

2024

THE VANGUARD

A Literary Magazine

Crafted by the Rowan College South Jersey Community



A Collection of:

**Fiction
Memoir
Film
Photography
Digital Art
Poetry
and more..**

**By the students, faculty and
staff of RCSJ**

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**ROWAN COLLEGE
SOUTH JERSEY**

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Letters from the Editors

One of our founding fathers and a fellow Philadelphia native, Benjamin Franklin, once said that if we wish not to be forgotten, we must either write something worth reading or do something worth writing about. This advice succinctly captures the power of art and the written word. Both transcend the confines of space and time, connecting people through our shared humanity.

This is exactly what we hope to do each year with *The Vanguard* - capture on paper the creative expressions of our college community and share them with all. We hope that you find the pieces within as inspiring and beautiful as we do. Thank you to all of the artists and writers who submitted, and a special thank you to my students in the Applied Professional Communications 3+1 program for their tireless efforts in designing, editing, and writing for this magazine.

Best,
Dr. Andrea Vinci
Assistant Professor, Director - 3+1 Applied Professional Communications
Faculty Editor, *The Vanguard*

As students, we are put outside of our comfort zones nearly every day, pushing past our limits and incorporating new techniques into our work, tirelessly improving. *The Vanguard* demonstrates the limitless potential of the creative mind; each piece showcasing the endless creativity that thrives within our community, as well as the bright futures earned by the creators of each and every submission.

We, the editors, had the unique opportunity to personally tailor and organize *The Vanguard* in a way that not only allowed us to better understand the dedication and talent around us, but also heighten our own sense of appreciation of the craft. We can only offer the highest of thanks and praises to Dr. Vinci for providing us with this opportunity and entrusting us with the skills necessary to create an official piece for the RCSJ community and beyond. It was a privilege to work with you and, most importantly, learn from you.

We want to extend our thanks to our contributors who have shared their rich creative visions with us. The works within are not just a collection of pages, but a true reflection of RCSJ's dynamic creativity. As you begin your exploration of this collection, allow the diverse voices of our creatives to elevate your perspective on literature and art with their own experiences. Through this perseverance and dedication, they will all go far beyond what is expected of them and represent the brightest parts of what it means to be writers and artists.

Best wishes,
The APC 3+1 Publication, Layout and Design Class, Student Editors



“For someone like me, black is more than a hue; it carries a burden, a struggle that’s true—a target on our backs from the judgments they cast.” There had been several break-ins in this quiet and small town of Windsorville. Everyone knew each other, and all the kids were raised together practically as siblings. News of the robberies spread like wildfire from the grocery stores to the hallways in school, and honestly, the whole town was shaken up, especially me. In the dead of the night, I'd be knocked out, but my eyes were wide open, glued to my bedroom window. Every little sound had me on edge, thinking it was some robber creeping around by my house. Everyone was on high alert, ensuring their doors were locked and guns were fully loaded. My family was still pretty new to the town; we moved here my sophomore year, and I was now a junior. We were the Black family. I mean, yeah, we are black, but we're quite literally the Black family, as in our last name.

We were one of the few black families in a predominately white town. I always wondered why my mom moved us to Windsorville and one day, she told me, "Marcus, it's a chance for you to get a better education, and there are more opportunities in this town." But I was the spelling bee champ at my other school. How much better can my education get? I was the smartest out of my family, which was another reason for them to hate me. My mother was a single mother who worked extremely hard to give us a better life than she had. With her being at work most of the time, she never really caught on to how my siblings treated me. I couldn't blame her, though, because she was always tired from grinding away at work to make ends meet. We never had to want for anything because my mom always found a way to make things happen, even if it included sacrificing her own happiness. In my family, I am the youngest; there's my mom and three older siblings. We were not that far in age, which caused us to fight like cats and dogs. I was often the target of these fights because I was so different from them, not to mention I had a different father, so they treated me like half a sibling.

My family was pretty lighter in complexion and I was the darkest, leaving me to wonder if there was any truth to my siblings telling me that I was adopted. I was always the odd one left out, and I didn't fit in, not in society, and not in the house of people who were supposed to love me and accept me. I struggled with self-image issues due to the things that my family would say about me. So many insults were hurled at me that I genuinely began to believe what was said. It was a depressing thing to be bullied by my own family, not only for the color of my skin but also for my weight. I stood out like a sore thumb against them because I was obese, dark, and 6' 3". There was never a day where my brother wouldn't call me fat and black. It had gotten so bad for me to the point that I started eating food to cope with my feelings, which led me to keep gaining and gaining. I started dressing in oversized hoodies and sweats to cover myself up from him and myself. There was no harsher critic than the person who stared back at me in the bathroom mirror.

Although I was what people would call a gentle giant, I had so much pain and rage building inside me, ready to explode like a fire hydrant on the hottest day. It was different for me in school, though I played the role of the class clown. I figured that if I could entertain and make people laugh, they wouldn't focus on my looks but more on my personality. I tried my hardest to fit in, but in a sea full of white kids, it was hard to blend in even when you tried dressing, speaking, and acting like them. The black kids felt like I was whitewashed because of this, and maybe they were right in retrospect. I was too black for the white kids and too white for the black kids. I had found a best friend in Steven though; we were like peanut butter and jelly from the moment I moved into town. Steven was outspoken like me and always voiced his opinions, no matter who was around. I was a little more timid in my delivery because I didn't want to be seen as a stereotype. He came from an Italian family. They were all boisterous and energetic, from his siblings down to the mangy mutt. They were wealthy and owned several successful businesses, which motivated Steven to act the way he did. He was spoiled, entitled, and had no respect for people, including his own family.

Seeing how he talked to his parents was a culture shock. Calling them bitches and mother**kers was a regular occurrence. If I spoke to my mom like that, she would've beat my a** from sun up to sun down. Yet, Steven's parents did everything for him. Whenever there was trouble, they came running to bail him out. Money was the answer to everything. In their eyes, you could have whatever you wanted if you had enough. If you didn't have money, being white could pay your way and open doors. For someone like me, life wasn't "as easy as a Sunday morning," as people made it seem. I always knew, but I especially found that out one evening when I slept over at Steven's house. We had been working on a school project, and he wanted to go to the local Quick Chek. Steven lived on the richer side of town, where they were more arrogant and pretentious, so I was skeptical. We weren't even supposed to be out late because the town had enforced a 10pm curfew, due to increased crime in the area. But Steven does what he wants and talked me into going with him against my better judgment.

I just had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I still hopped into the passenger seat of his Porsche, unaware of what was waiting for me at the store. As we pulled up to the store, we saw a large group of older kids, most likely seniors, causing a scene gathered around their pickup trucks, with most of them having a Confederate flag hung up. They were blasting rap French Montana's "Ain't Worried About Nothin'" through the speakers of one of the trucks, and everyone was rapping along. It's wild because all of them were white, yet you could hear them rapping along to the music, making sure they enunciated the n-word in the song. As soon as we got out of the car, the smell of alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes instantly hit my nose, making my nostrils curl up at the combined odor. I covered my nose, put my hoodie over my head, and walked into the store, purposely trying to avoid eye contact with the group.

But I looked over when I heard someone say, "Hey, Blackie, what's your fat a** doing on our side of town" as we were walking into the store. The comment was followed by a loud snickering and chatter as the store door closed. It was David, one of the seniors from school. I recognized his surfer wavy hair and the hoodie with the school logo on it. I truly despised him from the moment that I first met him. He constantly mutters some slur whenever he sees me. Sometimes, it would be about my weight, but most times, it would be about me being black. Could I blame him, though ignorance breeds ignorance, and I heard his family was ten times worse? "F**k them," Steven said, "Look at what they're riding in compared to what we just pulled up in." I replied, "You're right, but I knew we shouldn't have come here. Let's just hurry up and get back to the house". As we gathered our favorite snacks and drinks, we heard the sirens of a police car outside. We immediately rushed to self-checkout and paid for our things to sneak out without being seen by the cops. I didn't even think to put my stuff in a bag as I damn near ran out of the store. But by the time we walked out the doors, a cop was looking in our direction, and the group of pickup truck guys watched in silence.

"HEY BOY!" I kept walking as fast as possible to Steven's car, ignoring the officer. "HEY YOU, what's the big rush for?" Steven replied, "Can you leave us the f**k alone before I have my dad sue the entire police department." I thought, "Great, Steven's going to be why I don't make it back home today." My heart was practically beating out of my chest. I started to sweat profusely as I heard the officer reply, "Not you, son! YOU, in the black hoodie!" I turned around, and there, a few feet in front of me, stood Sgt. Raymond White looking up at me as he was at least 5 inches shorter than me. His face was flushed with anger, and his eyes were cold and calculating, seemingly piercing through my soul. He had a sinister smile that sent shivers down my spine. Even his voice carried an eerie tone, dripping with malice and deceit. As he approached, his hand instinctively gravitated towards the gun holster, exuding an air of authority and danger. I was frozen with fear, and all the hairs on my body stood up, knowing that a single move could change everything. The tension in the air was palpable, and the weight of his presence was impossible to ignore.

His reputation preceded him; I remembered him from my brother's close encounter with him. When we first moved here, he tried to falsely accuse my brother of petty theft, but multiple eyewitnesses of the crime verified that it wasn't him. You could tell he was disappointed he didn't get his way. It's as if he was trying to make an example out of me now. I mustered up the strength to say, "Officer, I didn't do anything wrong; we're just trying to head back home." Sgt White then said, "There were reports of people being rowdy, and something tells me that it was you, boy." I've dealt with your kind, and people like you are all a bunch of wild animals and savages. You can never be too careful. Instantly, I felt my heart drop out of my chest as I tried to get the strength to speak again. Anything that I say could be seen as a threat to him. I looked around behind Sgt White at the gathering audience; it felt like people were enjoying this. Their eyes glittered with amusement as they sat back and watched as if it was their favorite reality show playing.

But this wasn't scripted; it was real life, and I never thought this would happen to me. For someone like me, incidents like this are a common occurrence. "Didn't I just tell you to leave us alone? Marcus didn't do anything. It was these assholes that were just partying outside," Steven said. Sgt White replied, "Son, stay out of this. This has nothing to do with you. I received multiple reports of someone in a hoodie causing a scene." "But I was in the store with him the whole time, Officer, and I'm not the only one out here wearing a hoodie," I said. "So why were you running out of the store with no bags? Do you even have the money to pay for those things, or were you in there stealing like the coon you are!" Sgt. White exclaimed in disgust. Honestly, I was fed up with everything and everyone in my life. I was so tired of being picked on just because of my appearance. I've been dealing with it from everyone all my life, and I was just sick of the world. I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins, electrifying every fiber of my being. It was as if time slowed, my heart racing with fear and excitement.

I screamed with all my might, "F**K YOU, I can show you the receipt right now, as I reached to pull it out of my pockets. "HEY! Keep your hands where I can see them!" Sgt. White shouted, his hand trembling, as he grabbed his baton from the side. "I need backup now at the Quick Chek off of Church Road," he screamed into his walkie-talkie. I shouted, "Steven, please call my mom. Please get help!" I said a little prayer in my mind, hoping that this was all just a big prank and that Ashton Kutcher would come out any second with the cameras. I notice Sgt. White walking closer to me with his baton, and in a split second, I feel it strike me multiple times with a force that feels unbearable. I instantly fall to the ground and feel Sgt. White continuing to beat me with the stick while also stomping me out with his steel-toe boots. I could feel the weight of each stomp crushing down on my body, my bones and muscles screaming in agony. The pain radiated through my entire being, making it difficult to breathe, as if the very air had turned into shards of glass. The pain left me gasping for air, my vision blurring with tears, while I desperately screamed for help.

I remember the flashes of everyone's phones as they stood around recording me, ensuring they got the best angles. Once again, I tried to scream for help, but no sound would escape as Sgt. White had his hand around my throat, suffocating my cries. It's not like they would've helped me; they only wanted a viral video to post on social media. I could see the headlines now, "Superhero cop saves the day against a black teen. I hear Sgt White, what feels like from a distance, read my rights, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in court. You have the right to talk to a lawyer for advice before we ask you any questions. You have the right to have a lawyer with you during questioning". I felt fear, confusion, and anger swirling around in the back of my mind as he slapped those cold, hard metal handcuffs on my wrists; it was like my whole world turned upside down. During the car ride, I kept going in and out of consciousness in the back seat of Sgt. White's car; I remember touching my head and seeing blood on my fingers. My head was throbbing, and the silence in the car was suffocating, like the weight of everything was pressing down on me.

The rest of the ride was a blur and, when I woke up, I was in a jail cell. The walls were made of gray, unforgiving concrete, with dim, flickering lights overhead. The air was stale and musty, carrying the weight of confinement. The cell had a narrow bed, a metal toilet, and a small, scratched-up table. The sound of clanging bars and distant echoes filled the room, almost making me forget about the pain that I was in. I was scared for my life and what would happen to me. I was already beaten so severely to the point my right eye was closed shut, my nose was leaking, and I could still taste the blood in my mouth. I remember my guidance counselor saying that whenever I was depressed, I should turn to poetry instead of food, so that's what I did. I sat in that cold jail cell and put my pain into words as I cried deeply.

*"For someone like me,
Black is more than a hue;
It carries a burden, a struggle that's true.
A target on our backs from the judgments
they cast,
Ignoring our worth that lies within, still
treating us like the past.*

*Tormented daily for simply being me,
I just want to exist and to truly live free.
Living in a land where we are suspects
because of our skin,
Hunted like animals due to what sin?*

*All I had to wear was my hoodie and my
chocolate skin
For me to be deemed suspicious.
Caught up in a cycle where it's jail or 7ft
under is truly vicious.
You don't know what it feels like to be
someone like me,
Within a split second, you can be just another
black man,
Another sad story for TV."*

As the moonlight spilled through the cracks of the cell window, casting a soft glow upon the hard concrete floor, I sat alone in the corner, thinking about my life and how fast things changed. Just like that, I was arrested for just being me. Suddenly, I heard the loud thuds of heavy footsteps getting closer and closer. My heart pounded in my chest as I watched the man who beat me senseless over nothing approach the cell door. Sgt Raymond White's demeanor was cold and detached, his eyes devoid of empathy or remorse. With a nonchalant flick of his wrist, he turned the key in the lock, the sound echoing through the dimly lit corridor. Then, I heard him say in a stern voice, "Mr. Black, you're free to go. It was just a misunderstanding." I couldn't believe it. After everything I had been through, the pain I endured, they were letting me go without a hint of remorse or even an apology. It felt like a slap in the face, a cruel reminder of how little my well-being mattered to them. I was beaten until I was black and blue over a misunderstanding, and just like that, they were letting me go. The only thing I was guilty of was being black, but it felt like he just wanted to punish me out of hatred just because he could. I couldn't help but feel a surge of anger and frustration because he genuinely didn't care about what he did to me. He didn't care because, to him, I was just another black boy, something the world wouldn't miss a beat without.



“DAISIES”

BY: OLIVIA FRANSKO



I never wanted it to be over
But the sun has to set and chapters have to end
so new ones can begin
Old flowers have to die, so new ones can grow in their place
but one thing I will never forget is the look on your face
the last time we said goodbye, I didn't know it was the end,
but maybe you did, and if you could speak you'd say, "one day I'll see you again."
Maybe you wanted to go, maybe you knew it was time,
or maybe you had no idea I was even saying goodbye.
Maybe all you could see was the love in my eyes
maybe that was the last thing you saw before going to the other side.

You're waiting for me, I just know you are
and every time I see a shooting star,
I think, "That must be her, she's looking down on me;
She's cheering me on," while everyone else thinks I'm crazy,
but now daisies are my favorite flower and I cry when I see them
I want to pick every single one, I don't want to leave them.
I miss you every day, you were really one of a kind
I think about you and pray about you every single night
I pray to God that He loves you even more than I did
I don't know if that's even possible, I think the chances are pretty slim.
I'm sorry for any pain that I caused, if I could go back to when
you were here, I'd cherish every moment, I want to live it all again.

If I knew you were going to go so soon I would've held you so much tighter,
I would've done everything in my power to make your burden lighter;
but I can't go back now and what's past is past,
just know that I'll always love you, and my love will always last



A BROKEN FAREWELL TO STEFFON

By: Carthornia Kouroupos

On this day of September 14, 2023, I write to my dearest and sweetest grandson, Steffon Andrew Sanders, born February 15, 2000, and died March 16, 2023.

Steffon, I miss you so much! It's been six months since I've looked into your large, light brown, unassuming eyes. I miss the way your blinding smile would break through out of nowhere to brighten up your hospital room. I miss the warmth of your hands and the way your fingers curled tight to make small fists.

Although you were 23, you were still a baby to me. You never spoke, you never walked, you never went to prom, I dare not think of you too much in fear of breaking down.

I wish I was a Poet
as to write you something great
but the words don't seem to flow
as I try to write them straight

The day you got your wings
was such a happy day for you
You finally found your freedom
and around the room you flew

I came as fast as I could run
to see you take your flight
when I arrived and looked at you
your body was all white

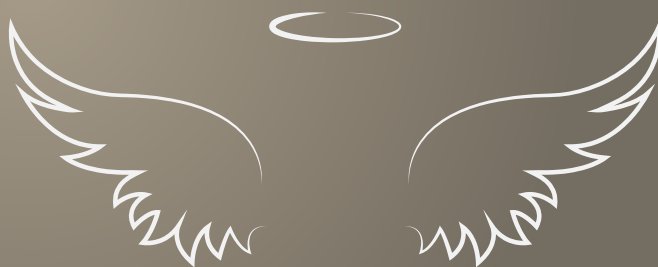
I recognized your eyes half shut
and all your curly hair
I held your hand, I rubbed your head
my grief too much to bear

I held your hand a little while
then gently rubbed your head
until they came into the room
and took you from your bed

The only thing left to take
were pictures from your wall
I turned around and took them down
then walked back down the hall

I haven't been the same since then
your death each day now brings
it won't be long because of age
that God sends me my wings.

We then can dance throughout the night
as Heaven's starlight charms
and laugh for all eternity
within each other's arms



"A MODEST ODE TO REJECTED REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, BOTH NOW AND YESTERYEAR"

By: Mitchell Thomas

Nikki Haley and Vivek

Suarez was too much to take

Rick Santorum, Ryan Paul,

Keep on knockin' back your Geritol!

Bob Jindal, "Lyin' Ted,"

Rand Paul's hopes were in the red

Scott Walker, William Hurd,

Douglas Burgum - how absurd!

They all tried to have their day

Dammit, Christie, go away

Carson, Kasich, Carly, too

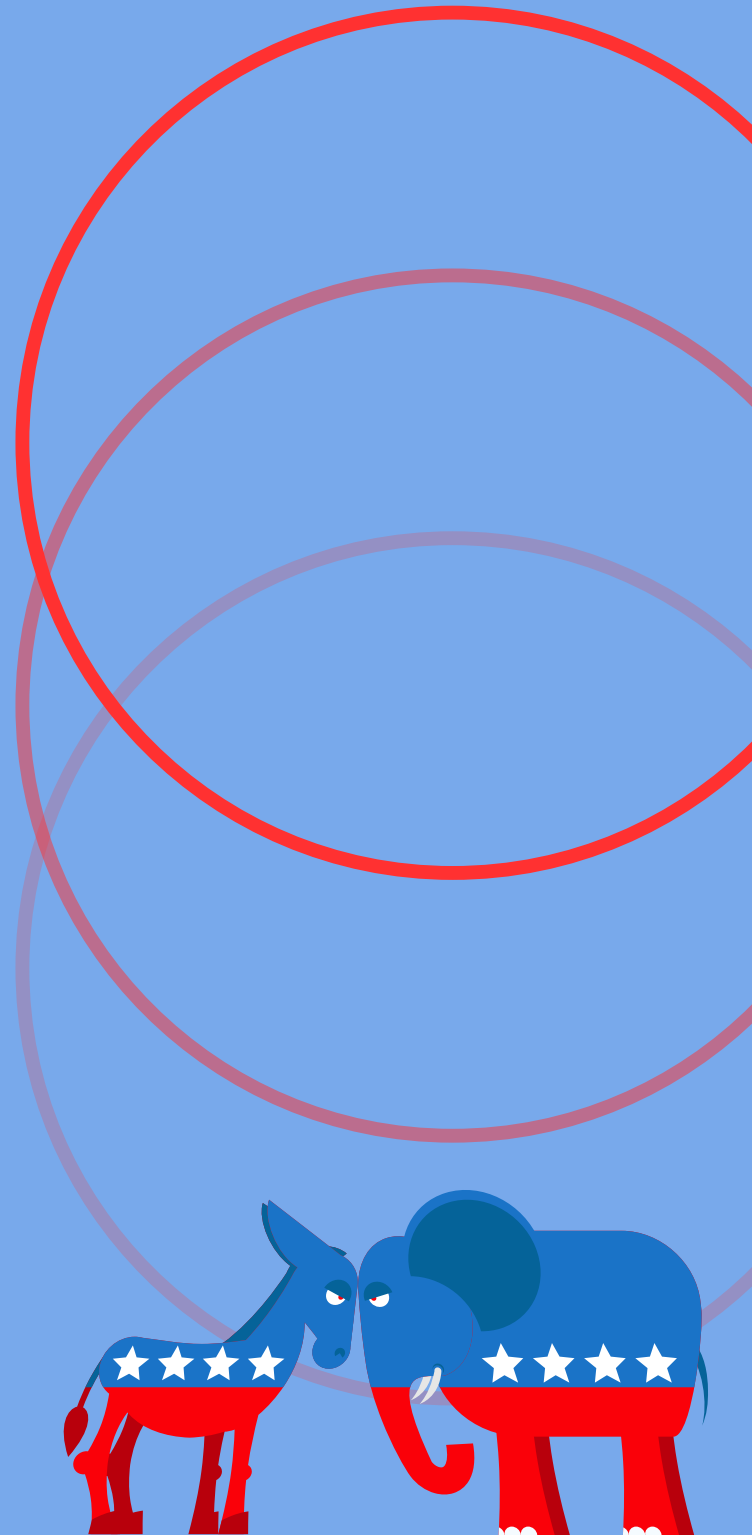
Tom Tancredo... wait, who?

Jeb Bush was a stupid a**

Mike Pence couldn't pump some gas

Some are still loved, some are hated

Sorry, Ron – you should have waited!



AT SEA - OIL ON CANVAS



PEACOCK - A LITHOGRAPH

Art by: Shraddha Fiorentino

SNAKES - A COLORED PENCIL ARTWORK



By: Adrianna Kelly

"AND THEN..."

By: Kennedy Aora

Way deep in the predicament,
Well past fate, faith, and ... and grace,
The gasping simmered in between,
The sweltering stich,
Salty chapped lips, wholly drained, and stiff.
Slowly,
I
Crawled, stretched my arms across,
And,
Breathlessly fumbled,
Making for the hands.

All in full recognition of their fragility,
The utter knowledge of my frailty,
And in the quest for peace and tranquility,
Channeling misery, agony and suffering,
Yet purposing to stay and board.
Trembling,
I
Clasped, and clung unto the fragile hands,
And,
They were going to determine tomorrow,
Then, place me in it.

Brother Where Art Thou?

By: Cathornia Kouroupos

December 1981. The operation was swift,
Performed with precision and skill,
It was as quick as the knock on the door,
I answered it.
No organs were left out of place,
The job was done so well.
I was told you were no more,
Gone,
Not to be found in the tiniest places,
Or even in foreign lands.
My heart turned to lead and dragged me
to my knees,
As my red hot liquid turned into small
beads of ice cold clots,
That forced the river from my soul so
deep,
So deep,
It took many years to crest,
Before I could rest,
My tattered being,
So broken, damaged, wrecked.
Didn't know how to pick up the pieces of
what was left.
I wanted to come to the place,
Where your final home was made,
You laid there losing warmth,
Until you glowed with an unfamiliar look.

I never did, though...I was afraid,
Afraid I'd find you,
Afraid of what you'd say.
I just waited for you to come to me,
And you did that very first night.
I was happy,
And surprised.
You told me it wasn't true,
That they had not done that to you,
That you had gone away,
Your absence a delay,
Until you were forgotten by those who
would lay you down,
In a hole,
Six feet underground.
I was so happy to see you, well,
And proclaimed my love for you,
And as I rose with the sun,
The truth pulled back the veil,
The operation had made a change,
So deep within my heart,
That when awake I dream you dead,
And when asleep alive.



Dear Memory

By: Taylor Travis

You chose to dance with the
Devil on your back
You stole, you were selfish
And I can't remember the last time
You were you
Now that She's gone,
You spiraled
You became free
And you took advantage of life
I can't tell if you changed
Or if you were always like this
And I was blinded by the man
You portrayed yourself to be,
You call yourself a man
But a real man doesn't do the
Things you've done
I refuse to end up like you
I refuse to end up like Her
You went from Dad
To Father
To Stranger
To Memory
That's all you'll be,
A Memory



Solace and Skyward Bound

Photography By: Dylan Kedosh



“Darkness”

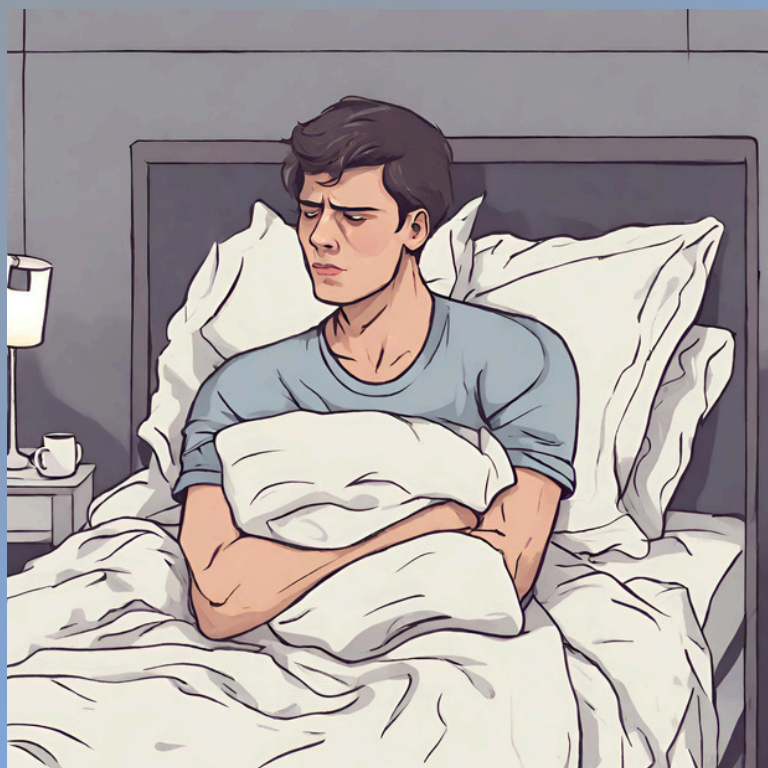
By: Brian Warriner

My eyes adjust to the surroundings. My ears ring among the music playing. There is this feeling that overcomes me with this sense of calm presentness—holding my pillow tight like a lover waiting to drift off to sleep. But my mind thinks in distracting ways that keep me alert—wanting to be asleep and find rest from the events.

The lateness gives over towards early, and I am in bed awake. I am overthinking, overanalyzing, and over-worried about many things. Wanting to be at rest gives me a rest but it drifts away slowly as the minutes pass. I am struggling with the painful feeling that could burn away the esteem I have. It’s making me question myself.

The blackness of this room comforts me as I am lost in the darkness of my room. If my mind could write, it would have written on the four walls that created this room. Through the years it would have covered them in layers of darkness. Every breath is to clear it away, but its thick, cement-like surface blocks out any light.

In essence, the darkness that I speak of is myself. It’s my own doing, yet I cannot break them down. Not when you are the darkness.



"BALANCE"

By: Katalina Evergold

Sometimes I feel defeated
Like all of this work was for nothing
But then I'm reminded of where I was
And all the things I wish to achieve
I mean really
I've nearly earned my bachelor's degree
Not that my worth quantifies in money or school
Because I've grown so much in these shoes too
I'm proud of who I am
And who I am becoming
I just have to remember
Environment does not define me
And darkness does not shroud me
I am light
I am the flicker of the moon
And yes my heart shines as the sun too
Balance is key
And that alone proves my growth
Defines me and my destiny



“WINTER SMILE”

By: Lenny Testa

Memories can sting
Like tearing your upper lip
From a winter smile



DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

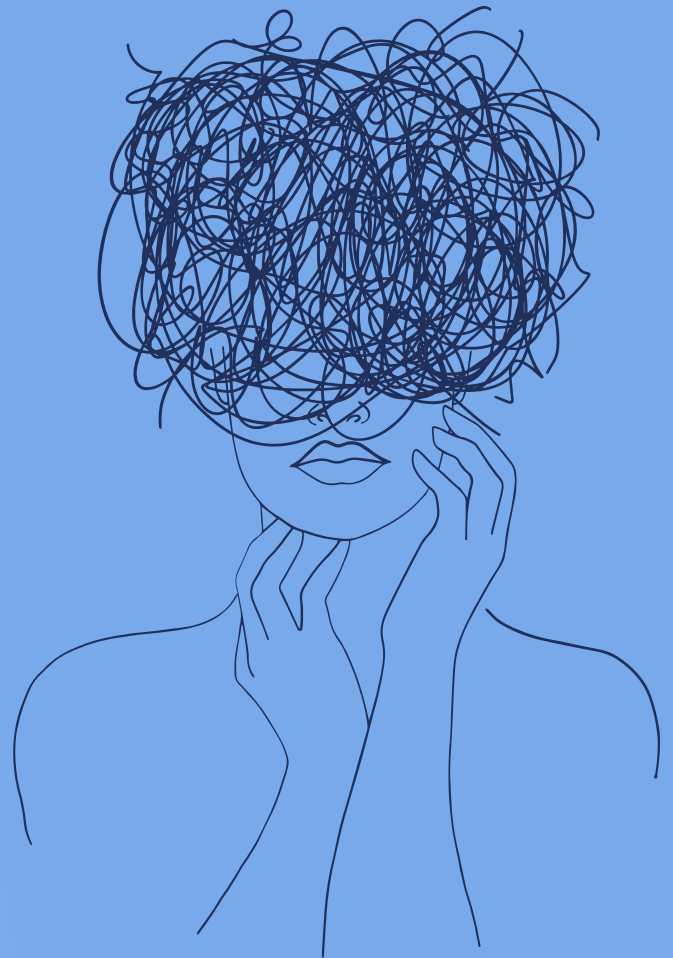
By: Mary Malinconico



“Get Me Out Of Here”

By: Ashlee Novelli

Waiting to get out of here
It's so cloudy and unclear
This place is full of things
Relationships and flings
They call it the control room
It's dusty, you might need a broom
I get trapped here often
Proceed with caution
Sometimes this spot makes you panic
Or it can make you go manic
Watching good things come and go
And all the bad things overflow
Piles and piles of photos
There are to-do lists below those
Long nights stuck here with no escape
Trying to remember if I ate
Here's a newspaper about a lost little girl
Her mom's stomach must be in a whirl
Lists of names on the wall
Some mean nothing, some I can recall
There is a ringing noise on the left side
The kind of sound you hear after you've cried
I can hear screaming from a mile away
I seriously don't want to stay
There is too much going on right now
I know there's a way out somehow
Being all alone causes you to worry
Someone really needs to hurry
I hope this doesn't end with me dead
It can't because I really was just in my head



The last time I spoke to my grandmom was right after Christmas. Since I hadn't seen her very much that season, I made sure to stop by her house to chat for a bit. I didn't plan on staying long, as I had been running around all day for reasons I can't remember now. When I got to her house, she was in her usual spot. Watching a Hallmark movie, sitting in her chair with her legs propped up, atop the blue carpet in the living room.

My grandmom was a pure, proud Irish Catholic. She had five children, all girls except one boy, and each of them attended Catholic school through high school. One of her greatest characteristics was pride. She was extremely proud of her heritage, her religion, her children, and especially the home she built with her late husband. Their house always felt familiar to me. After my parents separated, I spent so much of my childhood with my grandparents in their home. My grandmom's sense of style bled into her home seamlessly. She always insisted on keeping her bright blue carpets, no matter how many people told her to get them replaced. Right when you walked into their house, there was a mirrored wall to your right that disguised the coat closet. Along this wall was a glass case of some of her most prized possessions: her Lladros. These were beautiful porcelain figurines that originated from a factory in Spain. All her grandchildren knew how to be very careful around these since they were so expensive. None of us knew how much they cost, but rumors swirled of certain pieces that were worth thousands of dollars. To my grandmom, they were priceless. As a child, I marveled at the porcelain dancers and ballerinas as the sound of traditional Irish music played in the background.

That winter day, we talked about how we hadn't seen each other in a while.

Earlier that year, she briefly had to move into my father's house after a fall. We had gotten used to seeing each other every day. Without her at my dad's house, we had adapted back into our normal lives, which were growing busier by the day. There was a lot that the two of us had to catch up on. She brought up how my dad told her that I had a boyfriend now.

“I think it's great you have someone to spend time with other than your dad,” she laughed, referencing all the time the two of us spent together, even as I grew older.

“Did Dad tell you that he's Irish?” I responded, slightly trying to avoid her comment.

I watched as her eyes lit up and she started to laugh. I had to lead with that, knowing she'd be so excited that I found an Irish boy. We talked for an hour or two about family, work, and school. The two of us always clicked in conversation. Over those last few years, I had spent loads of one-on-one time with her as an adult. For a long time, I was there to ease the tension when family members got frustrated with her stubbornness. Both my grandmom and I recognized she was getting older, and things had to change, but she wanted to stick to her old ways. Sometimes with grandparents, you just have to let them win, since you don't know how much longer they'll be around.

Not even three months later, my grandmom passed away. Her viewing and funeral were right before Valentine's Day. My dad kept saying that she left us just in time to spend the holiday with Grandpop in heaven. At the viewing, multiple of her friends, some of whom I couldn't name, approached me at the end of the line with a hug and said, “I know how close the two of you were.”

Before this, it hadn't occurred to me just how close we were. I lived in her house as a child after my parents separated, we ate dinner with her countless nights after Grandpop died, and I helped take care of her for much of her last year on earth. These kind words from strangers signaled that she must've spoken about me often to friends, which was comforting to hear.

As time went on, my grandparents' house was cleared out and eventually sold. I have to imagine the new owners got rid of the bright blue carpet.

Grandmom's Lladros, Irish records, and piles and piles of clothes were distributed among the family. My bedroom was filled with furniture from one of her spare bedrooms. Sometimes, when I walk into my room, it still smells like their house. With their belongings spread across different homes and across the country, there are little glimpses of her style and spirit everywhere.



4 Mothers Day

By: Elizabeth Green

My God!
You would be seven.
Your little brother or sister would be six.
Gone are the days of feeling regret.
Gone are the things I can't fix.
Those decisions weren't so easy
And I promise they weren't rushed
But we'd be living in a world of hell right now
It'd be him with her...then us.
Yes, I thought about it long and hard
I suffered it for years.
No one to come and take my hand
And wipe my frozen tears.
For mine were the sacrifices
Just like every mother makes.
I am a mother too you know,
Except my children didn't wake.



The alarm clock was barely able to let out its first faint buzz before a slender caramel hand gently hit the snooze button. Tonya walked over to her full-length mirror and checked to ensure her uniform was okay and wrinkle-free. Her hair was pulled back in a high ponytail – her mother said it was more flattering to her cherub-like cheeks. A faint blush of embarrassment tainted her caramel cheeks, as she remembered how critical her mother was of her looks. Tonya leaned into the mirror to examine what her mother called her most intriguing asset – her grey eyes. Tonya hated her eyes as she was the only one in the family with that eye color. She first turned left, then right, satisfied that her blue and white plaid skirt was rightly pleated, and her white blouse and vest were crisp, she then left the room. While sitting at the breakfast bar, Tonya chuckled as she heard the chaos of the morning routine of Miss Patsy waking her siblings. Somewhere on the second floor a door slammed followed by the words, "Now do not let me have to come back and fetch you. At your big age, every day I must wake you, Mister Brandon." Miss Patsy made her way down the grand staircase clinging to the wooden banister, a slight limp in her gait.

"Good morning, TJ, good to see at least one of you can make it down unaided," Miss Patsy's voice was deep and raspy – the reward of an earlier smoking habit.

She placed a warm cheese bagel on a plate next to a tray with freshly squeezed orange juice, a cup of coffee, and the newspaper. Before she was able to utter a word Tonya grabbed the tray and said, "I got it, Miss Patsy."

At this Miss Patsy patted her hand; her big, wrinkled hands dwarfing Tonya's. She lovingly said, "That's why you're my favorite girl, Miss TJ."

Tonya smiled at the elderly housekeeper. Miss Patsy had been with the family since Brandon's birth twenty-one years ago and had been integral in Tonya's upbringing. She shooed Tonya along with the tray.

Miss Patsy pulled a watch from the white apron tied around her ample waist and bosom, and upon checking the time, shook her head.

Her grey house uniform swirled around her knees as she marched purposefully up the stairs to the second floor. Tonya took the tray to her dad's home office as she did every Monday to Friday morning. Her dad looked up from his notes, smiled, and mouthed good morning then he ended his call. He came around his desk and made a move on the chess piece by his table. He chuckled and said, "Your move TJ." Tonya looked perplexed for a minute then made a move that claimed one of her dad's rooks.

This was their special time; it was within this room that Tonya had gained her love for Art and History. Her father was from the James family, and he had fulfilled his duty of becoming a lawyer, but it was not like history - his first love. Harding James ate his breakfast while Tonya told him of her idea for history week. Tonya, of all the children, resembled her dad most, mahogany-colored hair, round freckled cheeks, big eyes, thin lips, and a tall and lean frame. Here the similarities ended. Harding James ate his breakfast while Tonya told him of her idea for history week. Tonya, of all the children, resembled her dad most: mahogany-colored hair, round freckled cheeks, big eyes, thin lips, and a tall and lean frame. Here the similarities ended. Harding James had the rugged look of a lumberjack with a tight fade. His skin, in his words, was the color of oatmeal, sprinkled with cinnamon. Elizabeth James, his wife, had been trying to get him to shave for over three months, to no avail. The drive to school was typical. Her older sister Kyla texted nonstop on her phone, completely ignoring her 'dork' sister.

Tonya had yet to decide if being labeled a dork by her siblings was a term of endearment. Harding James was arguing with his son Brandon. This had become routine. Brandon extolled all the merits of getting a new car; he had crashed two so far, and his dad rebuffed him at every turn. The commute took them through the heart of their community, Sunrise. The lawns were all well-manicured, the sidewalks were lined with elms and oaks, and all the yards were surrounded by either wrought iron or stained picket fences. Harding turned left into Dover Plains Ave, and traffic came to a standstill. There were several bulldozers parked along the narrow Water Lane Street, and men in reflective vests and hard hats were milling around. Harding said, "This is interesting, it appears Evolve Corporation has been awarded the permits for construction. This is not going to go well." Their ten-minute commute doubled that morning.

At school it was all anyone talked about: the Evolve Corporation and whether a mall would finally be built where Old Man Dan's Haberdashery is currently housed. Tonya listened to the comments and wondered how the shops along the main street would be affected. She had just ended her second class and was taking her English textbook from her locker when the vice principal called her name. "Tonya James, a minute please." Tonya turned to face her and instead looked up into the brightest brown eyes she had ever seen. Mrs. Rottlic did not seem to notice Tonya's trance-like stance and went ahead in her pitch voice, "Thank you once again for agreeing to chair this year's Week of History committee. Now this is Jason Dear a new transfer from Millville, New Jersey. He comes with a background in the History Society and has graciously volunteered to help." At this, the young man, who was well over six feet like her brother, stretched out his hand and grasped hers. Tonya winced, not in pain but at the thought that he felt how sweaty and hot her hand was. If he noticed he did not let on.

Instead, he smiled at her and said in the richest baritone, "Nice to meet you, Tonya. Looking forward to helping." Tonya gulped and nodded; her voice had taken flight.

Tonya urged her treacherous eyes to look in his eyes, not his broad, thick lips that encased pearly white teeth that stood out against his shiny ebony skin. "This is not going to be good," Tonya thought as both Jason and Mrs. Rottlic proceeded down the hall.

Over the next three weeks, Tonya spent every evening with Jason and the other Historic Society members. Jason and Tonya became fast friends.

Tonya quickly realized that Jason was a daredevil. He would try to get her to do subtle things that bent the rules, but she would never take the bait. They provided the perfect balance for their respective personalities. Tonya went bowling, skating, and rollerblading with Jason, all first-time experiences for her. And Tonya took him to her favorite place in Dover Plains, an antiques and dress store called *Déjà vu*. It was here that the idea to have an immersive exhibit for the Week of History was born. "We can have ushers dressed in era-appropriate attire while talking and showing the highlights of that period. It would be awesome," Tonya's grey eyes sparkled with excitement as she spoke.

At this Jason chimed in, "This will be the perfect project to include in your Yale application packet. You would be a stand-out."

Tonya and Jason spoke about their families and the pressure they were under to conform to traditional roles. Tonya wanted to pursue an Art and World History major but was facing opposition from her parents. They wanted her to become a lawyer in the family company, James, James, and James. It was at Jason's prompting that Tonya had decided to secretly apply to Yale.

Jason was in Dover Plains, living with his uncle, Joe Dear, because he refused to pursue medicine as his father proposed, opting instead to become a financial and business major. Jason understood all too well how challenging going against family traditions can be.

"I just hope my parents will be ok with this. I really want to be a historian" Tonya's voice had grown low and shaky. Tonya's mother, Elizabeth James, had always been critical of her desire to study Art and History.

Jason watched as the animated look left Tonya's eyes and the smile fell from her lips. "Hey," Jason said softly as he placed his hand under her chin to raise her head, "I wasn't going to say anything yet but remember I told you about my Aunt Helen?" Tonya rolled her eyes of course she remembered his mention of his world-renowned Art historian Aunt.

"I think you should meet her."

"How? Are we going to be jet-setting to the Isle of Crete anytime soon?" Tonya asked in a slightly mocking tone.

"Well, it turns out she is here, well near here. She just bought a home near White Plains." Tonya gulped, "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Nope, and she wants to meet you. Just let me work out the details ok." Tonya nodded yes vigorously.

Jason had started taking Tonya home from the second week he was at school. As he drove her home that evening, they were both surprised to see a whole block of Main Street flattened. The area looked barren, and dust swirled with every gentle breeze. Tonya felt a pang of sadness. "Oh no," Tonya exclaimed, "There used to be a flower and book shop on this block. I wonder what happened to the owners. This seems so wrong." Jason looked over at the block and spoke.

"They were moved. This is all a part of the change. Most of those buildings were falling apart anyhow. Something had to be done TJ."

Tonya nodded and turned to look at him as she said quietly, "I get that, but it doesn't make it any easier to see. I hope they don't mess with Deja Vu."

"I'm sure they won't," Jason said confidently as he continued his drive to her home in Sunrise.

Two weeks later they were on their way to visit Aunt Helen. Jason drove Tonya from school to his aunt's home near White Plains City. As they drove through the city Tonya marveled at the clusters of skyscrapers, futuristic and art-inspired buildings all abuzz with people, cars, buses, and trains. White Plains had grown tremendously since her last visit.

The noise was overwhelming to Tonya, and she commented to Jason how loud and grey everything looked. "That's because these buildings block out most of the sun," Jason said. Before long they were on a country road with houses that were few and far apart. Tonya watched through the rear-view mirror as the city grew further and further away. The ride took thirty-five minutes, but it felt like hours to Tonya.

Aunt Helen's house was fully encircled by a high moss-covered wall, a large iron gate that opened to a circular drive that ended with a water fountain guarded by a dripping mermaid statue. Tonya's mouth fell open in awe; the house was an updated Victorian with large, wide windows, a small turret, and a chimney, from which Tonya could see wisps of smoke rising.

As they made their way up the steps the door was flung open and a red-haired lady, no taller than five feet, came bounding down to meet them. She raised her hands and the sleeves of her green caftan bellowed behind her in the slight breeze. She wrapped Tonya in the warmest, tightest hug – ones she had only experienced from Miss Patsy- Elizabeth James did not hug.

"Welcome, welcome. Jason has told me so much about you TJ. Delighted to finally meet the girl who rivals me for my nephew's attention, a first might I add." Aunt Helen's voice was melodic and soothing. Her skin was a lighter shade of ebony than Jason's, and it was wrinkleless and makeup-free. She took them on a tour of the house, stopping every now and then to regale them with stories about different art pieces and furniture. Tonya felt the love that Aunt Helen had for each work of art in her possession and how she respected and valued the history attached to them.

The tour ended in the sitting room where Tonya and Aunt Helen commiserated and bonded over their shared love for art and history.

Jason gingerly reclined in one of the restored Victorian-inspired cushion-laden loveseats. He grinned from ear to ear as he listened to his aunt and best friend. Tonya soon explained her dilemma to Aunt Helen and revealed that with Jason's help, she had applied to and been accepted to Yale on a full scholarship to double major in World and Art History. They were in the sitting room discussing options to tell Tonya's parents about Yale. They were drinking lemonade made fresh from lemons grown in Aunt Helen's backyard when Tonya's cell phone beeped.

She excused herself to answer and was greeted by the angry hiss of her mother's voice, "Tonya Ann James where are you? Do you know what time it is?" Tonya gasped and turned to look at the antique clock above the mantle, it was ten minutes to six. She was expected to be home by 6 pm and ready for dinner promptly at 6:30 pm. Tonya stammered out her response, "Hello mother, I am with Jason and his aunt. I'm sorry I lost track of the time. I will be there shortly. Bye Mother." At her gasp, Jason had sprung up and looked at her with concern all over his face. "I've got to get home; mother is livid."

Jason nodded and picked up his keys while grasping her elbow he turned to his aunt and said, "I'm sorry, Aunt Helen, we will finish this some other time, okay." Aunt Helen got up and they walked to the door.

As Tonya walked down the steps Aunt Helen stopped her and said, "TJ, what we spoke of, do it tonight. Let your family know of your opportunity to go to Yale. It's their turn to support you. Be brave." As the car sped down the drive, the clock on the mantle chimed signaling the change in the hour. "The James family is built on a strong history and tradition of doing what is best for the continued growth of the family, not on the selfish, frivolous desires of an infatuated teen. I am telling you, no I am demanding that you end this shenanigan and focus on your college application for Law. We will not be funding any other majors. Do you understand, Tonya Ann?"

Tonya would normally cower and accept her mother's directives, but instead, she squared her shoulders and replied in a surprisingly steady voice, "Understood. But now, you hear me out, Mother." At Tonya's words, there was a collective gasp from her siblings and father. They were all in her father's study. Kayla stopped texting and placed her cell phone on her lap. Both Harding and Brandon abandoned their chess game and stood. Tonya continued, "I have been obedient, and I have conformed to all your rules, all the time. I am an honor student and president of five school clubs. I loved volleyball, but Mother, you told me it doesn't fit in with your plans for me, and I dropped it. Brandon is never on time; he has crashed two cars and is failing his pre-law classes. Yet he is never grounded, punished, or made to give up any other interests. Kayla is never reprimanded but given everything she asks for; her grades are mediocre at best. She spends more on clothing in a week than I do for a month," she took a steady breath and continued.

"I have one request. One request, Mother. Not for a car, clothes, or the latest phone. All I ask is that I be given the opportunity to pursue something I love for once. Yet you act as if I have committed the greatest sacrilege. This is college, Mother, Yale, one of the best schools in the country. I got a full scholarship on my own merit. Why must I carry the family honor on my shoulders? You have two other children, Mother – share the load. I do not want to become a lawyer in James, James, and James. But Brandon does. Give him the chance to prove he can be the best lawyer. I love you, Mother, but I will be going to Yale to study World and Art history. I can do it with or without your blessing. So please decide; which will it be?" A tense hush fell over the room as both Tonya and Elizabeth James stood facing each other. At this point, Harding took his wife's hand. He was looking deeply into his wife's chocolate brown eyes when he said, "Well, there is no question as to where her headstrong nature comes from, Liz. Let's talk. Children, give us some privacy."

Tonya waited anxiously in her room that night, but neither her father nor her mother summoned her. She had a fitful night. The house was quiet when she went down for breakfast, and it was Brandon who took them to school. When Tonya asked what her parents had decided, he shrugged his shoulders. Tonya then asked, "Bran, are you mad at me for what I said yesterday?"

"Honestly, I was at first," Brandon replied, "Then I really thought about it, and I saw that you were right. You were placed under a lot of pressure. I just didn't...we just didn't realize how much. Because it made things easier for us."

"That's a true, dork. With Mother's hopes and dreams firmly pinned on you, Bran and I got to cruise. We're sorry. We didn't realize how much of a burden it was to you. I mean, you excel at everything you do, even the pre-law that you claimed to despise," said Kayla who sat beside Brandon in the front seat, as she had placed her phone down to say it. "We've got you. Congrats on getting into Yale. For what it's worth, I'm proud of you, and I support you," Kayla said.

"So do I, dork, so do I," said Brandon. Tonya's voice was a little cracked, and she choked up when she said, "Thanks, guys. This means so much." An overwhelming sense of relief finally took over, and Tonya smiled.

A week passed with no exchange between Tonya and her parents on her 'Yale-gate' as her sibling dubbed it. It was the final day of the Week of History Art exhibit, and it was a raging success. Jason and Tonya were beaming from ear to ear. They were ending in ten minutes, but every booth was crowded with students, teachers, and parents. Members of the History Society staffed each booth, all dressed in costumes, on loan from Alice Moor - owner of Déjà vu, to depict the era of their exhibit. Jess dressed as Marie Antoinette showing how the guillotine was used in the French Revolution. Mark dressed as Leonardo Da Vinci, was pointing out samples of works of Art, science, and other inventions of the Renaissance. Mrs. Rottlic walked over to them and was praising and commending them on the exhibit when a familiar voice behind Tonya said, "And I concur

Mrs. Rottlic. My daughter and her friends did an excellent job."

"Mother, what are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming," Tonya asked as she spun slowly to look at her mother. Tonya was dressed as Catherine the Great, and the high-layered wig she wore was cumbersome.

"Well, it was your father's idea. He's parking the car. I must say, you outdid yourself. I can see the love and effort placed in all the details of this exhibition. You really love Art and History, don't you?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, mother, I really, really do."

"Yes well, I've come to realize that." At this, Elizabeth made a slight pause and surveyed the transformed gym. "Your father and I have decided to support you in your Yale endeavor.

After all, being a historian is a noble career. That was what Harding wanted to pursue, you know, history, not law. Harding sees this as a chance to fulfill a dream, as much for him as you. And..." Before Elizabeth was able to utter another word, Tonya engulfed her in a tight hug.

"Thank you. Thank you, mother. Your support means so much to me," Tonya sobbed. Elizabeth James patted Tonya's back stiffly at first, but then she leaned in and wrapped her arms around her. This was the scene Harding James was greeted with when he entered the school's gymnasium. He smiled, relieved to see his family reconciled and happy.

Jason placed the last of Tonya's luggage in the trunk of his car. He was taking her to meet his Aunt Helen. Tonya would spend the summer as her assistant while on a history cataloging assignment in Rome. After that, she would head directly to Yale. He then walked up the steps of the front door where Tonya stood saying her goodbyes. Kyla was texting but stopped long enough to say bye to her 'dork' sister. Brandon pulled on Tonya's hair which she had down and said, "I'm really going to miss you, TJ."

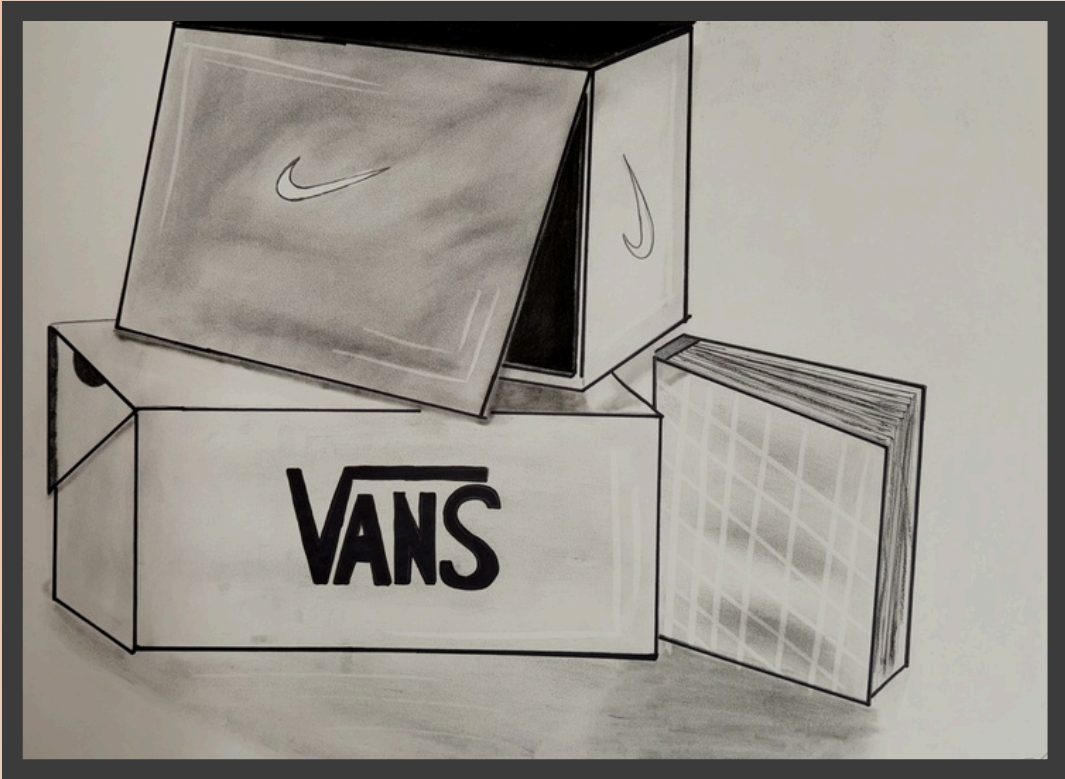
Her mother stood ramrod straight, her caramel skin cool and flawless.

Even on this informal occasion, she wore a blue pencil skirt, a blue and white tweed jacket, and pearl jewelry around her neck and earlobes. Her black hair was pulled back into an immaculate high bun. Her face remained severe and set as she said, "All the best to you, Tonya Ann. I know you will do well at Yale." Tonya reached up and hugged her mother. This made Elizabeth smile. "Thank you, Mother. I'll miss you too." Harding James walked Tonya to the car, where he shook Jason's hand and urged him to take care of his baby. He then turned to Tonya and hugged her tightly. He then whispered in her ear, "I am so proud of you for pursuing your dreams. I will enjoy it vicariously through you. Send me updates." Tonya smiled and nodded. It was her father who had stepped up that night a few months ago. He explained to Elizabeth that a compromise on her part was best, as they could lose their daughter. So, Elizabeth relented, and Tonya would pursue her degree at Yale, with her parents' blessings. The drive through Dover Plains felt different to Tonya. It seemed more modern, yet it still had pockets of old charm and quaint historic visage Dover Plains was renowned for, like Deja-vu - the antique store. Jason turned to Tonya and asked, "Are you happy, Miss Future Historian?" Tonya smiled broadly and her grey eyes twinkled as she replied, "Yes, I am incredibly happy."



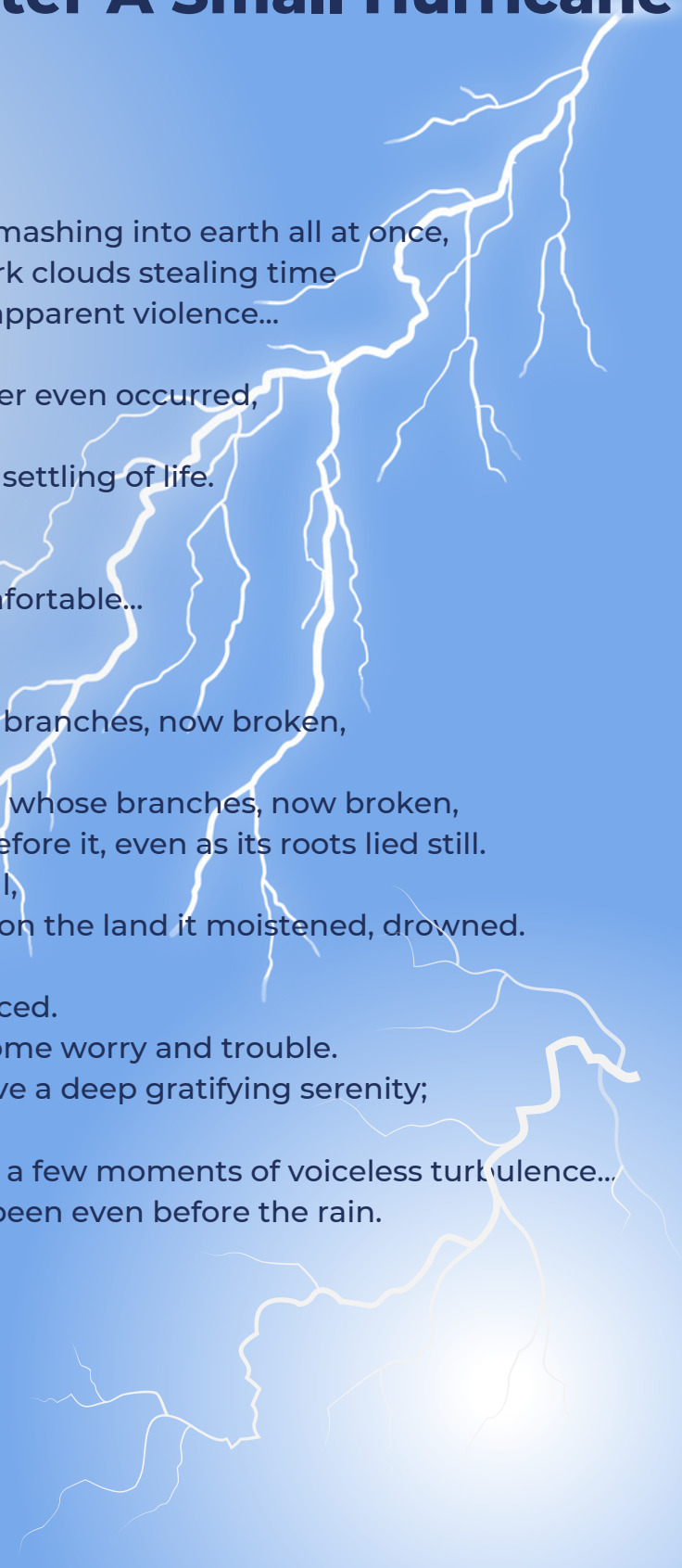
Artwork

By: Dasha Lyubetska



"6/09, 9:00 pm, After A Small Hurricane"

By: Kelly Edelman



There is a vigorous downpour—
Millions of whispering grey drops smashing into earth all at once,
And stirred up is an angry wind; dark clouds stealing time
When fog and haze sit amidst the apparent violence...
But, eventually, it stops.
It pauses, only once, as if it had never even occurred,
And there is this silence.
Perhaps not a silence as much as a settling of life.
Somehow the air seems cleaner,
After a torrent rain—
It seems cleaner, calmer, more comfortable...
Frustrated weather did its time,
Took its toll
On those perfect little trees, whose branches, now broken,
Had just begun growing;
On those large, impenetrable trees, whose branches, now broken,
Had seen a hectic world spin fast before it, even as its roots lied still.
A heavy, costly rain did that, but still,
The rain had left a contentment upon the land it moistened, drowned.
It caused a renewal,
And in its own way, it aided, unnoticed.
Even though it had given the life some worry and trouble.
To look back at the rainstorm, it gave a deep gratifying serenity;
Peacefulness;
It exposed a faultless sky, after only a few moments of voiceless turbulence...
Gave more silence than there had been even before the rain.



Digital Photography

By: Miranda Koehler

Reagan emerged at the start of another sunset, the sky igniting shades of ivory and crimson as the sun descended farther into the horizon. Tucked away on the outskirts of town, the convenience shop where she worked remained unbothered by the slow lapse in time. Overhead, fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed, giving the store an unsettling brightness with its harsh glare. Reagan stood behind the counter, her fatigue outlining its deep radiance. Her previously neatly groomed auburn hair now fell haphazardly over her face, framing eyes that revealed remnants of unfulfilled goals and commitments. Her thoughts were only accompanied by the register's constant chime and the steady beat of the checkout scanner. Outside, the world appeared still as nightfall wrapped around the town. The sound of cars produced a soft tune that comforted the day as it drew to an end. Walking out to the fleeting light, she hurriedly left the convenience store. Her shift was finally over. The car blinked behind her as she walked to her apartment. As she met its door, she attempted to open it quietly, but it wasn't enough to shield her cover. "What is this?" Carter clenched a crinkled lottery ticket in her fist. Reagan darted her eyes toward the slip of paper and, with a quick snap, grabbed it out of her hands, "I told you to stop going through my sh**." Carter sheepishly raised both her palms and backed herself onto the couch. The apartment they lived in was minimalist, to say the least. The windows sported thin, cheap blankets hastily tacked to the wall, acting as makeshift curtains. Around the surrounding area was a TV, dull in color, with a black strip that ran across its corners. Despite this, the setup exhibited a homey feel. Reagan took great care to furrow her eyebrows at Carter before hastily walking into her room, stashing the flimsy paper deep in her jacket pocket. With a deep breath, she launched her back onto her bed and went through her phone, the light illuminating the room ever so slightly.

Within minutes, her peace was interrupted by a face looming just outside the edge of her vision. Without wasting a breath, she expressed her grievances.

"Get out."

"You don't even play the lottery; why do you have that?"

"We just got a new machine at work; it looked interesting- I don't know."

"Well, show me."

Reagan let out an exacerbated groan and rolled over to her side. She gently pulled out the ticket and started using the edges of her thumbs to carefully smooth out the wrinkles. Once it was to her satisfaction, she raised two fingers to beckon Carter over. Carter crouched next to the bed, sitting herself on the floor. Reagan flipped the ticket to its back and pointed to a dark box with the words "Rolldown" printed in bright red. "See this here?" Reagan pointed at the box.

"What is it?"

"Every time a winner doesn't come forward, the jackpot rises. When it gets to \$8 million, there's a rolldown week where money is split to tickets with lower matched numbers."

"So, if we match at least three numbers, we get paid?" Reagan nodded her head in agreement and flipped the ticket over. She tapped her fingers methodically.

"The tickets would be cheaper than what's being paid out. The problem is, we're too broke to even see if it would work."

Reagan looked back up to Carter, only to be met with wide eyes. Before she could even utter a word, her thoughts were interrupted. "I have an idea."

"What?"

"You'll see, you don't have work tomorrow-right?"

"Not until Tuesday."

Without another word, Carter hastily sprinted out of the room. Reagan laid back down on the bed and shook her head lightly. The remaining glare behind the window's blankets began to soften until finally dissipating to the darkness of the room.

The silence of the night enveloped her, only broken by the occasional rustling of leaves in the wind. Reagan tucked her phone beside her pillow and stretched her body underneath the blanket, feeling the softness of her sheets against her skin. She breathed in the cool air and let out a deep sigh, feeling the weight of the day slowly lift off her shoulders. Exhausted, her eyes followed the rhythm of the night, watching the shadows dance across the walls as the moonlight filtered through the thin "curtains". The sound of her own breathing eventually became a soothing lullaby that eased her to sleep. A soft glow emerged from underneath the door, casting a warm orange hue on the walls of Reagan's room. Following the ray of light came a multitude of loud crashes. They boomed throughout the apartment, creating a cascade of sounds that rang through her ears until she couldn't bear to stand it. The noise was relentless, a storm brewing just outside her door. As much as she attempted to clamp her eyes shut, curiosity prevailed. She slowly got out of bed, her feet landing softly on the carpeted floor. She tiptoed towards the door, hand hovering over the doorknob, hesitant to open. The crashes continued, each one louder and more chaotic than the last. She couldn't resist the urge to see what was happening. She turned the doorknob slowly, the creak of the door making her wince. As she opened the door, the source of the noise revealed itself to her. Carter was in the living room, surrounded by piles of blankets and pillows, her face illuminated by the soft light emitted from the lamp on the ceiling. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Come on, come on!"

Reagan rolled her eyes and shut the door, the noise from the living room muted by the thick wood. She shuffled towards the mirror situated in her room and stared. Her hair stood on itself, strands fraying up near the center of her scalp. As she tried to flatten them, they would spring back into place once again, playing a game of cat and mouse. The unruly strands seemed to have a mind of their own, defying all her attempts to tame them. With a disappointed sigh, she eventually gave up and focused back on the mirror.

Her eyes traced the contours of her face, taking in the bags under her eyes and the exhaustion etched into her features. Another loud sound boomed from the outside. "Oh, come on," Carter bellowed through the door.

"Okay, okay!"

"Bring your keys, too."

Reagan looked back towards her dresser, her eyes drawn to a glint of metal on the stand. She walked up to her keys and grabbed them, gently resting them on the palm of her hand. She grasped them and hastily put them in her pocket before returning to Carter.

"You know, if you got a job, you wouldn't have to sleep on the couch. And better yet, I wouldn't have to pay your rent." "I would, but after MIT crushed my dreams with that rejection letter, I've been in a bit of a motivational slump," Carter quipped, playfully holding her hand up to her head in mock despair.

Reagan ignored her. "Anyways, where are we going?"

"Don't worry, I have the directions on my phone."

Reagan couldn't help but notice how Carter's baggy shorts flailed against the edges of the room with each sharp turn she took while her sneakers shrieked on the tiled floor. As they neared the parking lot, Reagan's hand reached for the key fob, and with a satisfying click, the car's bright orange exterior flashed twice, followed by two loud beeps. As they entered the car, Reagan settled into the driver's seat and adjusted the mirrors. The cracked leather seats felt cool to the touch, and the smell of stale fries filled the air. She turned the key in the ignition, and the car coughed itself to life. As they drove out of the lot, the lush array of trees and shrubs lining the road flashed by in a blur of green as the wind rushed through their hair, lifting it in soft waves. Reagan turned left at the intersection, the car dragging around the corner. Another left followed as Carter leaned forward to check their surroundings before nodding in approval. Eventually, Carter forced the car to come to a sudden stop, jolting Reagan with a sense of curiosity. The building they had arrived at was an old, run-down brick structure.

From a distance, it appeared somewhat presentable, but as she got closer, she noticed harsh cracks and washed-out graffiti on the walls. Reagan sat in the car, confused and disoriented. She looked around, hoping that something in her surroundings would help identify where she was. That's when she saw a filthy sign above the entrance that read "GAMBLER'S ANONYMOUS 10 AM". It hung precariously by one rusty nail, swaying in the light breeze. Reagan slowly turned to Carter, her jaw nearly gaping over her face.

"Are you fucking serious? No. Absolutely not." Reagan waited for a response but was only met with a wide grin from Carter. Carter slowly reached her hand over to unlock the car and swiftly jumped out with a sleight of hand, leaving only the sound of a large thud to accompany Reagan. Silence filled the scene. With a mix of frustration and anger, she sat still for a couple of minutes. Reagan muttered a multitude of curses before getting up to go inside the building. As she walked in, the area was flush with fluorescent lights beaming down on her face. She squinted her eyes, adjusting to the bright artificial light. In front of her was a circle of chairs, each occupied by a person with a look of defeat. They all looked downtrodden and worn out, except for a man sitting in the middle. He was dressed in a suit and tie, his posture straight and confident. Reagan couldn't help but feel a sense of unease around him. Then, she saw Carter sitting next to an empty chair. Of course. But before she could say anything, she was interrupted by the man in the suit. He spoke with a smooth, practiced voice, his words dripping with a false sense of compassion. "And what's your name?"

Reagan was still deciding whether to answer. She paused and looked straight at him. Her face became flush and feverish, and the only thing she could utter was a jumble of unintelligible noises. Carter stepped in.

"Oh! That's Reagan. She's with me. It took a while for me to convince her to come, but I knew that deep inside, she knew that she needed help."

"Well, Reagan, take a seat! It's always nice to see a new face."

Reagan forcibly turned the corners of her lips up and walked towards the empty seat. As she sat down, the sickening smell of stale donuts and watered-down coffee filled the air, making her stomach churn. She placed herself on the chair, leaning her head tight onto her palms as she balanced her elbows on her knees. The man spoke again. "Now that your friend is here, how about you continue, Carter?"

"Well, as I was saying, gambling took over my life. I lost everything. I'm broke and homeless; I mean, what more can I say? Do you know what digging through trash just to eat is like?"

Reagan raised her head from her palms and shot a harsh glance at Carter. Without a word, she slammed her foot into Carter's shoe, feeling a sense of satisfaction as Carter winced. Carter attempted to stifle her pain, but the sound of her grunt was too loud to ignore.

"Don't mind her! Our situation is painful to share... she was never one for vulnerability."

It was then another man interrupted. He was stout and rugged, with a thick beard and calloused hands. He smelled of dusty attic and car oil, a pungent aroma that made the room wrinkle its nose in disgust. His receding hairline met the enormous bald spot on the center of his head, creating a shape that resembled a mushroom. He wore a stained shirt and worn-out jeans, his sleeves rolled up to reveal a collection of tattoos that covered his arms.

"Well, I don't belong here; I'm just here because of a court order. My ex-wife always said that I had a problem, but guess what? I'm just good at the game. Can you blame me? Gambling has opened so many opportunities for me. I mean, look at me. The money I made from gambling allowed me to do whatever the hell I wanted. Especially f**k beautiful women. And I mean supermodels. The world owes it to me. So what if I lose a couple thousand here and there? To make money, you have to spend money."

Carter interrupted, "So, did you f**k beautiful women before or after your divorce?"

The man leaned back against his seat, "That's not important."

Carter and Reagan exchanged a quiet nod as their gazes locked. As she listened to his claims of riches and success, Reagan's lips curved into a cruel smile, each sentence a monument to the hollowness of his existence.

Reagan and Carter rose from their seats as the meeting drew to a close. Reagan leaned into Carter's ear and whispered in a harsh tone.

"What were you thinking?"

"This is a perfect place for us to find an investor; I mean, these people always take risks."

Carter pointed at the guy who spoke earlier. He headed through the doors, stomping his feet with each step.

"He's perfect. You heard him; he has money, and he loves risk."

"That's if he's telling the truth."

"Well, let's see."

Reagan watched as Carter ran outside to find the man. Reluctantly, she trailed slowly up to the door and met up with the two. Carter tapped on the man's shoulders. He quickly turned and gave her a look of disgust.

"Hey there! How would you like to help out some beautiful women?"

"Where are they?"

Reagan looked disapprovingly at Carter and rolled her eyes at the man. Unfortunately, her attempt to stop Carter's advances failed.

"That's funny, you're funny- you're a hilarious guy. Anyway, this is beside the point. I have an opportunity for you." The man's eyebrows raised in skepticism, but the glint of curiosity seeped in his eyes. He folded his arms across his chest, a gesture of guarded interest.

"An opportunity, huh? What kind of opportunity?"

With her most endearing smile, Carter leaned closer to the man as if they were sharing a secret. "We would like to make you a proposal. We've discovered a huge opportunity to make money." Reagan observed Carter's pitch, her words skillfully crafted to capture the man's attention without presenting too much. Reagan couldn't help but admire Carter's knack for persuasion as she spoke, her confidence shining despite the situation. The man listened intently, his expression shifting from skepticism to intrigue as Carter painted a picture of lavish wealth. He nodded carefully when she had finally finished, a little grin flickering at the corners of his lips.

"Well, ladies, you certainly have my attention. But you'll have to do better than just words to convince me."

Reagan watched Carter rise to the challenge and felt a wave of nervousness race through her veins. With a confident grin, Carter reached into Reagan's pocket, producing the crumpled lottery ticket. With an unwavering gaze, she extended it towards the man. "This is our ticket to success, and we can make this something big with your help. It could change our lives." The man looked at the ticket for a while, then back to Carter and Reagan. He considered his options, and for a time, the tension in the air began to crackle. Then, a smile blossomed over his face; he nodded decisively and reached out to grab the ticket. "All right, ladies," he murmured, a hint of enthusiasm in his voice.

"Let's see what this ticket can do." Carter and Reagan exchanged shocked glances with one another. With a short goodbye and exchange of contact details, they returned to the car. "Holy shit, I can't believe that worked."

"Me neither," Carter laughed as her face shifted from confidence to pure disbelief.

The man, now known as Dan, transferred \$3,600 to Reagan's account. Reagan would spend her breaks at the lottery machine for a couple of weeks, accumulating over 360 tickets. After each shift, a worn cardboard box next to the TV was filled with whatever she could stuff in her pockets. By the time the rolldown was announced, tickets were nearly spilling out. Both Reagan and Carter watched the screen intently. Then, the winning numbers flashed: 4, 2, 6, 5, 8, 8. With shaking hands, they proceeded to go through the collection of tickets they gathered, anxiously scrutinizing each number. After calculating the results, Reagan turned to Carter. "You won't believe this.."

"What, what?!"

"We made \$2700 in profit."

"WHAT?!"

A slight glow and vibration rumbled in Reagan's pocket. She fished out her phone and saw Dan calling. She hastily answered.

"So, did we do it?"

"We profited \$2,700, and each of us took 15%, leaving you with a profit of \$1,890."

"Wow. It actually worked."

Reagan and Carter's tiny, cluttered apartment had been completely transformed. Its appearance radiated opulence from every corner. The walls were draped with intricately woven fabrics of deep earthy tones that complimented the cherry wood flooring. The furniture sported plush leather couches adjacent to the intricately carved wooden coffee tables, it seemed like it was taken straight out of a home decor magazine. As the weeks flew by and turned into months, their profits swelled, and their lifestyle grew more lavish. In the meantime, Dan actively solicited other potential members to join the group and exploit the loophole. Soon, the rest of the gambler's anonymous meeting group had joined in. They pooled resources, bought more lottery tickets, and waited for the rolldown week. This routine would continue, and every month proved more profitable than the last. However, their idyllic existence was about to be shattered when Reagan's manager delivered gut-wrenching news. "We need to roll out this machine by the end of the week."

"What? What do you mean?"

"The state's shutting it down. There's going to be one last game."

Reagan panicked, calling Carter.

"The state's shutting the lottery down. We have one last game. I think we should get everyone to go all in."

"What? What if someone wins the jackpot?"

Reagan, though, was unfazed. "Then we leave some of our money aside. Think about it, Carter," she urged, her voice tinged with excitement. "If they all go in, the odds of winning are in our favor. And even if we don't hit the jackpot, we'll still make so much."

Carter paused and after a couple moments, gave in. "All right, fine. But if this doesn't work..." Reagan's eyes darted back and forth between the machine and the clock on the wall before abruptly hanging up. She contacted Dan and the rest of the group, encouraging them to make one last push.

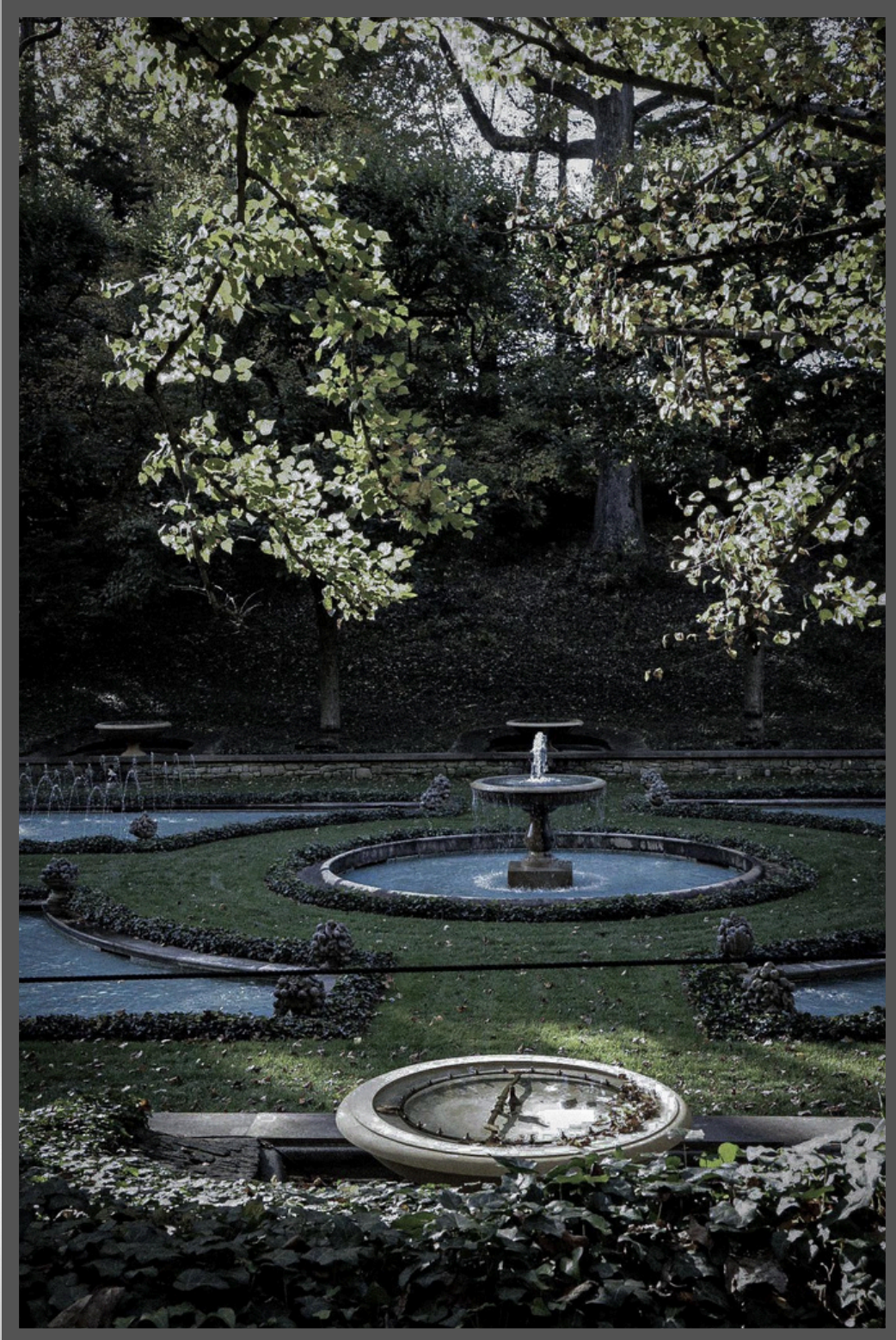
The excitement in the air was bright with desire as each person agreed, but Carter's skepticism was a looming shadow. When the lottery draw drew near, Reagan and Carter were hardly able to control their anxiety. As the winning numbers were revealed, their breath held.

And then, it happened.

Reagan's eyes were fixated on the screen as the numbers flashed one after the other. As her palms started to sweat, a deep beat from her heart erupted in her throat. Members from the group eagerly awaited, champagne bottles unpoped in hand. Suddenly, the last number appeared. The silence in the room was deafening, as all eyes were on the screen, waiting for the confirmation. Just as Reagan was about to sort through the tickets, the announcer on-screen screeched with amazement. Someone had won the jackpot. Murmurs could be heard throughout the room. Bellowing cries filled the air as the atmosphere in the room shifted. Carter's composure slumped, her eyes pleading as she turned to meet Reagan. However, Reagan's demeanor was solemn. Tension rose in the room as the reality of the situation loomed over. Carter turned to face Reagan. Barely raising her voice beyond a whisper, she uttered, "What are we going to do?" Reagan's response was cold. "Nothing," she replied, her voice devoid of emotion. "They knew the risks."

Photography

By: Derek Leyman



Amethyst Atmosphere

By: Dimitrius Demarco

Syzygy breaks that hazy lilac sphere,
Stars fade and fizzle, a thousand long goodbyes,
Admiring an amethyst atmosphere.

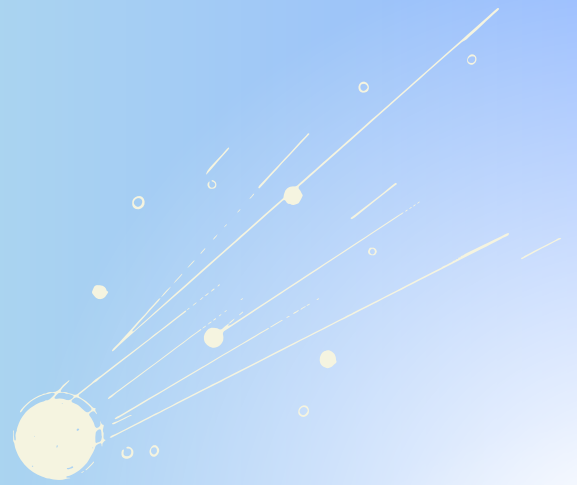
Crashing comets bring vicious violet fear,
False promises and gorgeous golden lies.
Syzygy breaks that hazy lilac sphere.

Novas erupt and burnish all that's near,
You could watch with me as that bleak star dies,
Admiring an amethyst atmosphere.

Lunar light lines your luminary tear,
And like moon tides, azure eyes swell and rise.
Syzygy breaks that hazy lilac sphere.

Eclipses mask a much brighter frontier.
Landscapes you'd paint with lush lavender dyes,
Admiring an amethyst atmosphere.

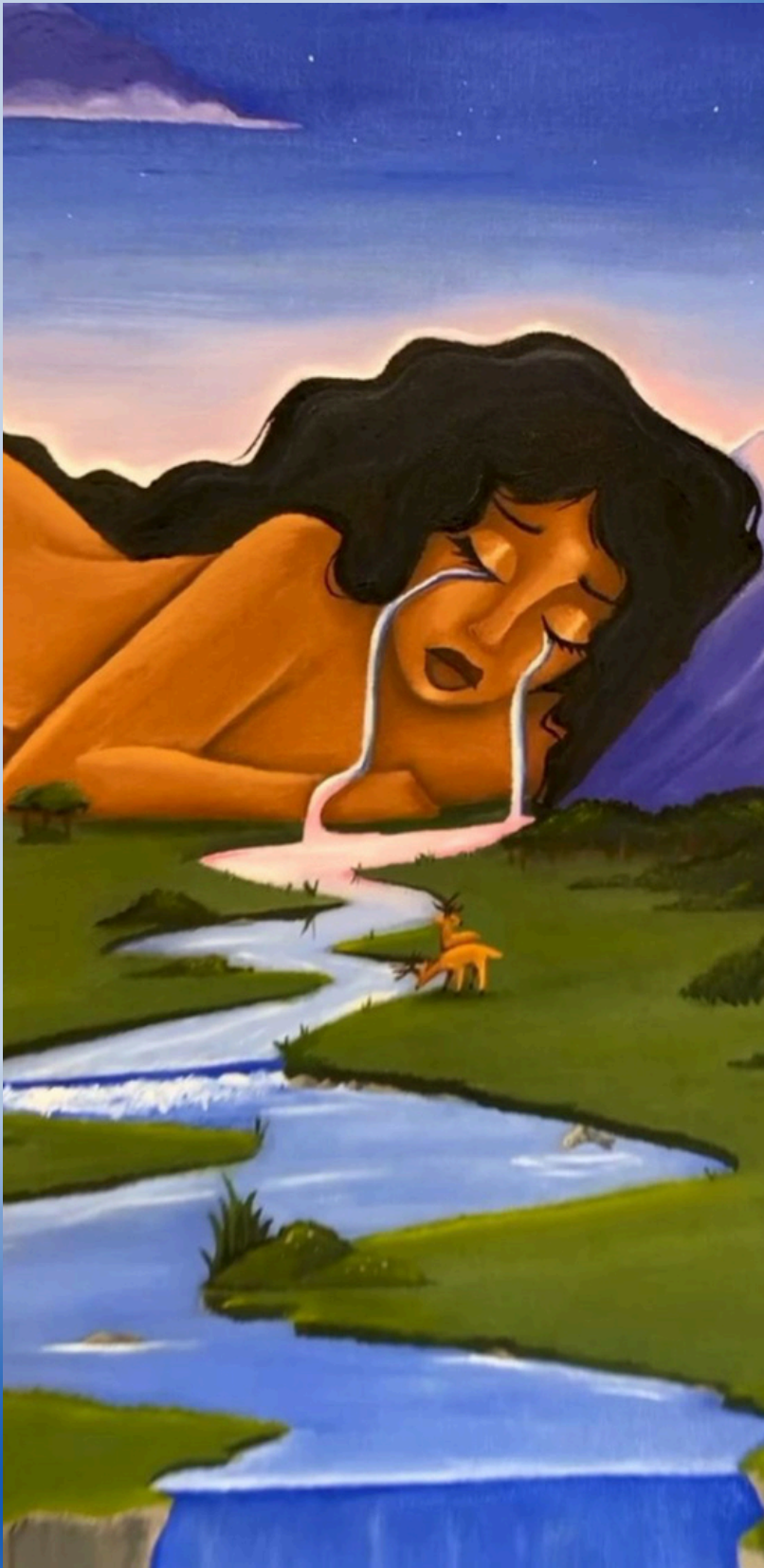
Cruel constellations crumble when you're near,
Magnitude matters not under orchid skies.
Syzygy breaks that hazy lilac sphere,
Admiring an amethyst atmosphere.



Procrastination

By: Ethan Hardy

I have a failing grade in my English class
which is a shame because as long as I can remember
I've always been told that I excel with reading and English
and it's not that the work is hard
but working is hard
Because no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get my body to care
I sing songs of my own sorrow and say that I'll do it next week
I'll do it when I'm free
But I never feel free and I never feel okay
And I think that I'm drowning, but it's okay
I'll just do it next week.
And when my grade comes I'm sad but not surprised
which....seems to be my life
I shove the paper in my bag which is a mess, that I said I should clean
I'll do it next week, when I'm free
But I'm never free..... and I'm always free
and it's always Cs...maybe because I lack the
aspirations
or the ambition
or the yearning
And the works not hard, but I'm working hard to get my body to care
and maybe I'm almost there
But then again,
maybe I'll just do it next week.



“Cry Me a River”

By: Shay Johnson

Loving Hard

By: Jeanne McKellar

The kind of love
That keeps you up at night
When you just know
It's right!
When you put him
On a pedestal
He is so unforgettable
It's so hard to
Bring him back to earth.
The kind of love
Where the mere
Thought of him
Makes you want
To hear
His voice
To see his face light
Up with joy!
The kind of love when you
Love so hard
You don't see the bad.
When loving hard
Makes you soft





"Emotions"
Listen and watch the
lyric video here

By: Marla Jimenez

"AN OPEN PRAYER FOR MOMS"

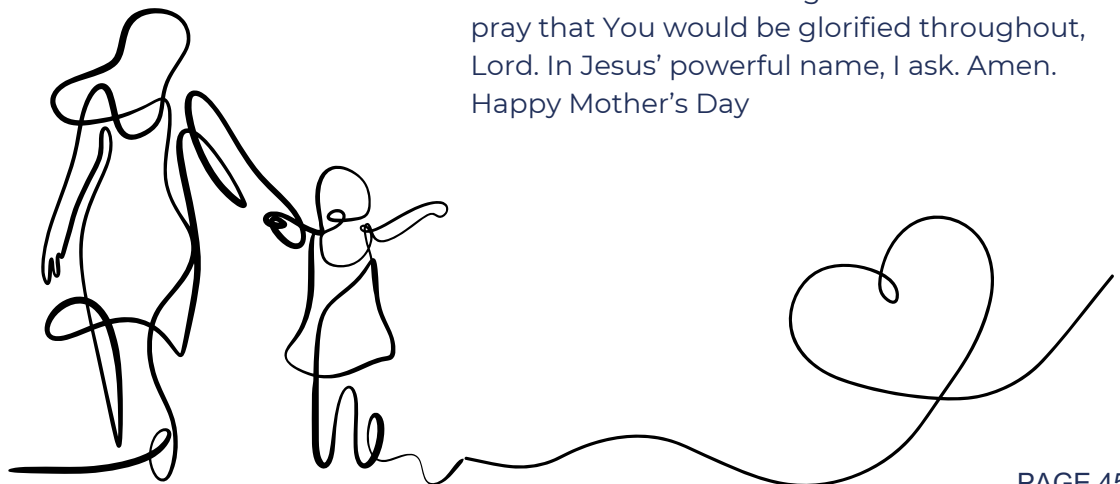
By: Michele Zakian

Hers is the first heartbeat we hear. Before we ever see her face, we know her voice. Her blood runs through our veins, and her words run through our minds forever. Science says that up until we are about two years old, a child doesn't even know that they are two separate beings: mother and child. Truth be told, sometimes I still feel that way. When I am sick, she intuitively knows it and calls just to check in. When mom sees us after a separation, she examines us and knows when something is off. They know because they know every nook and cranny of our being. When we are infants, moms are forced to read our every movement and every cry because that's the only way we can communicate. So when we are not right, we can't hide it from mom. She may let us believe we have fooled her, but mom knows. I believe that's how God intended it to be, His grace flowing through her. I have the privilege of knowing both sides of this coin, mother and child. What's ironic is how hard we fight for independence, only to realize that mom is the one who would fight to the death for us. She is our champion and number one fan! She is imperfect and human too, even if you don't believe it. Moms can be both fierce and fragile, sometimes simultaneously, and sometimes when she realizes how blessed she truly is to be a mom, she can be a blubbing mess too. It's intriguing that we have our earthly father and our Heavenly Father, but we only get one mom. She is the reason we are here. In a world where women can still choose whether or not to bring a child into it, KNOW that your mom chose life for you. This Mother's Day let's celebrate that!

I praise God for all the moms that pour out their blood, sweat, and tears for us. May God bless each type of mommy abundantly. The adopters, the fosters, the stepmoms, the Mr. moms, and the grandmas pulling double duty too. Lord, I pray for those whose mom has already left this world. I think about how hard this time of year must be for them and it inspires me to appreciate my own mom a little more. I thank You, Lord, for giving them a mom worthy of their grief. Help us to celebrate that those moms are with You today, God, and they are more joyful than we can imagine. Please pour out Your comfort over their families, Lord. I pray for those who had moms that were/are imperfect. I pray that we would see them through Your merciful eyes, Lord. May You give us hearts to forgive and eyes to see their flaws through Your grace. May Your grace abound, Lord!

Thank You, God, for making me a mom. Not because I deserved it but solely because You are God. You have used my children to grow me in ways I did not know were possible. For me, becoming a mom was my first understanding of unconditional love. I know the experience is not the same for everyone and so I pray an earnest prayer for all the moms who struggle. May Your love abound!

Lord, I lift up every mother and child reading this prayer. I pray for health and healing over all of us. We need it. We need You, God! I pray Your grace over the coming weekend as we celebrate Mother's Day. I pray that You would heal old wounds and forge new bonds and I pray that You would be glorified throughout, Lord. In Jesus' powerful name, I ask. Amen. Happy Mother's Day



"Half Empty Half Full"

By: Kennedy Aora

In you emptiness abounds
Grappling for fullness in the wilderness bliss
Botched promises...
Deferred dreams... and shriveled memories
You lurk and hung in limbo
Perceived

In me life's fullness engulfs my abode
Embracing the sanctity and its supplement in entirety
Sweet memories...
Forthright endeavors... and bright darkness
Positively charged I stay afloat
Acknowledged

In exact difference We differ togetherness
Yet we could concur and differ in difference
Yes, your half empty
And my half full
Could complete a spiral suppleness.
Solace

"Constructive Criticism"

By: Rebecca Force

I know what you said, I was there.
You said it before I was born.
That I was strong, with a glance that glared,
red-taped ensnared, but to you, adorned.

A house filled with many is empty.
Your house moves with a few, just me, you.
I envy the envious, the plenty.
You envy me, messy lefty with a penny.

It's tough to tell a story with a sonnet.
They learned I was maimed, a disabled, "Oh shit!"
Then chronic criticism with an offer,
to cut my hours until they were over.

Some never learn to write twenty words in two,
I did, the ninny oaf, that flew in queue.

There he sat, ominously within the confines of an empty hall. Not a trace, a measly high nor low of noise aside from an ear-numbing radiator. It was not for that it was loud, but rather a low bass humming drove the ear into a dulled trance. Beside the state of the radiator, the lackluster blue wallpaper grew ever more nauseating. Yellowed from age, it gave birth to an all-new meaning of waiting. Just beyond sight but still visible, a clock hung dormant on a wall. The seconds passed by, and the minutes followed suit. With every passing bit, he began to feel as if the wallpaper had become ever more yellow. The paranoia of what lies beyond the doors was all too familiar, yet so foreign. Sitting and waiting, sitting and waiting for those doors to open abroad. Before the wallpaper consumed him, the glooming doors swung open with a groaning creak. To step forth, a young, half-witted man, although a boy by his standards, came pressing through the mouth of the beast. "Thank you for waiting," said the man robotically. This did not entirely provoke, for he knew it was to be yet another fool's errand. "Mr. Baxter, you are now allowed to come in for your demonstration." Mr. Baxter now stirred, his old, decrepit body slowly creaking to life in a fashion similar to the rusty doors. Clenched underneath the side of his right arm, he toted around a briefcase with a broken handle. Likewise, as with the aged wallpaper, the case was yellowed by age. Although not blue, brown and yellow were also an ungodly pairing, sore to the eyes. Like a mirrored image, Mr. Baxter also held firmly to another item under his left arm. Dimensions and of probable mass to the briefcase, a binder chock full of papers was securely fastened by a leather strap. It took Mr. Baxter some time to move forward, especially in an encumbered state alongside his age, but he eventually shuffled through the doors that the cleric had opened.

The room Mr. Baxter entered was parted down the middle by a large mahogany table with a series of historical ornamentals decorated about. One corner housed a bowl filled with Spanish Doubloons, while another corner had residency spoken for by a miniature idol from Brazil. A tribal mask from Africa was the grand centerpiece of the table, fur and all. Beyond the wall, just as he predicted, his audience, an audience of one, was there to greet him from their chair. "Good evening, Mr. Baxter." Mr. Baxter then began to settle in, preparing his work for display. He first gently placed the worn-out briefcase onto the table, which let out a clunk-like noise upon setting it down. As he bent over to set down the binder alongside the case, Mr. Baxter caught the eye of a leering lion just above him, about seven or so feet above the ground. Although dead, it still had a grimace on it, like that of a killer. This sensation made Mr. Baxter shiver a bit, but he then glanced away. Within the coming moments, the deal was about to begin. With a sigh and a groan, Mr. Baxter addressed his employer. "I have scoured the globe in search of the artifact you seek, Lutch," spoke Mr. Baxter. A long pause loomed over the room. It rolled across the room, thick and as wide as that of fog. Tension grew, the atmosphere thickening. Finally, it released, and Lutch spoke. "But yet did you find it, mein Freund?" Mr. Baxter then proceeded to click the latches of his case and lifted the lid. Within the confines contained a glass case reinforced with lead struts. Mr. Baxter then lifted the container out and pressed its contents upon Lutch's eyes. "And its existence is true," said Mr. Baxter warmly. From the opposing side of the room, Mr. Baxter could have sworn he saw Lutch provoke a smile, but only for a fleeting moment. "Ah, so the rumors of it being in Tibet were true after all," said Lutch calmly. A pause. Mr. Baxter then placed the container on the table.

Within the metal-infused glass casket, a book, unknown in origin, sat patiently within. Another pause. Finally, he spoke. "Yes, Lutch, the Book of Hate does exist." Again, a fleeting smile. "Did you find trouble in obtaining it from those monks, mein Freund?" Mr. Baxter reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a box of matches, followed by a small carton of cigarettes. He gestured if Lutch wanted one, but Lutch held his hand up as a passing no. Mr. Baxter then lifted his left heel, struck a match hard on it, and lit up a cigarette. After a few puffs, he spoke. "I wish they did."

No smile, but rather dismay. Lutch leaned forward, grinding his backside against his chair. It sounded almost as if the chair was going to give way from under him. "Explain what you mean," asked Lutch. Another few puffs. "As I stated, Lutch: I wish they did." No smile, but rather dismay. Lutch leaned forward, grinding his backside against his chair. It sounded almost as if the chair was going to give way from under him. "Explain what you mean," asked Lutch. Another few puffs. "As I stated, Lutch: I wish they did."

"I wish they did stop me, for after coming across this book, for life has been nothing more than troublesome for me. Upon reaching that temple, the monks led me in by the hand, almost like that of a child. I inquired on the whereabouts of this book, and they came forth and said that they had it. I followed by asking for it. They said no. So what did I do? I stole it. But before leaving, they all stood around me, congregating into a circle, and said that you cannot have the book, but we will not stop you from taking it. Questionable why, but now I feel as if it was a means of punishment for what I did. This book, Lutch, this book is pure malevolence I say, and I wish to part ways from it!" Lutch leaned back in his chair, again creaking. Mr. Baxter stood there, nervously smoking away. "This troubles me, mein Freund," said Lutch. Pause. He continued, leaning back forward. Creaking. "You jump at the sound of money, you scream at its sight, you drool at its scent, and yet you don't want to be paid?"

No response, just smoke. "Mr. Baxter, are you feeling well?" Smoke. Mr. Baxter responded. "My payment is in the parting of this book and the knowledge I hold here," he said, slamming his hand upon the large binder. "This book paid me in ways you will never, never understand, Lutch, and when I am gone, you may find why I wish this book to never be seen, touched, nor heard from again." Once again, dismay, but a facade of a smile shrouded its existence. "But Mr. Baxter, mein Freund, do you not know how much money I am paying you for this book?" asked Lutch. Pause, then smoke. "The amount of money I am paying you is inconceivable to most, but to you, you know its true worth as..." Lutch was cut abruptly by Mr. Baxter, slamming his left fist onto the binder. "This book is not of this world, and what it contains is impossible for the majority of mankind to understand!" shouted Mr. Baxter. "If you wish to have it, so be it! Like the monks before me, I, too, will not allow you to have it, but I will not stop you from taking it!"

Mr. Baxter flicked out the remains of his cigarette and lit another one. Upon inhaling deeply, he expelled a large plume of smoke. "Tell me, Lutch: what do Hernán Cortés, Adolf Hitler, and Osama Bin Laden have in common?" asked Mr. Baxter. This question perplexed Lutch. Smoke. Pause. Smoke. Creak. "I may not be one who scours and dives at the chance of historical artifacts and archaeological digs," said Lutch. Pause. Mr. Baxter took a moment to breathe, cigarette in hand. Creak. Lutch continued. "I also may not find myself buried in books such as yourself, but are these not examples of some of the most destructive humans in history who brought death and war upon the doorsteps of others in biblical proportions?" Mr. Baxter reignited his cigarette and nodded. "Yes, Lutch, that is the exact answer that I wanted to hear."

Lutch didn't quite have an understanding of these questions. "Are you alright, Harth?" asked Lutch. Smoke, followed by a pause. Lutch continued.

"I know that we are under the relationship of employer and employee, but yet deep down we are still friends. Are you alright? What is with these silly questions?" Another burned-out cigarette. Flick. Mr. Baxter went for another, but it turned out that was his last one. He gritted his teeth, then answered. "It is because this is what the book answers, Lutch. The Book of Hate defines everything about humanity and how much sin has been committed."

"Let's consider for a moment, Lutch, that monsters exist, and they are no mere dreams, illusions, and are not works of fiction. To give you context, consider the ideas of Loch Ness, Bigfoot, Ghosts, and Aliens. These are monsters that arise from the belief of the unknown, the knowledge beyond human comprehension, and are nothing more than ways to cope with the real monsters that walk among us. What I just described to you, monsters of myth and legend, are just that: fake, fraudulent works of fiction. The true monsters are what we see every day. Humans, Lutch, Humans. Humans are the monsters we fear, and we do not have the recognition to admit it, let alone the courage to do so. We are monsters."

"This makes no sense, Harth," said Lutch, "of what meaning is all of this you speak?" Mr. Baxter continued on. Tensionized friction began to stir within the room. "Everything in life has a meaning," said Mr. Baxter. Pause. "Take as another means of knowledge to digest, Lutch." Mr. Baxter paused again, but only for a moment, and then pulled another item, thin in nature, from the worn-out briefcase. "This book," said Mr. Baxter, patting it lighting with the back of his right hand, "this book contains stories that were meant as teaching tools to the next generations of humans."

"The man behind this marvel is known as Aesop, and he expressed the world in ways that are much more colorful than reality. Labor, love, freedom, all contained within the confines of one man who wished to address the monsters of the world, yet by not calling them out." Mr. Baxter paused to look down at his watch. 10:37 P.M. He continued. " Although he only made it part of the way in calling out the monsters known as humans, from the pitiful origins of a slave, he was able to show the world to those

who listened that from the pitiful origins of a slave, he was able to show the world, to those who listened, that the world is inhabited by filth, destruction, and chaos." Another pause. Now, Mr. Baxter turned and looked over to Lutch with a soured scowl. "We, we humans, even ourselves, Lutch, are monsters in our own right, and we have yet to know it, let alone acknowledge it!" Lutch was lost for words. Mr. Baxter looked down at his watch again. 10:39 P.M. He looked upon Lutch again. "I wish to say more, but I cannot do it no more than I wish to. All of the knowledge you seek is within here," said Mr. Baxter, patting the binder.

Just then, the room began to grow cold. Mr. Baxter looked back at his watch, and he let out a sigh. 10:40 P.M. "My time is up." Lutch was perplexed by this statement. Then, without warning, the smoke from the spewed cigarettes from Mr. Baxter began to contort and take shape into spirals and edges. They then began to float down, spinning round and round Mr. Baxter like a vortex. This display began to frighten Lutch. "Harth?! What is going on?! Answer me now!" roared Lutch. The smoke began to rip and tear into Mr. Baxter's clothing, then his skin, leaving nothing but bone. Everything it consumed, turned into dust. "Beware Lutch Crevings," wheezed Mr. Baxter, "beware of the book that lies before you!" The smoke began to work its way up past his shoulders, tearing into his face. Wheezing. "Do not dare open its protective case, let alone its tainted cover, for it will spell your doom as it has mine." From the vortex, a skeletal hand lunged forward, grabbing hold of the binder and whisking it up to the sky with great force. "All the answers you seek, take heed and read my final testament," shouted Mr. Baxter, face now a skeleton. He then began to laugh, a wheezing cacophony of sounds. Lutch was now cowering behind his chair, only his eyes peering above its threshold, big and wide. There, he cowered, watching smoke rip and tear at human flesh while inhuman screams shrieked throughout the room. Finally, the smoke cleared, and the room grew warm. Nothing was left but bones, which came clattering down to the floor. The binder that his old friend Harth Baxter wielded came crashing down with a thud. Poetically, it landed neatly alongside the container that housed the Book of Hate.

Farthest from home, I am lying on the park bench just outside the train station. As the rain starts to drip, I can feel my clothing begin to soak as Adam's ale becomes heavier. I check my timepiece for some sort of awareness. Midnight. I struggle to recall the day's name. Not a soul around, yet a sound so deafening is trafficking my head. I start to wonder, where am I? What am I doing here? A crow flies down to seize the scraps from the dustbin. In distraught, I stared at the bird as it pecked every bite of a mortal's supper. It looked days old, even weeks. It makes me question, when was the last time anyone was here? Nervously, I approach the vacant flower shop, longing for service. No one. I step into the phone booth and start dialing. As I precisely hit each button, a shaking sensation takes control of my body. It appears as if I have run into deeper trouble. A dead end. The phone failed to reach the line. Panic. It seeps through me like water would into a sponge. I am all alone with no way to flee from here.

A piercing siren wakes the town. Where is it coming from? I trail north, step by step, searching for an answer. Talking to myself, I say, "I will be okay." "I will be okay." I figured saying it over and over would make me believe it. Still wondering where the sound came from, I started to speed up. There it is again, even louder. I cover my ears as the noise lasts. Uncovering them, tears trickle down my face. I have no idea where I am, what is going on, and what day it is! The feeling of abandonment is immersed in my veins. Thinking, pacing, watching, waiting, thinking, pacing, watching, waiting. The incessant cycle is clouding my judgment with each tick of the clock. Carrying on, I listened for the sound once more. Just as I thought I was getting near, the alarm had not gone off in the past interval. All hope was lost. Presently, I am as useless as a buggy with no fuel. Wobbling along, I stumbled upon a creek obstructed by mud and what seemed to be car debris.

Questions flood my brain, so many questions. What happened here? I follow the path of waste. Shrinking in size, the further I go, I get to the last sliver. Nothing. I hear footsteps. I stand as still as a tree. They gradually are getting louder, and I feel sweat oozing down behind my neck. "Please don't hurt me, please don't hurt me, please don't hurt me," I whispered. The strides are now closer than ever. I turn from behind the tree to peek. That's odd; there is nothing there. I can feel the footsteps shake the ground below my feet. I scream to the top of my lungs. The clatter is now right ahead of my body, but not even a feather is there. I dart through the woods, looking back every second. It is hunting me. I sense it getting harder and harder to breathe. I bank right, tumble over lumber, landing my head on a stone. I have been knocked unconscious.

Ducks quacking in the pond, children playing in the field, and mother hanging the laundry amongst the line. The bales of hay aligned alongside the barn. I remember where I am. I am home. I head into the barn to greet Pa. There he is in his favorite rocking chair, swaying back and forth. He shouts, "Oliver, You're home, sweet boy!" "Hi Pa, I am so happy to see you," I exclaimed. Embracing him, I filled with joy. I feel whole again and reassured. Pa said, "Where have you been?" "I don't know, but I am here now, Pa," I spoke with confidence. Pa spoke out, "I've been trying to reach you; why did you keep running?" I stare at Pa with a mass amount of confusion. I replied, "What are you talking about, Pa?" He screamed loud at me, "Stop running away from me, join me!" With fright, I say, "Pa? He emerged from his chair, bolting towards me; his face was melting. I jolted out of there with the greatest amount of fear my body could contain. Past Ma, past the children, past the pond, I flee. I find myself back in the woods, maneuvering and sprinting. I take a sharp turn, trembling over logs and banging my noggin on a large rock.

I regained consciousness, scooting backwards with my fingertips in distress. Where am I? Pa? The sun is rising, and I stand up, holding my head. I walk out of the woods, and there it is. The train station once more. I circled back from where I began. I find myself taking a pause on the bench. Still feeling lightheaded, I lie down with my hands tucked under my head. Tapping on my shoulder wakes me from my slumber. I open my eyes, and it is a woman with a pale face, red lipstick, and a handbag made of fur. She says, "Do you mind if I join you?" Sitting up, I look side to side, the pavement is full of pedestrians going both ways. I look at the woman with a lost look, saying, "What?" The lady repeats, "Do you mind if I join you?" She says, "I'm pregnant, and I've been on my feet for hours." Returning a stare again and blinking multiple times rapidly, I respond, "Sure, no, yeah, absolutely!" The woman sits with a smile upon her face. Enjoying each other's company, we both relax back on the bench. She begins to devour her sandwich, and a crow comes gliding down, landing on the arm of the bench. She whispers to the crow, "Do you think he'll join us?" I asked her, "What did you say?" She replies, "Oh, nothing, dear, just talking to myself!" I nod my head and share a smirk. I looked over to her, and I questioned, "I forgot to ask you, where are we? I have had a lot of brain fog." She made a signal to the crow, leaving me confused. I got louder and said, "Hello, do you know where we are?" She is mumbling something to herself and gazing at me, not blinking once. Swarms of crows crowd around us. They are circling faster and faster the more she repeats her words. I scream, "Make it stop, make it stop, make, make it stop!" She stops the movement of her lips, and all the birds drop to the ground. Her eyes close, and the woman passes out. My vision becomes blurred, then the world starts to spin, and I find myself now blacked out in the same spot I first was. I arose again. Michael? Squinting, looking into the distance. Is that my brother? What is he doing here? This can't be. How is this possible? The playground is packed with small children and their parents watching from the benches. Michael is swinging vigorously as Ma is pushing him back and forth.

The rest of the swing set is lined with kids having the time of their lives. Just before I approach my family, I stop, admiring the smiles on their faces. I shout, "Ma, here I come!" She did not even glance my way. I screamed once more, "Michael!" "Ma!" Not even a head turn. Not alerted in any way. Can they hear me? I march closer, hoping they will hear me this time. I yell again, "Ma, do you hear me?" Nothing again.

I am now closer than ever, steps away from them. It is like I do not exist. I go to tap her on the shoulder, and my finger goes right through her. I murmured, "Ma?" She disintegrates into dust. I ran over to Michael, hoping to get his attention. As I try to grasp his hand, poof, dust. I drop to my knees with tears falling down my face. One by one, each kid and each parent shatter into nothing but dirt. The wind picks up and starts to spin violently around me. I get swooped up into the tornado and everything around me has disappeared. Where the hell am I?

Here I am again. Lonelier than ever before, the bench beneath me, I lie at this place hopelessly. This time, I am choosing not to venture out. Maybe It will bring me back to where I belong if I just stay put. So, I do just that. Tick tock tick tock. Time is going by but there is no change of scenery. I remove my time piece from my pocket, holding it in my hand, watching the minutes go past. I tap my foot rapidly, growing impatient. I count 1, 2, 3, 4, over and over to try and calm my nerves. Twiddling my fingers on the arm of the bench, the sound my nails make as they hit the metal is only getting louder. I cannot take this anymore. I grip my watch with the palm of my hand, wrapping my fingers around it. Standing up, the cement beside my feet starts to shatter. All ground has fallen besides the piece below my feet. It becomes dark, my lip quivers, I have a lump in the back of my throat. I can feel myself starting to move, floating into the unknown. Unsteady, rocking side to side, I squat down to hold my balance. Grasping the sides, I hold on for dear life. Never to be seen again. Where the hell am I??

"Androgynous"

By: Rebecca Force

Twirled on Stinky Feet and Was Oh, So Sweet-

I was a boy, boy, you know? The girl who pegged cans, with rock bands, refused to hold and wash hands, bragged about warts, wrestled on the porch, got sticks, lit the torch, tent screeched, and then scorched.

Didn't realize it then, my father's fit, sweeping embers of hours from the fire pit. It caused our demise, mass-produced fast fries, fruit without pies, and men without ties.

Threw my pranks with eggs at tall, beefy legs, spit from the top in the mall, hit their heads. Girl who could brawl, take a fall, crunch and crawl, lit each game of ball, with the boys, boys and all.

Then went to her house, a perfect cat and mouse, Ken with Barbie, so we changed skirt and blouse.

Evolving Backwards (or: self-pity at 6:31am)

By: Gracie Teiper

They say that the reason
we are what we are
Is hundreds of thousands of years ago we made a trade:
We pulled out our teeth and carved away
our flesh; our grit
To allow room to grow—
Allow for our minds to expand in exchange
for a break from the violence
(or at least a limit)
Sometimes I feel like I broke that promise.
That I am so cruel in a way only known
as primal; animalistic
I wanted to bite, and so I bit
And my skull fused and I never learned
Can I be blamed?
We yell at a dog for biting the hand that feeds
But what happens when the hand that feeds deserves to bleed?
Or when the voice behind it yells and
tells you how you will be, in its own self-fulfilled prophecy?
I bit and I bit, and I paid the price
But if a hand places itself inside of your mouth
And tugs and your teeth and dares you to bite
Then maybe—just maybe—that blame isn't on you.

CHAPTER ONE OF "LEVINE"

By: Tylissa Arnold

Blaire hated taverns, yet somehow he always found himself in one. They were the best places to get information without speaking to anyone, yet they were so noisy it was hard to hear anything. He sat at the bar, swishing his drink around in its cup.

The barkeep, a skinny Ogre who looked drunk himself, strolled over to Blaire. He had been cleaning the same glass cup for at least three minutes (Blaire had been keeping track of the time), yet it still looked dirty. Somehow. "Are you from around here?" The barkeep asked, finally setting the glass down.

Blaire looked down at his own glass, wondering if it had been cleaned the same way as the other one. "No." He pushed his drink away. He wasn't very thirsty anyway.

The barkeep nodded his head thoughtfully. "So then, why are you here? Passing through?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions."

"Just making conversation. You seem lonely, Traveler."

Blaire scoffed, then drank his drink in one swift swig. "No. I'm looking for someone who can help me."

The barkeeper pulled up a chair and sat in front of Blaire. If there was one good thing about owning a tavern, it was that he always knew of someone who could fix any sort of issue you had. "I might know someone. What kind of help?"

Listening to these people's conversations hasn't gotten me anywhere. He better have something, Blaire thought, setting his glass down on the counter. The barkeep grabbed the nearest bottle and poured Blaire another shot. He hoped Blaire saw the free drink as a sort of peace offering, maybe then he wouldn't look so skeptical. Or maybe, that was his normal face. It was very difficult to tell.

"I need-" Blaire paused for a moment, searching his vocabulary for the right word. As it turned out, he didn't have the word he needed. It was rare he needed help from someone else, especially this sort of help. "A talker. Someone who can talk to people and get what they want."

The barkeeper laughed, making Blaire frown. He drank his second drink just as fast as the first one. This was exactly why he refused to talk to people. His vocabulary was limited and people often babied him because of it, believing him to be stupid. Refusing to sit there and continue to be belittled, Blaire got up out of the seat and walked towards the door.

"No, wait, Traveler! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh." The barkeep shouted, trying to compose himself. "You won't get many... Talkers... around here. If you go out of town though, you'll find a Chapter house. Real big, hard to miss."

I should burn his bar to the ground, Blaire thought, pushing the door open and letting it slam behind him. He looked towards the town's exit and just like the barkeeper had said, there was a large building sitting atop a hill. Vines climbed up its side and intertwined themselves with the red bricks and wooden balcony. At the very top of the building was a big telescope. It stuck out of the roof. The telescope resembled a bendy straw sticking out of a glass of frothy root beer. With two flaps of his wings, he was in the air and heading towards the Chapter house.

Eisha could not believe what she was staring at, nor could she believe that it was staring back at her. Or, was it staring at her? She couldn't tell if the potion she had brewed had come to life, and she hoped with all her heart that it hadn't. Not only was creating life illegal, but this potion baby would be very ugly. She slowly backed away from her station and picked up her staff that was leaning against her bedroom wall. Careful not to disturb the potential baby, Eisha poked the bottle just to see if it would do anything. Luckily, it did not.

She dropped her staff onto the floor and slipped oven mitts onto her hands. This potion had been brewing for the better part of two weeks, and it was the first time it had looked somewhat right. The first three times Eisha had brewed it, they never got past their second stage. She would have to ask Luell, again, where she went wrong. Eisha grimaced at the thought.

She was a strict and pushy mentor, always making sure Eisha was putting all her effort into her work. Normally, this would be a good thing, but she was not in the mood to try brewing again. At least, not today.

There was also Otto, but he was always being summoned to the capital. It was nice to be sponsored by the royal family since they funded a large portion of the house's studies, but the house felt cold without him. He was an intelligent yet childish human. Based on his appearance alone, one would mistake him for being in his early twenties, like Eisha. He was, in fact, closer to his mid-thirties.

Eisha placed the potion outside her room in the big red box labeled "Hazardous Waste."

"How'd it go, Eisha?" Luell called from her room.

Eisha sighed. She had hoped to avoid Luell for the rest of the day, not wanting to be lectured about her mistake. Unfortunately, Luell knew Eisha had messed up. A foul, rotting smell was making its way out of Eisha's room and infesting every other room on the floor.

"Oh...You know," Eisha muttered as she inched closer and closer to the staircase.

"I can't hear you, Eish. Come here."

Luell absolutely could hear Eisha. The house was nearly silent, save for the creaks from the old flooring and skitters coming from the ceiling. Eisha threw her head back and sighed as quietly as she could.

In her room, Luell was working on her own potion. She ripped apart a sunflower, then dropped its petals onto a small scale. She went back and forth adding and replacing petals until she was satisfied with its weight. "How did it go?" She repeated.

"It went fantastically."

Luell exhaled, her version of a laugh. "I bet it did. Do you know where you went wrong?"

"No, and to be quite honest, I don't want to think about it right now."

"Why not?" Luell stuck the petals into the beaker and poured cold water into it.

Eisha mumbled and shrugged her shoulders.

"That's a terrible reason."

"Thinking about it would just make me angry, I guess." Eisha crossed her arms and leaned against the hallway wall. "This will be the fourth time it didn't work. Brewing is supposed to be the easy part of alchemy, yet I can't do it."

"You can, you're just missing something."

"Yes, I know that. I don't know what I'm missing. That's the issue."

Luell hummed as she set her beaker over the small flame. "Did you follow the steps we wrote out together?"

Eisha was beginning to grow irritated. "Yes."

"Next time I'll watch you brew it." Luell turned the flame down and watched as the water began to boil. She took a pinch of a light blue powder and sprinkled it inside the beaker, then put a cork over its opening. The color of the liquid shifted from a light green to pitch black. "Did this happen?" Eisha nodded.

Luell pursed her lips and hummed, then she shrugged. "How about you begin brewing another potion?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

Just as Luell was gathering her supplies, the shop bell chimed as the front door creaked open. Eisha swiftly turned on her heel and jogged down the stairs to the shop on the first floor. A man with wings like an angel was standing at the front desk, idly shifting through a stack of flyers. He didn't notice Eisha's presence. Or rather, he was waiting for her to acknowledge him.

"Hi! I'm Eisha. What can I help you with?"

He looked up from the stack of papers. "Blaire. I was hoping you'd be able to...help me collect some things. And talk to some people. To get the things I need."

Eisha raised her brows slightly. He spoke as if he were unsure of the words he was saying, but his tone didn't convey that. He spoke with almost no inflection in his voice, which was impressive. His accent clearly stuck him as from the capitol and everyone there had a very dramatic way of speaking.

"Okay...collect what kind of things, Mr. Blaire?"

Blaire's face scrunched up as if he had tasted something sour. "Just Blaire. It's pages from an old book. I want to have it repaired."

Eisha nodded thoughtfully. "Simple enough. We do book repairs here as well. I'll be right back with a contract." She went back upstairs for Luell. To her surprise, Luell was standing at the top of the staircase, her arms crossed across her chest. She took hold of Eisha's hand and brought Eisha back to her room, then closed the door.

"I'm not taking him," Luell said firmly. "He doesn't seem right."

"He's a little awkward, sure, but he doesn't seem strange. I've seen stranger people and they've been taken before."

Luell shook her head. "Not taking him."

Eisha sighed. She had already told Blaire that the job would be simple. She would look like a liar if she went back on her word. She stared up at the ceiling and tapped her middle and thumb fingers together, trying to come up with a solution.

"Oh!" She said, snapping. "I'll take him."

"Absolutely not. You've never been out on a job before and I don't want your first one to be with *him*."

Eisha went over to Luell's desk and rummaged around until she found a blank contract. "I'll be fine. He just needs help getting book pages, nothing complex." She signed her name on the spot labeled "Accompanying Alchemist," then rolled it up.

Luell reached for the contract. "Eisha-" Eisha held the contract up high so that Luell couldn't reach it. "It'll be fine! If he does end up being strange, I'll just come back."

"That isn't-" Luell started. Eisha closed the door before she could finish her sentence.

Blaire was back to reading the flyers when Eisha set the contract down on the desk. Once again, he refused to look up until Eisha said something to him. "Sign on the dotted line, please. I'll be the one helping you. When are we setting out? And how long do you anticipate we'll be gone?"

Blaire nodded, then scribbled his name down on the line. His signature vaguely resembled his name, but it was difficult to make out any of the letters aside from an "A" at the beginning, probably a first initial, and a "B". "Dusk. A month." Eisha rolled the contract back up and stuck it in her apron pocket. "So soon! I better get to packing." She chuckled.

His smile was shallow. "That would be smart. I'll be back later." He took a flyer from the stack and stuck it in his small messenger bag. The door's bell jingled as he left.



"Borrowed Time/Debt Collection"

By: Casey Dubin

A war in my bloodstream
Has left a void in my veins,
Only the ghost of hollow longing
In my rabid heart remains.
A debt of flesh and of blood,
Eternally being paid -
Resounding echoes from the past,
Scars that never really fade.



"In the Quiet"

By: M.Torri

In the quiet of the darkness

I whisper...

Come into my dreams and stay with me all night.

I want to see your smile.

I want to hear your laughter.

I want to smell your fragrance.

In the quiet of the darkness

I plead...

Come into my dreams and stay with me all night.

I need to touch you.

I need you to touch me.

I need to know that you are real.

In the quiet of the darkness

I cry...

Come into my dreams and stay with me all night.

Tell me where you are.

Tell me why you left.

Tell me you'll come back.

In the quiet of the darkness

I am alone...

Come into my dreams and stay with me all night.

Remember that I love you.

Know that I miss you.

Pretend that you are still alive.



"Round and Round"

By: M.Torri

Grandmother sat by the counter
and made circles
round and round...
pushing...wiping away
the crumbs of yesterday's breakfast...
the remnants of today's lunch.

You are not the first, she said,
And you certainly won't be the last...
Through tears I embrace the wisdom.
Yes, but what do I do with her?

Raise her.
But how? I ask.
You will learn, she said.
You will learn as you go.

She cries in the middle of the night
And I cry, too.
What should I do with you? I ask.
You will raise her, I hear.
I stumble back to bed.
I stumble back to day.

She falls through air.
I am too late to catch her.
The eyes are bruised
The arm dangles.
What should I do with you? I ask.
You will raise her, I hear.
I stumble back to bed.
I stumble back to day.

She smiles...waves goodbye.
The music echoes as she turns...
The perfume lingers.
What should I do with you? I ask.
You will raise her, I hear.

I turn and look through the years.
But how do I raise her now that she is
dead?

Grandmother sits by the counter
and makes circles
round and round...
You will learn, she says.
You will learn as you go.
I stumble back to bed.
I stumble back to day.



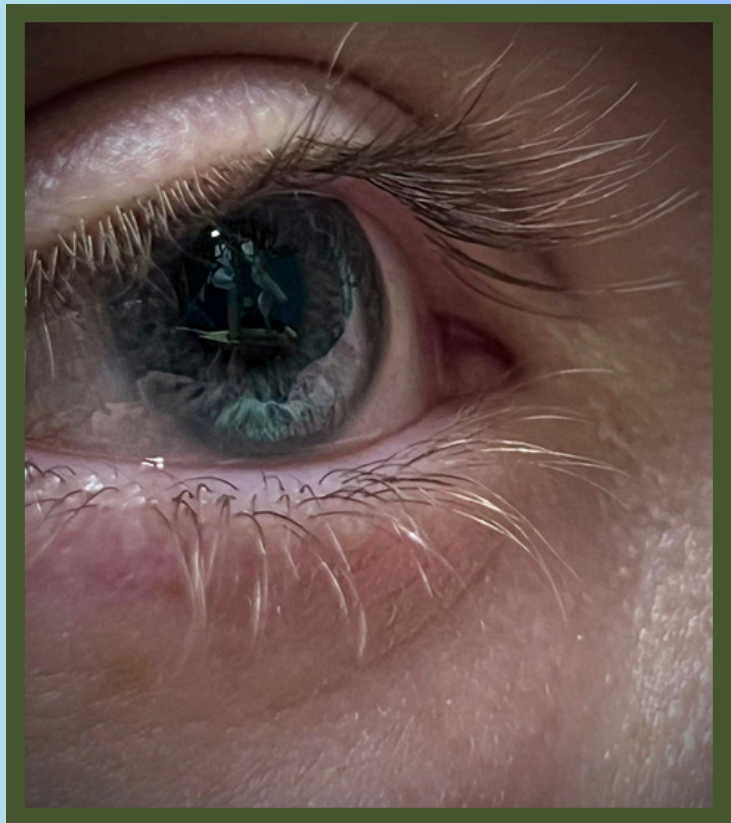
Lost at Sea

By: Jessica Bickel

Storms are gathering a rugged gray
Her mainsail billows and rips away
With little mind and much less care
The rains beat down behind your glare

Through chaotic waves of steel blue murk
That hurt you have held will always lurk
Her hull grows worn from salt spray swells
No matter, still, she shan't dispel

Despairing wakes swarm her bow so, dear
The push and pull of the tide's uprear
Throughout this distrustful tempest's reign
She endures for you again, again



OH, DEAR MOTHER, WHERE SHALL I BEGIN?

BY XACHIL S. JOACHIN MARTINEZ

Oh, Dear Mother, where shall I begin?

It is true, I am gone, but I still live in your dreams.

How quickly life took me, my pure soul never committed a sin.

Don't cry, Dear Mother, your tears won't bring me back and neither will your screams.

I know it was quick and we never got to say goodbye,

But you are so strong and learned how to live with it.

I know that you think of me every time you look up to the sky,

But our time for us to meet isn't here yet and that I have to admit.

No one will believe you when you tell them I had curly hair,

Well how would they believe you if most of them never got to know about me before I left.

I know you changed a lot and that you still believe it wasn't fair,

But, Dear Mother, trust me it was time and this was not theft.

I miss you calling me "Lorena" and calling me "mi niña" as well,

And I miss the adrenaline and craziness in which we had to live.

Oh, and remember that one time the donkey got scared and I fell?

I was so scared, but I knew it would be a great story for the future to give.

I hope it makes you feel better to know that I walk in peace and never in pain.

I don't feel the pain or sorrow, or any bad feeling within.

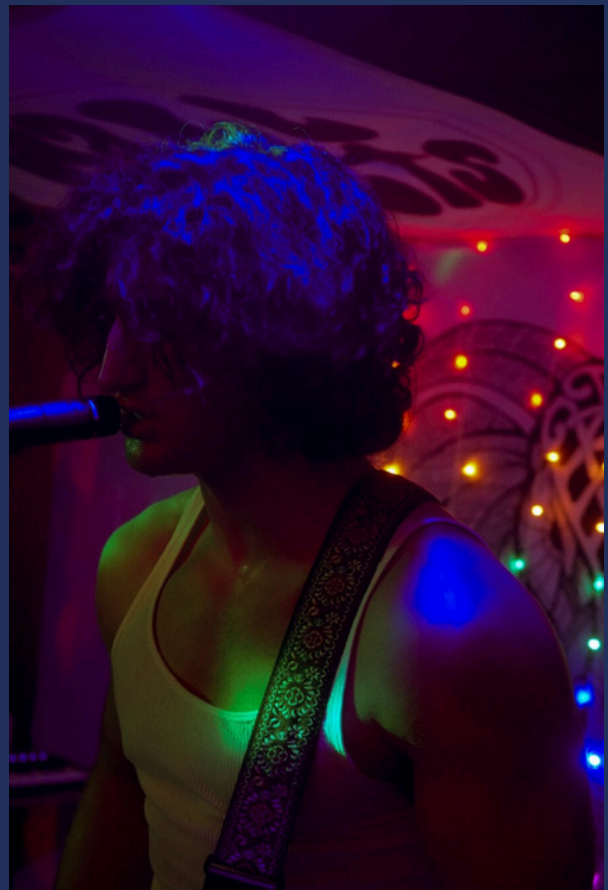
I can't wait to tell you everything I've done when we meet again.

Starting with these beautiful words, "Oh, Dear Mother, where shall I begin?"



Digital Photography

By: Joy Pierce



"Bouquet of Colors"

By: Alice Soto (Tati) Oil on Canvas



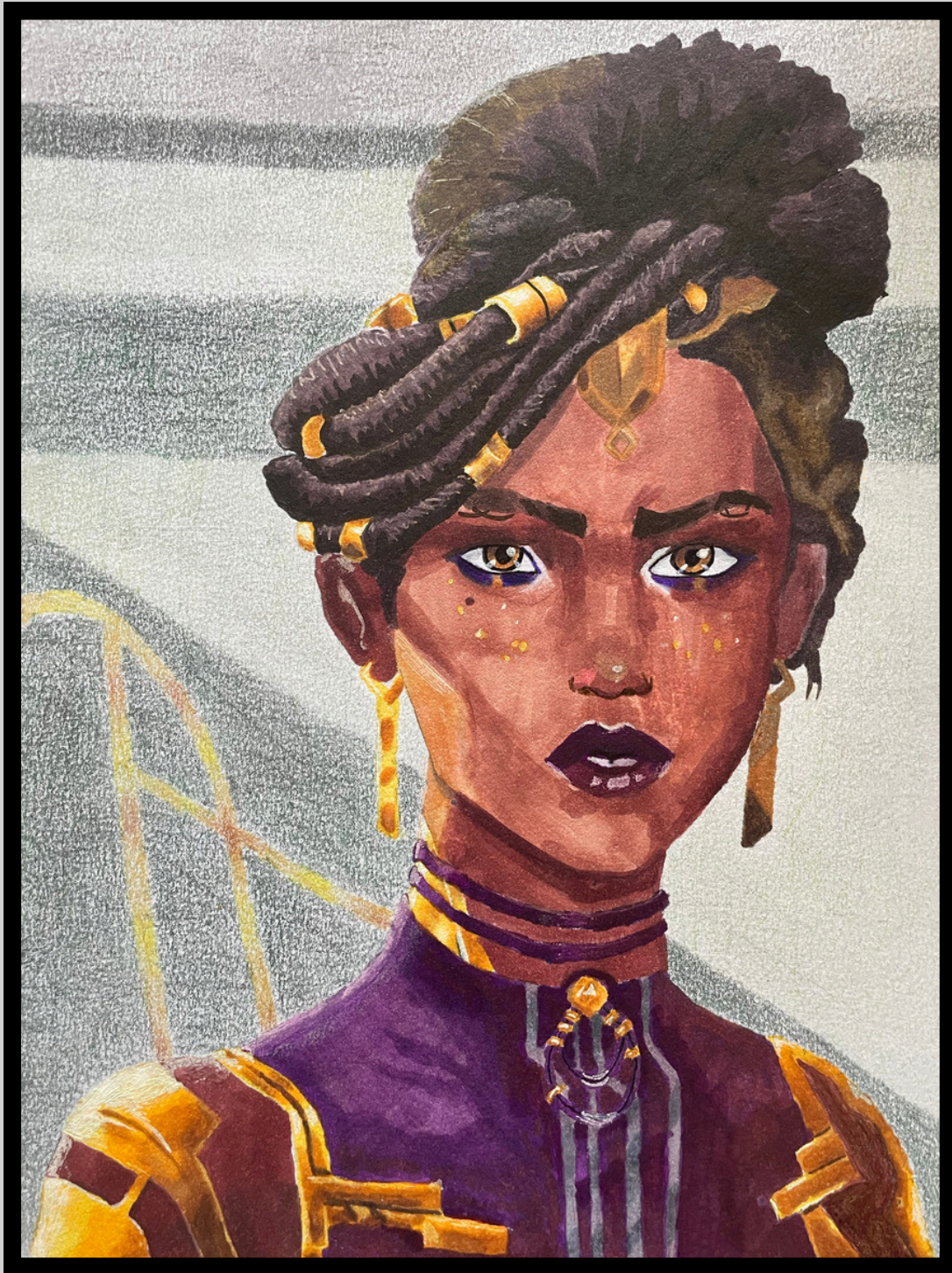
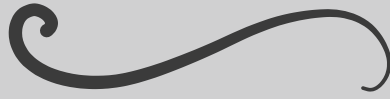
Artwork

By: Jennifer Bates



Artwork

By: Corban Fife



“A Queen and Her Tiger”

Artwork By: Anaia Richardson



Photography

By: Michael Seda



Montague Bud

Photography By: Katherine Daniels



Artwork

By: Ello Collazo



The Tree

Art By: Juana Juarez Franco



As seasons change and years go by,
The tree stands tall, against the sky.
A timeless symbol of strength and grace,
An inspiration for the human race.

Like that tree, let's face each day,
Embrace whatever comes our way.

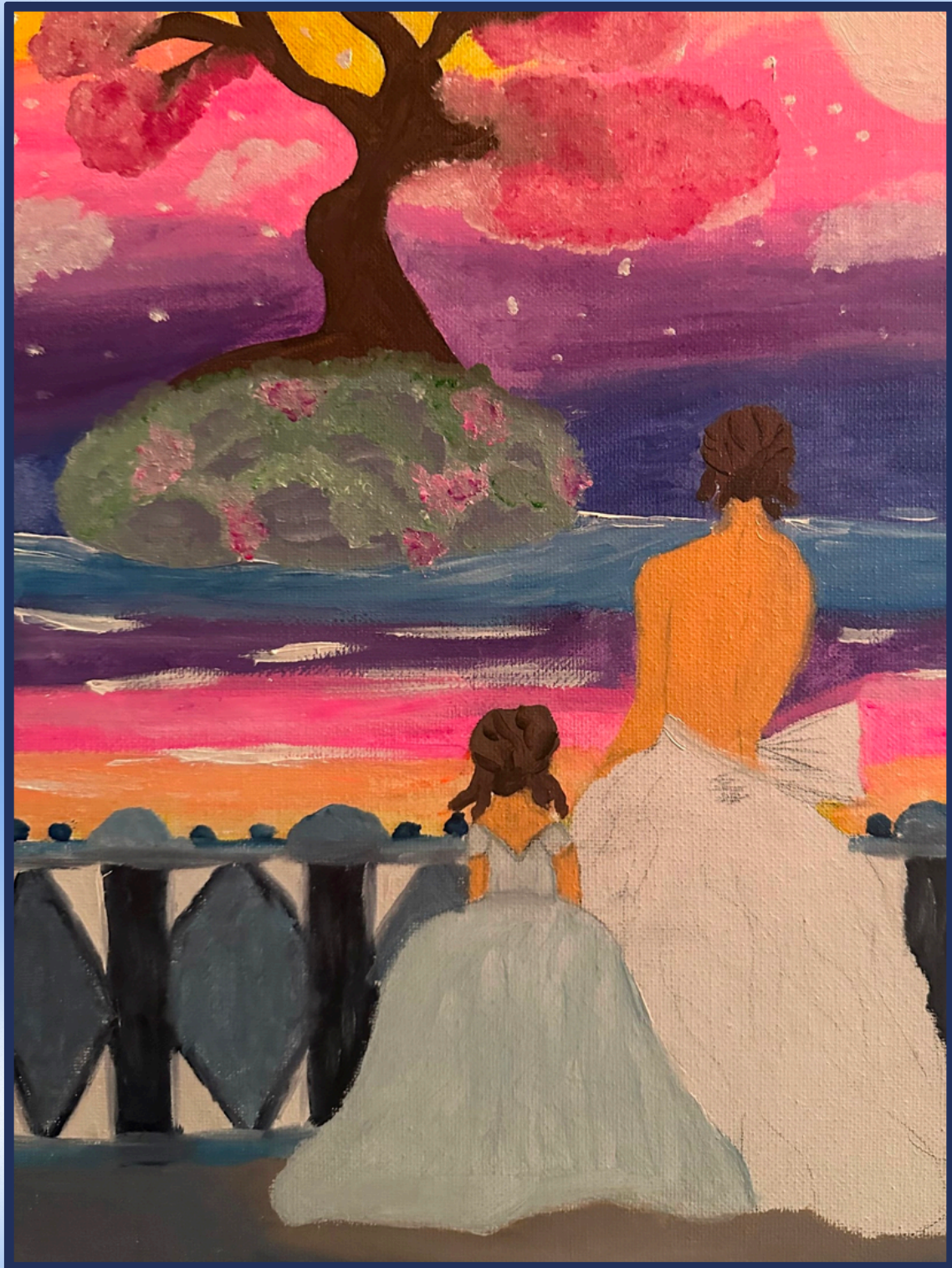
Photography

By: David Flannery



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The train rolls along the tracks, so smoothly that it could seem like it was actually gliding along them to most people. The train is rather quiet along the tracks, so it was the chattering among the passengers that I needed to block out. I look out the window at the view from the mountain, seeing all of the trees standing tall and proud and the rest of the mountains along the distance. I adjust the chinstrap on my noise-canceling headphones, and breathe a dreamy sigh as I knew that where I was going, it was the new start I have longed for most of my life. My dreamlike state is interrupted by a pleasant smell, coming from a cart being wheeled in by a pretty fox. "Hello, Miss Jackal, what would you like as your soup? We have potato-leek vichyssoise, French onion, tomato, and crab bisque."

I've always had potato-leek vichyssoise as my soup of choice almost everywhere I went. The creamy, silky smooth soup gave me a great amount of comfort, the taste of the savory vegetable stock, potatoes, and leeks, and the sweetness of the coconut cream blended perfectly together. I'm tempted to order that, but then I remembered first boarding the train, where an old horse warned me not to get that soup, since his recollection of the soup on that train was that it wasn't silky smooth, but had the texture and consistency of the mushy peas one would feed a baby. The thought of the texture alone made me shudder and look for another soup. "I'd like the French onion soup, please."

"Why sure thing, Sugar." The fox takes the bowl of French onion soup and places it on the table, "Enjoy."

The soup has crispy fried onions on top of some creamy cashew cheese. I take a spoon and tip down the cheese enough to get some of the vegetable stock, blowing onto it gently before putting it in my mouth. The stock was smooth and quite flavorful for vegetable stock. I take one of the fried onions on top and eat it, enjoying the savory taste and crunch, when my enjoyment of the soup is interrupted by someone asking, "Hey, can I sit here? I realized it was time for dinner on the train, but when I got to the cart where they serve the food, everyone else took the other booths."

I look up and see an ocelot that looks around my

age, gently smiling with her tail moving back and forth in a smooth motion. Usually I sit alone and don't let anyone else sit with me unless I've known and trust them well enough, or if I'm forced to. But...something about this one compels me to let someone that I only know as a complete stranger have a seat at the same table as me. And besides, there was nowhere else to go for them, so I guess there's no other choice. "Sure, but please sit across from me. I don't like being too close to others, especially those I don't know too well."

"I'd figure that; I don't like others getting too close either." The ocelot sits down in the booth across from me, and I notice them eyeing my soup. "Oh, I see they already came to this table. I guess I missed dinner."

"Not exactly. The carts come from where I'm facing, and they tend to come back around when they reach the back to make sure nobody is without food in front of them. A cart should be back in about a minute or two. I'll signal them when I hear them."

"Aww, you don't need to do that. So what's on the menu this time?"

"Soup. They have potato-leek vichyssoise, tomato soup, French onion soup, and crab bisque. Anyway, a word of advice, don't get-"

"The potato-leek vichyssoise. I heard that advice from someone when I first boarded the train. I thought they just had a bad experience, so I didn't listen. And I wish I had."

I'm about to say something when I hear a faint sound, so I pull a little on one of the cups on my headphones, making the faint sound more clear as the rolling of cart wheels. I let go of the cup and raise my paw, before sticking it out into the aisle until a gorilla with a cart comes by our booth. "Did we miss someone? Oh, I am so sorry." "You don't need to apologize, I was the one who missed you. I didn't realize they were serving dinner now. Anyway, I would like the crab bisque please."

"Sure thing." The gorilla grabs the bowl of crab bisque and places it right by the ocelot and left. The ocelot takes a spoonful of the soup, blows on it, and puts it in their mouth. "Let me tell you this is the best crab bisque I ever tasted. Perfectly smooth, and the flavors are all there, but they aren't too strong. You should try it sometime. Have you ever tried crab bisque before?"

"I have, but I don't have it often. I usually have potato-leek vichyssoise with other soups as alternatives if they don't have that. Anyway, I was going to say that you seem to know this train rather well. How long have you been on this train?"

"A few days now, and you?"

"Same with you. About two days."

I focus on my soup for the meantime as the both of us got quiet. That ocelot intrigues me, and I want to continue talking with them, but I don't know what to bring up. I'm not sure if they would want to talk about mythological creatures, rhythm games, superheros, or writing, but topics that everyone else talks about when first meeting somehow feel forced.

"So what do you do?" I hear the ocelot ask.

"What do you do?"

"As in, what do you do for a living?"

I take out my book of figurative expressions and flip to the questions section, and find the question "What do you do for a living?" in there. I look at the translation column, and it says that the question means "What is your job?"

"I'm a freelance author. I'm not very well known, but I do get quite some recognition. I'm also planning on applying for a job somewhere when I board off this train and into my new home."

"Ooh, what do you write about as an author?"

"Superheros with a mystery element. I like writing about fighting against supervillains and solving mysteries where some things, and some people, aren't completely as they seem."

"I love superhero stories and mysteries! I wish you were more well known."

"I'm okay with not getting as much recognition as other authors. In fact, I prefer that over being famous. It's a lot less stressful when you don't have to go all over the place and meet up with so many people."

"Ah, I see. I work as a graphic designer, mainly to help advertise businesses and events. I earn a decent amount from that, but I know a cute florist shop I want to work at where I'm going."

"Huh, that seems interesting. Excuse me if I'm quiet, I'm not the one to start conversations, even if I want to."

"I understand, I'm like that a lot of the time, too." We stay quiet for a little longer, me trying to think of something to continue our conversation with, and knowing that the ocelot's probably thinking the same thing. I then figure that maybe instead of thinking of a topic, I should ask what they want to talk about, something that should make a conversation flow easier between us. "So, is there anything you would like to talk about?"

"Not really. You?"

"Me neither. I just want to hear you talk more. You interest me."

"Oh, thanks." The ocelot turns away from me. They look very pretty, and their voice is sweet. I start to feel a light, fluttery feeling in my stomach and chills all over my body. It's a feeling I have felt before, and I know what that feeling is, but I'm not sure if I just want to be friends with that ocelot, or, as the physical sensations are telling me, if I want more. Maybe if I talk more with them I might know.

I look out the window when we were on the sky bridge, able to see the flowing river below and the forest and mountains. "It's a very lovely sight right now, isn't it?"

The ocelot looks out the window, and said, "Yeah, it really is."

We talk a little more about our interests, lives, and about the train ride and the view from it, even after we have finished our soups. I learn more about the ocelot. Her name is Maya, and she enjoys reading and the occasional nice swim in indoor pools in her spare time. She also loves to travel by bike whenever she can. I tell her a little more about myself as well, about how I enjoy riding kick scooters anywhere I can, and my strategies to help me with the writing process, especially when I'm dealing with a case of writer's block. The more we talk, the more I start to feel light and fluttery in the stomach, and chills all over my body. Maya then asks me, "So, where are you heading?"

"Cheston Harbor. I'm moving there."

"Oh cool, I'm going there too! I already live there, I can't wait to see you there! So what got you into moving to Cheston Harbor? The wonderful events? The tourist spots? The many job opportunities?" I already know what my answer is, and I do want to tell her, but I hesitate, since I expect her reaction to be like everyone else's

reaction. Everyone's reaction was of one of two things, either pity me and say I should stay "because it's for my own good", or go down that condescending, faux-inspirational route, with only a few good friends understanding my situation. But I decide I should tell her, since I've already gone numb from such responses after hearing them near-daily. "You know, you don't have to share if you don't want to."

"No, I do." I take a deep breath and look down, trying to recollect my thoughts. "It's because of my parents. I was diagnosed with autism as a child, and my parents were very devastated by the news. Because of my diagnosis, they formed an organization to help find a cure for my autism, and many other parents joined too. All of the messages they sent, about how autism robbed me of my childhood; how the diagnosis put a strain on their marriage, dreams, and everything they had; how I would never have any friends; and how they would never hear me say 'I love you'. And I understood everything they said and took it all in. It was the teachers and counselors that helped me with my confidence, and they showed me some groups in the school for kids like me, where I learned to be proud of who I am. But even when I made friends and could do a lot of things by myself, my parents still spread the messages of how I would never make friends, be independent, or have a normal life. And even when I confronted them and told them that I didn't need a cure for my autism, they told the public how I was in denial and wanted to be cured deep down. That's why when I was old enough and had enough money, and was determined that I was able to live independently, despite my parent's objections, I made an arrangement with a friend to live with him until I could rent my own apartment. I just want to get far away from my parents and start all over."

I expect the usual responses I get from others I have told, but to my surprise, Maya only nods slowly in response. "I understand where you're coming from. Quite a few people I have talked to also moved there because it's a place where one can have a fresh start in life. I'm no different from them, or you, in that regard."

That's all she said for a while, silence following right after. Suddenly, Maya gets up from her booth. "It was nice talking with you, but I better get back to my sleeping quarters to relax. I hope I get to see you more."

"Just as Maya's about to leave, I reach out my paw to her and shout "Wait!" Maya turns around, "I think I want to exchange numbers. I know we've just met, but you interested me, and I really want to know you more, in case we don't see each other again."

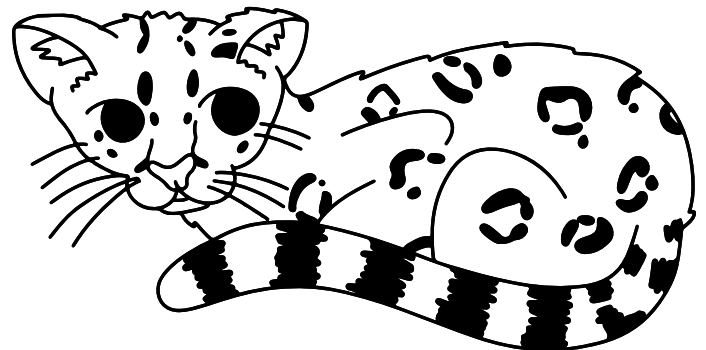
"Oh, I'm sure we'll meet again someday, but we can exchange numbers." Maya takes out a pen and a tiny pad, turning it sideways and writing down her number. I do the same thing as she does with a sticky note. We give each other our numbers, and take our phones out to put the numbers in. "Oh, I forgot to ask you your name." Maya says.

I look up after putting in her number in my phone. "It's Jade."

"Jade, that's a very pretty name, as pretty as the gemstone itself." My tail wags at the compliment. "I hope to see you again, Jade. Maybe I can show you around Cheston Harbor."

Maya waves goodbye and I do the same, staying in my booth as I stare off into the view. Maya seems very interesting, and although I learned a lot about her, she's still a mystery to me, especially when she mentioned she also moved to Cheston Harbor to have a fresh start, but never went any further than that. The fluttery and chilling feelings came back to me, and I started to realize that maybe I do want more than a friendship with her, not caring that we only just met. And knowing that we'll most certainly meet again, I could see if she really is the right one for me.

Now all I could think of is Maya and the mystery around her.



MEET *the* VANGUARD TEAM



Katelyn Craig
"Trying my best"



Sada't Howard
"I have to be successful because I like expensive things"



Hannah Iannotti
"Future Millionaire"



Dylan Kedosh
"Carpe diem."



Jose Marinero
"I wasn't prepared for all this."



MaryKate McAleer
"I wanna be successful when I grow up."



Zoe Reale
"Future employee somewhere."



Nicole Sailey
"I used to be a business major."



Taylor Travis
"See you on the shelves at Barnes and Noble"



Andrea Vinci
"I want to be writer when I grow up."