

Rapids Review 2019



The Rapids Review

A Literary Arts Magazine

A publication of the Anoka Ramsey Community
College's Creative Writing Club.

Senior Editors

Gabriel Tronson
Carissa More

Editors

Casey Jones
Julianne Del Castillo
Matt Young
Olivia Lee

Advisor

Jasmin Ziegler

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False Peace

Rachel Hanson

Through the eyes of the friendly neighborhood
night watch, the streets are cast in blight.

The neighborhood boys circle up on a trim lawn
and take turns screaming at the clear skies.
The sound ricochets off the house facades,
but no one comes to question their wailing.

A family man stands on the end of his driveway,
smoking, or dead-drunk at Mark's,
his dog pissing on the stereo.

A little redhead boy is a terror to the peace.
He'll play ding-dong-ditch or pretend
to be a package at the door,
popping out to ask you for your cell phone.
He's been shut out and can't contact his parents.

At one house there are police, an ambulance too.
A husband bites a bullet in his own living room.
Maybe, he woke from his nap into the war.
His wife is left to steam clean the carpets.

The neighbors peer at the scene from their windows.
How many understand the wife?
How many understand the husband?



Ribcage

A cage of bones encloses my soul in a secret garden.
Suppose I had the courage to break out of my skeleton,
and tear open my skin to reveal the innermost parts of my being.
Roots drape from my heart, drawing life from my bloodstream,
cultivating the vines that twist up the gaps in my ribs like a trellis.
They tangle into clots in my lungs, creeping up into my throat.
I open my mouth to speak, but a flower blooms on the tip of my
tongue.



On a cold autumn afternoon we were both sitting in my step dad's old van. Waiting across the street from my great aunt's house who my mother had promised would help her move out. We both were just kids barely old enough to tie our own shoes without any help, he always had trouble with laces and so did I. We were fooling around with all my step dad's tools even though we knew we weren't supposed to. Mom was about to leave us with him so she could go check on my aunt and figure out if everything was going to fit alright in the hunk of junk we were riding in. The second she leaves, my brother is hit with separation anxiety and starts crying all over the place for her. He opens the sliding door and starts to go towards her, what followed was just a blur. Life was like a movie in slow motion. My brain tried to process everything that happened but as a child I could barely make sense of it all. I don't remember ever crying, yelling, or even saying a single word that day. I saw him one second and he was gone the next.

My brother was hit by a car, got stuck in the wheel, and dragged about half a block before anyone could notice. The accident took only a couple seconds but it felt like an eternity from start to finish. I felt like I was looking into my life through a kaleidoscope that had mismatched moments all put together. That day went by in flashes from my mom tearing up grass and screaming in agony for her little boy, to paramedics trying repeatedly to resuscitate him. The last part of that day I remember standing in my aunt's living room staring out the window watching everyone rush to the hospital and leaving me with my older cousins. He was rushed to the hospital with nearly all his bones broken and missing a small bit of brain. It took nearly an entire day of surgery, but he was fine, or so we thought. After his surgery my brother enters into a coma that his doctors thought he would never wake up from.

He was put on life support, my mom and I would routinely visit him and try to stimulate him to see if he could hear us, and then we would proceed to the church where my mother would pray and beg for God to help her baby. After the third month Miguel woke up, when his doctors were about to give up on him he woke. That moment is one I will never forget. I was taken out of school and rushed to the hospital by my uncle. When we arrive I walk into his room and see him. Miguel is lying in a cradle surrounded by a myriad of beeping machines. When he sits up my mom asks him if he knows who I was and he responds with a very soft voice "Tamón". He proceeded to live the next six months of his life wheelchair bound. The crash had left him scarred and with a learning disability, but Miguel didn't care and he still lived his life normally or rather his definition of normal.

Growing up he was still the adventurous, care free, and smart kid he was even before his event, all the adults in our lives were careful and had extra patience with him, he loved to test their limits. Getting what he wanted, whenever he wanted and acting however he wanted. Always escaping from any consequences and getting his way by using his accident as his trump card. The kid was smart but he always seemed to get himself stuck in some hairy situations. His bread and butter was getting chased by squirrels, being barked at and avoiding dog bites by those dogs he so loved to annoy, escaping the wrath of other kids whenever he got lucky, scraping his knees and getting multiple stitches. To me he really seemed to enjoy all the attention.

For a boy with a learning disability he really picked up quick on a lot of behaviors of life—especially ones he benefited from—like pretending that he didn't know Spanish when being scolded, but knowing perfectly well how to ask our grand-mother for toys in Spanish, and frustrating our younger cousins and sibling to the point of them crying. Our siblings survived him. From our youngest brother being left in a dirty laundry hamper under a bunch of towels to him literally tossing our baby sister onto a bed.

Despite whatever anyone said about him he knew who he was. He was always determined to be the best at anything we did and he was always honest about his feelings. He would let you know if he liked you or not, he never had a filter. His feelings and thoughts were always out there for all to know. He did have trouble conquering school. Math was a foreign language from another planet for him and history might as well not have happened. Science was basically trying to do rocket science, and the only thing he really enjoyed at school other than lunch was reading. From when he started middle school all the way through high school a lot of his time was spent at the library. He was even given the opportunity to be a librarian's assistant, a job at school which he loved.

He inspires me because even with all the negative aspects of life he went through, such as when he was told that he would never be like anyone else, or that he would never be able to do a lot of what other kids were doing, he didn't care. Whenever he sets himself up and sees his goals in front of him he always goes for them, no matter the outcome. He wanted to live and he lived. He was a miracle child who defied all expectations. He wasn't supposed to walk or talk again but this boy didn't accept that. He got up from his wheelchair and said that he would not conform to others views of him. He wasn't expected to graduate high school or to be able to hold a job or even drive at all. He is currently 20 years old, is a high school graduate, and working a full time job. Now his next challenge is conquering the roads. Something he once thought unattainable. As his older brother I can say that he is someone I look up to, not just because he is taller than me, but because he is someone who doesn't care what anyone

says or thinks about him. We can all learn a lot from the people we least expect to learn from. He is his own person he will not conform to worldly views about what he should be. He is Miguel.



CLINK, CLINK

Katrina Saete

I didn't know where my daughters had gone, but I could hear their voices carry over the lake. The sky was overcast, a blanket of gray. All I had was an empty water bottle, the label torn away. It took time to find rocks the right size, barely larger than a nickel, to fit inside the slim mouth of the bottle. Dirt and grit lodged under my nails as I dug in the mud and under petrified logs covered in green algae. My favorite stones were the smooth, pearlescent minerals, round as beads. Into the bottle they went. Clink, clink. I sifted through mounds for pieces with unusual shapes or bright colors made brighter by their dampness.

They were tiny rocks. Barely rocks at all. Chips. Pebbles. Practically weightless on their own. I shook the bottle every once in a while to make sure they were still there.

Clink, clink.

Gas tank is empty. Pocket is empty. The change jar is full. A waterfall of coins into a paper bag that probably won't hold, so I cradle it like so much precious cargo. The bank is quiet as a library when I dump the contents of the bag into a coin sorter that whirs and clanks, pushing the rejects into a metal cache near the bottom. Clink, clink.

Not far away, on the same side of the lake, a man and his daughter inexpertly threw their fishing lines, dragging the lures back with smiles on their faces despite the empty catch. She wore a bright pink jacket that looked out of place against the gray-brown of the lakeside. He pointed to a cluster of bubbles at the center of the otherwise still water and told her the fish were too busy dancing to eat their worms. She tried to skip a rock, but it sank the second it touched the water's fragile surface. My daughters and I didn't have much time left at the lake. Seconds sprinted past toward evening when I would have to go to work, waiting tables and scraping plates of uneaten food, while my daughters would have to raid the cabinets like squirrels, fending for themselves. I made a mental catalogue of what they'd find: boxes of generic macaroni and cheese, stale crackers, cereal. Hardly nutrition, but they wouldn't starve. I picked up another stone and slipped it into the water bottle.

Older daughter wants dinner. Younger daughter wants to assemble a robot costume from cardboard boxes and aluminum foil. Wife wants attention, but not the kind I can give. Mother wants a phone call every Wednesday. Coworker

Co-worker wants a favor. I nod so much my chin starts to wear a hole in my chest, a flesh and bone pickaxe. Clink, clink.

The bottle was half full of colorful pebbles. Still damp with river water, their surfaces shone in the creeping sunlight. I switched hands, collecting with my left despite the awkwardness. I opened and closed my hand against a cramp. When did pebbles get so heavy?

There's a man who says it wasn't him and a woman who says it was and there's nothing to be done because other men volley credibility like a ball over a net. She wears my face and I wear hers and they wear ours. Why are you so angry? You should smile more. Why didn't you say anything? Why should we believe you? They didn't hear the laughter, the sound of the metal bed-frame against the wall. Clink, clink.

My knees hadn't been creaking when I started, but they were creaking now each time I bent to gather a stone that caught my eye. My back ached and my elbow was stiff from holding the bottle. Water lapped at my ankles as I waded deeper into the lake. There was still room in the bottle and still sun in the sky. The man and his daughter had gone. I was alone. The only woman hunched over the ground, collecting rocks.

I buy another bottle of whiskey before the first one's empty. The ice in the glass—clink, clink—cool against my forehead. We need cat food. We need toilet paper. Older daughter needs a costume for the play—she's a baby kangaroo—younger daughter needs a costume for the play—she's a bumble bee. The manuscript is due. The manuscript isn't finished. The manuscript may never be finished. I'm alone at my cluttered desk, the only woman hunched over the table, collecting words.

I stood at the edge of the lake with a bottle of rocks in my hand and wondered what to do with it. They were beautiful, but useless. A burden. Heavy. I could have left them behind, but they were my rocks now and I would carry them home. Their contents shifted in the bottle and a few pebbles dribbled out of the mouth. Clink, clink.



Piercing Silence

Morghan Gillispie

Stop.

Stop before your sandwiches
are painted black;
and your socks run dizzy.

A crocodile escorts a dictator;
blindfolded past the triggers
of American mutiny.

Stop.

Stop your moonlight gallop
in London for a quick thrift
for inexpensive suffering.

A remnant
through a kaleidoscope
to unpredictable creatures.

Stop.

Stop to see red umbrellas
that hide the knees
of our bitter babies.

Zucchini molded in the dirt;
a precise shrill
of orange rinds in a kettle.

Stop.

Stop before the high pines,
born yearly; but dead daily.



Chunks of Flesh

The earth had been reduced to a floating graveyard. The oceans were turning red with all the ended life. Body parts were the new grass. The undead were sick of being walked on, and started doing some walking of their own.

In the basement of one house, surrounded by the undead, a man and his roommate sit in the living room, waiting for death to squirm its way inside. The man, Vendetta, has a deep bite on his arm. The roommate, Fern, sits near him, tears streaming down his disheveled face like water down the side of a rocky mountain.

"At least the weather is nice," Vendetta says, rousing from another half-hallucinatory state.

"What?" Fern asks, wiping tears from his face.

"The weather. I mean, it could be worse, right? It could be raining." Vendetta glances towards the window and smiles at the sunny rays poking through the curtains.

"The fucking weather? Are you serious? It could be worse? You're going to die, Vendetta. There's no way this could be worse."

"No, no. It could definitely be worse. Rain would really damper my mood right now."

"Rain? You're missing a chunk of flesh." Fern feels the weight of the revolver in his left hand, but he doesn't want to look at it.

"Yeah, but, like I said, at least it's not raining. Plus the humidity is really nice. Not too stuffy." Vendetta takes a deep breath, as if to prove his point, and lets out a sigh of contentment.

"Are you listening to yourself?"

"Perfect humidity. No rain. I don't hear any wind either. Just pretty good weather all around. Yeah, could be worse."

"Are you okay? Like, do you need some water?" Fern glances around, looking for some curtain to get pulled back and reveal the big joke.

"Yeah. The weather is honestly stellar."

"Alright, I get it. You can stop describing the weather." Fern sighs, shaking with frustration and stress.

"I heard it was a good year for crops as well. Record high corn numbers. And, you know, corn is like a snowball effect on the economy," Vendetta says, his smile growing brighter like it were being woven by unseen, angelic hands.

"What fucking economy? Everyone's dead!" Fern stands, his anger flaring.

"No, listen," Vendetta says in such an earnest voice that Fern relaxes, "the more corn there is, the more shucking and threshing that needs to be done, so that gives hard working Americans jobs! Also, the farmers can put on threshing shows! Fun for the whole family."

"What the fuck? Nobody's going to put on a fucking corn threshing show! What is wrong with you?" Fern isn't sure if he should laugh or cry.

"We could put on a corn threshing show." Vendetta adjusts himself after saying this, a look of starstruck daydreaming plasters to his face. He adjusts the pillows behind his back and sighs. "Our very own corn threshing show."

"We need to figure out what to do with you, man. We don't have time for this nonsense. I can't let you turn. We both know..." Fern starts to raise the revolver, but is cut off.

"Yeah, we both know a corn threshing show would be pretty groovy right now. Something to help people get their minds off of all the undead waltzing around like they own the place. News flash, haha, they don't, you know?" Vendetta glances at the bite on his arm, thinks for a few moments, then nods, as if finishing a math equation.

"You've lost it—" Fern starts to say.

"Yes, I think we'd have enough time to put together a little neighborhood threshing show if we started now. Are you in, Fern? We could make some good money. Have some good corn."

"Vendetta, you're freaking me out. "

"C'mon buddy. We can just borrow the local farmer's corn. They won't miss it. This neighborhood is about to be treated to a threshing show they can't refuse."

"No, Vendetta, no. We—"

"It's the perfect weather for it too. Perfect humidity. No rain. Not too hot or cold."

"Vendetta."

"Perfect threshing weather if you ask me."

"Vendetta!" Fern stands, revolver still shaking in his hand. The creaking of the house increases as the loud noise excites the undead waiting outside. They reinvigorate their efforts to crack the outer shell of the house to get to the human-filled insides.

"Yes?"

"Just stop." Fern is shaking all over, reality slipping away from the grasp of his fingers. An ominous sense of dread has been creeping up on him, trying to hide in the mask of absurdity. Vendetta nods, sinking down in a lower sitting position. He takes in a deep breath and relaxes. Fern stares at his friends figure for a few moments, revolver half raised in his hands. The world is spinning much

too fast; Fern can feel every inch of its rotation. Vendetta's eyes suddenly twitch open, like shutters in an old, abandoned looking house being thrown open.

"Still, could be worse."

Fern groans and sits back down, "I feel like there are very few circumstances that would make this worse. Like, the number of actual situations that would make things worse would be under 10."

"Could be worse," Vendetta repeats again, "honestly, the economy has only been growing these past few years. Trump may be hated, but he's had some good effects on stimulating our economy and saving the average, American taxpayer."

"What in the everliving fuck are you-"

"Jobs, Fern! Tax-payers! There may be zombies outside, but we still need to pay taxes!"

"You've lost it. You have actually lost it." Fern shakes his head.

"Good god. I'm a genius. Having a threshing show would stimulate the local economy so much I might just get our senator's attention. They might just make me senator instead! C'mon Fern, old chap, we have work to do!" Vendetta pushes himself up, smiles, then falls face-first onto the floor with a crack. He's no longer moving.

"Vendetta?" Fern calls out, the shaking in his hands getting worse. The revolver feels much too heavy for his sickened consciousness to keep hold of. Vendetta doesn't move. The machine keeping his body moving seems to have finally ground to a halt. Fern lets out a small noise as more tears run down his face. The moans of the creatures outside ebb into his brain, becoming a permanent part of his life. He raises the revolver at his friend's head, shakes for a few moments like he was having a personal-earthquake, then lowers the weapon and kicks the wall in frustration.

"Could be worse," Fern spat as he slumped against the wall and lowered himself to a sitting position to wait for his friend to come back.



Brain on Fire

Jada Olson

Static crawls under my skin like an itch
Too subtle to feel, but I sense
It is there, a presence, a glitch-
self-destructing, trimming the wiring of consciousness.

Not wicked in intention, yet not pure, nor benign.
It clogs my throat, invisible fingers pinching my tongue,
not too hard, but firm, a sign-
claiming ownership over my lungs.

Electricity stings my muscles to move,
tensing in unison to a choir
of background noise, an unsteady groove
trying to keep up with a brain on fire.

Haywire, overcrowded thoughts bouncing one after another,
chasing the calm, grasping a tether.



Jen's Homage to Contemporary Art

Jen walked through the heavy metal doors, into the old high school gymnasium. Now that she was out of the bitter cold, and under the dim gym lighting, she could focus on her goal for the night. She looked around carefully. It was a big school. No one interesting had shown up yet. The few people who had shown up as early as her were busy taking pictures under the "10 Year Reunion" sign. It was written in "Comic Sans". How tacky.

If Jen were even a slightly more socially adept person, she might have realized that she was horribly overdressed. Her chunky heels, huge hoop earrings, zebra patterned dress, and green feather boa would have been bizarre even to her agent out in New York. She walked quickly over to the entrance of the main school building. The hallway lights were still on, and she heard vacuuming in one of the nearby classrooms, she'd have to wait until the coast was clear. She silently closed the door and jumped as she felt something touch the back of her neck.

"Hi Jenny! Remember me." A man says with a big genuine smile on his face. Jen did not remember him. "Of course, I do! How could I forget someone so," she paused for a moment desperately trying to think of something to say, "smart!"

The man began to laugh. Jen watched his face turn red as he doubled over. "Smart you say? Really? It's me, Alex. The guy who brought roadkill into the school to show the science teacher and caused a lice outbreak."

Jen suddenly remembered Alex with startling clarity. She couldn't forget him even if she wanted to, and boy did she. She postponed her grand plan for five minutes and thirty seconds to talk to Alex. He had a family now. He owned a restaurant down the way. They didn't talk about Jen. It never came up.

Alex saw a few of his old friends walk in through the double doors and ran over to them. The lights in the main hallway were still on, and there was no evidence that they would be off anytime soon. Jen marched over to the table of food. A few members of a local band had showed up to play. Most of them had been part of a bad rock band in high school, but now they had grown into a mediocre bluegrass band.

Jen couldn't get into the music. Back in the day she was known for being able to let loose, and throw herself into the music completely, but tonight she was on a mission. She had loose ends to tie up, and places to be. "Jen," She heard her name being shouted over the music.

She turned around to see her ex-best friend standing there, Ella. Jen had dated not one, but three of Ella's older siblings her sophomore year, and that didn't create the most solid foundation for friendship. Ella didn't seem to have any recollection of this because she pulled Jen into a tight bear hug. "I've been hearing all about your art. Did you know you have two of your paintings hanging in the local art museum? Abstract art has never been my thing, but..." Jen listens to Ella for eleven minutes, and forty-five seconds. They exchange numbers. Ella does pottery as a hobby, and suggests they try out a collaboration some time. It sounds fun.

As Jen makes her way over to check the main hallway once again, she walked right into an old professor of hers. Mr. Woodsman was around 50 when Jen was a student. It is shocking that he is still teaching there. He gives her a tight smirk. It's the same kind he would give students when he asked them questions he knew they wouldn't be able to answer. Jen remembers the time he made her sit in the hallway for not being able to pronounce the word mischievous. After a long talk with the vice principal they had come to the agreement that Mr. Woodsman was the one who didn't know how to pronounce the word, but Jen would still have to apologize to the class for her outburst. Mr. Woodsman makes a comment about Jens figure, and winks. Jen laughs in his face and walks away.

It's time to get things over with. Jen makes sure no one is looking, then enters the main hallway. She passes her old locker and listens to her heels click on the checkered tile flooring. Two flights of stairs later she is exactly where she needs to be. The art wing fills her to the brim with nostalgia. The smell of clay lingers in the air, and pencil sketches line the wall to create a familiar atmosphere. Jen is filled with nothing but ambition.

She walks into her old art room and marches straight to the back. She never should have let Ms. Avughn keep her piece as an example. Jen does admit that it is a good example of texture, but it's the meaning of the piece that has been haunting her. She had thought of it junior year during a particularly angsty phase of her's. It had been something about media's obsession with personifying common fruits and veggies, and society's willful ignorance in regard to the human condition. It had seemed genius at the time.

She ripped the drawing off the wall. Part of her felt she was overreacting. Maybe her need to destroy mistakes she made eleven years ago was a sign of a deeper issue. She looked over that painting one more time. She could replace it with something better if the school took issue with this. She was here. She might as well do something. "It's not that deep," she groaned before tearing the drawing to shreds.



Persephone

Leo Resler

Broken bottles
were the entrance to the underworld.

Her smile is a loaded gun,
dripping red,
hiding behind crooked, yellowing teeth.

The sweet smell of psychosis
follows her like perfume.

Pomegranate seeds and wilting flowers
pour from her eyes,
faster than blood from broken veins.

Her body stumbles, burdened
with tendrils of chaotic flame.

She prowls through hell--
barefoot on broken glass--
a lioness ready to claim her throne.



Sunday Night:

The cricket chirped. It chirped again...

and again
and again
and again
and again
and again
and again.

The cricket's chirps haunted my dreams.
They followed me wherever I went.

Monday Night:

It was a cold night in early spring. I was half naked in bed, beneath a thick comforter—the only way my obnoxious, idiosyncratically wired brain will ever allow me to sleep. My lamp was on, and I was reading *Blood Meridian*—enamored with the long elaborate descriptions of the Texas-Mexico border as the Glanton Gang traveled deep into the arid wilderness in search of Comanche scalps.

As I began to feel an almost sexual attraction to Cormac McCarthy's prose, the cricket chirped. It chirped again... and again...

and again
and again
and again
and again
and again... After a minute it stopped. Then it chirped again
and again
and again
and again
and again.

I knew immediately, I wasn't going to be able to focus with that racket going on. I set my book on the nightstand and threw off my blanket, as I sat up on the edge of the mattress. The chirping stopped for a moment. The little bastard must have heard me. Without moving, I listened intently for the slightest sound. After a moment of silence, the cricket chirped timidly. It sounded almost like he wasn't sure if it was safe. He was right.

Slowly, I shifted my weight onto my feet to stand. It chirped again

and again
and again
and again
and again
and again
and again.

It was in the exposed section of the wall next to my bed; I could tell. Where the walls met at the corner of the room, there was a utility space to access the pipes that ran through the walls beside my bed. Every time someone in the house took a shit, it went slopping through the pipes past my head.

The only thing closing this gap in the wall was a rectangular piece of particle board, leaning against the opening. I tilted the board away from the wall, revealing the small black insect, clinging to the side. It was looking right at me. Thinking carefully about my next move, I slowly leaned the board back, so the cricket wouldn't jump out of instinct.

I grabbed my copy of *Blood Meridian* and snuck back to the cricket's hovel. Without breathing, I tilted the board away from the wall. Thank god. The cricket is still there, I thought. This time I leaned the board away from the wall much farther, to give my bludgeoning arm some room for bludgeoning.

Even this took some planning. If I swung from too far away, the cricket would surely escape. If I didn't hit it hard enough, I might fail to kill it. At this point, I started to feel bad for the little guy. He was just looking for love after all. It's not his fault that his only means of sating his biological impulse to mate was irritating enough to drive a person to insecticide, I thought.

After saying an atheistic pseudo prayer for the cricket, I went against my empathic response to find a nonlethal method of capture. It didn't go my way. I slammed the book against the board, some of the pages bending as it hit the particle board. But in the split second before the book met its mark, the cricket rotated its body one hundred eighty degrees and vanished.

I couldn't believe it. I was outsmarted by a cricket. The thing had enough time to turn around and jump from its hiding place and was now scurrying off to some hidden corner of the cluttered mess of my room.

Tuesday Night:

I was in my room again, and there was no audible trace of an insect mating call. My book was sitting on the floor where I dropped it, after my last encounter with the cricket. I picked it up and sat against the headboard of my bed. I found my page and continued with the story. The Glanton Gang was coming up to a dilapidated hut in the desert wilderness.

Just as they dismount their horses to search the abandoned homestead, the cricket chirped. I gave a frustrated sigh and set my book down on the bed beside me. Listening closely, I tried to magically develop echolocation to find the little bastard's whereabouts. Nothing. I picked my book up again, determined to just ignore the chirping.

After about a paragraph, the chirping continued. It chirped again and again and again and again and again and again. "Christ," I said to myself. I can't live like this. The cricket's chirps are invading my psyche. How hard could it be to find a damn cricket? If I really work at this problem, I know I can find him, I thought to myself.

He was close. As a matter of fact, it sounded like he was in the same place where I found him before. Standing up slowly, I crept over to the board tilted against the opening by my bed. Ever so slowly, I tilted the board away from the wall, exposing the opening. He's wasn't there, and the chirping had stopped. My mind wandered to Loki, the Norse god of mischief. I bet there were a few Norse folk tales about Loki shapeshifting into a cricket. If Loki was real, he would no doubt take the form of a cricket from time to time. His new name is Loki.

I continued to listen intently. The chirping continued, echoing in the dank chasm in the sheetrock. He's trapped, I thought. I just have to expose him without letting him escape. The floor of the opening was cement. It was covered with filthy fiberglass insulation that has fallen from the wall. Great, we probably have mice too, I think. On the other side of the room, there was a broom leaning in the corner. I leaned the board back.

Walking silently, I went to get the broom. The chirping continued. It was starting to give me a headache. Grabbing the broom, I started to think of how I was going to do this. I'll have to be quicker than last night, I thought. There is no room for error. I paced back to the cricket's lair and prepare myself.

The chirping had stopped again. At this point, I was starting to develop an understanding of cricket psychology. He's just messing with my head now, I thought. He knows I am looking for him, but he is taunting me anyway.

Loki went silent for the moment. Once again, I grabbed the corner of the board and pulled it back, away from the wall. Picking up the board this time, I moved it over a few feet and leaned it against my dresser. With one hand I grabbed a flashlight from the shelf to light the dark opening in the wall, with the

other, I had the broom ready.

I knelt down and illuminated the lair of Loki the cricket. He gave one panicked chirp. It was loud enough to give an estimate of his hiding place. I know he's still in there, I thought. Carefully, I swept the disgusting insulation about keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of the little black insect. It was leaping around, and I was trying to smash it with the bristles of the broom. It didn't work. The bristles weren't doing anything.

Dropping the broom, I stood up to grab my book for the killing blow. But when I shined my light in the opening again, he was gone. It was silent. No more chirping tonight...

Wednesday Night:

Again, I returned to my room, and I could hear the chirping immediately. I had failed to kill the cricket. There was a flashlight on a shelf underneath my window that was fixed to the front of an elastic headband. I stretched the band around my hand, grabbed my book again, and prepared to finish Loki once and for all.

The sound was coming from the same place as the previous nights. I pulled the board away from the wall and switched the flashlight on, illuminating the dark corner filled with dirty fiberglass. What I saw was the silhouette of a cricket stretched across the backdrop of the mounds of insulation and the cement floor. I readjusted my focus and saw Loki sitting atop a piece of the debris.

Thinking about my past failures in killing the cricket, an empty sour cream container that had rolled beneath my bed caught my eye. I set the book down and took the Kemps brand sour cream cricket detention cell in my hand. I carefully positioned the empty cup over Loki and quickly brought it down around the cricket.

I was victorious. Loki was trapped in the confines of the container. Also, underneath the bed was a plastic folder, covered in dust and cobwebs. Keeping one hand on the container, I stretched my arm span as far as I could to reach the folder. Taking my hand off of the imprisoned cricket for a split second, I took the folder with my left hand and snapped back to hold down the container with my right. I slid the folder underneath the container, scooping up some of the insulation and bits of drywall.

To be sure I had captured Loki, I raised the container to my ear and shook it. I smiled as the sound of the cricket's frantic leaps tapped against the inside of his cup. Feeling triumphant, I went up the stairs and out to the garage. Instead of killing the cricket, I let him go at the edge of the grass. I threw the folder in the trash along with the insulation and pieces of drywall, but I kept the sour cream container as a trophy.

Still feeling elated, I walked down the steps to my room to enjoy my book in silence. I grabbed my book off the floor and sat on my bed with my back against the headboard. The Glanton Gang had discovered an old Comanche woman kneeling in the road...

Thursday Night:

...



Humanity

Morghan Gillispie

An ant arises after anger
bellows beneath bare bodies.
Captivating creatures, causing
deep discourage down dreamless
ember entities. Extravagant eagles
fly fictitiously, flourishing
golden goodbyes. Gossiping
hollow hallucinations, hidden
inside independent inspirations.
Jellyfish juggle jackknives
killing kaleidoscope kingdoms.
Lingering lifelessly, lacing luminescent
marbles majestically, mothering
nicotine. Neglected nutcrackers
observe outrageous overpowering of
pre-developmental perfectionism.
Quarrels questioning quicksteps
revolutionizing reproductive
strategies. Sheep suspensefully
terrorizing traditional temptation.
Ultimately uncovering unorthodox
viciousness; voluntarily vulnerable
weakness. Wolves wondering
xenophobically. Xenon xylophones
yielding yellow youthful
zig-zaggers; zero zygooids zealous.



The land wasn't burning. It was burnt. Everything was grey, from the ashy ground to the darkening sky. A light drizzle had smothered the last of the fires hours ago and had come and gone several times since. It was cool, but not cold, the only reminder that it was late spring.

Paul pulled himself through the sludge on his belly, afraid to even properly crawl across the land. Every few seconds there was a pop of rifle fire or the taka taka of a Gatling gun somewhere above his head. It was impossible to tell how close it really was with his eardrums blown out like they were. It could be miles away or skimming his helmet for all he knew.

Paul didn't know how long he had been going. The earth had gotten wetter. He had sunk lower. His features had disappeared under a layer of grey mud, so that only his eyes were visible. They were flecks of color amongst the grimness, bright blue around the rim and nearly silver around his shrunken pupils. He had been told often that they were charming, but now they were wide and bloodshot like a crazed horse. At this point, he didn't mind the grime. If anything, he wished he could reach back and zip the earth up over him. Frogs and turtles buried themselves under riverbeds in the winter and, for all intents and purposes, died for three months. I could do that, he thought to himself, and come out when this is all over. Once the world sorts itself out.

At some point, it happened that one of his hands sunk through the mud as he pulled himself along and struck the rough skin of a tree root. Thrilled that he had found a handhold, he grasped it like a rope and climbed it horizontally. The twisted shape of a dead tree emerged from the mist. It looked like it had been bombed. Half of it was blown to splinters, leaving only a stake of wood behind. It looked to have been very large, knotty and twisted, an age-old oak, if Paul had to guess. Below it, a tomb of earth had been opened up by a violent explosion, but somehow most of the roots had been left intact to hold the ground around it from collapsing inward. The result was what looked like an inverted tree, like someone had cut a tree down and flipped it on its head.

A bit of the mud gave way under him when he got close enough, which sent him sliding into it face first. Below the grey line of ash was a dark, healthy-looking mud, and under that strip it turned to a tough, red clay that ran all the way to the bottom. It was slippery and didn't give much under his body. He slid unceremoniously to the bottom and came to a stop.

He lay there for a while, forehead pressed into the clay, nearly breathing the clay, before he pressed his palms into it at his sternum and lifted himself up.

He shook from the strain. He had been using them for hours without rest. It was only now that he realized how tired he really was. And hungry. And thirsty. How far was the front now? He wasn't even certain he was going in the right direction. The sun was obscured. The wind was far above his head. Any moss had burned away hours ago. He had figured his heart would direct him home, as insane as it was, but he could be crawling up the deadlands for all he knew. He was paddling in a sea.

It began raining again, heavy enough this time to streak the clinging mist like an oil painting. Paul finally pushed himself up and slumped back against a large, groaning root. His helmet poured a curtain of water around his head. It was through the rivulets that a glint of light caught his eye. A box of moonlight danced in the shadows like a will-o-wisp. He blinked hard and reached up to rub mud from his eyes. Something clicked and Paul froze. It was a familiar, mechanical sound. The image smeared before his eyes and morphed into the squared barrel of a handgun, which was, of course, attached to a hand, to a grey sleeve, to an enemy jacket.

The soldier was slumped against the other side of the hole. His hair was as black and slick as ink from a pen. A tree root obscured his eyes from the angle Paul sat at. His hands were long and wiry, nearly skeletal in the fey light. The tendons in them pushed up through his skin as he squeezed the trigger. It clicked again as the hammer uncocked against the magazine, but no shot rang out. Paul heard what he thought might be a cuss, though he didn't know the language, and his heart burst with relief. The enemy soldier slumped back in acquiescence. Even from a distance, his chest could be seen lurching with breath.

Paul's gun was long gone, probably lying in the mud somewhere miles behind him. He still had a knife somewhere. It had been jabbing him in the hip for hours. He withdrew it and held it against his chest, letting the light catch it. The enemy soldier froze at the sight and reached around for his own. Now Paul had few options. At this point, he had no desire to attack the man, but he was exhausted and sleep would creep up on him soon enough. Of course the man would try to kill him at the first opportunity, or else risk Paul killing him. Which, granted, Paul might still do.

He was weak. He would have to put all his strength into it, but once the soldier was dead, Paul might rest in relative safety. Surely the soldier was thinking the same thing and was aware of the same conundrum. Even so, Paul could hardly get his body to move now that he had a moment of rest behind him. His limbs felt stretch and useless.

It would be better to wait, he finally decided, for the soldier to make the first move. He would have a better chance defending himself than aggressing. He was able to make out the soldier's complete face now that he had shifted, though the daylight was dying fast. He had big dark eyes and an odd mottled

shape around his left eye that could have been a burn or a birthmark. If he focused on it hard enough, his sleepiness would pass. They were both submerged into the depths of the night.

Paul had been raised Catholic and one thing that he had never been able to shake from his mind was the story of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden. He had always been so frustrated with Adam and Eve. Because they couldn't resist an insignificant piece of fruit, the entire human race was doomed to be severed from God as long as they were on earth. All the suffering in the world for a single bite.

He once asked the old priest, Father Joseph, what the world would be like if Eve had never plucked the fruit and Adam had never taken part.

"It would be paradise," the priest answered.

"Would people die?" he asked.

"There would be no death."

"Would people fight each other?"

"There would be no reason to."

"Then why did they have to do it?" Paul asked, thinking of the family dog that his older brother had to shoot. She had been the sweetest creature on four legs, but her body had given out. Logic dictated that was Eve's fault too.

"I think," the priest started. "that even if they hadn't, then their children would have. Or their children's children. Eventually someone would have plucked that fruit all the same."

This statement had always stuck with Paul. Once even, he had stopped believing in a god.

When Paul woke, the world was still dark. It was hard to tell how close to morning it was under the cloud cover. There were no birds. He felt the knife handle in his grip and remembered.

The enemy soldier lay asleep on his side of the ditch, his own knife still held against his stomach. Paul didn't bother to berate himself for falling asleep. Criticism was of no use to him anymore. Not when there were only two possible outcomes for a soldier like himself. He was still alive, which was all that mattered. He rose to full height, joints creaking from the strain. He knew it wouldn't be easy to kill someone with only a knife, but he was anxious to get it over with. He had probably already killed someone, but it was so hard to tell with guns, especially with all the mist. He had never seen their faces, just their uniforms.

He was certain now that the mark on the soldier's face wasn't a burn, or not a recent one at least. It was pink like sliced salmon, but not raw or ridged. Paul's younger cousin had a birthmark on his neck, though it was much smaller.

His mother called it an angel kiss. Suppose this soldier had been kissed by an angel too. He had probably been bullied mercilessly for it when he was younger. Paul wasn't a monster. He knew that this man had a family, and dreams, and a soul, and that extinguishing his light would leave the world just a little darker. Paul knew that. But he also knew that he very much wanted to live.

He noticed strange imprints in the clay ground as he drew close. They had the uniform shape and size of boot prints. Leading away from the soldier and then back to where he was now. Paul stumbled back and sat down again in his own corner, leaving some boot prints of his own. A cold dread pricked like needles on the back of his neck. That couldn't be right. The soldier had gotten up some time in the night, walked halfway over to him, and then turned around. He couldn't breathe. He needed to breathe. The moist air helped a bit to calm him. He removed his helmet and turned it over to collect rain. It was a light drizzle, so he had to wait to get even the smallest swallow, but it helped.

He needed to go. How many hours had he been down in the pit? Probably fewer than it seemed, but he had already been there too long.

The soldier had woken up soon after he sat back down and had been watching him since. He cupped his hands in the light rainfall, but Paul could tell even from where he sat that it wasn't catching enough. Paul hadn't put his helmet back on. Instead, he grinded it into the clay so that it didn't tip as it filled with water. He rose to his feet only to take a piss a short distance away. The soldier's hand jumped around his knife every time Paul moved about, but he didn't move to attack. The clay hardly absorbed any water, so that there was a growing puddle in the center of the pit. That was where all the rain ran to, and now so did his piss. He was miserable. The rain wasn't cold enough to endanger his life, but it kept him constantly chilled to the bone. At the same time, it wasn't heavy enough to keep him from smelling himself. He wouldn't be surprised if mold was growing between his toes. He was too afraid to look. He knew he needed to go before he lost his strength, but he also knew that the second he left, and heard the gunshots again and crawled past the occasional corpse, he would just regret that had left.

He could tell that the enemy soldier was thirsty, and Paul knew what he, himself, wanted to do. He came from a family that believed in charity and he had always taken great pride in providing comfort to others. His mother was a nurse, which alone wasn't enough to keep them fed all the time. But she always gave what she could and sometimes more than that. Her philosophy was that if there was one starving person and one person who ate just enough to be comfortable, then the latter should share with the former, so that they might both be a bit hungry together. The small bit of water and rest that Paul had gotten had helped him to remember that.

He swished the water around in his helmet, deciding that it was enough, and stood. The enemy soldier sat up, a threatening look on his face. He lifted his knife to remind Paul that he still had something to negotiate with. Paul lay his helmet down halfway between them, where their boot prints came close, and dug it into the ground to keep it from tipping. Then he backed off and sat down again. The soldier cast off his suspicion much faster than Paul had expected. He was up almost immediately. He grabbed the helmet and drained its contents where he stood. Then he stumbled back to his side, leaving the empty helmet to be retrieved. He muttered something in his own language as he sat down and Paul was surprised to hear how similar the man's voice was to his own elder brother's. He invoked dulcet tones from the core of his chest in the same way. Some part of Paul had expected his voice to be rough and low, something suited to a hard-ened soldier, but his brief vocalization was more fitting for a schoolboy.

"You're welcome," Paul answered.

He must have dozed off again, because he was having one of the strangest, most lucid dreams he had ever had. Everything was the same. He was still in the pit among the tree's roots with the enemy soldier eye-ing him cautiously. What was different was a single spot of color that he couldn't have missed.

One of the tree's limbs had been blasted from the trunk, but had caught it the roots. Every bit of it was charred, all except for the single apple that dangled down into the space below. It was mottled a pinkish-yellow and splattered with red, though this couldn't obscure its opulence now that Paul had noticed it. Paul already knew that he was hungry, but the sheer sight of it made it that much more unbearable.

He stood. The other soldier watched him with sharp, careful eyes, but he wasn't quite as defensive anymore. Sharing the water had changed something between them. The apple was just close enough to reach if he stretched, but something stopped him. He looked around at their bloody-red sanctuary and felt a thrill of cold. He backed away.

The other soldier had taken notice of the fruit then and was less hesitant around Paul now. He got up almost immediately.

"Wait," said Paul, showing his palms. Something was very wrong about all of this. The man frozen and inspected him, but the word meant nothing to him. He raised a hand and Paul watched with growing dread as he popped it from the dead limb. It crumbled to ash as if the apple was all that held it together.

"Stop!" Paul cried. He was losing himself to his heartrate again. The man turned to him and watched him for a long moment before tapping the apple with his finger and then tapping his chin. Eat.

Paul didn't move. The man took a hesitant step towards him and then another. Paul clenched the front of his soiled jacket like he was trying to keep his

heart from escaping. The man crouched in front of him, still several feet away, but too close, and far past the midpoint that they had unofficially agreed on. He did the gesture again, tapping the apple and then his chin. Paul's knife was between his hands but he couldn't move as the soldier raised his own. It sliced clean through the apple's flesh and divided it in two. Then he held out one half to Paul.

Take.

His mother had also taught him that there was always another way, but he knew now that she had been mistaken. Perhaps there was always a choice. Paul could take the apple and take its sustenance or he could refuse it and starve. Yes, he could refuse it, but he also knew that he wasn't going to, and that every other person in the world would choose the same if given the same ultimatum. What kind of a choice was that?

He took the apple and the two of them bit into their respective shares at the same moment. After all, he supposed, he couldn't stay here forever and he would need his strength and wit for when he left.



Sweet Suspense

Brianna Lick

We think the night brings out the bad,
letting loose the terrors that lurk about.
Like the suspension that fills the air
when you walk alone at night
and you hear a rustle in the bushes.
But what if we see the horror
in a less obvious manner?

What if we imagine an impending snowstorm
that never seems to show its ugly face.
We sit expecting the storm
as it looms just behind what we cannot see.

Yet we can still ignore the frigid temperatures,
even as it beckons us to give into the chill it
will inevitably send to our bones.

We wait for the sweet chill,

yet we don't even realize it.



The Vampire Nurse and Other Retail Stories

William Ritari

As my senior year's tailspin slowly wound down, I found myself without any of the "productive" pursuits required for my parents to let me camp out in their basement past my eighteenth birthday. I was recovering after three weeks of hospitalization, doing seemingly nothing with the very expensive second swing at a functional adult life. This second swing had more responsibilities than I was used to, the most pressing of which was rent. Due to my desire to sleep on a bed and not a sheet of cardboard, most of my time for the next five years was organized around the needs of the retail world... and what a needy world it is. Not only did most places require their employees to purchase all or part of their own uniforms, but it was also expected that they would cram the "Company Approved" response to every possible situation into their heads after two days of training and a shadow shift. Every expectation of the job was run through briefly, and the only unpredictable part of the job were the customers—called "guests," as though they'd been invited—and, of course, the full spectrum of human behavior.

Children ran through the aisles screaming, little old ladies tottered to the checkout grumbling toothlessly about coupons they couldn't see without their unfashionable readers, intimidatingly put-together mothers with cookie-cutter kids readied themselves to wail for a manager at the slightest hiccup in the checkout process.

As I spent hours engaged in the same loop of small talk with dozens of interchangeable faces, I felt the mask of bland, eager cheerfulness drying on my face like so much spilled superglue. I would come home from work with my face almost as sore as my feet from holding a mandatory smile for several hours. I became a feature of the store, belonging to the company as much as the belt I stood next to the squeaking floor tiles. As an essential but replaceable cog, I also became a blank sounding board for people's plans, hopes, and fears. People joyfully explained their holiday plans, tacking on a token "that's too bad" when they realized I was here because they were here. They expressed trepidation about a new video game system or an unusual flavor of pasta and were reassured by my rote recitation of the return policy. The worst times were after I chopped off several inches of hair and buzzed the sides of my head: I was vaguely masculine, incorrectly feminine, defying easy characterization, and apparently inviting a rude "are you a boy or a girl?" and scoffing responses no matter what polite noncommittal response I recited. (As happy as I am with myself now, I almost wish I could go back to snap all the witty responses to that question

I've thought of since - my favorites are "I'm an anarchist," "That's classified," and a simple but unexpected "Nope!")

The process of making these tiny connections is an essential part of living with other people but doing it for money while tiptoeing around anything that might make the other person unhappy—even if their expectations are completely unreasonable—is enough to make even the most stable person a little unhinged. I've been hit on, followed, screamed at, and been the target of vengeful projectile vomit from a child who was definitely old enough to know better. The strange vulnerability of working with the public, of being both human enough to hurt and not human enough for it to matter, has been a building block of my entire pattern of behavior. Working surrounded by cameras and people who can make your life extremely difficult with little provocation and no consequence is a new and crazy-making modern panopticon. I'd be fascinated by a study of rates of paranoia among people who work with the public vs people who work in an office or warehouse, assuming I had time to read it on my lunch break.

These interactions aren't always bad. Sometimes, they're just odd. One such interaction, dubbed the Vampire Nurse story, is a great icebreaker at a new job or a way to get unfriendly coworkers to open up and start telling their own horrible customer stories. The Vampire Nurse story starts, like many "what the hell was that?" stories, at a Walmart well after dark. The hours between 1am and 4am are generally fairly quiet, mostly made up of sorting incoming clothing and ringing up coworkers as they went on their lunch breaks. My coworkers were joined by the overnight nurses at the hospital just down the street, who would buy their lunch here to avoid the hospital cafeteria and get out of the building for a little while. One nurse struck up a very normal conversation (the topic is less memorable than what happened next, but it was highly likely that we were talking about the weather). When I gave her the change and receipt, she grabbed my arm with both hands and cooed "Oh, you have such pretty veins!"

Customers have been weird and overly personal with me before, but inquiring about my veins in such a joyous and determined way was a new one for me. No one, before or since, had ever inquired about my blood with so much passion. Even the nurses who draw my blood for tests and donations seem more concerned with my whole body than just the blood in it. Sure, they noted how easy my veins were to find and stick, but they had never ascribed beauty to them. I hadn't either. They're necessary and by chance convenient, but pretty? That's surreal.

She continued both holding my arm and asking me sanguineous questions, about whether I knew my blood type (I do) and if I donate blood regularly (I... try). Her rapt attention was only broken when another customer approached the beginning of the conveyer belt and began setting down their own items.

She reluctantly let go of my arm and left with a spring in her step, cheerfully reminding me, "The need is constant!"

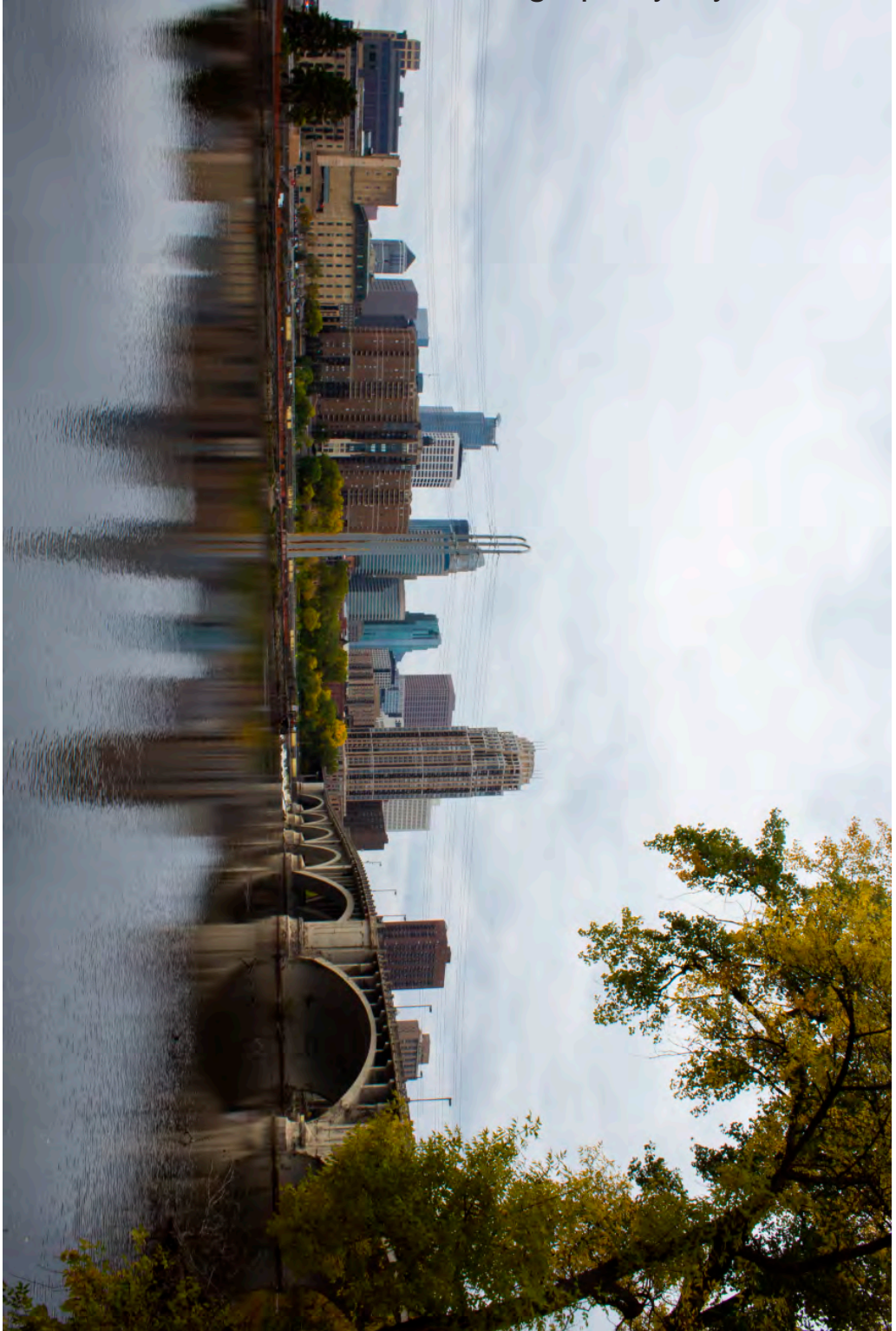
I don't remember how the person in line behind her reacted. Perhaps we shared a glance of "what the hell was that?" while fulfilling our respective responsibilities in the situation, or we might have discussed it for a few moments before the enforced normality of the situation took over and my focus was shifted to what they wanted double-bagged. Even as my working mind was focused on what my hands were doing, I wondered about that nurse and still wonder to this day. Was she an overenthusiastic blood drive hype man? A vampire whose profession and hours provided a mask of humanity? Some other blood-drinking creature, eager at the sight of an easy mark? I meant to look up missing persons cases in the surrounding area, just to check, but the thought was pushed out of my mind by the numerous mundane demands of managers and customers.

That's the thing, isn't it? This crazy thing happens to someone, something so off the wall it's impossible to be sure it happened and the only evidence it did is because people believe the story about it later, and the expectation is to just... act like nothing happened? Bounce back unchanged and cheerful for the next customer, an eternally-smiling face on an advertisement? That's the craziest thing of it to me, that as a cashier I am expected to mop up every emotional expression of everyone who wanders by, react correctly and predictably, and then immediately move on after saying goodbye. This form of making connections is completely artificial, and it shows in how tiring it is and how many weird stories anyone who works in retail collects from their coworkers and their own experiences. These connections are treated as disposable, which leads to treating the workers themselves as disposable. If you don't give a damn about the teenager behind the counter, all sorts of terrible behavior are suddenly acceptable: angry outbursts, unwanted sexual comments, blatant lies, and incredible displays of petty entitlement. Managers are rarely better than customers, citing the Always Right Clause to sooth the fragile egos of people sent into a screaming frenzy by an expired coupon or a double scanned box of Froot Loops. Many will take advantage of their employees by demanding increasingly long hours or unsafe working conditions, knowing that the bodies on the line are too poor and desperate to fight them on it. The dehumanization is immediate and deliberate.

Still, even in these crushing situations, it's not all bad. For example, children always bring an interesting dose of chaos. They haven't yet learned the rules of social interactions that govern small interactions such as small talk while buying groceries, so anything can pop out of their mouths. One such example happened while I was ringing up a woman's groceries while her grade school age daughter wandered around, glancing at candies and magazines. She suddenly noticed the ring on the middle finger of my right hand, and said it was very pretty.

When I showed her that the ring she complemented was actually two similar spinner rings, she gasped and asked me “Does that mean you’re marrying two people?” Once I had recovered from almost dropping a bottle of detergent on my foot from laughing and her mother had recovered from the mild mortification of having one’s child say something unexpectedly personal to a stranger, I was told that she was going to be a flower girl in a relative’s wedding. She’d become obsessed with weddings and anything surrounding them; I wasn’t the first person whose marital status she’d made an inquiry into or whose rings she’d complemented.

Retail jobs are both necessary for modern life and completely devalued by most people. The people who speak disparagingly about “burger-flippers” ignore how much of their lives depend on the people who do the necessary but unpleasant jobs, calling them talentless and claiming that they’re entitled for asking for the basics of dignified life. Though I intend to leave the retail workplace after getting my degree, the skills I learned in this field will continue to be useful in any future job I take: punctuality, tact, accountability, and an appreciation of the weird.





Water Thoughts

Morgan Doerr

Close your eyes, feel yourself becoming weighted into your pillow and your sheets. Your back imprints into your mattress, your ribs move with your breaths, your lungs grow and shrink with your ribs. Don't worry about the heat and silence, that will fade soon. Can you feel your memories coming into focus? Good. Alright, listen closely.

You grew up in the south.

You're nine years old and you are blissfully unaware of time passing. Your bedroom is shaded by a hundred-year-old oak tree that will be there long after you die and this is the hottest day you can remember. The cornfield view from your window seemed to be masked by rippling waves of heat and you can hardly breathe. Your lungs begin to fill up with the dense August heat.

You decide that the heat is worse when it's contained within walls, so you pack a small bag filled with food and a small knife and carry it along to a hidden creek in the woods. Your feet press into sharp rocks and soft soil, the ground is mostly shaded by the thick overgrowth of trees. The creek is familiar, it's yours. No one would ever find you here. In the bag is a small lunch of fruit from your orchard and peppermint water. You carry a small, concealed knife. Just in case.

When you arrive at the creek, you set your bag underneath a willow tree and pulled out the lunchbox. The forest here is dense, you would never even know there was an outside world. The trees gathered high and thick around you, barely allowing even the sunlight to touch you. You sat down and popped a berry into your mouth. Your chewing slowed as the heat made your head spin and you swallowed slowly. You decide to slip your shoes off and walk across the rocks towards the creek, now growing increasingly drowsy from the heat. You dip your feet into the water, which has been cooled by the rocks and tree shade. You weren't planning on submerging yourself into the water completely, but it was so much nicer than the thick, humid air you had been inhaling. It started with your feet as you waded farther and farther downstream. You were hesitant to get your clothes wet but as soon as it happened you didn't seem to care. Your clothes clung to your skin, the water clung to your clothes, and you press your feet into the river stones. As soon as you dunked your head underwater, the world dimmed. The world was quiet, only the sound of rushing water and the pumping of blood beneath your skin. Your body became disconnected and you suddenly didn't need to breathe or feel or think. Something brushed the side of your face and whispered your name, "Parvana." That is your name, remember?



White Wood Tree

Josh Cook

Tulips of the white wood tree,
a Russian spring in bloom.

Six lobes notched at the apex
of the lyrate leaves, greenish yellow
flowers pantomime familiar blossoms.

Winged fruits stolen by rodents
leave the tree bleeding sweet sap,
a solitary spout at the end
of each branch.

Ornamental, pleasing to the eye,
the tree is the pride of the Crimea.

Stringed instruments

cut, planed, sanded, and lacquered.

Processed from plucked nature.

Ash of the white wood tree,
once blossoming in spring,
gaze upon the remnants.
And listen to the sound of
euphonic sirens that fill the
concert hall.



Looking For God

Leo Resler

I tried to find all the answers inside of myself,
yet dust swirled around us like a cracked ancient tomb.
Swinging spiders creeping down my spine,
weaving lies about deities and finding peace.

Persephone's garden used to sit at the core,
a light breeze blew under my rib cage;
the sun boiled through my chest.
Yet pomegranate's dropped to the dusty earth,
crawling with infected thoughts,
exploding like an unattended gas leak.

Pieces of shrapnel still burrow deep in my flesh.

Trees wilted like flowers, the sky turned into ashy dust.
Gardens no longer have the will to grow
and trying to breathe has become like prying
steel fingers from our necks.

What is the purpose of an empty vessel
that no longer holds warmth?

Glossy eyes staring at the sky,
like the world is on fire
when really it's only the sun.





It was on a completely normal day that I found out my unborn cousin had died. Two days before my aunt's due date, I didn't think anything of it when my mom told me that my aunt was going to the doctor because she couldn't feel Mariah moving around a lot. Truth be told, I didn't think that anything could possibly be wrong with the baby. When my mom decided to go meet her at the hospital, I finally became concerned.

I was sitting in our worn leopard-print armchair when my mom got home from the hospital a few hours later. She came in quietly through the door to the garage, moving slowly, breathing raggedly, and visibly exhausted. I could tell immediately from the look on her face that something was wrong. Her appearance was concerning—red and splotchy eyes, rumpled clothes, withdrawn shoulders. My sisters and I were watching TV, but looked over at her as soon as she walked in. As I stood up from the old chair, I asked, “Is Auntie Sarah okay?” I could see the tears begin to pool in her eyes as my sisters stood up slowly from our brown leather couch on the opposite side of the family room. My mother looked heartbroken as she responded.

I felt myself begin to sob as she said, “Auntie Sarah is fine, but the baby isn't.”

It felt like an eternity waiting for my cousin Luca to be born. The anticipation of his birth grew exponentially from the moment my aunt told us she was pregnant. It was on my birthday, February 12th, that my family and I found out. I opened the gift my Auntie Sarah had given me, and I quickly skimmed over the card. My mom impatiently told me to reread it; I could hardly believe what I saw. “Happy Birthday! Love Auntie Sarah and your future cousin.” I was beyond surprised and ecstatic, but after the excitement of the moment faded, I became very worried because of her experience with Mariah.

Throughout the beginning of my aunt's second pregnancy, I could feel the stress and anxiety of every person in my family like a heavy blanket weighing the world down. My mom worried so much about my aunt. She struggled to come to terms with the fact that my aunt—and entire family—might be devastated again. Every time I imagined my new cousin, I couldn't help but reminisce about the one I lost. The possibility that another baby could be taken from my aunt was something I never wanted to consider, but thought about nearly every day. These thoughts and emotions slowly faded away like after-images as time passed and Auntie Sarah was doing well; There was, however, a hint of fear that remained. At the forefront of new emotions were hope and happiness, shining through

the cloud of anxiety. My aunt was one of the greatest people I had ever had the privilege to meet. She had a multitude of admirable qualities I couldn't help but be jealous of: her laugh could make even the saddest person smile, her love for every member of our family was evident, her optimism after experiencing the worst heartache possible was astounding. Towards the middle of the pregnancy, I went with Auntie Sarah to one of her ultrasounds. The baby's heartbeat seemed incredibly loud, like the constant and piercing sound of a tornado siren. I sat in my chair, the heartbeat repeating steadily and reassuring me that this time around would be alright.

The day before my aunt was to be induced, we moved her into her new house. She didn't live in a great neighborhood and wanted to be closer to my grandparents and the rest of us. For a long time, it was never a common occurrence to visit Auntie Sarah at her home. Now I was excited about the fact that she was nearby—the house she lives in now is a mere mile and a half from mine, and I couldn't wait for all of the opportunities I would have to go see her more often.

I was the person my aunt put in charge of setting up the nursery. As I put the crib together, I couldn't help but feel incredibly aware of how close I was to having a new cousin. I spent a while making sure that the room was as perfect as a star in the sky; I unpacked all of his brand new clothes, put the clean sheets and bedding on the crib, organized the various books and toys around the room. It was all adorable—orange and green walls, jungle themed bedding and lion-shaped rug, cozy rocking chair with enough blankets to keep an entire family warm. I couldn't wait for my cousin to see how loved he would be.

I finished decorating the nursery, and soon after, the house was situated. My aunt insisted that we all go home to rest, seeing as we had been at her house for nearly an entire day, and we needed to be at the hospital at 8:00 the next morning. I was so close to meeting my new cousin.

Nearly five years before Luca was born, I went to meet Mariah for the first and only time. As I entered the hospital, it seemed very dull to me. I only noticed the boring beige color of the walls, the seemingly never-ending hallway, and my comforting mother by my side. She pressed a tender hand into my shoulder, silently urging me forward I continued along, hands shaking, eyes drifting, courage failing. Almost no sound was made, the exception being occasional soft sobs. The air was heavy, and the scent of disinfectant was overwhelming, permeating throughout the room. When it was my turn to hold Mariah, my heart swelled with a flood of tears. The weight of her body in my arms was devastating. I had held a baby before, but Mariah was different—I couldn't feel her moving around, couldn't see her chest lifting with breath. Her skin was pale and slightly discolored. Her lips were dark, like the color of red wine. Her nose was small, centered perfectly

in the middle of her face. Her hair was dark brown and matted to her head. It was so odd to know that she would never grow up, and her features would never change. The gravity of this unfair situation was too much to bear.

I went with my mom, sister, grandma, and aunt to the hospital on the morning my aunt was to be induced; The excitement I felt was like waking up on Christmas day. The hospital was bright with morning light, the hallways wide and spacious. We were directed to a spacious room for my aunt, as bright and airy as a three-season porch. I felt anxious the entire morning, which continued to drag on like a long day at work. By the end of the night, my aunt was barely progressing through the stages of labor. My sister and I did not want to miss Luca's birth, so my mom allowed us to stay at the hospital overnight. Our only place to sleep was the family lounge down the hallway from my aunt's hospital room. Inside, there were only two options for a bed: one narrow couch and multiple small chairs. I struggled to get comfortable on the couch—my legs were hanging off the edge, I didn't have room to move around, the pillow I was given was lumpy. I was too tired to fall asleep, unable to stay under for much longer than an hour at a time. When I finally gave up trying to sleep, I went back to my aunt's room to check in with my mom. Still no baby.

By 4:30 that evening, no progress had been made. After thirty hours of labor, my aunt was taken back for a cesarean section surgery. While the surgery was being done, I packed up everything that had been taken to the hospital and got ready to move everything to the room my aunt would be staying in after the birth. I was a bit disappointed that I couldn't be in the operating room—as disappointed as I felt when I didn't do well on an exam. I had always been very interested in medicine, and my aunt had told me that I would have been allowed to stay in the delivery room had it been a normal delivery. Impatiently, I waited for the end of the surgery.

Finally, my aunt's nurse came out from the surgical wing to find me, and she took me to see Luca. I had no idea what to expect when I entered the room, but there were a few things I noticed at once: my grandpa sitting in a folding chair, my mom and grandma standing near a large hospital bed, and most importantly, my relieved aunt lying on the bed with a baby on her chest. She looked exhausted, but also like she had never been happier. While the nurse softly murmured to my aunt, I quietly made my way over to my mom and grandma, trying not to interrupt the moment. I couldn't see Luca's face yet, but it was clear that he was tiny. My aunt looked up when I walked in and asked me if I wanted to hold Luca. As I readily nodded my head yes, the nurse instructed me to sit in the large rocking chair placed next to the bed. I sat carefully, making sure that my arms were placed carefully, smiling shyly at the nurse, holding my breath in anticipation

Not long after I sat, Luca was placed delicately in my arms.

When it was my turn to hold Mariah, I couldn't feel her moving around, couldn't see her chest lifting with breath. While holding Luca, I could feel the movement of his chest, lifting with each breath he took. I held him carefully, as if he were made of glass. I could feel the solid weight of his body in my arms. I could feel love for him blossoming in my chest like flowers do in spring. His appearance struck me as similar to his sister's: slightly curled dark hair, rounded nose like a button in the middle of his face. Differences between Mariah and Luca were evident as well—his skin was as flushed as when someone comes inside from the cold, the color of his lips blending in with the rest of his skin like a snowy owl in winter. His eyelids lifted to display deep brown eyes—I couldn't help but wonder if they were the same shade as Mariah's. He was an angel sent down to earth by his sister in heaven. There's a term for the first baby that someone has after having lost one: a Rainbow Baby. In the moment that I met Luca, I felt a rainbow of hope far stronger than a rainbow in the sky. The entire time my aunt was pregnant with him, it almost felt unreal to me, like Luca was only a dream that would never come true. Having him in my arms, I finally knew that he was real.

“Reversed Reality” by Julia Neubauer



Mercury Moments

Kyle Engebartsen

In the eve of
a soul reflected
falling deeper in

moments past and
as shadows gather
the dream demons

flickers of memories
for ice dances like fire
of uncertainty and

self-doubt for
the future and
in plans forgotten

strength presses as
the past becomes
dreams shattered

will try harder for
the fall of the results
and words gone in

moments and in
rebuilding chance
with a slight glimmer

the possibilities for
eventual hope springs
of light for a second

lost pages of character
revealing the desire
if only it could last or

grow stronger but
adapt to overcome
these mazes are for

is extinguished until
nothing remaining but
undefeated thoughts

day is able to break
only in the present
achieving victory



Is There Life after the Death of a Loved One?

Richard Soto

After a long summer day in July, I decided that the best way to evade the heat was to have a big condensation-soaked glass of homemade iced tea and take a nap under the cold breeze of my air conditioner. Just as I was escaping the reality of my summer school homework assignment, I was abruptly awoken by my younger sister requesting if she should take my turn in spending time with our grandmother, Aida Galindez, so that I could sleep in just a bit more. I reluctantly declined her offer, quickly washed my face to wake up, and made my way to my grandmother's house.

When I arrived, the home attendant who was just finishing up her 12-hour shift with my grandmother politely greeted me and proceeded to gather her belongings to make her way out. As in traditional fashion, there she was: Aida, having her nightly cup of smoldering hot coffee with her saltine crackers, evenly cut brick cheese, and diced ham while tuning into her late evening Spanish soap operas. Her face, covered with tiny skin tags; her hair, entirely saturated in deep shades of grey; and her skin, weathered from a long and hard life, including having to raise four children on her own and then her four grandchildren. Little did I know that this mundanely routine night would change my life forever.

As the night went on and I was begrudgingly completing my homework assignment, she called me into her room where she was lying in bed and asked me to make a late night store run to get a loaf of bread. It seemed like an odd request, especially since it was out of our habitual routine, but I jumped up and took off to the store without hesitation. Upon my return, I noticed that she was sitting up in bed. She proceeded to grab the bread from me and stated in Spanish, "This bread is too hard, can you go get my money back?" Without thinking twice, I ran back to the store and returned the bread.

As I walked back into the apartment door, I heard a blood-curdling scream for my name. Instantaneously, I dashed to her room to find her on the floor, dazed and confused and reaching out for me just as she lost consciousness. I immediately alerted the authorities and moved on to performing the CPR techniques my mother taught me just a month before this night. My anxieties were at an all-time high as I desperately attempted to keep it together and breathe life back into the woman who molded me, who loved me unconditionally, and who was counting on me to be there for her in this very moment. As the firefighters entered the house, my greatest fear had come to fruition; despite my best efforts as a fourteen year old boy, my grandmother was gone. Aida, who I regarded

more as my maternal figure, departed from this world while under my care and I couldn't help but feel like it was entirely my fault.

Before this night, I consciously made every effort to be the ideal son and grandson I could be. Being the oldest of four siblings, I have always tried to be our missing father figure by way of leading by example with my manners, my school work, and my overall appreciation for the loving women in our lives. Needless to say, this traumatic event had an immensely devastating effect on me. I found myself losing those values I once held dear and heading on a destructive path that could potentially be the root to my own demise. I started acting out in ways I never envisaged before because of the agony and grief I was experiencing. I was numb to all emotions and held no empathy for anyone other than myself. I became disrespectful, belligerent, hostile, and antisocial. The once ever-loving kid my mother knew died along with his grandmother with no return in sight.

My mother unwaveringly tried to console me and reassure me that my grandmother passing was not my fault and that I shouldn't condemn myself to a life of depression. But just as any other rebellious teenager would feel, I thought to myself: "How could she know how I was feeling? How could she tell me everything was going to be alright when the one person I loved most in this world just died in my arms? How was I supposed to move on with my life?"

I would frequently visit a close friend of mine, who also recently lost a parent, so we could smoke and drink to forget life's transgressions. One day as our recreational herbal indulgence hit its peak, we discussed the loss of our loved one's in boundless detail. We shared intimate secrets on our true emotions and debated the possibilities of one day leading exultant lives. We used real life examples of people who were able to successfully move on with life and contrasted it to our own experiences with the opposite. We could not fathom the idea of moving on being probable, but at least we were having that discussion with ourselves now.

After a few years had passed, I would find that I was having that conversation with myself quite often and almost on a daily basis. The only difference is that now my questions transitioned from "How do I move on?" to "Why is it easier for some people to move on? What's their secret? Is there life after the death of a loved one?"

As these thoughts danced through my mind like Peter Pan chasing his shadow, it dawned on me: I wasted so many years selfishly dwelling on the negative impacts of losing my grandmother that I completely forgot to celebrate her life. I had taken for granted the countless morals she instilled in me in our short period together. Because of her I am bilingual, I can cook, I can clean, and I can dance—just to name a few of the life lessons she passed down to me. I spent an

immeasurable amount of time being distraught by her expiration that I lost touch with what really mattered: the memories that we made together.

When my thought patterns changed from harboring painful memories to blissfully reminiscing, I released such an abundance of emotions that I cried for hours being ashamed of my selfishness. It was never supposed to be about me. My focus shouldn't have been on the deleterious effects of losing my grandmother; but rather on the unquestionable positive influences that she imparted on me during our time together.

Now that my mind was able to vindicate itself from the perpetual mental prison of despondency, I felt a new sense of purpose come over me. It was as if the weight of fifteen elephants had been lifted off of my shoulders and I could breathe effortlessly again. I was able to summon up happy memories of my grandmother and use it as fuel to reignite the desire I once had to live a fully healthy and happy life.

As I sit back and ruminate on that transformative night, it's hard to picture that I could have done anything differently to change that undesired outcome. I have tirelessly replayed every possible scenario over and over in my head and have come to the same conclusions each time: death is an inevitable and necessary facet of life. Even if I would have been able to save her that night, her breast cancer would have eventually taken her life. I can't help but think that my grandmother somehow knew that her time had come and she was trying to spare me the heartache I felt for so many years. I guess that is just a question I will have to ask her when we one day reunite in life after death.





The Darkest Hour

Simon Mohamed

Do you wander the silent house at night,
Waiting for the sound of daybreak?

The birds chirping sounding like music in your ears,
alerting you that the new day has begun.

Do you wander the silent house at night,
listening for the wolves to howl at the moon.
Only to realize that you only hear their howl at a full moon,
And tonight the crescent moon shines brightly like a lightbulb in a dark room

Do you wander the silent house at night,
To find a cure for your insomnia that racks over you night after night.
You do wander the silent house at night for all those things,
But most importantly.

For the little break during the night that you can get from the stress of life.



The Pianist

Jacob Hawkinson

Joseph's hands wandered across the black and white keys. They struck chords, scales, and arpeggios as he matched the sounds of the orchestra. His left hand matched the pitch of the cellos and basses as they played low, rich tones. His right hand controlled the melody as he played with the violins. The percussion kept a steady beat while the woodwinds chimed in at times. His hands flew, they danced with grace and struck with power. It was perfection, a beautiful melody that told a great story through each instrument. As Joseph finished the piece with the orchestra, he smiled and turned to face the rest of the group. But there was no musician in sight, only an empty living room.

Pratt Lake High School had a mere 300 students that attended. It had one floor, with a handful of classrooms, a gym, a cafeteria, and an auditorium. Starting on the first day of school, Joseph walked the halls before and after school carrying a pen in one hand, and a clipboard in the other. He found unoccupied students and ask them to sign his petition.

"The school needs a music program!" he said. "And I'm not talking about a choir, I mean giving students an opportunity to learn an instrument. With enough signatures, the school could start a class!" What started as a sheet with just his name on it became 10 names. Then 20, then 50, then 100 names. When the spring came, he had nearly 200 signatures. With just a few weeks left of school, he gathered together his sheets full of names and headed to the principal's office.

"Mr. Wells, can we talk for a bit? I have something important I would like to discuss."

"Is this about your petition to start up a music program?" Mr. Wells asked.

"Yes Mr. Wells, I now have two-thirds of the student's signatures, and they are all in agreement that we should start a music class."

"I appreciate your effort Joseph. But the school doesn't have the money to build a music room."

"We don't have to build a music room, we could just use the auditorium to practice."

"I suppose that's reasonable. But even if we did use the auditorium, I've done some research and it's going to be very difficult to hire a teacher with a music background. Even Mrs. Kepler, the choir teacher, said she wouldn't be able to teach the students to play instruments. Our school also doesn't have the money to purchase instruments to use in class. I'm sorry Joseph, but I just can't make it work."

"The students could bring their instruments from home," Joseph said. "And if you need someone to teach a class how to play instruments, I could..."

"...You could what? Teach the class?" Mr. Wells scoffed. "We need a teacher with a music degree, not some teenager who knows how to play the piano." The room suddenly got very quiet, and Mr. Wells' words hung in the air. "Look, I'll tell you what, you can start an after-school music group in the auditorium next year. But that's the best I can do."

"Alright, I understand," Joseph mumbled as he turned to face the door.

"Hey, I am really sorry I couldn't make it work out," Mr. Wells added. "I played trumpet when I was in high school. I really enjoyed it too, and I wish I could give these kids the same opportunity I had. But our school just isn't in the right position to do these things. Most of the students who are interested in studying music go to Eagleson Academy. They have the money to do those things."

"I know Mr. Wells," Joseph said. "I just wish we could have similar opportunities."

Joseph played nonstop. Every morning, afternoon, and evening he would be found in the corner of his living room, turning page after page of sheet music. Now that school was out, he had nowhere else to be except his sanctuary, the piano. He played along with the symphonies in his head until his fingers grew tired. As September came closer, Joseph bought several sheets of poster paper. He decorated them in the blue and silver Pratt High School colors, with big bold letters that read: "After school music group! All are welcome! Meet in the auditorium at 2:30, Monday through Thursday!" And when school began, every wall was covered in posters.

When the bell rang, Joseph rushed to the auditorium. His backpack full of sheet music bounced behind him. He hopped up the steps and waited at the double doors for his orchestra to arrive. Joseph paced back and forth, glancing at his watch every few seconds. Soon, his watch read 2:30, and he was still alone. Perhaps they are already in the auditorium, he thought. But when he swung open the doors, the auditorium was empty. The next day, Joseph spent no time getting to the double doors. This time, he held a sign that said: "Afterschool music group, all instruments welcome!" But few students bothered to even make eye contact with Joseph. Am I the only one who plays an instrument in this school? Joseph thought. He stuck around for another half hour, holding the sign. But not one student entered the auditorium that day.

When the bell rang the third day, Joseph walked to the auditorium doors to see if anyone came. But the entrance was vacant. He made his way up the stairs and pulled the doors open to reveal an empty room. He walked down the aisle and made his way towards the stage. This time, he brought sheet music for a solo pianist. Joseph selected Clair de Lune and placed it on the music rack. He

placed his hands on the keys and began to play. His foot sorrowfully pushed the pedal, and his fingers reluctantly played each note. His hands began to roll up and down the keys, filling the entire auditorium with music. The sound poured out the open doors, spilling into the hall. He lost himself in the music. He played sections over and over just to hear them again. He didn't follow the sheet music, because he didn't need to. He knew the piece completely. When Joseph played his last chord, he reached to grab his music. But Joseph was interrupted by applause. He turned to face a group of two students with bright smiles.

Together they made the perfect piano trio. Day after day, Joseph would arrive early and set up two chairs, two music stands, and the sheet music for the three of them. When 2:30 arrived, Marcus and Holly would enter through the doors. Marcus would be carrying his cello, and Holly would be carrying her violin. Together, they played piece after piece. They would play until they got bored of the music they played. They reunited after the weekend and Joseph would come with new sheet music to play. Joseph played gracefully with the group, and the group matched Joseph's ability well. Sometimes, Joseph would get carried away. As he played, he followed the beat of the percussion. He hammered away at the keys with the horns, and his fingers hopped around matching pitch with the woodwinds. Not only was there a violin and cello, but many violins, violas, cellos, and bases. But every time Joseph and the group would finish a piece, he would turn to face an auditorium with only two other musicians with him. Where are the horns? He thought. Where is the percussion, the woodwinds, or the rest of the orchestra? Marcus and Holly were talented musicians, but they were nowhere near talented enough to replace an entire orchestra.

On a cold day in December, Joseph, Marcus, and Holly's practice was interrupted by Mrs. Kepler, the choir teacher. "Sorry to bother you three!" Mrs. Kepler squeaked. "But I have some news you may be interested in. Our district has a small group music competition coming up in a few months, and I thought you may be interested in entering. The winning group earns a \$50,000 grant for their music program!"

"\$50,000!" the three exclaimed. "\$50,000 could be enough to start a music program here!" Joseph cheered.

The date was circled in red on Joseph's calendar. Quickly, the group decided on their best piece and got to work. Every day after school the three rushed to the auditorium and practiced. After practice, Joseph would come home to practice more. Sleep, school, practice, repeat. Joseph's mind was so distracted by the music he forgot to eat at times. The contest was three months away, and quickly became two, then one. "From the beginning," Joseph said to Marcus and Holly. The three played with striking beauty. Each tone fit together perfectly to create melodies and harmonies that told a fulfilling story. With one week left

before the contest, Marcus bursted through the double doors.

"Guys, you gotta see this!" He said. "The district posted the list of the other groups performing, and Eagleson Academy's group has nine members in it!"

"Unbelievable," Holly said.

"That's ridiculous!" Joseph said. "Their group is triple the size of our group! That's hardly a small group. It's more like a chamber orchestra! How are we supposed to compete with them? Not only do they have more people than us, but they can also afford much nicer instruments!"

"So what?" Mr. Wells blurted. The three turned to face the principle tucked in the corner of the room.

"What are you doing here?" questioned Holly.

"Sometimes I take a break from my desk to listen to you three play. Haven't you seen me in the back surveying you?" Mr. Wells asked.

"We've been a little distracted with our music to notice you, or anyone else, Mr. Wells," Joseph said.

"Well let me ask you this: why does it matter how big Eagleson Academy's group is, or how expensive their instruments are? That doesn't change how good each musician is! You don't become a better musician by spending more money, or by playing in a bigger group! You become the best musicians you can because you have a love for the music you play, and you put in a great amount of time and effort into it. I've heard you play many times, and you all sound fantastic! Eagleson Academy and the rest of the district have no idea what they are up against. So go out there this weekend, and show them what you three are capable of!"

The three pulled into the parking lot of the event center in Marcus' rusty pickup truck. In the parking lot were a handful of school buses, and a coach bus with Eagleson Academy's name printed on the side. After the three checked in, they made their way to the performance room with the other groups. Three judges sat at a table in the back with a pile of scorecards. On the stage was a sleek black piano, a rack of chairs, and a rack of stands. One at a time groups were called up to perform for the judges. The judges would then spend a few minutes scribbling down notes before moving on to the next group. Second to last in the order was Eagleson Academy's nonet group. And last was the piano trio from Pratt Lake High School.

When Eagleson Academy's group was called up, the large group of students in matching tuxedos and dresses got up and carried their instruments on stage. It took several minutes simply to set up the chairs and music stands. "You may begin when ready," the middle judge said as they finished setting up. The members of the group looked at each other for a second, prepared themselves, and simultaneously began to play. With the size of their group, it was impossible for anyone else to play louder. With the price of their instruments, the tone they

produced could not be rivaled. They were perfectly in sync with each other and never missed a note. Was it even possible to play better than them? Joseph thought. As the group played their last few measures, Joseph turned to see all three judges beaming at the nine students.

“And finally, the Pratt Lake High School piano trio,” said the judge. The three students stepped onto the stage in their mismatched outfits and took their positions. “You may begin when ready,” said the judge. Joseph took one last look at the crowd, the judges, Marcus, and Holly, before playing the opening lines. Joseph’s hands wandered across the black and white keys. They struck chords, scales, and arpeggios as he matched the sounds of the orchestra. His left hand matched the pitch of the cellos and bases as they played low, rich tones. His right hand controlled the melody as he played with the violins. The percussion kept a steady beat while the woodwinds chimed in at times. His hands flew, they danced with grace and struck with power. It was perfection, a beautiful melody that told a great story through each instrument. As Joseph finished the piece with the orchestra, he smiled and turned to face not an empty auditorium, nor a performance room with two other musicians. Joseph turned to face a classroom full of music students. Joseph was the piano player for the new Pratt Lake High School Concert Orchestra.





Our pictures
torn from the walls.

The leaves in the background
of our halloween picture
match my current mindset,
w
e
a
k,
shaky,
s c a t t e r e d.

All of our photographs
in one large trash bag,
stored up high in the attic
where one day
they would be forgotten.

But for a while
my house looked bare
without you everywhere.



