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The Coraddi is the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's magazine of arts and literature. Submissions are open to both students and alumni. This semester's issue includes selections of art and literature from UNCG students submitted between August and November, 2021.

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COVER CREDIT

Cover designed by Hunter Pham using Alyssa Smith's photography submission, "Untitled".





Maxence Tromeur, On Se Revoit I'An Prochain

The Forest

by Darian Kiener

* * *

The sound of a grandfather clock endlessly flicks away the sound of time, like pieces of sand falling through an hourglass. All I can hear is the ticking of the clock as I pace the empty halls of this once great house. Darkness coats the walls thick in black paint, making the house feel like it is a living ghost, breathing its final breaths before it crumbles. The house was ancient, having been built by my great grandfather, who was once a clockmaker, and the one that made the Grandfather clock that sits as the headpiece of the main room.

The clock itself is nothing special; what made this clock so important was its connection to me. As if it beat the heart within my family's name itself, since it had been built I don't think it has stopped. Still, it ticks on, quietly, with the pendulum swinging slowly from left to right as if it controlled all the time in the universe. The dark stain that had been applied so many years ago had faded leaving an almost bleached look to the clock, mirroring the desolate look of the house.

The time continued slowly as I seemed to get lost in thought, looking at what was seemingly the last living piece of my family. Though I stood before it, admiring its will to continue ticking time away. I would not be surprised at all if this clock was here at the end of time, slowly ticking away those last moments before the earth was swallowed by darkness the same way this house had been.

The crunch of dead leaves and the sound of brittle grass breaking underfoot lead me through the woods to an old creek where I played as a child, and once as a teen, where I escaped to have time with my thoughts. Though those times are long past, and now I am struck by curiosity as to if the sound of running water can bring me back from the spell that the house had cast on me. The trees that hung heavy overhead had no leaves, and the bark that encased them seemed to be as cold and grey as the sky above me. I tightened my jacket around my brittle shoulders, which at one time could have carried me to the top of the tallest tree in the forest. I did not expect to see it today. It was a long trek when I was young, and with this cold, it would be deadly if attempted now. I continued to the creek, looking at every tree for memory, though those around me seemed so different from the trees of my youth. I walked into the gray forest that felt like home so long ago but was now foreign to me and dead.

As I got deeper and deeper into the woods I felt eyes, the feeling of being watched, though I continued to trek. I looked over my shoulder, though every time I turned to face whatever was in these woods, it was quiet. There was no wind to ruffle the dead trees. There was no sound of footsteps. I could almost be certain that there was nothing alive within these woods.

It was different from my memories and I could not recognize it. I remembered what it used to be, a small creek flowing into a pond teeming with life, but now the water was still. It was as if I was looking at a painting. The stillness was unsettling, the water, the house, and the woods did not move. Only the clock. It felt as if I was living within a painting, inspecting only a distant memory that I had since forgotten. Yet this memory was twisted and deformed in such a way that it made me quiver from malaise. I turned from this place and back to the path I had followed here, that was when I saw it.

One of the trees seemingly twitched away from my gaze the way a person does after they have stared at you just a second too long. I dismissed it as the wind, but there was none. My hands were trembling in fear. A feeling I had not truly felt since Vietnam, but here it was. I took a step towards the tree and could almost hear it whispering. I took another step and heard the movement of another tree, my eyes darting towards it. I took the last step, but this time it was a different tree that twisted away from me. I stopped. The drum in my chest reverberated throughout my body. I looked to the great grey tree in front of me and I called out to it, "Who are you?"

The tree was sedately untwisted. I could see its ancient face, eyes closed, mouth sealed, and about ten feet above me. It opened its eyes and bent down to see me. Its eyes were opaque and milky, squinting at me as if he needed glasses. Its face had crows feet around the eyes, wrinkles where his smile lines should have been, and his eyelids seemed to droop. The tree blinked a few times before his eyes seemed to settle on me.

I heard the sound of wood splintering and breaking, and noticed the other trees were turning to look at me. Their eyes all had that same droop that came with age, though none of the others seemed as aged as the tree that stood before me. I turned in a circle, meeting the eyes of every tree in the area. Some of the trees wore friendly smiles as if we were old friends. I tried to smile back at them, though I am sure it looked more like a grimace. Others looked on in a stoic fashion, judging me as if I was guilty of a crime I could not recall.

The trees seemed to watch me for quite some time. Each one's facial expression was unchanging, and though most were perfectly still, the only thing that moved was their eyes, and all eyes were on me. I turned back to the ancient tree that I had originally addressed. After a few seconds of waiting, he spoke: "We are the living wood, have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten?" I ask.

"You left some time ago," the tree grunted. Ignoring the question.

"What have I forgotten? I asked.

"You have changed," the tree said. Ignoring my question.

"I suppose I have aged," I said.

"Not that."

"Then what? What's changed?"

"You used to be living," the tree breathed out before looking at the tree behind him. I turned to see what had taken the attention of the ancient tree, and saw the cold face of another tree, eyes closed, seemingly asleep. I turned my attention back to the tree that I had been speaking with and waited for it to speak, though it never did.

That voice, those words, the clock, those were the things I heard. The squeal of the old wood under boot, and the crunch of dead leaves. Mundane sounds, dreary even, though those sounds took the space in my mind that was left and cast all other thoughts out. The sounds of life, oh how I miss them.



Galen Draper, Fall Leaves

Cherry Pits and Pomegranate Seeds

Plant a garden of cherry pits and pomegranate seeds.

Some say right and wrong started in a garden.

That is not my scripture. My scripture is

my mother, smiling, my father, laughing,

the ADHD meds on my desk, untaken. My brain

is a cricket, on the underside of green leaves. Poison

sumac or English ivy or prey for the spider

on the next branch. I don't like spiders. I don't

have the patience for weaving, or for

waiting. I don't like flies, either, but

I know which I'd rather be. Did you know, snakes are immortal? At least, the ancient

Romans thought they were. Until Augustus- except

he took the ivory gate. Aneas, I mean.

He walked back from the underworld and forgot

the words of his father. I forget most of the words

spoken to me. Most of my dreams, too. But

I do remember a rose bush, the black earth beneath

my nails- its branches taller than I am, now-

and the bright, sharp pain of hooked thorns

in the pad of my thumb, the curve of my wrist,

the sweep of my thigh. Right and wrong did begin

under a fruit tree, probably, but it had nothing to do

with serpents or apples. What use have the undying

for gardens? And by that I mean: what use have gardens? Or:

What is the difference between a garden and a forest?

The sentinel at the gate, Or the lock? And by that I mean:

what use have the undying for pomegranate seeds

and cherry pits?
Which are really promises

and arsenic. What use for blood and broken skin? Which are

nothing but what they are.

A Finger

* * *

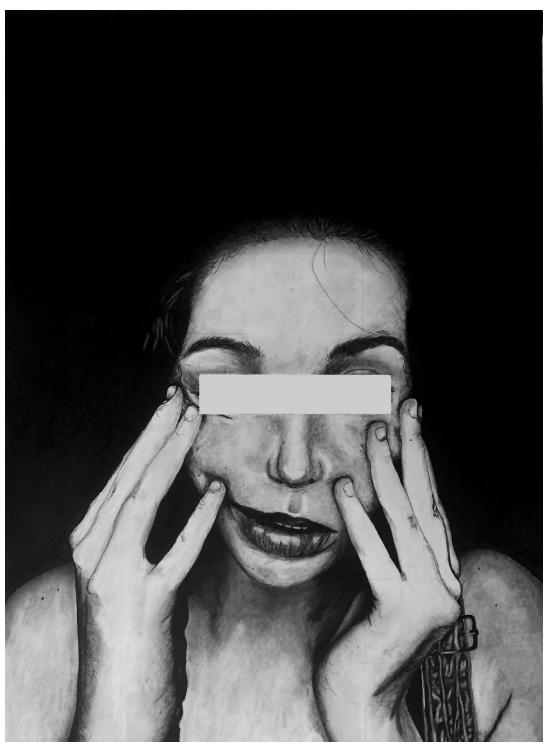
I woke up in a cold sweat from a nightmare I couldn't remember, and the only thing I can hear now is my own heart beating.

It's harsh, so harsh it rips straight through my flesh like a finger.

The passionate and pitiful sensation of a finger ripping me in half.

God,
The endless repetition.
The rhythm so loud
And so hard to follow.
Each pulse of tension shocking
Through my bones.
Oh, they're so harsh,
so harsh they pierce the top of my skull
like a finger.
That disgusting, sensual sensation
of a finger digging through my brain.

As I close my eyes,
Empty darkness
Sprawls ahead,
And all I can think is,
'I should wade into the ocean.
I should wade up to my neck.
I should wear the water like a dress
And forget I'm wearing it,
And let its own tender rhythm drown
Me out.



Sydney Hall, Don't Look

Wild Magic

* * *

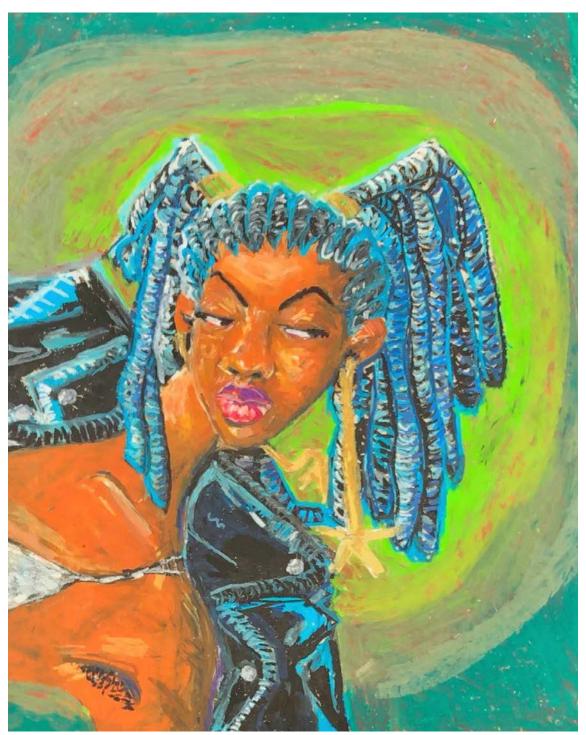
We are the wild ones,
Full of magic.
Men have always feared us,
Our power, our strength.
They have called us witches, whores, and more.

They destroyed the goddess
They banished us from their churches.
God is a man,
They said.
Women can not be divine!

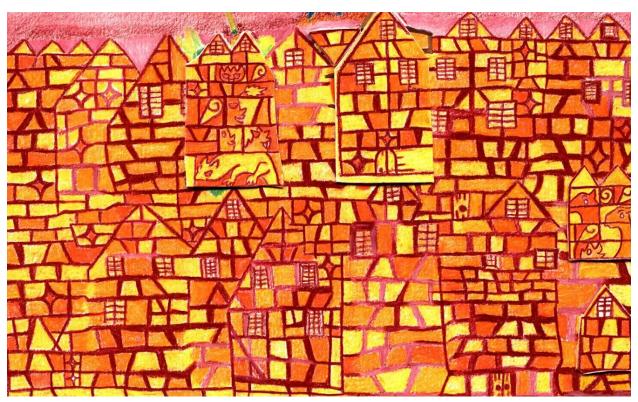
You are less than, They said. We are worth more than you. Your words don't matter, And neither do you!

But all this they did, Not because it was true But they feared us Because deep down They knew all we could do.

We are the wild ones, Full of magic. We are creators of life, The goddess divine And this, this is our time.



Tyler Jones, Calm Questioning



Maxfield Earle, Orange House

JD TERHUNE

The King's Court

I entered the domain of my crooked king Prepared to state my demands. I'll bribe, threaten, or beg I refuse to leave empty-handed.

The stench of starch and burning beef
Teasing my hungry nose.
I spy the royal court dining;
Cheeses and meat.
Confections unknown to one such as me.

Servants hustle and bustle about the court, Bringing and taking plates. No spark of joy, nor a smile Adorns a single face.

I approached the desk of the Speaker Who speaks for the king. Nobody speaks to the king directly, Nobody listens to the king but they.

Speaker! I cried
I implore you, give me something to eat.
Tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, and beef.
I'm hungry, I'm starving.
I beg of you,
Feed me
Please.

The speaker looked down from their desk And with a look of confusion, spoke.

Sir, This is a Burger King.

ANASTASIA NANTHANOLATH

3 a.m.

* * *

my feet are on the pavement of a road the memory of putting shoes on is vague i go through streets like pages in a book

i end up

wherever

my feet

take me

the world is too

quiet

my mind feels soft

and though it feels like sleepwalking, i am awake

the only difference between the me i am now and the me i'll be in the morning is that the me i am now area 1, usaop

it's 3 a.m. and the me i am now doesn't care

i don't care that my socks

don't match

or that i left my glasses on the bedside table or that it's chilly outside and i forgot to put on a jacket the me i am now doesn't care In Fact, I revel in it i revel in the shy silver crescent that hangs in the starless black sky i revel in the street lamp's soft orange glow that illuminates the ground i amble on

it's like i'm walking through a still painting one stroke at

a time

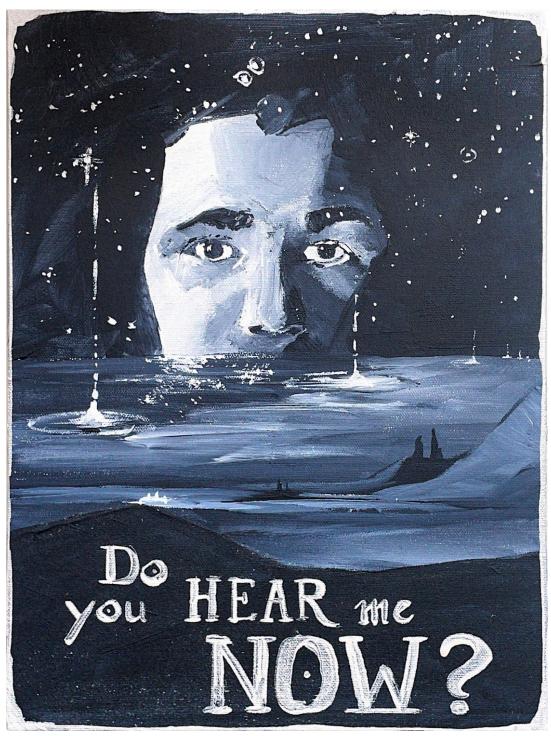
And I devour the night.



Hanna Gelwix, Misty Road



Amanda McGowan, Animals of Self Control



Evan Schock, Do You Hear Me Now

MICHAEL BRITT

Sweet Magnolia

+ * *

When will I find a tree I can climb forever? Let me smell the sweet magnolia blooms as I wrap my hands around each crumbling branch Let the roots burrow deep into my soul, while the white flowers float gently from the top Can I embrace the trunk without fear of letting go? Will this tree still stand if I don't chain my existence to its very core? Tell the neighbors to avert their eyes. I don't want them to see me weeping over this old magnolia I'll let it fall, and with it, all its eroded delicacies, shown only when uprooted All the black gunk trapped inside hollow wood. I'll remember it as waxy leaves and fuzzy buds that look like fruit But I'll let go, and with it My memory of You.



Alyssa Smith, Untitled

JOHN CARLOS AGUINALDO

Cerulean Blues

* * *

I'm howlin at the moon
I'm groaning
Bumping some blues cause I'm off it
All this henny's feeling pretty warm in my stomach
Buzzing I'm good I'm nauseous
Don't need to pull trig I feel awesome

Never pull up not on something
God second coming
Bad like Michael Jackson
I'm bumping
Kick it back like Jackie Chan
Yes I'm drunken master
I like to get plastered
Pre rolls on deck with the shatter
I'm chasing the high what I'm after
Blowing out ghosts look like casper
This is a disaster
I lost my 'preme bonnet it matters
I'm flattered

But I'm addicted
I live my life without convictions
I'm gifted
Glad I leveled up I'm persistent
Revel in my glory I'm afflicted
By the universe in opposition
I drifted to the shore
That's my existence

But I'm addicted
I live my life without convictions
I'm gifted
Glad I leveled up I'm persistent
Revel in my glory I'm afflicted
By the universe in opposition
I drifted to the shore
That's my existence

Emerald isle in my system

My mind is banjax

I'm no victim

Please I got wisdom



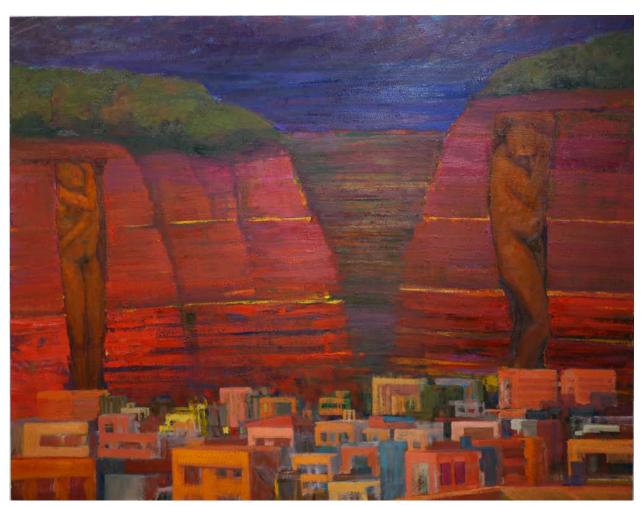
Quan Apollo, The Hungry Black Panther

MICHAEL BRITT

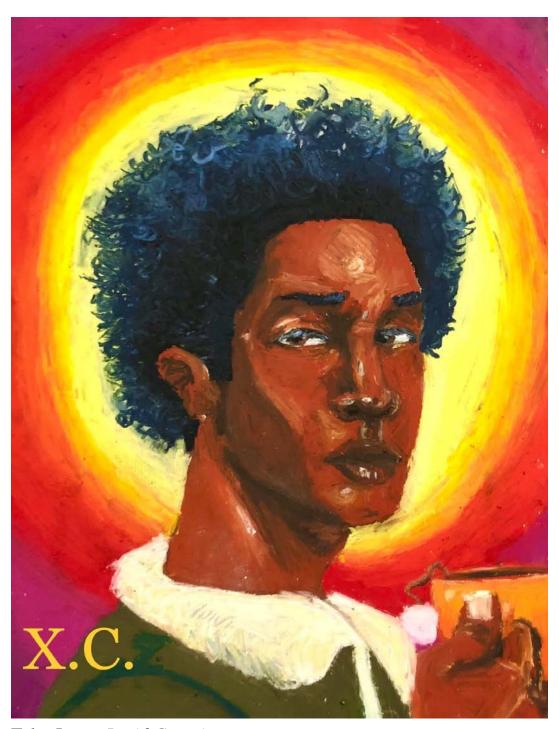
Everywhere for (mostly) Everyone

It's in the air around me in the phones buzzing every few seconds it's swirling in and out of trees it's at my feet beside me so close I can taste its sweet nectar feel its sweet ecstasy on my neck peppering the side of my cheeks it's in the clammy hands' nervous laughs it's in the stomach of scorching jealousy slipping up the throat and down again repeating until it erupts a fire of reds and yellows of slow to grow marigolds and the wings of hummingbirds

It's everywhere for everybody But not for me Never for me it's beside me It's at the lap of the one I want wrapping them in thick burgundy velvet blocking out my soft silk aching to be worn always a joke A twisted laugh on the cynical faces of little girls with big blue eyes of girls who never had to compete It's in the untitled document tucked away in the trash It's brushing against my lips tempting me with stone-flesh touch but service was never one for me and the sun doesn't rise for a bitter moon



Neeraj Sebastian, Two Trapped Giants



Tyler Jones, Lucid Conscious

CAMERON MARTIN

lull

* * >

standing in your kitchen the other night, you asked me, "is this what you romanticize?" your eyes on my eyes on your eyes,
—your lips, bruised cherry blight.

i think about the neglected biryani you made us and its sizzling onions; alabaster turned umber.



Adyera Robinson, Alpha Kappa Alpha

Wonder

* * *

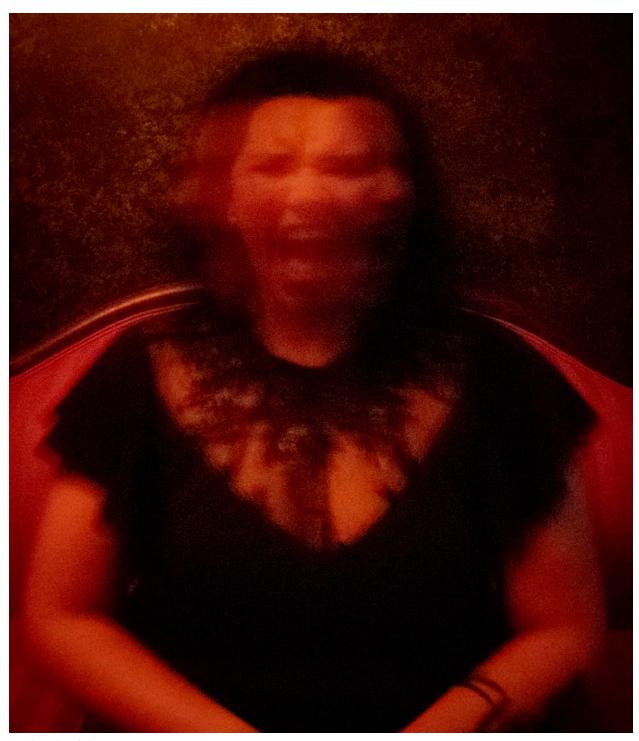
It is not worry I feel
It is what if and what now
And where to go from here

That is what I feel

When the birds wake Me with their songs And ballads

When the sun makes space In my room Through the open blinds

That is when I feel it all



Ashe Smith, Long Expos 3

HANNAH WARD

"Red and Wolves"

* * *

Red as blood, her dress billows As she dances among the flowers. She strays far from the path she knows, Pulled away by the dark forest's powers.

> The deceitful, bright forest Produces a seductive scene Where birds sign a soft chorus, But what lurks unseen?

A violent creature waits for prey To be enraptured by the glamour. He lures her, leads her astray, And she follows, enamored.

Unknowing, unaware of what has caught her, And she, docile, like a lamb being led to slaughter.



Amber Dowell, Milky



CARALINE MALLOY

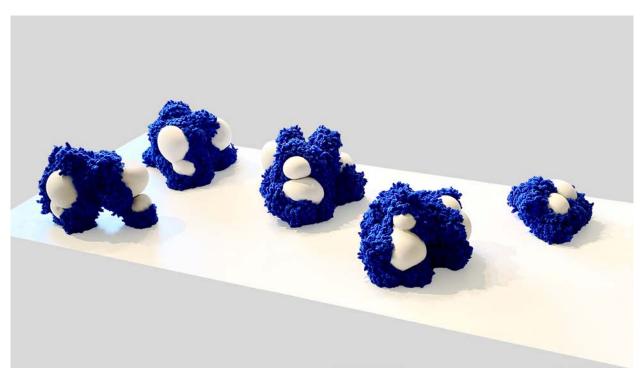
Zement Garten

Wo ist meine Heimat? Zwischen der Liebe und dem Hass Eine Außenseiterin in meiner Haut

Wo beginnt meine Geschichte? Zwischen dem Licht und der Dunkelheit Eine Migrantin in meinen Gefühlen Eine Bewohnerin mit meinen Füßen Reisen, aber nirgendwo hin

Leben aus dem Meer meines Vaters Zum Zement Schweigen gebracht Meine Blumen werden angezündet

Die Erde ändert immer noch Aber ich bin in diesem Garten, in dem Zement alle außer meine Lasten begräbt, gepflanzt Körper sollen durchstriefen Aber Geister sollen fliehen Eines Tages werde ich mein eigenes Licht erreichen



Jo Williams, We Are Blue... And Bone

GABRIEL DALTON

The Ventriloquist

+ * *

Sifting through the meaning of all words And all things understood As one does twist the lettered page Like limbs of clattering wood Staring back at me with lifeless eyes And waiting for an artist's touch Much to an empty sheet free of scribbled marks And lines tangled nearly as much The best moments of writing When the words spring alive in the air Like fiddly puppets on invisible strings From brain to paper bare And in witnessing the reactions Of both crowd and critical eye As they judge your magic moments How convinced are you and I?



Alexander Meeks, As it was ending

BRONWEN BRADSHAW

"Pink, Red"

* * *

You want me to be pink
Soft pink, baby pink
Frills and tea parties
Think pink, pretty in pink
Pink, pink, pink
A baby and pink
Soft like silk
Soft and pink

But your desire for me to be pink
Has stained me red
Red, red, red
Diluted, submerged in maturity and red
Your infamous lines,
I know now to read between
Soft, now hard
My skin thickened
My eyes no longer widened
Red, red, red

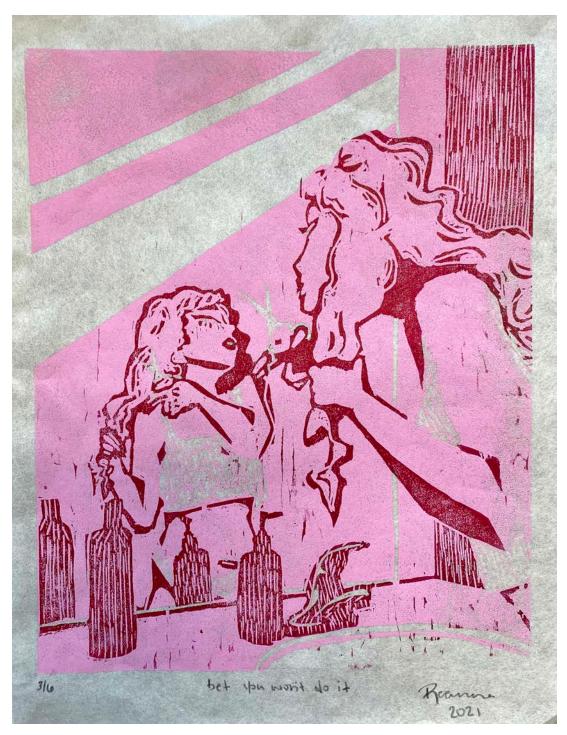
"I hate red"
"I want pink"
Did you not desire my rosy cheeks?
My lipstick smudged?
My rose-tinted glasses?
How I came to possess my red?

Or do you simply hate red Because red is harder to control Like a wildfire Don't get burned All you see Red, red, red A deep cut in the skin Stop the blood Stop the blood All there is Red, red, red

Pink is easier to control

Like a pretty pink flower
Pluck off it's pretty pink petals
One by one
Till it's no longer pink
It is nothing,
But disregarded
As you look for your next pretty pink flower
In a field of pretty pink flowers
Pink, pink, pink

But one day,
Those pink flowers will bud into red ones
And they will have thorns
And they will prick you
And you will bleed
Red, red, red



Roanna Green, bet you won't do it

venus & moon conjunct

by my stars, i love the moon
the way she curves against the folds
of the night sky.
the gleam of the still dark
somber, cold, teasing,
patronizing almost.
for when my tears have dried my face onto my pillow
her resilience bolsters through.
she'll wipe my vulnerable cheeks (soft, dewy, red)
and caress my back.
my head hangs low for i've fallen for her.
or perhaps i desire-to be loved just like her.



Julia Tasho, Pisces

How To Make Your Own Coffin

by Fox V.

* * *

So, you want to make your own coffin? A strange, but valiant undertaking. Why should some stranger decide where you'll spend the rest of your...not life? Sure, a coffin maker may know their way around wood and varnish, but you know your way around you. At least, you used to.

Speaking of wood, that's probably the best place to start. Many coffins of the modern day are made from expensive woods. You've been to enough funerals to see those fancy mahogany and oak caskets. Pretty to look at, sure, but that's more for 'those you are leaving behind' right? If you want to make your own coffin it should be about you! So, pick your favorite wood and run with that. If you're impartial, try pine wood. It's a very environmentally conscious option. Just because you're dying doesn't mean you have to take the environment with you.

With that out of the way, find a ruler. Multiple rulers if you can. Or one of those retractable rulers that makes the fun ZIP sound when you push the little button. With your preferred measuring tool of choice in hand, it's time to figure out exactly how much space you take up. Remember that thing your dad always used to say? Of course you don't, unless you've recently discovered how to communicate with 4 by 9 photographs on your refrigerator. Luckily for you, the adage is common enough for the fatherless to stumble across: measure twice, cut once. It would be real embarrassing if you went through all the trouble to make the damn thing only to not even fit!

You can't *just* fit though. You'll need some wiggle room. People often say ghosts are restless souls and that's probably because their coffins were too tight. No, you don't have any reason to come back here so better be as comfortable as possible. Be sure not to go too big though. Otherwise, you'll have your work cut out for you when you get to "How To Dig Your Own Grave".

Now that you have your wood and dimensions in hand, it's time to get building! Shape is an important factor here. The more rectangular shape of a casket is probably the easiest pull off. But a coffin has that classic spooky aura to it. It'll be a bit of a challenge, wood isn't exactly the most known for its angles, but you should at least go out with one accomplishment under your belt, right? Sure, you are still dying a coward, but you'll be a coward in a cool box.

Finished? Wonderful. With a wooden box at your feet, consider adding a little spice to the top. On the off chance a grave robber, sorry I mean archeologist, mistakes you for someone more interesting than you were, wouldn't it be nice to give them something to look at? Maybe something simple like "Hello There" or something a little more pizzazz like "DANGER!" in big red letters. Maybe then someone will bother to remember you.

And that'll do it! You have your very own coffin made by your very own hands. It's not the prettiest thing in the world, but then again, neither were you. Still, now is a time to be proud! If you know how to do that. Not like anyone's been proud of you before, how would you know what that looks like? Maybe if...no, it doesn't matter. You have your coffin and there's only thing left to do:

Get Inside.



Sophia Wilson, Summer Church

"Summer Storms"

by Hannah Ward

* * *

"What's your name, girl? How old are you?" He asked, the car rolling to a slow stop beside me. The two guys inside did not look like students, and their grey sports car had windows tinted darker than I thought was legal. The empty campus suddenly seemed less peaceful and more like a bad horror movie.

Not turning around or stopping, I lied. "Seventeen." It was a believable age. My friends always told me I looked like a highschooler, and I always got carded at bars. I wish I had gone to that stupid bar, I thought as I realized just how dark it had gotten. The car jerked forward. One of the guys leaned out the car window as they drove in front of the sidewalk, preventing me from continuing down the street. The clouds rolling over the sky blocked the setting sun and turned the evening into a dark night. A streetlight on the corner flickered and flashed above us like the lightning in the distance. Summer storms were common here.

"Hey, it isn't nice to walk away from people just trying to have a conversation," the driver called.

"Pretty girls like you should know better than to walk alone. Let us drive you home," the other offered.

Boom. The first clap of thunder punctuated his words. Suffocating clouds blanketed the sky, creating a weight like the one in my chest. He was right, I should have known better. But there was no way I was going to get in that car.

"No thanks," I replied. "My boyfriend is waiting for me." I gestured vaguely to the shops down the street, as if that would make my story more believable. I hoped they wouldn't ask anymore questions and I could dash into the nearest store to call Marina from there. If she wasn't blackout drunk already, I reminded myself. Funny how my decision to leave seemed so safe at the time, but led me to this. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Maybe a taxi would be better.

Boom. The first few drops of rain were beginning to fall and I felt the frigid liquid drip down my spine. The car engine revved. The first splatters of rain landed on my face as the exhaust from the car's engine assaulted my nose. The guys in the car snickered as I flinched and grimaced.

"Really, I insist," The passenger said. Your boyfriend couldn't blame you. What kind of guy leaves a hottie like you alone at night?" He leaned a bit further out of the car, his hand on the door handle. "What's his name anyway?" The driver asked, smiling at me. Did he know I was lying? Maybe it didn't matter to them either way. I had seen this car pass by a few times, but I was too tired to pay attention.

I was awake now. "I..." I stuttered. Crap, I wished my phone wasn't dead. The rain was holding at a drizzle. But the dark, rolling clouds suggested it wouldn't be for long.

"There you are! I thought you were meeting me at the gas station." A boy in a red and white jersey ran up and hugged me around the waist, leaning down to my ear. "Play along," he whispered, looking at me with eyes that were an intense shade of green. Then he looked at the guys in the car with disdain. "Who's this?" He asked, gesturing to the guys in the car, who were no longer leaning out the windows.

Who was this? Nevermind, I told myself. Just take the save and get out of here. "Just some guys who offered me a ride." I turned to the car. "Thanks, but I'm good, have a nice night!" I grabbed the boy's arm, yanking him around the car and down the sidewalk. Realizing I was no longer an easy target, the guy in the passenger seat flipped us off as they sped away. Relieved, I dropped the boy's arm and wiped my cold sweat on my skirt. "Thanks," I told the boy. "And sorry if I hurt your arm." In my fearful escape, I had pulled him fairly hard.

The boy rolled his shoulder and flexed his arm. "It's okay, you looked like you needed saving. Nice grip by the way." He laughed, and continued speaking. "I'm Garrett. Do you need me to walk you somewhere?" *Boom*, the thunder interrupted. "That rain won't hold off for forever."

As if summoned by the boy's words, the sky finally opened and warm, soft rain exploded from the sky. We sprinted to the nearest store front and threw ourselves inside. The sweet scent of pastry and coffee cream greeted us inside the crowded cafe. I glanced at Garrett, only to find him focused on me, a concerned expression on his face.

"Let me buy you a croissant and you can use my phone to call whoever you want," Garrett said, walking me to a table. "I can wait with you if you want, or I can go if that makes you more comfortable."

"Thank you," I whispered, shocked at his kindness. It should have been difficult to hear me in the crowded cafe, but Garrett nodded and left to order. Soon, he returned with two croissants and a single cup of tea. "I didn't know what you liked, so I got peppermint. Is that okay?" I gratefully took the warm cup in my hands. The scent of the tea was inviting, filled with mint... and was that lemon? An odd choice of flavors, but I wasn't going to judge.

Garrett took the seat opposite me and held out his phone. "Who do you want to call, Amelia?" He asked. Who could I call? Marina would likely not answer, and I didn't know many other people in the city. Taking the phone, I lifted my cup as I thought.

I hesitated, the cup barely a breath away from my open mouth. The steam tickled my skin.

I never told him my name.



Ash Strazzinski, Discharge (Grasses), Discharge (Path)



Ash Strazzinski, Communion



Shayla Glynn, Mariposa

MADISON GULLET

Unholiness

* * *

I lie awake and ponder

the way of life I wander.

The world I spend believing

of all that I've been achieving.

I question the length of my loneliness,

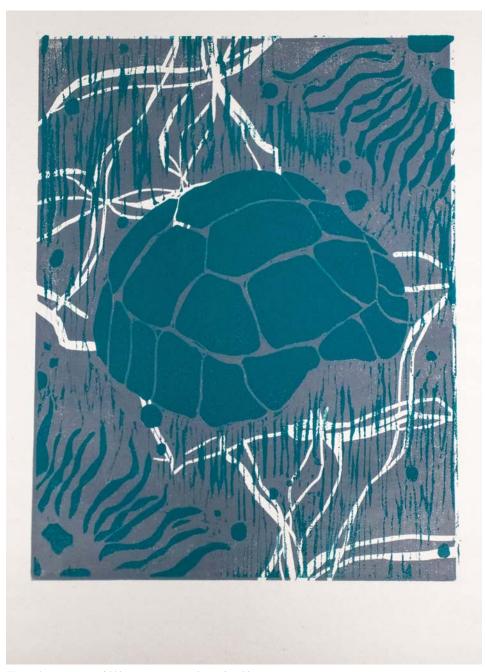
whether it is a mistake or of my unholiness.

So on this bed, I ponder

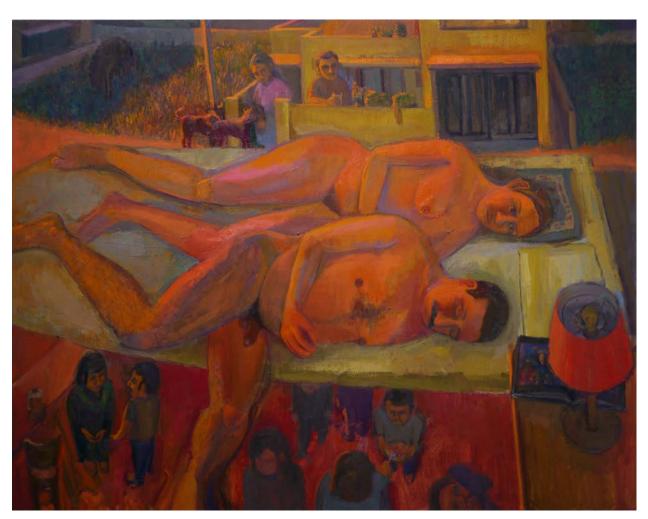
where on Earth I am to wander?



Gabriel Dalton, Untitled



SarahWen Williams, Turtle Shell



Neeraj Sebastian, Close, Step

LYNDIE ENCHATEGUI

Untitled

* * *

sleep

isn't much of a comfort

sometimes it's a way to escape the parts of you

running through my mind

like a movie

but more often it's a sequel

the dreams

they continue to play

the hopes the wants

y o u

you still run through my

mind

you still run through my dreams

i feel you holding me kissing me loving me but it's only a dream i am reminded

every time i open

my eyes

and that's when the waves come

the sadness.

the pain.

the greif.

that's the difference between being awake and asleep.

the happiness and the grief.

GABRIEL DALTON

Autumn Dogs

* * *

All greet the Autumn season, all fade, yellow, and cooling blush
Where leaves and most things brown in their way
And the sheen of the trees makes me feel far, far older
As the wind puffs hard with the Winter's rush
All hail to the evening months, a time of changes, thought, and of things unknown
Here where the dusk gives birth to a supernal dream
Calling me to some place ever beyond my reach
Where I feel so alone
All hail the burnished times, with myself, past guests
Where space draws itself into smell, touch and breeze
And where ripeness hangs like a deep perfume
Masking my duress



Jasmine Doctor, Eyo Masquerade

Goblin Gazette

by JD Terhune

* * *

Welcome back ladies and gentlemen, creatures of all sizes and shapes. Welcome back to another exciting episode of your favorite villainous news source, being broadcast straight from the Spire of Arcane Knowledge to you: The Goblin Gazette. Made by monsters for monsters. As always, I'm your host, the goblin with a voice as gold as my heart is black: Nakatar Ruth'al! This week's episode is an exciting one, folks. With stories sure to knock your socks, or equivalent articles of clothing, clean off your lower appendages. So, don't touch that crystal ball, just yet. We've got some exhilarating stories coming up, after a word from our sponsor:

* * *

Do you often find yourself on the wrong end of a fireball? Do you run the risk of having your skull cleaved in twixt? Are you tired of being beaten to a bloody pulp by every lousy do-gooder you come across? Are you worried every day could very well be your last? Then worry no longer, thanks to today's sponsor, Brew Apron. Brew Apron is the quickest and easiest way to get the strongest potions delivered directly to your hovel! Brew Apron has a potion for every occasion, from enhancing your strength, reinforcing your physical defense, or just healing your wounds! Potions from Brew Apron are made by the talented witches in the Chaos Swamps, using only the freshest ingredients with no added curses or hexes. Brew Apron will send any potion from their expansive catalog for just one easy payment of twelve gold pieces. You heard me right, just twelve gold pieces! You'd have to be a brainless slime to not take this deal. If you want some quality potions to keep you battle ready, then channel your summoning circle to Brew Apron, and tell them Nakatar sent you for 20% off your first purchase. Thank you again to Brew Apron for sponsoring this episode of the Goblin Gazette

* * *

And we're back! Let's move along to our first story of the day. The Dungeon of Derathil has been going through some changes as of late. For those unfamiliar, Derathil Dungeon is located inside Morag Mountain, and is filled to the brim with traps and skeletons who serve the necromancer Derathil, the namesake of the dungeon. But it appears there has been some conflict between Derathil and his subjects, and it seems like Derathil Dungeon is under new management. Coming to us live on the scene from Morag Mountain, is our Goblin in the field, Krenko Coppertoe.

"Thank you, Nakatar. I'm here at Morag Mountain, right outside the entrance to Derathil Dungeon. Under new management is an apt description of the state of Derathil Dungeon, as the skeletons revolted against Derathil and took over. With me is the leader of the Skeleton Revolution for an exclusive interview, Maurice Mandible. Tell me, Mr. Mandible, what led to this minion mutiny?"

"Now, I think mutiny is a bad word for what we did. What we did was topple an unjust system keeping us skeletons in forced servitude for decades."

"Unjust? Care to elaborate?"

"Of course. As you know, we skeletons were reanimated by Derathil. And Derathil forced us to serve him, being his minions. Contrary to popular belief, reanimated skeletons aren't mindless

boneheads, it is actually quite the harmful stereotype bonekind has been trying to separate itself from for centuries. Skeletons have aspirations and dreams like the rest of you. We don't live to serve whatever wackjob with a wand puts us together."

"But that 'wackjob,' as you put it, gives you skeletons life. It seems to me like you quite literally owe them your life."

"While they do reanimate us, we don't have to follow their commands. We follow their commands because, without their magic, we go back to just a pile of bones, so we don't have much of a choice."

"So how are you and the rest of the skeletons in Derathil Dungeon still standing? Couldn't Derathil undo his magic and get rid of all of you?"

"Yes, he could, which is why we came up with a plan to make sure that doesn't happen. We have Derathil bound in the dungeon, with one of the traps, two swinging sawblades, rigged to go. The only thing keeping the trap from activating is two skeletons who chose to hold the sawblades in place. If Derathil does undo the magic, those skeletons will no longer be holding the blades in place, and they will swing right into him. So he has no choice but to keep us alive or else he will also die."

"So, what brought this revolt about? Why did you choose to overthrow him now?"

"It's quite simple really. Derathil Dungeon is a prime spot for adventurers. While none have made it past Derathil himself, we skeletons guard the path to him. And after years of putting ourselves back together and rearming the hundreds of traps every time some fool runs through the dungeon, we collectively decided that we've had enough. We went to Derathil and demanded that he pay us skeletons proper wages for our work, as well as allow us breaks and time off that other minions get."

"You attempted to unionize?"

"That's correct. And Derathil, of course, denied us, so we swarmed him, tied him up, and took control ourselves."

"So, what will become of the dungeon and its inhabitants now that Derathil is no longer in charge?"

"Well, we've been planning on converting the dungeon into a tavern for other creatures of the night. Mortal taverns are abundant, but none will serve monsters, so we hope to open a tavern just for monsters! And many skeletons will stay to run the establishment. Those who don't seek employment in the tavern are free to leave and do, well, whatever they want. The skeletons of Derathil are imprisoned no longer. We serve no master other than ourselves."

"Truly an inspiring story. Best of luck to you and your business, Maurice. And that's all from Morag Mountain. This has been Krenko Coppertoe. Back to you, Nakatar."

* * *

Thank you Krenko. What an interesting turn of events this is, folks. Never thought I'd see the day a group of minions incite a revolution to overthrow their leader. Could this be the start of a wave of minion revolutions across the realm? Or will this be nothing more than the lone actions of a couple of boneheads? If you ask me, I'd guess the latter. I couldn't imagine Goblins revolting against our glorious leader, the Goblin King. And me being his royal advisor has NO impact on my statement. I simply think that the mere notion of challenging the Goblin King is a fool's errand, and no goblin should even entertain the idea. In completely unrelated news, the Goblin King has won this year's

election in a landslide victory as every other candidate either resigned or mysteriously vanished without a trace. In fact, we actually have the Goblin King in the studio today to say a few words regarding his complete victory. So, your nastiness, tell me, how does it feel to arise victorious for the twentieth term in a row?

"My victory was all but assured. It comes as no surprise that I once again reign supreme." I expected nothing less, your foulness. What do you plan to accomplish with this term?

"My goal has remained the same since my first term, to further expand Goblin territory on

"My goal has remained the same since my first term, to further expand Goblin territory and crush any who stand in our way."

A noble goal, as always. And what are your thoughts on the goings on at Derathil Dungeon? It certainly has people talking.

"If Derathil allowed himself to be overpowered by his own minions, then he is weak. A true leader would make sure his subjects know that their place is beneath their heel. If one can does not establish that they are stronger than their minions, then they do not deserve to be in power."

Very true, your sliminess. I know you are never one to shy away from a display of power. I know being a ruler is a busy task indeed, so I won't keep you much longer. But before you depart, have you any final words for our listeners?

"In fact, I do. If anyone finds themselves foolish enough to dare challenge me, I will use your entrails to paint my walls and drink from your freshly cleaved skull. Glory be to Goblinkind!"

Glory be, indeed. Always a pleasure to have you, your wretchedness. Long live the Goblin King, and so on and so forth. Our next story takes us down south to the Morshu mountain range. For any listeners unaware, the Morshu mountain range is right in between the Dwarven Colonies and Minotaur Country. It is a very valuable resource, with the many cave systems found in the mountain range holding an abundance of minerals and gemstones. Naturally, the two sides have been competing for control of the territory for years, trapped in an unending stalemate. However, there has been a development in the ever-escalating conflict. Recently, it was discovered that one of the cave systems is loaded with gold, causing more conflict between the Dwarves and the Minotaurs. But news of this discovery traveled, and it seems this two-way stalemate may have its great equalizer, as a dragon has been spotted flying towards the Morshu mountain range.

As most people know, Dragons are quite a greedy species, with many amassing hordes of riches and guarding them with their lives. So, no doubt the discovery of the gold studded cave has perked a few draconic ears. If the dragon is indeed flying to the Morshu mountain range, then its arrival may spell the end of this never-ending conflict. Dragons and Dwarves have been sworn enemies for millennia, so upon the dragon's arrival, I expect the two sides will clash. And even with numbers on their side, dwarves are completely outclassed, even by a lone dragon. Minotaurs, however, are on neutral terms with Dragons, and in some instances, the two species have allied themselves with one another. But this situation is quite different, as the Minotaurs are vying for the territory too. And should the Minotaurs not ally themselves with the dragon, we may very well be looking at the start of a three-way territorial war. Updates will be provided as this situation develops. We have one last story for you today, dear listener, and you'll hear all about it, after another word from our sponsors!

* * *

Magic is a very useful skill in today's day and age. However, many people don't know how to be safe while spellcasting. As great a tool as magic is, it is also easily detectable and traceable. Who knows who could be listening in while you're contacting another plane? Could eyes from above be watching as you sign a contract from below? Did someone sense the explosive rune trap you laid? Worries like this are faced by spellcasters endlessly in their day-to-day life. But a brilliant solution has come along to dispel all of your spellcasting worries. Introducing Ward CPN, the state-of-the-art Casting Private Network charm. With Ward CPN, you don't have to worry about your spells being detected by unwanted eyes, as it makes your magic completely unnoticeable, even to the highest level Detect Magic spell. Not only that, but it masks your location so you can discreetly use a summoning circle or contact another plane without the fear of being watched. Ward CPN allows you to even cast spells that may be blocked by your area's magical barriers. You can cast any spell from anywhere without fear of being noticed by anyone. I, for one, use magic quite a bit, so Ward CPN has been a godsend to secure my privacy while spellcasting. And for the low, low price of five gold pieces a month, you can have the Ward CPN charm placed on you, so you can practice magic without fear. And if you can get your first month free by chanting: "Locus a warding leporem in me gratias amicis nostris ad Goblin Gazette," when you order your charm from the Dark Paladins of Nazagoth. A Thank you to Ward CPN, proud sponsors of the Goblin Gazette!

* * *

Welcome back, listeners. Let us move on to our last story of the evening. This story is some celebrity gossip from the Desolate Woods. As I reported in the last episode, the Arachnid Empire of the Desolate Woods and the Aranea Aristocracy of the Izalith Plains have celebrated their unity recently as Duchess Freja of the Empire and Prince Tseldora of Izalith had their wedding, or perhaps a more apt term would be their webbing, last week. And this week we have some updates regarding the royal couple, and sadly, it is not the best of news. Prince Tseldora was found dead in the couple's honeymoon suite at the Blighttown Resort in the Chaos Swamp. The prince's royal guard found the prince's decapitated body lying in bed upon conducting their routine safety checks. Duchess Freja was also nowhere to be found, and it is presumed that she was the orchestrator of this regicide, as the window to their suite was open, and a strand of webbing matching her weaving pattern was also located on the scene. The Aristocracy's police force is still in the midst of the investigation, though most agree that this case is fairly open and shut. Needless to say, the alliance of the two kingdoms has been severed and there have been murmurings of the Aristocracy declaring war on the Empire. As for Duchess Freja, her whereabouts are currently unknown, and the Aristocracy has placed a warrant for her arrest, with a reward of three hundred gold. The prince's funeral will be held sometime in the coming days.

I'm sorry folks, I know that's a much more somber note than we like to end on here at the Gazette, but hey, I don't make the news, I just report it. And that was our last story of the day, listeners. Thank you so much for joining us today for another episode of the Goblin Gazette. I've been your host, Nakatar Ruth'al, telling you to stay evil, and have an accursed day. See you all for next week's episode, same goblin time, same goblin channel.

New Shoes

* * *

I rubbed the backs of my ankles raw,
I scrubbed like an obsessive bath time.
It's pink and stings, and
not one moment passed that I didn't feel
scraping against my heel.
Rough socks are like the green side of a sponge,
and each step is dripping with elbow grease.
I scrape and scrape and scrape and scrape
like stubborn moms cleaning caked in stains.
I walk like nails are in the toe,
I kick doorways as I pass by.

But when I step outside,
Into such magical sunlight,
I'm reminded
that pain is but one in the hundred
days of our lives. It will pass away
like the rain through the gutters.
By tomorrow I'll forget it,
As I behold the sun once more.
I'll feel the air run through my fingers.
Not just the love, but the fanatic,
not just the sun, but spurring action
will all meet and complete me.



Evelyn "Suzanne" Bradshaw, Head in the Clouds

VICTORIA COX

A Bell Jar

* * *

Lifting the glass that covered the clock, the bell jar moves it's reflection The eye of the observer sees the clock moving,

Ticking away through its own sense of time. The observer sees its own reflection.

The hands move, but the observer does not notice the time, It notices the double and its reflection.

Of oneself. The bell jar shows the image, The time clock ticks, the reflection.

Is printed on the mind of the observer. Never ending the inner double's reflection.



Abigail Dyer, Light in Darkness



Tiffany Tan, Box



Jo Williams, Guise



Evan Schock, Oppression

SARAH EMANUELS

A Collection of Haikus Pertaining to the Seasons

Roadkill-

Possum limp, repose Life gone, just to cross the road A lonesome slumber

Winter Comes and Goes -

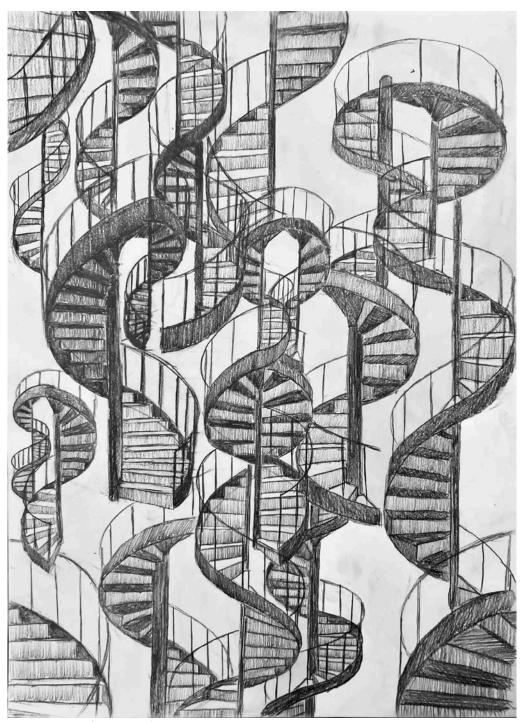
the lush of frost tree skeletons, hues of grey await greens return.

Untitled-

Stove burn, scar healing. Sticky flesh pried from its home. Soon, new skin will come.



Hunter Pham, Still Life 3



Ernest Kroi, Spiral Staircases Forever



Cristal Zeballos, Somos un Voz



Annabelle Kizer, *The Liar and The Truth Teller*

MAGDALENA BROCK

fate

* * *

my fate was written in the stars, but the moment i was born the universe knew i was a fighter screaming, covered in blood, ready to survive.

i've changed my destiny, not even the gods themselves can force me on a path no, i took my life in my hands after it was stepped on and broken and with these broken parts i will make myself whole again.

but was i ever whole to begin with? i was born a fighter, a survivor my fate i snot like icarus, although his glory still holds true. maybe i was icarus, having reached new heights only to meet my death,

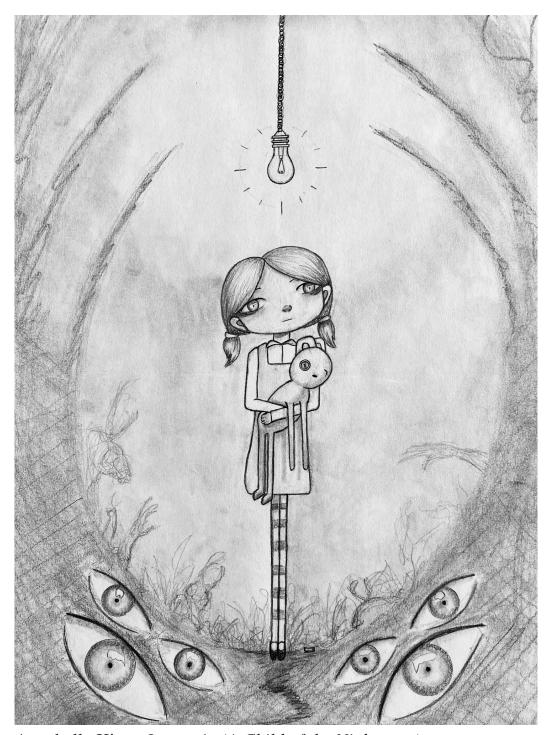
but how holy are we now? even hades himself is holy

ruler of the underworld, how that title demands, s c r e a m s 'respect me'.

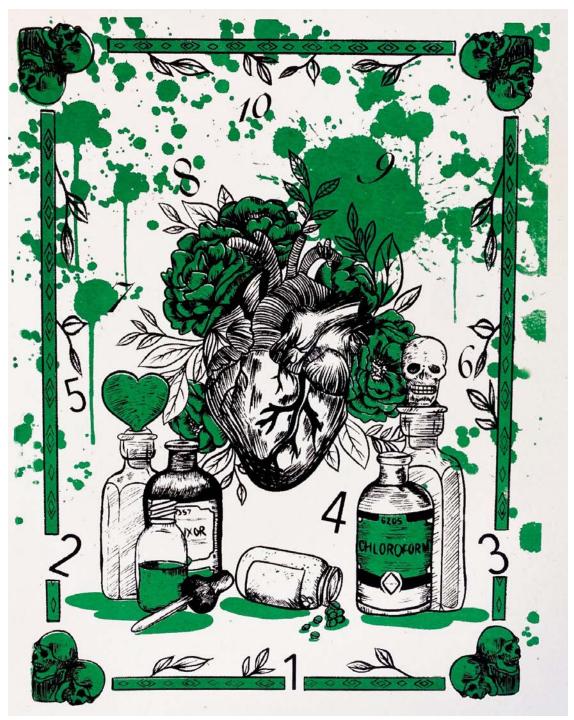
how i wish to have that, where people will not see me as damaged and broken i will continue to be both the holy water and the hellfire.



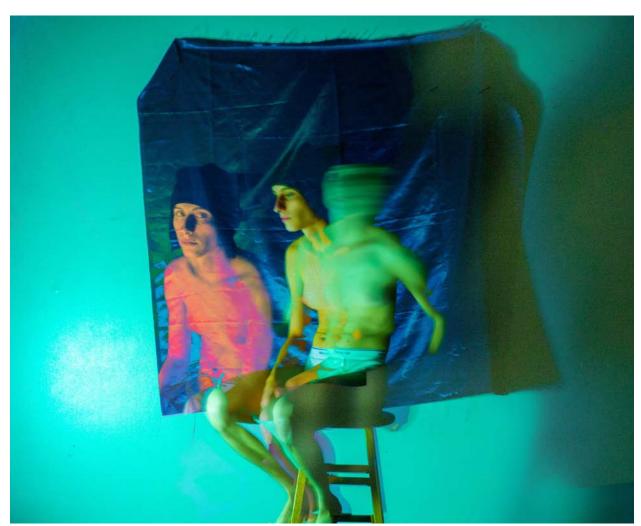
Cole Ware, Nursing



Annabelle Kizer, Insomnia (A Child of the Nightmare)



Amanda McGowan, Sick Love



John West, Lucky

CAMERON MARTIN

Swimming Lessons

+ * *

Jake's carried above my right at the brow like the sun cast low in the sky. He ate cherries during swimming lessons & spat the fleshy pit as far as he could & mocked the lifeguards while we sat on the side of a blue shed bleached by the sun. No running around the pool, he said again in between spitting and mocking the lifeguards. Moments earlier: his disheveled blonde curls suspended in the disturbed calm of the deep end and his laughter light like the buoys we cling on to. Those bitches will probably blow their whistles at us, his mouth says and Jake's sleight of hand draws away slowly, as we drift apart in the pool, learning to trust our bodies. I touch the wound, a colony of wasp built a hive under the blue shed while Jake talked about passing the five-foot test. Vespine burst, into putrid summer air—we stumbled. A dark gash blossomed on my right temple where cracked pavement stabbed. Jake's hands were slippery with my blood and he paused—your eyes look so tawny against all of the red, the words fell out. Jake, I said, you know that's really fucked up. I think of the overripe cherries as they brown and ooze sticky juice. I reach up to feel the dark congealed scare that lingers under my fingertips where my head is most vulnerable and for a moment, I imagine chewed up cherries sit there instead.



Janice Walton, Lady with hat

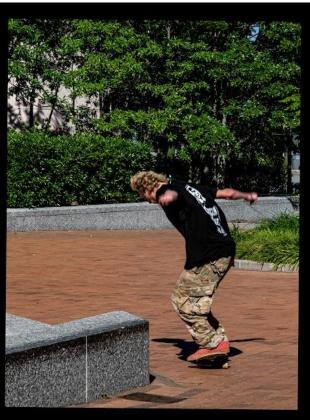


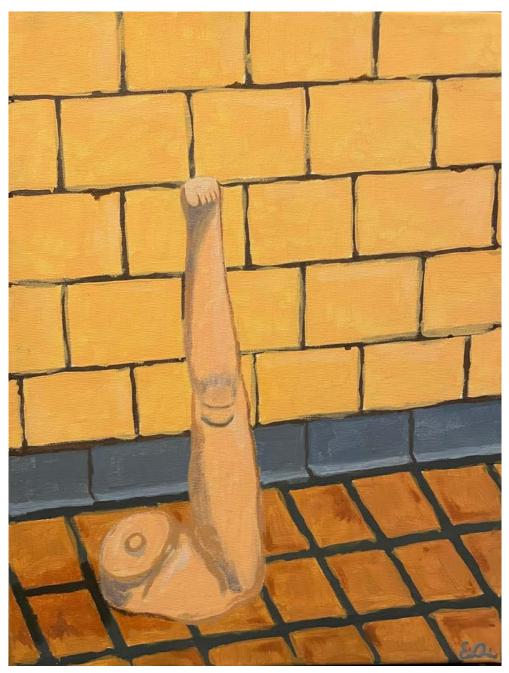
Cameron Brosnan, Long Exposure Light Trail



Ashe Smith, First Quadtych







Eileen Davis, Hall Pass

ANASTASIA NANTHANOLATH

Subway Tiles

* * *

In a city that never sleeps,

I sit on a train that rarely slows.

And I,

I sit alone.

When the train suddenly stops its constant moving,

and blurred images still,

everyone ups and leaves.

But I stay on for the next stop.

And the next.

And the next.

And the next.

I spend my days here,

slumped on slippery seats.

It's become my home.

Guests come and go.

Into the under

Just beneath the skin of the earth.

Here, under fluorescent lights,

An old man stares down at his phone.

A young man hides behind the Times.

A woman baring skin smiles

at a woman in full modesty.

A businessman stands in the middle aisle

too close to a lousy Statue of Liberty

gripping a ceiling handle for her dear life.

Here,

Every sort of person sits together.

Because here, under fluorescent lights,

They exist underground.

When the train suddenly stops its constant moving,

and blurred images still,

everyone ups and leaves.

One destination,

different directions.

But I stay on board and wait for the next stop.

And the next.

And the next.

And the next.

And I,

I sit alone.



Cole Ware, *Healed*

cinch

* * *

"hello god," i said looking under my bones digging past my skin. it said "hello" back soon after i crawled within myself; hiding in arteries, gulped blood, pulsing. i'd began to live inside myself teeth ripping worn flesh, and teeth tearing muscles. i began to sit on my ribs, feeding on my tendons. i danced with bone marrow merrily so i had then thought to ask-"are you really there?" no answer.

Sucker Love

by Sage Mohan

* * *

This is a place with no light. Even sound, which travels far in the ocean, is scarce at these depths. But I can smell you.

How can I describe it? The scent of you—you, who must be my lover if I am to live. It's a smell like blood, rich and complex. It is the opposite of decay.

I can't say how long I've been searching, wading through these desolate waters. At the moment I reached adulthood, my guts began to consume themselves. Even when a bit of plankton drifts my way, I cannot eat. What I feel isn't hunger precisely. Without a stomach, only phantom pangs linger, and those too are fading. Nevertheless, I am starving. Yet I don't feel weak. This vast ocean for me has narrowed to your pheromone trail.

You are a stranger and you are my home, if you'll have me.

As I swim along, feeling the plumed tentacles of sea cucumbers furl down into the seabed, I wonder what sort of fish you'll be. I imagine the tone of your skin, the shape of your jaw. I have never seen a female of my own species. I don't know your physical attributes. I only know I must find you.

I'm growing tired now. For days I've hardly sensed a living soul, save the sponges and corals that cling to the towers of rock through which I maneuver, scraping my soft skin on the craggy terrain. This solitude is for the best; I am easy prey. I am a cold blooded animal, yet somehow the chill of this water has sunk into me. I begin to doubt my own sense of smell. I fear I will perish without having seen your face.

Then, looming, mirage-like: a light.

Your lantern hangs in the darkness. What for another fish would be deadly temptation is safe harbor for me, your suitor. My weariness is eclipsed by a sudden energy. Our kind are not built for speed, but I find a burst, struggling forward as your glow flares. You fill my nostrils. Lush blood, nutrients burning slowly.

You illuminate slowly. The gleam of your leathery, coral-colored skin, stretched over the vast contours of your teeth. The closer I draw, the more of you there seems to be; your body is a reef of its own, dozens of times my size. I smell your satisfaction at the sight of my modest self, and my own longing sharpens in pitch, until my little teeth sink into the flesh of your belly, salty and sweet as the sea itself.

Biting down, I salivate an enzyme that begins to dissolve the barrier between our bodies. My mouth is no longer a mouth but a tether that holds me to you.

I think I feel you shiver. I see in your unbroken expanse that I am the first. You may take a second, third, even a fourth husband. Yet I treasure this: I am the first to know the taste of you, the tingling burn of my flesh fusing to yours.

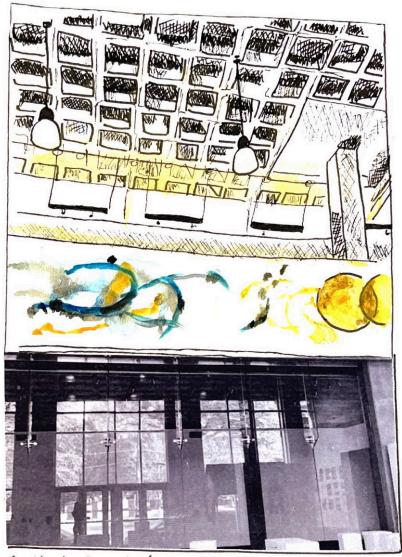
I feel your cool blood start to trickle into my own veins, laden with life-giving compounds, the fruits of your lethal patience. For the first time I can remember, I rest. I entrust my fate to you, my hump-backed beauty, my reef, my mate.

the fruits of your lethal patience. For the first time I can remember, I rest. I entrust my fate to you, my humpbacked beauty, my reef, my mate.

Over time my eyes shrivel. I don't need them; I see through yours as shapes loom in a space that is never dark anymore. My fins flake off to join the sediment on the seafloor. No matter; our vessel drifts easily through the water, reeling in doomed visitors. You unhinge our jaw to devour a squid half again our size, and I rejoice in the monstrous resourcefulness of this thing we are together.



Sophia Wilson, Don't be Scared to Wave



one of the best parts of my monday's include going to see the featured art at the Gatewood Studio arts building I usually go before my 9:00AM after grabbing my coffee that looking at so many different types of art is really good before going do my class because I feel like it shows me that there are so many different types of ort out there. It pulls me out of my confines & draws the creativity out of me.

Nadia Bradshaw, Mondays in 2020



The Writer and the Bartender

by Melissa Danai-Noldner

* * *

Whenever Macey got writer's block three things would usually happen. First, she would clean the entire apartment from top to bottom, play her old Bowie records, and when all else had failed she would go out day drinking. The harsh white piece of paper stuck out of the typewriter, haunting her, messing with her, and no matter how hard she thought she could not think of any words that made any sense.

This slump as she has been calling it was lasting a lot longer than she thought and it was beginning to scare her. The bills began to pile up with big red stamps reminding her they were past due, someone had already turned off the phone line, and soon they were going to turn off the lights. It had been months since she was able to sell one of her writings, the stack of rejection letters began to pile up too, no matter where she asked, no one wanted her work.

One early afternoon Macey was at some dive bar, the place was empty except for someone sitting in the back. She sat in the quiet all alone at the bar, with a half-empty glass of scotch sitting in front of her by this point, it was more water that melted from the ice. The bartender came over and refilled her glass. Macey lifted her head from the bar, pushing the locks of hair from her face. She has not gotten a haircut for what seemed like months, other things have become more important, she took the cigarette that she held between her fingers and shoved it into the ashtray, watching the little spark go out she turned her attention back to the glass in front of her. With one gulp she placed the empty glass back onto the bar.

"Alright then," the bartender said, pouring another, "everything good?"

Macey just shook her head. "You have no idea."

"I am a pretty good listener."

"That's a laugh." Macey said, picking up her glass and taking a sip, "all I had was one book in me."

"Oh, you're a writer?"

"I was." She said, "One book. Didn't make it to the bestseller list, but it was what it was, and now I got nothing. Can't think of a single thing to save my life."

"I have faith in you."

"My parents don't, they did not want me to become a writer, said to become a lawyer like my dad. I didn't listen, and now I have to go and hear them say, 'I told you so', they are going to be so happy."

"Why?"

"It's between asking them for money or losing the apartment."

"It wouldn't come," he told her, "I was only supposed to be a bartender for a couple of years but now look at me, I own this place. Things worked out in the end."

Macey looked around, the place was dark and old, an old man sat in the corner playing with peanut shells. The jukebox in the corner seemed to be out of commission for over ten years.

"You own this place?"

"Yeah, the old owner sold it to me."

"Maybe I'll come work for you." She mumbles. "Not like I am going to have a long career."

She places the glass back onto the bar which was now empty once more, waiting for the bartender to refill the glass. After a moment's hesitation he does.

"Don't you think you had enough?" he asks.

She looks him straight in the eyes and says, "Hemmingway was an alcoholic."

"He also fought in a war."

"Touche." Macey said, lifting her glass into the air to give a toast. "To Hemmingway, may you be remembered from all the work you accomplished, the good, the bad, and everything that didn't make sense." She laughs and takes a drink.

Suddenly she had stopped laughing, and looked as if she were about to cry, "I'm not going to be remembered."

"I'm going to cut you off now." the bartender said, taking the glass from her.

Macey reaches into her overcoat she was wearing and pulls out a pack of Marlboros, she offers one to the bartender, he shakes his head, but hands her a matchbook. After some struggling, she managed to light the match, "what was I thinking?" she asked, "I really thought I had something to say. I should have listened to my parents."

The bartender placed a hot cup of mediocre coffee in front of her in hopes to sober her up. Macey takes the mug and brings it to her lips and grimaces; it was not much better than the cheap grounds she had at home. She places it back onto the counter

"How much do I owe?" Macy asked and began digging in her packers again.

"It's on me."

She laughs, "you are too kind."

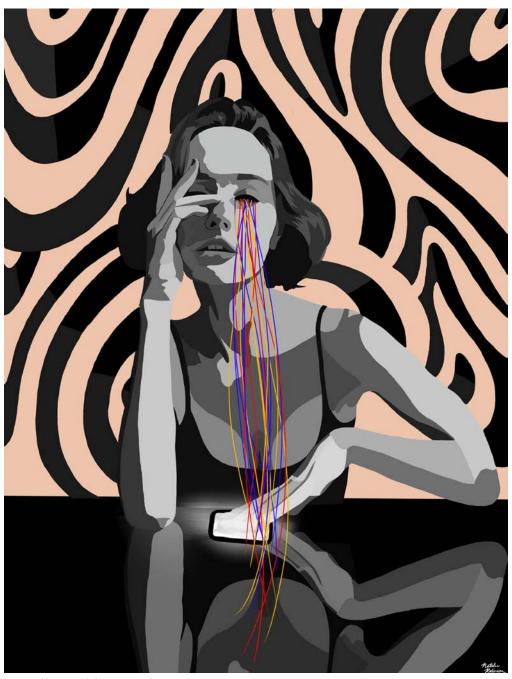
"Let me call you a cab."

As he leaves her alone to make a call on the phone, Macey turns her attention to a white napkin, unlike the rest of the bar it was clean, a pristine white napkin with nothing on it, just like the piece of paper she had at home. She picks up the napkin and cradles it in her hands being careful that she does not smug it or get it dirty. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the stress but she could not help it anymore and began to cry. The bartender, who had diverted his attention to the old man in the back, came back and helped her out the door. "Your ride is here."

Months had passed, one day the bartender all alone was restocking the empty bottles when he had gotten a parcel in the mail, all that was in there was a hardback book; "The Lonely Bartender." Skimming through the pages one of them caught his eye inked onto one of the first pages in an unknown font, "dedicated to the kind bartender, sorry I never got your name." He could not help but smile, and right above Macy's name on the front cover it read. "A New York Times Best Seller."



Jalen Campbell (photographer) and Gabrielle Williams (model), Tonal Shifts



Natalie Robinson, Time

The Good Egg

by Lauryn Anderson

* * *

I tried to ignore the feeling of my skin sticking to the blue leather seats of the bus. The air conditioning was proven to be ineffective as it only blew out hot gusts of wind and let out a rebellious whine each time the driver tried to adjust it. My legs began to grow tired from sitting in the same position for what seemed like several hours, and it became apparent the other students would never run out of new subjects to discuss. Running my fingers along the black rim of the window, I observed the way the dust clung to the tips of my fingers and tried to drown out the constant whining of the individual placed behind me. Sighing, I laid my head against the window and watched as the world became nothing more than strips of color as the bus whipped down the old dirt road. The longer we drove, the less buildings there were, and eventually we were left surrounded by the lanky grass.

All the sudden, the raindrops that had been released from the clouds were coating the bus in sporadic and patternless droplets. They soon became angry, and the constant pelting of the rain caused the driver to lean forward in his seat, and his knuckles became white as his shoulders tensed. It seems as if the rain served as a natural pacifier as the once rowdy students became intrigued by the change of weather.

The driver pulled from the road into an oasis of grass underneath the sign that read "Free Parking." I watched as the teachers gave each other a look that I couldn't quite distinguish.

"Is there any way we can hang out in here until the rain stops?" She asked.

"I'm on a schedule. I have another group to pick up right after this," the driver promptly responded while opening the doors.

"Great. Well can you at least drop us off closer to the entrance," she said while forcing a smile.

The driver glanced in her direction before looking back out the window. There is no entrance, there's nothing but grass. We started to grab all of our bags not missing the way the teachers emphasized how important it was to remember to bring everything, especially since the bus would not be returning until tomorrow evening.

This side of town has a history, much of which can't be explained. Schools began taking field trips to this place back in the 60s, but shortly stopped after a pattern of unexplainable disappearances. Every year before fall break, once the air would become sharp, thin, and wispy, classes of 24 would make their way to the founder's farmhouse. People could never explain how groups that big would disappear out of thin air, but rumor has it there was a boy who'd escaped and walked all the way back to his home, but was too traumatized by whatever he had seen to ever speak again.

We huddled together, waiting for the last student to exit before heading into the field of grass. The longer we walked, the louder the yelling grass became. Strings of "I'm cold" and "How much longer?" were being let out every few minutes before we finally reached the clearing. We all stood in utter shock at the house that stood before us.

It was old, that's a given, but for some reason it looked as if it was just built yesterday. Not a single scratch could be seen on the siding. Looking behind the house, I took notice of the barnyard and shed. It's apparent they weren't as well kept as the house, as it had been taken over by vines and moss. There was something intriguing about the barnyard and soon I felt a wave of uneasiness overcome me.

"Come on in, you're going to get sick," a young woman waved from the porch. The teachers gave each other a look yet again, before cautiously making their first steps in the direction of the house, the others slowly trailing behind. I found my place at the back of the line, following suit. The hairs on the back of my neck started to rise as that unsettling intuition was bubbling at the pit of my stomach. Turning to glance over my shoulder a final time, I was met with a boy who looked similar to my age, standing near the edge of the outing. His clothes were used and worn. He had several holes on the top of his shirt, and his sleeves looked like they had been torn off. I felt my eyes trail down from the ring of sweat that ran down to where his belt held up his trousers. The rough patchiness of the grass had to be somewhat bothersome as he was not wearing any socks or shoes. I reflexively raised my eyebrows and felt my jaw fall slack. I tried not to break eye contact with him, not yet knowing his true intentions. He slowly turned on one foot and walked down the path we were once on.

"What are you doing, Daniel? Come on, let's go." My teacher urged as she tugged my sleeve and ushered me through the door.

"Well well well, look at what we have here. You are all so beautiful and bright. I can't wait until your first lesson. But before we do that, I'm sure you've all had a tiresome trip here. I'm sure you're all ready to sit down and have a quick meal," the lady smiled. Her auburn hair was pinned back but left just a portion of fringe to frame her thin face. Her posture was as straight as a ruler, and her clothes had not a single wrinkle. As she smiled, her crow's feet served as a way to add more of a genuine warmth to her radiant smile.

"Follow me to the dining hall," she chirped dramatically, spinning around and leaning us into a separate room. We all sat down in front of the spots written in cursive labeled with our names. I curiously watched the other students to see what their parents had made for them when I noticed Michael. He'd opened his crinkled paper bag to find only a wrapper that had the remnants of whatever was meant to be there.

"Well, what do we have here?" The lady asked, with a smile that was once radiant that was now eerily sinister. Michael's teacher had worriedly asked if his mother had forgotten to pack his lunch again. He quickly denied stating that someone had eaten his lunch on the bus, but it was obvious that had been a lie.

"So, you're a bad egg," the lady said.

"No, I'm not a bad egg."

The lady took in a breath to compose herself before stating that we had all been made aware we needed to save our lunches.

"Benjamin!" the lady called. A man who had looked as if he had already served eight lives waddled into the room. His skin was ghostly white, and the skin around his eyeballs were so thin you could see the pulsing veins through it. The most striking thing about Benjamin was that his lips were sewn shut into a thin line. Multiple gasps had slipped from the students' mouths.

We watched in fear as he kept his hands neatly folded behind his back and slowly leaned into Michael. He kept getting closer and closer, his eyes becoming like saucers the closer he leaned in before Michael abruptly stood from his seat. Benjamin nudged him on the shoulder, leading him into another room.

"Excuse me, where are you taking him?" his teacher asked, standing up.

"You can have a seat and relax, darling; he's only taking him into the kitchen. "The poor boy has to eat something," she said. His teacher stood in shock, her eyes now wide and worried.

"Have a seat," the lady demanded. We all became uneasy as the teacher retreated to her spot. We all had been feeling the same emotion deep within our gut the minute we stepped into the house. We ate in silence. No one dared to say a word. It was so silent you could faintly hear someone swallowing their meal.

The chariot ride was supposed to be tonight, but because of the rain it was too dangerous for the horses. Instead, we settled on going into our rooms and settling down for the night. Even still, the room was silent as we were all afraid of being labeled "bad eggs" and suffering whatever fate Michael had. Once everyone fell asleep, I grabbed my sketchbook and started to draw the silhouette of the barn house, again being compelled by its aura. Once it became too dark to see outside, with the only light being from the crack underneath the door, I decided to call it a day.

I'm not sure how long I had been asleep for, but the constant tapping of an unknown object pulled me from my sleep. Looking to the ground ahead of me, I observed the patch of light coming from underneath the door. It was still. Almost too still. The shadow of a rounded object being slid across the ground was enough for me to cower underneath the covers. After a few beats of silence, I hesitantly bring the covers underneath my nose. I felt a cold sweat form on my neck. Taking a prolonged breath, I started to rise from my position. Facing my fears I walk over to the door, carefully tiptoeing to ensure I didn't disturb the others. As I wrapped my fingers around the cold, bronze knob, the tapping began again. Abruptly turning my head, I rushed to the window to investigate where the noise was coming from. My eyes were met with the same boy from earlier, who was staring directly at me. I allowed my eyes to follow the length of his pale, scrawny arm to the tip of his crooked finger that was pointed in the direction to the path he'd followed once before. I sank to the ground and wrapped the blankets around my body again, hoping to block out the haunting sounds that would soon start up again.

The next morning, we sat in the same dining hall. Everyone seemed like they had a hard time falling asleep last night as well. Following the gaze of a girl from a different class, I was shocked to see Michael's chair had been gone along with his name tag. It's almost as if he was never there.

Once it was time for the chariot ride, we were split off into two groups and went off in our separate ways.

- "Aren't we supposed to be riding horses?" a boy asked.
- "We have to walk to get to the horses," the man replied.
- "Where's Michael?"
- "He's sick."
- "What type of sick?"

The man puffed his chest and turned to face us. The deep furrow embedded between his brows was enough to tell us we were asking too many questions. My feet became tired from walking, and the air became stickier with each step. I knew I was gradually beginning to fall behind, but the humidity wasn't something I was used to. As an excuse to stop for a moment, I took to one knee and pretended to tie my laces. The sounds of footsteps approaching from behind was enough to make the hairs on my neck raise, and I completely froze in place like a deer in headlights. A turquoise marble rolled underneath my legs and stopped shortly in front of me. Gathering what bit of courage I had left in me, I whipped around to face the being that was behind me only to be met with grass.

I could feel my heart pounding against my chest. My hands trembling in fear. I turn back around to find my group, but the pathway that was once in front of me had completely disappeared. Impossible. In a panic, I ran forward and sporadically ran through the grass. I could feel the sharp ends leaving slashes on my cheeks and fingers, but I couldn't care less. I tried to be more conscious of my breathing in order to endure the burning in my chest and throat, but the sharpness of the air felt like glass with every inhale. The distant footsteps were picking up the pace and I could hear them getting closer. The only thing left for me to do is scream. Turning around to gauge how close they had become to me proved to be a mistake. The next thing I know, I am met with a mouthful of dirt.

"If she finds out you ran away, she'll say you're a bad egg," the voice spoke.

I couldn't bring myself to turn around.

"Can I tell you a secret?" The voice came closer until I could see the toes of the boy from last night. I snapped my neck to look up at him; his eyes as wide as saucers. I stood to my feet, coming face-to-face with the boy, and couldn't stop looking into his eyes. It felt almost as if I was staring into a void, the black orbs not absorbing any light from the sun.

"What's your name?" I asked out of breath, my voice now hoarse from screaming. He wrapped his frigid fingers around my arm and began pulling me through the maze of grass until we reached the back of the barn house.

"I'm not supposed to come down here, but sometimes when he's gone, I can see a little bit through the window. That's where she keeps all the bad eggs. You all shouldn't have come here. She can be a little scary sometimes,"

"Who?" I asked.

"Her," he replied.

"We have to get them out of there," I said.

"We can't." he explained.

"Why not?" I asked, becoming frustrated. I could sense the fear in his eyes. That was the first emotion I saw from him, which caused a pit of despair to form in my gut. I turned around to see Benjamin standing before me. I watched as his bent fingers began pulling at the strings holding his mouth together, and he started pulling the bloodied and crusty material through the holes. I stood frozen in fear, watching in horror. Once all of the string had been removed, his jaw hung slack, almost reaching his collarbone.

"What on earth is going on here?" His voice boomed. We both jumped at the sound before quickly looking at each other, hoping the other would speak first.

"Archie, you know you are not permitted to talk to the guests," he said.

"And you, why are you away from your group?" He finished.

"I'm sorry. I got lost in the fields and I hurt my knees. He was only trying to help me," I lied. Benjamin straightened his posture while taking in my appearance.

"Very well," he said before signaling us to follow behind him. I shot Archie two thumbs up before following Benjamin back to the house. He led us down a hallway full of photographs of the classes that had been here before us. We soon reached the opening to two office doors. The lady sat in a chair that was dramatically bigger than her. This time, the woman looked strange. It was almost as if she had aged nearly a thousand years since this morning. Her eye looked like it was ready to roll out of her socket, and her teeth had rotted from the roots.

"Well, I never. Didn't you ever learn how to knock?" She screamed before heading off in the corner of the room. I watched as she opened the bottle to a black syrup and swallowed every last drop. I stood in awe as she slowly transformed into the young lady we had been met with the first time we came into the house.

"I apologize deeply, Ms. Hastings, but the boy has been hurt," Benjamin said.

She began approaching me and I found myself stepping backwards with every stride she took. I felt the crown of my head knock the wood of the door.

"My dear boy, what on earth were you doing to get yourself all scraped up like this," she asked, cupping my face with her warm hands. It was a strange feeling; I knew something was terribly wrong, but I couldn't help but to feel a familiar warmth radiating from her. I found you. She smiled.

"I found him for you, Ms. Hastings. Does that mean I can go home?" Archie said.

"Of course not. Not until I deal with the others," there was a dark look in her eyes. "Benjamin, take him to his room and don't let him out," she demanded. I felt Benjamin's cold hands grab onto my shoulders and I panicked. I failed my arms and legs as I was trying to rip myself out of his grasp.

"Let me go," I screamed in his arms as I was dragged down further into the house. My hands were met with the cold tiles of the floor as I was tossed into a room.

"Please why are you doing this to me," I begged.

"Because you're a good egg. She likes good eggs. You're better off in here than out there. Out there the people are cruel and evil, that's not a world good eggs should live in. You'll understand once you get back home,"

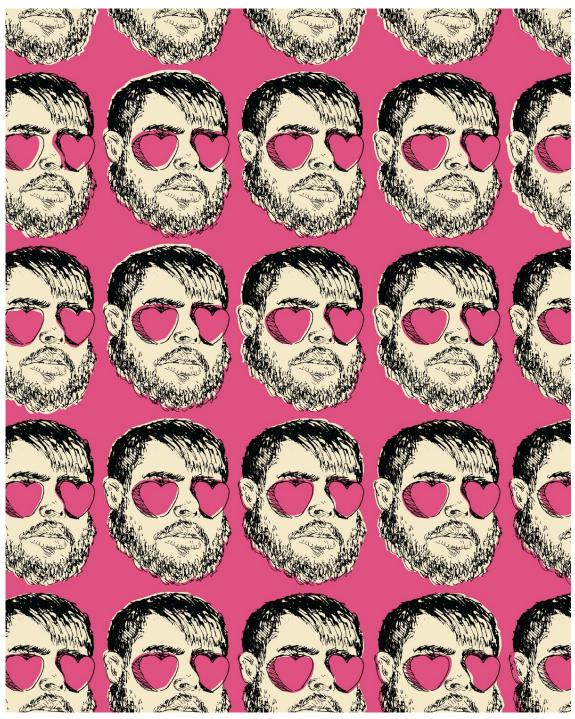
"Please let me out of here. I'm a bad egg, I promise. I lied to you, that's what bad eggs do, right?" I said. My pleads fell upon deaf ears as he slammed the door and the sound of the lock turning echoed through my ears. I tried for what seemed like an eternity to pull and prod at the locks, to no avail. I tried to slow my breathing and think for a moment. There was no escape, at least not for now.



Tiffany Tan, *Moving Forward*



Jalen Campbell (photographer) and Gabrielle Williams (model), *Tonal Shifts*



William Harvey, Lover Boy

In Memory Of

by Kelsey Moore

* * *

With every step, Jack's right foot sank further into the drenched padding of his boot. His mother had warned him to stay on the sidewalks that morning. It was his first day walking home from school on his own, and she'd told him not to stop for any reason, but to come straight home.

Jack had every intention of obeying her—until he saw the Richardsons' new puppy. Playing with a puppy outside for a few minutes couldn't hurt, could it?

And it didn't. At least not at first. It wasn't until Jack chased the puppy into the snow-covered yard that he tripped, losing his right boot and effectively soaking his striped blue sock.

As Jack neared the park a couple of blocks from his house, he spotted an old man sitting on a bench across from a small tree. Curiosity grabbed hold of Jack. He couldn't stop himself from traveling down the path to get closer.

"Aren't you cold, mister?"

Bespectacled eyes met the youthful ones of the small boy. "No."

In his trapper hat and thick wool mittens, the old man was as warm as could be. The hunch of his back came from being around for many years, not from trying to keep warm as Jack had assumed.

"I'm Jack. What's your name?"

"Ernest."

Jack moved closer until he plopped himself onto the bench next to Ernest. "What are you doing here?"

"I promised I would always stay by her side."

Jack twisted his head around, trying to find another person. When it became clear there wasn't another single soul around the park that wintry day, his eyes settled on the large tree in front of them. "The tree?"

Ernest nodded. "Isn't it magnificent?"

"It looks like a regular tree to me."

"You should see her in the spring."

Jack kicked his feet as they dangled off the bench. "Well, I better go now before my mom gets home."

He hurried away, assuming he wouldn't see Ernest again. But the next day, and the day after that, Ernest could still be found sitting at the park bench in front of the tree when Jack walked home from school. Each time Jack passed him, he wondered why the old man came back to that spot every day. No longer able to stay away, Jack returned to the park bench the following Saturday with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

"My mom made this and I told her you might want some too."

Ernest graciously accepted the mug. "Thank you."

And so their routine began. Every day after school, Jack joined Ernest by the tree for a few minutes before heading home. He didn't understand what the point of sitting there was, but he knew he liked Ernest's company. Jack loved to tell Ernest about his day at school, and sometimes, Ernest

would share stories about his wife, Miriam. There were also days when they simply enjoyed the peaceful silence by the tree.

The two often enjoyed cups of hot chocolate or warm apple cider until winter faded into spring. Before long, Jack was leaping over puddles of melted snow on his way to the bench. Birds began to perch on the branches of the tree, which had regained its vibrant green leaves.

"What kind of tree is this?" Jack asked one day.

"It's an apple tree."

"How come there aren't any apples on it?"

"Apples can't grow from a single tree. There needs to be other apple trees nearby so they can pollinate one another."

"Somebody should plant more apple trees here."

Ernest couldn't hold back his chuckle. He longed to see the world through Jack's eyes. Having the young boy around brought him back to a time when life was simple. "I one hundred percent agree with you."

Despite the lack of apples, Jack didn't stop coming to visit Ernest and the tree. Even when school was no longer in session, he walked the few blocks from his house to meet with Ernest. If anyone wanted to have a playdate with Jack, it had to be early enough for him to arrive at the park by 3:15.

"I brought my kite today." Jack held up the bright red object for Ernest to see.

"Have fun but be careful not to tangle it in the branches."

"Ok."

Jack ran around the open areas of the park, watching the wind sweep his kite up into the air. Once the wind died down and his kite fell to the ground, he returned to the bench.

"Do you ever get bored just sitting here?" Jack asked.

"Never." Ernest shook his head.

"Really?"

"Not even for a second. Do you?"

Jack's gaze lowered to the tops of his shoes as he admitted, "Sometimes."

"And yet you still come here every day."

"I like being here with you."

"I'm glad you're here too." Ernest smiled.

As the weather began to cool once again, the leaves turned to mixtures of reds, yellows, and oranges. Jack raced to the park after school. He couldn't wait to enjoy the fall colors with Ernest.

Jack stopped in his tracks when he found Ernest's body trembling. His shoulders moved up and down with every sob. Jack wondered why Ernest didn't share the same excitement over the changing of the leaves.

"Why are you crying?"

"Do you see what's happening to the tree?"

Afraid to get the answer wrong, Jack shook his head. He didn't see why the leaves changing color was a bad thing.

"The leaves are falling. It feels like I'm losing her all over again."

Jack stood at a loss for words. What could he say to make Ernest feel better? Remembering what his mother did when he was upset, Jack moved next to Ernest on the bench and began to gently rub his back.

Ernest's spirits remained low throughout the entire season. It had always been a difficult time of year for him, but Jack being there with him made bearing the fall a little bit easier.

On the coldest day of the year, Jack's mom arrived to pick him up from school. He protested immediately. He couldn't leave Ernest alone— even for a day. But his mother didn't waver. After having read the paper that afternoon, she couldn't allow Jack to discover the news about Ernest on his own.

As she drove him home, Jack's face pressed against the window. His brows furrowed as the park bench came into view. It was empty. Questions began to pour out of his mouth.

"Where's Ernest? Do you think he's running late?"

"I'll explain in a moment, sweetie."

His mom parked the car in their driveway before answering Jack. In the past year, it hadn't crossed her mind she would be having this conversation with her son.

"The reason Ernest isn't at the park, sweetie, is because he passed away last night." She reached out her hand to place on his shoulder, but Jack jerked away from her.

"That's not true! He's just a little late today. He's probably there, waiting for me right now." "Jack—"

He didn't let her finish before he threw open the car door and sprinted down the street. The wind beat against his soft cheeks, but he ignored the harsh weather and pushed his small legs to run as fast as they could.

Despite what he believed, the park bench was still empty when he arrived. He passed his regular spot on the bench and sat right in front of the tree Ernest cared so much about. Never having been so close, he found a glint of something that hadn't caught his eye before. Jack brushed off a clump of snow with his gloved fingers, revealing a shiny silver plaque that said:

In Memory Of Miriam Grace Worcester 1942-2011

The faint padding of footsteps on top of the snow drew closer to Jack from behind. Thinking it could be Ernest, Jack whipped his head around to see who approached him.

Jack's shoulders fell when his eyes met the sorrowful face of his mother. She lowered herself to the ground, ignoring the cold wetness of the snow, and wrapped Jack in her arms.

"I'm sorry about your friend, honey."

No longer denying the truth, Jack nestled his face into the crook of her neck and let his tears fall. Minutes or hours might've passed before his breathing slowed enough for him to push words past his trembling lips.

"M-mom, will y-ou help me with s-something?"

"Of course, baby."

* * *

Jack closed the trunk after putting in the last of his luggage. The drive to the university would take several hours. He hoped he had managed to pack enough of his life into a few suitcases to stay at the campus.

Back in the kitchen, his mom was filling up the snack bag. They never went on a trip without one. After Jack entered the house, he made his way to her and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"In a while. I'm going to the park for a few minutes."

Jack offered her a small wave before leaving the house. He walked down the familiar streets that led to his favorite spot in town. At this time of year, flowers were blooming and the gardens in front of the neighborhood houses displayed the most vivid arrays. When Jack heard the shouts of children playing in the fields, he could picture the place he would miss most when he went away.

There, in the middle of the park, stood two fully grown trees—branches filled with rounded green leaves and bright red apples.



Quan Apollo, Myrmecophila Tibicinis (Bateman) Rolfe

CAYENNE BLUES

by Brian Hutchins

FADE IN:

* * *

INT. GROCERY STORE - NIGHT

2000'S SOFT ROCK screeches from an intercom. FRANKIE (22, apathetic, great hair) stocks an aisle as an OLD MAN (old, walks funny) approaches him.

OLD MAN

Excuse me sonny, do you know where I can find some cayenne pepper?

FRANKIE

Well sir, you're actually right in front of the seasonings.

OLD MAN

Young man, don't be smart with me.

FRANKIE

I wasn't-

OLD MAN

I'm just blind as a bat. But otherwise, I do have the senses of a beaver.

FRANKIE

What-

OLD MAN

The cayenne pepper!

FRANKIE

Sure.

He moves over to shelving, scouring for the spice.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

I'm not seeing any, we may-

OLD MAN

Just keep looking, it probably got stuffed into the back or got mixed in with the lemon pepper. How do they make pepper from lemons anyways?

FRANKIE

Good question, I think-

OLD MAN

You know, when I was your age, if life gave me lemons, I made lemonade. Do you understand what that means?

FRANKIE

It means that-

OLD MAN

That the world isn't fair, and sometimes, you have to conquer your fears. You probably think you're fearless as a skunk, don't ya? Don't ya?

FRANKIE

Not at-

OLD MAN

That's the thing about skunks, damn things are smelly. I'd rather smell shit that just hit the fan.

Frankie stops looking for the spice.

FRANKIE

I don't think we have any, maybe you-

OLD MAN

Should stop being pesky eh? What do you know about pests. I was in Vietnam for christ's sake

FRANKIE

Oh, well thank-

OLD MAN

I watched all my friends die. I held their brains in my hands while I sang hymns to the heavens, praying the mortars wouldn't hit me next. Guess what?

They still fucking did.

He lifts up his pants leg to reveal a prosthetic leg.

FRANKIE

Sir...I am so-

OLD MAN

My damn leg still hurts. But guess what? It's not there? How the hell does that even work?

FRANKIE

(awkwardly)

We're out of cayenne pepper.

OLD MAN

Like hell you are! I asked your manager to special order me some.

FRANKIE

Let me grab him for you!

The man nods and Frankie sighs with relief. Frankie walks away, but stops.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)

I am curious, why do you need this pepper so badly?

OLD MAN

I've got a decent flower bed full of perennials and a couple tomatoes, it's a hobby I learned in 'Nam. My asshole neighbor's dog keeps pissing on my tomatoes. But, when they go out for a walk next time, I'll be on my porch waiting to throw this at that damn mutt.

FRANKIE

Isn't that animal cruelty?

OLD MAN

Nah, it's just necessity. In all my time guarding those plants, only one dog has died from it.

FRANKIE Died?

OLD MAN

Yeah, some kind of allergic reaction to the pepper. No one misses that ugly poodle.

He laughs as Frankie's discomfort grows.

OLD MAN (CONT'D)

So are you gonna go find that manager or what?

FRANKIE

Umm... sure thing, boss.

He departs for the stockroom.

LATER

Frankie returns, tapping the old man on the shoulder.

FRANKIE (CONT'D)
Here it is.

He hands the old man a container of cayenne pepper.

OLD MAN Took you long enough.

He hurriedly disappears around the corner. Frankie picks up another box and continues stocking.

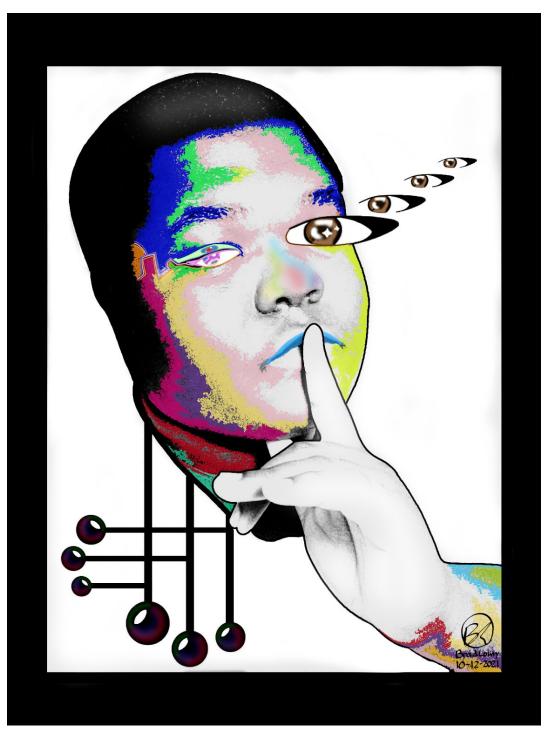
TO BLACK.



Julia Tasho, Fish Out of Water



Adyera Robinson, Nicole



Brad Lowry, Self-Masterpiece



Janice Walton, Traditional Example

In The Tavern Of Trolls

by Brittany Chapman

* * *

I adjusted the heavy war axe on my back and grimaced. I was so tired, and my feet were killing me. I scrambled to catch up with Michael and Ayla. "How long before we get to the tavern?" I asked wearily. "Not long, a couple hours maybe," Michael replied.

A groan escaped my lips before I could stop it. My armor was heavy and wet. My quiver was full of water, and the skies showed no signs of relenting anytime soon. Michael squeezed my hand and kissed my face. "Hang in there," he told me encouragingly. The look Ayla gave us could have withered grass. "Y'all are disgusting," she scowled, as she turned her back to us. I sighed. I hadn't meant to be insensitive, but Ayla was so touchy ever since her girlfriend had broken up with her three months ago for flirting with a guy. Ayla had insisted that it was no big deal. "It was completely harmless!" She argued. "You know that I like girls and guys, and sometimes after I've had a few drinks, I get a little careless with what I say." Still, Ayla's indiscretion had proved to be too much for Kasey, and the two had parted in a flurry of tears and angry words. Ayla had been a sullen and grumpy travel companion ever since.

We trudged on in silence for a while until we spotted the tavern ahead. A brief survey of the scene filled my heart with dread. This mission may prove to be more challenging than I had hoped. "Trolls..." I muttered under my breath. "And?" Ayla snapped,"What of it?" "Oh come on, Ayla," Michael reasoned. "I've got nothing against trolls, but even you have to admit that most of them aren't particularly sympathetic towards humans."

It was true. Humans and trolls had been at war for hundreds of years. No one really remembers what happened, but trolls and humans don't care for each other to this day. I had never liked trolls myself, at least not before I met Ayla. All the stories told of the brutality of the trolls and how they would kill a human without a second thought. The stories said that trolls often ravaged human cities, killing all that breathed and then razing everything to the ground. Some folk even believed that the trolls were demon spawn, sent from the underworld to torment and kill everything that crossed their path. I had heard that trolls were grotesque monsters, green and scaly and covered in slime, and that they had great horns growing from their heads that they would use to impale humans whenever they got the chance. But that was all before we met Ayla. Michael and I had rescued her from a troll snare several years ago, and we had become fast friends. Ayla had shattered everything that I thought I knew about trolls. She was beautiful! She was not grotesque or monstrous at all. She was taller and a bit more strongly built than most humans, yet there was a gracefulness about her that belied everything that I thought I knew about trolls. Her skin was the color of the sky, and I must admit that I have been somewhat envious of her shiny blue hair. Even so, I didn't like my chances of walking into a tavern full of potentially hostile trolls.

"Fine," Ayla conceded. "I'll go down and find out what the troll's attitude towards humans is. You two sneak down and keep yourselves hidden until I let you know that it's safe for you to come inside." It seemed like as good of a plan as anything, so Michael and I crept down the hill as quietly as

we could and found a dark corner outside of the tavern to hide in while we waited for Ayla.

She strode down the hill with that confident swagger of hers and knocked sharply on the tavern door. The door burst open immediately, and a petite yellow female troll with a drawn sword stood menacingly in the doorway. When she saw Ayla, she sheathed her sword and stepped away from the doorway. "Sorry about all that," she said cheerily. "Thought you might be a human. Some damned adventurer looking for trouble or something. And believe me, I'll give them all the trouble they want. Nobody starts trouble with Falkian and lives to tell about it! But listen to me carrying on like this while you are still standing in the rain. Come in! Tell me about your travels, maybe your name too, if you are of a mind to share."

Ayla didn't respond. She just stood there staring at Falkian, and I swear it seemed that she was blushing.

"Well?" Falkian demanded. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I...um...uh...tavern. Yeah, nice tavern here. I...uh, well, I'm Ayla. And...yeah. Uh, well, and you're very nice to meet me. No you! You're nice...no, no! It's nice to meet you." Ayla stammered, her face becoming redder by the second.

I had to cover my mouth to smother the laugh that threatened to escape. It was hilarious to see strong, confident Ayla so flustered.

"Looks like Ayla is in love again." I whispered to Michael. He smiled and nodded, but shushed me. It wouldn't be good for us to get caught hiding outside the troll's tavern, I suppose.

Falkian smirked, "You know what? Seems like you could use a drink, Ayla. This one's on me. Come on in." And Falkian disappeared into the tavern with our very flustered friend.

Michael and I waited outside the tavern for what seemed like hours. I was soaked and cold, and my foot was asleep from the way that I had been crouching. "She's forgotten all about us." I thought to myself miserably as I bowed my head against the driving rain. I was beginning to feel quite angry with our flighty friend, who was probably eating something delicious while getting warm and dry inside the tavern. And Michael and I had just been left outside to drown, apparently.

I didn't have long to ponder our plight before I felt a cold prick against my spine. I turned warily to find a huge troll holding a sword against my back. Another troll had captured Michael, and there were six others to back them up. I felt my blood run cold. Great. Not only had we been abandoned by our friend, we had now also been captured by our enemies. Seriously, how much better was this day going to get? The trolls grabbed our weapons and began to tie our hands. "You scabby humans are pretty stupid to be hanging around here." One of the trolls leered. "Boss is not going to be happy to see you here, I can promise you that."

I struggled and fought. I kicked, scratched, and clawed, trying anything possible to get free. It was futile. The troll was much larger and stronger than I was, and there were also eight of them. "You have to let us go! You'll be sorry for this!" I yelled as I fought against the troll who held me. I bit his hand as hard as I could, but he only laughed in my face and started dragging us towards the tavern. Having seen that there was no sense in struggling, Michael tried persuasion. He presented the troll leader with his most winning smile. "Hey big guy, seems like there's been a bit of a misunderstanding here," he began. "You see, we're actually friends with..."

"Shut your face, human!" The troll growled. "I don't want to hear your pathetic groveling. The boss'll know what to do with you." And with that we were unceremoniously dragged through the tavern door. The troll leader shoved us down onto a rough bench and assigned four trolls to guard us. "I'm going to go find the Boss. You let them get away, and you'll pay. Understood?" he growled at the guards as he trudged away.

Nervously, I scanned the room for Ayla. Where was she and why hadn't she intervened? I soon had my answer. She was sitting at the bar with Falkian, laughing, drinking, and flirting, completely oblivious to our predicament. At that moment, the leader of the trolls who had captured us approached Falkian.

"Excuse me, Boss. I know you're busy and stuff, but thought you'd want to see the humans we caught skulking around outside." He said.

"Kirjan, I really don't care about humans right now!" Falkian snapped. "You've captured them, which means that they are no longer a threat. Send them to the salt mines with the other humans and be done with the matter. And do not interrupt me again!"

At this Ayla bolted up from her stool in alarm and hastily whispered something into Falkian's ear. Falkian stood up quickly. "Kirjan, release those humans at once!" She commanded sharply. "And be quick about it. See that you don't injure them either."

Kirjan looked confused. "But Boss, you just said..."

"Yes, and I am allowed to change my mind. So release them now."

Though he was clearly unhappy about it, Kirjan cut the ropes off our wrists, muttering the whole time how he would send us to the salt mines if he had his way about it. "Well, good thing it's not up to you then!" I replied in an excessively cheery tone just to annoy him. I gave him a gloating smirk as I walked past and he bared his teeth at me angrily.

We approached Falkian to thank her for her generous intervention. Michael bowed to her, "Thank you, your Bossiness for your kindness. I can assure you that you won't regret..." "I can assure YOU that you WILL regret it if you ever call me that again." Falkian interrupted. Michael's face reddened. "Please accept my most sincere apologies. I just thought..." "I don't care what you thought, human." She snapped. "I did not save you because I have any particular liking for you or the girl. I only spared you because your friend here asked me to. However, I strongly advise that you get your puny human butts out of my tavern immediately before I change my mind and deliver you to the salt mines myself."

"Ah yes, we are just leaving." I smiled, trying to be charming. "Ready to go, Ayla?"

"Um, about that..." She stammered. "I'm not coming with you. Falkian has offered me a job as a tavern guard, and I'm going to take it. You know, it's a good job, decent pay and food and all that."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh come on," I grumbled. "Stay if you must, but at least be honest with me about why you are staying! I see the way you look at Falkian, and it's not the way a guard looks at their leader. And what about our mission to secure a peace treaty with the trolls?" I asked. Ayla's face flushed crimson, but her answer was strong. "Yeah, so what? You think I want to keep third wheeling with you love birds on your epic adventures? I don't think so. As far as the mission goes, well, it's basically accomplished already. I'll work on some things here, but I don't think there's

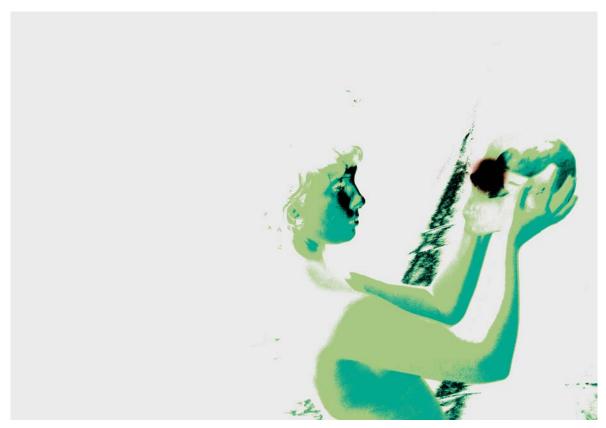
anything else for you two to do." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I like her, Diedra. I want to have a chance to see where things can go."

"Yeah, I know." I replied, sadness making my voice break just a bit. I hated that. "I'm very happy for you Ayla, I hope that you are very happy here. I'm sure going to miss you though."

"Hey, thanks for all your help with securing peace with the trolls." Michael said. "If things don't work out for you here, come find us. You can always get your job as the third wheel in our adventures back."

She rolled her eyes. "No thank you!" She snapped, but she laughed a little bit too. "Seriously though, I'll miss you too. Even if you are disgusting to be around with all your lovey crap." She paused. "Listen, I know I said that the peace treaty with the trolls is basically a sure thing, and it is. But these things take time." She pulled a tiny silver key out of her bag and handed it to me. "Take this and go to the Tower of Moranath. It's an ancient troll sanctuary, and there is a treasure box there that contains the Amulet of Sychath. Take the amulet and keep it in your possession at all times. Any trolls that you may encounter will not try to harm you while you are under its protective spell. Mind you, it only works on trolls. It won't make you invincible, so don't do anything stupid."

So I took the key and Michael took my hand, and together we headed back out into the torrential rain to seek whatever adventures the fates might throw at us next.



John West, Seeing Skulls

NEZAR KHABIRY

Beauty or Continuity

* * *

Beauty is subjective
Why do we treat it so objectively?

It's like we don't see clearly

Trying to see what they saw Ignoring what people really see

Seeing all my imperfections It's like beauty always points in one direction

And it's never in my way
We chase beauty, yet we hide from the beauty we have.

It's like we're blind to ourselves, Only seeing what we don't have.

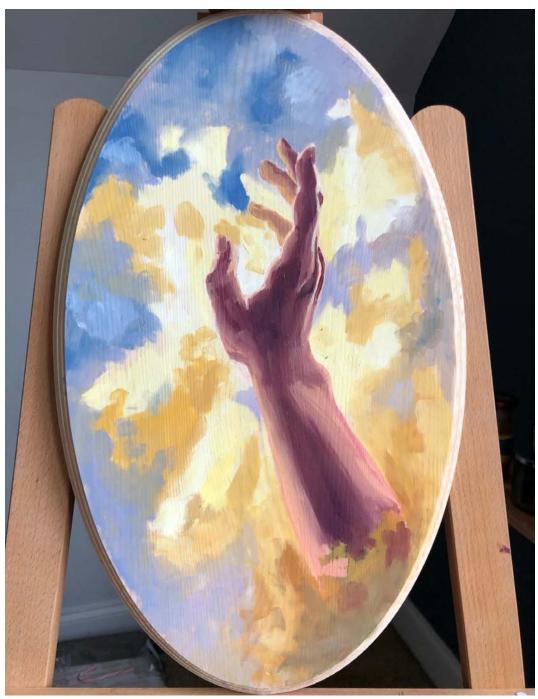
I have nothing to lose, so I'll give it all But in the end without you, I'll have nothing at all.

Craving something closer to human affection.

A grand projection

A instinct gone astray, looking for something new every day

Love isn't the same Love isn't the same



Abigail Dyer, Restore

BRIAN HUTCHINS

Autumn

* * *

It is autumn now, the trees are withering and
The earth is bombed by bursts of color.
Sharp gusts of wind carry the leaves like snowflakes
To a gentle landing on the surface of the creek.

It trickles by at the end of the street.

Zipping cars flow past, never noticing.

One year, I stopped by to capture a photograph of

That enchanting scene, all the nature, all the beauty.

The colors were swirling over the water, like birds Bored with flight, shedding feathers in the night. But they did not stop for me, they kept moving by Swiftly leaving me there on their way to die.

CONTRIBUTORS

* * *

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