

Jongleur

New This Year!

Photography Awarded
Separately

W
back to share your o
month. Readers

"The Jongleur is an awesome
showcase of student creativity
and innovation"
-Dr. Elizabeth M. Beard
Dean, College of Liberal Arts

2022



The Jongleur

noun Historical

/ZHôNG¹glər, ¹jäNGglər/

“An itinerant minstrel”

Jongleurs were either court attendants or individual travelers who sang verses and performed various acts including juggling, jesting, and conjuring to amuse all kinds of audience.

Editorial Staff of the *Jongleur*:

Alleigh Perles: Editor-in-Chief, Front and Back cover, Poetry format, Contest Judge

Amanda Mathews: Associate Editor, Secretary, Contest Judge

Anna Laborde: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Certificates

Bryce Bordelon: Associate Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Certificates

Eric Alai: Managing Editor, Contest Judge, Contest Manager

Cover Art is an Art Collage titled 'Paper Flowers' by Valerie Kendrick, with additions added by Alleigh Perles and Gavin Bridges.

The *Jongleur* is an annual publication of student work that is formatted and edited by a student staff. It is created for both the benefit of Louisiana State University at Alexandria and to project the voices of the students.

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Jongleur

Louisiana State University at Alexandria

8100 Highway 71 South

Alexandria, LA 71302

Editor's Letter and Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank a few people who make the *Jongleur* happen and allow the creativity of our students to shine.

Thank you to the members of the *Jongleur* staff this year, including Bryce Bordelon, Anna Laborde, and Amanda Mathews. This team was incredible to be a part of and was so much fun to work with. These students worked so hard to make this year's edition look top notch.

Thank you to Professor Eric Alai for being an outstanding mentor to all of us and allowing us to always show our creativity.

Thank you to Dr. Bernard Gallagher for lending a helping hand in making decisions for this year's issue and giving the best advice.

Thank you to Dr. Elizabeth Beard for supporting the students in every way possible and making LSUA really feel like home.

Thank you to Linda Smith for bringing this process full circle and keeping us fed and happy.

After going through the journey of creating this year's issue, I have realized how much work and effort goes into making this happen. I have been blown away by the hard work that all the members put in, hours upon hours of editing and perfecting. This team has been a pleasure to work with. I would also like to acknowledge the incredibly talented artists, photographers, and authors we have here at LSUA; without them the *Jongleur* could not be possible. Thank you again to everyone that made this process happen and good luck to next year's crew.

Always,

Alleigh Perles

Editor in Chief, 2022

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After graduation, she plans on going to
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Studies in Humanities.
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their lives easier.



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After her college graduation, she plans
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published writer.



Bryce Joseph Bordelon: Assistant
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Junior, Bachelor of Arts in English.
Going forward, he plans to teach
English: Grammar and write published
fiction.



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Art



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Lucas

Second Place: Party in the Night by Gavin
Bridges

Third Place: Paper Bag by Megan Hale

Honorable Mention: Planet by Elijah Lininger

Honorable Mention: Dripping Abstract by Beth
Broussard



1st place

Little Boy in Water
By Ashlyn Lucas



2nd place

Party in the Night
By Gavin Bridges



3rd place

Paper Bag
By Megan Hale



Honorable Mention

Planets
By Elijah Lininger



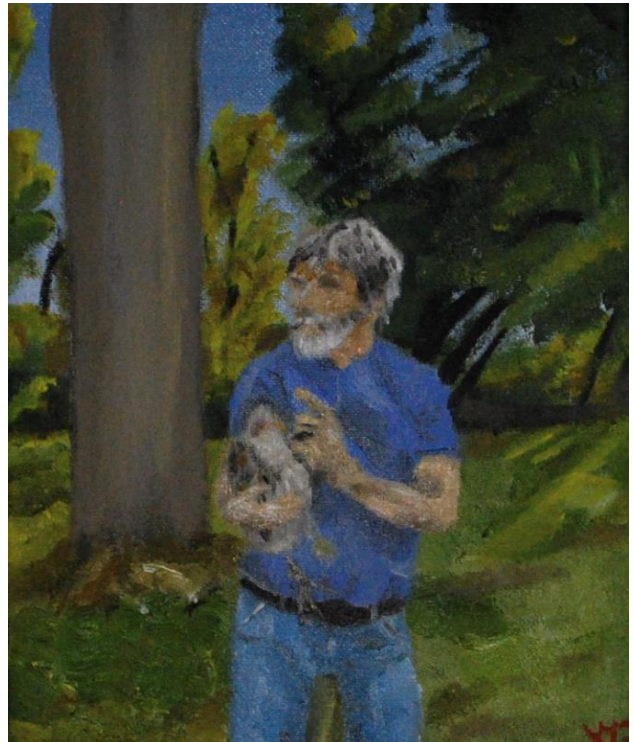
Honorable Mention

Dripping
By Beth Broussard



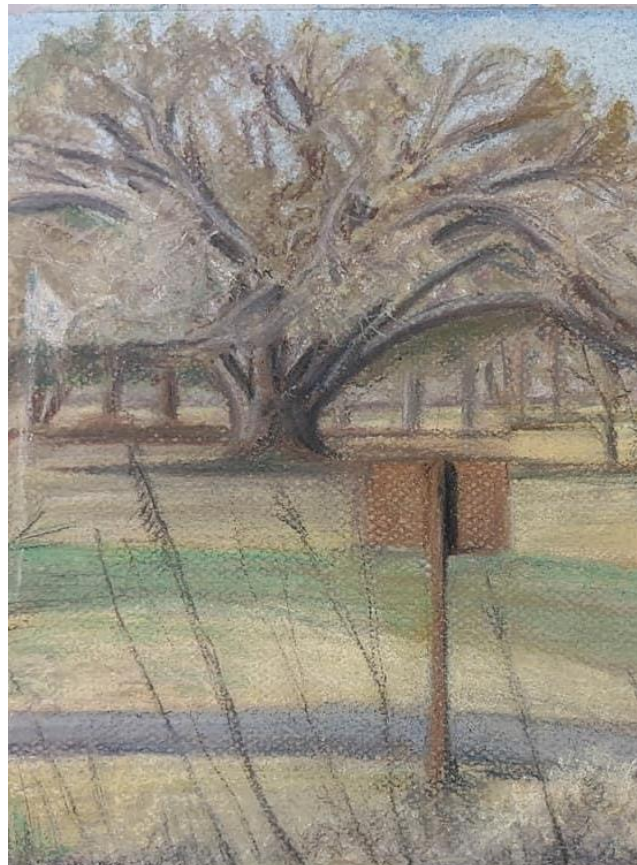
Willow
By Ashlyn Lucas

Ben
By Gavin Bridges





Turtle on a Log
By Gavin Bridges

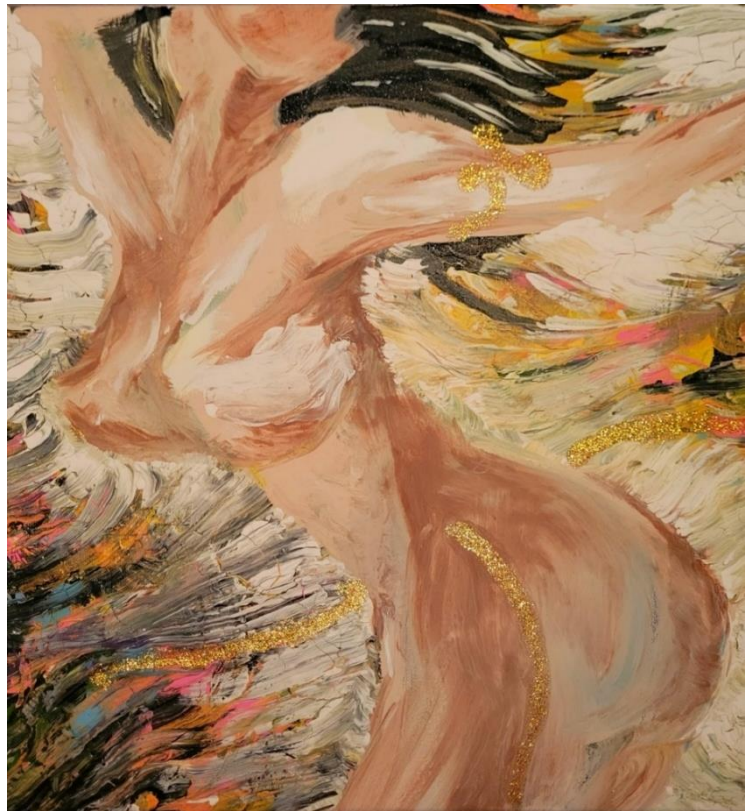


Golf
By Megan Hale



Rainbow Jelly
By Bethany Lambing

Stupor
By Jade Nugent

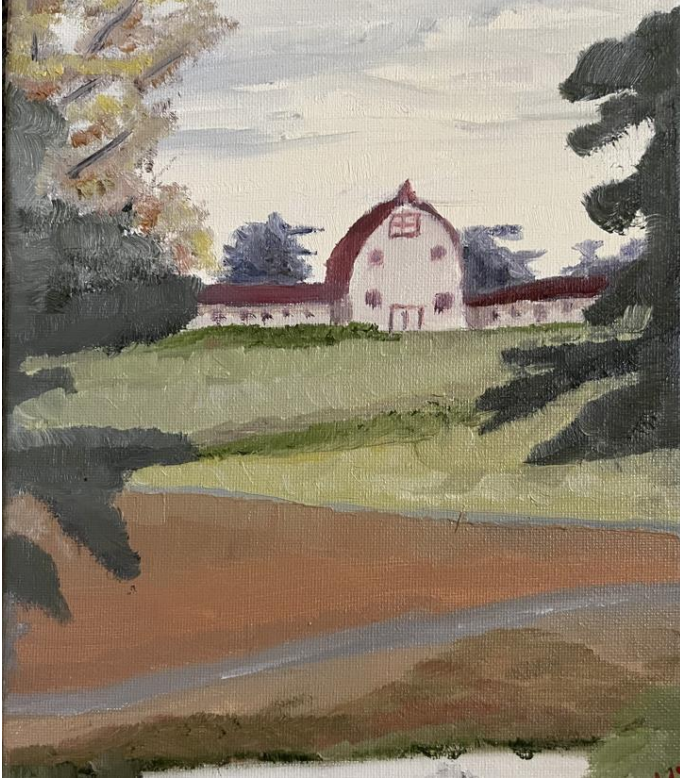




Blink
By Ashlyn Lucas

Kiss
By Ashlyn Lucas





Barn Painting
By Gavin Bridges

Eye Flower
By Laura Miller





Beaux Painting
By Gavin Bridges

Wedding Magazine
By Gabriela Chapman





Fairytale
By Gavin Bridges

Hiro Hamada
By Ashlyn Tabor





Leaves
By Laura Miller

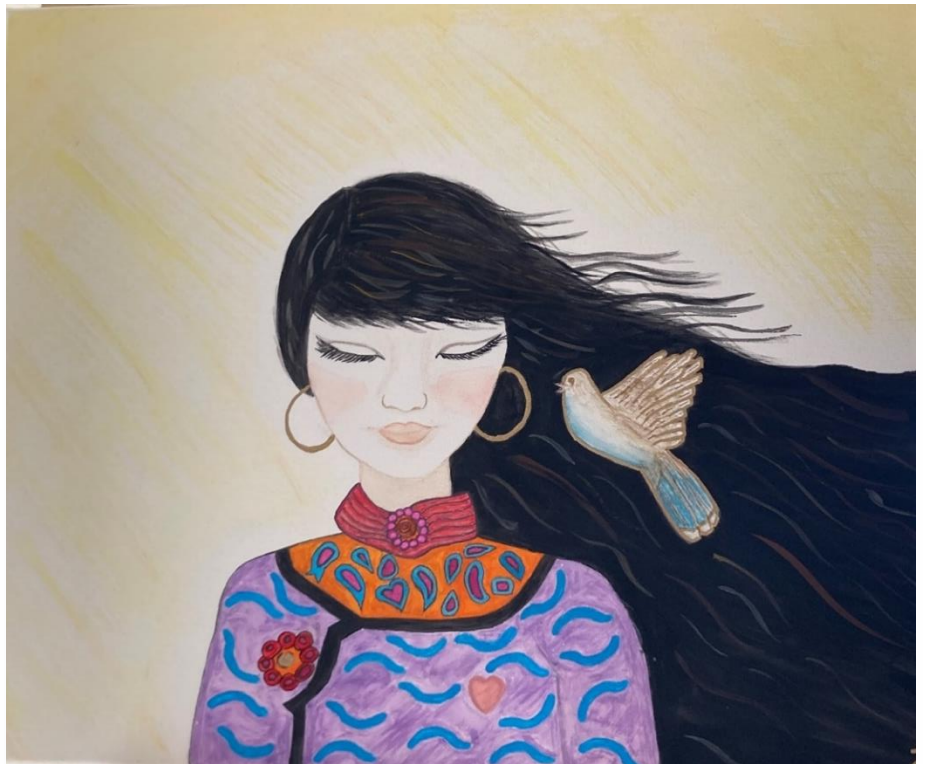
Noodles
By Valerie Kendrick





Fish fish Fish fish
By Valerie Kendrick

A Little Birdy Told
Me
By Laura Miller





Jasmine
By Gavin Bridges

Lake Bulow
By Gavin Bridges

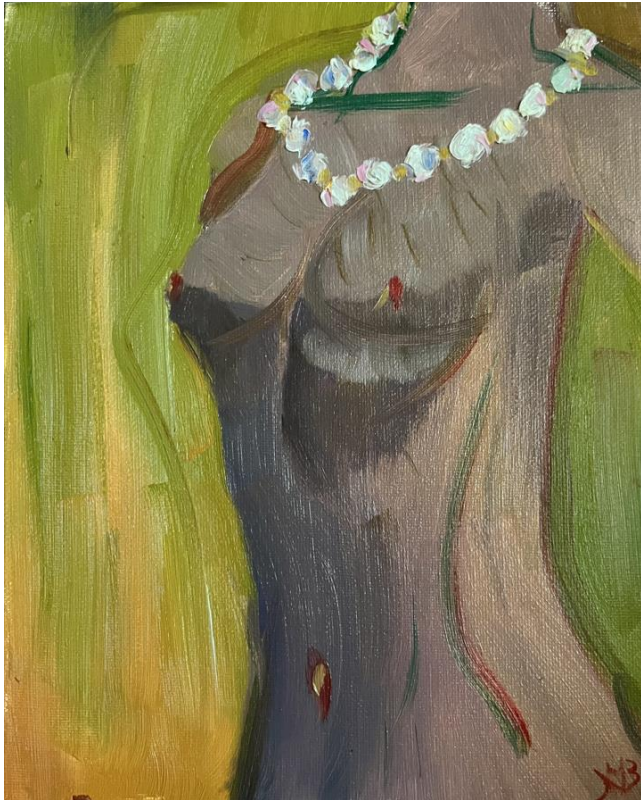




Oak Tree Study
#2
By Gavin Bridges

Ox Bow Painting
By Gavin Bridges





Pearl Necklace Painting
By Gavin Bridges

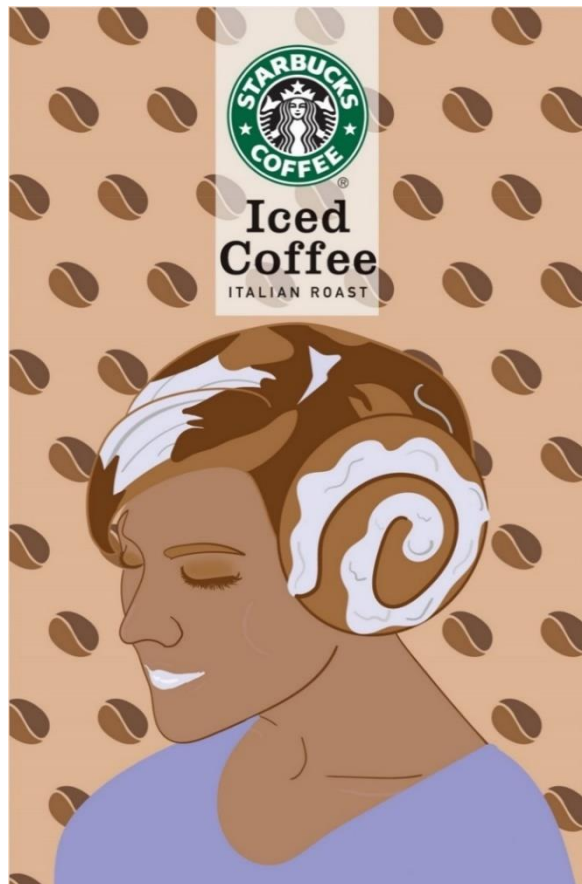
Still Life Study
By Gavin Bridges





Swamp Scene Painting
By Gavin Bridges

Iced Coffee
By Gabriell Guillory

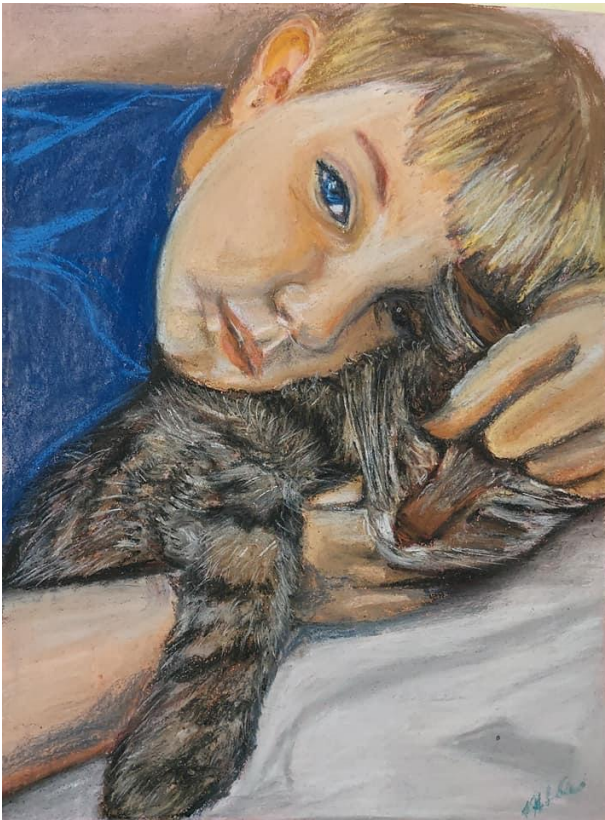




Victory
By Gabriell Guillory

Buddha
By Gavin Bridges

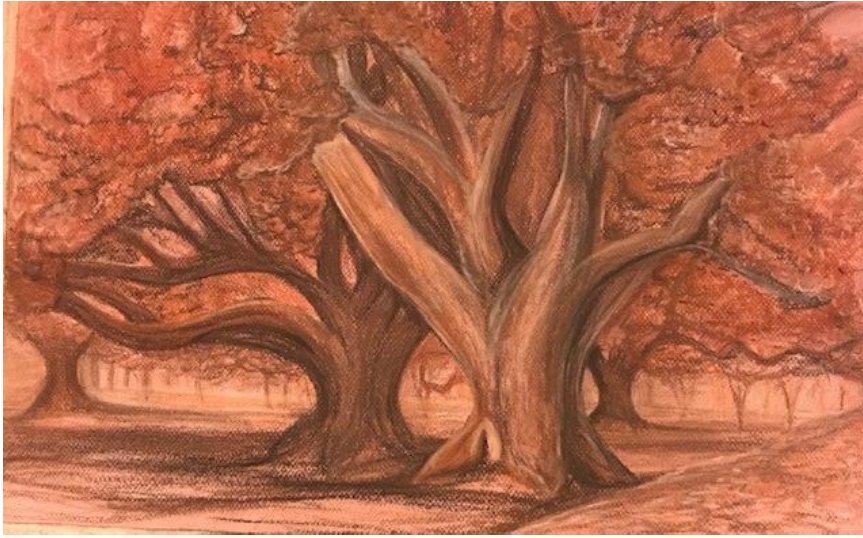




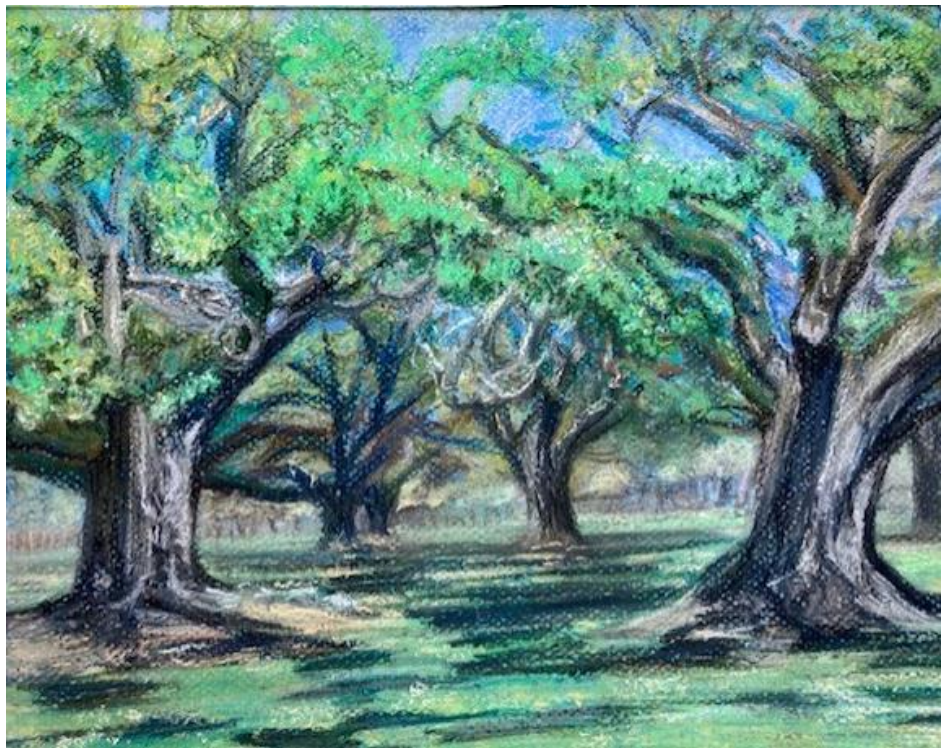
Sebastian and
Shadow
By Megan Hale

Ink Mulder
By Megan Hale





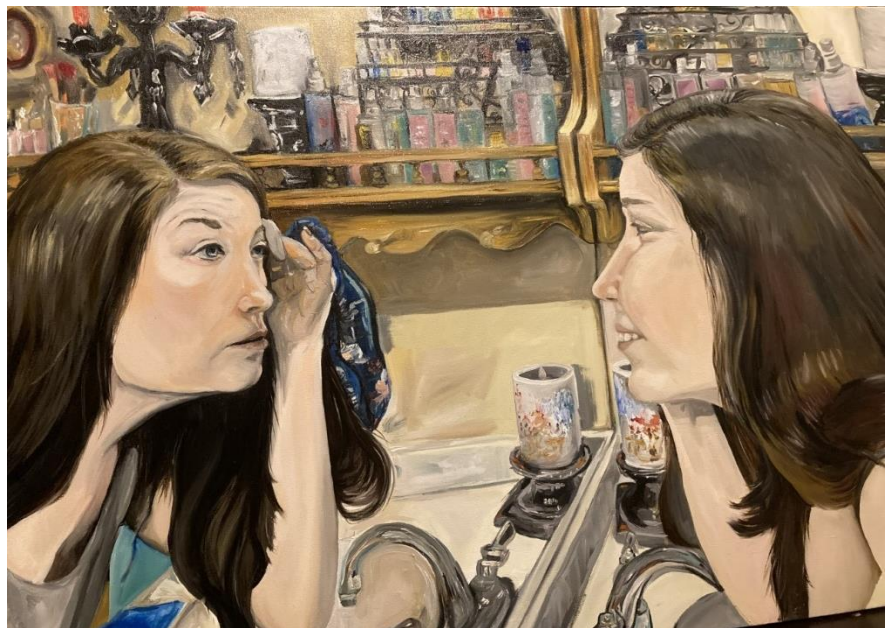
Oak Conte
By Megan Hale



Oak Grove
By Megan Hale



Plantation
By Megan Hale



Reflecting
By Megan Hale



Rush
By Megan Hale

Self-Acrylic
By Megan Hale





Self
By Megan Hale



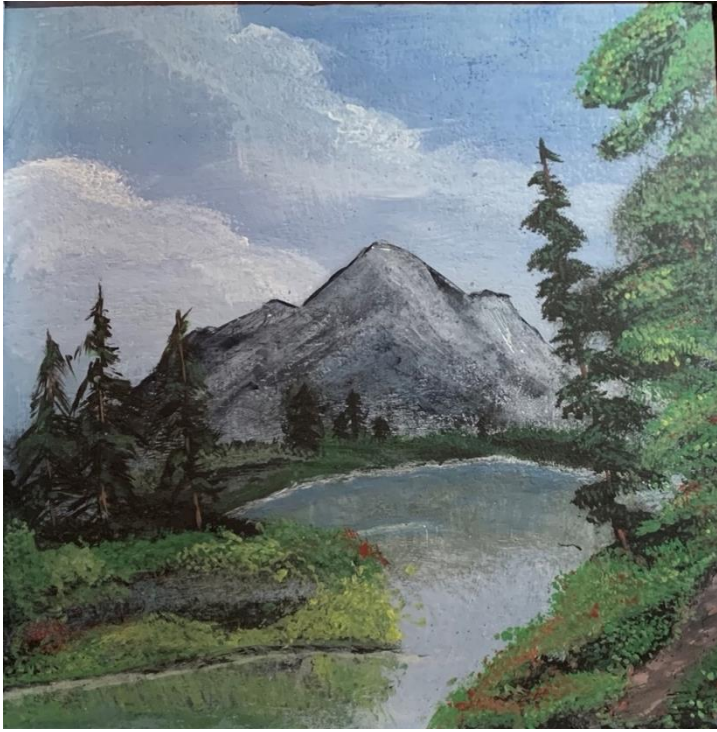
Taffy
By Megan Hale



Up
By Jade Mayeux

Daydream
By Savannah
Callaway





Mountain View
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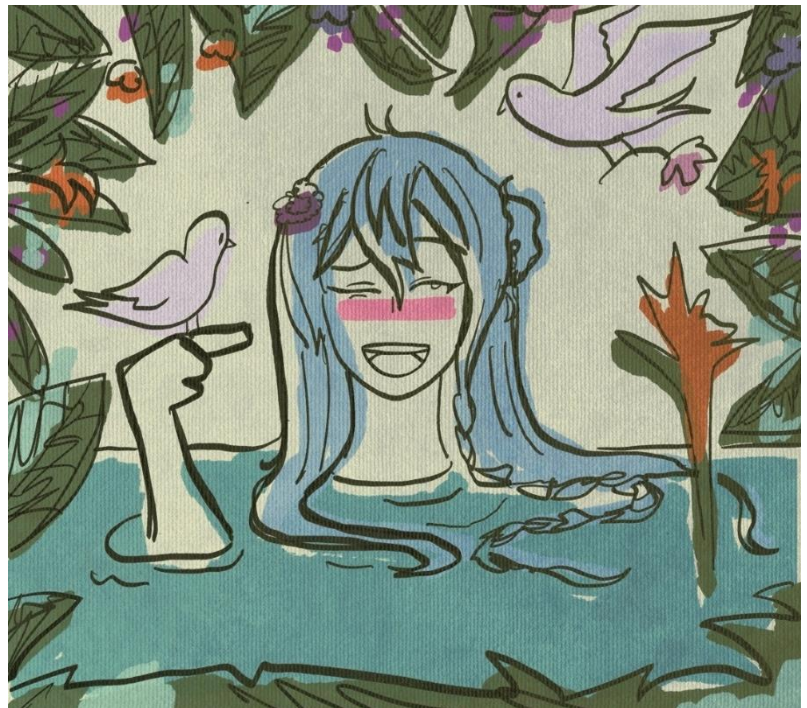
Valentine's Day
Cupcake
By Destiny Woodall





What is the
Measure of a God?
By Bethany Lambing

Sanctuary
By Bethany
Lambing



Photography



First Place: Spark Tree by Gabriell Guillory

Second Place: Lonely Barn by Jade Mayeux

Third Place: Black and White Ship by Kalli
Parker

Honorable Mention: Drip by Emily Ducote

Honorable Mention: Glowing Lantern by Kalli
Parker



1st Place

Spark Tree
By Gabriell Guillory



2nd Place

Revere
By Jade Mayeux



3rd Place

Black and White Ship
By Kalli Parker



Honorable Mention

Drip

By Emily Ducote



Honorable Mention

Glowing Lantern
By Kalli Parker



Untold
By Jade Mayeux

Shelby in a Hat
By Shelby Johnston





Estes Park
By Cailey Scadlock

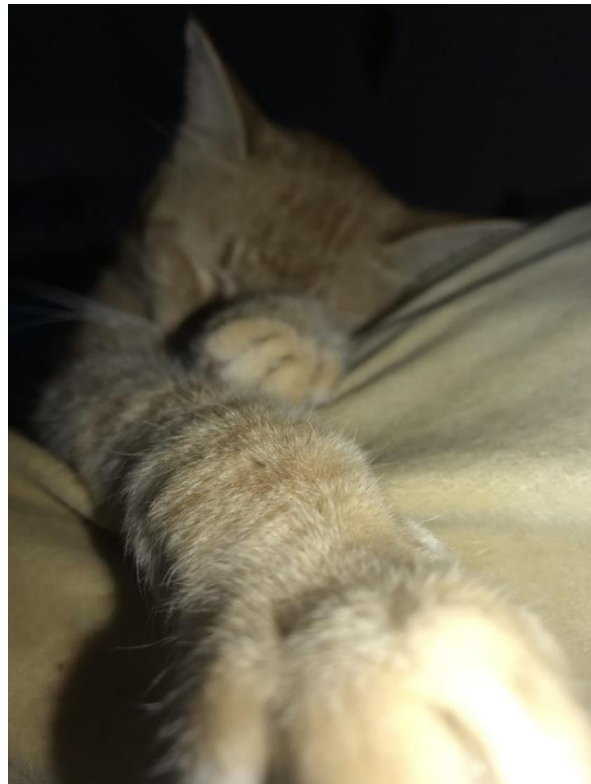
Radio City Music
Hall
By Gabriell Guillory





Space Frog
By Valerie Kendrick

Sleepy Kitty
By Kalli Parker





Cat in the Yard
By Kalli Parker

Tree Flower
By Kalli Parker





Leaves from Below
By Kalli Parker

Serenity
By Jade Mayeux





Old Scout
By Shelby Johnston

Red Book
By Gabriell
Guillory





Boulder Lights
By Cailey Scadlock

Brett
By Valerie Kendrick





Caged
By Austin
Souphanthalop

Manhattan
Beach,
California
By Valerie Kendrick

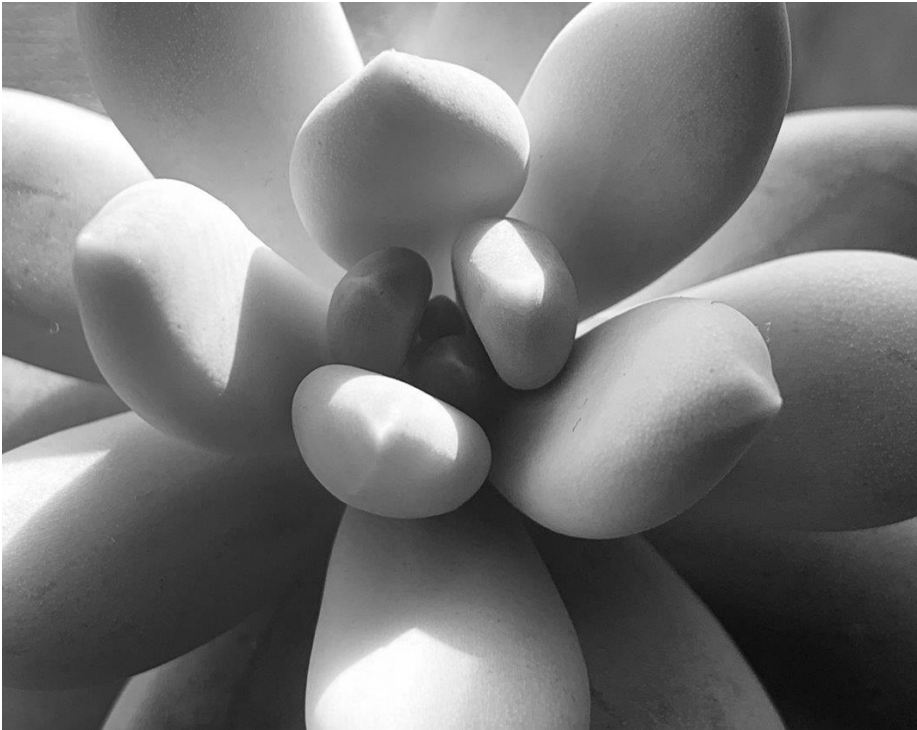




Moon's Eye
By Cailey
Scadlock

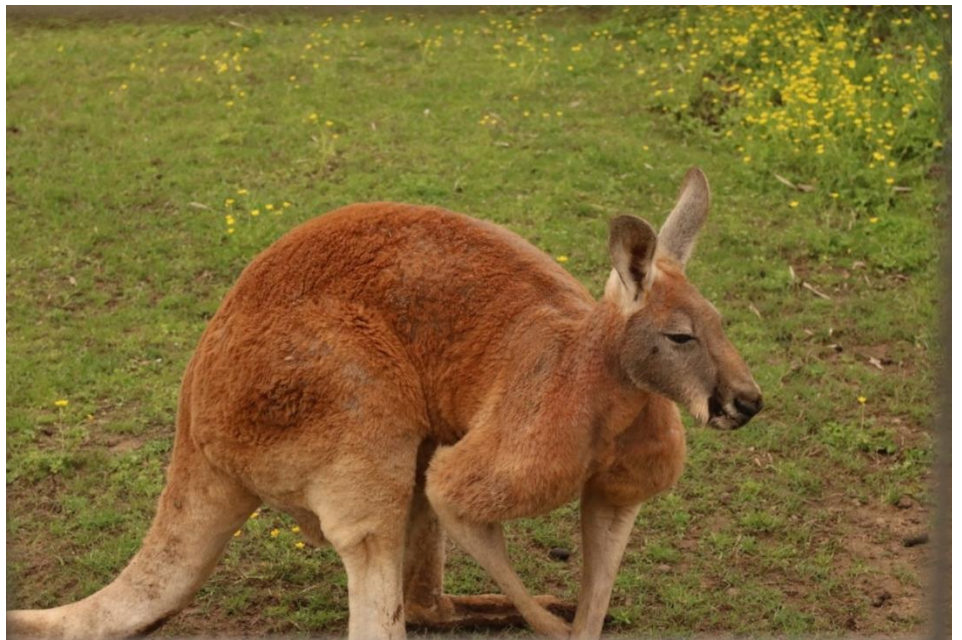
Dusk
By Emily
Ducote





Summer
By Emily
Ducote

Gone Wild
Safari
Kangaroo
By Kalli
Parker





Gone Wild
Safari Giraffe
By Kalli Parker

Beach Sunset
By Kalli Parker



Fiction



First Place: Red Roses by Elizabeth Elliot

Second Place: Red Nightmare by Tanek
Mouser

Third Place: Behind the Curtain by Kristina
Fuller

Honorable Mention: Pans on Aisle Five by
Tanek Mouser

Honorable Mention: Bury the Hatchet by
Tanek Mouser

Red Roses

By Elizabeth Elliot

"What are we?"

Citizens weren't meant to inquire. And even Youngers were considered citizens. It wasn't permissible, and without permission from the Elders to inquire, it was forbidden. As a Younger, things of politics and control mattered little to you. What was considered acceptable consisted of any and all topics.

"What are we?"

Your Youngerhood was plagued by that question, day and night, to the ambivalence of those around you. Your guardian, RayLl, didn't know, not like the Elders did. Of course, the Elders didn't have time for you. They didn't have time for anyone. Keeping The Gray in balance was an all-consuming duty. Everyone knew that the Elders had very little time to mingle amongst their fellow citizens.

But the Unelder had time. He knew better than anyone, and he was always available. He was the closest and only friend you had, up until the day of his passage ceremony. Your visits to him were frequent, daily, in fact. There eventually came a point where you didn't need to ask for anything, only to show up at his quarters. He knew what you wanted. "You want to hear of It again?" You would always nod. If the Unelder could have felt vexed by you, he likely would have.

"It used to be within all of us," he would begin the same way every time. "an essence which I cannot begin to describe. It was invaluable, and yet it was everywhere, interred in every Older and Younger. It was existence; nothing could replace It. At least, that's what the past believed. But at the Elders' behest, It was removed from us."

"Why was It removed?" You felt compelled to ask, despite knowing the answer. The Unelder would humor your childishness.

"As necessary as It was, It was found to cause divergence. No one knows why or how, but It caused citizens to act erratically and endanger the constructed order of things. It warped them on every possible level. Many of the divergents were eradicated as a result. Fearful of the safety of The Gray, the Elders removed It."

"Have you ever seen It?" That question was asked only once. The Unelder had given you a look that froze your thoughts. "No," he had muttered, "and I never will. It is no longer my concern to hold such knowledge."

The Unelder knew more than he was telling you. Even as a child, you knew what a secret looked like when you saw one. His words seared themselves into you like something you had no memory of and couldn't explain. On and off, the query presented itself, throughout your Youngerhood. Surely, it would leave you in tandem with your youth...wouldn't it?

"You're nervous." RayLl's stiff words pull you back into the now. She never asks questions. Not ever. She sees through you like glass and makes sure you are aware of it.

As always, she is correct. You are inexplicably terrified. Yet you lie. You deny your nerves. After all, RayLl can't really tell what the truth looks like. She doesn't really understand what "nervous" is. She has no concept, no frame of reference, for "nervous". In all truth, you don't understand it, either. But you know how it affects you. You are able to attach the label with the effect, the...feeling.

That was the term.

Feeling.

There was no indicator of where that word had come from. It had just always...been.

"I'm not nervous," you say, keeping your face quite blank, though your hands are trembling. "I've been Mended a thousand times before. I've nothing to be nervous about."

"That is an untruth." A horrible pause separated her words. You know your lie has been found out. "You have not been Mended one thousand times. However, your sessions are very frequent."

It's true, but the truth has never made you feel good about yourself, or anything else. It's just a reminder that you are alien, different, broken.

Broken minds need Mending.

That's what the Elders say.

They say it to you alone.

You, alone.

You.

Alone.

At random, it seems, RayLl crosses the room, grips you by your shoulders, and rotates you to face her. A low hum floats into the air as she begins to shorten your already shaved hair. "You must be presentable, especially when being in close proximity to the Elders. Your appearance is a reflection on me."

You don't like it when she shaves your head. When it grows out, it's fuzzy, and you find that texture relaxing. Sometimes, if she waits long enough or forgets, short pearl tendrils will reveal themselves. But very rarely does RayLl forget. Because your appearance is a reflection on her.

"Perhaps this session will be successful." She posits the statement as though she is hopeful, but she has no hope. Hope has never existed in her world, and it is becoming increasingly uncommon in yours. You mutter, "Perhaps..." and nothing else. You simply silently watch the thin strands of hair fall in front of your face. They shine in the artificial heat-light and glide away on the conditioned wind.

"I will not be attending with you today," She continues as she brushes the excess hair from your head and shoulders. "I have been summoned again to plea before the Elders on your behalf, concerning your behavior."

Again.

"I'm able to manage on my own. I've done this a thous...many times." You refuse to lie twice in RayLl's presence, at least, twice at a time.

She nods, without any disclosure of her thoughts. "You are presentable. Go and do as you're told. Do not become distracted."

Walking the distance to the Physic Centre is a walk of shame. Usually, when you are to attend a session, the Elders are merciful enough to set the appointment at a time in the day when no one else is about. Today, they were not merciful to you. Many citizens are out and walking, going from place to place, completing their tasks as directed. You rarely see them without a deadness in their eyes, and when you do, they are staring you down with complete and utter disgust. That is the only emotion they feel, you are certain. If they know nothing else, they know what is different. If they can do nothing else, they can identify the alien.

Different is despicable.

Alien is ugly.

They do it now. They rip you to pieces with their eyes, their gazes hellbent on the knotted scar on the back of your neck. It is a beacon, and it acts as a reminder of just how abominable you are. You wish you had hair enough to cover it, but even if you had, the citizens would likely still see your imperfections.

Never in your life have you more desperately desired sanctuary. The retinal scanner is activated and the double-doors are remotely unlocked for you. You practically shove your full weight against them and barely manage to remain on your feet.

"You're back?" The singular, blank voice carries well through the hollow structure. Alba is the collector at the Physic Centre. She ensures that citizens are where they need to be, when they need to be there, at least, as far as the Centre is concerned.

She would have sounded almost disappointed, if she could have felt such an emotion or defined the term at all. "I offer my condolences," she continues, as she walks away from her station. "Perhaps this session will be successful." Those are the same words RayLl said to you before you left your quarters.

All you can do is nod in acknowledgment, and sadly, that is sufficient for her.

You follow her down a funneling corridor that is just as pristine and simplistic as anything else one could find in The Gray. Everything is so blandly familiar, yet a single, nonsensical phrase prods you like a throbbing pulse: Red roses...

Red roses...

Red roses...

Red roses...

Nonsense, that is all it is. Just nonsense. "Red roses" doesn't mean anything to you. Neither are words. It is all nonsense.

Nonsense.

Nonsense.

Nonsense.

The harder you try to rationalize your thoughts and disprove your reasoning, the harder the nonsense resists.

ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...
 rOsEs... ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD
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 rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs... ReD rOsEs...

The Elder-appointed physician stands before you, where he usually does when you come to be Mended. It's dark, as always, and the vaulted dome ceiling makes the room abysmal. When you were younger, this room was terrible to you. Now, it is simply familiar.

"You're back?" His voice holds the same flat, almost disappointed tone that Alba's had, delivering the same message. Had you not known of their deadened natures, you would have taken it all quite personally. But, like before, you nod silently.

"I offer my condolences. Perhaps this session will be successful." The physician turns his back to you, knowing you are aware of what comes next. He is clueless of how jarred you are hearing the same three phrases over and over again. "Despite this," he says, "your guardian reports that you have shown improvement in your night terrors and obsessive tendencies. You are no longer asking The Question." You know exactly what question the physician is referring to, and he is correct. You've resisted the urge to revel in your Youngerhood and thin the air above the otherwise cloudy question marks. It is a crucial part in the Mending process, and you've done well thus far.

Why don't you feel proud of that?

Why is it not enough to satisfy you?

As if sensing your turmoil, the physician clears his throat and motions with an open arm to the padded reclining chair that is between the two of you. You don't have to be forced to lie back in it. You don't require sedation to relax against the chilled fabric. You don't need an outsider's suggestion of closing your eyes and taking slow, level breaths to stay calm. Years ago, things were different. You would thrash until your body ached and scream until your voice was hoarse. They would restrain your hands and feet to prevent you from hurting yourself, but you would continue to fight as though your existence depended on it.

rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD
 rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...ReD rOsEs...

ArE yOu LiStEnInG?

You are upright, gasping and trembling. The pain radiating through your body is nearly unbearable. A warm, liquid substance slides down your neck and back. Only once your senses are gathered to you do you realize that three familiar faces look down at you in the dark. The physician, Alba, and RayLl are struggling to hold you fast to the chair, looking as concerned as they are able to. Their lips are moving, but all you hear is the drone of that warped and nightmarish phrase. Your mind is receding further and further away from reality...devouring itself...

“Inhale.” The physician’s monotonous voice demands you to reassociate yourself with your surroundings. “Inhale deep, controlled, conscious breaths. Recall where you are. Recall that you are safe.”

“RayLl...” You strain your guardian’s name through heaving gasps. She hushes you brusquely; her face is the antithesis of comfort. You are allowed to remain upright, but six hands continue to tensely grip your skin. They hold you until you are able to breathe a bit easier. You are still trembling—never before have you seen your hands quiver so violently— but you are beginning to feel like yourself. Crisp, cool oxygen has flushed into the room, calming your nerves even more.

The physician examines you thoroughly by shining small artificial lights in your field of vision and checking for any superficial damage. Once complete, he says the words you didn’t know you dreaded hearing. “The process is incomplete, due to this disturbance. We must continue promptly.” The three begin to lay you back in the chair, but this time, you fight.

Thrashing and screaming, you struggle to break their grasp on you. You beg the physician not to throw you back into that nightmare. You beg RayLl to save you. You beg the Elders to show you mercy. But your pleas are completely unintelligible, even to you. Thirty cold, uncaring fingers bury into your skin and claw at you as they try to keep you restrained. Even when you manage to tear away from one hand, another seems to come out of nowhere and replace it. All the while, you can hear the physician shouting, “Avoid contact! Avoid contact! Whatever you do, avoid contact!” Amidst the chaos, a sedative is injected into your veins. Your body gives in almost immediately.

Your pulse slows.

Your thoughts freeze.

Your muscles slack.

Your nerves numb.

Something outside your field of vision occurs, and RayLl cries out in a voice more horrible than you’ve heard in your life. She collapses to the floor, cradling her arm. A substance of a searing shade speckles it. Alba rushes to her side and mistakenly touches her. Soon, she too is writhing in pain and screaming terribly. “Go

to the Elders immediately!” The physician’s voice is foreignly tense. “Immediately!” RayLl and Alba rush out of the room; it is the last you see of them. Through heavy eyelids, you see the physician tie thick restraints around your wrists, ankles, and chest. Once he is certain that you cannot move, he turns his attention away from you, without sparing you a solitary glance. You can do nothing but watch helplessly as your guardian leaves you to lose consciousness alone...

The other Youngers wanted nothing to do with you. For years, you tried to associate yourself with them, to show them that you were no different from anyone else. You learn their routines, their games, and their topics of conversation. You inserted yourself where you could and made efforts to contribute. But they wanted nothing to do with you. They would distance themselves from you. They would run away, always glancing over their shoulders to ensure you weren’t following them. They would point their fingers and cut their eyes at you; they were miniature replicas of the Olders.

Eventually, there was nothing to be done. You would watch them from your quarters until they learned of it and convened elsewhere. From time to time, you would see them, as you walked to the Physic Centre. They would be flashes of movement and shreds of sounds. They would see you and flee. Had it not been for the Unelder, your Youngerhood would have been spent completely alone.

Alone...

Alone...

Alone...

Will you always be alone?

The aching memories fade into an unfamiliar, fevered dreamscape. Nothing is as it should be. The soundlessness that constantly blankets The Gray is all but gone. The air has become a fury of lively, joyful textures. The floor beneath you is so vibrant that it seems to glow...

It is a new color...green.

Rather than being hard and plain like the flooring you’re used to, it gives way a little beneath your weight. Hundreds of fine tendrils press into your feet like soft needles. They seem to herald up toward the crystal-blue ceiling, which stretches further than your vision can take in. Your curiosity screams for you to satisfy it, and without hesitation, you do.

Your fingers, quivering with your anticipation, reach out to take one of the many little tresses. Their tips barely brush against the green, and your nerves are suddenly shot with pain. Out of shock, you draw your hand away as quickly as you can. Your emotions are so muddled that you can’t isolate or label a single one. The beautiful green heralds are blades...

You’re still in a state of wounded surprise when you realize you’re injured. There are deep gashes across three of your fingers, and a dark liquid streams from them.

In all of this, it is the only thing that is familiar to you.

You've seen it before.

It is red.

You watch, quite confused, as a single droplet falls from one of your fingertips and splashes against the green sea beneath it. That, in itself, intrigues you, the stark contrast between the two shades, how a single speck of red can stand out so strongly in the greenness. It's beautiful to you, more so than anything found in The Gray or anywhere else.

But the unexpected is far more beautiful.

Out of the redness, up from the green, bursts life, in a form you've never seen. It is comprised of spirals, dressed in something like satin, and is the exact color of your stained fingers. It stands upright and regal like a queen. Scarlet liquid drips from it, too, and as the drops land on the ground, more and more delicate, glassy stalks begin to reveal themselves. Soon, the green blades can barely be seen through the thousands of scarlet silk...things.

Roses.

The word comes to you like a distant memory.

Roses.

Roses.

Roses.

Roses.

Roses.

The roses are red.

Red roses.

These roses, they evoke a sense of serenity in you, something which hasn't been felt in a long, long time. It's a welcome feeling, one you fiercely wish you could hold on to. But just as quickly as the peace appeared, it begins to dissipate. You remember that despite all of the magnificence surrounding you, you are still deeply and desperately alone.

Alone...

Alone...

Alone...

Will you always be alone?

You are alone when you awaken, so perhaps. You're lying prostrate, your face pressing against an unforgiving tile floor. Your wrists and ankles are tightly bound, and RayLl is nowhere to be seen. Your memory is terribly misty, and the small pieces you do remember are nothing pleasant. The Elders were mentioned at some point; you do remember that, and it buries dread in your chest. It isn't the first time the Elders' presence has been requested regarding something you've done. But this is different. You feel the difference in your bones, and it aches.

What had you done?

What would be done to you?

Was your infraction irreversible?

Would you be eradicated?

Before your emotions engulf you, you force your mind to focus on the physical. What do you see?...Four walls, and nothing much besides. They are plated with sheets of metal, like the scales of an unnamed beast from a timeless story you've never heard. They act as a protective barrier on the beast, so perhaps that is their purpose now. But who do they protect, and from what?

Scales protect the beast from danger, from enemies who would do it harm. The enemies would see that the beast be destroyed. Their only chance at victory is to attack from within...

What do you hear?...Fresh air cycling in and out of the room. If you strain your ears enough, fragmented, incomplete sentences can be heard. There's no hope of understanding what's being said; you're simply too far removed. The voices are not at all familiar to you. They're dark, like nothing you've ever heard before. Neither in the real world nor your fantasies. You are deeply, intrinsically disturbed by such a sound...

What do you feel?...Many, many sensations all at once. Where your optical and aural observations had been few and far between, your physical assessments are infinitely available. The floor is hard and cold against your flesh. The conditioned oxygen in the room is crisp, so crisp that it almost hurts to inhale it. Your body hurts, too. Though your muscles have never been more relaxed, they are sore and twisted, making it impossible to feel comfortable. Above all, the back of your neck throbs with pain. You are still able to feel the sensation of that alien warmth sliding down your spine. The pain acts as a reminder of how cruelly you fought your fellow citizens, how you wounded RayLl...

The scales part like a sea just before you're able to destroy yourself with your thoughts. Two burly-armed citizens, whom you've seen before, enter into the room. They look at you, not with judgment, but fear, as much as they are able to. They lift you up like a leaf, demanding that you stand, and carry you out to face the Elder Court for the first time.

The Courtroom is vast and pristine. The walls, the furnishings, the light fixtures, everything, is made up of an opaque, crystalline material. Not one object in the room is any color but white. Nothing, save you, stands out. Nothing, save you, is unique.

You are forced to your knees at the center of a circular convergence formed by the slim, ghastly figures of the seven Elders. They are exactly as you pictured them, and even more terrible. They are epitome of blanched deadness, far surpassing any expression you've seen in regular citizens. Their eyes cut deeper into you than a thousand Youngers and Olders together. Their appearances are eerily similar; it is as though you have entered a hall of mirrors.

The world is silent for a long time, and it is agony; no one speaks, no one moves. The loudest sound is that of your heartbeat thudding in your ears. You don't know who will be the first to speak, but you are certain it won't be you.

"Have you the slightest understanding of what you've done?" The silence is suddenly shattered like glass by the Elder standing directly before you. "Are you able to grasp the sheer weight of your actions?"

"You've disturbed the equilibrium of The Gray," another Elder continues where the first has left off, "nearly destroyed it, in fact."

"You have irreversibly injured your guardian, as well as the collector of the Physic Centre and the physician. You have disrupted the peace of your fellow citizens and caused unrest to loom over us all. You have proven yourself to be an enemy of The Gray." Her words slash your soul, and she has hardly said anything.

"You are wondering how you've done such things," a different Elder speaks, "being only one citizen. To explain a matter as sensitive and precarious as that to someone as volatile as you, well...We would be sorely mistaken, to say the least."

"Consider yourself lucky that we are not inhumane, pitiless beings." The fifth says, with an obvious, scorning edge in his voice. "Against our better judgment, we have elected not to eradicate you."

"Still," the next Elder drones, "we simply cannot allow you to roam free in our fragile society, plagued by Questions greater than the ones you had before now. As dangerous as you are, something must be done with you."

"The sole solution, then, is to have you subjected to constant exploratory supervision, that a way might be discovered to Mend you once and for all." The seventh and final Elder's words bury in you the deepest.

You are no longer a citizen.

You are a creature.

A concept.

A source of study.

You are to be watched and torn apart, without falter, until this nameless destruction within you is itself destroyed.

"Please..." you begin, but are immediately silenced by the stoic citizen at your right. Had you any hair, he would've taken a fistful of it. Instead, his talon-like fingers grab ahold of your skull and force your head upward, so that you have no choice but to stare into seven pairs of gaunt, hollow eyes.

"Have you an objection to make?" The sneering Elder snaps his remark at you. "Would you like us to rescind our offer? Would you prefer to be eradicated?"

"The Court is being more than gracious to you." The droning Elder bores her gaze into the back of your neck; it feels as though the scars have been set ablaze. "It is in the interest of your own preservation that you remain silent."

You do just that. You clench your jaw, tighten your lips, and resolve not to say another word. Speaking will do you no good now.

"It has been decided," the seventh Elder says, "Citizens, you may take the delinquent away to the Research and Enhancement Zone, which you were shown. Should you encounter any resistance, you may use any means necessary to ensure the safety of all parties involved." The two citizens respond wordlessly. You are harshly lifted up by your bound arms and carried out of the Courtroom.

You will never enter it again.

They drag you like an animal down a hallway that resembles every other hallway. Almost all thoughts of fighting flee your mind. Even if you did manage to free yourself, you would not be able to navigate this maze before they caught you. You are brought into a windowless white room that resembles every other room, where several physicians have been waiting to receive you. As a last act, the burly citizens force you into a chilled metal chair, with which you are painfully familiar, and watch with numb satisfaction as you are restrained. You are left alone and at the mercy of emotionless strangers who view you as nothing but a scientific opportunity and a public enemy.

Things proceed in the way with which you are accustomed. Only this time, there's pain.

Horrible, horrible pain.

It shoots down your spine as the needle breaks your skin, spreading through your nerves like an infection. It is the kind of pain with which one can associate the words "white" and "hot". It is constant, undying, the kind of pain that siphons your will to live.

But a different, totally alien sensation overwhelms you more still. Something, something horrid, is being pumped into you. It's thick in your veins, making you feel weary and weighed down by it. It seems to fill every crevice in your body, like a caulk, with its tar-ish texture. Your skin feels as though it will split at the seams. This, too, is torturous.

A nightmarish sound fills your ears, and you realize that you are screaming. Try as it might, it does nothing to relieve the agony. In fact, it only worsens your situation. Out of nowhere, a thick strap is wrapped around your head and over your mouth. Some of it catches against your tongue and the taste reminds you of dirt and death. It is tied so tightly that you can feel it burying into your skin. Out of the corner of your eye, you see a bit of red, luminous and warm. It reminds you of that serene dreamscape and you desperately try to recall it.

Red.

Red and green.

Red against the green.

Red defying the green.

Setting itself apart.

Standing out.

Giving life

Creating roses.

Red roses.

Roses create more roses.

Life begets life.

Through your thoughts, you can sense a commotion. The physicians are tense; you can hear it plainly in their voices. They are saying the same words the physician at the Physic Centre used: "Avoid contact! Avoid contact!" One of them rushed over with a white cloth in hand. She gingerly pats the redness on your face, and you see it stain the purity of the whiteness. Then, like a divine vision, it hits you.

Was this It?

As in It?

The thing that was Removed from all citizens?

The thing that's existence plagued you?

Was this what years of your life had been spent searching for,

Was this the answer no one would give you?

It was.

It was.

It was.

All along, the truth had been within you. It had always been a part of you, ceaselessly flowing through you, giving you life.

Waiting for you to discover it.

Waiting for you to set it free.

It's time to set it free.

On impulse and without thought, you thrash your head as the woman moves to wipe your face again. A streak of red slashes her pale arm, burning brightly.

Red against the green.

She screams; it's long and terrible and sets a chill in your bones. It resembles your own very much. But as you watch, you see her skin begin to transform. A mellow, tan shade creeps along the surface of her arm, slowly, deliberately. It crawls up her neck and across her face, revealing colors of all sorts. Her lips are a muted pink, her hair brown, and her eyes blue. Dark spots playfully spatter her cheeks. She's beautiful, despite the terror cutting her expression.

Expression...

She's wearing an expression of emotion on her face.

She's feeling a real, true, deep emotion for the first time.

Perhaps that's why she's screaming.

Perhaps she's overwhelmed by it all.

Perhaps it hurts, filling an empty void to the brim with bursting sensation.

Regardless of what she feels, she is feeling. She is feeling because of the redness. The redness has awoken something that was dormant. Dead, even. It's why

everyone has been avoiding contact. It's why you were always viewed as a threat, a hazard. The peace of The Gray was never peace at all. It is an illusion. It is a matrix.

Doing as you must, you shove your head back against the chair, against the needle, and it buries its razor-sharp point deeper into your skull. Pain crosses like lightning over you, but you say within yourself that it is worth the reward. You take three deep, controlled breaths, all the while listening to the panic surrounding you and holding the dreamscape at the forefront of your thoughts. In a single, swift motion, the needle is torn away from your flesh. You hear the patter of hot liquid hitting the floor and you smile. The room becomes a radiant field, full of clustered red roses.

Red Night Mare

By Tanek Mouser

Neal awoke, panic freezing him in place. Panic from what, though? He was groggy, and all his sluggish mind knew was that something was wrong. He shook himself internally and took stock of the situation. He felt no pain, and his eyes were still shut, so there was nothing he could see that would be the cause of his now racing heart or the heat burning him up from within.

He was still for a moment, considering what it could be that had awoken him. Perhaps a sound had stirred him from his slumber? Or maybe a nightmare unremembered? Then it hit him. Since he had awoken, he had not breathed in. But why had he not taken a breath? His mind went to his throat, and he noticed something rough gripping his neck tight, crushing his airway, strangling him. Neal was being choked.

Fear pierced him like a knife, not the confused sleep-addled dread he had felt upon first waking but the panic of struggling for his life. He flew into action, his fingers grasping for the thing at his throat, tearing at the rough mass he found clamped there.

Blankets and sheets flew; his hands struck the wall, his bed frame, side table. Bruising them as he fought, kicking, flailing, battling for his life in the darkness. He struck away from himself with feet trying to find his assailant's body. For that's what it must be, an attacker, some dark figure bent to do him ill. He tumbled and tore, falling to the floor.

In his new position, he pushed himself away from the bed, dragging his body across the carpet, burning his back in his haste to be away. He came to his wall opening his eyes to the darkness before him. Shapes and shadows loomed before him undefined and unreadable in the pitch black of the night. He crawled his hand along the wall, above his back, until he found the light switch. Muscles tensing for action, panting out of breath, delirious and weak from fear and lack of air, he flicked on the light and found before him...

Nothing.

Save a tousled-up bed, pillows, sheets, and mattress thrown about and tangled together. Neal surveyed the room in disbelief a few times before standing. He blinked in denial and searched below the bed and even his closet, unwilling to believe he had been fighting nothing but bed sheets and air. He briefly considered the possibility that someone had made an escape through the door into the rest of the house but discarded the idea, as anyone trying to escape would have had to run right past him as he turned on the light, the switch being right beside his bedroom door.

Now walking to the bed, he surveyed it once more and, finding nothing out of the ordinary, he began the process of making his bed, finding, among the others, one of his blankets, a red, scratchy one, all tied into knots. He guessed that, in his sleep,

he must have somehow managed to slip this blanket around his neck and twist it until it began to smother him, his mind waking him in a panic as he began to asphyxiate. He unknotted the blanket and carefully made his bed, spreading out the blankets and sheets neatly and feeling the effects of the panic-induced adrenaline wearing off. He yawned. He was tired from the struggle, even more so than when he had first gone to sleep; the fight with the blanket had taken the energy out of him.

Turning off the light, he slipped into bed, pulling the covers right up to his neck. Soon, he began to drift off. Sleep pulling him down into the realm of unconscious, right as he slipped beyond that precipice of consciousness, right before he fully relaxed and faded into the realm of sleep, he realized he didn't own any red blankets.

Behind the Curtain

By Kristina Fuller

Charlotte's hand was starting to go numb. She really should have invested in a drill...or learned how to use one.

She had been plowing away with the Phillip's head for fourteen screws. It hadn't seemed like much at the time, but as she gazed at the remaining twenty-six, her hand ached in response.

"Time for a break," she said to no one in particular, standing and stretching her back arm over arm.

The room was a mess. Cardboard boxes and styrofoam flotsam littered the floor all around her half-built desk. She moved to the bookcase in the corner and ran her fingers over the spines. So many remained unread. A handful she had bought for Hector, thinking to stimulate in him a love of literature. In her view, it was an absolute crime the subject was not taught in the Mexican core curriculum, and she had so wanted to share that part of herself with him. But he had never found the time to read them.

Cracking open *Inca Culture*, the musty scent filled Charlotte's nostrils. She breathed it in with a sigh of pleasure.

Novels had always been Charlotte's escape from a mundane world. She could still remember the dramatic tones of her mother's voice as she read the thick book of fairy tales with gold glinting on the edges of the vibrant illustrations. As most children do when they get older, Charlotte learned to love the words more than the rest, creating a much more complex and exciting world within her own imagination than any artist could render. She had tried to write her own stories more than a few times but could never seem to accurately depict the fantastic worlds she dreamed of each night. A voracious appetite for story does not an author make.

Setting down the solid, textured weight of the book, Charlotte gazed out over the pieces of her life strewn about the room.

Peeking out of the top of one box was the familiar blue floral pattern of her four by six photo album. No one printed pictures anymore. These photos were collected more than twenty years ago, when her mother had gifted Charlotte with a small camera, and she had subsequently gone through a cataloger phase.

Inside were randomly taken photos, a snapshot of a different epoch known as the 1990s. Her grandmother always seemed to be sitting at the dining room table playing poker or checking her blood sugar. Her little brother laying on the floor wrapped in that ugly brown blanket, legs propped up against the tv stand, staring at a

twenty-inch Magnavox. There were a few of her eleventh birthday. Only three invitees attended, the only birthday party she had any memory of. There were some from the amusement park, where only two rides were tame enough for Charlotte to get on without severe anxiety. Her mother, the various Palacios cousins, and aunts and uncles were all featured in one photo or another.

Charlotte's father was notably absent. She only saw him once a year during summer vacation. He had gone and gotten himself a new family and was only a sporadic presence in her and her brother's lives. Same old story.

Her mother, on the other hand, was something of a mythical creature to Charlotte as a child. She was beautiful and always very loving, even when her children tested her patience to the limit. Charlotte remembered when her mom came to the day care every afternoon. She would come around the corner and smile, and it was like the sun had come up over the mountains. There was a big group hug, and Charlotte and her brother were so happy they wouldn't bicker for at least an hour.

As Charlotte grew up, she came to see her mother more as a person, with problems and insecurities like anyone else. Little did she know how her mother had hidden her loneliness and her fear. It wasn't until Charlotte went to college that her mother began to show that side of herself. And it wasn't until then that Charlotte became grateful for the man that her mother had married, who before had seemed like a gross intruder on a perfect life.

There in the corner was the cheap, stuffed tiger she had won at the rodeo carnival four years ago. A game of beer pong of all things. Apparently that skill was like riding a bike. Several years after graduating from college, her body had remembered the posture: knees bent, wrist tipped, eyes on the goal. Completely uncoordinated when it came to any real sport, Charlotte was a natural at beer pong. Hector was perplexed more than impressed, but she gloatingly gripped that tiger the rest of the night. It represented the only thing she had ever won, as well as the early days of their relationship. Back when things were simple and good.

Charlotte met Hector during a time of transition. She had just ended a nothing relationship and was working in a job she hated. She was taking courses at the local community college, because apparently a degree in Ancient History was never going to help her get a better one.

Charlotte was hanging on by a thread and chose that moment to go on an online dating site to find love.

At the time, she rationalized that she needed to start dating again because everyone said it was time to move on. By everyone, Charlotte meant her mother. Now, she wondered if she hadn't been looking for a relationship in order to find some sort of success in what she saw as a failed life.

Whatever the reason, Hector and Charlotte connected. At the time, he was a PhD candidate with a prestigious private university and lived across town. Even with the commute and other demands on his time, Hector couldn't get enough of Charlotte and made time to see her. It was the honeymoon phase, after which they broke up over a misunderstanding. Then they got back together for a year and a half, then broke up after he moved to Switzerland for his post-doctorate. Then, deciding they would try long distance, got back together. So on and so forth.

After six years, half of which were spent in different countries and different states, three break-ups, and many excuses later, here she was again, picking up the pieces. Charlotte thought it was love that always brought him back to her. Maybe it was. Love was certainly why she kept forgiving him.

He gave her little tidbits of hope that she held onto. He let her put a desk in his apartment, so she could work when she visited. She had her own drawer in the dresser. She had practically decorated the entire place, her touches noticeable in the crocheted blanket on the couch and the decorative wire basket holding his fruit.

But a girl can't live on crumbs forever. As much as Hector said he loved her, he still kept leaving her. Even now, when he was back in the States, he insisted on living apart. He still had excuses not to spend holidays with her and to keep her away from his family. Hector wanted to stay in their small bubble, no pressure, no commitments.

She could see now that he had been trying to tell her something, and she hadn't wanted to listen. Charlotte was listening now.

So, when Hector arrived home, Charlotte's clothes were gone. The home office was half empty, indentations still left in the carpet from where her desk had stood. The bookcase had been deprived of fiction. Only scientific journals and textbooks remained. The knick-knacks of hers that she had surreptitiously sneaked in were all missing, leaving the apartment all the more cold and emotionless.

He looked around, noting the changes but not yet understanding. Then Charlotte entered the living room, dragging a suitcase in her wake.

Pans on Aisle Five

By Tanek Mouser

The pneumatic doors wheezed open, and Henry walked inside. A veritable cornucopia of furniture opened up before him. A maze of desks, shelves, ottomans, rugs, and other accoutrements all separated by flimsy partitions made to look like different rooms of a house stretched on into what seemed like infinity.

Henry had come looking for a new computer chair. His had gotten old and worn out. It wasn't nearly as cushy as it used to be, and today, a wheel had even fallen off. Henry had been doing well for himself lately, picking up a little over time at work here, a bonus there, and felt that he could splurge on this. So here he was, at one of those big warehouse furniture stores, the type that had meatballs. Henry wasn't sure why meatballs and furniture went together, but the rest of the world believed that they did, so Henry went along with it.

Moving deeper into the store, Henry began to browse; he didn't see any signs to direct him, nor any employees, not even at the checkout counters. But for stores like this, that wasn't so odd, so he wandered, milling about past the displays for beds and mattresses, toilets, and stoves, even the ones for refrigerators and showerheads.

Little rhyme or reason seemed to be applied when deciding where to place the displays. Disparately different rooms were placed side by side, and coming to think of it, Henry realized, the ceiling was unthinkably high. This furniture store was two to three stories tall, and most of it was dead space, just air above the displays and people. Perhaps there was a code that said that furniture stores had to be a certain height. Henry couldn't think of a reason why, though. Perhaps there was something to do with fires, or perhaps the building had once been a warehouse or some sort of factory that had been converted into a furniture store.

So, he pressed on, continuing deeper into the store, passing more and more displays. Soon, he realized that he was lost. The displays were set up in such a way that each turn and corner cut off the line of sight from the one previous, and the walkways between the displays were set up in such a way that you had to turn in order to progress to one of the next display sets or back to the previous ones. Beyond that, Henry quickly surmised that the height of the display partitions was such that you would be unable to jump and grab the faux wall ledges or stand on any of the furniture to gain a view over them. Bringing all of that together, he realized he was surrounded, now, by a maze of fake rooms the only constants of which were the concrete floor forming the pathways between them and the distant ceiling with its florescent lights above, glaring down at him with piercing rays of white.

With no notion of which way he was now turned, no way to tell which path led deeper into the store and which led back to the entrance. With no other option but to press on through the store, he imagined that, eventually, he would either reach the

other side of the building and follow along the outer walls, or, even sooner, he might meet an employee who could lead him out.

“Now there was a thought,” thought Henry, “working in a crazy store like this, it could drive a man mad.”

So, Henry walked on, passing more room displays, some smaller, some larger, and before long, he was curious as to what time it was, so he pulled out his phone, only to find that it was completely dead. Not even the little “charge now” display appeared on the screen. All he saw was his reflection from the black glass. Had it been that long, or had he merely forgotten to charge it? The question plagued his mind, his chest tightened, and his heart began to race. How long had he been in here? He attempted to calm himself, took a deep breath and began to relax. Even if he had been in here with a fully charged phone, that would have only put him in here for an hour or two. The phone, after all, died quickly. Even straight off the charger, it died within a few hours at most, so that was the upper limit. A couple of hours at most. Likely, though, he was freaking out over nothing, and it had only been fifteen minutes, having, as he often did, forgotten to charge the phone.

So, once again, Henry walked on, that shadow of fear lurking in the back of his mind. How long had he been here? He had seen no one since he walked in. Could a store really operate with not a soul shopping? Certainly, the clerks could have been busy, but no shoppers? There should have been more people, right? Perhaps it was just a slow day, or perhaps he was the only one in the store.

As Henry mused on that notion, he realized something. Before now, he had seen a few plants, little fake plants for the displays here and there making the “rooms” look more lived-in. Before him now, though, was a real plant. All it took was a rub of the leaves to discover that. They crinkled and broke open, liquid squeezing out from inside them, wet and sticky between his fingers. Below them, too, was soil instead of filler.

How was that even possible? Who would water all of these, and they couldn’t get enough sunlight here, now, could they? Furthermore, why switch from low-maintenance fake plants to high-maintenance real ones?

Considering the light, Henry noticed something odd. The light. Now that he had stopped and focused on something, he looked up and—no, that couldn’t be right. There was no ceiling, no florescent lights. All that was there was just some sort of fog-like substance that looked much like a cloud. Henry rubbed his eyes hard and put a hand to his head. There was a cloud up there, and the light had changed too. Now that he looked, it was that sort of diffuse gray light like one saw on an overcast day. But that couldn’t be right. There was no way; the building had a roof. He was hallucinating or something.

His fear from earlier drug itself up from the depths of his mind, where it had been lurking, morphing now into terror. Henry was trapped in some sort of furniture maze, and he would never see the outside world again. So he ran, looking for an exit

past toilets and rugs and beds and curtains and all of it. He rushed past all of it in a daze. Until he fell, tripped on something.

He fell hard, sprawling on the floor, face in dirt.

“Dirt?” Henry asked himself.

He wondered at this new horror, pushing himself up. He looked around and saw that the floor had begun to crack, in some places cracking enough to be considered a hole, and in those holes was dirt, and in some, there was even grass poking up from the cracks and holes. The displays, too, had changed. Where once they were clean and ordered, they were now beginning to be overgrown. Moss and mold had taken root in parts of the carpets and upholstery. Vines grew over bookshelves and walls, and here and there, a tree jutted up not from a pot or planter but from the floor itself, roots buckling plywood display floors or concrete, displacing tile. The air, too, had changed. It was humid, and the fog or clouds from earlier hung in the air densely, obscuring all but the closest display.

Henry stood and brushed himself off. He wondered at all that was around him. There was something deeply wrong with this place. Not only the things within the place itself, but it all felt wrong, the atmosphere, the air, the way the light diffused through the fog. He felt unwelcome. With no other choice before him, though, he walked on. No longer running out of respect for his bruised body. A new terror began to overtake him. Not the hot terror that drove him to run but a cold dread that gripped his heart and set his muscles tense as piano wire.

Slowly he went, carefully walking, trying not to make a sound, as though the air itself, the very spirit of the building, store, place, whatever it was, might hear him and send him to some new hell.

Continuing on, the concrete grew even more broken, and the displays even more overgrown until, all at once, they stopped. The concrete ended as though he were at the end of the slab the store rested on. Before him, there was, as far as his limited line of sight could see, a forest. Complete with trees reaching into an abyss of fog above.

Tentatively, he walked forward, the dirt and foliage welcome padding to his feet, aching as they were now from the time spent walking on the hard concrete. A faint trail was his only guide as he moved deeper into the forest, no more sure concrete paths through the displays but a foot path between the trees.

All around him, he smelled the damp earthen air and felt a chill come into his bones, and now, the light began to fade. Fade until he was making his way through the forest almost blind, barely able to see the trail before him. Soon, though, he found he had no need of the trail. A faint glow came from ahead between the trees, seeming to flicker as though lit by flame.

Having no other beacon to make for, he made his way haltingly through brush and bramble, catching his clothes and body more than once on snatches and barbed vines. Always, though, he tried to keep quiet. He wasn't sure why, but he had the

feeling that something was wrong with this glow in the woods, and that wasn't to mention the feeling of unwelcome which had begun earlier. It had only grown worse as he had gone deeper into the woods.

Finally, the trees began to thin, and ahead, he saw a clearing, ahead through the branches. Figures were moving around within. Torches and a great bonfire illuminated the area ahead. He hid himself behind trees as he approached, crouching as he went, growing close enough to see the figures clearly. Some were human with robes and hoods, some with less clothing; others were human-like creatures. Here was a man, save for the cloven hooves he bore for feet and a pair of horns coming from his head. Another bore the entire head of a goat and was clothed from shoulders down, making it impossible to tell if he were man but for the head, and yet another had claws at the tips of her fingers and fangs that protruded over her lips. On it went, men and women, some with the features of animals, others normal as a man on the street.

Henry was rightly concerned by this but had expected as much. He wondered if, perhaps, he should introduce himself to the people. They could lead him out of the forest or at least help him find his way, and at the rate things were going, it was likely that he would simply walk until he died of starvation or exposure. Even if they did kill him, perhaps it would be quick.

While he debated the pros and cons of revealing himself, he noticed a woman tied to a post on the fringe of the clearing. She wore a simple white slip that billowed in the wind. She appeared quite young and beautiful.

Henry saw this and wondered why they would tie someone up, when his eyes alighted upon a large stone dais set before the bonfire, a knife laid to one side with a large golden bowl to the other. It took little to surmise that the woman would be sacrificed. That was why she was tied up, so she couldn't escape. Considering his options, Henry reasoned that, were he to reveal himself to the people in the clearing, he would likely either be killed or sacrificed with the woman, so his only true friend in this scenario was the woman.

His mind made up, Henry moved slowly and as quietly as possible, staying in the woods until he was right behind the girl, then moving out as low as possible right up to where the knot holding her to the post was located. As he grew close, the girl noticed him. He motioned for her to stay quiet, and she nodded her head in response. Quickly, he got to work on the knot, and after many tense moments of work, the rope finally let go, and the girl was able to wriggle her way loose.

They began making their way back to the safety of the trees, and just as they made it to the edge of the clearing, Henry felt something catch on the edge of his foot as he took a step. An impossibly loud rattling of leaves and crunching of foliage followed, seeming to echo throughout the clearing. Henry had caught his foot on a large dead branch that had been deceptively covered with leaves.

The light chatter and noise that had permeated the clearing until that moment stopped. Looking behind him, the people had all paused and turned, now looking directly at Henry and the woman.

Without thinking, Henry grabbed the woman's hand, and together, they ran through the forest. Tripping over brambles, stumbling over vines, they scrambled through the dark, dense underbrush until they found the trail that Henry had followed to the clearing in the first place. Henry need not look behind him to know the people from the clearing were close on their heels, evidenced as they were by their collective feet creating much noise as they chased them through the woods over the dead leaves and sticks of the forest floor.

After running for what seemed like an eternity, the forest eventually gave way to the concrete slab. Henry began to feel hope. Perhaps they could lose the people in the maze of displays. That would at least keep them alive for now, so Henry spurred himself on running faster, his lungs burning and muscles screaming at him with every stride. The woman seemed to be having just as hard a time as him, it seemed. At least as far as Henry could hear. She huffed and puffed right along with him, wincing as her bare feet ran over the sharp edge of a break in the concrete, but she remained right behind him, their hands never separating. But no matter how hard they pushed themselves or what random sequence of turns they took, it seemed that they couldn't lose the beings from the clearing.

Just as Henry began to feel it was hopeless, perhaps better to just turn themselves over to the beings than run themselves to the end of their strength in the labyrinth of furniture displays, just as he was about to give up hope, he glanced up and saw above him, dimly through the fog, the ceiling with its florescent lights, and while running, caught snippets of the displays which seemed to be losing their wild edge, becoming more normal, less overgrown, more fake.

With hope restored, Henry doubled down, spurring himself faster, pushing himself to run with all the strength he could muster. He hoped beyond any reason that, perhaps now, after however long he had been in the infinite corridors of furniture and the impossible woods of the forest, he could find the exit.

As he continued to run, he kept an eye to the ceiling and watched as the fog slowly receded and the ceiling grew closer, and then, as they rounded a corner, he saw it. A darkened empty storefront. Checkout counters deserted, and beyond those counters, glass pneumatic doors leading to a deserted parking lot, the moon hanging impassively beyond.

He pushed forward and risked a glance behind him. The people from the clearing were still on their heels, but he reckoned they'd have a chance if they could get through the doors, perhaps run into the street and flag down a vehicle, or perhaps the people wouldn't even pursue them beyond this cursed store.

They were through the registers now and almost to the door. Stretching out a hand, willing himself to the door as quickly as possible, he reached out his hand, contacting the glass, only to find a locked door.

Bury the Hatchet

By Tanek Mouser

The man went down easy. A single swift hit to the back of his head with the hatchet, and he was on the ground.

He was a simple-looking man. The coin purse jingling at his side had been his undoing. A grave mistake to carry coins in the open in these times or in these parts.

Brenston knelt down and picked up the man's coin pouch. "Feels heavy," he said, tossing it in his palm, listening to the coins jingle. "Shame we had to kill for it, but all in all's, a fella's gotta eat."

"Aye to that," Talc said with an air of finality.

They turned to leave the lonely alley and made barely two steps away before a voice called from behind them.

"Might wanna bury me, or at least the hatchet," a smarmy voice said.

Talc, Brenston, and Philips stopped, frozen in place. The alley had been deserted. They had been alone. Or had they?

After a moment's silence, hearts drumming as fast as horse hooves on pavement, tension building in the air, they turned, almost in unison, to see the man they had just killed standing over his own body. Shimmering in ghostly blue, opaque and ethereal, the man they had just killed had become a ghost.

Philips blinked, rubbed his eyes, and shook his head, Talc patted his head violently, and Brenston merely stood, his mouth agape, staring, and yet, the ghost remained there, a faint apparition floating a few inches from the ground, a perturbed look on his face, hands on his hips.

"Now see you here, sir," Philips said, wagging a finger at the spirit, the shock of the moment bringing out an authoritative streak, "you're dead, so get ye on before I have the church on ye."

"Get me gone to where?" the spirit questioned. "It's not like I have anywhere to get to now. I'll tell you; this'll be the last time I take a walk around town at this time of night. I swear, whole neighborhood's gone to shite," the spirit finished, shaking his head at his body, his face a visage of pure disappointment.

"You're a spirit now," Philips pressed on. "You need to do spirty things. You know, go to heaven, go to hell, maybe haunt your house, maybe get revenge on those who wronged you. But whatever you do, you shouldn't be here, right now, because you're dead, and we just killed you."

"We just killed him, so usually, ya know, ghosts, when they get killed, like, they haunt ya, ya know..." Brenston trailed off.

"I know what," Breathed Philips, rounding on him, exasperated by the interruption.

"Well...when you kill a guy, isn't there a chance, at least a lil' chance, they'll haunt you? So maybe since we, ya know, killed him and all, he's haunting us. Ya

know, revenge and all that, unfinished business, ya know. Perhaps he was a paragon of virtue, and he wants to effect one last change in the group of wayward strangers who killed him,” Brenston explained, gesturing wildly as he went. “Maybe he wants to, ya know, set us on the right path.”

“No,” the ghost said, shaking his head and folding his arms across his chest in indifference. “I really don’t care about you vagabonds one bit, but considering you did kill me for my money, which I’d rather not see go to waste being used by this repugnant city—I mean, they can’t even keep the streets safe—and I can’t stand criminals who get caught for ignorant reasons, I’m generously going to give you newly minted criminals some advice,” the spirit said.

“That’s the guy we just killed; he’s supposed to be dead and not blue,” Talc whispered conspiratorially to Philips.

Philips raised a hand and slapped Talc across the back of the head. “Grow a brain, man,” he said as Talc stumbled forward. “Now, spirit,” he said, rounding quickly to the ghost, “who are you who are so wise in the ways of crime and nefarious activities?”

“I am the dreaded bandit Raule,” the spirit said with a flourish.

“I haven’t heard of you,” Philips said.

“Nor have I,” Brenston concurred.

“I don’t know any Rau...Ra... Raulleleles,” Talc said with some difficulty.

“Well, you will hear of me, or would have,” the spirit said, a look of sadness flickering over his face for a moment as he glanced at his body. “Anyway,” Raule said, regaining his composure, “this body will be found by the constabulary if we don’t hide it, and the hatchet is quite bloody, so we’ve gotta get rid of them both... So, gentlemen, ideas?”

“Welllllllllll..... We could bury the hatchet,” Brenston said, scratching his chin, eyes turned to the sky, deep in contemplation.

“But in what?” Philips wondered aloud, twisting the end of his handlebar mustache as he considered.

“The...body...?” Raule suggested.

“Hmmm. Bury the hatchet in the body,” Philips said, narrowing his eyes in thought.

“Welllllll, all things considered, that’s what got us in this particular predicament, so perhaps not the wisest course of action,” Raule puzzled.

“It can’t really hurt to try now, can it?” Philips shrugged, jutting his lower lip out.

“I mean, I guess not,” Raule said. “I am already dead, after all.”

“Alright, then. Talc, give the body a thwack with the hatchet. Ya know, really try to bury the thing up in there,” Philips ordered.

“Sir,” Talc said, grabbing the hatchet and raising it above his head, then bringing it down with a low thud into the side of Raule’s body.

A little blood splattered, a little gore extruded, but the hatchet remained. Stubbornly jutting from the corpse.

“Status report, Talc,” Philips said.

“I am bloody, sir,” Talc said, snapping a salute.

“And the hatchet?” Philips directed.

“In the body, sir,” Talc responded.

“Very good…… Hmmm. Well,” Philips said, considering the hatchets handle, now jutting from the body’s side at an angle, “isn’t really gone, so not too much help. I guess remove it, Talc.”

Talc spent a moment pulling on the hatchet, grunting all the while, until he finally let go and straightened up into a salute once more. “Hatchet’s stuck there, sir.”

“Oh, that’s not very good,” Philips said.

“Well, I mean, it’s kinda made the body and hatchet a single entity, so not a total loss,” Raule shrugged.

“I guess not,” Philips replied.

“Now, what to do with the body?” Brenston considered.

“We could bury it,” Said Raule.

“That didn’t work so well for us with the hatchet. I mean, it panned out, but…,” Philips trailed off.

“Yes, but this time, we could bury it in the ground” Raule explained.

“Yes, but what would we use to bury it in the ground?” Brenston requested of the spirit.

They stood there for a moment, each staring off into space, considering the problem. Then Talc jolted back. An idea had struck him at stampeding-cow-speed. “We could use the hatchet!” he exclaimed.

“Except it’s stuck in my body,” Raule said, deflating Talc’s excited mood faster than it had come on.

They considered once more, moments ticking by in Sisyphean contemplation.

“We could always……use……Hmmm……Ah! A shovel!” Brenston shouted with the enthusiasm of a man rediscovering the wheel.

“Yes, but where to source one? The towns all rolled up for the night,” Philips queried. Silence once again descended on them as they considered the problem.

“We could always buy one from the…stores…that are closed,” Said Talc, breaking the silence as he reasoned his own way through the miasma the mind becomes when faced with a challenging situation.

“Hmmm. But where to get a shovel?” Philips said aloud, chewing on the problem as the words left his mouth as a tobacconist shews his newest leaf.

“Well, I’ve got a shovel!” Brenston said indignantly.

All eyes turned on him, tension becoming palpable on the air.

“You. Have. A. Shovel?” Philips said through clinched teeth, tensing his fists as he felt the blood go rushing to his ears.

“Yes,” Brenston said, an air of confused annoyance in his voice.

“We’ve wasted an entire minute of our lives trying to find a shovel, and you have knowingly had one the entire time,” Philips spat, quivering in anger, finger raised in accusation.

“No, you didn’t want to find one. You said, and I quote, “but where to source one?”” Brenston explained, narrowing his eyes.

“What’s! The! Difference?” Raule exploded, pumping his fist with every word as a butcher chopping meat, except this meat was a meat made of stupidity.

“Well,” Brenston began, sounding both disappointed and annoyed, very much like a schoolteacher having to explain a piece of maths to Timothy for the forty-second time in a week, “finding a shovel “implies,”” he said using the old finger air quotes, not that he knew what a quote was; the movement merely felt correct in the moment, “that you need a single one for use, whereas sourcing a shovel, as you stated earlier, “implies” the need to have a supply of them, perhaps a readily replenishing supply, as in a store; therefore,” Brenston explained, now steepling his fingers in front of his stomach as a merchant might when dealing with a difficult customer, “while I can provide a single shovel, I will not be able to provide a “source” of shovel,” he finished, the finger quotes making one last return.

The others considered his words and nodded, deflating, the tension leaving the air to be replaced with stagnant embarrassment.

Philips clapped his friend on the shoulder conciliatorily. “While it was not my intention for my words to be taken in the way they were, I now understand how they could have harmed your feelings. I am truly sorry.”

“I accept your apology and would like to, at this time, reaffirm our mutual friendship,” Brenston replied

“Of course,” Philips reaffirmed the reaffirmation.

Silence once again descended upon them as the revelations of the past few seconds sunk in.

“Well, we’ve got a shovel now. So that’s good,” Raule said, tentatively breaking the silence.

“So, I guess we just bury you now,” Brenston stated.

“Seems a little bit unceremonious. I mean, we’re not some gaggle of indiscriminate murderers. We could, you know, bury him with some circumstance. He did, in a way, feed us, after all, and especially seeing as we’ve made his acquaintance and all. I mean, would you not be hurt if three men, who killed you while walking upon a darkly lit street for your money, and who afterwards learned your name from your incorporeal immortal soul, just dumped you in a hole without so much as a word? Just a couple of quick shovels of dirt and “goodbye, have a nice afterlife,”” Philips spoke impassioned, tears welling at the corners of his eyes. “I for one would be hurt by

that. Can we not spare some time from our busy schedules of graverobbing, murder, and general vagabondery to usher this soul, this man, this friend of ours to the afterlife with a little pomp, a little circumstance, a little damn curtsy?"

The others were swayed and nodded their assent.

"I'd feel damn put out," Brenston said, sympathetic tears in his eyes.

"Well, then we'll need a few things. I'll find a nice spot to bury him," Philips began. "Brenston, we need your shovel, as a single item, not a source," Philips clarified, trying his best to be as clear as possible for the sake of his friend, and received an appreciative nod from the man, "and if you could, would you try to find some flowers? Maybe an item or two of significance to place with the deceased. Raule, could you come up with a eulogy, and we'll need a bible."

"Oh, I've got a bible." Talc said excitedly.

"Alright, then. Could you bring it here, Talc?" Philips requested enthusiastically.

Talc nodded emphatically.

"Alright. We've got an hour. Meet me here, and we'll carry the body to its place of final resting together," Philips instructed, and they departed to their respective tasks.

They met together once again at the appointed time. Philips had chosen the perfect spot, Brenston stood with a shovel on his shoulder and some flowers in hand, Raule held a piece of paper in his ghostly hand, and Talc clutched a thick book against his chest.

"Alright, Talc, help me with him," Philips said, grabbing the ankles of Raule's corpse.

Talc set the book down and grabbed the corpse's wrists, and they began walking the body, slung between them. A solemn silence descended upon them as they made their way outside of town, skirting the edge of a nearby forest to a hill near the edge of the woods that afforded a picturesque view of the nearby fields and the river that wound its way through them.

Philips and Talc set the body down and walked to stand next to the apparition of Ruale as it took in the area.

"What do you think?" Philips asked.

"It's the perfect spot. You never really think about where your body will end up when you die, but if..." Ruale paused and tilted his head, a smile spreading across his lips, "I mean, since I've had to pick a spot, this is it."

Philips nodded and motioned to Brenston to start digging the hole.

Within a few minutes, the hole had been dug, the corporeal men having taken it in turn to dig with the shovel.

"Alright, lads, it's time to say goodbye," Philips said, clapping the dirt from his hands.

With heavy hearts and eyes full of tears, they gathered around the body.

“I…It feels like I barely knew him,” Brenston choked out.

“I know what you mean,” Philips sympathized.

“He was kind of an ass but probably the closest confidant I ever had,” Raule began, a distant look in his misty, transparent eyes. “I’ll always miss the way he brought me wherever I needed to go, bought me food, nursed me back to health when I was sick, and was always there when I needed him, even in my stupidest plans and darkest hours. I like to think he’s still out there somewhere, listening to us. Maybe even standing right here next to us.”

Talc nodded, looking down at the limp form, his eyes watery, lips drawn in a quivering frown.

“Why the good must be taken from us so early!” Brenston yelled to the heavens, falling to his knees and pounding his fist into the ground.

Philips grabbed the man’s shoulder and squeezed it. The affair was almost too much for him. He could feel the wetness coming into his eyes and the tension of muscles all across his body. Even an ache began forming in his chest. He was holding his emotions back, but it wouldn’t remain that way for long. “Come on, boys, before the emotions get the best of us. Let’s proceed with this,” he managed in a low voice, choked with emotion.

Brenston stood, and together, he and Philips placed the body in the grave. “I’ll start with the eulogy if that’s alright with everyone,” Raule said, and they all nodded their assent. Raule cleared his throat and began to read from the paper he had brought with him, “Raule Joseph Remrent, the third esquire Jr, the bandit lord, flame of the northern coast, ecclesiastical scholar, aspiring artist, amateur carpenter, adamant atheist…” Raule paused for a second and looked down at himself with a frown and, pulling a pen from some ghostly pocket and scribbling for a second on his paper, then replacing the pen and clearing his throat, continued, “ex atheist, current questioning spiritualist, was many things: a badass, a leader to wayward souls, captain of his towns racketeering ring, and a friend. He is proceeded in death by his pet Yorkshire terrier, Mr. Fiddles Pumpelfiquestin the Eightieth. The thing that always struck me about Raule, aside from his dashing good looks, impeccable sense of humor, wit, poetic timing, never-ending array of skills, and ability to always be the most impressive person or thing no matter where he may have been, even in the presence of kings, scholars, or the natural beauty of the world around him, was how he took an interest in me. Specifically, I never found myself wanting. When I was cold, he found me a place to stay. When hungry, he fed me. When in want of company for the night, he found me a woman. It was this overwhelming sense of my needs that I will most remember him for. I can stand here with complete certainty that, had he met you before his death, he would have swindled you out of everything he could and stolen the rest. And you may ask yourself, “For whom?” Well, for me, of course. Friends, we have lost not only an accomplished bandit, artist, ecclesiastical scholar, carpenter, and ex atheist, currently questioning spiritualist, but a member of the

criminal community, and dog dad. God rest Mr. Fiddels Pumpelfiqustin the eightieth. Few can rival the number of heists, break-ins, shakedowns, and all other types of criminal enterprises. Friends, we must always remember that, though his corporeal body is leaving us, he will continue to live on, at least for the foreseeable future in...me."

A respectful silence was maintained for a moment before Philips broke it. "Talc, if you'll hand me the bible, I'll go ahead and do the final reading."

Talc handed him the bible, and Philips opened to the first page, wondering what an appropriate reading for a funeral was when he noticed something not right about the book he held.

"Talc, this isn't a bible; it's a dictionary," Philips said, looking at the man.

"Oh yeah, open it to page twenty," Talc said smugly, folding his arms across his chest.

Philips did so and glanced down at the page, skimming over the entries, "Talc, this is the definition of the bible, not the bible itself."

"Same thing, innit?" Talc maintained, completely nonplussed.

"Not really," Philips replied.

"It's just gonna have to do, I guess," Brenston shrugged.

Raule nodded. "As an ex-atheist, currently questioning spiritualist, it's what he would have wanted."

Philips cleared his throat and began, "Today, we'll be reading a few entries from the book of our language, encyclopedia Engliedia. First, a reading from the beginning. Beginning; one, noun: a point in time and space in which an object begins; two, adjective: new or inexperienced," Philips then flipped through the book a few more pages and found the entry he was looking for. "Now, a reading from the most holy of passages. Holy; one, noun: dedicated or consecrated to God or a religious purpose; two, exclamation used in surprise or fear; example: "Holy cow, that farmer grew a really big pumpkin,"" Philips flipped through the book once more before coming to rest on an entry he thought was perfect. "Finally, a reading from an obscure part of the text I believe our dearly departed friend would have found most appropriate. Larceny; one, noun: the unlawful taking of property with intent to deprive the lawful owner of said property permanently. These have been readings from the most linguistic of our books, may our speech and language be guided by it always, grammar."

"That was beautiful," said Raule.

Bresnton knelt and placed the flowers on the body's chest, folding the arms over them.

They each took a turn and placed dirt over the corpse until the dead man was fully buried.

When the work finished, the sun was just beginning to rise on the horizon.

"Alright, lads, let's go into town and have a drink. It's just a shame that all this

couldn't have been avoided. So young," Philips said, and all together, Brenston, Philips, Talc, and Raule turned and departed, their gold clinking in their purses.

Poetry

First Place: Nastic Movements by Austin
Souphanthalop

Second Place: Mr.Nightingale by Ji'Bril Harris

Third Place: Fire and Water by Moriah Dorsey

Honorable Mention: The Things That Surround
Us by Austin Monk

Honorable Mention: Algebra by Matilla Wiley

Nastic Movements

By Austin Souphanthalop

I awake from my slumber
 When the European Merops
 sing,
 When the whispering winds
 Jostle through the oak tree's
 deciduous leaves
 When the white lilies surrender
 To mother nature's waltz.
 You spare your luster into
 forbidden waters,
 Protected by those surfaced
 pads,
 Sunken grounds of fostered
 wildflowers When the glisten
 fades,
 And the cracked reflection will
 barricade
 Itself from light's penetration
 Which intensity is sharper than
 glass,
 Which love is richer than
 beauty,
 Until the moon eclipses the sun.

Soon he'll take over,
 And Autumn leaves will age
 And sung melodies will prolong
 And our white lilies will float
 In nastic movements.

Mr. Nightingale

Ji'Bril Harris

Mr. Nightingale
 For whom do you sing your
 starlit spell
 Is it the mist?
 To guide those laid to rest from
 eternal restlessness?
 Perhaps it's a fog
 To help those innocents lost
 Cowering from those, lurking
 Amidst the bog
 Can you tell me what you see?
 The Thousand eyes
 unbeknownst to me?
 A piercing note
 Am I meant to flee?
 For whomever
 May your symphony never
 cease to be

Fire and Water

By Moriah Dorsey

you want to compare me to fire
 “you’re fierce it’s how you were
 wired
 hot blazing uncontrollable
 don’t touch her, she’s
 dangerous, destructible”
 because I decided to say what
 was on my mind
 I get to the point and I don’t
 waste time
 and I’m sorry if that sends
 sweat down your spine

you want to compare me to a
 hurricane
 “your emotions so strong they
 upset the oceans
 your tears fall like explosions
 your reasons for disruptions
 has no substance”
 all because I made myself
 vulnerable
 explained to you how you were
 treating me unfavorable
 but since I let a tear run I’m
 uncontrollable
 I’m sorry if me making you
 accountable makes you
 uncomfortable

you want to compare me to
 these things
 that by nature were made to be
 extreme

but you need to understand
 that by design I was meant to
 beam
 I was meant to feel
 I am the supreme with no
 between
 and I’m sorry if you cannot
 stand the force of a women
 or the brightness of her flame
 so unless you’re willing to lose
 your vision to my glisten
 or feel the strength of my
 ambition
 do not light a match or call on
 the rain

The Things That Surround Us

By Austin Monk

Your misery was trapped
 In tangled up wires,
 Wound tight like vines;
 Crumbled sheets of leaves
 In an ashy rain that
 Drip down on a forest.
 And the two stood at the foot
 Of the base of a tree,
 Spent lifetimes in confines
 And shackled-up scenes.
 Words scattered the floor
 In smothered debris, He
 keeps a book of all the
 things His eyes have failed
 him to see.
 But can't you see?
 Isn't it a bit useless now?
 Have we thrown away all of
 the good things
 And replaced them with
 utopian figurines Built from
 the wreckage of the disputes
 We handled so poorly, only
 yesterday? Haven't I gone
 insane?
 To see you on the verge But
 not catch myself hurt you?
 I guess it's funny when we
 beg. I guess it's good to
 regret.
 But, this time, you said,
 "You've pried into this hole
 inside me Opened it, and tore
 my insides out.

And now they lay on this grass
 carpet To remind me of the
 ways you made A safe place:
 Fate, chased, and designed it
 differently;
 'Disparity.'
 And have you no shame?
 To see a soul so tongue-tied;
 you lied
 And said, 'it's alright.'
 But it's fine; it has happened so
 many times." "And now I have
 nothing.
 There's no excuse for the way
 things are.
 How far have I gone for my
 pleasures? Seeking answers
 wherever And I never find
 them.
 Left worlds between us and still
 felt no signs That things can be
 altered.
 And, we can't hide from the
 things we've said
 In desperate moments,
 Now circling my head.
 These trees around us wither
 With the same carelessness I
 shoved down your throat.
 Our hands were soaked in the
 dirt And I can't find a reason
 Why didn't I clean mine?
 I was flirting with disease
 But didn't see how unkind these
 things are.
 And your blood was turned to
 ash."

"You injected the dirt into our
 bodies! And, I'm afraid I'm just
 not strong enough To overcome
 the needle this time.
 I just can not find the same
 strength
 I once had
 To feel the same way I did.
 I cannot commit to this promise
 If I cannot even see it I just don't
 have the heart to say 'no.'
 I will always love you,
 Although, I'll never love the
 way I felt.
 Life is so much more
 Than what is happening right
 now.
 And, right now, I'm losing
 focus."

Algebra

By Mattila Wiley

Sitting here trying to decide if
 $y=x$ or if $x=\pi$.

They told me this is math, so
 why is there a z ? Please,

can someone also tell me what
 $y=mx+b$ means.

I have equations, quadratics and
 point slope form

but I'm dreaming of the day
 when addition is the norm.

My brain is in a knot, my eye
 begins to twitch.

I've got to learn these formulas

and I've got to learn them quick

but then someone throws a ∞
 into the mix!!!

$\tau!!\%#\@*\&!!\varphi\sigma\int \llcorner\varphi\epsilon\infty\varphi\cap!!!$

The Things That Surround Us Reprise By Austin Monk

Every day is the same
 I am lost in this strange place
 Thinking how you made a safe
 place; Fate, chased, and
 designed it differently;
 Disparity.
 And have you no shame?
 To see a soul so tongue-tied-
 you lied
 And said "It's alright."
 But it's fine; it has happened so
 many times.
 Every day is the same
 Yet, I'm not used to this pain.
 What's the point of it all?
 I am lost and cannot find a
 reason to stay. It's so
 uncomfortable to see you Not
 living with yourself.
 Every moment I spend here
 I'm breathing into your hell.
 And, well, I'm feeding its
 swelling
 Needing someone to tell me
 'It's alright!'
 I will always love you,
 Although, I'll never love the
 ways I felt.
 Life is so much more Than what
 is happening right now. And,
 right now, I'm losing focus.

Aurora By Austin Monk

A sunbeam dressed in waste;
 Tumultuous flame stitching
 holes into your face.
 Erased and kept safe: a frantic
 dormancy.
 To cut my heart open
 And wait to see if it will bleed.
 And I lay here, cold, on this bed
 of ash;
 A desolate star falling victim to
 nothing.
 Obscured Aurora-
 How could clouds falter this
 way?
 To cut my heart open
 And see the yellow blaze.

Chagrin

By Austin Monk

Dark arts painting me, I stitch
 myself together
 Just to feel myself bleed.
 It's obnoxious: I'm nauseous;
 Anxious to want something else
 Because every time we fought
 You'd throw me away
 And say you've fixed
 everything. Is that what I mean
 to you?
 That's not what you mean to
 me!
 I'm so in love with all these
 memories.
 Dark hearts swelling, Torn
 through obscurity.
 My insecurities envy your
 insincerity.
 I lack the will to need, Yet I
 need the will to leave.
 But, I'll live.
 I'm opening the door
 From my soul into yours
 I hope you'll accept me this
 time.
 I victimize myself; My eyes
 stare into hell;
 This time I'm the one who
 needs help.
 The worst part of my soul
 Is the best part of this poem
 I confide in you the place I call
 home
 This pace is familiar
 My face has grown so cold
 All I need is something to call
 my own

Omniscient

By Austin Monk

I wish I could be another
 human;
 Not just another cloud in the
 sky.
 The tide is high; it's never-
 ending. I wish I could be
 another human.
 Can you feel the shores are
 muddy?
 I guess that's what happens
 when we bleed.
 You know, we're all clouds
 And when the rain is coming
 down, It's like we're bleeding.
 I just want to be someone
 Who doesn't always feel
 ashamed. I feel this way way
 too often.
 I just want to be someone
 Who can make a difference
 Indifferently, in different seas
 But you see
 Darkness cannot drive out
 darkness.
 That's why I'm always clouding
 over the sun.
 And you see that we can't
 breathe
 Because I am bleeding where I
 am And it is raining where you
 are.
 I'm so sick of seeing scars.
 Why don't you tell me who I am;
 what we are?

Relapse

By Austin Monk

Can you feel the movement
 Draining from your skull?
 It's so hard to breathe when
 you're alone.
 This time I'm taking back
 Things of what I meant to be.
 Yet swallowed in gulfs and
 flames,
 Ashamed of what is me—
 Walls stretched of white noise
 Painted across an empty fabric
 of time. My hand was a ball of
 dough
 Met with ashes and smothered
 in wine. We created our voices;
 lusting choices In the cavern of
 our minds.
 I hear you laugh and say
 "It's fine— it's fine— it's fine!"
 I fear my heartbeat's stopped
 And clearly feel this empty drop
 of blood
 Pour out onto the pavement;
 I did this for you To show you
 what you've done to me.
 I feel it around yet I feel
 nothing.
 Stitched onto this covet: your
 hollow promise. This feeling
 surrounds; I'm feeling
 weightless.
 I'm feeling worthless.
 Was it worth it?
 Or was I just nervous?
 Was it on purpose?

You pulled apart the curtain,
 hurting,
 Choking, hoping everything's
 alright.

Alpine Meadow

By Austin Souphanthalop

Taiyotos Mountains,
 Your northern winds carry
 The faint aroma:
 Herbs from hills
 Vapors from villages
 Flowers from fall.
 Beyond, cities and seasons
 Watch over the summit.
 From below,
 Black Night grows.

I ask of you,
 To place me in a bed of snow
 To let me sink into the ground
 For I will be found
 In your sophistication
 And your culmination.

Replace this blanket of snow
 With your vision,
 Revealing the alpine meadow
 beneath me,
 And I shall reach my hand
 Out of the crevices of limestone
 And the bark of plane trees
 To preen my leaves in your
 light,
 To bathe my roots in your rain.

Inward

By Ji'Bril Harris

I burned all the bridges
 Watched their ashes smolder
 To feel the warmth one last
 time
 Plunged to the murky torrents
 Let the riptides tear me apart
 Let the currents fill my inner
 depths
 Icy shackles guide me deeper in
 the abyss
 To the purest isolation
 Who am I in your absence?
 the warmest embrace possible
 A hearth found within two arms
 and ten digits
 A fire to ward off any cold
 A inner blaze burning hotter
 than any bridge
 A light brighter than any abyss
 I burned all the bridges
 To build a flame within

Panhandlers and Rocketships

By Emily Prior

Panhandlers and rocket ships
 are a warning sign
 All the purpose I created for
 myself, gone
 I don't want it anymore, I've lost
 my place in line
 I don't have the energy to live
 in a man's world anyway
 I said I'd write the path to mars
 But they won't make an
 Oppenheimer out of me
 What else is there in this world?
 Garage science and a shitty job
 I don't want to find out
 If it's easy to ignore suffering
 among the stars
 A head caught up in the birds
 and the bombs
 They don't tell you that one in
 school
 There is no room in this world
 of panhandlers and rocket ships
 I don't need a telescope to see
 that
 Bombs here are made from
 intersectionality
 But they can't have a single one
 out of me
 I miss craving wonder in the
 universe
 Dreams of a vast expanse to
 feed my ambition
 But my dreams will always
 serve the
 I wish they told me that in
 school

Backwards Poem

By Savannah Ward

This is a backwards poem
 Nothing will make sense
 because
 A poem should face forward but
 This poem does not follow the
 rules.
 This is a backwards poem
 One that should start from the
 top
 Unlike a regular poem
 This one will make you think
 This is a backwards poem
 Don't start at the top because
 This poem starts here.

Bad Dream

By Devin Stewart

I've never felt so unaware
 Lies to myself said I care
 Try hard to play it off
 I couldn't keep my cool
 But understand How I did it
 Girl ain't nobody gone compare
 Don't know this feeling I've
 been feeling lately
 A want for something
 Almost drove me crazy
 It first kicked off
 And it was so amazing
 You're like a drug
 I'm gone lie I was sedated
 Promises made to be together
 That we broke
 Separated by emotions
 From secrets that went untold
 Miss the times we were
 together
 Never thought I see you fold
 Never thought I'd see this day
 You went away And I've been
 cold
 I been so shallow
 I been lost without a trace
 Out chasing shadows when it's
 cloudy
 I'm ducking on sunny days
 Keeping my distance from my
 people
 Don't want them to see face
 Cause I don't recognize the
 person
 When I'm starring in my face
 It's clear to see

Not hiding what's come to be
 By myself dealing with sorrows
 I can't let you know I'm beat
 Ride around all by my lonely
 Had to find my therapy
 Stacking money
 While I'm thinking that I'll never
 thought you leave
 Wake up wake up wake up
 It's a new day
 Roll one up and face one
 Make some new pay
 Still don't wanna break up
 I just want you bae
 I can't be a playa
 Feeling This way
 And though I know I cannot fix
 it
 Still ima set out on that mission
 The things I did I shouldn't have
 did it
 If I was you I wouldn't forgive
 me
 If I had loved you then I never
 would have done it
 Is what you told me
 right before you turned around
 and took off running
 That's when I broke down to
 myself
 whispered I should have seen it
 coming
 I Should have come straight
 home to you
 Instead of fooling with that
 woman
 I'm all alone
 No messages on my phone

No calls, no voicemails, just
echos from off da wall
Just a tossing and a turning
Then I woke up out my sleep
Over my shoulder saw you
sleeping
So I pulled you close to me

Pet Peeves By Savannah Ward

“Got any pet peeves?”
I asked my friend Jeeves.
Sitting back, he looked at me
And clicked his pen upon his
knee
And smacked his gum and
chewed his pen
Just when I thought it was the
end
He made a fist, stuck out his
pointer
(If he had a wife he’d disappoint
her)
How he shoved his finger in his
nose
And wiped the snot right on his
clothes.
“Pet peeves?” he started
(Before he lifted up his leg and
farted.)
He scratched his chin and then
was done
“You know, I don’t think I got
none.”

Survivor

By Seneca Cox

I'm a survivor
 Spent so much time
 thinking "I'm just tired"
 thinking "I'm still fine"
 I didn't see
 The fear, the flight—the fight
 Ahead of me
 But I'm still here,
 and I no longer fear
 Whatever life can throw at me
 after this year,
 since I have nothing to fear,
 'cause I'm still here—
 This year—
 Next year—
 I'll be here.
 I'll be alive next year.
 So I'm a survivor
 Of this trial by fire
 Of living life on the wire
 Of my own self-ire
 But I'm still here
 To hear
 To cheer
 To help others worse for wear
 These past long nights
 of my life,
 I persist despite
 the tight-
 rope I walked so many nights
 But I'm still here.
 I no longer fear
 The change each year—
 So I'll cherish those still here—
 still near,
 Those close to me, that can
 listen—that can hear,
 That can feel and understand

That know the weight
 of "I'll be alive next year—"
 I'm still here.
 I can cheer
 For those who drew the line so
 near—
 I'll be alive next year.

Parts

By Savannah Ward

Momma's eyes,
 Daddy's nose,
 Toes just like cousins Seth and
 Rose.
 Grandma's hands, Grandpa's
 feet
 I guess I just am not complete!
 Auntie's teeth, Uncle's hair,
 Ain't even my name in my
 underwear.
 Hand-me-downs from big
 brother Jim,
 Guess I got my rear from him.
 This ain't right, this ain't fine.
 None of my parts can I call
 mine!

Thumb Wars

By Savannah Ward

The day of the quarrel
 Was the talk of the school
 Some kids didn't care, but some
 said it was cool
 The day the thumbs went to
 war.
 We leapt into action
 We rounded the troops
 At a quarter to three,
 Near the basketball hoops.
 The day the thumbs went to
 war
 Was a scary day indeed.
 The left thumb cowered in fear
 And the right one took the lead.
 They prepared for the battle
 And off they went
 Blastin' their cannons
 Oh, what an event!
 All the kids watched
 And all the kids cheered
 Some found it funny,
 Some found it weird
 The day the thumbs went to
 war.
 I can't tell you the victor,
 Which thumb won or not
 All I know is they got tied up in
 knots
 The day the thumbs went to
 war.
 Because of this knot
 They couldn't get loose.
 And both of the thumbs
 Had to call it a truce.

A Poet's Tree

By Seneca Cox

Take me
 To the poet's tree
 Where (its) writing stretched
 Across the sea
 A forest made
 For you and me
 We added our notes—
 We added to the tree
 A place that seemed
 So lively and free
 No longer able
 To ID
 And now it's just me.
 How can it be?
 This place we'd been—where we
 thought we'd always be—
 We'd leave.
 And now it's just me.
 What happened to me?
 How could such a place
 Be made unfree?
 And what happened the tree?
 Years had passed
 Since I last caught a glimpse—
 A memory which made me wince—
 To see oneself, so young and
 carefree,
 To see it now
 Drills a hole through me—
 How can it be?
 To see
 Such a place as you knew it to be
 Distorted such to none but me
 How can it be?
 What happened to this place?

What happened to me?
 And what happened to the tree?
 I look inwards
 And search through me
 I think of my question
 and ponder the nature of
 humanity
 Much had changed, at the turn
 of the century—
 Technology—its quality—
 The amount of time spent
 staring at a screen—
 Had all greatly increased.
 This
 led most to choose ignorant
 bliss,
 To pretend that this
 World—this mess—
 Had simply been missed
 In the midst
 In the mist
 In the mess
 Of the wreck
 Some chose to see—
 They saw the weed(s)
 They saw the tree
 Some, even, saw the poet's tree
 They saw the darkness of
 humanity
 They saw the poison so deeply
 rooted in the tree
 So they tried to free
 The tree
 Even as more and more poets
 turned to pessimissity
 Even as more and more poets—
 though they did not know it—
 turned to pessimissity,
 poisoned the tree.
 At its roots, they poisoned the
 tree.
 And so—
 They poisoned me.

Heroes

By Matilla Wiley

To all of the nurses who do
 what they can
 trying to save their fellow man.
 I know you are tired, I know
 you are crazed,
 and still you fight yet another
 day.
 You hold their hand when
 they're in despair
 and wishing their loved ones
 could also be there.
 You were put to the test and
 you deserve some rest,
 and yet you give them your
 very best.
 Your complaining is zero,
 just like all heroes.
 Please keep up the fight, up
 ahead is the light.

My Father, My Friend

By Matilla Wiley

Once there was a happy little
 girl,
 the sunshine in her eyes
 and her hair all in curls.
 The world was her oyster, but
 her home was her world.
 Her dreams and ambitions, at
 the very next door.
 Her father was her light,
 he always loved her through all
 wrongs and rights.
 The girl was young and free
 and never
 realized how fast life can flee.
 She always had this one great
 man,
 willing to lend his helping hand.
 Then came the day we knew his
 life was slipping away.
 For the next year to come she
 never left his side,
 she stayed with him and kept
 their hope alive.
 Her dreams and ambitions were
 never denied.
 Eventually she lost the gleam in
 her eyes,
 but her love for her father she
 could never disguise.
 After a year of smiles and tears
 it came to an end but there was
 no fear.
 She felt so alone but knew life
 had to go on.
 The fact that he lived made her
 the person she is
 and she will never forget her
 father, her friend.

Regrets

By Matilla Wiley

Working so hard, I want to go
far.
I want the land that I dreamed
of,
with the house on the hill.
I want to fill my palace with
diamond rings.
The world will love me for all
my things.
My work has been grueling,
not much time for love.
But I've got all this stuff, and
yet, it's just not enough.
My treasures keep growing, and
yet I feel small.
My life grows shorter, I'm
losing it all.
I lay in my mansion and wish I
could stay.
As my heart starts to fail me, I
know just one thing.
My time has been wasted and
my dreams are done.
My palace will soon belong to
another someone.
My work here has ended and
what have I done?
I've acquired new property with
a big headstone.

Writers Block

By Ji'Bril Harris

I miss that little boy
Writing to his wits end
With pensive mind
And nimble pen
Unconcerned
With conventions

Lay My Vacant Beneath The Willow Tree

By Ji'Bril Harris

Lay my vacant beneath the willow
tree
Return my breath to those whom
grief left choked
Cover all who reminisce my past
as they confront my present
Shade their sullen lids, and
shimmering cheeks from the
unapologetic sun
Forgive their wails of hysterical
babel
Embrace the weeping with your
morose lace
Whisper your primordial truths
upon their ears
That death is merely a rite of
passage in the world of the living
That life is never lost only found
in new bewildering ways
Lay my vacant beneath the willow
tree
Take part in my physique
May the crows, and insects
repurpose my hands, toes, and
feet
Make use of my used
Turn my singularity to plurality
Turn nothing to everything
My me's to we's and I's to Us
Conjoin the fibers of my past to
nebula yet formed
So as we lay underneath the
Babylonica
Teach me of the ancient histories
left untold
Lay my vacant beneath the willow
tree

The End is Near

By Matilla Wiley

Standing high upon a mountain,
waiting for the end. The time is
here, the time we feared. Our
future is condemned.
The asteroid shoots across the
sky, almost gracefully, as it streaks
on by. We hold our breath one final
time, as the air ignites, the
winds stand still. The scene I see
is so surreal. My thoughts go
back to a time so dear. My friends,
my family, I wish they were
here. Do they know my depth of
love was deep? Did they feel it as
if it were complete? Should I have
hugged and gave much more, or
kissed the guy that lived next door.
My thoughts are disturbed by
the distant roar, then all around , I
began to see the gore. The wave
of the blast knocks me to the floor.
As the world rocks out of
control, I wish I'd gave just a little
bit more. I wish I'd done more
than before. I wish....

Unconditional Love

By Matilla Wiley

I watch you sit there rocking in
your chair.

The love I have for you is
beyond compare,
if you ever need me, I am right
there.

I protect you from strangers
and all sorts of dangers,
I give them a warning and send
them running.

My love for you is always pure,
my loyalty will always endure.
When you look at me, I feel the
sunshine.

I am yours and you are mine.
The love for me will always be,
for you are my human and I'm
your Yorkie.

Thirty Years of Bliss

By Matilla Wiley

We made our vows, we said "I
do". It meant something to me,
why not you?

Life with you was sometimes
hard. You put me down until I
was tired.

I always found a reason to stay,
even though things didn't go my
way.

You said you helped me when I
was down, that I should be
happy you were always around.
You said you didn't have to but
you did anyway and I should be
grateful

until my dying day, the thing
about that is it went both ways.
I helped you with yours, you
helped me with mine.

You made me believe our world
was fine, how was I to know
you were lying?

You promised to love me and
always be true, and now you
wonder if I'll ever forgive you.
We made our vows, we said "I
do". It meant something to me,
why not you?

The Wildflower

Matilla Wiley

I was a weary wildflower, living
 on what I had.
 No one looked after me when
 the times got bad.
 I was tested and tormented
 almost everyday.
 Is this what is normal? Is this
 really the way?
 It's all I've ever known, so I
 guess it's OK.
 I wanted to be beautiful, I
 wanted to stand out, but the
 searing heat,
 the trampling feet, the winds,
 the rains.
 It was all so unbearable, it was
 crazy, insane.
 I tried to stand up, I tried to be
 proud, I tried so hard but I
 didn't know how.
 The bitter weeds around me
 seemed to always say,
 "We'll smother your life, we'll
 take it away".
 I tried so hard against their
 attack,
 but the time came, I couldn't
 fight back.
 My world ended young, I had
 just begun,
 but every year you can see I
 was here.
 I left my seed to brighten your
 day,
 to prove that my life wasn't
 thrown away.

The Truth Is Coming Out Tonight

By Kalli Parker

You can call me fragile,
 You can call me weak.
 You think that I am broken,
 But I am stronger than you think.
 Your names pulling me under,
 Holding me like a weight on a shelf.
 I swallow my pride while I look into your
 eyes,
 The truth is coming out tonight.
 Trade my happiness for protection,
 Yes please.
 Don't you think it's kind of strange?
 That I live on the street...
 When I am a part of your family,
 But no one in the world knows me.
 I'm just a person you'd see on the street,
 The truth is coming out tonight.
 I'm borderline crazy, a sinful human being,
 That's what you say to me when we
 speak.
 PTSD, bruises, scars, and
 All the yelling that comes from your black
 heart.
 Physical, emotional, and mental abuse,
 Cheers to the coward who thought I'd
 lose.
 Standing up to you was simply hard,
 But easier than continuing with your
 cycle.
 And I feel sorry for you.
 I overcame the ability of your ways,
 helping others too to escape.
 I am a warrior. You battle against me, and
 I fight back.
 The truth has come out tonight

The Mighty Dear Hunter

By Matilla Wiley

I'm going to the woods, gonna get myself a deer.
Do it like the old days, the way they use to do it here.
I have a three room tent that I put on rent,
a bed made with air and a couple of pillows to spare.
Bought myself a fire pit to warm the night air, fire can be a hazard if it gets out
of there.
Had to buy the wood,
can't cut it here, the fine alone just makes me scared.
I clean the camp of leaves and debris,
set up my tent, but the rooms are not three, where, oh where can the other pole
be.
Never can find it so I nail it to a tree. Next part is great, really easy.
The bed has an air pump so its pain free. I get it where I want it and flip the little
switch,
wouldn't you know it, needs electricity, oh what a hitch. I tried to blow it up and
was
doing quite well, until that faithful moment when it all went to hell.
The hissing of a snake rang out like a bell. I let out a scream, more like a yell.
I got to my feet and run like hell but the air bed tripped me and down I fell.
I could hear the tent ripping, or was it just tipping?
I got to my feet, dusted myself off, and tried to find my integrity,
which I had somehow lost.
The tent was in pieces, all tattered and torn. The fire pit fell over and everything
burned.
The leaves and the trees and all the debris crackled and popped in the night
breeze,
I decided its time to take my leave and grabbed the one thing not burning.
The air bed is what I had in my hand and I thought that maybe this could be bad.
As I left the woods, I caught a beautiful sight, the glow of the trees burning in
the moonlight.
There were hundreds of animals heading for the hills.
There were raccoons and squirrels and varmints unknown, when off to my side a
buck stood alone.
He stood tall and proud, twelve points upon his head and I immediately said,
“well big buddy, tonight you are dead”.

I reached for my gun, this was going to be fun and right about then he began to run. Something was wrong, it's just not right, this gun of mine is way to light.

The deer flew past me and he was even bigger, but that gun of mine, I couldn't find the trigger.

With further inspection I knew my fault, I had finally found that tent pole that I thought was lost.

As I looked around, I was not alone, the game warden had found a gun of his own.

I hollered out, "Shoot Him!", but he was no fun.

He didn't see the humor in the things I had done, upon further inspection, I guess he was right.

I learned a valuable lesson that firey night, don't build a fire and hunt when its light.

Dear to the Person Who Never Knew

By Kalli Parker

Dear to the person who never knew,

You are at a moment in your life where you finally hit rock bottom, or something close to it. You knew this day would come. The life you are living now is good, if not great. You had to reach this point in your life somehow. Every trial and tribulation. Every decision. Every thought. Every move. Every person. Each thing in your life contributed to this exact moment.

So, where did you go wrong? What happened to the person that I knew? One thing is for sure, you grew up. Whether you were willing to or not, you had too. I see the way you question yourself about every little thing. Every judgmental thought. Every insecurity. Every toxic experience. Every memory. I know what other people do not. I know you.

I know the look on your face when realization hits about who you can trust versus those you cannot. The moment when in a group gathering you feel like you are suffocating. When you don't want to be touched by others around you. The time you were peer pressured and almost said yes. The number of times where your friends burden you with their secrets. There is a reason why you observe others rather than speak. You do not like confrontation. You do not want to be the center of attention. You do not want people to see what I see. You do not want people to see you.

A person who struggles. A person that does not understand. A person who is scared of the world. A person who is an emotional wreck. A person who questions the aspect of life and religion. A person who does not have it figured out. A person who is lonely. A person who needs more. A person who craves more. A person trying to be a better version of themselves.

Newsflash you are NOT alone. Even if it sometimes may feel that way, you have a constant friend who loves you. You have ME.

Sincerely,

Yourself

