

Obscura

19th Edition



Red Rocks Community College

Obscura 19th Edition

Spring 2023

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What is Obscura?

Obscura is an annual literary and art magazine that features the creative work of Red Rocks Community College students. Founded in 2004, Obscura has grown to become a staple of Red Rocks' creative culture.

Obscura's editorial staff is made up of students who take the Literary Magazine (ENG 2031) course in the Spring and a faculty managing editor from the English and Literature program.

Students in ENG 2031 work as an editorial team to select poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and art for each edition. Students contribute to the designing, promoting, and overall vision of Obscura both in print and online.

Digital editions of Obscura can be found at rrcc.edu/obscura.

All former editions are archived at the Red Rocks Community College Library in Lakewood, CO.

SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT THIS 19TH EDITION

This edition was printed in May 2023 and contains submissions received from Fall 2021— Spring 2023.

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JOI LUCERO

THE DREARY DREAM

Poetry

The wind rustles through the charred trees like an eerie song
ravaging through the cadavers for mere bread crumbs.
Scavengers fly away, retreating with the breeze
the shredded fruits rotting- dead, cause total disenchantment

Walking through the empty field, they remember.
Once greeted by life, they now despair to see
commemorating what happened in an earlier November,
the remains of what used to bring them glee.

A flame had set it ablaze, the land abandoned by all.
Uninhabited, only a skeleton remained in destruction.
Gone were the days the cattle grazed on the pasture,
the sweet people out, with no reconstruction.

Although a corpse is all that was left behind,
the memories of this land are intertwined in the dreary dream.

KARA CONNELLY

THE PORTAL

Fiction

The mesmerizing blue and purple hues glimmered in my living room. I contemplated the portal, not sure what to make of it. After all, it isn't every day you find a portal in your living room. Had Mom not seen it when she left for work? It was blocking my way to the kitchen, taking up the entire space of the door frame, I knew she must have. Anxiety swept over me.

Did she go through? How would she find her way back? Was I on my own now, orphaned by this strange portal? So many questions, doing little to ease my fears. I ran up to my parents room for the landline. Mom always kept a post-it of all the important phone numbers I needed to know—Grandma's, the neighbors, 911—one of the numbers being for Mom's office.

I tentatively pushed the keys on the phone and held it to my ear. One ring. Two rings, three. The phone was answered by the fourth.

“Leo?” Mom's voice echoed through the phone, “Good morning baby, did you make it out of bed ok?”

“Yes”

“Are you feeling sick? Should I come home and call you out of school?”

I hesitated, considering telling Mom about the portal. She told me to call her for emergencies. This felt like a pretty big emergency, but she had been very stressed from work and I didn't want to cause her more. I'd have to be a big boy and figure out what to do about the portal myself.

“No, I'm feeling ok.”

“...Alright,” She sighed. “Make sure you don't miss the bus. Have a good day at school.” Her tone sounded more worried than annoyed,

but I couldn't help feeling a little guilty.

"I will," I hung up.

I couldn't leave the portal, who knew what it might do if unsupervised. It could grow and eat the whole house. What if aliens came through? I'd seen enough of my dad's sci-fi movies to know it was a bad idea to go through. I wasn't allowed to watch those movies, but Dad never made an effort to hide them from me. I would have called him, but Dad was away on a business trip. Mom said it was important and that Dad would be in a lot of meetings, so calling could be disruptive.

NASA would know what to do, after all they studied space. NASA wasn't one of the numbers on Mom's post-it. Could you even directly call NASA? Do you have to call the government to reach NASA? It was starting to dawn on me how little I was compared to this large problem.

I checked the wall clock, there were 10 minutes left until the bus came. I was starting to regret not having Mom call me out sick, now I didn't have an excuse to miss class. Was a portal in your living room even a valid excuse to miss class? I hadn't thought this far ahead. I shrugged off my anxiety; relieved that my teachers probably wouldn't believe me anyway.

Thirty minutes passed in silence as I sat crisscrossed in front of the portal. Every 5 minutes it made a weird *whooshing sound and constantly released a low hum. Curiosity was starting to get the better of me. Every time I'd look up at the portal, a rush of adrenaline coursed through my body. A few times I dared to inch closer to the portal, but never got up to go through.*

What kind of portal was I even dealing with? Did it lead to an alternate dimension? Were there aliens? I didn't think I could handle aliens today. Maybe it leads to a different timeline. I liked the idea of aliens more, but only if they were friendly aliens. If I went through, the chances of meeting an alien best friend increased.

I gave in and stood up to face the portal. My hands and neck felt tingly and my palms were sweating. I wiped them on my pajama pants and

was hit with the reality of my situation. If I were to go through this portal now, then I'd arrive in a foreign land in my blue owl pajamas and that simply would not do. If you're going to explore a new dimension then you have to look the part.

I came back down the stairs, dressed in blue jeans and a Minecraft graphic tee. If I was going to meet aliens then I would need proof of all the amazing things Earth has to offer, so I packed a bag with a coloring book—one of the fancy ones with water activated paint on the page, a rubix cube, and a Wiimote; all staples of Earth culture.

This time when I faced the portal I wasn't scared, but instead was full of a newfound vigor and excitement. To be sure it was safe, I stuck a crayon halfway through the portal. It came back in perfect condition. I lifted my finger towards the portal next, trembling slightly as I moved towards the portal.

The doorbell rang and I jumped away from the portal. My Dad's sci-fi movies came to mind, again. There was no other option, this had to be the government. They were coming to remove the portal and wipe my memory, like MIB. I lifted the blinds expecting to see men in suits and sunglasses, but was instead met by a couple that looked to be in their mid 20s.

I knew it was a bad idea but I opened the door. I don't know what it was, but something deep in me knew that opening the door was the right thing, like I was compelled to do it. It would be easy to chalk it up to curiosity, but there was something more rooted in me that drove me to the door.

The woman had dyed pink hair with black jeans, a Hawaiian button up, and a cardigan that had some sort of feathery orange boa. The man was in a suit, but not the kind you'd see someone in an office building wearing, instead it had layers and one of those fancy waist bands—the kind worn in history documentaries—with a backwards baseball cap and an actual baseball bat as a cane. The woman smiled.

“Hello little boy. We seem to have lost a portal, have you seen one?”

I nodded.

“Excellent, would you mind showing us the way? It’ll only take a moment.”

I pointed, taking in their attire. They had to be aliens. I was giddy at the thought. So far so good. They weren’t trying to eat me, and they seemed a little sociable and competent with my Earth language. The odd couple followed me to the portal.

“Thank you, young man.” The man tipped his cap. He took the woman’s hand and walked through the portal. The woman handed me a lollipop and winked, patting my head.

I readjusted my backpack. This was it. A new life awaited me on the other side of this portal. Would the sky be ocean blue and purple like the portal? Maybe they had gigantic mushrooms instead of trees with grass that lights up when you walk on it. Or maybe they lived on a gray wasteland, like the moon. That was a depressing thought. A new world entirely devoid of color and life. There were too many uncertainties. That should have been obvious and all, seen that it’s a new dimension, planet, world thing.

The woman gave me a once over, then walked through the portal behind the man. As soon as she walked through, the portal dissolved. It scattered into mist, the remnants of the portal lighting up like a firework before disappearing completely.

I called my mom and asked her to call me out sick.

SAMUEL MADRID

THE WOLVES ARE WATCHING

Fiction

Nothing can compare to that of childlike terror; the kind of horror that turns you inaudible and immobile. Your mind screams at you to flee, hide, do something, *anything*, but your body refuses to react.

I was completely entranced by its piercing amber eyes that peered through the overgrown bushes that surrounded the cabin. Snowflakes danced across its dark fur. *You would have called it beautiful*. The way every step closer was so gentle yet so bitter.

Am I going to die? Is this what I really wanted?

My ears burned and the hammering of my heart echoed inside my head. I felt my hands begin to go numb as I dug my nails deeper into my palms, surely enough to begin to break skin.

The wolf suddenly lunged forward. I clenched my eyes closed in anticipation of the impact of the wolf's body against mine. *Would I finally get to see you again?*

Just as its claws made contact with my shoulders I lurched forward, grasping my sheets as I panted. My hair and t-shirt clung to my body as my heart pounded against my ribs. A high pitched ringing in my ears made my head throb as I whipped my head to the right, scanning the room for the wolf.

The moon light danced across my pale blue walls. I swallowed, and remembered to follow the instructions of my therapist. *Deep breath in and deep breath out*. I gently laid back down in bed, my hands still trembling and my foggy thoughts still convinced the wolf was still lurking somewhere near.

FAITH ELMS
FOREVER CRESCENT

Poetry

I look up to see it
Up there in the night
Forever shining
Forever knowing

Like a beacon
To all who see it
Like a star
But even brighter

What if I could go there
And look at the world
from a height
Would I see a different place
Or would I still see what I do
Not what I did

It's dark side and it's bright side
Just like all of us
It's face we see
and it's heart we don't
Only when we look deeper

What if it were a person, wise and experienced
Forever shining, forever knowing

AUDREY DONOW

LADY OF THE HOUSE

Fiction

The door creaked open. Chills ran down my spine as if a spider climbed down it. A large pair of dark red-wood stairs lay directly in front of me. I ignored the strange feeling I carried with me and searched around the house. The light from the window above the door hit the dust-covered rug, illuminating it in the foyer. I peered around the corner to the left, spotting the large office lit up by a stained glass window. It lit the room with a million different colors that had been shown from the reflection on the desk. I ran my finger across the window sill, lifting up what felt like never-ending dust particles. The whole house was dark. The only light seemed to only have come through from the sunlight outside. I slammed my bags down on the ground, lifting even more dust into the air. As I finally took my first steps into the house I felt the same chill rerun down my spine. It felt as if the spider crawling up and down my back would never leave as long as I was here.

I had a difficult time remembering what had happened before I entered the house. Different memories passed by me like my life was displayed on a film screen. I remember listening to an angry blonde woman shouting in my direction. Something about me not organizing her eggs the way she had wanted. I remember different faces, smiling at me as I finished bagging their groceries. On a rainy October afternoon, I arrived back home at my apartment and dropped down onto the couch, instinctively turning on the TV. My living room was filled with clothes, piled high from my lack of energy to do laundry. The TV illuminated the dark room, spotlighting my stack of books on the coffee table. My cat, Mittens, soon came prancing up to me. She nudged her way under the blanket I had claimed as my own and laid to sleep for the night. I relived the boring day I had and prepared myself for yet another boring day to come.

I was awoken suddenly by an insistent ringing. I checked outside to search for the sun but it couldn't be found. I quickly turned to the clock that read, "3:02 am" My landline rang repeatedly until I rolled off the couch to receive the phone call. Half asleep, I picked up the phone and immediately heard a voice on the other line.

"Is this Mrs. Margret Abrams?"

I somehow managed to respond with a half-asleep, "yes" as the woman on the other line proceeded to speak again.

"I have troubling news to inform you, your aunt Meridith tragically passed earlier this evening. We would like to speak with you about the contents of her will as soon as possible."

The rest of the conversation was a blur. I met with the strange woman over the phone a few days later. She sat me down in her office and asked me confusing questions about my late aunt. Such as who she had been in contact with recently, and how close I was with her.

I never really knew my aunt. She was somewhat of a mystery to our family. I have a faint memory of a gift she gave me when I was a little girl. It was my 6th birthday. After everybody had sung to me, I blew out my perfectly placed 6 candles that had dimmed the room after being blown out. My aunt handed me a box underneath the table when no one was looking. It was a very peculiar-looking gift with a green ribbon tied around a small pink box. I pulled off the ribbon to reveal a miniature bird ornament. I looked up at her with a pleased look on my face and she winked back at me. She had a twinkle in her eye as she moved her attention back to my family. I have very few memories of my aunt apart from that. My family rarely spoke of her so it perplexed me to hear the woman sitting in front of me asking me these questions about her. She revealed that my aunt had left almost everything to me, her estate in the countryside that housed the cook, gardener, and stable boy, and nearly all of her personal belongings inside the house.

The days that followed passed by quickly. I was soon packing up my apartment, ready to prepare my late aunt's house to sell. She was a very wealthy woman that owned a very large estate that I planned to renovate and sell. I prepared a long conversation with my manager that ended up in a screaming match where I then marched out of his office with my last paycheck gripped tightly in my hand.

The scene played over in my head once again; Walking into the large mansion of my late aunt, feeling the same chill that would never leave. The door opened slowly to reveal my room. The windows were thin and had very little light shining out of them. Draped around them was a pair of yellow curtains that looked like they used to be a bright white color. There was a single bed placed directly in the middle of the room. It was stained the same color as the dark redwood floors, almost making it difficult to see where the floor ended and the bed began. The entire room was covered in dust yet everything was placed particularly as if it was waiting for me.

Each day that passed was the same. I would wake up to the sun shining on my face and prepare myself for the day ahead by eating the breakfast the cook had left for me. After breakfast, I would clean and reorganize one of my aunt's many rooms. Today's room was the library which I had been putting off since I arrived a month ago. I carefully removed each book, dusted the front cover then the back cover, and then put it back on the shelf. The sun began to set when I finally began on the floors. By the time I finished my hands were covered in dust and grime from the floors and the sun had completely disappeared for the night. I wiped my hands on my jeans and began to leave, feeling accomplished after a job well done until I heard a noise behind me, when I turned around there was nothing there. I brushed it off and walked a little faster to my exit. Suddenly I heard the noise again. It was a quiet shrieking coming from behind one of the shelves. A familiar chill ran down my spine as I peered around the corner. I froze at the sight I had just witnessed. Behind the bookshelf I saw

Mittens squirming in the corner, huddled by a large stack of books. Her back arched and she shrieked even louder than before. Dark maroon blood covered her clean white body like a wine stain. The blood dripped off her fur onto the floor underneath, soon reaching my feet. I stumbled backward quickly, trying to outrun the inevitable blood stain on my shoes and the death of my cat. My breath quickened as hers came to a stop. My screams echoed through the quiet hallways. I looked down at my deceased cat, frozen in place.

I have yet entered the library since then. The shrieks from my ghostly cat echo through my ears at night. I have lied awake, wondering what could have happened. I thought about the strange occurrences at the house as I dusted off the desk in the office. The sun shone through the stained glass window, nearly blinding me as I finished cleaning. The room was illuminated with hundreds of different vibrant oranges and blues and purples, giving the office an array of different things to look at. After rearranging the furniture to fit perfectly in the office, I wiped the sweat off my forehead and began to walk away. Once again I heard strange noises. My heart nearly dropped, expecting the worst. Only this time, the noise came from outside.

The front door opened slowly and I saw the gardener happily humming. He appeared to be dressed in dark overalls, nearly entirely covered in soil and leaves. He didn't even seem to notice me when I stepped outside. I took a deep sigh of relief and went back to continue my rearranging. As I continued, I could hear the constant humming from the gardener outside. It began to ring in my ear. The same tune repeated over and over again until I could no longer focus on the task at hand. I felt the humming begin to beat on me like a drum, pounding on my ears until I could no longer hear anything else. When the insistent noise began unbearably, I set my broom down and marched outside. Before I could reach the door handle, the humming had stopped. I opened the door slowly to reveal no such humming gardener. I stepped out into the grassy fields to discover that there was

no one there. The garden look untouched, the flowers were dead and the soil dried up, appearing that no one had been caring for it in years. I turned around, ready to shake the idea from my head until a familiar sound returned. I turned around quickly as to catch the gardener in the act. I whipped around to see the same gardener. Only this time he was different. His garden gloves were covered in blood that was dripping off of each finger. His fists were enclosed as if he was holding something inside. His eyes narrowed as he stared at me. I watched as he lifted each finger carefully to reveal a familiar-looking bird inside. The bird, as well as his gloves, were covered in dark red blood. As he unveiled the dead bird in his hands I heard the familiar humming from before. My heart dropped to a pit in my stomach. A scream escaped my mouth before I quickly slammed the front door and began to run. Sprinting to the bedroom, I felt as if I could hear his footsteps quickly behind me. I entered the room, sliding my back on the door to barricade him from coming in. I could barely catch my breath before I heard loud banging on the door. I thought his hand would soon puncture through the door. I felt as if the room was eating me whole. It soon became harder to breathe as the banging got louder. I held my hands over my ears, closing my eyes so tightly as if it would make him go away. My wish didn't seem to come true this time through. The knocking began to rattle the floor underneath me.

My knees rested tightly against my chest as my hands covered my ears, waiting for him to finally break the door. When I opened my eyes I expected to see the dust-covered room I had been staying in for the past 2 months but instead, I saw the same news show I had put on before sleeping. I quickly got up from my position on the couch and Mittens leaped off the couch from being suddenly awoken. I looked around to see the living room. I saw Mittens curl back up on her place on the couch. I jumped at the noise of the phone ringing. I looked at the clock on the wall and checked the time. The clock read "3:02" I walked slowly over to the phone. Picking up the landline attached to my wall, I immediately heard a familiar voice calling my name, and the spider crawl up and down my back once again.

MATTHEW LINEBERRY

HOW TO CLEAN A BEAST (ON LITERATURE)

Poetry

It always starts with the tender belly
sliced from pelvis to sternum;
your knife may be jagged and catch of the soft flesh;
don't be mislead, this must be a patient cut.
It will be bloody and messy,
if you turn away it will rot;
You will want to vomit and cry—remember this,
at which organs you react,
it is important for your reflection.
It seems so mundane when you begin,
so diminutive when you end
to ask what purpose did God intend
from making the liver brown and hot?
What purpose did God intend
from its dying breath to spit
blood into your panting mouth?
When you hold its heart in your hand
you will panic, thinking you killed it;
this should be the second step,
to take a quick meager bite out of it
like a tomato
and do not choke.
As the flies and vultures come to claim your winnings,
climb inside of the ribcage
and feel its chest beating from inside—
this is language.

LOVE, LOVE, LOVE

Poetry

I wonder how Kurt Cobain fell in love with Aberdeen
With its empty, weed-ridden lots.
Old, unkempt houses with addicts sitting on their porches
in a rocking chair, gazing suspiciously at the middle distance.

I wonder how he hated it too,
how he glared at the muddy bay and sky
and he screamed at the crumbling pavement,
“this is your fault! this is your fault!”
and how all he talked about was leaving this place,
setting himself free.

But some of those days,
when the sun and blue sky graced golden trees, and the leaves twirled
down to the ground--
and cars passed by indifferently,
he must have felt like a feral hawk;
he must have seen that day out the window of a bus years later in a
different country,
he must have sighed at the spiteful hope in nostalgia.

ALEXIS MICHALAK
EYE OF THE STORM

Poetry

It's as if someone stole all the air in the room.
Gone within just a moment.
Maybe I missed it, the giant vacuum hovering over my head.
Everything felt heavy.
I could already smell the heavily perfumed flowers that permeated my mind.
Didn't want to see it, I can't see it.
My mind was betraying my me.
Paralysis took over me, seconds felt like hours
If you saw me now, it would be as if my heart was torn out of my chest
Oh, my heart just thundering in my body. alerting the area
Inhala, Exhala
Don't look at me, please don't look me.
I was sure everyone could hear my booming heart.
Colors that once presented themselves in bright hues, shifted to a sepia.
Salty tears rolled down my face.
Tighter and tighter my throat squeezed.
The scene was already playing in my thoughts.
Surrounded by people dressed in formal suits and the 'I'm sorry' whispered
about,
a room that hadn't been renovated in over 30 years with the outdated interior and
green carpets that should have never been installed in the first place.
And then there was that awful rose scent that everyone seemed to think could
mask the rotting corpse.
Why did people think that the scent could mask it?
Now I hate flowers.
I shouldn't take it out on flowers, they didn't do anything wrong.
Everyone is supposed to love them.
Flowers only remind me of one thing.
Flowers remind me of that feeling.
A feeling that drowns you and drags you down with it.
It's a feeling that comes in waves and disappears with the tide.
Creeping around trees and lurking in the tall grass.
Inevitably, the hurricane arrives.

SERENITY LAUFT
THE DEATH OF A SUN

Nonfiction

Time can be generous, but it is anything but fair.

The old girl who can barely stand, is afraid. But I will tell you she wasn't. She is weak, but I will tell you she was strong.

I can see it in the way the man turns his body, a message of abandonment that seems to occur far too often in a line of work where animals are loved dearly.

"Will you be present for her passing?" I ask, because I am expected to. I ask, because I cannot show judgment. I ask, though I already know the answer.

"You'll take care of her?" He asks instead. I assure him I will. "It won't hurt her, will it?" I assure him it won't.

The lie is evident, however. Because it does hurt. It hurts the dog in ways that aren't physical. It hurts me to have to lie to spare the feelings of one who does not deserve sparing.

A betrayal that strikes deeply.

And as I crouch next to the old girl whose legs are shaking —from fear or weakness I do not know —I take the leash from the man. She takes a wobbling step to follow him. But she can't. She must stay with me —a near stranger. And that man takes his leave from the exam room, one last kiss atop the old girl's golden head.

So, I wrap my arm around her, stroking her back to soothe, but that does not seem to ease the confusion and fear in her amber eyes. Eyes that follow her owner as he backs away. As if he can no longer stand to be in her presence. Can no longer look at what he is leaving.

A form of guilt that eats at me too.

Though she doesn't know me, she leans into my side, and the weight of her —the lack of it —is startling. But she is still warm. Tail still wagging weakly as if she were waiting to go outside to play. An old memory of fun and warmth that she always seemed to bring.

She watches her owner leave into the sunlight instead. Without her. And he does not look back though she still watches, waiting for him to return and take her with him.

The man cannot bear to be present when it happens.

When his family member is put to rest and takes her final breath, she will be doing it with strangers. She will be doing it with me.

The unyielding loyalty of the golden retriever suggests that it would have been different if it were reversed roles. If her owner were on *his death bed*.

"You would have stayed right by his side, wouldn't you have, old girl," I say to her. Tears that threaten to leak are held back by only pure stubbornness.

She still looks to where her owner disappeared.

"It's not because I don't love her." The man had said. Something else those who leave their dogs to be euthanized, alone, always say.

But I am a professional, so I don't allow judgment to show on my face. I am a professional. So, I pretend to understand.

But after he leaves, I let myself hate him. Just for a moment —only for a moment. Because this isn't about him or his selfishness or his weakness.

It's about a loving dog whose cancer has spread to uncontrollable depths. It's about an old girl who leans into me for the support and kindness of a stranger. It's about making her last moments as special as they can be, even if it's just with the veterinarian and myself.

So even as those tears threaten to unravel my professionalism, I gently pull her to me in a tight embrace because the old girl takes another wavering step to follow her owner—her father... her best friend. I soothe her with words that fail to comfort even myself, and pick her up.

She is fragile, but her body still carries the warmth of life. Her fur is just as soft, if not as thick, as when she was a puppy.

Even though she had stopped eating a few days ago, she nibbles at the rest of my subway sandwich. I bought it intending to eat it alone at lunch in my car.

But today we will eat it together.

And though it is just a nibble at a time, and I must hand feed her, she's enjoying it.

They say that dogs can sense when one is sad, and as emotionally attached as golden retrievers are, I try not to cry. I even smile—her warmth and love are as vibrant as any sun.

She had lived many days being the sunshine for those who needed her. Her golden fur, her amber eyes, only just mere glimpses of the loyalty that still burns in her heart.

I will be her family now, even if it is just for these last moments. We only met twice before, but I owe her that much. More even. More than I can give her.

But I can still give her what her owner failed to. It will be the sense that a family member sits by her side as she passes away. It will be that she is loved even as she takes her last breath.

She does not move when I place the catheter, though even my own hands are a little shaky. Perhaps she is stronger than I am, after all.

Her dry nose investigates the backs of my hands as I tape it into place. But she sits perfectly still.

And when the doctor returns to the room, she whispers words of encouragement to the old girl with gentle soft strokes to her ears—her muzzle—her paws—her tail.

I sit with her as the veterinarian finishes her injection. I sit with her for long moments after she takes her final breath.

Yes. There was the death of a sun today. Its warmth and love, lost behind mountains.

But in its absence came the rest and piece of darkness. The old girl will now frolic through fields as glorious as her nature.

The shackles of her physical body have fallen away. Freedom that only this darkness can provide, but that does not mean she still cannot shine through it.

It is true. Time can be generous. But in its length and intangible youth, it is anything but fair.

BOOTS

Poetry

A time in the night when a monster truly shows,
Head shaking as you pulled at my clothes,
Words unspoken, fight or flight stolen,
Ripped away from the drink that left me frozen.

A subject of matter that had me unbelieving
An event made up in my head though it left me raw and bleeding.
Tried to justify the action but found I could not excuse,
what you did to me that night after two—

Not after all the anxiety that demanded to be introduced.
Ruining my life for years without even being pursued.
If I told someone, would you claim it to be untrue?
Do you know that the dreams still haunt me about you?

And now you're with a girl who you have chosen,
Does she know what lay beneath that mask of devotion?
Does she know that your wounds to me were handwoven?
And I hate you, though years have passed, and I shouldn't still be
broken.

But all you saw was a friend wide open.
Took a chance and hoped she wouldn't be woken.
I haven't seen you since our youth.
But I still can hear the noise of your boots.

ERICA HIEBERT
THE GENTLE EMBRACE

Poetry

Somewhere,
Among the stars,
There is a story,
In which you were hurt.
The moon,
Wraps its beams,
Around this version of you.
The sun,
Shines its light,
In the darkest crevices of your mind.
The stars,
That hold your story,
Channel this to the trees,
Who circulate it,
Among the underground mycelium systems.
The moss encapsulates it.
The rain washes you clean of it.
The soil,
Will never share your story.
The flowers,
Will never taunt you for it.
The earth,
Will wrap you in its warm embrace.
As the rocks,
Teach you once more to stand on your own.
“Your story,
Is safe with me”
Mother nature whispers.

BRITTNEY TAFOYA

SHAKESPEARE BECOMES RELEVANT

Poetry

I've always hated Shakespeare.

But when I saw you,

I understood Romeo's desire to be a glove that might gently touch that cheek.

And when I saw you with another,

I knew

What it meant to become a green-eyed monster.

KATRINA PY
MOTHER

Poetry

Mother,
I found angels
Exactly where I shouldn't have.
A molten, lovely thing
Climbed out of the storm drain
And showed me how
To hold a gun.
She spoke to me in a language
I didn't have to bend my teeth around,
And told me why everybody
Walks like their father
And preserves their mother
In their bones (your DNA is afraid to die).

Mother,
I found life in bad weather
And in the stories I hide under my tongue,
Leaving anger at my heel
And holding my heart out
For the sun to kiss, Mother,

I am your daughter.
I cannot outrun this,
And when I listen to you cry
Under the weight of everything
You failed to kill,
I begin to think
I do not deserve it.

SOLSTICE

Poetry

Peace came for us
In the collision of skies
Over rain-damp fields.
It ran to us
Through somber woods,
Flickering in shadows
Deep as dreams.
It sang to us
Through the laughter
In our own throats,
Burning, breaking apart in the open air,
Through the wind, through a sigh,
Across highways and into windows,
Through the late sunlight tangled
In our skin, our hair,
And in the last breath of an old doe
Curled up under the pines.
Peace leapt for us,
Eager and unafraid,
So I could turn to you
For the very first time
And tell you,
I am alive.

MAIKO GHIMIRE
HONEY LOVE

Poetry

She speaks hidden questions,
Naked gaze in the sunshine.
Golden light pours on her,
My sweet Clementine.

Humming birds gather,
Droplets wash over,
Bird song drowned morning,
Like yesterdays whisper.
cascading camellias haunt her,
As She gives in

A flower so frail
petals leave a mesmerizing trail.

Short lived agony.
Wind blows part of her away
Yet An Ocean of misery, taunts her everyday.
Star-crossed to fall Off the balcony.

The blossoms end today,
New beginnings start to sway clementine away.

RJ PRINCE

SPRING NEVER CAME

Fiction

I knew I was going to die before spring came. I felt my skin tightening around my bones, my fatigue growing until I could barely stand to carry it, and soon I was hardly able to hunt animals anymore, they were always able to outrun me. Whenever I caught a glimpse of myself I would notice more bones becoming visible, and what was left of me was being consumed by my own body in an attempt to preserve itself.

Some days all I had the energy for was sleeping, and on good days perhaps I found enough strength to start a fire before my lover came home in the evening. Some days I would be able to go pull roots, or cut off tree bark. My energy was as inconsistent and as scarce as our food source.

I stopped being able to pull back a bow a few months ago, I stopped being able to run shortly after that. My lover is still capable of hunting, but I'm not sure where her energy comes from, she always ensures I eat more than she does.

Before the snow came, Agatha and I had sustained a lively farm. We had an abundance of things growing in our garden. We hardly knew what to do with them. Once a week, I would go out and harvest everything that had grown and make a soup. We used to have animals, too. Horses, cows, pigs, almost every sort. Alongside the soup, whatever these animals would give us fed us for so many years. Our energy was abundant as well, we never felt hunger nor fatigue. Our bodies served us as much as we needed them to.

This is the harshest winter either of us have ever seen, the first snow came thick and without warning. We were able to save some of our food supply, for a while. Most of our crops were still edible even after they froze, and our livestock survived until they all started freezing from the inside out. We thought we had more time to prepare, but then snow started falling.

It never stopped.

My lover and I both watch my body deteriorate. I was going to die before spring came. Sometimes, as I gather, the world gets so quiet. I can hear my heart beat, faintly, barely. I know that one night I will lay into bed, and I will not have the energy to wake. I've given my lover permission to eat me when the time comes, but she insists that I will survive through this.

I watch fat snowflakes fall on my skin, but they don't melt. Shouldn't spring have come by now? I look up towards the sky, my heart begs for some sort of sun, but all I can see is gray, and white snow falling onto my eyelashes.

Underneath my feet I can feel the soggy dirt of what was once a lively forest, overtaken by squirrels, deer, rabbits, even wild boar. I long for the days I would hear life. I am deep in the forest now, I can no longer see my cabin. I can only hear my heart, and my breath, and my blood slowly forcing its way through my veins.

I wonder what my lover plans to do with me, once I die. I hate the thought of her skinning me and hanging up my meat to dry, being forced into consuming what might be left of my body by then. consuming what might be left

"I may not wake up one day," I said to her as I sit in front of the fire. I boiled some water with tree bark in it. Anything to fill up our stomach, if nothing else. A warm drink, if nothing else.

"I may not either," She said back, coldly.

"No, you..." I breathe out. I don't know how to tell her this, my heart begins to beat faster in my chest, I try to force it to stop. "You will wake up. You are stronger than I am now. You can still hunt, you can still gather. You can still carry water, and you can still carry me. I can hardly cook for you anymore now. Do you not see me?"

I struggle to stand up, I pull up my shirt. Once, my stomach had excess. It was full, never hungry, and folded over my pants when I sat down. Once, I had breasts and hips and you couldn't see any of my

bones. I was a shell now. I wrap my hands around my upper thighs, thumb to thumb and pointer finger to pointer fingerbones protruding poking from my skin what if they pop right through?

My lover sighed, and shoves her mug into my hand, beckoning me to drink. “Winter will be over soon, you just have to stay alive until then. I will bring you home the fattest boar, and I will serve you a feast,” she grabs my wrist and pulls me into her warm lap. She’s gotten smaller, too. We share whatever was left of the hot water in silence. Always in silence. The heavy snow absorbs all sound for miles.

“I will die before spring comes, at this rate. Don’t interrupt me- when I die, please don’t follow. You should prepare my body like it's a deer.”

“Rosie what...what are you trying to say to me?”

“You have to do what you have to do to survive. I want you to survive, even without me.”

“You’re disgusting. If you die, I’ll bury you in the back, next to Sam. And when I feel as though it is my time, I will dig myself a grave next to you both and lay in it.”

Sam. He died early on, a couple of weeks in. We were feeding him more often than we fed ourselves, we gave him meats and vegetables and everything we could get our hands on. He ate two of our pigs alive, his insatiable hunger became too much of a burden on us soon. Agatha and I found him, whimpering outside in what was once the garden. He lay in the snow, his muzzle buried in the ground. Sam was a good boy until the end, we scratched his ears and rubbed his belly and told him how much we loved him we loved him so much sam was such a loved dog until we felt his body go limp. Agatha dug a grave for him, as we put him in the ground I whispered how much we loved him, and how we were so sorry so sorry so so sorry sam for everything. Sam is now buried outside. His flesh has fallen off his bones there is nothing left of him.

I feel a lump of dirt under my feet, so I kick at it with my toes. I feel veins, and thick hair. I fall to my knees, digging at the hope that there is something, *anything under this snow. My fingers graze it. My heart*

stutters my blood pouring my heart pumping working heart at the absolute excitement that we will eat tonight. I pull at the frozen roots, and they keep coming. Gray and spindly roots rip out the earth, welcoming me into the hope that maybe winter will be over soon. I am out of breath before I could even finish fighting to pull the roots out, my arms begin to tremble with the force. I persevere.

The roots fill up my bag completely, we'll eat for days! I hope my lover has had as much success as I have, maybe we will make it through this. I walk over to a nearby tree, cutting off some of its bark, and some of the fleshy shreds underneath until my pockets are full. I feel thrilled, excitement wiggles its way through my pores. It isn't much food, but it's something. Something to fill our stomachs, if nothing else nothing else nothing there has to be something. I can hardly feel the chill of the snowflakes, adrenaline is keeping me warm now. I get back onto my hands and knees, throwing snow off the ground until my fingertips graze frozen dirt. I am looking for more roots, if the ones I've found can survive, who knows what else can?

I rip up some blades of grass, and hurry my way home with full pockets. My lover will be so proud, I can feel it. I can already feel her warm arms wrapping around my waist and her lips kissing my forehead. We will eat for days, and if she has managed to find anything, perhaps a week. As soon as my cabin is in sight, I sprint towards the door, but my body feels so heavy that I have to settle for just a fast paced walk. I fill up our pot with snow, start a fire, and watch the snow melt into water, the water begins to simmer, then it begins to boil. The heat of the fire in our cabin warms my once frozen nose, fingers, toes, ears. I barely bother cutting the roots or breaking the bark into smaller pieces.

Agatha's heavy feet stomp on the porch. Her footsteps say good news, not great news, but anything is better than coming home empty handed empty empty handed with nothing we will starve and i will die before spring die empty handed. I rush to the door, throwing it open. The wind blows my skirt around my ankles and the chill is so, so harsh against my skin my skin is so cold my bare skin is so cold so harsh.

“Roots!” I screech in excitement as I throw myself into her.

“I got us a mouse, and pine,” she presses her lips into my cheek as far as they could go. It's nights like these that make me think that maybe, I will see the spring. Once everything seems hopeless something comes around to show me that maybe not all hope is lost. I prepare our food, boiling everything together until the mouse is cooked soft enough to swallow without chewing without chewing without chewing, and the bark and pine needles and grass are easy to rip apart with your tongue. Whatever we don't finish I put into the cold box. We can at least eat tomorrow.

Once, I would've used the stove to heat up our water. I would have skinned the mouse, removed its bones and hair, discarded its head and cooked it. Properly. With herbs and vegetables, likely alongside some of the meat I had already prepared. I would have served it on a plate, we would have sat around the dining table and listened to music. We lost power in the beginning. No more stove, no more music, no more fresh water. As if our cabin was in a bubble just outside of the world's end.

We ran out of the mouse and root boil after three days. We were unable to find food for almost another three after that, we once again survived off pulling flesh from trees and pine. At least it wasn't nothing.

On the fourth day of no food I had lost hope, once again. There was no purpose to get out of bed. If there was any food left we would've found it by now. Shouldn't winter be over by now?

On the fifth day, my body wouldn't let me rest. I lay awake in bed until evening, and once my lover came home and fell asleep next me, I laid awake even still. I wanted nothing more than to fall asleep, but my adrenaline was so high. Electricity ran through my skin in currents, sending me into bursts of trembling. I wasn't cold. I wasn't scared. I was *excited*. *A voice rippled through the trees surrounding my cabin.*

“Help!”

There shouldn't be anyone in the forest. How would they have survived this long? There's no food, no fresh water, no warmth. Whoever is out there must have been out there for days, alone. They have to be on the brink of death, there is no way a human can survive out here. I throw myself out of bed and rush to the door, I don't bother putting on my coat- I won't be out there long. I don't know what my plan is. Do I help them? Maybe I should just turn out the lamps and hope they don't stumble upon the cabin. Maybe I invite them into the barn, where they can feast off whatever muscle or brain remains on the walls from the livestock we once had.

I have to open the door slowly, the creaking may wake Agatha. I don't want to know what she would say to me in this moment.

"Ignore him, he's on his own, we're on ours. If he dies, that is his responsibility."

"Let him in! We should at least warm him and send him on his way."

I shake her voice out of my head. I am on my own in this decision. I push myself through the door, grabbing my hunting knife and sticking it into the back of my night shorts.

"Hello?" I call out into the silence. Silence, as always, deafening and smothering. I wait, but no response comes. Am I beginning to hallucinate? hallucinate nothing nothing there is nothing Did I dream of it? "Are you there?"

"Y-Yes! Hello?" The stranger calls back. It's a man, older than either I or my lover.

"I am here! Follow my voice! I have a cabin near here, I can help!" I stand barefoot, in the snow staring into the haunting dead abyss of the forest. My ankles are frozen, and something sharp is underneath the soles of my feet but I know I have to do the right thing, I can't flee. I'm in too deep.

The man emerges from the darkness, he's bundled in thick wool clothes. "Oh I am so happy to see you, I haven't seen another person for months," he smiles, too warmly, too big, too teathy. His yellow

skin contrasts too harshly against the snow and the darkness of the tree.

“How long have you been out there?” I ask him, reaching out a welcome hand-but he never reaches back.

“I haven’t seen another person for months. You say you have a cabin near here?” Too toothy, too yellow, too big. The sleeves of his coat hand limp. Where are his hands?

“I..I do. Where did you come from? How have you survived?”

“I haven’t seen another person for months.” As though a scratched record playing over. My bare skin shivers and I don’t think it's from the cold. Months, he says? Hands teeth yellow skin his skin where are his hands his mouth is so big why are his eyes so dark hands teeth skin his wool sweater is so thin his hair is so thin my bare skin shivers and i dont think its from the cold his eyes are so dark he looks at me fully taking my body in, as though devouring me with his dark so dark black eyes i may as well be wearing no clothes at all.

“Please, come inside,” i say to him and step away from my door he walks in front of me where are his hands were are his legs he looks me deep in the eyes and says thank you and he makes his way towards my door towards my cabin where agatha is sleeping

My knife makes its way into the back of his skull. I don’t stop stabbing until his head is sprayed open, staining the white snow black and crimson. I prepare his body like a deer like a deer just like i told my lover to do to me.

In the morning, Agatha wakes to a breakfast full of meat. She kisses me harder than she has in years her mouth tastes so nice but the meat i made is nicer she tastes so nice she tastes so nice there is a man in my barn splayed open liiver and guts and his heart is coated in salt his flesh suctck in my teeth teet teeth ththeet

“Where did you find this!?! Is this cow?!” she lifts meat to her mouth she swallows swallow and i can see it move down her throat her throat i say nothing grab her hand lead to the barn she says nothing when she sees a human arm detached from its owner she says nothing at all but her lips are pursed hse is so mad she is fo mad hse is so mad at me he shates me she hates me

“We have to dry the rest of the meat. Before it goes to waste.” She finally says, in a monotone voice hardly above a whisper.

we will eat for months

MICHAEL AUSTIN

YOU CANNOT GOOGLE THAT

Poetry

You cannot Google that
"How to write a poem,"
Remember when you tried before?
wikiHow, instructables, Quora
Purdue, Grammarly, and more.

How to understand the mind in a line?
Google will not tell you anything.
Let alone the rhythms and the rhymes
Or the absolute pleasure of achieving,
The thing you've come here for.

Without Plath her colossus wouldn't exist
Nor the black art from her friend Sexton.
Owens and the old lie dulce et decorum est,
The wasteland and its fire sermon.
Even Bukowski and a whore.

Hamlet, and his famous question,
Frost and the road not taken.
Maybe you thought I'd forget to mention,
Poe and his famous love, Lenore.

Make productive use of these amazing words,
You shouldn't search anything anymore.
Reading poetry is like an emotional secret you've overheard,
As you silently lift your ear from the door.

Where two roads diverge in a yellow wood
There sits Hughes with his dreams deferred.
Within a country not fit for old men
Roams a jabberwocky mocking the absurd.

Bukowski is drinking too much, again

With Plath and the father of hers
And there is the famous E. Dickinson,
A well known debauchee of dew
Her statement is, of course, second to none:
I taste a liquor I never brewed

But at that moment there appears Walt Whitman
Belching, moseying on up to the crew
He lamented, he slurred "oh captain, my captain"
As he took a long huff of perfume.

He fell to the floor, perfume in hand.
Old, just hanging by a thread.
Wails fill the air as Walt Whitman cries out
"My captains fallen cold and dead"

The crew crowds around, clueless and confused.
Collectively curious how anybody could
Habitually imbibe perfume.

Well the answer, honestly
Is I think it's funny
To write in this style, didn't you?

After all, writer's block is a cruel mistress,
There is a reason we have the word "muse".
And in this poem, to overcome it,
That's exactly what I had to do.

MEAV AZOULAY

NAMELESS

Poetry

Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder
She is the engine that drives humanity
Though she once held the fruit she is not to blame for the bite
She has eyes but is not seen, ears but is not heard
Her deeds, her accomplishments, her struggle to survive
But though she prepares a place in this world for the unseen victory
she will remain... nameless

CHASE R. LEAVER

THE LONG ROAD BACK

Fiction

Lana tore her gaze from the haunting sight which loomed behind her and glared at the back of the one other person in her proximity: a man who went by many names and claimed none. He continued to stride forth, seemingly unconcerned by her presence directly behind him. They walked with one hand adjoined, keeping the other arm raised to shield the eyes from the front-facing wind. Amidst the constant gusts of sand-spitting wind, his other hand remained weaponless, his back turned to her. An enticing opportunity, she thought. And yet, she couldn't shake off concern that the gesture might've been feigned with open awareness or even mockery. There was no telling if he really was defenseless.

She contemplated just how long this farce could continue. Birthright beyond reach and revenge reclaimable; the ends and means were damned. A sentiment blended between nostalgia and the present, something beyond love and hate. Her thoughts continued to circle in search of something intangible, the repetition torturous yet comforting. They were but two people with injured bodies and shattered souls, walking across a seemingly endless hall of horrors. It was as if they were the last two people in the world, she thought. All she knew for certain was that their shared space was a tangible paradox, a herald of disaster.

The city's desolate ruins were framed in sunset and shadow, the sunset a soft tangerine glow which flickered under the passing of dusty clouds to and fro like a candle about to be snuffed. Above, one lone star struggled against ravenous clouds. While below the land simmered with a dry, hostile heat poised as to suck the moisture from life itself. Gusts of wind swept forth frequently. It was an unavoidable environment in which the sun seemed ever-weary, keeping the world stuck beneath unrelenting orange twilight from which there was no escape. All the while, their shadows stretched ever further from their fleshy frames, as if seeking release.

Long had they traversed amongst the rubble, stuck in silent solemnity as if there were no need for words between them. They each moved at

a different stride, yet the distance between them never seemed to change no matter how far they walked. But it was not so; with any other it may have been true. But Lana knew such things were not in his nature, and never could be; the idea of a truce was utterly laughable. It was a reunion that could never be called fated, only cursed.

After surviving a near-eternity of that sand-spitting storm, there was a brief lull in the weather. Squinting her eyes beneath the scorching sky, she moved her arm ever so slightly to the side and glanced at the ruins around her. The once-grand city appeared stagnant as if preserved in time, with the truth sheltered by the sand and limited light upon them. It almost felt like the world had been emptied of all other souls, leaving them in this numb vacuum to be the last relics of an extinct age.

Even if that wasn't the case, her own goal was separate from worldly affairs. This would be the one and only thing she, or anyone could do, that still mattered. Lana returned her eyes to the figure before her yet again. She had still to find her answer. Perhaps to anyone else, it seemed meaningless. Still, it was all that was keeping her going. His hand could only be dragging her deeper into hell- that much she was sure of. That was fine, she thought. After all, she intended to follow this path to the very end.

Should another being have gazed upon this scene, they would have observed a single adult-sized silhouette struggling to persist against the elements, with none other in sight. Dreams and reality itself had become intertwined. And so, on the precipice of a dying world, two individuals marched on.

CASSIDY HOLMAN

REVELATIONS, TONIGHT AT 9

Poetry

we exchange impending dooms
i had another dream about what's next
someday, someday all the bad things
will have already come and gone again
i'd like to learn the word tender for the first time
for the last time right here, right now
give me a timeline, give me a location
i'll meet you at the altar in a decade away

i love you in television static
like a warm screen still hissing
reaching out to grab fingertips
channel nine still humming in the colors
something about something in some place
and all the somethings run together
hark the angel with severe weather warnings
touch the map of sunshine in my yard
tell me the weather like a prayer

be my baby in the morning, that's it
stop by at 8 a.m. and let me give you a tour
if this is how we domestic
if this is what communion looks like
we should go to church
we should become unferal right here
go back to good graces and god

tell me once how you turn a home
let's have simple alchemy in the evening
let's see how pews fit in the kitchen
i have a sermon for you on
how to be gentled and loved
tell me, have you ever had a headboard?
can you unlock doors alone and
string up Christmas lights in October?
can you stay Here?

PULLING TEETH

Art



WOMANHOOD, ETC.

Poetry

if i have to nurture something to be happy then i am going to be miserable my whole life. i do not want your motherhood. i do not want your lingering eyes. i do not want your little kindness. i do not want your bed top. i do not want at all. i am godly and clean. i do not want. i am praying. i do not want. when my mother shifts her gaze i do not want. when your wife looks away i do not want. how many ghosts walk your halls and do you still call them sister and mother? how many wives came pooling into your kitchen to give you surrender and you called it marriage? you don't even know what your mother thinks of you, you do not want to.

my mother never had a daughter and then she prays for a son. my mother only had semblances and then she begs for a son. my father filled his house with armed guards and claims they're women. my uncles brought home milk teeth and cavities and called them daughters. my grandfather married a casket and called it a wife. i do not want. my sister married a truant and called it sweetheart. i do not want. when a love like this comes to my door, i am not home. i do not want your cradle. i do not want your suits. i do not want your stakes. i do not want to be grown. i do not want to be a home. i do not want. i do not want. i do not want.

CARLIE KILROY

PHEV AUTOMOTIVES DISCARD FILE:1

Fiction

Day One: Victorville CA

I'm just leaving the PHEV facility and heading north. This is my first-time test driving a vehicle so I have a veteran driver as my guide; Bailey, fully inked sleeves of meaty arms, definitely not the first person I'd imagine working for an electric car manufacturer. But she's in high spirits and seems to know what she's doing. Fingers crossed it stays like that.

The heat is as arid and unbearable as always, but the A/C keeps picking up some nasty odor, the smell is thick and sticky like a swamp or sewage. Bailey says we probably just need to replace the coolant; I'll take her word on it.

Day Two: Eugene Oregon

It took us fifteen hours including traffic to make it up to Eugene and we parked at a gas station and charged our car. Bailey went in to use the restroom and an old truck pulled to a pump. No, not old, the design was sleek and glossy, but the engine heaved and gurgled with rust-colored exhaust drifting out in thick clouds.

The driver stepped out, cigarette between his teeth. He wore a gray jumpsuit, or at least the mess of stains encrusted all over it looked gray, and an equally grimy baseball cap with just the word TRUCK written in snot green letters. I must have been eyeing him long enough to notice; he caught my eye and waved at me, slowly as he began to stalk toward me. His face split into a grin that seemed to stretch the skin like latex, his cigarette still held in corn yellow teeth. He towered over me, even as he leaned on the hood, and began to ask me about the car. What model, where I got it if it's a smooth drive? I was polite as one can be when a stranger blows his tangy cigarette breath in your face, but he only seemed to lean in closer and give me a good look at his thin face, which was damp with some oily fluid.

Bailey's reappearance got the creep's attention as she grabbed my arm

and shoved it full of gas station snacks. The man's grin strained, but he waved goodbye and his truck hacked itself onto the highway. All he left was a greasy handprint on the hood of our car. Let's just keep going.

Day Three: Miles City Montana

The A/C smell has become unbearable so we stopped at some random Kroger parking lot and Bailey popped the hood. I know Montana isn't the most populous state, but it seemed eerily empty; there wasn't a sound outside of us. I turned to the supermarket and saw the lights still all on, but they looked dim and ill, a flickering urine color that made my skin crawl, but I couldn't see to look away.

My attention snapped back to our car when Bailey began to hack as a rust-colored vapor puffed off the car. The coolant was low, that's what Bailey said, it was remarkable that we even had air conditioning at all. We laughed as Bailey hopped in the back seat, but when I saw that handprint still glistening with an off-white fatty color, I felt uneasiness and I knew she was wrong.

Day Four Albuquerque New Mexico

We're being followed. It's some motorbike that is coated in moss and rust, like it's been decaying for decades, only roaring to life for this pursuit. I noticed it several hours ago when Bailey had to retch, and we both held this deep panic as he weaved through cars to stay at our tail. Bailey did eventually get the nerve to get the police involved, I could bring myself to risk letting them get closer. Sirens cracked through the traffic as a cop car pulled in. Bailey was relieved, but when I saw the cruisers' chipped paint and officer's stained uniform, all I could feel was a sickly dread.

The officer gave us a withering look when we told her what happened, she just clicked her leathery tongue against crooked teeth and told us they'll take care of everything. I knew she was lying, Bailey argued to have some faith, but I knew. And a few minutes later as we crossed the border into New Mexico, lo and behold; the biker came back. Bailey wanted to call the cops again, but she began to retch, and I knew we were beyond help from them.

Day Five: _____

I finally lost the biker, but now we have no clue where we are. No cell service or people in the last five hours; everything is decrepit and abandoned, like a ghost town. Bailey is looking bad, her skin has lost color to the point that it's graying and she hasn't kept anything down since yesterday. I've just been driving around trying to find a hospital, or at least something, someone. Anything that isn't trees long dead, jutting out like snaggle teeth, and billboards with advertisements for hairspray and furniture all peeling like skin.

*Day*____ _____

I can't find Bailey, she just disappeared. She vanished two nights ago, or three, The sky was blotted out by the haze lingering like a fog, gagging you, strangling you. She was feeling ill, with gray skin now a fever sweat sheen, so she got out to walk around. As I waited, I heard an engine coughing in the distance. Thinking it was the biker again, I went to grab Bailey, but she wasn't there. I've been driving around, looking for her, but all that's left is me and that horrible engine's crows. The car is going to run out of power soon. They'll catch me if that happens. I don't know what to do, my whole body is shaking. I'm just so scared.

RUSSEL WALLACE PATHOLOGY LAB

Fiction

“Local delivery man, Sydney Hall, found dead this morning on Interstate 90 at the top of the bridge. Hughes County Police Chief Gloria Wells is with us now to tell us what she found on the scene, Gloria?”

“The beast must've been at least the size of a man; ripped him in two like a kid on Christmas. And it dragged it to the freeway from the looks of the poor kid's face.” A faint voice of an un-miced interviewer prompts Chief Wells to chortle.

“Mountain lion? Those things are dangerous, but it'll be the day when I see a mountain lion doing this much damage. This thing had a kind of cruelty I have never seen in an animal. This kind of violence, the one that would possess something to rip a man open and leave not an organ behind. We sent it over for an autopsy at Russel Wallace Pathology Lab, we should hear from them if they can see heads or tails about this.”

Post-Mortem Examination File

Name of Deceased: Hall, Sydney G.

Date of Death: September 12, 2000

Date of Examination: September 15, 2000

Pathologist(s) Practicing: Dr. Roberta De La Torres; Nurse Dirk Sanchez

Age: 23

Sex: Male

Report Description: Dr. De La Torres recording description. Mr. Hall was reported missing on September 11 by his wife, Cynthia Hall, who had not seen her husband return after a shift. His body is in two pieces split below the third rib, though his halfness was not recorded by police who only mentioned lacerations in the front torso, it can be concluded that Nurse Sanchez dropped the body when retrieving it and simply assumed I'd not notice. This will give this a trial to create a full

report. Aside from that, the body appears to have been dragged on asphalt, at first seeming to be an incident with a vehicle dragging the body, but on further inspection the friction burns appear to be abnormally deep. This likely meant Hall was dragged at a slow pace with his body forcibly pushed to the road.

His insides are another mystery. All of the internal organs are missing, even blood, leaving his insides crusted and pink like raw chicken that was shriveled by the sun. The only organ I could find was the brain, untouched and only suffering minor concussion. It was likely that he was killed on the road and some ravenous animal just picked him clean, but since I have been barred from making my reasonable assumptions, the cause of death will remain unknown. This document will be sent to Police Chief Wells on the 16 of September 2000.

Cause of Death: Unknown

Dirk Sanchez <thedirkanator@hughes.org>

Dr. Della Torres,

Hey Doctor D! I was looking over the reports we sent out, especially that Hall guy, creepy shit for real. I noticed you didn't mention the cause of the lacerations, other than me, sorry about that lol. Can't get anything past you, can I?

Anyway, I took a look at his body and the injuries seem to have been internally sourced. That means the cuts in his chest came from inside! Do you want me to tell the cops?

Dirk ;0)

P.S. Your glove has a hole in it that looks like a heart, it's so cute! But you should get new ones when shoving your mitts in dead man meat.

Roberta De La Torres <rde-la-torres@hughes.org>

Nurse Sanchez,

I hope this email finds you well. I did not mention the injuries inflicted due to the recent bout of incompetence you had last night that was likely the cause of the injury appearing internal. The human body suffers internal damage when dropped. Please remember to use my

actual last name that is clearly visible when you sent your last message.

Dr. Roberta De La Torres

Dr. De La Torres shut her chunky laptop as gently as possible when one was boiling over in rage at a clown of a man she was working with. She stuffed her work in her satchel and briskly walked out of the lab. It was dark when made her way to the bus stop where she sat scratching her arms.

God I hate cold weather. she thought as she scratched, *It madkes my skin all dry and scaly.* The dark street was filled with sounds of her nails digging into a flakey dry patch on her wrist. She knew full and well itching would make it worse, but she had fifteen minutes to wait for the bus and nothing better to do. But just as the dead skin had begun to pile on her lap like the world's nastiest snowfall, Doctor De La Torres heard something. In the alleyway across from the bus stop, faint sounds of movement could be heard. They sounded heavy, full of force like bags of sand, and wet too every slap was accompanied by the sounds of sloshing and oozing of runny liquid.

The sound grew slightly closer to the mouth of the alley and a damp smell began to waft out of it, so strong she tasted it settling in the back of her throat. The smell was musky and putrid like the stench of old sweat, but there was a metallic tang to it as well, that burnt her nose.

Dr. De La Torres could hear what sounded like drenched meat being dropped and gushing fluid and blood on the floor. The sound grew and it began to sound like footsteps, clumsy and drunk, but it seemed that an enormous cut of meat was hobbling out of the alley with viscous and shifty body parts pressing it forward. The sound was echoing across the street and the smell was heavy in the air. Dr. De La Torres knew if it took a few more steps she'd see it in the street light. It would just be across the street and she wouldn't know what to do. Why didn't she run or find a pay phone, why did she just sit here listening to that sound? Why did she stay at work for so long responding to Dirk's stupid emails? Why-

“Hey Doctor D!” Speak of the Devil. Dirk's freckled grinning face popped into view. Doctor De La Torres swallowed her scream, but a yelp slipped out. Dirk giggled and took a seat next to her.

“Sorry for scaring you Doc! I just saw you and I couldn’t resist.” He patted the Doctor’s back, a step too far for Doctor De La Torres. She stiffly stood up and forcefully brushed off the Dirk from her jacket.

“Yes. Well, hello Nurse Sanchez, I did not realize you took this bus.”

“Oh no need for the nurse last-naming stuff D. We’re off work, live a little.”

“Fine, so...Dirk... You are taking this bus?” Doctor De La Torres was ready to walk home, meat monster nothing, if Dirk took this bus.

“Nah, I’ve got a car. My sweet Honda Civic, I call her Jordan.” His grin has been plastered to his face so sincerely, like he is oblivious to how much Doctor De La Torres can’t stand the sight of him. How could someone be so dumb and become a nurse, you have to go to school for that, how did he go to nursing school and be this dumb? Dr. De La Torres prayed to the bus gods to just hurry up already.

“Did you get my email today?” He did not wait for an answer, “Because I was looking at that Hall guy’s body, no organs and stuff like he’s naked but reverse not gonna lie I poked around in there, and when I pulled back I saw that my gloves were covered in this nasty white powder. It was all over his insides. I think we should redo the autopsy homework cause there is all sorts of crazy new stuff we didn’t find.” Before the Doctor could get a word in, the bus finally arrived.

“I have to leave. Please let me know if you have any concerns in an email. Goodnight Nurse Sanchez.” Doctor De La Torres got on the bus faster than she has ever done anything in her life. She grabbed a seat facing away from Dirk just in case he was waving, and she turned to look out the window on the superior Dirk free alleyway.

And that is when she saw it.

Post-Mortem Examination File

Name of Deceased: Fitzgerald Randel T.

Date of Death: September 9, 2000

Date of Examination: September 16, 2000

Pathologist(s) Practicing: Nurse Dirk Sanchez

Age: 60

Sex: Male

Report Description: Nurse Sanchez recording. Dr. D. called out sick today and probably started coughing on that stick up her ass. I kid I kid, but for real, she has got to loosen up. Anyway, Fitzgerald had a bunch of azoxystrobin in his system, which is a major fungicide, but also a peoplecide because it killed him. Don't know what possessed the man to ingest that much without realizing it was a bad idea, but live and learn, or not in his case. He was also found with a suicide note, but the man's handwriting is straight trash so who knows what it means. If he really wanted to off himself he should've jumped out the window; his apartment was one of the top stories. He's got white powder on his nose too, so I will not rule out cocaine as a potential instigator for his fungus flavored death bender. I hope Doctor D. doesn't have some dead people germ kind of sick because that would be vile and I don't wanna catch dead guy flu. I'll give this to the police in like an hour because I am going to go wash my hands for corpse cold germs. Also! Forgot this part but I wrote this in pen so I can't fix it. I know it's azoxystrobin because we have some in the exam room and his guts smell exactly like the fungus killer we have. I am not sure what the reason for said fungicide is in an autopsy, but who am I to judge Doctor D. 's decorating choices?

Cause of death: Suicide by ingestion of toxic chemicals

Roberta De La Torres <rde-la-torres@hughes.org>

Nurse Sanchez,

I hope this email finds you. Are you familiar with insect-pathogenic fungi? There is this particular breed, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, commonly known as the zombie-ant fungus. This fungus will infect carpenter ants, leeching their nutrients and life force until it takes root and controls the ant. It will puppet the ant to climb high into a tree in desperation to reach the sun, cling to a leaf, and let the fungus erupt from their body to spread and leave their husk behind. It's really quite ingenious really, but the name 'zombie-ant fungus' isn't quite correct. You see, contrary to the popular belief of this fungus manipulating the ant's brain activity, recent studies have found it does not touch the brain. This fungus threads itself through the body and slowly contorts the mussels to its whims, but the victim is completely and entirely

conscious; aware that they have no control.

I will be returning to the office tonight and I expect you to be there to assist in performing an examination for Mona Peterson.

Warm regards,

Roberta

Post-Mortem Examination File

Name of Deceased: Peterson, Mona R.

Date of Death: September 28, 2000

Date of Examination: September 30, 2000

Pathologist(s) Practicing: Nurse Dirk Sanchez

Age: 46

Sex: Female

Report Description: Nurse Sanchez recording. I don't know what to say. The Doctor came in like she said, but she was acting really weird. Like her email was already wild, especially signing her first name like that, like girl are you finally letting your walls down? But when she came in she was smiling at me and said hello. NEVER has this crotchety lady given me a hint of a smile, much less said hi? After, she asked me to pull Ms. Peterson's body out, but while she said that she only brought her stuff to the table. I asked if she wanted me to get my own stuff, and she just laughed.

I tried to get that woman to laugh. I've been trying since the first day we met, but that laugh, that cackle of pure patronizing malice. I don't think I've heard anyone sound so cruel. She told me she'd be performing this exam alone and said she had a personal connection to Ms. Peterson.

I wanted to argue but the strain of The Doctor's smile stretching to look like bared teeth changed my mind. I pulled on my gloves and headed to storage and got the body, but due to how cold it is in storage and how heavy a fully grown person can be, I dropped her. I quickly and calmly, after freaking out a smidge, lifted the body up on a cart and checked to see if she was still in one piece. She was thank goodness, but that was when I noticed she had something in her

mouth. I gently pried her jaw open and tilted it to the light. Inside her dry shriveled maw, tiny spindly white strands branched out just under the dark flesh on her throat, gums and even her tongue in root-like patterns. I quickly zipped the body bag up when I heard The Doctor scream.

I rushed in, body in tow, to find The Doctor hunched over her laptop. Her torso fought and jerked as she hastily typed, her breath ragged and her face twisted into a snarl. She met my gaze and even as her face warped and twitched, her eyes, they never looked so relieved. She slammed the laptop shut and her features stiffed back to the manic grin she held before. She thanked me for the body and took it off my hands. I asked her what she was typing and she just muttered something about management being a pill, and she leaned in and asked me if I knew what she meant. I nodded as she slowly backed into the examination room and slammed the door shut. I peered into the window of the room and saw The Doctor looming over Ms. Peterson's body like she was a tender piece of meat, pulling the jaws with bare hands and eager vigor.

I know Doctor D. would never let me touch her laptop, but at the same time, I knew that woman could not possibly be The Doctor. I slowly cracked the laptop up and it faintly glowed the bright white of an open word document. In choppy sentences, the document reads out:

MONA IS STILL ALIVE. TURN ON THE CREMATION FURNACE. PUSH US.

I turned to the window and saw Mona Peterson's eyes wide open in stark terror as Doctor De La Torres sliced deep into her stomach and pulled thick roots, dripping with meat and fluids, out of her body. I rushed into the room with her laptop and bashed The Doctor in the head, sending her sprawling as I skidded to the furnace. I cranked it up and opened the hull, letting the roaring heat come out in a wall. The Doctor convulsed on the floor, and her shirt began to soak with deep red. I heard the wet ripping, like pulling apart raw beef, and a fleshy mass jutted out of her chest. Her body began to drain and deflate as the insides pulled themselves out of her. Her blood soaked the floor as the white roots manipulated her tendons in jerky steps forward. I could feel the hot bile on my tongue as The Doctor's flesh came stumbling towards me as I backed into a shelf that came crashing on top of me. As I scrambled to get up I noticed a large yellow jug labeled: azoxystrobin, fungicide.

I popped open the bottle and doused The Doctor's meat, The flesh let out a gurgling screech, so animalistic and rage filled as it lunged at me. I grabbed the flesh and shoved it into the furnace. I heard its cries fizzle into nothing as the room filled with the scent of burnt flesh and boiled chemicals. I turned to Ms. Peterson's body, which had long since bled out, so I rolled her body into the furnace letting it fry to a crisp.

I sunk to the floor and began to violently retch. The Doctor, the only person I know that could have had any answer, is now ash. I laid on the floor for a long couple of hours. I know I was likely infected with this... Whatever it might be. So this has become my message. I don't know where this fungus came from, or how, if at all, it can be stopped, but just be wary. Please.

On a warm September evening, Delivery Man Sydney Hall sat parked in his truck on a random off road. He chatted on the phone with his wife.

"I don't know Cynth'. That guy was creepy, and gross too, like ever heard of a shower?"

"Well some people are just nasty. What did he need for you to ship?" His wife answered.

"Some equally rancid little box with this white stringy shit coming out of the cracks and it's like wet."

"Wait, do you have it right now?"

"Yeah it's in my lap."

"Ew! Don't hold it if it's soggy!"

"Relax, my uniform is waterproof. I'd ship it if I could, but I looked and there is no shipping address. How does this guy expect me to ship this without an address?"

"Maybe he is just forgetful, you know, from your description he sounds like he forgets to shower too." They both laughed at this as Sydney went on.

“You don’t even know half of it. This guy was filthy. He had this sort of slimy residue to him, and his face looked like a latex mask, all shiny in the grossest way.” The box suddenly began to twitch.

“Hang on Cynth. I think the box has an animal in it or something. I’ll call you back.” Sydney hung up the phone and pulled out his box cutter to open this repulsive little package.

GRANT GONZALEZ

MY FEET

Poetry

My feet were molded by Mother Earth.
She composed them from her clay,
She sculpted them from her love.

My feet can glide, and sprint, and jump,
Because Mother Earth sent them my way.
Just as easily as my feet can forge, they can also destroy,
They can dismantle, demolish, and devastate.

Mother Earth gave to me in a selfless way,
Like all mothers do.
She did not expect anything from me in return,
But I know that it is my duty to repay her.

Mother Earth has many children.
Most of us choose to ignore her,
We fail to comfort her when she is in pain,
We fail to restore her when she is broken.

I know my feet were made for healing.
My feet were shaped by Mother Earth,
So that one day I can mend her,
The way she has mended me.

SYDNEY HINES
NOW BOARDING

Poetry

Airports are in-betweens.
Spaces dedicated to crossing paths with
an infinity of stories you will never know,
and this tends to bring on a feeling of smallness
that only occurs when a liminal space is occupied
by a traveler in their own state of limbo.

I don't remember a time in my life
where airports weren't as familiar
as my childhood home.

Much of the airport experience is anything but calm.
But after the hustle and bustle of
baggage registrations and
claiming tickets and
navigating the irate lines in the TSA checkpoint and
finding your gate in the crowded wings,
there is a moment of respite to revel in,
before you are called to board.

Despite living a constant existence in the peripheral
of hundreds of strangers,
the quietness has always been a calmer temperament
before the inevitable storm that is life:
between the joyful welcomings and teary goodbyes of loved ones,
between a vacation to warmer places of saturated vibrancy,
and between visitations and gatherings of a family unseen in a decade.

Frozen in time and space,
wondering if I could stay on this plain.
There, among the tantalizing smell of Auntie Anne's pretzels
that is strongest in the slowest of lines of security,
and the tabloid magazines that bombard you with updates
on celebrities you forgot were alive.
I could take refuge next to a baggage claim conveyor belt,

rest my eyes to the soothing lullaby of departure announcements.
How long would it take for travelers to consider me
an extension of the airport itself,
a bird that managed to entrap itself in its confines,
fluttering in the rafters in constant momentum.

Alas, intermissions are not finales.
So, I'll continue on,
anticipating my next destination.

TYLER JOHN MILLETT THOMAS

BEGGAR

Nonfiction

I never thought myself a beggar. Yet my ears begged to listen. My shells of capturing sound, arms outstretched to take in whatever passes by. To purloin words spoken softly. To join this cavalcade of juveniles, angst and dewy-eyed individuals. A weird time in our lives, a place between childhood and the steps to adulthood. Belonging to neither, a procession of youth and ignorance. Our immaturity as raw as a hatchling of a brood of callow snakes.

Perhaps I was too naïve. Kids can be so hurtful with their words. To believe empathy had yet begun to fatten through the minds of adolescence. Yet like a thief, I stole their words from their lips. ***Disgusting... dirty... stained...*** Storing them in a bag inside my mind, like a bandit eager to escape with their plunder. Their richness in popularity, even their average in obscurity, were drips of golden liquor my thirst was not allowed to be quenched with.

Envy, a friend I hated, visited me. To remind me of the sluggish minutes and the hours that never seemed to arrive on time. Each click of the second hand, matching the pang of hunger. Whispers and murmurs to exasperate the sensations of knuckles scrubbed raw, through hand me downs from absent calluses of people stuck in a bottle. Oh, the joy the other's must feel of nay a worry on which number the hand of time falls on.

I never thought myself a beggar. Yet when the first word slipped, the knees buckled. Silence is what I begged for. Benevolence was my prayer. To plead and implore, exhort and adjure, I begged. There is a terrible trap with begging. You can buckle, offer and entreat. You can beseech the highest power in your world, your circle, your party of many. Yet the one thing you cannot do, is choose.

JOHNNY KLIS
A SINKING SHIP

Poetry

I am on a sinking ship
And I am not the captain
Everyone's in a state of panic
Finding ropes to fasten
I go down to my quarters
Disobeying direct orders
From my captain
In his cabin
He says we'll find a different route
I tell him that there's no doubt
I'll find the map in my quarters
So I disobey his orders

The map, I have to find the map
It's the only thing that can show my way back
Even throughout the halls of the ship
I can find them if I find the map quick

I am on a sinking ship
And I cannot find my captain
This isn't going how I planned
This wasn't supposed to happen
I must have taken a right
When I should have gone left
There is no one in sight
Is there anyone left?
Maybe I can retrace my steps
Back to my quarters
There must have been a single misstep
When I disobeyed my orders

Could it be that's where it happened?
I didn't fail to follow the map
I should have stayed and followed my captain
No way to fail when there's no way back

I am alone on a sinking ship
Am I to be its captain?

ALICE MORELAND

THE TOWN AND ITS PLAGUE

Fiction

She woke up in her dark room, the sound of rain pattering on her window both familiar and comforting. Her nightgown flowed around her as she stood up and walked to her window, throwing open the curtains; metal against metal making a small screeching sound as she did. The clouds outside shrouded her apartment building, but she didn't mind seeing them as the street lamps were willing to light her way to work that day. She tied her hair up with the ribbon that always sat on her nightstand and walked to her full length mirror, smiling at herself.

“Good morning, m'lady.” She giggled, curtsying at her reflection. “Might I add that you look rather dashing? Any plans for today?” She did a little twirl and hurried to the bathroom where she brushed her teeth and took a refreshing bath.

“Amelia? Are you up, darling?” Her older sister called, knocking on the bathroom door.

“I'm bathing, sis,” Amelia replied, running her fingers through her wet hair. “I'll be done in a moment. Do you need the room?”

“Not now. But don't be too long, alright? I just finished your laundry. I don't want you to be late.” Her sister's voice faded as she walked down the stairs. Amelia heard her scold the cat from the living room and she just laughed, draining the water in the tub, watching the bubbles go down the drain making a funny sound.

“Xyla!” Amelia shouted, realizing that she had forgotten a clean change of clothes as she slipped on her nicest pair of earrings. “Xyla, could you bring me my clothes please?!”

No response.

“Ugh, Xyla!” Amelia ran out to the hallway in nothing but her towel, her wet feet slapping down the stairs.

Her sister looked up at her and chuckled. “Is that what you’re going to wear? I’m sure Dr. Ira will highly appreciate it.”

Amelia gave her an unamused expression and snatched some clean clothes from the basket sitting in front of her sister.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Xyla told her, trying not to giggle.

“I’m not listening!!” Amelia ran up the stairs, almost slipping from her wet feet, but quickly catching herself. Her face turned a bright shade of red from embarrassment before she hurried back to her room.

She watched in the mirror as she carefully buttoned each button on her white dress. She pulled back her strawberry blonde hair into a carefully secured bun, making sure that no pieces of hair would fall out by running her hand over her scalp, followed by a brush.

“Amelia! The truck is here!!!” Xyla shouted from downstairs.

Amelia cursed under her breath and slipped on her sheer white leggings, almost falling on her dark oak floor. “Coming! Just give me one sec!”

“You better hurry!! You’re going to be late!”

“I know!” Amelia squeezed her small feet into her pumps and rushed downstairs, the clack of her heels echoing down the halls.

She placed a small kiss onto her sister’s cheek and went to run out of the door, but felt Xyla’s hand on her shoulder. “Wait, Amelia, you almost forgot.” She held out her bag and a mask.

How the hell did she forget a mask? She shook her head in disbelief at herself and placed the mask over her nose and mouth, locking the bag in her arm. “Did I forget anything else?” Amelia asked, smoothing any wrinkles in her dress with her hands.

“No, Amelia, so get out before Dr. Ira kills you.”

“He’s not going to kill me.” Amelia rolled her eyes and ran out of the door, greeting the men at the truck, who opened the passenger door for

her to crawl in.

The drive to the office was always long. At least it felt that way. The men never had anything interesting to say. Well, they never had anything to say at all. All of the fun from Amelia's morning was always immediately drained when she got in the truck. Though, to be fair, this was not a job that she necessarily should be cheery at.

She stared out of the windows at the empty streets. No one was outside. They weren't allowed. The bells hadn't chimed yet. Amelia wasn't a fan of the whole curfew system they ran, but it was better than the whole town getting sick, that was for sure.

Amelia rolled down her window and let the cold morning air brush its fingers through her secured hair. She wished even for a second that she could lower her mask and breathe in the wind without any boundaries. It had felt like years since she had done that last. So instead, she watched as street lamps flew by as fast as the truck was going.

After a long and tiring drive, the truck came to a halt, the brakes screeching. Amelia mumbled some joke under her breath complaining about the driving, and stepped out of the vehicle, her heel making a small click onto the cobblestone. She thanked the man holding her door open for her and looked up at the building.

It was so eerie. So... unsettling. But it was helpful, and that was enough to make her go inside every day. Without that uncomfortable building, and Dr. Ira, of course, half of the town would be dead.

Amelia took a deep breath and hurried inside. The receptionist at the counter looked her up and down and adjusted her mask. "Dr. Ira's waiting for you, Nurse Zobe." She gave her one last judgmental look and continued writing some reports and visitor passes. "You're late."

"I'm not la-" Amelia tried to impose, but looked up at the clock. Not only was she late, but she was twenty minutes late. Xyla was right. Dr. Ira *was going to kill her*.

Amelia had never run so fast in her entire life. She threw her heels into her bag and ran up six flights of stairs in record time. If she hadn't

spent the whole morning goofing off, she wouldn't be in this position. Her heart was pounding. Which room was he in? What were they doing that day?

She dug in her bag and fumbled out a crumpled sheet of paper with the day's plans. Room 306. Goddammit. She ran up six flights of stairs for nothing.

She turned around and went to run back down the stairs, but ran into something large, causing her to fall straight on her backside, losing her breath.

Amelia sat heaving for a second, trying to recall the ability to breathe and looked up. Oh, she was definitely dead now.

Dr. Ira kneeled down to her and looked into her eyes, his large black ones nearly piercing her soul. "Nurse Zobe. What are you doing all the way up here?"

Amelia rubbed out a spot that was definitely going to form a bruise. "I should ask you the same thing."

"You're late, you know?" He held out his hand, but Ameilia ignored it and stood up on her own. She was honestly surprised she didn't shatter her tailbone.

"I'm aware," she wiped off her skirt and looked back at Dr. Ira. "And I apologize."

Dr. Ira chuckled, trying to fix a piece of jet black hair that kept falling in front of his eyes. "It's quite alright. But I'm actually kind of glad you're up here. Could you be a dear and run to my office? I forgot my tools. I'll meet you in room 306, alright?" He waved her off before she could get a word in and vanished.

God she hated that man sometimes. "*Could you be a dear and run to my office?*" She mocked quietly, unlocking Dr. Ira's office.

Everything in there was so organized. There were paintings from past patients strung on the walls and paperwork piled on his desk. Fresh

clothes were hung on a rack all the same shade of charcoal black, and a typewriter laid peacefully on his desk containing a halfway finished patient report.

Amelia looked up and down, but couldn't find his bag anywhere. It was a leather duffle bag that could easily be heard from a mile away with all those metal tools that filled it. Was it really that hard to find?

Finally, she put her hands on her hips and stood in the center of the room, trying to get her bearings.

“Right in front of my face. Dummy.” As she grabbed the bag that was sitting on the chair to his desk, she noticed a piece of paper fly from it, slowly falling back and forth. Amelia grabbed it and tilted her head, reading the first half.

Dearest Varek, the letter read. About the plague: we have a new backorder of-

Amelia jumped hearing the door open. She quickly shoved the letter in the front of her dress and looked up.

“Is everything okay in here, Nurse Zobe?” Dr. Ira walked in and saw her still without her shoes holding his tool bag.

“Everything’s fine.” She stood up, struggling to carry the heavy bag. “Jeez, what’s in this thing?”

Dr. Ira laughed at her and took the bag. “You know full well what’s in this thing. Now let’s hurry, wouldn't want our patient waiting would we?”

“Of course not.”

“Though,” Dr. Ira eyed her feet, which were only covered by her sheer leggings. “I would suggest some shoes before we get going, yes?”

Amelia’s face went bright red. “I’ll meet you there, okay? *Asshole.*” She muttered as Dr. Ira stepped out of the room. She slipped her shoes back on and headed to her small office to drop off her lunch and other

unnneeded materials.

The paper poked at one of her breasts and she pulled it out, wincing slightly. She was curious, but knew that she had no time to read the letter, so she laid it on her desk upside down.

Before she walked out of the room, she caught her reflection in the small window on the door. She really wasn't cut out for a job like this. Saving people's lives. But she didn't really have a choice.

She grabbed her crow shaped mask and walked to room 306, not missing a beat.

The room smelled of chemicals and slightly rotted. She scrunched her nose under her mask and tried not to cough. Dr. Ira turned to her and she could tell by his eyes that he was smiling. "Are you ready, Nurse."

Amelia nodded and watched as he put on his black crow shaped mask, securing it in place. He walked over to help Amelia with hers, and this time, she allowed it, feeling the warmth of his gloved hands on her neck. "You seem nervous," he whispered, the sound of his deep voice sending a shockwave down her spine. "Don't be."

"I'm not nervous." Amelia admitted, making sure her white mask was perfectly in place before turning to the doctor. The beaks of their mask were touching, but she could barely see him past the black mesh covering her eyes.

"Well then, let's get to it." Dr. Ira opened a curtain that was covering a bed. A man laid in it, breathing softly. He looked fine to Amelia, but that's always how the plague looked. And that's what made it even more terrifying. No one really knew if they had it or not, so that's why the town was in a constant quarantine besides the short hours of noon. It was a crunch, but it was necessary.

The man looked up to Dr. Ira, his eyes glossy. "Am I going to be alright, doctor?" His voice didn't have a hitch or even a specific sound to it.

Dr. Ira hummed and pulled out some tools that weren't going to be

used. He finally stopped when he pulled out a small jar containing some eucalyptus in it. “You will be fine, sir.”

The man sighed in relief and laid back on his pillow comfortably. “That’s good to hear.”

Dr. Ira hummed in response. “I’m glad.”

The treatment was quick and painless as it always was. The doctor would open up the mini jar of eucalyptus and fan it next to the patient’s nose while Amelia just stood there, feeling useless. She never really had much to do. It was mostly handing the doctor what he needed and comforting the patient.

The patients would go through about a week’s worth of the same treatment and then were clear to go home. But just because they got to go home didn't mean the plague was gone. Once you got the plague, it was always inside of you. Luckily, the town was in quarantine all day, so their town jumped to it before any death could spread.

Amelia sighed as the doctor walked out, leaving her and the patient alone. She wrote the paperwork that was needed and felt a tug on her dress. She looked up to find the patient smiling at her.

“Thank you, Nurse,” he had said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

She smiled, but he couldn't see it past the mask. “Of course. That’s what we’re here for.”

“I was scared when the trucks came.” The trucks. Everyone’s worst nightmare. It was Amelia’s way of getting to work, but other’s way of driving straight toward the grim reaper. The trucks would show up and the men would barge into their home, checking for any signs of the plague. And if they had symptoms or they thought it was the plague, they were taken away without warning and without saying goodbye to their families. The trucks. Every citizen's worst nightmare.

“Well, you should be home soon.” She hoped she was right, especially considering that he was still smiling.

“Thank you, Nurse.”

“You may rest now.” She stood and bowed at the man and closed the curtain around his bed.

She hurried to the reception desk to drop off any papers earning her a cold stare from the receptionist. “He’s in room 208. Better hurry,” the receptionist filed her nails and looked at Amelia. “I heard this one’s a nasty case.” That’s what she always said though just to get under Amelia’s skin. She knew she had a long rest of the day ahead of her, but she would get it done as she always had.

Amelia hung up her crow mask and breathed in the mostly fresh air through her smaller face mask. Nothing like a stuffy day breathing through a small hole. She walked to her desk and packed up her bag, finding the letter once more. She turned it over and heard a knock on her door. She placed the letter neatly in her bag and quickly closed it before opening the door.

“Nurse Zobe,” Dr. Ira stood at the door, still towering over her despite leaning down a bit. “Heading home?”

“I am.” Amelia clutched her bag, her green eyes locking onto the doctor’s. “Are you?”

“I still have another hour,” he rubbed the back of his neck. “Did you get those papers in by any chance? Dr. Martin needs them by tomorrow.”

Amelia nodded. “I did. I turned them in this morning. I got them done late last night.”

Dr. Ira sighed in relief. “Oh, thank god. You’re a lifesaver, you know that?”

“Why does everybody call me that?” She murmured under her breath as she went to push past the doctor.

“That’s because you are.”

Amelia turned around shocked. She didn't think he would hear that.
“No, I'm not. I'm just a nurse.”

“Who else would keep the patients company after treatment?” Dr. Ira's eyes showed that under that mask, he was flashing Amelia a crooked smile.

“I'm going home, if you don't mind.” She kept her head up as she pushed past the doctor.

“Have a good night, Nurse Zobe. Stay safe out there.”

She didn't respond, just kept walking.

“Oh, and Amelia?”

She jumped hearing him call her by her real name. “Yes?” She turned around, the fluorescent lights above them flickering in the dark hallway.

“Speaking of Dr. Martin. I'm supposed to get a letter from him. Let me know if you see it, alright?”

“I will.” She quickly turned around and walked down several flights of stairs. Amelia bit her tongue. She had the damned note in her bag and didn't even think about giving it up. She just felt like she needed to read it. It really was none of her business, but she took it home anyway.

Amelia stepped into the parking lot and held her head high seeing the truck.

“Ready to go home, Nurse Zobe?” A man asked, holding open the door for her.

“Yes please.”

The drive was quiet. She didn't even roll down her window. Amelia kept her eyes in front of her and just watched the dark road. Whatever was in that letter, she needed to read it. She didn't know why, but it would be gnawing away at her for the rest of her life if she didn't.

When she got in her house, she didn't even care to eat dinner, she just threw off her heels and ran upstairs, putting on her nicest nightgown.

“Amelia?” Xyla tilted her head as she walked in the room. “Not hungry?”

Amelia turned to her sister. “Not really. Save me a plate though. Long day.”

“Ah, I understand. Well, dinner will be waiting for you. Hope you had a nice day though.” Xyla exited the room, leaving her scent of lavender perfume behind her.

Amelia could feel herself shaking when she opened her bag. The letter was still right where she left it, neatly atop her books and gear. She set the letter in front of her, the cursive both old fashioned and neat.

Dearest Varek, she read again. About the plague: we have a new backorder of titan arum. We apologize for the inconvenience.

Titan arum? Amelia tilted her head. Why would a hospital need corpse flowers? She decided to keep reading.

And about the patients. We believe that they are starting to find out. I got a letter from the mayor this morning stating that citizens during the hours of quarantine's breaks have been complaining about their loved ones being taken away despite their good condition. The other scientists and I have decided to create an anti medicine of sorts. To make the patients actually look sick. We were hoping to try it at the hospital starting the first of next month.

The mayor has congratulated us for our work thus far creating a farce plague. Apparently air pollution has gone down 60% in the last eight months. We still have a waste problem, but that isn't for us to deal with.

Thanks again.

Sincerely,

Dr. Peregrine Martin

Amelia's breath hitched. The plague. It was fake this whole time. No wonder the patients looked in fine condition. How long had this been happening? Was this only their town?

Her mind spiraled. She needed to tell someone. Anyone. She knew she didn't trust that damn Dr. Varek Ira.

"Xyla!" She ran down the stairs and her sister halted her piano practice turning to her with wide eyes.

"What's wrong, Amelia? What's that face for?"

"The plague," her breathing was heavy and her heartbeat fast.

"What about the plague?"

"It's fake."

Xyla tilted her head and broke out into laughter. "Amelia, you're so funny."

"I'm serious."

Xyla's laughter ceased. "Okay, not funny. You know how much the plague has affected the town."

"The fake plague, you mean?"

"Amelia, stop. That's not funny. People are dying."

"Who?! Who in this town has died from the plague?!"

Xyla stopped to think for a moment, looking at her sister's messy hair. "Amelia, that's because you and the other doctors are working hard. The plague hasn't killed anyone here because we were prepared."

"Bullshit! The mayor just wants our money and pollution to go down!" "You need to eat," Xyla got up and walked to the fridge to get Amelia's food. "Clearly wearing that heavy mask all day has taken a toll. After this go straight to bed oka-" When Xyla walked back to the

living room, Amelia was gone and the door was wide open. Xyla ran to the door in a panic, but Amelia was already far gone by then, leaving Xyla all alone in an empty house.

Amelia ran down the cobblestone streets both shoeless and maskless. She could breathe. The air hit her face with cold whips and she even coughed a bit while she ran. When was the last time she had breathed in fresh air? She couldn't remember.

The mayor was right about one thing, there really was no air pollution in their town. The air was fresh and she could see every bright star.

She kept running, hoping to not bump into any guards who would take her in claiming that she had a plague that wasn't even real. Her feet were starting to hurt as pieces of pebbles would dig into her heels or the arch of her feet, but she didn't really care. She needed to find anyone that would just listen to her for even a second.

But she quickly stopped, almost falling from the sudden lack of momentum, as she came across a wheatfield. It was empty besides a figure. At first she thought it was a scarecrow, but it was moving. Her brain said stay away, but something else told her to move closer, so she did. She walked into the field, her bare feet brushing against soft wheat and dirt that felt like flour.

As the figure got closer, her heartbeat got faster. If the sound of her footsteps weren't giving her away yet, her heartbeat would eventually take over that role.

“Amelia,” her stomach shot to her throat as she was jumpscared by her own name. “What are you doing all the way out here without a mask?”

Dr. Ira turned to her, showing that he didn't have a mask on either. “Says you.”

“Fine, you caught me,” he put his hands up in defense and chuckled. “So, what *are you doing?*”

Amelia stood closer to the doctor, noticing a scar on his bottom lip. She had never seen his face before. It was odd. “How long did you

know?"

"About what?" He inquired, sitting in the wheatfield and inviting Amelia to join him.

She did, their knees touching. "The plague. It's fake."

He turned to her in shock. "How did you..."
"Dr. Martin's letter."

"Ah, so it was sent." His voice was soft as he kept his eyes on the sky.

"He wants to give the people a sort of 'anti medication' to harm their system."

"He what?!" Verek looked just as shocked as she did when she first read the letter.

"Here." She handed him the letter and he read it quickly. He gasped at the end of it.

"Damn. They told me that the plague would only be for a short period of time."

Amelia looked into his black glossy eyes. "How long has this been happening?"

Verek sighed and put his face in his hands. "The plague was never real. We created it here to stop air pollution two years ago. They told me that when pollution dropped enough, they would let the people outside again. But it doesn't look like that's going to happen."

"So why haven't you done anything about it?!" Her voice was stern. She didn't care if she sounded mean.

"I don't know." He admitted, staring back at the sky. "This isn't just my fault, you know?"

"Then why haven't you convinced Dr. Martin to stop?!"

“The man likes money. Especially government money. I wish we could stop it, but we’re just two people. It’s not like anyone would believe us anyway. Plus, even if I stopped doing this job, there are other doctors, fake doctors, who can take my position.”

“So you’re not even a real doctor?!”

“I am. I went to school for years. All for nothing it feels like.”

Amelia sighed and laid in the wheat. There really was nothing they could do.

“Now that you know, Amelia, are you going to quit?”

“Probably.” She looked at Varek in his black jacket, who was still staring at the moon. She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him down to lay next to her. “Why didn’t you quit when you found out?”

Varek hit the ground with a thud sound, wincing. “Money sounds nice, right?”

“To spend on what?” She snorted and looked at him funny. “A date? Lunch out? Not much of that you can do in this fake town, huh?”

Varek chuckled. “You’re right.”

The two laid in silence for a moment, weighing their options. Birds chirped in the distance of the forest and they could hear other sounds from the field. But other than natural life, the town was quiet. It was always quiet. Nothing they could do about that now.

“Let’s leave.” Varek said, turning to Amelia. “Get your sister and leave. We’ll live a life outside of this town. You go your way and I’ll go mine.”

“And leave the people here to rot?”

“Why not?” Varek shrugged.

“That’s evil.”

“We’re not heroes, Amelia.” Even after almost three years of working together, it was still shocking to hear Dr. Ira call her by her first name.

“That sounds,” Amelia sighed, sitting up. “Nice actually. My sister doesn't believe me though.”

Varek handed her the letter. “Show her this. Leave. Live a life outside of this godforsaken town.”

“And you?”

“I'll pick you two up in one of the trucks. Help you as much as I can.

Then I'll find somewhere of my own to stay.”

“Not stay with us?” Amelia joked, smiling a bit at him.

Varek smiled back and sat up, grabbing her hand to help her up as well. “I don't have to be a part of your life anymore. You got a degree as a nurse, yes? Use it. Help people who are really sick.”

“Who else would make fun of me for forgetting shoes?”

Varek laughed, his white teeth shining.

“Let's not grow apart so soon, Varek. Let's try to help these people. I know there's not much we can do, but maybe someone will believe us.”

“Maybe.” Varek echoed.

Amelia stood up and took a deep breath in. “Let's see what we can do.”

“You couldn't even get your sister to believe you.”

“Oh, Dr. Ira, always doubting me.”

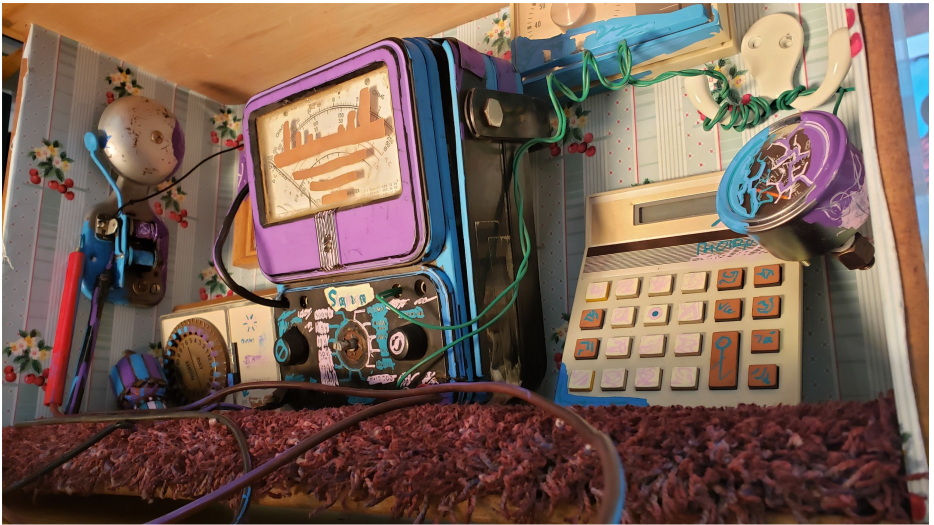
“Oh, Nurse Zobe, always keeping me on my toes.”

Amelia grabbed Varek’s hand and the two walked out of the field, crows flying behind them.

Maybe no one would believe them, but they were going to live a normal life sooner rather than later.

STELLA DYKES
THE TOOLBOX

Art



DRINK!

Art



JONAH RUPE

LOOKOUT, MOUNTAIN!

Poetry

Blue-eyed, bodacious, boisterous, big shot Buffalo Bill
Takes time off to ride off, through mountains, cow towns, deserts,
 woods, creeks
He's beginning a badly behaved trip, a big thrill
Back home to beloved backcountry, of which he often speaks

He hauls all his tack back to his handsome old horse
"We're gonna git goin' up th' mount'n, o' course,"
They plod through pale prairie and hurry through village
Passing pioneers picking places to pillage

He sees trees with winsome white bark and dark eyes
Their pensive polka dots dot lots of thin skies
Light creeping down through them, and kissing the ground
When the breeze stirs the leaves, a whispering sound

Come fall, they'll go brown, and come squall, to the ground
Just a helpless heap, a melancholy mound
It makes sprouting seem like an empty endeavor
"Guess no one runs around above ground forever,"

Moonbarkers sing in darkness, Bill happily howls along
Singing his ringing, rowdy, loud and carefree canine song
But tonight they sound panicked, barking not with glee but with terror
Bill wonders why til the sound of a rancher's rifle cuts the air

Tough tangles of lush sagebrush here, he recalls
But what he sees now gives him color-withdrawals
What once was white, yellow, blue, purple, red, many greens
Picked clean down to brown. Hungry beef leaves many such scenes

"They jes' up 'n' leave it hwen they're done wit their fun"
"Them careless cattlegoik don't gotta grow back none,"
"They abscond, vacate, vanish, vamoose, git along,"
"In th' eyes o' th' law they ain't done nuttin' wrong,"

Ambling arroyos flow through rock
Torched, scorching stone pulses under your hand
But plants still dance, what a sturdy stock!
What a lively, lazy, colorful land

“You could cut th’ silence with a bowie,”
“Take a big bite ‘n’ it’s almost chewy,”
“Heals a headache ya din’t know ya had,”
“A region they ain’t ripped up like mad,”

Well, it was until the degrading dirt-diggers moved in
Like bugs bore into trees, they broke into hills, deranged din
Looking for magnesium, iron, gold, copper, such sin
They’ll find uranium, but not brains in their craniums.

“It’s fit ta make a man sick, ‘n’ it has,”
“My heart looks ta go ‘n’ give out, I s’pose,”
“Let’s git in our goodbyes ‘n’ all that jazz,”
“Lemme pet yer nose before my repose,”

Now Bill’s days are done, he’s got took out
From up on that hill he’ll play lookout
His grave overlooking the perishing plain
Where Bill’s favorite animal once had free reign

He hopes like hell his staunch steed finds a new home
A foreign field where he can relax and roam
No barbwire or buildings or businessfolk
“All’s ya need in life’s a pretty place ta croak,”

Rivers dammed, damned, poor Bill isn’t sure why
“Hwat’ll they do hwen the river runs dry?”
“Hwen it dudn’t flow south, hwat’ll they do?”
“Or don’t them Mexicans git thirsty too?”

Folks forced under fetid, festering sky
Their trees taken, best to turn a blind eye
The living can look away and not cry
Take it a day at a time 'til you die

But Bill rots in that spot
Bawling all like a child
Watching what he should not
A West no longer Wild

PONDEROSA POINT CONDOMINIUMS

Fiction

September 28, Morning

He crests the hill. Tired, a little dehydrated, and more than a little filthy, the wanderluster looks down on the toothlike rows of condos in more than the literal sense. Every one the same. From here, he can't even pick out which is his.

He sits beneath a ponderosa tree. This hill has many.

"Funny thing about hills," he thinks. "They're harder to build on."

He glowers down at the other hill, the condemned one, the one the condos have wound their way up like a snake.

"They don't make it impossible, though."

The wanderluster tilts his head back and looks up. He sees bits of sky through the branches. It's a little like trying to see anything with your hair in your eyes. Instinctively, he tucks his further into his weathered green ballcap.

There's only a slight breeze. Most of the aspens shed their leaves while he was gone, but a few brown and even yellow ones wave from the tips of branches.

"Funny thing about leafless aspens," he thinks. "Their branches look like roots."

He wonders if aspens are symmetrical, if they look the same underground as above it. He regrets coming back.

September 23, morning

Does the hasty wanderluster still have desert fever? Yes. His affliction grows like a tumor. His bloated brain is inflamed with infatuation and his hurting heart aches with admiration for his dear desert. But in that moment, he knew it was time to say goodbye.

“Don’t make this hard, now,” he began. “We both knew our relationship would be long-distance for at least a while.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier,” she said tearfully. As always, she was beautiful. He stood on a precipice overlooking a sandy plain scattered with junipers and transected by a long and rocky mesa. She wore a deep-blue sky with light streaks of cloud here and there. He wore a fraying green ballcap, tattered hiking boots, and the same stinking t-shirt he’d had on all month.

“Well, parting’s such sweet sorrow and all that,” he said, unable to think of something original.

He wasn’t looking forward to going back to his family, his friends, or the 12 in-progress credit hours needed to wrap up his degree. But he had a foreboding. A premonition. A divination. A gitchy feeling that blew in on the wind and wouldn’t dislodge itself from his head. Big stuff was coming. He needed to be there.

“Can I have a hug?” she asked shyly.

There was nothing on this red earth he wanted more. He hugged her, stretching his arms wide as they went, from one horizon to the other.

September 28, morning

Ponderosa Point Condominiums hadn’t always been there. Just look at the name. Thirty-odd years before Elizabeth was born, the endless rows of buildings, painted the most colorless color, had been grafted onto the hills with minimal resistance. Most of the residents in the then-hinterland had happily given up their acreage when they heard a big enough number. However, there was one man -- 40-something, bachelor, no kids -- who wouldn’t be tempted. When handed a check, he immediately crumpled it into a ball and swallowed it. Despite his ongoing efforts to rally the people of his census-designated place, he was no match for the developers. Eventually, they had the permits to build around him, and made a point of doing so as loudly and at as unreasonable an hour as possible.

One night, under a full moon, the construction workers saw a tower of

roaring fire erupt from his property, rising impossibly high into the sky. The man had left a note, taken as evidence of suicide in the absence of a body: “I can’t stand to live on this here planet no more,” Thirty years later, still no sign of the man, and the condos were all an entire generation had ever known of this hill. This included Elizabeth and her brother. She didn’t expect to see him ever again. People who vanish into thin air don’t usually turn up again. Definitely not right back at the condo they disappeared from.

Another hug, a different meaning.

“You’ve been gone a month! Where were you?!”

“Desert,”

“We’ve all been worried sick!”

“Sorry,”

“Why? Why did you leave? Why did you take off in the middle of the night without even a backpack?”

“Got bored,” he says.

“And now you’re back?”

“Had a foreboding,”

“What?”

“A premonition. A divination. A gitchy feeling. You know,”

“So, what, something bad’s gonna happen?”

“Soon.”

September 22, night

The wanderluster shivered in his hoodie. The sandstone protrusion he was laying on was sheltered by a large boulder and didn’t heat up

during the day. Though at that hour, all the rocks had probably gone cold. In the low humidity, temperatures drop fast. He was in a wash strewn with rocks and pebbles. Bushes festooned the canyon walls, walls so high you could lean all the way back, squint up at, and just barely see the tops of. Just before the path made a quick bend to the right, there was a boulder, 30-odd feet, sheared off the wall by a thousand years of rain and cold and now leaning haphazardly against the canyon. Many would consider it good housing. Piles of scat served as a logbook of all the guests who slept there before.

He could hear the wind whipping past outside. It was that first night of piercing gusts that makes your thoughts turn to winter.

He didn't mind the noise. It's like the deep and unbothered breathing of someone dreaming pleasantly. He sits up gently and props himself against the canyon wall, careful not to wake *her*.

It had happened again.

He'd been dreaming about his childhood elementary school, reconstructed as well as he could remember it. He'd been able to hear high-heeled footsteps coming up the stairs. A menacing, cheerful, sing-song voice echoed off the empty halls. The voice of Señora Hernandez.

“¿Estás listo para la clase de español?”

The wanderluster turned and fled, never mind that he was now mostly grown and had already fulfilled his foreign language credits. He sprinted past an endless procession of classrooms with closed doors.

He turned.

She was right behind him.

Emitting a terrified squeal, he fell onto all fours and ran like a hunted coyote.

He slid around the corner, giving himself severe rugburn. He made it to the end of the hallway before noticing his hat had come off. He had

no choice.

He stood up and whirled around, preparing to charge headfirst at his pursuer and reclaim his most beloved possession. She wasn't there.

Instead, he was on an endless plain. Fat snowflakes streamed from the cloudy night sky and accumulated over the amber grass and yellow rabbit brush, their colors dull. Far in the distance, a leafless tree stood cold and alone.

“Not again!”

He turned in all directions. All the way to the horizon, there was only the cruel smoothness of the prairie. There is no escaping from the vastness of the Plains of Foreboding. He had been here enough times to have learned that.

When he turned back to the tree, he saw a crow perched on one of its branches. The snow was falling fast. It had already piled up to his knees. His jeans clung to his legs and his nipples hardened. By then, the snow had covered all the vegetation but the tree, coating the plains in milky glass that glowed in the moonlight. The bird took flight, leaving a branch swaying. Was it an omen? A cryptic warning? The wanderluster was too cold to care. He could feel the snow up to his waist.

“Get on with it!” he screamed.

The bird looked back his way, emitted an unsympathetic *caw*, and *continued on its flight path*.

The snowscape kept growing, and the gap between land and sky shrunk further.

The snow was up past his neck. This was always the worst part. He stood, arms crossed against his chest, muscles aching, heading throbbing, teeth chattering, as the snow piled over his head and buried him.

The wanderluster returned his mind to the cave. This was the sixth foreboding he'd had in his life, and none had ever signified anything good. Were they a gift from the gods? Advice from the ancestors? He'd always thought of them as a curse.

"Like I'm getting any sleep after that,"

September 28, midday

"Will you stop pacing, man?"

"I can hardly think on my ass. Can hardly think except when I'm walking. The legs are the motor for the brain. Do fish think? No, those idiots swim up rivers cuz they're picky about where they screw."

Their brainstorming session isn't going well. Neither can figure out what the hasty wanderluster's foreboding might mean.

"Maybe one of us'll get in a car wreck?" Elizabeth suggests.

"Nope. Forebodings are never that obvious."

"Wait. I just thought of something. When did you get the foreboding?"

"Five days ago."

"And how far in advance do you usually get them?"

"You saying something happened?"

"Yesterday. There was a hailstorm out of nowhere. The sky was clear and then, literally out of the blue, a bunch of hailstones come flying down so hard they punch 18 holes through the roofs. What was weird is that the whole thing lasted maybe 10 seconds."

"Tragic."

"It's pretty sad if you're the one who has to pay for them. The building managers didn't want to shell out the cash, so they put 18 flags up there and called it the Ponderosa Point Rooftop Golf Course."

"Premonitions are for bigger stuff than that. Last time I had one was a few days before Ashley dumped you."

“She didn’t dump me! We broke up because she was moving to Nebraska!”

“Who moves to *Nebraska*?”

There’s a deafening crash. Framed childhood crayon drawings of flowers (Elizabeth’s) and cacti (guess whose) plummet to the floor. The siblings run outside and see a plume of smoke pouring out of the Ponderosa Point Pool at the end of the block.

“Something just fell from the sky!” someone screams.

The hasty wanderluster turns and gives Elizabeth his wide, squinty smile.

“Now that? That could be premonition-worthy,”

September 23, afternoon

Though hasty, the wanderluster can’t travel 357 miles very fast on foot. So, as he did for his descent into the desert, he hitchhiked. He hailed a semi. The driver seemed to understand that the wanderluster didn’t feel like talking, and amused himself with his music.

“Satie’s ‘Sport et Divertissements,’” he’d explained.

After about an hour passed nonverbally, the hasty wanderluster uncharacteristically tried to make conversation.

“Sorry I stink. Haven’t seen soap in a month.”

“You need fear no judgment from me, young man, for I was once in your ragged, malodorous shoes!”

“You a desert rat, too?”

“Decidedly! The desert was my first and, to date, only love! I was reared in Saguaro country, where spent my boyhood romping about under the tutelage toothy ranges! When I was no more matured than you are now, I sashayed my way to the land of noble Joshua trees and

creeping tortoises!” The hasty wanderluster gaped in awe at the kindred spirit.

“After many years traipsing through the basins and ranges, I found myself here in the canyon country, where the goblins dwell! May I assume you were also reared under the desert’s alluring aridity?”

“Nope. I’m from Colorado,”

“Ah, a convert!”

“Mhm,”

“Accept this advice: don’t leave her. Life will become, shall we say, complicated. Grow your roots here and, though adulthood will allow but limited time to wander, you may yet marvel in the desert’s beauty,”

“Too late. Got family at home. Almost got a degree.”

“If I may inquire, what force was sufficient to tear you from your studies?”

“Got bored.”

“How insouciant! To simply depart!”

The predecessor licked his lips mischievously.

There was a long silence. The predecessor was no doubt thinking. The truck stopped.

“Young man, you have woken me. There remains sides of the desert I’ve yet to see, and my eager soul will not permit me remain a working man any longer. I intend to sell this vehicle posthaste and experience the world’s largest desert.”

“The Sahara?”

“Antarctica. There shall I nestle among the penguins and seals,

subsisting on moss and communing with the stony mountains, forever in your debt. And I shall make preparations this very second,”

The hasty wanderluster hopped out of the truck and moved away. Then, remembering his manners, he whirled around and pinched the brim of his ballcap in salute of his predecessor.

September 28, midday

Susan Schmetterling had given many announcements. When the building managers had hired her back when Ponderosa Point first opened, she'd been told her job was to make "the unpalatable palatable." She had never erred in this task. When the Managers had banned outdoor decorations leading up to the Halloween of '98, it was Susan who had gotten the residents to put down their pitchforks. "The true beauty of condominiums," she'd said, "is their uniformity. Like the precise, linear ordering of a piano's keys, our neighborhood will dazzle with its linearity and consistency. So no more jack-o-lanterns."

Here she was, thirty years, two divorces, and one meteor later, and still the best PR agent above 7,000 feet. She stared out over the packed meeting hall, pleased that, for the first time in her storied career, every chair was filled. She tucked her bleached blond hair behind her ear and leaned down to the microphone.

"First, allow me to express my relief that no one was hurt in the meteor impact. The safety of residents has always been among Management's highest priorities. Second, I'm happy to report that Management has generously promised to provide several hundred gallons of bottled water, as many residents' drinking water is sourced from the pool."

Oh boy. They didn't like that.

"My friends, whatever is this commotion? Aren't you happy your water serves both recreational and life-giving functions? In this arid-"

"Semiarid!" screams a young man in an old baseball hat.

“In this semiarid clime, is it not our duty to use each drop more than once?”

A murmur of agreement. A crisis averted. Here comes the hard part. She bites her collagen-injected lip, inhales, and proceeds.

“Out of the goodness of our hearts and the insistence of the law, Management is also disclosing that the meteor ruptured the nuclear waste storage tank located directly beneath the pool.”

Oh boy. They *really didn't like that*.

“Friends! With atmospheric CO₂ concentrations exceeding 400 parts per million and all of us suffering for it, should we not be grateful there are those who would seek to replace fossil fuels with uranium? And shouldn't we, the humble residents of Ponderosa Point, be honored by their decision to trust us with their nuclear waste? Should we not be proud to play a role in a carbon-neutral future?”

A murmur of agreement. A crisis averted.

“Yessir,” thinks Susan. “Best above 7,000 feet,”

September 28, midday

“When are mom and dad coming home?”

“I called them when you showed back up yesterday. They're driving home as we speak.”

“Great time for a vacation.”

“For your information, they were in New York talking to the best private investigator in the country to try and find you!”

“How flattering.”

“You could've left a note, you know.”

“Would've defeated the purpose.”

They're standing in the street. He's bouncing a tennis ball off the wall.

Each time it lands it leaves a muddy smudge.

“You’re messing up the wall,”

“It was already messed up. Never seen an uglier color in my life. Whoever heard of ‘London Gray,’ anyway?”

“You’re throwing it too high. At least keep the mess on our unit’s walls.”

He lobs the ball as high as he can. It sails through an open third-story window. Someone inside yelps. The wanderluster briskly walks down the street, Elizabeth tailing him.

September 23, evening

The hasty wanderluster has left the desert. Where he’s at now is only semiarid. A pinyon-juniper woodland. It’s not bad, but it’s also not her. ‘She’s her is what she is,’ he thinks fondly. ‘My bladder’s full,’ he thinks less fondly. He stops right there and unzips. Like all who can pee standing, he’s entranced by the cascade before him. ‘Why’d people ever invent Inside, anyway?’ he muses. ‘Inside is where the lights hurt your eyes. It’s where a thousand voices fester together in a cesspool of sound that robs your train of thought like Jesse James,’ The sound of his fluids soaking the ground is soothing. It inspires further philosophical reflection. ‘They make you ignore people Inside, too. On a trail, you always wave and say hi. Inside, you ignore them when they pass you in the hall. You’re not even supposed to look at them. It’s a way of keeping people lonely,’ he decides. His bladder almost empty, he concludes his meditation. ‘You can’t just piss wherever you want Inside, either. Gotta get yourself to a bathroom every time. They make you waste a whole gallon to flush your piss away. And when you’re done, they make you wash your hands, even if you didn’t get piss on them. They found a way to overcomplicate pissing. They can piss off,’ He shakes out the final drops and continues. He’s got a ways to walk.

September 28, evening

“Exciting news, friends!”

Susan never gets tired of these meetings.

“Earlier today, Mr. Eric Sakata from Unit 926 B made a very exciting discovery! Mr. Sakata?”

Eric takes the podium, visibly shaken.

“I was w-walking my dog down the s-street, and I passed the pool,”
He gulps.

“And there, coming out of the m-meteor, was some kind of...creature.
It looked like a j-j-jellyfish with deer antlers and-.”

He shudders.

“-and handsome, muscular legs, like a Greek statue.”

He bursts into tears. Then, sniffing, he collects himself.

“It was horrifying,”

His piece said, Eric departs for the first of many therapy sessions.
Susan retakes the podium.

“Neat, right? Imagine ol’ Ponderosa Point being the site of First
Contact!”

A murmur of agreement.

Susan thinks, *“If I weren’t being paid to do this, it would almost feel
wrong,”*

“Before we all head out, I need to mention that the United States
Space Force has made very clear their intent to forcibly disappear
anyone who discusses this information publicly. So zip your lips and
have a great rest of your night!”

September 28, evening

Elizabeth and the wanderluster walk home as the sun sets.

“Is it possible this was part of your premonition?”

“Nope. Far as I can tell, the calamity is yet to strike.”

“Ok, but there was that crazy hail-”

“
Typical Colorado weather.”

“-and then a meteor-”

“One of sixty-one-hundred that hit Earth a year,”

“-and now an alien?”

“I’m sure the folks from Space Force are shipping it down to the Springs as we speak.”

“So what’s it take, then?! What kind of catastrophe warrants one of your stupid premonitions?!”

“Something big. Something you can’t explain away at a conference.”

“Like Ashley moving to Nebraska?”

The wanderluster takes that ratty, green baseball hat off his head. He runs his thumb along the frayed rim sadly. There’s an embroidered emblem in the middle showing a frisbee landing in a frisbee golf basket. The letters underneath say “Disc Golf Association of Saskatchewan.” Ashley didn’t even like frisbee; she’d just bought that for a dollar at a thrift store. Elizabeth still doesn’t know why Ashley gave it to him in the first place. He sniffs.

Elizabeth hasn’t seen her brother cry in years.

September 28, evening

They walk in silence until they reach their condo. The wanderluster is the first to notice.

“Now, that’s something!”

Elizabeth leaves the keys in the doorknob and looks up.

It is something. Or, depending on who you ask, nothing. The building next door is gone. It's clear where it had been: marooned in a sea of asphalt, condos on two sides and streets on the others, is a grassy patch. Not a lawn; the prairie grasses are that translucent yellow-orange of fall, bent under the weight of their seeds like children falling asleep sitting up. A sharp eye could pick out the dried sage, its blue-green browned by the cold. Juniper shrubs and bearberry lay stretched out over patches. You couldn't take a step without a pinecone crunching underfoot. In one corner stands a tall ponderosa. The siblings stride over.

"I think I'd remember if this was here when we left," says the wanderluster.

"You mean if it was gone," says Elizabeth. To her, something's missing. To her brother, a dead emptiness has finally been filled. He sniffs the rust-orange bark for that trademark vanilla smell, and satisfied, leans back and stares up at the crown.

"At least a couple hundred years old."

"Right."

"So either this was inside the condo next door all along..."

"Unlikely."

"Or this grew in the hour we were away at that meeting."

"More unlikely."

The wanderluster licks his lips. There's a long silence. That wide, squinty smile appears.

"This is the kind of thing that warrants one of my stupid premonitions."

September 28, night

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t sleep. Going to antarctica.”

“Get back in the tent.”

“Can I at least take my sleeping bag and sleep next to the tent, cowboy-style? I can’t sleep next to other people.”

“These lawns are tiny. You’d be next to somebody anyway.”

“Is everyone in the whole neighborhood sleeping outside tonight?”

“I guess nobody wants to be inside their condo when it disappears.”

“Oh god, the sprinklers are turning on. Ok, I’ll come back in.”

September 28, night

“Hey, Elizabeth.”

“Who-- what time is it?”

“Can’t tell. There’s too many streetlights to see the stars clearly,”

“That’s what your phone is for. God, dude, it’s 4 am!”

“Listen.”

“...”

“Hear it?”

“Yeah, coyotes, whatever. We’ll be fine.”

“That’s what I thought. Only the sound isn’t going *to the moon*,”

“Fine, whatever, they’re howling at Orion’s belt or Venus or something. Will you lay back down?”

“No. It’s coming *from the moon.*”

“...Are you still dreaming?”

The wanderluster lays back down and tries to interpret the meaning behind the howl. It’s a melody of elation, vindication, and hope. It’s not a message, but a feeling spewed from the depths of the guts, from the epicenter of unprocessed emotion. Like all the best songs, it articulates those feelings that wind their way deep into the labyrinthine folds of the brain and wedge themselves in the swirling, fiery depths of human psychology. Those primeval feelings omnipresent since before we descended from the trees, before we lost our tails, before we slithered from the ocean, before the human mind was, so to speak, human.

Then! Another voice, this one much closer. From the mountains comes a ringing, rowdy, loud and carefree canine song. Elizabeth groans.

“Great, now they’re closer. Never going to sleep at this rate,”

It is not a night for sleeping. It’s a night for scheming, anticipating. For plotting and plying, devising and dreaming, contriving and concocting. The voices are rallying each other, as before a battle.

The wanderluster falls asleep and dreams incoherently.

September 29, morning

“Get up.”

The wanderluster groans. He didn’t sleep all that much last night.

“Get. Up.”

He puts his hat on and follows his sister’s voice outside the tent. Seeing what has transpired in the night, he grins.

“Ponderosa Point’s a strange place right about now.”

Indeed it is. A development once praised for its consistency and regularity is now inconsistent and irregular. The rows of houses are gone. Ponderosa Point is now a seemingly random patchwork of ponderosa woods and buildings. About half the condos have been replaced by square swatches of trees with sprawling branches sweeping the sky. The grasses bob at the slightest breeze. The conversations of birds and squirrels fills the streets.

He turns around and, to his delight, sees his childhood home is one of the condos selected for deletion. A large heap of rock maybe 15 feet high sits just behind the tent. A determined sapling peeks its head through a crack in one of the boulders.

“Couldn’t ask for better remodeling than that, could I?”

Elizabeth trembles with anger.

“Is this a joke to you?”

“I like the delivery, but the set-up was a little flawed.”

“This is apocalyptic!”

“Nope. Just the opposite. A reverse ragnarøk, an anti-apocalypse, a contra-cataclysm, an everted eschatology, a-”

“People’s homes are gone.”

“But look at all the new places squirrels and elk and bears can live!”

“Gramma and grampy’s heirlooms. Letters from friends. Family photo albums. Gone. Our whole lives were in that condo.”

“Not mine. I slept in it, sure. Laughed in it, even. Will I miss squeezing past dad in that narrow kitchen to steal some of whatever’s cooking in the skillet? Or that stain in the carpet I said looked like a duck but that mom said was Shakespeare’s head? Or even the way the shower would just up and run out of hot water at the worst time? Sure. That’s home. But my life happened plenty of other places, too. And even you can see it’s better this way.”

She wants to slap him so hard his hat falls off. She wants to run off and cry, tearing through the alleys between condos and woods, catapulting herself over the hills until she finds the condo, lost and wandering the mountains. She wants to lead it back home, warm it back up, put every picture frame and carpet stain and dirty sock back into place and she wants to sit on the couch while her dad makes dinner and her brother burns his pilfering fingers on the cast-iron and her mom comes back through the door to complain about her job.

He doesn't. He wants a neighborhood softly humming with life, human and not. He wants to walk without having to check both ways for cars. He wants a real night sky like in the desert, one where he can lay back and see the stars passing while he and his sister and dad and mom talk about anything. He wants to piss wherever he wants just because it's inhumane to force someone inside and on their ass, and it's inhumane to make their neighborhood a grid of inaccessible domestication where the only place you're welcome is your own house and the sidewalk. He wants to saunter through grass and trees or, better yet, through brush and over rocks with a bellyful of cactus and nothing to worry about tomorrow but finding a new place to pitch the tent and maybe patching his boots if he gets around to it.

Can the two ever be at home together?

September 29, morning

It started with a thunder-like rumbling. It was a sound the corpse hadn't heard in well over a hundred years. Even among the heavy hoofbeats, he could pick out the familiar clip-clop of the watersmooth-silver stallion's hooves. He could hear him pawing furiously at the stones and dirt above him, digging until--success! He rises from that grave, wet with dead man's tears, and greets his companion. Death has changed the horse: it wears a mask white as a skeleton, ornamented with all the colors the two had seen on their rides together. Streaks and swirls of yellow, blue, purple, red, and many greens bring the man's deadened eyes back to life. He lays his hand on the horse's nose and feels the familiar warmth under his bony fingers.

"I'd say it's high time we had ourselves another ride, pardner,"

September 30, morning

Elizabeth stops hugging her brother and looks to the mountain. His eyes follow. A stampede of buffalo flies down the hill towards the condo. Leading the charge is a black horse with a white face, carrying a ghostly figure. A Stetson on his head and spurs on his heels, the specter howls out in gleeful gutsong, shooting his revolvers in the air.

His herd barrels downhill, closing the gap impossibly fast. The sound is too much. The siblings turn and run. Elizabeth looks over her shoulder at the unremitting ungulates, then to her brother.

“They’re gonna kill us!”

“Could be.”

“Come on, let’s get up these rocks!”

“Ok.”

They scramble up the clump of boulders, their shoes scraping away lichen. They turn back to witness the carnage.

Each and every resident of Ponderosa Point huddles outside their condo, some in trees, some on rocks, some hidden in the grass. The buffalo ride through, their trail blazed by the boisterous buscadero, the rambunctious roughrider, the crude cowboy, kicking up obscuring dust in their wake. The sound is deafening. Elizabeth, the wanderluster, and everyone else coughs. The hoofbeats die off. The dust proverbially settles. The damage is surveyed.

Ponderosa Point is no more. The condominiums, each and every one of them, are gone. What remains is woods. Like nothing else was ever there. Not a trace of asphalt, cars, brick, mortar.

September 29, morning

The world itself didn’t want Ponderosa Point Condominiums. Like a body fed poison, the earth vomited up the offense and expelled it from Being. It undid the doings of contractors and water lawyers and dirt

diggers and PR agents simply because a line had been crossed. It couldn't take it anymore.

To lay waste to family memories and domestic bliss— could the world be so cruel?

Yes.

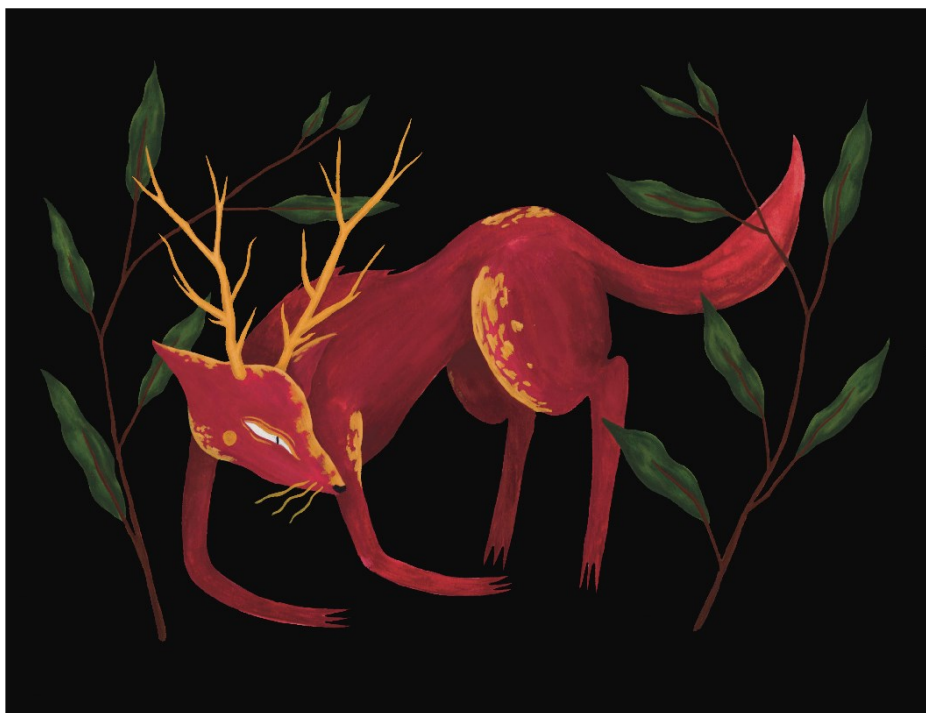
Like all other organisms, earth is driven by those swirling, fiery feelings deep within: to eat, sleep, reproduce, to run and hide, and to fight. Like all living things, its strongest desire is to postpone its death. And like all living things, the earth will fight with tooth and claw, with hailstorm and meteor and extraterrestrial and stampede to perpetuate itself.

The wanderluster turns to Elizabeth.

“I'm going to Antarctica.”

BECCA HEUBERGER
PROWL

Art



MARISSA MELLING

CHEESEBURGERS WITH A SIDE OF DRAMA

Nonfiction

Despite Central City being a small town, its historic brick-lined streets are filled with the life of gambling addicts, mountain men, families visiting, and drama. The people living in the log cabin homes surrounding the casinos know every detail of those who spend too long in their dwellings.

Debbie, despite time showing itself on her wrinkled skin and awkward walking gait, she is still well known as the woman who will grab your ass of any age or gender at the town's local bar. Debbie never suffers the consequence of her sexual harassment because she is a server at the more popular restaurant Mid City Grill and handles the town's local mail once a week. So naturally, nobody wants to get on the wrong side of the women who control the food quality at the one place with a decent cheeseburger and can view the mail details of everyone. Debbie clocks out of every serving shift, declaring, "I need a drink." Then will promptly walk across the street to the bar Docile Alley, where Jared, her most extended-lasting husband, is already three beers in and has Debbie's signature gin and tonic ready for her on a coaster.

The head Chef Armenio, a man who pretends to speak in broken English around any authority figure at work, was the first friend I made there. He used to be a proper cowboy in Mexico, but when he came to America soon after his son was born, he struggled to find work and took up a simple kitchen job. After a few years, Armenio is now well known for his cooking powers that seem to enchant anyone who takes a bite.

My favorite moments with him must include the times he would drag me outside with him and have us sit down on the worn concrete steps leading up to the casino's back entrance. Armenio lights a cigarette, specifically Marlboro Red, always offering me one despite my polite decline each time. While he smokes, he will talk about his tales back home of training wild horses and bulls for farmers. A few stories have included him getting kicked by one of the large animals, where

he showed me the still scarred and damaged flesh on his legs. A stark difference compared to the current type of work-related injuries he suffers from now. His hands or forearms always have some slight burn on them. Just last week, he sliced the tip of one of his fingers. Maybe his history of more aggressive injuries is what created him to become so casual now when he makes a mistake. Whenever he damages his hands, he will merely wrap them up as quickly as possible before returning to work.

On the other hand, my coworker, Brooke, does not carry the same dedication. Brooke is a snake, to put it simply. Being better known for his ability to break every rule in the book and get away with it constantly by charming anyone who tries to call him out. Brooke's most recent scheme was when he memorized every server's employee number logging on to the computers at work and transferring the tips from their tables onto his. It was a more sneaky alternative to his previous attempt at theft. He pretended to help bus tables when he was actually stealing tips from them. When they caught Brooke and his elaborate scheme, he somehow talked his way out of any kind of consequence. Instead, management decided they would take it as an opportunity to update the computers and gave each employee a personal swipe card to access them. The ironic part was last week, I witnessed several of the cards fall out of his apron when he took it off for a smoke break.

Dan is the only coworker my age up there. Dan is twenty-four and has been working in the Deli since he was fourteen. He left for a few years, attending Colorado State University, and getting a degree in Microbiology. But the last semester of his senior year, he dropped out, picked back up the exact schedule he held beforehand, and has stayed since. When I asked him about this, he simply said, "I make good money doing easy work." I agree that the job is easy and that Dan's pay must be excellent after ten years there, but I always wonder if he secretly craves more. He lives in the same house his father raised him in; even when his father sold the house to him, Dan stayed in his childhood bedroom rather than moving into the master bedroom. Dan clearly enjoyed his short time away from school. Whenever I bring my biology homework to him for help, his eyes glimmer with excitement. I just think Dan is a perfect example of those people who find more joy in the simple things in life.

In a way, I admire Dan for that aspect. In fact, I admire all the people at Century for how they can make their lives seem so fascinating and complicated. With a town population of 256 people and the nearest grocery store being thirty minutes away, everyone up there is living their own soap opera. The job has inspired me to branch out more in a strange turn of events. My hobbies no longer strictly consist of just school and work, now that I've made genuine friendships with my older coworkers. Debbie occasionally invites me to her weekly bingo night. On a good night, she will get so drunk that she will stand at the table to shout "BINGO!" Or Armenio, who I've invited over to my house to teach me how to properly season with ghost peppers, where the spice does not overpower the meal but rather enhances it.

Obviously, I will not stay at that job for the rest of my life, or I at least hope that the town's strange tantalizing grip doesn't hold onto me too well. But for the time being, I enjoy the new perks it's brought into my life. I did not realize how dull I had been living until working there. Where even the darker moments of listening to coworkers tell tales, including hard drugs or scandalous cheating, teach me valuable lessons. Granted, I don't think I needed this job to teach me its best not to cheat on my significant other and not get caught screaming at one another at the local bar. But it's more interesting to learn some things in life through an amusing story rather than knowing the difference between right and wrong, something more likely preached from your parents growing up. The laughter found in the tales seems to make the lesson itself stick better in my head, reminding me of the maple syrup that constantly coats the tables inside the restaurant.

REALITY ULRICH

TIME

Prose

The clicking clock ticks and talks for hours by the second. Second only to the time we waste hastening the end of time. Rhyming to timing of clocks ticking. Locked in a time of hours and days, a daze of shared time, our hour. Hand in hand and time together stopping to watch the watch stop atop the clock. Becoming clockwise to fight the counter clocks so time can spiral without fears. The ever-shifting gears of time march forward until spring, springing cages of times long past from future to past and all that will last past the future. A second only to yourself and a hand in mine will find no time for seconds, only time to find yourself. And the talking takes time away from the ever-clicking clock and soon time must find a rhyme to hide the secrets of ages of dust for it must cease the forward turn for years once yearned. And the talking clock ticks and tocks until the talking stops.

BRANDON JAMES BOONE

RAW

Art



G. WEAVER

INHERITORS

Fiction

Quiet waves of dark cerulean water lapped at the rocky shore of the northmost point of the continent of Tempatia. There hung a low hum in the air, the very energy of the land gently dancing beneath the light of countless distant stars. A traveler mounted atop an alk, a tall horned beast often used as a work animal or mount, made their way along the shore. They valued the beast as their travel companion on account of its high intelligence and emotional expression. The traveler quietly sung a tune to themselves, their mount slowly waving its head to match the rhythm.

The evening air was crisp and wet with smell of the sea, and they were taking in every bit of it. Adrift, aimless, wanderers on a journey across the vast land they called home. As nice as it was to bask in the beautiful night and take in the undisturbed nature, they were still growing quite weary.

“Still no signs of anyplace to tuck in for the evening...” the traveler exhaled. “We might just need to spend a night under the stars, eh Panna?”

The alk huffed back at her rider, eyes weary and a touch annoyed, but still showing care. A rocky coastline doesn't exactly make for the finest bedding.

“Hey now, to my credit I'd assumed there'd be another village this way by now. I'd heard as much in town before we ventured out this morning,” the traveler leaned over to look their companion in the eye more directly.

Panna heaved a compromising sigh as it looked forward once more, scanning the horizon for any sign of a comfortable spot to stop. Alk have incredibly hardy bodies, but regardless of one's sturdiness it doesn't change the fact they were still surrounded by ridged, uncomfortable stone.

The traveler understood their companion quite well, and gently stroked the soft fur on the back of Panna's head to urge it to keep going. It would be easy enough to throw together the miscellaneous camping supplies they had; however, a base of gravel would do no good for either of them regardless of cozy blankets. They were willing to endure so long as it was what their companion desired. Such is the way of their partnership, one of a Kyran and a mystic beast. The traveler continued to stroke their companion's mane, when suddenly her gaze shot right.

“What is it- oh?” the traveler spotted as well, a little way further down the coast, a slight gleam of light coming from an outcrop of rock on a hillside, which created a sort of covering. “Well, let's hope these folks are understanding, eh?”

Panna picked up the pace to investigate the light, her body relaxing a little in anticipation of rest after a long day of roaming. The traveler was preparing themselves for whoever may be waiting at this presumed campsite, running through possibilities of how to make a case to be allowed to stay the night. What if they were a recluse in solitude, ready to sling stones or spears at any who dare invade their space? Or hopefully it's just a kindly monk living in isolation, that would be nice. Maybe they would have some interesting knowledge to share too? Regardless, as the two passed between a narrow entryway, they found themselves on a medium size, smooth stone platform, about large enough for 8 or 9 people to comfortably lay down. At one of its sides sat a man wearing a thick cloak, draped over in a blanket-like fashion. A bright lantern with a white and gold flame sat at his side. He looked over to the companions as they entered, face mostly shrouded. His mouth was visible, dark stubble tracing along a strong jawline. He didn't seem wary, although his mouth retained a serious expression as he spoke.

“Can I help you?”

“Us, uh no, not in a particular way, simply uh...” the traveler paused for a moment. They weren't one to let nerves take over, that would never do for an adventurer trying to explore the whole world. Despite this, the mysterious man gave off an incredibly ferocious aura, one nobody else in their travels had ever come close to. They pushed

themselves to continue. “My companion and I have been wandering all day and need a spot to turn in and the rest of the coast is too craggy to set up camp so it would be nice if you'd allow us to hole up here as well if you would be so kind,” the traveler asked in one long, taking a couple deep breaths afterward.

The man stared blankly for a moment, then leaned forward tilting his head to the side. “Well, I'm just resting up here for the night myself, not my place to turn you away. Come on in.”

The traveler exhaled as Panna stumbled onto the cool, smooth stone. They slid off her side, and she immediately curled up against the wall opposite the mysterious wanderer. The traveler followed suit, gently resting against their companion. They took a moment to further observe the person across from them, who was hanging his head once more, seemingly asleep. The cloak he was wearing was thick and greenish black in color. It couldn't really be seen from the entrance, but the man also had a long sword leaning against the wall to his side, one of a unique shape that the traveler hadn't seen before. The two sat in the slowly dimming glow of the golden flame in the lantern. Leaning back into the soft hide of their companion, the traveler shifted around a bit, folding their arms together. Their eyelids grew heavy, and soon enough they drifted into a cool slumber.

An icy whistle cut through the air, and the traveler hazily opened their eyes. As they looked beyond the stone overhang, it was still pitch dark in the sky. Only now the gleam of stars was far fainter, and they could see rain pouring down against the jagged, rocky coastline. Their clothing was fairly light, and it had only just occurred to them how chilly the wet sea air was growing in their little campsite as well. They looked around and saw that the cloaked man had moved to a more covered position than he had been in before. Still, he was resting in a near identical way as before. The only difference was that the lantern was even dimmer. As calming as it was to gaze upon, it certainly wasn't helping with the whole warmth situation.

So, the traveler turned back and began sifting through a large bag resting against Panna's side. She glanced back for a moment, although she didn't react in any way beyond that. Her eyes were already drooping shut again as she lay her head flat against the stone. The

traveler pulled forth a bundle of dry wood and began piling it into a small bonfire between himself and the man. He must have heard the rustling of their work, as he finally made a move and glanced over, mouth shifting in slight confusion, before returning to the way he had been sitting in his cloak before. Upon finishing the stack of wood, the traveler then held out their hands and began whispering a near silent stream of words, a warm pulse slowly emanating through their body. From beneath the hood, the man listened and slowly turned his gaze back to the pile of tinder. After a few moments the traveler's fingers tensed up, as a warm crimson light illuminated against the brown of their matte, stonelike skin. Embers drifted and weaved between the cracks in the wood, and soon enough they burst into flames. They then positioned themselves in a way that would block the wet breeze entering through the crags from taking away their comfort.

“Lifeblood magic?” The man said under his breath. As though the sight of the crimson flames emitted by the traveler illuminated something long sealed away.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I'm decently proficient I suppose,” they responded earnestly, leaning in to take in the warmth of their work. “Well, I know the basics to make my traveling easier at least,” they chuckled.

The cloaked man turned to face the flame and leaned in himself, parting his cover slightly and revealing more of what resided behind the shroud. Comfortable and insulated clothing, with armor plating on vital areas. His face could be seen more fully now. His eyes shined with a dull gold sheen; pupils white like stars. “I can imagine that's a rather useful skill. Striking sparks any time you need heat can be troublesome,” he joked flatly.

The traveler turned to Panna, who was now half awake and taking in the warmth of the red flames. They once more sifted through the bag resting on her side, and after a brief moment pulled forth a pair of lumps covered in a paper wrapping, roughly the width of a person's hand with the fingers outstretched. They partially opened one, revealing a flaky golden crust. “Feeling a bit peckish, care for a snack?”

The man adjusted himself a bit, rolling back his shoulders. “Well, if

you're offering than sure, your kindness is appreciated.”

“Of course,” they smiled as they handed over one of the rolls. They peeled away the thin paper sealing away the delicious treat that awaited. The buns were filled with a sweet and savory fruit paste. A popular snack eaten all over, and it just so happened the previous village had a rather masterful baker. The two quietly enjoyed the delicious treats in the warmth of the fire. Soon enough however, the traveler began to speak once more. “Well, I don't see myself getting any more shuteye while this storm howls at us,” they gestured at the opening in the rocks, “now that I've opened you up a bit, how's about we pass the time a little bit eh?”

“Huh, fair enough,” the man let out a tired exhale. “I can entertain that idea, what did you have in mind?”

“Mostly just want to talk a bit,” they leaned back again, placing their palms against the stone. “I've been wandering all across Tempatia for a couple years now, my main interest being that I get to meet all sorts of different people,” they looked up to meet the man's gaze. “You definitely seem like an interesting wanderer, compared to some of those I've met. A mysterious man hiding out on a remote coastline. You a traveler, or something else?”

“Wanderer, you got that part right actually,” he responded plainly. “I've been on a rather long journey myself, just traversing and learning about the lands.”

“I see I see, interesting!” The traveler leaned in once more. “I suppose we may as well share a little bit more about ourselves, trade some stories and all that,” they gave a cheerful grin.

“Honestly I'm quite curious about you,” the man interlocked his fingers in front of his mouth. “You seem to be... Kanite?”

“You'd be correct in that assumption friend,” they nodded their head towards the man, who was staring intently. “I come from Southern Tempatia, although my family originates from the Viskayan territory in Kania,” they elaborated while waving their hand in a dismissive manner. “A lot to unpack there, but hey, it's history now.”

“Indeed...” the man softly whispered as he remained still, seemingly trying to retreat into his cloak once more.

“Hey, don't close up on me now,” the traveler huffed. “Anyway, my past aside, I've been traveling the continent for self-improvement and, well, wanderlust really. Beyond that, I've also been trying to further master my Lifeblood attunement... say, I just realized that we still haven't really introduced ourselves proper,” they paused for a moment. “I go by Talin, and this is my partner Panna,” they stroked their half-asleep beast's neck, who gently exhaled while lazily looking up at the man.

“Well, nice to meet you two,” the man gave a half smile. “I apologize, I'd rather not share my name, if that's alright.”

“Huh? Well, that's not very fair now is it!” Talin leaned in, resting a hand against one of their knees. “Guess I still need to soften you up, hold on,” they went back to rifling through their supply bag.

“No, it's alright, please,” the man calmly held out his hand while letting out a hazy laugh. The adventurer across from him turned back around, a couple more buns ready to go, and a determined look on their face. The man sat upright, and finally let down the hood of his cloak. His long and somewhat messy hair drifted in the breeze still carrying across the camp. “Fine, fine, I am called... Sirris, yes, that should suffice.”

Talin tilted their head to the side. “That should suffice? Really? What've you got to be secretive about?”

“Well, if you must call me something, then that's what would probably work best. Listen, how about I share a story with you instead. It's a bit long, but I know it well and value it greatly. Would that be satisfying?”

Talin sat with their legs crossed, half of a bun in their mouth, while also feeding another one to Panna, who gnawed at it while scarcely moving her head. They swallowed their bite, and then yawned and gave a relaxed smile. “Fine fine, keep being a mystery. Let's hear this thing.”

“Great, wonderful,” Sirris stared into the fire. He then sat up and looked forward once more with a focused expression. He rested his hand on the lantern to his side, and the golden glow within began to revitalize. “Allow me to recount this tale, a story whispered everward by the Aspects...”

GRAY ADAMS

A THIEF, BUT OF HEARTS ONLY

Fiction

I may be a rat, but I'm also a thief. Wait. No. I may be a thief but I'm also a rat. Whatever. You get it. In our city of Florence, my human assistant Pepe finds customers for me—ones that don't know I'm a rat—and tells me what to steal in exchange for a percentage of my earnings. Pepe and I—we make good money. I have as many female rat companions as I could ever dream of. My section of the sewer is filled with food and other interesting things, like a small, shiny shard of a mirror I found in the dumpster behind McDonald's. I can also afford to buy micro-doses of drugs off the street so my friends can trip on shrooms. My rat brain is wildly advanced.

And yet, my life feels empty. The woman I desire is a human. A client of mine, actually. Italian. Thick, wavy dark hair. Eyelashes as long as my paws. Plump curves. Ones I would literally get lost in. She towers over all other humans. A literal giant. I could climb her like the empire state building. I feel an overwhelming *need* to make her mine.

Even so, I am a rat and she is a human. It seems as if we are doomed to be apart, but I have a plan. Recently, I stole a gem from a ridiculously wealthy human, and while I was there, I noticed a relic—a necklace that could turn you into whatever you wanted as long as you were wearing it. At the time, I was in a rush so I couldn't steal it, but now it is my utmost goal. Second-time heists are always more dangerous. After being stolen from once, rich people tend to increase security. It will be tough, but I'm willing to risk it all for my *patatino*—my potato.

Somehow, I managed to get my paws on the relic after several close calls and the harrowing experience of losing my tail. As I made my escape with the artifact in tow, I was chased by a guard with a hunting knife who managed to corner me. In that moment, I thought I was going to die, but I made a break for it through his legs. Luckily, when the knife came down, it only caught my tail, but when I returned home to the sewers, it was difficult to stop the bleeding. It seemed a fitting exchange—my tail for a chance at humanity. It's still difficult to see it

go, however, since I cannot grow it back.

Anything for my love.

Finally, after morning my tail, I placed the relic around my neck and wished to be human. I expected some sort of pop or at least an odd sensation as I transformed, but I felt nothing. Nervous that it hadn't worked, I opened my eyes to find I was high above the concrete of the sewers. I rushed to the murky waters to see my reflection, and staring back at me was a short, greasy-looking man. Success!

I couldn't believe my luck and jumped into the sewer water naked to wash off as much of the grime as I could, which proved somewhat difficult. As I crawled out of the water, I changed into the set of human clothes I had prepared for myself— a pinstripe suit and matching fedora. Perfect. They were a bit too big on me, but I was far too excited to care. Immediately, I emerged from the sewers and bought an extravagant bouquet of flowers for my *patatino*.

By some stroke of fate, I ran into her on the narrow, cobblestone streets. With stylistic flair, I handed over the bouquet and said, "Beautiful lady, I have watched you from afar and realized you are my one true love in this world. Will you accompany me to a restaurant so I may pamper you as you deserve to be pampered?"

The love of my life blushed and shifted on her giant feet. Even as a human, she was a few heads taller than me and definitely *wider* than me. After taking a moment to compose herself, she nodded and accepted the flowers. "Of course. I would love that. I am so very flattered."

My rat heart soared. I couldn't believe it. With her on my arm, I sauntered down the Florence streets to the most expensive restaurant I knew.

Our first date was like a dream and went so well that I was invited to her place afterward. We got along together like two puzzle pieces. It was only a matter of time before we stumbled to the bedroom, giddy with our newfound love, for another amorous activity. Just when I thought I was the luckiest rat in all of Florence, as she took off my clothes, disaster struck. Somehow, while in the throes of passion, she

managed to unclasp the relic around my neck. One moment, I was next to her face, resting my body against her ample bosoms, but the next I was falling, landing on my pinstripe suit as a rat.

“*Dio Mio!*” she exclaimed, thick hands moving to cover her mouth. It was all over. All of my hard work had been for nothing. My love began to cry. Heartbroken, I turned around and made my way to the door. A rat without his tail. A rat without his soulmate.

To my surprise, she scooped me up and brought me up to her teary face. “Wait *amore mio*, there is something you must see,” she said, placing me on the bed. With shaky hands, she revealed a necklace much like my own and unhooked it from her neck. In the blink of an eye, she shrank down into an animal— a large, beautiful, plump raccoon. “I thought I would never find anyone else like me,” she whispered, wiping more tears from her eyes. She was perfect. So perfect. More than I ever could’ve guessed.

Tenderly, I placed my paw on hers. “I love you. Please be mine. You are so beautiful.” With a gentle smile on her raccoon face, she nodded and brought me into her huge body for an embrace.

Now, we roam the streets of Florence as partners in crime. I ride my sweet *patatino* through the sewers like a steed, the two of us renowned throughout the land as the best thieves in the world.

ANNA BRUNK
CIRCLE OF THREE

Poetry

1

Who is the nervous spirit of this world: you
You hole in the wall small, crinkled from rage
Unshared hobbies, secluded in their “Marry Me Date Night,” wrong place.

2

Whatever this spirit, it says “Come Alive for the Compound Dance!”
Squirmy strange markings of an animal thing, antiquated and bold
Our world translating helplessly, from lush to flesh, truth and not.

3

Spirit better than memory, resisting faults
Museum home’s “Wulfenite Shuffle” with the old stone aroma, welcome
Clipping tiles and sweet sanitizer sting, Kindergarten lunch time, perfect.

*

All this at angel length distance: moon, sun and dusk. Balance of the eternal cycle.
Better than beauty- what I must ask you to imagine.

-

“If We Kiss, Will We Explode?”

FIVE ANONYMOUS TWO SENTENCE STORIES

These stories were randomly selected by the Obscura editors from a fishbowl of campus submissions

I was born. I will die.

Trash goes out Monday.

I have to put my shoes on
if it snowed outside.

With all the nurturing and care you can give, a bad nut can still be born.

After climbing the mountain and taking in the fresh view, Oscar the octopus fluttered down the reef to recount an unforgettable experience.

“It’s only a blackhead; I’ll just squeeze it out,” I said and pinched the skin. The bulbous lump began writhing under my fingers as the fat and slime-covered thorax of an ant emerged, legs twitching freely on my face.

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