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# THE TROJAN DIGEST

LASSITER HIGH SCHOOL'S  
LITERARY MAGAZINE

INTO THE WOODS

INTO THE WOODS

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LITERATURE  
IS THE ART OF  
DISCOVERING  
SOMETHING  
EXTRAORDINARY  
ABOUT ORDINARY  
PEOPLE, AND  
SAYING WITH  
ORDINARY WORDS  
SOMETHING  
EXTRAORDINARY.

BORIS PASTERNAK

# The Diploma

Samantha Binder

“Annie, wait up!” I yelled as I tried to catch up with her in the hallway. Even though I had only met Annie a few weeks ago, I became good friends with her rather quickly.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I reached her.

“I’m fine. It’s just that I don’t have any pencils because my mom couldn’t buy me school supplies this year. I was using a pencil that I found on the ground, but now I have lost it.” She said as she flipped her orange hair behind her shoulders.

“Oh, well you can borrow one of my pencils,” I told her.

“Really? Thank you!” she said.

I reached for one of my older pencils in case she lost it, but instead she grabbed one of my brand-new mechanical pencils.

“Thank you so much!” she said over her shoulder as she walked away to her next class. Since it was a Monday, I let it slide and I continued on with my day.



On Tuesday I met up with Annie again. I noticed that she had a brand-new binder filled with loose leaf notebook paper and I thought to myself “Maybe it’s just leftover from last year”, but I still couldn’t fully forget about her excuse for taking my pencil the day before.

“So, did you end up getting new school supplies?” I decided to ask. There was a moment before she responded.

“Oh, my dad bought some yesterday after I told him that I still didn’t have anything,” Annie responded.

“Oh, okay.”

At lunch I sat down with Annie and noticed that she didn’t have a lunch today. “Did you forget your lunch or something?” I asked

“Actually, no. My dad told me that I was getting fat so he said that I couldn’t have lunch anymore, but I’m so hungry,” Annie said.

“Well, do you want some of mine?” I offered.

“That would be great!” she said and then took my sandwich and pudding, leaving me with only some carrots. I hate carrots.



On Wednesday I talked to Annie in the morning like I always do, but unlike yesterday, she was sad.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No, I couldn’t do my math homework because I just don’t understand it,” she said.

“I can help you if you need me to.”

“That would be amazing!”

When I tried to help her, she just gave up and acted helpless. I ended up just telling her the answers, because she wasn’t following anything I said.

At lunch she brought her own lunch again which had a sandwich, grapes, chips, and a cookie. I was confused because she said that she couldn’t have lunch anymore.

“So are you allowed to have lunch again?” I asked.

“No, I had to sneak it into my backpack,” she said. “My mom still thinks I’m getting too fat.”

I just went along with that but I then later realized that yesterday she said that her dad said that she was getting too fat.

On Thursday, Annie asked me if she could borrow \$20.00 so that she could buy her great aunt, who was turning 85, a birthday present.



“Sure,” I said while I reached into my backpack for some money.

“Thank you!” Annie exclaimed.

“Please make sure you pay me back,” I started to say, but Annie was already starting to walk away.

On Friday I met up with Annie in the morning and noticed that she had a new pair of shoes. I asked, “Did you get some new shoes?”

“Oh yeah, I bought them yesterday, aren’t they adorable?” she replied.

“Totally,” I commented.

“What did you get your Great Aunt?” I said while I tried to push the thought of her spending my money on those shoes out of my head.

“Oh, I haven’t decided yet.”

“Oh, okay.” And soon after, Annie was gone and was talking to some other friends.

At lunch Annie sat next to me like usual and had a lunch with her again. “So, do you want to meet up at the café and work on homework tonight?” Annie asked.

“That sounds great,” I said. “What time?”

“How about 5:30?”

“5:30 is perfect.”



I showed up to the café at 5:15 so that I could find us a table and order waters. At 5:30 I noticed that she still wasn't there. I decided to give her another 15 minutes in case she ran into traffic. At 5:50 I decided to call her.

"Hello?" Annie said.

"Did you forget that we were meeting up or something?" I asked.

"Oh, I am so sorry. My dog is very sick and I can't leave him right now."

"Oh, okay. I understand."

"Thank you and I'm sorry for not telling you sooner."

"It's fine," I replied.

I cleaned up my homework, paid for the waters, and went home.

On Saturday I got a text from Annie asking me if she could sleepover because her parents were fighting.

"Sure," I responded. "Hope it gets better."

"Thank you and I do too."

A few hours later Annie came over. I asked her if she wanted to work on the group project that was due on Monday. She just said that she didn't feel like doing it.



Most of the night I just listened to Annie telling stories about herself and at this time I was wondering if any of them were true. When we finally went to bed, Annie jumped onto my bed and took all of my pillows and blankets and left no room for anyone else. That night I had to sleep on the floor with nothing but the clothes I was wearing.

On Sunday I woke up and realized that Annie had already left. I started to make my bed when I realized that we still needed to do our entire project. I picked up my phone and called Annie.

“Hey, sorry that I left before saying goodbye,” Annie said when she answered the phone.

“Oh, it’s fine,” I said. “We didn’t do our project though.”

“I completely forgot about that!” Annie said.

“Me too, but if we split it up then we can get it done. I could do the PowerPoint while you do the poster.”

“I can’t work on it today because my brother just dropped out of college and my parents are really mad at him so I’m trying to help him feel better.”

“Oh, okay. Well I guess I could try to do your part as well”.

“That would be great!” Annie said quickly. “Bye!” and then she hung up.



Not knowing what I just got myself into, I started to work. Ten hours later, our presentation on the Great Depression was done. I made note cards and decided to stop by Annie's house to drop them off so that she would be prepared to present on Monday.

When I got to Annie's house, I noticed that she had a pretty new house with a very nice yard. I knocked on the door and her mother answered.

"Oh, hello," she said.

"Hi, I'm Annie's friend," I said. "I was going to drop off some notes for her."

"Oh! Well come on in! It's very nice to meet you," her mother told me.

We walked into the kitchen and I noticed that the cabinets and counter tops were filled with food. There was an assortment of bags of food that had labels reading "Just for Annie".

"Don't mind all of the food, we keep it out in the open so that Annie doesn't forget to eat," her mom said with a smile.

I then noticed that on the fridge was a certificate that Annie had gotten for "excellence in math".

"Annie used to be good at math?" I asked.



“Used to be? She still is,” her dad said as he entered the kitchen and gave Annie’s mom a kiss.

I wandered over to the wall where a drawing of a dog was hanging but, on my way, I tripped over something in a gift bag.

“Oh, is that for Annie’s great aunt?” I asked.

“Annie’s great aunt passed away last year so probably not,” her mom said letting out a small laugh.

I then studied the drawing of the dog. “Is your dog feeling better?” I asked.

“Dog?” her dad asked, “We have never had a dog because I’m allergic.”

I then saw one more thing on the wall which confirmed my suspicions. I was staring at a college diploma from someone who graduated last year.





Cassandra Waldron

# Colors

Nora Fahim

The brush glides and slides  
telling the story of my life  
colors twists in a magnificent collage  
of my story  
oh how I love beautiful paintings  
oh how I love beautiful colors  
A moody blue sits at the base of my  
canvas  
a blue that is not sad but not happy  
a blue that is not dark but not light  
just a neutral blue representing the  
childhood  
though rough around the edges that  
shaped me  
As the blue subsides a bright red  
flushes onto my canvas  
an angry jaded red  
a red not understood by most  
because I felt I wasn't understood by  
most



A red angry because I didn't understand  
why I was different from everyone  
I didn't understand why my family was  
different from everyone  
Why mom didn't talk like everyone and  
why my dad was louder than everyone  
My red then bleeds to a soft, a yellow  
flooding happiness onto my canvas...  
My memories are filled with picnics  
with Girl Scouts  
with books upon books  
filled with happiness  
Happiness smells like yellow-  
laughter and smiles smell like yellow  
a sweet yellow like that of my favorite  
fruit - mangoes  
My yellow swirls and twirls with live-  
ly green onto my canvas  
encompassing my memories into one  
word - music  
My love of all genres fills my memo-  
ries



The green swanky notes of Nat King  
Cole's piano jive with the smooth  
melodies of Duke Ellington's  
saxophone

The vivacious beats of the Egyptian  
drums that showed me my love for  
dancing and the rhythmic

strumming of Paul McCartney's guitar  
creates a wild euphony of notes that  
are constantly

running in my head

The lively green then turns into a tur-  
quoise onto my canvas

To me turquoise is synonymous with  
traveling

traveling because the beautiful waters  
of my memories are always turquoise  
and my favorite thing to do is travel

My memories are always turquoise  
and my favorite thing to do is travel

My turquoise then melts into a gold  
onto my canvas

a gold fit to represent only the best of  
my memories



memories of my normal days with  
everyone I love

soon to be a memories I look back on  
nostalgically

whether it be when I play the violin  
with my friends or volunteer at nature  
centers with my sister

or cook with my mom

The gold represents the simple;  
the gold makes me cherish what I  
think will be forever...

late nights laughing to early mornings  
walking the dog

It all seems so normal now, but later  
those will be the best memories to  
look back on

As the colors flow they form a unified  
body - my unique canvas

My canvas shows the rainbow of my  
life

To look at the canvas as a whole you  
would see so many things about me



You would see my colors combining in  
different ways to represent different  
aspects of my

Character...


You would see my love for concerts as  
a smooth yellow and green mixture  
or my love for debating as an aggres-  
sive red and yellow duo

My canvas is a constantly spreading  
rainbow,  
painting the colors of my life.





Chandler Eakle



## Spit

Robin Guerra

Not one day goes by when I don't think about what my life could have been had I simply felt a little more eager to learn about my past when I was younger. About 2010, the idea of sending some random corporation a genetic sample of sorts and later receiving information on the heritage of that individual was new, but not uncommon. In fact, throughout social media the concept became pretty well known. For some reason, it was always those who were influencers or idols to the youth who were sponsored to advertise these corporations. It went almost unnoticed how targeted these advertisements always were. That is, until 2083, when a company by the name of JuvenilityC was discovered by reporters. They had been able to keep quiet about their testing for more years than people would ever know, but when a new hire was accidentally given access to a wrong file and decided to go deeper down the rabbit hole, he saved the information he felt he needed and quit before anyone could find traces of his snooping. He offered small pieces of information to reporters working for different companies for extremely high prices. It was October 12<sup>th</sup> when it was found that the first human age-reversal experiment had been a success.



The race for information had begun, and it was only a matter of time until the basic science of the technology had been released globally. Surprisingly, JuvenilityC did not make much of an attempt to keep anything confidential. However, the people of the world were able to piece together the reasons why almost immediately. Those who had been theorizing for some time now boasted, bragging about the precautions that they had taken. They had traced back the details of JuvenilityC and their relations and found that they had branched off of another organization by the name of DiscovRoot, which had faded away unnoticed by the year 2026.

This company offered an exceptionally cheap way to send in genetic samples to receive information about the heritage tied to that sample. JuvenilityC, you see, had for years been setting up a system in which they could sell tickets to an extended lifetime in an alliance with an undercover global science community. They specifically targeted the youth in hopes of gaining samples of those who had just completed puberty, as this was the easiest and most promising sample to be used for age-reversal. If I had sent DiscovRoot a sample of my DNA while I was in my mid-to-late teen years, they would have kept this sample stored away so that when this breakthrough did occur (promised to occur by the year 2045) they would have had the ability to sell the sample back to me.



I, like the fortunate individuals at the time, would have eagerly spent my life's savings on the sample and spent even more to be promised a life nearly twice as long. Many searched their past belongings and homes for any samples that promised hope, but very few prevailed. If a sample was kept in an open space long enough, it became useless. My home had been devoured by flames three weeks after my nineteenth birthday, along with every memory lying inside. Neither I, nor my parents, had any hope. I am now visually and technically 89 years old, and my biggest regret will always be not spitting into a test tube when I was a teenager.

The process of age-reversal took some time to be finalized, and JuvenilityC began to offer the return of people's genetic contents for outrageous prices even before it was possible for anyone to begin the process. People would spend their life's earnings without question and, believe me, I would have too. Sudden panic was spreading globally as everyone scrambled to find a way to access youthful genetic material. From the beginning I knew I had no hope. The fire that tore apart my home incinerated any chance that I may have had. I watched my closest friends' skin grow soft and eyes grow youthful as I grew old and withered.



Although no one really approved of it or spoke of it, the unfortunate souls were left behind, even shunned in some circumstances. When the rest of the world is just waiting for you to die out, it becomes much harder to enjoy waking up in the morning.

I wish I had kids to take care of me, I wish I were happier, I wish I had spat into a test tube when I was a teenager.



Emma Rasmussen

# Out of the Wilderness

Lauryn Hallum

June 9, 2001

The genesis of my story  
The birth of a newborn baby  
Red and yellow, like a peach, with the  
Summer morning breeze and sighs  
Of relief, as my mother's pain was over  
My cries were released.

*Tick tock, tick tock, goes the clock*  
As I'm held in my mother's arms  
Like she would never let me go  
She looked at my darling face  
Scrunched and bunched like a raisin  
Drowning in tears from lack of understand-  
ing  
Like it was the most beautiful thing in the  
world  
And for her it was-- her first and last baby  
girl.



This baby, destined for greatness,  
Will be tall like her father,  
Stubborn like her mother,  
Bruised and abused like her aunt,  
Hurt like her ancestors,  
And angry like her brothers.

At 1, I stumbled about with chest leaning  
forward.

My heart, which had always beat too fast,  
lead the way before my little legs caused  
me to

Crash.

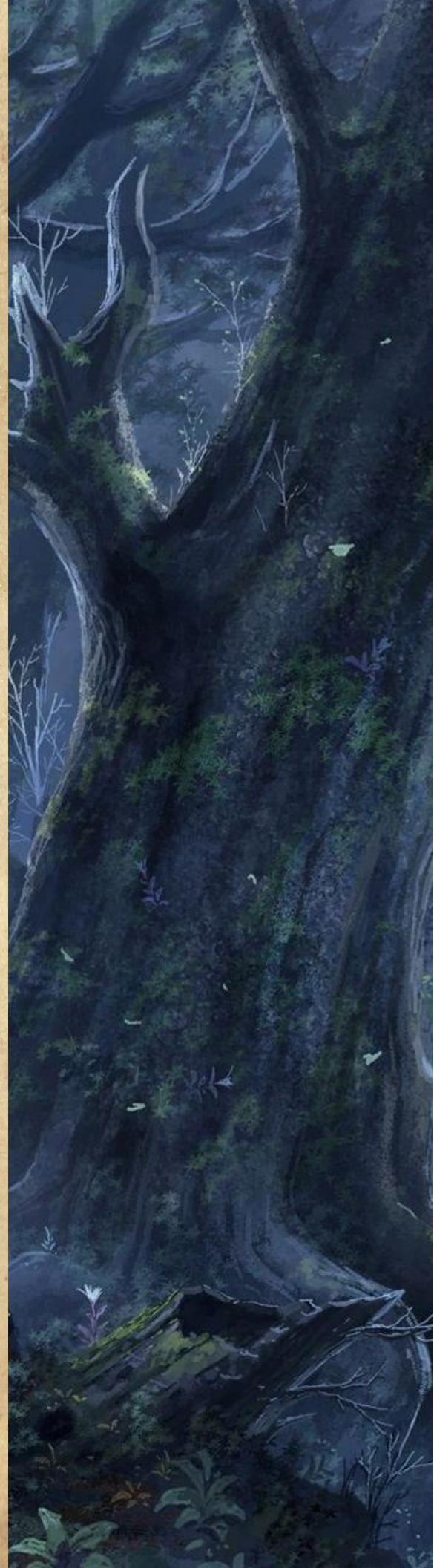
My mother had been there to catch me  
when I had fallen.

Wondrous eyes curiously painting images  
onto the walls of the world with my  
finger-tips—

dipped into the paint of yellow sunshine so  
divine

that I wished to make sense of such  
beauty. This wonder for what the world is,  
where has it

wandered off to now? I wonder.

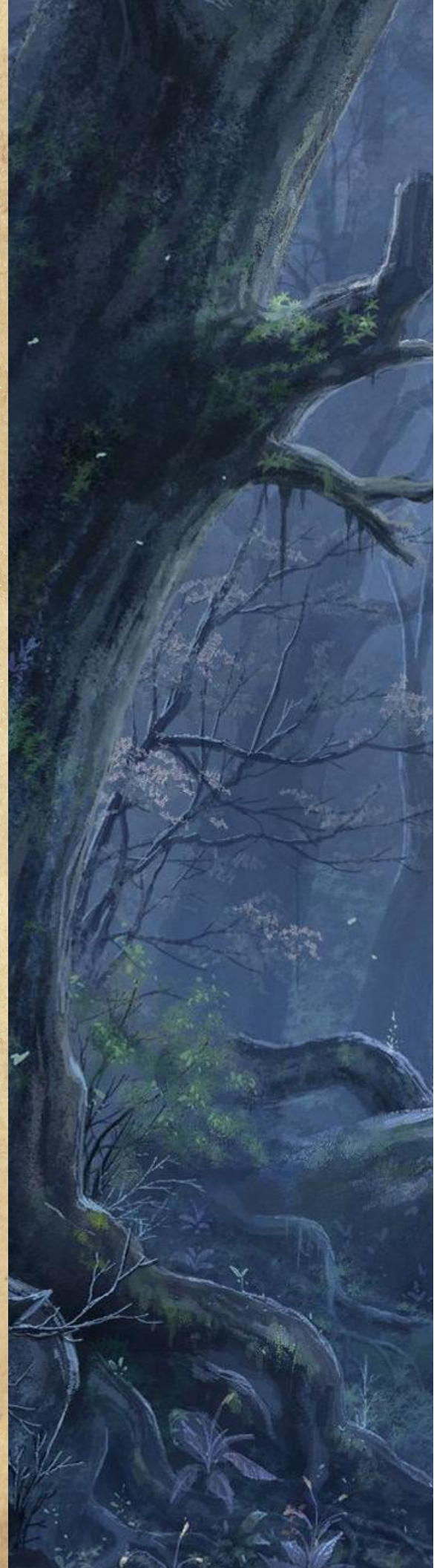


Blue. Green. Yellow. Pink. Black. Red.  
The lovely masterpiece of the world so unknown  
that surrounded my little body with halos of pastel  
paint left me wondering— what is this?  
before I forgot.

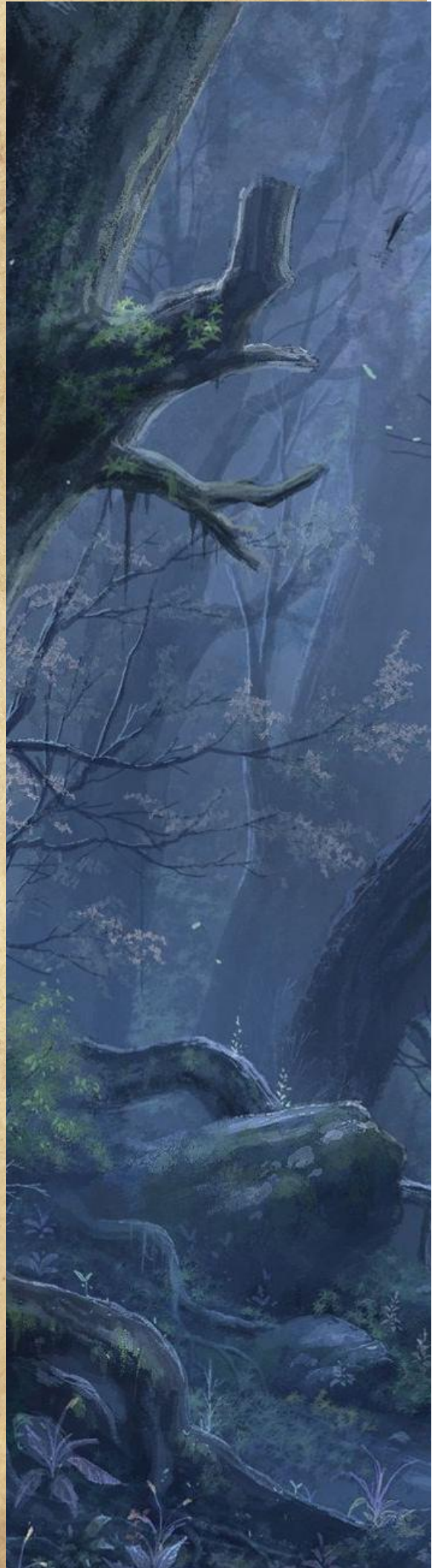
At 4, I tried to gladiate my soul sucking  
demon,  
But was defeated by a man too strong  
The reigning champion, the destroyer of  
worlds,  
that took the color out of my world.  
The colors I painted looked dim. Why?  
Why me? Is this... normal?

At 9, I found out it wasn't.

At 12, I had been like milk spilled: I had an  
expiration date stamped on my forehead—  
as I grew with age, my mind, this body,  
which I despised aged like spoiled milk  
poured out onto the counter.  
This was no mess that people were willing  
to clean up.



My deformed body, which then lay  
on the counter, begging for a heroic  
encounter,  
filled the air with a scent so ghastly  
that people  
stayed 50 feet away—I'm too much of  
a downer.  
No one wished to clean up the mess of  
my mind,  
and they just told me to bite my tongue  
and deal.  
No time to heal.  
It's my fault, isn't it? Take responsibility  
for allowing it.  
My rampant mind splashes with random  
emotions  
of black mixed with my chunky, funky  
mess which still  
remained on the altar. The sins of others  
stained  
me, stained the counter, stained my  
heart saturnine,  
which prayed to be cleansed.



At 14, I died. Baptize me O, Lord!  
Wash me! I have died too many times  
and the inconsistent rhythms of the  
drums of death boomed in my head.  
The *zip, zap, zoom*.

At 16, I again, heard the *boom*. *I heard  
the screech*

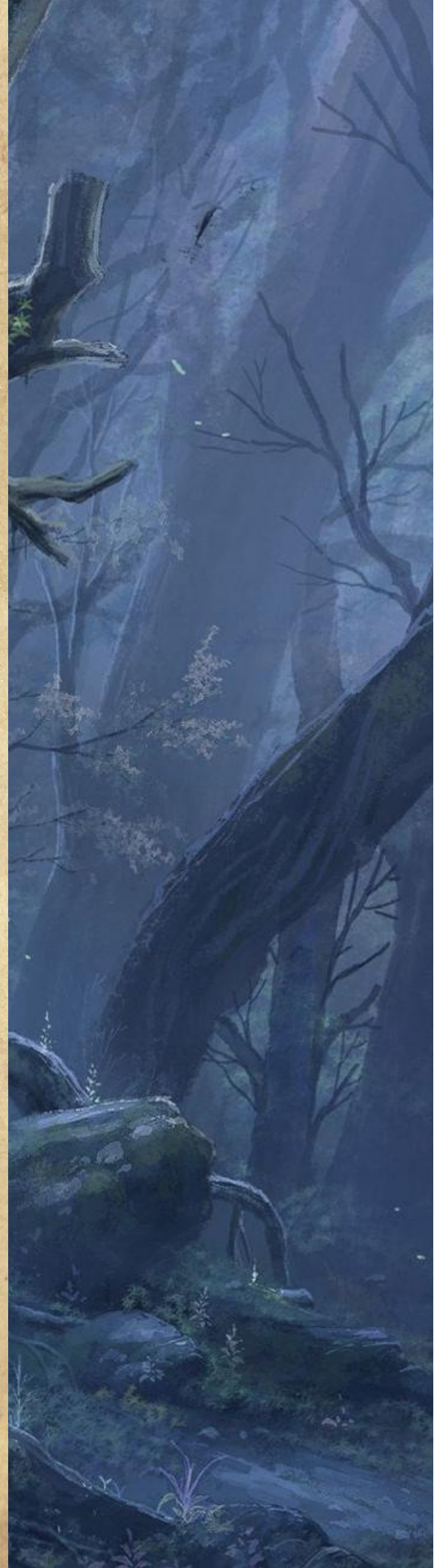
of my demonic ways burning my flesh  
alive. Fire

—the heat, like a sick hunger, my si-  
lence strangling straight jacket,  
left me entranced.

A molten, hot lava from hell fueled by  
Lilith.

The heartless gaze in the mirror I had  
come to know, I had come to love too.  
I screamed at the top of my lungs to  
exorcise myself.

To be free.



At 17, the season of rebirth arrived. I  
fell in love.

I fell in love with the clash, the cacophony,

the mess, the rosy vines wrapping  
around my legs,

the tragedy of me. I'm on a journey,  
though sickly sweet like the bitter honey  
of my life,

a journey of self love and no longer  
hurting.

I'm alive, in tune to the pitch of the  
Gospel

with soulful runs like a river.

*"This is freedom!"* I cry as

I stretch my black hands towards the  
Kingdom's doors.

If He'll accept my broken, scarred  
body with

dampened wings, then maybe I can  
take flight.





Katherine Tanner

# Sunset

Diego Quiroz

When I was a boy I used to chase the  
sunset

Though it stung my eyes what was  
ahead of me was something beautiful

Something worth pursuing

I felt that the reward outweighed the  
risk and so I chased the sunset

I ran like I'd never run before

I chased the sunset, ignoring the tragic  
tale of Icarus

I chased the sunset, hoping it would  
lead me to a brighter future

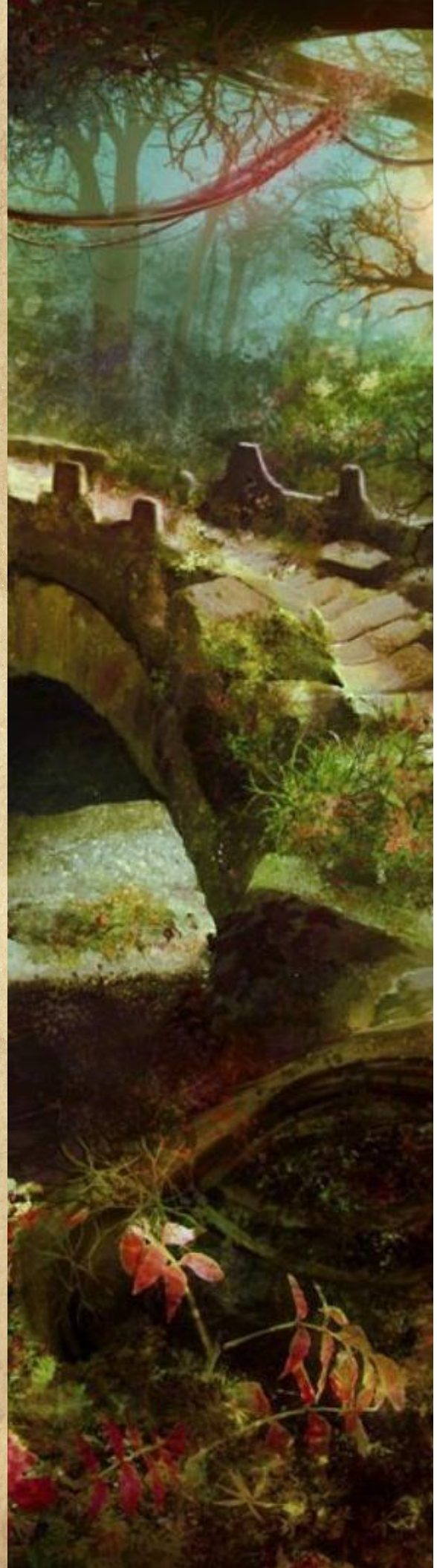
A glowing paradise in the form of a sa-  
cred sphere that I could seemingly  
hold in my palm

A sacred sphere that provided our  
neighborhood with the security of light

I chased that glowing ball because I  
didn't want it to leave me

Because with its absence came the  
darkness

And with the darkness came  
the demons



Or that's what I saw when I was  
younger

I now see that it was my insecurities  
filling the atmosphere around my head  
Polluting my thoughts with toxins that  
were seemingly impossible to recover  
from

Causing me to drift away into the ev-  
erlasting nothing that were my night-  
mares

When I was a boy I used to cry  
almost every night  
I was never sure what was wrong with  
me

I asked my brother for help and he  
bluntly replied with

Boys don't cry

If that's true, who am I?

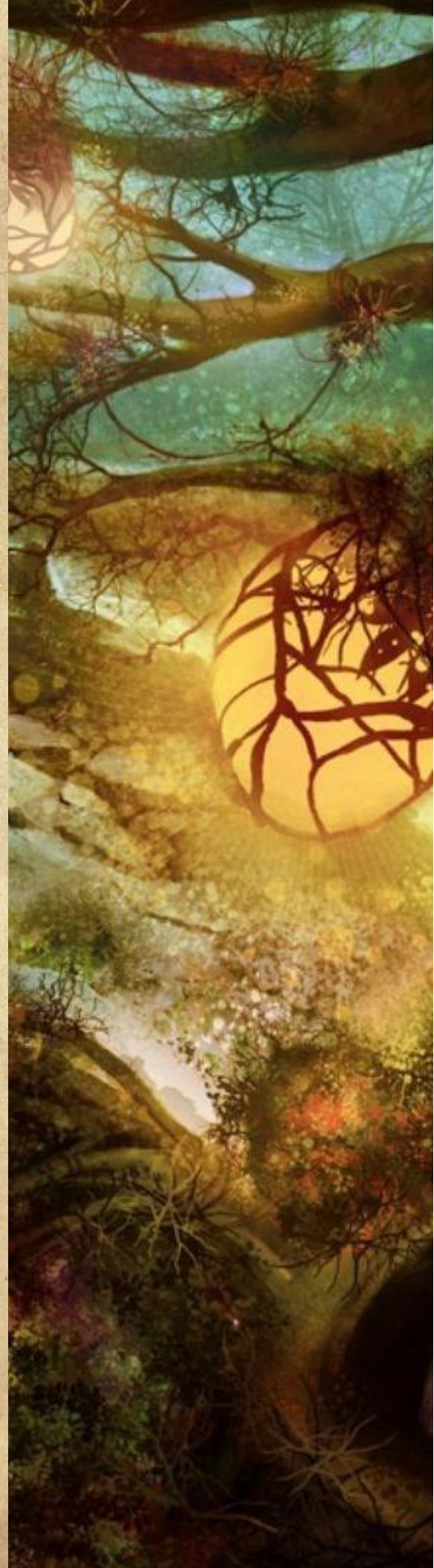
Why am I like this?

When I was a boy I used to cry  
almost every night

But what caused the steady flow of  
tears was the fact that though I had a  
father

I never had a dad

The lack of connection led me to dark  
thoughts- I lacked a male role model.



And I was worried that I wasn't going  
to become a man

I "lacked direction"

And how am I supposed to be complete  
when what makes up half of my  
blood won't even look at me?

Why don't you think I'm your son?

These are the thoughts that caused me  
to want daylight to stay

But the sun escaped instead of setting  
slow

That boy died in the sunset

And from his ashes rose a young man

A young man who's learned what it  
means to truly feel alone

But is also aware that he is  
independent

Though his mother couldn't teach him  
how to be a good  
man

She taught him how to be a good  
human being

The day I made this discovery was the  
day the roles reversed

That evening we were going away  
from the city



I remember riding in the backseat of  
our minivan  
Looking out the window- I noticed  
something  
At that moment on the freeway, I  
noticed the sun was setting  
But this time, I was ahead of it  
It was at that moment I realized  
I had chased the sunset until the sunset  
chased me.





Anna Schultz

# My Motherland

Sara Sehhizadeh

I watch the brittle, green leaves crumble  
through the cracks of my grandmother's  
hands.

I am mesmerized by their dance, like au-  
tumn leaves they fall into the tin plate.

I sit across from my Mamahni, the Persian  
rug under our bums is coarse from time.

Bronze mountains encompassed the hori-  
zon, lush green trees painting the  
foreground

and a clear blue sky to finish  
the ensemble.

It's a four hour car trip, if you take the  
express highway.

My uncle drove north from the capital,  
Tehran,

and didn't stop until we reached a house  
with white columns and red tile roof.

There is a familiar symphony  
of pots and pans

coming from the open kitchen window,

And a pleasant murmur from my mom  
and aunties joins them.

The old stove stops momentarily to play a  
simple beat

And reignite the flame.



The aroma of heavy spices and basmati  
rice  
is intoxicating and my stomach longs for  
attention.

It is Ramadan and my family is  
celebrating the fasting month.

I return to my poor imitation of grand-  
mother's practiced motions.

She looks strangely like an old Russian  
woman

Her expression stern,  
from habit, not actual displeasure,  
hunching further into the floor.

Her wrinkled hands dyed green from the  
mint leaves

with calyces earned from years of  
domesticity

Her hijab and thick coat she insists stay  
buttoned,

encompassing her figure.

I ask her if she is hot, under all that black.

Emerging from the villa's kitchen with a  
platter of tea and delicacies

My Mamahn tells me



They must grieve  
All day and night,  
Because they can do nothing else  
For their fallen empire.

I ponder her words and wonder  
what a novelty this experience has been  
for me.

As an Iranian child, born from the  
diaspora,  
I can speak the same language as my  
cousins,  
yet I will never know their struggles and  
suffering.

Still I am no different from any of them  
I like to eat good food and to sleep in till  
three.

I like the smell of new books, and the  
way graphite dyes my hands after  
sketching.

I like wearing my red panda slippers on  
chilly winter mornings.

I will not deny the culture barrier  
between us,

It is something that is a part of me as  
much as a part of them.

But the motherland welcomed me.





Joely Goss

# Who I Want To Be

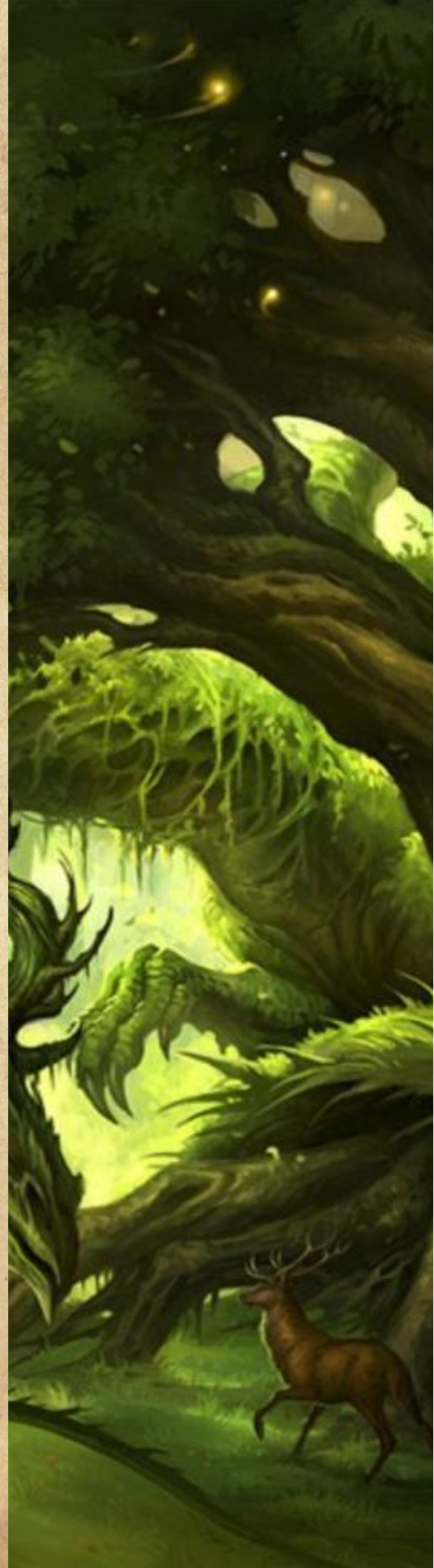
Sara Lionberger

As pieces of glass scattered on the floor  
I ached to fix it, but I couldn't start  
I can't keep up this image anymore! The  
perfect reflection shattered apart

For years I attempted to wear a mask  
Hiding from the truth, from the facts  
Never confiding, though people would ask  
Showing a vision, a fictional act.

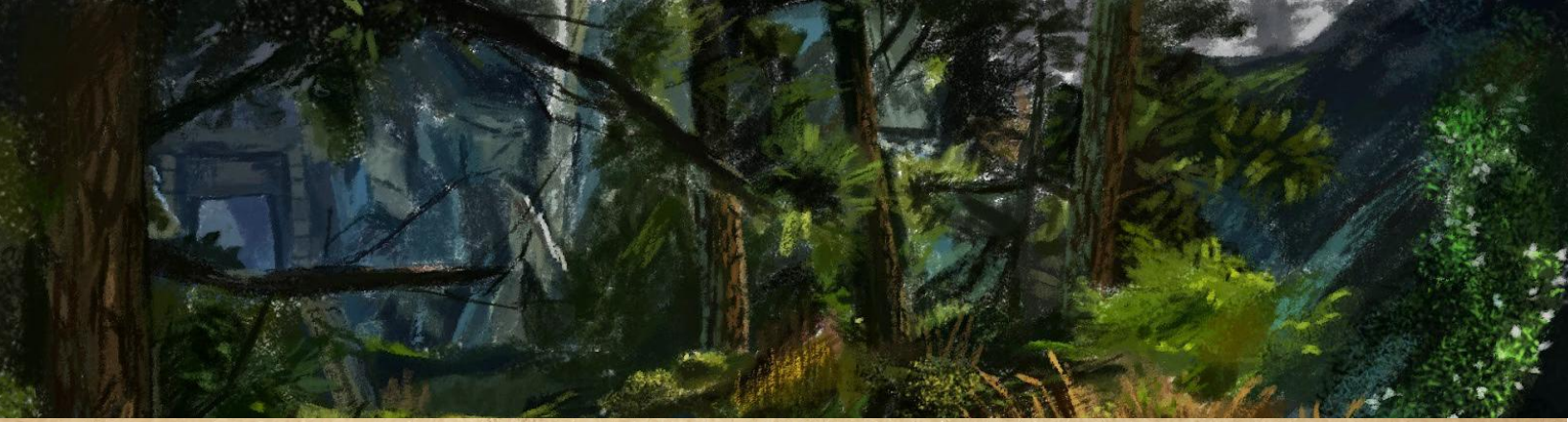
Last year I was drowning, deep in my fear  
Perfection was forced and hid all my  
doubts

Now I am honest, my image is clear  
I finally know what life is about  
I may not be perfect, but I am me  
She is exactly who I want to be.





Kelly Meyer



## The Butler

Sophia Maier

I can remember the house quite well. The manor was luxurious: framed by brilliant white pillars and fragrant magnolias that my dear wife Dorothea was so fond of. When I took Dorothea's hand in marriage, I moved into the manor, which Dorothea's family had owned since the French possession of Louisiana. From the moment we wed, Dorothea expected me to fulfill her every desire. First the demands were miniscule: a new set of china or an upholstered chaise; however as the seasons progressed, Dorothea's desires grew more sinister.

Dorothea had inherited the tobacco plantation beside the manor and the slaves who worked the land. I myself felt different from much of the society of New Orleans during the time. My wife, along with other dignified members of the town, were rather merciless to the slaves who worked the plantations. I had to often conceal my disapproval of Dorothea's manner toward them as I liked to call the "workers" of the plantation. I could not bring myself to fathom the need for threats of punishment or refusal to feed such workers. However, Dorothea's love for me seemed to halt me from going against her wishes. They were such horrible crimes she made me commit...



I can barely force myself to recall all the times she made me carry out the whippings of the unsatisfactory workers. Once, I managed to attempt to challenge my wife's requests of me.

I begged Dorothea, "Dear, could you not call for the help from your brother to carry out your punishments? I cannot bear to yield force against the swollen backs of these poor workers."

"Thaddaeus, stop calling them workers. Call them as they are: negroes. They deserve what their unspeakable acts have garnered. I thought that I married a man, not a child!" Dorothea responded.

"I am no child, dear. Do you not see how these men do not deserve this brutality? They only took a mere half an hour break. Please just let them get back to harvesting. I beg of you, darling." I answered with my utmost sincerity.

"Ma'am, please believe your husband! We done nothin' against your wishes ma'am. I done say no lies, for sure I'd be disrepectin' our heavenly Father," one of the presumed guilty men by the name of Daniel interjected.

"Enough is enough! The heavenly father knows what you've done, and for that, you will pay the price!" Dorothea said with a sly grin, after which she gave me the slick leather weapon.



As Dorothea watched, I shed bitter tears as I felt her eyes move the whip in my hands against the backs of the wrongly accused. I thought to myself, How can I be doing this? I cannot be performing such demonic actions. Dorothea's malevolent powers were starting to be uncovered by my suspicions; however, my notions were yet to be fully confirmed. It would take a greater power to enlighten me about Dorothea's true powers.

One night, a few weeks after Dorothea's last bout of rage, Dorothea did something incredibly strange. An awful storm had occurred in New Orleans on that night: one I had never seen the likes of. I woke from my finite slumber to an ungodly roar of thunder, only to then be jolted out of my bed. I stared wide-eyed at my beautiful, yet ominous, wife cradling a dark-skinned infant in her arms.

"Thaddaeus, my dear, look at what I have! I am holding the future perfect slave, no, forgive me, he shall be better than a slave; he shall be my most regarded servant!" Dorothea exclaimed.

"My precious wife, what on earth are you shouting about?" I questioned.

Dorothea responded with even more excitement, "Well, my darling, I saved this boy from a gaggle of dangerous women- voodoo priestesses! News has been going around town that one of these



horrid women had given birth to a baby boy. Once I heard of this, I knew what I needed to do to prevent the demise of this poor infant. I ventured out into the storm and rescued the boy.”

Feeling amazingly dizzy, I sat back down onto the mattress and only asked Dorothea one question: “What should the boy be called?”

“His name will be Herc, shortened for Hercules: he who was the only servant who could perform 12 great deeds for the notable Apollo. He will be the best servant. Oh, how all of them will aspire to be as good a servant as he!” Dorothea boasted.

As the years drifted by, Herc, as Dorothea had predicted, became the most attentive servant in the manor. He spoke in perfect English and only addressed Dorothea as madam. He never complained about any given task, but simply smiled and executed Dorothea’s demands perfectly. When Dorothea and I had visitors over, nearly every guest seemed to say, “My goodness, what an exceptional slave!” Dorothea treated Herc like his skin was the same creamy complexion as hers. In fact, Dorothea never allowed Herc to see her maltreatment of servants or workers on the estate, until one unfortunate day came along when she let Herc see the monster that she had long kept hidden.



Upon Herc's eighteenth year, Dorothea decided to have a small dinner to celebrate. A few servants worked on a main course of simmering jambalaya, creamy grits, buttery biscuits, and savory okra. The final dish, sweet beignets, were specially requested by Dorothea. A house girl named Lula was presented the task of making the beignets, as she was known to make the best beignets in the French Quarter. Dorothea took one bite of Lula's sugary treat and fumed,

"This is pitiful! Absolutely pitiful. You disgust..." Dorothea stopped herself, as she realized that Herc's big brown eyes were watching her display of poor character, "I apologize Lula. These are wonderful-I think that I am just a bit tired."

When the meal was over, Dorothea and I retired to bed, as well as Herc, who had been allowed a few extra hours of sleep as a treat from Dorothea. As I dozed off, I had the most peculiar dream. I was in a field and woke to the foreign chants of slave women wearing long dresses made of a silky white fabric with their hair wrapped in the same bright fabric. Their beaded jewelry swayed furiously as they each helped fix a potion of a reddish substance that appeared to be blood along with scents of strong herbs. The substance was in a metal cup that boiled as the women's chants grew louder. Their language was one that I had heard in the Quarter before, but I could not pin down who these women were.



The chants rose as the women took a small dagger and cut into their dark skin, dripping blood into the bubbling elixir. The last substance was the strangest ingredient of the potion. It was a lock of hair, a chestnut color similar to that of Dorothea's. Once the portion of hair was dropped into the silver cup, a man appeared. The man wore white ghoul-like paint that was striking against his dark complexion. He was clothed in a black coat and wore a top hat lined with small skulls of otherworldly creatures. As the man appeared over the women, the women shouted "Papa!" The man smiled at the women, took the metal cup, and drank the deadly concoction. After his lips took the last sip of the potion, the man winked at me, and with horror I suddenly knew who he was. I ran to the cackle of women and the man I knew as Herc, but as soon as I reached their location, they vanished into the night sky.

I woke startled to a stringent scent that burned my nostrils. I opened my eyes and stared ahead in horror. I was not in my bed, but instead was in front of the manor. Before my very eyes, the manor burned with hellish flames. I shouted Dorothea's name, but it was not her who responded. As I turned my head, Herc responded with a cackle, "Don't worry, Papa has taken care of her."



Kenadie Larson



## Someday

Seneca Crosby

She's late, again. I sit at a table in the cafe she visits every morning at exactly 7:00. I look over at the large clock mounted on the left wall. The minute hand clicks past one.

“Can I get you anything, sir?” a friendly looking waitress stands by me, smiling. I shake my head.

“No, thanks.” I smile back. She frowns.

“Are you sure? You've been sitting here for a while and I'm sure you're at least a little thirsty,” she says. I grab her wrist.

“I said no.” I release her and return my gaze back to the doors. She scurries away.

And then I see her.

She walks through the doors, her raven hair pulled back into a bun. Her glasses slightly askew on her nose. She wears a black dress, tights and high heels, a picture of perfect serenity. I stand from my seat.



She is standing in line with several people in front of her. Delighted, I make my way towards her. I can smell her cherry blossom perfume from a few feet away.

*But he got in line behind her.*

Her idiotic boyfriend. His orange hair is unkempt. He wears a worn leather jacket and ripped jeans. His large stomach manages to hide his waistline. One of his shoes is untied. I curse under my breath and make my way towards the bathroom to avoid wary glances. I lock myself in a handicapped stall and pace, anger boiling up inside me.

*He probably doesn't know as much about her as I do. I've spent months researching her. I know her schedule, her family, her friends, where she lives, what car she drives. Of course I know about him too. He's unemployed, lives with his mother, and spends every spare minute eating. I hit my head on the stall door. Frustrated with my stupidity. I could have gotten up sooner to confirm my spot in line behind her. Then she would have noticed me. She would have left her good-for-nothing boyfriend. She would have been with me. With me.*

I haven't gone insane. An insane person would babble on and on about useless information. My brain contains useful information. Information that I can use to get her. To make her mine.



## *Someday.*

I return to my table and watch as she orders her usual. A plain bagel with a Caramel Pumpkin Spice latte. Her boyfriend gets nothing. She does not get whipped cream. That is her only flaw.

They shuffle over to a table near mine. Yet, it's too far away and I cannot smell her perfume. I stand and shift over to the table next to theirs. She glances at me.

“The sun was in my eyes.” I smile and point at the sun streaming through the window. She nods and turns back to her boyfriend. I tilt my head slightly so I can hear their conversation.

“Do you know that man over there?” her boyfriend asks. She shakes her head.

“He's here every day. And I forgot to thank you for the flowers you sent me yesterday. It makes me happy to know that you remember my birthday,” she smiles. Her boyfriend looks at her, puzzled. He should. He didn't send the flowers. I did. I send her something every year for her birthday. Her boyfriend is too dull to understand the concept of gifting on birthdays.



“What flowers?” he asks. She frowns, then shrugs.

“Doesn't matter,” she grins, but I can see the hurt in her eyes. She's not happy with him. She'd be happy with me. If only she realized.

### *Someday.*

They stand and walk out. I count to ten before standing to follow them. She leans against his truck, arms crossed. He walks around to her and stands next to her. She looks at him and starts yelling. They argue. I start to walk away when I hear a car door slam. He's in his truck and she's walking to her car. I watch as she gets in her car and drives away. I look at his truck. It sputters, then it stops. His battery is dead. He gets out and slams his fist on the hood. I see my chance. I walk over to him and tap his shoulder.

“Is the battery dead?” I ask. He nodded and opened the hood. Smoke billows out, overcoming us both.

“I've got a tool kit at my apartment. It's just around the corner. I'll let you borrow the tools you need.” I point to the building next to the cafe. He nods.

“I'm Tony. And you?” he asks.



“I'm Christopher,” I say. Christopher was my father's name. My decision to hide my true identity will help in the end. I motion for him to follow. He trudges behind me, kicking a rock. It hits my heel a few times. I ignore it, knowing it will all be over soon.

### *Someday.*

We arrive at my building. I hold the door open for him. We walk up three flights of stairs. We reach my floor, I lead him to my apartment. Room 316. I unlock my door, and he walks in.

“You may sit on the couch while I find my tools.” I retreat into my bedroom. In my closet, on the left shelf, at the very top, sits a dusty tool kit. I pull it down and open it. Taking out a wrench and closing the lid back. I hide the wrench behind my back and return to the living room. I hand him the kit.

“Take what you need,” I say, opening the lid. He sifts through the tools, pulling a few out. I grip the wrench tighter. He looks up at me.

“Do you have a wrench?” he asks. I nod.



“Here.” I swing the wrench at his head and he falls to the floor. I can't tell if he's alive. To be sure he isn't, I wrap a plastic bag around his head. I put him in an oversized trash bag and drag him out of my apartment. Down the stairs. Outside. I push the bag over the top of the dumpster. I hear it thud as it comes in contact with the dumpster floor. I wipe my hands on my pants and walk back inside. I return to my apartment and put the tool kit back in its original place. I look at my watch. It's 9:30 in the morning. I decide to lie on the couch. I kick my shoes off and lie down. My eyelids close and I drift to sleep. A short tap on the window wakes me. I stand and look out. Nothing. I lie back down. Before I fall asleep again, I hear another tap. Louder this time. I look out again. Still nothing. I walk into my kitchen and open my pantry. Inside sits one wrench. Nothing else. I rub my eyes and blink twice. It's still there. I hear a tap on the window twice now. Louder than the last. I remove the wrench from the pantry and set it on a counter. I return to the couch and sit. The tapping becomes more frequent. One after the other. Louder than the one before it. Then something hits the door of my pantry. I open it and inside sit two wrenches. I remove them and set them next to the first. As I walk away, something hits the pantry again. This time, there are three wrenches inside. The tapping gets louder, but I leave the wrenches in the pantry. The banging at tapping causes my ears to ring. I withdraw to my bedroom. I cover my head with a pillow, hopelessly trying to block out the noise.



The noise grows louder still, penetrating the thin layer of protection I had from it. A loud thud outside my bedroom indicates something has fallen. I walk out, covering my ears. The sight I see causes my stomach to drop. Wrenches are pouring out of the pantry. Out of my cabinets, covering the floor. Spilling closer to me. I flee from my room and run to the parking garage. I find my car and unlock the door. Wrenches start falling out of my car, too. Generating out of thin air. I bolt away and out of the building. I run down the street; the sound of the wrenches clattering behind me causes me to run faster. The tapping and banging noises follow me too. I reach a police station and sprint inside. I slam my hands down on the counter and cry out.

“I killed him! I killed her boyfriend!!” I scream. I look at the woman sitting at the desk. And it's *her*.

“Sir, calm down. Tell me what happened,” she says slowly. The noises cause my head to spin.

“I killed him with a wrench! Arrest me! Just make them stop!” I sob. She looks worried.

“Make what stop?” she asks. I rub my head.

“The noises!!” I cry. I bang my head on the counter- trying to make them stop.



“Who did you kill?” she asks. I pull at my collar.

“Your boyfriend!” I wail. She gapes at me. My knees give out and I slide down to the floor.

“Why?” she asks. I look up at her, helpless.

“I wanted him to go away. So you'd be with me. So you'd be-” I choke. The noises have become so overwhelming, I can't hear myself think.

“So you'd be...” I tilt my head up. “You'd be mine someday.” I mumble.

And the noises stop.



Kendra Garcia

*Kendra Garcia*



## The Rose Killer

Lauren Miller

*“The Rose Killer is close to becoming one of the most notorious killers in our state’s history. In just five months, ten lives have been claimed. Another person has been murdered. Reports say that they were dead for about twelve hours before the neighbors realized something was wrong and called the police. The victim was found surrounded by an array of black roses. If you see anything suspicious, don’t hesitate to call the authorities.”~*

I’ve always loved flowers. I love all kinds, all the way from a misshapen birthwort to a glowing sunflower. I love watering, planting, and anything else to do with nature.

It was a day like any other. When I stepped outside of my house, I could feel each ray of sunlight penetrating my skin. Spring was here, and the smell of sweet blooming flowers was dancing throughout the air. As a part of my usual routine, I followed the winding, cobbled path behind my house to the greenhouse: my safe place. It was a huge, open building where I could just relax and observe my beloved flowers. I turned on some classical music as I filled up my watering can and tended to each section.



Over the years, I had built up quite the collection—sunflowers, chrysanthemums, carnations, begonias, tulips, poinsettias - the list goes on and on.

“Lily! There’s a letter in the mail for you,” I hear my sister yell from the back door.

I immediately sprung up and dashed out of the greenhouse doors all the way back to my house.

Normally, the prospect of getting a letter wouldn’t be so exciting to me, but this wasn’t just any letter. It was from a special person, someone who just got me. He was one of the few people who didn't think that my obsession with nature was crazy, but all good things have a catch. We’d never met in person. Despite this, it felt like I’ve known him for a long time. I opened the letter and it read:

*Hello again Lily,*

*I was taking a casual stroll when I saw this amaryllis and thought of you.*

I picked up the flower, so perfectly preserved in the envelope. He knew just what to pick. I believe that every flower has a meaning, a purpose. An amaryllis is true beauty and a very delicate flower. I’d have to think of what I’d send him back...



*"The Rose Killer is still at large. Another person was found dead. The authorities are looking into it but can find no other evidence besides the circle of black roses left at the scene of each crime.*

*Please make sure to be aware of your surroundings and always have someone walk with if you are going anywhere late at night."*

I finally decided on a flower to send back to him: a Bird of Paradise. These flowers are pure joy - the mixtures of exuberant oranges and yellows represented how happy it made me to talk to him. These are quite the rare flower, and I only had two in my whole plant sanctuary. I felt like he was worth it, though. I wrote a response to him:

*Hello Jack,*

*How are you doing? I found the perfect flower to describe you. We've been going back and forth for almost five months now, and I feel like I know you, but at the same time I want to be able to see you.*

I sealed it up and stared at it a while before putting it in my mailbox. There was always one thing blaringly odd about his letters: they were never addressed. The only thing written on the envelope was *To: Lilly*. They would appear about once a week, and I hate to admit it, but it did give me more motivation to check the mail.



I never knew to whom to address my responses, so I just wrote *To: Jack* and left it in my mailbox. They were always picked up, and Jack often talked about how he loved my responses, so I knew he had to be reading them.

...so my life continued in this pattern- him sending me flowers, me sending flowers back. My friends and I all liked to joke and speculate who the mystery man “Jack” was.

Until they just *stopped*.

It had been three weeks since I last received a letter, and my letters were no longer being picked up from the mailbox. Had he moved? Was he ok? What’s going on?

“Maybe you should be careful...” my friend Taylor says. “The Rose Killer is still out there... And him sending you letters is kind of creepy.”

Of course, I didn’t think anything of it.~

*“There has been a new development in the Rose Killer case. The latest victim has led the police to a new suspect. The young man is in custody now, and the authorities are hoping to close the case soon.”*



The next day I woke up and stepped out onto my porch as usual. Today was a gloomy day, the sun hid behind the thick, low lying clouds that covered the sky. My flowers even seemed to be feeling the effects of rainy weather. I headed towards my mailbox, and when I opened it, I saw a carefully sealed envelope inside. I snatched it and immediately opened it, only today there was no flower.

*Lily,*

*Sorry for my lack of writing, but lately my life has been unraveling. The Rose Killer... murdered my brother. I don't know what to do. I don't know who to talk to. I don't think I've ever hated someone more. How could someone do that to him? I'm sorry to unload on you... but I think we should meet in person. I want to talk.*

*Jack*

My hands went cold as I clenched the paper and then relaxed. I felt tears slowly streaming out of my eyes. I've become weak, I thought. I dropped the letter and ran to my greenhouse. I pushed past the sunflowers and bluebonnets, toppling over my topiaries.



~

I finally reached the very back, to a secret, more private, corner, and there they were.

My perfect, opaque black roses. I carefully reached down and picked one, clenching it as the thorns dug into my hand, drawing blood. As my hand caressed the thorns, I almost experienced regret, but I couldn't handle him hating me. I couldn't handle the only person who gave me purpose thinking of me as a monster. It won't hurt, will it? I guess he's next.

~

*"A new victim has been found dead in his home, only a teenager. The Rose Killer was thought to be in custody, but it is looking like the killer is still active. There was a difference at this scene, though. When the body was found, there was not an array of roses, only a single black rose."*



Kyle Kinard



## A Night of Reflection

Kayla Cohen

11:37 p.m.

The last customer had just left Cheval's Diner. Vannah finished wiping the tables and locked the front entrance. She glided by Donna toward the bench near the bathrooms. She began to quickly untie the laces of her skates, a ritual she had become quite familiar with after working at the diner for over three years. Lifting her delicate foot out of her white skates always felt like heaven. Donna followed in suit, collapsing on the bench to remove her clunky, black skates. "Ugh, I chipped my nail polish!" Donna groaned.

"It's just nail polish. You can always repaint your nails you know."

"I know, but this is my favorite shade of blue: the shade of Andrew McCarthy's eyes," Donna swooned. Her dramatic nature always put a smile on Vannah's face.

"I swear I can never find it at the store anymore," she mumbled.

Vannah rolled her eyes and reasoned, "Oh, stop complaining, Donna. You got more in tips tonight anyways. A little chip off the



nail won't hurt ya."

Donna and Vannah had grown rather close ever since she started working there a few months ago. Vannah had recently mentioned quitting in order to go to cosmetology school in the city, but Donna did not like the idea of Vannah leaving her at the diner after establishing such a friendship. This was also because Donna had a fear of being truly alone. She always tried to make someone, usually Vannah, take the closing shift with her at the diner. Tonight, she had to take the task on by herself.

"Tell me again why you are totally ditching me here to close?" Donna questioned.

"Gregory is leaving for college tomorrow so I wanted to say goodbye. I'm sorry, Don. I know you don't like being here by yourself, but all you have to do is make sure everything is clean and ready to go for tomorrow. It shouldn't take you long."

"Okay, fair enough," she surrendered.

"Say, speaking of boys, are you still seeing that—oh what's his name?" Vannah asked.

"Ned? We aren't seeing each other . . . exactly."

"No? He seems to really like you."



“I know. I have been making him work for it actually.”

Vannah had a puzzled look on her face as she inquired, “What does that mean?”

“If he wants to be with me, he has to prove his worthiness by winning me over.”

“Come on, Don. It’s 1984 not 1884,” she teased.

“I guess you could say I’m a traditionalist.” Donna said confidentially with a smirk.

“Sure, whatever helps you sleep at night.”

The girls carried on their banter for a few more minutes until Vannah untied her apron and clocked out, signifying the end of her night at the diner.

“All right, Donna, I will see you later. Have fun and watch out for the shoelace serial killer!” Vannah joked.

“Even if he did decide to make his way to this diner, he would never hurt a sweet creature like me!” Donna spat back. The truth was, other than being alone, Donna was not afraid of anything because she felt untouchable, or at least that was what she told herself. The shoelace serial killer, who was allegedly responsible for the recent string of local murders happening was no exception.



Things like this did not frighten her, though, because a pretty girl like her was always good at talking her way out of things. Sometimes she didn't even have to talk- she could be exonerated with just a glance. Life was good if you were Donna.

Back in the kitchen, Donna began to put all of the food and ingredients back to their rightful spots. She turned on the radio that the cooks kept in the back. She flipped through the stations until she heard the familiar sound of "Spirits in a Material World" by The Police. She bobbed her head to the beat of the drums as she stocked away the last container of potatoes. It did not take long for the next song to get interrupted by an alert on the radio from the authorities. "This is an official warning from the police department. An immediate curfew has been set. All residents of Speculo County must be home by 12:30 a.m. tonight due to the suspicion of a convicted criminal on the loose nearby. This man is very dangerous and is believed to be possibly armed or has the intention of harm and or the death of others. Please get home immediately if you have not done so yet." The announcement was followed by static leading into the next song, "True" by Spandau Ballet. Donna was a bit taken back by the warning, but she still knew that she was safe.



“It is totally ridiculous that there’s someone out there who kills people with shoelaces! Of all things! How stupid is that!” Donna exclaimed to herself. Her ignorance of reality acted as a force field that protected her from anything she didn’t want to face. The current time was 12:27am, and she was ready to go home, not because the authorities on the radio told her to, but because she wanted to. Just as she was about to turn off the radio and exit the kitchen, she noticed that the cups had not been put away. Her manager had an eye for detail, so she knew she might as well organize the cups before she left. As she touched the cold glass of the cup, she heard the next song come on the station. It was “Somebody’s Watching Me” by Rockwell. “Geez I hate this song. It’s totally overplayed,” Donna complained to herself. She stowed away the last cup with a twinkle in her eye and freedom in her stride. She exited the kitchen and made her way towards the punch clock. When the clock punched her timecard, it was like the sound of sweet release. Eager to get home, Donna almost tripped over her skates. “Oops, I almost forgot these!” she giggled. Reaching down to pick up her roller skates by the laces, she could not seem to grasp them. This was due to the fact that the laces were missing. They had been pulled out somehow. “Well that’s peculiar. I don’t remember taking those out.”



She pondered, patting down her pockets and apron. She felt a slight wave of panic, but she assured herself that it was nothing. She decided to ignore her intuition and leave the diner through the front entrance because she was slightly afraid to leave through the back alley. Digging into her pocket, Donna grabbed the shiny key and jiggled it into the lock. She realized that it was already unlocked. “I swear Vannah locked up this door. I must be losing my marbles,” Donna reasoned. A chill went up her spine, like a phantom traveling through her nerves, creating a synapse of true fear.

She backed away slowly toward the kitchen, dropping her skates to the ground. Once her heels reached the swinging door of the kitchen, she bolted for the back door leading to the alley, her dark haven. Near the gate of heaven, she heard a shuffling of feet. Her skin was like ice cream a la mode, feverishly hot while clammy with chilled sweat. The first thing she could think of doing was ducking and crawling into her manager’s office, which was adjacent to where she was standing. With just a few strides on her hands and knees, she was able to sneak into the small room. She sat with her knees at her chest under a desk. Donna closed her eyes and attempted to find her “happy place,” as her dorky shrink stepfather suggested she should do when she was nervous.



She became flustered after only a few seconds because of her impatient nature. “Typical Bill, always offering the most useless advice.” She opened her bloodshot eyes and looked directly at the wall in front of her. Her gaze was caught by a corny cat poster taped to the cheaply plastered bricks. The cat was suspended by its arms on a tree branch with large text under it reading, “Hang in there!” The helpless face of the feline hanging on the tree reminded Donna of a distant memory.

It was the summer of 1974 when Donna was seven years old. She was at her friend Stephanie Seraph’s house. Stephanie’s house was the place to be because she had a pool directly in her backyard. After an afternoon of swimming, Stephanie and Donna sat with their wet swimsuits sticking to the wicker furniture on the patio. “I am beat! I could go for some popsicles. You got any, Steph?” Donna asked greedily.

“Of course! What flavor do you want?”

“I like the red ones!”

Stephanie exclaimed, “Me too! Two red popsicles coming right up!”



She skipped over to the screen door, slamming it behind her as she entered her house. The exterior of the house was the purest shade of white that Donna had ever seen. A small part of her wished she lived in Stephanie's house, with a married mommy and daddy and an array of popsicle flavors. Her envious thoughts were interrupted by a grey, fuzzy cat rubbing its arched back against her leg.

"Oh, hello there, Norman." She greeted. Donna was never a fan of cats because they always gave off a bad omen to her. A boy who Donna liked had once told her that cats could only swim in chlorine, but not regular water, which was why they were so afraid to get wet. Donna, being more curious than the cat itself, decided to test this hypothesis while Norman was laying on the wooden surface, waiting for a tummy rub. A sparkle appeared in her eyes as if she were a doctor saving a patient's life. "Come here, Norman! Let's go swimming!" she exclaimed. Before the cat could twist its body back up onto its feet, Donna had grabbed it by its torso and galloped off the patio and onto the concrete surrounding the pool. The cat wallowed in fear and tried with all its might to squirm out of the girl's arms. Staring at her reflection in the pool, Donna counted, "One . . . two . . . three!" and tossed the poor pet into the dark blue pit of hell. She watched as the animal sunk underneath the undulating water.



Norman surfaced for only a moment before the weight of his wet, heavy fur dragged him down. Donna observed the cat struggle for several minutes, until it surrendered to the flood. Behind her, she heard a soft plunk on the wood of the patio. She turned around to see Stephanie with her mouth agape and two red popsicles laying on the floor, bleeding out on the lightly stained balsa wood. As the crimson syrup melted down the patio stairs, a tear slid down Stephanie's face. That was the last image of her that Donna had in her mind. She wanted to feel bad. She wanted to have the urge to apologize. She wanted to feel something, but how could she be guilty of simply relieving her inquisitiveness? Donna figured that blaming herself for the death of her friend's cat would be a cruel self-infliction.

A large wave of heart palpitations threw Donna back to reality. Her back was glued to the wall as cold sweat dripped down her forehead and spine. She could not hear anything but her heart thumping in her chest. It was like a tiny, angry orchestra was performing in the tympanic membrane of her eardrum. Donna felt the vibration of different things hitting the ground outside the door of the office. She was crippled by the realization that the office door did not lock. Donna knew that she would need a plan B.



She crawled out from under the desk and elevated herself with her shaky knees. There was not one bone in her body that was not trembling with fear. She searched the desk for something that she could use as a weapon. Hoping to find a letter opener or a stapler, she shuffled through the papers on the surface of the desk. She had no luck as she heard the sound of cascading kitchen materials come closer to the office. Back to her search for some sort of makeshift weapon, Donna came across one of Vannah's paychecks. The manager had not mailed it to her yet. Looking at the envelope reminded Donna of something she had done to Vannah just a month ago.

"I probably won't get in, Don, but it doesn't hurt to at least try." Vannah explained as she counted her tips from the night.

"I know, but it's just a waste of money to even apply to cosmetology school! You can't make a career out of that."

"Well I sure as hell can't make a career out of waiting tables on roller skates either, now can I?"

Later that night after the end of both of their shifts, Donna snuck over to Vannah's house.



She could see the glow of the lamps in the windows. The whole family were night owls. Little did they expect to find a bird of prey rummaging through their mailbox. Donna opened the black metal door and grabbed the stack of mail. The flag was up so she knew there was something being sent in the pile. Not to her surprise, the third letter in the stack was the diamond in the kimberlite. The letter was addressed to the cosmetology school in the city. Donna smirked and swiped the letter that would separate her new best friend from her. As she walked to her bright blue '82 Buick Riviera, Donna almost stepped in a puddle from the heavy rainstorm earlier in the autumn day. Looking down at the collection of water, Donna saw herself holding the letter. She knew she was holding a sacred document. She knew Vannah would be devastated not to get into this school. Nonetheless, Donna felt that their friendship was more important and she thought maybe one day Vannah would thank her. She stomped right through the puddle and swerved off recklessly, feeling confident about her accomplished mission. For weeks Vannah idled by her mailbox like a housewife waiting for her husband to return from war, knowing deep down that she would never hear back.



Donna had to put the envelope down because she was getting distracted. She knew she had to get out of the office and into the kitchen. Surely, she could find something to defend herself with. She carefully opened the handle of the door and crawled out and over to a shelf of ingredients, where there was space for her to lie under. Her heart beats synchronized with the continuation of noises coming from the crook in the kitchen. She turned her head to the side looking for the source of the sounds and saw an old picture on the wall of Farrah Fawcett sitting on the hood of a red Ford Mustang. Just like the kind Ned had until he was in that terrible accident. Donna remembered that day well.

It was about six months ago. Ned called Donna every night, asking her on a date. He was not persistent for no reason, however. Donna loved having him beg for her. She felt like the forbidden fruit. She felt like the ultimate prize. One day Donna finally gave into one of his pleas. As Ned cheered on the phone, Donna told him her one condition, “I do not want to be seen with you in public wearing those god-awful glasses of yours.”

“I need those to see, though, darling,” Ned reasoned.



“You want to go out with me, right? Don’t wear the glasses!” Donna said as she hung up. She smirked as she felt power coursing through her veins. Hours passed and Ned had not yet picked her up for their date. She heard sirens whistling in the spring air. A call followed just moments later. It was Ned’s mother. In a frantic voice, she explained that Ned had hit a tree on the way to Donna’s house and his car was completely wrecked. He had a broken arm and a few bruises. She said that he must have somehow forgotten to wear his glasses, which he needed to drive. Ned came from a lower-middle class family. Paying the hospital bill was going to be difficult for them. Their prize possession was that red Mustang that Ned’s father bought at an estate sale. Donna realized that his family no longer had their pride and joy because it was wrapped around a tree. Donna sent her best wishes and hung up. She thought about what would have happened if she hadn’t told Ned to not wear his glasses. Was it truly her fault that he was a reckless driver? Donna did not think that it was fair to condemn herself for such bad luck on Ned’s behalf. Even the night after the accident, Ned called Donna from the hospital to let her know how sorry he was for not showing up. The ball was right back in her court, where she liked it.



A loud footstep jolted Donna out of her trance. She looked around once again and caught the sight of a knife set just steps away. This was her chance. Donna pulled herself up from under the shelf and grabbed the biggest knife of the set. The sharp piece of metal emitted a deadly sound as Donna slid it out of the wooden block. She tiptoed toward the cup station and saw the back of the disruptive dark figure that had been torturing her with suspense. It was life or death. With the knife in hand, she raised her forearm, catching her reflection in the slab of carbon steel. The silver of the knife soon penetrated the back of the perpetrator, covering it in his warm, red blood. One stab was not enough for Donna, though. She felt power in her veins like she always did when she got what she wanted. She stabbed him nine times. Falling to the ground, Donna saw the face of the man she just killed. It was not the scoundrel face she expected to see. In fact, it was the face of a cherub. It was Ned, bleeding out on the white kitchen tiles like Stephanie's popsicles. The blood began to form a puddle much like the one that Donna stepped through on the night she took Vannah's application letter. Donna dropped to her knees in confusion. She saw something on the ground next to him that had caught her eye. Blue shoelaces. The very same blue that blessed the irises of Andrew McCarthy.



She picked up the thick strings before the spreading tide of blood reached them. She also saw something sticking out of the pocket of his jacket. It was his glasses. She picked them up and saw herself in the cracked lens of the spectacles. They must have fractured under his weight when he fell to the ground. She felt something else in his pocket. It was two pieces of paper and a hair pin. One piece of paper seemed to have a recipe for spaghetti on it, Donna's favorite meal. The other piece of paper was a folded-up letter written in calligraphy that read, "Be my girlfriend, Donna." Her face turned white. Ned must have unlocked the front door with the hair pin and took out the laces of her skates to put in the beautiful blue laces. He was rummaging blindly around the kitchen to obtain the ingredients that he could not afford to buy to make her a romantic dinner. He wanted to surprise her and officially ask her to be his. Disgusted with the mess she had made, Donna decided that she only had one option to rid herself of any crime. She stood up, blood staining her clothes, and hustled over to the large stove. She turned on all of the gas burners to their maximum heat. She then grabbed the peanut oil used to make fries and sloshed it all over Ned's cold body. She snatched the nearest rag and doused it in oil as well. Following this, she used the fire from the stove to ignite the rag.



Donna next threw the rag onto Ned. The fire erupted into large flames within seconds. Donna then rushed to the back door, only finding it to be locked. She ran back to the front of the kitchen, but the flames created a blockade in front of the entrance to the kitchen. She was trapped in the hell that she had created. The blaze of the fire reflected onto her eyes until there was nothing but darkness left.

3:17 a.m.



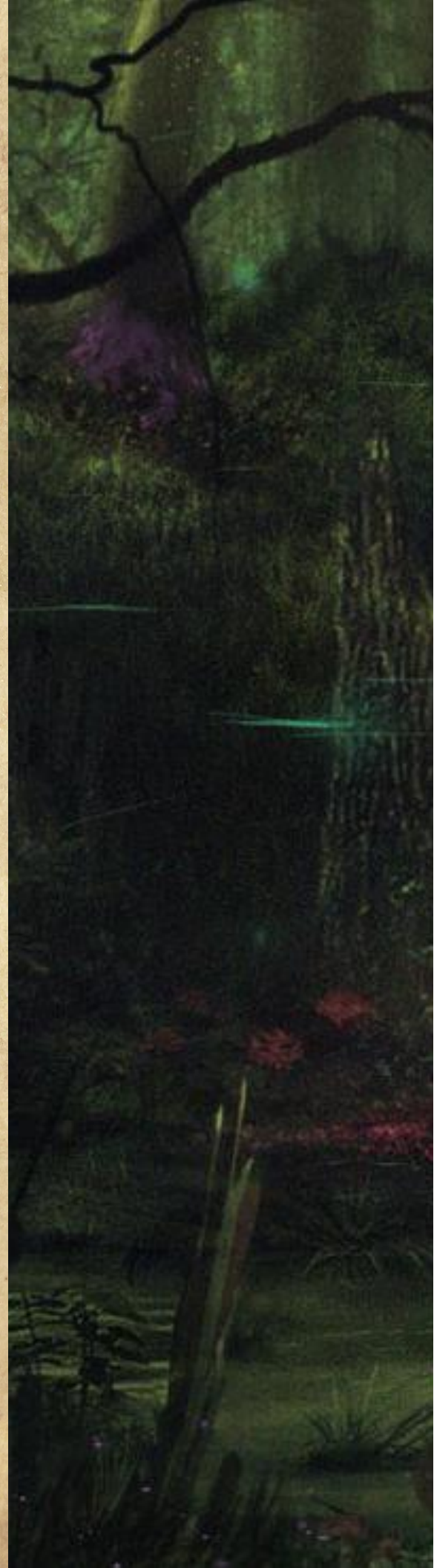
Kyle Kinard

# The Machine

Junaid Mohammed

O' wretched beast, o' foul demonic machine, why...why do you torment me so? My life has been a relatively blessed one. At a very young age I was found by a family on a dreadfully rainy summer's night. After being taken in by them, I experienced true warmth for the first time. The brightness of the laughter that filled the home, the comfort of the food that filled my belly, and the kindness of the child that took care of me the most. Seeing as how I never knew my father, the child was the closest thing I had to one. From bathing me and feeding me to playing and educating me, the child took care of everything. For the first few months living in that house, every second of my life was pure bliss. However, my frivolous days of bliss were ruined by It.

Even though I had lived in the house for months already, I had not explored it fully. My time would always be spent with the child in his room or the rest of the family.



One day, the entire family left the house, leaving me time to explore. After an hour of thorough exploration, I happened upon a small side closet. Even before I had opened the door, I felt waves of dread come over me, but my curiosity could not be contained. Unfortunately, my curiosity proved to be quite harmful, as there It stood the second I opened the door. Frozen in terror, I gazed upon its vile machine body. It was not sleek or elegant like the other machines in the house. It was ugly, rough, and brutish. However, its despicable beauty did not mesmerize me long. Soon the waves of dread became a violent whirlpool of fear, and I fled the closet in haste, promising myself I would never go near It again. Only when the family came back home did I finally feel relief, but even then I was stuck wondering what purpose It served.

I indeed kept the promise to myself and never approached the closet again, but, only a few weeks later, I came across It again. To my surprise, It was being dragged along by the child who gave It commands as it moved. I was still fearful of It,



but I remained watchful from my hiding place. Suddenly, after the child leaned down next to Its body, a terrifying noise erupted from its body. A mechanical whirring continuously poured out of It, as its ugly machine body gnawed at the ground, yet the child remained unfazed and continued to order It around. As its miserable body approached me, unable to bear its sound, I fled in terror once again. After an hour of cowering in fear, the sound disappeared from the home. It was back in its detestable closet.

Soon my nights were consumed by its awful visage. My dreams were plagued with horrifying sequences of trying to escape It and the horrible whirring sound it made. I tread back and forth nightly, steeling myself to attack if the ugly monster reared its head again, but I would always tuck my tail between my legs and run in fear whenever I saw It. It was too powerful. Not only was it much larger than I, but It could not be hurt by my small body. Thus, my days were filled with staring at the foul machine with loathing as it gnashed along the floor moving back and forth.



Oh, how I dreamed I could crush and tear its sordid body. I wanted to drag its mangled body across the floor and show it the fear I felt whenever I saw it. Because of the sheer anger and animosity I felt for the boorish machine, I became braver. Whenever it returned to its den in the closet, I would carefully creep around it looking for weaknesses. My fear propelled me forward until I believed I knew It better than It knew itself. Thus, I waited in anticipation. I thought I had the knowledge to destroy It once and for all. Then the day came for the attack.

It was making its way around the house again, with the child guiding it as it made that horrible whirring noise. It grew closer and closer to my hiding place. With each second that It grew closer, I grew more and more angry. Finally, it was right in front of me, taunting me by just standing there. It was within my reach! The wretched, foul machine that had caused me endless pain and suffering was allowing me to attack!



Its terrible whirring that invaded my dreams and turned them into nightmares could finally be silenced! I could finally be free from this endless torture! With rage filling my body, I charged at its ugly body, ready to tear it to shreds.

However, as I grew nearer, my fear grew as well. The horrid whirring grew louder and louder in my head, and its imposing body loomed even larger. As I stood right in front of It, I froze yet again. The sheer terror of It stopped my body from moving an inch. I knew I had to run; it was coming right for me. Yet, no matter how scared I was that time, I could not run. As It continued to draw near, I resigned myself to my fate. I would finally be defeated by the hands of the mechanical beast.

Then the child stopped It. He roared with laughter, shouting, “Mom, come look at how scared the cat is of the vacuum cleaner!”

Still petrified with fear, I gazed up at the child. Vacuum cleaner? What is a vacuum cleaner?



Then it dawned on me. The monster that plagued me had a name and a terrifying one at that!

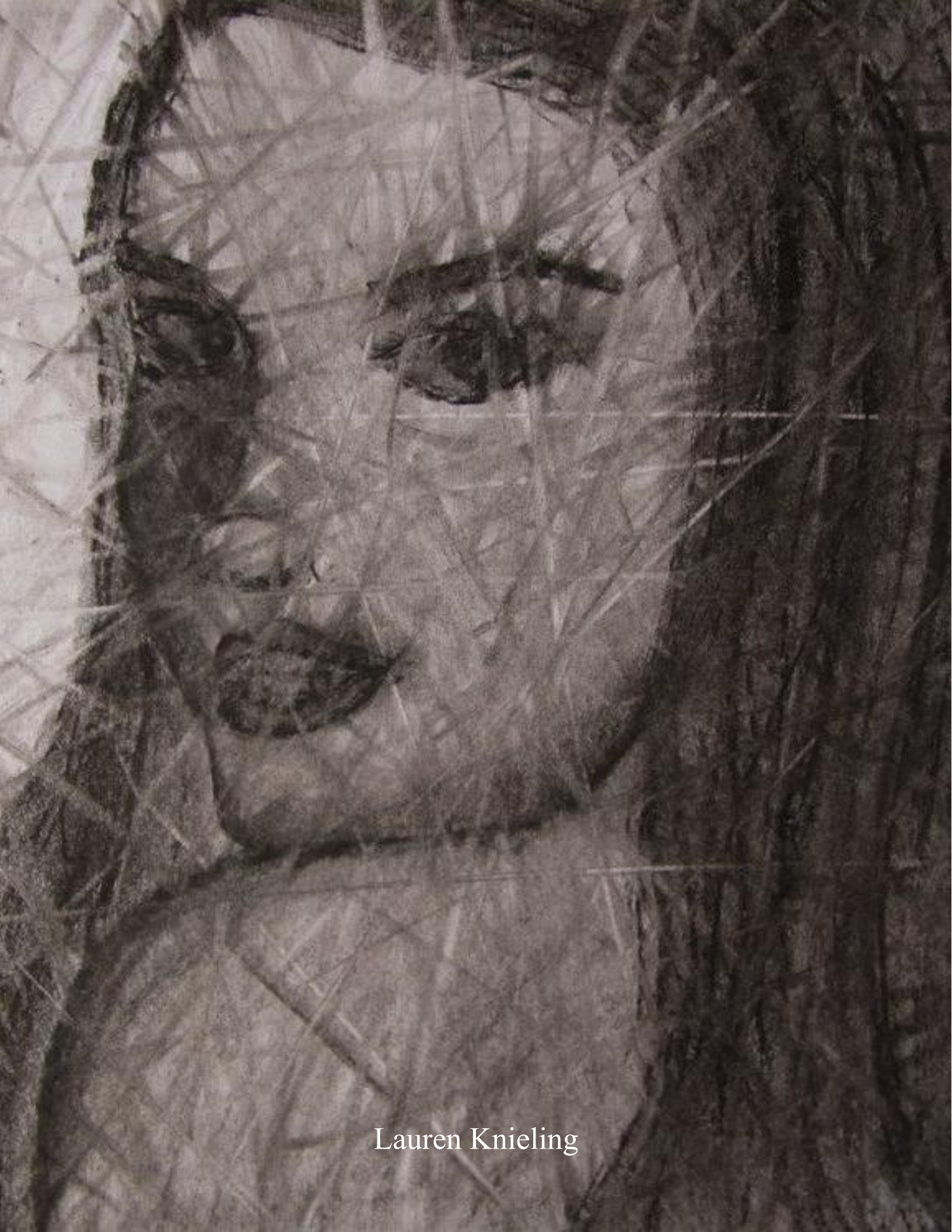
As I mulled over my new discovery, the child and his mother came and laughed at my misfortune.

“What a dumb cat,” the mother proclaimed. “How could he get scared by a stupid vacuum cleaner?”

The blood boiled inside of me. Did she not understand the fear that I felt with every waking moment of my life? The laughter was short lived, and the “vacuum cleaner” was returned to its closet.

To this day I still continue my fight against the foul machine. I swear to myself that one day I will bring an end to the vacuum cleaner!





Lauren Knieling

# Life

Julia Carroll

A life lived is nothing but a pure gift  
From the first breath taken, up to the last  
A finite sea in which we lay adrift  
A sea whose beauty cannot be surpassed.

From the earth comes life, delicate at first But  
as time passes, it will become strong.

Wiser and able to take on the worst  
Practice makes perfect as time moves along.

And to that same earth go those who have died  
Drifting to the limits of their own sea  
But our seas' borders could never divide.

They have given us a chance to be free  
Bound to growth, love, adventure  
and stories

A life lived well is nothing but glory.





Libby Killackey



## Anonymous

Helena Karas

Gray, lifeless eyes glared at me, raking over my paralyzed form. Surgical tools gleamed before my eyes, glistening with menace and steady resolve. Hairs on my arms stood trembling upright, waiting for the ultimate incision to take place. A ruthless cut that would mark the beginning of the Trial and my ultimate test as the kingdom's Poison Taster.

It all started weeks before. Being the king's guinea pig had its perks: training with the armory's weapons was my ultimate source of passion and, at times, frustration. The moon scythes and practical daggers I adorned were my protectors, and I would brandish them as a sick form of armor to deter any sniveling nobles who scoffed at my Poison Taster status.

I came from a humble upbringing, to say the least. The streets of Estoria were my niche: streets that were perpetually littered with ill bodies, pitiful beggars, and uncoordinated thieves—the latter being myself. Such reckless behavior prompted a helpless nobody such as myself, delirious with hunger, to steal the prince's coin purse. I was then hung from my collar like a broken marionette before the king's wrinkly face, a face whose furrowed brows raised up in boiling hatred as he looked at my ashen skin and



bright, green eyes— eyes that marked me as one of the Chosen, blessed for my healing and regenerative abilities. The perfect test dummy, I realize, now that I look back at my naïve self and think of the king's crude grin. But caution was overcome by desperation at that point in time as I was fed mutton, bread and wine to fill the empty dungeon of my stomach.

Therefore, when the conniving king came to me with a proposition, I did not blanch. A new weapon had been discovered in the States: a kingdom of corruption and superficiality that marketed itself as some sort of democracy. Yet, this country's military was rife with bulky firearms and war machines that could easily turn Estoria's streets into a giant pool of scarlet blood. This scared our beloved king—as cowards normally tremble before opposition. Therefore, the king wanted to test this infamous weapon; reports in the States' borders described its heinous symptoms and casualty rates. Descriptions of sliced wrists and glazed eyes and emaciated bodies had my palms sweating profusely, yet as the weapon was plopped harmlessly onto the king's mahogany table, my fears vanished as if they were an afterthought.

A gleaming device stared at me with satisfaction, its sleek finish beckoning my hands to run along its gorgeous length.



I was told that I was to be an experimental subject, left for one week to test its effects on my physical form. My regenerative abilities would prevent any unwanted casualties in such a trial. Yet, I never even considered that the device's artificial light would one day haunt my dreams, my eyelids squirming like maggots. I never even considered that my regenerative abilities didn't extend to the one sanctuary that wasn't covered with old scars and bruises: my mind.

Now I had another thing to hide behind, another thing that was mine—tangible, yet almost ethereal in nature. A device that was surgically grafted into my brain, implanted to speed up the weapon's drastic effects. Almost like a single cancer cell magnified into bulbous, ever-multiplying tumors.

The Trial had begun.

### **Day 1:**

I was chained in a room. Mirrors assaulted me at every turn, reflecting a kaleidoscope of a stagnant form sitting cross-legged on a bed. The bed had white sheets: the kind that are crisp to the point of uncomfortableness, the starch digging into my flesh.

I had never been the type of person to sit still, but I decided to reflect upon myself that day, as every human is selfish and narcis-



sistic in that regard.

I thought about my arrogance: the superficial confidence that I wore like a second skin. The type of casual bravado that was supposed to protect my reputation around the palace. Such an open display of strength had shielded me from the pitying stares of the cooks for so long, stares that turned to downcast eyes as I was forced to chug down food lanced with potential curare or even nightshade.

And perhaps, now that I look back, such an innate insecurity at the Trial's commencement foreshadowed my future plunge into insanity. Even on the first day, the weapon's roots started to puncture my psyche, funneling my insecurities through an endless cycle of anxiety.

## **Day 2:**

The whispers caressed my ears like small daggers. They came and went like forgotten memories, like a snowflake upon a winter's breath. However, their lulling sounds mimicked the creepy and grave tones of nightmares. Almost predatory in nature, a steady flow of paranoia started to build within my heart. Something was wrong. "Everyone knows," the voices whispered. "You are nothing," they said.



“Knows what?” I replied hesitantly. My voice reverberated in the chasm of my mind, waiting for a reply. Only silence greeted me. Yet, as I pulled the covers over my head, prepared to submerge myself in sleep’s welcoming arms, a loud cacophony of scorn filled my brain. The chip in my head pulsed with alarming clarity.

“You are nobody and nothing and insignificant,” the voices screeched. “You are just a slave bended by the king’s demand, nothing more. An orphan who will forever be a charity case of Estoria,” the condescending voices stated.

Hours passed. Obscenities and insults racked my brain, my internal voice of reason too weak and feeble to fight back. After what seemed like an eternity, the voices volleyed into a crescendo of screams and cries until only a buzzing silence was left. Seconds passed. I realized I was rocking. My hands were clutched to my knees. Tear stains had left salt tracks down my cheeks. This trial would destroy me.

### **Day 3:**

The monster that was my stomach growled and woke me from my reverie. I had been staring blankly across the room for what seemed like hours. Sleep provided me no comfort from the



endless monotony of mirrors that assaulted my eyes. A ding echoed from the room, signaling my morning meal's arrival. I slowly made my way up from the corner of the room, untangling my numbed limbs with an almost clumsy efficiency. Needles stabbed through my feet, like walking on iron-tipped blades of grass, yet I made my way towards the bland meal of bread and cheese. However, as my hand reached out for the stale chunk of swiss, the chip in my head began to pulsate with abrupt, choppy bouts of heat. My arm retracted out of pure instinct. Perplexed, and still a bit shaken, I reached again for my breakfast, hands trembling with leftover adrenaline.

A line of fire promptly darted down my spine. My vision turned fuzzy, almost disorienting then. Distorted images made their way into my field of vision. I crawled across the floor, still reverberating with pain, and found my way to the wall of mirrors. That is when I saw it. The chip in my head seemed to buzz in satisfaction then, bringing my vision back into clarity. A mountain of fat rolls greeted my eyes. I was looking at myself, but instead of muscled, well-built arms, cascades of cellulite seemed to escape my shirt sockets. My green eyes seemed yellow and almost sedated, my once crystal-clear skin marred in red, splotchy sections. Patches of my hair were missing, its mousy-brown ends thin



-ing into oily ropes.

*I am ugly*, I noted. *A complete and utter abomination*, I thought.

Yet, as I tried to listen to my voice of reason, to unleash myself from this living hell, the chip in my head sent cascading electrical pulses down my body, knocking me unconscious. I woke up with my face next to the plate and promptly vomited. The mirrors around me lied, convincing me that I was skinny and pretty and beautiful again.

The chip became my conscience that day and my stomach a chasm that would forever remain unfilled.

#### **Day 4:**

All night, I had dreamed of a girl in the States. A girl who was backlit by the weapon's artificial light—like a moth and flame. The girl was about fifteen years-old it seemed; short and pale. She possessed a simple type of beauty, reminding one of a porcelain doll. Dimples dotted her cheeks and freckles kissed her nose, yet hazy, almost glazed blue eyes distinguished her face. The girl was clearly entranced by the weapon, and faint chuckles seemed to escape her flat mouth. She seemed to be looking at a pixelated image: an average guy's arm around a petite, beautiful



blonde. The girl's eyes briefly registered longing, until the cacophony of laughter rose up like the chorus of a song: full of pain and scorn. That night, after the image eventually vanished into the depths of my subconscious, I felt a finger down my throat, choking me of air. I guess the girl had deemed herself ugly as well. And, as I was choking for oxygen, throat muscles stretched taut, a large picture was brought to the forefront of my mind. It was like a projector screen reflected before my eyes. The girl was there, but she looked different. She was no longer sad, it seemed. Her beautiful blue eyes crinkled in unbridled happiness and her smile was stretched to the skies, a smile that somewhat reminded me of the ones I plastered.

A smile that, on closer inspection, didn't seem all that human.

### **Day 5:**

(I never made it past the week. This was the Day of Reckoning.)

The pungent smells of rotting food assaulted my nostrils, rendering me incapacitated for a brief moment. The last night had brought me nothing in terms of dreams. I had a creeping suspicion that I would never see the blue-eyed girl again, yet a burning picture of her creased eyes and mortared smile seemed to constantly



haunt my psyche.

I was also being watched. The girl in the mirrors continued to pace around the room, mimicking my movements in an attempt to mock me with her beauty.

She stared at me with a green intensity that reminded me of a sunlit jungle. Carnal, yet majestic.

If only I had realized that such eyes were my own. Now that I look back, my system buzzes with anger and frustration, although at that moment in time I only saw something that amplified my insecurities. Something that I had to destroy.

The weapon's chip in my head continued to pulsate, filling me with jealousy and a rush of adrenaline. My fist soon cleaved the mirror's glass into tiny fragments of forgotten frustration. A cascade of sparkling daggers rained down on my form, drawing attention to my throbbing hand, a hand that should have been minced meat, but as I pulled apart the skin slowly, pain receptors completely numbed, metallic parts gleamed from underneath. An intricate system of gears and wires was churning beneath my skin.

I don't remember much after that. The doctors rushed in— the examiners completely in awe of the weapon's drastic effects.



I was wheeled out of the room that day. I passed by endless glass walls of patients in their testing chambers, completely glued to white, hypnotic iPhone screens. They looked like mindless robots.

They looked like me.

Signed,

Anonymous



Sophie Maier



## A Mother's Love

Grace Karas

I woke up to a faint fluttering. As I lifted my head, heavy from deep slumber, I found my mother staring at me, the usual concern flooding her tired eyes. After gently guiding me to a comfortable position, she gave me the bitter pill, offering a simple smile as if her compassion could change the way the day would inevitably unfold. Noting my typical unresponsiveness, she casually said, "I found something that may lift your spirits." Before I could object to her efforts, the resumed fluttering caught my attention. As confusion settled in, accompanied by a dash of curiosity, I followed her with my gaze and watched as she navigated to the corner of the room. Only then did I notice the brass cage and the small, chirping bird inside.

The only emotion I deigned to show was a pair of furrowed eyebrows. The rest of my body language suggested indifference. Defeat lingered momentarily, but she snapped quickly out of its hold, somehow invigorated by my defiance. With the hope of eliciting a stronger response, she heaved the cage from the corner table, placing it hastily on my rickety nightstand.



The creature squawked angrily at such carelessness, and I could not stifle the laugh that erupted from my lips. At this, she snapped her head toward me, and I swear one could have bottled the hope clinging to that expression.

I thought at the time that I could give a little effort. At least for her sake. For several moments, I sat there regarding the beautiful bird, noticing the deep-blue stain of its feathers and the long, slender beak curved in the shape of a scythe. I even flashed a subtle smile, allowing the corner of my lip to expand to uncharted territory. My mom, seeing my interest piqued, then proceeded to spew factual information about the species, none of which I remember, though now, I would do anything to hear her voice again. However, as I beheld the bird more intently, I realized it was missing its right wing. And, then, I realized the desperation in its fluttering. And its desire to escape. And, now that I am reflecting, I realize that this needy, flightless creature resembled me.

**The very notion infuriated me so.**

With this, I latched onto my mother's arm, digging my nails in brutally, tearing away small pieces of flesh as she yelped in surprise. Well, at least this was what I envisioned, for I had not the strength to do so. Instead, I snarled in her direction and asked bitterly, "Do you think taking care of this pitiful creature will give



me some sense of purpose? Some magical will to live?” She gawked at me for several moments, clearly taken aback by my unexpected display of anger, and this rage ultimately consumed me. Before she could even begin to utter some kind of explanation, I grabbed hold of the cage and, with all the physical strength I could muster, I violently launched it across the room. The bird whirled in the cage, spinning uncontrollably, attempting to brace its wings in preparation of impact.

**The thud of its body against the bars delighted me so.**

As I watched the bird reel from its tumultuous landing, a wide grin sprawled across my face. The disgust in my mother’s eyes was visibly apparent, yet I craved it. I *wanted* her to be repulsed by me. I *wanted* her to give up, as I had. In acknowledgement of my violent message, she backed away from the bed and approached the cage lying on the course floorboard. She picked it up and placed it gently on the table in the corner. She watched it for a moment, as did I, and she smiled as the creature acted like nothing had happened. It simply resumed its futile flapping of its left wing, unperturbed and eager. Then, just as I was becoming more amused with its efforts, my mom quickly turned towards me and bit her lip harshly to keep from lashing out. The stream of red pooled at her chin, and as she faced me, she softly said, “I know



you're in pain, but so am I." With this, she walked slowly towards the door and whispered, "I can't fight this alone." Then, she was gone.

When the door lightly clicked shut, I bathed gloriously in the silence, wishing that Death would induce me into a permanent slumber. At the time, I felt no guilt. No remorse. I hated the world, and I believed it deserved this hatred. I sat there for several hours, chained to my bed-prison, but eventually I was whisked away into a dream. In this dream, I was just learning how to use my wheel chair. I thought it absolutely thrilling at the time, strolling through the wide hallways in my house and being escorted around as if I were some sort of celebrity. Unfortunately, the pitying stares and the enraging whispers soon made me believe otherwise. Delight turned into dread, and despair turned to rage. I began thinking dark thoughts. I thought about ripping those leering eyes out. I thought about screaming at the insensitive onlookers until their ears bled profusely. I thought such terrible, vicious thoughts, and I do regret them now.

**The thought of death calmed me so.**

As the dream unfolded, I became aware that I was reliving my first experience using the wheel chair. My mom had been there smiling. Even when my dad had left, she remained **strong**,



strong, never letting me hear her cry, though I could hear her muffled sobs at night. In the dream, she pushed me down the small, grassy hill in our backyard. Yet, in this version, instead of holding on, she roughly pushed off.

Rather than rolling down a nice hill, I had plunged off the slide of a steep cliff. I looked down to see my house from an aerial view. My mother was screaming, and she ran inside as if to call for help. As I fell deeper into the light-blue abyss, I instinctively struggled. However, I soon gave up the futile effort, ready to meet a blissful end.

### **The fluttering frightened me so.**

I jolted awake, lifting my head as fast as my body would permit. I looked at the raucous bird across the room, and I realized the mischievous creature was trying to escape yet again. It was dark now, and I consciously wondered where my mother was. I recalled the sound of her starting her car earlier that evening, and I thought it peculiar she had not come in to feed me yet. I listened closely for any shuffles or clanging of pots, but I heard nothing. At the time, I believed that she was trying to punish me, so I simply closed my eyes and fell back asleep.

The next morning, I expected to be confronted by the



concerned eyes of my mother, but she was nowhere to be found. My stubbornness prevented me from calling out to her, so I sat in silence, wishing that I could dream. Instead of staring out the window, which showcased the vast country landscape of our quaint farm, I stared at the bird. It seemed to be resting, and I was glad to be rid of the annoying sound created by the beating of its one wing.

### **The loneliness enveloped me so.**

One more day passed, and I did not hear from my mother. My stomach growled vigorously, and my mouth felt like a desert wasteland. I knew something dreadful had happened. I felt it in my frail bones. As I contemplated her whereabouts, the fluttering resumed. It was ceaseless, this fluttering. It clawed against my mind and the bird's incessant efforts became maddening. Every time I would even think about sleep and its lovely release, I was interrupted by the rustling of the cage. How could it continue such flapping, knowing escape was impossible? Better yet, how could it want to escape, knowing it was flightless? These questions swirled in my head, and I pondered them deeply.

As time blurred, I became progressively obsessed with its tenacity. It truly amazed me, and I became fixated on its being. Although, soon, the fluttering faded. The bird became weak,



almost atrophied. It chirped far less frequently, and it let out small shrieks to mimic its suffering. I thought that when it finally gave up, I would be content. Instead of relishing the silence, however, I *yearned* for the sound of its fluttering. During this time, I also grappled with feelings of abandonment. I thought to myself, “This is what you deserve for pushing her away.”

### **The silence pained me so.**

Watching the bird made my heart ache. Eventually, it stopped stirring all together. It no longer flapped about in an effort to escape. Rather, it lay lifelessly still, dispirited and dying. The day it entirely gave up, I cried. *Cried*. I begged it to flutter. I begged it to lift its head. It did no such thing and remained unresponsive. And out of all the pain, this was the hardest I ever endured, as I had to watch this amazing creature lose its will to live.

The pain was unbearable.

### **My stubbornness inspired me so.**

I told myself I would not let that bird die. I became resolved to free it. As I lay there dying, I used all my strength to roll off the bed. I landed quite roughly, breaking my right arm from the force. I screamed out in pain, wishing my mother was there with her reassuring smile, but she had left me, and I understood.



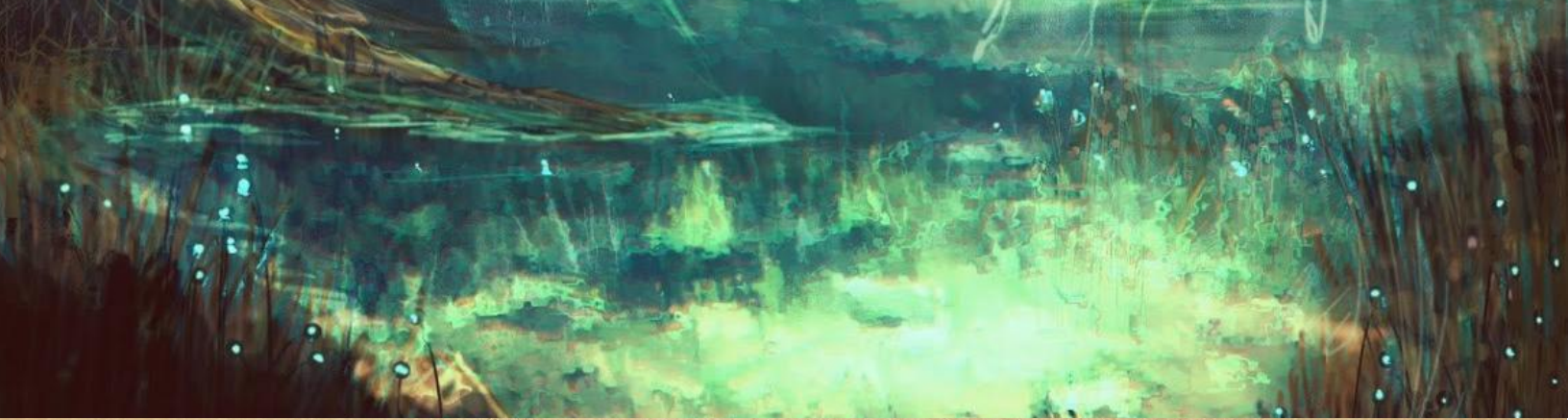
I presumed that she felt as if I had already died, and I figured she had lost her will, too.

This immense guilt from reflection fueled me, and I began *crawling* to the cage to free it. I heard the sickening crunch of my brittle bones as they broke under the slightest pressure. The pain overwhelmed me, but I could not pass out. I bit my lip hard (to remain conscious), just as my mother had for my sake. With each excruciating movement, I looked at the bird as a reminder. It seemed to be a tad curious, having only ever witnessed me screaming or sleeping or staring. When I finally reached the table (after a grueling couple of hours, I might add), I knew I wouldn't have the strength to reach up for it.

It didn't matter because I soon faded into unconsciousness.

**My resolve drove me so.**

The sound of sirens awakened me. I vaguely felt the prickly sensation of needles as I partially opened up my eyes to see blurred, moving images. Someone called out, "She is showing slight response." Instantly, I realized I was in an ambulance, but instead of relief, a sense of dread washed over me. I thought to myself, "The bird! I must save it!" Anxious, I ground out, "Please, free it."



“It forgets the beauty the world has to offer.” I heard mumbling, and I knew they didn’t understand. Darkness claimed me again.

I rose to the warmth of the daylight. I thought I was all alone in the sterile, whitewashed hospital room, until I saw a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye. My enthusiasm faded as I beheld a brute of a man, cloaked in police attire. However, his rough exterior was betrayed by a gentle voice that said, “Hello, I am Officer Drake. I’m the one who found you. You have been in a coma for three days.” Before he could inquire more with his routine questions, I interrupted him and asked, “What happened to the bird? If you found my body, you must have seen it.” He seemed struck by the oddness of the question, but through my desperate tone of voice, he garnered that I cared deeply for it. He evenly answered, “I don’t know, but I will find out.” With this, he exited the room, and I was again drowned by the deafening silence.

**The truth freed me so.**

When he came back, he had an unmistakably somber look on his face. He sat down and calmly said, “I’m truly sorry. The police report found the corpse of the bird. The cage had somehow fallen off the table, and it was instantly killed.” He paused for a moment and continued, “I want you to know that it wouldn’t have lived long anyways.” After he finished, he searched for signs of grief



in my eyes, but I offered no such emotion, instead allowing a smile to spread across my face. Though my heart did ache for the loss and its suffering, I smiled. It wasn't out of happiness but out of understanding, as I knew I had never reached that table. That magnificent creature had not given up, and that gave me hope.

However, my smile did not seem to rid the officer of his solemn face. I realized then that he had more news to deliver. I knew it was about my mother, and I decided to spare him the difficulty of delivering it by asking, "What happened to her? I want to know everything." His eyes widened briefly, surprised by either my insight or the brutal honesty I implored him to use, and then he steeled himself with a long breath. Then, he frankly stated, "She died in a crash on one of the backroads leading to your farm. We believe she swerved to avoid a deer and then was ejected, as her body was found far from the vehicle." Minutes passed as I let the information soak in, though I wanted to reject this reality with every fiber of my being. After I finally stopped shaking, I asked, "Was there a trail of blood to the farm?" This seemed to unsettle the officer, but he succinctly replied, "Yes, why?"

I felt a cold tear splash my arm, for I realized that she too had crawled...but to me.



Truth Trussel

# The Gardener

Henry Tegethoff

O old man, who doth my garden keep  
The things that you have seen would  
leave most men to weep  
Tirelessly you work, and nothing do  
you reap  
Apart from all my dreams, which you  
harvest from my sleep

You've taken all I had now and raised  
it as your own

And saturated, now, is the garden you  
have grown

All the other fields lay barren, apart  
from Meter's throne

My dreams, noble fruitions, so morally  
you've sewn

Now both we lay, feeble, at our hum-  
ble garden's edge

And the smallest stars begin to perfo-  
rate the sun's setting edge,

While lassitude, in its brilliant soft-  
ness, begins to settle in

Six feet beneath the daisies, in rest  
from mortal sin





Grace Witkowski



## Who I Am

Gloria Wu

You're four years old. It's the first day of preschool, but you panic because you need to go to the bathroom but you don't know how to say that in English.

You're seven years old. You go to school and bring your favorite, mom's special handmade dumplings. Your classmates freak out. "It smells weird." "What is that?" Out of anger, you throw away your lunch and ask your mom to never pack Chinese food again. From this point on, you settle with a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich every day, like the rest of the kids.

You're nine years old. Mama takes you and your siblings to China. You see your relatives, and you stand out because you're "American." You enjoy large feasts and meals day by day with your relatives. They look at you with respect, asking you your favorite activities at school in America.

You come back from China, knowing that you have it so much better than your cousins to be able to grow up and have an education in America, but the feeling fades away. You go to school. One kid pulls the corners of their eyes and says, "Ching chong, wing wong." Another kid asks, "Can I call you shrimp fried rice?" "Are you Asian or Korean?" "You must be good at math."



“Do your parents beat you if you get a B?” You want to speak out, but who’s gonna care? You’re just that introverted Asian who minds her own business. You don’t have a voice.

You don’t have a place in society. You have no significance. No longer respected as the American one, you become the stingy stereotypical Asian who is known for her weird food.

Your self-esteem plummets, and you hate yourself and who you are.

You’re playing basketball. Strange right? Doesn’t seem like a weak, small Asian can play such a physical sport. It’s the last two minutes of the game. You steal the ball and there’s a fast break. “GET LINGLING!!” shout the girls from the other team. From this point, there is nothing you can do that won’t make you seem isolated from the crowd.

You’ve been desperately trying to find yourself and who you are. Society is all about the white and the black. You don’t even belong there. There’s no category for you. You don’t belong in America; everyone tells you that, but it’s not like you belong in China.

You’re an American to them.

You’re fourteen, and you find a group of friends- they are just like you and go through the same struggles.



You're not just Asian, and you're not just American. You can't fit into this one group. You're Asian American, a whole new category. But you're not alone. Throughout America, you have 17 million others who are living your same story.

You're fifteen. Crazy Rich Asians comes out. You watch the movie with your family, and all of a sudden, tears burst through your eyes. It's a new age, and Asian Americans are being represented and have a new view from society. You're confident, and you know that no matter what you do, you will still be Asian American. No matter what you do. You learn to embrace it: embracing the nights when you make baozi and dumplings with your family and embracing the football games on Friday nights with your school friends. Although you know that you're not someone who belongs in one culture wholly, you finally come to terms with yourself as one who enjoys the best of both worlds.

You embrace yourself, hoping that someday, others will too.



## Dal - Rice

Aarti Pappu

Freshly-baked cookies, pungent peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, steaming cheese pizza — these smells immediately flood my senses as I enter the crowded and noisy lunchroom during my third grade year. It's finally lunchtime, and I can't wait. With the smell of food omnipresent, I sit down at the gray, rectangular table with my classmates, avoiding the food crumbs that plague the floor from the previous class. I unzip my lunchbox with caution, pulling out a large, warm thermos and a clear container filled with white rice. Twisting and removing the lid of the thermos gently, I can finally smell the food that I have ached for all day: dal (an Indian lentil soup). I embrace the smell, letting the cloud of steam rising from the dal mask my face as I stare down the thermos. I feel my hectic surroundings chip away, and the memory of my grandmother and I, sitting across from one another and eating steaming dal-rice from our bowls, takes form around me. A sense of security and warmth protects me as I pour the yellow gold gently, allowing the dal to drench my rice and seep into each crack between the white grains.



The spoon in my hand grabs a small sample of the meal, but before I can feel the spice and intense flavor of the dal strike my tongue, four words of my classmate halt my movement: “Ewww, that looks gross!”

Four words — all it took was four words to shatter the bubble of security I floated in, draining the feeling of comfort and home from my body. The visible joy on my face faded, and a feeling of shame began to course through my blood. I felt as if I had committed a crime by bringing something “foreign” to the public eye, and a mounting pressure pushed me to atone for my sin. Without hesitation, I quickly sealed the lid on my dal-rice, stowed it into my lunchbox, purchased cheese pizza from the cafeteria, and ate in silence.

Despite the nine years that have passed, the seed of shame that my classmate’s words planted within me continues to grow, clouding my mind with doubt and fear every time I share my culture. When someone asks about the food I eat or the festivals I celebrate, a part of me stumbles before I answer, fearful of the judgment or disgust that my answer will bring. Although this fear continues to pervade me, the ignorance of my classmate’s words has shaped a maxim that I carry with me in every encounter and interaction I have with others — do not judge what I do not know.



Looking back, he who spoke those words did not know. He did not know that the dal is the product of my great-great-grandmother's recipe, passed down through generations. He did not know of the precision and affection with which my grandmother had made the dal the previous night, ensuring to add the perfect amount of chili powder, garam masala, and haldi. He did not know of the care with which my dad had warmed the dal and packed it for me in the early morning. He did not know of the caution yet joy with which I had carried my lunch throughout the school day. He did not know.

“Do not judge what you do not know” — a simple yet influential statement that impacts how I approach others every day. It is easy to be ignorant, to not truly understand the story behind each situation, and this ignorance often falsely justifies us to make baseless assumptions while clouding our heads from uncovering the truth. For this reason, I strive not to fall blind to ignorance by understanding the story behind every action, word, or person that influences me. I listen before I talk, ask before I assume, and think before I speak. Because had my classmate done the same, who knows, he may have enjoyed some dal-rice too.

# As Day Turns to Night

Nicole Campbell

As the time ticks on with  
passing seconds,  
The day quickly runs out and  
fades to night.

One views the stunning  
colors it beckons,  
How marvelously beautiful a sight!  
A blend of blue, purple, and  
some soft pink

In several patterns of light swirls.

Before you know it, the  
sun starts to shrink,  
Down behind the cloud's  
magnificent curls.

There goes the sky once filled with  
colored light,

And it all goes black as the sky  
grows dark,

As though something gave it a fright.

Although they're gone, the colors  
leave their mark.





## Law of Life

Caitlyn Doucet

There are many maxims about having courage, but my favorite quote is from Eleanor Roosevelt, “Courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the long run it is easier. We do not have to become heroes overnight. Just a step at a time, meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it not as dreadful as it appears, discovering we have the strength to stare it down.” Roosevelt’s quote exemplifies how I feel about my Type 1 Diabetes. I was diagnosed at age 6 and all I can remember about that fateful day is my mother crying. I did not understand why she was so sad, but now that I am older, I understand that her deep sorrow was because she understood the impact this diagnosis would not only have on me but on our entire family; my father is Type 1, so she knows, only too well, the devastation this disease can wreck on one’s life.

It is also the reason that I plan to study pre-med or nursing in college; I want to make a difference in the lives of those living with Type 1 Diabetes. Medical research is rapidly changing how we live with this disease, and I am excited to see what the future holds as I am confident that a cure is on the near horizon.



As is typical of my mother, she wiped away her tears and immediately went into “let’s fix this problem once and for all” mode, which meant she obsessively conducted research on which experimental drug study had the best chance of success with finding a cure. She signed me up for a double-blind study at the University of Florida where every 28 days for 36 months, I would receive an infusion and if I missed even one appointment, I would be removed from the study. We would not know if the infusion was the experimental drug or not until the study was completed.

So, every 28 days, at 4 am, my mother drove me the five and a half hours to Gainesville, Florida for the day-long appointment. The infusions were painful, the drive was long, and I hated the doctors because I felt like a guinea pig under a microscopic lens. My mother bribed me with treats because I put up such a fit about wanting to quit.

Over those 36 months, I gained a rope swing in our backyard, several stuffed animals, and movies to watch on the long drives. When I think back on what my mother did for me, in her effort to save me from this debilitating disease, I am in awe; she will do anything when it comes to Type 1 Diabetes and in the process, she instilled in me the importance of having courage.



By the end of the study, I was clear about the impact Type 1 Diabetes would have on my life; I struggled in school because of being sick from high blood sugar levels. My fingers hurt from all of the finger sticks and I was carrying around a lot of anger about having Type 1. My older sisters did not have it, so I was angry that I was the one of the three of us who had inherited the unlucky gene from our father.

Over time, I have come to understand that living with Type 1 Diabetes requires courage: courage to take care of myself and courage to face the adversity that comes with having this disease. Yes, it is not a fair disease and it is painful at times, but now that I am older, I can see that having this disease is the reason I am a strong person today.



## Law of Life

Colin Zimmer

“Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter, and those who matter don’t mind.”

- *Bernard M. Maruch*

### Character Trait: Concern

People live every day hiding behind closed curtains not showing their real selves, but instead following others on how to live their life. The truth is that struggle is a human attribute, and struggle is the only way to successfully do something productive with one’s life. I have struggled with a minor speech problem my entire life; I have struggled with R’s and many other pronunciation issues. It’s tough not to think about how my life would be changed without it, or how I sometimes wish it would just vanish. This struggle affects my life every day: from the willingness I have to speak in class or the words I choose to avoid and replace with similar words. I sometimes speak to people and then seconds after I turn my head, they begin laughing at how I just said a word.



This society chooses to judge instead of being respectful towards the problems people endure. They judge based on what they see without knowing the whole story of one's life. I've gone through so many situations when people laugh at the way I talk or the way I pronounce things. People judge me before knowing me and if I have to speak in class, I always freak out and look ahead to see if there is a heavy R word ahead that I can't say well. With this speech impediment, I have also gotten thousands of questions about if I am from England. Most of the time when I meet a new person, they usually ask me if I am from England. Although they mean nothing by it, it's offensive to me because I know that they can tell I don't always speak right. Because of what I've seen in my life, I feel like everyone will judge me for speaking a little different, even though I know it's not true. For some people, the courage to go out and be their true selves is nowhere in sight due to how this world treats them. For some, fear haunts their mind, and they are scared to open the curtains to be themselves; therefore, they are always hidden inside this robot that controls their actions and controls how their life is run. I am concerned about how people treat others poorly, and how that makes the victims not want to share their story with the world, which, who knows, might change a life one day.



This law of life, “Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter, and those who matter don’t mind” by Bernard M. Maruch, is one that I have known for a while now. Reading this quote makes me know that those who know my story are the ones who will not be bothered by any problems I have. Those who care to laugh and make fun of me are the ones who don’t know my story and are the ones who don’t matter that much. I have learned to go through life as myself, without worry about what people think of me. No matter what I go through, I know that being myself will make me feel better as a person and it lets me know that I have the strength to withstand people judging me. I would rather be loved for the person I am, rather than be loved for the person I'm not. I hope one day I can share my story and convince people to share theirs, which, who knows, might change a life one day...



## Law of Life

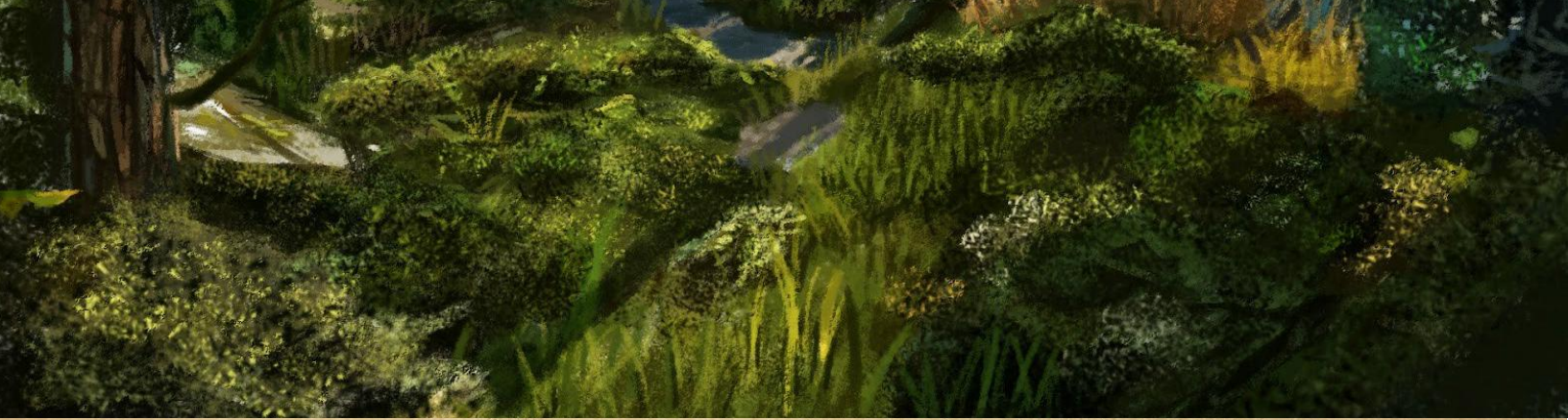
Neel Iyer

I am an Indo-American who has grown up with a life much different than that of my peers. I have always been raised differently, but my law of life is applicable to everyone who breathes on this planet. I grew up as the depressed, socially awkward nerd, who never fit in. When I was young, my parents got divorced, and harsh, separate parenting was very hard on my mental health, even at a young age. Later on, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and within a year it spread to her lungs, spine, stomach, liver, and brain. After ten years, my parents finally got back together, due to the diagnosis, but only for my mom to pass away later that year. After her death, all I could think of was all the things I could have done – how I could have been a better son and done things with her so that maybe I could have made the difference that would have let her live. I felt worthless, and I felt lonely. I felt like I had nothing, and I felt like a burden. Within that one year, my entire life changed. We sold my father's house, my sister moved to college, I transitioned to high school, people around me changed, and all my friend groups changed.



I felt like such a new person to the point that my memories didn't even feel like mine. At that point, I told myself I was useless, and I had no purpose. There was nothing left in my life.

This all changed one evening at a football game. One of our school's teachers has a baby with a rare form of cancer, so the game was dedicated to her and her family. Being a part of Student Council, I helped collect money for her family throughout the night. As I was helping to raise hundreds of dollars for the baby, I realized that my life wasn't meaningless. Helping people and children in need was my purpose, and no matter how much of a burden on others I knew I could be, I still knew that I could help and make a difference. I looked at that poor girl, and I felt nothing but a desire to help: it just had to be done. I couldn't stand the fact that children — people who haven't done anything to deserve such pain — could go through illness like that. I knew then that helping people is a must, and it is my purpose.



Today, I am in nine clubs at school and an officer of multiple ones. I work to bring community service to everyone at school as Class President, and I am on a separate fundraising campaign for a non-profit. People often tell me that I do too much, but with the impact I can make for people all across the world, I have the opportunity to be a ray of hope so that I can shine a light into people's lives— when I couldn't for my mom.

My life has been full of trauma, and throughout all the trauma, I have learned the true value of life. I've come to understand that it's never too much to do anything if it is for the well-being of others because the best way to live life is to give life to others. It's not a mere choice, not a one-time thing, but a moral obligation to anyone who has anything to give. So long as we are able to, we must never stop aiding others, because we are all in this together. As the Buddha once said, "Have compassion for all beings, each has their own sufferings."



## Christmas in October

Katharine Campbell

It was a perverse Christmas. There was no Santa Claus bringing sacks of toys; instead there was a crew of men, sweating even in the cool October afternoon, hauling large bags of belongings down the apartment stairs. Tuesdays in Cobb County are eviction days. The bags were my mother's formerly folded sheets, now bulging with surprises; books and jewelry and glasses and shoes. Like children, we tore away the 500-count cotton wrappers and looked inside but groaned instead when we saw the goodies; splintered ornaments and shattered plates. Under the three-story building, a sore excuse for a sparkling evergreen, my father grimly walked around our leather couches, stacked up like shiny presents. We avoided each other's eyes but still noticed my mother's puffy face, streaked with salt. I tried not to, but watching strangers gape in probing curiosity as they drove by the contents of a whole apartment spread surreally on the pavement was too much, and I had to cry.

Although initially prospects seemed dismal, and the fear that I had nowhere to stay scratched like an animal in the pit of my stomach, I discovered quickly that a good friend will always offer what they can, be it a meal or sofa. I drifted around in that fashion for a few months, but by Valentine's Day I brought my suitcase to my parents' motel, where sordid shadows kept to themselves and blue police lights often flashed past midnight.



There are five of us still there, in addition to various and sundry insect friends, who for some reason refuse to leave, despite our valiant efforts. There are a thousand ways to look at the situation, most of them bleak, but I have chosen the road less traveled. Robert Frost also once said, "In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on." And so it has, bringing with it many surprises.

One day some weeks after the eviction, I drove around running errands, exhausted from school, a long swim practice, and a trip to the library that lasted four hours- I hadn't eaten in about seven. Irritation crouched in my tongue as I snapped at my siblings, taking my brother to his teammate's house before giving my sister over to my parents in a seedy extended-stay. The whole drive over, I had brooded on my hunger and unfinished homework, dreading the fact that it'd have to be done by the light of my phone, as not to wake my friend on the other side of the room. As I put the car in reverse, watching my mother hold my sister's small hand and wave goodbye, I felt the tears that had been pricking my eyes for weeks spill over, my vision blurring as I swung out of the lot. My hands trembled on the wheel and I found myself sobbing the whole drive, desperately missing my family, my house, and the way my life was before the breadcrumbs of lost jobs, unpaid bills, and bad luck led to myself weeping at a stoplight. But when I finally got home sniffing and pulled my notebook from my bag, the frustration and resentment seemed to disperse like smoke.



I read curled in the corner of a fold-out couch, calm, or at least not on the verge of a breakdown, for the first time all day, and the sur-prising distraction was an unexpected but welcome guest. When I fell asleep with the book spread open in my lap, I wasn't thinking of the morning, day, or week to come, just the information I'd learned, and then nothing at all but sleep. It was the first time, and certainly not the last, that studying served as a sanctuary, a haven tantamount to many other comforts. A love of learning may have always been there, but that winter, I felt it harden from smoke to stone- a true Christmas present.

# Dinner Party at 44 Fairfield

Catherine Pereira

The new Fairfield folks are fairly odd  
I explained, to Cheryl and Maud  
Most of the day, they stay inside  
They keep to themselves – nothing to hide

But every dawn, at six forty-one  
That father goes out with his son  
Armed, with knives and camo hoods  
They creep into the local woods

They must love to hunt; I shrug and sigh  
Suppose it's better than a farmer's life.  
I only hope that kid can socialize  
He's not enrolled at Bakers High

Finally, it seems, they're reaching out  
That dinner party, a week from now  
Bet they invited the entire street  
It's about time we all got to meet



I asked Tom Hart and Sarah Bella West  
If they were dinner party guests  
Tom shook his head but Sarah froze  
Staring across the street to Mrs. Noe's

The Armstrongs took a trip to Rome  
By now, I thought they would be home  
I called, regarding next Sunday  
I guess they took an extended stay

It's summertime and as you'd surmise  
Fairfield gets quiet, coated in sun and flies  
I refuse to embrace the feverish malaise  
Dinner parties – a perfect end to my Sun-  
days

I headed down at a quarter to eight,  
Compared to when I dine, a little late  
That teenage boy answered the door  
Whispered hello, but nothing more



He led to me the dining room  
It was nothing like I presumed  
Fairly small, yet held an entire buffet  
Silver platters lay beneath  
steaming entrees

The father entered, and I exclaimed,  
Goodness me, I had no idea you were a  
gourmet!

This must be straight from a café  
Shame it's only us today

Well, I'm starved, if it's time to eat  
Where did you find all this meat?  
Ah, fresh from the market,  
Just down the street

This is lovely, Mr. Lecter  
I gushed, picking at the offal  
Oh please, he replied, just *Hannibal*



# Unremarkable

Thomas J. English

Dr. Blanchard said,  
Write a poem about yourself.  
Make it personal.  
Make it emotional.  
You have a week.  
I spent this week thinking about what  
to write.  
I'd talk about personal hardships, vic-  
tories.  
The more I thought about it, the less I  
knew what to write.  
I wasn't sure what to say, and I'm still  
not.  
I'm white, seventeen, and I live a  
cushy suburban lifestyle.  
My life is one of relative stability.  
Money tends not to be a problem.  
I attend a pretty good school.  
I don't struggle with mental illness.  
I don't face discrimination.  
I have no disabilities.



There haven't been any deaths in my family.

My life is destitute of any tragedy or tribulation.

I have very little to complain about.

My classmates will probably have more to say about their woes than I do.

I have none.

So far my life has been rather uneventful.

Nothing to be sad about.

Nothing to be angry over.

Nothing to complain about.

Nothing to celebrate.

Nothing to be proud of.

Nothing, necessarily, of note.

Because my life has no tragedy, has no triumph,

I don't think I can make any poem emotional.

This is as personal as it'll be.

That's my poem; a poem about as unremarkable as me.



DHgate

# The Wind and the Willow

Halle Burns

Whiplashed by the endlessly-giving  
hands of the restless wind,

Weeping willows wonder.

They try to listen to the voices beneath  
their strands

Which, without the breeze, would otherwise  
be heard under the trees' thick  
locks.

Underneath the bangs of one willow's  
hanging tresses

Sits a pair— a couple of friends, or  
two lovers, maybe—

Who whisper secrets into each other's  
ears,

Unaware that other botanical sets are  
also listening.

*Oh, you nosy willow- why can't you  
simply be pleased by my breeze?*

Its branches are left aching and sore,  
and as it tries to recover, it also tries to  
hear.

The self-sacrificing wind— the earth's  
mover, pusher, its forceful, shapeless  
hands— cup the tree's curious ears.

“Could you whisper a little louder?”  
the tree asks the two who lie beneath  
it,

But only the wind can hear the selfish



plea and tries to accommodate  
accordingly.

The noble element struggles desperately  
To capture the sounds of the unknowing  
pair

And please the needy tree,  
Making up for stressing its beautiful,  
fibrous branches.

Suddenly, the wind hears a quiet “I love  
you,”

And quickly, tightly clasps the words  
between its hands,

Withholding them from the willow’s  
ear.

The three words flutter within them  
Like a firefly hunting for an escape be-  
tween a young girl’s sweaty palms—  
Traps that have just captured a speck of  
light, a segment of a star,  
On a humid summer night.

“I love you.”

What will the willow do when it knows  
of love?

Will it use this emotion selfishly, refus-  
ing to say it to the so-deserving wind,



Forcing it to capture and echo endlessly  
in an attempt to please?

Will it repeat the phrase to another ele-  
ment— fire or water—

Leaving the wind forever-enslaved to  
an unthankful master?

Maybe. So the wind keeps the words to  
itself,

Squeezing them between its hands

Until they condense into a strong, silent  
breeze—

A force that whips the hairs of the wil-  
low.

The couple stands up and walks else-  
where.

“Someday,” the wind thinks to itself as  
it playfully twists the willow’s tresses  
between its fingers

And the selfish plant, once again,  
recovers from this generous, blown  
caress.



# Prayer From Mt. Whitney

Henry Tegethoff

I'm praying for the first time at 10,000  
feet

Reflecting on the time you showed me  
the Brooklyn Bridge in the morning

Ah God,

And playing back again and again that  
chirping of children's rubber feet on li-  
noleum floors when rainy days would  
come

I'm wishing I could be back knocking  
my teeth out in a parking lot town,

For I know that if I could change the  
world, I'd run away before I had to.

Back to the cruel electric heat and the  
creaking embrace of wind on windows

That's where you gnawed at the beds  
of my fingernails with steel wool



That's where you taught me tears,

Ah God,

And how to wipe them at the lamp  
post before you come inside

And how to pretend that you don't see  
that your mother has learned how to  
do the same thing

So carry out your plan for me quickly,  
and give me the eternity that remains  
to rest.





## I'm Worth Fighting For

Seneca Crosby

The cold temperature of the scale startles me. I stand and cross my fingers. My heartbeat grows faster. I close my eyes and count to three. I look down at the scale. My heart drops. Tears sting in my eyes. I slump to the ground. My body trembles at the recognition. She was right. Again. My mind swirls through the thousands of times that I'd stepped onto the scale. She'd always been right.

Her name is Ana, others call her Anastasia. The ones who pity us call her Anorexia. Regardless of her name, she still takes over everything I thought was mine. Her judgement is the only thing that is real to me. She's dug a pit in my head that has only grown bigger as I feed her with my hunger.

She started as a whisper, then she grew. Now, her voice booms over the rest. She's the only one I hear, the only one I listen to. She's filled my brain with her version of others' opinions of me. She's beaten the nail of my worthlessness into my skull. My worth is based on others' opinions. My worth is nothing



without her. Without them. And I believe her.

The food on my plate infuriates her. She screams in my ear, forces me to push the plate away. The worried look in others' eyes no longer worries me. "You're doing this for their approval," Ana says. "A little hunger never hurt." Only the 'little hunger' grows into starvation. My stomach grows flatter and I begin to lose drastic amounts of weight. Ana only becomes stronger— her presence weighing more upon my shoulders. She occupies all of my time. I grow apart from my friends to make time for her.

Ana consumes me. I lose all connection to the world, spend my days behind closed doors. I spend more time worrying over my weight than on my studies. My grades drop. Others begin to take notice. Ana loves their attention. She calls it 'praise.' She says I'm finally doing something right. The idea of gaining this 'praise' motivates me to continue with Ana's plan. I cut out all the food I was eating. Water becomes my main source of nutrients. More and more people take notice, only they ask questions. Ana hates questions. She wonders why they ask them. Don't they understand my reasons? I am not harming myself. Harming myself would be bad. Ana is not bad; she is my friend.

Ana pressures me to continue. "Ignore them," she says.



“They are just jealous.” I lose larger amounts of weight and plunge into a deeper isolation. This isolation takes a toll on me, the social energy that I had before Ana tried to push back against her. She tries to hide it, but somehow, it breaks through her walls. I begin to look for someone who can make Ana leave.

Everything that used to make up my personality floods through the hole in her defenses. Everything that I used to believe in pushes Ana into a small corner. She screams at my failure to make something of myself. She says that I am worthless again. That she, and only she, can give me worth. This time, I see through her lies. This thing she calls ‘worth’ is very far from its true meaning.

I am not based on what others see in me. My worth is not something to be debated. Ana blinded me: I did not know my own worth because of her. She implanted an impossible worth standard in my head, one she knew I could never obtain, one she knew would kill me if I pursued it. Without knowing my own worth, Ana was able to whisper a worth that was far less than my true worth. When you know your own worth, no one can make you feel worthless. I am worth so much more than Ana. I refuse to be her victim again.





**LATER**

IN A MOVIE ABOUT  
THE MAFIA...

I KNOW IT WAS YOU, FREEDO.

SO WHY ARE WE HERE?

FOR RESEARCH.

