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wtma

LITERARY
JOURNAL

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Editor's Message

Welcome to the 2026 WTMA Literary Journal, Volume 1! This is a student-led journal that showcases the creativity, talent, and unique voices of students at Well-Trained Mind Academy.

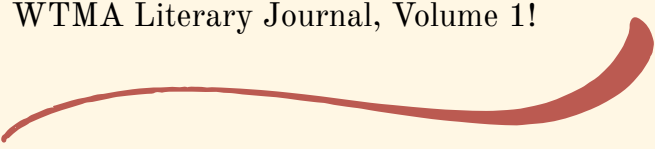
The journal is divided into four seasonal sections, each featuring pieces connected through shared themes, moods, and color palettes inspired by the changing seasons.

The journey begins in autumn; a section centered around adventure and reflection, from venturing alone into the woods to questioning self-worth. Winter follows with themes of tension and isolation, from a tale of betrayal within a kingdom to the loss of a beloved pet.

Spring introduces a softer, lighter atmosphere filled with humor and new beginnings, ranging from unexpected moments in the kitchen to joining a rebellion. Finally, summer explores discovery and growth, from solving a mystery to remembering falling in love.

As you read through these sections and explore these works both individually and as a collection, I hope you are encouraged to reflect on your own emotions and experiences. I also hope that within these pages, you may find inspiration to begin or continue creative projects of your own.

Thank you for being here, and I hope you enjoy the 2026 WTMA Literary Journal, Volume 1!



I want to give a huge thank you to all the students who shared their work! I truly appreciated seeing your creative pieces and I am very grateful to have the opportunity to share your work with others! I also want to thank the students who showed interest in helping me put together this journal, especially the editorial team who played a major part in making this all happen!

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Design & Layout & Poetry Editor

Isabella Klaas
Poetry & Prose Editor

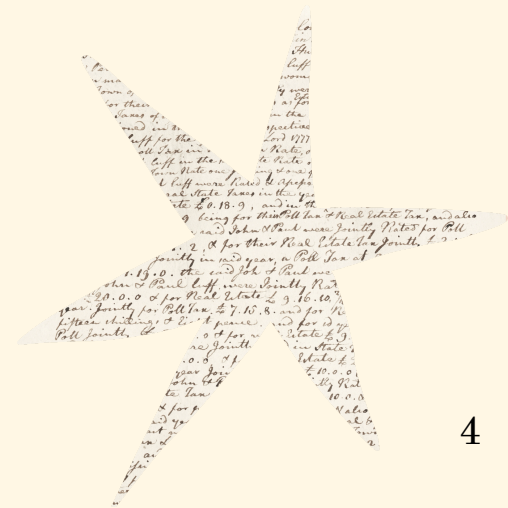
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AUTUMN



The Bird and the Fish

by Morgan Morris

Once there was a fish, slick like the water he swam in. His scales sparkled like garnets and rubies. Anyone who saw him was sure to think, “That creature is nothing if not beauty.” And he was, indeed, beautiful, but he was trapped. The walls of stones and murky translucent water boxed him in.

He glided along the bottom of the river, looking for the colors of rocks or other fish. Truthfully, he hated the bland stream and longed for something new and vibrant. He slid his fins against the water, swimming up to the crystal surface. He twisted among water lilies as light refracted through the water, glinting across his scales. He stared up at the stars. They were like spinning, spiraling bits of sun. The sky was a deeper, clearer color than he’d ever experienced, blue and purple and dark. But the clouds were so unlike what he had underwater. No senses of his to compare them to.

Existing parallel to the fish, was a bird. Her feathers were soft and ruffled. Although she could soar well, quite better than many other birds in fact, she didn’t enjoy it. She simply had no desire to fly. The sky was empty, no texture or shimmer or plant life. Not a single thing above could satisfy her. The trees and flowers



on the ground were nice, they were colorful, but they were dry and gave her no feeling of life. What the bird wanted more than anything was to swim. She slipped through the green branches and landed on the bank, next to the river. Moonlight caught on each ripple, moving back and forth like carved glass. Even the sounds of the water were unique, like spliced wind. A flick of gold grabbed her attention.

“Are you a bird?” the fish asked.

“I am indeed,” she replied, tilting her head animatedly.

“Then don’t you fly?” he implored.

“I can fly higher than any bird you’ve seen. Can you swim, fish?”

“Smoother than water moves. Is the sky as heavenly as it looks from here? Have you touched the stars yet?”

“The sky is nothing, it’s so empty! Is the water like cold liquid glass? How does it feel?” she inquired with passion now.

“The water is cold yes, but I can never leave.”

“Of course you can, I can take you out right now!”

“Would you really?” he asked with hope.

The bird flew back, and then above the water. She picked up fish with both her talons and flew him as high into the sky as they could go... and higher still. The fish looked down at his river and then up into the stars, they were so much brighter above water, and the sky was a swirling mess of violets and reds. Off on the horizon, a full yellow sun was rising. Bird released him, and now, for the first time, he was flying, falling, the air was so much more free than he could've ever known. He fell through a cloud as the sunlight hit his scales one last time.

The bird felt exhilarated by freeing the fish. He reached his goal, his dream. And with that feeling of fulfilment, she dove straight into the river. All her feathers were suspended as she got hit by the cold, fresh feeling of water. It had rained on her before, but she'd never been submerged like this. This was beautiful. She watched the light shine on every single thing around her, like the water and even herself were glowing. She felt like a part of the dark, blue, gemstone body of water as she sank to the bottom.

◆

Fire

by Astrid Hoffbeck

Dancing, licking, devouring.

Blue, green, orange, red.

A friend, a foe.

Bringing life, bringing death.

Destroying, growing.

Dancing figures in the flame.

Twirling in a mad dance.

Lasting for only a few seconds.

Then being reincarnated.

An everflowing cycle, until it burns itself
out.



Lizard Eye by Ellie Piehl

The Written Secret

by Alethia Andrews

He wrote down the poem,
Laid deep in the land.
Leaving a trail of sand,
For anyone to find pieces
Of a beautiful artwork.
So difficult to rework,
No one ever found the end.

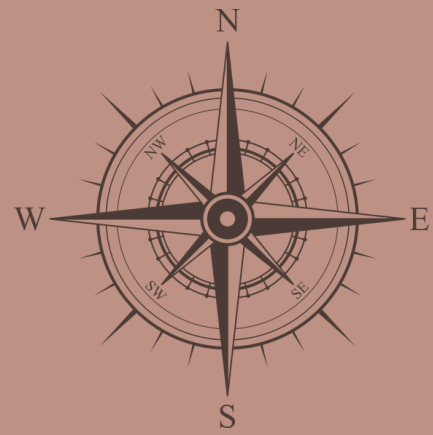
Leo the Dragon Slayer died in the wasteland.
Peter Watchmaker got lost in the cave.
Warner was drowned.

A young woman read of the poem
Wrote about it in her journal
The Diary of Myrtle
She watched as the legends died trying
To find the secret poem;
Their failures the end of them.
Not a single one ever got close.

Don of the Claw was killed by a monster
Shaw Redwrite burned in the lake of fire
Sam fell to his end

Myrtle drew the paths of failures.
She drew an X where they died,
And realized the poet must've fled.
He couldn't have put clues in the wasteland
If he'd walked all the way there.
Or climbed down the Great Tear.
He wouldn't have made it passed the sea

Falken of the Dreamwalkers stretched too far.
Growl Snapjaw drew the X at the snake river.
Saw ended in gloom.



She began to pack for her journey
Food and water and anything necessary
Clothes and shoes but she couldn't tarry
She called up to the last of the dragons
She said she needed a ride
And she needed him to take her side
Or she'd never reach the end of her journey

John the Serpent Charmer wandered too far
Andrew Windstrider was blown away
Max sailed off the world

The dragon huffed and snorted.
He had just been napping
and he disliked her incessant tapping
He wanted to end her journey,
Even if it was her journey through life
On the other claw she did wield a knife...
He stretched his wings and agreed to help.

They sailed over the wasteland,
They dove through the Great Tear,
They flew across the sea,
They slew the beast,
They passed through Labyrinth Cave
They soared over Snake river
They followed the trail of sand
To the end of the journey
She found the poem
She lifted the last clue
She opened it with shaking hands,
And saw it was empty
He was waiting for her to finish the story.



Wolves and Ravens

by Lucy Moore

Once upon a time there was a forest. Not a particularly wide forest, nor a particularly long one, but all forests are deeper on the inside than they look on the outside. This forest was tucked in between two wooded hills and filled the small valley in between.

One day, on the front porch of a little house on the smaller of the two hills, a girl sat on a porch swing reading. Her back was to the valley. The world was filled with the soft golden sunlight of time just before evening.

She kicked her foot against the leg of the porch swing as she read, her dark hair falling across her face. Suddenly, a voice from indoors called, “Brynna!”

The girl hopped off the bench and opened the front door. “Yes, Mom?”

Her mom stepped out onto the porch, dark hair the same color as her daughter’s falling across her shoulders. “I have something that needs to be taken to your Aunt Mavis. Can you take it to her before dark? You can probably just stay over at her house tonight.”

Brynna’s Aunt Mavis lived in a cabin at the top of the opposite ridge, across the little valley. Brynna and her siblings often walked through the woods to their aunt’s house and spent the night with her, since she had no children of her own. Brynna loved spending time there.

She headed into the house to grab her sweater before leaving. As she was walking out the door, she was intercepted by her foster brother, Trevor.

“Going to Aunt Mavis’s house?” he inquired.

“Yes.” She answered shortly, moving to walk around him.

“Can I come?” he asked.

Brynna turned around. A wave of irritation that had left while she was reading on the porch swing came flooding back. “May I be brutally honest with you, Trevor?”

Trevor looked surprised. “Go ahead.”

“You have been very, very frustrating today. I haven’t had a moment’s peace since I woke up this morning. I don’t know why you decided to be unbearable to live with today, but I just need a break, okay?”

Brynna took a deep breath, realizing that she had yelled the last few words. She unclenched her fists from around her sweater and looked at Trevor. He just stared back at her.

Trevor had come to live with her family almost two years ago. Brynna’s family was planning on adopting him soon. However, since they hadn’t known each other for that long, their relationship was more like that of friends and not siblings. So when Brynna yelled at Trevor, it felt to him how it might feel to you if your best friend yelled at you and called you unbearable.

Brynna felt guilty almost immediately. “I’m sorry, Trevor.”

He shrugged. “It’s fine.” Then he stepped into his room and shut the door. Brynna stood in the hallway for a moment, and then angrily pushed her guilt away. She had to get to Aunt Mavis’s house before it was too dark to see.

As she was pulling on her sweater and walking out the door, her mom stepped out of the kitchen. “Here is Aunt Mavis’s book. Have fun, stay on the path and watch out for wolves!”

“Yes, Mom.” Brynna answered, half laughing at her mother’s joking warning.

A couple of minutes later, she stood at the top of a small rise. From there, the narrow, crooked path, made by two generations of children's feet, disappeared into the thick woods. It was almost dusk. For some unknown reason, Brynna hesitated, nervously rubbing the red fabric of her sweater with one hand. Then she took a deep breath and plunged into the forest.

From the beginning, this journey was different from the others Brynna had taken. The sky was cloudy and gray. The dim twilight filtered through the trees. It felt as if she had stepped of the face of one world straight into another.

She followed the twisting path down the side of the hill. As she walked, the nervousness she had felt earlier dissipated. She hummed to herself and thought about the plans she had made for the next day.

Suddenly, like an explosion, a raven burst from the underbrush next to the path and landed in front of her. Brynna jumped back with a startled yelp.

The raven cocked its head to the side and looked at her with one bright eye. Brynna laughed rather nervously, her heart pounding.

"Hello. Where did you come from?" She stepped forward hesitantly. The raven didn't fly away. "Are you hurt?" She stepped even closer. The raven held perfectly still. It just looked at her with what Brynna felt compelled to describe as curious eyes. She crouched so she was almost level with it and reached out one hand slowly. The raven didn't move.

Just before she touched its glossy black feathers, an unfamiliar voice from behind her said, "Excuse me."

Brynna screamed and jumped up, whirling around. In the middle of the path stood a boy of about ten or eleven. He was wearing overalls and his blond hair stood straight up in the front. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Brynna recognized him. His family lived fairly close to hers. "Hi, you're Alaric, right?"

He nodded. "You should stay away from the ravens if you want to get to your aunt's house before dark."

Brynna blinked in surprise. "What did you say?"

He turned and started walking back down the path. "I have to get home. See you later!"

Brynna started after him. "Wait a second!" But he turned into the woods and disappeared into the trees. She hesitated for a split second, and then ran after him. "Hey! You shouldn't wander around the woods in the dark!" She called after him. But he ducked through the woods like a rabbit and before long Brynna couldn't see him anymore.

She stopped and caught her breath. *I suppose if he wants to get lost in the woods that's his business*, she thought. She turned around and began to walk back to the path. The evening shadows were beginning to deepen and fill in the corners of the forest. Brynna shivered and began to walk faster. She hadn't meant to be in the woods for so long. Suddenly she realized that she should have been on the path by now. Turning around to look behind her, she didn't recognize the woods behind her. Beginning to panic, she turned and ran in the opposite direction. The woods were slowly being swallowed up by the type of dense fog that dwells in valleys. Soon it would be night. Soon it would be dark.

Brynna stopped running. Wrapping her arms around herself, she took a deep, shaky breath. *I need to calm down*, she thought. She turned to observe her surroundings. Trees, mostly birch and spruce.

Fog. A darkening, cloudy sky. Nothing whatsoever that was familiar. All at once she wished dearly that she had let Trevor come with her.

Then she saw it. An oddly familiar marking on a nearby tree. She stepped closer. It looked like a rather crudely carved wolves head. Suddenly, a memory practically jumped on her. When her mom and her aunt were little, they used to play a game in the woods. They called it, “Wolves and Ravens”.

Laughing to herself, Brynna looked at the wolves head again. The nose was pointed to the right. She was about to head in the direction it indicated, when she saw a ravens head carved on the tree opposite. “Oh no”, she muttered to herself. Which was she to follow: the wolves or the ravens?

She pressed the palm of her hand against her forehead. Why couldn’t she remember? “One will lead you further into the woods, and one will lead you to Aunt Mavis’s cabin,” her mom had said when telling her about the game. But which was which?

“Oh!” In a flash, Brynna recalled her mother’s warning, “Watch out for wolves,” and Alaric’s cryptic remark, “Stay away from the ravens”. It was as if the child her mom had been had reached ahead through the years to help her.

Brynna followed the wolves head into the woods. At first it was difficult to find the carvings, but she quickly got the hang of it. Soon she began to recognize her surrounds. However, just before she began to climb the last rise, a twig snapped in the woods behind her.

Brynna froze. Her breath came in gasps. Someone was walking through the woods behind her. Clutching her aunt’s book, she broke into a run. She was so scared that she almost didn’t recognize the voice calling her name behind her.

“Brynna!” Trevor called. She slowed to a halt. Trevor came up next to her. “I was worried,” he said. “Mom said I could come find you.”

Brynna let out a breath. The light from the cabin windows shone through the trees. “Thank you, Trevor.”



Marks of Time

by Danica Piehl

I walked through a field, with the weight of a heavy burden on my heart. Far off I saw a tree. I walked to it. I felt as if it was calling my name. I looked at it and saw the lines of age upon it, the place where many children once had played. I saw marks on the branches and trunk where children had climbed. Lines carved into it, the initials of friends. Grooves from a rope where a swing once swung. I sat down at its base, and although time had taken the children away, I felt as if I could see their happy faces still, and could almost hear their joyful laughter. And I smiled.

My Own Competition

by Melinda Smith

I am my own competition
And I am losing at my own game
Slowly falling into a trap of my own mind

Told I am doing great
While I just feel like I am failing
Drowning in my own expectations

Praises and awards lining my mind
But my mind puts me in last place
Never better than the other

Becoming faster, stronger, smarter, better
Even that will never be enough
Always one step behind another

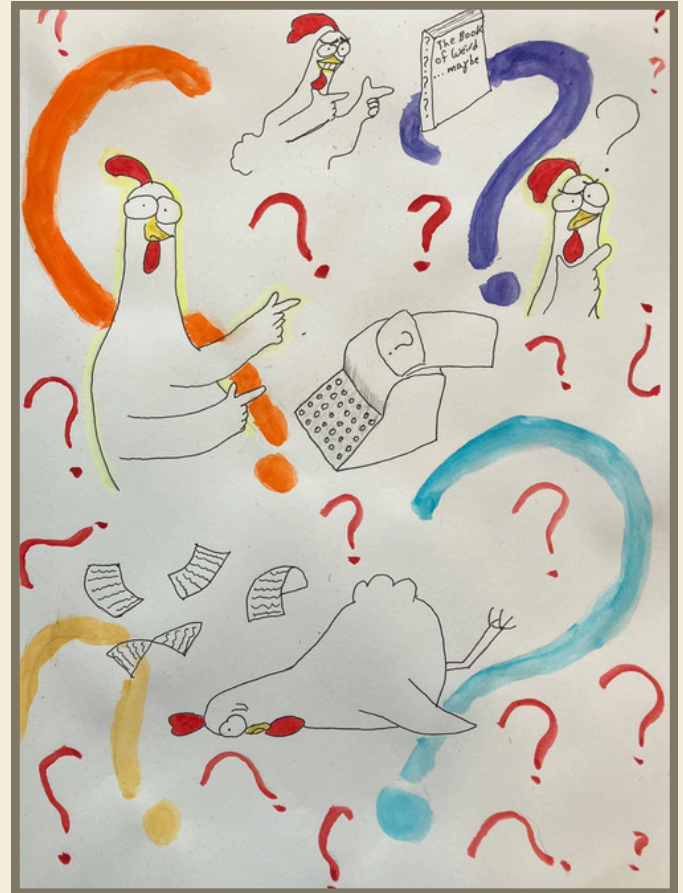
Keep trying to be better
But never quite reaching my own bar
Sitting alone surrounded by my own thoughts

Trying to balance the weight of my world
The feeling of stumbling through the dark
Falling and rising again

Slowly getting tired
Staying down longer
Before forcing myself up again

Losing the spark of inspiration
Trying to reignite it with a dying match
Never giving up

Keep trying, learning, practicing
Your best is all that you can do
Surrounded by love



Hens in the Art of Writing by Clara Graham

Slowly healing from your own mind
Still an impossible bar
But it's getting clearer

Accepting the world for what it is
Fighting for my own best
Learning to heal, rest, recover

I am my own competition
And I am doing my best
Rising out of ashes



Mushrooms and Magic Lightning

by Alexis Sutterley

Kaia sighed as she climbed down the side of the tiny ravine. The Moonlight Well was known for being the only place that moonlight mushrooms grow, silver mushrooms that have extreme healing compatibility.

I officially hate climbing, Kaia thought as her foot slipped for the third time, causing her to almost plummet into the darkness below. *It's awful*.

Suddenly, she saw a shimmering glow beneath her, and she sighed in relief. *Finally made it to the bottom*, she thought. *Now I just need to get out of here before any lightning storms come*.

Kaia jumped down the last few meters, then tucked and rolled, landing in a patch of grass with no mushrooms. She looked around and gasped. The bottom of the ravine was much wider than the top, and all the grass but the patch she was standing on was covered with shiny silver mushrooms that caught the moonlight. Everything seemed luminous; the rocks gave off a silver sheen, and the grass was the most vibrant she'd seen in ages.

Kaia grabbed her satchel and started stuffing it with mushrooms. As she touched the first mushroom, a tingle went up her arm. *Weird*, she thought, picking it and continuing on to the next mushroom. Each time she grabbed one, a tingle went through her arm.

After gathering about twenty or so, she glanced towards the 18-inch-tall mushroom in the center of the ravine's bottom. *That would be worth a fortune*, she thought, scrambling over a rock. She put her hands at the chunky base of the mushroom and squeezed, then began to rotate it.

The tingle went up her arm again, this time so strong that it almost made her fall over. *I don't want to damage the mycelium*, she thought as she gently tugged it free. She shoved the giant mushroom in her satchel and scrambled up a silver rock to the side of the ravine. As she examined the rock wall, she noticed a little path winding up the side of the ravine next to her. *How useful*, she thought, hoisting herself onto the small path.

Suddenly, Kaia heard a huge *BOOM* echo throughout the ravine. Blinding light came from above, and she saw the flash of lightning that arched overhead. She cursed, scrambling faster.

Another burst of light lit up the ravine, and suddenly Kaia was falling. Her entire body started tingling, to the point where she just couldn't feel anymore. Then everything went black.



Chasing the Shiny

by Anonymous

Black and white, black and white, they sit in
feigned ignorance,
As my hands plead upon the ivory keys, my
brain lost in smog,
I can't hear, I can't see, I can't breathe,
The tortured notes echo- not from the
strings but a shallow,
Artificial noise.

Anger, fear, humiliation,
Have visited me again, shattering the
remnants of my ill-fated pride,
And pushed me back towards my little
corner,
Where I can cry in peace over my
misfortunes,
In silence.

"You're so talented," they said, "You're so
musical," she reassured me,
But never could I tell if she was lying.
Deep down, I know she only said it to please.
You can't fool me; I always find the truth,
and this time,
She lied.

Competitions, you are my nemesis, you pull
my hair,
Drown me in pain, feed my self-doubt.
I am always the loser, always beneath
someone better,
Always less.

Isn't it music?
Shouldn't it feel free- not heavy?
Oh dear piano, tell me why
You loathe me so.

Dear fingers, why can't you work the one
time I need you?

Why must you tense and freeze
When beauty demands balance?
Dear keyboard, I love you still,
Despite the banging, despite the rage.

Dear teacher, I've let you down again,
haven't I?

I tried my best, I really did, I practiced five
hours a day,

Yet no matter what I do I always lose to
some prodigy who practices for ten.

I wanted so hard to make you proud and
When I fail, I am wretched.

I am like a raccoon, chasing something
shiny,

To admire when I go to sleep, to caress when
I wake.

I need that medal,

Not because it shines,

But because without it,

I don't know what all this was for.



Birds of AZ by Safa Kartoumah

Never Enough

by Anonymous

Never Enough work harder do better try harder be better never enough	Overwhelmed Closing in Always drowning	I know others have it worse I feel guilty for feeling This way When I have all this	It feels selfish But I feel the need to point out The good I've done To get credit
Sensitive can't focus always failing	The voices In my head The monologue The bully	I don't know real suffering It's not fair For me to feel this With so much privilege	They won't notice The mistakes are what show I need the validation The praise
why am I never enough? I want to be myself society says no they don't see my effort	The self deprecation The hatred Truth embedded in lies?	I feel alone Lost Inadequate Burdensome	They beat me Into the ground The weight Of expectation
Forgetting things Making messes Always feeling guilty	So much potential Lazy Undisciplined NO!	Why? I can never live up To what people expect of me A constant let down A disappointment	They don't know Don't understand Their crime What it does to me
I hide my pain No one needs my problems Don't be a burden You can cope	I try Harder than anyone Work Til I cry out in defeat	They think its intentional It isn't They think I don't care I do	Anxious All the time What can I do I just have to go on
Interrupting Zoning out Always getting lost	Exasperation Reminding me once more I didn't meet the Expectation	I care more than they can know It kills me to let them down Again What a terrible word	Never Enough Never Ever Enough
The mask It never slips Until it does The flood breaks loose	I'm not perfect I feel I need to be To be accepted To be loved But...		



one, aligning them in order. Eleanor soon realized that the timeline was wrong—possibly even deliberately wrong—and someone had tried very hard to cover it up.

A soft cough broke her concentration. Startled, Eleanor nearly dropped the book. She looked up to see Mrs. Calder from the historical society standing at the circulation desk, hands folded over her handbag. Mrs. Calder was known for being bitter, sharp, and a tad bit nosy. Her smile was polite but sharp, her gaze flicking not only to Eleanor, but to the book in her hands as well.

“Researching local history?” Mrs. Calder asked.

“No, simply dealing with a shelving error,” Eleanor replied, her voice sharper and more defensive than she intended. Confrontation was supposed to be avoidable, but Mrs. Calder had away of drawing it out.

“Funny,” Mrs. Calder said, tilting her head and staring at Eleanor with a hawk-like gaze. “That book just keeps turning up in the wrong place.” She lingered a moment longer, then left with a small nod that suggested she knew more than she let on.

Eleanor exhaled slowly. Glancing over her shoulder to confirm Mrs. Calder was gone, she locked the volume in the reference cabinet reserved for rare materials, her hands steadier than she felt. She told herself she was only preserving evidence of misfiling, of careless handling, of nothing criminal at all. Still, as she turned off the lights and walked past the long rows of quiet shelves, a single thought settled into her mind, causing a shiver to go down her spine. Clearly, someone in Briar Creek didn’t want Margaret Hale remembered correctly. But who? And why?



My Dad’s old Hyundai

by Juliette Rose Charlebois-Sinanis

“Humm!” I love that sound
The sound of that radio pound
Peppa Pig was my favorite show
Every time I bumped I said “Whoa!”
My dad’s Hyundai so old
While my dad was so bold
Listening to my favorite show
While my dad said “Let’s go!”
On my way to school
My dad’s old Hyundai so old
And I and my dad so bold



The Privilege of Suffering

by *Mary Gilbert*

Suffering is not an intrusion upon life,
but its evidence—the mark left behind
when something has been allowed to matter,
and has done so completely.

The heart does not break arbitrarily.
It fractures along the fault lines of its own
openness, yielding only where it first
consented to be altered.

We do not grieve what we have not loved,
nor ache for what we have not, at some point,
granted a kind of permanence.

And so loss does not oppose love,
but extends it—a persistence that continues
even after its object has withdrawn.

In this sense, grief is not emptiness,
but a particular form of possession:
not of what remains, but of what refuses—
even in absence, to be fully relinquished.

And what we call overwhelm
emerges in much the same way.
It is not excess in the world,
but the self encountering
more than it has yet learned to contain.

For we perpetually ask for more—
more depth, more meaning, more life,
without reckoning with the fact
that enlargement is not gentle.

Growth, then, is not an addition,
but a replacement.
The self that could not bear what is coming
is gradually dismantled,
and in its place something wider emerges—
less stable, possibly, but more capacious.

It is here that the feeling of ‘too much’ arises:
not as evidence of excess, but as a kind of
delay—

a lag between what one now holds
and what one has become able to hold.

And yet, even this dissonance
is a kind of privilege.

For there are lives that remain untouched
by such transformations,
lives that do not open far enough to fracture,
nor reach far enough to exceed themselves.

They are preserved, in a sense,
but only by remaining partial—
spared the strain,
and with it, the magnitude.

To suffer is to have crossed that threshold.
It is to have encountered something
that does not permit a return
to the former self.

Even longing,
that quiet and persistent dissatisfaction,
is not absence, but evidence—
the trace of having once perceived
something more.

One does not hunger
without some prior apprehension of
nourishment,
just as one does not reach
without some sense, however faint,
of what might be held.

And so the one who suffers,
who feels themselves stretched by becoming,
or hollowed by what has been lost,
does not stand outside of life,
but at its most exposed point.

For this is the cost of permeability:
to allow the world to enter,
to be altered by its presence,
and to find oneself unable
to return unchanged.

To love is to accept the inevitability of loss.
To grow is to accept the inevitability of
fracture.

To desire is to accept that fulfillment will
always remain,
In some measure, incomplete.

Remove these costs,
and what remains is not peace,
but reduction,
a life diminished to the point of safety.

A life without suffering
is not a life preserved,
but a life unopened.

And so the question shifts.
It is no longer how one might avoid pain,
but how one might understand it—
not as punishment,
nor as failure,
but as consequence.

To be marked
is to have permitted entry.
To be changed
is to become conscious of it.

And what announces itself as weight
is, in truth, the mind recognizing
that something has occurred
which cannot be undone—
something that does not pass through,
but remains.

To be affected, then,
is to carry this forward—
to bear within oneself
the enduring trace
of what has been loved,
what has been lost,
what has been reached for
and, if only briefly, held.

Pain, then, is not opposed to meaning.
It is meaning, made tangible.

And the life that feels it most acutely
is not the most burdened, but the most
revealed—
a life in which experience has not merely
passed through,
but taken hold.

What a privilege it is, then,
to be undone in this way—
to be expanded to the point of discomfort,
and to discover that even in that undoing,
something within you has widened.

What a privilege it is
to realize that suffering is not the mark of a
deficient life,
but of one that has exceeded itself—
a life in which something was received so
fully
that even its absence persists
as a shaping force.

In this light, pain is no longer merely
endured,
but interpreted—
the final articulation
of having lived without remaining
indifferent.

WINTER



The Blizzard

by Clara Graham

I am alone, at my desk, and our annual spring blizzard is raging outside. I can feel the wind whipping past the walls and rattling the window screens. Besides the storm, all I can hear is my keyboard clacking. And I wouldn't have it any other way. I am alone but not lonely because I have great company.

This morning, it looked as if someone had just blown flour over the earth; it had snowed all night. The best part, the strongest part, of blizzards always comes at night, which usually annoys me, because I hate to miss it, but today I don't mind, after waking up to something as beautiful as this morning. Now that the snow is coming down harder, I can barely see out the windows because the snow has stuck to the screens. The general shapes of the trees shaking and leaning to the left in the wind are barely visible.

On days like this, I try to imagine how it would feel if I walked outside, and the blizzard and cold didn't touch me. For that day I could just sit alone in my shell and enjoy the peace of watching the flakes swirl by. I feel that way in any storm; when something so great in nature is happening just feet away from me, even if it's behind a wall. It makes me feel like I'm on an island no one has ever seen or will ever see.

Now I am concentrating on the individual snowflakes. When you look at the whole blizzard, everything seems to move in the same slanted direction. However, it's really one huge mess of tiny bits of ice moving wherever they think the wind will stop chasing them. While some keep falling quickly towards the ground, others fly sideways suddenly, start moving upwards, and then follow a crooked path that eventually takes them right into a tree.

The blizzard is getting even stronger. It is harder to see outside, because everything blends together. Travel is nearly impossible. Since I have been awake, I have seen only one sign of life: a snowplow fighting a losing battle against the elements. I can't even see the road, or much of any house. Nature surrounds me, and nature seems to have its own plan, which it will carry out, because it is stronger and more determined than all of us.

Here at my desk, I am content and safe within this storm. My family is waiting for me downstairs. I am starting to hear doors open and close every now and then, and sometimes the smell of coffee floats up the steps. But right now, it's just me, the sound of my keyboard, and the blizzard which will soon give way to spring.



Echoes of the North by Melissa Arolli

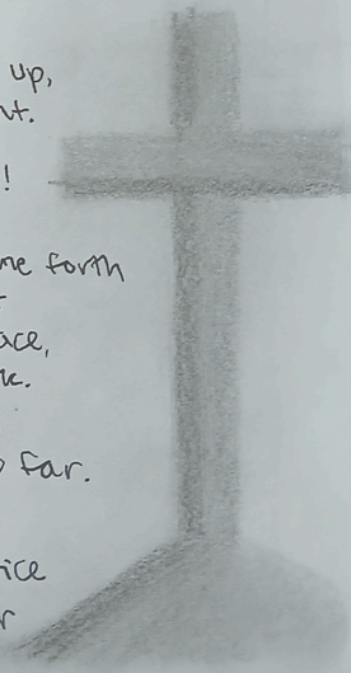
In This World of Darkness

In this world of darkness,
Where can I find the light?
The rock upon which I can rest,
The sword with which to fight?
To know between the right and wrong
And where my footsteps fall;
Be guided by the Loving One,
Even when I feel so small.

I cannot get out of this dark night,
No matter how hard I try,
It feels I'm wandering aimlessly,
That I'm living in a lie.
No light at the end of the tunnel.
No hope for me in sight.
I'm about ready to just give up,
To give up this crushing fight.

But there is a light ahead!
There is hope for me yet.
He is the strength to push me forth
And make me never forget
That He is the Prince of Peace,
To bring comfort in the dark.
He is the Goodly Shepherd
When I wander a bit too far.

He is the only one
Who could give His sacrifice
To ensure He is our Savior



So we don't have to pay the price.
Turn to Him always,
In your time of need.
He will lift you with His love,
Through His blood you will be freed.

-Janelle Bailey

The Battle of Darkness and Light

by Alianna Boudreau and Sadie Williams

Lightning flashed across the sky while rain battered down on the ground. The oak trees swayed viciously as the wind howled. The silver moon reflected off a small puddle the rain had created.

It shone as bright as a diamond shining in the light, but the dark clouds seemed to block out its shining beauty.

A grey furred wolf with a white stomach and muzzle emerged from the trees. His brown eyes glowed in the storm.

Suddenly, 3 small pups with all shades of grey and black came racing down a small hill to greet the wolf. "Nightwatch! You're back!"

A female wolf with black fur and light blue eyes said. She embraced him as their muzzles touched each other.

"It's been so long, Nightfrost!" the male wolf exclaimed. The pups below Nightwatch were either jumping up and down or batting at his paws and tail.

I mean, I only went hunting for some pesky rats, he thought. Nightwatch hated rats. Especially after what had happened years ago...

"Tell us a story please!" a small female black pup with cyan eyes asked.

"Midnight's been waiting for you to come back," Nightfrost said. "She missed your stories."

"We've all been waiting for dad!" two small grey male pups protested at Nightfrost's comment.

"Ash, Brezzleclaw, you know what I mean." Nightfrost gave both pups a look that said, 'You better not object,' and both pups closed their mouths.

Brezzleclaw.....I remember a wolf named like that, Nightwatch thought, his thoughts venturing into his past.

"You know, I could tell them about the story of the Battle of Darkness and Light." Nightwatch said.

Nightfrost glanced at the pups before saying, "Come on pups. Let's go back into our nest and hear a story from your dad."

All of the wolves gathered into a small cave with moss on the bottom and sat down right on top of the moss. Nightwatch gathered Brezzleclaw and Ash next to him and Nightfrost kept Midnight close to herself. After all, they fought a lot.

"This is the story of The Battle of Darkness and Light. You've been told of the legend of the Prophecy linking to the story. The part you haven't heard yet."

"Well, what's the prophecy?" Midnight yipped. *"The sky will darken with lies and betrayal. Truth will be hidden. The sun will turn as black as midnight. The Eclipse of lies shall begin. The power of dark will course through the night and spill in the day. But only a few will hold the power of truth and light. The battle of darkness and light has begun....."*

"Wow! That seems really cool!" Ash, a small pup with ashy grey fur, said.

"It was cool. Not only was I a chosen one, the chosen ones got powers!"

"They did?!" Brezzleclaw yipped with excitement.

"Yes. I shall now start the story, young ones."

The cubs huddled in with interest and curiosity.

“It was a bright day and many animals had not a single care in the world. Until the First Eclipse happened. The sky turned red and the sun turned black. Animals were frightened but Flame, the fox leader, was not. He told the others to get ready and he knew that the chosen ones were coming soon.”

“Did they!?” Midnight asked.

“Not exactly. They came.....quite a couple years later.” Nightwatch said.

“Many, many, many, years later, a wolf, me, Nightwatch was one of the chosen ones that the prophecy had spoken of. When I was a young wolf, our leader, Starwing, was commanding her wolves to move temporarily due to some fire started in the snakes’ land. Starwing was never really nice to me. She only cared about one wolf named Brezzleclaw. Anyway, I hated both of them. Brezzleclaw always got hurt in under 5 minutes and Starwing, like I said, never really cared for me or was nice to me.

So on the night we had to move, I was watching a wolf named Claws. His mother had gone to go hunt for rats while I watched him. He told me we couldn’t go back to the camp because there was too much smoke where our home was. After his mother, Breeze, took her son back, I wondered what we were going to do. I then realized, was I meant to live in the forest or in a camp? I decided I lived in the forest. So that night when everyone had calmed down and were sleeping, I ran off into the forest.

On the first day, I nearly got killed by a pack of foxes but a snake named Veloria saved me. I was obviously embarrassed how I was almost defeated by a pack of foxes because I was bigger and I was a wolf. I asked Veloria why she saved me and how she ended up in the forest like me, and she said that her Tribe’s home land was burned down and that she heard there was a stone that could bring back everything. She told me that not only did she want her home back, she wanted her friend, Slither, princess of the snake Tribe and next to be in line to become leader, back. She said they were good friends but they slowly got separated and finally Slither hated her.”

All the pups’ mouths were open. Nightwatch waited to see if they had anything to say but for once, they were quiet.

“We went to go find the stone and a fox came running to us asking us to hide her. We were confused but hid her anyway. Some other foxes came up and asked if we had seen a fox looking exactly like her and we declined saying we were just traveling. The foxes ran off and the fox we had hid told us that her name was Vixi. We then both realized that we might have been hiding a murderer! She told us not to be afraid because she had been framed for killing the Rabbit Tribe leader, Whitefoot. We asked what made her think that she was framed and she said in these exact words, ‘Because I wouldn’t kill anyone! I had no grudge against him! They said they found me over his body with small spots of red on my mouth, but in my defense, I had just recently eaten some red berries.’

But she also said that she had seen a dark figure named the Ravager. We didn’t sleep for nights because The Ravager was a mysterious Tribe of crocodiles and alligators and they were banished for Invading other Tribes’ land. At some point, two more animals had met us. Woodsplinter, an otter seeking revenge on The Ravagers, and Silverfrost, a sleek silver cat wanting adventure. Veloria said she had heard of The Ravagers and so did Silverfrost. Silverfrost then said she had to put her name as Silverriver cause they were looking for her to just keep her as bait and/or a prisoner.

A couple days later with surprisingly no obstacles except for climbing mountains and making a camp every few nights, we had finally gotten close to the stone! But there was a really big problem. It was a Human village. We had to maneuver our way through the village and at the end, we met a mouse named

Moxie! She was trying to find some materials for her mom, the new leader of the Mouse Tribe because their old leader, Mousewhisker, died from a cat named Night, and she said she had heard of the Ravagers. She joined our adventure and we finally found the stone thanks to Moxie's quick thinking!"

But we weren't alone. The Ravagers were there and they tried to take the stone! But.....we didn't realize fighting the Ravagers came with a price. Silverfrost was lost in the battle as we won the fight. After that, we all moved back to our homes wanting to never fight again."

"At least you guys won!" Brezzleclaw said.

"What were your powers?!" Ash asked.

"Oh, uhhh....." Nightwatch forgot that he had mentioned they got powers. "Well, I got the power of strength, Woodsplinter got the power to know if someone was telling the truth or lies, Veloria got camouflage, Moxie could change her size to the height of a cat, Vixi could run fast, and Silverfrost told us she could hear voices. Not of the dead. Just voices."

"Oh look...the rain stopped." Nightfrost said.

The cubs looked out. The sky was as clear as day and the moon shined once more. Everything seemed perfect. Like even chaos stopped just for them. Just to feel the moment of peace they felt so many few times.

Nightwatch breathed in that earthy smell and smiled. This is what he fought for. Peace, animals, and the world.



Memento Mori by Molly Tangorre

Christmas

by *Mary Alice Alligood*

Christmas is here,
With laughter and cheer!
Stockings and presents,
Red noses – so queer!

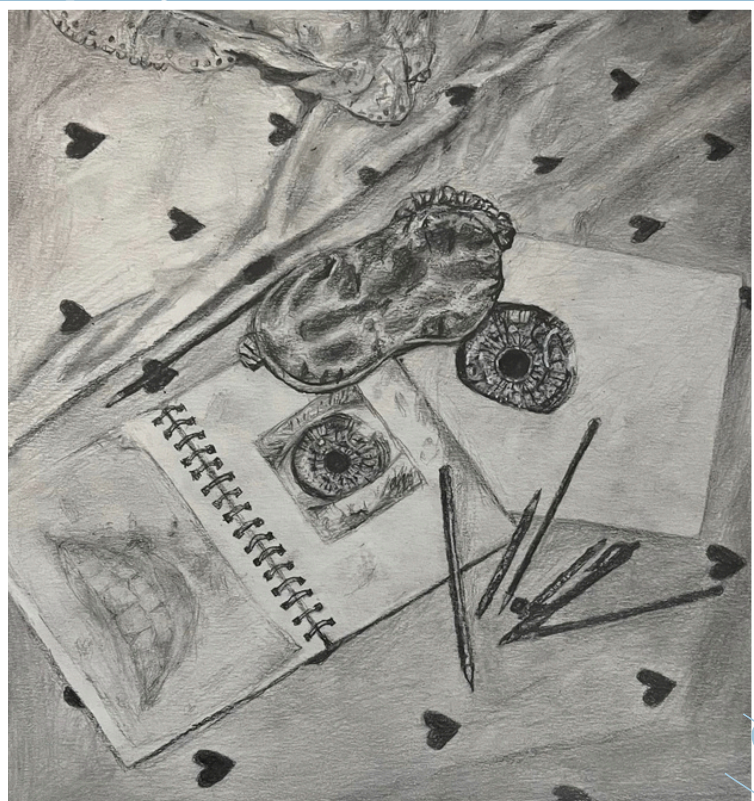
Soon comes the day
Santa readies his sleigh
To give toys to the children
Close and far away

So many baked treats
That I get to eat
Strudel and candy
Juicy, red meat!

Sister got blocks!
I open my box.
Brother got Hot Wheels!
All I got was socks.

Jesus is born
On a cold winter morn
In a small, dirty stable
To save our lost world.

Sleepless by Hannah Hornkohl



Luna Bunny's Nibbles by Astele Liu

Music

by *Harper Best*

The music was:
Snow on mountains,
Crystal fountains,
Honey on silver,
Making us shiver,
Filled with emotion,
The strength of an ocean,
Bold, as brass,
Sweet as spring grass,
The music was free,
Comforting as sweet tea,
The music, music...



Snowboarding
by Savannah Ng

The Dragon *by Amara McLaughlin*

Snowboarding is super fun,
Even if you prefer skiing,
To see the snow glittering in the sun,
You almost think you're dreaming.

To see my little brother, coming down the slope,
He is so cute, waving at us from below,
To check the clock and to have the little tiny
hope,
Is there time to go once more, or will we be too
slow?

Driving back down the mountain, there's lots to
do and see,
Talk together, listen to music together, those are
only a few things,
And see a gas station, a deer, even a few fake
trees,
And stop at In 'n' Out, with all its delicious
eatings.

When we arrive home, the hour is usually nine,
We are all tired and go to bed without a delay,
But we are still glad, happy, and fine,
It's been a truly wonderful snowboarding day.



Prelude to “The Estate Sale”

by Gwyneth S.

“The first book,” he said, gazing into the past, “was on our wedding day. ‘Anna Karenina,’ like in that movie. She really did love those books. After that it was every birthday, every anniversary, Valentine’s Day, Christmas, and sometimes for no reason at all other than that I loved to see her eyes light up when she opened them. Someday, my boy, you will find someone you love so deeply that you would go to the ends of the Earth just to see her smile.

Eventually it got to where we had an entire room dedicated to holding them all. But when she got sick, and we had to sell the house to pay for all the treatments, they ended up scattered all over, on any surface of that tiny apartment that would hold them. Sometimes they were her only consolation while the chemicals ravaged her body. After her funeral, I gathered them all and packed them up. It was too painful to see her smile on the covers and between the pages. I needed them gone. So I sent them to you, in your little antique shop, where I hope someday some lovesick boy will come in and buy them for his beloved. In the meantime, I know they will be well cared for in your hands.”



The Estate Sale

by Gwyneth S.

Cardboard against cardboard.

The groan of a tape gun
as it seals memories, seals
little pieces of her away

Gone in one afternoon.

All those books,
shipped away
to sit in some antique shop
in some dusty little town
until they call out
to a passerby,
and with one touch,

the cycle begins anew

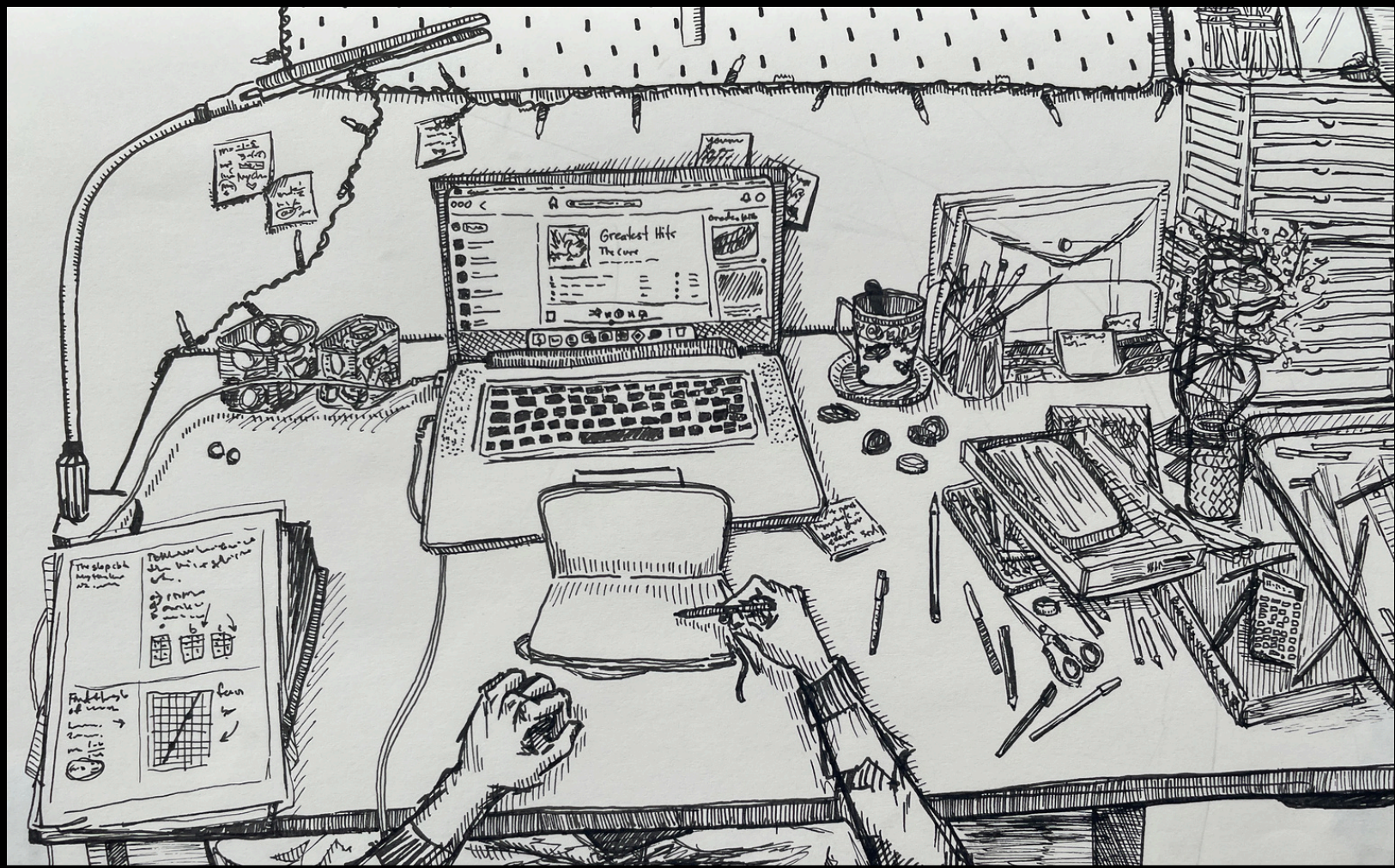


Space Case by *Alyssa Karge*

Cloud

by *Meru Sashikanth*

A breathtaking view lies below me
As I drift effortlessly above blanketed mountains.
I am surrounded by my kind;
We cling together as one.
We meander for hours,
Sometimes days,
Gently propelled by the wind.
Often, we wander apart, each sent our own ways,
Yet, never am I alone.
I scud across the skies,
Caress the crags,
Skim the slopes,
Drift along dales.
I am the daughter of the sea—
I fall to her, and she nourishes me.
I am the child of the sun—
I cool him, and he lifts me.
I am the sister of the breeze and the gale—
Though I tease them, they touch and move me.
I am a wisp,
A streak,
A pillow,
A puff,
One and many.
I am the frigid drear of November;
I am the comfort of the twelfth month.
I am the bringer of life
And a forewarning of death.
I enkindle the warmth of creation
And incite the chill of destruction
I am droplets,
I am drizzle,
I am the six-sided scintilla
Of delight and despair.



Making Room by Molly Tangorre

The Guardsman

by Elizabeth Stiles

Boots strike the flagstones, and frost shakes from the cracks in the wooden doors of the great hall as they crash open beside me. I watch as four of the King's Guard lead a condemned man inside to face his punishment.

I have watched many such condemnations in the centuries I have dwelt here in this hall, growing in my seam of stone across from the throne while kings have come and gone.

Rockfoil, they call me, the sigil of the Northern Kingdom - my form clings to the snow-crueted rocks of the white and blue crest that hangs above the King. Breakers of stone, my kind defies the relentless winds, and blooms first of all plants after the freezing chill of winter. For this they love me, and for this I was chosen long ago, to represent the harshness of the North in which this kingdom takes its pride. I have grown in the great hall since it was built, and they say if I fail, the fail of the kingdom will follow.

And so, I have watched. There have been times of peace, and great wars, a time when the whole hall was burned, and only the stone of it - and somehow, I - remained.

I cannot decide what I would call this time. There is no war, yet no true peace either; the young King who succeeded his father lacks skill. Small thanks I have to him for tending me more; they bring snow for me to drink now, as they had forgotten to do for a time. Still, I do not like him; he values human lives too little. Could I speak, I would tell him they are already brief and do not need to be shortened further. But humans do not understand these things; they want their enemies dead at once.

Today is no exception, for the man the Guard brought in is condemned for treason. What treason, 30



Raven Smock by *Hannah Hornkohl*

I do not know; he has not let some foreign army through the gates of the keep, as has been done before. Perhaps it is because this time it is not a foreigner or a commoner the King punishes, but one of his own assembly.

I have often seen this man in the hall. He is middle-aged and tall, standing quietly among the guards; not struggling. I find it strange that he would be so accepting of the orders of someone barely half his age, but then perhaps he knows struggle would be hopeless. The King's Guard in their crimson cloaks are without match - they are perhaps the best swordsmen in the realm.

I watch as two of his sons enter amongst the throng, and stand at the side of the hall, one older - almost a man, and the other younger, perhaps eight winters. The older, dark-haired like his father, watches with a flat expression as the King begins, while his brother tries to imitate him, but fails; I can see the fear rimming his eyes.

"Betrayal from beyond these walls is expected; betrayal from within is rot." The King's voice is icy. "You stood among my assembly, but you chose treason. That crime carries no ignorance and earns no mercy. As tradition binds the traitor, so it binds his house: your bloodline is forfeit alongside yourself."

The first sign of emotion flickers on the older man's face. He turns subtly to look at his sons, with wide, hopeless eyes. His eldest son's expression is hollow still; he gives only the slightest nod. He had expected this, I realise; he is not surprised. But his younger brother turns to look up at him, terror now written plainly on his face.

"He means us, doesn't he," the boy whispers.

For a long moment, his older brother says nothing. His fists are clenched; I can see him deciding. Then he answers, his voice low. "Yes... but do not fear. There is something I can do."

The young man steps forward. "A man should not be bound by the crimes committed by his father," he says, his voice strong. "And I do not pardon them. I wish to repay you, my lord, to serve you with my life. I wish to join the King's Guard."

The request is an odd one for the circumstances, and I can see a flicker of surprise cross the King's face, and many other faces in the hall.

"A place in the King's Guard is a great honour, boy," he replies, "one bestowed by the King, not a service to repay him."

The young man stands his ground. "I will serve another way if you wish, but I am willing to swear my life to the Guard."

It was the highest oath a man could swear, binding him to the King for life. To abandon the guard, or to defy the King in any measure, was to forfeit that life without appeal.

There is a long silence as the King surveys the young man.

"And I only take those of the greatest skill to the Guard, boy, you know that."

"Yes, and I believe my skill to be adequate."

“Go fetch this boy’s sword.” The King gestures to a servant at the back of the hall. “Hold the traitor for now.”

The man's father is led aside as the King turns to one of his Guard standing at his right, with pale blonde hair to his shoulders. “See how this boy fights. See if he can hold his own.”

I have seen these sorts of fights before; this will be no training duel, but a fight aimed to kill. Against one of the King's elite swordsmen, it could end only one way. The King is truly clever, but not in a way that I admire.

The servant returns with the young man’s sword; it is not the simple beaten iron of a commoner, but it is no match for the four-foot white-steel blade of the guard.

They begin; steel rings and slides, the sound swallowed by the great hall’s stone. The young man is indeed skilled, meeting each cut with speed, parrying even the most complex maneuvers. He presses forward, then draws back, circling the blond guard and giving ground only occasionally.

But his breath begins to shorten; he cannot sustain the precision of his movements, I can tell - no one can truly outmatch a guardsman.

And at last, he falters. He puts a fraction too much weight on his front foot; his cut angles half a hand too wide. He knows it the instant he does it - I can see it in his eyes: the flash of certainty, the knowledge that this is where his life ends.

But the blonde-haired guard does not take the opening. Instead of driving his blade forward to kill, he swings his sword lower to meet the young man’s steel again as if nothing had gone amiss.

To anyone watching, nothing would seem to have changed. The two continue to circle and press, advantage passing back and forth without pause. But I have watched more duels than the men in this hall combined, and I could see the disbelief flicker across the black-haired man’s face, and see the blonde-haired guard’s eyes crinkle in a subtle smile. The mercy surprises me, in one sworn to serve this King.

Eventually the blonde guardsman calls out, “you may cease,” and turns to the King. “This man can hold his own against me, my lord,” he says simply.

The King does not seem pleased, but neither is he angry. He studies the young man for a long, cold moment. I will consider it,” he says finally.

Without another word, he turns toward where the young man’s father is standing among the guard. “Bring the traitor forward, and we will finish this.” Then, shifting his gaze back to the young man, he adds, “the guard must be strong, and fear nothing.”

The older man remains calm, even now, as he is led before the King, but as he passes his son, something breaks through the discipline of his face. His lips move in a whisper barely audible in the stone hall. “Thank you. Be strong now; keep them safe. I...am proud of you.”

His son simply nods in response, but his eyes snap away from his father’s face, and his jaw tightens.

The King rises, draws his sword, and without hesitation, drives it through the man. The body crumples to the stone.

The young man stands there, and as he knows he must, he watches without blinking, without flinching, without making a sound. Something drains from his face, leaving it pale and fixed, but nothing else betrays him.

When it is done, he lifts his gaze to the King, who sinks back into his seat. “Now... come here, boy.”

The young man steps around his father’s body and approaches the King, and only then does the faintest trace of approval flicker across his face.

“Good,” the King says. “You will have a place in the guard.”

Trapped in an Illusion

by Skye Miller

Trapped behind bars of steel
Captured within walls of stone
Silence so loud when you're alone
Your body numb but longing to feel

You've lost all sense of time and space
Days slip by while you sit in quiet lament
You can't keep track of the time you've spent
In this dull and lonely place

Before you know it, something alters
One day while lying on the grainy floor
A beam of light emanates from the door
Blinding you as your vision falters

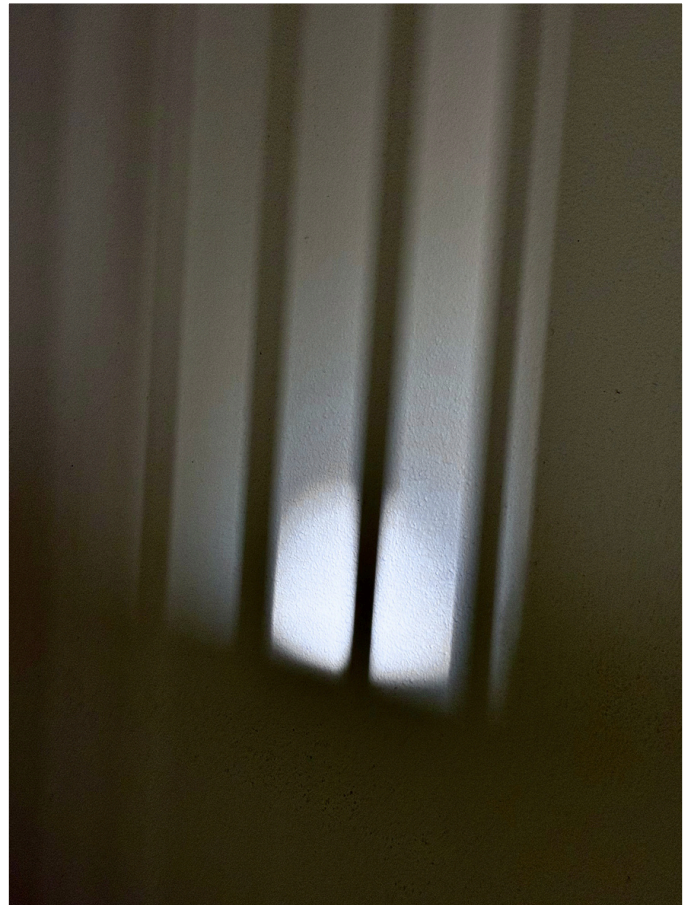
A wave of curiosity fills your core
You drag your withering frame across the room
Hoping you'll get to feel freedom soon
You reach your hand out, searching for more

Your fingers glide through the row of bars
Their silhouettes shimmering in the light
You stumble forward without a fight
Outside, you're surrounded by stars

You shiver but not from the cold
Goosebumps ripple across your skin
Your gut twists, this whole time where've you been?
It feels like you've been released from a hold

You look behind you one last time
In the air there's only a faint haze
You squeeze your eyes shut in a daze
Afraid you're being tricked by your mind

When you look into the world in confusion
You see no bars or walls of stone
No shadows, but a feeling of home
Like you've finally awoken from an illusion



The Mission Room

by Soleil Phillips

"Look, I'm only helping because I owe you," Linnie says, her gray eyes gleaming in the dim glow of the garage lights. Shadows stretch across the dusty concrete floor, and the faint hum of a generator vibrates through the walls. But I know the real reason.

My best friend, Elaise, smirks. She's short, fiery, always tapping her foot like she's ready to bolt. "You and I both know it's because you like the chase."

Wrong again. It's because we pay, and she needs the money to take care of her mom. Elaise doesn't know, she isn't as close with Linnie, like she is with me.

"You aren't wrong, Bear," Linnie says, reaching for the flashlight on the worn table cluttered with gadgets and maps.

"Don't call me Bear, that's not my name," Elaise snaps.

A low voice cuts through the tension. "Sena."

Not him. I didn't invite him.

Everyone holds their breath.

"I'm just here to pick up my check," Ilan says, stepping out from the shadows. Broad-shouldered, messy brown hair, sharp blue eyes. He sees our mission suits and frowns.

"This is ridiculous. How many times will you exclude me? It wasn't my fault Becker escaped."

"It was, Ilan. You can't say it was anyone else's fault." Elaise glared at him.

Azure, my sister, who'd been silent near the back wall, steps forward, her long flowing black hair trailing behind her. Her small nose crinkled as she spoke, "I'm not letting you leave without me."

"Or me," Ilan adds, stepping closer.

I square my shoulders. I invited who I did, and that's final.

Azure's green eyes narrow. "Aren't you going to hand me the equipment?"

"Why? You weren't invited," I respond, harshly.

"Because I created this group, not you," she snaps, tugging at a sleek black suit. "Just because they voted you president, doesn't mean you can keep people away."

"Actually, it does," Linnie says, stepping to block her.

"Don't get near her," Ilan says.

A cold, commanding voice cuts through the room. "Always the protector, Ilan."

My mother, Anda, steps into the garage, tall and imposing, her sharp suit making her look like she owns the building. The fluorescent lights catch the gold streaks in her hair. Anxiety spikes in Azure's voice. "Mother..."

"Oh, please. This is my office," Anda says, eyes scanning us. "Of course I'd appear. Another thing you overlooked in this idiotic project."

"Idiotic project?!" I snap. This is my dream, something I've built since childhood. The mission, the suits, the careful plans, it's finally coming together, and she wants to crush it.

"Mrs. Hessian, we promise we'll end this monstrosity," a steady voice says.

Men in heavy clothing and stern scowls arrive. Heavy boots echo on the concrete floor. Steel doors click, the smell of oil and metal filling the air.

The guards. They were here. For us. And it was all over now.

Gus

by Bryn Farrell

I remember the first time
That I saw your face
Your sleek, brindled fur,
Your goofy, calming grace

I was frightened at first
Of the love I would clutch
Good things don't last
And the hurt was too much

I wanted to be brave
To follow your call
Better to lose love
Than never love at all

Your ears were so floppy
Cropped to a V
We took off the tape
I knew you were for me

My mother showed me
A gift from her bag
Your collar had come
With "Gus" on the tag

You wiggled your tail
I scratched your pink chin
And I thought to myself:
"Gus is a win"

You loved to play ball
You'd squeak them like prey
All that you wanted
Was to play fetch all day

Then came your "moosy"
A soft, squishy toy
You slept and you played
While I told you "good boy!"

Dogs like to swim
We thought, "why not Gus?"
We put you in the pool
But you made such a fuss

Instead you would lay
Sunny couch by the fence
Covered in shade,
To you, that makes sense

I wanted you
To sleep in my bed
But you preferred
Your crate instead

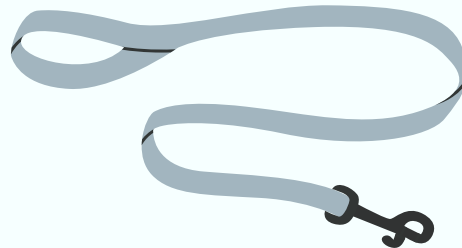
We'd drive to the rink
You'd wiggle so hard
Everyone loved you
And you loved them all

Sometimes I'd give you
What I liked to call
A "sister scratch"
Worth dropping the ball

I'd scratch your ears
I'd scratch your neck
You would lean in
You loved to be pet

You hated squirrels
You'd growl and bark
I know you thought
"I'm the king of the park"

You loved your groomer
And her two dogs too,
We'd say "is that her!"
And you'd brighten our mood



We sent you to daycare
To be with your friends
You met a husky,
We called her your "girlfriend"

There was a call
The air became thick
I heard the word "seizure"
And looked over quick

We rushed to the vet
Only to find
It was a fluke
That was the first time

It happened again,
Smaller, but urgent
That's when they told us
To schedule more appointments

You had a heart condition
That wasn't a seizure
We put you on meds
And a life of leisure



I watched you slow down
No moosy, no more ball
I watched you lose interest
In squirrels and in all



I sat with you for
What seemed like a blink
I just rubbed your ears
Knowing the ship would soon sink

They told me it would
Be the kindest thing
To give your life up
Painless and quick

I don't want you to suffer
But I don't want to let go
I wish that I knew
What to fight for

So I rub your ears
And kiss your wet nose
I can't hold back the tears
Though I know how it goes

It kills me to wonder
If you know what will come
And if you're just waiting
For this all to be done



But what if you're scared
If you want to live on?
I'm scared of the future
But I can't make it stop



I meet your gaze
Your big, brown, bright eyes
And somehow I know
There's suffering inside

I need to be strong
But I remember the times
You brightened the room
By opening your eyes

Cause I'll miss the way
You wiggled your body
Curled up like a donut
It was so funny

And I'll miss the way
You'd pounce on my bed
I don't wanna wake up
To alarms instead

I'll miss the way
Whenever I was sad
I'd hold you tight
And felt all the bad



I didn't say anything
I didn't have to
I felt your soft fur
And you always knew

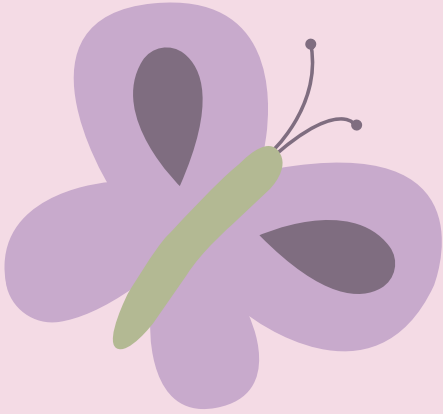
No one but me
Knows how special you are
They don't know I'll die
Every March 23rd

They can't know my feelings
They can't hear my thoughts
And I have to tell them
When I'm feeling lost

I don't know what's out there
Will I see you again?
I love you, my Gussy
You were my best friend







Sea of Purple by Valerie Arolli

Spring

by Valentina Barrios-Fanaei

Oh men and beasts rejoice!
The breeze is crisp, the soil moist.
And finally call
“It’s spring!”

A clarion call of exultation in the smallest bud unfurling
Fresh flower smells on the wind are whirling
Whispering
“It’s spring!”

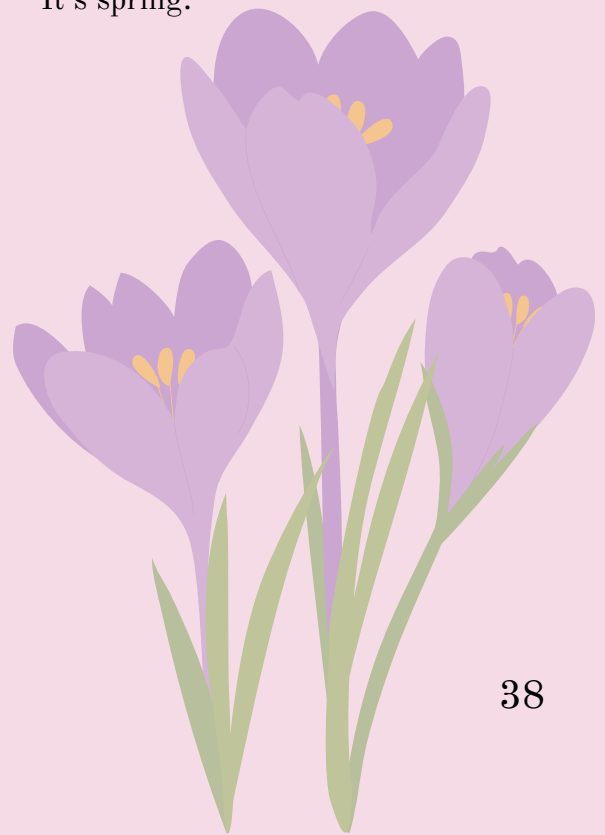
Persephone returns to the land of the living
From Hades she flees, and greets her mother giving
Her fond tiding
“It’s spring!”

A peach blossom blown by the inconstant gusts
Opening to new life, new shoots outthrust
declare
“It’s spring!”

No longer does Boreas’ icy grip crush mankind
The days are long, Phoebus’ rays remind
The world
“It’s spring!”

Fauns dance in the glades
Every bright fresh grass blade
Proclaims
“It’s spring!”

Demeter’s grief, Demeter’s longing, are
turned to radiance
for all grateful men
Smiling fondly down she smiles
she sighs
“It’s spring.”



The Dough-Saster

by Sage L. Ruehle

Mr. Harrison turned the doorknob. The door swung open with the strength of ten men. This was probably due to the fact that Mr. Harrison had installed the door's closing mechanism backwards.

Yesterday he baked a fresh batch of everything he sold, and yesterday was also the day he discovered his customers only buy bread. Sometimes his bread, other times just bread from home they take to eat in front of him.

Now, he started the oven pre-heating and went to grab some flour. Unfortunately, the nasty old pantry had a surprise for him. There was no usable flour in it, just expired, purple sparkly powder. Of course, what else was he supposed to do but use what he had? The grocery store was two whole blocks away!

Soon the bread was baking, and Mr. Harrison's mind was on Jupiter again. The bread rose nicely in the oven, almost completing a full circle!

Ding! The mystery bread was out of the oven. The baker carefully picked up a toothpick and poked it to see if it was done baking. A loud bang rang out like a foghorn. The bread had popped similarly to how a balloon would if you poked it. The entire loaf of bread ejected itself from the pan and almost burst through the window.

Mr. Harrison's face turned white. He had never seen a loaf of bread exceed ten miles per hour. His heart felt like it was doing parkour in his chest cavity.

The bread was still on the floor. Then, it moved. Slowly at first, then faster. It expanded, filling itself with air. Finally, it pulled itself upright. Three holes appeared. One mouth. Two eyes. "I think I put too much yeast in the bread." Thought Mr. Harrison.

The mouth expanded, hovering over the baker, moving towards him as if to eat him. The mouth became a gaping hole. The bread came closer till its mouth touched Mr. Harrison.

Suddenly it spoke, "Do you have any coffee?"

"I suppose I could make a pot. Do you prefer dark roast?" Internally, Mr. Harrison hoped that the bread did not like sugar in its coffee because he was almost out.

"Whichever one that doesn't judge me for being gluten is fine."

"Alright..." Mr. Harrison went to the coffee station, which was next to the kitchen. He could only find unground light roast, so he put a light bulb next to the coffee bean grinder in hopes of making it even lighter. He made a mental note to patent the idea later if it worked.

"Alright, the coffee is finished—What are you doing?"

"I cleaned the kitchen for you."

"Where?" asked Mr. Harrison.

"Why, right here of course," the bread proudly gestured to a single floor tile that practically sparkled.

"Ah, good, one less thing to mop. I must get to the front now; the shop opens in several minutes," replied Mr. Harrison.

Soon a well-dressed businessman walked through the door to the front counter. He furrowed his brow and inspected the donuts. After several minutes a look of worry crossed his face as he debated over which flavor would be the best. Mr. Harrison watched the man agonize over the donuts. The poor fellow looked like he was choosing which timeline to save.

“I would like to get a maple flavored donut please,” the man said, his voice quivering as though he had just made a terrible, irrevocable choice

“There’s your change,” Mr. Harrison replied, handing over the donut.

Mr. Harrison walked to the kitchen fridge to retrieve the other tray of donuts. As he rounded the corner a smell hit him, like rotten eggs. The kitchen was filled with smoke, and the bread was holding a tray of freshly made croissants. Besides that, the microwave was glowing.

Mr. Harrison blinked. “I was gone for almost thirty seconds.”

“I made croissants,” the bread said proudly. “The microwave helped. It’s very enthusiastic.”

“Enthusiastic?” The microwave boomed. “I saved us all from a pastry-pocalypse.”

“I did try to help this lump of gluten bake pastries,” it continued, “but if I were you, I would not eat one. The bread ignored every safety protocol I recited.”

“I followed most of them,” the bread muttered, deeply offended. “I only skipped the ones that sounded optional.”

Mr. Harrison sighed. “Microwave, can you heat the extra batch of donuts please?”

“No,” the microwave thundered. “I have seen a distant timeline where the donuts control all people because I reheated them.”

“In that case, cold donuts it is,” Mr. Harrison walked out to the next customer.

An elderly woman was studying the pastries with the intensity of a jeweler inspecting diamonds. As Mr. Harrison approached, he heard raised voices from the kitchen. The bread and the microwave were arguing again – loudly.

“Toaster ovens can do many more things than a microwave, usually,” the bread insisted.

“Microwaves are far more cost-effective than your pretentious little toaster boxes,” the microwave snapped. “Some of us don’t need heating coils to feel important.”

Mrs. Warren leaned in. “Why, Mr. Harrison, do your assistants argue very often?”

“Yes, Mrs. Warren. They do,” he sighed. “I should probably break up the argument. Pardon me.”

In the kitchen, the debate had escalated.

“Gluten-free bread is superior,” the microwave declared. “It is lighter. More aerodynamic. Better for throwing.”

“You take that back,” the bread gasped. “I am *full* of gluten and *proud* of it.”

“Stop, both of you,” Mr. Harrison said, stepping fully into the room. “Find something to do that actually benefits the bakery. Also, I don’t see why you would want to throw bread.”

“Yes, don’t throw me.”

“Well, bread in general,” replied Mr. Harrison.

He walked out before either appliance could respond.

After helping Mrs. Warren, Mr. Harrison decided that, for the sake of his sanity, he would walk to the grocery store down the street.

As he stepped outside, a microwave—now propped up on a cardboard box like a street preacher—shouted, “Support Berry’s Bakery!”

“Microwave,” Mr. Harrison groaned, “I told you to help my bakery, not Berry’s Bakery.”

“I am helping,” the microwave replied. “By sabotaging the competition. You’re welcome.”

When Mr. Harrison returned to the bakery, he found the bread helping customers. The bread was also wearing his best suit—a suit Mr. Harrison was fairly certain he did not own.

“Here you are, Mr. Fancy Shoes,” the bread declared, presenting a tray of croissants with the confidence of a man unveiling a priceless artifact. “Our world-famous donuts.”

The customer blinked. “Those are... rather pointier than I remember.”

“They’re artisanal,” the bread said, as if that explained everything.

The microwave’s lights flickered. “My time... grows short... tell the donuts... I tried.”

“You’re not dying,” Mr. Harrison said. “You’re overheating.”

“Same thing,” whispered the microwave.

The bread straightened its suit. “In light of recent events, I will be assuming the role of co-owner. Also, would ice help the microwave?”

Mr. Harrison opened his mouth to object, but the bread handed him a contract written in crayon and dry-erase marker.

He signed it. He was too tired not to.

And so, the bakery continued—one man, one ambitious loaf, and one microwave that occasionally screamed prophecies from the back room.

Business was booming.

Mr. Harrison was... coping.



Handmade Cardboard Star Wars Helmets by Lawrence Wunderlich



Tulips

by Kaoru Asahara

They can be in a variety of colors.

Red, orange, pink, and more.

Planted before snow starts,
and struggles to hide from predators.

It attracts bees and butterflies,
making the air delightful
just like a freshly baked pie.

And just before winter arrives,
I plant tulips with my dad.
Seeing them bloom is pleasant,
but planting them is fun too.

When I place each tulip into the earth,
I think of what it would look like when grown.
Would the flower petals be narrow and open up like a
Japanese bell flower?

Or would they close up and look like a rose?
This part is my favorite part when planting them,
because you never know the answer until winter passes,
and spring arrives again.

Finally, when you wait until a whole year changes,
and spring arrives, you will find yourself with a batch of
charming tulips.

And when time comes,
I would go out to the garden to sit down on the earth
in order to observe the tulips that are now fully grown.
And when I watch these flowers having a smile on their face
while surviving these harsh conditions in nature,
I can feel encouraged to enjoy every moment of my life,
gives me a big smile,
and also can feel more joy to hear all of the chirping and
buzzing
that the flowers bring,
which makes me feel peaceful and away from the busy roads
that there are,
in the cities.

The Accidental Revolution

by Maya Sharpe

Every morning, Harold Dunn arrived at Maplewood Elementary at precisely 6:45 a.m., fifteen minutes earlier than required. He liked to think of himself as a man of punctuality, though no one had ever noticed. The teachers arrived later, the children later still, and by the time anyone saw him, he was already halfway through mopping the cafeteria floor, humming tunelessly to himself.

He had been the janitor there for twelve years. Twelve long, sticky, gum-on-the-floor, juice-box-exploding years. Twelve years of “Instructional Staff” looking through him as if he were made of plexiglass had turned Harold’s soul into a dry sponge. Mrs. Langley, the third-grade teacher, once used his bald head as a reflection to check her teeth for spinach while he was literally scrubbing the floor between her feet.

Harold wasn’t invited to staff meetings. He had tried once, standing awkwardly outside the library door, holding his mop like a spear.

He coughed to get their attention. A dozen adults turned to stare at him.

“I thought maybe I should—since I work here too—” he began, but Principal Hargrove cut him off.

“Oh, Mr. Dunn,” Hargrove said, smiling in that way people do when they’re about to exclude you politely. “This is a meeting for instructional staff.”

Instructional staff. As if cleaning up after them didn’t instruct him in the futility of human effort.

The children were his daily tormentors. Not intentionally, perhaps, but effectively. They left trails of destruction wherever they went—muddy footprints, spilled milk, mysterious sticky substances that defied both science and cleaning products.

“Hey, Mr. Dunn!” a boy named Tyler had shouted one morning, pointing at a puddle of chocolate milk. “You missed a spot!”

Harold had smiled, though his eye twitched. “Thank you. I’ll get right on that.”

Tyler had laughed and run off, leaving his half-eaten sandwich on the floor.

By March, Harold had developed a quiet resentment he disguised as professionalism. He told himself he didn’t need thanks—that doing a job well was its own reward—but deep down, he longed for someone to notice. Just a simple “Nice work, Harold.” But in the meantime, he got by imagining small, satisfying acts of revenge on staff and students alike.

One afternoon, while cleaning the staff lounge, he overheard Mrs. Langley complaining about the coffee. “It’s too strong,” she said. “I swear it gives me heartburn.”

Harold looked at the coffee pot and realised how easy it would be to switch the grounds for decaf. He imagined them all sluggish and confused, wondering why they felt so tired. Maybe they’d even laugh about it later. “Oh, Harold, you rascal,” they’d say. “You got us good!”

But Harold’s plan went awry almost immediately.

He had misread the labels in the supply closet. Instead of decaf, he had grabbed a large tin of fiber supplement powder that the nurse kept for the teachers’ wellness program.

By 10:15 a.m., chaos had descended upon Maplewood Elementary.

Mrs. Langley had fled her classroom mid-lesson, clutching her stomach. Mr. Peters, the gym teacher, was pale and sweating, sitting on a bench outside the boys' locker room. Principal Hargrove had locked himself in his office and refused to answer the phone.

The children, sensing weakness, began to stir.

"Where's Mrs. Langley?" Tyler asked.

"She ran out," said another boy. "I think she's sick."

Within minutes, word spread: the teachers were down. The adults were incapacitated. The school was theirs.

They poured into the hallways, shouting, laughing, and throwing paper airplanes. Someone pulled the fire alarm. Someone else started a conga line.

Harold stood in the middle of it all, mop in hand, not exactly believing what he was seeing.

"Janitor!" Tyler shouted, climbing onto a table. "You're in charge now!"

"What? No, no, I'm not—"

"Yeah! You're the only adult left! You're the leader!"

A chant began: "Jan-i-tor! Jan-i-tor! Jan-i-tor! Jan-i-tor!"

He tried to calm them. "Children, please, this isn't—"

But it was too late. They were dancing, running, and some were even sliding down the hallways in their socks. Someone had found the intercom and was playing music through the speakers.

Harold stood there, surrounded by pandemonium, and for a brief, shining moment, he felt... appreciated. Powerful, even.

Then the fire department arrived.

Sirens wailed outside. Firefighters burst through the doors, axes in hand, only to find a cafeteria full of children dancing and a janitor standing in the middle of it all, holding a mop like a scepter.

"Sir," one firefighter said, "are you in charge here?"

Harold didn't really know what to say. "Well... Yes?"

By the time the teachers returned, the music had stopped, the children had been herded back into classrooms, and Harold was sitting on a cafeteria bench, staring at his reflection in a puddle of spilled juice.

The teachers looked terrible. Mrs. Langley's hair was sticking up in odd directions. Mr. Peters looked like he'd aged ten years. Principal Hargrove's tie was missing, and his expression was that of a man who had seen things he could never unsee.

"Harold," Hargrove said, his voice trembling with fury, "what did you do?"

Harold could tell he was on the verge of unemployment. He had to choose his words carefully. "I—well, technically, I made coffee," he said.

"You poisoned us!" Mrs. Langley shouted.

"I wouldn't say poisoned," Harold said carefully. "More... cleansed."

Mr. Peters was shaking with anger. "Cleansed?! I spent forty-five minutes in the restroom!"

"I'm truly, truly sorry. It was an accident. I thought it was decaf, I really did."

Principal Hargrove pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're finished here, Harold. I can't have this kind of—"


"No!" Tyler's voice rang out from the back of the cafeteria.

The teachers turned. A small army of children stood behind him, faces defiant.
“You can’t fire Mr. Dunn!” Tyler said. “He’s the best janitor ever!”
“He gave us freedom!” a girl beside him said. “He believed in us!”
“He’s our revolutionary leader!”
“He kept the school running when you all abandoned us!”
The teachers exchanged uneasy glances.
Principal Hargrove sighed. “Children, please, this isn’t—”
“Jan-i-tor! Jan-i-tor! Jan-i-tor!” the chant began again, louder this time.
The teachers looked around helplessly as the cafeteria filled with the sound of stomping feet and cheering voices.



Free Bird

by Dahlilah Ramirez



A bird can fly,
A bird is freedom,
It soars through the uncharted, shimmering sky.

Spread your wings and devour the blue,
Perch on branches, seeing the world anew.

A bird is calm,
A bird is quiet,
It waits with patient, watchful eyes.
It dances softly for its lover’s gaze,
It guards its young through nights and days.

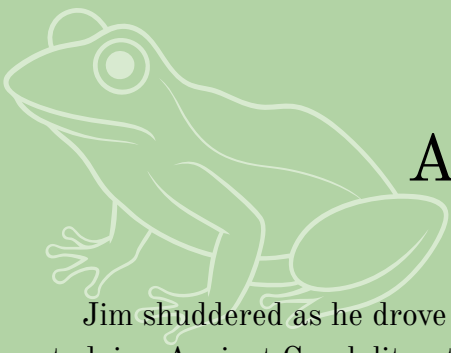
A bird is loud,
A bird is bold,
It hunts, it dives, it rides the cold.
It chases horizons past the sun,
Into the promise of what’s to come.

A bird knows no limits,
No walls, no ties,
It falls, then rises, relearns the skies.

A bird is beauty,
A bird is strong.
Its beating wings, and complex songs.

A bird has wings,
A bird has choice,
A bird is freedom given a voice.

And yet -
It was never meant
to be the bird.



Amphibian Armageddon

by Dmitri Ross

Jim shuddered as he drove back to his college apartment. Currently in his second year of college studying Ancient Greek literature, Jim was returning from visiting his friend downtown, who had the brilliant idea of showing Jim his pet frog. When his friend had proudly presented his beloved frog Herbert, Jim had let out a scream and tried to smash it with the nearest thing at hand (a newspaper on the table). After his heart rate had returned to safe levels again, his friend had yelled at him for attacking his pet. Jim hadn't apologized though. He hated frogs, slimy, despicable creatures, he reasoned. They had no reason for existence. The trauma of the event still haunted him.

All this swirled round Jim's head as he parked his car and walked across the parking lot to his apartment. He climbed the stairs normally and pulled expectantly at the door—it was locked. Oh well, his roommate must be out. After he had fumbled with the keys and gotten in his apartment, he headed straight to one of the two bathrooms. Time to wash his face and recover from the ordeal. As he opened his bathroom door, Jim saw to his indescribable horror a whole host of frogs leaping around the bathroom.

Jim was not brave. Jim screamed like a little girl and slammed the door with the force of a minor earthquake. He stood outside hyperventilating. Frogs were in his apartment. *Frogs were in his apartment.* Still though, he was a man of action. Jim ran to the cabinet and grabbed the duct tape, then (this took the same amount of bravery it would take you to enter a scorpion pit) opened the bathroom door and rushed in. Jim stood, waved his hands around, eyes shut, as he groped toward the toilet. Once he felt the cold ceramic, he opened his eyes and started duct taping the lid. Trying not to look at the frogs, he opened the windows to let them out. He would release the frogs until he could find a better way of quarantining them. Once Jim was sure that the frogs were gone, realization began to dawn on him.

The toilet must have backed up and for some cruel trick of nature that made the frogs come out. The other bathroom in the apartment also could have backed up. This was unacceptable. Jim retrieved the large blue cooler he took camping and headed across the hall. He paused at the bathroom door. Was this actually a good idea? Jim could leave the frogs for his roommate, making it his problem. But then he thought about frogs being within a few yards of him.

Jim charged the door. Frogs came pouring out. Jim pushed inside and locked the door, wildly waving his hands around to keep the little green menaces away from his face. After a minute, he decided that locking the amphibians in the cooler was a terrible idea to begin with, so Jim decided to reuse his window method. He then duct taped the lid of the toilet shut. He didn't care about the outside world. Jim needed those frogs out. Once they were out of his apartment, they were no longer his problem.

Once all of them were gone, Jim heaved an enormous sigh of relief. He felt proud of himself; he had dealt with the problem. He strolled casually back outside and immediately saw a green mass of frogs in his apartments. There were hundreds of them. It seemed like the walls were vomiting green slime. Jim let out a strangled cry of horror and fear. He ran to get a broom and then opened all the windows. Waving the stick around, he herded the slimy wave towards the windows. He screamed as loud as his voice allowed, attempting to insert himself as the alpha predator among these beasts.

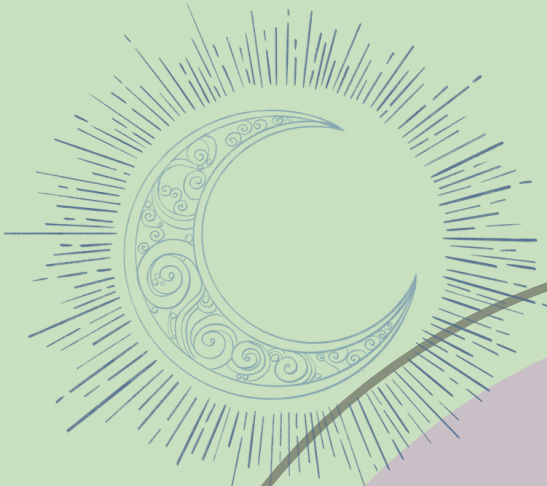
Some of his roommate's stuff crashed to the floor, but Jim paid no attention. There were more important things to focus on, such as the legions of frogs invading and currently conquering his apartment. A frog leaped onto his head to reach the window and Jim instinctively whacked his own head with the broom. He shook and his head hurt, but this didn't deter him. He simply staggered a little and started yelling again to scare the mucus colored monsters. After twenty minutes of eradicating the beasts, it was over.

His head ached and his apartment looked like a war zone, so he set to clean it up. That night, taking a well deserved rest, Jim switched on the TV. The local news was reporting that frogs from the nearby swamp had been seen roaming through the city. Jim yelled in outrage at the frogs on the screen and fumbled with the remote until he turned off the TV. He then went to his bed, hoping that his battle with the amphibians wouldn't haunt him through the night.



D.C. in Spring by Jelsa Robinson





Velvet
by Arya Brooke



One velvet dusk I woke,
To see the mist like spirits,
the ferns like blades,
the bats like fairies,
And the haziness, a cloak.
One velvet night I woke,
To see the trees like shadows,
the stars like jewels
the moon like ice,
And the darkness, a cloak.
One velvet dawn I woke,
To see the sunrise like gold,
the dew like glass,
the birds like friends,
And the freshness, a cloak.
One velvet day I woke,
To see the sky like paint,
the flies like pixies,
the leaves as glows
And the brightness, a cloak.
And every velvet time I woke,
To see the days like hours,
the hours like minutes,
the minutes like seconds,
And the years unfurling like a cloak.



The Molding

by Caleb Baskara

Today is Molding Day. The day where all of our thoughts—theoretically—become equal. At least that's what the Auxilian government says. They aren't always right, though. Especially not their list. So why should—

“Nathan Grout, Livvy Harper, Willow Haven, please report to the nurse's office for your Molding.”

Sighing, I walked out of chemistry class, which was unfortunately the one subject I was actually good at. I saw Livvy's flowing black hair as I entered the hall and instinctively paused, but she immediately turned around.

“Hey, Weeping Willow,” she said with a smirk. “Excited?”

“Not as much as you,” I muttered. “Bet you're looking forward to thinking like a robot.”

“Lucky for you, you're already one.” With that, she spun away from me. Livvy and I weren't enemies, but we definitely weren't friends.

I considered what I had spoken. Thinking like a robot? Surely it couldn't be that bad. As I carefully stepped down the hall, I went over the sequence of events in my mind.

Nearly a year ago, days after my fifteenth birthday, I watched a small snippet of Auxilian news. The guest, a popular writer named Martin Leecher, was being questioned for his new book about opinions causing division and his proposed solution, “molding” thoughts into given “truths”. At first, it had just sounded like a fun idea for a dystopian novel.

Until Auxily's government suddenly posted their “list of truths”. Every topic ever worth debating had a conclusion on the list, but to me, some of them didn't seem right. Free speech was considered dangerous and needed restricting? God doesn't exist? That was the “truth” now? It's like they were trying to create a new religion. Auxilianity or something. It didn't feel good.

Subsequently, “Molding Day” was announced, the day where every Auxilian would have their brains Molded. Today was that day and—

I suddenly bumped into Livvy, snapping out of my thoughts. She scowled at me but said nothing.

Nathan walked out of the nurse's office. With a calming smile, he made eye contact with me. “Hey,” is all he said before continuing to his classroom. I was confused; I didn't know Nathan.

“Someone's got a lo-ver!” Livvy squealed before greeting the nurse.

It's okay, I thought. *You don't know Nathan. He's probably a nice guy.* I couldn't shake off the fact that something was off, though. His attitude seemed...well...

Artificial. That's what it was.

“Willow Haven?”

I started to walk inside but nearly collided with Livvy again. She didn't seem to mind.

All she did was smile, look at me, and say, “Hey, Willow.”

I felt my chest go cold. Besides for the fact that Livvy had unnecessarily greeted me, something about her tone was off. It was sincere. Too sincere.

Unnerved, I cautiously tip-toed inside, where the nurse instructed me to sit down on the exam table. “It's just going to be a quick shot, a special one, nothing to worry about,” she said sweetly. I almost

laughed. I don't think fifteen-year-olds are scared of shots. As I tried to calm myself down, I could distantly hear the names of three more students being called to the office.

It's okay. The nurse approached me, shot in hand. *It's for the better!* Her small hands reached for my shoulder. *No fights, no war, no problems...* She pulled up my left sleeve. But *it won't just change my thoughts; it'll change my lifestyle.* Livvy was proof. The needle slowly made its way towards my skin.

It's not okay.

I push myself off the table, breaking free from the nurse's weak grasp. Sprawling on the ground, I avoided her subsequent futile attempts to restrain me before scampering away, spitting a few brown strands out of my mouth.

I had to get away from here. I began to run to the school's front doors when the intercom blasted another message out.

"All personnel, please discontinue your current work and help stop Willow Haven!"

Teachers, cleaners, and students—only Molded ones, though—rushed out of their classrooms to catch me. That's when I realized Molding's true intent

Molded people could be controlled.

Suddenly, I bumped into Livvy as I sprinted out the front doors. To my dismay, I heard her footsteps madly pursuing me through the front yard. Everyone else wouldn't be fast enough.

Looking both ways, I dashed across a road. Livvy followed, oblivious to the oncoming cars. Frustrated, I transitioned my course into a nearby grassy field. Looking back again, my foot suddenly snagged a rock. In a second, I was rolling on the ground, covered in dirt and grass stains.

Livvy pounced on me, pinning my arms to the ground with great strength. After a few heavy breaths, she shouted, "Got her! I've..." She trailed off when she realized no one else had followed. With an angry sigh, she held down my kicking legs with her feet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I made out a figure. I couldn't tell what they were planning to do, but no doubt it involved me. I lay contemplating, ignoring Livvy's glares, when she suddenly yelped and collapsed over me. With a smile, I shoved her off before I saw the figure again. Before I could understand what was happening, a dart sunk into my left shoulder. *Ironic*, I slurred. *That's where I was going to be Molded.* Then everything went black.

Someone was shaking my body. *Please stop*, I tried to say.

"Come on, wake up..."

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes. I looked to the side where I saw the figure that had tranquilized me. It was Martin Leecher.

"Hey, you're the guy—"

Martin held his hands up to his chest, probably in protection. "Hold on, let me explain first. To start, I don't know your name." After saying it, I carefully sat up, turning my head to observe my surroundings. The room was dimly lit, but I could make out a few other people wandering about. The only door out was barricaded by a heap of junk. Twisting, I spotted Livvy, unconsciously propped up on one of the walls. Then I noticed that that wall seemed a little off.

"Where are we?"

"A two-car garage on the far side of town."

“Why?”

“We’re escaping the Molding.”

This was a new development, completely awakening me. “What? You were the one that proposed this whole lunatic idea!”

Martin looked at me sadly. “That’s what everyone thinks.” I was still confused. “I didn’t write that book. Auxily did. But they Molded me, forced me to claim it as my own.”

“Why aren’t you acting Molded?”

“I was given a beta formula. Apparently it wore off after a few months.”

“Not the new one?”

“If our research has been correct, it’s permanent.”

I paused. “Wait, “our”? Who are you guys?”

Martin smirked. “All of us are Niques. Rebels.”

“As in, u-nique? How clever.”

“Just trying to preserve humanity’s creativity,” he said with a shrug. “You could be a Nique, Willow. What are you good at?”

“I’m pretty good at chemistry,” I said.

“That’s great. I bet you could work on counter-Molding people, finding a cure, you know?”

I nodded. Tired, I retreated to the crude bed I had awoken from, lying down on the flimsy structure. The events of the day flashed through my head. The afternoon had just started and I was already part of a makeshift rebellion. I guess there wasn’t much I could—

A loud pounding on the door edged me back into reality. “Auxily Police, open up!” a gruff voice shouted. I analyzed the barricade and the few Niques attempting to hold it back. It wasn’t going to work. Suddenly, Martin dragged me off the bed, but I managed to stay upright.

He led me to the garage door. “How old are you?”

“Almost sixteen.”

“Alright.” As he narrowly opened the door, I hastily crawled through, quickly reemerging. A dart gun followed me through, but when I bent down to take it, I heard Martin instructing me.

“There’s a bunch of chemicals at Melland Lab,” he whispered. “Break in. Take out anyone who tries to stop you. Try to make a cure. You can do it.”

“What? But I—”

I heard the door burst open and a few men running into the garage. Martin was immediately restrained by the officers.

“Livvy! I need help!” I shouted. “Help” was a trigger word for Molded. In response, she crawled to me, greeting me with another “Hey, Willow.”

I gave a sad smile. Livvy was purely controllable now, but at least it wasn’t just Auxily that could force her actions. I could. If needed, I would do so until she was cured.

For the moment, we were allies. “Protect me, Livvy.”

I heard Martin shout, “Use what you have before you lose it forever!” before he gave a quiet grunt. He was Molded.

I was a Nique. I had a mission. Everyone was counting on me.

It’s okay, I reminded myself, before sprinting off towards Melland Lab, Livvy right behind me.

Love's Remedy
by Luke Harbuck

I. The Quiet Harbor of My Mind

In the noisy halls where high tides roll,
I keep a harbor, a quiet goal.
A thought of you, a steady light,
That anchors my days and seasons the night.
No grand declaration, just a hum,
Of every moment yet to come.

II. The Flicker in the Crowd

A sea of faces, a typical haze,
But my world refocuses in a dozen ways,
When your laughter rises, a silver bell,
Breaking a carefully constructed spell.
You're not a storm, nor a sudden blaze,
Just the softest warmth in winter days.

III. The Words I Fold Away

I write you letters, then fold them tight,
Mapping feelings by candlelight.
They speak of coffee on rainy morns,
Of shared silent jokes and friendly thorns.
A simple truth I can't yet say,
So they remain unmailed, for another day.

IV. A Shared Horizon's Glimpse

It's in the small things where my heart resides:
The way your eyes catch the turning tides,
The book you mentioned, now on my shelf,
A subtle reflection of my very self.
We look at stars with different eyes, it's true,
But I hope we see a shared horizon in blue.

V. The Wish I Cast on Stars

If every star could catch a single plea,
I'd wish for you to really see,
The depth of care, the simple, honest pride,

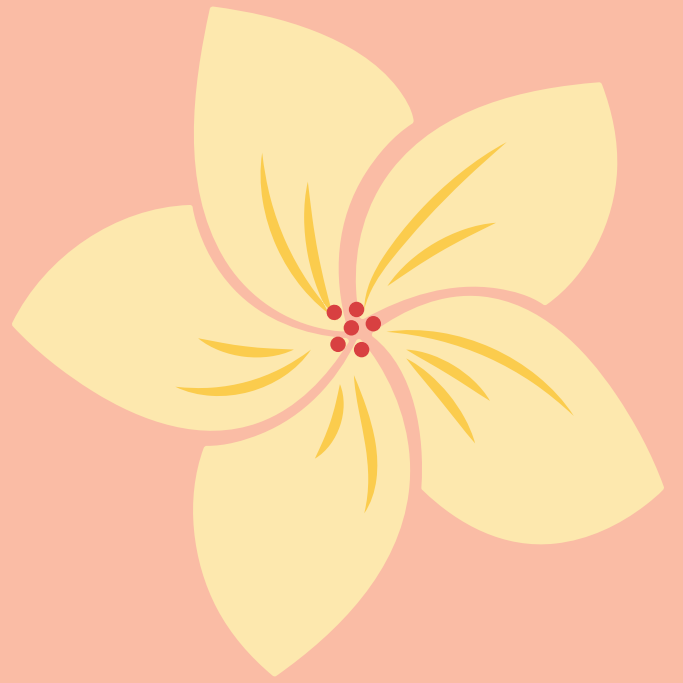
For you, the one in whom I confide.
It's not a burning, restless flame,
It's a steady fire, I'm proud to name.

VI. The Unspoken Promise Sent

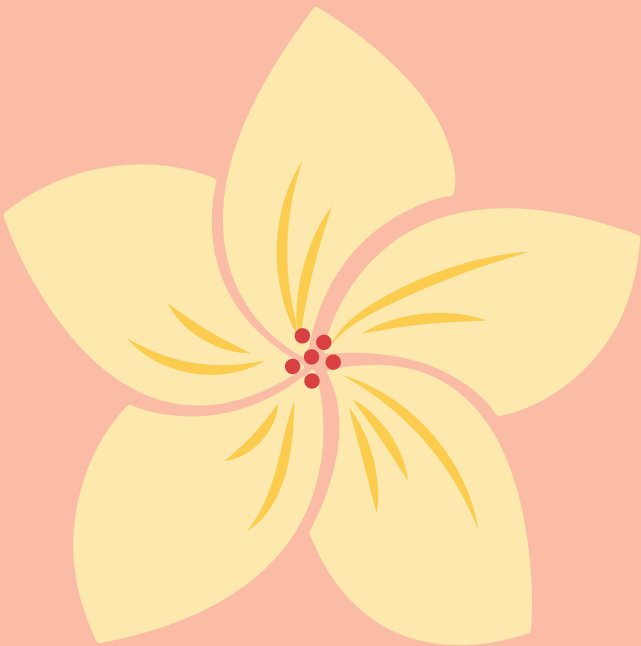
So take this poem, this little bent,
A quiet message, softly sent.
It carries a truth I've yet to speak:
Of all the girls, it's you I seek.
Consider it love, unspoken and true,
From me, across the world, to you.



Overcoming Challenges by Elizabeth Scott



S U M M E R





Peppers

by Ellie Powers

Layla, a seven year old girl with an attitude, was slowly walking down the stairs, getting ready to watch some TV before Mrs. Lilley came and told her that it was bedtime. Mrs. Lilley was her babysitter, a sweet, probably-in-her-80's old lady who came over to watch Layla and her brother, Eric, when their parents were away. But for the most part, Mrs. Lilley slept the whole time she was there, barely moving from her rocking chair; so Layla could count on watching cartoons until she fell asleep.

Once she had reached the bottom step, she picked up her pace until she arrived in the main room, where she found Eric, in all his dark, curly hair-ed glory, standing with his hands on his hips, grinning at her.

“What up?”

Layla scowled, hating when he tried to use teenage slang to sound older.

“What do you want?” she asked.

Eric sauntered over to her as best as a ten year old could, and ruffled her own dark curly hair.

“Making sure you get to bed, silly.”

“You can't make me!”

“Why, wouldn't you prefer to snuggle Peppers under your covers while you suck your thumb?”

Layla's cheeks heated up as she hugged her little stuffed dog closer to her heart. “His name is Peppers!”

Layla stuck her tongue out at him, turning toward the couch. But Eric reached around her and grabbed Peppers, holding him above his head as she leapt to reach him.

“Let Peppers go!” cried Layla, hopping on her tip toes.

“Not a chance,” Eric said, laughing as he ran away up the stairs.

Layla ran after him, crying as she staggered up the stairs, finding Peppers lying crumpled under a chair leg. Layla collapsed, trying vainly to pull him from underneath, until she finally used her strength to push the chair up and grab him.

Hugging Peppers to herself, Layla ran into her room and, slamming the door behind her, ducked under the covers, crying with all her might. *I hate him.* She thought bitterly, curling into a ball. *I wish I didn't have to be his sister, wish I didn't have to be part of his life.* She lay there for a while, thinking hateful things toward her brother, until she finally cried herself asleep.

Sometime in the night, if you had seen Layla lying pitifully under her sheets, her cheeks wet, you would have briefly seen Peppers glowing.

Layla slowly opened her eyes to some pink tinged light filtering through her bed covers, and crawling to the end of her bed, she peeked out.

Remembering her anger the night before, she bolted out of bed and ran downstairs to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, she reached up and grabbed the ketchup.

“He'll pay.” She said, sounding adorable if not for the genuine malice in her eyes.

She went into Eric's room to find—a complete mess. She stepped around Legos and toy trains as she walked menacingly toward his bed, lifting the ketchup above her head as she came to his face.

Layla grinned; she had always wanted to do this.

Squeezing the red bottle, she sent a long jet of the paste onto his face, making him jump up sputtering and wiping his face.

“Hey!” he cried, toppling out of bed and yelping as he stepped on a Lego.

Layla was laughing hard, so hard that she had dropped the ketchup and plopped down on her butt.

Eric finally wiped the last of the ketchup off his face, and peering around the room, he saw the ketchup.

“Hey!” He cried again, “She hit me and ran away, the coward!” And grabbing his Nerf sword, he stalked out the room.

Layla got up confusedly, staring after her brother. Has he gone to ignoring her now?

Layla followed him to her room, then to the main room, in which Mrs. Lilley was still napping, and to their parents’ room, all the while running in front of him, waving her hands and pulling weird faces, wondering why he didn’t even look at her. Meanwhile, Eric’s pace had quickened.

“Where is she?” He said, now sounding scared rather than angry.

He raced out of the room, his sword lying on the ground, and Layla went to follow him, but noticed something.

Their parents had a full length mirror in their bedroom that Layla remembered having fun making poses in, from puckering her lips to wiggling her butt, but now as she walked up to it, all she saw was the room behind her, with her parents’ queen-size, fluffy bed, and the billowy white curtains waving by the large window.

Then, in a bolt of clarity, Layla realized that Eric couldn’t see her.

“I’m in-vis’ble!” She whispered.

Then she heard a thump and ran to find Eric on the floor of his room with his back to her holding Peppers, who she had left on the floor when she went to follow him.

Stepping around him and over Legos, she also saw that he was crying.

“Oh, mom! Dad! Where is she? I lost her!” He cried suddenly, breaking down into sobs as he hugged Peppers toward himself.

Layla felt her eyes burning as she held her fists to her sides. *He . . . Misses me.* She realized. *He . . .* She started hiccuping. *He loves me!*

Suddenly she started crying too, and Eric oof-ed as she tumbled into him and hugged him hard.

Between them, Peppers glowed warmly for a second.

Then, Eric cried “Layla!” as he saw her hugging him, and he tackled her across the floor, hugging her back, even with Legos poking him in the side.

“Ow! Eric, that hurts!” Layla said, still hiccuping.

Eric let her go and looked at her, before saying, with his cheeks red, “I should show you something,” and getting up to rustle under his covers.

When he came back, he sat down and showed her a fluffy stuffed seal.



August Artist

by Dorothy Slater

My mother said your eyes spoke to her soul
A feeling I can't wholly comprehend
And not just comprehension, but something
perfectly mystery
Like how the ashen oil paint moves and bends

But I won't be a charlatan
And say what I don't know
Like how to play a sonata in the key of Z
Or speak of fabricated feats of crows

I once called you an august artist
One no one doubts will plenty impress
But somehow the thought of inferiority
Come to mind, nevertheless

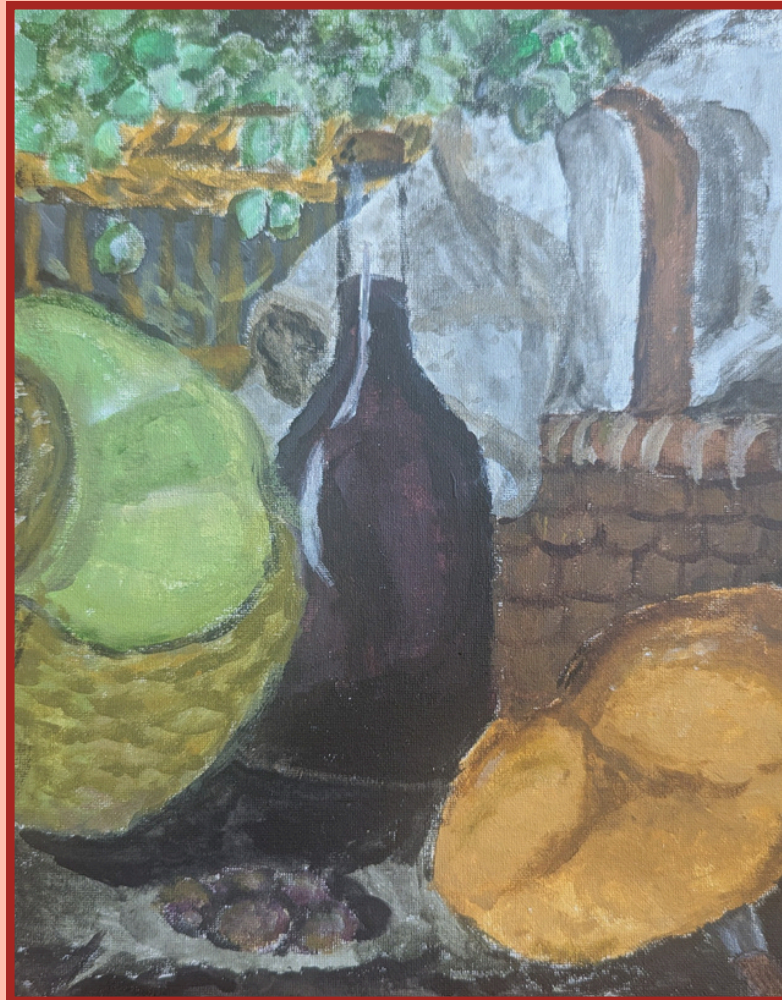
Cause those tormented eyes speak more than
I ever could
Reminds me of those salty bluegrass days
Fever dreams in nights of ochre and jewel
And withered pictures from the good ol' days

Did you wonder the same things I do
Like why people hug or cry for a friend?
Like the man who fought for poetry upon the
eastern shore
Or the daughter who for a family tries to
mend

Did you ever get those stares in coffee shops
And silent friends and people pleasers?
Do you understand the code of a dreamer
And the fear that comes along when you reap,
sir?

Your eyes tell me you understand those lonely
nights
Those nights where you hear the crying through
the door
And the walls are too thin, so the sobs seem to stay
in
But sometimes hope comes right as, caving in,
comes the floor

What an uncanny thing our parasocial relationships
But it all shifts back to your portrait
Etched and frozen in oil and ink
Just like your face and my stupid wit



A Section from 'La Merienda' by Ellie Piehl

The Case of The White and Gold Mask

by Kinsey Robertson

“Can you remember anything else about the party that you haven't already told me about?” I ask, as me and my detective partner Wren zip across the thick red carpet and portraits of aristocrats.

“I think I've told you everything, anything else is a minor detail!” Wren breathes out, trying to keep up with me and my clanking leg.

“*Every* detail matters in a case, even the small ones. *Especially* the small ones,” I huff out. My leg was starting to bother me, the heavy metal weighing me down and causing every step to feel like I was sinking through jello. The Montgomery manor's long hallways didn't help, adding to the trek. However, I wasn't the only one struggling as my new assistant, Wren, was too.

“Well, I do remember there being a white and gold mask near the gates of the manor when my family left, but I don't think that's very important,” Wren wheezes, slowly melting towards the floor, “Hey Cal I know this case is important, but could we take a break? All this walking is making me lightheaded.” I pause, looking down at the clock that lay inserted in my metallic arm. *Twenty minutes*. That's all the time we have left before the police take over the case. The impatience inside of me stirs but after a second I begrudgingly slide down onto the floor next to Wren.

“We just have to get to the end of this hall, do you think you'll be able to make it?” I ask Wren, stretching my robotic leg out in front of me, the gears inside cooling down.

Wren takes a big gulp of air, “Yeah, I can do it. Is it always like this at the end of a case?” she asks, turning her head towards.

“The adrenaline is always this high, but I can't say there is this much walking,” I say, looking at Wren's gold and white hairbow. My eyes go wide.

“Wait, you mentioned something about a mask, right?” I ask, standing back up, my leg clacking underneath me. Wren shoots me a confused look.

“Yes, but like I said. I'm pretty sure some random guest discarded it.”

“I agree that someone discarded it, but I don't think it was someone *random*,” I replied. I start speeding towards the room at the end of the hall, the one where our audience is waiting. I hear Wren scramble up, combat boots stomping after me.

“I thought we were taking a break!” she yells.

“We were!” I respond, throwing open the doors to the room. “But then I solved the case!”

A group of aristocrats stares back at me. Mr. and Miss Montgomery sit apart from each other, each one with puffy eyes.

“Ah, Mr. Caltrez I'm so glad you could join us,” a woman in maid's attire, Miss Baudelaire, says.

“*This* is who you went to to solve our daughter's kidnapping?” Mr. Montgomery cries. “He's a *child!*”

“Actually he's 18, he just suffers from severe baby face,” Wren wheezes behind me. I scoff at Wren's comment as Mr. Montgomery lets out another ear piercing cry.

“*Another* child!” screeches Mr. Montgomery. Miss Montgomery glares at us, dabbing a tissue under her eye, as she clutches her daughter's red hair bow to her chest. Miss Baudelaire sits beside her, holding the tissue box.

"I'm glad the police are coming soon because there's no way a cyborg and the scum of the White family are going to figure this out," she mutters while the other upstuck aristocrats whisper amongst themselves.

I clear my throat, capturing the gazes of the Montgomerys.

"I know what happened to your daughter," I look down at my watch, *10 minutes*. "But it's not the answer you think it is," I say. Wren stands beside me, face scrunching in confusion.

"Just tell us who took our daughter!" squeaks Mr. Montgomery.

"No one *took* your daughter, she left herself." At my words the room freezes. I continue, "I first got the suspicion that she had run away when Wren gave me her observations of the two of you during the party," I say.

"Yeah!" Wren pipes up. "Me and my family attended your party, and I didn't know anyone so I started people watching, that's when I noticed how awkward you two were. I knew it couldn't be nerves because your family has been hosting this annual themed masquerade for decades now. When I heard my mom talking about divorce it all clicked into place."

"Did you know divorce is one of the highest causes of children running away?" I ask the Montgomerys. Miss Montgomery looks at me, mouth agape.

"But how did you? We never announced our divorce to the public!" she says.

"Information leaks spread fast at social events," shrugs Wren. In response, Miss Montgomery closes her mouth and looks down at her heels.

"When Miss Baudelaire called me about the case, she briefly mentioned Willow acting distant, which is a clue as to how your behavior was affecting her," I remark, walking behind Mr. Montgomery's chair. I tap my metal finger against the plush rim and shuffle through events in my brain.

"This next part is a jump, but given these two bits of information I presume your daughter saw the party as the perfect escape, as it *was* a masquerade." Everyone's mouths turn into an 'o'.

Miss Baudelaire said that Willow went to bed at 9pm, while the party was still going on. Miss Baudelaire later went to check on Willow at 12am, after the party had ended, but was shocked when Willow was gone. She went to get Mr. Montgomery, who started a search for his daughter, but they couldn't find any traces of her. Other than that," I point to the hairbow Miss Montgomery clutches. I walk and pluck the hair bow out of her hands. The red bow contrasts my metal arm and I mess with it as I continue my deduction.

"This hairbow was found in Miss Baudelaire's room, which sparked the blame game. There are only three known people who *could* have kidnapped Willow. Miss Baudelaire, because of the evidence, and the Montgomerys because of divorce shenanigans."

"But Cal, you said that Willow ran away?" Wren says, looking at me from the middle of the room. She appeared confused, but I could tell her brain was slowly working out the puzzle as her face was no longer scrunched. I nod.

"The suspects *couldn't* have kidnapped Willow because they all have the same alibi, they were at the party. Ask any guest, the Montgomerys were at the party the entire time, and Miss Baudelaire was with them the entire time because she is Miss Montgomery's personal maid."

"But what about when Miss Baudelaire went to check on Willow?" asks Wren.

“That was after the party, there would've been no distraction had Miss Baudelaire kidnaped Willow then. Besides, she couldn't have packed Willow's bags in that short amount of time.” Wren's eyes go wide.

“The missing clothes!” she exclaims. Everyone's eyes go to the stuffed closet in the corner of the room.

“That's right. After learning about their daughter's disappearance, the Montgomerys searched for any and every small clue. Something that they discovered was that some of their daughters' clothes were missing. The most notable being a white and gold party dress. Your family hosts annual masquerades, but every year the theming changes. This year the theme was white and gold.” I say, continuing my circling path around the aristocrats. “Except, your family always has to be different from everyone else, has to stand out, so this year *you wore red.*” I motion to the red hairbow I am holding. “Your daughter left the party with everyone else, she changed dresses and hid her bags under her giant skirt,” I conclude, looking at the Montgomerys.

“But, how do you *know* that's how she got out?” Mr. Montgomery questions.

“Simple, because of a white and gold mask Wren saw on her way out of the party. Your daughter must have discarded it after exiting the gates,” I say, shrugging.

“But...where is she now?” Miss Montgomery asks, dabbing at her puffy eyes.

“That I can't answer, because our time is up.” I lift up my metallic arm, showing the clock embedded in my wrist. The Montgomerys both start to cry again, as I exit the room. Wren trails behind me, her big boots slapping against the red carpet.

“You pieced everything together quite well Wren,” I say, looking at my assistant. Wren gives me a lopsided smile.

“It took me a while, but at some point my brain just...started putting the pieces together as you explained. When did you figure it out?”

“When you mentioned the white and gold mask. After that everything clicked into place,” I respond.

“Theres still something I don't get...you said you couldn't answer their question of where Willow is because our time ran up, but do you actually know where she is?”

“I don't know where she is, given time I could probably figure it out, but that's not our business anymore. Besides, the Montgomerys have the police to find their daughter.”

“True, it just feels wrong leaving them to figure the rest of this out. I hope, whether or not they find their daughter, they will discuss their issues,” sighs Wren. “What do we do now?” I look over to my partner and flash her a smile.

“Now we move onto the next case, for now this one's closed.”



Young and Free

by Abigail Tran

Long ago, when I was young and free
I grew up by the country side
O'er the rolling hills
That tumble still
Birthed by winter's violent tears
And spring's gentle sun
Awaiting the days yet to come



Forest Floor by Victoria Scott

Along that country stretch
I long beheld an open land
Where little grew in that desertlike sand
Til by the country side
O'er the rolling hills
A lovely thing arose
Framed by cedar logs:
A home, amidst that barren land

And there by the country side
O'er the rolling hills
I, still young and bright,
Beheld an aweing sight
I met the young of cattle and man
Racing o'er my wispy, dewy lashes
Shouting, calling, working, laughing,
Their lively feet suffocating my breath

By the country side,
O'er the rolling hills,
Seasons passed
By that land, mighty and vast
The wild wind and heavy sun
Bronzed and scorched my weary blades
I sank down as autumn winds passed
Eager to spring again with the flower buds
But as time slipped by
There was heard a heavy sigh
For, trampled by young and lively feet,
I soon lay down, old and weary

And by the country side,
O'er the rolling hills,
I gazed once more at the setting sun
Knowing my time was nearly done
Til there I lay, unmoving and silent,
Pressed against earth's soil,
Old and weary,
No longer swaying in that gentle wind.

Evangeline's Dream

by Vivian

One day not so very long ago—No, hold on I know what you are thinking, a fairytale should start with once upon a time. Well yes, the ordinary sort of fairytale should start with that, but this is no ordinary sort of tale, it is a *real* fairytale, the essence of something true. And so now, after having explained that part I shall go on. Once upon a day, not so very long ago, there lived a young woman named Evangeline. She was a lovely woman, loving, gentle, patient, and kind. She did not have much to share as far as food or luxury was concerned, but as for giving comfort and peace there was no one like Evangeline, she longed to sow seeds of peace and comfort wherever she went.

One day as our young maiden was weeding her small but productive and tidy little garden, she heard the sound as of horses hooves coming toward her across the green. As Evangeline watched, she let loose a cry of joy, and her face lit up, for just rounding the bend was a dappled grey horse, and mounted on its back was a lady dressed in dark blue, who bore her dark hair braided upon her head in a crown. “Cordelia!” Evangeline gasped out, “Well this is a surprise!”

“Yes it is!” Agreed Cordelia, “How have you been my friend?”—Here I will stop for a moment, and describe this young woman named Cordelia. She was a pious Christian woman, very beautiful, both in spirit (where it is important) and in physical beauty, but she did not boast of it, nor did she hide it, she just let it draw people to her so that she could bring them to Christ.

Now, back to the story; By this time the two young maidens had gone inside Evangeline's cottage, and had set themselves down around the tea table (even if she didn't have much luxury she could still have a jolly good tea every once in a while) and had begun to talk of this and that until finally Evangeline said, “And now Cordelia, you must tell me a bit about why you came here.”

Cordelia, who had been nibbling at a biscuit, now set it down and told her story, “Well it is really quite simple, I felt that someone was going to need help explaining the mysteries of the Faith to themselves.” As she finished speaking, the bells in the valley below started ringing for Vespers. “I am now going to go to Church, would it be alright if I boarded here tonight?”

“Yes of course,” responded Evangeline, “but do youwell... I have always wanted to go to church, but have always been scared to, do you mind if I come with you?” She finished all in a rush.

“You need never ask me about going to Church! I will always say yes!” Replied Cordelia.

And so both the girls went to Church, and afterward came back to Evangeline's home, where they took their dinner and went to sleep. Some hours later in the night Evangeline started to dream. She dreamt of a kingdom. In the kingdom she saw a gate made of a single pearl, she walked on streets of gold, avenues of silver, and roads of diamonds. She passed houses made of jewels, shimmering in the sun. The roads, streets and avenues all led to a shining lake. Three boats lay in waiting for her, Evangeline boarded one and began moving across the lake. In the far off distance she could just make out a palace, a king's palace. She reached the shore and stepped out, she walked up to the gates and they swung open, revealing a figure she knew must be there, yet could hardly expect. The figure was clad in white with a shining, shimmering crown upon its head. She fell at its feet and said, “My Lord!”

He answered, “My daughter.”

The sky overhead was cloudless, no sign of rain, and why should there be? For there is no rain, no sorrow, where there is God.

When she woke up, Evangeline had tears on her cheeks, she got up, sped to the guest bedroom where Cordelia was sleeping, and cried out, “Oh Cordelia! I am going to be baptised as soon as possible! I have had the most wonderful vision, and I want it to really happen to me!” Cordelia was half crazy with joy; she had, with the extreme help of God, accomplished what she had been sent to do.

Evangeline was baptised and had a long happy life as a devout Christian woman, and when she was a very, very, old woman, Evangeline dreamed the dream once again, with only one difference this time, it was real.



Reflections of Annecy by Valerie Arolli

Andromeda

by Isabella Klaas

The gulls circle high above the waves crashing upon the rocks. They turn and dive, climbing up towards the heavens on strong certain wings before swiveling to plummet back towards the earth.

They are wild. They are unchained. They are free.

A noise in the room pulls my attention away from the gulls. I turn my face from the window toward the noise, keeping my hands on the warm windowsill where I can feel the wind kissing my fingers and see the sunlight glowing on my skin.

My mother approaches me with quiet steps. She places one hand on my back and smiles, eyes full of pride.

“Are you ready for the banquet, Andromeda?” she asks.

I turn my gaze back to the window. The gulls have almost all flown away now, with only one still careening on the wind’s back.

My mother places her hand under my chin and turns my face gently toward her.

“You are so beautiful, my daughter,” she purrs. “You will look radiant at the head of the banquet table at Phineus’s side.”

“What is the use of my beauty if it is to be given to one who does not care about it?” I respond.

“My darling, he is going to be the next ruler of our kingdom. You must be his queen to keep our name in the royal line and to ensure that his rule is uncontested. You will be a gorgeous consort for him.”

“He cares only for the crown.”

I stand still, unresponsive to her attentions.

“Do not worry, my dear, he sees you for what you are—a beautiful prize worth having.”

I gently pull away. The final seagull is gone, borne by the breeze to freedom. Would that the wind could do the same for me.

Rays of light from the setting sun pour into the banquet hall. Flattery pours into my ears from the mouths of the nobles, praising my beauty, their words as full of substance as the intangible sunbeams.

One guest addresses my mother: “I have heard of your daughter all the way from my kingdom across the strait and have heard accounts of her loveliness. She by far exceeds these descriptions. Andromeda is the most beautiful young girl in all of Kush.”

My mother swells with pride, no doubt at the compliments of this other ruler, who has no need to flatter my parents nor me. “There is certainly no question of that. Most definitely in Kush, and, without doubt, in the world!”

My father chuckles. “My dear, show some modesty.”

My mother turns to him, smiling upon me as she does. “I only speak the truth. The whole kingdom knows she is more beautiful even than the Nereids.”

The hall goes as still and silent as a tomb. Even the slight breeze blowing through the window seems to hold its breath.

It is taboo to speak ill of the Nereids. They are the beautiful daughters of Poseidon, the jealous and wrathful god of the sea. He crashes his anger down upon those who presume to put themselves—or their daughters—above his offspring.

My father breaks the deafening silence.

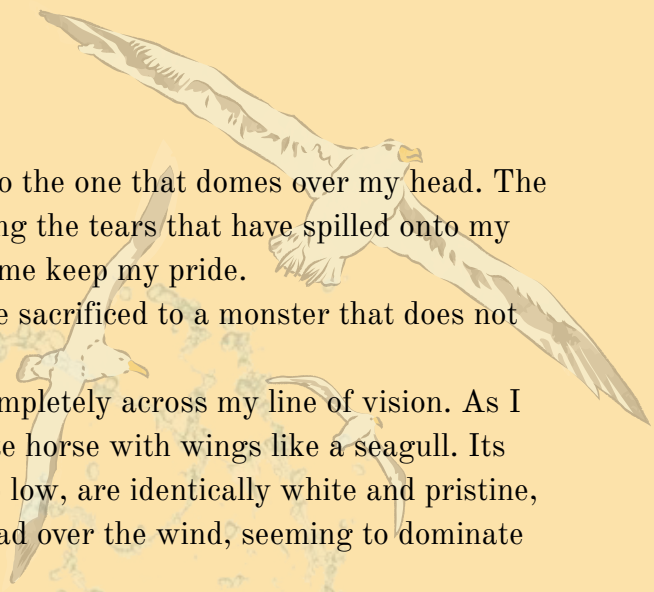
“Let us have a toast!” he cries, raising his goblet. “To Dionysus, god of the vine, and my daughter Andromeda!”

Two days later the news reaches the castle. A terrible monster has risen from the sea, terrorizing my father’s kingdom. The oracle who delivers the news says that the beast will not cease in its rampage until the object of Poseidon’s wrath has been sacrificed to it.

Tears run down my father’s cheeks as his words pour into my ears. He wrings his hands, begs me to forgive him, but says it is the only way to save the kingdom. My mother will not face me. She locks herself in her room.

The soldiers do not meet my eyes as they lead me to the seashore. Nor do they touch me, and they do not need to. I may be about to be offered as a bounty to a monster, but I am still Andromeda. I will preserve my dignity. I walk with my back straight and head raised high as shells and sand crunch under my feet.

When they have left me, my wrists are fastened in iron manacles embedded in the cold, wet rock. My feet slip on the stone as the waves lap inches from my toes.



I raise my eyes from the blue ocean that stretches before me to the one that domes over my head. The cry of the gulls echoes in my ears. The wind kisses my face, drying the tears that have spilled onto my cheeks. It was not able to carry me to freedom, but it has helped me keep my pride.

So this is what is to become of Andromeda's beauty—it is to be sacrificed to a monster that does not care for it.

A gigantic bird soars overhead, its wings stretching nearly completely across my line of vision. As I look closer in wonder, I see it is not a bird at all, but a snow-white horse with wings like a seagull. Its feathers, of which I can see each one, for the creature is flying so low, are identically white and pristine, each equally carrying the weight of the creature. The wings spread over the wind, seeming to dominate the breeze.

On the winged horse's back sits a man clad in Greek armor, his hair catching the sun's rays. His eyes flash with confidence and a hint of carelessness.

As the winged horse arcs over my head, its rider pulls it to a stop. His eyes lock with mine as he looks down on me, a confident smile splitting across his face.

“Beautiful lady, are you in danger?”

My pride rises like the ruffled feathers of the sea gull in a storm. I may be chained to a boulder, I may be about to be devoured by a beast of the sea, but I am still Andromeda. I will not be hailed so casually, called by that very feature which has led me to my doom. I will preserve my dignity. I straighten as far as I can against the chains.

“No,” I reply scathingly, tossing my head. “I am merely getting my afternoon sun.”

His grin widens; a sly look comes into his eyes. “If I rescue you from your fate, will you give me your hand in marriage?”

I raise my chin in indignation. “How dare you take advantage of my plight in such a way!”

His smile does not waver. “I will return. Do not go anywhere.”

He spurs the horse on, leaving me to my confusion, irritation, and wonder. The minutes tick slowly by, marked by the crashing of the surf. Far away, a shadow beneath the water draws my eye. Could the Greek and his winged horse also have abandoned me to my fate?

The sea explodes. The head of a yellow-eyed monster emerges, followed by its snake-like, bottle-green neck. I do not scream nor try to break free, but freeze in horror as the creature draws nearer, its body winding through the water.

A flash of white crosses my vision. The winged horse and Greek man have returned. He reaches into a bag.

“Close your eyes!” he shouts.

I obey. As I stare into the blackness of my eyelids, I hear a screech, followed by the sound of cracking stone and a tremendous splash. Dare I now see what has transpired?

“You can open your eyes now,” an amused voice sounds in my ear.

I snap them open to see the Greek man approaching me, the winged horse landed upon the rocks, its wings folded to its sides. I stare at the sea where the monster was, just in time to see a pronged tail-tip of stone disappear beneath the waves—the creature has been turned to a statue.

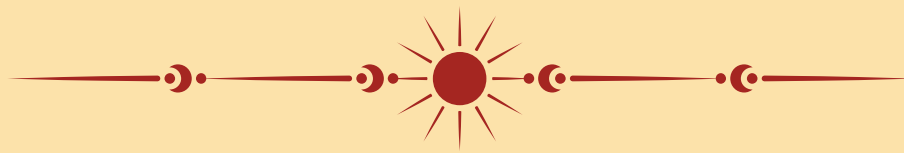
The chains are off now, and my smug rescuer holds out a hand. “How would you like to ride the Pegasus?”

My eyes fill with wonder once more as I stare at the animal with its strong, beautiful wings, and imagine it carrying me on the wind.

“I would like that very much,” I say, the edge that I prepared to use gone from my voice, the proud walls around my heart falling.

Another minute, and we are astride the horse and in the air, my legs gripping the Pegasus’s body tightly as I sit behind the Greek–Perseus, he says his name is—just in front of the horse’s beautiful wings. A single powerful beating of those wings, and we are aloft, leaving the rock and the sea far behind, the wind not just a force carrying us, but a servant at our command as we fly like the gulls, masters of our fate.

We are wild. We are unchained. We are free.



Life Of An Author

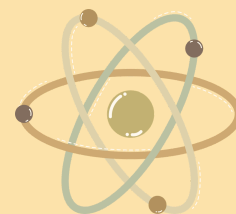
by Nyjah Caleb

guy with tie dye shirt starts playing bongos

I procrastinate yes I do
sleep instead of writing
when a chapter is due
paper left empty
while I sit with no clue
poor little me
poor empty book!

Bongos stop





A Particle or a Wave, What Shall I Be
by Jordan Abouelazm

An electron, when left on its own
Acts just like a wave, it is known.
But if you should peek,
The wave starts to leak,
And it hits like a dull, heavy stone.



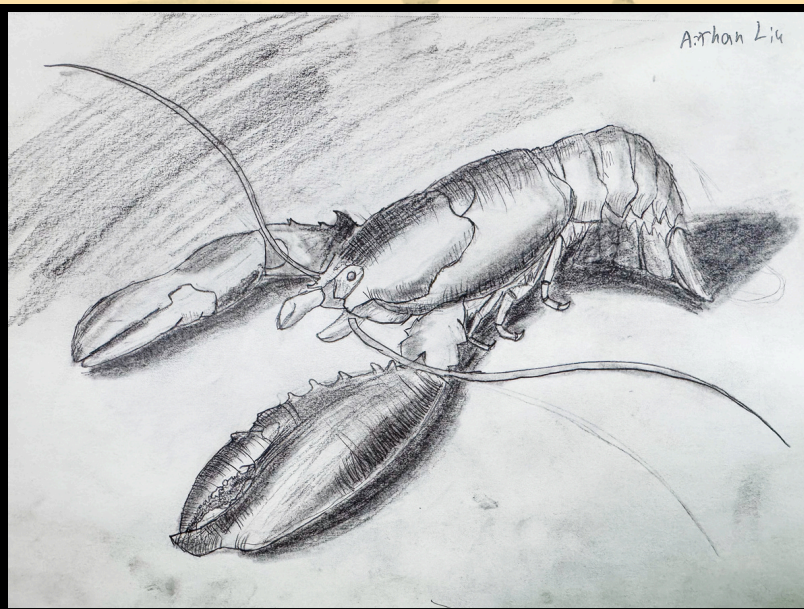
The Skull *by Aithan Liu*

Natural Beauties
by Noah Patullo

Great, beautiful lake
Pristine, untouched, reflective
Symbol of beauty

A tall vantage point
Overlooking trees and hills
And a great blue sky

A delicate seed
Sapling sprouting from the earth
Size does not matter



The Lobster *by Aithan Liu*

I Remember, You and Me

by Mae Allen

I remember the first time you held my hand;
Our toes were in the sand.
The waves crashing on the land
This was the day everything began.

I remember the first date,
You decided to teach me to skate
On so many levels we could relate
To our future, we couldn't wait.

I remember the first time you kissed me
Somewhere private where no one could see,
I wondered how you and me could possibly be
I didn't dare to believe

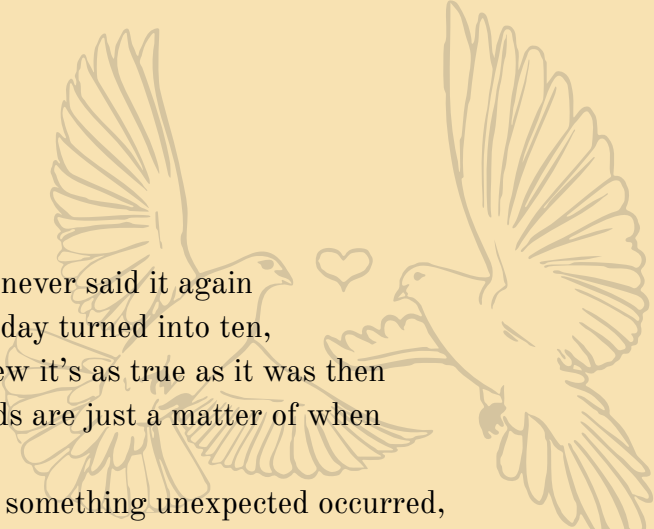
I remember the love you would confess.
A thought I didn't think you should suggest
I didn't know what had you possessed
How was this something anyone could suggest?

For how could anyone love I?
My mind spun with questions, like why?
I had to imagine this was a lie
I didn't dare to reply

I am utterly unlovable
I am constantly unstable
I am anything but notable
I am every bit unlovable

So why, oh why, do you lie?
No one could ever look me in the eye,
Now you expect this love to apply?
And why am I so worked up over some guy?

For now all I feel is guilt
If I don't reply, will you wilt?
Even with the careful friendship we've built,
Everything began to tilt



And you never said it again
And one day turned into ten,
But I knew it's as true as it was then
The words are just a matter of when

But then something unexpected occurred,
I began to think of that word.
And once I had recovered,
I slowly became unshuttered.

And one day I said it back.
And your whole face went slack
And I felt the heart attack,
And my whole mind turned black

But than you smiled so great
As if the words had opened a flood gate
And it didn't matter that my confession was late
For the words now carried no negative weight

And I can remember every step forward
Every moment, even the awkward
I can remember every one of our words
Every confession, even untold.

But I can't pinpoint the moment that everything
turned,
When my love for you sat inside me and burned.
When I knew it was true and so easily
discerned,
All I had to do was let myself be yearned.



Acknowledgments

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We would also like to thank *you* for taking the time to read this volume. We hope you enjoyed the 2026 WTMA Literary Journal!

