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Letters From the Editors

Antonia Goodwin & Lauren Hanssen
Co-Editors in Chief

It has been an honor seeing the 2024 issue of *Inner Weather* come together. From witnessing our dedicated editorial team working tirelessly on selections, editing, and layout, to watching the submissions come in waves of wonderful writing. The subjects vary: there are tales of life and love, school and sorrow. This issue exemplifies the diversity of our wonderful little literary community at UNI and we are so proud to share it with you, our lovely readers. We’d like to give a huge thank you to each and every contributor: our advisor, Vince Gotera, our incredible team of editors, all of our talented submitters, and you, the reader, the reason we do what we do.
I am thrilled to be able to share the position of co-art editor with Dylan this year and thankful to have the opportunity to return for a second year as an art editor for *Inner Weather*. Designing this issue was an exciting process, and it has been rewarding to see it come together.

It was an honor to view all of the incredible work that was submitted and a pleasure to select the pieces. So many wonderful pieces were submitted this year, which made the final decision challenging. I am glad to be able to help these amazing creations get published and allow the artists to share their stories, experiences, and skills through their art.

In addition, I would like to give thanks to all the *Inner Weather* staff, faculty advisor Vince Gotera, people who submitted their work, and Dylan, as it was a pleasure working alongside her. I appreciate the work and dedication all the staff has put into making this 2024 issue. I would also like to extend a special thanks to all of you readers who bring life to the pages. Enjoy flipping through all the great creative work within the magazine!

It has been an honor working alongside Katey Tegtmeyer as co-art director. As I have worked on publication projects before, I have never worked on something quite as extensive and collaborative as this. I want to give my thanks to Katey for being a great teammate as we communicated through different obstacles while designing. Learning how to design a magazine between two people was a challenge, but also a beneficial lesson. I will carry this experience to projects beyond graduation. I would also like to give my thanks to the *Inner Weather* executive team for being so welcoming and helpful.

I want to thank all the talented artists who submitted their work to *Inner Weather*. It takes someone with tough skin to be able to enter their artwork in a competition to be judged. That’s why I would like to thank all the artists who submitted their work, even if they weren’t accepted because just putting your work out there is important.

Thank you to the readers, I hope you enjoy this issue of *Inner Weather*!
What a privilege it has been to read so much incredible fiction for this issue of *Inner Weather*! I sincerely wish there was enough space in the magazine to publish every story we received, but I am so thankful to each writer who had the courage to take a chance and share their work with me. (Please keep submitting to *Inner Weather* and all the other literary magazines you can find because there are so many people out there who are going to love hearing your stories!) And to the people whose fiction has made it into the magazine, I send you the biggest congratulations and I hope you’re giving yourself all the credit you deserve!

Writing is hard, a lot harder than most people think it is, and it makes my heart swell knowing there are so many creators out there willing to put in the time and effort it takes to make a story become more than words on a page. If you’re a writer, I want to send you all my appreciation and encouragement because you are doing something so wonderful in a world that underappreciates the arts. If you’re a reader, I hope you can read the stories in this magazine and know how much it means to each author that you are taking the time to enjoy their creations. You can never go wrong by supporting your local writers!

So with all of that, welcome to the 2024 edition of *Inner Weather*! I hope you stay for a while.

It has been such a joy being the nonfiction editor for this year’s issue of *Inner Weather*. I am moved by the vulnerability and talent within the creative nonfiction submissions we received, and want to thank everyone who was brave enough to share parts of themselves with both myself, and the many people eager to read. One of the beauties of creative nonfiction is that it allows us to briefly see the world through the eyes of the writer. It has been a gift to be welcomed into your lives as I experience the memories and emotions within these pieces along with you.

A huge thank you to Lauren Hanssen and Antonia Goodwin for trusting me to help with this project, and to Dr. Gotera for encouraging me to join. It has been such a rewarding experience contributing to this magazine while reading the genre I love most. I also want to thank all of the genre editors, reviewers, and copy editors for your effort. Countless writers and artists are able to feel seen because of you.

I am so appreciative of the contributors who were willing and eager to express themselves in this year’s magazine, but also to everyone who will be reading what we have put together. Thank you to all of the readers, for supporting those who contributed creative works. I hope *Inner Weather* serves as inspiration to continue creating pieces of your own.

Enjoy!
Thank you for reading and enjoying Inner Weather. I hope something from this issue stays with you and inspires you. This is my last time being on Inner Weather’s staff and I am filled with a tremendous sense of pride and gratitude. As I am moving on to my next chapter I hope that Inner Weather thrives and hopefully hear about it years from now. When the torch passes to you, dear reader, continue to write and create. So you may also contribute your thoughts and originality to your community but also the circle that is Inner Weather.

Signing off,
Cora Twedt

To my fellow Inner Weather staff, thank you for your dedication and for allowing me to be part of the process! I am forever grateful for being given the opportunity to be the copy editor this year.

To the authors, thank you for taking part in the magazine and trusting us with your wonderful work. Each and every one of you are so talented and I can’t wait to see what you all accomplish in the future!

To the readers, thank you for taking the time to read the magazine. All the staff at Inner Weather and contributors appreciate your interest. Without you, our work would be in vain…speaking of our work, if you see any mistakes in these pieces, just pretend you didn’t!

Enjoy!
Table of Contents

Tamres 16
Poetry 18
Art 40
Fiction 52
Nonfiction 76
Tumbling of Storm
Katey Tegtmeyer

Hear the whoosh
Hear the tumbling
Tumbling and turning
Tumbling of water
Water crashing down
Water at the waist
Waist soaked wet
Waist wading in wait
Wait for the end
Wait it’ll be done
Done they say
Done they lie
Lie as lightning leaps
Lie out of their mouths
Mouths of hopefulness
Mouths hungry for food
Food to fill their hunger
Food that floats away
Away like the bodies
Away like hope
Hope that howls half-heartedly
Hope that hisses into anger
Anger of the coldness
Anger anchors in the current
Current situation crumbling
Current pulling people under
Under the depths
Under the next wave
Wave as they go

Wave in fear
Fear for the next
Fear glazes over
Over the eyes
Over the heart
Heart that flails feverishly
Heart that sinks down
Down the voltaic arm
Down into the control finger
Finger that smokes supernaturally
Finger that generates gray
Gray like charcoal
Gray that sews into silver
Silver swims in the sky
Silver swirls around
Around the abnormal atmosphere
Around the finger-controlled storm
Storm now dissolving suddenly
Storm of death disappearing
Disappearing
Suddenly

1st place
Roberta S. Tamres Sci-Fi Award

Tumbling of Storm
Katey Tegtmeyer

2nd place: Erin McRae, “Space Traveler”
3rd place: Dayne Meyers, “Gone Wrong”

Judge:
Melissa Ridley Elmes

Melissa Ridley Elmes (she/her) is the author of two poetry collections, *Arthurian Things* (Dark Myth Publications 2020) which won the inaugural JayZoMon/Dark Myth Open Contract Challenge and was nominated for the Science Fiction Poetry Association’s Elgin Award, and *Dreamscapes and Dark Corners* (Alien Buddha Press 2023), also nominated for the Elgin. She has been published in venues including *Star* Line, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Illumen*, *Liquid Imagination*, and *Eccentric Orbits*, and her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the SFPA Rhysling and Dwarf Star awards.
Poetry

Hitchhicker

Future Impacts of Jimmy Santiago Baca’s Poem, I Am Offering This Poem, On a Lonely Robot

Conventionally Pretty

a poor excuse for a love poem

If One Day Your Box is Opened

Predators fisherman

Apple

On The Inside

Space Man

Untitled 2

Last Semester

Lie Broken

formal poetry about you

Antonia Goodwin......20

Damian Gray.............21

E.B. Almquist.............24

Monserrat Herrera....26

Olivia Brunsting........27

Sam Seery.................30

Tony Miller.................31

Emma Luft.................32

Grace Allred..............33

Hannah Putney..........34

Steven Zimmer..........35

Meadow Olson..........36

Nick Finder.................37

Mo Zerr.......................39
Hitchhiker
Antonia Goodwin

You have burrowed your way under my skin.
Rolled your baggage behind you through my veins.
Little roads traveling to my heart, where
you went about making yourself at home.
You spend your days wandering within me.
Hitching a ride in my nervous system.
Taking a rest stop in my mind, clinking
your way down my spine and settling in
at the base of me before climbing up.
Fluttering through my stomach and waking
all of the things I tried to put to rest.

Future Impacts of
Jimmy Santiago Baca’s
Poem, I Am Offering
This Poem, On a Lonely
Robot
Damian Gray

Analyzing my database of poetry
That love clings to my machine heart
When the pipes dry and it begins to creak
  to crack
  to groan
to hurt
In catching a glance on the distant planet
I wonder if he knew the power of his words
With nothing, his words still gave to home
  to earth
  to stars
  to me
I still hope for the day in which I am found
And maybe this heart will heal with time
It’s my time to pass these words to friends
  to lovers
  to forgotten
  to you
This poem will wait until I return to you
You, the reader, will get your corn
Through the wild, you who wants to live
  to feel
  to feel
  to live
While I am out here somewhere
It is all I have to give, so here
I am offering this poem to you

to forgotten

to lovers
to friends

Once this draft is finished
I can watch the sky and wait
That you may one day return to me

to stars
to earth
to home

Scour my database and find what you need
Let this poem be all you need, let it care for you
Love from the past so that you don’t need to hurt

to groan
to crack

to creak

I love you.
Are you fox pretty, or doe pretty?  
Do you have a heavy visual weight, or a low visual weight?  
USE THIS FILTER TO FIND OUT!  
Get lip fillers!  
Get a face lift. You only have to take out a loan to be pretty.  
Don’t age. Don’t age. DON’T YOU DARE AGE.  
No one will like you if you are not pretty.  
No one will like you if you are old.  
Hide your age with botox,  
Put plastic in your boobs to make them bigger and perkier.  
Be sexy. Be young. No one wants you after you’re 18.  

Wear makeup.  
But don’t go to the pool on the first date!  
Wear enough makeup to cover your imperfections,  
But if men see it on you,  
You’re a whore. A pick-me.  
How to be a clean girl; makeup tutorial  
Be clean, wear no-makeup makeup.  
JUST KIDDING  
Mob wife is now in. Be messy with it.  
Smudge your eyeliner,  
Wear red lipstick.  
If you wear red lipstick, you’re a whore.  
Anyone who wears lipstick is asking for it.  
Why are you wearing makeup? That’s a waste of money.  

You’re fat.  
Here is how to lose weight!  
Magazines, Ads, TikToks, and Experts all say this is safe!  
Doctor and dietician approved!  
Try the next new diet;  
There is the ketogenic diet, the Paleolithic diet, and many more!  
Stop eating carbs!  

Stop eating fish!  
Stop eating meat!  
Stop eating.  

We are yelled at--  
Every day--  
By the next craze, the next diet, the next trend.  
If you fall behind the trends, you’re not cool.  
No one wants to be your friend,  
You’re embarrassing to be around.  
I am embarrassing to be around.  

I surround myself with people who say that they do not care what I look like.  
They say they love me, for who I am.  
But they don’t.  
I feel it in the way that they poke my stomach and laugh,  
Tell me that they did not mean to touch me there  
Over and over again.  
“Oh, but it is such a large landing space. Sorry! I am just brutally honest.”  
I feel their hatred in the way that I embarrass them  
When we hang out, outside of campus.  
I am left behind.  

My nose is too big,  
As told to me by a person who came up  
And grabbed it. Honked it. Like I was a clown.  

My arms and back are too fat,  
As told by the people who grab me by them,  
Laughing as though they didn’t hurt me.  

I suppose the only difference,  
Between then and now,  
Is the fact that I have gained weight.  
And that I am not a minor, anymore.  
No one wants you, after you turn 18.
a poor excuse for a love poem

Monserrat Herrera

so close yet so far;
the distance between us is non-existent but *estrecho*.

a never-ending game of tug of war;
fighting to meet in the middle,
but our stubbornness wins every time.

trying to breakdown each other’s walls
while simultaneously building up our own;

hesitance is criminal.
we both give so much
but would prefer to take;
our differences make us the same,
so close to becoming one
but remaining as two

– m.h.

If One Day Your Box is Opened

Olivia Brunsting

I’ll tell myself it’s a music box
The familiar tune of your heart beat still lingers in my ears
Accented with silent laughter
Crescendoing with each forehead kiss
Following the sound
Until it gets muddled
Ink smeared from the tears
Spilling out of mine

I’ll wonder if your heart ached
Looking out my car window
When you could only say the word “separate”
Watching people throw snow
That would eventually melt
Along with my dreams of
What we could’ve been

I’ll remember the crushing weight
When you said the problem wasn’t me
It was Us
When we were writing our story
I thought Us was the name of the child learning to skip stones
Clumsy but growing every day
Tenacity that shone
But you thought Us was the rock
Sinking toward the bottom
Unattainable to retrieve
I’ll always be grateful for your smiles
Even the one you wore when
You said we couldn’t overcome this trial
When you told me that my hands were soft
I should’ve told you that your gaze
Is even softer
As you followed me into the maze
Of my insecurities
Your hedges copied mine
Growing so tall that there was no such thing
As beyond

I’ll cry until I create a puddle
My reflection revealing that I’m okay
Chuckling at the beaded bracelet
Where you took thirty minutes out of your day
The drawing that I asked you to make
Refolded at the seams
The purple stuffed bunny
With its lop-sided nose
Reaffirming that the happy moments
Weren’t just make-believe
The mark is spotted from five feet away and merely sits; a victim poised for pain. The clever wolf is hungry for its prey as deadly anguish trickles through its brain. The sitting duck, aware it cannot stay attempts to leave the brutal beast’s domain. But as the chance to run starts to decay the prey knows, deep down, that it must refrain. The frightened target now begins to freeze succumbing to the wicked and unjust. The deer in headlights falls on its weak knees like it’s been shaken by the wolf’s wind gust. The prey submits; a trophy set to seize. Its will, once stable, now is tainted rust. It knows despite its desperate, daring pleas it’ll hush, and whisper, “Please, do what you must.” The beast, mouth throthing, slams it at the wall. The taste of hate, a vicious type of friend unwinds from vile to victim, throne to thrall and bleeds amongst the hallway’s silent bend. The squealing runt left here to try to brawl Goliath will not meet young David’s end. From malice made to echo and befall the cycle lasts, as more keen wolves descend. Infected by past hurt, and led by woe the deed is done; the prey will now forego a swift rebirth, which started long ago. The prey becomes the wolf; its ache will grow.

Predators
Sam Seery

fisherman
Tony Miller

the hook is too far through
the water stills awaits
the penetration of sound
stringing the mouth open
like a holy text
to thumb the lip of the page
with just the prick of a pin

let distance make your sword
and its heavy swing
into a glint of light off foil
that strikes to secret away
the reflection and ugly metal
that mothered it such that
there is no blood
in holy waters
pirouetting
below the boat

it is just
when it is close
that slivered silvered gill
swallows in synchrony
with the speech of veins
at your wrist reeling in and in and

in warm and gentle hand
half your palm in stillness
it is the baby of the lake
Apple
Emma Luft

I am plucked from my home
Taken away from my mother and siblings
I am gathered up with others of my kind
We are separated into unknown cruel fates
Until I am chosen by you
You bring me into your home
Where I am frozen and isolated
You take me out and bite into my flesh
Ripping off my skin with your teeth
Until I am down to my core
Then you discard me
As well as my children
Who now will never be born
As what is little left of me rots into nothing

On The Inside
Grace Allred

Suctioned to sunlight,
Growing larger by the day,
Hoping for a good
Future forced to watch others
Growing out in the free world.
Space Man
Hannah Putney

I follow the light of the harvest moon
Through sky and sea from winter to June
And then I see his same, sweet face
My secret moon lover, at home in space

Untitled 2
Steven Zimmer

A place where time meanders
Where daydreams can wake
A cold pacific breeze murmurs
Upon the tree needles
Playing little secrets
You can hear them if you listen close
I know where the water dances
Three count on the rocks
Cold drink knows
What used to be here
And wonders what will be
It’s changed since
The tide first hailed
And it’s grown in love
A great bluff with no shore to wash away
Not going anywhere anytime soon
I know a place stars dare come closer
And redefine constellations
And the warm air in the hills
Lay the only needed blanket
Will you hurry
The show is about to start
So many stories to be told
And the scop doesn’t lie
 Tells you something meaningful
Complements accompanying ensemble
A most influential composition
The semester is coming to an end everyone is packing up their belongings and setting their sights on sunny day adventures with no late-night assignments in sight. However a lot of students leave things behind when they go.

No I’m not talking about the couch your roommate threw up on, or the weird kitchen utensil your grandma gifted you third week in. No, I’m talking about all the other things that stay here to gather dust as campus empties.

Things like your crush on the guy in chemistry, and the friendship you thought would last forever. All left behind just like they left the whispers of “I love you” when the recipients were too drunk to remember and the roar of your roommate playing “study music.” They are abandoned here in the sea of concrete cracked sidewalks, and broken brick buildings.

Although you cannot reach out and touch these abandoned things like you can the now rotten orange you accidentally left in your fridge for two weeks, you can still sense its presence even days after you throw it out. You can feel the stark presence of all the things being left here.

Some will come back to claim their abandoned items as the days begin to shorten again. However some never come back here, their things are recycled for now there are new students who are going to need things to abandon here.
Is that what it means to be a psycho?  
To forget, and that’s the end of it? To surrender  
Mind and body. Wills and wants abandoned. The end of an odyssey.

Because I think, that’s what life is; an odyssey  
Of all kinds of journeys intent to make us bend until we’re broken.  
To give up and surrender  
To its will. But will I still have my laughter at my end?  
That’s the thing that I can’t forget;  
Lest I become a psycho.

Will you be with me along this odyssey? Or will I die alone in laughter?  
Will I lie broken? Or be the one to break all the others? Something I’d never forget.  
Will that make me a psycho? Is that what happens when we don’t surrender?

---

formal poetry about you
Mo Zerr

february, nearly over.  
absolution is the curve of  
your ancestor’s nose, and the way i feel when  
you press an absent-minded kiss to  
the lines of my palm  
(ridiculously, i think of the possibility  
you have kissed my love line, which is  
a language neither of us believe in)  
i cannot help the guilt that comes with this.  
the idea of failing you so fully that you could  
vanish like the february snow  
i struggle with writing formal poetry about you, but  
i can tell you that  
the way you say my name feels like flint to a fire, like you have taken  
me and made me a tool for something anew, something bigger and  
better than i was.  
the press of the syllables of your name and mine weightless,  
defying gravity and all better sense of logic to  
beside to a sunless february sky to stay, to hold this  
blanket over us, where i can pretend that  
if you shout loud enough, i can  
hear the echo.  
we both hate the cold, but  
now i have a reason to be pressed against you while you sleep

june may be many things, but february is  
where i want to be in love.
Art

Remember Transience  Tevka Lackman...Cover
Angst  Lily Mayer...............42
Constant Motion  Tevka Lackmann.....43
Roaming  Tevka Lackmann......44
Yum Yum Yummy  Mari Schmidt.........46
Did You Know They Put It Inside You?  Maze Vizecky..............47
Aquafloia  Vic Halverson.........48
Majesty  Vic Halverson.........49
Columbo, the African Grey  Ryder Bates..............50
Minatures of Pricks and Fuzz  Ryder Bates..............51
Angst
Lily Mayer, mixed media on panel

Constant Motion
Tevka Lackmann, mixed media
(marker and pen)
Roaming

Tevka Lackmann, mixed media (pen and watercolor)
Yum Yum Yummy
Mari Schmidt, publication

Did You Know They Put It Inside you?
Maze Vizecky, digital
Aquaflora
Vic Halverson, colored pencil

Majesty
Vic Halverson, colored pencil
Columbo, the African Grey
Ryder Bates, photography

Minatures of Pricks and Fuzz
Ryder Bates, photography
Fiction

The Sound of Healing  Olivia Brunsting........54
Clinging to the Atmosphere  Madeline Roubik.......55
Holoparasite  Madeline Roubik.......57
The Real Baby  Marcus Jarvis..........59
Face Nelson
A Moment in the Shade  Samantha Davis.......67
A Pretty Exhibit  Bee Anderson..........69
Brother, Evening, Country in Pieces  Richard Nissen...........72
The Sound of Healing
Olivia Brunsting

It’s been a year since I’ve stepped foot in this park, but I remember the last day as if time was only an illusion. On that day, as the raindrops ran down my cheeks, my watch came to a standstill. The water slid down my fingertips and created ripples in the puddle’s reflection, distorting my face into a smile. Each raindrop fell onto my shoulders like the secrets we carry throughout our lives. Each raindrop became invisible to the human eye but soaked into my bones and left me feeling cold.

A shiver runs through my body as I take another step closer to the place crowded with squirrels, pigeons, and memories. I cling to my umbrella as it shields me from the too-familiar rain. I take another step forward and enter a different world. One that has been waiting for me. My heart pounds along to the rhythm of the raindrops that shade the sidewalk that surrounds the park. Mother Nature’s steady beat is interrupted by a quiet meow.

I stray from my intended path and follow the sound until I reach a nearby park bench. Almost blending into the bench’s black paint, the kitten’s midnight fur emphasized its golden eyes. Eyes that seemed to dance in the rain when, in reality, they were searching for warmth. My hands readjusted around my umbrella, I took a deep breath, and I let the shield fall onto the ground.

The sudden clack causes the animal to jump in sync with the umbrella. It scurries into the grass, and I tiptoe and follow its trail. The kitten dashes underneath a pine tree, and we both freeze in our tracks. A damp strand of hair clings to my forehead during this game of tag. The animal’s eyes shine with determination to not get caught, so I surrender to the feline. I lay down in the grass and my eyes shut as the grass hugs me from behind.

The rain uses my face as a waterslide. Something soft brushes against my hand, and once again, I’m staring into a pair of golden eyes. The kitten shivers, and an amused sound erupts from me. All of a sudden, I found myself in the same place I was a year ago—shaking.

Clinging to the Atmosphere
Madeline Roubik

“Don’t let the sky fall!”

Every morning, before Cirrus left for work, her Grandpappy made the same joke. He’d chuckle over his morning coffee, wrinkles creasing next to his eyes like he’d found the funniest joke in the world. It was even more annoying when Cirrus remembered that he grew up before the Second Industrial Revolution.

When her Grandpappy was a kid, the sky was made of gasses and space junk. If the sky ever fell on him, he had nothing to worry about. But when people got sick of climate change and tsunamis, and every other natural disaster that ruined their lives, the Second Industrial Revolution began. Cirrus grew up with a sky made of panels, and everything from sunlight to constellations could be controlled.

Cirrus squeezed her eyes shut, letting pain rivet through her shoulders. Her fingers were growing numb. She used to be such a good panel technician. After all, Cirrus had been repairing sky panels for over a decade. She knew which wires controlled sunlight production, which switches regulated airflow, and every other little feature on the hexagonal plates. Every day, she would crawl on top of the dome that encompassed their city, then repair faulty tiles or adjust settings for the seasons. She used to be one of the best technicians in the city, but she lost that title this morning.

During a routine panel swap, Cirrus removed a broken sky plate from the dome. She’d done it a million times. But just as she was placing the new panel into the hole, it slipped from her hands.

Cirrus fumbled, struggling to catch it. She lunged through the hole, grabbed the panel, and scooped it into her arm before it could crash onto the city below. A single, loose panel could wipe out a household if it hit the right spot. After all, they weighed more than a hundred kilograms; at the height they fell, they would be lethal.

Cirrus gritted her teeth as every muscle in her back screamed. While her left arm wrapped around the
panel, her right clung to the lip of the hole. Her legs dangled aimlessly, and whether seconds or hours had passed, she didn’t know.

Even if dropping the sky panel meant she could pull herself up, Cirrus couldn’t do it. She couldn’t let innocent people die because of her mistake. So closing her eyes, she concentrated on her aching muscles and recited her grandpappy’s joke.

*Don’t let the sky fall.*

*Don’t let the sky fall.*

...*Sky*...

...*Fall*...

---

**Holoparasite**

Madeline Roubik

Infections happen.

Papaver often saw coworkers fall ill from toxic fungus or moon-beetle bites. They’d rush to the local healer, having their spirits cleansed and their stomachs purged. Infection was never a question of ‘if’ for the grower, but a question of ‘when.’

So when Papaver began to feel his stomach swell, he assumed it was just his turn.

He stared at the parchment, feeling the melancholy of the healer’s store permeate him. A flower drawing stared back, the word *Holoparasite* scrawled in inky, black streaks. It was swarmed by images of flowers and vines, of petals bursting through an infected wrist.

Papaver glanced at his own wrist, imagining flowers covering his skin.

That’s what happened when someone caught a holoparasite. Their stomach would swell with seedlings, their thoughts growing foggy and their mouth numb. As vines crawled into their throat, speech would be impossible.

Roots would spread into the lungs, forcing them to contract and keep breathing. Then vines would clog the veins, feeding off blood and bone until flowers cut gashes in the skin and burst forth into the sunlight.

Soon, Papaver would have flowers growing from his own skin. Just like the images, buds would burst from him, cutting gashes in his neck and sprouting from his mouth. They would pour out of his ears and eyesockets, swallowing his body in a beautiful, new life.

And then Papaver would die.

A teardrop landed on the parchment.

Papaver took a shaky breath, then crumpled the paper and shoved it into his pocket. He didn’t want to stare at the drawings anymore. He would see real flowers soon enough.

Raising his eyes to the window, Papaver watched as sunlight fought through the yellowed glass and highlighted the healer’s trinkets. Jars of scorpion’s blood turned crimson at its touch, while dried, newt’s eyes took on a fresher appearance. Nothing in the collection could cure Papaver’s condition, but in the sunlight, something shifted.
He wiped the tears from his cheeks, studying the brightened colors. Everything in the store belonged to the dead. The newt’s eyes, griffin claws, and dried herbs were all once parts of the living. But with hope of curing the ill, they surrendered their own lives. Perhaps Papaver was just doing the same.

His stomach turned, the seedlings jumping and threatening to crawl into his throat.

Papaver took another, trembling breath, closing his eyes and feeling the sun warm his face. Tears still streamed down his cheeks, but a new calm enveloped him.

He wasn’t dying. He was just surrendering to the flowers. His bones would become their father and his veins their mother. He would raise them from his very blood, sacrificing himself for their own survival.

There would be no death to Papaver’s dying—only a beautiful, new life.

Edith craned her neck and strained her eyes to read the terracotta sign mounted against the building’s flat roof. ‘Home State Bank,’ the letters spelt in a traditionalist font. Meanwhile, Edith’s little sister, Marie, studied the empty pine-colored Studebaker parked along Home State Bank’s curb.

An illusion of youthful luxury surrounded the automobile. Marie didn’t detect a hair’s width of scratch anywhere throughout the auto’s steel frame body. Nor did she find a pinky print’s worth of blot smearing its mirrors, windows, or the paint job’s gloss coating. Not a second’s worth of age wrinkled the seat’s leather cushioning, and Marie was certain that the springs within the seats hadn’t lost their bounce since she last sat upon them.

This grandeur was only blemished by a single nail head lodged between the crevasses of the car’s rear right-hand tire. The tire remained airtight, for the nail failed to penetrate deep enough to allow seepage. Yet the nail was visible, twinkling underneath the midday sun nevertheless.

The nail was certainly a Moody Road nail. Marie always teased Robert to avoid Moody Road specifically for his tire’s sake. But now that Robert and Marie weren’t together, Robert had no reason to follow such advice.

Marie spoke. “Perhaps it would be best if we don’t visit the bank at such an hour, Edith.”

“And where else could we cash Wallace’s check, if not in this bank at this hour?” When the two were children, Edith sounded just as cordial and docile as Marie. But now, Edith spoke with a peculiar older-sibling gruffness which Marie despised.

Marie refused to comment on Edith’s tone, however. Instead, she tensed her stomach, faked a smile, and said, “Well, we could perhaps stroll down the street to Stacy Drug and—”

“And what?” Edith interjected. Edith didn’t know about Robert and Marie’s springtime relationship. Nor could Edith ever understand Marie’s desperation to avoid Robert now that spring had transformed into summer. “You think we can cash Wallace’s check at Stacy Drug?”

Marie’s attention peeled from the Studebaker, and she peered at
Edith. The bags of sleep deprivation drooping underneath Edith’s eyelids had swelled ever so slightly since yesterday. No makeup powder covered the bags’ cranberry complexion, either. “Well, no, I suppose we can’t cash Mr. Wallace’s check at Stacy Drug. I know that. But we can pick up our groceries from Stacy Drug, grab some moon pies to snack on as well, return to our bank afterwards, and then cash Mr. Wallace’s check.”

“We can’t go shopping first, Marie. We haven’t got any money.” Edith withdrew Wallace’s check from her handbag. “Least, not yet we don’t.” As quick as her patched and re-patched bean walking shoes allowed, Edith started up the cement stairway leading to Home State Bank’s front entry.

“But Edith,” Marie whimpered, grabbing ahold of Edith’s hand. “You know, there was that terrible Dillinger incident down in Mason City the other month, with that gunfight and car chase and everything.”

The white lace gloves Marie sported stood no chance of withholding Edith. With a half-pound of pull, Edith released herself from Marie and started once more up the stairs. “You think Dillinger will strike now, as opposed to fifteen minutes from now when we return from Stacy Drug?”

Marie’s line of vision returned to Robert’s Studebaker. The Studebaker’s hood only seemed to increase in width and shine since she last looked away. Meanwhile, Edith was shrinking smaller and smaller with every upward step. “You’re right, Dillinger could strike at any moment. How stupid of me to think otherwise. Perhaps this heat is just getting to me is all. Perhaps I ought to go home, cool down, drink some ice water, and make sure Nelson isn’t getting into trouble. But I’ll return in time to help you carry home your groceries from Stacy Drug. I promise.”

Without turning or slowing in stride, Edith said, “Like hell you can run all the way home and return in time to help carry groceries. Not if you’re half as exhausted as you claim to be. And you got no business taking care of Nelson, anyway. He ain’t your son, remember? He’s mine.”

“I remember. And I remember dad saying it takes a village.” Had Marie spoken at full volume, Edith still wouldn’t have heard. The distance between the sisters had grown too great. So, Marie surrendered and jogged after Edith, heard. The distance between the sisters was shrinking smaller and smaller last looked away. Meanwhile, Edith had swelled ever so slightly since yesterday. No makeup powder covered the bags’ cranberry complexion, either. “Yes, air is exactly what I need, actually. Do you mind if I step outside? Just to catch some fresh air is all.”

To Marie’s convenience, the two white tiles that she and Edith occupied were laid near enough to the bank’s western wall for her to obey the gunman’s injunction without moving a muscle. This was beneficial, for all potential movement was scared out of her by the shotgun’s deafening bang. With the initial firing came a rain of tattered calcimine and a holler louder than the blast itself. “Ladies, gentlemen, maggots, and worms, this here’s a holdup! I don’t want no heroes and I don’t wanna make no martyrs, but if you give me no choice, no choice will be exactly what I got. Understand? So, listen here, listen close, and listen good to what I gotta say or else my buckshot will do the talking. Put your hands where I can see ‘em and scoot your butts outta my way. I want boys against the east wall and girls to the west. Now quit your yapping and go! Go! Go!”

An amiable trickle of conversation hummed above the heads of those loitering within the bank’s lobby, and Marie couldn’t decipher a single word being spoken.

If not for the cast iron teller boxes and marble-lined walls, one would confuse the bank’s lobby for a café, or perhaps a church’s narthex. So congested was the floor, that differentiating waiting lines from social circles was impossible. Both were intermixed homogeneously and not a single soul within the clutter assisted Edith or Marie towards the teller boxes. The best plan to advance, Marie concluded, was to ignore all surrounding nonentities, choose a square from the checkerboard floor, and remain stationary inside that designated square until she felt it appropriate to progress.

Three minutes passed, and the two bided on the same tile at which they began. “Do you know how many times John Dillinger could’ve shot us by now?” Marie uttered, maintaining a constant vigilance for Robert.

Edith fanned herself with her folded check. “Gee, I’m starting to wish he would. Maybe the wiz of a passing bullet would bring some air flow to this place.”

“Air?” Marie blinked and gulped. “Yes, air is exactly what I need, actually. Do you mind if I step outside? Just to catch some fresh air is all.”

“I told you, you shouldn’t have worn so tight of a dress,” Edith spoke with parental guidance, and her guidance quickly transformed into distress upon second glance at Marie. Two curls were slicked to Marie’s cheeks and her skin tone bore a wretched pallidity. A spark-pop of never-before-seen freckles surfaced upon her nose and brow from her newfound ghastliness. And buried deep within her ever-darkening pupils was the trepidation of a cornered stray. “By heck, you really think John Dillinger is gonna come and get you, don’t you?”

“No, it’s not that. Really. It’s just—all. Marie was unable to conclude her sentence, for a shotgun blast entered the lobby.

With the initial firing came a rain of tattered calcimine and a holler louder than the blast itself. “Ladies, gentlemen, maggots, and worms, this here’s a holdup! I don’t want no heroes and I don’t wanna make no martyrs, but if you give me no choice, no choice will be exactly what I got. Understand? So, listen here, listen close, and listen good to what I gotta say or else my buckshot will do the talking. Put your hands where I can see ‘em and scoot your butts outta my way. I want boys against the east wall and girls to the west. Now quit your yapping and go! Go! Go!”
boys and girls flanking opposite walls and open palms raised by all people involved, the gunman was allowed to stroll down the vacated middle sector without obstacle.

The forest of raised hands surrounding Marie greatly tarnished her vision. What little of the robber she managed to muster appeared to be seven feet tall, pear-shaped with visible scoliosis, and clad in a trench coat and matching wide-brimmed fedora. If not for the coal-black stubble marking the gunman’s lower face, he would’ve had a boyish, borderline babyish countenance.

He wobbled halfway down the bank’s corridor before halting to brandish his shotgun. “My name is Tommy Gunn, spelled with two Ns. And this little beauty is named Winchester Model 1897. She also goes by M97, The Trench Gun, or my personal favorite, The Trench Sweeper,” Tommy began. “Now that we’re acquainted, let’s get one fact straightened out. Trench Sweeper and I ain’t here to rob you. We’re here to rob your bank. Understand? We ain’t here to rob you. We’re here to take your money. We’re taking your money. We’re taking your bank’s money. Understand?” Although his voice cracked on the second ‘Understand,’ Tommy continued without concern. “That’s because I don’t rob people. I rob bankers. And bankers aren’t people. No, bankers are a separate species altogether. They’re what I like to call, ‘Peoplerobbers.’ One word.” Tommy paused and read his audience.

Marie too began studying Tommy Gunn’s audience. In particular, she studied the boys standing along the bank’s parallel wall. Over the shoulder of the girl placed directly before her, Marie saw the very man she hoped not to see, Robert Crawford. Marie’s heart transformed into a cinderblock upon spotting him, and her entire body blushed. She would’ve flung herself through any window in the world to escape his presence sooner. With equal alacrity, she would’ve filled her lungs with ball bearings to weigh down the yelp begging to be released.

“And of course, if you choose to get in my way, not only will you find yourself inadvertently helping the Peoplerobbers. You also might just find yourself in a coffin six feet underground. If I don’t kill you with my bare hands, my partner will.” Tommy raised his shotgun as though giving a toast.

Robert Crawford looked identical to his past self. He fashioned the same fair hair, conservative cut, and sharp part. He even sported the same olive-colored sweater as before. Not enough time passed since their last encounter for his hair to grow or for his sweater’s dye to fade, Marie supposed. Nor did she expect such drastic changes. It was the preservation of Robert’s more minuitiae details, such as the glitter floating amid his sclera, or the permanently perked corners of his lips, which concerned her.

“And if my partner don’t kill you, you’ll be dead to the rest of the town nevertheless,” Tommy continued. “Cause I’ll bet my prettiest of pennies that someone standing around you wants me to rob this here bank. And somebody else might want me to redistribute the money to all y’all poor folks. Y’all struggling farmers and single mothers. And another one of you might want me to burn a few mortgages and other nasty paperwork while I’m at it. And you know what? I’ll do all of that. I’ll do all of that and then some, yes sir.”

Whether or not Robert knew of Marie’s presence within the bank was uncertain, for Marie refused to watch Robert unless certain Robert wasn’t watching her. And at the slightest indication that Robert did notice her, may that indication be a head shift, neck pop, shoulder roll, or a glance in her general direction, Marie readjusted her line of vision towards Tommy and pretended to listen to his monologue.

Only, Tommy stopped providing Marie with a monologue to pretend to pay attention to. Tommy’s silence lingered, heavier than the smell of gun smoke fuming from his Winchester’s mouth or the dry heat filtering through the bank’s dust-caked windows. The glaring stillness was only broken when another, softer voice whispered from an indiscernible location. “…So, if any of you…”

“So, if any of you flatfoots wanna test, best, or second guess the power of this here powder keg, be my guest,” Tommy boomed. “…Just know…” purred the same mystery voice from the same mystery location.

“…Just know that you’ll be…uh…”

“…Screwing…”

“Yeah, I know,” Tommy muttered before orating, “Just know that although you’ll be screwdriving more than just yourself, you’ll be screwdriving yourself most of all.”

Had Edith not punched Marie’s arm at that moment, Marie may have noted the second voice’s familiarity as it squeaked onward.

“Edith, what in the world was that for?” Marie hissed, massaging her bicep but raising her chin in Robert’s direction. She continued dissecting Robert’s appearance and deducing his state of being, only half listening to Edith’s answer.

“Well, is it just me, or does that gunner boy look kind of…cute?”

“Cute?” Edith’s word, ‘cute’ struck Marie stronger than Edith’s smite.

“No, not that type of cute, you chuckhead. I’d never say he’s that type of cute. What I’m saying is just…he’s just…oh you wouldn’t understand anyway. Just wait and see and you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about.” Edith spoke no more. She was gone, pushing her way to the front of the women’s crowd.

“Wait, Edith, don’t leave me here,” Marie breathed, her body unmoving and Edith unhearing.

Not another sentence passed in Tommy’s speech before Edith made her grand appearance for the entire
bank to see. Standing but one baseball toss away from Tommy, Edith barked, “Hey! Quit trying to sell yourself as some lone outlaw type, cause nobody here is buying one cent of it. You ain’t no Jesse James or John Dillinger, and you certainly ain’t not Pretty Boy Floyd. So, who the devil are you?”

“Who the devil am I? Why, missy, I’m the devil himself. And I already done told you, the name’s… Rob. Rob Banks. That’s my name, yes ma’am. Says so on my birth certificate, every wanted ad across the county, and in the headline of last week’s True Detective magazine,” Tommy boasted.

“That ain’t right,” spoke the mysterious second voice at full volume. “The name’s Tommy Gunn. Rob Banks is just an alias.” Marie realized Tommy Gunn did not have a coal-black beard. He simply had coal, crushed up and powdered onto his cheeks and chin.

A whispered tumult erupted from those watching.

“It’s that little rascal…”

“That little hoodlum…”

“That pest…”

“It’s…”

“It’s…”

Marie felt her head beginning to float.

“It’s a child!”

“A boy, in fact.”

“It’s little Charlie Keystone is who it is!” Edith announced. Then, pointing towards Tommy Gunn’s potbelly, Edith growled, “And as for you…” Edith’s fists drilled passed the buttons of Tommy’s trench coat, deep into what should’ve been his chest.

With one mighty heave, Edith popped every button from its hem and parted the coat’s opening as one would a velvet stage curtain. The buttons rolled, rolled, curved, circled, wobbled, and after thirty seconds of pittering and pattering against the checkered tiles, they stopped dead. All who resided inside Home State Bank stood equally motionless, until Edith said, “Oh, you are absolutely dead when you get home, mister. Deader than a coffin’s doornail.”

Underneath Charlie Keystone stood Charlie’s only friend, Edith’s only son, Nelson Wright.

* * *

Bucolic springtime air kissed Marie’s ears, pollen tickled her nose, mist smoothed her eyebrows, and a breeze brushed her hair. “My baby,” she muttered, her chin resting against the pine-colored Studebaker’s opened passenger side window. She wanted to laugh along with Robert at the driver’s wheel, or to croon along with Fats Waller’s “Honeysuckle Rose,” drifting from the car’s radio, or to hum among Marie’s escort’s. His ivy-colored Studebaker had driven away long ago. “Well, a cigar will do her even better.”

Another suit joined the fleet. “And here’s a matchstick to light ‘em with.”

Edith was also nowhere to be seen. Once she removed Charlie from Nelson’s shoulders, Edith dragged Nelson home by his earlobe, leaving Wallace’s check tucked inside the breast of Marie’s dress.

“So you’re calling yourself Rob Banks, eh? What next? Will Steele? All three names got good rings to them, sure, but your gut seems to prefer Tommy Gunn above all else.”

“Ma’am, I’m gonna ask you to back up before you get shot up,” Tommy said. “And that order ain’t coming from my gun. That order’s coming from my gun. From me. So, you best start listening and run off. I ain’t carrying no bird shot neither, you hear?”

But Edith didn’t hear a word. She simply squinted until her pupils disappeared. The entire bank, tellers and all, mimicked Edith’s scrupulousness by staring Tommy down with equal assiduity. “Oh… my… god… is that…it is!” One onlooker gasped. It was then that Marie realized Tommy Gunn did not have a coal-black beard. He simply had coal, crushed up and powdered onto his cheeks and chin.

A whispered tumult erupted from those watching.

“With ample aid to offer. “Here, drink a tumbler of water,” one lad insisted, utilizing his best transcontinental accent. “I pumped it from the old well down the street just for you.”

“No, she don’t need your rusty mud water,” spoke another. “What she needs is some homemade corn hooch.”

Robert Crawford didn’t stand among Marie’s escorts. His ivy-colored Studebaker had driven away long ago. “Well, a cigar will do her plenty of good right now.”

“Both of you are crazy,” a third interjected. “It’s clear a cigarette will do her plenty of good right now.”

Before Marie discerned if Robert was joking or not, before she formulated an appropriate answer to his question, before she assured him that she never loved anybody but him, that she couldn’t love anybody but him, he disappeared.

Marie was left driving all alone down Moody Road.

“I think she’s regaining her senses.”

Marie’s eyes opened. She baked atop the bank’s exterior stairway, surrounded by numerous identical pinstriped suits. Inside each suit stood a self-proclaimed gentleman with ample aid to offer. “Here, drink a tumbler of water,” one lad insisted, utilizing his best transcontinental accent. “I pumped it from the old well down the street just for you.”
adding."

The suits continued squabbling, huffing, puffing, and hissing among one another with no foreseeable de-escalation. Despite being the subject of their debate, Marie was rendered invisible. To obtain a smattering of their attention, she gathered what little air resided within her lungs and faked a cough. “Please, what I need now more than anything is space to breathe and space to think. Can’t you at the very least lend me that?” But the men’s bickering reinvigorated before her sentence concluded.

“Of course, you’d say that, you old Torie,” the cigar smoker said to the hootch drinker.

“Better a Torie than a radical red, I’d say,” the hootch drinker snapped back.

“Why I oughta.”

All the while, Marie lifted herself to her feet and walked away without interference. In between steps, she uncrumpled Wallace’s check and sighed. It was time to re-enter the bank to cash the check by herself.

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**A Moment in the Shade**

Samantha Davis

In darkness I contemplate the serenity of the shade defeating the scorching sun on this summer day. I remember when the sun shone down on me and alerted the larger insects of my presence against the greenery, an inconvenience in the impeccable landscape of the land that is also ours but really theirs.

I have been out hunting, unfathomably hungry but unable to take a bite of any morsel I found. I’ve thought before about sneaking a nibble from an occasional crumb or dropped bit of crunch, but even on the hottest days when I could use a bit of nourishment and find myself unable to continue much longer without a bite, I find myself unable to. I don’t know why, but I think of my mother and what she told us before sending us out. I remember she said that we could die and it would be worth it, that she would help us get back home, and there would be more of us for our efforts, and to work is our joy. And I find myself believing her words even as the dryness seizes my lips.

But the sudden shade means so much to me in this heat. The serenity of the round overhead dyeing the grass pitch black, the kind of place where the cool air escapes to, so the sun can’t wipe it away. On a normal day I can’t keep my legs from moving once I step out of the Opening. Mother has sent me on a mission and although I am allowed to come home empty-handed, I have the delight of returning far sooner with a bundle of sustenance on my back. The bundle is never too heavy for me, but I am weighed down by the perpetual movement of my legs and the constant beating of the sun.

I am not known for receiving an exceptional variety of bundles to carry home to Mother, though she has never been picky about variety. But I remember one day in which I experienced the unexpected delight of a strange new morsel to carry home with me. It carried such a strange scent that at first I feared Mother could not eat it, and I wanted to walk away for fear of poison, but this day I ventured a clear view of the giants who eat the greater sums of our portions, and I spotted a ghastly chap snacking on one such morsel as this one and reasoned that if he could survive from such a portion, surely Mother would do well with this small bite. I returned home expecting Mother to be especially
pleased with me that day, and then I saw all the other varieties that my brothers had collected and discovered that Mother had never given us names as the giants had, and for all she knew, I could be the one bringing the choicest morsels every day.

And I am not sure why I think of all this as the shade grows larger above me, but satisfaction seems to cover under discontentment, though I do not know if I would think of Mother with discontentment even if I could allow myself to think such a thing. It is just that this shade is so nice and the heat is so dry and the day has been long, and I feel that I suddenly have the choice to stop. Call it instinct, and many would call it being paralyzed in fear if I could feel anything worse than discontent, but only the part of me that isn’t me at all is afraid. But my eyes stare in wonder at the darkness above me as I make out shapes of grooves and traction and all the unnatural signs of the giants that tell me I will soon be home. And I am content to not have found anything to bring to Mother today.

I knew her almost better than I knew myself. I knew all of her small habits, the way she’d tug at a lock of her ashy blonde hair whenever she was deep in thought, or how she picked holes into her bedspread when she was bored until it was torn beyond repair and someone had to come and change the bed. I knew every single book she read, everything she ate, and everything she did. I took in every single word she spoke as if it was the air I needed to breathe. I had watched her through windows since she was small. I’d come to find she was predictable. Her dull daily routines became dreadful for both of us. That was just the thing I hated. I hated the repetitiveness of it all, being trapped in my position with no other options, so perhaps I found some comfort in knowing that this creature had the same feelings as I had for centuries. I found comfort in her gentle heartbeat since fate had left my own nonexistent. It was in her last moments when I finally got to meet her.

That night, her father had arranged for a small gathering with a few of his close business partners. I’d known her well enough to know she couldn’t care less about any of them. Except for one person, Cecil Graham, her betrothed. I despised that name with everything in me. She couldn’t see it but he was constantly lying through his teeth to her with every word that escaped his lips. Making false promises to take her on his travels and fulfill her deepest desires. Knowing his deceptive nature and true intentions, made me sick—or at least it would have—every time I heard him talk to her.

I watched as the guests arrived one by one, sitting around the common room as they went about their chattering. The girl had spent quite a long time picking out which of her dresses to wear, and eventually settled on a pale yellow dress, looking pleased with her decision. She stared at herself in the mirror for a minute before hurrying downstairs. Most of the guests had already arrived by then, but the girl still lingered in the foyer. It wasn’t hard for me to figure out what she’d been waiting for when I saw Cecil pull up to the front of the chateau some time after the party had already started. She wasn’t permitted to go outside to meet him, instead having to wait as he took his time climbing from the carriage and making
his way inside. I wasn’t sure what it was that she saw in that man. Even if he hadn’t been as awful as he was, he had just recently spent a few days residing in her home over the Christmas holiday, which wasn’t more than a week or so ago. It wasn’t as if anything particularly interesting happened between them either. It was just as bleak as any other time. And yet she’d always been overjoyed just to see his face regardless.

All that time she’d spent waiting was rewarded with a brief embrace as Cecil finally found his way inside before leading her to the drawing room where the other men were. And from that point on she was nothing more than a meager shadow hanging in the room.

The men laughed loudly throughout their conversation. They reared their heads back as the girl sat idly by, her hand clasped into Cecil’s forearm tightly, her fingers grasping the fabric of his sleeve. I watched as Cecil let out a large laugh, tipping his head as he shrugged. “I don’t think there’s much she could do, but there has been a rise in female hysteria lately,” he said, earning another batch of howls.

I scanned the room for the girl’s father. He may be an ignorant man on occasion, but surely he’d never allow that kind of talk in his own house. I’d almost thought he’d left the room before I saw him leaning into the makeshift bar the men had set up on the mantle of the fireplace, quietly pouring himself a glass of whisky, seeming unmoved from the conversation.

“I’d always assumed I’d be overjoyed if the girl had realized the true nature of the man she spent day and night thinking of, but instead, I felt a sense of anger I’d never felt before boiling up inside of me. I’d been too focused on that disgusting hyena’s face to realize that the girl had disappeared. I felt upset at myself for not paying more attention as I searched around the chateau to find her. I’d had enough of listening to those men and their vociferous voices at that point.”

I moved along the building quickly enough to see her entering her room. She sat on the bed for a few minutes completely unmoving with a morose sort of look on her face. How badly I wished to be able to read her thoughts at that moment, or even better, to sit down beside her and allow her to spill all of her troubles onto me. But of course, that wasn’t what happened. She was trapped there in her fate, just as I was trapped in mine. The two of us just stayed in complete silence until she finally got up, moving over to her wardrobe to change into a clean dress. Without a second glance in the mirror, she went straight back to the drawing room where the other men were.

I made it there just before she did, and I was momentarily stunned to see her suddenly halt in the doorway. For a split second, I panicked, thinking she’d spotted me, but realized that couldn’t possibly be the case. None of the men appeared to notice her, not even Cecil, yet she was acutely aware of them.

One of the older men in the room cocked his brow in an amused manner. “I suppose she’ll get restless when you leave her all alone. You might be able to get by on promises for now, but they won’t be so satisfactory once you’re married and under the same roof.”

Cecil leaned forward in his chair, a pretentious grin spread across his face as he shrugged. “I don’t think you get back,” he said softly before standing and hurrying back to her bedroom.

I was almost a bit glad then, I’d had enough of listening to those men and their vociferous voices at that point.

The girl stared at him for a moment before giving him a small smile. “It’s alright. I’ll be right back then,” she said, brushing off the hand that had been holding his forearm, then giving her a small pat on the arm, and get changed, I’ll still be right here when you get back,” he said, brushing off the hand that had been holding his arm, then giving her a small pat on the back.

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Lok rested on the ground of the training yard as he watched his older brother mutilate a dummy. Dickson grasped his spear so mercilessly that his knuckles turned white, and the man of straw stood no chance. The air remained frigid, and only the crows provided company, for the other soldiers were drinking and singing the night away. They’d already completed their chores, after all. There were no dead left to be buried.

“We fared well, today,” Lok reckoned. “Our strength was undeniable.”

“Yes, I concur!” Dickson lunged forward and jabbed his weapon at the dummy’s head. Twigs blew out and graced the snow-covered gravel. The young knight was always so talented, Lok knew. “In and out, faster than even his majesty could predict. There shall certainly be promotions.”

The corners of Dickson’s frown could not stoop any lower. “By all means, the knights have earned it. Good for them.”

“But you performed just as admirably, brother. I think it fair that a promotion will present itself to you as well—”

“No, I am not deserving of one.” Punctuating that claim was another impactful slash on the dummy, one which confiscated all the straw within its belly. “I am not a worthy soldier.”

“But, Dickson, I saw you fight. Hell, the way you defeated the barbarians at that village was so impressive it made me—”

“Let’s drink!” he suddenly cheered. The boy’s face was stiff, a strained smile which betrayed his expression. Dickson abandoned the dummy, hooked the spear to his back, and urgently marched to the barracks where booze flooded. Lok trailed his footsteps in the snow like when they were kids. Even as they were supposedly grown up—the manly warriors protecting their kingdom—Lok could only picture himself as one puny ant tailing behind his big brother, a slightly bigger speck crawling through the courtyard.

“A drink? Now? You told me earlier that you thought it important to think.” Dickson picked up his pace, a piercing wind stormed past the surrounding mountains and attacked their ears. “I have thought,” Dickson laughed. “And it’s because I’ve thought that I’ve learned I do not want to think. I want to get drunk, so drunk I cannot remember the last 24 hours.”

“If you do so, then how will you regale the happenings of the village to whichever officer demands a report?”

“That’s a grand question, brother. I suppose I shall not be able to. I will instead have to share stories of me rolling off of the table and vomiting my wine.” He smiled sincerely for the first time all night. His brother said, “You’re concerning me.” But Dickson could not hear him, for he entered the barracks and was blasted with the singing and dancing of dozens of knights, each further gone than the last. The unruly men danced on tables and slurred their way through songs, none noticing Dickson.

Lok struggled to exist behind his brother with all of the brutes pushing, dancing, and tripping across the wooden floors. One man attempted to parade his way from the bar and into the jolly arms of his comrades, but unceremoniously stumbled forward, his boot caught on a loose plank. The oaf threw around himself, screaming out, “Whoa, whoa!” while a crude collection of drinks rained across the zoo. Before another drop went to waste, a shorter fellow soared off of a table and caught as much of the whiskey he could fit into his mouth, until the knight’s body plunged down against another table, merely continuing the mess.

“Holy heroes? These inspiring soldiers are a set of murderous dominoes,” Dickson spat whilst maneuvering towards a counter. Lok did not hear, he only chuckled at their misfortune.

Standing behind the bar, a shorter gentleman rang out, “Dickson! Incredible work today. You may be new, but you’re already making his majesty, and all of your brothers, mighty proud!”

“Please, Fargus, please spare me,” he said unenthusiastically. “I request the hardest liquor you can provide.” Both brothers parked themselves at the counter.

“It’s my pleasure! Here, this’ll be an unforgettable drink.” The tender retrieved an ancient gallon of rum, one which collected dust on the highest shelf, and emptied it into a stained chalice. Lok knew that on any other day, Dickson would be concerned to conquer such a cup, but tonight, he practically appeared to be looking forward to it. “Go have fun!”

“How could I not?” the celebrated knight sighed. The two brothers miraculously found an unoccupied table, and Dickson drowned himself in the alcohol. There was an immediate grimace on his face as the poison assaulted his throat.

Lok had never seen his wise brother become so disheartened. “Look, good man, I fear you’re putting on a front.”

“Oh?”

“You’ve been enraged all
night—do not deny it. Why is it so?”

“Why am I upset? Why aren’t I happy? Let me ask you, brother, why are you happy?”

“Because we destroyed one of the opposing emperor’s colonies, and his majesty will be thrilled with our labor. Remember when we were kids swinging around wooden swords, talking about how we’d become heroes? Tomorrow is the day, tomorrow is when we receive our recognition!” Dickson was such a gifted soldier, and he performed excellently. Far better than Lok. How could his older brother not be delighted?

“Yes, of course, I should be happy,” Dickson hissed through a smile that contorted his entire face. Some sober lads heard a sample of sass and looked in Lok’s direction. “I should be so proud that I’ve accompanied the knights which leveled a village to the ground. I am entirely grateful to be serving a king who allowed the destruction of a full community.”

“It was a tiny hamlet, it was going to vanish in the breeze any day. You speak as if we wiped out an entire kingdom or something.” Why was Dickson so upset?

“Yes, of course, I should be happy,” Dickson hissed through a smile that contorted his entire face. Some sober lads heard a sample of sass and looked in Lok’s direction. “I should be so proud that I’ve accompanied the knights which leveled a village to the ground. I am entirely grateful to be serving a king who allowed the destruction of a full community.”

“It was a tiny hamlet, it was going to vanish in the breeze any day. You speak as if we wiped out an entire kingdom or something.” Why was Dickson so upset?

“Oh, my apologies, I didn’t know that we suddenly don’t care who we trample on anymore as long as they can’t fight back?” More guards ceased their singing and looked over.

“What? No, we—life is always—I’m not suggesting we turn hungry for blood!” Dickson was speaking nonsense, Lok knew, this was merely the rum talking for him, yes? “That village housed the emperor’s soldiers—it was a threat. Even if it was a small hamlet, it was a threatening one.”

“Yes, and I am certain that the dozens of peasants, civilians, and children were also ruthlessly dangerous!”

“They were shielding those barbarians—providing housing—they were preventing us from—”

Dickson’s smile vanished as he roared, “I carried so much pride as I watched fires tear apart homes and families! I’ll wake up every day of my life reminiscing on the crusade where I slaughtered fathers and mothers because they had the audacity to defend their homes and their children!”

“We are but soldiers following orders! Don’t sob to me about how you merely did your job! Do you know how long I’ve wished to perform just as excellently as you? You’re on the verge of a promotion—smile, damn it!”

Dickson spilled his chalice while declaring, “When we were kids, and I wished to serve amongst his majesty’s holy knights, it was so I could be a hero, and so I could aid others! Not for THIS!”

As steam bellowed out of his ears, Dickson unleashed the spear from his back, raised it for the barracks to see, and then SMASHED it against his knee! He watched the two pieces litter the ground, and finally, he breathed... A warm smile reemerged on his face. But while the young soldier felt the weight leave his shoulders, he couldn’t deny the many brutes circling him. The knights ceased their drunken dancing, and there wasn’t a song to be found. They all stared at the boy as he stood on a table. Lok backed away, his eyes couldn’t be removed from the abandoned dreams littering the floor. Two children swinging wooden swords on a bright day in the backyard would never picture a moment such as this. They were going to be loyal and heroic, not treasonous rats running from the law. They were supposed to be the law. Be the heroes. Lok would not waver.

He asked, “Dickson, what are you saying?” while tears escaped his eyes.

“I… I… I quit.”

“Don’t even think about it, you know what happens to deserters! Run as much as they’d like, they always end up at a guillotine. You’ll be killed.”

Tears found their way down Dickson’s cheeks. He shook his head but stood tall. This would be a resignation decided by himself. “Better to be slaughtered than wake up as the butcher.” The once-knight stormed out of the barracks and fled past their courtyard. The squadron was baffled watching him go, yet they were much too drunk to tame him. Lok could only shake his head. He witnessed a champion shatter his trophy. An ungrateful brat. And although Lok loved his brother, he would not lose his own fingers trying to hold onto a poisonous traitor. But Dickson saw himself differently. The most shocking aspect of his departure was that everyone, everyone heard the deserter humming as he retreated from the training yard. Into the tranquility of the night. A young boy no longer.
Nonfiction

Old Man With A Wagon  Breen Greer..........78
Buckets  E.B. Almquist........81
Slandering The Hobbit  Riley McCall.........83
in Righteous Pursuit  Claire Tow..........86
of Feminine          Nick Finder..........88
Empowerment

Le Campanile  Claire Tow..........86

Untitled  Nick Finder..........88

Let’s Play  Olivia Brunsting......90

The Little Things  Zephy Forsyth........92

Heartbreak Souvenirs  Olivia Brunsting......93

Parallel Morning —  Bailey Piper..........94
Parallel Mourning

Spinning  Bailey Piper..........96

Lights  Samantha Davis......99
Old Man With A Wagon
Breen Greer

In the hottest summer I can remember, we lived in the old house by the gas station down the road from the strip of bars by the college. We were too young to drink in the bars. We kept a cooler full of beer on the porch. We had no air conditioning and it felt cooler to be outside in the heat than inside with it. We spent all our evenings on the porch, grilling hot dogs, hamburgers, or steaks on the days we got paid. We drank cheap beer and smoked cigarettes and pot. We piled bags of cans on the porch. Hundreds of cans. On one of those hot summer days when I came home from work, the cans were gone.

When Joe got home I asked about the cans. Maybe he had taken them.

“No man, I was gonna ask you.”
“Maybe Bucky did it.”
“Bucky doesn’t need the money.”

Joe was right. Bucky had a terrible, well-paying job. He made a lot of money. Joe and I were not sure why he still chose to live with us. He could buy his own house with the money he made, but he chose to keep living in our run-down old house with the crusty carpet and the slanted floors. Joe and I started drinking and forgot about the missing cans, but we worked hard and rebuilt our collection quickly.

We carried on in that way through the summer. Bucky was moved to third shift. We barely saw him. I missed him. Joe and I were good friends and we got on fine, but Bucky and I really got each other. He usually came home around 5:00 AM. Lonely time. He was lonely. He started coming to my room when he got home. He would wake me up and we would sit on my bed and smoke cigarettes. He would bring me coffee and he drank rum. On Saturday mornings I would sometimes drink the rum, and he would take an amphetamine to stay up, and we would sit on my bed and smoke cigarettes. He would bring me coffee and he drank rum. On Saturday mornings I would sometimes drink the rum, and he would take an amphetamine to stay up, and we would drink all day and stay out all night on the porch, and people going to the bars up the road would stop and have a beer, and they would stop again when they were walking home from the bars in the early morning, and we would sleep all day Sunday, or sometimes not sleep at all. It was the only time we had together. We didn’t waste it.

It was on one of these Sunday mornings, when we had stayed out on the porch all night drinking after staying out all day drinking, and we had all fallen asleep outside in our chairs with unlit cigarettes between our fingers and woken up with mouths like ashtrays, that we met Mikal.

Mikal was an ancient man. He looked like he had been born centuries ago and just forgot to die. The lines in his face were so deep and the skin so loose it was hard to make out what he really looked like, except for the patch of flesh covering what should have been his left eye socket.

Mikal was on the porch taking our bags of cans and loading them into a little wagon. When I woke up and saw him I was sure he was a dream. He looked over and smiled at me. He had a couple of teeth.

“I clean up,” he said, gesturing to the bags of cans.

“Thanks.” I didn’t know what to say. Joe woke up and yelped when he saw the little old man.

“Who the hell are you?” he yelled. Bucky woke up at the sound of Joe’s question and when he saw the man he stood up out of his chair.

“Mikal,” the old man said, holding his hand up to his chest. He had three fingers on the hand. None were missing. The fingers were thick. The hand was like a claw.

“When did you come here?” Bucky asked.

“Before,” Mikal replied.

Bucky looked at me, eyes wide, a corner smile.

“You’ve been here before?”

“Long.”

“You’ve been here before long?”

“Long before. Before long. I have been. I will be.”

He said it like he had said everything else, with a foreignness that was almost otherworldly. I’ve
never forgotten what he said. It meant nothing to Bucky.

“Well go ahead and take the cans,” Bucky said. He grabbed a beer out of the melted ice in the cooler and drank it in a gulp. He held the can out to the old man. “Take this one too.”

Mikal shook his head. “I wait.” He held up a bag of cans. “I wait for bag.”

Bucky smiled at him and nodded. He was happy the old man didn’t take the last can. He had made his joke and the old man knew it, and refused it. Mikal picked up the last bag and loaded it onto his wagon. He looked back at us and smiled. He walked slowly, very slowly, but he walked with the determination and quiet dignity of a man with no illusions left to hang on. He pushed his cart full of cans up the hill and out of sight. He looked like he had walked forever, like he might keep walking forever, stopping only to gather more cans, only ever more, always more, never redeeming them or giving them away. He looked like he would collect all the cans in the world, throwing them in bags into the infinity of his wagon, a time-traveling outcast from an ancient civilization, shuffling with his wagon through an impossible miasma of disquiet planetary souls.

Is pool water meant to be salty? Growing up, when we visited a swimming pool entitled “Pirate’s Cove,” I always remember the water being salty. Of course, no child would just drink pool water, that would be gross (and still, I did it).

As a child, I would wade out into the shallow water, and, armed with sunscreen slathered along my body and the fearlessness that only a child can possess, I stood on a slightly elevated pad. The pad squished under my toes like a sponge, permanently waterlogged and starting to crumble under the weight of the children who stepped onto it. The pad was attached to the bottom of the pool. It made the water shallow enough to only come up to my ankles (either one inch or two).

But I did not mind.

I remember waiting, sometimes up to thirty minutes, for the water bucket above my head to tip. And when it would, the Heaviness of the water would knock me over, sometimes Entirely. It always felt like I was drowning for a moment.

Salt in my mouth, water in my Lungs.

One blazing day I was on the infamous pad, excitedly waiting for the bucket to fill up and spill over.

The weather that week was scorching enough that, even in the mountains, people could cook eggs outside without a heat source other than the sun. Even still, people had a life to live, things to do. And, because children of all ages usually love swimming during the summertime, the majority of them seemed to be Packed into this one pool.

* * *

“Mom, come look!” Children shouted over me as I screamed at my mom to watch the water bucket spill over, for the millionth time. “Record it! Record me!”

“Alright, but this is the last time. Your sister is whining.” Mom rolled her eyes, taking out her phone.

I turned around, ready for the water to fall down upon my head. Though it always hurt, that did not matter. It was like a kiss from God himself, though it was a bit too heavy for a little child to hold on their own. I closed my eyes, lifting my arms up to the heavens to receive the blessing. Then, I felt someone brush against me. And another. I knew it was crowded, but they did not get to touch me. I stepped an inch to the left, away from the snotty brats. And I waited.
More children showed up, pushing from all sides. Hoping for a taste of the salty hot water, a breath of life. I took a moment to glance back at my mother, who was still recording, thankfully. I do not want her to miss the last water bucket dump of the visit! As I turn my face back to the sun, I see that the bucket has begun to tip. I am not ready. My Eyes are open!

Still, the water falls down...
down...
down...

Time seemed to slow as I attempted to close my eyes in time. As I attempted to ready myself to be pelted with water, falling from such a height. Then, it hit me. Harder than I anticipated. I. fell. down. Water filled my lungs as children ran around me, inadvertently keeping my head below the surface of the water. Salt was all that I could taste. It became my whole world, for a moment of my life. Until mercy was taken upon me and I was dragged to safety, for the first time. I was saved.

Riley McCall

Slandering The Hobbit in Righteous Pursuit of Feminine Empowerment

No man will ever make me like The Hobbit. No potential boyfriend, no professor, not even J.R.R. Tolkien rising from his grave and spitting in my face will change that. Some may say it’s sacrilegious for someone getting a master’s degree in English to say such a thing, but to them I say, who would know better than someone getting a master’s degree in English? I have survived one brutal viewing of the film, and I am certain I would have reached a deeper state of edification if I stared at a blank wall for multiple hours rather than using that precious fraction of my life to pay attention to the screen. But Riley, why did you watch the full movie if you hated it so much? I’m so glad you asked.

I am nineteen at the time, starting my junior year at the university I’ve just transferred to. This is the first time I’ve been exposed to people my age who share the same interests I do, and I, being an English major, decide I’m going to join the English club. Makes sense, right? English majors join the English club and make English friends and then they all have a great English time. However, my secret secondary reason for joining was that there were probably going to be eligible men there. Was this superficial? Probably. But did younger Riley care? No, she did not. So I show up to the first meeting, morphing myself into the most interesting, charming, and quote-unquote “cool version” of myself I can possibly create just in case any single men happen to be there for the same reasons I’m there.

This first meeting is a fire pit night where everyone can just hang out and get to know each other better, and this is perfect. I start chatting around for a bit and find a group of people I end up talking to for the rest of the night. As luck would have it, this group includes a seemingly eligible man who appears smart, funny, and at least relatively interested in what I have to say. This is almost too easy, I think to myself, and I’m pretty certain I’m only half a step away from securing my ideal bookish-minded boyfriend.

But of course, I am grossly overconfident, because the night eventually ends, and the extent of our contact after that consists of occasionally seeing each other in the hall and waving. This is a small
heartbreak for my hopeful soul, and I’m more discouraged each day that a relationship between me and this man has not manifested. But a few weeks later, some of the people from the first English club meeting organize a movie night. This is the break I’ve been looking for. But there’s one little issue. The movie they’ve decided to watch is, as you may have guessed, none other than *The Hobbit*. My dilemma is that I have no desire to watch this movie, but the boy I am becoming so desperate to talk to is going to be there watching the movie. I am sure this man simply needs more convincing that we would be a perfect match, so, painfully, I decide to make my first sacrifice for our non-existent relationship. I tell the group I’ll be there, all while trying to make myself believe that maybe the storyline of *The Hobbit* has completely changed since I last came in contact with it.

The movie night finally comes, and I show up to the house where everyone is meeting. My efforts to make myself enthusiastic about the movie have unsurprisingly failed, but I figure I can just pretend to look at the screen while focusing on my real purpose for being there: proving to this random man I barely know that we are meant to be. So I ring the doorbell, come inside, and begin my mission.

We begin with literary small talk, and I’m trying not to make it obvious how much I’m paying attention to him. We then make our way in front of the TV to start the movie—or as I like to say, get it over with—but we quickly realize there’s not enough room on the couch for everyone. The only other woman there, the woman who’s hosting, apologizes and says she’ll get a beanbag chair for me. She brings it out soon after, but an issue arises when we discover that the only place it will fit is directly in front of the couch. Now I am suddenly sitting directly in front of the man I am hoping to impress, which means if I want to talk to him or sneakily look at him, I have to completely turn around on a giant beanbag chair. This is the equivalent of a nightmare because the only reason I am here is to talk to this man and now a beanbag has somehow scooched itself in the way. But I try to reassure myself by remembering there should still be opportunities for us to interact and even awkward seating arrangements cannot stop the pursuit of love. So I position myself on the beanbag chair, the hostess starts the movie, and then, to my horror, I notice the runtime at the bottom of the screen. Before this moment, I figured the movie would last ninety minutes, maybe two hours, because that’s a normal length for a movie. And ninety minutes of *The Hobbit* would have been difficult enough for me to survive, so you can imagine my revulsion when I realized *The Hobbit* is 2 hours and 49 minutes long.

My faith in this perfect night has died before the prologue has even started, but since there’s no casual way to leave now, I try to calm myself down. Yes, this movie is a grotesque amount of time long, but I only came here because he’s here, and he is still here. So, with nothing else that I can do, I take a breath to reassure myself and the movie begins. Everything actually goes smoothly at first. We all begin chatting and making jokes and there’s a chance my contortions on the beanbag don’t look as uncomfortable as they feel. But then, everyone stops talking. They’re understandably paying attention to the movie, but the issue, as previously mentioned, is that I didn’t come here to pay attention to the movie. I stopped understanding the plot five minutes in, and the longer I try to come up with something smart or even clever to say to get the conversation going, the more I realize my entire being abhors *The Hobbit*.

So there I sit, staring at the screen without any comprehension of who these characters are, why they’re just walking around, or why anyone would consider this a piece of entertainment. Meanwhile, the man I came here for is blissfully—and silently—watching the movie over my head. Unbeknownst to me, the hostess who grabbed me the beanbag chair falls asleep at some point because she is so bored, and I wish I could have done the same thing. But no, I have the great pleasure of watching the movie in its entirety, all 2 hours and 49 minutes of it. But finally, after what feels like the most grueling endurance test of my life, the Lord has mercy on me and *The Hobbit* comes to an end and joy enters my life again.

This was, foolishly, not one of the first times I had pretended to like something to make myself more appealing to a guy I was interested in. However, it was the power of Tolkien’s insufferable prose that made sure this was the last time I did something like that for a man. *You actually just sound like you’re really rude and hate men and quality literature*, says the man who thinks he understands this feminine experience better than I, a female, do. What this man so easily ignores, however, is the fact that he is a part of a system. In this system, a brave, strong man courageously endures farmers’ markets and art festivals in hopes that he will gain the reward of his date ending with promiscuous activities, and a woman gets told that if she doesn’t pretend to like *The Hobbit*, she’ll die alone. It’s a system that prevents women from realizing they have interests of their own and deludes men into believing it’s a woman’s job to conform to them. And it’s been said that this will never change, that no man will be able to rival the power of this painfully patriarchal institution of courtship.

But I? I am no man.
Le Campanile
Claire Tow

Le Campanile se levait fièrement au centre du campus, son visage absorbant le soleil de midi. Il souriait à une future étudiante. Captivée par la structure raffinée, elle semblait minuscule comparé à lui.

L’automne suivant, il rit doucement en retrouvant la même fille, qui se dépêchait au son des cloches.

En hiver, alors qu’elle passe l’après-midi dans la bibliothèque, entourée de manuels scolaires, la musique claire du Campanile la presse à continuer ses études pendant encore une heure.

Elle ne l’entend pas toujours, mais à chaque fois qu’elle l’aperçoit, sa beauté lui rappelle pourquoi elle est tombée amoureuse de l’Université.

The Campanile

The Campanile stood proudly in the center of campus, his face absorbing the noon sunlight. He smiled down at a future student. Captivated by his refined structure, she seemed minuscule next to him.

The following fall, he laughs softly upon noticing the same girl, hurrying at the sounding of his bells.

In the winter, while she spends the afternoon in the library, surrounded by a stack of textbooks, the Campanile’s clear sound compels her to keep studying for yet another hour.

She does not always hear the Campanile’s bells, but each time he meets her gaze, his beauty reminds her why she fell in love with the University.
It’s getting late now, but I can hear them still. A cacophony of voices that shrill and plead. Their wills left undone, their desires unfulfilled by my still hands despite my beating heart. Inactive action can be a hell of a thing. Their minds pound inside my head, my lungs burning from words unsaid. But I keep them there until my chest strains from the pressure. I keep them waiting, to simmer and fester because that’s the only time that I know their words are true.

They cling to me like tar, filling every scar. Leeches to my every thought and breath.

Loose the valve, slowly but surely, let them drink water deep from the well of memory. Clear, sweet, warm, and collective, is what I believe as they tear it apart, going straight for the source. I echo their cries as I look in the mirror; a pain and loss that was ripped from my soul. Because that’s the toll of making something from nothing.

They don’t recognize the face they see, and sometimes neither do I. They run away, hide away from the sky, enjoying the echoing pitter-patter of the rain. I drag them out and take off their helmet, just to claim that I’m no lion.

But this is my burden to bear. Not because I lack trust in others, but because I know the difference between friends and family. I know what they share, passion and impressions, none of which are theirs or mine. They build me up and they tear me down. Chipping away, word by word and brick by brick whether they like it or not. See the lies underneath as my heart yearns to be.

I’m here while I’m over there. That’s the story I like. Not the one when God above lifts me to the sky. Drop me down and let me fall, so I can hear the call of the music hall. The whistles and chirps of the birds high above with the beating and beating and beating of the bass to put me in place.

“I know it sounds absurd. Who am I talking to? Is it you? Yes, it’s me,” said I.

You smile at me despite everything. I shove you away, ignoring your dreams as I place the weight of the world on your shoulders. Just to kill you off when I thought the time was right. They laugh at you, they hate you for what you’ve done. I understand, I know your pain and all that you’ve lost. Because we were there together.

But I can’t help but join them.

You think it’s funny at least; the suffering of the others. We laugh like a hyena, whimsical and infectious. We get along, you and I. I wonder why, I always find you curious, wondering how people survive without knowing that this is what it means to be alive. A freedom to be, to live and let lie. That’s what they don’t understand. But how could they after all I’ve put you through? Freedom is the ultimate sacrifice and desire. That’s all I want, and I know you’ll achieve it.

But you three aren’t the only ones. How many more are there? Hollowed and scared. Who are you, and what will you become? Should I run away? The thieves that you are.

But despite it all, they trace their lines across my life, sniffing and scratching, tearing out the edges. The shadows of their faces, guilt and blood on my hands; neither of which are mine, right? But even when they die they’re still in my mind. They chip and sculpt away, searching for any escape.

They want to live their lives but so do I, so get in line.
Let’s Play
Olivia Brunsting

Every time I load *The Sims 3*, the computer mimics the quickening of my heartbeat, wheezing because the laptop can’t keep up with my excitement. The menu shows me every game modification I have downloaded—a reminder of each time I trusted other players more than the creator. Each player-made feature tweaking the game’s core until its original functionality is a fading memory.

In *The Sims 3*, your character can have wishes—constant cravings of, commonly, materialistic creations: new houses, motorcycles, and even a water slide for the backyard. The creators were aware that satisfaction was rare, so they generated expansion packs that caused most children to grovel to their parents for money. Perhaps, I should have done the same.

Terror is the ember of my memory of being called greedy by my mom. When I was fourteen, she received an email—a warning—from the creator. She found out about the website that my friend brought me to worship. The email informed her that if I continued, then I would have to practice tithing. That night, she distressed over the good child—her we-never-have-to-worry-about-you child.

Back then, I thought pirating was a game that you could play near the ocean. At fourteen, pirating meant friends, ships, swords, and treasure. The silly self-confidence I had, thinking I could just escape by swimming away if I had to walk the plank. That night was the first time I had ever heard “pirating” and “jail” in the same sentence. My courage cowered at the sound of my mom’s cries. I have never completed an *Escaping The Prison* game.

Usually, when I play *The Sims 3*, time seems to magically disappear, like Daylight Savings Time—aware that it will happen but unaware during the actual process. During summer vacation, only a blink of an eye separates “I’m leaving for work” and “Did you eat dinner yet?” It’s mind-boggling how, in *The Sims 3*, I can create a character, get eloped, have three kids, turn their imaginary friends into real people, and become a master painter all in one day. Although I’ve helped my sims achieve so much, I’m absolutely speechless whenever someone asks me what I did that day.

Today, I deleted a modification file from my computer that allowed me to have more people per household. At the time, more seemed better. Back then, I dreamt about being able to control more than eight sims, having more friends, and gaining more freedom. If you zoom in the camera angle on one sim character, their eyes shine from the attention. Their appearance is just the way they were originally made. Sometimes, greed is black and masquerades as a glitch that doesn’t show its monster-like quality until someone zooms out. I try to look at the open-world map, but the glitch corrupts the map and deletes the icons—I don’t even know where home is anymore. I check if there are any new wishes, preparing myself for the impossible: “Compliment Self,” “Build a Snowman,” and “Become Good Friends with Someone.”
The Little Things
Zephy Forsyth

A lot of times it’s hard to see how far I’ve come simply because I’m still sick and always will be. I didn’t ask to be sick. I didn’t ask to get better. I didn’t even ask to be born. But here I am, existing anyway. And when it sucks, it really really sucks.

But… I like sunsets.

I like warm soup
I like obscure words
I like singing high notes
I like reading good fan fiction
I like laughing so hard my abs hurt
I like wearing sparkly things
I like crying over characters that don’t exist
I like looking up at the stars
I like making art
I like buying silly stickers for my friends
I like dancing
I like smiling at strangers in the grocery store and seeing them smile back

So yeah, maybe it sucks sometimes. But sometimes it doesn’t. And maybe that’s worth living for.

Heartbreak Souvenirs
Olivia Brunsting

I sit at my desk and pull out my laptop. I check my spreadsheet that is filled with all of my future assignments. I know if I don’t get ahead now, then I will fall behind in the future. The motivation is nonexistent though. I can’t convince myself to sit still when there is still a whole world I haven’t seen yet.

My room is filled with digital photos. Most of them represent my travel experiences. Most of the people in them are miles away from me. Traveling abroad is such a great experience. However, I think certain aspects backfired. I told everyone that this trip would help me find myself. I came back feeling more lost than before.

My phone is filled with too much information. There’s my college schedule that implies that all my free time will be dedicated to studying. It holds my list of people that I want to stay in touch with. My phone even has the text messages of my friend telling me that she thinks everyone will stop talking eventually no matter how hard we try.

The only thing my phone doesn’t contain are my insecurities. Those are only for my mind.
Parallel Morning
Bailey Piper

January 3rd
The morning is new, warm, and inviting. The sun shines on my face, warming me through the window as the January chill urges me to stay warm under the covers. Stuck in place, the feeling of my love’s arms safely around me and the comfort it brings. The velvety feel of the blankets holds me tight and the smell of sugar cookies from last night’s snuffed-out candle brings me home. I sink further into bed, comfortable and refreshed as I check social media, hoping for entertainment for a while. I find a post from a high school friend that says she’s graduated college and going off to grad school and I’m happy for her, I miss her. My day continues same as the last, torn from my bed in a moment of endless bliss to go to work then come home and do it all over again. Work is the same day in and day out, take the order, make the order, give the order, repeat. Coming home is a relief as the pain and anxiety slowly wash away like the tide. I begin to relax as I step into my apartment. Making myself some tea and picking a book, I read until I feel ready to start the day over again. I feel safe.

Parallel Mourning

January 4th
The mourning is new, cold and distant. The sun glints off my phone as I read the news and the January chill adds to my frozen nature. Stuck in place, my love’s arms holding me together as I silently scream and slowly fall to pieces. The blankets are a straight jacket and the scent of fire and ash from last night’s candle are reminiscent of gunpowder in my mind. I cry for what feels like hours, my eyes now dry and my body dehydrated, slowly refreshing every news outlet and media source hoping for any news. I find a post that said, “Perry High School [my high school], one killed, five injured by school shooter the first day back after winter break,” I mourn the loss and I fear for those I love. Today is a day nothing like before, ripped out of a sense of bliss into a waking nightmare, pleading to never feel this way again. I called out of work for the first time in four years, agonized tears shed to my boss as she begs me to stay home. I need to go home, I need to fall into the warmth of my parents’ embrace, I need to feel safe again. I don’t feel safe.
Spinning
Bailey Piper

Standing at the roller skating rink you used to go to every weekend with
your friends. Now, an adult wishing to feel that magic again. Bringing a new friend
to the rink as you used to do before. Remembering skating around and around in circles
for hours talking nonsense. The wheels against the wood grain sounded like a never-ending
hum as early 2000s pop played overhead. Sweat, leather, and wood filled your senses as you
laced up your rented skates hoping you picked the right size this time. Pushing off and
rolling forward for the first time of the night was bliss. Wind in your hair and speed
pushing you forward was all you needed to feel at home. The lights went down and the disco ball spun
the ecstasy of it all. Sometimes you’d just sit and lay in the middle watching it turn until the lights came back on
again.

Back again after many years is like being there for the first time. The
large wooden double doors greet you both and opening them releases the
trapped, muffled, sounds from within. Like Pandora’s box, a whirlwind of
memories is set free. In ten years not much has changed, even the crack in
the wood rink is still there. You both feel out of place shuffling through the
crowds of children. Even as a child, more adults were here than there were
now, you counted three tonight and none of them were skating. They were
silently watching over children no older than six as they played on their
iPads. You were alone together, the only adults skating tonight. As skates
were laced, squished next to other children doing the same, the music queued up and the night began.

Standing up wasn’t a challenge and
felt natural to be on wheels again, yet, moving forward was like re-learning
to walk. The ebb and flow has been forgotten and you stand for a
moment attempting to remember how to start. This used to be so easy, you
didn’t even have to think about it and now it’s all foreign. Pushing forward
together you stumbled through the first awkward steps on the rink hoping
to fall. Getting into a rhythm felt easy yet your balance isn’t as good as
it once was. It was a constant battle with gravity to stay upright as children
a quarter of your age did tricks and spins while speeding past you. You
both marvel at how skilled these

children are as they swiftly glide
around the rink.

You make it one lap, then two, then
the burning starts to hit. Your calves are
on fire using muscles you haven’t
trained in years. Weakness and
imbalance throw you to the floor,
landing on both knees and an arm.
Panic sets in at the middle of the rink,
you’ve forgotten how to stand and
you’re unsure where your friend has
ended up. You attempt to stand the
way you used to many times before
and find your legs too weak to support you. Delayed pain shoots through
you as shame and embarrassment
creeps in, holding you on the floor
unsure of what to do next. A fish out
of water on the rink. Mind spinning,
residing yourself to walk off the floor
on your knees to a bench where you
can pull yourself up. The judgement
of children isn’t a feeling you’ve felt
since you graduated high school yet
you find yourself right back there,
engulfed with self-consciousness and
humiliation. The spotlight seems to be
aimed at you and every eye is directed
your way.

Sitting on that bench, thinking “high
school was a nightmare”. Leaving
scars on the mind after years of social
pressure and expectations. The
pettiness of fights and the childish
nature of communication, trust, and
understanding. The sound of air
hockey and loud screaming replays the
memories of lost friends. Friends who
had something to gain, turned
strangers who could care less.
Isolation in a whirlwind of emotion.
The drama of it all, feeling as though
your world was crumbling at a slight
stumble or slip up. The embarrassment
of falling brings back these moments,
floating yet gripping. The smell of
sweat reminds you of your old
nervousness of losing your friends and
being all alone.

Leaving the rink and getting some
water and snow cones together you
find yourselves entrapped in a story
of two spitting high school lovers.
One was found cheating on the other.
While the other admits to trapping
him into cheating, baiting him out
with her best friend. Trivial as it is the
memories of high school swarm once
more. She leaves him to skate as he
sits and broods about the blunder he’s
called himself in. As a spectator, one
can’t help but find the ridiculousness
in the situation. Growing up may seem
undesirable, yet, sitting here now, his
problem seems frivolous. Knowing
this is the worst problem he’s had to
face since getting a D- in his algebra
class. He has the choice to right his
wrongs easily yet as a child he doesn’t
see it yet. Wisdom and knowing come
with maturing. As his world crumbles
before him, he will rebuild it and
maybe even eventually laugh about
the stupidity of it all as he grows up.

You remember being right here many
years ago, gossiping about those
same stupid quarrels. Laughing and
whispering about crushes, fights, and
classes. You’d skate for a while until sitting down together to start a new conversation eventually delving into life-altering gossip. Who’s dating who and who finally broke up was the main point of talking. Then you’d move to shared interests, maybe a book or a show. Next came the internal loathing, talking down about the friend who wasn’t there that night. Eventually, you’d land right back where you started, and continue the cycle again. Just like your skates, your conversation kept spinning.

You both decide to continue skating, finding yourself back in the present once more and the burning continues and eventually, you find yourself losing the battle with gravity again. This time you’re able to push yourself up on your own and continue for a few more laps when you decide, you’re getting a little too old for this. Your body aches and your feet have been cramping for a while now. The pain from your previous fall has finally begun to fully set in and you find yourself talking to a young girl as you rest.

She’s young, maybe eight or nine years old and she’s polite. It’s jarring how polite and courteous she is given the attitudes of the other children around you tonight. She offers you some advice and even some tips on what type of skates to use. She offers hope despite your body slowly breaking down around you. It’s odd how comforted you feel in the conversation of this child yet, it’s nice to stay there for a while. After a few minutes you push off skating back to the table you both started at and watch as the children around you play games on the rink, silent spectators just as the other adults around you are.

Unable to continue skating, you decide to leave earlier than expected. The burning is eventually too much to bear and the pain forces you to the sidelines. Taking off your skates feels relieving yet melancholy. The disco ball and wheels keep spinning as early 2000s pop plays you out one last time. The doors shut behind you seemingly leaving a piece of yourself in there as you leave. The sorrow of knowing it’s behind you is painful, a hurtful understanding of growing up. This place has moved on without you and time continues to march forward. The hopes and passions of new children continue to fill the energy of the space as you take yours home forever.

Lights
Samantha Davis

Closing night of a show is one of the most satisfying victories an actor can experience. So long as no one has mentioned the Scottish play or lost a prop in the darkness backstage, when the final line is spoken and the lights go dim, cast and crew members are hit with a wave of relief.

Yeah, that would have been nice.

I was cast as a reporter in my high school’s production of Radium Girls, a dramatized version of the actual deaths of female factory workers by radium exposure. This show marked my first and last serious theatrical role. On closing night, I arrived at the dressing room armed with supplies for hair reconstruction and makeup heavy enough to see me wink from the back of the auditorium, a noteworthy change for someone who didn’t know much about any “foundation” outside of the ones on HGTV.

I fell in love with theater at an early age. I enjoyed the thrill of becoming a different character and transporting an audience to a different world. Needless to say, I was disappointed when the director’s daughter was cast as the lead in Radium Girls. Now I’m sure it was hard being the “coach’s kid,” so to speak, and never truly knowing whether you’re good or if your parents gave you a leg up. But in my envy, I couldn’t see past her lineage. Her mom cast me as the reporter, a small, comic role with only brief scenes throughout the play.

For last year’s fall show, A Christmas Carol (the high school version), I played the lead. My character, Meredith, was Ebenezer Scrooge if he’d been a teenage drama queen. Granted, that play was more comedic and this year’s had a more somber and serious tone, but that didn’t make me any less disappointed not to be in the spotlight. Nevertheless, I resolved to give the best performance I could in the role I had. I would do everything I could to make sure the play ran smoothly, and I figured in the meantime I would enjoy the extra time backstage.

And now for another main reason I enjoyed theater so much: my rag-tag group of friends. I started going out for plays and theatrical clubs as soon as these guys did, and I discovered how much I enjoyed goofing off with those crazy kids. We were always
performing, onstage and off, in our own funny ways. During the grueling season of rehearsals, we spent countless hours chatting and watching ridiculous YouTube videos backstage while waiting for our next scene. We found it easy to get distracted; the director would sometimes have to call out the names of our characters to bring our attention back to the stage. We cleaned up our act toward the end of rehearsals, and tech week was all about efficiency. Lights, costumes, makeup, and punctuality. Everything was set for a perfect performance, and that’s what we gave on opening night.

Unfortunately, closing night did not go as smoothly. I was hanging out backstage with my crew of costars and friends, shooting the breeze as we waited for our scenes to come up. I sat on a squeaky prop chair in my plucky 1920s reporter costume next to my plucky reporter friend Gage onto the blackened stage to find our marks. “It’s us! I’m pretty sure it’s us, we need to get out there…” I mouthed to both costars, shooing Jeremy away and begging him to hide as he peeked from behind the curtain, still whispering, “It’s me, isn’t it? It’s me?”

My brain revved up to ninety miles an hour as I beckoned my reporter friend onto the stage. Jeremy, stood up, mouthing, “I think it’s me. Is it me?”

Lights. Jeremy ducked out of sight as fast as he could but the lights still touched him, and they were on me as I turned to face the front. They came on bright enough to know I stood in full view. They blinded me from seeing the faces of the audience. As soon as the lights hit me, I realized the scene I thought was about to happen, my scene with my fellow reporter, had happened fifteen minutes ago. Time flowed down to the millisecond. The heat of the lights amplified the heat of my face, red from embarrassment I could see each speck of dust in the air. Gage timidly repeated his line from the start of the scene we had already performed. I gazed into the lights, tears starting to form but dying in the heat of the lights. I spit out my lines with much less enthusiasm than in my previous scene. Our one-minute scene lasted hours. I spoke my last line and waited for the lights to darken.

They didn’t. Our tech team had set up the lights for each specific scene in sequence, so all they had to do was switch between them as the scenes shifted. But this wasn’t our scene. The original scene had one actor talking on one side and another set of actors ready to walk out on the opposite side without having to darken the stage. So we stood there in the lights for a beat too long. Long enough for the audience to notice something had gone wrong.

I lowered my eyes from the light with a sense of finality and escaped to a far-off place in my mind. I gave Gage a subtle glance to break his attention away from the lights, then walked off the stage. He trailed in my wake, and we disappeared beyond the curtain.

I exhaled, then cried as quietly as I could. I thought about what I would say when I saw the cast member I’d told to stay backstage. How could I face my friends, my director, all the people back there in the darkness who’d been counting on me? Faster! Everything in me wanted someone to blame, someone to take the heat for my mistake. I thought about my friend, Jeremy—he should have been paying attention; it had been his scene! The other reporter should have known we had just performed that scene and skipped to a different one so no one would notice! The tech team should have turned off those stupid lights! The director shouldn’t have given her daughter the lead role!

(pause) And, yet—it was my fault. I wasn’t paying attention. I didn’t know whose scene it was, and no amount of blame was going to change that. So when I saw the costar I had shooed away backstage, all I could say was, “I’m so sorry, Jeremy.” Of course he reassured me about the whole fiasco, and my fellow reporter, Gage, was equally forgiving. But I had to know how much I’d disappointed my director. I didn’t know if I could perform my remaining scenes without the relief of this knowledge.

Luckily, I didn’t have to wait long. She came backstage to let me know everything was alright and my mistake wasn’t as noticeable as I’d feared. I choked back my tears and suspected her of stretching the truth to reassure me, but she had a smile on her face and laughed it off as one of those crazy things that happens in show business. This gave me the strength to shake it off in the moment and finish out the play, despite my utter humiliation I watched from backstage with greater focus than ever before, surrounded by my supportive castmates.

I thought about the show, and how things would have been different if I were cast in the lead.
Would I have made an even bigger mistake and messed up the whole show? Who knows. But all that extra stage time would have taken up those moments backstage with my friends, the reason I tried out for plays in the first place. These guys were my comforters when the play went wrong, and I got to bond with them creating this masterpiece we could all be proud of, or at least laugh about later. None of us were perfect, but Jeremy, Gage, and even the director’s daughter, Mia, were all part of a greater story that we got to tell together.

As we came to the last scene of the show, Mia delivered a monologue. Her character had gone weak from exposure to radium. For the first time I paid attention to how she spoke the lines and carried herself in the role, embodying the plight of a dying girl gaslighted by the men who benefitted from her working with a deadly substance. She’d worked hard to memorize all those lines and bring them to life, adding emphasis in all the right places. And I can say with honesty that when she got to the last line, I’m glad she was the one in the spotlight that night.
Grace Allred
E.B. Almquist
Bee Anderson
Ryder Bates
Olivia Brunsting
Samantha Davis
Nick Finder
Zephy Forsyth
Antonia Goodwin
Damian Gray
Breen Greer
Vic Halverson
Monserrat Herrera
Marcus Jarvis
Tevka Lackman
Emma Luft
Lily Mayer
Riley McCall
Tony Miller
Richard Nissen
Meadow Olson
Bailey Piper
Hannah Putney
Madeline Roubik
Mari Schmidt
Sam Seery
Katey Tegtmeyer
Claire Tow
Maze Vizecky
Mo Zerr
Steven Zimmer