

The Muse 2021

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Letter From The Editor

This year has certainly been a journey, to say the very least. Sometimes, I felt like I was coasting through my senior year, but most of the time I felt like I was being tied to the back of a pick-up-truck by my pony-tail and dragged down a dirt road. There have been rats, rat traps, masks, people who refuse to wear them, spikes in Corona virus numbers; each of these have acted as stones or puddles that I've been dragged through on my journey through the country backroads. Gives a whole new meaning to 'senior trip.'

Throughout it all though, people have had my back, and made it just a bit more bearable. Teachers, friends, counsellors, random people who complimented my outfits in the hallway: all have made my life a bit brighter, but there are a few people who I would like to specifically thank for all they have done.

First, the custodians, thank you for picking up after all of us and working to keep our school a safe, clean space.

Second, to the students who have so graciously submitted their work to be included in the Muse; we couldn't have done this without you.

Third, to the three teachers who have taken up the position of Muse Sponsor in this one short year. To Mrs. Trimm, Mrs. Chandler, and Mrs. Shoemaker, I appreciate all that you have done for the staff this year and want you to know that your support has been invaluable.

Lastly, and most importantly, to my fellow muse staff. You guys have been a great laugh, and wonderful companions who have guided me through this year and made the magazine possible. Especially one Georgia Kate, without whom this magazine would literally not exist. I'm not kidding --It would have been less of a magazine and more of a folder of Google Docs.

There are so many stories I could tell about this year (being unwillingly hauled through the mud keeps life interesting), but this can only drag on for so long. Just remember, that the people in your life make things possible, even when everything else goes wrong.

-Arden Tapp

Thank You From Our Staff

The 2020-2021 Muse Staff would like to say thank you to the amazing teachers who helped us create this year's Muse literary magazine despite the unorthodox year we have had; Mrs. Trimm, Mrs. Chandler, and Mrs. Shoemaker. We owe many thanks to these wonderful women who quickly adapted to our abnormal situation and graciously volunteered their time and energy to keep this publication alive.

We would also like to thank everyone who took the time and effort to submit works of writing and art to be published in the 2021 Muse Literary Magazine despite the stressful and chaotic year it has been, this publication would not have been possible without you.

We would like to say thank you to our incredible staff who have worked tirelessly this year to create this magazine:

To Arden Tapp, our Editor in Chief, without whom, the Muse would likely no longer exist. We are forever grateful for the intense efforts you put in both expectedly and unexpectedly this past year to ensure this magazine is not only published this year, but continues to be published in the years to come.

To Georgia Kate Scott, our Technological Director, who stepped in to create, organize, and design this virtual publication when Mr. Weatherly retired. We are all grateful for your willingness to learn the program required to create this magazine and your patience in dealing with the some-what ancient and decidedly frustrating laptop necessary to use this program.

And finally, to our wonderful and dedicated staff members; Ky-Lin Berg, Virginia Kate Brandt, and Emily Russell, your hard work and endless devotion to creating your own pieces for this magazine and the countless hours spent reading and editing other works to ensure this publication met the standards of quality of the Muse as well as its deadline did not go unnoticed and we are all incredibly thankful to have had you on our staff.

With many thanks to all the aforementioned individuals and to all those who have elected to read this publication, The 2020-2021 Muse Staff proudly presents this year's Muse!

The Flower Aisle

By Kate Barlow

I was rich for five minutes but not really rich. Rich for a ten-year-old.

The lights reflected off the shiny floor onto my face, and chills instantly appeared on my arms as I walked into the building. The odor of flowers flowed freely throughout the whole store. My feet carried me to the boxes of tiny pumpkins. As I searched for the smallest one, I heard my mom laugh from the aisle over saying, “What are the odds that we would run into y’all here?”

“I know, it’s crazy,” said an all too familiar voice.

I walked to the corner of the aisle, following the laughter, and my heart filled with joy as I saw my best friends from church.

Laughter echoed around the store for hours as we played with pumpkins, candies, and vegetables. As we rounded the corner and passed all of the delicious smelling cheeses, the scent of flowers grew stronger. A neatly folded piece of white paper caught my eye.

“Is that a receipt?” asked Jay.

“Probably just trash,” Mae Mae remarked.

“Let’s see,” I said as I ran up to it.

The closer I got to the piece of paper, the color began to morph from white to a familiar green, and as I stared at it, the face of Benjamin Franklin stared back at me. All my blood rushed to my head, and I felt as if my heart was about to burst out of my chest. My hand reached for the money, and I felt the crisp one hundred dollar bill in my hand. I started back towards my friends, feeling joy spread to every part of my body.

“No way,” Jay said “I saw it first.”

“Come on guys, I want to show it to my mom!” I exclaimed.

Heart fluttering with pride, I walked towards my mother’s laughter. I began to imagine all of the things I could buy with one hundred dollars. I could fill my room with stuffed animals, or buy a new book, maybe even convince my mom to let us get a dog.

“Of course you would find one hundred dollars in a Trader Joe’s,” Mom said cheerfully.

“Attention customers, the store will be closing in fifteen minutes,” the manager said over the intercom.

“All right Trammell’s, time to pack it up,” said Mae Mae’s mom.

“Us too,” said Jay’s mom.

Mom and I followed our friends towards the exit, but instead of leaving, we headed to the checkout. I watched as a man in dark-colored pants pulled out a crisp hundred-dollar bill and handed it to the cashier. Once he received his receipt and left, we put our groceries on the counter. I watched as each one was scanned, then we got our receipt.

“What am I going to do with this money?” I asked Mom.

“I think you know the right thing to do.”

I knew exactly what she meant: she wanted me to turn it in. I guess it was someone else’s money. But then I thought about all of those stuffed animals and journals that I could get.

I walked towards the door, but not the one that would take me to the warm autumn air. As I approached the door, a sign written in huge letters said “Customer Service.” Mom and the man’s voice are all that I heard for the next ten minutes, as they went over everything. When the evening was recounted, the man looked at me and said, “You did the right thing.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s your favorite thing from Trader Joe’s?”

“I love the sea salt caramels.”

The man’s footsteps faded away while Mom scribbled down our contact information and put the folded bill into an envelope. A few minutes later, the man returned with a box of caramels.

“Thank you so much!” I practically screamed.

“No, thank y’all,” the man responded.

Finally, I was back outside in the autumn air, and the sky was dark. On the way to the car, I saw the man in the dark pants looking around his white van. Mom saw it too and voiced what we both thought. “I wonder if he lost the hundred dollars?”

“Maybe.”

The view of the highway came closer as we made our way home, but then we quickly spun back in the opposite direction towards where we had left. We pulled into the familiar parking spot right next to the white van. Mom stepped outside once more and walked to the white van. The man in dark pants walked slowly towards her, and I could hear the faint sound of their voices being carried by the wind. Once Mom buckled again, she said to me, “He doesn’t know if he’s lost anything, but he’s thankful that I told him.”

The next day, I got a call from Trader Joe’s that said someone had claimed the money.

Your Local Coffee Shop

By Ky-Lin Berg



Caramel Comfort

By Catherine Guilsher

I stood—four years old—just past the entrance of a quiet, Canadian chapel. The rays of the afternoon sun beamed in through the windows onto the light brown wooden pews. I could see thousands of dust particles slowly dancing around in the sunlight. Dad, nearby, confided in someone. This man—younger than Dad—maintained direct eye contact with him as both of his eyebrows reached for his hairline. Just ahead, Mom sat in a pew with Sam, my older brother of three years, in her lap. Resting in her loose fist, a handful of caramel cubes glistened in the light. She fed them to him one at a time as they rocked back and forth, mirroring the pace of the dust flurries' waltz.

It was the summer of 2008. "Healing Hearts Camp" I read carved onto a large wooden sign upon our arrival. A week of correction awaited us.

"Okay, Catherine, this is a parenting camp that's gonna help Daddy and I understand how to connect more with Sam," Mom explained, "these people have worked with other kids who have R.A.D.*, so they'll know what to do. Do you understand?" I fully heard her, but I looked over at Sam. Does he even know why we are here? This whole thing is for him, after all. His eyes did not stay focused on one place for more than a few seconds. He twiddled his fingers and bit at his nails.

"Uh huh, Momma, but- but what am I gonna do?" I looked up at her tilting my head and scrunching my eyebrows.

"Oh, um, you'll just do the exercises for Sam and the other kids while we're learning with all the parents." Her eyes quickly broke away from mine, seeking to move on in the arrival process.

"Oh, okay." I murmured, unsure if I was heard.

That one afternoon, a few days into the "Healing Hearts Camp," Sam's taste buds were undoubtedly spoiled by those perfectly wrapped caramels Mom slowly fed to him one after another. At the same time, an affinity of comfort and peace between them appeared to form. In that moment, the muscles in Sam's body finally surrendered the tension they fought so hard to maintain. I do not remember the details of the whole process, but I do know that once Mom completed the exercise and felt a sense of contentment and connection with Sam, Dad settled onto the same, sunlit pew, embraced Sam in his arms, and rocked him back and forth with a fluent sway. He, too, carefully unwrapped and fed Sam a handful of caramel cubes. Sweet, buttery, creamy, caramel cubes. I stood, my mouth watering.

Despite the beauty and allure of the chapel, the sun rays, the maple scent in the air, and the ambiance of peace, my vision quickly blurred as tears developed in my eyes. I wanted that loving attention too. I needed to be an equal priority. I needed to reignite my relationship with my parents too. In that moment, my needs were not vocalized, but Mom and Dad noticed the small sparkles of sadness slowly gliding down my cheek. So, after Sam's turn, my parents did that same exercise with me sitting on the pew of the quaint chapel.

Although my taste buds were absolutely enraptured as I nibbled on the soft cubes that tasted of pure palatableness and warmth, traces of hurt resided in me knowing that Sam came first, and I followed. Nonetheless, the feeling of comfort and the sweetness of the caramels brought a sense of contentment over me, and I accepted this structure of my future. Instead of marinating in resentment, I closed my eyes and let the warmth of the sun, my parent's arms, and the caramels fill me with serenity.

*R.A.D. is an acronym for Reactive Attachment Disorder. It relates to a child's aggression and inability to trust. Most common in kids who started their lives in an unkempt orphanage and were later adopted. Sam spent the first sixteen months of his life in an orphanage in Kamchatka, Russia where he and fifty other babies were being taken care of by two caregivers.

Escaping Reality
By Ellie Usdan



Ocean and Water and Sand, Oh My!

By Virginia Kate Brandt

“What are you doing outside?” 16 year old Mary asked as she came up behind her younger sister.

“I’m watching the sun go down,” replied Phoebe. She leaned over the railing, trying to feel the cool mist of the ocean. The soft wind blew her short brown curls around her face which she managed to contain with a beret.

Phoebe’s eyes saddened as she gazed over the ocean. Her elbows supported her on the railing of the balcony and her chin rested on her palms. Below, the smooth waves crashed onto a sandy beach filled with shells and promises for the typical eleven year old.

Mary stood behind her and twirled one of her sister’s curls on her finger. She followed Phoebe’s look out over the ocean. There in the distance, she watched as the deep marigold sun, framed by a sky painted in brilliant hues of red and indigo, slowly descended below the distant horizon.

“We won’t see this for awhile.” Phoebe murmured as she felt the wind on her face. She closed her eyes to absorb the sounds and smells of her shore.

“Well, it’s not safe out here. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to miss it too.” Mary said, putting her hand on her sister’s shoulder. She ushered her sister back towards the indoors. Thick black curtains lined the doorway on both sides. Phoebe glanced back to where her beloved ocean stayed calling her with the soft hush of the distant waves.

“Girls, I hope you’ve packed everything!” Their mother called. The click of her heels met the wooden floor as she rushed around making last minute decisions.

“Yes, mother!” Phoebe called as she flung herself on her bed and felt the comforter engulf her. Mary went back to Phoebe’s closet and looked through some dresses hung on the hanger. She moved back and forth between Phoebe’s wardrobe and the chest which sat between Phoebe’s closet and bed. Phoebe watched with a still expression while her sister looked back and forth from the chest to the closet, debating if she had been making the right packing choices.

Her daze was interrupted by her mother opening the door to her room. Phoebe jumped at the sound of her mother’s voice.

“We have to be out by noon so please make sure you check the packing list tomorrow morning, just to make sure.”

“Yes, mother,” Mary replied.

Phoebe was quiet and her expression turned darker as her mother walked over to the balcony door where the door had been left ajar. She secured it and pulled the curtains closed. No light would escape the windows and out into the night.

Phoebe burst into tears.

Her mother turned to see her youngest sniffing, “Oh darling, it’s going to be alright!” she exclaimed. She made her way over to comfort Phoebe and sat next to her daughter on the bed.

Phoebe sat up and buried her head in the crease of her mother’s neck while clinging to her.

Mary stood still with a dress in hand and her gaze fixed downwards. She bit her lip as her vision became blurred. She dropped the dress on top of the chest, putting the task of packing behind her. Mary joined her mom and sister while trying not to let her emotions overcome her.

“You and Grandma are going to have such a fun time together, and I’ll be coming up soon. You know that right, darling?” Phoebe’s mother said as she rested her head on Phoebe’s hair.

“I know! I just don’t want to leave the sea!” Phoebe sobbed.

The next morning, Phoebe and Mary were taken to the train station where they would go to London and then Scotland. The girls said goodbye to their mother and took the connecting train to King’s Cross where parents and children crowded the station. The train pulled into the station where it was bustling with activity. The train slowly chugged past the platform where many people scurried about. A few enlisted recruits or the British Armed forces walked through the station in search of their trains. Phoebe held Mary’s hand and they looked out to see kids exactly in the situation they were in.

When the train slowed to a halt, Phoebe leaned forward to get a glimpse of the city life. Contrary to Phoebe, Mary checked her watch and then the other train tickets she clutched in her hand. They were crinkled from the warmth of Mary’s hand holding them for the whole way. She pocketed the tickets and stood up as other passengers began to get their luggage out of the overhead compartments. Mary reached up to grab hers yet couldn’t get Phoebe’s trunk out of the overhead. It was stuck and people began to wait on Mary to get her things.

“Come on girl, the line’s moving.” An impatient man said standing behind Mary.

“But my sister...” Mary began to argue.

“She can get it herself, the line’s moving.” The man snapped.

“I’ll be outside waiting, Bea.” Mary said grimacing. She moved out of the way and out of the car to make way for the man.

Phoebe sat back down and watched the passengers move out of the car. A boy came up to her.

“That wasn’t very nice of him” He said, “I’ll help you.”

“Really? Thank you!” Phoebe said. Her lips tugged at the corners for the first time that trip.

The boy smiled back.

Phoebe scanned his face and settled on his eyes. She remembered the blue she saw in the water below her balcony window, it was as if the sea had found itself into the eyes of a friend. His hair was golden like the sunset she saw for the last time. He had freckles like the shells which littered the sand on the beach. She found comfort in his smile.

When the line died down and most of the passenger’s left, the boy she met helped her bring her luggage down. Together they left the car and found Mary standing beside the entrance.

"I'm glad you made it out soundly," Mary said, sighing in relief.

"Me too, but I had help." Phoebe replied happily. Her curls bounced in response to her cheerfulness.

"Oh, well I thank you," Mary turned to the boy who stood a little behind Phoebe.

"You're welcome." He replied with a smile. "I'm Charles."

"I'm Phoebe, and this is my sister Mary." Phoebe replied, sticking her hand out in a friendly gesture. Charles shook it.

"Would you like to stick with us, Charles?" Mary asked, "In times like this we all need to stick together."

"Really? I'd love to have some friends." Charles's eyes lit up with hopefulness.

"Well, stick with us then." Mary said. She pivoted and began walking to find where the next train was.

Phoebe and Charles trailed her as they began striking up a conversation.

"You remind me of my beach back home." Phoebe commented.

"I think you look like my favorite tree to climb. You have green eyes like the leaves on it."

"Wow! That must be a pretty tree!" Phoebe exclaimed.

Charles beamed which made Phoebe look into his gaze once again. She grinned, she originally hated the idea of leaving her beloved ocean. Now it was like she never left it at all.

Useppa Island

By Beatrice Spencer

Croquet Matches, Bocce Ball games,
Fishing Tournaments, Night Blooming Cereus,
Waves Crashing, Manatees Swimming, Sunsets Setting,
Island of Beauty:

They tell me you are dangerous, for I have felt the strength of your sun burning against my skin.

And they tell me you are remote, for I have traveled the distances to reach you.

And they tell me you bring fear, for I have experienced the fear your storms can bring.

And with experiencing this all, I will turn away from those who may despise this island:

You are a secluded slice of paradise, like the Garden of Eden.

Skies clear as glass nourish the wonders of the island,

Shells from the bottom of the ocean wash up onto your shore.

The sound of the dolphins jumping echoes throughout your land,

Laughing,

Biking,

Swimming,

Walking,

Riding, watching, exploring.

Under the land, the turtles bury deep for safety,

Under the banyan trees, the birds sing their melodies.

You only bring smiles to all those around like kids on Christmas Day,

You may be far away, but you make the trip worth it.

You may bring fearful storms, powerful sunny days, and you are far from home, but those can't take away from all your beauty.

Joy is found beyond the strength of the sun, fearful storms, and far distances with croquet matches, bocce ball games, fishing tournaments, Night Blooming Cereus, waves crashing, manatees swimming, sunset setting, island of beauty.

Night Lights
By Ky-Lin Berg



Los Angeles

By Clara Howell

The city of Angels,
Home to the wealthy and the well-known.
Gathered mountains, beaches, and skyscrapers;
A City that has it all.

Some say you have it all, but who is the judge?
For sights of lights and hazy winds have filled my mind.
Some say you have the best food,
 and I have tasted your signature dishes.
Some say you are honest,
 and the rash comments on the streets stand for your opinion.
You are not my city, you are not my home. You are my getaway

You are kind and generous.
Pretty sunsets and sunrises are given by you.
You are home to wishers and dreamers.

However, you are brutal.
You drain our wallets and our time,
Shameful pride is provided on your streets,
You deem competition onto those who fill your city.

Waves crashing,
Cars honking,
Mountains standing still,
People walking,
Dogs barking,
Music blasting,
Loud and alive, you are.

Birmingham Booming

By Lizzie Amberson

Steel welder carving out a city,
a city of magic.

Constantly evolving and improving,
a never ending cycle of hard work.

Some say you are dull, small, underwhelming.

I see the deeper beauty,
a city built on roots of evil,
yet prevailed when equality came.

I have seen the scars you bear,
yet with those you create light.

Light shining on 3rd Avenue North,
coming from the crimson and ivory bulbs on the theater marquee.

Your furnace stands tall,
years of hard work and sacrifice made by many working there.

Lurking over the mountain,
stands a gentle giant:

Vulcan judging the city with his stare.

Forever watching in fear but also in astonishment,

Of your beauty and madness.

As Birmingham Booms.



New York

By Bentley Carroll

The Big Apple, Capital of the World, Empire City,
Busy, Noisy, Expensive, Empire City
The city so nice they named it twice.

You are the waitlist of the world, as I have spent hours upon hours waiting for my hunger to end.
You are unwashed and smeared with debris, as I am still scrubbing my bare feet and squeezing the bottle of soap for the very last drop.

And you are a mystery, giving me the desire to want more as I see the designer bags all around the city.

Prove to me that you are worthy enough for my time and money to be spent here. Prove to me
The people here are friendly and that success will be in my future.

Show me the sparkling lights and happily married couples as the ball drops at midnight.

Bright as the horizon when the sun begins to rise in the early morning

Children laughing until no more air can come out of their lungs

Laughing at the memories made in Central Park,

Barefoot,

Sweating,

Hand Holding,

Palms sweating,

Running, walking, swinging

With the people that make you the most happy,

Wiping the leftovers off your face with your jeans unbuttoned

Carelessly swiping your card in the thousands of places, forgetting the price of the green
paper no longer existing in your wallet.

New York,

As big as you say you are,

Are you laughing at my indecisiveness? Let me go,

Reliving the City of Dreams, busy, noisy,

Empire City, Reliving the City that Never Sleeps,

Only to just be a block away.

Beautiful Rain

By Bella Donner

With wet cobblestone roads,
It is a lovely gloomy day.

A city full of love,
Or so it is said to be full.
Though who can be the real witness of love?

The darkness no longer so dark,
Temporarily lit by the light.
This is the City of lights,
Yet it is failing to brighten the darkness.

Bread Bakers,
Clocksmiths,
And artists roam these glittering roads.
The beautiful rain coats the stone.
Architecture that one envies.
Travelers from far wanting to see its glory
And wanting to relive its story.

Its history, beautifully broken.
Like petals that cover grass,
Blossomed but fallen.
This city with its beauty.
There is longing for fulfillment,
But one city can't fill every void.

Something Sappy

By Ky-Lin Berg



Houston

By Sareena Askenazi

Space explorer,
Top energy maker, cancer fighter
an ideal urban city that is home to millions;
Homeless, wealthy, middle class
City of industry:

To the world you are a city and I feel as though its true, for when someone walks into the brisk air they feel pollution.
And to the world, you are too busy, and I feel as though its true, the five o'clock traffic serves as a roadblock in the planning of any person on an average day.
To the world you are too populated, and my response is: that makes for endless opportunities for relationships
Even with the many flaws that you are often characterized upon, you are my city and for that reason I defend you when others belittle.
Show me another city that has a prideful population and stands together during the countless natural disasters.
Another city that serves as a pathway for entrepreneurship, with suburbs around the outskirts providing a border of security.
A city as fast paced as an assembly line during the holiday season, prideful like a population when soldiers come home from war.
Providing a home,
A shelter,
A sense of community
For not only people, but providing a habitat for creativity.
You provide a desire for exploration and learning new things by your willingness to learn about the outside world
You provide a sense of pride for the
Rockets, Astros and Texans.
Their cheers are directed towards you.
You provide a sense of urgency within your people.

Even though you are loud, expensive, constantly busy, and gigantic,
you are a space explorer, the top energy maker, a cancer fighter
an ideal urban city that is home to millions;
Homeless, wealthy, middle class
The city of industry.

Gotham

By Sarah Cushman

The city that never sleeps,
tall towers looming over Gotham,
loud honks, shouting, and bright lights,
the nation's most expensive jewel,
the Big Apple.

They tell me you are filthy, and I agree with all my heart when I see your polluted air
and trash everywhere.

You are filled with angry taxi drivers trying their best to navigate you,
while also trying to avoid a lawsuit.

You have some of the wealthiest people thriving in your land,
yet also have some of the poorest people just barely surviving.

Blinded by your filth, hiding your glory,
people do not understand the wonderment I have for you.

The most hardworking, determined, bright, and fearless.

Rebuilding the tallest of towers, becoming clean, rebuilding your heart,
no other city compares to the biggest city in the nation.

Bright as the sun that shines on the clearest of days,
Fearless as a knight protecting his kingdom.

Trendy,

Famous,

Wonderful,

Fearless,

Picking yourself back up.

Beneath the rubble of 9/11,
cheering with pride for your people.

Beneath the amazement of your lights,
cheering for your immense beauty.

Cheering for your people who show good,
even in the worst of times.

Boasting and cheering for your great strengths,
and even your weaknesses,
cheering!

Cheering for the city that never sleeps, the people of Gotham,
hearing loud honks, shouting, and seeing the bright lights,
proud to be the nation's most expensive jewel, the Big Apple.

Fort Morgan

By Joseph Moellinger

Secret sunrise and sunset giver to the guest,
Beachcomber and sacred soldier,
Keeper of history and provider of nature,
Calm, reflective, historical,
Community of sad, quiet peace:

They arrive on land and ocean, and they seek your beauty and peacefulness.
There is turmoil in your existence but calmness in your waters.
There is war in your landscape but peace in your people.
There is hope in your fortress but despair in your story.
Bring me to another community as great as you with wild nature, deep history, and unbridled weather.
Crashing waves of dark sea water,
Strong as a diamond but lost in the sand,
Broken,
Desolate,
Weathered,
War-torn,
Alone,
Quiet,
Within the walls of the history's fort, you are bricked and locked with security.
Within the waters that surround the peninsula, you provide freedom and flight of the sea.
Smiling at the sunrise and sunset that hide your tragic tales, you bring forth joy.
Find us relishing the sun warming your visitors and the light of the moon glistening on your waters!
Find us smiling at the serene scenery of the now quiet fortress of your walls, weathered, war-torn, withered by time and broken
into quiet peace in the sacred sunrise and sunset of your peninsula community,

Secret sunrise and sunset giver to the guest,
Beachcomber and sacred soldier,
Keeper of history and provider of nature,
Calm, reflective, historical,
You are the community of peace.

Snowfall
By Ky-Lin Berg



The Web

By Emily Russell

The door swung open. Megan and Calvin stood in the doorway panicked to see their parents, two close friends and an unfamiliar man sitting on the couch. Megan's skin turned red, and after a long silence the man spoke, "Megan, Calvin, please sit down." Calvin grabbed Megan's arm: "It's a trap. Do not go in" Megan looks at her husband. She pulls her arm away and moves into the cabin. They take a seat in the empty chairs that face the group of people. Calvin sits in terror. He begins to speak but quickly the man interrupts him:

"Do you know why y'all are here today?" The couple looks at each other. "My name is Dr. Harrison Jacobs; I'm here because your friends and family are concerned about the recent incidents that have happened." Calvin reaches for Megan's hand. She intertwines her fingers with his. He leans over, and his shoulder pushes against hers.

"We don't have to be here, let's go. Let's leave right now," Megan looks at Calvin with fear in her eyes.

"I want to know what they have to say," she says calmly. With a deep inhale, she nods to the man in the middle, allowing him to continue.

"We've been very worried about you two. Your family has written letters expressing how they've felt about your recent debacle." One by one each family member reads a heartfelt letter to the two. They speak about how much they love them, how worried they are, and how much they need them to come back home. The couple sit still in their chairs watching the time pass, worrying about being there for so long. Finally, Becky reads her letter.

"Megan, you're one of my oldest friends. We've been through everything together, from the first day of kindergarten to your wedding day with Calvin. I love you so much, and I need you to come back. You've been running for months now, but you need to listen to me. Calvin is telling you a lie. The night we celebrated your five-year anniversary, everything seemed wonderful. Calvin, you had just received a promotion. I was so happy for y'all. I couldn't wait for the two of you to live the life y'all have always dreamed of. But the two of you became distant, I didn't hear from you for weeks, until you, Megan, asked me to keep your dogs for a weekend. That's when everything fell into place. That first night I went to your house, I found your dogs lying on the couch, a musty odor floating through the air. That weekend, I spent lots of time at your house! I started pilfering around, because I knew something was off. I almost gave up, until I ran across a few printed emails tucked into a book. Calvin, these emails were between you and your boss. They were talking about the new products you were selling. I traced the email, and it turns out there's no user under that address. They're all fake, and that's when I got confused. I started doing some research, and-"

"Stop! Please let me explain." Calvin cuts her off. "The emails were a hoax to get the cartel off our trail. They're after us, Becky, please believe me. We need help, they're trying to kill us."

"Please calm down! Let Becky finish. We know about the people after you." The doctor says in hopes of letting Becky finish.

"I- I did some research and, Calvin, the company you claim to be working with has been out of business for almost seven months now. They closed down because of rumors that the factories had been smuggling narcotics into their products. Megan, I need you to listen to me now. You're caught in his web of lies. You're running from nothing. This isn't true. You need to come back." The group sat in silence for what seemed like hours. Finally, Calvin stood from his chair. Megan followed. Calvin pulled his wife into a bedroom. Faint mumbles of the couple came from the room for almost half an hour. Then Megan slowly came out, a tear rolled down her cheek:

"I think I need help," she weeped. "He's not right. He hasn't taken his medicine." Becky stood and gave her a hug. They sat on the floor and waited for the doctors to take away the stranger that Megan thought she knew.

The Lake Can Be Pretty Sometimes

By Virginia Kate Brandt



Rolling The Trees

By Elle Stokes

“Elle. Elllllle. Get up!”

I felt my body shaking back and forth. I slowly opened my eyes and saw my best friend leaning over me with her eyebrows furrowed and her lips in a thin, tight line. My other friend stood in the corner of the room, similarly frightened. Her arms were crossed as if to hold her body from falling, and her eyes were as wide as a doe’s. Confused and disturbed, I thought my brother had decided to use the restroom. I prepared for another few hours of sleep.

“Elle, come on get up.”

The shimmer of lights on the mirrors in the hallway caught my eye. It took a few seconds before I fully took in the atmosphere and cleared the dreary tiredness out of my eyes.

“What? What’s going on?”

The sound came first. No one was yelling, but there was a commotion that aroused my nerves. The sound of heavy boots hitting the stairs with a moderately quick pace. Deep voices spoke in hushed tones in the hallway outside the guest room my friends and I had crashed in that night.

My friend explained, “There’s an ambulance. I have elephant ears and heard them come to the house. Now they’re outside with the flashing red and blue lights.”

Walking out of the room, I turned to peek around the corner. Then, I saw it. The dim blue and red lights highlighted on the mirror came into view. I turned to look over my shoulder towards a familiar noise. My dad looked concerned, talking to a huge man in a humongous black jacket. The firefighter looked to have a gaze of agony. He had a calm demeanor and nodded when talking to the big man standing there, but his shoulders slumped over, and he fidgeted with his hands.

My dad spotted me standing there and turned to face me. He took a few seconds to register my state at that moment. He came over and squatted next to me; then, he rested his hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, kiddo. I know there’s a lot going on. It’s all gonna be okay. Mr. Hurley is gonna take y’all over to his house. You know Mr. Hurley, the dad of the family across the street.”

“But Dad, what’s going on? Why are all these people here? Why do I have to go across the street? I just wanna stay with you.”

“I know honey. Mom... mom needs to go to the hospital, and I need to go with her. She’s gonna be okay, but I need you to go with Mr. Hurley, alright?”

I just nodded my head because I had a lump in my throat, and a large dose of anxiety entered my body.

As I walked down the driveway with the bitter cold wind causing goosebumps to crawl up my legs, I felt nausea and unease in my gut. Mr. Hurley met my brother, my friends, and I at the sidewalk and walked us across into his yard. He met me with a soft, grandfatherly kind of smile.

“Hey guys, I know this is a very scary situation to be in, but everything is gonna be fine. Let’s go find something to do while we wait for your parents to get back.”

We followed him into his house, and he put us in front of the TV while he disappeared into the basement. He came back a couple of minutes later with rolls of toilet paper. There were so many that each person carried eight rolls. As we carefully followed him out of the house, balancing our stacked toilet paper between our arms, we headed towards our other neighbor’s house. He smiled, made jokes, and then motioned for us to be quiet.

“Now, be real quiet. We don’t want to get caught.” He winked at us, and started decking the other neighbors’ trees in the toilet paper. Quickly, the rest of us followed, launching our white flowing paper into the air and landing across branches and the ground. We giggled silently with each other and finished the yard off with the mailbox. By the time we were finished and headed back to his house, my grandmother showed up to take us back to the house and watch us for the night.

Pink Skies
By Virginia Kate Brandt



The Song of Crickets

By Anna Yeager

The song of crickets drifts through the air,
Drawing me to the rail.
A secret song they sing to me,
Which never seems to fail.

Under the moon's light the water gleams,
A beacon I can't resist.
Calling me to its shallows
And begging for a kiss.

Down the stairs and down the hill,
I race to her gleaming shore.
Like a man who's lost his sight,
I trip and fall before her.

She draws me in with her glittering waves,
Gentle in their caress.
Inviting me closer and closer and closer
So that I may rest.

Deeper and deeper, I wade through the water,
Searching for that addicting light
While she pulls me further and further,
Until there's no land in sight.

The waves have lost their gentle caress,
And the water has lost its shine.
The moon is the only thing that remains,
But clouds she hides behind.

The waves grow in size and anger,
Trying to drag me to her depths.
I try to stay afloat, I do,
But time will never rest.

My limbs grow weary and my eyes grow heavy
As the moon fades from view.
I try to fight with all my might,
But the will of the soul is few.

Like a brick, I sink to her depths.
My aching and weary soul.
Finally, after years and years,
I return to where I call home.

Sounds

By Islay Brady

The mines are either ear bleedingly loud or quieter than a funeral. Tonight is the latter: all I can hear is one bad faucet that leaks constantly. My rough, calloused hands play around with the bandage that is meant for my cuts. I got them two days ago from a beam that fell —fun times. I'm looking for something, but the moment I entered the mines, I forgot what. I guess I'll look for whatever I've forgotten. What could it have been? My pick is at home and so is my lantern. No one is here, so it must be important or something I'm not supposed to have.

What could it be? I let my fingers dance across the chipped walls as I make my way deeper into the labyrinth of labor. Tiny bits of fools gold and coal are illuminated by the light of the torches that also litter the walls. Small pebbles crack beneath the steel toed boots I stole from my brother. He was angry, but I couldn't afford new ones.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. Wisp, wisp, wisp. Drip, drip, drip. Three sounds; three consonant sounds. Crunch, wisp, drip. Not pretty sounds, but something to remind you that you can hear. It's stupid, but it's true. I hear crunch, wisp, drip, and that means I can hear. It's those small noises. They don't matter in the end, but they remind me that I can hear. The farther I go down the corridor, the happier I am that I can hear the crunch, wisp, drip. Crunch, wisp, drip. Crunch, wisp, drip. They become quite pleasant after you listen to them for a while.

It's a pattern: Crunch, wisp, drip. It's nice to listen to, but I still can't figure out what I've forgotten. The more I listen the more I forget. Crunch, wisp, drip. What have I forgotten? Crunch, wisp, drip. What have I forgotten? Crunch, wisp, drip. I remember! Where is my dignity?

Dear Lydia

By Arden Tapp

Dear Lydia,

I have never been the smartest man. Even basic concepts of science, math, and grammar have been just out of my grasp for as long as I can remember. I was held back twice in third grade, and even then I couldn't get a handle on multiplication tables. It was no surprise to anybody when I flunked out of high school my sophomore year and got a minimum wage job at the dilapidated convenience store on the corner. I used what meager money I got from that job to buy myself a few new addictions and a couple of vices. That lasted for about a month until I got fired from that convenience store for stealing alcohol from the stock and getting drunk in the bathroom on my Sunday shift. Shortly after, my parents kicked me out of their house for getting high on heroin while I was supposed to be watching my little brother. So I picked up my stuff, only the essentials: two pairs of jeans and a wad of cash for drugs, and I ran out of that house.

From then on I lived on the streets, squatting in random houses and doing all kinds of drugs with all kinds of people. I learned how to pickpocket, though I wasn't very good at it, and I got most of my money by stealing cash off of dead or dying friends who smoked a little too much heroin at once. It wasn't until three winters passed that I met Jessica. I had been slouched against the bottom of a telephone pole during the tail end of a trip when she came up to me and asked if I was alright. At the time, I thought she might have been an angel, ready to take my soul to heaven and forgive me my earthly sins. Her soft, angelic features and blonde hair lended themselves to the image. It didn't get much further than that, as I threw up at her feet and promptly passed out.

When I next woke up, there was a tuna sandwich and a bottle of water next to my head, and the same young woman leaning against the brick wall to my left. I, in all of my eloquence, threw the water bottle at her head and told her to go away, though I said it with a few more choice words.

I imagine she pitied me, a well dressed woman of class like her had no other reason than to stay with a swine like me after such a violent encounter. Or perhaps she craved an adventure, a project, and what better to save than a disgusting drug addict straight off the streets. Maybe she really was an angel, sent from the heavens to save my forsaken soul. Or maybe it was something as simple as the look in my eyes, which she claimed to be the reason after I asked her years later. I suppose a well-off woman like her could afford her eccentricities.

Whatever the reason, she stayed. I learned her name was Jessica, and that people called her Jess, and I told her that my name was Martin, and she began calling me Marty. She bought me food from the gas station and dropped it off on her way to and from work, and she helped me get clean. She sent me to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and got me job interviews and helped me through withdrawals and relapses. It wasn't long before I fell in love with her, inevitable, I suppose.

I got a job at a toy factory, loading up crates of marbles onto forklifts and moving them to shipping. I carpooled to work and eventually got myself a shoe-box apartment in the building next to where Jessica and I first met. Everyday, I was working up the courage to confess my love for the angel that saved my life. I didn't have enough money for any substantial gift, but I poached a cat's eye marble from work that was the same color as her eyes, blue with hints of yellow and green. I kept that same marble in my pocket for weeks while I worked up the courage to tell her, but then one day, she walked into my apartment with a fat diamond on her finger. Apparently, she had been dating some other man for weeks, nothing too serious, and she accidentally got pregnant. His name was also Martin, she told me, and he worked as a mid-level bureaucrat in city hall. How cruel, I thought, that she would end up with a man who shared my name, but not me. I almost relapsed again, but then I thought of Jessica, and the little baby in her stomach, and the fat diamond on her finger that would doubtlessly provide for the both of them.

I stayed clean, if only because I wanted to meet Jessica's baby. I met this other Martin, and I proudly noted that Jessica did not call him Marty, only me, and I told him that. Eventually, Jessica got onto me about my attitude and encouraged me to get to know Martin. I learned that Martin was a good man with a fat wallet, and a true devotion to his new family (even if only to prevent a political scandal), and a bank account large enough to provide what I never could. I think that's why I got over myself in the end, Martin was smart enough and wealthy enough to be worthy of Jessica, and I was only a highschool drop-out and former drug addict. Though, despite my new conviction to accept Martin and befriend him, I never stopped loving Jessica and I always kept that cat's eye marble with me.

I stayed with Jessica throughout her pregnancy, and I cried when she asked me to be the God-Father. I walked Jessica down the aisle on her wedding day in place of her deceased father, and I hung up pictures of her ultrasounds on my refrigerator door. I waited outside the hospital room while Jessica gave birth to her new baby girl, that would be you, Lydia.

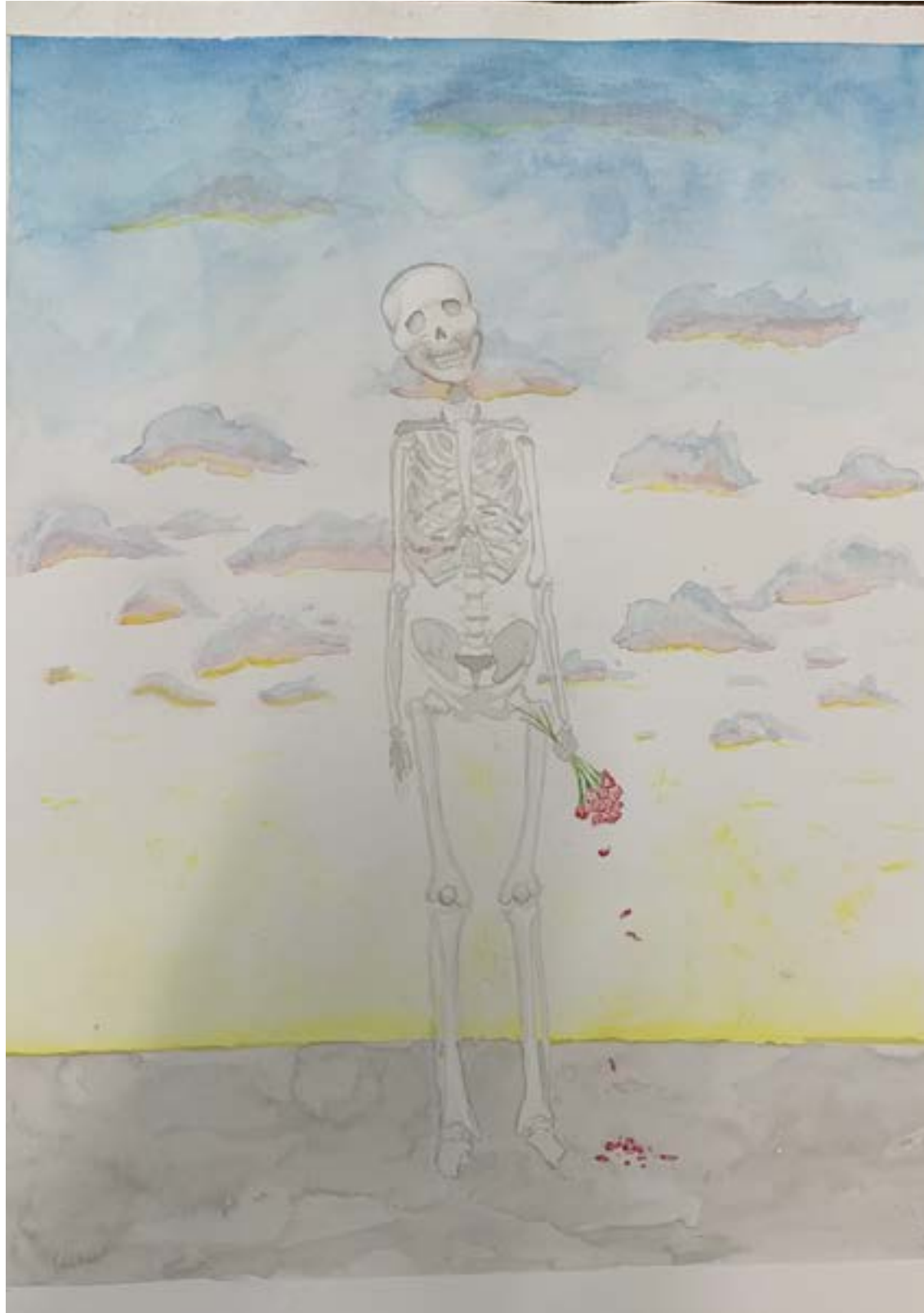
Jessica died that day due to complications, and Martin got caught driving in a big storm a year later.

I put all of your inheritance into a savings account that opened when you turned 18, and I worked extra shifts at the toy factory to move us into a bigger apartment. I watched as you grew up. I cried when you took your first steps, and laughed when you took to calling me Uncle Marty, and hung up your report cards on my fridge next to your yearbook photos. Eventually, that cat's eye marble that I kept with me everyday didn't symbolize my unrequited love for Jessica anymore. Instead of envisioning her eyes every time I looked at it, I saw the bright blue eyes of my wonderful talented daughter. I put all I had into taking care of you, and I treasured every single second that I spent with you.

I know that last time we talked was years ago and that it wasn't the most pleasant conversation, but I want you to know that I love you, Lydia. I wanted you to know that you have your mother's eyes and your father's intelligence. I abused my body for years, and it has finally caught up to me, but I want you to know that while my life might not have amounted to much, you have been my greatest accomplishment. That I had the opportunity to love you and be a part of your life is the best thing I could have asked for. I do not have much money to leave for you, nor many valuables of any significance, but attached to this letter is a single cat's eye marble that means the world to me, and I want you to have it.

Much love,
Uncle Marty.

Unrequited
By Sydney Velasquez



Waiting For The Bus in The Rain

By Ky-Lin Berg

The only light illuminating the dark street was one lone lamp. Peter watched from under it as the rain poured in diagonal streaks, shining in the flickering yellow light and gently tapping at the glossy city sidewalk. His bus was late by five minutes now, but with nothing else to do, he waited patiently, tapping his foot to the rhythm of his music player. Bus by bus passed, all various shades of different striking colors, but none of them were the one he was searching for. He wondered distantly if it had already passed him by, blending into the blackness of the night. Any scenario was likely at this point, he figured.

Before his thoughts could wander any further, a man approached the bus stop and took a seat on the bench behind him. At least he had an umbrella, Peter admired bitterly, adjusting the damp hood over his head to better conceal his eyes. "What's a young man like you doing out so late?" the old man called with a raspy, kind voice. Peter didn't turn to look at him, shoulders tense, but could envision his typical, crinkly smile regardless.

"Just waiting for the bus," he answered coolly, not bothering to pause his music, "What about you?"

"Ah, well," the old man laughed, "I'm just making my way to the hospital." Peter turned, curiosity peaked, and noted the man's overall good health despite his fast-approaching age. He looked pretty well dressed too, even if his shirt was buttoned one button off and his tie hung loose around his neck.

"Oh? How come?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned against the frigid metal pole.

The old man sighed happily. "My granddaughter just had her first son. I don't have a car, and these old bones wouldn't get me very far on foot."

Peter smiled a bit and nodded. "Congratulations." The old man waved his hand in the air but laughed, pleased all the same.

"Thank you, son," he shifted a bit, crossing one leg over the other, "What about you? Where is a young man like yourself headed on a night like this?" Peter fiddled with his headphone cord, debating whether or not to tell the old man a lie.

"I'm going to the hospital too," he decided, "To visit a friend." The old man nodded solemnly.

"I hope it all goes well, young man." Peter couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face, the first and last genuine one of the night.

"It will."

As soon as the words left his mouth, the bus finally arrived, crawling up to their stop in its typical lumbering fashion. Peter allowed the man to board first, filing in behind him. The ride there was peacefully quiet, just the two of them and the unassuming bus driver. Peter kept his face turned towards the window, watching the passing lights of the city and listening to the soft conversation between the two men at the front of the bus. When it finally came to a stop some time later, Peter let the old man lead the way again, clambering off shortly after him.

"Have a good night, son." The old man smiled back at him, entering through the glowing doors of the hospital. Peter waved a bit, mimicking his expression.

"You too."

He waited a few moments before he followed suit, just to be sure that man was gone. Smile long since faded, he entered the hospital, silently walking through the waiting room and glancing at the faces he passed. None of them saw him, thankfully. That old man must have been one in a million.

Peter made his way to the elevator, standing unassumingly in the corner until he made it to his floor, and walked out without a word. He found his room and opened the door with one hand, fingers running over the worn buttons of the music player in his palm with the other. There was a woman laying on a hospital bed, pale and unmoving. She was sleeping, breath coming in short, raspy bursts, but otherwise peaceful. This would be one of the quiet ones, it seemed. Stepping in beat with the song, he walked closer and placed his hand on her forehead. One, two, three, four...

The flatline was perfectly in tune.

Redeemer

By Georgia Kate Scott

It was an unlucky day,
Friday, the 13th of May,
when my journey did start,
when I was placed on the carton of salt.

Now just \$1.99!,
I exclaim at each customer who walked by,
each one ignoring my calls,
until one grabs my box and gets in line.

I beam at the cans of soup and bags of dates,
as I am passed over the scanner and placed in the bag,
but I fill with fear as the cashier states,
Your total is \$2.13, go ahead and put your card in, the machine tends to lag.

As I am carted out of the store,
I begin to think I may be a curse,
but on the trunk of my owner's car,
the license plate reads P3R L13.

My fear dissipates,
relief sweeps over me,
for superstition states,
misfortune repeated thrice is lucky.

Days Like Today

By Emily Russell

Her phone alarm sounds. She rolls off of her right side and slowly moves her fingers to turn it off. This happens again and again, every fifteen minutes, 6:00-6:45, every morning. Once the 6:30 alarm rings, she finally lies awake. Her body is cold and numb, the way a homeless man feels during the month of January. Her mind is awake, but her eyes are closed. She knows that if she gets her phone, she will not be able to fall back asleep. She lays still, anticipating the next alarm. Her mind focuses on her heart; it pounds awaiting the chimes of her final alarm. She tries her best to calm down, but it is too late. She feels as if she just ran a mile, out of breath and panting but calm at the same time.

15 minutes have gone by right? They had to have by now.

She grabs her phone: 6:37.

You have got to be joking. You're freaking out over nothing. You need to calm down.

She begins to breathe again; however, she's too awake to fall asleep again. She gets up. Her tired, ghostlike body moves out of bed. She removes her shirt and underwear that she slept in the night before. She floats to the shower. The water caresses her body while her eyes slowly begin to become more aware of her surroundings.

I hope I have everything ready for today. Did I do all of my homework? Okay, Anatomy? Yes, did that. English? No, we didn't have anything. French? Yes, did that. Oh my god, what about math? No, stop, you did that. Calm down.

Her heart pounds with the underlying feeling that she's forgetting something. Once again, she disregards this familiar feeling. She reaches for her towel to dry herself. With just the cloth wrapped around her, she lies back in bed to capture her last bit of rest.

Don't check your notifications just get onto Instagram or something. If you check your Snapchat and he hasn't answered you, then you'll be upset and overthink it. It's best not to know. Do not check.

She reaches for her phone lying face down on her bedside table. Neglecting her entire thought process, she clicks on Snapchat to find his name. William. There's no reply.

Are you kidding? God, where's your self control? I thought that you weren't going to get on Snapchat. He probably hasn't woken up yet. You're fine.

She climbs out of bed once more and throws on sweatpants and a t-shirt she wore before she went to sleep the night before. She moves to the kitchen. The cold wood pierces her feet as she walks from room to room. She eats slow, playing out her day and the rest of her week.

Seven hours of school. Three hours of dance. Two hours of homework. Only three more days until the weekend. I can't wait for tonight. That's when we get to talk on the phone or text or something. I just want to talk to him. I want to ask him more about the personality tests that we were taking yesterday. INTP, I'm pretty sure that was his. I'll make sure to ask him about it today.

"Good morning," her mother says as she walks into the kitchen. She gives her mom a faint smile and returns to her meal, "I have to leave early today, so I need you to pick up your brother from school."

Obviously, mom, I get him everyday.

"Okay, sounds good, I got it," she says.

Once she's done eating, she goes back to her room. She stands in front of her full length mirror examining her body.

I think it's gonna be cold, so leggings?

A black pair of leggings lay on the couch along with the rest of the clothes she struggles to find time to put away. She slips them on, her reflection watching her every move as if it was another being judging the way she dresses. She turns away from the judgmental stares and glances she receives from the girl in the mirror. She checks her phone.

William. Yes, he answered. Shoot, only one minute ago. I have to wait.

No, stop. This is stupid. He won't notice when I answer him. He won't notice or care if it's been one minute or one hour. He doesn't think like you do, he does not overthink like you. Answer him.

She answers the boy. Trying her best to look like she's not trying, she gives a soft smile. She then finishes her routine with putting her books in her backpack, grabbing her keys and leaving for school. While driving, her mind begins to run and the feeling returns.

It's just another day. It's just another day. Nothing is going to happen. Stop thinking anything will. You're stuck inside your head, get out, just talk to your friends and it'll be okay. You're perfectly fine. It will be a normal day.

Anatomy. Her first class. She sits in the back with a girl she is only friendly with. She likes this class. She claims that it's the only subject that she can learn easily. It clicks with her.

So if the central nervous system is where the brain and spinal cord are, then does that mean that all the other nerves around are connected through different pathways, or do they all connect into the spinal cord?

Her classes move slowly. She drifts from course to course. Her mind races as she sits and stares blankly at the motivational posters at the front of each classroom. She thinks about her life, herself, her friends and family. She thinks of it all. Her heart beats faster as the voice in her head begins to overwhelm her with irrational scenarios and ideas that could never happen. She looks towards her teacher. Words fall out of his mouth like throw up after a long Friday night. She wishes it was a Friday night. She wants to escape, escape from the words and the sounds and everything around her. She dreams of euphoria, a time without worry of responsibility. She wishes for pure happiness. The happiness that one would feel on a summer night with their friends.

I can't do it anymore. I can't do this. Still three more days till the weekend.

She says to herself as her hands doodle the word "Friday" on the crumpled loose leaf paper in front of her. Three more days until she can forget it all. The bell rings. She walks to her next class. In the corner of her Business technology class, she sits with three boys; Robert, Alex, and David. They all talk and playfully and make fun of each other while doing their assignments.

"You kind of look like a farmer in that," Alex says to her.

They obviously don't mean that. You like this outfit, don't let it get to you. No one thinks you look like a farmer, and even if someone does, it doesn't matter what they think. You look good. It kind of sucks being the only girl in this class. It'd be nice if Victoria or Natalie were here with me.

“Well you look like an idiot,” she said sarcastically. The boys laugh while continuing their work. They chatter and chuckle with each other through the entire period.

Wow, I’m absolutely starving. I should have gotten something to eat in the lunchroom earlier. It doesn’t matter how I look when I eat. I eat normally. I shouldn’t starve myself because of how other people will look at me when I eat. It’s not like I care what they think anyway. I just don’t want to draw attention to myself.

Yet she sits still in her chair, her stomach aching with hunger. Once again, the bell rings. She collects her things and moves towards the door, thanking her teacher just before exiting. She finds William in the hallway, walking him to his next class. She keeps her head down, looking at the details of his shoes. Through all the commotion there was silence between the two. With awkward pauses between the small phrases that they would pass to each other.

This is weird. Why does this feel so weird? Why does he seem so disengaged? Maybe I should just stop talking. I shouldn’t say anything else. Maybe I should keep talking. Maybe he thinks I look like a farmer, like what Alex said. Stop, that’s stupid, don’t think that. He hasn’t even given my outfit enough thought to even think that.

“Alright bye!” she says as he walks into his Precalculus class. She walks back to her French class, stepping in just before the bell rings.

“Salut classe! Comment ça va?” her teacher exclaims. Her mind drifts off, replaying the brief encounter she and William shared just moments before. She thinks of her words, her body language, her eye contact. She analyzes her movements, her thoughts, his feelings, always coming back to the conclusion that he hasn’t had a single thought about her since that encounter.

“Hey? Are you coming?” She wakes up from her daydream to discover that the hour has passed and once again it’s time to pack up her things. Victoria waits for her by the door. They march to math, passing the same robot-like people they see every day. William’s shoulder brushes against hers, without a word Both give each other a faint smile and continue moving like strangers passing on a street.

If I just ignore my heartbeat, maybe the pounding will go away. Maybe I’m hungry. That’s why I can’t stop shaking. I don’t know why I’m so worried. There’s no reason for me to be. I need to focus. I have a test. I can do this.

The blank paper sits in front of her. Numbers and letters jumbled together into irrelevant questions, testing knowledge she’ll never use in her life. Working slowly, she finds answers, but second guesses her every move, hesitant towards her next step. With twelve minutes left in the period, she finishes. Her shaking hand places the papers into a basket for her teacher to grade. She sits back at her desk, stares at her phone, hoping to make eye contact with no one.

“Bye! See y’all tomorrow! You guys are amazing!” her teacher shouts as the students exit back to the hallway. Finally, her day is over. She pulls her keys out of her backpack and heads to the parking lot. In the privacy of her car she sighs, exhausted from her mediocre, uneventful day.

Home, finally. I need a nap. I do have a lot of homework though. Oh, wow, I love this song.

Nostalgia by MØ plays as she sings along to the tune. She feels a sense of relief, her chest relaxing from the anxiety of being with the same people she sees everyday. She collapses into the comfort of her covers. Alone at last, she opens her computer, passing the time with the show Criminal Minds and disregarding all of the responsibilities that she knows she must do.

I think mom is getting home around 5, so that gives me a good two hours to chill before I have to do the dishes and all my stuff. What time is it right now? 3:11, Okay, that’s not bad. Unless she gets home around 4:30, that only gives me, like, an hour and a half. Maybe I should do all of it now so I don’t have to worry about it later.

Setting her phone down, she rolls onto her side forgetting her entire plan and procrastinating on her chores. After an episode, she reaches for her phone: 5:47. She jumps up in a panic. Her heart racing with adrenaline, she runs to the kitchen to find her mother flipping through the mail casually and drinking a Diet Mtn Dew. Unsteadily, she sneaks to the sink beginning to wash the dirty plates and cups that were left there earlier.

“Oh, thanks for that,” her mother says calmly, “How was school?”

I didn’t have anything to worry about, that was stupid. Why was I so nervous about nothing? Why did I worry that she was going to be so mad? She never even asked me to do this, why did I think she would be mad? Why am I like this?

“It was fine. Nothing exciting. I had a math test, and I feel okay about it. Probably got, like, a low B.”

What do I do with my hands? Why do I feel so awkward?

“That’s good. Do you have dance tonight?”

“Yeah it starts at seven. I’ll be home around ten.”

Finishing the dishes, she moves back to her room. She stands in the mirror, observing her reflection and feeling disproportionate and disformed. She reaches for a sweatshirt and throws on the baggy, shapeless clothes, grabbing her keys and once again getting in her car. Driving down the highway, she screams along with each song that plays, releasing all her emotions into the air.

Why didn’t I do my homework when I had the time? Now it’s going to be another really late night. Why did I act so weird around William? Why do I feel so weird all the time? My heart. My heart won’t stop. I can’t stop this agonizing feeling of longingness and emp- no that’s not it at all. It’s anxiety. It floats around my brain like a bug. I cannot stop these stupid irrational fears. I need medication. But once I get medication, it turns into a disease. It’s not a disease. It’s not. I’m fine, I just worry a lot. What if I don’t have dance tonight, and I’m going to walk in there, and no ones there? Oh my gosh, stop, that’s obviously not true.

She pulls into the dark, eerie parking lot. Still hesitant in her head, she takes her bag and walks towards the building, refusing to allow her abhorrent thoughts to control her life. She sits on the floor in a room with girls she’s known for roughly a year. The class passes by quickly, and with just eighteen minutes left, they begin to work on a routine. The girls dance six at a time, angelically floating through the air with their perfect turns and jumps. She watches in awe at the talent that stands before her. When her turn comes, she shakes and hesitates, feeling unworthy and embarrassed to dance on the floor that the angels had sailed across just moments before.

Watch the mirror. Don’t watch yourself. Watch Raya. Don’t compare yourself to her, just watch the way she moves. Follow her movements. I can’t balance. Shaking. I’m shaking. Stop shaking. Breathe. I’m fine. Oh my god, I messed up. I’m so stupid, how could I forget this? We literally just learned it.

She dances, blending into the crowd, feeling heavy and sad because she'll never live up to the girls around her. After a few tries, her instructor dismisses the girls. She gathers her bag, takes a sip of water, and heads to her car to finish the last moments of her day. During the drive home, she weeps.

So embarrassing. I'm so embarrassing. Why do I look like this? Why can't I be shorter, or just not look so awkward? I hate dancing. I hate that I always stand out. I hate it.


She pulls into her driveway. Wiping away the tears, she steps into her house walking straight for her room. She takes her backpack and finishes the few assignments that she was given earlier in the day. Then, she reaches for her phone to delay sleeping just a little longer.

I know I have a history test on Friday, but why study? Who even cares. I'll just do it later. It doesn't even matter. Hopefully tomorrow will feel different. Maybe it'll be exciting, and I'll forget all this stupid stuff inside my head. Maybe I'll finally feel calm. No, I shouldn't get my hopes up. Only two more days until the weekend.

Finally her eyes grow heavy. She rests her phone on her bedside table and turns off the beaming light above her. She slips into the escape she's wished for all day. For six hours she lays still, finally achieving her euphoria until the cycle restarts; her phone alarm sounds. She rolls off of her right side and slowly moves her fingers to turn it off. This happens again and again, every fifteen minutes: 6:00-6:45, everyday.

Chicago
By Lawrence Schultz

MOUNTAIN BROOK HIGH SCHOOL PRESENTS



CHICAGO

HIGH SCHOOL EDITION

Book by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse-Music by John Kander-Lyrics by Fred Ebb
March 14-19th @7 Matinee March 15th @2
In the black box theatre
presented by special arrangement with samuel french, inc., a concord
theatricals company

End of 3748

By Sareena Askenazi

“It’s a possibility,” my parents told him.

“Only a possibility,” my mom repeated with a hesitant smile.

And after that optimistic sentence, quarantine was now more than ever a time to stay home. It was my family’s time for transition and new beginnings.

It all started with COVID. COVID caused the return of my persuasive older brother. The return of my brother caused change. Change caused a new beginning.

Family dinners were upsetting. Family dinners were full of disappointment as days continued with no change. Day after day of hearing bad news eventually turned family dinners into an hour worth dreading. But, it wasn’t until one specific night when our family dinners went back to normal and the primary emotion in the room changed from negative to positive.

During the process, there were constantly strangers over at my house and I was instructed to have my room stay the cleanest it had ever been. Change and change had been made in effort to make my house feel less like a home and more like a “living space.” The pictures were taken down, the dog bowls were put away, and the paintings were changed all because of the opinion of a newly hired woman I did not recognize.

Shortly after these changes were made, the first of many awaited days had come. A big red sign stood tall at the front of my lawn. I drove home every day passing the big red sign, and, in a way, I was still oblivious to what was happening. I had been taking the precious nights sleeping in my little grey room on Mountain Hill Road for granted and realized that I had less time left than I thought. The words at the top of the big red sign changed within three days of putting it up.

As days went by, eventually weeks, the news my mom shared at family dinners was not so exciting anymore. Everything in my house slowly but surely turned into the color of cardboard, and this color brought with it the fear of the unknown, given the fact that there was no definite plan following 3748.

“What now? Where are we going?” I said to myself constantly.

Set on going into an apartment at this point, these family dinners continued to be full of complete and utter disappointment until one Sunday night about a month after the sign had changed.

“We found one and it is just so perfect,” my mom announced one night.

“For real? No way, finally! I am so excited,” I screamed.

“I’ve been waiting for this day for so long,” my sister said.

After this conversation, my mom began to glow rather than having a dominant feeling of stress which we were all so used to.

Two weeks later, with an early start to the morning, man after man was filing into 3748, working, sweating, and lifting every possible thing they saw into their big truck. It really was official. It was the end of 3748. When those men finished their job, I sat there. I sat there in my freshly painted, completely empty room. All I wanted to do was sit. It had not hit me that it was my last time ever in the place I grew up. It had not hit me that I would no longer drive home to 3748. I closed the door for the last time and within hours, 3748 became 2964 and Mountain Hill became Windsbrook.

Spanish Ninja

By Virginia Kate Brandt

The first time I felt the shame of being linguistic came in fourth grade when I was dubbed the Spanish Ninja in Spanish Class. A lot of the kids in my fourth-grade class never paid attention in Spanish, but I did. I grew up hearing Spanish, making it really easy for me to pick up the language. However, it meant I stuck out as plainly as a shark in the water. I always enjoyed being different, and it soon came with a price. When my elementary teacher called me the Spanish Ninja for the first time, I could feel my classmates' smirks as they judged me. It hurt to find out my favorite subject in school would also bring me down the most. For three years, one boy tried extra hard to make fun of me. My classmates called him the Non-Spanish ninja because he could 'never beat me'. If we were playing a game in class and I messed up, he would rub it in my face, but it looked like he was just playing around and having fun. He carried it out of Spanish and made fun of me behind my back. It was so subtle and so discreet I never realised his intention until the next year.

When I did, I felt shame having an interest hardly valued in society, but it didn't stop me from deciding to take French and Spanish in 7th grade. The classes were great, but the reactions were excruciating. I tried to keep my schedule a secret because I knew how other people would react if they found out I took both. They found out regardless, and the lack of support they showed towards my interest never failed to bring me down. The same simple questions always felt like an attack, like I was a threat or way too weird. 'Why do you want to take both?' 'Is it for your resumé?' 'Do you ever get them confused?' They started popping up rapidly with random people in my grade asking me those questions as if they're wondering if the rumors are true. I have answers to those questions, answers so simple and basic to me. I know people should understand.

Yet, I can't answer their questions without a lengthy explanation they have never heard before. It made me feel worse. I would feel ashamed in Spanish for pronouncing something with a good accent, ashamed in French for being able to construct complex sentences, and ashamed for being able to pull together words and respond to a question like I would in English. So I began to pronounce things like everyone else: I wouldn't answer questions, and I would pretend to mess up. I always dreaded doing well in the classes. It always made me feel really bad about myself, I never wanted to look like I was better than anyone else. It was just my thing. I love learning languages, even if I don't like what others think. Being myself is often more rewarding than going with the crowd. I've never contemplated quitting French or Spanish because it's become a part of me. Even when I feel embarrassed, somehow I don't stop doing what I love. Even to this day I struggle, but I still pull through it. Last year in French class, we were instructed to ask each other 'what we did yesterday'. When asked, I said I went to a restaurant with my family. My teacher was somewhat interested so she asked why. I forgot to reply in minimalistic basic french and replied in a full paragraph explaining how my brother takes violin lessons next door at Mason Music, and my family and I usually eat there on Wednesday nights after his lesson. I felt everyone's stares, none of them impressed but a little annoyed. My face flushed with embarrassment-- I had never been so put on the spot in my whole life. It felt like someone had taken a secret and shared it with the whole world. It didn't help when one of my friends jokingly whispered, "Showoff."

Ocean's Daughter

By Anna Yeager

A crash upon the starlit sand
Wakes me from my dream
Of fairies and sprites and grand ole nights of dancing in the sea.

Once again the waves beat the shore,
Steady as a drum,
Adorn the waves the diamonds do and closer to me they come.

To the sand I walk with vigor and crashing in my ears.
Blankets of sand caress my feet
And dry my lonely tears.

Like a hug from a thousand mothers,
The waves crash upon me.
Welcoming home a daughter lost,
Returning to the sea.

The water tries to drag me down, down, down to the depths.
Trying to take its daughter back then crying as she wept.

Her tail is now legs and her gills have closed up.
Her mother's greatest woe,
Forgotten how to swim she had,
Now stuck upon the shore.

Dr. Dog
By Emily Russel



CityScape

By Arden Tapp

I stand before the crosswalk, bright white parallel lines painted on the ground like a horizontal ladder leading from concrete to more concrete, like a black and white rainbow road guiding you to nowhere new. Once, twice, three times I glance at the glowing red hand across the street, bleakly wondering if I should jitter the button again to shock the Earth into turning faster, but in the end my tapping foot wins. I pause, if only for posterity's sake, looking both ways for oncoming traffic and then waiting for a sputtering metal husk to pass and leave shrapnel in my lungs, and then I step into danger.

As I pass by the warning beacon on the other side of the road, I briefly catch the red illumination finally shift into white glow just a few moments too late. I kick an old cardboard fast-food cup and knock off the plastic lid and straw. Watered down soda spills onto the deep cracks of the sidewalk and funnels into the bed of the dead tree that the city insisted on planting in one of their bi-annual 'Be Green' initiatives. I hope elm trees like flat diet coke and gray air.

Not as if it could expect anything better, what with living in the city and all, but I bet if the tree could speak it would beg for reprieve, for somebody to come and dig up its rotten roots and plant it somewhere new, somewhere with fresh air and clean water, or at the very least, somewhere it could die without the cacophony of sputtering engines and grating cell phone tones haunting the air.

I walk past. Identifying with a dying sidewalk tree is perhaps too much even for me.

Herbert Crabkins

By Georgia Kate Scott

The waves lapped up on the shore and slithered back into themselves, each time reaching farther up the beach than before. I stared out at the rising sun and surrounding sky, which was tinged red. Oh no, I thought, of course today of all days there's a red sunrise. I glanced back at the familiar line where the trees met the sand, I remembered how I had felt the first time I stood there, looking out at the expansive waters. Six years of preparing for this moment and now that it was here, the sunrise was red. It's just nerves, you'll be fine, just stick to the plan, nothing bad is going to happen. I began digging my burrow, glancing around every so often to make sure no one was suspicious of me; well now people are going to find you suspicious because you keep looking around like you're hiding something, I chastised myself, It's fine, just keep digging, no one's going to notice you if you just don't stop digging. I couldn't help myself, I glanced up again, this time making eye contact with the guy next to me, oh great, well now you've done it, I told you this was gonna happen why would you be so stupid. He turned back towards his burrow, clearly satisfied with intimidating me. I sighed out of relief and glanced back out at the ocean with the red sun now completely above the horizon. The skies had begun to fade to an orange tint, and the others began going into their burrows and covering the entrances. Now's your chance, I thought, just do it, go, you'll never get another opportunity like this. But the red sunrise lingered in my mind, pressing on my nerves. What if it was a sign? What if I wasn't supposed to go through with it today? What if that sunrise was a warning to wait another year? I couldn't help but worry, but I also couldn't let myself sit around for the rest of my life, waiting for the right time. I scuttled across the beach, making a beeline for the small, salvaged debris ship I had hidden in the cove. By the time I reached it, the voices in my head had gone quiet. My mind was crystal clear as I pushed that vessel down towards the water and boarded it. As I floated out towards the open sea, I glanced back at the little island I had called home for the past six years, and a small wave of guilt washed over me. Just then, a large wave took me by surprise and I fell off the boat. I forgot all about my guilt as I climbed back onto the boat, now very cold. Not my finest moment but that's life, I guess. I carried on floating out towards the horizon for days, wondering if this was all I'd ever get to do. As it turns out, the ocean is a very boring place. I was so hungry and exhausted that when the water grew still and the sky dim I didn't even notice. It wasn't until the torrential downpour had started and the waves began tossing me every which way that I even realized I was in danger, but when it hit me, oh boy did I panic. I can't even remember what that period of time was like, all I remember is that it felt like forever before I woke up again, this time on a sandy beach very far from where I had started. It's been three days since I woke up here and I still have no idea where I am. There are thousands of animals here but very few look like me. I don't know if I'll ever get back to my old life, but I think from here I'm just going to try and start anew. Maybe my dream was silly, maybe it didn't work out, and maybe I ended up somewhere I definitely should not be, but at least I tried so that others can learn from my mistakes.

Knick Knack Paddy Whack (Give A Dog A Bone)

By Ky-Lin Berg



An Ode To Spoken Word

By Emily King

The beating of my heart, the booming of his lines,
They rattle in his head, they sound within my soul.
It is the words of this odeum divine,
That poetry, which makes me whole.
I've heard that music is the food of love;
Romance may dance and sing, but I prefer
To speak - the rhythm melodic as a dove,
The words alive, dripping like liquid myrrh.
And without it, we are shells,
Awash from the ocean floor,
But empty of the seas echoes and swells,
Instead an endless barren shore.
And so when injustice and evil, from every corner, rings,
Turn out your mouth, be a poet, sing.

Those

By Virginia Kate Brandt

Oi there what are those
On your feet, my lady, on your toes

ThEy ArE mY cRoCs
I wear them over mine socks

What atrocity, good madame...
Now, our relationship has a casm

My lady you doth wear sketchers
But for what measures?????

Why does that matter
Look towards the latter

Oh. so freely...
He's wearing heelys

He concerneth me
what a trouble this be

And that shalt be the tea
Thine Fashion hardly has degree

The Strife of a Desert Succulent

By Ky-Lin Berg

Of all the places to stumble across an iceberg, the middle of the Arizona desert was not at the top of Johnny's list. Initially, he'd thought it was just another wavering illusion on the horizon, a product of the stifling, arid heat of high noon. But as Dime a' Dozen trotted onward, her silver coat glistening in the unforgiving sun, he finally admitted to himself that the looming structure blocking their path was indeed wedged between the rising walls of the canyon.

"Hey, Al, up ahead."

After a few beats of silence, filled only by the dull thump of the horses' hooves on the simmering sand, Johnny looked over his shoulder. The Scotsman, previously engrossed in his map, stared blankly forward, eyes shielded behind bushy brows. "Ah, well..." he chewed on his lip, "That's an iceberg."

Johnny deadpanned. "Thanks for the diagnosis, doc. Care to explain what it's doin' out here?" Sweat pooled beneath his wide-brimmed hat and trickled down the back of his sunburnt neck as he spoke. With a gentle flick of the reins, Alastair guided his horse a few paces ahead.

"What do you think's the source of this?" he asked, voice light and casual as his eyes sharply scanned the surrounding landscape. Johnny's jaw clenched as the familiar pang of dread coiled around his insides like a rattlesnake. It was happening again, wasn't it? "Dunno." A few yards off of it now, he could see a warped version of the desert through the iceberg, unbothered by the searing climate around it; there wasn't even a puddle of water at its base. "Whatever it is, don't get too close, Al. I've got a bad feelin' about all this."

"Awe, you're worried about me, are you?" he grinned back at him, metal teeth reflecting the sun's light directly into his eyes. Before Johnny could come up with a retort, or just throw something at him, Alastair suddenly shot upright, a string of indecipherable curses flying from his mouth. "Man alive, did you feel that wind?!"

It only took a few seconds for him to catch up, and then the Sonoran Desert's suffocating warmth was instantly replaced with a blast of frigid air. It should have been relieving, but Johnny couldn't remember ever feeling this miserably cold in all his life, not even in Kentucky's harshest winters. "Y-yeah, it's gettin' a bit chilly." he bit out, teeth chattering involuntarily. His arms felt like they were going to turn to ice, and he's sure if he could feel his legs to begin with, they would've been freezing too.

Despite their best efforts, the pair could only make it a few more paces before they had to stop. The icy gusts were beginning to pick up, whipping the sand around them into a dusty fog and making the horses stiffen and snort nervously. "Any ideas how to get around it?" Alastair shouted over the noise, gripping desperately at the map that threatened to go flying. Johnny almost hoped it would, the stupid thing. He looked into the sky, stubbornly ignoring the sun in pursuit of answers, and watched as a few wrens flew overhead, seemingly unaware of the chaos unfolding below them. Following their carefree path, his eyes suddenly widened.

"We've got to run through it."

His companion gaped at him, eyes wide. "You can't be serious, lad, you'll freeze to death before you reach that thing!" Johnny almost wanted to yell back at him, to tell him that they'd come too far to turn around and look for another path, or god forbid, give up altogether. But the winds were picking up speed, roaring and howling like a wounded beast from hell; Johnny knew his voice would never reach the Scotsman's ears. So instead, the former horse jockey lowered himself into the racing position he hadn't taken in years, whispering more to himself than anyone else.

"Just trust me, Al."

With a loud crack of the reins, he bolted forward. Time seemed to slow down as he raced towards the misshapen pyramid of ice, exposed skin burning in the frigid air. Johnny felt like he was flaking off and falling to pieces, scattering bits of himself all over the desert ground like snowfall. Squeezing his eyes shut, all he could hear was the sound of his own labored breath and the harsh clop of the horse's hooves, in sync with his racing heart.

And then, suddenly, he felt like he'd been sucked into a bubble. The sensation shocked him so badly that he instinctively jerked on the reins, causing Dime to let out a loud whinny of protest before coming to a stop. After several minutes frozen in place, he opened his eyes. It took a few seconds to register that he was actually inside of the iceberg. Once that was out of the way, Johnny noticed that, much to his surprise, the inner climate was pleasantly warm, nothing like the bitter cold or sweltering heat of the outside world. Sunlight shone through the translucent ice, refracting at odd angles and casting distorted shadows across the contained landscape, and at the very center, right beneath the peak of the iceberg, stood the tallest cactus Johnny had ever seen in his life. As he stared up at the enormous Saguaro, he faintly registered the sound of a horse fast approaching and barely managed to steer his horse out of Alastair's oncoming path.

"Johnny!" he shouted, eyes flying open as he burst into the tiny sanctuary. His gaze

landed on his companion almost instantly, expression shifting quickly from relief to fury. Johnny, try as he might, couldn't hide his smug smile.

"Check it out, it's like a smaller version of the desert in here."

"Don't just pretend like the last few minutes didn't happen, you bloody idiot! Why did you go on and take off like that?! Good God, You could've gotten yourself killed!" Johnny, electing to ignore Alastair's outburst, simply pointed upward.

"I saw those birds make it through just fine, figured we could too." Alastair, dumbstruck, followed Johnny's finger and saw the wrens flitting about the towering cactus. It only distracted him for a few moments before his ire was turned back to Johnny.

"You should've just said that then, you halfwit!" he barked. After a few breaths and a glance at their surroundings, his fiery anger dissipated. "Wait... Did you figure out what this thing's deal is?"

Both of them already knew that this iceberg was no natural structure, and a quick look around confirmed Johnny's suspicions that, save for the birds, there were no other living things inside of this crystal chamber. If magical forces were the culprit of this crime, they needed a living criminal. Alastair had quickly caught onto his train of thought, staring at the towering centerpiece of the room. "You don't think..."

Johnny blinked. He could barely even believe it himself. "It's the cactus. The cactus made the iceberg."

“That’s impossible! You need a bloody soul for magic, and plants don’t have souls!” he scanned the room for any other explanation, looking up nervously at the offending succulent, “...right?”

Very quickly, Johnny decided this debate was above his intellectual pay-grade. “Guess not. Regardless, it seems like it ain’t doin’ much more than this.” Alastair shrugged, clearly torn somewhere between curiosity and caution, and hopped off of his horse to pace around the miniature desert. Johnny simply decided to observe, running his hand along the nearest wall of ice and watching as the clear, cool water steadily dripped onto the coarse soil below. “I reckon it’s just sapping the warmth from the outside to make a little paradise for itself.”

The Scotsman was more focused on digging through the sand in search of answers, and only supplied a noncommittal noise of agreement. Johnny, only a bit offended, set his horse on a trot following the wall, and eventually came to what looked like the mouth of a cave, framed by ice and showcasing the champagne-colored sunset of the desert. “Found the exit.” he called, glancing back at Alastair as he climbed back onto Doonie . Giving her a light pat on the neck, he made his way towards Johnny.

“Seems like it. Let’s get out of here before we lose any more time, aye?”

Nodding in agreement, Johnny led the way. As the familiar dry heat encompassed him once again, he couldn’t help but miss the more pleasant climate of the iceberg. Turning to take a final glimpse, Johnny noticed it had seemingly disappeared from view, leaving an open pathway in the canyon behind them. Before he could mention any of this to his partner, however, the Scotsman’s mouth was already up and running.

“See, this is why we follow the bloody map,” he chided with an audible smirk, face buried in his crudely drawn map, “No need to throw yourself at a glacier just to catch a break.”

With a well-aimed throw, Johnny couldn’t help but smile as his canister, finally, knocked that stupid, cocky grin off of Alastair’s face.

Flowers For Something
By Islay Brady



Chasing The Moon

By Anna Yeager

Streaming through the window sill,
A moon beam rests upon me.
The sun's light has gone to rest,
Hiding 'till the morning.

In its place, the moon shines,
Bright and white and full.
An ethereal glow lights the night,
Alluring in its pull.

Walking to the windowsill,
The moon pulling me so,
Its beautiful light a calming sight
To my tired, aching soul.

The glow of the moon invades my room
And fills it with its light.
Under the stars, I come apart
With no place to hide.

Leaning out the windowsill,
I reach and reach and reach.
Grasping the stars, and pulling hard,
To the sky I climb.

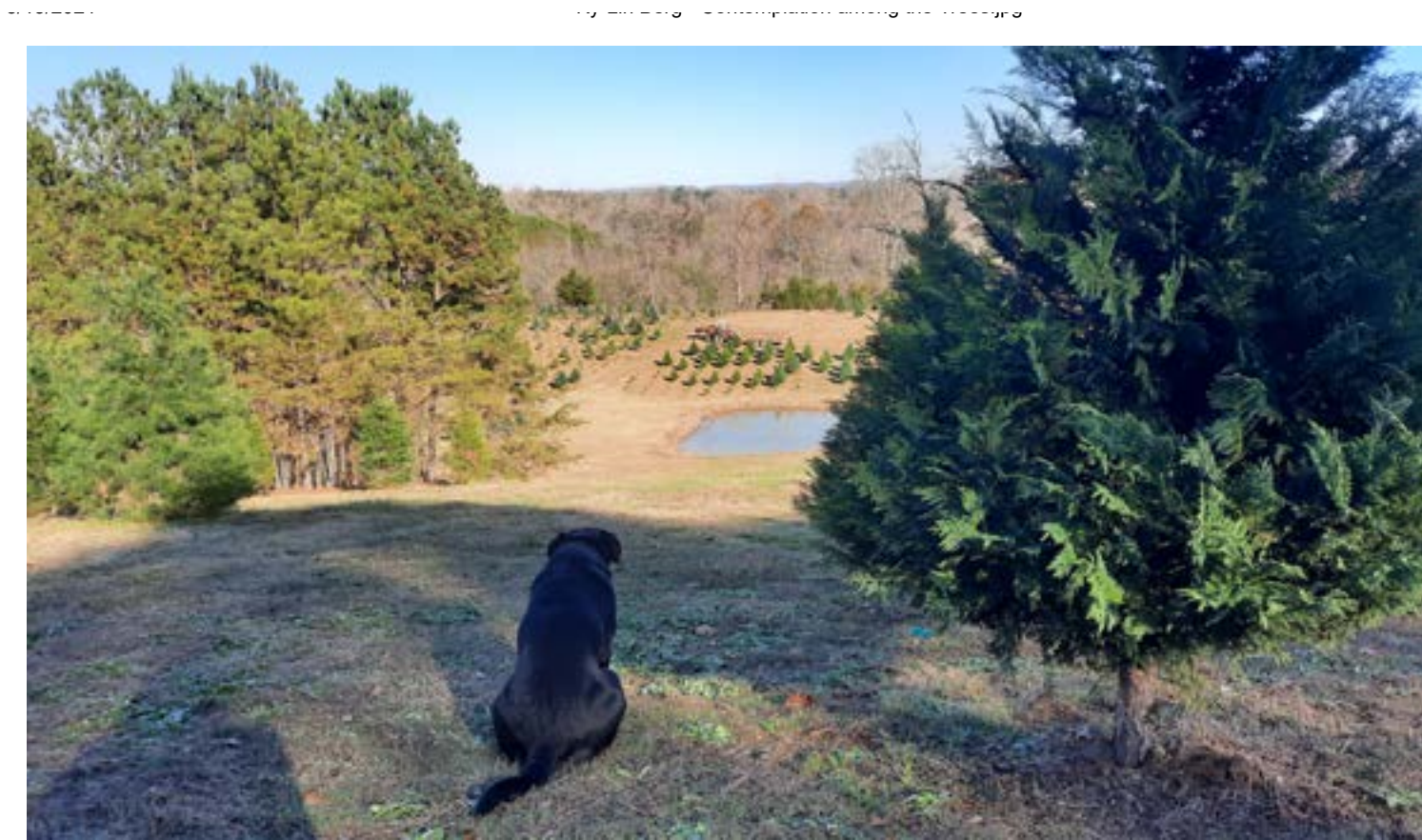
Closer and closer I rise,
Yet she stays out of my grasp.
Tauntingly close, yet never enough,
A dream I can never seem to grab.

Earthen

By Arden Tapp

Bare feet sunk deep into fresh dirt come rain.
Oh my! To feel damp soil between curled toes,
good vibes eating my tired mind. I'm sane.
Earthy smells tingling deep, far in my nose.
The kidnapped daughter grows in hell for mum.
No better way to satisfy goblins
than shiny rocks and stones; it makes hearts thrum
with notes and tones that sing of blonde pollen.
Old leaves will sit and rot with carrion.
The trinkets eaten, chewed by moss and snails
like me in three more seasons time. For when
fungi grows from out of my ears, I'm frail.
A bed of dirt waits for my tired soul,
not long before the earth and I are whole.

Contemplation Among The Trees
By Ky-Lin Berg



The Caged Castle

By Parker-Kate Searcy

Sweat dripping, heart beating, my emotions were swirling the day I started my new school. Mountain Brook was known for the average bratty teenage girl. My sister and I were about to face the demons, enter the walled cage, and encounter these so-called pearly princesses. We had just moved from Auburn, where we knew everyone, and everyone knew us. My best friends were there, and I did not want to leave them behind. It became my safe place over the years. Nothing could go wrong in Auburn, but there were no promises for this new venture. Moving halfway through the year puts an immediate target on my back. In a class of ninety people, I was the only new girl starting school in January.

“Should we go in yet?” Payton asked. “Because I’m not sure if I want to.”

“We can give it a few more minutes.” I tried to be strong for her. “You know, when we were getting out of the car I noticed the bricks make the building look like the castle from Beauty and the Beast,” Payton loved stories, especially the ones with a hero. “I bet if we go inside, it will look just as cool.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to go inside,” she adds.

“How about we count to three and do it together?”

“One...two...three, and we’re in.”

Walking through the door was the first task. We had successfully entered Mountain Brook Elementary School, there was no turning back now. I knew this move was hardest for her, before we had spent years never leaving each other’s side. The day we got the news we were moving, she would not stop crying. She became a fountain and the tears kept coming and coming, until one day they just stopped. It was like she gave up. My face was glued into a smile. I needed to be the strong one because she looked to me to be the hero, so I put my cape on. We walked into the school together, and the moment we looked up, all I could see were the daunting bricks. Soon, we went our separate ways; her fifth-grade class was on one side of the school, while my sixth-grade class was on the other. It seemed like countries were separating us. My face was stone, all I could hear was the uneven beat of my heart pumping, pumping, pumping.

“I’ll meet you right here when school ends.” I tried to calm her nerves right before she faces her peers.

“You promise you won’t lose me?” she whispers.

“I promise.” I was on my own now.

Did I wear the right clothes? Did I have the right brands? Am I smart enough? Are classes going to be too hard for me? Is my backpack cute enough? Will I already be behind? Are the girls as bad as I think they’ll be? Will I have to eat my lunch alone? Will I ever meet another best friend? Will they even like me?

I stumbled into homeroom. It was weird going from a middle school in Auburn back to an elementary school in Mountain Brook. It seemed like I was falling behind in some way. All I could see were eyes staring at me like I was their lunch and they had been starved. Before I knew it, my new teacher sat me down with a group of girls at a table and introduced me to the class. Until P.E., I stayed quiet, only answering the necessary questions. As I entered the gym, a group of girls asked me if I wanted to play four square with them. Breathing a little easier, I answered, “Yes.”

Finally, the bell rang, and there she was. Bounding down the hallway was Payton’s fluorescent red hair. She came straight to me and asked, “Do you want to meet some of my new friends?”

A Cat's Eye

By Emily Russell

Her body caresses the metal as she rounds the corner into the hidden cracks of the alley. Footsteps rush past her; the puddles from the dank asphalt stain her hair. A siren rings in the distance. Her head turns, and behind her she sees a face, peering into her nook. She runs, her body just barely brushing the red bricks next to her. She turns back; four men dressed in black carry a large sack down the dark alley. Aiming to catch her breath, she inhales; a foul odor seeps into her nose. She turns to face the danger she just fled from. Her curiosity overwhelms her urge to run. She creeps back; the men crowd around the dumpster she had once hid behind. She peers her head around a cardboard box, and the men creep away, as if they had never been there. Although there is no bag with them. She climbs onto the box and leaps into the waste bin to find a pale, dead, hand dangling out of the bag that the men placed in there. She lifts her head to look at the men one last time. One looks back into the darkness to see two green eyes from the cat gazing back at him.

Villanelle

By Virginia Kate Brandt

If I could stop and rewind
I would have a lot to tell the younger me
I would love to turn back time

To paint myself with some color
Just to say: “plant your roots like a tree”
I would love to stop and rewind

I wouldn't take everything for granted
Those dreams would have wings to fly
I would turn back time

If I could tell myself to have those ideas planted
And stop everything from ticking away while I once stood by
I would stop and rewind

If I knew it was never my fault or anything I could control
The cause and effect of everything I've done is felt every day
Would I still turn back time?

I will never know if it is worth it to offer myself console
Hands on the clock only turn one way
Stop, rewind
Turn back time



The Beast That Prowls in The Night

By Anna Yeager

Darkness is broken by streaks of moonbeams
Like stripes across a beast
Prowling about in the darkness
Looking for a feast

It yearns for just a drop of sun
Just to light it's way
But forgets the moon is right behind
Scaring the darkness away

All throughout the night it searches and cries and yearns
For that little drop of sun to be bestowed and in its grasp

The moons grows shy and gives away
What little light she has
Shrinking more and more each night to light the beast's path

Her light, her love, her inner peace
Guiding the beast on its way

On the last night before she wanes
She pleads and pleads and pleads
for the sun to spare that drop of light
For her beast's wish she prays

The night alights with thousands of drops
Of starlight swishing and swirling
Her beast's wish is true
He can finally stop yearning

So there she goes
Waning into nothing
Her light a mere sliver now
With one last kiss she sends her light
Streaking across the sky

The Man And The Cat

By Ky-Lin Berg

The door shut with a dull thud, and silence engulfed the small apartment. From the well-worn leather couch in the center of the room, I folded my arms tightly across my chest, eyes fixed on the makeshift cat tower looming in front of the window. It was tall and gaudy, decorated in an abundance of bright colors and mismatched pillows, and at the top sat the black and white cat, tail swinging back and forth like a pendulum.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

My inquiry was left unanswered. The cat, unbothered, pawed at one of its ears. It was looking away from me, through barely-open shutters at the rainy city below. I faintly registered the sounds of traffic over the blood roaring in my ears. “Don’t play deaf,” I spat, “You cannot hide your true nature from me with silence alone.”

Again, nothing. I scowled, reaching for the coffee on the nearby table. The bold, rich flavor was perfect, just like it was in every other cup she had made, but did little to calm my fiery nerves. “Why are you here? Surely you have other matters to attend to, legions of your kind to command.”

At last, the creature turned to me. Amber eyes met mine, and I was nearly overwhelmed with the sensation of its gaze, a near-irresistible force attempting to pull me in. But I was familiar with that wicked temptation and easily turned from its siren call.

“I could ask you the same thing.” Its voice wasn’t as scratchy from lack of use as I had hoped; it was smooth and silky, with a commanding presence that urged those around to listen. To my horror, I recognized it.

“Answer my question.” I bit out.

“I am only here because she wants me to be.” Jumping down from its tower, the cat made its way towards me. I tensed as it perched on the ottoman only a few feet away, posture as smug and sure as any feline’s. “Perhaps we are not so different, you and I.”

“You dare make such an accusation?!” I stood before I knew what I was doing, wings unfurling with every ethereal feather at sharp attention. The very thought that we were anything alike sickened me. The lights sputtered briefly, casting the apartment nothing but a pure white glow.

Any mortal creature would have shrunk away in terror. Instead, the cat simply watched me, almost bored. “Oh, stuff it, you oversized pigeon,” It said, stretching lazily, “I have no intention of incurring your divine wrath, or what have you.”

I watched the infernal creature, fists shaking. My instincts screamed at me to attack it, to purge this sacred place of its influence. The cat eyed me in return, something of a mocking grin spreading unnaturally across its feline features. “Careful now, Gabriel,” its voice was soft, but the words rang in my ears regardless, “Rachel would be very upset if her precious little pet were to suddenly disappear.”

Silence, again. Our eyes locked in mutual understanding: victory would inevitably be mine in combat, but nothing was ever that simple. Teeth clenched, I sat back down and grabbed the coffee again. It was already too cold for my liking, but I drank it anyway, taking comfort in the solidness of the mug in my hands. The quiet lingered. Unwavering, I watched the cat as it pretended to sleep.

“You know, I always thought you would be a woman.” The creature began unprompted, eyes shut and posture deceptively relaxed. “That’s what I’ve always heard, anyways.”

“Trivial matters such as those do not concern me.” The cat cracked open an eyelid, watching me curiously. “I chose this form based on her preferences,” I continued, guarded yet honest, “You understand, of course.”

A noncommittal meow was all I got in reply, its eyes closing again. The tension slowly ebbed out of the room as we came to terms with our stalemate; words would be our only weapons. The cat changed positions on its fabric throne, facing me.

“But of all names you could have chosen...” It looked exasperated when I didn’t respond immediately, “Seriously, Gabriel? Are you even trying to be subtle?”

It took all of my self-control not to roll my eyes. “You have no right to judge what I call myself, Oreo.”

“She chose to call me that, I didn’t pick it!” The cat flicked its tail in agitation, fur puffing up a bit.

“The fact that you didn’t immediately burst into flames upon your christening astounds me.” I stood, carrying the mug into the adjacent kitchenette. It was decorated much like the cat tower— or the entire apartment for that matter, a hodgepodge of colorful knick knacks and questionable decor. All of it was so beautifully, wonderfully her. Caught up in my thoughts, I barely heard the voice from the living room.

“You love her, don’t you?”

The question was sudden, but my response was immediate. “Of course.” I grabbed the coffee pot and poured myself another cup. “If you’re trying to start a proper discussion, at least have it in the same room as me.”

Before I had even finished my sentence, the cat had made its way towards me, given away by the tapping of its claws. It silently jumped up onto the counter, watching me with an unreadable expression. “Why? You’ve met thousands like her.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Human language would not do my reasons justice.” I didn’t bother to continue, and neither did the cat. This time, the gentle hum of rainfall filled the void between us. I had already finished half of my cup when it spoke up again.

“She isn’t perfect, you know,” Its voice was quiet now, tail curled around its body, “She’s done wrong in her life, committed sin.”

“I am aware,” I smiled gently, more at the thought of her than anything else, “but it does not make her evil. Her soul is not condemned.” When I looked up from the dark black of my drink, my expression froze. The creature was sneering at me, looking less like a cat in that moment than it had the entire evening.

“You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you?”

She made it home some time later, bursting through the apartment door and cursing under her breath as the warm pizza box pressed into her skin.

“Hey Gabe, help me with this, will you?” I was up from the couch before she finished her sentence, lifting the scalding cardboard out of her hands and setting it on the kitchen table. She planted a chaste kiss on my cheek, and all I could do was grin, stupidly happy. “You two behaved, right?” She moved over to the counter, scratching the cat behind its ears as it purred. “You were a good boy, weren’t you, Oreo?” she cooed. One of its piercing, amber eyes was on me. I ignored it in favor of watching her. “Of course, love.”

Peace

By Georgia Kate Scott

I am the mist that settles in your mind when you sleep,
the collection of empty moments you consciously keep,
the quiet that consumes you when you can no longer think,
the darkness that captures your soul when you blink.

For most I am but a ghost,
a shadow in the back of foggy memories,
a muddled aura that floats
about when you're still.

And yet the moment always flees,
for I am uncapturable,
I am peace.

Looking Out
By Virginia Kate Brandt



Just The Way Life Goes

By Crawford McDuffie

Here we are, you and I.
Never asking why or how.
Wishing we could stay awhile,
Here in this forsaken place.

The Garden of Eden where all things go,
The Garden of Eden where the light glows.

Stronger and stronger and brighter it glows
But the closer you get,
The farther it goes.
We both can see it,
Because it's always been there.
Just out of reach of my weathered hand.

Your white facade that you hide behind,
Leaving me out to dry.
Like a rag after being used,
You hang me up, just to be used again.

Searching but never seeking,
Pondering but never believing.
Maybe there will be a time
When all things go the way we want them to go.

But here we are, separated so far.
If only I could find the time
To sit you down and ask you how
Or why we cannot find
Our little Forsaken Garden of Eden.

The Garden of Eden where all things go,
The Garden of Eden where the light glows.

I wish it could be,
Just you and me.
But as I ask myself, "Do I Dare?" and, "Do I Dare?"
I begin to realize this isn't possible.

I am the runner of the underground railroad.
I am Harriet Tubman's fiercest competition,
As I have run this path countless times.

Running between real life and my fantasy
Begins to tire me.
And I begin to realize
That this isn't possible.

The Garden of Eden where all things go,
The Garden of Eden where the light glows,
In reality, the Garden of Eden just isn't possible.

Nap Time
By Emily Russell



These Fears That Hold

By Ida Rutkoff

Please let me go,
Let loose a hold,
For I am scared of you;
The inner thoughts that keep me chained,
These worries of mine hold.
While these stressors peruse and roam,
They keep me interlocked;
Between the eyes of the beholder,
My mind's freedom robbed.

Like taking candy from a baby,
This anxiety grabs me from behind,
A red-eyed demon follows me,
My wish to be stress free declined;
Haunting my inner soul and tearing me down,
Makes everything wrong and
Nothing seems right.

For the fear of failure follows me closely,
And holds me forevermore,
Drowning in a sea of despair.
In this head a man is at war.
This permanent jet lag,
Please let me go
Back to when I was young and unencumbered,
The screams from this naked mind unbearing,
“Please let me go! Oh, please don't trap me here!”

Yes, I've known this fear,
Oh, we have but heads for a lifetime,
These inner entanglements in my mind
make this anxiety burn inside me afire.
Alas to trade this failure for acceptance,
I must be perfect in every which way,
For to be unseen and unheard
Is to blend in completely.

I will never able reach
Queen Hera's golden apple,
To grab it means gaining inner peace-
To be perfect in the crowd,
To fuse with these peers,
My worries would cease.

However, it will never be possible.

My differences make me unique,
Yes,
Yes,
I know. I've known since I was young,
But this doesn't give me the answers,
The answers to all of my problems.

In pouring white and browns,
they seep into this gray
when I wish I had been made to be golden.

This gray is my chokehold.
This gold is my forever lasting label.

But could it be really?

Tempest

By Arden Tapp

I see clouds of acid and it's going to rain soon
just another night caught in the full moon
my parents are downstairs
looking for hairs;
and dark thunder rolls in the distance
I know the tolls of its insistence;

one hair out of place and she'll know
a stain on his face and she'll know
but I guess you reap what you sow
so huddle in the bathroom hide from the storm
ignore all the thunder just pretend it's the norm
forget all the memories where I could have sworn
that my house and my home felt so much more warm

and when the rain comes crashing down
just be glad it drowns out that sound

Nietzsche's Nikotin

By Ky-Lin Berg

It billows from nearby chimneys.
The world is covered in ash and soot
as I stare into the cloudy sky,
watching the end of my cigarette.

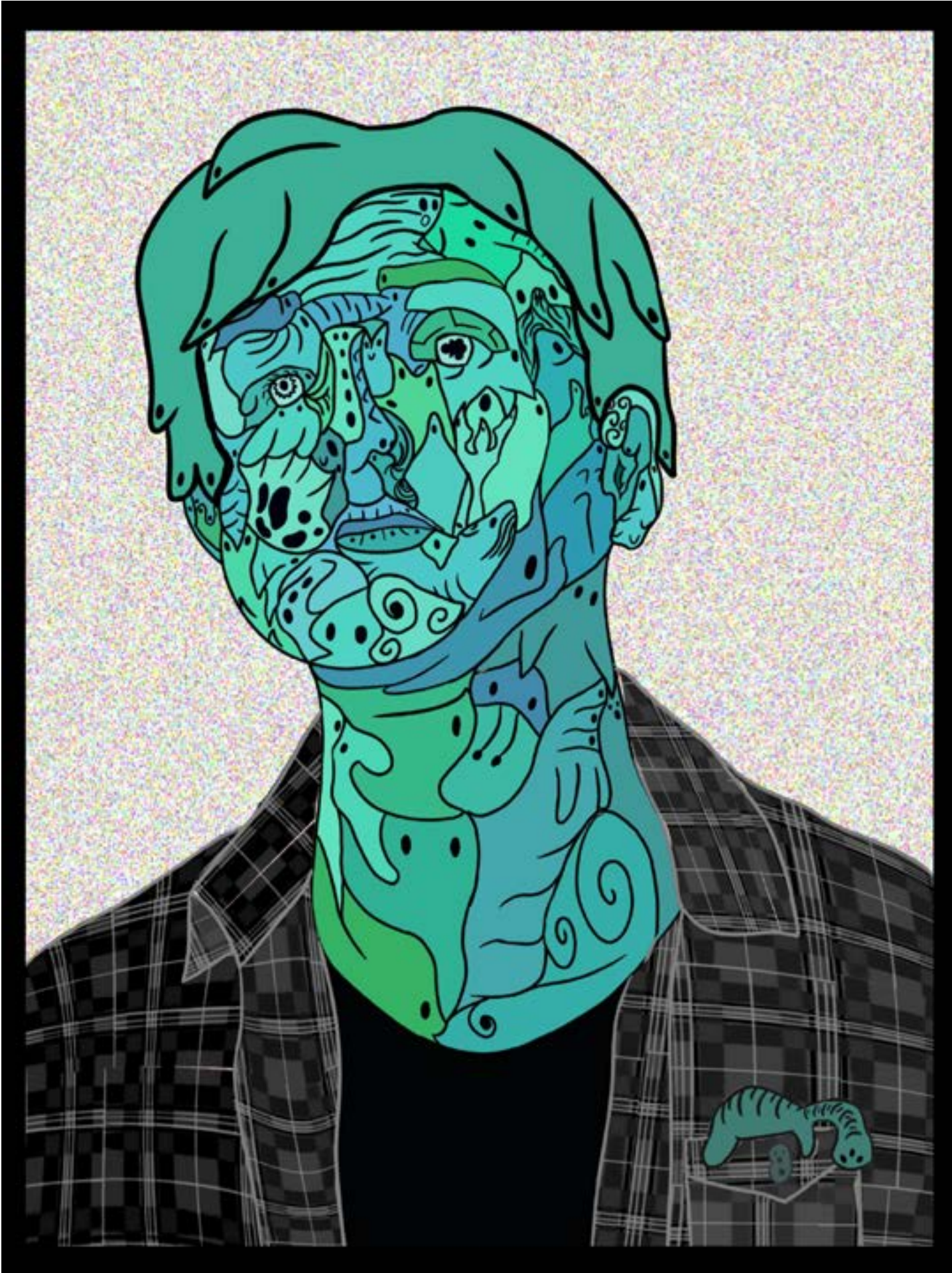
Was it all for nothing?
The worn pair of shoes, this empty briefcase,
and my hole-filled umbrella, held in fear that
the rain will try to smother the smoke?

I suppose, in the end,
I don't need an answer
so long as my lungs still work,
and I just keep breathing.

The buildings in the distance are faint,
drowning in the soupy smog of the city.
If I tried to reach out and touch them,
I know my hands would just phase through.

So, instead, I lie here,
watching the days blow past me
like the fumes from a car's tailpipe.
Inhale. Exhale. Repeat.

Selfie
By Lawrence Schultz



Fairies Work

By Anna Yeager

With the first light of the rising sun,
The flowers begin to bloom:
A purple one, a brown one,
And one that's black and blue.

Little fairies with their wands
Wave them round and round.
And in their wake, flowers bloom,
Waiting to be found.

Run and hide, the fairies do,
Settling for the day,
Content to hide in trunks and trees
And watch the flowers sway.

In groves, children stalk the field,
Searching for their prey.
A flower or two, maybe one that's blue
To complete their bright bouquet.

The first star lights the night
And with it a mother's call,
Drawing all the children back
With flowers big and small.

Out of the trees the fairies fly,
Glowing with their pride.
Taking stock of what is left
And through the night they glide.

Out of the forest come the elves, gnomes, and trolls
Combing the field for a prize
To brighten up their bedrolls.

Preen and glow the flowers do,
Lighting up the night.
Every last one is picked with care
Until there's none in sight.

The fairies dance and sing all night
Until the dawn has come.
When they set out again,
Never to succumb.

Yvette Speaks

By Georgia Kate Scott

Mr. McCreedy is an interesting bloke,
who likes to sit around in his office and smoke.
He works everyday from 9 until 2,
then he lights his cigar and kicks up his shoes.

The papers and paintings get covered in grime,
but he doesn't care-- it's his smoking time.
If anyone even dares to complain,
Mr. McCreedy gasps and asks "are you insane?"

You see, smoking is one of his few delights,
and giving it up would be such a plight.
"Besides, it's just one cigar a day,"
"How bad could it possibly be?" he'd say.

He doesn't care how hard it is for me to clean,
or how it could one day cost him everything.
He just coughs and he scoffs and says "honestly, I'm fine,"
ignoring every day how his health declines.

I guess you could say, then, that I wasn't too shocked,
this morning when I knocked and I knocked,
but there was no answer because behind that door,
was Mr. McCreedy, in a pile of ash, dead on his office floor.

Phase To Phase

By Annie LaRussa

A seed that's planted in the heart of young
and nourished by the sun of passion bright
And watered with the spirit of delight
Is proof of knowledge soon to now have sprung.
It learns to use the soil in which it lays,
To thrive on land where storms and fear abide
And seek for one that care thou shall provide
To guide the strength and set her pride ablaze.

From phase to phase the heart begins to bloom
While branches grow and leaves unfold in light.
From seed to tree the process strengthens her
So form and light she dost thus now consume
Which gives and ties the bonds of faith and might
To send her off and show her quaint allure.

The Ripple

By Ky-Lin Berg

Those wild flames that scorched my waters cold,
so fiery and arrogant they scald.
I tried to turn from embers glowing gold,
but your inferno kept my tide enthralled.

You spurred a boiling rage within my soul,
what with your silver tongue and flippant sparks,
but as the clock ticked by and took its toll,
I peered inside the hearth within your heart.

Fortuna sang her song to scarlet Mars
as pyre burning bright began to cool.
Beneath the smoking brimstone lay your scars,
and I no longer thought of you a fool.

You've sent this ripple through my aching chest.
I've only you to blame for this unrest.

Sneak Attack

By Virginia Kate Brandt

Ever since I was extremely young, 6 or 7, I wrote endlessly, which sometimes turned into fanfiction or continuous ideas for new stories, which then turned into a problem when I wrote essays. Assigned with an essay, my seventh grade self sat plagued at home with the foreign thought of structured writing. I didn't know what was supposed to show up on my computer screen. I read over the directions for the essay in my english binder, unsure which parts of the essay were what. I remained unaware as the afternoon was quickly turning into the evening. With a jolt back to my senses, I could smell the aroma of okra and ground beef my dad was cooking dinner. Obscure parts of my room became more and more interesting to me as I thought about everything but the essay. My made-up ideas for a story would drift through my mind and soon I would be creating a book filled with events that my essay could never have. It was my first essay and I hated it. It was something so structured, having required parts and no details to fill the brain with imagination. It was informative, not relatable or entertaining. The dark shadows of night crept up on me as suddenly as a sneak attack. And it was a sneak attack, the time rushed away from my grip. The remaining glint of light scolded me; I had to write something.

The Wallows
By Emily Russell



Mirror Shards

By Anna Yeager

Mirrors show our other halves
The ones we want to be

They're nice and fine and shine with artificial light
Until they drop and crack mirroring our inner fight

What can a mirror be
But a gateway to a place where we are barred

Nothing can hide from the mirror shards
Not anger or sadness or spite
Maybe one day we can again find that inner light

Perspective
By Ky-Lin Berg



Turning Back

By Ann Louise Rowe

If I do not turn back, how will I know if he turns back?
When the plane takes off, the rest lands.
Where do I go? Who do I see?
Mascara is rolling down my face,
gradually running from my eye.
But it is him, running from me.
Leaving me be, let me see who is here, as he sees who is there
But tomorrow, today I turn back
As I watch the plane go
a piece of me goes with it,
a piece of me breaks.
I can no longer turn back the page.
It is me, alone in this chapter
It is me, with a promise to see
In the final chapter of my children's book
as the adult novel slides off the shelf.
Do I end it here? Or pick up another children's book?
My promise to be free until I was a graduate slipping away.
Locked down for the many, many days I have left.
I must turn back, I know it, I must.
Or I migrate
Fly away from the harsh cold,
Then come back when I am ready
Will I regret not setting myself free?
Or will I regret being free?
He may be the prodigal son, or he may never come home.
It is like Daniel in the lions' den: trapped.
The greatest chapter of my life ending sooner than I thought
I could keep going, like a train up the mountain:
Getting to the top, only to go right back to the bottom.
The book of life is written through years,
but for most, that book is never published.
It is written one day at a time, one page at a time.
All my life, I have tried to sprint to the end, writing before I know what to write.
It is like I have bought flowers already bloomed, and planted them in my garden. But now, those flowers are being ripped from
the soil.
I can put them back, or plant new flowers
Letting the flowers grow as I do,
not knowing what their future is going to look like.
Like a finished puzzle that was just thrown across the room.
Finally made up, to be destroyed
I do not know if it is me or you.
If I turn back, life would be like the seasons
Sunny and bright,
then cloudy and cold.
But if I do not? My life may be full of clouds.
Looming over me like the what ifs,
Written in pencil, my story may be rewritten
But will I lose myself to have you?
All my life I have longed for the chapter that lies on the next page. All my life I have longed for the book that is sliding off the
shelves. Now I may only have one.
Tomorrow crept into today.
Today, I see who is here and you see who is there.
Today, I close the children's book.
Today, I officially lose the thing I have longed for in that next book.
I do not want to see who is here.
I wish you were not seeing who is there.
As the clock struck twelve,
so did the final chapter of my children's book.

That was it.
A phone call closed the book, and a new one opened.
I am not so sure what this one is about,
But I do know that the seeds have been planted,
the pencil has been erased,
the sun is out,
the plane has landed,
and this is where our story begins,
Our story written in pencil.
I turned back...

Photosynthesis
By Lawrence Schultz



A First Time For Everything

By Ky-Lin Berg

“Um... broken.”

Doctor Pemberton didn't have to turn around to know that the soldier was staring at him, sharp eyes boring to the back of his head like the barrel of a gun. Either scenario probably felt about the same, he decided miserably, feet frozen in place at the doorway of the small tent. “Yes, he's broken. Entirely beyond repair, at that! A shame there isn't much I can do about it, a real tragedy, it is.” With each word that flew past his lips, he could practically hear himself digging his own grave, and as the man on the rickety wooden table let out another rattly breath, he figured he wouldn't be the only one thrown into it.

“Well, there's my diagnosis!” he laughed nervously, creeping backwards, “Now, I really should be going, back to the frontlines, you know, field medic and whatnot...” He knew there was a place in the woods, not even a mile off from camp, that would be perfect for a situation like this. A perfect little sanctuary where he could vomit and cry and curse the world for doing all these horrible things to him and nobody would have to know. Surely, it would be better that way, he reasoned. Before he could make his grand escape, however, the soldier grabbed him by the collar of his button-up jacket, sharply jerking him down to meet the bright blue eyes hidden beneath the well-worn cap.

“Now, Michelle—”

“My name is not Michelle.” she bit out, “It's Michael. You're supposed to call me Michael.”

“Right, right, Michael! Of course!” Doctor Pemberton's head bobbed as he nodded, lightheaded from the proximity of the soldier's threatening gaze. He discovered her secret only a few months ago, right after a misguided enemy bayonet found itself lodged in her shoulder. She told him it was nobody's business, and he was rather happy to agree with her, seeing that between the two of them, she was the only one who knew how to properly use a musket. “Would you be a dear and stop shaking me? Scrambling my brains, it is.”

Michelle, or rather Michael, huffed, releasing the firm grip on the doctor's already disheveled uniform. “Fix Richard.” Her voice was almost like a growl, barely audible from between her clenched teeth, and Pemberton couldn't help but shrink away from it. Of all people to witness his inevitable failure, why did it have to be her?

“But I can't, love, he's broken, essentially a dead man!” he pleaded earnestly, feet edging another half-conscious step or two away from the operating table. He was just about to blurt out some other nonsense before she grabbed his hands, and all of his thoughts went with the feeling in his fingertips.

“No, he's not.” Very quickly, Michelle dragged his unwilling body closer to the table. As he stood there, uselessly listening to the pallid man (his patient, good God,) sputter like a diseased horse, she went back to the tent's entrance, grabbing what he had left there and shoving it against his chest. “You're a doctor, aren't you?”

“I-I am, yes.” he murmured, eyes flitting to the medical bag in his trembling arms. The leather was dry and cracked, flaking off and fluttering to the ground like fresh snowfall. The shiny, unused tools it was filled with, however, seemed unbothered. “Went to school for it, at least.”

“Then fix him.” Her command carried the same weight as any general's, even though she didn't speak any louder than usual. Was this an attempt at motivation? Under any other circumstance, it may have worked, but that traitorous, nagging little voice in the back of his head was too loud. Run, it whispered, Let someone more competent deal with this. Just get out before you make things worse, you moron!

“I, uh... it's just so...” Doctor Pemberton couldn't hold in the anxious word-vomit that poured from his mouth, none of it consciously registering in his head. “His ribcage, you know... I mean even if I could, I've never...” His nerves fired through him like explosions on the battlefield. Of course she didn't understand. There was no way that someone as brave or as strong as her could even fathom how an utter coward like him felt. He wanted so desperately to be like her, to project this heroic, can-do air, but all his good intentions crumbled away when faced with the slightest possibility of failure with consequence, and the doctor knew that if he couldn't get the bullet out of this man's chest, he would die.

With her usual lack of hesitation, truly a soldier, Michelle reached for his bag and pulled out a scalpel, pressing it into his palm. If she had cut him, he couldn't feel it.

“Time to get to work, doctor.”