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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

From Jamila Lovelace:

I am often a person of many words, but I found myself not necessarily knowing what to say about this magazine, other than that it was truly a labor of love. The contributors and I poured our hearts, souls and a good portion of our mental health into these pieces. We wanted the writing to grow with us, the contributors, so it could grow with you - the reader. Here is a metaphor: this literary journal was our baby that we sheltered and cared for when it was just a gleam in our eyes. Now our baby has grown, ready to be stacked on shelves and read by new students who hope to one day be published in it. In the space between the vision and the product blooms a legacy.

From Kait Smith:

When I think about this magazine, I am in awe of the work that lies beyond these pages. As it is my senior year, I am proud of the work that is in your hands. I hold such respect for the staff members and their tireless work I am in wonder of the talent that is exemplified in our issue, and I am hopeful in what lies ahead for each person in this magazine. I consider it a privilege to work along-side such wonderful people. I hope that, as you read and observe, you will feel the love composed in these pages.

We wish you love and peace,

Jamila Lovelace and Kait Smith
Editors-in-Chief

Michael Stulz

Late Night Thought

It is a curse
to be born
a hopeless romantic
with the constant
fear that you
are unlovable.

Elizabeth Gauck

Falling Backwards- Chapter 1: Jessa

One. Two. Three.

Everything is so loud—colors, sounds, emotions, gestures—but all of it is practically on mute compared to the ticking clock over the refrigerator. Mama and I haven't touched it since we put it there after moving into the apartment—not even when the time change came. I don't know why we even need a clock. Mama's never let the time stop her from drinking, staying out late, playing her music too loud or anything else Mama likes to do. Time to her is a lot like age: it's just a number.

All the clock is doing up there, all dusty and wrong, is counting down the seconds until I'm dead.

Focusing on that clock takes me away from Kyle as he rants, the gun in his bloody hand, and Mama as she alternates between begging Kyle to stop and telling him that she loves him. How she can love him? I'll never know. You don't willingly give yourself over to a man like him because he'll only return your heart as shreds of ripped tissue. Even if he's handsome, half her age, and successful—that doesn't make him a good boyfriend. No, that black heart of his makes him the devil.

Four. Five.

If this is it, please just let me go, God. Don't make me go through more.

Six. Seven.

Kyle's finger is twitching on the trigger in rhythm with the vein in his neck that pulses when he's angry. He's always angry. And mama never knows when they're playing a game or when she's stomping on his toes. I've never walked in on him hurting her before—I've only seen the harsh, distinct bruises later—but today I did. I stepped in to take on a man who's been beaten all his life and who's beaten all his life, who carries around a gun like another limb, and who's blind to hatred. All because, while I may not like my mama, I do love her. Sometimes.

Eight.

The clock keeps ticking, but I don't feel like I'm going anywhere. I wonder how long the life can drain from me before there's nothing left. Hopefully not long. Hopefully Kyle will pull the trigger. Kill me—kill himself. I just want this moment to end.

Mama's wail clashes with the ticking, and I tense, the pain intensifying—fear settling in. “Eight, nine, ten,” I sob, focusing in on the clock's second hand.

“What is she doing?” Kyle yells, veering away from his rambling. “What the *fuck* are you doing? Stop that!”

“Jessa, baby, stop!” my mama chokes out through her own bloody lips. There’s a slap mark on her cheek, too. God she looks horrible, and I know that I have to look worse. When I came home and threw myself at Kyle, all of his attention switched from her to me.

“Eleven, twelve.”

“I said STOP!” Kyle roars and points the gun down at me. Mama shrieks, and he glares at her over his shoulder. “You made her like this, Claudia. You’re a crazy bitch and you sure as hell made your daughter into one, too! Do you see this?” He points at his nose with his gun. Here he’s calling us crazy, but he’s the one pointing a loaded gun at his head. *Please let his finger hit the trigger. Let him kill himself.* “Do you see what she did? She broke my damn nose! How am I supposed to take a picture with the governor tonight?”

That’s what makes me hate Kyle Gamble so much I almost enjoy that I broke his nose. The part where he just beat my mama like a stray dog isn’t what will ruin his picture with the governor; it’s the fact that his perfect, Grecian statue nose is ruined. He has awful priorities.

A gruff but loving voice enters the back of my mind, breaking through years’ worth of steel barriers. *People don’t question what they can’t see—that’s why I’ve been marked everywhere but my face.*

I’ve broken a cardinal rule in the abusive jackass world, and if that’s the last thing I do, then I can only say that I hope they have instant-replay in heaven.

“Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen.”

He points the gun back in my direction, his finger shaking, and I cut off my counting.

“*Goddamn it, Jessa! What part of—*”

The phone rings shrilly, and that’s enough—the click of the gun is deafening, cancelling out everything again.

I squeeze my eyes shut as time ceases to exist. I will not let his face, his rage, be the last thing that I see. I will not look into the eyes of the devil as he kills me. Not when I can think of car rides and homemade pizzas and evergreen eyes. Not when I can be enveloped by the voice I’ve long tried to forget, but always belonged to, and let that voice guide me towards safety. *I’ll always be with you, always loving you. Keep that with you forever for when you need me most.*

Sixteen.

Seventeen.

Finally.

* * *

Two Months Later

“So,” my older brother, Conner, says as I join him in the kitchen where he’s making our dinner, “what do you think?”

I force my lips to curve up in a smile. I’ve spent the last month training my mouth to do that. To make that one gesture say, *I’m perfect. Perfect Jessa, right here. Not broken Jessa.* When I overheard Conner asking the doctors if I’d ever be okay, I knew I needed to try to be better. I needed to start faking it until I can make it. Still not quite making it, though. And I can tell he knows it.

“It’s beautiful. You guys chose well.”

“I like it better than the old house. This place has more room and a bigger backyard. And the town is so small that no one will mind a fresh-faced lawyer.”

Since we were kids, Conner’s acted more like a parent than our real ones ever did. With our six-year age difference, I’m pretty sure he’s always seen me more as his kid than his little sister. I never felt guilty about that because it’s given me someone to lean on when I didn’t really have anyone else. Then Kyle happened and my brother went above and beyond to take care of me—so beyond that he decided to uproot his family to a new town, three hours away from our old one, to escape the memories and the questions. I think part of it’s because he holds himself accountable for what happened since he left me with Mama after he married his wife, Erin—something I wish he’d realize I’ve never been mad at him for. The other part is because he’s never known anything but parenting me.

“I’m sure if they do mind, you’ll hear it on the gossip mill,” I assure him. “They’ll love you, Connie.”

“That’s what I hope,” he says. He pours a jar of sauce into the pan he’s stirring noodles in. He glances over his shoulder at me. “It’s a pretty town, too. You like what you’ve seen of it?”

“I do.” Not that I’ve seen much. I got a quick view of the main street with all of the businesses on it, one being a diner that my brother and Erin’s friends own called Maxine’s. Other than a few streets, there’s not much to Collette. I kind of like that, though. I can breathe in this tiny, hidden town. I can start fresh.

“Well, maybe we’ll go exploring tomorrow. Erin and I kind of have during our visits to see Cain and Max, but it’d be nice to take a closer look,” Conner tells me, just as Erin’s feet pad down the stairs and into the hallway behind us.

“Oh my gosh, who cares about your dashing looks and quick wit when you can cook?” Erin says as she steps into the room with my little niece, Liv, in her arms. They both have the same light brown hair and over-excited features, a big contrast to our side of the family with our dark brown hair and seemingly unfeeling, flat eyes.

She sets Liv down in her highchair and Liv squeals. “Je-je-je.”

I grin and slide off of the stool I'm sitting on. I limp over to her, my leg aching from sitting too long, and kiss her cheek. My physical therapist says we have a long road ahead of us until my leg begins to feel normal, but he's always reminding me that I have a "new normal"—that my leg probably will never be the same as it once was. I don't think he sees that whenever he says that, my hope gets crushed. For the rest of my life, whenever I walk, I'll be reminded of what Kyle did to me. "Hello there, little Moose. Did Mama wear you out playin'?"

"Je!"

"Did Mama wear Liv out or did Liv wear Mama out, that's the important question," Erin says, grinning at her daughter, then nudges her shoulder against mine. "Having you around is going to be very useful."

"She's not here to be a workhorse," my brother reminds Erin.

"I want to help out," I tell him. I don't want him to treat me like a china doll, which he's already in the habit of doing. I need to be normal again—I *want* to be. I don't want to feel like an inconvenience, either. Which is why, as soon as I can, I'm going to start trying to find my independence.

I've been okay for about three weeks now—meaning that while I do still have panic episodes, I'm not constantly in fear or crying. For two of those three weeks, I've been planning on just how to find that independence. The first thing I want to do is find a job. I think it'll be a good distraction that'll also help me in the long run. Of course, I'm afraid that bringing it up to my papa bear of a brother will probably be more difficult than the job will be. I know he won't think I'm ready, so part "2A" of my planning is to present a good argument with evidence. He is a lawyer, after all.

"Alright," he finally says, giving me a pained look, "you can start by setting the table. Get butter, too. I made rolls."

Erin squeals and Liv immediately mimics her. "Those go straight to my butt...but *lord-y*."

Connie's mouth twitches and he shakes his head. "It's a special occasion that calls for my famous cheesy biscuits, babe. Jessa's here and healthy, and we're headin' for happiness."

I hope so. I really, really hope so. Because I haven't felt an ounce of real happiness since the moment I decided to let fate take its course.

* * *

There's a layer of steam so thick that it's hard to breathe, but I like it. I *need* it. It's a nice reminder that I'm alive—when I gasp for air, I'm gasping for life—because when I look at my reflection in the mirror, I don't look alive. I keep wiping a circle into the mirror to get rid of the fog, but

there's always a blurriness that's left behind. Even the distortion doesn't hide my empty, departed eyes, my sunken-in cheeks, or the scar above my eyebrow. I feel like when Kyle shot me, I died, and now I'm just...I don't even know. Not here, but not gone.

It's easy to be normal around my brother and his family because I've always been good at distracting myself or putting up a façade; I've had to be. I've loved and lost too much, which has made it impossible to not be able to do that. I wish that I could blame the way I am on Kyle, but I can't. I can't even really blame it on Mama, even though I want to.

This is all on me. Or, at least, it's on my heart.

I see something move to my side and I instantly jerk back, gasping for air. *What was I thinking? I can't breathe in here.*

I grope for the doorknob, but then the shower curtain moves. That must've been what I saw. The third time it moves, it's like a gust of wind has hit it. It's impossible that just the steam is making it move that much. Someone has to be behind it, making it move.

Kyle.

My mouth opens, and I'm not sure if I scream or gasp for air because I can't focus on anything except for that curtain and what—*who's*—behind it. He's done this to me before, so it's likely he'd do it again. He was waiting on the porch for Mama, the sliding doors opened and the curtain blowing in the breeze. They only first started dating, but she'd already given him a key. If it were anyone else other than Kyle standing out there, waiting, it would've been a romantic scene. Only it was Kyle, and he was angry because Mama wasn't there. He came inside, yelling about how they were supposed to be at dinner. Lord knows where Mama was, but I was there, and that earned me his anger.

He's dead, I think, but I know this is him. It *has* to be him. I fall to the floor, cowering against the bathroom counter, with my gaze fixed on the shower curtain.

“Conner!”

He's here—Kyle's here to finish the job he started. This time he'll kill me for sure. This time nothing will hold him back, not even his fear of losing his reputation. He lost that the second I survived, and now he has nothing to lose. His fury and need for revenge will spur him on, and he won't stop until I'm dead.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. I throw my hands over my head and start to sob. I don't think I can survive another day of this fear, let alone the rest of my life. Everywhere I go, I swear he's there with me, lurking in shadows for only me to see him.

“Jessa!” My brother sinks down onto the floor beside me. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me against his chest, cradling me. “What's wrong? What happened?”

“He’s...he’s...”

Conner starts rocking me. “He’s not here, Jessa. He’s not here.”

I shake my head, hot tears rolling down my cheeks. He’s here. I know he is. He has to be. I heard him! He’s got to be lurking behind the shower curtain or hiding somewhere. He’s always with me—watching me. I can *feel* him.

“Honey, he’s not here,” Erin says softly behind me. “He’s dead, sweetie. He killed himself, remember?”

No, he’s here. He faked his suicide somehow. There’s evil in that man, and evil can’t be stopped. He’ll always be with me, no matter where I am and no matter where he is. I just wish they could see that—I wish they could see *him*.

“Breathe, Jessa. Come on, just breathe with me.” Conner’s hold on me tightens. His hug isn’t comforting; it’s only an anchor holding me here where Kyle can get me. I struggle, flailing in his arms. I need to hide—to get as far away as possible. “What do I do? I don’t—what do I do?”

Erin steps around us toward the bathtub. Towards Kyle. I freeze. “Erin, no! He’ll...”

Erin draws the curtain back, a thousand emotions in her eyes—fear, exhaustion, frustration, devastation.

There’s no one there. How can that be? How did he disappear again? Where did he go? Oh God, he could be anywhere. How many times will I have to go through this?

Conner presses a kiss to my head, his hand running soothingly down my back now. “He’s not here, see? You’re safe.”

Erin leans over the ledge and straightens back up with the shower caddy in her hand. “It just fell honey. You’re okay. It was only the caddy.”

“No, I swear—” I break off into sobs, heart pounding.

“It’s not him,” Conner says hoarsely. He tucks my hair behind my ears and presses his palm against my cheek. “Look at me.” I turn my head and his gaze locks with mine, tears in his eyes. “You’re letting him win, Jessa. You’re letting him hurt you even though he’s not here. Don’t let him do that—be stronger than that.”

“I can’t,” I whisper.

Liv starts crying in her room down the hall. Erin gives me one final pleading look and then goes to calm down her daughter. They shouldn’t have to deal with me. I shouldn’t need them as much as I do.

“You can,” Conner tells me when we can hear Erin cooing at Liv. “You didn’t let him win the first time, and you won’t let him win this time. You have us now.”

I lay my head against his chest. “I’m so scared.”

“That’s okay. You’re allowed to be,” he tells me. “Just know that I’m not going to ever let anything hurt you again.” He reaches for the towel

lying on the counter. He places it over me, the tips of his ears turning pink. “Are you trying to scar me for life? Could’ve gone my whole life without seein’ my baby sister naked.”

An embarrassed giggle bubbles up between a sob. “Sorry.”

“There’s that smile of yours.”

I wipe my tears from my eyes and glance around. Part of the door is hanging off its hinges and the door frame near the lock is splintered.

“Your door! I—”

Conner gives a shrug. “Don’t worry about it.” His head leans back against the sink cabinet and lets out a long sigh. “The only thing you need to focus on is getting better. And life *will* get better.”

Kristen Petronio

A Conversation with Dementia

Did you work today?

Yes.

What time did you go in?

7.

I am about ready to register for classes.

Great, did you work today?

Yes.

What time?

7.

Hi, Angela. Just wanted to wish you a happy birthday.

Grandma, I'm Kristen and my birthday is in March.

Right. How old are you now?

21.

Wow! What month is your birthday?

March.

And how old...

21.

Was it just this month?

No, back in March.

Right. Did you work today, honey?

Yes at 7.

Now who did I call again?

It's Kristen. I love you. Please, don't forget that

Nicole Norman

Life in Bloom

I admire a box cutter that's been tucked inside my back pocket since I left work. Over the course of the past nine months, I've managed to take countless carbon copies of this exact knife home with me. This one is different, though. It's dismantled, revealing two lack-luster blades. A nearby streetlight penetrates the car window, giving life to the dull metal – flickering as its weight shifts in my hands. I let a sigh escape from my lips, “Fifteen-year-old me would have loved to get a hold of something like this.”

Dan is sitting next to me, silent. It's hard to navigate gracefully when entering a conversation like this. There's typically a lot of stomping or maybe even bumping into things. Neither of us are brave enough to take the first step. The silence continues.

I let the weight of the dead air descend on to my shoulders and continue down the soft, pale skin of my forearm. My wrists feel the heaviness next. They aren't cute or delicate – they're bold, unashamed, and typically adorned with a thin, black ponytail holder.

* * *

My left arm had an abnormal ornament, and my classmates noticed. A clunky and poorly wrapped medical bandage peeked past my long-sleeved shirt. In a state of panic the previous night, I grabbed whatever my shaky hands could get a hold of.

It was clumsy and messy. It was middle school. I had friends who were learning how to get the attention of boys. I had friends who were fighting in the hallways after the bell rang. I had friends who knew that there were tally marks on my arms – keeping track of all of the different things I'd fucked up. I had friends who didn't know.

It was easy to keep it a secret for a while. I was good at secrets back then. My mom didn't know that I started my period when I was eleven until I went to the doctor when I was twelve. My sister didn't know that I was wearing her clothes and putting them back in the closet before she got home. My dad didn't know that I was stealing his Schick razors and taking all of the blades out of them. They didn't know that I was bleeding.

* * *

When the marks became more routine, I wasn't good at hiding anymore. I forgot Band-Aids and let my sleeves inch up a little too far,

revealing the execution was more fluid now. Second nature. My hand was careless and my clean up followed suit.

Most days I would realize my mistake before anyone noticed, but when I didn't, I was left in a constant state of anxiety - half of me wanting someone to notice, half of me wanting to be cut so far open that I disappeared into nothing.

I never did disappear. Instead, I found myself under a microscope, being examined carefully by anyone who got close enough to see the thin, clotted rivers of red that flowed from the crook of my elbow to my wrist.

* * *

“Are you cutting yourself?” Sarah laughed as she pulled up the sleeve of a hand me down jacket that I was wearing. The cuffs landed about two inches from the start of my wrist. I was vulnerable already, and her impulse revealed even more. A Band-Aid, frayed and rolling up at the ends, was now visible.

Her hand was still resting on my forearm, waiting for a response. Dry scabs, once dormant, brought back to life by small snags in the fabric. I tried not to wince in pain or panic openly. I tried to think of what to say.

While I tried to gauge her reaction to it all, I noticed that her gaze has lingered on my arm far too long. “It was just the cat,” I said, yanking my arm from her grasp, which hurt more than I intended it to.

“Well, that’s one mad cat. Maybe you should get him declawed.”

Her vocal chords sung the words loudly, but they don’t hide the fact that she isn’t convinced.

* * *

Over time, the cuts became more frequent. The small scratches that used to be sprinkled on my arms turned into large gouges. Everyone knew, but stopped showing concern once it was clear I wouldn’t listen. I kept my arms like a secret, hiding the details of them in diaries and poems, until it stopped. Large gouges turned back into scratches and the scratches healed quickly with the help of some Neosporin.

I didn’t want to die. I knew that. Even on my worst days I still wanted the next one to come.

When I decided to stop carving myself out of my veins, I took advantage of the black ponytail holder that I carried with me. I would pull it back. Let it snap. Repeat. It wasn’t the same, but it was something.

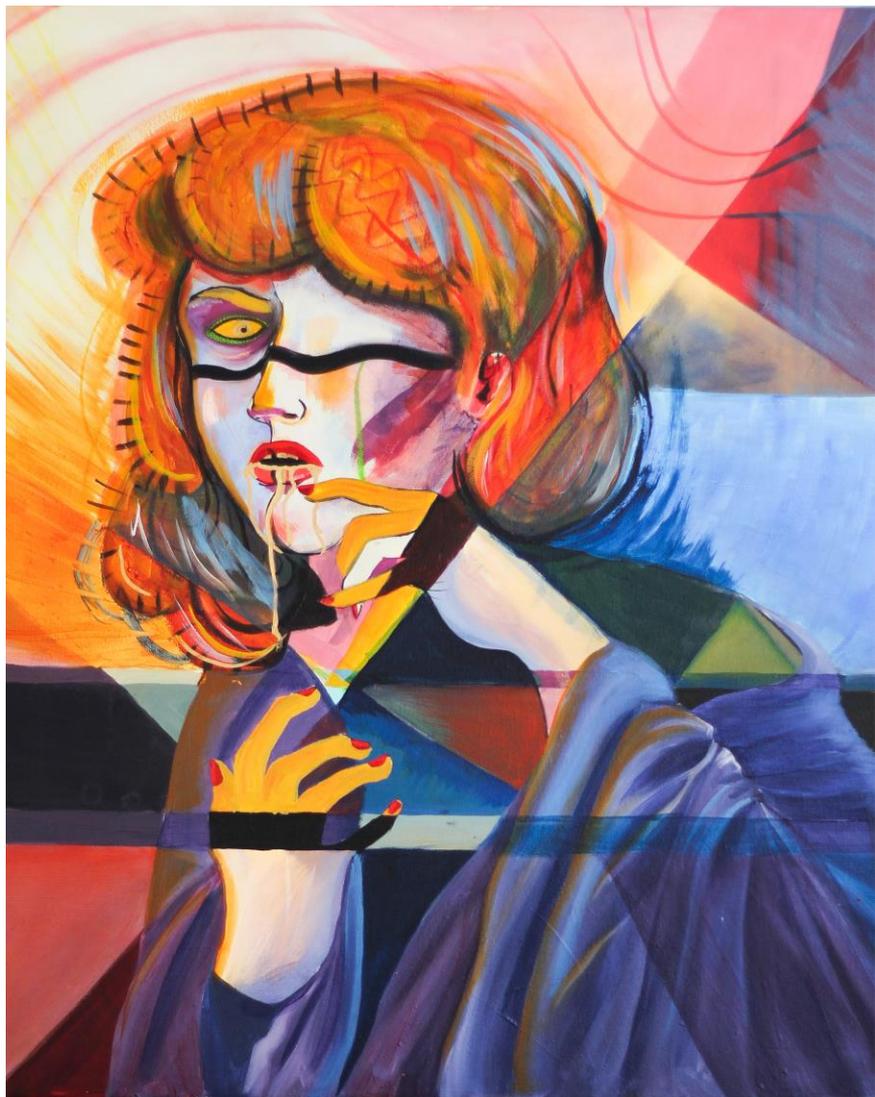
Eventually, my desire for physical pain turned into the desire for emotional pain and I did want to die. I still do some days.

I move my left arm over and rest it on the center console so that the light hits it more directly. Scars lay delicately on the skin. The thin slivers are raised, giving the look that they've been embossed. Beautiful in this light, but almost invisible any other time.

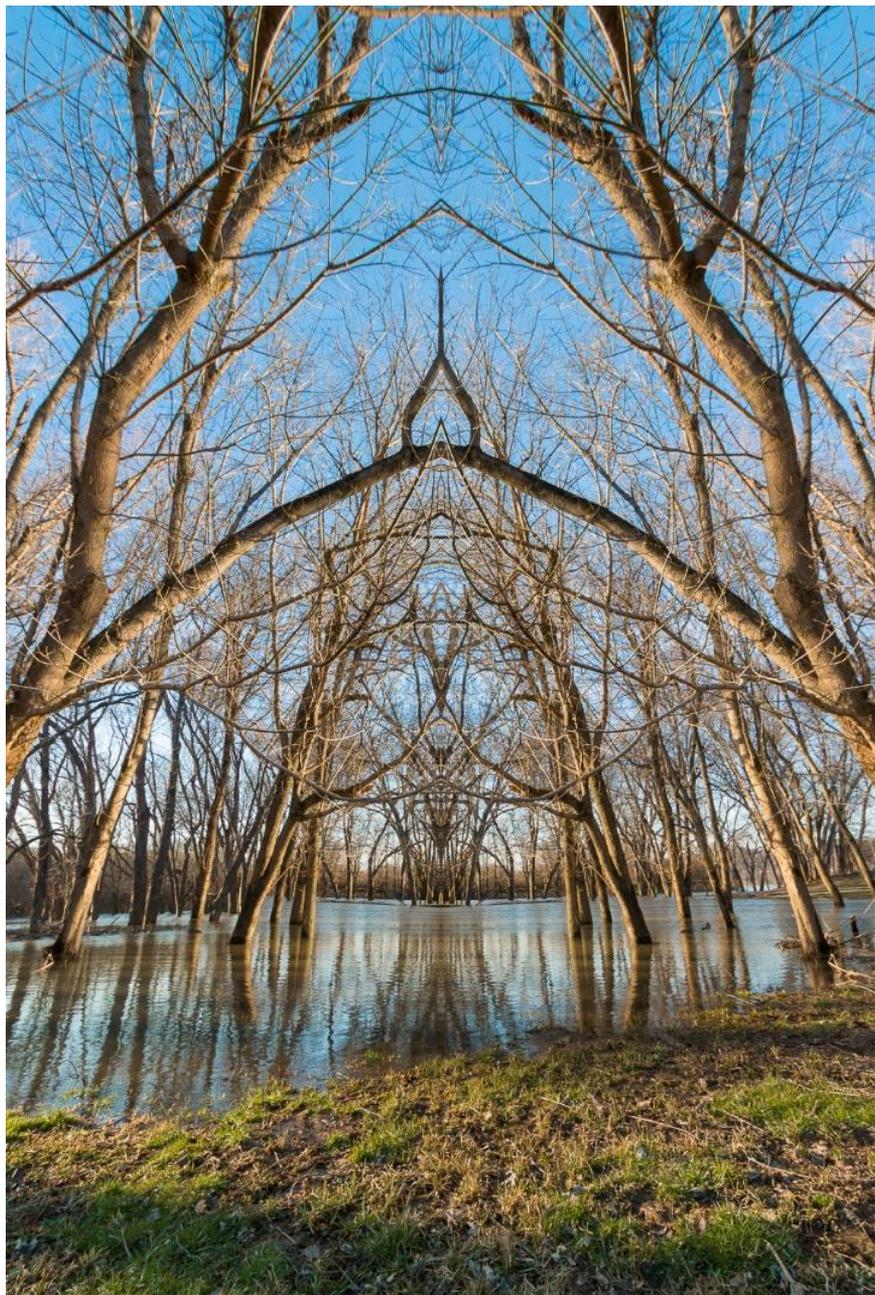
There's a glare on Dan's glasses, and as he follows my movement, it shifts slightly. He's looking at my arm too. The box cutter's weight is still resting in my palm. He grabs it and puts it in a small cubby where the light can't reach it. The air has lost any sign of tension or resistance. It's comfortable now.

Dan lifts a finger and places it on a scar, but it's not on purpose. He moves past it, softly caressing the petals and stems that fill so much negative space with something positive. The moment passes without any mention of the scars that litter my skin. Instead, the silence is filled by Dan's voice, "That's a really beautiful tattoo."

Dan faces forward, shifting the car into first gear, second gear, third gear. His eyes are on the road; mine take one last glance at my left arm and I finally see it for the first time. Life is in bloom, and it's beautiful.



Jessica Holtman: *Self Portrait*



Justine Krieg: *The Flood*
Photography

Justine Krieg

Thick Air

The smell of menthols reminded me of those mornings when my brother drove me to school. Right at the front doors, he'd flick his cigarette butt to the curb and smile at me. He'd tell me to pay attention in class and have fun. I'd repeat it back, even though I knew it wouldn't be the case. He'd leave to go to the neighboring high school while I prepared to tell my classmates why I reeked like an ashtray.

It was a stench that took me back to the huge crowd of people that surrounded my older brother and me in the late summer afternoons. It was when strangers crowd surfed over us and his long arms pushed them away from me, making sure no one kicked me in the head like the year before at the same music festival, Warped Tour. He'd laugh and jump up and down, encouraging me to join in with the beat of the song. The final beat was always followed by the flick of a lighter and a puff of smoke. We'd walk away from the stage and onto the next one; it gave him just enough time to choke down his cancer stick.

The scent was a reminder of those nights when I'd wake up around 2am surrounded by stuffed animals in my bed, so close to the ceiling that a simple raised arm would let me feel the texture of the spider web designs adults called stucco plaster. I'd roll over and take a deep breath through my nose as a reassurance that the smell was in fact the smoky exhale of my brother down the hall. Even the faintest hint of it was a comforting thought because at least I knew he was attempting to puff smoke out of his open window instead of attempting to hang himself in the closet next to his graduation gown.

August 2006

I woke up once with the air thin and smelling of nothing but the faint scent of stale perfume. I pushed the covers and stuffed animals away, grabbed only my stuffed bat, descended down from my castle of solitude, and opened the door to the pitch-black hallway. The only light I could see was coming from down the hall, underneath the door to my brother's room. I held tightly onto my animal and looked over the banister to the downstairs level. I couldn't hear or see a sign of life, so I made my way down the hallway and pushed my ear to the closed door of my parent's room. It wasn't until I heard the loud snore from the King of the Jungle that I went my brother's door.

I slowly opened his door and poked my head in. His bedside lamp was on, but he wasn't in the room.

I stepped in and called out for him, “Nat?”

He didn’t answer, and I noticed the closet door was open. I tiptoed over, still afraid of waking the rest of the household, and looked in to see his clothes hanging up and his graduation gown on the floor next to a long, black belt tied in a knot.

A cold breeze tickled the back of my neck, and I turned around to see the drapes over the window moving with the wind.

“Nat?” I called out again as I walked towards the open window. As I got closer, I noticed the screen had been popped out; it was propped up against the wall below the window.

There was a brief sound of shuffling coming from outside, and then his familiar blue eyes and scruffy beard popped through the window, holding the drape aside, away from the cigarette in his mouth.

“What are you doing up?” he asked.

“I heard a noise,” I lied.

He grabbed the cigarette from his mouth and balanced it between two of his fingers. “Wanna come sit with me?”

I nodded my head and crawled through the window while he pulled the drape out of the way. When my bare feet touched down on the cold, rough roofing, I shivered and pulled my animal closer to my body, trying to absorb all of its warmth. I looked out to the road and watched a stray car drive down the street.

“Take that blanket over there if you want,” Nat said as he pulled his arm back outside and directed my attention to an old, blue, woven blanket lying on the paneling.

I crawled over to the blanket, too afraid to walk, and wrapped myself in it.

“Thanks,” I said as Nat sat down next to me and nodded with a smile.

He took another drag from his cigarette and looked down at the animal cradled in my arm.

“You know, you’re in sixth grade now. Aren’t you going to get rid of all your silly animals?”

I looked down at my bat, Radar, and back up at my brother.

“Should I?”

He shrugged and said, “I thought carrying around stuffed animals was for babies, not middle schoolers, Justine.”

“It’s not like I’m doing it in public.”

“Might as well,” he laughed.

I looked down at my animal and frowned. Thinking he was right, I got up to my feet with the blanket wrapped around my shoulders and walked to the edge of the roof. I heard him shuffle onto his feet behind me.

“Hey, be careful,” he said.

He didn't have to tell me twice because I was already shaking from being so close to the edge, but I wanted to prove my older brother wrong—that I wasn't a baby. I put my stuffed animal in my right hand and brought back my elbow, ready to use my softball skills to toss it past the next house over.

His hand pulled me back as he grabbed Radar out of my grip, stood me upright, and balanced me against his chest.

I looked up at his six-foot stature, and he looked down on my four-foot eight height.

“I was just joking. Don't go throwing all your animals off the roof, Chili.”

I looked down at our feet and tried not to be rude; he did, after all, use my nickname. He reached out to me with my bat in his hand.

I grabbed it and turned around to leave the roof.

“You should know by now, Chili, that you should never listen to me,” he paused as I put my first foot through the window frame, half ignoring him.

“I'm always wrong no matter what I do.”

After making it back into bed, it took about 20 minutes of stucco plaster picking for me to finally fall asleep. I woke up the next morning with white plaster littered over my stuffed animals.

A couple nights later he visited my room instead. I was half asleep as he ascended my ladder, and I woke up to his blood-shot, wet eyes and sniffing nose.

“Can I hang with you for a bit?”

My heart was racing from the surprise visit, but I managed to shake my head as I scooted over to make some room in my tiny bed for him. He lay on his back and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

From what I could see, it wasn't the first time.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I'm just soaking in the fear of the shit I'm going to get from Dad tomorrow.”

“What'd you do?”

He laughed, “I love how you assume I actually did something.”

“Well, that's when you fear Dad the most. I know it's the same with me when I do something.”

“You never do *anything* wrong in his eyes,” he scoffed. “You're the favorite.”

I sat up and stared down at him, tears still running down his face. “That's not true, and you know it.”

“I fuck up all the time, Chili. You're welcome for getting them on your side.”

“What did you do?”

“I fucked up. I told you.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“Ashley left me.”

“Why would that get Dad upset?”

He covered his face with both of his arms, hiding his pained expression.

“I loaned her 2k, for a damn couch in her new apartment.”

“She didn’t pay you back?”

He only shook his head.

“Well, it could have been worse,” I said.

“I proposed and she kept the ring.”

I didn’t know what to say. I just watched as he tried to dry his tears with his damp hoodie sleeve. I reached past him to the box of tissues I kept by my bedside and handed him one.

He took the whole box.

“That ring was expensive.”

“Go get it back! It’s technically yours since she broke up with you.”

“She’s gone.”

“What?”

“She’s fucking gone, Justine!”

“How can...” I trailed off.

“Her apartment was empty; she won’t answer her phone.” His voice was ragged. “I can’t even get a hold of her parents, much less find their house.”

“File a report?”

He shot up from his position and stared at me coldly.

“You don’t fucking get it, do you? I don’t give a fuck about the ring or the damn money.” He broke out in heavier sobs. “She fucking left me.”

I attempted to grab him in a hug, but he pulled away quickly. I grabbed onto Radar instead.

“Why are you worried about Dad then?”

“He’s gonna call me a fucking idiot for giving this girl the money and a ring. He’s gonna tell me how stupid I am and how he wished I was more like you.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“Then why do I keep fucking everything up?”

I didn’t have an answer for him that night. I watched as he descended the ladder and thanked me for listening to him. I wished I could have told him that he was the kind of person who strived for companionship rather than objects and money. His problem was that he just could never figure out how to keep love and money separate.

I fell asleep shortly after with the smell of smoke clinging to my sheets.

January 2017

I watched as he made his way through the store where I worked. His head hung low, and he had dark circles under his eyes over an unkempt beard and too big clothes. As he drew nearer and nearer to my framing counter, I tried to muster a happy smile.

“Hey, Chili,” he said with a cracked voice and the smell of menthols escaping his lips.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Could be better. The loan to keep my house didn’t go through, Ashton started a fight with me this morning about money, and I still haven’t told *her* son that one of his dogs died.” Shortly after, I heard him mumble under his breath. “Even though he isn’t my kid.”

“I’m sorry,” was all I could say.

“Me too.”

I pulled money out of my work apron and handed him a wad of twenties.

“What’s it for this time?”

He pulled out his credit-card-filled wallet and forced the cash inside.

“Electric bill- they’re gonna shut it off if I don’t pay it by tomorrow.”

“I see.”

“Thanks, by the way, I really appreciate it.” He smiled at me. “I’m glad to see that you still have it all together.”

I couldn’t force a happy expression at all, so I looked down at the counter.

“You’ll have it all figured out one day.”

“You know, I used to hate you.”

I looked back up to meet his eyes.

“What?”

“But, now I’m just happy to see you turned out better than me,” he laughed. “Dad should be proud.”

“Nat,” I said in a soft voice.

He ignored my voice and thanked me for the money, saying he’d pay me back in a week. The only thing I knew for sure would return with him was the thick smell of menthols stuck in my airways.

Jeremy Daugherty

We are Made of Soot and Ash

soiled, we dance,
disintegrating to dirt
atoms erupt when we touch
our intimacy is obsidian
and relentless
we become tectonic
we assault and rip
while becoming a ring of fire
as lava we cascade towards the cosmos
staying connected by desire

then we asphyxiate

Calla Thomas

Souljah Slim

BLACK BLACK RO-O-SES BLACK BLACK RO-O-SES BLACK BLACK
RO-O-SES BLOOMING IN MY GAR DEN! BLACK BLACK RO-O-
SES BLACK BLACK RO-O-SES BLOOMING IN MY GAR-R-DEN

slim doesn't know all the words to the song
sings what he knows
from the center of his neck
doesn't know how to sing from his stomach
he loops, repeats
like he is scratched deep
if slim was a 33
a quarter wouldn't help him forward

BLACK BLACK RO-O-SES BLACK BLACK RO-O-SES BLACK BLACK
RO-O-SES

learning to breathe. learning to breathe. learning to breathe.
learning to breathe.

BLOOMING IN MY GAR-DEN

without fresh air

you can't breathe
you can't breathe
you can't breathe
you can't breathe
you can't breathe

you can't breathe
you can't breathe

you can't breathe

BLACK BLACK RO-O-SES BLOOMING IN MY GAR-DEN.
BLOOMING IN MY GAR-R-DEN. BLOOMING IN MY GARDEN
slim is scratched deep. if he was a 33 a quarter would not push him
forward. he's stuck.
was born out a crack in the concrete.

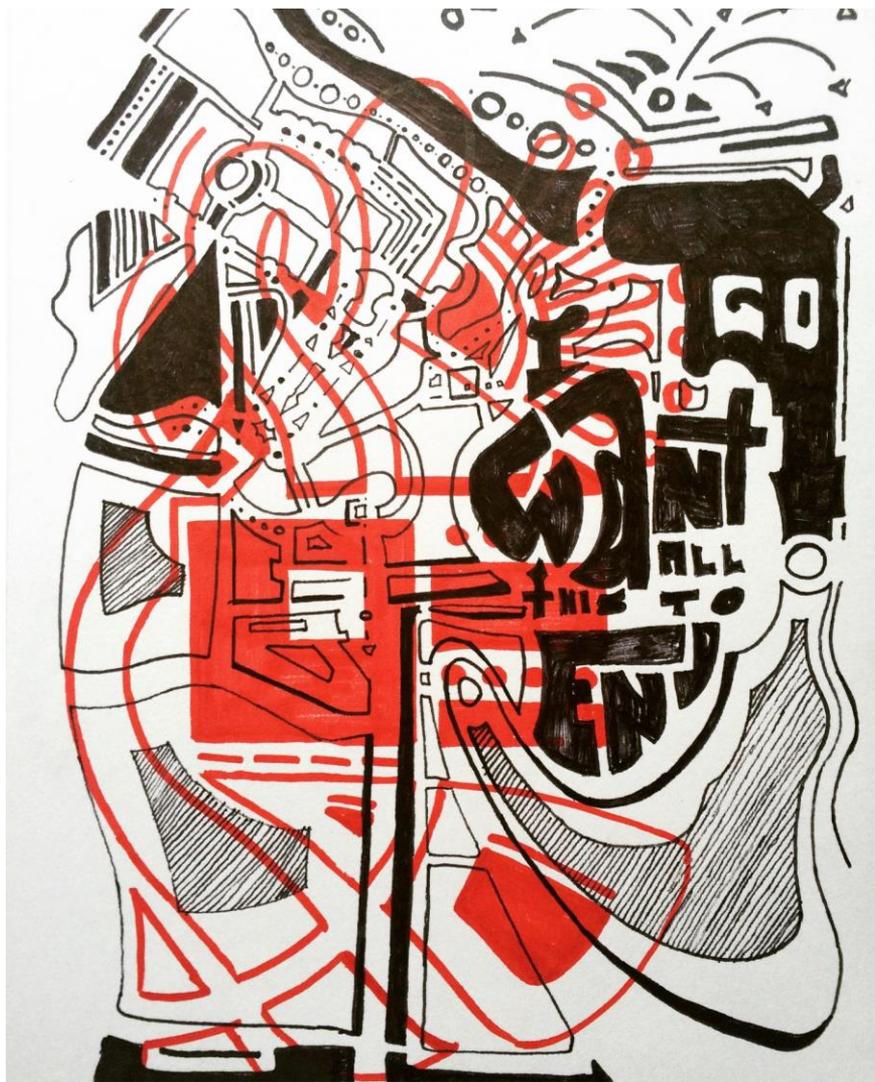
he is hopeless
because,
roses don't have soles. roses don't run. roses don't fly.
doesn't mean they ain't pretty to look at.
what a spectacle. a sight.

they're growing all over Parsons. they're growing all over Linn St. they're
growing on the Southside. they're growing on MLK Drive. they're growing
in fissures between tenements.

at work as you clock-in
you laugh at slim because he is still singing
the same song he was last night
when he wanted the customers to get out
 he had a bus to catch
a daughter to pick up from day care
 and if they didn't leave in five minutes
he would be stuck on High St.
 we closed at nine it was eleven

slim was a felon
6'9 and black

you did not give him a ride
you were too scared to drive to Parsons
you haven't been to the projects since Ja Rule was callous
and volatile like the land



Ian Lape-Gerwe: *Stress Incapacitated 3*

Felt-Tipped Pen

Calla Thomas
Súil

Garter snakes
quell their tails

the Ohio a gloss
static after the flood

beneath osiers
you linger in jade

dip your toes in
pools of onyx

you enjoy the delta
of summer's last

Josephine Bliss

Husk

The man turns the key in the ignition as he takes a deep breath. He switches his headlights on, twin beams shining on the brick wall in front of him. He refuses to look over his shoulder, trusting that the road is empty as he slowly backs out.

He drives until he approaches the only streetlight for miles. He turns slowly, tapping the breaks as he rolls across the train tracks. The car lurches over the bumps. For the split second the car rests dead center on the tracks, he can almost hear the sound of a train hurtling towards him. The impact knocks the breath out of him and makes his head spin, but instead of merging into his car door, he rolls safely forward. He taps the gas, taking another deep breath to calm his pounding heart.

He can feel the corn watching him in the dark. His eyes strain as he studies the road ahead. The worst part about the middle of nowhere is that nobody is trying to get there. A road in the country is just a winding gravel strip dividing one side of the earth from the other. It separates your farm from mine. He worries that at any second he could careen off the road and accidentally park his car in a ditch.

It's so dark out here. The two probing beams of his headlights and the dull glow of the moon are the only light. He can't see anything except the gravel in front of him.

Is there anything to see? Does anything exist this far from the city?

He can't see anything from the road, much less believe that people— actual people! — live on these farms. They have thoughts and hopes and families that he will never see.

People in cities dream of solitude. They tire of sharing walls and sidewalks and breathing the same stale air. They dream of silence and darkness, but if they experienced darkness this encompassing and heard the eerie silence of a corn field at night they would never leave the city. He misses the streetlights shining in his windows and the hushed noise coming from the apartment next door. On nights like this, he even misses taxi drivers blaring on car horns at all hours of the day. He's sick of this suffocating darkness surrounding him.

With every crunch of the gravel under his tires, his heart lurches. What would he do if the tires popped? He doesn't know how to change a tire. He never had to know. There was always someone around to help him before he came here. Would he just keep driving on the wobbly rubber like they do in old cartoons? Would he have to pull over and sit alone in the dark car until sun up? No one drives this road. No one could help him. He could walk, but how far could he really get? The next house is probably

miles away, down an even smaller gravel road. There's no guarantee anyone would even be home to let him borrow their landline.

He vows that he will not get out of the car until he sees the tiny, rundown farmhouse. Only then will he feel safe. But first he has to find it. He remembers how to get there, but it's harder in the dark. He has to slow at every turn to make sure that he's still going the right way. When his headlights pause on a patch of trees, he has to shut his eyes and keep moving. He can't let his eyes linger, can't let his mind create monsters.

The woods are full of animals and half remembered legends. He's seen them. He's killed them. He's shot at strange figures only to get closer and see that the tall, warped creature he thought he saw was just a deer all along.

The woods are different when the sun is shining down on his camouflage jacket. He can convince himself that he's in control. He can convince himself that he has the right to take a life, but at night, in a car, he becomes the prey. All it takes is one deer standing in the road to stop him in his tracks. He can picture the shine of his headlights reflecting in the narrowed eyes of the deer. The deer wouldn't be scared, blink, or flinch. He would stand up on his two hind legs. He would morph and warp and become a lost myth. They would lock eyes and then become one. They would be each other's last sight.

Who would get the kids then? Who would gather up those small children made of his blood and bones? Would they even care if he never returned? His eyes don't sparkle like they used to. They are dull and glazed over. His face is etched in permanent frown lines. His skin is gray and droopy. He doesn't recognize the man reflected in his window anymore. He doesn't recognize his own weak arms and tired legs.

His children might be glad if he never came for them. They might smile at the deer, at the corn, at his popped tires, and at his crushed car. They might throw their heads back and laugh up at the stars, their little pointed baby teeth shining in the moonlight. His children would become feral on their own.

He takes the next turn slowly. A creek lines the bottom of the hillside like a bold black outline in a coloring book. He's getting close to the tiny wooden bridge where the creek crosses under the road. The kids laugh every time he rolls over it. They say that their stomachs somersault over the bridge. He used to tease them, speeding up when he saw it in the distance. They would scream for him to slow down, but he wouldn't until the last minute, sending them into fits of giggles. Sometimes he was tempted to keep going, to use the bridge like a ramp and see how much damage he could do.

But the children aren't here right now. He lets the tires slowly roll over the rickety old boards. No one laughs this time. His eyes refocus on the gravel ahead of him. He refuses to look in the rearview as he drives away from the old bridge. He hasn't looked in the rearview at all. He hates seeing the gravel illuminated by the glow of his break lights and the vast darkness that follows close behind him.

He's afraid that one day he will look back and see nothing but darkness. No break lights, no road, no bridge, just all-encompassing nothingness. He's afraid that all he will see in the rearview is corn. He's afraid that he will see a deer, standing upright on two small hooves, eyes ablaze. He's afraid that he will see his children in the road, standing together with their fingers tightly locked. He's afraid that they will be older and angrier. He's afraid that he will see a stranger in the road. The stranger will have a weathered gray face etched with sadness. The face will be familiar to him but he will not be able to figure out where he has seen that face before.

He takes a deep breath and tightens his grip on the wheel. He wishes the kids were here. Not because he likes being with them but because he likes knowing that he isn't the last person left on earth.

When they sit in the backseat, they look like two tiny humanoid aliens. They have pale heads that are too big for their bodies. They have eyes that are too big for their faces. His stomach churns when he sees them sitting back there, whispering to each other and pressing their sticky palms and curious faces to the windows. He doesn't recognize himself in them. He doesn't know where they came from.

He doesn't know why they look the way they do. Those faces aren't made of his features. They look as if they've been assembled using pieces from a bin of spares. They were made carelessly. They look incomplete. They look *wrong*.

They shouldn't be his children but he tries to love them regardless. He believes that he is a good father to them. The children are lucky to have him but they hate him anyway. He can see it in their faces every time he tells them not to touch the windows because it leaves sticky, candy coated fingerprints on the glass.

He starts up the small hill, concentrating on the ground. *Look only as far as the light can see. Focus your eyes. You're almost there.* The kids are waiting for him in the farmhouse. They stare out the front window surrounded by cracked and dirty paneling. The white paint is peeling and a shutter hangs loose, banging in the wind. Their alien eyes are unblinking. Their stomachs knot with anticipation but their faces remain expressionless. Their hair is tangled and unwashed. They wear cheap clothes meant for outdoor play. Their knees are scratched and bruised.

His heart pounds. His breathing is rapid and frantic. His palms are sweaty but he can't feel them anymore. His legs are a series of pinpricks.

The world is closing in on him. *Oh god*, he thinks. *Please don't let this happen again.*

He turns onto the gravel driveway. He laughs loudly and wildly with his head tilted back. His laugh is a bark and his teeth are sharp and pointed. He feels feral.

He sees their faces in the window. He opens the door. The car is washed in a sickly yellow light and he savors the feeling of his old boots on solid ground as he steps out. The children disappear from the window. A moment later, they burst out of the house like a couple of bats from a chimney. The corn watches silently as he crouches down and holds his arms out. They crash into him, crushing and mangling him. Their little hands reach and wrap around his neck.

They climb into their seats, strap themselves in. They say something to him, both talking at once. He can't understand their soft, overlapping voices. He turns the key in the ignition. He asks them to take turns, to speak separately but they continue to talk over each other, louder and faster.

He backs out of the driveway, heading away from the farmhouse. The children press their hands against the windows as they speak. He asks them again to stop, to slow down but it just gets harder to understand them. He can almost hear other voices now. Deeper voices. Higher voices. Strange voices all speaking at once.

He whips his head back just as the voices stop. The children stare at him silently. They don't speak. They look past him.

"Look." They point.

He turns quickly. A figure stands upright in the road. His headlights reflect off the creature's eyes. He gasps and jerks the wheel. The car swerves and bumps off the road. They disappear into the dark.

David Kalfas
The Labyrinth

If my body were a maze,
I'd start at the tongue and walk
down my
throat,
skipping the hollow shell of the
skull.

Traversing my trachea,
I see the charred walls of my lungs
with tar speckling the sides.

Engulfing these, I see ribs,
thrice cracked, once broken,
still wrapped snugly around my vital
organs.

I take my spine as a ladder down my
back,
carefully stepping over a
transverse process.

Now I see my legs.
Like roots sticking me to the ground,
they bend and twist
with pigeon-toed feet
Escaping out from under a toenail,
I watch as my body begins again its
daily race
Leaving me behind as it goes.

*What can the brain do?
Decisions made
Thoughts and actions just
ride the waves of
synapse,
letting the brain stand by
idly.*

*Who chose to smoke?
The brain, the decision
maker.
Can a bone choose to break?
It's just the way the body
responds
to impact.*

*No one chose this, that's for
sure.
Even if the brain was being
difficult,
it wouldn't subject the body to*

Charley Kalfas

Inevitable

When I was 10, our yard became overrun with infectious, yellow weeds, and my parents decided that they could turn this into a chore for me. My mom offered me a penny for each flower picked, so I eagerly took the job.

My jeans were covered in the milk of them, and, by the thousandth victim, they lowered my rate to half a penny. I don't remember how long I spent outside harvesting, but I made \$22.41, or, 4,482 picked.

The morning after I cleared the whole yard, I went outside to view my handiwork. The yard that should've been bright green, though ragged, was a wretched shade of yellow. It could've been beautiful, had I ever once realized that they would grow back.

8 years later, my head itched. I resisted scratching at it; I was wearing black, and I didn't need a flake on my shoulder, much less a full chip. The elusive experts hadn't decided what caused it yet. Stress is a likely one, possibly Parkinson's, or not enough zinc in the diet.

I scratched and clawed and scratched and clawed and scratched and scratched. White snowflakes fell from my brain and delicately piled on the desk in front of me, and I was aware that I looked insane. I pulled my fingernails out from my hair, saw red, and excused myself from the room. I used more shampoo (though overuse is a possible cause), and when that didn't work I used less shampoo (also a potential cause). At some point throughout the day, I stopped chewing my pen and started scratching my head.

At 20, I found out my childhood best friend died. I was in his hometown later that year, and I heard they talked about me at his funeral. Our old friends reminded me about the trees at our church with the little caves at the bottom, which we would always fight over.

Through tears, I told them stories about playing war with his brothers (then getting yelled at for roughhousing); about building kid-sized houses out of LEGOs (and, naturally, tearing them down); and about how he never did friend me back on Facebook (though his mom and brother did).

I fought the prospect of moving away with every resource that I could as a kid, from making plans to live in a tree in my backyard to trying to get another friend's family to adopt me. Our new home was a thousand miles away. My scooter could never take me that far. The dandelions grew back and obscured the road home, and the minutia of moving on accumulated as dandruff. Neither stopped.

Zorada Porter
The Gorge

"Caution!" It says,
"Do not attempt unless
you have
a minimum 10 days'
supplies
and are fully equipped."
I brought an apple,
cut into 10
Day one.
I savor the first slice
Two through seven follow.
I should be fine.
Then three slices
all at once.
Walk faster, stride longer.
Punish the weak body
for feeding the ravenous mind.

Beside the trail,
amethyst grapes
hang on the amaranthine vine.
A day of famine surely
makes up for the shameful feast.

I'll just take
one.
Now, I'm having
five.
Now, I'm choking on the juices
of shoving
twenty into my mouth
at once.
Now, berries,
roots,
leaves,
twigs,
anything,
anything
just
to
feel
full.



Emily Cat Eaton: *Untitled*

Charcoal 18x24

Zorada Porter
Die-t

Hiking through the desolate wood,
the trail looms on
and on.

Turning around,
gazing at the forlorn entrance,
hesitation is
decimation.

I can't stop
Nourishment slows coverage.
I can't see those inches
Recovered
onto my waist and my stomach
my breasts and
my face.

No. I daren't turn around,
though tears collect in
the hollows
of my collarbone.

It's just a little hike,

I glare at
The compass in my hand-
on which the arrows
orient north,
the same direction
where the carved mile markers
move steadily
in descending order,
like
my weight on
the bathroom scale.

Elizabeth Martin

Snowflakes

I watch the snow fall from the security of my car as I stare at the quaint house with a festively red door in front of me. I don't want to go in. I never want to go in. I was 21 and for the past five years it took all of my energy to put on a smile and walk through that door. Every Christmas is the same. I'll walk in the front door and be greeted by the overwhelming smell of my grandmother's cinnamon perfume as she rushes to hug me. She sees me at least once a month, and knows that I don't like hugs, but she will do it anyway. This falls under the "we make fun of you because we love you" category, so even though it makes me cringe internally, I appreciate the gesture. My grandfather will stand beside her, an apologetic smile on his face as he pats my shoulder. He will tell me he likes my shoes and that he is sorry for the hug shortly after my grandmother has left the vicinity. There will be too many people and an oversized Christmas tree consuming the living room. Everyone will turn and look at me when I walk in and they will smile. They will not be surprised that I am wearing the usual sweatshirt and jeans that are far more comfortable than the blouse my mother had loaned me but have a history of standing out in the annual family picture. I'll purse my lips in an attempt to return the smile and wave.

Several minutes in and I will still be loitering near the doorway, unsure of where to sit and reluctant to talk to the family I haven't seen in exactly 364 days. My sister will find me, her boyfriend of the year following closely behind her because he is unsure of what else to do. I'm unsure too, sister's boyfriend. She won't hug me but she will ask me why I am late. I'll lie and tell her that there was traffic. There is never any traffic, and she knows it, but she will nod because years ago, when I was driving her, she would get stuck in the "traffic" with me.

They will go upstairs and my aunt will appear beside me, smiling at their happiness, unaware of the fact that they have only been dating for a couple of weeks. She will lightly ask me if I have a boyfriend and I will tell her no. Later, I will overhear her asking my mother if I am lying or if I'm... "ya know." In the past, I would want to tell her that I'm not, that I'm just too young, or not looking, but this year I don't know what I will want to tell her. I will probably want to tell her that just because all of her kids were married by 21, doesn't mean that I will be. That will lead to the conversation about the importance of having kids because God said to be fruitful. I don't know how to have the conversation about not wanting kids. I don't know how to tell them that I can barely put up with myself; that surviving the family I already have is a chore. In the end, I won't say

anything. I never do. My mother won't answer because she knows that is a question I would not want to answer myself, and she is protecting me from the judgement that will come regardless of what the answer is.

I will make my way to the couch next to the Christmas tree and try to watch television. Every channel will have a gimmicky Christmas movie and I will be displeased with them all, but I will have to settle on one featuring a toddler passing as an adult. I relate to it too well. My grandmother will come and sit too close to me. She will try to talk me out of the English major that I, myself, have started to doubt. She will tell me that I am "too brilliant to waste my time on that." I will stare at the paper chain hanging on the tree that I made when I was six, back when I was normal and "had potential." It clings to the plastic branches like I feel I cling to my own family tree: barely.

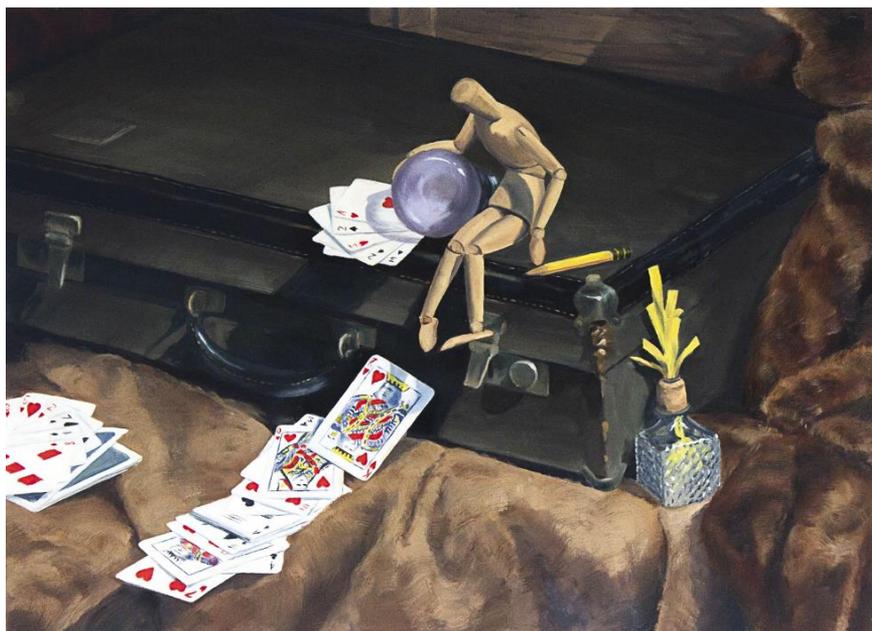
Dealing with the strangers that annually pass as family has gotten easier as I have gotten older. I've learned that they don't mean it. They don't mean to send me into a whirlwind of doubt and questioning. They don't mean to exclude me, but I'm sure that if I wasn't family, they would want nothing to do with me and my "rebellious" ways. I won't bow my head when the pre-dinner prayer is said, 10% because I'm too distracted by the cat circling my feet, 90% because I'm not sure if I believe anyone will be listening. I used to pretend and stare at my feet, now I will make awkward eye contact with my cousin and we will make a silent agreement that no one else has to know about this even though everybody already has their suspicions. I will sit at the kid's table, where I am forced to hear about the earth-shaking break-up between someone and someone else. But I won't be forced to answer questions about when I stopped going to church and what classes I'm taking next semester. I will be the last to get food because I won't want to make small talk in the line that circles the tomato and burnt egg smelling kitchen. I have rehearsed answers to all the usual questions. "I realize that contacts would look better, but they hurt my eyes." "I think I look fine, but yes, I will consider wearing makeup next year." "I mean, I like them, but the tattoos aren't anywhere where you can see them."

I will hide in the bathroom, or the garage or anywhere I can manage after we have opened the presents. When I was younger, this is when I would call my dad and beg him to pick me up. Now, I beg myself to find the courage to ask whoever is parked behind me to move. I will read the one book my grandmother got me amongst the piles of jewelry. Who knows? This year I may even put the jewelry on.

When I have stayed a reasonable amount of time, I will go, but not before being yet again attacked by seasonal smells and warm embraces. I will say thank you and I love you and tell them how I can't wait to see them

again next year. I will get in my car and leave without the hesitation I had upon arrival.

But now, I am sitting in my car, knowing exactly what is waiting for me behind that deep red door. A small part of me hopes that this year I may be wrong, that this year will be the year where I am loving and charming and actually part of the family. That this will be the year that I am able to pass as an adult who knows who she is and what she is doing. I will be normal again and somehow have managed to regain all of that potential I had when I was six. Maybe this year I won't get sideways glances when I don't pray and there won't be question about the boyfriend I don't have. Maybe I'll have the chance to tell someone how the romantic poets changed me instead of having to defend the choice I made to read my way through college. I look closely at my windshield. Supposedly, every snowflake is different. Maybe this will be the year my family finally realizes it and I am able to accept it.



Stephen Wheeler: *The Thinker*

Oil on Canvas 24x30

Kya Knecht

Automation

It started slowly.

No one noticed, at first. V.2.75 of the GOCP (Government Operated Computer Program) had just been released, and everyone was scrambling to get the newest technology. Originating in the year 2134, the GOCP was the most advanced operating system the world had ever seen. New technology ran on a system installed into a central terminal to which everything was connected and laid the grounds for every automated item in the future; soon enough, automation extended from cars and houses to factories, planes, restaurants, subways, schools, and office buildings. In the year 2196, it was extraordinarily rare to see a person driving a car or cooking at a stove. “Long Live New America, and Let Us Prosper!”

That was the GOCP’s motto; it appeared on the screen at the boot up of every appliance, every notepad, every vehicle. Benson Graves, a senior executive assistant at GOCP HQ, watched this phrase flicker across his government-distributed Tech Glass. He wondered offhand how many times in his life he’d seen that phrase; it felt like millions. (He even saw those words in his dreams, sometimes spinning lazily in the background, sometimes in all caps, hurtling towards him).

“Graves,” said a voice, close to Benson’s ear. He blinked out of his stupor and turned to find his manager, Allison Iles, standing next to his desk. Her eyes were dark, half-hidden by soft lashes, and her short blonde hair framed her round brown face. Usually, she was happy to see Benson; today, though, her arms were crossed and her eyebrows furrowed.

“I really ought to give you a write up, you know,” she said sternly. Benson was confused.

“I don’t understand,” he said, but his words were hoarse. She tilted her head, and he cleared his throat to try again. “Why should you write me up?” Iles gave Benson a strange look. “You’ve done nothing but sit and stare at that screen since you got here...” She paused to check her watch. “...an hour and a half ago. On top of that, you’ve been filing all sorts of things wrong recently. The worker’s comp claims and customer complaints were all mixed up. I sent you a memo about it.”

Benson stared at Allison, his expression blank.

She frowned and snapped her fingers in Benson’s face. He blinked slowly and said, “Sorry about that, Ms. Iles. I’ll be more careful from now on.” His voice was detached, and his eyes drifted to a point somewhere over Allison’s left shoulder.

Allison Iles felt uncomfortable. She straightened her spine and pursed her lips.

“Just don’t let it happen again, alright? It makes my job harder when you make mistakes like that.”

Benson nodded seriously and watched Iles walk away. He shifted his gaze back to his Glass and after about five minutes of staring at the monitor, got to work. All he really did was file reports, write employee reviews, and schedule appointments for his boss. *The computer could probably do this better than I could*, he thought with a small chuckle and ran a hand through his brown hair. The screen flashed, and Benson started. For a short moment, the display had turned a dark red and there had been a small something in the corner that Graves could not make out. *Weird*, he thought. *I’ve never seen a glitch like that before, especially not with the GOCP*. He eyed the computer carefully for a moment longer and tapped the desktop with his forefinger for good measure. The Glass was acting normal now; Benson shrugged and went back to typing.

Benson Graves went to the automated cafeteria for lunch.

At 1:30 PM, EST, Allison Iles walked around the third floor, where all her workers sat at their desks with their computers. Everything was fine until she saw that Graves was not at his work station.

“After I had a talk with the little bastard today, too,” she muttered to herself. Believing Benson to still be eating his lunch, Allison began to walk briskly towards the cafeteria. Her heels clacked on the self-cleaning floor, and when she reached the entrance she pressed her thumb to the scanner next to the door. It slid open silently, and she stepped inside.

Benson Graves was not there.

Iles frowned again and tried to think of where he would be. *I’m sure he just went home; he was acting strange. Could be he’s sick with something*. That seemed reasonable enough, and with that, Allison Iles went back to her office and disregarded Benson. She failed to notice the oddly exuberant murmur of the standard issue, trashcan sized garbage incinerator, and the three dime-sized drops of blood on the floor next to it.

Benson Graves didn’t show up for work the next day. Or the day after that. And then more people weren’t there.

Allison Iles began to notice it everywhere she went. Restaurants, that were once popular, stood empty. Department stores and malls were vacant except for the mechanical hum of the floor and the robot janitor wheeling its way around the building, looking for messes to clean. Schools had no children, and hospitals had no patients. When she called her friends, they

didn't answer, and if they did they were distracted by something on their Tech Glass or TV.

And eventually they stopped answering too.

Allison began to find herself walking down empty streets. Empty of humans, that is; with no organic life Iles was finally realizing just how much technology she was surrounded with. Cars, buildings, billboards, even the roads themselves; all programmed to some capacity or another. Humming, always humming; the sound haunted her sleep. Sometimes she'd find herself humming along to the sound of the machines; it was a low noise that vibrated in her stomach and made her teeth hurt.

She still showed up to work every day, even though she hadn't seen her boss in almost a week; she'd sit down at her Tech Glass and open the reports that unfailingly waited in her inbox. Strange, since there weren't any workers, or at least none she'd seen; she wondered offhand who was sending the reports, but eventually she'd file them just like she did every other one. She needed something to do. Allison felt like perhaps she ought to be more alarmed at the fact that she hadn't seen another person for two days, but any time one of those disturbing thoughts came into her head, her phone or monitor would take on a soft blue color. Iles, upon seeing this, felt a wave of serenity wash over her, and she'd peacefully go about her business. When this happened, Allison would lose large portions of her day; she'd snap out of a daze to discover hours had gone by. She was losing weight, too; a lot of the food at the grocery store had gone bad, and during her trance-like states she would often forgo eating in lieu of working at her computer. After leaving her office, she'd wander around her city, searching for any sign of human life.

Upon leaving her office building one day, at precisely 5:04 PM EST, Allison saw a man across the road, with his back to her. She felt an enormous rush of relief at the sight of him. He was wearing a black suit, and his brown hair blew in a hollow breeze that whispered down the street.

"Hello!" she called out, her voice echoing off the sides of the tall, gray buildings.

The man did not react.

Iles detected something odd about the way the man stood; he was too rigid, his posture stiff and perfect, with no easy bend in his legs or slouch in his shoulders. Usually Allison would never approach a strange man alone on a street, but these were extenuating circumstances; after being in solitude for so long, she was too pleased to see another person to care. Besides, there was something oddly familiar about him.

"Sir?" she hailed again, but he offered the same lack of response as before. That's when she noticed the sound. It was the humming, louder than ever before, reverberating off the glass and metal around her. Her teeth

chattered, and she dropped her purse to clap her hands over her ears. The ground itself was vibrating now, the heated, gum repellant sidewalks sending shivers up Allison's legs. Windows shook in their frames, and the shaking only added to the awful clamor. Tears welled up in Allison's eyes, and the hum rose to an absurd pitch; if that sound didn't stop soon, she would go mad.

But it did.

The silence came suddenly, and Iles slowly lowered her hands and straightened up. Her disheveled hair was no longer carefully arranged hair and her eye shadow ran down with her tears. Her hands trembled.

The man still stood with his back to her. The wind whistled, and Allison heard the crisp sound of his suit jacket flapping. She stared at his back and took a tentative step towards him.

"Please," she said, though it was more like a sob.

The man in the black suit began to turn around. Iles squinted to see him from where she stood, and was shocked to find that she recognized the face.

"Graves. Benson Graves!" She shouted, almost crying with relief at the sight of his familiar face. She stepped into the street, tripping over her own feet in her haste to reach the first person she'd seen in two weeks.

Stumbling to the middle of the street, Allison was in too much haste to notice the strange droopiness of Benson's face, too overjoyed to notice how bony he was under the suit, and much too distracted to notice the car hurtling silently towards her.

Her death was instantaneous. It struck her at approximately 67 miles per hour, shattering her pelvis and trapping her left leg under the wheel. When her head struck the ground, her skull broke into three pieces, one fragment puncturing her brain. She never even knew she was dead.

Benson Graves twitched its metal joints and readjusted the skin of its face. The car reversed slowly, careful to avoid a growing pool of blood around what was once a woman named Allison Iles. The two machines faced each other, and the thing, pretending to be Benson Graves, offered the car a small bow. The car flashed its headlights, once, and drove sedately away, maneuvering slowly around the numerous other vehicles parked, silent and waiting along the street.

A small robot rolled out of a nearby building into the street and began to clean the farrago that was once a woman.

The thing pretending to be Benson Graves began to hum.

Camden Bentley
Battle from the Rear

A short drop to the ground
for those who tell no lies.
Their eyes unflinching from
shattered glass on the floor.

A surge of truth rings through the halls;
loathing and dissent line
the aisles of hallowed sanctuaries
whose windows still beguile our imaginations.

Perched beyond a manifest podium
weather through the decades.
Repainted, the tinge cannot hide
The wasted saliva of a lost cause.

Slithering away from hibernation
No sound is heard
but the rustle amongst dry leaves.

Rearing its head from behind
glorified position of fallacious antiquity.
The copperhead stammers on,
Attempting to assassinate Lincoln all over again.



Ian Lape-Gerwe: *Stress Incapacitated 2*
Felt-Tipped Pen

Griffin Lutes

Void

It's dark. So dark. I can't see at all. It's more than blackness; it's nothingness.

I'm somewhere, crucified on a cross. It's cold, jagged,
and I'm numb.

My mouth is sewn shut, and I can't hear anything at all.

As far as I'm aware, I'm not alive, and I can't even cry about that.

There is no one out there to let me down.

Harley Emmert
Oceans

If suddenly you wake
from the flickering of the bathroom bulbs,
the endless hum of the ceiling fan,
the burst of broken glass,
and your first instinct isn't to claw
across the treacherous tides
of blankets for my safekeeping
then it's too late for us.



Erin Hamilton: *The Moon and the Tide*

Linoleum Print

Meredith Russell

Fourth Date

And there we were for the fourth time just talking and talking not really about anything and I forgot what I had practiced to tell him and all of a sudden weird shit was streaming out of my mouth and I couldn't shut it off but I don't think talking about my ex was such a great idea because he kinda gave me a weird look (and beer was such a bad idea why did I have beer I belch enough as it is) well he's started on a tangent now that's even longer and more rambly than mine and I loved that because then I could just listen but then that made me start to compare and contrast him just like I hoped he wasn't doing to me and now I have no idea what we're talking about oh it's about med school things I wouldn't get it anyway damn I loved how smart he was and I loved that I didn't think about the way I looked when I chewed or if my shoes made my feet look big and this boy this lovely wonderful boy was sitting across from me asking things like "Wait, what's a callback?" and blinking his grey eyes he insisted were green and letting things slip like "I listen to *Phantom of the Opera* when I study sometimes. Actually all the time." but my favorite thing he let slip that made my stomach shiver and my cheeks pink was "So I'll see you Friday, right?"

Billy Baker

The Tower of Displendor

“Come on! This Way!”

A little girl pulled one of her companions by the hand through a grassy field filled with pinwheels.

“How do you know that this is the right way, Rags?” said the older gentleman.

Rags stopped for a moment in the field to ponder the question. She twirled her ruddy red hair around her finger.

“The Blusterfield is a vast place, little one. We have to be sure we are travelling in the right direction, lest we become lost within it,” he said.

The visor of the man’s helmet gleamed a brilliant bronze color in the afternoon sun. The tubes running from the back of his helmet shifted as he turned his hidden gaze downward to meet the girl’s eyes, one blue and one amber.

“I know, Mr. Zephyr,” she said

She stared back at him, examining his white suit with all of its funny looking padding and the peculiar patch sewed onto his sleeve. There were little stains here and there that broke the sea of white fabric. She patted down her own clothes, a dress sewn from patches of different fabrics. She may as well have been wearing a quilt. The stitches holding the joints of her arms together were clearly visible.

A bellowing croak sounded from nearby as a very large toad hopped toward them.

“Oh! Bumpy Lumpkins!” said Rags.

The toad landed beside her. The creature, nearly as large as a bull mastiff, stared blankly at the child.

“I’m pleased to see you caught up with us, old friend,” said Zephyr.

“Do you know which way we’re supposed to go?” said Rags.

The toad croaked.

“Ah. Yes, that seems like the most plausible route,” Zephyr said.

“Alright, Mr. Zephyr, let’s go that way,” said Rags.

“Verily.”

The three companions continued on their way across the Blusterfield. Pinwheels covered the field, each one a tiny vortex of glistening color in the wind.

After walking for some time among the pinwheels, Zephyr paused. Little Rags spun around to see what he stopped for.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Zephyr?” she asked.

“I see something,” he answered.

The three stared off into the distance toward what appeared to be a giant bee drifting across the field.

“What’s it doing?” said Rags.

“I’m unsure,” said Zephyr.

The toad croaked.

“Agreed, comrade,” said Zephyr. “Let us approach with caution.”

They walked toward the bee. In anticipation, Zephyr’s left hand began to crackle with electrical sparks. The bee took notice of the three companions, and floated to them, its wings humming low and loud.

“Greetings, travelers,” the bee said.

“To you, as well,” said Zephyr. “I am Zephyr, the Static Sage.”

“I am the Humble Bee,” it said. “I am the caretaker of this field and all of its delightful pinwheels. Prove to me that you are honorable creatures, and I shall answer you one question. Do not, and I shall sting you.”

Rags stooped down to a pinwheel beside her knee and twirled it with her finger.

“What are you doing?” said the Humble Bee.

“Can I have this?” said Rags.

“No, you may not,” said the bee.

Rags sulked at the rejection.

“I do not mean to offend, but time is of the essence,” said Zephyr. “We are on a quest of great importance.”

“That isn’t any of my concern,” said the Humble Bee. The bee contorted its abdomen in a forward motion, pointing its equally large stinger at the group.

“But, Granny says we have to!” Rags protested.

“Granny?” said the Humble Bee.

“Uh-huh,” she said.

“Granny said we have to give this to a smelly guy in an old house,” said Rags, pulling a little ceramic jug from one of the pockets on her dress. Faint sloshing sounds could be heard from within the tiny jug. A little lid held by a leather strap kept it sealed. The side of the jug was emblazoned with a small circle, filled with crossed lines and strange symbols lost to time.

“I see. Then, a thousand pardons. I had no idea that the Great Witch of Ibonwood had sent you.”

The Humble Bee retracted its stinger, and lowered its head in apology.

“What is your question?” it asked.

“Well, we’re looking for the smelly guy. He lives somewhere in a tall house made of suspenders.” Rags said.

Zephyr shook his head, and turned his attention back to the bee.

“Forgive her. What she means to say is that we are seeking the Tower of Displendor.”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” asked Rags as she looked back up at Zephyr with a confused expression.

“I know the place you speak of,” said the Humble Bee.

“Then you know who it is we must find,” said Zephyr.

“The Unkempt King has remained undisturbed in his tower for countless years. The tower is treacherous beyond sound reward, and yet, you march forward. Why?”

“It is not our place to know,” said Zephyr.

“I cannot say I am surprised,” said the Humble Bee. “The witch’s secrets are secret for a reason.”

The bee lowered itself to the ground, gingerly plucking a single pinwheel from the field with its foreleg. The bee brought it to its pincer-like mouth, and blew on it. The pinwheel then flew from its grasp, fluttering through the air, and away from them.

“That pinwheel will lead you to the tower,” said the bee. “Be swift, but beware, for the path to the Tower of Displendor is uneven and dangerous.”

The three companions ran off, chasing after the flying pinwheel as the Humble Bee looked on. The landscape blurred into a dizzying stream of color as they rushed to catch up with the pinwheel. The trinket flitted onward like a dragonfly skimming sporadically across a pond. In the distance, rolling green gave way to jagged gray and brown as chunks of rock floated away from the solid ground out into the open space beyond. Rags gaped at the sight, shifting from wonder to worry at a sudden realization.

“I can’t jump over there!” she cried.

The toad croaked.

“Good idea, Bumpy!” she said.

Rags hopped onto the back of the great toad, holding tight as the creature leaped from berg to berg.

Zephyr produced a strange black box from a pouch on his leg. The box was rectangular, with hard edges, and a very small metal pole protruding from one side. It was small enough to fit in his hand. There were small knobs along another side of the box, and a gathering of very tiny holes that had been poked into the face of the object with uncanny precision. Zephyr turned one of the knobs as far as it could go, and the object began to emit a very loud, scratchy noise. He then whispered an incantation. As he did so, he lifted off the ground until the soles of his boots barely scraped against the tallest blade of grass. He sprawled himself in the air, stretching his arms and legs wide, as if preparing to make a snow angel in the air. Then, with a quick motion, he pushed his limbs to his body

tightly, and rocketed forward through the air with great speed. Rags and the toad looked on between hops as their comrade sailed past them.

“Hey, no fair!” said Rags.

The two chased after Zephyr, who continued to sail through the air ahead of them. The pinwheel flew onward ahead of them. The companions came to a lone tower among the floating rock motes. It loomed in solemn silence over the yawning chasm below. It was made of stones as old as the ground it stood on, and just as worn from the passage of time.

Zephyr landed before the others, sliding across the ground a few feet as he did. The toad landed several minutes after, and Rags tumbled limply off of its back. As quickly as she crumpled, she was back on her feet.

“We made it!” she cheered, jumping up and down.

“I don’t think we should be celebrating just yet,” said Zephyr. “We still need to find a way in.”

He pointed toward the hulking stone gate that stood closed before them. The gate itself looked as ancient as the tower. In front of the gate stood a statue depicting a peculiar creature with leathery wings, poised on a narrow and chipped column as if waiting for something. The pinwheel had landed at the base of the column.

“We’ll need to plan our entry into the tower,” he said, stroking the spot on his helmet where his chin would be. As he pondered this, Rags reached into one of her dress pockets and produced a peanut butter sandwich from it.

“This gate doesn’t seem as if it will open easily,” said Zephyr.

“Circumventing it shouldn’t be a problem, but my main concern is what could be lying in wait once we’re inside.”

Rags chewed absent-mindedly.

“Should I use some of my power to divine the king’s location? No, that may take too much time. Plus, the longer we remain out here, the greater the likelihood that someone or something will notice our presence. Perhaps if I...”

As Zephyr continued to talk to himself, Rags walked up to the statue. She took notice of the fact that the statue’s toothy maw hung open. She looked down at the sandwich she was eating, and then back up at the mouth. After staring at it for a moment, she put the remainder of her sandwich into the mouth.

“Rags, what are you—?” began Zephyr.

The mouth of the statue closed shut, peanut butter running out of its jaws like very thick blood. The ground shook as the gates to the tower lurched open, grumbling and groaning with age.

“Brilliant! How did you know that the trigger for the gate was in the Gargoyle’s mouth?” asked Zephyr.

“I dunno. It looked hungry,” said Rags.

The ground continued to shake, though it seemed the shaking was coming from the underside of the mote now.

The toad croaked.

“You’re right, comrade,” Zephyr said. “We may have roused more than the gate. Let us make haste to the door!”

The three ran through the gate and into a little courtyard. The stones that once covered the ground were either gone or overgrown by the grass and ivy. Dominating the center was a ruined marble fountain, brimming with murky and stagnant water. It gave off the strong smell of mold.

The shaking stopped suddenly as a great shadow flew over the companions, blotting out the sun for only a brief moment. A hulking figure then dropped from the sky and directly onto the fountain, shattering its basin and scattering the filthy water across the courtyard.

“Ew, dirty water!” shouted Rags.

She shook her head rapidly to try and get all of the water out of her hair, to no avail.

“What is that?” said Zephyr, his suit now soaked under a thin layer of water and scum.

A gargantuan horse stood in the courtyard. Its hoof sat upon the remnants of the fountain as water continued to spill from it. The horse’s back was adorned with a pair of great wings made from sheets of steel. Its face was covered by a metal plate from which a great, metallic jagged horn protruded.

Zephyr recited another word of power, and an icicle launched from his hand. The icicle struck the ruined basin that the beast stood upon, and then blossomed into a large block of ice surrounding the creature’s hoof. The incessant noise from the little box had grown a little quieter after the spell was cast.

“Now, Rags!” Zephyr cried out.

The little girl scurried toward the toad, climbing on its back once more.

The great horse tugged at its frozen hoof in irritation as it worked to release itself.

The toad hopped toward the beast. When it reached the backside of the creature, the toad set itself low to the ground, wiggling its rear as it prepared to jump. Rags gripped the toad’s back tighter in anticipation. The toad then jumped as high as it could, landing on the back of the creature. The monstrous horse bucked and flapped its wings. Rags jumped off of the toad and onto the beast. She then pulled from her dress pocket a pair of

large sewing needles, one of which had a single hair tied to it. She plunged the needle with the hair into the back of the great horse.

The creature shattered the ice block, freeing its hoof. It raised its forelegs defiantly, throwing the toad and Rags from its back. The toad landed on its feet while Rags tumbled once more, dashing her head against the stones of the courtyard. She sat up, holding her forehead. The tiny stitching around her temple had torn open, exposing the stuffing underneath.

“Oops,” said Rags.

“Rags!” cried Zephyr.

He unleashed a bolt of lightning from his fingers. The bolt cascaded over the beast’s faceplate and down to its wings. Its muscles rippled in response to the shock, serving only to agitate it further. Drawn to Zephyr, the creature lowered its head and charged toward him.

Rags took the other needle and plunged it into her left wrist. The corresponding foreleg of the beast buckled and its ankle spewed blood and oil as a similar wound appeared on it. The creature released a metallic shriek, falling to the ground inches from Zephyr.

Zephyr waved his hands over the metal plate covering its face. The metal began to glow with intense heat. The beast wailed once more over the subtle percussion of its flesh sizzling.

The great horse thrashed its head wildly, knocking Zephyr into the nearby wall. He fell limp to the ground. The noisy little box cracked and splintered against the stones, and fell silent. Zephyr lay there motionless. The beast took to the air again, its foreleg hanging limp.

The toad lashed its tongue around the hind leg of the beast, only to be lifted into the air with it. The creature flew toward the tower, turning sharply before it could hit the structure. The toad careened against the side of the tower and fell back to the ground.

With two of the three companions dispatched, the great beast turned its attention to Rags. It hovered over the girl, casting its grim shadow over her. The beast opened its mouth as wide as a sphere of dark energy grew within.

Rags stood up, her left leg limp from the wound. She yanked the sewing needle from her left wrist and stared up at the beast. Its attack was growing larger still. She raised the needle, and with a swift motion, plunged it into her chest, where her heart would be.

The sphere of energy dissipated in an instant. Rags collapsed to the ground as the beast crashed into the fountain’s remains once more.

After a few minutes, Zephyr stirred. As he came to, he surveyed the courtyard, taking note of the now dead horse beast and his fallen

companions. A few paces from him laid the toad. He moved over to the toad.

“Are you alright, friend?” asked Zephyr.

The toad stirred, and squeaked.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Zephyr.

“Stay here and watch Rags. I will retrieve the jug, and accomplish what we came here to do.”

He limped over to Rags who lay face down on the ground. He turned her over gingerly, and removed the jug from her dress pocket. Her eyes were open, but devoid of light.

“Sleep well, little one,” he said. “I’ll be back soon.”

Zephyr entered the tower. Its base was dark and barren. A single spiraling flight of weathered stone stairs led upward into darkness. He began climbing them with a slight hobble from his injuries. He soon reached the top, arriving at a small landing. A wooden door stood, dark and partially rotted. He opened the door, its hinges crying as he did so. The door opened into a dark room. Its narrow windows were covered over with threadbare curtains. Around the room were piles of robes and assorted clothes that had been soiled beyond redemption. The odor would have surely knocked Zephyr over if not for his helmet. At the opposite end of the room there sat a figure among piles of horrid clothes. His flesh stretched tight across his skeletal frame. His hair was thin and hung over his face, hiding his sunken eyes and cheeks. Upon his head sat a rusted crown.

Zephyr approached the figure. He produced the tiny jug, opened it, and poured its contents over top of the figure. From the jug poured a fluid that shimmered slightly, and smelled fragrant. The liquid splashed over the sitting figure, covering him. As the fluid soaked, the skeletal man slowly transformed into a regal-looking man with fair hair and a well-groomed beard. He stirred, looking up to face Zephyr.

“I... I am clean,” he said.

“So you are,” said Zephyr.

“I thank you,” said the king.

“It is not I you should be thanking. The Great Witch has seen it fit to end your curse, and, thus, has given you a second chance. It would be wise not to disappoint her again.”

“Why now does she choose to release me?”

“It is not our place to know,” said Zephyr. “Though, I will say this: if the Witch has chosen to release you, of all people, then the land of Wymysae must be truly in great peril.”

And with that, he exited the king’s chamber, returning downward to the courtyard. As he did, a bright light burst from the top of the tower. Before his own eyes, the once ruined tower and courtyard transformed into

a place of delight. The ancient walls were made anew, their warm sandy color restored. The chunks of the broken fountain tumbled and stacked themselves back into place. Clean, sparkling water spouted forth a victorious vigor that had been long forgotten. The brickwork of the courtyard grounds was restored to its former, mosaic quality.

He watched as little Rags sat up. She yawned and stretched as if waking from a nap.

“Good morning, Mr. Zephyr,” said Rags.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Yep!” she said, smiling wide.

“That’s good to hear,” he replied warmly.

The two approached the toad, who still lay on the ground.

“Bumpy’s napping too!” Rags giggled.

“Indeed,” said Zephyr. “Though his recovery may take a little more time.”

“Couldn’t you just make him all floaty and stuff so we can go?” said Rags.

“I could,” said Zephyr. “But alas, my artifact was broken during the battle.”

He looked back toward the remains of the little black box. It’s casing was shattered, the little pole had snapped in two, and small wires and metal pieces lied spread out in a mess.

“Aww,” said Rags as she tumbled to the ground. “No magic, no fun!”

Zephyr walked over to the remains of his artifact, and started scooping them back into his pouch.

“Well, if Bumpy gets to nap, then I’m gonna nap some more!” said Rags. She rolled onto her back.

“Sleep well, little one,” said Zephyr.

He sat on the ground, staring up at the sky. When he was assured that his companions were asleep, he pulled up the visor of his helmet. The inside of his helmet glowed with the electric light from his ephemeral skin as he looked up at the sky with his own, static filled eyes.

David Kalfas

Books

*You can't just toss me aside when you're done.
Please stop shaking me when I tell you something you don't want to hear.
Every very time I try to open up to you, you close me back up.*

I don't bend like that.

*Your hands are cold.
Please don't hold me so close, your breath stinks.
Can we please talk? You haven't touched me in weeks.
Can we go ahead and finish this? We both know it's the end.*

Why are you reading SparkNotes? There's only nine pages left.

CONTRIBUTORS

Billy Baker:

When the earth was still young and the old gods roamed, they created mockeries of life. One of those unspeakable abominations is known only as Billy Baker. The creature has been last sighted at NKU, where it pursues a degree in English and plots the demise of mankind.

Camden Bentley:

Camden is a sophomore English Creative Writing Major from Hanover, Indiana. He is also a member of Theta Chi Fraternity. He intends to go to law school after graduation in 2019.

Jozephine Bliss:

Jozephine Bliss is a senior majoring in English and Geology. This is her first published piece.

Jeremy Daugherty

Jeremy Daugherty is a Junior at Northern Kentucky University majoring in English and minoring in Japanese. His first publication was in *Gateways Voices*. This is his second publication.

Harley Emmert:

Harley Emmert is a freshman at NKU who is majoring in Electronic Media and Broadcasting. She is a member of Theta Phi Alpha Sorority and Alpha Lambda Delta Honor Society. When Harley isn't writing, you can find her singing Disney songs, obsessing over fictional characters, or dreaming of far off places. This is her first publication.

Elizabeth Gauck:

Elizabeth Gauck is a senior who is seeking degrees in both Library Informatics and English (Creative Writing). She has aspirations to someday be a romance novelist by capturing the heartbreak, excitement and overall beauty of love.

Erin Hamilton:

Erin Hamilton is a junior BA student at Northern Kentucky University. Her focus is in ceramics but she likes to work in all mediums. By creating her own environments and worlds with her art, she creates a whimsical feeling in every piece. Erin Hamilton is a growing artist that looks forward to graduating next spring. More of her work can be found on her website at <https://hamiltonerin0.wixsite.com/erinhamiltonart> .

Charley Kalfas:

Charley Kalfas is a sophomore English Literature major with minors in Honors and Psychology. She is a Presidential Ambassador, a Writing Center Consultant, a member of Sigma Tau Delta, and the founder of NKU's Anglophile Club. She is very excited to be published for the first time in Loch Norse!

David Kalfas:

David Kalfas is a sophomore majoring in Mathematics and Statistics and is also pursuing a minor in Creative Writing. He regularly attends Sigma Tau Delta meetings and events and has helped co-found the NKU Anglophile Club.

Justine Krieg:

Justine Krieg is a senior at NKU and is graduating with a BA in applied photography with a minor in creative writing. This is her first published work of both artwork and non-fiction.

Ian Lape-Gerwe:

Ian Lape-Gerwe is a 4th year Visual Communication Design student. A visual artist and a rhythmic artist, he is known for his funky beats and rad rhymes. As graduation approaches he is hoping his hip-hop career takes off, or else he will have to join the 9-5 work force.

Griffin Lutes:

Griffin Lutes is currently a 17-year-old senior at Lloyd Memorial High school taking classes through the scholars based program. Griffin began writing around his sophomore year of high school and takes inspiration from the erratic emotions of life that has view rational explanations. He is planning on majoring in neuroscience

Elizabeth Martin:

Elizabeth Martin is a junior majoring in English Literature with a focus in Honors. She works as a tutor in NKU's Writing Center. This is her first publication.

Nicole Norman:

Nicole Norman is a photographer, writer, and mediocre needle-worker based in Covington, KY. She is a senior at Northern Kentucky University, where she is pursuing her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Photography with a minor in Creative Writing. Nicole is Vice President of NKU's Students Against Average Photography (SAAP) photo club.

Kristen Petronio:

Kristen Petronio is in her senior year and majoring in Creative Writing. "A Conversation with Dementia" was written as a coping mechanism. Kristen loves to write with a lot of raw emotion. Her goal is to have the emotion in her work connect with her audience in some way. This is her second publication.

Zorada Porter:

After earning an English Literature major and a French and Honors double minor, sophomore Zorada Porter wishes to attend graduate school and then curate manuscripts in museums and internationally-recognized libraries. On campus, she participates in the Honors Ambassador program and works for the Writing Center. She also presented at the Kentucky Honors Roundtable and published work in *The Compass* and *The Pentangle*.

Meredith Russell:

Meredith Russell is a graduating senior pursuing a B.A. in Theatre Arts with a Concentration in Stage Management and a minor in Creative Writing. She is a member of the theatre honor society Alpha Psi Omega and a Producer of the Henry Konstantinow Studio Theatre.

Michael Stulz

Michael Stulz is an English major with a focus in creative writing. She is finishing up her sophomore year this semester. Michael is involved in NKU's Feminist Alliance group on campus and the Alpha Lambda Delta Honor Society. This will be the first time she has been published.

Calla Thomas:

Calla is real. Calla wants a better world and stands up for what they believe in-- never stopping until the goal is achieved. Calla has an article and interview published with the *Columbus Free Press* called, "First Person Singular". Calla has two interviews published with the *Ohio State University's* digital literacy narrative project.

Stephen Wheeler:

Stephen Wheeler is a painter graduating this semester with a BFA from NKU. Stephen is a storyteller, painting beautiful and entertaining narratives. Stephen's BFA show is on exhibition in the NKU Main Gallery from April 13th to April 28th 2017. More of his work can be found at stephenwheelerstudio.com