



The Rapids Review
2023

The Rapids Review 2023

A Publication of the Anoka Ramsey Community College Creative Writing Club

Rapids Review Mission Statement

Our mission at the Rapids Review is to provide an inclusive environment for writers and artists while publishing work that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. We work hard to make sure writers and artists of all races, religions, sexual orientations, marital statuses, ages, and abilities have a voice in our journal.

A note from the editor

Welcome! Thank you for picking up the 2023 edition of The Rapids Review. It is so exciting to share with you all these wonderful works by such excellent writers and artists from differing backgrounds. This year we had so many submissions, and it made it difficult to decide what to include in this journal. It goes to show how many brilliant and creative minds represent the student body! After some intense deliberation, I think we at *The Rapids Review* have put together something truly special this year. Now, without further ado, we present to you the 2023 edition of *The Rapids Review*.

-Sincerely, Russell Melby (Editor-In-Chief)

Acknowledgments

We had the honor of working with a wonderful team this year. Thank you to everyone who helped to make this journal come to life. A special thank you to Professor Laurel Smith for all her help and support. And of course, thank you to everyone who submitted to the journal! We never would have done it without you.

Head Editor

Russell Melby

Assistant Editor

Claudia Ionescu-Robertson

Section Editors

Claudia Ionescu-Robertson

Rachel Minicucci

Sam Bender

Makya Nevilles-Sorell

Max Saguindang

Dylan Larson

Advisor

Laurel Smith

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EYE BY CLAUDIA IONESCU-ROBERTSON

By Claire Tessum

**Content Warning—Implied death*

Jude carefully lifted each foot, unsticking them from the long, damp grass of early morning. In fact, it was so early, the stars still lit his path to the train station and gave a certain glow to his reddish hair. He gripped the straps of his heavy backpack with his life and overexaggerated a step over the barbed wire that his neighbor had pointed out to him less than a year ago.

His careful steps crescendoed into a sprint as the light of the train station came into view. He had to be there in enough time to buy the ticket. And with it, he'd go places. Places he'd never heard of, but places, nonetheless. He leapt onto the platform with as much energy as most thirteen-year-olds did and gripped his backpack even tighter. It meekly covered his flannel and was filled with food, a blanket, spare clothes, and a knife, as such things seemed necessary to run away. He handed the conductor the ticket, and found a seat as fast as he could, as if it would pick up and leave without him. The train doesn't stop for anyone.

His nerves crawled and swarmed through his body. Jude didn't know what he was running from or running toward, but he supposed it was too late now; turning back wouldn't really do him any good. As his parents had convinced him, he didn't have anything to turn back to. The Depression had no mercy for boys like him, and neither did they.

Jude grew into the life he now knew. The clicking of the railroad tracks slowly transformed into the tapping of rain collecting in puddles along the side of a dirt road. The world

was chaotic, and Jude looked for his place in it. But for now, it was the roadside.

And it was for others, too. The gravel unspokenly marked a sacred path that outlined the border between success and failure and when it was acceptable to cross. Raine Booker was stuck on Jude's side. Her hair was chopped short and bobbed, but it was beautiful and golden and bright as the smile she displayed for him. While girls obsessed over their looks, she wasn't bothered by such things. However, she didn't have a say in the matter; her only pair of clothes were dull and draped over her. Still, Jude was convinced that beneath the rags lay lovely curves she'd prefer to hide. With such a flawless image, it was hard for him to imagine she was in the same situation.

Daily, Jude desperately added to a jar to support his family to whom he was simply a burden. He could return-- but if he couldn't provide anything, they wouldn't want him back. It was then that Jude and Raine grew up together. Four years seemed long in the days, but the years slipped through their fingers. They lived along the railroad tracks-- the same tracks they longed to ride someday. They'd travel. Find a new home for themselves and live the dreams they'd dreamt. And with so little hope to spare, you just don't break promises like that. The handful of money Jude had saved for his family was now meant for greater things. Things like Raine. His family wouldn't want Jude's money, now. He wouldn't give it to them, either; they wouldn't understand.

The rocks that flooded the railroad tracks crunched and slid beneath their feet, but the wind was so loud it was barely audible. In what would have been a very foggy morning, the strong breeze flowed relentlessly, and with it, they moved. Jude's arm slung around her shoulders, pulling her closer, and her arm similarly wrapped his waist. They stepped silently, as

their words were quickly taken by the wind. They thought of their new life together, the new clothes that would suit them so nicely, the successful jobs they might obtain, and the desserts Raine claimed she once knew how to make. They'd like it there-- wherever they were going. Jude was sure of it.

The rocks rattled beneath their feet. A sudden gust came from behind them, and silently, they turned. Desperately pulling to a side. It was too late. The train doesn't stop for anyone.

By Spencer Keis

Antarctica seems less and less appealing every day. But this is what I wanted, right? It's what I went to school for, it's what I saved all my money for, and it's what I've always been waiting for. So why do I feel so nervous now, so regretful now? It's not like I didn't know the risks and the drawbacks, I've had them drilled into my head for years. Though for some reason, spending years of my life in the coldest, darkest, and loneliest part of the world seemed so alluring not that long ago. It's too late now though, I'm already on the goddamn boat there. What the hell is wrong with me?

"You OK Stevens? You look a little seasick there."

I jumped a little bit; I was so lost in the dumpster fire that is my current mind that I didn't even hear Mark's steps behind me. "I'm fine, maybe a little homesick if anything," I replied thinking that somehow sounded better than the truth. As Mark shot me a look, I realized there was probably a better excuse.

"Oh buddy, if you think this is bad, wait till you've spent months alone with nothing but ice and other men." Mark puts a hand around my shoulder to try and help calm my nerves, but it makes me more uncomfortable than anything. I actually don't mind being surrounded by only men, but it's not like I'm going to say that to someone who's almost three times my senior. "I get where you're coming from, though. It's always tough being away from your home for so long.

This is your first time too, isn't it?" Mark questioned as he removed his hand from my shoulder to stick it back into his pocket.

"You got me, but really, I'm not that nervous. This is what I signed up for isn't it?" I gave a decent enough chuckle to try and hide the fact that I was asking myself the same question. This is exactly what I signed up for; I've known that for almost a year at this point. So why was it that I'm so horrified now? This was a dream to me, my biggest dream, in fact. Now, though, I just feel like the biggest idiot, in fact. There had to be some reason why I stayed up late so many nights looking forward to the most isolating experience one could have, right? I catch myself almost letting "this idiot," slip out of my mouth before I realize I'm still talking to Mark, and that I've just missed the last minute of what he's been talking about.

"You seem like a tough enough kid, though; I bet you'll be fine. Well, unless you snap and kill everyone with an ax or something," Mark's face shows that he realized too late that this was probably the wrong thing to say to someone who's very clearly anxious about this whole situation. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding, that's not going to happen to you. It's a simple research station right on the coast anyways, not the Overlook Hotel,"

I just stare at him for a moment trying to think of something not horribly embarrassing to say to a man who I try so hard not to embarrass myself in front of. Though, now I'm realizing I probably already screwed that up at this point.

"Come on, you've never seen *The Shining*? Guess that must've completely gone over your Gen-Z head."

“Oh, I’m just not that big of a horror guy. My brother just convinced me to watch The Thing before I left. Which I’m now realizing was a horrible idea.” I chuckle thinking back to the reaction I had on my face as I quickly realized this wasn’t going to be a happy movie about researchers in Antarctica.

Mark lets out a much louder laugh as he pulls one of his hands out of his pocket to slap against his chest. “Yeah, that was a pretty horrible idea, and here I thought I had an asshole of a brother. Now that I’m thinking about it, an ax murder is way more likely to happen than any alien activity. So, let’s just hope you don’t snap along the way.” Mark lets out another laugh as he makes his way to the door of the room.

“I guess you’re right, but thanks for the talk, though; I’m feeling a lot better about this now,” I lie straight through my teeth.

“Don’t mention it. I bet good money that everyone here is feeling a little homesick. Really, it’s best to think of Antarctica as your new home. I bet good money that it’s a lot nicer to look at than Montana too.” He lets out one final laugh as he passes through the door and into one of the many hallways of the ship.

As I see him leave the room, I once again think about how awful I’m feeling. I’m not feeling homesick; I’m feeling like a goddamn idiot for ever agreeing to this in the first place. This wasn’t the only option I had; I easily could’ve gone back to school for another few years or looked for other options in the field. Antarctica was not my only option, but for some reason, there was this little part of me that continued to tell me that it was. Ever since I was a kid, it has been my dream to do research work in Antarctica, but maybe it’s stupid to have the same dream for all your life. Stewing in my own thoughts, it occurs to me that I’m probably just being too

hard on myself. Putting aside all the fears and the anxieties, there is still that part of me that has a childlike excitement for finally being able to come to Antarctica and follow my dream.

In only a few seconds, my mood does indeed feel better. Way more than it did from talking to Mark, that is. With some motivation regained, I quickly moved out of the room and down the hallway until I caught a glimpse of Mark again. “Hey Mark, wait up, let me walk with you. I needed to go talk to Gary anyways,” I called out loud enough for him to hear, but not loud enough that it came off as embarrassing.

This time Mark is the one who jumps a bit as he looks back towards me. Grinning a bit, he pulls his hand from his pocket to wave me over, “Come on, I thought you were going to sit alone in that room all day again.”

Damn he was right. I spent most of the trip sulking in one of the rooms of the ship. If I want this stay in Antarctica to go well, I should probably interact with my fellow researchers and now act like a massive loner. Though, I’m pretty sure that’s what almost everyone else was doing. Not to play into any stereotypes, but these researchers are not the most sociable. If anyone here was a people person, it would be Gary.

Gary would also definitely be my closest friend here on the ship, too. He and I went to the same school and became fast friends during those days. Though looking back, it is a bit odd that we became such good friends seeing how different we are. Like I said, Gary is absolutely a people person. Very energetic, very outgoing, and very confident. Me, well, not so much. I guess it is true when they say that opposites attract. I was overjoyed to learn that he would also be going to the same research station as me. It’s not as lonely in the arctic when you have a good friend, and over the years me and him have gotten really close. I can only imagine that we’ll

grow even closer over this very long trip, which makes me pretty excited. I know I shouldn't put all this pressure on him to keep me sane, but hey, isn't that what friends are for?

Speaking of the devil, not that long after I follow Mark through the almost maze-like halls of the ship, I see Gary talking to some of the others in an open room. "Ah there's Gary, I'll catch up with you later Mark," I excitedly say as I make my way into the other room.

"I'm surprised it took you this long to go talk to Lynch, this might be a new record. Take it easy buddy." Mark slaps me on the back and walks off while all I can do is stand there in the doorway and try to think about what the hell that meant.

Yeah, it's obvious that me and Gary are good friends, but it's not like we're inseparable. I've barely even wanted to talk to him at all since we've started the trip over to Antarctica. Really, maybe that's part of why I've felt so apprehensive about this trip. While of course, I was glad to have someone like Gary with me during these lonely years practically alone, but still it made me ... nervous. I mentioned earlier that I don't mind being surrounded by only men, yeah put two and two together. The other guys here hadn't shown themselves to be homophobic or anything, but I still absolutely did not want something like that getting out, especially with how long we were all going to be together. I probably would snap and go for an ax, if I had to hear everyone make snide remarks about being attracted to Gary. I'm not saying I am, but I doubt you'd believe that at this point.

"Hey Nolan, are you just going to stand there?" Gary lightheartedly questioned as he looked right at me. Damn it, why do I keep embarrassing myself so much today. I make my way into the room instead of leaning against the doorway like an idiot, which I have firmly established that I am.

“Oh yeah sorry, I was just talking to Mark, you know how he is,” I say trying to make myself seem casual and not like I’ve just been thinking about how close I am with Gary for the last few minutes. Maybe it was a bad idea to come here in the first place. I did have something I needed to talk to Gary about, but it could wait until I’m feeling less like a total idiot.

“God you’re right, I was just trying to make small talk with him earlier, and he went on and on about how great I’m going to do here. Which I already know, but if I get an even bigger ego it’s going to blow up and take this entire ship with it,” he jokes as everyone else in the room laughs, including me, even if I am just humoring his humor. Despite how great Gary is, his jokes really aren’t that funny. Like he said, he does have a big ego; maybe telling him that would do some good, but now is not the time or place. “So did you need something?”

“Yeah, it’s just that I finished some of the forms I needed you to look over. I can give them to you later though if you’re busy,” I say, desperately hoping he is busy so I can return to my room and go back to my sulking.

“Oh no, you guys are fine; we were just chatting with Gary anyways,” one of the others in the room says as he and the one other person with Gary in the room get up to leave. “See you later Gary,” the other one says as they both quickly leave the room.

“Crap, I almost completely forgot about those forms. Thanks for reminding me about them. Let me go look over them now.”

“Oh no you’re fine, I can get them to you later.”

“Come on Nolan, you already have them ready, and besides, I’ve barely talked to you at all since we got on this stupid boat. You’re the one person here I like talking to anyways. Not to

play into stereotypes, but these researchers are antisocial,” Mark jokes once again as he pats me on the shoulder. I freeze for a second, before that same motivation from earlier hits me. I’m still anxious about this trip, but talking to Gary helps. I guess some people can make Antarctica feel a little warmer.

By Danielle Ricchio

At eight years old, I plagiarized the first song I wrote. I knew passing off someone else's efforts as my own was wrong, but I did it anyway. I had almost gotten away with it, too, but then my piano lessons got revoked for three weeks. To this day, I've not forgiven Mr. Rafferty, my childhood piano instructor, for telling my parents what I did.

I've never again tried my hand at plagiarism. My parents' three-week punishment did the trick to deter me from repeating such an offense. Well, that and I concluded I'd never make a career out of stealing other people's work. Unless I intend on being Dateline's next shocking news story, which is a tempting thought if I'm honest.

"Class," Ms. Lozano announces, halting the chatter of her students. "Remember, today is Charlie's last day with us. She's off on a writing retreat with her composing partner for the rest of the semester."

If I had my way, I wouldn't be going anywhere. I'd stay and continue my position as a teaching assistant for this class.

"Going forward, please, don't contact her with questions concerning assignments. Don't ask her to give you information about when the final exam will be either," Lozano adds.

This semester's students took office hours more seriously than last semester. Students would pile into my office and ask questions about their eccentric melodies. And, overall, teach me about writing music more than I did them.

“Miss Harris, would you like to say something to the class before I begin my lecture?”

Lozano asks.

“I can't stress enough how much I've enjoyed this semester with you all,” I begin. “If I had my choice, I'd stay with you through your entire stay here at Berklee.” A handful of my favorite students, who I'd never admit aloud are my favorite, cheer for me to stay. “And, despite Lozano's instructions, reach out if you need anything. I don't want any of you to forget about me while I'm off writing in the middle of nowhere.”

I kid you not when I say I'll be in the middle of nowhere. If it were my choice, I'd choose a writing location within walking distance of a restaurant. I'd prefer to be near a coffee shop and a convenience store, too. But hoping for a decent-sized city population is too much to ask for when you have a writing partner like mine.

Johnathan Hatton is someone who sleeps until noon every day and begins work at sunset. In the time it takes him to smoke half a cigarette, he drinks a cup of green tea on his high-rise apartment's balcony. Then, he smokes the other half of the cig inside while warming up his fingers at the piano, or on the guitar or drum set.

Everything about that description makes me want to swoon and lay in bed with him all day, too. But, having worked with him for the last four years, I've grown immune to his rusty four a.m. charm.

“Professor Lozano, could we hear what working with a partner is like from Miss Harris?” a student asks. He interrupts the start of today's lecture when I've sat at the back of the lecture hall.

“Levi, we can take a moment at the end of class to ask our TA questions about her writing process. Only if she's up for it, that is,” Lozano replies, raising an eyebrow in my direction.

“Fine with me,” I admit, though not honestly. “But let's not rush this lecture. It's one of my personal favorites.”

“Sound good to you?” Lozano asks the student sitting in the third row.

“It'll do,” he shrugs, getting half the class and Lozano to laugh.

“Now, I want each of you to close your eyes; let your mind go blank,” Lozano conducts.

I was a pupil of Mariana Lozano's a few years back; it's how I came to be an assistant for her class today. Her teachings, which combine visualization and music theory, changed my life. Not only as a composer, but as a human who lives, breathes, and grieves music.

Johnny and I were in the same section with Lozano, who introduced the two of us to each other. When a peer review assignment came around, Lozano paired us as critique partners. Our pairing was a shit show because Johnny and I are so similar. We're passionate, perfectionistic, and passive-aggressive. And at the time there wasn't a bone in our bodies willing to take each other's critiques as constructive.

In another class of Lozano's, we got paired up again. This time it was because we were sick on the same day and missed the class where everyone chose their partners. Luckily, this time around things went differently for the two of us. And I mean, vastly different.

“Harmony, shut your eyes,” I demand, catching a student staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. Yes, she's a music major named Harmony.

“Keep a mental list of each of the experiences your senses pick up,” Lozano advises.

“Ask yourself: what do I hear, what am I touching, what do I smell, and what, if anything, do I taste?”

I too fall into a visualization once I close my eyes. It's been some time since I used this technique in my composing practice. I suppose I'm getting a refresher course today.

“What do you hear?” Lozano asks.

I hear Mariana's feet waltzing back and forth across the cement floor of the auditorium. I hear the murmuring voices of students outside, making their way to and from their classes. A shifting body, likely uncomfortable in an auditorium seat, distracts me.

“Where and with what is your body making contact?”

From my ankle through my right foot, there's a sensation of pins and needles pricking me. I move around to return the blood flow to my right extremity, which takes a moment to take effect.

“Everyone, what smells can you pick up from around this room?” Lozano questions. “Or, what smells of importance come to mind?”

Inhaling through my nose, the scent of day-old takeout from a student's backpack sends a wave of nausea my way. When I switch to breathe from my mouth, I'm reminded of the woodsy air of my family home. My mother and father insisted on keeping a window cracked all year round.

“Class, before I close this exercise, I have one final sense I want you to consider. What tastes do you prefer, and which don't you prefer?”

The air in Johnny's apartment tastes of sheet music, cigarette butts, and vanilla ice cream. Somehow, wherever he goes, the air fills with that musky and sweet flavor. It's almost as if he's a walking air freshener.

“Alright, let's transition into the present moment. I'll begin my lecture on why I'm teaching you this exercise once I have all eyes on me," Lozano says.

As I bat my eyes open, the fluorescent lights above are harsh on my large pupils. Luckily, the more I blink, the more my eyes adjust to the artificial brightness in this room.

“The purpose of this technique is two-fold,” Professor Lozano says to the class. “First, to set the scene for composing. Sometimes the best thing we as creators can do is step back into our bodies before we set our minds to work. To cast the chaotic uncertainty in our lives aside for a mind grounded in creativity.”

This technique is the reason things were different for Johnny and me the second time around. We'd met up at the library, both angry to be each other's partners again. I took my shot at leading our meeting, suggesting we use the visualization exercise for our assignment. Johnny looked so shocked by the idea that his expression resembled that of a baby eating a lemon.

“What are the chances you and I have the same favorite composing technique?” he asked.

We set aside our disastrous first encounter and finished our assignment by midnight. Neither of us had written a piece that quickly before, nor had we known what to do with our ability to work so well as partners.

“Secondly,” Lozano continues. “This technique may help you in finding inspiration for your melodies and lyrics. It could be through the rhythm you find in your thoughts, be that a tempo or a time signature.”

I wish I had recorded this lecture to bring with me on Johnny and I's composing trip. This is the longest period we've gone between writing sessions since we partnered up. And as a result, we're bound to get into creative disagreements. That is, many more than what is typical for us to get into while on a trip.

“Yes, Naomi,” Lozano calls, noticing a student near the middle of the group with her hand held high.

“What if we prefer not to compose from our own experience?” she asks.

“There is a way to use this technique secondhand or even thirdhand if you prefer,” Lozano explains. “I've written secondhand many times. Once you all are comfortable with this method, I encourage you to test it out on a classmate or two.”

“I second that suggestion,” I cheer. “When your work feels like it's going nowhere, a new perspective will take you in the right direction.”

Lozano winks at me. “See, I'm not up here blowing smoke up all your butts every class.”

Johnny and I had been writing together since graduation up until six months ago. It started with him pulling back on our collaborative group, known as CJ Harper, to work on a few solo projects. Then, three months ago, Johnny traded in the apartment next to mine for one six blocks away.

It's like suddenly I became the most repulsive thing to him. Like my very essence threatens to rot his creativity if I'm within six feet of him. I mean if removing me from multiple areas of his life isn't a clear sign he wants out of the group, then I don't know what is.

I'll give him that he's got the whole artisan chic aesthetic and too cool rockstar vibe nailed. I could see him pulling a Justin Timberlake or deserting me to live in the middle of a West Coast forest. He'd have no neighbors within earshot of his cabin nor a city light within one hundred miles.

"We've reached the end of the lecture," Lozano announces, zapping me out of my thoughts. "Charlie, we have five minutes left of class. Are you still open to discussing CJ Harper and Company with us as a parting gift?"

"I'm open to answering a few questions," I hesitate, exiting my seat from the back of the auditorium. I can feel the student's eyes burning into the back of my head as I make my way to the front.

"Levi, we'll start with you since you brought up this line of questioning," Lozano says, passing the baton.

"What's it like working with a partner like the Johnathan Hatton?" Levi asks. "Is his process of creating music as ingenious as his work sounds?"

"Johnny is at times silent in his creative process, and other times he shakes the walls from how loud he gets. I'm talking, staring out into the dark abyss of nighttime or thrashing his hands on an instrument. When we began working together, it was a scary sight to witness, but then I learned to respect his process."

I have more I could say on that because I know Johnny so well, but I also want to respect his privacy.

“Working with Johnny is the most challenging, yet rewarding, experience. Like most creatives, we trash more work than we make public,” I add.

If I felt I could say more, I’d talk about the dozens of music books stacked in his living room. Or the half-written sheets of music scattered across his dining table. A lonely pack of cigarettes and a lighter sit out on his balcony, waiting to be lit at sunset. And, how his favorite guitar of the month stays hidden under the frame of his bed.

“Charlie,” Lozano whispers, shaking me conscious.

I zoned out again. “Sorry,” I choke.

Mariana releases me from her grasp and returns her attention to the students. No doubt she's about to cover for my strange and awkward behavior.

“Class is dismissed. See everyone next week,” she announces, pulling me off stage.

My clammy hand nearly slips out of hers as we head down the stage steps and over to the corner of the room. Mariana places me with the wall behind me and plants a firm hand on each of her hips. I feel like a toddler who's about to get a scolding from their mother for finger painting on the walls.

“I know that look in your eye,” Mariana says, staring me down with a hint of sincerity. “What did Johnny do this time?”

“It's sort of a long story,” I reply, picking at my nails.

Mariana backs away and sits in an auditorium seat. "I've got time, Charlotte Harris. Plenty of time."

"Fine! He's leaving me," I fret, placing myself in front of her. "I'm certain of it."

"I seriously doubt that, but what makes you so certain?"

I tap each of my fingers to remind myself of all the reasons. "He's moved, we don't really talk much, and we haven't written together in six months," I explain. "Shall I continue, or is that enough?"

Mariana nods her head, but I'm not convinced she's on my side. Johnny and I both have a mentoring relationship with Lozano. His has always been more private, off the books, than mine has.

"I don't usually tell you his business, Charlie," Lozano says. "But unconsciously I think he knows he needs you to know what's going on with him."

I've wanted in on their secrets before, and I'd be lying if part of me wasn't thrilled by this invitation. But would Johnny see this as a breach of information, therefore pushing us further apart?

"Johnny was in a legal battle over plagiarism," Mariana says. "He's fine now, but if things blew up publicly, he didn't want to take you down with him."

"Why didn't he tell me! I could've helped him through it," I assert. I slump down next to Lozano, seeing as her words further complicate this upcoming trip.

“You’re asking the right questions to the wrong person,” Mariana says. “Don’t you think it’s time you and Johnny air the truth?”

I rise from my seat and march across the auditorium. “It’s certainly time for something to change, Lozano,” I shout from the door. “I’ll see you after the retreat.”

By Maddy Kleinman

The monster continued to live under the girl's bed despite the numerous bedtime rituals performed every evening by her parents. Supposedly, these practices were guaranteed to cast out any creatures of devious intentions. Unfortunately, the monster under the bed did not seem to care much about flashlights and mild-mannered threats. After all, the ultimatums issued did not match the furniture, or the lavender walls, or the bay windows curtained by pink tulle. So there was no one to blame when the threats fell on indifferent ears.

The monster watched sock-covered feet shuffle across the hardwood floors, knowing that the routine had started and soon the lights would go out. It hunkered closer to the floor, unseen in the shadows between Barbie-filled plastic totes.

The girl's father knelt to the floor and lazily swept the beam of his flashlight into the monster's eyes. It pulled back further, irritated. The father offered assurances that, no, there wasn't anything under the bed, and that yes, he would leave the hall light on for the little girl. The girl shifted above the monster, causing the bedframe to squeak. She asked her father to check the closet for her before he left, and he obliged.

The monster waited a while before emerging. Its shoulder blades creaked as it scuttled across the floor on all fours to sit in its favorite spot: the luscious armchair covered in castaway clothing. From its perch, it watched the girl. She tossed and turned, frequently shifting around to glance in its direction. The monster knew that she could sense its presence, maybe even see the glow that emanated from its three eyes. Eventually, the girl's breathing lengthened as she fell into uneasy dreams.

It was here that the hunt began.

Shadows squirmed across the floorboards, liquifying into vile and hideous creatures beyond any mortal comprehension. They cried out in high and keening wails unheard by human ears but understood by the soul. The monster leapt from its perch and sank jagged teeth into the haunches of a shadow creature. Another shadow creature made its way toward the little girl's bed, intent on poisoning her dreams. A third, enraged by the fall of its brethren, joined the fray. Ichor splattered against the walls in flecks of blackness as the creatures waged war against the monster.

More shadow creatures formed, born out of the wickedness of the void. They swarmed the monster, maws dripping with malice. Leathery wings beat against the still air of the bedroom. The monster fought back. It leapt into the air and seized one of the shadow creatures with its widened jaw. The monster threw its head back, striking the creature again and again against the lush carpet. Talons ripped through the monster's hide, and its screams echoed down the hallway and throughout the house.

The little girl awoke.

The only thing she saw was the monster; violet eyes glowing in the darkness, black ichor dripping from its shifting, stygian body onto the floorboards. Its ivory talons gleamed in the light of the hall.

The little girl sat, frozen. And then she screamed, throwing herself beneath her flowery blankets.

The shadow creatures dissolved as her father flung the door open and flicked the lights on. The monster scuttled beneath the bed before the girl's father could comprehend the scene before him. The bedframe cried out as the girl's father sat next to her. The monster began to lick its wounds as the girl's father assured her of her safety.

The monster peeled its eyes open, blinking sleepily. The lights were on. It peered around, wondering what had awoken it. Wide blue eyes met its own, and the little girl's mouth opened, but she did not speak.

"Hello," the monster uttered, its voice uncoiling like a snake ready to strike.

The little girl whimpered.

The monster tilted its head at her, silently observing the tiny human it had chosen to protect.

"I knew you lived under here," she finally whispered.

It nodded, its head gliding up and down. "I do."

"Please," she started, polite as her parents had taught her. "Please, can you leave?"

It paused to consider this request before responding with a question of its own. "Child. Do you know why I live here?"

"To scare me." The answer was confident, sure. The little girl's eyes were defiant now. She is brave in the face of fear itself, the monster thought.

“No, no, no,” it chuckled, “I am here to scare away the things that scare you.”

“Oh.”

The monster nodded again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must get back to sleep.” It curled up, wrapped its tail around itself, and shut its eyes.

That night, the little girl’s father checked under the bed and in the closet, assuring the little girl that there was nothing to fear. The lights went out, and the little girl sat up, wide awake. The monster crawled out from under the bed and took its perch on the chair in the corner. It said nothing to the little girl, and the little girl said nothing to it. Soon after, the shadow creatures appeared, and the battle began. The little girl sat with her blankets wrapped tightly around her, enraptured.

This time, the little girl did not scream.

When the shadow creatures retreated at dawn, the monster crept back in between the plastic bins to tend to its wounds and rest. Later, when the afternoon sun shone spears through the bay windows, the little girl peered beneath the bed once again.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

The monster yawned and turned to face the little girl. With a fanged grin, it responded, “Do I get to stay?”

The little girl nodded seriously “Sleep lots.”

That night, when the little girl's father went to check under the bed, she stopped him.

"But what about the monsters?" he asked.

"My friend lives there," she said. "And he is not a monster."



THE BEGINNING OF SUMMER NIGHTS BY EVELYN ORTIZ MARTINEZ

By Sam Bender

**Content Warning—Mental health, hospitalization, and reference to self-harm*

Goosebumps outlined my body like chalk at a crime scene upon entry to the Cambridge Medical Center. It was far from my first visit, closer to my tenth, but the nerves never dissipated even after it became routine. The humidity of a late June day gave way to air so sterile I felt as though it were cleaning my lungs out, removing any and all toxins in proximity. A faint scent of lemon cleaning product hovered heavily in the air. My eyes darted rapidly around the lobby as they tend to do when I'm anxious, and then they landed on the sitting area to my left, decked out in inoffensive shades of green and blue with horrid oak chairs. Several occupants were there, each minding their own business as one ought to do in a hospital. I'm inherently curious, though, and I couldn't drag my eyes away from their forlorn faces. Everyone had their heads down, watching their tapping feet or scrolling on their phones incessantly. I almost wanted to run over and offer each of them a hug, but at 14 I was both touch-averse and possessed the knowledge that most strangers don't look for comfort in random teens. No words or acts of consolation passed between us.

My dad, who is himself a deeply introverted and tense person, grabbed my hand and gave it a gentle, reassuring squeeze before leading me towards the desk straight ahead. A woman sat there, watching us take our time and constantly rethink our decision to visit, as was typical for us. She was overwhelmingly patient while my dad asked for directions, but she avoided eye contact with me, which led me to believe she wasn't nearly as confident or stoic as she was acting. Her directions were simple, but we still managed to get lost in the seemingly-labyrinthian

halls. Presently, I could find my way there with my eyes closed, but it took us far longer than it should've to locate the Psychiatric Ward inside the one-story building at that time. We were stopped by a passing staff member who offered a pointed finger, wrinkled from age, down a hallway with vague art. Another half-pitying look from an adult I didn't know had me moving quickly in the indicated direction.

There's a plain white buzzer that everyone has to press in order to get into the first room. To the right of it is a sheet of plain printer paper taped up but peeling around every edge. I itched to pick at it but forced my shaking hands to slide into my pockets instead. After we gathered the courage to press the button, we were told to wait for a moment. When someone responded, we had to state the name of the patient we wanted to see and pause for a confirmation buzz before we could enter a small white space that could hold no more than four adults. Even though it was just my father and me in the room, it still felt suffocatingly small, and as short as I was at 14, my wingspan couldn't fully extend without a hand injury. In this room, small metal lockers lined the left wall with nothing opposite them but safety warnings. There were a couple of signs posted near the doors that listed what to put in the metal cages and then what to do with the key to the locker. We placed our phones, keys, and any other loose belongings inside and sealed them away, clicking it shut with a sense of finality though it wouldn't be long before we could get them back. The first time we visited, our key had a neon green band attached for securing to your wrist, but on this occasion, it was a deeply appalling and near unsettling orange. It fit too snugly around my father's wrist, restricting blood and threatening to turn them purple, so I asked to wear it instead and was granted permission. By the end of the visit, I had snapped the traffic cone-colored band by messing with it between my hands as I looked around.

There were two women behind the next desk we encountered after we'd buzzed in a second time. We spoke to one of them, and she directed us down the hall to find a recreation room where my mother would be. The second woman accompanied us and got her attention before we had to search the place awkwardly, avoiding eye contact lest we offend someone. I was aware that these people were mostly without any intent to harm but remained cautious nonetheless. My mom has never been a tall woman, but inside this building, she had never looked smaller. Her wrinkled face still lit up with the same smile I'd come to know and cherish over the past decade of my life, but it felt permanently altered and vaguely disingenuous. She waved us over, and I noted her trimmed fingernails, odd to me because she always took pride in growing them out and painting them varying shades of red. Her favored shade was burgundy with a light shimmer only visible in the sun. She stood to hug us both, very briefly, and then started to give us the grand tour like she'd designed the place herself. We were already more than aware of the blueprint of the ward but allowed her to tow us around again.

The rec room was the largest part of the entire ward and held one TV, playing exclusively Golden Girls, and then a cupboard that was bolted back to the wall and locked with two separate padlocks. Inside it were board games, but the preferred entertainment of the group of ladies my mom stuck to was Barrel of Monkeys. I was goaded into playing a game and won quickly but the tension was clear in my shoulders, and my father was able to redirect us to a more private area. My mother's room was the second closest to the entrance, and her name was scribbled on a whiteboard beside another, Tammy H. The few minutes I ever saw Tammy, the largely cryptic roommate, were stilted and uncomfortable for all parties, and I was pleased for many reasons when she was released back home. Our second and final interaction left me feeling as though I'd never spoken to a stranger before.

“Ope, sorry,” the woman had walked into the unlocked room and then promptly tried to turn around but was stopped before she could get a socked foot back out. My mother waved her forward, her mouth full of half-chewed hamburger and therefore incapable of calling her over in a polite manner. “I’m just grabbing my sweatshirt.” Tammy stepped cautiously back in towards the open shelves. Everyone in the room was aware the sweatshirt would be without zippers or strings tied through the hood. My father and I had brought a sweatshirt on our second visit, and the minutes in which the simple white string was painfully removed seemed to stretch into agonizing hours. I’d almost asked to turn around and leave but couldn’t muster the energy.

My mom swallowed her food so quickly she might’ve choked, and although I’d be hard-pressed to call anything that occurred during this time period a *miracle*, it seemed a work of some higher power that she came through that meal physically unscathed. “Stay!” She was far over-excited given the situation, but her enthusiasm never drifted, even when our family was shaken by the strong waves of anguish. “This is my family. This is my husband and my daughter. They brought me food.” We had met before and had brought food nearly every visit. Not a word of this was spoken to her as a silent agreement between Tammy and ourselves.

“Of course. It’s very nice to meet you. She’s told me all about you.” This was said in such a manner that made it clear we’d never been mentioned before, at least not in any positive manner. “That smells great,” she indicated the brown paper bag. “I’m out of here tomorrow and that’s the first place I’m headed,” Tammy grinned and laughed with her whole body, her head tilted back and shoulders shaking but her eyes unwaveringly still. She was a good match for my mom, and in another situation, I feel that they could’ve been good friends. If they had met years earlier, Tammy might have spent time at our house catching up on the latest news of the Royal

Family or one of the many crime shows my mom was obsessed with. Honestly, though, the woman drove me a little mad, and my skin prickled and burned under the cold air of the hospital. She felt too sane to be in the room with my family while all of us cracked apart like dropped teacups. Her feet never stepped on a piece of ceramic, but she wasn't tiptoeing either and never once glanced down to the chilled linoleum.

"Right?" My mom popped a fry in her mouth with unearned cheer. I always found it odd how she ate fries and chips one at a time instead of shoveling them in by the handful, but I attributed it to an odd quirk. She had a lot of odd quirks.

The conversation, if you could call it that, fell apart soon after. Tammy excused herself, recognizing that this was a private moment, but not before making a few more comments I could conjure no response to. As soon as she left, I sort of missed her. She could bounce off anything you said with the appropriate response and I was envious of that ability. What I wouldn't have given to have that confidence. The door didn't close behind her as she left, it wasn't allowed to, but it still swayed shut in a definitive manner that told me I'd never see her again. With the distraction gone, my attention shifted back to my surroundings.

A bedroom in a hospital is almost exactly what anyone would expect. The beds are small and mostly bare save for a thin blue blanket and an almost entirely flat pillow. Between the two beds in the room were two nightstands with rounded edges and drawers with a slow-closing mechanism. My mother had magazines in hers, two of which I had found at a vintage store and purchased because of her love of the Kennedy family and Marilyn Monroe. She has an appreciation for the 50s that I'll never understand but am endlessly intrigued to hear about from her. She sat down on her bed and offered up the one chair that was free to be moved, and I took it

if only to appease her and switch topics hastily. The air conditioning unit, secured in an unreachable spot on the side of the wall, buzzed and blasted ceaselessly. The goosebumps I'd had upon entering the building rose higher still and left me to rub my hands uselessly up and down them. No one else seemed bothered. Every meal my mother had had since our last visit was recalled with excruciating detail while I shivered, but it was clear that it was to avoid silence, so we listened to tales of flavorless chicken, seasoned with a single salt and pepper packet, and cold soup eaten with plastic spoons. In a hospital room, there's not much you can do but talk.

I'd decided that day that we would visit near the end of visiting hours because I didn't feel I had the emotional capacity to survive within those walls for much longer than 30 minutes. How my dear mother survived weeks on end, I'll never know and forever be too scared to ask. When the time came, the first woman from behind the desk arrived to give us a warning. She told us to say goodbye and then sign out at the desk, and then she left, but her gaze lingered for moments after. I stood first, eager to leave but suddenly feeling guilty about it. I had dreaded coming and was ready to leave the entire time I was there, but my feet didn't move until I practically picked them up and placed them down. I'm still quite sure the floor cracked beneath my sneakers.

My mother hugged me and squeezed me firmly, not dissimilar to the way my dad did in difficult situations where words wouldn't meet the purpose. We promised to return in a few days and to bring McDonald's again. No one talked about how it would have to be searched for sharp objects anyways or how the drink that accompanied it would have to be a sealed can. There was no mention of slip-on shoes since laces were forbidden. Not one of us dared speak of the lack of

hairbrush or pens. My mother's phone was in a drawer at home racking up unheard voicemails and unread texts, and long after the object was removed, the messages remained painfully answered. We didn't say, "I love you" in the ward because we didn't want to taint the words with this feeling, this memory, so I squeezed her hand and tore out of the room. Even though all you can do is talk in a psych ward, there's very little you can truly bring yourself to say.

By Samantha Rolfson

**Content Warning—Substance abuse, child neglect, self-harm, emotional abuse, and homophobia*

He's telling me his life story.

He's not the first. It always seems that within the first hour of meeting someone, they end up telling me everything. Their history. Their secrets. Their fears. If it lives in a dark, miserable corner of their brain, they give it a voice and let it speak to me.

I listen intently as he talks. His voice is hesitant. His eyes dart from place to place, often looking down, rarely looking at me. He seems ashamed. Men often do. They seem to think they should be strong enough to not need help. They're taught as much. He brushes his hair out of his face and keeps talking. He pauses every so often, to make sure I'm listening. He pauses. I nod. He continues.

He lives with his mother in poverty. She takes her stress out on him. She calls him worthless, helpless. He feels worthless, helpless. When he was a child, he was neglected, locked away in a dark room when his father didn't want to deal with him. Now he's afraid of the dark. His father abused him, his mother, and his grandmother, beating them with his fists when he was slobbering drunk. His father left him when he was young, for the better, I think, but he still longs for a father.

As he talks, I'm reminded of my own family. My mother was cruel to me as well. After my parents divorced, it seemed that all my mother saw when she looked at me was my father. She treated me accordingly. She'd yell at me, call me names, tell me I was just like him in all the

worst ways, stoic, emotionless. In response to her accusations, I became just that, stoic, emotionless. Naturally, this made things worse. I remember wondering then if there was something wrong with me, if the problem was truly me.

“Is there something wrong with me?”

He’s looking to me for reassurance. I tell him there’s nothing wrong with him. It’s perfectly natural and justifiable to be the way he is. He mulls that over for a moment, then asks me a question. I answer candidly. When presented with such raw honesty, I’ve found it suits me to respond in kind. He listens, thinks for a moment, then keeps talking.

He had a rough day today. He called the suicide hotline and was met with an unenthusiastic voice on the other end. The voice read him lines he’d heard many times before. The voice was exasperated when he didn’t immediately improve upon hearing the prescribed script. He hung up and was left feeling like laughing as much as crying.

There was a girl I knew in middle school who had short, mousy brown hair and a warm smile. Her home was a mad house. Her father was in prison. She had to care for her three younger siblings because her mother was neglectful. There were locks on all the cabinets and cupboards to prevent her and her siblings from eating outside of mealtimes. Her mother was consumed by the idea that her children were getting fat. They were all alarmingly skinny. I’d share my lunches with her at school, so she’d have something more to eat. She didn’t want me to tell anyone what was happening. Like a fool, I didn’t.

When she’d talk to me, she was always loud, angry. She’d rant about the unfairness of it all, about how much she struggled to do right by her family and how little it was appreciated. I’d

agree with her. It was unfair. Beyond that, I'd try to remind her of their perspectives, what they might be struggling with. That would usually calm her down. I was able to give her a perspective she was too deep in to see herself. Somehow, even though she was plainly the victim, she was never sure her suffering wasn't her fault.

“Is there something wrong with me?”

No, there wasn't.

I don't know the girl well anymore. I saw online that she married a boy she used to hate. She got pregnant at nineteen. At least she was older than her mother was.

Her story is not dissimilar to his, I notice. His family too relied on him, up until he broke down that is. His fiancé, a woman he spent seven years of his life with, a woman who pledged to bear his children, suddenly left him. He fell to pieces. He spent two years of his life recovering, drinking her memory away every day. He couldn't work, not in that state, so his mother supported him. Eventually and understandably, she grew impatient, but she expressed her discontent through cruelty and blame, not the ideal approach. He took to cutting himself. He was trained in trauma care, so he knew how to tend to his self-inflicted wounds. He was too embarrassed to seek medical attention, even when the loss of blood made him dizzy.

There was this other girl I knew in high school who had a copious number of piercings, bleached blonde hair, and pale eyes. She lived with her grandparents because her mother was dead and her father was a drunk. Her grandfather hated her for being a proud lesbian. He'd insult her, call her an embarrassment. Her grandmother wouldn't defend her.

When her girlfriend dumped her, she cried all day, through class, through lunch period, all the way up until the final bell. At the end of the day, she wiped away her tears and turned her face to stone. Her grandparents didn't know she'd had a girlfriend.

When she'd talk to me, she was always very quiet, a departure from her usual thundering force of personality. She'd mumble under her breath, sometimes so quietly I'd have to ask her to repeat herself, louder this time. She'd ask me, again and again, if it was alright for her to love the way she did. I'd remind her, again and again, that it was. I wasn't the only one telling her. I was just one of the precious few she listened to.

"Is there something wrong with me?"

No, there wasn't.

I don't know the girl well anymore. Last I heard, she was moving out of the state. Maybe she found someone else to support her, love her. I certainly hope so.

He asks me what I'm thinking about. I apologize. I'd gotten distracted. My mind had wandered down a rabbit hole of possible pieces of advice I could offer, reassurances I could give. He repeats himself. I tell him I understand. I don't, but that doesn't matter. It's more important that he feels understood. He keeps talking, and I slip back down the rabbit hole of scripts I can read, bits and pieces of guidance I can give.

After you listen to so many stories, they start to sound similar. There's always an issue with their family. There's always some dissatisfaction with themselves. There's always some source of grief or distress that still gnaws at them.

There are only so many things one can say, not because the words are lacking but because there are only so many things people want to hear. People want to feel heard, so you say, “I’m listening.” People want to feel understood, so you say, “I understand.” People want to feel connected, so you say, “I know how you feel.”

I worry sometimes that I seem heartless. I put on the same face to listen to each story, speak with the same voice, say the same words. I’ve heard so many horrible stories that I’ve become somewhat numb to them. Perhaps it’s a defense mechanism. I don’t dare feel too connected lest their story somehow become my burden to bear, my cross to hang on.

I can only guess as to why they tell me these things. What makes me seem so trustworthy? Is it my face? Perhaps the soft curves, the rounded features, something in the color of my eyes, tells them “This is the face of someone you can trust.” I wonder if it’s my voice? It’s rather low for a woman, I think. Maybe it tickles the ears just right, tricks the brain into thinking that maybe this voice is that of someone older, respectable. Then again, maybe it’s the way that I speak? I’ve been told I sound mature for my age. Something in my diction, my thought process, makes me sound more capable than I am.

He’s done talking. We say our goodbyes, and afterwards I’m left with his story swirling around in my head, a whirlwind of dreadful thoughts. A little helper in my brain gathers all the new information, all the thoughts and worries, and stashes it all away in a box beside the rest. There’s a corner of my brain dedicated to other people’s stories. I’ve amassed something of a collection. So many life stories in my head, only one of which is mine. I wonder sometimes, was I a good listener? Or was I just a handy container?

There has to be a balance, I've been told, between preserving oneself and helping others through their pain. I've achieved that balance, I think, but I'm never sure. Sometimes I feel I get too close. Other times I feel too far away to possibly relate.

My own story is a privileged one. My childhood was comparably wonderful. My parents were wealthy enough that I received anything I ever wanted. I remember being drowned in gifts on holidays, presents in the double digits. My mother volunteered at my school. My father read to me every night.

So much changed after my parents divorced. All my parents' investments fell through, and my mother blamed herself for every one of them. It was rather appropriate, unfortunately. They were all predominantly her fault.

My mother became a different person. She was angry, spiteful, despondent, restless. She found a new man. He was awful. He'd drink himself into a monster, howl curses in the dead of night. She'd screech at him in return, a night bird screaming in the dark.

When I stayed with her, we lived in poverty. I remember visiting churches and food shelves just to have something in the fridge. My mother was humiliated. She'd drink away all her money, her account balance spinning down the drain to fund her drowning.

I lived in poverty only selectively, though. When I'd return to my father's house, I lived in relative luxury. The roof over our heads was a reliable, watchful sentinel shielding us from the wind and rain. There was never any doubt we would eat and eat well.

My father tried to support us from afar when we went to our mother's. He sent her money, but she'd squander it, leaving us with precious little to live on. She stayed in motels

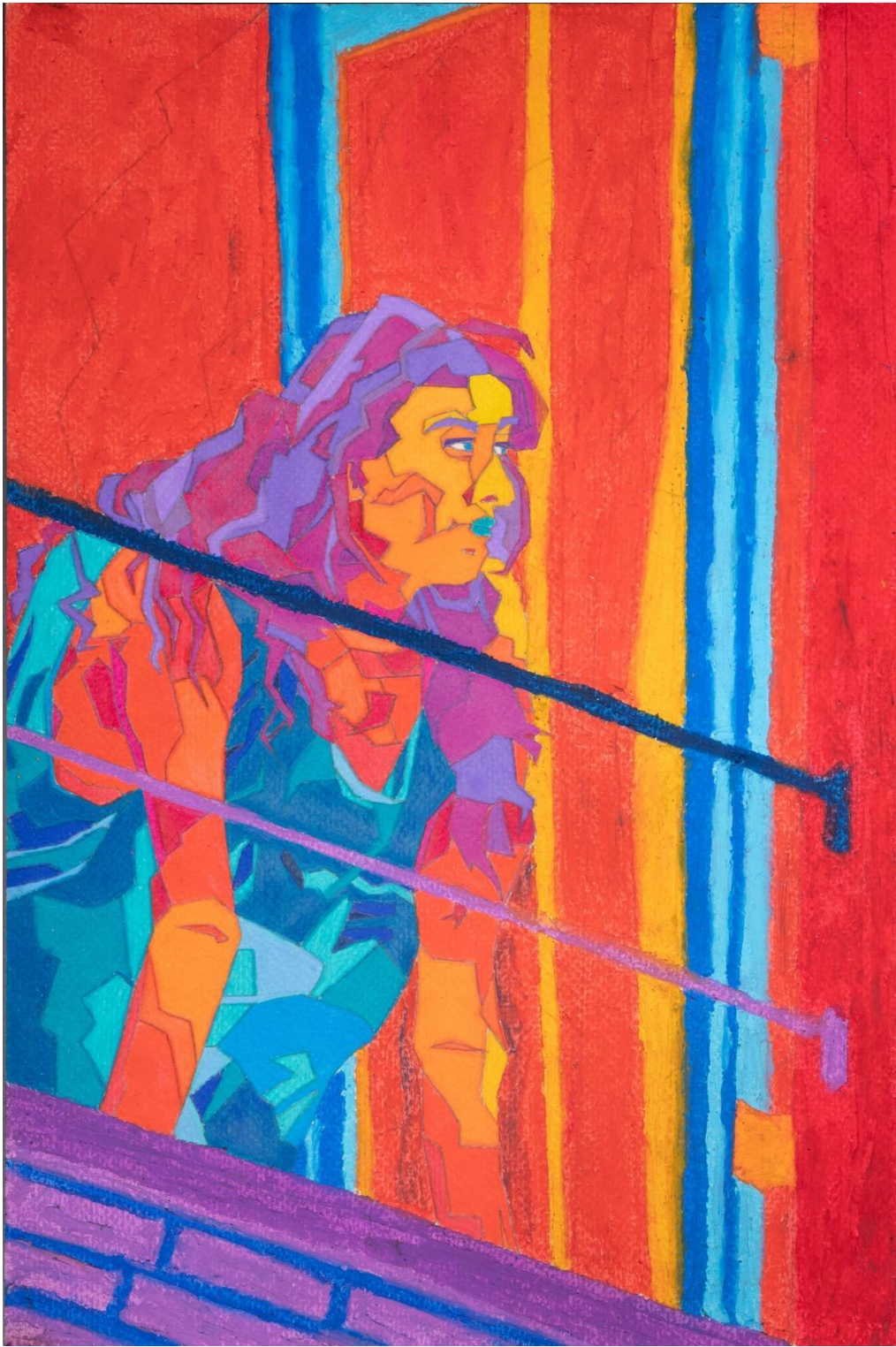
when she couldn't find an apartment that would overlook her bankruptcy. We stayed with our father for a time when she lived in her van, so desperately poor that she couldn't even afford to live in motels anymore.

When I'd call him crying, my father would swoop in to take my brother and I away, a dependable savior, ever-present and reliable. My mother saw this as a betrayal that I would rely on my father to escape her. When I'd return, I was met with contempt. Eventually, I simply stopped returning. My only regret is that I didn't take my brother with me. He loved her even after I lost hope. I thought that was enough.

The names she called me would boil in my belly even when I was apart from her, the aching resentment roiling within me. They would hurtle through my mind, colliding with the walls of my skull, my misery like a horrible headache, hammering to the rhythm of my heartbeat. It would flow through my veins, the despair settling in my belly like the relentless pull of gravity, dragging me down into the dirt. The names, the ugly thoughts, would pummel my insides, and over all the battering agony I was left with one overwhelming thought.

“Was I the problem? Is there something wrong with me?”

It's been years. I'm still not sure.



WOMAN OVER RAILING BY ZACHARY RIEMERMANN

Megan Probach

It felt a lot like moving out. I already lived with my mother, so it was just a matter of taking the belongings from living with my dad and bringing them all to one final place. Most of my stuff had been packed into boxes for me, save for the things they wanted to keep, like my vacation keepsakes and pillows – *for when you visit*, they said, although I never planned to stay the night. I couldn't. I was working, taking classes. I didn't want to. My Barbie dolls and computer games had been packed in a box alongside my books. In another, my clothes and stuffed animals. Not much for such a long time existing at this house.

With college coming up, and my job closer, I had chosen to live with my mother near the cities. City-slickers, my dad would call them. It was a demeaning term, but I grew tired of pleasing him at my expense. Her house was always my place of being, and every week at his felt like isolation. Detainment. Like playing nice for the relatives you don't agree with during a family holiday. Eggshells around every corner, with every word, and, yet, when I turned to my room, nothing in it seemed like mine. Then I would return to my mother's house, have friends and freedom and life. Those weeks always seemed much shorter.

Two big boxes, in the back of a 2000 Buick. Sorrowful hugs, ignoring the pain. Ignoring the past. Ignoring everything. Hiding it all, on both sides. He was never one for emotional confrontation - not subtly, at least. I didn't want to express anything that would be a lie. Dogs barked from behind a screen door. My engine ran idle as we exchanged awkward, Midwestern pleasantries. My backpack was in the front seat, with my old school supplies. An old sequined Justice bag with a big M on the front sat in the leg space – the bag of everything I wanted to

bring between houses every week. Notebooks with scribbled secrets - although my stepmother found them anyway, so they weren't secret anymore. I got good at writing in metaphors – bits of crafts I was starting, a phone charger, and anything else I thought to bring. A laptop bag sat next to it, given as a gift for college, as my dad had given my sister: all my important belongings.

Those two boxes they give me get shoved under my bed. Then, later, shoved into a closet. They are found one spring, and I'm told to look through them. I remember when I used to melt perler beads into designs, remember *The House of Gentle Men*, remember my old Bratz dolls and all their names. I take out my books, take out my dolls, and push the boxes back into a closet. Few of these items belong in my life. Too many of them belong to someone else; they belong to a young girl, just a teen, who went to church, watched TV with her parents, and prayed during meals. She, too, is pushed back into a closet. She belongs in the walls of that cage she was born in, pruned and nipped while I expanded my roots into the soil far away like ground ivy. Sometimes she comes out, like old Christmas decorations, and used for a second before she's overstayed her welcome past the holiday.

"We kept them," my stepmother tells me as they handed me my old pillow and blanket, "For when you stayed the night – although you never did."

"I worked the next day," I say, but that's all. I don't say that I never wanted to. I don't say that it would feel like being a stranger in a foreign place. It feels like betrayal taking them back. They don't live in that old house anymore, full of ghosts and stains. I carry the good I wanted to keep. The rest stays forgotten under the stairs with the Christmas decorations.



IMAGE FROM ALONGSIDE HER: A SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE BY CHRISTY HILYAR

By Taelynn Wade

**Content Warning—Racism*

Black kid! Get in line so we can see who is lightest to darkest!

Whose ugly and more beautiful!

These were the words I remember growing up as a kid.

School and home. What is worse?

These are the words spoken by my own people.

My people who yell, “America is racist!”

“We deserve justice for what our bloodline has suffered through!”

These same people that tell me I deserve to rot in hell,
the darkness of my skin.

The same blacks who claim as they go shopping,

The white people,
stare and compare.

Try to detect the kind of black they might be,

These are the same blacks tired of spotting in their rearview mirror,

The colors red and blue,

That us blacks were raised to view as cruel.

Pulling over because their speakers were screaming,

“King’s Disease3!”

But they love them some 21 Savage.

These the same blacks who scream in anger,

Just as I scream in anger,

Frustrated on where we can belong.

These the same blacks who cannot take it any longer,

Feeling unworthy to be considered,
American people.
The same blacks who claim,
Playin' the role is the only way to be.
Living.
The same blacks who came from my mama,
My granny,
As their mama is my mama,
They granny is mine.
Same slang,
Same type of thang' I used to do,
Those blacks used to do.
Yet,
Just as Jim Crow had done,
Not that long ago,
Keeping his people separate from all blacks,
And claiming it is equal,
Yet, the same blacks who scream I am tired of all white people,
Decided it is best to keep the light skinned,
Dark skinned people separate.
Claiming it is best to keep the people,
Black people,
Separate but equal.
These the same blacks who decided to hate white people,
But hate dark people too.
Claiming they better,
Lightness is brightness,

They claim to be the stars.

They forget stars cannot exist,

Without pure darkness.

By Martha LaBine

Tangling muggy palms,
leaden with self-conceit,
tethered by briars,

and sown by relatives;
a generation tolerating
a kickstand of kindling,

and narrowing significance,
held in a quandary
with bales of dormant apologies—
easily flammable genealogies.

By Najma Sheikh Ali

It began

ideas sprouting like flowers

pencil sliding across the crisp paper

sentences spinning like windmills

It continues

the flame consuming my paper

thoughts flickering like candles

journals piling like a growing wildfire

It still lingers

pages dancing together

stories substituting my dreams

this feeling my definitive destiny

Makya Nevilles-Sorell

**Content Warning—References to death*

When I was a child,
Death stopped by to say, “Hello.”
He said He’s never seen me here
before and He asked me,
“Are you new?”
I said, “I am new in one way,
but old in others.”
I was old enough to know
what the others knew.
Death can be a friend, or an enemy,
although He only wishes
to be understood.

When I was a child,
Death did not mean to scare me
He said He’s been known to do that,
and said, “I’ll see you later.”
That’s when I was terrified.
So, I asked my mother,
“Mom, why do we die?”
She spoke words so crystalline,
so serene and soothing, it was like

a lovely lullaby laid out in lavender.

“Death – my dear – Death

is what gives life meaning.”

By Claudia Ionescu-Robertson

**Content Warning—References to death*

I saw a dead man on my 13th birthday.

My coiled snakes under my red Pegasus's rim were devouring the road in dusty gulps,
leaving behind the run-down Motel 6
with its mustard-green Dodge wagons
snoring like mellowed pets in the stale afternoon breeze.

He must have been sleeping on the train tracks when it happened.

Was he a wanderer, or was he there by a menial accident?
His worn-out shoe was swinging in a tree, a bird with no wings,
purpose, and no haste. Blindingly white, it grounded itself
with one long red feather to us.

As red as the candles on my birthday cake.

By Derek Rivard

Your meaning is lost to me.

As though I'm like a disciple
forever searching for the word of God.
The traces of your art shun me
like a sorrowful father to a troubled child.
Understanding your taste is like speaking
a different language, but no matter who listens,
they are deaf all the same.
Moisture forms on your skin, leaving
confusion to consume me.
Like a beaten dog, I've learned to enjoy the pain,
distracting myself from places
I no longer know.

Our garden's withered into a prison of purgatory.
Time shifts as grey clouds torment
the sky like an unseen war.
The breeze dies, letting the frigid air
frost the earthly fruit.
You could feel something was stalking you,
like a shade honing a sinister smile.
Always feared its evil, scentless bite.

You were never long for this place.

And still, with a golden hand I caressed
and fed you weeping apples, whilst tightening
my rusted chain around your wrists.

The title of martyr has forever been stolen from me.
My hands like smoke, the fruit of their labor
is the fleeing of their graces,
destined to unreal harbors.
A thousand ships choked in a wildfire
of grey flame and white ash.
Like a dream, the scent of apple trees
kiss your hands,
leaving welts.

Locked in the seeds of a rotten apple,
 your gift of self is raked.
The apples are bruised,
rotting from the inside out,
like an infection festering the wound,
 and I can't help but think of you.
Like scars from the past poisoning their skin,
 turning you black.
 With shifty eyes you beg for help,
 but I stay away.

Bitter sweet is the apple,
like a double-edged sword,
a symbol of knowledge,
 the origin of sin.

You've eaten this apple before,

so young...
 too young.

For once I understand.

Now it's my turn to consume the apple.

By Sierra Burke

**Content Warning—Mental health*

Grey fog no longer weaves its way through my brain,
but I miss its biting embrace.

The kind of cold that slips under your skin
and sucks your flesh to your ribs.

I am insulated now with drooping, sodden clouds,
heavy with unfallen rain.

I told myself I'd never again crave
the deep freeze of January.

But here I stand,
gazing into the frozen abyss,
willing the cold to return.

I've lost my internal companion
that kept me comfortably on ice.

Frozen in time.

Not moving forwards
but never going back.

I'm not who I used to be,

But I don't know how to live

As the person

I am now.

By James Ricci

**Content Warning—Mental health*

one once told me writing is vulnerability,
a partaking of pride or maybe humility
to find a means, or exercise futility?
to share space in proximity, resides anxiety
they said let's spend some free time, sometime, possibly,
we both know damn well that it does not come free
"it should all come easy" they say
"you should have no reason" they say
"to be so reserved, so lost, so unwritten" they say
am i to become, to grow into being "one day"
or remain, reduced to solely being, repeating "one day"
am i self-absorbed? or finding myself
am i doing it right? or hurting myself
can i make things right? is there such a thing?
should i invest in fate, and what it brings?
do i have place, between
should i idly find comfort, in simple things?
is sharing my essence an exercise in purpose?
I gaze upon my privilege and pain, do I deserve this?
am I flailing wildly, fawning for attention?
like a wailing infant, seeking direction?
to remain in their minds, their retention?
or do i truly want to help, and learn lessons?

lessons to give, and lessons to receive
find definition in the core of our beings
to leave an impression, to be impressed upon
to find reason
wandering

.....

i never stopped to think about how the past would be so important while i was making it.
how could i, i was just a kid

i am not who i was, i wish i was who i am.
a crystal ball, smoking flowing through it's interior
a hazy window into memories familiar.
some welcome, some sharp and fanged

i am not who i was, i wish i was who i am.
psychological tourism, on your left you'll see pain, on your right you'll see triumph.
welcome to the show, promise me you won't cry if i am.
Is it the right impression, have I been too intense?
have You possibly misconstrued my intent?
Or maybe you know it better than i do.

i am not who i was, i wish i was who i am.

.....

It seems i've lost myself again
i know they think better of me
i wish within could think better of me
building up is tiring

tearing down is relief until it isn't
tearing up is freedom but
who can you truly share that pain with?
why must we worry about who sees us cry
vulnerability is embarrassing
strength demands otherwise
ignore the elephant in the room until its sitting in your lap
collapse. i hope i have what it takes to bounce back

.....

where will I find enough
where will we find enough
what will it take
what will it take from us
who will it break
who is to blame
when
when
why
how

.....

I wonder sometimes if it's how it's meant to be.

she, me, ~~we~~

would it had been different if I weren't so heavy
or maybe heavier

right person, wrong time. Is there such a thing
can one only fall in love with who one could become?
if right now isn't enough.
affectionate dependency
ignoring those eerie hidden tendencies
pretending you're perfect, pretending they're perfect
deciding all the pain to be is worth it
can you truly be amorous if there dwells a need to change your ways.
or perhaps theirs.

love, infatuation
where's the line
who drew it

.....

i no longer intend to make excuses for myself.
reasons and explications of failure to take care of myself.
this day, tomorrow, things will change. next week, same thing.
it won't prove useful to ask why. i must forgive. them, me, us, it.
dopamine, a commodity sold cheap,
i wish to return to simple things.
knowing that's impossible i intend to drive forward.
no longer for the sake of proof of worth, proof i'm enough.
proof to them.
I must do it because I know I can. I can change.
maybe tomorrow.

i am not who i was,
there is unlimited possibility as to who I can be.

By Ashlee Millette

The soul of the field.
Grain of wheat,
rattling in the breeze.
Lavender naked and bathing,
glowing in the lamplight,
fragile to touch.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.
Sighing, yawning, impatient.
Wondering, and pacing,

by the cherry trees.
For the brisk air
that burns to touch.
June is like an orange,
peeling each day away
till the gray of December.
When we go numb
and rest.

By Claudia Ionescu-Robertson

**Content Warning—References to surgery*

"It's healing beautifully," the surgeon says

after the corset of bandages has been removed
from my itchy and torn flesh.

My finger strokes the jagged red line,
learning the new geography of my body,
angry, where once was sweet.

The cicatrix lays sumptuously,
a ribbon of lace like my Victoria's Secret bras
long discarded in the garbage.

Later, during the ordinary rituals of the day,
my child's fingers will curl and burrow into tender skin,
pulling the flesh apart again, and letting out

the songs hidden within,
the beauty of life given again.

By Makya Nevilles-Sorell

Here's a bit of truth

I

Am from Duluth,

But

Someone should have told ya,

now,

It's East of the Dakotas.

That's

The one in Minnesota.

Not Georgia.

Up North,

the summers are spent

down

at "The Wall."

This one is

found –

by the shore. Well,

next to The Lift Bridge.

Whether you sit or explore, you can tell, this is –

where We have been seen playing carefree.

All Our responsibilities aloof – hurrah
All of us saying, “Ope!” – and “Uff-da.”

The shortest of seasons approved of
And can be found in the Twin Ports –
That’s Spring, Summer,
Fall,

They’re known for leading us all
Astray,
and to that longer one, of course.
The one that overstays –
Its Welcome, – which would be Winter –
Unwanted and unwelcomed –
with its windy weather and wealthy snowfall.

It’s a place I hold dear. A place I know and Love.
A place which with you, I’d like to share some –
Secrets.

When driving on I-35, you wouldn’t know that –

Beneath it,

There’s a whole world of art.
Rightfully named, “Graffiti Graveyard”

By Us locals. A hidden gem, an opal.

Many will

Walk –
to Bayfront Festival Park, found

Across –
from that gem in the dark.

Astounded –
by the festival of lights, that go up every year.
You may have heard of it, by mouth or by ear,

Bentleyville.

Christmas cheer –
lights up the sky every time it appears

And it eventually will.

We all know why,
Because it shows up every year and
I would not lie. It's
Open to all, as long as you come here –

To the place I hold dear. The place I know and Love
The place which with you, I'd like to share
An iota

Of things someone should have told ya

Located Southeast of Manitoba,

That is Duluth –

In Minnesota.

Not Georgia.

DULUTH BY SAM BENDER



By Derek Rivard

What is beauty to you?
Something delicate
like a rose?
Something so pleasant
as a perfect face?
Maybe something breathtaking
like a miraculous sunset?
These are beautiful things,
but none of which I seek.

I wish to witness
the beauty of an eye
that has never known a day
without tears.

I beg to experience
the beauty of a painting
with the pallet of simple tones
like an old movie.

I ask to feel
the beauty of a heart
that has never felt the
warmth of another.

I plead to touch
the beauty of a figure
scarred by the efforts of a
broken soul.

I crave
a mind that is of the clouds,
filled of dreams
of a better lie.

I see the beauty
in the pain.

The pain that forces you
to face yourself,
to love yourself.
The sort of beauty that cradles the night
like a mother to a babe.

A tune which sing's gentle whispers to
the ears of a dying dream.

A sensation that makes me crave the pain,
the empathy of another.

I
crave the
eyes.

I
crave the
scene.

I
crave the
heart.

I
crave the
scars.

I
crave the
dreams.

I
crave the
pain.

I
crave
beauty.

By Lauren Commaford

The smell of the coffee beans brewing,
like they are rushing to get out of the coffee shop door.
The sounds of the wind brushing through each leaf on the trees.
The noise of people walking from every direction,
stepping on the crunchy leaves that have fallen from above.
The feeling of the cool autumn breeze gripping my skin.
The warm steam of my coffee trickled up to fight the cold.
This place is so quiet,
yet so chaotic.
Opening my eyes and taking in everything around me.
The perfectly blue skies with the perfect fall colors

Watching the strangers walking on this city street.
Are they going to work?
Are they late for work?
Are they college students just like me?
Are they shopping around here?
Have they tried this coffee shop?
So much to take in,
i could sit here forever and never get bored.
Taking a step back from this hectic life,
to just observe my surroundings.
Allowing the world to keep moving,
and letting everything go.

By Ashley Yang

Breeze of the night,
the fondness for you grows.
Heart flutters, mouth mute,
it feels like flying.
Secrets like hidden gold;
missing the cool dark;
so simple but complex
like magic.
Looks like a rare
jewel of the color lilac,
the image floods and
holds the imagination
as a hostage like a prisoner.
Young night;
fingers tremble to the
promised sound— silence.
Like crystals, the night
sky is clear and sparkling.

By Martha LaBine

**Content Warning—Sexuality/sexual references*

The crack in the cement
draws me close to its own face,
fluidly filled with mirrors of dissent
only meant to reflect, not replace.

Still under the burdens,
there is a current underneath,
made *darker* with assertions,
and breathing to float—
or choosing to seethe.

Resting in this place,
stuck now, after always wanting
to stay, the avoidance of the storm's
own grate, led comfort to plateau
through intentional replay.

Nothing more to this than
a shallow collection.

The depth stops
at the first knuckle of my index finger,
and though I'm not interested
in any form of connection,
hold me like a splinter,

like you need to be *inside me*
to feel *something*.

Now I, as a woman, must go
because I'm looking like a man,
only seeing my surroundings
as nothing more than holes.

By Abby Walberg

**Content Warning—Mental health*

The parasite within you is a liar
It binds to you
To your cave of loneliness
Telling you to sleep all-day
Filling your brain with self-loathing
Saying that you're a burden
Sewing your mouth shut to prevent being evicted
Not allowing any loving voice to speak over
Trying to free you from your chains
How can I help you when the monster is all you hear

It has latched onto your being
Fighting to keep your thoughts hidden
Only to help itself grow
It's feeding off of your despair
Consuming all that you are
Stealing your days away
Leaving you numb and lifeless
Left smothered by the voices in your head
Struggling to reach fresh air
Only to think why no one has come to rescue you

By Lauren Commaford

Walking the streets of Soho, New York.

I see someone

Or me.

Or someone.

Or me.

Quickly my head snaps forward

I snap back around

At the same time,

She does.

I pinch myself.

Trying to escape this terrible dream.

And I wince...

Not a dream.

I feel as if I'm looking in the mirror that has broken glass,

Allowing me to see more than one of me.

A mirror. On the crowded streets?

I don't know her name.

Or if she even has a name

Or if it's even someone.

Or if it's me.

By Ashley Yang

Far out in the distance, a pair of gleaming eyes,
it comes from an odd-looking man,
and now wondering, what would he try?

He tiptoes closer, one inch at a time,
now able to see, the man is tan,
In the distance, a pair of gleaming eyes.

His hair looks raggedy and fried,
probably from laying on hot land,
but wondering, what would he try?

Dirty face, but clean lines, he also cries;
dirt everywhere, but his hands,
and again, the pair of gleaming eyes.

Mouth shut, but when opened, tongue-tied,
and with his feet, he digs into the sand,
still wondering, what would he try?

Only now was he trying to find,
the will to live, like finding a clan,
with his beady, gleaming eyes,
he wonders, what should he try?

By Ashlee Millette

Fear,
the idea that consumes you raw.
That gnaws on those almond- shaped nuclei
that reside in your temporal lobe.
Like at the age of five,
the thought of monsters hiding under your bed
left you restless and scared,
slowly killing like a game of chess-
as you'd ponder the worst.

As time ages, fear revolves around security.
Security of a job, of money, of life-
an endless cycle of obstacles to overcome,
like the strategy of playing your pawns in chess.
Although, you may not leap over these hurdles as gently
as a horse at an equestrian competition,
if your fear starts s p r e a d i n g and consuming you.

Fear is what will trap you in a corner,
like a rook in the starting formation of a chess game.
Fear is this dark cloud that lingers inside.

It follows you and g r O W S every step you take,
awaiting its chance to ooze its thick preventions on you.
This cloud will makes you grow hungry,

but not for more.

It'll leave emptiness and the feeling to seclude,
to hide under the covers, like when you were five.

You must be strategic, play your pawns correctly
to checkmate fear.

By Christy Hilyar

**Author's Note: This poem is dedicated to Nikki Jagodzinski. Thank you for helping me find the courage to choose life, to send my work into the world, and to ask for help when I couldn't walk on my own anymore.*

On a trail, alongside her, is where I first became aware of a
fragrance that would forever be a
time machine; a savor of
northern white cedar and rich earthy leaves that were
saying goodbye, to longer days. My feet, like
small children found joy in the "whoosh" of each step.
Kicking up golden gifts of birch foliage
sprinkled on the forest floor after
raining down like nature's glitter.

Noticing for the first time how tree
roots spread out like veins,
recognition of how deeply connected we all truly are. The
arteries of earth, in their twists and loops,
formed cursive words that said...

"it's never too late for the child within you to find happiness,
and you are never too old to discover new things through youthful eyes."

I knew then, I would never feel alone again.

Like a shepherd of that sacred land,
she cared for me and offered me teachings. I
embarked on a
pilgrimage filled with maps to find the me
I never knew I needed, and my
true north that would always guide me back.
Assurance I would never be lost again. A
journey that brought understanding that
spirituality could be found under a canopy of trees or in wide open fields. As my
faith strengthened, so did my courage.
Revealing the strongest and yet most
vulnerable me I had ever been.
Bravely authentic.

Beside her is where I
unearthed the gospel truth, that not all great

love stories happen between two humans, and not all
gospels are found within the four walls, where man,
not God, determines who is worthy.
Step by step I grasped that there was a different way than a church where
patriarchy grows. A way that would
show me truths that
aligned with my internal
compass. Truths that I would come to know as
noble instead of commanding.

She brought me to the shore where
waves composed notes of a
hymnal of healing and hope.
Chiming like Tibetan singing bowls, the rocks
performed a song that the water conducted. The waves
sang “shalom aleichem”. I
danced beneath the moon without fear.
Beside me she watched, without judgment.
Never, had I ever, felt so free from the
ugliest parts of myself that I had always
hidden, letting no one see.

It was on a trail alongside her that I first became aware of the feeling of
falling truly and unconditionally in love with her, with
myself, the earth that I am a part of, and that is a part of me. I
discovered a friendship I’d always ached for and, a personal
creed that became my foundation. With each mile,
growing as a student of the universe.
Developing patience, harmony and benevolence, all
necessary to live a life beyond just survival. I
honored her by leaving no trace, only
planting wishes to someday return.
Wishes to spend the rest of my days
beside her.

I whisper her name often,
in hopes of manifesting more than just visits when I can sneak away.
“Gichigami”
Loving the way her
Ojibwe name
rolls off my tongue,
“Gichigami”
Awaiting the day I can return to her,
forever.
Gichigami...The great and Superior, Gichigami...