



# The Rapids Review 2021

# **The Rapids Review**

## **2021**

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

### **ARCC Rapids Review Mission Statement**

*The Rapids Review*, the Coon Rapids Campus student literary magazine, is dedicated to publishing a wide range of excellently crafted work by student writers of any experience and all ethnicities, genders, religions, sexual orientations, marital statuses, ages, and abilities.

© Anoka Ramsey Community College All rights reserved

## **A note from the editor**

Welcome to the 2021 edition of the Rapids Review! I am thrilled to share with you some of the amazing work created by Anoka-Ramsey Community College students. I have been captivated by the originality, talent, and passion portrayed by my peers through their submissions. We selected pieces that display individuality, imagination, and skillful artistry. It has been an honor to be a part of a magazine that showcases writers who have found their voice and artists who have shared their vision. The importance of sharing our diverse lived experience through literature and art cannot be overstated. Enjoy these thought-provoking pieces!

-Julia Kramer (Editor-in-Chief)

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the students who submitted their work—for their willingness to share their prose, poetry, and art with our community. My team of talented section editors provided the enthusiasm and work ethic needed to produce this year's magazine. My gratitude extends to them and our fantastic advisor Laurel, whose guidance was indispensable throughout this process. Thank you to our amazing faculty who encouraged and supported these students in their creative endeavors. I have felt a true sense of purpose in the literary community here at Anoka Ramsey Community College. Thank you to everyone who has directly or indirectly impacted the 2021 edition of *The Rapids Review*.

### **Section Editors:**

Amara Isom Karypis

Aj Layland

Alyssa Overtom

Lilianne Marlton

Jasmine Knapper

### **Advisor:**

Laurel Smith

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Yellow by Quintessa Taft.....                              | 1  |
| Daydreams by Angerise Carter .....                         | 6  |
| My Mark by Raven A. Wolf.....                              | 7  |
| Existential Crisis by Samuel King.....                     | 8  |
| A Young Woman Reflects by Angerise Carter .....            | 10 |
| Biological Discovery by Nice Plasabas.....                 | 11 |
| Why We Laughed by Elisabeth Bazant .....                   | 17 |
| Untitled by Quintessa Taft .....                           | 24 |
| Mausoleum by Tiffany Schroeder.....                        | 25 |
| Double Helix by Aj Layland .....                           | 28 |
| Journey to Success by Yusma Mushtaq .....                  | 32 |
| Bronze Dragon by Robyn Peterson.....                       | 37 |
| Dare He Speak a Love Poem by Angerise Carter .....         | 38 |
| Windows by Raven A. Wolf .....                             | 39 |
| Guardian by Raven A. Wolf.....                             | 45 |
| Winston by Brittany Benjamin .....                         | 46 |
| The Dead Dog That Follows Us by Julia Kramer .....         | 47 |
| To the Man Whose Child I Born by Angerise Carter .....     | 54 |
| Authority, State, and Dystopia by Samuel King.....         | 55 |
| Untitled by Quintessa Taft .....                           | 56 |
| Watch Dog by Kelia Nsoh .....                              | 57 |
| The Bridge by Jasmine Knapper .....                        | 63 |
| In the Family Way by Raven A. Wolf .....                   | 70 |
| Honey Pot by Robyn Peterson .....                          | 74 |
| Short Poem in Four Seasons by Claudia Ionescu .....        | 75 |
| Nagging Hag by Raven A. Wolf.....                          | 77 |
| The Young, the Bold, the Beautiful by Phillip Rosier ..... | 79 |
| Untitled by Quintessa Taft .....                           | 81 |

## **Daydreams by Angerise Carter**

Escape inside your mind's desire,  
and relish what you may.

Collect upon the past forsaken,  
deliver future gains.

In every vein there lies a path,  
choose what you will become.

In every window the sun can shine,  
and shadows cast no doubts.

Roses without thorns,  
rivers instead of drought,  
blue skies instead of blue lives,  
heroes and heroines abound.

Whatever pleasures reality denies,  
a daydream can abide.

## **My Mark by Raven A. Wolf**

where I  
have stepped. where  
I am going. what I have  
done. what I am  
doing. with these actions  
I leave my mark. upon the world for  
all to see. but who will see. where I have  
stepped. where I am going. what I have done.  
what I am doing. are these marks worth seeing. do  
they portray my intentions. my thoughts. my  
feelings. should I stomp heavily. should  
I tread lightly. do I want all to see.  
where I have stepped. where I am  
going. what I have done. what  
I am doing. am I proud to look  
behind me. at the trail I have left.  
am I proud of what I plan to do next.  
do the marks I leave lead someone other.  
do I follow the marks made by another.  
where have they stepped. where are  
they going. what have they done.  
what are they doing.



## **Existential Crisis by Samuel King**

I was around five or six. My grandma had recently passed, and she was by then buried. The image of a gravestone latched itself to me, a ghost that would not leave. I cried in bed; I sweat and shivered, chilled to the bone by a thought I couldn't quite wrap my head around yet. I went to my dad—or he came to me. There's too much noise in the memory to recall which one. He hugged me, comforted me, told me the things I needed to hear.

I was fine the next morning. I think I was.

—

I was fourteen. The previous year had been an emotional tar pit, depression dragging at me for months on end. I was past it, though. Most of it, at least. My first semester of high school had gone well enough. I'm lying in bed, lights off. At some point, the shadows become too distinct, the light too distant. An idea scratches at the backdoor of my brain, an idea I don't think I'd truly considered before. The dark in my room closes like fingers over my eyes, and I shiver.

The next day, I spent my free period looking up ways of suspending a brain in a jar to preserve it, that old sci-fi daydream of immortality. That was the need I had. Fear is a transient thing; this was true anxiety, as I hadn't experienced before. I was possessed.

The next few years blur a little. My nights were spent watching movies and TV shows under my covers to distract me. Going to sleep—that gentle drift into another world—felt a little too much like death.



—

I'm twenty. I examine the life-death binary for leisure. Existentialism, which draws on Heidegger's notion of anxiety towards death defining us, isn't much to me. The poltergeist that haunted me for so much of my developing years has become a shadow in the back of my mind; every now and then, it slips over me again, a cold breath from beyond, but after a moment's consideration, I brush it aside.

Some nights though, if the day has been particularly hard, that notion clamps tight again. It latches on, inescapable. I lie there, a lump of already rotting meat that is destined one day to die.

## **A Young Woman Reflects by Angerise Carter**

Night comes falling silently,  
as the day descends from mind.  
Time brings not memories of poverty,  
but sweetness of life.

Day and night are as one.  
Absent of time is a clock.  
Bittersweet is my heart,  
of pains ones not forgotten.

Growth is like a shrub sustaining,  
your innocence no longer details.  
Doubt and serenity prevail,  
as gates open to heaven and hell.

Choices come more than once in a lifetime,  
but faith and hope must survive.  
Vices have little virtue,  
when your spirit rather falter than fly.

Youth is only a blissful moment of purity  
not yet devoured.  
Womanhood develops through hardships,  
long and dark,  
like the night it comes.

## **Biological Discovery by Nice Plasabas**

The salty taste of my sweat slipped past chapped lips, meandering off my chin like a small thin stream. The humid air was too much to endure, the dryness urging my dried nose to relinquish an onslaught of red proportions. It was only a few more blocks to the designated oasis, my aunt's house. While no air conditioning existed within the home, the thought of the whirling blades of her ancient fan brought great appreciation within me. Only in the Philippines could it be so hot that I would willingly throw myself into the shark infested waters of the ocean to cool off.

I walked steadfast towards salvation, making sure to stay a few paces behind my boisterous cousins. I only knew a few of my cousins; the older children were the ones I was most familiar with. Leaving the Philippines at the age of five really alienated me from my family. Despite being related, I felt uncomfortable with everyone. Many of my cousins would constantly question about my life in America. Most times they would giggle at my accent, making jests about my English-speaking abilities. I would often bite my tongue, trying not to bark out a snide remark about their broken English. I would often tell myself they had no right to judge me or make me the laughing stock of the family jokes.

My eldest female cousin Rea would often exclaim, "Nika, your English gives me nosebleed." She would announce this to anyone within earshot.

I would often be reprimanded for not being able to speak my native language. I would feel great shame in only being able to understand Bisaya; nobody had ever taught me after I had left. My mother was the only other part of the Philippines I had with

me, and even she had become accustomed to speaking English around me. The cultural touch of the Philippines faded as I grew up in the states. It was due to the long exposure to the western culture I chose to alienate myself. I felt different, no longer part of the culture I had been born in. It was my difference that would be the center of my cousins' jokes. I kept away to escape their bullying.

I kicked the dirt beneath my sandals, the material slapping, right foot cramping, mind spinning. We continued to trudge forward, a grunt of disgust slipping past my lips as my foot sunk into a small hole of mud. My two eldest female cousins slowed their pace, giving me quizzical looks as I sheepishly flung my foot about to get rid of the sludge. I hastened my pace to where they stood, awaiting the humiliating jokes they would throw my way. They never came. I looked about, only to realize they were no longer beside me. Turning back to look behind me the two stood awfully still, living statues against the backdrop of a tropical paradise. I walked closer, hoping for an explanation I knew would come in broken English.

"Nika, we hurry to house now," Windel whispered.

I was herded past a man hunched near the walkway of my aunt's house. His face was cast downwards, a baseball cap hiding most of his facial features. My cousins barely gave him a onceover, quickly shoving my sweaty body in the confinements of the cool house. I peered outside the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious man. My hands began to excrete a never-ending supply of sweat. My heart began to thrum due to nervousness, on the verge of what I thought would become a heart attack. The man stared directly at me, never breaking eye contact. Despite having a massive family, I knew the man was no family member of mine.

“Stay away from the windows Nika!” came the scream of my mother.

She ushered me up the stairs, hurriedly speaking to her sisters and brother too fast for me to properly translate. A look of fear flashed across her face, and her nudging became increasingly stronger. My foot slammed hard against the surface of the dilapidated planks of the wooden stairs. The laughing creaks of the boards obnoxiously loud as my right foot painfully stabbed itself against the top plank. I could hear the door from the first floor below being slammed shut. It was a sound that could rival the loudest thunderstorms in existence. The house shook, giving the effects of a possible earthquake. Windows were quickly draped, and hushed whispers exchanged throughout the house.

“I have something to tell you about the man stalking the house,” my mother squeaked out, fear evident in her eyes.

“That man is your biological father; he is here to see you,” she slowly explained.

My heart began to palpitate painfully, my hairline completely drenched in sweat. The salty taste resembled much of my salty attitude towards the news. No tears came to fruition, or an ounce of anger. I numbly followed my mother down the same set of stairs I came up on. Everyone crowded the entrance to the kitchen, casting me pitiful looks. I pushed past the mob of gossiping family members. I caught the bright glint of a kitchen knife upon the table, my aunt sitting rigid with her hand laying near the handle. On the opposite end sat the man, presumably my father. I always wondered where I had inherited the eyes, and who I should thank for the obnoxious curly hair. Brown eyes stared inquisitively at me, no doubt comparing our similarities in the same fashion I was. The similarities between us were not hard to find: the small squinty set of eyes, firm lips,

skin complexion, and smile. As hard as it was to swallow, I had to accept he was the man everyone claimed him to be.

We sat in silence, the humid air making the scene even far more unbearable. My mother's eldest sister shuffled in her seat, bringing attention to the cleaver that sat in front of her. She glared him down, daggers flying out her eyes. The knife was no doubt only a show of intimidation, at least I hoped so. I knew the events of the day would be the biggest gossip of the year amongst the neighbors. I was glad for my aunt's presence; it was comforting to know she had my back.

An apology slipped past my father's lips in broken English. I blubbered out forgiveness in response, though I had not really forgiven him. He had been absent from the very start, no father to hold me as I gasped for my first breath of air. It was petty, yet I felt I had good reason to be angry. Forgiveness would have to be earned. Thirteen years of his absence fitted with a weak apology was simply not going to cut it.

His mouth blossomed into a toothy smile, a sigh of relief escaping him. My aunt sighed in return, her intimidating stance ebbing away. The air seemed to clear at the sound of my forgiving tone. Other formalities were exchanged, and questions were asked that had long been unanswered. It seemed as if hours had passed, when only a mere half an hour had gone by. As he spoke, I constantly wished to hug the man before me. However, I kept still. The anger I had buried within me festered, but I refused to show it. Questions began to pop through every crevice of my mind, ones too inappropriate to voice out loud.

I was later introduced to a younger sibling. My half-sister scuffled towards her father, glaring me down. I laughed silently to myself. She clung to him, much like a

koala to its favorite branch. She must have thought of me as an intruder, someone trying to take her dad away. I gave her a small smile, greeting her in English. My father pushed her towards me, but she refused to unlatch herself. I knew she found it a hard pill to swallow, knowing she had an older sister. If only she knew the pain I felt, discovering I had three younger half-siblings. If only she knew the hurtful question I kept asking myself. Why did he not want me? He chose to have three other children not much younger than myself. I had a half-brother only a year and a half younger. Why was I left behind?

Days passed as my father suffocated me in years' worth of affection. He would bring me confections and sweet savory breads. He would offer me motorcycle rides to wherever I pleased. I took him up on his offer just once.

The feeling of the wind swishing past me, tickling the exposed skin on my neck was enchanting. The rush of being on his motorcycle brought great exhilaration. I clung to him in the same manner my sister had as he rode past the scenic view of the banana plantation. The sun was beating down, the golden rays scattered on the dirt floor of the fruiting trees. The golden splashes on the ground were fluttering dancers, swishing about as the canopy of banana leaves swayed with the wind. It was the last and only hug I ever gave him. Many wishes came true, and endless hours of side aching laughter. During the days of fun-filled activities, I still harbored a stash of bitterness. The sourness leading me down a regrettable path.

As my summer vacation came to an end amongst the sandy white beaches and beautiful islands, my short time with my father also faded away. I became a memory to him, as he did to me. Our meeting was indeed once in a lifetime. As I boarded the bus



that would take me to the airport, I never looked back to say goodbye. Perhaps it was my unconscious way of giving him a small taste of his own medicine.

It is on days when the air becomes humid, and the soft breeze swishes against my face that I try to conjure up the image of him. I only remember the image of a man waiting by the entrance. His facial features now barely unrecognizable. That is the memory I carry with me. While the connection has long been severed, I no longer carry around the question of who I am and who he is. Perhaps it was the small ounce of bitterness of not being wanted that washed the memory of his face away. I now know it does not necessarily matter where my blood relations reside that make me who I am. It is those that have grown with me and the experiences I have had, that make me the person I am today. The sourness I harbored has long faded away. The only regret I carry with me is never having said goodbye.

## **Why We Laughed by Elisabeth Bazant**

The soft yet ominous roar of thunder faintly echoed through the hills. Though the sky above my head was clear, I glanced to the west and could see utterly grim-looking clouds along the horizon, from which the unmistakable voice of thunder had come. The clouds slowly writhed their way towards the unsuspecting campsite. My stomach churned, and I felt uneasy. Despite this sudden change of weather, everyone went about their day as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

As I stood alone in the open grassy field, I studied the tranquil scene before me. Some of the horses were grazing in their portable corrals made with two strands of thin electric wire; others were tied to hitching posts, peacefully enjoying their fresh bags of hay. Enthusiastic little children ran around the camping trailers playing tag, their frequent bursts of screams and laughter ringing through the air. It was 5:20 p.m., and all the dads, standing around in a circle firing up their grills to fry fish and pheasant, were discussing dad things such as fishing and fixing cars. The moms were bustling about setting up canopies and tables, making sure that the dishes for the potluck—casseroles, Jell-O salads, fruit medleys, cheese, crackers, brownies, cookies—were all accounted for, neatly set out, and equipped with the correct serving utensils.

As I continued to stand there enjoying the mouth-watering aroma of fish frying on the grills, I was aware of someone coming up behind me. I turned around to see my friend Erica making her way towards me. In each hand she held a couple of ropes; attached to the end of each rope was a horse. Our two quarter horses, Quincy and Derby, were beautiful creatures. Erica's horse, Derby, was a tall stunning sorrel that

would immediately catch your eye. My horse, Quincy, a handsome red dun, was quite a bit shorter and more compact than Derby. He was not as immediately eye-catching, but to me he was still just as magnificent.

Erica and I had each brought our horses on this camping trip that we had been planning for months. We came with our saddle club that we were a part of, as it was their annual tradition to camp at this gorgeous site in the hills of Red Wing, Minnesota. Our saddle club had approximately 25 members, and with a horse for each, it was quite the crowd. We had all gone trail riding together the day before, and the feeling of my horse carrying me up steep inclines, his powerful muscles flexing and straining, the sound of his and 24 other horses' heavy breathing, their hooves thumping the rocks as they clambered up the hill trying to find their footing, the smell of the damp summer evening filled with the aroma of sweaty horses, was an experience that I will never forget.

"Just thought I'd let them eat some grass before we get to go eat our own supper," Erica explained to me. I nodded and smiled, then reached my hand out to take the rope that belonged to my horse. We patted their necks, and they dropped their heads to begin devouring the luscious green turf.

"Looks like a storm is coming." I gestured towards the dark mass, even closer now than before. "Have you heard anything about how bad it's supposed to be?" I asked.

"Nobody here has cell service, but I believe it's supposed to just blow right past us. We'll get some light rain, I reckon."

I trusted Erica's judgment. Being quite a bit older and more experienced than I, she was usually right about things such as this, and I felt my anxious mind relax for the time being. We stood there with our horses grazing in silence for what seemed like three hours, but was only, at best, twenty minutes. In those twenty minutes, thunder began to rumble more frequently, and several streaks of lightning could be seen between the clouds.

"Watch the horses for a minute. I'll be right back," Erica said as she handed me her horse's rope. I watched her sprint across the field into the campground and soon was out of view. The air was completely still and quiet—except for one ghastly noise—the steady deep rumble of thunder. It was like hearing a freight train coming and waiting anxiously for it to rush past you on the tracks—only this freight train never came.

I was suddenly sick to my stomach. I felt completely isolated and vulnerable out in that big open field with visible lightning becoming more frequent. Every minute passed slower than the last. Erica was not back yet, and I had not a clue where she had gone. The silence was insufferable, and the great tenebrous clouds appeared as though they were intending to reach out, snatch me up, and devour me, much like a young child in full possession of a jar of cookies. Any sound there may have been was muffled by the heaviness and denseness of the air, which gave the campground an eerie atmosphere. The place I was grazing the horses was not too far from where Erica and I had set up camp, which was roughly 100 yards from where the rest of the saddle club was settled. I coaxed the horses to put a pause on their joyful consumption before tying them up to their hitching post, throwing them some hay, and hastening into the camp to find company.

I found most of the ladies under various tent canopies playing card games, talking, and slowly starting to put some of the potluck dishes inside just in case it started raining. The men were still at their grills—as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Nobody seemed overly concerned with the current state of the weather.

“Maybe it’s really not that big of a deal,” I thought to myself. “Erica was probably right; it will just pass right by us.”

I decided to join the ladies, and they kindly invited me under their tent. They asked me how school was going and about my job. It was then that I began to feel at ease. I was trying to ignore the fact that the bright August day had suddenly turned into night and that the menacing clouds above our heads had a green tint. A soft puff of wind, as if a warning of what was to come, slowly made its way through the campsite. As it brushed passed us, we all stopped talking and looked up. There was an eerie silence in the air. A chill ran down my spine. We were all anticipating something, but none of us knew what to expect.

“Here it comes,” I heard someone behind me say.

In that instant, it was as if the sky erupted. Torrential rain and nickel-sized bits of hail plummeted to the earth like a heavy blanket being dropped. An explosion of wind sent the camp into a tumult. Canopies, grills, chairs, and debris went flying. I heard people yelling and saw them running to the nearest shelter with their arms around their heads. I heard metal crashing into metal and canvas violently flapping. I heard the sound of tent poles cracking and breaking. The sudden burst terrified the horses, and they began panicking, running back and forth, two small strands of wire being the only things keeping them contained.

I wheeled around, suddenly remembering the horses I had just tied up, imagining them hurting themselves by pulling back on the ropes out of fear. I made up my mind in an instant to dash back to the other end of the campsite to check on them. My heart pounded rapidly as I ran. I could feel it banging in my chest as if it wanted to escape its confinement and flee somewhere safer. The copious amounts of rain plunging from the sky stung my face as I cut through it. Another forceful blast of wind, which sent debris flying through the air, caused me to falter and lose my balance, but I regained it quickly and continued to bound across the campsite. I glanced back to where I had been and could hardly see through the thick curtain of rain. I could make out the faint ghost-like silhouettes of the camping trailers and of the panicking horses, still rushing back and forth, wanting to get away from the relentless downpour.

I reached our horses, who, to my utter relief, were standing calmly with their backs to the wind and rain, waiting out the storm. Then, to my dismay, I noticed the tent that Erica and I had stayed in the night before: completely floppy, soaking wet, and approximately one gust of wind away from joining the rest of the debris in the sky. I lunged forward and grabbed it, holding on without any idea of what to do next.

As I stood there, absolutely soaked to the skin and freezing cold, my teeth chattering fiercely, I held on with whatever strength I had to this violently flapping tent. As my wet hands slowly lost grip on the likewise wet fabric of the tent, and as thunder and lightning raged overhead, I began to chuckle and found that I was no longer afraid of this storm. It is not every day one finds oneself in a situation such as this, and it struck me as utterly hilarious. My white knuckled hands were getting tired, I was chilled to the bone and soaked to the skin, but I had no intention of letting go.

As I stood there, accepting the fact that I may just be in this position for the rest of the evening, I noticed a small, dark, blurry figure hastily making its way towards me. It was none other than Erica herself! As she reached me, she grabbed the other end of the tent, and we stood there for a moment looking at each other.

“Well, this was quite unexpected!” She almost had to yell to be heard over the roar of the storm. Then we laughed.

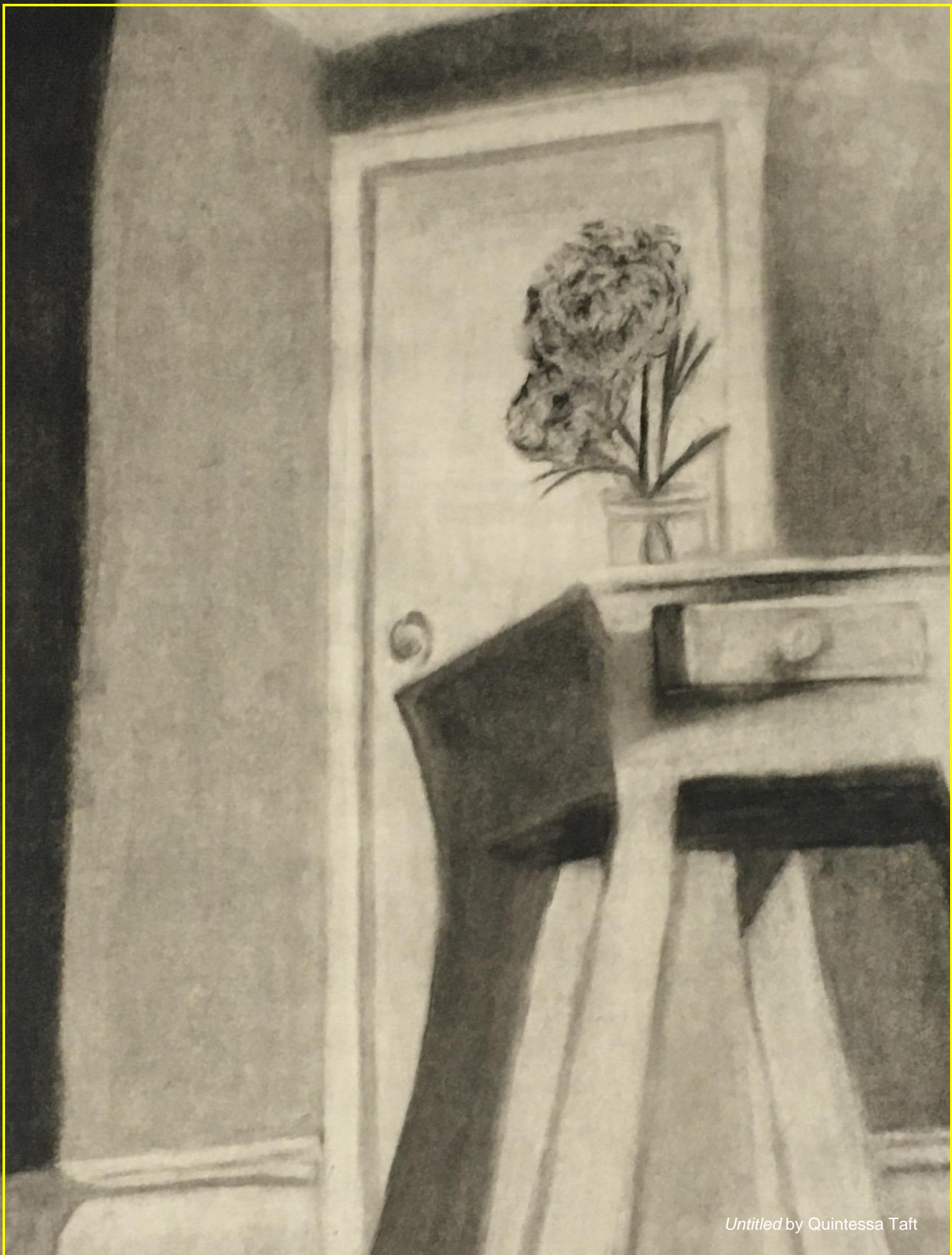
We laughed as we threw the mangled tent and sopping wet sleeping bags in the back of her horse trailer. We laughed as we ran back to the campground together through the torrential rain and over the inundated ground. We laughed as we hid under a canopy tent with several other people, having to hold it down so it would not fly away with every tempestuous gust of wind. We laughed at our painfully sore arms, chattering teeth and sodden clothes, and we laughed because we knew that we would have a story we would be able to tell for years to come.

After an hour or so of substantial rain, constant gusts of damaging winds, children crying and people praying, everything finally started to calm down, and the sun began to faintly peek out from its heavenly abode once again. Folks were emerging from their various hiding places, making sure all humans and horses were well and accounted for, which they were. The campsite was once again filled with laughter and with the chattering voices of people sharing and comparing experiences of the events of the past hour.

The dads immediately picked their grills up off the soggy, debris-filled ground, fired them up, and began grilling and talking about dad things. The moms were once again bustling about setting up tables, raising canopy tents, and fetching all the potluck



dishes to feed the many ravenous mouths. It was as if absolutely nothing out of the ordinary had happened—as if the day had gone about exactly as we had previously intended it to—and that is when Erica and I laughed the hardest.



Untitled by Quintessa Taft

## **Mausoleum by Tiffany Schroeder**

I kept my life,  
distributed over years of memory,  
in a conservatory I keep in my basement,  
like a bank, like a library, like a color-plated window.

I looked upon the dead bodies of the past,  
shook the preserves around in their jars,  
until they bubbled up dizzied themselves,  
and set them back up on their dust-greased, melting shelves.

They could not see me through their oily basins,  
yet I could watch their little feet slip along the side of the jar,  
and the small clump of hard jelly plunge within the yellow submerge,  
like the memory of my learning to swim, crusted, within it.

Some of these preserves, I keep awake.  
I let them swim within the formaldehyde,  
or float within the stale air trapped inside.  
I let them live.

I kept you on the top shelf with all of my favorites.  
I let you fly around like a lightening bug in your jar,  
and I watched you smack your fragile body, desperately,  
against the glass, your light flashing off and on, disturbed.

One day I thought I would open up your jar,  
just a crack, just enough so that you may peak back at me.

Instead, you managed to trapeze your small figure out of this view-finder,  
and you escaped the old rotten air,  
that had been fresh only years ago...

Instead of waiting for you to land;  
instead of waiting for you to press yourself to the  
single bulb draped from the ceiling, I dropped the  
open glass back over your small frame.

In a wave of tempestuous turbulence, I slapped my palm down  
over the other,  
you trapped inside.

I held your aching preserve,  
your wings bent backwards and sideways,  
and in the wrong way, and you quivered,  
rolling around in attempt to make those broken wings work.

When I noticed the still, final roll of your body  
toward the center of my palm, your wings collapsing  
into the common folds of my skin, tickling,  
I instantly regret, again, as always I do with memories,  
that I should have managed it that way.

In a fit of rage, reminiscing now,  
I grasped each jar from the shelves of my basement,  
escorting them to the dirty concrete floor,  
swarmed with a cacophony of mummified voices,  
filling the room with the rotten, stale smell of formaldehyde and regret.  
Watching now,

all of the bodies lie among the floor in pools of themselves;  
others on their bulb, swinging back and forth,  
reminiscent of the first time I got on a swing with my parents at the park.

Smashing them all one by one,  
until the only ones remaining,  
are the ones left unlidded upstairs.

## **Double Helix by Aj Layland**

Elena, my scene partner, shrugs off her lab coat and strolls back onto the stage as her monologue begins. “Rosalind Franklin,” she announces to the judges, finding her mark at the table which presently serves as her desk. “King’s College London, 1952.” Separated from her by a thin curtain, I struggle to slip into a blazer while she launches into a lecture regarding DNA. When I take my place beside her again, I will be Maurice Wilkins, British physicist and molecular biologist with an ongoing disdain for this woman in my lab. Yet for the next thirty seconds, I am a mess of a performer in an oversized costume, a period piece purchased at the Goodwill that my shoulders don’t quite fill. I can’t help looking laughably insignificant even as I am here to bring life to a history that has been chronically ignored.

This is our third competitive performance in a series of National History Day events, a project-based competition which students compete in annually. After a decent pre-run at our school event and a successful advancement at regionals, we’re up against the other top performers in the state. The group who went on before us keeps shuffling throughout the room as they collect their props, which is definitely in violation of the rules, but the rules mean nothing to Maurice Wilkins. They are merely a blur of frenzied color in the darkness. My classmates in the audience cast them distracted looks, but the frantic background whispers do nothing to drown out the sound of the judges’ pens scratching against paper.

The theme for the projects this year is “Triumph and Tragedy,” which is history in a nutshell if you ask me. If history had a genome, there would be no As and Ts or Cs

and Gs. There would just be triumph, tragedy, and maybe a mutated segment about the exchange of cultural ideas on the Silk Road. My entrance cue approaches, and suddenly I am in a position where I don't have the time to care about any of that.

I press my shoulders back and step coolly into view as if I have walked into this place a thousand times before. This is *my* lab after all. Rosie is just an assistant, although not a very cooperative one. She's alright with x-ray crystallography, which is about to prove incredibly valuable. Because there, taped to the table for everyone to see, is a copy of Photograph 51. This image was taken under the supervision of Rosalind Franklin herself and holds the key to one of the greatest discoveries of the century. It displays a vague indication of the double helical structure of DNA, which my colleagues James Watson and Francis Crick will successfully use to make their revolutionary model. It is, quite possibly, the most important photograph ever taken.

I sneer at Rosalind as I approach her, garnering a gentle laugh from one of the judges. The part of me that is not a practiced actor does not find this very amusing. I still wonder what I am doing beneath these stage lights as an audience of nervous onlookers mirrors my anxious thoughts. I worry that my voice will not carry, and that if it does, the weight of my words will not be enough to convince the judges of the truth. Unlike Wilkins, I am chronically unsure of my permission to exist in this space. As I glare down at Rosalind Franklin, I wonder if she feels the same way too. I can hardly stand to look at her.

What I can stand to look at is the x-ray image that she has taken. I let my gaze drift downwards to that photograph as we argue. She's always in my lab and in my way, claiming that she's more than an assistant when we all know better. The words that we



exchange are brief, but they are harsh enough to make her leave in a hurry. This is for the sake of the performance, a condensation of many misunderstandings between these two people. We have ten minutes to bring years of history to life. It takes Franklin less than ten seconds to disappear behind the curtain.

When she's gone, I grab the picture off the table and hold it up to the light so that it can take center stage. We're at the heart of the story now, when both the triumph and the tragedy unfold. I glance over my shoulder to ensure that Rosie has left before walking away with her work. Maybe she's not entirely useless after all.

Watson, Crick, and Wilkins go on to be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1962 for their discovery of the double helix. Franklin dies of ovarian cancer before then and is not formally credited for her contribution at the time, likely due to the circumstance of her lacking a Y chromosome.

As for Elena and I, we finish our performance with the greatest delivery we've pulled off yet. In the final scene, we are two women in our own lab, reflecting on the past that has brought us here. We talk animatedly about genetically modified babies in China, the development of CRISPR, and our own careers in a gene sequencing laboratory. Our dialog reveals the strides we've taken since discovering the double helix, but an air of unspoken sorrow hangs between us in that moment. Neither of us says it, but sharing this story is a triumph of another kind.

We go on to recite the script once more that day, this time against the top six group performances in Minnesota. If we can beat even one of them, we will medal. When I am Wilkins, I cannot see why Rosalind Franklin would be worth mentioning. All

she did was take a decent photograph and surmise about nitrogenous bases. When I am the woman in the lab coat, I resent the fact that history forgot her at all.

## **Journey to Success by Yusma Mushtaq**

It is crazy how people's decisions, good or bad, could completely change their lives. Some decide to get married, have kids, or even go to college, but these simple decisions could impact their lives so much. My life, for instance, where it took a big turn and the outcomes of that simple decision still amazes me. It impacted me both in a positive and negative way but brings a smile to my face every time that I think about it. My parents made the toughest decision to move to the US from Pakistan, and the day they sat me down and told me changed me forever.

On a typical bright sunny day, coming back from school, I hugged one of my best friends super tight as I stepped off my school van on a rough textured road. As I walked towards my house, I noticed my dad's motorcycle parked outside meaning he came home early from work. I knew something was up and unknowingly a surprise was waiting for me inside. I was desperate to know the reason behind him coming home before his usual time, so I quickly changed my uniform to my newly washed clothes that had a great scent of tulip. While we were having lunch together, my parents broke their silence and announced about moving to the US. The moment I heard that, my jaw dropped to the floor because I had such mixed emotions that I could not even express at that time. I asked them the purpose for moving here, and they said, "for our better future." Since then, I never questioned about anything regarding moving to the US even though I had so much to ask. However, the only thing I was happy about was traveling on an airplane, which back then was a huge deal for us. Yet, I did not want to leave my country and commit to living at a random

place. Also, I did not want to leave my friends who I grew up with knowing we will always stay together. I will admit, me and my friends were troublemakers, and that is what made us “popular” in school. Well, we were not bad kids but were not innocent as an angel. Before leaving my hometown, all the happy moments chased me as flashbacks and made me want to convince my parents to change their minds. On the other hand, I knew they probably made the right choice for us.

The neighborhood in both Pakistan and the United States were different. The people in our old neighborhood were very polite. I still remember going to my neighbor's house whenever I felt like it. No one cared if there was a whole army of people just chilling at their home. Their doors were open to everyone, and unexpectedly, we would fly into their place like a free bird. Since all our brick houses were literally squished together, we could clearly hear what episodes of whichever shows were playing next door. Along with sound came the smell of traditional food marching to our noses forcing us to show up to them. No one was professional, but the meal was always delicious, freshly made with love and served with honor of having us. In our neighborhood, there was no such things as being “invited”; we were welcomed all day and night. Our neighborhood was full of respectful and soft-hearted people.

After moving to the US, we struggled to live in a new neighborhood. After coming here, I noticed every pentagon shaped house was like a mile away from another house. We bought a house with four bedrooms, a huge living room, and a standard size kitchen. There was a lot of space in my backyard to build an entire mall. Seeing gigantic houses and this much space made me feel like a princess living in a

castle. In addition, it was new to me to adopt a time limit to staying at someone's house, even at my relatives that lived here. We did not even know who our neighbors were and what they did for living. We became prisoners staying home all day, especially me, who used to have whole society's girls to gossip to. Moving here taught me that such thing as distance exists.

Starting school here really motivated me to become interested in learning. The education system is way beyond different in both countries. A person would have to spend a lot of money for either private or public-school education, which my parents did as well. Even after paying so much, there were no sports teams or extracurricular activities one could join for entertainment. We had small classrooms with limited amount of space, but we still had over 40 students in each room. Each classroom had few wooden desks with only two people to sit at. When it came to my academic progress, my grades never satisfied me, but I still did not bother to fix them. Since we moved here when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I had no interest in learning and becoming someone at all. I had no plans for my career, nor did I want to. The reason for that was because in my hometown anyone could get a job without a proper degree or any type of experience and knowing that never made me feel as if I needed to be educated.

Schools in both countries had a different environment. One of the biggest opportunities I got was going to a public school and receiving the same education but at no cost. Also, I discovered what kind of activities I enjoy by being involved in programs and clubs that I had no idea even existed. Also, I took my education seriously and encouraged myself to plan things ahead for future. I started working

hard in each class to build up my GPA. I set my goals high and promised to achieve them no matter what. My perspective on education drastically changed from what mindset I had before coming here.

Moving here triggered me the most with my self-confidence. I used to be a girl who could easily talk to anyone and never thought about little things often. Even if I met someone my age, I interacted with them as if I had known them for so long. I was very open with all my friends by informing them about all my crushes to even my family problems. Over the weekend, we had many sleepovers where I would lend them my clothes if they had forgotten theirs. My friends were flowers of happiness because they showered laughs to make me smile. The hardest part was telling them that I would be leaving everyone there and did not know if I would come back or not. I was very independent and outgoing before coming here.

I converted from an extrovert to an introvert when arriving in the US. I became isolated with people once I found that communicating was not as easy as it seemed. I was scared to talk to anyone, even my teachers. I reserved myself so much into my own things that I did not like talking to other people. I was nervous to even speak to anyone because I thought I would be annoying if I said too much. Until middle school, I did not even try putting any effort to make friends. The loneliness made me feel like as if I were unwanted. I would sometimes cry in the dark and questioned myself “why did I even agree to come here?” I had no one to talk to or express my feelings to. Since I got no attention that I was looking for, my self-confidence decreased in no time. One of the many reasons for this was because the lack of English I knew at that time. I was barely talking to anyone in school because firstly I had no confidence to

and secondly, I had no words to talk to somebody. All I knew was how to greet people, which I made sure I did each morning.

I will never be able to forget the day I found out about moving to the U.S because it gave me a new life and a different personality to live. I found a way to pursue all my dreams and fulfill the goals I am dedicated to. Even though there was a decrease in my confidence, it taught me how to act around people in a quiet way. Also, it took all the fun away from me once we moved here, but it showed me how different the world is from my little country that I had never thought I would be able to know.





*Bronze Dragon* by Robyn Peterson

### **Dare He Speak a Love Poem by Angerise Carter**

Dare he speak in subtle tones,  
and listless tongue  
of undying love.  
I have heard his cry of needs  
through loud,  
and futile callings.  
His temperament  
has castrated our love,  
and his words on deaf ears does fall.  
Let tomorrow find us uninvolved,  
void of any longing.  
Hope I may.  
Hope I might,  
forgive his false proclaims.  
Live for me today,  
and grow tired of me tomorrow,  
for dare he speak a love poem.

## **Windows by Raven A. Wolf**

A typical day for me begins with the parking of my van. Usually tightly squeezed between some sort of Toyota Camry and Chevrolet Impala. I open up the back of the van and gather my equipment. I attach my portable bucket filled with a diluted solution of Dawn Soap to my belt, wrap a blue sleeve around my T-bar, and decide on which squeegee will be appropriately sized. From there, my workday can begin. I move from one window to the next, scrubbing my T-bar against the glass before wiping it off with a squeegee. It's the same routine every day without falter. The job is dependable, consistent, and rather dull.

When I first told my family that I'd gotten the job, they told me it was a perfect fit. I initially took that comment as a compliment, likely how it was meant to be interpreted, but as I continue working, the truth of their statement becomes ever more apparent. In my personal life, I blend in. I go unnoticed as people living their lives pass me by. Now, as a window washer, I'm employed to do that very thing. I peer into the daily lives of others through a freshly cleaned window and am hardly ever noticed. I gather what information I can and connect what glimpses I am given. Twice a week, I piece together the lives of a group of regulars that sit on the east side of Milly's Diner.

A woman I estimate to be in her 30's or 40's always sits in the booth in the far corner. She might appear to be a natural brunette, but on occasions when the sun shines through the window just right, I can see that her roots have a lighter color. Her back is to the rest of the diners as she faces the brick wall and looks into the eyes of this week's lunch date. He's an older gentleman and the prime definition of a silver fox.

His gray hair is well-groomed, along with a stylish beard that molds finely around his cheeks that appear to have light cosmetic work. The woman ogles his expensive-looking watch, a Rolex or Parnis Submariner perhaps. The incoming light reflects off of it and shines better than my cleaned window. The only consistent piece of jewelry I see on the woman is a wedding ring, an accessory I rarely see on her dates.

After all my weeks of washing these windows, I still haven't learned her name. Occasionally on my weeks off, I come in and order a coffee on the other side of the diner. I manage to get a sprinkle of information out of the waitress from time to time about my regulars, but this woman's name is always left out. It makes me think that even the waitress might not know.

A few tables down from this mystery woman is Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, who gaze down at each of their daily papers. Mr. Stevens occupies himself with the crosswords while Mrs. Stevens works out the sudoku puzzles. They sip on their coffees and share a dessert. This week it's a warmed cinnamon roll. Later, when they've finished, a two-dollar bill will rest under the plate. Mr. Stevens adjusts his glasses, and a perplexed look comes across his face. A sign that Mrs. Stevens and I know means one of the hints has left him stumped. Mrs. Stevens offers her help and is declined for a little under a minute before Mr. Stevens circles the troublesome hint and slides his newspaper towards her. His pencil has circled hint number 4, which I would later look up after my shift and learn was an eight-letter word beginning with the letter "D," which means having loyalty for a person, activity, or cause.

In the booth next to the Stevens is Mrs. Greeves. As usual, she's the only one that notices my presence and waves her wrinkled hand eagerly as I arrive at her

window. I return her gesture with a smile and allow her to return to her daily meal. As always, it's a steaming bowl of oatmeal with a drizzle of honey on top, an English muffin with raspberry jam, and a small glass of milk. She hunches over the table and eats slowly, glancing out into the restaurant and waving to anyone that catches her eye through her large spectacles chained around her neck. The young boy, perhaps eight years old, arrives at her table and asks her a question. With a smile and a nod of her head, she reaches into the pocket of her red shawl and pulls out a wrapped candy. He smiles, exposing his lack of front teeth, and retreats to his mother two seats over.

As the young boy walks back to his table, his mother takes hold of his wrist and commands him to take a seat on his side of the booth. She takes the candy out of his hand and lectures him as he crosses his arms and slumps down in his seat. His lips move timidly, a sure sign that he's mumbling something and a sure way to irritate his mother, who rolls her eyes. She turns her attention to the infant at her side, happily sitting in a car seat. The mother dangles a colorful assortment of plastic keys above the infant's head and makes exaggerated faces to earn a gummy smile. Her son takes the opportunity to swipe back his candy, unwrap it, revealing its red and white stripes, and pops it in his mouth. Of all my regulars, this family is the most recent addition.

\*

It's my next visit, and unsurprisingly, the mystery woman has another date. This one is younger than her, wearing a muscle T and a snapback hat. His hairless face and fleshy cheeks make him look as though he might still be in high school, but a student ID and miniature college mascot on his keychain assured me otherwise. The woman's hair is tied up in a high ponytail, and her shirt's V is noticeably low. The young man leans

forward on the table, and she moves closer. She places her elbow on the table and leans her chest against it, emphasizing the line of her cleavage. Her chin rests in her hand, still adorned with a ring.

Mr. and Mrs. Stevens look contently at their newspapers. A pair of chocolate eclairs rests between them to accompany their mugs of steaming hot chocolate. Mrs. Stevens places her pencil down and looks triumphantly to her husband. Mr. Stevens looks down at her newspaper moving his head forward and squinting his eyes. With the tip of his pencil, he points out two threes within the second most left column. With a shake of her head, she flips her pencil around and commences vigorously erasing the puzzle. Mr. Stevens takes her free hand in his and gently grazes his thumb over her knuckles. Her gaze is stolen for a moment as she looks up at him, then she returns to her newspaper, which she calmly continues to erase before beginning again.

When Mrs. Greeves sees me approaching, she lifts her hand with a shaky arm and waves at me. Like clockwork, I return her greeting with an earnest smile. I'm sure I will never tire of seeing her enlightened face. She slowly lowers her hand and returns to her meal, which sits abnormally untouched as she looks out to all the restaurant patrons. The young boy comes to her booth and pleasantly interrupts her sightseeing. Her hand reaches into her pocket, but as she retracts it, nothing is pulled out. Holding up her index finger, she asks the boy to wait a moment while she searches her other pocket. Her other hand pulls out three wrapped candies from the other side of her jacket, which she gives to the boy. A large grin appears on his face before he races to his table.



The boy eagerly climbs into the booth and takes a seat on top of his feet before laying out his treasure to his father seated across from him. Met with a smile and mighty high five, his father unwraps one and throws it up into the air, extends his tongue, tilts to the side, and catches the candy in his mouth. His son attempts to emulate his father, but the candy hits the side of his cheek, and it rolls onto his seat. A humorous sight for all of us involved. A coloring book sitting between the two is littered with games of tick-tack-toe. Many of which are cats. They took turns placing their Xs and Os with an orange and purple crayon but are interrupted by the wails and tears of the agitated infant beside the father.

\*

Another two weeks have gone by. This will be my last visit to the diner for some time. I've just been assigned a new region of town that no longer includes washing the windows of Milly's Diner. The mystery woman is sitting on the wrong side of the booth today. Her back is to the wall, and she looks off at the passing waitresses with a scowl on her face. Across from her is a man similar to her age. He's speaking to her, gesturing with his hands in big motions but he's met with a lack of eye contact and occasional eye rolls. When one of his gesturing hands moves towards the window, I can see the ring on his hand, matching the mystery woman's.

The Stevens are sharing a newspaper this week. Both of them are taking turns scratching their heads or tapping the table with the eraser side of their pencils. They comb through a sea of letters searching for the few remaining hidden words. Their waitress arrives with two slices of pie, one meringue, and the other apple. She sets their plates down slowly as she looks at their paper, then points out a backward word right on

the top, “blessing.” Mr. and Mrs. Stevens raise their hands and thank the young lady before she walks away. Mr. Stevens pulls out a two-dollar bill for her tip as Mrs. Stevens circles the word.

I prepare to give my last smile to Mrs. Greeves, knowing that she will be the only person to notice my absence, but her booth is empty. No bowl of oatmeal is resting on the table, and no personal effects are in the seat. My look of shock matches the young boy’s who arrives at the booth looking around before slowly returning to his parents.

Standing at the end of the table, he spoke to his mother and father, who respond with confused looks to one another and shrugs. He walks out of the way of the waitress and takes a seat next to his father. The waitress pulls out a writing pad preparing to take the family’s order. Rather than look at her menu, the mother turns away from the infant at her side and points in the direction of Mrs. Greeves’s booth while speaking to the waitress. The waitress’s face turns melancholy as she speaks to them, and the father puts an arm around the boy to pat him on the shoulder. Never in my life have I wished more not to be peering through a window.



## **Guardian by Raven A. Wolf**

babe. when the sun no longer rises, you'll be left alone  
with feeble cries which will never be heard  
with a yearning for a palatable breast  
with fragile skin never experiencing touch

babe. when the sun no longer rises, you'll be left in fear  
of the tendent beasts residing beneath your bed  
of peers readying an ambush in the yard  
of benevolent men with odious intent

babe. when the sun no longer rises, you'll be left alone  
to experience the change of your anatomy  
to feel emotions expel themselves from within  
to endure the gruesome truths of the world

babe. when the sun no longer rises, you'll be left in fear  
that your livelihood will crumble beneath you  
that abusive hands could induce cardiac fracture  
that displacing gravel is the only reason you have weight

babe. when the sun no longer rises, you'll be left alone  
so marital agreements are merely contracts  
so progeny wastes boundless potential  
so your name is known only on a headstone  
but until that inconceivable night, I will be your guardian





Winston by Brittany Benjamin



## **The Dead Dog That Follows Us by Julia Kramer**

Evelyn felt eyes on her— uncomfortable eyes, eyes embarrassed to look but unable to avoid her. She scanned over the weight room. Had she done something ridiculous? Had she forgotten to rerack her weights? Put away her clips? She hoped she hadn't had poor form because she had been working hard, boiling up sweat that congregated in the small of her back, on her top lip, in between her legs...in between her legs. She looked down, seeing the muddied scarlet stain on her white gym shorts— something that was supposed to be a rose petal but was an angry, bleeding begonia. The heat in her cheeks sparked on her sun-tanned skin, a red flare that was her body's distress signal. Evelyn made eye contact with a dark-haired girl whose eyebrows were scrunched and eyes deeply swirling with sympathy. The girl reached out but Evelyn raced past her, exiting wildly through the doors, past the other high schoolers gawking at her. Her chest was laced tight, each new set of eyes in the hallway lacing the corset tighter.

She darted into the nearest bathroom, avoiding a girl who was by the sink and ducking into a stall. With the heels of her palms into her eyes, pushing back tears she paced the stall. Slow footsteps approached the stall door and there was a quiet tapping. Evelyn glanced up, seeing a set of pastel pink nails holding a purple-wrapped tampon over the door of the stall. She reached up and took the tampon delicately as if it were something she could break. When she opened her mouth to thank the girl, her voice shrank away, seemingly scared of the possibility of being heard. The girl outside the stall quietly and discreetly exited.

Evelyn had been preparing for her period since she was twelve, waiting anxiously for it to happen. As the years ticked by, she grew tired of being on the lookout and failed to be prepared. Now, at fifteen years old, she looked at the tampon and felt like a child. As she tore open the wrapper and slid out the tampon, her hands were trembling, unsure of what to do. She debated whether to take this new, stomach-turning step into womanhood. She grasped her forehead and decided she didn't have a better option. While on the icy white seat she eased her hand in between her legs but heard a crushing splash. Slipped right from her shaking hand, floating in toilet water, the tampon pitied her. The sob choked her— it bounced off the stall walls as she cradled her head in her hands until she saw furry paws poking under the side of the stall door.

She drew in a shaky breath, reaching down to touch her fingertips to the paws. A large black nose, like a coiled licorice whip scooted in between the paws. A shallow whine slid from under the nose and across the white tile. Her phone buzzed in her sweatshirt pocket and she answered the call quickly.

“Hey Dad,” she said.

“Hey, are you done with practice? I'm in the back lot,” his low, gruff voice said.

“I...I got my period and I bled through my shorts,” she said.

“Oh...okay. That's okay. I got a pair of black sweats you can wear.”

“I'm in the bathroom that's outside the weight room,” she said, sniffing like a small child.

“It's alright Evie. I'll be right in, okay?”

“Okay, bye,” she said quietly, hanging up quickly.

When her phone buzzed again, with a text saying that he was outside the door, she cautiously opened the stall door and peeked around, ensuring nobody had snuck in. She rounded the corner, seeing the proud Shepherd sitting in front of the sink. His chest was a golden plate of armor, one she would envy if she could envy him. The dark fur on his snout brought out the caramel shade of his eyes. His ears were pointed stiffly up as if they were radars ready to listen. When she reached out towards him, his ears flattened shyly so she could run her hand over his head. He licked her palm with a cold wet tongue before she moved to open the door slightly.

“Hey sweetheart.”

Miles looked too young to be her dad, his face void of wrinkles or sunspots. His slightly overgrown beard had no silver strands, only vibrant, strawberry blond hair that matched Evelyn’s. He was in shape from fairly constant exercise and working demanding construction jobs, which encouraged his youth. He had her when he was eighteen, only a few months out of high school.

“Hi Dad,” she said, as he handed her a Walmart bag with the sweatpants tucked inside.

“I’ll wait right here okay?”

She nodded and returned to the bathroom stall, where she changed into the sweatpants that bunched at her ankles and had to be tied tightly to cling to her narrow waist. As she pushed her bloodied white shorts into the Walmart bag, her cheeks burned, despite there being nobody to see her moments of embarrassment. She tied the bag tightly and went to the sink to wash her hands. The Shepherd sat next to her, his tall frame allowing his head to extend above the sink, watching as the blood from her

hands swirled down the sink. In the mirror, her eyes were hidden behind puffed and reddened lids. Her face was spattered with blotches of deep red, her sloped nose slightly pink. She sighed— it trembled its way past her lips. Before stepping out of the bathroom, she offered the Shepherd an affectionate poke to the nose.

\*\*\*

After a silent but not uncomfortable ride home, Evelyn found herself in the bathroom yet again, staring at the tampon in her hand. Tears were drizzling down onto the floor, as they had been since they arrived home as she recounted the horrors of the day.

“Evie, it’s okay. Nobody will even remember this in a little bit,” Miles called from outside the bathroom door.

She drove her hands through her hair, gripping the sides of her head hard as her chest burned. Something slid across the floor from under the door. She picked up the business card size paper and looked at the directions taken from the inside of a tampon box.

“Dad...did you get this laminated?” She asked, as she turned over the shining card in her hands.

“Uhh, yeah.”

She laughed, and the sound fought meekly through her tears. With a smile, feeling more confident about taking the daunting step into womanhood. She followed the directions carefully, feeling only slightly nauseous about the process and scrubbed her hands clean before opening the door to see Miles sitting on the floor, legs stretched out in front of himself.

"I did it," Evelyn said.

"Nice," Miles said, holding out his fist.

She smiled and tapped her knuckles against his.

"See, we can do this," he said.

"Yeah, I think more girls should get a celebratory fist bump after putting in a tampon," she grinned.

"It felt right, didn't it?" he laughed.

She dabbed her eyes with her sleeves, embracing the momentary loosening of the laces in her chest.

\*\*\*

Nearly two full hours before her alarm was set to ring, Evelyn woke up and couldn't ignore the growing sickness in her stomach and clenching in her chest. The more she imagined going back to school, seeing the kids from the weight room at practice, the more her stomach churned. She moved from her bedroom to the bathroom when her mouth filled with saliva, anticipating the vomit to come. She sat in front of the toilet, pulling her hair back quickly, as she was no stranger to getting sick. As the nausea built, she felt heat rush to her face and she wretched over the toilet. She coughed and spit and vomited and repeated until she was weak, crumbling back against the wall. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes until claws clicked across the floor. The Shepherd looked down at her, eyebrows raised slightly. He squeezed himself between her and the corner of the wall, fitting his body into her open arms. She wrapped him up tight, his head tucking under her chin. She held his warm snout, feeling the warmth of his breath that escaped between the folds of his jowls. Her thumb

brushed along the top of his head, where he had a tiny streak of silver hairs hidden amongst the gold.

The knock at the door sickened her, but she stood up and opened it anyway. Miles frowned beneath his beard, seeing Evelyn's disheveled hair and watering eyes.

"Is it the cramps?" he asked.

She shook her head, knowing she wouldn't need to explain any further.

"You don't have to go to school today, okay? We'll both take a sick day," he said.

"Things haven't gotten better," she said.

"What has Dr. Hayes been saying?" he inquired.

"The same shit...that it's separation anxiety, that I didn't fully register when Mom left because I had him to help me. And now that he's gone, all the trauma and anxiety is coming back."

"But Mom is back."

Evelyn smiled, but it was bitter.

"That doesn't help anything, does it?"

\*\*\*

Evelyn was six when she had chased her mother's suitcase down the gravel driveway, grabbing hold of the handle and pleading for her to reconsider leaving. Bear, their massive German Shepherd strained against his cable, claws dug into the dirt. He barked and whined, trying to wriggle free of his collar.

"Lea, Jesus. Think about this for a second," Miles called from the porch.

It turned out that she had spent years thinking about. She had saved money, got a passport, found a man with money— everything somebody needed to forget a family.



She tugged her suitcase away, causing Evelyn to fall. The gravel scratched her knee and cut a slit in her bottom lip.

“Oh honey, I’m sorry,” Lea gasped, reaching down towards her.

Miles was there first, scooping up Evelyn, holding her head, shielding her.

“Get the hell away from my kid,” he said, as Bear’s barks escalated to snarls.

His ears were pinned, lips raised.

“Wait, let me say goodbye to her,” Lea said, but Miles had turned his back, advancing up the driveway.

“Miles! Let me say goodbye to her,” she repeated.

He sat on the edge of the porch, setting Evelyn down who looked back to Lea.

“Come here honey. Mama has to say goodbye,” she said, holding out her arms.

Evelyn stood looking at her mother as Bear sniffed her knee and then her lip. He sat firmly next to her.

“Come say goodbye,” Lea said, voice shaking.

Evelyn turned and buried her face in Bear’s thick fur. She gripped the fur in her small hands as she heard Lea walk down the driveway. She breathed in his earthy scent as she heard the suitcase being thrown in the truck. She clung to the golden plate of armor as the truck drove away.

## **To the Man Whose Child I Born by Angerise Carter**

She was conceived in love,  
which later turned to doubt.  
She was born not of your name,  
but requested not of it.  
She was beauty, not riches.  
She was pride, due of respect.  
She was little and helpless,  
demanding all that I had to give.  
She was all mine,  
born of no man or of his name.  
Days and nights have come and gone.  
One and two years old are distance now.  
Love that turned to doubt so long ago,  
has left me blessed with a beautiful little girl.

## **Authority, State, and Dystopia by Samuel King**

With ten thousand eyes,  
it observes our movements  
With one million ears  
it listens to our speech  
It disciplines;  
It punishes.

It once, long ago, declared its holiness;  
Today, it pretends to ask our consent.

An ungainly and sluggish war-machine  
rolls across a wasteland of its own creation;  
its amassed bureaucracies grind and cough.

What tragedy struck so long ago,  
where our child, man's monster,  
Crowned itself king



*Untitled* by Quintessa Taft

## **Watch Dog by Kelia Nsoh**

The sun was slowly setting. It was mid-June, which meant the rainy season was coming to an end in West Africa. The smell of smoke lingered in the air, and a few stray clouds blotted the darkening sky. With every passing hour, the smokey scent lessened. The aromatic fragrance of the palm trees was then permitted to break through. The earth was still slightly damp, recovering from the early morning rain, and the compound appeared peaceful. Every now and then, a chicken would strut past mindlessly, ignoring the steam coming from our kitchen next door where its kin was probably being prepared.

In our little compound, three main buildings housed the village residents. A few palm trees were scattered around the area, towering over the dust-ridden buildings—lanky, bristly, and unmistakable. The buildings had a rectangular shape with flat roofs and three doorways at the front of each one. In the center of those dusty blue buildings there sat a large mound of sand approximately twenty feet high. All three buildings faced the sand mound, and children from the compound often snuck out to play barefoot in it. Once, my aunt caught ten of us with our pant legs rolled up wading through the sand. Immediately after spotting us, she began ranting and lectured my brother and me for almost an hour afterward. We didn't even *glance* at the sand mound for weeks after that.

During the rainy season, everything outdoors appeared gloomy, but tonight the atmosphere was different. Many visitors came late in the evening to see my family, who had just arrived in West Africa. The room was quickly flooded with noise as people



conversed loudly amongst themselves. Every now and then, my mother would gesture for my brother and me to come over and greet another relative just coming in. As more bodies occupied the living room space, our house seemed to grow more and more humid. Sweat dripped down the sides of my face, and the thin cotton sweatshirt I had on clung to my body like Velcro on a toddler's shoe. Soon everyone was shedding the layers they had put on earlier to combat the chilly air outside.

Later that evening, I heard a loud rapping on our front door and thought to myself, *more people*. I got up from my spot on the couch, and within ten seconds another body filled the space. I made my way over to the door and removed the rusty lock to let the stranger in. As the door wedged open, I was surprised to see a familiar face. As soon as he laid eyes on me, his face lit up. My uncle smiled and embraced me with a tight hug. He had eyes that often seemed to be all-knowing and a smile that played at the corners of his lips. He was a relatively tall man with a normal build and a deep brown complexion. My uncle was dressed rather casually—loose-fitting dark wash jeans, new black tennis shoes, and a dark baggy hoodie. Underneath the hoodie, he had on a pitiful serpent green t-shirt. After releasing me, he caught my brother staring in his direction and walked over to where he sat on the couch. He was greeted with a hard smack on the back which caused him to wince a little and slightly jolt forward. He laughed it off and shook my uncle's hand.

My brother and I shared the same dark bronze complexion that glistened underneath the sun. He was somewhat on the lean side and rather tall for a ten-year-old boy. His head was shaved nearly clean, and he was scarcely seen without his long baggy jean shorts. His dark brown eyes often hinted at the mischief he plotted within.

Today was no different. After exchanging greetings with my uncle, he disappeared among the many warm bodies.

When he had finished circling the room and greeting the other guests, my uncle took hold of my hand. After spotting my brother, he motioned for him to follow us with his free hand. He then let go of my hand and opened the door, which I did not bother locking after he came in.

“Where are we going?” I whispered into his ear.

“We’re going out,” he said.

“Where to?” my brother and I asked in unison.

“You’ll see,” said my uncle with a mischievous grin. “It’ll be a surprise.”

The cool air that touched my roasting skin as I stepped outside was refreshing, and with each deep breath, I felt at home. The scent of the Cameroonian palm trees lingered in the air and brought clarity to my mind. The darkness of the night sky engulfed me, wrapping around me like a blanket. The air had its usual smoky scent from the firewood previously burned that day, and the moon shone brightly, watching over the compound. It was the only source of light. However, the light from the moon only lit the sky, leaving the ground beneath barely visible at night. My uncle found my hand in the dark, and my small hand disappeared in his as I took his right hand. The darkness taunted me with its secrets and strange sounds. I leaned into my uncle’s body and squeezed his hand tighter. I peered over my uncle and saw my older brother grudgingly accept his other outstretched hand. By then, the door behind us had fallen shut, and my uncle urged us to begin walking. Before my feet could leave the orangey surface

beneath me, I heard it. My body tensed; the rhythmic pulsing of my heart accelerated... I couldn't breathe.

There was a low growl that echoed through the night. I pursed my lips and scanned the area, searching for the source. The sound came again, still low but audible. It was coming from the house to the left of us. There was a moment of silence; then the source of the noise was revealed. A large dog appeared in front of us and took in the scenery, ready to pounce at any sudden movement. It felt the fear I was nursing as well as my anxiety. It felt the small hope I had buried deep down fade away. Realizing this, I wanted to curl up into a ball on the ground and rock my body until those thoughts seemed far away.

The dog had a thick white coat of fur that looked like it hadn't been brushed in ages. Its eyes were dark and piercing at first glance. The dog's paws were stained an orangey-yellow and its two front paws probed the ground as if searching for hidden treasure. The canine had pointed ears that stood up and a black nose that jutted out, enhancing its wild nature. Saliva dripped slowly from its narrow mouth as it waited, patiently anticipating our next move. Each bark was more aggressive than the last. When it wasn't barking, the dog's heavy panting interrupted the night's silence. I eyed the dog, and it returned my pitiful expression with a frightful snarl and shined its teeth in my direction. At that moment, the dog became a bear searching for its next prey. I stood firmly with my feet planted on the ground, gaping at the sight before me, wondering if my fear could be detected, calculating how I could possibly outrun the dog. My muscles were rigid, and my breathing felt labored. My fingernails dug into my palms so deeply



that they surely left traces. As if hearing my thoughts and feeling my apprehension, my uncle spoke calmly.

“Don’t run; he’ll follow you,” he said.

I sensed that deep down he was compressing his own fear. I listened closely to his words. My brother, on the other hand, did not. Within seconds he was sprinting almost blindly through the darkness and ignoring my uncle’s pleas for him to stop.

“Stop!” he shouted. “He knows you’re afraid.”

I could faintly see his slender figure in the dark as he plunged headfirst into the mound of sand just ten feet in front of us. He now had the dog’s full attention. Quickly, he wedged his head out of the sand and ran frantically, searching for the path that led out of the compound. With the dog now distracted, we followed in pursuit. My uncle pulled on my arm, awakening me from my current state of disbelief. When we made it to the path, I could see my brother a few yards ahead of us. His feet pounded the ground rapidly as he ran. I looked back and, to my surprise, the dog was no longer chasing him. It was chasing *us*. I was not sure when the dog had circled back. *Maybe it had hidden in a nearby bush waiting for us to appear*, I thought. Thankfully, we were only a few steps away from reaching the end of the curved path. As soon as we exited the compound, the dog stopped chasing us. I could now barely make out my brother in the dark as he disappeared into the night. He continued running and did not bother to turn around to see if the dog was still pursuing him.

That was no ordinary dog that chased us. It was a guard dog, the type of dog that guarded a compound and kept all unknown visitors out and everyone else in. I felt lucky to have escaped and knew that if it were not for my brother’s recklessness maybe I

would not have. After we were far from the compound, I stopped running and discovered that somewhere amid all the chaos I had released my uncle's hand. He was a few steps behind me, so I gradually slowed my pace until he caught up. For a minute, we walked side by side, breathing hard after what seemed like a marathon. He rested his right hand on my shoulder, and both of us paused until our heart rates slowed enough so that we could finally speak.

"Are you good?" he asked, concerned.

"Yeah," I replied, looking up at him.

As soon as our eyes met, his concerned expression began to fade. Light from a nearby house lit up his face. We were the only ones on the road at that time of the night. The sides of his lips crinkled upward, and soon he was smiling widely at me. His smile was contagious, and I found myself returning it, except I could not quite see clearly anymore because there was water pooling down my cheeks. My uncle busted out laughing, and then so was I. The cool air comforted us the rest of the way, and soon we also disappeared into the night. By then, I had forgotten all about the surprise.

## **The Bridge by Jasmine Knapper**

My steps creaked on the staircase of my apartment building as I held my grocery bags close to my chest. When I came to my door, I tried to find my house key in my mess of a purse with one hand. The old steps below me made more noise underneath my weight, eerily, as if it were trying to tell me a secret.

When I successfully opened the door, I saw my mother, Doria, calmly look back at me on my couch. I shrieked in surprise. She was the last person I thought I would see. We had a lot in common physically: she had the same dark, curly hair as mine but with gray razor-sharp streaks cutting through. She also had the same brown doe-like eyes that initially would trick most people into thinking she was harmless, but I knew better.

What was she doing here? I couldn't remember when I last saw Doria, but the moment she opened her mouth, old memories came rushing back in. "I would have thought you'd already be home, but I guess I was wrong." She was on my small couch, her purse clutched tightly to her stomach as if she were afraid someone would kick in the door and snatch it from her.

When I didn't say anything back, she looked me up and down in that familiar way.

"You're too skinny. Are you eating properly?" she took a deep breath in and out in exhaustion. "You always ate more junk than actual food."

I just looked at her, my eyes intent on her. I had hoped that after moving out years ago, my mother would have changed. That she would have softened a little, but it

was as if my very presence turned her mood from good to bad. I had imagined countless times over the years of her silently reflecting on all the times she had put me down, endlessly wishing she could have more time to say she was sorry.

“What are you doing here?” I asked icily, but it turned out it was like I had never left. Instead of just walking out the door, I closed it behind me and put the grocery bags on the table in my tiny kitchen. It wasn’t much, but it was mine. Despite its broken-down appearance, I loved my apartment down to the old-fashioned silver stove to the cold wooden floors. It was my home, and it was mine.

The muscles in my jaw clenched in defense when I noticed Doria looking around my place. Her perfect, freshly made-up face wrinkled. Already she was finding every possible way to bash it. For a moment, I could see what she was seeing for the first time. The ceiling was a little bit leaky from a recent storm. The walls were too thin, as an argument played out all around us from next door. I hadn’t gotten to cleaning up just yet. A few articles of clothing lay on the floor. The dishes in the sink were piled high. In my defense, I had been gone nearly all day doing errands. No one else was going to do it. It was just me.

Ignoring my question, she said, “You need to clean up. This place is a pigsty.” My mother said with a click of her tongue.

Openly annoyed, I started to put away the groceries, ignoring her. Maybe if I acted like she wasn’t here she would go away. I knew I was a grown woman acting childish, but I didn’t care. Doria continued on her rant about how I obviously can’t take care of myself when she finally snapped.

"Lena, look at me when I'm talking to you!" I jumped, nearly dropping a can of black beans. How could someone so small be so commanding? I looked at her with effort.

"We need to talk," she said.

I shook my head, my dangly silver earrings hitting my chin. "No, we don't. I'm sorry, but I'm busy, as you can see." Faking absentmindedness I said, "I thought you would have thrown away my spare key after what happened with daddy."

"Of course I didn't throw it away," she appeared dejected. It was like the scales fell from my eyes as I really saw her as she was now: a lonely widow.

When I first moved into my apartment, I had given my spare key to daddy, who had helped me move out three years ago. He was the only one allowed to visit, and then he passed away last year. Why hadn't she just thrown my spare key away?

I leaned up against my table as I just watched my mother's face. Doria leaned forward on her spot on the couch. She took in another deep breath, and I waited. "The reason I came here today was because I wanted to see you. I wanted to make sure you were okay. I know that your father was always your favorite, and now..." she trailed off. A beat later, she pulled herself back together. "Now it's just us."

I softened at that. Maybe it's time to let this go. This has been going on long enough. If I learned anything, it was that time was a precious thing. Even though we had never seen eye to eye on anything, that didn't mean that we had to be enemies.

"But now that I'm here, I see that you're clearly not fit enough to be on your own. Besides, a woman shouldn't be living out here alone. Look at this place; it's dangerous."

She waved her arm back and forth to emphasize her point. As if on cue, noise from an ambulance ricocheted off the thin walls as it passed my apartment.

“I suggest tonight you’ll pack your things and we’ll head out bright and early tomorrow morning. Now I didn’t disturb your old room or anything in it, so it is exactly as it was when you left.”

My eyes went wide in horror. I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but then she said something very familiar that stopped me cold.

“Lena, please, I’m only looking out for you. Don’t make me the bad guy.”

*“Lena, don’t make me the bad guy,” Mom sounded exasperated. I was on my bed, and she was right next to me.*

*“Lena, look at me when I’m talking to you.”*

*I bit my lip, but looked up at her dismayed face. I was always hearing how pretty mom was, from daddy, from friends at school, from passersby, and I saw it too. She had these big, round brown eyes, full lipstick red lips, beautiful brown skin, and a dark brown bob that framed her face nicely. Today it was perfectly iron-pressed straight. She always made sure her appearance was perfect, even down to her sophisticated clothes.*

*“You do know that the chances of becoming a famous writer like JK Rowling or Shakespeare are incredibly slim, right?”*

*Shudders went through me as I held in my argument because I knew, **I knew**, that she would twist it to fit her case. I nodded my head when she expected me to nod and stayed quiet when she continued to talk; like a good girl. I twirled a strand of my hair a few times.*

*“I would rather you study to become a lawyer or a doctor, something practical sweetheart. The life of a writer is just not going to cut it, do you understand?” She put a hand to my cheek, her eyes resting on mine, expecting me to agree. I shook slightly, so slightly that anyone watching from the outside would barely see. Mom pretended not to see that I was near tears.*

*“Do you understand?” She asked again, more firm.*

*I nodded my head, closing my eyes, I gulped back the tears. I could have said that my English teacher thought I had real promise today, or that she had even gone to the trouble of hand writing a letter addressed to my parents about how talented I was, and about these different writing workshops I could attend over the summer, just a thought. But she had to ruin this, too.*

*Under the weight of my mother’s determined hard stare, I helplessly complied.*

When the déjà vu sensation ended and I was back in the present with her, I stood up straighter than I’ve ever stood.

“No!”

Her relaxed smile left her face as her eyes narrowed.

“No?” She eyed me questioningly. She tipped her head slightly to the side like she misheard me.

I shook my head again, putting my hand firmly on my chest, “This is *my* home. I am staying here.”

Doria suddenly sat up. Her eyes were on fire. I could physically see her take in a deep breath like a dragon before she exploded, “Lena Diane James, you have no right to talk to your Mother this way!”

I similarly puffed myself up, “There was a reason Daddy was my favorite! I mean, look at you; you’ve never supported me! At least he had the compassion to tell me to follow my dreams. All you did was stomp and spit on them!” I cried out all of the hurt and pain in one wild swing of my arms. I wanted to stop, but something in me couldn’t stop the flow of anger. “I told Daddy to hide that key. How did you get it?” My eyes burned a hole into Doria until she finally looked down. In that moment, I needed her to hurt as much as *she* had hurt *me*.

Doria closed her eyes, bringing her hand to her face as she pinched the bridge of her nose. She looked like she was in pain. When she opened them, she just looked tired.

“He gave it to me, if you must know so badly. He hated to see us fight.” Doria let out a pathetic sigh. A sigh full of earnest remorse. “I made a promise to him before he died.”

When I didn’t say anything, too shocked into silence, she just let out another sigh.

Her head low, Doria took her purse off of the couch and weaved over the mess on the floor. She stopped right beside me, and I froze. My chin lifted up involuntarily as I smelled her lavender perfume. The smell from childhood that I had begrudgingly missed.

“You’re right. You and him were both so much alike, and I was brought up a lot differently. I know I did things that I can never take back, and I am truly sorry. I know you hate me, but don’t expect me to stop coming by.” She took my hand in hers, and I could feel something cold and small touch my skin. The clack of her high-heels sounded



off until the door closed quietly behind her. I opened my palm and saw the key to my apartment in my hand.

I could finally let out my held breath. That was the moment I realized that despite all odds, my father was the bridge to my mother and me. Despite all odds, he kept us together.

## **In the Family Way by Raven A. Wolf**

As she finished up the last of the breadsticks, Kate moved the basket to the edge of the table and turned her attention to her fingernails. Henry, her husband, reached over and gently took hold of her hand and rested it atop her knee to prevent it from further bouncing.

"It'll be fine," he said warmly.

"It might be too soon. We could always reschedule later," she anxiously suggested.

"We can't reschedule now. They'll be here any minute. Let's just try and have some fun. OK?" he said with a smile, to which she hesitantly nodded in agreement.

"Look, there's your mother," he said, directing Kate's attention to the entrance. "Nancy, over here," he called to her raising his hand to get her attention and inadvertently a few glances from other customers.

Kate's mother strutted over to the table. "Looks like I got here first. They can't complain this time," she bragged smugly.

"Hi, Mom," Kate said shyly as her mother sat down.

"We're glad you could make it, Nancy," Henry stated. "It's going to be fun having a bit of ah... family evening," he smiled.

Nancy put on a lightly forced smile. "That's a sweet thought, Henry," she said, resting her hand on his forearm, "but we know that's not going to happen," she said patronizingly.

Henry brushed it off with a chuckle but was interrupted by Kate nervously grabbing his arm, looking off towards the entrance.

“Mom, Dad,” Henry called out and stood up at the sight of his parents, Marge, and Jim, who were walking towards the table, waving their hands.

“There’s my baby boy,” his mother cooed before embracing him in a hug. A few humored smiles crept onto nearby customers' faces. “Hello, Dear,” she said, walking up to Kate before kissing her lightly on the cheek. She then sucked in her enlarged gut and apologized to the family beside them as she scooped past to reach her seat. Following his wife, Jim patted Henry on the back and squeezed Kate’s shoulders as he passed to sit down. Kate timidly greeted each as they approached, and Henry took his seat alongside her.

“And Nancy too. Nice to see you on time,” Marge greeted passive-aggressively behind a cheery smile. “Did your manager at the gas station let you off early tonight?”

“No. I work at the diner now, in the mornings,” Nancy said triumphantly.

“Ha. I can’t imagine you waking up before 10 a.m.,” Jim said with a laugh.

“Dad,” Henry said to his father, imploring him to be kind.

“Relax, Henry. It’s just a joke,” Jim assured his son.

The waitress arrived at the table with a notepad and pen in hand. “I see the whole family’s here now. Can I get you guys something to drink?” she asked.

“I’d like to order, actually,” Nancy quickly remarked.

“Well, Nancy, we were planning on having dessert first. A little treat for this evening,” Henry explained.

“Hmm. That must be something you picked up from your *mother*,” Nancy inferred side-eyeing Marge’s frame.

“Excuse me?” Marge said, offended.

“You watch your mouth!” Jim demanded.

The waitress gave a consoling look toward Kate. “I’ll come back,” she said softly while Nancy spoke over her.

“My mouth!” Nancy erupted. “I’m surprised you haven’t gotten a complaint yet from your neighbors about this yipping dog of yours,” Nancy said, slighting Marge.

“Mom, please,” Kate pleaded, seeing all the heads turning in their direction and hearing the sounds of moving silverware cease.

“You always do this, Nancy. Ruin things for everyone else in hopes no one will notice what an obvious failure you are.” Marge jabbed.

“Failure? What, because I can’t sit on my fat ass all day? I’ve worked hard for what I have. While you two live off a company, *his father* built,” Nancy said, pointing the finger at Jim.

“Guys!” Henry interjected, trying to impede on the verbal altercation taking place.

“I’m pregnant!” Kate blurted out. She was met with a halt of discourse and looks of surprise and confusion.

“Kate, please. I know you wished your mother wouldn’t act out in this way, but this isn’t an appropriate way to go about it. Henry’s already told us of your inability to have children, Dear,” Marge scolded, disappointed.

“We’ve been seeing a doctor for almost a year now to impregnate me artificially. One took three months ago... So yeah, I am pregnant. Henry planned out this whole evening with a special reveal cake and everything in hopes that you guys would get along. But I was right. You all can’t be in the same room with one another for more than two minutes without making a scene. I’m not having our kid go through this,” Kate declared, grabbing her purse and leaving the restaurant.

“Kate, wait!” Henry called to her, grabbing his jacket and standing from his seat. He looked at his parents and Nancy with disgust and disappointment before following after Kate. His expression matching the faces of all the other patrons and staff within the restaurant glaring at the three remaining.



*Honey Pot* by Robyn Peterson

## **Short Poem in Four Seasons by Claudia Ionescu**

We first started noticing that my father was shrinking last spring, I think.  
Must've been right around Easter.

At first, we all thought it amusing, his shoes suddenly too big  
and clothes too roomy.

The doctors and specialists shrugged their shoulders,  
It happens, they said, people sometimes do shrink.

By early June, he had lost almost two feet  
and took to sleeping in the dog's bed.

Every morning, right before croissants and coffee,  
dad sat against the entrance door.

Back straight, head up high, toes diminutive,  
he let us measure his height.

Some days, he grew an inch or two.  
Rarely, he even made it to his normal height.

Once or twice, he was the giant I remembered from before.  
I reckon, ten feet tall, at least.

Still, week by week he shrunk,  
As seen dutifully stamped against our brown door.

I think he started playing hide and seek around mid-fall.

Dad always gave himself a good head start.

Mom would find him hidden under the bed, in the laundry basket, under a flowerpot, behind the trash can, in the washing machine, up in the cupboards, in the suitcases stacked in the closet, and even in his old tool kit.

I would find him in the vegetable bed, in an Amazon delivery box, in the mailbox, in the Halloween pumpkins and in between the couch cushions.

Wringing our hands, we would beg, be careful, daddy,  
you are so small now, so fragile and light.

But he would just laugh at our silliness  
and carry on with his game.

Once, last December, we searched for him for days  
by then he was maybe inches high.

We feared he had become so small  
that our eyes might not see him.

Could our soft kisses crush him?  
Might our booming voices deafen him?

I found him, on Christmas Eve,  
Tucked away in his grandfather's old golden compass.

Aethereal, like a wisp of smoke, he was sleeping,  
Head pointing north.



## **Nagging Hag by Raven A. Wolf**

Markus's phone rang again, illuminating the dim room. He glanced away from the TV and read the big white letters lit up on the small screen, "MOM." His eyes rolled, and he let out a frustrated sigh.

"We need to pause it?" his friend Jared asked, lounging in a bean bag chair in front of Markus, his eyes focusing on the TV ahead of them.

"Nah," Markus responded and lazily reached over to his phone, resting on the cushion beside him. He pressed decline before returning to lean against the arm of the couch, turning his attention back to the show.

"Who was it?" Jared asked.

"My mom," Markus answered, annoyed.

"Again?" Jared asked, amused.

"Again."

"That's what? The third time now?"

"Fourth," Markus corrected.

"Damn, man. Your mom can't take a hint," Jared remarked with a small chuckle.

"I know, right!" Markus flared. "It's not even 10:30 yet, and she's already on my ass. I can't catch a break."

“And that’s why we hang out here, so we don’t have to deal with *the nagging hag*,” Jared remarked in a crotchety voice, making both of them laugh.

The sound of heavy footsteps approached Jared’s room before his mother opened the door, her phone held up to her ear.

“Yes, Nicole, he’s here,” she said into the phone, flicking on the light, prompting both boys to groan and look at her annoyed. “Markus, do you know your mother’s trying to call you?” she asked in a concerned tone.

“No. My phone must be on silent,” Markus falsely proclaimed and turned his head back towards the TV. “Can we finish this episode, at least? It’s almost done,” he tried to negotiate.

“No, you need to go home now. Your father was in an accident.”

## **The Young, the Bold, the Beautiful by Phillip Rosier**

We arrived at one single destination.

Time was slower in seconds.

Anticipation was the key of survival,

The tree that holds the reunion together,

But yet we must enjoy the moment.

A Strong wave of fire and warmth

Taking place in the air.

And if you lay on the ground.

Tradition always mattered here.

Everywhere you go is different

But this spot remains in the same spot,

As it did a long time ago.

It started with the grown folks coming over and  
spending as much time as the clock needed.

Then the young ones,

Summer vibes with hissing sounds

That came off like a cricket.

Waves of light bouncing across the sky,

That echoed the sound of danger.

Waves of dark skinned people

Who claimed this area as their home.

We were at the bottom.

The dirty, dirty they call it.

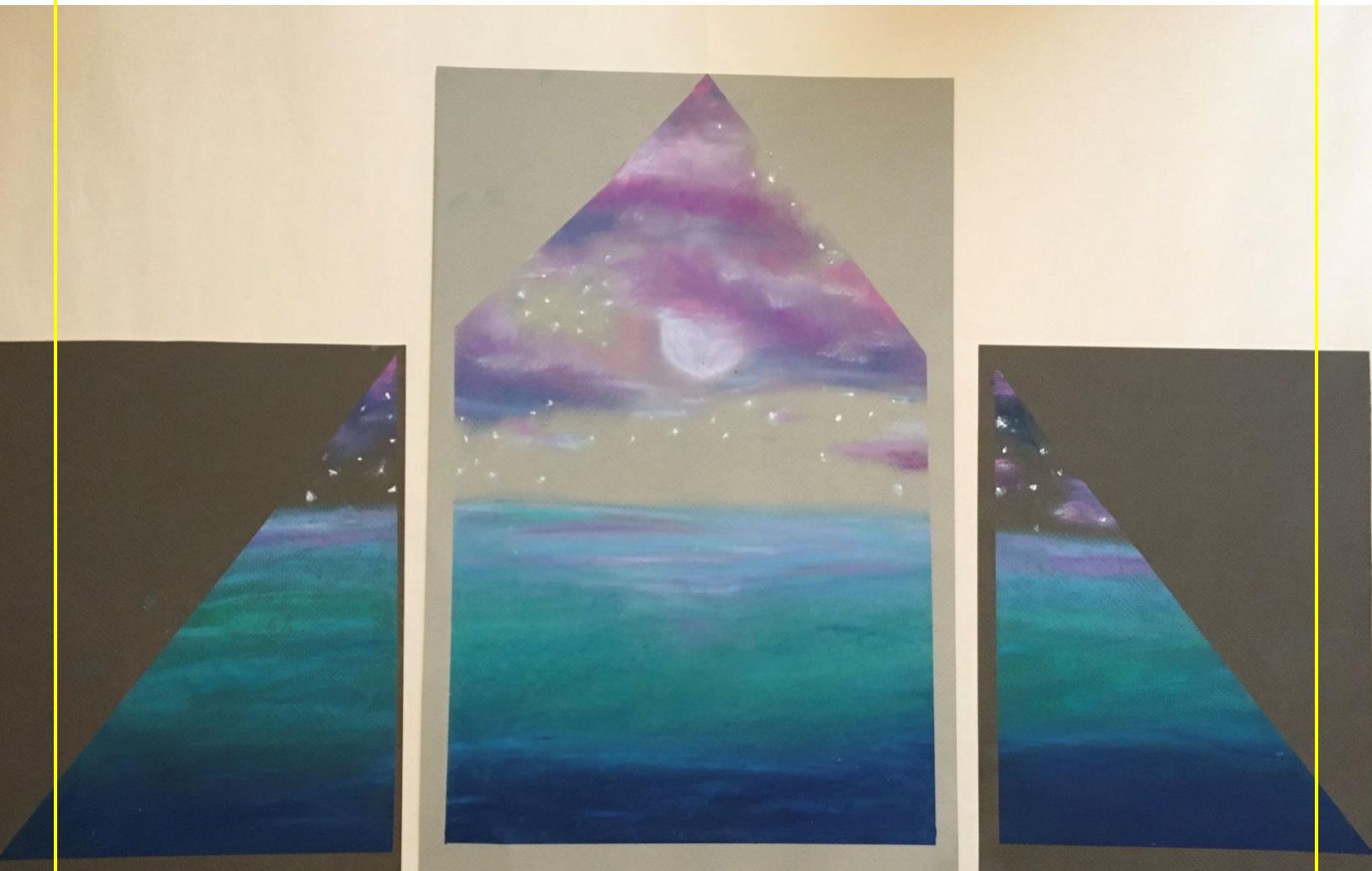
Accents have changed.

Jackets and coats were no longer a thing.

Just a happy home.

With the gifts of loveable food and good weather.

And it felt good every day.  
Every day felt like we were close to the Bahamas.  
We played with other members of the tree.  
No regrets,  
Just learning every lesson that goes  
While being the young, bold, and beautiful.



*Untitled* by Quintessa Taft