended as our spirits are whole  
You liberate me from the grave  
Marian, *mein Schutzengel, mein Heiliger*

## Nightly Comparison

*Isabella Park*

He is lost on lightless new moon nights.  
Covertly stuck between zipper clasps and tight french braids.  
It is an illusion breaker. A great shattering—  
makes one wish glass turned back to sand when it broke,  
makes one wish to have been born different.  
Preferably with an ass that looks impressive in spandex.  
Or something of equivalence like breasts plump  
enough to fill a sweetheart neckline dress.

# Ribcage

*Eris Hembree*

My heart sits in a cage of flesh and bone  
It sits enshrined in the center of my chest  
Trapped within is both love and pain equally sown  
All I am is hidden under my dress

To find me is a brutal affair  
A cruel act of carnage borne of care  
It is to ruin me beyond repair  
It is an irredeemable sin and a sacred prayer

Shatter my ribs  
Rend my flesh  
Rip my heart from my chest  
Taste my heart with your teeth  
Let my blood drip, drip down your face  
Feel my entirety burst sticky and sweet in your jaws

It is messy and unholy  
It is brutal and excruciating  
It is loving and devoted  
It is primal and it is divine

To love is to be consumed  
To be loved is to consume  
We are an ouroboros  
loving flesh consuming loving flesh

Breaking free from that cage  
That sits in our chest



**Pride and Joy**

Robert Smith

*24" x 24" Oil on Panel*

# Call Us When You Need Us

*Sam Pickett*

I follow dad across the road through the moonlit cold towards the neighbors' house. All their lights are on. We go up the driveway, crunching leaves, and approach the front door.

Dad knocks on the door's glass, then pulls it open. An alert system chirps. He pokes his head in, lowers his mask below his lip and yells out to make our presence known. A small reply from somewhere. "Betty," he says. "Where you at?"

"In here." From the hall to the right.

Dad steps inside, so I step inside. He pulls his mask up and pinches it on the bridge of his nose. I have never been inside the neighbors' house before, but I don't take a look around. It is warm, bright. I follow dad.

Miss Betty jumps as we appear in the hallway. She is a little old lady, with short dyed-dark hair and bright red lipstick. She looks at dad. She looks at me. Then she cocks her head sideways and her eyebrows go up. "Oh, hi," she says to me.

"Hi," I say, and I smile at her beneath my mask. I look past her, down the hallway. The lights are on in every room. There is a double-doored closet to the left with a towel draped over one of the doorknobs. Below that there is a wet red splatter soaked thoroughly into the carpet. Blood. I return my attention to Miss Betty. She's smiling at me.

"Wow. It's been awhile," she says.

"It's been awhile," I say, looking at the blood on the floor.

"How've you been?"

"I've been okay."

"Betty," dad says. "On the phone you said—"

"Oh. Yes. John is sitting up now. He's in there." She gestures at the bathroom at the far end of the hallway. In the doorframe there are two pale bare knees peeking, and grunting and breathing emanating from inside. "You two sit in the living room while I put his pants on. I'll call you when I need you."

“Okay,” dad says.

I follow dad to the living room. He sits on the couch, so I sit on the couch. I peel my shirt away from my back, and now I look for the thermostat. There are stacks of books lining the walls, and shelves above them displaying hundreds of little porcelain angels striking various poses. Some pray. Others weep. Most are infantine. I look at myself and dad reflected in a big wall-mounted Sony tv from the mid 2000s as Miss Betty says, “Hold on, hold on, John,” and Mr. John grunts and breathes. Dad looks at the ceiling. He taps his feet and patters his fingers on his kneecaps. A Holy Bible sits on the coffee table in front of the couch, on a black hardcover book without a dust jacket. I slide it out and open it up down the middle. Both pages are blank. I thumb through it a bit and discover that every page is blank, so then I turn it over and look at the title on the spine. *Reasons to Vote for Democrats: A Comprehensive Guide*, by Michael Knowles.

“Okay. He’s ready.” Miss Betty’s voice.

In the Sony TV screen, I see her standing in the hallway, looking at me looking at her. Dad stands up, so I stand up and place the book down. I follow dad to the hallway.

I find the thermostat on the way. It reads eighty-two degrees and I believe it.

We step over the blood on the floor.

Dad goes into the bathroom. I stand outside. Miss Betty is fitting slippers onto Mr. John’s feet—they are all I can see of him in the doorway. “Hey neighbor,” Mr. John says from beyond the off-white wall.

“Hey neighbor,” dad says, his hands on his hips. “Hear you might’ve taken a spill.”

“Heh. Sure as hell did. I—”

“He managed to crawl in here and pull himself up on the toilet,” Miss Betty cuts in. “I didn’t know if I should call but I saw your lights were on and the cars in the driveway and he didn’t want me to call an ambulance.”

“Because I’m not dying and old men fall all the time,” Mr. John says. “I just need some help over to the couch. That’s all I need. No ambulance.”

“No no,” dad says, looking at Miss Betty. “You call us whenever you need us.” Then he extends his hand towards Mr. John.

A frail hand reaches out and latches onto dad's forearm. A bald head comes into frame.

"Get the other side of him," dad says to me.

I go inside the bathroom, and I get the other side of Mr. John. I place a hand in his armpit and use my other as a guiding counterbalance. Not that I need one. There is no weight to Mr. John at all. I'll pull his arm off if I walk too fast. He breathes and he grunts and he farts all the way down the hallway as Dad and I lead him.

"Sorry fellahs," Mr. John says.

"You're alright," Dad says. "You're alright."

We step over the blood on the floor.

We cross the living room slowly, the porcelain angels clinking along with each one of our steps. Then we lower Mr. John onto the couch. He sinks in, grunting and disheveled, his gut hanging out the bottom of his t-shirt and his pants a little too low.

Miss Betty brushes by. "Thank you both so much." She sits down and situates him.

"Absolutely, Betty. We're your neighbors," dad says. "We're sure about that ambulance?"

"Are you sure about that ambulance?" Miss Betty asks Mr. John.

"I'm sure about that goddamn ambulance," Mr. John says. "I'm not dying or anything like that. It's the clot acting up. I got a little faint and fell, is all. Old men fall all the time."

"He's got a blood clot," Miss Betty says to dad.

"Oh no," dad says.

"They say it's because of the vaccine."

"They say that?"

"They say it might be. I don't know about you but we're not going to get that booster. They might make us all get one. We're going to refuse it if they do. They

haven't done enough research."

Dad nods at the floor.

Mr. John grunts.

"Well," dad says. "I think research is good."

"I agree," Miss Betty says. "And we need to kick that old guy out of the office."

Dad chuckles. "I think there are a lot of old guys in office we should get rid of. Unless we had John here at the helm."

"What?" Mr John says.

Miss Betty rubs his knee. "You'd get it all set straight, wouldn't you?" she says to him.

Then Mr. John lurches forward, coughing and gagging. Miss Betty pats his back.

We all look at him.

"What?" Mr. John says. "I'm not dying."

"Just making sure," dad says.

Mr. John laughs.

"Yes sir. John would whip things into shape," dad says.

Everybody agrees.

"Whelp," dad says. "If you are positive about the ambulance, I think we'll get going here if you two are situated." He steps towards the door. I do too.

Miss Betty gets up, and she follows us. The three of us stand by the door. "Thank you both so much," she says.

"Absolutely," dad says.

"We're always able to count on you two. I miss that one being around to mow the lawn." Miss Betty points at me.

“Same here.” Dad slaps my shoulder. “Call us when you need us, Betty.”

“I will,” she says. “Thank you.”

“And you take care of yourself, John,” he talks past Miss Betty.

“What?” Mr. John’s voice from the living room.

Then dad opens the glass door, and I follow him back outside. The chilly night breeze is a relief. The door swings shut behind us, the hinges hissing. Miss Betty waves at us as we walk across the road towards our house.

“They’re sort of weird,” I say to dad.

“Yeah. But they’re our neighbors,” he says.

“Yeah.”

# Heart of Ohio

*Corlan McCollum*

Welcome, one and all, to the Heart of Ohio!  
Where we have, or have had,  
every!

conceivable!

thing!

We have been through hell and come out singing!

Welcome, travelers from distant lands,  
to the bleeding Heart of Ohio!  
Where time spills out backwards  
and unravels in our revolving doors!  
In our vast showroom,  
world-class, unique, and labyrinthine,  
we have seen and will yet see  
every object of human manufacture,  
from the earliest mammoth-bone calendars  
to the exhausted machinations  
of the automated factories  
of this!

poisoned!

Earth!

We have your future at the Heart of Ohio!

Every paper shredded,  
every body burned,  
all these things—and more!  
Half off at the Heart of Ohio!





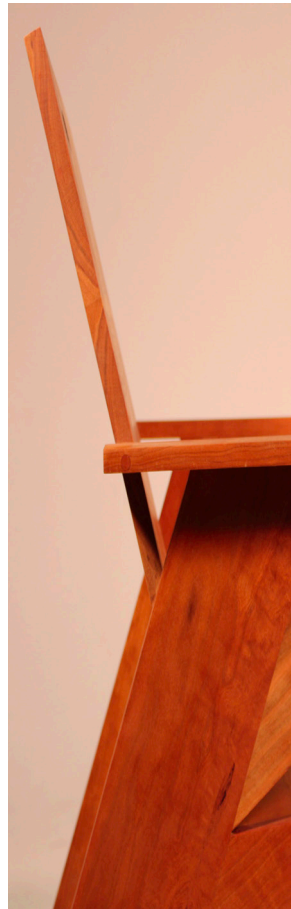
## **Chair 01**

**Joe Chimenti**

*Traditional Wood Joinery*

*Cherry Wood*

*with Danish Oil Finish*



# Along the Perforations

*Amy Schleppenbach*

I'm home on leave from the Army and I open the door to my father's book closet. The smell of musty textbooks, spiral bound notebooks, and old, yellowed books, is a physical presence so I hesitate, half expecting to be yelled at for entering his study without permission. I pick up a random notebook from a shelf and flip through it.

\*\*\*

As kids, my siblings and I would crowd around my father's study, daring each other to enter to ask for television privileges. After a while of our not-so-quiet stage whispered arguments he would close the door and tell us to go play elsewhere.

My father took classes at Purdue and would take notes in various yellow legal notepads, spiral bound lab books, and leatherbound journals. His tiny handwriting was meticulous and any mistakes were annotated in the margins. Later he would type them into his computer, print them out, and put them in big three-inch binders. His study was always off limits but if we were quiet, he would leave the door open and let us watch TV.

\*\*\*

I set the notebook back on another shelf. My father and I had a fight. This would be the last time I talk to him and don't want a physical reminder. I grab a stack of my childhood books and go through the garage, to avoid meeting him and my stepmom. My younger brother is talking with them on the driveway, running interference as I make trip after trip, filling the back of the minivan with my book collection.

\*\*\*

After high school, I took a year of community college but couldn't afford tuition for a second year, so I returned home to help my mother care for my fourteen, all biological, siblings.

While in college, I enjoyed reading my papers to my mother who would correct my grammar or spelling mistakes. She would listen patiently as I read the rubrics to her, pondered over new material, or struggled to make friends with the wide variety of people and cultures I had never encountered before.

When she died of cancer I needed to escape and made the decision to leave home, possibly forever.

\*\*\*

I joined the military and writing became an odd mix of perfunctory flowery language for awards, meticulous annotations for medical documents, dry reports, work emails, and supply logs.

Writing was no longer fun, it was routine and boring. It was a simple fill-in-the-blank. Answer all five W's, who, what, where, when, and why, then submit for review. The only somewhat exciting writing was practicing sworn statements that we were graded on after fast paced training events. This was a chance to tell a story I had witnessed.

Several of my Military Police buddies assured me they became stressful or boring to write after a few months. Their accuracy for legal reasons had to be perfect, the events were either traumatizing to witness or very routine, thus the practice.

One of my Sergeants shouted for me to come into the platoon office.

\*\*\*

I'm trying not to cry as my second grade Catholic teacher scolds me for writing a short story about aliens eating people. I ought to be ashamed, it is un-Christian, unladylike, demonic, and I should be spanked. What would my parents say?

\*\*\*

I stammer to explain my actions were sanctioned by my Sergeant First Class, and my Second Lieutenant chuckles, asking what I was going on about. She just wanted me to help one of the Sergeants proofread his college paper since I was good at reading and writing. I should finish getting my associate's degree and become an officer, she says. You'd be good at it.

\*\*\*

My second grade teacher, who called my writing demonic, could not believe I was reading fiction years above my grade and believed me only after I told her the plot of Jack London's *White Fang*, a book for seventh graders. She confirmed this with the librarian who had honestly wanted to see if I would read it when I finished my Scholastic reading challenge early then had filled in more books on the back of the page, hoping for extra points for our class to win the pizza party.

The meeting with my parents and principal went much better than I expected as my principal expressed regret that there was not an advanced program I could be put into then expressed a desire to read any books I published in the future. I still got spanked for my aliens eating people story, which was taken down from the hallway display. Our class did not win the pizza party, which I blamed myself for. I should have read more books.

\*\*\*

Despite the mixed messages, I was destined for great things, a responsibility I didn't want, and so scared by my second grade encounter, I wouldn't write for fun again until high school.

Fanfiction became a safe anonymous way to write whatever I wanted. Criticism from strangers online was easier to take than from those who loved you.

Then one of my teachers introduced my class to journaling. I poured my soul into works I swore I would never share after my classmates laughed at my open prompt story about a frightening event from my childhood. I even told my teacher not to read them, writing in big letters at the top of my submissions that they were now private.

Finally, after years of guilt, long after my grade school had been closed down and my encouraging principal had passed away, I rewrote my second grade alien story to redeem myself.

The aliens were now vegetarians and ate carrots, not people. I should get an editor and publish children's books, my English teacher remarked. This is very cute.

\*\*\*

I load my journals full of fanfiction into the van, say a stilted goodbye to my father, and leave. It was a quiet ride to my brother's house and we reminisced about our mom. He grins at me and says he snagged her typewriter from the garage since our stepmom was throwing all of her old things away.

Teary eyed, I fish the heavy contraption from the backseat and hear her typewriter clacking away, as she meticulously pulls back the carriage bar as it dinged when it got to the edge of the paper.

Her Braille typewriter only made raised dots on paper, each of the keys creating a raised dot in a six matrix cell that corresponded with the Braille alphabet. The raised dots could be felt and read by our mother who was completely blind,

but I only ever learned to sight read them.

The real reward was waiting to pull the feed edge off the stacks of thick stock paper when she was done with them. The typewriter still has motes of fine white dust and the wonderful smell of cardstock in it. We would be severely punished if we tore the perforations before she typed on them, since the feed edge was needed to keep her sheets aligned in the typewriter. I inhale deeply.

\*\*\*

I am a kindergartener, placing a Barney sticker on the back of my mom's typewriter, wanting to help her with her work. I was scolded severely. She doesn't want the typewriter to be damaged but leaves the sticker on the back if I promise not to put more stickers on it.

\*\*\*

I start crying in the van. There is sticker residue where other stickers had been scraped off, since I quickly broke my little kid's promise, but the faded Barney one is still there. My brother punches my arm. He's driving and can't see the road through his tears.

\*\*\*

I'm in college, sitting at a computer and typing yet another paper, wondering if I will ever publish a book knowing those who encouraged me to have all passed. I struggle after years of being my own worst enemy to find my voice. Do I really want to put such a hidden part of myself on paper and share the pain with strangers? I'm three years into my English Major and still haven't decided yet.

# Doomsday

*Evan Allee*

As the Sun falls behind the yew tree,  
I watch you making your rounds,  
and I think to myself,  
*When will my world end?*  
*Will we be 90 and 93—*  
*next-door neighbors in assisted living?*  
*Or will we be 25 and 28—*  
*will I die falling?*

As the Sun sets behind the funeral home  
you hug your partner, brother of the deceased,  
and I see how Grief—The Sculptor—digs  
brute fingers and blunt nails into the faces  
of my loved ones, rearranging their features,  
carving bags under their eyes and frown lines  
where there should be dimples,  
and I understand his inability  
to write his brother's obituary.

I imagine the damnation of living  
with a sibling as a corpse, and my chest  
becomes so cold and hollow,  
I fear I mirror Joshua. A grimace  
slashing a pale face, frozen on waxy lips,  
and I do not feel that mine would ever thaw.  
I avoid the once-warm man who laughed  
with his brother while I laughed with you.  
He had a gap between his front teeth.  
He had a full head of beautiful,  
brown curls that are now dull,  
and piled atop his concaved skull.

Your hair is curled, and I imagine you  
in the future, your wedding in Sedona,  
hair flowing in front of red-rocked mountains,  
so vibrant and alive that staring into the Sun  
would bring relief to my watering eyes.  
It is pitifully dim compared to you,  
but I have to thank it for being

the most appropriate thing  
to metaphorize you. On July 15th,  
you burst from the Sun,  
a star in the shape of a big sister—  
too incandescent to be concealed  
by the casket I imagined you in, unbidden,  
when I finally took a look at Joshua, and  
that body looked *nothing* like him.

My life is spent preparing and I am sure  
you would be concerned, but when  
a happy man is scorned by death,  
it's natural—taking shelter  
from the storm. But time  
is a dormant volcano—  
and is that an earthquake, or the cry  
of a newly-dead's loved one?  
Are you in your 60s—is it quick and painless?  
A heart attack? A car crash? Homicide?  
Type II diabetes? Chronic obstructive  
pulmonary disease?  
Will you forget me  
years before time rips my soul from yours?  
Have you been suffering—are we relieved  
your pain has an expiration?  
Will we be 90 and 93—mercifully,  
next-door neighbors  
in assisted living?  
Or 25 and 28—will one of us die  
falling?

If mercy is not a privilege I am granted,  
I will spare a warning:  
If the world tried to take you, I would  
burn it to the ground. If it didn't give you back,  
I would light up the ash, I would let flames  
swallow exorbitant wealth and drown the ocean  
in orange—global warming is a hoax;  
it's just a person in mourning.  
I am warning the world  
for the horror I would become,  
I am no longer a pacifist; I am a liaison  
with a gun, shooting at the Sun, and as sparks  
rain over the heads of the innocent, my hands

will stay cupped, outstretched in demand  
for the remnants of Heaven to give  
what was once my sister back to me,  
even if she is one spark of debris. I will be  
the reason we are cloaked in darkness, I will be  
the heat that suffocates the stragglers.

This will be of no concern to me; I would rather  
be damned than an only child. Moral codes  
are inconsequential without you to love me;  
they're no more than a conch shell reverberating  
vain blood back to me. The rain will make mud  
and your footsteps will be as permanent  
as the relentless shore of Destin Beach  
where I walked behind you,  
my little feet sinking into your steps—  
the waves ate the proof of our lives,  
yet we continued to feed it,  
but I will let my vengeance starve it  
without you to walk with. Beaches we once loved  
will no longer exist for tiny feet to skip through;  
I will not watch children who are not our own  
crash through foamy waves and dig for seashells  
while I dig a grave.

What a sick and twisted sculpture  
I could make ... But who am I, really,  
compared to the center of the solar system?  
And what could *I* do the day the Sun  
decides to collect you? What will I do  
the day my world ends?  
Will I warm my hands  
to mold Death's grimace  
from your cold face? Use leftover clay  
to stuff cracks in the atmosphere,  
and force the universe to share  
its last breath with you?

No. I am a poet, but I am a coward at best,  
so I wash my hands and premeditate  
a nonfiction piece of a world so uninhabitable  
I will inherit the title "Sculptor." This is a  
universe crafted with words in the shape  
of you, in spirit or in chalk. I will try not to

balk when the stars blink at me  
like defibrillator machines.

I stare back  
through the pitch black, wondering  
if this is a sign  
to warm my hands to write, wondering  
if Grief  
will perform a mimicry of mercy in a dream—  
the conformation that I will write  
my best man speech  
before I write  
her obituary.



## **Family**

Emma Cremeans

*Digital Painting*

# Fatal Development

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

I think you long  
for the days when  
I was still a part of you.

Developmentally,  
there's a period  
where the born baby  
still cannot distinguish  
itself from the mother.

How long does it take  
for the mother to  
distinguish itself  
from the baby?

What happened when you  
realized you couldn't see  
your face in my reflection?

I think you long  
for the days  
when I made you  
feel whole.

After birth, the uterus  
is a gaping wound,  
"dinner plate sized."

To fill the void,  
did you start putting me  
on your platter?

Thin, spaghetti hair.  
Candy apple cheeks.  
Olives for eyes.  
Did I taste good going down?

Marshmallowy fists.  
Plucked chicken thighs.  
Fleshy, full lips.  
Did I curb your craving?

I see your face  
in my reflection  
with my blood  
dripping down your throat.

Was it worth it?  
Do you feel whole again?

I don't think I've ever felt whole,  
but I'm afraid of building something  
I cannot help but bite into.

## Second Place

*Hayden Garris*

Heard about your second life, found  
the writing on your Facebook wall.  
A wall between us, where fissures  
hide behind lines of neat prose,  
typed above idyllic photos  
of you in some faraway  
fairyland, where money,  
your currency for love,  
buys you the life  
you always dreamed of.

I cried when I read the status,  
not because you were no longer mine.  
I cried because you chose again  
to put us, your family, in second.  
Were we another achievement?  
Left behind and succeeded?  
Replaced, not because we're not enough,  
I know better, but because you "fell in love."  
How much love does one person need?  
Is love, like money, a kind of greed?

You amount to more than money.  
We want you, we're starving  
for someone who doesn't exist.  
For someone who puts us first,  
the ones you pledged to provide.  
The ones who know you're dying.  
Time is finite, yours is ticking.  
Your final breaths are all we want,  
your final words, hugs, and kisses.  
The last of your wasted minutes.  
So when our children ask, we can say,  
"Gone is the man, but his love remains."

# Grieving in Advance

Ashley Vega

I've always had a sliding scale of anxiety about my father's mortality. Him being nearly 50 when I was born didn't help that and made me much more aware than my peers that, *Wow, my dad is old*. Having a parent in that age range was incredibly abnormal where I grew up, and my classmates in elementary school constantly confused my dad for my grandpa, and I'd have to correct them when they commented on how cool and nice my grandpa was. I'd turn around at lunch and say, "That's not my grandpa, it's my dad." Eventually, they caught on, but there were definitely kids who thought I was lying or joking around about that for a while. It made me overly aware that my dad was notably older than most parents, at least back in the early 2000s.

When I was around ten years old, I realized my dad's age meant I'd lose him far before I was ready. Not that I'll ever be ready, but that it could happen when I least expect it. That was the moment the anxiety crawled its way into me. It wasn't even particularly rational as far as anxieties go because it wasn't tied to his current health status; it was more of a total acknowledgment that he was getting older, and I was starting to understand and grapple with what that meant. Grieving the living became a very concrete concept to me because his aging meant he could die. Back then it was the thought process of a kid who has older parents and very little lived experience with death. I'd come to learn that even as death did happen to and around me, it didn't ease my fears about my dad, but instead exacerbated them and made me imagine what I'd say at his funeral, how I would put his eulogy together to sum up what he meant to me.

Speaking of eulogies, we started discussing the idea of me writing his around my early-to-mid teens. I'm still undecided on whether that helped quell my worries or just made my imagination run more wild. This is also when, as a family, we started having realer conversations on the possibility of him dying. He was in his early sixties at the time, and once again not particularly ailing, but we had to talk about it anyways. My refusal to talk about it started then, and to a large degree still follows me now. To this day, my dad tells me, "Don't cry when I die, I've lived a good life." As if that's going to make it easier for me to accept or live with. I'm happy he feels fulfilled, but how am I meant to live without him?

Thankfully, these conversations didn't start to feel real or carry weight until my early twenties. Up to this point, his health had been fine, but this was when alarming things started to happen. This was a period where I started thinking, *Oh shit, it could really happen. This isn't just a child's worst nightmare anymore*. The instance that brought this to the surface for me was when I was 23 and got

a call from my mom telling me my dad was in the hospital. He had a severe nosebleed, one that was nearly impossible to stop. He had to call an ambulance, and later I was told his apartment looked like a crime scene; there was so much blood. He'd gotten a couple before this one that weren't quite as catastrophic but seemingly served as omens for an occurrence of this magnitude. At the time, I was 400 miles away and felt helpless standing in the break room at work. Everything would end up fine, but it pecked at that part of me that, on train rides home, would think about the fact that I was so far, and he was in his seventies.

Now, he's in his mid-seventies. He and my mother, many years divorced at this point, are roommates. I've moved back to Indiana not only to go back to school, but to be closer to him. He's just been diagnosed with cancer. Fortunately, not the kind that kills, but here I am, feeling like that terrified ten-year-old girl again.

Nothing prepares you for how horrible the word "cancer" is when you hear it about someone you love so deeply. It's not like I'd never heard about someone having cancer before, but now I intimately know what it feels like because it's wriggled its way into my family, into the one person I can say I love more than anyone on this earth. I hear what the doctors say about outcomes, and I *do* believe them, truly. They're not deceiving my family and I when they say this is highly curable. That doesn't stop me from getting the news and staring up into the dark of my ceiling and sobbing, from catastrophizing. It doesn't stop me from telling my siblings, who I know are also processing this and hurting over it, that I'm not willing to face the possibility of this being the thing that kills him. I won't hear it, and I don't want to talk about it. I'm scared, obviously. It all makes me come off as a petulant child, a porcelain doll, but I don't care.

My dad is my best friend. He's the person who made me care about keeping up with the news, shaping my political philosophy very early on. He gave me a comedic edge when I was young because we watched late-night TV together all the time. He let me know all the time that no matter how old I was, watching cartoons would keep me in touch with the kid in me. He's taught me everything I know about life. I cannot imagine the world without him. I don't know who I am without him.

Parents talk a lot about their kids being their "mini-me's," but since I was old enough to imagine a life where I traveled and saw the world, my dad has looked at me and said, "You're just like me, not afraid to go out into the world." Even though he taught me to go into this world unafraid of it, what he doesn't know is that, even though I know what he means when he says that, it's not fully true. I'm scared of this world more than he can even fathom if he's not here to keep guiding me through its twists and turns. Without his knowledge, his smart remarks, or him telling me "Love you more" before we hang up calls, I don't know how

to navigate this life. How am I supposed to make sense of anything if one day I can't call him every day?



## **Mend**

Sarah Montanez

*8" x 8" Found Image, Archival Inkjet Print on Habotai  
Silk, Embroidery Floss, Embroidery Hoop*

# The Sleepwriter

Evan Allee

1934

Ellis Covett has always been a sleepwalker. He assumes it's because of his overactive imagination.

He has so many words that it is overwhelming attempting to find somewhere to put them. He's almost glad that he runs on such little sleep. When he gets a full night, his imagination thrives like moisture feeding a fungus.

Imagination is a blessing and a curse, if Ellis believed in blessings. Somehow, Ma still did, making wishes on stars and eyelashes, even if they were fished from her eye. She argued that they counted anyway, and she and Ellis needed all the luck they could get.

She tries finding purpose in everything in a desperate manner. She has a mantra: "*expectin' the worst, hopin' for the best.*"

Ellis doesn't have a mantra. Ellis has school and a journal and somehow, he still has time to think up a universe that only he has access to. He loses hours to paper and pen, writing faster than he can think. He starts new projects before finishing the multiples prior, hunched over his desk until his back ached. He writes until the sun goes down, or until his father gets home, and then he would lie in bed and think of stories to write until he falls asleep.

Ellis often wished that his father had died in the war. Then it would be him and Ma and he wouldn't have to hear crashes or see Ma pretending like she hadn't been crying, and he wouldn't have to live with the stomach-curdling guilt of knowing he can't do anything but make it worse.

Instead, Ellis goes away. He goes away when the world is too loud, when it's too quiet, crowded, stifling, when he wants to be anywhere but where his physical body currently is.

Sometimes he can't figure out if he's awake or if he's sleepwalking, and he doesn't hate the feeling.

\*\*\*

Ellis wakes on Christmas day, shivering. The mountains are frozen over and

capped in white and the cold seeps through the window like smoke. He bundles up and pads to the living room, where Ma is stoking the fire. She's wrapped in fabric, and when she turns, she smiles a quirked, lopsided twist. Ma's smiles are rare, and Ellis thinks they're as bright as the center of a flame.

"C'mere," she says. She walks on her knees to the center of their sad excuse of a rug, where a lump sits, hidden under a blanket.

Ellis goes. He sits cross-legged next to the thing and waits with his hands in his lap.

"Open 'er up," Ma says.

"What's it?" Ellis asks. He lifts the very corner of the blanket and finds a hard, black case.

"Open 'er up," she repeats. She's almost grinning. The skin on her nose wrinkles.

He opens 'er up. The thing is a latched case with a leather handle. It's an odd square shape and a bit clunky, but it would be useful when he could go back to school in person. Ellis thinks he should be more outwardly excited, but excitement is a foreign feeling. He isn't sure how to show it on his face.

More than anything, Ellis is confused. He hasn't done anything to deserve this, and the depression wiped the school out months ago. He thinks about asking why she's giving this to him, but he doesn't know if that would seem ungrateful, so he decides not to.

"Thanks, Ma," he said quietly. He pets the dust from the sides of it.

It takes him a few more swipes before he realizes she hasn't responded. When he finally looks at her, she's hiding her mouth behind a fist. Ellis frowns, because he knows he's not funny. "What?"

She nods towards the case. "Open it."

Ellis pops the latch and lifts the lid.

He immediately slams the case closed again when he sees circular keys. Denial is the safest and easiest option for them both, so Ellis pulls the blanket back over the typewriter and pushes it over to Ma.

After three or four tries, Ellis is able to choke, "No."

Ma waves a hand like it's unimportant, leaving Ellis at a loss for words despite the number of notebooks he's filled.

"Ma," Ellis repeated, more urgently. He glances down and finds he had subconsciously tucked the blanket around the typewriter like he was putting it to bed. When he blinks, he sees "Remington" branded onto the back of his eyelids. "This is—Ma, what'd this cost? It's too—we're not...doin' good." He cast a quick look over his shoulder, as if mentioning his father would summon him. "Pa's fixin' to flatten us—"

"Nope," Ma said firmly, "he won't. We ain't gonna say nothin' to him."

Withholding information from his father was an unspoken safety precaution. Never once had they spent money on unnecessary purchases, and Ellis can't imagine his mother doing such a thing. She struggles enough to find food to put on the table. Not to mention his father would notice the money missing, and the consequences of that are too dire to be worth any happiness.

"I'm...*mighty* grateful for this, Ma." Ellis's voice cracks, as it's been doing recently. He swallows the burning coal of righteousness, "but we can't be throwin' money at that."

"Darlin', it ain't cost nothin'," Ma says. "Rich folks'll toss out just 'bout anything."

Ellis blinks. He waits for more stipulations, but Pa's ignorance to the typewriter seemed to be the only one.

He doesn't quite know what to do. He's never received a gift. Pa says that how hard he works to provide for them is a gift enough. He said that people get gifts if they earn them, but that Ellis hasn't done anything worthy of one.

Ma said every day was a gift, but every day Ellis wakes and can't find it in himself to be grateful for receiving it.

Ellis opens the case and frowns at the typewriter, a gift, and he still doesn't understand what he did to earn it.

"Why?" he asks.

Ma's face seems to melt, almost curling in on itself. Ellis wishes he could shove the word back in his mouth or take the typewriter and run so he didn't have to look at sadness he'd put on her face.

“Cuz you’re a good boy, Ellis.”

“Thank ya,” he says. He avoids her eyes and hopes she moves on, even if Ellis’s confusion hasn’t been cleared.

She doesn’t seem assuaged. If anything, she looks conflicted. Ellis doesn’t know how to handle soft feelings, but Ma does. She caresses his face like she might cry, and the sentimentality makes him very desperately wish he could hide.

“I wan’cha to be happy. Be some’un’s and make ‘em happy,” she says. She takes a sad little breath. “Wan’cha to be a good man.”

They were more than aware of his father’s negative traits, but they were never discussed. Ma’s implication feels almost illegal. She lets it simmer for a moment, but it quickly boils over. She withdraws her hand, and Ellis’s face burns when he registers what else she’d said. His stomach turns when imagining himself as “someone’s.”

He’s never liked the idea of going with someone, even when he sees Beth from school looking at him, and he sees the way the other boys look at her. He doesn’t think he feels those things for people. His mother mentioning this makes him wonder if she somehow knows that his romantic feelers are broken, and his cheeks hurt from the heat. On top of this, if his Ma and Pa are an example of what it is to “be someone’s,” that is the last thing Ellis wants.

“Do anythin’ for ya. Ya know?” she whispers, bringing Ellis back to the present. “Anythin’.”

He hates himself for his immediate bitterness. He nods anyways, rolls a shoulder and stretches his neck and notes where bitterness and shame feel in his body for when he needs to write about it next. Shame, right there in his trachea. Bitterness, in his cheeks and his clenched teeth. And that other lingering feeling, that nauseous dread in his stomach when he thinks about being someone’s.

But he needs to look excited. And grateful—and he is, he *really* is, but there is such an overwhelming mixture of surprise and confusion and anger and discomfort that he ends up unfocusing his eyes in the way he does when he needs to power through something.

He says, “I know, Ma.”

She tugs at the blanket under his knee, teasing him. “I’d even pick through some’uns trash.”

He snorts so he can hurtle the emotional moment back to lightheartedness and tries not to focus on how tired Ma sounds when she tries not to sound tired.

“Can’t wait to see what’cha come up with,” Ma says. Ellis knows what a conclusion sounds like, and he nearly vibrates with the anticipation of being alone with the typewriter. She closes the case, latches it, and waves him off. “Go, go. Best get started now.”

Ellis got started then. He sets the case on his desk with the softness one would handle a newborn baby with and pops the latch, which he wouldn’t do with a baby.

The typewriter is made of a sturdy metal, painted a glossy black with a red trademark sticker on the top left of the cover. The typebars are a bit crooked, and when he presses a key, they show themselves and disappear again like ground-hogs. “Remington Portable” is in gold lettering, impossible to miss over the black.

Ellis rips a blank page from one of his notebooks and fiddles with loading it until he figures it out. He scans the keyboard for the letters he wants, running his fingers along each key and memorizing the order they’re in, testing them, feeling the steel that he swears will never be cold again, and Ellis writes.

Ellis sleepwalks less and writes more.

## 1938

Ellis dreamed that one day, he would be a writer talented enough for he and Ma to have a house that she chose, with her own car, and a larger garden where she had the freedom to grow more than vegetables.

He didn’t expect that his first publication would be Ma’s obituary.

The *Sheridan Post* arrives in what is now his front yard, and Ellis unfolds it to find his mother’s face on page two. Her smile is posed. It is not the smile with the wrinkled nose or the lopsided quirk.

He starts to read, but he doesn’t need to. He’d toiled over it up until the day the funeral home needed it. It is not his best work, and he hates that.

Just to torture himself, Ellis scans it. He gets as far as:

*Dorothy A. Covett (Preston), 39, died at her home on Thursday, October 20th*

before he curses at it, drops the paper on the kitchen counter, and retreats to the typewriter.

He makes himself think of new stories he can write instead of how sick he feels, and how the house still smells like cleaning supplies, and how lucky he is that her blood blends in with the red bricks of the hearth.

Ellis knows he isn't funny, but he jokes to himself.

*At least Pa's dead too. I can write whenever I want now.*

## 1940

Ellis works enough to keep himself afloat and writes when he's not working. Writing brings in very little income, but it keeps him sane, and Ellis thinks that has to count for something.

## 1942

When Ellis checks the mailbox, he's hoping for a congratulatory letter from one of the seventeen magazines he submitted his story to.

Instead, it is an order to report for induction.

\*\*\*

Ellis says goodbye to his mother in May. The sun is still bleary-eyed in the early hours of dawn, and Ellis needs to head towards the train station.

He'd learned young that dwelling on the carelessness of the hand he was dealt was a futile thing. Fairness is an unfamiliar concept; one he seldom knows or understands. Waiting on fairness to show its cowardly face is an otiose endeavor.

Though he'd attempted for years to rationalize this, Ellis still can't help but dwell on how unfair it is that Ma is buried next to the man that killed her.

\*\*\*

Ellis doesn't want to make friends, but Gabriel Cassidy is quietly adamant and talks mostly about his family. Ellis thinks he might just need someone to talk about them with. Gabriel has six siblings. He'd hoped that he and his brothers would be stationed together, but one was assigned to the Air Force and the other was already dead.

“What about you?” Gabriel asks.

“Only child,” Ellis says.

Gabriel doesn’t push. Ellis thinks that if he has to have a friend, he’ll keep Gabriel.

“What are you always writing about?”

Ellis passes over his small notebook. Gabriel scans the framework for a scene he wants to write for a story he hasn’t fully fleshed out yet. He nods, passing the notebook back to Ellis. Ellis scans it himself, trying to read it from the eyes of someone who’s reading it for the first time.

“Nice,” Gabriel says. “So he goes back in time and, what, like, fucks around with things that have happened already?”

“I think so,” Ellis says. He scratches the stubble on his jaw. “Dunno how, though.”

“Well, I’d read it,” Gabriel says. “Write me when it’s done, yeah? Or mail me a copy?”

“Will do.”

## 1943

Ellis watches the other men write letters to their loved ones. He taps the back of his pen on a piece of paper and tries to think of ideas for a story. His imagination has subdued with age, but it is still there.

Gabriel asks him, “You don’t have anyone at home?”

Ellis shakes his head and writes a new idea instead of verbally answering.

Writes in dead loved one’s voice, sends to no one, returns to sender, reads them as if received from loved one.

“Cuz he don’t talk to anyone,” Johnston says. His words are spoken towards his lap, where he scribbles chicken scratch onto a piece of paper. His words are obscured through the pen cap between his lips. “Hard to talk to someone who only knows two words: his first and last name.”

“Man, why do you always have to be a dick?” Gabriel asks.

“Cuz I know you’ll always defend him,” Johnson laughs. “Y’all fags or what? Acting like a fuckin’ knight in shining armor over here.”

A few other men snicker. Ellis hears someone else say something, but he doesn’t bother listening.

Lieutenant McCavy says, “Enough.”

Gabriel shoots Ellis a look, but Ellis keeps his eyes on his paper. They finish writing in silence. Ellis thinks he feels Lt. McCavy looking at him, but he doesn’t turn his head to check.

\*\*\*

“Shit,” Lt. McCavy says. He crouches at the entrance of the foxhole, looking back and forth between Ellis and Gabriel. “Thought this one was mine.”

“s’alright, sir,” Ellis says.

Gabriel mumbles something and rubs his eyes. While Ellis is sat up, he fixes the blanket barrier between him and Gabriel and tucks Gabriel’s arm back under it.

Lt. McCavy looks Ellis up and down, then leaves without another word. Ellis thinks of stories to write until he falls asleep.

**1944**

Gabriel is killed in Ireland.

Ellis knew the army would inform his family, but he still wrote to them.

\*\*\*

Ellis doesn’t have any ideas for stories that don’t have to do with death. He lets his letter for Gabriel’s family be the last story he writes.

\*\*\*

Ellis goes away while it happens. He sees his lieutenant and he sees the barrel of a pistol and he closes his eyes and goes away until it’s over. It hurts. He’s had worse. McCavy breathes down his neck and then the moisture there is cooling and he can breathe again. He doesn’t want to. Breathing means he’s alive which means it’s real. The zip of McCavy’s pants sounds to Ellis like a gunshot. He

throws Ellis's blanket back over him, says something, and climbs out of Ellis's foxhole.

He wants to shoot McCavy and then himself. He wants to scream, even though he isn't sure his voice is capable of it. He wants to tear into the soil with his bare hands and only speak with his fists from now on. He wants to shroud himself with his genetics and become someone he swore he'd never be; a shell-shocked caricature of a person so irate that they send him away for the safety of others. He wants to terrorize, like a rabid dog until someone has mercy on him and puts him down.

Ellis does none of those things. He lies unblinking in the pitch black until he needs to get up and pretend like he doesn't wish a shell had been dropped on him in the night.

\*\*\*

Ellis's unit is deployed to Germany.

He bumps into a German soldier. He looks probably about as shocked as Ellis feels, but Ellis's shock resides in the fact that he thinks, for a moment, that this man is his father. They look unsettlingly similar. He freezes, like he used to when his father pinned him with the same look this man is.

Muscle memory forces Ellis from inaction as the soldier raises his gun.

Ellis checks the soldier's pockets after he's killed him. There's a picture of a woman and a little girl in his lapel pocket. Ellis flips the photo and tucks it back in with their faces pressed against the man's heart.

\*\*\*

Ellis gets deployed to Belgium.

**1945**

He's moving through the woods and from the corner of his eye, a tree bursts. Ellis drops to the ground, and an artillery shell explodes in the branches above him. He's not fast enough to tuck his legs away before hot steel is flying towards him, slashing into his lower half. He doesn't know if the pain forces him into silence or if the explosion has deafened him.

He doesn't look down when a medic wraps his legs in splints. They pull open his shirt and something pokes and prods him and he realizes that his torso was hit

as well. In the medical tent, they try to put a mask over his face, and he recoils from it.

“It’s going to hurt, and we need you to be still,” a medic says. She tries to wrangle the anesthetic mask back over his head, and he jerks away from it.

“I’ll be still,” Ellis says. He fears he won’t have a choice on his consciousness anyway. He wants the choice. He wants to be awake when they touch him. The loss of blood is making his lips and face tingle. The vicious battering of his heart against his ribs makes his vision swim.

The mask goes over his face.

Two minutes or two days could have passed by the time Ellis opens his eyes next. He’s at a real hospital. The doctors have British accents. One pries his eyes open, shining a light into them.

Ellis feels his chest vibrate with what he assumes is a growl. His hearing has returned. It is a dog-whistle shoved into his ear canal, and he would choke out as many medical professionals as needed if it meant they would stop touching him.

“Get off,” he thinks he says.

“We can’t do that,” someone says. They pull the splint off. The blood that glued his wound to the fabric comes off as well. Ellis makes a noise that sounds more animal than human and lunges for their hands.

More hands. They grab his wrists and hold him down at his chest and his shoulders. They cut his pants from his legs. They rub his shoulders and it feels worse than the shrapnel did. They try to squeeze his hand, so he tucks his hands under his thighs. The surgeons prod at his legs and turn them this way and that and look through the holes that should not be there. His legs look like they’ve been butchered. One looks purple. He tries to swing them over the bed to stand, but they don’t move. He knows he can’t walk. He doesn’t know why he’s not able to stand. A cool hand rubs over the back of his neck. He feels the coldness of a gun and hands on his bare legs and hips. He leans over the side of the cot and vomits.

More voices. They say, “We’re just changing the dressings.” They say, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” when Ellis’s growls turn to puffs of panicked breaths. They speak in soothing tones, like mothers do to their children. Ellis feels like a little boy, running to Ma with a skinned knee or a busted lip. He doesn’t think he’s cried since he was that little, but something is coming from him and it sounds like a sob. They say, “Just hold on. Just a little longer. You’re so brave.”

The surgeon says, “The leg has to go before the gangrene spreads.”

Ellis says, “I don’t care, I don’t care. I don’t  *fucking*  care— *get off*  of me. Get off.”

He does not have time to think of anything before his mouth is covered and the room turns hazy. Ellis hopes he dies.

\*\*\*

Ellis learns that the sleepwalking has resumed when he wakes, sprawled on the floor of his hospital room. Pain flares and pulses from his torso and both legs, but when Ellis looks down, there is only one. It ends under the knee.

The nurses hurry in and he doesn’t know why he asks, but he doesn’t think it’d hurt.

“Can I have my leg back?”

The nurses look at him very sadly. Ellis takes that as a no.

\*\*\*

Ellis is discharged.

He thinks he should probably sell the house. Just the thought of how much effort that will take exhausts him, so he avoids his parents’ bedroom at the end of the hallway and does not use the fireplace.

**1946**

He can’t always remember his dreams, but he can piece them together by where he wakes up.

He wakes up at the hearth, clutching the wheels of his chair. He assumes he dreamed about holding Ma’s cracked head together. He is squeezing the wheels of his chair, and his hands ache.

He wakes up at the backdoor his father killed himself outside of.

\*\*\*

He doesn’t always wake up where he’s sleepwalked to. Sometimes he wakes up in his bed. He knows he’d sleepwalked because his crutches are somewhere

he didn't leave them. Sometimes he wakes up with his prosthetic carelessly donned and his stump aches.

Sometimes Ellis dwells on the hand he was dealt, and he decides that an amputated limb is not his most painful loss.

\*\*\*

Ellis woke up at his desk.

He'd dug the typewriter from the closet in his sleep. It glares up at him. His fingers are poised to type.

He puts it away. He has nothing to write about, and the things that will come out of him are nothing he wants to see in words.

\*\*\*

Ellis starts working at Hoover's Clock Repair. He finds that he likes fixing things that are fixable. His co-workers are nice, even on days where he can't speak or days when his stump feels like ice and fire at the same time, or on days that he wishes he didn't wake up.

## 1947

Ellis has been out of combat for two years, but he's spent the better half of this year battling with the sleepwalking and the typewriter. His subconscious wants him to fix something that cannot be fixed. He does not have it in him to try. He doesn't want to.

\*\*\*

When he wakes up at the typewriter again, he sees that he'd loaded it with paper. Packing it up and putting it away sounds like climbing a mountain, so Ellis leaves it and hops back into bed.

## 1948

Ellis works and goes to his doctors appointments and physical therapy and finally sells the house. In his apartment, he reads books that have nothing to do with the military or any wars. He tries reading romance novels, because perhaps this broken part of him is fixable. Perhaps it is true that he hasn't met "the right person" yet.

He finishes a few, but he finds them very boring. He has never felt any of these feelings. He thinks he would be perfectly content living with a friend for the rest of his life.

He wonders if that friend could have been Gabriel.

\*\*\*

Ellis hates romance books because he hates what they make him dream about.

Now that he's read what romance feels like to other people, his subconscious has taken those constructions of feelings and crafted them into recurring dreams where he enjoys the attack.

After he wakes, he thinks about when McCavy will die and feels relieved. He assumes he wouldn't feel relieved if he had enjoyed it.

He returns all of the romance novels to the library. He prefers horror.

**1949**

Ellis's dreams become more vivid. They force memories to the surface of his mind. Even in his sleep, he does not know what to do with them.

Sleepwalking feels like a physical escape attempt. In dreams where he wishes he could run or hide or fight, he wakes up somewhere he did not fall asleep.

The typewriter mocks him. He wakes in front of it and thinks, I could write about it, but his thoughts become so jumbled and desperate for release that he can't sort out one sentence at a time.

\*\*\*

He dreams about finding Ma dead.

He wakes at the typewriter. In his sleep, he has written.

**She still smells like vanilla extract. I wrap my hands around her skull and hold it together. This feels like the right thing to do. The bones scrape together. It feels like potsherds. It's not too different from terra cotta. I want to throw up. I don't. I am worried whatever is left of her brain will fall out if I move. I want to salvage what I can.**

In his sleep he had written the dream out, word for word. There are some details that Ellis hadn't remembered until now, down to the forgotten words McCavy spoke as he snuck from Ellis's foxhole.

**"There are so many odds stacked against you, Covett. Remember that."**

Ellis shoves the paper deep into the desk drawer and goes back to bed.

\*\*\*

Ellis shoots awake at the ringing of a gunshot in his ears.

He dreamt that he made too much noise. McCavy shot him and said Ellis had killed himself. He is dripping with sweat, and it feels like blood pissing from a bullet hole, and he thinks, *Okay*.

Ellis has heard people say that they wouldn't take back the things that have happened to them, and he wants to laugh at the idea of someone not taking their chance to make their life easier.

Gabriel's voice comes to him.

*"So he goes back in time and, what, like, fucks around with things that have happened already?"*

Ellis thinks, *Wouldn't that be nice*.

He doesn't know what it says about him that he would rather the man that hurt him be dead than the woman who would have died for him to be alive.

He wonders if she'd still be alive today. He wonders how she would have fared, living alone, not knowing if Ellis was going to live or die. For a moment, Ellis feels relieved that she didn't have to experience that, and that he didn't add to her burden, and that he doesn't have to pretend to be coping better than he is around her.

Then he feels horribly guilty.

**1950**

**For some reason, I am watching this dream in third person.**

My foxhole is there. McCavy is getting closer to it. He is not walking away from it. I see that I am still sleeping, bundled up, and on my side. I am not face down, half naked, covered by a thin blanket.

I want him to change course. Good, yes. Go through the trees. Away from me. Keep walking. Keep walking. Away from the camp. Someone is calling after him. Make him wave them off. Keep walking. Walk him until he's far away from where I'm sleeping. Far enough away that I will get a good night's sleep, and not even his death will disturb me.

Get the pistol out. Push it hard against his temple. Yes. Hold it there. Let him struggle for a moment, just until his confusion is replaced with horror. He won't scream for help, but wrangle his mouth shut anyways, just because I can. Let his life memories begin to flash through his mind. Let him realize that he will lose against some invisible force. Let him beg for his body to cooperate. Good. Let him offer desperate prayers to a God he'll never meet.

**Pull the trigger.**

\*\*\*

Ellis reads this with a frown. This is much to process first thing in the morning.

Lt. McCavy's death is something that he hasn't thought about in years. The confusion surrounding why he had committed suicide weighed heavily on Ellis for a few months after it happened, but truthfully, he hasn't thought about Lt. McCavy much in the last few years. He doesn't know why this is coming up now.

He plugs the context clues of what he's written into the mystery of Lt. McCavy's death and doesn't like what his mind comes up with.

Ellis digs through his desk drawer of papers. Some of them are unintelligible messes of ink. Some are limp with how beaten they are, covered in ink like Ellis had pushed the carriage back again, again, again, then flipped the paper and repeated. Some are neatly typed, legible entries. Some have only a few sentences. Some have only a few words.

Ellis scans one from last September; an assault, word for word, in excruciating detail.

**I thought he was Gabriel, but then I thought that Gabriel would never touch me like this, and then I remembered Gabriel is dead. I assumed I'd suffered an injury of the sort. It was the logical explanation to why my lower half was exposed.**

**When I turn, I see the barrel of a gun.**

**McCavy says, "Shut up."**

**I shut up.**

Ellis drops the stack into the drawer and slams it shut. He feels—as a distant memory, as a nightmare—hot breath and invasive pain and words that break his already feeble heart, and his stomach twists at how vivid it is.

Ellis remembers, *"So he goes back in time and, what, like, fucks around with things that have happened already?"*

Ellis thinks, *That's impossible.*

Ellis remembers, *"Write me when it's done, yeah? Or mail me a copy?"* and, *"Can't wait to see what'cha come up with."*

Ellis doesn't know what to do with the things he thinks he's learned, so he lets the ideas for the story he'd abandoned years ago come back to him.

He remembers Ma and Gabriel and thinks, *What if the protagonist could bring people back from the dead, too?*

Ellis loads a blank sheet of paper and writes.

And writes.

And writes.



## **Behind the Gate**

Anthony Stewart

*16" x 20" Graphite Pencil*

## Duality

*Hayden Garris*

**I am** two voices alone in the night,  
**a** crescendo of whispers with a  
**double** entwined. One half my  
**agent** of despair and my other  
**whose** role is repair. Identities  
**only** in name, evolving with the  
**goal** of keeping me sane. Where  
**is** the other piece? My truest self  
**to** keep - the one I crave. Did it  
**survive** when I became a war of  
**two halves** never restrained? All  
**of** me wishes to unite the faces of  
**a** coin, the walls of a proud facade,  
**crumbling** beneath the weight a  
**whole** will never contain.

# Muñeca

*Dayanara Guzman*

*My Quinceañera, 2019*

Pristine princess with a porcelain face  
dressed head to toe in rose and gold.

Curls coiled and still in place. Our last waltz  
while the triumph trumpets of womanhood  
trumpets through the air like victory claimed,  
but the little girl inside me has died,  
the ashes disguised as shimmer  
embroidered on her skirt.

I whisper my goodbyes in her ear as I hold  
her tight. I tell her she will sit in my bedroom  
and watch my Converse change into flats  
and the sweatpants turn into skirts, and that some day  
we'll both be punished by daggered eyes.

I have now grown into my mother's face and  
my father's charm. I am at the cusp  
of adulthood yet I still remember  
her trim and lace swaying  
while her crown stayed in place.

I am no longer the girl that held her  
but the woman that she helped raise.



**Annie**

Robert Smith

*18" x 24" Graphite Pencil*

# The Midnight Flight

*Shyama Prasad Dash*

The midnight flight to Indianapolis was nearly empty. The lights flickered softly, and the air reeked of coffee and recycled exhaustion. I looked out of the window, more concerned with hiding my face than the view. My reflection stared back at me from the glass, distorted and broken by streaks of condensation — hollow, unfamiliar, ashamed. Somewhere far below, the lights of my home town flickered like dying embers, fading with each mile.

Before I left, Baba had been standing by the door, one hand tightly gripping onto the frame as if holding himself up, the other dangling loosely by his side. He didn't say much—he never did in moments like these. Just a soft nod, the kind that might have meant “Go,” or “Don't worry,” or maybe even “Come back soon.” I didn't ask which it was. I couldn't. A part of me still remembered the days when his breath grew shallow, when COVID almost took him from me. The fear that had gripped me then had been my silent companion ever since. I couldn't bring myself to let go back then—not after everything. But now, there was no choice. I was leaving.

When the car pulled away, I looked straight ahead, focusing on the road instead of the rearview mirror. The sound of the crunching gravel was the only thing anchoring me in the moment, but even that faded too quickly, leaving behind a silence that felt suffocating.

I had meant to leave a note—something short, maybe a few words scribbled on a scrap of paper. But as I sat at the dining table that afternoon, pen over the page, nothing came. Not because I didn't know what to say, but because I knew there wasn't enough space to say it. How do you condense a lifetime of debt and guilt into a single sentence?

Baba had always held the belief that serving the homeland was a calling higher than any individual ambition. He never said it outright, but I knew he saw my decision to pursue an education abroad as a quiet surrender to a different ideal—a path he hadn't chosen, one he might not have fully understood. Yet he never once tried to stop me.

Somewhere over the Atlantic, I reached into my bag and pulled out a packet of cashews Baba had slipped in without telling me. He always did that—packed something small, like a talisman against the unknown. I stared at the crumpled packet for a long time, the faded logo mocking me with its familiarity. I didn't open it.

In my mind, I kept replaying the last few weeks, the quiet rituals of leaving. Baba's disapproval wasn't loud; it was in the silences, the way he busied himself with my packing, his hands steady but his eyes betraying the weight of unspoken fears. I had felt the weight of his convictions over the years, and I knew that a part of him struggled to reconcile his ideals with the reality of my leaving. The way he handed me item after item to pack into the suitcases, how he folded my clothes with the care of someone piecing together something already falling apart, his silence at dinner, the unspoken things weighed heavier than words.

The night before I left, I found him sitting alone in the living room, his glasses perched on the edge of his nose as he pretended to read the newspaper. The ceiling fan above him creaked faintly with each turn, and his tea, gone cold, rested on the arm of the chair. I wondered if he was replaying his own departure from his father's house when he left his small village to make a life for himself in the city, decades ago. I didn't ask.

As the engines settled into a quiet hum, the seatbelt signs turned off and the flight attendants got up to start the service. I hurriedly wiped my tears and settled in for the long journey ahead.

There is a peculiar weight to the moments we leave behind. A stray glance. A hand brushing the edge of a suitcase. The lingering smell of incense from the puja he performed that morning, as though offering our fates up to some higher power. I didn't know if I believed in a higher power—if one existed, I had been damned for a long time. But he believed, so I closed my eyes and prayed, not for myself, but for him.



**DUEL AT DAWN**  
Eswar Prabhath Kamiseti  
*Photograph*

# Gold Cross Chain

*Dayanara Guzman*

Where did you get it? The one that reflected  
my rosewood lips, draped over  
my face like a rosary and slipped  
in my mouth like communion.

Does sativa still turn your cheeks red  
like the cherry burning in your bowl?  
Does it remind you of mine  
after a hit or two? In the smoke,  
do you picture our faces? Or has  
the haze swiped your mind.

Is that why you resurfaced on my phone? Did  
the look in her eyes remind you of mine?  
Responding to you now just feels like a waste  
for your absence has made my heart stronger.

So, was the grass greener on her side?  
Or is it fading like the ungodly olive  
colored bomber jacket I borrowed one night?  
Is it wrong if you still linger in my mind?

## love languages

*Evan Allee*

a wild dog's devotion  
you domesticate,  
and do not reciprocate.

i.  
gifting a carcass;  
a hound's loudest love language  
shamed, diminutive

ii.  
whining for hours,  
your dead silence. it's deadly;  
the love you bury

iii.  
waiting by the door  
hoping for one scratch between  
these perked ears. please. touch.

iv.  
your fierce protector.  
they tell you, "call off your dog."  
you say, "sit. stay. bad."

v.  
desperate for your time  
pawing, whining, crying, bite—  
flinch. cower. shake. sleep.

neglect is watery  
devotion is thick  
i dredge through the mud of it.



## **Weightless**

Sophia Sturgeon

*24" x 36" Acrylic on Stretched Canvas*

# Floodland

*Elena Saorrano*

This is the way it was  
Night reflecting up from the shimmering asphalt  
Firing glints of embers back into crystal clear windows  
In the passenger's eyes, all was calm  
Driving through the terror was a different story

“No harm will come your way”  
No harm does not make the driver any calmer  
White knuckles gripping the wheel,  
Steering the two into the dreary, drenched oblivion  
With no qualms other than why

“Any time, just raise your arms above the flood”  
In reference to the raging storm? Who knew  
Perhaps she sensed the desperation brewing beside her  
The road, her road, moves like a drunkard's hallway  
Like the sea

The ocean before them brings on its waves  
It echoes with a million voices calling their names  
One distorted, one clearer than yesterday's skies  
Driving on through the floodland, into the sea  
Off the great white pier standing amidst oblivion

This is the way it was  
Never to wake up from this land  
This fragmented, endless dream on loop

This is the way it is  
Driving through the floodland  
Comatose for however long

Too much, but never enough  
Having everything within one's reach  
Just to tear it up and watch it fall

And let Death will you away

## **(I) Wanted (My D)ad**

*Tegan Blackburn*

### **WANTED: Lobotomist (one-time job, name your price)\***

Autistic, genderqueer twenty-something seeks competent but morally dubious surgeon willing to perform a lobotomy on their father. Official job title not required, but experience preferred. Must provide your own tools. Transorbital or prefrontal are both acceptable methods. The following behaviors and capabilities from my father must be semi-guaranteed post-operation: still able to drive, so he can take me to Blockbuster (I do not care that the only one left is in Oregon) and we can pick out a movie (it will be Barbie related) and on the way back stop and buy a Hershey's Cookies n' Cream bar to share. Remembers how to swim, so we can spend summer days in the pool ~~at the house we don't live in anymore~~, dunking each other underwater and wasting water via attacks-by-garden-hose. Sudden aversion to firearms, prompting him to sell his many guns and use the money to re-purchase all the toys he and my stepmother sold without my permission when I was 11. Retains no memory of stepmother; will be compelled to sell her various minstrel memorabilia. Hearing the words "MAGA," "Brandon," or "Donald Trump" will cause him physical pain and/or intense panic (if you must pry his eyes open and torture him with Fox News *Clockwork Orange* style, I will not question your methods). Important: please have a similar vibe to Herbert West.

\*Please print the additional ad below until one of the two is answered.

### **WANTED: Replacement Father (full-time)\***

Autistic, genderqueer twenty-something seeks replacement father for the hollowed out, still-warm crater the original left behind. Must be physically strong but emotionally vulnerable, like Spider-Man, so you're not afraid to hug me tight and cradle me in your arms. Intense sense of justice required, like Batman, but more open to killing fascists, like Captain America. Will smile at me and ruffle my hair and say it looks cute shaved short. Would accompany me to a pride parade, while wearing a shirt proudly proclaiming your love for your little queer child. Being gay is not required, but preferred, so I may have a chance at not one, but two replacement fathers. Acceptable applicants, compiled from ages 10-now, include: Danny Tanner, Doctor Who (David Tennant specifically), V (he had a Vendetta), Sasha Nein, Professor Membrane, Kiryu Kazuma, Stanford Pines.\*\*

\*If this ad is answered first, please remove the original and kindly print the following below.

\*\*If you are not any of these men but embody similar qualities, please respond.

**WANTED: Lobotomist**  
**(one-time job, name your price)**

Autistic, genderqueer twenty-something seeks competent but morally dubious surgeon willing to give them a lobotomy. Official job title not required, but experience preferred. Must provide your own tools. Please use whatever method will allow for more specific, minute changes. Depending on how extensive you can be without causing unwanted damage, please remove as many memories as possible of my former father. All of them would be preferred, but a majority is acceptable. Please leave any and all other memories and faculties in-tact. If the former becomes unlikely or impossible, pockets of amnesia can be forgiven. Take care not to mistake memories with replacement father for former father. This part should not be difficult. Important: please have a similar vibe to Herbert West.



## **Gossip**

Emma Cremeans

*Digital Painting*

# The Vapor

Maura Weber

We linger in the air above the dirty laundry and the stripped mattress. My lips are still burning from where you kissed me, my cheek still stinging from the slap that came before. My chin is raw from your stubble and stings as I cry salty tears that bead and slip, bead and slip, bead and slip. There are traces of you in my hair, sticky on the back of my neck. I'm not a person, and neither are you. We are vapor, gasps of hot air and choked curses. We are sweat, sticky and cooling on clammy skin. We are knots, tangling in our bellies.

Strands of my hair are loose from where you pulled my ponytail until I fell for you. Now, the whisps snake around my neck like a collar. Your hand finds its way to my throat and slams me down, spitting in my face and growling *don't you ever do that again*. I've disobeyed you, a cardinal sin.

An egg is cracked over the top of my head, cold wobbly yolk running over my hot brain and down my back. Your teeth are gnashing and my spit is flying as white-hot confusion takes over the wheel. Like a fox in a trap, I beg. I gnaw at the frail tendons in my leg, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I am stupid. I am ugly. I deserve this. Please, please, let me make it up to you. I'm sorry. I'm nothing.*

Finally, you let go of my neck. You morph from a monster back into a man, leaving me bent over the mattress and shaking as I come back to myself. I stare at the ceiling while you put your shirt back on and try not to think about how my body feels like a live wire in the snow. My mouth tastes like a battery, sour and metallic. I close my eyes and take three deep breaths, hoping I come back to myself before you start crying like a child who's broken his favorite toy.

I slip off the bed and onto the floor, rooting around the filthy carpet for my socks. Selfishly, I hope you keep me under your bed with the rest of your dirty laundry. I hope you hang me in the closet with the rest of your skeletons. I hope you never display me like the other notches in your bedpost. I hope this makes me special.

# Hopeless Songs to the Solar System

*Jaylee Chastain*

## Sun

Radiation of romance,  
Center of this hopeless heart.  
My warmth so dependent on arms  
Outstretching into a flaming embrace.  
Revolving kisses gently blow in solar wind  
With electric charged strands held in hands  
And lipstick pressed against golden dome.  
A collection of your smiles erupt my day,  
Making life bright and sweat glisten.  
Sweet words, sweet promises  
Chase along soft axis  
Of your lips.

## Mercury

Heart ignited at first,  
But I always came in second.  
Responses flow in small variables,  
Pass of 88 days before my recognition.  
Even with thin atmosphere— transparency  
Of emotions, pressure keeps me breaking.  
I named you after a god, but my ideations  
Are Helios, and I start to question faith.  
I ignore irritations to preserve tails  
Made in quickness of our start,  
Pushing lack of shady,  
Dark moons.

Venus

Love and beauty–  
Hot and ready, so they say.  
You may appear bright in my sky,  
But acid rain laced words burn my skin.  
Despite stings, I'm drawn to your magnetic  
Field of charm, amber hair, heat unleashed.  
My thinking rotates clockwise as my gaze  
Darts to the brightest star in blanketed,  
Tragic sky, dim orbs peppered lightly.  
Even with your beaming spirit,  
A telescope still seems  
Needed.

Earth

I seem so convinced  
That only you can give me life.  
Only you can give something organic,  
Or pure slivered tastes of something real.  
Beauty can bloom, but core cannot uncover  
If crust of my being is merely being picked at.  
I'm suffocating on oxygen, but only artificial.  
The flowers on my skin are just now grown,  
And with them I make you a bouquet.  
But you can't even gift a seed  
On the day that I was  
And am.

Mars

Storms of dust whir,  
Emotion specks around– water  
Freezing over by red that I ignored.  
Not even Olympus Mons can compare  
To cratered communication days you deal.  
I keep making excuses, defending possible,  
Potential life residing in our future, but you  
Can not look past that thin atmosphere  
To even attempt to uncover such  
Revelation about my being.  
Delusions of superior–  
Astronaut.

Jupiter

Clouded visionary  
And rapid rotation of thought.  
Your heart seems so big sometimes,  
Until you are in a Red Spot. Pushing field  
Yet I pull, knowing you are no king to name.  
I see your faint rings, I have memorized each,  
Though it is too much trouble to know mine.  
Too much time, too much time, you can't  
Handle the clouds in the sky, nor stars  
So why do I expect memorization  
Of constellations? You only  
Know Little Dipper.

Saturn

No intention of big rings,  
I suppose I knew from the start.  
I asked and you took six steps back.  
As a result, I choke on your dust and ice.  
I can feel you furthering, your flattened tone,  
*Sudden rockiness to your core, short-worded conversation—  
Dense talks at surface level, and simple, small-scale visions.*  
I can't seem to land on a reasonable decision.  
My jet-streamed conscious falters pole  
To pole, moons falling to pieces  
In the weighted gravity  
Of this soul.

Uranus

Your cold shoulder,  
The very same I would lean on.  
Your particles of dust have turned dark,  
That I no longer have the skill to read you.  
We finally start to collide, spinning on my side,  
Facing my back towards what used to be warm.  
Your eagerness no longer visible to naked eye.  
I have to squint, even then you're drifting off.  
I didn't think I would begin to feel blue  
With you in my system, my love.  
Yet here I stand, a gas  
Of ideal.

Neptune

Further from heat,  
Further away from my heart.  
Frequent storms occur, but your voice  
Never had the courage to raise itself up—  
Grab the attention from 7 other planets away.  
Now you will speak of rings to others in system  
Just as you might have done while still with me.  
Only now I can't hold you back, nor can I grasp  
On the imagination of the rings you showed  
To me in the back of my hopeful mind.  
May I see your face in the stars,  
Becoming someone  
Else's sun.



## **Koi**

Sarah Hollcraft

*4" x 9" Digital Photography*

## Full Moons Are Perfect for a Werewolf to Come Out (As Transgender)

Levi Miller

Hand outstretched toward the doorbell, Donnie tossed a nervous glance at me. “You’ll be good tonight, right?”

I injected my glare with all the malice I could possibly aim at my boyfriend. “If you get off on treating me like a kid, you should’ve mentioned that sooner,” I said.

“Gross, Joe,” Donnie said and huffed out a breath, fingers twisting in his hair like he’d done the entire car ride here. He kept saying he was overdue for a haircut, but I liked him a little scruffy. “You know how important this is to me,” he added.

“And that’s why you persuaded your mom to move your family’s Thanksgiving to after the full moon,” I reminded him. “Now it’s over. Everything is going to go fine.”

His lips twisted to one side. “Could you at least lose the sunglasses?”

“So they can see these?” I lifted my frat boy sunglasses to give him an unblocked view of my yellow eyes. I found it incredible how easy he forgot.

“Right, yeah,” Donnie said, worrying the cuff of his sweater between his long fingers. “We can’t screw this up.” In that *we*, I heard a clear and obvious *you*. As if I was a mindless dog, not a grown man who could handle a stupid dinner party.

“Don’t worry your pretty little ass off. I’ll be your good fuckin’ boy,” I said, reaching across him to ring the doorbell and end the conversation. Seconds later, a woman with a gaudy bedazzled turkey apron answered the door. Her mousy black hair swayed around her pointed face as she looked at me. Scratch that, not at me—*over* me, never meeting my eyes.

“Hi, mom,” Donnie said, that lopsided smile I love brightening his face like a rebooted laptop. “Happy Turkey Day!”

She pursed her lips, eyes trained on the pins decorating my jean jacket. Donnie made me take off the ones with nudity, violence, and profanities before driving over. “You’re two minutes later than you told me, sweetie,” his mom said, voice warm in a way that didn’t seep into her face.

I squinted at Donnie to see how he'd react to the snub, but his smile was superglued on. "I know. I'm sorry," Donnie said. He turned to me as if remembering I was there and slapped me on the back. "This is Joseph Ratley, my boyfriend."

I held out my hand to shake, ignoring the way it made me feel like I was selling something. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Zhang," I said, cringing when my voice broke on the second syllable of "Mrs." My voice hadn't cracked that bad in a while, now that I was close to being ten months on T, but sometimes the HRT gods still decided to strike down my ego.

Mrs. Zhang stared at the tattoos on my hand, lingering on the word *hell* scrawled across my knuckles. The other hand read *bent*. If it had been a colder November night, I might have been able to cover the more raunchy ones with gloves, but no luck. I silently cursed climate change.

Staring somewhere between my eyebrows with a tense smile, she said, "Call me Violet."

Donnie and I followed her inside the house, which was about ten degrees cooler than outside. All the fans were on full blast, the light whirring noise accompanied by warm chatter seeping from the dining room where a long table seated a group of people who looked at me with a variety of uncertain expressions. I took notice of an older woman with bubblegum pink cheeks who let out a little snort when I walked in and a chubby teenager wearing a Cure hoodie who surreptitiously checked me out. I bared my teeth in what I hope looked like a smile and ignored the urge to adjust my shirt.

An older man with thinning hair styled like an aging rockstar waved his arms out wide. "Junior! Good to see you," he said to Donnie, who returned his wave.

I sat down in one of the empty seats, reflecting on this information. Donnie never talked about his dad, who he was apparently named after, or his family for that matter. Looking at the cheerful guy sitting across from me, I wondered why.

"Nice specs," said a man who dressed like he thought Cybertrucks were cool. I didn't know why anyone would wear an untucked t-shirt over belted khakis, but I knew damn well those horn-rimmed glasses weren't prescription. I raised my eyebrows at him, opting to keep my inside thoughts inside for once.

"What's up, old man?" Donnie said as he took a seat next to me. "How's tricks?"

"Old man," the elder Donovan chuckled. "Things are great here. I was just

telling your mother she needs to take a break from the night shifts. Now that you're set up in your new practice, we'll be millionaires by the end of the year!"

"He's a therapist, not a surgeon," a woman on the other side of Donnie said with a tightness to her voice that screamed *I lived in a big city for at least a week*. Beside her, Cybertruck Guy hid a snort with a sip of iced tea.

"A doctor is a doctor," Donovan said. He waved a hand at me. "Plus, he's got a hot brunette on his arm. You're living the American dream, Donnie."

Before I could address being called eye candy, the old lady with a blush fetish did it for me.

"I don't know what America you're living in," she said like she was trying to be quiet. The goth teenager stiffened beside her, and City Girl stared at her napkin like it was a mildly interesting Twitter exchange.

"Food's ready!" Violet called out from the kitchen. The table let out a collective sigh. I followed the herd into the kitchen, snagging a finger in Donnie's belt loop to keep from being separated.

"I can guess which ones are your parents, but who the hell are the rest of these people?" I hissed under my breath.

His eyes flashed a warning at my language, but he pointed at the bitchy old woman and said, "That's my Grandmother Richards, dad's side." Next, he pointed out City Lady and Cybertruck Man. "My sister Alexa and her husband Grant." The goth teen. "Their son Parker."

I forgot half of their names immediately, but I nodded. "Got it. Thanks, baby."

He handed me a plate. "They don't bite," he said, then paused to consider before leaning closer. "Unlike *some* people."

Before I could reply, he moved to help his grandmother fix her plate.

*Bastard*, I thought with a smile. Then, the smell of the food hit me. I wondered if Violet was magic the way each aroma complemented the next, succulent steam rising from the feast like fog on a lake. I waited my turn behind Grandmother Stick-Up-Her-Ass and filled my plate with heaps of turkey, ham, chicken, that hot dogs and beans dish, and a couple sticks of celery to balance it out.

"Guess not all libs are vegan," Grant said as I set my plate on the table, careful to not topple the pile of meat.

I shot him a look that sent him back to buttering his baked potato. Truth is, I used to be vegan until recently. I changed my diet for a couple reasons. One, I got major protein cravings from the testosterone, and plant-based meat wasn't doing it for me anymore. Two, I got turned into a werewolf.

I don't have a cool story to back it up. If your life and body are going to be permanently altered by a supernatural monster, you should at least get an epic fight story to share. But no—a few months ago I fell asleep at the bus station after working a double at the supermarket and woke up to a snarling werewolf sinking its canines into my shoulder. It bolted when I cried out, and my bus arrived soon after. I staunched the goopy flow of blood with my jacket on the ride home and passed out the second I got in bed.

When I woke up the next morning the wound felt slimy in an infected way, like the top layer of soup forgotten on a stove. My brain banged around inside my skull and my limbs weighed me down like full-to-bursting grocery sacks. I called Donnie between bouts of puking my guts out, and he drove me to the hospital, running a hand through my hair when he wasn't holding it away from my face as I hurled into a grocery bag. By the time he pulled into the emergency bay, I felt completely fine. Hell, I felt better than I had before getting attacked. And I was starving. After the hospital's infection tests showed up negative, I convinced him to drive to a crappy pizza place where I devoured a full meat lover's pie under Donnie's concerned gaze, thinking it had just been a really short 24 hour flu.

I didn't realize anything was wrong with me until the next full moon. I mean, I ate twice as much as usual, gained enough weight in muscle to stretch out my clothes, and got significantly more hairy, but I chalked it all up to HRT doing a damn good job. The body contortions and blackouts during my first full moon clued me in. Lucky for me, my boyfriend spent a majority of his childhood idolizing Sam and Dean Winchester. We squeezed lycanthropy into our relationship like a third member.

Violet sat down next to me at the head of the table with a modest plate of greens. She cleared her throat, and the table quieted. "Now that everyone's settled, who wants to say grace?"

I looked to Donovan, but his eyes were on Donnie. So were the eyes of everyone else. I held back a laugh, knowing damn well Donnie hadn't stepped inside a church since his eighteenth birthday.

"I can do it," Donnie said, holding his hands out. Surprised, I took one. Violet took my other hand, her cold, soft fingers barely skimming my skin. I watched as everyone tilted their heads forward.

“Bless us O Lord,” Donnie began, then everyone chanted with him. “And these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord.”

“Amen,” Donnie said, squeezing my hand before reaching for a spoon. I waited to make sure there were no more surprise rituals before grabbing my own cutlery. It didn’t sit right with me how easily Donnie could switch it up and pretend to be Catholic just to please his family. Made me wonder what else he’d change for them.

“Who’s got bets on the Bengals this afternoon?” Donovan asked, breaking the cult-like spell that went over the family as quickly as it had come.

Grant stabbed a fork in the air in front of him. “You’re insane if you think they’ll beat the Forty-Niners.”

“Have some Midwest pride,” Alexa said, pouring herself a glass of wine.

“Pride,” Granny Rich muttered under her breath. I held mine, shoving meat into my mouth instead. At the taste, all thoughts of bitter old ladies fled my head. It was just the right combination of soft, juicy, and smoky. It was like licking the inside of a grill. My mouth watered, and I made plans to get seconds.

“This is amazing, Violet,” I said to Donnie’s mom. She smiled weakly.

“Thanks. Mrs. Richards always said I had a knack for cooking,” Violet said, nodding toward the Grandmother, who focused on cutting up a bit of turkey on her plate.

“She was right,” I said, darting my eyes to Donnie to see if he noticed my ass-kissing. He was busy fending off an excited Grant about some conspiracy theory the latter had discovered. A little pissed, I went back to eating.

“So, where did you two meet?” Donovan asked, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Class,” Donnie said at the same time I said, “Bar.” Donnie shot me a look. After dating for the past two years, I could read the subtext in his eyes proficiently. This time, his face said *I swear to god if you tell them the first thing you said to me was that you could show me something better to do with my mouth than drink, you’re going to need a new ride home.*

“Class,” I appended.

“Yeah? What class?” Alexa asked, leaning forward on the vinyl tablecloth.

I let Donnie answer. “Poetry elective,” he said, nudging my shoulder with his. “He needed help interpreting Keats.”

“And you needed help writing metaphors,” I said with a sugary smile, knowing damn well Donnie only knew the name John Keats because of the quotes I scrawled on sticky notes on our bathroom mirror.

“What did you study in college?” Donovan asked, patting his mouth with a napkin.

“Art,” I said, sending a round of eye contact around the table.

“That’s awesome,” Parker said, finally looking up from where he’d been lining up the green beans on his plate. “What’s your favorite medium?”

“Mainly ink,” I answered, “but I mess around with graphite. Pretty fond of spray paint, too.” I paused for another bite of chicken before asking, “You into art?”

Parker’s face lit up. “Yeah, I started drawing a few years ago, and I really enjoy it. My main interest right now is watercolors.”

I nodded, thinking about it. “Good stuff, but I can never wait for the layers to dry.”

“I just use a hair dryer,” Parker said with a shrug.

Alexa swatted her son. “Is that why my Dyson Supersonic keeps going missing?”

Parker turned back to his green beans.

Donnie cleared his throat. “Joe’s working on a project for the library.”

“That’s great,” Donovan said. “What kind of project?”

I nudged Donnie’s foot with mine to say thanks. I knew he knew that I could talk about this project for hours. “They wanted a mural for the lounge of the new teen section, and I’m friends with one of the librarians. I’m going for abstract portraits of famous authors. Y’know—Dickenson. Lorde.” I smirked at Donnie. “Keats.” In the spirit of gratefulness, I neglected to mention that the librarian friend offered me the mural over a bowl of weed.

Donnie, never passing up a chance to brag about me, said, “They’re adding

places for kids to get resources and hold club meetings. I think people have already started setting up an LGBTQ club and a monthly horror movie night.”

“That sounds nice,” Violet said right as her mother-in-law loudly clucked her tongue. Fueled by meat and already on edge, I narrowed my eyes at the Grandmother.

“Do you have a problem with that?” I asked. Donnie cleared his throat, eyes wide enough that I could see little red blood vessels.

She kept her gaze on her corn as she gently sawed it off the cob. “In my opinion, children shouldn’t be exposed to that sort of thing,” she said.

“You mean my sort of thing?” I said. “Our sort of thing?” I waved my hand between Donnie and me, ignoring his kick to my shin. The people around me took great interest in their food, silverware clinking out a chaotic pattern as Alexa stirred up a conversation about gas prices.

Grandmother Richards rose to her feet, slowly but full of livid energy. “Don’t drag him into this. He’s completely normal.”

I laughed. “Your grandson’s fucking gay.”

“Joe!” Donnie snapped.

“What? You are,” I said. He shook his head, not in refutation of the fact but disappointment.

Grandmother Richards raised a shaking finger at me. “At least he’s not a monster.”

I shot up to my full five feet and nine-and-a-half inches across from her, curling my nails into the tablecloth. “Monster, really? Is it that fucking hard to just call me what I am?”

She held her finger steady, then hissed, “*Werewolf?*”

Everyone stared at me, food abandoned.

I took off my sunglasses to see the unfiltered truth on my boyfriend’s face. “You told them I was a werewolf?” I asked, my voice surprisingly steady.

Donnie had the nerve to look uncomfortable as he shrank back. He spoke slowly, as if talking to a wild animal: “You said you’d rather me come out for you

than have to deal with it yourself.” *Please just sit back down*, his eyes said.

I exploded. “I meant about being fucking trans!”

A few weeks ago, Donnie and I watched a movie where some train operator messed up the railroad switch operation and ended up killing dozens of people—children, parents, bystanders crushed immediately by the metal beast. At the end, they showed a picture of the real people from the story, including the guy who caused all the damage. The look on his face was identical to Donnie’s as he said, “Oh.”

The rest of the family, who had remained silent thus far, exploded into a flurry of sound.

“You’re trans?” Parker asked.

“Do you know Kai? They’re my coworker’s nonbinary daughter,” Donovan said. “I think they’re your age.”

“A gay, transgendered werewolf,” Grant said. “The left’s wet dream.”

“When you two do it, is it technically bestiality?” Alexa asked.

I looked to Donnie for backup, but his attention was back on his plate. I decided to answer the last one. “No. What the hell?”

“What?” Alexa shrugged, leaning back in her chair. “I’m curious. I’ve read some freaky books.”

A loud thump sounded at the end of the table as Grandmother Richards knocked over her chair. She grabbed her butter knife and waved it in my face. “I will not have a creature of the night in my house, seducing the only son of my son!” she yelled.

“That’s vampires, Gran,” Alexa muttered under her breath.

“Get out!” Grandmother Richards shrieked. The knife came dangerously close to my nose, and I hissed at the burning in my nostrils. “You like that?” she cried. “It’s silver!”

Before I could pounce on her ass, Violet took my hand and yanked me into the living room. She closed the door, muffling the desperate voices. I took a minute to practice some of the meditative breathing Donnie’s always begging me to try. Funny enough, I stopped seeing red after a few breaths.

The living room was messy, lived in. There were photo albums stacked on the coffee table, which sagged under the weight. Five-dollar knick-knack elephants littered every surface, including the top of a boxy television that looked half my age. The brown carpet crunched under my feet, stains of all colors surrounding me. A light fragrance of vanilla danced over everything.

“Better?” Violet asked, still holding my hand.

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

Violet led us to the couch, falling back into the pilling fabric and plethora of throw pillows. I sat on the far end, watching her fingers tap out a rhythm on her knees.

“They get so loud,” Violet said after a bit.

I nodded. “They do.”

“How are you feeling?” Violet asked.

“Fine,” I said.

“Are you sure?” she asked in that warm voice. I felt my insides bubble, and words began flying out of my mouth.

“I’m mostly pissed at Donnie,” I said. “He didn’t back me up at all back there. I don’t know why he brought me here if he was just going to throw me to the wolves at the first sign of trouble.” I paused as my mind caught up to my mouth. “No offense.”

Violet remained silent, so I went on, voice rising as my anger reignited. “I know I’m messed up, but I thought he liked me that way. But no, now he wants me to tone myself down to fit into his perfect family, where he’s got this perfect house and a sister who bugs him and a mom and dad who care enough to ask—”

“He doesn’t have a dad,” Violet interrupted.

I squinted at her. “Then who the hell is Donovan?” I asked.

“You mean Don? My husband. His stepdad,” she said. “Donnie’s dad died twelve years ago.”

“Oh,” I said.

“It was a car accident. Donnie didn’t come out of his room for weeks after. I had to call firefighters to break down his door to make sure he hadn’t killed himself,” Violet said with the tone of someone reading a recipe. Her fingers tapped faster. “So, we’re not a perfect family. You fit in fine. I’m sorry anyone made you feel you had to change.”

“Why wouldn’t he tell me?” I asked, quieter.

Violet shrugged. “He feels big feelings, but he doesn’t talk about them much. Probably inherited it from me. I was shocked he decided to be a therapist.”

I settled farther into the couch, which tugged at my body like quicksand as my mind wandered. Last winter, I drove to Virginia and back a lot to help a friend going through chemo. Donnie didn’t say anything to stop me, but I could feel the anxiety radiating off of him. He’d attack me with hugs the second I stepped through the door. Sweaty and tired from hours crammed in a small car, I resented it. And he didn’t cry when he drove me to the hospital when I got bitten. He shut down, treating it more like an errand than life or death. I was too sick to be bothered at the time. I remember how white his knuckles got on the steering wheel, though. And the first few months we lived together, I’d wake up sometimes to him pressing two fingers under my jaw. I thought it was a sex thing at the time, but I realized now that he might have been checking for a pulse.

The door between the dining and living room opened, and I wondered briefly if my musings had summoned Donnie. But it was just Parker, hands stuffed into his hoodie pocket. He plopped onto the couch next to Violet.

“Great-grandmother is still yelling,” Parker reported. “Loudly.”

“Reminds me of my mom,” I said with a laugh.

“She wasn’t big on the werewolf thing either?” Violet asked, eyes focused somewhere between my eyebrows.

“Not that,” I said. “She wasn’t a fan of the trans thing.” I’ll never forget how she reacted when I came out to her. She pursed her lips, grabbed my wrist, and said we were going bra shopping. I asked her if she’d heard what I said, and she tightened her grip and told me to shut the hell up. At thirteen, I did what she said.

“Oh,” Violet said. “That sucks.”

I laughed at her bluntness. “It does.”

A thoughtful expression passed over her face before she said, “I think you’re

a fine young man, if that helps.” She raised her black eyes to mine, and my throat tightened. There was a hesitant sort of kindness in her gaze, one I hadn’t seen in years. If I squinted, I could pretend her hair was brown, longer and curly, her eyebrows thicker, and her eyes the same muddy green as mine used to be.

“What helps is I haven’t seen her in half a decade,” I said, ignoring the twinge in my guts as the woman beside me morphed back into Violet.

“I can’t imagine that,” Parker said. “Losing contact with your mom.”

“You get used to it,” I lied. Violet patted my arm, and it was all I could do not to lean into it. She smelled like autumn, but more like apples and bonfires than pumpkin spice.

“How did you choose your name?” Parker asked after a while.

I shrugged and said, “I was a big fan of joe mama jokes as a kid.”

“Bullshit,” Violet said. Her language jolted a squeak of laughter from my throat.

“Nope,” I said, recovering quickly. “I was the king of fifth grade.”

That got a smile out of them both.

The door to the dining room creaked open, and my hackles raised. But it wasn’t Granny The Werewolf Slayer standing there, waving her cutlery. It was my boyfriend.

Donnie shut the door behind him, running over to me as his mouth overflowed with apologies. “I’m so sorry, Joe—I didn’t mean to—I should have asked to clarify, and—”

“It’s okay,” I said, mostly to shut him up.

“He’s lying,” Violet said. “You kind of shat the bed on this one, sweetie.”

“Mom,” Donnie said, scandalized as he squeezed between me and the end of the couch.

“They still gearing up to stake my heart?” I asked. Donnie sighed in response and set his head on my shoulder.

“That’s vampires again,” Parker said.

“Who’s the werewolf here?” I asked, softening my words with a wink.

“Don’s talking Grandmother down as we speak,” Donnie said. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of a younger version of him, curled up in his bed and staring at the walls, too tired to cry anymore.

I kissed his forehead.

“What was that for?” he asked, his smile reappearing like sunlight through the cracks of a dilapidated roof. “I thought you were mad at me.”

“I am,” I said, holding him closer. He cuddled up into my side.

Parker made a surprisingly accurate gagging noise. “Not the PDA.”

“I second that,” Violet said. I could have sworn she smirked. Donnie sighed dramatically as he disentangled himself from me.

The door opened, and Don poked his head into the living room. “So sorry about all that, Joe. Grandmother promised to keep quiet, if you want to come back in here.”

Just as Don finished talking, Grandmother Richard’s voice peeled in from the dining room, sharp and sudden: “–am not going to play nice with the transsexual werewolf!”

Don grimaced. “We gave her plastic silverware, if that’s any consolation.”

Donnie looked up at me. *We can leave, if you want*, his face said.

“Well.” I slapped my thighs, preparing to stand. “Let’s face the fuckin’ music.”

\*\*\*

A month later, the living room was covered in twinkling lights, wrapping paper, and hundreds of pine needles. Don and Grant were glued to the football game on television, and Parker was eagerly inspecting the set of watercolor pencils I’d gotten him. Alexa paused to ruffle his hair before turning back to her conversation with Violet over a podcast she’d recommended. Grandmother Richards sat in a rocking chair in the corner, turning the pages of a yellowing book. I lounged on the couch, sipping eggnog from a smaller batch Violet had made with less cinnamon to accommodate my easily irritated nose.

Donnie leaned back from where he sat on the floor between my knees and handed me a package shoddily wrapped in gold paper. “This one’s for you,” he said.

“Who’s it from?” I asked, already unwrapping it.

Donnie shrugged. “Didn’t say. Does it say inside?” When I didn’t answer, he looked up at me. “What is it, baby?”

I held up a shock collar the perfect size for a Doberman or Great Dane.

Donnie’s face dropped. His head snapped to his sister. “Alexa!”

“Wasn’t me,” she said, hands up. “It’s kind of funny, though,” she added with a giggle.

“No, it’s not,” Donnie said, sitting up. “Who did this?”

A sharp noise, like a polite throat-clearing taught to kids in the 1950’s, cut through the room. Grandmother Richards flipped a page in her book, unable to hide her smug smile.

“Grandmother, we talked about this,” Donnie said, and it sounded like the start of a lecture. I shut him up with a nudge to the side and a look that said *I got this*.

Locking eyes with the Grandmother, I put the collar on and grinned my sharp-toothed smile. “We’ll find a use for this,” I said, planting a sloppy kiss on my boyfriend’s lips. He smiled against my mouth, and I almost didn’t hear his grandmother’s scandalized gasp.



## Herron Hallway

Paige LaMar

*18" x 24" Pencil*

## Cannoli

Chase Benson

An Italian dessert born from Sicily.  
Derived from *cannolu*- little tube,  
stemmed from *canna*- cane.  
Spiced flour made soft by wine and glazed gold by oil.  
A barren valley blessed by the embrace of light,  
sweetened ricotta fills the crevices tight.  
Adorned in lemon zest and bathed in chocolate.  
Garnished with fruit, it fills the mouth with thick cream.

Sweet words press into my ear as the night rolls on.  
His hand on my cheek, my lips filling his,  
silence quailed by pleasure and warmth.  
Honey and sugar, pet names drape the table.  
His hands coat mine, spooning the filling in.  
He rims the shell's interior with a light jam,  
As cream reaches the cusp, sap seeps out the edge.  
A dash of cinnamon apples passes the nose  
as he places bits in my cannoli.

He gorges on mine as I rest on his.  
The hard shell caresses my lips, sweet flavor bared  
in a smooth, thick cream that mixes apples and jam.  
My heart swells as he tilts my chin up, crumbs in beard.  
His chest on mine, he scoops in cream with his tongue  
and the rest pours into me.  
A succulent nectar, sweet, sour, and rich-  
Who knew cannolis were this good?

# Scum

*Hayden Garris*

I hope I work with her today. I hope she brings booze. A couple of shooters should do it. Enough to get drunk but not too much or else I won't be able to drive home. My highs don't last as long as they used to. I need another person working in the kitchen so I can have a few smoke breaks. Two cigarettes left. I'll only smoke half of one and save the other half for later. Shit. No one's working the specialty board today. I'm on my own.

Orders pile up. I hate those coupons. Ten sandwiches. Drop fries. Twenty sandwiches. Cook patties and chop onions. Thirty sandwiches. Do the dishes, scrub the floors, clean the hoods. Forty sandwiches. Grab the wrappers, toast buns, change gloves, salt fries, sanitize the board, refill ketchup, take out the trash. Come back in. Fifty sandwiches.

I need a cigarette. A drink. To get high. I need to get through this shift. Call me a degenerate, an addict, a cog in America's obese machine. One of many. It's fast food. We're greasy, missing teeth, come in all shapes and sizes, and covered in scum. Maybe we are scum. Scum feeding each other scum. Thousand-calorie burgers cooked, built, and served by the lowest of the low.

Pedophiles, abusers, drug dealers. The worst kind of people. But few of them last. Fast food isn't for the weak. But it doesn't weed out all the cowards. I should know. No time for self-reflection in this environment. Watch the screen. Watch coworkers come and go. Finish the never-ending list. Don't cry when they complain—the manager or the customers. If it gets too hard, smoke or drink something. It always gets too hard. Accept your role as scum and buy a pack of Winston blacks. Light cigarettes are for the weak. Don't worry about the wheezing, the insurance here won't cover it anyway.

I get depressed looking at the schedule. I stopped recognizing the names. All my friends disappeared. Maybe that's why I don't get attached anymore when I train new employees. They won't last more than a few months at most. How did I do it for thirteen? I could say the vices helped. But vice is an imagined crutch by someone too weak to handle their reality. I'm too weak. Maybe all the people who left were too weak. I miss them anyway. Even those that the drugs made me forget. They aren't all bad. The people, I mean.

My favorite manager's little brother, fresh out of prison, might've been my favorite. He had a bad past with drugs. Prescription. He came out sober though, besides weed and beer, and promised to keep it that way. I judged him before he

came because of what I'd heard, and the ankle monitor he wore. He lifted a metal tray above my head and I flinched. I apologized and he said, "It's alright, bub."

He always called me bub. I'd been wrong about him. He had a good heart. He inspired me. He was a doer. Not someone with all sorts of plans and ideas, but a guy who gets things done. When he saw a tree in the road, he got out, before I could put the car in park, to move it. Once our path had been cleared, he kept going. He wanted to clear the way for oncoming traffic too. I hope he goes far. But few in fast food do.

I liked that kid who always slid across the greasy floors like an ice dancer. The one who sang along to *Santeria* with me in the back while we made sandwiches. Whenever I came in, he clapped me on the back and his face lit up. We had chemistry in the kitchen like no one else. We understood each other. But he left before I had the chance to say goodbye. He worked two jobs, and fast food didn't pay enough.

I miss the girl I fell in love with. Who snuck back from the front to bother me while I was still learning the ropes. I made dumb jokes, trying to make her laugh. She had a smile I couldn't get enough of. We snuck off to the freezer to kiss. When we got back, others laughed because they knew. We rescued each other from bad relationships. But when she left, she couldn't save me from myself. From losing fifty pounds living on cigarettes and Red Bull. Or gaining it all back and then some when I started getting drunk every shift.

I embraced the lifestyle at a certain point. But I didn't always turn to vice. I want to blame my first night shift manager. The one who snorted meth in the kitchen closet. The one who offered me a bump, telling me it would get me through the night. The one who supplied my first cigarette, and the hundreds after. The one who asked and received naked pictures from my first girlfriend there. The one who slept with the coked-up girl working at the gas station while I ran the store alone.

I don't hate him. He introduced me to more than the vices that fast food runs on. He introduced me to scum. Scum uses scum. He used my car to meet his mom so they could plan to beat and rob someone for meth money. He used my money to buy a case of beer so he could get drunk before his girlfriend and her son came home. He used, yelled, and threatened to kill. But he called me his little brother. I can't explain it, but a bond makes you ignore the scum right in front of you. He was scum and I loved him.

Scum isn't all bad. Maybe it calls you bub, sings *Santeria* with you, or rescues you from a bad relationship. Or maybe it calls you its little brother as it lights your first cigarette for you. Maybe, on some level, we're all a type of scum.

I took this job as a stepping stone. I needed the experience. Back then, my hairline didn't recede, I weighed a healthy amount, and I didn't drink or smoke. I wore a button-up and black slacks with a belt to the job interview. I even printed out my resume for the meeting. The GM laughed when I handed her the paper.

"I just want you to know, fast food workers are the scum on the bottom of people's feet," she said. I laughed the comment off and took the job.

But I'm done laughing now.



**Man with Turquoise Necklace**

Daylen Byrd

*20" x 16.5" x 1.5" Mixed Media*

# The Intricacies and Eccentricities of Loving a Necromancer

*Evan Allee*

I cannot be held accountable for the situations I find myself in when tempted, for I am prone to dissociating, susceptible to sympathy, and plagued with intent.

The rabbit's head was flattened, only its ears intact, still erect. Brain matter framed its head like a halo, seeped into tar where it was hit, smeared to a halt. It was only a short burst of red, not enough to be alarming. Enough to spare.

It came home with me, the rabbit. Peeling it from the asphalt proved difficult, but I persevered. Unfortunately, the skull was not salvageable. Fortunately, I had a supplement.

My workspace is pristine. A bit too dark for my preferences, but a lamp suffices. Shadows lick and whisper against the wall as I work, peering over my shoulders as I operate on the being. I often have to bat them away. Their breathing distracts me, but they refuse to leave, and who am I to dictate over them?

Just a man, or something eerily similar to it.

Whoever committed the heinous crime, admittedly, has impeccable aim. They had managed only to ram into the head, leaving much potential leftover. With the body intact, I only must peel the skin from the ruins. Pick the bone shards from matted fur. The smell is quite wretched, but after much practice, I am able to distract my senses.

Reattaching a new skull to the spine is the easiest part, but having a head to press my lips to is the most exciting. With a mouth to breathe life into, I am capable of anything. Should this... ability have been bestowed on another, less ethical individual, one could raise an army of the dead. One could kill and revive and kill again; the most cruel form of torture. To be the first and last face a person sees. To be their savior and their demise.

The rabbit breathes without assistance. A furry body and an ivory head.

It will join the rest of them; the menagerie of Half-Beings. Mostly animals. I say "mostly" because I value honesty and integrity. I will not lie to you, I will not evade. They live here, inside this home and in the wilderness surrounding us, with me. Me and the shadows. I do not surround myself with humans. I also value my own time, and I do not have predilections towards wasting it.

Every once in a blue moon, my supplies will dwindle. There are only so many skeletons for one to find, though I do search ardently. For every decomposed animal I find, there are five currently dying. I am only one person, I am only one man. I cannot save them all. I do not have the means to do so.

I did endeavor. Once. To revive an incomplete being out of anguish.

I learned from this botched attempt that if the being dies with their bones intact, they must be brought back with them. Poachers are my worst foe. To kill an innocent one - to steal their autonomy for one's own pleasure - I find vile. But I digress.

Back when I was a boy, in the woods I found a buck horizontal on the leaves, its eyes glazed over, unblinking. The murderer had butchered it there; taken from it the parts they could eat. The antlers, only serrated stumps by an amateur wielder. Skinned and left to freeze in the winter chill.

It did not fight when I touched its wound; a single bullet hole in the temple. There, I kissed it. Blew into the cavity like one would exhale tobacco smoke.

It awoke violently, kicking and wailing in pain. A hoof landed a fatal blow to my left eye, squelching in the socket. I was not angry, simply shocked. Confused as to where the darkness erupted from. The pain did not register then, but the horror did.

The animal ran lopsided, a mutilation of lacerations and tendons. Uncoordinated legs, naked, pink flesh, unprotected from the cold. A ribcage on display, the wind slithering through the bones like it would a wind chime. The buck did not sing, however. It screamed until it collapsed again, twitching, then slumped into the snow.

Every day I learn something new about this ability of mine. I cannot find it in myself to be disconsolate anymore, only intrigued.

My research has shown that the body remembers the bones. The structure. It is my responsibility to restore that, however I must. Once, I was brought a three-legged dog. It was simply born that way, cast aside by the breeder as defective and taken in by a kind individual. Its passing was untimely, so it was brought to me. Because the body had never known the feeling of four legs, it did not need a fourth to be revived.

Over the years, I have been forced to make artistic choices I otherwise would prefer to not. I have learned that parts do not need to match; the importance is that it must be bone. An animal with a crushed skull requires a head. A forcibly

shed buck needs antlers. If I am lucky, I may find some naturally shed, otherwise I am forced to practice creativity.

Desperate times have often forced my hand. I have strengthened my sleuthing skills over many years of practice. Graveyards have provided ample stock, and bone carving has become a hobby out of necessity. I was able to bestow new antlers to the buck that blinded me and, as I screwed its skeletal frame together again, pride imploded within me.

My artform is disturbing to many, despite those who pay handsomely for my services. My excursions into town are scarce and brief, but the rumors persist nonetheless. I loathed the idea that I was only a curiosity to the town. A blank canvas to cast aspirations onto.

Luckily I was sensible in my desires, and did not dilute my focus with want.

Until he appeared.

Panting, breathless, staggering from behind the tree that supported his weight. His face brightened with recognition as he mouthed, "*Help me,*" then collapsed at my feet.

As mentioned earlier, I cannot be held accountable for the measures I take when tempted, as extemporaneous as they may be.

My turmoil was palpable, but I noticed his blood. Smelled it. I could not turn my back, let alone the fact that I knew this man.

His parents were herbalists, and he had been raised in their family apothecary. One I frequent on my necessary trips into town. I had seen him on occasion, but never concerned myself with toddling through conversation, though he frequently attempted. As one who derives pleasure from isolation, my social adeptness lacked exponentially. My contributions to conversation were nods and half hearted grunts.

The Half-Beings are notoriously curious, flocking to the door to tilt their heads inquisitively. To walk on the stomach of the deceased man while I pulled the door closed. To sniff his clothes, his hair, his bleeding wound. Nosing at it and staring at me until I validate their concerns.

The shadows are helpful when they choose to be. They shoo the animals. Assist me in dragging the man to my workspace, hauling him onto the table.

I did not have to operate. He only required a breath to a bullet hole.

My name is cursed throughout the city, conglomerated with blasphemy and debauchery - and while I do quite enjoy those things, I do not wholeheartedly agree that those words encompass who I am - but the man smiled up at me when he awoke.

The man did not leave after that. I did not ask him to.

The words simply did not exist in my vocabulary. I had never involved myself in scenarios of requesting another to extricate themselves from my life, and the invocation of such emotions - tenderness - towards another person were unfamiliar and eerie. It made speech all the more difficult. How had such a disposition been quaked by one smile?

At first, I asked him to stay for observation. Having never revived a human before, my knowledge of recovery was scant. Animals spring awake, sprinting, like a child from an afternoon nap, but he woke slowly. Unhurried, he wiped his own blood from my upper lip.

From our first conversation, he enamored me, and simultaneously unmoored me from the lifestyle I had grown accustomed to. My self-imposed exile had reached an expiration.

For a long while, I agonized that he felt somehow indebted to me. Never have I indulged myself in the fantasies of romance. I had no desire to, let alone to manipulate a person into false attraction towards me.

Perhaps it was his unyielding trust as he laid, dying at my feet. I did not know the story of how he had entrapped himself in such a dilemma; shot dead in the wilderness. My cabin was miles from civilization, and I lied perturbed at the narrative that he had sought me out. I have since learned that it was an unfortunate hunting accident, thus furthering my distaste for the sport.

He laughs freely. Despite my incompetence towards comedy, I have never once felt belittled or secluded, though I do at times catch him and the shadows in gesticulating conversation.

He possesses a childlike eagerness to learn, fingering through my books and journals, crowding me in my workspace and hiding grimaces as I breathe life.

He once asked me, *“Must you place your mouth on the gaping wound?”* To which I responded, *“If I recall correctly, my mouth on your gaping wound did not result in such disgust,”* and he cackled, scaring the squirrel from the dead. It clattered about the room as I fought to open the window. With genuine interest, and to my deepest surprise, he requested I enlighten him on my talents.

I learned that he is a painter.

At the beginning of his second week, I designed an easel. On my next trip to town, I purchased brushes. He created paints from clay, leaves, berries, and flowers.

The house seemed to brighten once he became integral to the foundation. The shadows delight in him, and did not seem perturbed by the lack of shade. I hypothesized that they require more stimulation than I could provide, and he supplies it easily and without reservation. That, or they were constantly bored of my notions.

I am a metaphysical man. A man of poetry, and an avid reader. I am a man of many thoughts, but they falter in his presence. I have ample opinion and have no qualms with sharing them loudly and with vehemence, but that was mostly reserved for the shadows, and they are barely sentient. Or so I had thought. Sharing such intimate details with another person, watching them as they processed and formed their own responses to my words was strange, and I had not expected it required such preparation. Simple conversation often left me exhausted, but his devotion to me, of all people, never wavered.

Desire was no longer sour, it was the berries he crushed for paint. It was the tea he made every night after supper. It was a hesitant kiss to my unseeing eye. It was fresh baked bread with herbs from his family's shop. It was native flowers blooming in pinks and yellows. Blues and oranges.

Despair was red.

The effects of my abilities revealed themselves with a shout, and a cry of my name in a tone that resembled the one he used as he lay dying.

He was kneeling in the garden, our half-skeletal cat limp in his lap.

*"I kissed it,"* he breathed. *"I only kissed it and it..."*

He did not need to finish, he only raised the corpse to my own treacherous mouth, his eyes frantic and confused. I cannot speculate my expression was an image of anything different, though our reasonings were, drastically.

The cat did not wake.

Despite my uneducated state of comforting another person, I attempted archly. It did not last long because to my surprise, he, with vehemence, apologized to *me* for the death of the cat.

His concerns for my well being floored me. I recollect a soft hand on my chin, manually shutting my mouth as my jaw had unhinged in shock.

He dejectedly, not for his own sake, but mine, resigned himself to the wilderness for hours at a time, foraging for mushrooms and miscellaneous bones, transplanting what he had found miles out into my own yard. He mixed new paints and surprised me with a mourning portrait of the deceased animal; our unforeseen collaboration.

His niceties were suffocating. His loquacious tendencies, despite the recent events, persisted. His forgiveness and hankering to spoil me with small gifts was undeserved. Guilt was foreign and grotesque; a miasma of filth polluting the air of our home, darkening the space he brightened so effortlessly. A fortnight after the death of the Half-Being, I confidently deduced that my abilities catered to humans as well, with harrowing caveats.

I had begun preparing for his absence. For the chasm it would create in my soul. I wondered if another shadow would spore from my melancholy. I had spoken to the shadows in whispers and apologies. I had even folded his easel and tinkered a case for his paints, but he did not gather belongings when I requested his dreaded departure.

He appeared crestfallen, but left.

He reappeared a few short hours later, bearing gifts of bones. Saying he found them in a clearing, and the sun was shining over them; a beacon. Saying he will leave if that is my true desire, but if the difference is to be made, his choice is to stay.

I opened the door.

*“I cannot allow you to kiss me,”* he stressed. *“I cannot bear the thought. I will not take the chance.”*

Our lives intertwined quickly, vining around one another like the ivy after winter frost. Over time, it brought to the surface my outdated fears; that he stayed out of misguided obligation, not a genuine love for me, as I had for him. The urge to conclude our relationship for his own health nagged me; a worm digging its way through the core of an apple.

Instead of allowing it to consume me, I asked him why he chose to stay. He had stared at me in disbelief for an uncomfortable minute, before his omnipresent smile returned. *“You truly do not believe my affections?”* to which I argued, *“I do, of course.”*

*“You entered the apothecary, skulking. It was quite endearing. Rumors of you flitted about the town, but I am a stubborn man, as you’ve come to know,”* he said, leaning back on his palms, the grass cushioning him. *“Do you recall my attempts at courting?”*

*“Courting?”* I balked. *“Me?”*

He laughed. *“Do you know how difficult it is to find echinacea year-round? I either procured from growers out of county, or bought out another shop’s inventory of it. You did not think that to be odd? Only one business in town having the ingredients for your favorite teas?”*

I flushed. He sighed fondly, shaking his head.

*“And all it took was a painful death to covet your attention. You do love to make me work for it.”*

I need not ask again.

Our intimacy did not lack because of the absence of corporeal closeness. My inexperience and disinterest in the physicality of partnerships did not deter him. He expressed many times that it put him at ease; knowing I was not dissatisfied. I was quite the opposite, in fact.

When my anxieties gripped my bronchial tract and squeezed, he loosened the fist with a warm fire and tea, or a passage from the book he read, or sometimes a kiss to my left eye as we danced in the center of the room, my ear to his heart-beat. The one beating because of me, he so often loved to remind me. He often pressed my hand over it, telling me to *listen, listen*.

I cannot be held accountable for the decisions I make when desperate, even when I am uncertain of the outcome when the decision is made.

On the last day of his life, I prepare for a kiss.

His hair is now grey. The hand that hovers over mine, tracing the bulging veins, is unsteady. The heart inside of him stutters, his breaths labor. His form is sunken; skin, papery. I am aware of my own reflection, but I do not concern myself with the vastness of aging. It is simply too large for me.

My love for him is greater. Visceral. Since the day I met him, I feared the inevitable day I would lose him. The longevity of our lives I am immensely grateful for, but the life we have grown is naught without him to plant seeds with.

Our love is perennial, that I know.

I was once a man who did not waste time with wanting. Because of him, I am now a man who values dreaming, and the importance of living.

I can only yearn to reunite, whether it is in this life, or our next.

# The Computed Image of Us

*Isabella Park*

Where are you now that you are elsewhere? Are you talking to a Viking pirate or a catholic priest? Are you rethinking a disagreement with an extremist from r/worldnews subreddit? Have you found a tank to take over—are you shooting big missiles into empty fields of overgrown grass? Are you working through complex equations or performing long division? Are you coding a program to manage the burdens of feeling human? Have you asked Chat GPT about us? Did you receive its advice like you would your father's? What algorithm will show that I am beside you tonight? In your world, do the boundaries of me still render on screen? May I emulate how the moon is growing brightly into our room? Do you miss touching soft skin? Or do nude pixelated girls preform your wants with discretion? Have you fallen down lines of JavaScript? Can you climb up the blue light to exist with me for a stint? Will you stay awhile before the servers spit you back out like a cannon?

# Artists' Statements

**Evan Allee** is a Creative Writing and Literature major. When he's not reading, writing, or thinking about writing, he spends his free time watching anime and hanging with his cat, Stuffing.

**Chase Benson** is a Liberal Arts student at IU Indy who aspires to break into the artistic world through literature, art, and graphic design.

**Ashley Noelle Bertram** is a poet and a winner of Ivy Tech's *New Voices* poetry contest. Her work delves into Gothic themes, exploring the complexities and darkness of the human experience. Through her poetry, Ashley seeks to uncover the hidden recesses of emotion and thought, often illuminating the shadows of the human psyche.

On "Pretty Ladies Shouldn't Cry," Ashley says: This piece is written for the women who grew up having to be seen and not heard, who sacrificed themselves under the guise of grace, and who are ready to embrace that their humanity is what makes them beautiful.

**Ellie Bevan** is a sophomore studying art education at IU Indianapolis, where she spends many hours at Herron, bringing her works to life. Over her time at Herron, she has developed a deep appreciation for a variety of mediums, from charcoal and oil paint to ceramics and collage. Always open to new materials and ideas, she pushes herself to create work that is strange, personal, and unmistakably hers. After graduation, Ellie plans to return to Northwest Indiana, where she hopes to inspire future artists as an art teacher by sharing her love for creativity and self-expression with the next generation.

On "Masque of the Red Death," Ellie says: This work is a collage inspired by "Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allen Poe. Using a technique including collage, acrylic paint, and printed photos she created this patchwork piece.

**Tegan Blackburn** is a graduate student majoring in English. They hope to one day work in the publishing industry, ideally writing loud and proud queer books for the people who need them. In their free time, they enjoy stalking the aisles of local libraries and drinking copious amounts of lemonade.

**Victoria Bozinovski** has had a passion for the written word since she was young. If you spot her in her free time, she'll likely have her nose in a book or be typing a poem idea frantically into her notes app. Currently, she is a senior at IUI majoring in Medical Humanities and Health Studies. Victoria hopes to use her passion for writing and undergraduate degree to pursue a career in law.

On “I go there,” Victoria says: Negative feelings can be intense and hard to navigate! Based on the author’s own journey with mental health, this piece was meant to capture the process of letting go of negative energy because it isn’t always easy to do. In whatever form these feelings may come to someone, there is a way to accept their presence and choose a different place to go. This poem invites the readers to find the places they can go to.

**Daylen Byrd** previously attended Butler University as an Art & Design student with an emphasis in Art History and a minor in Museum Studies. He has been a full-time IUPUI student at Herron and is pursuing a BFA in painting. Though studio centered, he still maintains the passion for working within museum curation and art restoration. Having most experience in traditional art, graphic design and writing, he has developed an appreciation for many art forms. Within his art he aims to reimagine the traditional principles of classical and academic art.

**Isaac Chaifetz** is an illustration student from Indianapolis studying drawing and illustration at Herron School of Art and Design. He currently holds an Associate’s Degree in Fine Arts from Ivy Tech Community College. Chaifetz’s attention to specificity of life is exemplified in his portrait and figure work.

On “The Danse Macabre,” Isaac says: The Danse Macabre as a late medieval allegorical trope has a certain amount of frivolity that he wanted to lean into. With this in mind, he planned compositions which would convey the specific lyrical rhythms of certain folk dances, to give a fun rhythmic movement to the characters in the piece.

**Jaylee Chastain** is a first-year student majoring in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing. She often uses writing as a coping mechanism to help channel her emotions, hoping her work inspires others to use this creative outlet as well.

**Joe Chimenti** is a 22-year-old furniture designer from Richmond, Indiana. His work combines mid century modern design with biophilic elements. This mix shows his love for simplicity and functionality while connecting people to nature. Joe’s designs feature clean lines and organic shapes. These elements create sense of nostalgia and timelessness. He aims to craft pieces that are not just functional but also create comfort and intimacy in the spaces they occupy. Each piece is thoughtfully made to enhance daily life, encouraging clients to engage with their surroundings in a deeper way. As Joe prepares to move to New York City after graduation, he is excited to explore how urban life can blend with nature-inspired design. He wants his work to evoke strong emotions and create spaces that promote connection and reflection. Joe believes that well-designed furniture can turn a house into a home, and he is committed to helping people achieve that transformation through his designs.

**Emma Cremeans** is studying Drawing and Illustration at Herron School of Art and Design. She grew up in Indianapolis and still works in the city running a commission business during her time in school. She focuses on traditional oil painting techniques in new mediums, such as her digital work. Outside of her art, Emma is President of Herron Student Council, an International Success Ambassador, and the Director of Communications for the IU Indy student government. Her pieces have been seen in various county and state galleries, as well as juried competitions. Emma aims to work in the film industry, focusing on the development stages, such as concept art.

On “Gossip,” Emma says: [This piece] is dedicated to the delicate moments found in conversations, especially between women. The art of conversation is rarely represented naturally, this piece aims to show the audience the beauty found in these conversations.

On “Family,” Emma says: This artwork depicts her older sisters (left) and herself (right). Comparing siblings of similar ages is common, this artwork represents the dynamic between sisters. The sister on the left is the most rendered and structured, reflecting her more rigid personality, and as the eye moves right, the rendering becomes more loose and obscure, demonstrating the more relaxed attributes each sister displays in life. As the youngest sister, she has a sketch quality imposed on her figure, reflecting how she feels that she is never as finished as her sisters.

**Monica Cunningham** is a senior at IUI studying Psychology, while also getting an Art minor and Art Therapy certificate. She one day hopes to work in a profession that allows art to help heal people.

**Leah Darden** is a photographer and visual artist from Indianapolis, Indiana. Leah’s work comes from a place of aiming to inspire others. Though her work focuses on nature photography, her work also explores being an advocate for her culture and familial history, gratitude of life, and nostalgia.

On “In the Haze,” Leah says: This piece was inspired by a 70’s influenced photoshoot. She is influenced by nostalgia in her work, and therefore was inspired to recreate a portrait that was 70’s themed. The hazy, diffused, warm lighting, paired with the hair and posing is what allowed this piece to be successful in that.

**Shyama Prasad Dash** is a graduate student pursuing a Master’s in HCI at Indiana University Indianapolis. Hailing from Odisha, India, Shyama is passionate about creating painterly visuals and writing and believes in finding profound meaning in life’s quietest moments.

On “The Midnight Flight,” Shyama says: [This piece] is a deeply personal reflection on leaving home, torn between reflections and the weight of farewell. Through intertwined thoughts, his own and his father’s, it explores the bittersweet nature of leaving home, the emotions of guilt, and the search for belonging beyond borders.

**Elise Dobson** is from Rensselaer, Indiana, and moved to Indianapolis at 18. They study Art Education with plans to pursue a Master’s in Social Impact and serve in the Peace Corps. Their work explores themes of faith, identity, and societal critique through various artistic mediums.

On “In the Shadow of Magdalene,” Elise says: [This piece] critiques the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in Catholicism, drawing parallels between her stigmatized identity and the marginalization of modern-day sex workers. The piece challenges the hypocrisy within religious institutions and reflects on themes of redemption, shame, and the societal implications of faith.

**Dex Fee** is a Junior at IUI studying Creative Writing. This is their second appearance in *genesis*, with their first appearance being in the spring of 2024 with their poem “To Have and To Hold.” They would like to thank their family, friends, and the staff of *genesis* for the continuous support.

**Hayden Garris** is an English Literature major. When he’s not reading and writing, he spends his time gardening or hanging out with family and friends.

**Dayanara Guzman** is a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student majoring in Psychology and minoring in Creative Writing. She enjoys writing poetry with themes of love, heartbreak, and the time in between. Dayanara is of Salvadoran descent and enjoys spending time with family and friends.

**Eris Hembree** (she/fae) is a sophomore at IU pursuing majors in Creative Writing and Computer Science. In her free time, she enjoys writing and playing tabletop games. Fae also enjoys spending time with her friends and working at the LGBTQ+ center on campus.

On “Southern Sweet,” Eris says: [This poem] is a piece written about Eris’s complex relationship with her upbringing as a queer person growing up in rural north Alabama and her bittersweet feelings about having left the deep south.

On “Ribcage,” Eris says: [This poem] is a piece written about Eris’s experiences with the complexities and brutal nature of trust and vulnerability, and how growing close to someone and choosing to trust can be an act of change, albeit messy in nature.

**Sarah Hollcraft** is an aspiring analog and digital photographer based on the southern side of the Indianapolis area. She is studying at Indiana University Indianapolis and is in the process of achieving her Bachelors in Fine Arts. She works primarily with digital photography in her work, using it to explore the complex relationships humanity has with nature. Hollcraft works mostly with highly saturated colors as well as different textures within her images in order to create beautiful prints of the world around her. She is expected to graduate in May of 2025.

On “Koi,” Sarah says: [This piece] was taken at the Columbus Zoo in Ohio and has since been one of her favorite pieces of work to show to people. At the time of this piece she was working with more abstract borders and using unconventionally sized images to create a larger collection; like a bunch of small puzzle pieces coming together.

**Elise Howe** is a sophomore Drawing and Illustration Major at the Herron School of Art and Design. She works primarily in oil paint and narrative artwork. Outside of campus, she is an employee at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. In her free time, she is a mother to her cat Puff.

On “Sister Golden Hair,” Elise says: [This piece] is a painting of her sister on their childhood spot in the mountains of Arizona.

**Caedence Jones** is a sophomore Creative Writing major, whose main goal in life is to publish a series of poetry books. She is never happier than when she is writing. You can often find her with her eyebrows scrunched, typing furiously in her notes app, trying to find the perfect ending to her new poem idea.

**Eswar Kamiseti**, while currently exploring informatics after a career in dentistry, finds creative escape in photography, drawing, and illustrations—photography naturally being the most fulfilling. Behind the camera, he preserves fleeting moments, emotions, and stories, capturing life’s raw authenticity as it unfolds.

On “DUEL AT DAWN,” Eswar says: This picture was captured at dawn on his way to Chicago. To him, it symbolizes a dramatic struggle between sun and clouds, as sunlight boldly breaks through only to be swallowed again. Amid this duel, the towering windmills stand calm and unwavering, quietly belittling everything else beneath the shifting sky.

**Kim Kile** is a PhD student in the American Studies program with a focus on studying how best to integrate bibliotherapeutic techniques into school counseling programs. When not working or studying, Kim enjoys reading, writing poems and short stories, and hanging out with her family and friends. Her favorite people in the world are her four grandchildren, Henry, Sophia, CeCe, and Finn.

On “Generations,” Kim says: She wrote this poem about her father’s progression with Alzheimer’s using the metaphor of an invasive plant choking and, eventually, killing the man she knew and loved. It was the little things that should have been their clues. It is inspired by “When You Have Forgotten Sunday: The Love Story” by Gwendolyn Brooks.

On “Genetics,” Kim says: Her poem is inspired by Sylvia Plath’s poem, “You’re,” and both are about their first pregnancies. For nine months, a mother has the privilege of growing a human being, someone they dream about and wonder what they will look like, who they will become. Her poem looks back at those days with love and excitement, then asks the question, “What happens next?”

On “Body Art,” Kim says: She comes from a generation that didn’t fall in love with body art and tattoos the way her children’s generation has, so she examined what her body says about the life she has lived without using ink and wrote “Body Art.” It is inspired by the poem “Used,” by Rita Dove.

On “Created Equal,” Kim says: She was inspired to write this poem based on the poetry of Adrienne Rich, along with the current events in the United States as they apply to Women’s Rights and bodily autonomy.

**Paige LaMar** is a senior majoring in English Literature with a minor in Film. She is an honors student and member of ALDPES. She loves the outdoors and spending quality time with her friends and family. She resides in Indianapolis.

**Corlan McCollum** is a real human being from Pittsboro, Indiana.

On “Heart of Ohio,” Corlan says: [This piece] has previously won the Eric Sharp Gateway Poetry Award and the Rebecca Pitts Poetry Prize, but this is its first time in print. If you are ever in Springfield, Ohio, stop by its namesake; the Heart of Ohio Antique Center.

**Thomas McNeil** is a student at IUI majoring in Creative Writing with a minor in Psychology. He has a passion for teaching and writing and in his free time he enjoys spending time with friends and family, playing horror games, and watching adult animation shows just to over analyze them.

**Ginger Miller** is a senior at the Herron School of Art and Design, studying Art Education and Pre-Art Therapy with minors in Psychology and Art History. She uses fibers and etching to explore the intergenerational experience of immigration, feminist epistemology, and remembering/forgetting.

On “꿀 생강 (Honey Ginger),” Ginger says: This piece depicts her mother as a child, smiling beneath a yakgwa sun. Yakgwa is a honey-ginger cookie

served during Korean celebrations. Its inclusion represents the intergenerational experience of immigration and the inherent connection between mothers and daughters. Specifically, how experiences, traumas, preferences, and culture are inherited biologically and psychologically, beginning in the womb. Moreover, “honey ginger” is a play on words, referring to both yakgwa and her mother’s nickname for her. A softground impression of a norigae knot—protective Korean knots that often symbolize eternal youth—attempts to retroactively preserve her mother’s childhood joy and innocence.

On “Act Like a Lady,” Ginger says: This piece is about feminist epistemology: how women contribute to the construction of knowledge and the history of women being barred from academia and/or going uncredited for their contributions. This oppression parallels art history where female artists, disciplines, and subjects were historically viewed as lesser. Her piece depicts three of her female professors reenacting poses from art history that demonstrate female power. The etching on the left reimagines Lady Justice, removing her blindfold to symbolize the reality of the disparity and oppression women face in our society. The etching in the center embodies the phrase “As Above, So Below,” serving as a tongue-in-cheek expression of the idea that God is a woman. The etching on the right is a reimagining of Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi, a prominent female Baroque-era artist known as a feminist trailblazer. The title recontextualizes the misogynistic phrase, “Act like a lady,” referring to the female empowerment highlighted in her piece rather than traditionally valued “feminine” qualities like submissiveness.

**Levi Miller** is an IUI junior studying creative writing. He loves to spend his days drawing, writing, and listening to music. His proudest achievement is listening to “Hot to the Touch, Cold on the Inside” by Fall Out Boy 121 times in one day.

On “Full Moons Are Perfect for a Werewolf to Come Out (As Transgender),” Levi says: This story was an experiment in horror-comedy—that is, finding comedy in life despite the horror of being a transgender man in 2025 America. He hopes Joe’s stubborn resistance and ability to come out on top resonates with a few of you.

On “Punk Was Dead,” Levi says: This is the first act of a screenplay about a washed-up punk band teaming up with a cynical journalist to stop her sister from resurrecting their dead drummer with the family cult. It gets pretty gnarly, dissecting celebrity culture and the pain of forgiving old wrongs.

**Sarah Montanez** is a Photography major at IUI’s Herron School of Art and Design. Much of her work is about family history and cultural identity, including themes of loss, grief, and generational dynamics.

On “Mend,” Sarah says: She used an old photograph of her grandparents before their divorce. She never saw them in the same room together growing up. This work is an attempt to bring them together, but also to heal the pain and trauma experienced by her mother and grandmother, caused by her grandfather’s absence and infidelity.

**Xavier Neier** is a former student at IU - Indianapolis, graduated in Fall 2024. His major is English with a concentration in Professional and Public Writing. He would like to thank his supportive family and friends for their encouragement and help throughout his life.

On “WANTED ADS,” Xavier says: If anyone feels compelled to answer to the wanted ads, don’t.

**Signe Nettum**, originally a Wisconsinite, has found herself traveling the Midwest for the perfect story. From the cornfields of Iowa to the crossroads of Indiana, she has straddled the line between reality and imagination. Her work can be found in other university magazines and in *Utopia Science Fiction*.

**Mack Nigh** is nothing if not a storyteller. As a Marketing student at the Kelley School of Business and a prolific freelance social media marketing manager, she practices her talents through online campaigns and interactive collaborations. As a lifelong writer (seriously, lifelong. Her favorite ‘computer game’ as a child was Google Docs.), she tells her stories through her written collections.

On “In the Gales I See My Fate,” Mack says: [This piece] is her second published creative work. It explores the delicate balance between surviving in the expected chaos and living a lifestyle of horrifying serenity. What is stability to those who are to drift? What is safety to those who have never known it? She shares her experiences of growing out of an anticipated yet callous childhood and into a secure yet known adulthood.

**Isabella Park** is an English Major concentrating on creative writing in Indianapolis, Indiana.

**Sam Pickett** is a recent graduate.

**Alicia Rump** is a senior majoring in English and creative writing. She loves exploring family dynamics through fiction. She’s excited for what her future has in store and hopes to share more stories as she moves forward, beyond IU Indy.

**Elena Saorrano** is a forensic science major with a chemistry concentration who has been writing since elementary school. They enjoy reading horror, fantasy, and scientific nonfiction, along with making jewelry and listening to music.

On “Marian,” Elena says: [This piece] was inspired by the Sisters of Mercy song of the same name.

**Amy Schleppenbach** is an Army veteran and the oldest of fifteen. She loves books, art, video games, and gardening. She has read over 3,000 books in nearly every genre and will always take recommendations. She is excited about graduation and a new adventure after college.

**Robert Maurice Smith** is a painter and draftsman based in Indianapolis, Indiana. Formerly a metal fabricator, Rob is a full-time student at the Herron School of Art and Design pursuing his Bachelor of Fine Art in Painting and, prospectively, his Master of Fine Art in Painting. Possessing a curious mind, Rob views the artist’s role in society as that of a philosopher and visual translator. Often anthropologic in subject matter, Rob fuses observational imagery with abstract symbols and motifs to generate deeper inquiries into the human condition. Rob regularly exhibits work in regional juried shows such as the Richmond Art Museum Annual Art Show and the Hoosier Salon. He is currently a member of the Stutz Artist Association.

On “Pride and Joy,” Robert says: A metaphorical still-life containing construction tools, a steel toed boot, and a gold medal culminating into what his life has amounted to so far.

On “Pictures of Lily,” Robert says: [This piece] is a mixed media painting on canvas whose theme is based on a song with the same title by the band The Who. The subjects depicted in the piece are typical still-life objects that act as pictorial metaphors of the story described in the song.

On “Marina,” Robert says: Drawing from a photograph he took of a girl he attended a workshop with years ago in Chicago. Painting outdoors, he noticed the sunlight illuminating her charm. He asked her to pose for a picture and 2 years later, a drawing was made! He chose graphite over color to give the drawing a feeling of nostalgia.

On “Annie,” Robert says: Portrait of a model he only met one time. The angle of the interior lighting causing her hair and robe to glow and complement her approachable charm. Like the Marina piece, he worked in graphite to induce more of a nostalgia feel.

On “Totem for the Working Man,” Robert says: His piece is a metaphorical self-portrait. He took familiar tools and equipment from his occupation as a metal fabricator and incorporated them around a male mannequin. The odd arrangement gives off the impression of embodying something spiritual such as a totem. Possibly a deity of some sort given the idealized torso of the mannequin

and the mysterious aura permeated by the turquoise-filtered light.

**Valerie Snelwar** is an Indiana-based artist who intends to attain an ISP in Painting and Printmaking, with a minor in Book Arts. She aims to integrate recycled materials and develop political symbolism in her future body of work.

On “Dilapidated Mountaineer’s Cabinet,” Valerie says: Haunted cabinet presiding in a lonely mountaineer’s house way up high and distant. Desolated. Failed to be exterminated. Dust and debris all too familiar to me. Ceaseless. Useless. Don’t decipher this.

**Anthony Stewart** is an artist based in Indianapolis, IN. Stewart is actively pursuing his Bachelors of Fine Arts Degree in Drawing and Illustration at Herron School of Art and Design.

On “Behind the Gate,” Anthony says: This work represents the feeling of uncertainty and fascination concerning the afterlife. The elf on the bottom half of the drawing represents humanity. The entity above the castle represents a mysterious god-like figure. It is up to the viewer to decide whether to fear or trust the entity.

**Sophie Sturgeon**, a freshman at Herron School of Art and Design studying Art Education, is passionate about creativity and connection through art. She believes art transcends boundaries, inspiring and engaging others. Through her studies, she hopes to share art’s transformative power, fostering deeper connections with the world around her.

On “Weightless,” Sophia says: This piece is a part of a larger collection of works that focus on the mundane of everyday life. Through this work, she hopes to capture the feeling of peace that comes with taking time to slow down and enjoy where you are in life.

**Kira Taylor** says: Hummingbirds have been seen as healers and representation for the sick in numerous cultures. Anomaly represents the suffocation they feel trying to heal from chronic pain and conditions.

**Elizabeth Terhorst** is a junior at IU Indianapolis majoring in Secondary English Education and English Literature. Outside of school, they’re the external president of Domestic Abuse Prevention Student Organization (DAPSO) and hosts events at local DV shelters for the residents to enjoy and provide educational and community-building nights on campus.

On “Sammy,” Elizabeth says: [This piece] was written after reading news about the 2025 inauguration. This was Elizabeth’s way of coping with a lot of the

distressing information and executive orders circulating the internet. It's about growing up and realizing you cannot recognize something you were once so proud to be a part of.

On "Teenagers," Elizabeth says: [This piece] is centered around Elizabeth's relationship with their mother. The two have experienced their fair share of ups and downs, but since coming to college and understanding how trauma affects grieving individuals, Elizabeth gained a more holistic understanding of their mother and is working on becoming close with her.

**Emile Tipton** is a mixed media artist. In her artistic practice, Emile interweaves the complexities of female experience, human struggle, and addiction, using a blend of painting and printmaking to explore these themes. Her work vividly portrays the internal and external conflicts faced by women, while also reflecting broader human vulnerabilities.

On "The Human Heart Hasn't Changed," Emile says: [This piece] is a triptych of copper plate etchings printed on paper, exploring the complex interplay between emotion and color. The bold, vibrant hues contrast with the abstract, somber faces depicted, creating a dynamic tension that reflects the multifaceted nature of human experience. This juxtaposition suggests that joy and sorrow are not opposing forces, but rather coexist as integral aspects of our emotional landscape. Through this work, she aims to convey that emotional complexity—where multiple feelings can be felt simultaneously—is an ever-present part of the human condition. The series invites viewers to reflect on the resilience of the heart and the way in which emotions, though often contradictory, are deeply intertwined in our shared humanity.

**Ashley Vega** is a senior Creative Writing student at IUI. She is a lover of words of all forms, whether it be novels, music, or poetry. In her free time, she enjoys going to concerts, FaceTiming her long-distance friends, and rewatching the same handful of TV shows.

On "Grieving in Advance," Ashley says: She was inspired to write this piece as a way to work through her dad's recent cancer diagnosis. Instead of talking about it, she wrote. This piece was born from the whirlwind of emotions of coming to terms with a new reality and grappling with complicated and long-held feelings.

**Gabriella Weaver** is a senior at IU Indianapolis working towards earning her degree in Psychology along with minors in Anthropology and Criminal Justice. While she isn't entirely set on where she is going after college, she feels incredibly supported and wants to thank those responsible.

On “Fighting Your Memory,” Gabby says: For her, writing has always been a way to personally reflect on experiences, and by sharing she has found that she is not alone in those experiences. She chose this piece as a way of inspiring connection and understanding, especially amongst those who have been forced to grow up earlier than others.

**Maura Weber** is someone’s daughter, someone’s girlfriend, someone’s adoptive mother, someone’s friend, *someone*.

*genesis* publishes a new issue every  
year.

Submit your work, see past issues, and read current  
editors' blog posts:



To submit:  
[iupuigenesis.submittable.com/submit](http://iupuigenesis.submittable.com/submit)

To join staff:

Complete your apprenticeship in:  
ENG-W 280 Literary Editing and Publishing

All editors are eligible for a one-credit internship per semester.  
For more information, email us at  
[genesis@iu.edu](mailto:genesis@iu.edu).



We would like to thank the following:

Indiana University Indianapolis Office of Student Involvement

Liberal Arts Student Council

Indiana University School of Liberal Arts

Indiana University Indianapolis English Department

Printing Partners

Ray Bradbury Center

& friends of *genesis*