

Contrast

Spring 2022



Contrast
Literary
Magazine

Spring 2022

Editor's Note

Readers,

We humbly present this collection of creative pieces to you as a time capsule of the experiences, cultures, perspectives, styles, hopes, fears, losses, and delights of McDaniel students living through the new roaring '20s. The following is organized with the intention of providing a balance of diverse themes and tones.

Editions of Contrast past have been given individual titles. We ultimately decided to keep this edition nameless, but when considering what we could have titled it, the most resonant single word we came up with was "trauma." As Danielle also discusses on the next page, themes of death and endings dominated 2022's submissions. This is revealing of our collective vulnerability in a world that feels to be growing exponentially large exponentially fast, but so too is the prevalence of pieces capturing joy, beginnings, amusement, discoveries, and re-evaluations. Change is dependant on the end of what's familiar. We hope this collection celebrates that.

To our contributors, thank you for trusting us with your stories, your artwork, your feelings, beliefs, and experiences. You have not only participated in the legacy of our creative community over two unpredictably difficult years for education and extracurriculars, you have kept this club alive when it easily could have fizzled out. In the face of physical isolation, vulnerability, and mass loss, you still shattered our expectations of submission volume and participation in the process of making this manuscript.

Contrast would not exist without the generosity of our Editorial Board who have given their time freely to curate this text, the flexibility and support of our advisor, and the constant dependability of my co-editor-in-chief. As both Danielle and I graduate and hand this club off to the next generation of Green Terrors, we thank you all for trusting us with this responsibility. This project has been one of the most meaningful parts of my time on the Hill.

—Becca Halaney

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

Helping to create editions of Contrast has been one of my greatest joys during my time at McDaniel. I am incredibly grateful to be a part of a community that fosters connection through art, to be a part of an organization that celebrates creativity and craft, to be part of a legacy that honors the power of story-telling. This year was a historic year for Contrast—we had the largest Editorial Board I've ever been a part of, and we had an impressive number of submissions. Unfortunately, this year was also historic in another sense—it has been a hard year for many. You will find that sense of struggle enclosed in these pages. Many of the submissions this year reflect on hardships and trauma, a veritable kaleidoscope of grief and mourning and loss.

Thank you to everyone who was willing to share their stories, written and depicted, with us. The act of creation is an act of vulnerability, and, whether a piece features hardships or not, and whether a piece was accepted into the magazine or not, it takes a great deal of bravery to shine a light on pieces of yourself for others to see. I applaud those that do so.

I also extend a sincere thank you to my co-editor-in-chief, Becca Halaney, who is able to juggle challenges as well as she juggles multiple pizza boxes and to Dr. Kate Dobson, our advisor, who serves as a constant source of guidance and encouragement. Thanks are also due to our wonderful Editorial Board for their late nights and wonderful insights on submitted pieces. This magazine would not exist without your hours of hard work.

My final thanks goes to you, the readers of this edition of Contrast. I hope that everyone, especially those among you who are struggling, will find connection and catharsis in this magazine. Read on, readers, and please enjoy this collection.

—Danielle Wendt

Contrast Literary Magazine

McDaniel College
2022

Editors-in-Chief

Becca Halaney
Danielle Wendt

Adviser

Dr. Kathryn Dobson

Editorial Board

Eamonn Fay
Grace Maglietta
Emily McGraw
Eliezer Mercedescordones
Ciara O'Brien
Molly Sherman
Celia Stern

Cover Art—*Bolt*

Mackenzie McCarter

Table of Contents

We Sing (FM) Radio	Prose 12
<i>Maddy Lee</i>	
Deflation	Art 13
<i>Matthew Hodgdon</i>	
On Words and Worms	Poetry 14
<i>Pauline Tillotson</i>	
Crow Against Clouds	Art 15
<i>Harrison Booth</i>	
Fridge Message	Poetry 16
<i>Raquel Sobczak</i>	
When I listen to an audiobook; when I read.	Poetry 17
<i>Jordan Dent</i>	
A Little Tired	Art 18
<i>Collin Beattie</i>	
Ivy	Poetry 19
<i>Grace Maglietta</i>	
Haunted	Poetry 20
<i>Danielle Wendt</i>	
Drafted	Art 21
<i>Jordan Dent</i>	
Dinner Plate: Popular Meals from 1920-2010	Art 22
<i>Kate Cramer</i>	
Alan Watts, from the mouth of God, 27 November 1970	Prose 23
<i>Harrison Booth</i>	
Appendages	Art 29
<i>Molly Sherman</i>	
break ups.	Poetry 30
<i>Michie Oliver</i>	
Love Language	Art 31
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
Ode to a Musician	Poetry 32
<i>Micaela Champion</i>	
Costanza Bonarelli Attends the Opera	Prose 34
<i>Celia Stern</i>	
R. Capa and Clematis	Art 37
<i>Lyra Houghton</i>	

Table of Contents

The Rise of Autumn	Art 38
<i>Collin Beattie</i>	
Baltimore Eclipse	Poetry 39
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
Juggernaut	Poetry 40
<i>Eamonn Fay</i>	
Manufactured Obsolescence	Art 41
<i>Becca Halaney</i>	
Reaching For It	Art 42
<i>Collin Beattie</i>	
A Deeper Look	Poetry 43
<i>Micaela Champion</i>	
McDaniel Environmental Center	Prose 44
<i>Molly Sherman</i>	
Floating Higher	Art 49
<i>Matthew Hodgdon</i>	
We Fell In Love In October	Art 50
<i>Larkin Diener</i>	
Forever	Poetry 51
<i>Alishia Mitchell</i>	
(untitled chalkboard piece)	Art 53
<i>Harrison Booth</i>	
Hey wait those aren't stars!	Art 54
<i>Steven Herd</i>	
The Anguished Man	Poetry 55
<i>Eamonn Fay</i>	
Top of the World	Art 56
<i>Christina Baker</i>	
On Permanence	Poetry 57
<i>Pauline Tillotson</i>	
U2	Poetry 58
<i>Lyra Houghton</i>	
Family	Art 59
<i>Molly Sherman</i>	
Hearing Things	Prose 60
<i>Sophia Gilbert</i>	

Table of Contents

Stars We See	Art 63
<i>Larkin Diener</i>	
Mellow	Art 64
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
Demolition	Poetry 65
<i>Grace Maglietta</i>	
Cigarette Smoke	Poetry 66
<i>Micaela Champion</i>	
The Leaf-Blowers	Art 67
<i>Jordan Dent</i>	
The big decision: birth control methods, effectiveness, and potential side effects	Art 68
<i>Kate Cramer</i>	
1808	Poetry 69
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
It's quiet.	Prose 70
<i>Molly Sherman</i>	
Cumulonimbus	Art 77
<i>Becca Halaney</i>	
Charlie	Art 78
<i>Mackenzie McCarter</i>	
Memento	Poetry 79
<i>Grace Maglietta</i>	
Chesna	Art 80
<i>Collin Beattie</i>	
When I wake up today / When I go to sleep tonight.	Poetry 81
<i>Jordan Dent</i>	
The Weeping Book	Prose 82
<i>Celia Stern</i>	
Lady of the Ferns	Art 91
<i>Raquel Sobczak</i>	
Guiding Light	Art 92
<i>Larkin Diener</i>	
Overkill: The Death of Rocksand	Poetry 93
<i>Steven Herd</i>	

Table of Contents

The Knack	Prose 94
<i>Eamonn Fay</i>	
The Metaphysician	Art 103
<i>Harrison Booth</i>	
Funeral Masks	Poetry 104
<i>Micaela Champion</i>	
Sunset at Venice Beach	Art 105
<i>Mackenzie McCarter</i>	
Jellies	Art 106
<i>Christina Baker</i>	
Jellies	Art 107
<i>Raquel Sobczak</i>	
Precious Time	Poetry 108
<i>Matthew Hodgdon</i>	
Goodnight, Sweetheart	Prose 109
<i>Danielle Wendt</i>	
The Dusting	Art 116
<i>Jordan Dent</i>	
Alhambra	Poetry 117
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
Makela	Art 119
<i>Sarah England</i>	
Imagine Injustice	Poetry 120
<i>Maddy Lee</i>	
Worth Your Weight in Gold	Prose 121
<i>Becca Halaney</i>	
Winter's Evening in Westminster	Art 129
<i>Steven Herd</i>	
November 19th	Poetry 130
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
The Axeman's Children	Prose 132
<i>Maddy Lee</i>	
Paper Bride	Art 134
<i>Simone Smith</i>	
A COVID Goodbye	Poetry 135
<i>Tabitha Zolnerowich</i>	

Table of Contents

Lip gloss

Molly Sherman

Art **137**

PINNED: Small-Town-White-Girl-Moodboard

Maddy Lee

Poetry **138**

The Dick

Eamonn Fay

Prose **139**

Lil Booty

Raquel Sobczak

Art **151**

Awards

Art

1st	Mellow <i>Simone Smith</i>	64
2nd	The Metaphysician <i>Harrison Booth</i>	103
3rd	Dinner Plate: Popular Meals from 1920-2010 <i>Kate Cramer</i>	22

Poetry

1st	PINNED: Small-Town-White- Girl-Moodboard <i>Maddy Lee</i>	138
2nd	Baltimore Eclipse <i>Simone Smith</i>	39
3rd	Demolition <i>Grace Maglietta</i>	65

Prose

1st	We Sing (FM) Radio <i>Maddy Lee</i>	12
2nd	It's quiet. <i>Molly Sherman</i>	70
3rd	Alan watts, from the mouth of God, 27 November 1970 <i>Harrison Booth</i>	23

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Spring 2022

We Sing (FM) Radio

Maddy Lee

1st Place Prose

My family sings FM radio to solve our problems.

I wish I was kidding, but the husky, homicidal tunes of female country artists have always been our love language. Never much of a talking bunch, we focused instead on what could be shouted out car windows, speeding down highways in those racing, rushed moments we spend together.

Time has never been on our side. We always thought there would be more of it, but scarcity defines our sort of affluence. Southern royalty down on its luck, scraping for change in the crevices of antique daybeds. My great-grandmother hung her genuine mink-fur coat on a Walmart hanger in the basement when her dementia set in. No one knows what happened to it after that.

When the well dried up and the pressure set in, accusations flew like loose crows in the house. They shattered windows and knocked over the Christmas tree. We placed it back upright, straightened the crooked star, before another family came over that evening. Down on their luck too, we promised to show them a wonderful holiday evening. A masquerade for the faceless.

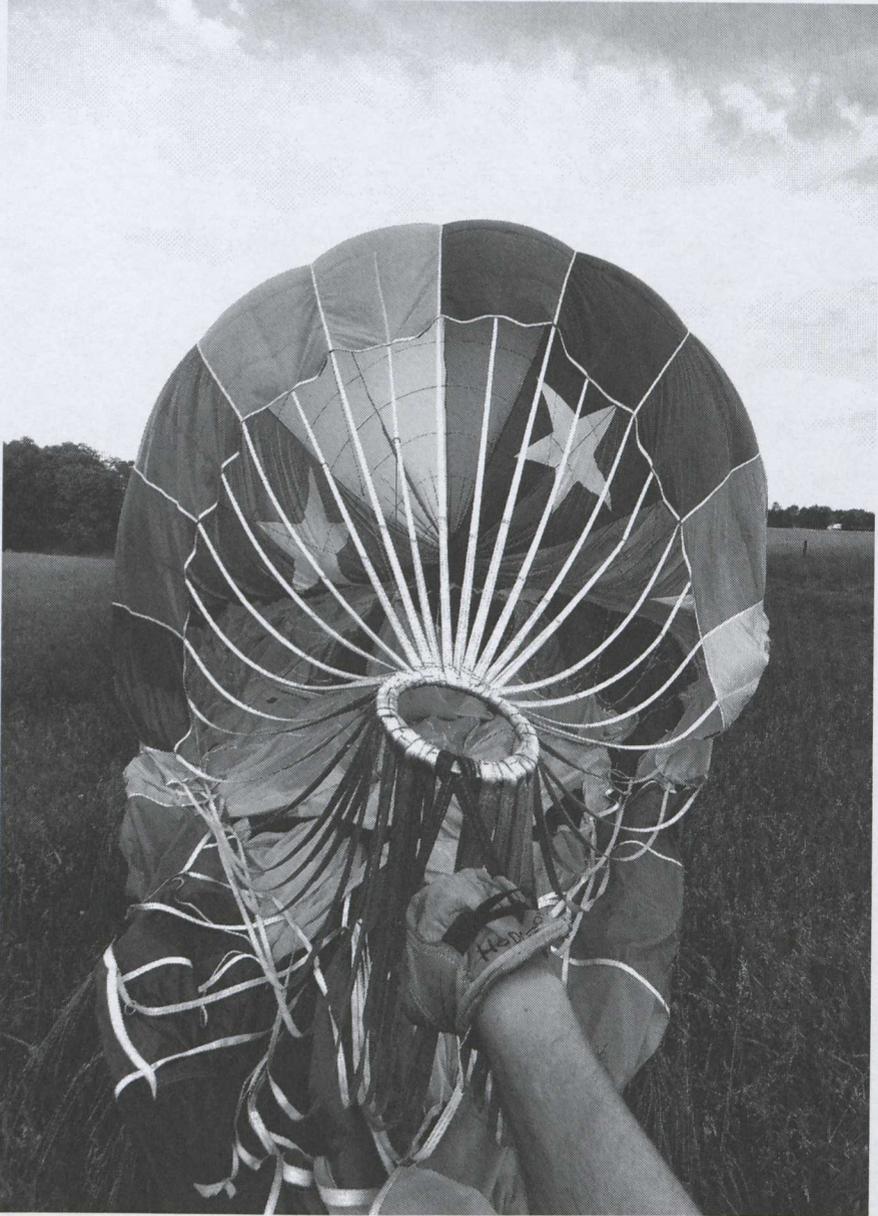
Diplomas came like drops in the bucket, but droughts came like flies to shit. Shouting never raised a GPA, but never let it be said all attempts weren't made. The chasms between us deepened, widened, lined with spikes, and then set themselves ablaze. Still—

When the car sped without care for our safety, when the croon of the crackling speakers rose, we crossed them each unharmed. A harmony of the unspoken rings among us as open windows immediately drink it from our lips. Only the highway will ever know this love for each other—this tangible, toxic tambourine that unites us. A speed bump skips a beat, the song drops out, and only our own remembrance sings in the silence. Perhaps someday we will recover the way the families on television do.

For now, we have FM radio.

Deflation

Matthew Hodgdon



On Words and Worms

Pauline Tillotson

Of mighty kings and rebels both we keep
just tales we tell as clearly as we may,
and bones that last just long enough to weep,
so swiftly lost to rot or worn away.
But how much clearer would our memories work
if faces stayed immortal as a word?
If worms could tell a man from so much pork?
If worms respected us, what perfect world?
Imagine fields of alabaster limbs,
unmoving and unmarred, names long unsaid:
a farm that should the living feed, which brims
with all the common, nonheroic dead.
No, when we're lost and mourned and then forgot,
be glad the worms enjoy the ling'ring rot.

Crow Against Clouds

Harrison Booth



***When I listen to an audiobook;
when I read.***

Jordan Dent

There is an indefinable point at which

I can no longer hold onto

hold on to my words.

I pretend. Every decent thing perversely stained by the temporality
~~of the day~~ of the day.

Well. Spring's beauty in a cold frost trampled.

I'm trying my best. I can be invisible for now, too.

I can be familiar, hope to come again to the story—

like a beloved friend—not knowing when you'll see them again.

To seize too hard would be to suffocate.

A Little Tired

Collin Beattie



how long have I spent trying
to understand my own desire
stamped out when it was barely blooming
unwelcome weeds in the holy garden

how still, it sprouted and spread
cracking stone and climbing over
the garden gate until
I could not rein it in

I think I could spend a lifetime feeling
like I did at thirteen
like the only stone wall covered in vines
the only one who has ever wanted

Haunted

Danielle Wendt

Sleep-deprived synapses
firing in slow motion
slinking deeper and deeper into
haze presses headily—
hear we function highly?
Haunt habitually.
See *through* the screen as
fingers ghost along the keys.
Yawning... yawning... yawning...
Mouth wound open with a
car jack—possessed jaw
sucking in air like it
will inhale the sleep
I won't give my brain. A
spectre of myself
sits with ghoulish eyes—
bleary shadow
I can't quite capture.
How did Sunday night become
out-of-body experience?
Pray: séance save me,
personality betray me—
curse the poltergeist
who made me.

Drafted

Jordan Dent



exclamation "I yam what I am" (266).
Do you think there was a time in my life that
the things that I really liked?
Country music, Serotypes, Gospel music... the
The smell of sawdust, smells. things about Da
tget you grew up with.
What about anger, what about my feelings.
Drinking beer. Watching movies The accordion -
it was something I missed.
One of my favorite lines in the Invisible Man
"I yam what I am" (266). Apart from the jovial
its pleasurable use of _____ (rhyming or follow-
a larger series of phrases in the same vein. Re-
by. "Never mind, I am what I am" (269); I won
whom I was" (31); and "yet I am that they
of these is another word in the author's ongoing
his identity. "It was exhilarating."
xxxxxxxxxxxx "I no longer had to worry also
(264).
Precede this with the bit about freedom and t
Essentially, the Yam man encounter (or, in lig
yam man encounter places the Invisible Man in
he feels awakened to what he most appreciated:
of be thin hiddatways loved. (266). In the end
such a descriptor, it seems believable. But I
like to believe that they are the most cure
a thing to so powerfully shake somebody that
shift the perspective (or alter the perspective
in my own experience, there are many things
which I mix more or less disassociated
(or is it dissociated) myself with when I was
These were not all things disagreeable (or dis-
though some of them were certainly alien and n
professed to adopt. Even now my conscience is
it really did like or appreciate those things:
of which I only saw two in eight years; we are
which I was alienated of my Father's accordin

Dinner Plate: Popular Meals from 1920-2010

Kate Cramer

3rd Place Visual Art



Alan Watts, from the mouth of God, 27 November 1970

Harrison Booth

3rd Place Prose

[The following is a fictional lecture written in the style of 20th century speaker and philosopher Alan Watts, derived from his style of oration before a public audience.]

" (2)

Now, look here;—

I was in a bookstore in downtown Sausalito,
one of those real lovely places in the narrow space between the
two adjacent buildings,
And I was flipping through one of those books writ
-ten for a young child in probably, ..oh let's see here,
the third grade,

published with the intent of educating aspiring physicians,
one must suppose,

on the "ins and outs" of the human body.

the "ins and outs." (-)

You see, these types of books are supposed to be *simple*, much
simpler than the average
psycho-physiological textbooks and whatnot you'd find in the
hands of a Yale undergraduate these days,

but they are liable to produce some fascinating revelations if
you're willing to really...

[pause with a conclusive tail] sink your teeth into them.

They're like koans, in a way; there's this kind of
clandestine charm to them, the kind that lets you *slip* from
time to time and

leave your doors unlatched.

Now, it was a lazy afternoon, the
houseboats were all still and flat on the water, as they are on these
kinds of days,
and I decided I was going to do just that.

And lo and behold, I flip to the second-to-last page, and written
there in large black typeface, right there next to a drawing of a
curious red-haired child simply gazing at its hand, is the phrase,
"But the largest organ in the body isn't internal at all...
It's your skin !"

[pause, letting its flavor permeate the tongue –
resuming, with the momentum of confidence]

Now, I ask you,
is your skin an internal organ?

[brief pause for the dramatic]

Internal to *what?* [] ..Or, alternatively, is it external?

[pause -- bashful audience laughs. Watts holds a playful finger out
to the audience, crooked at the knuckle in anticipation -]

External to *what?* ..

[Audience laughs. Watts laughs too.]

That's the real charm
of these books, isn't it? .. koans.

..

Now,
I think it's fairly easy to see how preposterous this so-called
predicament is.

And yet,

it takes tremendous effort—

...or, perhaps, a tremendous *stopping* of effort—

to see that the mind is synonymous with the flesh of God.

[silence on
silence.]

—You see this whole time we've been taught to *look* for the answers.

As if through enough squirming,
through tearing the world *apart*,
we will find written in its fragments some divine message,
some >'mathematical
equation,' that will elucidate the ultimate nature of things.

] Now what that might be nobody can really say, but most of us are convinced that it must be distant to us. something to be sought after .

We remain *transfixed* with the notion that that the realms of truth are either far *above* us somewhere, in the monarchical realm of some cold and distant *primum mobile*, or *below* us – to be pinned under a microscope,
to be captured in some yet-to-be-written piece of scientific or philosophical
literature.

but what is it exactly that we are hoping to capture?

Imagine trying to—now I mean, *really* imagine this—
trying to turn around fast enough to catch a glimpse of your own

face. -

Now imagine,
you really *seem* to have done it.

My, my. [laughter.]
now imagine

, that you really think, really and *truly* think,

□
that the *image* face , the mir-
age, is the *real* one.

[laughter ,
...resumes as it dies down]

Preposterous!

And yet...—
We do this all the time, really. with the so-called world at large,
and with ourselves.

When will we realize that we *are* the membrane there,
the one that we feel must be located somewhere between the
inner dermis & the flesh, where we
thought there were only words?

[silence .]

And that's really the question, isn't it?
Where do I go when I realize I'm
infinitely thin?

What becomes of this "I" when it draws the curtain on this
world of _...invisible
substantiality?

[uncertainty in the audience]

Now this *really*

is a trip, isn't it? [laughter]

Not a trip to anyWHERE, but a trip all the same.
To use a crude analogy,
perhaps a bit like a road trip. ...only, there's no one
driving the car!
[chuckles to himself]

Now, look here –

when one pushes himself up against a wall --

∴ || | such that he *becomes* the wall —;

anyhow, how does one keep his head about him when there's no
head he feels the need to carry around and 'keep about'?
[silent laughs]

Well, naturally, when you've really turned on to this way of
thinking,
you find that you don't need to "do" anything, really ..
—and why *SHOULD* you?

Does a tree hold itself up by force of will,
and steer its branches toward the sun, with any violence
whatsoever?

Or does it simply *do* that?

Is that simply its nature? [with momentum]

And what is the "it" that is *separate* from its nature?
who is the owner of life? Or does only life remain, when
language is removed from the equation? ((0))

Isn't it the case that we think and reason and know in the same
way we know how to breathe ? | \

[suspension]

--
Now it's an inherent feature of words that they draw lines between
things. between, for example,

the action and the implied *doer* of that action. But where is
this line, after all, between inside and outside?

~~

[a shift]

Anyhow – [clears throat—`look here! `]

regardless of how the intellect tries to pin it down,
all of this is not something you can *really* understand by, say,
simply *imagining* it in your mind.

This isn't a quilt I'm handing you
for a while to hang in the back
room.

Being is too close, too simple, to pry open,
really. —there is nothing to locate.

[slightest of pauses]

- and why should there be! —
ask yourselves, what is the location of

everywhere?

) • (

. we are the answer, tickling the back of its
own throat. —~ [audience unblinking.]

get it?

[with a twinkle]

and all of this is to assume, —naïvely, I might add,
O hands of Shiva, -

[chuckles]

— that there is
a distance between us and the
"it" there is to get.

you've always known this, really.

~~~{{{}}}~~~

it is, indeed, something we all can understand, — *really*  
understand, —  
the moment we admit that there is absolutely nothing to stand  
under.

"

—~ [radio static]

# *Appendages*

Molly Sherman



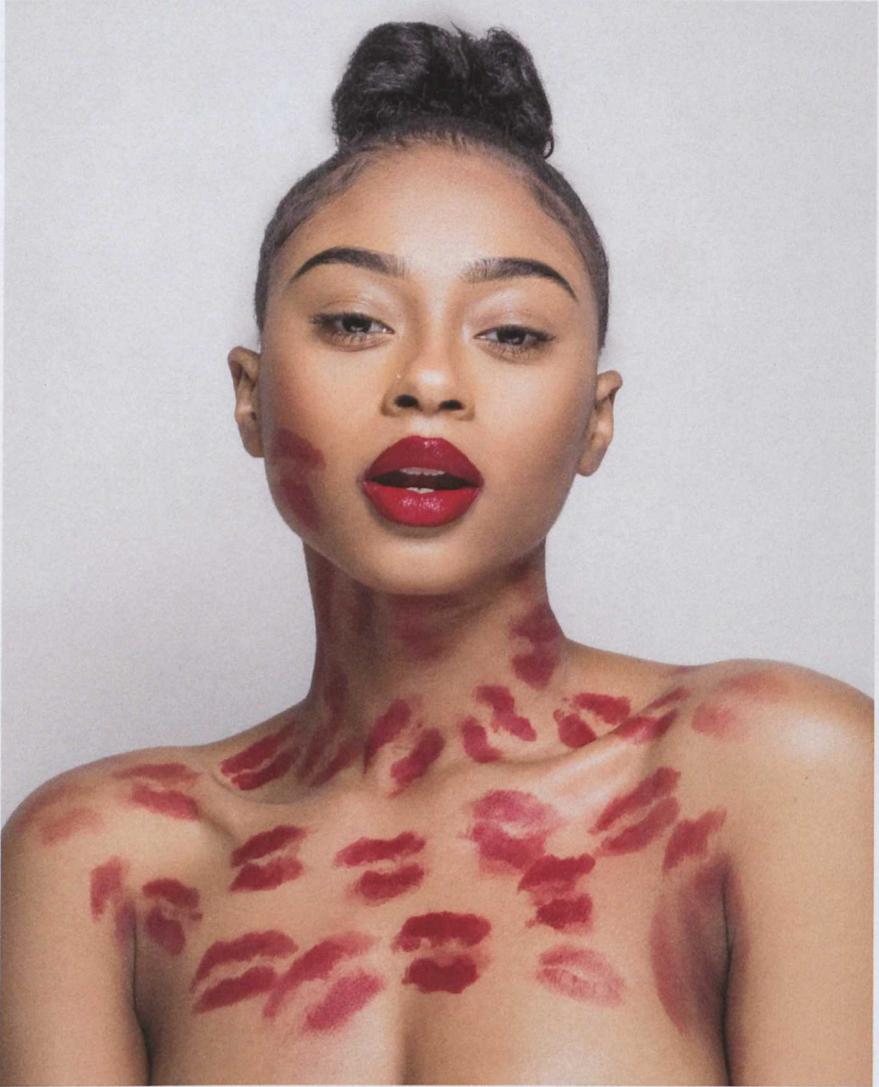
## ***break ups.***

**Michie Oliver**

they break **you**  
instead of the toxic cycle.  
so don't bother  
fixing what's already  
been shattered.  
you will only start  
to bleed.  
so I guess you  
were right, the  
colour red does  
look good on me.

# *Love Language*

Simone Smith



# ***Ode to a Musician***

**Micaela Champion**

Nimble fingers  
dance across  
the piano,  
the guitar,  
the tiny tin whistle.

Pattern upon pattern,  
a kaleidoscope dance,  
putting me in a trance,  
as all I can do is stare

and listen.  
To the beauty  
and the grace  
that the simplest  
strum,  
chord,  
or breath  
can make.

And then the drums cascade in  
one crash,  
one blow,  
to the beat of my heart  
and I fall apart  
as the rhythm  
takes hold,  
of every bit of my soul.

And the face  
behind it all,  
eyebrows furrowed in thought,  
eyes glowing with passion  
and desire,  
tongue resting  
on parted lips  
as they swell

in concentration.

His hands,  
playing a million symphonies  
all in one  
minute tone.

All the while,  
my eyebrows unwind  
with the melodious groove,  
my eyes shine with love  
and great rapture,  
my tongue feels foreign  
with the need to move in syllables of song,  
and my lips curl  
in a buoyant smile

as I applaud  
for the musician  
who plays my heart.

# ***Costanza Bonarelli Attends the Opera***

**Celia Stern**

She prefers her Italian artists. Costanza is nothing if not a faithful woman. But the seats her husband has arranged for them, for a much acclaimed interpretation of *Jenůfa*, a Czech piece, are too good to waive, so Costanza dresses up and exchanges the circles in her coin purse for a tiny libretto to study, acquainting herself with the story before the lights dim.

At the end of the first act, Jenůfa's face is mutilated by Laca, the cousin obsessed with her and jealous of her connection with his half-brother. A spray of blood falls down the soprano's dress and when Laca, in his contrition, presses his hand over the wound, his palms come away blocked in crimson.

But by the time the curtain lifts on the second act the soprano's face has not been altered. No cicatrice appliqué gapes on her cheek though there had been plenty of time to attach one during the interval.

A practical decision, Costanza thinks as the soprano elongates her mouth with a vertiginous note. The plaster would be split, and the illusion ruined. Better to let the audience imagine the destruction, or they will nearly forget it's there.

Costanza makes up her mind to use the bathroom during the performance. Under the fluorescents of a public bathroom, the scar is like to glimmer, and her lipstick has been too carefully applied to be smudged with a disguising scarf. Her memories of the years following the attack smell strongly of wool and winter, having rarely left the house without an excuse that would allow her to bind her disfigurement against the chilly air. A scarf, a tall collar, a blend of foundation, anything to pretend it wasn't there until the day it wasn't, when it was a syzygy of silvery hairs, an unlikely position of the light, when looking in the mirror her concerns migrated towards the darkness beneath her eyes and the slack skin by her throat.

Occasionally she goes to the Bargello to look at herself. Liberally

windowed and pregnant with warm air, the museum's former identity as a jail is an absurdity that Costanza pinches herself to recall every time she finds herself longing to tarry a little longer in its halls. Visiting the bust is a concession no different from her husband's after dinner cigarette—one that risks addiction if too often indulged. The large white bust sits on a modern black plinth just short enough for the man of above-average stature to look down on. Recently they have put her under a plastic box to keep her from illicit contact with the public.

Several weeks ago, a feminist struck her cheek with red lipstick.

The bust was rushed to the conservators, triaged ahead of the Titians and Giotto's so the virulent greases might be sponged off before a blush could settle permanently over the bust's pallid cheek.

Under cross-examination, the feminist recounted her day at the museum. She had attended an exhibition of Camille Claudel and was wandering the chambers of the sculpture wing when she came upon the bust. Being a student of art, an admirer of the Baroque, she knew what had transpired between the sculptor and Costanza, and as she studied the bust disgust built up inside of her until, her face hot with rage, she printed the sculptor's crime over his perfidious art.

To the feminist, it was not a portrait of a romanced woman, her hair tousled from sex, her breast open in favor, but of the last fires of terror. Her lips eternally parted in shock without the anatomy to allow her the privilege to speak. Behind the lips a stone tongue, or no tongue at all. And the hair and the shirt would not be so messy if she had not been seized by the hair and tugged towards the point of the knife.

It wasn't planned, the feminist defended, Or I would have drenched her in blood.

Costanza read the news stories. The feminist travelled to England with a stick of dynamite to blow the Hughes off Sylvia Plath's gravestone. She thrust a sign that spelled out ¿*Dónde está Ana Mendieta?* in weeping pig intestines in the face of a curator. The photo of her in the paper has her bent over a copy of *Frankenstein*

as her lawyer battles with the judge.

In the strange light of the protective box, overlaid on the restored bust, Costanza's expression is motionless as rock, though the face casting it is anything but motionless. It has smiled, laughed, squinted with anger, wrinkled over time. The bust is a charming snapshot of naivety.

A scar is not Jenůfa's only torture. Without her beauty, her fiancé, the father of her unborn child, leaves her for an heiress. Laca, still in love, won't marry her if he has to suffer the indignity of raising her baby, so to protect Jenůfa's future, her stepmother pretends the baby has died, a façade made flesh when on Laca and Jenůfa's wedding day the baby is found in the river.

Jenůfa forgives them all because to show anger at her attacker, the slayer of her child, the man who left her would make her revolting, a bitter stony woman. Because what would all that anger do? She is a young woman. The scar will fade; the men won't remember.

At the curtain call the soprano bows alone, and Costanza allows herself to believe her smile is Jenůfa's smile.

# *R. Capa and Clematis*

Lyra Houghton



# *The Rise of Autumn*

Collin Beattie



# Baltimore Eclipse

Simone Smith

2nd Place Poetry

I remember exactly when it started. it was  
around the same time my neighbor grew  
into a ghost of the friend I knew  
adorned with gang colors over blood stained sheets.

or maybe it was when my mother called to  
me in the streets, guarded my chest like treasure  
yanked down cotton fabric and warned me of predators.  
but never of the men she brought in to call us home,

home was a city torn, and I knew what we were  
women scorned, a shade too dark, dead only inside.  
I didn't mind the pain if it meant monetary  
possessions in the morning, or the mall

after mass, or corner work Saturday night. I recall the night  
cold. we on the same side of the rails on cold spring  
and the men would come, drenched in sweat  
smelling of 40's and hands dirty from dice that

they picked up from the same cement their sons  
would hug and cling to for breath, for life. they  
were looking for prey, the savages my mother  
prayed over me for. initiation into womanhood

required proof you were less than human,  
and I was offering a skin tight invite. my hips  
a violin, my breast a place to rest, my lips  
a place to fill, I was the death row last meal

that men would devour voraciously. mother's words  
stayed with me, they were uttered with more regret  
than demand. *don't be like me*, and my legs  
began to work again running to a safe haven. watching

with my eyes straining between cracked doors. heart  
pounding in an empty cage. mind—blank—. tongue—  
locked—, escaping the eclipse.

# ***Juggernaut***

**Eamonn Fay**

You tell me that our jobs are simple. It's up to you to build your walls, and up to me to tear them down. I hate the work, but can't resist the glint in your waiting eyes. I see your smile on the other side congratulating me with affection, apologies, and your promises of easier times to come before you lock me out again. Your walls are not blockades, but tests. You ask, "How sturdy can I make them before they stop falling down? How much can you, my juggernaut, endure before you break? Something must give, and when the last wall prevails, what's the use in keeping you?"

# *Manufactured Obsolescence*

Becca Halaney



# *Reaching For It*

Collin Beattie



# ***A Deeper Look***

**Micaela Champion**

Clean and fresh from the first look,  
a blank slate in the moment,  
a hand seemingly like all others.

But what happens when you turn it over,  
trace the fine lines,  
or caress it from end to end?

First, you'll find what's on the surface.  
Crimson cuts from the last days of work,  
scars that decorate my flesh  
with a life's worth of stories  
ragged cuticles  
pulled from years of angst,  
jagged nails  
chewed with stress in tow.

With every new touch  
you'll find what it holds.  
A maze of lines brazens my palm  
giving way to a depth unknown.

A life line sketches the darkness of the past  
and trails off with a future that may never be held.  
A line of fate dimly emerges  
shortened by the control of my own free will.  
But proceed with caution  
as my heart line is hidden,  
camouflaged with a façade of uncaring strength and a need to run.

With a single turn  
and a clench of my fist,  
that all drifts away  
and my hand becomes like the billions of others  
just trying to hang on.

# ***McDaniel Environmental Center***

**Molly Sherman**

The car jostles over bumps and potholes as it heads down the road. Passing family homes and backyards of retired Barbie four-wheelers and above-ground pools, it feels like a wrong turn. A McDaniel student on their way to an outdoor lab rounds the bend at the bottom of the hill and the property opens up—an oblong pond reflects a red-shouldered hawk gliding above as a green heron hops back into the marsh. The car finally steadies onto the freshly laid rock of a new road, passing a pavilion of students with journals and field guides awaiting instructions from Jason Scullion, PhD, the young professor who, moments before students arrived, left his house only a few hundred feet away from the outdoor classroom.

Jason grew up in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains in Washington, surrounded by dense coniferous forest: Douglas-fir, western redcedar, western hemlock, grand fir, silver fir, Sitka spruce, and Alaska-cedar. The Washington trees stand like giants against the gray sky, inspiring awe with their sheer size and deafening dark greens. In these Northwestern forests, many areas have evaded severe disturbances of roads, human migrations, and logging—permitting trees to live their entire life cycles in the same place, growing up surrounded by the wisdom of their ancestors. Jason traveled throughout the West Coast and ventured into the South Americas before moving to the foothills of the Catoctin Mountains in Westminster, Maryland. He planted his roots at a small liberal arts school, McDaniel College, to teach students about environmental studies and the lessons passed onto him from the Washington forests and Peruvian jungle.

Years before Jason arrived, College President Robert H. Chambers sought farmland to preserve in Carroll County. He traveled 10 minutes outside the boundaries of the campus with his sister-in-law, Marthiel Mathews, to meet a man who shared his passion for the liberal arts, Charles Singleton. Charles was an expert on the works of Dante Alighieri and the writings of Giovanni Boccaccio, cherished poets and philosophers. He acquired the land as a hunting lodge and a retreat for art, likely intending to write his own novels in the tucks of tall grass on notebook paper

inevitably softened by the Maryland humid air. The farm was acquired by McDaniel College in the late 1980s, presumably when Charles was too elderly to care for the land by himself. Half of the land was given as a gift to the college in 1987, the remainder was purchased from Johns Hopkins University in 1988. The farm was renamed from Singleton-Mathews to the McDaniel Environmental Center (MEC) in 2020.

Jason has replaced Charles in the falling-down brick farmhouse at the end of the road running through the property. It's a simple, brick, single-family home, with six average windows as a signal of willful inhabitants. Vines wrap around the few sections of iron fence that sit plainly atop cement blocks, acting as a porch, but there isn't a chair in sight. He lives there with his dog, Sam. When students visit the property for class or research, they often distractedly toss her small sticks and wood chips. She'll run gleefully, skipping in her stride as she chases the newfound toy up and down the slope behind Jason's house, dodging glossy magnolia tree leaves. Her cream-colored curls and loose, floppy ears bounce as she pounces onto fallen leaves.

Before Jason inhabited the homestead and began to steward the land, the farmland was empty, cleared of biodiversity and native vegetation—perhaps it was once filled abstractly with dreams of early, roughened Carroll County farmers who held concrete images of grazing land for their cattle. This vacancy of vegetation may be assumed to be neutrally empty, but it was destructive to the health of the small river running through the property; the absence of robust tangles of native foliage to protect the integrity of river banks left the land vulnerable to water runoff that depletes the soil of nutrients and tears off chunks of land. The exposed land was also the perfect template for an invasive tree to put up tree stands across the property and bully out remaining native plants.

Varnish tree, stink tree, chouchun in Chinese, *Ailanthus altissima*, bastard tree—tree of heaven—the deciduous tree that went too far, or further than we wanted it to. The tree, native to China, was introduced to the United States as a quick-growing accessory for urban landscaping. It was unproblematic, a dutiful supplier of shade, a fast grower, and initially absent of insect or disease issues.

Just as the quirks of someone you first meet is adorable at first and then one day prick every nerve on your back to attention, these once admired characteristics dissipated into incessant irritants. Charles brought the tree to the farm when it was considered for use in the timber industry, but it was soon found to be unsuitable for wood products. All across the less occupied parts of the MEC, the tree put up dense stands, crowding out remaining native species with poking spreads of branches, and even going so far as to release a chemical into the soil, plaguing the native forestry. It's marked by an aggressive and pompous root system that ignores any sign of life other than its own, growing into building foundations, street pavement, and sewers. The tree of heaven, ironically to its name, wreaks havoc on natural biodiversity and human urban diversity, upsetting the communities they invade.

The most upset of all might be those who seek to restore the land trees of heaven colonized—students who have their classes at the MEC, summer researchers, volunteers looking for service hours, volunteers looking for any excuse to be in the woods. The easiest approach towards protection of our wilderness is to attack the trees while they're young. The juvenile sapling looks strikingly like a black walnut tree, both having V-shaped leaflets diverging from a central stem, creating an appealing symmetric pattern at the end of each branch and making it hard to differentiate between the two. Until they develop their bark, the difference between the two is nearly indistinguishable, even to the most trained eye. The slight contrasts are in the toothed edges of black walnut leaves and the presence of a terminal bud (a small pea-size lump at the base of a leaf shoot) while tree of heavens have smooth leaf edges and lack the hormone generating bud, replacing it with a thumb-shaped appendage. The junior plants can be removed by ripping them from the ground—often releasing an odor that smells like rotten peanut butter, an unpleasant signal that the correct tree has been removed. If the tree grows beyond the age where it can be simply wrenched from the soil, it develops a smooth, almost silvery, brown to gray bark—distinguishable from the chunkily-textured, dark bark of the black walnut—and, in their hasty growing, the trunks are often skinnier, paling in strength when compared to the patient and slow-growing, wider trunks of native trees.

Students are tasked with helping Dr. Scullion remove the trees to

make room for the planting of native species. They hack at the bark, attempting to take down the only line of defense a tree has to preserve itself. A hatchet is used to etch a skirt of bark off the waist of the tree, making the tree vulnerable to infection—by insect, disease, or administered toxins. A hatchet may also swing into various spots of the tree, at random, making deep gashes—the most vulnerability-inducing hits dent past the bark and the thin green line and into the initial orange layer of wood before resting in the clammy, white center of the tree. Round-Up is sprayed into these cracks of the tree's resolve. The tree of heaven will keep trying to feverishly reproduce, even as it is dying—sending up spokes left and right, hoping that their offspring can live the life they never got to. A steward of the property will come by, a week later, with a machete to swipe them away. Maybe the son of the first to plant them.

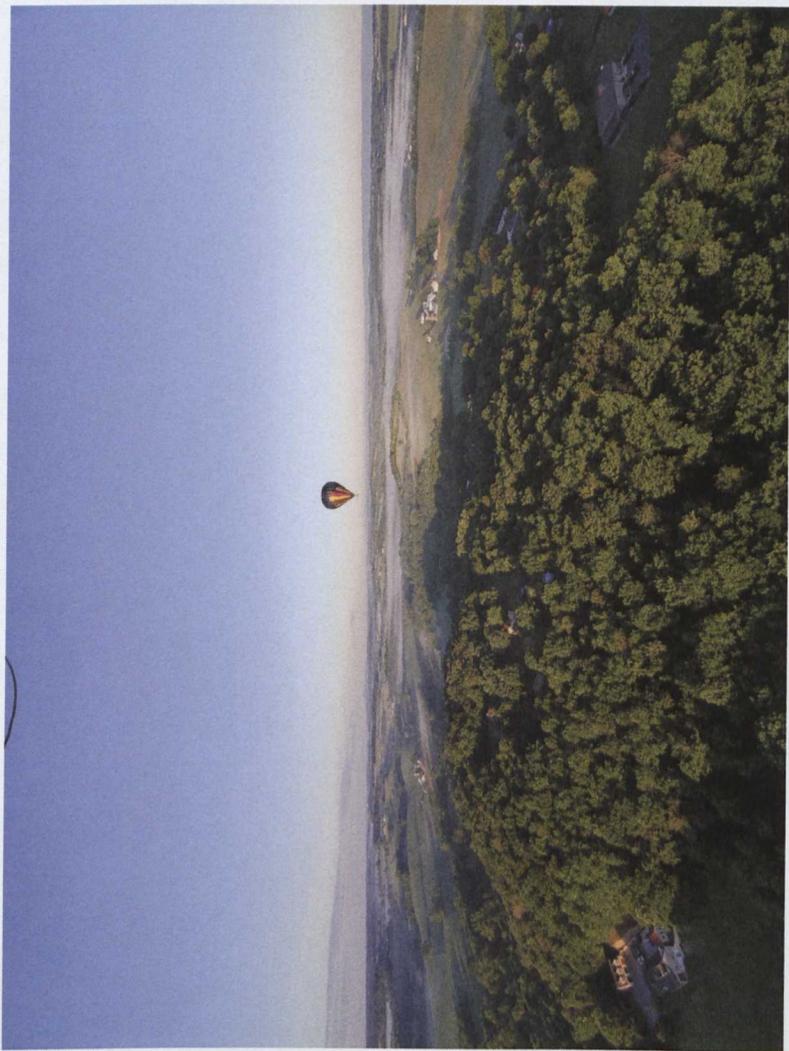
After many seasons of invasive removal, the farm is dotted with the plantings of many native plants intended to reinstate the stream banks—Jewelweed with cherry, orange bells at the ends of bushels of soft, green leaves, Black oak trees that grow vivacious roots that hold the banks up with their strength, button bushes of cherry blossoms that look like popcorn balls rolled in push pins. Erick and Sarah worked there one summer, facilitating first-year students planting natives as part of their orientation to McDaniel College. Other students, fully oriented to the college and taking Jason's Environmental Management course, are empowered to choose their own vegetation, assess the needs of the area and the growing conditions of vegetation, and plant them on a 25x25 feet plot of land they are entrusted to recover. After planting, students guard sproutlings from visiting deer and encroaching invasive vegetation with metal cages—cut by hand and bent into the shape of a protective cylinder.

On one mid-semester Friday afternoon, I went on a trip to the MEC with Erick and our friend Jack to clear plant cages and remove trees of heaven. It rained. We had crossed the bridge over the stream, taking note of how young plants had blossomed, far from their humble beginnings in arid, black-plastic holders. We walked up the hill, leaving the water-loving plants and soft sounds of water trickling over river pebbles behind us. On the crest of the hill, we could look out over the expanse of trees—new and old—

the vegetation disappeared into the crevice of the stream. We heard the rain far before we saw it. Raindrops tapping on leaves, a cold front rumbling through the understory. The wall of rain took its time growing near. As it rolled in, the noise encased us like a blanket over a fort, held up by a single, reliable oak tree above us. We never felt a drop of rain. Under the safety of our tree, we watched leaves bend as they were hit by single droplets, glistening, the sun shining on them ominously from another place in the sky.

# ***Floating Higher***

**Matthew Hodgdon**



# *We Fell In Love In October*

Larkin Diener



# **Forever**

**Alishia Mitchell**

Alone, says the birds  
Away, says the trees

When you ask me if I'll ever be free  
I want to tell you that I feel like I'm stuck  
in a cell with a key that'll never be found  
I want to tell you that the demons in my closet  
are a silhouette of the person that I truly am  
I mean, I've been stuck in the same  
cycle, and I feel my body screaming for a break

Breeze, says the sky  
Break free, says the clouds

I mean, I've been floating away  
and nothing feels real anymore  
and I'm really sorry for being the person  
that we promised we'd never be  
I mean, I promised you that we'd be here forever  
I promised you that I'd never leave

But lately, I've created maps to get out of this place  
Lately, I've been working towards pushing  
your love away from my heart  
I've created walls with the hopes  
that you'd never find my address

I've clouded my judgment and allowed the rain  
to flood all the flowers that you've worked so hard to grow  
Lately, I've created mountains out of my insecurities  
and allowed my mind to climb higher than expected  
I've allowed the snow to mask my true feelings

I mean, I've created anger out of busy  
I've allowed my rage to spill over and knock down  
everything in its path  
and I'm sorry for breaking the bridges  
that are worth so much to you

It's not that I don't care  
It's just that, some days are a lot harder than others  
and I have no choice but to fall  
and I spend my days in the road

Create, says the plant  
Careful, says the bee

Forgive me if I fill my pen up with too much of my blood  
Forgive me if I bruise my heart and give it to you  
as a souvenir for meeting me  
Forgive me if I spend all my days dwelling on yesterday  
I'm afraid of losing myself to tomorrow

I'm afraid of caring too much and too little at the same time  
Forgive me if I separate myself  
If anything happens, I love you.

*(untitled chalkboard piece)*

Harrison Booth



# *Hey wait those aren't stars!*

Steven Herd



# *The Anguished Man*

Eamonn Fay

No longer frightened by boogeymen  
or the monsters in cartoons, my little  
hands clumsily tapped at the keyboard in search  
of ghosts caught on camera;  
cabinets that opened and shut on their own  
and chairs that rocked back  
and forth regardless of whether or not  
they were taken. Among the menagerie  
of haunted chain letters and photoshopped  
spirits was a video about a chipped,  
aged oil painting known only as  
the **Anguished Man**.

Its subject was something  
that might be construed as a face;  
two empty sockets where eyes should  
have been and a gaping mouth  
sat on a red, otherwise featureless head that  
wailed silently upward toward the sky of a lapis  
void for reasons that likely died  
with the artist. His dried blood  
was said to still be mixed in with the paint, and  
wherever the painting resided, there was crying,  
doors slamming without cause,  
dark figures moving through hallways,  
and cold hands on shoulders. I decided I'd  
seen enough, quietly closing the website  
and moving on with my day. I never  
dared seek such things out at night.  
Though I had no haunted paintings of  
my own, I'd later be haunted all the same. Bedtime  
was cowering beneath the sheets  
from the room's darkest corners, television shows running  
endlessly to drown out the eerie  
silence, curtains shut for fear that, outside,  
the dark, empty eyes of  
the **Anguished Man**  
would be waiting to meet mine.

# *Top of the World*

Christina Baker



# ***On Permanence***

**Pauline Tillotson**

*Based on the Met Museum's "Carpet Fragment with Mosaic Floor Pattern"*

Come wander through the halls. Admire how  
this rug is turquoise, red, and green on gold,  
at least, the half of it remaining now,  
still vibrant though it's sixteen centuries old,  
the loops of yarn are like a pixel screen,  
or tiny fragments of mosaic swaths.  
In fact, the basic pattern has been seen  
more often in mosaics than in cloths.  
Yes, it is beautiful and bright today,  
but lost so much to wear and tear and bugs.  
They could have chosen stone, which would have stayed,  
so why spend all that time to make a rug?  
I think I know: it would have been immortal,  
but mortared in some dusty hall, immobile.

# U2

## Lyra Houghton

I saw an old man today who looked  
a lot  
like  
you.

Not really. He was just old and had crow's feet and a kind smile.  
Blue eyes and white hair.

Now I'm second guessing myself—was your hair white  
or gray?

It was gray, right?

As I write this, I hear an ambulance mourn its way  
past my dorm to some other person's heartbreak.

You know, I heard a Coldplay song in the grocery  
store the other day

heard U2 on the car radio

saw an elderly man pleading while his daughter led him out of  
Urgent Care—

"Please, don't be this way!"

"You are so obstinate!"

And I hid behind LED lights on the waiting room bench

turned the dial to some pop station I despise

bought a knockoff of your favorite chocolate chip cookies

and then went home to vent on pen and paper,

not knowing how else to grieve on such an abnormally warm

and sunny

day.

# *Family*

Molly Sherman



# ***Hearing Things***

**Sophia Gilbert**

I had been scared of the dark ever since I was young. I don't remember what started it. Does anyone? It seems almost innate, fear left over from ancestors who knew that straying away from the firelight meant death. For as long as I could remember, I would sit awake at night with the lights on listening for any sounds coming from down the dark hallway. When you sit that still and listen that hard, it's amazing what your brain comes up with. One time I swore I heard the creak of the screen door opening at two in the morning and the light thump of the front door following closely after it. Listening harder, was that footsteps? We didn't even live in an old house, barely fifteen years since it had been built, but my brain conjured ghosts in every corner.

I started playing a game to get used to the noises. I would sit there with my eyes closed and listen until I could barely stand it and when nothing came of it, my breathing would come more easily and I would open my eyes again, only half-confident that it was truly just a figment of my imagination. My breathing would slow nonetheless though, and my pulse would eventually stop racing until another peculiar sound caught my ear. Then the cycle would continue until sleep mercifully overtook me.

I had also been cursed with insomnia as long as I could remember. Often, I would sleep only after pure exhaustion took over in the early hours of the next morning. The result of this was that I quickly developed near-permanent dark eye circles, ones I still sport today, as a 6-year-old, no doubt making me look like the ghost of a young Victorian child myself when paired with my pale skin and long dark hair. If anyone had ever broken in, I imagine my appearance (along with a habit of intermittent sleepwalking) would have scared them off rather quickly. As I got older, the insomnia became recurrent rather than a permanent state of being. Every month or so, I would have a week where I barely slept 8 hours combined. The rest of the time, though, I slept fairly regularly, and if I didn't always get my 8 hours, I was at least relatively well-rested.

Things had also gotten somewhat easier since I adopted a grey tabby cat from a local rescue. I had named her Ghost, partly because of her coloration and partly as a personal joke when she wandered around the house. If I thought I heard noise from the living room late at night, it was just a Ghost, prowling around for the mice and spiders the old building was also home to.

There still were bad nights. At their worst, my psychiatrist had suggested a prescription of antipsychotics for my "auditory hallucinations" but I quickly found it didn't help. Neither did the anxiety medications, although it did help with the occasional episode of insomnia in between, those due to natural causes. However, it had no effect on those longer periods, the ones that had me listening in terror on nights that Ghost curled up in my room instead and I had no other explanation to the specters I was hearing. Whatever I was dealing with was not nearly so clear-cut as simply a problem with my brain chemistry. It seemed to be much more insidious.

I never experienced the usual signs of a haunting. There were never any moved objects or scratch marks beyond the routine ones from owning a cat. There was never any evidence of the supernatural during the day. With sunlight streaming through my windows and the busy sounds of the street outside, I could almost believe that whatever was going on was all in my head. I was simply hearing things.

So at night when I heard the screen door swing open, I ignored it.

When I heard the front door swing creakily open on the old hinges, I ignored it.

When I heard the floorboard at the base of the stairs squeal, I ignored it.

The thump, thump, thump of footfalls on the landing, softened by the carpet of the hallway leading to my room.

The rasp of breath before the furious slamming on the weak wood of my bedroom door.

The crash as it flew free from its frame.

The yowl and hiss of Ghost as she dived under the bed from her spot beside me.

Because when I opened my eyes, there was never anyone there. Ghost was still downstairs. Whatever I had thought I had heard was nothing more than a figment of my imagination. This particular brand of hallucination continued the rest of the week. I always opened my eyes to a quiet, empty room.

On the Monday morning of the following week, however, the rays of sun coming through my window fell across the garish scarlet stain of two bloody footprints positioned at the foot of my bed.

# *Stars We See*

Larkin Diener



# ***Mellow***

**Simone Smith**

1st Place Visual Art



# ***Demolition***

**Grace Maglietta**

3rd Place Poetry

*—a tribute to Richard Siken's "Scheherazade"*

You deserve the simplest moments you say you do not want:  
the butterfly kisses and car rides home and coffee  
with too much sugar.

But I cannot tell you what you want to hear  
when all I've ever known of love is blood on the sheets where you  
now lie.

We were not destined for mundanity, my beloved.  
You, golden-haloed and hungry,  
and me with a thousand bodies  
beneath my bed.

I will not mind when you are gone. I am used to  
sleeping with ghosts.

But will you still love me with a dagger in your throat?

With a bullet through my brain?

This place is already in ruins, and if you  
keep loving me like this,

we may as well be dead by morning.

# ***Cigarette Smoke***

**Micaela Champion**

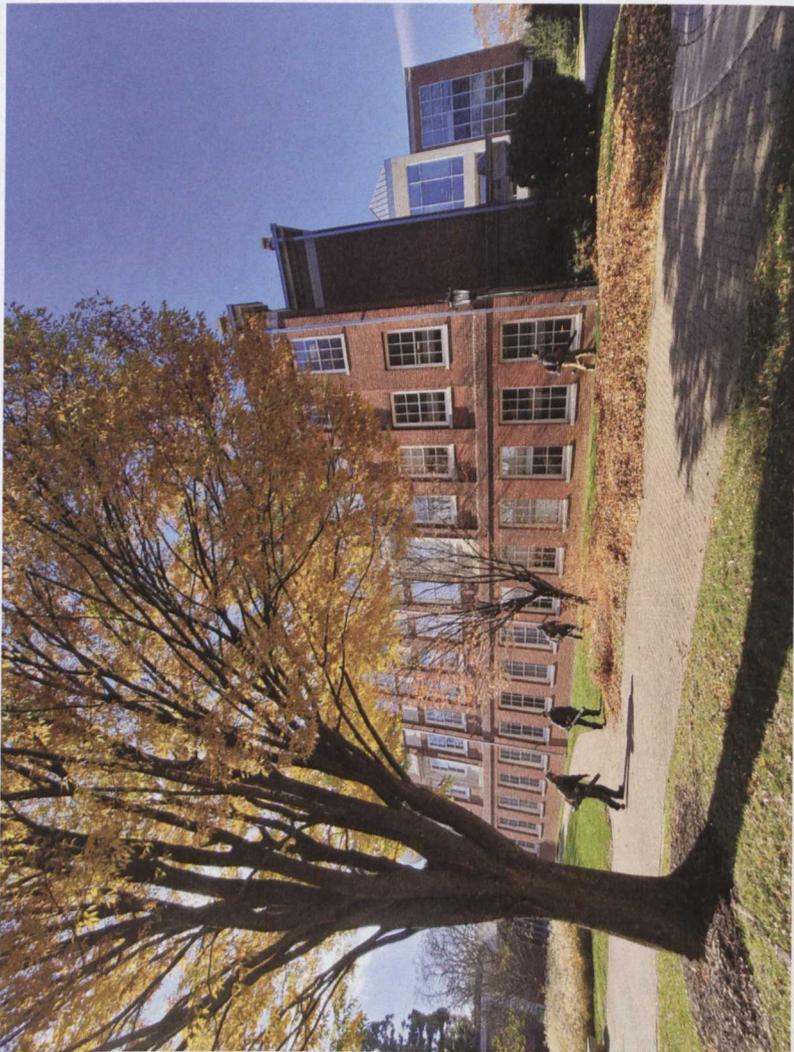
The smell of burning tobacco lifts in the air  
stale and ashen as it fills any space it can,  
following, lingering,  
you can never escape  
for when I inhale the acrid smog of the puffing chimney  
I know you can be found nearby.

The stale scent lingers all around.  
The tattered t-shirt you wore just last night  
deserted in the hamper after no more sweat or sawdust could  
make their mark,  
the tan Carhart jacket you haven't worn since last January,  
sitting alone in the darkness waiting for the day it can embrace  
you once again,  
and in the air around you,  
mingling with the earthy aroma of the cup of darkness  
roasted not five minutes ago,  
drawing me down the stairs like an alarm clock I never set.

As I watch you walk out the door,  
catching a peak of the shimmering plastic of a fresh pack of  
Marlboro Lights in your pocket  
waiting for the right moment  
to lure you in like a siren calling in sailors,  
all I can say is  
"Have a good day,  
Drive safe,  
I love you, Dad"

# *The Leaf-Blowers*

Jordan Dent





the ship carried corpses of my native tongue  
the land made them imminent immigrants  
God deemed them strangers to his son  
sold their spirits and devoured their infants

I have seen souls jump to salvation  
into murky waters with no intent to swim  
victims to the tightening noose of a foreign nation  
drowning on their faith in the quiet dim

I have lost more brothers than I can count  
buried more mothers than I can bear  
brutalized in an unfathomable amount  
remembered by their screams and lifeless stare

may I one day kill the kin of my oppressor  
may they suffer forever for deeming my skin lesser

# ***It's quiet.***

**Molly Sherman**

2nd Place Prose

*Notes: This memoir samples from a book my friend was writing; these sections are in italics. His words have been slightly altered to match the tense of the story. There are mentions of suicide in this piece.*

We pour "Freakshow" wine into Styrofoam cups. It's my mom's favorite wine. She knows Styrofoam cups are bad, but we both love the feeling of using them, flexing their sides aimlessly, occupying our busy hands while we attempt to be still. We reuse them until they crumble, or until we forget our promise to lessen our waste. Then, they'll join the occasional banana peels gone un-composted and tuna cans we didn't wash out and recycle.

On the ledge of the Weverton Cliffs, the light of the setting sun bounces around in our cups, kissing the taste of stale red wine. I grip the cup like it's a mug of coffee, hoping it will bring me the same comfort. It burns my chest on the way down, warming my body against the whispers of winter. The wind gently grazes our faces as we perch on the rocks overlooking the Potomac River. The evergreens growing impossibly on the rocks reach out to the rare fall colors. My friend had noticed that at *elevation, you really get to appreciate all the colors that are starting to show. Even though the greens are most prolific, the reds, yellows, browns, and oranges that are spreading across the landscape make the greens stand out in a way that makes it look like it's also a new fall color.* The water looks so far out of reach beyond the ledge of the rocks. It's quiet.

"I don't think Erik is doing well," my mom tells me. "I haven't been able to get ahold of him for a few days."

My mom's words go past me as I keep my eyes locked on the bends and bulges of Virginia across the river.

She has been texting him every day, hoping for an answer. "I don't think he feels well, I don't know what to do for him."

Her words land like oversized rain drops in puddles, joining unspoken worries of the extent of his suffering.

I was quiet.

"Tell him thank you for this hike, he loves this spot," she directed, concluding the conversation before it goes too maudlin. "He hikes here every Thanksgiving Day." It goes unsaid that he doesn't go home during the holidays to see his family. We sit uncharacteristically close, huddled on the cold rocks.

Her legs are folded beneath her, her purple hiking boots smooshed between the rocks and her boney ankles she thinks are too thick. She's getting more comfortable wearing the shoes, and being against rocks, despite our distance from the next footholds of solid ground, and me being too close to the ledge for her comfort. Mom crinkles the plastic bag of Triscuit crackers and rips through the wax coverings on chunks of different cheddars. Silently, we pass the food back and forth, the sharpness of the cheese tingling our taste buds and the layers of shredded wheat drying our mouths even more than the wine did.

Before we begin our hike back, she takes my picture, but I know she won't let me take hers. I don't think she likes the way she looks; it's ironic she creates the best photographs. I sometimes fear I won't have any pictures of her when she's no longer here, so I record her feet crunching on the fallen leaves of changing maples hiking back to the car. Before I put my phone away, I send a text to Erik: "The hike you recommended was perfect!!!" I want him to know how much we appreciate him.

I don't think he knows. Not enough.

As we walk down the vista route of a Maryland section of the Appalachian Trail, we're encased in a parade of light and foliage. The disappearing sun sends bending tree shadows around us, my fingers begin to ache in the cold as we dissent from the overlook. I think what Erik would've liked most in that moment was the *light breeze not hard enough to hear or feel but blowing just merely enough to make the newly changing leaves dance like they are*

*excited to try on their new fall ensemble.*

When Erik was healthy, in mind and body, we went on hikes with him and his dog, Koda. The two of them gave my mom and our dog, Piper, more time together—better time together. Koda would take off after smells, bringing Piper along with her, the old Doberman cantering heavily behind the brindle-coated mutt before they would spend the rest of the day napping and watching Erik and my mom work around the farm. Piper's arthritis seemed to subside in these moments in the backfield; my mom's worries of how she was going to take care of her dying mother seemed to pause. Piper stayed in the back field after she passed, I hope.

My favorite picture of Piper is in the backfield, she is looking peacefully into the brambles of the tree line, rays of light reaching down from the heavens and touching her blue striped coat. An hour before she died, I took her back out hoping a walk would let the pain of the bone cancer in her head subside, but cancer is different from arthritis.

*Hiking makes for an even mix of a physical workout while the hamster in your head is getting their exercise by running in place on their wheel. My and Erik's heads were training for the Olympics.*

Erik always walked slowly, the type of pace that was almost infuriating, and sometimes was. He was busy looking. His quickness was in his eyes, not in his feet, as he scanned the ground and the trees looking for squat honey mushrooms, spreads of crust fungus, citrusy ox tongues, his favorite, and the elusive sunset-colored chicken of the woods, my favorite. He knew where to look and had long practiced his patience. He knew, as he put it, *all the local delicious shrooms to eat, the ones to just add a little bit in recipes, the ones to avoid, and most importantly, the ones that will cause extreme pain, illness, and/or death.* I wish we could've found a simple mushroom, an uncomplicated bloom of fungus, that would've helped him avoid infection of long-term COVID-19 or the plague of suicidal thoughts that would accompany it. Although we did dance around our emerging expectations about the ability of psilocybin mushrooms to fight depression. In the end, he had not put that hope into practice.

I wonder if he was at peace with dying. I wonder if he was at peace with what was next. I wonder if he was at peace knowing that we would never truly be again. He had known my friend from high school had killed himself. He thought it was horrible. "That's terrible," he had remarked to my mom.

Now, I wonder where his eyes were for that conversation, I'm certain they weren't looking at my mom's. I wouldn't know how much he had thought of death until after he was gone, and I was left to scour his Facebook posts he wrote before we knew him. In April 2020, when he first became infected with COVID-19 and doctors were just barely able to diagnose him, he described the lack of oxygen having almost a relaxation effect on his mind. He described not being able to panic, even when it felt like he wasn't going to take another breath. "I'm a fighter, I've been through too much in my life to just lay down and quit," he wrote, I imagine he was thinking of how family had hurt him and how he struggled to start his woodworking career, maybe even his chaotic ex-girlfriend. "But I was relaxed enough to let it go." Let us go; let his dog go; let the stack of sapele wood he got for an unfinished project, go. My mom thought he would be coming back over on Monday.

He knew I was a wreck when the boy I didn't know at college let it all go, just a few weeks later after my friend, who I did know, had passed. I watched a community grieve for any and every reason—for what this manner of death stirred in them, for the vibrant and complete person that was lost meant to them, whether they knew him or not. After the college had held a vigil, I held the professor of one of his classes in my arms. She sobbed. She didn't know if she had done enough. She had emailed him on the day he died; he missed a meeting they scheduled for a check-in. On the bench outside, we shook from sadness and the lip-numbing gusts of freezing wind.

"I know you did all you could," I said, "Because you did it for me." I hadn't told her this before. "You saved me."

She had protected me from me—my loneliness and my sorrow. I had to tell her, right then, that she had saved me, to save her from herself, to save her from the torturous blame game I would watch plague my mom a mere month later when Erik killed himself.

"It wasn't me; it could've been me" were the words in my head that went unsaid to my professor, words I would never say because it shouldn't have been him either. Later, when people would say that the school hadn't done enough, I would hope they weren't talking about her, or about the people in boardrooms who shake hoping they don't use the wrong words to describe a loss that falls so far from our conventional understandings of death. Outside the chapel that night, every tear turned to ice on our cheeks as we sat clinging to what we knew was real, the cold and the closeness. Erik had broken ice out of the water troughs with my mom when our first winter with him came. Then, the horses weren't drinking, and they didn't know why. He took off his rubber-soled shoes and put his feet squarely on the ground. He dipped his hand into the water and a shock coursed through his body, "yup, the heaters are broken" he said, as a matter of fact, taking the spark swiftly, painlessly. He fixed the water heaters that day. Months earlier, he had fixed the faulty wiring in the basement and the tangled messes of wires in the barn, months earlier, and the front porch fans and the bathroom cabinets, too. Everything he touched got better. When my horse strung his leg up in wire, the metal coming centimeters away from slicing his deep digital flexor tendon, Erik stood in the rain with my mom and built a higher fence to deter my horse from playing too close to the wire again. He kept us all so safe. It's painful that I couldn't save him, that my mom's many texts and attempts to get him help couldn't save him—that no one could.

I don't think it's a coincidence that a picture of Erik at Weverton cliffs has him positioned on the rock just behind where my mom and I sat on our own trip there. When I hold the pictures next to each other, he's watching our backs. The climb's ascent having settled our thoughts and stilled our churning fears of whom we have let down or have yet to let down when we go silent. In our respective photographs, we look out onto the same river, or as "same" as moving water can be. You can tell, it's quiet here.

One day, my mom called to say she dreamt of him, in a place she didn't know, but that felt familiar. She thinks they were outside. He lay on his side, knee bent lazily—relaxed and at ease. She said he was happy. She said he was not in pain anymore.

"I don't want to talk about what happened," she said she had told him. He was not looking at her, but she pressed on. "But what you did... it really hurt Molly." This was the only instance she said he looked sad; his smile dropped for a moment. "I am sorry about that," he said, looking at her for a moment before, again, *thoughtlessly staring out at the beauty that nature has provided.*

He used to come to me in the trees, but I haven't found him in a couple of weeks. I'm searching hard. My mom lets the birds remind her of him and I try to do the same, but I haven't found him yet. Instead, like him, I *notice how peacefully quiet and how empty the sky is, and maybe it isn't just the absence of clouds and wind that makes it feel so empty.* It is knowing that he is not here anymore. It is knowing that all the stuff I planned to do with him around, I will be doing by myself. I hope, through starving sobs, I can build the shelves in my van with my mom half as good as he would've, and that I don't eat the wrong mushroom along the Appalachian Trails he knew so well. My mom holds his drill he left at our house, and the promises of coming back he left with it; I use mushroom guidebooks and linger by mushrooms until I can make a guess what they are. "Erik, can you help me out with this?" we ask, my mom out loud.

I am trying to find the reasons for his disappearance—foraging, if you will. I've started looking at where the sky meets the trees, the ever-expanding loneliness meeting a forest family. It's ironic that his favorite project he did with my mom keeps your eyes high on the house, close to the sky, with gorgeous wood gables he carefully aligned into the eaves of the roof. While he was with us, *I had my eyes on the ground most of the time.* Now, I look to the sky.

Sitting on the bank of Pretty Boy Reservoir, I stare into the trees. A barrel of wind rolls through the fallen leaves and twirls up to the tops of the branches. The trees' crowns do a dance, bare where colorful, dancing leaves should be. I wave. Another breeze meets me on the ground, tickling the Mountain Laurel around me, its plasticky green leaves reflecting the light of the setting sun. I swallow my sadness, trying on what peace might feel like. I'm trying not to be angry, but I am. It hasn't been quiet in my mind since everyone started leaving; since my grandma, my dog, my friend, a friend who wasn't mine, and my mom's best friend left

all within six months. It has been so loud since he left with them. But in the moments, I think I see him, or the moments I feel like I live through him, hiking and being kind, things go still. And, except for the breeze leading the leaves in a dance, it's quiet.

# *Cumulonimbus*

Becca Halaney



# **Charlie**

**Mackenzie McCarter**



# ***Memento***

**Grace Maglietta**

I have become too welcoming  
to dear old death,  
I fear

no recollection of when I first left  
my window cracked  
in case he might slip in—  
the youthful rendezvous  
that never was

until,  
slowly,  
he succumbed  
to my sordid seduction,  
leaving blooms  
and calling cards,  
and with a bony finger,  
still,  
I beckon,  
yet to feel his kiss

I know he will not mind  
that I no longer set the table  
with my mother's doilies  
or dress my bed  
in silken sheets,  
for when he pays his final visit,  
he needn't knock

and when,  
at last,  
he takes me,  
I trust it will be softly  
and with purpose

# *Chesna*

Collin Beattie



***When I wake up today /  
When I go to sleep tonight.***

**Jordan Dent**

I am tension, and I am deep breaths of relaxation.  
I am vast depths of confusion, and I am action.  
I am torn by my distraction, I am listening in attention.  
I am the silence of the morning, the babble of the evening.  
I am the scum of uncleaned tile; I am the patina  
of a burnished pan.  
I am everything thirsty and unwatered;  
and I am the water-bringer.  
I am your alarm; I am your rest.

# *The Weeping Book*

**Celia Sterrn**

As their home in Saint Paul still carried the humid odors of sickness and required airing under the indifferent supervision of the maids, the Blackwells decamped from their keep on Summit Hill to their second house on Lake Minnetonka with nanny and the Newfoundland. On this visit, the five-bedroom lake house seemed overly large, especially without guests to distract the family from their loss. Mr. Blackwell spent his days circumnavigating the lake away from his two children—his head as bent and dark as the Canada geese that lighted nosily on the water—and spent his nights in his wife's empty bedroom. His daughter stayed tucked away behind the house. Named Hortensia after the heaps of pink and purple Japanese flowers that grew in the back garden, she felt a special entitlement over the family's horticulture; it had been her responsibility to dictate the patterns of the beds and the species of the flowers, and as much pleasure as she had taken in reigning over the plants in previous stays, she now took in their dismantling. She stood in the garden like a lacy black vulture, her fingers growing cold and unwieldy in her groves as she stripped the petals off the freshly watered hydrangeas. Falling, the petals spotted her lap or drifted to the grass, turning the lawn into a mosaic. The son, Ignatius Carol, confined himself to his room and occupied himself with looking out to the silver facade of the lake where occasionally wind-brushed pleats rolled and driven scows moved from edge to edge. His days were occupied with dreams of varying shades. At every bland supper he remembered fondly the mille-feuille and oysters of the dining car; at every recreational scratch of his pen, he thought of the essays he had yet to complete; and whenever the afternoon light struck a water glass, he thought of the boy on the bench.

To call him a boy may have been an insult for he was several years older than Carol was himself, but the direction of the sunlight through the dust-smirched window had erased the boy's blond brows and lashes against his face and made him appear babyish. At the time, in his placid boredom, Carol had wondered if his mother had died too.

Helen Blackwell had contracted pneumonia a little after her Boxing Day fete and valiantly struggled through the new year before she succumbed to her illness at the close of January. In the brougham from the train station, above the rustling of her crepe-hung bonnet which obscured her eyes like a valance, Hortensia recalled to her brother how even lying sick in her bed, she was still so beautiful as to resemble a bisque doll in a box of ribbons and lace, a handkerchief pressed permanently over her white lips, her blue eyes losing clarity. The rale of her lungs was like the breath of a woman underwater. She was, on the Saturday after Carol's arrival, interred among her ancestors in the family mausoleum, her epitaph gilded on the outside of her marble cabinet.

The loss had been so unexpected, so untearfully stated in his father's telegram, that Carol hadn't yet believed he should be sad and so spent the hour before he was due for the station studying the boy on the headmaster's bench instead. He thought he might know him. He was the Laplander with the satirical name: Søren Sørensen, and on Parents' Day it was his funny-accented aunt that visited him; he was friendly with the contraband boy. Unless his mother was already dead, making Carol wrong, self-obsessed, purblind, Søren would have to sail home to attend the funeral.

A week into his stay at home, Carol stole a refreshed page of paper from his father's study and worked to copy out a narrative he had composed partly while waiting for his train and partly while riding upon it, the shakes of the track mutating his ordinarily fine copperplate into a limp scrawl. The tale was much improved in smarter dress. The aroma of dying fish broke through his window.

*The sails, which when bulging with wind resembled the skulls of men, led us further into the deathlike darkness of the swarming clouds. Like sensualists before a fetid banquet, we heeded not the augurs of our senses, bowing instead to the great devil inside.*

oOo

The letter from Søren's father informing him of his mother's death had been delayed by ship travel, appearing ten days after it had been composed, and while not recommending a journey home, Søren nevertheless used it as evidence to the headmaster that he

should be given stays on his schoolwork whilst he was away. Most of his time aboard the ship to Christianland was occupied with the staving off nausea, accomplished with a fist of lavender beneath his nose.

Søren spent an afternoon by his mother's grave. Several heads of blushing dianthus poked out of the ground next to her gravestone and he decollated them, arranging the five-pointed flowers in a strike over her name.

Attempting to fraction her time spent in the November rains, Oline Andersdatter had cut across a neighbor's field, heaved herself over his decaying fence, and on her descent over the other side was struck in the leg by a splinter as large and keen as a dagger. A long and chilly suffering overtook her. Her leg was deemed irretrievable by the county doctor after it had purpled and swelled immensely in the span of two days, and was sawn off. A pool of blood reached her waist as wet surgical threads slipped again and again from the doctor's hands. Poorly bound, the end of her leg became infected and she perished. Her body was buried next to her first husband and the two daughters they had lost, the reunited family sleeping amongst the suicides, the accidents, the fevers, the murders.

By evening, he was on the Hekla bound for New York City besides three hundred Norwegian, Danish, and Finnish emigrants. Even if he had had the time to linger, he had felt too awkward to impose on his father. They hadn't met since Søren had last left home to stay with his aunt and American uncle in Gelderland, New York when he was eight. They had much to say to one another but little urge to do so in the presence of a third person. The absence of his wife had been debilitating to Søren's father and the maintenance of his house, so a rosy cousin had been assembled by the family to tend him, and speculating upon the single used bed, Søren believed his father would soon provide to him a letter of introduction to his new mother. She lumped a second helping of sugar in her cousin's bowl of bilberries.

During the ship ride home he spat over the side and imagined the momentum was great enough that his spit would drive all the way through the sea, balling up more water like a fistful of snow rolled down a hill, until, becoming so unmanageable and great a bubble,

its contact with the ocean floor would have the impact to displace the ship. Should those circumstances occur, the ship capsize, hundreds of Nordic screams shoot up, condense, and quit, and Søren himself tumble heel over pate into the ocean, he would not be harmed. Rather the ocean would seal around him and he would float, safe as an unspoken thought in a quiet mind, back to New York Harbor.

The afternoon of arrival saw him again deposited on the headmaster's bench as a hushed argument took place in the headmaster's office. The son of a famous family had been given Søren's room in his absence and was uncommonly put out by his reappearance.

It was the Frau who convinced them in his favor. He's a grieving child, she insisted, a statement Søren would have scorned if it was given in his presence. He was nearly eighteen and a member of the tenth graduating class of Schermerhorn College for American Boys. He had through his own wits and activity secured the reservation of a summer apprenticeship at an accounting firm in Albany where he planned to implant himself immediately after he was awarded his diploma. When the family was exiting the headmaster's study, their expressions pulled in moues of mixed pity and resentment, Søren stood, nodded his deference, and turned at just the right time to sharply knock his shoulder into their son's.

oOo

*The leviathan gripped one girl in each suckered limb like some diabolical girandole, the skin of its murdered waxy and white, their diaphanous curls floating upward like flames.*

A leaf from one of Carol's stories had found its way under Hortensia's door and having no time in the day to read, she was sentenced to its experience within an inadequate areole of candlelight, reading panicked, reading sick, until she could not bear the situation of darkness and refused herself the snuffing of the flare before she went stricken and sweaty to bed. She avoided bathing in the lake for many days out of the fear that a thick sopping feeler would encircle her ankle and hurl her beneath the water. Even the bathtub when obscured with suds made her uneasy.

After he had returned to school and Hortensia and their father to the city, he packaged such stories alongside his regular and friendly mail and posted them to her.

Hortensia took to tearing up these letters from her brother, for while she felt safer when away from the lake, his first several scribblings of ramshackle dachas and hypertusked fish monsters had given her bad dreams and reduced her to a restless state such to make her negligent in her attendance upon their father. Shamed for her fear, her letters back overpraised the tales and an incomplete correspondence was induced between the siblings as Hortensia shined the engine of her imagination to produce more and more adulatory phrases to sheets she never read and would have despised if she had.

Carol suspected enough what she was doing although his guess at why gave himself little credit. She was bored by the stories, he assumed, thought them immature, vulgar, and worth less than the stationary they were sketched on. The putative snub failed to harm him. Hortensia was a syllabub of a girl, and her tastes were equally airy and sugared. Much was her loss.

So without any monsters to pull her woes, Hortensia was left with the business of being a motherless girl. She doted relentlessly on her father, wrote the staff's checks, received condolence cards from neighbors, repaid visits, entertained a young man who wished to marry her and displayed his sensitivity to her grief by the sable band encircling his arm, and made sure nanny would not feint her supervision of her father while Hortensia went for a drive. When she wept, which was seldom, she did so with the Newfoundland as handkerchief, for his hair was so black and absorbant that inspecting his back afterward would disclose no tears.

Sparingly, though often enough to invite interrogation, her letters bore such bruises of being rained upon by tears, under which the melancholy lines of her pen ran in blue creeks.

*And please tell me how you are doing - Father and I would both like to know. I count the days until your summer vacation when we can all be together again.*

But for her pains, he responded thus: *Ravings of froth broke and scattered on the black promontory like an arrow shaft on the shoulder of a dragon as in her dank and loathsome chamber, suspended like the guillotine's knife, Creusa etched heretical lyrics into her grimoire.*

The first words were rent as soon as spied.

oOo

While Hortensia took her brother's literary pursuits as a pointed prank towards her nerves and nanny, when informed, believed them a transient fancy ("Boys don't dream of offices, but he'll learn well enough that even Trollope was a house inspector"), they conquered his life. By day he kept a pencil, a paper, and a knife in front of him at all times. As the social master spoke fondly of the wreck of the *Deutschland*, Carol bent over his notebook and wrote: *With the last of his air, Brother Cuthbert shot oaths into the sky like rockets. That a dutiful cleric would be sentenced to drown in the mirror of his beloved heaven seemed the foulest contrapasso. Chains of water ate into his cassock, and as his prayerful lungs fattened with brine, he sunk further away from paradise and deeper into the devil's cold blue sea.* The words twisted out of his pen like unmitigated ivy. During the night while bundled in his dormitory, he urged his mind to sink into horrors, sculpted killers from the shadows that bleed from underneath the beds, pressed spurs of fear into his mind to darken his work. A casual friend he recruited to hold his head down in the bath so he might acutely replicate the sensation of drowning in his prose.

He submitted his work to magazines whose niche attracted his style and humble success attended. For a poem, one worried over for many days and nearly used instead for rolling paper, he won a prize of two dollars, a year's subscription to the magazine, and a letter of more than usually hearty congratulations which he pressed into his autograph book as tenderly as if it were a blossom.

Out fell the money from the envelope in two luxurious banners like the twin ends of a stole.

One was newer than the other. Green as spring leaves and with a clean portrait of George Washington on the front which glowered with grave pride over his achievement. The other was cottony from overuse, and on the upper right-hand corner there was an eclipse over Christopher Columbus's face, a black circle Carol at first thought was mold but on second inspection was a drop of ink which disfigured the picturesque image of his success more than a fly on a dying face could ruin a final photograph.

Too old to exhaust his money on marzipan from the confectionary shop in town nor attached to a girl he could impress with a bauble, finding an item worth his work over the poem presented some difficulty to Carol. But ever since he had begun to try his hand at publishing, he thought of himself more as an adult than a boy and desired to celebrate his profit with adult pleasures.

oOo

Cigarettes were stylish contraband at the college. In the washrooms, the dormitories at night, and at the edge of the sports field, azure spirals flew into the air and were quickly dispatched by a hectic wave, or else a coin purse was snapped open and the smoke deposited inside as preciously as if it was silver coins. Those methods of disguising the visual smoker from masters and nurses worked often enough that the mischief was not edited, but what could not be hidden was the smell. Spearmint was chewed, hair lacquered thickly with rancid pomade, and baths leapt into with stunning regularity for a group of boys, yet the stench of smoke still remained on their clothes, floated up from the hems of their socks, tucked into their buttonholes like daisies.

That is why Søren sold perfume. It was nasty perfume to be sure, a turbid puce substance brewed in the furtive lacuna between classes, made from water and pestled flowers, the former easy to gather from pumps while the latter required him to loot the window boxes of local ladies though it was a criminality that would buy him a severer punishment than getting caught with a cigarette.

He and the boy who smuggled in the cigarettes, Wilfred Haines, had a rude friendship, one that was maintained by mutual avarice and was on Søren's side subject to slide into envy. Tobacconists

peddled a perennial vice, Søren's product waned at the busiest time of year. Bottles of freesia, tuberose, and dahlia dwindled in his cabinet until all he had was a measly inch of anemic lilac, a hard sell to anyone familiar with his business.

Wasn't it then to Søren's luck when Carol came asking for a cloud of scent, ignorant of the prices, still exhilarated by his first acquisition of tobacco, wealth if not rattling inside his pockets then at least in popular existence. Mostly Søren had tried to avoid Carol's attempts at patronage, out-pacing him in the hall as the younger boy cantored slightly behind him. He offered his poem, a work worth at least two dollars.

It took convincing but Carol managed a trade of perfume for the three editions a year's subscription to *MacWhirter's Quarterly Creepies* would grant.

Søren also demanded the original copy of the poem, a request made with half a mind and then more sharply when he saw how dismayed Carol looked in response. It might not have occurred to him to present Søren with a false original and lie. It was what Søren sometimes did when he truly lacked for product. A hide of goosebumps always rose upon his skin when he did this: instead of leaving the washroom with the other boys when he had completed his nighttime toilette, he slipped out a bottle smuggled under his dressing gown and topped it with the leavings of his soapy water then sold it later as fresh lavender. They shook on it, agreeing to complete the transaction once the cigarette had been depleted, and when, three days later, the payment had been delivered by a boy stinking of ashes, Søren splashed the last of his liquified flowers over his body.

Below a window where moonlight crouched short on a far-protruding sill, the blue ink of the poem glittered like ice as Søren, rapt, read it for the first time. He didn't keep the poem for long. He read it over several times whenever he caught a corner protruding from the pell-mell of his papers, every time turning over the leaf for more lines. One day, in opening summer, he waylaid it. And though he could not tell you where Carol's first lines lie today, whether they were wrapped around a piece of muck or seized by rapacious and literate wind, his acquaintance with them was dear

enough that he could reconstruct their trickling rhythms out of the dark warp of his brain, so when he again made the passage to Norway to attend his half-brother's funeral, they recited themselves to the thumping of eddies on the hull. They lie beneath.

The Underworld  
I. C. Blackwell

The dash of billows into smoke  
sings with the black cormorant's croak.  
And that elegiac choir calls  
to grim Atlantis.

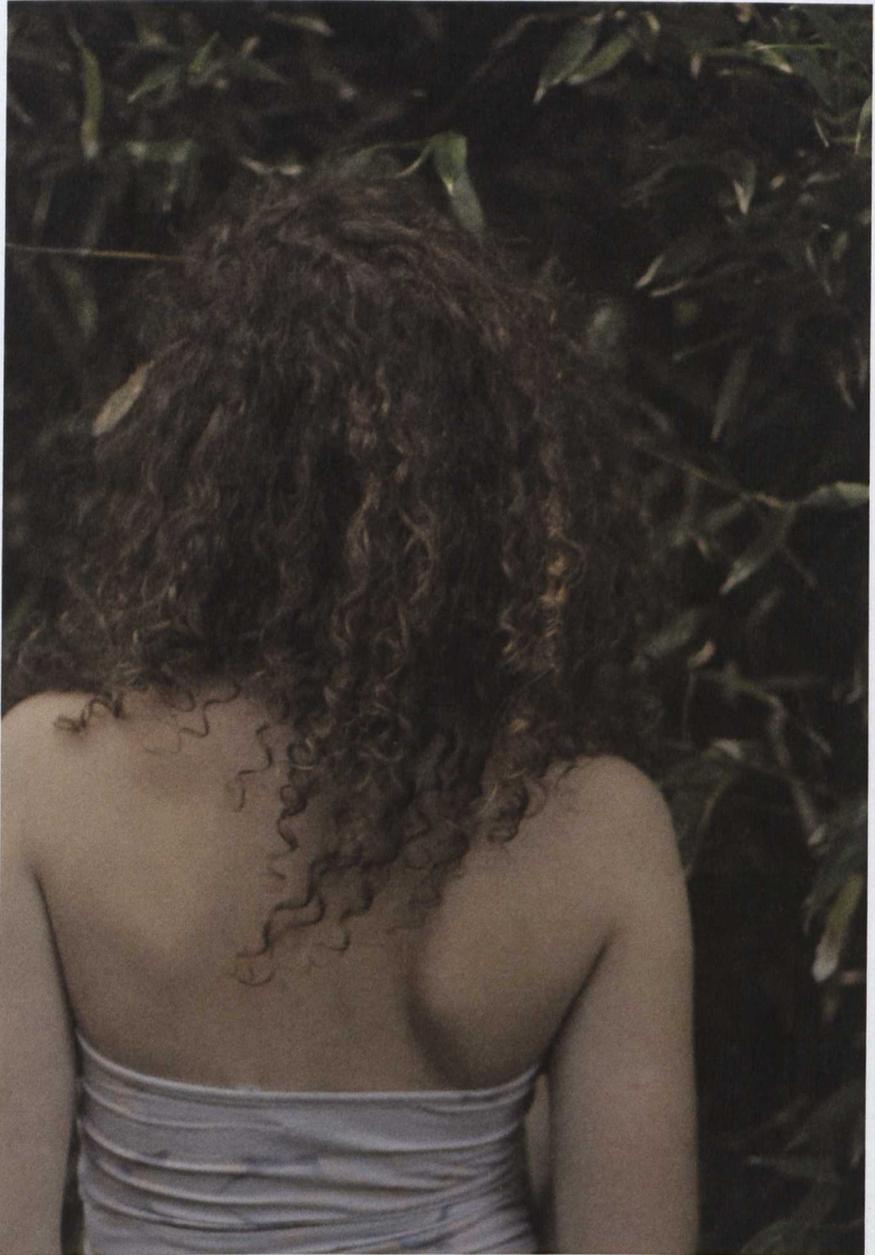
Far from the sun and surface airs,  
on the crumbling temple stairs,  
the form of Amphitrite sprawls  
in cold Atlantis.

Where in the miry dims and damp  
the only lights are angler lamps  
reluming the forgotten halls  
of dark Atlantis.

Down float the favors maidens gave  
to twist upon a wave-raked grave  
until the final spirit falls  
from dead Atlantis.

# *Lady of the Ferns*

Raquel Sobczak



# Guiding Light

Larkin Diener



# ***Overkill: The Death of Rocksand***

**Steven Herd**

Sit back, my friend, and watch this greatest show  
about a fool who tried to run away.  
Each citizen owes us his service, no?  
We work, but fleas like him just seal. I say!

He claims we have no right. Such arrogance!  
But truly 'tis but null more than an act.  
Brandish my gun and see him fail to dance...  
Conviction? Hardly! Sloth this is, in fact.

I SAID DANCE YOU LAZY NO-GOOD SHITHEAD.  
BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! Oh shit, reload!  
"Oh come on now, do let him rest in bed,  
the meek inherit, in The Book we're told."

Yes, yes, I do believe you're right. We should  
leave him to the mercy of his God. Then,  
we'll see if truly he was ever "good."  
He my deny our charge, but for wicked men  
Hell is not an if, only a when.

Let us not keep the good Lord waiting long.  
And no more shall he sing his wicked song.

# ***The Knack***

**Eamonn Fay**

Valerie was having that dream again.

Every time it was the same, and she found herself wedged in a cruel sweet spot between knowing it was just a dream yet not able to have any control over it. She would be in the theatre, dressed just as she had been that night in her boots and beanie, her denim jacket that she'd since lost to a friend who "borrowed" it. Everything would happen just as she remembered it—there was this compulsion to continue moving deeper into the theatre, somehow undeterred by the sense of creeping dread that got twice as awful with each passing step. Then she would come to the top of the steps and stare at the stage, this time waiting, and worse yet knowing that things would soon go off script. It was there. It was *always* there, and it saw her. Somewhere, the lumbering wretch was hunkered down, its yellow eyes locked onto her, and soon, with cruel randomness, it would start coming after her. Last time, it came sprinting from the other staircase. The time before that, it crawled out from under the seats and charged at her on all fours. This time was maybe the worst—it came from *behind her*. She turned around and shrieked as its face hung inches from her own. She could smell the rot on its breath as it wheezed with laughter.

Then came the chasing, and the chasing was always agonizing. It was always one of those dreams where you would forget how to run. Sometimes she would slip like the floor was coated in soap, or she'd start running like she was on the moon, floating upward slowly and helplessly with each step. *It* never dealt with that, though. No, it would chase after her just fine, and it would adjust its pace when it noticed when she was having difficulties—when she could run, it would barrel toward her at top speed, always just slightly faster than she was. When she couldn't, it would slow down, creeping and crawling toward her and cackling wildly as it listened to her scream. Valerie would immediately run to the lobby, but the doors were always locked, and unlike the first time, they *never* budged. And so she took to the halls, and the halls were just endless. They would seem to loop, and doors that shouldn't have been there led to deeper, darker hallways, each more decrepit

looking than the last. And only when she was so hopelessly lost and tired that she just couldn't run anymore—when she sat defeated in some dark corner of the endless theatre bawling her eyes out breathlessly—only then would she wake up.

But tonight was different.

She'd had been running for what felt like hours but knew that it had likely only been terrible minutes. She figured she had a long way to go, and as always, the thing was hot on her trail, panting wildly like a sick animal. She turned a corner and rammed right into someone. He was only barely pushed back, but it was enough to send her tumbling back onto the floor.

"Pardon me," the man said. "You alright, miss?"

"It's coming, run!" she said, getting up as quickly as she could and running past him.

"From what?" he said. Valerie stopped, only because she realized he had a point—the slapping of footsteps that had been following behind her all that time seemed to have stopped. She turned around. The man was facing her now. He was round and aged, his greying hair slicked back slightly and his suspenders keeping his dress pants secured around his high waist. His hands sat coolly in his pockets, and a well-kept moustache sat above his smirking lips. "You seem lost. Need directions?"

"This... this is a trick," Valerie said, taking two cautious steps backwards. "It has to be."

"That old pervert doesn't know any tricks," the old man said. "All it knows how to do is slink around, laugh, and eat—like an animal."

"...Eat?" she said.

The old man gave her a concerned frown. "You seem very shaken up," he said. "And confused. Do you drink, miss?"

She shook her head.

"So much for bourbon. Do you drink coffee, then?"

"At this hour, no."

"What are you afraid of?" he said. "Waking up?"

"Fair enough," she said.

"Great," he said. "Why don't we stop by my office, we'll chat."

She did not move. "Is it still there?" she said.

"Oh, it's in here somewhere," he replied, turning to walk down the hall. "It's hiding. Stick with me and it'll stay that way."

Valerie reluctantly followed. As she turned the corner, she was amazed to find that the hallway had changed completely. What was once an endless labyrinth of doorways and turns was now one straight corridor. Doors closed and vanished as they passed, and it felt like the hallway was somehow getting shorter.

"As luck would have it," he said, "I've been trying to get a hold of you for quite some time. I'm sorry I haven't been able to sooner."

"Oh?" she said.

"Yeah," the old man said. "Initially I thought you were a-okay on your own. You seemed to know your stuff. It lured you in, but you figured it out fast. You got the hell out of there and avoided this hellhole like the plague. I wish everyone was that smart. When I found out you were still coming here and wandering around like this, I tried damned hard to find you, but before I knew it you were in too deep, then the next minute gone."

"I don't understand," she said. "This is just a dream."

"And you're mostly right," the old man replied. "But people like you dream differently than most. Your body is asleep, but your—well, let's call it your soul—sometimes your soul doesn't fall asleep with it. It keeps wandering around, and usually it doesn't get far. But sometimes it stumbles into bad places, and the things that lurk

in those bad places notice and start screwing around with you. That's what's happening to you now."

"So," she said. "While I'm here like this, can Big Red hurt me?"

The old man stopped and turned to face her. "What?"

Big Red," Valerie said. "That's... kind of what I call it."

"Big Red," the old man said with a chuckle. "That's funny. No. That rat bastard can't do a thing to you here other than scare you. Unfortunately, that's all it needs to get its kicks... Come in here body and soul, though, that's a different story. Anyhow, we're here. Please, come in. Have a seat."

They reached a door not far from the exit at the end of the hallway. It looked older than the others. While most were newer with metal handles, this one was wooden and aged with a brass doorknob. The old man unlocked the door and opened it up, stepping inside. "Shut it behind you if you would," he said. She followed him inside and cautiously obliged. The room stunk of cigarettes, and an ashtray on his cluttered desk was still smoking. Old photographs in black and white hung on the walls, some of the old man, some of his family, and a few were pictures of the casts of past productions. Dawn began to creep in from the window.

"It's morning?" Valerie said.

"Getting there," he said, pouring two cups of coffee from what looked like a metal kettle. "Does the sun usually wake you?"

"My blinds are probably closed," she said. "My gi—" she looked around, and, getting a very "fifties" vibe from the room, figured that she was likely speaking to a man from a less than accepting time. "My *partner* usually likes to keep them closed."

The man placed a cup of coffee down in front of her and placed a small, ornate bowl beside it. Valerie watched as sugar cubes seemed to rise to the top out of nowhere. He gestured for her to help herself and chuckled. "*Partner*," he said as he took a sip his cup. "No need to dance around it. I've done more than enough

hiding of that sort myself."

She looked again at the picture of his family—his children, his wife—and looked back at him sadly. The man nodded in understanding and sat back in his chair. "We're getting off topic," he said. "And we don't have much time. If that lady friend of yours happens to wake you up, or the sun gets up too high, I don't know the next time we'll be able to chat. So, I'll do my best to cut to the quick—there's someone I want you to meet."

"Oh?" she said.

"Yeah," he said. "He's like you. But I don't think he knows it."

"Like... gay?"

The man chortled, nearly spitting out a little bit of coffee. "No," he said, wiping his mouth. "No, no. He and I met. I spooked him for sure. He seemed very confused, confused in a way that he wouldn't have been if he understood himself as well as you understand yourself."

She sipped her coffee, reeling back slightly as it scalded her tongue. "Maybe I have a class with him or something. Any idea what he looks like?"

"That's the trouble," the man said, leaning back in his chair. "I don't know. I didn't see him long. We didn't exactly get to exchange pleasantries, either. I caught the bastard—you know, Big Red as you call him—trying to trap him."

"How?" she said. "It can't be that crafty, can it? You said it yourself—it's like an animal."

"It's not about being crafty," the old man said, standing up and starting to pace. "It doesn't need to be smart, it only needs to be an opportunist. You notice how when you went into the theatre that night and things seemed just a little off—a little dustier, a little colder? Like the way the halls get here when you go too far in?"

Valerie nodded.

"That wasn't quite the theatre," he said, picking up a pencil from his desk and twirling it between his fingers. "It depends on the person and it depends on the place, but there's more to those cold spots than you might think. A lot of people will walk into one and not even notice anything save for a drop in temperature... But people like you and that fella go somewhere else completely. Your body stays in the light, among the living, but your soul finds its way somewhere else—someplace wedged between past and present, someplace where the cold is colder. You follow?"

She looked uneasy and a little lost, shaking her head.

"Maybe a bit much for first contact, hm?" he said with a sigh. "Well, all you need to know is that those places are where the bastard can getcha, and this fella was in some dire straits. I had him shut up into one of those cold spots—"

"...Dead zones?" she suggested.

The man smiled wide in a manner that was almost eerie. "Dead zones," he said. "Morbid. I like it. Well, I had him shut up into a dead zone to keep the bastard off of him. As I was letting the poor guy out, he caught a glimpse of me and... Well, if I could show you the look on his face..."

"He'll get used to it," she said, not really knowing why she almost felt wistful.

The old man went to continue, but the light from outside was beginning to get oppressive. He looked down at his hand and noticed that a ray of light coming from outside made a patch of his skin gray and skeletal. He hoped she wouldn't notice. "Damn," he muttered. "We've got less time than I thought. This way, please." He downed his coffee, and noticing that it had cooled down enough, Valerie did the same. The old man led her down the hall and to the double doors at the end. Things began to get more familiar. Valerie followed him up a small flight of steps (that he seemed to do a little funny jog up), and stepped into the lobby, dimly lit by the sunbeams coming in from the windows.

"Here we are," he said.

"Wait," she said. "The person you want me to meet—how do I find him, then?"

"Right!" the old man said, clapping his hands together. "Thanks, kid, nearly slipped my mind. Look, this might be a lot to ask but—is there a half-hour window that works for you every day? Same time?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "I'd have to check my schedule..."

"No time for that, kiddo," he said.

"Um... I get lunch every day between one and two," Valerie replied. The room was growing brighter. The old man looked a bit more nervous.

"Any specific place?"

"The dining hall usually..."

"Where in the dining hall?"

"I don't know! The back?" she said, already dizzied by the barrage of questions.

"Good enough," the old man said. "This is a long shot, but I'm gonna hold out for this guy. Now, I know this is a tall order, but try your best to be there between one and one thirty at *least*—do that every day if you can help it. I'm gonna tell him to go right there at that time if the opportunity arises."

"I mean I—" she said, stammering. "I'll try."

"All I can ask of you," he said. "You take care, now."

"H-hold on," she said. "What do I do now? How do I get back?"

He shrugged. "Just head on out. You'll find your way."

She nodded, but still seemed leery. "But... What if I don't?"

"Oh, you will," the old man said.

She took a deep breath, nodded, thanked the gentleman, and turned to go.

"Oh—hang on," he said. "When you meet him, tell him Mr. Brown sent you... He'll know what you mean."

"Mr. Brown," she said as she pushed the door open. "Got it."

"And one more thing," he said.

She stopped where she stood without looking back. The light outside was bright. It hurt her eyes to look at.

"Sorry," he said. "I don't believe I caught your name, miss."

"Valerie," she said, turning around then gasping with fright as she saw what had become of the old man's face. A wide, drooping grin was now spread across pale, skeletal cheeks. The old man's facial hair was patchy and now missing in some places. His eyes were lifeless and yellow, sunken back into their sockets yet still eerily focused on hers. The man's round figure now seemed to be deflated, his waist seeming to ooze over top of his belt.

"*Valerie,*" he said in an unfamiliar tone—it was slower, deeper, somehow more gravelly than it already had been. "*Lovely name, young lady. Now—next time that thing's chasing you around, you shout for me and we can wait out the morning over coffee again.*" He winked with a quiet and sickly squelch, and before Valerie could so much as react, she felt herself falling backwards into the open door. She fell and fell, trying to scream but finding herself unable, until she landed in her bed, her body seeming to rise twenty degrees as she did so. She sat up with a gasp as she settled back into her own skin. The first thing she did was pat herself down—her denim jacket was gone, her feet were bare, her pants now only shorts—she even pulled a lock of her hair down to make sure it was purple now and not blue. Looking around, she was indeed in her room and safe. Liss stirred beside her, shifting slightly at Valerie's sudden movement but not waking up. Valerie sighed. As always, she held tightly onto the comforting idea that it

was only a dream. Some dreams were just dreams after all, and she sometimes couldn't distinguish which had any kind of meaning and which didn't.

But as she licked her lips and tasted coffee on them, then tasted more on the back of her tongue, she sighed, put her head in her hands and quietly uttered "*fuck.*"

# The Metaphysician

Harrison Booth

2nd Place Art



# ***Funeral Masks***

**Micaela Champion**

The face I wore at the funeral  
was stark,  
white,  
an unblemished sheet of paper.

My mind was in toils  
with no indignation  
of how to move my mouth  
into a somber quiver  
to match the flock of buzzards  
trying to pick at the last piece of your soul.

Or how to let my eyes cry rivers  
when my tear ducts were drained weeks ago  
and my eyes could not move  
from the simple dove etched into the grave  
that never should have been yours.

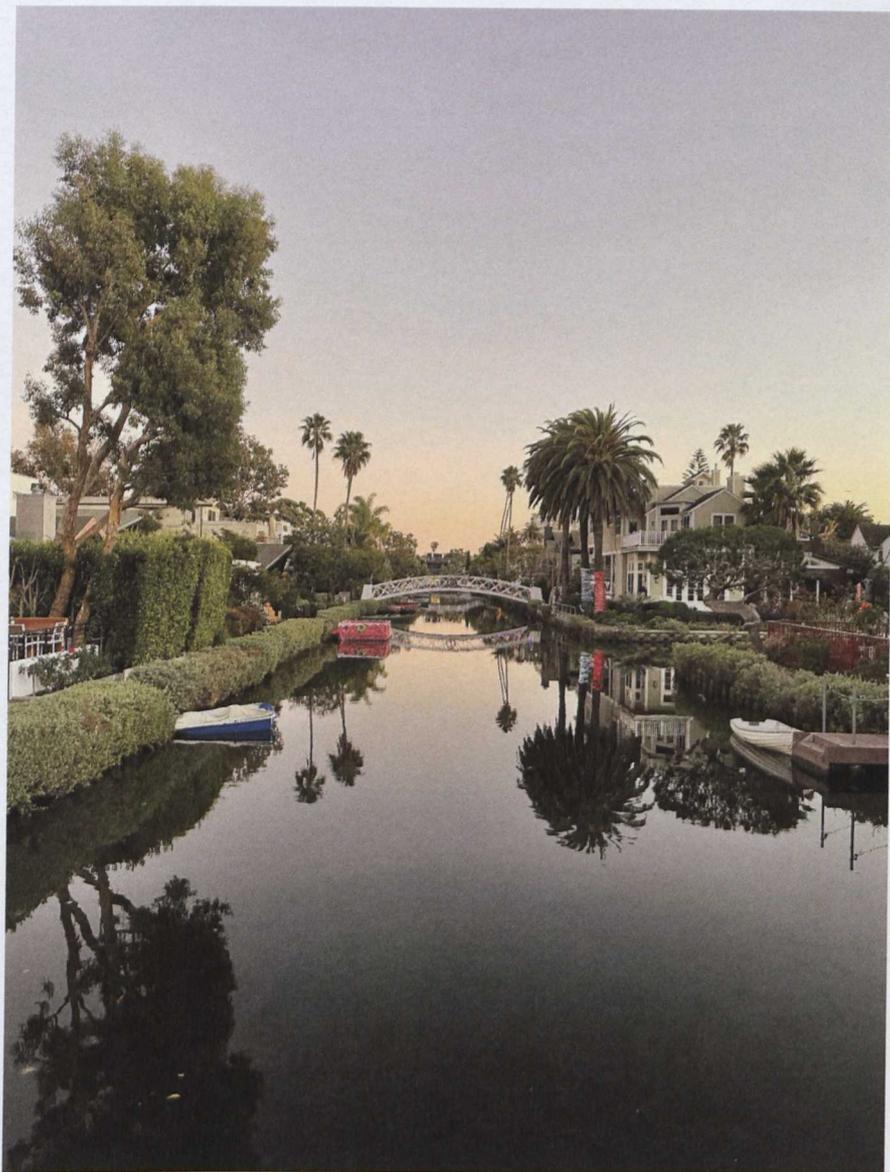
Or how to feel the sadness  
that your husband showcased,  
like a brand-new car,  
when my anger  
had its talons  
sinking into the supplest piece of my heart.

But they expected me to bawl,  
to let my grief ridden tears  
drip onto your little piece of earth  
and show my condolences  
to a family that was never yours.

And when I did,  
the face I wore at the funeral  
was anybody's but mine.

# *Sunset at Venice Beach*

Mackenzie McCarter



# *Jellies*

Christina Baker



# *Jellies*

Raquel Sobczak



# ***Precious Time***

**Matthew Hodgdon**

With the press of button, a buzz grants me entrance.  
As I enter the ward, the air filled with disinfectant,  
the ward empty but packed.  
Empty of hope, packed with sorrow.  
More a dystopia than a place of healing.  
I stand outside the next doorway to room ICU 3.  
Heart pounding, soul sloshing, emotions spilling,  
time keeps ticking.  
Time ticking, ticking away.

Hands sweating, knees shaking, teeth grinding,  
I finally muster the strength to proceed.  
I stand at the foot of the bed.  
His body motionless, almost lifeless.  
Tubes and machines, is he human or a cyborg?  
Time still ticking, ticking away.

I hold his hand, his skin a shade of ghostly white  
with fingers cracked and dry.  
Oxygen dropping, pulse plunging, pressure plummeting.  
Past memories becoming more precious,  
future memories becoming only a dream  
as time keeps ticking, ticking away.

Is this the end? His final chapter?  
Is this life by machine his destiny?  
I refuse to abandon my post,  
not knowing what his future holds.  
His future, an uncertainty.  
The only certainty he has is time.  
Time still ticking, ticking away.

# ***Goodnight, Sweetheart***

**Danielle Wendt**

There are no tears in my eyes as I stand in the back of the room of Papa's wake. It's been three days since his death. I have not cried yet.

Before today, the only funeral I have attended was for my mom's best friend's mother. Though I had only met the woman once, I still found myself leaning on my little sister's shoulder, the two of us sobbing over someone we didn't even know.

Today, when facing the death of a man I have known my entire nineteen years, a man who has changed my diapers and sung me to sleep, I have not shed a single tear.

After endless hugs—they are practically required for an Ammirati greeting, especially today—I notice that most of my cousins do not share in my stoicism. Tears, messy and uncontrollable, adorn several of their cheeks. Seeing them so vulnerable startles me. My mom is the youngest of seven children, so my cousins are much older. I have always looked up to them—literally and figuratively—feeling young and unaccomplished in comparison.

One of the most tear-stained is my cousin Veronica, the eighth oldest (of nineteen), a finance-worker who wears trendy clothes and makes even more money than my mother. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and her cheeks are damp with tears when I look her way.

My cousin Eric, though not crying, also seems particularly affected. At one point, I turn to my mother, remarking at how often he has gone to visit the body. While my siblings and I are unnerved at the prospect of sitting next to my grandfather's remains, requiring parental escort to the casket, Eric has gone to see Papa three times already, kneeling beside him with hands clasped and his head bowed. I would not describe Eric as religious, but I suppose it's his way to honor our grandfather, who, once upon a time, went to church daily.

My mom, while not scolding, says something that sobers me: "Baby, he saw Papa almost every day."

My stomach twists as my eyes again flick over to Eric, legs digging into the cushion of the kneeler, whispering something to Papa.

"They were very close," she continues. "It's going to take some time to say goodbye."

oOo

My memories of my mother's father are hazy at best—a whipped cream layer dissolving atop the steaming mug that is my brain.

It wasn't so much of a surprise that Papa Tony had passed away. He had been suffering from dementia since I was in high school, no longer the joking and joyful patriarch that he was, but someone who was constantly stuck in a state of confusion, his memories locked inside a broken jack-in-the-box. They lost their ability to resurface years ago.

The last time I had seen him alive was at our annual Ammirati family reunion in Long Island. That August, my relatives had flooded to my grandma Boo-Boo's house to spend the week together. With the exception of my grandmother's 90th birthday celebration, the week was fairly typical of our reunions: dinners for over forty people which individual families took turns cooking (my grandmother having long-since grown tired of that task), nights spent in fun-filled wine-hazes, and at least one day at the beach, which, with my aversion to sand, I was perfectly fine skipping.

During that last week, as I had done for the past few years, I found myself avoiding my grandfather, unsure of what to do or say to him in that state. Staring at his lifeless body at the other end of the room, one of those moments sticks out in my brain, gnawing at me now that I know I will never get another chance to interact with him.

I had been sitting across the room from my grandfather, the usual cacophony of Ammirati chatter surrounding me in the family room, loud and passionate, interspersed with familial yelling and boisterous belly laughs. For my part, I was silent as I observed Papa, debating whether I should go over and talk or just practice my typical level of shy and quiet avoidance.

My Aunt Toni, my godmother, took the decision out of my hands when she asked me to bring over the blue footstool by the fireplace so that Papa had a place to rest his aching feet. At first, she tried shouting, but when it proved difficult to hear her over the noise, she instead signed: *TABLE YOU MOVE*.

While my Aunt Toni worked on the administrative staff of a school for the Deaf, my ASL skills had grown rusty from a summer of lack of use, and it took a few moments for understanding to worm its way into my brain. *THAT?* I signed in response, my fist pointing to the small wooden stool in front of me for confirmation.

She gestured approval impatiently, her fist vigorously nodding the *YES* in response.

With much trepidation and a bumbling lack of poise, I staggered to my feet, picking the stool up with one hand and weaving between a few family members to reach them.

My grandfather sat nearby in the rocking chair, the old blue cushions likely not providing much comfort, as he was shifting in his seat, a grimace on his face—thick white brows scrunched, and face pinched accordingly.

"Help me raise his legs," my aunt said. With another burst of awkward hand fidgeting, I complied, taking the other side of his thick-socked feet and placing them atop the stool.

Aunt Toni fussed, moving his blanket this way and that to try and ease his discomfort while I stood saying and doing nothing except reaching out my arm, the outstretched hand a clear display of uncertainty in my meager attempt to help.

"How're ya feeling, dad?" Aunt Toni asked Papa, craning her neck down and speaking quite loudly to be heard over the din.

When Papa looked up at her, his face showed nothing but confusion.

"What'em I doin'?" he asked, his Long-Island accent gravelly with age.

Lately, that's all I'd heard him say, 'What'em I doin?'

My skin prickled, and I shrugged my shoulders at him helplessly, feeling very much like I didn't know what I was doing either.

But my aunt, having taken care of her own father-and-law years before and having worked with kids with disabilities her whole life, was much more confident in how to respond. She smiled, "You're relaxin'," she told Papa, adjusting his blanket around his arms for a final time to ensure he stayed warm. She laughed, a deep cackle. "I'm jealous, Dad. You're gettin' to relax."

After a few moments, my aunt was pulled away by one of her siblings, leaving me in front of my grandfather, alone despite the hordes of people around us. It doesn't take long for him to repeat himself, this time to me alone, "What'em I doin?"

I mumbled something inconsequential in response, made all the more inconsequential by the fact that he couldn't hear me.

"Huh?" he said, his creaky body leaning forward in the rocking chair to get closer to my face.

The panic rose in my chest, but, thankfully for me, I heard Nina, my bubbly cousin—she inherited the Ammirati extroversion that I never understood—come up from behind him. Several years my senior, she had always seemed so together, in a way that seemed fairly unattainable to me. Unlike me, she felt no trepidation at any social situation, bonding with our very Catholic grandparents in the same way that she easily soothes our little cousins' temper tantrums, and even when she struggled—she can't clap on-beat for her life—she did so with a smile.

This instance with Papa is no exception to her pattern of excellence. She spoke loudly enough that he could hear on the first try, and she didn't appear uncomfortable at all. She grinned at him, hugged his side, and asked, "Do you want to put on some Louis, Papa?"

Louis was Louis Prima, an Italian-American singer-songwriter and trumpeter. Prima was his favorite; his music was one of the

only things that, by that stage, brought a sense of life to my grandfather.

Thoroughly embarrassed and ashamed of myself, I navigated back to the other side of the room, slumping down to the floor and watching them as Nina opened her phone. The music began to play through the speakers. As the two of them sang off-key, smiles on their faces, the guilt rose. I fidgeted with my hair, yanking at my ponytail in dismay and envy.

oOo

Later during the wake, feeling numb and wanting a break from human-interaction, I find myself pouring over scrapbooks and other memories that my family had collected in honor of my grandfather. There are dozens of pictures of him, many of which are faded bluish gray, so old that even my eldest uncle, now in his sixties, wasn't born yet. A few cards and poems by my mother, detailing the trips they took to Italy to Montana and expressing her love and appreciation of her father, are scattered amongst the pictures. But the one paper that grabs my attention is a card written by my cousin Mary, likely when she was in her teens. In the card, she talks about the surprise pizza parties that my Papa would host. Apparently, when my older cousins were young, he would print little menus and pretend to be a waiter, taking their orders and cooking personalized pizzas for each of them. I, for one, had never had the privilege of dining at Papa Tony's Pizzeria.

My fingers sweep over the text, the pads of my fingers pressing the edge. I tried to think back to *my* childhood, searching for any comparable memories that I had lingering around in my skull.

Rubbing my temple, I found my head empty, most of my memories of my grandfather more like stories other people told me (the whipped cream is far too dissolved for my tastes).

The only memory I can turn up that's wholly mine, not passed down through written word, is how Papa used to sing the Barney "I love you" song. His voice would get all goofy and high, and he would hold out the final "too!" with his index finger pointed to the sky, often taking a breath in the middle to hold the note even

longer. Sometimes he would pretend to fall asleep in the middle, and only a kiss could wake him. My sister and I would burst into a fit of giggles after our kisses miraculously revived him.

It was something, but it wasn't very much.

Outside of my early childhood years, no memories remain. And I have no memories of unique moments between me and Papa alone. Even my sister, Alex, despite being three years younger than me, has a special story with my grandfather: the time when he tricked five-year-old Alex into letting him pull out her loose tooth, one she was too scared to pull out herself.

Leaning back in the chair, I press my eyes shut. But this doesn't make me cry. I still haven't cried, and I don't cry, in fact, until the moment we're closing his casket.

oOo

The Ammiratis are a singing family; with the right trigger word, any number of my aunts will burst into the same exact song. It's eerie how the same song will pop into their collective consciousness at the same time, a veritable hive-mind. There's even a song they used to sing when my siblings and I were still little, one that would encourage us to ignore our fear-of-missing-out and go to bed at our bedtime.

It's this song that my cousin Nina tells us we should sing when our generation got the opportunity to say our last goodbyes to our grandfather.

"No," I hear someone say. I think it's my brother, his voice raw with the fear of the prospect of emotional vulnerability.

"Let's do this for Papa," Nina urges, and that silences all arguments. She's probably the least musical of us all, but she knows we need this, even if we are unaware of that need ourselves.

And so we start to sing: *Goodnight, sweetheart, well, it's time to go. Goodnight, sweetheart, well, it's time to go. I hate to leave ya, but I really must say, goodnight sweetheart, goodnight.*

This would be the last time I would sing this song to him, and, as the song builds, our collective voices cracking and wavering with emotion, everything inside of me swells until it bursts, popping like a balloon filled over its capacity. My contacts swim with tears. Nina tells Papa how much we love him and how much we'll miss him, and I find myself turning away, furiously trying to catch my breath, heart clenching at how a life could be lost too late and too soon, at how this feeling of regret would never be able to go away, and at misplaced memories, moments fragile and unformed.

# *Alhambra*

Simone Smith

the wilting gray fence  
and whirling winter wind  
both hellbent on slicing my skin  
steps made of cheap cobble  
where a stray or two would hobble  
the green porch made of slate  
that threatened to give way at the weight

lilies and roses long abandoned  
with roots dry and damaged  
I could plant myself in between  
and a difference wouldn't be seen

the ceiling that threatened to cave  
similar to my mother  
neither of which I could save

dreams burned in the oven  
smoke covered us in a mist  
here for a second  
then long gone like my father's scent

my sister's door  
blocked and barricaded  
knowing if I opened it  
I would find her decaying remains  
she was a victim of the plague  
promiscuity and poverty  
the same poison I drank

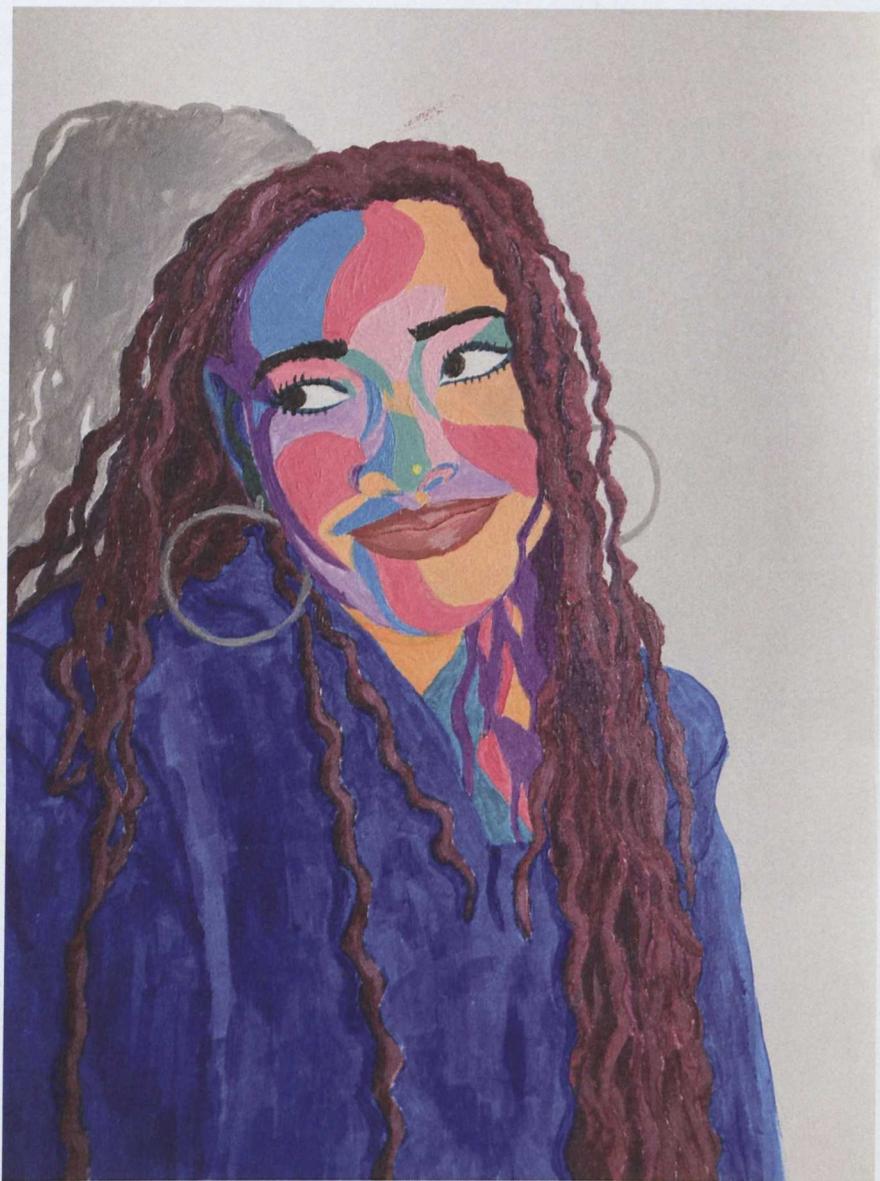
my brother was covered  
by white noise and lovers  
a solitary soldier  
content in his closet sized enclosure

my mind forgoes the memory of my room  
less of a sanctuary

reminiscent of a tomb  
purple walls and off brand perfume  
the bed where I'd lie awake  
frozen in fear or an anxious shake  
praying tonight would be different  
that the carpeted floor would give in  
and finally swallow him  
but some cycles have no end

my square window held the memorial  
of the woman I could have been  
the idea of her shoved in stained chests  
folded neatly and laid to rest  
Alhambra made no attempt to nurture me  
tan and stubborn she gave her burden to me  
I curse her name  
and attempt to light her in flame

***Makela***  
**Sarah England**



# *Imagine Injustice*

**Maddy Lee**

Imagine running for your life.  
Have you ever run like that before—or  
was it always a game that could end?

Imagine something shines on his belt.  
Breath pours like a faucet—honest  
women aren't out this late anyways.

Imagine distant, clicking porch lights.  
A moment's reprieve—and a please,  
ma'am, could you tell us what happened?

Imagine fluorescent hours in concrete stations.  
Distractions, contraptions, infractions—retractions,  
he doesn't have all day.

Imagine night comes when sleep will not.  
The sun needs no justice to rise—you surmise  
this happens every day.

# ***Worth Your Weight in Gold***

**Becca Halaney**

Most of us wore our performance dresses because they were already black. I could not sing at your funeral. I tried, but could only mouth the words. Your concerts had overflowing audiences, but your memorial service dwarfed them by far. The church was a sea of wailing students, current and former, trying to remember the lessons you'd taught us, to emulate your techniques in honor of your memory—but a choir without a director loses its backbone. The songs you loved were earnestly bastardized as watery, off-key cacophonies from the lips of sobbing mourners. I still can't sing in church. I tried to join a choir moving here to Maryland, but once again only lasted a semester before the pain became unbearable.

I moved across the country to escape your memory, Miss Kathy. You would have called me Jonah: I hopped on a denial boat and pushed off from the shores of your absence. I learned that you had been murdered, and plugged my ears and tear ducts shut, never spoke or wrote about it, kept it inside. I waited for my grief to evaporate on its own like a puddle on a sidewalk.

You were my favorite teacher, but that makes me one of hundreds; at every performance you directed, flocks of former students spanning your entire thirty year career gathered to remind you of your life changing impact, some bringing their own children for you to instruct, an intergenerational legacy. While you were still here, I had my heart set on acting. I first met you as a shrimpy sixth grader in an audition for a high school musical, and while the older kids laughed at my short stature, cystic acne, and technicolor fashion combinations, your belief in me never wavered. You humored me by letting me audition ("just for practice"), applauded my heartfelt belted singing, and gave me a lead role despite my insufficient age. You affirmed that decision when the teenagers complained about having a little kid in the production. I only knew you for a few years but that seemed like a whole lot to my ten-through-fifteen year-old self—a whole third of my life at the time.

Nothing could ruffle you. In this particular section of our homeschool community fundamentalist Catholicism ruled, and

yet the group orbited around you, a twice divorced, platinum blonde, take-no-shit, badass, independent bombshell of a woman. You were our sun, larger than life, explosive, infectious. I was mesmerized by this powerhouse that is you, who picked *Once Upon a Mattress*, a musical where the running joke is sex out of wedlock, to be performed by Catholic teenagers who you forbade from saying "hell" onstage. Your dedication to faith and hymns must have overpowered the petty fleshly disagreements the other more traditional adults had with your tone of voice, your attitude, your v-neck sweaters and oversized belts. I didn't even like choral music then, but joined your choir after the musical's production ended just to continue having you as my teacher.

I never fit in there and I think you must have known that I was queer and floundering in an ocean of ritualistic homophobia. My family is neither fundamentalist nor Catholic, but this group, the Christian College Preparatory Academy, offered by far the best education available for a homeschooled middle grade student. The other kids and their parents didn't like that I was a bastard child of divorce, that I was on "the birth control pill," that I was outspokenly questioning of authority including within the church, that I refused to call adults "Sir" or "Ma'am" and spoke up when I disagreed with them. You tamed my narcissistic preteen tendencies but let my independence flourish in a community that felt threatened by it. You taught me to listen more than I spoke (and sang). We could depend on you to meet each of us where we were, to take each of us seriously even though we were children, to treat us with as much dignity as if we were grownups. If you saw how painfully in love I was with the byronic Sarah Lynn McNany in the alto section, you never made me feel any different for it; my peers certainly did.

When I scandalized CCPA by shaving my head bald just for fun, you defended my choice to do so—even though you didn't like it, even though you cited to me Bible verses about the virtues of not drawing attention to oneself unduly, you did not require me to buy a wig for our performances. I drafted a response email pointing to the parts of the Bible that take specific issue with the braids and curls you styled your hair in, with the flashy jewelry you wore daily in your ears and around your neck, but decided against sending it. It would have been petty. I bought a wig not because I felt obligated, but in an attempt to show my appreciation and

respect for you even when we disagreed. It still sits in a dusty tangled mess in my closet at home. I can't bear to get rid of it.

Now, some of me wishes I had sent that email, if it's even remotely possible that it could have prevented your end. Hindsight renders innocuous details impossibly important, it places responsibility on every word.

I lost my voice, Kathy. Everything I know about music I learned from you. After you died, I tried to keep going to choir practice. The woman who took over direction from you did a wonderful job, the choir is larger and more successful and organized than ever, but I could not stay. I hear every technique in your voice, *raise your soft palate, eyebrows up, yawn, tighten your core, make sure your mouth is open wide enough to fit two fingers*. Every time I breathe and remember to sit up straight, I see your ultramarine eyes go razor sharp, your penciled brows knot together and nostrils flare with determination as you sucked air into your capacious chest, telling the girls and only mouthing around the boys, "Speakers up, ladies." It made us all giggle no matter how many times we heard it. I was amazed that the middle school boys couldn't seem to figure out what you meant by your double entendre. I couldn't make it one full semester without you. I never seriously participated in theatre again.

Living in Austin, Texas, with its well-earned title of the Live Music Capital of the World, I could not avoid your ghost. Your choir, the Christian Choral Society of Austin, was so prolific and popular that hardly any place has been untouched by it in my memory. We sang in the Capitol, we sang in nursing homes all over the city, in schools, at city events, on farms, funerals, weddings, baptisms, in museums; we competed at the state level and won routinely thanks to your inspired and individualized direction. Even restaurants have been marked by your music's echoes: I can't eat an organic burger at P. Terry's, diablo sauce from Torchy's, Chipotle, Amy's Ice Cream, or Kerbey Lane Cafe pancakes without remembering our after parties, trying not to spill ketchup on our choir dresses. I see and hear you everywhere in my hometown.

You caught up to me again, Kathy. My boat broke and the fish spat me back on your beach just as I thought I had gotten far enough away from it to forget the pain. Last week I saw a video about you

from a YouTuber all the way over in Ireland. Your story is traveling around the world, can you believe it? I was afraid to watch it, with its classic true crime trappings: "The Case of Kathy Blair," "Beloved Music Teacher Attacked in Her Sleep [HIGHLIGHT] One Deadly Mistake," your face in greyscale beside black and red text evocative of your death. I preemptively assumed bad faith sensationalism, exploitation of you and your legacy, a flippant airing of your dirty laundry.

I had not read about you or Googled your name since the murder. It feels unfair how I remember every moment of that night, yet cannot remember the last words we exchanged, the last time I hugged you; how futile the human condition, that such precious moments feel unremarkable until after we realize they were the last we'd ever get. What was for dinner and how much homework I had due the next day dominated my mind, maddeningly insignificant—I wish I had paid attention. It happened in early December. We stood out in the cold at the living museum waiting for you to begin our Christmas concert, but were told by the upperclassmen with terror on their faces that we misconstrued as stagefright, "Miss Kathy can't make it tonight. Go home, the concert's canceled." You had never been late to a performance before. We made jokes in ignorant poor taste about having driven so far for nothing, glad that we did not have to stand there shivering in our thin choir dresses any longer.

We got the call the next morning. The adults sanitized the details for us. You had been murdered. Someone attempted to rob your home, you woke up, they panicked and pushed you. You cracked the back of your skull open on the tile floor. A terrible, pointless accident. A whole human life exchanged for petty cash.

I shut down and withdrew. I could not cry. I felt numb, my perception of time failed me. There are months at a time that year that I remember none of. My brain fortified itself against emotion. I stopped talking to friends, stopped forming relationships with the adults in my life. Isolation is safe; there is nothing that can be taken from me. It's been eight years, and until now, I could not let myself process your absence. Writing this feels like prying my ribcage open, digging half my life's worth of repression out from the rusty nooks and crannies. Waiting did not dull the pain like I hoped it would.

Many threw themselves in the opposite direction from me, rallying to demand justice, to bring your killer to task. A group that proclaimed itself so pro-life as to oppose all forms of birth control suddenly begged for the state to use the electric chair. The last I heard before the case was placed entirely in the hands of law enforcement was that the prime suspect was your gardener. You were only fifty-three years old, half of your life expectancy robbed from the world just to pawn a few hundred dollars of stolen jewelry.

Jonah sat on the outskirts of Nineveh to stubbornly watch and wait, refusing to engage. I wouldn't watch that video for a week after I found it, staring at the title card, unable to click and unable to look away. Just typing your name into the search bar felt like swallowing a whole unshelled egg. Nonetheless I knew what that video meant: the mistrials were over, your killer had been sentenced, the court documents had been released to the public. At least the video's narrator wasn't putting on makeup.

For eight years, your murderer became the faceless boogieman in my mind. I knew nothing about him other than he was the kind of person who could attack an essential stranger in her sleep. He had only done work for you twice. I imagined him to be impossibly large, hulking, bear-like, inhuman despite his humanity being the most frightening aspect of it all. It shouldn't have surprised me that finally watching the video helped me begin to heal. I cried for days, but not because they had done you wrong by covering your story: I finally got to see you in motion again, Kathy. The YouTuber picked only the most flattering photos, videos of you doing your greatest work, the achievements of your own children and the students you acted as a surrogate parent for. They honored you. I've watched it tens of times by now, soaking in every detail that I had been running from before. Now I can see the appeal of true crime, to some extent; indeed, what happened to you would seem unbelievable in fiction.

The boogieman began to take a concrete shape. I learned that your death was not an accident, in fact you were the first known victim of a serial killer: days later, three blocks from your house, two more were murdered in much the same fashion. They were a couple in their eighties, their home like yours ransacked for

valuables late in the night. You and they had nothing in common, no relations, no knowledge of each other. I finally got to see the faces of your killers—yes, there were two. The tip the police received about your rude, aggressive gardener yielded a man named Tim Parlin, behind bars for a cumulative total of thirty years before you hired him to work on your yard. I don't know how I expected him to look, certainly not like a fat, constipated, dollar-store George Clooney, but he was closer to the image in my mind than the person who would ultimately be found chiefly responsible.

Thank God a neighbor of yours accidentally recorded your murderer walking toward your house that night, testing his brand new thermal scope and entirely unaware that he was capturing footage of a crime. When Tim Parlin implicated another man, Shawn Gant-Benalcazar, the police didn't believe him. Tim looked the part, Shawn did not. He was a high school teacher like you, Kathy, but trade singing for science. You attended the same college twenty years apart. Shawn had no record, was meek and polite, thin and tall, a suburban poster boy with a mane of curls around a clean late-twenties-year-old face. The car that your neighbor caught on camera may have belonged to Tim the gardener, the pawn shop receipt for your gold necklace may have had his name on it, but the person who entered your house stepped out of the passenger side seat. His silhouette was tall and thin, much thinner than Tim had been for decades at least.

I still bargain for your life, dealing in *what ifs*. *If only* your naval officer son had come home from the bar an hour earlier. *If only* he had stayed at home that night entirely. *If only* you had gone out with him. *If only* your house had an alarm. *If only* you hadn't woken up when the intruder entered your house, or *if only* you had pretended to be asleep while he rifled through your cabinets. *If only* your dachshund were a bigger, scarier dog. You were an easy target, a physically small middle-aged woman who usually lived alone, who wore your wealth in your clothes and your jewelry.

Yet I still bargain, too, in petty concessions because they picked you, and they picked the *wrong fucking woman*. I was always aware that you were the toughest person I knew, but I could

never imagine how brave you could be. No man could tame you, not your two ex husbands, not the patriarchal institution of the church, not two failed career criminal cowards who assumed they could intimidate you because you were a woman alone at night and they were big tall men. A less selfish part of me thanks God that you did wake up, that you saw Shawn standing over your bed holding a knife and chose to fight, that you lunged toward him and wrestled him for it—because it's very likely that you stopped a serial killer by doing so, Kathy, at least much earlier than he would have otherwise been caught.

Tim was careful and experienced; he made sure they left no DNA, no evidence. They expected you to see the knife and beg and cower for your life, give them whatever they wanted, but you were never one to go quietly. You leapt from your bed, grabbed his weapon, and you held onto it and fought so hard to take it from him that not one stab to your neck, not two, not three, not even five could subdue you or loosen your grip, not even the six stabs to your chest, not his attempt to strangle you. If you had not held onto your life with that degree of violent voracity, if your blood had not showered the entire room by the time he had resorted to finally slitting your throat, then the crime would have been pinned on Tim alone, and Shawn would have walked free to kill far more than just the three of you. After he had pilfered your belongings and left you to die alone on your bedroom floor, it was ultimately that ruthless fight that left a clear print of his shoe in blood on the carpet, a shoe that couldn't fit Tim, a shoe that Shawn was thankfully stupid enough to wear into his interview with police.

He learned much from you. He limited the bloodiness by beating the next victim to death, the next after that by stabbing once into the skull and leaving the knife lodged there. He left no trace of himself other than the tactical similarities and the miniscule distance between houses.

In the interrogation videos he seems so small, gaunt and willowy, sinking into the couch with crossed arms and legs, shoulders slumped. It almost seems to swallow him. He looks like he's falling asleep as he whines and waffles about "I don't know, I didn't kill her, you have to ask Tim, I don't know," and finally I am so relieved to be the child whose teacher was murdered instead of a

student whose teacher turned out to be a serial killer. When the police pointed out the inconsistencies in Tim's story, he caved, his explanation as pathetic as his motive: "I stabbed her in the neck. I didn't even wanna do it, I was trying to get the jewelry without doing it."

Even brutish, mean mugging Tim seemed small and pitiful in the courtroom. His reason for facilitating the killings, bringing Shawn to the houses, acting as lookout man and getaway driver was that his job at 7-Eleven didn't pay enough. The address was never released, but my friends and I would walk from choir practice down to the corner of the block every day to buy snacks and sodas—from a 7-Eleven right beside your house and the houses of the other two victims. I have to wonder if I ever saw him there, if he ever sold me MoonPies or Sprite. Both men blamed and continue to blame the other. I suppose there isn't a better argument for raising the wages of public school teachers and felons than this.

There is no appropriate justice for the killers of sleeping strangers. They both received the closest we can hopelessly come to it, life without parole. I'm glad that neither were sent to the electric chair or condemned to a slow death via painful injections. In fact, I hope they live for the next fifty years that they robbed from you, from all of us. I hope they sit alone for decades with nothing to think about except the priceless soul that they filched and traded for a few hundred dollars of blood money. Your life was worth so much more than a fourteen karat gold necklace. You were incomprehensibly loved.

I try to keep my speakers up, Kathy. I think I'm starting to learn how again. I'm trying to be patient with myself.

# *Winter's Evening in Westminster*

Steven Herd



# ***November 19th***

**Simone Smith**

I attended the viewing alone  
placed my heart at the headstone  
buried my love in the body  
turmoil read the obituary  
anguish drove me from the cemetery

at the repass mother cried  
again I knew she had discarded her pride  
pleads for peace  
but to no avail  
fathers heart had already sailed  
docked in voluptuous vainful women  
scribbled checks and ironed linen

I've stumbled upon bodies before  
stiff, soulless and poor  
I've lived with bodies before  
faceless, stagnant and sore  
I was a body before  
before the funeral  
before the war

but now they were the bodies  
and I watched from afar  
found refuge in flying away  
searched for home in harms way

father feigned sympathy  
drained our hopes until we were empty  
claimed some birds were never meant to fly  
clipped our wings before we could try

mother made herself a martyr in men  
baptized in holy water to hide the scent of sin  
found faith in falling short  
three sacrifices she wished she could abort

but I've stumbled upon bodies before  
stiff, soulless and poor  
and I've lived with bodies before  
faceless, stagnant and sore  
I was a body before  
before the funeral  
before the war

the service was held november 19th  
the day I knew we would never be free  
entrapped in an estranged hell  
a story known all too well  
of battered nests  
and broken homes  
a woman wounded before I could walk  
a statistic before I could talk

but I've stumbled upon bodies before  
stiff, soulless and poor  
and I've lived with bodies before  
faceless, stagnant and sore  
I was a body before  
before the funeral  
before the war

# *The Axeman's Children*

**Maddy Lee**

I grew up in Someone Else's Home.

There is nothing I could have done to change that at those young, tender ages, but the ghost of something cruel haunts this place still. The Home is tucked into the bellowing skirts of the mountain, hidden amongst the frills of the trees and the stalking mountain lions. Another family lived here once—a someone else to define us. They climbed those trees to pick the freshest fruits, scaling down like lithe, languid lemurs. Father called them animals, called them wretched, and said those trees were best for Axemen. I cannot remember what I said to him back then. I only remember the crescent moon and the French-paned window, the whittling knife and the hunting boots. I only remember waiting.

Father marched on the trees with his axe weighed heavy upon his shoulder. The first of the forest came tumbling in his wake, lumber enough for the longest of winters. But with it came the longest of wails, a Someone Else who cried for the cracking eggs, the running yolks that spread like blood from beneath its massive trunk. Father pushed her aside to bring us firewood. Mother praised his bravery and Brother practiced his own swings in the yard. I dreamt of the Someone Else that night, screaming curses as watery, wasted yolks dripped from her lips.

I sought Mother's comfort in the morning. She stroked my hair as I recalled and recanted, fearful of her digging nails as she hissed towards the Someone Else. The trees grew first when we demanded, the seas can't return us to the land we abandoned—and so the guilt cannot be ours. If not their fault, then proxy punishments at least. Mother could not make me understand this, so she sent me away. Brother was never confused by these teachings. Maybe that's why, the next morning, he strode through the yard with an axe of his own. I never knew from where it came, but Mother's watchful eye made it clear that there would not be one for me.

I walked behind them, instead, with the wheelbarrow. They told me it's for firewood and I can't say if I believed them. I walked with

heavy feet but did not stop. Did not turn back. Father marched on the Home this time, axe held high above his head. It landed itself in thick, oak doors, splitting open their defenses and ringing out with frightened shouts. Father and Brother swung with a rhythm—*ba-thump, ba-thump, ba-thump*—for minutes on end until the Home surrendered with a groan. The walls cracked as the ceiling turned to dust. The Someone Else cried out from inside. She had a little, defenseless thing in her arms, eyes that pled for a shared humanity. But she was Someone Else—and Father says we cannot abide by that. I tell myself I've done her good by witnessing. Besides, it's my job to get the firewood.

I turn around then. Not from indignation, but because the Home has swallowed them up somewhere deep inside. Father and Brother begin to chop the rubble. I collect what they deem worthy and try not to think about myself or Anyone Else. It would be years before I was willing to confront that—before any of us were, but who did it serve at that point? My Home was built on bones and greed, the forest plucked for winters that never came, and the air filled with the smoke of cleansing fire. The stench of what we are remains. Those around me deny my guilt, deny its use, deny its purpose. I deny it when ribs crack under the weight in my chest. Father denies nothing for he buried regret in the rubble. "The tree forgets but the axe remembers," someone said to me once.

But what does that say of the Axeman's children?

# ***Paper Bride***

**Simone Smith**



# **A COVID Goodbye**

**Tabitha Zolnerowich**

I remember the beeping of the machines.  
The stench of chemicals and cleaning products.  
The plastic visitor's gown and nylon gloves  
stuck to my skin like glue,  
both of which kept me from holding you one last time.  
My throat stung as I desperately fought to maintain some  
composure.

The shuffling of nurses outside the oak door  
reminded me that this moment was separate from the hectic world  
that awaited me.  
I remember you.

I remember the pit in my gut and the August heat suffocating me.  
As I struggled to get out my last promises and confessions, they  
came out strangled and strange,  
still, I knew you could understand.  
I remember you.

I remember holding your hand through the rubbery  
barrier, taking care to avoid the IVs.  
I gripped your hand like this when you  
and Sido took me to the mall,  
insisting on buying me a new outfit for Easter.  
A white lace dress and a royal blue shawl, you swore  
I looked like a princess,  
a princess with chocolate ice cream on her rosy-cheeked face.  
I remember you.

I promised that the white gown looked amazing on you, that your  
hair was still a white crown.  
Your eyes opened when you heard my voice.  
Sticking your tongue out one last time,  
our secret signal, our special way of saying I love you.  
The first time we did that my mother scolded  
me, thinking it was rude,  
but you just laughed and did it back.  
I remember you.

Hoping, wishing, begging to wake up from this nightmare.  
I remember the look in your eyes,  
a look of confusion, recognition, then of love.  
Always full of love and kindness.  
You braided my hair before my first dance,  
you always did love playing with my hair.  
You held me tight no matter how old I got,  
kissed my forehead no matter how tall I got.  
I remember you.

I remember the fluorescent lights overhead as I walked away.  
The smell of the hospital continues to haunt me.  
Colorful curtains and vibrant signs appeared gray to me.  
I can still feel the strain in my voice as I greeted  
my brother in the waiting room.  
He took quick steps knowing what was about to happen,  
the only thing holding me up was his hug.  
I will always remember you, Tata

# *Lip gloss*

Molly Sherman



## **PINNED:**

### ***Small-Town-White-Girl-Moodboard***

**Maddy Lee**

1st Place Poetry

Sex, death, baby's breath,  
whorish, hateful shibboleths,  
baking biscuits, cooking meth,  
swearing off swearing, "fudge" for "eff."

Curses, verses, shining hearses,  
half sticks of gum, grandmother purses,  
words of a woman—wasted, worthless,  
Sunday school teachings—smile more, earn less.

Leaving this evening, nigh upon thieving,  
dream of degrees, faith beyond reasoning,  
justify silence, sweet tea, deceiving,  
slamming screen doors, chicken, no seasoning.

Nostalgia nihilistic, hope insecure,  
Original Sin, infants impure,  
fieldtrip fundraiser, something-for-a-cure,  
sharing is caring, "Salvation is Yours."

Birth control, color guard,  
navel ring with belly scarred,  
mothers worn from working hard,  
rearview mirroring needs fresh starts.

# *The Dick*

**Eamonn Fay**

An old friend from my hometown called me last week. It doesn't usually happen, but when it does it either means someone's engaged or someone's dead. I hit answer and mentally flipped a coin.

"Hello?" I said.

"Mac, did you hear?" he said, wasting no time.

"About what?" I said. "Or, God forbid, about who?"

"It's The Dick," he replied sadly. "He's dead."

I sat in saddened silence for a moment. "Shit," I eventually muttered. "When's the funeral?"

Everyone has barstool stories. I have a couple, myself. But the most interesting by far, my go-to story, involves a man who, as far as I know, has only ever been called "The Dick." Everyone in my hometown knew who The Dick was, but that was about all they knew about him for sure. He was a man shrouded in mystery, but not in a sexy sort of way. He was a lanky, awkward-looking dude with a perpetually patchy beard and a slight underbite. He liked to walk around shirtless, showing off a torso covered from top to bottom in crudely done tattoos. On occasion you could see him getting around on a skateboard. I mean, not far. But around. There were dozens of stories about him, so many that after a while nobody was quite sure which of them were actually true. While a lot of these stories depict him as just some bumbling idiot getting himself into trouble, there's also a lot of weirdly heroic shit that he's allegedly managed to pull off. Now, granted, most of the time he didn't mean to do anything heroic, but you gotta give credit where it's due.

The first time I ever heard about The Dick, he had allegedly thwarted a home robbery. Some dude who lived in one of the McMansions downtown went off for vacation with his family and

his security system happened to go on the fritz while they were away. Two assholes were somehow privy to this pulled up in a van one night to loot the place. They were barely able to step out of the vehicle before none other than man, myth, and legend, The Dick, ran out of a nearby bush screaming bloody murder. He was covered head to foot in cuts and bruises and was, horrifyingly, buck-naked. He shouted something along the lines of "the gremlins are real." The thieves, though armed, didn't bother resisting. They got right back into their van and fucked off post-haste. I'm surprised they even had the coordination to do that. If I had seen The Dick's member, and if it was anywhere near as pale as the rest of him, I think I'd have been blinded on the spot. Anyhow, apparently, that night The Dick had been on what was decidedly a bad trip and his buddies lost control of him. He stripped naked and ran into the woods. As for the gremlin attack, those were just cuts and bruises from some hedges he had been crawling through for God-knows what reason.

Most of the stories about him, "Dickies" as we called them, usually went like that.

Nobody was quite sure how Dickies got passed around as they did. Having spoken to The Dick, I can tell you that they didn't come straight from the horse's mouth. I think that's next to impossible. Trying to follow that man's train of thought was a fucking wild goose chase. I know having spoken to him myself that he didn't talk much, and when he did speak it was borderline incomprehensible. Friends of mine who have heard him try to tell stories say that he would speak entirely in sidetracks. Even his sidetracks had sidetracks. Someone joked that if you were to sit there and listen to him go on like that for long enough, he would tell you just about everything he knows (which, admittedly, probably wasn't all that much).

Regardless of how Dickies end up getting circulated, what astounds me is how many of them are supposedly not bullshit. Sometimes you hear them from people with no reason to lie, and other times you would get something like actual photographic evidence. I don't like putting numbers on things like these that are based entirely on hearsay (Dickology is not a study yet, I think), but I estimate with a good degree of certainty that every three out of five Dickies you hear are at least mostly true, which I think

is incredible. No matter how implausible, it's gotten to the point where people rarely call bullshit on a Dickie unless someone's heard a different version of one.

If I told you every Dickie I know, we'd be here for hours. And, let's face it, they'd be incomplete. I wasn't even there for ninety-nine percent of these stories, and I'd hate to not do them justice. Some of you are no doubt curious, and I hate to disappoint. So, please accept some brief highlights as consolation. Off the top of my head, The Dick has allegedly:

- Gotten hit by three cars on the same day. It was later discovered that the second two times were on purpose because he "liked the high it gave him." Nobody ever found out what he meant by this.
- Drank an entire gallon of holy water at the local church thinking it was communion wine. Before puking his brains out on the altar, he claimed to see angels. The angels allegedly all had D-cups. He is no longer allowed in the church.
- While hopped up on something, watched a twelve-hour Spongebob Squarepants marathon and was later found trying to swim to the bottom of a local pond to, and I quote, "have a word with Squidward."
- Appeared on the local news stumbling into the shot, pulling his pants all the way down, and taking a leak in some bushes in the background. For six glorious seconds, his bare ass was on live, public-access television. My brother and I have a tape of this somewhere.
- Tried to impress a girl by saying he was a fire-breather. When asked to prove it, he swallowed a BIC lighter, belched for ten uninterrupted seconds, then was immediately rushed to the hospital. He complained the entire ride over that "he almost had it."

I'm sorry, but I truly can't bring myself to relay any more of these to you here. I have watched people craft epic narratives around this man, and I am not blessed with a good sense of storytelling. That being said, twenty years ago I was blessed with something

else: I witnessed a Dickie with my own two eyes, and without any further ado, I will tell it to you now.

This happened back in the early 2000's. My parents were out of town frequently, which was great news for my brother and me as we loved to party. We had a system going between the two of us as we were gifted with different things, my brother gifted with popularity and myself gifted with looking closer to twenty-five at eighteen; he'd bring the people and I'd bring the beer. On this night in particular, I had been sent to get some alcohol for the sixteen or seventeen year olds that my brother managed to bring. With a number of crumpled fives and tens in my pocket that were supposed to pay for two thirty-packs of shitty beer, I pulled up to the liquor store and made for the freezer in the back. There was some sort of racket going on at the front counter. I'm pretty sure the clerk was poking some guy with a broomstick and telling him to get up, that he'd catch shit from his boss if he knew about this, things to that effect. Ordinarily I'd have asked what was going on, but my voice didn't sound quite as mature as my face, and I didn't want to blow my cover at the only liquor store in town that didn't ID. Just before I was able to start scanning the back for the most economically sound option in terms of drink-per-dollar, I heard something from the front that made me just about piss myself.

"Don't fucking move! Empty the fucking register!"

I dove into the next aisle to conceal myself just a second too late.

"You!" the robber cried. "Behind the wine bottles!" Cringing, I rose slowly with my hands up. Fifteen feet away, there was a robber with a gun pointed right between my eyes. He looked pretty textbook—balaclava, nondescript clothes, you know the look. Even then, the gun looked slightly fake, but I wasn't keen on fucking around and finding out. Evidently I wasn't moving fast enough for his liking, because he stepped over with a sense of shaky unease, making several threatening advances but seemingly reluctant to actually touch me or fire his weapon. "G-get to the front!" he yelled. "H-hands where I can see them!" I am not exaggerating when I say that this guy seemed so unbelievably nervous that I came this close to asking him if he needed a hug. I did what he asked and moved to the front. He pointed his gun back at the cashier, whose hands were up as high as they could go. "Empty

the register!" the thief said. "Ah-uh, in the bag! N-now!" The cashier looked around frantically. "What bag?!" the cashier said, desperate to comply. The robber looked around and, realizing he hadn't even brought one in, swore under his breath. "Just give it to me, then!" he shouted. "I'll put it in my fuckin' pockets!"

The cashier began emptying the register, coins and all, onto the table as the robber grabbed handfuls of bills and stuffed them into his jean pockets. I'd have been laughing my ass off if my life hadn't depended on keeping quiet. Just as the register seemed to be half-emptied, a loud groan reverberated through the dram shop that was so loud that I swear I heard some bottles rattling behind me. The robber shrieked at the sound. "Wh-who's that?!" he shouted, barely keeping his composure as he leaned over the counter gun-first. "Who the fuck is that?!"

It's so strange finally seeing people you've only heard about. I had been told that he was anywhere from four-foot-nine to seven-foot-five, but in actuality he stood at what was probably a modest five-eight. He did, indeed, have the gangly build that had been described. He was tattooed all across his shirtless chest, sported a patchy, scraggly beard, and on this particular day, he wore messy dreadlocks and a broken pair of sunglasses that were missing a frame. I can't tell you how, but I knew in my heart that I was looking at him. This was The legendary Dick.

The robber held his gun shakily toward him, seemingly at a loss for words. Silently, The Dick blinked once or twice and looked around trying to get his bearings. Finally, he turned to the robber and grunted. "Who the fuck am I?" he slurred. "Who the fuck are you?" The robber, still trembling, croaked in lieu of words for a moment before finding his voice again. "I-I'm your worst fuckin' nightmare!" he said. "Now put your fucking hands up before I blow your brains out!" The Dick said nothing. He took a deep breath and stretched. "That gun ain't real," he said. Then, suddenly, the robber pointed the gun at the ceiling and fired round after round into it. Everyone instinctively ducked. He was a lot scarier all of the sudden. "That real enough for you, motherfucker?!" he shouted. "Get your fucking hands up or I'll f-fucking kill you!" The robber seemed to be crying now. In hindsight, I almost feel bad for him. "Just do what he says, Dick," the cashier said. "It's not worth it, man."

And, in what became a phrase that would follow me for the rest of my days, The Dick replied: "Gun or no gun, a bitch is a bitch. Fuck you, binky boy."

The robber, in a display of fury I hadn't expected of him in my short time of knowing him, put the gun to The Dick's head and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Now, I couldn't see his face underneath that balaclava of his, and he didn't say much of anything, but I am positive that his face went completely white. He looked at his gun, pulled the trigger again. Click. He made a sound like "buh" before The Dick clobbered him over the head with a huge bottle of Jack Daniels. The glass didn't shatter, only making a dull thunk as the robber dropped to the ground. I and the cashier looked at each other and then at the now incapacitated robber in full disbelief and silence before The Dick tapped the cashier on the shoulder. "Can I get this?" he said. "For free?"

Needless to say, the cashier obliged.

Thankfully able to escape with my life and eager to tell my brother about the legendary encounter, I headed back to my car with shitty beer in tow. I put the goods in the trunk and went to get in my car, but as I glanced back at the entrance and saw The Dick stumbling out looking like he didn't know what year it was, I had another idea. I would do more than just come back with a Dickie, I would do them one better and bring The Dick himself.

"Hey!" I called out to him.

He turned to face me slowly. "What's up, my hambre?" he said.

"You're The Dick, right?" I said.

He looked immediately offended. "What the fuck, man?" he said. "You callin' me a dick?"

"No, no," I said. "Not a Dick. The Dick."

His face softened. "Oh," he said. "Yeah, that's what they call me."

"You uh, you got anywhere to be?" I asked him.

He stared at me blankly. It seemed like it might have been a little much for him to process (he had just woken up after all). I took a different approach.

"Do you want to go to a party?"

Now I was speaking his language. He grinned, nodded in understanding, and started dancing toward the car. The regret set in immediately.

He sat down in the passenger's seat, and the first thing that hit me was the smell. I don't mean body odor (though that wasn't great, either), I mean that, for whatever reason, he reeked of gasoline. I turned and looked at him. "Is that... is that gas?" I said with mild confusion. The Dick turned to me, looking confused himself. "You askin' me if I ripped ass?" he said.

"No," I said. "I mean you smell like gasoline."

"Oh," he said, "Yeah."

He turned straight forward and the car fell silent. I waited a minute for him to explain himself, but no explanation came.

"Why do you smell like gasoline?" I finally said.

"It was uh... it was only a buck fifty," he said.

"...What?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I got it for a buck fifty. But I didn't have a tank to put it in, or a car, so I just kinda... I just kinda put it on."

I stared at him. "You... put it on?"

"Are we there yet?" he slurred, looking at me expectantly. I gave up.

By the time we got to my house, he had fallen asleep clutching his bottle of Jack like it was a teddy bear. I shook him awake and told him we were there. The Dick immediately looked around, confused, before opening the door and tumbling into the driveway. The bottle fell out of his hands and onto the pavement, but again, miraculously survived its second bout of blunt force trauma of the evening. I helped him up, I grabbed the drinks from the back seat, and we made for the front door.

It was a fucking madhouse. When I left there were maybe thirty people. Now I could barely see over all the heads. I cautiously stepped inside, and someone began shouting. "Yo!" someone yelled. "The beer's here!" I was immediately buried by people I haven't met and people who definitely didn't pay for any of the beer they were now stealing. They tore open the boxes like vicious dogs. I held my booze harder than I ever had in my life, but by time I got out of the swarm of people, all that remained of the thirty-packs were cardboard handles with nothing attached. It was like a fucking cartoon. I stumbled into the kitchen, which was a bit crowded but nowhere near as badly as the hallway was. My brother saw me from the other end of the room and flagged me down.

"This shit has gotten out of hand, dude," he told me. "I'm afraid the cops are gonna get called. A bunch of freshmen showed up and someone told me that someone was doing lines in the bathroom."

"Someone's doing fucking coke?!" I asked.

"Well, no," he said. "Apparently it looked more like Fun Dip powder, but I'm not taking any fucking chances. Did you get the beer?"

Stone-faced, I held up the cardboard handles. His mouth dropped open. "Holy fuck, dude," he said.

"But I got something else," I told him.

"What?" he said.

"I found him," I said. "The Dick."

He leaned closer. "Are you fucking with me?"

"Dead serious."

"No," my brother said. "Please tell me that you're joking."

I turned around and, right on cue, The Dick stumbled in behind me holding his booze in a defensive football carry. "It's like a daycare in here man," The Dick mumbled. "Bunch of kids trying to take my earnings." My brother was stunned at first, then he looked panicked. "Are you out of your mind?!" my brother said to me. "Why the fuck did you bring him here?!"

I guess there's something universally and inexplicably recognizable about The Dick because someone (90% positive it was the same guy from earlier) shouted: "Yo, is that The Dick?!"

First, every living soul in the house that heard him cheered at the top of their lungs, then another swarm of people stormed the kitchen to see for themselves. Seeing this, my brother and I gave each other knowing glances and escaped into the garage before the flood could sweep us away. I'll never forgive myself for abandoning my gasoline-scented new friend, but there simply wasn't time to save him. We stepped over a few people who were passed out, tried our hardest to ignore that my brother's car was rocking back and forth, and stepped outside into the evening air catching our breath. I at last understood my brother's apprehension. On top of the fact that The Dick's mere appearance had just made everyone even rowdier, I thought back to all the Dickies and remembered what he was capable of. My brother and I came to an agreement right then and there: The Dick had to go. But first we had to find him.

Our search thankfully didn't last long. A simple retracing of our steps revealed that he was just out back surrounded by laughing stoners. Someone had just passed him a bong and held out a lighter, but he refused. He reached into his pocket and instead pulled out a matchbox. My eyes widened.

"The gas," I said, turning to my brother. "He put on the gas!"

My brother looked at me in total confusion. "What?"

By time we turned back to look at him, it was already too late. He had somehow dropped the lit match onto his pants, and his entire lower body erupted into flames. Everyone screamed and backed up, but The Dick didn't seem to notice, continuing his hearty bong rip. "You're on fucking fire!" I yelled out to him. The Dick looked up, let out a giant cloud of smoke, and smiled. "Thanks, hambre!" he said. "No!" I said. "You are actually on fire!" The Dick slowly looked down at his pants and gasped. He reached for his bottle of Jack to put it out.

"No, you fucking idiot!" my brother yelled. "The pool!"

Bottle still in hand, The Dick sprinted to the pool and, all things considered, did the most graceful cannonball I have ever witnessed. A massive crowd of people walked over, all murmuring as his silhouette sank to the bottom. There was a moment of stunned silence, then we watched as he rose to the top. He doggy paddled to the edge of the pool and a few people helped him up. The Dick crawled onto the porch, sitting on one of the steps as he coughed and caught his breath. The hush remained over the crowd as he regained his composure. His jeans were burnt and he looked shaken up, but he seemed fine otherwise. Finally coming to his senses, The Dick looked at the bottle in his hand as if it were the first time he had ever seen it, stood up, took off the top, downed the entire bottle, and smashed it onto the ground.

The yard erupted into cheers and the party continued. My brother and I gave up and decided to devote the rest of the night to minimizing damage to the house.

Thankfully for us, however, it seemed like that marked the peak of the night anyway. People began to trickle out, and before long, all that remained were people who had either passed out or were about to. All that was left for us then was to find out what became of The Dick.

Later, I found him pretty much where we had last seen him, seemingly passed out face-first in the backyard. I made sure he was still breathing (and he was), and rolled him over onto his side

in case he threw up. As I did so, I spotted it—there, on the back of his still-soaked pants, was a little embroidered message. I leaned in, adjusted my glasses, and took a look.

I tried to memorize the number and went back inside to the phone, not knowing what else to do. Dialing in the number, someone picked up within the first ring.

"Hello?" a low voice said on the other end.

"Hi, yeah," I said. "The... uh... The Dick is outside my house. The thing on his pants said to call you?" There was a moment of silence.

The voice then continued: "Has he caused much trouble?"

"You could say that," I told him honestly.

"What's the address? We'll be right over."

And they were. About fifteen minutes later, a camper van pulled up on the driveway. Three men dressed similarly to The Dick came out. "You said The Dick was here?" said the tallest of them, who I assume was their leader. I led them through the house and into the back yard. Two of them grabbed The Dick and flipped him onto his back. "Dick," one of them said. "You alright, man?" The Dick groaned and rolled back over. Seeming satisfied with this, I watched in disbelief as two of them picked him up by his arms and legs and began carrying him through the house and back to the van. The tall one stayed behind. He wore crooked sunglasses and a beard that hung down to his belt. He approached me and introduced himself as Eli. Eli had a smooth voice like a radio host, and was definitely the one I heard on the phone. He pulled out a notebook and pen. "Do me a favor," he said as he flipped page after page. "Tell me everything he's done since you've seen him."

As I finished describing it all to him, the robbery, the party, the gasoline, he thanked me for my time and headed back to the trailer. The other two stepped out of the van as Eli entered equipped with gloves, mops, and buckets. "Need help cleaning up, kid?"

By the end of the sleepless night, the sun was beginning to rise over a now nearly empty house. The Dick's friends, whoever they were, did indeed help us clean up. By the end of the night, most of the mess was gone save for a few spare cups and some puke-stained curtains. When the job was deemed done, the men cleared out of the house and went back toward the camper van without so much as a word. My brother, exasperated and exhausted beyond belief, went upstairs to bed. I stepped outside to see them off. Before they left, I watched as The Dick, who seemed to have made a full recovery, leaned out of the camper van and gave me a wave. "Thanks, hambre!" he yelled. I shook my head and waved back. His head disappeared back into the van, and they took off down the street.

Though it was a stressful night, my brother and I have come to laugh about the whole thing now. We both came back for The Dick's funeral yesterday. Well, as much of a funeral as they could afford I guess. His friends, the ones in the camper van, seemed to still be around. Eli was there and recognized me with a slight nod. First, they spread his ashes into the local pond (for some reason), and afterward they held a gathering in the trailer park where they lived. A microphone had been set up, and one by one people who I hadn't seen in years got up and told their Dickies. I heard plenty of old ones and some new ones, too. Though The Dick's buddies probably knew which ones were bullshit and which weren't, they kept their lips sealed. I think it was a nice thing to do.

The more uptight folks in my hometown took his death as a chance to once again insist that The Dick was nothing to celebrate, little more than a deadbeat and public nuisance. But they're wrong. He symbolized something greater. For all his oddity, he and his bizarre feats were a little dash of weird-ass magic in an otherwise humdrum little town.

And so, to those naysayers, I say fuck you, binky boy.

***Lil Booty***  
**Raquel Sobczak**









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