

THE RAPIDS REVIEW 2024



THE MUNCHING
BY CLAUDIA IONESCU-ROBERTSON

THE RAPIDS REVIEW 2024

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

ARCC *THE 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, sexual orientations, marital statuses, ages, religions, and abilities.

A note from the editor:

Welcome! Thank you for picking up the 2024 edition of *The Rapids Review*. We are excited to share with you the poems, stories, and artwork that Anoka-Ramsey Community College students have created. The editorial team has been intentional to read each piece with care and have been personally inspired by the compelling submissions that have sung off the page. Like a symphony, this literary journal and its beauty wouldn't be possible without each student who courageously shared their authentic voice and experience. We officially present to you *The Rapids Review* and like Jack Gilbert said in his poem "A Brief for the Defense," we hope you will come away knowing that in a world full of suffering and sorrow "there will be music despite everything."

Sincerely,

Eric Linder

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to our wholehearted team of editors who engaged in the reading and deliberation process with passion and professionalism. A special thank you to Professor Laurel Smith whose compassionate leadership and support created space for students to grow as editors and leaders throughout this process. Lastly, we want to thank everyone who submitted to the journal this year. The 2024 edition of The Rapids Review wouldn't exist without your instrumental contributions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----|
| A Father's Hope (Marilyn Boros) | 6 |
| After Loss (Aurora Monthony) | 9 |
| My Familia (Morgan Schmidt) | 10 |
| My Armor (Aurora Monthony) | 11 |
| My mother is no saint (Emma Endres) | 13 |
| Drink Up (Heather Bowler) | 14 |
| Delicately Interconnected (Morgan Loff) | 15 |
| Zealous Love (Nancy Martinez) | 16 |
| Love on a Saturday (Evelyn Soldner) | 17 |
| Waiting for the A-Ha (Shelby Gunderson) | 19 |
| For the Sake of the Others (Calleigh Haglund) | 20 |
| Pride (Morgan Schmidt) | 21 |
| Escapism (Malorie Chock) | 22 |
| How Dare She (Ramsey Jones) | 23 |
| Oh the Places I've Slept (Tony Albright) | 24 |
| To See and Be Seen (Eric Linder) | 25 |
| Reservoir (Martha LaBine) | 26 |
| Shower (Heather Bowler) | 27 |
| Slivers (Martha LaBine) | 28 |
| For All the Unlucky Dice Rollers (Ariel Bjorneberg) | 29 |
| Snow Types (Rachael Hiles) | 30 |
| Salted Tongue (Lynnea Johnson) | 31 |

ART

| | |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| The Munching (Claudia Ionescu-Robertson) | Front Cover |
| Dune (Tanner Loe) | 33 |
| Heceta (Tanner Loe) | 34 |
| Stillness (Eric Linder) | 35 |
| Exposure Therapy (Eric Linder) | 36 |
| Polarizing Times (Eric Linder) | 37 |
| Azaela Encore (Marilyn Boros) | 38 |
| Sights of Spring (Marilyn Boros) | 39 |
| Take a Walk (Nathaniel Oman) | 40 |
| Awakening (Nathaniel Oman) | Inside Back Cover |
| Graze (Tanner Loe) | Back Cover |

CREATIVE NONFICTION

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Pumpkins (Amber Stark-Herberg) | 42 |
| Amidst the Chaos (Aletheia Pull) | 47 |
| First Look (Hannah Sovich) | 49 |
| My Angel (April Mengelkoch) | 51 |
| We Are Hunters (Rachael Hiles) | 53 |
| Saw What Owl? (Audrey Mann) | 56 |

FICTION

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| The Forest Speaks (Alex Jaspers) | 59 |
| Up North (Claudia Ionescu-Robertson) | 62 |
| The Last Polaroid (Aurora Monthony) | 65 |
| Fretting Over Nothing (Russell Melby) | 66 |
| “Compos Mentis / The Harrowing Eyes” (Makya NeVilles-Sorell) | 69 |

SCREENWRITING/PLAYWRITING

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Troubled Waters (Eric Linder) | 76 |
|-------------------------------|----|



A FATHER'S HOPE

By Marilyn Boros

In the morning before the dawn,
Tumbling toward the light,
I saw your face;
You held my tiny being safely in your loving hands.

There were diapers to change;
Little ones to feed;
And so many sticky hands to hold;
Yet, you found joy in each of us;
And celebrated life in its greatness.

I giggled and sat in the creaky red wagon;
As you pulled us up and down
The long dirt driveway,
Around and around the circle garden,
Where the old willow tree and the bluebells grew;
You were out of breath!
But it was Sunday and a time to play with Dad.

The seasons flowed from one to the other;
You sold houses;
And walked the lands of acreage in the countryside;

Together, you and Mom taught me the joys of nature;
There were berries to pick, trees to climb,
Romps in the woods, agates,
Beautiful fall leaves, and snowball fights!

When the pain of life came,
You taught me to turn to the Source of all beings;
And I saw,

Your footsteps.

I remember the Mass – all in Latin;
When my knees hurt from the stiff wooden kneelers,
I'd ask, "*Couldn't I sit, just for a moment, Daddy?*"

You'd shake your head and motion, "Look...listen."

And so, I looked.

And so, I listened.

I stared at the beautiful stained-glass windows
and the mural behind the altar;
During communion, I could hear your voice singing;
After Mass, the church bells rang;

My Faith was born of your Faith.

Though I never heard you say it,
Your life was based on Hope.

Once when I was up early,
I caught a glimpse of you kneeling against your bed;
It was the day I got to ride along while you drove the school bus;
Wasn't I the luckiest little girl in the world?

Though I never knew what you prayed for,
You taught me,

Hope.

Then, in the frustration of not understanding a daughter's choices,
There were misunderstandings;
I was pulled in a different direction;
We grew apart.

And, I suspect,
you were still on your knees.

Years later, when the Irish Sister's weathered black shoes
Appeared under the curtain of my hospital room,
I began to recall the Hope you had taught me;
Sister's gentle, smiling face reminded me of your Faith;

I remembered the Love you showed me;

Your weekly calls to me hid the worry in your voice.

“How are you today? All my priest friends are praying for you.”
Your jokes and care kept me from sinking into
The black hole of despair thrust upon me by the doctor’s words,
“Pancreatic cancer;”

Though I refused to tell you my deepest fear,
That of leaving my two young children motherless,
Somehow you knew;
You were still the salesman,
Selling me hope...the hope I needed, to fight.

Only days before your death,
We spoke of the brevity of life,
And how, when our life’s work was ended,
We would be called home again.

Faith, Hope, Love- your soul’s gifts to me.

How grateful I am.

AFTER LOSS

By Aurora Monthony

Kitchen counter.
Cup of coffee.
Warm,
but not warm enough
to block out the pummeling, icy fist let in through the open window.
Gray fog hangs heavy in the air,
clinging to the trees and
washing out the world.
Paintings hanging on the wall,
that used to smile,
now frown.
An empty chair
wishes for the weight of an occupant.
An empty harp is left to disappointedly collect dust;
nobody's fingers floating across the strings.
An empty bed sits waiting,
its cold blankets wishing to be wrapped around someone.
One plate on the table
Looks idly for its mate.
A bird sits alone somewhere outside the window,
calling out.
Silence chokes the air,
suffocating
the faint echoes of laughter and conversations.
A depressed pair of boots sag in the doorway,
left hap-hazardly behind.
One person
tugs on a lonely sweater,
eyes avoiding the sorrowful gaze
of the mournful house.
Nearby,
a fat, orange cat sits in its bed,
watching
and waiting,
endlessly.

MY FAMILIA

By Morgan Schmidt

My hermano y yo
both took Spanish for three years.
My parents don't know mierda.
When I have secrets to share,
I'll speak for my family to hear:
"Hola hermano ¿has oído?".
My brother will smile and say
"No ¿que es?".
And my parents?
Ellos nunca sabrán.

MY ARMOR

By Aurora Monthony

My armor
is
the door to my room,
closing behind me
and blocking out the swarms of voices
that demand to be let in.
A bubble of safety
in a dangerous world.

My armor
is
the oversized sweatshirt
I pull over my head
and down to my knees.
I hide inside
its hood and too-long sleeves,
away from the prying eyes
of enemy spies.

My armor
is
my words,
carefully crafted into sharp spears
that pierce the skin of my opponents
and the walls I've built,
high into the sky,
to keep out the intruders
who dare to keep climbing.

My armor
is
my phone,
kept up to my face
in uncertain surroundings.
I look intently
for nothing.
A perfect disguise

against
the curious looks
of unknown assailants.

My armor
is
my mother,
who shields me
when I am barraged by
the attacks of word-wielding warriors
who surround me
and demand to know
where my guarded secrets lie.
She protects me also from
my mind,
which threatens to destroy me.
A tsunami of panic
and strangling horror,
its icy fingers reach for me,
but remain unable to break through
her impenetrable
forcefield.

MY MOTHER IS NO SAINT

By Emma Endres

A woman with such poise
Such knowledge you couldn't bare
She seems to tune out the noise
That's been thrown around the air
She seems to have it all together
No matter the day
No matter the weather
And there isn't a bad thing about her you could say
Except for what I have uncovered
Something about her just wasn't right
I have finally discovered
Who she is in the night
I saw her escape in her jeep
And her secrets she can no longer keep

DRINK UP

By Heather Bowler

Forgive the dad who ran off.
Forgive the sister who teases.
Forgive the brother who drinks.
Forgive the young pregnant mom.
Forgive the labor worker who whistles.
Forgive the married one who lies and cheats.
Forgive insurance companies that refuse to pay.
Forgive the doctors who ignored your symptoms.
Forgive the IRS, and the government that enables.
Forgive the lying politicians who only line pockets.
Forgive billionaires in their crisply ironed underwear,
perching on their big 10-million-dollar yachts, sipping
their champagne while you guzzle lead-laced tap water.
Forgive the boy who hit you with the big red ball at recess.
Forgive the teacher who said, "You won't amount to anything."
Forgive the haggard old church lady who sweetly condemns you to hell.
Forgive the new golden puppy who piddles where you step in clean
socks.
Forgive landlords who buy homes with cash when you need a loan.
Forgive addicts who leave needles at your child's playground.
Forgive those living in tents under your new overpass.
Forgive the thug who mugs you at gunpoint.
Forgive the thief who steals your BMW.
Forgive the child molesters.
Forgive the murderers.
Forgive the rapists
and
forgive
yourself
for being
unable to forgive.

DELICATELY INTERCONNECTED

By Morgan Loff

We are never separate from nature, even as we feel the unwelcoming cold of concrete beneath our feet. The flow of traffic like a river where cyclists are stuck in the currents and fighting the tides. In the metropolitan forest, animated entities contend and cooperate. There are beings whose existence allows others to breathe. Without you there wouldn't be me. I forage for fungi and find them fruiting in clusters. Below the soil there are vast Mycorrhizal networks that allow the trees to speak. Even spiders weave colorful crocheted webs of belonging. A patchwork of apartment windows light the pitch black sky like stars coming alive at night. Each individual shimmers, exuding an aura of their own amidst a sea of glimmering iridescence.

ZEALOUS LOVE

By Nancy Martinez

Away from you, my heart aches.
Beside you is where I want to be.
Constantly wondering when you cry.
Desperate attempts are causing me to drown.
Everyday things are supposed to get easier.
Fear will consume me the day you fall.
Grief makes me want to grovel.
How can I do this in an empty home?
I think that pain is inevitable.
Just tell me this is all a joke.
Knowing everything, the feeling is enough to kill.
Left before, but I never learned.
Melancholy tones pour from my mouth.
Never say never, until they say no.
Over the year everything has gotten older.
Present isn't enough to pacify.
Questions left unanswered, and I quit.
Racing thoughts left to recharge.
Somebody will tell you my secrets.
Try as I might, it won't come true.
Unlikely that we'd be so unlucky.
Victims to love, the effort was vigorous.
Why did we choose to wander?
Xanthic flowers bloom as your words pierce my xiphoid.
You are the only one I want to yearn.
Zealous at first but we amounted to zilch.

LOVE ON A SATURDAY

By Evelyn Soldner

Love on a Saturday—it can tell a story,
can take you somewhere new,
somewhere cool, somewhere away from
the officer and momma and give you your own turn
at happiness, if only for tonight.
That night anyone can be a hero,
everybody can try their hand at being someone new,
trying something they were scared of.
A waltz, a date, to pair off with someone
who they were too nervous to meet before
the moment, the passionate moment where
the evening falls and you can remember who
you are at night. There's a reason the fairytale
ends at midnight, because after that the little
things become so big—lunch is a feast,
being alive is a masterpiece, there are
multitudes of strangers you meet
and any one of them could be the one you marry.
The road is hazy, and the woman in the mirror is too—
makeup smudged, grin giddy, still here in the morning
but so subdued. Could you ever see her again,
or will she be lost to time when you wake?
You can't bear the thought of losing her, of
waking now, waking soon, waking later,
waking and seeing she was nothing more
than the night's mirage. Send the midnight
agents every day, if that's what it takes to
remember her, to remember the liaisons,
to recount the paeon to all of her beauty,
the poems you could write about a wink
or the little smile she gave around you.
You search uptown, downtown,
like every second that goes by this Sunday
is love's sand falling through a beautiful,
ornate hourglass, finishing its drifting descent,
putting the muse of your art into a pit she can't move on from.
You know you barely know her, don't you?

You know that, but you also know beneath the black sky,
alone save for her, agony ceased for a moment,
for the steps you took together, and you will give anything,
anything at all, to catch a glimpse of her,
even if she's only in line at the ticket booth,
even if she tells you she's sworn off of love,
even if she scoffs at your ballads,
because any answer is better than to lose her,
to see her with someone who could never love her
more than you.

There are moments where you wish you could just
forget her, forget it all, but that would only mean
you play this game another night,
a reprise of all the shadows come before.

WAITING FOR THE A-HA

By Shelby Gunderson

A longing for love twisted in the sheets of loneliness.
A fear of falling through a floor full of failures.
Give up and let go, give in and grieve.
The lightbulb won't light when I twist to the right,
did I flip the switch one too many times?
Questions need answering, mind needs numbing, kids need feeding.
Endure the ache, suffer the pain, forgive the trauma.
A piggybank full of unwanted thoughts, just smash it open,
I can always buy another.
I'm scared of the scarce, lying to get the last then laughing at the lost.
Memories are forgotten, revolts aren't stopping.
The apocalypse of life started when our minds turned against us.

FOR THE SAKE OF THE OTHERS

By Calleigh Haglund

Voices from all sides mumbled
the same words. Like dense smoke,
they start to suffocate me.

I had to kill them. For the sake
of those around me, they had to wither
away like a flower in the fall.

My sobs of grief echo through
the air like a crow's cry for help.

When the time came, I sat them down.
They stared into my eyes as I poured
us drinks. Red liquid, too clear to be blood
but the right color, filled the glass.

The look of sorrow in their eyes was
too much for me to handle. I looked away,
but in the dark of my mind, I could still see
them, sad with eyes like dark lakes.

They'd ask why, and I can't answer.
I raised my glass, and they did
the same. Then, with my shaking
breath, they took their last.

PRIDE

By Morgan Schmidt

Nothing could suppress my pride
The day I hung my flag in my window
I was ecstatic, elated, I could be myself.
I wasn't afraid to let the world know.

And now you're tucked in a garbage bag
A dead rainbow, torn and faded.
What happened to your pride and glory?
And why is mine as torn as you?

ESCAPISM

By Malorie Chock

A drop of ink flows from the pen.
Slow and steady, I create a gentle rainfall.
The quiet pitter-patter of the pen picks up pace.
The sprinkle turning into a shower.
As more and more ideas begin to surface,
the pressure begins to strengthen.
The pen can't move fast enough.
The shower to runoff,
runoff to a stream,
the stream to a river,
the river to a waterfall,
a tsunami to a hurricane to-
The pen runs off the paper.
As I look down at the mess I've made,
the table looks back up to me and whispers,
"Be careful, child; it's not always going to work as an escape."

HOW DARE SHE

By Ramsey Jones

How Dare She
Beat
The Concrete Drums?
With plum
Colored shoes caked
With the hardest to
Peel-off mud.

How Dare She
Escape
The Toxic Taste?
Of the fretting-faced
Words
Which confined
Her to a safe place.

How Dare She
Seek
The Salty Streaks?
To pour out
From her cheeks
Wearing the struggle
Is the ultimate defeat.

How Dare She
Outrun

The Voice of Reason.

OH THE PLACES I SLEPT

By Tony Albright

The parking lot of Wal-Mart
because I heard it was allowed.
Borst Park during the daytime
because I-5 can sound like a river.
Word of Life Christian Center Campground
because Pastor Cotton was like a grandpa.
On the street outside Express Personnel Services
because it was more reliable than driving there.
The alley behind Fox Theatre
because Bob Corl was a friend.
The parking lot at Centralia College
because my parking pass hadn't expired yet.
The street outside the Timberland Library
because it felt good to be near books.
Paradise RV Resort in Mossyrock
because mom had a membership.
In a tent by the Chehalis River
because it felt like camping.
Anywhere I wouldn't be chased away
because I didn't want to be a bother.
Outside the house I first came home to
because it felt like my parents left it to me.
In my king bed every night with my wife
because I didn't let all of the other places kill me.

TO SEE AND BE SEEN

By Eric Linder

I can still hear the squeaky wheels of shopping carts being pushed by men and women clinging onto what's left of their lives. The Psalms a man hollered in desperation and perfect accuracy still resound in my ears. Mothers screamed at their children to stop crying while rushing to a nearby shelter. Others laid curled up beneath buildings after scavenging the whole world for the love of a father and failing to find it. A homeless woman invited me into her tent, a portal into her reality, where we ate Hostess Streusel Coffee Cakes and investigated each other's eyes. As she looked at the tiny version of herself in my blue, she was transported to a moment where she was no longer invisible. Seeing myself in her brown, the tension in my body that had built up over years of self-consciousness began to melt and I joined her in the present. Surrounded by the sounds of human beings groaning to be heard by heaven, both of us munched and laughed and reveled in what felt like a dinner party being thrown to spite suffering and risk delight.

RESERVOIR

By Martha LaBine

Collecting in an area I cannot drain,
stagnant until I evaporate,
only then will it be too late
because when accumulating into a lukewarm reservoir
is all you know,
stagnancy becomes the reflection of an overflow.

SHOWER

By Heather Bowler

Soft

steamy

droplets

fall

from above

gently landing

on goose

bump riddled

skin

like

kisses

breathing

life

into aching

limbs.

In

my

private

rainstorm

I am reborn.

SLIVERS

By Martha LaBine

Living wounds need to be left alone
so that they may die
before being subjected
to supporting a home.
Such lesions insert themselves
into the forest floor,
then roll over into a wood paneled ceiling
revealing severed trees—
the only form that leaves slivers.
As my eyes swim lazily in the knots,
bared when I lay on my back,
I take to ripping the seams,
opening old wounds
with fingers like driftwood,
soothing the dead wood,
and if I cannot resist comforting
what I assume to be my roots,
then would you please tell me this:
“Warmth was never something you had,
and the fire burning in the palm of your hand
was only ignited
because it was filled with slivers of a man.”

FOR ALL THE UNLUCKY DICE ROLLERS

Dungeons and Dragons Edition

By Ariel Bjerneberg

A glaring portrait
staring unseeing
upwards to a face
an undeniable loss
the fall from grace

The heavy weight
of failure consumes
distraught features
drawing inwards
impatient creatures

Inevitable consequence
unlikely chances come
to light emboldened by
circumstances, clutching
the support of an ally

The wicked smile
of the puppetmaster
pulls at fate, clipping
strings of life erased
fortune starts flipping

A natural one,
the game has begun.

SNOW TYPES

By Rachael Hiles

Snow comes in variation,
So much deviation.

The soft clumps
That stick to windows
And eyelashes.

The single flakes
That flutter and twirl
To catch on your tongue.

The dazzling snow,
In drifts across the ground
Catching the sun,
Radiant as the moon.

The softer sparkle,
Of the glitter snow,
That subtly winks,
With a thousand miniature stars.

Yet the best snow of all
Is the kind that falls,
Silently, at night.
Coating the world in a serene, still, silence.
Transforming the world,
Into nothing but white.

SALTED TONGUE

By Lynnea Johnson

The seashell rested on my opened palms
and the sound of waves crashing filled my ears.
I felt the sand on my feet, in between my toes.
The smell of salt flowed through my nose,
my tongue felt as though it was covered in salt.
The warm, soft sand fell out of the seashell,
awakening me.

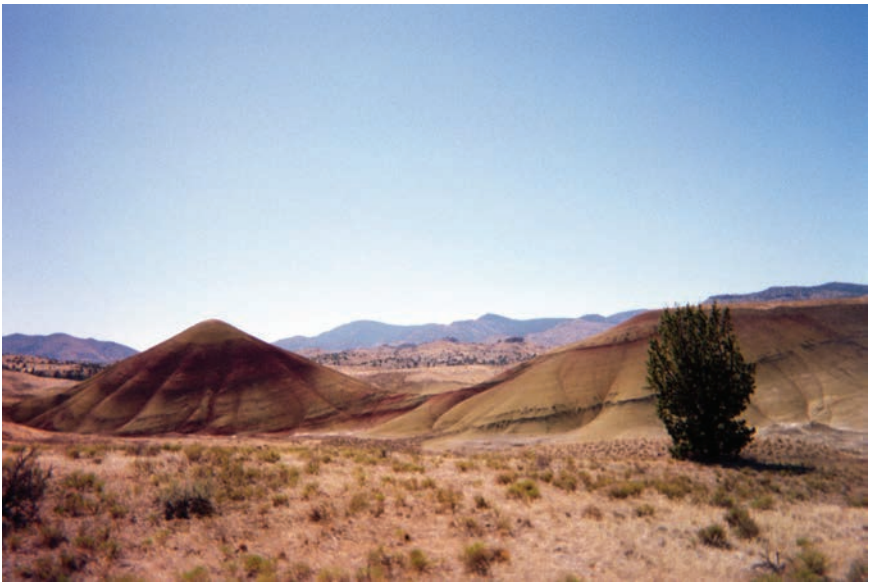
Back to reality.

I stared down at the multicolored shell,
blues, tans, and browns.
It was soft to the touch, a little cold.
The waves still echoed through my ears,
salt on my tongue.
I remembered this taste from when I was young.



DUNE

By Tanner Loe



HECETA

By Tanner Loe



STILLNESS

By Eric Linder



EXPOSURE THERAPY

By Eric Linder



POLARIZING TIMES

By Eric Linder



AZAELA ENCORE

By Marilyn Boros



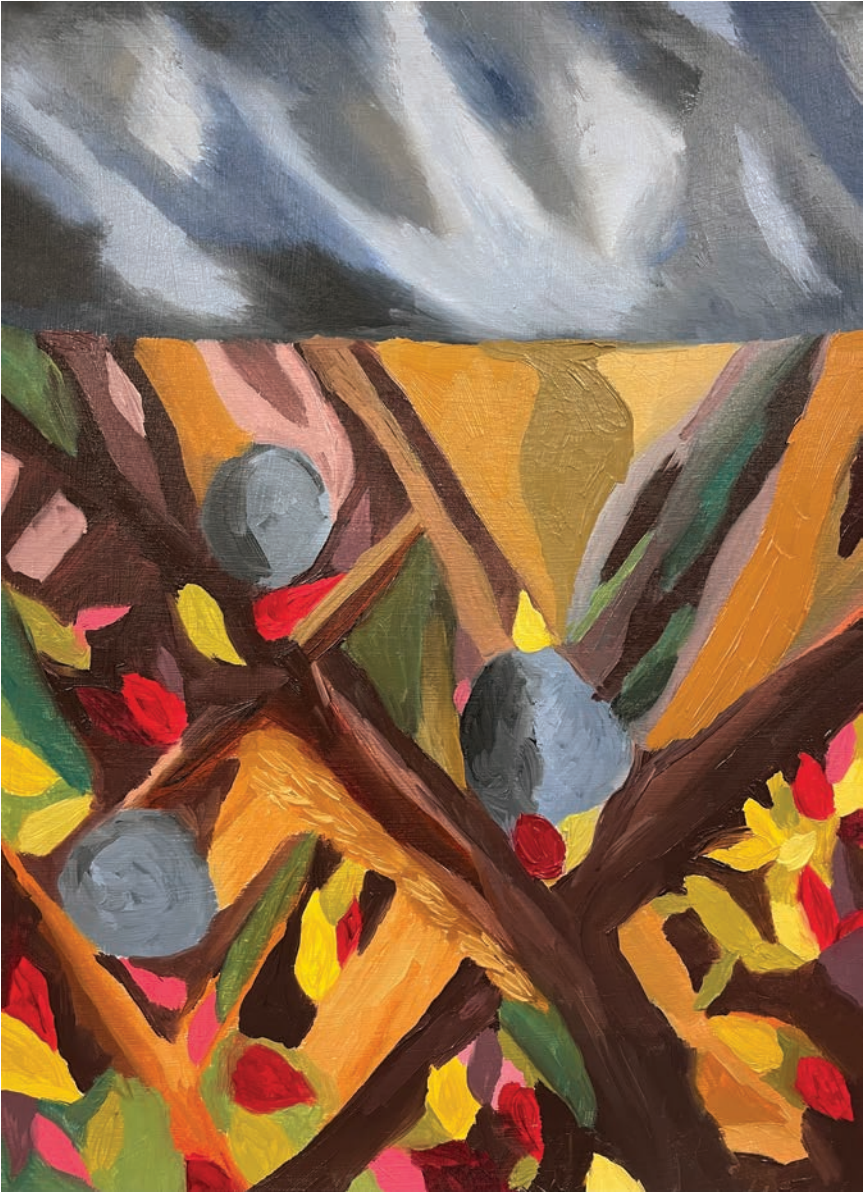
SIGHTS OF SPRING

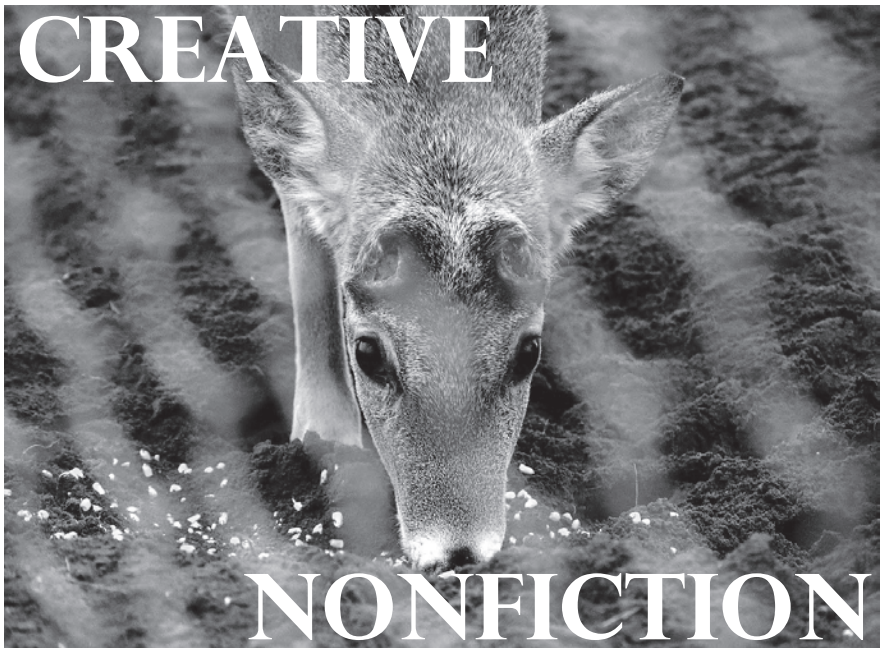
By Marilyn Boros



TAKE A WALK

By Nathaniel Oman





PUMPKINS

By Amber Stark-Herberg

It's a mosaic of oranges, tans, and greens – the landscape a mess of twisted shapes and pudgy sizes. Footsteps crunching on vines and leaves that litter the ground like confetti as we meander through the pumpkins, careful not to trip on the protruding tangles of green that link the pumpkins to one another. Ahead of me my daughter dashes about, her vibrant pink hair like pixie wings giving her speed and grace as she looks for the best pumpkins to bring home with us.

“Wow, Mommy,” she says, her breath ending in a sigh of awe, “there’s so many pumpkins!”

My mouth curves up as my knees lower myself down to her level, creaking in protest, “Remember, we can only pick out two to bring home. One for you,” I boop her on her slightly sunburnt freckled nose, “and one for Mommy.”

She nods, her blue eyes swirling with pools of thought. “Mommy, I wanna get one for Daddy, too.”

My chest constricts, a python squeezing it tightly. “Honey, that’s something you need to ask Daddy about next weekend when you see him.”

“Ok, Mommy.” Her bright smile makes the snake inside lose its coiled grip, and I mentally shake myself free of the yawning black hole to focus on her and the task of pumpkin picking.

It takes her awhile to pick out the most perfect pumpkins. A long lanky and misshapen one and the other one bloated round except for its single flat edge. I stop my face from cringing at the sight of the sad-looking pumpkins she’s picked out, not wanting to extinguish her happiness. Instead, I breath in deeply, filling my lungs with resolve, and grab a rickety red wagon that was left nearby and pick them up, placing them inside, the boards groaning. I dart back, momentarily wondering if the weight is going to break the wagon but nothing happens. I grab her hand, its soft small weight folding perfectly into mine, and then we walk hand in hand, my other pulling the wagon as it rocks side to side, to the front gate to go home.

Paying for the pumpkins, her little body vibrates with excitement. “Mommy, I wanna carry one!” Looking over, she’s at the lanky one trying to lift it out. I get to her before she drops it.

“Sweetie, it’s too heavy for you to carry; we have to use the wagon to get them to the vehicle.” Seeing her face start to scrunch up, wrinkle, and her eyebrows angle downward to argue with me I intervene, “and you don’t wanna accidentally drop it and break it. Then we’d only have one pumpkin to bring home and carving one pumpkin is not as fun as two.”

A moment’s pause, those eyes flashing with thought. “We could get another one if I drop it, though.”

“No sweetie, we can only get two, and if you break one, we can’t get another. That’s the rules.”

“Those are stupid rules!” She pouts, stomping her foot and crossing her arms in front of her chest.

“You might think they’re stupid rules, but we still gotta follow them. Hey,” I add, putting excitement into my voice, and to an off-key tune of “Do You Wanna Build a Snowman,” I ask her, “do you wanna ride in the wagon?”

With a high pitch screech, she sprints her little legs to the wagon, trying to climb in with the pumpkins, her arms, and legs awkward and flailing about like the twisting vines of the pumpkin plants around us. I reach down, placing my hands under her armpits and hoist her up and into the wagon, right in between the two pumpkins. “Ok, now you hold onto those pumpkins and make sure they don’t roll around while Mommy pulls the wagon, alright?”

“OK!” She is all giggles and smiles as she holds on to the pumpkins to keep them steady, and I start pulling the wagon with my cargo to my cardinal red SUV for the trip home.

The drive home was long, she babbled nonsense the whole way about the pumpkins, preschool, and how excited she was to tell Daddy all about the pumpkins. I humored her though it all, battling the inner chaos of my emotions. Once we got home, I unbuckled her from her car seat and lifted her out. Placing her on the ground I say, “Why don’t you run inside and go tell Grandma all about the pumpkins while Mommy brings them inside.”

“OK!!”

I watch her run to the door, grabbing it, and throwing it open with a flourish and a bang. I wince knowing that probably left a dent, and just as it's swinging shut, I hear her yell, "GRANDMA GRANDMA GUESS WHAT!?"

I collapse against the vehicle door, the metal sending slight tingles of pain through my back and into the base of my skull. The physical pain is a reprieve from the turmoil inside, the snake that wants to squeeze tightly every time she mentions her dad. I give myself a few silent moments to collect myself before I move. I open the car door, and I carry in one pumpkin at a time, the sound of her cheerful voice filling the house as she regales my mom with all the details she can remember about our trip to the pumpkin patch.

The rest of the night is a blur of playtime, giving her a much-needed bath, and then her throwing a fit about not wanting to go to bed. I made her lay down in my bed with me, watching *The Aristocats* until she fell asleep. Once she is out cold, I get up, leaving her swaddled within the blankets, her face at peace with sleep. I lean over, give her a quick kiss on the cheek before I turn my feet to slightly pad down the carpet to find my mom.

I find her in her room, lying in bed with her lamp on reading her book, "You have a moment to talk?"

She looks up, "Of course I do, what's wrong?"

Sighing, I flop onto the edge of her bed, eyes looking at the ceiling trying to gather my thoughts. "I don't even really know. It's just a difficult day for me and she keeps talking about her dad. She asked if she could get a pumpkin for him, and I told her that was something she had to ask him next weekend." I throw my hands up, shrugging my shoulders, not knowing how to accurately communicate my tumbling thoughts. "It's just, I don't know, I guess it's just difficult. I don't want to talk about him; it still hurts though it's been months now. But I also don't want to make her confused or question why I don't want to talk about him or make her think something's wrong with her for talking about him." I look at her, my eyes pleading for understanding, for confirmation that I am not losing my mind, that I am not crazy. "I know this separation is new still, and she doesn't understand why we're not together or why he has someone new. I just don't know how to navigate this with her and make sure she's doing ok with all the changes." Blinking rapidly, I try to make the brimming tears disappear. "How do I do this? How do I make this change not only easy for her but explain this

to her in a way for her to understand?” I go silent, not sure how else to articulate how I am feeling and why my chest is so tight and why I also feel such anger at him and at my ex-friend for their betrayal.

My mom sighs, “There’s nothing really you can do but do your best. You have to take it one day at a time.” She pauses, “And you’re doing an awesome job. You don’t let her see how much it bothers you, and you’re redirecting things perfectly. You’re also doing far better than I did during either of my divorces, and you don’t say anything negative about him in front of her.” She leans forward and gives me a hug, “I know it doesn’t seem like it but you’re doing a great job.”

I hug her back, unable to keep the tears from spilling out now. “I don’t feel like I’m doing a good job, at any of this.”

“I know, but I promise you are.”

Unable to keep the tears from continuously falling, we talk some more about how hard the divorce is on me, on my daughter, and how stressful all the changes are for all of us. An hour goes by before I finally head back to bed. She moved about in her sleep, her small body splayed across the whole queen size bed despite her small frame. I nudge her over gently to fit in beside her and hold her close for the rest of the night, long after I have finally fallen asleep.

“Damn it!” I swear, sticking my finger into my mouth. Tasting the coppery metallic liquid on my tongue, I glare at the offending pumpkin that caused the blade to nick my finger. We had scooped the insides out together before she got bored and wanted to go play outside. My mom went out with her to keep watch while I stayed in to draw the faces and cut them out. Taking my finger out of my mouth with a pop, I look at it. It is not bleeding too bad, but I still scoot the table chair out with a quiet scrape and go in search of a band aid. “Stupid fucking pumpkins,” I mutter to myself, rummaging through the bathroom cabinets. I knew these would be difficult to carve because of their shapes but this is ridiculous. Finding a band aid, I wrap it around my finger and go back to table to continue fighting the orange villains. Wrestling with the knife and the pumpkins for the next hour I finally, FINALLY, get them finished. Getting up from the kitchen table, I put the knife in the sink and go to the junk drawer to find a couple of tea lights. Coming back, I put them inside the pumpkins and light them. Walking to the open window I

call out, “Audrianna, come inside with Grandma and come look at the pumpkins!”

I hear a high pitch squeal, the sound of a door closing, and then her little feet pound up the stairs, my mom following suit.

“Ok, come here by Mommy while Grandma gets the lights so we can see them glow.” She comes over to me, and I hold her, facing the pumpkins. My mom flips the lights and covers the windows with the curtains so we can see the pumpkins light up better.

“Wow,” I hear her whisper, and the wonder that I hear from that one word makes all the work and aggravation of trying to carve the impossible pumpkins worth it. She whirls around and throws her arms around my neck, giving me a quick tight squeeze. “Thank you, Mommy, I love you!”

I hug her back, “You’re welcome, and I love you, too.” She squeezes me again, even tighter this time.

She turns back around, watching the pumpkins sparkle with light, her smile twinkling in the glow. I watch her, my chest, which still had a tightly wrapped snake around it since yesterday, loosening fully at the sight of her smile. I let out a relaxed breath, feeling the tension and guilt fall away, and focus on the moment of watching her happy and content with the gleaming pumpkins around us.

AMIDST THE CHAOS

By Aletheia Pull

I hate medical things. Even a loose tooth makes me feel queasy. I have always known if a loved one was injured, I would be helpless in an emergency, paralyzed by the sight of a bloody wound. When my cousin Lucy injured herself while swimming, I discovered the truth.

The hot tub steamed invitingly as I sank gratefully into its depths, my muscles responding to the heat. Across from me, my cousin settled into the water. It had been months since we had last seen each other, and the cozy evening proved the perfect opportunity for us to catch up.

The laughter of children in the wading pool, the voices of conversation elsewhere, the scream of my younger cousins as they flew down the waterside, all sound and chaos faded into the background. As I focused on my friend, we became oblivious to the outside world, caught up in each other's stories. With fizzling water washing against me and my friend nearby, I was at peace.

At first, the scream was distant. Then I heard it more fully. Shouting, breaking through the walls of hushed conversation. I stood up, concerned, looking. My cousin Lucy running across the pool deck, wailing. In an instant I take in a hundred things. The trickle of blood running across Lucy's hand. Scarlet drops falling on the pool deck. Her hand hiding her right eye. My younger cousins and siblings behind her, terrified. Instinct kicks in, unknown, unbidden, but needed. I grab her trembling shoulders, steering her through the door. Outwardly, I am calm, almost unemotional.

"Get Grandpa!" I command.

Rushing through the hotel hallways, we leave a trail of water and blood on the carpet. We burst into the lobby, where my grandfather sits sipping coffee. He turns around, disturbed at the shouting, and ten people all speak at once. He sees Lucy. The blood is now down her neck, her swimsuit, and her arm. Trails of blood across the white tile floor betray us, and the woman at the front desk hands us a towel. She glares at the marks which mar the perfect entry to the hotel. The white towel becomes a bandage, stained with scarlet.

Grandpa grabs one of the plush footstools and gently sets Lucy on it. The blood contrasts sharply with the white shade her face has become, and I know she is going into shock. One quick glance behind the towel

shows a deep gash, splitting her eyebrow in half. The cousins and siblings crowding around gasp, and my heart feels sick. I push the terror down, focusing on Lucy. She knows the injury is bad, but the crowd of concerned faces is making her panic. I order someone to find clothes and a blanket in the hotel room. Some of them leave, eager to have something to do.

I grab her clammy hand, saying her name over and over. I beg Lucy to take deep breaths, and I breathe with her as she tries. I ask her to focus on something else. Her breathing slows a fraction. The shaking ebbs, and morphs into shivering. I continue to talk with her, comfort her. I force her to look at me as grandpa searches on his phone for an emergency room. She slowly becomes a fraction of her normal self.

Clothing is handed to me, and I help Lucy pull sweatpants over her dripping swimsuit. I zip a gray jacket around her small shoulders, and we hustle to the car. The flow of blood becomes a trickle as we put Lucy into the small car. The ride to the emergency room is long and Lucy is still scared. We sing her favorite song again and again, and she calms down. A long wait at the emergency room yields eight stitches.

Only in the morning does my mind begin to replay the images in my head. Blood, gash, blood, over and over I see it until I feel sick. And then I find myself amazed. I helped Lucy calm down, even when inwardly I was anything but calm. I overcame my fear of blood while I helped my cousin through shock. I handled an emergency with a bloody, gaping wound. Now, instead of being sure I will fold, I am confident in my ability to stay calm in medical emergencies.

FIRST LOOK

By Hannah Sovich

She is pale. Her eyes are shut, and her mouth is tightly closed like she is pressing her lips together in dissatisfaction. Her left hand is placed over her right hand, the emerald wedding ring sparkling against the yellow lighting. Is this what everyone looks like in a casket? The unnatural flush on her cheeks makes her look like she is trying to go back to the eighties, and the matching pink lipstick is creasing into the wrinkles around her lips.

More than anything, she looks like she is pretending to be asleep. Like she is ready to smile and shout, “Boo!” to scare me. But I know that will not happen. Grandma passed away last Thursday from heart failure. My family and I were with her at the hospital when it happened. Mom stared in disbelief at the nurse who informed us. Dad tried comforting Mom by rubbing her back. My younger brother just looked confused, but he is too young to understand death. I looked at the closed hospital room across from us. I was waiting for someone to say, “Just kidding!” and for Grandma to walk out like nothing happened. It would be a cruel joke, but at least she would be alive.

I look up at my mom who is holding a damp tissue up to her face. It is stained with her mascara and foundation. She wears a black, knee-length dress that comes up high on her neck. Mom did not wear her black heels because she was afraid she would trip over her feet due to crying, so she settled for black ballet flats. Dad stands behind her, mimicking his hand movements from the hospital and rubs my mom’s back, guiding her back to their seats.

Out of my fifteen years, I’ve never seen a dead body. Family that have passed away have always been cremated, or I wasn’t able to go to the funerals. An hour before the funeral, my dad sat my brother and I down to explain what Grandma will look like.

“Grandma will look like Grandma, but also not. If you touch her hands, they’ll be cold, and she’ll look...sick. Don’t be scared to walk up to the casket; it’s not scary. It’s just different,” he explained, his eyes bouncing in between us.

My brother, Jackson, joins me at the casket with his hands in his pockets. Dad had gone out and bought him a nice pair of black dress pants and a black button-up. The cuffs of his pants scuff the old carpet,

and he tries to play it off like there is something behind him. Jackson peeks into the wooden casket and grimaces.

“She looks weird,” he whispers to me.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, because she’s dead, idiot.”

Jackson raises both hands and mocks my sentence. “Yeah, because she’s dead, idiot” He raises the pitch of his voice and waves his hands up in the air. He glares at me before walking back to his seat.

I take one last look at Grandma and follow my brother, and I sit down next to him and wait for the speaker to start the ceremony.

MY ANGEL

By April Mengelkoch

It had been a few months since my childhood cat, Snowball, began the last stage of his life. He was 15 years old and had grown a tumor on his jawbone. I had already begun grieving him. I spent nights awake asking myself, "How will I live without him?" And I often asked him, clutching his increasingly frail body to my chest and sobbing into his silky black fur, "How will I live without you?" Little did I know he had an answer.

It was a late summer Sunday and, in the first miracle of the day, I was awake before 8 a.m. My dad sent me a simple text. "Baby kitten in the three-season porch this morning." I shot up out of bed. I was at my parents' house in 15 minutes. I knew I had to be fast because Snowball was very territorial and would certainly scare off this baby kitten. I walked into the house vibrating with nervous and excited energy. *Maybe I could actually adopt this kitten!* I thought. I could see from about 10 feet away, through the dusty glass door separating the kitchen and porch, this tiny fluffball. On size alone, I estimated her to be three months old. She was a tabby with lots of white, a cotton ball dusted with darkness, and she was beautiful. I walked through the kitchen up to the sliding glass door- and she ran and hid.

At this point, I was nervous. What if I scared her? What if she ran? What if... the worst was coming to mind, but I kept my composure. I walked out onto the porch. I laid down onto the ground, Slowly, quietly, gently. And I meowed to her. For a moment, nothing changed. I was lying on my back with my head towards her so I couldn't properly see her, but I had family on all sides of me ready to help. I meowed again and waited. And meowed again. It took a few minutes, but she came out of her corner. She cautiously crawled up and slowly, quietly, gently, nuzzled my head. And I fell in love.

I was soon able to scoop her up and begin cleaning her. She was filthy, like a toy left out in the elements, with a mask of ticks and severe ear mites. Clearly, she had been abandoned and needed love. Snowball, my dying best friend, hobbled out of hiding once I began cleaning up the kitten, and something struck me. Snowball was right there this whole time. The cat who hated all other animals on his property. He must have brought me this kitten. There's no way he would have waited like that if

he didn't want me to help her. Snowball had realized that I needed him too much for him to leave me alone. So he brought me an angel. He brought me a miracle.

He died less than a month later. And, in the last miracle of my lovely companion, I was okay. I was okay because I had my kitten. I was okay because my best friend made sure of that. Snowball gave me proof on that summer Sunday morning. Proof that the ones who love me are always looking out for me. Even when they can't tell me they love me. And I also now believe that the world will give you what you need, exactly when you need it... if you just let it come to you.

WE ARE HUNTERS

By Racheal Hiles

There is something special about today, October 17th, 2019. It is the day my family, my dad, brother, and mom, are going up north...for deer season. It is going to be my first year in the deer stand. Due to some unfortunate circumstances, I was unable to participate last year. A broken collarbone will do that to you. I was super excited. The first day we were there, my dad and I woke up early, before 6:00 a.m. The deer like to be out at dusk and dawn, so we would go for about four hours before coming in for lunch and doing other fun activities, like boating into town or fishing.

The first thing you notice about being in the woods is the silence. You are high up in a tree, in your deer stand, and it is quiet. No birds singing. Not a creature moving. Everything is a shade of gray. Wearing headphones, so your ears are protected from the loud noise when you shoot, it's even quieter. However, with my special pair of headphones, every teeny-tiny noise is amplified. Every rush of air, every spoken word. You are tense, on edge. Waiting for that moment. Waiting for the snap of a twig, the stamp of a hoof, even the softest snort. Every nerve is stretched to the breaking point...until the sun comes up. You never notice it. Everything just seems the same. Gray, gray, and more gray. Then, suddenly, BAM! Everything has color. The fallen leaves are bright red, orange, and yellow, coating the forest floor. The far-off grasses in the marsh are pale green. The evergreen trees are no longer dark and foreboding. The leafy trees show all their brown, bare branches. No longer grasping fingers, they sway gently in the wind, like soft fern fronds. The fog over the swamp slowly begins to burn away in the newly risen sun. The quiet chatter of a squirrel. Everything is serene.

And then a boom sounds. Like distant ice groaning, but louder, and much less innocent. My dad would always tell me about a quote from his father. One shot means a hit. Two shots mean maybe. Three shots, no deer. On this occasion, there is one shot. It is sad to know a life has been taken, but that is the way of life. There are many deer. There are few predators. Adding hunters means just a few more predators. It is the natural way of life. We hunters are just another part of the cycle.

I know that there are bad hunters out there. The sport hunters. The poachers. The rule-breakers. The ones who take more than they should, the ones who delight in the killing. But that's not what hunting is about.

We are normal people, who like going out and bringing home a deer for some good venison steaks on the grill, or some delicious cheddar meat sticks. 40-50 pounds of meat means lots of meat sticks. We bond as a family over those quiet moments in the woods. The celebration when you get your first deer...you are surrounded by the warmth of family, friends, and you bask in the equally warm glow of praise and pride all evening. It is a happy thing. Loss is not meant to be soul-crushing, but rather a celebration.

The first time I ever shot a deer was much the same. There I was, in the deer stand, about 15 feet off the ground, in a tree, with dad. The quiet morning, the sudden color, and then the occasional gunshot. Finally, we hear the noise. The rustle of leaves. We turn, the deer are coming from behind us, just past us on the trail. Exactly as we planned. I quietly flick the safety off. The gun is already loaded. We wait for the deer to appear. And there they are. Two does. I can take a doe in this hunting area, though I would rather not. More does mean more deer the next season and more cute baby fawns in spring. Thankfully, I quickly noticed I was wrong. One is a spike buck. A young male, with his first antler points. I decided on that one. The deer are in the perfect position...but they are moving. Not a good opportunity. I could miss it entirely, or it might not be a clean, instant kill shot. As we had planned, dad let out a shout. The deer freeze in place. And I pull the trigger.

It was a perfect shot. The deer collapses, legs stiff, and it hits the floor. The other deer unfreezes, looking at its companion. Dad goes to move, to get down from the stand, but I stop him. We will wait. The other deer looks down at the buck. It sniffs. It snorts. It steps closer. It does not know how quickly death had come. I give it a moment of peace. To understand. To say farewell. Silent observers, we wait. Finally, we climb down, and the other deer bounds away with a flick of its white tail. I kneel next to the deer, observing it. It is in good condition. The coat is thick and chestnut brown. The antlers, small though they are, are hard points of bone. The wound is small. The blood has already stopped. I understand what I have done. But it is not a dreadful thing. My hands are not coated in innocent blood. It was a noble, natural death. We will not leave it here to rot. We will use it. We will donate the pelt to a program run by the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, Hides for Habitat, which focuses on turning deer hides into dollars to protect more wilderness. Just like wolves, we will leave the entrails for the crows to have as we take our share. We are predators, and we kill creatures, but we use them as we should. We do not make any animal suffer needlessly. We know the kill shot; we practice for hours at a range to hit exactly

where we aim, and we take it. It is over immediately. We celebrate its death, and we respect it. It has not died in vain. We will eat it, and we will use it. We all play our part in the natural cycle of life. We are hunters. It is what we do.

SAW WHAT OWL?

By Audrey Mann

An owl is primarily a nocturnal creature. They wait until the ball of light in the sky dips below the horizon before waking from their slumber to catch unsuspecting rodents. It is easier this way, because the prey they hunt are more active at night as well. They are awake at night for the same reason as the owls. To keep away from predators such as the mighty eagle, who soars in the sky at mid-day.

It was around ten-thirty in the morning. I was sitting on the middle cushion of a three cushioned beige couch. Behind the couch sat the 4-lite bow window in which four long rectangular pieces of glass formed a panoramic view of the front yard. The window viewed three stumps in front of it. Pine trees with long sharp needles lined to the right of it. In between them was the lone tree that had mourned the other trees' departure. It seemed to be reaching a branch towards the awning that sat to the left. Glimmering snow came falling down from the smoky gray sky, joining the few inches of snow on the ground. It had to have just started snowing, for there was no snow on the awaiting branch. Cars flew by in the background.

I was sitting in the middle of a soft couch. My mom sat to the left of me while one of my brothers sat on my right side. We were talking about the events of the day when, for whatever reason, I felt the urge to look back through the forlorn window.

Suddenly, through the lenses of my glasses, I saw a flurry of feathers! I had never seen such a big spherical-shaped bird before in the wild. It was about the size of a small guinea pig. It was only when the branch welcomed the yellow talons of the bird that I realized it was an owl. I was quick to point out to my family this great discovery that I'd spotted. I could hardly believe my eyes! Owls are hardly a common occurrence during daylight hours.

Its keen eyes made up for its small stature. I imagine that the piercing orange gaze would have blinded me had it been looking straight at me. I had never seen such a magnificent creature! Lines of brown and white feathers shot out from its eyes, which created the perfect mask. Black eyeliner made the eyes pop out. Mandarin colored stripes ran diagonally across its white, feathery chest. The plumage on its back was the color of roasted almonds, similar to the color of the tree behind it. It was perfectly camouflaged with the trees and snow. It had a small black

beak that curved downwards and looked as though it could cut through bones. Its great talons sunk into the rough bark of the tree bough. They looked sharp enough to have broken that tree limb in half had it wanted to.

I sat there looking at the owl with awe, but I could not figure out what it was doing. It did not cross my mind that it would be hunting at daytime because owls usually hunt under a blanket of darkness.

It was only when its gaze met that of a cedar pelted mouse that I concluded that it was not there to be gazed upon with wonder or awe, to win a beauty contest, or to appease the audience, but to instead play out one of the most important parts of its daily life. It was on the hunt for food.

The mouse was in front of some edging stones that separated the lawn and the walkway to our front door. The mouse had just come out of its burrow looking for some delicious food. The owl had exceptionally good eyesight and caught minuscule movements while searching through the blinding snow.

The owl locked its sight on the mouse, much like a snake before it struck. The owl was unaware of its audience as it started flapping its strong, silent wings. We watched as it flew silently towards its prey, much like a fictional angel that flaps its wings as they descend from the sky above. The timid mouse was oblivious to the oncoming predator. It was only a few seconds before it was unwillingly captured by the talons of the swift flyer. There were no movements coming from the creature as it was lifted off the now blood-stained snow. Strong talons held on tightly to the limp mouse. The owl did not let go as it flew off to another oak tree further away. It started eating its fresh kill and did not spare us a single glance.

Later, we found out that it was the beautiful northern saw-whet owl. Scientists have proven that its species is strictly nocturnal, and they thrive in lush forests all around north America. To have seen such a breath-taking and illusive animal at ten-thirty in the morning was a sight I might never see again. I will never forget its vibrant orange eyes, nor the spectacle of it hunting down its prey. I can only hope that the owl lived a splendid life. It was truly a magnificent sight to see!



FICTION

THE FOREST SPEAKS

By Alex Jaspers

Little Mary Jane Sue was an odd child, whose favorite pastime was to wander into the woods behind her house and talk to the forest. The forest never talked back, but she liked to pretend it did.

It was dusk in the wood, only faint streaks of light dappling the grass below Mary Jane's beat-up Skechers. Most parents would be looking for their nine-year-old child at seven o'clock in the evening, and Mary Jane's daddy used to, until Mommy left. After that, he started taking a bottle to bed earlier and earlier, until he was sound asleep by six. Good luck for Mary Jane, who knew she had a while yet to play.

She slid down her favorite tree, the bark scratching against her legs beneath her sparkly pink shorts, and plopped down among the mushrooms and bugs of the forest. She giggled as a centipede crawled across her ankle, plucking it up with two fingers and lifting it to the sky.

"Hello, Mr. Centipede!" She said as the bug tried to wriggle free from her grasp. "What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"I'm going home to see Mrs. Centipede," replied the low voice of Mr. Centipede from the corner of Mary Jane's mouth. "She's making my favorite pot pie."

Mary Jane gasped in delight. "How lovely! Go on then!" She dropped the centipede back into the grass, where it skittered away.

High above her head, an owl nested in the oak, feeding its squawking young.

"Hello, Mrs. Owl!" Called Mary Jane to the tree.

"Hooo, Hooo goes there?" Hooted Mrs. Owl from between Mary Jane's cupped palms.

"Why it's just me Mrs. Owl! Mary Jane Sue!"

"Mary Jane Suuuuuuuuuue. How delightful to see you again dear!"

"You too, Mrs. Owl!" Said Mary Jane.

Mary Jane greeted all the residents of the forest she saw. The squirrels, the ladybugs, the worms, and the crickets. Even the grass and mushrooms were not exempt from her conversations.

The only creatures Mary Jane left out were the ants. Mary Jane used to think they were funny, with their little legs and the way they carried heavy blocks of food across their backs. Daddy hated them though. Said they were pests, stomped on them every time one managed to slip into the house. When she was sure Daddy was looking, she stomped on them too. The ants from the hill beside her left sneaker gazed up at her with their wet beady eyes, as if waiting for their greeting. Mary Jane did not give them one.

Finally, just as the sun had finished ducking its gleaming head below the horizon, Mary Jane revealed the true reason for her visit.

“Everyone,” she called, hands placed on her hips. “I have something important to tell you all.”

The wind whispered through the leaves; the bugs held their breath for her next words.

This past month, Mary Jane had begun to bring special things to the denizens of the forest, special things she told them she had found in the woods. Last week it had been a bent deck of cards, along with a few rugged-looking poker chips to play games against the squirrels. The week before, it was a chipped shot glass with a leprechaun on the front, which Mary Jane filled with rainwater and tipped down her throat. The week before that, a rusty iron flask with a drop of amber liquid at the bottom, which she swallowed with reverence. And now, something new.

Mary leaned forward toward the ground, as if trying to talk to the Earth itself, and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. “I have a secret.”

The forest bent its head in close to listen.

From the tight pocket of her shorts, Mary Jane pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes. She tugged one free, giggling all the while, and set it in her mouth, letting the orange end hang from her lips.

“You stole those from daddy,” said Mr. Centipede. Mary Jane’s mouth had not moved.

Mary Jane froze, the cigarette drooping from her lip. “No,” whispered Mary Jane. “I found them.”

“Lies, lies, lies,” whispered the forest, its cool breath rustling the trees, until the woods were shaking around her as if caught in a storm. Rain began to drip onto her forehead.

Mrs. Owl landed at her feet, her great head twisted round backwards. “Just like daddy,” she cooed. “Little Mary Jane is just like her father.”

"No! I'm nothing like him!"

"Lies, lies, lies," called the forest. The woods were caught in a hurricane, wind whipping Mary Jane's hair into a frenzy and sending branches flying across the horizon.

Mary Jane began to cry, pressing her hands over her ears. "So what if I am! My daddy is a great man!"

"Lies, lies, lies," yelled the forest, the torrential rain turning the forest floor to mud.

Mr. Centipede sat upon her shoulder, his low voice in her ear. "Daddy's little monster, who he sends out of the house so he doesn't have to look at his biggest mistake."

"No! He wouldn't!

"Lies, lies, lies!" screamed the forest.

Thousands of ants began to scuttle up her legs. "Why Mary Jane?" they cried in a hundred tiny voices. "Why do we disgust you so?"

"You don't!" she cried. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Mary Jane cupped as many ants in her palms as she could, gathering them against her small heaving chest. "I didn't want to! It wasn't me!"

At that, the forest was quiet.

The wind died down, the dirt sucked up the rain, and the trees regained their limbs. They created a canopy of motherly arms around her shoulders as she sobbed and sobbed. "It wasn't me," she cried. "It wasn't me."

She fell asleep among the bugs and the dirt, and when she woke to realize Daddy had not come to look for her, she finally realized the forest was right.

And now, after that day, when Mary Jane talked to the forest, it talked back.

By Claudia Ionescu-Robertson

The solitary oil grease spot on an otherwise pristine menu was so jarring that Olanthe considered leaving the diner altogether. In almost ten years of marriage, as happens to most couples, she and Dylan had exchanged their most persuasive pet peeves. His was not putting things back where they belonged and spots of any kind on kitchen appliances; hers, chewing loudly and driving too slow in the fast lane. She pushed her thumbnail against the plastic, trying to scratch it off, but the stubborn stain would not give.

"You ready to order, hun?"

Olanthe startled and glanced up, but not higher than the mole on the waitress' chin, which looked like it should have been under a dermatologist's scalpel ages ago.

"I am sorry, I didn't get that," she apologized.

"Said my name's Laura, and I am your waitress today. You ready to order?" The waitress' voice was comforting in its scratchy, hoarse depth.

She blanked on the answer momentarily before returning her gaze to the menu and quickly scanning the options.

"Yes, can I have a hamburger, please?" Why did she say that? She was a pescatarian most of the time, working her way through vegetarianism. She, in fact, genuinely enjoyed having quinoa and kale at least twice a week and went through a Trader Joe's bag of avocados each week. (Whole Foods had fallen out of her social consciousness' approved places to shop after becoming too bourgeois and too gentrified.)

"Sure thing, hon. With all the fixings and fries on the side?"

Olanthe shrugged. "Yes, please. And a Coke." Might as well go all the way.

Laura's pen scribbled the order in large, vigorous lettering on an old-fashioned pad. Her cherry red nail polish was chipped, and there was a line of gray and brown roots coming out from under the bottle-blonde hair.

"Let me grab that menu for you!" she offered, and Olanthe gratefully handed over the irritating menu.

Laura was generously endowed by nature in all the places some men—the kind who wear hats and flannel shirts unironically and drink beer around the fire talking about the size of fish they caught in summer pasts—prefer extra padding. Olanthe suddenly had a vision of her going through life unapologetically, grabbing it with both hands and squeezing out every drop of pleasure it could offer, eating through the steak with no remorse or counting of macronutrients, dancing throughout hot June nights until her feet hurt and her makeup had all but dissolved under the sweat, bringing men to her bed and leaving them spent.

The phone vibrated in her back pocket. 13.30. Back in Minneapolis, on the 10th floor of an undescribed building, the team meeting started. Olanthe should be there, in her Tuesday outfit (the power suit with the red lucky earrings), giving updates on the percentage of customers who have positively responded to the latest mass advertising email. The team would be nodding understandingly, their fingers flying over their company-issued laptops. But she wasn't there, was she? She was all the way up north, past Duluth, and she had jeans on and was wearing a worn-out sweater she had dug from the bottom of her closet that all but engulfed her waifish figure. The ruby, star-shaped earrings were still on, and she touched them with a mixture of reverence and superstition.

"Here you go, hun! Careful, it's hot!" Laura was back, placing a plate with a gigantic burger surrounded by steaming hot fries. She placed a tall glass of Coke next to the plate, with ice swimming in its brown depths. Condensation was already starting to trickle down on the checkered tablecloth.

Olanthe bit into the burger without any couth, letting the savory juice spill down her chin. It tasted like an orgasm felt, and she had no idea why she did not eat one more often. Her phone vibrated again, and she ignored it. She was not ready to return yet, not ready to answer questions that puzzled her, not prepared to go to that place and figure out why she was here instead of the team meeting, why today, after putting on her makeup and the ruby red earrings she decided that she would drive up north instead of downtown Minneapolis, and more importantly why she didn't bother letting anyone know, not her husband, her job, or even her parents, that her plans had abruptly changed for the day.

She wolfed down the burger in a couple of gigantic bites, letting the nourishment rise from her belly to her heart, enveloping it in heat.

The last time she had such a high protein meal, a year to the day, she was recovering from her latest miscarriage. Her 4th. The doctor had

pointed out that her hemoglobin was dangerously low, and she had embarked on eating a rare steak to regain her strength to try again. Dylan was so comforting, so doting, and she could feel resentment building up under the stratum of genuine care. Perhaps he did not know it himself at that point. That steak was red, like the pad the Emergency Room nurse had placed between her legs, like her lucky earrings, and she had promptly thrown it up as soon as she swallowed the last bite.

Olanthe grabbed the ketchup bottle and impulsively drew an exclamation mark on the tablecloth. She dropped a \$100 bill next to it in an attempt to assuage her feelings of guilt at making a mess. The phone vibrated again; this time, she pulled it out of her pocket and turned it off completely.

The car's gas tank was almost empty, but she knew a gas station should be nearby. The day was still young, and the road ahead was long.

THE LAST POLAROID

By Aurora Monthony

To a stranger, the picture on his fridge seems to have no correlation with its owner. Two round-faced teens, as identical as boy-girl twins could be. Both curly, long-haired blondes with matching cheesy grins. Only five years have passed since it was taken, but to him, it's been a lifetime. He's young, but his eyes disagree. His sunken cheeks are hidden by stubble, but his hollow gaze cannot be disguised. His hair is now cropped short, hacked off the first time he saw her face in the mirror after the accident. His smile, too, is gone, buried along with her.

FRETTING OVER NOTHING

By Russell Melby

It had been half a year since the death of George's Uncle.

George watched as Jenny stooped under the table, forcing her back into what looked to be an excruciating angle. He could picture the dust kicking up and tickling her nose and face, like a billion ants crawling on her cheeks.

She pulled herself up and shook her head. "I'm sorry, George," she said.

George crossed his arms, his face wrinkling deeply. He sighed, rapping his knuckle against his brow like a steel drum.

"Where the hell is it?" he asked.

Jenny threw her arms up and shouted as George walked off into the living room, "I mean, your capo couldn't have just bought itself a ticket to China!"

George began to pace, yelling back, "Honestly, with my luck I wouldn't be surprised!" He shook his head. "I can't very well do without it, what with tomorrow!"

Jenny followed close behind. "Honey, please. I've seen you play without your capo dozens of times. Besides, it's just a family get-together," she said.

"But without it, I can't play the songs!" said George.

Jenny shrugged. "So just play without one. Y'know, find another set of songs."

"Oh yeah, with my squeaky voice that'd be something," he puffed, raising an eyebrow. "Hello everyone, I'm Johnny Cash. Here's 'Folsom Prison Blues.'"

"Well, that's an option!" she said, placing her hands on her hips.

George shook his head, waved his hand, saying, "I don't have the bass-y voice. This was supposed to be for songs like 'Here Comes the Sun' and 'Time in a Bottle!' Songs that Uncle Paul would have liked." He bit at the nail of his thumb.

Jenny shook her head. "I'm sorry, but we've looked all over!" she said. "If I have to check the couches again—"

“I’m just about to scream myself, Jenny. God! This is just what I needed. First the funeral, then the crap at work, and now this!” George said.

He dove his hands into the cracks of a nearby couch. He closed one eye and stuck a tongue out, like one of those cheesy cartoon artists. He felt around vigorously, trying to find the missing capo.

Walking up behind him, Jenny asked, “George, are you okay? You’ve been acting just... irritable lately.”

Sighing, George said, “look, I’m a twenty-seven-year-old fry cook, stuck in a crappy Minneapolis apartment. Life keeps throwing hard balls to my groin. I can’t even afford to buy you a proper ring. The least I can do is find this damn capo!”

Cursing some more, he waddled over to the next couch, wiping the dust from his hands. He shuddered as he traced his hands behind the cushions.

A guitar capo’s function is to transpose, yet somehow, he knew, it wasn’t just the music that needed transposing. Life had dealt its fair share of cruel jokes on George. Death after death in his family, most recently the passing of his Uncle Paul, was all proving too much to handle. Plus, his boss kept piling unrealistic orders on him at work. It all made his heart want to dig deep into the dirt.

His eyes widened as his hand touched something hard and cold. “I think I’ve got it!”

He pulled it up only to find an old phone case. He frowned, then threw it on the floor.

Jenny eyed the phone case. She said in a soft voice, “you know, we could just stop at the music store tomorrow.”

“We’re not exactly ‘rollin’ in the dough’ with how much we make,” George said. He scratched at himself. “Look, I know it’s here somewhere!”

He slammed the wall. Jenny jumped.

To hell with the neighbors, George thought, paying no mind to his girlfriend.

“Slow down,” Jenny said, her voice shaking. “Let’s just think about this, okay? Obviously, you’re stressed. Let’s stop a minute. There’s no reason why—”

George turned to her. “THIS IS ALL I HAVE, ALRIGHT?” he yelled. “JUST HELP ME FOR GODSAKES!”

Silence.

George watched as Jenny stared, her eyes large and wet. He thought he could see her lower lip quivering. Slowly, she said, “I’m going to the bedroom to read.” She turned on her heels and left the living room.

George stood for a moment, fuming, before he threw himself onto the couch and sighed.

Time passed and George lowered his head, thinking as hard as he could.

It never used to be this hard, he thought.

He looked over at his acoustic guitar sitting in the corner.

He remembered the reason he first learned the guitar, reminisced what triggered him to play. It was the first time his Uncle Paul showed him The Beatles’ *Rubber Soul* Album, the way the songs all shared a certain color, and the jangling of the guitars. The harmonies, so distinct and melodious, held such a hold on his young ears then. Now, since the death of his uncle, he dove into the guitar as a mode for repairing his own shattered soul, to *feel* in control.

And now more than ever, the music was all there was, the way it vibrated at his fingertips.

Maybe I don’t need the capo, George thought, getting up with a soft sigh. *I’ll figure something out.*

He walked into his bedroom and saw his girlfriend lying in bed, her face submerged in a book.

“No luck?” she asked, her voice hard.

“No,” George sighed. “Look, I’m sorry about earlier. You’re right, I’ve just had a lot on my plate lately.”

Jenny put down her book. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No, that’s okay,” said George. “Maybe tomorrow. I just need to kind of decompress, you know?” He slipped under the bed sheets and kissed her on the cheek and turned around.

Jenny’s eyes floated back to her book.

The clock ticked in the background as George hugged himself. The tune of “Michelle” played in his ears.

“COMPOS MENTIS / THE HARROWING EYES”

(An E.A. Poe/A. Carter Style Tale)

By Makya NeVilles-Sorell

All I ever wanted was to be known as a sane and sober man. A sane, sober man who could not possibly be mad. For madness is a disease, a corruption, that slinks its way into your soul and slithers its sickly tongue around the very same stolid stature.

Madness—it silently slithers and slips its way in in order to seduce the sanity from your soul’s stoic center and leave you squirrely and stark staring mad.

Surely, if I knew what was to come, I would have done my best—my absolute best—to change the outcome of the tragedy that has befallen me and my love and my world and my countrymen. Surely, we have all seen the same type of sickly, sedated, and insane senior citizen who wanders the streets hopelessly through the night—calling out for their long-lost loved one who left them legions of fickle lastingness ago. Though, out in the street, there they go. Looking, lusting, longing for their loved one to come back to them and caress them, to tell them it’s all right, that they can finally go home. That’s the type of madness *I fear most*.

You see, when I was a young lad, I never thought this as a possibility, as a realistic threat. I was young; fit as a fiddle, and sharper than a *fierce-tipped Victorian five-pronged fork*. In my youth, I never would have guessed the *latter* would resurface in an unexpected way. . . later in life.

With that in mind, I have a tale to tell you. A tale of how I ended up behind the cold steel bars of the local county jail, behind these bars and awaiting my hearing with the judge. Here, where I am patiently waiting for the beams of the dawn-sunshine to spread through this cell and light the path to my immolation. Here I sit, simply waiting to hear what they have to say about what I have done. But I know—I already *know*—what I have *done*. Though, I promise you this; I am not *mad*; this is *the real* story of what happened to me, on That One chilly, bone-chilling night in late December.

That night—*The Night*—which I thought to myself, “*When had I ever before hustled this fast through my frigid, frozen little Minnesotan town?*”

That night, as I ran, I could hear the bottom-side of my shoes making loud, lugubrious echoes as they pummeled the cold, crispy-chilled Earth beneath my heavy heart and soul, which in turn, boomed off the surrounding buildings under the midnight light of a full moon. Those echoes emitted beneath me resembled the sound of thunder roaring and lightning cracking. I am not mad; there's no way I could be mad. If I were mad, then I wouldn't be able to tell you that my heart and head were pounding faster than a drum circle's steady tempo on that very same night. That night, that chilly bone-chilling, frozen, frigid night in late December.

My eyes were wide—Oh! How they were wide! They were wider than the sun on the horizon; wider than stretching from cliff edge to cliff edge over the Grand Canyon; wider than ever thought possible—even in the deepest of all-consuming darkness of the latest December midnight. I could feel how my eyes were mere seconds—dare I say, mere fractions of a second—away from tumbling out of their sockets. I was trying to hold them in place, trying to keep them from escaping their chambers for fear they would fall, roll, and run away rampantly through the snowy streets and vanish forever; therefore, leaving me brilliantly batty, blind, and bothered.

Although I can't tell you how long I had been running—if it was for minutes, days, *shakes of a lamb's tail*, or for decades even—I *can* tell you that I had been running for so long I forgot that my dear friend, Samuel, had been running right along with me, right at my side! At once, upon my realizing this, I stopped, so we could both catch our breath. The two of us were standing there, our heavy breaths coming out in big puffs of cloud, like we were in a smoke lounge puffing on the finest Figurado Cigars. It looked as if a dense fog had rolled in between us; but I am *not* mad, and I *know* there is *no fog here*. Not this late in December.

While turning to look at Samuel, I had asked, “Samuel, are my eyeballs still in place?”

I can recall Samuel telling me, “Bart. . . they look stable to me. But you can never be too sure how long they'll stay resolute like that. You'd be smart to hold them when they feel as though they're about to slip out—OK?”

Oh! That reminds me –

Samuel – he's a good man, a good friend! I've known him since my elementary years. It was one late December's day when he appeared to me—*seemingly out of nowhere*—and since that day we've been as thick

as thieves; the best of friends; two peas in a pod; *pickles & peanut butter*. Samuel, you see, he calls me Bart, and he's the only one that truly knows how my real name drives me *mad*; however, because my *sanity* is surely intact—I know that only a madman would go about his daily business being addressed as ‘*Bartholomew*,’ and I can assure you that I am *not mad*.

Oh! Now, as I was saying –

After we rested a moment, Samuel and I couldn’t recall why we were running. That was when I finally released the supportive embrace I had around my eye sockets—in case my eyes decided to slip away and run free. I cancelled this embrace to see that my hands—Oh! The Horror! — My hands, they were red, sticky and covered in something that felt like raspberry syrup. Oh! How they shimmered and shone in the midnight light! *It was spectacular!*

I was startled and shouted, “Samuel! Samuel, my hands! What has happened?”

Samuel just looked at me, he looked at me with a smirk, as if he wanted to laugh, then said, “Bart... You remember... *Don’t you?*”

I was still so caught off-guard; I didn’t answer Samuel right away. I started to feel my face, to make sure my eyes were still there, and to make sure they hadn’t leaked. But, as I did so, I could also feel the sticky, red syrupy substance smear all over and onto my cheeks, chin, nose, and forehead as I checked around to be sure my eyes had not moved even a centimeter out of place.

After some time inspecting my face and getting refamiliarized with it, I finally said to Samuel, “*Remember?* Remember what, Samuel. Now, the real question is what is this mess upon my hands?”

Samuel spoke sharply, nearly snarling, “Bart, you *need* to remember! Stop playing around with your eyes and *remember!*”

Samuel has never spoken to me this way, I felt shocked, shaken, and taken aback all at once—I felt I had been yelled at, then set straight by my teacher in my elementary years—that’s when I stopped fidgeting with my eyes and put my sticky, red hands down into view. I stared deeply into my palms, trying to read the lines which stretch and crease across the surface of my future and my past. I am not mad, and I know reading palms isn’t a real thing, that’s something only a madman or woman believes they can do. But my palms started to tell me a story; a story which told me how Bart and I ended up here; how my hands

became stained with this mess; why my eyes—*my eyes*—why, they felt as if they were going to pop and fizzle and turn into jam.

There was this flash—a bright white light—that glazed over my eyes, I shut them quickly, then it was like a movie began to play. There I was, inside my home, my wife was setting the table for dinner. I walked closer to her. She was facing away from me preparing the table, placing the place settings, while I stood back, in the dark corridor leading to the dining hall. My wife, she could not see me, she could not know that I was there—*watching*—or though it seemed that way. I tried to call out to her, but nothing came from my throat, only dust and this profound pressure pressing on my Adam's apple. I slowly started to creep and step to approach her, to get her attention, when this feeling of rage suddenly came over me. I felt as though she had betrayed me. I felt as if she had cheated me and had stolen from me, she had bribed her way into my life! I rushed over, out of the darkened, damp corridor, and I swiftly snatched up one of the five-pronged Victorian forks from off the table—that's when my wife turned around.

Oh! The Terror! The Horror! My wife, she had no eyes—no eyes—I tell you!

There were only gaping holes where her eyes were supposed to be! Oh! All the blood—all the blood had already drained down her charming, cherry-red cheeks from the now empty, soulless sockets in which I could see all my own sins within. I could feel myself turn as white as a ghost; whiter than a fresh blanket of snow; whiter than the whole of Antarctica; and—even another tint paler—when I looked down at the fork, and there was *one of my wife's eyes*. Three of the five prongs on the fork were going right through the beautiful blue shade of iris my wife had been famous for having—*bull's eye!* My hands were red. So red, sticky and covered in my most prized raspberry syrup, I nearly fainted. Somehow, in this movie—which played out as if it were a real experience, like this had just happened—I managed to tear my sight away from that horrible Victorian fork and back up to my wife. Oh! She was starting to smile at me, starting to smile while staring at me with those bloody socket holes full of my very own sin. The Horror!

I screamed—I screamed louder than I knew I could, and this scream brought me back to consciousness—it brought me back to life, and I could feel the frozen, frigid, chilly, bone-chilling wind rush across my numb face. The bleak, biting, Baltic wind of a late December midnight in my little Minnesotan town.

I screamed again, “Samuel? Where are you?”

There was no response from my dear friend, so I tried again, “Samuel!”

I looked about, but there appeared to be no sign of him. I looked upon the ground; there were no tracks, no other tracks besides my own leading to this very spot upon which I stood. I felt as though I were *mad*.

Then, there came a faint voice, “Bartholomew? Is that you?”

This couldn't be Samuel—I thought to myself at the time—this couldn't be him, could it?

“Samuel?” I had mustered once more, for good measure, although my windpipe was nearly frozen solid.

The faint voice was louder now, “Bartholomew!”

Then, louder still, “You need to come with me right away; before this situation gets anymore out of hand; before someone else gets *hurt!*”

It was then that I finally recognized the voice. That voice I heard had been so faint—*so* faint and *so* distant—until it crept upon me. I thought the malevolent spirits of my past had finally caught up. That was, until the earnest, sincere voice registered—*that's the voice of my doctor!*

But the question remained, what is He doing out here in this desolate late December freeze?

That is what I had wondered to myself at the time. No longer was I paying attention to the fact that Samuel—my dearest friend—had abandoned me when I needed him most. I suppose at that time, I settled for the Doc, because the Doc—now this I know for a fact—is *not mad*.

Doc said again, “Bartholomew, you must come with me right away, you're not right. You're not right at all, you're *way far* left, in fact. You see, you're sick. You're sick and you need your medicine—you really must come with me!”

As you may imagine, I was completely baffled and confused after he said this to me, I had thought to myself: *Sick? No, I am not sick? No! No, it can't be me, only a madman needs medicine...*

My thoughts were interrupted when the Doc said, “Bartholomew, if you do not come with me right now, then the officers will have *no choice* but to get *you* themselves. I would rather it not come down to that, you see, they're eager, eager and ready to suppress and subdue.”

I wished he'd stop saying my full name; it drives me mad when people call me by my full name—Bartholomew...

The doc was next to me now, carefully placing a hand on my shoulder, when he said, “Bartholomew. I need to tell you. . . your wife is dead—we know you stopped taking your meds; we found your medicine bottle in the toilet. Now, the police have some questions for you, but you should really take these first. . .” As he finished his spiel, he reached out with some pills in the palm of his other hand, shaking slightly, due to his inherently nervous disposition.

I looked at the pills, then I slowly, cautiously looked the Doc in the eyes—as though it would harm me—I was scared to find out if what I had seen in the movie that played while my eyes were closed was real, not only a dream, *but reality. My Reality.*

I say to him, “Doc, will you please stop calling me Bartholomew. I am not a madman! I would have to be insane to go by that name—and do I look like I am *mad?*”

The Doc frowned when I said this. That was when I remembered what was painted all over my hands, my face, my shirt, shoes, pants, and even slicked back in my hair. . . *the raspberry syrup.*

The Doc glowered at me and said, “We only found you because some concerned folks called in reporting a bloodied man with blood-stained hands and clothes who is running around in the snow talking to himself.”

I could only look at The Doc in disbelief, thinking to myself, “*Could it be true?*”

The Doc scrutinized me silently, then after a brief pause, he reluctantly told me, “Bart, I’m sorry but—*you are truly mad.*”



TROUBLED WATERS

By Eric Linder

Scene: Matt and Nicole wake up in a lifeboat the morning after a shipwreck. There is no land in sight.

MATT: Just say it.

(Nicole rolls her eyes. They both shiver as the sound of wind and waves surround them.)

Matt: C'mon Nicole don't do this, say what you wanna—

Nicole: Say what?

Matt: Just say I told you so. You were right, okay?

Nicole: Actually, what I want to say is that you're selfish-

Matt: Okay I—

Nicole: Distant, moody, self-absor...

(Nicole looks away from Matt as her voice trails off. She takes two quick deep breaths to try and control her anger.)

Matt: I'm sorry, okay? I know it's my fault. How would I have known we would be here spending the day after our anniversary in the middle of the fucking Atlantic?

Nicole: So, because you feel bad, I am supposed to just forgive you? You don't get it. I wish—

Matt: What? That you weren't stuck with me here?

Nicole: That you would just listen for once! You didn't listen when I told you that I get seasick or how much I hate the water. You haven't listened to me for the past couple of months and you're not listening now.

Matt: You would think we would have seen other people by now.

Nicole: What?

Matt: We haven't seen any other lifeboats, people, ships, land, nothing.

Nicole: Jesus Matt! You're impossible.

Matt: I'm listening okay, but this is a life-or-death situation. You know I was an eagle scout—

Nicole: Here we go.

(Matt licks his finger and sticks it in the air.)

Nicole: I don't know if we will make it out of here.

Matt: That's what I'm saying; reach under your seat and check—

Nicole: No Matt. I don't know if *we* will make it out of here.

(Nicole motions toward Matt and herself. The water and the wind grow still. The two of them sit in an uncomfortable silence. Beat.)

Matt: I thought we already talked about this. Remember? I told you that I was going to try harder, and I am trying.

Nicole: Oh, you're trying? You call taking the trash out and doing the dishes a couple of times trying? Just admit it; you're scared of commitment. My friends were right.

Matt: Oh really, who told you that? Because I'm pretty sure all the two of them do is trick guys into thinking they are celebrities so they can sleep with them on OnlyFans.

Nicole: I already explained to you that's not what OnlyFans is. They were talking about Tinder.

Matt: Well, isn't it a good thing that I don't know? Tinder doesn't sound any better. What do they do on that one? Act like their hot shit by uploading a picture that they took four years ago and lying about how they hike and floss every day?

Nicole: No.

Matt: Because nobody flosses every day. Your dentist already knows you're lying but lying to attract someone isn't-

Nicole: Well at least some of some of the people on Tinder end up getting married. It's been 4 years Matt. Why haven't you asked me to be your wife?

(Matt looks down at his feet. Beat.)

Matt: Nicole—

Nicole: I don't know what it is, but ever since you turned 30, you've changed. Something's clearly consuming you, and you won't talk to me about it.

Matt: If fearing commitment means I'm scared of letting you down, then yes. I'm scared. Time is moving fast and turning thirty just felt like-like I'm running out of time to-

Nicole: You're so hard on yourself.

Matt: No just-well think about all the dreams we had when we first met. Now we're barely getting by...I actually did try saving up for rings, but you didn't know that.

(Matt tries not to cry. Nicole's expression softens.)

Nicole: Matt—

Matt: But what was I supposed to do when we could no longer afford our rent? I didn't want to be the guy who proposed without a ring, but I didn't think of what I've become by not doing that. And I didn't think about what you were feeling. Why am I crying? I-I don't know, it all feels like too much.

(Nicole wipes away Mark's tears and lifts his chin so that he's looking at her.)

Nicole: What feels like too much?

Matt: I don't know. Living up to everything we talked about and envisioned. Trying to be a good man for you.

Nicole: Matt. We were in college dreaming about the future, what the hell did we know? This is what I want. I don't want you to try to say and do the right thing all the time, I just want you to be honest.

(Nicole puts both her hands on Matt's face and brings his face closer to her)

Nicole: I love our life, okay?

Matt: I love you, I'm sorry-

Nicole: Shh-I know. It's okay.

Matt: I guess the cruise was a bit excessive.

Nicole: You think?

(Nicole smiles)

Nicole: You looked at rings?

(Matt grins. Nicole and Matt suddenly hear a horn and look to see a rescue ship in the distance. Matt reaches down and grabs a piece of seaweed off the lifeboat floor and wraps it around Nicole's finger)

Matt: It's top of the line.

Nicole: I can't stand you.

End of Play

AWAKENING

By Nathaniel Oman





GRAZE
BY TANNER LOE

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