





## *The Traveler*

Volume 55

The Traveler is a student creative arts publication produced by the Art and English Departments of Glendale Community College in Glendale, Arizona. The contents of this publication are uncensored. The Traveler may include adult content and not be suitable for all ages.



With this year's theme, we travel to the Busytown Campus where students are creating art, writing, procrastinating and glugging coffee. No matter where you are on your path, we are all in this journey together. To lift each other up, support, encourage and inspire one another.

Congratulations to all of the creative students who were selected to have their work included in this publication.



# Table of Contents

## Fiction

1st Place: <i>The Dreamer</i> by Ben Bruce	8
2nd Place: <i>8 Minutes and 20 Seconds</i> by Jack Nichols	15
3rd Place: <i>Bioluminescent Walks After Dark</i> by Joselyn Lopez	20
Honorable Mention: <i>Front Doors</i> by Jessie Kurak	25
Honorable Mention: <i>Beer Run</i> by Patrick McCarthy	30

## Creative Nonfiction

1st Place: <i>The Tallest Grass</i> by Lilli Titus	34
2nd Place: <i>Lucky Fish</i> by Jessie Kurak	35
3rd Place: <i>Problems as a Straight Woman</i> by Lilli Titus	37
Honorable Mention: <i>First Drink</i> by Patrick McCarthy	39

## Poetry

1st Place: <i>A Love Song to Tomatoes</i> by Carol Powell	44
2nd Place: <i>Room for Dessert</i> by Jessie Kurak	46
3rd Place: <i>Stone Fires</i> by Brianna Lucio	47
Honorable Mention: <i>Carousel</i> by Jessie Kurak	48
Honorable Mention: <i>The Storm</i> by Hailey Wyman	49

## One-Act Play/Drama

1st Place: <i>The Gas Station</i> by Catherine Cubillas	52
2nd Place: <i>Bunny Island</i> by Constantine Dino Cotton	62

## Drawing & Life Drawing

Honorable Mention: <i>Expression</i> by Pearl Willis	72
Accepted: <i>Sitting in Silence</i> by Micah Armas	73
Accepted: <i>Still Life</i> by Alondra Mora	74
Accepted: <i>Alone at Sea</i> by Dang Le	75
Alternate: <i>Still Life</i> by Adrian Delgadillo	75
Alternate: <i>Nightmare Fuel</i> by Alondra Mora	76
Alternate: <i>Objects of Interest</i> by Kristina Page	76

## Ceramics, Sculpture, Assemblage, and Relief

Accepted: <i>Spiders in my Head</i> by Laura Doyle	84
--	----

## Painting & Watercolor

1st Place: <i>Andy Biersack Portrait</i> by Alondra Mora	77
3rd Place: <i>Nothing Lasts Forever</i> by Alondra Mora	78
Accepted: <i>Eureka Springs</i> by Michelle Diaz	79
Accepted: <i>Untitled</i> by Jazmine Liddiard	79
Accepted: <i>Geronimo Lake</i> by Fiala Richard	80
Accepted: <i>Untitled (Octopus)</i> by Joy Li	81
Accepted: <i>Feeling Blue</i> by Michelle Diaz	82
Alternate: <i>Balance Rock</i> by Fiala Richard	83
Alternate: <i>Pillars of Creation</i> by Joanne Crawford	83

## Photography

Accepted: <i>Lady Kat IX</i> by Paul Dameron	85
Accepted: <i>Youth - Before the Storm</i> by Maombi Zanadi	86
Accepted: <i>Man at the Bus Stop</i> by J. Paige Vargus	86
Accepted: <i>Lost in the City</i> by Esain Pereda	87
Accepted: <i>Sunbathing Sanctuary</i> by Tari Fields	88
Alternate: <i>Dystopian Couture</i> by Tari Fields	88
Alternate: <i>Estes Park</i> by Sebastian Bueno	89
Alternate: <i>Fountain</i> by Bonnie Doolittle	89

## 2D, Intermedia, Comics, and Sequential Art

2nd Place: <i>Family Portrait</i> by Erin Shaeffer	90
Honorable Mention: <i>Twilight</i> by Leanne Kamben	91
Accepted: <i>I Don't Know Why</i> by Erin Shaeffer	92
Accepted: <i>A Perfect Day</i> by Leanne Kamben	93
Accepted: <i>Heist at the Bar</i> by Carolina Ravelo	93
Alternate: <i>Playroom</i> by Carolina Ravelo	94
Alternate: <i>Poe's Study</i> by Cuinn Richard	94

## Glass and Jewelry

Accepted: <i>3D Skull</i> by Harold Knoer	95
Accepted: <i>Abstract Peacock</i> by Harold Knoer	96
Accepted: <i>Emerald</i> by Mary Worel	96

## Graphic Design

Honorable Mention: <i>Ghost at the Mirror</i> by Isabelle Morones	97
---	----



*Fiction*







## The Dreamer

by Ben Bruce

"Are you feeling alright?"

Her voice, just a couple feet away was barely audible amid the cacophony of voices. Everything was so loud that it seemed impossible to remain stationary, I felt myself being dragged in every direction all at once. Each table, each conversation, each person seemed to have their own gravitational pull that drew me into their orbit for a moment, irradiating me with knowledge I did not want or ask for.

The shrill voice of the woman across the aisle informed me that her husband was still too cheap to buy the family a swimming pool, even though he had promised to after he got his promotion.

A husky smoker's rasp came from behind our booth to ask if I thought some individual named Anthony was secretly queer.

Another man's booming voice confided in me that, just as he had predicted his deadbeat stepson had dropped out of art school and come running back home asking for a handout.

A waiter grumbled that Julia always gets to go home early without doing side work, and a fellow responded that if he wanted to go home early, he'd probably have to start blowing the managers as often as Julia did.

The infinitesimal moment seemed to draw on and on as each voice washed over me, threatening to drown me in the reality of other lives completely separate from my own. I couldn't help but focus on each of these people that I would never see again. My brain worked to consider each of their situations and compute what chains of events led them from their births to this moment. The fact that each of them seemed to be stewing in various shades of callous negativity could not be ignored, and as I listened the phrase "overdosing on empathy" flashed in my mind like a neon sign. The candlelight seemed impossibly bright, and no matter how tight I closed my eyes it cut straight through the darkness. My head throbbed as the noise blended together into one deafening note. I was suddenly conscious that all noise was simply the vibration of the air, and I felt that I could feel each individual vibration crawling into my ear and reverberating off the interior of my skull, continually gaining speed and force as it echoed throughout my mind. I was thankful I hadn't eaten because the pain was making my stomach turn, and it was hard to breathe as I struggled to keep the bile down.

The throbbing began to lessen as it always eventually did. They had told me to expect the symptoms to come in waves. The tolerable periods only seemed to get shorter as the migraines became more frequent visitors. There was no medication for it because there was no physical stimuli to treat. And I had been informed that largely there was no real scientific understanding of how migraines work at all, or even where they come from.

They knew perfectly well where mine were coming from, but I couldn't worry about that now. This was her night.

My eyes flashed across her concerned face, and I realized hardly any time had passed. It was amazing how long a minute could last when you wanted it to be over.

I made a pained physical effort to block the rest out and smile "Yeah. Sorry I was just a little lost in thought. Didn't get much sleep last night."

The worried look lessened but did not disappear, and I felt her study me a moment longer before reaching for the center of the table to grab another piece of bread. With unthinking muscle memory from thousands of other pieces, she pulled the crust off and discarded it on my plate before dunking the remainder in her dish of olive oil and tossing it into her mouth. Still chewing

she smiled at me and said "You know I think I could use a nap myself if you're interested."

I laughed and reached over the table to brush a couple crumbs from the corner of her mouth "No way missy, this is a special night and we've got some celebrating to do. Besides I think napping after six pm is just considered going to bed."

She giggled and smacked my hand away before furrowing her brow and leaning in to growl with exaggerated anger "Stop wiping my face like a baby."

"Stop being such a messy eater then." I replied turning in my chair to look for our waiter. He was nowhere to be seen, so I turned back and pointed to the door "Do you want to get out of here?"

Her brow remained furrowed but now her tone was one of confusion "We haven't even ordered our food yet."

I shrugged and gestured to my plate which was piled high with bread crusts to the point of overflowing "But I'm guessing you've filled up on bread and would just pick at your food anyways."

She didn't need to feign frustration this time as she said "Shut up, you know the bread here is my weakness."

Chuckling and throwing my hands up in surrender I did my best to reassure her "No judgement, I just know the only reason you want to come here is the bread."

She pointed an accusatory finger "That's right buddy, and you will keep all comments about my bread eating to yourself from now on if you ever plan on getting laid again."

Pulling out my wallet and dropping a few bills on the table I stood and offered her my hand "You got it baboo."

She glanced at my hand and hesitated "Are you sure you don't want to stay and get something to eat?"

"I think our waiter is probably preoccupied with a joint somewhere. And I've got something better in mind."

Her incredulous look turned into one of her beautiful smiles, the ones that conjure a grin of my own without me even realizing. She took my hand and stood to follow me out the door.

As we neared her car on the far end of the parking lot, I cut off her approach to the driver's door and leaned against it holding my hand out "I'd like to drive if you don't mind."

She crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow "I do mind as a matter a fact."

Putting on my sweetest smile I raised my voice a couple octaves "Pretty please." She didn't budge and I lamented that being cute never works for the guy.

"If you wanted to drive, why didn't we take your car?"

"Because the heater is out, and you would have gotten cold in that pretty new dress."

She made a last-ditch attempt to push me out of the way but I stood firm, holding her by her shoulders at arm's length. She raised her voice as she swatted daintily at me and stretched for the door handle "Jason Phillip Turner get out of my way and sit your ass in that passenger seat."

I moved my hands down lower on her arms and held them to her sides before pulling her in close to me. Sometimes I liked to playfight and try to get my way for the fun of it, but this was not one of those times and I needed her to know that. Looking deep into her eyes I mustered all of my sincerity "I've got a special idea in mind and I want you to be surprised."

She relaxed in my grip and searched my eyes for a moment. Finally, she reached a hand down into her purse and pulled her keys out, giving her best exaggerated groan as she placed them into my hand.





I gave her a kiss on the cheek and let her go "I'll be extra careful I swear."  
"You better be, no surprise is romantic enough to make up for wrecking my car."

We drove in silence for a while. I didn't mind, my head was still foggy and it seemed harder to remember directions these days.

She tried to act like she wasn't nervously watching my every move, and I tried to act like I didn't notice her nervousness. She was shuffling through her playlist, and absent mindedly skipping every song that played.

I gently chided "We're gonna be there by the time you pick a song baby."

She set her phone down "Sorry."

"You know, I think most people that date for three years are comfortable letting their partner drive their car."

We had fought over this before, and as she fiddled with her fingers and glanced out the window, I could tell that she was anticipating another one "I know, I'm sorry. But in my defense, it took me five years to pay off this car, so you've really got two more years of trust to build up if you think about it."

Laughing I decided to drop it. This kind of thing seemed so insignificant now. As I turned onto the quiet dirt road, I watched her out of the corner of my eye. I could tell she wanted to ask where we were headed, but she did her best to hold in her questions. I thought back on the times when the small stuff had seemed like the most important thing in the world, yelling matches over who drove, all-nighters spent arguing over what to wear to costume parties, even fighting over what brand of kibble to feed the damn cat. I thought back to the stranger in those memories, the man who overlooked the good for the perfect and forgot however briefly just how much she meant to him.

I grieved for time wasted.

We had been very gradually working our way upwards, climbing the edge of the valley. The distant streetlamps from the road we had come from disappeared from the rearview, and we were left alone with only our headlights. The desert mesquites and cacti lining the path grew less plentiful as we ascended the densely packed clay and rock wall of the mountain.

I slowed to a crawl as we crested the lip and emerged onto the plateau sitting atop it all. The road had become a mere outline of aged tire tracks from the few who had braved the climb before.

Looking around at the desolate empty space surrounding us she asked "Are you planning on murdering me or something?"



I paused for a little dramatic effect "No..."

She punched my arm just hard enough to sting "Then what are we doing out in the middle of the desert?"

"Spending a romantic evening together, what else?"

I could actually hear her eyes roll as she said "Oh yeah I can totally see how this won out over candlelit Italian dinner in your mind for a good date."

"I'll have you know this idea kicks the absolute shit out of a candlelit dinner."

"I guess I'm just incapable of understanding your brilliance then."

We were approaching the far western edge of plateau. I pulled the car around and reversed until the rear bumper was as close as I was comfortable getting to the drop "Well genius like mine is rarely appreciated in its time."

Shutting the engine off I got out of the car and gestured for her to follow me. The night air was crisp and cool. The strong easterly wind of the day had calmed to a gentle breeze that whispered around us, carrying the subtle smells of the earthy soil on which we stood. Just as I had hoped, the last lingering clouds from the season's monsoon had been carried off behind us to chase the coming sun. The harvest moon sat immense and iridescent overhead, like a great orange button on the universes velvety blue coat. The stars themselves were innumerable, each shining with a silent twinkling intensity that made it hard to draw one's gaze away.

I walked to the edge and scanned the horizon. The quarry below was silent, and the great machines that worked in it by day sat still and slumbering nestled amongst vast sheets of stone. Exactly as I remembered, I could see no signs of civilization for miles past the quarry. No people, no distractions, and no pesky light to detract from the majesty of the stars overhead.

I heard her footsteps come to a stop behind me and the soft whispering of a single word "Wow..."

I couldn't help but grin at the sight of her taking in the scenery. The orange moonlight danced in her hair and made it seem more vibrantly red than it ever had been before. Her deep brown eyes absorbed every pinpoint of light in the sky above and shone it back at me. Her black dress rippled in the breeze and made her appear as if she was floating as ethereally as the moon itself. She would have looked right at home sitting in the sky with everything else that makes us stop and wonder.

I took her hand and twirled her around with a little flourish "What do you think?"

"It's stunning. You forget what the sky can really look like without all the air pollution."

My grin only grew wider "Well you ain't seen nothing yet."

Gently pulling her hand I led her back to the car and opened the hatchback. I leaned inside and pushed the seats forward so we could comfortably fit inside. I pulled out the mound of blankets I had stashed in the back seat and wrapped one around her as she sat next to me.

I leaned against her shoulder and took a moment to scan the sky, struggling to remember the maps and charts I had studied. It took a while but eventually the stars stopped blending together and pictures and shapes began to emerge. I pointed my finger and traced the constellations before us "That cluster directly under the moon is Sagittarius."

She followed my gaze and strained to connect the dots "Isn't Sagittarius supposed to be a centaur with a bow or something?"

"Yeah."

"All I'm seeing is a little trapezoid with a pointy hat."

I couldn't help but laugh at the incredulous look on her face "Astronomers call it the teapot actually, but I don't think the ancient Greeks had much of a concept of what teapots were so they went with centaur."

I saw it click on her face, and her voice was filled with pure satisfaction as she





said "I can definitely see the teapot."

I slowly drew my hand down and to our right "Now move your eyes from the tip of the spout towards the horizon. The group that forms the little seven is Scorpius' tail." I watched her eyes catch up with my hand, and led them on "And just above his tail, parallel to the moon is Saturn."

She sat still for a moment, drinking in the scenery and breathing deeply "I don't think I've seen a planet outside of a picture before."

I took her hand in mine and gave it a small kiss "Well now you have."

"I feel like I could stare forever and not know what any of it was...what any of it means."

I considered this thought for a moment with her "I don't think it really means anything."

She turned to face me at last and frowned, it was not the answer she had wanted.

I continued "I think it can mean anything to anyone. Some people look and see the benevolent eyes of god, and others see a cold void sucking the life from everything around it. The Greeks saw the resting place of fallen heroes, and we see a teapot."

She sighed and turned away again "All I know is that it makes me think about how small we all are."

I glanced at my phone and checked the time "Keep watching between Saturn and the moon."

"Why?"

"Because there's something cool."

"Is it aliens?"

"No."

"Is it a rocket?"

"No."

"Are you sure it's not aliens?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Well then what am I looking for?"

"Just shut up and watch you goober. It's almost here."

Overhead the uniform deep indigo of the sky was broken. It came suddenly and unrelentingly, in every direction thin lines of flashing light zipped into view and disappeared just as quickly. They were small at first flying with incredible speed, tiny bursts of warm red that faded to the deep mottled purple of a bruise before dissipating into nothing and returning to indigo. Ripples in the sea.

Then came the waves. Brilliant streaks of green that hit the atmosphere at a long flat angle and transformed into the bright white flame of a welder's torch. At first it was sporadic and occasional, with only a few true meteors among the tiny burning shrapnel. But as the minutes went on a few became dozens, and dozens became hundreds, until they seemed to fill the entire sky with their hectic celestial migration.

And then it was over, the sea calmed and the stars returned to their stationary posts. I considered just how many millions of miles and thousands of light-

years those meteors had traveled. The stories they could tell of their journeys and where they had come from. I considered how quickly everything ended for them, and found both comfort and terror in the fact that even the most eternal things could end in a flash.

But they weren't really gone. They were gifted to our planet from some faraway place, and their elements would be absorbed and redistributed to form new things and begin the cycle over again.

We laid there in silence for a long while, watching the now still sky. I was so lost in coping with the disintegration of some space rocks that when I turned to look at her, I was completely shocked to see streaks of tears running down her face.

I sat up quickly and moved to hold her "Sydney what's wrong?"

She wiped her face with her hand before leaning into my chest. I heard her snuffle and attempt to stifle the rest of her emotions "I'm sorry" she muttered into my shirt.

I rubbed her back and gently rocked her in my arms "You don't need to be sorry it's okay. Take your time and let it out."

After a few moments she pulled her face from my chest and wiped her eyes again. She looked at me and sniffled "I really am sorry, this was super romantic and I appreciate that you put so much thought into celebrating me getting this job. But I'm really scared. I'm panicking that I'm gonna be terrible at this, and that I just wasted four years of school to not be happy in this field."

Looking into her eyes I ran my hands through her hair "Baby it's going to be okay."

She pulled away from me and punched my arm again, fresh tears emerging "And I fucking hate how you are always so calm. I always feel like everything's about to fall apart and you never freak out. You always are able to say that it's going to be okay, and I don't know how you do it Jay."

I rubbed my arm and looked out at the night again "I get that feeling too... Sometimes I feel like the world's ending and there's nothing I can do about it." The headache was creeping back in.

"But you never seem to panic, you never even really cry. How do you just carry on when you feel that way?"

I turned back to her and hoped that my wince from moving my head went unnoticed "I dream."

Her face dropped, and she looked like she was about to punch my arm again "What?"

"I daydream, about some distant time when life has worked out and this problem I'm facing is so small and insignificant that I don't even remember it."

Her expression warmed a little and she chuckled "So you go to your happy place?"

"I guess you could call it that."

She paused and thought about it for a moment, weighing its validity "What does your happy place look like?"

"Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to picture it with me."

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, conjuring the image in my mind "It's several years in the future, we're middle aged and starting to slow down. We own a little piece of land in some small town far from the desert, with a garden and some animals to tend to. We run a tiny little flower shop in town, and it's slow and easy going but we don't have to worry about money because I've worked hard and sold a few books. And every day I set aside the prettiest flowers in the store and bring them home to you. And on this day that I'm picturing, I come home to find you setting the table, because the kids are coming to visit





us. I build a fire in the den and help you finish dinner, and I grumble about you spoiling the dog with table scraps and you just smile at me. And in that moment, I know that everything is okay. The worst is behind us and we have the rest of our lives to spend picking flowers."

When I trailed off, she asked "What the hell do you know about growing flowers?"

"Not a thing, we would get to learn together."

I opened my eyes and she leaned forward to kiss me. It was the kind of kiss that makes you forget what it's like to have to breathe, and as we pull away and I look at her, I feel the way that I do in the dream. I feel infinitely strong and crushingly weak under her gaze.

She smiled at me, and I smiled back as she said "That was a pretty damn good line."

My smile turned into a smirk "I stole it from some twilight fanfiction."

She broke out into raucous laughter and snorted in that ugly way which was so damn cute and I ugly laughed right along with her.

When we were done, she gestured to the space around us "I have to ask, just how did you come up with all of this?"

Steeling myself I prepared my best poker face "My dad and I used to come out here to look for UFO's."

She laughed again but pressed further "No, but how did you know about the meteor shower?"

I hadn't wanted to bring up the topic but relented a little "My new doctor is an amateur astronomer, and he was telling me about it."

Grimacing she smacked her forehead "I'm so sorry, I've been so caught in my shit that I completely forgot about your checkup. How are the boys feeling?"

I winced at the memory of the biopsy and mustered all of my sarcasm "You're not gonna believe this, but having a needle repeatedly driven into both of your testicles hurts like fucking hell."

She laughed again but this time it was more short-lived. The worried look was back "And what was the news?"

I looked into her eyes and weighed the costs of my choices. I thought about how she would remember this night in a years' time. I couldn't let this be what she took away from it all. It was painful to smile as I told her "It's just a little cyst, doc says it's completely benign."

The worried look dissipated and she kissed me once again. I would tell her soon. Tell her and ruin the happy girl whose only worry was fitting in at her new job. But for now, I would let her dream a little while longer.



## 8 Minutes and 20 seconds

by Jack Nichols



Arthur Morgan was an author. Well, technically, a failed author was the more appropriate title, or at least that was what he had been telling himself all these years. He had once jokingly referred to it as his only redeemable quality after having one too many Jack and Cokes that he theorized were mixed somewhere in the vicinity of ninety-ten; he expected that to get some laughs, but never expected not a single person to chime in and tell him otherwise. It was a joke where you always expected someone to come to your rescue, to save you from yourself.

"No, Arthur, you have plenty of talents." He thought they might say.

"Don't sell yourself short." Someone else would hoot between laughter.

"My husband has many redeemable qualities, I can promise you that much." His loving wife Elene would say as she held onto his arm, as though if she drifted too far away from him she might be lost forever to a crowd of strangers.

Of course, none of that really happened.

They laughed and laughed, the self-deprecating joke had the intended effect, and Arthur felt the full force of his failure over the years hit him at once like a runaway dump truck. He had stood there, looking into his half-empty glass as though expecting it might have some sort of answer to this churning chaos of emotion he suddenly experienced.

Flattened beneath my own garbage.

He had spent his teenage years working mediocre jobs and once he had finally gotten fed up with minimum wage and minimum self-worth, he stepped into his nearest community college to try his worth. He was good too, he had a whimsical way with words that could twist any half-assed essay into something that was B, or even A material; it was there that he developed the bad habit of never putting forth the real effort.

Arthur figured he would pocket an easy degree in Gothic Literature in the meantime of working on his Novel, a three-part series that he was confident would make those teenage romance series look like a child's scribble. He would pocket hundreds of thousands in royalties, tour the world explaining the depth of his lore and the masterful world he had constructed to fans and critics, and he would ensure he had a hand in the film adaptation so they did not ruin his story. It would be a modest life, he would retire a multi-millionaire and spend his remaining days on earth soaking in the sunshine on some foreign beach that he had no idea how to pronounce, or even spell.

That was about fifteen years ago, and Arthur was nearly thirty-five now. He served as an assistant editor to Polarside Publishing. There was a palpable irony in his dream of becoming an author being side-lined as he worked to correct the mistakes of would-be authors that all had gotten the opportunity he never did. His salary was laughable, but that was where Elene came in; she was a brilliant firm partner, a lawyer with a specialization in wrongful death suits. He was proud of her: they entered school at the same time and nearly two decades later, and she made five times his salary—or at least that was what he thought, he never dared actually inquire about her pay.

She deserved it more than anyone and he loved her whole-heartedly, but it was for the sake of his own self-worth that he kept his financials apart. There was something soul-crushing about devoting your life to a dream, not achieving that dream, and then not getting paid what you felt you were owed. Arthur knew that made him a bad person, and he didn't care. He felt selfish and pitiful and angry at times, and that was unmistakably human of him.

There was a spark of light in his dim little world though, and her name was Jessica. Their first-born daughter, a doey-eyed six year old that was equal parts





beautiful and smart. It was as though someone had taken every good thing about Arthur and Elene and smashed them together into one tiny little person. When he looked at his little girl, the momentary absence he felt in the wake of his shattered dreams faded, and was replaced by her bright little light. He often referred to her as his second sun, brighter than the first.

That was what made November 8th 2026 so grim.

Cartoonish figures danced across the television screen in the middle of their modest suburban house. Elene always insisted that they get a bigger place with 'more space to grow' but Arthur was fine growing into this one first. It was early in the morning, the various alarms that went off told Arthur it was 5:55 AM, then 6:00 AM, and then 6:05 AM, until it was Jessica that shook him awake.

"Daddy your alarm is loud." She said simply. Her long brown hair disheveled, her expression a copy-and-paste of Elene's when she was unmistakably upset with him.

"Right, right love, I'll be up in a minute..." He blinked the blurred vision away and lazily reached over to shut off his chorus of alarms.

"Can I have pancakes." She asked, though it was more of a demand.

"Mhm." He mumbled.

She waddled away and her cartoons got noticeably louder in the next room. He ignored it, but after several minutes he realized that he was going to have to make the pancakes and so he forced himself to roll out of the bed.

"Honey, turn it down a bit." He said as he walked into their kitchen and fetched himself a mug from the pantry. He looked up at the television and saw that the volume had been dropped one whole point. "Jess, more than that."

She groaned and almost sounded like she was on the verge of a tantrum, but relented and turned it down enough that he could hear himself think.

As his coffee brewed, he half-checked his phone. Elene had left earlier in the morning, her commute was nearly half-an-hour, and for a moment Arthur felt terrible for not agreeing to moving a bit closer to her work. Afterall, he worked remotely at the moment, and the majority of his day was... well, doing nothing but taking care of Jessica.

"I love you, have a good day at work." He texted her but an alert told him his message had not been sent. Curiously, he checked his connection and noticed that he was only connected to the WiFi, and not his service provider.

Looks like I have more work to do today... He clicked his tongue disapprovingly, mixed his coffee and sat at the table with his iPad. He told himself that if he could just manage to write one thousand words a day for his novel, then in theory he would be done in roughly two hundred days. He could barely manage to get one hundred, let alone a thousand. The older he got, the more the creativity escaped him.

A whine came from his feet and he looked down to see Scruffy, their mutt of black and gray hair staring up at him. There must've been some bits of Terrier in him, because Scruffy, as his namesake, had a very scruffy beard.

"Outside?" He said, his voice becoming high-pitched. "Wanna go outside? Gotta go potty?"

Scruffy's body became slave to his tail, and he wiggled in an enthusiastic circle. Arthur stood up to let him out through the side door, and closed it behind him. Scruffy was definitely his dog, they were both creatures of habit, and both tired all the time.

He stared at the blankness of his iPad screen and was considering how much money he was tossing down the drain by subscribing to Microsoft Office when he never actually wrote anything when the joyous sound of cartoon shenanigans was suddenly cut out.

The television screen went almost completely black and there was a piercing sound that repeated twice, went silent, then repeated twice again—there was an uncomfortable pause, and it happened again.

"Daddy the TV isn't working..." Jessica whined.

"It's just testing the Emergency Broadcast honey, it's fine."

"I'm hungry." She somehow made that seem like a reasonable response to what he said.

He stood up and went to the kitchen, beginning to fish out the pancake mix, eggs, and milk—no, not milk, we're out... damn. He paused to add it to their shopping list attached to the fridge, and had just set the ingredients on the counter when he spotted the text and strange, robotic voice that spoke.

"EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM: THE PUBLIC IS ADVISED TO REMAIN INDOORS FOR THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. THIS HAD BEEN A NATIONWIDE EMERGENCY ALERT. PLEASE REMAIN INDOORS FOR THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS."

It kept playing, over-and-over. It got to the point where Jessica was becoming increasingly annoyed that she was missing her cartoons, so Arthur decided to just mute it.

"Daddy what does that mean? Why can't I watch TV?" Jessica whined.

"It's probably just a weather warning honey. It's been raining a lot lately, right? They're probably afraid some giant hail will fall down." Jessica's mouth went agape in disbelief, and Arthur shrugged casually. "I suppose we'll have to run to the store in our anti-hail armor."

"We have armor?" She said in disbelief.

"Of course we have armor, we're not animals."

She shook her head slowly, her eyes wide suddenly. "SCRUFFY!! He doesn't have his armor!" She ran off to the door to summon the mutt, and Arthur chuckled. Now he'd just given himself a ridiculous project later on, making armor for some imaginary super-dangerous storm.

He checked his phone once more and this time went to the internet, as the internet always had the leading answers on this sort of thing: Twitter, Facebook, even Tik Tok—certainly someone was complaining about a nation-wide message.

He sipped at his coffee, and lightly thumbed at his screen to scroll:

#SUNSDOWN 1.4 million retweets.





#2026LASTYEAR 326k retweets.  
#8MIN20SEC 1 million retweets.  
#COUNTDOWN 287k retweets.

He followed the trend with detached curiosity, reading a headline with the same haste that he might a tabloid. "In an unexpected and undoubtedly catastrophic event, our Sun seems to have gone supernova. Skeptics claim that all world governments have had knowledge of this weeks prior but have made no efforts to alert the public due to the futility. The blast will completely eradicate Earth."

He blinked at that, his mouth suddenly dry, and his tongue felt like it did not quite fit in his mouth. He read on: "Extinction Event inevitable. It will take eight minutes and twenty seconds for the blast to reach us. Good luck, and God Speed."

The more he read, the more he let his doubts take over: how would they know exactly when this alleged supernova happened, and why would they have not informed the public? Arthur walked outside to see Jessica chasing Scruffy in an endless circle, the dog refusing to yield to her summons, mistaking her for playing with him. He looked up at the sky, and though it was nearly 6:15 AM... the sky was as bright as it had ever been, bright and unmistakably red.

Jessica hardly seemed to notice, but how could she? Sunrise usually did not happen until 7:00AM, and even on the most exotic of days, it did not look this bright—this red, like some fierce crimson eye in the sky had suddenly opened and laid its sight upon them all.

Eight minutes... He thought and went to his phone once more. He tried to call Elene—and unsurprisingly the call did not go through, and he found himself chuckling. Figures... If this were the last few minutes he had on Earth, it was a cruel cosmic joke that his wife would be just now settling into her office, a blood red sky peering through her window, and with only that expensive coffee she bought every morning on the way to work to keep her company.

Why is it red, anyway? He found himself regretting not paying more attention to astrology, and the functions of their solar system. How unlikely was this to have happened? Was there anything that could have been done? What of all those yammerings about how perfect Earth had been to facilitate life? What would they say now that they were about to be blasted into oblivion, scattered into stardust.

He sipped at his coffee—his hand shaking nervously now. Jessica was suddenly at his side, tugging at his pajamas with an insistent need. "Daddy?" She asked, and he looked down at her. "I'm hungry, and Scruffy won't come in."

It really was like a joke. Arthur had a lifetime worth of confessions that would never be heard, and only those doey bright brown eyes of his little girl looking up at him. She was too young to know the scale of the imminent danger, but she was bright enough to know that something was wrong.

"Tell you what Sunshine, how about you and I go to Dorothy's Eggs and Pancakes today?" He lied.

"Really?!" Her excitement shined brighter than the growing red in the skies.

"Yup, really, and you can get whatever you want. You can even skip school today."

That was the icing on the cake for her, she was practically bouncing up and down with joy. "I love you Daddy!" She squealed, and he wondered if she truly meant that, or if she had just learned enough to repeat the phrase during moments of want and need.

"I love you too Sunshine, but..." He began, raising a single finger to caution her. "First, we have to make sure Scruffy comes inside. I'm going to trust you with this daunting task." He gave her an all-too-serious salute, which she mirrored with her tiny face scrunched in determination.

"Yes sir!" She turned to Scruffy, locked eyes with him, and suddenly bounded

towards him. They were chasing each other throughout the backyard—he would turn and charge her, she would run around their pool, and then suddenly he would be running from her. She was laughing, Scruffy was barking.

That was the way things should end. The both of them sharing a blissful ignorance, something that Arthur currently could not afford. He wanted to see Elene one last time, even though they had been married for a decade, in this moment he could not quite recall what she had looked like this morning; he couldn't even remember if he had told her he loved her.

Had the entirety of his life up until this moment been a vague shadow of what it could have been? It was the end of the world, why wouldn't he try to think of some hindsight?

The sky went from an angry, brilliant red to an obnoxious white, an almost golden-yellow that shone too bright to look up—it reminded him of the snow's reflection of sunlight. You couldn't look down to escape it, nor could you look up. You were enveloped in light, all around.

If I hadn't made all those mistakes, I wouldn't have a loving wife and a beautiful baby girl... The voice came from his head, but he was not quite sure it was his own thought. There was truth to that, though. His only regret in this last moment was never having the opportunity to see her grow up, and become the perfect person he knew she would be.

He had almost finished his coffee, his eyes were beginning to hurt from looking up at the sky. It dawned on him, he might not have ever been a published author... but, he could potentially be the last person, ever, to write a story.

He pulled out his phone one last time, opened his notepad, and thought for a moment. It would need to be a short story, something... ominous, the last ghostly whisper of humanity flung out into the cosmos, maybe one day it would be discovered by some strange alien species.

"I got you!" Jessica called out, laughingly holding onto the collar of a panting Scruffy who seemed satisfied just to have been allowed to run around for as long as he had.

He smiled at her, and the inspiration came.

Ah, I got it...

"Once, there was an explosion..." He typed.

Perfect.

Light spilled over everything and everything went blank. In the smallest of instances, everything Arthur ever was or ever would be was vaporized, demolished in the wake of a swing of a force so powerful it made the whole solar system shudder.







## Bioluminescent Walks After Dark

by Joselyn Lopez

Her hair was in her face yet again. The fiery, loose tendrils whipped back and forth against her cheek from the harsh wind. She draws her thin cardigan closer to her body in an effort to ward off the cold.

The cold and her swirling thoughts. Thoughts that beg to be shouted and why not here, in the dark, in the stillness of the night amongst the splashing waves?

She paces back and forth, the motion kicks sand inside her boots, then stops. She blows out a breath and then the most pained-filled scream rushes out of her, resonating within her bones and around the jagged rocks near the shore. She doesn't stop until her voice becomes hoarse and her lips dry.

"Why'd you have to leave?" Her voice cracks.

Exhausted, she slides down along the sand and gravel, her gaze clouded amidst the tears that slide from her eyes. How was she going to pay all the debt, everything that fell on her shoulders once they left? Her degree is worth nothing without experience, experience she doesn't have. Nobody wants to hire her. And now she has a kid to take care of whom she can't leave alone all day. Problem after problem. Did they ever consider the pain, the sleepless nights? Of course not. It's not their fault though, they wouldn't have known. Wouldn't have known that a car was going to skid right towards them.

She scoffs at her suffocating thoughts. But still, her resentment runs deep entangled with the love she once held for them.

"Help!" She screams at the wind, the sky, and the soft waves. "Just help! Why won't you help me, huh? You leave me with all your problems and for what, so you can rest? Why is it that when I most need you, you're never here?! Never then and never now!"

She wipes the snot on her sleeve, her tired eyes focused on the overlapping waves. On the edge where the shoreline and waves meet, overflowing plankton drifts back and forth within the waves, casting a shimmer that glows in the most iridescent shade of blue.

"I can't with this insufferable pain."

She begins stripping off her cardigan, letting the coldness wrap itself around her. Then her boots and faded jeans. Welcoming the numbness the cold brings as it seeps inside her bones.

And continues undressing until it's just bare skin on lingerie.

She then proceeds to walk numbly into the water as if it beckoned her. The waves rush towards, pulling her in, soaking her pores with the saltiness of life. She continues on until her waist is under. She releases a breath, and with that her body becomes loose. She lets her worries wash away from her, lets the memories go, and everything escapes from her system.

"I'm sorry," she voices before submerging under.

The cold water nips at her skin and fills her ears. The waves rock back and forth, lulling her to a dreamless sleep.

She hold her breath and counts how long she has before her body demands oxygen.

Thirty seconds? Twenty seconds? Maybe less. She was never great at holding her breath. At that, she smiles. It won't be long.

From under the water she sees the light from the moon fading away. Her heart begins to pound so loud it hurts her ribs, her lungs begin to burn, and her body jerks on its own accord.

She thrashes around swallowing water, but before she could do anything or think, the water around her ripples, the waves pulling her under.

She closes her eyes.

Everything in her burns and aches, as if she's on fire and yet the water surrounding her does nothing to alleviate the pain.

Something strong wraps around her arm and her eyes shot open. A hand? She screams, bubbles forming to the surface, her body jerks, and then everything becomes murky.

Her eyes come in and out of focus as a hand tucks her to the surface.

She gasps up at the moonlight.

A body is on top of her, performing chest compressions. She sucks in a breath, and then some before spewing out water on the sand. Her pulse thrums with dread, and her heart throbs painfully as if berating her from the inside, scolding her for refusing to breathe. That, or he cracked some ribs.

"Hey, is everything—" a long pause of panting, "alright?"

She jolts upward, her mind grabbing onto the voice, the roughness of it slices through her thoughts, feelings, and sensations until she is a jumbled mess of confusion.

"W-what?"

She blinks away the murky shadows to find a man, no older than thirty, in front of her, "How many hands am I holding?"

She lifts her bloodshot eyes, meeting piercing teal ones and the shadow of a beard in the moonlight.

"You have nice eyes. A light shade of bioluminescence," she coughs up some more, "lovely."

He doesn't answer. He goes straight to her pulse, counting the beats.

"You don't have to check if my heart's beating. I'm clearly alive." she throws a grin, wiping her lips and stops as sand finds its way to her mouth.

"Are you really?"

She stops her rambling, taken aback. Is she alive? She has asked that question countless times since... since her parents.

She blinks profusely at the memories she vowed wouldn't resurface.

Red lights. A knock. Gone. Red, so much red!

He calls out to her but her mind is frozen, swirls of smoke fogs her senses and she's gasping for air

"Hey, it's okay. I'm here."

She blinks, dazed. And finds the man staring at her, and a jacket wrapped around her bare skin. Her immediate thought is that it is his jacket because it smells like cologne and a musky, earthy scent that washes over her skin and she wonders when he draped it over her. She looks down at her pronounced collarbone and slightly protruding ribs from hunger that isn't ever satisfied and instantly wishes to pull the jacket closer, but she doesn't. He has already seen her.

There's nothing left to hide.

"You better?"

She nods and with trembling hands rummages through her clothes on the sand, her hand slipping inside the back pocket of her jeans, and produces a silver zippo lighter and a packet of cigarettes. Then tosses her jeans aside.

"You shouldn't be smoking, especially after—" he shakes his head and looks away, his eyes clouded.

"Yeah well, I am. And thanks." She motions to the jacket.

He turns to her with a sad smile, "It's the least I could do, you were shivering," he extends his hand, "I'm Jasper."

"Everly."

He nods towards the waves, "You uh . . . were gonna do it?"

Everly laughs dryly, her wet hair clinging to her face as she does so. "No. I don't know.

Maybe. Yes. Yes, I was until you dragged me out."

She pushes her hair away and pulls a cigarette from the box and places it





between her teeth, the lighter still in her shaking hands.

He doesn't say anything.

And Everly watches as those light eyes of his access her and her near-bare state, but she doesn't mind. There was a time when she would but now, now nothing of that matters to her.

She motions to her cigarette, "Want one?"

"No."

"Suit yourself."

Everly cups her left hand around the cigarette and with her right flicks the lighter a couple of times, the wind threatening to extinguish it, before it ignites the tips of the cigarette.

She sucks it before exhaling it slowly, relishing the bitter and slightly woody taste to it.

"Since you see I'm alive and well, are you planning on leaving, or are you going to continue to stare?"

"Are you kicking me out of the beach?"

"I suppose I am," she flashes a smile.

"I can't leave now, who's to say you're not going to dive back in? Who's going to be there to save you?"

She scoffs, "Saving? Please."

"I heard screams. You're not alright. Want to talk about it, why your here all alone?"

"Why'd you care?" Everly shoots back as he cautiously approaches her.

"Because everyone deserves to be heard,"

Everly stays silent contemplating his words. "Fine."

She brings the cigar to her lips, "Thinking. I come here often to sort my thoughts. You?"

"Did it help?"

"Sometimes. Other times I gotta let it all out," she murmurs. "But clearly it didn't help me this time."

She places her lighter back down and blows a ring of smoke. She pats the rough sand, inviting him. And Jasper takes the opportunity to ease himself next to her and brings his hand around her lighter before confessing, "My grandfather used to have one of these. Well, his was mostly rusted, you could barely see the steel out of it. He never wanted to part from that thing."

Everly glances at her lighter between his fingers, the initials F and M in perfect cursive along with the words love always engraved below.

Jasper follows her eyes, "What do F and M stand for?"

"Franklin and Margaret."

Jasper looks at her confused and so she adds, "My parents. Were my parents before the accident. They loved to smoke," she says, her eyes glistening, "and so I had their initials and everything made for that zippo lighter. It used to be theirs. And it used to annoy me so much, them smoking, hated the smell and taste and everything. But now, it feels effortless, pleasurable, and calming even."

He flips the lighter on, watching the flames dance.

She laughs humorlessly, "The irony, right?"

He stays quiet. And for a long while they stare at the waves and the occasional whoosh and splash as water sprays on their skin.



"I—" he stops, lifts his head towards the sky before looking back at her, "Your screams, they had me worried. I thought someone was getting hurt, badly hurt. Or worse. And then I saw you in the water. And—"

She grabs her cigarette between her two fingers and sucks it before slowly exhaling some more, listening to his words as she gazes forward, the clouds darkening.

"I'm here if you want to talk. Someone to listen. I know how hard it is to lose someone and have to hold the pain for the sake of sanity."

"Well, it seems to me like you need a listener."

He laughs at that.

"Go on. I'm listening, Jasper."

"Only if you vow to share."

Everly rolls her eyes, "Har, har."

He shoots her a pointed look, she puts her hands up, "Okay, fine."

"My sister, Stella, didn't want to be here anymore. I couldn't save her. She did it in the bathtub. I found out because the water was gushing out of the floors all the way downstairs and into my room."

Everly shivers, "Oh, that's—"

"Yeah."

"—Horrible."

"When I saw you I... hoped I wasn't too late. I couldn't repeat it. I wouldn't for—"

"Stop," Everly cuts in, "Just stop."

"No. I need you to understand. Ending it doesn't simply affect you. It affects people around you, even strangers. It's a dominos effect that haunts memories and shatters families, friends, and acquaintances. Don't play with your life Everly."

She blows a breath, eyebrows furrowed, "You think I don't know that? It's the reason why I made sure to stay away from everyone, why I'm all 'alone', why it's way past midnight, and why no one's watching. And you just came to complicate things, Jasper!"

"Seriously? I'm complicating things for you?"

"Yes!" She stands up, removes the jacket, and tosses it in his face, he dodges it by mere milliseconds.

"You're the one who's indecisive because you don't actually want to die. You just want your problems to disappear. Guess what? They won't disappear it'll only make it worse."

"Oh fuck off." Everly places the cigar in her mouth, and with both hands grabs her clothes and boots and stomps away.

"Everly, you know it's the truth," he turns to her departing figure, "Everly?!"

After a few seconds, she frustratedly plops her stuff a feet away from Jasper on the sand and turns around, and pulls the cigar out of her mouth.

"What?"

"Unburden yourself."

"Talking doesn't change a thing," she retorts. "Talking won't change my mind and talking won't bring your sister back." She winces at the last part. "Ah fuck. I'm sorry I didn't mean that. I —"

"No, you did. And you never know, it might. It might bring more than that with the right listener."

"Okay, I'll humor you." She sits back down, "Yes, I have fucking problems just like everyone except if I don't find a job they're gonna kick me and Bryson. And he'll be taken away from me. And I'm drowning in debt with no way to the surface . . . and everything is falling apart no matter what I do to put the pieces back."

"So you're here feeling miserable and instead of doing something you're giving up," he fires, placing her lighter down.





"Sounds about right," she exhales, the smoke curling around her fingers, "And this scenery. I figured if everything's falling to pieces, and nothing I do will prevent it, I might as well scream it out and enjoy the lulling waves while I still can."

"Sounds depressing," he plays with the sand between his fingers.

"Yeah well, I can't help it."

"What does Bryson think?"

"He'll do better off without me."

"How so?"

"He'll be fed well, be happier..."

"He's happy simply having you by his side."

"No, he doesn't need me. I'm only dragging him down with me and we'll both suffocate. I can't allow that."

"What do you think will happen once you're gone?"

"He'll live somewhere nice, be taken care of and—"

"No. That's where you're wrong. He needs you. You. Clothes and toys are all materialistic things. Food, food always comes. Don't worry."

"Don't worry? Have you seen me?" Everly points at her body.

"Don't worry Everly. See the bright side of things. You met me."

"Oh, how happy I should be," she rolls her eyes, exhaling.

"Everly, Everly, Everly...."

"What?"

"If you're gone what will Bryson think? Your problems won't disappear completely, they'll multiply. He'll have thousands of questions that will burn right through his heart and mind, staring with why'd you do it? Didn't you love me enough? Wasn't that enough? And those questions will eat at him while you're six feet under."

"I..I haven't thought about it like that."

"Stop worrying so much, and breathe once in a while. Worrying and becoming obsessed with your problems is what got you here in the first place."

"You don't know me."

"I don't need too."

"It's too late though. I'm in too deep now."

"Well, that's too sad."

Everly leans forward, "What is?"

"I was going to offer some suggestions."

She arches a brow.

"About that job," he continues then stops, and gazes at her, a mischief glint in his eyes. "I have a proposition."

"And what's that?"

"You'll see, now come on," he extends his hand.

She bites her lips, analyzing the situation. She and Bryson could be homeless and starving by tomorrow for all she knew. But those bioluminescent eyes of Jasper held everything and nothing. What more could she lose?

## Front Doors

by Jessie Kurak



Patricia looked down at her hands. At 65 her fingers were still strong, and she never developed sunspots like other women her age. She used her sunscreen and face creams faithfully. She prided herself on how fast she could type when she was in high school. She was the fastest typist in her class. She developed the skill just as typists were no longer needed in the workforce.

When she got her job at the grocery store, she prided herself on how well she remembered the produce codes. Even the obscure ones. Back then, avocados were rarely in stock, and rarely bought. PLU 4225. Mangoes were PLUs 4961. And she could type them in fast. Her fingers looked old, but she was still proud of them. And they gave her somewhere to look.

She didn't want to raise her gaze, because she knew when she did she would see Robbie's picture, one of his hiking pictures, blown up to poster size and framed, on a stand, with flowers all around. She went down to Walgreens herself and had that picture made. She didn't want anyone else to do it.

She didn't want to look to her side, because she knew she would see her daughter, Mandy, who had not spoken to her in five years, and her son, David, who chose money over his family a long time ago. David bought the flowers, and paid for his brother's funeral. He bought all white flowers, mostly lilies, and they stunk to high heaven. Patricia hated lilies, but she appreciated David's contribution.

She couldn't afford a funeral. She couldn't afford a casket, either, so Robbie's ashes were sitting in a wooden box there by the picture. She hoped he wouldn't mind. He didn't have any plans for a funeral, and they never talked about it. Why would he? He was 37 years old. Adrianna didn't come to the funeral, and Patricia was glad for that, and also angry at Adrianna. There were enough people that she didn't want to talk to as it was, but at the same time, how could she not come? They were married for 15 years, separated for only two. Some of Patricia's co-workers from the grocery store showed up. She was glad they arrived, but mostly so she would have something to do besides staring at her hands.

Patricia sat in the front row, the place of honor that no one wants – a place for the people mourning the most. The chairs were padded and upholstered, armless and stackable, ugly, yet functional and comfortable. She always pictured funerals like they were in the movies, in a stained-glass chapel with wooden pews on either side, a bit of colored light illuminating the mourners, a central aisle for the pallbearers to escort the casket. She pictured a light rain, a general feeling of grief, maybe a bit of hope or comfort from being surrounded by loved ones.

Robert's funeral was in the funeral home under fluorescent lighting, in their smallest "chapel", because she didn't expect many people to attend. The floor was covered in utilitarian carpeting, the walls were painted beige. There was a small podium at the front of the room, and next to it the large picture. Robert's friends were there, maybe ten in all. She was glad they had come, but she was envious of them, too. They knew him better than she did, and she wondered if they knew about the pills.

The funeral director came in and asked if she'd like to start. She didn't want to start this funeral at all, but she had to start it to finish it, so she said yes, she didn't think anyone else would be coming. Robert's uncle, Patricia's ex-husband's brother, stood up to say a few words.

Patricia didn't want to speak in front of everyone. She didn't want to say a word. She wished everyone would go away and it would just be her and Robert again. He was the one who had stuck by her, and he was gone. She didn't want to face anyone. She didn't want to hear her ex-husband's brother talk about Rob-





ert, a nephew that he barely knew and hadn't seen in years. But Uncle Joe was the nearest thing to a religious leader Patricia knew. She wasn't a good Catholic anymore, and Robert wasn't anything. He probably wouldn't have wanted a Christian service, but they never talked about it, because he was only 37 years old. He wasn't supposed to die.

Joe talked about Robert as if he knew him. He talked about the only memories he had—those from Robert's childhood before his brother left their family. And then from a Christmas 10 years before when Joe had tried to "reach out" because he wanted to "share the gospel" with Robert. And now he was talking about Robert as a lost sheep, and how God searched for lost sheep. Patricia tried not to smile. Robert would have made some jokes if he could hear this now.

She was sure if there was a heaven Robert would be in it, and he would be cracking hilarious jokes about his funeral up there. Patricia almost forgot why she was sitting there as she remembered her son's sense of humor. But when she looked up at the huge picture of him smiling, it all rushed back. He was using his humor to hide his pain, she thought. And I missed it all. I knew he had a problem, but I didn't think it would come to this.

After Joe's mercifully short sermon, he invited David to speak about his brother. He shared about their childhood shenanigans, about their late-night phone calls. They were close.

But not close enough, thought Patricia. None of us were. Then it was Mandy's turn. She was crying, dabbing her eyes every now and then. She talked about her baby brother, all the things she did for him growing up, how she dressed him and drove him to school, and how she was like a "second mother" to him. Patricia bristled. You haven't talked to him in over a year, and you haven't talked to me in at least five, she thought. But this wasn't the time for an argument. "...and I know if he knew I had cancer, he would have reached out right away. He would have been there for me. He would have been a great uncle to my kids and helped us get through this." Mandy choked back a sob, and Patricia sat there, frozen. Mandy has cancer, and this is how she chose to tell everyone? In a eulogy? Even Robert's eulogy had to be about her. It was so typical of Mandy to point someone else's spotlight on herself. David was sitting next to Patricia and reached over for her hand. She took it to steady herself. This was not how she imagined her life turning out.

On the day the meowing started, Patricia was in a rush. She was rarely in a rush, but on this day she was trying to get out the front door of her townhouse to meet Mandy at her first chemo appointment. Mandy was allowed to have one person there, and she asked Patricia, and Patricia, quite frankly, was shocked. So, the meowing didn't register as very important to her on that day. Her daughter had given her a chance to be there for her, so she would investigate the sound another time.



It was March, and the evenings were still cool, so that night after sitting with Mandy through her treatment she sat and ate her dinner with the front door open and the security screen locked. She was home in time for Wheel of Fortune, and she needed something to take her mind off of the day. The doctor said that Mandy's cancer was very treatable. Patricia didn't like the word cancer, treatable or not.

Her dinner was a frozen "healthy" meal with very little taste. She used to like to cook, but

cooking for one was a bore. Lately, it mostly reminded her that she had lost Robert. So, she preferred to get it over with, microwave a tray with a corner of the plastic pulled back and escape into the colorful Wheel. She'd usually doze off during Jeopardy before turning off the TV and going to bed with a magazine. She could barely understand the Jeopardy clues, much less know the answers. Robbie used to know quite a few of them.

As she stood by the microwave, readying her Diet Coke, she heard the meowing again. "What in the world?" she said out loud. She didn't usually talk to herself, but it was happening more and more.

She left the small kitchen and walked slowly down the hall, stopping to listen by the bathroom.

The meowing was louder there, but still muffled. She opened her hall closet. It wasn't in there. She stepped into the bathroom. Not there, either. Then she heard faint scratching. It sounded like the meowing was coming from inside of the wall.

"Oh, what in the heck." She put her ear to the wall and listened. She knocked on the wall, and the meowing stopped. Maybe it's in the attic, or maybe the sound is coming through a vent, she thought to herself. She shook her head of gray hair and walked back to the kitchen in her gray slippers. She peeked out of the security door to check if any of the neighbors had seen her.

That was the only problem with keeping the door open. She could see out, but they could also see in. Robert had overdosed down the hall from her bedroom in her old house while she slept.

After that she couldn't stay in that house, so she moved here. And now there was a cat in the wall. She had rarely left this house except to go to work, which was like a second home now after 25 years. She wasn't a hermit, but when you're sad it takes more to entice you out of your home, and she had very little left to entice her. A woman of her age ought to have a group of old, loud woman friends, she thought, but she wasn't loud, and didn't like loud people. A woman her age ought to have friends who might call her after her son died, or bring a dinner over. She had thought she had those friends, but they never did call and they never did show up. A woman her age might join a reading club, she thought, or volunteer at a hospital, but she only read magazines, and she could just imagine introducing herself at the first club meeting:

"Hi, I'm Patricia. My son died and my daughter has cancer." That wouldn't work at all. She never did meet most of her neighbors, but she learned a lot about them just by sitting there and watching. She didn't consider herself a nosy neighbor. She was just observant, and she would probably never meet them anyway, she thought.

The man whose door faced Patricia's door across the parking lot was Henry. Patricia knew she was considered old, but she considered Henry to be very old. Patricia was 65. She guessed that George was about 80—much older than she was. He was usually out watering his pots of flowers in the spring. She always pretended to read her magazine in case he looked up and across the parking lot into her open door and saw her watching him watering his plants. He probably wouldn't, though. He probably couldn't see that far, she thought. For not knowing Henry, she knew a lot about him. She knew that he went to the grocery store every Tuesday from 10 to 11 in the morning. She also knew that he had





professional house cleaners come every Wednesday and his piano lesson was on Thursday afternoons. She had only spoken to him once in the past year, and that was to say hello when she first moved in and they met at the community mail box. Then a familiar distance fell between her and most of the other neighbors, a very friendly, very silent, yet very proximate distance.

The next morning the meowing started again while she was eating her breakfast. She shuffled back down the hall and listened to her wall again. She didn't know what to do. She was just considering the question when she saw Henry come outside to water his plants. He was already dressed in a pressed button down, long-sleeved shirt and khakis with a belt. She looked down at her own house dress and decided to change, because her idea was to ask Henry if he might be missing a cat. She had seen him take a cat in a carrier to his car, presumably for a vet appointment.

She dressed as fast as she could and walked outside just as Henry was finishing up his watering.

"Hello, Henry."

"Oh! Hello there!" Henry was always friendly, maybe too friendly. She knew that much from watching his interactions with solicitors who came to his door.

"I don't know if you remember me. I'm Patricia."

"Well, yes, I do remember you. You are my neighbor, Patricia."

"Yes. Well, I hate to bother you but I will just get to the point if you don't mind. I was wondering if you are missing any pet cats, because there is a meowing sound in my house, and I think there is a cat trapped in my wall, and I do not for the life of me know what to do about it, so I thought I'd start by asking you." George's mouth quivered as he took in this news.

"Well, no, I'm not missing any pets, but I did notice a cat kind of hanging around here. I wonder if she had kittens? Oh, what are you going to do? Are you sure it's in the wall?"



"Well, I think it is, and I wonder if I'm just hearing things. Would you mind coming over and seeing if you can hear it?" As soon as Patricia asked this she thought it was a bad idea.

Henry agreed to listen to Patricia's wall, although it was the strangest request he had received in maybe a decade. Henry carefully and slowly stepped through his front rocks to the water spigot and turned the water off, then carefully turned and walked with Patricia back across the parking lot to her house.

Patricia hadn't locked the door, so she opened it and stepped through, then invited Henry in. She realized that he was the first person she had ever invited over to this house.

"It's right down here."

Henry removed his oversized sunglasses and squinted as he allowed his eyes to adjust to the lower light. He then walked slowing down the hall and listened for the meowing. Patricia was suddenly embarrassed as she couldn't hear any meowing just then. Mercifully, it started up again, and it was very loud.

"Well, I'll be. It sure does sound like he's in there," Henry confirmed.

"What should I do?" Patricia asked the universe more than Henry and threw up her hands.

"Well, you probably don't want to hear this, but I would say you'll have to cut a little hole in the wall and see if you can let him out." Although it sounded absurd, Patricia found her set of basic tools, and Henry asked for a chair. He sat down and listened until he was fairly sure he had pinpointed where the cat might be.

He took a screwdriver and placed it against the drywall and tried to use the hammer to puncture the drywall, but the screwdriver was bouncing around too much.

"Here, you better try." He handed the tools off to Patricia, so she sat down and tried the same technique. She chiseled a small hole into her wall, and the meowing was even louder.

"Now, before we get it out, should we prepare a box of some kind? Do you have gloves?"

It might be a good idea to wear gloves."

The only gloves Patricia had were some knit winter gloves, but they decided that they would be better than nothing. She found a box in the kitchen with only a few bags of chips left in it, and she put a kitchen towel in the bottom. Suddenly, dread had turned to anticipation. There stood Patricia in her fuchsia winter gloves, hammer in hand, in her hallway, with Henry, her 80-year-old neighbor standing by with an empty box, also wearing a pair of bright red winter gloves.

And for the first time in a very, very long time, Patricia laughed. She laughed and couldn't stop laughing, in a way that made Henry laugh, too.

"Would you look at us?" Patricia snorted out through her laughter. Patricia went back to work, chiseling and hammering, pulling parts of her drywall out.

She wasn't even worried about how she would fix it. She would deal with that later. She was having too much fun. When the hole was about 3 inches across, a little, dusty paw no bigger around than a dime stuck out from the drywall. She reached in and pulled out a little black kitten smaller than the palm of her hand. She stuck him down in the box. He was so small he couldn't even walk properly. Annoyance that had turned to amusement now shifted to compassion.

"Oh, he is a very little thing, isn't he?" Henry commented.

"How on earth did you get in there?" Patricia asked the kitten. "What should we do?"

Patricia had never had a pet cat, and she wasn't really looking to get one, but she had a passing feeling that this kitten showing up wasn't all bad. For one thing, she now had a friend.







## Beer Run

by Patrick McCarthy

Overnights aren't too bad, just a bit boring.

The Truckstop has two hundred semis parked in the back lot. They might be there for hours, days, or even months. This is home for the drivers. They shower, eat, and even socialize on the property. The Gas Station has people coming in for bathrooms, smokes, coffee, and snacks.

I'm at diesel and my clerk, Terry, is on gas.

It's my second month on the payroll, I've done my training on days and am now running shifts on the overnight. I have been a manager for many years, but the truck stop scene is new. The people we hire are also different than what I'm used to.

Terry is tall, skinny, lazy, and has a flinching twitch that makes him appear constantly scared. He wears thick bottle glass lenses with the hooks that go over his lengthy ears. His shirt is always coming untucked making him look sloppy and his movements scream apathy. He holds multiple part time jobs that fill his day and evenings, so he is always tired.

Terry is what we call a warm body. He isn't someone we would ever look to promote but he can run the register, so we keep him.

I do the books, with a shower turn mixed in here and there, while Terry cleans. The ding of either door alerts us to customers, but they are few.

"Go check the restrooms." I position myself in between the gas and diesel doors, watching both.

"Do I have to, Paul?" Terry slumps his shoulders.

"Just do what I tell you," I have no patience for his laziness.

Terry drags down the hallway with a slight frown and then returns shortly with a flip thumbs-up. I lock the beer cooler doors, pulling the booze forward and spinning the cans so the labels show outwards, then get back to closing the day.

The empty store allows me to focus on paperwork. This is the time of night when everyone in their right mind is sleeping. I hear the chatter of some gas customers coming and going, but I haven't seen any drivers for a while.

My ears perk to crying in the distance. I shake my head at the thought of someone bringing a baby here at this time of night. Stepping from behind my desk, I survey the sales floor. I don't see anyone, but someone is throwing a tantrum. Terry is not at his desk, so I follow the sounds to the hallway with the walk-in cooler entrance.

A short teen with a shaved head and a white wife-beater is flailing about. I rush forward to help but a few feet away I see Terry on the ground holding onto the guy's leg. He is curled into the fetal position and wailing like a newborn. The teen is punching and kicking him while a broken twelve pack of beer litters the tile floor.



"Hey!" I charge. The teen realizes I'm there as I weave my arms through his and lock in a Full-Nelson. Terry is bleeding from his eye and has cuts and swelling all over his face. He is still whimpering as I pull the struggling thief off him.

"Let me go," the short teen squirms.

"Shut up, punk. Look at my clerk. You're going to jail."

"Let him go." I look up to an enormous young man towering over me.

"Hit him, stick him with your knife," the teen in my arms orders.

"You get involved," I reason, "and you're going to jail too."

"I said let him go," the large kid clenches his fists.

I throw the teen to the ground and square up to fight the big one but the little thief spins around and hits me with an uppercut. It upsets me more than hurts, so I growl a threat.

He reaches down to grab the broken case of beer, but I smack it from his hand. His face pinches like I just stole his lunch money, but they turn and run out of the store. I follow while dialing 911.

"Two males, silver two-door, license plate number —"

They rip off the license plate, jump into the car, and squeal the tires as they flee the parking lot. I head back inside, cops on the phone, Terry still on the ground, crying.

"Shit Terry, why didn't you just let the guy go?"

"I was grabbing some creamer. He was coming out of the cooler, and I told him he couldn't be in there. Then he started hitting me. I figured I was going to die, so I wanted to hold onto his shoe for evidence."

"What are you talking about?" I examine his cuts. They look bad but are superficial.

"I watch a lot of crime shows. They could get DNA from his shoe. It was all I could think to do."

"Those shows are fake, man. Are you ok?"

"I think so. I hurt but nothing feels broken."

"You look like hell," and more so than usual, I think to myself.

The cops and paramedics come and take a report. Terry is shaking bad but refuses to go in the ambulance, saying he will drive himself to the hospital. I'm left alone in the store.

After a few phone calls, I get a couple of employees to come run the desks. I need a smoke, so I find a spot on the side of the building. It's well past two, the moon is high, but the desert air is still warm. I'm on my third cigarette, I earned them, but the cocking of the gun stops me mid drag.

"Get up and don't make a sound," the little thief taps the back of my head with the hard metal. The big teen waits in the running car on the other side of the lot.

My legs are jelly, but I stumble along. We climb into the rear of the vehicle with the barrel pressed against my temple. Thumping base rolls from the speakers as the car creeps into the unpaved wilderness surrounding the store. The truck stop is on the edge of the city and the empty desert spreads out for miles.

The lights of the city disappear as we drive further into the darkness. The car is following a small trail, probably somewhere they've been before. They pull me from the car, shoving me to the rocky ground. The big teen starts a small fire, while the small one waves his gun at me tauntingly. A case of beer is removed from the car and the boys sit down and begin drinking.

"No one stopped us this time. How's your buddy?"

"He'll live, asshole."

They laugh and toast their drinks. The moon is high in the sky with just a few resting clouds. The fire ruins my vision. I plan to run but want to avoid a bullet in my back.

"Stand up," the smaller teen orders. The pistol hangs loosely in his hand but





points in my direction. His words slur, so his aim is probably deteriorating.

"You going to shoot him?"

"Not unless he makes me, but he can be our clown."

"What can the monkey do?" the big guy stands.

"Let's find out," the smaller one pushes himself up.

A rock thuds near the fire. The teens turn in the direction it came from.

Jumping to my feet, I bolt into the dark emptiness of the desert. There is cussing and shouts behind me, but no gunshots. I sprint blindly, occasionally dodging left and right, until my foot kicks a rock and I skid against the hard ground.

There is silence while I calm my breathing. I lie still and listen to the returning hum of insects. My eyes begin to focus, the moonlight providing a few feet of vision. I'm not sure of direction or distance but I start walking away from the distant glow of the teen's fire.

The crack of a gunshot makes me jump and spin back towards the camp I had run from. Another bang slices through the air and then the faint glow of the fire disappears. I hunker down.

"Paul," my ears perk at the shouting of my name, "where are you?"

I creep back towards the teen's car, staying low. The shouting continues.

"Terry?"

"Paul, thank god."

"Where did you come from?"

"I was in my car, I didn't want to go to the hospital, but I also didn't feel like going home. I saw those assholes come out with beer, and then they grabbed you. I kept my lights off and followed."

"Did you call the cops?" I glance around.

"I didn't call anyone. We need to get back to my car and cover up my tracks."

"What about the guys?"

"Don't worry about them. I cleaned up after myself." Terry taps the butt of a gun peeking from his waist. I can hear his smile in the darkness.

"Shit Terry, should we call an ambulance?"

"Call a hearse if you want," he starts walking, "I was never here."

I rub my eyelids and the scruff on my chin. "What are you going to do?"

Terry pulls two cans from his pocket, handing one to me. "I can tell you that I'm not cleaning anymore bathrooms," he laughs as I flinch.

"Don't worry boss," he pops the top and takes a drink. "I like you, have a beer."

I crack mine and pound it, "I hate overnights, too much excitement."

## *Creative Nonfiction*







## The Tallest Grass

by Lilli Titus

Dearly Departed,

The tallest grass grew on top of your grave. Leaves rest on the canopy that they formed. The headstone I decorated for you would be hard to find after years of nature continuing through its cycles. Nothing stops after death, except you, of course. The seasons still come, and I still live despite your passing. I've come to believe that you were not truly the whole world like I believed back then. No one believed such about the fallen leaves or the patches of sterile soil scattered on the other side of the yard. What makes our connection different? A human and a cat.

On the day of your death, you carried extra weight. Sure, you were always a big cat, a majestic Maine Coon Mix, but never close to thirty pounds. Your full food bowl reaffirmed us that something was wrong. Nearing four in the afternoon, my mother realized your chest was expanding. You were slowly suffocating, fluids crushing your lungs. We rushed to the vet for your relief, but we already knew it was too late.

The diagnosis: a condition affecting many species, congestive heart failure.

With congestive heart failure, the chambers of one's heart struggles to pump blood effectively, causing the chest cavity to collect misplaced congestive fluids and preventing the lungs from taking in enough air. Sometimes the lungs begin to fill with this frightening fluid. The odds of developing congestive heart failure are more common for two cat breeds: Ragdolls and Maine Coons. After developing such an agonizing disease, the damage that occurs in the lungs is irreversible, and the condition becomes life-threatening swiftly. If we had caught it earlier, you would have, generously, one year left to live. We didn't. You died Sunday May 8th, 2016, and my family and I buried you the same day.

I remember your burial well. My father dug the yoga ball sized tomb, and my mother carried you wrapped in a blue and white striped blanket. I kept my distance at first, stood across the then barren yard. I cried on your belly just hours before, and I would never again. After your feline brethren processed your death, I got a closer look at you. Your eyes were crusty from your pain, your nose was still wet from your fight, but your fur was still soft. You still felt warm. Of the many details I remember of that day, what I don't remember was that it was Mother's Day.

Memories are tricky like that. They're formed and defined by our emotions. The most intimate moments will outshine the basic facts and holidays simply because an emotionally intensive event creates the most vivid memories. A paper titled Flashbulb Memories calls these "flashbulb memories," and they only occurred for emotionally significant moments or during shocking surprises. Your death was both a sudden and devastating end to the world I had known. May 8th will be the anniversary of your passing first and foremost. The mundane day,

Mother's Day, will be forgotten. The empty sky of today will be irrelevant after today. The gentle wind and the cold breeze in my backyard will only be the trigger of a much stronger memory. A gray and cold dream I had some time after your death. You had come back, arose from the dead and walked on a decayed paw. The heart shape on it made it my favorite feature of yours. I was overjoyed by your return and held your paw like many times before. Alas, this joy was not to last. Your paw had crumbled in my clutch. I realized at that moment why you must die, and I too one day. There was no preventing the unpreventable. If your life were to go on, your days would be full of misery and suffering; you deserve peace after all the heart you offered the world. Your food bowl was full so your brothers could eat. Our connection was strong because we supported each other. And that's why the tallest grass grows above you.

Sorrowfully, Lively Me

## Lucky Fish

by Jessie Kurak



The fish with the venomous spines swam after the lure and successfully nibbled the crab meat clumsily pushed onto the hook as bait. These were first-time fishers, with borrowed poles and a rusty lure. They had already repaired the line once after the lure got stuck in some seaweed, then rocks. At low tide the lure was miraculously still in among the rocks, so they reattached that, too. It was their last morning, and they decided to give it one more go before packing up. The crab meat was from the crabs they had dug up the day before, small things, an invasive species that locals wouldn't have bothered with. But if you've never been crabbing before, finding any crab, cooking it up, and eating it is the most exciting thing you've ever done. That sounds like an exaggeration, but it isn't.

The fish thought it had gotten away, but in an unlucky twist, its side was caught on the back hook of the lure. This was lucky for the young fisherman, a boy of six, whose mother had cast the line for him, since the pole was finicky, left in their rented cabin for tenants to use, a cast off of the owners. His eight-year-old sister was fishing, too, but her pole was even worse, and her lure was smaller, and the fish got the crab meat off of her hook and got away every time.

The only species of fish they knew that swam in the Colvos Passage, an offshoot of Puget Sound, was salmon. They knew there were fish around in the waters in front of the cabin because there were at least three seals, including a mother and baby seal, hanging around and hunting fish not far from the shore. The mother couldn't quite cast as far as the seals, but the lure was getting far enough to catch a fish, she thought. And she was right.

The boy reeled in the line slowly, as he had done at least twenty times already that morning. When he could see the lure moving in the shallow waters by the shore, he announced that he hadn't caught anything. Again. But then, as he reeled the lure out of the water, his mother saw that there was more than the lure on the line. A little seven-inch fish was there, too, hanging from its side, with what looked like a frill, or wings, up near its head. They would learn later it was a sculpin, a common fish on the western coast of North America. It was the type of fish that serious fisherman would catch as bait or the fish they really wanted to catch. But if you are six years old and it is the first fish you have ever caught in your life, a sculpin is the most amazing fish in the world, and catching one is the most amazing experience of your life. That is not an exaggeration.

Sculpins come in different varieties, but they have a few things in common, of course, one of those things being that they are venomous. If you don't know how to handle a sculpin, you might grab it by the spines, and frilly, wing-like structures up by its head. And if you do that, you will notice immediately, because your hand will start shooting in pain, like the largest bee in the world has stung it.





You will wonder if you accidentally grabbed the hook, but no, it hurts too much for that. Most people only make this mistake once in their lives.

The six-year-old boy was jumping up and down, screaming and squealing, the only sound on the Colvos Passage at that hour of the morning. His sister ran to get a bucket for the fish, a sand pail they had used to put the clams that they dug.

"Daddy! Come! I caught a fish! I caught a fish!"

The sculpin was still hanging by its side off of the lure on the fishing line, gently swinging back and forth as the mother held the pole. There hadn't been a plan for what to do if a fish was caught. The sculpin was biding its time. Surely, they will grab the spines, they will injure at least one of their hands, its defense mechanism will operate as intended, and it would swim away. The father or mother or child, or all three, would travel to the airport with searing pain, and their trip would be ruined. The sculpin waited there on the line.

The sand pail arrived, and the fish was dropped in, still on the lure. Pictures were taken. The boy wanted to pose with the fish, so the fish was raised back out of the pail, dangling near the boy's face as he smiled big, and his eyes twinkled.

Now all four looked down into the pail, and the father said it was time to release the fish. He was lucky that the fish was unluckily caught on its side, not its mouth. To free it from the lure, it was easiest to grab the fish by the tail, avoiding the venomous spines up by the head. The lure wasn't in deep, barely through its slimy skin.

With the lure out, the triumphant boy grabbed the pail with both hands and looked down at his first catch one more time before turning the pail upside-down and letting the fish fall back into the waters of the Colvos Passage. Luckily, he wasn't interested in touching his fish whatsoever. The fish waited in the water near the rocks by the shore, shocked at this turn of events on its Saturday morning, until it re-oxygenated and came to itself again. It was unscathed, as was the family, unaware of their barely-avoided brush with disaster.



## Problems as a Straight Woman

Now With Solutions!

by Lilli Titus



In a time where people are more open to discussing different sexualities, it can be challenging to be confident in your straight identity. From people advertising that gay actions can be neutralized with a pair of socks to others labeling you without your approval, you can get confused by the polarizing opinions that breed among your peers. Here is a list of the most common problems, with respective solutions, as to how to reaffirm your heterosexuality as a woman.

*Problem One: You fantasize about women at night.*

**Solution:** There is no problem. No one knows that you do. Because you are a ten-year-old girl, even saying that you like Sailor Moon doesn't surprise anyone. For all they know, you just enjoy the show. You are normal.

*Problem Two: You watch a suggestive show as a means to explore who you are.*

**Solution:** Stand by as your parents blame this unsavory pick on your teenage cousin. They, as do most adults in their position, associate the pair of boobs to the teenage boy, thus eliminating any possible blame landing on you. You finally find it great that you all use the same Netflix account. Just don't get caught watching it on TV; a 3DS works just fine.

*Problem Three: Your girl friends are talking about their crushes, and you don't have one.*

**Solution:** Pick a poor boy that you can tolerate. If your friends are nosy, you may have to tie an invisible tether around you and your "crush." Stay within 20 feet of this soul, and glance at him a lot. In no time your friends will believe in the romantic vision you cleverly painted.

*Problem Four: You aren't attracted to any of the men in a good, old-fashioned game of "Smash-or-Pass."*

**Solution:** An excuse that any of your straight friends will accept is that you just don't find anyone except your crush attractive. Tell them that you simply have your eyes out for that poor soul from before and are blinded by love to see the beauty in any other man. This tactic works like a charm.

*Problem Five: Someone suggests you could be queer.* An unfortunate side effect of middle school is that people expect you to hit your "boy crazy" phase, and you can stick out like a sore thumb. At the same time, the other sore thumbs tend to explore the possibility of being queer, leaving you to fend for yourself.





Solution: At this point, agreeing that you're "gay because you're happy" won't work anymore. You need to proclaim "I am straight" as many times as you need to. If you find yourself having to repeat this step, pretend to be offended by the insinuation. At a certain point, even you will believe this farce.

*Problem Six: A rumor starts to spread that you finally came out as a lesbian.* Friends congratulate you on this accomplishment, and you fear it recontextualizes the sudden end to your last relationship. A lesbian couldn't provide the desires of a straight man, they think. Of course he was seeking attention from other women.

Solution: Flirt around (with boys, of course)! Show that you can be affectionate to the opposite sex. And if you are feeling confident, cuddle up with your closet boy friend. People will be convinced that you were holding out for him. It's funny how fast speculations are made.

*Problem Seven: You consider that there may be a chance you are queer.* Luckily, there are two possible courses of action.

Solution One: You disregard the thought as lunacy. If you liked women, you would have known by now. However, this option can get old when the question keeps nagging at you. Since you were little, you felt like you couldn't as easily relate to other girls and sought ways to be involved in their "boy talks." If this is the case, consider Solution Two.

Solution Two: Suppose you were queer. Why were you so against the possibility? At what point did you even discover that "gay" meant more than happy? Look into your past and recontextualize those previous problems. Explore your identity, whether it is straight, lesbian, or actually bisexual! I'm not asking you to do anything beyond that.



## First Drink

by Patrick McCarthy



I consider myself obsessive-compulsive. I'm not clinically diagnosed but ask my family and friends and they would be happy to corroborate. The common definition of this disorder is a person having uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts and/or behaviors that they feel the urge to repeat over and over.

My wife simply calls me "extra", and it applies to just about everything. I'm a workaholic, an alcoholic, and generally addicted to anything I have defined as important. I struggle constantly, like many, with self-control and self-discipline.

I do believe that this obsessive behavior has many benefits on top of its numerous pitfalls. I get things done because I must. I don't stop mid project because it would drive me crazy. I have always gotten overtime because I will not leave until a task is completed, and therefore they quickly become salaried. Seventy-hour workweeks are normal and even on vacation, my phone is always by my side.

Earl Nightingale reiterated time and again, that "You are what you think about, most of the time." This quote is a positive testimony to obsession if your obsession is a worthy ideal. It is too bad that most of my obsessions have not been so noble.

There were approximately 6 million reported motor vehicle traffic crashes in the US in 1999, and this was an unnecessary one.

The crunch of metal resonates in your head as the two tons of Toyota does cartwheels down the freeway. Knocked unconscious after the first tumble your life is spared by the tightening of the belt that keeps you from super-manning out the windshield, digging deeply into your chest and shoulders. The shattered glass cuts into your skin wherever it is exposed while your head bounces about like a bobble toy. The engine is no longer running but headlights shine brightly into the dirt and ice, while the radio plays the red eye.

You have no recollection of anything as the smashed door is yanked open by some passing Samaritans who witnessed the tail end of your catastrophic collision with concrete. They manage to undo the belt, wrestle you from the flattened cab of the once pretty pickup, and begin to escort you with your bloody arms draped over their caring shoulders across the empty freeway. Your eyes begin to focus as you slowly awaken and find yourself in this compromised position.

"What happened?"

"We we're going to ask you."

You struggle to look over your shoulder to remind yourself where you are and how you got there. The image of your smashed smoking truck hits you like a club on the back of your already bruised head. Your returning vision goes dark, and consciousness comes and goes as the crushing reality of the accident hits you full force.

"My truck."

The little strength that had returned to your legs flees, but the Samaritans are prepared for your collapse and continue to drag you to their waiting vehicle.

"The ambulance is on its way, sit down and relax."

They open the passenger door to their SUV and attempt to place you on the clean beige seat.

You pull back at the last moment realizing how much blood and dirt is about to flow off you and stain their vehicle.

"I'm all bloody."

"It's fine, just sit down."

"I'll sit on the ground."

You drop slowly to the rocky pavement and put your swollen head into your





shaking hands trying to piece together the last few minutes.

"I hit ice." It comes to you like an inspiration, flashes of memory, flashes of falling. "My truck."

The sirens race by on the opposite side of the road then cut through the divide and pull up behind you. The concerned medics question you, then strap you to a gurney and load you into the running ambulance.

"Thank you," you smile weakly at the couple as the doors close and you are whisked to the Emergency Room.

Doctors bustle, nurses prod, and police wait for an opportunity to question you.

"You're lucky," the doctor is looking at a clipboard, "bumps and bruises, but nothing broken. I'll get you some pain meds but other than that you're good to go."

"Thanks doc," you don't feel good, but you appreciate the optimism.

"So, what happened?" the officer has his notepad out.

"From what I remember, I hit ice on one of the overpasses. Slid left, tried to correct, slid right, tried again, then my front tire grabbed the dirt in the center divider and pulled me into it. I remember thinking that I would jump out the other side into oncoming traffic, but if I turned the wheel I would roll, so I turned the wheel. Then everything went black."

"Sounds about right," the officer looks you over, "your truck rolled five times. Doctor says you'll be fine. I say you're lucky to be alive."

You take a deep breath and let his words sink in.

"How fast were you going?"

"Like seventy, I think."

"Did you have anything to drink?"

"No, I was coming from Vegas. I have a new job in Phoenix, I'm supposed to be on site this morning."

"Black ice. You're the tenth accident we had in that same stretch of freeway last night. Here is the info on where we towed your vehicle."

The officer leaves and you are dumbfounded by his admission. That's a lot of accidents.

You get a room at a cheap hotel, buy a change of clothes from Walmart, and look at the bus schedule for a ride back to the city.

It wasn't that you were needed at work that day. Your boss knew you were in the process of relocating from Las Vegas to Phoenix. You were still in training and a missed day would have meant nothing to your employment. You had barely slept and planned to drive all night and work all day. Your wife had warned you about driving so late with frozen roads, but work is more important than safety. A near fatal accident due to your compulsion to be viewed as perfect.



The common definition of alcoholism is a pattern of alcohol use that involves problems controlling your drinking, being preoccupied with alcohol, or continuing to use alcohol even when it causes problems.

There were approximately 1.5 million DUIs in the US in 1992, and I was one of them.

Sixteen years old and I kept getting into trouble. My parents drug tested me multiple times, sent me to a therapist, and made me move into the house from my stand alone, pool room, structure. I was allowed to get my license and a car anyhow.

Driving drunk became my normal state, so of course I was inebriated when the red and blue sirens lit up behind me. I remember smiling with confidence after successfully walking in a straight line, as they placed me in handcuffs.

Being a troublemaker, I knew most of the inmates in Juvenile Hall.

We were a bunch of puberty strung boys sharing a common area, but because we are kids, we got our own cages to sleep in.

The public bathroom and showers were the most embarrassing part, especially when they limit us to three squares of toilet paper, no more.

The guards were power hungry sadists, but they were not allowed to hit us, so they locked us in solitary and made us pee in our bath towels, after telling us not to.

There was also the memorable experience of getting hosed down while naked, squat and cough. We had one TV, a couple of books, lots of dirty jokes, and a couple of fights, but at least we didn't have the big prison problems.

Alcoholics Anonymous teaches an alcoholic that the only acceptable outcome is sobriety. Founded in 1935 in Akron, Ohio, Bill W. and Dr. Bob helped form a fellowship of alcoholics trying to get sober. They wrote a twelve-step recovery program encouraging members to admit that they are powerless over alcohol and to take steps to no longer drink. One of the most powerful lines for sobriety was "You cannot get drunk if you do not take the first drink."

Compulsion has always been a struggle for me. I try to quit behaviors that are dangerous or unproductive but, like many, find myself indulging in them after I choose to forget how bad they are. AA helped me quit drinking, until I quit AA. I have quit other destructive habits by removing myself from peer groups and using hypnosis. Upon reflection however I think that the best solution for obsessive behavior is to never first try the destructive habit. "You cannot get drunk if you do not take the first drink."

Nature versus nurture is a common discussion when it comes to obsession-compulsion and addiction. Theories and studies will be happy to point to both as causes for these psychological disorders. Without getting too much into the scientific discussion surrounding these ideas, or my own personal upbringing, I can understand the merits of both ideas.

My parents told me when I was about to have a child that "The kid wouldn't be able to hide anything, because I already knew all the tricks."

I decided that I didn't want to be that absolute authority that my child had to rebel against, so I came up with another idea to help postpone negative obsessive behavior. A bet.

I told my daughter about my struggles openly. We had real discussions at an early age about negative behaviors associated with drugs, alcohol, and addiction. Rather than be a hypocrite about what she could or couldn't do, I told her that if she waited until the age of twenty-one to try any adult or illegal substances, I would owe her one million dollars. Not fake money, but money I would have to pay out for the rest of my life.

She is definitely obsessive. You can see it in her schoolwork, friendships, and habits. She is almost eighteen and thankfully you cannot see it in her experimentation. So far, she is obsessed with winning the bet, a worthy ideal.







Poetry





## *A Love Song to Tomatoes*

by Carol Powell



I.

Seedlings in compost pots  
impaled by plastic-picket labels  
sit in their tray  
awaiting a warmer day.  
Soon.

II.

My trowel releases decay-scented molecules  
as it creates negative space.  
The seedling in box-shaped soil  
slips from its pot  
into a newly-excavated Earthen container.  
Dirt dribbles from my hand to fill the gaps.  
I tuck the seedling in,  
patting the soil smooth  
like a brown blanket on a bed.

III.

The rains come. The sun shines.  
I watch and wait. Anticipate.  
The eager shoots reach upward.

IV.

Small, haughty blossoms gloat over  
color-twinned dandelions  
in the green carpet  
rimming the rectangular bed.

V.

Green umbilical cords  
feed the tiny, shiny, green globes.  
The blossoms dry and drop.

VI.

The bushing vine begins to bow,  
laden with bulbous fruit.

VII.

I pound larger pickets into the Earth beside  
the fecund stalks,  
binding stalk to stake with strips torn from bed sheets.

VIII.

As the fruit blushes,  
I, like the famed dog, begin to salivate.  
Big Boy, Better Boy, and Beefsteak  
are a few of the lovers who vie for my affection.

IX.

Holding the firm, first fruit in my palm,  
my fingers smudged green and smelling of vine,  
I lift the warm tomato to my face and inhale  
time.

My thumbs rub dirt from the flesh.

I bite into life, tender and bleeding.

What it means to be.

I bite and slurp until only the navel  
remains between my dripping fingers.

Sunshine inhabits and covers me.

X.

So many tomatoes.

Slices as big as my palm.

Small like plums,

smaller like grapes and cherries.

So many tomatoes.

Too many to eat.

I make friends via paper bags full of tomatoes.

XI.

Frost tonight.

Time to gather what remains.

My kitchen is a Jackson Pollock

Christmas painting:

window sills, countertops,

and refrigerator shelves

splotched in red and green.

I prepare the dish that signals the final harvest:  
fried green tomatoes.

XII.

Give me oranges or apples.

I can't eat another tomato.

Outside, the last leaves fall.

XIII.

From my kitchen window,

the frozen bed below is dusted with snow,

barren until spring.

I wait.





## *Room for Dessert*

by Jessie Kurak



Tumbling out of the womb, we start life lightly,  
no memories even to fill up on  
till we begin to grasp and follow,  
to find out that our voice is ours,  
and we can start to appetize  
on the flavors and savors of our childhood.

Our bodies reach full size before our minds do,  
and we reach the main course,  
as we're told we're in our prime,  
we pile more onto our plate,  
and spin multiple plates,  
occasionally dropping one to the ground,  
but we always have time to go back for more,  
until we don't.

We pick at our life at times,  
wonder if we're full,  
then go back for more.  
We nourish our bodies, our minds,  
or not,  
as our lives tick through their courses.

We want to save room in our lives for the dessert of our passions,  
but when, and how much room to leave?  
Should we eat it now,  
or is that too soon?

Did I get my fill, or will I be hungry again?  
Feast on your loves soon - now - and often,  
just in case.

Such a tragedy to leave room for dessert,  
only to see that there is none.

## *Stone Fires*

by Brianna Lucio



Glassy beads  
Dried lips  
Joints that creak  
Like old windows

The cold pallor  
Of name plates  
Among a room  
Of ghosts

Antique glass  
Frosted by eternities  
As clear as  
The eyes of the dogs  
Standing on the shelves

Oh, how wonderful  
to seem  
So alive  
In Death





## Carousel

by Jessie Kurak



How strange how I lost you  
that day. The giraffes with their long necks,  
the zebra, the carousel.  
We were happy, walking along the paths, looking for the animals,  
then you fell.  
I fell with you, called for help (I think).  
We were happy, and then you were leaving.  
The paramedics came, the children were still laughing,  
the music of the carousel still playing, the animals still spinning around.  
Only we stopped, everything else continued.  
We rode in the ambulance, and we weren't in the hospital long  
because you were already gone, so I went home.  
Where else could I go?  
How did I lose you, by the carousel, and they didn't stop it from spinning  
around, and nothing else stopped or changed?  
I'm left here alone, with the whole world  
spinning around. The music won't stop.  
The giraffes saw us, but they didn't seem to care much,  
and they are still there, I imagine, munching their leaves indifferently.  
When I wake up, before I open my eyes,  
my thoughts tell me to go back to the carousel.  
I left you there, after all.  
But you aren't there, and you aren't here,  
and I am having the hardest time  
Getting used to the great gone-ness of you.



## The Storm

by Hailey Wyman



The sky was always dark.  
The storm was always waiting-  
For happy days to ruin.  
  
The girl sat in her closet  
Holding her breath.  
The wind screamed, slamming doors  
She stayed silent,  
Hoping it would not come her way  
  
Listening to the devastation it caused,  
Voices were raised-  
The cracks grew larger.  
The air froze in her lungs  
She wanted to help battle the storm-  
But she stayed silent.  
  
The storm finally stopped  
But stayed above the house.  
It was waiting.  
Biding its time till  
Someone stepped wrong.  
  
The girl knew.  
But pretended that everything was fine,  
Until it wasn't again-  
Even then, she stayed silent.





*One-Act Play/Drama*





# The Gas Station

by Catherine Cubillas



FADE IN:

EXT. ROAD – DAY

A dark blue beat-up Jeep speeds past a slick road on a rainy day.

INT. JENNA'S CAR – RAINY DAY

A young woman who looks to be in her mid to late 20s is at the wheel, with a dead focus on the road ahead. She looks like she's been crying. This is JENNA. In the passenger seat, a phone RINGS with the caller ID of "Sara." Jenna ignores the call and drives faster.

As the car drives on, the gas light blinks to life with an annoying beep to follow. Jenna can feel the engine start to sputter as the gauge ticks lower.

JENNA  
No no no no

Jenna pulls over to the side of the road, in the middle of a forested stretch of nowhere. Nobody is out here. All the noises seem to grow louder: the rain, the engine BEEPING, the phone BUZZING. Building up the intention, Jenna angrily gets out of the car and kicks the side of the wheel screaming. Jenna sits in the front seat, pressing her palms to her eyes.

JENNA  
I just...let me disappear.

A beat. Jenna, knowing she must do, writes on the something back of a notepad: "BE BACK SOON" She grabs an umbrella from her car and looks at the road. An exit sign reads 'GAS STATION 3 MILES' Locking up the vehicle and grabbing a small backpack, Jenna starts walking.

INT. GAS STATION – DAY

Standing behind the counter, a man with messy brown hair, who looks to be in their early 30s looks frustrated. This is MATT. He paces the small counter space as he speaks on the phone.

MATT  
(into phone)  
This is the 5th time you've canceled this month alone! With no warning! I can't keep covering like this.

DING! DONG! Jenna enters and walks straight for the water bottles. Matt, upon seeing her, moves closer to the phone.

MATT  
(hushed)  
Look, dad didn't leave this place to us for you to abandon it. If you aren't going to show up and help, I'll hire someone who will. Fine, good riddance. Show up for the paperwork tomorrow. Bye.

Matt hangs up and, more than a bit firm puts the phone down. Standing with his arms resting on the counter, Matt frowns.

JENNA (O.S.)  
Excuse me

Matt's head jolts up with a plastered customer-service smile.

MATT  
Sorry, how can I help you?

Jenna takes a step back a little in concern. She places a half-drunken water bottle, an array of junk food, and an empty gas container on the counter. Matt dutifully starts ringing up the items.

MATT  
Do you want the container filled?

JENNA  
Yes, please

MATT  
That'll be \$48.76

Jenna grimaces but hands over her credit card. Matt takes it and runs it through, but frowns as it beeps. He breathes on the chip and rubs it, running it again. BEEP.

MATT (CONT'D)  
It's saying it's been declined. Do you have another card?

Taking the card back, Jenna rummages through her bag. She holds out a few crumpled dollars.

JENNA  
No. Uh, here, this can pay for the water I think. Sorry.

Embarrassed, Jenna grabs her half-empty water and leaves. She hits a snack display on the way out, causing food to scatter everywhere. Matt watches her go, cautiously interested.

EXT. GAS STATION ALLEY – DAY

Jenna shouts in haphazard anger, hitting and kicking the wall before slumping down and covering her face. Rain falls on her face, darkening her jacket. A beat.

MATT (O.S.)  
Um, sorry to intrude but is there someone you can call? Maybe pay-pal you?

JENNA  
I...don't think that's a good idea

MATT  
I could call a tow truck.





JENNA

I can barely afford water! I--oh no! Did you come out here because I have to pay for the snacks I dropped too?!

Matt sits down next to Jenna on the step, chuckling.

MATT

No, they're packaged well. Just got to restock them. No worries.

JENNA

I'm sorry. I'm giving you more work and you're out here for whatever reason and...

MATT

Rough days happen. I get it.

JENNA

Speaking from experience?

MATT

A bit personal for someone who hasn't even given me their name.

JENNA

Oh, sorry, I'm Jenna

MATT

Matt... Now, I can't have my only customer out in the rain. Bad for business, you see. So, what can I do to help?

JENNA

Well, unless you have \$50 laying around...

Matt's eyes go wide with an idea and a smile crosses his features. Jenna sees his look and now looks worried for his sanity.

INT. EMPLOYEE ROOM – DAY

The "room" is a decorated storage closet with a rickety table and a few chairs. White lights buzz overhead. Matt stands in the room, holding a bright red vest by the hanger like it's the next hottest fashion item.

MATT

Ta da

JENNA

I don't get it

MATT

I could hire you!

Jenna sits on the dingy chair, looking at Matt as if he has a screw loose.

MATT (CONT'D)

Look, the guy who normally helps gone so I need a position filled. You need money to get your car running. Now, as nice a guy I am, I don't have \$50 on me and I can't take it out of the register without stealing it but if I were to pay a new employee...

JENNA

Um, as...nice...a place this is, I don't think I want a career as a gas station employee. No offense.

MATT

No, no, no. Temporary. Complete the shift for today which is about 6 hours. That means you make \$67-ish which is more than you need! After that, you can quit and we can part ways. A one-day win-win hire!

Suspicious but having no room to complain, Jenna grabs the vest and looks at it. She frowns at its gaudiness but doesn't have many options.

JENNA

And after today, I just...quit? No warning?

Matt nods.

JENNA (cont'd)

Why are you doing this?

MATT

I just told you. I'm down an employee.

JENNA

But it's not like your busy. You could get by without me. Save some cash.

MATT

Well yeah, I but that wouldn't could be very nice of me. Plus I get really bored of my own company. There's no point in a manager if there's nobody to manage.

JENNA

And you won't get in trouble with your boss or nothing.

MATT

Nope! I...know the owner. They're a pretty nice guy.

JENNA

(sighing)

Do I need to do any paperwork or something?

Matt, eager she's going along with the idea, smiles. He grabs a paper from a dusty file cabinet and a clipboard which he hands to her.

MATT

Fill this out

A clock ticks away a few minutes. JENNA hands the form to Matt, whose hovering eagerly over her shoulder.





MATT

Good, no criminal record. Over 18. Previous work experience. Uh... whoa, you're birthday was yesterday! Happy Birthday!

Jenna gives a forced grin as the "interview" continues.

MATT (CONT'D)

Okay, now, Ms... He squints at the paper.

MATT

Halisey, what are some words that you would use to describe yourself?

JENNA

Um...hardworking, organized, and tired

MATT

Wonderful words! And why would you want to employ yourself here at this lovely Gas Station?

JENNA

Cause I need the money and you need an employee

MATT

Great! You're-

JENNA

(interrupting)  
Wait! What makes this place worthy of my time?

MATT

(surprised)  
Er, it's easy pay, you get free food on lunch breaks and...I'm better company than bears and hitchhikers

JENNA

You had me at pay

Jenna wants to laugh at the man's smile, as he outstretches his hand. He was odd but in a nice goofy way. Not in a serial killer kind of way, she watches a lot of murder mysteries to know the difference. At least it would be an entertaining couple of hours.



INT. GAS STATION - DAY

Exiting out of the backroom door, Jenna wears the work vest over her hoodie with a handwritten sticker saying "Hello, my name is: JENNA." Matt follows holding a cardboard box.

MATT

Okay newbie, for your first task, some customer left all their stuff on the counter and knocked over a display. I think they'll come back for it so go ahead and put it behind the counter for now and restock the stand.

Jenna looks at him in shock, a tinge of red on her face. Yet, obediently, she walks to the counter. Silently she reprimands herself, forgetting so much junk food and being clumsy.

INT. AISLE - DAY

Matt is carrying some boxes between the aisles. Jenna walks up to him.

JENNA

Done. What's next?

MATT

Oh, already? Um, normally Nick would clean the bathrooms when he gets in but that's more of a...day two employee thing. How about you stock the shelves? I think these are all the boxes.

Jenna looks at the six large boxes between the four aisles in discontent. This was going to be a lot of labor.

JENNA

Are there any instructions?

MATT

Um...put the older stuff in the front and the newer stuff in the back. If it's expired, toss it. Any extras, leave in the box... I can supervise if you want.

He sounds desperate as he picks up the bathroom supplies.

JENNA

Oh I wouldn't want to keep you no. from your duties.

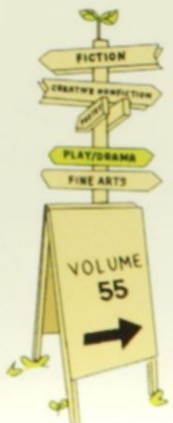
Matt hangs his head low in a mock sigh and walks towards the bathroom.

MATT (O.S)

Try not to break anything!

INT. AISLE - DAY

On the bottom left of the screen, text says "HOUR 3." With a radio station playing overhead, Jenna opens a box full of chips. Taking out the old ones, Jenna puts in a few new bags. She easily gets used to restocking the supplies. BUZZ. BUZZ. Jenna looks at her phone and silences it. The screen BUZZ. display says '12 missed calls, 4 voicemails, 7 unread texts' She turns the phone off. Jenna returns to the task slightly more annoyed.





INT. AISLE - DAY

Camera stays on an annoyed Jenna who was just finished putting the last snack on the stand. Matt walks in from off screen.

MATT

Okay, I take back my gentlemanliness. You're cleaning the bathrooms next time. Those things are -

Matt takes note of the half-completed work and a slightly perturbed Jenna.

MATT

Are you alright?

JENNA

Peachy.

Matt looks at his digital watch and then out the window at the grey sky.

MATT

We've been at this for a couple of hours now. Want your lunch break?

Jenna looks at the empty boxes and the ones still full.

JENNA

A break sounds nice.

INT. EMPLOYEE ROOM - DAY

Jenna sits with a fountain drink and a packet of chips she just stacked on the table. She is scrolling through her voicemail, playing different clips aloud. THUNDER rolls in the distance.

SARAH (V.O.)

That was so rude! We came out for you! - BEEP - Jen, I know you miss Mom since she got sick, but Dad's moved on. - BEEP - If you want to act like a child then fine! I'm acting like one too. I'm eating your cake! - BEEP-Look, just...tell me you're okay. I have to leave tomorrow and I want to see you before then.

MATT

She sounds worried. You going to call her back?

Jenna looks up in surprise, which turns to anger. Rain hits hard against the roof.

JENNA

Were you eves-dropping?

MATT

Uh no, I was just-

JENNA

You were just giving your opinion on how I should deal with my own life? Thanks for giving me this gig and all, but don't act like we're friends. You don't know me so kindly butt out.

Matt's friendly face flickers with hurt and puts his hand out in defense.

MATT

Okay, sore subject but you don't need to lash out at me about it. I just came in to our breakroom to shared grab some more cleaning supplies and to tell my that their break employee was nearly up.

Grabbing a box of sanitizing wipes, Matt closes the door behind him, leaving Jenna staring in a flurry of emotions.

INT. AISLE - DAY

Jenna finished stacking the last bag of snacks. Grabbing the empty boxes, she sets them down in the storage room. She looks over at Matt who has been aggressively wiping the counters for an hour and a half. Carefully, she makes her way over to the spotless condiments area.

JENNA

I finished with the stocking.

MATT

The rollers need to be reloaded. Food is below the counter.

Jenna grabs the food from the cooler beneath the rollers and the two are quiet, working back-to-back. A beat.

MATT

(walking away)  
I'll cover the counter

JENNA

I'm sorry

Matt stops, but doesn't face her.

JENNA

(cont'd)  
I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. You've been so nice despite us being complete strangers and I can't handle one more person angry at me right now and-

MATT

I accept your apology.

Matt turns around to face her with a kind smile.

MATT

(cont'd)  
And I get it; life is hard and relationships are harder, but it also makes things easier. Running away and giving up just causes the people who love you to worry.

JENNA

...speaking from experience?





MATT

(reluctant)

Yeah actually. So, speaking from the other end, being run from sucks. It makes no sense to run from the people who actually understand the problems you're going through! It just makes you a coward.

Jenna realizes she's touched a nerve and stares. She takes his words to heart. Matt composes himself, clears his throat, and starts to busy himself.

MATT

(cont'd)

Uh, finish the rollers and then your shift is up.

INT. COUNTER - DAY

BEEP, BEEP. KA-CHING. Just like earlier, Matt is standing behind the register and Jenna is facing him. The box that Jenna packed earlier is now sitting between them.

MATT

Okay, after taxes your total comes to the return of one vest and -\$25.32. We can fill up the can on our way out.

Jenna takes off her red vest and hands it to Matt in exchange for the receipt and cash. Jenna puts the money into her backpack before shouldering it. Matt takes the nametag sticker off the vest and proudly places it on the box. The two notice that the room gets lighter and look to the window. The sun begins peeking through the grey clouds and there's barely more than a sprinkle.

EXT. ROADSIDE - MIDDAY

The red gas can is sloshing in a hand which, as the camera pans out, is Matt. Jenna, by his side, is carrying the box of stuff.

MATT

You walked three miles in the rain?

JENNA

(shrugging)

I've walked more for less.

MATT

Okay, either you're really in shape or I need to work out more. really

Jenna laughs.

JENNA

Well, it's good I can see my car

Coming into view is a dark blue Jeep which is covered in water droplets from the recent rain.

INT. JENNA'S CAR - DAY

Jenna sits in the driver's seat, turning the key. The vehicle roars to life and the young girl looks relieved. Matt places the can in the car trunk and moves to the driver's window.

MATT

Ready to go then?

JENNA

Yes, thanks for everything.

MATT

Thanks for being my one-day employee.

JENNA

Oh! By the way, I quit

Matt laughs.

MATT

(over-dramatic)

Oh, I could have never foreseen this!

This time, both people laugh. A beat.

MATT

(cont'd)

So which way you headed?

Jenna pauses. She looks at her phone which holds a screensaver of her sister, father, and herself. It may be broken, but it's her mess.

JENNA

I think...I want to go home.

Matt nods, slightly proud of her choice.

MATT

Good luck. Be safe.

EXT. ROADSIDE - DAY

Jenna pulls into the road. Matt can see she looks different: freshened up and content, yet determined as ever.

FADE TO BLACK





# Bunny Island

by Constantine Dino Cotton



FADE IN:

INT: Small house in El Paso, Texas, 1970, FRANCIS, a frail lonely old German man sits at a table by himself, staring at a black and white photo of a young woman, his deceased wife, Ingrid. You see an old record player against the wall playing "Solitude" by Billie Holiday.

CUT TO: INT: Prep School Hallway, a fist strikes WALTER right in the nose. Blood begins to pour out and Walter runs away crying while children laugh.

CUT TO: EXT: Walter walks down the street crying tears and bloody snot. Francis, standing on his patio sees Walter and calls to him in a thick German accent. He has a German flag and American Flag hanging from two flag mounts on the patio awning.

FRANCIS

Dear boy, why are you crying?

WALTER

L... I was hit in the nose. It's bleeding. It really hurts.

Francis beckons Walter over, taking a step down from his patio.

FRANCIS

Come up here and let me take a look. I'm a doctor.

Walter hesitates and appears cautious.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Don't just stand there bleeding on the concrete. I have some gauze.

Still crying, Walter cuts through Francis' grass and pulls his bloodied jacket from his nose. Francis begins to inspect Walter's nose.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Why are you still crying? Tears are never from physical pain, my boy. Tears are always emotional. Fear, sadness, longing for your mother. So that people will see us and take pity. Are you looking for pity, or does your nose just hurt? Because lucky for you, its not broken.

Walter stops crying, quickly correcting himself.

WALTER

No.

FRANCIS

Vat is your name, Junge?

Walter wipes the final tears from his face.

WALTER

Walter.

FRANCIS

Valter? Valter vat? Vat is your surname?

WALTER

Leibowitz, sir.

Francis reacts as if he won a bet with himself.

FRANCIS

Ahh, Mah Schlom Cha?

Walter, with wide eyes, looks surprised and confused at what Francis just said.

WALTER

I think I'm better now.

FRANCIS

You need to study up on your Hebrew young man.

Francis turns, gripping the porch railing for support while walking back up his steps back to his patio.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Would you join me for some Koppke?

Francis turns back around toward Walter pointing at the wicker furniture on his patio. Walter looks down the street anxiously for an excuse to leave.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Do you like cookies? Lebkuchen?

Walter shrugs and follows Francis up to the patio. The patio is covered in little houses that Francis created for little birds or mice made of flowers and vines with shiny stones scattered about.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Have a seat and I'll be right back.

Walter peers into one of the houses hoping to find someone living in them. Above he hears a symphony of chimes dangling above his head. This is a peaceful place to him. Francis appears behind the screen door holding a plate of cookies. He turns his back to the door to push it open, balancing the plate.

FRAN (CONT'D)

Did you meet them?

WALTER

I don't think so. Who would I meet? Birds?

FRANCIS

The fairies. Those are their homes.

Walter looks back around the patio in amazement. Francis sets the plate down and slowly takes a seat, grasping at the chair handles.





WALTER

I've never seen a fairy before.

FRANCIS

Yes, they only show themselves when they want to be seen. Very elusive little creatures.

Francis pulls out a full bent pipe from his pocket and taps it on a small ashtray on his coffee table. He opens a small glass jar filled with tobacco leaves and begins to pack the bowl.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

(Murmurs while puffing his pipe)

Help yourself too a few cookies.

Walter reaches curiously for one of the round glazed gingerbread cookies.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Now tell me of your nose Valter.

Francis blows a few round circles of smoke, catching Walter's attention.

WALTER

(mouth full of cookies)

There was a boy at school who wasn't very nice. He punched me.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

And why would he do a thing like that?

Walter scratches his forehead in shame.

WALTER

He said he hated my big fat Jew nose and that he was going to break it off and give it to all the children in town with little noses.

FRANCIS

I see. That seems like quite the feat. Do you believe him?

WALTER

Well he certainly tried.

Walter begins to look around as if he remembered he needed to be somewhere. Francis looks out to the west above the neighboring houses into the sky. Among the blue was the moon, in a faint white half circle.

FRANCIS

Can you see the moon there Walter?

Francis points slowly up at the moon.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Every day it stands they're in the same facing position staring at us. We move around the solar system while spinning, but the moon just stands there, sentinel, watching as it has forever and will continue to do so.

Walter stands up and walks to the edge of the patio, looking down the street and then back up at the moon.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Nothing we do here on Earth will ever change that. And the same goes for human nature, the hearts and minds of Man.

Francis points at his heart and head.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Just as the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, it is predictable every day. This boy is a bully.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

He is by nature your enemy. There will always be bullies and there will always be enemies.

Walter turns back towards Francis with a frustrated look and tone.

WALTER

Well then how do I get him to stop being my enemy?

Laughing slightly, Francis rests his pipe down on the table and goes to pick up a cookie. He looks at it carefully.

FRANCIS

Mother Theresa once told me that if I wanted world peace, to go home and love my family.

Francis pauses for a brief moment, moving his hand toward the picture of his family in his shirt pocket.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Unfortunately for you, I do not see a scenario where this boy's mother and father are going to go home and love him tonight.

INT: WALTER'S HOME - NIGHT

Walter's father, LENNY Leibowitz is yelling I at Walter having just struck him. He then turns to his wife who is coming to his aid and slaps her.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

Bad father, no father. That is how our world's villains and tyrants are made.

EXT: FRANCIS' PATIO - DAY

Suddenly a loud whistling sound came from inside the house growing in intensity. Francis gestures to Walter.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Walter, would you be a good lad and retrieve the water for the tea please? Just follow the whistle.





INT: Francis House: Walter nods, then opens the screen door. In the front room, we see an old wooden sofa, a lounge chair and a turntable with a large fluted speaker curving out of the top. "Rise of the Valkyries" by Wagner is now playing. The kitchen is beside the stairway to the second floor. Next to the stairway was another set of stairs leading down into the basement. As the whistling intensifies, Walter quickly hurries to relieve the pot from the stove. Francis announces from the porch...

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

The tea tray is in the cupboard below the cutting board.

Walter, carefully balancing the hot water on a tray takes his time to look around the living room. We see a wall of old black and white photos. One photo is of a tall man standing with a woman and two young boys that we assume is Francis and his family. The other photos are of Francis as a younger man in black military attire posing in front of submarines, boats, and planes with obvious swastika imagery on them. The last photo is snugged into a certificate frame, he quickly catches the words "Certificate of Citizenship ... Operation Paperclip, 1947." Walter opens the door and places the teapot down on the patio table.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Have you ever heard of Bunny Island?

WALTER

I don't think so. Do you mean Easter Island?

Francis opens a small jar and pulls out some broken leaves placing them onto squares of cloth. He bails them up and ties the cloth with a string and hands one of them to Walter. Walter looks confused at Francis' gift.

FRANCIS

(laughing)

Tea dear boy.

Francis pours the hot water into his cup then places the teabag into the cup, stirs.



FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Bunny Island. The utopian island of rabbits. A marvel of social engineering and society.

EXT: We see a picture of the Earth from space. Then we zoom in on a small sand belt in the Mediterranean Sea.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

Off the coast of Mallorca some time at the end of the 15th century, there was a small island filled with bunnies.

EXT: There is a large group of multi-colored rabbits standing around in a group on a sandy beach.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

The most beautiful bunnies you've ever seen. All assorted colors and breeds. Brown, White, Jack, Hares, Lops, Spotted.

EXT: There are bunnies handing each other food and hugging.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

These bunnies had created a utopian society.

EXT: The bunnies are holding hands, singing, and going in and out of grass huts.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

All of the bunnies were equal socially and economically. Men were equal to women, everyone shared everything. They all shared abundance together.

INT: A multi-colored bunny with one ear and a long tail is shown being praised and given presents of luxury inside the nicest hut in town.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

Naturally, the bunnies chose a leader, but they chose this leader because they were the most unique bunny on the island. It's name was Roby. The bunnies celebrated how unique and different looking this bunny was from them. They adored their special leader.

EXT: Francis' patio. Walter starts choking on some of the cookies offered on the table. Looking at Francis doubtfully, while wiping his mouth.

WALTER

Okay this clearly isn't a real story.

FRANCIS

This is the most real story I will ever tell you.

EXT: Francis' Patio. Francis takes a few long puffs from his pipe, appearing to take his time before continuing the story.

FRANCIS (CONT'D)

One day a Spanish conquistador arrived upon their shores...





CUT TO EXT: Island: DIEGO, a conquistador clad from head to toe in dull steel-plated armor. Filthy from travel with the appearance of a man unbathed for weeks. His beard, unkept, dripping with salt water and sand. The bunnies begin to gather around curiously in a semi-circle around Diego.

DIEGO

My name is Diego de Pizarro, I would like to speak with your leader.

EXT: The bunnies all look toward Roby at the top of his large boulder in the middle of the small island. ROBY, steps up proudly.

ROBY

My name is Roby. I represent our people. How can we help you?

EXT: Diego approaches Roby slowly, while staring at the small bunny on the little rock below him.

DIEGO

My name is Diego de Pizarro and I claim this island as my own.

EXT: Roby looks aghast in disbelief. His voice and posture begin to weaken in anger and fear.

ROBY

This is not YOUR island, this is OUR island, and we share it among each other. Please leave.

EXT: Diego grins at Roby mischievously displaying a set up brown and yellow rotten teeth. He reaches for the hilt of his Toledo sword and pulls it from a leather bound scabbard. Sword raised above his head, Diego strikes down cutting Roby's head clear from their body and into the crowd.

Roby's blood dripping down his blade, Diego pans across the crowd of bunnies and proclaims once more pointing his sword at each bunny.

DIEGO

My name is Diego de Pizarro and I claim this island as my own. Now bow to me.

INT: Francis takes a long drag from his pipe and rests it in his lap. He acknowledges Walter's confused gaze, who is longing for a punchline.

FRANCIS

You see, your race, your nose, how special you are like Roby. It doesn't matter if you are weak and defenseless. Are you a conquistador Walter, or a bunny?

For a split second out of the corner of his eye, Walter quickly sees a small fairy-like figure peek out of one of the huts on the patio interrupted by the sound of tires screeching and a 1960 Chevy Corvair jumping the curb into the grassy verge between the sidewalk and street. Walter's jaw drops and is suddenly filled with overwhelming fear. Gasping for air, Walter jumps to his feet and runs down the steps toward his father stuttering to explain himself.

WALTER

I'm... he's...

LEONARD angrily sprints toward Walter.

LEONARD

A Nazi? What the fuck is wrong with you?

Leonard quickly reaches out and slaps Walter in the face. A large cupped pop echoes out as his hand connects. Walter immediately blacks out and falls lifeless into the grass. Francis steps up toward the edge of the patio to observe the situation. Leonard points up at Francis angrily.

LEONARD (CONT'D)

If you ever talk to my son again, I'll have you locked up! Francis points at Walter disappointedly.

FRANCIS

The unconscious boy on the ground?

LEONARD (CONT'D)

Lenny begins to fumble with the limbs of his son's lifeless body while trying to pick him up.

LEONARD

Get up, get up. You're fine Walter, get up!

Walter slowly begins to regain consciousness while his father drags him back to the car. Neighbors begin to come out of their homes and gather to the commotion.

NEIGHBOR #1

Hey is that Lenny Leibowitz?

NEIGHBOR #2

The carpet store guy?

Francis' neighbor begins to approach from his house.

NEIGHBOR #1

Hey is that kid okay?

Leonard opens the back right car door and begins to push Walter into the back seat.

LEONARD

Get in the fucking car!

Leonard slams Walter's door shut and quickly moves back to the drivers seat looking towards the ground avoiding eye contact as if his rage was now replaced with shame. Leonard sits back in the car and peers out the window at the crowd of people glaring at him, whispering to each other in disgust. He accelerates the car, bumping off the sidewalk back into the street. Looking up into the rear view mirror he looks at a groggy Walter holding his face, coming to.

WALTER

I'm... I'm sorry.





LEONARD

(frantically)

Wally. Wally, you're gonna listen to me and you're gonna listen good. Those people. Those people are murderers.

Leonard grips the steering wheel firmly, adjusting his gaze between the mirror at Walter and the road ahead.

LEONARD (CONT'D)

They killed millions of us. Jews. Just like you and me. They gassed them and stuffed em' in ovens.

LEONARD (CONT'D)

World War 2 and Hitler. They're the bad guys. Do you understand?

Leonard now safely away from Francis' neighborhood pulls the car over to a full stop and turns fully around to look at Walter.

LEONARD (CONT'D)

We're the good guys. I'm the good guy. They're evil. Like the Axis of Evil.

Leonard turns back around, takes a deep breath in thought.

LEONARD (CONT'D)

How is that guy even alive? He should be locked up. I gotta call somebody.

Walter looks back out of the window towards Francis' house, spotting the old man staring back until he is completely out of sight.

CUT TO INT: Walter's school hallway. A long cold hallway filled with children in uniform. We see Walter's nose is bruised and now we also see that he has a black eye, presumably from his father. Walter walks down the hallway toward a small group of boys with his chin tucked, head dipped, eyes focused and angry with fists clenched. The boys are laughing when interrupted by Walter.

RANDOM CHILD #1

How's that big beak?

GEORGE

What do you want Christ killer?

Walter reaches back in a rage and punches George in the nose while yelling like he's snapped.

FADE OUT

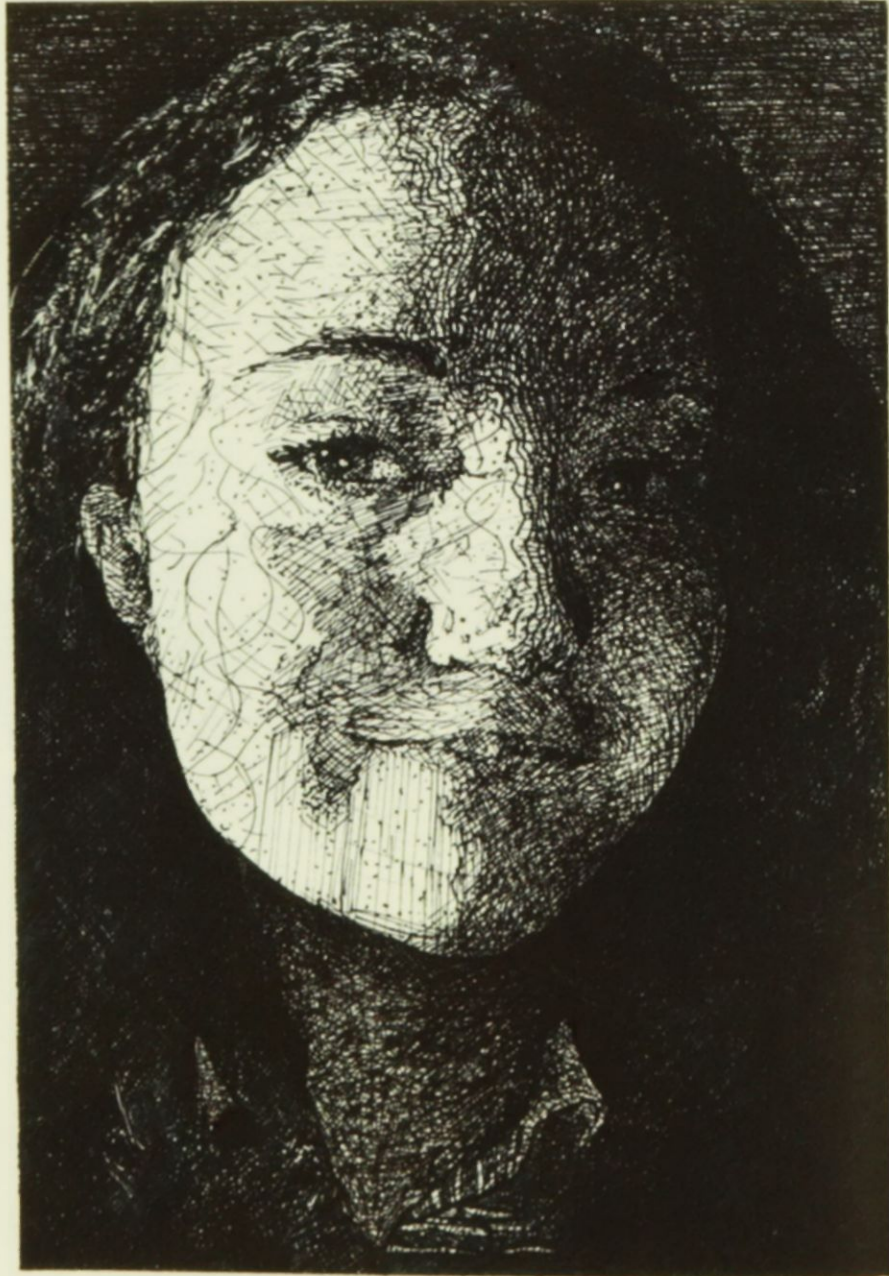
## Fine Art





*Drawing & Life Drawing*

*Expression*  
by Pearl Willis

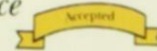


LINE

Pearl Willis  
9-6-22



*Sitting in Silence*  
by Micah Armas





# Drawing & Life Drawing

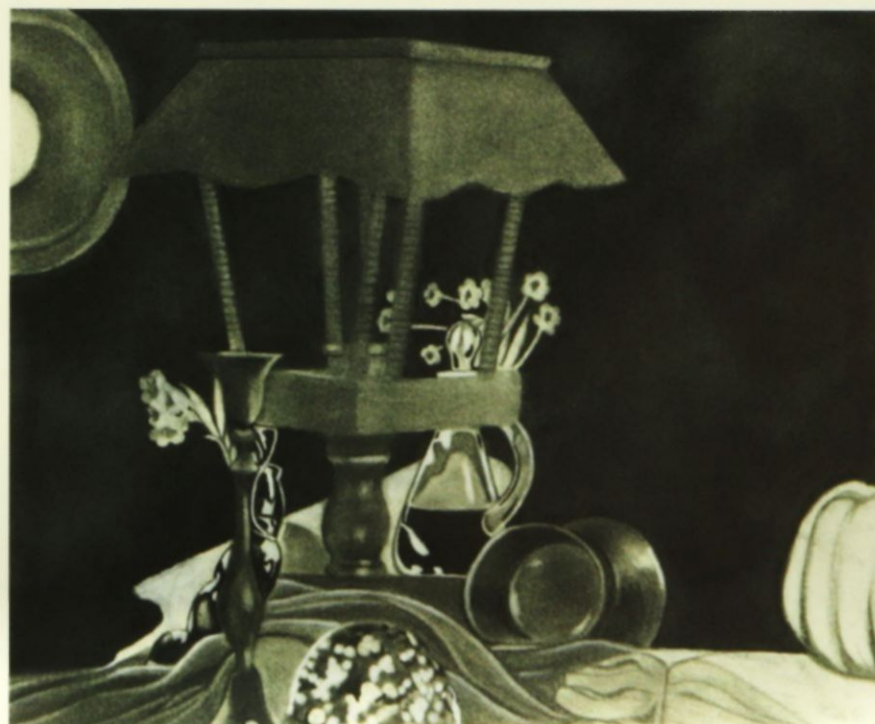
*Still Life*  
by Alondra Mora



*Alone at Sea*  
by Dang Le



*Still Life*  
by Adrian Delgadillo





*Objects of Interest*  
by Kristina Page



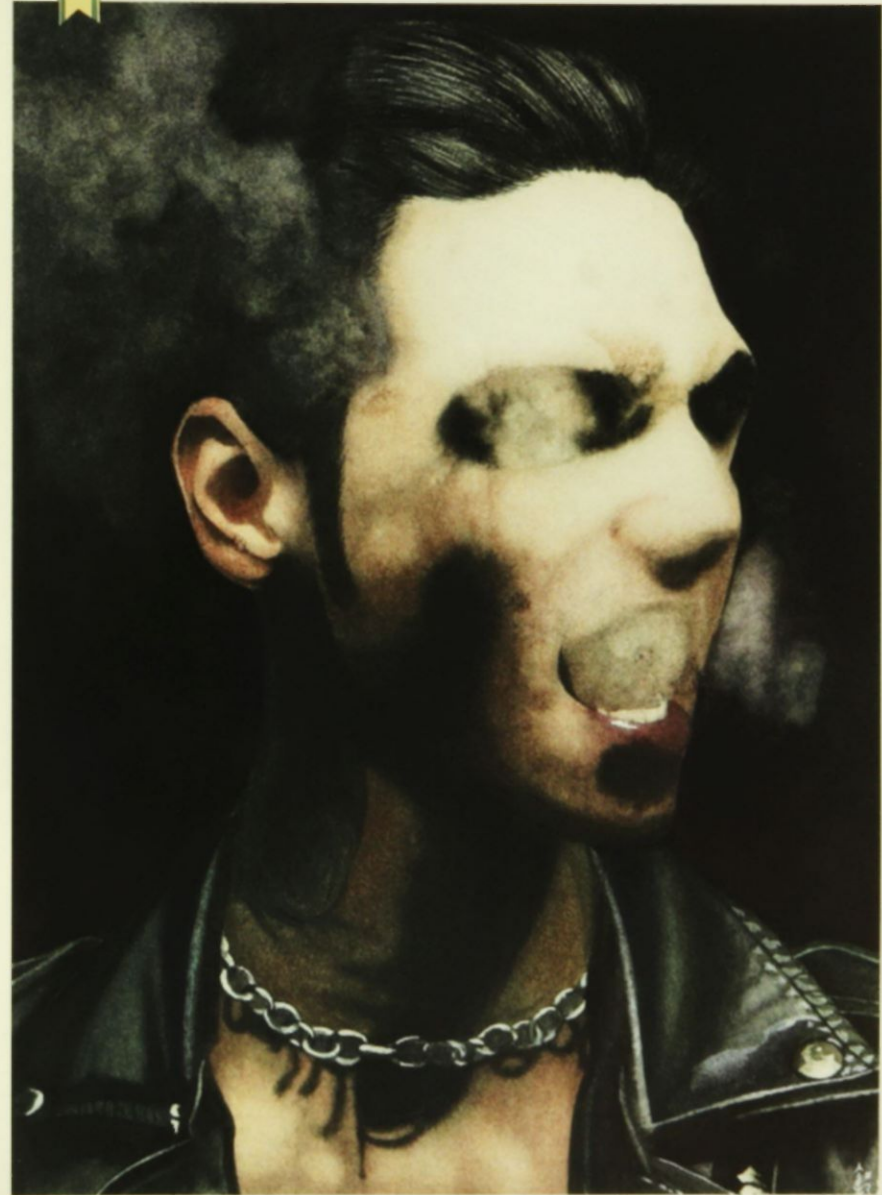
*Nightmare Fuel*  
by Alondra Mora



*Painting & Watercolor*



*Andy Biersack Portrait*  
by Alondra Mora





Painting & Watercolor



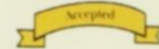
*Nothing Lasts Forever*  
by Alondra Mora



*Eureka Springs*  
by Michelle Diaz



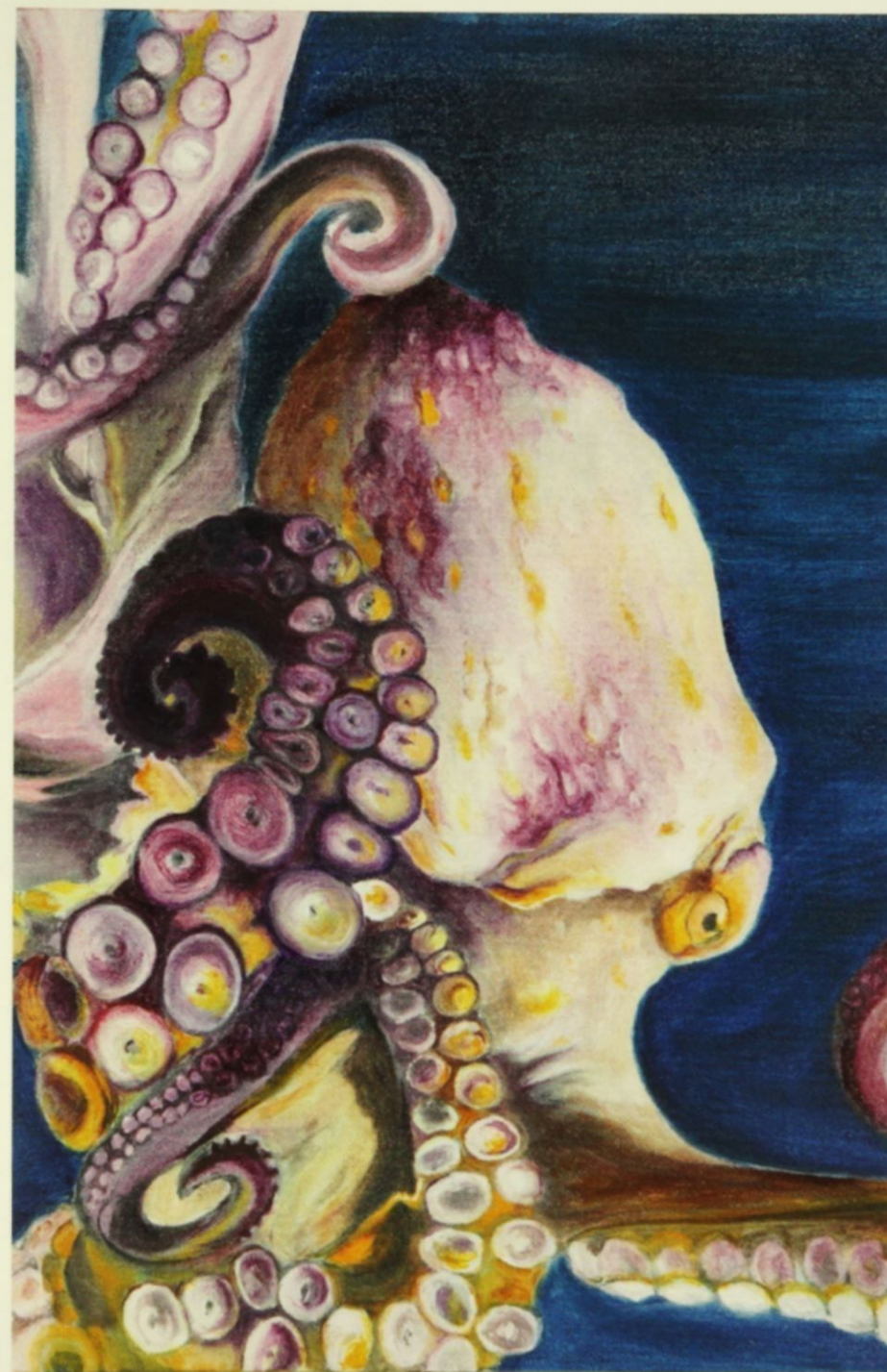
*Untitled*  
by Jazmine Liddiard





*Painting & Watercolor*

*Geronimo Lake*  
by Fial Richard



*Untitled*  
by Joy Li



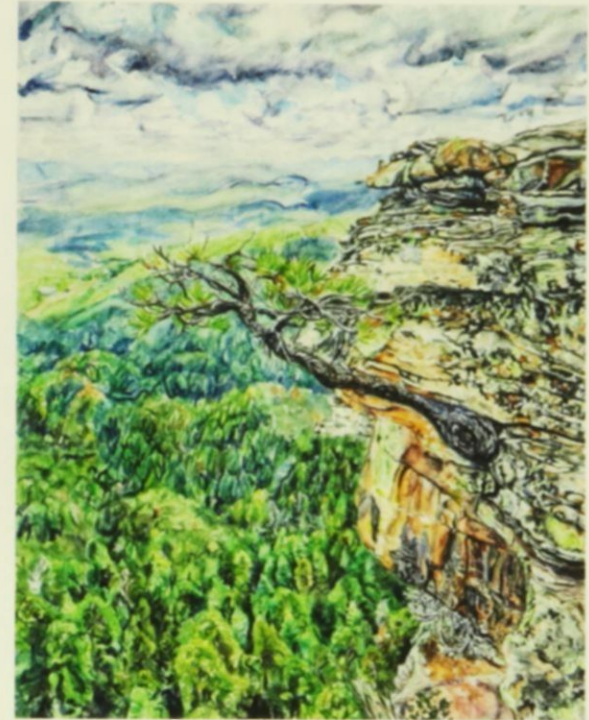


# Painting & Watercolor

*Feeling Blue*  
by Michelle Diaz



*Balance Rock*  
by Fiala Richard



*Pillars of Creation*  
by Joanne Crawford





*Ceramics, Sculpture, Assemblage & Relief*

*Spiders in my Head*  
by Laura Doyle



*Photography*

*Lady Kat IX*  
by Paul Dameron





# Photography

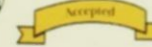
*Youth - Before the Storm*  
by Maombi Zanadi



*Man at the Bus Stop*  
by J. Paige Vargus



*Lost in the City*  
by Esain Pereda





# Photography

*Sunbathing Sanctuary*  
by Tari Fields

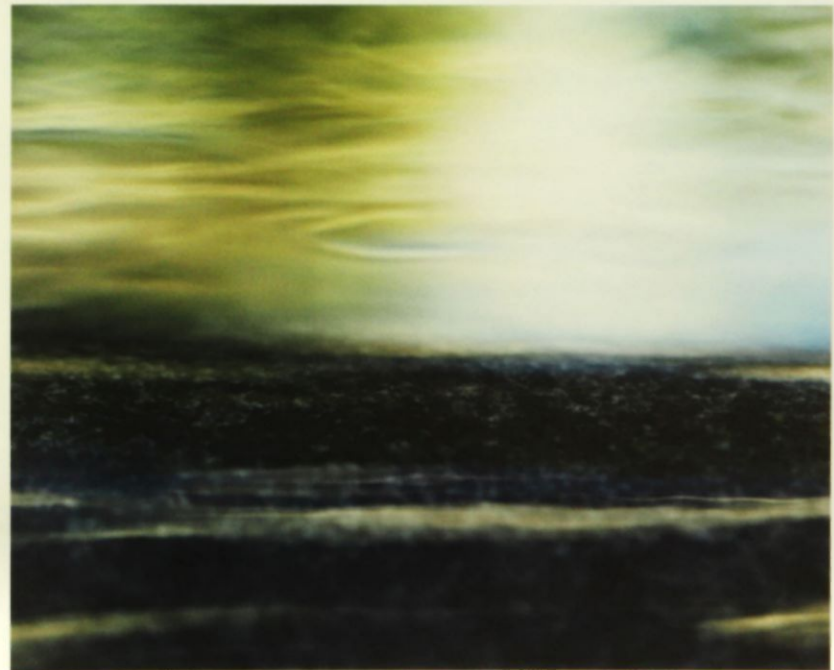


*Dystopian Couture*  
by Tari Fields

*Estes Park*  
by Sebastian Bueno



*Fountain*  
by Bonnie Doolittle





2D, Intermedia, Comics & Sequential Art



Family Portrait  
by Erin Shaeffer



Family Portrait

W/P

Erin Shaeffer 2022

Twilight  
by Leanne Kamben



Twilight

Leanne Kamben 2022





## 2D, Intermedia, Comics & Sequential Art

*I Don't Know Why*  
by Erin Shaeffer



*Heist at the Bar*  
by Carolina Ravelo



*A Perfect Day*  
by Leanne Kamben



*A Perfect Day* by Leanne Kamben





2D, Intermedia, Comics & Sequential Art



*Playroom*  
by Carolina Ravelo

*Poe's Study*  
by Cuinn Richard



*3D Skull*  
by Harold Knoer



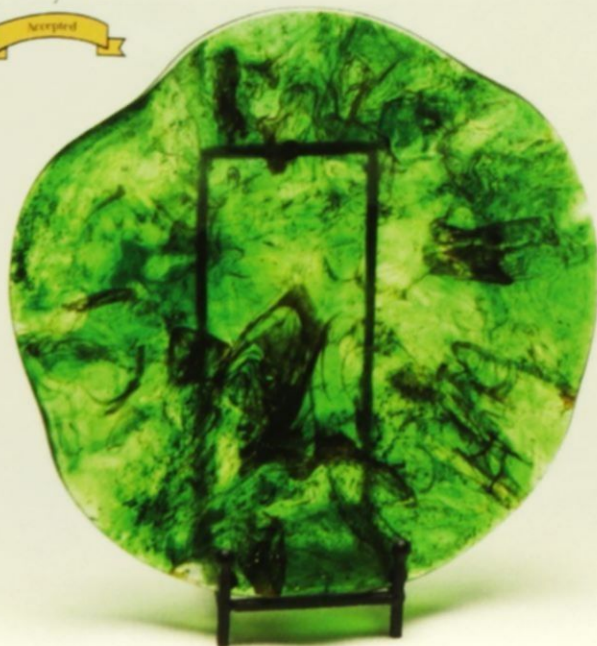


## Glass & Jewelry

*Abstract Peacock*  
by Harold Knoer



*Emerald*  
by Mary Worel



## Graphic Design



*Ghost at the Mirror*  
by Isabelle Morones





## Credits

### *Book Theme Design and Illustration*

Julianne Kyle Licas

### *Book Design Faculty Advisor*

Michelle Blomberg

### *Art Content Faculty Advisor*

Gaylen Stewart

### *Literary Content Faculty Advisor*

Jeff Baker

### *Student Art Jurors*

Nicole O'Bannon  
Jazmine Liddiard  
Fiala Richard

Anjali Vijayvergia  
Erin Shaeffer

### *Community Art Juror*

R.J. Merrill

### *Student Literary Jurors*

Patrick McCarthy  
Lilli Titus

Jessie Kurak  
Josh Washburn

### *Faculty Literary Jurors*

Mary Beth Beattie  
Justin Burns  
Jayme Cook  
Roxanna Dewey  
Donna Perrigo

Eric Luthi  
Chad Merrell  
David Nelson  
Ray Lira  
Lori Walk

### *Community Literary Reader*

Francis Wiget

### *Special Thanks*

Meg Ruff  
Brendan Regan

Ryan Kennedy  
Susan Campbell





