

Chestatee

R E V I E W



Volume XXVI Spring 2022 University of North Georgia

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Spring 2022

Thank you for reading *The Chestatee Review*, The University of North Georgia's student literary and arts magazine. If you are a UNG student and want to publish a work in the magazine, please visit chestateereview.wordpress.com, where you can read about future contests. The deadline of the Annual Contest, which provides most of the magazine's content, is in late October. Also, *The Chestatee Review* hosts several literary events each semester—many with the help of Sigma Tau Delta—and information about these events is on the website too. Lastly, *The Chestatee Review* is a student organization, so if you are a UNG student and want to join the magazine's staff, please contact Professor Ezekiel Black at ezekiel.black@ung.edu. He will get you started, no experience required.

Masthead

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- 2nd Lauren Carlisle, "Paperweight"
- 3rd Marion Crossfield, "The Skeleton Poem"

Short Story

- 1st Annaliese Miller, "The Clocks Don't Run Anymore"
- 2nd Ethan Holtzclaw, "Nightjar"
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- 3rd Sydney Petty, "Operation Desert Storm"

Visual Art

- 1st Ashley Herman, "Playing with Fire"
- 2nd Briana C. Andronicescu, "Ambivalence"
- 3rd Rowan Finch, "CAW!"

Editors' Notes

For the last two years, it has been a blessing to work for *The Chestatee Review* as the Editor-in-Chief of the Gainesville campus, especially when the world changed. I never thought I would gain so much confidence or so many leadership skills and event planning skills. I thought that joining this club would only help me learn more about a sector of my Graphic Design major, and it did, but I also had fun learning more about my members and team collaboration as well. This amazing crew that I have been with for the past two years has taught me more about myself than I ever knew. The foothold of this group will now carry on and grow even if I choose a different position or step down. I am glad that we made new traditions, such introducing art to the Gothic Writing Contest. I am so proud of the time and hours everyone put into the club, from my Dahlonaga Editor-in-Chief McKenna Graham to our advisors Ezekiel Black and Matthew McEver to the students working extremely hard in the Magazine Production class, to make the magazine look so clean every time. I thank you all for letting me share my ideas, work ethic, and contributions, and thank you for making this the best club ever!

ANGELICA CUMMINGS

Editor-in-Chief, Gainesville Campus

Throughout my time with *The Chestatee Review*, I have gained experience in leadership and have loved reading each submission that comes my way. As Editor-in-Chief of the Dahlonaga campus, I help plan events for the magazine, and I look forward to seeing friendly new faces at each one. Upon taking this role, I realized that community is just as important as getting things done because the community at the Dahlonaga campus allows me to contribute to something larger than myself. With my fellow Editor-in-Chief, Angelica, I have come to find a deeper appreciation for the people behind the scenes of a great masterpiece. For those who are unsure of what kind of communities that can be found at UNG, this is a phenomenal example of a true writer's guild.

MCKENNA GRAHAM

Editor-in-Chief, Dahlonaga Campus

Poetry

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE C. QUILL BOWERS: Why become a poet? Becoming a poet feels as if we are dabbling in madness. Sitting in solitude, thoughts filling our heads, words transfixed upon a blank page, metaphors, similes, irony, metonymies dispensed to pique a sense of awareness. Why do we write? Why do we put ourselves through this arrangement with words, conjuring up memories, dispelling time and opening ourselves up so that others might hear our minds? Because it is as Emerson said about the poet, “It is in us and must come out.”

Carl Jung said, “Poets function as life givers—educating the spirit of the age.” The poet allows us to see with their eyes and to apprehend and spy a larger and fuller world. In a world filled with technological wonders, the imagination has been pushed to the side, curiosity diminished. The role of poets and artists is to once again open that curtain to the realm that lives just outside the modern eye—the soul of being—a mysterious realm where beauty and nature lie. Words are the poet’s visual tools to create images and convey emotion. It is no small task to be a poet.

As I read these poems out loud, transfixed on every word. I found myself transported into their worlds and to places I had never been, but yet places that I had been. It sparked memories and a curiosity to know more and to understand. It was a journey and I am grateful that I have had this opportunity. My only regret is that I was given the task of choosing only three poems to share and those were chosen after great deliberation. With that, I choose Hannah Bagley’s “Forgotten Grandfather” for first, Lauren Carlisle’s “Paperweight” for second, and Marion Crossfield’s “The Skeleton Poem” for third.

I pray that you will all continue to write and let the well-springs of your imagination fill you will poetic delight. Dabble on, young poets, and fill the air with the music of your being because I need you and the world needs you.

Forgotten Grandfather

by HANNAH BAGLEY

I muddled down into the yellow ryegrass
Carefully beside his shoulders, lacing my fingers together in waiting
The straw-like tendrils scratched the goosebumps on my legs
As I told him stories of today's world

"So much has happened, did ya hear?"
I laughed almost to myself
To think of this old man and all he saw on the same ground
Where I now sat with my rubber sole shoes and portable phonograph
"But polio is gone so that's good, right?"

I wondered if he looked up at me
Like a small girl coming to see a grandfather
Under the apple tree, pipe in hand and flannel worn
Or if he peered from around the corner
When kids horsed around the general store
Church shoes scuffed and dresses tattered at the hem

If he wished to talk to me, if he wished to hear or know
Or if he was just the grave I sat in front of today
Biding time until he rose again
A forgotten stone of salty slate, scuffed numbers printed under his name
Maybe he knew one of my grandfathers
Frog town could only get so big over a couple of centuries

Or if he envied me and wished to take my place
Envy is only green for the graves that can afford zoysia
While a pale yellow settles deep into the cracks of bones
Aching for a stretch above the clay

The living cannot truly be jealous of another
The capacity for want cannot grow past the skin
No one wants like a dead soul does
Deep in the earth, wooden slats collapsing into the dark
As someone else's granddaughter sat in his lap
Asking for help with her homework

Paperweight

by LAUREN CARLISLE

when you're
a girl with paper skin
you always let the light peek in
there's no protest
no punishment
just blank page and filament
when you're a
girl who's made of glass,
daughter of fire and sand,
delicate strong artifact
a sharpened blade in hand,
chances are you'll come undone
turn back to fire and grain
glass, the fragile thing that
beams with color when it's stained
glass grazing your lips at breakfast,
glasses resting on your face
priceless crystal glass in pieces,
perfect porcelain drops of rain
made of glass the thing that
shatters when you toss it on the floor
a glass that overflowed because somebody
overpoured
glass that crumbles when you don't
protect it anymore

when I'm made of water,
I'm a soft and rapid wave
foaming over with a fury,
a girl anyone could change
I tried to spill the stories like I was
a blank slate but instead I turned to dust
and settled on a paperweight

woman made of flesh not stone,
a woman made of blood and bone,
stole the shape of every vessel 'til
I filled up to the brink
cursed the night in hopes that dawn
would steal a favor from the sun
and stretch me out into the morning
amber gold or rosy pink
everything I hoped to be was
something light and something free
nomadic bird or whistling breeze
honeysuckle, honeybee

cashmere kiss of autumn
or soft pastel of the spring
ruby of cranberry syrupy sweet
grenadine
something you can wrap your hands around
and rest upon your cheek
a woman made of something strong

something wild
something sweet

The Skeleton Poem

by MARION CROSSFIELD

Jealousy, a horrid thing
Fashioned from stolen wear
Jealousy dons envy's crown
Head bowed by thoughts to bear

Jealousy nicked anger's mask
Yet you'll never see the pout
For clever little Jealousy
Wears it inside-out

Jealousy dimmed the stars
And under darkness whispered fears
Until sadness handed over
Their sacred moonlit tears

Charming Jealousy
Then borrowed patience's shoes
Yet unlike patience, Jealousy can take them off
Anytime they choose

Jealousy took one more thing
Their devious hands stole love's heart
And for that reason, Jealousy and humanity
Will never be far apart

Short Story

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE LEVERETT BUTTS: These stories are almost too close to call. However, this is the ranking I have arrived at: in first is “The Clocks Don’t Run Anymore” by Annaliese Miller. This story takes a fresh perspective on the post-apocalyptic tale. It is well-written with believable characters, and the dialogue, though sparse, is believable. In second is “Nightjar” by Ethan Holtzclaw. Another fresh take on a common fantasy theme: immortality. The characters are endearing, the dialogue is natural, and the story itself is impossible to put down. In third is “Her Last Kill” by Krista McDougal. Really intriguing spy story that goes in an unexpected direction. Well-written, tight dialogue, and interesting characters. Well done all around.

The Clocks Don't Run Anymore

by ANNALIESE MILLER

I don't remember the world ending. A leathery hand scratched the words out onto the page. The bic ball-point pen it pulled along was threatening to run dry, the line of black sinking like sand in the top side of an hourglass. But as cloudy eyes squinted down at the pen, it kept on writing, intimidated into recording what might be the last written text of humanity. So the ink flowed out, swirling with handwriting that had once been beautiful. It doesn't happen as fast as they show in the movies you know. The world didn't end in rapture, humanity being swallowed up or floated away all at once. Instead you hear on the news, "The world is ending" and you believe them. But after a month or so of panic, you start to cozy up to the idea. So the world is ending. Sure is taking its time. The scratching paused, and the pen was set down with a sigh. The woman hadn't written much of anything in a long time, and her bones were growing old. Maybe it was age that urged her to write. Putting to paper everything she could think of before time or accident took her to be with the rest of her kind. One arthritic hand rubbed the other, warmth and friction soothing just enough to pick the pen up again. Those months soon turn into a year, and that year into two or three, and then you realize you're alone. But by that point running into anyone is rare, and the realization doesn't settle with you. How can you be sure you're alone? Somebody might show up. Just give it time.

A knock came at the door. Rapid fire, as if the knocker came with urgent news. The old woman stood up from her writing seat, hands pushing against knees, somehow finding balance in the pressure. The door was only a few steps away. Everything in the house was close knit. With a turn of the brass knob the visitor was revealed: a woodpecker, startled to see the hinged wood swing open with anything other than an insect snack.

"Oh, go on!" the woman urged with irritation. The trees far outweighed front doors now, but still a bird or two was bound to get turned around. As far as they were concerned the human race was extinct, and they weren't far from the truth.

The old woman decided to take the knock as her sign to get out for some fresh air. She gave out a huff before reaching a round little hand into the front pocket of the apron she often wore. There her fingers wrapped around the smooth glass face of a watch. The synthetic leather wrist band that had once held it had since rotted away, leaving behind a naked clock face, giving it the look of a much older timekeeper. Gnarled fingers brought the watch to rest just under the old woman's nose. She squinted at it for a moment, holding her breath as she waited for it to announce itself with its heartbeat. It felt like minutes passed before the tick, tick reached her ears, but a relieved sigh came when she heard it. She cooed to it encouragingly, replacing it in her front pocket, then patting it reassuringly through her apron fabric. Her eyesight wasn't sharp enough to read those impossibly small roman numerals anymore, but she knew it was still ticking, and she was happy.

The path away from the house was a well worn one. Soft, sandy ground making for easy footfalls. Tall grasses and the branches of trees all leaned in towards her as she passed—nature in awe of her continued existence. Much like the watch, she continued to tick, even as the original purpose of the object fell into neglect. Everything ran at full function, there was just no one left who could read. Her footsteps came in rhythmic succession, stomping her presence into the Earth. Insistently reminding the ground below that she was there. Her walk took her out past her garden, where tomatoes, cucumbers, and corn grew. Past the blueberry bushes and fruit trees that came to life for far too short a time out of the year. And finally, past a small lake where the woman always had good luck catching fish. The lake was fed by a spring where the water always ran clear and cold. It wasn't hard to guess what had urged the woman to make this place her home. At the end of the world, the life she found in the mountains seemed nothing short of an Eden. A paradise where anything she could wish for was just outside her door. But sometimes her walks would take her beyond the lake to an overlook where a stone wall had once served as a safety barrier. What still stood was decorated with paling graffiti. The old paint showed the names of strang-

ers long passed, not unlike a memorial wall. Only those mentioned had left the mark themselves, and likely at a time when they thought they would live forever. The old woman ignored the names, looking over them and out into the valley below. At night the crowded hole used to glow with light, polluting the air and choking out the stars. Those lights were gone now, the city replaced with lumps of green. The old woman gave a curt nod, seemingly content with the current state of things in the valley. Then she turned and headed back for the house.

Humanity feels like a faraway thing to me now. In my mind, the further back I look, the cloudier it gets. The sun poured red over the paper, coming in from the westward window with more intensity than it'd shown all day, bathing the house in a crimson finale. The old woman was sat once again in her writing seat, doing her best to sound reflective. At least on paper. Not humanity as a whole anyway. I can't remember how so many people could ever fit on one Earth. Sounds busy. But I can remember other things. I like to remember the mirrors in my grandmother's house, in her dark bedroom. One hung on the wall, and one spun on a dresser just across from it. I remember I would turn the mirror, tilt it just the right way, where I could see myself looking at myself and back towards myself. Me looking at me. There were at least a hundred copies of my head, peeking out from their own little doorways down a curved hall. At least that's how the mirror made it look. I would try over and over again to turn the mirror just so, to look down that hallway and see who was standing at the end. But whenever I did, I would slip all the way past until there was nobody. All my little floating heads growing tiny until they fell into that blob of green. The old woman thought about the overlook she'd visited that day, the town below that had been swallowed up. Her mind went briefly to the names on the wall, but she was quick to distract herself by putting a hand to her front pocket. She let her mind sit with the quiet tick, tick coming through her apron and falling against her hand. Then she wrote, *I suppose those mirrors told more about the future than I ever could have imagined then. If society grew to be too much, all those copies of people having to fall away, the green of the world was more than happy to fill the valley left behind. It was like a homecoming really, watching all the trees and vines come in untamed and unstunted by silly concepts like landscaping. They just took right over those towns and cities, turned them into*

giant topiary gardens of building shaped bushes. She smiled to herself at that.

“Pretty clever for an old woman.”

Night came early in the new world. There were no night owls when light switches brought nothing but a rhythmic click. So as the sun sank behind the trees and long shadowy fingers pried their way in under doors and up through floorboards, the woman was urged to join nature in sleep. Her bed was in the main room, same as everything else besides the toilet. The building she had chosen to be her home was an old hunting lodge, a well made cabin albeit humble. The area surrounding was what had really brought her here, and she found the little log house to be comfortable. Shade from the summer sun, and warm when the winds picked up. It was an easy place to sleep and an even easier place to dream. As the bed creaked beneath her, the watch face ticked comfortingly on her bedside table. She always placed it near her head. It acted as a conductor, tapping out the tempo for the performance of her dreams. Tonight the stage of her mind was set as a schoolhouse. A teacher stood tall over a classroom where every seat was occupied by a body. It felt horribly claustrophobic. Everyone turned towards her. They were faceless. Then the window yawned comically wide, pulling her out like a vacuum into a different setting. Dreams don't often like to sit in one place for very long. Now she laid out in the grass by a pond. Eyes closed to the sun and nose filled with the sweet scents of spring. There was the sound of a splash to her right followed by a soft mist on her cheek. Someone was fishing, but her eyelids felt much too heavy to even spare him a glance. She didn't have to know what he was wearing. A straw hat, thinning at the peak where it was most often held in his hands. And a watch, tightened to his wrist. A bee flew near her, but even its pollen crazed buzz was soon swallowed by the sound of the watch. Tick, tick.

Time is a strange thing. It keeps going even if there's no one around to track it, counting down the days on calendars they created. The woman greeted the morning with writing even before collecting water from the spring. She felt compelled to do so, the act of recording her thoughts now taking priority over washing her face or even the day's first cool sip. *I've always been one who's enjoyed watching the stars and the moon, but I couldn't tell you a thing they meant. I knew when*

the moon became just a sliver, when it looks just like a fingernail, that the nights would be darker. But I couldn't tell you what it meant for the months that were passing. I know the sun has a tendency to kilter over until it's just scraping over the horizon during the colder parts of the year, instead of being just overhead like it was in the summer. But looking at those things and writing calendars or charting stars? That's beyond any skillset of mine. The woman adjusted the watch face on her table. The light was reflecting into her eyes. *I know that it's fall, and I know that it's morning. Is the rest really all that important?*

The kitchen was easily the woman's favorite part of the house. The old cabin was built with the expectation of no electricity, so it perfectly suited her needs without being too outdated. Fish often frequented her table, the lake nearby making it one of the most accessible foods. The woman had grown up around farmers. They were her family she knew, but how they'd been related felt fuzzy to her now. More vividly than the farmers, she remembered the farm. She remembered watching animals and crops being tended to. She remembered being shown how to can foods and dry plants. Most starkly she remembered being show how to tan hides, the animal skins then being used in many crafts for clothing and tools. But she had become too sick at the sight of the animal carcass to continue being an attentive student. Still, the woman took pride in her upbringing in this way. Assured that the things she'd been exposed to as she'd grown up had prepared her for entering this new world more than most. The smell of baked fish filled the house, and the woman opened the windows, sharing the sensuous aroma with the world. She went outside and carefully selected the herbs she intended to use for her fish, all from her garden. Standing at one end of her yard was a beautiful lemon tree. The yellow fruit was always a happy greeting for the woman. She smiled as she picked one to use for her fish.

Herbs and lemon in tow, the woman went back inside. She jumped at the sight of a woodpecker on her table. No doubt it had come in through one of the open windows.

"You startled me . . ." she spoke softly to the bird. Guests didn't frequent here. The bird tilted its red head at the sound of her voice, but became quickly

distracted by the shine of the little glass circle, still sitting on the table.

The woman didn't recognize what it was at first, not until after the bird had hit it with two swift hits of its beak. Disbelieving, the old woman's hand shot up to her front pocket, feeling frantically for that precious object.

"My watch!" Her shaken voice alone was not enough to deter the bird, and it knocked at the glass clock face again and again until it was met with a crack. The old woman shrieked, dropping her fresh herbs and her bright lemon and rushing forward. The woodpecker, finally spooked, flew out the window. As soon as she reached it she took the watch up in her hands, turning it over and over. The glass face was shattered. There was no hope of reading the numbers now, or even making out the placement of its hands. Oh, how faithful that little watch had been, and how well she'd cared for it. She ran her thumb over the shattered face, the broken glass slicing right through the pad of her finger. Her thin blood flowed easily and was soon all over her hand, her apron, her watch. Tears blurred her eyes as she brought the clock to her ear. She held her breath, waiting for the little clock's heartbeat. Her lungs were swollen with air crying to be let out. She held it until she couldn't hold it anymore, but the watch remained silent. Dead.

When the exhale did come it was followed with sobs. The old woman came down hard onto her knees on the cabin floor, tears and blood streaming as she mourned the watch. She sat there until her floorboards turned red and her cabin filled with the smell of burning fish.

Weeks passed before the woman sat in her writing seat again. She was met with it every morning, staring her down, urging her to sit. To write. But every morning she explained to it that she was far too tired. How did it expect her to get any sleep without the rhythm of her watch on her bedside table? She laid awake some nights well after dark, waiting for sleep to come. But it wasn't easy anymore. She knew what was missing. She would whisper it to herself in the dark, "Tick, tick."

Months passed before she dared to pick up the pen. What empty months they had been. There was no heartbeat next to hers in her apron pocket. No tick

to keep time for the songs she'd hum when she cooked. No smooth glass to run her fingers across out on her walks. No guardian by her bed. But now she sat before her paper, ballpoint pen in hand, its ink almost gone. And somehow she managed to feel more drained than it was. Still, she urged herself to write. Hoping to find the scratch of the pen distracting from the silence in her pocket.

I know it's silly, but I used to think about the others still out there in the world. I would imagine they were friends of mine. Since it's been so long since the end began, I would think that maybe it's just one of us per continent. If even that much is still livable. I would wonder if there's a good friend of mine in Africa, going on about their life as I go about mine. Maybe they're thinking of me. Thinking if there could still be anybody across the great ocean. But there was never any hope of crossing it to check. How foolish to even think of risk-

ing so much on a daydream. The words grew lighter on the page. The ink really was running out. But the leathery hand pressed on, even as the bandaged thumb felt a twinge of pain. *I think I know now, for certain. I am alone. No other human heart beats on this planet besides mine. I used to feel grateful, being blessed with this glimpse into the Earth's future. I was one of the few to see how the world would carry on without us. And it's doing just fine. But I'm not. I didn't know I could feel so lonely.*

“Lonely” was barely legible on the page. The pen had given its last. The old woman stood, feeling her writing looked more impressive from a distance. An icy chill went up her spine and she realized she'd left the front door partly open. She crossed the room, stepping over the floorboards stained red to close the door, shutting out the unmistakable winds of oncoming winter.

Nightjar

by ETHAN HOLTZCLAW

“Always knew there was something strange about that fellow,” the old man said, staring into the fire as though daring it to make a move. “Just never thought I’d be proven right.” A long silence fell between us, punctuated by the continuous ticking of the mantel clock. “Beg your pardon?” I responded, looking over the rim of the warm mug I was nursing between my chilled hands. He gave no sign or indication that he was actually speaking to me—from the look in his eyes you would think he was talking to the entire world, or to no one at all. His eyes seemed distant, as though he were somewhere far from the waking world, and far from the sitting room in the quaint country house in which I had taken refuge from the storm outside. His eyes sat steady, fixed upon the fireplace, unperturbed by the steady pattering of cold raindrops on the windowpane. This silence that is not a silence continued for a time until he spoke again. A question. “Tell me: you ever heard of such thing as an immortal man?”



“The first time I met him was during my college days. God, that must be 40 or 50 years ago now. How the time flies. Well, for most of us, anyway. I saw his name before I met him, written right there on the ledgerbook: Prof. James A. Carrington. Was never really clear what exactly he did other than teach a class or two, but he was tenured to the moon and back. That was the strangest thing, especially for a man who looked no older than 30. I was in one of his classes my junior year, “Introduction to Obscure History” I think it was called. I don’t remember that much about the class I’ll admit, but one thing I’ll never forget is his eyes staring at me from behind the lectern. Cold and blue, like ice they were. The class was fairly small, only about ten or so of us in total, but he seemed to keep those eyes trained on me more than any of the others. I can almost see them now. The eyes of death. His teaching style was peculiar to say the least. He would show up late half the time, and if he wasn’t late he wasn’t there at all. He hardly bothered to get fully dressed in the mornings, usually just throwing a jacket on over his pajamas and walking to class barefoot. Sometimes he’d get

confused and mix up the time periods of his wardrobe. It was as though he could never quite separate himself from the subject he taught. Like he lived his life in the pages of history. Even stranger was his teaching style. He would always speak about the past as if it were the present. He would talk about the Battle of Gettysburg in such detail you’d think he was there. He would critique your paper on Henry XVIII as if he’d shook hands with the man. Some of us began to think he had. Some of the things he told us simply could not be found in any historical record, no matter how hard I looked. But something I cannot explain told me that it was the truth. Perhaps it was the way he said it, all those years ago. Perhaps it was the look in his eyes.

“One day, sometime in late September, I found myself at a cemetery. I had been taking my afternoon walk through the little college town I lived in and found myself there. To this day I don’t remember going there, or leaving. All I remember is the place itself. As I was standing there, the autumn leaves falling about me, my gaze happened to fall on a weathered old tombstone. The inscription was barely legible, but I remember it even now, plain as day. It read *Here Lies Edward A. Carrington. January 6, 1769–August 14, 1803.* I thought this must be some forgotten relative of my Professor Carrington, and I resolved to tell him about it as soon as I could. When he did not show up for lecture the next day, my classmates encouraged me to find him myself, and so I decided to do just that. Just finding any information about where his rooms were located took a day and a half. I thought I might find him in Robbins Hall, where history is taught, as that is the only place he is ever seen, but I could find no trace of him there. From there I was forced to scour the University records for information on where he might reside. The only mention I could find on the rooms of a Professor Carrington was ancient and no doubt hopelessly out-of-date, as the dilapidated state of the door seemed to confirm. Clearly no one had walked through this doorway in decades. Just to be sure, I knocked. And to my surprise, he answered. He looked equally surprised to see me there, as if he had never considered that a knock on a door means there is a visitor on the

other side. But I suppose he decided it was too late to back out now, so he invited me inside.

“The inside of Professor Carrington’s rooms was almost as strange as the man himself. Anyone could look around and tell that this was a man who devoted himself to the study of history. Countless relics of bygone eras line the walls wherever you look. Antique pottery lying in one corner, helmets of long-dead knights and soldiers and warriors lining a wall, a broad assortment of antique firearms kept behind a locked cabinet on the west side of the room. And on the walls are numerous paintings of landscapes. Some are familiar, some depict impossible places or alien worlds, and one or two I was reasonably sure had disappeared from various museums over the years, though I didn’t know enough about art history to be certain. Multiple taxidermied animals sit around the room, including a giant stuffed crocodile hanging from the ceiling. There are three bookshelves, each stuffed to overflowing with untold numbers of books and manuscripts and scrolls, all showing the weight of the years on their tired old pages. On his desk is a jumble of papers, new freshly-printed copies mixed in with ancient parchments that should probably be kept somewhere safer. Among them are two weathered tomes, no doubt pulled from the extensive library that the cracked-open door to my right hints at, left open indicating he had just been studying them. One is about the beliefs and practices of the Tibetan monks, and the other specifically about the theory of reincarnation. From then I noticed perhaps the strangest thing in the room: on his desk sits a number of small portraits in their own little frames, each one of a different woman. Some were sketched in what looked like charcoal, but others were done in color, either with paints or something similar. One particular portrait stuck out to me. It seemed to be important as it was in the middle of his desk, but before I could get a good look at her face, Carrington rushed over and tipped the portrait over with a deliberate casualness. But the one thing I do remember is her striking green eyes, like emeralds under a bright light, and her name, written hastily on the back of the frame: Eleanor. She seemed familiar somehow, though it was hard to place where I’d seen her. Perhaps in a dream, or in another life. I thought it was strange that Carrington would have been so desperate to hide her picture, seeing as he couldn’t possibly have met her. He wouldn’t have been more than a baby

when the portrait was made, surely. But I decided it best not to mention the subject and brought up the reason I was there in the first place.

“When I brought up the grave of Edward A. Carrington that I had discovered, his response was—to put it lightly—not quite what I expected. When I mentioned the name, he looked at me with those cold blue eyes. Well he didn’t exactly look at me. It is nearer to the truth to say he looked through me, as if there was something more interesting to look at behind my head, or in another time. I had to get his attention again, at which point he seemed to suddenly come to his senses. He immediately began to claim he knew nothing of this distant relative or why his name was so similar to his own, but those eyes told a different story. If before they were looking through me, now they were looking into my very soul, as if he was just now seeing me for the first time. A sudden chill gripped my heart, and my head was filled with an indescribable feeling that I had done something that must never be done. He continued to assure me that there was nothing at all strange about Edward Carrington’s grave and that I absolutely should not worry myself with this subject any longer, but those eyes stayed with me until I suddenly found myself back in the corridor, looking at that dilapidated old door again. Something was clearly strange about Carrington. He knew too much about things he shouldn’t, his rooms were filled with things that should not be there, and he simply didn’t seem to exist when you weren’t looking at him. Perhaps it was the quest for truth that led me to search for an answer to what I would call The Carrington Problem. Perhaps it was the irresistible feeling of a mystery at hand. Or perhaps it was the uncanny, chilling memory of those eyes staring into the depths of my being. Whatever the cause or reason, I began my search.

“My initial efforts were fruitless. There was no mention of Edward A. Carrington in any records held at the local library, nor was there any evidence that James Carrington, the man I knew, even existed at all outside of the University. It was as if someone had expunged all records of the entire Carrington family. How far back this wipe extended I could not tell, but if I was meant to be discouraged by this development, I was severely underestimated; far from discouragement, I was driven further towards the search for truth. The University records hardly proved useful, but I searched them anyway.

They did, however, tell me what the A in his name stands for: Ambrosius. Not to be deterred, I expanded my search. I decided to scour every bit of census data, every birth and death certificate, every property tax record I could get my hands on for any Carringtons that might match the mystery. For the first week or so I found myself wading through a sea of Carringtons. I knew this would happen; any search by last name alone is bound to be tedious. Then I discovered my missing link, the solution that had been staring me in the face the whole time. J. Carrington and E. Carrington both shared a middle initial. I know what the A in James' name stands for—who's to say the A in Edward's doesn't stand for the same thing? After all, sharing a middle name with a dead man would hardly be the strangest thing to happen to him. So I narrowed my record search to A. Carringtons. The list narrowed, but was still broad enough to give me a solid few days' work before stumbling upon what I had been searching for: an A. Carrington, in the property tax records, this time named Adam. He owned a stretch of land a few miles out of town about a hundred years ago. Further search turned up other A. Carringtons with all variety of names: John, Stephen, Benjamin, William, Christopher, the list goes on. Looking at each one of them, I discovered an unsettling truth: each man inherited the same piece of land, owned it for 34 years, and then died. This cycle went from the James I knew to as far back in time as I could find records for, and perhaps longer. The earliest record I could find was a title deed to a Mr. George A. Carrington, who first claimed the land in 1645. The ink was faded and the parchment threatened to fall apart at any minute, but the truth was there, right in front of my face. The only question was, what does it all mean? Who is James A. Carrington? Is he the man I know him as—or is he something far greater?

“For the next few days I found it difficult to sit still. I needed to confront Carrington with this new evidence, but I didn't want to do anything until I was absolutely certain what it all meant. And I didn't like the idea of having those icy cold eyes staring into me again. But before my quest could continue, disaster struck. My grandmother, god rest her soul, had passed away. She was walking by the banks of the River Quill, alone, when she slipped. No one found her until it was too late. It was a nightmare come true, one I'd never really believed I'd have to live through, especially with no warning such as this. I had to take

an entire week from my classes to get back home to my family and help with the funeral arrangements and the will. When I told my professors about my planned absence, they were all very sympathetic and understood my situation. But when I told Professor Carrington, something seemed to change in him. His life went out of him as quickly as if I'd flipped a switch. Those piercing eyes of blue ice now looked dimmer, as though they had melted. He excused me with hardly a word and a wave of his hand, and before I knew it he was gone.

The funeral went smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, that I can hardly remember it. It's as if my mind sealed itself off from that event as a way to cope, or to survive. Before I knew it I was back on campus, staring at the ceiling over my bed. I thought about all the strange events that had occurred in the past month or so: the mystery surrounding Carrington, the grave of the nonexistent relative, the records of the men who should not be. I thought about my grandmother while she was alive. The stories she used to tell me. My favorite was one about two lovers. Not the most original story, I know, but this one stuck with me. One of the lovers died, and the other was in the depths of despair with mourning. But when she least expected it, he came back to her in the form of a nightjar. But before long, she died as well. Now whenever you hear a nightjar call, you know it is him, searching for his lost love in the dead of night. It is a sad story, but it has stayed with me for all these years. I missed my grandmother so much, just like I miss her today. I felt so overwhelmed by recent events, I just wanted to drop it all. Who did I think I was, poring over library records for some kind of mystery? I felt like a child with a toy sword, looking for pirates in his backyard. I wanted nothing more than to just forget everything. And then I remembered. Something from the funeral that I'd missed, something that I had been unable to think about until my train of thought led me there. A hole in the ground, six feet long and six feet deep. My grandmother's casket, being lowered steadily into the unknown. And the portrait of her at the graveside, looking upon all of us as if she were still here.

Her eyes, piercing green, like emeralds under a bright light.

And below that, her name: Eleanor.

I sat bolt upright in my bed. Realization struck me like a kick to the head. Is the Eleanor I know the same woman as the Eleanor in the photograph? And if the two Eleanors are the same . . . who's to say the two Carringtons aren't? Who's to say they all aren't? I had to know. I had to find Carrington.

Hallways blurred by me as I rushed to get to his rooms. I turned corners at frightening speed, pushed past people as politely as I could manage, and vaulted over a waste bin on at least one occasion. I knew the state Carrington was in when I told him of my grandmother's passing. I didn't understand then, but I do now. I had to get to him before it was too late—if it wasn't too late already. Before I knew it I was standing at that old door again. I threw my shoulder against it as hard as I could. It didn't even budge. I tried once or twice more, to no avail. At my wit's end, I decided to turn the handle. It opened. I rushed inside as quickly as I could, and nothing could prepare me for what I saw.

The glass cabinet on the wall, door hanging wide open.

One gun missing, lying on the floor in the center of the room.

An antique flintlock pistol in good condition.

Next to it, an empty suit of clothes laid out on the floor.

And all around it, a pile of dust in the shape of a man.

The problem is solved. James A. Carrington is not here. James A. Carrington is gone."



". . . Is that it?" Several moments had passed since the old man had finished his story. I noticed the silence for the first time. The storm had stopped. Only the incessant ticking of the mantel clock served to tether my mind to the room it inhabited. "Is what it? That's the end of the story," the old man replied. "But that can't be the end," I started. "We still don't know what happened. We don't know whether he was a . . ." "—An immortal man?" the old man interrupted. "Who is to say. All I know is that no one has ever seen or heard of any James A. Carrington ever again. Even that plot of land I found in the property tax records is in the hands of someone else now. Mr. Brown, I think his name is. Nice fellow." "So is that it then?" I asked, growing desperate for a real answer. "Were all the A. Carringtons really the same man?" The old man thought for a moment, before replying. "That depends on your interpretation of events. But I like to believe that something inexplicable was happening around Professor Carrington. Something otherworldly. That is all I can say." At a loss, I decided to simply thank the old man for his story and be on my way.

As I left his house, the full moon overhead seemed brighter than ever. The last of autumn's leaves tumbled through the air as I walked down the stone path, across the high bridge over the babbling creek below and down to the road. I was thinking about what the old man had said, when suddenly I heard it, plain and still, echoing through the night sky: the call of a nightjar. *Whatever happened to old Carrington, I thought to myself, I hope he's found his Eleanor.*

Her Last Kill

by KRISTA MCDUGAL

She had watched him every day for two months and knew all of his routines, but she was not sure if he was the one she was meant to kill. He was nothing like she expected. Damien Meyers was tall and handsome, with dark brown hair, a clean-cut beard, and eyes the color of warm chocolate. A smile always brightened his face, and his eyes twinkled with good-natured humor when he laughed. He owned a little coffee shop on the corner of a busy block in New York City and treated everyone with respect. He seemed the least likely person to have been a world-class assassin.

The bell on the door rang as she entered. The café was mostly empty, just a brown-haired girl sitting next to the window reading a book and a bearded, blond man with a laptop sitting at a high-top table. Laura Martin, a red-haired, green-eyed, and freckled nineteen-year-old who was one of Damien's employees, was cleaning tables to the back of the café. Damien was standing in his usual place by the cash register, engrossed in a book held up by his arm propped on top of the counter, as he waited for more customers to come in. He glanced up when she entered and gave her a smile. It was the special one he seemed to reserve only for her: an almost shy, little smile that warmed her insides. "Miss Waters," he said.

"I told you to call me Lily," she said with a playful grin.

"Only if you call me Damien," he replied. "Want your usual?"

"Yes, please, I need to get some work done. The deadline to submit it to the editor is coming up next month, and I still need to fix the ending." Damien knew her as Lily Waters, a romance novelist who was just getting started on her career. She lived in an apartment across the hall from him and went to his café every day to eat breakfast and enjoy the free WIFI as she worked on her book.

"You should get me an advanced copy and sign it," he said with a teasing smile, "that way, when you are

rich and famous, I can tell people that you wrote your best-selling book while sitting in my café."

"Deal," she laughed and went to her usual seat in the corner by the window. Sitting with her back to the wall was a habit formed from years of being a spy. She had already analyzed the other occupants of the café and determined them not to be threats, but she could never be too cautious. Lily took her laptop out of her shoulder bag and brought up her typed work. She was only supposed to be pretending to write, but she had actually written a novel over the hours spent in the café. It gave her something to do while she watched Damien, and as a teenager she had considered becoming a writer, only to change her career choice at the last minute and join the intelligence agency. Perhaps one day, she could retire from her life as spy and actually become a writer.

Laura brought her coffee over and set it down. "Hey, Lily," she said.

"Hi, Laura, how's college going?" Lily smiled at the girl.

"Pretty good. I registered for a creative writing class. I'm thinking about changing my major to English and just minoring in psychology, instead of majoring."

"Well, I certainly approve of the choice. I could give you some writing tips if you want."

"That would be awesome. Thanks." Laura grinned. "I'm just glad that Damien is so nice to me. He's paying me a lot more than he should, because he says that it makes him happy to contribute to my education. Last semester, he paid for my books. And he lends Mom money when she needs it to pay rent. I don't know what I did to deserve a boss like him." Another customer walked in. "Guess I better go," Laura said. "See you around, Lily."

As Lily sat there, sipping her coffee, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. Instinct told her that she was being watched; she glanced around as sub-

tly as she could. Everyone in the café seemed preoccupied with their own business, but the bad feeling only increased. Lily glanced at the glass door and saw a man standing outside. He was staring into the café, and he locked eyes with her, his gray eyes seeming as cold and hard as ice. He smirked coldly as he stared at her, appearing to be sizing her up. Her instincts told her that he wasn't just some random man creeping on women; the way he was looking at her seemed to suggest that he was determining if she were a threat. She stared right back, noting his features. He was tall with tan skin and light brown hair, muscular and athletic.

The man shifted his gaze away from her and onto Damien, who was helping a customer and was unaware that he was being watched. The stranger's smirk only grew colder. He glanced once more at Lily and left, disappearing into the crowds of people on the streets. Lily wondered why she had such a bad feeling about him and resolved to be more cautious. He could turn out to be a threat to her or her mission.



Later that afternoon, she walked back to her apartment. She had spent a few hours at the café, working on her book, before deciding that she needed to pick up some groceries.

She ran into Damien outside her door; he did live across from her after all. "Hello, Lily," he greeted her warmly, smiling the smile that made her feel warm inside. No one had ever been as nice to her as Damien was, and she sincerely hoped that he would not end up being her target.

"Hi, Damien," she replied. "I didn't see you when I left the café, or I would have said goodbye."

"I came back to get changed." Instead of work clothes, he was wearing a red flannel shirt, black leather jacket over it, jeans, and black converses. "I promised that I would help out at the homeless shelter this afternoon. They're going to be cooking soup to hand out."

"Maybe I could come and help too sometime," she mused. She had spied on Damien before when he had been helping at the shelter, and there was a part

of her that wanted to join in. Damien was a kind soul who seemed to enjoy making others smile. Last month, she had heard that several of the shelters in Manhattan had received large anonymous donations and had traced them to Damien. He had covered his money trail carefully, but she was a fairly good hacker.

"That would be great." He smiled, eyes twinkling. She blushed and silently cursed that he had this effect on her. "I, ah, was wondering . . ." he cleared his throat. "I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner. My treat, of course." He glanced at her hopefully.

"What, like a date?" she blurted out. Oh smooth, she scolded herself, pull yourself together. You are not a love-struck teenager with a crush, she thought. You are an agent. So, act like it.

He raised an eyebrow, grinning at her. "Only if you want it to be a date." This wouldn't be the first time he had asked her to go somewhere with him. Two days before, he had invited her to a concert being held in Central Park, and other times he had invited her to museums or the zoo, but they had never called those occasions a date. This would be the first time he had asked her to dinner. Damien continued. "How does eight o'clock at that new Italian restaurant around the block sound?"

"Sounds like a date." She smirked at him with good-natured humor. He grinned in response and said that he would see her later. As he walked to the elevator, she felt that bad feeling again and turned around to see the strange man from earlier standing there at the end of the hall. He watched as Damien left before turning his cold gaze at her. He grinned and left, heading down the stairs. She knew now that he had to be following either her or Damien; it was the only explanation for his turning up twice where they were that day. She didn't know why. Unless another agency had uncovered the same suspicious money trails linked to Damien's account, ones that originated from ten years ago and were large amounts of money that were believed to be payments for completing contracts. Lily didn't even know how her agency had discovered those.

As she unlocked her door, her mind still on the strange man, she realized that Damien had just left her with the perfect opportunity. If she want-

ed to prove that he was the assassin, she needed to have a look around his apartment, which she had never been inside. Now was the perfect time. She went back into the hall and looked around carefully for any witnesses before picking the lock on the door. His apartment was small like hers, but richly decorated and containing objects from different cultures. A red leather sofa sat in one corner of the room, facing a flat-screen TV and a glass coffee table. The walls were a neutral color; a samurai sword hung above the TV. Two of the four walls were taken up by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves overstocked with books, although they were still meticulously organized. A Chinese silk screen with beautiful sketches of dragons and flowers sat in another corner. Behind it was a tiny desk with a computer, neat stacks of paper, and a globe. She searched the room but found nothing related to her mission. She did find an easel with a half-finished painting of the Eiffel Tower. So, he was also an artist. She tried very hard not to imagine those long, slender hands using a brush to lovingly caress the canvas with beautiful strokes of color. Trying, and failing, to put that image out of her mind, she attempted to log into his computer, but didn't know the password and thought that it would take too long to hack, especially since she didn't know when he would come back.

She went into his bedroom and looked around. His bed was neatly made, and a painting of Big Ben hung above it. A dresser and a nightstand sat in the corners of the room. She noticed a sketchbook on the nightstand and picked it up, curious. Inside were numerous landscapes and portraits he had drawn, but the most interesting were the ones of a woman he had painstakingly detailed. With a start, she realized that the woman was herself. There were at least ten of them, some black and white, others done with colored pencils. He had done a marvelous job on the ones with color of capturing the faint flush of her pale cheeks as she smiled, the way her blue-gray eyes resembled storms on the ocean, her raven black hair, and the ripped jeans, worn red sweater, and black boots that she wore most of the time. Of course, her hair wasn't naturally black; it was a light brown normally, but she had dyed it for this mission. She felt a tightness in her gut and a lump in her throat as she stared at the sketches of herself. She had never wished that the job was finished and she had returned to her normal life as much as she did in that moment. She could put this whole thing be-

hind her and move on with her life. Lily Waters was a cover, and nothing more. At the same time, there was a part of her that wanted this life she had here to be real. What was wrong with her? She loved her job as a secret agent. So why did she suddenly not want to be that anymore? Lily set the sketchbook down. She was a professional; she shouldn't let a few pencil drawings affect her emotions this much; she shouldn't let Damien Meyers get under her skin in the way he was doing. She was going to pull herself together and do her job.

Lily eyed the painting on the wall. It seemed the perfect place to hide something. She carefully lifted the frame off the wall and discovered a safe behind it. Luckily, she knew how to crack a safe. She opened it and found only a small dagger with a decorative engraving of Chinese dragons on the blade. She recognized it as the one that he had used to kill his targets and that had given him his assassin codename "The Dragon-Wielder." Here was the very proof she had been searching for, and all she could do was stand there frozen. She realized in that instant that she had been hoping that he wasn't her real target, that Damien Meyers was just a regular man who owned a coffee shop, and that she wouldn't have to kill him after all. She had carried out kill orders before and had never hesitated like this. Damien was different than the other assassins she had killed, even though he had been one of the most successful contract assassins in the world until his disappearance nearly ten years ago.

It must have been five minutes that she stood there shocked, her mind wrestling with her heart. She had to follow orders; she had to contact her agency and tell them. Lily knew what their response would be, but she had to do it. She pulled out her phone and called the memorized secure number. "Target has been confirmed," she said. "Requesting orders."

"Eliminate," her supervising officer said. "Then dispose of the evidence. Report back when mission is completed."

"Yes sir. Understood." She ended the call and removed all traces of her intrusion into his apartment. Glancing one last time at the sketchbook, she left and returned to her apartment. Once inside, she devised a plan and decided that if she played her cards right at their date, she might be able to get Damien alone

afterwards in a place where she could complete her mission.



Two hours later, she was arriving at the restaurant. She had pulled out all the tools at her disposal to make herself look incredibly stunning. Indeed, Damien seemed speechless by the radiant beauty she was. Her hair was curled into long ringlet curls that fell over the shoulders of her lacy black dress, and her feet were clad in black high heels. She had spent an exorbitant amount of time applying eyeliner and eyeshadow to make her stormy blue-gray eyes stand out in her face. Diamond earrings dangled from her ears, and a diamond necklace was around her neck.

Damien was also a stunning sight to behold; he looked so handsome that she became flustered. His black suit clung to his body, showing off muscular arms and his slender frame. Damien smiled shyly at her and offered her his arm, escorting her to their table where he waited until she was seated and then slid her chair in before taking his own seat opposite her.

“You look lovely tonight,” he said, “like a faerie whose beauty is immortal and limitless, drawn to walk the mortal world and charm men.”

“You think I am only here to seduce men?” She raised an eyebrow.

“It’s certainly worked on me,” he said, before giving her a teasing smile to show that he was joking. She let out a quiet breath she had not realized that she had been holding. For a second, she was worried that he had discovered the truth. She relaxed slightly in her seat. It would not do any good for her to be tense. She could not think about what would happen later, because right now she had to be Lily Waters.

Their waiter approached and took their orders. He seemed slightly familiar, but she could not recall where she had seen him before. Maybe he had stopped by the café one day while she was there. He left, and she turned her attention back to Damien. “So,” she said, searching for topics to start a conversation, “what’s your favorite thing about living in New York?”

An hour later, both were completely relaxed and telling stories. She told him about a trip she had taken to Paris, leaving out that it had been for a mission and saying instead that she had gone there to search for inspiration for a book. In return, he told her about his five-week stay in Greece and the sights he had seen, saying that he had traveled the world before settling down in New York. He left out the real reason he had traveled the world, brushing off her casual question with a comment about needing to find himself. He told stories about adventures in distant lands and made her laugh.

His eyes glowed with laughter and happiness as he talked. She became lost in his eyes, staring into their brown depths. They looked like swirls of melted chocolate, and suddenly she imagined those eyes staring at her with love. She realized that she had missed most of the story he had currently been telling, when he ended it with “And that is why it is never a good idea to have a drinking contest with a Russian.” She laughed, which only made his grin wider. “Now I believe it is my turn to ask a question.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, I don’t know much about your family.”

She shrugged. “Mom died of cancer when I was ten. Dad and I didn’t have a good relationship since he drank away his grief, so I moved out when I turned eighteen and we . . . lost contact after that. What about you?”

“Car crash when I was twelve. Got put in the foster system and left when I was eighteen.” He shrugged too, adopting the same indifferent attitude.

The mood was somber now, despite their combined efforts of keeping it indifferent. She glanced around and saw that the restaurant was mostly empty, which seemed strange for one in New York. There were only four waiters that she could see cleaning tables.

Suddenly, there was a rush of movement to her right, and her ingrained survival instincts kept her from getting stabbed with a steak knife. She grabbed the wrist holding it and twisted, breaking bone, and she looked into the pained eyes of their waiter. Lily realized suddenly why he had looked familiar earlier; he was the same man that had been following them.

She recognized the gray eyes. Her shock at the realization cost her a punch to the mouth, splitting it and causing blood to drip down her chin. She punched him in the neck and leaped to her feet, aiming a kick to his chest. She finished with a punch to the face, knocking him unconscious. Lily had time to see Damien wrestling a gun from a second waiter while a third advanced on him, when the fourth grabbed her from behind. She elbowed him hard in the chest, using his bent knee as a springboard and flipping over his head. She landed and swept his legs out from under him, grabbing him and slamming his head into the table to knock him out. Damien had succeeded in defeating his two opponents, who were lying unconscious on the floor. He looked at her, jacket ripped and blood on his shirt, and she realized that her cover had been blown. She tried to excuse her combat skills. "I took a few self-defense classes in college," she said with a shrug.

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "Just . . . just don't, okay? I know that you were sent here to kill me."

She lunged for the gun hidden in her purse, aiming it at him, but he kicked it away. Damien raised his hands and opened his mouth; she didn't know what he was doing, and she didn't care. She lashed out with a punch aimed at his face, but he caught her wrist and held it firmly. He caught her other wrist too, but Lily pushed off his chest with both of her legs, using his body to do a backflip and break his grip. He raised his hands again in the same manner as before. "I don't want to fight you," he said.

She didn't trust him and spotted the waiter's gun on the floor, picking it up and aiming it at him. For a minute, they stayed in their respective positions. Then Damien sighed. "Just do it," he said, sounding as if he were tired of life itself. "It's your mission, isn't it? So, get it over with. I'm not going to fight you." He saw the confusion in her eyes and continued. "When I decided to quit ten years ago, there were people who were very unhappy with my choice. "These guys—" he pointed to the unconscious men—"work for them. They're here to either bring me back or kill me. And your agency found me too. So even if I fought you and survived, either the agency or other mercenaries will find me again. So why should I fight you, when I don't want to hurt you anyway?"

She found her voice. "Why don't you want to hurt me?"

"Because I love you. I fell in love the moment I meet you, and I loved you even after I realized the truth. Just tell me one thing," he said. "What is your real name?"

"Lila Woods. My name is Lila Woods." She realized in that moment that she had fallen in love with Damien Meyers in the two short months she had known him. But she had to do something because the agency would either put her in prison for the rest of her life or kill her if she didn't complete the mission.

"I love you, Lila Woods," he breathed her name like a prayer. She knew then what she had to do. Lila aimed and pulled the trigger.

For a few seconds, neither of them moved. Then Damien glanced down at the bleeding wound on his arm where the bullet had barely grazed him. He stared at it, and then at her, in shock. She called the secure number on her phone, "Mission complete. Cleaning up the evidence right now."

"Good job, agent," her supervising officer said. "Report back to base when finished."

"Sorry about that," she said to Damien, after she hung up. "That way if they put me through the lie detector, I can honestly say that I shot you. They haven't realized yet that I know how to beat their little detector."

"But why didn't you kill me?"

"Because I couldn't. Because I love you."

He smiled at her. "What happens now?"



Six months later, she was sitting at an outdoor café in Paris, the same café she had once told Damien was her favorite in all the world. After her mission, she had returned to the agency, managing to convince them that she had killed her target. She had then retired from the life of a spy, and disappeared, traveling the world and disguising herself to lose

anyone following her, before settling in Paris two weeks ago. Her hair was now short and strawberry blonde, and she was tanner than she had been before. Lila had plans to become a real writer now under a pseudonym. But first, she was there with a purpose; she had someone to meet.

A shadow fell over her table. "Excuse me, mademoiselle, but I am looking for someone named Lila Winters?" She glanced up and saw a handsome man with black hair, a clean-shaven face, and warm chocolate

eyes. She hadn't been the only one who had gone into hiding and changed their looks.

"Of course," she said, standing up and shaking his hand. "You must be Damien Manor."

He grinned at her, eyebrows raising in a teasing manner, and she knew that everything was going to be okay. They were both free. As they laughed and talked outside the café in Paris, she thought about the person she used to be, and knew that she was gone. Lila Woods was her last kill.

One-Act Play

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE VANESSA BAMBER: In the opening of Bryson Edmondson's "Reunited," the reader is immediately transported to a futuristic dystopian setting through the main characters, not humans but robots. In fact, the writing focused on one main robot. While an AI character wouldn't normally be considered "believable," in regards to a traditional story line or setting, "Reunited" created an empathetic character, immediately hooking the reader to the robot's sensitivity and drive to connect with a human memory. It is in this robot's sensitivity that the reader is moved emotionally, carried forward alongside the character to journey to a conclusion. In second place is "No Road Home" by Eliza Bean. In the opening of "No Road Home," the reader is moved into a small diner. Not much description is provided about the diner in the stage directions, though as the dialogue begins, the reader is made aware that the town is small, small enough to know families by name. In the evolving dialogue the setting becomes further defined, as the action progresses within the space. Deviating from traditional one-act structure, the writing focused on two main characters, Ben and Ivie. That being said, the quality of the writing did carry the reader to a conclusion. The outline of the piece had clear "cut to the chase" exposition, a clear climax, falling action, and conflict resolution by the end of the play. In Alanna Neidigh's "The Making of 2020," the third place winner, the plot, or action, revolves around one main incident—how the year 2020's happenings came to be. In the opening, the reader is introduced to a number of characters gathering around a conference table. Deviating from traditional one-act structure, the writing focused on six main characters, a band of "eternals." And as the dialogue carries on, it becomes faster and faster in its delivery, in step with a solid comedic timing.

Reunited

by BRYSON EDMONDSON

FADE IN:

EXT. DESERT WASTELAND—DAY

Harsh WINDS pierce an ugly, brown landscape, hoisting dirt into the air—hopefully, the dirt ends up someplace better.

There is no life as far as the desolate, alien horizon shows. However, strangely enough, a single building sits in the wasteland, the front reading “ECO-FRIENDLY RECYCLING PLANT.”

Then, a loud FACTORY WHISTLE echoes from the rooftop.

INT. RECYCLING PLANT—CONTINUOUS

The lights flick on, illuminating the industrial interior. CONVEYOR BELTS begin to move as a giant metal CLAW hanging from the ceiling hovers over a massive pile of recyclables.

The claw descends onto the pile, grabs a handful of items, and slowly lifts back up. Pieces of debris fall out of its grip, creating a hypnotic waterfall of trash.

GARAGE DOORS line the walls of the plant, and with a gear-turning THUD, all the doors rise in unison. As they do, UPBEAT MUSIC begins to play with voiceover NEWS CLIPS.

SOUTHERN NEWS ANCHOR (*v.o.*): Good morning, Dallas! It’s a nice, clear summer day here in the heart of—

The doors open to dark, ominous rooms. But then, rows of RED CIRCULAR LIGHTS flicker on.

BRITISH NEWS ANCHOR (*v.o.*): This is News Channel 4, keeping you up-to-date on the ongoing—

HUMANOID, BIPEDAL ROBOTS with RED-LIT EYES and RUSTED ARMOR march out of the rooms, hundreds in perfect synchronization.

TRAFFIC REPORT NARRATOR (*v.o.*): I-89 is seeing some heavy slowdowns going up the bypass, but it should—

COMMERCIAL ACTRESS (*v.o.*): Need help starting your day right? Our new attitude-enhancing product can—

The news clips layer on top of each other as the robots march out of the plant, passing by a MURAL of a robot giving a thumbs-up, reading “SAVING THE WORLD SO YOU DON’T HAVE TO.”

EXT. DILAPIDATED CITY—DAY

Robots scatter into the unkempt streets, the buildings barely still standing on their foundation.

A ROBOT, with 4-D6 etched into their shoulder, scans the street with a CHEST SCANNER resembling a RECYCLING SYMBOL. A low, disappointed BEEP sounds.

4-D6'S CHEST SCANNER: No recyclables.

Another ROBOT, 9-PI, scans a rusted STATION WAGON lying on its side in the street like roadkill. A happy DING.

9-PI'S CHEST SCANNER: Glass found! Metal found! Paper found!

Like two hungry vultures, 4-D6 and 9-PI prey on the station wagon, ripping off the doors and kicking the windows open.

EXT. CANYON BY A LIGHTHOUSE—DAY

Robots trek down the canyon's steep slope as a LIGHTHOUSE looms above on a cliff, half of its exterior rotted away. The robots look on to see the canyon's massive scope, the ground jagged, full of trenches and hills.

INT. BEDROOM, ABANDONED HOUSE—DAY

A DRESSER covered in BOOKS is propped up against a DOOR, blocking the outside. But, after a shuffle of the doorknob—

BAM!—A ROBOT, 8-O9, busts in, flopping over the dresser, sending the books flying. It scans the room. DING!

8-O9'S CHEST SCANNER: Paper found! Cardboard found!

8-O9 collects the books, ripping the pages out of hardcovers. A second ROBOT, 2-B3, marches in and sees a PHOTOGRAPH of an ELDERLY WOMAN (60s) and her GRANDSON (9) on the ground. DING!

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: Paper found!

2-B3 walks over and picks up the photograph.

INT. RECYCLING PLANT—DAY

Robots march in balancing twenty-foot tall TOWERS of recyclables in BASKETS wrapped around them like a book bag.

They walk to the edges of large HOLES in the floor lined up side-by-side, resembling in-ground pools with no water. The robots toss and dump trash into the holes.

SODA CANS, WINDOW PANES, a CAR DOOR, and other trash hit the bottom of the hole and, like a boot squashing a bug, a HYDRAULIC CRUSHER from above SLAMS down on the objects.

The crusher rises, the trash now flattened into a thin sheet.

Others walk over to a huge SHREDDER, its sharp teeth spinning with a ROAR as robots toss in paper and books. Paper floats gently through the air until it is ravaged unceremoniously by the shredder.

The robots go back to work. 2-B3, however, eases up to the edge of the shredder, looking in. It holds the photo of the woman and the child to its eyes, looking at it one last time.

It drops the photo to its chest, scanning it, and—DING!

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: Paper found!

With that, 2-B3 flicks the photo into the air, watching it flutter down into the hole. The smiles of the woman and the child face the robot as—

BZZZT! The shredder destroys the photograph, ripping it into shreds. 2-B3 stares into the shredder, not moving an inch.

Then, 2-B3 walks away. Back to work.

EXT. DILAPIDATED CITY—DAY

4-D6 scans the outside of a leaning building that used to be a DINER. A disappointed BEEP vibrates from its chest scanner.

4-D6'S CHEST SCANNER: No recyclables.

4-D6 turns back to the road; it is completely empty. The sidewalk and asphalt blend together in a dirty, orange hue.

EXT. STRIP MALL—MEANWHILE

2-B3 and 8-O9 scan the white, faded lines of the parking lot. An INFLATABLE SANTA CLAUS decoration sits on the roof of the mall, joyfully waving and smiling at the end of the world.

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: No recyclables.

8-O9'S CHEST SCANNER: No recyclables.

Then—BOOM! The two turn to see the mall collapsing, each store falling over the next one like dominos. The Santa Claus inflatable goes down with the mall into a CLOUD OF DUST.

Marching out from the cloud is 9-PI. A low, dejected BEEP.

9-PI'S CHEST SCANNER: No recyclables.

EXT. DILAPIDATED CITY—DAY

The four robots meet up in the middle of the road, examining each other's trash-less baskets. 4-D6 nods its head.

4-D6'S CHEST SCANNER: Our job is complete.

The other three nod and, lining up into a square formation, they march in unison out of the scavenged city.

EXT. DESERT WASTELAND—LATER

As the four travel across the flat, barren terrain, 2-B3 halts, breaking out of formation as the rest continue their trek. 2-B3 looks down at its feet.

2-B3 takes a step back and scans the ground beneath where it was standing. After a hint of decisive processing—
DING!

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: Glass found!

2-B3 falls to its knees and digs through the dirt. 3-feet in, it sees it: a shining piece of GLASS. It drives its hand into the ground and pulls out, unexpectedly, a GLASS CANISTER.

2-B3 examines the canister's lid before holding it up high, wiping dirt off the exterior. There is PAPER inside—
DING!

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: Paper fou—

The scanner is interrupted when 2-B3 jolts, looking at the contents of the paper within; it reads "TO SUSANNA ROSS."

2-B3'S LED eyes fade from a vibrant red to a soft YELLOW.

The robot sits criss-cross on the ground, looking at the cylinder from every angle. Like a kid about to open a cookie jar, 2-B3 looks back and forth at the empty wasteland before taking off the lid and dumping out FIVE pieces of paper.

2-B3 picks up the paper, reading the chicken-scratch writing.

COLIN (*v.o.*)(*British accent*): To tell you the truth, I'm not sure how time capsules work. I don't know if I'm supposed to put a date down on when to open this or what. So, how about: if the maple tree behind you is cut down, then you may read this.

2-B3 turns around to see nothing but a flat, empty horizon.

COLIN (*v.o./cont'd*): For if it is, then we've failed her.

As 2-B3 reads, a FIGURE steps into view, eclipsing the sun. 2-B3 looks up to see COLIN (30s) with shadows under his eyes and hands in his COAT POCKETS. He turns his focus to the sky.

COLIN (*cont'd*): My name is Colin Quill. I was born in Wallingford, England, near a church that looked like a castle. And, for three years, I've been searching for Susanna Ross, the love of my life.

EXT. RUGBY STADIUM—DAY

With a flicker, 2-B3 looks up from the pages to see a group of RUGBY PLAYERS barreling towards them, YELLING and ROARING. After pacing in place, 2-B3 jumps out of the way of the stampede onto the turf, losing their grip on the pages.

The robot, on their knees, frantically collects the fallen pages as a recognizable man runs past them; A YOUNG COLIN QUILL (20s), now with much more fire in his eyes than before.

2-B3 stumbles upward onto their feet. They chase after Colin, trying to match his movement—their feet become in sync.

COLIN (v.o.): Susanna and I met in college when her friend forced her to go to one of my rugby games.

As Colin catches the ball, his gaze falls on a part of the CROWD; a bored SUSANNA (20s) and her cheering FRIEND (20s). Colin's focus fades as he and Susanna lock eyes—The world around them slows. 2-B3 looks back and forth between the two.

COLIN (v.o./cont'd): I saw her in the bleachers. She saw me on the field. (Beat) And then I got pummeled to the ground.

Time speeds up as a BURLY PLAYER SMASHES into Colin, sending him down hard. The crowd all GROANS as 2-B3 jumps, surprised. Colin sits up. He looks at Susanna—She laughs. He smiles.

COLIN (v.o./cont'd): We lost, but I got to see her laugh.

INT. TRAIN CAR—DAY

Colin and Susanna face each other in RED BOOTHS, 2-B3 seated beside Colin. The colors of autumn trees flash by in blurs through the train car window.

The two rest their chins in their hands, grinning, both in a comforting daze. 2-B3 tries to mimic them, awkwardly placing their hand on their chin.

COLIN (v.o.): She was much smarter than I was. Prettier, too.

Breaking them out of their daze is a WAITRESS (30s) with the two's dessert; two plates of SLICED CAKE. Susanna chows down.

COLIN (v.o./cont'd): She had these big dreams of how she was going to change the world.

Colin goes in for a bite but stops, staring at Susanna. The sun shines on her face as she chews, looking out the window.

COLIN (v.o./cont'd): It was at that moment on that train that I knew I loved her. And that was when the war began.

EXT. WAR TRENCH—NIGHT

BANG!—An EXPLOSION of RED GAS goes off at the top of the trench. SOLDIERS SCREAM. 2-B3 reels back from the whiplash, hugging the trench's curve. 2-B3 turns to see a new Colin.

Colin, now in WHITE FUTURISTIC BODY ARMOR covered in mud, hugs the curve, taking off his HELMET, breathing heavily. As the sounds of LASERS roar from afar, Colin brings his head up to see Susanna in the trench, her clothes perfectly clean.

Her arms are crossed, glaring at Colin with furrowed brows.

COLIN (v.o.): I knew I had to fight for my country. I had a job to do. But Susanna couldn't see why. It was against everything she believed in.

YELLOW LASERS *streak above as Susanna stretches her hand out to Colin. His eyes water as he stares at her open palm.*

COLIN (*v.o./cont'd*): She gave me an ultimatum: Stay with her or go to war. And I chose wrong.

Susanna drops her arm and walks away from Colin, her face emotionless. Tears stream down to Colin's chin as BOOM! A red explosion goes off. Yellow lasers soar by, the war getting louder and louder. Colin's face turns red—He SCREAMS—

EXT. BUSTLING CITY STREET—DAY

2-B3 almost falls over, trying to catch their balance. They whip their head side-to-side, surveying the new location.

HONKING their horns, CARS fly through HOLOGRAPHIC STREET LIGHTS. PEDESTRIANS walk both ways down the sidewalk.

2-B3 bumps into PASSERSBY, not seeming to notice the robot's presence. 2-B3 gets on their tip-toes and . . .

Twenty feet ahead, 2-B3 spots the AGED COLIN from earlier, wearing the coat and shadowed eyes. 2-B3 rushes over to him.

Colin looks up to the sky, standing still, as 2-B3 arrives.

COLIN: It was a decade until the war was over. I came back to a world I didn't recognize.

Colin, with 2-B3 following, turns to an elderly woman and her grandson holding a PLASTIC FAST FOOD CUP sitting on a bench. The woman leans over and whispers to the child, waving to a clean, slick ROBOT standing beside them . . .

It is 2-B3.

The rusted 2-B3 tilts their head, watching as the child cautiously hands the empty cup to the mint-condition 2-B3.

MINT-CONDITION 2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: Plastic found! Thank you for your assistance!

The woman laughs; the child just stares. The rusted 2-B3 watches as their older self marches away into the crowd.

COLIN: I tried to find Susanna, tell her that I was sorry. I had to clean up the mess I made. But, I couldn't.

2-B3 turns to Colin, who's now facing the old, unkempt robot.

COLIN (*cont'd*): It was like she disappeared off the face of the Earth. I needed her now more than ever, but she was nowhere. (*Beat*) But, turns out that she was standing right in front of me.

2-B3 leans in, fully encompassed into the story.

COLIN (*cont'd*): Because, after all these years, I finally got my answer. Susanna was—

EXT. DESERT WASTELAND—BACK TO

BZZZT!—A SHOCK stabs through 2-B3's body, their head twitching violently, dropping Colin's papers to the ground.

2-B3 spine contorts, folding onto itself, before SLINGSHOTTING the robots backward through the air into . . .

THE VOID

2-B3 lands on their back. They struggle to sit up as they look around, their body shaking. It's nothing but DARKNESS.

Then, BOOM—Two enormous YELLOW CIRCULAR SCREENS light up the darkness, blinding 2-B3. They look through the screen to see the empty wasteland they were just in before.

DESERT WASTELAND

Now stiff, The robot's eyes fade from yellow back to red.

THE VOID

The screens turn RED. 2-B3 watches as the screen pans over to Colin's papers on the ground with the time capsule. DING!

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER (echoing loudly): Paper found! Glass found!

2-B3 jumps as the voice reverbs in the dark. Then, flicking on with a BUZZ, a massive RECYCLING SYMBOL appears behind 2-B3.

DESERT WASTELAND

The robot picks up the time capsule and pages. It then turns and starts marching towards where the other robots went.

THE VOID

2-B3 shakes their head "no" as they stumble onto their feet, rushing towards the screen. They outstretch their hand. But then, RED TENDRILS, like the tentacles of a jellyfish, seep out from the recycling symbol. They streak toward 2-B3.

The tendrils wrap around 2-B3's ankles and wrist and pull, stopping them from reaching the screen. 2-B3 looks back at the recycling symbol the tendrils are pulling them towards.

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: We have a job to do, 2-B3.

2-B3 turns to the screen. It's the entrance to the recycling plant. 2-B3 struggles, trying to break out of the tendrils.

RECYCLING PLANT

The body of 2-B3 marches through the rows of standing robots, all shut down, no light illuminating from their eyes.

THE VOID

2-B3 frantically shakes, their feet sliding across the floor. They are pulled closer and closer to the chest scanner.

RECYCLING PLANT

The body marches over to a hole. They hold the time capsule up in the air before throwing it in, and BAM!!—The hydraulic crusher SLAMS down, destroying the glass canister.

THE VOID

2-B3 pulls with all their might against the tendrils.

RECYCLING PLANT

The body marches to the shredder, holding the pages.

THE VOID

The tendrils struggle to keep pulling. 2-B3 fights back.

RECYCLING PLANT

The body stands at the edge of the ROARING shredding machine.

THE VOID

A few tendrils begin to SNAP as 2-B3 pulls harder and harder.

RECYCLING PLANT

The body raises the papers into the air, above the shredder, ready to drop, its red eyes glowing brightly.

THE VOID

SNAP! SNAP! SNAP! Tendril after tendril breaks as 2-B3 starts stomping towards the screen. The recycling symbol flashes.

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER (echoing): We have a job to do!

Then—SNAP! All the tendrils break off, freeing 2-B3. They fall to the ground from the release. They then stand back up and run as fast as they can to the screen and . . .

INT. RECYCLING PLANT—CONTINUOUS

The robot's eyes fade back from red to yellow. 2-B3 slouches in exhaustion. They then look at their raised hand. Nothing.

2-B3 looks inside the shredder. The pages float down into the teeth and—

BZZZT! Colin's papers shred one by one, pieces flying into the air like confetti. 2-B3 stares at the shredder, unmoving.

2-B3 falls to their knees. Then, in a burst of rage—BAM! They punch the ground, leaving a three-foot-wide crater. Their head drops, putting their hands on their face. Their shoulders bounce like they are sobbing.

But, they raise their head up to see a piece of shredded paper floating in the air. 2-B3 gently grabs it with their thumb and forefinger. They bring it up to their eyes—DING!

2-B3'S CHEST SCANNER: Paper found!

2-B3 sits there for a moment. Not moving an inch. They then crush the paper, balling their hand up into a fist. The robot stands and, in one fell swoop, CLAWS into their own chest, wrapping their fingers around the chest scanner.

"PROGRAM ERROR" flashes in 2-B3's eyes as they RIP out the scanner, SPARKS flying, RED WIRES connecting the scanner to the inside SNAPPING in half. The chest scanner voice SCREAMS.

Then—POP. The scanner's last wire plucks out. 2-B3, now with a hole in their chest, watches the green symbol fade. The voice of the scanner GLITCHES within 2-B3's empty chest, spouting nonsense. Sparks fly out of exposed wires.

2-B3 tosses the scanner into the shredder. The scanner jams into the teeth, getting stuck, the shredder making a bone-chilling SCREECH. Smoke then rises from within the shredder.

They drag their feet, their head down. They walk through the shut-down robots. The shredder behind them catches on fire.

EXT. DESERT WASTELAND—SUNSET

2-B3 stumbles through the empty, flat landscape. They hold their chest opening closed with their palm.

EXT. CANYON BY A LIGHTHOUSE—NIGHT

They trek across the enormous canyon, limping on one foot.

EXT. MOUNTAIN—DAY

2-B3 slowly climbs up the rocky side of the mountain, the leg they were limping on now completely nonfunctional.

EXT. UNDER A BRIDGE—DAY

2-B3 crawls along a trench under a dusty bridge. The robot looks up; only half of their faceplate remains.

They see a giant TOWER in the distance. A CLOCK sits on the top, the MINUTE and HOUR HANDS still intact. A part of the tower's wall has fallen, revealing BIG BEN'S BELL inside.

EXT. CHURCH—DAY

Now missing an arm, 2-B3 crawls on their knees to a church that resembles a CASTLE. They inch their way into . . .

EXT. GRAVEYARD, CHURCH—CONTINUOUS

2-B3 struggles to bring their head up as they survey the GRAVESTONES. “MABEL ROSE SANDERS” . . . “ZAIN JOHN HOLMES” . . . “COLIN DAVID QUILL.”

With newfound energy, 2-B3 crawls to the grave. They are eye-level to Colin’s name. 2-B3 places a hand on the stone.

2-B3 CHEST SCANNER (*glitched voice*): Thank . . . you.

2-B3 shifts their gaze to a large grave with carved FLOWERS lining the edges beside Colin, the name covered by dust. 2-B3 crawls over to it. As they do, their legs unlatch, leaving them only half a head, a torso, and a shaking hand.

They inch to the unknown grave, about to dust off the name—

They collapse, 2-B3 falling onto their back. They reach the name from the ground, but their arm is an inch too short.

They drop their arm, lying on the soil in front of the stone. They stare at the sky. Though the sky is empty . . . They hear it. The sound of birds CHIRPING.

2-B3’s eyes fade out, their body still. The chirping stops.

A GUST OF WIND soars by. It wipes dirt off of 2-B3’s face and then travels up the unknown grave, dusting it off. It reads: “SUSANNA ELIZABETH ROSS QUILL. Genius. Environmentalist. Reunited.”

FADE OUT

No Road Home

by ELIZA BEAN

A young man is driving his car into the parking lot of a small diner. He rummages through his glove compartment until finally pulling out a book. It's a small paper back that he proceeds to shove into his jean pocket. He gets out of the car and walks up to the door. As he opens the door, he pulls the sunglasses from his face and drops them on the collar of his shirt.

He walks into a mostly empty restaurant, and from behind the counter an older lady tells him to sit wherever he likes, someone will be over in a second. He wanders towards a booth, pulling the book from his pocket as he sits down. As he opens it, the title becomes clear: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. After reading for a moment, someone walks up to him. He hears them, but waits until he is at a good line to stop. When he drops the book, he sees a young woman standing in front of him. She smiles at him and points to the book.

WOMAN: Good choice.

MAN: You've read it?

WOMAN: Yeah, when I was a kid. What can I get you?

MAN: A reality in which I can walk into a wardrobe and be transported to a magical land.

WOMAN: I'm sorry we're all out of that. Does anything else look good?

MAN (*Laughing*): Your name. I'd like that.

WOMAN: I'm Ivie.

MAN: Ivie. I do like that.

IVIE: And yours?

MAN: Ben. Ben Dalton.

IVIE: So, Ben Dalton, can I get you started with something to drink?

BEN: A Coke.

Ivie nods and begins to walk back behind the counter. As she does, Ben picks up the menu and begins to read that. However, he puts it down quickly and begins reading his book again.

Ivie watches him from the counter for a moment before mentioning him to the older lady.

IVIE: Miss Susan, do you know any Dalton's?

SUSAN: None that got a boy like that.

Ivie crosses the diner and places the drink down in front of Ben. He smiles first without looking up, and then lays the book down and looks at her.

BEN: Are you from around here?

IVIE: No, I'm not. Are you?

BEN: No, I'm not. If you're not from here, why are you here now?

IVIE: You wouldn't believe it.

BEN: I might. I believe in quite a few strange things, like aliens, Bigfoot, and the chupacabra.

IVIE (*Laughing*): Maybe some other time. You know what you want?

BEN: Okay, okay. Could I get the bacon burger with curly fries and ranch.

IVIE: Coming right up.

Ivie disappears behind the counter and Ben begins to read again. The door chimes and he glances up. A big dark haired man walks into the diner and as he gets to the counter, begins to slam his hand on the bell. Susan stares at him for a moment before speaking.

SUSAN: What do you want, Will?

WILL: Well, hello to you too, Susan. I just came by to talk to Ivie. Where is she at?

SUSAN: She's busy—

WILL: Tell her to go on break. It's urgent.

SUSAN: Will, she's working. Come back later—

WILL (*Yelling*): IVIE!! I NEED TO TALK TO YOU!!

Ivie walks out and glares at Will. Susan goes back to her paper and Will sits down at the counter across from Ivie.

WILL: Where have you been?

IVIE: Here, Will.

WILL: I came by yesterday, you weren't here.

IVIE: Yesterday was Sunday, in the mornings I go to get groceries for the diner.

WILL: Don't get smart with me. You'd be back with mommy and daddy if it wasn't for me, so watch your mouth. How's my money coming along?

IVIE: Will, I'll get you the money.

WILL (*Laughing*): I know you're good for it, I know. I just know how much you hate owing people, so . . .

IVIE: I'll get you your money.

WILL (*Smacking the table and standing up*): See that you do. And make it quick.

After Will walks out of the diner, Ivie disappears behind the counter again. Ben tries to go back to his reading but ends up putting the book down. After what he'd just heard, he doesn't feel like reading anymore. He stares into space, zoning out for a moment before snapping out of it at the sound of a phone ringing. Susan picks it up and begins to talk. After a moment, she hangs up and calls Ivie's name. Ivie pokes her head out from around the corner.

IVIE: Yes?

SUSAN: I got to go, Doll. My brother isn't doing well, and I . . .

IVIE (*Empathetic*): Go. I'll take care of everything here, don't worry.

SUSAN: You're a peach.

Susan leaves out the back door. As she gets into her car, the focus shifts to Will, who sits in his car. He chuckles as he sees Susan drive away, and mutters to himself.

WILL (*To himself*): Must be my lucky day.

He pops open his glove compartment and pulls out a gun. He climbs out of the car after loading the gun and walks back towards the diner. Before he reaches the door, he shoves the gun in his waistband and covers it with his shirt.

When he walks in, Ivie is in the back. Will jumps over the counter and walks back there. Ben turns to look as he did, and then slowly gets up to see where Will has gone. After a few moments, he hears Ivie speak. She says something Ben couldn't hear when suddenly Will begins to yell about opening the register. Ben runs to intervene as more commotion comes from the back.

As he gets to the counter, Ben hears a gunshot and stops dead in his tracks. The heartbeat in his ears is so loud he isn't sure he would ever hear again. He moves a step closer to look around the counter, and his eyes fall on Ivie. She stands over Will's body, holding the gun. As she sees Ben, she drops the gun and falls to her knees.

IVIE: Oh my god, what have I done?

Ben tries to respond, to say something, but no words come out. He stares at Will's motionless body, blood beginning to pool on the floor by his chest. After a moment, he regains his breath and spoke.

BEN: What happened?

IVIE (*Stuttering*): He . . . He came at me—he had the . . . the gun, he—he, I don't know how I got it, I just . . . I didn't mean to but he scared me, I . . . I . . .

BEN: It's okay, it's okay.

IVIE (*Panicked*): Oh god, I killed him. I'm going to spend the rest of my life in jail.

BEN: No, you're not. We'll figure this out.

IVIE: No, you're not a part of this, you have to go, I'll—

BEN: I'm the only witness, so we can fix this.

IVIE: Fix it?

BEN: Yes. We can figure this out.

Just then, a timer rings in the kitchen.

IVIE (*Shakily*): Your burger's done.

BEN (*Exhaling*): I could use a burger.

Ben sits in the booth as Ivie drops the burger plate in front of him and then paces around the room.

BEN: How do you know him?

IVIE: He helped me after I ran away from home. Loaned me some money.

BEN: How much do you still owe him?

IVIE: Two grand. I need bleach.

BEN: What?

IVIE (*Rummaging through a cabinet*): I have to get that blood out of the floor.

BEN: Where do we put him?

IVIE (*Popping her head up*): What?? Oh my god. We have to move him.

BEN: So we have decided we are disposing of the evidence and pretending this never happened?

IVIE (*Shrugging*): I think so.

Ben picks up Will's feet as Ivie shoves the bag over them, and they continue until he is in the bag. They finally get him completely into two trash bags and drag him out the back door. After dropping him on the ground outside, they both take a deep breath and lock their eyes. There is a long moment of silence until it is broken by Ivie.

IVIE: Great way to meet someone, isn't it?

BEN: It does make for an interesting first impression.

FADE OUT

The Making of 2020

by ALANNA NEIDIGH

CHARACTERS

MOTHER NATURE, *The goddess figure of the play, soft spoken, yet dramatic and passive aggressive, angry at the humans for all they have done to the earth, wants to punish them.*

FAIRY, *The secretary of Mother Nature, tries to “knock some sense” into her boss, very annoyed with her. She is the logical one of the group.*

GOD, *The almighty being of the world. He is laid back and absent minded, almost like he’s hungover.*

ANGEL, *God’s secretary that is trying to rationalize with God and make him change his decisions. The Fairy and the Angel are good friends. He is also a logical part of the group. Both being secretaries.*

SATAN, *Confused as to why he’s at this meeting, wants to go back to hell so he can sleep, subtly trying to break up little arguments between God and Mother Nature, while slightly helping to make a few decisions.*

DEMON, *Basically Satan’s sidekick/secretary just kind of mimics him and agrees with everything he has to say, very very dumb.*

SETTING

All of the almighty beings and their secretaries are meeting at a round table in Heaven to discuss the events that will occur in the year of 2020. GOD is seated next to the ANGEL, the Angel is next to the FAIRY, the Fairy is next to MOTHER NATURE, and SATAN and the DEMON are seated next to each other but there is a space between Satan and the others because they don’t want to be too close to him. The lighting is bright and the stage is set up as if they were on a cloud.

Scene 1

(All the characters gather around the round table to discuss the events that will go on during the year of 2020.)

GOD: Ah, hello brother *(Waving to Satan)*, hello Mother Nature *(Winking to her with a smirk)*. Interesting dynamics so far.

ANGEL: *(Does a quick little wave to everyone very visibly eager to start the meeting)*

SATAN: Why am I even here? You don’t like any of my ideas.

DEMON: Yea, what the boss said, you don’t even like any of his ideas.

(God ignores Satan and the Demon)

MOTHER NATURE: Hello God, Satan. I have a bone to pick with you Mr. Almighty. Your people have trashed the place. Animals are dying, the air is toxic, the oceans are drowning in plastic *(Said in a ranting tone)* You need to fix it. *(Pointing her finger to him)*

FAIRY: Mother, you need to keep your cool . . . we don't need a storm brewing . . . *(Said in a quiet voice)*

GOD: My people are not flawed, they're perfect. You're the one who is supposed to keep the planet clean. Maybe you should do your job.

MOTHER NATURE: You are useless. How do you even manage to run the entire planet?

SATAN: Lots of wine. Lots and lots of wine.

DEMON: Yeah, wine, lots of it.

GOD: Yeah, Yeah, whatever. . . . What's this meeting about again.

ANGEL: Uh we need to discuss the year 2020 . . . It is about two weeks away . . . *(Face palms)*

GOD: We haven't done that yet?

ANGEL: No, you haven't even mentioned it.

GOD: Right, right . . . well let's get started. *(Clapping hands together)* Who has any ideas?

MOTHER NATURE: I do!! *(Said in a crazed fast tone)* I think we need to light the place on fire. Not just for a day but multiple days. Burn the place to the ground. And then flooding. Massive flooding we want to help them a little bit after the fire but not a lot so flood the place. And then we could do . . .

SATAN: You sure you're not supposed to be the one to run hell?

FAIRY: Yeah . . . Mother Nature . . . that sounds . . . a bit rough.

GOD: *(Said while popping the "p")* Nope, sounds good to me.

ANGEL: WHAT! Are we going to provide the humans with any support to handle any of that?

GOD: Nah.

FAIRY: I think we need to rethink that . . .

ANGEL: Yeah. How are they going to survive or rebuild after any of that?

MOTHER NATURE: They need to learn a lesson. *(Snapping her fingers)* You don't mess with Mother Nature.

ANGEL: *(Sighing and shaking his head)* All in favor of letting these natural disasters unleash on the humans say aye.

MOTHER NATURE AND GOD: AAYYEE

SATAN: Aye, I guess.

GOD: Great, on to the next part. What's the year again?

ANGEL: 2020 why?

GOD: Ebola . . . when was that? *(Said while rubbing his chin)*

ANGEL: About ten years ago . . . why? *(Visibly confused)*

GOD: Why not give them another?

ANGEL: HUH. Are you trying to kill them? Why God, why is this the first thing to come to your mind?

GOD: Seems fun.

ANGEL: I don't think that's a good idea.

SATAN: I don't get why you were dad's favorite.

DEMON: Yeah why were you dad's favorite.

SATAN: *(Turning to the Demon)* Please shut up.

DEMON: Sorry boss.

FAIRY: God is this pandemic going to be . . . deadly.

GOD: It's basically the flu.

ANGEL: Oh so nobody is going to die. That's a relief.

GOD: Uh I never said that. It is the flu . . . but on steroids . . . about two million people will die.

(Angel faints.)

FAIRY: Oh no. *(Rushing to his side)*

MOTHER NATURE: While we're at it, Satan, don't you have that one bug that can basically kill you?

SATAN: You're going to have to be a little more descriptive here . . .

MOTHER NATURE: It's like a bee but like . . . deadly.

SATAN: The murder hornet?

MOTHER NATURE: YES!

SATAN: Yeah? Why? They are just used to torture people in hell.

MOTHER NATURE: Release them to the humans.

SATAN: *(Visibly confused)* You want me . . . to release a deadly bug . . . to the humans.

GOD: Sure why not?

SATAN: You both are evil.

DEMON: Evil, the both of you.

(Satan glares at the Demon. Angel wakes up.)

ANGEL: Woah, you guys, what did I miss?

FAIRY: Murder hornets . . . from hell.

(Angel faints again.)

SATAN: *(Laughing)* I should have brought popcorn. This is interesting.

GOD: What else . . . ? OH I got it. Someone has to die.

MOTHER NATURE: Who do you have in mind?

SATAN: At least give me someone to work with.

GOD: What about Kobe Bryant?

MOTHER NATURE: Who's that?

SATAN: *(Standing up, freaking out, flames coming out of his eyes)* ARE YOU KIDDING?! YOU WANT TO KILL KOBE BRYANT?! ARE YOU CRAZY?!

GOD: I just have this gut feeling I gotta do it.

SATAN: IF YOU DO THIS YOU WILL FOREVER BE THE WORST SIBLING.

GOD: *(Shrugs)* I can live with that.

SATAN: You are the devil not me.

MOTHER NATURE: Wait . . . who's Kobe Bryant?

FAIRY: Some basketball players.

SATAN: *(Pointing a finger)* Watch your mouth, pixie. He's not just some basketball player. He's amazing.

FAIRY: I am a fairy. Not a pixie you stupid goat.

SATAN: You all got your fun now it's my turn. I want some security down here. These demons ain't cutting it.

GOD: Okay peanut gallery, what's the idea.

SATAN: What if we take a police officer?

GOD: Wouldn't he come to me . . . and why kill an innocent cop?

SATAN: You literally killed Kobe.

GOD: Touché.

SATAN: While we're at it, we can have the people riot. But it won't just be any riot, they're going to be rioting for blood. *(Evil laugh)*

ANGEL: I'm awake. Before you all make me faint again, what if we do that all but minus the blood. What if the people are protesting for something that's actually . . . I don't know, good?

SATAN: Works for me as long as I get something interesting going on in Hell.

GOD: I think we have covered most of it. Can I go back to my . . . uh . . . grape juice, Netflix, and fluffy bed.

SATAN: You are a sorry excuse for a world ruler.

MOTHER NATURE: Yeah I have some flowers to make.

GOD: We will meet for the making of 2021 in a year!!

(God, Satan, and Mother Nature leave. The Angel, Demon, and Fairy stay)

FAIRY: The humans really have it coming to them. *(Said with a frown)*

ANGEL: Yeah, what are we going to do?

FAIRY: There isn't really anything we can do.

ANGEL: Maybe for the year 2021 we plan it instead of them.

MOTHER NATURE: *(Said from offstage)* FAIRY!!! Do you have the sunflower seeds?

FAIRY: I gotta go. *(Waving)* See you all in a year. They aren't invited to the next meeting!

ANGEL: Bye Fai—*(Cut off by God's voice offstage)*

GOD: *(Said from offstage)* ANGEL!!! GET ME MY WINE!!! Oh . . . I mean my . . . grape juice.

ANGEL: Oh my . . . Good luck to the humans I guess.

DEMON: Yeah . . . what they said. *(Waiting for Satan to call for him offstage)*

SATAN: *(Walking on stage grabbing the Demon's hand)* You are a literal child.

DEMON: Sorry boss.

SATAN: This is going to be a long year.

FADE OUT

Creative Nonfiction

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE GLORIA BENNETT: In first place, “Not My Story” by Amy Davis contains rich details and the purpose of the narrative is clear. Davis demonstrates a clear connection to the characters and how their experiences have impacted the Davis’ own life. In second place, “Worth the Wait” by Tanya Morris is a suspenseful piece that holds the reader’s attention to the very end.

Not My Story to Tell

by AMY DAVIS

I was taught from a young age to enjoy the little things in life. From playing hopscotch on badly painted sidewalks to digging up frogs from local storage drains to sharing ghost stories with one another during family dinner—my family has always kept me company on days too mundane to remember in totality. It's not the whole that matters, but rather those tiny moments in between that have imprinted themselves into my memory like a cement sidewalk paving the foundation of my mind's infrastructure. Unfortunately, none of those sweet instances would've come to pass if not for my mother and her ability to love so wholly. She was a one-woman army building stone walls and protecting her children from a world that wasn't half as kind to her growing up. And her story, however crazy or difficult, molded my mother into a woman hellbent on milking everything she could out of life. Hence, my mother taught her children to enjoy even the smallest moments before they fade into memory.

I used to sit with my mother on our front porch and just listen to stories about her life growing up. It started out sweet, beginning with how my father proposed with nothing more than a twist-tie ring off a loaf of bread and three weeks spent together previous . . . Eventually, though, the stories contorted into something more serious. Once I was old enough to comprehend her stories, she'd go on to tell me of a time my grandparents had left her and my uncle at a train station, give examples of my grandfather being an abusive drinker, and warn that our family's dysfunction was often glossed over during family events. Instead of having a real discussion about those tragic events, there were closeted conversations and hushed whispers spoken softly between adult ears.

Through it all—through the sadness and trauma of her childhood—my mother had her Ma Marjorie and Da Dole to help her. It wasn't until recently that my mother showed me this porcelain dancer which plays a tune when the base is wound, mentioning that her grandfather had given it to her to sooth the pain. "Da Dole," she explained, "would come into my room whenever I would wake up crying and sit on my bed and wind this all the way. He'd stay with

me until I fell asleep to the sound of its music, and every time I would wake up in tears — Da Dole would come back and do it all over again." Her life could only be described as an abyss of tidal waves and my great grandparents the lifeboat there to keep her from drowning. Perhaps they're angels swooping in to save their grandchildren from a high tumble into frigid waters, there as both a savior and beam of light in the dark, ebbing ocean waves.

As the title implies, though, this is not my story to tell. My mother's difficulties, my grandmother's drug addiction, my grandfather's ability to drink himself into a murderous frenzy—I have no authority to share any of it. Yet here we are! I could list many a moment my mother shared with me (both the unmentionable and most exciting), each example fueling my mother to pick and choose her own parenting tactics. Kindness here, sternness there, and just that all around motherly look of disappointment to show how badly her children had failed her. The worst was always the "ear grab" she saved specifically for those moments in stores when my brothers and I had crossed one too many imaginary lines. Never once were our punishments undeserved, though; never once did my mother or father drink themselves into abuse; never once did my father pull a gun on his wife like how my grandfather had many years ago. No, rather we as siblings were given a roof over our head that never faltered and parents there to tuck us in on chilly, unforgiving nights.

Of course, that's not to say we didn't have our own set of hardships to deal with. My father, being in the military, was gone much of my younger life—thus leaving my mother alone to raise three little rascals with imaginations too big to keep contained in their tiny bodies. She had to deal with my brothers often running away to go see girls they barely knew and hitting one another over disagreements no one else understood. I tried making life easier, but obviously no ten-year-old is perfect with their big ideas and crazy demonstrations. My elaborate shenanigans found me wandering off around the yard, sometimes making my mother worry I'd perhaps daydreamed myself a little too far from home this time. Late in

my teenaged life, too, I found myself slipping into a depression so severe I was hospitalized for a short period. It was those couple of weeks that made my mother anxious, made her worry that she'd failed as a mother. No, it hadn't been her, but rather a set of unfortunate events in my life stacking themselves up so high that if they tumbled so would my every ambition. She aided in mending those sorrows into chainmail armor I now wear on my chest for protection.

If we don't hold onto those exciting moments spent around family or the happiness found thereof, our lives will lose their sparkle. My mother, no matter the suffering or abuse, kept herself whole by holding onto joy despite the ever-encompassing negativity.

She passed this lesson onto her children, who have passed this lesson onto their friends. And one friend is sharing such a lesson with you now. This world is unforgiving, ruthless even, and without that tight grip on each great moment—there's no telling where anyone in our family would be now. Whether it's Ma Marjorie's Christmas dinners or going together on a camping trip into the mountains or spending the day in the woods pretending to be explorers with siblings and friends alike, there's just so many euphoric memories to look back on. While, yes, society has its own ways of making our lives that much more strained, my mother taught me how to see positivity in everything. And that optimism, I believe, is the best quality for any person to share.

Worth the Wait

by TANYA MORRIS

I had never thought of myself as courageous or strong, until recently, when you pointed these things out to me. At a young age, I learned to buckle down and tackle the task in front of me. One of the many lessons I've learned in my seventy-something years is that all situations present us with choices. Often, the consequences of these choices show the world who we are. But, once in a while, we stand face-to-face with a monumental challenge. This is when we prove to ourselves who we are and what we are made of. This is when we dig in deep and hold onto faith. My mother always said, "Alan Faye, there is something positive in everything. Sometimes you will have to look harder to find it, and sometimes you may have to wait longer to realize it, but when you see the silver lining, it will be worth it." Mama was right.

It was early in the summer of 1970. What should have been a joyful time became a nightmare in the seconds it took to utter a few words.

Your daddy and I were awaiting the arrival of our first baby. The nursery was ready, our hospital bags were packed, and the only thing left to do was wait. As the due date got closer, I found myself in the nursery watching the puffy animals of the mobile travel in a circle to the tune of a lullaby. I tried to imagine how I would feel when a baby, my baby, our baby, looked back at me from that crib.

When the time finally came, my stomach fluttered, and my heart pounded; Tommy nervously twisted a string between his fingers the entire drive.

Walking through the lobby, I knew something was wrong. I felt it, like the lady behind the desk knew something that we didn't, then I could see it in Mr. Crowell's apologetic smile as he escorted us to his office. His mannerisms and tone made me think of the way people talk in a funeral home, low and mournful. He sighed and said, "I have bad news. The mother changed her mind. She has left the hospital and has taken the baby with her."

The butterflies in my stomach instantly turned to lead, and the heart that had thumped in anticipation suddenly slowed with the downward pull of disbelief, disappointment, and despair. We had driven five hours to Pensacola, Florida to meet our new baby boy, the baby we had dreamt of since February. We had traveled there to welcome him into his new family, to love him, to cuddle him, but instead, we had been handed a nightmare.

The drive back to Mississippi was long and mostly quiet. We cried. We talked a little. But we were silent a lot.

Monday morning, when Tommy went back to work at the paper mill, my friends took turns stopping in for short visits. They tried to comfort me, but when they went home, the deafening silence of our empty house, a sound that had never bothered me before, screamed at me loudly.

Tommy and I went about our daily routines, not ignoring the pain, but each working through it in our own way. Our families and friends were a great support, but when it got down to the nuts and bolts of the situation, it was up to us to hold ourselves together. I kept myself busy to avoid the pain. He left for work, I cleaned, friends came to visit, I cleaned, Mama called to check on me, I cleaned, cooked dinner, I cleaned, bathed, and slept.

On Sunday, two weeks after our trip to Florida, Tommy was piddling around town on his motorcycle, and I was cleaning the kitchen. The house was quiet, and I was ok with that, not good, but ok. Sadness came in waves, not to take me under and hold me there, but to knock me off balance, reminding me to trust God. I knew there was a bigger picture, and I could only see my tiny corner of the world. I knew that, for some reason, that baby boy wasn't meant for me and Tommy. Knowing that didn't make the loss less painful, but it made the pain more manageable.

The phone rang, shattering the silence that housed my thoughts . . . I felt them scatter. That day had been a better day emotionally, but still, I didn't want

to talk to anyone. Staring at the phone, I debated whether or not to answer. Three rings had passed when I grabbed the chartreuse receiver from the box that hung on the wall. I tried to sound upbeat, but the “Hello?” came out flat.

The deep voice on the other end was Mr. Singley, our attorney. He sounded nervous when he asked, “Is Tommy there with you? I have some news for the two of you.”

I should’ve let it ring, I thought, as tears streamed down my cheeks, remembering our last conversation after the road trip to Florida. “No . . .” The rest got stuck in my throat.

After a long pause, he said cautiously, “I wish he was there with you. I could call back, but you’re gonna want to hear this sooner rather than later.”

“Ok?”



Tossing and turning in the bed, we both saw every hour on the clock that night. I remember staring through the curtains at the moon, a few days beyond full, when Tommy said, “Let’s go. Neither of us is sleeping. Let’s just go.”

Mama wasn’t sleeping either when I called to tell her we would be leaving in a little over an hour.



This time the drive to Pensacola was quieter. We were all hopeful, but with guarded emotions. My daddy couldn’t go with us on this trip, so Mama dozed in the back seat. I’m sure Tommy’s mind whirled with the same thoughts spinning through mine.

After what felt like a 48-hour drive, Mr. Crowell greeted us with a wide smile. “I want you to know that you were the only people I thought of when I got a call from this family on Friday. I didn’t even call Phillip until yesterday when the mother had signed the papers and left the hospital with her family.” Phillip was our attorney in Mississippi, Mr. Singley. We all breathed a little easier after hearing that.

Mama stayed at his office while Mr. Crowell took me and Tommy to the hospital. From here, everything seemed to play in fast-forward and slow-motion at the same time. We looked through the long horizontal window into the hospital nursery and tried to guess which one of the babies might be you.

I was lost in a dream-like state when a nurse approached us to ask if we were ready to see our baby and if we had brought clothes for you. “Yes,” we both said anxiously and followed her into the nursery.

She led us to a bassinet at the far end of the nursery. “This is your baby,” she smiled and nodded toward me.

“Oh, she is beautiful!” is all that would come out . . . over . . . and over . . . and over. The nurse nodded toward me again as if to say you can pick her up.

I looked at Tommy for assurance, still hesitant to let myself be fully in this moment. He nodded. Tears filled in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks when I looked at you. I leaned over and picked up the tiny white bundle with dark hair. I know I probably imagined it, but when I lifted you from that plastic bassinet, I thought I saw you smile like you knew who I was. I snuggled you next to my chest so you could hear my heartbeat, and I asked God to let you know that I was your Mama. I didn’t want to let you go, but your daddy was patiently waiting his turn. When I placed you in his hands, which were nearly as big as you, you sighed, like you knew who he was, too.

The nurse bathed you and dressed you, and then they released us to go home.



At Mr. Crowell’s office, we quickly introduced you to your Mamaw, told her it was time to go, then headed out of town like we were smuggling stolen merchandise. That brown Bonneville didn’t stop until we crossed the Alabama line. Tommy pulled off on the side of the highway. He looked at me, “Mama, see if she’s got ten fingers and ten toes.” The three of us looked at you and agreed that you were perfect.

When the sun’s rays glistened through the windshield, the white trim on your tiny pink dress ap-

peared to have a silvery shimmer to it—the silver lining to our recent storm. I thought about what Mama had told me through the years, “. . . sometimes you

have to look harder; sometimes you have to wait longer, but when you find your silver lining, it will be worth the challenge.”

Formal Essay

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE KRISTIN KELLY: The first place winner for Formal Essay, Amy Davis's "Worth a Nickel and a Dime," builds upon a careful architecture which includes family stories set down within a larger narrative. This method of organization allows the reader to appreciate the remarkable tenacity of Ma Margie. The writing is vivid and quick-moving as it brings an entire family to life. The second place winner, "Discovering Identity with Childhood Shenanigans," also by Amy Davis, is a careful meditation upon childhood and identity formation. Davis describes gaining vast inner strength through many childhood trials. The conclusion expertly blends hope and memory as it showcases resilience. The third place winner, Sydney Petty's "Operation Desert Storm," is distinctive for its directness and exact reporting. Petty precisely documents the transformation from civilian to soldier—from basic training to advanced individual training to even more specialized training as a platoon medic. The suspenseful crux of the essay describes Denton Petty's compassion when he meets enemy combatants who are both scared and starving. Finally, the essay successfully captures the pure joy of coming home to Blue Ridge, Georgia, after ten and a half months in Iraq.

Worth a Nickel and a Dime

by AMY DAVIS

My name is Amy Davis, descendant from a long line of strong women, one of which I've chosen to interview. Her name is Marjorie Lindsey ("Hodges" being her maiden name), a woman so devoted to her children and her religion that the good Lord has given her eighty-seven long years upon the earth thus far. It wasn't until recently, around four years ago, that my immediate family and I moved back to Georgia in hopes of helping our oldest relatives—Ma Margie being the eldest of our living kin. I never knew her other than from stories told to me growing up, but I've adored every second spent in person with my Great Grandmother in these past couple years. Ma Margie is the family historian in a way, always being able to look at a photo and give you the exact circumstances of that moment—no matter how old that photograph might actually be. She rambles much now, my questions spawning many stories I didn't ask for but was happy to listen to. So, in turn, I've interviewed the most important woman in my matriarch's history.

To understand my Great Grandmother's tenacity, we must first look at her humble beginnings. Born in 1933 and the second youngest of eight siblings, Margorie Hodges was raised through the Great Depression with her father working to support their family as a farmer. Margorie was often teased by her many brothers, recounting to me one story in which her siblings Ray and Chapel scared her with tales of the Boogie Man: "There was this wall of clay beside the road we'd drive by . . . They'd say, 'Ya see those holes in the side of that hill? That's where the Boogie Man comes out! He'll come to get ya if you aren't good!'" She proceeded to explain how she used to believe as a little girl that Hell was beneath the ground and Heaven was in the clouds, thus making Ray and Chapel's story that much more terrifying! It just goes to show that my Ma Margie has always found herself close to God and her beliefs aligned with bible verses and psalms galore. Perhaps her belief stems from her lineage or from her family, but perhaps also from the lack of mischief she experienced throughout her life having married young.

Margorie Hodges became Margorie Lindsey at the age of fifteen, having her first child that same year. Yes, she married in haste, but the events leading up to her vows are nothing less than a fairytale. There was a "picture" theatre right in front of the Hodges' home where my Great Grandmother worked. Once, while hanging out with her older sister Helen, a nice young man currently dating said older sister decided to ask Margorie on a date. Instead of a serious reply, she responded with a laugh and a coldly placed "no." But my Da Doyle had been persistent! Somehow or another, they'd gone together for that movie—and the rest, as most people say, is history. They'll go on to have three daughters who bore six children who give way to even more cousins and kin than I could possibly count. Ma Margie is proud of *all* her younger kin, though, often posting kind words and tagging them in life events on "the Facebooks" as her way of keeping in touch with the outside world. She couldn't be prouder!

Speaking of pride, I'm surprised my Great Grandmother hasn't succumbed to her boastful shenanigans. Margorie hurt her lower back in her youth by showing her daughters how good her *barrel rolling* skills were. You read that right! Barrel rolling! Ma Margie had taken to her backyard one afternoon and dragged her daughters out with her. I can only imagine how many times she yelled "Watch This!" before taking one false step and tumbling to the hard earth. The injury bothers her more in her old age than it had back then, her job managing a textile mill not being much affected by the incident. Margorie Lindsey had left the movie theatre for a supervising position in the women's textile factory while her husband opted to support the family through his job as a Coke Cola driver. They'd both worked until their bodies had nearly fallen apart, passing their hard-working genes on to future generations. So, while my Great Grandmother might be prideful, her stubborn fervor has shown her children what it means to be a *real* woman.

Despite most people not truly knowing what a "real" woman looks like, my Ma Margie is the prime example thereof. She wasn't always this angelic figure

of life and beauty, though, no matter if her great grandchildren think she was born the spitting image of perfection. Margorie Lindsey learned how to be a caring, God-fearing woman from her own Aunt Julia Bell. Now, Aunt Julia Bell was much more “harsh” than my own Great Grandmother—never taking no for an answer. The most vivid tale my Ma Margie has told me about was of this old convenient store just down the road from where she lives now. To the normal eye, it’s just some rickety gas station with a sign that says “Jesus is Coming Soon” out front . . . but to my Great Grandmother it’s much more than that. The space was once used at a gambling center late at night, the men in town gathering to gamble nickels and dimes. Aunt Julia Bell’s husband was so caught up in losing all his earnings to those games that she decided to take matters into her own hands. “She got a big stick and went over yonder,” Ma Margie began explaining—going on to say how her Aunt destroyed the poker tables with many mighty whacks and hits from the wooden rod. “Every chance she got to grab her big stick and break up a poker game—she would. Well, my Uncle got so embarrassed and didn’t talk to her for about two weeks. Then he came back and said to her ‘Bell, I’m goin’ to Charleston, South Carolina. You comin’

with me or not?’” My Great Grandmother can’t help but chuckle every time she tells that story, and (with how often she tells it) I believe it’s one of her favorites to share. Never a dull moment with my barrel rolling, storytelling, church regular Ma Margie.

Margorie Lindsey is, and will always be, one of the images of strength within our family tree. She was kind where she needed to be kind, she was the beacon of hope where there was none, and she taught every generation that came after how to support each other in such a brutal society. Life changes, life goes on, and while Ma Margie falls victim to time in her little Dudley, Georgia abode—the memories she shares will forever be etched into our family’s minds like a headstone built upon holy ground. I can’t imagine life without my dear Great Grandmother’s tales of woe and wonder, making me happier than ever now that I’ve selfishly gotten to know her in these later years. Eighty-seven and taking each second as a gift bestowed upon her by the Lord himself! I suppose it’s a present for her every noble deed and ploy of religious devotion, because without her stable actions—who knows where her descendants would be now? Especially me.

Discovering Identity with Childhood Shenanigans

by AMY DAVIS

When I was a child, my brothers and I lived in a North Carolina home with nothing more than a haunted past and fifty-foot pine trees known for reaching their branches out just enough to scare us. Within these trees, though, us three rascals would create stories and play as if we were from a different reality in which elven archers and orcish giants took claim to said lands. Together, we'd bond by dodging falling pine cones and building forts out of the fallen bases of dead lumber. This was the happiest I've ever been, using these many experiences to form who I am today—courageous as a knight yet cautious as a thief, bold as the chill of winter yet frugal as the October harvest, sweet as sap yet sly as the devil himself. Who I choose to be is borne of my childish innocence and the memories I've collected along the way. Idiosyncratic influence, my daily encounters, and working through difficult issues has built the bricks and mortar holding me together. Identity, though different for every individual, is who we are based on not only our personal experiences but the choices we make thereof.

People are difficult to understand, especially when considering what qualities are often placed on a pedestal compared to others. Usually, someone's identity is much more than their surface strengths, but rather the driving inspiration of their personality. For me personally, the real question isn't so much "Who am I?" but rather "What influences me?" I can say the stereotypical "I am" statements of "I am kindhearted," "I am intelligent," even "I am reliable"—but where's the truth in that? My identity is much *more* than that, more of a "because" than a straight "*I am*." I mean to say, that I am one way *because* of the multitude of life experiences I've suffered through. This includes but is not limited to "I am kindhearted *because* of my emotionally stifled home life," "I am intelligent *because* to be anything other meant I'd go nowhere in life," and "I am reliable *because* I know how it feels to be left behind." My genetic make-up and the argument of nature-versus-nurture does nothing in defining who I *choose* to be. I've come to decide that I'd much rather be the opposite from how I was raised, my childhood being the foundation of my identity. I can keep all the happiness, all

the times I used my imagination while playing with my brothers, and leave all other negativity behind.

Identity is shaped by how people conduct themselves. Often, choice can derive from previous encounters and learning from those hardships. Take my military upbringing as an example. This lifestyle meant my family would move every other year, damning me to either be alone or learn how to make friends quickly. Each move consisted of changing not only location but the people I'd be surrounded by. Leaving was heartbreaking—leaving meant I'd do nothing, *say* nothing on the seventeen-hour car ride across four and a half states. The only way to hide my distraught emotions was by taking my mother's camera (which contained no more than a hundred photos worth of storage) and then point it up at the clouds as the road hurled by beneath us. The unfortunate truth of the matter is, with emotion being seen as weakness in my household, I was forced to shade my sadness behind these cotton candy clouds. I learned to hold a mirror up between me and my family, carving out a lackluster image of what *they* wanted to see. My identity, the person I was deep down, was molded by the independence my family expected of me. It wasn't until our final move, from Texas to Georgia, that my façade cracked, and my parents had me institutionalized for severe depression. No, the depression was *not* what shaped my identity, but rather the shame and shunning therefrom. Through it all, though, I was given the choice to let darkness define me or build myself a fortress of love to surround my aching thoughts—and I chose the latter. If not, who knows *who* or *where* I'd be today?

Obstacles aid in the construction of someone's individuality. That hardship, whether physical or mental, brings out hobbies or interests' people don't normally consider. Often, vices or different ways to handle rough situations can swim to the surface. There's painting, writing, playing sports, or many other hobbies that come from tribulation and create yet another piece to someone's identity. My emotionally-deprived household, for example, doesn't mean my life was awful. On the contrary, my life has been filled by an infinity of beautiful pictures painted by

only ink and paper. Books were an escape for me, my personality fusing with the hero of each tale similar to the fusion of peanut butter and honey sandwiches—both sweet and salty. The main characters of each story would teach me self-worth or how to love myself on those lonely nights spent with tear-stained eyes. I used these books to mold myself into a ball of solid steel, using my cunning wits to avoid awkward situations or learning how to make people smile when they're struggling to keep their chin held high. Considering how shy I used to be, I'd say that books helped to improve my atrocious small talk, too. There's no longer a stranger in my eyes, just people I have yet to call "friend." Thus, the idea of identity has left me questioning not only what makes me *me*, but also what makes other people *them*. What vice helps keep them calm in a society known for brutal judgment? Luckily, individuality is rewarded, so everyone's unique identity gives our world flavor in an otherwise dull life.

As a whole, identity is a difficult topic to pin down. We could go with the general definition of "identity is who someone is", but that leaves out what caused said person to become who they are. People are made up of much more than just skin and bones—they're made of choice and personal expression, as well. Someone's individuality is built upon figuring out one's interests, and being molded, too, by the people surrounding them. They're life, though defined by experience, also consists of decision making. They can choose who they want to be, deciding for themselves if they would rather abuse others or build them up. I understand what it feels like to be broken down and forced to hide yourself, thus my efforts to comfort others has molded me into someone kind. From suffering-in-silence types to adrenaline junkies, we all have an identity with its own humble beginnings—and a multitude of other stories for our identity to tell.

Operation Desert Storm

by SYDNEY PETTY

They say the 82nd Airborne is the most feared division in the world. The all-American Division, devils in baggy pants. “We were considered an elite division because of our capabilities of going in by land, air, and sea. We could be anywhere in the world in eighteen hours, we were a force to be reckoned with.” Denton Petty is a retired combat veteran who served in Desert Storm in 1991. Denton was assigned to the 82nd Airborne parachute infantry regiment and was HHC 2504 but was attached to Charlie Company. He was born and raised in Blue Ridge Georgia and is the son of Doyal and Glenda Petty. Denton went into the military in September of 1990.

“After I graduated, I spent two years blundering around trying to find something that was meaningful, something that was going to amount to something.” He had been working with the local fire department until he decided one day, he wanted to be a medic for the United States military. When he joined, they sent him to basic training in Fort Bliss, Texas. After he graduated from basic training, he was sent to San Antonio where he completed his advanced individual training and received his medical training.

“In the middle of the night they came and woke us up and said everyone who was going to airborne school had to be downstairs and on the bus.” Denton rode this bus from San Antonio all the way to Fort Benning, Georgia. Fort Benning is where he attended jump school and became a paratrooper.

“After I’d had about thirty jumps, I looked at my squad leader while we were about to jump and I said, ‘Does this still scare you?’ He said, ‘Yes, and if it don’t scare you, we’ll find you something else to do. Fear keeps you safe.’”

In 1991, Operation Desert Storm began when the United States responded to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. “We were fighting for their freedom, the ones that were being killed, and fighting for each other. When you go to war there’s always more than one driving force.” The DRF is the first unit to respond, within eighteen hours of getting the call they were on the ground in Iraq.

“Nobody believes that you’re going to end up in war. My drill sergeants told us ‘You will see war in your enlistment,’ and I didn’t believe them.” Denton was at Fort Bragg when he got the call he was being deployed. At the time, Denton and his platoon did not believe them because they were so used to getting calls that were simply just drills.

“They started giving us live ammunition, that’s when we knew that it was real.” Denton and his platoon landed in Saudi Arabia and were filled with a mix of excitement and fear.

“This is what we trained for, we were warriors and we were ready to go to war.” Denton describes the hardest part of being at war as missing home, which is being in the United States and being free. He told stories about being in a foreign country with people trying to kill you as not only a physical challenge, but an incredibly difficult psychological experience. Denton was the platoon medic and was responsible for thirty men. He was their first line of treatment. He describes the scariest time in Iraq as a time when he became lost. He was travelling through Iraq with his platoon trying to get to the Euphrates. They were driving day and night, but every now and then they were allowed to stop. There was an ambulance that followed the men, and in the ambulance, there was electricity. At night there was light discipline, you could have no lights on for the enemy to see. However, some nights the men could seal the ambulance up and play cards inside. At this time, they were burning the oil wells in Kuwait, you could not see anything in front of you, it was so dark. Denton was trying to make his way back to the truck from a long night of playing cards in the ambulance. He went to the left too far and became lost.

“These Iraqis would come and try to get close to us, I knew they were out there.” Denton knew if he kept walking, he could possibly run into the enemy. He laid down, covered himself in sand and waited until day break. When the light broke through Denton was able to see his platoon and safely made his way back. The United States military captured thousands of Iraqi soldiers in Operation Desert Storm. The

United States had cut off all forms of communication for the Iraqi soldiers. Denton says when they found the soldiers, they had no idea what was going on; they were starving to death with no supplies.

“We would capture them and take them back, I felt so bad for them. Sometimes I’d give them food.” Denton says some of the men in his platoon were not nearly as forgiving. Denton describes the prisoners of war as humans who were ordered to do things just as he was. He describes a personal experience he encountered with one Iraqi prisoner of war: “I had given him something to eat, and he told me he was sorry. He showed me his scars and told me he didn’t want to fight anymore.” After the war was over, trying to get the soldiers home drug out for quite some time. To Denton, the process felt like an eternity. Rumors about going home spread throughout the troops for weeks at a time, none of them seeming to be true.

“They told us we were going home. Nobody believed it. We got our stuff ready and got on planes and when it lifted off everyone was yelling and screaming. We knew we were going home. That was the

best time.” Denton had been in Iraq for ten and a half months. When the American soldiers landed in Bragg, they went back to the barracks and turned their weapons in.

“I got in my truck and I drove to Blue Ridge.” Denton came home on a two week leave where he was able to see his family and friends. He describes his experience at home as being incredibly welcoming. Denton arrived back at Fort Bragg and was from there deployed to Panama in Central America. This is where he completed jungle operations training. “We learned how to survive in the jungle, we learned how to go to war in the jungle.” After three months of being in Panama, Denton came back to Fort Bragg where he completed the rest of his service. His last jump was at Fort Bragg where he unfortunately encountered a foot injury. Denton broke his foot in three places and was able to go home to his family. Denton completed his service in 1993. “What I learned was to appreciate all that I have, I appreciate this country and our freedom.” Denton is most proud of his ability to never give up or turn down any obstacle put in front of him.

Visual Art

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE MARK BRAUGHT: The quality of the entries in this year's competition was very good. In reviewing the submissions for this competition and the number of various media applied to create the entries, it was apparent that establishing an equitable and fair means of evaluating them was necessary. Scale and personal inspection of the work submitted was not possible. Judgment was made solely on the image submitted. Evaluation was based on three criteria that could be applied to the many media used to create the entries for this year. First is creativity, the ability to communicate a thought and or idea in a visually dynamic, unique, and unexpected manner. Second is fundamental expertise, the application of the art principles of composition and the creation of a strong focal point using scale, color, value, and scale. Third is technical execution, mastery of media used to create the submission. This year, "Playing with Fire" by Ashley Herman won first, "Ambivalence" by Briana C. Andronicescu won second, and "CAW!" by Rowan Finch won third. The winning entries struck the elusive balance of the three criteria. There were many entries that exhibited high marks in one or two of the categories, but fell short in a third. It is my hope that, in no way, my opinion dissuades you from your commitment to continue to creating visual solutions. Every artist has an audience, and it is our goal to continually explore, through experimentation, improvement and disciplined dedication, to determine how to reach them. This is a journey that has the potential of creating a career. This is hoped for all who want it.



Playing with Fire

by ASHLEY HERMAN

Textiles

25 × 25 × 10 inches

Ambivalence

by BRIANA C. ANDRONICESCU
Digital
11 × 14 inches



CAW!

by ROWAN FINCH
Cardboard, black paint,
acrylic sealer, hot glue
22 × 9 inches





La Rosa del Desierto Azul

by DASHANAY BROWN

Ceramic

8 × 8.25 inches

Idle

by HAN NGUYEN

Acrylic on canvas

16 × 20 inches



Portrait of Boredom

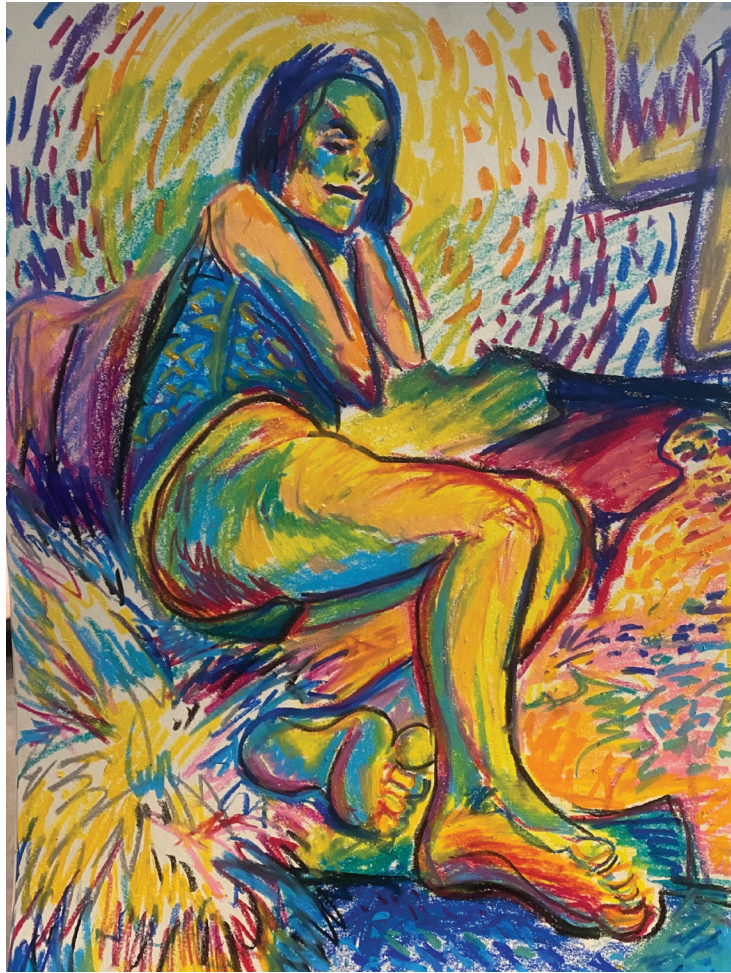
by HAN NGUYEN
Oil pastel on paper
14 × 17 inches



A Pair of Cherries

by HAN NGUYEN
Acrylic on canvas
12 × 16 inches





Psychedelic

by ALEX PATARINSKI

Oil pastels

18 × 24 inches

Oranges

by ALEX PATARINSKI

Charcoal

18 × 24 inches



Tati

by ALEX PATARINSKI
Charcoal
18 × 24 inches



Punch-Out

by ALEX PATARINSKI
Charcoal
18 × 24 inches



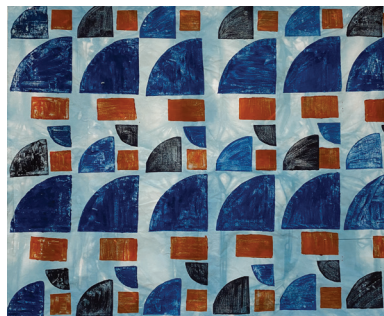


Dream in the Windowsill

by ABBY RAMSEY
Photograph overlay
6.5 × 10 inches

Butterfly Effect Triptych

by ABBY RAMSEY
Hand-dyed and painted textile
2.5 × 3.5 feet each



Tidal

by *ABBY RAMSEY*
Photograph overlay
5 × 7 inches



Pumpkin and Mums

by *KAYLEIGH RIKER*
Acrylic on canvas
16 × 20 inches





Hidden Beauty

by CHRISTOPHER NOELL
Photograph

2729 × 3867 pixels

Waterfall

by ASHLEY HERMAN

Large-format film photograph

8 × 10 inches



Gothic Art Contest

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE CHRIS DANT: Defined as “having a prevailing atmosphere of mystery and terror” by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Gothic artwork should not simply haunt or scare, but should affect the viewer on an emotional and psychological level. Using these themes as a guide, the following artworks encapsulate the essence of the Gothic.

The first place work, “The Many Faces of Internal Agony” by Sophia Garrett, stuck with me even after the sea of figures left my screen. Similar to a Francis Bacon painting, the afterimage of this piece is truly something from a nightmare: not fully recognizing the things you see, but knowing you are in danger and feeling surrounded to the point of claustrophobia. This image stays with you even after it leaves your field of view, which is a testament to the raw and unnerving imagery created by Garrett.

In second place, Sophia Story’s “Goat Gas Mask” provides one still of what seems like an incredibly intriguing and frightening narrative. How did this figure end up this way? Is this located in a battlefield of the past or a post-apocalyptic landscape of the future? These questions keep me coming back to this intriguing piece.

Finally, in third place, Sophia Garrett’s “Moving On, Not Looking Back” has a bit of whimsy present, reminiscent of the famous Grateful Dead Dancing Skeleton. The playfulness in this piece is refreshing and lively, and almost makes one forget the fact that this skeleton could never move this way.



The Many Faces of Internal Agony

by SOPHIA GARRETT

Ink on paper

8.5 × 11 inches

Goat Gas Mask

by SOPHIA STORY

Digital

2,000 × 2,500 pixels



Moving On, Not Looking Back

by SOPHIA GARRETT

Digital

12 × 12 inches



Gothic Writing Contest

AWARD CITATION FROM JUDGE ERIC LOCKABY: In every good scary story we find the fundamentals of a living body—a bit of brain, a thumping heart, a nerve exposed. For the “body” of this year’s Gothic Writing Contest, we find selections that each represent these parts in their own way. Where the brain would be we scoop out Madison Clemente’s “Eldritch Falls: Death of a Bachelorette,” the third-place winner, a playfully macabre detective story that sees characters attempting in vain to apply reason to the supernatural. Where the heart normally resides lies Amy Davis’s “Pumpkin Patches and Candied Corn,” the second-place winner, which views Halloween with a candy-sweet nostalgia for the holiday’s mix of memories and monsters. In the final hollow we find the exposed nerve of Amy Davis’s “Four Walls, a Door, and Nothing More,” the first-place winner, a short story where the inanimate is made alive, given fresh fears, subjected to the ravages of time. Scared yet? You should be, as these three parts define you as well. At least for now.

Four Walls, a Door, and Nothing More

by AMY DAVIS

It was only a house. Just a hollowed out form of concrete poured in such a manner that a manor might arise in the hours after. There were bricks and wooden planks carved into the house to make fireplaces and floors with which children could run wildly without fear of falling through. It was a safe haven, a dreamlike place set to bring wondrous images of life to the resident's eyes. Yes, it was built to one day be a home.

Yet it remained merely a house. No children had clambered noisily with their fits of laughter nor taken to the wallpaper with markers and Crayola crayons alike. Rather, the life once promised within the confines of this palace had rotted into both sunken nightmares and cobwebs adorning the halls like party streamers. The floors began to warp, no longer beautiful as they'd once been. And each hearty fireplace instead shown signs of decay having may been used even once.

No one knew why the house never sold despite the manor having been built as beautiful as a summer rose and smelling as sweet as one, too. Perhaps it was a curse or because the land gave onlookers such an eerie feeling, but either way—the house had warded the degradation all on its own. Sometimes, on nights in which the moon had gone to sleep along with the rest of the world, they say the house would breathe its oh-so-hefty sigh of relaxation. It was left alone and all the happier for it.

And as the seasons began to change, often willing themselves to shift their temperatures and moods all the same, the manor would sink deeper into its foundation and settle into the hinges of the many doors perpetually left open. Every neighboring home could tell that the autumn weeks were the empty house's favorite, as the outside mortar and brick would somehow glow with glorious life as each October rolled around. It decorated itself with an ivy smile and moss hair freshly shaped as the damp weather fostered the plants into tender adoration. As expected, leaf nails of trees along the property's edge fell with their auburn and orange hues; all of which made way for branch fingers and tree trunk arms

ready to cover themselves with snow gloves later in the year.

The silent structure would claim each hour, inhaling the season's spice with a swing of the front door's frame. Its fences would slowly rust as each rainstorm dragged itself by; the windows would fog and clear and eventually break with the temptation of age passing the glass by; holes would find their way into the roofing until water damage was just a promise when entering the lackluster indoors of this once great house. The world and its persistence of time was constantly knocking at this manor's entryway until one day it finally got in.

It was never lived in but somehow its walls were wrought with memories imprinted into them like foam having been slept upon for decades prior—this house was a home all its own. It needed no family, no kin, no playful charades nor laughing children, no late night TV marathons nor popcorn popped along messy stove tops, no dogs to track mud along its pristine wooden floors, no newlywed couple who'd surely bring offspring into the world one day, no loud singing in the shower whose timbre would ring effortlessly in the halls, no legacy or photos taken there as a way to show the memories having existed at all. No, the house needed none of it—but instead took pride within the solitude it sported as a trophy.

It was a home. Not merely a house made of concrete and brick, but a home with the potential to thrive in isolation even after all other neighbors had fallen victim to time. It would be there, petrified similar to a mountain surviving the weathering of wind and the erosion brought on by flowing water. Each flaw gave way to permanent scars which only made the structure that much stronger. It had character and with it came the everlasting vow to exist even after everything around it crumbled back to the earth from which it came.

A manor, a house, a building of many names . . . but more importantly—it was a home.

Pumpkin Patches and Candied Corn

by AMY DAVIS

Perhaps it's the memories we've come to love,
The sweet and sour need to glove
Our fingertips on these chilling afternoons,
Left dancing and singing like crazy buffoons.

Not just October and the months thereafter,
Rather the harvest and its every tractor
With the pumpkins and corn it's set to collect,
Children carving and the dreams they're set to infect.

We all know the stereotypical Halloween theme,
Where the world gives out candies that they deem
To be tradition on one such Pagan holiday,
Giving both sugar and nightmares as they may.

Costumes and masks of monsters galore,
The stories and tales told as folklore
Across tabletops and bonfires alike,
There until midnight decides to strike.

Yes, the season has arrived and gone,
Ole Hallows Eve with its curtains drawn
Open for all onlookers to see,
The year's days continuing—never just let be.

And though we must say goodbye as time rolls around,
Many shall revel in the memories they've thus found
In the painted faces and candies and ever-present fear,
But I know we'll do it all again next year.

Eldritch Falls: Death of A Bachelorette

by MADISON CLEMENTE

*Sally Slasher took a knife,
To cut everyone out on Halloween night,
And break the hearts of the boys she used to know,
For it is their own fault,
She took the wrong road.*

Sally Slasher took a knife—Jack Gardner sat up abruptly, gasping for air. His hands moved at their own accord, fumbling across the drenched fabric clinging to his chest in search of an entrance wound. To his surprise, he didn't find one.

Jack let out a small, relieved breath, the pain in his side started to subside, giving him everything he needed to know. It had been a nightmare, one that felt more real than any bad dream in a *very* long time.

He sat back against the headboard of his bed, forcing his eyes closed in order to rid himself of the eerie poem. It was an old nursery rhyme, a silly little song that the kids of Eldritch Falls would sing on the playground during recess while playing tag or jumping on and off the merry-go-round. Jack hadn't thought much about it before this week, he hadn't needed too.

The story of Sally Johnson, an innocent girl turned notorious one-night killer was an urban legend, a simple bedtime story used to keep the youth in line during Halloween. It was something used to scare children to make good choices and not stay out late, the consequence being Sally would come and snatch you up.

He glanced down at his lap, eyes falling onto the old newspaper still sitting there. Jack realized he must have dozed off while reading. A girl's yearbook photo stared back at him, the exact same face of his current date to the Halloween dance.

A shiver ran down his spine, prompting the hairs on the back of his neck to stand up. Maybe, his best friend had been right when they discovered something didn't seem right about the girl who happened to bid on Jack for the Morgue's Bachelor Auction. Her skin was far too pale, her hair oddly thin with swirling shades of grey.

She also had a strange resemblance to the same girl, who fifty years earlier killed her former lovers on Halloween night. It was said, by those in attendance at the party and local police reports, that Sally had officially snapped and was plagued by paranoia about the rumors surrounding the boys she used to date; they cheated, lied, and didn't love her. It is said that she took them each out with a kitchen knife, carving her name into their skin and cutting out their hearts right before she killed herself.

Of course, it would have been his luck that he and his two best friends raised a serial killer from the dead, and that said killer was his date to the dance. Then again, this was Eldritch Falls, anything was bound to happen.

Jack quickly threw off the covers and shot to his feet, already reaching for his phone. There was really only one way to find out if they had done the unthinkable.

"You know, I'm used to Blake being the one with all the horrible and spontaneous ideas, but this . . . this has probably got to be one of the worst you've ever come up with." Carter Campbell admitted truthfully, clutching one of their only sources of light between his fingertips.

The Eldritch Falls' public cemetery sat on the opposite side of town, eerie and abandoned underneath the light of the chilling October moon. It was well past midnight when the three boys finally took up camp, finding themselves standing at the foot of Sally Johnson's grave.

Jack sighed heavily and glanced up at the sandy-haired boy. He had stopped shoveling, although his grip on the item in his hand tightened. Blake Gregory and Jack were only a foot and half deep into the rocky earth, both drenched in a mixture of sweat and dirt. "I told you, you weren't going to like it." Jack reminded Carter, then paused, eyes closing briefly.

“But I . . . I just need to make sure Sarah isn’t Sally, I can’t explain why exactly . . . it’s almost like I’ll go crazy if I don’t know the truth.”

Blake snorted, lips curling upwards in amusement. “I think it’s a little too late for that buddy, everybody in this town already thinks you’re crazy.”

“Thanks Blake.” Jack said, tone anything but grateful. “What would I do without you and your encouraging words.”

Blake grinned and lightly patted his shoulder, not missing an inch of the sarcasm in Jack’s tone. “Probably a lot of stuff you shouldn’t have.”

Jack rolled his eyes and glanced back at Carter, who was looking like he would jump at the sight of his own shadow at this point. His skin was paler than normal, but his dark, brown eyes were wide and alert.

“You know we are technically trespassing, right?” he asked, voice moving a mile a minute. “Disturbing the dead counts as a second-degree felony if you’re caught and I really don’t feel like kick-starting my criminal record for the second time this week.”

Jack shook his head, biting back his rising smile. “No one is going to jail or kick-starting their criminal record.” he reassured Carter, watching the tension slowly start to slip from his shoulders. “We’ll be long gone before Mr. Boney makes his rounds.”

“Are you sure? Because remember what happened last time we were here? We almost got caught and then you ended up getting grounded which is one of the reasons why we are in this mess—”

“Look, Jack’s right.” Blake said, heaving a huge pile of dirt over his shoulder. “All we gotta do is take a quick, little peek inside to check and see if the body is still in there. If it is, no harm, no foul we’ll clean up the mess. Maybe, even throw in a few scented candles and do some sort of *Michael Jackson* style song and dance tribute . . . but if she isn’t, then we know that we might have accidentally raised the killer *Bride of Frankenstein* from the dead.”

“And that is supposed to make me feel so much better.” Carter muttered under his breath. He looked

away, body and flashlight beam drifting across the landscape till the light landed on a figure standing no more than two feet in front of him.

Carter hadn’t even heard footsteps approaching, and he was the one on watch. “What the—Jesus!” he dropped his flashlight and slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from screaming.

A heavy duffel bag landed on the ground by his feet with a loud thud, prompting Jack to suddenly look up slightly startled and Blake to drop his shovel, wide-eyed.

The person standing before the trio was definitely not the *girl* they were looking for. She was shorter, with longer hair, a familiar smirk and made of *real* flesh and bone.

“M-Maddy?” Carter questioned, slowly reaching down to pick up his flashlight. The Mayor’s daughter cocked her head to the side, smirk turning barbaric.

“What?” she teased. “Afraid I was the little ghoulfriend you’re looking for?”

“Okay, first of all, for the millionth time it was an accident and secondly . . . she isn’t our ghoulfriend”—Blake gestured between himself and Carter—“she’s *Jack’s* ghoulfriend.”

The boy in question turned to glare at him. “Seriously dude?” he asked, then fixed his attention on Maddy.

“I thought you said you were busy?”

She shrugged, kneeling down to unzip the bag she brought. “I was . . . but then I decided that hunting for your killer girlfriend sounded a whole lot better than studying for my chemistry quiz.”

“It’s your fault we’re even checking to see if she’s still buried six feet under, you know?” Blake said, shoveling once more.

Maddy slowly stood back up. Her hands found their way to her hips as she arched a brow, lips pressed firmly together. “How so exactly?”

Blake gestured to Jack with one hand, cradling his shovel against his chest with the other. "You didn't bid high enough on him."

Maddy's mouth fell ajar. "I'm not the one who summoned a deranged serial killer from the dead!" she shot back.

"She's got a point." Jack admitted with a shrug. Although Carter stayed silent, he nodded his head in agreement.

"Hey, hey! There is no need to start pointing fingers, it was a—wait, why are you dressed like a grave robber?" Blake asked instead, giving Maddy a once over. Her jeans were dark and surprisingly not ripped, her sweater was large and slipping off her right shoulder and the black beanie that sat atop her long, brown hair was a new addition.

She moved a few strands of hair back in order to get a better look at her outfit. Maddy met Blake's gaze a second later.

"Oh, I thought I came dressed like you." she confessed, a hard blow. But, the curly-haired boy hadn't come dressed in his usual "I shouldn't get caught because I've seen WAY too many movies" attire.

In fact, Blake's shirt was bright yellow. It was an Indiana Pacers jersey that he had thrown over his hoodie this morning. His expression turned grim. "You really aren't that funny, you know?"

Jack quickly drowned out the rest of their conversation turn argument, head shifting in the opposite direction towards the gates of the graveyard.

He could hear the faint rubble, something that sounded strangely like that of a car engine. His theory was proven right not even seconds later when Jack caught sight of a sudden flash of colorful lights and a single beep that belonged to a— "Get down!" he shouted, mere seconds before a lone cop car entered the grounds.

Carter turned off the flashlight and dropped down onto his stomach behind a neighboring gravestone, Blake switched off his headlamp and ducked while Jack aided Maddy in climbing down into the hole with him. Carter eventually pulled himself to his

knees, eyes just barely grazing the top of the weathering headstone. Three sets of heads popped up over the edge of the grave behind him, also looking in the direction of the incoming sound.

Tires on gravel, the screeching of brakes, an engine shutting off and a door slamming shut. A tall, slender man in his mid-forties stood less than twenty feet from the group in his standard police attire.

"Is that . . ." Maddy squinted in the dark, trying to make out the figure. "Sheriff Bailey?" she asked then paused briefly. "What is he doing here?"

"Probably, the same thing we are . . . except he's doing a security sweep and planning to arrest anyone he finds, living or dead." Jack offered. "The half-eaten bodies and missing limbs from the grave robbing's are just the beginning."

"Which I think we can thank our friend Sally Slasher for." Blake made sure to mention. The quartet stayed silent, the only sound being that of their shared breathing as they watched Sheriff Bailey do a quick sweep of the area. When he appeared satisfied, he said something into the walkie talkie on his chest, climbed back in his cop car and drove off.

Jack waited exactly sixty seconds, then resumed digging. It didn't take long till they were face to face with a brown, wooden coffin.

Carter swallowed hard, no doubt forcing back his dinner that was threatening to make a reappearance. "Is it too late to turn back now?" He was answered by a chorus of yeses.

Blake smirked, dropping his shovel. "This is it, Sally Slasher's casket."

The boy on his feet above him, shook his head. "We're breaking so many laws for this."

"Just get down here!" Maddy ordered. Without much protest, mostly to do with the fact that Maddy could be quite terrifying, Carter did as instructed and climbed down into the grave.

Jack used his shovel to break the lock. "You wanna do the honors?" he asked Blake, stomach twisting at the thought of what they were about to do.

His best friend waved him off. “Nah, man. She chose you, she’s your girl. I think you should be the one to check if she’s inside.”

Jack frowned. “I was the one who did most of the digging!”

“So? I had to haul my ass out of a two-story window too—”

“Fine!” Maddy shouted, pushing aside either boy. She stepped between the two in order to open the box. “I’ll do it.” she said. “God, you guys can be such drama queens. Geez, calm down.” she muttered, earning a small chuckle from Carter.

Maddy leaned forward and pulled open the casket. They each held their breaths.

It was empty.

She stood back up, an odd expression dancing across her pretty features. No one spoke, but the group all shared the same matching looks.

“Isn’t . . . there you know . . . supposed to be a body in there?” Maddy asked aloud, after a few seconds of silence. “One preferably made of bone?”

Jack ran a hand through his messy hair. “You know what this means, then?” He had been really hoping Carter was wrong and that the nice girl he was taking to the Halloween dance tomorrow night wasn’t actually a deranged serial killer.

What were the odds that when someone actually wanted to get to know him (not that he had much of a choice when it came to the bachelor auction) they were some sort of supernatural creature? None of them could catch a break, or be in a happy, normal relationship.

“You happen to be dating a real-life version of *Jennifer Check*? Except instead of trying to seduce you and eat your flesh, she wants to turn you into her corpse husband by possibly burying you alive?”

Blake was met with three sets of eyes, each not finding his comment in the least bit funny. “What?” he asked, shoulders slumping. “It was just a joke.”

“Okay, I can get behind the theory that this town’s underlying Eldritch energy is one of the sparks that brought Sally back to life, just look at half the stuff it’s been cooking up recently, and that she’s been feeding on the newest burials in order to stay young. But what I can’t pinpoint exactly, is what caused her to officially rise from the dead.” Carter said.

“I’ve got a thought.” Maddy began, pursing her lips. “Maybe it has something to do with the fact that three dumbasses with a Ouija board tried to take a shot at summoning the dead?” she suggested, folding her arms. “It makes perfect sense.”

Maddy had told them it was a stupid idea to begin with, even after she had found out that they had done it for fun as part of their pre-Halloween tradition. It was something that they should have been cautious about doing, especially when living in a town like Eldritch Falls, a tourist trap known for its ties to the supernatural. Demon drivers ed cars, vampire pageant queens, evil lunch ladies, athletic crazed ghosts trapped in letterman’s jackets, they had plenty of red flags to keep them from indulging in something as simple as talking to the dead.

Carter instantly threw his hands up in defense at the accusation, then pointed at Blake. “To be fair, it was all his idea.” he said, to which the taller boy glared at him.

“Hey!” Blake cried. “I thought we said we weren’t pointing fingers and that it was a collective accident!”

Maddy shook her head. “I don’t care whose idea it was.” she told them. “We just need to find Sally before tomorrow night—she glanced over at Jack—or worse, before she finds you.”

They all understood the consequences of what was to come. This wasn’t just another normal monster of the week. Someone could get seriously injured, or more unwelcomed, join the army of the undead.

“Yeah, I don’t feel like becoming a ghouls’ zombie boyfriend.” Jack admitted. “Or her late-night snack.” he added rather morbidly a second later, shivering at the afterthought.

“This isn’t going to be a normal Halloween after all, is it?” Carter asked, saying what they all seemed to

be thinking. "Because at this point, I'm starting to think staying inside and watching old horror movies with all the doors' bottled shut doesn't sound like such a bad idea."

Maddy smiled proudly at the statement and gestured to the shorter boy. "I told you." she beamed happily.

Jack shook his head, knowing the answer to be obvious, his eyes fell back onto the empty box. "When has anything in this town ever been normal?"

Kathryn Hinds Memorial Prize

In the Fall of 2019, the English Department of The University of North Georgia established two memorial prizes to honor Kathryn Ann Fernquist Hinds and John Ingrisano. Kathryn Hinds was an adored member of the English Department from 2011 until her passing in 2018. The UNG community knew Kathryn as an inspiring teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. Kathryn was a prolific writer, having published extensively in such diverse genres as poetry, historical nonfiction, fantasy fiction, and young adult fiction. To commemorate her legacy, a prize will be awarded each year for the best creative writing in any genre. This year's winner is "We Don't Understand" by J. Sebastián Chérres.

We Don't Understand

by J. SEBASTIÁN CHÉRRES

Eris blinked, and she jumped a little as though she'd been dropped, her mind struggling to boot itself back up and take in her unfamiliar surroundings. She was sitting in an uncomfortable plastic chair with thin, unforgiving gray padding. Her hands abruptly reached out and gripped the armrests, head reflexively snapping up and smacking against the wall with a hollow thunk. Pain and heat gnawed on her like someone was failing to start a fire on her lower back as Eris rubbed her head and winced. The discomfort soon faded, and she allowed herself to relax with a forceful breath. While she looked around to scan her environment, she clenched and unclenched her jaw to cope with the frustration of hitting her head.

More chairs identical to hers lined the perimeter of the cramped room, two chairs pushed back against each wall, an unassuming side table crowding the already minimal gap between each pair. Standard office tiles and rectangular fluorescent lights clung to the ceiling, muffling an idly humming air conditioning unit somewhere above. Eris' eyes narrowed and she ran her fingers through her hair, shaking her head softly. *No windows*, she thought, leaning forward, eyes darting from chair to ceiling to chair to table. *No doors. Nothing on the walls. No one else around* . . . She opened her mouth, took a breath, closed her mouth, then sighed in a quiet huff before whispering to the empty room.

“. . . what the *fuck* is going on?”

Eris leaned back in her seat and glared at the side table on the opposite side of the room, crossing one ankle over the other. *Right, so, how did I get here? After I woke up, I . . .*

Recollection sparked, and Eris' hands instinctively darted to her jacket pockets, heart jumping a little in her chest. Her fingertips brushed against cool metal, and she exhaled softly as she pulled out her set of lockpicks, turning it over in her hands and opening the case to inspect it. She blinked and her brows flickered, her chest tightening as her index finger traced along an empty slot. *I lost one? There's no way I'm that stupidly careless, right?* Eris closed her

eyes and leaned forward, resting her forearms on her legs, finger running along the missing pick's housing.

I got up. Had water. Double-checked the location. Grabbed my belt, my jacket, my picks, my knife . . .

Eris' eyes snapped open and head rose, her hand instinctively patting her right hip, and her chest seized again. She looked down and flicked the corner of her jacket aside, and a pulsing chill started in her arms and crawled all along her spine as she realized *I don't have my fucking knife*. A missing lockpick she could excuse with some light handwaving. Her knife, meanwhile, should either be in her hand, or secure in the now-empty sheath on her belt. *Who could've even—*

Her train of thought sped through a hairpin turn and derailed itself as Eris lifted her head to scan the room again and froze with the realization that her surroundings had somehow changed again. Even the chair felt different, thicker padding and a more comfortable back, built solidly with a faint scent of communal firewood that her nose immediately picked up after the sterile palate cleanser the waiting room had been. The room was an office now, warm, heavy, and dim thanks to the nearly orange lamplight on the desk that sat in front of her and curtained windows just behind it. Soft creaking and crackling noises behind her and to the left, as well as a gently pulsing orange glow dancing along the curtains, meant there was probably a lit fireplace. The desk in front of her had hardly anything on it besides the lamp, a notepad that had about half its pages folded over the top, a fountain pen, and what looked like a bishop from a chess set, but Eris was too focused on the person sitting on the other side of the desk to give it a second glance.

Staring directly at her was a man, middle aged from what she could tell, but that wasn't much of a guarantee. Clean shaven and neatly combed hair, casually dressed, and leaning forward with his forearms braced nonchalantly against the lip of the desk as he sat in a chair that was similar if not identical to the one she sat in. His face was round and expres-

sion neutral, almost unassuming, but his eyes were dark and deep. His were a shade of blue so rich they matched the darkness behind him, the occasional pulse of orange from the lamp and fire making them glow for a moment as they absorb and swirl the brightness sinking into them before the light shifts and they go dark again. *Dark, aware, but not threatening. He's either not a threat, or he assumes I'm not a threat myself.*

"You're perceptive."

Eris jumped a bit at the sudden statement, the stranger casting his eyes down and shaking his head lightly as if remembering a load of busywork he had to attend to. He ran his slim fingers through his hair while flipping through the used pages on the notepad, each one totally covered in cramped, tight handwriting Eris wouldn't have been able to read even with good lighting. He trailed his finger along a few errant lines to notes before tapping the pad and nodding his head with a confirming *click* noise from his lips.

"That tracks with what I've got here, anyway," he said, his voice light and natural, and he glanced up at her before continuing, eyes heavy and endless. "I'd expect nothing less from a serial murderer."

Eris had a physical reaction to the accusation, her entire body tensing. Her right hand snapped to the empty sheath on her hip again, and her mind flew at Mach 5 trying to analyze a response, verbal or physical, to the situation she found herself in, the stranger across from her, and his statement.

"What is this?" Her mouth moved of its own accord, her voice a strained tightrope, vibrating dangerously at the lightest disturbance. Eris kept her tense stance as the man gave a wincing sigh.

"This is my fault, really." The man set his pad down and shook his head, his face apologetic, his eyes still alert and cavernous. "I should know by now dropping people into the deep end doesn't make this any clearer. Putting you in the waiting room makes things even more confusing, I'm sure, but we've had a busy set of weeks here."

Eris held her silence, wetting her lips lightly while her eyes searched for any purchase in the slippery

trench of his eyes. She very desperately wanted to say *this had better get to the part where you explain why you accused me of being a serial murderer real fucking quick*, but something about the man, and the room, and all the weirdness happening gave her the impression there was a lot she didn't know about the situation. *Interrupting the guy who's about to explain himself probably wouldn't be a good move here, at least not yet. The second I have my bearings, though . . .*

As the thought crossed Eris' mind, she noticed a subtle change in his expression, his lips moving very slightly, eyes flicking just a bit, fast enough to make her wonder if she imagined it.

"Here's the long and short of it," continued the man, tapping the other end of his fountain pen against the notepad. "You're dead, and it's my job to help you accept your death and move on to the afterlife."

"I'm . . ." Eris' voice faded as her throat closed up, and she stared off into a dark corner of the room as she tried to make sense of how that could even be possible, one of her hands going to her chest to feel for a heartbeat.

There wasn't one.

"Yes, Eris, you're dead." Hearing the man speak her name brought her eyes back to his, a viscous dread coating the insides of her lungs, every breath feeling shallow. A patient, open expression held to his face, and he spun the notepad around and pushed it to her. "This is an account of your life. Apologies for my rushed handwriting, but you should see my point."

Eris leaned forward, hesitant to touch the pad. Her lips parted and brows furrowed as she read the open page. *December 23rd, awoke at 2:34 AM and left on foot, arriving to her destination by 3:22 AM, where she broke in—*

"Okay, but what the actual fuck is this?" Eris glanced up and tapped the line she'd been reading, her confusion draining into her gut and boiling into the beginnings of cornered rage. "Who are you, and how do you know any of this?"

The man reached across the table and pulled the notepad back. "You can call me Calvin, for what it's

worth,” he said, languidly twirling his pen between his fingers. “This is a brick wall you shouldn’t bang your head against. You’re dead. If you’d kept reading, you’d remember that you went upstairs to the master bedroom after picking the front door lock of the suburban house you visited. You were prepared to deal with the alarm, but dropped your pick as a car passed by, forcing you to scramble inside to avoid being seen. You went upstairs to the master bedroom, pulled out your knife, and stabbed a man you hadn’t even met through the heart as he lay sleeping.”

Eris leaned back into her chair, eyes hard and calculating. *He’s making a point. I still don’t know jack shit about what’s going on. Just wait.* She swallowed the lump that’d been clinging to the back of her throat and another thought prodded at the back of her mind, though she tried her hardest to ignore it. *If I really am dead, there’s not much worse that could happen, right?*

Calvin—if *that’s even his real name*—continued, occasionally glancing down at the notepad. “Unfortunately for you, his spouse was using the master bathroom, and when she heard bodies thumping and cloth tearing, she grabbed the firearm they kept under their sink, opened the door to find a stranger standing over her bed, and shot you in the L1 vertebrae. Your spine lost contact with your legs, causing you to fall over backwards and hit the back of your head on the corner of the nightstand. A hematoma formed in your brain, and you died on the floor well before the police or ambulance arrived.” Calvin paused for a moment before flipping down the pages of the notebook and smoothing them out, raising an eyebrow at her as he did so. “Does that sound right?”

It does. As he’d spoken, the memory returned to her, and Eris could only slump back in her chair, her eyes darting back and forth as she stared off into space and remembered the scene of her death. Her lower back twinged again, and she subconsciously rubbed the back of her head as she blinked and swallowed heavily. *I hadn’t even thought twice about it. It was just another house. I had the knife in his back, then something moved behind me, then my back exploded in pain and I was falling—*Eris’ eyes focused on Calvin’s, still smooth and vast and bottomless—*and then . . . darkness.*

“What the hell is this?” she asked, her voice soft and terse, the uncertainty binding a distant relative of fear to her tone. Calvin nodded sympathetically and pursed his lips for a moment.

“This is purgatory, you could call it.” Calvin leaned back in his chair, shifting his weight to rest an elbow on the armrest. “Every soul who dies passes through here, and they can only move on to their afterlife once they’ve accepted their deaths.”

“*Their* afterlife?” The question scrambled up Eris’ throat and slipped past her lips without thinking. “. . . which afterlife?”

“We don’t know,” Calvin replied, spreading his fingers and shrugging. “It hardly matters. My job is to get you to accept your death, not whatever comes after. Every soul before has accepted theirs, and every soul after will follow suit.”

A righteous indignation swelled in Eris’ chest. Her posture stiffened and her hand drifted along her empty sheath again on instinct. “And . . .” She paused to swallow the lump that had metastasized in her throat. “. . . if I don’t accept my death?”

Calvin pressed his lips together, the corners of his mouth curling into a gentle smile just on the fringe of being condescending.

“I see. I should’ve expected as much from your file, but I’m going to have to refer you to Susan.”

As he flipped to the last page of her file to scribble down a note, Eris narrowed her eyes. Her mouth opened to politely inquire about what the hell a referral meant in this context, but when she blinked, her surroundings changed once again.

She was in an airplane now, sat in a window seat just narrow enough to be uncomfortable, just enough space between the seat in front of her to torture her legs with the promise of full extension. A glance through the open window on Eris’ left revealed nothing but a series of night-soaked clouds blocking her view. Brief flashes of light pulsed meekly from within the swirling streaks of padded night. *City lights? No . . . it’s flashing. They’re just wing lights. Probably.*

Craning her neck, Eris glanced around the cabin, the only light sources being the tiny aisle lights and whatever diluted moonlight could trickle in from the open windows, dusting the interior with a soft cloud-colored condensation. Every other seat was empty, and the arrhythmic jolting of the place made it harder for her to ignore the poorly-padded, angular seat digging into her legs and back at perfectly obnoxious angles. *Whoever this Susan woman is needs to get a better place*, she grumbled to herself as she tried to readjust to a more comfortable position, testing the recline button—*of course it's broken, why wouldn't it be?*—when she noticed a dark outline making its way down the aisle, light clattering and squeaky wheels accompanying it. As the figure approached, Eris got a better look.

A woman looked down at her, younger than Calvin judging by her face, though comparing potential age against Calvin probably wasn't a great metric to begin with. With auburn hair pulled back into a ponytail, a face with a light coating of makeup peered through the damp lighting, her muted flight attendant uniform causing her to blend in with the watercolor light bleeding into the cabin. Her face was angular and expression curt, though her eyes were clear and bright. Hers were a tone of brown so light they pierced the murky haze of the cabin, the passing shadows of clouds and flickering aisle lights occasionally making it seem like her eyes were suspended alone in the air, everything else disappearing until the light returned and muted the intensity of her stare. *Light, clear, but not innocent. If she has secrets, she doesn't hide them in her eyes.*

"I see why Calvin said you're perceptive." The "attendant" halted the cart next to Eris' aisle—*trapping me in, don't think I didn't fucking notice that*—and rested an elbow on the headrest of a seat in the previous row. "I'm Susan. I told him you should see me first, but he insisted on taking you anyway."

Prolonged exposure to her surreal reality dulled Eris' ability to remain speechless, a reply already neatly arranged in her mouth.

"You're here to convince me to accept my death, too?"

"Convince isn't the word I'd use, but yes."

"Why the different surroundings, then? First an office, then a plane? Is this supposed to make any sense?"

"Mm, that's not the point of this," Susan said with a shake of her head and purse of her lips. Her fingernails idly tapped on the side of the drink cart. "You know enough to understand why you're here, and that's enough."

Eris pressed her lips together and fidgeted in her seat again, crossing her legs and glaring up at Susan. *Nothing new to tell me? Then I'll return the favor.*

Susan's eyes flickered in a manner eerily similar to how Calvin's had, and just as briefly.

"Enough about us. This is supposed to be about you, after all. You're nowhere near the first serial murderer we've seen here, but they're always a challenge." A brief stab of panic sprinted through Eris' mind as Susan referenced her deeds so casually. Her fingers reached for her belt, again, but Susan continued before she could form another reply.

"What would you say your relationship with death is like?"

My what, now? Eris leaned back in her seat, clenching her jaw as she rolled her response in her mouth for a moment. *Relationship with death? You're trying to convince me to give into it, what do you think my opinion on it is?*

"It sounds like you know everything I've ever done. You tell me. I'd say I'm pretty familiar with it."

Eris crossed her arms. Although her act of defiance lost a bit of its luster as she had to readjust again on the utterly awful seat, seeing Susan's eyes darken and lips purse again brought Eris no small amount of satisfaction. *Yes, I'm being difficult. I don't want to die. Fuck you.*

"Sending people to their deaths doesn't equate to a relationship." The light in the cabin faded as the plane cut through a particularly heavy cloud, and Susan's bright brown eyes gleamed dangerously in the brief submarine darkness. "Pushing people off a cliff doesn't tell you anything about what the bottom is like."

“Who cares?” Being spoken to like a child had finally ground Eris’ patience down to a bare nerve. “It’s not like it matters. My ‘relationship with death’ won’t matter if I’m dead anyway and all this is just . . . just fucking killing time.” The realization sapped the warmth from Eris’ chest, and she slumped a bit in her chair, looking back up at Susan. “Am I just killing time? Am I . . . ?” She paused to swallow another cancerous lump in her throat, and Susan interrupted, a tiny smile creeping onto her face.

“Well done. I’m impressed, really.”

“. . . What?”

“That was a revelation I thought I’d have to drag out of you, but you stumbled into it all on your own.”

“I . . .” *What the hell is she on about?*

“You *are* ‘just fucking killing time’ here. It’s not a puzzle. There’s no back way out, no loophole to exploit, no technicality to point at. There’s only death, and whatever comes with it. The only variable is time.”

“. . . Are you . . . ?” Eris blinked and moistened her lips, her words fading as she closed her mouth, opened it to speak, then closed it again. *Are you testing me?* crouched in the middle of her throat, but something inside her mind refused to let her voice the question.

Again, Susan smiled, and she reached down to open a compartment on the drink cart.

“Yes, Eris, we are. And you’re passing with flying colors.”

Wait, I fucking know I didn’t say that out loud—

Then she was back in the office.

The shift from the aquatic dusk of the plane to the bleeding warmth of Calvin’s office sent a shiver down Eris’ spine, and her lower back twinged once again. *I’m never going to get used to that.*

Calvin still sat in his same chair on the other side of the desk, although now there was a second, smaller notepad next to his original one. Eris could just bare-

ly make out a different style of handwriting before he turned it facedown and looked up at her again. After Susan’s porcupine quill stare, Calvin’s abyssal blue eyes were almost a welcome sight. *Almost.*

“I see Susan let you in on a few things,” he said, tapping the turned-over pad lightly and watching her smoothly.

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“What would be another way of putting it?”

“Making everything more fucking confusing.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

Calvin leaned back and attentively poised his fountain pen above his pad. Eris scoffed.

“There’s no point. The more I say, the more words I give you to twist around and psychoanalyze.”

The corner of Calvin’s mouth twitched, and his eyes flicked up to hers briefly from his pad.

“You’ve certainly acclimated to all this already. Before I referred you, you were soft spoken and tense. Now you’re completely at ease, saying whatever comes to mind. I find that curious.”

“It’s not like you can do anything to me. If I really am dead, and the end is inevitable, like you’re saying . . .” Eris’ bravado briefly stumbled on a reality pebble. *That’s pretty big fucking “if.”*

“That’s a fair point. I’d respond by saying neither of us has threatened you with consequences for refusing to accept your death. We only want to understand.”

“Understand?”

“Yes.” Calvin stood, moving slowly, although any movement was enough to make Eris twitch, fingers aching for her belt once again. He stood behind his chair and leaned forward to rest his forearms on the backrest. “How do you feel about all this, Eris? Irony at a murderer meeting death? Regret from having your life cut short? Rage at being told you’re already dead?”

Eris paused to take a slow breath, watching Calvin's face and eyes intently. *These questions aren't for my benefit. They've both seen enough people go by to know I . . . probably won't hold out for very long. These questions are for them, not for me.*

"There's nothing you'd find interesting," she finally said. "I feel like I don't want to die, is that what you want to hear?"

"You've told us that much, and it's a common sentiment. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't expected more."

"I'm fucking dead and I'd rather not be. What else is there to say?"

"Is that really all? Is there nothing you wish you would have done differently? No final wish, no impulse left unsatisfied?"

"Of course there are things I would have done differently. I wouldn't have gotten shot if I knew what was coming. Not much I can do about it now."

"This is fascinating." Calvin shook his head in disbelief and scribbled furiously on his notepad, occasionally glancing back up to meet her eyes. "You're utterly vehement in your desire to not accept your death, but when I ask you why you care or what you're holding onto . . . you have nothing to say. You're just stalling for time. An intense, burning indifference . . ."

As he continued to scribble on the pad, a thought struck Eris. She leaned forward in her chair, opening her mouth and pointing a finger at Calvin.

"I know what this is now. You're looking for a reason. You want the *why* behind everything."

He paused in his writing and met her stare coolly, the whirlpool blue of his eyes less mystical now that she knew what they wanted to draw in.

"Yes, you're correct. Why are you restating this?"

"Because there isn't any."

"Excuse me?"

"There isn't any *why*." Eris crossed her arms, and she felt a smug smile she had no intentions of hiding sneak its way onto her face. "This is exactly why I never got caught, anyway. I forget the exact number, but there's some stat that says people are usually murdered by someone they know. Everyone spent so long trying to find someone linked, someone with a motive, and I used that to my advantage. It's so much easier to not get caught when killing is something that just comes naturally."

"So, you . . ." Calvin paused and tapped his pad in thought with the back end of his pen. ". . . There was never any greater purpose? You only ever led your life as a murderer because it . . . 'came naturally' to you?"

"Exactly." Eris leaned back and closed her eyes in satisfaction. *Damn, it feels good to be the one leading people to the obvious conclusion.*

When she opened them again, she was back on the plane.

She jerked upright in her downgraded seat, eyes quickly finding Susan, who still blocked her path to the aisle with the drink cart. A bright flash sent a flare of white light through the windows on the other side of the plane, followed by a rumbling wave of thunder, the jolting causing Eris to have to grip the seat in front of her for balance. She tried her best to steady herself through the rough weather while also glaring at Susan.

"Why am I back here?" Indignant confusion tugged at her vocal cords.

"Because Calvin referred you to me again. We can send you back and forth as often as we like."

"I was talking to him! I fucking had him on the ropes!"

"I saw. He does that sometimes. Every time, really."

Although she knew it was a bit petulant, Eris couldn't help but cross her arms and glare out of the window on her left, the clouds shivering and splitting around the wing and lightning as the plane plowed through the storm.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Just because he kicked me out doesn’t mean I wasn’t fucking right.”

“Believe me, if anyone had reason to gripe about Calvin ducking arguments, it’s me.” Susan sighed and pushed the drink cart to the next row and lifted the aisle armrest so she could take a seat, the two of them separated by the center seat. Eris watched carefully as Susan reached behind her head and undid her ponytail, shaking her head briefly before leaning back and rolling her head to the side to lazily stare back. “I suppose there’s no real reason to hold you here anymore. We’ve got our answers, or at the very least an interesting response.”

“Hold me here anymore”? Excuse me?

“What the hell are you talking about? Isn’t the whole reason I’m stuck in this therapeutic purgatory because I haven’t accepted my death yet?”

“That’s what we told you, yes.” Susan sighed again and rubbed her eyes. “In truth, we intercept souls here before they move on. Noteworthy souls, ones who we feel have something to say, based on their files, the lives they’ve lived.”

“So . . . I’m still dead?”

“Yes. The minute either Calvin or I decide your soul gets released and goes to whatever afterlife the universe has planned for you.”

“So, you weren’t lying when you said you don’t know what comes after?” Eris frowned and turned in her seat to face Susan with her whole body, a flash of lighting and wave of thunder accompanying her movement. “Forgive me if I don’t take you at your word anymore.”

“It’s the truth.” Susan’s brown eyes gleamed again. Despite her laid-back position, they shone an even more threatening brightness whenever a bolt of lightning flashed across them. “There’s so much we don’t understand about the world. We’re stuck here, between life and death, with only the power to pull a few souls aside to tell us what the rest of the world is like. We want to know what your life was like, what *everything* is like.”

Eris mulled this newest revelation in her mind for several moments, eyes flicking intensely around the cabin from window to floor to aisle to terrifying piercing glowing eyes and back again. A brief bundle of thoughts warred for dominance, but one question beat the rest into submission and firmly sat itself on the tip of Eris’ tongue.

“Why me?”

“Because you fascinated us.” Susan straightened in her seat, turning to face Eris as she had moments before. “Because you tore through your life with such a blatant disregard for the lives of others, for your own life, that we figured there had to be some grand meaning, a raw purpose driving you.” Susan smiled bitterly and laughed softly. “Only to find there was no underlying reason. You killed because it came naturally, an instinct, and you couldn’t even be bothered to work out why you should accept your death. You left such a stain on the world, on the lives of so many others, with no true purpose. You just . . . existed.”

Hearing her entire existence stripped down to so simple a synopsis wasn’t doing Eris’ sanity any favors, but she managed to keep her composure. A sudden ripple of calm started in her chest and spread throughout her body with a single, steady breath, and she met Susan’s stare.

“Sorry if I disappointed,” Eris apologized, searching Susan’s eyes for any further details, but coming up empty-handed. “I just lived a life. I didn’t know I’d be judged for it.”

“This isn’t judgment. Only observation. Besides, if what you’ve told us is true, there isn’t much else to observe with you anyway.”

Susan extended her hand casually. Eris hesitated for a minute, a final wave of thunder jostling the cabin, before reaching out for a firm handshake. Susan nodded at Eris, and a soft smile spread across her face, all traces of scrutiny and distance absent.

“Thank you for existing, Eris. A life lost is a life lived.”

Eris blinked one final time, and the dark embrace of death claimed her at last.

Fucking finally.

John Ingrisano Memorial Prize

AWARD CITATION FROM THE JUDGES OF THE JOHN INGRISANO MEMORIAL PRIZE: Regarding the first place winner, one judge said, “I really like Hadley Blankenship’s ‘Poco a la Montaña’—it was very advanced in its use of the bandages, lies, candy, fame, and legacy. The imagery and symbolism stood as polished techniques and added significantly to the reading. The relationship between the two characters proves universal in nature given that as a child, they didn’t understand nor believe in the gravity of the situation—very authentically juvenile and therefore relatable to all readers. I found the entire piece outstanding. The content was something Ingrisano would have found creative and worthy of a prize like this one.” Another judge added, “The major strength of Blankenship’s ‘Poco de la Montaña’ is that it blends believable dialogue with minimal exposition—Blankenship’s ability to show, rather than tell, is the highlight of this piece.” About the second place winner, a judge said, “Hana Tucker’s ‘The Drummer Boy’ held my attention in its use of letters between a mother and a young son. The letters demonstrated a relationship between the characters as well as a dynamic within the family to which I found relatable to a universal audience. The piece also demonstrated a creative use of research which I thought to read quite effectively.” Another judge said, “Tucker’s ‘The Drummer Boy’ does very well in establishing style—the author’s voice comes through and establishes a strong and purposeful narrative.” Lastly, one judge wrote this about the third place winner: “Pierce Garramone’s ‘Now Am Found’ provided keen imagery throughout the entire piece. As a reader, I found the visualization a particularly effective aide in understanding that being said in the direct dialogue as well as the implied messages left unspoken between the characters.” And another judge thought that “Garramone does an excellent job of building suspense with subtle details, and he does very well in allowing the reader to engage the mystery without being overly explanatory.”

Poco de la Montaña

by HADLEY BLANKENSHIP

“Dang it, Kev. How are you so short, huh?” Poco grumbled, pitching rocks into the stream running beside us. It was the middle of August then, and the air had grown grittier and wet as we walked along a treaded path.

His throws were weaker than I remembered, since his wrist was all bandaged-up. I wiped the sweat from my forehead as we trudged along the muddy path, our breaths hacking like dying birds. That was our punishment for being so relatively unfit and useless. And it was only during this walk when I realized how much I despised me and Poco for skipping gym class. I wondered if that was also why his wrist seemed so numb and useless. It was as if simply wrapping a bandage around it made him crippled.

He used to use that bandage all the time to get out of gym class, and I couldn't help but tease him for it. He'd used it so often that the bandage itself looked more ripped-up than his throwing arm. He always had a different reason for his wrist every day too. In January, it was a torn fiber. In February, it was a fractured joint. In March, it was a surgery. In April, it was a popped artery. In May, it was Leukemia. And June was just him wearing it around to get free candy from the supermarket since he did all of his parents' shopping. If Spider-Man were reading this now and heard me tell him what I had done, he'd never forgive me for my sins. For, with Poco's great power of fibbing, I mooched off his abuse of it and became his partner in crime instantly. We were like the anti-Batman and Robin duo, always skipping gym and getting free stuff.

Unlike Poco, my excuse was always the same. If somebody said “are you going to PE?” all I'd have to say is “Poco wanted me to sit out so he isn't lonely. Is that okay?”

It always worked. People are real suckers at times. I even proved this by telling my mom I was going on a hike that day with Poco because he didn't have much time on Earth to live with his Leukemia. I'm sure if I ever mentioned Poco just as somebody I was hiking with so close to sunset, she would've had a connip-

tion. The woman worries about me too much not to. I'm her only son to begin with, so I understand her thought process. But I think she just wants me to be happy anyways, and that's why she's a sucker to begin with. If life has taught me anything, it's that people can make themselves happy. Otherwise, you'll just pee your pants with misery.

Poco did, anyway. He used to cry and pee at the same time when he was real little. Now he kind of just pees. I hadn't seen him cry in a good while at the time. Then again, I never really looked at his face. Only his wrist. I couldn't take my eyes off it. Plus, I was WAY shorter than he was by an entire foot. Somehow, he was a pee-cryer and 6'0" by age 11.

“Whatcha' mean, Pocky?” I spat in the bushes next to me, since a gnat flew into my mouth from the water beside us. I never forgave that gnat either for what it'd done to me.

“I mean ya look like Edie Gaedel, Kev. Do you know anything about Edie Gaedel though?” Poco rolled his eyes, picking up a stick and hitting it against the tree trunks beside us.

“Knowing you, I suppose he's a baseball player. You act like he's some enigma though the way you're using his name and mine like that.” I chuckled, sighing and staring at the blunt sky. Clouds started covering the sun a little, so I didn't have as wonderful of a sunset to watch. I was sure Poco did with his big, stupid, skinny, napkin-thin body.

“You're right about one thing. The man was an enigma alright. Shortest guy to ever play in the MLB, and ya' know how many hits he got?” Poco whipped the stick on a trunk and broke it in half as he said this.

“Watch the splinters, jerkwad! Jeez.” I shouted since he almost murdered me for the fifteenth time. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to my free candy just yet. Poco said kids like us don't get to go to Heaven and get free candy in the afterlife anyways, so I was always trying to be careful. I even threw away my rollerblades to prevent me stepping on them,

tripping, then falling on my face so hard my brains would explode.

“Oh come on! You won’t die from a stick! How stupid is that? A stick killin’ ya out here?” Poco chuckled sickly, smacking the gum in between his chubby lips. “Anyways, Kev, he got no hits or runs much.”

“Who? Edie Gaedel?”

“Uh, *yeah*. Geez, you’re slower than a tortoise.” Poco picked up another rock, then stopped himself, gazing into the water beside him.

“Okay, but what about him? Uh, Poco?” I stared at him, watching him stand at the edge of the stream with an unthrown rock in his hand. He didn’t answer me, only turned around and kept walking up the mountain trail as if nothing happened.

There was a silent agreement me and Poco had a while back, where we both decided if one of us ever stopped talking or insulting each other, the other needed to shut their trap, because the silent one was prolly lying. We used this method with our teachers all the time. If one of us was called on to come to the front of the class to talk about something like Poco’s “May Leukemia,” Poco would go up to the front of the room and say nothing. Then the teacher would ask me if I could go up to the front of the room and help Poco explain Leukemia to a bunch of noobs. In that case, my job was to stay silent and make no eye contact with anybody, as if I never heard her to begin with. Even if the teacher had offered either of us candy, we were required to resist the urge to answer any question for the other person if they were silent about it. That way, we kept our lies alive. I’ll admit it was an oath I never technically swore, which is how I can come out and brag about Poco and I’s brilliant fibs so confidently. I ain’t owe him nothing, though.

“Anyways, he was a short guy. 3’11” or somethin’. But that’s what he was famous for, just bein’ short and playin’ ball. Makes it seem so easy.” Poco grunted as he tossed the rock in his hand at a tree branch far away from us.

“I’m not *that* short! And you and I know I will never be famous!” I laughed a little, but the idea of me being shorter than him still stung a little. He used to be ten times shorter than me. I don’t know when or

how he grew so quickly. I assumed it was sometime over the summer break.

I hadn’t seen him all of that summer at all. He never called me or asked me to hang out or nothing. It was as if he’d completely forgotten about me. And because he never talked to me, I never talked to him. For a long time, I honestly thought we weren’t friends anymore. But when school started in August was when he returned as the only person in my life I could resonate with. And I think he missed me a bunch, because he wouldn’t ever leave my side. He got a bit clingy for most of the year. He wouldn’t even go to the bathroom alone. And I wondered around that time if maybe his lies to skip PE weren’t even lies. Which was why I was hiking with him so late in the afternoon. He refused to go alone.

So, me being confused about his height at the beginning of the year was completely logical. I’ll admit I was jealous of it though. If maybe God had given me just one more foot, then I could be more like somebody cool, like Robert Wadlow, and not some rando like *Edie Gaedel*. Who even names their kid Edie?! That’s just plain sacrilege. You really need to get your kid a nickname or something, like “Ed” or “Edison” so they seem super-duper smart and get accepted into college, because I know a pet name like “Edie” won’t get anybody anywhere. It didn’t get Edie Gaedel any hits or runs. The man could get hits and runs all on his own. It didn’t matter his height, but the fame he gained from his shortness is a different story. The man was definitely infamous for his shortness. But he was famous for being short and a baseball player. If I had known that at the time, I would’ve understood Poco’s antics. He was trying to tell me something.

“Lucky. I would *kill* if people stopped asking me to do things all the time.” Poco grunted, finally just walking beside me like a normal person.

“Asking things? Like for your cookies at lunch or sum?” I sighed, looking at Poco’s stale, grey shirt. His hand rubbed his wrist bandage.

“Leukemia, Kev. Stupid Mrs. Feeslethorne. I hate that woman with a passion, her makin’ me go up to the class like Pinocchio and sing some silly ol’ preachy song about Leukemia. I don’t wanna be famous for

somethin' like that when I grow old, like Edie with his height."

"Well, whatcha wanna be famous for? I can tell you now throwing with that wrist of yours ain't gonna work out in the long run. That thing has been so bandaged it's as if it doesn't work anymore." I joked with him, reaching to feel its brash texture. Poco jerked his wrist away.

"Kev, it's actually injured." Poco laughed out of awkwardness and fear.

"I know that trick, Pocky. You can't fool me. I bet if I took that bandage off there'd be nothin' underneath there. Not even blood." I was only kidding with him at first.

"I don't know. It's kinda sick. My mom told me to keep it wrapped because it's too ugly to be seen by human eyes. It's like a tumor or something. The kind that grow eyeballs and teeth!" Poco gnashed his teeth like a bear.

"I have been watching PG-13 movies since I was born! It can't be that bad!" I boasted.

"Okay, butcha can't tell anybody what I showed ya. Okay?" Poco paused.

"On my spit, grit, and . . . I can't say that word."

"Nevermind that! Just say you promise or something!"

"Okay okay. Fine! Geez!" I stood beside him, eyeing only his wrist.

"*Not* a soul!" He snapped a final time.

"I *know!* Get on with it, moron!"

Slowly, Poco unwrapped his wrist. And I was utterly disappointed. I expected to see some black, hairy, puss-filled tumor bulging from his veins or something. Instead, all I saw was a couple of red spots that blended in with the freckles on the rest of his body. I didn't notice them until Poco pointed them out.

"Apparently, they're called Petechia or sum'. I had a ton on my legs over the summer that the doctors had to fix. They kind of fade naturally, so I haven't

been too worried about them. They're kind of like summer for me. They just come and go or sum'." Poco sighed, rewrapping his wrist after witnessing my visible confusion. We continued on the trail to the summit.

"I don't even wanna know how to spell that." I dreaded the idea.

"Yeah. I can hardly pronounce it as is. It leaves a weird feeling in the back of my throat. So does Leukemia. And Cancer. And Chicken Coop. I'm not sure why."

"Chicken coop?"

"Yeah. It's a stupid word. It's just 'poop' without the 'p.'"

"Whatever ya think, Pocky." I glared at the foot of the summit of the trail. We were almost completely there, where rock and sky met. I was in no hurry though. I liked talking to Poco. Plus, the clouds hadn't moved past the sunset yet. "Ya know, Pocky. Ya never answered my question."

"What question?"

"What do you wanna be famous for?"

"HMMMMMM." He took a long, deep sigh as if letting a heavy weight off his shoulders.

I looked up at his face for a quick moment, just to see if his lips would move and initiate a response. But they were static. His eyes, however, met mine directly. At the bottom of them, his tears pooled but didn't quite fall. They weren't ready to.

"You know what? I wanna be the bestest baseball pitcher in all the world. That's what I wanna do, Kev. Yeah . . . I'm gonna be a pitcher . . ." He nodded to himself.

Then, slowly, I watched his expression melt away from a grin to a painful frown. He bit down on his bottom jaw, sinking into the ground like a dumbbell. He didn't stop walking though. He just kept walking towards the summit.

"Pocky?" I quivered, unsure how to comfort him in the situation. I'd never seen him cry without peeing

to know what to do. This time, he was actually in pain.

I watched Poco fall onto his knees at the summit. He kept his head in his hands, curling into his legs to hide his face from me. But I saw it anyways. He shivered too, like a cold dog in the middle of an earthquake. Like paper in a hurricane, just being ripped apart and tossed in the wind like trash. I got on my knees beside him, leaning toward him as the sun reached past the black clouds.

He threw his head into his knees. "This sucks, Kev! I don't know if you get it, but it sucks so bad!"

Poco choked on his words. He didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to say. My lying little brain told me to stay silent like our oath. *Just stay quiet.*

"Why do you stay with me, huh? Because I'm 'The Cancer Kid?' Am I just somebody to use as a tool to get what you want all the time? I am that, Kev! I'm a tool for everybody! I'm a tool for my mom! I'm a tool for Mrs. Feeslethorne! I'm some bloody puppet just to prove kids can get Cancer, but it's like I can't live my life! I can't even go anywhere alone anymore!" Poco sobbed, burying himself into a deeper grave.

"I'm sorry, Pocky. I know. Cancer sucks—"

"IT'S NOT THE BLOODY CANCER!" He screamed, staring deep into my eyes. His seemed to radiate more pain than mine could muster as if he'd saved it all for this moment in time. "I keep getting treated like a pet. Like Edie Gaedel. It's as if my life has turned upside-down or something, and I'm sick of it. Everybody keeps treating me differently like my life is suddenly precious or whatever! Before I had Leukemia, my mom couldn't give two craps about me! But now, I can't escape her! Now all these people give me extra treats and cookies that I never asked for. And what is it for?! To make me feel better?! How can I feel any better about this?!"

"Pocky, they just want to help you out." I tried to be careful with my words.

"Help me? Hm. Is that what you're here for too? Are you going to come over here and fix me or somethin by telling me I'm *special*?" Poco wiped the tears from his eyes onto his shirt.

"No." I sighed, standing up and reaching out my hand.

Poco looked up and chuckled. "I cry my heart out and yell at you, and that's your reaction? Holding out your hand like a motivational speaker or sum'?"

"Yeah. I like getting free candy all the time! You should really invest in the number of free things you get. I'm thinking free tee shirts! Free ice cream! Free cakes and cookies! Free watches! Heck, you could get a free puppy! You not taking advantage of this is seriously damaging towards the economy." I joked because that was all I knew to do.

"What?!" He hysterically laughed, taking my hand as I lifted him up. He didn't let go of it, as if I was dragging him forwards.

"All I'm saying is that you really need to be way more optimistic! If you just sit and keep thinking about death, how will you ever enjoy the life you have left? You're a kid for the sake of it! Act like it, idiot!" I told him as I pulled him closer to the summit.

"Geez okay! Stop going so fast! You're practically breaking my good arm. Let's just walk to the summit together. Okay?" Poco stopped me and let go of my hand.

I looked ahead at the summit, and back at his red, cheerful face. He didn't even realize how close he was. How close we were.

"Yeah. We can walk." I sighed, walking side by side like we'd been doing before.

He turned to me and looked me up and down.

"Dang, Kev. How are you so funny?" He asked me. And to this day, I still really don't know how I made Poco laugh so hard.

But I hope you are still out there, Poco. And I hope you keep climbing your mountain, because if you don't keep going, you'll never make it to the top.

I miss you, buddy.

The Drummer Boy

by HANA TUCKER

Robert and his mother stood together in the modest kitchen of their farmhouse. The farmhouse stood on a twenty-acre farm that the family had owned for generations.

“Robert, we’ve talked about this many times before,” his mother said exasperatedly. “I refuse to let you join until you’re fifteen.”

“But Mother,” Robert countered, “that’s another *two* years. The war might be over by then!”

“I pray to God it will be,” she answered. “Now go out and help your sister bring in the cows.”

Robert sullenly complied. On his walk to the fields, he thought, *My older brother, James, joined up a week after the war began. Why can’t I go kill Rebs, too?*

Even in his head, he heard his mother’s reply, “James was eighteen when he joined. You are only thirteen!”

It doesn’t matter what she says, he thought defiantly. *I am going to find a way to join—no matter what!* But even as he thought the words, he knew they weren’t true. He wanted to fight more than anything, but he would never betray his mother like that.

That evening at the dinner table, Robert’s father had news.

“They’re organizing another volunteer company in town,” he said, “and they need drummer boys.” With those words, he looked meaningfully at Robert.

Could this be my chance? Robert thought. *Am I going to be allowed to join?*

“I’ve talked it over with your mother,” his father continued, “and we have decided to let you join. I talked to the company commander. He says the company will mostly be guarding supply trains, instead of fighting.”

Robert was ecstatic. To him, even guarding supply trains was better than nothing. He wanted to go up

and hug his father but stifled the urge. His thoughts began to race so fast that he barely heard what his mother said next.

“I don’t like this at all,” she told him. “But you will join up eventually, and I would rather see you join now and do something safe, than join later and be sent straight to the front lines.”

There were tears in her eyes as she said this. The gravity of the choice before Robert slapped him in the face.

“So, Robert,” his father asked, “do you still want to join?”

All eyes were on him: his father’s, his mother’s, his younger sister’s, and even the dog’s. They stared at him for what seemed like an eternity while he thought. Finally, he said, “Yes, I want to join.”

“So be it,” said his father, and they went back to their meal, talking of trivial things like nothing had just happened.

What am I getting myself into? wondered Robert, as thoughts of becoming a soldier raced through his head. *What am I getting myself into?*

The next morning, his father walked him down to the train station, where the names of the volunteers were being taken. There was a rugged looking man in an army uniform sitting behind the table, and a line of young men in front of the table. Robert looked around; he was the youngest there by far.

This is what I wanted, he thought to himself. Then, gathering all of his courage, he walked boldly up to the line and waited his turn.

When he reached the front, the rugged-looking man looked at him and pointed to a spot on the list marked “Drummer Boys.” Robert signed his name down.

“You must report back here in three days’ time, after which you will be sent to a fort to train,” he said. He smiled at Robert when he finished, showing his black teeth. “You are going to have a grand ole’ time, boy,” he said. Then, he noticed Robert’s father.

“How come you’re not fightin’!?” he demanded.

“An old injury,” replied Robert’s father, looking uncomfortable.

The man just looked at him for a long moment. Then, he gestured for them to leave. Robert felt bad for his father. He knew his desire to fight was even stronger than his own, but the army would never take him with his injured leg.

In three days, Robert was back at the train station with his entire family. He hugged his sister, shook hands with his father, and then looked into his mother’s face. She looked sad, which he had expected, but there was a certain pride in her face as she hugged him.

“Be careful, and promise to write,” she said.

“I will,” Robert said as he broke away from her embrace.

“Good-bye!” they called as he boarded the train. Robert waved back, and that was that. He was on his way.

The next few weeks passed as a blur for Robert. He and the other new recruits were trained rapidly and then sent to guard supply trains, just as the company commander had said.

The locations of the supply trains they guarded varied. Sometimes, the supply trains were miles from any battlefield, and the soldiers were nearly bored out of their wits. Other times, they were so close to the battles that they could smell the smoke from hundreds of rifles and feel the ground shake as the cannon balls crashed to earth. Throughout all this, the one thing that stayed consistent were his mother’s letters. They came frequently, and every time Robert saw one, his spirits soared.

My Dearest Robert,

March 2, 1864

I miss you more and more each day and pray the war will be over soon so that you can come home. Nothing much has changed since you left. Your sister still complains about school, and the dog still barks every time your father walks in the door. I do not know why we even keep her around anymore.

Spring is on its way here. The snow is beginning to melt, and dainty little flowers are pushing their way up out of the dirt. I hope it is spring where you are; I know it is your favorite season. Do not forget to write.

*Your loving mother,
Elizabeth*

It was indeed spring where Robert was. His company was in the deep South guarding a supply train about twenty miles from the nearest battlefield.

“I want to see some action,” complained Roy, the most restless man in Robert’s company.

No one answered him because the company commander came riding up with news.

“We have been ordered to reinforce the 122nd about twenty miles south o’ here,” he yelled. “Get on your feet and let’s start moving!”

Some of the men looked excited at the prospect of action, but others, like Robert, were apprehensive. None of them had been tested in an all-out battle before, and Robert was questioning his courage. Even though he was the drummer boy and wouldn’t be doing any actual fighting, he still didn’t want to think about what would happen if he got scared and abandoned his brothers in battle.

His drum beat out the rhythm as they marched, nearly keeping time with the pounding in his heart. *What was battle like?* he wondered. *Did Rebs shoot at drummer boys? Am I courageous?*

My Dearest Robert,

March 5, 1864

I hope this letter finds you well. We celebrated your sister’s birthday yesterday. The cake was not as grand as the one on your last birthday because sugar is getting harder and harder to come by, but we made do. I be-

lieve the festivities took everyone's mind off of the war for a moment.

We have not received a letter from James in many weeks. I suppose there is a very small chance that you might see him. If you do, please let us know. We are desperate for news of you and him. Please remember to write.

*Your loving mother,
Elizabeth*

Robert and the rest of the men marched all that day and long into the night. The moon was high in the sky by the time they reached the 122nd.

“That felt like a lot longer than twenty miles!” one of the disgruntled men said. Robert didn’t want to say so, but he felt the same way.

Their company commander went off in search of the 122nd's commander, and the men all put down their heavy packs and began to set up a camp. They could see the evidence of a battle all around them. Some of the trees looked like they had been chewed by huge, ferocious jaws, and there were large craters in the ground, like the tracks of a giant monster. The ground was stained a horrible red color in some places, but there didn’t appear to be bodies anywhere. The men looked around nervously for the enemy as they set up camp.

“The Rebs have retreated for now,” said the company commander, who had returned from his consultation with the 122nd's commander, “but you boys need to stay alert. They could be anywhere around here.”

At that, the men all looked at each other, but no one said anything. Just then, Robert noticed some movement in the dark.

Just a deer, he thought, but his heart pounded. He knew no deer would come near an active battlefield, with all its horrible noises and smells. He peered further into the dark woods surrounding them.

“LOOK OUT!” he screamed.

A cannon ball came crashing through the trees. *Ka-boom!* It landed right in the middle of the makeshift camp. Men screamed as they were thrown into the

air. Robert was thrown into the air, and time seemed to slow down as he fell to earth. He saw men, pieces of wood, and dirt all falling with him. Suddenly, he hit the ground with a tremendous crash. His eyes closed.

Robert was only unconscious for a moment, but that moment was enough for absolute chaos to ensue around him. When he awoke, dirt and debris were raining down on him. Smoke filled the air and his watering eyes blinded him. The smell of dirt and gun smoke filled his nostrils. *Crack! Crack!* The din of muskets filled his ringing ears. *Boom!* Another cannon ball landed relatively close to him, and he was jolted by the impact and deafened by the sound. He rolled over onto his stomach and crawled to the body of a soldier near him. In the hazy moonlight, he couldn’t tell whether the soldier was friend or foe, but he could discern the musket in his hand.

He grabbed it and reloaded it frantically. Then, he quickly got up on one knee and fired towards the woods. *Crack!* He was beginning to reload again when he saw something that stopped him in his tracks. It was the body of Roy, one of the men from his company. He had never liked Roy, but he still felt a blinding rage envelope his body.

How dare they kill him?! he screamed in his head. All of a sudden his mind became clear. He had to kill the Rebs; he had to save his brothers. Without another thought, he picked up the rifle and charged into the woods.

Musket balls whistled around him, but he didn’t care. He charged on, screaming like a banshee. He raised his rifle to club the man in the gray uniform in front of him, but he never got the chance. *Thump!* Robert crumpled to the ground under the force of the blow a Rebel had given him, and he did not stir.

My Dearest Robert,

March 15, 1864

We have not received a letter from you in a long time. I hope this is because you have simply forgotten to write, not because you are on a battlefield somewhere. James visited home a few days ago. He was on a short leave from the cavalry and was in the area. In the beginning, he was distressed to hear of your enlistment, but he is proud of you, as are we all.

Your father says he wishes you would hurry up and win the war; he needs you back at home to help with the chores. Truth to be told, I do not think he cares about the chores one bit; he just misses you. Please write and come home soon.

*Your loving mother,
Elizabeth*

When Robert awoke, the first things he noticed were the bright sun in his eyes and the blinding pain in his head. He immediately closed his eyes, and the pain subsided slightly. Gingerly, he opened his eyes again, doing so slowly enough that his head hurt less.

He was in the back of a bouncing, decrepit wagon. His hands and feet were bound with rough ropes, and there was something sticky on the side of his head. Walking alongside the wagon were men in gray uniforms carrying old, rusty muskets. Robert made eye contact with one of them, and the man immediately scowled at him. That scared Robert so much that he dropped his eyes to the inside of the wagon, sending another flash of pain through his head.

Once the pain had lessened, he looked around inside the wagon. There wasn't much to see. One other man was in there with him. However, he appeared to be asleep, and Robert had neither the energy nor the desire to try to rouse him. They both sat in the back of the old wagon, with another Rebel soldier driving the mules drawing it.

He looked down at himself. His blue uniform was torn and dusty. He had no idea where his cap was, and his knife was on the belt of one of the Rebels now.

I wonder what time it is? he wondered to himself. Then, he nearly laughed in spite of his predicament. I am a prisoner of the Confederate army, and I'm wondering what time it is. I don't even know what day it is. Or what's going to happen to me.

My Dearest Robert,

March 19, 1864

Paper and ink are getting hard to come by, so I am going to have to start shortening my letters. However, I will try to send them just as frequently.

We have gotten a new puppy, and it is a little terror. It has tried to steal food four times now, and I had to chase it out of the kitchen with a broom. If it had been any other time, I would have sent it away immediately. But the puppy's antics entertain us and make us smile, which few things do in this day and age. We all miss you very much; please write soon.

*Your loving mother,
Elizabeth*

The cart rumbled to a halt inside a large wooden stockade. The guards grabbed Robert and the other man and dumped them on the ground. Once his head stopped pounding, Robert looked around him. He assumed he was in some kind of prison camp because the sign on the door of the guard house read: "Andersonville Prison." Inside the stockade, there was a jumbled tent-city. The ground was covered with mud, and the tents seemed to be set up wherever the occupants had found a somewhat dry place.

"You two!" someone bellowed. Robert jumped and looked up sharply. A rough, burly-looking man was stomping towards them.

"Yes, you two!" he yelled again. He came to them and grabbed each of their arms and dragged them towards the tents.

Robert's heart beat with fear as he and the other man were dragged along. *What is happening?! he wondered frantically. What is he going to do with us?*

The man unceremoniously dumped them on the ground near one of the tents. Then, he got so close to Robert's face that he could smell his rancid breath.

"See that open area there," he said, pointing to the area he had dragged them across. "If you so much as put a toe o'er that line, the guards are within their rights to shoot you!" And then he turned and started walking back toward the gate house.

"Wait!" Robert called, "aren't you going to untie us?"

"We will," said a voice. It was coming from the tents. Then, he noticed what appeared to be walking skeletons coming towards them. He was getting ready to scream until he realized that the skeletons were living men.

My Dearest Robert,

May 20, 1864

In the last letters I have written you this month, I mentioned how we have not received any of your letters. Now I know why. I received a telegram this morning, and it scared me to death. I was afraid it would contain the news that you had been struck down in battle and were now lying in some nameless grave somewhere. However, the news was not quite that bad. You are a prisoner in Andersonville. Even though I know you will never see this letter, I feel I must reassure and console you somehow, even if it is only to ease my nerves. I will get you out, son, if I must write to the President himself. I will get you out!

*Your loving mother,
Elizabeth*

Robert awoke that morning with a cough and terrible fever. The sickness had been spreading through the camp since before he arrived, but he had managed to avoid it for the two months he had been there. It now seemed that his luck had run out. He stared up at the ceiling of the tent and wondered how long it would be. Hardly anyone lived once they got sick. Some died within a day; others lasted a few weeks. Robert closed his eyes. He just wished he could have spoken to his mother one last time. He had imagined all of the letters she had sent him and had often written out his replies in the dirt with a stick. It was the only thing that had kept him go-

ing—the letters. One last time, that was all he wanted, one last time.

Dearest Robert,

May 30, 1864

I have written to the President, but I do not know how much good it will do. However, I will not stop trying. I will come to get you if I must!

Oh, Robert, why did I ever let you join in the first place? You are too young for this fate! I never should have let you join; this is all my fault. Please forgive me.

*Your loving mother,
Elizabeth*

The men carried the body of the small boy and buried him outside the stockade.

“Poor kid,” one said. “He deserved better than this.”

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Henry,

May 30, 1865

I regret to inform you that your son, Robert Henry, perished at Andersonville on the 30 of May, 1864. We were only recently made aware of this because the camp was just liberated. Please know that he died in the service of his country.

*Sincerely,
Col. Richard Best, U.S. Army*

Now Am Found

by PIERCE GARRAMONE

It was at the brink of dawn by the time they would arrive at the beach. The sunrise told the time—should they arrive late for the sun to crest the horizon, they'd have half an hour or so to themselves. The coast conveniently faced eastward, soon it'd premiere a generous end to their morning, and beginning to their day. If they were so lucky, a wide set of purple shaded clouds would complement the orange horizon. The near picture perfect view was just about the only thing that was free in their world, and they felt no obligation to share it. It was an hour or so after low tide, demanding a rocky venture to the water, one that would be compensated with apologetic sand.

The figure of a man and a young boy approached the water, which gusted up and away from their ankles. A smile spread over the young boy's face as his eyes were on the tide.

"Hello . . ." He greeted the approaching wave in his amusement, ". . . goodbye."

His father sunk one end of a surfboard into the support of the sand. "That'll never get old, will it?"

The boy shook his head left to right and continued to converse with the waves. If only it was always this easy to keep him occupied. Shuffling close to the coastline, he crouched and dipped his hand experimentally into the reapproaching water, a hello in the ambience. Chilly, of all days to forget his wetsuit, but certainly hypothermia-free. Days like this, he wished the sun would rise sooner. Then again, there were only so many weekends in the year where stings weren't a concern; might as well cherish the pros. The father withdrew his board from the sand, worn and torn, but sentimental.

"Where will you go?" He inquired.

"Nowhere."

"And if you do?"

"I ask first . . ." The boy dragged on, aware of the drill.

"Good."

Their conversation ended abruptly with a dive into the water—the temperature would become tolerable in time. He sunk beneath the waves as they came and kept his board close beneath him, as if it was his companion. The two soared under the oncoming obstacles to reach the ones they intended to face. The median between low and high tide was the sweet spot for this sort of activity. Finally, he peaked a reasonable distance from shore and awaited his challenge. A sizable wave was approaching, but it wasn't what he was seeking. Tightening his grip on the board, he breathed in and drifted back under, planting his toes into the sand. The wave carried his hands for a moment before releasing its grip. Back to the surface.

He breathed in sharply, blinking away the salt water. The next wave was far more adversarial—he was ready. A series of kicks gained momentum, and the father hoisted himself onto his board, his feet wobbling in their attempts to stay balanced. They came to a halt, and as the wave neared, he ascended, his adversary calmly carrying him back toward the sand. He gazed ahead and squinted his eyes against the wind, observing the land. This was, without a doubt, the highlight of his weekend. His eyes adjusted, as the shore was empty of anyone and anything. His face dropped. He opened his mouth to yell. In his distraction, his adversary gained the upper hand, curling around the father and dragging him beneath. The board reunited with the land and left its companion behind.

He rested at the bottom, the seeping color of red drifting toward the surface and mixing with the reflection of the early sun. The splashes of color stood out in the dark, and the temperature dropped. Goosebumps emerged from his skin. The feeling in his eyes returned, the salt battling the numbness. It was peaceful; the colors bouncing off one another, creating images of the past. Through the glowing lights, a hand broke through the surface of the water and pulled him through.

At the brink of spring, construction echoed down the neighborhood road. Seemingly, everything except the old home was changing; being torn down and replaced, or reoccupied. The dynamic suburbs were forced to work around one static home, but the owner liked it that way; change hadn't felt right in years, and it was unlikely it ever would again. The sound of a knock appeared over the layers of ambience. Again. On the third time, a set of footsteps came in response. The door creaked open, and the near-emaciated father peered around to the rare visitor.

"Oh," He opened the door further. ". . . hello, Sherry."

The woman greeted him an attempt at a comforting smile. "Hi, Miles." A circular tray rested in her hands, carefully topped with a sheet of aluminum foil. "I brought you something."

Almost cautiously, he opened the door and grew an artificial smile. "How nice . . . what's this?" He questioned, carefully taking the ends from her.

"Quiche."

"Right, quiche . . . the kind from Haji's?"

"Nope, not store bought. Home-made."

Miles peeled back the wrap. It was unappealing as any other food had been, but it'd be impolite to let it show. He replaced the wrap before the heat escaped. "That's very thoughtful of you, Sherry."

She nodded her head proudly in return. "I just . . . thought you could use a home cooked meal. Nobody has seen you out lately."

"Ah." He nodded dryly in response. Should it continue, the conversation would depend on her now.

"You look skinny. And . . . pale." She reluctantly added, not expecting another opportunity to connect any time soon.

Eye contact was broken abruptly, as he had nothing to add. He simply stared down at the wrapped tart.

"Do you need to talk to anyone about her?"

"No . . . that's all right."

"Are you sure?" She rested her hands in her pockets.

"I'm sure. This was . . . very considerate of you, Sherry." He paused and met eyes with her again. "So, how are you feeling about it?"

"We were never close, but it's always hard losing a sibling. Especially when they're the last."

He merely nodded in an act of understanding.

Suddenly, her expression flipped. Her eyes shifted back to Miles. "You and Eve haven't been together in . . ." She paused to count. ". . . eight years. Since—"

"Since our son disappeared."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be."

"I get it, Miles."

He reserved his head behind the door now. It was just a matter of time before it'd shut. His head hung weakly as his mind struggled to continue.

"I really do. You think you have nobody, but that's not the truth." She continued. "There's always someone, so long as you're willing to look for them."

"Thank you, Sherry." He said effortlessly, allowing his deadweight to push the door closed. In its current state, the interior of his house would likely send shivers down any new visitors. Dusty, dimly lit, and giving off a haunted impression, it would made for a vampire's ideal vacation home. He flipped the light switch on in the kitchen as he entered, and lazily dropped the quiche into his trash bin—not out of contempt, but merely a lack of appetite; after all, it could draw bugs, and bugs could bring disease.

When the clock struck eight, it was time for his show. Regardless of his grief, the thrill of watching others gamble away their money in return for a room of mystery was as good as it would get when the objective was to distract. Miles sunk into his reclining chair, though the ringing phone stopped him from

switching on the television. The noise blared, as did the silence between rings. He picked it up.

“Yes?” He croaked.

On the other end, the sound of gurgling became apparent. Flesh-like objects collided with one another, and the shaking vibrations grew louder in the ambience. A slime-like substance seemed to coat it all, and the collective noise was broken with an incomprehensible grunt. The call continued for mere seconds before he slammed the phone shut in horror. “No.” He groaned. “I thought this was over.” He planted both hands onto his face, returning to the dark for a moment.

The phone blared once more, almost louder than the previous time. This was not a daily occurrence, so he fed the urge. He picked it up again, sitting up right in his chair. “What?” He muttered confrontationally. The response of a robotic telemarketer was a punch in the stomach. He calmly rested the phone back down with no dismissal. He’d be missing the show, but it wasn’t his biggest concern now. Miles rose and entered his dark bedroom, aggressively turning the light switch on. He withdrew a silver key from his back pocket, stuffing it into a locked drawer, turning, and pulling it open. A notebook and ball point pen sat alone. Taking it out, he sunk into his chair and flipped through the pages, halting at the recently incomplete one. In chicken scratch handwriting, he logged the occasion.

10/26. They called again. They’re persistent, and I believe what happened to Eve was them.

As frantic as the moment was, the show was the only drug to slow his mind. He returned to his reclining chair and resumed with his evening. In the morning, a knock at the door woke him up. Though it was in the AM, a visitor this early was unusual. The TV was still on, only projecting static, a waste of power.

As he trekked tiredly down the hallway, the heavy knocking proceeded.

“Coming!”

He took the knob a moment later and simply opened it, having forgotten to lock up last night. He observed the suspicious sight of a pair of police of-

icers loitering on his porch. One stood close to the entrance.

“Is this the address of Mr. . . . Lewis? Miles Lewis?” The officer inquired.

“That’s me.” He squinted, his eyes adjusting to the blinding sunlight. “What seems to be the problem?”

“There’s no problem at all, sir. Did you not receive our call last night?”

“You called?”

“Yes, and it sounded like you picked up, but said nothing.”

“I’m sorry, what is this? Am I under arrest?”

The duo chuckled in response. “No sir,” The lead cop responded. “Mr. Lewis, we believe your son is alive.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Yesterday evening, a young man walked into the station and claimed his name was Caleb Lewis, and that he’d been away for nine years. Now, if you’d like, we can give you a ride to the station and you can see for yourself, and, well, if it’s not enough for you, we can run a DNA test.”

Miles remained motionless. His eyes widened, beaming at the officer.

The press served as obstacle to enter the station. Individual reporters flocked the doors, being forced to make way by the officers escorting Miles through. The reappearance of a missing person was perhaps the most interesting thing to occur in the town since the disappearance itself. They entered through the glass doors.

“If you’ll follow me this way, sir.” An officer requested.

The officers led Miles into a waiting room of sorts. Inside, the head of a young man perked up and looked at the entering group, and a vast smile grew across his face. His hair hung beyond his shoulders, a teenage stubble occupied his face, and a pair of identical eyes looked back at Miles’s.

“Dad?” Caleb exclaimed as he rose and dashed across to the room to his long lost father. He fell desperately into his arms, an expression of safety taking over his face while his arms wrapped easily around his significantly thinner father.

“Hello.” Miles struggled to let out in his son’s hold. “You . . . you’ve grown.”

The room fell quiet in his response, the officers and permitted press gazing to another behind forced smiles. Caleb chuckled in response, burying his face into the security of his father. After a moment, Miles gently rested his hands onto his son’s back.

In a separate room, an officer pulled up a chair and sat across from the father and son. He rested down a stack of paperwork and rolled a pen across the table, rotating the papers to face them.

“Judging from his statement, sir, your son was not a victim of any crime. He was checked by a medical examiner as well—no visible injuries or scars. The DNA test came back positive as well. Everything sound okay to you two?”

Caleb nodded in response.

The officer redirected his attention to Miles. “By signing this form . . .” The officer pressed his finger onto the top paper. “You’ll be reclaiming full custody of your child and agreeing to frequent visits from protective services to assure the security of your home . . . and a healthy relationship between you and your boy. And you’ll just be signing . . .” His finger shuffled to an empty line. “. . . here.” As he looked across, he observed a distracted Miles in confusion. “Sir?”

Miles had his eyes on the wall across from the officer, his eyebrows furrowed and his eyes squinting slightly.

“Sir? Are you all right?”

Miles responded with a blink before snapping his attention back toward the officer. “Oh—yes, I’m good, officer.”

The officer gestured his hands, skeptical. “Can I get you a water?”

“Okay.”

At his house, Miles pushed the front door open, having left it unlocked once more. He eyed up to the locks for a moment before continuing, his son lagging slightly. The naturally cold temperature of the house gusted over the two as they entered, and the sounds of following reporters was cut off with the door closing. Caleb gripped the slings of his backpack as he observed the dark house, his careful steps echoing on the hollow floorboards.

“It’s a lot darker than our last home.” Caleb commented.

Miles rested his keys on the kitchen counter, waltzing toward his reclining chair once more. He sunk into it and pressed the top button on the remote, returning to the world of distractions. His son approached soon after, folding his arms and resting them atop the chair as he joined in on watching.

“What’s this?”

“An American show.”

“What’s it about?”

“A bunch of random lads buy a bunch of random storage units, get to keep whatever is inside. It’s like gambling, but they film it.”

Miles rose back to his feet. “Take the chair. I’ll be right back, son.” He spoke blandly, disappearing around the corner. Caleb hesitantly took his seat, though he was not as easily distracted by the show; he shimmered around to get comfortable. Miles entered the kitchen, opening the mostly empty drawers in search of a decent snack—surely cheese curls would be sufficient for his teenage son. From what he knew, taste buds made drastic changes every decade or so, so it was safe to assume Caleb would still find them delicious.

As he reentered the room, he watched his son place the phone down. His eyebrows furrowed once again. “Who called?” He questioned.

“Just a telemarketer.”

“A telemarketer?” He muttered.

“One of those . . . automated ones, yes.”

“Right.” He paused for a moment. “Hungry?” Miles put on a smile as he approached his son, serving a bowl of the cheesy snack in front of him.

“I’m famished.”

He pulled a decorative chair to his son’s side, taking a seat and kicking one leg over the other. Though the television occupied his eyes, his mind was elsewhere. The wind, the murmurs of the outside reporters, and the television created a hypnotic ambience that echoed in his mind until it drifted off.

“Dad?” The voice of his son woke him up.

Miles opened one eye before both, looking up at an overhanging Caleb, his face lit dimly by the television screen and the streetlights peering through the blinds.

“You fell asleep.” He spoke.

“Why didn’t you wake me sooner?” Miles calmly rubbed his eyes.

“You looked comfortable.”

“What time is it?”

“Dinner time.” Caleb suddenly dismissed himself to the kitchen.

Miles sat upwards, blinking a few times as he processed the room and his surroundings. The show was long over, and the TV had somehow returned to static. The gas stove around the corner clicked. Tiredly, Miles went to the kitchen.

“Figured I’d make us some mac and cheese—that okay?” Caleb said as he rested a pot of water over the stove and gazed back toward his dad.

“You said there was a telemarketer on the phone?” Miles questioned.

“What?”

“The phone rung earlier. You said a telemarketer called, yes?”

“Uh-huh, a telemarketer. Was trying to sell some sort of gem necklace.”

“What’d you say?”

“I told him to f-off.”

Miles processed this, before reluctantly nodding. “Mac and cheese sound fine. And, hey, where’d I teach you to talk like that?”

After a while, the two took seats at the dining table, with Miles once again having to use the decorative chair due to the lack of furniture. Caleb rested the bowl of cheese-drenched pasta in front him, taking his seat across. Miles remained still while Caleb dug into his meal.

“Those telemarketers have been calling a lot lately.” Miles said.

Caleb merely responded with a nod of understanding.

After finally taking his first bite of food in days, Miles looked toward his son, pointing his fork over. “So, what happened?” He asked unusually casually. “When you left?”

“I already told you.” He responded, taking a moment to wipe his face with a napkin.

“What? When?”

“At the police station.”

Miles’s eyes darted over and away for a moment. “Did you?”

“You looked tired, dad. Have you been sleeping?”

“I . . . no, not really. I can’t fall asleep in bed, and when I do sleep, it’s in my chair, and only for a few hours every other night. I’ve . . . never slept during the day like that before.”

“Maybe you should get some rest, then. Real rest. Go to sleep at a normal time, wake up at a normal time. And try to sleep in bed.”

“I’m not sure that will work.”

“Give it a try, at least.”

“I’m going to get some air.” Miles dropped his fork into his bowl and stood from the table, walking toward the back door. “Unless those damn reporters have the place completely surrounded.” He paused as he turned the corner, before diverting to his bedroom, returning to the locked drawer. He quietly slid the key into the drawer, occasionally looking to the empty doorway in caution, before withdrawing the notebook once again, flipping through the pages. He halted at a torn page.

“What?”

He flipped back and forth between the pages to assure one was missing.

“No.”

His hands trembled as he shoved himself out of his room. Taking slow steps, he returned to the kitchen, glaring at a still-dining Caleb. He moved along the counter and to the corner, facing him from a distance.

“You go into my office, boy?”

“What?” Caleb gazed over.

“My office. Did you touch anything in there?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“What?”

“My son.” His hand calmly opened the neighboring drawer, resting onto the handle of a kitchen knife. “My real son.”

At dawn, Miles pulled the sliding glass door open, emerging into the crisp morning air, the yard conveniently cleared out of impatient reporters. He breathed in sharply and exhaled, his breath visible in the cold air, before focusing his look on a blue light barely shimmering in the place of the sunrise. He took a step closer. A hint of red made its presence in the mixture of glowing colors, and he squinted, puzzled at the sight.

“I understand now.” He confessed to the light. “You’ve been here since that day.” The light reflected off his eyes as they began to water. “For what, fun? Why me?” His fists tightened into balls as he took steps further into his yard, parallel to the light as it came to a stop. “At first, I thought it was odd—looking into the eyes of my boy and feeling nothing—absolutely nothing. It didn’t make sense. It does now.” Gently, he dropped to a knee, falling into a seat on the curb. “You win. I’m surrounded.” He admitted, the screams of sirens fading in from the background. The knife fell from the weak grasp of his hand and clattered down the steps. “All I ask . . .” He murmured desperately to the impending light. “. . . is that my boy isn’t forgotten for who he was.”

Inman Quill Memorial Prize

Conducted by the English Department of The University of North Georgia, The Inman Quill Memorial Prize seeks the best essay written in ENGL 1101: English Composition I and ENGL 1102: English Composition II. Dick Inman established the contest to honor his wife Peggy Inman, a Departmental Assistant who fostered many students, faculty, and staff across the Dahlonega campus. He donated the original funds because he also valued excellent writing and believed it inherently important for a strong economy and country. This year, the English Department awarded the best ENGL 1101 essay to Charlotte Roberts' essay "*Avatar: The Last Airbender: An Outlet for American Trauma*" and the best ENGL 1102 essay to Caitlin Jahn's essay "The Almost Hero: The Kid as a Failed Protagonist in *Blood Meridian*."

Avatar: The Last Airbender: An Outlet for American Trauma

by CHARLOTTE ROBERTS

Netflix added this series back to its library, and the fandom quickly resurged, proving that even twelve years after its conclusion, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (A:TLA) is still a show worth talking about. Between 2005 and 2008, Nickelodeon aired an animated, action-adventure, fantasy series for kids, exploring the journey of a powerful boy named Aang (“Avatar”). Creators and producers Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko worked to tell of a world split apart into four nations: Water, Earth, Fire, and Air, with benders who can magically control these elements. To expand its power, the Fire Nation attacks the other nations, igniting a war. Only the Avatar can stop their advances, but he has been missing for a hundred years, and the world is losing hope. Aang (Zach Tyler), Katara (Mae Whitman), and others team up to help Aang realize his destiny while Fire Nation villains hunt them down. I argue that Nickelodeon’s *Avatar: The Last Airbender*’s sudden surge in popularity stems from its reflection of current events, allowing Americans an outlet for nationwide trauma through the hegemonic, antagonist Fire Nation and individually relatable protagonists.

A number of television critics have recently suggested that the subjects *Avatar: The Last Airbender* tackles reflect on current, divisive issues happening in the United States. Kari Sonde from the *Washington Post* explores how A:TLA has affected young adults, diving into how these Americans’ 2020 experiences have influenced their perceptions of the show and its relevance to their lives. Maeve Orlowski-Scherer from *America Magazine* and Eden Arielle Gordon from *Popdust* investigate this idea further. Both identify the Fire Nation in A:TLA as a way for Americans to recognize issues within their nation; however, Orlowski-Scherer examines how audiences can relate themselves to the protagonists, while Gordon explores an alternative option through a morally complex character. Deviating from the rest, Adam Fleming Petty from *Vulture* offers insight into how the merging of Orlowski-Scherer’s and Gordon’s ideas have provided Americans a sense of balance while watching the show. Though all are published in the same year, these four authors present different inter-

pretations of how a cartoon world illuminates real societal injustices.

During the chaotic events of 2020, when many Americans were confined to their homes for extended periods, watching A:TLA became an accessible option of both entertaining oneself and contemplating current times. Investigating this, author Kari Sonde published an article titled “‘Avatar: The Last Airbender’ Became a Hit This Summer—15 Years After Debut” in which she argues, as I do, that A:TLA has experienced a sudden surge in popularity because of its reflection of tumultuous current times, making the show a “grounding force” for young adults. Sonde illustrates this point through the opinions of five young Americans, each explaining A:TLA as it relates to their 2020 experiences. Sonde’s first interviewee, Sarah Drepaal, describes that she needed a “lighter” show that would not “wholly disconnect [her] from current events”; A:TLA became that show. Instead of dissociating Drepaal from issues such as the coronavirus and racial justice protests, the show “felt like a lens that [she] could better understand [her] society” (Sonde). Through Drepaal’s quote, Sonde summarizes how just like a “lens,” A:TLA allows Americans to perceive their world differently. Jade Tyra’s perspective further explains this viewpoint. She states that A:TLA “frames [justice] in this easy-to-manage and easy-to-comprehend format, which is a children’s cartoon” (Sonde). Through this medium, A:TLA is able to take apart complicated issues, and Americans can then relate those issues to the havoc swirling around them. Exhibiting this, Priya Dadlani describes a specific part of the series that has reminded her of current life (Sonde). Dadlani states that Zuko’s renouncement of his nation to join the protagonists’ side “reminds her about community accountability” because “you’re seeing someone unlearn their history, sacrifice privilege, family and social standing to stand up for what’s right,” a process that she believes “is happening now” (Sonde). These perceived reflections demonstrate my broader argument: Americans use A:TLA’s portrayal of divisive topics to better understand issues in their own lives, an occurrence that became especially

popular in 2020. Sonde shows that series like *A:TLA* have allowed Americans to identify issues in their society through a “lighter,” “children’s cartoon,” but I argue this extends further. While shows that allow Americans to identify problems in their nation are necessary, they can also build pressuring discomfort without a release valve, which can turn viewers away and dampen their impact. Orlowski-Scherer’s interpretation explains one way *A:TLA* has allowed that needed outlet.

A:TLA’s fictional setting allows a variety of interpretations of the show’s relevance to the current world. In her 2020 article “The Deep Spirituality of ‘Avatar: The Last Airbender’” Maeve Orlowski-Scherer claims that young adults are rewatching *A:TLA* because the show provides a relevant, religious message on justice that reflects the current Black Lives Matter movement. While this religious claim is valid, I contend that the examples she offers may be more revealing. Orlowski-Scherer asserts it is “difficult not to see the connections between the show and ongoing discussions about the United States’ history of colonization and white nationalism.” She further highlights the US’s foundation of slavery that has continued to impact societal structures years later; “the prison industrial complex and institutionalized racism have preserved that system of white supremacy” (Orlowski-Scherer). Under this consideration, Orlowski-Scherer states that “the imperial impulses of the Fire Nation take on a particularly sobering tone.” Suddenly, the fictional government that invades other nations and detains their people in prison camps evokes eerily similar images of the United States. This perceived connection has allowed Americans like Orlowski-Scherer to address their nation’s injustices; however, as Orlowski-Scherer describes, this can be “sobering.” Fortunately, *A:TLA* provides an outlet. Many viewers still must see themselves as the “good guys” ultimately fighting for the right side. Orlowski-Scherer does not relate US activists to those of the Fire Nation. Instead, American activists become the protagonists: “In the same way that БИРОС . . . activists are leading the current movement for racial justice, Aang and Katara fight to liberate themselves and their communities . . . We watch Aang take up his staff against the Fire Nation once more, and we are similarly called to fight” (Orlowski-Scherer). The US’s perceived reflection of the Fire Nation is a vent for American’s frustrations—a way to point to the worst of the nation—but by relat-

ing the individual activists to the protagonists’ fight, Americans acquire their release valve. This distinguishes them from their government and gives them an identity. In this way, watching *A:TLA* through the protagonists’ eyes allows many Americans to acknowledge the faults of their nation and process what this means without sinking themselves into a depression that nothing can be done to change it.

While this approach works for the activist American already well aware of the US’s injustices, not every citizen can relate to the committed, unwavering protagonists. In order for those citizens to feel represented, *A:TLA*’s creators needed to create an alternative. Eden Arielle Gordon’s 2020 article “America Is the Fire Nation from ‘Avatar: The Last Airbender’” argues, as I do, that watching *A:TLA* in 2020 has allowed Americans to see the faults in their own society through the parallel of the Fire Nation; however, unlike Orlowski-Scherer, Gordon illustrates this point through a more morally complex character: Fire Nation Prince Zuko. Zuko begins the show as a villain (“The Boy in the Iceberg”). Only through a long, non-linear character arc does he realize the propaganda he has been taught all his life was concealing brutality and devastation. In the climax of his journey, Zuko renounces his nation and confronts the Fire Lord, describing all he has learned: “Growing up, we were taught that the Fire Nation was the greatest civilization in history, and somehow, the war was our way of sharing our greatness with the rest of the world. What an amazing lie that was” (“Day of the Black Sun Part 2”). Gordon relates Zuko’s speech directly to American life, stating, “In America . . . where an ideal of American exceptionalism continues to legitimize our racism, xenophobia, and aggressive conquest of the Middle East, [Zuko’s] words ring true with stunning relevance.” Gordon explains that through Zuko’s journey of leaving his nation and its violent actions, Americans can examine their own issues with their society. She acknowledges that “for those of us who grew up within the system, realizing this can be jarring” but like Zuko’s own realization, “clearly for the best” (Gordon). While the Fire Nation allows Americans to process the issues they see within their own nation, and the protagonists provide a needed counterbalance, characters like Zuko have a special importance. Either Americans can relate to him as who they were in the past, or they can currently identify themselves in a part of his arc. Through Zuko, audiences can find themselves in a

person born in a nation that has committed many injustices yet has managed to educate himself and fight against them. While many citizens blind themselves to the United States' greatness, Gordon and I argue that Zuko's journey reminds Americans of the capability of becoming better, a concept that is particularly relieving for those who see themselves in him.

Orlowski-Scherer's article exhibits Americans viewing themselves as the protagonists, and Gordon's article exhibits Americans viewing themselves as the more troubled anti-hero, but Petty's 2020 article "*Avatar: The Last Airbender* Will Always Feel Relevant" describes a marrying of these two ideas, which may be more influential. Petty claims that *A:TLA* processes the trauma of the US post 9/11 through its depiction of two enemy characters who join forces; however, he does not explore as thoroughly as I do how greatly this friendship can currently impact Americans. He describes that when *A:TLA* first aired in 2005, "the U.S., reeling and vengeful after 9/11, had careened into the buy-one-get-one-free wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Petty). This resulted in television during this time overflowing with "stories about two sides locked in existential battle" (Petty). *A:TLA*, however, diverged from this standard. The show presented Aang and Zuko, the protagonist and antagonist, "less as opponents in a contest and more as threads of a single story" (Petty). This contrast is significant because while other media used their antagonists as thinly veiled depictions of the Middle East, "Avatar was telling a story about the children of warring nations coming together to save the world" (Petty). Through watching Aang and Zuko's friendship, Americans experience a balance of opinions and sides working toward the same goal.

Instead of the creators advancing one perspective as just, Aang and Zuko are simply "threads of a single story" working alongside each other to overcome the injustices in their world. In light of the turmoil of 2020, this idea became especially attractive, as seen in how the series has impacted Americans like Sonde, Orlowski-Scherer, Gordon, and Petty.

Avatar: The Last Airbender's appeal has expanded in a time of national upset, allowing many Americans a way to understand the injustices in their world through a children's cartoon. The show provides a needed balance: Americans can dually relate their nation's offenses to those of the antagonist nation while also personally identifying with the resistance. This allows audiences to approach difficult issues in manageable ways. Instead of depressing themselves with what appears to be the overwhelming, seemingly unchangeable government around them, viewers can channel their experiences through the protagonists' eyes. This acknowledges their individual power and makes them feel heard. By providing two types of characters—the resolute protagonist and the maturing anti-hero both working to defeat the same force—*A:TLA* has attracted a variety of viewers and prompted diverse perceptions. Further research could reveal how depicting a range of relatable characters, further than just the typical righteous protagonist, allows audiences to more fully engage with a fictional world and identify with those characters' struggles. During 2020, *A:TLA* appearing on Netflix was the ideal way for many Americans to stay home, address the issues within their nation, and feel a sense of empowerment, therefore aiding its sudden popularity and the influx of articles, all in 2020, demanding audiences see the importance of the show.

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The Almost Hero: The Kid as a Failed Protagonist in *Blood Meridian*

by CAITLIN JAHN

Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* is far from a traditional Western story. The present action of the story follows the Kid, the nameless protagonist who falls into the company of a less-than-upstanding crowd of gangsters known as The Glanton Gang. During the prologue, the reader is led to believe that the Kid, an impressionable character with much potential for pivotal development, will be the center of the story. However, the emphasis placed on the violence of the American frontier and the profession of evil in antagonist Judge Holden largely shift the focus away from the Kid. The Kid's failure to again become the focal point in the present action solidifies his status as a failed protagonist. In this essay, we will consider that Judge Holden is the principal mode of obstruction to the Kid's character development, resulting in a protagonist that just barely misses the call to the overt moral awakening one might expect from a Western.

The Kid is an atypical protagonist in that he does not remain the focal point of the story for its duration. Judge Holden's unshakable belief system creates a tense dynamic between the Kid and Holden wherein Holden makes every conceivable attempt to keep the Kid from shifting away from violence, toward a more positive worldview. The first and third sections of the novel in which the Kid is overtly present are offset by the second section, in which "the kid ceases to function as a focal character and in fact often disappears" (Schopen 184). This narrative structure, when paired with McCarthy's intentional failure to acknowledge the inner thoughts of each of his characters, produces a protagonist whose dynamic nature is difficult to track. It may be there in a very limited capacity, as the Kid is suddenly called "the man" shortly after the onset of chapter 23 (McCarthy 334). However, because McCarthy distances himself from the psyches of the characters in *Blood Meridian*, the complete picture of the Kid's moral awakening is largely left to the interpretation of the reader. The Kid lacks a name, which implies a lack of self-identity, and much like the recurring violent elements of the story, this detail works to dehumanize him. However nonspecific his identity, the Kid

still manages to be relatable as a symbol of the easily corrupted young America in which he lives.

One significant aspect of the Kid becoming a disappearing protagonist is the dynamic established between him and Judge Holden. Especially indicative of the tension between Holden and the Kid is the scene in which Holden visits the Kid in prison. He holds the Kid in contempt because "[he] sat in judgement of [his] own deeds" (McCarthy 319), never fully embracing the savagery that Judge Holden thrusts upon him. The Kid's "turning a deaf ear" to Judge Holden and his violent philosophy prevents Judge Holden from taking the Kid on as a disciple of violence, as he intends to do while the Kid is impressionable. Though the prologue presents the Kid as having "a taste for mindless violence" brooding within him from the beginning of the story, the Kid shows notable resistance to Holden's belief system. From his extensive monologues to his jarring appearance, Holden largely represents "the violence that constitutes the emergence of culture in general" (Evans 424), while the Kid outgrows whatever miniscule inclination toward violence he has at the beginning of the novel. Perhaps Holden erroneously assumes that the Kid's stance on the morality of violence is far more malleable than it proves to be. The Judge demonstrates a mastery of language that serves a specific purpose in the juxtaposition of Holden and the Kid; as Carson writes, "Judge Holden seeks to exploit this power of language" (21). The contrast is stark between the rhetorically masterful Judge Holden and the illiterate Kid. The reiteration of Holden's outlandish belief system contributes to the Kid's disappearance from the foreground of the present action by overshadowing the voices, actions, and beliefs of everyone he encounters.

To further evaluate the character of Judge Holden and his effect on the Kid, we need not look further than the closing scene of the novel, in which Judge Holden and the Kid have their final confrontation. The motive behind the Kid's death is contested among critics, but one interpretation, which holds that "the judge derives more satisfaction from tormenting

than from eliminating” (Shaw 107), aligns particularly well with the previously established personality and ideology of Judge Holden. Holden embodies a desire to conquer from the moment he incites the riot to murder Reverend Green (7), and rarely deviates from his barbaric actions for the remainder of the novel, culminating in what some interpretations deem a sexual assault. The killing ensues after the Judge throws several demeaning accusations at Reverend Green, subsequently claiming that he “never laid eyes on that man before today” (9). In this scene the Judge favors slow, torturous humiliation rather than simply killing for the sake of killing, a sadistic violence of its own kind. In this demonstration, the Judge draws the reader’s attention away from Reverend Green, the Kid, and any other feasible subject of the scene. Contrary to the sadistic interpretation of the Kid’s fate, part of Shaw’s argument acknowledges the stance that Holden kills the Kid simply because he can (103). However, paring the understanding down to this alone fails to consider the inclination toward drawn out killing demonstrated above and disregards McCarthy’s intentional delay of the Kid’s death.

Though he does not fit into the framework of an ordinary protagonist, the Kid is akin to a Greek hero in some respects. While the narrative may not have culminated in the noticeable character development characteristic of Greek tragedies, the Kid does exhibit a fatal flaw. There is undeniable parallelism in Judge Holden and the Kid, up until the very last scene, being unwilling to die. The Comanche attack at the beginning of the novel and the Yuma attack near the end mirror each other, and though he sus-

tains some injuries, the Kid survives both. The Judge periodically reemerges into the narrative with a sort of eternal presence. After everyone else has died, the Kid is the only character left to challenge the Judge’s violent philosophy. In a last-ditch effort to turn the Kid toward the prevailing darkness of his worldview, Holden tells the Kid that he who “has offered up himself entire to the blood of war . . . and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart” (McCarthy 345) is the only man that can dance, where dancing is participating in the savage practices that helped to shape America. The Kid’s reluctance to embrace Holden’s philosophy ultimately ushers in his downfall.

The Kid is certainly not the gleaming image of an upstanding character, and while his moral development is less explicitly demonstrated than that of other coming of age protagonists, he does awaken in some respects. In particular, he resists development in the wrong direction while the temptation of Judge Holden could easily have infiltrated his worldview. Evans notes that “The revisionist Western aspires to tell a story of violence in the interest of nonviolence” (430), which comprises part, if not all, of the Kid’s narrative significance. Remarkably, by the novel’s end, the Kid has simply grown tired of the savage lifestyle that permeates the West. Despite being comparatively static as a character, the level of maturity between the Kid and the Man contrasts greatly with the prevailing idea that frontier America is entirely driven by a desire to preside over everyone and everything that possesses any semblance of freedom.

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Biographical Notes

Contributors

BRIANA C. ANDRONICESCU was born and raised in Europe until the age of eight. When coming into the states, she didn't know English but once she learned the eccentric language, she relied heavily on visual arts, poetry, and writing to get her through the difficulties being a foreign child.

HANNAH BAGLEY is a junior pursuing a major in English Literature and a minor in German. She was born and raised in the Dawsonville/Dahlonega area and plans to continue her higher education to the doctoral level after graduation. Bagley's hobbies include swing dancing, writing, and video editing.

ELIZA BEAN is a freshman who is enrolled at the University of North Georgia. She is majoring in Film and spends most of her free time either watching movies or creating storylines for her own that she would love to direct someday.

HADLEY BLANKENSHIP has been writing ever since she was born, and often embezzles the wonders of artistry, whether it is liberal or visual. Many of her stories are based on people she has met in her life, such as close friends, family, or even teachers. She someday hopes her writing will leave an impact on any person's heart, inspire others to either write or read, and eventually become better people while also respecting the people she admires. In her stories, she uses a "slice-of-life" style to often portray life-like events in order to diminish the barrier of readers and writers. She believes they are both equal in value and hopes to make both people enjoy her works. Especially when in the end, everyone needs somebody to relate to. That's exactly what she aims to provide.

DASHANAY BROWN created this piece from her love and appreciation of experimenting with textures. She also wanted to incorporate elements of nature and decide to showcase the rose in an abstract form. The glaze that she chose was purposely created to have a running affect so that it would highlight the texture and curves of the rose petals. She decided to use slab building to create the foundation body then added strips of clay to the form the petals. The name

came to be "Blue Desert Rose" because it was a gift for her mother for Mother's Day and had a bouquet of beautiful roses in it.

LAUREN CARLISLE is a Georgia native who is passionate about writing, though she mostly practices this passion in the Notes app of her iPhone. She lives in Flowery Branch with her wife, Kayla and their daughter, Cadence. When she's not hanging out at home, she is wishing she was hanging out at home.

J. SEBASTIÁN CHÉRRES is a Junior at UNG, Dahlonega, majoring in Writing and Publication and Marketing. He lives in Cumming with his parents and younger brother and has enjoyed writing stories since he was very young. He hopes to graduate and find a job as an author or an editor.

MADISON CLEMENTE is a sophomore at UNG majoring in Strategic and Security Studies. She developed a love for fiction writing and story telling at a young age and since then it has become something she is very passionate about. Madison hopes to one day become a best-selling author.

MARION CROSSFIELD is in her last year at the University of North Georgia as a political science, pre-law student. In addition to politics, she enjoys studying philosophy, creative literature, and the Germanic languages. She aspires to attend law school after graduation in New York City.

AMY DAVIS has been a UNG student since January of 2021, majoring in Criminal Justice. Between working full time and attending school part time, Amy writes as a way to relax and relieve stress. She hopes to one day publish a book or two of her own, though!

BRYSON EDMONDSON is a student at the University of North Georgia currently majoring in Film and Digital Media with a concentration in Production. Though new to the practice, Bryson has been praised by professors and fellow students for his artistic writing style and unconventional narratives to tell an emotionally-driven story.

ROWAN FINCH is a Visual Arts major focused in sculpture. In addition to creating art from mixed media, Finch is a part-time writer amid the many books and assorted audiobooks they have absorbed over the years. Rowan has been interested in writing horror stories ever since they picked up their first scary story by children's author Mary Downing Hahn. They enjoy stories that include the supernatural and horror.

PIERCE GARRAMONE was born just outside Las Vegas, Nevada, though he's lived here in Georgia for more than half his life. He's always had a fascination with entertainment, be it books, television, or movies, and a desire to put writing in his own words. He hopes to one day write something truly memorable.

SOPHIA GARRETT is a junior studying art education at the University of North Georgia. She has been a passionate artist for most of her life, diving into a deeper exploration between the psyche and expressionism in art. Her works vary by material, style, and overall mood, but continue to flow along with her distinct mark-making.

ASHLEY HERMAN is an Art Marketing Student who works in both photography and textile art. She is an artist who grew up in North Georgia. Her work focuses on exploration of places around her and different materials. She likes to explore different areas in the North Georgia mountains.

ETHAN HOLTZCLAW, sophomore and English major, has a passion for the written word. At any given point in the day he is probably reading something, and if he is not reading then he is writing. If he is doing neither of those things then he is either eating, sleeping, or doing nothing much at all. What he will read or write next is a mystery to all, most of all to him, and it is a mystery he has the continual pleasure of solving. That is how he lives his life, and that is how his life is to be lived.

CAITLIN JAHN is a sophomore at UNG Dahlonega majoring in Nursing. A graduate of Forsyth County, she moved from Cumming to attend UNG as a residential student. Outside of academics, she plays guitar and enjoys writing, playing, and recording music.

KRISTA MCDUGAL is a twenty-four year-old Writing and Publication major who grew up in the

mountains of North Georgia. She spends her free time playing video games, making TikToks, and writing novels, short stories, and poems. Her favorite genre is fantasy, but she also loves horror, mystery, and science fiction.

ANNALIESE MILLER is a student at the University of North Georgia pursuing a BA in English Literature with a minor in German. She enjoys writing—in and outside of class—and is motivated by the love and encouragement of her friends.

TANYA MORRIS is a senior English major focusing on writing and publication. Her work has been published previously in *The Chestatee Review* and *Iris Literary Journal*. Through creative writing, she highlights the unique qualities of marginalized individuals, whose virtues are often overlooked. Currently, she is working on a novel that she hopes to finish by the time she graduates.

ALANNA NEIDIGH is a freshman this year at UNG Gainesville majoring in Communications and minoring in writing. She moved here from Pennsylvania to attend UNG for her athletics in marksmanship, and her passion is to write. She also loves the outdoors, art, and going to concerts/traveling.

HAN NGUYEN is an international student from Vietnam. She is a junior majoring in Digital Art at University of North Georgia. Han loves creating art in many forms like painting and sculpting. Although working with colors is something still new to her, she enjoys trying different styles and mediums to express herself.

CHRISTOPHER NOELL is a sophomore at the Dahlonega campus, and his major is currently modern languages. While he enjoys learning and practicing Spanish, his passion is photography. He has been doing photography for seven years, and he has photographed a variety of subjects including landscapes, plants, portraits, wildlife, and insects.

ALEX PATARINSKI is an aspiring Graphic Designer at UNG. She likes to express herself through visual art by her use of intense hues and drastic contrast. Her favorite medium is charcoal and oil pastels because they require her to get her hands dirty.

SYDNEY PETTY is a nineteen year old college student living in Blue Ridge, Georgia. Sydney is the daughter of Hollye and Denton Petty. Sydney enjoys spending time outside and hiking with her dog. Sydney enjoys going to school and spending time with family. Sydney plans to pursue an education in psychology.

ABBY RAMSEY is a senior Art Marketing Major at UNG Dahlenega and is pursuing an emphasis in photography and textile design. She loves creating art that symbolizes polarities in her life and situations that many individuals cope with but never express or communicate. Abby has developed a love for self-reflective work in an acceptance of both dark and light, calm and the storm, stillness and movement.

KAYLEIGH RIKER is a junior at UNG pursuing a graphic design degree. She is also a freelance artist. This semester she has been a vendor at an art festival, decorated homes for the holidays, grown her photography career by taking wedding photos, and will soon begin her internship with a large boating company in their graphic design department.

CHARLOTTE ROBERTS is a full-time dual-enrolled student this year. She is finishing her senior year of high school at the UNG Oconee campus. In her free time, she loves drawing and creating fictional stories. She also enjoys doing dance trapeze and spending time with friends and family.

SOPHIA STORY is a fourth-year student at UNG's Dahlenega Campus. She is a Digital Art major that is studying to one day be involved in video game production, specifically character design and concept art. She enjoys fencing and playing video games when not making artwork.

HANA TUCKER is a junior in high school and is currently finishing up her first semester at UNG. Outside of school, she does karate and kickboxing, and is a member of the Civil Air Patrol. After she graduates, she intends to enter the Air Force Academy to become a pilot.

Staff

ANGELICA CUMMINGS is a Graphic Design major. She loves art, anime, trivia, and nerdy pop culture. She's always been a creative writer since the seventh

grade, and her work is always filled with her thoughts and personality. She says often that her prose speaks better than she does.

KAYLEI GAYTON is a junior at UNG's Gainesville campus. She is an English major with a Writing and Publications concentration, and she also minors in Journalism. Outside of school, she enjoys reading novels, playing video games, and spending time with friends and family.

MCKENNA GRAHAM is a sophomore on UNG's Dahlenega campus. She majors in English with a Teacher concentration. When she isn't writing songs or stories of all sorts, she loves to listen to the Toni and Ryan podcast and read with her dog Thor.

SARAH JACOBS is a senior on UNG's Gainesville campus. She majors in English with a concentration in Writing and Publication. She also minors in Art History. Sarah enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with her pets.

LUCAS JANSENSEN is a high school student dual enrolling in University of North Georgia. He enjoys creative writing, tennis, and jiu-jitsu. In the future, Lucas aims to begin practicing law and get published writing fiction.

ANDREW LEE is a senior on UNG's Dahlenega campus. He majors in English with a Writing and Publication concentration, as well as minors in German. Apart from his language studies, he enjoys spending his time hiking, reading, and taking care of his dogs.

KRISTA MCDUGAL is a twenty-four year-old Writing and Publication major who grew up in the mountains of North Georgia. She spends her free time playing video games, making TikToks, and writing novels, short stories, and poems. Her favorite genre is fantasy, but she also loves horror, mystery, and science fiction.

ANNALIESE MILLER is a senior on UNG's Dahlenega campus. She is an English major with a concentration in Literature. She is also minoring in German Language Studies. When she isn't reading or working on her own stories, you can usually find her longboarding or writing letters to her pen pals from around the globe.

TANYA MORRIS is a senior English major focusing on writing and publication. Her work has been published previously in *The Chestatee Review* and *Iris Literary Journal*. Through creative writing, she highlights the unique qualities of marginalized individuals, whose virtues are often overlooked. Currently, she is working on a novel that she hopes to finish by the time she graduates.

Judges

VANESSA BAMBER is currently the Director of Development for the College of Arts and Letters. Her professional background is varied, from musical theatre performer to professional theatre producer, and is owner of Spellcast Entertainment LLC. She has most recently served on the 2020 playwright selection committee for PlayPenn.

GLORIA BENNETT writes poetry and prose and teaches creative writing at the University of North Georgia. She was named finalist for the 2015 Georgia Author of the Year Award and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of the South.

MARK BRAUGHT is a nationally-recognized, award-winning artist who has created images for corporations, institutions, advertising agencies, publishers, and design firms and is included in a number of permanent corporation and museum collections. In addition to his commissioned projects, he lectures and does workshops at schools, institutions, conferences, events, and organizations across the country and has enjoyed teaching as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Georgia, Portfolio Center, IvyTech, Hollins University, and the Creative Circus.

C. QUILL BOWERS is a poet and writer who lives in a cozy coastal cottage sheltered by the majestic moss-covered trees in a place called Storybook Lane. She travels all around hiking and writing and capturing moments of immense beauty and sometimes terror with her camera and an eclectic use of her imagination.

CHRIS DANT is an Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of North Georgia. He is an image maker and mixed media artist who makes work about the struggle against generational trauma and the hopes and longings we experience as we navigate through this world. Chris received his Master in Fine Arts degree from the University of Notre Dame in 2016. Along with exhibiting his work locally, regionally, and nationally, Chris is always seeking to be involved in community-based art projects and collaborations. Outside of his artistic practice, you can find Chris exploring the forests of the Southeastern United States, with his wife and pup, looking for rocks to climb and swimming holes to dive into.

KRISTIN G. KELLY has an MA in English from the University of Georgia and a Ph.D. in English from Georgia State University. Her publications include essays and poems in *War, Literature and the Arts*; *Annals of Internal Medicine*; and *Hospital Drive: The Literature and Humanities Journal of the University of Virginia Medical School*. Her essay entitled "Books at All Costs" was recorded for NPR/Public Radio International's *The Bob Edwards Show*.

ERIC LOCKABY is a professorly spirit who haunts the hush-quiet halls of UNG, Gainesville. Most recently, you can find his fiction at *The NoSleep Podcast*.

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