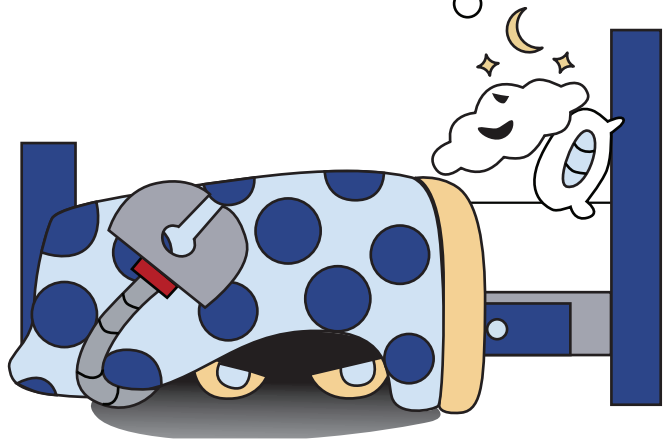
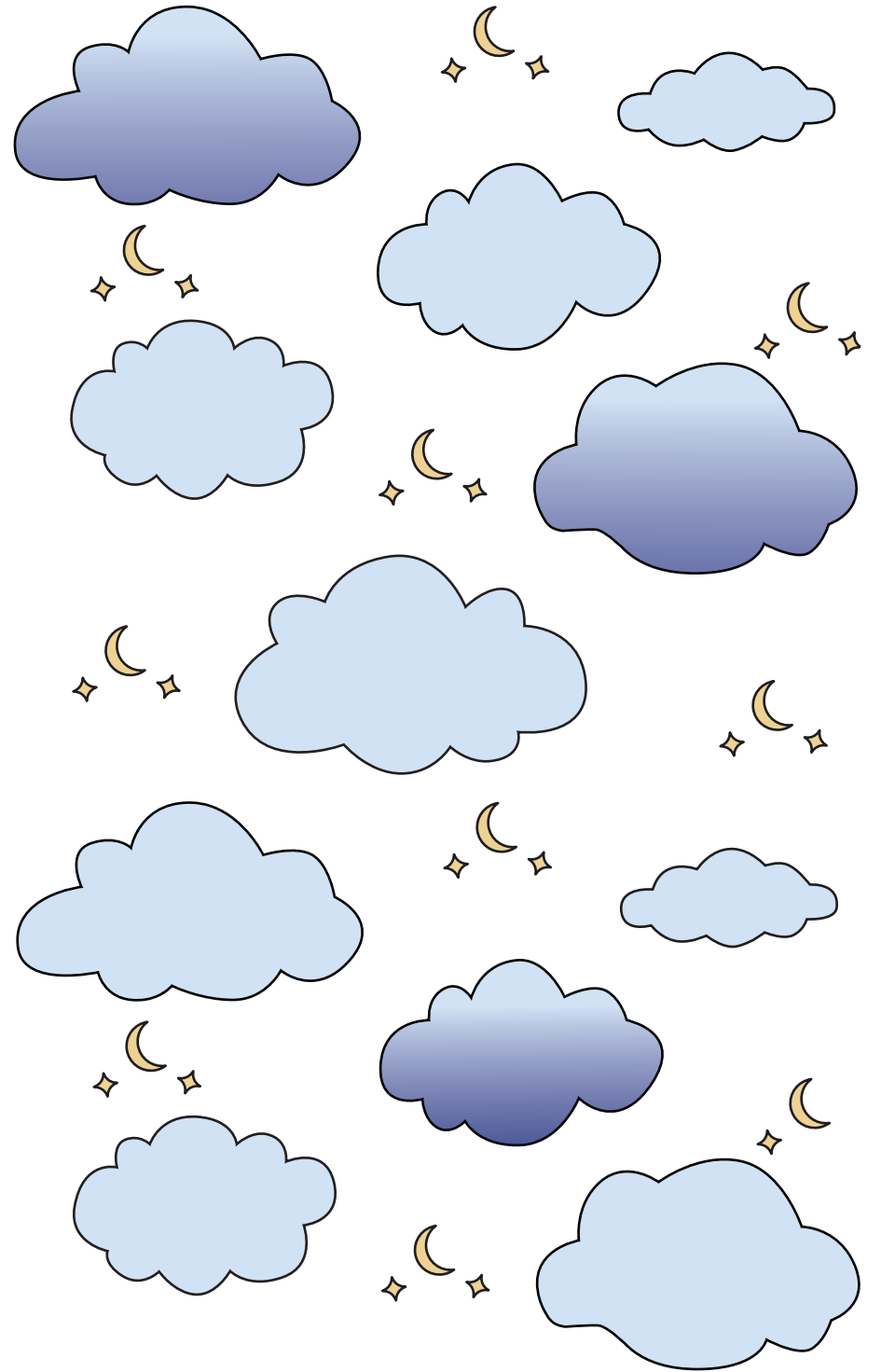


Traveler

Volume 56





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

Artificial intelligence continues to grow in popularity and usage, despite some being hesitant about it. Follow our character, Destin as they journey through dreams and you'll soon realize how easy it is for it to get out of hand. Each chapter represents a different AI inspired dream. We hope this journey inspires you to tread lightly in AI and follow your own dreams.

Congratulations to all of the students who were selected to have their work included in this creative publication by the past winners and advisors.



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Fiction






Forty-Two Children

By: Patrick McCarthy, 1st Place


Of all the superpowers people dream about, I end up with the ability to murder.

Somehow, I can kill with wishes, well, prayers. For some reason, God grants my kill requests.




My family is very religious. We go to church every Sunday, dressed in our best clothes, and look down on those that don't. We pray over meals, we pray before bed, we pray about everything. My mom says that all prayers are answered in time, just maybe not how we want them to be, but I have found that if I pray for a death, it happens quickly.


I first noticed it when I was in kindergarten. This boy--I don't even remember his name--took the dump truck I was playing with. I was so mad, I cried, then I wished him dead. Not out loud or anything, just in my head. At bedtime I prayed that he would die, and the next day he wasn't at school, or any day after. My mom told me later that week that the boy's family had been in a car accident, I don't think she said dead, but I knew he was.



I started experimenting after that, picking random people I would see at the grocery store or the library, someone that I came across multiple times so I could track my progress. I would select a target and then wish them dead, but that didn't do anything. Then I tried ordering them dead out loud in my room, but again no response. Finally, I would pray, just like my parents taught me. I would kneel by my bed, fold my hands, and pray for my target to die. It worked, and I have duplicated it multiple times.



I could not control how they died. I tried praying for specific details: a stabbing or a gunshot, but they died differently each time. I got to pick who, but not how. It was enough, and it was exciting, my own game, my own superpower. I kept a journal, a tally of kills, a record of failed attempts, and I kept it inside my Bible, added pages to my spiritual journey. I collected crosses, to set the mood, and my parents seemed to approve. My room became a sanctuary, my holy place, crosses adorning walls in scattered patterns. Any trip we took I found something, a plastic Jesus, or a bronze Celtic, I loved them all. If I wasn't in my temple I would sit on the porch and read the Bible. God's wrath was my comfort.



I consider myself a good person. Everything I do is based on my faith, so I am justified. I found early on the scripture that described my abilities, 2 Kings 2:23-24. It talks about Elisha being mocked by little children, and what does he do? He curses them, prays to God for punishment, and what

happens? Two bears come and kill forty-two children, because of a prayer. I'm like Elisha then, I'm basically a prophet.

I tried not to kill kids from my school because I didn't want people getting suspicious. I knew there could be repercussions if anyone found out. I limited my killings to only a few a year. Sometimes though, someone would really upset me, and I had no choice.

When I got to junior high, a couple of bullies liked to pick on me during class. They sat behind me and flicked my ear or whispered mean things. It happened all the time and I finally told them if they didn't knock it off, I would kill them. They laughed and continued their harassment until I couldn't take it anymore. I went home one night, got down on my knees, and prayed that one of the bullies would die. I specifically prayed that he would get a baseball bat to the head. He didn't, it ended up being a drowning at the river, but the other guy stopped picking on me after that. He never accused me of anything, but people started looking at me strangely.

Everyone talked, just not to me. I didn't care, I didn't need people. My parents started asking about my lifestyle, if I was on drugs, why didn't I show interest in sports, why was I always alone? I told them I was studying to be a priest, that I only had time for the Bible, and prayer. They liked the answer and used it to avoid me. I began to practice remote killing. Praying for people I had only seen on television or read about in the paper. It was harder, and sometimes it failed, but I kept at it. Her arrival changed everything.

Her name was Jackie Spencer. I remember when the moving truck pulled up across the street. The house had belonged to an older couple whose children had been grown for years. I guess they decided to leave. A couple of guys with uniforms that read Mike's Moving jumped out of the cab and raised the door on the back of the truck. They were setting up ramps and dollies when the blue minivan arrived. I was sitting on my porch, acting like I was reading, but I watched.

A man in jeans and a ball cap stepped out of the driver's door, a woman similarly dressed came from the passengers, Jackie sprang from the back, looking like any other kid, shorts and a t-shirt, with short brown hair. She took in her new house, looked up and down the street, craned her neck towards the sky. Her dad spoke with the moving men and hurried to unlock the doors.

Jackie saw me perched on my chair and skipped over, giving me a huge smile.

"Hi, I'm Jackie."



“Heh.”

“What’s your name?”

“Oh, I’m Ted.”

“Do you go to Shadow Brook?”


“Yeah, I’m a junior.”

“Me too. I start there on Monday. We just moved from Chicago.”

I looked at her blankly.

“Alright,” she flashed her smile again, “I’ll see you on Monday.” She winked and skipped back to her mother’s side.

I continued to watch.



Jackie was an instant sensation at school, she was friends with everyone. She participated in all sorts of clubs and was always smiling. Girls liked her, guys liked her, I liked her.

We became close. She would walk with me down the hallways, sit with me at lunch, and hang out on my porch after school. We talked about Chicago, about her family. She told me about the clubs she joined, all the new people she met. She once said that she thought her superpower was making friends.

I showed her my room once. She frowned at all my crosses. She left quickly and I haven’t asked her back. Her room had plush and unicorns.

I still spent most of my time at home, but I stopped experimenting with my powers. I didn’t feel like killing anyone when she was around.

Jackie and I would sit on my porch and talk. Our knees bumped, occasionally she swatted at my arm when I made a joke. It felt right so I asked if she would go to prom with me.

“Ted,” it was the first time she did not smile, “I already have a date. I didn’t think you liked dances.”

“I don’t, I mean I just thought, maybe— “

“You should come with us,” her smile returned. “I’ll find you a date. We’ll go double.”

“No, I was just thinking--” it was a stupid idea. “Who are you going with?”

“Allen asked me, but you should come with us.”

I mumbled some more. My eyes were starting to burn. I made some excuse and went to my room. I didn’t have a problem with Allen, but for the first time in a long time, I thought about praying for someone’s death. I debated in my head, but I decided against it. I didn’t want to hurt Jackie.

It was the following Thursday; he was at basketball practice; something about his heart. Jackie was devastated.

It wasn’t me though. I never prayed for Allen’s death. I thought about it, but I didn’t.

This was purely an accident, or fate. I have considered it many times, but I’m sure I didn’t do it. I care too much for Jackie.

Jackie cried a lot. She had never known anyone who had died. I read scripture to her. I think I helped.

We would sit on my porch, or in her room and she would put her head in my lap, and I would read. This was our new relationship, I was ready for this, practiced all my life for these moments. She started to smile again, slowly.

And then she started dating, other guys, not me, but it was ok, she seemed happy again.

That’s all I ever really wanted, was for her to be happy. I was always there for her, to hear about her good times and her bad. We were best friends.

It was a Saturday night. I was in my room reading. I had a lamp at my bedside, otherwise the room was dark. It was storming outside, and she was drenched when she tapped on my window. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she had alcohol on her breath, but it was the tears struck me.

She crawled through my window and crumpled in my arms, her body heaving with sobs. I held her, brushed her forehead, stroked her back.

Her sadness turned into anger.

“Assholes,” she ground her teeth, “I hate them.”

“Are you ok?” we sat on my bed.

“I thought we were getting serious. Then he dumps me for that bitch.”

I listened.

“Evan and Melissa. Right there at the party. They didn’t even wait till a left to start kissing.”

“I’m sorry,” I rubbed her hand. “What are you going to do?”

“I want to kill them,” her face pinched in anger.

“We can. If you want.”

I left Jackie sitting on my bed as I kneeled on the floor.

“What are you doing?” her tears stopped.

“I’m going to pray,” I said.

She looked confused, tired, pathetic, but she joined me on the ground. She slouched at my side. My voice was strong--my true self was back--my powerful self.

I didn’t say much. I didn’t have to. I closed my eyes and prayed that Evan and Melissa would die. I prayed out loud. It only took a few seconds and when I opened my eyes, Jackie had the same pained expression as when I started. I helped her take off her wet clothes and we laid under the warm blankets.



She got up and left early the next morning. She didn't say a word, just crawled back out the window. I didn't see her for a couple of days. It wasn't until news of Evan's and Melissa's accident hit the paper that she came to see me. She came to my porch, where I sat reading the Bible.

"Did you hear?" She seemed distant.

"They hurt you," I knew what she meant.

"They said he was drunk, swerved into traffic."

"That's what I heard."

"Did you kill them?"

"Yes."

"You're scaring me." She shifted slightly.

"They deserved it."

"I don't understand."

I hold up my Bible. "My superpower is murder."

"Did you kill Allen?"

"I don't think so."

A sadness showed on her face, a mixture of loss and revulsion. "Ted, I never want to see you again."

Two more crosses added to my wall--forty-two in all.

If I could pick one power, it would be to make Jackie love me. It is the only power I have ever cared to have. Superheroes do miraculous things with the gifts they are given, they save people. I started to cry when Jackie left, but my tears became prayers.



The Confusing First Time

By: Lucas Price, 2nd Place

Carrie Watson was sweeping the halls of her building for the Infinite Frontiers Foundation (I.F.F), located in Holdrege, Nebraska, as other people were starting to pack for the weekend. Lucy Mars, still in her space suit minus the helmet, approached Carrie. Lucy was a bit bulkier and a head taller than Carrie.

"Hey," she called, "I'm a bit more tapped out than usual today, so I'll be heading out early. You'll probably be the last one out, so how would you feel about taking my keys?"

"Me?" Carrie said she caught the keychain. "I-I'm flattered to have gained your trust, Commander. For the whole weekend, though?"

"If you can hold on to a recent meal after a classic gimbal rig," Commander Lucy chuckled, "you can hold on to some keys, am I right?" She put a hand on Carrie's shoulder. "Seriously, you're like a robot for how much energy you still possess after multiple physical tests. It's part of why we see so much promise in you." She walked off behind her and waved with the back of her hand. "See you on Monday!"

That night, after most of the lights had been turned off, Carrie reached a hall with a dead end, midway through which stood the hatch-like door labeled "Warp Testing & Training." Nobody was outright prohibited from entering this room, but few people had access to it or were invited inside. The lock took the form of a card scanner. Carrie thumbed her way through the set of keys and punctured cards she now had until she found one that said, "Warp Room" and slid it down the lock, opening the door.

The large, square room featured a two-to-three story high ceiling and began with a ring along the walls that served as the upper floor, and stairways splayed throughout it led to the same lower floor about half a story below. A lone trashcan stood against a wall of the upper floor while the lower floor nested various gadgets and machines with just enough space left between which to walk around in. Carrie eyed each object while sweeping the upper floor.

"Hmm, the shuttle-like pods may be for motion endurance testing, and the capsules are probably where actual warping happens. But what are those chairs?"

Said chairs, which were grouped in fours around a lumpy, wiry device, were large and wrapped from behind by helmet-like hoods. Cables connected them from behind to that central device, appearing to transport faint sparks through like nutrients across a bloodstream. By each grouping, a small prop-



up table held an abnormally large syringe. None of them contained fluids, nor were any fluid containers to be seen.

Once all the dust on the floor was gathered to a pile, Carrie pushed that into the dustpan and carried it to the trashcan. When she dumped it inside, a flash went off, and the pile appeared at a nearby corner of the room.

“Ah.” She laughed. “A cute demonstration. I wonder what the other things here have in store...” She set her broom against the wall by the trashcan and entered the lower floor, her first pick being one of the chairs. After scooting inside it, she examined the buttons of assorted colors, which were separated into groups by labeled, rounded boxes, on each of its arms. A lever labeled “Adjust Angle” dwelled beneath one arm. Above her hung a helmet, and at her sides sat a pair of seatbelts.

Within the box “Helmet,” Carrie pressed an orange button with a down arrow, but nothing happened. She then pushed a green button under “Activation” that had the power symbol, to which a deep whir started. Upon a press of the previous button, the helmet sunk onto her head and brought a visor over her eyes. She fastened the seatbelts and reached an arm over to a pink button under “Warping” that showcased five white dots surrounding a larger, oval-like dot in the center.

White streaks in the air began to continuously fade into sight in front of Carrie, slithering on behind the chair. Then a faint pink light appeared above the center device, soon bursting into a rapid tunnel engulfing the chair. The white streaks now sped past Carrie, who felt no force of motion but an increasingly airy head and a compressing body. Images of moments she remembered flew by as well as those she did not and those that excluded her outright. As she felt her body about to collapse and her head about to pop off, the tunnel slipped out of sight faster than it came, and the tension steamed out of her until she felt normal again.

Carrie pushed the orange up arrow under “Helmet” to remove the helmet, pressed the red power button to shut the machine down, unbuckled her seatbelts, and eased herself out of the chair, feeling slightly light-headed as she stood up. The broom, dustpan, and dust pile were absent from the upper floor. Carrie looked around and saw them nowhere in the room. She approached the door, cautious of what may lurk beyond, and slipped the card through the lock; thankfully for her, it still worked. Wondering through the dark and (proudly) particle-free halls, she found the broom and dustpan in the janitorial closet she took them from, but the dust itself remained a mystery.

After she locked up the place and left, the outside world appeared no different, though a pink eye-looking spot in the twilight clouds struck



her as interesting. The sun was at the west horizon, but on her way home Carrie noticed it was rising rather than setting. She checked her auto-adjusting phone for the time: “Saturday, 6:13 A.M.” Once home, she saw the other clocks matched the phone’s time, which now read, “6:39 A.M.,” but otherwise the house was largely the same. The alarm in her bedroom was going off at a slightly different key than usual before she turned it off. Strangely, she did not feel tired enough to go to bed; in fact, she felt full of energy, as if she just woke up. The newspaper and television programs seemed nothing out of the ordinary.

So far, it was just the dust, the cleaning supplies, the sun, the time, and the alarm that were different. Carrie decided to dial the number of a colleague for extra checking. After half a minute, he picked up.

“Hello. Barney Parker speaking.”

“Hi. This is Carrie Watson. From I.F.F.? Do you happen to remember what happened last night? What’s the time for you?”

“Yeah, you were sweeping, and I left with some of the Tesla division. It’s 6:42 now.”

It was called a crew before. “Okay, thanks. My mind just feels a little scrambled right now.”

“Well, let’s hope you’re not infected.”

Infected? “Yeah. Let’s hope not. So, what are you doing right now?”

“Well, I gear up some warm-up exercises before engaging in the real stuff at seven—of course, not before having a complete breakfast. You?”

“Oh, I just relax, stretch a little, and prepare my mind for the day.” Hey, maybe I can see if he looks any different. “You wanna meet someplace later?”

“Sure. How about at ten we go to the beach?”

A beach? In the middle of the country? “Alright. What beach, exactly?”

“Um, the one by Javelin Avenue. I’m sure you can figure it out from there. See ya; gotta do more workin’ out.”

“Bye, then.”

Once the call ended, Carrie swung her arm down. “Ugh,” she snickered, “he probably thinks I’m crushing on him now or something.”

She never heard of Javelin Avenue, but it turned out to be just a few miles south of her home. When she arrived around the specified time, there stood Barney waving at her before a descending set of wooden steps that indeed led to a beach; the round walls surrounding the water looked just like the extended ocean and sky, its features even providing realistic movement. A closer look showed a wide, gruesome scar over Barney’s eye. Carrie did not see herself wincing.

“Ah, this still gets to you?” Barney stroked two fingers across the scar



while turning away pensively. “It brings back the time I fell into those open cables while fending off some particularly aggressive viral animals at our work, huh?”

Carrie cupped both hands before herself. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not a problem at all! Anyhow, why don’t we get to what we came here for? Race you to the water!”

Barney started down the stairs. Carrie stood for a moment then shrugged and followed him. The water felt fresh and cool as ever. At one point, though, a person bumped into the walls, which let out a ripple. She swam up to another spot on the wall, and a touch by her fingertips brought out another ripple and a tiny, painful zap.

Barney appeared from behind her. “This hydroelectric parchment-like stuff is pretty neat, huh? Some dams even use this material. Gives you a little buzz when you touch it, though, as you might’ve just learned.”

She dared not to touch it again for fear of something worse happening, like going unconscious. “Yeah. I got that.”

“You seem a bit worn out. How about we take to the sand and relax?”

“M-hm,” Carrie nodded, and Barney began heading toward the shore.

Maybe she was finally starting to feel tired and did not notice it. After catching up with him, she identified a familiar figure lying on a beach mat, in sunglasses, below an umbrella, reading a magazine. Carrie approached her. “Mrs. Mars, is that you?”

Commander Mars flicked the shades above her eyes and grinned at who she saw. “Well, fancy seeing you here, Carrie!”

“You tell me,” Carrie said, drops of water falling from her hair beside the mat. “What are you up to this weekend, if you don’t mind the question?”

“Oh, simply chilling with my partner; maybe watching a film or a few—that sort of thing. Hey,” she whispered, “want to hear a secret between you and me?” She beckoned with her finger, and Carrie stooped lower to listen. “I don’t think you’re from here.”

“Pardon me?”

“I mean I believe you’re from another world—a parallel dimension, to be specific. Our Carrie is a bit rougher in demeanor and was probably swapped into your world at whatever spot she was at the time. Were you sweeping I.F.F., had my keys, and used one of the machines in the warp room?”

“Yes.” Carrie turned away, feeling a bit embarrassed.

“Now, do you have mutated animals in your world which come to invade the I.F.F. building about every Saturday noon?”

Carrie shook her head and mildly laughed in nervousness about where this was going, “No.”



“Then, you’d better get back to your own world because these things are tough, and the whole crew needs to be prepared to defend the work building. You have any combat training?”

“I possess good endurance and stamina, but no.”

“Well—” Mars looked at her watch. “—it’s 10:46 right now, so you won’t have much time for even light training. Take Barney with you so you won’t get hurt by any early birds.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” Carrie ran up to Barney, who was laying out mats for the two of them. “Hey Barney, you may have been wondering why I’ve been acting a little weird today, right?”

“Uh—” He froze and stiffened. “—y-yeah, to be honest.”

“Well, I’m not the same Carrie you know. It seems your Carrie and I have swapped dimensions. See, my Commander Mars gave me the keys as she turned in early and I was sweeping the whole place, and eventually…”

“And you went into that warp room, didn’t you? And one of the machines there swapped the two of you out?”

“Swapped, or we just happened to go off at the same time; I dunno.”

“Same difference, really. Do you have mutant, hostile creatures there?”

“No, and I am not trained in combat, either. Say, wouldn’t these leisure activities,” she pointed her hand around the beach, “inhibit your performances so close before the time comes?”

“Oh, it actually gets our minds right in gear before the storm,” he explained. “Guess it works differently where you come from.”

“Sort of depends on the situation, I suppose. Now, we should get moving; the sooner, the better.”

Barney repacked his supplies and into his car, and Carrie hopped into her own car.

“Er, the building is still at 49th Street, right.”

“Yeah. Best to follow behind me, though, in case our directions are different.”

“Right.”

Once at the I.F.F. station, Barney started equipping the combat gear he kept in his trunk. The time on Carrie’s phone was now 11:27. No creatures have yet appeared.

“Now, remember,” Barney said as he clicked the belt of his large, electric gun around his chest, “just because we don’t see ‘em out here doesn’t mean there aren’t any inside; some can squeeze through windows.”

“Yikes! What else can they do?”

“Throw you; peck you; slash you; infect you—it varies from creature to creature, as does the size and overall threat level. Just stick behind me, and



you can alert me when you see something behind us. Still got the keys?"

"Of course." Carrie pulled them from her pocket and opened the front entrance, which lay as empty as it did before.

The two took their time traversing the halls with quiet steps when Carrie spoke up in a whisper, "You know where the warp room is, right?"

"Vaguely, but I could never quite recall the directions to get there since that wasn't important for me."

"At the end of this hallway, you take a right, an immediate left, straight down all the way, then a right, take the stairs, pass the first intersection there, then a right. You'll know the door when you see it down there."

"I'll do my best to remember all that, but you can correct me if I ever take a wrong turn. A creature may still surprise us."

Carrie nodded, and they continued through empty hall through empty hall. The stairway featured what resembled a large fly with smaller eyes, a more hourglass-like figure, and twiggy arms and legs hanging at the corner of the ceiling.

"Don't worry," Barney assured. "They're harmless." As they approached, the thing flew away. They passed the first intersection, as instructed, and stopped at the hall they were looking for, where the fly had flown and at the end of which a green crustaceous-looking creature large enough to touch both walls sat grooming itself with its puffin-like beak.

"How many of the creatures you deal with look like hybrids."

Barney shrugged. "This cruffin isn't too bad to handle, fortunately. If we just take it slow and steady, we may not even provoke it at all."

They tiptoed down the hall, and the fly crawled to the middle by the warp room door. When they reached that door of "Warp Testing & Training," the fly spontaneously panicked and buzzed toward the "cruffin," who shooed it away before faced Carrie and Barney. It then crouched as if preparing to pounce.

"What's it doing?" Carrie asked as she took out the keys.

"Nothing much. Just get in there and do what you need to do." Just then, it began to charge. "Our Carrie can take these on with her bare hands."

"I'll keep the door open for you to get in." She slipped the card through and opened the door. "Those things can't fit through here, can they?"

"Nope I suppose not." They hurried in, and the cruffin prevented the door's closure by poking its beak inside.

Carrie turned to the room itself but spotted, high in a distant corner, a cloaked humanoid figure facing that corner. It floated without legs and glowed in a purple aura. She tapped Barney's shoulder and pointed up to it.

"Oh, those are a relative newcomer; we're still figuring out where they came from and how to manage them. What we know is they seem to be deaf,



so go ahead and do your thing. You should probably do it quickly, though, as their threat level swings across a range between totally docile and incredibly violent."

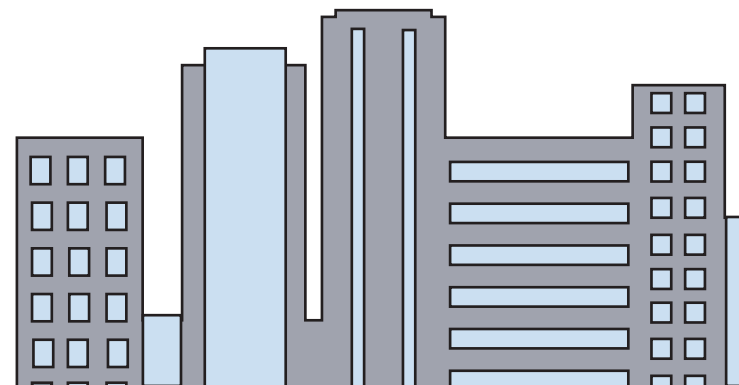
By the time Barney finished, Carrie was already stepping into the lower floor. She pressed herself into the chair, tapped all the buttons she did before, snapped on her seatbelts, and watched the white streaks and the pink orb appear. As that happened, Barney shouted, "It's coming for you!" his voice being somewhat muffled by the phenomena surrounding Carrie, just as soon the chair's hood quaked, creature's bony, long-nailed fingers of gray curling into sight from the top. Just as it was rearing its ash-colored face, the explosive tunnel blew it off the hood.

The sense of a forward motion commenced as usual before reversing, the white streaks going forward and the pictures seeming to show some of the other Carrie's memories while still following the streaks' new direction. Soon, the tunnel shrank into the top of the central wired device, and Carrie slid off the chair to look around. The broom and dustpan were absent, but the pile had returned. She jogged out the still open door to see Mrs. Mars at the end of the hall, sweeping with the broom and dustpan. Mars heard Carrie's footsteps and turned.

"So, you warped, huh?"

"I believe so, Commander. I apologize."

"Live and learn. You know, hearing that Carrie call me as I was preparing for bed, telling and showing me she was at her home, was strange at first. She had a hardness to her, though, which I liked, but she wouldn't have fit in like you have. Just be glad your story didn't end up much worse."







Hold the Anchovies, Please

by Olin Reams, 3rd Place

Timothy Oldfellow sat in his kitchen, drank his morning coffee, and had a quick read of the paper to start his day. As he sat, he contemplated his past, present, and future. One question he had for himself was when exactly did his surname transition from a family name to a descriptor?



Today was not a day he was looking forward to. After living in his home for 46 years, he and Valerie raised their two kids, Scott and Bree. For the last four years, he had lived there alone; his wife passed away so early. It hurt him to still think of her being gone. Scott had moved to California, a coast away, for some high-powered tech job. Bree stayed in town; she was a manager local furniture manufacturing company. On occasion, he could expect her to stop by and say hello, or even stay long enough to have a coffee and reminisce.



This Saturday's visit was going to be much different from previous visits. She was coming to lend a hand at getting ready to sell his stuff. Yes, 46 years of accumulated stuff. Oh, not all of it was accumulated by him. But it fell on him to get rid of it. The house was a bit much for Tim to handle, so he was moving into one of those 55-plus apartment communities. Bree had helped organize and promote the sale, and today she was going to help with the staging. She told Tim, they would need both Saturday and Sunday to sell all the stuff. As luck would have it, she had one of those quarterly business reviews today, so she could only help with setup. On Sunday, she promised she would be on yard sale duty all day. As Tim picked up his coffee cup for another sip, he heard a knock on his back door.




Tim turned around; he saw Bree. "Come in, come in. It is cold today. Let me get you a cup of coffee."

"Never mind, Dad. I will get my own. I want to make sure the milk hasn't turned into yogurt yet."

Bree was wearing an old pair of faded jeans and a T-shirt two sizes too big, and her rich auburn hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail. She had in her arms a dry cleaning bag and a backpack. "Dad, I am going to put these in my old room; after I help you, I need to change for work."

"Go right ahead. I am sure you remember where your room is."



Putting her clothes in the closet, she walked back into the kitchen. "Sorry, no rest for the weary. Let's get you set up to sell before I have to get ready. Meet you in the garage."

Due to Bree's exceptional organization, the staging was easy. Most of the big items were sitting in the garage, and several folding tables were in the

drive. Everything was already priced and labeled. "Dad, here is your cash box to make change. I placed two folding chairs in a good spot for you. I asked Mavis and Jose to check on you during the day. Mavis will be here as soon as she can this morning."

"I don't need no one checking on me."

"Dad, you can't sit out here all day and not get a bathroom break. They are coming to help, and that is the last word. Look, you are open for business now. I am going to change. Good luck, remember Saturday is the busiest day. Sell what you can, let it go cheap, and don't argue with the customers."

"I know that. Do you think your mom would have married a dummy?"

"I am going to plead the fifth on that." She kissed him on the forehead, "Good luck; soon as my QBR is over, I will come by to help you close up. If you are nice, I will bring us a pizza."

"Pizza sounds good. No anchovies, please."

"Who puts anchovies on pizza anymore, Dad? You are living in the past. Oh, Dad, I almost forgot, today your number one priority is to get rid of your canoe. That thing is huge, and I know you haven't used it in like 30 years. Regrettably, where you are going, there is no place for that monstrosity. It is like 15 feet long."

"It is 16 feet. You do remember that Scott and I built the cedar canoe in our backyard as a scouting project? Scott earned a merit badge for canoeing because of our project. Do you have any idea how many hours your brother and I put into that canoe?"

"Look, Dad, I checked with Scott, and he doesn't want it. It has to go!"

"Looks like I get to trade my hand-built cedar canoe for a pine box. Sounds like a bad deal to me."

"If it is still here when I come back tonight, you won't need a pine box. I will give you a Viking funeral, and I will be shooting the flaming arrow. Capeesh!"

"Capeesh. Remember, no anchovies."

"Got it."

Tim brushed off the folding chair; he did not want it to appear as if he sat in a sack of flour. He sat down as the first customer of the day, walked up the drive. She spotted the bisque-colored vase he had on one of the display tables. She picked it up and closely examined it. Looking up over her reading glasses, she queried loudly. "How much for the vase?"

"If you look at the base, you will see a price tag; it is clearly marked."

"I saw the price but thought it was a mistake since there is a chip on the base. I would consider buying it for half of that."

"Well, hunky-dory for you, I would never consider selling it for less than



marked.”

She curtly put the vase down and rushed back to her car.

Tim saw his next-door neighbor, a smiling Mavis, approach him, cutting across the strip of lawn that separated their homes. “Tim, good morning. How is business so far?”

“I’m open for business, but it is slow. Would you like a cup of hot coffee? There is a fresh pot in the kitchen; the milk in the fridge is good. Bree checked it this morning. The door is unlocked.”

“I trust Bree, I can’t say I trust your judgment. More times than I would care to count, your milk is curdled.”

Five minutes later, Mavis exited the house, her hands cupping a steaming mug. “Thanks for the coffee. I skipped my caffeine fix this morning. Needed to rush over here and see how things were going. Any big spenders come by yet?”

“Only one customer so far, nobody serious. Just someone who wanted something for nothing. Thanks for stopping by. I need the moral support. Look at this idiot driving up in the BMW convertible?” Tim said. “The fool is driving with his top down. Why is it not even 50 degrees this morning.”

The Beamer’s driver parked at the foot of the driveway and strolled up to the folding table display area. He quickly scanned the items on display. Occasionally, he picked something up for a closer look.

Mavis walked over to see if she could be of assistance.

Tim called out from his chair. “Hey, mister, is your Bimmer broke?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Well, it is damn cold, and you are driving with your top down. Any colder, and you would get yourself frostbite.”

“I like driving with the top down; it keeps me alert.”

“Jeez, do you know what the letters B M W stand for?”

“Sure, Bavarian Motor Works!”

“In this neighborhood, they stand for Big Mouthed Weenie.”

The man looked up and glowered for a second in Tim’s direction; he then turned and made his way back to his car.

Tim, turning towards Mavis, remarked, “Guess he was just window shopping.”

Mavis responded, “I swear you embarrass me at times. How come we are friends? You can be such an ass.”

“I am guessing because of my social graces?”

“Tim, I need to pick up my husband. He dropped his car off at the garage this morning. Don’t get yourself a bloody nose while I am gone. There will be no one around to stop the bleeding or call the paramedics.”



“I will do my best, but no promises,” as Tim waved bye.

Mavis had just left when a group of potential buyers arrived and started browsing the sale tables. After a few minutes of browsing, one young man in a tie-dyed shirt separated from the group, and approached Tim. “Excuse me, I was looking at the items you have for sale, and I do not see any electronics. Do you have any electronics for sale?”

Tim responded irritably, “You have me confused with Best Buy. You can see for yourself I am not wearing one of those nifty blue polo shirts.” Tim emphatically waved his hands over the display tables. “By the way, tie-dyed T-shirts went out in the 70s. Where did you find the one you are wearing? A yard sale.”

The group stopped browsing in unison and hastily left. Tim could have sworn he heard them whisper, asshole.

Next up was a beat-up U-Haul truck, black graffiti script on the side proclaimed Rose’s Thrift Shop.

A tall lady with short brown hair and sunglasses exited the passenger side of the truck. Tim assumed that her name would be Rose. She strolled over to one of the two lazy boy recliners Tim had on display. “Hey, are you in charge here? Got any furniture to sell?”

“What does that look like — garden tools? That is my entire living room out here for sale.”

“This stuff is junk!”

“Just wait a minute. I will call my country club buddy — Richard Branson, and see if he has any furniture he would like to sell on the cheap.”

“No need to bother Mr. Branson today. I would like to buy your faded sofa, both lazy boys, the coffee table, the two end tables, and your floor lamp. Normally, I would say one hundred, but I am going to offer one fifty — I will have my boys pick it up now. It will be out of your hair.”

“Thanks, but I don’t have any hair for it to be removed from.”

As the truck turned and roared away, Tim did not hear Jose walk up.

“Hello, Tim. Bree asked me to stop by this afternoon and see how you were doing.”

“Not too bad; it has been a long day. I am still one hundred dollars short of a hundred dollars.”

Jose, held his back with both of his hands, said, “Bree is going to have your hide. Haven’t you got rid of anything?”

“I got rid of a few customers, but I guess you are telling me that doesn’t count. What is wrong with your back? Is it bothering you?”

Jose grimaced as he arched his spine again, “Man, my back is killing me.”

“You should do what I do: take two fingers of bourbon in a water glass



before bedtime; I guarantee you will wake up either feeling better or worse. It never fails me.”

“Tim, that sounds like old man medicine to me.”

“Jose, that kind of sounds almost like ageism to me,” replied Tim in a prankish manner.

“You can call it ageism if you want. I think it is bogus medicine.” Jose glanced under one of the tables at a box stuffed with comics, “You’re selling your collection of comic books. Aren’t they worth something?”

“Jose, there are two different ways comic books are valued. By their condition, or by what they mean to the reader. These are so used, they’re only valuable to me, but I don’t have space where I am going.”

“During summer school break, when you put your box of comics on the front porch for the neighborhood kids to read, meant a lot to my kids. Got my youngest, Kenny, interested in reading. He is now reading at the 4th-grade level.”

“That makes me feel good. Jose, take the box home with you. I am glad your kids enjoyed them.”

“Let me pay you,” Jose reached for his wallet.

“Please take them, I am glad to see they are going to a good home.”

Jose extended his hand, “Thanks, that means a lot. If you are OK by yourself, I am going to call it a night and go home. Night!”

“Night!”

As Jose walked home with the banker’s box under his arm, Bree pulled up from work. Getting out of her car, she shot a stern look at her dad. Raising her arms up in the air with palms extended, she emotes, “Dad, you did not sell anything today. I can’t believe it. Tell me you got rid of something.”

“I got rid of my comic collection.”

“That is not much, but it is something. Tomorrow is going to be a long day for both of us. Come on, let’s get this stuff in the garage and then have some pizza.”

“You mean I still get pizza?”

“Yeah, I guess so. You definitely don’t deserve it, but I got us a pizza.”

“Did you remember no anchovies?”

“Yes, Dad, I remembered!”



Too Much Exposition!

By: Lucas Price, Honorable Mention

Steve Astley was all set to start heading to work early as planned (that is, as decided the night before because he felt tired earlier than usual). He put on his office suit, ate his bacon and eggs, and would eat a wrapped donut on the drive there. The whole family was still asleep at 7:06, when the sun shone, as it was summer break for all but himself.

“Man,” he thought aloud, approaching the door, “to think that this time I’ll be the one brewing the coffee for everyone at the office. Heheh! Didn’t think I’d be so pleased at tha- Oh?”

When he opened the door, two alien-looking entities were standing in front of him with swamp green skin, large and drooping snouts, and pointy horizontal ears. One was slim and a head above Steve in height, and the other was round and about half that height. Besides their shared brown leather clothing, the tall one possessed bulging eyes with closed, wrinkly lids and wore a tan shoulder warmer while the stout one bore large white tusks and sported shoulder plates and silver-brown arm gauntlets.

“Um, may I help you?”

“Yes,” spoke the tall one with a deep, sage-like voice, and he pointed with a bony, frog-like finger over Steve’s shoulder at a rose-shaped ornament sitting on a stand against a wall. “That. We must take that possession of yours back to our home.”

“Now, why would I let you do that?” Steve said blocking the way with his arm.

The tall one let out a gentle but disappointed sigh. “Very well – we shall explain everything.”

Steve grumbled internally. This better not take long.

“To begin, we should introduce ourselves: I am Glank, and this is Bobulbza.”

Bobulbza waved his stocky chalk white hand. “Hi!” he said in a high-pitched and garbled voice.

Steve waved back with his slim but normal human hand and a toothy smile, visibly confused about what this was all about. “Hello there. I’m Steve. Steve Astley.”

“We come from a dimension known as the Dormantium,” Glank began, “where all sorts of creatures and races take refuge after the destruction of their homes. Oh, woe to us, whose lands were dissolved by an Unknown.”

“An unknown what?” Steve inquired with a bit of bite.

“We call ‘em Unknowns,” Bobulbza answered, “because we never really



seen ‘em and don’t even know very much about ‘em – just that they go around dissolvin’ dimensions, and it probably ain’t multiple types o’ thing, you know? Like, that wouldn’t make sense if—”

“Anyway,” Glank interrupted, “we are known as fibble elves—”

A puff of laughter seeped from Steve’s lips.

“—and hail from the land of Gobba Geem.”

A chuckle now blew through his teeth, and he had to cover his mouth. Glank went silent and placed his hands together.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Steve tried to apologize while waving his donut. “Carry on.”

“As we bore psychic powers and philosophical prowess, our arrival was a blessing for the other residents. We could soothe the stressed,”—Glank raised a palm—“heal the hurt, enlighten the educated, delight the dim,”—Another hand rose as a fist, and his head turned up; after a beat he lowered all three back down—“and help protect our people, new and old.”

Steve had begun eating his donut, and now turned to Bobulbza, expecting him to say something next.

“Each species that enters the Dormantium,” Bobulbza continued, “brings its own kit o’ skills to the table and finds a role by those.” He began counting with his fingers: “Cloobs, an armored folk, take charge of military stuff and can carve up some really sweet games; marbs are made of this squishy stuff that can be taken and molded into ammo, toys, some tools, and other things...”

Steve looked at his watch. 7:13. So much for being early.

“Look, guys,” he interrupted before taking another bite of his donut. “This is fascinating and all, but I have a job to get to, so may you get to where my one-in-stock, bargain-priced souvenir ornament from China comes into play?”

“Very well, then.” Glank took a deep breath. “Towering above our capital city, around the central area of the Dormantium, stood a splendid wall everyone called,” with a roll of the tongue and a risen arm, “the Ornamental. It blocked, for a hundred and four years and a month, a cave that would about every year unleash a miasma of horror, despair, and chaos even our kind could not hold off. We called that cave the Abyss of Death.”

Glank stepped away from Steve and Bobulbza, sunk to one knee, and wrapped his arms around himself. “It was a dreadful, cruel time whenever it came. Destruction struck our buildings, illusions danced in our faces, no one would trust no one. And then the Aftercold when that was over – some say it was worse.”

He pinched the edges of his shoulder warmers for a few moments, then



shook himself back to focus and treaded back beside his partner.

Bobulbza took it from here: “At some point, a Jorb – whose race’s specialties include inventions, ideas, and elemental control – thought to, with the help of fellow Jorbs, forge this wall with a combination of their diverse powers. When that alone didn’t work, the Jorb beckoned the other races to gather as much dust as they could from the purple, ever-changing skies – it possibly being the solid material they needed to pull it off. What was gathered only filled a few feet, but the Jorbs made do with what they had.”

Steve, now over halfway through his donut, peered at his watch again. 9:14? He pulled out his phone. Same time.

He held a finger at the duo. “Hold on. I gotta make a call.”

He dialed the number for his work and waited for an answer. For several seconds.

“Uhh, oh,” Bobulbza commented. “He’s-a-comin’, isn’t he?”

Steve moved the phone away from his mouth. “Who, now?”

“A Cloob who threatens the order of the Dormantium,” Glank answered in a more dire tone. “He shattered the Ornamental, foolishly thinking with its fragments he can control the compressed power that had built up within the Abyss of Death. Fortunately, thanks to new developments in our psychic abilities, we were able to lull that power into a temporary sleep before it could cause any damage.”

A force became sentient? Steve thought. This is too crazy!

“We’ve had to search across many dimensions to find the pieces that scattered.” Glank pointed at the rose ornament again: “That is one of the Jorbs who sacrificed their bodies to make the Ornamental! You must give it to us now before our adversary reaches it.”

“What?! That was a living being? Okay, I’m gonna need some proof that all of this is true before I do anything for you.”

From a finger, Glank shot a small orb of white light into the ornament. “Go, and touch the ornament, and it will simmer with a forceful shine like you never experienced before.”

Steve plopped the remaining mouthful of donut into his mouth and did as he was told, closing the door to make sure the guests wouldn’t try something funny. As he wrapped his palms around the ornament, the orb grew to encompass his hands, and vibrations filled his arms and then his entire body from head to toe. Looking to the ceiling now and his head bobbing rapidly, he screamed to let out this overwhelming force:

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

When the light shrunk away, and he could let go of the ornament, he



turned back to the guests, who had now entered the house.

“There,” Glank confirmed. “Now will give us the ornament?”

Steve looked at his hands and moved his fingers, the sensation having not quite left him entirely.

Just then, something burst through the wall next to the door, somehow leaving a gaping hole thrice its width. Dust crowded around it, but from the silhouette Steve could make out a rounded, pin-like head and a reverse-triangular body with shoulder blades. When the dust settled, the figure was shown to have full black armor with yellow outlines, and its head was as shiny as Steve imagined. This figure was also kneeling in a flashy pose with one arm in the air, and the backs of its orange bladed roller-skate heels spewed dark, sparkling smoke and orange embers.

What the heck is this?

“He is here,” Bobulbza said solemnly.

The figure stood, and the red lines on his head opened into glowing eyes without irises. No other facial features appeared present. “So, you thought you could beat me to the last piece, huh? Ahahahahaha!”

“Alright, so who are you, now?” Steve cut in.

“I am the Reaper of the Past; a Revolutionary for the Present; a Future Terror! I am what will bring the Dormantium to an era of unchallenged dominance when we shall fear nothing ever again! I am...the Skater!”

Steve just burst out laughing at this point, and the Skater’s eyes widened in surprise. “The Skater? Seriously? I’ve been listening to all your silly names like “fibble elves” and “crooky doos” or whatever they call you guys—”

“Cloobs,” Bobulbza corrected.

“Right, thanks, but then you, this big-scale villain with buildup, just go with ‘the Skater?’”

This whole time, the Skater just stood there dumbfounded.

Steve wiped below his eye for any light tears. “Okay, so what now, guys?”

“We race to the ornament or fight to the death,” all three agreed, and the battle began.

The Skater’s eyes caught the ornament, and he dashed toward it. Glank’s eyes glowed white – “Mova Noa,” he chanted – and white spirit-like tentacles flew from his body and seized the Skater in the air. When the Skater threw out one of his heel blades, which bore clock faces, Bobulbza deflected it back with his arm and entered a stance with his arms straightened in front of him.

“Shoota Latta!” he shouted, and his arms started firing volleys of bullets and small missiles. The barrage lasted for about half a minute as the Skater wiggled repetitively.

“Hey,” Steve shouted through tunneled hands, “I have a family who’s



sleeping!”

“Oh. Our bad.” Bobulbza seized the assault and pulled back his arms.

“Just give us the ornament, and we’ll be done with—”

The Skater, visibly unaffected besides some soot and a dent or two, tossed another heel blade at Bobulbza, which grew to his size this time. Bobulbza held it back with both arms, even as it pushed him to the floor. The Skater shot out the other heel blade, cutting Glank’s tentacles and setting himself free. As the Skater rushed toward the ornament, Steve impulsively laid his hands on him, immediately wondering why he did that.

Time slowed, or even froze, for a second. Then a blast from Steve’s palms sent the Skater across the room.

“W-what was that?!” Steve asked the fibble elves.

“When you touched the rose,” Glank answered, back in his normal state but sounding a bit weaker than before, “I gave you a sample of my power, partly as a failsafe. I am pleased to know the transfer worked.”

“Well, in any case”—Steve grabbed the ornament and tossed it to them—“here, take this and get this scuffle out of here.”

As Glank caught it, the Skater reached out a shaking arm and faded into a colorful mist along with his blades: “Nooooooooooooo!”

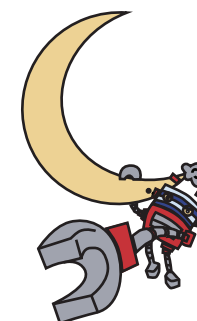
“Did he,” Steve wondered, “die or something?”

“We agreed to a clause,” Glank answered, “to be returned to the Dormantium once all pieces were retrieved. Farewell.” He disappeared the same way.

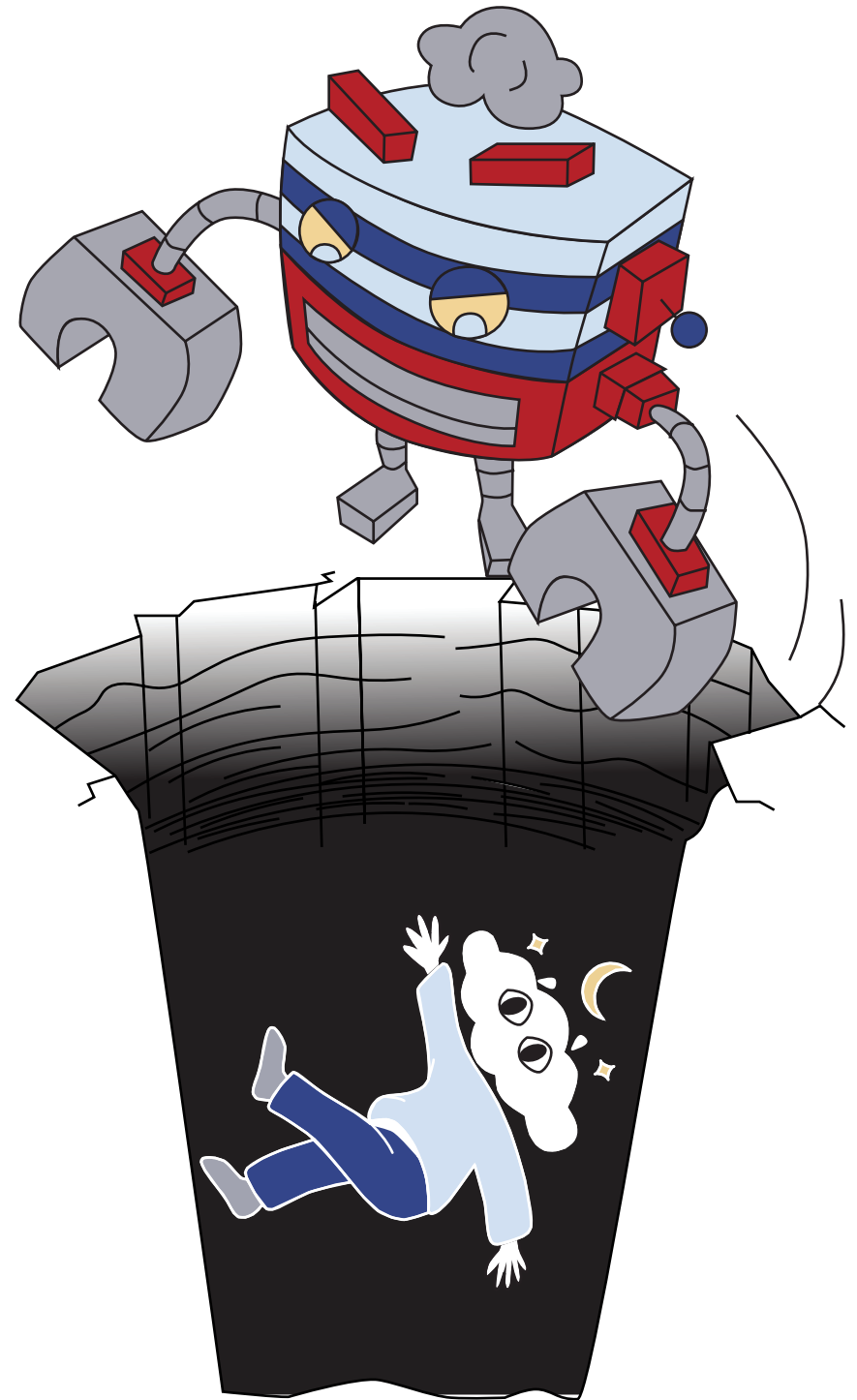
“And what about the damages here?”

“I’ll fix that,” Bobulbza assured, standing back up. “By the way, you may get a kick out of this: that Jorb’s name was Clogius the Pird.” He knocked on a wall before vanishing, and the house was back to normal.

Steve checked his watch and his phone. 7:06. Guess he’d still be early after all.




Creative  Nonfiction






Lively Lifelessness


By: Lucas Price, 1st Place



I don't know about you, but from my childhood I recall imagining certain objects as living things; fans became faceless cyclopes that blew playful intimidation from their beams of wind; televisions and radios wore masks of light and sound as they performed; even individual drawers had life breathed onto them, bringing about a wild collection of abstract expressions. Of course, with the passage of time came tasks and responsibilities, not to mention the thriving of other interests, so my animistic anthology could not last forever – at least consciously, that is. This brand of imagination was never really lost; I just hadn't found much use for it. However, like with most re-acquired tastes, my commitment to it would return once I pulled myself back deeply enough into it. This brings me to my latest and most elaborate canvas yet: the campus of Glendale Community College.



I exit the Language Arts building to meet the gray gloom of one Wednesday afternoon, courtesy of the clouds blanketing portions of the sunlight. On the far left sits a brick tunnel of shade that probably covers about ten steps; to the far right lies a spread of concrete paths, gated out by stone walls that stand just below knee height; and in front of me, metal tables and chairs stand islanded by trees and grass. As I steer to the right, the air's humidity squeezes with eagerness, though it does not rely on stickiness for attention. Further ahead, mats of grass and trees decorate the spaces between each path, and the same air clumps the blades together in a manner that might suit a swamp setting. A few left and right turns further out, a pigeon's body is lying at a tree's underground feet, its wings splayed out over the soil and feathers bursting from its chest. Did this bird face a collision, or did a predator attack and leave the body? Whatever happened here, the sight is a bit of a shock coming from a seemingly serene area, although I would learn two weeks later that these are a common find within the college campus.



Later that same day, I have found shelter from the rain's wrath under a roof outside the Humanities building, by the room HU 106, remaining as close to my pickup spot as I can. Brown spots populate the surrounding cement like they would a cheetah's fur, but the collection of rocks on the left appears unaffected, save for a current of tracks that slithers a short distance toward a palm tree on the left before fading out. Inspection of said tree begins to imagine it as the arm of a buried giant, who had used the last of its energy to reach out as far as it could to grab the clouds above. Its multiple green claws now lie limp over a single wrist coated in a pinecone-looking tuft

of fur (or are they feathers?). More such arms line up beside it left and right with plenty of space between one another; can this be a burial ground for titans from an unspoken past, or might each arm be connected to a single, more spectacular beast that is resting in slumber? The gray screen still looms over the whole picture, but without the same level of influence as before despite the rain's presence.

The following Monday morning, in front of the Instruction 2 building, the sun fans its full glory over the earth once again. Amongst a band of yellow gloves of flowers, two butterflies/moths appear to be commencing a ritual (perhaps to mate, with one going behind the other) but then begin flying about after no payoff; maybe they were just finishing? Behind me, below the words "INSTRUCTION 2," a patch of the same flora appears to seal down an abyss with its entanglements, even though the rebellious left side refuses to wear the yellow gloves. This patch and the one to the right are reaching out in one direction, like a unified entity that may in fact be wishing to escape its prison to reach what it so longs for. Dozens of fat fountains of whiskers colored like hay stem outward from below the decorative rocks littered before the building, though the texture is rougher than that of real whiskers or any liquid that could erupt from a fountain. Lying among one pair is a stray branch splitting into two paths – an helpless outcast trying to hide from the sun in shame. A few greener, thicker fountains spray upward with even rougher skin and display yellow hairs that wave and curl in comfort on their hosts. Trees of a much lighter green rise above the rest of the plants, with one couple having decided to hold hands over a dirt pathway left of the stray branch, establishing an arch of romance. At the left edge of this pathway, a mix of much smaller rocks among those of typical size mimics the powder that waits on the bottoms of some cereal bags. One white standard-sized stone resembles a large tooth, though the dirt stuck to it poses as a plaque. By the nearest corner of the Instruction 1 building, a red candy wrapper sits in the company of the familiar surrounding plants, with another pair hiding behind it. I decide to take up the duty of disposing them; it seems my poking around ends here.



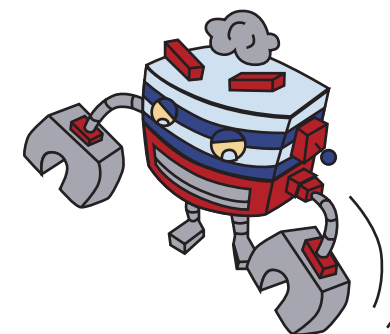


Except it doesn't. On the side of the Instruction 2 building, herds of green cables weave around themselves with the intricacy of veins in a bloodstream, lit by the flaming pink flowers that grow upon them; even one network that has dried into a light brown showcases its own successful mutation of exquisiteness. These continue to the rear corner of the building. As I turn around that corner, a flowery scent, possibly coming from them, tries to bend me to its liking but withdraws with little resistance. The odor of the men's restroom at the back is not much better, presenting an atmosphere of chemicals and cold air that invites nausea, but a trashcan stands ready to accept my offering of wrappers. Further across the building from my exit, the plant life takes a turn for the ugly: the cable clusters over there have mangled themselves into knots of disorder, and one dark bushel holds fruits that were bruised by time. A trek back to the previous weavings, though, reassures the observer of their beauty. Back at the front of the building, the whisker fountains are now acting as pom-poms to cheer on passing students as they head to their classes.

As I exit the Language Arts building after my last class of the day, a deviation from my usual route reaps out new observations from within the campus. Near the Humanities building, at the corner of one mat of grass, a small gutter lid splattered with rust reads the words, "Sewer Sigma." Not far ahead, a clump of yellow grass molds out the shape of Africa in the middle of the walkway; earlier, on the way to my class lay such a clump that shaped itself into Australia. The bark on the palm trees that tower throughout the area marks itself with chaos, or, as the flesh of ancient giants, decay. The palm of a person's hand will be driven out by the pins and needles that guard them, and these will make themselves known to any nearing eyes as spaced out hairs. At one of the closer arms to my pickup spot, by the two Music buildings, a clear orb the size of a few pin-heads shines inside a shallow tunnel like a dew or a pearl; maybe a tiny creature (once) made its home here. The grass carpet that these graves surround, laid between the Music buildings and the Humanities building, reveals a map, with patches of missing grass marking continents and islands which sink below the green sea instead of above the blue. From the edge facing the Music buildings, I make my way diagonally across the map to the side of the Humanities building. Over there a bird chirps with confidence from upon a branch, and a trio of crows makes a left turn from behind me into a landing like a jet fleet; now I want to be a bird and let the breeze of flight stroke my neck and body. A half-cylinder of wood, for whatever reason, is hiding up in one tree's arms while a tree nearer to where I waited in the rain is carrying a dismembered branch, whose original owner I do not consider seeking out (especially as my

ride has arrived). A week later, these two items are in those same respective spots.





Throughout the campus, legitimate life – the plants and animals – has been coexisting with, sometimes conjoining with or even morphing into, imagined life, which can involve the materials and forces; even when dead, they did this. One such force, the state of the weather, might have helped shape the birth of the other imagined life—and their individual stories—by influencing the genes that tie into mood and tone. The most vital aspect of their makeup, however, is the living perceiver, who determines which among them enters the world in the first place, much less survives in it. So, what other sorts of phenomena can you uncover within the college campus?





When Home is Home

By: Edward Howard Freese, 2nd Place



I stand in the backyard of my parent's house and look straight up. The sky, a down gradient of azure to baby blue, is cloudless. The sun, round but shapeless, drops a cool warmth on my brow. A dog barks next door; an F-35 roars overhead; a neighbor's heating unit kicks on. My parents have lived in this house for the past twenty-five years; I have lived here for the past three. Twenty-five years have passed in between moving out, and moving back in. The states and houses changed, but not the feeling of home—that was before the extra bedroom became my bedroom. The jolting overnight transition from tourist to local—like falling asleep as Rick Steves in a hotel and waking up as a leper on the streets—cannot be undone; I am here now. From above, the yard is a square U, bordering four adjacent yards, two in the back, and one on either side. The yard's southern border is lined by 12-inch-high cinderblocks. Privacy walls run south- to-north on either side of the yard; the walls start at 12 inches high at the rear of yard, and stagger up, via plateaus, to nearly 6 feet high at the house. The patio is a tapestry of hand-sized hexagons, some the color of a faded pink pencil eraser, others sidewalk-gray. The sharp morning light, reflected in broken glass, frond wax, porcelain, and tin, casts strong, high- angled shadows behind anything with a little courage. The plant-life is plentiful: a palo Verde tree, an orange tree, a Joshua tree, three palm trees, and a variety of desert shrubs, flowers, and cacti. Near the house, the orange tree's dark green crown is bare of oranges until halfway up; I pulled all the low hanging fruit about a month ago; the kind act of a gracious guest perverted into the dutiful chore of an occupant. Two near life-size porcelain squirrel monkeys, painted in vibrant reds, yellows, and blues, dangle from the orange tree's branches. The trunk, and lower branches are protected with a coat of white paint. A half dozen oranges, out of my reach last month, dot the ground around the tree's base. At the back of the yard, a young Joshua tree stands stubbornly straight. About 5 feet up, the trunk splits into four symmetrical branches; the tree looks like a hand tiller stuck in a ceiling of grass. I step into the superficial shade of a palo Verde, the state tree. The palo Verde marks the center of the backyard. About 18 inches above ground, the tree splits into three branches; two feet up, and the branches split again. Planted as a sapling 15 years ago, the tree now stands over 25 feet tall; its canopy going up, over, and out in a 40-foot radius. An inconsistent breeze nudges branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, and petals. The palo Verde's yellow-green leaves give the impression stale mint of gum. Sap drips from a limb onto brown, gray, and red rocks the size of a thumbnail;

the ground looks like a dirty cork board.

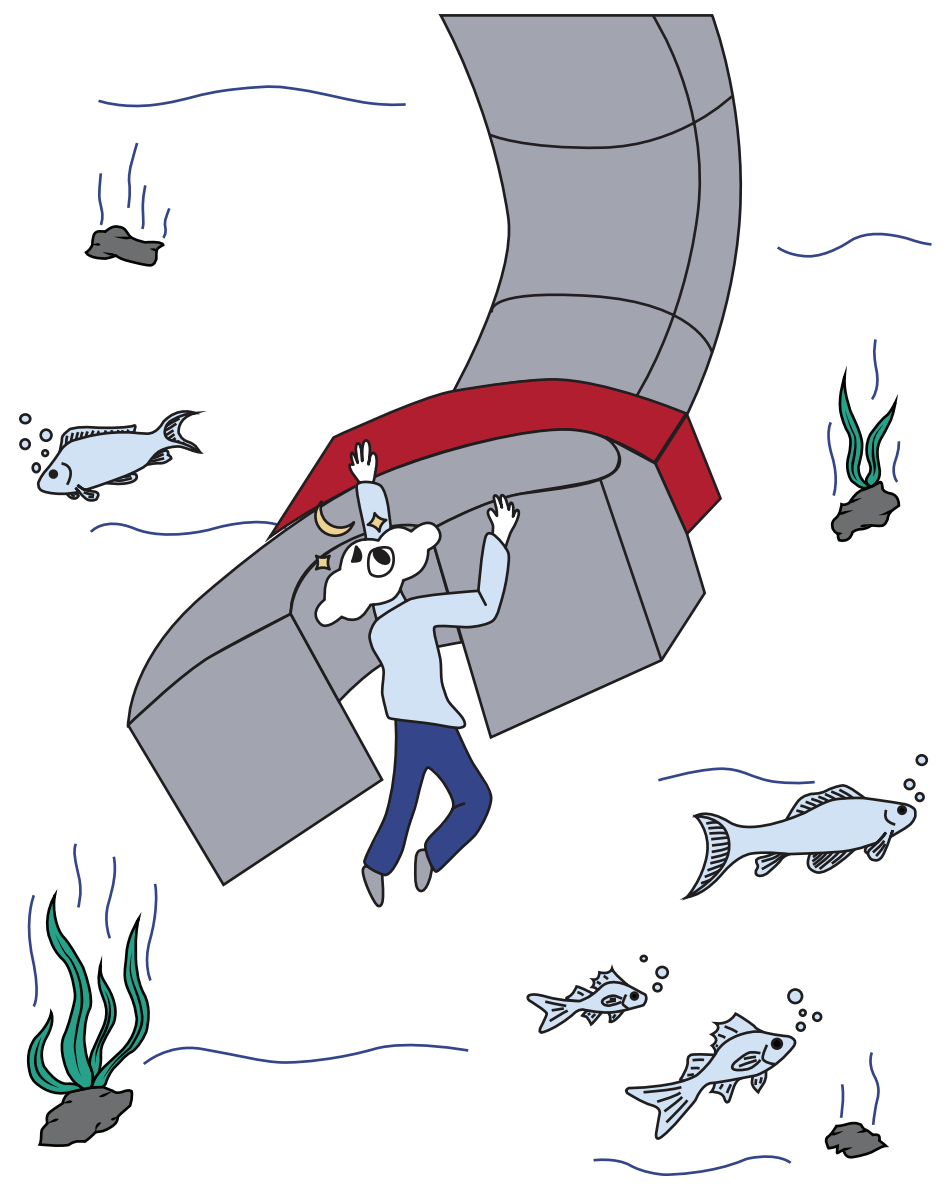
Just beyond the Verde's shadow, a slight mound, the size of a child's casket, blemishes the yard like a blister. On top of the mound is a rusted shaman standing 3 feet high with arms outstretched in every direction. At the shaman's oval base rest three cacti, round and green like unripe pumpkins riddled with nails. My father made the shaman at the metal club during his "shaman period." He is also responsible for the ubiquitous insects, and crustaceans lurking on branches, and beneath bushes; grasshoppers made from wrenches, crabs made from horseshoes. More common than my father's manifestations are my mother's many brightly colored sculptures. Ranging from toy-sized to life-sized: horses, owls, lizards, and more horses. Tiny towers litter the yard, both a byproduct, and an intention of my mother's meditative stone stacking hobby; rocks balanced on rocks in a kind of geological Jenga. The yard's bright, and eclectic personality made possible by parent's appreciation for the aesthetic. Something else in the yard made possible by my parents—me.

Beneath the palo Verde, looking around the yard with the eyes of a resident, I now see only overhead: property taxes, labor costs, a patio needing repair, and an irrigation system needing renewal. The yard, benign during a three-day-stays at Christmas, is now a hotbed of hostility. Any relaxation is now found despite, instead of thanks to, the tranquil setting. This is no longer a little getaway, this is home. When the liberation of bachelorhood is supplanted by the oppression of responsibility, and homecooked meals lose their novelty, if not their flavor, stepping out back for a breath of fresh air can be suffocating. Wherever you go, there you are—but you can't go home again when you're already there.





poetry

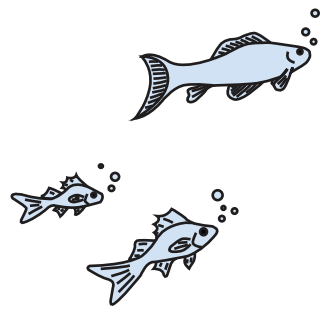





Masked

By: Patrick McCarthy, 1st Place

Though a hero
 Still, I hide.
 Vigilante. Masked
 with pride.
 Criminal
 To get away.
 Boasting later
 Not today.
 Need to be a Luchador.
 Celebrated Warrior.
 Masks for safety and for need.
 Protection or to help us breathe.
 Many masks I wear each day.
 You never saw me anyway.



Temporary

By: Patrick McCarthy, 2nd Place

Pudgy digits grab my finger.
 Innocent vice-grips in my hair.
 Everything a target, hit and grab.
 In the mouth and up the nose.
 Don't slam them in the door.
 Learn to write and cut and draw.
 Piano lessons / play guitar.

Pat-A-Cake, Pat-A-Cake

"What's wrong with her hands" - mom first.
 I see it - the world goes dark.
 Doctor and nurses - It's ok, it will be ok.
 Money, hospitals, hardships, life--
 Teasing, torment, judgements--
 Why would this happen? Why me?
 Call family and cry, tell the story,
 through choked tears, again and again.
 Kids notice, Adults shocked when they see.
 Judgmental scowls, pity, disgust, questions--

A note appears on my desk-

"I ask god to make my handicapped child whole.
 God said, No. Her spirit is whole, Her body is only temporary."



And After All

By: Amal Emily Zahroon, 3rd Place

I suppose, thought I
hell is a girl's mind put on trial.
If they knew what thoughts she frequently thinks
she'd certainly be guilty of delusion or denial.



You're just a girl, hold your tongue.
He's mean but that's ok
his heart must be in the right place
his tongue is just not his brain.
Its not his hands, its not your face
don't leave it all in disgrace.



She thinks she'll own a house one day
with the white fence and red roses.
She'll realize she only lives there
no one but her will know this.

Have you ever noticed, we give each other roses
not yet bloomed?
And how they've been mutilated from their protection
their thorns not in use?



And what good would her thorns be?
She carries a weapon she can not conceal.
She wants to wither away,
she was never meant to stay
she stays
only because she can not ignore this.



Poor little girl with a thorn in her side
don't clap for her
she's going through a spiral.
She'll think she'll wilt in a few days
but she's got a whole lifetime just to smile.

Girls Turn to Monsters

By: Amal Emily Zahroon, Honorable Mention

Our pennies in shambles
So I was a witch six years in a row
Never realized, always minded, that's what most people don't know
one year my face painted green, the next it was pink
Dirty white sneakers underneath you start to see what most people think

I would pretend I was a princess in the sky
Lived in silver sandcastles until the seas began to cry
I would pretend I was a little flower girl
so I learned how to sew
Until my flower began to melt in the threads lined with bloody snow

I used to run about with an idea of a treat
My thoughts in tow, lie and smile to the people that I greet
Knock on doors,
hey mister lend the us sweets
Don't smash the pumpkins,
their smiles stay underneath your feet

I would pretend I was a pretty black cat in the night
But I was always scared, never looking for a fight
I would pretend I was Dorothy on the sparkly brick road
So I learned how to grasp the image in my mind
Until the road began to crumble that dream I couldn't find

Come to seven and I dress as a crow
Purge the ideas revenge on an all time low
Made up my mind,
save all the hidden dimes
I don't go walking at night anymore,
the crime of the forsaken times

I would think I was monster,
Sleeping tightly in a bed
Turns out I'm a clown,
it's all in my head.



There Are No Mandatory Minimums Here

By: Edward Howard Freese, Honorable Mention

Alright, you went back and salted the earth you scorched,
but haven't you gotten enough of what you deserved? Time's been served.
You don't have to live like this.

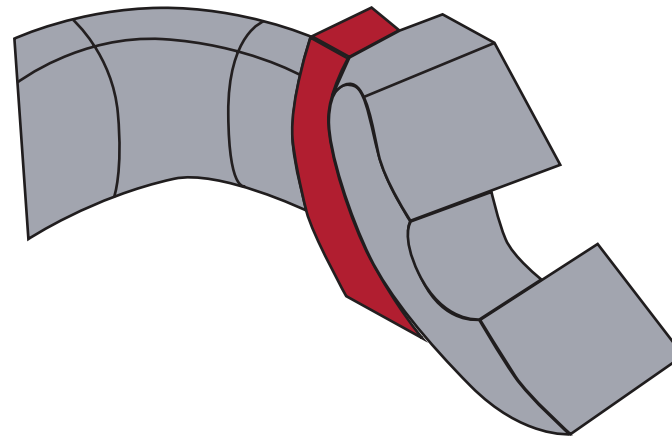
So, you turned into a soft scoundrel, a diet despicable; get over yourself.
No matter how much you punish yourself, nothing you can do will make it
alright—you went back and salted the earth you scorched.

Your friends are four walls, a ceiling, and a floor, but you forgot the door.
There are as many ways out as in, and no one is keeping you here.
You don't have to live like this

if you don't want to. You aren't chained up or locked down.
The bed to couch to bed routine ends whenever you realize that
you don't have to suffer

for the rest of your life. You aren't under observation, or any obligation;
there's no surveillance to skip or promise to keep.
You don't have to live like this.

You don't have to cry into your coffee; you don't have to sob yourself to
sleep.
You don't have to pace from closet to bathroom to closet.
You don't have to suffer,
you don't have to live like this.





One-Act Play/Drama






Messages of Atonement

By: Sarah Dahdal, 1st Place

FADE IN:

INT. JOSHUA'S APARTMENT - DAY



JOSHUA, 25, medium build, tall, facial stubble, and in his nursing scrubs, walks inside his modern and slightly rustic apartment, takes his shoes off by the door and sets down his groceries and keys. Taking out his phone from his pocket, he looks at the date, his eyes widen slightly. He disregards the groceries still on the counter and sits on one of the kitchen stools, his eyes never leaving the screen. He opens the text thread between himself and his father. The last text message reads: "Merry Christmas." He begins to type out: "Happy Bir-" but erases it, pauses, and clicks the audio icon instead.


JOSHUA

Happy birthday, I hope today...

He taps the stop button, deletes the recording, and tries again.

JOSHUA (CONT'D)

Hey, happy birthday, hope you and mama are good.




Joshua stops and deletes another failed attempt to try one more time.

JOSHUA (CONT'D)

That's just not enough, c'mon J. It's not that hard to send him a stupid message you've known the guy your whole life.

He fidgets in his seat and adjusts himself to a more comfortable position before starting again.

JOSHUA (CONT'D)



Hey, happy birthday, you deserve to have a good day. Eat some cake and have a drink for me...

His voice trails off.

Man, you sound like a damn greeting card. You can't do better than Hallmark?

He tosses his phone onto the coffee table in front of him and walks over to the window. Joshua gathers himself before walking back to the kitchen to make lunch. He glances back and forth from the phone to his task. The knife slicing through various ingredients to the cutting board becomes more agitated and forceful.



INT. ABEL'S HOME - FLASHBACK

Joshua and ABEL, 55, a little more rugged than Josh, full beard, very stocky, and slightly shorter than Josh, are in a heated argument in the middle of the living room. It's a very lived-in family home with subtle floral wallpaper and wainscoting. The fight is getting nastier by the second.

JOSHUA

(yelling desperately)

You're never here! You're here physically but ever since the funeral, you've been checked out! We need you! I'm not supposed to take care of everyone and you can't just shut everyone out!-

ABEL

Don't you dare speak to me that way! I am and have always been here for this family! I don't need anyone's help, definitely not yours! I'm fine the way I am. If you don't like the way I run things, there's the door! Otherwise, you do as I say.

Josh hurt and angry, storms past his father in silence, hitting his shoulder with his own and jogs up the stairs. Abel rubs his temples with one hand, a beer bottle gently swaying at his side in the other.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

Joshua's anger slowly turns to sadness. His movements turn defeated as he lets the knife roll off his hand and clatter onto the board. He leans his arms against the table and hangs his head in the deafening silence.

EXT. FUNERAL CEREMONY - FLASHBACK

20-year-old Joshua sits between his mother, ANNA, 48, petite, tall, and dark brown hair, and GRANDMOTHER, 88, shorter, also petite, and dark grey hair. His brother, JESSIE, 17, shaggy black hair, lanky, and tall, and sister, MIKIE, 22, brown hair, fashionable, and slightly shorter than Josh, are beside Anna. All in black attire. An empty chair meant for Abel sits to the left of his Grandmother.

They're all facing a beautiful oak casket and the PASTOR, 50 standing at the head, delivering a eulogy.

PASTOR

We deliver him back to you Lord, we pray he rests peacefully within your grace. Please be with his family; his wife, his children, and grandchildren as they...

Joshua stops listening after a while, he can't help it. His gaze follows the soft reflection of sunlight hitting the casket towards the pastor and the painting of his Grandfather. His already darkened complexion only turns darker looking down at the chess piece tightly coiled in his hands; the white knight.

INT. ABEL'S HOME - NIGHT

Joshua comes down stairs and sees his father splayed on the recliner with the television still playing. He's still wearing most of his suit but his shoes and tie lay haphazardly on the floor. Joshua looks at the table beside the recliner holding three beer bottles and a whiskey flask. He walks steadily over to his dad and picks up the throw blanket on the couch adjacent. Josh gently places it over him and stands there for a moment.

JOSHUA

(Quietly)

I just wish you would let one of us in. I miss how everything used




to be. I wish you would go back to being my dad.

Of course getting no reply, Josh takes care of the bottles, turns off the tv, and leaves to go back upstairs, tired and defeated.

INT. ABEL'S HOME - DAY

Joshua and Abel are in another fight, this time it's worse than ones before.


JOSHUA



Y'know what? I'm sick of this. I'm done. Get me? Done! You want me gone, I'm all good with that. I gave you so many chances and you trashed every one of them! What happened to always bein' there? Huh?! What happened to you?

ABEL


I'm gettin' sick of your attitude and blatant disrespect. You wanna be gone, go ahead. Like I told you before, you don't like it, there's the damn door! Don't talk to me like I'm some kind of monster. You should show me respect young man!



As Abel is still talking, Joshua throws his backpack onto his back and walks right out the front door. The rest of the family looks devastated as Josh leaves for the final time. Abel wastes no time at all, slamming the door.


BACK TO PRESENT DAY

INT. JOSHUA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT



Joshua is now on the couch with a half empty plate of food on his lap. The television is on and his phone not having moved an inch sits on the table. After an hour or so of not thinking about it, the phone catches Joshua's eyes again and all of the feelings from earlier start creeping back. Joshua sets his plate on the coffee table, resting his elbows on his knees and folding his hands. He pauses for a moment and looks from the phone to the chess set displayed on the table beneath the window.

INT. ABEL'S HOME - FLASHBACK



A much younger Joshua, 9, and his GRANDPA, 80, a cheery gentleman, taller than his wife, grey hair, a little chunky, and glasses, are sitting in the sun room. They're surrounded by his Grandmother's various plants and seated forward on rattan chairs in front of the stocked bookshelf facing each other. The afternoon sunlight pouring in from the floor to ceiling windows behind Josh's Grandfather. Their gazes shifting between each other and the chess board between them.

JOSHUA

I'm gonna win this time Grandpa, I know it. I'll show you how good I've gotten.

Pawn to h2.

GRANDPA

I bet, kiddo.

Pawn to e4. Pawn to c6.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Hm.

Pawn to d4.

JOSHUA

Told you I've gotten good.

Pawn to d5. Knight to c3. D5 pawn to e4.

GRANDPA

Ooh. Gotcha.

C3 knight to e4. Knight to d7. King to e2.

JOSHUA

Throwing your king already? You scared I'm gonna win or somethin'?

Knight g8 to f6. E4 knight to d6.

GRANDPA

Mmm, no just showin' you who's still on top.

JOSHUA

Aw c'mon! Checkmate already? How?

Abel comes around the corner from the kitchen and wraps his arms around Josh. He tickles him and sways him back and forth sending Joshua into an outburst of laughter, squirming to break free.

JOSHUA (LAUGHING) (CONT'D)

DAD!

ABEL (PLAYFULLY AGGRESSIVE)


Why didn't you use the one I showed you J? You woulda had him dead to rights!

GRANDPA (AUDIBLE WHISPER)

Your dad can't beat me either. I taught him everything he knows.

He winks at Joshua causing another fit of giggles. Abel and his dad smile at one another.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY



Joshua's smiling gaze pans towards the record player. He pauses for a moment and walks back to the window.

He thumbs through each of the records until he finds Air Supply's Lost in Love. He gently places it on the turntable and sets down the needle. The music flows through the apartment as Joshua makes his way back to the couch.

INT. ABEL'S HOME - FLASHBACK



A 12-year-old Joshua and his mother are in the family kitchen in front of the stove making dinner together, Joshua standing on a chair. They're both quietly singing along to the music and giggling at the antics ensuing in the next room. Joshua's grandparents, father, and siblings are all singing passionately and foolishly to Air Supply's "All Out of Love".

GRANDPA
I'm all out of love! I'm so lost without you!

GRANDMA
I'm all out of love! I'm so lost without you!

JESSIE
I know you were right, believing for so long! I'm all out of love, what am I without you!?

MIKIE
I know you were right, believing for so long! I'm all out of love, what am I without you!?

ABEL
I can't be too late to say that I was so wrong!

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

Joshua's sitting on the floor, staring at the phone's black screen. He gets up, stops the music and begins to pace, rubbing the back of his head and neck. In a moment, he whips around, and grabs his phone. He deletes the last attempt and begins a new one.

INT. ABEL'S HOME - MOMENTS LATER

During his small birthday gathering with his mother, Anna, Jessie, Mikie, and a few work friends, Abel is looking at his phone in disbelief, terrified to find out what this message could be about. He excuses himself from the dinner conversation and sits on the edge of his bed, hesitantly pressing the play button and bringing it to his ear.

JOSHUA (V.O.)
(Sounds slightly static)
Hey dad, happy birthday...I hope you and mama are good.
(MORE)

JOSHUA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I miss you guys and I just wanted to say mostly to you dad, that I miss you a lot. I'm sorry about everything that happened years ago when I left.

INT. JOSHUA'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Joshua puts his phone back on the table only this time face down. He's nervously biting his nails and just staring at the phone, waiting for it to do something.

JOSHUA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I don't need everything to be cool. I know we might not get back to how it was but...

INT. ABEL'S HOME - SAME TIME

Abel continues listening intently to the message.

JOSHUA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I couldn't keep goin' like this without you hearin' an apology from me. So, I'm sorry. I love you. Have a drink for me. Happy birthday.

The message ends and Abel slowly pulls the phone away to look at the display again. He pauses for a moment, trying to hold back emotion, and begins typing.

INT. JOSHUA'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Joshua's still waiting by the phone for what seems like a lifetime. *BZZZZZ*. The phone slides across the table a bit from the vibration. He quickly picks it up and opens the message: "Meet me at Gianni's tomorrow." Immediately, his whole demeanor changes and a look of relief, happiness, and nervousness wash over him at once. He slowly leans back against the couch, processing what just happened.

INT. GIANNO'S DINER - THE NEXT DAY

Joshua opens the slightly rusted door to Gianni's diner. It's a little run down with paint chipping in corners, a shorted lightbulb, and somewhat wobbly tables. Nervously scanning the room, Josh clocks a Man resembling his father facing away from the door. He cautiously yet confidently walks over to him.

JOSHUA
Dad?

The man, tightly gripping his phone in one hand, turns around to look up at Josh. It's Abel. Time seems to freeze for a moment as he slowly gets up and faces Joshua. There's no visible emotions on his face and Josh looks unsure of what Abel's going to say. In a split-second, Abel drops his guard and that stoic expression turns warm and inviting. He hugs Joshua as tight as he used to all those years ago. Joshua is taken aback a little but not enough to pull away. He hugs him back tighter before they let go and sit together.

Josh sits across from Abel and pulls out a small, gift-wrapped box, sliding it across the table to his dad. Abel opens it, revealing what's inside, and a wave of emotion overwhelms him. The gift is a chess piece, the white knight, from the very set they all shared.

They exchange warm smiles that seem to understand each other's pain and Joshua is reminded of days with his dad over a decade ago.


INT. GIANNO'S DINER - FLASHBACK

12-year-old Joshua, sitting in the same seat thoroughly enjoying a Reuben sandwich.

ABEL
How was your day at school? Did you learn a lot?

JOSHUA (MOUTH SLIGHTLY FULL)









Uh-huh. I'm doing really well in science. I think I wanna be a nurse one day.

ABEL

Oh yeah? Well I think you'd make an amazing nurse buddy.

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

A server comes to their booth with a plate for Abel and a Reuben sandwich for Joshua. His dad remembered. A feeling of peace washed over the two, something neither felt in a long time.



Chinchilla

By: Adrian Castillo, 2nd Place

EXT. PARTRIDGE HOUSEHOLD - EVENING

The sun is sets over the mountains in Page, Arizona. The wind races through the trees, enunciating the animation in the leaves. Rain puddles from the afternoon showers sit across the roads, leaving stairs and sidewalks wet and slippery. The street lights dimly illuminate the streets and the sidewalks with their orange glow - complementing the sun's violet, blue, and orange variants.

EXT. PARTRIDGE HOUSEHOLD - BACKYARD PATIO - EVENING

CAROLE - 39-years-old, wife, blonde hair, oversized loose cardigan - patiently waits. She sits on her patio sofa, gazing at the lit fire pit in the center of the patio.

She has a BOOK at her side with a minimalist cover. She keeps it open and face-down to her last read page. Her right hand occupies her lit CIGARETTE. An entire CIGARETTE PACK lies on her lap. Her SMARTPHONE sits face up on the arm rest.

DING

Phone alert, but she does not look at it.

INTERCUT

INT. PARTRIDGE HOUSEHOLD - FRONT DOOR

TED - 40-years-old, husband, brown hair, upbeat - enters the house. He swings his KEYS around his finger and mumbling a song in his head.

TED

Wife!

Carole hears his exclamation reverberating in the home. She panics as she looks for a place to dispose of her cigarette. She quickly tosses it inside the fire pit. Her cigarette pack goes in her cardigan pocket. She picks up her book to her saved page.

CAROLE

Hey! Out here.

Ted finds Carole and leans on the glass sliding door that leads to their backyard patio. He gazes at her.

TED

(smiling) Hey.

CAROLE

You're home early.

TED





Rain check. Rob got called in for work.

CAROLE
For the body shop or the paint shop?

TED
The wife shop.


CAROLE
How is Heidi?



TED
Being Heidi. Killing her hair, per the usual.

CAROLE
Hm. Same ol' Heidi.

Ted pushes himself from the glass sliding door to join Carole. He sits on the opposite end of the pit to have a view of his wife, the fire, and the cloudy sunset.




TED
How's your book?

CAROLE
Uhh... It's good. Kinda boring but, y'know.

TED
What's it about?

CAROLE
It's about a couple that has a lot of conflicts and, uh... resolutions. They tell themselves everything will be okay, especially when they get drunk and reconcile all over again.




TED
Interesting. What are you planning this Christmas?

CAROLE
What do you mean?

TED
Were you thinking about going somewhere or...?

CAROLE
I'd like to see my family. In Mesa.



TED
Okay.

CAROLE
Why? Did you have plans?

TED
No. But, Mesa...

CAROLE
What's wrong with that?

TED
That's like, a ten-hour drive, we'd be spending Christmas on the road...

CAROLE
Not even!

TED
And, your dad...

Carole closes her book and sets it beside her.

CAROLE
What about my dad?

TED
He's like, you know...

CAROLE
(mockingly) Um, like, I don't know.

TED
(scoffs) Your dad makes me uncomfortable.

CAROLE
(laughs) Okay, babe. My dad makes you uncomfortable. Your father strangled a rat at the dinner table last year.

TED
He was showing off his trophy after catching that thing running around his garage. Today's actually the anniversary.

CAROLE
(scoffs) Congratulations, or happy one year.

TED
Did you know rats are actually closer related to dogs than they are to --

CAROLE
Uh uh, we're still talking about you and my dad. What's the deal there?

TED
(raises hands) Nothing, no deal.

CAROLE
Teddy, you've never mentioned this before, what are you talking about?

Ted takes a moment to think of an answer.

After a few moments of silence, Carole chimes in.



CAROLE

You don't want to see my family for Christmas?

Ted is caught off-guard.

Carole laughs with a hint of offense. She stands up from the couch and paces inside the house, leaving her book and her phone.

DING



TED

Care...

Ted grunts as he lifts himself from his seat to follow Carole.

KITCHEN

TED

Where are you going?

CAROLE

Bathroom - don't follow me.



TED

Hey, listen.

CAROLE

I'm going to the bathroom, Ted.

HALLWAY BATHROOM

Carole enters the hallway bathroom and slams the door behind her. Ted jiggles the DOOR HANDLE - Carole already locked the door.

Ted keeps his hand on the handle and leans his head on the door.



TED

Carole.

Carole climbs onto the sink to face the ceiling vent. She projects her voice to conceal the sound of her sparking her LIGHTER. She pulls out another cigarette and lights it.

CAROLE

I'm on the toilet, Ted.

TED

Unlock the door.

CAROLE

You're not gonna like this sound that's gonna come out of me.

Ted lifts his head off the door. He lifts his hand to graze across the top of the door frame.

TED

At least let me see the look on your face when I tell you something.

Ted grabs a KEY from the top of the door frame.

Carole puts the lighter and cigarette pack in her cardigan pocket. She grabs the BAR OF SOAP from the sink and drops it in the toilet. Water flies from the toilet and hits the tile floor.

CAROLE

Yeah, I don't think venison pizza is good, either.

Ted unlocks the bathroom door and witnesses Carole with a lit cigarette in hand.

TED

Yeah, that smoke you blow into the vent moves around the house and puts whatever smoke particles on our furniture, including that upholstered chair that you love so much.

Carole climbs down from the sink, mouth agape, offended. Ted shows her the key he used before she snatches it from his hand.

CAROLE

You -- (slips on toilet water) are sick...

TED

Two: remember to wipe off your shoe prints when you step on the counter - they're not supposed to be there.

CAROLE

No! I'm mad at you! (throws the key at Ted) Don't act like not wanting to be with my family isn't what we're talking about.

TED

"We". I had to fish you out of the toilet to get you to respond. And, I only did that to keep our bed from smelling like our fireplace.

CAROLE

You know I smoke?

TED

Yeah?

CAROLE

(presenting her cigarette) You understand this is, like, a de-stresser for me, right?


TED

It's a vice. (points at the bar of soap in the toilet) You understand that's, like, your money in the toilet?

CAROLE

Well said...

Ted rolls up his sleeve to fish out the bar of soap.



TED
Don't go there.

CAROLE
Seventeen years, Teddy. Seventeen years you have put into our savings.


Ted retrieves the bar of soap, washes his hands with it, and puts it back on its plate on the counter.



TED
Carole.

CAROLE
You could have - *we* could have gotten a new home, save enough for retirement... but, it just had to go into the pockets of every person practicing law in Arizona.


TED
Hey...



CAROLE
He's guilty. I understand he's family and all and you were helping, but your brother is not coming back from that, he's never gonna get off the hook.


TED
You don't understand him or his situation.

CAROLE
There are a lot of things I'm not understanding. Like, why? Why are you now opposing seeing my family, why are you barging into the bath-- why do you have a key to the bathroom? Why can't I just have a moment to myself sometimes?



Carole turns around to leave the bathroom. Her cardigan sleeve gets caught in the door handle and pulls the cardigan off her shoulder, dropping the lighter and pack of cigarettes to the floor. Carole grunts and removes her sleeve from the handle. She picks up the pack and the lighter and takes a moment.

CAROLE
Yeah, it's no secret now.



Carole drops them to the floor. She keeps her current cigarette and walks back to backyard patio. Ted wipes his face with discontentment. He takes a step before slipping on the toilet water that remains. He drops a HAND TOWEL on top of the splash and wipes it with his foot. He bends over to grab the towel, the bathroom key, and his wife's lighter and cigarettes.

BACKYARD PATIO

Carole stands at the back wall that is diaphragm-high with a view of the small town. The sun resides beyond the mountains, leaving the far reaches of its rays in the cloudy sky a yale blue - it might rain again.

Carole rests her forearm on the wall and smokes with her occupied arm.

Ted passes the patio couch, where Carole's book and phone sit.

DING

Ted joins Carole on her right. Carole pays no attention to him.

TED
Carole.

CAROLE
(exhales through nose) Not now, Ted. I'm too annoyed to talk to you right now. I've reached a homeostasis with my anger right now. So much has been going on this past month and I've never felt this disassociated with my own life. Or within my own household, for that matter. If you don't wanna listen then don't be here. I'd like to... be left alone to my "vices".

Ted takes a moment to share the view with her.

Carole rests her head on her hand and looks towards the setting sun.

SPARK

Carole drops her resting hand and looks towards Ted who is lighting a cigarette.

CAROLE
Ted...!

Ted blows out a cloud.

TED
You're right. This month has been crazy for us and I didn't think about how you were doing. (presents his cigarette, jokes) I'm on your level now. Let's talk.

Carole turns around to lean against the wall and have Ted in her view.

CAROLE
Okay. (inhales cigarette) How are we gonna fix this money thing?

TED
This new rec center we're building by the school will make up a good portion of that. Next thing.

CAROLE
Why do you have a key to the hallway bathroom?
TED
(jokingly) So you don't hotbox the bathroom.

CAROLE
Haha okay. (beat) How long have you known?



TED

Your sweater you're wearing ... it lingers. I don't know any other smokers you come in contact with.

CAROLE

Right.

Carole turns to look back at the town. She takes another inhale. Ted still has only taken one drag.

TED

What else?

CAROLE

I can't think. I'm too ... mesmerized.

Carole looks back at Ted.

TED

You understand that we're still adapting right?

CAROLE

I know.

TED

Ten, twenty years and we'll still be trying to keep up with this town then.

CAROLE

I know. We've gotten this far, I think we can handle anything.

TED

Yeah. You don't get views like this in Phoenix. Away from the light pollution and the rush...

Carole recalls an earlier conversation.

TED

Fewer crime rates here than some places.

Ted turns to look at Carole. She is not amused. Carole pushes her lit cigarette onto Ted's neck, singeing his skin.

TED

Haaaaaahhh!

Carole flicks her quelled cigarette at Ted. Ted drops his cigarette and puts pressure on his burn.

CAROLE

You are keeping me from seeing my own family! What is your deal?!

TED

Your dad is sick! I can not be in the same room with that man! Not one meaningful or respectful word or conversation has come

out of his mouth! I don't understand what I have done to this man to deserve such a piss-poor attitude!

CAROLE

It's the attitude that makes you "uncomfortable"?

TED

More than that! When we went to your grandma's funeral last year, he said to me, "remind me who you are again?"

CAROLE

Grow up, dude. Like you've never been teased before...

Carole pushes herself from the wall and walks towards the patio couch.

TED

For eighteen years? Yeah, he's a real joker, keeping up his act at his mother's funeral.

Carole stops to pick up her phone and her book.

CAROLE

You married me and my family! What more do you want?

KITCHEN

Carole walks inside the house and pulls the sliding glass door behind her closed. Ted, who is following her, stops the door from sliding shut. He pushes it open.

TED

I'm trying, but Lord, how can you be so ignorant with this abuse? Show some concern for what is going on between your dad and your husband who has actually tried to be civil with him!

CAROLE

You are so childish.

Carole and Ted stop at the dining table. Carole throws her phone and book on the table and stands behind the island.

TED

Me, childish? You've been running away after anything slightly inconveniences you this whole night. I'm playing Hide-and-Go-Seek with a cat with opposable thumbs and black lungs.

Ted throws the lighter and pack of cigarettes on the dining table with Carole's phone and book.

DING

TED (CONTD)

Or am I the childish one for wanting a resolution to this argument?

CAROLE


So, this is an argument?




TED
It evolved into a fight after burning me. But I'm still trying to rectify.

CAROLE
Rectify what? My smoking?

TED
You're gonna get addicted, I know you! You had it with binge eating, shopping online...!



CAROLE
Oh, my god. It's not an addiction! I can quit anytime I want! But, you've done a real job and a half trying to "rectify" our argument. Or our "fight". I don't have anything else to say to you right now. And, don't even think about saying anything back, because your efforts are disrespectful. "You're gonna get addicted"... and, bringing up my eating habits from ten years ago. I bet you liked bringing that up to put me down, huh? Who are you, dude? Fuck you.




Ted has no response. Carole looks away from Ted, she taps her fingers on the countertop, waiting for him to go away to finally have a moment to herself.

Ted remains with his hands in his pockets.

Ted breaks from his frozen state, he walks towards the bar in the corner of the kitchen. He grabs a BOTTLE OF WINE and two WINE GLASSES. He takes everything to Carole's side of the island. He sets a glass in front of Carole and himself, he pours the wine into both glasses.

Carole's eyes stay on the glass.




Ted lifts his glass, takes the first sip, and sets the glass down. A few moments pass until Carole indulges in her glass.

MONTAGE OF TED AND CAROLE CONVERSING.

Ted and Carole talk like they were young again. They are reminded of what drove them to each other - all that once was is not quite gone yet. They pull up chairs. Their conversation has sidetracked from work drama, to neighborhood politics, to what their cardboard box house would be. They talk as their glasses fill and the bottle drains.

An hour and a half has passed. Intoxicated Ted and Carole are on their last glass.



CAROLE
But, I think my domesticated uh, "iguanasaurus" would fend off my fellow hobomates from invading my UPS box home.

TED
(sipping wine) Yeah? You didn't take into account that my raccoon-rat friend - my "ratcoon" - does crack, so...

CAROLE
And? I am already injecting heroin into my eyes for, uh... "coon-rat" repellent.

TED
Hannah Montana body spray is raccoon repellent.

CAROLE
Haha okay, you win. I don't even know where this conversation is going anymore. What even is the time in here?

Carole gets up from her chair to fetch her phone at the dining table. She wakes her phone and sees her notification alerts. She sets her phone face down. She cups her face in her hands.

Ted sees Carole's disappointment. He slowly pushes himself from his chair and steadily strolls to Carole at the table.

TED
(consoling) What's wrong?

CAROLE
(upset) I totally forgot...


TED
(understanding) You know this is what you wanted, right?

Carole looks Ted in the eyes to elucidate a point.

CAROLE
This is what *we* wanted...

Carole excuses herself.

HALLWAY



With heavy steps, she makes her way to the end of the hallway. She approaches a closed door, she grips the handle. She takes a moment to look down at her fume-riddled cardigan. She lets go of the handle to take off her cardigan. She lets it fall to the floor. She resumes her grip on the door handle and pushes the door open.

BEDROOM

A room with one window. The light of the moon is the only light source present that exposes the room. The walls are painted with floral patterns, a colorful puzzle piece styrofoam mat sits on the floor.

Carole numbly approaches the end of the room.

She looks down to gaze upon her BABY sleeping in their crib.

Inside is a VIDEO BABY MONITOR and a PLUSH CHINCHILLA tucked under the baby's arm.

Carole tilts her head and smiles at her sleeping child.



She grazes the back of her hand across her baby's face. The baby lets out an unhealthy cough.

CAROLE
(voice breaking) I'm sorry.

The baby's inebriated mother understands her fault.

The baby continues to cough.

MASTER BEDROOM

Ted and Carole lie awake in bed, staring at the ceiling fan. Carole rests her head on Ted's breast, Ted has one hand around her and the other on his forehead. The lights are off but the sliver of light from the moon peers from between their window blinds. Rain rhythmically taps against the glass, the wind can be heard whistling as it passes through the trees.

Ted inhales through his mouth, recovering from his drinking.

TED
How much do you think it'd cost to duplex corrugated cardboard homes?

Carole lifts her head off Ted's chest to look at him.

CAROLE
Ted.

Ted takes his hand off his forehead and looks back at Carole.

CAROLE
Don't think I'll forget about what happened tonight.

Ted recalls her recent interaction with their child.

TED
I'd hope not.

Carole takes one last look at Ted before setting her head back down.

They return to silence and bring their focus back to the ceiling fan.

END.



Randall's Birthday

By: Brigham Rhett Larson, 3rd Place

FADE IN:

INT. APARTMENT COMPLEX HALLWAY - EVENING

OLIVER (formal, contained), DARCY (casual, in constant motion), and HOWARD (somewhat on edge, lips pursed) stand outside an apartment door, holding wrapped-up packages. Howard, holding a cake in his arms, looks around a bit and checks his watch. Oliver reaches forward and knocks on the door.

No answer.

HOWARD
(clearing throat, trying to ease tension)
Well, been a minute, hasn't it, guys?

DARCY
Yeah. I mean, it's been, like, four years, or something.

HOWARD
Without Randall?

OLIVER
(sudden, authoritative)
Six.

The number catches everyone off guard. Oliver knocks on the door again.

The door to the apartment opens and the group meets RANDALL (messy, somewhat hyper).

ALL
Surprise!

RANDALL
(in shock)
Wha--wha--oh, I--I...guys! I-it's you! I--I--! Come on in!


They cheer and walk into Randall's apartment.

INT. RANDALL'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

FOYER

The three of them walk into the apartment, which is quite messy and full of papers and trinkets scattered just about everywhere.


Randall gives each of them a hug. Darcy goes in for a full hug, Howard gives a nice brotherly hug, and Oliver gives an awkward side hug before moving along to setting up the party with the others.



RANDALL
It's been too long, guys! It's so great to see you!

DARCY
Oh, yeah, you know, we were all just in town, and things lined up, so, yeah!


RANDALL
Darcy, you were doing, uh, graphic design last I saw you, right? How's that?



DARCY
Yeah, I've actually made some album covers for some local bands, and bakery flyers, and whatnot.

RANDALL
Cool, cool. Howard? Your motel chain idea?


HOWARD
(setting up the cake in the kitchen)
Not much going on there at the moment, honestly, but hey, we're gettin' there.



RANDALL
Yeah, and you, Oliver? I saw your Facebook a few years back, tech startup, nice job!

OLIVER
Yeah, thanks.
(beat)
And you?

RANDALL
Well, actually, things have been pretty good!
(MORE)



RANDALL (CONT'D)
Now, now, I know that you've seen the things that have been happening, what with the whole thing about the government experiments, DCMAELSTROM, all the Facebook bans and whatnot, and you might not believe that things are good, but trust me, they are. I'm-- I'm doing a lot better.

The group appears vaguely standoffish at this outburst. They're all glad that he's doing alright, but this is clearly a subject they wanted to avoid.



OLIVER
(restraining himself)
Well, I'm glad to hear that.

RANDALL
You know why?

DARCY
Why?

Randall excitedly holds up his laptop.

RANDALL
The documents. They're being declassified. Just in a couple hours. You guys know me and you guys know how I get, but...closure! I mean, isn't this exciting?

Howard clears his throat. Oliver looks at a picture, seemingly annoyed. Beat. Darcy decides to speak up.

DARCY
So, it's your birthday! You're, what, it's, uh--

RANDALL
Thirty-three!

DARCY
Thirty-three! Well, you're officially old then, welcome to the club.

Randall laughs.

HOWARD
It's all downhill from here.

RANDALL
Aren't you guys only like five months older than me?

HOWARD
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

OLIVER
Well, you know, those few months can instill a whole lot of maturity, you'd be surprised!

RANDALL
Oh, yeah, maturity. Look, I spent three years of my life being drugged and tortured for some random government information. I mean, if that doesn't instill some sense of--


Oliver turns around from the picture he's looking at and locks eyes with Randall, firm yet trying to remain calm.

OLIVER
(abrupt, collected)
Okay, look, Randall. I'm saying this because I'm your friend, and I want you to know that, because this is going to make me sound mean. But, look, the government experiment thing--

Howard subtly elbows Oliver and gives him a glance.

Randall is taken aback and somewhat offended by this statement. Nonetheless, he remains calm.


RANDALL
Well, I don't know what to tell you. I saw what I saw. What happened happened. I can't stop you if you don't want to believe it,



but...yeah.
OLIVER
No, look, you don't have any evidence or anything. I simply think--

Darcy gives a death glare to Oliver. He stops himself from talking further, with great difficulty.

RANDALL
(visibly more distraught)
When the files are declassified...



OLIVER
(quiet but intense)
The files won't tell us anything we don't already kn--

Darcy interjects quickly.

DARCY
Okay. Let's just...have some cake. Calm down and have some cake.

Howard walks to get the cake from the kitchen.

INT. RANDALL'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER



LIVING ROOM

The four of them sit on the couch, eating cake in silence. Oliver and Randall stare daggers at each other. Howard and Darcy look tense.

Randall glances to his side. Oliver follows his gaze and sees Randall's laptop.

HOWARD
So, I, uh, accidentally hit a bird last week--


Randall slams his plate on the coffee table and stands up.



RANDALL
I have something I need to check on my laptop.

He starts toward his laptop, but Oliver puts down his cake and lunges toward it, grasping it tight against his chest.

OLIVER
I'm doing this as your friend, Randall! You need to face the facts for once in your life and acknowledge that you were not a test subject or of government interest or anything of that nature, you are delusional! Pure and simple!



RANDALL
(anger escalating)
I saw what I saw!

Howard and Darcy get up from their seats and rush over between the two. Oliver and Randall just continue yelling.

HOWARD

(desperate)
Guys, guys--

OLIVER
(matching tone)
You saw what you saw! Great! Ever heard of confabulation? Textbook case, Randall! And I don't know what overrode your memory, but you just can't seem to accept--

HOWARD
You're just making everything worse!

RANDALL
I was there! It all happened to me!

OLIVER
Let's be honest here, Randall, what are the chances, what are the chances, that all of this happened to you? And if it is true, by some massive cosmic stroke of luck, what the hell do you have to gain?

DARCY
(desperate)
Oliver, stop--

Randall bares his teeth. Tears of anger are beginning to stream down his face.

RANDALL
Maybe I--

OLIVER
The way I see it, you have not earned the right to have a say here! You believe something that--

HOWARD
Oliver, stop!

OLIVER
(ignoring)
--that is so obviously false I have no idea how you could possibly think that you could contribute anything outside of delusional paranoid fantasies!

RANDALL
I'm not delusional! It was all real!

DARCY
Stop!

HOWARD
Is this actually worth it?

OLIVER
You're not delusional! Well then! Uh oh, I'm sorry, am I hurting those little government-drugged neurons? Wake the hell up, Randall! Nothing happened!



Randall explodes in a shrill scream packed with sadness and fear and anger and the pent-up tension of everything that's happened to him. The other three draw back into silence.

Randall collapses onto the ground and sobs into the carpet, curled into a fetal position. He jerks around a bit, at one point hitting his head on the coffee table and letting out a pained yelp.

DARCY
Oh my goodness, Randall, are you okay?

Darcy and Howard run to comfort Randall, who is still bawling. Howard pats him on the back, and Darcy lightly strokes Randall's hair.

Oliver looks at the situation with a look of sadness and regret in his eyes, seeing what he's wrought with his stubbornness and inability to live and let live. He looks sick. He looks as if he wants to cry himself.

Howard and Darcy look up at him. He says nothing. There's nothing he can say.

Oliver walks slowly to Randall, stands there for a second, and places the laptop at Randall's side.

OLIVER
(weakly)
I'm sorry.

Oliver walks up the door. As he opens it and begins to step out, something catches him off guard.

RANDALL
(disarmingly calm through tears)
Wait.

Oliver looks back. Randall, though still shaken and still having the tears come out of his eyes, is beginning to sit up on the floor, with support from Darcy and Howard.

Randall looks at Oliver and sighs.

RANDALL (CONT'D)
I don't know. I don't. Maybe you've been right all along.
(beat)
I do have gaps, Oliver. I have gaps in my memory in places that I can't explain. Not even with the experiments. I always thought doctors were just being paid to hide the truth from me. And you know what? Maybe they are.

Randall shakily gets to his feet.

OLIVER
Randall, you--

RANDALL



Yeah, I do. Tonight was hell. But it has to end one way or another, and honestly, maybe it doesn't even matter how.
(beat)
But it has to end in some way.

Oliver walks back into the apartment.

INT. RANDALL'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

The camera pans down and rests on Randall with his laptop open on the coffee table, surrounded by his friends. He moves around a wireless mouse.

LAPTOP SCREEN.

An official-looking PDF is open. Randall scrolls through it to find the table of contents.

GROUP.

DARCY
(pointing at screen)
"List of confirmed test subjects."

LAPTOP SCREEN.

The cursor hovers over a link with the text "List of Confirmed Test Subjects."

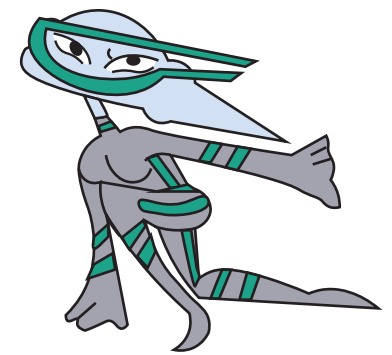
THE GROUP.

Randall pauses as he puts the cursor on the link. He is calm, and yet overcome at the same time. Randall exhales, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath.

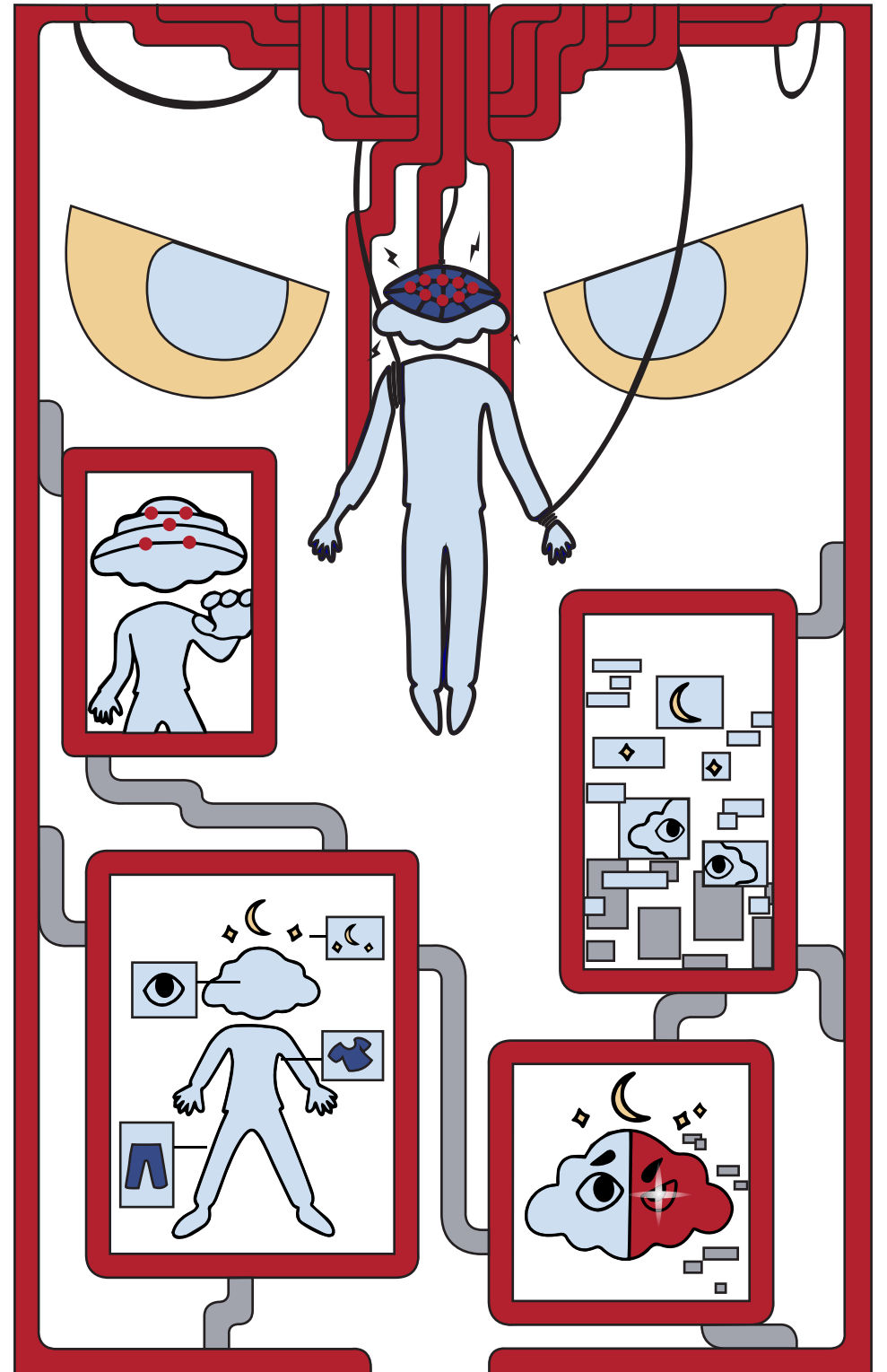
He clicks the mouse.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE OUT.



Fine  Art



Drawing/Life Drawing



Show Off
By: Alondra Mora, 1st Place



Resting
By: Adrian Delgadillo, 2nd Place



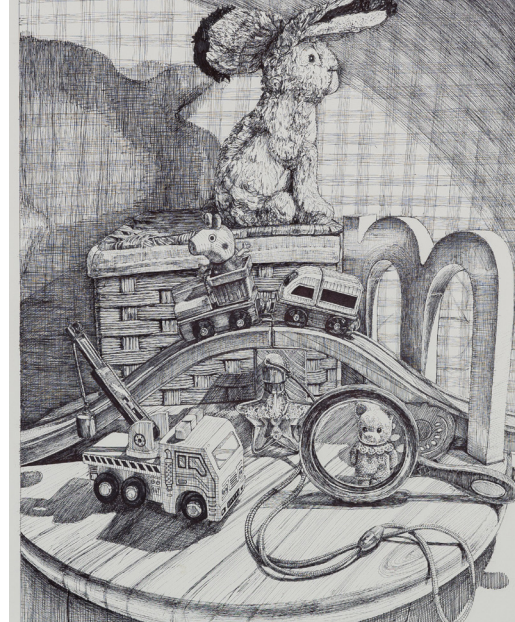
*Charcoal
Life Drawing Sonic*
By: Miguel Villicana
3rd Place

Drawing/Life Drawing



Patience (Pinecone)
By: Ciara Castillo
Honorable Mention

Drawing/Life Drawing



To be a Mom is to be a Mess
By: Melissa Cota-Robles, Accepted



Selfie
By: Julia Angoco, Alternate

Myself
By: Krystal Johnson
Honorable Mention



Sonoran Song
By: Rebecca Abbott
Accepted

Painting/Watercolor



Blueberry Cheesecake
By: Alondra Mora, 1st Place



Road to Kansas City 1
By: Debi Coons, 2nd Place

Painting/Watercolor



I've Lost Mine...
By: Nannette White, 3rd Place

Melancholy
By: Pearl Willis
Honorable
Mention



Scout
By: Joan Maceyko, Honorable Mention



I made it another year
By: Alondra Mora
Accepted

Painting/Watercolor

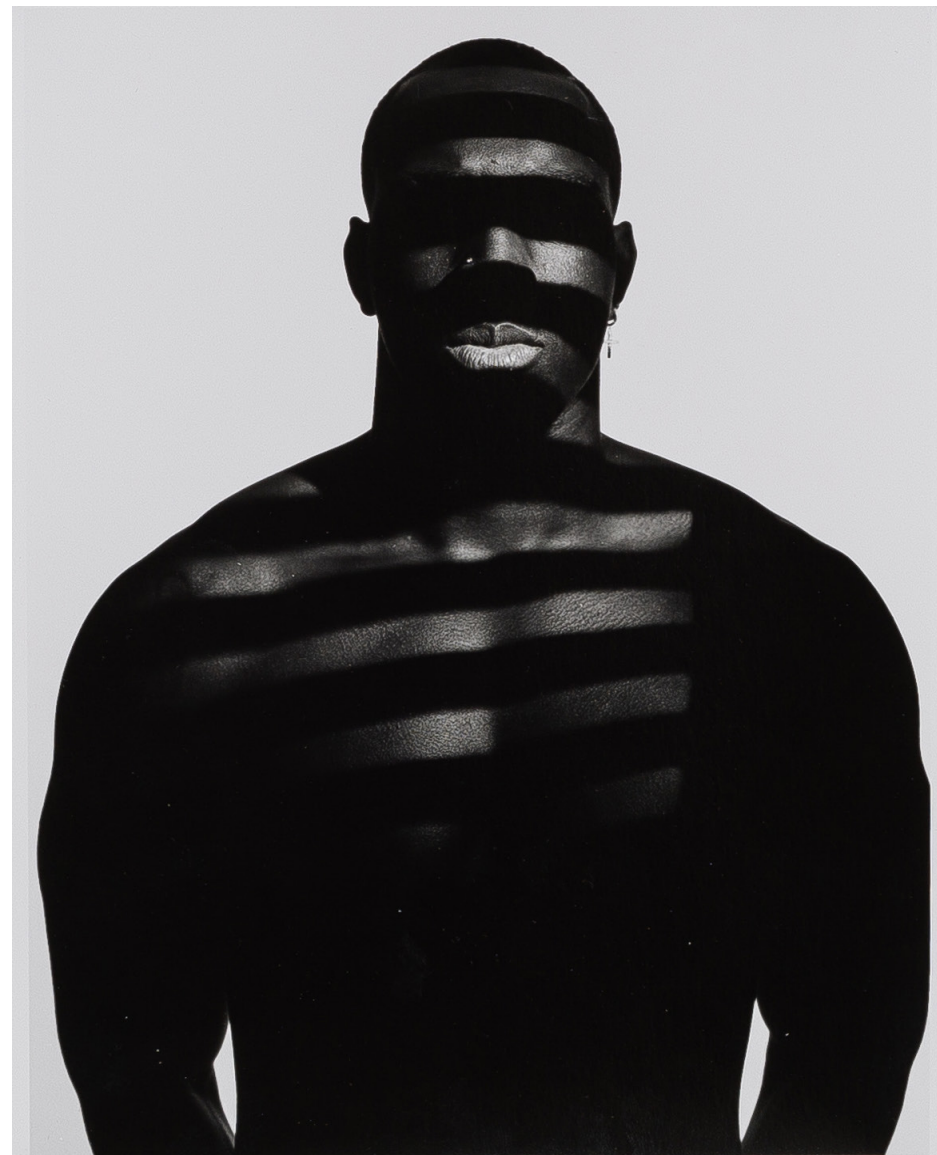


Landscape pattern
By: Colleen O'Donnell, Alternate



Road to Kansas City 2
By: Debi Coons, Alternate

Photography



Shadow man
By: Mark Thompson Jr., 1st Place

Photography



La Montaña
By: Korbin Ottley, 2nd Place



Back in time
By: Kailee Frey
3rd Place



Reflection
By: Kenia J. Cerna, Honorable Mention

Photography



Running man
By: Thadius Scott, Honorable Mention



Emma
By: Joshua Fosbre
Accepted



Her Drink
By: Tyrin Clay, Honorable Mention



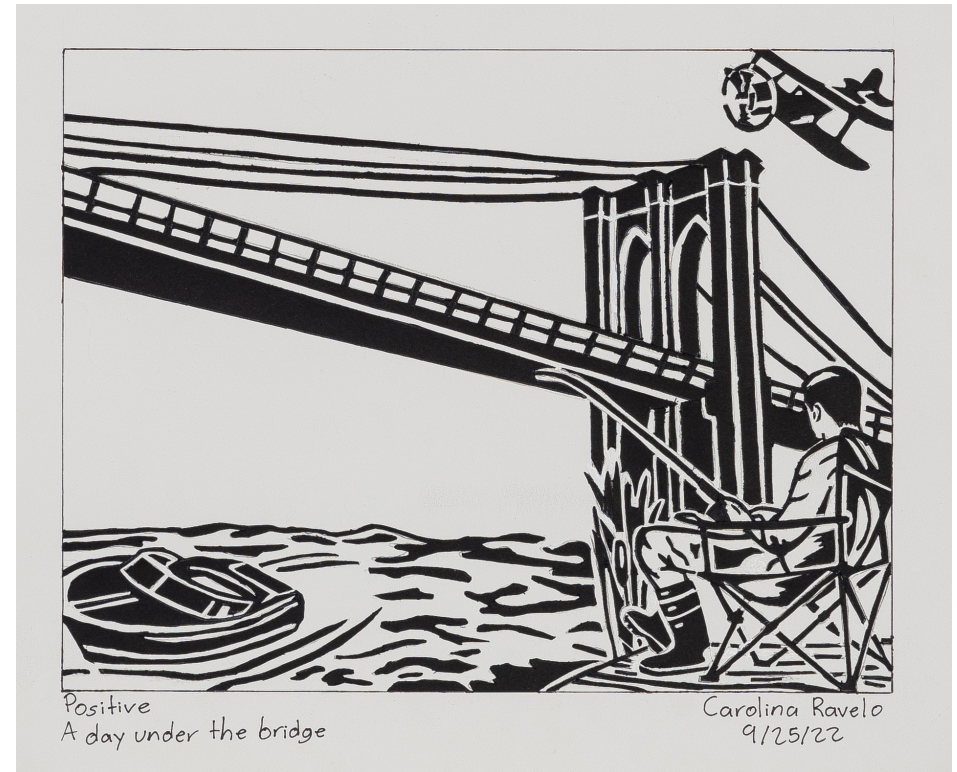
Morning Shadows
By: Rumi Poling, Accepted

Printmaking/2D Design



Parler D'Amour 1/15 Rebecca Abbott '23

Parler D'Amour
By: Rebecca Abbott, 1st Place



*Positive
A day under the bridge*

*Carolina Ravelo
9/25/22*

A day under the bridge
By: Caro Ravelo, 2nd Place

Printmaking/2D Design



In My Wizard Era
By: Rebecca Owen, 3rd Place



Citronnier
By: Erin Shaeffer, Honorable Mention



Mirthful Mourning
By: Rebecca Owen, Honorable Mention

Printmaking/2D Design



Ink
By: Krystal Johnson
Alternate

Under 2/10 Johnson 2023

Tiger
By: Sherrri McClendon
Alternate



"Tiger" AP Sherrri McClendon 2023

Ceramics/Sculpture/3D Design



Ocean Life
By: Harold Knoer, 1st Place

Ceramics/Sculpture/3D Design



Candle Holders (Set of 3)
By: Leanne Kamben, 2nd Place



Piggy Bank
By: Erin Shaeffer, 3rd Place



Gege
By: Adrian Delgadillo
Accepted

Ceramics/Sculpture/3D Design



Gold
By: Krystal Johnson
Accepted



Octopus
By: Joanne Crawford
Alternate

Glass/Jewelry



Orchid Profusion
By: Danit Ozer, 1st Place

Glass/Jewelry



Optical Illusion
By: Mary Worel, 2nd Place



Be Inspired by the Stillness of the Night
By: Joy Dunn, 3rd Place



Neck cuff
By: Danit Ozer
Honorable Mention

Credits

Book Project Manager

Jillian Wright

Book Designers

Deanna Alcala
Jillian Wright

Book Illustrators

Zahria Carter
Lazaro Torres
Annabel Cox
Andrew Galardi

Book Design Faculty Advisor

Michelle Blomberg

Art Contest Faculty Advisor

Gaylen Stewart

Community Art Juror

Daisy Brady

Literary Faculty Advisor

Jeff Baker

Student Art Jurors

Alondra Mora
Leanne Kamben
Dang Le
Michelle Diaz
Sebastian Bueno
Erin Shaeffer
Carolina Ravelo

Student Literary Readers

Patrick McCarthy
Dawn Gibbs

Faculty Literary Jurors

Jeff Sanger
Jayme Cook
Ray Lira
Roxanna Dewey
Lori Walk
Eric Luthi

Community Reader

Francis Wiget

Special Thanks

Meg Ruff
Brendan Regan
Brandon Cleworth
Ryan Kennedy
Susan Campbell

