

# The Laconic

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Northampton Community College



Διακονικός κθ'  
Fall 2025



# The Laconic 29

Λακωνικός κθ'

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Northampton Community College  
Fall 2025

Front cover art:  
*Wanted*, by Amber Tobiasen

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*The works contained within The Laconic are the artistic expressions of individual members of the students, faculty, and staff of Northampton Community College. This collection is not intended to be viewed as a statement about the views of NCC as a whole. We apologize for any content which may be viewed as offensive.*



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*THE LACONIC STAFF WOULD LIKE TO OFFER A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO THE  
CENTRAL DUPLICATING STAFF – WE COULDN'T DO THIS WITHOUT YOUR HARD WORK.*





Editor's Note:

*The fabric of our lives is being stretched to its limits. The steel cords which once made up the fabric's edges reach their maximum capacity for tension as we brace ourselves for its inevitable whip and snap. A crack that will shake us to our core, the metallic wobble that leads to a ship unmoored. We have spent our lives adding the threads of our lives to this tapestry. Emboldening it with color, enriching it with history and building our communities upon our shared times.*

*There is a trapped breath that awaits the drop of a pin, eyes laser focused on current events. Our words are scalpels operating on sensitive organs, one wrong move and we will be forced to confront a horrifying failure. We are under the microscope of History. Every misstep will be scrutinized in future books.*

*Posters hang from windows, "Never Again." It is sold on shirts, mugs, blankets, stickers. The words are hopeful, but we have robbed them of substance. We have replaced their conviction with commodity. We need something new, something authentic, tangible hope. We have all grown weary as our reserves of faith and hope wane. We do not need another slogan, we need the one thing that has always been here through it all, that which has been dissolved.*

*The future is attainable, where peace is possible, nuance is encouraged and compassion is the cultural norm. A world where dogs play in the field and no longer eat one another. Where we no longer pluck the flowers to appreciate the splendor of hues and the bees are no longer a cause for fear. A future in which we embrace our neighbors regardless of distance and circumstance, a future reliant in the one thing that matters—community.*

*Thank you for all your submissions and for being brave enough to submit deeply personal work. It is inspiring to bear witness to the physical and literary manifestation of your spirit. Our community of faculty, students and alumni grows and changes each semester. Each of us submitting and contributing art molded by our hopes, dreams and relation to the world around us. Every magazine is a cross-section of time with which we can understand our sentiment, hopes and fears. You keep alive our memory and record history through your submissions.*

*Our previous president and editor, Jacob Shively, noted that we must, "Always remember how romantic, and beautiful everything around us really is." Get to know your professors as I have with Dr. Abigail Michellini, Professor Michael Pogach, Professor Jessica Bacho and Professor Thomas Brown. These professors, and many more, are inspirations who have set me on track to a better self. There are many extraordinary and talented people in this school, students and staff. My advice to you would be to indulge yourself in the splendor of your community members, get to know your professors, ask silly questions and submit the bad poetry.*

*Your hopeful, perpetually tired and chatty Editor-in-Chief,*

Alix Gonzalez





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Fall 2025

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**THE LACONIC**  
IS OPEN FOR  
SUBMISSIONS

Faculty, Staff,  
Students, and Alumni  
give us your best:

POEMS

SHORT STORIES

VISUAL ART

Follow the QR code or links  
below to submit and find  
out more! Prizes for "Best  
Of" in each genre!

Check website for  
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**WEBSITE: [LACONICNCC.WIXSITE.COM/NGCLACONIC](http://LACONICNCC.WIXSITE.COM/NGCLACONIC)**



*Selected by the staff and editors of The Laconic*



ISAAC POLONIO

## La flor que me encontró

Vine a tierra extranjera buscando bienes y riquezas,  
pero sin darme cuenta,  
me perdí entre pensamientos e ideas.

—¿Por qué siempre he de pensar en lo terrenal? —me pregunté.  
—Porque así has de hacerlo para vivir una vida plena —me respondí.

Un día, me encontraba pensando  
acerca de lo efímero del tiempo  
y de lo rápido que pasa,

hasta que una flor, hermosa como ninguna otra,  
reposando en un pequeño jardín  
de estas extrañas tierras,  
vino a mí y me preguntó,

con suave voz y tiernas palabras,  
si ella me interesaba.

Yo le respondí apagando mi cerebro en ese momento,  
con la luna en lo alto del epicentro,  
siguiendo las palabras de mi corazón,  
y pronunciando con clara entonación:

—Sí.

La flor, ese día, se sonrojó.  
Y desde ese día,  
jamás volví a dudar  
acerca de mi corazón.



# The Flower That Found Me

I came to a foreign land seeking wealth and riches,  
but without realizing it,  
I got lost in thoughts and ideas.  
—Why must I always think about the earthly? —I asked myself.  
—Because that is how you must live a full life —I answered.

One day, I found myself thinking  
about the fleeting nature of time  
and how quickly it passes,  
until a flower, more beautiful than any other,  
resting in a small garden  
of these strange lands,  
came to me and asked,  
with a soft voice and tender words,  
if I was interested in her.

I responded by turning off my brain in that moment,  
with the moon high above the epicenter,  
following the words of my heart,  
and speaking with clear intonation:  
—Yes.

That day, the flower blushed.  
And from that day on,  
I never again doubted  
**my heart.**



THE LACONIC  
FALL 2025 STUDENT "BEST OF" VISUAL ART CONTEST WINNER

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*Selected by the staff and editors of The Laconic*



DANIEL BLATT

## MUSICIAN PORTRAIT





*Selected by the staff and editors of The Laconic*



SOPHIA CURET

## Sentiment

There wasn't much left for us. The bag was mostly full, only a few bits of sentiment to be packed away before it was done.

My husband grabbed a framed picture off my bedside table. It was a picture of me and him, arms wrapped around each other at a little beach in Northern California smiling through a simple silver frame. The bright yellow of my sundress was a stark contrast to the foggy blue ocean behind us. I remember how cold it was. It was the kind of cold that seeped beneath your skin and slowly took over your senses, invading your body like a cancer, and though I never complained, my husband lent me his jacket to keep warm.

"That was right before we got engaged," I said. "I knew exactly what you were about to do and exactly how I'd answer. It was so sweet. The view of the cliffs from the lighthouse, the record player with our song, the flowers all over the room. It was beautiful. You're such a romantic. Do you remember getting caught in the rain on our way back to the car? We got totally drenched. Obviously, a warm sunny day would have been just as lovely, but we laughed so much trying to race down that path, tripping over ourselves. We looked like absolute fools. I remember it so well. That's probably one of my favorite pictures."

In lieu of a response, my husband grunted and placed the photograph in the suitcase. He was never a man of many words. He was intelligent and kind and incredibly well-spoken, but those were not gifts he often shared with the world.

Opening the drawer, John pulled out two economy class plane tickets to Greece dated two weeks from now, on the anniversary of our marriage.

"What's this, Em?"

He spoke so softly, I could barely hear it.

It was meant to be a surprise. We'd always talked about going to Greece. He loved the myths, the legends. He was a huge history buff and I know how badly he wanted to tour the ancient ruins and temples. I was more interested in the beaches, cuisine, and spontaneous singing of Abba songs. I'd packed all the luggage, booked the hotels, everything so I could surprise him. Of course, there'd have to be refunds now, or at least a very generous gift to some friends.

John sank onto the bed. He rested his head in his hands, the way he always does when he's stressed. I didn't have to look at my husband to know the exact way his brows furrowed and the lines on his forehead creased at that moment. We let the silence enfold us, a reassurance it would always be there. When he was ready, John set his jaw, stood back up, and put the tickets



in the bag with a resigned sigh. What we'd both give to be able to take that trip together, or any, ever again goes beyond money.

Reaching back into the drawer, John pulled out the last of our personal effects. He held the book of American poetry I was reading. Flipping through the hardcover, he stopped at every dog-eared page; Emily Dickinson's "479", Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay", Walt Whitman's "Praise of Death", and Edgar Allen Poe's "Annabel Lee". When he opened to the last poem, an envelope with his name on it fell to the floor. Neither of us moved, we barely breathed for what felt like an eternity. We both knew what was in that letter. It was a confession, or maybe an explanation. He held it like it was glass, as if he so much as touched it wrong, he'd be the thing to break. I looked at him, and he couldn't meet my eye. Before I got a chance to say anything, he put the letter in his pocket and the book in the suitcase, finally closing the bag and zipping it.

That was it. We were done packing everything up, ready to start a new chapter in both of our stories. Now we stood side by side in the room we went to bed together in every night and woke up in every morning. Where we celebrated every happy occasion and consoled ourselves for all the sad ones. The sun would no longer stream through our sheer curtains, and would never again fall across our faces on lazy days in bed. Every pure joy, every moment that should be lived in its fullest, designed to be taken for granted and left as a vignettted memory at best could now never be relived. Our life had been folded and loaded into cardboard boxes and canvas bags, and our home had been reduced to nothing more than walls and a roof. The emptiness pierced me like I wasn't there, the disturbed dust swirling in the cavity of air I was supposed to be standing in. There was nothing left for us.

We shut the door and turned the key in the deadbolt for the last time. John put the suitcase in the trunk of his car, we got in, and he drove. The ride was long. We passed playgrounds and I talked about how we met in high school and how young and stupid we were. We passed churches and daycares and I talked about our wedding, our hope for kids. We passed cornfields and I reminisced about how we'd go on autumn dates in mazes and how he always looked so good in the crisp October afternoon glow. John didn't say anything. He just stared straight at the road and cried.

At the end, John parked the car, unzipped the suitcase in his trunk, and took out all of my things. He moved through the motions like he was being told what to do, pausing at every interval. Kneeling in front of me for the last time, he laid our memories at my grave.

He stared at the mound of dirt, now with little sprouts of grass stretching through the soil. We couldn't tell how long we stayed like that, still as the stones that surrounded us. It began to rain, a gentle homage to the tears we've shed. Softly, the drops landed on the ground, feeding the seedlings just beginning their life, but not enough. I'd never feel spring again.

Pulling the envelope from his pocket, my husband unfolded my letter and started reading. His glassy eyes betrayed his fragility. His hands shook and cries began to rip through his throat. Every line was a knife and a balm, and the last ones he'd have from me ever again. In the letter, I told him what happened. How it couldn't be helped, and that he wasn't to blame, especially because he never knew. I apologized, I pleaded, I gave my excuses, and told him I love him. I wrote that I didn't let him know what was happening because I wanted him to remember me as the person who brought joy to him, I told him I didn't want to break his heart. And then I watched him mourn. I watched the heart of the man I love bleed out with tears. I couldn't kiss his forehead, couldn't hold his hand. I couldn't offer a word of comfort, and I couldn't so much as look him in the eye.



He begged for me, his now hoarse voice calling my name like it could bring me to him, like if he screamed for me loud enough, I could hear it and come back. He didn't know that I could hear him, and that I was there. He didn't know that when I went to brush his cheek, my gesture went right through him. He unraveled, telling me everything he thought I'd never get to hear, and repeating the things I always loved to hear. We sat entangled in a warmth we couldn't feel. We could have been there for days, and neither of us would have known.

After we'd resigned ourselves to our separate solemnity, John knew he had to move on with the life we was still a part of. He stood and brushed the dirt off of the knees of his old, weathered jeans. He'd be ok; He was resilient, smart, he could move on. I hoped with every bit of my soul left on this earth that he would move on. I hoped he'd go somewhere with plenty of history, find a job he was impassioned by. I hoped he'd find a new love, one that wasn't left to his memories, and as much as I love him, I hoped I'd very rarely see him again if at all.

John put the letter back in his breast pocket. As he stepped into his truck, he turned to look at the lifeless stone I'd become and waved goodbye. He knew I couldn't wave back, but he did anyway. I waved back, and I watched him drive away.



Summer 2026

For questions e-mail Amber Gore at [Agore@northampton.edu](mailto:Agore@northampton.edu)

# Culture, Society, and Psychology in Vienna



## Program Information

Travel Dates: June 3, 2026 - June 10, 2026

Faculty Lead: Professor Karin Donahue

Number of Credits: 1

*Sigmund Freud  
Museum*

*Hofburg Palace*

*Viktor Frankl  
Museum*

*Belvedere Palace*

**\$2,700**

### What's Included:

- All transportation
- Admission into all museums and attractions
- Some meals
- Flight
- Lodging
- Guide
- In-country 24-hour support
- Insurance

*Vienna Museum*

*Mozart House*

*Scan Me!*



<https://forms.gle/7SkRR5ZnxDmoENCH6>



# THE USA IS 250 YEARS OLD AND THE LACONIC WANTS TO KNOW: WHAT DOES AMERICA MEAN TO YOU?

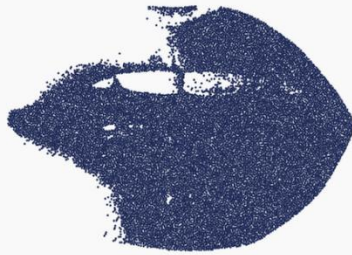
**What does living in America mean to you?**

**What is the American Dream to you?**

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Submit your poetry,  
fiction, and visual art on  
this theme for this  
special spring issue of  
The Laconic! Deadline  
March 1, 2026.

Regular subs are still  
open too! Full  
submission guidelines  
on our website below.



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MEGAN WOLFE

## Purple Jacket

You told me my jacket looked nice,  
and I kept my mouth shut.

You told me I'd look prettier if I smiled,  
who said I wanted to look pretty?  
But, I kept my mouth shut.

You groped and grabbed at me.  
I cried afterwards,  
and I still kept my mouth shut.

You stalked me home.  
I wanted to scream.  
But I still kept my mouth shut.

I thought you were only my problem,

I didn't know of the women before me,  
I won't know of the ones after me.

I didn't know I needed to hide  
from people like you  
I didn't know I needed to speak out.

I never realized my silence protected you.





AMBER TOBIASSEN

## Endeared





# Rural







SYDNEY KANTOR

## Swept away

The ocean isn't really all that dangerous,  
if you stay close enough to shore.  
When the waves aren't too rough,  
and you know the right tricks,  
you can tread water for a long time.  
It's when you get pulled into the undertow  
that you need to worry.  
When the waves sweep you out,  
the current pulls you under  
and your body becomes too weak  
to fight back.  
Once you're caught  
it's much harder to get back out.  
*-addiction*





CONNOR EVANS

## A Cookie Cutter Life

The universe gave birth to Earth  
The rocks evolved into us  
That's the way the world works  
'Tis why we're so fucked up

We stab a thing, it stabs us back  
We take a rifle and shoot it flat  
We eat that thing and shit it out  
That's what life is all about

We differ, we relate  
We satiate, we mate  
We burn it all, we roast each other  
We love it all, we die together

We laze about  
We come too late  
We don't feel sorry  
We can't relate

We want it all  
We want it now  
We isolate  
We head down south

We're distant cousin  
We're estranged child  
We're demonized  
We're dubious wild

Bye bye rules  
Bye bye self  
We'll end as pools  
Of dusty shelves





YULIA TCYMBALOVA

## Memory Released by Yellow

Dandelion yellow of the yellow dandelion—  
it's just the beginning of spring  
and I'm probably five or six.  
I'm squatting, exploring a dandelion  
on a sunny little hill next to my granny's house.

I'm looking at the flower, wondering  
why it's yellow and not white.  
How can the yellow dandelion be the same flower as the fluffy white one?  
How, when, and why does the metamorphosis happen?

I'm holding the flower, looking closely,  
bringing it to my nose,  
inhaling the spicy smell.  
They say there's dandelion milk.

The crows' shrieks pierce the Astrakhan sky.  
It's muddy around me,  
and the only signs of spring here are the buds on the fruit trees,  
the shy patches of grass,

and the dandelions.  
The hollow stalk bleeds white in my hand,  
it does look like milk, and I taste it.  
It's bitter.  
They lied.





ALEXIS PASTULA

## The Vanishing of Verity Lane

The autumn wind whispered through the trees as detective Evelyn Grant stood at the edge of Verity Lane, a quiet street tucked away on the outskirts of town. The neighborhood had once been peaceful, but that had all changed a few days ago due to the mysterious disappearance of Clarissa Hartwell, a reclusive artist, making headlines.

The circumstances surrounding her vanishing were unsettling. No sign of a struggle, no ransom note. Just an empty house and an air of unsettling quiet. The police had already conducted an investigation, but the case had stalled. Having realized too much time has been wasted, Evelyn takes charge of the search.

Clarissa Hartwell was well known in the art world, but she had kept to herself for the past several years. Her work, however, had gained considerable fame—dark, surreal paintings that unnerved anyone who looked too closely. It was said she had become obsessed with creating “realms” in her artwork, where reality and illusion blurred together. Some questioned if her artwork wasn’t just paint on a canvas, but she was channeling something from beyond.

Evelyn stepped forward, her boots crunching on the leaves scattered across the sidewalk. As she approached the front door of the Hartwell home, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Something...felt off.

She rang the doorbell. After a moment, the door creaked open, revealing a young man with disheveled hair and tired eyes.

“Can I help you?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Hi, I’m Detective Evelyn Grant.” she said, flashing her badge. “I’m here about Clarissa Hartwell. I’m investigating her disappearance.”

The young man nodded but didn’t say anything immediately. After a long pause, he stepped aside and gestured for her to enter.

Evelyn walked into the dimly lit hallway. The house had an air of neglect about it, dust settling on furniture and paintings alike. She could smell a faint odor of something old, something forgotten. Her eyes caught a glimpse of an odd shape in the corner of the room—an unfinished painting, its edges ragged as if hastily abandoned.

“Who are you?” Evelyn asked, studying the man.

“Charlie,” he replied, his voice barely above a whisper. “I... I used to be her assistant.”

“Used to be?” Evelyn raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Charlie muttered, rubbing his temples. “I haven’t worked for her in a few months. She changed, you know? Something happened after that last exhibition. She became, well, obsessed.”

Evelyn took a moment to absorb the information. “What do you mean by ‘obsessed’?”

Charlie’s eyes darted nervously toward the stairs. He looked like he was considering whether or not to speak. Finally, he sighed, the weight of whatever was troubling him apparent.



“She started talking about...things,” he said slowly. “Things that didn’t make sense. She said she was creating something... a portal, or a door. She thought she was painting a way out.”

“Out of what?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie rubbed his neck, his eyes shifting from side to side. “Out of herself maybe? I don’t know what she meant, but it wasn’t just the paintings. She became kinda different. Sometimes I’d hear her talking to herself, arguing with someone. She said it was the ‘realm’. She said it was calling to her.”

“Did you ever see anything unusual? Any signs of something strange going on?”

Charlie hesitated. “There was one thing. One night, I came by to drop off some supplies, and I heard noises coming from the attic. When I went up, there was nothing there. But the air was cold. Like... like something had been waiting.”

“You think she was hiding something up there?”

“Maybe,” Charlie murmured, his gaze lowering. “But I never went up there again. After that night, she locked the attic door. She wouldn’t let me near it.”

Evelyn’s curiosity piqued, and she decided to inspect the attic herself. Thanking Charlie on her way, she headed up the creaky staircase. The door to the attic was at the end of the hall, a simple wooden door with no handle. It was locked, just as Charlie had described.

However, there was something else. The air around the floor felt heavier. As if it was resisting her presence. Evelyn’s mind raced, piecing together the bits of information she gathered. Clarissa had become obsessed with creating a doorway, something between realms. Now, the attic door was locked, as if something—someone—was waiting.

She drew her flashlight from her bag and knelt down, inspecting the keyhole. There was a faint scratch mark around it, as if someone had tried to force it open in the past. Evelyn took a deep breath, her instincts kicking in.

She knew she wasn’t going to get anything more from Charlie. She needed to find out what Clarissa had been hiding. In order to do that, she needed access to that attic.

The next few hours were spent tracking down a locksmith who could open the door. As the man worked, Evelyn couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching her. The house was strangely silent, except for the soft clicks of the locksmith’s tools.

Finally, with a satisfying click, the door swung open. The smell of stale air and dust hit Evelyn’s nostrils. She stepped inside, shining her flashlight across the attic. The space was cramped and cluttered with old furniture covered in white sheets and boxes piled high. Then, the light fell on something unusual.

There, in the far corner, was an easel—an unfinished canvas. Evelyn moved toward it, her heart racing. The painting was strange, even by Clarissa’s standards. It depicted a swirling vortex, a dark spiral of colors that seemed to draw the eye inward. But there was something else, something unsettling. In the center of the vortex was a figure, a silhouette of a person, their features obscured. Evelyn felt a chill run down her spine as she stared at the figure, almost feeling like it was watching her back.

She stepped closer, studying the painting more closely. The vortex seemed to move beneath her gaze, shifting in a way that felt...alive. The longer she stared, the more disoriented she became.

“Clarissa,” she whispered, as if the woman could hear her from the depths of the painting itself.



Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement. She spun around, her flashlight illuminating a shadow darting across the far wall. Her heart hammered in her chest. Someone, or something, was here.

She hurriedly turned toward the door, but it slammed shut in front of her. The suddenness of it sending her pulse into overdrive. The air grew colder and colder, and the flashlight flickered.

Then, from that corner of the room, a soft whisper filled the space. “You shouldn’t have come.”

Evelyn froze, her breath caught in her throat. Her breath came in shallow gasps as she turned, sweeping the flashlight across the corners of the attic. But, there was no sign of anyone being there.

The whisper came again, louder this time. “She took the step... and now it’s your turn.”

Evelyn’s mind raced. “The step? What step?” She tried to keep her composure, but her hands were trembling, her body frozen in place by some unseen force. Her eyes darted back to the canvas, the vortex swirling more violently now, as though it were alive.

With that, the darkness of the attic seemed to close in around her. The walls felt like they were breathing.

The last thing Evelyn saw was the figure from the painting, its form stretching towards her before everything went black. The figure in the painting was moving.

She stumbled backward, knocking over a pile of old boxes in her panic. The flashlight flew from her hand and skittered across the floor, casting an eerie, jagged beam of light which made the shadows seem darker. The walls of the attic pressed in on her, narrowing the space until she could barely breathe.

Her thoughts raced. *Clarissa’s obsession. The “realm”. She opened something, the portal. But what happened to Clarissa?*

And then it hit her—the step. Clarissa hadn’t just painted these twisting realms. She crossed over. Somehow, through her art, she had crossed a threshold between realities, and now Evelyn was on the brink of following her.

Evelyn bolted for the door, her mind screaming at her to escape, to break free of whatever had a hold on her. As her hand grasped the doorknob, it twisted on its own, the wood creaking like an old door protesting against being opened.

Suddenly, the walls seemed to bend—no longer perpendicular, no longer solid. The paintings that lined the walls of the attic now appeared to be alive, the figures moving ever so slightly, their eyes following her every step. There was a soft scratching noise behind her, like nails on glass.

Evelyn whirled around, her heart hammering in her chest. The figure from the painting—the one in the vortex—was no longer confined to the canvas. It had stepped out.

There in the corner of the attic, just outside the reach of her flashlight’s dying glow, was a figure. It was Clarissa, or at least looked like her. The woman was covered in a film of dust, her hair wild, while her eyes were empty voids. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, as if she were fading from existence.

However, it wasn’t Clarissa. Not fully. Her image flickered, distorting in a way that made Evelyn’s stomach churn. She *was* Clarissa—but also, she *wasn’t*.

“Clarissa?” Evelyn whispered, her voice cracking.



The figure tilted its head slowly, its mouth stretching into a sickening smile. “She is gone,” it rasped, its voice an eerie blend of Clarissa’s and something far more ancient. “But I am here now. We are all the same, and you will be too.”

Various amounts of pressure filled the room, like the weight of the entire universe shifted onto Evelyn’s shoulders. She gasped, her vision swimming as the air thickened and pressed on her lungs. The attic started to swirl and walls folded onto themselves.

The figure took a step forward, and Evelyn instinctively stepped back. However, the figure’s impossibly quick movements, while distorting and stretching, flickered in and out of focus.

“You’ve seen it all now Evelyn,” the entity whispered. “You’ve crossed the boundary line between the realms. There’s no turning back now.”

The figure reached out with a hand, but more like a tendril, something otherworldly, its fingers elongated. It touched Evelyn’s arm, and the cold seared through her like ice, traveling up her spine, numbing her entire body.

Everything blurred, and then Evelyn saw it—the vortex of the painting, but it wasn’t just a swirling mass of colors anymore. It was alive and reaching towards her, the very air vibrating with its force. There within it was a figure, her own face, staring directly back at her.

Evelyn screamed, which was swallowed by the vortex. Her surroundings melted away, and she felt herself being pulled into the spiraling mass. Her body was weightless as it twisted her in every direction. Her heart thudded, her pulse racing, as if she were being torn apart from the inside out.

But then, everything went dark.

Lights started to flicker many moments later. Evelyn noticed and sat up, her head pounding every other second. Evelyn’s eyes focused on the figure represented across from the light.

The figure appeared in full detail—a face Evelyn would recognize all too well.

Clarissa Hartwell’s face.

And she was smiling.





LAUREN CRUZ

## Portals





## Koi City, Population: Them







AMANDA ALFARO

## Donut Day

A quick tuck of the sheets and a kiss on the forehead before my mom is off to do whatever she does while my sister and I are sleeping. Night after night, I envy my sister lying above me on the top bunk. She can fall asleep practically as soon as her head hits the pillow. Her rhythmic breathing taunts me. It's so annoying. I lay here feeling the weight of my day. The weight of my life. Left alone to fend off my thoughts, trying desperately to get some sleep before I have to do it all again.

This is the worst part of the day. It's when I replay all the embarrassing things that happened in the last twenty-four hours. When I'm done with those, I replay the things that happened the day before that. It's a battle between my body, which is desperate for sleep, and my mind, which is desperate not to let me. Currently, my mind has the upper hand. It takes hours until my body finally wins.

I wake up to the alarm clock blaring and slap it until it turns off. Slowly, I roll out of bed and head to the bathroom in a sleepy haze. I am midstream when I realize the toilet paper roll is empty—just my luck. I start getting ready and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I'm a raccoon with bloodshot eyes. I fantasize about some catastrophic weather event that shuts the school down, so I don't have to go. Once, it rained so much that roads flooded, and the entire district got a 'snow day' in the middle of September. Fingers crossed for a monsoon.

Music is blaring from the kitchen. When I walk in, I find my mom dancing around like a wild woman. She really is a terrible dancer, but watching is fun and somehow contagious. She grabs my hands and spins me around, knocking into the little table in the center of the room. Coffee spills over, but she doesn't care; she's already on to her next move. This is when genius strikes and I remember Don't Day. My mom calls it a mental health day, but I call it a Donut Day because I get to stay home and binge on donuts and my latest TV show. After taking three last year, she said I was abusing it and has declined every other one I've asked for.

As she whisks me into a swirl, I notice it's bright and sunny out. No rain, no wind. Damn.

"So, Mom," I say as she jumps up and down.

"Yes, my darling?"

"How do you feel about me having one of those mental health thingies?" I say, my voice sounding weirdly high. She doesn't slow down, shimmying over to the opposite side of the room, which prompts me to continue. "I just don't want to go. I didn't sleep well, and I have to buy a pencil, and there's this test, and..." I try to come up with something good, but instead I stall. Finally, I blurt out, "I just can't even with today."

I know I blew it. She isn't taking me seriously; she isn't even looking at me. I feel deflated. She finally stops and bends over, letting out a loud "woo!" and laughing, says something about her age. I gape at her. I just asked to skip school, and she doesn't even seem to have heard a thing I said. *How is she always like this?*



“Okay, honey,” she says.

Instant relief.

“But,” she continues.

I sigh, relief gone.

“It’s gotta be a trade.”

Oh gosh. I’m going to have to do chores or virtual school or something.

“Never mind,” I say, rolling my eyes and turning to go back upstairs. I shouldn’t have taken so many Donut Days last year.

“I just want an hour with you. And... it will include yoga,” she says, shoving a carrot into the juicer. I watch the deep orange juice gush into the cup at the bottom. I swear she thinks yoga is the answer to everything. Your back hurts. Yoga. You have a crappy day. Yoga. You didn’t get any sleep. Yoga. She senses my reluctance.

“Oh, come on. It’s one hour,” she whines.

“Fine,” I say. She smiles, and we shake on it. She returns to her juice, and I hurry up the stairs, excited to return to my slumber. I run past through the loft and crash onto my bed, relishing in the comfort of my pillows and blanket. I fall asleep quickly.

I can tell that I’m dreaming, but it feels so real. All the hair on my body is standing at attention. I’m in a large, dark hallway that looks like my school, but the hall seems to go on forever. I turn and look behind me—a solid wall. I slowly start to move forward and peer into the first classroom. Inside is a group of the popular kids. They’re all laughing and talking and passing around a bottle of Jack Daniels. One of the guys drains it and then tosses it on the ground in my direction. They abruptly stop everything they’re doing and look at me, completely silent. I wave. They keep staring at me with vacant looks in their eyes.

Slowly, I step back into the hall. *Weird*. There’s another room on my right. Maybe it has a way out. I look in through the tiny window. The only thing inside is a large TV, blaring a news station reporting on the wildfires in California. I look away and turn back to the hall. A sinking pit is growing in my stomach, my heart is racing, and I want to run, but can’t. My legs are too heavy.

I get to the next room. My family’s inside. *Great*. I push open the door, asking where we are. But stop talking when I notice that we’re actually in a hospital room. The monitor has the telling sound that someone is dead. Everyone is crying. My dad has his head in his hands. I’m too scared to push past to see who they’re surrounding. My sister is against the wall. She looks so small. I try to get her attention. I try yelling, but she doesn’t budge. She won’t come with me. I shake her, but she doesn’t respond. I feel like I’m going to be sick. I shake my head and leave the room. I start to move down the hall, picking up speed.

The next room has my class cramming into a closet, the teacher hushing them. I start jogging now. Another room with a news report. A new COVID outbreak and a rising death toll. Lockdown orders are flashing across the screen. I run. I only slow down to glance into a room, hoping there will be an exit. News report. More wars. *Keep going*. It’s hard to breathe. The rooms are coming faster and faster. Races under attack, women’s rights gone, the capital infiltrated, children washing up, families separated. Room after room after room.

I jolt awake, tears are streaming down my face, and I’m drenched in sweat. I still can’t breathe. I can’t think. I’m trapped. I start ripping at my shirt, trying to get free. I think I’m suffocating. I hear a strange sound; it’s coming from me. My heart is going to explode. *Fuck, I’m going to die!*



I don't know how she got here, but my mom is rubbing my hand. She is saying something, but I can't hear her. She sounds far away, like at the end of a tunnel. She places her hand on my chest and waves the other one around. *I can't do this!* I think she's saying to look at her. I try to focus. She is making herself big. When her body swells, her hand goes up. When her body shrinks, her hand goes down. She's saying to breathe.

"In. Out. In. Out," she says, in sync with her motions.

I match my breath with her hands. She starts feeling closer. My vision is becoming clearer. *Okay, I'm okay.* I can breathe. I am here. My face is wet, and I am exhausted.

My mom doesn't say anything. She just sits there with me, and I'm grateful. I start to feel embarrassed by my childish reaction to a nightmare, but I stay quiet. After a while, she gets up and heads to the door.

"Ready for yoga?" she asks. "You have five minutes," and shuts the door.

*She has got to be kidding. Did she not just see that? I almost died. Surely this is her idea of a joke.* I wait ten minutes, and when she doesn't return, I poke my head out the door. *Not a joke.* I'm too tired to argue.

Two mats are rolled out on the plush rug. Candles, with tiny flickering flames, give the space a warm glow. The room smells of mint and eucalyptus. My mom walks in, dunking a tea bag in and out of my favorite mug, and hands it to me. She picks up a bundle of sage and matches and takes her place on a mat. I watch her, feeling annoyed. She gestures for me to take a seat. I let out a huff and plop down.

The match strikes, and we have begun. She burns the tiny bundle of sage, moving it in swirly designs around our bodies. The smoke permeates the air, filling my lungs and making me feel heavy and anchored. It feels like we've been transported somewhere. I surrender.

We start with breathing. She makes the same motions she did when I was losing my shit in my room. I copy her, one hand on my chest, the other floating up and down, matching my inhales and exhales. I lose track of time, locked in a rhythmic trance. Then, taking things slow, we twist our bodies in and out of different poses. Every now and then, I move too quickly, breaking the rhythm, topple over, and feel embarrassed. Every time, without looking at me, she makes the breathing motion with her hand. It reminds me to slow down, and I drop back into my body. I'm surprised at how in sync we are and how I can gracefully follow her. When we come to the end, I feel relaxed and relieved. I open my eyes. My mom is sitting cross-legged in front of me.

"Now, we are ready to talk," she says.

And we do. She explains that what I experienced was a panic attack and that she has had them, too. She says that sometimes our minds can take off to places that we don't necessarily want to visit. I immediately think of all those rooms and that awful hall. She explains that yoga is a way to channel our energy, and meditation is a way to train our minds. This gives us the power to decide when to visit those places. She shares that doing these things saved her life and that these practices are a gift. I understand my mom better by the end, and I'm happy I did this with her.

That night, with a tuck of the sheets and a kiss on the forehead, my mom leaves the room, making the breathing motion. I lay flat on my back, hearing my sister overhead. Resting my hand on my chest, I match my breath to hers and fall asleep in no time at all. I wake up refreshed and can't wait to tell my mom all about it. I race down the stairs, not hoping for rain or storms. My mom is dancing in the kitchen, and on the little table in the center of the room is a giant box of donuts.



# The Dark Night

Evening fell quickly, and when the *tap, tap, tap* at the door came, I hid. I crouched in the corner, closed my eyes, and begged Mother Earth to grant me more time. She did not oblige. The knocks turned to bangs, and I knew I had to face them. So, I left the safety of my hiding place and unlocked the door. They rushed through the entry, knocking me to the ground. Their claws and fangs lashed at me as they passed. The last one scooped me up, carried me to the others, and unceremoniously dumped me in a heap on the floor, and the lock clicked.

They wasted no time before tearing into me. Some of them drew it out, making sure I acknowledged them as they sliced bits of me away; made me watch as they slurped me off their grotesque fingers. Others I never saw coming, quickly overwhelming me and taking pieces in a fury. I fought them with all that I had. I yelled until my voice was raw. They worked tirelessly and ripped away all my armor. Time was lost – days to weeks to months, maybe even years. They stripped me bare. Eventually, I grew too tired. In the smallest, youngest voice that ever slipped my lips, I begged for death. I was gone.

I woke up to crows picking at the dried, hardened skin of my lips. My decay permeated the air. I peeled myself off the ground with a will I'll never understand. I took a long walk and eventually found my house. I considered not going back, but that will wouldn't let me leave. I took a jagged breath and knocked. The door creaked open. They were all there. I could see their faces; I recognized them then. They sat at the round dining table, casually draped over the chairs. I did not flinch at their gangly limbs and gnarly features as I walked past them. I put on the kettle. There was an eerie silence as they waited for me. Then, with shaky hands, I set the table.

One by one, I poured them a cup of tea. I asked their names and learned their fears. When the nastiest one shattered a saucer with their fist, coming down in a fit of rage, I did not run. I fetched a cloth, took their gigantic hand into my own, and tended to the wound gingerly. I poured a new cup of tea and offered an extra cube of sugar. We worked through the turmoil, pain, anger, and grief. When all was addressed, they left the table and curled up in front of the fireplace, basking in the warmth. It was grueling, but a patience had settled over me, and I kept working until every last one was properly soothed. My house became their house. I no longer fear a rap at the door; I leave it wide open. My demons are now my pets.





HOPE KEMMERER

## Dancing Fireflies

Happiness is chasing a firefly in the yard.  
Glowing brightly in a mason jar.  
As they fly from afar  
We run and chase  
Through the flowers and trees, our backyards become a maze.  
We get so close yet still so far

We follow their lights that glow brightly like the lights on a car  
A glow that is reminiscent of a child's innocence.  
An innocence that fades with time.  
A common memory ingrained in our minds.  
A pleasant reminder of our simple beginnings.  
A time when we knew little but imagined great.  
When our minds knew no boundaries and our shoulders held no weight.  
Our curiosity often took control and we watched that neon light now glow on our tiny fingers. As  
we realized the fate of the firefly, the sting in our hearts began to linger. We start to air with  
caution as we now care for these little creatures.

For now we appreciate them for lighting their way through the night.  
And making our memories ignite.





JONATHAN JANNEY

## Short Sighted

“Was that a scream?”

“Ilian,” Dalrin said taking a deep breath to control his rage. “Every single night it’s, ‘Oh, what was that?’ and then when I believe you it’s, ‘Oh stupid Dalrin, you dwarves are so stupid and gullible, unlike us high and mighty elves with our stupid pointy ears.’”

“I’m not joking. There is something out there.”

“Another specifically dwarf-eating monster that only you long lived elves remember with your superior intelligence and stupid immortality like you lied about last night?”

“To lie in jest is by no means the same as lying when confronted.”

“Only a species as lazy as you elves would ponder how lying is not lying.”

“The elven race is never lazy. We work tirelessly to contain all the evil in the world.”

“By lying and taking advantage of a dwarf who’s scared of the dark?”

“I’m wasting my life trying to help you overcome your insufferable fear of the dark and inescapable claustrophobia.”

“How can you waste your life? You’re immortal, unlike Rolan.”

“That was not my fault. I forgot humans had that aging problem.”

“You left him for fifty years to chase some mythical dragon.”

“The dragon isn’t mythical. You also left Rolan, and you left only to invent an engine to move your quill so you wouldn’t have to strain your poor little fingers.”

“Well,” Dalrin said, “you never found it. Did you?”

“The time I was given was too short.”

Dalrin glared at Ilian. His hand strayed to his axe as he said, “Are you so high and mighty that you dare to use the S word around a dwarf?”

“What? Oh, I see. I think we can resolve this quick easily so long as you aren’t short slighted.” Ilian said chuckling. “Yes, I do believe we can solve this in short order.”

“Ilian, you better get your ugly elven mouth to start behaving, before I start beheading.”

“In the future I will attempt to not refer to your slight stature.”

“I am not an idiot. By rephrasing it, you don’t change the insult.”

“There it is again! There was a scream. Look, I am truly sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you at first. But then, when the opportunity presented itself, I was just kidding, seeing how far you’d go, but I’m not kidding now. Something is out there. Can’t you hear that in my voice?”

“Look Ilian,” Dalrin said, “You elves train for courts and subtleties. We dwarves are as blunt as they come, so please, spare me your intricate deceptions and slight variations of voice and let’s simply enjoy this campfire.”

“I’d love to, but I’m not joking. There was a scream and then it was cut sho—”

“Cut short?” Dalrin said raising his axe.



“We’ve known each other for a long time and neither of us will die anytime soon unless you do something rash, imprudent, impetuous. Which word gets through your thick skull? Not everything is an insult in relation to your height. There truly is something out there. If you weren’t so sh—”

Dalrin took a step closer, his axe raised menacingly. Ilian stood up too, one hand reaching for his bow and his other for an arrow.

“Haven’t we been friends long enough not to kill each other, Dalrin?” Ilian said. “Whatever is causing all of those screams could attack us next. Please hear me out.”

“I’ll hear you out, but I shall never forget this insult.”

“Forget the insult. I think we should put out the fire, stay quiet, and wait until whatever is out there, isn’t there anymore, and whoever is screaming isn’t screaming anymore.”

“Who’s screaming?”

“I don’t know. Do you expect me to be able to hear an accent from a scream and identify what nation they’re from? Or perhaps tell you who their mother is? How would I ever know such a thing? All I know is that there are people screaming in terror.”

“This joke has gone on long enough. Just admit you lied, and we can continue on as friends. I might even forget what you called me, so long as you apologize and cook for the next two weeks.”

“Two weeks! That’s a bit absurd, don’t you think? Especially since I am not lying. There it was again, another scream, only a s—,”

“Only a what? Go ahead, say it.”

“Only a short distance away. A short distance away, you dwarven fool. Not everything is about you. Whatever is causing the screaming is coming this way. I don’t have time to deal with your insufferable dwarven insecurities.”

“My insufferable insecurities? We dwarves have gone to war for less of an insult.”

“You would, wouldn’t you? You’d think, you pesky, short, beardless, dwarves would have had a little tougher skin from living in rough dirt, good for nothing except the defecated waste of dogs. Instead—”

Ilians words were cut off as a maw rose from the darkness and swallowed him whole.

Dalrin, looking up at the monstrous head simply said, “Well, my elven friend, I do believe I’ve found your dragon.”





SARA SMIGIELSKI

## Disposable

*Tink!*

Shit.

The woman rinsed soap suds off her hands and cleared the sink of dinner plates. She checked the bowls and cups just in case it fell in. Her shoulders drooped; it wasn't there. The woman's focus shifted to the bottom of the sink. The drain cover was off, a dark abyss lay below. There was nowhere else for it to go since her hands had been in the sink the whole time.

Taking a breath, the woman leaned forward towards the small pit. It was just a garbage disposal. There was nothing to be afraid of at her age. Sure, it scared the hell out of her as a kid, being noisy and all. But she was no longer a little girl. If she could close on an old house like this, knowing all the repairs and renovations that would come with it, surely a drain wouldn't scare her. It worked perfectly fine when they needed it, no lingering bits of food left over. Although it sometimes gurgled after use and it gave off a strange, sweet scent.

But she still couldn't see anything. It was just too dark down there. She sighed and leaned against the countertop, weighing her options.

"Honey, could you come here for a minute?" the woman said.

"I'll be right there!" her husband called back.

Thinking ahead, she walked out of the kitchen and into their laundry room. She riffled through the cabinets until her hand brushed the cool metal of their flashlight.

"What do ya' need, hun?" her husband said from behind her.

"I dropped my ring in the disposal," she said.

"Gotcha. No worries, I'll save the day," he said, while posing like a superhero. She cracked a smile at him and his antics.

She joined him by the sink, handing him the flashlight. Her husband angled the light above the disposal and began to check around. His brows furrowed as he shuffled around the sink. Her husband huffed and drew his face closer to the opening.

"Where on Earth did it go? You didn't turn it on by accident, right?" her husband said.

"No. You would have heard it. Honestly, you would have felt it, too. Damned disposal shakes the whole house," the woman said.

"Hmm. You know, it's strange. I can't even see the blades of the grinder, it's just all black. Could you turn it on for a second?"

She reached over the counter and flicked on the disposal. It buzzed to life. Grinding, gnawing, ripping, tearing. The garbage disposal's blades cut through the waste like the gnashing of teeth. The whole house shook with its power. The linoleum floor vibrated under the couple's feet. The woman wondered if her neighbors could feel the trembling, if they could hear the shredding.

"Alright, that's enough," her husband said.



The woman shut it off. She watched her husband lean over the edge and peer into the pit once more. He started to speak, before shutting his mouth quickly. His eyes opened wider as he jumped back.

"What's wrong?" the woman said.

"Look in there," her husband said.

She took his place in front of the sink. The white granite of the sink was a stark contrast to the disposal's innards. The woman bent forward once again. She couldn't see well without the flashlight, still in her husband's hand, but what she could see startled her. The disposal was still full. It held an inky liquid, somewhere between black and green. The substance reflected colors like oil.

"The hell?" the woman said, cringing at the sight.

"We just turned on the disposal. Why did it go down?" her husband said.

"Forget mechanical issues, what is all that? I only just put chicken bits in from dinner."

"Maybe it's clogged up from the fat and bones. The liquid could be a mix of coffee grounds and whatever we rinsed out."

"But I've been using the sink all day. I think all the coffee grounds would be washed away by now."

Her husband went quiet for a moment. She watched him turn and walk towards the other side of the house. The sound of a closet door squeaked through the building. The woman turned her attention back to the sink. It smelled sweet again. It wasn't a pleasant smell to her, being somewhere between fruit and garlic. It was odd. Neither of them used much garlic in their cooking, as it always triggered her migraines. After a few minutes of grumbling and rummaging, her husband returned. He held a ruler in his hand.

"How is that supposed to help?" the woman said.

"You still want your ring, don't you? I'm going to try to scoop it," the man said.

The woman mulled over it. Did she even want the ring at this point? Surely she would have to take it to a cleaner's. But the thought of losing his promise to her so soon after she got it was too much to bear.

She nodded at him, giving him an encouraging smile. She watched her husband get to work. He started by poking around a bit, his arms twisted around the sink to give the ruler better leverage on the side closest to them. The ruler dipped in and out of the disposal, dragging the sludge up with each stroke. Her husband's stirring became more and more rapid when the woman grabbed his arm. He shoved the ruler aside, frustrated.

"It's no use. Let's just call a plumber tomorrow," she said.

"What if the ring got stuck at the bottom when we tried clearing all this shit out. Like, what if the reason nothing is going down is because we just made a giant plug out of fat, bones, and your ring?" he said.

It could be possible, especially if the drain blades were broken. She started tallying up repair costs in her head when she realized where this was going. Her husband, the flashlight, the ruler that now stunk of rotting meat, and his pride.

"Oh, no. You are not going to D.I.Y. your hand down the drain," the woman said.

"We're tight enough for money as it stands. I've done this before at my parents' place, there is nothing to be afraid of. Come on, just sit down and let me take care of it," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

She sat down at their table, crossing her arms for comfort. She didn't like this. The idea of him sticking his hand down a drain made her nervous. Even putting aside the drain's



disgusting contents, the lingering idea of the disposal turning on while he reached in gnawed at her mind. But they were the only people in the house, he would be fine.

Her husband grabbed a pair of rubber gloves from a drawer to calm her nerves. He rolled up his sleeves to the elbow and made sure the gloves were snug. Giving one last smile to comfort the woman, he dipped his fingers into the grimy disposal.

The woman saw his hand sift around, to no avail, then sink further in. His wrist went under, then half his forearm. He pulled back a bit, turning to her with a confused look.

"I can't feel the bottom. I have a third of my arm down the damn disposal and I can't feel the bottom," he said.

The woman couldn't speak. The whole situation was beyond normal by this point. She could not rationalize it away like before. She had seen the sink and disposal when they toured the house months ago. She was just looking to see how clean and functional the appliances were. Nothing stood out to her. No strange smells, no oddly deep drains, nor oily black liquids.

Her husband turned his attention back to the disposal, giving it another go. He had taken off his shirt entirely, now just wearing a white sleeveless undershirt. He had taken off the glove as well, tossing it in the trash can behind him. His hand dove into the drain, reaching as far as his body let him. The woman gripped her thighs, fingernails digging in. He was almost shoulder deep in the sink.

The sound disturbed her the most. The liquid made a glooping kind of sound. It reminded her of homemade slime or putty. Each time her husband retracted his arm, a waft of sweet, putrid meat filled the room. The oily sheen of the liquid splattered the entire countertop. All of her freshly washed dishes were coated with the grime. The festering smell and the unnatural sounds made her stomach churn. She felt a migraine coming on.

Her husband took in a sharp breath. "I just felt something. I don't know what, but something just brushed up my arm," he said.

"No, stop! Don't do that to me right now," the woman said.

"I'm not playing around, I mean it. Something hard and bumpy touched my arm."

"It is just the chicken bones, it has to be, nothing else is down there, I swear to you."

Her husband gave her a strange look. Somewhere between shaken and curious. She knows he will not stop. She wants to know. And he has to know.

For one last time, he plunges shoulder deep into the disposal. His face turns to agony. Screaming out, he yanks his arm back, to no avail.

"Oh, God. What happened? Pull your arm out!" the woman said.

"I can't! I can't! It's got me," her husband said.

"What's got you?"

"I don't know. Shit!"

The woman positions herself behind him, wrapping one arm around his midsection. With the other arm gripped under his armpit, she pulls as hard as she can. Her feet dig into the linoleum floor. With a count of three, they use all their strength to pull up his trapped arm.

Her husband yelps, whether from pain or shock, she does not know. Blood sprays across their faces from the force of their pull. Around his arm is a twisted mass of teeth. Each tooth is barbed in the center with a pin-like stinger, oozing the oily substance. The mass snakes up his arm, the bottom of it coming from deep within the drain. Her husband's arm is shredded. Tendons are visible where the mass used to be. His hand is nothing more than a stump.

Still recovering from the sight of her husband's demolished extremity, her grip falters. The thing in the sink takes the chance and pulls down hard. The woman throws her arms around



her husband's neck and chest, trying desperately to get him back. But the thing in the sink holds strong. The drain in the center of their sink widens, expanding like the jaws of a snake. The granite does not crack or buckle. Instead, it curls around the opening of the drain.

Her husband had been mostly incoherent up until this point. "Please, don't let go of me," he said.

"I'm trying. I'm trying, I swear!" she said. But the woman was running out of strength. She could try going for a kitchen knife, but they were far enough away that she would have to let go at some point. The ruler that her husband originally used was knocked off the counter by the struggle, not that it would help much anyway.

The woman's grip was slipping. The combination of the oily substance and the blood had made their floors slick. As she tried to readjust, she lost her footing. As her back hit the floor with a thud, her husband was dragged forward. The maw of the sink must have been massive at this point. Her husband had stopped screaming, having lost too much blood. The mass of teeth pulled him into the depths of the sink, swallowing him whole.

Silence fell on the room, only being broken by the occasional drip of mixed liquids off the countertop. The smell was stronger now. Metallic and sweet.





JASMINE DOWELL

## Nature







VINNY CYR

## Longevity

It was an early spring morning in God's country, and The Vampire rose with the sun.

It wasn't a common trait for vampires to seek the sun—rather the opposite in fact. But this vampire, The Vampire, was older than most of his kind, and he craved sunlight as humans craved water. After all, his people had worshipped the sun as one of their many gods, and who was he to shun the old faith this late in life?

He sighed, turning his face this way and that, soaking up the rays as best as he could without incurring a sunburn—an unfortunate reality he did have to contend with. The birds were singing, the air smelled of dew and grass; light stretched over the endless sea of green foliage that shielded his hilltop home from the prying eyes of the nearby villagers. The village itself he could see in the distance, tiny homes dotting the landscape like anthills; he knew his son, Jonathan, would be moving amongst them, being as he was visiting friends for the weekend as an escape from The Vampire's apparently heavy-handed parenting style. The house was quiet, save for the distant grunts of their milk cow, who he'd already tended to an hour prior.

He had just finished donning his hat and cloak—the two best defenses he knew to protect his pallid flesh—and was readying himself to tend to his flowers, when a distant swear broke through the morning's splendor. He gazed down the hill towards the source of the sound and was pleasantly surprised to find his woods-dwelling neighbor, Mr. Paiker, inching along the dirt path at the bottom, grunting as he pushed at a large, covered wheelbarrow.

The Vampire smiled at the sight, unable to quell the excitement he felt bubbling inside of himself—Mr. Paiker was an uncommon addition to his view this early in the morning, and he didn't come this way unless he was traveling to the village. He had always been wary of The Vampire, understandably so considering what pests vampires could be to someone living so deep in the woods; nevertheless, The Vampire always made an effort to be welcoming, in the event that his estranged neighbor was feeling cheery enough to join him for tea. He hadn't accepted the offer yet.

Still, today could be different. The Vampire soared down the hillside, holding onto his hat as his long hair whipped in the breeze. He landed with nary a sound, his boots sinking into the dark soil.

"Fancy seeing you here, Mr. Paiker!" he announced, voice chipper even as his neighbor shouted and unceremoniously dropped the wheelbarrow.

Long ago, The Vampire had made it his general policy to be polite to strangers, no matter the circumstances—unless they were holding swords. Mr. Paiker did, admittedly, often carry a harpoon, but that was hardly a sword, and he only pointed it at The Vampire when he was startled, like he was right now.

His neighbor clutched at his chest, panting like he'd done a sprint through the woods. "Sodding Christ! What're you doing here?!"



The Vampire smiled. “I saw you passing by as I was watering my roses, and I just couldn’t let you go without saying hello! Might I offer you some tea?”

Mr. Paiker, wide eyed, actually seemed to consider it for a brief moment, before he shook his head. “No, I don’t have time for it today. I’ve business to attend to in town.”

The Vampire nodded with great enthusiasm, hoping to convey his interest in the matter at hand. “Hm, yes, it is rather early! Tell me, what’s the occasion? Are you carting away more deer bones?”

The question was unnecessary— The Vampire could smell all manner of meat from miles away, and there weren’t any deer bones in the wheelbarrow. But there was something sitting in the air, mildly odorous, but not yet offensive.

Mr. Paiker gave him a withering look. “My mother passed last night. Or this morning. I’m not sure which.”

The Vampire blinked— he hadn’t expected that answer. Much as he sought (*pined*, as Jonathan insisted) after the man’s company, he didn’t know much of his life outside of their brief encounters. His neighbor was monosyllabic on a good day, foul mouthed on a poorer day, but he was always tight-lipped about his personal matters. He hadn’t even known Mr. Paiker had a mother, much less lived with her.

The Vampire eyed the wheelbarrow, thinking of the stench in the air. “Is she—?”

“Yes.” Mr. Paiker interrupted, sounding very tired.

The Vampire shifted from foot to foot. “I see. I’m very sorry to hear that, Mr. Paiker. Would you like help carrying her into town?”

“What, so you can drain her dry when I’m not looking?” Mr. Paiker snapped, anger momentarily overtaking the exhaustion so set into his features.

The Vampire’s nose wrinkled at the thought. “I’m not much for dead blood, thank you. Please believe that if I had any ill intentions towards you or your family, I would have made them known long ago.”

Mr. Paiker stared at him for a long moment, before letting out a bone deep sigh, shoulders slumping. “Sorry. Yes, I’d appreciate help. This has been... difficult, for me.”

The Vampire smiled as kindly as he could— through the centuries he’d found that, while closed-mouth smiles could be unsettling, a mouth full of fangs would inevitably be even more so. He tried to find an even ground, generally, though he wasn’t sure if he was succeeding, considering that Mr. Paiker was looking at him like his old master had when he’d asked to learn to read.

He sidled up to the wheelbarrow, gently wresting it from his neighbor’s hands and lifting it from the ground. It was objectively quite heavy (Mr. Paiker clearly fed his mother well, The Vampire noted with some fondness), but not much for the preternatural strength he’d developed over the many centuries of his existence.

“Where to? The village, yes?” he asked, already plotting a route in his head. He began to push, the rusty wheels creaking under the strain.

Mr. Paiker nodded, trudging along beside him. “There’s a graveyard on the edge of town. Hopefully there’ll be room enough for her. If not...”

His companion didn’t seem keen to continue with that line of thought. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” he soothed, in the tone he usually saved for when his son broke a toy or scraped a knee. “I take it you’re not religious? Since we’re not going to the cemetery.”

The cemetery he referred to was a small plot attached to the village’s chapel, tended to by an overwhelmingly neurotic priest and his small army of veiled minions. The Vampire had



witnessed a few burial ceremonies in passing, and they seemed quite lovely, if understandably somber.

Mr. Paiker shook his head. “I don’t worship any God you’ve heard of. Besides, I can’t afford the burial fees they’d demand. The potter’s field will suit her nicely. If I’m lucky I’ll find a stone to mark her with, so I remember where she is.”

The Vampire puzzled over this— it had been a very, very long time since he’d buried anyone himself, but he could have sworn at least one of his prior families had had a private cemetery, with each resident receiving a headstone engraved with their name. His own had been decently ostentatious, being carved of marble. He wondered if it was still there. If anyone was.

Mr. Paiker continued, “‘Course, if I were a better son I’d bury her at sea, so she could rejoin my father. She wasn’t right after he died, went all... strange, sometimes. Stared into the fireplace, rocking in her chair, didn’t make a peep. I didn’t think she was long for this world, but she held on for some twenty-odd years before kicking it last night.”

The Vampire frowned. “You’re certain he died?”

“Who?”

“Your father. Lost at sea, I take it? How would you know he’s dead?”

Mr. Paiker scoffed. “He never came back. That’s as good as dead.”

The Vampire could feel his mind come to a brief, difficult halt. He thought back to the people he’d left behind, had let think he’d passed away, when in reality, he’d just passed through. He’d spend some years in a certain place, charm the locals, find a girl and marry her. They’d be happy for awhile. She’d ask him for children, for an heir to carry on her family’s legacy. He’d lie and promise her a son (nobody wanted daughters), and they’d try, and when their efforts were inevitably for naught, they’d try again. The family would grow frustrated. His wife would grow old; he would not.

When suspicions ran high, he’d find a corpse, glamour it to look like him, or something resembling him. He’d feign a hunting accident, or a fall down a cliff, or a robbery turned maiming. He’d leave on a passing breeze, unseen and unheard, carrying himself to locales unknown.

And he’d start again.

Jonathan had been different— unplanned, for one, as much as the acquisition of an orphaned child could be “unplanned”. The Vampire had never had a child before— he hadn’t been allowed when he was alive, and he hadn’t been able once he was dead. There was novelty to the idea of having something of his own, someone he needn’t hide from, if he played his cards right.

In hindsight, his reasoning hadn’t been the soundest— children were hardly objects, and Jonathan swiftly proved to be a hellion, angry at the world that took his parents, and at the fiend trying to play house with him. He’d broken a great many windows in their old manor.

Still, it had been fascinating to view grief from the outside looking in— his own grief had always been quiet and cold and deep like a well. He’d balked from its icy depths, fearing that if he looked too closely into the still waters he’d fall in and drown.

Jonathan’s grief was a tide pool, ebbing and flowing; he’d waded into the heart of it, reveled in his own pain and anger, splashing mud everywhere. He’d had his parents for seven years of his tiny lifespan; The Vampire had no way of knowing his own age, but he knew he had to be pushing his first millennium. Jonathan would have lived and died 10 times in that span of time and still have felt more than his surrogate father ever had.



The Vampire had always known that he would outlive his son. He had outlasted societies, civilizations, species; in the face of such enormous longevity, what was the life of a foul-mouthed little boy with a chip on his shoulder and the anger of a thousand suns?

A lot, he realized, an ache growing in his chest. He'd spent aeons as a transient seed, floating from place to place, pushed about by whims and circumstance. Putting down roots was foreign and unnatural to one such as him, and yet he'd done it without noticing.

He knew then, with a sudden surety, that he would not leave his son. That he would be there for every milestone, every failing and floundering; his first love, his first heartbreak, his first kill. That he would sit by his deathbed, holding his son's hand as he drifted off into the great unknown; as he did when he was a child, still afraid of the dark.

*"Oi!"*

He could feel himself jolted back to reality—he must have stopped moving at some point during his reminiscing.

"Something wrong?" Mr. Paiker asked, and The Vampire might've sworn he heard a note of concern in that tone, though he had surely imagined it.

He shook his head, plastering on what he hoped was a pleasant smile. "No," he said, eyes averted to the ground as they began to burn. He started pushing once more. "Nothing at all."





ELLA SUMNER

## A Ballad of Loss and Hope

Here I stand.  
In the very chair he once sat,  
Gaping at the house that was once his home.  
I see the books we read,  
And the creative games we would play.

He was a legend.  
Kind, had compassion, gave joy.  
And he would kill for his wife, children, and me.  
To others in this world, he would be of no comparison.

He is the past tense now,  
Woeing from beyond the stars, where the Lord reigns.  
And he looks down with a hopeful smile,  
Proud of what has become of me, and what has happened to me.

There is no saving him, for he has already been rescued.  
For he is favored and he is loved.  
In the sky, with his heavenly Father,  
He has been a servant, his job was well done.

But woe is me, for I feel that he cares no longer.  
I stare at a door that was once his as I ponder.  
What is a man worth if he does not worry?  
What is a human if you do not feel them?  
And why, oh why, do they never leave your mind?

Walking outside, I see the tree I once gifted him,  
Blooming pink and white, full of spirit.  
Why did the Maker not kill it instead of its owner?  
And can I get rid of the bark and tear it apart  
To bring him back?

But in the clouds he looks down, and to the sky I look,  
Not worrying, for he knows me,  
Not touching, for he is in me,



Not leaving, because he cares for long.

Look up! Don't look past.  
There is no such thing as loneliness,  
For there he is, perched, watching me.  
Up, and up, and up, but so close.

From the deepest valley and the highest mountains,  
From the darkest chasm to the brightest beaches,  
At the end of all days and the dawn of every beginning,  
He is with me.



# **I am**

I am light,  
I am creator,  
I am the beginning and the end.  
I am truth,  
I am peace,  
I am the sovereign judge.  
I am good,  
I am just,  
I am the righteous king.  
I am love,  
I am compassion,  
I am the ultimate sacrifice.  
I am perfect,  
I am safety,  
I am a shield for those who take refuge in Me.  
Even though many are blind to me, I will still be the light,  
Even though many doubt me, I will still be the creator.  
Even though many try to disprove me, I will still be truth,  
Even though many fight over me, I will still be the peace.  
Even though many hate me, I will still be good,  
Even when many call me unforgivable, I will still be compassionate.  
Even though many try to deem me as evil, I will still be perfect,  
Even when people run from my protection, I will still be their safety.  
Even when the voices of the evil one cling to you,  
When you are consumed by hate and depression,  
The faults and sins of your being are etched in your soul  
And you feel as though you do not deserve me,  
I Am.





AIDAN VILLEGAS

## Misread

I heard your soft spoken words.  
I wrote them down like it mattered.  
Let them bruise me with their borrowed weight.  
Each note I made turned inward like a blade.  
An edge I honed in silence.  
I made weapons from words.  
Then carelessly aimed them.  
I watched you point to stars I couldn't see.  
Your eyes bright with names I'd never learn.  
I think sometimes it's ghosts I'm chasing.  
That never promised to exist.  
Still, I listen for meaning.  
Like they might spell something true.





BRIAN SIX

## Jittering Vision

Not just a battle, a slaughterhouse.  
A killing floor with clogged drains.  
The fresh scent of nature occluded by the gore surrounding us.

Fighting, swinging, raging.  
Blindly following my anger.  
Eyes gone red, can't see the blood anymore.

Forgotten how long we've been here,  
Haven't seen the sun in some time.  
Man-made clouds won't clear.

Lost my squad,  
Lost my sight,  
Lost my way, can't see the light.

No allies, no enemies,  
just animals.

Keep moving.  
Stay alert.  
No mourning.

Stabbing, thrashing, clashing.  
Who stood in my way?  
No matter, no time to pull my punches.  
Survival's the only play.

Fighting, swinging, raging.  
Blindly following my anger.  
Eyes gone red, can't see the blood anymore.

I've been gifted every strength at the cost of my sight.  
Who are these enemies?  
Which side have I found myself on?



No allies, no enemies,  
just animals.

If god doesn't crave violence,  
why give me this rage?





JADALYSE JONES

## Talk Silence

The day we met, I talked your ear off, but you often assured me that you loved hearing my voice  
After months of being unlabeled, you asked me to be your girlfriend, and I accepted, of course  
Our favorite place to hang out was the park, often talking about old stories and new dreams  
Not leaving until it got dark. One night, sudden rain poured down, and you took my hand  
We danced, no music, just the sound of our feet twisting in the moist, unbalanced sand  
The memories constantly looping, all the way from my amygdala down to my heart  
After years spent together, it leaves me so shattered that somehow, we grew apart  
Now the rain is heavy, conversations are useless, and music just isn't the same  
I had no words, no say, while you happily invited others into our love game  
We don't talk now, but once you were my best friend and lover all in one.  
The only madman who dared to wake me up before the rise of the sun  
So many words, many questions I want to ask, but of course I won't  
And now it's just me here with painful recollections of our conte  
Nowadays, I don't babble, because what's the point anyway?  
Yet my heart won't stop talking every minute of every day  
No more late nights or spontaneously dancing in parks  
Just raw silence from me and my sore, broken heart





ELVIS FERIA HERNANDEZ

## Apathy Wears a Human Face

I was not born angry.  
It found me in the silence  
between what was said  
and what was endured.

There is a rage that does not scream  
it simmers,  
lodged between bone and breath,  
waiting for a world  
that dares to feel again.

I have seen the eyes of men  
blink past blood  
as if horror were  
a static in the background  
of their next promotion.

I have watched women  
exhausted by survival  
apologize for stillness  
as if rest were theft.

And I have carried my own ache  
quietly,  
translating grief into grammar,  
sacrifice into silence,  
so others could be comfortable.

Why do they not see?  
Why do they not look inward  
where the soul begs for reckoning?

Is it comfort?  
Or cowardice?

Apathy, I have learned,  
does not shout.  
It hums  
in small talk,  
in scrolls,  
in “that’s just how it is.”

But I remember  
I remember when meaning  
was messy,  
and grief had a place at the table.

I am not ashamed of the weight I carry.  
It is not bitterness.  
It is witness.  
It is truth.





EVE WOOD

## Zombie

The disease enters your vein

I watch through the crack  
You groan and move slow,  
turning brains into snacks

Does your mind remain?

If I enter, would you see?  
The you I once knew  
Seems not to notice me

You need one more brain

Just one, then two, then three  
What more can I do?  
I need to set you free

But the people you've slain

What an unpretty view  
The life left your eyes  
You've started turning blue

Could you see my pain?

Or tell how I yearned?  
No, the infection's taken over  
And you've turned



# The Fool







JOY VALENTIN

## Wish I Could Stay

I stare at the gentle rise and slump of your body.  
Your snore is soothing, in spite of every self-loathing comment you spit out.  
I think back to the moments before when your breath was anything but gentle,  
And I wonder whether you'd noticed my hollow eyes,  
My factory processed movements,  
The practiced repeated phrases.

In this bed,  
Is the happiest place on earth.  
Soft warm quilts that smell of sweet fire,  
The mountain of pillows you incorrectly insist make the bed more comfortable.  
Your burning skin, still marking mine long after I've left,  
Beckoning for the next time.

And yet I still find myself on the sidewalk only minutes later,  
Confused, cold, and empty.

Our stupid conversation made me forget all the stress I've felt lately.  
Cuddling up with you made me forget what being lonely felt like.  
Undressing made me forget why we don't do this every week.  
Sex made me forget why I thought I would like this.

It's not that I don't feel physically good.  
It's not that I don't love pleasuring you.  
It's not that I don't still have my breath taken away by the sight of you.  
It's not that I don't feel connected to you before or even after our body's union.

I don't know what's wrong with me.  
I felt so sure of what I wanted, desperation inescapable.  
But by the time we've started, I'm no longer here, no longer myself.  
Just a shell, taking its space so I don't ruin this for you too.

And then another week goes past.  
And I'll forget again.  
And I'll return to you.  
The lonely broken thing on the sidewalk wanting to come back home.



# Dysfunctional

“Raise your head up!”

Air escapes my lungs in a spray of bubbles traversing to the surface.  
My nose burns and sputters unable to deject the foreign liquid.  
I feel the red in my eyes as salt irritates them perpetually.  
The waves bob my head out of the water.

“Raise your head up!”

Body expands and contracts with the frequent gasps that have become my voice.  
Left ear hears nothing but the water slushing through it.  
Clothes feel tight and heavy against my skin.  
Hair curled into frozen tendrils, the scalp bearing the brunt of the freeze.

“Raise your head up!”

I can't feel my fingers.  
I can't feel my legs.  
I can't feel my neck.  
I only feel the comforting warmth of tears.

“Raise your head up!”

She stands on solid wood.  
With dry clothes.  
And a hoarse throat.  
But I can't tell if she's underwater.

“Raise your head up!”

He says holding steady to the railing.  
Taking desperate quick drinks of ice-cold water.

I taste salt in mine.

But I can't tell if he's barely floating above the surface.

“Raise your head up!”

As they throw another life preserver.

Too far for me to grasp.  
No one will jump in to save me.



But I can't tell if they don't feel their limbs anymore.

"Raise your head up!"

And I don't know the difference between a polypeptide and an isotope.  
And I don't know the formula for a slope.  
And I don't know how to tell my cousin she's picked bad ways to cope.  
And I don't know how to give my family hope, when *I* have none.

"Raise your head up!"

And I'd rather live with a cyst on my eye than take my make up off.  
And I'd rather break my ankles than stop wearing boots.  
And I'd rather cut open my skin than have hair on my legs.  
And I'd rather tear out my tongue than say another word I don't mean.  
And I'd rather be shot in the street than dress like someone else.  
And I'd rather die than let you decide who I am.

"Raise your head up!"

I'd rather drown.





CHRISTIAN SIBERT

## The Whims of My Addiction

A good story ready to read,  
to entertain me once more.  
To satiate my addiction with books galore.  
But what of the end, when it's all good and done?  
What will be the next, to keep up the fun?  
So, I search for so long in an unending quest.  
Lining up story to story so I can finally rest.  
But one isn't enough and neither is two.  
So, I line up more stories, wasting days to do.  
With everything settled, I ready my story at last.  
But with sorrow I find it wasn't quite up to the task.  
With that becoming boring and not worth my time,  
my interest in the others changes on a dime.  
With my mood and my wants shifted slightly to the side,  
all the stories are now meaningless, forced to be set aside.  
Not matching the shapes that used to fit so well,  
my mind screams for more, but I'm unable to quell.  
So I lay down defeated, bored and tired.  
Feeling my thoughts are stagnant and mired.





JAMES MANOY







ETHAN BACHSTEIN

## A Familiar Face

Ed Winant was an odd sort of fellow. Had a familiar sort of face, the kind you might see on a dozen different folk. That was the thought that came about me that warm May evening way back in '64.

We'd been following Lee's rebs for a few weeks, as a part of Unconditional Surrender's campaign to chase the old goat down and decimate his army once and for all. I myself had been with Meade's army, the main force pushing south, for about a year. Ed joined just a few weeks ago, and I latched onto the lad, who seemed rather green.

Together we fought the Battle of the Wilderness, where he seemed to grow a little more comfortable with fighting. He was a young boy, no older than twenty. He bore a freckled, childish appearance, but stood on a sturdy frame. Ed was tall, too, towered over most of us in the unit. Made the poor kid a target during combat, but he managed. His hands were that of a man who had never worked a hard day's labor, something he was teased for by the other men. To me, he just looked wealthy, someone who had been pampered all of his life. But then, why was he fighting? Most rich boys just had their papas pay for a substitute in their stead. That wasn't an uncommon appearance. No, seeing a young, well-to-do boy such as Ed was the bizarre sight.

Ed stared up at the dark, starless night sky. I studied him while I mended my pants. From time to time, he would sit up and poke at the fire to keep it live. But mostly he just stared, lost in his thoughts.

"You better sleep, Ed. No doubt you've counted all the stars already," I said, eyes still on my sewing.

He was startled, jumping a little in place. "Oh, yeah. Probably."

I chuckled. "If you're nervous about tomorrow, lad, don't be. You've got some action in you already, you'll be alright."

He doesn't answer, but clearly doesn't agree. After a moment, he reaches over to his pack next to him and pulls out a small leatherbound notebook and a pencil. He intently jots down several sentences, pauses to think, then continues on. By the time I rolled over to turn to sleep myself, he was still scratching away.

The next morning, we all woke shortly before dawn to move to our formations. Ed and I were part of the group approaching from the west flank. We were to take position among a group of trees as the main body would curve them toward our position. Then, we were to ambush them, take them by surprise and give 'em a good whooping. We crouched next to each other.

Ed seemed to have composed himself since the night prior. He got like this at the Wilderness too, a sort of focused calm that washed over him before something major was to happen, always preceded by the jitters. In the distance, gunshots began to sound off.

We waited, as we expected to do. Ed several times pulled out a small, black object, different from last night's, which he kept close to his chest. At the time, I think I believe I



surmised that it was a darkly painted tin for photos. He moved strangely with it, shifting his torso from side to side with the tin pressed flatly across his breast.

After a few hours, the shots and cannonade moved closer. Our time was soon approaching. The order was given down the line and fix bayonets, preparing in case the order to charge was given.

Then we saw them. The force of Rebs was down in a valley in front of us, a steep hill to their side and front. We were positioned on a hill higher than their ground and tall enough to be an advantage, but much shorter than the other hill to try and fishbowl them in.

They were trapped.

The company commander shouted out, ordering us to fire down into them. A volley pounded their lines. I was engrossed myself in the business of my rifle, but noticed out of the corner of my eye Ed slow to the trigger. Rarely did he fire and when he did, he shot down ever so slightly, seemingly deliberate to not let his round reach any living target. I ignored it. If the boy didn't want to kill, that was between him and the Lord.

The Rebs regrouped with astonishing speed. Redressing their lines, they responded in kind, backing up in order to get both the previously known Yanks and their newfound aggressors in the line of fire.

A return volley was sent our way, peppering the trees around us. I felt no lead reach my flesh, but Ed was not so lucky. I looked over and saw him hunched over, blood pouring from his stomach and face.

He groaned loudly. I dropped my weapon and knelt down to address him. He was lucky that the bullet only grazed his face, just the top of his eyebrow, but a stomach wound was bad news. I've seen many over my year of fighting, and it was a rare occurrence to see a man survive.

I held his head and whispered comforts in his ear, telling him to pray, that God would take care of him.

I heard the company commander holler out, "Stand strong! Charge bayonet!" I whipped my body around to grab my rifle. I would give him one last embrace before he shuffled off, then I'd stand and charge with my unit. I grab my rifle and turn back, only to find Ed gone.

I searched quickly, to see if he tried to run to the back of the line or to medics in the moment I'd been turned, but it was too fleeting. Ed had simply vanished.

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I finished my term with the army, and came home to my family. I was a lucky man to have survived, and I didn't waste it. I went into business, dealing first in paper goods then in steel. My fortune grew, and I was comfortable.

Years passed. I never forgot my army days of course, fighting for the Blue. The case of Ed Winant's seeming disappearance vexed me, of course, but over time I came to terms that the intensity of battle can weaken a man's simpler sense at the same time as sharpen others. Can make men see things they didn't or perceive them differently. I had returned after the battle to the spot where he was shot and scoured the area. I never found his body, and no coroner report turned up. Perhaps he had deserted, which wasn't unlikely.

That should have been enough for me. But what never sat right with me was the wound he received. He had been shot in the abdomen, which in essentially every other instance I had ever seen or heard of like his wound, the afflicted were stopped in their tracks. Unless they were



carried off, they likely would have not been able to move and die where they lay. Ed Winant certainly died that day, but I could never find any evidence for it.

Eventually, I had to chalk it up to bad eyes and an old mind. My memory was aging just like the rest of me.

Originally from New York, I moved to Pennsylvania to the southeast corner to put my roots into their steel industry. I had a fruitful career, and after a long time I was able to retire.

I never married, and my fortune left me little else but the freedom to travel. So in 1920, I believe, I took the train back to New York, to the city.

Stepping out of the car, I was greeted by my niece, a lovely young girl who lived in the city and wanted to show me around.

“Uncle! How good it is to see you again,” she said.

Her embrace crushed me slightly. “Gently, my dear. This old goat has seen its fair share of days.”

Together we walked, up and down the tightly packed streets of Manhattan. I grew tired and overwhelmed by the sounds and stuffiness of the streets. “Dear niece, let’s find a place to dine. Let us get out of this noise,” I asked of her. She agreed, and together we ducked into a rather desolated street cafe.

My niece got us a table, and went off to wash up. I sat alone, among only a few other people in the establishment.

The door opened, ringing a little bell. In walks a tall man in a suit and hat, probably in his early twenties.

He had a familiar sort of face, one that you almost would recognize on anyone. But there was something about him particularly that struck me about him. I had had that feeling many times before about plenty of other folk, so I wrote it off. He went about his business, ordering a coffee and sitting at the table across from us, facing me. The entire time, his hat remained on.

Until he reached his seat. There, he removed the hat, revealing all of his features.

And above his eye was a deep scar, one that looked freshly healed.

My heart stopped, just as he looked up to see my staring. He looked confused, and nodded politely, then slowly he realized exactly what I did.

He shot up from his seat and made his way right out the door.

“Ed!” I called after him, shooting up myself. Vigor filled my aching body, and I kept a clip to follow him out.

He rounded the corner into an alleyway, nearly jogging.

I rounded too, seeing him run down the alley. I ran after him. He bolted around the next corner, which led to a dumpster and a dead end.

By the time I turned to see, he had vanished.





HUGO SEGREAVES-ZEPEDA

## Seafaring Folk

Thunder clapped amongst the clouds;  
Lightning cracked, and waves crashed down.  
Water rose as tall as sky;  
The beach was beaten all through the night.

Booming, banging, blaring cries—  
It echoed, echoed, far and wide.

Solemn sorrow swept out to sea,  
The storm had broke with mourning breeze.  
Wind whistled, gently, softly when—  
The sun crept up the horizon then.

We had a quiet moment, the gulls and I,  
Staring out at the horizon line.

Before long, I asked, how did they brave  
The turbulent ways of the waters they face.  
My friends told me tales of how the weather goes,  
“You've gotta be tough to join seafaring folk.”

Following their gaze, I looked out towards a boat,  
I watched with each wave  
It bob high and bob low.

How it withstood the storm, I do not know.  
How birds can do it, I do not know.

The people on this island  
Run inside and they hide.  
It's a safer, smarter way to survive.  
My mind had settled, like the ocean's tide.  
And I looked back to town, a familiar sight.

It's one that I'm usually comforted by.  
But after hearing the birds—who seemed very wise—



I wondered why,

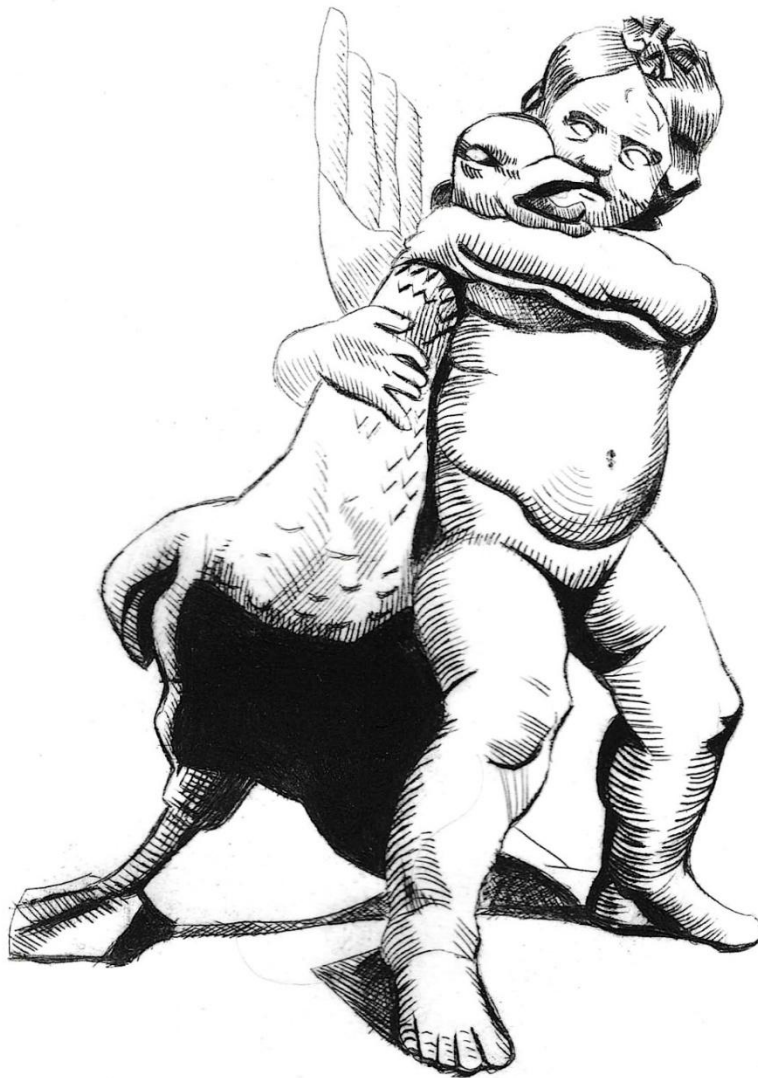
On the beach, alone,  
There sat I.





JACOB TALIJAN

## Geese Are Bad







ALEXIS WENNER

## Runaway Clown

I spent a majority of my life in a circus,  
believing I was born to obey.  
I remained a dancing fool to my master,  
subject to mind games they would play.  
Then came the day I was finally freed,  
and got to return home again.  
To the roses, to the lavender, to the sickly sweet honeysuckle.  
I raise my hand to the wind,  
catching the sun in my palm.  
As the woodland creatures surround my large red shoes chitter with delight,  
I ask,  
Am I allowed to be loved?  
Such joys were a luxury in my old life:  
a reward for good performance.  
A foreign concept it is: to just exist  
and to deserve all of this.  
I rip the steel mask from my face,  
that was held together with chains and barbed wire.  
I bury it deep in the dirt, hopefully never to be seen again.  
I'm allowed to show every emotion,  
even those that have been deemed ugly.  
No longer do I have a crowd to satisfy.  
I'm finally allowed to cry,  
and continue to be loved in spite of it.  
I carved my path in stone with bleeding hands,  
and created my own destiny.  
Far away from that horrid music and flashing lights,  
and popcorn that is far too expensive.



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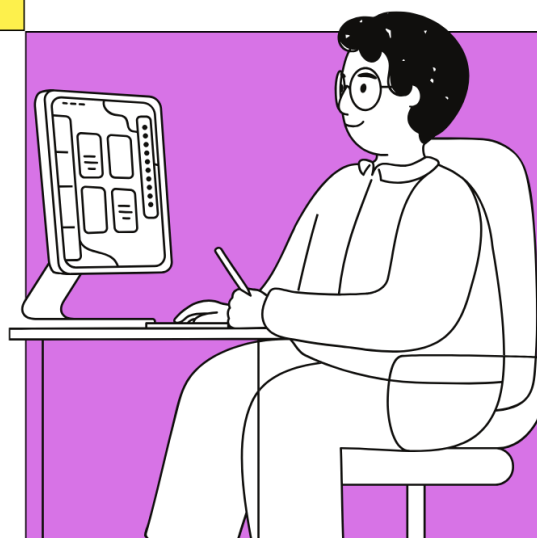
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CARA ANN LUFF

## Enough

I get on my tiptoes to reach higher and brace my hip against the kitchen counter. I wish I were taller, I'm so short, the shortest in my middle school by far. I feel cool air against my stomach and quickly cover my skin with my shirt. The last time Dad saw my belly protruding from my shirt, he called me an embarrassment. If I were taller, I might slim out a little and be less of an embarrassment for him.

Mostly, I want to be taller so I can reach this stupid glass. I reach higher and trip on my pj's. When I try to catch myself, I slam my hand against the cabinet shelf and tip the glass in the process. The glass slips right past my fingers and crashes to the tile floor.

"Sadie!" Dad says.

I open my mouth to respond but I can't find the words. How am I going to explain this? There's glass everywhere. His heavy footfalls approach and my body stills.

"What the hell are you doing?" He scowls at me underneath thick eyebrows.

My mouth hangs open, but nothing comes out. Come on Sadie, talk, say anything.

"Well..." he says.

"I- I didn't."

"You didn't break the glass that I paid for? Really?"

"No- I."

"No what?" His voice is louder now, and I suck in a breath to brace myself against the volume.

Nothing I say ever stops him from yelling, but I keep hoping that if I find the right combination of words, he'll be a little calmer.

"I didn't mean to," I stutter.

"I- I- I-," he mocks. "It's all fun and games for you, until you get found out huh?"

I stare at the glass on the floor, too scared to meet his intense stare anymore.

"You aren't even supposed to be up right now," he says. "You are supposed to be in bed, you know that, and yet here you are making a mess of my kitchen, ruining my sleep in my house."

I stay quiet and still. I just wanted a glass of water. I know that I am not allowed to have any drinks in my room, so I have to come to the kitchen every time. I can never do anything right.

"Hello, are you even listening to me?" His voice startles me from my thoughts. I meet his dark gaze and try to find a way out.

"I'm sorry." I swallow the lump in my throat.

"Oh, you're sorry." He laughs. "You're always sorry, in fact, I am sick and tired of your empty apologies!"

Tears pool behind my eyes, and I try to slow my breathing.



"You know what your problem is? You never think anything through. If you had just gone to sleep like I told you to, my kitchen wouldn't be covered in broken glass!"

"I just wanted some water," I say as the tears I've been holding at bay roll down my cheeks.

"Oh, here we go." He rolls his eyes at me.

I quickly wipe away the tears and fight the sobs wreaking havoc on my body. Come on, Sadie. Get it together. Crying only makes it worse.

"It's always the crocodile tears with you." He slams his hand down on the counter. "You can just knock it off now. I don't believe it anymore!"

"I'm trying, Dad."

"Try harder."

I can't try any harder, I am always trying. I have straight A's. I do all my chores. I don't go out with friends. I don't date. I eat less. I don't wear V-necks or eyeliner. I don't talk back or stay up past curfew. It's never enough. I'm never enough.

I hang my head towards the floor and stare at the glass scattered on the tile. I realize the glass cut the side of my foot, and blood pools in the grout, but I don't feel it. I wish I could.

"This kitchen better be spotless by the time I wake up, Sadie, so help me." He stomps out of the room.

I stay carefully still until the door to his bedroom slams shut. I finally stop fighting the tears and release a sob.

I kneel on the floor and start picking up the glass but the tears in my eyes blur my vision and make it impossible to pick up the glass without cutting my fingers.

"Babe." A soft voice meets my ears.

I stay kneeled on the floor picking up the glass with bloodied hands until warm hands graze my arms. I pull my eyes away from the glass to meet the rich brown eyes of my husband.

"I dropped it," I say. "I didn't mean to drop it." More tears blur my vision.

"Sade, shhh." His warm hands run up and down my arms softly. "It's okay, it's just a cup, no big deal."

My breathing starts to slow. He's right, it's just a cup.

"We need to clean you up, okay?"

He lifts me by my elbows and brings me to the sink. He pulls glass from my hands gently and apologizes every time I hiss in pain. He reverently cleans each cut and wraps it carefully. He even offers me a joke that forces a smile out of me. In return, he grins back like my small smile made his day.

"Go lie down, I'll finish cleaning up in here," he says.

"You don't have to do that. I'm the one who made the mess, I should clean it up."

"I don't mind." He smiles and kisses me on the cheek.

"Why are you always so good to me?"

He says the same thing every time.

"Because you're worth it."





ALYSSA PELONERO

## The Weight of it All

The weight of it all does not define me anymore.  
It built me.  
Layer by layer it grew with me becoming conjoined  
to my spine.

I learned to carry it—  
mine, theirs,  
All the burdens handed over  
without a second thought.

No one asked if I could hold it.  
They just gave it.  
And I took it all.  
Because I could. Because I didn't know any better.

But now—  
I know that strength isn't silent suffering.  
It's a choice.  
It's saying: just because I can, doesn't mean I must.

I am not carrying the world's pain.  
I am a woman with wings beneath the weight.  
And I get to decide  
what I carry next.





ALIX GONZALEZ

## Anthropocene

You know, I thought  
that when we realized the world was ending  
that everything would change.

I thought the children  
would be jumping out of shut windows.  
I thought that we  
would tear out our gardens,  
leaving just the weeds

I thought.

I thought the elders  
would beat pedestrians with canes.  
I thought we would quit our jobs  
and break up with each other.

I thought the hawks  
would screech at fingers over buttons  
as the doves cooed them away.  
I thought we would be quick  
to call our parents  
and tell them how much we hated and loved them.

I thought we would burn the buildings,  
unafraid of being caught later.  
I thought we would shout  
obscenities at the children.  
They wouldn't have a future  
to be traumatized about anyways.

But none of that came to pass.  
We looked at each other's hollowed out eyes  
and rubbed our drooping bags.

We took one more sip of coffee or tea, shrugged



and punched out of work.

We had given up, went home  
turned the tv on  
to our favorite shows  
and ate our frozen dinners.  
We went to bed to sleep out the last of our days.

The zombies did doom us after all.

We gave up,  
and let the world die in our hands.  
And the most we ever did  
was groan about it.



# Trumpet

When the Light parts the clouds,  
will, it be enough that you said sorry?  
Will every thrown stone melt like snow?  
Will the hungry feed on your leftovers?  
Will the bodies you riddled still rot?

When you return Home,  
Will it be enough that you said sorry?  
When you rejoin Them,  
Will it be enough that you left us behind  
Paying the debt of your sins?

When the Trumpet calls,  
Will you still collect rent?  
Will you still turn me away from the  
hospital?  
Will you chant slurs through thunder?  
And smite use with lightning for your  
grievances?



# Dear Literature

My love,  
I am sorry for leaving you again.  
I found comfort in the solace of violets.  
I was pacified with intrusive desires for finales.

I stopped feeding you,  
Stopped seeing you,  
Stopped thinking of you,

I came to you with ribs split open.  
My sternum, a torn wishbone,  
my heart exposed,  
my lungs bare for you to inhabit.

Yet I still find myself pulled away  
Distraction halts my meditations

I split my ribs open for you,  
Only to fail to let you in.  
I split my ribs open for you,  
Only to fail to love you.  
I split my ribs open,  
Only to splinter my lungs with my own bones.

Oh, literature, my love,  
how I have failed you,  
forgone my vows,  
let you rust in summer rains.

I fell into the arms of violets  
and violently left you  
standing in barren fields,  
ripped from my being.

Forgive me, my love,  
my literature.  
May we reunite and dance together once more  
nn those same summer rains from before.





MICHAEL SCHWAB

## Watermarks

To see my body lifeless,  
at least not in the way I used to,  
I imagine waves rippling across the surface  
as I sacrifice myself for you  
Even now, I'm not quite weightless  
and I'm trapped beneath the blue  
I look up at you look down on me  
as I fold myself over for you  
Do you see that lifeless beauty?  
do you at least say it in your mind?  
Like how you say drowning can be euphoric,  
worth moments that last lifetimes

...

When bliss becomes irrelevant  
and the metal heart irreverent,  
I can't help but think of the terror and exhaustion  
of dying in this riptide we're caught in  
Because even after feeling heaven with you,  
conscience may bubble up through the blue  
To see my body lifeless,  
gray, and sunken like it used to



# Dear Prudence, Don't You Come out to Play

Dear Prudence, Don't you come out to play.

For I am in limerence  
    with this new thing called certainty.  
With the debate of its subsistence,  
    I beg, do not antagonize me.

For many times I have valued your caution,  
your painfully pompous equivocation  
accumulating an empty currency  
to pay for some archaic, righteous innocence.

But I care no more to be fair,  
    and I care very much to live.  
And you cannot live in a house on fire,  
    no matter the tears you have to give.

...

If I loosen my white knuckles  
    I know they could all fall to the sand,  
my manipulated muscles.  
    Or might they stay placed in the palm of my hand?

It is in my power to say yes,  
    for as many years as I can spend.  
And if they so happen to be gone tomorrow,  
    It is also in my power to mend.





EMMIE KOCHANOWICZ

## Self Portrait







SUSHI

## Come at Me Bro



## Twin Sparks of Dawn







EMILY EISENHARD

## Personas





# Unraveled





# Shipwrecked







KIARA RHYNE

## Den of Sin

The riverboat thrummed with life, walls reverberating with bursts of laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the occasional shout of triumph or despair from a game table all mixed with swinging jazz. Thick curls of tobacco smoke coiled lazily in the air, mingling with the heady sweetness of spiced rum as she kept her head down.

Fiadh's mini dress brushed against sticky tabletops and eager gamblers as she wove her way through the crowded floor, her heels muffled by the worn velvet carpet beneath her feet.

All around her, patrons indulged in their vices: gambling, drinking, smoking, and exchanging coy glances with beautiful company. The din of the crowd washed over her like waves, but she remained focused. She knew that she couldn't linger too long tonight so she needed to find a table quickly.

Finally, her eyes lit up when she found an open seat at a blackjack table. She slid onto the plush seat between two men and tapped on the table to be dealt in. When the dealer pointedly ignored her, her lips curled into a fanged snarl. "I'd think my coinage would still be good here," she called out.

Before her temper could boil over, a heavy hand clamped down on her shoulder. She stiffened, the touch radiating unwelcome heat through her dress.

"Well, chérie, ain't no need to get pissy!" A rich, molasses-smooth voice drawled behind her. She stood and spun on her heel and found herself looking up at a man who towered over her like a mountain.

His purple suit shimmered in the low light, golden embroidery catching the glow of nearby neon lights. The fabric stretched taut across his broad shoulders, as though it could barely contain him. His grin was crooked, almost disarming, but his eyes betrayed him; sharp, predatory, and hungry.

"My sinners just wanted me to meet you properly," he said as the overpowering scent of his cologne clung to the air between them. Beneath everything though, she caught the unmistakable, primal scent of one of her own kind. *Dragon*.

Shrugging off his hand, she glared up at him. "It ain't often we get friends here. May I ask your name?" he continued, his hand outstretched.

"Fiadh," she replied, taking his hand reluctantly. His grip was firm, his skin rough, and when he lifted her hand to press a kiss against it, her stomach twisted. She was used to men paying their respects to her, but the heat of his lips lingered on her hand a little too long.

"Now that we've met, am I free to gamble as I please?" she asked, snatching her hand back. The urge to dust it off on her dress was strong, but she resisted. His gaze lingered as she lowered her hand, settling on the small patch of green scales she hadn't been able to hide with makeup.



"I can't just let a pretty thing like you wander around my fine establishment without somethin' in turn," he said, smiling wide. She knew what this was - a veiled threat wrapped up in every bit of honey he could manage.

She smiled back, knowing that she needed to dance a fine line to make it out alive. Strutting into another dragon's den unannounced had been bold. If he wanted her out, he'd have to force her.

"You must be a gambling man," she said, motioning to the tables around them. "How about a game of chance? If I win, I get to gamble to my heart's desire. If you win, I'll happily leave."

A ripple of unease spread through the room. The gamblers nearest to them grew silent, their cigarette smoke curling upwards in ghostly spirals as they turned to watch.

His shadow flickered behind him, moving unnaturally. For a moment, she could swear it grinned - a jagged, toothy smile that sent a chill down her spine. His face betrayed nothing but a mild annoyance as he slipped a set of bone dice from an inner pocket.

"Well, that sounds mighty fine to me," he said with a sly smile. "Ladies first?" He held the dice out to her, their worn, yellowed surface catching the light.

She took a sharp breath, her nostrils flaring. "Oh, you must take me for a fool. I know where I am. If we're going to do this, let's use dice from one of them," she said, motioning to the many tables around them.

His smile faltered, irritation flashing briefly across his face before he slipped the dice back into his pocket. "Well, ain't you somethin'," he said, taking an offered pair from a nearby craps table. "Fine. We'll do it your way, but I'll start us off. Lowest number rolled wins."

The crowd leaned in, holding their breath as he stepped to the table. His grin widened, and she caught the glint of his fangs in the neon light. But her attention was fixed on his shadow, which writhed and twisted on the floor, moving as if it had a mind of its own.

He shook the dice twice before letting them tumble onto the table.

"That's three, Ms. Fiadh," he said, another lazy smile stretching across his face. She stared at the dice, her heart pounding. Snake eyes - that was her only way out.

Placing the dice in her hand, he leaned in close, his breath warm against her ear. "You know," he murmured, his voice was a low and dangerous purr, "this could all be over in a moment if you come below deck with me."

The room seemed to grow distant as she closed her fingers around the dice. "Not a chance in the seven hells," She pushed past him and stepped up to the table. The dice felt like lead in her hand as she let them roll around for a few moments. She knew that she could make it off the riverboat fairly fast, but she didn't want to risk injuring anyone else in the process.

Biting the crossbow bolt, she let the dice fall from her hand. There was a gasp from the crowd and she looked down. A sparkling set of snake eyes stared back at her.

"Well, would you look at that! Snake eyes!" she crowed, smacking her hand down on the velvet covered table.

Her companion's face went through a flash flood of emotions before he landed on an expression that might have been relaxed, but she knew better.

"Ms. Fiadh, congrats - let's just hope your luck continues."





CAROL RENNA

## Musings

Strawberry vanilla ice cream-colored clouds  
Softly glowing in the hot, sticky July evening sky as the red-hot sun sets.

Faerie lights twinkle in the evening dusk;  
Lightning bugs hoping to find their mates.

A symphony of sounds bombards my ears:  
Leaves in the trees rustling in the welcomed breeze,  
Cicada and locust love songs,  
A dog barking to be let back into the house,  
The hum of my neighbors' air conditioners,  
A car driving by, its tires rumbling on the still hot macadam  
A radio playing a popular song

Darkness settles around me  
A comfy, cozy blanket promising safety, security, and anonymity.

If only this moment could last forever.  
If only...



# Electricity

Your glance sparks electric jolts in my heart  
A lightning strike that powers my soul  
Like Frankenstein's monster, I come alive  
Experiencing the world like a newborn babe  
Fear first  
Then, tentatively, I touch your skin  
Sparks tickle my tummy and butterfly kisses lead my thoughts to

Endless possibilities  
Wet possibilities  
Slippery possibilities  
Hungry possibilities  
Throbbing possibilities  
Urgent possibilities

S T O P

Take a breath

Savor the NOW

It's the only thing that's real.





ZOE HAINES

## Verisimilitude

Sarah and Jareth twirling in a pool of masquerade  
Interlinked, interlocked; a single teardrop cascades  
Peering out into a sea of mannequins who's only purpose is to perspire  
Eyes without a face in a room of eyelets faces is all I desire  
Mise en scene, hate how the curtain falls when the palpitations ensue  
Rule of thirds, third time's a charm, the last of the trilogy all mine  
Figure eights of Midsommar that envelope us drop flower crowns  
Ring around the rose of your cheeks make me fall down  
Centripetal, centrifugal, the gravitational pull is delightful yet perilous  
Every melody transcends and blends; I hope this soundtrack never ends  
Hands clasped in mine as the bass cries out for mercy  
Four shoulders become one, our souls one: the damage has been done  
Vertigo held in place by a heartstring  
Chase me until we collide, until the percussion is strange and uncanny  
Kiss me until the line between real and fake eradicate  
Verisimilitude.  
Blind my conscience with the most endearing grin.  
Suspend us, ascend us, above the rest. We are akin.  
Very similar altitude.  
Drag my ankles against the tightrope, stealthily into the imaginary without jog  
Very simulated fragrance, so pure and nude  
Pull out the stitches sewn onto my lips, so I can say what's unwritten  
Pull us out of the crowd of extras. Break the fourth wall.  
Verisimilitude. For I am smitten.  
You and I. Fantasia and reality conjoined by the tesseract of a looking glass  
A true man who thinks he's as broadcast as Truman  
A woman blessed and burdened by the editing of the shots, so crass  
To love what doesn't exist you must believe it's real  
Trapped in a paradox. Who cares? Play the jukebox!  
Can an actor or actress curate something this bona fide?  
Don't stop this pirouette of perpetual revolution; mirage or illusion  
Is this too good to be true?  
No. I've reached my final resolution and final conclusion.  
People? Or fabricated from stars.  
Devotion of this star crossed love will go far.  
For love is real, even if we are not.  
Ver-i-sim-i-li-tude.





MORGAN FLAGG-DETWILER

## Lilacs

The lilacs were at the end of their time-  
    Petals fell lightly as we walked in the dew.  
The fragrance intensified the warmth in my face  
    Because all I could feel was *you*.

There was a strange gridlock of longing and restraint-  
    As laughter filled our faces.  
A swarm of lavender-hued subtle ease,  
    Saved for our most hidden places.

The whiskey drained, and my cup felt full and-  
    Even though I knew things would never be as they were,  
Like the late-night lilacs,  
    I felt lighter and pure.



## **When Was?**

When was the last time you called me Mommy?  
Mom feels short and cold.  
Your sweet voice and baby cheeks seem a distant memory-  
Like the way you used to give a toothless smile and a belly laugh at any given moment.

When was the last time you willingly snuggled up?  
Side hugs aren't nearly as satisfying.  
Your deep sleep breaths and mid-dream jumps are fewer and farther from my grasp.

When was the last time you watched that silly show?  
The one I couldn't stand in the moment,  
But now I wish I could hear the theme song routinely echoed with your giggles.

When was the last time I carried you to bed?  
Now you're a heap of long legs and stinky feet.  
Too heavy for me to carry for long, light enough to make me recall.  
Like the way I'll always hold you in my core, no matter how grown you become.

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

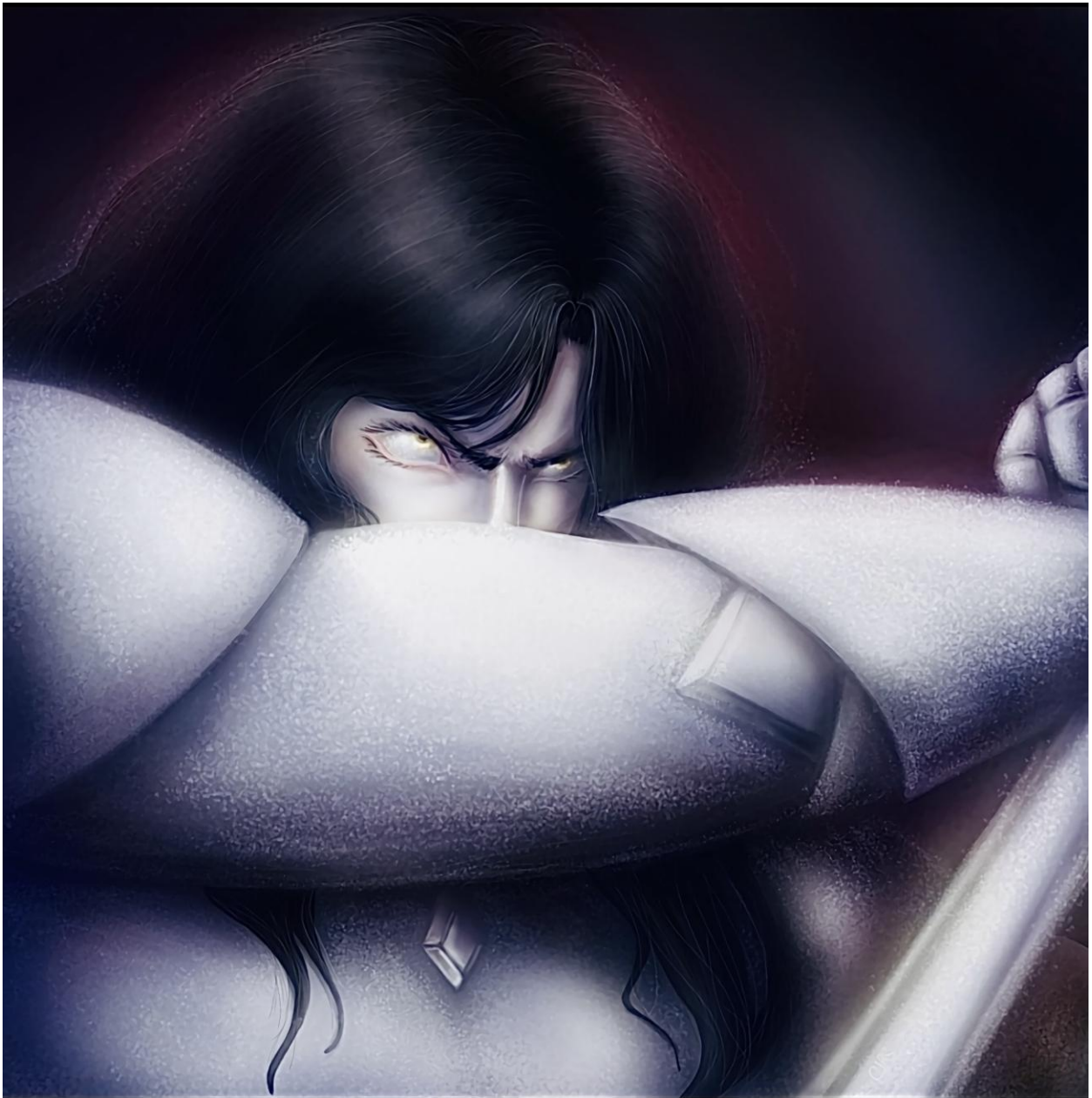
No.  
It's you.  
A you problem.  
And I can't get out of my head-  
Second guessing, circling, spiraling.  
Maybe I'm not good enough.  
A me problem.  
It's me.  
Yes.





NAHIOMY

## Lorrik's Look





## Moon's Necklace





# Lady in the Ashes







EMMIE KOCHANOWICZ

## Shade For A Fairy







AMARIS H.

## Love Untouched

What happens to a love  
That is left untouched  
Does it fly away like a dove  
Or like a leaf, gets crushed

Does it hide away  
Like a scared little mouse  
Or maybe it crumbles on the stairway  
Alone in the great big house

Perhaps it sits still  
Waiting, on display  
That is, until  
It begins to rot away

So again I ask  
What happens to a love  
That is untouched, and unable to bask  
In the yellow sun above





JANAE

## Please Arrive Slowly

Have you ever wanted to die?

Wonder how your body would decay along with Mother Nature? The pounding, furious rhythm of life would be a mythological lesson. Every dream would become a blur, every symbol of hope would become an empty coldness of nothingness, and every feeling of love would become unseen, unworthy, and unnecessary, leaving behind a corpse with no purpose. The thought of death can be both terrifying and intriguing. Imagining the gradual decay of our bodies as they return to the earth is a morbid yet fascinating concept. The idea that all our hopes, dreams, and emotions will ultimately mean nothing in the end can be a sobering realization. But perhaps it is by facing the inevitability of death that we can truly appreciate the beauty and fragility of life.

Mother Nature accepts everyone. You wouldn't go to waste. Your skin will age, discoloring and expanding as a passage to feed the workers. Your organs will be used as food to nurture those below us, strengthening the soil and providing for those below you, while your bones will be left for recognition. Your legacy will live on in the cycle of life as you become a part of the earth once more. Embrace the unknown and trust in the natural order of things. Just as the seasons change and life ebbs and flows, you too will find your place in the grand tapestry of existence. Fear not the end, for it is just another beginning in the circle of life.

You would still feel the warmth of the sun, smell fresh raindrops after a hot, sunny day, taste your favorite dish through the winds, hear laughter in the distance, and look as beautiful as ever below the tough ground. Your spirit will continue to dance among the stars, guiding and watching over those you love. Your legacy will live on in the memories of those whose lives you touched. So as you return to the earth, remember that you are never truly gone but simply transformed into something greater and more eternal. Embrace this cycle of life with open arms, and let your soul soar beyond the boundaries of time and space.

However, with the beautiful, pleasant surface, what's underneath the skin? The darkness that surrounds you is suffocating, pressing in on all sides as you struggle to find a way out. The realization dawns on you that this beautiful facade was nothing but a cruel trick, a mirage that lured you in with promises of escape and freedom. Now, as you lie trapped in this hellish nightmare, the true horror of what lies beneath the surface becomes all too clear. The pain, the fear, the regret—it all comes crashing down on you like a tidal wave, threatening to consume you whole. But in the midst of this despair, a small flicker of hope remains—a tiny spark of defiance that refuses to be extinguished. You cling to it desperately, knowing that it may be the only thing that can save you from the darkness that threatens to swallow you whole.



There were times when I tried to die. Self-strangulation, drowning, overdose, drinking bleach, razor blades, etc. Mostly with reason, others just wanted to see what happens, and every time I almost accomplish my task, I ask myself, What about my sisters, my parents? Would they think I'm weak and that taking the easy way out is the way to go? What would my mom think? Is it her fault? And every time my vision goes black, I keep hearing the screams when they find me- feel the tears on my cold skin, taste nothing but blood filling my lungs, smell dirt pilling on top of me, and look at my lifeless coral gray gravestone, reading my name with blue and purple flowers on top of it- and every time I stop myself.

I'm not brave enough to end my life. I never was. So I keep torturing myself, giving myself reason to keep going. I am accomplishing one thing to expand my life sentence, while the dark thoughts keep popping up in my mind once the lowest hits. And once I have the courage, I may join her with open arms, as she does all the others. I will continue to silently suffer, away from the light, unknown to others. Once I have the guts to say goodbye, I will, and may that day arrive.

Slowly.



## A Letter to 8 Year Old Me

*Look in the Mirror and say....*

*I am BEAUTIFUL*

I'm beautiful was the hardest thing to say to myself. I can say those words numerous times, but I won't be able to look myself in the eye and say that because I know its a lie. Cause the eyes never tells you what other people see you want you want to see

*I want to be able to grow*

Failure was always my greatest fear. The potential of emptiness in someone else's eyes when they realize they chose wrong. Each mumbled word, failed opportunity, look of pity gain every time someone hears our story makes me want to scream until my voice alters.

*I shouldn't be who I think I should be*

Envy is not a stranger to us. Comparison should never be your expectation, but it was the only way I can determine if I was valuable. We always thought that I was most favorable, desirable, but here I am doing the same thing for 5 years now; staying in our lane, living in fear, cause we would rather turn everyone away than face rejection from someone you care about. God I fell pathetic, every time I see them living the life I desperately wanted; getting an internship, gaining a steady income, living without the care in the world. Knowing the people who dealt the same or worse hands and still became someone has left a bitter taste in our mouth.

*I wasn't at fault*

I knew deep down you did, if you would've spoken up we wouldn't have left us, and I would've had the family I dreamt about. Instead I feel disgust every time I look in the mirror, disappointed that I couldn't achieve the life I wanted, and grateful that I couldn't have the guts to stand up for myself and put a monster in jail so I can feel the shame and anger I felt that night.

*Living is easy, life is not.*

I desperately do. I want to live. I want to live. I want to live. I want to *live*. Please believe me. I'm trying. I'm trying. I'm going to keep trying, because I'm not living for me, but for you. For the girl who never had the chance.

*I want to live.*





SARAH LARIVIERE

## Frayed Ends

the yarn in my hands feels like its splitting my skin  
as my knuckles scrape across it but i can't

*push, under*

stop now it's the only thing keeping me sane while  
these thoughts invade my head and i want them

*grab, through*

out i want them out and it's easier to focus on the  
grating blister on my finger and the ache in my

*back, twirl*

hands than the hitch in my breathing or the thing  
gnawing at my mind but all i need now is to

*pull through*





GIOVANNI FAILLA

## leaving?

*home.*  
such a silly word.

we are always told  
that this is  
a place

Well,

should be a place  
where you go  
when you feel  
lost

But,

what if i feel lost  
because i am  
that part is *home.*  
never really  
talked about.

so silly.



# slowly falling

It starts as a thought  
Making itself known  
I catch every word it says

catch

I slowly start to spiral  
My mind begins to race  
I cant control the panic  
release me from this panic

me

Breathe in,

Breathe out,

Breathe in,

Breathe out.

Nothing seems to help  
im scared to look down  
My mind is falling apart  
I need

im falling

help

help

please rescue

me

me.





## Pale Moon Rising

Branwen had always hated the formalities that came with being the chief's daughter. She rolled her eyes, blowing a puff of air out causing the hair in her face to dance in the unseen breeze. A young man, with tousled brown hair was exiting the tent. "Da please tell me there are no more," Branwen pleaded gripping her father's forearm gently.

"Eithne," Fiach called out, and a middle-aged woman appeared, bowing low.

"Yes, m'lord?"

"Was that the last of the suitors?"

"I believe so m'lord. Shall I have the commander check?"

"Aye," he said nodding.

Branwen watched as the maid disappeared and audibly groaned when Eithne reappeared, shaking her head negatively. "There is one more m'lord. It seems he's only just arrived."

"Just arrived?" he asked, "But the day's nearly done." Branwen could see the last remnants of light on the horizon casting their carnelian rays through the tent's opening. Fiach, pinched the bridge of his nose before rubbing his face in his palm, letting out a deep sigh, "Send him in."

Branwen didn't try to hide the annoyance on her face as she sank down in the throne, focusing intently on tracing the knotwork designs on her dress. She jumped, startled from her reverie as a young man cleared his throat, "Forgive me, m'lord, the sea has been particularly rough these past few days."

"Who are ye lad?"

"Aodh m'lord," came the stranger's suave reply.

"And ye came by boat ye said?"

Aodh nodded solemnly. "Aye. We set out two weeks ago from our isle; many feared the journey was ill-fated. Our ships were beleaguered by storms for most of the way. I admit I too feared it might be our end."

"Yet ye survived and in one piece," Fiach interrupted.

"By the grace of the sea. My men prayed to the great ocean spirit and swore to be faithful to this land forevermore in return for our lives. I may be the only survivor, but I will uphold my promise. I swear my life to your heir, Branwen." Aodh suddenly looked up his gaze unflinching. "I'd be honored to compete for her hand if she'll allow me."

Branwen blinked in surprise at Aodh's forwardness. Fiach leaned back in his throne, looking down his nose at the young man. "The choice is yours, lass."

"Let him try."

"So be it. Eithne show Aodh to his tent please and it's time for us to retire for the evening. Come on Branwen." Fiach stood, not waiting for Aodh and Eithne to leave as he guided Branwen out of the tent and to her own. "Good night lass."



“Goodnight Da.” Branwen slipped inside, sleep claiming her the moment her head hit the bed. The whinnying of a horse outside her tent jolted her from sleep. Immediately her head throbbed as a pounding headache overcame her. “Eithne?” she called out to the darkness.

“Yes, m’lady?” Eithne said softly, appearing from behind the curtain.

“Can I have some chamomile tea with breakfast? My head is killing me.”

“Forgive me m’lady but it is dusk. Your father is concerned that you have not been with him all day. Shall I have the *liaig* bring it to dinner for you?”

“Yes please. Let me get ready and I’ll be right out.” Branwen moved as quickly as her pounding head would allow, careful not to bend too often as it only made the pain worse. Leaning on Eithne, Branwen made her way to her father’s tent. She slipped in beside him, nodding curtly trying to manage a smile.

“Evening lass!” he boomed.

Branwen flinched, answering back quietly, “Evening Da.”

“What’s wrong with ye?”

“My head,” she said pointing lazily at her temple. Branwen was grateful when the *liaig* appeared with a steaming cup of tea. “Try to eat something when the ache fades,” she ordered. “She should have some meat. If she doesn’t get better let me know and I’ll come again.”

“Thank ye, Maire will ye dine with us?” Fiach asked.

“No thank ye. I have an early morning tomorrow.” Maire bowed low and exited the tent.

As Branwen sipped her tea, the pain in her head slowly faded. Branwen was digging into her venison when a flash of fire caught her eye. She swallowed, looking up to see the Aodh in front of her table, bowing low.

“May I join ye?” he asked, a smile on his lips.

“Aye,” she said quietly nodding her head.

Aodh smiled, “Thanks.”

“How’d ye rest?” she asked in between bites.

“Best sleep I’ve had in weeks. And ye?”

“Slept like the dead,” Branwen said softly. “You’re crazy to sit here ye know?”

“Is that so?”

“See anyone else up here?”

“They’re fools,” he whispered. Branwen couldn’t suppress a shiver running down her spine, her hand freezing on her goblet as he continued, “and I’m all the luckier.” They talked all night, stopping only when the soft purple glow of dawn began to tint the horizon. Aodh cleared his throat, “I’ve kept ye up all night.”

“I don’t mind,” she said somewhat defensively, “it was nice getting to know ye.”

“I hope I don’t get your days and nights confused on ye now. I’ve been up until all hours since the beginning of my voyage and now I’m sleeping my days away. Would ye mind if I call on ye again after we both rest?”

“I’d like that,” she said before slipping off toward her tent. Sleep was quick to come, but it was fitful. She could feel the wind whipping through her hair as her stallion *Dáithí* galloped through the blooming heather, the flowers of the field tickling her bare feet. *Dáithí* slowed to a canter, moving slightly to the side and his ears pricked forward. “Easy *Dáithí*,” she whispered gripping his mane tighter in her hands. Her heels nudged his sides, to urge him away from the darkening path ahead. “Easy boy.” If they could just make it to the wall, she knew she would be okay.



Branwen swallowed a scream as she looked back over her shoulder seeing a decaying, demonic horse hot on their trail. Its breath came out in large bursts of steam, roiling around its head. Two red demonic eyes stared back at her, its bones exposed through torn flesh. The horse was a grey-white spectre in the dark night, like some horribly reanimated unicorn. Branwen didn't need to look to sense the creature was almost upon them. Dáithí began to lag, foam whipping up onto her arms. "No, no, no! Come on Dáithí!" She urged and Branwen shivered, feeling the hot breath of the horse cascading down her back. This was it. This was how she died.

Branwen woke up, covered in a cold sweat, her body shaking uncontrollably. A sob wracked her frame as she covered her eyes, afraid to see those red demonic eyes peering back at her from the darkness. Every squeal of a horse made her jump and despite her best efforts, she couldn't go back to sleep. The pangs of hunger ended up bringing her back to her father's tent.

"What's wrong with ye lass?" asked Fiach.

"What?"

"I asked what's wrong with ye?"

"Just a bad dream is all. I'm sorry what did I miss?"

"Ye need to decide whether the track will run through Widow's Vale or not," Fiach said, crossing his arms.

Branwen tilted her head to the side for a moment, contemplating, "They say the Sidhe live in the Vale."

"Aye, they do."

"Then let it be a test on whether they return alive at all."

"Ye think just like your mother. Very well then, we shall see what these men are made of."

She walked through the camp finding herself at Dáithí's stall. "Hiya boy," Dáithí knickered happily in response, and Branwen smiled for the first time in days. The murmur of voices came from the other side of the stall wall, Branwen pressing closer to Dáithí's side as she strained to listen.

"There's only one more competition tomorrow. Have either of ye spoken to the chief?" asked the first man.

"He says he knows his daughter has a favorite," answered the second.

"So, what are we gonna do?" whined a third voice.

"Oisín offered him a handsome bride price for her, and he agreed," replied the second man.

The pit fell out of her stomach as Branwen listened to the men. "What am I gonna do?" she whispered to Dáithí, petting his broad nose. He nuzzled her face, snorting gently. "Ye think I should race?" Branwen raised a brow. "I don't recognize the horse next to ye, do ye?" Dáithí was silent. "Then I'll ride him. They'll never know. Once I win, we'll be rid of them. I'll change and return before morning."

True to her word Branwen did just that, cautiously laying a saddle on the stallion's back. The horse bucked and she stumbled back a few feet. "Easy now!" She said trying to calm the creature. Each attempt at laying a saddle down failed, to the point that Branwen decided to ride him bareback. Leading him by the reins she brought him to the starting point, climbing up onto his back. The stallion shuffled where he stood and a "whoa" slipped from her lips which seemed to calm him.

They were off at the sound of the horn and Branwen knew she was in trouble. This stallion moved quicker than any other steed she'd ever ridden. She struggled to stay on him,



digging her heels into his sides to steady herself. Branwen clung to his back, but he quickly stopped short, bucking her off. Branwen collided with the ground, and the world went black.

When she came to, she couldn't help but wretch. Gore covered the ground, and the mangled bodies of two other suitors recognized only by their bright banners hung from the trees. And then there was Aodh bloodied and in repose beneath the ancient oak. "You killed them!" She shrieked.

"I didn't do anything," he said gesturing to her.

"Me?" she asked, horrified and he nodded. "What happened?"

"You stole my horse, for starters."

"I remember that."

"What else do you remember?"

"I was riding and we just stopped short. I was hanging on but that's it." She said wiping her hands on her dress. She frowned, repeating the process and gasping in horror when she looked down to see her dress covered in blood.

He gestured behind her, "You thought you could tame an Each-uisge. An impossible feat for a mortal. You were thrown."

"If I had your horse, how did you get here?"

Laborious breathing filled the night, and the decaying horse stepped forth from the shadows. Terror filled Branwen and she tried to escape.

"He won't hurt you. Relax." Aodh chided.

"You know this thing?"

"He is my friend. I never would've caught you without him."

"Why does he look like that?"

"Oh, this? It's a glamour. Come on show her now." He swatted the stallion's haunches, and the visage of death fell away. A sleek black stallion that glowed from a fire within it took its place. Steam swirled out of his nostrils with every heavy breath. "There we go."

Branwen was in shock. "We need to get back."

"Back?" asked Aodh.

"Yes, I'm sure my father is worried sick about me. He'll be so thankful you saved me."

"Branwen, I'm sorry but you can't go back."

"What do you mean?"

"We aren't in the mortal realm. We're trapped on this side until the planets align once more. But it's not a bad thing. You'll have plenty of time to sharpen your skills on the lesser fae."

Branwen felt it then. The hunger. A dull ache, a compulsive need that she was desperate to fill. "What have you done to me?" she asked in horror.

In the flickering light of the stallion's heart, she saw the fangs glistening as a wicked smile spread across his face. "I have set you *free*."



## Blood Echoes

“Hold your head high!” The command sent my head upward, tilting back my chin so I could look up.

*But not so high as to offend the Master.* I reminded myself, tucking my chin back down to make sure my eyes were averted. I had always struggled with the second part. Willful. Rebellious, they called me. Never quite revolutionary. No, the Master sure to beat that out of me. Repeatedly.

“Stop cowering!” he ordered and with a crack, the whip lashed my back as I fought every instinct to cover my head from the blow. I had to kneel there, staring straight ahead. Only the occasional flash of white and red let me know the Master was still nearby. He moved in silence and lurked within the shadows. I was too disgusting for him to spend much time near. He didn’t want to be ‘tainted by my presence’ or some shit like that. I didn’t know and I didn’t care. It bought me a respite from his unmerciful blows.

I inhaled deeply, hearing the whip lash the ground behind him just before it came arching overhead. My flesh burned where the silver touched it, splitting my lip and cheek open. I bit my lip, sucking on the tender flesh and swallowing the blood trying to stifle my cry. “What was that?” He shrieked, grabbing me roughly by my hair and dragging me to my feet. He didn’t stop though. Up and up he lifted me with ridiculous ease in one hand while the other flourished the whip. My brows furrowed and I looked up to the sky for relief. It twinkled, from captured soul fires, the closest thing we were allowed to stars. The Master had kept us in the tombs and temples. The outside world was not for us. Not the females at least.

I bit back my scream as the whip coiled around my wings, failing when the metal sliced like butter through my muscles. The Master’s smile only grew at the sound. He had wanted this reaction. Gods damn me for giving it to him too. I bit my tongue, my fangs piercing the tender flesh as blood began filling my mouth. I gulped and thanked the gods my mouth was full. Instead of crying out I was silently pleading with whatever deity that was in existence to spare me from his torture. I would do anything. Give anything. I had to survive this. Survive him.

I shook my head, a silent answer to his question not daring to meet his gaze. His grip tightened on my throat and cracked my vertebrae with unbothered ease, “Answer me!” I remained silent. I would not give him what he wanted. I knew he had been waiting millennia for a moment when I would be easily disposed of. It was not a matter of if but when and now my silence was either going to save me or doom me.

“Your eminence,” my stomach dropped at the sound of Nun’s voice as it cut through the silence that had engulfed us. It was silky smooth, a rich vibrato, so in contrast to the harsh snarls of the Master. Legend said Nun was gifted with a silver tongue by the darkness itself. An unholy weapon to be wielded against the gods. Which he did. Nun cut them down on and off the battlefield and was renowned among immortals. He was one of the Master’s most successful generals, and the bane of my existence. In a cloud of black mist he appeared a few feet from the Master, his head bowed.

“Speak!”

“The generals have returned from the battlefield.”



The Master narrowed his eyes, then turned his gaze upon Nun. "Can't you see I'm busy?" "The army of Gan Eden has more than tripled its size. I'm afraid that we need to convene the council."

The Master rolled his eyes, "I thought you were adept at handling such matters."

"I am. I thought you'd want to be there," Nun hesitated for a moment before speaking, "Tiamat is sending a personal envoy."

"Tiamat? What does she want?" he growled.

"From what I've gathered, to make sure that we are not becoming like fat contented house cats."

The Master growled, slamming me down into the ground as he snapped his whip back away from my wings. "Fat house cats? She dares insult my legions!" he screamed, shoving past Nun and completely forgetting I existed.

I tested them weakly, trying to extend one and then the other to no avail. I curled in on myself, holding my knees to my chest with every weak movement my wings made. I tried to not bring the focus to myself while the Master was still present. The silver kept me from healing like I normally would have. If this was what it was like to be human, I hated it. I didn't weep though. I just stared at the Master's boots as they disappeared, focusing on the pain and breathing through it. I forced myself to my feet.

Nun offered me his arm but I shook my head. "What did you do this time?" he asked exasperatedly.

"I asked about *her*."

Nun groaned, "When are you going to learn to not piss him off? Of all topics I've told you to avoid with him, why must you repeatedly harp on this one?"

"I deserve to know the truth," I mumbled.

"You don't *want* to know the truth. That's a burden no one wants," he replied, a bitter edge to his voice.

"If you know something tell me."

Nun only shook his head in response, a scowl playing upon his lips. "Not gonna happen Naunet. You'd better get cleaned up. We'll be expected in the great hall."

"More like you'll be expected. The Master wouldn't dare convene council without his right hand," I sneered, rolling my eyes.

"Trust me," he chuckled, "he'd notice your absence as well. You have been his *favorite* as of late."

I narrowed my eyes, "Favorite servant or toy?"

"Both of course," he said smiling, "comes with the territory of being female."

My lip curled at the thought as my stomach threatened to hurl its bloody contents upon the floor. "I don't understand why there aren't enough slaves to keep either of you busy."

Nun shrugged nonchalantly, "There are, but they're human. So frail and delicate. They're not made to last. Not like us."

I shivered in disgust as he ran a finger up and down my spine, "I'd rather meet the dawn."

Nun leaned down, his breath hot in my ear, "Don't say that too loudly or he might take you up on that offer."

"I could fight," I countered.

Nun just chuckled, shaking his head, "You think you can do a lot of things little sister."

"I know I can. I may not be the biggest but I make up for that in speed and dexterity."



I knew I was getting on Nun's nerves when he pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. Quickly though he composed himself. "Of course you can," he cooed, "instead of waiting for Father to pick you off why don't you take control of your life. How about that?"

I crossed my arms. There was no way. "That's kind of hard when you're kept in the kitchens."

Nun smirked, cocking a brow, "And if I could get you out?"

"And just how are you going to do that?"

"Become my Cailleach Fola."

"A blood sorceress?" I gasped, "But that magic has been forbidden for millennia."

Nun leaned in, resting his chin on my shoulder as his arms wrapped around me from behind, "as you said, as long as Father is preoccupied with one of the slaves, he'll never miss you."

"What's it going to cost me?"

"It doesn't have to cost you anything," I shivered as he languidly caressed my upper arm as he continued, "unless you want it to."

I sneered in disgust, yanking my arm away from his touch. "I'll take my chances with the Master."

"Don't be stupid. He's going to kill you. With me, you at least have a chance. Besides seeing you as a blood sorceress will be much more satisfying."

"If he finds out I'm learning any type of blood magic he'll go to war." Nun smiled at my words. "You want him to go to war?"

Nun shrugged. "It would be an opportunity not likely seen again for a long time."

"So I'm trading one master for another?" I asked, hands on my hips.

"You wound me Naunet. I only mean to free you."

"Why?"

"Because you are her daughter. The blood you can hear it singing to you. Just like it does to me." Nun leaned in, gripping my shoulders tightly as he practically purred into my ear, "and you were born to be so much *more*."



# Nameless Queen

Had it been days, years, or even aeons since they had last been summoned like this? Lotan wasn't sure but he knew he didn't like the situation. His military training told him there was only one reason why the legions of the Abyss would be assembled like this in a single place. "Dread hangs over this hall," he said under his breath.

"While you're content with complaining about some pansy feeling of yours I on the other hand will not be ordered around like some common dog. I demand to know who has summoned us!" He raged across the hall, waiting for someone to respond. A heavy silence descended upon the crowd.

*CRACK!*

Lotan watched his friend crumple to the ground in front of him. He opened his mouth to speak when he was cut off.

"No one gave you permission to speak," multiple voices echoed off the slick stone walls. Lotan turned round looking for the source but all that was there were shadows. Realization dawned on him that it was the shadows themselves that were speaking.

Instinctually Lotan sent up a shield of magic around his body, his wings flaring behind him as he looked for the source of the voice. His stomach clenched and twisted as dread filled him. The hellfire barely illuminated her shadowy figure as Lotan peered into the darkness, afraid of what might be looking back this time. Her chest was wrapped in black linen bandages, her midriff exposed. The cuffs on her upper arms held up her sleeves as she made sure to avoid the corpse. The quiet splatter of blood seemed to echo off the stone walls as she looked down, tossing the severed head away in disgust.

Lotan didn't know how she did it. No one's magic was that fast. To decapitate one of the most unholy generals in all creation. It was blasphemous. He prepared to strike, a blast of magic forming in his hand. "Be still!" she commanded, dark tendrils of black magic wrapping like a shackle around Lotan's neck and dragging him down to the ground. He threw his hands out in front of him to stop his fall, but that did little more than shatter his bones from the force of the impact as the woman's magic forced his body into the floor.

He dared not look up to see if any of the others were in the same situation as him. Did it really matter? All his years of training and he was still caught like a rat in a trap. The question was whether he was going to have to chew his own leg off to escape or not. Given the low moans of commiseration, Lotan figured he wasn't the only one in a similar situation. "That's better," she said quietly. "Which one of you is the leader?"

"I-I am." He coughed, spitting up blood into the stone. In an instant, the magic bindings that held him disappeared and he could breathe once more.

"Stand," ordered the woman, and Lotan obeyed. When his eyes met hers, it was like looking into a dying star. Her eyes glowed like the great red giants, the massive dying embers of the universe. Her hair sparkled with the very dust of the cosmos itself all against an onyx backdrop. It was her smile though. How her lips pulled back to reveal jaws filled with razor-sharp teeth like a shark. She licked her lips, the saliva cascading down her chin and pooling on the ground as she watched him. Lotan knew this was his end. He would be damned if he was



going to die like this. Summoning his magic, he lunged forward conjuring a holy dagger in his hand. He swung down, aiming for her chest.

Time seemed to slow to a stop. Lotan was frozen mid-air, the tip of his blade just beginning to pierce her skin. Her multiple voices echoed throughout his mind and the hall, "You move fast but we are faster." Her voice was quiet, no more than a whisper as she side-stepped the attack, her hand covering her yawn. With a flick of her wrist, Lotan was sent flying. His wings wrapped around his body, protecting his still-aching arms from being broken once more. He was gasping, coughing, and spitting out the silver black blood that was quickly filling his mouth. "Wh-what do you w-want?"

"You will choose." A question and a demand delicately rolled into one.

Lotan looked up from beneath his brow to see the hall, covered in similar celestial blood. The metallic tang of it filled his nostrils, overwhelming his sense of smell. This creature, this woman, whatever she was was playing with them all like they were little more than pieces on a board. He dared look up at her, gritting his teeth as he spoke. "Ch-choose what?"

"To serve," she answered simply. "You will do so willingly or by force. It matters not to us, but you will serve."

When Lotan looked out he saw what remained of his friends. The generals who had not been eviscerated hung their heads in defeat. Some of them were bowed low, prostrating on the ground before the woman. A million thoughts raced through his head but only one spilled forth from his lips, "Who are you to command us?"

"You dare ask anything of us? We should kill you where you stand!" Her voice was a hiss laced with the venom of a cobra.

"But you haven't. Or can you not?" It was suicide to speak to her in such a way. Lotan knew that but he would be damned if he was going to go down without at least saying something. His men, his friends had died for nothing but her whims.

"Your life lasts as long as our amusement in you does. Now choose. Will you serve?" Lotan opened his mouth to retort when the woman spoke again. "We would think again before speaking. We wouldn't want anyone acting rashly." She snapped her fingers and Lotan's heart sank.

"Tunnanu!" he called out to his son, watching as sinister black tendrils tightened around Tunnanu's throat.

The woman smiled, her tone calm and unbothered, "What were you saying?"

Lotan's retort died on his lips as he swallowed his pride seeing his son's pleading eyes. The last remnant of his mate. His Jannah. "I'll do it," he whispered bitterly.

"What was that?" the woman crooned, clearly pleased and drawing out the interaction between them.

"I'll serve you. We all will." Lotan nodded his head, in the direction of his remaining generals. They each gave begrudging nods of agreement.

"Father, no!" cried Tunnanu. The woman sniffed and Lotan knew she was displeased.

"Silence!" Lotan shouted, his wings flaring in agitation and desperation to keep his son alive but once again the woman was faster.

"Mighty talk for one whose blood smells so sweet. Come say that again to our face. Stare down the monster you are so bold to challenge." Her gaze shifted to Lotan who could do nothing but watch as the woman caressed his son's face. Her fingers traced the curve of his cheek, tilting his head back so that he could stare into her eyes. "We admire your spirit child." Lotan flinched as her tone shifted. "The next time he speaks out of turn, he dies. Are we understood?"



“Yes, my lady,” he replied bowing deeply.

“Good. Take him and get out of my sight. All of you. Tomorrow, we have work to do.”





MAX PESAVENTO

## The Sick Hitchers of Galen County

Anyone with a buck's worth of common sense knows not to hitchhike within a hundred miles of Galen County.

It ain't the drivers you gotta worry about; you won't get picked up by a serial killer or a talkative pervert or a chainsmoker that won't roll the windows down. We've got our share of all them, sure, but they won't stop for you. The only car that'll stop for a hitcher out here is the one that peels their buzzard-eaten body off the dirt, because hitchers are bad luck.

It started around the time my mom was little, or at least that's how my nana told it. Story goes that there was a trucker who pulled over for a woman way out in the desert, a few hours' walk from the nearest town. He regretted stopping as soon as he got a better look at her, sweat-slick but shivering, clutching a bundle of ratty sheets to her chest. She'd gripped the passenger window tightly to keep him from driving off, insisting *Look, look* as she peeled away a corner of her sheet.

Inside the cocoon, her daughter's face glistened, damp scarlet from her third ear infection of the summer. She just needed penicillin, that was all, and it was too hot to walk the rest of the way to town, and he could take all the money she had if he'd just get them somewhere fast.

He dropped them a dozen or so miles down the road, just outside a respectable little town called Greenville. No one ever told me what happened to the trucker after that, so I guess he must've made out okay.

The town's clinic was run by an old man—some kids said he was a civil war vet, but I was never good enough at math to figure whether that was possible—with piss-poor eyesight and the misplaced sense of self-sufficiency most men have at that age. He couldn't read the medicine labels, waved the nurse off when she offered to help him find the penicillin, and so he settled on giving the woman a bottle of sugar pills and held out his hand for payment.

But of course, the woman had given her money to the trucker, so she shook the doctor's hand and tucked the pills into her daughter's swaddling sheet, and the two of them went back the way they'd come.

No one thought much of the junkie or her daughter until the doctor got sick. Then his wife, then the butcher, the sheriff, the mayor, the teachers, the kids. Measles. No one in Greenville had gotten the jab yet, couldn't afford to get it that far out from the city, so things got quiet fast.

You can still visit Greenville, but the only folks who bother with it these days are college kids stopping by on spring break, hoping to see a ghost. Best you'll get is a coyote hiding under a sun-bleached porch and the smell of rot on the breeze.

\*\*\*



When I finish my story, the cowboy looks at me funny. I guess it'd be hard for him to look any other way, missing most of his nose and all. He leans forward enough to take his hat off before settling back, propped up against the van's busted tire.

"No common sense on either of us then, huh?" he says, picking at the hat's pilling brim.

I shrug. It's awful nice of him to sit with me. Awful lucky I hit that armadillo a few hundred feet up the road from him, too, because Lord knows I wouldn't have stopped if I'd had the chance to drive past him. Would've made things real awkward.

"Guess that explains why nobody was stopping for me," the cowboy says, pressing his head back against the van's body, tilting his scooped-out face toward the sky. "Figured they just didn't want some ugly sumbitch sweating on their seats."

He ain't ugly. Just sort of unusual, is all. He's probably waiting for me to say something back, but I'm stuck staring into the overripe pit of his nose, trying to find the bottom of it.

"You figure we're gonna be out here a while, then?" the cowboy asks.

I nod.

"Think it might be smarter to just start walking?"

"Next sign of life wouldn't be for at least ten miles," I say, my voice craggy as I push it out my throat. "If we ain't got heat stroke already, we'll sure as shit have it by then, if not something worse. Better to wait 'til closer to sundown. Might even get lucky and have an out-of-stater drive by, someone who won't know better than to stop for us. Keep your eyes peeled for Oklahoma plates, they oughta be dumb enough to stop."

The cowboy laughs, sort of dusty-sounding, and it carves little dimples out between the scabby plates of his cheeks. He ain't ugly at all.

He gets quiet then, and I hope he didn't notice me staring at him and figure I was thinking something unkind. To tell the truth, I'm not thinking much at all right now, unkind or otherwise. Maybe I do have heat stroke.

"You don't gotta sit so far away," the cowboy finally pipes up. "If you're worried about catching anything, I mean. I'm probably not contagious."

"Probably?"

"Most folks're immune, that's all." He takes off his hat, picks at the fraying brim. "Bible makes it out to be a lot worse than it is, y'know?"

"How'd you get it, then?"

"Guess I ain't most folks." He shrugs, digs up that dimple again. Sweat's starting to pool in my waistband and I try to keep my eyes on the dirt.

"You gonna die?"

"Well, sure. Not from this, probably, but something down the line's bound to catch me with my pants down." His belt buckle is silver and rusted around the clasp. "Biggest risk is that I can't feel my hands much anymore, so if they got caught in a gear I wouldn't be liable to notice 'til I could only count to seven. Ain't happened yet, but knowing my luck, it's only a matter of time."

"How long you had it?"

He looks away, his teeth working at the inside of his lip, not answering.

"You don't gotta tell me," I say after twenty seconds or so. "Was just curious. Ain't much my business, just... never met a leper, is all. Sorry."

"Nah, I don't mind. Hard to remember, that's all," he says, setting his hat back on his brow.

"Does it mess with your brain?"



“Don’t think so. Just been a long time. Stuff like this, it gets to a point where you don’t remember that there even was a ‘before,’ y’know? Becomes part of you faster than you think. Last time I visited my mamaw, she handed me this old picture she found in her attic, and I had to ask her who it was because the kid she showed me had a nose between his eyes and I forgot that he was me.” He presses the tip of his fingernail into the ridge of flesh between his brows, just above the pit.

“Did it hurt? Your nose?” I know it’s rude to ask, but I can’t help it.

“Wasn’t exactly pleasant,” he says, giving me that little dusty laugh again. “Could’ve been worse. Didn’t fall off all at once or nothing, just sunk in bit by bit. But it scares people off. That’s the worst part.”

“I ain’t scared,” I say.

“And I thank you for that. Nice change of pace.”

The quiet comes back and this time we just sit in it. I can feel my brain cooking in my head and the dust under my palms getting muddy as I sweat into it, and that part’s sort of good because at least it gives me something to think about besides the goddamn heat.

When I get bored of feeling the mud, I start watching the cowboy again. He’s whistling under his breath, something that I’m pretty sure is Cash, except I can’t remember the words on account of how dizzy I’m getting. He runs his hand along the van’s busted tire, pulls out a chip of the armadillo’s shell that got stuck in the rubber, and pockets it.

A low rumble picks up behind me and I turn to see a rust-red Chevy coughing dust on its way down the road, its plates loose and rattling against the bumper. I throw my forearm over my eyes, ready to protect them from the cloud it’ll spit at us when it passes, but instead the tires crunch to a stop and the driver shouts at me through the window.

I clutch his passenger door tight to steady myself, tell him that I popped a tire on an armadillo and need a ride to town. He asks about the bag of bones behind me and I say *Him, too, please, he’s been out here longer than I have.*

The trucker says no, that he’s only got room for one passenger, even though I can see that the bed of the truck is empty. I point to it, start to tell him that he’s got plenty of room for both of us, but I see the way he’s looking at the cowboy over my shoulder, fingers tight on the steering wheel and his teeth cutting divots into his cigarette, and I know that he’s scared.

I look back at the cowboy and he tips his hat to me, smiles and pats the pocket he put the piece of armadillo in. He reclines against the tire, legs folded under him, getting comfortable.

The leather of the truck’s seat sticks to the back of my neck. The trucker gives me a half-drunk bottle of hot water and it tastes like plastic.

He drops me just outside a respectable little town that he says has a decent enough mechanic. I watch the trucker trundle off, Oklahoma plates rattling, spitting dust.

When I manage to find the mechanic—it sure as shit ain’t easy with my brain still half-fried—he says he can fix my tire but that I’ve gotta pay him upfront. Too many bums who promised to pay after the work was done and drove off without paying a cent, never again, no sir, not him.

I pat down my pockets and find them flat, empty. Must’ve left my wallet in the van.

I leave the mechanic and start walking back the way I came.





SU YADANAR HTUN

## Fading memories

I sit again in this familiar place,  
a desk before the library.

faint keyboard clicking,  
the low buzz of printers and  
pages flapping,  
a peaceful silence serenading between aisles.

I loved this spot,  
where friends come in and out,  
like a warm breeze brushing past.  
I knew their favorite corners,  
the window seats where sunlight shimmered,  
scattering gold through the bookshelves.  
who came on Wednesday evenings,  
who lingered to walk home together  
as we watch the sky paint itself orange.

But now,  
no familiar faces.  
A hug, a wave, a passing 'hi'  
no longer appear.

Some are working,  
some live off campus,  
some in another city, just a bus ride away,  
others half a world away,  
scattered by oceans  
from mountains to plains,  
shores to islands,  
lives unfolding in places  
I can only imagine.

The air is cold.  
The library feels larger.  
The silence I once found peaceful



presses me  
empty  
yet heavy.

What once felt so normal, safe and near  
has slipped away,  
leaving me with fading memories.





GANESHY HERNANDEZ

## Without Him Here: A Restless Soul

She yearns for the ghost she used to be,  
the one who found full colors in a world filled with black and white  
the one who understood the pulse of true happiness,  
the one whose heart was indulged in pure love-  
before the barren white room was erased by darkness.

The bed is too cold without him here,  
haunted by the scent of his cologne,  
choked by the echo of his soft-spoken voice,  
drowning in the silence he left behind.  
Suffocating in clouded thoughts-  
paralyzed.  
A wave pulling her back,  
deeper each day.

But here she is, sitting alone in this nightmare;  
staring at the mirror that holds a broken soul,  
a restless, hollowed-out face stares back.  
Where is the happy girl?  
Who can't seem to find her way back home.

It's a slow, cold ache that never seems to end,  
while everything inside her turns grey  
with a permanent smile stuck in place.

Feeling like a vase that's shattered on the ground,  
praying for his hands to make a sound;  
a prayer that will never be heard.

The sun to her moon,  
leaving her far too broken and too soon.  
Her world went quiet the day he departed;  
he left for a place she cannot follow,  
leaving her pure heart once filled with love,  
now replaced with one made of sadness and spite.



This is the only way she could speak her mind;  
These raw words are her only voice.  
But now he is just a stone,  
and the person she was is now gone.



# EAST 40 POETRY WALK

FEATURING THE WORK  
OF ABIGAIL MICHELINI

## *Truancy*

I walk out  
past the garden and tulip poplar,  
the new bees and established hive,  
through the trees where the wind  
snags on branches, too netted  
to snatch my hat.

Along the far field  
by the long grass with bubbles  
tucked in its tufts, a black butterfly,  
blue on its edges and red in the center  
of its tail, flits around, restlessly  
alighting in low grass,

then riding the breeze  
smoothly, up and down the runway  
patch of mown earth. How many things  
thrive best unattended? What kinds of growth  
need truancy, need left alone, need nothing  
of anxious forethought?

*The culmination of poet Abigail Michelini's summer Artist-in-Residency at Northampton Community College is a new Poetry Walk at the college's East 40 Center for Place-Based Learning, located on NCC's Bethlehem campus.*

*Dr. Michelini, who is an Assistant Professor of English at NCC, spent several the summer months walking, sitting, listening, and writing about her interactions, thoughts, and experiences in the East 40. Inspired by the woods, meadows, and community gardens of these acres, she ultimately crafted nine poems which comprise the walk. She recorded each of the poems, and created a website that features both the audio and text versions of the poems (see QR code).*

*The Poetry Walk includes a marker at each of the nine different locations where individual poems were written; a QR code on each sign directs the participant to the website to hear and/or read the poem. One of the poems, "Truancy," can be seen here.*





# CREATIVE WRITING



So, you want to be an author? Did you know that professional authors/writers earned 60% higher median wages than all US workers in 2020\*? With recent growth in both traditional and self-publishing, as well as multimedia content distributors, publishing paths for new authors are flourishing.

The Creative Writing Specialized Diploma at Northampton Community College is a flexible and collaborative program designed for students interested in honing their craft, finding publication, and/or transferring into a BA or BFA program in creative writing. At only 20 credits, our Specialized Diploma in Creative Writing can be earned on its own or in conjunction with an AA degree in the Liberal Arts.

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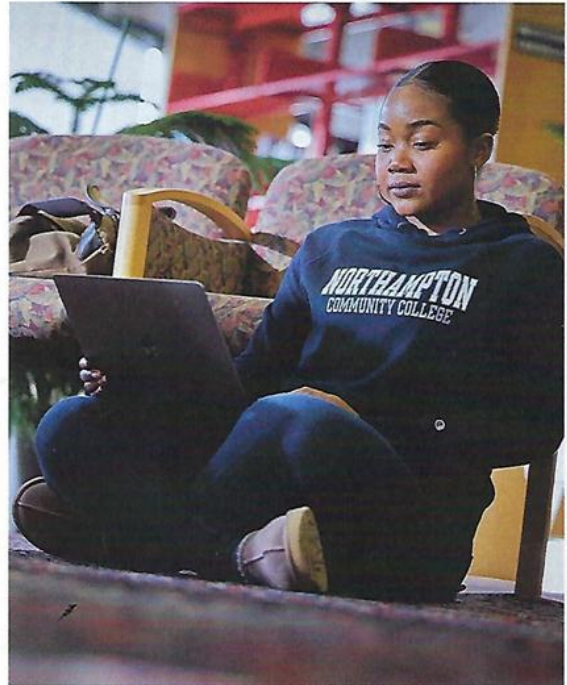
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## THE PROGRAM OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDING:

- Working in writing and critique workshops
- Interacting with visiting authors
- Meeting literary agents
- Attending local writers conferences
- Presenting work to the NCC community
- Having work published in NCC's literary & arts magazine: *The Laconic*
- Working with NCC's prolific and award-winning creative writing faculty



\*median income statistic according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics:  
<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/media-and-communication/writers-and-authors.htm>



NCC's Creative Writing students are encouraged to join the student-based staff of *The Laconic* to help produce its annual print/e-book issue.

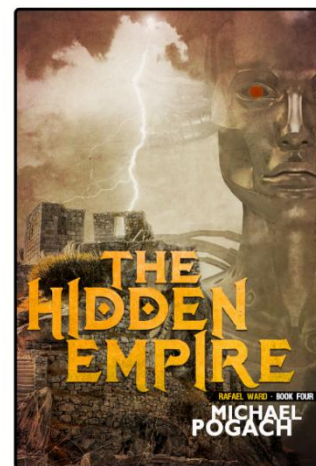
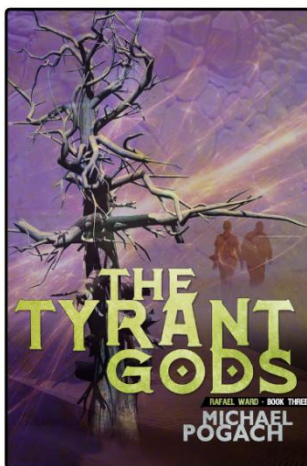
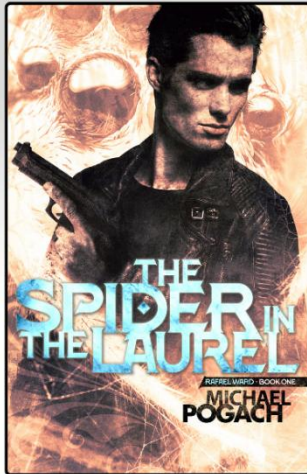
## CREATIVE WRITING CAREER PATHS:

- Traditionally published author
- Self-published author
- Novelist
- Poet
- Feature writer
- Editor
- Publisher

See the reverse side for detailed information including curriculum or go to [northampton.edu/creative-writing.htm](https://northampton.edu/creative-writing.htm)



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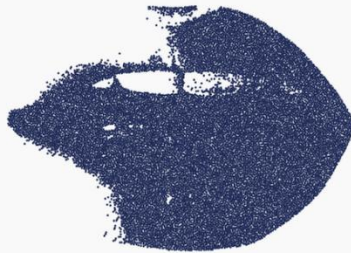
**What does living in America mean to you?**

**What is the American Dream to you?**

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